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Mysterious and otherworldly as they are, it is questionable whether the marks on Ogham stones can be described as literature. Many of them seem to be monumental inscriptions remembering the dead. Probably they also had other social values, ones of which we can hardly begin to fully comprehend the significance over such a distance of time: denotations of territorial bounds; a cipher for another alphabet of runic origin; waymarkers for pilgrims and travellers; a cryptic alphabet used by druids as a code in resistance to the military authorities of Roman Britain; something to do with hand-signals or the number tallies of merchants... these have been some of the suggestions, but who knows?

Some things scholars are more certain about. A connection grew over time between the Ogham letter-names and types of tree or shrub, probably because the letter shapes looked like forking branches. For example, the fourth letter of the Ogham alphabet, four right-side downward strokes, came to be associated with saille, the Irish for willow (Latin salix, English salley or sallow). Perhaps Yeats, who knew about these things, was thinking of the old Ogham form when he wrote his famous poem “Down by the Salley Gardens”.

But all these questions of Ogham are much disputed by the experts, and the job is made harder by many inscriptions being defaced or worn away. All that survives of the Ogham stone in Ardfert, Kerry, is transliterated as “CT (A) N QLOG”.

This is different from literature, different too from history or even those tales which touch on legend – such as those told about my ancestor from the early 1900s, Father Barton, who is remembered in Ardfert parish as a sharp-tongued priest (he was once forced by the Bishop to apologise for saying that the teachers in nearby schools were not fit to teach pigs; he did so a few weeks later by saying he stood corrected, they were fit to teach pigs).

Despite the seeming distance, however, there is maybe a connection between Ogham and literature as we think of it now, in one of the origins of the word “ogham” itself. For it finds a possible root in the Irish og-úaim, “point-seam”. According to the leading Ogham scholar Damian McManus, this refers to the mark made by a sharp weapon. There is an analogue, again maybe, with the Greek word τύπτω or típos, meaning “type” but possibly also connecting to “tip”, with an array of meanings thus:

1. A blow, pressing
2. The results of a blow: mark, impression
Maybe Ogham began as this kind of scraped pattern-making, like the marks round the top of an ancient Greek vase.

Pattern-making is one way of describing what literary writing is, too, but we can’t be entirely certain of all its values either. One day in the far digital future people could look back on the literary productions of our own era with the same puzzlement as we look back on Ogham, as it cannot necessarily be expected that deep scholarship will continue. It certainly seems, with the advent of the Donald, that we are entering another Dark Age. But it is not all his fault; scholars too must share some of the blame for their own auto-da-fé.

Therefore we must be grateful for institutions such as the University of Limerick, which continues to support ventures such as *The Ogham Stone*, a beacon of light fostered, during these days, by those attending the university’s Master of Arts programmes in English and Creative Writing.

Questions of value often arise in creative writing teaching, with the most basic expression being that of the student who asks the tutor, “is this any good?” One is often tempted to give the answer that Joseph Conrad gave to himself, describing the feeling, in his autobiography, *A Personal Record* (1912), of getting to the end of a piece of writing:

*Here they are. ‘Failure’ – ‘Astonishing’: take your choice; or perhaps both, or neither – a mere rustle and flutter of pieces of paper settling down in the night, and indistinguishable, like the snowflakes of a great drift destined to melt away in the sunshine.*

Personally I think “does this work?” is a more useful question than “is this any good?” These questions of technical competence, albeit that they seem to become more existential the older one gets, are maybe slightly different from those that hover round literary value itself. I mean by literary value those reasons why we think we should read certain pieces of literature, or literature in general, though that is perhaps another thing again: those reasons, anyway, to do with
feeling and cognition, society and the individual, the national and international . . . all those things that literary critics simultaneously disabuse us writers of believing in and chastise us after the event for not having fulfilled.

Ethics (or Essex, as my colleague here on the MA in Creative Writing course, Professor Joseph O’Connor, amusingly puts it in this volume, in another’s voice) is important, too, and so is aesthetics, though I would always plump for the latter over the former. Another black mark!

We are often told that literary value is not what is expressed in the text, just as the voice of Joe’s voluble fellow, with his excess of discrimination (actually a failure of discrimination), is not the voice of Joe. Here is an august body, the New South Wales Quality Teaching framework, on this topic:

**Literary value does not include the values expressed or implied in a text but refers specifically to how one can attribute worth to a text in terms of its value to ‘civilisation’, a culture, a society, or a particular group of people. Each of these groups may attribute a different value to the text and use different criteria to do so.**

I have no animus against New South Wales in particular or Australia in general – every state now has mechanisms which seek to enforce good student outcomes. I offer the quotation only as a means to point out that pieces of writing often valorise those things that we (I mean, specifically, the community of writers and readers, constituted across time and space) seem to think are important.

To take some examples from these pages:

Eithne Reynolds’s paper boat launches us back to Chaucer’s invocation near the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, “Go, litel book, go litel myn tragedie” – and many a following analogue between the ship or boat and the literary work, no doubt because the latter invites us, writer and reader alike, on a voyage. The adventure is presumed to be a good thing, a literary value, though a reading of Mallarmé’s “*Brise Marine*” might cause one to doubt that.

In the tools and the kit and the tension and the precision of Catherine Phil MacCarthy’s poem, also published here, we see the radical object orientation of literature, the way it helps us build a world round things. Often this material approach (Henry James’s “solidity
of specification”, Roland Barthes’s “reality effect”) is set against one in which primacy is given to the evanescent voice; but MacCarthy nicely reminds us that the mouth is full of pins.

Both voice and object are also put to useful work in two other pieces, Mike Gallagher’s Heaney-esque “Sledge Hammer” and Barry McKinley’s comic but also moving piece, “The Boy”.

This relation between words and things is one of the conduits for memory in writing. Sometimes the memory is more powerful, actively constructing new states of being, when the original priming object is destroyed, as with the levelled crop (corn, perhaps) in the poem by Orla Fay, or D’Agostini’s shed in “Mr Henry”, by Anne Griffin.

As for the Russian doll that must be sacrificed, in K.S. Moore’s poem, all writers know about that, across the very long, fairly unsteady spectrum from writers in prison to those whose only problem is that or those which Cyril Connolly characterised as ‘the pram in the hall’ in Enemies of Promise. These constraints are different from those which concentrate and limit a literary form within its own terms, whether it be a sonnet or a thriller, but constraints they are all the same, creeping into the work from life either loudly, like the barking dog in Stephen Reid’s poem, or quietly, like the ‘murmurings of wind and water’ in Eithne Lannon’s “Binn Êadair”.

I love the lines she gives us there, “Like a container that holds and pours / we are filled and emptied”; they remind me of Keats’s “Ode to Sleep”. And if you read the contents of this journal in page order, they also prefigure the trials of miscarriage described in excruciating detail by Nuala Ní Chonchúir (what a phrase that is, “blighted ovum”).

Apparently, it is according to the moment and location of fertilisation, the exact spot and place at which the sperm hits the egg, that certain of our bodily clocks and instructions for cellular growth are set. Perhaps something similar happens when the informing idea for a piece of writing first enters the writer’s mind. I certainly think one needs to go back and try to revisit that moment, in the course of writing, to verify that one is doing what was intended and that one is controlling it properly.

But there is much in writing that cannot be controlled. You may plan to get from Limerick to Dublin on the M7 but will also find yourself diverted by the seductions of individual words from the highway (slighe), to the main road (ród), from there via the connecting road (lámraite), to the side road (tógraite), and even the cow road (bóthar). If you find yourself down a bóithrín (or boreen, as this even
more diminutive road is dubbed in English, which is almost another thing altogether), do not despair, as it’s often there that the gold is buried.

But all the while, as you make your immram, wandering like the hero of an old Irish tale, such a one as might have inscribed one of those old stones, it’s important not to forget the significance of the original idea and the initial conditions that gave rise to it. Don’t, in other words, like the man in Kenneth Hickey’s story, leave your umbrella behind, as everything that follows, even the seeming randomness of the aleatory, is a consequence of it.

The educative consuls of New South Wales stipulate that by Stage 5, students must know that “textual patterning is aesthetically pleasing”. And here it is on show in Jaki McCarrick’s spider poem, in the insect’s lacy weave and the “taut silver of her newest air-spun lines”: the “l” and the “I” and the “s” crossing over themselves between “silver” and “lines”. And here it is again in the “metronomic motion” of falling words in David Murphy’s “Had You Been There”.

Patterning, the quality which gives a text cohesion (full marks for that, cobber), is tertiary in writing to notation of reality, such as those “things I’ve noticed in my sister’s backyard”, as vouchsafed by the speaker in Monica Rowley’s poem, or “the strange fish to be studied” in Kiera McGarry’s. By tertiary I mean literally that the observation comes first. Next (secondary) comes combination of the observation into a grammar, which rises the notation from a basic to a surface level of language. Finally comes the third stage of patterning, which would apply to a total literary structure at all modular levels, and is one of the things which distinguishes literary language from ordinary language.

But all this is as arguable as the true meaning of inscriptions on Ogham stones. Even these notations of reality in which literary language begins, the scholars tell us, are pre-empted by the net that language systems in general, like McCarrick’s spider, spread over our perceptions. But there is something before language too, even closer to the body. It is the sound or movement before sense, that very real thing, the nod or grunt or fart dolefully celebrated by Marie Cadden – all of a piece with the bite and the outstretched arms and the spit conjured by Leah Jespersen, and also the walking dance of the Mexican girl in Josh Wann’s “Cognate”.

That poem speaks of ‘a composition of grace’ and the next, by Glen Wilson, of “thick roots”. I am reminded now of Paul Muldoon’s lines in “7 Middagh Street” where Yeats’s concerns about the political
effects of his play *The Countess Cathleen* are first mocked (“If Yeats had saved his pencil lead / Would certain men have stayed in bed?”) and then answered: “For history’s a twisted root / with art its small, translucent fruit / and never the other way round”.

Anyone who bangs on about literary value needs to remember that it’s history that is wearing the trousers, and mostly men’s history at that: something put to rights, in the smaller domestic sphere, in Catherine Donnelly’s acidulous short story, “The Sleeping Giant”. The further danger of speculations on literary value is that once they become institutionalised edicts, they risk overcooking the golden goose. And it is very easy to overcook a goose (one must presume it is already killed, being in the oven, but it is accepted that scholarly activity does need a frame).

Perhaps this overcooking is the danger that our Australian friends have fallen into, and their equivalents policing higher academic enquiry in the Research Excellence Framework in Britain, which insists on “originality, significance and rigour”. We can be glad that none of these authorities quite as yet speak lines from the Ruined Bodies section of the National Codex, as does the spectral mouth of the President in Jamie Samson’s story in this volume.

The dangers of the institutionalisation of literature are laid out in a recent book by the English critic DJ Taylor (*The Prose Factory*, 2016). There he identifies the creative writing course as one of the culprits. All I can say in reply is that teaching it, doing it – this slippery, awkward subject – here at Limerick, we are like the narrator of Philip Webb Gregg’s story in this volume: always ready to walk into the waves, recognising that writing is a process like the rhythm of the tides, like the rhythm of a heartbeat, like the way the Shannon slides on the river of itself down to the sea.

Sometimes I come out during a break from classes and stand on the Living Bridge that spans the river here on campus. I lean over and watch it darkly move below, jouncing a little as students pass to and fro behind me. It’s a good phrase that, Living Bridge, a human being came up with it, just as human beings made the marks on Ogham stones. If anyone next asks me what literary value is all about, I’ll tell them, go and stand on the Living Bridge in Limerick and you will know. You will know that it is about connection and dynamism – and you, too, reader, will know that also, absorbing the words gathered in this latest issue of *The Ogham Stone*.

