The Ogham Stone
LITERATURE & ARTS JOURNAL
Spring 2016

Featuring: Jenny Belton, Nickolas Butler, Elaine Gaston, Colum McCann, Paula Meehan, Joseph O’Connor, Mary O’Malley, Peter Robinson
Ogham (oh.hae.m /stone/[noun])

"Ogham is climbed as a tree is climbed; by treading on the root of the tree first with one's right hand before one and one's left hand last. After that it is across it and against it and through it and around it (one goes)"

Auraicept na nÉces
( The Scholars' Primer )
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Introduction

by Donal Ryan

It sounds easy. Put out a call for submissions. Read them. Choose the ones most suitable for inclusion. Put them in some order, commission your artworks and send them to the printers. But the processes involved are complex, the going is arduous, the terrain treacherous, and, for most of the team, completely new. The hopeful casting about, the painful selection process, the challenge of fundraising, the forensic editing and formatting, the development of ideas into design and execution, the conducting of a great maelstrom of voices and images into a glorious melody while allowing each piece its own singular voice: it’s a nearly impossible task. The Ogham Stone is something to be cherished. Its creators, the MA students of English and MA students of Creative Writing at the University of Limerick, led by Dr Patricia Moran, are to be applauded and celebrated. They have further enhanced this university’s reputation as a bastion of creativity, inclusiveness, and innovation. They represent a wonderful confluence of critical and creative endeavour, and their efforts are embodied in this beautiful object, this testament to the talent and effort and imagination required to provide artists and writers with a platform, to allow their work to be experienced and to live. The Ogham Stone has become a landmark in Limerick’s broadening cultural territory. It is, I’m proud to say, the first literary journal I was ever published in, one of the highlights of my year as Arts Council Writer in Residence at UL. Writers and artists search endlessly, having embarked on a journey with no clear destination, trying along the way to cast some dim light, to fill silent places with images or sounds or lines of words that may give pause, or a moment of peace, or of laughter, or move us a fraction closer to some truth. The Ogham Stone is at once a sanctuary, a welcoming repository and a beacon, casting the saving beauty of the search into sharp relief. Each iteration becomes, to steal from one of the visitors to this year’s team, Rebecca O’Connor of The Moth, a beautiful artefact, a thing to be kept forever. Thanks to our Frank McCourt Chair of Creative Writing, Professor Joseph O’Connor, who has given us more than we could ever have asked for, as a teacher, mentor, friend and endless source of inspiration. Thanks to our incoming Arts Council Writer in Residence, Mary O’Malley, who has already given so much of her time and talent to the furtherance of the arts at UL. Thanks to Paula Meehan and Colum McCann for their incredible generosity; to Tom Lodge, Dean of Arts; to Tadhg Ó hIfearnáin, Head of the School of Culture and Communication; to Claire Ryan, and all the people whose help and kindness make The Ogham Stone possible. Thanks to the people who toil for the arts in our city of stories and song. Thanks to the writers and artists whose works live in these pages. Thanks to the students whose passion and dedication became these pages.
In Finnish mythology, Vetehinen was a genii, a water dweller. He lived with the God of the Sea, Ahti and his wife Vellamo and was the most powerful of all the genii. Ahti was named the sea’s protector and so it was for him to decide how much fish Man could take and at what price. Vetehinen, as the instrument of his God, had the power to visit on Man a fearful reckoning, a price of blight, disease and destruction. In Irish mythology, the God of the Sea was Lír, but the name of his instrument has been lost down the centuries...

I waited as the boat eased towards the quay, sidling up like an old friend unsure of their welcome and throwing the fishermen around me into smooth, long practiced activity. The night was warm, the weather and the sea calm, soft, quiet. But I could hear the water. Hear its gentle lapping against the quay, feel its movement far beneath me, through the boat’s metal hull, the almost imperceptible roll of the waves. I sighed, lifted my head. Ahead of me, a bridge spanned the bay, marking the mouth of the River Barrow like a banner and as I looked a car appeared: its lights flashing as it sped between the struts, illuminating the water below. It reached the end, braked hard into the turn of the road and then accelerated quickly away. I watched it follow the river inland, disappear into darkness and then turned away, back towards the town. The lights there were too bright, reflected in the night they gave the quay a twinkly, fairy magic look despite the concrete, the flaking paint, half rusted metal, but their glare hurt my eyes, threaten to sear my skin. I pushed my head and chin back. Into the depths of my hood and the cloth I’d wound like a scarf about my face. I sensed a fisherman approach and turned to watch as he crept past me, his face and eyes carefully averted, his body awkward as he leant away from me. Stretching it as far as it would go. I smiled to myself, and for one moment was tempted to raise my hand, to see the expression on his face, to watch him start and squirm. But I knew better. Tonight, I needed them as much as they needed me.

I slipped to the edge of the boat. Around me, the fishermen each took a step back. Simultaneously, from different parts of the boat, the effect of their movement was curious, comical almost. I shifted my weight, preparing to step then glanced upwards and back, looking for the captain. He was watching me from the wheelhouse; his mouth closed impassively tight. I nodded once and then I was turning and moving. Lifting one foot up high and swinging it over the rail and onto the quay below. I followed it with the other foot, felt the back of my coat linger for a moment on the rail behind me and then I was off the captain’s
boat and onto the quay. A fisherman behind me intoned a Catholic prayer, making me smile, the skin of my face crinkling beneath the cloth. As if that could help, I thought, dismissing him. Looked back one last time to see the captain’s mouth fall open. Imagined more than heard his breath exhale.

I walked across the quay, feeling my legs shake, threatening to buckle. The ground was too hard, too unyielding; it resisted my movement when it should have given way, flowed up around and over me. But I pushed grimly on, knowing from long experience that eventually my legs would adapt. This concrete was the worst, harder than anything I’d known before. I missed the old wooden quay, could almost see the worm and weathered planks, hear the creak in the wood, feel the almost imperceptible sway as it followed the ebb and flow of the tide. My legs were getting stronger now, more certain, but still my body listed, fighting the absence. A layer upon layer of stone, miles deep. I

I heard one of them laugh as I lurched, unnoticed, down onto the train track. Laugh away, for you’ll have no luck tonight, I thought to myself grimly, for this is my night, my hunt. I stepped over the train track, passed a street lamp that flickered and died. And then I was moving into the road, crossing the empty lanes, the faded white lines and heading for the alleyway opposite. The alleyway beckoned, looked more like an entrance to a hole. A hole made of brick and stone, stained green and scented with the smell of the sea, the dank saltiness of its depths. I passed the old gas lamp, felt the stone ceiling close over me, felt its welcome coolness as I followed the slope upwards, into the belly of the town. It was dark, the incline deep and I heard the clacking before I saw her. After a moment she appeared, a woman walking towards me, her figure sillouetted by the light coming from the street above. She was looking down, watching where she stepped, her body jerking as her heels wobbled and caught. Threatened to tip her forward, to plunge her, head first, down the cobblestones. I moved closer, saw how pale her dress was, how tightly pressed it was to her breasts, hips and thighs. Heard her sharp intake of breath and saw her lift the back of her hand to her nose and knew she’d caught my scent. She looked up, saw me and jumped. Pressed one hand to her chest and stepped sideways, into the wall. Without a sound I moved sideways after her, keeping my eyes on her as I took the four paces between us. She cried out, pressed her back against the bricks, trying uselessly to get away as I lifted up one hand and slowly, steadily let it glide over her, inches from her face. She stared at it, following its path, her eyes impossible big as she saw not the skin and fingers of a human hand, but suckers, sharp little bones like teeth and iridescent fish scales. I watched her for a moment, watched her eyes glaze in shock and disbelief and then lowered my hand, slipped it back into my pocket. Felt strangely sad, regretful. She was younger than I’d thought. I could hear her heart beating, could hear it tripping over itself. Feel it echoing through the brick and stone. And then I saw her body shudder, sensed the blood and tissue rushing to protect it and knew it was too late. The die was cast, the disease already beginning. But I was in luck, for already there were people leaving. Hugging the shadows, I followed them. Watched couples, with hands clasped or arms wrapped, walking side by side with laughing, calling groups of men and women. Silent, unnoticed, I flitted past doorways, taking my time yet always slowly gaining ground. I reached them, was little more than one step behind and then I was moving, slipping through them. A lone, dark figure covered almost from head to foot and carrying the fetid scent of dead fish, rotting seaweed, I weaved silently in and out, with one hand trailing. One by one they shrank from me, from my smell and the laughter and the calling faded. Their instinct, like ancestors reaching down through the millennia, was trying to warn them but once again it was too late. Nothing could stop the seed I’d planted, the blight that one day would be visited on each and every one of them.

It was getting late, the last bar had closed and the streets were empty, the dawn not so very far away. Satisfied with my night’s work, I made my way back down the alleyway, across the road and the concrete quay and over to the boat. The fishermen saw me come and began to move, to ready the boat, impatient to be gone. Impatient, I knew, to have me gone. I ignored them as I climbed back on board. Paused for a moment to savour the feel of the movement of the sea beneath me and the thrill of pleasure that ran through me. I thought then of the cool, dark depths, of the feel of water as it enveloped my body, slid like a lover’s tongue over every part of me and moved to the far side, eager now myself as the fisherman began to loosen the moorings. Above me, the captain was still in the wheelhouse. Was watching me even though he pretended not to. With his thick black hair and haunted eyes, the tilt of his shoulders, I knew him as the son of the family that had come before him. None of them had the stomach for it. Inwardly I shrugged, knowing, as had the town’s Elders, that it is the way of things. Nothing is without cost, a reckoning. And what was one night? A few lives? Nothing: a small price to pay. For all the sea’s, the ocean’s bounty.

