

Here We Go! **HERE WE GO!** Here We Go! Here We Go! Here We Go! Here We Go! Here We Go! Here We Go! Here We Go!



HERE WE GO!

An Anthology of Writing from the Cork County Council Writer in Residence
Library Workshops 2024: Bandon, Carrigaline, Cobh, Kanturk &
Mitchelstown



SEPTEMBER 20, 2024

CULTURE NIGHT
Mitchelstown Library



Comhairle Contae Chorcaí
Cork County Council



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Foreword

In a 1961 interview with the BBC the famous Cork writer, Frank O'Connor, exclaimed, 'You don't have to sell Cork to me... To me it's the most important city in the world.' As Cork County Council Writer in Residence for 2024 and a proud Cork woman, Frank O'Connor's words and genius were very much to the forefront of my mind as I travelled around the five libraries selected for my residency – Bandon, Carrigaline, Cobh, Kanturk and Mitchelstown – facilitating workshops for local writers. I was met at each library with a very warm welcome and was reminded that libraries are the lifeblood of our cities and towns and serve so willingly and enthusiastically the diverse needs of their communities. I was honoured to have a chance to work with the librarians in each library and thank them sincerely for their co-operation, advice and assistance in organising and helping with the administration around the writing workshops.

The generosity, openness, humour and talent of each member of each writing group I had the pleasure of working with is palpable in the following pages. We've all been on quite a journey together over my residency and I have encountered wonderful writers with unique talents, stories, perspectives and experiences that only further prove O'Connor's dictum that Cork is the most important city in the world, but I would add that Cork County is the most important region! All of life is here within the stories and poems in this Anthology, and I am so proud of each contributor for the work, dedication, engagement and warmth they brought to the workshops, readings and to their writing.

O'Connor also said, 'I can't write about something I don't admire. It goes back to the old concept of the celebration: you celebrate the hero, an idea.' And here again I agree with him because this Anthology is a celebration of the creativity and originality of the Cork writers who participated in the workshops. I hope readers will enjoy these offerings as much as I have, and I wish all the contributors luck and joy in their future creative endeavours.

Thank you too to everyone at Cork County Council, especially Emma Dwyer who has been such a huge support and guide in navigating the parameters of this position.

I am so delighted and honoured to launch our Anthology, *HERE WE GO!* as part of Culture Night 2024. UP CORK!

Victoria Kennefick
Cork County Council Writer in Residence 2024

September 2024

And Then It Was Winter Again

Mary Angland

The sun is a slant of summer gold rippling through the trees. I skip along holding her hand. The rays of light through the green branches almost blinds me but I peer upwards until I can see the tops reaching way, way up, all the way to heaven.

You know, it was trees like these Jack climbed, she said, huge ones with stout trunks and wide overhanging branches, so that Jack had a firm grip as he climbed higher and higher, then he wouldn't fall down and hurt himself.

The branches flutter and wink down at me in the light breeze as I search for a glimpse of Jack. The sun is blinding me but still I look upwards, blinking away the sunshiny tears. I am disappointed because I can't see Jack.

C'mon, she says, let's play.

She catches both my hands in hers before criss-crossing them and side by side and we both skip along the grassy path, singing

Hey ho, tipsy toe

Turn the ship

And away we go

Heart somersaulting, I wait for 'turn the ship'

It's my favourite part and I scream with delight when she dances me over to her other side. We shout the words together laughing and they float away up the Jack and the Beanstalk trees, higher and higher towards heaven, miles and miles and miles above us.

Though the autumn sun sparkles, there is no warmth in it. It is hard to see through the windscreen as the cold rays dazzle me. The hands are loose on her lap, wedding ring a dull gold against the smart navy slacks. I smile brightly and try to ignore the churning in the pit of my stomach and think of something to say.

I point to the side of the road flashing by her window.

Over the ditch along here, there's a canal, built a couple of hundred years ago, meant for barges, never used though, can't recall now why not, I tell her.

She turns her head sideways. *Imagine that, she says, 'weren't people wonderful in the olden days, the things they could do with so little.*

Her voice light, interested as if this useless piece of information is the most important thing. And all the time closer, closer...

*Hey ho, tipsy toe
Turn the ship and away we go*

It is dark so early now, the streets are alive with shoppers and cars are moving at a crawl. I peer through the windscreen. Spread out in front of me, the city lights, a patchwork quilt, twinkling, shimmering.

In the foyer is a huge Christmas tree, multi-coloured lights blinking madly.

I stand at the door of the room. She hasn't noticed me yet, She's lost in thought, face almost fleshless now. And her hair, I try not to look at her hair- dull, thin, baby pink scalp.

I straighten my shoulders, smile...

I take her hand and she returns from wherever it is she's been. She is surprised to find me here. She smiles but I feel the slight tremor of the hand in mine.

'I won't be home for Christmas,' she says. She squeezes my hand.

I hear the words and I feel myself sliding, sliding...

*'Hey ho, tipsy toe
Turn the ship and away we go'*

I stroke her hand softly now. Her eyes are closed and she lies there, perfectly still. The room bare and drab, a simple crucifix above the bed. At the corner of her left eye, there is a tiny sliver of moisture, which I wipe away with gentle fingers.

'Do you remember our games under the Jack and the Beanstalk trees in the avenue long 'go?' I ask her.

The hand in mine is still.

I continue to paint a kaleidoscope of memories. *Waltzing round the kitchen, the words of 'Goodnight Irene' rising and falling, before escaping gleefully through the open door and beyond the small blue gate. Orange and white summer dress bought in the Nottingham markets flashing as you twirled. The soft snores of Sam, curled up in the armchair, twitching as he chased the postwoman in his dreams.*

*I remind you of the scary stories you used to tell, the flames of the open fire throwing leaping shadows on the walls.
And when the story was over, you'd whisper to go outside and bring in another few sods for the fire. And I'd
sbriek with delicious terror and fling myself on your lap, burying my face in your hair...*

A soft breath - a pause

Then another.

A longer pause ...

I softly caress your cheek - thin and sunken.

And from your lips ...

One tiny flutter

a wisp

floats

and stops

And rests,

Suspended...

Like a blessing

before dissolving

soundlessly...

Hey ho, tipsy toe

Turn the ship

And away we go,

Go

Go

Cruisin

Clare Bell

The cruiser pulled in on a beautiful clear blue sky, the sun shyly peering out behind the curtain of clouds.

What a sigh, the three deck cruiser, they came off it for a visit with their identity cards lest we who are not passengers jump onto to it and enjoy their holiday delights.

“BRILLIANCE OF THE SEA” it had written on the side of it, “treat me well,” she said.

The waves dashed against the rocks, and pier that said “Stop here, thus far, no further.”

Couples, around 50/66.

Young couples, with children smiling “Welcome to Cobh” we said, as they go to the Titanic Experience to find out where they came from - and how they got to AMERICA, coming back around again, then find a rock to sleep on and dream of Jacob’s ladder – of Heaven’s ladder to the restaurant and then a meal awaits.

All the best fish, muscles, squid, crab, cod white fish, parade their glory in audition for the talent show to get on the menu.

A feast of mussels, fish and chips – golden crisp and just right when chewing the taste of the golden potatoes still on the tongue.

At the outside view over the sea, she waited, in hope that the man of her dreams – not tall dark and handsome, but a man with a twinkle in his eye and joy in his smile from the joys of his life – to get to dance over the sea.

‘Hello,’ he said in his soft New York voice “Hello” – she said – curvy – still soft skinned in her matured years her eyes, hazel green still striking a resemblance to Joan Collins – emeralds.

His lit up with kindness and a smile.

“I’m Dan, from Fusion 101,” his voice singing, she says, “I’m Olivia.” He kisses her affectionately on the cheek.

“I’m Hungry “I’m ordering fish and chips,” she says, “Me too,” he says “mussels and some crabs with chips.”

Two glasses of wine later Dan and Olivia walk out onto the pier, it gets chilly. Dan puts Olivia’s shawl around her shoulders – Olivia feels cared for and it was romantic.

Then Dan said “I have to go back to the ship. Tomorrow, you can come on board for lunch – and stay until evening, but you will have to go at 10pm.”

“Yes, let’s do that,” she said looking into his kind hazel brown – grey eyes, his hair thick greying and wavy.

Then he got up, paid the bill like the gentleman he was-

Olivia, gracefully followed and they walked out together, almost looking like a couple.

Outside he took her hand, she felt warm and excited like she was these years ago on her holidays in Greece, Spain with her romances on the pier.

At the Annie Murphy statue, just at the exit to the cruiser, Dan said, in his NEW York accent “When I have had my shower, you might be in time for a breakfast with me.

Dan, bent down and kissed her on the cheek-

This made Olivia feel more passionate than if he had taken her there and then and kissed her on the lips, because it meant that he cared about her.

In her white Marilyn Monroe dress and gold sandals – he waved goodbye-

He turned to look at her again, then went back on the cruiser.

‘BRILLIANCE OF THE SEAS’LIT UP IN THE NIGHT SKY – UNTIL ALL THE PASSENGERS RETURNED.

She walked up that hill, but with no mind of the effort in the task and finally reached her Dutch looking house, which reminded her of a weather house she got from Santa Claus- It was so Mum to pick a toy like that for her-

She fell onto her midi blue velvet couch, and Topsy, her little cat, bolted out the door to fight for his territory that night.

A text came through – “Thinking of you –Heart emoji

She sent a heart emoji too.

Then she had a cup of tea and biscuit watched “Twilight zone.” And went to bed feeling everything is as it should.

The next morning, her mobile rang, the strong New York Accent which stirred her heart on the other side- “Good morning “Olivia

“I’m ready for breakfast, ILL BE WAITING FOR YOU IN THE LOBBY”

“I’ll be there in twenty minutes,” said Olivia.

Downstairs she ran “What will I wear what will I wear? Showered in 3 minutes and out on her everyday dress for all occasions summer version – starts her packs her shorts swimsuit (Just in case) –Topsy was let out into the back garden for the day.

She walked down to the pier – He looked handsome at the entrance of the cruiser “I have a gig this afternoon and tonight, so you can come and see me- then.”

She smiles “She’s my guest” He said

Olivia gets past security, and he brings her to the dining room –

There was music, he was working on the ship with his band, he was the keyboard player.

I have a gig this afternoon and tonight, so you can come and see me – then.