Giles Foden
January 2017
The child sailed the high seas along the wavy grains
Of the church pew, in his paper boat
Fashioned from the Sunday missalette.
The boat lifted and fell on the tide of his imagination
Until it finally came to rest in the palm of his hand.
I watched and sailed with him back to my childhood,
To a single memory, a time with my father.
I saw him in that moment—the first time in decades.
But then, in front of me the child tired of the boat
Scrunched it in his fist and threw my memory away.
Along Rue Lacapede, a window on shoes, belts.
Inside the door, hangs the rich odour.
A man, at a counter, lays aside his work,
displays shoes he makes himself,
for dancing classical jazz. ‘Pelliure’
is the word that he suggests,

offering to fit a waist. I think of live calves,
vellum, the Book of Kells, my father
paying for a bellyband for a horse,

a new winkers for the mare.
At Carews, William Street, he stood by the till.
There, tools are clipped on a wall.

Here again, the gilt-embossed S
on a black sewing machine,
its wrought-iron treadle,

that spells S-I-N-G-E-R. Monsieur praises
the invention, shows the eye of the needle,
‘Il n’est jamais cassé’.

There’s my mother at her table,
hand winding the wheel, mouth full of pins,
the rat-tat-tat of the silvery metal

foot, between mid-finger and index.
The needle drills a long seam
to make a new dress, in green poplin,

a summer shift, a dancing skirt.
Fabric cascades onto the floor, a waterfall,
All business, new words drop from her lips:

In that moment, her precision
and concentration knew a life beyond children.
Russian Doll

K.S. Moore

We’re sacrificing a Russian doll,
my husband says

and I see
her waist,
the curve
defining
head and body—
a body of coal.

Flames raise hands
to her dignified form,
worship a woman in heat.

She is no witch,
she is just warm-hearted, modest,
her back burns first.

And when there is only ash
it occurs to me, she could
have housed the bodies of others,

Children, their ghosts
with fingers on lips,
whispering, mother, mama.
I watch her weave lacily,  
scuttle hump-backed  
to the lantern’s rim  
where I survey her handiwork:  
long diameters cross  
with concentric threads  
to where she first spun out.

Down from the table’s edge,  
in a cupful of August sunlight,  
her new rig stretches  
to my matching metal chair,  
her caught grime and dust  
like white fish trembling  
in an air-flung net.

She works around me,  
ignoring me then stopping for signs  
for I could destroy everything.  
Her ropes become like heart-binds  
as I look for an unbound exit.

A scuppered web  
hangs off the light-stand  
Thick and long as unloved hair,  
it has none of the taut silver  
of her newest air-spun lines.
Dredged from the deep, they had brought the strange fish to be studied, and locked her away in a dark room with insulated walls to keep the cold in. The tank hummed. She hung motionless in the water like a pinned frog, bloated and cross. Along the jaws were the clear teeth: a splay of jagged glass in the car-crash mouth. The barriers of the tank walls clinked against her fangs as she floated like a severed head in the still water. Their limits offended her; she, from a world of tooth and tentacle and endless dark had known none. Up came her last meal, a vomit of bubbles and broth; then the gelatinous smudge of jelly that was the tail of a dragonfish, severed from the body. The world wondered at the dark violence of her, the ugliness of the humped back, the black stain of her tongue, and waited for the one part that they thought could be remotely beautiful: the glow that came from the tip of her esca, fluorescing briefly like the light given off from a dying star, burned up in the moment of its extinction. But, forgetting that, could they not see a perfectness of that cavernous head: the stalagmite teeth gating the entrance, the single lantern that was her lure reeling them in? She was a dab of ink on an already black page: concealed, fathomless.
Some things I’ve noticed in my sister’s backyard:
There are butterflies looking for landings;
there is a birdbath with no water;
there are many outdoor chairs and no people;
the cicadas are loud and I like them.
The fire pit, full, is ready and tempting me to light it.
The groundhog has an established hole by the shed.
It is obvious two months ago the hydrangea had a fabulous year.
At this time of August, there is one lily blooming,
small and orange and fresh.
I wonder if I should tell my sister
about something as tiny as just one strong flower,
and that she just might be with the wrong man.
Spadeagled
beneath the safety net
of a lengthy marriage,
speech lies stripped
to a needs-must
surplus-to-requirements
can’t-be-arsed formula
of phatic communion.

When you know
each other’s script by heart,
when your next remark
gets second-guessed

a monosyllable
will fit the bill.
In time, intimacy
can dismantle

all language
but the pure
mute familiarity
of a nod, a grunt, a fart.
First attempt:
A faceless boy has pinned you by the hands and lips, and you swear
he’s trying to turn you inside out,
and you know you’ll give him every edible part of you,
bite back as good as you get, if he’ll just
say your name like it’s a psalm one more time.

Second attempt:
The faceless boy is blonde—no—brunette, or maybe both. Let’s go with both.
He’ll be whatever you want him to be. This boy is walking into a dark room,
your arms outstretched, feeling for edges,
and you find an unmade bed in the middle of it.
He’s not quite coming home, but he’s close enough.

Third attempt:
The boy looks like someone you used to want to eat alive.
He calls you his sweetheart, and you call him your undoing, and he just laughs
He knows you’re touch-starved,
and he mocks you for it.
He swallows down your profanities, and spits them back up,
following the script you gave him. His name is walking right into a storm
because you’ve heard there’s peace hidden somewhere in the centre.
we worked Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays, and 8 glorious hours on Saturdays together cleaning tables at the local Mexican restaurant.

I was all of 16 years of lanky angst, sophomoric humor, and going through what my parents hoped was just a phase with rap music. you were more authentic Mexican than the food our restaurant served.

your eyes were two birds from a land I hadn’t been to yet. how could something be so darkly colored yet speak of light that was desert warmth?

when you greeted me at the start of every shift you were the only one that called me by my full name instead of Josh. “hola Yeshua” and it left me with no choice but to play out my balcony scene nevermind that Romeo and J had died at the end. We hadn’t got that far in English class yet.

so I stopped you 5 minutes after close and to the music of half drunk cleaning cooks giving their best mariachi I told you that our words might need to be bilingual but our skin spoke one language. I told you it was music when you spoke even if I didn’t know the song of every word you used,
it was a dance when you walked,
a composition of grace, even when you were carrying
30 pounds of dirty dishes, your body lines were clean
as a painter’s. I believe at one point I even used a phrase
about our countries having boundaries but there was no need
for a passport between hearts.
you smiled
you nodded
you outstretched your arm with an open hand
“’xcuse mi Yeshua”
and you grabbed a clean towel from behind me.
I should’ve paid as much attention in Spanish
as I did in English.
I know you are there, giving your shade when the dawn comes each day.

You are not alone there, the red sowing of those terrible years gives you company.

There are thick roots, hybrids of hearts making these trees strong in coital vision,

stretching up in the St Petersburg sky, thin at the top but whispering holy words.

You can see to Africa now, spot the giraffes and hippos that entranced you Nikolay.

I am alive but lonely, coming here when I can to lean against the trunk, watch autumn leaves.
I’m writing

to say the weather is changing and
I feel as lonely as god.
I am doing things everyday
coming in contact with the city
and the places of growth
in the dark green country.
Drinking coffee,
I see their smoke rising
though the signal
I dare not broach.

The lake is a wash basin
and the moon is an unfinished
white marble sphere
on which heaven was a mural
which faded in time.

As a child I drew eternity
as an imperfect cobweb.
My teacher said
I did the exercise wrong.

I am learning to hear music
with my eyes
and listen to the curve of the blue.

The sycamore are truly red here
auburn burning, bunting crimson
falling fiery tongues
on ley lines and blue prints.

I’m in a car park with the windows down.
A dog is barking
and I am gazing
from a distant plain.

My mind is in parlay
with my conscience
weighing a mountain
against a cloud bank.
I have waited through the long winter grey
for the slow clean curve of spring,
the sun a warm breath on my neck,
its lips glossed with a damp breeze.

Far below, the murmurings of wind and water
weave a familiar braid of intimacy.
The whole of the blue sky is stretched wide,
light falls on us, a lovers’ blanket spread on sand.

This moment is already time’s fugitive;
sweet rain pooled in a dockweed’s leafy
pocket, the soft unwrapping of downy buds,
moss gathered in a hollowed bowl of earth.
Like a container that holds and pours,
we are filled and emptied.

To be lifted then into the loose
hem of the breeze,
cast out over the spooling cliff,
to drop like a bird,
free-fall into the wind.
Had You Been There

David Murphy

If you were there and saw her bend
to lift the letter from the hall,
you would have heard her shuffle
to the kitchen, hands on chest,

and heard, in early morning air,
those anxious fingers
slit your palest envelope
ear to ear,

and heard her slippered feet
on cold tiles;
her muttered whimper
fragile as dead birds.

Had you been there
you would have seen,
and understood,
her outstretched hand

and seen your words
fall slowly, softly
through thin air
in metronomic motion.

Had you listened
earnestly, even
just carefully,
you might have heard

the clink paper makes
when it collides with
the hollow inside core
of kitchen bins.
Today, he bequeathed to me his sledge, 
fourteen pounds of dead-weight steel, 
hickory handle rubbed smoother still 
from years of salt-sweat excursions 
along its shaft. 
It was not meant to be like this. 
I, the back and forth emigrant, 
met him first in Mike the Pies, 
cream froth slipped halfway 
down his glass, 
another Guinness always 
on the boil. 
We clicked 
as happens, once, twice, or 
if you’re lucky, three times 
in a lifetime. 
The one you look for 
as you approach the bar; 
the hours of easy chatter; 
holding out for afters; 
the only one 
to tear you down a strip 
and walk away 
unhanded. 
And once, we shared a tear.

I, a decade the older, 
had lined him up 
for the miscellany 
of tools in my shed – 
knick-knackery acquired 
down the years from 
flea markets and boot-sales. 
Aldis and Lidl’s – 
until the affair of his heart 
intervened 
and stents and bypasses 
interfered, 
upset the balance 
of our friendship, 
brought this warhorse down, 
this wiry graftier of a man, 
this connoisseur 
of mud-daubed walls and river sand; 
hard as the nails he drove, 
but courteous, 
soft as new turf he saved, 
willng to give of his all. 
He bequeathed to me his sledge today. 
And yes, I hid a rueful tear.
For over a month the crows woke us in the dawn to the sound of tapping, their beaks once or twice to the glass, knocks to jolt us from dreams.

I bolted the door to death seeing only the shadow of his wing, the disintegrating cloak of the Morrigan a puff of dark smoke.

I watched July become August and the past was toppled with the crop, mooning germs in the sun’s reflection. I could not stand to look on the fields that I had loved for their tall splendour, their windswept secrecy. Yet when felled and gleaned their levelness worded how painful endings disguise new beginnings.
Leonard Cohen has ceased to exist as a thing in this world.
And yet he continues to exist.
I can see his face when I close my fist.
His words just came out of my mouth, like this:
I have tried
In my way
To be free.

I believe in him like Jesus
Both Jewish guys who suffered
And performed their suffering
In the hope it would help others.
In the hope it would help them to
Transcend.

Both singing,
At the end,
Hallelujah.

Now, here, on a train, in dirty dawn light
With an iPhone
And an hour before my flight
As his name starts to trend
(Tapping gorilla glass
On the porn-smudged screen
Of a pink iPhone, at
6.46am
A poet?
A prophet?
All wrong.
A lover?
A cleric?
A...
No.)
Who am I, to sum up
A man who could spend
Fifteen years writing a song
Five minutes long,
That will outlive America?
So...

In the terminal building
I take out my sandwiches
They’ve leaked tears of honey
On my book, my harmonica
I wipe them down
With a serviette.

Approaching the bright orange
Easyjet plane
I finish my poem
And whisper his name

And I play the sweet harmonica
By the thrumming engine of the jet.

As Leonard Cohen’s body warms the world, I board my flight.
We leap into the sky, up through low clouds, and into light.
Today is my birthday. I am having one of my ‘I’d rather be elsewhere’ days. The problem is there is no elsewhere to accommodate me. No matter where I go, there I am, as the Caitlin Rose song says. No presents so far – my husband ‘hasn’t had time to wrap them’.

“Do they need to be wrapped?’ I ask. ‘There can’t be that many, can there?’

On his birthday there is special breakfast and present unwrapping with the kids. Today, I spend the morning in my bed crying, thinking about every horrible thing I have ever endured or done. Grumpiness over lack of birthday fuss is the least of it.