I looked out across the water and far out to sea. And yet to Man, all those riches, that incredible beauty were not enough. Even in the darkness, I could see the movement of the waves. The soft lapping that hid the real monster within, the depths of water that it had chosen, could come and keep on coming. I smiled and my lips pulled back behind my cloth were vicious. They didn’t know it yet, but the price, the reckoning was going to get higher. A lot higher. More than they could ever pay.

The boat was moving now, slipping away from the quay. And the captain was spinning the wheel, easing us out and turning. Taking us back out to sea.

The Ogham Stone Literature & Arts Journal
The Sea Cave

by Paula Meehan

It is as close as I’ll get to her in this life: to swim into the dark deep in the cave where the hot springs are, to float in her amniotic dream of children, of a husband, of home. Flickers of light there where minnows teem like memories pulsing through my veins, that lull me, that shrive me, uncertain whether I hear her heartbeat or mine.
The group assembled in the large activities room with sooty yellow walls, which served as the smoking area at all other times. The floorboards creaked and the antiquated white radiators stood out like dinosaur ribs. Poorly aligned windows and tepid heating meant we all wore jumpers. As the room was full of lightweight plastic chairs, our first task was to place them in a circle for the therapeutic session. The walls were rather bare, barring a curious collection of pictures: a monochrome of 1960s flower power; Argenteuil by Monet; Malcolm McDowell’s stare from A Clockwork Orange and Dire Straits Live. The choice of these pictures would have in their own right been an interesting subject for group discussion.

Our facilitator, a psychologist called Dr Edie Bowness, was a slight woman in her forties. She was new and I had been an in-patient in our psychiatric ward longer than she had been with us. She was different from her predecessor in that she possessed a unique quirk: she demanded silence and stillness for forty seconds before commencing group therapy. The slightest disruption and she would start all over again. It was obviously a device to control us, but I had my doubts whether it would work. The reason was that we were a very unusual group of patients in that we were all doctors, medical doctors. Highly opinionated consultant surgeons, physicians, psychiatrists, pathologists, gynaecologists and ophthalmologists who were not used to receiving orders, let alone obeying them – in sanity or in insanity.

Edie arrived wearing a pale silk top with dark trousers. She walked in with a slightly disjointed gait that very thin people sometimes displayed. I thought she was inordinately lean; enough to consider the possibility of anorexia. I had detected additional evidence: dry skin, thinning scalp and tellingly, chipped nails and a crop of downy hair on her arms. There was no denying that I greatly missed my profession as a psychiatrist.

Edie welcomed us and pressed a button on her stopwatch. It took less than fifteen seconds before Dr Abodakpi, an endocrine physician with severe hebephrenic schizophrenia began to mutter.

“Doctor, are you with us?”

Abodakpi looked around perplexed, and did not respond. Edie waited for a few moments.

“Okay, let’s start again.”

This time, the deadline was achieved without interruption and Edie appeared relieved. The week before it had taken three attempts before the group could kick off.

Edie said we would listen to two or three patients, then a discussion on learning from their disclosures, followed by the final summation by Edie. “Last week we had two members speak about their lives,” she said, “and bravely share some painful experiences. So, who would like to volunteer today?”

She looked around, getting no response.

“Surely someone is prepared to speak? What about you, Dr Varma?”

I had only recently contributed to the group, where I spoke about my isolation in my flat. So I shook my head.

“I see you’ve been hurt,” she ventured, noticing my facial injury.

“He was whacked. For messing with a surgeon,” quipped the consultant gynaecologist.

“Thank you, Mr Harker-Herd,” said Edie. “Dr Varma can speak for himself.”

“I’m sure he can.”

I didn’t like Harker-Herd but exercised self-control as he was a hulking man who happened to be sitting beside me. A gynaecological
before. He then reached out for a
his tie. I had never seen him tie-less
one was prepared to sit next to him.
change. The consequence was that no
nurses were constantly trying and
from his clothes, even at night. The
a brown tie. But he was inseparable
attired in a dark three-piece suit and
a distance, Abbas was impeccably
bundling him into a wheelchair out

Mr Abbas, a consultant orthopaedic
haven't contributed before.”

“What about you, Mr Abbas? You
didn't walk out. If he did, there
very much.”

“Why?”

“Because I wanted to die.”

“Because I tried to kill myself.”

Edie looked pleased that his voice was
professional voice had transformed
him. I could see that the other patients
had their legs crossed – shielding
him. I could see that the other patients
in the experience of feeling a large, living
artery from your own body and seeing
it in broad daylight? It was soft and
supple and moist and....and wondrous.”

“Is because I tried to kill myself.” he said, voice trembling.

“Why?”

“Because I felt there was no point in
going on.”

I intervened: “Can’t you see he
is uneasy?”

“Dr Varma,” Edie snapped, “this group
runs on rules, thank you.
I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“My life…my dignity…hope.”

He shook his head.

Abbas’ eyes darted around the
room. He had probably struggled
to confess this to his psychiatrist,
let alone to so many patients.
Edie reiterated that everyone in
his group had to say something insightful.
Edie had, at the peak of his psychosis,
the three met
Abbas’ hands went up and his
head went down. The three met
to create a triangle of despair.
“Don’t know. I don’t know.”

“I think you do,” said Edie.

Abbas’ eyes were bloodshot. “I tried to
kill myself,” he said, voice trembling.

Edie looked pleased that his voice was
louder and clearer. “Thank you for
that. Could you tell us a little more?”

“I tried to end my life.”

“Thank you very much. I appreciate
this disclosure must be painful for
you.”

“Not half as bloody painful as
waiting for that infernal reason,”
snorted Harker-Herd.

“Allow the man to continue,” said
Harker-Herd. “I clearly remember
his femoral region.”

“Pardon?”

“Mr Abbas, most patients have
spoken before but you have not.
We all have to air and share.”

Mr Abbas, in seclusion receiving high-doses of
medication, had his psychosis eventually
melted away, what remained was
murderous preoccupations eventually
became adequately anaesthetised. I then
drew my scalpel.”

Edie looked aghast and it was too.
But not for the same reason. I couldn’t
before this was Abbas speaking. His
professional voice had transformed
him. I could see that the other patients
had their legs crossed – shielding
themselves from Abbas’ scalpel.
“Do continue, Mr Abbas.”

“Is it possible for you to explain
the contents of her abdomen with
sterile gauze, sutures, electric cautery
and of course, lignocaine injection.”

“I didn’t want to get an infection.”

“Why?”

“Because I thought I could not
stop you there, Mr Abbas? Let’s move
on.”

“Allow the man to continue,” said
Harker-Herd. “I forced him to
speak.”

“No,” said Edie, her voice a whisper, “I say we stop.”

“On whose authority?”

“Mine.”

“Just a moment,” interrupted
Harker-Herd. “I clearly remember
one of your group rules: when we
ask a member to terminate, it
would be based on consensus.”

By then Edie had turned a shade of
grey-pink. And she was twitching at
the corner of her lip.

“My femoral artery,”

Edie announced.
I watched Edie’s fingernails embed
into the sides of her seat. It couldn’t
have been easy because the facilitator’s
was the only solid wooden chair.
Abbas looked at all of us and used his
hands expressively. “I then studied the
situation: the artery was throbbing, as
do all arteries close to the skin’s surface, the femoral is the
biggest. It was magnificent, especially
since I had dissected right through to
its surface. And with my heart going so
fast, it was positively bounding. I even
touched it, Miss Edie. Can you imagine
the experience of feeling a large, living
artery from your own body and seeing
it in broad daylight? It was soft and
supple and moist and....and wondrous.”

“Abbas’ eyes darted around the
room. He had probably struggled
to confess this to his psychiatrist,
let alone to so many patients.
Edie reiterated that everyone in
his group had to say something insightful.
This was eminently reasonable and
logical but, of course, those with
severe psychosis were not governed
by reason or logic. Standard group
therapy rules could not apply when
someone was hearing threatening
voices or living in mortal fear of
being kidnapped by aliens.
“We are all waiting, Mr Abbas.”

“...I felt there was no point in
going on.”

Abbas raised his hand. “I then lifted
the object of my endeavour.”

“Why?”

By then Edie had turned a shade of
grey-pink. And she was twitching at
the corner of her lip.

“My femoral artery,”

Abbas announced.
I watched Edie’s fingernails embed
into the sides of her seat. It couldn’t
have been easy because the facilitator’s
was the only solid wooden chair.
It was after test time on a Sunday evening in November and I had been at work for fifty-seven hours. But I don’t want to sound like I’m complaining. To be fair, I’d had two hours of uninterrupted sleep on Saturday night. I wasn’t even woken by my pager then. It was the dream of the consultant shouting at me because I drank all the Lucozade on the patient’s bedside locker that made me sit up in bed in the doctor’s res, tightness gripping my chest.

