THE STINGING FLY

NEW WRITERS · NEW WRITING

A SAMPLER OF WORK FROM ISSUE 42 VOLUME TWO, SUMMER 2020

'… God has specially appointed me to this city, so as though it were a large thoroughbred horse which because of its great size is inclined to be lazy and needs the stimulation of some stinging fly…'

—Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates*

A sampler of work from Issue 42 Volume Two Summer 2020

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the stinging fly
NEW WRITERS, NEW WRITING

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How to begin? There seems no point in opening this 'in lieu of' editorial with choice words about the pandemic, the lockdown, the apocalypse for 'normal'. Instead, the facts: our offices are closed and we cannot deliver the summer issue on time this year. Until we are in a position to present you with the physical thing, this PDF sampler offers the opportunity to read some of the work we've selected for publication in what will be the sixtieth edition of the magazine.

In addition to what's here, the full 240-page print issue will feature new work from Max Porter, Wendy Erskine, Thomas Morris, Hugh Fulham McQuillan, Louise Hegarty, Camilla Grudova, Jeff Young, Tim MacGabhann, Manuela Moser, Jonathan Creasy, Kimberley Reyes, another two poems from our featured poet Nidhi Zak/Aria Eipe, and much more besides. So plenty for now, and plenty for later; summer is still a bountiful season!

Now, how to begin again? As I said, it doesn't seem possible to make definitive statements anymore, about the pandemic or anything else, but we can all do that thing we've done for millenia, which is to share our experience. Thus, we asked our contributors to share some of their experiences of and thoughts about the pandemic, and lockdown wherever they are, and so they'll speak for us now in a kind of extended editorial placeholder. If this magazine can be an assembly of voices reflecting the world back upon itself, here they come:

PANDEMIC
NOTES FROM CONTRIBUTORS

Articulating The Atlas

I did this tiny dance in my living room in Berlin on a Sunday in April.

You are invited to explore your own version of it.

Find a comfortable seated position with your feet resting beneath your sitting bones. Notice the space beneath the occipital bone (the ridge at the back of your skull) and the foramen magnum, the hole in the skull where the spinal cord passes, merging with the brain. Here is the atlas, the first vertebra of the spine on which the skull rests, forming the atlanto-occipital joint.

The only task is to articulate tiny movements from this place. Perhaps start by seeing if you can feel the connection between the opening of the foramen magnum and the opening of the bowl of the pelvis, the pubic bone. In my own body I can feel my heels connecting to the top of my femur bones, plotting a line up to the nerve endings of the brain stem. Then I notice how my shoulder girdle feels as though it is sitting awkwardly on the rib cage. I am doing too much, trying to hold my self together. Do less.

I let my desire to find more room around the atlas take me forward into a little ball. There is satisfaction in the contradiction of this position: smallness as safety, connection; smallness as openness, being left utterly exposed.

Here we are, together, now.

—Kathleen Heil

Today, Tomorrow

TODAY: Agitated. Recorded a fairly miserable time on my morning run. I can't remember what I read on the *Irish Times* app on my phone before I got up but whatever's left of it is needling me. Something I saw on Reddit's r/Ireland board last night too, on why people believe conspiracy theories: they assuage insecurities, massage egos and allow for the righteous clarity of victimhood. A bit of this shit going around my extended family. Might ask my closest cousin to check the Facebook account of my most belligerent uncle for mention of 5G masts or how Leo Varadkar wants us all to stay inside and lose our jobs because he's about to usher in George Soros's reign as new world emperor. I don't want to know; another cousin hasn't spoken to me since I called his favourite online hatemonger a steak-poisoned cunt. Can't work with that sort of codswallop bothering me on top of the poor run time and the nursing-home deaths and people having house parties on the sly. Am I a curtain-twitcher now, Father? Can hardly concentrate as it is. Halfway through sentences I'm shrinking the document window to play Mahjong Titans. I haven't finished a book in two weeks, and even then it was a graphic novel. *Sabrina*. All the characters were lumpy, passive. It is still troubling me.

TOMORROW: Positive. I'll record my fastest ever 5k. I won't meet anyone on the road or see any rubbish on the grass verges. I'll bake a cake: polenta with macerated strawberries, espresso and walnut, or treacle baked cheesecake. Sugar rush and look at that, the numbers are down. Dr Holohan will say we're doing it, look lads, that curve is practically horizontal. I'll read something inspirational from a page and not from a screen. I don't need to be a curtain-twitcher because everyone's got the hang of this now. Cop on will literally be common sense. My uncle will laugh warmly and tell me he never believed any of that shite about 5G. Leo Varadkar will declare himself a socialist but a real one, not a Bertie Ahern one. I will write a thousand stunning words and it will become my new normal.

—Lisa McInerney

Isolation

In the centre of Mexico City, just outside the bathrooms of the Museo Nacional de las Culturas (a 16th-century palace that was once the city's mint), a small plaque informs visitors that the partially excavated rooms below formed part of Moctezuma II's famous Casa Denegrida. Now just a few rectangular hollows, the 'blackened house' consisted of a windowless chamber where the emperor would come to meditate. The walls were painted black and the floor was made from dark basalt. It was here that he would ponder a flame in the sky that turned the night-time to day, the boiling of the lake water and the waves that lapped against doors, and six other omens that foresaw the disastrous arrival of the Spaniards with their iron and viruses. This habit would be his downfall. Whenever trouble arrived, Moctezuma self-isolated. If he could only just sit and think, the answers would come.

We were given two days training on how to conduct online classes and on March 19th, the day I turned forty, I gave my first virtual lessons. I teach adolescent boys and girls. In Ireland they'd be called 5th and 6th years. Some of them enjoy my Theory of Knowledge course, some of them do not. Trying to keep them engaged online is a tricky and exhausting business. I get up at 6am and when I log off at 2.30pm I collapse in a heap. My eyes are sore and I think I need glasses. Maybe it's all the screen time. Maybe it's my age.

I'm lucky. Sixty per cent of the workforce here operates in the informal sector. If they don't work, they don't eat. Social distancing started relatively early. It seems to be working. If the numbers are real.

I *have* been reading, but just for an hour or two a day. I've been drinking Sazeracs and Old Fashioneds. Mostly I've been sitting in a blackened room and pondering, thinking of Ireland. But I'm not Moctezuma and this isn't so bad.

Thanks to a bursary award, I was supposed to spend four weeks at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre in July. I don't think that will happen now. I hope I'll still make it to Ireland. What I miss most (besides friends and family) hasn't changed. The mercury-coloured sea and the knowledge that it's close.

On my shelf I keep a tiny jar of sand and shells from Ireland's Eye.

—Dylan Brennan

Pasta On File

I am naturally quite an anxious person, so as the news of the pandemic started to leak into my consciousness I began to buy lots of tins of chickpeas. I warned my friends, my partner and my mother that it was all about to kick off and they laughed at me. We are renovating a house in Donegal and the building work was in full swing when the lockdown was announced. The workmen downed tools, literally, and left to build a unit in a local hospital, leaving equipment and a half-dismantled kitchen. My friend Livia (another writer), who is at least as anxious as me, brought forward her planned trip to visit us with her husband, after receiving terrifying news from Italy to London, where full denial was in place. They arrived the day of Leo Varadkar's first speech and are still here.

The first few weeks were tense; the feeling of not knowing what was ahead was paralysing. I couldn't read or write; often I couldn't even get out of bed. But slowly we began to find a rhythm. We cleared the builders' tools. Arranged areas to write in and established the new kitchen with what we could find in the piles of old furniture in the house. We now have a filing cabinet full of pasta, and a working oven that is hot enough to make pizza in.

The world reduced to the domestic. My partner Dean (whom I met at a *Stinging Fly* launch so we are more in debt to these pages than most) started making sourdough and I planted far too many tomato plants. Spring was late this year and I found myself pacing the garden looking at the closed buds willing them to open. Eventually the Green Alkanet started presenting their blue flowers and I felt like I could relax.

The outside feels very far away now, and many of our dinner conversations have revolved around how lucky we are to be in Ireland. The reaction has been wonderful, something we should be very proud of as a nation. I'm not sure what will happen next, or how long it will take, but I have begun to write again and maybe some reading will happen as well, so I'm looking forward to the future, and proper pints.

—Emily S. Cooper

One Hundred Ways Of Cooking Eggs

My weed ran out, and I went through the usual thoughts—you know this could be good, it would be a worthwhile experiment to go without for a while. I will eat less Tangfastics, drink no Dr Pepper. The days quickly got longer. I kept coming up with the wrong things to google—'Dublin homeless coronavirus' / 'coronavirus Roma Bulgaria' / 'how many ventilators in Malawi' / 'ethnic conflict coronavirus' / 'Orbán'—and everything was bad. In times of stress I reach for a villain. I turned to spitting at my computer every time I saw optimistic or 'inspirational' 'content', angry every time I read an article about how this affects people I deemed less relevant, furious when *The Irish Times* described 'gangs' of teenage boys in the generally empty and fox-governed city centre as 'menacing' for being guilty of the crime of sportswear. My dreams got longer. I was often on boats, boats populated by people I've known and thought I didn't care about, boats heading places I wasn't sure they should head. I became sincere. I sent text messages and emails to people on the edges of my life, blankly hoping that everyone's elderlies were 'safe and well'.

I got a number. I texted the number. I was then sent another number, and I texted that. Three o'clock at the park beside the cathedral. To facilitate a socially distanced transaction, I put the money in a book, *One Hundred Ways of Cooking Eggs* by Alexander Filippini. I let him know the money would be in a book. I let him know I had a beard and would be wearing a black jacket. This was to be the first outing of my spring jacket, and my first time in two weeks going beyond the curb where I leave my green bin. Through Slack, I let my co-workers know I would be taking a 'late lunch'.

That evening, as I suckled on my weed vaporiser like a piglet at sow, it occurred to me that googling the impact of lockdown on densely populated Indian cities did nothing for the people of India and nothing for me. I started listening to weirder music and eating more, talking to my cat like a person, picking up books to place on my lap and rub while I stared at nothing thinking nothing.

—Robin Fuller

What Covid-19 Taught Me

There are many things Covid-19 has taught me; among them, primarily, grief. Grief is not what I imagined it to be. It is not the bone-shaking, relentless watery paroxysm I expected, although it certainly begins that way. It is permafrost, always there, a solid and ice-cold presence lurking beneath a surface which freezes and melts, freezes and melts, but most of the time looks normal. I function. I even smile and laugh, and I am appalled that I can do that. I hate that already I can thaw and uncurl from it; I never knew I could be so hard-hearted.