I think about my thirtieth birthday. That was the day I had my first miscarriage – I bled out my honeymoon baby. I had my seventh pregnancy and fourth miscarriage last year at forty-five. The pregnancy was unplanned but we were delighted. Who were we to argue with new life? When the pregnancy failed, it took much of my happiness along with it. You took my joy and I want it back, goes another song that rattles through my brain frequently.

The smallest of upsets pushes me far under since my latest loss and when I’m in this place, I can’t be with other people. I can’t even reach myself. Work – that is, writing – becomes difficult, like wading through treacle. I do it, because I know it’s good for me, good for my sanity, for my day, but it’s hard. I feel leaden and want nothing other than to be asleep. I don’t want to do school-runs, or talk to my husband over our morning cup of tea, or make dinners. I rehash a juvenile fantasy about running away. I’ll stockpile money and cut up my bank cards. I’ll work in a bar in some quiet foreign place – an island? – and be stoic. I’m a loner anyway, so I’ll be OK. Stoic, me? And, anyway, I have three kids and a man here that I love beyond reason. Traumatising their hearts by leaving them is not any kind of solution, no matter how bad I happen to feel.

My husband and I are planning a fourth child. I am forty-six. I know the risks but I’m determined. I am counting on one good egg,
despite my terrible history. How this golden egg is supposed to exist, I
do not know. I’m trying to relax and build a good internal environment,
with nutritious food, light exercise and pre-natal vitamins but, really,
I’m stressed by the whole enterprise. I wake up every morning with a
sore neck, sore shoulders, sore arms. Even my thumbs hurt.

We were going to try for Baby #4 in December but then a
summer conference in China hoved into view and, after two previous
failed attempts to get to Asia, I want to go. And I don’t want to be
heavily pregnant in 35°C Shanghai heat. So we hold off. We’ll try
in January. But, no, my husband has to be away with work at the
favourable time so the opportunity is lost. February then, definitely
February.

I hunt out my silver Sheela-na-gig pendant and start to wear
it again. I put the granite Sheela, carved for me by a Wicklowman
who heard me talk about fertility symbols on the radio, radiating
towards my chair. I slip a rose quartz ring onto my finger and a bowl of
uncooked rice under our bed. I order a silver and turquoise Kokopelli
pendant online – it arrived today, on my birthday. Good omen?

I do searches for ‘positive older mother stories’. There is little
good news. Firstly many ‘older mothers’ are ten years younger than me.
Secondly, miscarriage is rife over forty. Thirdly, other issues present
themselves: the chance of having a baby with chromosomal issues, for
example, increases to 1 in 30 for women over forty-five.

My Ma is amazed that five of my seven pregnancies were planned. ‘We
just got pregnant; we were glad of a miscarriage,’ she said after my
second loss. Perhaps a peculiarly Catholic response in a country where
contraception was illegal until 1980. But I find miscarriage extremely
hard to get over – apart from the avalanching hormones, there is the
anger towards my body and what I have begun to refer to as ‘my rotten
eggs’.

Ten months on and I am still not over last year’s miscarriage.
No one notices. Apart from the grief, I’ve lost interest in most things.
I sleepwalked my way through the publication of my latest novel, the
book tour, the launch – all of it. A friend ignores me anytime I bring up
the miscarriage. Another comes to visit but never asks how I am feeling,
never mentions our loss. I send a long, heart-poury email to a friend
who has had miscarriages and was devastated by them. I get a one line email in reply. When I mention my sadness, it seems, I get discomfort that comes over as disapproval and impatience.

4pm and still no presents. Then I remember my sister gave me a package when I met her before Christmas. I had put it away for today. I retrieve and open it; there is a silver bumble bee on a chain. It is finely made and beautiful. Bees are a fertility symbol; the Greek fertility goddess Cybele was also a bee goddess. Another good omen?

My Ma texts me for my birthday. ‘Happy’ is all the text says. I am tempted to reply ‘No’.

* Five weeks on from my birthday and I get a BFP on a HPT. Translation: I take a home pregnancy test and it’s positive.

* It’s Mother’s Day today and you’ll be glad to hear the presents were present with the breakfast: a beautiful cup and saucer, dark chocolate, a CD of fiddle music and a jasmine-scented candle.

My husband includes the lentil-sized foetus I am carrying in his Mother’s Day card to me, which is sweet.

The pregnancy is a worry for both us and thinking too far ahead makes me feel I will jinx it. And when you have lost a pregnancy (never mind four) it breaks your trust in the power of nature to do the right thing. Your own body becomes a site of mistrust. My symptoms are low key: fatigue, a churned-up stomach, bad skin, bloating and tender breasts. I am wishing for more – even the violent nausea I had on my successful pregnancies. My GP is sending me to the Early Pregnancy Unit for an ultrasound scan next week, which is both reassuring and terrifying. What if, once again, there is no foetal heartbeat? An ultrasound screen without a flickering pulse is a barren, gut-plummeting sight.

Scan day. We endure a two and a half hour stint in the waiting room. When we finally get in and the sonographer begins, she can’t see what she needs to because of my tilted uterus. Ah, yes, the tilted uterus that I am so often assured has nothing to do with my multiple miscarriages. I am sent out to empty my bladder so she can perform an internal scan.

Back in place on the bed, I can’t see the screen so I look, instead,
at my husband’s face; he is sitting to my left, gripping my hand. The sonographer’s mouse clicks as she takes her measurements on-screen, but she is silent. My husband looks stricken; his eyes flick over the images. On and on the clicks go.

Eventually I ask the sonographer, “Can you see anything?”
“I’ll explain it all in a minute,” she says and, with that, I know. There is nothing to see.

I’m doing a reading at a literary festival in Dublin tomorrow. There is no way not to do it. My compromise to sorrow is not to travel to the hotel booked for me in Dublin tonight; I prefer to do my weeping in my own bed. I dream of babies, endangered ones. The image of the newborn being washed in a puddle in a Greek refugee camp haunts my night. In another dream, a baby is dangled, naked but for a nappy, in a shop, then it is thrown screaming onto a pile of groceries. There is nothing, it seems, but jeopardy for babies.

I get up and apply lots of make-up to disguise my tear-swollen eyes. The literary festival takes place in the coastal town of Dún Laoghaire and it’s a warm spring Saturday. But I’m frozen – I cannot shake the cold from my bones. From my seat on the stage in County Hall I can see a slice of the sea. When my fellow reader is answering his interview questions, I focus on that wedge of water but, like a phantom, the scan image of the empty pregnancy sac floats into view. The black, black hole of it. And the sonographer’s words: ‘Blighted ovum’, words I have heard before. Words that mean this foetus was, most definitely, made from one of my rotten eggs.

It is the day after St Patrick’s Day and I have my second scan – the one to confirm that, one week on, all is indeed lost. This one-week wait is policy in Ireland because abortion is illegal, unless the pregnancy endangers the life of the woman. The scan is performed by a different sonographer. This one is less technician, more motherly midwife. My miscarriage is complete the scan shows and that’s a relief – I won’t have to have any drugs or procedures. The sonographer seems to read our minds about our hopes and pregnancy prospects, due to my age and fertility history.

“This is not the outcome you hoped for, obviously, but now you
can move on,” she says. She is cheery, encouraging and, unbelievably, has us giggling as she ushers us out the door saying she has no doubt she will see us again.

It is another gorgeous spring day, with an aqua quartz sky and warm sunshine. Our kitchen is filled with daffodils and blue hyacinths. Yesterday, though equally bright, was difficult. I like St Patrick’s Day but I was weepy, tired and angry so I missed any and all celebrations. Today I go for a walk, glad I’m not trapped in the hospital undergoing procedures. I live in a market town and it’s friendly – people say hello as they pass. Today I notice that a regular greeting is, “Are you well?” I want to answer “No” but, funnily enough, I don’t feel as unwell as I think I should. The matronly midwife-sonographer has made all the difference.

Four weeks on and I have an appointment with the consultant. Part of me hopes she will tell us to stop trying, that she will say, baldly, that I am too old. Because here’s the thing: I’m not yet ready to let go of the idea that I might give birth one more time.

The doctor we meet is not my consultant but a member of her team, a stranger to me. She is matter-of-fact about my advanced age, outlining all the pitfalls. She tells us she’s had three miscarriages and ‘wouldn’t dream of going again’ at her age. She is younger than me.

She says – and this I’ve never heard before – ‘You know, when the body has a few miscarriages in a row, it is primed for miscarriage. Most likely the following pregnancy will also fail.’

I feel angry with her. This sounds like personal theory rather than medical fact. It also directly contradicts the motherly midwife who told us that a woman who loses a pregnancy is extremely fertile in the months following, as her body is ready for pregnancy.

“The womb is waiting to do what it’s meant to do.”

Who to believe? And does it matter? I feel I’m too tired to want to go on. My rational self tells me to take care of myself, body and mind. Concentrate on the kids I have. But that annoying little thing called hope insists on flying in and out of my consciousness. At unexpected moments it spreads its wings and flutters through my mind. It drops its feathers. It perches in my soul. It lays its golden egg.
“A mother who loses her child can no longer believe in God”

The boy had a mouth like a twisted rag. He stood in the doorway of the house at Tottenham Green and looked us up and down. We needed engine parts for a Honda 175.

“It’s out back,” he said. “I’m breaking it for scrap.”

The boy brought us through the house. His mother walked past us carrying a ball of laundry. Her eyes were aimless. The world dumped pain and washing at her feet every day and it didn’t matter that her son was leading strangers through the messed-up living room.

The back yard was full of junk. Sheets of de-laminated plywood covered some of the wreckage, but most of it was out in the open: A blue bathroom suite, a wardrobe with a cracked mirror, a plastic fertiliser sack stuffed with shoes, a guitar with a missing neck and two solid bags of old cement.

“Cool stuff,” Kevin said.

Sarcasm. The boy didn’t get it. He puffed himself up with the pride of ownership. He pulled back a tattered Union Jack and revealed a smashed-up piano.

“Someday I’ll restore that, and I’ll play it.”

Kevin gave him a look that said, “No, you won’t. You will never fix anything. You belong to a breed that breaks, wrecks, smashes and ruins, and then you collect the debris. Your father, your grandfather and your great-grandfather were damagers and destroyers. They passed down their toxic DNA in a series of short bedroom grunts -- to you. You, my child, are about as useful as a fucking pogo stick in a minefield.”

The boy grinned as he tinkled on a fractured key. There was a scampering animal sound inside the piano; the boy stepped back and slammed down the lid.
“The Honda One-Seven-Five,” Kevin said. “We need the piston rings.”

The boy pulled aside the drum of an old tumble dryer and the wing of a car. He revealed the barest skeleton of a motorcycle. The back wheel was missing. The petrol tank was missing. The indicator stems dangled from electrical threads. The handlebars were gone and the speedometer glass shattered. The engine was still in place, only because the demon of carnage had run out of destructive energy.

“You’ll need a ten, a twelve and an eighteen millimetre socket,” Kevin said.

“I know what I need, mate,” the boy sniffed. “I’ll go get my tools.”

“You do that, mate.” Kevin said.

The boy went into the house and Kevin rolled a joint. “What do you think of Quasimodo,” he said. I didn’t understand. Kevin laughed. “You didn’t notice the hunchback?”

I said no, I hadn’t.

The door opened and the boy’s mother came out with another giant ball of laundry. Kevin nodded at the rusty drum that lay in the middle of the yard. “Will we pop it in the tumble dryer?” He asked, holding out the joint in her direction. She was a drab thirty-something woman in apron and slippers with a life that stopped moving sometime in the Sixties. She took the joint and stuck it in the side of her mouth. The big ball of laundry dripped on her hip as she took two deep drags. She blew a lungful of smoke into the space between us, and then chased it with a cough. She handed back the joint and went about her business.

We watched her hang the laundry and then prop it up with a four by two, the staple maypole of the tenement. She went back inside and the boy came out. He carried a tin bucket filled with an assortment of greasy tools. He had sockets, screwdrivers, a cold steel chisel and a ball-peen hammer. The boy put a ring spanner on the twelve-millimetre bolt and it spun without catching.