I looked at my watch, realised how long I’d been asleep, panicked and bolted into the corridor. As I sprinted past the nurses’ station, I dropped everything and ran. As I turned a corner, I heard “Beep Beep Beep,” a sound that would later take years of deconditioning. It was the dream I had jinxed myself by even considering the forbidden “Q” word.

Down in the tiny accident and emergency department, I barged in through the doors of the resuscitation room. I knew something was different immediately. The light blue skin of palpating and blindly sliding the needle under light blue skin. As I had never put a needle in a child before. It would be a few years later before I learned the tricks to keep a tiny, squirming fist still while blocking out the crying for a minute. Just try your best.”

He didn’t have to tell me twice. The lights on my pager were flashing “5 missed calls,” the bleeps unheard in the chaos. As I slipped out through the resus room doors, I was aware of a group of four or five people huddled at the other end of the corridor. One woman was sobbing, the others were silent in expectant dread. I focused on the white floor tiles and tried to look like someone of little importance with no useful information as I skulked away, out of the department and back to the main hospital. I thought of Joe and the news he would soon have to impart on that little group, shattering their lives.

I stood in the reception hall of the hospital. For a moment, I couldn’t remember what I was doing or where I was going. Back upstairs I suppose, one foot in front of the other. There was nothing else for it. That man still needed a catheter.

“The Ogham Stone Literature & Arts Journal
On a Training Chart

by Peter Robinson

for Matilde

'Not for navigational purposes' it says,
but to draw a course across
these oddly-figured channels, bays
and creeks with Perspex Portland plotter.
Now it's as if the hungry ocean
had altered salt marsh, headland, sand-spit,
each place-name picking out only the nowhere
you could ever go.

But here their altered outlines
pose more questions facing you,
and wherever a compass needle points
will be your bearing, too.
It's like you've leaped headlong into the sea
to get more acquainted with quick-sands, rocks,
the soundings made through unfamiliar
shallows, straits, the clearances
projected up ahead where there are
great waves, inlets, covers ...

Then when wind veers,
rippling over the wound-out sheets
and you're sighting along a tightly reefed boom
for sea-marks to steer by, let them be
chimneys, towers on this green shore-horizon,
banishing, equally, comfortable advice
or fond father's foolish fears
regarding imaginary coastal waters
and the open sea.
A Small Storm
Outside Wichita

by Gary Allen

For Willie Drennan

That was in the seventies, I was hitching across the USA
and never had any trouble, until that day when the cloud hung low
in the Mid-West country. You read about such things,
tornadoes, thunder storms, out-of-season hail
and not a car in sight, the dry grass by the freeway crackling,
wooden clad farmhouses in fields of sweating wheat
shifting in the heat haze like a breath-sucking mirage.
The creaking whistling grain silos, and no one about
and the mountains silent and bristling on the far scape.

And just when nothing seems to happen at all,
a battered and dusty Chevrolet pulls alongside.
Get in. And I got in, regretting it as soon as he revved-up
and threw back clouds, the dashboard a mini souvenir stall,
the cliché of fatigues and crew-cut and weary mad vet.
I loved it over there, seriously, I hate being home,
my only regret, that we didn’t kill enough of them.

We left the storm behind us for another storm
of low burning tension. Do you smoke?
And I wondered what the answer should be
when he answered for me and pulled open the glove compartment,
a customised tin of tobacco and hash and rolling-paper.
I rolled and we smoked and the radio crackled like small stories
until he pulled up at the side of the road
before a roundabout of crisscrossing freeways.
Sorry man, as he pointed off to a country road in the distance,
I work on a farm up that way. A hard place to hitch.

But I was full of relief as I watched the fumes
of the black Chevrolet grow smaller on the roundabout,
and then perplexity as he sailed round and came back,
flung open the door aggressively, swearing
that I had stolen his tobacco-tin of hash.
You mother… I’m coming back, and he sped off
round the roundabout, in the direction of the farm.

Leaving me to calculate how much time I had left
and how far off was sanity. Did he come back?
A truckload of locals, whooping it up, with ropes?
I don’t know, anxiety wilted a small box car
to the most unlikely of hitching places.
Where are you going, son? A good dirt-farmer.
Anywhere’s good for me, sir. Anywhere but Wichita or Vietnam.
To my recent student at the University of Limerick, my fellow novelist, Helena Close, I owe the lovely moment when Michael Hartnett and his work came back into my life.

I hadn’t thought about that work in a while — I don’t know why. Perhaps it doesn’t matter.

Poems seem to drift in and out of our emotional weather, like certain friends we don’t see for years but feel immediately comfortable with, or faintly disconcerted by, or both, whenever we bump into them again.

In September 2014, when we began teaching the Creative Writing MA at UL, I asked the eleven members of my inaugural class, in our introductory session, to bring in a piece that meant something to them, and to read it aloud to the group.

We had extracts from novels and short stories and plays: Anne Enright, Dickens and Tim O’Brien, Kingsley Amis, Brian Friel, Bob Dylan. There was a piece from a contemporary crime novel that has a psychopathic serial-killer as its hero, and you’re invited to empathise with this charmless dweeb as he murders all around him, which established many things for me, not least among them the fact that, as TS Eliot put it, ‘I grow old, I grow old.’

Helena brought two poems by Michael Hartnett. The first was funny and wild, and was distinctively Hartnett, in that the text included his very name. It’s called ‘On Those Who Stole Our Cat, a Curse’.

On those who stole our cat, a curse:
may they always have an empty purse
and need a doctor and a nurse prematurely;
may their next car be a big black hearse — oh may it, surely!
May all their kids come down with mange,
their eldest daughter start acting strange,
and the wife start riding the range (and I don’t mean the Aga);
when she begins to go through the change may she go gaga.
And may the husband lose his job
and have great trouble with his knob
and the son turn out a yob
and smash the place up;
may he give his da a belt in the gob and mess his face up!
And may the granny end up in jail
for opening her neighbours’ mail,
may all that clan moan, weep and wail,
turn grey and wizened on the day she doesn’t get bail
but Mountjoy Prison!
Oh may their daughter get up the pole,
and their drunken uncle lose his dole,
for our poor cat one day they stole — may they rue it!
and if there is a black hell-hole may they go through it!
Unfriendly loan-sharks to their door
as they beg for one week more;
may the seven curses of Inchicore rot and blight ‘em!
May all their enemies settle the score
and kick the shite of ‘em!

I wish rubies on all their pets,
I wish them a flock of bastard goats,
I wish ‘em a load of unpayable debts,
TV Inspectors — to show ‘em a poet never forgets his malefactors.

May rats and mice them ever hound,
may half of them be of mind unsound,
may their house burn down to the ground
and no insurance;
may drugs and thugs their lives surround beyond endurance!

May God forgive the heartless thief
who caused our household so much grief;
if you think I’m harsh, sigh with relief — I haven’t even started.
I can do worse. I am, in brief, yours truly, Michael Hartnett.
Never annoy a poet, is the message of that poem. Hearing it read in my seminar at the University of Limerick, on a glorious autumn afternoon in 2014, the memories of Hartnett returned to me. I had crunched through puddles of wafer-ice on my way to the classroom. It’s the brittleness of memory makes it bittersweet.

The first poetry reading I ever attended was an event my friends and I helped to organise, as students at UCD, in the late medieval era that was the early 1980s in Ireland. We were all members of the college’s Anti-Apartheid Society, and we were students of something calling itself ‘Anglo-Irish Literature’, which was neither English nor Irish nor literary. Putting these myriad facts together, we came up with a scheme for a benefit night called ‘Poets Against Apartheid’.

If ever a phrase encompassed the celestial naivety and yet the enduring idealism of student politics, it is surely the butt-clenching formulation ‘Poets Against Apartheid’. I doubt that the South African regime was shaking in its jackboots when and if it ever heard what we were up to in our contrivance of its ultimate and necessary destruction. But we were young, and idealistic.

I say we were idealistic, although, in truth, not all of us were. My friend John McDermott, a tall, lanky fellow whose dad was a Garda sergeant from Roscommon, advised caution when it came to the planning. What exactly was a poetry reading, another boy wanted to know.

I told him it was a situation in which poets stood up and read out their poems. ‘Their own?’ he asked.

‘Their own,’ I replied.

‘Who in the name of Jesus would pay good money to go to that?’ my classmate wondered. ‘Bad enough having to read their poems yourself, without paying to hear thefuckers who wrote them read them.’

Perhaps he shouldn’t have been studying literature.

Our professor, Seamus Deane, was an accomplished poet, and so we asked him to participate. He agreed, and suggested a few more names. Derek Mahon was good, so Seamus confirmed; so were Pearse Hutchinson, Thomas Kinsella and Hugh Manning. Nobody, at this stage, mentioned Michael Hartnett to any of us. He wasn’t invited to ‘Poets Against Apartheid’ but one of the other poets fell ill, and Hartnett turned up in his place. It’s more than thirty years ago, but I remember him well.

There was a gentleness in his manner. In conversation, he didn’t want to meet your eyes. He had that particular mild courtesy and intelligence that Irish country people often have, and it put you at ease as you spoke to him, like underground water.