She smiled, Olivia loved music, as she was also a singer.
He had a blue shirt and light blue trousers – against his tanned face. It was rugged and close shaven.
They sat at a window then queued to a breakfast buffet.
After they went for a walk as the upper deck to the outdoor pool.
To the swimming pool for the morning, Olivia swam a few lengths and then lay out sunbathing.
Dan jumped in like an Olympic swimmer and swam a few lengths. He was a strong swimmer.
When he got out the water was glistening against his skin.
They got dressed and went for the buffet lunch, glass of wine.
Dan left after to set up for his afternoon gig. Olivia as his guest went to his cabin for a nap, then got ready for his evening gig.
Olivia went to the karaoke first and sang her song “Haplessly devoted to you “
Then went to Dan’s evening gig.
When they had finished, he came over to her and they sat for a while.
“You know Olivia, I would like you to come to Dublin next week and spend some time together when I play there.”
Olivia was over the moon but had to hide it. “After Dublin, I will return to New York, come to me there.” Olivia said “Yes, I will, but I live in Cobh.” Dan said, “You know I was thinking of moving to Cobh.” They walked on the bridge of the cruiser.
The wind blew against the back of Olivia’s neck.
Dan turned and bent to kiss her gently on the lips, then longer and more passionately. “Goodnight Olivia, see you in Dublin.”
He escorted her off the cruiser, and they kissed again. “You know said Dan – I think we have a future...” Olivia turned to wave and when she walked home –she knew...

Christmas Shopping

Mary Bradford

Ellie wandered through the streets, stopping every now and then to admire the window displays. She loved this time of year. The shopping for gifts was her particular favourite thing. Each person on her list was followed with three suggestions for what to buy them. Her gifts reflected her thoughtfulness to others. When it came to being organised, Ellie was gold medal standard. Remembering snippets of conversations with her family and friends for items that they liked, she took notes and on December the eighth, she went present hunting. She loved seeing the joy when she handed over a gift at Christmas.

Charity shops were her favourite places, not everything had to cost a fortune plus she liked the aspect of helping the charities that operated the stores also. So far the weather was mild, just a touch of frost in the dark evenings. Everyone longed for a white Christmas morning but it rarely happened. People still clung to the sentiment as the lead up to the big day went by. Ellie checked her piece of paper, names on the left, gift suggestions on the right. Nine people to be bought for. Passing a side street, she glanced down it. Some bistro tables were placed beneath canopies and Ellie thought to treat herself to a hot chocolate with marshmallows.

Seated and enjoying her beverage, she noticed an old-style shopfront three doors down. There were no lights or garlands adorning the windows or doorway. In fact the whole street was silent. Not one of the few stores and café played Christmas music.

“Excuse me, what is that shop.” She pointed towards it. “I’ve not noticed it before.” Ellie enquired of the waitress.

“Oh, that’s been there forever. Very quaint isn’t it. You may have noticed no music and glaring lights on the street. We know some people like a quiet place to sit or wander around without the frantic hurry of the festive season.” The waitress wiped down the table while she spoke.

“You’re right, it’s wonderful to sit and be able to listen to your thoughts.” Ellie smiled.

Once finished her drink she headed towards the shop and admired the window filled with Bric-a-Brack and crafts. She looked up and read the name, *The Heirloom*.

Inside, shelf after shelf were packed with a bit of this and a bit of that. Spotlights lit the dark corners and highlighted pieces of sculpture. A glass topped corner counter displayed jewellery and crystal. A large bookcase stood against the far wall. Leather bound books, journals, diaries, and some classic novels lined the rows. It was a winter wonderland for gifts.

She moved from spot to spot. So much to see and savour, how had she not known about this place? There were others browsing, reaching out unsure whether to touch the item or not,

everything appeared coated with magic. Time stood still in here. No rush or push from others around you. Ellie felt emotional. This is silly she thought. It's a shop. Yet the shop touched her. Its peace was tangible. This was what Christmas should feel like, not the frantic panic so many encountered.

That was it! Ellie's gifts for everyone this year would be a gift of her time. She would offer to cook meals for her parents, babysit for her sister and brother-in-law, attend a concert with her brother and invite her friends to a night at the cinema. They all had enough in life, did they really need some monetary souvenir so to speak, to mark Christmas Day? Giving her time, being present with her family and friends was what she would do. She would organise for it all to happen in January, on a day that suited the recipients. Something to look forward to in the dark New Year. She spied some craft supplies, a calligraphy set, sheets of festive notepaper and small glass vials, with colourful ribbons attached. Tearing up her gift list, she purchased the items and left filled with happiness.

Back home she set to work. She wrote out each gift in beautiful longhand, having practiced her script before she wrote on the pretty notepaper. She scrolled them up individually and popped them inside the vials. Before placing them beneath her Christmas tree, she hesitated; would they like this year's presents? Everyone always praised her gifting skill. What if they hated the idea? What if they thought her being mean this year? But the feeling of being in the shop swept back to her, the calm, and the tranquillity of the street itself amongst the busy town assured her she was doing the right thing. After all, the gift of time is priceless.

A Turning Point

Ann Bradley

My Aunt was on holiday from England asked the dreaded question. How did you get on in the Leaving Certificate Examination? I squirmed and replied that I had passed, thank goodness she did not want to see the results! She suggested about applying for Nursing in England. I applied to Hospitals in England although I had no idea what Nursling involved and in hindsight was very naive. Unbeknownst to me my father intercepted an invitation to an interview. He was disgusted that I would go to a non-Catholic Country and what he thought of the Nursing Profession could not be repeated. Luckily my Aunt Mary contacted me wondering what my plan was. Despite my father's protestations, I skimped and scraped the fare together and took off to England with ten pounds in my pocket.

My Aunt and her husband who had three school going children and worked full-time guided me especially in the early days until I found my feet. She ensured that I got to the interview spick and span and guided me in getting a job as a Nursing Auxiliary until the Training commenced. That was the turning point for me and from then on, I went from strength to strength. To say I took the scenic route in my career is an understatement, the Leaving Certificate results came back to haunt me. My Aunt was discreetly determined that I would make something of my life, and I was quietly optimistic. I enrolled for evening classes and got the grades. I had the most rewarding wonderful career as a Nurse. I will always be grateful to my fantastic Aunt who planted the seed. To my shame it was often a case of 'Eaten bread is soon forgotten' and 'Bite the hand that feeds it'. Of course, she is fully aware now of the difference she made in my life.

Blissful Ignorance

Honor Carroll

The occasion was Jack's fortieth birthday party. The garden was beautiful. Garish birthday banners, plus strings of multi coloured lights and balloons were strategically placed by Tom's wife Adrianna for maximum effect. The caterers were on site. Forty friends' family and colleagues had arrived. Tom was six years older than Jack. Since their teenage years their gifts to each other were as outlandish as possible, often thought to be offensive by guests.

Happy birthday was sung by all with Tom as master of ceremonies. The party had started.

"Hey bro! Happy birthday," shouted Tom as he kicked a present across the crowded garden to his brother Jack. Jack hugged it to him like a goalkeeper who had saved a goal for the Cork football team. Excitedly, Jack tore the wrapping off his gift. Jack gasped with joy, hugged his brother and thanked him profusely. Jack held up a beautiful dark grey *North Face* jacket. Jack's joy was obvious as Tom was often known for his cheap and cheerful gifts to family.

Jack, delightedly put on the jacket, saying "thanks bro, I never had a *North Face*" when the jacket was off Jack examined it. He stared at Tom. "You cheapskate Tom, you bought me a dupe from Penneys" At this revelation everyone was laughing hilariously at the two brothers.

Diagio's beer had loosened Tom's tongue such a lot I knew he wouldn't shut up. "It's not the first time you wore Penneys dupes," said Tom. Oh, dear God, all I could think of was after all these years my secret would be revealed. Tom had promised me he wouldn't tell Jack what happened twenty odd years ago when he was at university. I cringed inwardly while smiling at the guests. Tom was on a roll. If a pin dropped it would be heard.

Jack, said Tom, you remember when we were sixteen and ten our father disappeared to Australia to start a new life with a new wife? Tom was in his stride; he had everyone's attention. "Life was tough for us. Do you remember me dragging you out of bed, giving you your breakfast? Yes you do. I remember you were a cranky little weasel. Mum had to go to work early. I found an old letter from her to Gran after she died, it explains everything," said Tom, "Mum had to work three jobs in the week to support us."

"Do you remember Vera next door? She used to keep watch on us from a distance. Mum had to leave early to work her three jobs. When I graduated from UCC I bought sweaters second-hand, they had Gentleman Quarters' labels. You begged Mum to buy the same for you; she didn't want to disappoint you; boy you had it easy!"

"Mum couldn't afford the brand. Walking through Penny's she spotted and bought the dupes. She then cut the labels off both sets of sweaters. Mum stitched the Gentleman's labels on to the dupes. I found about it when I asked her how to wash my sweaters. The labels had mysteriously disappeared. Mum 'fessed up. So, bro there you were swanning around Trinity and Temple Bar wearing your Penneys' dupes in blissful ignorance."

Jack looked at Tom, they both laughed and laughed.

Sean

Alan Chaytor-Grubb

I have some fond memories of seeing Sean in his cot, but I'd say by the time he was 5 that had changed. When people talk about "brotherly fights" amongst siblings they've no idea how bad this was (Cain and Abel is the best analogy I can give) We literally couldn't have cared if the other died. He even threw a knife at me.

When he wasn't fighting me, he was scrapping with someone else. As a youngster he was known as "basher" He would end up hitting someone on the playing field, so I'd hit him and then get in trouble from my mum. Mum would strike us most days.

Ok she did give us a warning, then all hell would let loose, fists around the head, dinners thrown at us, and she would send us to our rooms. Sean would smash his room up and she would come up and hit him again whereas I turned the anger in on myself. I couldn't stick up for myself, but I do remember telling her to "leave him alone" once after I felt she was giving him an unjust beating.

Mum even called the parish priest in one day to have a chat with me, which I was terribly ashamed about. I don't know why my parents sent my enemy, to same school. We would fight even at the bus stop, and I remember an old lady telling me to leave him alone one time and I replied, "It's ok. He is my brother."

At 20 I had to move back home, my parents had downsized, and I had to share with my sibling. We had a curtain dividing us and I had started the karate by now. I would go to bed early and an hour later when he came to bed I'd talk and talk. We went for a run, me in my bare feet on concrete and him in trainers "I left him dead" even though (unlike me) he was a natural athlete. He was so impressed, so joined the karate and for a few years we had some good "brotherly experiences" and even danced together at night clubs.

He then married a woman he met at karate who hated our family. Abbey was very anti-Catholic, because her 16-year-old pal at school was refused contraceptives by her Catholic doctor, but I think her anti-Catholic sentiments ran deeper. You see her grandmother was a born again Christian and Abbey's mother, Moya, told me that when she was a child her own mother, accused her of throwing her sister off a balcony (it was fatal). Sean used to say his mother-in-law was "evil" though I'm not sure he really appreciated what evil was.

Whilst training as a counsellor I tackled my mother as it was clear we had been abused physically and should have been taken into social care, but when I expressed this to Sean his reply was "we deserved what we got and turned out ok." You shouldn't be afraid your mother. The only time I saw the nurturing caring side of her was when I was sick with asthma at night, and she would come to my aid

Days after mum was buried Sean came into the house and said, "Do you know what your plans are?" I had been caring for my mum and had just lost 2 mums in one day, my mum in Eastbourne and my aunt in Ireland who was like my mum there. My marriage had ended a year earlier. I was struggling with chronic illness. What I needed was "time."