“Imperial,” Kevin said, “that’s half inch. You need metric.”

“I know what I need, mate.” The boy said.

I couldn’t take my eyes off the lump on his back. How had I missed it? It sat between his shoulders like the birth of another head. The boy tried to clamp the nut with a visegrips, but the tool was
old and rusty and the jaws wouldn’t lock. The boy reached into the bucket and pulled out the chisel and hammer. One by one, he sheared off the eight retaining nuts. Kevin winced every time; he wasn’t great with people, but he would never hurt an engine.

The boy lifted up the metal cover and grinned. “All right mate?” he said, and then he poked into the opening with a flat screwdriver and pried off the clip on the cam chain. The chain itself dropped into the depths of the gearbox. Kevin closed his eyes and shook his head.

“See,” the boy said, “that’s how you do it.”

The cylinder head did not separate immediately. The years had turned the gasket to glue. The boy smacked it with the hammer and a cluster of brittle cooling fins snapped off. He kicked them aside. He hit it again and the head tilted. Two more heavy blows and it fell to the ground, revealing the block and the pistons in their sleeves.

“There’s the pistons!” The boy said with some excitement. He reached in and tried to pull the engine block free. It didn’t budge. The boy kicked it with the heel of his shoe. Nothing happened. He tried to push the screwdriver between the block and the gearbox, but there wasn’t a razor blade of space. He couldn’t wedge, lever or force the obstinate lump.

“If I had penetrating oil,” the boy said, “I’d have it out in a flash.”

“But you don’t have penetrating oil,” Kevin said.

“No,” the boy replied, “but I do have petrol.”

Kevin looked at me and said, “He’s got petrol.”

The boy went to a shed half buried in trash. He pulled open the sheet of corrugated metal that acted as a door. He disappeared, and when he emerged, he carried a milk bottle filled with a yellowish liquid. He sloshed it into both cylinders. It spilled out over the gearbox and onto the ground where it formed a rainbow puddle.

“That’s going to penetrate,” the boy said. “And once that penetrates, the whole thing will slide away like butter. Like butter, mate. Wait and see.”

We waited.

After two or three minutes the boy said, “That should be enough.” He kicked the engine once more and the petrol sloshed out. The block was as tight as ever.
“Do you know what we need?” The boy said, “we need to force the pistons back down in the sleeves.”

The boy went into the shed and returned with a pickaxe. Kevin’s eyes widened.

The boy hefted the pickaxe over his shoulder. The handle rested on the ball of his hump.

“Heigh-ho, heigh-ho,” Kevin said, “it’s off to work we go.”

The boy didn’t get it. “One smack,” he said, “slap bang in the middle of the crown, that’s all it needs.” He turned to Kevin, looking for agreement, but Kevin remained inscrutable.

The boy swung the pickaxe and the sharp point tore through the centre of the piston. It smashed the aluminium and plunged six or seven inches into the guts of the engine.

“Good shot,” Kevin said, lighting another joint.

“It was, wasn’t it?” The boy replied, but the piston hadn’t budged, not even a fraction. The boy took the end of the pickaxe handle and wiggled it. He rocked it, he shook it, he kicked it and he knelt upon it. “I’m going to take it out and try again,” he said. He grabbed the head of the pickaxe and tried to withdraw it, but it had become part of the motorcycle.

“Excalibur.” Kevin said, but the boy didn’t get it.

The boy climbed onto the frame, put all his weight on the pickaxe handle, and started jumping up and down. The motorcycle keeled over and the boy landed with a crash. The last dregs of petrol flooded out on the ground and rolled towards the piano. The boy swore. He took the hammer and bashed the seat. He bashed the frame. He smashed the headlight. “You’re a bastard,” he said to the motorcycle, “a bastard.”

There was blood on the boy’s hand from the fall. A splinter of engine fin had lodged in his palm. He pulled it out and pretended to feel no pain.

“What we need to do,” the boy announced, “is heat the bastard.” He poured the last drop of petrol into both cylinders and then asked Kevin for his box of matches.

“Are you sure that’s wise?”

“Just gimme the matches, mate.”

Kevin tossed the yellow box at the boy. I had a bad feeling. The
boy struck a match and flicked it at the motorcycle. The inferno was instant; the flames shot out of the cylinders and set the foam in the seat alight. The clutch cable turned into a fiery snake and the carburettor popped. The wiring loom melted and toxic floaters drifted through the air like miniature umbrellas. A molten drip landed on the rainbow puddle and a blue wave flashed across the yard and into the mound of rubbish. The dry tinder in the piano ignited and the creature living within scratched in panic. It created a noise like improvisational jazz.

The boy went into shock. He had never imagined that petrol and fire could make such poor bedfellows. He grabbed the ragged Union Jack and started beating the flames. The flag caught fire and he tossed it onto the pyre. Kevin took a long drag on the joint and then, improbably, started singing Jerusalem:

Bring me my bow of burning gold,
Bring me my arrows of desire;
Bring me my spear! O, clouds unfold!
Bring me my chariot of fire!

The boy still didn’t get it.

I looked to the kitchen window where the boy’s mother stood at the sink, watching the flickering blaze. She turned on a tap and filled a basin with no great haste. She looked like a woman whose life could only get better if her house burned to the ground.
There is no hollow on the pillow next to me, no trace of a husband. I remove my earplugs; snoring saws up from somewhere below, while crows tap dance on the flat roof above my head. No rain, yet. Eyes shut, I explore the day before me. It unfurls as they all do; a steady hammering of seconds, minutes, hours. Today will be different. Today I will tell him.

Decision made, like every morning, I switch on the radio; my sleeping pattern seems tuned to the weather bulletins, and I rise to a string of synonyms for the wet October day. In the bathroom mirror I see a grey-haired stranger holding a toothbrush; I make a face, but her wrinkles threaten to swallow me whole. I lower my eyes and spit.

Clothes donned and face on, I tip-toe down the cast-iron stairs and past the Sleeping Giant’s den with Jack-and-the-Beanstalk stealth. No point in telling him first thing; if I wake him now, I will have to endure all manner of aural assault. I cannot face another morning of bathroom acoustics, or the gnashing of teeth on peanut butter toast.

I used to be proud of this house my husband built, this perfect modernist box. I loved the clutter-free surfaces and tall glass walls, the minimal design, the impeccable tidiness of it all. Even when we had Bri, the house seemed made to amplify our happiness; love bounced back and forth off the glass and laughter resonated across every inch of marble floor. Now, in this house that frowns on doors and curtains, that is all hard lines and so hard to heat, I find myself craving the softness of furnishings, the privacy of walls. I want silence - from the crows, from the rain, from it all. I will tell him after my walk.

I find my keys and fish the brolly out of the stand, glancing at the empty space where Meta’s bed used to be. I still miss the thump of her tail. The Sleeping Giant doesn’t want another dog – *fee, fi, fo, fum*, he says; we’re not getting any younger. Yet I keep up the old routines, tracing the same loop each morning - albeit at a slower pace. I set off down the drive past long limbs of copper beech, and see Meta as a pup chasing the autumn leaves, all paws and tail and tongue, Bri
proudly holding on to the leash for dear life. The memory of it makes me feel like chasing after ducks, or barking at joggers in their luminous lycra. I contain myself to a silent stroll, reserving a docile nod for the moorhens as I pass the Atlantic pond. With the drizzle thickening, I head for home. The Rav 4 is no longer in the driveway. The beech hedge matched Bri’s height, back when she was young enough to hold my hand, but wouldn’t. Now the overgrown trees wave their arms, as if in protest that I had to let the gardener go.

Throughout the morning I follow the giant’s trail. I sweep away the toast crumbs and mop up the coffee spills; I clean freshly-shaven spikes from the bathroom sink and deposit sweat-hardened socks in the laundry bin. Armed with air freshener I enter the den, opening windows to let out the lingering traces of ogre’s breath. I take last night’s empty bottles and add them with a clink to the collection in the cupboard under the stairs. I put a clean throw on the crumpled sofa and tidy the books and magazines (a heavy tome on Japanese architecture; *Golf Weekly*; *The Wine Connoisseur*).

I don’t know when my husband first became the Giant – it happened slowly. Not long after poor old Meta passed; definitely after Bri had gone to Australia. The snoring progressed from gentle to grotesque, the mannerisms from endearing to infuriating. Bottles amassed. Moods fermented and set. What will Bri think when she finally comes home? How can I tell her? I don’t need to tell her. I need to tell him. *Fee, fi, fo, fum,* I hear him say, *you don’t have it in you.*

On my second coffee, I check my email: there’s one from Bri, - *Hi Mum, Jonas just lost his first tooth!!! Look how cute. Give my love to Dad. Talk at the weekend xxx.* She has attached a picture but I have forgotten how to download it. There is a tiny thumbnail on the screen; the dark blob against the dazzling bright background I presume to be my grandson. I look above the piano to my favourite picture of Bri, a framed shot taken in her last year of school. Her hair is still its natural brown and her skin a healthy Irish cream. Her father and I stand close behind her, straight-backed and smiling, almost wrinkle free. In the pictures she sends now, I barely recognise the Bri with the blonde hair and tan and the big silver bangles, the toddler swinging off her side. I want to tell her about the Sleeping Giant, but I never know how to start, so I type a quick reply – *Hi Bri, I can’t believe how big he is!!! Can’t wait to hug him. Dad’s out playing golf, as usual. Look forward to speaking to you, love to Jonas and Mike too of course.* Mike being the Australian brute she married. He’s a doctor, apparently. Do all doctors
in Australia have tattoos? Oh Mum! I hear Bri say.

Coffee pot emptied, shirts ironed, breakfast dishes washed and dried, I retreat to my workshop at the end of the garden. My latest mosaic is a small round mirror for Jonas. Backed on cheap plywood, from the fragmented shards of coloured glass and ceramic I construct a diamond-cut border of birds, flowers, and Jonas’ favourite - crocodiles. I smooth the render, then spend a while preparing the next batch of tiles. I tap, smash, sort, label. All these years of trifling and still I am an amateur; I eye the mirror with its toothless crocodiles, and give the grey woman a long hard stare. Tonight I will tell him. The hag staring back doesn’t look so sure. I tidy up and lock the shed, hiding the key under the flowerpot - as if anyone would want to steal my ‘work’. The Giant finds my projects embarrassing - he asked me once to stop giving them as Christmas presents. The drizzle has given way to proper pitter-patter raindrops, and I hurry up the path.

Inside, the rain becomes deafening as it smashes off the metal-coated roof, and I switch on the radio to drown it out in time for another weather update. The weather man sounds in a good mood, at least, chirping through the weekend doom. I switch to Lyric, and pick at the leftovers of the salad in the fridge for lunch as a quartet of strings compete with Nature’s open-air percussion show. The Giant will have been rained off the green, and I picture him settled by the clubhouse fire, a brandy in one hand and the paper on his lap. When he reaches a certain column, the purple of his nose will deepen, and he will rise, brandy in hand, to pontificate to anyone who will listen on the state of the nation and the lack of real leaders on this goddamn wreck of an island. Fee, fi, fo, fum. Soon though he will tire again, and bow back into the armchair. By three o’clock, he will have dozed off (does he snore at the club, I wonder? Part of me cringes to think of it. Part of me hopes he does). At some point a bartender will discreetly nudge him, and a brandy or two later, he will head for home.

It was not meant to be like this. We were supposed to retire to Tuscany. I picture us in a rustic villa, with purple bougainvillea trailing beautiful solid stone walls; faux-Roman statues point down the steps to where our many grandchildren play in a turquoise, petal-strewn pool. Instead came the Recession, and the realisation that we had made some very poor choices with pension funds. Bri qualified as a nurse into a healthcare system on the brink of collapse; she emigrated without looking back. I have yet to meet my grandson. My husband gave up learning Italian and became the Sleeping Giant, a living,
breathing, boozing ogre; he spends the daylight hours working on his
golf handicap and the night time playing at wine connoisseur on bottles
of cheap Chianti. As the years pass I spend more and more time in
my workshop, trying to make something beautiful from all my broken
pieces. I am going to tell him. Tonight.