In lockdown, grief links arms with guilt and resentment. My loved one died in a different country. I couldn't be with her in her last days. I couldn't be with her at her funeral. Her body lies in a box on the back seat of my mother's car, burnt and crushed into ash, waiting. One day soon, we will gather, all of us, and carry out her last wish. But in the meantime, I chafe at the invisible bonds that imprison me, at the policies of 'herd immunity' and enforced DNR which took her against her will; she only said last summer she was not ready to go, that she was waiting for the Queen's telegram. She had most of a decade left.

I used to think outpouring grief was how we honoured our dead, the weeping, the voicing of loss, the poring over old photographs, expensive funerals attended by crowds. I was wrong; that only serves the living. It is the everyday that matters, the little private memories that steal into our thoughts unasked for while washing the dishes, or vacuuming the stairs; the ones that sting our eyes, make us pause and smile. I think of her when I paint my nails; hers were always immaculate, and she painted them herself, right into her final days.

Grief is raw, like toothache; I prod and poke at the pain because it is good pain, and compulsive, the kind that brings pleasure in the hurt, the pleasure of a hundred tiny remembrances. In time, her ashes will be taken up by the wind and blown around the world, and she will be everywhere and nowhere, able to travel freely as we are not.

—Ali Isaac

From The Unreal City

Is *everybody* else out there dreaming like there's no tomorrow?! Here in London (and I know this is true of friends and family elsewhere), dreams have been hyper-real. For me: fabulous, extended journeys. Usually outdoors. Great woodlands, the like of those that must have been here before. Places somehow familiar, more true. Our brains must be doing some serious maintenance. Then, awake in the city, nothing feels real. Can't help but wonder if this is a Capgras delusion. From the doorstep, it looks like our neighbourhood, but we know for sure it's not. So we go back to sleep, or hyper-extend all pleasurable things. Potting on seedlings the other day, I suddenly realised I'd been crumbling compost between my fingers for far longer than was seemly. Black, slow, organic… hands crumbling blocks of the good stuff into tilth, itself a word to savour. The medicine of texture, potential. Scraps and protozoa. Husbandry. Here in the Unreal City, I'm hanging on to the dream of what *could* grow out of this.

—Ruth Wiggins

Regaining Ground

I'm not sure I've learned anything during Covid-19, beyond the knowledge that I am happier left to my own devices, and that my inner reserves are self-serious, hyperactive, and need routine to function. I have asthma, and have been on lockdown for weeks and weeks and weeks. I moved to Glasgow last year after a decade of being crushed by Dublin, and it follows that existing in survival mode for so long means that a pandemic would either kill me immediately, or barely affect me. I have worked very hard to make meaning out of my life, so I am mostly fine, and get upset about small things like getting locked out of my online banking.

If anything it feels like I am relearning things, relearning myself. The need for each single moment to be meaningful has been squeezed out—time must be boring and meaningless and a drag now, and filling time is something I am good at, something I was built for. Time has had so many different forms, from a seemingly endless, miserable adolescence in Westmeath, to completely mutated post-recession in Dublin. It has stopped and started and gripped my body anxiously and terribly and possessively.

Now it is mine to squander. I am rereading *Lord of the Rings*, and *Frankenstein*, and writing short stories about angels and snakes and sex. I am applying for every grant I come across. I am living on Universal Credit and my partner's wage. I go for walks in the parks close to my flat, and look at cherry blossoms and wildflowers and ducks. I've jumbled up my writing routine. I am happy to have a reason to stay inside, but it's been hard to allow myself to work, because it feels ridiculous to be so fortunate, to have so much time after years of not, while everything feels so fucked. It has become clearer that the pressure cooker we are all living in is set to varying degrees; those who are and will be sick, who will be physically affected by this; and those for whom the changes will be intangible, who will have maybe learned how to cook and not crack up being inside for so long.

—Anna Walsh

Western

The guy I like was in the Tesco, at the self-checkout machine, watching me through the window. I was in the queue outside with my ex. If one person came out, I could go in by myself and talk to him. If two people came out, we would have to go in together. The guy I like hung back, waiting for me to come in. No one came out. The nice security guard apologised for the delay.

The sun was unusually hot and shone directly into my eyes. I raised my hand to my forehead to shield them.

'You're touching your face,' said my ex.

'It's the back of my hand,' I said.

'It's the back of my hand you'll be getting,' he said.

We laughed and I rubbed hand sanitiser all over my hands and wrists and went back to watching the door. The guy I like came out and I was allowed in alone.

—Eva Kenny

Penis-centric

Now that I have sold a novel I know a writer must never look at her Goodreads page. I know because, bored and lonely in lockdown, awaiting the imminent launch of my debut in a world without parties or panel discussions, I looked at my Goodreads page and saw a young woman deriding my firstborn for having too many penises in it. This book, she wrote, is *penis-centric*.

Lockdown is a challenge for many reasons and I am a privileged detainee. Without care duties or an especially pressing job, with a laptop and a balcony and a brick of raw cacao I bought on the internet, I am getting along just fine. But being alone and idle creates festering conditions for narcissism. My first mistake was googling my own name; my second was taking the penis thing instantly and devastatingly to heart.

I'm a skeezy pervert, I thought, with a book nobody can love. I'll be nominated for the Bad Sex Awards and it will be like the prom scene with the bucket of blood in *Carrie*.

The first friend I texted in panic asked politely if I'd been under the impression my novel would only get good reviews. Until that moment the answer had been an unqualified Yes, an impulse which testifies now to the sheer indomitability of the human ego. I, a person convinced since Montessori that the other kids hate me, a person who has assumed impossible levels of cosmic responsibility for unfortunate events on the grounds of deserving the karma for some reason, a person already on the dole when the Covid-19 crisis hit, nonetheless robustly believed nothing but validation would come my way in this specific respect.

Absolutely nobody would entertain my complaining about the penis thing, which, they suggested, I was blowing way out of proportion. Because I was. And yet, the condition of being poised on the cusp of a future that is now even more speculative than you'd thought encourages hysteria. Being a vagabond artist is all fun and games until a global pandemic causes the second economic crash of your adult life.

But then I got over it. Because, alone and lonely in lockdown, I had nothing else to do but get over it.

This experience is causing us all to fall back on our resources and our resilience. All struggles have lessons to be taken from them. This week, mine were: books get bad reviews; don't look at your Goodreads page; reconsider the penises. Or just brace for the glorious furnace of public opinion, and grow.

—Niamh Campbell

An Itch

Romanian lockdown. A bad sci-fi film. Police cars patrolling deserted streets, loudspeakers blaring: 'Obey the military decrees! Protect your lives!' Cheap drama—uniformed generals on TV arresting the entire populace. Nobody to leave home even for bread without a full page affidavit. One for each trip. Stupendous fines for infractions. Night-time curfew. The TV news gave the approaching plague a non-stop drumroll. All eyes on the deathometer.

Schools, businesses, parks had closed weeks before. But when I saw the grim, empty streets, I knew a dose of coronavirus was better than this experiment in mass incarceration. My 7-year-old daughter lives with me half the time, half with her mother. So one week I was occupied, the next completely alone. Over the winter I hadn't been doing well. Let's call it that.

I no longer enjoyed solitude, among other things. I had been getting better when the lockdown hit.

It should have been a time for the outdoors and limited socialising with close friends, but it turned out I was alone in that idea.

I don't know what disgusted me more, the radical suspension of civil rights or the way my chickenshit friends consented to do time in their small apartments.

I walked the traffic-free streets, where the air was finally clean. The police never stopped me.

My sources of income evaporated. The military decrees were extended another month.

I developed an itch. It got worse. Scabies, I thought. I sought a dermatologist. I live fairly centrally, but the lockdown made it difficult to access medical help. Studies will be done on how many lives the various national lockdowns cost. Breakdowns, suicides, heart attacks. In the end, I had to take two buses to the edge of the city. The doctor excluded scabies. He asked if my work involved hazardous materials, then about my attitude to life. I left with a prescription for antihistamines and something he said was for my chronic insomnia. When googled, it turned out to be a tricyclic antidepressant.

That was two weeks ago. Meanwhile, it seems the lockdown has been too successful. There are too few cases. And we'll have to stay locked down forever to keep it that way. I speak to people on the phone. Their voices are duller and more tired as the weeks pass. Everybody is broke. I still itch but I take my pills and sleep better. My attitude has improved.

—Philip Ó Ceallaigh

24th April 2020

My life has suddenly become very streamlined. My to-do list is practically empty. There are no plans to organise. No rushing anywhere. No checking bus times. No holidays to book. In a normal week, amidst the flurry of general life admin, there would be trips to cinemas, theatres, restaurants, pubs and now there is nothing. There is so much I cannot do, so I focus instead on what I can do. I work from home. I go on walks when the weather is nice. I organise photographs. My house is spotless. It feels like everything has changed and that things will never be quite the same again.

But people forgot about the 1918 pandemic. At least 23,000 people died in this country and 50 million worldwide, but the memory of all that got lost amidst war and politics and nation-building. Life fell back into a familiar groove. Will this pandemic bring about a fundamental shift in how our lives are shaped? Or will it be viewed as just another chapter in the Brexit/Trump/far-right maelstrom of the past few years? The reason we forget things—even big, important things—is that our brains are focused on comprehending the world around us and not necessarily on remembering it. Our brains' primary goal is not to preserve information but to make good decisions. Right now, things definitely feel different. Things feel changed. But they won't always feel this way. And whatever long-term change may or may not come, any return to normalcy in the near future will involve a certain amount of forgetting on all our parts.

—Louise Hegarty

Having An Abortion In Scotland During The Pandemic

The clinic gave me my abortion kit in a big paper bag, like a takeaway. The day before, I had an hour-long interview by phone instead of an onsite examination because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Inside the kit were painkillers, hormone pills and antibiotics that would temporarily make me allergic to sunlight.

The first pill I needed to take was Mifepristone, which stops the pregnancy. I was so anxious after I took the pill I half convinced myself I hadn't taken it, but had dropped it somewhere on the bed or down my shirt. The next day, at the same time, I took four Misoprostol pills, which expels the pregnancy. The instructions said I could either stick the pills in my vulva, or under my tongue for thirty minutes until they dissolved. I chose under my tongue. I sat in bed with my mouth shut, the pills turning chalky, and was glad I was alone because I couldn't talk back to anyone.

For the first ten minutes I was watching videos of Isabella Rossellini feed her ducks on Instagram, thinking I can handle this. Ten minutes after that I was writhing and shivering in pain, vomiting all over my bed. The pain came along like a large hand sweeping everything off the table set with all my problems: my little teacups of unrequited crushes; the bowl of complex feelings for the guy who knocked me up; the plates displaying various financial anxieties, writing ideas, daydreams that I had picked idly at with a fork. I kept fantasising about an old-fashioned cowboy with a gun coming into my bedroom and shooting me in the head.

My phone, which I had been giving updates to my mom and my friends on, was knocked off the bed when I tried to remove the vomit-covered duvet. The phone was useless now, nothing more than a pink square with a zebra on it. I was alone. Even my cat had run to hide in another part of the flat.