At a family funeral some years later, his daughter confronted me as to why I wasn't talking to her father. I told her I kept the peace between my mum and her mum for years. She wasn't happy with this and hasn't spoken to me since. Her dad wanted to be "huggy-kissy" with me (the drink) but I wasn't interested.

Somewhere within

Neil Collins

Away out beyond the reaches
Where only a light cobweb lingering of whispers
Ghostly splintering voices, chorusing
Caught up in the cosmos of time
Like each neuron firing the Genesis of a new beginning,
Being reborn again and again
In a remaking of a better self

This is where I find myself
Lost in meditation of an old and ancient mantra
Being in a hermitage within stillness
What is emerging? So different from who I used to be
Following an instinctive trail
Looking for instant gratification
Now the moment matters, to be experienced in slow motion
To let it linger and drip like honey
Or as rising sap beneath the bark
Wanting time to slow down
Needing the moment to matter.

So where am I going in such a hurry anyway
Take it easy man, take some weight off, sit and chew the fat for a while
Slip off your boots, lie into the high grass.
Look up and watch the sky and the clouds go by

Remembering the days pulling weeds in the beet fields
The sun melting us into the ground
We went and lay under the shade of a whitethorn
That was wise and that day lasted
Now I'm trying to go back into that slow moving space
Where everything matters
And my time can spill out over the cap
And I can slurp it slowly out of a saucer
Like tea on a summer's day in a meadow making hay.

Dreaming

Noreen Collins

Yes, oh yes, I am a dreamer
I love to drift away
To far off places
Where the sun
shines all day
And I wile away the hours
Under the shade by the sea
Watching the waters ebb and flow
And I dip my toes in the sea
Then jump right in swimming out and in
And delight in doing it all over again
Then I take a stroll along the warm sand by the shore
While the sunshine bright, dries my sun kissed flesh
Then I lie awhile in the sparkling sun
Scroll through some magazine
do a crossword just for fun
Then I turn on some of my favourite tunes
And hum along to my heart's content
How I love this great escape
I want to stay and linger a little while yet
If only this were real, Alas I savour this dream
On awakening to what is real
It's time to get up and go, the clock is ticking
Real life awaits, as I step out onto the floor
No sandy beach just cold floorboards
My day is started, I'm on the go
Though I long to be in my dreams once more

Cutting our Teeth

Holly Darragh-Hickey

I have spun and moult you
my muscles remodelled,
repurposed for your new order.

We are being tempered
in rounds of milk, tears, poo,
to the ebb of my blood moon.

These are testing grounds,
where suns rise at night
forgetting, falling between states.

I wear you as a second skin,
you mewl and throw
my compass into panic.

New senses open,
we welcome them, stretching
our wings into alignment.

Stakes grow, tower into
your demands, my promises,
I can be ambidextrous, and more.
I am cutting my own,
fumbling with blind instinct—
I hope I am good enough

Just keep our legs kicking,
heads up, hearts strong—
metamorphize.

A brush with fame

Margaret Donnellan

It started like this. I was on the train into the city centre one evening to attend the launch of a friend of a friend's David Bowie colouring book. Thirty-seven different outlines of the musician at varying stages of his career, all painstakingly hand-drawn by Crispin or Tristram or whatever his name was.

It was one of those autumn evenings before the clocks go back where there's still enough light at 5pm to fool you into thinking the weather is pleasant, so I was shivering in a knee-length jersey frock, no tights. I was trying to pull my dress down over my knees as much as I could without irreversibly stretching the fabric when I saw him.

The actor. *The* actor. The man of my dreams since I was a pre-pubescent girl alone in my bedroom, rewinding and rewatching my favourite film – his triumphant debut – until the VHS wore out and I had to lobby my dad for a DVD player. And here he was, on my train. Unmistakeably him – that iconic black quiff and the booming Estuary voice I recognised from many a talk show. He was engaged in an animated conversation with someone sitting across from him. An agent, perhaps? Another luvvy friend? I knew it wasn't a wife, because although my obsession had waned slightly as I grew up, I remained a card-carrying member of the Quiffy Actor fan club and knew that his 2004 marriage to a slightly more successful actress had ended in swift divorce.

Quiffy Actor related news had dried up quite a bit in recent years, along with his output. This probably explained why he wasn't in the first-class seats on the train, but I chose to think of it as the result of his own decision to pick more challenging roles, which were presumably harder to come by.

I had to talk to him. He was my favourite actor – possibly my favourite person – of all time, and now here he was, six feet away from me. I couldn't miss the opportunity to tell him how much his films meant to me – the high fantasy romps of my youth, his pivot to cheesy, almost feminist rom-coms, even the confusing art house productions of the mid-2000s (I mostly enjoyed them for the full-frontal nudity, but I would reference the interesting cinematography). I might mention how I'd named my cat after him, despite my fiancé arguing that he'd be better off keeping the name the rehoming centre had given him as a kitten three years previously. Perhaps he'd like to see a picture of my cat? Oh, a picture! A selfie of us together on the train?

All these thoughts whirled in my brain as I approached, steadying myself on the seats beside me as the train took a sharp turn through a tunnel and the adrenaline thudded through my brain. I was there, right by his shoulder, and he'd stopped talking! I beamed at him, opened my mouth to speak and...

“No”.

He pronounced his warning in that booming voice, not even looking at me, immediately resuming his conversation.

My face flushing – at least I had finally warmed up – I pretended as if nothing had happened and stumbled to the disgusting toilet.

This all took place ten years ago but let me tell you: I’ve never watched “The Legend of the Benevolent High Kings of Tauron” or “That’s How You Know He’s Into You” ever again.

Hospital Visit

Ella

Not looking forward
For what I might see and find
Although we are not close
I really do mind

That you feel comforted and that
You are without pain
Now, being in the hospital
Even the smells
The make me want to walk away

But support that is all I need to give
Thus, I walk on,
And upon opening the door
Oh, what a relief

The bold head after chemotherapy
Shows a beautiful face
Under a shiny wig
You, talking about your next long trip
And all the books you read

I don't know how, I don't know why
I walked out happy and with a smile
That is called the passion for life
Oh, we both knew that you are going to survive

You Never Came Home

Breeda Fitzgerald

It was 1949, two years after the Big Snow. You were barely sixteen when you took the emigrant boat. Orphaned, a farmer's labourer. No need to announce yourself. You were Paddy and Irish or Irish and Paddy. Interchangeable and irreversible. A brother and three sisters awaited, a guarded welcome. After all, their lives were now established. One sister and a stepbrother left at home eking out a living. She, Alice had put name tags on your clothing. Was she envious? Was she frightened?

Yes, and yes. A gnawing anxiety for the rest of her life. She didn't see you physically again until you were in your fifties, she in her sixties. And it wasn't you who came on a visit.

You wrote, you said you found work, you didn't say what kind. Did you like many others drive a tunnel through London clay? Did your ears scream in pain at the jarring, clanging, thundering machines? Were you as Christy Moore sings? "Good for nothing but stacking a brick, Your best mate's a spade and he carries a hod, two work horses heavily shod".

We know the drink and betting on the nags became the panacea, your solution – a cry for a reimagined past, your prop to live in the moment, to numb the pain of loneliness, to create indifference to the future.

I can see you jumping out of a van at five in the evening, soaking wet, into the pub, no thought of the lodging or a hot meal. The picture presents of getting a draw in advance of the wages, a drink on the slate, handing over the role of English green notes on a Friday night at six o' clock to be rewarded at twelve by a reduced wad and some shillings.

Like many the hard man, Paddy, you never married. Yet, there was a woman of origin unknown, short lived, long lived- who knows? There was a son, his name that of your father, his whereabouts unknown.

I remember when Alice went to visit you, the image of the two of you sitting on a Park Bench -a lifetime unspoken and unspeakable -sister and brother-Strangers, Displaced.

All the promises to come on a visit as soon as the horse came in, as you said the wherewithal to come back not home. Then, the ticket was bought. You were at the ferry gate. You walked away, unable to take the insurmountable step.

Your latter years, as we say comfortable, the demon drink banished, still the odd flutter.

Status for you, maintenance man and gardener in the complex where you lived alone. The loyalty of your sister Bridie/ Maria as she religiously visited, steadfastly enduring your contrariness and your growing dementia.

The visits of your grandniece Aisling, recognised on the doorstep as "Young Alice", the panloaf of ham sandwiches prepared for her. Your room was stacked with newspapers, the Irish Post keeping you in the loop of events in Ireland.

Monday, September,9, 2019- Ruislip Church Mass followed by Crematorium, a handful of elderly neighbours, your sister, some nieces, a nephew. Farewell to Paddy/Pat who never did come home.

The Back Room

Bunty Flynn

The back room is small and cramped. It is where Hazel lives now. The rest of the house lies unused, black and green mould creeps up round the windows and there is a faint smell of cat's urine. The once luxurious velvet curtains remain closed day and night. She sits in the breakfast room of this big cut stone house in front of a small one bar electric fire too frightened to turn on the light in case they see it and come back again. Marbles her black cat sits purring on her knee.

What was once the small breakfast room now holds everything to meet her daily needs. A microwave heats the ready meals that she has delivered from the local supermarket. The electric kettle sits on a tray on a small table beside a box of tea bags and digestive biscuits. She clings on to the grandeur of the past by using a Royal Doulton China cup and saucer, part of a set that rounded off many a four-course dinner, the silver and crystal glass dancing and shimmering by candlelight then.

She sits up all night listening to the radio and only allows herself to sleep as the dawn breaks or when she hears her neighbour's car leaving for work.

Peter her only child lives abroad and what joy there was when Kevin her grandchild came to study in Ireland and stayed the odd weekend with her often bringing his friend Rodney with him. He was charming and had an easy way about him and she helped him with his enormous rent and huge college fees. Sometimes he would call and say 'Gran, I hate asking you, but could you possibly give me a loan as my account has been hacked or my wallet has been stolen.' He would give her an enormous hug and say, 'You are an absolute peach' She was concerned that he had lost weight and sometimes sounded very elated when he rang often late at night. She found out from Rodney that he had dropped out of college and was sleeping rough. When his body was dragged from the river her heart was shattered.

Even before the cremation, three men visited and demanded money that they said Kevin owed them. They asked her to withdraw cash from the bank. Hazel refused. Later that night others returned and with their faces covered, they hacked the fireplaces from the walls. The crystal chandelier was cut down and placed in her cat's basket, its soft lining pillowing the diamond shaped facets. Her mother's engagement ring and gold chains, bracelets and gold sovereigns were torn from the drawer of the writing bureau. They took her mobile phone with them and the rings from her arthritic fingers. They left with the words 'I'd mind that cat. If I were you.'

The new phone she finds difficult, and she only uses it now to place an order with the Supermarket or talk to Peter in Germany.