The Marks & Spencers meal deal is in the oven - a sickly-sweet smell of
duck *á l’orange* fills the kitchen - and I am dressed for the occasion in
a black off-shoulder number which I dug out of the wardrobe, having
read in a women’s magazine that the shoulders never age. The dress
is from M&S too. The Sleeping Giant will be on his way home in the
ridiculous red Rav 4 that he spent the last of our retirement money
on. He will have a shopping bag beside him with a couple of bottles
of tonight’s poison. I go over the words in my head. I see his face –
purple-nosed, pop-veined, confused. *Why?* he will ask. *Why now?* To
which I will answer, wiping a tear from the corner of my eye (magically
wrinkle-free in the scene which plays over in my mind): *Because you
are no longer my husband. You are the Sleeping Giant. The first thing
I hear in the morning is the sound of your snoring. That, and the
crows. You disgust me. I do not desire you. You do not deserve me.* To
which he replies, *But where will you go? What will you tell Bri?* And to
these questions I have no answers.

I hear the Rav’s engine at the same time as I see the lights round
the corner at the far end of the driveway. If Meta were here, she would
be doing her little spaniel dance in circles by the front door. I see Bri
with her chestnut hair falling past her shoulders, button nose pressed
against the wall of glass, her call echoing bird-like through the house;
*Daddy’s home! Daddy’s home!* I see the stooped grey-haired woman
reflected in that same glass wall, her black dress sagging in all the
wrong places. She raises an eyebrow in a rainbow of wrinkles, and I
experience the common certainty of doubt. Lights are speeding up the
drive, ricocheting around the glass walls at dizzying angles and *fee, fi,
fo, fum*, I find myself thinking that now is not the time. Better now to
make the small talk; to go through the motions of a meal. I will tell him
later.

After dinner I escape back out to the workshop with torch in hand.
The showers have eased but the wind is rising; the chimes on the
back porch are clanging out a rusty overture. Spots of light still fork
through my eyes, and I stumble a little on the path in my too-tight
suede heels. The strip light of the workshop makes the headache worse, but I spend a while sanding down the crocodiles. Opening a drawer labelled PEBBLES I search for the smallest, whitest, shiniest ones in my collection. I try a few arrangements, but the pebbles are too rounded; the crocodiles all look like they’re wearing false teeth. I think of Bri’s baby teeth, which I still keep in a pillbox in the bathroom. Would Jonas mind having crocodiles with his mother’s teeth? Would I need to tell him?

I don’t have the head for detail tonight so I take down a toolbox and empty all the cutters and picks and hammers onto the workbench, wiping each of them clean with an oiled cloth before replacing them one by one into their velvet-lined slots. The smell of the linseed is soothing. I’ve been meaning to put up a recent picture of Jonas in the kitchen; I leave the largest hammer aside to carry back to the house. I wonder if I will get around to hanging it. I rather hope I don’t.

Hammer in one hand and torch in the other, I click-clack back to the house with wind biting my bare shoulders. I don’t know why I didn’t put on my anorak. I lock the door behind me, remove the heels and hang up the torch. Splotches of light still dance across my cornea. Instead of tip-toeing past the den, I pause, and push open the door - it is the only real solid door in this house. Even the bathrooms have just a frosted glass pretence at privacy. The Sleeping Giant forms a horizontal mass on the sofa. The snoring is gentle at this early hour; fresh drool glistens on the patchwork throw. I resist the urge to wake him. To shout all the words that never leave my head, never make it to my mouth. I back out softly.

I cross the cold silent marble to the front of the house, meaning to leave the hammer on the hall table where I will see it in the morning. I haven’t decided yet where to hang the picture of Jonas - there are not a lot of options, given the effect of nails on glass. As I switch out the main lights I see the security light in the driveway come on, and press my face to the nearest pane.

A fox looks back. He seems to have walked straight out of a story book; he has a strong bushy tail, one paw raised, ready for flight. We stare at each other for a long moment, until he blinks his yellow eyes, once, twice, then turns and stalks off around the back of the Rav 4. Any other night I might have turned for bed, keeping the afterimage of the fox for the morning. I have a box of beads from a broken amber necklace, with which I might have tried to recapture the fierce beauty of his eyes.
But the security light stays on, and with the fox gone, it spotlights another beast: this one of shiny red metal, sitting smug on the drive in all its idiotic glory. I slide the front door open and step out. The damp gravel crunches softly, sticking between my toes. The freedom of being on bare feet shifts my balance; as I circle the Rav I feel a bounce, a lift, a purpose to my stride.

I circle it twice, then stop at the bonnet and quick, before the doubt can come back, I swing the hammer at the driver-side headlight. It makes a satisfying smash. That’s for Meta. I take out the other one. Glass tinkles at my feet. That’s for Bri. I walk around and take out a side window with one smooth blow. That’s for Italy. The alarm goes off, wailing above the gusting wind and the sound of glass breaking. I take the windows out one by one and start on the hood, which dents beautifully, red metal groaning under each blow. Bang, lift, smash, swing. I’m not strong, but I know how to handle my tools.

The lights in my left eye slow to a waltz and I feel a jolt of arthritic pain in my arm. How long has the Giant been standing there? He seems to be saying something, but I can’t hear over the shrilling alarm and the wind. I picture myself as he must see me: a barefoot hag in a shapeless black dress on a scrapheap of glass and red metal, grey hair wisping everywhere on the wind. Hammer whirling, windscreen smashing, piece by piece I rip through his world. I raise my face to the night and laugh, and laugh, and howl, and smash.

My husband remembers the zapper at last; he points it towards me and the blaring stops, leaving only a hollow harmony of wind and trees and leaves. The show is over; I slide off the bonnet with as much grace as I can gather and turn towards the house. He steps aside for me to pass. He looks smaller. His lips are chapped and covered in wine stains; they open and close in short unsteady pops.

I head for the stairs, trailing grains of blood and glass and gravel across the white floor. I leave the hammer by the bathroom sink and pick up my toothbrush, remembering to lower my eyes as I brush. Without bothering to undress, I wrap myself in the stiff white sheets, reach for my earplugs and close my eyes. Nothing left but to wait for the morning. For the rain, and the tap-dancing crows.
The umbrella. His umbrella. There was no way then to know the significance of that umbrella. The consequence of the thing. You could tell the weather by it. He never took it when it rained and when it did rain he was always caught without it. It was a present I think. From some friend or other. Back when we still had friends. I never liked it much.

She never liked the umbrella much. She said it was too dreary, too dark. She preferred colourful things. Things with colour to them. Had I not brought it that evening things might have turned out differently. Things might have turned out exactly the same. Who knows. Who knows for sure. There’s no way to know.

That’s how I knew he was in the apartment as soon as I stepped through the door. On dry days anyway. It would be lying there in the hall, propped up against the old hat stand I found at the flea market. Once I saw that I knew he’d arrived. He never rang. Never let me know in advance. It would just be there. Intruding. If it was a wet day he wouldn’t have it and there’d be no warning. He’d just be sitting there in the old leather armchair looking out through the big bay window at the soaked street. The crying trees. Lost in himself. Contemplating.

I don’t know why I brought it. It wasn’t even raining. I carried it all the way over there just to leave it in the hall. I fixed myself a drink. Scotch with a splash of water. I knew she wouldn’t mind that. She’d see the umbrella and know I was there. Waiting for her. There’d be no surprise.

It was a day like any other day.

That afternoon seemed different. Felt differently.
I wrote the note and left it where I knew he’d find it. I don’t know why I did that. I couldn’t explain it now. I should have known. I should have guessed. What use was there in pouring myself into meaningless words? What did I think it would achieve? I knew what we were doing. I understood what the rules dictated. I can’t pretend otherwise. Even if I want to. I despise myself for that weakness. I can forgive a lot of the other errors but such weakness is unforgivable.

I was surprised. I can admit that much. I didn’t think she’d ever do something like that. Something so bold. She knew I’d find it. I hadn’t understood she’d reached that point already. That inevitable junction where action must be taken. I thought we had longer. Her handwriting was so neat. Small and fragile. Almost childlike. The opposite to the way I thought of her. Like a child. It confused me. I didn’t know what to do. I read it. I read it several times. But what then? How does one move beyond that point once it has been reached. Once what needed to be said had been spoken.

I said it all. I said everything. I was tired. Tired of being the other one. The forgotten one. I think he knew all along. I think he had guessed anyway. Figured it out. He just ignored it for as long as possible. Chose to turn his face away. He left me no option. I had to write it then. But what was I wishing for? He was too cold for it to have any effect. It didn’t have any effect.

I was amazed. It took me by surprise. She had said everything. The things I already knew but had never heard her say. Not out loud. I remember some of the lines. I feel abandoned by you. Forsaken. Thrown to one side to be picked up when I’m wanted again. Or something like that. Something of that nature.
I remember she used the word ‘abandoned’ and ‘forsaken’. I recall that. I’m sure of that. They were words I never thought she’d use. That stuck in my mind.

I found it in his wallet. One of those small portraits you get from machines in train stations. For passports and such. I had it enlarged so I could look at her more closely. To see what she had that I didn’t. What was there that wasn’t here. What kept him. Kept him going back. That’s all I wanted to know. What was the difference. I couldn’t see the difference. Was there a difference? She didn’t seem prettier? I don’t know. I don’t know what it was but he always went back. Again and again and again.

That was a happy day. The day the picture was taken. We’d been out all afternoon in the country. She liked that, going to the country. On the way back at the train station I convinced her to get it done. She hated having her photograph taken but I insisted. Something for my wallet I said. She agreed in the end. It was different then back before there was someone else. When it was just us. When it went missing I thought I’d lost it. The way you lose small things. Small insignificant things which just drop out of your life. Like old photographs. Like umbrellas.

I knew he’d be angry. He got angry easily. It wasn’t the first time for that. He wouldn’t have understood. He wouldn’t know. I hid it. Under the bed. With hindsight a poor choice. The one place we spent a lot of time together. It wasn’t as if he took me out for romantic dinners. We were not a public couple. But I knew that was the way of it. I knew what I was getting into. I can’t complain about that. All the other matters I can question but I’ve no excuses there. Not on that count.

It was a fight unlike any other. I’d never fought with her like that before. The
usual coldness was gone. Replaced with something without name. She screamed. She screamed words without meaning. But nothing changed the facts of what she’d done. She’d still taken it. Committed the deed. She gave it back but the damage was already done. It was already dying then. I made her burn the copy. Threw it into the open fire she had lit because of the bad day. I was soaked to the skin. Caught in the rain. I had forgotten my umbrella. As expected.

Roses. That’s what he brought the time after. White roses. Bridal roses. Almost a bad joke. Almost. He wasn’t clever enough for it to be a conscious gesture. It was afterwards I heard about his thing for flowers. How he always used them to try to glue back together things that were already broken. Shattered. A mutual friend told me. An old friend. One who remained. He came in smiling and presented them as if it was all water under the bridge. Sins washed away. Absolution. I didn’t know what to say. I just shook my head and muttered. He seemed to take that as an acceptance. I never knew what he assumed I accepted.

I didn’t know what else to do. What other course was left to me. I wanted back what was gone. Returned to the way it had been. It hadn’t been my fault. I had tried. But the light had slipped out through the cracks we had put there. Through the cracks that had always been there. I thought it might work. Flowers sometimes work. Sometimes. I think she liked them. I hope she did. She didn’t say either way. She just twitched her face and murmured. I didn’t catch the words and couldn’t find the courage to ask for clarification.

I may have decided to do it then. Maybe I decided to do it later. Looking back through reflected time it’s hard to separate one incident
from the other. But something had changed. After he’d walked in with
a smile and roses I knew it was never going to go back together. The
pieces didn’t fit anymore. All I could see were the thorns. Even as I got
some water, found a cracked vase and put them next to the bay window
to get some sun. That’s all I could see. Thorns.

She was quiet after that. Just sitting
there looking out the window. Like I used
to do when I was waiting for her to
return to that place. There was
something on her mind then. She was
thinking. Now, I could probably guess
what it was. But not then. Then I just
thought she was quiet. That maybe it had
been a tiring day.

