

A person in a black dress is performing a handstand on a sandy beach. The person is silhouetted against a bright, golden sunset sky. The beach is wet, reflecting the light, and there are some footprints in the sand. In the background, there is a calm ocean and a mountain range on the left side. The overall mood is serene and artistic.

the incubator

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the incubator journal
home of the Irish short story

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call for submissions

Our reading period is now open

(April 2017)

for new Irish writing.

For Issue 13

(due to be published in August 2017)

*we are seeking **flash fiction, short stories and memoirs.***

*Guidelines are at **theincubatorjournal.com***

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editorial

SINCE THE LAST EDITION our features editor Claire Savage has had her debut novel *Magical Masquerade* published. It is very exciting news! Happily, this time I was able to turn the tables and grill Claire about what inspired her storylines and what continues to enthuse her artistically, which is really insightful and motivating in itself since Claire wears so many hats professionally and still has managed to produce such a brilliant book for the younger reader.

This month we are home to lots of poetry, with emerging and established writers finding their wonderful words sharing space on the pages of the journal. Again Anne has chosen great pieces of flash with voices that stay with you, and I have selected four short stories to be savoured.

I hope you enjoy the issue.

Best wishes,

Kelly Creighton

Editor

in interview: Claire Savage

author of Magical Masquerade

HI, CLAIRE, IT'S LOVELY to talk with you about your own writing for a change. You usually speak to writers for The Incubator as Features Editor, and I'm curious if being a journalist helped you write fiction?

Thanks Kelly. I think being a journalist has helped more with idea generation – as a reporter you learn to see stories everywhere and to pick up on things other people might miss. But in terms of the writing, I would say not so much, as my journalistic writing is very different to my fiction writing. As a news reporter, you have to write in a very short, punchy style in as few words as possible – conveying the key facts and nothing much more. Feature-writing is a bit more indulgent but the form is still quite different from prose-writing. That's why English graduates often find the switch to journalism difficult, as it's a totally different writing style to what they've been used to. Less 'beautiful prose' and more bare, hard facts.

But being a journalist, and also a copywriter with my business, Claire Savage Editorial, means I write quickly, being used to deadlines, and I'm better at editing my own work than I would be otherwise. As I write a lot of content for businesses and organisations, including SEO website content, blogs, press releases, articles and so on, as well as freelancing for Culture NI, I do all sorts of writing, and I suppose the simple fact that I'm just always writing in some form, probably helps in some way with my fiction.

Your debut novel has already received some high praise indeed – Carlo Gébler has called *Magical Masquerade* 'A rich, dream-like story full of adventure and phantasmagorical

creatures', Felicity McCall has called you 'a compelling new voice in children's fiction'! Can you tell me some more about Magical Masquerade?

Yes, the feedback from Carlo and Felicity has been brilliant, and it means a lot to me as I really respect both of them as writers. I was delighted when they agreed to read *Magical Masquerade* and give quotes for the cover – and that those were very positive!

Magical Masquerade is a fantasy adventure novel aimed at children aged 9-12 but of course, it may well appeal to slightly older or younger readers too, and hopefully also some adults! Set on the north coast of Northern Ireland, the book is inspired by the landscape and the myths from that area but is an original story and not in any way a retelling of any legends.

The blurb probably gives the best overview of the story:

Summoned by the Pebble People to a world which mirrors her own, but is full of hidden magic, Felicity must use her wits to survive. Can she stop the mysterious smugglers causing mayhem in this darkling realm, and solve the Rhyming Riddler's puzzles before she's trapped here forever?

Befriended by Bob, a bookish brownie, and Hatchet, a kidnapped hobgoblin, Felicity soon finds herself lost in a shadowy kingdom cloaked in secrecy and enchantments. Her most startling discovery, however, is yet to come....

*'When she went to the beach one sparkling spring day,
She picked up a pebble ... and it whisked her away.'*

What themes does the book deal with?

The key theme, I think, is probably that people/situations aren't necessarily always what they seem. We can all wear masks — masquerade as something we're not — so it's important to look beyond the obvious and not to take people at face value. Similarly, how we initially perceive a situation isn't always how it really is...

There's also an enduring theme of hope – Felicity gets herself into a fair few sticky situations but she's always hopeful she'll overcome them – and there are also themes of endurance, both as a team and as an individual.

Perhaps there's quite a feminist theme as well – I knew from day one that my main character was definitely going to be female and, although a lot of supporting characters are male (including her sidekicks), Felicity is the one who must complete the quests and do all the hard work. I wanted to have a strong female lead because I feel that (these days more than ever), it's important young girls have positive role models and understand they are capable of more than they often believe.

I wanted to write a story which, although set in a magical world, depicts very real problems and forces our heroine to solve them imaginatively and overcome various obstacles in lots of different ways. I think it's just a good life lesson to know that challenges will always arise, people and situations will not always be as they seem and that you need to trust your own intuition. However, that being said, it's also important to include the message that hope can always be found in any situation – no matter how impossible it may seem.

What inspired you to write *Magical Masquerade*?

I'd written a draft of an adult novel, which I wasn't really happy with – I discovered that the adult fiction I enjoyed reading wasn't necessarily what I enjoyed or felt comfortable writing. So, I decided to write a story inspired by the books I loved reading as a child – magical adventure tales. Although I didn't initially set out to write a novel, for some reason, this story just kept on going and when I'd almost filled a fairly thick journal, I realised that maybe it *could* be a novel. So I kept on writing and that's what I ended up with.

Inspiration for the story, when I began writing, came in various guises – there are bound to be influences from all the fantasy books I read as a child, but also, I was inspired a lot by the landscape around me on the north coast. I'd tease out ideas as I walked my dog twice a day

along the cliffs and beaches, getting lots of inspiration from the scenery...which includes everything from caves and secluded coves, to rugged countryside and wide open spaces. There's also a lot of folklore and myths up on the north coast – about banshees and mermaids and the like – so all of that inspired me too.

A lot of my ideas also just came to me as I wrote though – one idea brought on another and so on.

When did you begin writing?

I began writing again seriously around about 2010/11 but before that I always wrote as a child – keeping journals (mostly in the summer holidays!) – and also writing little stories here and there. I also wrote poems as a child, which has also stayed with me. But around 2010/11 I decided to try my hand at novel-writing, starting with adult fiction before deciding on *Magical Masquerade*. After that I began writing more short stories and poetry and submitting them to journals and competitions.

Which other writers have inspired you most (maybe before you started writing)?

My childhood was filled with Enid Blyton – reading the Famous Five, Secret Seven, all her fairy stories and also, The Enchanted Wood series (now more commonly referred to as The Faraway Tree series). I read a lot of books by other authors too, but Blyton definitely hooked me into reading in a big way – I loved her stories and they most certainly inspired me. I also loved reading animal stories when I was younger – e.g. Colin Dann's books (including *The Animals of Farthing Wood*), *Watership Down* by Richard Adams, *The Hundred and One Dalmations* by Dodie Smith and so on. Later I also read a lot of Anne Rice's vampire books – I liked writers who told stories which appeared very different from normal life but which, in doing that, also looked at very 'real-life' issues within those fantastical worlds...

How do you gather your inspiration? Do you have any special techniques?

Not really, but then again, maybe I do but I'm not really aware of them! For my fantasy fiction I like that anything can happen – when you're writing about magic you really have no limits as to what you can include in a story and so, a lot of that just comes from my head (though there's always influences from other fiction I've read, films I've watched etc. which no doubt filters through). For my short stories (which are adult fiction) sometimes I am inspired by an article I've read, or I draw on an experience I might have had myself and work that into a story, though I don't write autobiographically.

You write for adults too, and you write poetry, do you have a particular preference? What are the main differences you have encountered writing across different forms?

I like the variety of writing poetry, short stories and longer prose but if I had to choose a form that I prefer, then it would probably be novel-writing, as I like getting stuck into a story and fleshing it out. But they all involve a lot of work, so it's not to say writing a short story is the easy option, as any short story writer will know. All of these forms need a lot of editing and refinement but every word doesn't have to fight for its place as much in a novel as in a short story which, to me, is more poetic in its form.

It takes me less time to write my poetry and I like to switch back to something like that from time to time as you get that feeling of accomplishment much quicker than when writing longer prose. When I wrote *Magical Masquerade* I concentrated solely on it, but I often write poetry and short stories simultaneously and quite like flicking from one form to another.

There is always debate about whether writers should blog. What is your take on this?

I think it's down to personal preference, as there's no point blogging if you don't enjoy it, but it's a really good way to raise your profile as a writer and to engage with like-minded people. Also, if you're publishing work that you want to sell, such as books, then I think it helps a great deal in making people aware of what you're doing and it helps build an

audience that might potentially support you in your writing (either through buying the book or simply reading your blog).

I've been blogging for about four years now and I also have a business blog for my copywriting work, all of which has definitely increased my online presence. It doesn't necessarily mean that everyone who reads your blog will buy your books etc. but it gives you an audience you can engage with and helps connect you to other writers as well. I should point out though, that you don't have to be selling anything to blog (and you shouldn't just blog with the aim of trying to get customers!), as it's inherently a social medium which allows you to connect with other readers and writers and just have fun. It's all about making connections.

What is the best advice a writer has given you?

Damian Gorman, an award-winning poet and playwright from Northern Ireland, once told a writing workshop I was attending that if you write, then you're a writer. It sounds quite obvious and very simplistic (and I'm not sure if it counts as advice), but that really resonated with me. He was leading the workshops and said from the very outset that if you write, then you should own that writing and identify yourself as a writer. That struck home with me as there's a preconception amongst many that you aren't really a writer unless some big publishing house has published your work. Not true at all – I think that's a very supercilious thing for anyone to imply and some traditionally published writers (and also non-writers) are still of that view. Lack of confidence is a big thing with a lot of writers and I think that the best advice for anyone is therefore to believe in your writing and to know that if you write, then you're a writer. Don't let anyone tell you differently.

Also, on a more practical level – when you're writing, just get it all onto the page and edit afterwards, not as you go along. Perfect it later. (Lots of writers have told me this over the years!)

Many writers say they find writing a novel daunting, usually because of the amount of commitment they have to give to a novel. What advice would you give anyone thinking of writing longer pieces?

I would say to approach it as a short story and don't commit to writing a novel at first. See where it takes you and if, as you write, you want to keep writing, then go for it. It also depends on how you approach writing – it can help to plan and plot beforehand so you know what the story structure is before you begin. Once you get to the actual writing stage, then it will be a bit easier, as you don't have to come up with new ideas at every turn. On the other hand, seeing what appears on the page can be what keeps another writer interested in writing the story, so it's whatever works for you.

Breaking a bigger project down into sections might also work. Think of how many chapters you'd like to write – e.g. 20 – and then divide up your time to get these done. You might aim for writing three a week, or one a week – whatever you feel is achievable.

What are you working on at the moment?

With getting *Magical Masquerade* ready in recent months I haven't been writing a whole lot of new material but now that the book is finished I'm starting work on the follow-up...

Claire's debut children's novel, *Magical Masquerade*, will be available from Amazon as a paperback in early May and an e-book for Kindle from 29 April.

poems

Bernadette Gallagher

Animal Republic

All politics is failure
tell that to your cat —
she will look at you
with contempt.

Cats kill to survive, they find
shelter in a ditch or under
your roof.

You too could kill — rabbits?
We poisoned those with
Myxomatosis — a slow death
to control the number.

We left the cave and settled
down to farm — religion
to keep us in check. Now
we don't know when to kneel.

Eileen Ní Shuilleabháin

Night Song

This hum in my marrow is lost
to some wild and
untamed place.

A rattle roar
bruised deep like a dark mountain.

A riot in my veins
a deepening forest
whose path long lost
calls me like some wild fire.

A wolf howls
carved from a buttery moon.

A raven croaks
salt from the sea air
and you,
thread a needle with my words
dance with me a circus dance.