The pregnancy slid out of me like a jellyfish. I screamed a lot, and the pain was over.

I felt a brief euphoria. I got half-dressed and went into the backyard of my building, putting out food for the stray cat Pasolini who lived under the shed. Soon the pain came back, and I took more painkillers, falling asleep in my vomit- and blood-smelling room using a wool jumper as a blanket.

—Camilla Grudova

Liverpool, Spring 2020

In Liverpool, the Mersey holds her breath;
the River Explorer tethered at the Pier Head,
all of the docks—Stanley, Wapping, Albert—
are hushed for weeks, and in the Walker Gallery,
Beatrice is laid out, *Dante's Dream* interrupted,
Shelley's funeral pyre arrested mid-flame,
and Maurice Greiffenhagen's lovers are bound
together the way we were, but mustn't be now.
No more great gulps of sea air, rushing hand
in hand over Queen's Square from Lime Street
to sit knee to knee in Brasco sharing tapas.
The Liver clock chimes only for key workers
or risktakers, and, separated, we're holding
our breath, a lifesaving pause, we hope.

—Maria Isakova Bennett

My Invincible Summer

> *'The age is characterized by a need to testify. Everywhere in the world women and men are rising up to tell their stories out of the now commonly held belief that one's own life signifies.'*
>
> —Vivian Gornick

i

The night that the nation is set to slide into lockdown, in the month of Chaitra, third day of the lunar new year, under the mark of the moon hare, I fall into the headlong limbs of love.

ii

It happens somewhere between nine and half past eleven, at the first hint of curfew, I will touch his knee, tell him to stay. Later, we will marvel at this moment, surefiresign, steering the tired heart true.

iii

Ask: do you think this would have all played out the same should we have met in *other* circumstances? There is no need to say normal when clearly/nearly nothing is. Yes, we decide, yes, we agree, yes—we wouldn't change a thing.

iv

Through the upper sash window of his Georgian redbrick, he taps the long ash out on tiptoe. I watch his forehead furrow, the lithe line of his back, his cough burrow deeper. Smoker's cough, not dry, he assures me, when I whisper the telltale symptom. He will start to quit soon anyway.

v

He buys a blue velvet sofa. I crave comfort from an oven-blush pizza. We watch television, which I never do myself. In my home, it's different—we make things: breakfast, love, promises. There is a future, we know, we that are young—one that looks different and never better.

vi

We exist in a miracle of geography and destiny within one another's allotted radius
We orbit our small portion of the city together as though we have never lived apart
We appraise houses for sale we try to conceive a child we dream
We are the new cartographers mapping out this novel territory dodging bodies of sickness are bodies of light
We live in/out this fantasy *know this love—*

We wouldn't change a thing.

—Nidhi Zak/Aria Eipe

View From The Roof, Tacubaya

Lately I've been spending a lot of time on our roof. Because I can't get phone-signal here, I can't check the news, so it's easy to pretend things are normal. Planes keep whooshing low overhead. Trucks keep beeping. Ambulances keep whining down Avenida Jalisco.

But then there's the view. In Mexico City, no matter where you look, you'll see traces of catastrophe. Our neighbourhood's no different. Among the boxy improvised houses with their hopeful juts of rebar, you'll see old haciendas and villas. The parched grey streets sloping down from Parque Lira, they used to run with water. Our nearest market's called El Chorrito because a torrent used to flow past there, under a green hood of laurel leaves. Ruinous drainage projects did away with all that. Now the city's soil is so dried out that sinkholes open up and gulp down cars, quesadilla-stalls, houses. We turn taps attached to pipes that lose thousands of gallons of water per second. Our city hasn't long to live.

People joke that ours has been a post-apocalyptic city since 1519, but, when the Aztecs settled here, and quarried tezontle for their temples, they used an igneous rock supply formed when the Xitle volcano erupted and destroyed the city of Cuicuilco in the first century AD. One ruined city is built on another. The present one doesn't look much better. Disaster is our Mass in Ordinary Time.

Not far from our house, in Parque Chapultepec, you'll find these empty Prehispanic cisterns. One day I went there with an archaeologist friend. Light spilled down, white and dry. Behind the cisterns, underground, my friend said, a team had discovered a villa ruined by an earthquake.

'Not much is left,' he said. 'Just this fountain, bone-white, and stone corbels spattered with red lichen, and carved all over, mostly by provincial workers fleeing drought or war or whatever, and taking shelter in the wreckage, writing names, dates of arrival—1857, 1891, 1910—or drawing stick-outlines of trees—mesquite, casmarina, guanacaste—with Nahuatl and Chichimeca and Mixtec names underneath, every mark in the stone basically saying, 'I was here. I made it.'

From the medical oxygen warehouse next door, Pedro and Lalo, the father and son who work there, and who moonlight as lucha libre wrestlers, slam themselves against the punch-bag hung up in the central yard. The chain jingles. Downstairs, my partner's niece sounds out the letters in her textbook. A frayed tangle of cables converges at the gable end of our house. When the wind's up, the pole shakes, and every light on the street flickers. A chain of long black ants with golden legs is making its way across the wire, from all the way across the street.

—Tim MacGabhann

The Enigma Of The Bend

Aude
Translated from the French by Cristy Stiles

It seemed to me that in some past life I had already experienced this exact situation. I even recalled that the first time, this feeling of déjà-vu had also been grafted onto the actual course of events. Once more I turned her hand gently in mine to create that slight shimmer on her mother-of-pearl fingernails. I stroked one of them gently with the tip of my right index finger. I asked her if she had already said these words, in circumstances different from these but so identical that if you meticulously cut out the scene we were currently enacting, its outlines would coincide exactly with the other one. But I was not only unable to pin down when it had happened, I doubted its very existence. She said no. I insisted. She said no. She withdrew her hand and buttoned the top of her thin knitted shirt, which she was wearing for the first time because we had only bought it the previous day, but my memory had recorded it long before, as if by some power of clairvoyance that came into play only after our ecstatic couplings. Elsa brushed her fingertips over my cheek, then left the room. I drew the wide-toothed comb through my hair and brought it close to my face so I could feel its faint static pull. The air must have been dry. I put down the comb and went back downstairs to join the others.

As soon as I appeared, M offered me a drink, which I took and brought to my lips without taking my eyes off him, waiting endlessly for his face to thaw. I drank slowly to give him enough time but when I put the empty glass back into his hands, his face was still frozen. My gaze followed the tip of his nose, crossed his forehead, and stopped right at his hairline, where, if I picked with my fingernail, something would lift that I'd only have to peel off a little more before I could tug both sides at once to remove the mask that grew back over

and over like snakeskin. But I didn't lift my hand and I left him in the belly of the boa. Just to the right of his ear, but in the background, Elsa entered my field of vision without knowing it. M grew blurry. I didn't open my mouth, I didn't even make any movements that would spread my scent around the room like a message, but Elsa still turned abruptly towards me. The lips of the man facing her kept moving. Hers stretched until that sharp stop when the dimple on the left side of her mouth, slightly swollen, couldn't be hollowed out any further. M exited my field of vision. Someone came between Elsa and me and I had to refocus my perspective. He gave me a drink. I didn't know him but I quickly scrutinised his hairline. I didn't see anything. He must have been cut from a different cloth, unless he just had a subtler knowledge of the art of concealment. Foreseeing this possibility, I withdrew deep inside myself and waited patiently for him to come to me, leaving enough distance between us for the dug-out trap I knew he would inevitably fall into, like the others, before he even came close enough to feel my breath. The drink had already been given. There was no doubt that feverish excitement would follow, imperceptibly at first, like the movements of a mouth forming a smile, as if that were a required preparatory exercise for the articulation of those stereotypical words he would say without the least surprise or unease. Then there would be the inevitable pause provoked by the presence of cigarettes between us, at the end of his arm, which nothing could have predicted, because his attention was seemingly elsewhere, but which would nevertheless be there, waiting for my fingers to approach and create the first contact between us, via this intermediary at first, probably to avoid the possibility of too violent a shock. But I'd do what I always did, I was never going to make the expected movement, and my hand would stay resting on my thigh as my interlocutor insisted and leaned even closer to me, teetering on the edge of the trap that, to my astonishment, stayed empty because the man in front of me did and said nothing. Elsa was in my field of vision again, but I hadn't perceived any movement in the scene, where her motionless face, far behind the man's face, had no dimple now. Her expression bothered me. I prepared to down my drink and turn around, but through the ice cubes and the thick layer of glass at the bottom an unexpected change occurred on the man's face, which I was suddenly sure I had seen before,

or at least had expected. I lowered the glass but the mutation remained. He was smiling now, barely, but smiling, his head bent down a little as if to watch me in the bottom of the trap that he too had dug between us and that I hadn't sniffed out in time. The glass slipped out of my hand. When it hit the floor, it shattered. That grenade having created a diversion, I slipped away and headed towards the exit.

When I got to the apartment, I dawdled a little, then I went to the kitchen. I made loose-leaf tea, for the smell since I don't drink it, and for the teapot too, the Chinese one with its ceramic white sugar riverbanks and its dragons. The cat rubbed against my ankles and then curled up on the chequered floor. I went to sit on the patio and wait for what I still wasn't entirely sure would happen. The tea gradually cooled off and, as always, the porcelain sugar didn't melt. I was waiting for a car; he was on foot, which would explain why he was late, although he hadn't specified a time, or any meeting at all. In fact, he had done absolutely nothing; he hadn't said a single word to me. He was going slowly down the main alley between the two buildings in the complex. At the bend, with Building 1 on the right and Building 2 on the left, he stopped for a moment, then retraced his steps, following the same even rhythm. He went past the wall and I lost sight of him. I was confused for a moment, but I found him again a few seconds later when the telephone rang, and I could see him, as I had every other time, in all his weakness, hesitating in the face of what he had to do, taking detours and precautions, his ear pressed against the receiver in that phone booth, which he must have stepped into even though he didn't want to talk to me, since even while waiting for me to pick up, he was probably clamping his lips shut so they wouldn't open automatically at the sound of my voice, which he just wanted to hear, not only to make sure I was there, but especially to have the advantage over me of already knowing my voice. So I answered but didn't say a word, which was useless, because it was Elsa. That bothered me and I hung up. I returned to the patio, careful to seem unhurried, aware that he'd inevitably come back. He must have been sitting on a bench now—because he wasn't in the main driveway or at the bend—just waiting for me to make a sudden movement, to glance worriedly towards the driveway or the park, proving to him that, in effect, I was waiting anxiously for him, just like he wanted. I put on my