I saw it as I came in. That same umbrella. And in that fraction of an
hour knew what I was going to do. It had been a difficult afternoon.
I hadn’t expected him to call. It had been a while since he called. I
pushed open the door into the dusk soaked room and he was sitting
there like every time before looking out into the street. Bathed in dying
sunlight. I called his name but he didn’t respond. I called his name
again.

What are you doing here she said. I
wasn’t expecting to see you. She’d never
asked me that before. She’d always had
just walked in. Maybe kissed me lightly
on the cheek but never asked why I had
come. Nice surprise I hope I said. She
nodded and muttered. I see you brought
your umbrella she said and not a cloud
in the sky. You never know I said. Is
that right she said. You never know.

He left it behind that night. He’d done that before. It would remain in
the same spot during his absence and he’d take it the next time. Take it
home. But not on this occasion. Not now. Once I was out in the falling
twilight I opened it up and walked the few streets to his apartment.
There was a small shower then but I didn’t get wet. I had shelter. She
didn’t know who I was at first. I recognised her from the photograph. *Here’s his umbrella* I said. And I could see the truth in her eyes. Her eyes knew. I got wet on the way home.

I don’t understand why I had taken it that last time. It had been a nice spring evening. Weak dying sunshine. Why did I have it? But I did. If it was bucketing out I would have left it at home. But I didn’t. Maybe it was meant to happen. There was a plan to it all. Maybe it was meant to happen. It happened none the less.
Universal planetary and solar cycles will remain constant as its torso broadens and its limbs extend, and the child will be praised by men and women alike for its obedience, intelligence and energy and for the blueness of its eyes, a placid cool tone that will be favourably compared to the blue of the nation’s flag, and it will manoeuvre its bicycle through the streets and broad squares of the capital, always performing the accepted gesture of devotion as its passes the Presidential Residence and the Bureau of Industry and Projects, and on warm days it will leave its bicycle to rest by a tree in a local grassland enclave and will lie down on the ground to observe oddities of cloud as they float in the space of sky overhead, clouds with polychrome gashes that are heavy-looking and slow-moving and that give off the honeyish odour of chemical waste, clouds the shape of milk jugs or antlered deer or Russia, and some time later the child will die, there will be a collision with a mobile crane, crushing its skull and spine, destroying both bicycle and child, and the ruins will be examined and briefly appraised by a pair of adults in protective clothing before being delivered in a cube of black glass to the home of another pair of adults, the child’s father and mother, who will pay a small fee – incorporating the cost of the cube and the rental price for the obligatory mourning device, a large electrical box that plugs into the wall and assesses in a more comprehensive manner the potential value of the ruins – and then they will bring the cube and the mourning device into their home, make several phone calls to other adults, informing them of the state-mandated mourning procedure to take place the following evening, and later on, as they discuss the various emotional and practical implications brought on by a child in ruins, there will be a wettening in the father’s eyes, though not in the mother’s, and after a period of exactly twenty-four hours sixteen men and six women will gather around a table in the darkest room of the parents’ home, and the glass cube will be delicately cracked open with a clay hammer and the ruins of the child pulled out by the ankles, its clothes removed, and it will be placed nude on the surface of the table by the father as the guests secure their metalloid face-masks and their plastic coverings, as the mother connects each of the twenty digits from the child’s hand and feet to the flexible nylon tubes that protrude from the mourning device, which, upon being plugged in and switched on, will immediately begin

Mourning Device For A Child In Ruins

Jamie Samson
to drone and crackle and make certain respiratory noises as it measures the ruins of the child for its energy resources, the smoothness of its bodily tissues, the rigidity of its internal organs, the vulnerary qualities of its liquids, the chemical properties of its irises, and the manufacturing potential inherent within the bones and marrow, and the mourners will stand in elaborate silence until the electronic registering is complete, and then the mourning device will project onto the wall a pre-recorded video image of the President’s bandaged face, slightly misshapen against the contours of the mantelpiece, which will open its visible mouth to recite familiar lines from the Ruined Bodies section of the National Codex, so that these ruins may contribute to the machinery of the future, that they may help us to destroy our enemies, that they may be bring forth grand and beautiful ziggurats of progress, that they may feed the mouth of the nation, rather than rot and stink like the wretched insect, rather than perform the miserly contortions of the halved worm, and over this recital images will appear of colossal electroverdant spew from the enormous chimneys of industrial plants many miles away, and in the smouldering green centre of this rising smoke the Angel of Ruined Bodies and the Angel of Industry and Projects will appear as spectral smoke-beings, one lissom hip melded into the other, and they will join hands onscreen and smile and then fade away into the general effervescence, and then the President will invite the mourners to switch on the electric knife, to remove the desired pieces of the child, as dictated by the device – in this case, the spinal chord, the liver, most of the intestines – and to ensure that they are stored correctly in closed containers filled with ice, for later government collection, and when these duties have been brought to completion and the President has given his pre-recorded farewell and vanished from the wall, the men and women will share amongst themselves the child’s unserviceable remains, its impotent internal organs, its resource-free buttock meat, its brain, eyeballs and tongue, all too badly mutilated by the crash to be of any use beyond the banally nutritional, and with some disappointment they will eat the flesh as quickly as possible, chewing and crunching and wiping away streaks of blood and fingernails from the insides of their mouths with tongue and hand, and after the rushed meal they will pour themselves drinks and move upstairs to the east-facing balcony where they will look over the rooftops and the concrete towers of the capital and wait in obedient silence for the state-provided fire, the Flame of Closure, built and lit in a secure zone at the city’s easternmost limits, a pillar of frail, ochre light, marking the completion of the mourning period and the return to ordinary life.
Prejudice
Joseph O’Connor

Important to stick together. In these difficult times. Not be doing each other down. Look out for one another. Sure it’s gossip and backstabbing has this country ruined. But some people. Don’t be talking. Terrible, how bigoted some people are. Injected up to the gills with it. Like botox into a yuppie. And the way they do be gossiping. Not like me, of course. Prejudiced? No. Not me. Never was. As they say in the Irish, “Ní neart go cur le chéile.” All pull together and we’re strong. Eh?

I just...don’t like yer man.
Something about him.
I can’t stick yer woman.
Not my kind.
Don’t ask me about that crowd because you’ll only get me going. Look at the hair-do. Look at the walk of it. I’d say she says more than her prayers, wouldn’t you?
Course you know about him. Did you never hear that? Sure, that’s well known. That’s gospel fact.

They’re ignorant, they are. It’s the way they were raised. Course I’m tolerant to the last. I don’t believe in gossip. Give everyone a break. I’m big into that. I was anti-Apartheid. My cleaning lady is Chinese. I can’t abide intolerance. I don’t DO prejudice. But you know what they’re like. They can’t help it, God love them, it’s in their DNA.

Not that I’ve anything against them.
They stick to their own. Oh, thicker than thieves. Don’t want to know the rest of us. Don’t want to mix in. Think they’re better than us. Their discos, their pubs. Equal RIGHTS they want now, if you don’t mind, Missus. Their rights and their dignity and the front of the queue, and the hand in your face for whatever they can get, but you can say nothing these days, so I keep my opinion to myself, but between you and me, and a hole in the wall, I’d trust any living one of them as far as I could spit a RAT. Not that I’m prejudiced mind you.

Oh, yes. I say nothing. But I watch. And I learn. They’re not the same, I’m sorry, but it has to be said. Even the way they look at you, the way they go on. They think scruples is a nightclub. Think ethics is in England. Think the ten commandments is a mountain range in Connemara. And they laugh at us, you know. Oh they are
scuttling themselves laughing. And why wouldn’t they laugh, says you? They’re on the pig’s back.

But I’m not prejudiced. No. Bigotry is wrong. It’s a small, select group I don’t like or trust. The Irish, the English, the Travellers, the Roma, the Taigs, the Prods, the gay people, the straight people, the women, the men, the whites, the blacks, the kids these days, the country, the western, people who go to Mass, people who don’t go to Mass, culchies, jakeens, liberals, conservatives, vegetarians, carnivores, the Poles, the Chinese, Podge, Rodge, the fruitcakes, the gougers, the gurriers, the goms, yourself, myself, Muslims, and Justin Bieber. Apart from all THEM, I’ve no problem with anyone. Well, Manchester United, obviously.

But you can say nothing these days. You’re branded if you do. It’s political correctness gone BATS, so it is. It’s political correctness gone bats. Can’t have a joke. Can’t have a good laugh. You’re suddenly a bigot. Can’t open your beak. If anything I’m TOO tolerant. Really I am. I take everyone at face value. I’m gullible. I don’t like GOSSIP. But you have to draw the line. I mean, really and truly, would you want any child of yours to marry one of them, being honest? I don’t mean to be prejudiced. Ask anyone, they’ll tell you. That’s what I’m like. I’m each to their own and hail fellow well met and the benefit of the doubt and whatever you’re having yourself. But who in the name of God do they think they are? What are they on? What are they like? Why are they trying to shove it down our throats? Why can’t they keep to themselves?

They’ve one of them working in the Petrol Station up above. I see him every day. Every day! Not one of the nice humble type, not grateful or anything. But bold as brass. The look in his eye. It’s like: ‘I’m here. And I want my rights.’ But I don’t like to say anything. Well these days you can’t. Open your gob and come out with a joke and you’d swear you’d lurried your granny into Guantanamo Bay to be waterboarded. They’re organized, you see. You wouldn’t be up to them. You mark my words. We’ll be sorry again we’re finished. There’s one of them next door to you. And they’re talking to your kids. Pumping them full of nonsense. Propaganda. It’s everywhere. Schools, universities. The box, the radio. Ryan Tubridy’s in their pay and so’s the half of Dáil Éireann, and Senator David bloody Norris is their secret commander, and just you wait and see if it doesn’t come true. I’m all for people’s rights. Give me a petition, I’ll sign it. And the only way of getting through the tough times is we’ll all stick together. Ní neart go cur le chéile. Eh? We’ll all pull together. That’s the only way. But, God, it has to stop somewhere...
My Father was a man of the Ocean. He had salt-blood in his veins and his heart beat with the rhythm of the tides, as does mine. But not, I think, as strong as his. I cannot speak to the waves the way that he could.

I have brought the shovels and the wheelbarrow, and the sun is nearly down. The Oysterboy will bring the torches and meet me at the gate. He loves me, I know he does. He has wide shoulders and strong arms, and his palms are rough from the ropes. He would do anything for me, I know he would. He kisses me nervously when I arrive, and I notice, not for the first time, that his lips are a lot softer than his hands. I smile as we walk along the path and the sun sets behind the hills. First he talks, muttering anxiously about small nothings, then when I don’t respond he goes quiet and looks at the darkening sky. It is mid-summer, the night will be short. I tell him we will have to hurry.

It was my Grandmother, my Father’s Mother, who gave us this gift. She came from the Sea. One summer morning, on a Wednesday, so the story goes -striding up the beach as naked as the crystal sky. When she reached my Grandfather’s door she knocked three times and said: ‘I have come to take you as my husband.’

When we arrive at the place, the Oysterboy hesitates, looks at me and asks if I’m sure. His jaw is straight like the bow of a boat, but his hands have become restless birds, diving in and out of his pockets and flapping at his sides. He asks again, desperate for reassurance, and there is a trembling in his voice like the rough spilling of sand. He sounds so young, I am almost ashamed. Touching his face in the dark, I whisper something in his ear. Then I pick up my shovel, and start digging.

She was not a beautiful woman, my Grandmother. Her skin was not smooth, her lips were too thin, and her hair was never
anything more than a tangle of salted brown- the colour of dry seaweed. But still, my Grandfather loved her from that day until the day he died. Together they had three sons in the short happy years they shared. Two of them disappeared into the surf just a few months after they were born. The third -my Father, chose to stay. I often wonder where they went, my Uncles. Perhaps it was to them that my Father would converse.

It takes us a long time, the digging, longer than I expected. After the first hour the bones in my back begin to twitch and moan, aching like twisted driftwood. We wedge the torches between some stones, moving them often, as we go deeper and deeper into the earth. Luckily the Oysterboy is stronger than I am; he works tirelessly, digging in rhythm with his breath. I am glad he is here, I could not do this alone.