We talked a bit about Limerick because my father had worked there as a young man and it was a part of the country my dad had an affection for. I said I was worried that not many people would come to the poetry reading. Hartnett shrugged and pursed his lips and looked away into the distance, as though hearing strange music in the halls of his mind. ‘Sure, there might be one,’ he said. Gradually, one by one, the other poets turned up. And there came down upon the room that curious atmosphere that sometimes unfurls wherever poets are gathered: admiration mixed with envy and mildest suspicion, like the meeting of a dysfunctional family that has had a good deal of therapy but not quite enough. The poets looked at each other, and then they looked at us. My friend John McDermott was unrelaxed. Having never met a poet before, and having often insulted their profession, the sudden presence of five or six of them made him behave with false glee. Hartnett gloried at him, strangely. And Hartnett was a man with a glower. You didn’t want to find yourself in its crosshairs.

The poets paced and pondered. More of them arrived. Soon, there was a fair amount of tweed and bohemian polo-neck in that room, a redolence of recently rued but not entirely laundered insecurities, avow for a language to play in. It came time to decide the order of the evening: who would read, when, for how long? And it was obvious, despite his modesty and his great grace to his colleagues, that Michael Hartnett had already decided who would be topping the bill. Michael Hartnett.

I want to stress that this was communicated without rudeness or discourtesy of any kind at all. He merely made it somehow clear that he would be going on last, the climax of ‘Poets Against Apartheid’.

He then took what was, in some respects, a considerable risk, by making it clear that not only would he be headlining the evening, but that he wouldn’t be listening to any of the other poets. In fact, he would be going to the student bar this very moment. One of us, probably my lanky friend John McDermott, was to go over to the bar for him, just as the second-last poet of the night commenced reading. Hartnett would return with John and do his thing.

It seemed, at least to me, a preposterous proposal, but none of us dared to interdict it. Perhaps the other poets were accustomed to such finely calibrated negotiations with reality. Perhaps they were even relieved that Hartnett wouldn’t be there while they were reading, to glower at them like a sculpturally handsome rural County Limerick maniac who hadn’t bothered taking his meds that day. I don’t know. But so we agreed.

Off strode Hartnett to the student bar, and the rest of the audience trickled in. Things weren’t promising. Wind whistled down the concourse. There was a girl I liked at the time, and I wasn’t touched by any of them. Hartnett was by now somewhat refreshed, to put it mildly. Seating himself, with no small difficulty, on the edge of a desk, he said that he would like to commence his reading by telling us what he called ‘an ancient Irish folk tale.’ He continued, ‘It’s about a man who goes up to the attic of his house and he finds an old painting and an old violin. Next morning he takes them to the antique dealer. The dealer says, That’s amazing, do you know what you’ve found? That’s a genuine Piazzetta and a genuine Stradivarius.’

‘Unfortunately,’ Hartnett continued, putting a light cigarette, ‘Stradivarius did the painting. And Piazzeta made the fukken violin.’

We laughed. He laughed.

‘Who in the name of Jesus would pay good money to go to that?’ my classmate wondered. ‘Bad enough having to read your poems yourself, without paying to hear thefuckers who wrote them read them.’

I had sensed a degree of friction when poetry entered my life. Hartnett shrugged and pursed his lips and looked away into the distance, as though hearing strange music in the halls of his mind. ‘Sure, there might be one,’ he said. Memory is a cruel and confusing sweetheart. Let’s say there were ten students in that audience. Which wouldn’t have been bad. But there were eleven poets. That’s not a comforting situation.

When the number on the stage exceeds the number of those in the auditorium, apartheid is going to survive.

Well, true to the word, the poets all read, and the rain came beating on the windows. The poems were all admirable, in that one admired the craft and work behind the endearments, but I must admit that I wasn’t touched by any of them. As the penultimate poet stood up to read, my friend John McDermott departed for the bar, charged with the mission of bringing back Hartnett. Which, five minutes later, he did.

I don’t think I will ever forget the strangeness of the scene. Hartnett, now accompanied by a group of perhaps fifteen students to whom he had somehow got talking in the course of the evening, came processing with a kind of stern slowness down the concourse of the Arts Block, preceded by my lanky friend, John McDermott, who was bearing – with solemnity, reverence, like a cardinal carrying a holy relic – five pints of Guinness on a tray. Hartnett was by now somewhat refreshed, to put it mildly. Seating himself, with no small difficulty, on the edge of a desk, he said that he would like to commence his reading by telling us what he called ‘an ancient Irish folk tale.’ He continued, ‘It’s about a man who goes up to the attic of his house and he finds an old painting and an old violin. Next morning he takes them to the antique dealer. The dealer says, That’s amazing, do you know what you’ve found? That’s a genuine Piazzetta and a genuine Stradivarius.’

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I had sensed a degree of friction when poetry entered my life. Hartnett shrugged and pursed his lips and looked away into the distance, as though hearing strange music in the halls of his mind. ‘Sure, there might be one,’ he said.
she clenched her brittle hands around a world
she could not understand.
I loved her from the day she died.
She was a summer dance at the crossroads.
She was a card game where a nose was broken.
She was a song that nobody sings.
She was a house ransacked by soldiers.
She was a language seldom spoken.
She was a child’s purse, full of useless things.
He continued, almost without stopping, into the following poem.
Every rural cage has prisoners,
every small hill-sheltered townland,
every whitewashed tourist’d village
holds a heart that cannot speak out,
exists a life of angered murmurs.
Over eleven pints of Guinness,
we have talked about our futures;
we have found no quick solution.
Every St Patrick’s Day, we
bring the benefit of Unions
by our appearance every Sunday.
If to small tyrant employers
we are unemployed eccentrics.
we have a language to speak.
if one is lax in adoration,
we have found no quick solution.
but that didn’t happen. Which in it is itself important.
Hartnett wasn’t for everyone.
No important artist ever is.
But those few of us who were there will never forget it.
Indeed I notice, thirty years later, on the rare occasions that evening with Hartnett often comes up.
Apartheid is gone, and the world has changed, with new horrors and 
strangenesses and new liberations too. We felt we’d been present by
drawn into that room by the
evocations, that students passing by
of the lines, the patterns, the stanzas,
the look of the poem on the page.
One of the reasons why a sonnet has the power of a sonnet is that you know there’ll be a denouement in the last two lines.
Over five years, it was one of the most beautiful things any life can ever have: the right
to read alone. You don’t even know how long the poem is going to be.

The fact that a poet has a pleasant
or sonorous voice means nothing at all, at least, not to me. If you’ve ever heard the recording of Yeats reading his work, you’ll know what I mean.
I think you lose so much by hearing poetry read to you; the arrangement of the lines, the patterns, the stanzas, the look of the poem on the page.
If what we love is all corruption,
we are unemployed eccentrics.
We have found no quick solutions.
where form was concerned – nevertheless tried to paint, not poetise. It seemed to me, as a young man captivated by what he was doing, that he wanted you to feel before thinking.

On the reading went, until Hartnett reached the end. I’d love to be able to
tell you that he raised roaring
evocations, that students passing by were drawn into that room by the
power and quiet authority of his voice.

Auden says poetry makes nothing happen.
But Hartnett’s unveiled our
eyes and opened our hearts. In more than thirty years, they’ve never quite closed.
Auden says poetry makes nothing happen. But Hartnett’s unveiled our eyes and opened our hearts. In more than thirty years, they’ve never quite closed.
We came upon boots and bones
Heels and toes together
As if at attention.
As if this Unknown Soldier,
Grown jaded of War,
Had wanted to sleep it off.

While Sergeant went for help,
I lit a Pall Mall and reached
For a small bone, a finger
Perhaps, that resisted.
Pried it from frozen ground,
Cleaned it with my bayonet.

As I cleared more mud away,
I discovered bits of rotting fabric
Rusted with blood,
An arm band, tattered and dirty
Bearing the Medic’s Red Cross.
One of our own was he.

A second trove turned out to be
His wallet with Army ID,
A driver’s licence from Minnesota,
Pictures of family in front of a
Sturdy, red-bricked house
And a letter I did not read.

How long would it be before
They learnt that their son
Was no longer MIA, but KIA?
Their hope hopeless, prayers wasted?
I nodded at my skeleton
For, he was mine then.

Imagined him heeding screams for help
Stumbling and crashing down the hill
With no thought for mines.
Did he die instantly, or linger fatally
Wounded, calling Medic, Medic,
To himself?

I gazed over the valley
At the hills all covered
In an icy white-blue frost
Nothing stirring.
A Christmas scene
In this killing field.

Why don’t we?
Wade across the valley to meet in the rising mist.
Share cigarettes, swap souvenirs, admire family
Photos. Find a common language.
Walk away together, wherever our hearts take us,
So that when the call to arms sounds on the battlefield,
There’s no one there to hear.
Every Wednesday, I prayed for my mother to be late. Wednesday was the day for leotards and hairnets. On Wednesdays, I clattered to the top of a set of wooden stairs, where the two rooms waited. The blue room was the reason we were there, but it was the brown room that made me wish my mother would be late.

The brown room bookended our ballet sessions. At the start of the hour, we shrugged off our jeans and bobbed jumpers and attempted to transform ourselves into mini-Pavlovas. Our hair disappeared under hairnets and wide blue bands, our mottled legs were encased in white tights; soft leather shoes moulded our feet. We stuffed our civilian garb into plastic bags imprinted with dancing blue girls; we could only dream of matching their athletic grace. Once dressed, we formed a reluctant, shivering line. Back then, Tchaikovsky's delicate melodies held no sway.