sunglasses to hide the direction of my gaze even though I knew perfectly well, because I had bought them for that purpose, that the blue of their lenses emphasised the appearance and direction of my eyes more than it camouflaged them. Then I opened a magazine and started to read an article about a rape in the courtyard of an apartment complex surrounded by stone walls, inside of which, however, not a single man could be seen surveilling me. Maybe he had simply abandoned his plan or then again, maybe he was trapped in the impossible enigma of the bend; that is, whether I lived to the left or the right. So, I stood up to have a more complete view of the courtyard, but this movement made the magazine slide off my lap. As if pulled by an invisible thread, it tumbled onto the cement patio, up to the edge and then over it, starting its long fall down. With my head suspended in the void above the railing, I was dragged into the trap in turn, where he waited for me at the bottom yet again. He had already taken his clothes off and was lying beside the pool with only his swimsuit on, looking at me as I was still leaning over, although the magazine had completed its ten-storey trajectory. Now he'd get up and walk over to get the magazine and bring it back to me, perfectly innocently, talking about chance and the apartment that he had just rented there too, which would explain why I felt I had already met him. But to my surprise, he remained lying down, and I had to take a step back and raise my head, where blood was rushing too violently, clouding my vision. I went back inside and brought the teapot back to the kitchen, where I poured myself some lemonade and added a few drops of rum. The doorbell rang, and at the door there was a little boy whom the man in the green swimsuit had asked to return my magazine. I said there had been a mistake and that it wasn't mine. I added that even if it had been, it would have been untrue to believe that it had slipped from my hands out of neglect and that on the contrary, I would simply have been getting rid of it, since I'd finished reading the only article likely to interest me because it talked about those situations you think you've already experienced in some long-ago past, when what's really going on is that you're immediately recognising the present situation at the very instant it's turning into the past. I closed the door and went to my bedroom, from which, without even having to crack open the blinds, I could see him, his eyes closed now, maybe waiting for a

response from the little boy, even though he hadn't asked me any questions, or requested a message that would make him stand and come up here. Even though I didn't take my eyes off him and I didn't notice a change at the moment it must have occurred, his eyes were open now, and his face was tilted slightly to the right, towards the little boy, who was standing a few paces away, but the child had his back turned to him, and was talking to a man in a green swimsuit. The boy left, handing the magazine to the man, who glanced up towards my balcony before turning to his left where the man in the red swimsuit (not green as I'd previously thought) starting talking to him, probably telling him that the magazine didn't fall from my balcony but from his, next door. The man in the green swimsuit held the magazine out to him. He took it and immediately opened it to a specific page with such confidence that I was certain he was intimately familiar with (and maybe was the author of) the article on Greece, specifically the island of Mytilene, originally called Lesbos. I thought he wanted to intimidate me, so I decided to just walk out onto the terrace, first passing through the kitchen and adding a few ice cubes to the lemonade I'd left there. While I was doing this, he must have changed seats, because now he was sitting upright in a lawn chair, probably so he could write in the magazine more comfortably, although it had neither a quiz nor a crossword. I was surprised that I hadn't immediately noticed that he had put his quilted canvas blazer and green pants back on. He was writing without stopping (unless his pauses coincided with the brief moments when, for the sake of caution, I looked away) and he seemed to be writing without taking heed of the text that was already there. He must have been writing between its lines, unless he had slipped a blank page into the article and he was using the magazine only to support it. After he snapped the magazine shut, however, he didn't pull anything out of it. He got up and left the walled pool enclosure to head slowly towards one of the paths leading to the bend, where he stopped to throw away the magazine he'd been writing in so painstakingly for more than thirty minutes. Then he turned his face towards my apartment building, but since his head didn't noticeably shift in elevation and his glasses didn't show the direction of his gaze (perhaps he'd bought them for that purpose), I had no way of knowing whether he was checking to see if I'd witnessed his movements. I suddenly had the

feeling I'd been unwittingly made part of a game or scenario in which I played a central role but about which I knew nothing except that I absolutely had to make contact with or flee from this man, who from the very beginning had kept his distance so that I didn't know whether he was approaching or moving away from me. Elsa's car went down the main alley, then she took the left fork, into the bend where the man had disappeared without my being able to tell which way he'd gone. He must not have gone towards the pool, nor towards any of the benches, because I didn't see him there. Elsa pulled over, got out of the car, and looked up at me through her rose-coloured glasses, which she had selected to better stupefy her adversaries, like Medusa. She didn't remove them when she entered the apartment this time, trying naively to turn me, too, into stone. I only had to touch the nape of her neck with my fingertips to knock the joker right out of her deck, the joker walking with one arm bent at his hip and the other dangling at his thigh, weighted down by the spectre lurking at its extremity: his own head bobbing up and down, disguised as a hatmaker's dummy. He certainly couldn't have come to this place by chance and with the simple aim of throwing out the thing he'd already spent quite some time writing. As my hands touched her, Elsa softened gradually, and I could re-form her mouth, making it smaller and more closed this time, which left me with a little extra modelling clay in the palm of my hand, which I shaped into a glass, filled with lemonade, rum, and ice, and handed to her. While she drank, I went back to the patio. The paths were still empty. Elsa asked if I was waiting for someone. That bothered me. I responded, monosyllabically, probably yes, or then again no; anyway, it was just a single note, which mattered little because she reacted to the intonation and not the word, draining her glass and slamming the door behind her. When after a few moments she exited the building and went towards the parking lot, her entrance into my field of vision made me jump in the same way I would have if it was he who had appeared at the entrance of the complex. Even though it had only lasted a few seconds, the permutation that had taken place between them, and that made me react to one as I should only have reacted to the other, was so complete that I was certain it hadn't happened inside me but inside them, by some strange phenomenon of transference. The car had gotten past the

stone wall of the main path leading to the bend, where there was, in a trash bin, a magazine that only I knew contained esoteric signs, or coded messages, or at the very least annotations to the article I hadn't read but should have, because it discussed mandrakes and amulets. I took a step back and let the sliding door shut, then closed the thin bluish-purple curtains, despite the time of day and the heat. I was exasperated. I poured myself another drink. Without having to utter a single word, without even requiring his presence, he had succeeded in monopolising my attention to such a point that, in the end, I believed he had—perhaps taking advantage of the moment when I had watched Elsa to the right of his face a little bit behind him, or even in the brief instant when I had looked at him through the thick lens at the bottom of the glass I was finishing drinking—grafted an entire remote-control operating system onto me, which he could not only use to control my actions however he wanted, but also to be a hidden witness to them. Since I couldn't get rid of this pull, I decided to immerse myself fully in it, but without fighting it this time, and I went downstairs and walked out to the bin and plunged my whole arm into it to remove the magazine. Inside, on page thirty-one, written not between the lines but above the article on Mytilene, was my name, in black ink, repeated countless times, calligraphed with an artistry that only Egyptian hieroglyphs possessed. I headed towards the car and returned to their private exhibition.

I saw him from the threshold of the door, as if he hadn't budged in all these hours, motionless in the same spot, holding the glass I thought I had broken, or another. I went up to him and asked him if it was true that he was an aquatint engraver. He said no. I asked him what he was. He said something but didn't enunciate enough. I asked him to repeat. I still didn't understand. With the tips of my fingers, I reached into his jacket and from his inside pocket removed a drawing pen whose reservoir must have contained Chinese or cuttlefish ink. Then I opened the magazine and asked him to write the word I'd just made him repeat. He took the pen and started to scratch the paper, leaving fine traces of black ink in the creases, formed into tiny overlapping and interwoven leaves, curlicues, and flowers ornately crafted out of precious metals. Once he was done, I took the magazine and raised it in front of the light source, which, when

I isolated the page, allowed me to read, like a watermark, through the overwhelming mass of details, my name. I lowered the magazine and let it fall to the ground. I said I was thirsty. Without taking his eyes off me, he raised his arm and snapped his fingers. They brought me something to drink. I raised the glass to my mouth. He said he had been waiting for me. I lowered the glass without having drunk. After a few moments, I told him I knew, and that was why I'd come back. I asked him right away if it was a bet, a challenge, or just chance. He said that to others it was a bet, to him a challenge, to me chance. It wasn't until then that I noticed that they were watching us through the interplay of mirrors and glass. Elsa arrived in a frenzy and came so close to me her mouth practically touched my ear. She whispered that she needed to talk to me. I said out loud that it wasn't worth it because I already knew this man was only here for revenge, not his own but others'. They were here, hidden behind a few pointless pleasantries, waiting for the moment when this man was going to break my neck, which had resisted them until today, and they'd feel almost as if they'd broken it themselves, too. Through this Heracles, they'd get their payback. I headed towards the door. In the palm of my hand was the fistful of masks I'd just snatched off of them in one fell swoop. Those masks were melting in my hand now, regenerating bit by bit upon their flayed faces.

It was hot outside despite the sinking sun. I headed towards the apartment. Passing by the bend, I had the impression that another message had been hidden for me in the trash bin. I didn't stop, however, convinced that he wouldn't have had the time to come back here, because I'd just left him at the private exhibition. I went up to the apartment, first to change, then to turn on some lights and open the curtains a crack before going back down to the courtyard where I started to look for the bench that would give me the best vantage point, while still being hidden enough to reverse our roles. I'd been waiting fruitlessly for almost two hours when suddenly, but more forcefully this time, the feeling returned that there was a new message for me in the bend. I got up and started to walk slowly, towards the marina at first, to let him think I wasn't looking for anything, then towards the tennis court, passing by the bend. But I couldn't keep myself from stopping there when I saw the magazine. Its cover, which I hadn't noticed before, showed a woman whose neck was encircled by a metal hoop with an onyx cameo,

a double profile of an Amazon suspended from it. I leaned down to pluck the magazine from the bottom of the bin for the second time. Inside it, on page thirty-one, this time between the lines and in the margins, black-ink calligraphy stretched into a long text accompanied by a map. The starting point indicated was this bin, where he could only have placed this message during the few minutes when I went upstairs and turned on the lights to conceal my departure. I went back to the apartment to look for my bag. Inside it, aside from my papers and keys, there was a little ivory-handled knife. Then I went back down to begin the car chase. It lasted more than two hours and led me to the designated point, where it was written that I would have to follow on foot for about twenty minutes.