Your whisper in my ear
cracks the growl in my throat

as you gather me home
trembling and tamed
to the stillness and warmth of
your thigh.

Winter Stars

Darkness is its own dominion
winter stars are small fires tonight.
From silvered edges of the Milky Way
you peer through our windows
remembering our living past.
Mountain hovels of ancestors
roads of solitary corridors
cathedrals of yellowing grass,
hard heather and stone.

I watch you like you watched them,
when black haired wolves
roamed the landscape scarred
and full fires were still on your lips.
I imagine you always there

your brilliant silence
looking into the heart of another dying winter,
while you fold our memories
like a letter to yourself,
shutting the past softly like a gate,
on our sleeping houses.

Kathryn Reynolds

Butterfly Wings

(after Dennis O Driscoll)

That she would be known as refugee
That she would be seen as stateless
That she would train in roof-bombed pools
That she would walk the road from Damascus
That she would swim for her life
That others would swim to their unmarked graves
That she would drag a dinghy of twenty to shore
That her sister would push by her side
That she wouldn't do it for ceremony
That she would do it for the race
That she would do it to make her people proud
That she would be known as Olympian

Consider This.

Bloody mess
premenstrual stress

Need a bit
Of tender care
No way to change
No comfort
Pains
Can you help me
Homeless.

Amanda Bell

A Small Attendance

There is a vacancy for an old man in my life:
I hadn't realized until today when books arrived
by morning post, sent from a recent friend.

They will join the set of *Littérature Française*
passed on when you moved to a first floor flat,
chosen for the view, not emphysema.

To have a companion so much my senior
seems normal now, even familial –
as heads tilt in for quiet conversations,

more ordinary than those dinners you prepared
when I was seventeen: sherry and *ras al hanout*—
tempered stews, Moustaki on the stereo.

My father waited anxiously –
cheroot-tip glowing as I hiccupped my way in –
when you dropped me home in the tiny car
you folded into like *Monsieur *Hulot*,

draped in the dark red jumper, which you wore
from my first year in school into retirement.

I think you were wearing it in Marrakech
when I came down by train in '89,
with the blissful abandon of a run-away.

We bussed to Agadir to escape the Easter cold,
ate preserved lemons in a pungent tagine,
bitter and more salt than I could bear.

The last time I visited you there, I brought your meds
from home. You had travelled alone
with your oxygen tank, I had a family in tow.

You chose not to say goodbye to me when you returned to die,
so your obituary side-swiped me over breakfast.

Like so many stories, yours ends in Mount Jerome:
the Brandenburg concertos, a small attendance.

*'Hulot is someone who exists only in the eyes and mouths of the beholder. He is someone who awakens suspicion or amused attention... Hulot is a blurred man, a passer-by, a *Hulotus errans*.' Wikipedia

Paul Perry

I am a crowd, I am a lonely man, I am nothing *(after Maura O'Halloran)*

I walk past the snow covered apple orchard. With its single black crow on a naked bough, the mountains look high.

What is it that I lack?
I want to go deeper, see clearer.

Today I planted flowers. I feel I have died in a way.
I rescued this notebook from a fire.

It's sunny. I'm watching the beans grow.

The clock stops. I stay up late.

I love to stand in the rain for the longest time without getting wet.

The bird in the apple-blossoms shook the moisture from its feathers and sang.
I, in sympathy, shook in my mac and was silent.

Siobhan Campbell

Clifden 1984

Coming from the city to the land of black armbands
I did not dare to ask the question of the day.
Hammerhead knew it, drowned in his knowing.
They found him puffed to his enormous brow.

Out here the sun will leave only when pushed.
Down into the sea it goes, setting the night creatures free.
Walking Sky Road leads to thoughts that fly apart
and will not be re-hooked.

Everyone knows the Dutchman who swims naked in snare cove.
His purple cock swings into the dreams of peeping girls.
No surrender, Ulster says no; Out out out; the lady's not for turning

We, who were never Catholic before,
are reading the new covenant of liberation.
Sound-bites from Peru excite our tongues.

The summer is long enough to wait for new translations.
When they re-sit, they may reframe the question.
We try growing beards, not shaving our legs,
practice mantras as if we could go mystic in the morning.

Anne Casey

The Lady Angophora

golden limbs stretching
in the warm sun – winter garb
strewn about her feet

Edward Lee

Remember

Illness made him an echo
of himself
before death made him
a heavy memory
that time and distance made light,
light enough
to rise high
to the back of our minds,
and lie there
waiting to be remembered
with some fondness.

Not his fault
to be remembered as such.
That blame lies clearly with us,
too eager surviving
to spend time remembering
a death that made us realise
we weren't living at all.

Alice Kinsella

Jellyfish

Swish-swashing in the swell
it offers up floral entrails
floating like licks of kelp.
Inconspicuous amongst the pink
of wading legs clashing with the waves.

Not minding the rush of beach goers
a farmer hauls a harvest of sea weed into his tractor,
calls out nonchalantly;
Watch the dead ones now, they can still hurt you.

Colin Hassard

we respect Death

we respect Death
but are not sure why.
the rituals in the ripple
are silence, stillness,
reflection.

engines stop for the hearse.
mourners stand with heads bowed.
but our Death is all movement –
shuttling, passing,
departing – anything but the certainty,
the halt.

we respect Death
but only through fear.
as the mind ponders
the intricate secrets,
the bones know
that a hungry dog is coming.

and as kitchen floors are mopped,
and empty tuna tins carefully rinsed,
the alive distract themselves
with the work of the dead.

we respect Death
and hope it comes invited;
breeze-like
on a spring night
in anything but a white coat.

Jo Burns

Paperweight from home

I fall into your globe of cool glass
opened up to pull me in, inside your stratosphere.
The weight of cobalt, indigo, shrinks the room

in relativity. I stand on bills, school letters,
unticked to-dos enveloped by Atlantic waves,
the smell of the old distillery

High weathered forts fend off the tides.
They mock my nature's sighing winds
cradling the spindrift mother-stream

which strokes Runkerry manes of reeds
to the basalt trenches of Fionn's platoons.
The rising granite of hexagonal magma

the shaping of old Morven's bridges,
which smothered Benandoner
Kittiwakes glide the yawning skies,

dark vulture stones stand sentinel
to white reapers who lash with salted tongue.
I am whittled to my very bones.

Chasing the seep of horizons, the currents dare
to loot and steal from whiskey brown streams.
I look up at the woman looking through the glass

tilting her hand, whipping up the sea.
Her eyes glazed in a kind of meditation
taking grains and almost all of me.

Mike Gallagher

*In Lourdes
for CS*

Did you know him?
Did you know Jimmy?
And the glint in her eye
lit the gap
in between
and the zip in her voice
snuck us off over
the chattersome room
sped us back to a time
of prim-pursed lips,
of whispered asides,
of wagging of tongues,
of wringing of hands,
of fingers pointed,
of priests paralysed.
And us in love.

Lorraine Devlin

M1

Remember the time we hit 115 on the M1,
the darkness of the night country rushing by,
our hearts pounding as I opened the throttle,
just to see how fast my old Corolla could go.

In a sci-fi movie we would have rocketed
through time and space at 88
and who knows where we might have ended up?

Perhaps not here, bored and married,
sinking under the weight of our rings,
the sofa cushions lumpy,
the garden growing weeds.

Brian Gourley

Smithy

A blow on bellows—

The fire soars into full bass,
Its hard throat bristling on the skin,

In the glow his red beard gleams.

Stand closer—

The reddening heat sears the skin like meat.

Coals. A handful.

The red eye rises

From depths,

As if

Surfacing from the devil's cauldron.

The loop of the shoe,

Bristles red,

Then white.

The arc curves

To the clamour

Of the impatient hammer,

He wields with Vulcan arms

Gaudy with tattoos, as thick as the trunks

Of ashes.

Thrust into water.

Steam clouds rise,

And there it is,

A curved bow,

Black metal,

The devil's rib.

short story

Nora Shychuk

Domains of Life

AS THEY DRIVE, RAY Madden puts a hand on his daughter's knee. She smiles, and the pale afternoon light, sporadically dotted by tall trees, casts shadows across her face. Ray notices she is tired, hair messy, bags under her eyes, pants worn and wrinkled. She is too young to be so tired, he thinks.

He pats her knee to the beat of a song on the radio, a song he has heard many times before. John Denver sings about sunshine on his shoulders as the car shakes and bumps along a back dirt road, kicking up dust and rocks which clunk-clunk-clunk against the metal rim of the car and get stuck in the tires.

The thermos of coffee is warm in his hands as he brings it up to his lips. He takes a long sip and passes it to his daughter. Kristin opens her mouth and points to her braces.

"I'm not supposed to have anything hot, remember?"

He takes the thermos back and places it in the holder between them. Of course, he thinks. He has just picked up his daughter from the dentist and he should have known that. He has never been good with details, with remembering everything. He feels anger rising. Kristin's mother should be here.

But when Ray looks back at his daughter, she is smiling. She doesn't mind, not anymore. She knocks his knee with her small, bony leg.

"He gave me purple rubber bands this time," Kristin says, and shows her teeth again.

"Looks nice."

"I like the aqua ones more," she says.

"Did he tighten them too much?"

"Just a little," she says.

"Bastard."

"Dad."

"He does this every time."

"It's just uncomfortable. At least they're not loose. Remember Dr. Herald? The brackets popped off."

"We could stop at Seven Eleven? I can get you a slushie. Might help with the pain," Ray says.

Kristin shakes her head and tells him she needs to get back. She can't miss her afternoon classes. She checks the watch on her wrist and looks out the window, impatiently drumming her fingers in her lap.

Ray notes how many trees they pass in the car as they whoosh by. Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. He counts quietly under his breath, using his fingers to keep track. Cherry trees, firs, and maples. They have grown so tall that their branches dip and reach out over to the other trees across the road, creating a canopy of shade.

Cold Creek Road is the longer way to get to the middle school but Ray takes it every time, to drop Kristin off, to pick her up after classes, softball or track and field practice. Kristin likes it too, especially since they saw the fox last month. The animal, with its orange, fiery tail, scurried across the road to a dark corner in the woods with a little bird lolling from its mouth. Before it disappeared, it turned and looked back at them.

By the time they reach the edge of the woods, they will be just two minutes from the school. Ray's black Sedan will be painted in another thin coating of orange dust, like always. Soon, Ray thinks, he'll have to wash the car, but he knows it's supposed to rain tonight. He can leave it outside the garage and let the weather do its work.

But as he looks up into the sky, it is cloudless and blue, with no sign of rain.

As long as the weather holds, he and Kristin will play basketball as they do every Wednesday night. Under their ten-foot basketball hoop with the torn, grey net, they will shoot around, playing H-O-R-S-E and 21, maybe even a little Around the World. He will let Kristin go first; he will let her win, but not without a fight. Deep down, he thinks she knows this, but she plays along and laughs and taunts when he pretends to be pissed off about his defeat. With a flushed face and flyaway hairs clinging to her sweaty forehead, Kristin will dribble the ball between her legs and land perfect, smooth layups. Ray hopes she'll go out

for basketball next year. She has talent, athletic skill, but is still no match for his height. He can block almost every shot she throws up, but only does every so often to keep the game alive. To give her a chance.

She is competitive by nature, Ray thinks. She is quick, smart, a real fighter. He likes that about her. It is clear that his little girl was raised by her dad, by her old man alone. She gets her stubbornness from him—her drive to be the best. They have the same dark eyes, the same pointy, thin nose. Their smile is similar too, wide and slightly gap-toothed. When he looks back at old pictures of himself as a baby, he remembers the day Kristin was born and how, when their eyes first locked, he realized he was looking at a version of himself. He knew then that it would always be enough just to have each other.

Back at home, he will have to get everything ready. He'll check the pressure in the basketball, mark the Around the World stopping points in yellow and blue chalk. He could even buy a new net from the sporting goods store, snow white and tear-free, but this might upset Kristin. She helped him put the old one up when she was seven, her little hands reaching up to the rim as he held her up over his shoulders. To her, replacing the net would mean burying the memory.