In the blue room, we were greeted with a blast of cold air, which swirled in through the high windows. The arched blue ceiling framed the darker blue of our leotards. The floor was scorched by a thousand clumping feet. Apart from a piano in the top left hand corner, a blocked up fireplace and the regulation barre lining the walls, it was bare. We stood in serried rows. I was always at the front. In the back row were the tall girls whose hair was made for buns, a sea of Clarissas and Clairees, their long legs making graceful shapes.

Miss Quinn was a remote figure at the top of the class; her body stretched upwards by invisible elastic. Her mouth was a whip, her Cork origins submerged in blinis and borscht. My lumpen limbs struggled to follow her commands. Good feet, bad feet, good feet, had feet. First position, second position, plié, demi plié. The hour stretched into infinity, until at last we were released into the brown room’s warm embrace.

A scrum of bodies packed tightly around the coat rack in the centre of the room. Its metal hooks were weighed down with bags and coats. I dived headlong into the scrum, eager to shed my alien garb. The air smelled of damp and skin. The coat rack was in the shape of a pyramid, its black legs spread-eagled across the chapped floor, pushing us to the bench at the edge of the room. I took my spot nearest the door. Behind me, scratched blue shelves climbed to the ceiling. Boxes bulged with unidentified treasures. But it was the stack of girls’ comics that called to me. As soon as I was dressed, I delved into them.

A voice called my name and a familiar figure beetled through the throng. My mother was here to claim me. I packed away my things with exaggerated slowness and waved goodbye to the genteel trinity, letting myself be dragged away from the womb. The blue room was the place where boxes were ticked. It strove with every fibre of its being to shape us. But the brown room gave us space to grow.
When the plane touches down in Conakry
I smell the familiar
taste the unknown
red dust seducing me
Afro beat and Nescafé
fried bananas, drums, condensed milk
the geography of my Africa
I love the feel of the sweat
dripping down my back
clay sticking to my legs when I hop
I am the white oddity, speckled skin
like some unusual breed of hen
trying to find my own dance

I long for heat
the equator where all is equal under mangoes
to squat low with the women under the tree of seven trees
Bantu Waro, reverence for the tall standing ones
I need to listen for the rhyme of you grinding flour
the syncopation of pounding maize
I need you to beat it hard
so I can hear every note
and know you inside out

When we are together
I want you to leave me alone
you wrap me up til I am malleable
and I am woman amongst women
I gulp back your songs
in a long drink of honour
I cherish the moments we meet Africa
the relief to be with you
the desire to leave you
like some tormented lover
I learn we all search for gold
in the same river
“...I want to be a tree,” said Melissa.

Rang a hAon went quiet. No one even laughed. Melissa didn’t mind, though.

“You can’t be a tree, Melissa,” said Ms. McNulty.

She looked a bit like a tree herself – tall, wrinkly and with long fingernails. When she rubbed things off the whiteboard, Melissa imagined a tree waving back and forth in the Autumn wind.

“We’re talking about jobs here,” she continued, in the sing-song voice that grown-ups do to babies. But Melissa wasn’t a baby, she was six and three-quarters next week. “Johnny wants to be a policeman, good man, Johnny, and Rachel wants to be a writer, like her Mum. What do you want to be?”

“A tree,” repeated Melissa. She couldn’t understand what the problem was.

Ms McNulty had a habit of asking questions that there was only one answer to. For example, in maths this morning, she had asked the class, “six plus three equals...?” and then held her eyebrows raised until Luka said “nine.”

“Good boy, Luka,” said Ms McNulty.

Six plus three could be sixty-three too, but when Melissa wrote this in her test copybook, she got a red x.

Ms. McNulty gave a sour smile and moved on to Luka, who was sitting beside her. Luka said that he wanted to be an astronaut.

The problems started for real later on that day, when Ms McNulty handed out some pieces of paper that everyone had to read and fill in the answers. The rest of Rang a hAon started working right away, but Melissa just sat there, looking out the window. She was thinking about Simon, the tree that was outside her bedroom window at home. He had begun to lose his leaves.

“Melissa, do your work please.”

“No thank you, múinteoir.”

She raised her tree-hand up to her glasses and took them off.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Paper comes from killing trees,” said Melissa. It did – she saw on the television last night that the forests in the Amazon were getting smaller because people were chopping them down and using them to make paper, like the handouts for Rang a hAon.

“Melissa, do I have to speak to mammy again?”

Again, múinteoir was talking to her as if she was a baby. “You can if you like,” said Melissa simply. This seemed to upset Ms McNulty. But Ms McNulty, like all grown-ups, got upset by things very easily.

Múintóir wrote a note in her homework journal and when Melissa took it home to show it to her Mum, her Mum just sighed. “Melissa,” she said, “you need to do your work.”

“Mum,” Melissa said seriously, “paper comes from trees in the Amazon and the trees are running out.”

Mum didn’t say anything back to her. Recently, Mum didn’t say much, just when dinner was ready and what she bought in the shops for lunch. She didn’t look sad, just looked like nothing. Not happy or sad. Melissa spied on her one Saturday. She pretended to be asleep and then walked downstairs to look at Mum in the living room. The main light was off, and the colours from the television were dancing on her face. But she wasn’t even looking at it – instead, she was looking at the carpet, her arms crossed, staying very still.

Melissa was excellent at staying still, and so that meant she’d be an excellent tree. She had won nearly every single game of musical statues she had ever been to. The only time she didn’t win was at Luka’s party last week, but that was because Luka was cheating and his parents wanted him to win everything on his birthday.

Dad used to say that the real winners in the world were the people who tried new things. For example, Mozart made
the best music because he started something new. Auntie Margaret made the best apple pie because she put chocolate chips in it. So, when Melissa came home from school one day and she had to colour in a picture of a sheep, she asked him a question.

"Can I colour the sheep purple, Dad?" Purple was her favourite colour, but she had never seen a purple sheep before.

"Why not?" he said.

She coloured the sheep purple, and Ms McNulty didn’t hang the picture up on the wall.

Bring a tree, though, made perfect sense. In order to prove to her Mum and Ms McNulty that it was a good idea, she wrote a list of reasons on the back of her copybook in pencil:

1. They are running out of trees in the Amazon.
2. I’m really good at standing still.
3. I’m trying something new.

If she convinced more people to be trees, then the forests would be saved. All you needed to do was paint yourself brown and the tops of your fingers green. Luka was already brown, so she asked him on the lunchbreak if he wanted to be a tree with her.

"Oh," he said.

Luka’s two favourite things in the world to do were counting things and picking his nose while nobody was looking. He counted everything; the little lines on top of the radiator, the amount of chewing gum spots on the tarmac, the branches and Melissa couldn’t help but laugh. It was like the fierce storms in the Amazon that she saw on the television and she was in it, right in the centre, arms spread out and laughing.

Just as it began to die down, she heard footsteps running towards them. “Melissa?” her Mum shouted, “Melissa!” Melissa wanted to talk to her Mum, to tell her to come over and enjoy the wind with herself and Luka, but she didn’t open her mouth because… because, well, trees can’t talk. So, she waved her arms instead. Eventually, her Mum found her.

She wasn’t mad. In fact, she had tears in her eyes that Melissa saw glistening in the moonlight, like little diamonds. She hugged her really tight and Melissa felt herself become human again as her branches turned back into arms that held on to her Mum.

"I love you," said Mum.

"I love you too," said Melissa.

She had had the most amazing time being a tree, but she missed her warm bed and how warm her Mum was. She hadn’t hugged her so long, and now that she was wrapped up in her, she never wanted to leave.

"Let’s go home," she said to Mum, and Mum agreed. Luka didn’t mind either, so they set off for the car.

On their way home, they drove into town to get some chips. It was really exciting sitting in the car and driving at night – she felt like she was all grown up. They ate in the back and Mum dropped Luka home. "Bye, Luka," Melissa waved, as Mum walked him back to his house.

"Bye, Melissa," he waved back.

Mum tucked Melissa back into bed. She perched her lips to give her a kiss on the forehead and Melissa laughed.

"What’s so funny?" said Mum, smiling.

“You look like you’re going to make the tree noise," said Melissa. She showed her mother how to blow the oooohh sound, and her Mum did it with her. Then, she turned off the light and went to her own bed.