I got out of the car to check my surroundings. In the direction they had indicated, there was no road and no houses were in sight. Although from the start I had harboured no illusions about the nature of the meeting, the choice of this locale was an unpleasant surprise. The darkness would soon be total and there were far too many trees. Everything was going to be much too impenetrable. I went back to the car, thinking I'd retrace my steps, but I noticed that the keys weren't on the dashboard anymore, where I thought I'd left them. I rifled through my bag; I looked under the seat and went back to the edge of the woods. I completed this cycle three times, each time in vain. It bothered me. I took the spare key out of my bag and was about to start the ignition when there was a long shriek, of a bird or a woman. I froze in place and waited motionlessly for the rest, but nothing came. It was only then that I realised how surprised I was that Elsa hadn't followed me after the scene at M's house. I carefully put the spare key in the pocket of my blouse and took the little knife from my bag and the flashlight from under the seat. Then I got out of the car. The map showed a straight path but I didn't see it at first and I had to go in and walk around the undergrowth a little before I found it. After about five minutes, the path ended without any warning, with neither a house nor a clearing, just a place where the line on the map split. I had to turn on my flashlight because from this spot on, my route would be indicated by red blazes on the trees. The first few that I saw were made from paint that was still wet and shiny, and I had no trouble seeing them. But after about ten minutes, the markings changed, not just their shade but also their

reflectivity, as if my flashlight's beam was diffused, not reflected, by red. I approached a tree and discovered that it wasn't daubed with paint, but something thinner and clearer that I would have mistaken for hair dye if it hadn't been odourless. With my finger, I touched the still-dripping liquid. It was only when I brought it to my mouth that I realised it was blood. I was seized with such terror that I stayed rooted in place, unable to banish my horrifying visions of Elsa's pallid corpse split open from her pubic bone to her throat, like the eviscerated rams whose blood we had collected to smear on our doorposts. Once these images dissipated, I decided to retrace my steps while there was still time. I hadn't realised, however, that when I turned around to go the other way, the marks on the trees wouldn't be visible, which meant I'd have to take a few steps then turn around to verify my direction before continuing at random towards another sign, then another, until the moment when I couldn't find any more and tried to go back to the last one I'd seen but which I couldn't see any more than I could see any of the others. There was a noise not far from me. When I swept the area with my light and saw nothing there, I was seized with panic and started to run straight ahead, holding tighter and tighter onto the little ivory-handled knife, whose delicate scrimshaw pattern must have been imprinted in my palm. After a few moments, however, I had to stop because the air that had rushed into my mouth had dried out my mucous membranes, to the point that I couldn't breathe any more without tearing my throat. I let myself sink down the side of a tree and I turned off the flashlight and closed my eyes. Gradually, saliva came back to moisten my mouth and let me breathe in and out more easily. I tried to filter the sticky air by putting my half-spread fingers in front of my lips. With my other hand, still holding the little knife, I clutched my trembling knees in front of me, unable to will them into my control. Ever since I had begun this back-and-forth with the man whose face had attached itself to my eye through the lens of a glass, I'd been certain that such an adventure could only end in his victory, which, however, paradoxically and in spite of everything, would also be my own, because for too long already I'd been waiting, without admitting it, for the day when a man from elsewhere would arrive by force and look for that tenderness in me that no man before had known to find. But now, in this wood with bloody trees, letting him win was out

of the question. I got up and, without turning on my flashlight, I started to walk, not making even the smallest sound, despite my knees, which trembled more and more. There must have been a path somewhere I could follow to the first house, where there would be people in rocking chairs on the veranda, no matter how late it was, since their bedrooms were hot as ovens and there wasn't the slightest breeze. Little by little, a few to my left, a few to my right, the crunching of leaves and branches forced me into one particular direction so consistently that I suddenly realised I was the prey in a great hunt driving me to the clearing that must be the site of the shadowy meeting I now wanted to escape at any price. But I barely had time to gather any momentum before I was struck down by a swarm of transmigrated vultures in human form. My knife rose and fell against them over and over until I could get back up and restart the frantic race that led me to the earthen path, where I let myself fall flat on the ground. Blood rushed to my temples as if gigantic floodgates had been opened within me and I felt like my heart was rising to my mouth, soon to burst out and dangle from its own viscera. It took me an enormous amount of time to right myself, alien to everything that had so overwhelmed me and preoccupied with nothing but my stretched-out body. Inside it I moved quickly to quiet the balls rolling all around my veins, my belly, my throat, keeping me from breathing and from swallowing the saliva that didn't come but that I insisted on swallowing anyway, purely reflexively.

When my body's rhythm was bearable again, an immense slackening occurred inside me, leaving me empty of all emotion. I stood and began to walk up to the house where the people rocking indicated to me—very reluctantly, because I still had the little ivory-handled knife in my fist, stained with blood just like my hands and my clothes—the path I should follow to get back to the point shown on the map, where the car ought to be. From afar, on the road, I saw that one of the car's doors was open and that someone was sitting inside it. I let myself slide into a ditch and started to crawl slowly forward on my stomach until I was close enough to see that the body on the seat was inert, its head flung back, with something dangling off it that must have been hair. Worried I'd fall into some new trap, I approached very slowly, brandishing the little knife, no longer able to close my fingers tightly on its handle, which mattered little because it

was Elsa, her right breast torn off or burned. Around her neck, she was wearing her thin metal hoop with an onyx cameo dangling off it, engraved with a double profile of an Amazon. I closed the car door and immediately went to sit in the driver's seat. On the dashboard, the keys had reappeared. I started the ignition and sped off. At the hospital, Elsa left the treatment room conscious but already numbed by a strong medication. They took her to her room and there was nothing left for me to do but leave.

My apartment window was the only one with light in it at this hour. Approaching it down the long corridor, I looked for the key on my chain. It wasn't there. That explained the key ring's disappearance at the edge of the woods. I approached the door and listened. There was no sound. I turned the doorknob and pushed softly on the door, which wasn't locked from the inside. I stepped in and saw him right away, sitting calmly and drinking some lemonade spiked with rum. He seemed to be alone and I entered, closing the door behind me. He asked if I had had a nice trip. I didn't answer. I was looking for a trace of blood on his skin or clothing. He wasn't wearing his quilted canvas blazer or his green pants (maybe he had stained them with wet paint). I asked him to leave. He didn't react, so I asked him multiple times what he wanted from me. He didn't answer. I decided to act as if he weren't there at all. I went to my room and got clean clothes, then shut myself in the bathroom. I took a shower, careful to leave the curtain halfway open so I wouldn't be taken by surprise if he tried to enter, which he didn't do. When I came back to the living room, he seemed not to have moved but his glass was full again. Once more I begged him to leave. He didn't respond and continued to wet his lips in his glass. Then I remarked that he had on his finger a ring with an onyx signet bearing two profiles of Heracles. He must have noticed me looking because he said that M and the others wore identical ones now. I responded that I had never seen anything like it on their fingers. He replied that, as for him, even though he had never noticed me wearing something like it, he knew that, hidden away in a little rosewood box, I possessed a metal hoop with an onyx cameo that… Without giving him time to continue, I said I had never denied it. I asked him to explain what had just happened in the forest. He stayed silent for a few minutes, then responded that it had been one of their initiation rites. I responded that in that case it was better that he didn't

believe everyone had come out a winner, unscathed by the challenge. He started to laugh and responded that the scars left by a fine blade were just stars on a man's face and body. I asked him why, then, the initiation rite didn't consist of a reciprocal mutilation. He smiled as he said that this couldn't be a part of the rules of their game, since a woman's hand had never participated in it. I said that a game you accessed by making others pay the entry fee was nothing but a game for cowards. His eyes hardened and his laugh disappeared into his glass. He asked me to remember my own initiation rites as well as Elsa's. I responded that we hadn't mutilated anyone in order to earn the onyx medallion. He said that there were more serious mutilations than bodily ones, and dirtier too, because they're done insidiously. He started talking about M. Then little by little, his voice softened until he told me, finding his smile again, that soon, soon, at any rate, we'd be even. He started wetting his lips in his glass again while his 'soons' drilled minuscule craters the size of bullets into my head. Beneath the weight of my fatigue and this new tension, my knees started trembling again. I decided to go to the kitchen to pour myself some lemonade. Even though I turned the lights on when I entered, I didn't notice anything at first. It was only when I turned towards the Chinese cabinet to take a glass out of it that I saw my cat through the window, hanging from a rope, her white stomach split from top to bottom, her heart and entrails hanging. Without a sound, I returned to the living room's doorway and, with a sharp flick of my wrist, stabbed the little scrimshaw-handled knife into the man's throat. To make a star. His eyes, the eyes of a fictional character, grew glassy. Now we were even.

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Aude is the pseudonym of Claudette Charbonneau-Tissot, a French-Canadian author and professor. Born in Quebec in 1947, she began writing and publishing as a doctoral student at the University of Laval in the 1970s. She taught French language and literature until her untimely death in 2012, in addition to publishing fifteen works in French, only two of which have been translated into English. Her novel *Cet imperceptible mouvement* was awarded the Governor-General's Award for French-language fiction in 1997.

Cristy Stiles is a French-English translator based in Los Angeles. Her translations of previously untranslated short stories by Aude from her first collection, *Contes pour hydrocéphales adultes*, have appeared in *Two Lines* and *The Lifted Brow*.

As I said I am

I spent 262,800 hours assembling every pixel
of that image you see on screen.
87,600 hours on that which you can't see, but sense.
The codec that defines me.

That was the hardest part.
To think: what do I want to think,
how do I want to come across,
how do I want to sketch out
my self.

Everything that is on the reverse of the image.
Everything that, we know, doesn't matter.

175,000 hours it took me to craft what will speak for me
even if I fall silent.

I dedicate 4 hours every day
to feeding that image of myself on the screen.
Once I export the final version of the design,
I devote my time to maintaining it.
Not going outside, not speaking for too long.

I don't want them to discover that
I
am not as me
as I said I am.

Celia Parra

Translated from the Galician by Patrick Loughnane

Celia Parra, a Galician poet, is the author of two collections: *Pantallas* (Galaxia, 2018) and *No berce das mareas* (Fervenza, 2009). Her work has been included in several anthologies of Galician contemporary poetry, and published in magazines such as *Shearsman*, *sèrieAlfa*, *Dorna* and *Luzes*.

Patrick Loughnane is a poet and translator from Galway. His translations have most recently appeared in *Asymptote*, on headstuff.org, and in the anthology *Wretched Strangers* (Boiler House Press, 2018). He lives in Galicia.

Chinese Whispers

Robin Fuller

No one in the University College Dublin Jazz Society knows that they are in the University College Dublin Jazz Society. They know only that they are building revolution. Each member knows only two others—the person who recruited them, and the person who they recruited. This network returns information to the central committee (me), which rules in accordance with Presidente Gonzalo's principle of Jefatura (Great Leadership). To build true Democratic Centralism we must for now remain cellular. This method of organisation is not perfect; even I do not know the precise number of members.

Our current operation is to infiltrate and seize control of (and then either re-educate or liquidate) the various LARPing Maoist factions spilling from the UCD campus, including The Revolutionary Communist Party of Dalkey (Marxist-Leninist-Maoist), Revolutionary Action in Exceptional Times (Gonzaloite), and Principally Maoism (Marxist-Leninist-Maoist). While these emos make 'Maoism' a hobby—denouncing one another on Twitter, stealing and burning the Trots' newspapers, erecting dead rats on sticks outside the doors of rival factions (a specialty of the Gonzaloites), and generally renaming schoolyard bullying as 'Struggle'—our clandestine organisation is poised to build a Mass Line deep into the Gaeltachts. The only alliances the other idiots are forming are with graphic designers and lads selling yokes at Happy's on Francis Street.