She is far too sensitive but he doesn't tell her this, and won't, not until she is older. Maybe next year, when she's fifteen. He hopes high school will toughen her up—but only just enough. He doesn't want her to change, and doesn't want her to grow up too fast; he just wants her to come out of her shell and make some friends.

Ray can't remember the last time his daughter brought a friend over to the house and this worries him. She won't want to hang around her dad forever.

“What do you want for dinner tonight?” he asks.

Kristin continues to gaze out the window, shrugs, and offers no suggestion, so Ray says he'll make her favorite: ground hamburger and cream of mushroom soup over a bed of steak fries. Kristin nods and Ray grabs his thermos of coffee again and gulps it down. The smell of sugary French vanilla fills the car.

Kristin closes her eyes and rests her head against the seat. Ray turns the wheel carefully, attempting to make the ride as smooth as possible. The low rumble of the engine has always made Kristin sleepy. He wonders what she is thinking about. Suddenly he feels the need to say something, to keep their conversation going, to keep her young and awake

forever, but all he does is click the radio off completely.

Even with her eyes closed, the sunlight hits Kristin's face and she sees splotchy, bright dots dance inside her head. It makes her think of science class, of the day where they got to use the microscopes in the lab to look at water and earthworms, then at the leaves of a four leaf clover. The shifting shapes, the network of veins, the colors. A whole world unseen suddenly seen up close.

Kristin focuses on the sound of tires crunching on dirt. Underneath, she hears her father's steady breathing and the jingling of car keys.

Today, Mr. Davis will cover what will be on the science test on Friday. The classifications of all living things, from Kingdom to Species. The three domains of life: Archaea, Bacteria, and Eukarya. The genus and species names of plants and animals. That's why she has to go—to take notes so she knows what to study. Otherwise, she would have taken her dad up on his offer. Blow off school for today, stay home, watch re-runs of *The Twilight Zone* and *Married with Children*. But she is too interested in the way the world works and the natural order of things. She thinks of plants growing out of damp soil, of stars bursting to life only to dim and die out after thousands—millions—of years. There will never be enough time to see it all, to understand everything, but she plans on trying.

She opens her eyes and unzips her book bag, shuffling around between books, pencils, and paper. She takes out her purple, wide ruled notebook and sees that it is almost full, scribbled with lists and names and cycles and formulas; she makes a mental note to ask her dad to pick up a few more notebooks for her this week. She will need them for finals coming up in May.

They turn off the uneven, dirt road and pass houses on a residential street, a blur of reds and yellows and blues and browns and whites. They pass the Simon's yard, then Mr. and Mrs. Hughes' house. Mr. Windell stands outside and waters thick, evergreen bushes, his golden retriever Lucy yelping and digging her paws into the dirt close by. Kristin waves and Lucy barks.

“Can we get a dog?” Kristin asks, turning to Ray.

“A what?”

“*Canus lupus familiaris*,” she says.

“What was that?”

“Dad.”

“I can't hear you,” Ray says, turning the music back on.

“I'll walk it. I'll feed it. I promise.”

Ray turns the music up, louder than before.

“Huh? I can't hear you.”

“*Dad!* I promise.”

“You have to talk louder, sweetie.”

He twists the dial to full blast and points to his ear, shrugging.

“This isn't over,” Kristin yells, laughing.

The parking lot is full by the time they get to the school and Ray stops right in front of the big, glass entrance doors. He helps Kristin with her book bag and lunch. He kisses her forehead and says he'll be back to pick her up at 3:15 this afternoon.

“On the nose?” Kristin asks.

And, as always, Ray touches the tip of his nose and as much as she doesn't want to, Kristin laughs.

“Do you have your excuse to show what's-her-face?” Ray asks.

“Miss *Hopkins*? Yeah.”

Kristin holds up the note from the dentist and gets out of the car. Closing the door behind her, Kristin waves at Ray and Ray waves back. Once she walks away, Ray revs the car's engine and drives off, beeping the horn the whole way out of the parking lot, hoping to embarrass her.

The sky above Kristin is still clear, still blue. A bird, a hawk, circles far above her head and Kristin wonders what the world looks like from way up there—if the hawk can even see her. *Falconiformes accipitridae*, she whispers, thinking hard about the order, about the corresponding scientific family name. She jumps up and down once and waves her arms in the air, but the hawk flies on and circles, never slowing and never calling out.

At the door, Kristin takes out her student ID card from her pocket and scans it over the touch pad. It beeps, the glass doors open, and she goes in, checking the time on her watch as she walks inside and across the wide entry hall as she has done so many times before.

Instinctively, Kristin steps down a large set of steps that descend from the other side of the hall. The cafeteria sits immediately at the base of the steps and around this time, it is usually noisy, filled with screaming classmates and scolding, miserable teachers on lunch duty. As she makes her way down, she checks her watch again. It isn't until she realizes that she can hear her own footsteps that she looks up.

The whole cafeteria is visible to her now. The long tables are empty, but the floor, the floor is covered with bodies, but nobody moves. Kristin trips and falls down the last few steps and lands on her knees. She drops her book bag and her lunch. Milk spills out all over the floor. The skin on her knees stings. It stings so badly.

When she looks up, she sees Mr. Davis, the science teacher, walking over to her. He never has lunch duty on Wednesdays and Kristin knows he shouldn't be here; he should be in his classroom. His shirt is stuck to his body and there is so much blood. All over him and on the floor and on the faces of her classmates and other teachers. She sees Coach Reynolds, her softball coach, slumped in the far corner, his mouth agape, and she knows that he is dead. Kristin forces herself to look away. To her left is Miss Hopkins, the office lady, hiding under one of the tables. She is crying and there is blood on her hands.

As Mr. Davis approaches, all Kristin can hear are his footsteps and the milk as it laps out of the carton and onto the floor.

I kept track. I have entered and exited this school a combined one thousand, eight hundred, and twenty-seven times—and that is the number that will stretch on forever. That number is infinite. Dateless. Endless. It won't change.

And the children. Twelve, thirteen, fourteen. They will always be young. They will never age. After today, the school will be fitted with metal detectors, with state-of-the-art scanning technology. They will try to ensure that this does not happen again. The police will come fast and every second counts. I have to hurry. I feel the pistol in my pocket, cold and hard and metallic.

I look down and Jessica Lewis is bleeding out on the floor. She was a good principal, a fair and patient boss. On my birthday, she left a card on my desk and sent an Edible

Arrangement to my house in the shape of a spaceship. I ate the strawberries first.

Her blood is brighter than I thought it would be. Almost pink—it reminds me of flowers. Spring tulips. Then her eyes roll up and into the back of her head and I hear her exhale, long and slow. She blinks so quickly, like some speck of dust or dirt is bothering her, and then she goes quiet.

I hear a gasp and whirl around. Mr. Williams, the janitor, stands motionless outside of the cafeteria bathroom with a fat boy clutching his hand. Dried vomit is caked to the boy's shirt and he is having trouble standing up. They must have been on their way to the nurse's office.

They see me, right there in the middle of the room, surrounded by all of the bodies. My shirt is covered in what used to be their hair and hearts and skin. I raise my gun and walk over toward them. Mr. Williams puts up his hands and tries to reason with me. He says, hold it Mr. Davis, what's wrong? I can help you, he says. What do you need? What's wrong? Mr. Davis, what's wrong? Are you alright? Let me help. Come on, now. No, Mr. Davis. Not the boy. What's wrong? What's wrong? He asks this again and again and again.

I point the gun at his chest and expect him to run but he doesn't. His eyes just well up and he shakes his head and snuffles. He asks me why, his voice surprisingly direct and clear. Then I think he says his wife's name, Cathy or Catherine or Cathleen. I shoot him quick. The boy runs off and I only have to take a few steps before I get him too. He drops to the floor with a thud and blood sputters from his mouth.

When I was a teenager our dog, a little, white poodle named Pixy, got sick. She was old and smelled awful, as if her body was prematurely decomposing. She had cloudy cataracts in her eyes, a missing toe on her back, right paw, and chipped, yellowed front teeth. For some reason, Pixy always slept at the foot of my bed. I think she liked how I kept my bedroom window open, even in the winter. She liked the breeze, the light from the moon and the sound of the rushing creek at the back of our property.

Her shallow, wheezy breath kept me up at night. The smell of her decaying body didn't help either, but I learned to live with it. I started to like having her there. I even brought her milk bones and left them by my feet so she could snack during the night if she got hungry.

But one night she didn't come and dad came in late and got me out of bed. He said

Pixy had been throwing up blood and shitting downstairs—that it was time for her to go. He took her out to the back yard and I remember it was very cold. I didn't bring my coat and my fingers felt tight and frigid, like my skin didn't fit anymore. There was no snow, but the ground was hard, almost frozen. I remember wondering if we would even be able to bury her. I asked, but dad didn't answer. Didn't even look at me. He just put Pixy down on the cold ground and there was a loud pop and it smelled like the air after a fireworks show on the Fourth of July.

I hear something as I start to walk away. Turning back, I see Mr. Williams dragging himself across the tiled floor. He is trying to get to the boy, but the boy is dead already. I watch; there is no point. A small, silver iPod sits nearby, blood-soaked, and through the speakers I hear music. Jazz. Charlie Parker is wailing on his saxophone. The song is familiar, *Yarbird Suite*, I think, but I step on the iPod to silence it. I let Mr. Williams crawl a few seconds more. He grabs the chubby boy's hand and I shoot him.

His hand stays on the boy.

I remember that I left the front door of my house unlocked this morning and that I forgot to water the flowers leading up to my red, front door. I left no note, but that's okay. It doesn't matter. Who would read it, anyway? The meteorologist said it would rain tonight. The flowers will get their drink. They will grow.

The cafeteria is quiet now. Vacant. Everyone is either dead or hiding. I think of counting the bodies, but know there isn't any more time. Absolutely none. I could go look for some more of them in the halls, in lockers or in the classrooms, but the deeper into the school I go, the more the police will pile in from all entrances and surround me.

I cross the cafeteria and head for the large doors. On the way, I see Miss Hopkins, the office receptionist, hiding under one of the long tables. Her bright, pink skirt gives her away. I guess that she is the one who called the police. I'm almost sure of it. She was in the front office, heard the shots, and made the call.

I'm almost to her table, can even smell her perfume, when I hear a buzz and the front doors open and a young girl walks in with a book bag and lunch in her hand. I stop. She walks down the steps and checks her watch. When she finally looks up and sees what I've done, she loses her footing and falls, smacking onto the ground, hard. I go toward her. She

looks up and sees me coming. The gun feels very heavy in my hand so I switch it to the other and point it at her. She starts to cry. I can feel her terror. I stop advancing and she clumsily stands up. Her fingers are shaking. She looks back to the door and wonders if she can make a run for it but like a smart girl knows she can't.

The spilled milk from her lunch spreads over the floor and she is heaving now, crying so hard as she looks back at the doors. She brushes strands of hair from her face. I realize that I teach this girl. Yes. In my fourth period class. She sits in the front row and takes notes and asks thoughtful, careful questions. Kristin Carr. That's it, that's her name.

At the beginning of the year we went over the anatomy of the human body. I think of what this bullet will do when it crushes into Kristin's heart. People assume a shot to the heart is an instantaneous death, but it isn't. In fact, depending on where the bullet strikes the heart, survival is possible. But, if I'm careful, if I place the shot just so, the organ will burst; the shot will disrupt her system irrevocably.

I am still pointing the gun at her chest when she turns away from the entry doors, away from the steps, and looks directly at me. Her hands still shake, her cheeks are tear-soaked, but her dark, piercing eyes bore into mine. I lower the gun slightly, unsure of how to respond. I wait for her to say something, to talk to me the way Mr. Williams did, to scream like the girl with the blonde hair when I first started shooting, when I first started this. I want to give her a moment to say what she needs to say, to think about her life and what she is leaving behind, but she just looks at me, blank and somehow beatific.