And so, she sits in her ever-decreasing world, waiting.

A Fall from Grace

Ciara Ann Flynn

Laundry rooms kept her busy
Cotton sheets bleached
Leave no mark – leave no stain
Locked in for years
Tied to dishonour

Destined to carry her secret
she fell from grace
A lack of justice for
tired hands trying
to scrub sins away

Plans to build where
once stood a place
where pain was met with
Glory in God's mercy.

A prayer for the damned
No repentance given
An urge to wash away tears
A lock of hair –
a reminder with her always

Prayers offered up for lost souls
Thoughts scream in her head
Shame doled out to many
A reminder of what went before

A Ghost Itches

Anne Griffin

Nana was the youngest of thirteen children. In her 80s, she was also the only surviving member of her family, so she liked to pray for them all each night. It took a long time.

Nana, once widowed, refused to sleep in a room alone – in fear of being “haunted during the night” - so it fell to me, an only child in the household, to be her roommate. I thus became privy to, and part of all her nightly rituals. Over the old fireplace in our bedroom was a huge oil painting of the Virgin and Child. The holy water font was hanging right beside it. Each night my grandmother shook a drop for each of her departed siblings, parents and all their extended families. The living got a showering too. On and on went the list, Nana’s murmurings lulling me into sleep, only to be rudely reawakened by the cold blessing landing on my forehead when she processed around the room, bathing everything in sight to keep us safe during the night.

Once the spiritual side was dealt with, the practicalities began. Unwinding her long plait from around her head and brushing out her swathe of waist-length hair; applying Vaseline to her forehead to keep it smooth and pouring liquid paraffin into her ears to prevent a build-up of wax – she also drank some of that to keep her bowels in good working order. The white enamel chamber pot was placed strategically under the bed but within easy reach in case she got “short-taken” during the night. Then the undressing began, layer after layer, culminating in the removal of her long-legged pink or blue knickers which, in winter months, she then placed on her head in order not to waste the heat. Rosary beads in hand, her sibilant whisperings finally allowed me to fall into an undisturbed sleep until morning.

When she broke her hip and could no longer climb the stairs, we moved into one of the large front rooms downstairs which became our bedsit. It also became the social hub of the house when friends and relatives came to visit. The holy water ritual was abandoned in favour of reading novenas, provided by a zealous niece who always brought a new one when she visited from Cork so they rapidly grew in number. When I acquired a tape-recorder and she was in good form, I amassed a wealth of songs and stories from her memory which I still have today. Fond of Power’s whisky and snuff, without them life to her was “dull and dreary”. When I started dating, her advice was: “Remember, any fella who doesn’t drink or smoke is no good, only a dry oul’ cod. You need a fella with a bit of life in him!”

Throughout those years, which were many as Nana died just three months before her 100th birthday, I can recall just one event which caused rancour and many a row between us. Nana developed The Itch. This Itch, she claimed, started at night in bed and kept her awake for hours. I looked at the spot and saw no sign of rash or redness on her blemish-free skin. Always obsessed by her health, she liked to have the doctor call quite often and he, who held her in very high esteem, obliged willingly. After examination of the leg in question, he pulled out his prescription pad. “This is very expensive cream so use it sparingly”, he told me.

“Where exactly do I apply it? Where is this phantom itch?”

Nana looked on smugly as he explained to me that since her sleep was disturbed by this discomfort, he felt he should try to alleviate the situation. I ended up resentfully lavishing on the prescribed cream all over her leg to cover all possibilities and to stop any future rogue itches from invading that territory. At eighteen I had lots of exciting prospects on my mind and rubbing cream onto a 90-year-old leg was not one of them. The cream ran out and the Itch was eventually forgotten amongst other more real issues.

And now as I lie in bed at night, sleep disturbed, my right heel scratching my left instep, in a spot where there is no rash or blemish of any kind to be seen, Nana’s voice echoes down the forty-three years since she passed away:

“If you don’t pray for me when I’m gone, I’ll come back and haunt you!”

Moonchild

Kenneth Hickey

Take that sinner boy home¹

Away from the sparkling sea
And the rolling wave breaking
On an untouched shore, virgin sands
Now a paradise

Hid in the reeds there are eyes that peak²

Watching love's young lust at play
They squint from valley windows
Stars as numerous as sands
And clack after clacking tongues

Gaze at the sky, with tears in my eyes³

Here is the resurrection
Flesh and blood as food and drink
Each the other's salvation
Crucified side by side, a sinner and a thief

Set my soul free, please...⁴

Till time destroys that Eden
Intervening years wandering lost
In sands that glisten like diamonds
Here is your constellation

¹ *Sinner Boy* - Rory Gallagher

² *Daughter of the Everglades* - Rory Gallagher

³ *At the Bottom* - Rory Gallagher

⁴ *I could've Had Religion* - Rory Gallagher

Mothers Cry

Frank Keating

Olivia Butler was twenty-eight years old and a brilliant doctor who had worked for Médecins Sans Frontières MSF, since her graduation at the age of 24. The youngest of June and John Butler's three daughters. She had spent the last four years, working in Palestine. But now that was all about to change, and she'd be safely back home in Mitchelstown by Christmas.

Kirat Arba, Hebron Israel, October 1st, 1998.

Eli was born on October 1st, 1998, in the urban Israeli settlement of Kirat Arba on the outskirts of Hebron. On January 17th, 2003, a group of Hamas terrorists attacked his family home killing his father and injuring his mother and two sisters. Eli was visiting the home of a family friend at the time of the attack. When Hamas launched the attack against Israel on October 7th, 2023, Eli had already served seven years in the IDF. At the age of 25 he was a seasoned fighter. He had led many undercover attacks against Palestinian targets resulting in the elimination of key Palestinian military and political figures. As far as he was concerned all Palestinians, including women and children, were legitimate. This was a war to the death.

Al-Mawasi Gaza October 2023.

Al-Mawasi is a narrow strip of land located by the Mediterranean Sea in southern Gaza. It has few buildings and largely consists of sandy dunes and agricultural land. The area was designated as a humanitarian safe zone by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), who encouraged 1.8 million Palestinian civilians to move there to escape the war. The total area of Al-Mawasi is approximately 8.5 square km (3.3 square miles). This is equivalent to the area covered by London's Heathrow Airport.

Al-Mawasi, Gaza, December 2023

In December 2023 hundreds of thousands of Palestinian civilians fled southwards seeking safety in Al-Mawasi. However, the IDF claimed that this mass movement of people was used as a cover by Hamas militants to move both arms and hostages to this new area. Eli's brief was simple; locate and extract 30 Israeli hostages being held by Hamas within Al-Mawasi. However, after a week's reconnaissance. When he began to wonder if there was an alternative explanation. Was it possible that it was some sort of military/medical facility?

Olivia Butler walked the short distance to the makeshift maternity field hospital. The unit was split into three different sections. The largest section catered for up to 30 mothers with their newborn babies. The two smaller sections were split between the labour ward and a surgical unit for emergencies. On Sunday December 10th, as Olivia stepped inside the tent, Eli watched and made a snap decision. He sent the coordinates to the control room located several kilometres away. The raging fire indiscriminately consumed the bodies of 58 mothers, infants, and medical staff including Olivia Butler.

A week later, Eli stepped on an improvised explosive device. (IED) Another Israeli young man died in Gaza and his mother cried. In a makeshift maternity unit half a kilometre away another Palestinian baby boy was born in Gaza and his mother cried. That same day the remains of Olivia Butler arrived back in Mitchelstown. The victim of collateral damage, the Irish woman died in Gaza and her mother cried.

Drive-by

Aedamur Kelly

It was a fleeting moment: a glimpse from the car while waiting in traffic. Something about them intrigued me. The grey hair, line traces and marbled skin suggested that they might be in their eighties. One woman shuffled determinedly ahead, casually balancing a walking stick on her shoulder. She exuded an air of confidence and adventure, advancing with purpose, while occasionally glancing from side-to-side. Curiosity piqued, I smiled, instantly drawn to her.

Her trailing companion appeared scowling and reluctant, clutching at a patch of green material belonging to her friend's coat: the wizened thumb and index finger seemingly belying the ferocity of the grip. I sensed it, this pincerlike hold, perceiving it as a restraint.

Suddenly, the traffic moved: we were off, and they were gone, disappeared into the ether. Yet, the image of the pair stayed with me. I felt somewhat unsettled. Something was bothering me. Later that evening, reflecting upon the scene, something seemed familiar. Slowly it dawned: these two women represented contrasting parts of myself.

One part wants to forge ahead in life, to explore, to be curious. It encourages me to be myself, to believe and reach for my dreams and for what might be possible. This part knows where I want to go and is confident that I will get there.

Yet there is another part; more reluctant, cautious, doubting and self-critical, that attempts to keep a firm and restraining grip. It does so by instilling sheer terror and paralysing fear. At times this fear serves in a misguided mission to protect. In reality, it often thwarts any sense of enthusiasm, joy or momentum. The image and felt sense of those wizened pincers seemed to trigger an active fear within, but of what?

As I wander in the mid-afternoon of life, I find myself reflecting, sometimes fearfully upon ageing and what the process might hold in store for me. Right now, menopause is toying with me, as it spotlights and fast tracks so many changes. Yet, despite the intermittent brain fog, clarity is emerging, focusing the lens on what is truly important. In naming what I fear something softens, instantly dissolving the instinctive need to vilify the things that I most fear and resist.

Should I be so fortunate to live into my eighties, I hope that I too will be able to shuffle determinedly ahead, fueled by a spirit of adventure. Alternatively, should I be more feeble, frail and cautious, I hope I can offer kindness and tenderness in the midst of it.

It is difficult to distinguish between what I saw that day, and the storyline that my mind created. Watching the fleeting scene from the car, perhaps I loaded and discharged my own expectations, fears and projections. Was she really scowling or even restraining her friend? Is it possible that she was a little nervous and unsteady on her feet and holding on to her dear friend's coat for support? Perhaps what I witnessed was a snapshot of true and lasting friendship?

What is that saying?

'We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are.'

Worth bearing in mind, don't you think while journeying through life?

My best friend

Esther Langley

'Where were you born?' she turned round in her desk, and I liked her friendly face. 'I was born India too!' she exclaimed when I told her. We have an immediate rapport. It was my first day at this new school and I had made a friend already. It made me very happy. At break time we began chatting and we had so much in common. Her name was Elisabeth. This was the beginning of a firm friendship that has lasted to this day. I invited her to my tenth birthday party, and we begged my mother could she spend the night, so when her mother came to collect her, we persuaded her to let her stay.