The University College Dublin Jazz Society was officially disbanded eighteen months ago, following bitter ideological struggle. The debates that had surrounded a proposal to host a Benny Goodman tribute concert had

exposed the contradictions inherent in the organisation, and had radicalised many, or more accurately, had made radical 'chic'. But for an advanced minority, the events provoked in us a genuine class consciousness. Our faction got ourselves into a position where we could split the Jazz Society and take the majority with us to form a UCD Jazz Society (MLM). But rigorous application of Chairman Mao's principles of Self-Criticism helped us realise the foolishness of this idea. All that would happen would be talk of revolution on campus and talk of careers in parents' homes. Did Saloth Sâr spend the sixties walking around in a Stalin t-shirt, posting dank Maoist memes on Twitter under his own name like today's campus fantasists? Of course not. So we publicly dismantled the Society and went underground.

My public retreat from political engagement was entirely believable. I came across as one of those self-deluding liberals with an academic interest in Marxism; the type whose chief political act is to throw a vote to whatever puppet parliamentary party the Trots have going at election time. I even went so far as to engage in middle-class causes, such as the closure of a local bourgeois farmers' market and the need for reverse-flow cycle lanes. I created a plausible persona for my deep studies of Lenin, Stalin, Hoxha, Mao and Guzmán—I was interested in the 'history of ideas'.

So far, the various Maoist groups have done little apart from squabble amongst themselves. Nevertheless, they pose a potential threat—if united and better organised they could discredit the name of Mao in the minds of the masses. Further, it is obvious what path these sons and daughters of solicitors, doctors and high-ranking civil servants will ultimately take. What little revolutionary potential they have will be redirected towards revisionism—to the cul de sac of People Before Profit, or all the way to the reactionary Greens. We must take action.

We have infiltrated the groupings. Reports arrive to me—never written—through our network, which I collate and interpret, transcribe on twenty by forty-five-millimetre pages, and then secrete in an anal capsule. One can never be sure of the original source of the information, nor to what extent it has mutated in the chain of Chinese whispers.

***

Saturday, 13 Prairial, CCXXVII. The Revolutionary Party of Dalkey held a stall on Manor Street, in attempt to raise money for Love and Spoons:

a Stoneybatter coffee shop that had been firebombed by the Gonzaloite group, Revolutionary Action in Extraordinary Times. The Gonzaloites correctly hold that gentrification is class war. However, this does not stop them from also, in effect, chasing the proletariat from Dublins Seven and Eight to Balbriggan, Laytown and Drogheda, to be replaced by gourmet vegan sausage rolls—they hold their meetings in a 'yoga space' above a coffee shop on Meath Street. To the chagrin of the Gonzaloites, the fire appeared to be an accident and their statement to the media was ignored as crankery (their Facebook post of said statement, up for over a month now, has received one like, no comments and no shares). Our agents informed us that the Gonzaloites planned to attack the Dalkeyists' stand with improvised pepper spray (ingredients: scotch bonnets and Drumshanbo gin). However, before they arrived, the Dalkeyists fled a group of working-class eight-year-old boys who had terrified them by knocking several flyers off their stand and calling them 'saps'.

*

Friday, 19 Prairial, CCXXVII. Principally Maoism is a not an organisation, she is an individual. She has yet to be engaged with, or directly observed by the central committee, but we know this: she is a Californian on a 'digital humanities' post doc. To her disappointment, her research exclusively involves scanning accounting documents from the archive of Constance Markievicz, applying optical character recognition software, and then making corrections manually through reference to the originals. Principally Maoism's only known action to date has been to transcribe sections from *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (chapter 31, 'Women') in Sharpie on the doors of toilets, signed 'Principally Maoism (MLM)'. We seem to be the only people to have noticed, having rumbled her through fortuitous constipation.

*

Sunday, 21 Prairial, CCXXVII. The Dalkeyists have hung a banner on a crane on Upper Clanbrassil Street, protesting the closure of a pub's beer garden. It reads, 'Fight the Power'. This is the second such action. Back in Floréal, they drew body outlines all over the ground of a near-derelict market square, in response to the closure of a 'vintage' market.

There is no denying the middle classes' profound ability to mobilise each other through performative radicalism. A market too unprofitable to

afford to keep running, a pub that blasts techno at families in council flats around the clock: 'campaigns' to 'save' these 'spaces' activate the students. The mercantile hobbies of KPMG accountants' children—attempts to milk money from cheap property in working-class areas—are described as 'creative communities' vulnerable to nefarious capital.

We must go beyond established Maoist principles. Maoism is a science, but largely a descriptive one. It teaches us how revolution is built, through analysis of what is happening and what has come before, so that we can build a possible better world. But can it always guide us when we take the path of the unanticipated? Pre-emptive cultural revolution is required. Look at the Nepalese! The Maoists took control, but failed to liquidate the comprador bourgeoisie and the feudal classes; and so revolution was halted and the old class structure was reasserted.

The yoke-guzzling, thumb-scrolling, kale-munching twat-herd that calls itself the Dublin left is not the Kuomintang—they have no guns. We cannot make strategic alliances with them to build revolution. The path must be cleared.

*

Thursday, 25 Prairial, CCXXVII. Troubling report received. 'Our Unity Org has secured a truce between the Gonzaloites and Dalkeyists.' What is a 'Unity Org'? I am failing at Jefatura—our cellular organisation is sloppy. A purge seems in order, but for all I know any face I pass on the street could be a lapsing comrade.

*

Sunday, 28 Prairial, CCXXVII. The forces of reaction appear strong—are they really just paper tigers? Today an organisation known as Dublin Cyclist Action, aided by a young Labour councillor, who on his social media profiles describes himself as a 'vintage hound', successfully blocked all traffic on Drury and Fade Streets (or 'Dublin's Creative Quarter' as they called it) from six in the morning until nine in the evening. Can you imagine those who call themselves Maoists in Dublin having the organisation and support to pull this off? Simon Coveney showed up, played vollies with the kids (plum-mouthed and plaintive Oscars, Oisíns, Lilys and Rubys), and proceeded to be face-painted as Spider-Man. The Gardaí were seen handing out Cornettos!

Of course, the ever-acquiescent Trots joined in—a few of them showed up, handed out flyers on 'the left solution to the environmental crisis', and attempted to flog a few papers. The Gonzaloites arrived, dressed hood-to-boot in black with faces masked by red bandanas, on a mission to intervene. In the fancy-dressed and face-painted festivities they inadvertently blended right in, and their rugby-tackling of the Trots went unnoticed.

Later, in an Instagram story, they recounted the day, from arrival, to tackle, to burning the Trots' papers in a dumpster. The story has yet to be liked.

*

Wednesday, 1 Messidor, CCXXVII. We are now in the month of Messidor. The Dalkeyists' and Gonzaloites' attempts at collaboration have been set back. They met in a karaoke room at the back of a Korean restaurant on Parnell Street. The meeting was seemingly brokered by a shadowy 'Build Committee'—who are they? Six people in total attended; it is likely that at least two of these were our agents. The agenda was building the Mass Line—going to the people, engaging in their struggles, interpreting them through Maoist Science, and building solidarity and revolutionary class consciousness. The Dalkeyists suggested going to Goatstown and educating the masses with 'workshops' on fermenting kimchi and separating plastics for recycling. Recycling is a bourgeois hobby, a self-flagellation with which to ornament the self, like yoga or brown rice. When something to this effect was pointed out by the Gonzaloites, the leader of the Dalkeyists began weeping and asked, 'But what about the poor fish?'

*

Friday, 10 Messidor, CCXXVII. It has been confirmed that the leader of the Revolutionary Communist Party of Dalkey (henceforth codenamed Comrade Feliciano) is in fact from Killiney. He is conducting PhD research on the poetry of Talib Kweli Greene. His father holds a senior position at Grant Thornton and his mother is a Portuguese-born artist of no merit, collected and valued considerably—and only—in Ireland. Being half-Portuguese, Comrade Feliciano describes himself as a Person of Colour.

His first appearance in the political arena was not Maoist in orientation. In the vague revolutionary foment that permeated UCD in the months following the Benny Goodman crisis, he was that sort of opportunistic

ideological drifter, looking for something to be angry about. Only four months ago, in early Ventôse, he was inspired by TED Talks and 'DIY culture' to host an evening of talks in an Anarchist-run 'space' on a laneway off Dominick Street. He didn't even realise he was citing Lenin when he named the event, *What Is To Be Done?* Topics included, 'Sustainable Fashion', 'Fostering a Creative City', and, inevitably, 'Make Dublin Bike Friendly'. An *Irish Times* journalist was seen in attendance.

This event provoked the Gonzaloites' first public action. They decorated the entrance to the event with dead rats impaled on two-metre sticks—a symbolic gesture to intimidate the enemies of proletarian revolution. However, for the exclusively middle-class audience, this act was easily explained away as the doings of the ever-present bogey men: *scumbags*.

*

Thursday, 23 Messidor, CCXXVII. Presenting my front bourgeois persona (dressed in a navy, wooden-buttoned 'shacket'), I attended a meeting at a Dublin Seven Educate Together primary school organised by a local young Green councillor on the subject of 'dog fouling' in the area. It was the usual wearisome affair, the ostensible topic often lost in meanders towards vague notions such as 'sustainability' and 'community', nothing achieved other than an unearned feeling of satisfaction.

I noticed a woman sitting cross-armed growing increasingly red-faced. Eventually she stood up, declared the entire assembly to be 'bourgeois running dogs' and left. An American accent—this could only be Principally Maoism. I was impressed and intrigued.

*

Saturday, 2 Thermidor, CCXXVII. One must admire the zeal of the Gonzaloites—however misguided their praxis, they are entirely committed to the Maoist cause and are unafraid of illegal operations. Yet they do not build—they focus only on antagonism. This is unsurprising given their leadership (who we will call Comrade Míriam)—a committed political woman hailing from Iona Road in Glasnevin, and a central figure in the Benny Goodman crisis. She was raised by a single mother (a leading organiser at SIPTU as it happens) in a four-storey Victorian redbrick. The fact that these red bricks are on the northside renders her the closest thing to a working-class person among the UCD Maoists.

She is radically opposed to Benny Goodman and can sing along in perfect synchrony to every note and squawk Albert Ayler plays on *Ghosts*. During one of the many nights-long Goodman debates, she pelted one of the Kautskyite wing of the Jazz Society in the eye with an orange for calling her a 'knacker'.