I shoot from very close range and the blast is so powerful and loud in my ears that I stumble and cower back. Kristin falls to the ground and her eyes stay open but they look at nothing. Her blood mixes with the spilled milk.

I double back to find Miss Hopkins still under the table, clutching a picture of her baby girl and a man who I presume is her smiling husband. I tell her I'm sorry and she is singing, singing a song very quietly. I cannot place it—I do not recognize the words. This bothers me. I almost ask her what it is, where she heard it, who sings it even, but then her face falls. I feel bad for making her wait, so I shoot her right between her eyes. It's the most respectful way. Like the cows at the slaughterhouse when they're stunned.

Miss Hopkins falls back and her hand still grasps the picture. Her little girl is dressed in a pink, sparkly princess gown and is holding the index finger of the man. A rainbow

lollipop is in her other hand. They are outside somewhere. A big castle stands in the background. I study it further. It is a blue, summer sky and the sun is shining and I see balloons floating upward behind her. So many people are walking around, all around, in shorts and hats and sandals. Miss Hopkins, unseen, must have taken the photo herself. I take the picture and turn it over to look at the back. It reads, in loopy, blue ink, *Stella, 4 Y.O., Walt Disney World, Summer 2015.*

I decide to keep the picture. I fold it carefully and put it in my pocket. I walk back to the foot of the steps. Kristin is ghost white. As I pass her, I notice the blood has completely taken over the milk and everything around her is a dark crimson. I reach down and put a hand on her head and whisper that it's all okay now before I walk up the steps myself. Before I even reach the top I hear the sirens, their wail muffled from the closed doors. It reminds me of being underwater or right in the middle of a muddled dream.

From the window I see that the day is bright and mild and I can't believe the weather calls for rain tonight. I wonder when it will come. I wonder if it will fall heavily and for how long—how many inches. I imagine stepping outside and smelling the freshly cut grass one last time and looking at the flowers planted around the flagpole, but I remain inside.

Even so, the sun is hot on my face. The sirens are louder now. Closer. I open the door just slightly and look out, past the car park, and hear the screech of tires on the street before I see the police cars rocketing down Main Street. In a matter of seconds, they will turn into the parking lot.

I close the door and turn away. I take a seat halfway down the steps, not far from Kristin's body. I look out once more at the silent cafeteria, at the way the sun casts slants of glowing, yellow light across the tile floor. It is so quiet that I hear a fly buzzing somewhere, its little wings beating and cutting through the air.

Mark Kelleher

Smoke Signals

HE HAD A WEEKEND'S worth of stubble and wore untied and oversized powder blue moccasins that flopped when he walked. At the door, cocooned in a belted dressing-gown, he squinted into the sun's glare and greeted me speechlessly, using his thumb to point back towards the darkness obscuring the hall. A faint grimace came over his face when he did this, as if his present disposition was something he had practised all morning. I gestured back at him, arm outstretched. We walked in. The walls were grimy jasmine and there was a smell of bleach. He led us beyond two shut doors to what appeared to be the living room. Shelves crammed tight with alphabetised and dust-jacketed books of all sizes. A portable television, its aerial kinked, was switched off. Overhead, the blades of a ceiling-fan were cruddy and unmoving. He walked to the window and popped its top section ajar.

"Bit more air," he said.

These were the first words I'd heard him speak in over a year and a half. His voice carried a strain of unease that did not surprise me. It was possible that he hadn't spoken out loud since he had moved in, though when that was no one seemed entirely certain. Over the months, I frequently found myself thinking about his remoteness and how the necessity of speech may become something he would no longer have to concern himself with. The more I thought about it, the more I envisaged him devolving into an existence where he might one day forget how to talk.

"Books," he said, nodding his head at nothing in particular. "Still reading them like you used to?"

I knew in the moment that this was an attempt to accompany something neutral – the universal of reading – with the personal of our shared past. He was prone to this, filtering abstractions through easily digestible inanities. The question itself struck me as absurd.

“Sometimes,” I lied.

He turned and began to inspect the titles piled on a straightened drafting-table by the rear wall and ran fingertips along their tops, half-muttering author names to himself. His voice, jittery a moment earlier, was now edged with quiet excitement. He enunciated Eastern European names in whispers with barely concealed enthusiasm and briefly seemed to forget I was there, staring at his back.

Twilight of the Idols, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, Anathemas and Admirations, The Better Angels of Our Nature, Intuition Pumps. He said them out loud, near breathlessly, his voice inflected with faux-profundity. He slipped one out, replaced it, took another, repeated the act.

“You can borrow any of these.”

Crouched down, using a long thumbnail to pierce duct-tape sealing a small box, I noticed how his gauntness made him look abnormally long-framed. His stooped shoulders were spindly beneath the thin fabric of his gown and his back looked longer and broader than any human back should be. A faint burn mark circled his neck and made the rest of the skin around it look paler than it actually was. His hair, unwashed and wiry, was newly flecked grey and misshapen. He looked like a man who had forgotten who he was meant to be, no longer willing, or able, to inhabit himself.

He returned to his feet with an awkward stagger, a paperback in his hand.

“Give this one a read. In your own time.”

The cover image depicted a single leafless tree in a field at dusk, its bare branches forming multi-coloured neurons. The book’s blurb mentioned the modern astonishments of brain science, the exposing of age-old delusions, how scanners had destroyed the concept of the soul. I fought the urge to contemplate why he would hand me this specific book. I was vaguely acquainted with the field of neuroscience. I’d studied it for a semester during a degree I hadn’t used and probably never would. Was this a subtle attempt to bring me into an understanding of who he was and what he had become? I flicked open a random chapter, then another, pretending to read their words.

“This would have been a good one to work on, I’d say. You’ll see what I mean.”

“Right,” I said.

His belt had loosened when he had stooped. I saw now that he was wearing a t-shirt with a faded Pepsi logo embossed across the chest and jog-pants, the ends of which stopped an inch above the ankles. This dishevelment struck me more as premeditated, carefully chosen, than something unavoidable. An unwanted necessity rather than an unpreventable regression. He was not, I was certain, without money.

Looking at him, I wondered: was this man really my father?

The presence of stubble was something I imagined was permanent. Beneath it, from his left earlobe to just below his underjaw, ran the faint trace of a scar where they had opened up and wired him.

“It’s a bit clammy in here. Must do something about that,” he said.

We brushed through stained door beads into a kitchenette crammed with uncleaned cutlery. A decaying workbench with an attached vice-grip was positioned in the middle of the floor, its top covered with pencilled sketches, thick stacks of old magazines, a jar holding a cluster of small paintbrushes. In the corner, an unplugged fridge and a small cooker upended on its rusted side, a bundle of cut cables protruding out from the end.

The space was cramped and reeked of wood smoke.

Curious, I stepped towards one of the drawings, turning my head to inspect its image.

He sighed elaborately.

On the page, there were a series of scribbled measurements and the vague outline of what looked to be the early foundations of a complex railway track. The end was initialised and dated. He had only finished it that morning.

“What is this?”

He paused, wondering, I guessed, what version of the truth he could offer me.

“Just a little project. To keep the minutes ticking by.”

My father – the fact-checker for over thirty titles a year, the dog walker at dawn, the regular church-goer, blue-eyed and clean-shaven, notepad perpetually within reach. It was difficult to imagine him there, at the table-top, elbows perched on art-pad, thinking in abstract images. For most of his working life, he had dealt strictly in language. I once heard him say that existence took place in the spaces between the words of a sentence. He was speaking on the phone to an agent in the city, celebrating the completion of a book of meditations on nature. As a child edging towards the quandary of adolescence, I didn’t know

what he meant then, and still don't, but his conviction roused something in me. I became a reader, gorging on words and the worlds they made, stopping only when I felt I could no longer read comfortably. I wondered if he still believed in that idea, that life resided between words.

"Drawing?" I asked, realising only now the situation – all of it – had reduced me to clumsy half-sentences.

"Drawing, yeah," he said. "Although I wouldn't exactly call it that. It's just messing around, really. You know yourself. Bits and pieces, here and there. As I say, keeps the minutes ticking."

I stepped over paint-pots and a snapped broom-handle and used a thumb to separate the slats of the greased venetian blinds. The yard outside was in complete stillness and the way the sunlight hit the grass through the smeared window made the scene look like an old photograph. The bungalow was rimmed by an oblong of thick, high hedging that hid it from those passing a hundred yards down the gravel pathway.

"It's in disarray, I know," he said. "I don't go out there much."

He unbolted the door's two locks and wriggled its chain free. Warm light fell into the opening. We were high up, 500 yards or so at the tip of a hill, but the possibility of an aerial view of what lay below was made difficult by the surrounding overgrowth. I wondered if this was also intentional, but couldn't bear to ask. Sounds reached us from all angles and distances, some intermittent, others constant. A pneumatic drill bore through solid ground somewhere close by. Overhead, electrified pylon cords sent sharp hisses across the river far below. A disorientated gull pitched through the sky, screaming. I watched him listening to these sounds of the world and wondered what they meant to him now. His face twitched, before righting itself again. I wanted to ask him if he was aware of it, but chose not to.

"Who owned this place before?"

The question, the entirety of a sentence, startled him. He paused a moment before wincing in exaggerated reflection, hand at chin.

"I'm not entirely sure, to be honest. "

He went back inside before returning a minute later, foldable chair under one arm, what appeared to be a ripped segment of a shower curtain clamped under the other.

“Can you do me a huge favour?” he asked, pointing to his hair. “No hassle if you’d rather not.”

He slipped a hand into the breast-pocket of his gown and took out a rusted nail-scissors.

“Doing the front is all right, but the back is hard, as you can imagine.”

Did it dawn on him at all that none of this was imaginable?

The thought of placating him seemed alien to me, but the helplessness of the request made it difficult to decline. Taking the scissors without a word, I told myself that the act need not be intimate, that physical closeness might be a necessary burden if I was to get whatever it was I had come here looking for.

He unfolded the chair, sat and wrapped the curtain around himself and tucked its edges into his t-shirt. I stood behind him and stared for a moment at his bare neck. Close up, his hairline was more jagged than I had first noticed. Long, stray hairs of different shades sprung from where his spine jutted out. His sideburns were uneven, dark grey, oily to the touch. I shifted to his side. The droop of skin under both eyes was more pronounced from there. His cheeks were blanched and pockmarked, his nose empurpled.

I clipped, wholly unsure of what I was doing or why, as he sat, body-stiff, eyes shut the entire time, the sun scudding shadows around us.

The hair came off in clumps, falling on the outspread curtain, his lap, his feet, my feet, the grass beneath us. His head moved in sync with the random sections I cut at. With his back to me, I could have slashed at his neck, killing him in seconds. The throb of his pulse beat against my fingers as I cut away the parts that grew out and over his ears.

Holding a blade to the head of such a man, it was difficult to not submit to peculiar thoughts. When the stories, and later their more nuanced truths spread, we – my mother, my sister and I – sought comfort in the hope that we were merely witnessing the first symptoms of a growth that had altered his mind. For weeks, my mother browsed the web, dredging up obscure articles from disreputable medical journals. There had been an American teacher whose apparent evil turned out to be an egg-sized tumour pressing against his orbifrontal cortex. If I burrowed into the skull of what was left of my father, this man who once taught me how to ride a bike and tie my sneakers, I wondered if there was an unfound truth, buried at the neural-level, locatable somehow. Slipping into the imaginary, I envisioned a shaved and

lacerated head, scalp stretched neatly back, a shower of skull-dust, brain aflame with unwilled desires.

“Tilt forward,” I said.

The right side had taken on some semblance of shape. The left was still slightly skewed, but I wanted to stop there. I stood back to signal I was done. He flapped the curtain and sent a rain of hair to the ground. He ran a hand up and down the length of his neck and legs, rose to his feet and began to blow into his shirt.

“Thanks.”

I nodded.