It was fun making up the spare bed in my room and we chatted nineteen to the dozen. I loved showing her my comic collection, and special toys. She liked Enid Blyton books too and we discussed the characters in these. I was invited to her house the following weekend. It was fun travelling together by bus after school. I liked her parents and little sister and brother a lot. Her father joked that we were like two guns going off as we both talked nonstop, we had so much to say to each other. In bed we played games and taught each other songs. Elisabeth played the piano beautifully. She was the leader in our friendship. She was very clever, and I admired everything about her. We decided to write a book together and illustrated it with our childish drawings. We spent a whole day taking it in turns to scribble out the story which was a school story similar in style to Enid Blyton. That evening we went hand in hand to the sitting room to show my parents our endeavour and they liked our book a lot.

The teacher found us annoying because we chatted during class, and she couldn't stop us. In desperation she called a meeting with our mothers, and they felt like two naughty schoolgirls themselves! It was decided that as Elisabeth was so bright and always top in the exams, that they would move her up a class to separate us. This was so disappointing, and I missed her. However, we kept in touch and wrote notes to each other every day which we swapped before morning Assembly when we met briefly. At Christmas my mother gave us a large diary each and said if we completed them, she would give us a prize at the end of the year. We kept them dutifully, and it was fun reading each other's diary. Hers was very neatly written, and she led a very eventful life. We are still great friends after seventh five years, and Elisabeth is a Godmother to my daughter, and we still have these childhood diaries after all these years.

Things from my youth that are not around anymore

Peter Langley

Billy: everyone in the countryside had a Billy or a Dolly; these were ponies, if not they had a donkey. They were the basic component of transportation; cheap to maintain because they ran on grass which they were able to get by grazing the sides of the roads and lanes, otherwise known as the long acre.

Pony trap: this was a two wheeled box type vehicle pulled by the Billy and could transport up to five people, again extremely cheap to run.

Donkey butt: like a pony trap but was flat, pulled by a donkey and used for carrying churns of milk to the creamery, it was also useful for getting the owner to the pub and home again as a donkey could be easily trained to carry out this operation unaided by an inebriated driver.

Threshing machine: No combine harvesters in those days; Corn having been harvested and brought into the farmyard it still had to have the grain separated from the straw and this was done by a threshing machine, the forerunner of agricultural contracting as the machines were expensive. Six or eight men were needed to operate the process; so, you had to attend the threshing at six or eight of your neighbours, with a midday meal provided together with a mug of porter, and a few more at the end of the day. For many farmers it was considered one of the top social events of the farming year.

Moving from agricultural memories, we come to:

Oil lamps: at the time, the best lighting system going and were more efficient than candles one would always be on a hook on the wall beside the kitchen fireplace. While others with handles could be carried around the house.

Coal Range: this was the means of cooking, for best results and heat, coal had to be used but wood and turf were there as a backup. Not only did the range cook it also heated the water and like a giant radiator it warmed the house. In the evenings you could open the front and treat it like an open fire.

Water ram: an ingenious invention which provided water in the house without the problems of power because it provided its own. Water dropping down a pipe from a stream up the farm passed through a vacuum cylinder, a rubber washer and plunger providing the energy for a portion of the water to be pumped into the house. Of course, with the water coming from a source in the Comeragh Mountains, it was a long time before I realised that bath water was not meant to be brown in colour.

Survivor

Miriam Logan

Wired to the moon
on a rope of stars.
Heart beats fast, you
embrace your scars.

Follies, dug in heels,
walk away, amends.
Recalibration, stars
aligned, confluence.

Finding your bearings,
marking cardinal points,
a hub takes shape, holds.
From here you choose life.

Your proud skin
shines in the night light.
Wired to the moon
by survivor insight.

The Final Day

Flor McCarthy

It's never easy letting go, turning keys a last time, goodbyes, everyone dashing off. Freedom brings its own high. I'd imagined today many times over years of officiousness of school control. Yes Sir! No Sir! For eight years I had hated it. Today I'm a warrior from my book. It's my day, the risk is great; by staying calm, I can do it. A trace of sadness is of losing friends moving on, and a soft girl with brown eyes.

With the gate locked and voices stilled, I returned under overhanging churchyard trees. The summer silence peculiar to schools had settled. My nervous rattle released the worn lock, a reminder of lining up for his damn school, talking shite, keeping everyone in their place. He hated my guts, knowing I didn't care bugged him. Long refusing having my hand lashed, unafraid, I'd outwait his impatience. Some said he never taught boys, he whipped, they learned. He schooled a breeding ground for bullies, if targeted, I became a battle cruiser.

Recalling stealing his keys two years before, blinded by anger he'd suspected everyone, ranting about liars and thieves to the unimpressed parish priest. Rage popped his eyes, I prayed his tie would throttle him, an ignoramus not worth hating.

Keying the door inside, exit route checked, hearing the silence, smelling chalk. I'd practiced leaps to reach the high sill. The first match failed to light shavings and paper scraps under the fuseboard, the second glowed yellow, then red, I smelt fire, my first trace of excitement! Pocketing keys and matches, switching the mains on. The timber wainscoting and floors with linking doors opened would blaze into the exposed roof.

Sticking to my plan, crossing the classroom, up onto the sill, closing the window and dropping to the ground. Into shadows of trees, not rushing a route I walked before, slinging keys and matches, onto the road beyond our house. Breezy days brought Angelus bell chimes, today it rang again, louder and longer.

At home calmly scoffing new jam on fresh scones, someone ran past shouting '*The school is burning*'. 'Did you hear that?' mother asked, 'lucky school's finished.' Years later, she gave that look. 'Remember when the school burned down? I was sure that was you!'

The mystery never resolved, agreed as old electrics due for replacement left switched on, the ignoramus unable to explain. Next day off to beloved grandfathers for usual holidays, avoiding braggarts claiming they saw everything. Arguing of a cycling man, disagreeing which road he'd taken. The ruin eventually cleared for a car park.

My warrior day led to new curiosities. I thrived in second level, the headmaster an opposite. With encouragement gaining marks in high eighties, ninety-nine in another subject. The magic one hundred per cent achieved in Irish writing, framed on a wall for years. The Universe seems to have reclaimed that skill, stubborn as ever I pretend, I'm not fussed what a reader might decide. I know, I once wrote a perfect essay.

Sanctuary

Geraldine McNamara

After breakfast, Helen went for a walk through the fields with Shep, who wore that ‘hangdog’ look which showed he knew that today was the day. When she got home, she washed and dressed and finished her packing. Only the essentials would travel. After dinner, in the middle of the day, Jim Donohue would collect her at the road to bring herself and his own daughter back.

Her mother had a salad ready. There was no point, she said, in having anything heavier before a long journey. They sat across the table from each other, as they ate.

“Shur you’ll be back again in no time.”

“I will Mom.”

“Shep will miss you alright.”

“I know, I’ll miss him too.”

They finished and put the plates in the sink.

“Have you everything so?”

“I think so.”

“Your father left ten shillings on the dresser for you. I thought he might be here before you left.”

Helen placed the note carefully in her purse and put it in the inside pocket of the bag she was to carry by hand. She hoisted a second bag on to her shoulders.

“Are they heavy? Will I walk up with you?”

“Not at all, no need. Shep will come to the road.”

“Okay so. Mind yourself and work hard.”

“I will Mom.”

She called the dog, and they walked down the yard. At the bottom, she stopped, turned and waved. Her mother waved back, and Helen thought she cut a lonely figure standing there framed in the doorway. Despite this, she suspected she was glad to see her leave.

At the road, she waited patiently for Jim and Mary Ann, sending Shep home with a pat on the head when the car appeared on the bridge. Jim greeted her warmly, taking her bags and putting them in the boot. It was Jim, ever pleasant and obliging, who had also delivered them home in June. Their

own car always seemed to be missing, for one reason or another, and was never available to do the run.

She got into the back seat beside Mary Ann whose cheeks were tear stained. She had obviously suffered in her leave taking from home. She barely spoke. Helen instinctively curbed her exuberance and whittled down her conversation to be more amenable to Mary Ann's mood.

“Can you believe the Summer is gone and we're back to that dungeon again for months on end?”

“I know. It's terrible.”

Helen worked at maintaining her sullen visage for the duration of the journey. Mary Ann's younger brother Jimmy stuck his head round between the seats at regular intervals smirking at their obvious misery. Mary Ann stuck her tongue out at him in response. Jim, glancing in the rear-view mirror, promised to stop for ice cream, to lift the mood.

They journeyed on. Mary Ann's mother had made a huge fruit cake for the nuns and a batch of queen cakes for the girls to enjoy at teatime. They were allowed to eat one or two of the buns on the road. Mary Ann's mood failed to lift. She leant towards the window soaking up the scenery like she was tasting it. Eventually they turned into the long avenue and drove under the trees to the entrance. Several other cars were there ahead of them at various stages of dislodging their charges. The girls collected their bags, and Jim shook hands with them both. “I'll be back to collect ye for the Christmas holidays” he shouted after them as they climbed the steps to the door where Rev. Mother was waiting to greet them. Helen knew that yes; indeed, it would be Jim fetching them home again next time. And Christmas? She preferred not to think about that now.

While cheery greetings rang out around the corridors and dormitories, as friendships were rekindled after the long break, the mood was quite sombre overall as homesickness was still very raw. Classes would start tomorrow. Meanwhile, there were lockers to be claimed, filled with books and belongings, beds to be made and just enough time for a walk around the grounds before tea. Then there was reading and board games before bedtime and lights out. An occasional sob escaped into the silent darkness. Helen wiggled her toes under the cosy blankets and smiled secretly to herself. It was good to be home.

Birthing, Brides and Bridles

Johanna Murphy

Did you know with that white mantle,
Says Mammy to me at the altar,
“You’re a Bride of Christ now?”
“Why? Mammy, Why? I am only seven!”
“Look! I can fly too!” I say, twirling my arms outside
So that my white dress fans out almost to lift me
To my ethereal dream in the sky.
But a wayward cherry blossom has bled a pink tear
Onto my brow.
And I stay earthbound.

“Drink the fizz, my dear,” says the priest in dark glasses,
Who’s so buoyed up with the adulation,
He seems to float through the church doors,
While the swifts soar and sink from the eaves
And turrets and back down to the floor.
Fast car to Youghal beach then, cosy on mother’s lap.
A world of green blue and white streaks, seen through
The window of a door which flies open,
Onto a road which wants to say hello to me,
This wasn’t on anyone’s Holy Communion map!
But I’m saved by my mother who slams the door with a sharp rap.

But Brides will birth,
Even Brides of Christ,
This one is assisted with a plethora of needles, tubes and instruments,
Which tie me to the hospital bed afterwards for weeks.
So Nappy Times are not Happy Times.
My bloods betray me, constantly coagulating,
Even though my body has expelled its beautiful invader
One false move might kill me.
Yet I must answer the calling of being a mother,
And to the roar of my baby daughter,
Filtering through the breathing holes
Of her perfect glass cage.