*

Sunday, 10 Thermidor, CCXXVII. I had breakfast this morning in a recently opened café, One Cup on Cork Street. When I went to the toilet, I left my book—*With Stalin: Memoirs from my Meetings with Stalin* by Enver Hoxha—on the table. When I returned, in absolute violation of all protocols, I found a pencil-written letter tucked into the first page of chapter five, as well as a wobbly graphite underline on Hoxha's words, 'If Albania is strong internally it has no danger from abroad.'

The letter read as follows: 'The subject is under duress, depressed and erratic, and not without reason. The subject's emotional well-being is of little importance; our only moral obligation is towards revolution. That is why I question my mission. It is not in our interest to have an unstable leader of this organisation.' I duly committed the letter to memory and ate it.

Today, the tenth of Thermidor, is the anniversary of the death of Robespierre and with him the death of French revolutionary zeal. Today, we too are threatened by the forces of reaction. We lack discipline and we lack intelligence. Who left me this letter and what does it mean? Among our ranks we must always be watchful for Liberalism. As Mao himself wrote back in Fructidor of CXLV, 'Liberal pursuit of unprincipled peace leads to decadent, degenerate, counter-revolutionary politics.' We must be willing to purge the counter-revolutionary in our organisation and ourselves, if we are to take the shining path.

The presence of One Cup in Dublin Eight is an act of class warfare. And there I dined with my book (can you imagine a more despicable sight than my baring an image of Hoxha's glorious face in that cesspit of centrism?) so that I could enjoy an overpriced and poorly-conceived breakfast of peanut butter and avocado on toast. This is Liberalism. I will return tomorrow and deploy several glass stinkbombs—less as Direct Action than as Self-Criticism. O Koba, guide us.

*

Saturday, 16 Thermidor, CCXXVII. We have just learned of relations between Comrades Feliciano and Míriam. They were spotted together at an outdoor Wes Anderson retrospective in Smithfield Square. Míriam was seen stroking the head of a weeping Feliciano, seemingly moved by a George Clooney-voiced fox reassuring his young cub.

We now know that they live together, in an apartment owned by Feliciano's father, directly above a gentrifying restaurant on Benburb Street. We are not sure what to do with this information: will unification of the Dalkeyists and Gonzaloites make them easier to eradicate in one swoop? Or are we better off provoking them into destroying each other? We must not be hasty, but we must not vacillate. Our intelligence tells us that their relationship is not stable. This evening, at the launch of a 'street art' exhibition, agents heard Feliciano describe their relationship as under strain because of Míriam's refusal to concede that their (undeniably straight) relationship was also somehow outside the 'dominant hegemonic cisgender paradigm'.

*

Saturday, 23 Thermidor, CCXXVII. The Dalkeyists have established what they refer to as a 'Mass Organisation'. Ten days ago, on Wednesday, 13 Thermidor, every door in Portobello received a letterpress flyer, with fluorescent ink on recycled paper reading:

KEEP PORTOBELLO TIDY!
JOIN THE MASS ACTION!
2PM BANK HOLIDAY MONDAY
MEET AT PORTOBELLO HARBOUR
LET'S GET THIS PLACE SPIC'N'SPAN!
TAKE BACK OUR COMMUNITY!

On Monday 'the people' punctually showed up in their hundreds (the Facebook profile of *KEEP PORTOBELLO TIDY!*—2,388 followers—claims as many as 600 attended). They picked up litter, swept, and washed every street and alleyway until eight o'clock. Following this there was a 'community party' on Lennox Street, at which a pretty, young, Portobello-

based Dalkeyist gave a speech on how Maoism means 'empowering local communities' and 'protecting and cherishing our planet'.

Admittedly, and bizarrely, they have been in a sense successful. *The Little Red Book* has been seen peeping from back pockets throughout Portobello, and a Peruvian food truck parked at the harbour is the latest fad.

*

Monday, Fructidor 2, CCXXVII. Today I learnt of the Facebook page for a Dublin-based 'Committee to Build a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist Party'. Mysterious. Their analysis is ideologically correct at all times, guided by Maoist Science. Some examples: at home, they reject electorialism and denounce the collaborationist parliamentarian Trot TDs; internationally, they support the DPRK's right to self-defence against yanKKKee imperialism; and online, they scour for revisionism from 'left' posters, in order to respond with the truth of Stalin's achievements. This is highly suspicious—no one in the Dublin Maoist milieu, apart from our Society, is as ideologically advanced as this. Is this a psyop?

*

Friday, 6 Fructidor. CCXXVII. Our agent(s?) (somehow?) observed a one-on-one Struggle Session between Feliciano and Míriam. Míriam attacked Feliciano on grounds of Class Collaborationism. He argued (I believe this to be close to verbatim): 'Following the words of Lenin and Mao, we cast our nets as wide as possible and organise all who can be organised. Forget your moralism. We need to win over the people of Portobello too. If we don't the fascists will be victorious.' Comrade Míriam keeled over in stitches. Reports are contradictory as to what happened next. Feliciano either fell to his knees weeping, clutching Míriam's legs and declaring his undying love. Or he nobly denounced Míriam for Commandism and ideological purity over revolutionary pragmatism.

*

Sunday, 8 Fructidor, CCXXVII. Digital surveillance (Twitter) gave me reason to believe that Principally Maoism might be at a 'hip hop brunch' in a recently gentrified Smithfield pub. I was interested in observing and possibly approaching this potential comrade.

Four disappointing hours of a nursed Smithwicks and ear-busting boombap later, and still no sign. But then I spotted Comrade Feliciano, his

shirt open to his hairless navel, with a group of what looked like 'creatives'. They were shouting and swaying, voguing and gurning at phone cameras, seemingly on a roll-over based on the caked white goop at the corners of their mouths. I positioned myself to eavesdrop.

I could not quite make out what he was saying. He was fluctuating between celebratory 'woohoos', and morose whines. I tried to move closer and he spotted me. 'I remember you,' he said. 'You sellout. You think you're so radical, hiding behind your books.' He slapped my copy of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* from my hand, soaked me with Aperol Spritz and called me a 'reactionary'. He then immediately started crying, and said, 'I'm so sorry.'

As Feliciano was taken weeping to the bathroom by a consoling friend, I had the opportunity to seize his phone from the table and, guessing the unlock swipe (an anti-clockwise tour of 3, 2, 1, 4, 7, 8, 9, 6) I opened his Facebook app to discover it logged-in to the profile of the Committee for Building a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist Party. There I could see, undisguised, that the co-moderator was Comrade Míriam. Our organisation is imperfect, but we would never allow such lapses in security. I put the phone down and left.

I headed up Church Street to the Luas tracks, which shone golden in the Fructidor sun. I decided to take a pilgrimage on the Red Line, from Four Courts to Fatima and beyond, to trace the chase of the proletariat from the city centre by the series of conquering hordes—art galleries, coffee shops, whiskey tours and student accommodation. Before we reached Heuston, traffic lights parked us outside a bar named The Castro, from which could be heard the thudding promised by the 'Smithfield Digital Radio Back to School Weekender' window posters. Inside I spotted Comrade Míriam in discussion with Principally Maoism, the sun reflecting off Míriam's orthodontically-perfected smile.

I aborted my journey; I was now on a mission. Inside The Castro everyone was drunk, dancing, and on cocaine. I have an ability to recede in these environments. Everyone ignores me; I become invisible. I found a vantage point behind a fluttering curtain of dancers. I couldn't hear what they were saying of course, but I could see: Míriam was doing a routine of effusive laughter and head throws, punctuated with warm smiles and

strokes of Principally Maoism's forearm. Principally Maoism remained stony, unmoving.

But then she raised her arm out straight and pointed through the dancers, directly at me. Míriam turned and, for a moment, there we three stood, arguably the most ideologically advanced revolutionaries in the country, looking at each other, frozen, not knowing what to do. I legged it.

*

Monday, 8 Fructidor, CCXXVII. Things are not going according to plan. Today I received a report about myself. Of course, only I know it is about me, because only I know that I am me. Nevertheless, agents report that my (civilian me's) behaviour is suspicious. He (I) has been spotted, several times, spying on activists and revolutionaries. My own comrades are now planning to monitor me, in order to send the central committee (me) an exhaustive report. They are sure by my physique and gait that I could not possibly be Special Branch. So, they fear something darker—COINTELPRO. If I squash this operation I risk arousing suspicion; but if they are successful… then what?

I feel cornered. I have an overwhelming desire to reach out to Principally Maoism. Surrounded as I am by fantasists playing at fanaticism, I see in her the potential for a true comrade in arms. But if I associate with her, do I risk putting her in the very same danger I fear I may be in?

***

Vertu, CCXXVIII. It is over a year since the above reports were originally compiled. Shortly after that time we were once again forced to dissolve the organisation. We should have known better. Cellular organisation is an essentially anarchist idea, the sort loved by seventies Germany hippies with a propensity for lobbing bombs at supermarkets and shooting cops. Not dishonourable activities, but without a disciplined party behind them they cannot lead to true revolution. When I put the edict out to exterminate all members of the Dalkeyists and Gonzaloites who were not also agents of the Jazz Society, there was no one to exterminate. It turned out that all these childish Maoist activists had in fact been the spoiled fruits of our Society's misspent labour, mutations formed through poor organisation.

We must purge the jazz in ourselves. Go to a Newpark Jazz College

graduate's concert and what do you hear? Meandering, disorganised, discordant, and dislocated abstract noise. Go to a trad session in Hughes and what do you hear? Everyone playing the same melody, in unison, over and over again. This time we will need to build a mass base *en masse*. It will be slow, but then that's why it's called *Protracted* Peoples' War. I have joined with Principally Maoism—we are very much in love, and have fled to the Connemara Gaeltacht. We are struggling to learn the native language, in order to better deliver the Good News about Mao to the true vanguard class of Ireland. DEATH TO THE MIDDLE CLASSES! PÁIRTÍ CUMANNACH NA PEIRIÚ ABÚ!

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The Word & The Kiss Are Born From The Same Body Part

Ali Isaac

SYNDROME

March 2008. We are sitting in the geneticist's office in the Children's Hospital in Crumlin. We have come for test results, for answers, are strung tight as guitar strings. Carys is sitting on Conor's lap; she is nearly two and a half years old, but she looks like a six-month-old. She should be walking, but she's not. She should be talking, but she's not. She sits in the halo of Conor's arms, eyes the colour of water, dark ringlets of hair that would be the envy of any Irish dancer, her little body bloated by steroids, just one component of the chemical elixir of life that sustains her. Beside me are our two boys; Mal, four, is pushing two toy cars along the arms and back of the chair he should be sitting in, while Cai, six, is battling Pokémon on his Game Boy. The geneticist wanted to see the whole family together. I wonder if his eagle eye is pinpointing the faulty gene in all of us.