It was really windy outside and Melissa heard a gentle tapping on the window. Drowsy, she got up and parted the curtain a little. It was Simon, rubbing his branches on the glass. Waving goodnight.
Out
by Alena Kiel

for so long I’ve had these flowers growing from my elbows and kneecaps. for so long I’ve tried to hide them, kill them, deny them. the blooms are a color you don’t like but now I water them every day. listen, of course I’ve thought this through. I am more me now than ever before, more honest.

listen, listen. your stunned silence howls through my bones and rattles my heart, can’t you hear it? it roars like a train and shakes me down bare, laid out in front of you with nothing left to hide.

this isn’t about you. your ideas and concerns and opinions don’t belong here. they burrow through my belly button into my guts where they stick and burn like acid. listen, these confused words you’re spitting out like bullets, malicious and roundly accusatory, make me wonder what I was thinking telling you in the first place.

my body is no longer made of barbed wire. I no longer have to live in a warzone between what I do want and what I should want. my opposing halves are shaking hands, embracing. listen, they’re having a good laugh about the whole affair. the years that died at their hands rest fitfully but I tell myself what matters is that peace was eventually agreed upon.

you attempt to bluster in, belligerent, but we’re all slinging our guns over our shoulders and walking back home, arm in arm, already beginning to forget the atrocities of this suppression. I sleep soundly now, sure you’ll run out of wind eventually and learn to love this newfound peace.
Ghaydaa flung his slippers through the door of his room, tossed his loosely-stitched football on top of his father’s work-bag and stepped into the kitchen. Dust-brown perspiration stained his shirt. The Syrian heat had not deterred Ghaydaa and the boys. His mother sat in front of the television set his father had brought back from Damascus. On the screen a white man in a suit stood at a podium, gesturing vigorously and speaking in English.

“What’s he saying, Mother?”

Ghaydaa’s mother had studied English in Aleppo. She never let a chance go by to remind her son that she had been educated. But there was something different about her today. Ghaydaa didn’t expect any lessons from his mother that afternoon.

His mother hadn’t heard her son come home, nor his question. She watched the man slam his palm on the flat of the bench in front of him. Ghaydaa dropped on all fours and began sneaking up on his mother just as the foxes stalked desert shrews nearby in the evening. Ghaydaa loved to watch them slink down a sand dune towards an unsuspecting victim. Then pounce.

“Stop it, Ghaydaa,” his mother muttered as he grasped at her calf.

“Go and play outside for a while.”

“But all the other boys have gone home!” Ghaydaa contested. “I can’t play by myself, can I, Ummi?”

Borders

by Ciarán Clarke

The name didn’t elicit the smile Ghaydaa was so used to seeing. His mother was transfixed; the white suit-man was even angrier now. It reminded him of the time his father dove into the water at Bala’a Lagoon. Ghaydaa had leaned over just too far to catch a glimpse of the scaly fish making such a commotion under the boat. Once he had been fished out his father took him to the shore and bellowed like a madman.

“How dare you,” he roared. “How dare you. Next time you plan on killing yourself, think about who will really suffer. Allah, why have you delivered my family such a selfish boy? He wants me to live an empty life, without a son. He wants to remove himself from me, all for the sight of a fish. My only son. How dare he.”

Ghaydaa’s mother was wringing her hands. He began to shift his feet.

“Tell me what the white suit-man is saying, Ummi,” he demanded, mimicking the teachers at school.

His mother turned and looked at her son. She stared a while before she spoke. “Remember the airplanes that had an accident last week in America? This man is very sad that many people lost their lives. But he is also angry.”

“Why is he angry, Ummi?” he asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” his mother
whispered. “Now go and wash yourself, I can hear your father coming this very moment.”

The shocking news sent Ghaydaa spurtling down the hall toward the water basin. As he reached the basin, he heard his father trounce into the kitchen. He coughed for a while and then caught his wife chewing her thumbnail. “You’re an animal,” he yelled. “Don’t sit in front of me and chew at your own filth.”

“IT’s the Americans,” his wife replied softly. “George Bush is sending his men to Afghanistan.”

His father was stone. “Well, that’s their trouble, not ours.”

Ghaydaa glanced at a withered old translator asked them a question. Some wouldn’t stir unless the man who stamped his own papers, sending him back to that hellhole in Lebanon. He remembered Aadab in the Mediterranean. He couldn’t shirk the smile. One only other child is what you see in this village and he can’t go back. His father had never been truly content with no country; a man with no wife. Of course, he might drown. He had swum in years, and he hadn’t paid a fortune to take them to Greece was kneeling on the hollow plastic hull, wrenching the last of the brine from his throat. Ghaydaa approached and chung to the side of the vessel. The man pulled him onto the boat. He stared blankly at the exhausted man lying at his feet.

“My son. Where is my son?” Ghaydaa pleaded.

“The little ones never stand a chance if we go over,” he replied gruffly. “We need to keep moving. We won’t survive another dive.’ ”

“Where is my fucking son?” Ghaydaa shouted desperately. “Find my fucking son! Find my fucking son! Find my...”

Ghaydaa’s hysteria had numbed him. He had not heard the tension in the timber gunwale as the man leaned overboard. He had not felt the thumps of little limbs dragged along the boat’s bottom. He had not seen the man remove the lifejacket from the flimsy miniature corpse. He didn’t get to touch his son before he drifted out of sight. He had glued glanced at a withered old Greek man leading his family to the head of the queue. The man fingered the edge of his documents. He glanced from Ghaydaa to the translator, opened his mouth, muttered a syllable and then caught himself. Better to stay silent.

“Ask him the usual,” Ghaydaa said to his translator.

Ghaydaa stared at the queue of people before him. Scores of people had come to his station on the Turkish border since the Russians invaded Greece. The country was in chaos and thousands had been forced to leave their homes. Turned away by those in the West, they fled east.

Ghaydaa had never been truly content until he was hired to work at the border. He smiled as the Greeks came to him. A tossy smile that gave the wanderers hope as they tried to make it into Syria. They came, bent over double, with their United Nations papers clutched to their chests. Some would cry. Some would laugh. Some wouldn’t stir unless the translator asked them a question. Ghaydaa glanced at a withered old Greek man leading his family to the head of the queue. The man fingered the edge of his documents. He glanced from Ghaydaa to the translator, opened his mouth, muttered a syllable and then caught himself. Better to stay silent.

“Ask him the usual,” Ghaydaa said to his translator.

“Why are you intent on leaving the Republic of Turkey and entering the Syrian Arab Republic?” the translator asked in Greek.

The man looked again at the two men behind the glass in front of him. He took a moment before replying.

“He says he lost his daughter a few weeks ago while crossing at Ipsala,” the translator told Ghaydaa. “Says the Russians bombed his village and he can’t go back. His only other child is what you see in the barrow behind the rest of the family. He’s broken his back, but the Turkish hospitals won’t help.”

Ghaydaa needed to hear no more. He had made his mind up about this family before the old man had uttered a word. He always had his mind made up early. He gestured for the man to toss his papers under the glass window. The man did so and watched as Ghaydaa stamped each sheet individually.

Ghaydaa looked up at the man and gave him a smile. “Tell him the usual.”

“At the behest of the officer you and your companions have been deemed unsuitable for integration into the Syrian Arab Republic. You will be escorted to the holding bay where you will be assisted in disposing of your belongings. You will be provided with a cot for each pair, as well as clothing as per the availability at the holding bay. Any injured persons in your party will be taken to the medical holding facility. As of now you are considered subject to the United Nations Refugee Act, 2016.”

Ghaydaa remembered the short week he had spent in Greece, some thirty years before. He remembered the man who stamped his own papers, sending him back to that hellhole in Lebanon. He remembered Aadab in the Mediterranean. As the old man began to moan Ghaydaa waved away any protestations and repeated his favourite line: “Sorry, but that’s your trouble, not ours.”

He couldn’t shirk the smile. One more refugee kept out of Syria.
The Hare

by Mary O’Malley

I’m back with my long ears
And leverets. In Spring
I box for a sweetheart
Box with my sweetheart
And dance like Nijinsky
Otherwise I’m shy.

Old rites. Old as my strong back legs
Leftover legs with a spring in them
And my long ears for beauty.
Strange, some think, prehistoric
But once I heard it said
I have the shape of a hermit’s poem.

Card Deck

by Kornelija Stringyte

Poly-faced portraits
with bodies dissected in half-
abandoned float, on the algae rich
pond of the table.

The oaken shore,
beyond the ridges:
ivory, azure, crimson, sable-
stacked in unison.

The cross-hybrid of cardboard and plastic,
desiccating under the poker lamp;
stuck in half-motion of overturning-
the un-clocked metamorphosis.