July Day, searing sun
Central heating cranked up,
Forty coats thrown on.
“White blood cells up,”
Mam says, on whom the forty coats hang.
That Christmas Even both her stomach and the
Forty coats are long gone.
Bound to a bed,
By the futility of force feeding by a well-meaning nurse.
“But will she get to see Santy?” my daughter asks,
To fill up my own mummy purse.

Sheila's Walk

Anna O'Connell

Sheila woke up bright and early as the **sun** streamed **in the window** to light **up** her newly painted terrace white coloured **room** with matching bedding. Sheila felt refreshed after **a** good night sleep. She gave herself **a couple** of minutes to **scan** her bedroom taking in all aspects of the **room**, which was **comforting and** full of **possibilities**. She **gave a** good stretch and took **a** couple of deep breaths to ground herself **and** clear her head and plan her day ahead. she was meeting **her** friend Breda **later for a** chat and **a** catch **up**. She **always feel better** after their chats more positive **and** better **able to** sort out any **dilemma** she **was** working on. Breda worked in a **large** retail store in town, she is always glamorous, well turned out **and is** great advertisement for the benefits of **smart** casuals. Sheila pulls **back the covers**, exposing her **warm** skin to the **air, and** she got herself **out** of bed, Put on her favourite dressing gown **and smelt its freshness as** she walks to the kitchen, flecking On the kettle waited for the familiar humming **sound**. She took out Bewleys Gold Roast **Instant** coffee. She watched as the coffee hit the bottom of the mug with a plop, releasing its **beautiful** aroma hitting the back of her nostrils. She held the **mug** with both hands **and sat down**. At **the door** she heard the postman pulling **up and** the **sound of a** letter being pushed into the letter **box**.

As she started to read her heart started **pumping**, her eyes **found** it hard to **focus**, and eyesight became blurred. She started to sweat, **her** breathing became shallow **and** fast, She **felt** she was losing control. **Once** read it could not **be put** back. Things **would be** very **different she knew**. She had this urge **to run**, she **left** her home **and** headed to the **canal**. **The** canal was a walk she was familiar **with**, **she** loved **this** walk **in the** past. **The** **smell of the** honeysuckle, **the** colour **of the** yellow **flags** dotted along **the canal** keeping watch like **soldiers**. **She** realised today this walk had lost **its** colour. As **the wind began** to rise, **she** could see the trees **once** still **now** shaken. **This is how** she had **felt**. Shaken, shaken to **the core**. **Life** seemed to **be suddenly difficult** and **enormous**. As the canal opened **up and** stretched **before her**, **she** felt She was going to **be** swallowed whole. **She** thought why **me, why** **now**. She took a breath to try to **steady** her nerves **as she thought about the letter** she **received this** morning **such an** innocent letter, **plain white** crisp envelope. **She thought** back on **the last** few weeks that lead up to this. She **felt emotional, exhausted as she** started to run out **of steam she** noticed. her walking **still fast but** slowly **down now in its** familiar **rhythm**. **She took a several** **deep breaths**, becoming **aware of** her surroundings again. **She** felt more **grounded, she felt** her body **and** mind respond **and settle**. **Thoughts flooded in** with more **clarity**. **She thought** of Breda her **friend** maybe she could **help her**, maybe **she is stronger that** she thinks, **maybe all could be okay**. She kept walking

letting her **skin** feel the cold air **and the sound** of **the birds now returned**. Maybe it
was time
to go home.

A Childhood Memory

Mary O'Farrell

In the mid-1950s, a terrible fever hit many parts of Ireland and Clonmel did not escape. It was paratyphoid. People died of it, and many were hospitalised. I contracted this awful scourge. I remember when I first felt its onslaught. I was coming home from school with my friend Ann. I know exactly at what part of the Western Road we were, when a most awful pain engulfed me. We continued and instead of following our plan to go to Ann's house on Oliver Plunkett Terrace, we decided to go our separate ways and each of us went to our own house. In the short space of time of reaching home, the sickness had taken hold. I felt terrible. The doctor was called, and it was obligatory that I would go to hospital. It turned out that the Fever Hospital in Clonmel was full of patients with the disease, so an ambulance was arranged to take me to the Fever Hospital in New Ross. The situation was extremely serious. A priest from the local Franciscan Friary, Father Loyola, heard my confession and gave me the last rites or Anointing of the Sick as it is now called. Once I arrived in New Ross, I was not allowed to have any visitors. It was a long car journey from Clonmel, but on a few occasions my family did come and shout through the closed window. Every single day, except Sundays, (there was post-delivery on Saturdays), my mother wrote me a letter. Each day there would be a bar of chocolate and once a week a comic, sometimes 'My Friend', 'Bunty' or 'School Friend'. The wards were separated by partitions, the upper halves of which were glass. It became routine that when I got my letter, I would stand up on the bed and wave it about. This let the other patients know that the post was 'in'.

To be declared free of the disease, one's urine sample had to prove negative of it for three consecutive weeks. At some stage, I had had two weeks clear. Because I was the only one of my age, I became very friendly with the nurses. Otherwise, there were babies, very young children and adults. At that time the nurses' duties included bedmaking. I was shown how to correctly fold the corners of the bedclothes to make a neat edge. I did a lot of bedmaking and helping nurses, fetching for them whatever they required. One day a two-year-old died in her cot next to my bed. That bothered me a lot, more so than when an adult died. On the last day of my three-week sample taking, a nurse and I were labelling the samples. I contradicted the nurse and claimed that one bottle was mine. She thought otherwise but I was adamant. She accepted my say-so and off went the samples to be tested. After almost three weeks of being clear, this time the result was positive. I had to begin another three weeks of sample testing. In all, I spent eleven weeks in New Ross. Missing my family was the hardest part once the real sickness had subsided.

The Humble Safety Pin

Eamon O’Leary

Despite the awful weather, I’ve made a couple of forays into the garden whenever the sun made an appearance. Nothing much, just tipping around collecting the last of the leaves and mucking about. For some unknown reason I prefer, like the renowned gardeners, Gerry Daly, and Monty Don not to wear gardening gloves, and of course, I picked up my first thorn of the year. A good sized one right at the tip of my pinkie.

I prepared for surgery, and went searching for a needle, but with socks no longer being darned in our house, needles are in short supply. Eventually, I found a brass pin not much longer than a grain of rice.

As I poked about at the aforementioned thorn, a thought struck me.

What has happened to the Safety Pin? They are nowhere to be seen.

Did I miss out on some referendum where they were banned?

One of my fondest memories is of mother using one to fasten a cauliflower sized rosette onto my, *you’ll grown into it*, blazer on First Communion Day. And she used pink tipped harpoon sized pins to secure nappies on my brother’s wriggling backside. Many’s the time he let out a piercing yelp when prodded by one.

Ah, yes. The times before disposable nappies and washing machines. Every day the clotheslines in our estate were festooned with dozens of handwashed nappies, each a differing shade of white. The pigeons had great fun.

Ma always said that no woman would dream of heading off to a dance without popping a safety pin in her handbag along with her powder, lipstick, cigarettes, matches and her lady bits.

“You’d never know when a hem might drop, or the strap of a dress give way.”

Da, like an FBI agent flashing his badge, would flick open the not insignificant lapel of his gaberdine coat, revealing at least two safety pins. One short, the other of a size that today would be deemed a lethal weapon.

“Essential, Son,” he’d tell me. “An immediate solution if ever you lose a button off the fly of your trousers and ideal for removing a bit of rasher stuck between your teeth.”

At school, we used them as weapons, poking the backsides of those sitting in front of us while the girls, more civilised, made bracelets.

Today we have Velcro and a myriad of other fasteners but I’m thinking it’s time for a return of the humble safety pin.

Maybe I’ll set up a movement!

The Betrayal of Jude

Janet O'Leary

Looking back, he was never really one of us.
A bit of a loner, always on the fringe,
punching above his weight and hungry for the fast buck.
Too cool for school.
His name was Jude and we called him Jude the Dude.
Just for a laugh
We pushed him to the edges, kept him out of the loop.
We stopped talking or laughed behind our hands
whenever he came near.
He pretended not to care, like he was better than us
or something.
But it showed behind his eyes, if you really looked.
And I did.
And I saw the pain and the scourging of his soul.
But we turned the screw on his discomfort
and kept turning.
Never missing a trick to make him feel left out,
not one of the gang.

I remember the day we heard he had died.
The master told us. "Your brother is dead," He said.
And something about a deal gone wrong.
Thirty pieces of silver failed to come back clean from the laundry.
Blood money.
The pointing fingers stopped at Jude.
He was in the loop then, sure enough.
The loop of the hemp rope, slung in a noose
over a willow tree.
As the Master looked at each of us in turn,
his chosen twelve - now eleven,
his eyes stripped us bare of pretence.
And we heard the words from his last lesson in the boat,
coming back from the fishing:
"And whatever you do to one, the least of your brethren,
you do to me."

I turned away, trying to hang my
clean conscious on the hook of a dirty deal,
And I heard the cock crow.
And its crew both loud and shrill
on the dark dung-heap of my heart, mind and soul.

A Near Miss

Angela Osborne

As far back as Mrs. Maguire can remember, her daughter Paula sang. Even as a toddler, she listened to the radio, picked up the words and sang along. All through Primary School Paula loved the annual Nativity Play and Christmas Carols. She was in her element.

Then, it was Secondary School and down to studies. Still, Paula tuned into the music on radio and television as much as possible.

One day, Paula's mum was reading the local *Guardian*.... 'Listen to this, Paula:

'Girls and boys between the ages of 16 and 18 are invited to audition for a part in a live production of *The Sound of Music* and, it gives a phone number. You should give it a try.'

'Do you think so Mum?'

'Yes, I do.'

They rang.

'I'll take your name and number and get back to you when auditions are being held.'

Every day after school Paula queried her mother:

'Any call, Mum?'

'No Paula, not yet.'

Then one day they noticed a missed call. 'Your audition is today at 3.30 pm.'

They checked the time it was 3 45.

Paula grabbed her coat and hopped on the nearest bus to the theatre. She arrived flustered at reception.

'It's 4 45. You're late for your audition. We like our boys and girls to be punctual. However, there is a cancellation, so please take a seat and wait.'

When called to the stage, Paula poured her heart and soul into a rendition of 'The Hills Are Alive With The Sound Of Music.'

When she finished, there was a loud clap. Paula waited nervously.

'You've not only qualified for the Chorus, but you've given the best version of Julie Andrews I've heard all day. You have the part of Maria.'

Paula was flabbergasted. She rushed home to tell all to Mum.

'I'm so excited. Imagine, me Maria.'

Mum, wasn't it a near miss?

A Close Shave

Gerardine O’Sullivan

Herself was fiddling with a new razor set and attachments, like a child with a wind- up toy. I knew I was a bit unkempt, about the face, but really, was there a need to bring in the big guns?

“A bargain Paddy, a bloody bargain” she says, “only 25 quid in Lidl’s! I just can’t figure out how closely each blade is going to shave”.

Oh great, she’s going to try them out on my poor head, and I’ll end up looking like a badly groomed poodle.