“Really, I’m sure it’s great.”

He stepped towards the hedging and stared through its gaps, neck crouched, head craned left. The sight unnerved me but I could not look away. He was peering out and down towards the house in which he once lived with us. Our homes, our lives, were separated by the height of a hill and a strip of river that bent west towards the Atlantic a mile downstream. This tidal gap gave the impression of a considerable distance, but it was slim to the point that, late at night, it was common to hear from one side the voice of someone on the other. In letters to us, drawn up and posted by a legal intermediary, he had stressed that the short distance between his new home and ours was coincidental. He was not legally allowed to select where he lived. Unsure of what to believe, in those early days I simply tried to forget about everything, certain then that, despite our close proximity, it was possible I might never see him again. Looking at him now, staring back towards a physical past, I was convinced he looked upon this nearness as punishment, the visible presence of an urge that could never again be satisfied.

He turned again.

“Different. From here,” he said. “The water, I mean. Grey, sort of. Quicker.”

When had he begun to speak like this? Gone was the speechifying, the lofty statements, the vivid descriptors attached to all things spectral. He now spoke low-toned and timorously, in rapid sentences splintered with doubt.

“Back in a sec.”

“Fine,” I said.

The sun sank below leaden cloud and evening was in slow descent. The birdsong that had been coming from the thicket of bushes beyond the hedge had ceased. The scorched grass had borne the brunt of the summer's twilight heat and cracked lightly as I walked over it. On the east wall of the house, a drain-pipe had fractured and come loose, its mouth pointed upwards. To its side, a large splotch of cream paint covered a sprayed slogan, its message partially obscured.

He was known to be living here. That much was clear. Even before his letters arrived, word of his presence had spread, mentioned, in the beginning at least, on a near daily basis. Rumour had soon followed and before long he became mythologised. Everybody had seen him and nobody had seen him. He'd grown a beard, taken on a limp, turned religious, was heavily scarred or heavily tattooed, prowled, at all hours, all over the surrounding area, on backroads, through woodlands, across public parks and into private gardens. None if it was believable, but it was hard to not succumb to their suggestions, the strange allure of their fictive qualities. This blurring of the actual had the effect of reducing its unbearable edge. It all became unreal and dismissible.

He returned changed, a purple fleeced hoody zipped to the neck, khaki shorts with Los Angeles printed in indigo down the left leg.

"Had a look inside," he said, pointing at his head. "You did a good job."

We stood for a moment. A ship we couldn't see hummed by below. A cloud of midges descended around us and he began to swat at them, tongue out in agitation. They flew off and returned again.

"Getting a bit nippy," he said, hugging himself.

"Yeah."

"What harm."

He sat on the doorstep and began smacking the dust and dirt off his bare feet.

A group of young men came when he was hospitalised and demolished the fuse-box. This was one of the things that had been said, spread, celebrated. Everything I had seen so far confirmed it – the defunct utilities, the complete absence of electrical sound, the dearth of unnatural light. Perhaps he welcomed these inflictions, or saw, at least, a sense of justice in them bound to a truth greater than his own experience. He hadn't fixed the power and

probably never would. I saw him giving himself over to the rhythm of day and night and submitting to whatever unforeseeable events they contained.

“What do you eat?” I asked.

He rubbed at his eyelids with a knuckle, taking a moment, it seemed, to decide upon how much he could tell me. Something in his cramped posture suggested whatever information he had stored within him was his and his alone. It was difficult to know who he was trying to protect.

“Woman down the road,” he said finally. “Martha. Elderly, pushing well into the eighties. Nice lady, barely talks. Bit gone, but not fully. Brings me stuff every few days. She bakes, borrows some of my books in return. The lighter stuff. Wodehouse, the Christies, what have you. Doubt she reads them.”

“Which house?”

He stood and motioned towards the pathway.

“Only three or four hundred yards down that way. You wouldn’t see it unless you were looking for it. Brambled, hidden away by nettles. There her whole life, I’d say. But like I said, she speaks very little.”

Who was this woman and how aware was she?

I pictured an elfin wanderer, mindless and spine-warped, taking twenty minutes to advance up the short gravel path.

“She saw all the cars up here one day. Got curious, as old women tend to. Roamed in, knocked. You know how it is.”

He sounded like a stranger talking about other strangers. Every word he spoke only strengthened my suspicion that he had mutated into someone, or something, else, and would remain unknowable. I realised that I, too, was one of *them*. Them, in this sense, meaning everyone who wasn’t him — everyone who was capable of remembering the recent past.

“I think I need to go.”

“Of course. I understand.”

We walked back into the kitchenette, alight in a hue of amber. He stood on a length of copper coil and swore through an excessive sigh.

I stopped a moment and looked at the desk again. All the drawings, carelessly-strewn, ink-blotched and dampened, seemed related to the railway track sketch from earlier. A carriage, gilded in gold pen. A black chimney piping out a scrawl of smoke. Piston rods, a numbered brass bell, a slew of finely detailed wheels. The dimensions were minute, intended for an expanse no greater than that of a room. Some contained colour, delicate shadowing, others showed vague, indistinct outlines. They all looked guided by meticulous instruction.

"I don't have any of the materials," he said. "But it's nice to imagine the finished article."

"How far along into it are you?" I asked.

"There's no measure of that. I sit, fiddle with it, most days."

He picked up and flicked open one of the magazines and landed on a fold-out black and white image of a Locomotive.

"They were a series that came out years ago. She brought them up here a few months ago. Some of the editions are missing, so I have to predict some of it."

We passed into the hall and he stopped abruptly at one of the shut doors and began to unlock it.

"Something to show you," he said.

Curiosity made a criminal of my father. It took, he said, just one click, followed by many more. From there, the irreversible inward spiral began. A man whose professional life was predicated on the necessity of the truth, he remained committed to accuracy even when it promised to destroy him. No excuses were offered. He said he looked because the opportunity presented itself. The desire to take it overcame any consideration of consequences. Then he continued to look. This is how he spoke about it, with the detached, slightly bored air of a scientist trying to explain a complex theory to the public. This honesty, more than the actual crime itself, is what the media focused on. What he said in court perplexed those who didn't really know him. The three of us who did were not surprised.

Where, the media asked, were the excuses, the desperate allusions to the dangers of solitary work? He stood, head up, tethered to the truth, speaking to a room of gasps and heads set to shaking.

The police file stated he'd been watched for the greater part of a year.

Twenty months for 918 images. The youngest was eight.

I followed him into the room. A torn swathe of flower-patterned polyester mesh ran from the ceiling to the floor, blocking the window and shutting out the evening's fading light. On the wall, a crookedly hung painting of a melting pocket-watch. A neat pile of hardbacks on the bedside table, empty water bottles, handwritten notes held in place by elastic bands.

"This will interest you," he said, pointing to a corner of the ceiling smudged with mould. "A Rorschach."

I looked away and focused my eyes on the bed. The sheets were yellowed and flung back. In it, I saw him blinking through insomniac hours, whiling away terrible night by conjuring, under the dull glow of moonshine, images from the darkness overhead.

"Here," he said, holding a manila folder out to me. "I wanted to give you this before."

Across the folder, FACTS had been stamped in red ink.

"Most of the stuff I've worked on has been dull. Historical dates, quotes from people now dead, that sort of stuff. Tedious, by and large. But I keep — *kept* — a list of the best ones. You'd be amazed at some of the stuff I stumbled upon."

Before we left the room, he fixed the sheets in place and puffed the lone pillow.

I stood at the doorstep and looked in the direction of an ocean I could not see. Before me stood the hedge and beyond that the pathway, the potholed road, the promenade with its fifty-foot pier, the ferryboat, the river itself. All that was stationary, all that was in motion, lying out there, waiting to be walked through, witnessed.

I stood and looked at this man, at my father.

A nerve twitched in his cheek. He pulled the hood up over his head and began to hug himself again. Balancing on the edge of the step, he looked huge, but unimposingly so. A man unsure of his own structure.

Gone were the elbow-padded tweeds, the brogues, over-polished and tightly-tied, the ubiquitous navy necktie. Gone, too, I realised now, were the exuberant gestures — the half-smile habit, the mid-speech hand movements, the closed-eye contemplating. Someone who only half knew him might mistake him now for a reclusive brother he didn't have.

"Take care," he said, flicking the index finger of his right hand.

I took off, without word of reply or a glance back. He'd wait a few moments, I figured, for me to disappear behind the hedge, and he'd wait a few more until he could no longer hear

my receding footsteps. Then he'd go back inside, re-bolt the door. Back to the unlit room, the desk of drawings, the presence of a silence complete and a night that would seem time-stretched. Then, wherever his imagination would lead him.

We remain the nuclear family long atomised. The shed where he worked stripped down, replaced by unfilled space. The walls photograph-free. The wheezing wife, bed-bound in drunken stupor. The daughter, long moved away. The son, the slacker, reduced now to relentless contemplation. The dog, three months dead.

We are a subgroup of that which makes up *they* to him.

Who are the others?

They came two years ago with the steel enforcer, obliterating the door at first light. Up the stairs, the manic shouts, cuffed and gone.

A different *they* came some months ago, loaded with a length of pipe and spray-cans, three or four or five of them, dead of night. A strike so vicious two inches of jaw just gave way. Reset, rewired, sewn up again. *They* came again weeks later, discreetly this time, with wire-cutters and wrecked the fuse-box.

Who are these people?

Names have been heard. Some known, others only half-familiar. I've seen these men, sitting in tight groups in bars, their voices dropping when they see me. They leave me alone – not out of sympathy, but because of what I represent. The inescapable links. They see me as who he was before he became who he is now. Sometimes, I sense they're just waiting.

In light of everything, who am I?

I no longer read, have never yearned for a God. In the mirror, I look for things until I see them and then I wish them away. A gnarled nasal bridge, an acne-cratered section of neck, crooked canines. In my reflection, I seek but find nothing of my mother's face.

And what of our rooms, dimly lit by the emerging morning? I walk through them, from the silence of the sitting-room, to the ambient din and damp of the kitchen, summoning, through sheer habit, visions of an alternative future. My mother in the high-backed chair knitting a cardigan, stopping every few moments to drag on a rolled cigarette. My sister, soul of the family, her belly a bulb of imminent new life. They are speaking, laughing together. Where is

my father? Sitting on a low stair, sheet in hand, running a ruler under each line. He's smiling when he does this, as always, lost in the reliable comfort of the written word.

And where, in this invented space, do I reside? In the yard, infinitely circling the house, stopping at each fogged window to gaze idly in, both there and absolutely not there, forever the detached observer.

Have I always been this way?

Two days later, I open by the window the manila envelope he pressed into my hand. It is Tuesday morning, the first week of hectic September.

The pages are margined down the side, the lines bullet-pointed.

- It takes ten minutes to drown in salt water.
- The Eiffel Tower expands in the heat.
- Roy C. Sullivan was struck by lightning seven times in a thirty-five year period and died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound.
- More lifeforms live in an individual's skin than there are people on earth.
- Some corpses are used as waypoints for climbers on Mt. Everest.
- Two thirds of the world's population has never seen snow.

The list goes on for eight, double-sided pages, each new fact cataloguing some inexplicable quirk of the world. What drew him to these specifically? Is it the deviation from normalcy? The unknowability, deep down, of all things?

I fold over the pages and slip them back into the envelope.

Outside, the early birds are beginning to trill, swooping by in black flashes against a bruised sky. The ferryboat will sail its first voyage of the day in ninety minutes and soon the traffic will arrive and build outside.

Over the river, I see squiggles of smoke mingling with clouds that look painted on. I know where they are coming from. For the briefest of moments, I wonder if I am hallucinating. As my eyes fix and adjust, I begin to see plumes shifting, thickening, proceeding steadily east.

I rise and take to the small patch of lawn outside. A light gust breathes through the town and sets the sailboat masts to ringing.

I cross the road and look closer, harder, at the hill up there.