In the short, warm nights of summer, he would sit out by the Sea, his huge frame curled underneath him, resting his head on his hands. I would watch him by the light of the house, for hours and hours as he spoke his words to the waves. Then I would go down early the next day and wish the Sea good morning, hoping it would say something, anything back. But it never did. It never has.

The coffin is pine, a solid wood. It takes many blows before it cracks. We fall back when the stench hits us, a smell like nothing I’ve ever known. The Oysterboy makes a sound like dry retching, like drowning while breathing. I rest my palm between his shoulder blades and wait, holding the tears from my eyes. Slowly, after a long pause, we peel away the lid, piece by piece, revealing a thing that no longer looks like the man I loved. His face is bleached beyond all memory. His fingers are pale and fat like naked little crabs, and his whole body is bloated and frozen in death. I begin to cry as we lift him out of the ground. I could never have imagined he would be this heavy.

Three days ago the tides stopped still, and my Father fell down in the kitchen while scrubbing fish; there were scales all over the floor when I found him. His mouth was blue and gaping, like a catch. Heart attack, they said. High blood pressure. They buried him the next morning in a graveyard miles from the beach. I haven’t slept since.

Again the Oysterboy asks if I’m sure. He tries to hold me in his
arms but I push him gently away and start filling in the grave. Silently he helps me. It takes us the longest time, every movement aches and burns but we have to hurry. When we finish we pat down the grave, hiding the fresh earth and replacing the flowers. Next comes the hopeless part, the journey through town.

They didn’t listen when I told them it was wrong. My Father’s wife, and all her pretty sisters- they called me child, and little girl. They even laughed when I told them about my Grandmother. Old fishwives’ tales, they said. But they don’t understand. My Father was not born to be buried in the earth.

The streets are painfully bright and filled with the stench of dead fish. The Oysterboy and I take turns to push, making slow progress. We pass sleeping houses and closed windows, moving as soundlessly as we can. The thing sits gracelessly in the wheelbarrow, his huge frame curled underneath him, stinking far worse than the town. There is the slightest hint of a squeak in the axle of the wheel, it whines as we lift it onto the pavement. My breathing shudders when we see a group of cats, three of them sitting around a rubbish-bin overflowing with bones. They watch us fearlessly, like old women with pearly eyes shining in the streetlights. We meet no one else.

He should have drowned. He should have fallen from his boat in the heart of a storm and never been found, or walked out one evening and never come back. Both of these I would have believed. I would have accepted.

Eventually we reach the Sea. Both of us are utterly exhausted and the sand is slippery and awkward. The surf roars up in the early morning tide, spraying us with welcome. As I brush the wet hair from my eyes I am reminded of my Grandmother with her salt-brown, seaweed locks. I glance at the Oysterboy beside me, his features are tired but beautiful. Slowly I touch his shoulder, his neck, his face. I do not smile and he does not speak. Silently the sun rises over the ever-breathing Ocean. Then with the last of my strength I pick up my Father, and walk into the waves.

That was the first time I heard the voice, liquid and female, quietly whispering: ‘Thank you.’
Mr. D’Agostini’s shed burned down the day after my seventh birthday. I sat on the low wall that divided our school from his house watching it fizzle out while I waited for my mother to arrive. Mother was always late on Thursdays. She worked the laundrette - Pristine Pete’s. Hattie, the woman she worked with, took a late lunch Thursdays. It gave me time to watch the town - Ormsby, Ohio - the trucks and cars ambling up Main Street, the shoppers slowing outside Wollensky’s candy store as others hurried on, refusing to be tempted.

Ormsby Elementary was like every other school in the state, only smaller, given the town’s population was about as big as could fit in The Stadium – an old sports hall out back where we spent most of our time playing basketball. The Stadium had six rows of benches. Not that everyone got a seat when the Ohio Schools’ League was on. Then, people stood bunched at the doors, the overflow reaching outside whilst the freshly polished white sneakers squeaked on the floor.

From its open doors I could glimpse Mr. D’Agostini’s garden as I dribbled the ball past with my right hand - could never’ve seen it with my left, I was hopeless with my left. Perfect lawns, front and back, apple trees and bunches of red and white roses. The space and smells mesmerised me. On certain days its sweet scent that made my stomach ache for a Wollensky’s strawberry malt, mingled with that of the dirt and sweat of The Stadium. We didn’t have a garden as we lived in the apartment over Pristine Pete’s. Instead, we had steamed windows and stifling heat.

Mr. D’Agostini had been the principal back when our school was first built. The house came with the job for life. By the time I started he’d long retired. But because he still lived in the house, I was convinced that he and Mrs. DeWitt, my principal, must’ve been married.

“Numbskull,” Tommy Trujo said. “Mr. D’Agostini ain’t married. Mr. Henry lives with Mr. D’Agostini.”

“Who’s Mr. Henry?” I asked, as the basketball landed hard into my chest.

“Mr. D’Agostini’s ‘special friend’.”
He laughed in a mean kind of way that I didn’t understand but refused to admit.

Sometime prior to my seventh birthday, a month or two, I couldn’t tell you now, and possibly couldn’t’ve told you then, Mr. D’Agostini had died. Mother had brought me to the funeral. It was pretty much just us, Mrs. Fontane from the mail office, Father Gallo and Mr. Henry, sitting up front. I watched him walk down the red and black tiled aisle behind the coffin when the service was over, his head high, his hat held to his chest. When we got outside, Mother went to talk to him. She took his hand and whispered something in his ear. I saw him close his eyes then raise his head again and straighten his body as the pallbearers began to carry the coffin toward the grave.

“Momma,” I asked, when we got back to our apartment, “did people not like Mr. D’Agostini?”

“I guess they’d better things to do than pay their respects to the best teacher this town has ever known,” she said, taking the pin with its white pearl top from her hat and laying both on our red formica kitchen table. Her eyes became lost some ways off. “You know, when I was in school he made us keep a journal - General Knowledge, he called it. I still have it somewhere.” She looked around like it might be lying on the kitchen counter. “In it we wrote the names of the world’s tallest mountains and longest rivers and greatest artists and writers. By fifth grade I knew the name of every one of Shakespeare’s plays.”

She smiled to herself.

“Momma, what did you whisper to Mr. Henry?”

My question stole that smile.

“I told him…I told him we never deserved him...this town never deserved a man as wonderful as Mr. D’Agostini.”

I considered this a little while, taking a good long gulp from my glass of milk, then asked:

“Does a ‘special friend’ mean you have to be brave for your friend?”

“It does ‘round here, it seems,” Mother said, watching her finger push the hat pin back and forth where it lay, looking more hurt than the morning she found Pop’s note.

The day I sat on the wall, the smoke still rose in places. The smell
stung my insides. I’d never seen a fire or its aftermath before. The excitement of the fire-truck arriving at recess was more than us kids or Mrs. DeWitt could bear. She’d screamed at us like I’d never heard her before to get back inside.

Mr. Henry seemed smaller standing there than at the funeral. I watched him pick his way about, poking at burned things with a long stick. Hunkering down, inspecting them, before letting them fall back into the blackness. His lips made a sound like when Mother sucked a lemon drop. His face looked the same too, cheeks pulled in as if in pain. I didn’t know why she ate those sweets. She said they used rip the skin off the top of her mouth. But still she bought a quarter every Saturday at Wollensky’s. Me, I liked liquorice. There was no danger with liquorice.

“Lord save us,” Mr. Henry said, over and over under his breath and sometimes louder when he found something that I supposed was of great importance. “Lord save us.”

“Lord save us,” I replied.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about. It wasn’t your shed burned down.”

“I just like the sound is all - Lord save us,” I repeated, getting down from my perch, moving across to stand beside him. His white trousers were smudged now but were still neatly pressed like a pair Mother might have worked with the iron press. I liked to watch the steam rise when she brought down the handle. She promised to let me work it one day and drew a line on our kitchen door frame to show how big I’d have to grow first.

“Mrs. DeWitt said if your shed burned much longer she was gonna send us home. I’d a liken to go home.”

“Maybe you’d’ve liked if the whole house burned down?”

“Nah huh. I just wanted to go home ‘cause yesterday was my birthday and Momma got me a new pirate ship.”

I looked up to see if he might wish me happy birthday. Instead, he walked back to the wall and sat in the exact spot I’d been. Hands in my pockets, I surveyed the wreckage in front of me. Pools of black water glistened in the summer sun, staining the perfect grass. I’d’ve happily poked around with my own stick imagining what everything once was, but that seemed rude. So I played the game where I stood.
The long mound with the most smoke rising was Mr. Henry’s periscope, used when he sailed Cape Horn. To its left was the compass that saved him from near death when he got lost in the Grand Canyon. And the snarled up long piece of wire right at my foot was a string from Elvis Presley’s guitar.

I looked behind to see Mr. Henry’s head in his hands.
“Was it an accident?” I asked, walking back to sit beside him.
“It was those Castor boys.”
I knew all about the Castors. Mother had told me to stay well clear of Roy and Paulie Castor - bigger, louder and meaner than any other kids in town.
“Got nothing to do all day but torment folk.”
“Are you sad, Mr. Henry?”
“Mad. That’s what I am. Madder than a box of bees.”
“Momma kills any bee that comes near her.”
“It’s a sin to kill a bee, son.”
Even though I was enjoying our talk, I wasn’t ready for him to burst my delusion that Mother knew all there was to know in the world. But I decided to give him another chance, given the day he was having.
“Momma says when I’m sad I should go to a special place in my head - the place that makes me happy. Tommy Trujo’s tree house makes me happy. I only been there once but I wanted to stay forever and ever.”
“Is that right?”
“Uh huh. His Pop made it for him. It’s up so high and is so big you could put a bed in. My Pop’s not here to make me one. Besides, I don’t got no yard.”
“So, what do you think about in your special place?” Mr. Henry asked, poking his stick at the ground.
“I don’t know. Stuff. Like boats and trucks and sometimes trains.”
“Why only sometimes?”
“Well, Momma says Pop left on the Missouri train and if she could’ve she’d a blown it up. Have you ever been on a boat Mr. Henry?”
“Never been out of Ohio. Should’ve left long ago.”
“When I’m big I’m gonna build a boat to sail the world.”
Mr. Henry laughed a little.
“You liked your shed, huh?”
Mr. Henry stopped with his stick and looked right into my eyes.
“It wasn’t mine, it was Wilson’s. Mr. D’Agostini’s,” he added, helping me out.

The rules adults had around the do’s and don’ts when death was mentioned had me stumped, so I shifted my butt a little before deciding to say nothing at all.

“I suppose that shed was my special place,” Mr. Henry said, after an awkward silence. “It felt like he was still there, the place he was happiest, with his tools and his pots and his plants. I spent a lot of time there in the last while.”

Mr. Henry looked back at the burned remains while I watched him and counted the wrinkles ‘round his eyes and those that drooped from the corner of his mouth. I didn’t get what he meant. Took me a few more years to figure that out.

“Momma says this town didn’t deserve Mr. D’Agostini.”
“Your Momma’s right about that.”
He started to poke the earth again.

“Never darkened his door, you know, after the rumours started,” he continued, “the great and good of Ormsby. I’m surprised they let us stay in the house. ‘These people aren’t the witch-hunting types, Frank,’ he’d say, like that made it all better. They let us alone, alright, alone in every sense of the word. Never invited him to another dinner or town occasion. I wanted to leave but Wilson wouldn’t. His petunias and his pride kept him in this backwater.” Mr. Henry threw away his stick like it was some piece of dirt. “Course, they won’t let me stay in this place now, not that I’d want to.”

He looked up at the house, as I tried to make sense of what he was talking about. I was still at it when I saw Mother on her way up.

“I gotta go now, Mr. Henry,” I said, not knowing what to add as I began trotting down Main Street.