“What do ya think?” she asks, holding up two blades, “number 1 or number 2?” My face gives nothing away, as to be honest, I wouldn’t be sure myself, so I stay quiet on the matter. I’ve learned over the years it’s better that way. In three, womanly strides she quickly crosses our small, town-house kitchen and cups my face in her hands. “Aah Pad” (a pet name she uses when she is in good form), “I’ll sort you out my darling” and with that, plants a quick kiss on the top of my head.

NOW...I know I’m a bit dishevelled now, but I have to say, I quite like it, it gives me a rather sexy male about the town look- windswept, but interesting like. But herself doesn’t like it, and what Mairead doesn’t like, Mairead sorts out!

Patio doors thrown open to the summer, I can hear our neighbour next door. From behind the garden fence, a ballcock head bobs up and down. Bouncing Betty is on trampoline hour again.

“Hellooo” the bounding body calls out, her voice rising and falling along with her leotard clad carcass. “How’s Paddy doing after his stroke gurl?”

“Yerra, alright” Mairead bellows back, catching Betty on an upward bounce.

“How’s the memory with him? Any improvement?”, she enquires, her head up and down like a chimney sweeps brush.

“He forgets he’s gone to the toilet, then, he looks to go again. Didn’t he keel over last night in the middle of it, wet my floor and then walk into it? Gawd, but I’m wiped!”

“Just like Paddy’s’ pee”. Betty’s reply sends both women into hysterics.

“Betty, if I didn’t laugh, I’d cry, but I must go now because I’m giving Paddy a haircut”. With that, the bouncing head bobs off.

Mairead approaches, razor in hand, ready for business. A threatening buzz rings in my ears as she starts at the top of my head. Supporting my face gently with one hand, she motors on over rough terrain with the other. Then, moving her hand to the small of my back, she runs the razor downwards as I’m fairly hairy south of the scalp alright. It was when she sank her hand further down over the cheeks of my arse that I shivered in anticipation, just not the right kind! Was she really going to bare my rear end to all and sundry?

The razor, now with a mind of its own, ploughed through bristles and hair I’d been nurturing for some time. I started to feel a breeze. Well, if I get a cold in the whole of my body and die of pneumonia, it’ll be on Mairead’s’ head!

“Well done, Pad” says she, switching off the razor, blowing out the hairs. “Would you like a treat after all that?” Once again, I shivered in anticipation, this time, the right kind.

I thought it best to say nothing, so I wagged my tail instead!

The Playground

Mary O'Sullivan

To me this playground is a theatre, the stage set, the scene varying according to the time of day and season of the year. The first to arrive each morning are the free, relaxed, unencumbered, retired folk, mostly men. They walk the circumference at a brisk pace, morning papers folded under arm. Weather permitting, they sit in groups or alone at the far end, their gaze averted, looking across the road to the broad beach. Having chatted for a while and admired one another's canine friends, they head for home and the welcoming smells of coffee, bacon and toast. Next in view are the busy distracted timekeepers taking the short cut from the high street through to the bus stop. No time to admire the sea view now. Watches are checked, phone calls made and received before exiting at the north gate, barely making the number nine or in many cases missing it and moving towards the taxi rank.

At mid-morning comes the chattering stream of toddlers and preschool children. Pigtails, ponytails, multi spotted raincoats and cartoon painted wellies, skip and bob. Many hold on to the side handles of buggies as their younger sibling's sleep. Young mums meet and greet, exchange gossip and telephone numbers while sipping coffee from polystyrene cups provided by the Polish man in the food truck. Slides are climbed in open mouthed concentration. Screams of excitement accompany the long whooshing descent. Two three-year-old strangers face one another in warlike silence on the see-saw, words may destroy the daring rhythm. The boys show their macho side and start the chair wheel, one foot on the board and one on the carousel. They invite the girls on board with what can only be observed as a disarming charm. Alas, all too soon the three o'clock bell beckons and all must leave to collect the older children from junior school. There is a brief delay, a reluctance, a feeding of ducks at the little pond and the splash of multi coloured rain boots in pools of sullied water or melted snow depending on weather.

Summer comes round bringing freedom from the clock and the arrival of all groups at all times. It appears to me then as if the director has neglected his task. Old, young, not so old and not so young all gather and meet. Children are introduced to one another's grandparents and much spoken of dogs are seen at last. Then dusk descends and an eeriness takes over. Young hoodie clad men assemble or pass one another with an agitated gait. I see them exchange money for small little packets, hastily concealed in pockets of sports gear while looking over their shoulders. I see their faces pale and gaunt under the streetlight at the main gate. They don't look healthy or happy. I feel it is a great shame. Margaret is here now to put me to bed, so I wheel my chair away from the window. The men with their dogs and morning papers will be here by eight.

My Monster Within

Susan Parsons

She lives deep within my head
Deathly still, but never dead
She slumbers there for sixteen days
Then awakens from her languid haze.
She starts by numbing cheeks and jaw
Then goes on to numb me more
Until I lay there scared and still
I take my meds, my migraine pills
She makes me shake; she makes me dumb
Until all my limbs are numb.
As I slip in and out of me
She makes me hurt incredibly
Then throbbing head and tiny cry
She makes me feel like I will die.
So, five hours pass, and she has fled
Back into my woolly head
And there she'll sleep for sixteen more
As I try to function as before.

A Tale Of New Plastic

Marian Roche

When I was a child in the late 1960s Macroom, Mom and I invariably visited O Leary's Hardware Store in North Square. That was where you'd find any new product, material or gadget. New ware or new paint or even a new mouse-trap. But one day, we discovered the ultimate invention. The Plastic Dish. A beautiful bright, shiny, red one! We lifted it up. We felt it and pulled at it. We marvelled at how light it was. The Shop Assistant declared, "That dish is made from a new material called Plastic. Plastic is going to change all our lives forever. And it won't break if you let it fall." She said it could be used as a sink dish or a cake-mixing bowl or for bathing a baby or feeding the hens! We bought the red dish and Mom said we would use it for baking.

I had been pestering Mom, for some time, to make fudge, like Aunty Pauline's, so Mom agreed we would make fudge that evening after milking the cows. I don't know whether I was more excited about making the fudge or using the new red plastic dish. But, while Mom was out milking, I thought I'd get a head start by getting out the ingredients: cream, sugar and butter. That was all. As we didn't have a weighing-scales, I had to guess the proportions, like Mom did, when she baked brown cakes every day. I put the ingredients into the new plastic dish. But my patience wore out and I decided to go ahead and make the fudge myself. I would surprise Mom and present her with a plate of my very own golden chewy aromatic squares!

I loaded the AGA with coal and logs. I put the red dish on top. I watched the butter melt into a golden stream as it soaked into the sugar and the cream began to bubble and pop. The aroma of melting butter, sugar and cream was deliciously tempting. I ran to the dresser to get out the wooden spoon. The drawer was stuck, and I had to jiggle it with the old knife from the back kitchen, to get it open. Just then, I began to smell a horrible stench that made my throat gravelly and sore. And what was that thick black treacly stuff dripping down off the Aga? There was a horrible cloud of green smoke coming from the dish and the fumes made me cough as I approached the cooker. I hurriedly tried to lift off the dish but it wouldn't budge! I pulled it with all my might, and it eventually came away. But when I looked, only the top part had come up with me! The base of the dish, along with my lovely creamy fudge mixture had turned into a thick black river which was flowing down over the Aga surface. Black bitter-smelling gunk! "Mom's going to kill me!" I exclaimed to myself in fear and panic. I used the old back-kitchen knife to scrape all the gunge into the coal bucket. Just then, Mom arrived in. "What's that awful smell?" she asked, "And what happened to the new dish?"

We were always good at recycling and re-purposing old items before today's smug Eco trends. Mom used that red dish-top to display her dahlias in the garden. What a pretty sight they looked, until one day, we went to the beach and the pigs broke out. They rooted up all the grass and obliterated Mom's dahlias. And there in the centre of the garden was one audacious pig with the red dish-top in her mouth! Mom distracted her with a slice of bread and hunted her across the yard into her pig-sty. Meanwhile, I took the dish-top and threw it up onto a high ditch behind the house.

Thirty years later, my brother was clearing out the back area to build a new shed. I went to see the old place before he bulldozed everything away. There, on the high ditch was the old dish-top. A little bit faded, but now it was sporting a fine bunch of nettles!

Ward 24

Catherine Ronan

Mirror Man, you secrete the sun,
walk with dusty regret, crawl under
floorboards, crack secrets of detention,
find broken bottles with scraps
of coloured label and soon,
the battlefield is slippery.
Bloodlines refuse to coagulate
and you begin to call me witch.

Summer shutters drowsy insomnia,
squirms in plastic chairs as kisses
taste like rubber eels. You steal teeth
from dream, stroke splintered mania,
promise to show me your new ink
if I take my old pills.
Mirror Man, I think I love you.

And this is a moment you should have been petrified

Triona Ryan

It was a powerful afternoon in every way. The waves were massive, rolling in tall and fast from the Atlantic. Two young girls were having fun in the breakers, being lifted up and down into the swirling salty foam over and over again. One of the girls, Steffi, was suddenly dragged tumbling to the shore. She stood with difficulty wiping the hair from her eyes and mouth and said she'd had enough. She knew the tiny Algarvian cove better than her Irish cousin Tara and told her she should get out too, it was getting too rough. Her cousin simply said, "yeah but I'm eleven" and ran towards the waves undeterred. Steffi, who was nine was not convinced. She watched nervously as a gigantic wave crashed in front of her older cousin. Tara hardly flinched. Then suddenly she sped backwards as a towering wall of water was suddenly upon her. She wanted to dive through it but it was already breaking on top of her from a height so instead she held her nose and braced for impact.

It soon felt like she was in a giant washing machine being spun around and around, like a rag doll for ages. Then everything went very quiet. She looked up and saw the summer sun dancing on the surface of the water above. It was so pretty, so tantalising but completely out of reach. She realised she had somehow been swept out to sea and was in very deep water indeed. Instinct took over and she decided not to struggle; it made no sense to. She knew that she could not make it all the way to the top, so she made the conscious decision to let go. At a moment when she should have been petrified, strangely she was not.

She let go and was instantly engulfed in the most blissful feeling she had ever known. Suddenly she (that is to say her consciousness) was propelled out of her body where she could see her cousin pacing the beach frantically looking for assistance. She could clearly see but also feel her anguish. It was very hard to watch.

It was not until she was flung onto the beach, face first, that Tara realised she was back in her body. Moments later two men hauled her into the upright position and began gently thumping her on the back. She noticed Steffi, with a look of such relief and joy on her face that she began to snigger with laughter. Steffi joined in and so did the crowd that had gathered.

Fortunately, Tara lived to tell the tale, though at first, whenever she did tell the story, she left the best bits out. Years passed and little by little she became confident enough to tell the whole story to a few close friends. Then one fine day, she decided to let go and share it with anyone who cared to listen.