The smoke grows and smears itself in spooky silence across a lengthy patch of brightening sky.

I can either smell it or I have convinced myself that I can.

Is this a case of him or someone else? Is this, like all events, possibly fated? Which version of the world am I observing now? Which opposite is at play?

Leaning on the wall separating the road from the river, I continue to look. The incoming tide laps lightly and the gulls are making their arrival known through eager shrieking. The heart does not succumb, does not even seem interested. It's all either too real or too unreal.

Pay attention to what is going on inside you and separate yourself from your immediate thoughts, he once told me. It was the only advice I ever took.

The smoke thickens. I'll do what any son in my situation would do.

Susanne Stích

Afterthought

VICTOR OPENS THE FRONT DOOR. He reaches for the new handle the neighbour has fixed to the wall. With the sun hitting his face, and the doorstep reminding him of the entrance into a swimming pool, he thinks of water for a moment; how it's colourless when he turns on the kitchen tap, like he did this morning, for the first time in weeks. The sea, on the other hand, can appear blue under sunlight. He hasn't seen it in years, but it lives inside his head somewhere, a shimmering billboard. Slowly he lets go of the handle, leans onto his walking stick and steps on the gravel path. His free hand reaches for the hat, moves around the band, searches for the bow, and relaxes.

He got dressed early this morning. Just out of bed, he walked across the cold floor to the wardrobe and looked at his shirts and trousers. They had been in there all this time, in the dark. There were enough clothes to dress at least seven men, seven Victors. In the end he opted for a light blue shirt and grey slacks, then left the room with the wardrobe doors open. Ready to go to the shop when it opens at eight he waited at the kitchen table for over an hour. The hat was an afterthought. He spotted it on the way to the door. It had been lying on the high shelf in the hall for years. Few people wear hats these days, but today, putting this one on after so much time, its snug fit around his skull made Victor believe that if only he let himself, he could run to the shop like a boy.

He looks around the front garden. The snowdrops have disappeared, the daffodils haven't come out yet. There is a smell of earth and air. In the street beyond, a black Mini zooms

past, then a silver jeep from the opposite direction. He hesitates, shuffles toward the front gate, opens it. The terrier in the garden across the street yaps, the clouds above him are moving fast. Victor whistles, almost inaudibly, but the dog calms down. He sets off along the sidewalk. In the distance is the shop, the big red sign with white letters. It hasn't changed in years, SuperValu. The missing *e* still bugs him. More cars pass. Drivers have long used Victor's street as a shortcut in the early morning traffic. Other than him, there's nobody out walking. Every now and again blackbirds hop out from underneath the hedgerows. They could be the same ones he watched from his bedroom at dawn, they could be different ones.

In the hospital nobody talked about time, especially not Victor's, the hours spent waiting between the uncomfortable bed and the blue chair beside it, the decades that went before. When the door was open, Victor could see into the staff room, a cramped space with glass walls. He saw nurses and doctors come and go. They arrived for work looking exhausted, they drank coffee, ate sandwiches from plastic packs, and keyed messages into their mobile phones. He had no idea what age they were, but there was something about them that made them look like giant babies, members of a world he hardly knew, a world they had somehow managed to be in charge of, harbingers of all kinds of progress. When they talked to him they put on quick, thin smiles, just like the disposable gloves they wore when taking his blood. Sometimes he tired of them and closed his eyes, but their sounds jarred with him, just as much, the strutting across linoleum, the constant demands, the slamming of doors along the corridor, as if all was lost, and always had been, in the most unspectacular way.

He finally reaches the shop. The automatic doors open, he squeezes through, picks up a shopping basket. He scans the shelves, reaches for a small loaf of bread, teabags, a pint of milk. In the next aisle a shop assistant is replenishing the shelf with bottled water. Seeing so many plastic bottles in one place, Victor can't but think of Charlie, the youngest qualified nurse in the ward he just left. At night they sometimes talked while the other patients were asleep, their voices close to inaudible. They were both good at making out what the other person said nonetheless. It was one of the first things he noticed about her. Her real name was Charlotte, but she called herself Charlie, and Victor never closed his eyes when Charlie

was in the room. In fact, he kept them wide open. She, too, smiled at him, but only when there was a reason. One night she cried, though. It started with her explaining to him that he had to drink more. She already looked sad when she came in, and Victor hadn't touched his bedside jug of water all day.

'You have no idea how much your body needs it,' she said.

'But I'm old,' he replied, feeling sheepish.

'Even if you were a hundred years old, Victor, it wouldn't make a difference. It's nature's law. We're made of water. Largely anyway.'

Once he had drunk half a glass in several, small gulps, she gave him the thumbs up. He lay down again and watched her close the curtains, her long-limbed silhouette like a choirboy's. She checked the medical chart of the sleeping man opposite him. Eventually she pulled up a chair and sat beside Victor. He knew she did it because he didn't have visitors. The other nurses sometimes asked him about it. Charlie didn't, she simply made a point of sitting with him in the semi-darkness, a small amount of light pouring in from the corridor.

'It's crazy how much water we need. It means that some get rich selling it in plastic bottles,' she said in her quiet voice, and Victor nodded.

'I saw this documentary last week about plastic waste, the landfill sites, the polluted oceans. It's horrific,' she continued, and for the next while Charlie talked to him in great detail about the suffering of sea birds and mammals. Finally, she cried a little. She buried her face in her plain, ring-less hands, and all he could see was her short blond hair, and the nape of her neck with the small tattoo he had often wondered about. Close-up he now recognized it as the silhouette of two birds mid-flight.

'It's bloody hard to be yourself in the world. Wherever you look, there's madness,' she said from behind her hands. Then, for a quick moment, she revealed her face, a quivering shape that reminded him of a three quarter moon. Victor didn't know what to do, and when she didn't stop crying, he reached for her left hand, tapped it gently. There was pain in her face, and there were things he wanted to say, but didn't. He hardly knew her, and he was almost four times her age. The more he thought about what to say, the more hesitant he became. If only he could have cast his thoughts around the room, like a spell or a blessing, even if they ended up dissipating in the hospital air.

'At home I always drink tap water,' he managed instead, and perhaps it wasn't the worst thing to say.

'Good for you, Victor.'

Her reply arrived like a shot, her face brightened, and he had a sudden vision of her going places in life. He liked it when she said his name, and when she looked up at him this time, things were different. Her eyes were brown, like his, and right then they had the mystery of well water.

What would it have been like to have a daughter, let alone a granddaughter like Charlie? This wasn't the first thought to arrive, but it was the type of thought he pulled out like a screen so no one would see things as they were. It was the thought people would relate to, the one that would have them nod in sympathy, make it okay for him to stay in the room. The other thought, first in line, was dressed in a glamorous hat, more dazzling than the hat on the shelf in his hallway, a top hat perhaps, a hat like another, more complete version of Victor. It swam in his mind like driftwood, caught and bobbing in a weir. It was always there somewhere, a pulse without a body. Right then, in the well water of Charlie's eyes it coalesced into an image of her and him as one and the same thing, her boyishness beside his softness. He pictured them beside each other like those small dog toys in the backs of cars, nodding forever, yes, there is a way, look and see, we're living proof. Not that Charlie needed proof. Hers was a different time. She'd long caught the train he himself had never got on. A day or two earlier he had seen her from the window in the car park outside. She was stepping off the back of a motorbike with another young woman in the driver's seat. He didn't mistake Charlie for a boy, but only when they both took off their helmets did he recognize her. The other girl was petite, her red hair bobbed with a shiny fringe. When they kissed, Victor shuddered a little, but then felt joyful for the rest of the day. This time the first thought did not hit him in the stomach, it didn't collapse like a domino stone either, causing others to collapse in its wake, making him sick in yet another part of the body he had lived in for eighty-four years. Instead, with Charlie's face as close as before, rather than follow the well-trodden path into the conundrum of his life, Victor managed a smile. And Charlie smiled back. She pulled a tissue from her pocket, blew her nose and stood up.

'I'm so sorry ... I guess I'm having a bad day. This isn't how it should be! My apologies, Victor, I should really be comforting *you*.'

She fixed his pillow, handed him his bedtime medications, and when he swallowed them instantly, followed by more water, she nodded as if he'd done something amazing.

'Good man,' she said, remaining in the doorway for a moment. When she finally disappeared, he lay awake for hours, wondering what exactly he might need comforted for at this stage.

Victor joins the queue at the till. Four people are ahead of him. Three of them hold baskets filled to the brim. He clasps his own with both hands, takes a deep breath and looks at the man in front of him, a broad-shouldered redhead in a tracksuit. The woman at the checkout chats with another shop assistant who holds up a double page spread in a glossy magazine with the big grinning face of a man in a blue tuxedo.

They're all at it these days, the woman at the till says, scanning the barcode of a tin of beans.

Flipping fags taking over the world, the other one adds.

Even though his hearing is good, one of the few things he has managed to preserve, Victor feels as though he is listening from inside a cave. The basket is suddenly heavier. It would be easy to set it down, a simple act of lowering it, carefully, slowly, until it touches the light blue linoleum under his feet. Afterwards Victor would straighten up again, and watch as each customer gets served. He would stand patiently, it's in his nature. This is 2016. People buy things in shops every day, and today, for the first time in weeks, he is one of them.

But the basket has a life of its own. Victor's fingers wriggle in an attempt to rescue it when it's already dropping, irrevocably, and much more slowly than he would have expected a shopping basket to fall. A tin of peas rolls toward his left foot, the milk carton bursts, the white liquid painting an uneven circle around his scruffy brogues. And in the midst of it all, regardless of the tremor that has taken over his body, now that his hands are free, they reach straight for the hat.

Christ! Dial 999!

You okay, sir? Can you hear me?

A pair of unknown hands with numerous rings and red nails guides him to a plastic chair by the door. Settling into its uncomfortable seat, Victor looks at the floor, imagining the seaside.

‘Let’s pick up some rubbish,’ he whispers to Charlie. They walk up and down the beach together, gathering all kinds of things. The water glistens in the sun, birds flap in the distance. Somewhere below them are fish, maybe even dolphins or seals, and by the time Victor and Charlie finish and leave, the beach looks a better place. No need to tell anyone. People will find out for themselves. Before long, they will come and see.

Outside SuperValu an ambulance has arrived, but nobody has got out yet. Maybe time has stopped. After all, Victor has made up his mind. In a moment he’ll lift his hat to greet the ambulance staff, stand up, walk back down the street with his groceries intact. He’ll reach the gravel path leading up to his front door. He won’t succumb to fear, to anger, none of those, never again. And even if his steps have shrunk in size, he’ll walk ahead of anyone coming after him. He will use the new handle to pull himself back up on the step. Then he will head straight into the kitchen of the small terraced house his parents left him, switch on the radio, run the tap and pour himself a glass of water. There will be horrible news about some place or other. If he’s lucky they’ll play an old song afterwards, one he knows and likes. He’ll hum along, and while drinking he’ll imagine the sheer amount of water he has consumed in his life, all the water without which, regardless of everything else, he would long be dead. He will still have his hat on. Nobody will mind, it’s his kitchen.

Seán Kenny

Fine

MY FATHER IS ALREADY in the pub, communing with his stout. This slow courtly raising of the freshly pulled pint is the closest thing to an intimacy he will allow. I feel as though I shouldn't even be watching him, unseen as I am. The football is a murmuring slab of high definition on the wall a few feet from his table.

We are meeting here for the match. We couldn't meet simply to talk. And so the match is useful. It justifies us, gives us a remote focal point. It's all about the match. Which is to say, it's not about the match at all. Not from my end it isn't.

"No score yet?" I say.

"No," he says.

"Any chances?"

"Ah, not really."

"A cagey start then."

"Cagey enough, yeah," he says.

Cagey. Yeah.

And then it's half-time. We cover politics, the economy, my job, his golf. Safe ground, well-trodden.

“How’s Mam?” I say, just throwing it in there like it’s no biggie.

“Your mother is fine. Sure, you were over a few days ago.”