That night, I woke to hear the fire-engine’s siren one more time. I elbowed Mother ‘til she too lay startled. We knelt on our bed and poked our sleepy heads through the curtain. The flames of Mr. D’Agostini’s house whipped up into the Ohio night-sky. And there, walking down the middle of Main Street, was Mr. Henry carrying a suitcase. I waved and shouted and knocked at the glass pointing to the inferno behind him. But he never heard me, at least that’s what I assumed, because he kept on walking, never looking up, never looking back.
Notes on Contributors

Marie Cadden is the co-editor of *Skylight 47* poetry magazine and a winner of Cúirt New Writing Prize for Poetry 2011. Marie’s poems have been placed/shortlisted for various awards and widely published in journals and anthologies, most recently *Even the Daybreak: 35 Years of Salmon Poetry*. Her debut collection *Gynaecologist in the Jacuzzi* was published by Salmon in May 2016. She lives in Spiddal, Co. Galway.

John Chavers enjoys working as a writer, artist, photographer, and general creator. Most recently, his writing and artwork have been accepted at The Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library, *So It Goes* (2016), *Literary Journal, 3Elements Review, Foliate Oak Literary Magazine, Ascent, Birch Gang Review, Four Ties Lit Review, Ground Fresh Thursday, Silver Apples, and Verity La*, among others. John’s residency fellowships include Blue Mountain Center in the Adirondacks and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. He has a fascination for the diminutive, works of art on paper, and the desert.

Catherine Donnelly lives in Cork and works as a Spanish and English teacher. She is currently studying for an MA in Creative Writing at the University of Limerick. Catherine was shortlisted for the Colm Tóibín International Short Story Award (2016), and received a special commendation in the RTE Francis MacManus Short Story Award (2016).

Ruth Egan is an Irish artist who studied visual arts at fine art academy St Lucas in Brussels, Belgium. Her work is mainly in painting and some printmaking. Currently based in Dublin, she has had solo exhibitions of paintings and prints in both Belgium and Ireland, and participated in Arts festivals around Ireland.

Orla Fay is the editor of *Boyne Berries* magazine and a Forward Prize nominee. Her poetry has recently been published in *Crannóg, Boyne Berries, Abridged, Tales from the Forest, North West Words, HeadStuff, The Pickled Body* and is forthcoming in *Skylight 47* and *The Ofi Press*. She blogs at http://orlafay.blogspot.ie/.

Mike Gallagher, writer, poet and editor, was born on Achill Island and worked in London for forty years before retiring to Kerry. His prose, poetry, haiku and songs have been published in Ireland and throughout Europe, America, Australia, Nepal, India, Thailand, Japan and Canada. His writing has been translated into Croatian, Japanese, Dutch, German, Italian and Chinese. He won the Michael Hartnett Viva Voce competition in 2010 and 2016, was shortlisted for the Hennessy Award in 2011 and won the Desmond O’Grady International Poetry Contest in 2012. His poetry collection *Stick on Stone* was published by Revival Press in 2013.
Julian Gough is the author of three acclaimed novels, two BBC radio plays, a successful stage play, and the ending to Time Magazine’s 2011 computer game of the year, Minecraft. He also sang with underground literary pop band Toasted Heretic. He won the BBC National Short Story Award in 2007, and was shortlisted, twice, for the Everyman Bollinger Wodehouse Prize. A poetry collection, Free Sex Chocolate, was published in 2010, and in 2013 he had a UK number one Kindle Single with the comic novella CRASH! His latest novel, Connect, will be published by Picador in 2017. Julian also writes children’s fiction: Rabbit’s Bad Habits (illustrated by Jim Field) was shortlisted for an Irish Book of the Year Award 2016; its sequel, The Pest in the Nest, has just been published. Julian recently returned to Ireland from Berlin, and is the UL writer in residence for 2017.

Anne Griffin’s work has featured in The Stinging Fly, The Irish Times, The Honest Ulsterman, The Incubator and Bunker. Anne has been shortlisted for the Hennessy New Irish Writing Award and longlisted for the Seán Ó Faoláin Award. A recent graduate of UCD’s MA in Creative Writing, Anne is completing her first novel: All That I Have Been.

Kenneth Hickey, born 1975, resides in Cork, Ireland and has had prose and poetry published in several literary journals in Ireland, the UK and the US. His awards include the Eamonn Keane Playwright Award in 2005, PJ O’Conner Award (shortlist) in 2003, and the South Tipperary One Act Play Chapbook Awards in 2003 and 2004.

Leah Jespersen was born in Ireland in 1995, but was raised in Norway from the age of five. Her love of literature encouraged her to pursue her current undergraduate study: Publishing Media and English Literature at Oxford Brookes University. She hopes to one day become an editor of literary fiction. She discovered Richard Siken’s free verse poetry last year, which served as inspiration for a poetry collection entitled Hunger that she submitted as her final piece for a Creative Writing module. The collection focused on depicting intangible yearning: lust, jealousy, possessiveness, as well as striving for recognition.

Eithne Lannon is a native of Dublin and teaches in Kilbarrack. In 2015 and 2016 she has had work published in Headstuff, Bare Hands, Skylight 47, Tales from the Forest, A New Ulster, and the anthology And Agamemnon Dead. She was shortlisted for the Galway Hospital Arts Competition in 2016. Eithne does regular open mics around Dublin, has hosted the Gladstone Inn and Ardgillan Readings, and has read at Skerries Soundwaves Festival and Skerries Donkey Shots Festival. She was Artist in Residence in Loughshinny Boathouse, Co. Dublin in summer 2016.

Jaki McCarrick is an award-winning writer of plays, poetry and fiction. She won the 2010 Papatango New Writing Prize for her play, *Leopoldville*, and her most recent play, *Belfast Girls*, developed at the National Theatre, London, was shortlisted for the 2012 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize. It has had three international productions. Jaki has published poetry in numerous journals and is winner of the 2010 John Lennon Poetry Prize. Her debut story collection, *The Scattering* (Seren), was shortlisted for the 2014 Edge Hill Prize. She is completing her first novel.

Tom McElligott was born in Israel. He has lived all of his life in Limerick and is married with three children. Tom took up photography when he retired, favouring photos shot in abstract and monochrome. He has an interest in portrait photography. He writes and paints and is a member of Limerick Writers. His writing has been published in: *Limerick City of Culture’s Anthology of Short Stories*, *The Clare Champion* Poetry Corner, and in *Liberties Flash Fiction*.

Based in Islandmagee, Northern Ireland, Kiera McGarry writes mainly on the boundaries between the human and animal worlds through her exploration of animal conscience, as well as her experiences of growing up on a working sheep farm. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in English with Creative Writing from Queen’s University Belfast and is currently undertaking a Master of Arts in poetry at the university.

Barry McKinley was nominated in 2010 for Best New Play in the Irish Theatre Awards for *Elysium Nevada*. He has written plays for BBC Radio 4 and RTE, and his stories were twice shortlisted for the Hennessy Literary Award. His forthcoming memoir, *Meltdown Expected*, will be published in May 2017 by Old Street Publishing, London.

K. S. Moore’s poetry has recently appeared in *Crannóg, Nutshells and Nuggets, And Other Poems, Ink Sweat and Tears* and *The Seventh Quarry*. Flash Fiction and short stories featured in *FlashFlood, Metazen, Number Eleven* and *The Bohemyth*. Shortlists have included: Flash Mob 2013, Blog Awards Ireland and 99 Fiction. K. S. Moore has read at Waterford Writers’ Weekend, Waterford Winterval and Swansea’s Dylan Thomas Festival. She blogs at ksmoore.com.
David Murphy’s poetry has been published many times in various magazines and anthologies in Ireland and abroad, including *The Poetry Bus, Stony Thursday Book, Revival, The Burning Bush, Irish Literary Review, Cyphers* and *The Shop*. Also a short story writer and novelist, his latest book is a fiction-memoir called *Walking on Ripples* published by the Liffey Press in 2014. Website: www.davidmurph.wordpress.com.

Kieran Nee lives in Cork, Ireland. He works in public engagement and outreach and is studying for a PhD in English literature. His inspirations include the illustrations of Harry Clarke and Eleni Kalorkoti.

Nuala Ní Chonchúir (Nuala O’Connor) has published four short story collections, three novels and three poetry collections. Her third novel, *Miss Emily*, published by Penguin USA & Canada and Sandstone UK, about the poet Emily Dickinson and her Irish maid, was shortlisted for the Bord Gáis Energy Novel of the Year. Nuala has won many fiction awards including RTÉ Radio’s Francis MacManus Award, the Cúirt New Writing Prize, the Jane Geske Award (USA), the inaugural Jonathan Swift Award and the Cecil Day Lewis Award. She was shortlisted for the European Prize for Literature.

Joseph O’Connor’s books include *Cowboys and Indians, True Believers, Star of the Sea, Redemption Falls, Ghost Light, Where Have You Been?* and *The Thrill of it All* (Le Point magazine, France, 25 Best Books of the Year Award, 2016). He has also written radio diaries, film scripts and stage plays including *Red Roses and Petrol, My Cousin Rachel* (Gate Theatre, Dublin) and ‘Joseph Mary Plunkett’ as part of *Signatories* (2016). His work has been translated into 40 languages. Prizes include the Irish PEN Award for Outstanding Achievement, France’s Prix Millepages, Italy’s Premio Acerbi, an American Library Association Award and the Prix Zepter for European Novel of the Year. He is Frank McCourt Professor of Creative Writing at UL; with colleagues he runs the annual UL Creative Writing Summer School at NYU. He is a member of Aosdána. In 2017, *Star of the Sea* will become the first Irish novel since *Ulysses* to be published in Cuba.

Stephen Reid is a 24-year-old English graduate from Westmeath, currently undertaking an MA in Irish Writing at Trinity College Dublin. He has been writing poetry for a number of years, alongside prose works.

Eithne Reynolds writes poetry, short stories and flash fiction. In 2016 she was awarded first prize in The NY Literary Magazine competition. She was the Irish winner of The Fermoy International Poetry Competition 2014; placed second in The North West Words Poetry Prize 2013 and placed second in Poet of the Year/ The Creative Flow 2015. She was short-listed for the Ó Bhéal

**Monica Rowley** teaches amazing high school students in Brooklyn, noting that they are far better than she is at trigonometry and pentameter. She loves sharks and tigers, *Gilgamesh*, and Ramprasad Sen’s poetry to the Goddess Kali. She is the oldest of seven, and her siblings are her best friends. She considers this turn of sibling luck the best fortune she could have. Monica has been the recipient of several grants and awards, including one from the National Endowment for the Humanities. If you would like to read more of her poems, check them out on Brooklyn Poets’ *The Bridge.*

**Jamie Samson** is a twenty-two year old writer from Dublin currently working on his first novel. Previously he has lived in France, Spain and Israel. His story, *Mourning Device for a Child in Ruins,* is a single-sentence, somewhat experimental attempt to estrange and obscure what might be considered the normal processes of grief and mourning, a picture of society in miniature, shot through with hints of science fiction and horror.

**Richard Smyth** is an Irish Fine Art practitioner resident in England. He holds a BA in Fine Art, an MA in the History of Art & Design, and an MA in Fine Art (with Merit). His works are held in private and public collections in Ireland, Britain and the USA. Details of other work by the artist can be obtained from richardsmyth54@hotmail.com.

**Josh Wann** is a creative writing teacher in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He is a recent graduate of Oklahoma City University’s Red Earth MFA program. He has been a featured Woody Guthrie poet and his work has appeared in *Concis* and *Dragon Poet Review,* among others. When he’s not teaching or writing, he’s tending his children and pepper plants.

**Philip Webb Gregg** is a recent graduate in English and Writing from Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge. He writes both for pleasure and for necessity, believing stories are somewhat like the sweet-smelling spirits that rise from the fermentation of our subconscious. His work tends to orbit themes of human psychosis coupled, or in conflict with, the natural world.

**Glen Wilson** lives in Portadown, Co Armagh with his wife Rhonda and children Sian and Cain. He has been widely published having work in *The Honest Ulsterman, Foliate Oak, Iota, Southword* and *The Incubator Journal* amongst others. In 2014 he won the Poetry Space competition and was shortlisted for the Wasafiri New Writing Prize. He was shortlisted for the Seamus Heaney Award for New Writing 2016. He is currently working on his first collection of poetry.