Conversations at Dinner

Nicola Sheehan

—Innocent! I told you.

—He's not innocent, Dave. None of them are innocent.

—They all are, every single one. All proven innocent in a court of law. Love, that's a good steak, what's the seasoning?

—Cajun. They were found not guilty. There's a big difference between being found not guilty and being innocent. Pass the salt, would you?

—Not guilty equals innocent in my eyes. Damn disgrace they were put through that media circus.

—Well, I thought – eat your vegetables, sweetie.

—Yes, Mummy.

—And Tommy, no dessert unless I see a clean plate. I thought their behaviour was absolutely disgraceful. I'd be ashamed if I was a mother to any of them. Especially *him*. Arrogant until the end. Even the statement his solicitor read out was shameful. At least the other fella had the cop on to show some remorse.

—Nonsense. He was cleared of all wrongdoing. Damn fine rugby player he is too. At least now he can concentrate on the game and put this sad state of affairs behind him.

—He's also a misogynistic pig, Dave. Tell me, what kind of role model is he? What kind of message does it send to young boys? Frankly, it makes me sick that he's still allowed to play at all. At least he won't be playing here.

—Huh, pressure from the sponsor; they were protecting themselves from the onslaught of the snowflakes. It's a good thing he's still young and has his whole career ahead of him. He'll be able to prove himself on the pitch again, won't he, Tommy?.

—Sure, Dad.

—A damn fine role model if you ask me.

—Really, Dave, a role model?

—Yeah. What he does in private is his own business. He shouldn't be penalised for the rest of his life for one lapse of judgment.

—You read the WhatsApp messages, right? They weren't just one lapse of judgment.

—Ah, that was just a bit of harmless banter between the lads.

—Harmless banter, Jesus Christ, Dave, are you serious? They were talking about spit roasting women like they were pieces of meat. Tommy, Sarah, are you both done?

—Ciara, you take a look at any WhatsApp groups involving men and I guarantee that there's been worse said.

—Please don't condone their behaviour, Dave. And I hope you're not in any of them.

—Dad?

—What is it, son?

—When I'm older, I want to be like him and play for my province.

—That's my boy. And if you work hard, you might even play for your country too. And I'd be the proudest father in the world.

—Daddy, Daddy?

—What is it, sweetpea?

—When I grow up, I want to *marry* him.

—...

—...

—Ah...no, honey, you don't want to marry someone like him.

—But, Daddy, you said...

—Forget what I said.

—Christ, Dave.

Picasso – *The Weeping Woman* and war

Anthony Sheridan

Some years ago, I visited the Queen Sofia National Museum Art Centre in Madrid to see the painting, '*Guernica*' by Picasso, a work I had long wanted to see. Although it is regarded by many art critics as the most moving, and powerful anti-war painting in history, I was disappointed.

The black-and-white painting is massive, at 11 feet 5 inches tall and 25 feet 6 inches across. It portrays the suffering and brutality of war. Picasso painted the piece in response to the 1937 bombing of Guernica in Northern Spain by Hitler's Luftwaffe during the Spanish Civil War [1936–39].

I began to understand my disappointment when I went to an adjoining room and watched a documentary about the civil war. Picasso's *Guernica* was, at least initially, exploited as a work of propaganda designed to demonise the nationalist side led by Franco.

But the documentary told a different story; it revealed the extreme brutality practiced by both sides in what was probably the most vicious civil war in history.

Picasso, I suspect, was unhappy with the propaganda element of his piece. I believe he wanted to create a work that exposed the brutality, horror, and despair associated with all wars; throughout all history.

And then, recently, flipping through the channels, I came across a documentary by the broadcaster, Andrew Marr, which completed my understanding of why I was disappointed with *Guernica*.

The subject of the documentary was another painting by Picasso entitled –*The Weeping Woman*. The painting is a continuation of the artist's *Guernica* theme. Marr explains that Picasso was influenced by two factors: a letter from his mother describing how smoke from burning buildings in Barcelona had made her cry and the influence of fellow artist Dora Maar.

Maar, who was the model for the Weeping Woman and Picasso's mistress, was also a great artist and photographer in her own right. She was the principal influence on Picasso's understanding of the dark times they were living through.

Andrew Marr tells us that Picasso obsessively painted and repainted the Weeping Woman until it was perfect. He was, I believe, trying to create a work that depicted the obscenity and suffering of all wars, not just the conflict in his own country.

In other words, he was doing what all great artists do—portraying truth through art without the contamination of political or other agendas.

The Weeping Woman does exactly that.

Letting Go to Grow

Jennifer Smee

I sit here now at the age of 33,
I know now for sure that I am "me"
For in the past days gone by
I wasn't sure on who was I?

Lost in a world
Of confusion and doubts,
Wondering what on earth,
Was my life about.

Like crazy paving on the ground,
No starting point to be found.
A life that looked so bleak often thinking,
Is this all?

Will I be like Cinderella and go to the ball,
Where a happy ending is in site and answers to my woes enlight.

Clearing the house

Fiona Smith

The kitchen is silent, nobody eats there now.
On the windowsill, the radio splutters,
picks up the music of the finches outside.
They circle the apple trees, all new to them.

Unplugged, the TV makes the whitest of noise.
It steals into my head as I sleep upstairs.
In the damp, mossy room, I inhale
the right type of dust, peaceful, quiet.

Above my head, the attic mumbles softly.
Its dark fusty cool gives nothing away.
Latin books, papers, secrets, all in boxes,
Sealed where nobody can touch them now.

The wispy dream catcher that came from Nepal
lies idle, its yellowed feathers curl inwards.
When we were small it wasn't there to ward off
the bad dreams of school, life, other people.

The small fridge comes to a juddering halt
As I shut the front door to go down the path
Past cypresses braced for the new owner's saw.
Nothing or nobody can touch me now.

An Awkward Flight

Eve Telford

Conrad never forgot the night of his twelfth birthday. It was the last time he had felt the dancing of his legs as he ran, a dancing akin to flying. But not once in the years that followed would he regret the measures he had taken to protect the flying of that mottled one— to salvage that awkward flight.

Through the hush of the dusk light, they ran, father and son, tripping in the long reeds that twisted in the meadow. The sky was grey with humming clouds, and the grass was uneasy in the restless wind. By day this was Conrad's holy place, where he wove the reeds into jackets for the fairies or cast branch-boats out into the shimmering pond. He knew every branch, every tussock of grass, every flower. But now his holy place had become an unfamiliar Hell. His father was taking him to join them, the Killing Ones, that rabble of grown men and their sons who lurked by night in the copse, or by the little pond, shotguns proud in their hasty hands. Soon they reached the opening to the wood. Conrad stopped at the threshold of the trembling trees, clinging to his innocence as he hurled himself down on the blanket of muddy leaves. Three times he begged, and three times his father bellowed: It's high time I made a man out of you! Suddenly his father caught him by his coat collar, and dragged him along the slippery path, beneath the creaking elms, while Conrad wriggled and wept. And there they were, the Killing Ones. There stood their hulking shadows, blocking the path, grey as the baying of the hounds. So, you've finally brought your son, that weakling. We will make him strong, as strong as our sons. Conrad's voice was as firm as tree-bark: I am no weak one. The Killing Ones' voices rang out, hammy and hearty: Well, then. Kill us a duck or two. They thrust a shotgun into his hand. They hollered, and heaved their bodies towards him, blocking Conrad on all sides with their shadows and their guns. Conrad quivered in the loneliness of his resolve. He pressed himself into the shadow of a tree. He held the gun and smiled. He knew what he would do.

The grey clouds parted like a rush of smoke, and a clear crescent moon swung low through the trees. At the same moment, three caterwauling, red-cheeked pheasants, flushed out by the hounds, struggled with the sky. Conrad's father shot one; Hermann shot a second. They hung in the air for a moment, and then, as if their feathers had been cast with iron, they tumbled down through the grey air to the indifferent leaves. It was a silent death, a martyred death, and Conrad's childhood died with them. The last bird is yours, his father urged him, and gestured to the lonely, screeching pheasant in the grey sky. My gift to you is your flight, Conrad whispered up to the bird, and then he turned the muzzle of the shotgun down to his own young legs. And although his feet gave way to the hard, blackened soil, he kept gazing up, as he lay stretched out on the woodland floor, at that

frantic, flapping bird, still grappling with the air, still screeching, still blushing red. And he who had now lost the use of his legs felt, and would always feel, that awkward, jittery flight: felt it forever in his soul, raising him up like a kite, and bearing him gently into a silent, pond-like sky.

Bobbins

Sharron Toner

Through the hall, across the wooden floor, second door on the right. The dining room of Granny's house faced north with a large window pleading for light. I don't remember much dining taking place there, but the room was heavy with dark imposing furniture from a different era and finer situations.

To open the doors and drawers of the large sideboard and high display cases was a curious adventure. A rainy-day adventure we would dive into sometimes when bored. Stacks and untidy bundles of sepia photographs. Silver cutlery in some mild kind of order, coins from far flung places. Granny enjoyed catching us rooting and didn't seem to mind at all how badly we returned the treasure as long as it wasn't left on the floor.

The room changed overnight when Grandad passed. We arrived one day to a huddle of Aunties whispering in the kitchen, the dining room door firmly shut. No sign of Granny. I was a child whose habit was to move silently, unnoticed. And so, I stood outside the dining room listening to the busy whirr of a singer sewing machine going in fits and bursts inside the room. Instinct told me the firmly shut door was a barrier to something but didn't apply to me.

So, I reached high, turned the handle and slipped in closing the door silently behind me. The scene was industrious and orderly, stacks of fabric neatly folded, all black with different patterns of white -stripes, dots, waves and checks. I knew not to speak for the moment, and I would be permitted to stay, to observe and gorge on the curious process of dressmaking. I was witnessing 'operation mourning clothes', the making of an entire year's worth of wardrobe for my Granny. Winter and summer, every day and special- all black. Black fabric, black thread, black zips, buttons and clasps.

She moved swiftly and confidently handling pattern, fabric and pins with skill and confidence. The dining room table was for the moment offering a different type of sustenance. The fabric scissors moved with a deadly splice through all it was presented to. Bobbins of black thread lined up beside the singer. Crisp pattern paper rustled with every move and Granny was master of it all. She paused in her work only to reposition fabric beneath the Singer presser foot. Her glance came briefly in my direction over the rim of glasses perched mid-way on her nose. I detected a gentle smile through a mouth of pins before her attention returned to matters at hand.

The choice

Noreen Whelton

Let me choose freedom
Let me choose joy
Let me choose peace
I am.....radiant
Joy is me
Compassion is me
Peace is me
My spirit can soar
Like a lark
Rising from pain
Rising from sorrow
Rising from judgement
Away skyward
Rejoicing in blueness
All cloud gone
Heavenward.
Happiness is a choice