“I know. But since then, how is she?”

He cocks an eye, swings it back to his pint. He drinks deeply from his glass, gaze now switching to the TV. Just then, a goal is scored and we’re saved from the moment. The cheering round the bar is loud and sustained. It’s the sort of cheering that drowns out anything that might compete with it. I order two pints and a sneaky short, downing it with my back turned to him and quietly returning the glass behind the bar.

Thus fortified, I try again. “You haven’t noticed anything, then, about Mam?”

“Jesus,” he says. “You’re like a dog with a bone. I’ve already told you; your mother is fine.”

“Oh, look,” he says, gesturing at the screen. “This could be a chance here.”

It peters out. Chances are like that.

Emboldened by further pints, I try once more as the final whistle blows.

“About Mam,” I say.

“Sweet Jesus. That’d be your specialist subject on Mastermind, wouldn’t it?”

“Look, I just think she’s getting very forgetful lately. It might be no harm if she went to Doctor McCann. Just to rule things out.”

“There’s nothing to rule out.”

“Right. So when I spoke to her at four o’clock on Tuesday and told her I was coming over at six, why was she so surprised to find me standing at the door?”

“Ah, she probably got the days mixed up,” he says.

I replay the scene in my head. Me ringing the bell, the soft clack of her slippared feet down the tiled hallway. Her face, at first tight with suspicion, then loosening to a broad smile, eyebrows raised.

“Kevin!”

“Hi, Mam.”

We hug. Her body is still robust, and it jars. This is a woman who, contrary to the most rudimentary instruction of her orthopaedic surgeon, continues to prune her hedges from the top of an eight-foot ladder.

“Were you in the area?” she says.

“What?”

“Passing by? I mean, it’s a lovely surprise.”

“I...” Do I say this? Do I ignore it? What’s the least bad thing to do here?

“Mam...I was talking to you. A couple of hours ago.”

She smiles and turns, wordless and white-faced.

She used to make fun of her forgetfulness. *Head like a sieve! Another senior moment!* Her little jokes. She doesn’t make those jokes anymore.

I decide it’s best just to leave it there.

“On the phone,” I say, unable to leave it there. “I said I was coming over?”

“Oh, yes. Yes, of course!” she says, now she’s had time to compose herself. Her voice is emphatic, and there is an oh-silly-me nod. “Here, look, I’ve made some tea for you.”

She pours the cold straggle of tea that remains in the pot into a mug, quarter filling it. Without a word, she turns, fills the kettle and flicks its switch. I’ve noticed a new type of smile fill her face on occasions like this, vague and benign. It appears now, the beatific smile, beaming its wattage to the kitchen at large. I’d like to think of it as the bliss of ignorance. I’d like to, but all I see is a mask.

“Kate Kelly died, did I tell you?” she says.

“No. I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Pneumonia in the end. But she hadn’t been well for years. The funeral’s tomorrow. Your father and I are going.”

“And how are you?” I say, just tossing it out there casually, directing my gaze away from her, blowing on my tea.

“Me? Sure, I’ve the old aches and pains. But I’m grand.”

She smiles the big saintly smile again. I keep wanting to examine her expression for traces of it, wishing the signs were tangible – like a cancerous mole, something to give a doctor, to say, “There! See? Cut it away. You can cut it away, can’t you?”

“How’s the bingo going?” I say. “Any big wins?”

“Ah, just a few quid here and there. We won’t be buying the villa in Spain yet anyway.”

There is a silence, then. We fill it by failing to finish the day’s crossword together. I have biscuits forced upon my person.

“Did you hear Kate Kelly died?” she says.

I keep my face very level. I perform the required mime. I tut, exhale a soft *aw*. The brief solemnity called for by news of an elderly ex-neighbour’s death.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I say. “She’d been sick for a while, hadn’t she?”

“She had actually. Pneumonia in the end,” says my mother.

It’s Groundhog Day. We act our parts, mother and I. Our own little movie. And I want to smash the cameras, haul down the lighting rigs, torch the fucking script till it’s wispy blackened scraps drifting overhead. She used to love a Hollywood ending, my mother.

“Well, it’s nice to see you,” she says, as I’m getting up to leave. “Were you in the area?”

“Yes, Mam,” I say. “I was just passing.”

The little lies are not that hard to tell. But the big lie? That’s the easiest of all.

After I leave my father – “Don’t be upsetting your mother with any of this nonsense.” – I call my sister Sarah. She lives further away from our childhood home, a property boom refugee. Her phone rings a long time. She answers eventually, a touch breathless. In the background there is the sound of a cartoon at ear-melting volume. Every so often Sarah’s voice becomes remote whilst she says, “No, Lucy” or “I told you; put it down.”

“How’s life at the zoo?” I ask.

“Zoos are a lot more orderly than this place,” she says.

I’m just working up to it, moving through the gears to Mam – I’ve done our jobs, her husband Mike, her daughter Lucy – when I hear my niece calling, “Mammy! Mammy!” in the background. The sound gets louder, more urgent. I imagine her small sticky fingers pawing at Sarah’s leg. Sarah starts responding to me with *mmms* and *yeahs*, becoming vague, remote.

“Look, Kev...” she says.

“You have to go?”

“Yeah, sorry. Lucy...”

“Yeah, it’s grand. Look, why don’t you come up on Sunday? I’m heading over to Mam and Dad’s. I’m sure they’d love to see Lucy. Not to mention their golden first-born.”

“Yeah, grand,” she says, mouth clearly turned from the phone. Lucy is now producing a sustained noise of near-operatic pitch and volume.

“I’d like to get your opinion about...” I say to a line that goes dead.

Second opinion. The words sneak up on me.

“A second opinion,” I say, now that it’s safe.

So our family convenes round a Sunday roast. Except I’m the only one who knows we’re convening. It walks and it talks like An Ordinary Sunday Dinner. I don’t like that word,

convene. Too legalistic. Like *power of attorney*. Like *compos mentis*. Their succinct little brutalities.

I intercept Sarah upstairs on her way back from the toilet.

“Kev, what is it?”

Her bracelets jangle down her arm as she checks her watch.

“Eh, look...Okay, right...”

My heart is ba-dunking, ba-dunking. It’s making a punchbag of my ribcage.

“Jesus, Kevin, spit it out!”

The bracelets rattle again as she turns her palms up.

“Okay, right. C’mere, have you noticed anything about Mam lately?”

“*Mam?* Mam hasn’t changed as long as I’ve been alive. Like, even her hair. It’s actually kind of phenomenal when you think about it.”

“I mean her memory. Like, forgetting stuff, repeating herself.”

“She’s always been scatty. That’s normal.”

“Look, I know you haven’t seen that much of her lately, but...”

She cranes her head forward. Her eyes get buggy.

“Yes, Kevin, I do have a four-year-old *child*. And a *job*. And *another child* on the way. The gestation of whom has just caused me to vomit in the bathroom, thanks for asking.”

She rubs her belly, leans against the wall.

“I didn’t *mean* anything. Jesus!” I say. “I’m only saying that I’ve seen a bit more of her. And I know she’s always been scatty. I don’t mean that. I think this is something more.”

The word hangs. *More*. I’ve hoisted it now, the little black flag. Sarah’s face falls; she scratches her wrist harder than seems necessary. Those bracelets are driving me nuts.

“More? Like...”

"I don't know. I really don't know."

From the kitchen there's a scream like a high c straight from hell. Little Lucy and her Olympian lung power. Sarah sighs, gets her game face on.

"You have to go," I say.

"Yeah."

When I return to the kitchen, Lucy is sitting on our mother's lap.

"Lucy, Lucy, Lucy," she is saying, sing-song, and the mantra seems to have worked its granny magic.

Lucy. Lucid. The words make sport of their closeness, dart round my mind, puckish and smug.

I'll wait for a gap in conversation to bring it up, I tell myself. Except that most of the conversation *is* gaps. All that time to think. I mentally build up to it, then falter, a horse refusing a jump over and over again. When I finally manage it, the words stampede trembling from my mouth. (Wait, wait. You can congratulate me on my exquisite tact later.)

"Mam, have you been finding it hard to remember stuff lately?"

And so the sledgehammer meets the bone china. Her expression freezes, ice sweeping her face. There is a short and thrumming silence.

"Well, maybe we don't all have perfect memory like you, Kevin," she says, and I may only be imagining the unusual force with which she skewers a piece of chicken with her fork.

I'm just considering how to respond when my father speaks.

"Everybody forgets things, Kevin," he says. "Especially at our age. Don't be upsetting your mother like that. It's a perfectly nice Sunday dinner. There's no need to ruin it."

I glance at Sarah; she is wiping Lucy's nose, her tongue slightly protruding as she concentrates on the task. How the hell can she be so absorbed by wiping a child's nose?

"I'm not trying to ruin anything," I say. "I'm trying to look out for Mam."

I kick Sarah under the table. She lets go of the now de-snotted Lucy.

“Mam, maybe it’d be no harm, just to rule things out,” says my sister. “For your own peace of mind. A quick word with Doctor McCann.”

“She doesn’t need peace of mind. I’ve told you there’s nothing the matter with your mother,” says Dad, crossing the kitchen to turn on the radio. “Ssshhh,” he says. “This is the Dublin game.”

Our mother picks up a Sunday supplement, leafs through its thin gloss. Our father lingers by the radio. He stands intent, head cocked. The football commentary has his full attention now. And so the veil is drawn over the unmentionable.

“There are more potatoes on the stove if you want some,” says Mam, continuing to give her full gaze to not-actually-reading the magazine. “Get them yourselves. You probably wouldn’t trust me with hot objects.”

“Ah, Jesus, I’m trying to listen here,” says Dad, over the whine and roar of the match.

“Was that a goal?” says my father. “Sssshh, listen up. Jesus, it was too! G’wan, the Dubs!”

“Yay, Dublin!” says Lucy, flinging her little arms in the air.

“G’wan, the Dubs!” says Dad, lifting Lucy and spinning her round as she squeals with delight. They’re a blur of long blonde hair and beer belly. Dad turns the radio up louder still.

“Here,” I say. “I’ll feed Bonnie the scraps. I presume she’s out in the garden.” I scrape the plates into the Westie’s food bowl. Neurotic and impulsive, Bonnie is by some distance the sanest member of the family.

I click with my tongue and call her name. “Bonnie! Bonnie! Bonnie!” I check her kennel – empty. The side gate has been left open, juddering harshly against a gutter in the wind.

“Who the hell left the gate open?” I say. “Bonnie’s gone.”

“No, Bonnie!” says Lucy, collapsing into tears.

"It's okay, darling," says Sarah. "We'll find Bonnie. Just tell the truth; you won't be in trouble. Did you leave the gate open?"

"No, Mammy, I didn't," she gurgles through her tears.

"I know you were out in the garden with Granny looking at the lovely flowers."

Lucy glances at her grandmother, who meets her eye briefly then returns to the magazine, not-actually-reading more furiously than ever.

"Granny said Bonnie would come back."

There's a rapid cracking of Sunday supplement pages.

"Granny said not to tell," says Lucy. "Granny gave me a Freddo bar."

The silence spreads thickly over the next few seconds. Mam rises from the chair, letting fall the magazine, which she doesn't pick up.

"You shouldn't tell tales, Lucy," she says, and there is the sound of her slow tread on the stairs.

flash fiction

Eibhlín McAleer

Last Tour

THE SKY IS GIVING UP on the day. Smudges of thunder cloud gather in the distance like thumbprints on a school copy book. The November rain hits diagonals on the yellow haze of car headlights. He walks briskly, his coat collar pulled against the chill of winter air.

It is the last tour of the day at the old prison.

The coffee shop has a seat by the window.

Conor orders a warmed scone with blackberry jam. He spreads it evenly over the heavy helping of butter. Heart attack on a plate. The tour group are gathering outside. An odd looking bunch. All flat caps and padded jackets. He wasn't there for the company.