The armies in deuce-
the reds and the blacks;
the hearts of the diamonds
spaded with clubs.
Wasting your time, yeah right. ‘Sepia.’ Cool name. Adrian is so clued in he Googled it off that Cohen Brothers film. Nice word. Catchy. One word. Arty. Easily pronounced. Reminds me of Sepultura or Nirvana. Simple. So long as it has that feel about it, that groove people can relate to. Something that people can remind themselves of the Gods of Indie Rock. And if Kim Kardashian can be famous for having a big arse then so can we. Can’t believe we’re playing Cleere’s, yeah, well, we’re nineteen now. Kurt Cobain was twenty-two when he made the breakthrough, so, it’s about time. We could play The Pumphouse, Ryans, you never know who’d be there, could be John Cleere, Cormac Battle, Dave Fanning. Get out there, be playing Whelan’s, the Button Factory, the Fifty Posters Hanging by Patrick Murphy

**Fifty Posters Hanging**

_by Patrick Murphy_

I.M.C., yeah. No more of that mid-day, afternoon, teeny-teenie, Wine-bar, No-Name, Battle of the Bands, catch-your-lucky-star shit for us. It’s time to get down and get on the road. We’re gonna get a mention in the ‘Gig Guide’ in the Kilkenny Advertiser too. That awl’ music. Cillian’s dad knows Edwina Grace. I wonder if we can get a review? Gig Guide, that should bring an extra forty or fifty people in. And the posters. And word of mouth. Yeah, we’re the word out on the street big-time. Fieram, and Brid, and Aine and Jackie are coming and Sam and David and Marco and Jamie and if they each bring along a couple of mates. And Adrian’s brothers are coming and Cillian’s sister and a couple of her mates. That should bring fifty. And these posters, that should bring in another fifty. So we’re gonna have at least one-fifty maybe two hundred there. Cool. This poster. Cleere’s. Been in the window there a week now. Nice one. Everyone sees it going to gigs for the next three weeks. Five notes in, that’s... two hundred each, after sound. Can’t ye go out and go to college or get a proper job. Broderick’s doing that for us. Got to get the sound right. Two hundred for one gig, well it’s about time we started making it pay. It’ll show Dad. But it’s not about the money, it’s about the music. And the chicks. They used to just come up to Curt after gigs. Didn’t even want them he said. Yeah, I’m gonna do that too. Act cool. Don’t give a shit. I’m gettin’ my nose done as well. It’s grand for Adrian up front. Everyone can see him. His tats and his lip rings. I’m gonna get a big silver fuck-off spike in me nose. An’ I’m not gonna get hammered before the gig either. Only after it. I hope they see me. Nothing in it. Always hiding in behind on those drums. I’d love to do a drum solo. Gotta practice. Practice. Yeah, I’m gonna do some work tonight. I hope Grace Cantwell is there. Jesus she’s some ride, what I wouldn’t. Comes to the gig, sees me on stage, two of us get trashed together, then. Be like Jedward only we’d have real women after us. And we’re gonna play real music. We’re gonna fuckin’ trash the gaff.

Where else could I put one now apart from Cleere’s? Well, the music places for starts. Essenes, Brodericks, Rollercoaster ... Irish Heartbeat ... H.M.V. ... I wonder would Sherwoods take one? They sell stereos. Maybe Ladbrokes, they have a good stand. Dad not putting one in his place. Get that ring out of your ear I’ll have no fucking queers in this house. The Book Centre, yeah, people who read books. And Manning’s Travel, people are always looking in the window there. And The Field, they always have bands. Jesus, fifty posters is a lot when you think of it. What about Mc Donagh, yes ... the Health Food Store would take one, alternative place. And fuck it, just slap up few around the square when no-one’s looking. The railway station, yes? Get a few tourists, and what about the hostel across from the Pumphouse, that’s another one. The Watergate, yes, always have a load of posters there. What about Langton’s, The Set? ... Hmmm. The Credit Union Community Notice Board, now they might seeing as I’m a member ... Night and Day Cleaning, yes, Erin’s auntie owns it ...

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The Ruins at Dunass

by Patrick Corcoran

I’d love to stay here, 
forever
and play with all the ghosts, she said.

Hide and seek amongst the laurels 
and fire-hollowed tree trunks.
Jumping over gnarled branches 
and ancient rocks.

They like company…
days of endless games,
eternal summer evenings by rapids’ edge,
watching anglers rest.

Peering at the last lady of the grand house, 
walking slowly through her lawns.
Her elderly frame flitting in and out amongst the dappled light.
She’s aware of them, but takes no notice,
she’ll join them soon enough.

They giggle at flickering circles of boy scouts, 
jostling around campfires, 
laughing nervously at ghost stories.
Most don’t see us, but some, 
the sensitive ones,
feel our presence.

And so she joins us, 
her new found, eternal friends, 
as we laugh and skip with dogs at heel, 
through overgrown, enchanted gardens.
Near the Edge of Darkness

by Colum McCann

In the early 1990s I was researching a novel, part of which entailed getting to know some of the homeless people in the tunnels of New York. At that stage—before physics was applied to the World Trade Center, and the Giuliani administration locked off most access to the underground—there were a couple thousand people living beneath the city.

A crack tunnel down in the Broadway-Lafayette station. A heroin tunnel not far away on Second Avenue. Organized prostitution in subways in Chinatown. Immigrant families in the railway tunnels under Riverside Park. Specious rumours of a community under Grand Central Station, fueled by journalists who wanted to apply a name to the idea: the mole people.

The idea of living underground, in the dark, feeds the most febrile part of our beings. The tunnels operate as the subconscious minds of our city: all that is dark and all that is feared, pulsing along in the arteries beneath us. There are seven hundred miles of tunnels in the city. The capacity for shadowplay is infinite. There are hundreds of nooks and crannies, escape hatches, ladders, electrical rails, control rooms, cubbyholes. An overwhelming sense of darkness, made darker still by small pinpoints of light from the grates of topside. And then there are the rats, in singles, pairs, dozens, sometimes hundreds at your feet. If anything can happen, the worst probably will.

I visited the various tunnels, on and off, for the best part of eighteen months. Sometimes I went with the transit cops and the Metro North Police; other times I went alone. I didn’t try to disguise myself as a homeless person. There is nothing more obvious than a middle-class white man trying to pass himself as authentic. I didn’t carry a weapon, or a phone (were there even phones at that time?), and I kept money to a minimum. Cigarettes were a currency: I kept packs in hidden pockets. Most of the time I hung around outside the tunnels, waiting for someone to chat to, a sort of cigarette firefly, pulsing red at the end of the tunnel. When I lit their smoke, I would have a chance to look in their eyes and make a split-second decision about who they were and if I could trust them to take me into the darkness. There was something Promethean about it. Here I was, at the edge of the dark, giving fire.

The tunnel under Riverside Park was one of the most fascinating of all since it seemed to embody the character and texture of most of the other tunnels. At the mouth, by 72nd street, there was a good deal of light under the rail-work fretwork. It was possible to believe that it was a scene from the Great Depression—immigrants leaning against their shacks, looking out over the Hudson, warming their hands over barrel fires. The deeper you went into the tunnel, the darker it became, down by 79th, 90th, all the way to 125th where it blazed out into daylight once more. A consequence of darkness is mystery. The farther underground I went, the more mysterious the people became. A pair of runaways. A Vietnam vet. A man rumoured to have once worked for CBS. A former University of Alabama football player who now looked at his life through the telescope of a crack pipe. Bernard Issacs, a man with long dreadlocks who lived in a cubbyhole in the rafters of the trains. Another man, Marco, a flute player, who lived in a cubbyhole in the rafters and wanted to be known as Glaucon. And Tony, a paedoophile who pushed his shopping cart full of tiny teddy bears along the edge of the tracks.

The Amtrak train thundered through their lives. There were murals and tags on the wall. Martin Luther King, Cost Revs 2000, Salvador Dalí’s melting clocks and even a replica of Gurrenois. The light shunting in from the grates up above formed a sort of natural spotlight. You could tell the time of day from the angle of the sunlight streaming down from above. Once, in spring, I watched the cherry blossom leaves fall down through the grates in the ceiling while the light caught the leaves in their peculiar aero-batic spin. The rats trapped through the cherry blossom leaves: the moisture rose where their paws pressed. You could take ten paces and you were in an almost complete darkness. The distant light became hallucinogenic. Metal dust from the trains hung in the air. It was otherworldly ... until it wasn’t.

Each time I went to Riverside Park I saw a woman, Denise, who lived just inside the mouth of the tunnel, around about 74th or 73th; in other words, she lived near the edge of darkness, in a shack slung together from wood and metal. Denise saw me one day cleaning my hands with a paper towel from an airplane sachet. "Can I’ve one of those?" she asked. I was traveling extensively, and so I had pockets full of them. Delta. Aer Lingus. I reached into my vest pocket and handed her a couple of sachets. She went to her toes and kissed me on the cheek. Denise was probably in her early thirties but the world had pushed an extra decade onto her. She cleared her hands meticulously and then tucked the extra sachets away. "Thank you, Irish," she said. The next time I visited I brought her a couple more sachets. British Airways. Virgin. Iftahussa. Denise was dressed and tucked them away in a fake fur coat that she wore, sometimes even in summertime. There was something so private and personal about the transaction: it was ours. She went to the tips of her toes and kissed my forehead.

One morning I decided to make Denise’s day. I went to a supermarket and searched the aisles for an extra-large packet of wet wipes. This would last her the whole winter, I thought. Hundreds of wet wipes in one convenient plastic container. She would be so pleased. No more furtive cleaning of her hands. She could do it whenever she liked.

I entered the tunnel at 98th Street and slid down an embankment, jumped down into the tunnel, walked down towards the 70s where Denise was living. I knocked on the aluminum sheet that went for a door. I was already patting myself on the back. She invited me in, but I remained in the doorway. I didn’t like going into the shacks alone. I handed over the bag of Handi Wipes. Denise took the bag and peered inside.

“What the fuck?”

She ripped it open and pulled one after the other out like a magician pulling a cloth from a dark plastic hat. The wipes fluttered to the dirt floor. “The fuck?” she said again. A shine in her eyes. A grief.

I thought of her for a moment as bitter, tired, ungrateful, but then it struck me:— What had I been thinking?— Denise could not carry a huge box of tissues in her imagination fur coat. She liked the anonymity of the small sachets. They were so neat and tidy. She didn’t want the humiliation of removing a wipe out of a plastic box. Maybe she did not want to carry around a single thing that might remind her of diapers.