A tour guide ticks their names off on his clipboard. The whole thing should last approximately one hour after which there will be time for questions he says. Questions... his mind drifts.

It is easy to lag behind. He edges to the back of the group.

Snatches of white light blink as Conor's feet walk the long corridor of the prison wing. Old iron doors moan. A death rattle of pigeons mocks him from some forgotten corner. His heavy step bounces off every wall.

The remnants of the outside rain lie beaded on his grey overcoat which refuses to hold any warmth.

Grey beams of light meet in prisms of rainbows in the centre of the floor. Cell doors lie open beckoning him in to hear their secrets. He wonders which one belonged to Mr Hunter.

Mr Hunter got ten years for the abuse and Conor's sizeable compensation was *reinvested with the state until he attained the age of eighteen.*

Conor had come once before after his eighteenth birthday but he couldn't get off the prison bus. He wanted to have the conversation. It was too much.

He remembers the bus driver

— it happens sometimes, Son...people freeze.

— is it yer da you're going to see? These bloody troubles, eh? Can be a bit scary in there. What with the lifers and the paedos... don't worry, son, I'll drive you back to the gate.'

Conor remembers how the driver whistled *always look on the bright side of life* as the bus trundled back.

He stands in this grim half beaten place catching ghost's voices in the air. If despair has a smell, this is it. The air seeps with pain.

The Irish News confirmed Mr Hunter's death years ago. Conor heard there was hardly anyone at the funeral.

Conor's mother was delighted. She went to the cremation service to make sure it was definitely him.

— Serves the bastard right. Now the real penance starts. Fuck if he thinks he was burnin' today he's in for a quare shock. Bastard.

Bile rises, spitting and spilling. Conor falls on all fours expelling the contents of his stomach. Then it comes. A long hard scream. He howls.

— Mr Hunter... I'm sorry. I'm sorry I lied. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry

The words he has rehearsed so many times ricochet through the prison's shell. Each word returning to him over and over taunting him like a childhood rhyme.

Damhnait Monaghan

Tinker

SHE DIDN'T LIKE DECEMBER, not a bit of it, and especially not the short afternoons. A heavy downpour had delayed her walk and now, in the gathering dark, she cursed the trees that shook drops onto her rain bonnet. Her eyesight was fading with the light and there was no sign of Tinker. Shot off after a rabbit or a squirrel, she couldn't say which.

"Never wanted the damn thing," she muttered. His idea, after he retired. But then he went and died nine months later, didn't he? She nearly got rid of it but her daughter said it would be company. Pah. What kind of company was the odd growl or bad smell while she watched the telly?

She spied him then, down by the river.

"Tinker," she called. "Here." But he didn't move. Cursing, she hobbled closer, her bad hip protesting when she bent over.

"Wotcha," said the dark shape and she startled backwards, the pain in her hip so sharp now she nearly lost her balance. It was a young man, with dirty jeans and a...what did they call them? Hoodies. Hug a Hoody, she remembered. Not bloody likely.

"Any dosh, Gran?"

He reeked of stale alcohol, an odour she hadn't missed this past year. Her fingers gripped the coin purse inside her coat pocket.

“No,” she said. “I’m walking the dog.”

The Hoody staggered to his feet, his eyes on the bare lead in her hand.

“Tinker,” she called, her voice quavering.

He moved closer. “I asked you a question. Any dosh?”

She shuffled backwards in the dead leaves, thinking about the dark path behind her, the steep hill to come.

“What do you say, lady? You sure you got nothing in them nice deep pockets? I could have a feel round them for you, just to check.” He took another step towards her.

She was shaking. She could feel it. “Tinker,” she called, and then, louder, “Tinker!”

The young man raked phlegm from deep within him and spat loudly. “I think it’s just you and me out here,” he said. “I don’t think Tinker’s coming.”

But he came. Bounding through the woods, tongue hanging out, no doubt having rolled in something disgusting, too.

The Hoody jeered. “Call that a dog?” But when he grabbed her arm, Tinker growled. And when Tinker sank his teeth into the lad’s shin, he fell to the ground groaning.

With shaking fingers, she clipped the lead on her dog and limped away, refusing to look back. There might still be time to call in at the butcher’s. Yes, she did call it *her* dog. And, it turned out, he was some company after all.

Sandra Arnold

See what I See

EMILY WAS, OF COURSE, expecting greater clarity when the bandages came off. She had even, on the surgeon's advice, taken the precaution of bringing dark glasses to reduce the shock of vivid colour and the sun's glare. What she didn't expect, because the surgeon hadn't mentioned it, nor had she read anything about it during her research on cataract removal, was that her hearing would improve too. She walked out of the eye clinic into a cacophony of screeching tyres and pneumatic drills. She winced and clapped her hands over her ears.

"Wassup?" Kevin asked.

"The noise!"

"What noise?"

"Why are you shouting?"

"Whatya talkin' about, woman? Must have your hearin' aid turned up."

"It's not in," she said and kept her hands over her ears all the way home despite Kevin's irritated tongue clicking.

Over the following week she heard sounds she hadn't heard for years: the distant rumble of thunder, the drumming of rain on the roof, the shushing of wind in the trees. That she no longer had to ask people in shops to repeat what they'd just said meant she could take part in real conversations. She noticed people smiled at her more too. At home, the television volume stayed so low that even Kevin noticed. "You sure it wasn't *ear* surgery," he

mumbled without taking his eye off the screen. That she could also hear Kevin was a bit of a mixed blessing.

In her garden she was moved to tears by forgotten details: a raindrop clinging to a leaf, a ladybird inside a purple pansy, the colours and textures of clouds.

"I've been only half alive all these years," she told Kevin.

"Yeah, well," Kevin said, changing channels.

"So I've been thinking..."

"Uh-oh! A woman thinking. God save us!"

"I've been thinking we could get a manager in. We don't need to keep on working so hard at this stage in our lives. I'd like us to travel before we get too old. Use some of the money we've saved. Go where the spirit takes us."

But Kevin was already screaming at the ref.

After visiting the bank to check on their accounts she went to a cafe and sat in a corner with her cup of tea, doing the sums on a piece of paper. They could easily afford a campervan. They could fly to Oz and buy the campervan there. Travel around Australia for a year. Go to the arts festivals in Adelaide. The opera in Sydney. See crocodiles and snakes and those amazing golden spiders. Ayers Rock. Aboriginal art. Beaches. Warm sea.

As she scribbled, random phrases from people at the other tables drifted her way.

That was easy. Stupid bitch actually believes me

Hit me one more time you old sod and I'll stick a knife in your ribs while you're asleep

The thing is, he really loves me but he won't leave his wife because of the kid

Yeah, I met this really cool guy in detox...

How could he even think of leaving me for that little tart?

His parents are decent enough people I suppose, but they live in a state house, so obviously he's not the right sort for Pippa

Anyway, she's agreed to sell us the baby. We'll have to take out another mortgage to buy it but...

Her face burned. The things people said in public! She glanced around the tables. The words she was hearing were not the words people were speaking. Mortified, she stuffed her notebook in her bag and hurried back to her car.

That evening, when she plucked up courage to tell Kevin what she'd heard he muttered she'd had a bloody *eye* operation, not a bloody *brain* transplant though if she carried on like this... A roar from the television made him turn back to the game. "Oh *bloody* hell, woman! You made me miss the *goal!*"

That night she couldn't sleep because of Kevin's dreams. Not that they were interesting, just loud, dealing as they did with his opinion of the current government, the amount it was going to cost him to get another irrigator and what he'd like to do to those soddin' greenies who clogged the streets with their arty farty placards about dairy farming causing everything from water pollution to gale force winds. She needed silence. She got up, put on her dressing gown and gumboots and went outside to breathe in the cool night air.

Sitting in the middle of a paddock she stared at the black dome of sky and tried to identify the constellations. She remembered that she used to know their names, but it had been a long time since she'd sat out at night and looked at stars. She listened to their music and let it fill every cell in her body. She heard the sighing of all the folk who had passed this way. She felt their regret at what had been left unlived. She saw herself as a child talking to birds and ants and bees. She saw herself in the psychiatrist's office with her parents, the creases of anxiety on their faces softening as he prescribed pills, which, he assured them, would prevent these episodes. She saw the bewilderment on her ten-year-old face as she learned that other people did not see what she saw, hear what she heard, or feel what she felt, and that she needed pills to make her unsee and unhear and unfeel. Was that why she'd married Kevin? She couldn't remember. But sitting under the stars she remembered who she'd been.

contributors

Sandra Arnold is a novelist and short story writer. Her work has been widely published and anthologized in New Zealand and internationally. Her flash fiction has been published in online and print journals. She has been nominated for The Best Small Fictions 2017.
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Amanda Bell's collection *Undercurrents*, a psychogeography of Irish rivers in haiku and haibun, was published by Alba Publishing in 2016. Her illustrated children's book, *The Lost Library Book*, will be published this spring by The Onslaught Press, and a debut poetry collection, *First the Feathers*, is forthcoming from Doire Press. @gagebybell
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Siobhan Campbell received the Oxford Brookes International Poetry Prize in 2016. Her fourth collection, *Heat Signature*, is published by Seren in 2017. Interested in bringing the lyric close to the political, she is influenced by the dialectic mini-dramas of Louis MacNeice.
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Anne Casey's poetry appears in *The Irish Times*, *Into the Void Magazine*, *Tales from the Forest*, *Luminous Echoes* anthology, *Dodging the Rain*, and *The Remembered Arts Journal*, among others. Salmon will publish her first poetry collection this year. She has worked as a journalist, magazine editor, communications director and author. <http://www.anne-casey.com/> <https://twitter.com/1annecasey>

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Lorraine Devlin was born in Belfast on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic, she writes poetry, as well as YA prose under pseudonym Ziv Gray. Lorraine is passionate about issues of mental health and LGBTQA+ representation, and writes poetry based on personal experience with these topics. <http://www.twitter.com/ZivGray>
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Mike Gallagher, an Irish poet and editor, has been published and translated worldwide. He won the Michael Hartnett Viva Voce award in 2010 and 2016, the Desmond O'Grady International award in 2012 and was shortlisted for the Hennessy award in 2011. His collection, *Stick on Stone*, is published by Revival Press.

Brian Gourley's poems have appeared in a wide variety of magazines including *Incubator*, *The Eildon Tree*, *The Honest Ulsterman* and *Acumen*. He is currently seeking a publisher for his debut poetry collection and doctoral thesis in Reformation Drama.

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Seán Kenny is the winner of a Hennessy Literary Award and was named *Over The Edge* New Writer of the Year. His stories have appeared in *Over the Edge* and Hennessy anthologies, *Crannóg*, *The Irish Times*, *The South Circular* and *Southword* in addition to being broadcast on RTÉ Radio One.

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Eileen Ní Shuilleabháin grew up in the Connemara Gaeltacht. Her poetry has been published in a number of literary journals and magazines including Skylight 47, Barehands Poetry, Boyne Berries, Scissors and Spackle, Emerge Literary Journal, The Burning Bush, Crack the Spine and Crannóg Magazine amongst others.

Paul Perry is the author of five collections of poetry including GUNPOWDER VALENTINE (Dedalus Press), and three co-authored Karen Perry novels published by Penguin including THE BOY THAT NEVER WAS, and GIRL UNKNOWN. He teaches creative writing at UCD, where he directs the MFA course in Poetry.

Kathryn Reynolds is from Galway and living in Barcelona. She teaches English while she travels. She loves writing and has tried her hand at different forms. She studied theatre in Sligo and Galway and her play, 'Rose Spreckles', was produced during the Jerome Hynes One Act Play Series in NUIG. www.spreckleswritings.wordpress.com.

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Nora Shychuk grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania before she hopped across the pond and earned her MA in Creative Writing from University College Cork in Ireland. Her work has appeared in *The Quarryman Literary Journal*, *The Rose Magazine*, and *The Lonely Crowd*. Her work can be found at www.thinkbreathewrite.wordpress.com.

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