Perhaps, I panicked, she might once have shared his sandwich, or at least given a friendly sous-chef could be found, or a doorman on Riverside Drive who might share his sandwich, or at least a dumpster at the back of a fast-food joint where more than enough food could be salvaged. Nor was there ever really a problem with clothing— in the nineties, there were more than enough charity organizations in the city to give out coats and boots and hats. Nor was even the prospect of breaking the law such a huge dilemma for the homeless—the cops more or less turned a blind eye. The homeless were largely unseen, unheard, left alone. No, these things weren’t a problem. Dignity was a problem. Dignity was the problem of all of us. I had taken Denise’s, or sidestepped it at least, and she had let me know.

Nothing ends really. A few weeks later I was in Denise’s shack and noticed the plastic bin again. All the Handi Wipes were gone. Perhaps they had been used, I don’t know; I’ll never know. She was using the plastic bin for odds and ends: a Giants keyring, a crack pipe, a swirling plastic straw, and a very small empty picture frame. The world we get is sometimes more than enough. It’s the picture carry with me somehow now, an empty space where the imagination dwells.
Not much of a man for music, you said in an alien tone, on that stark day.

The school choir borrowed your voice for your younger brother’s requiem: Mass of the Angels.

Not much of a man for flowers, you said arranging sombre bouquets in the pews.

His classmates carried bright tributes behind the white coffin you shouldered. Only sixteen but double his age, you were his hero and proud protector.

A great man for the fishing, you said releasing the first tear since that day, when the river snatched him, quenching his young life and slowing the flow and rhythm of yours, forever.
Mick Wilkins’ Sculpture Garden

Corkman Mick Wilkins began working with limestone after a move to Kilkenny in 1985, when he rented a house next to a stone quarry. Prior to that he had earned a degree in sculpture at the Crawford College of Art, but he worked primarily in wood and had never touched stone. Wilkins taught himself how to sculpt stone, working with two chisels acquired from the local hardware store and hauling pieces of limestone out of the quarry on a self-built trailer powered by his moped. His first finished piece, of a local man who tended a neighbour’s farm, still stands outside the front door of his cottage in Cork.

Although he sculpts in other media such as steel and bronze, Wilkins still works primarily in limestone, and in recent years has worked extensively on commissioned large-scale public work projects. He dates this development to time spent living in Galway, where he created a number of public art works, such as the Magdalene Laundry sculpture installed off Eyre Square in Galway City. Back in Cork since 2010 and working out of the National Sculpture Factory, Wilkins continues to produce numerous public sculptures, including a piece now installed at the Christian Brothers College in Cork to commemorate their 250th anniversary and pieces to commemorate the 1916 centenary for locations in Cork and Galway.

The sculpture garden at Cara National School in Mayfield, Cork showcases Wilkins’ versatility, combining as it does steel, bronze and limestone. This commissioned installation, designed for students with autism and mild to moderate learning disabilities, references trees, plants, and seeds — ‘things that grow and develop’ — but are not ‘real’ or ‘identifiable,’ which Wilkins believed would limit the students’ imaginative and sensual engagement with the pieces. Many move in the wind, creating ripples of soft sound, and the smaller ground-level sculptures, such as a multi-faceted seed pod, invite tactile involvement. The installation, Wilkins reflects, is ‘about things that move, that feel nice’: his hope is that the sculpture garden will speak to children for whom communication with a world outside the self poses seemingly insurmountable difficulties.
Jeanie’s Cure

by Elaine Gaston

Annie and I were still at primary school - there was only a year between me and her - we lived right at the foot of the Shankill, when she shushed me off one day in summer, beyond Woodvale, up to the waterfalls. We lay in the long grass, counted swallows, watched them flit past over the salmon pools, paddled, dipped with them into the shallows.

Before we left we hooshed out a bottle, filled it to the brim with mountain water, carried it down between us, like treasure, back to our kitchen house where our mother took it in small sups for her arthritic hips.

April Amish

by Nickolas Butler

1. West of Marshfield, a man can’t spit his Trident out the window without blinding an Amish. There is no changing the CD, or unwrapping the submarine sandwich riding shotgun. No phoning home or red spooning a Blizzard. Don’t even think about sexting or scanning the dials. It’s a jam of traffic on Highway 10 today, a dozen buggies, all with one or two horsepower engines, wood-wheeled and rolling at breakneck Amish speed. It’s enough to make a man pump down the volume, to ignore leaden zeppelins exploding levies or the ghost of a beautiful banshee, wandering those same fields, collecting the smithereens of her badly broken heart.

2. So many melancholy farmers in their blue uniforms and matching chinstraps, with their work ethics and Popeye forearms. Their G-rated laundry out for everyone to see. A double-dare to sneak up stealthily and pin some pink panties or a leopard-print thong to their line, a DD lime green lace brassiere or maybe an AC/DC muscle shirt, shook me all night long.

3. And yet, their draught horses mush, implacably through glacial debris, chomping their bits and I wonder about their own equine aspirations, or is it enough? A furful of orange carrots, last October’s mealy Braeburn or a single sugar cube, perfectly square and crystalline melting in that beautiful skull, pounding in that huge heart, those muddy hooves, that silent man, perhaps considered a best friend, even a brother, out laboring those April fields, while I fly past seated, at seventy miles per hour, singing Aerosmith, sweet emotion.
The bonfires burn night-long in the estates and car parks and football fields and scrubland, more than usual. The fires are ancient, echoes of previous fires that burned houses and streets and police stations and peasants and cattle and hay and gods.

Men and their boys sit in deck chairs, guarding the bonfires but they are not raucous and there is no beer, no music, no whistle-silver in the velvet night. Effigies grin and melt on the bonfires – the face of a politician flits into other countenances before it is consumed.

The women stand with cranky infants at their hips, in tube dresses and union jack nail decals, under the limp, proud flags on the lamp posts they sing in vocabularies they cannot know.

The twelfth of July seems to last longer than 24 hours. You can’t sleep as ghostly old boys march in orange sashes, wreathed in dripping poppies round and round and round and round you are afraid to listen you are afraid to know.

* * *

When you menstruate – a horse with a tangled mane appears beneath your window and waits to be ridden. On these nights you dream of a man in a mound of soft earth, crowned by briars eternity staining his black mouth purple. You wake at 3am.

* * *

You make the mistake of conceiving under a hawthorn tree. The child, when it comes, is sullen, its skin smells of spring rains and sweet rot. It does not resemble you. You know what it is. Concern is expressed over the iron crib.

* * *

Schoolchildren who see the Blessed Virgin in communion frills often go mad.

* * *

There are infants that will always, always, be in the ground. Except when they are not.
THOSE THREE WORDS

Those three words mean nothing to a girl like me
I’ve been too badly burned
And that’s what I learned
That those words meaning nothing to me
If it was an art to break your heart
Then you’d see my work in the national gallery
Through the carnage I’ve come out quite tarnished
And yet there you were
Our first date was at the bar
And you didn’t get very far
But I thought I could really like you
And we made a deal to make it easy
Uncomplicated, unromantic and not one bit cheesy.

Now I see love is a choice you make
It’s in the way you behave
It’s how you make me laugh
And enjoying what you have

So don’t say those three words that are so insignificant to a girl like me
Don’t say them with meaning or flippancy
Don’t look into my eyes and consider them

All I want you to do
Is to behave like they mean something to you
Cos those three words mean nothing to me

by Jean Powell

THE LAUGHING STAIRCASE

Gran pushed Dad down the stairs again. It was late at night; Dad had been going to the bathroom and she had thought him a burglar. A grown man sneaking around in pitch darkness; what else was she supposed to think? It was obviously the burglar’s fault when Dad ended up in hospital and Gran would boast of her bravery. Ever since she walloped him with the frying pan, we knew we’d have to put her in a home soon. Dementia may have been consuming her mind but she was deceptively strong for a small old lady.

Sometimes she would realise what she had done and would just laugh. It was good to hear her laugh, it meant she was remembering. Our favourite loved one was still here with us. My little brother Tim had this same realisation and in an effort to make Gran happy, kept trying to push Dad down the stairs. He succeeded three times and she laughed on every occasion.

Months passed by rather quickly after that. Gran was sent to the home but she didn’t spend long. While a nurse was pushing her trolley, a wheel accidentally crushed Dad’s foot and he hopped away in pain only to fall down the nearby staircase. Apparently, the subsequent laughter had induced a stroke and that was that. At the funeral Tim just kept holding on to my trouser legs and looked confused. It hadn’t hit him yet. Gran was cremated and we kept the urn on the mantelpiece. Unfortunately, Tim was a good climber and I caught him one day trying to sneak something big into his room. It was grandmother’s urn and Tim’s tiny arms were hugging it close to his chest. Tears were streaming in those giant eyes and his knuckles were white as his fingers clasped the artistic floral designs of the silver container. He finally understood.

“Timmy,” my voice was soft “put that down.”

He didn’t want to let go, neither did I. It was sad to think she was gone. We wanted desperately for her to be here with us. The loneliness ached. Eventually, Tim compiled and put the ashes down. That’s when Dad came out to see what the fuss was about. As he did so, his foot landed on the urn and... he fell down the stairs. We both smiled as laughter filled the air.

by David Tierney
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