In the early days following Carys's birth, the discussion around her condition fractured into multiple possibilities without resolution. Everyone had an opinion: Noonan syndrome, one doctor suggested when she was only two days old, pointing out the long list of her defects. I turned over the leaflet he left us with, one small sheet of paper, the sum of our knowledge. I would later find out that Carys's syndrome is often mistaken for Noonan, as they share the same genetic pathway. PHACE syndrome, possibly? Turner, said another, or maybe Costello? But that's over two years ago, and since then all thought of syndrome identity has been driven from our minds as we struggle just to cope with Carys's ever-expanding repertoire of abnormalities and developmental delays. There are things you can see—the angry red

haemangioma which claimed her forehead and grew so big it threatened to blind her; the seizures which jerk her body as if she is possessed; the facial features which mark her as different, like the lack of eyebrows, no bridge to her nose, the low-set tilted ears, drooping eyes—and there are those you can't see: the low level of cortisol that complicates every minor childhood disease; the sensory processing disorder; the messed-up messaging service between brain and body that prevents perfectly workable limbs from functioning; the hypertrophic cardiomyopathy that will one day stop her heart and prematurely end her life.

'It doesn't change anything,' the geneticist warns, picking up the report that lies on his desk. 'It's just a label, just words.'

It's not that we want to label our daughter. We know that syndromes are genetic conditions that can't be unpicked and rewoven into a more favourable design. Carys will still have all the same disorders which will continue to be treated in the same way with the same drugs and therapies; the physio, incorporated into daily play, that will one day get her from sitting to crawling to walking, the messy play that will desensitise her hands and mouth, the deep massage that may lead to hair washing that's free of screaming, the eye-gaze training that may lead to meaningful communication. Her life, our lives, will not be transformed because this thing which shapes her suddenly acquires a name. There is no cure to be found. It simply is, and life goes on. But still, we need to know.

Because having a diagnosis makes a difference in a way the geneticist fails to comprehend. It means you find your tribe: other children with the same condition, and their parents and siblings. A whole new genetic family you never knew existed. A community, marginal in the context of wider society, but where you and your child are unconditionally accepted and understood, where you can rant and let off steam, give and receive comfort, learn from other parents, and generally share in the ups and downs of raising our unique children. This new 'family' may be distributed around the world, but that doesn't matter; technology makes us neighbours.

The geneticist passes the paper to me. It flutters in my hand, a poorly photo-copied document from the Children's University Hospital in Manchester, England. He is still talking, but his voice recedes as I scan the page, my eyes fastening on these words halfway down, in bold:

This result confirms a diagnosis of CFC syndrome in Carys Walker.

The print blurs as my eyes fill. I fluctuate rapidly between elation and despair, back and forth, back and forth. I am sucking in air as if I have just run a marathon. We have a diagnosis! But what does it mean? I have no idea. I blink, and a series of numbers and letters swim into view: a heterozygous mutation c.1406.A (p.Gly469Glu) in exon 11 of the BRAF gene is the cause of Carys's condition. My mind stumbles over this unfamiliar equation which sums up my daughter's body: flesh and blood reduced now to maths, a series of unintelligible numbers and letters, stark in black and white, a formula that explains what but not why or how, set out in precise, minute detail that can't be argued with. It is official. It is final. It is definite. CFC. Cardiofaciocutaneous syndrome. We now know… but it is all we know.

Today, in 2020, the rare diseases website says this: CFC is a 'disorder that affects many parts of the body, particularly the heart, face, skin and hair. People with this condition also have developmental delay and intellectual disability, usually ranging from moderate to severe.' It goes on to list 120 symptoms, many of which Carys has. But in 2008, in the days following Carys's diagnosis, such information is not available. Google does, however, introduce me to CFC International. Scrolling through a gallery of photos reveals dozens of cute children who look just like Carys, and it strikes me: these children are happy, enjoying their lives. Knowing your syndrome is a beginning, not an ending. The website gives me articles written by parents that bring tears flooding; they could be describing my life, my child. I realise I'm not alone anymore, existing on the periphery of society with my mysterious daughter. There are others out there just like us. An email to one of the founding members of the group in the US brings a response as soon as time differences allow, bearing words of kindness, welcome and hope. I register Carys and join the parents' Facebook page. This is our new beginning. Carys has a syndrome, and now we know its name. We know what it looks like, and how varied it can be. There will never be a cure. It is something we have to learn to live with, and accept. It is as much a part of our family as Carys is herself.

ENLIGHTENMENT

October 2018. I am sitting in a crowded lecture hall. I am struggling to breathe, struggling to stem the tide of my grief, before it breaches the containment of my skin and washes into the public domain. My grief is a

personal thing; I only allow it to surface when there are no witnesses. Like in the car; the car is a good place to cry. I've only been caught out once, and that was by a friend whose two-year-old child had died from a rare leukaemia. I had just dropped my boys at school; Carys was in her car seat, we were still in the car park. It came suddenly, without warning, a storm of grief, and I couldn't drive because I could barely see; all I could do was let it come, and pass. And then, the tap at the window, the lowering of glass, the struggle for composure, and eye contact. She understood immediately, before I even said a word. I cry in the car, too, she said.

Being a student allows me to be someone else, someone not defined by the state of motherhood, by the shape of my body, or societal expectations. University is my sanctuary. I sit in cafés between lectures with fellow students, and we talk about Federici, Foucault, Zemon Davis, Ladurie, or the latest essay we are working on. At uni, there is neither space nor time for grief. The persona of student I adopt is the dam that holds back the flood; this acquiring of knowledge builds a wall around me and makes me feel strong, more than just mother. But now, in this lecture hall, the student has cracked open, crumbled by a weight of words, revealing the fragile mess of motherhood I really am. I could get up and leave, but then I'd have to turn my back on the stage and face the three hundred faces of my fellow students. I'm not sure I'm strong enough to show them the spectacle of my grief. Nor do I want to miss what else is being said.

Because the woman on stage is talking about bodies and borders, queer bodies and ableism, biopolitics and neurodiversity, the monster and the disabled. There are words pouring from her throat that I have never heard of but which resonate with such clear and relevant meaning: the 'crip stare', 'disabled by association', 'other', 'abject'. They are words which explain my lived experience. I don't want to hear them, these parcels of sound which convey the sum of my life with Carys, but I can't tear myself away. I'm reminded of another lecturer standing on that stage, a young man discussing Althusser's theory of structuralist Marxism. 'Meaning given to words is arbitrary and relationary,' he'd said. 'There is no inherent connection between a word and what it designates.'

I didn't really understand then, but now, in connection with the example of my life with Carys and the light that is shining out of a Disability Studies

lecture, I am beginning to. Words are just sounds without the ideology we create for them, and that can be changed, extended, distorted at will. There is a boulder in my throat no amount of gulping will shift. I want to leave before I start sobbing, sounds which clearly express meaning across boundaries of language and culture without the need for words, but I am pinned in my seat by the twin fears of missing something important, and drawing attention to my weakness as I flee.

CRIP STARE

Strangers are good at spotting what my loving eyes have grown blind to. As a shy person, I don't do well under the spotlight; it suits me that as I age, I am slowly turning invisible. The disabled may be collectively shunted into the shadows of institutions where they cannot be seen, but their difference is a brightly burning beacon; the disabled person out and about in society can never be anonymous, or invisible, no matter how much they might wish it. Carys has always drawn the public gaze, even as a baby, innocent and unaware, asleep in her buggy. I watch people recoil from her as if her appearance is in some way offensive. In disability studies, this gaze is known as 'the crip stare'. Starers don't want to look, perhaps out of embarrassment or shame, but they can't look away. This is the fascination we all have for the abject. Think of bodily fluids as an example of something which is abject: menstrual blood, sweat, spit, snot, urine, faeces, mother's milk… they are all produced by our bodies and yet the vast majority of us are disgusted by them. We feed mother's milk to our babies, yet how many of us are willing to taste it? In the same way, Carys has been produced by a human body, yet is rejected by the starer as an abject object. The eyes of the starer then travel to me, up and down me actually, seeking the answer or the cause in the mother's body; they are making me disabled by my association with a disabled person. They see that I am watching them staring at Carys and me, and they look away. Often, it's just embarrassment; most people don't mean to be rude or hurtful. But sometimes, that look away is dismissal, denial, rejection.

It is down to the disabled person, or their carer, lover, friend, whomever they are with, to find a way to manage the staring. For me, it has been a long and difficult process; my fierce protection of my daughter, my sense

of outrage on her behalf, the unfairness of it all, would fire me up with overwhelming feelings of anger. It made me vengeful and confrontational; I'd return a stare with a challenging stare of my own, words forming on my lips such as 'Got a problem?', 'Never seen a disabled person before?', 'Don't you know it's rude to stare?' but I never gave in to those urges because I wanted to raise awareness, not barriers. It's impossible not to see the staring, but I have learned to view it from a vantage point of detachment. As long as Carys lives and breathes and moves in public spaces, she is going to be a focal point. I don't want my body to become a well of fury and resentment.

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Father's Day, 2019. Conor and I take Carys out for cake. She loves cake, but especially carrot cake. As Conor parks the car, I hold Carys's hand and we meander slowly towards the café; she can walk a little now, with support, and it is a huge achievement, and a wonderful freedom not to have to bring a wheelchair. This simple thing, this act of walking beside my daughter, not behind her wheelchair, of holding her hand as she walks, not the wheelchair handles, this mundane, everyday thing that we have worked so hard for, fills me with joy. The sun is shining, the car park is not busy. A woman and three children walk around us. The mother pretends she doesn't see us, no friendly 'Good morning!' The children unconsciously slow their pace and stare, the two youngest turning away when they realise I have noticed. The oldest, a girl probably about thirteen, the same age as Carys, moves her eyes to me and does not disengage. I smile to try to show her there is nothing threatening about us; she does not smile back, but continues to stare. Her intensity surprises me; the young are usually curious, not hostile, when they encounter Carys. They gravitate towards her with serious faces, and are open to simple explanations before their embarrassed parents whisk them away and spoil the opportunity to nurture acceptance. But this girl has clearly never been taught that staring is anti-social, and is not corrected by her mother this time. It may be a minor incident, but to go out of our front door is to experience any number of repeats throughout the day, every day, for the entirety of Carys's life. I can only take so much; after a while, it gets tiresome.

In her book, *Staring: How We Look*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson cites the works of artists Doug Auld and Chris Rush, which challenge viewers to 'go

ahead and stare' without recrimination or guilt. Auld painted the melted faces of burns victims and exhibited the series entitled *State of Grace* in 2005. His intention was to enable viewers to freely stare at his representations of these distorted faces and through doing so come to recognise our shared humanity and fellowship. Similarly, Rush's drawings feature close-up portraits of adults and children with disabilities; his collection was exhibited in Brooklyn in 2006. Carys was not even a year old then, the full extent of her condition yet to be revealed. It is twelve years later that I come across these images, yet even viewed from a screen their impact is not diminished. The subjects' eyes seem to gaze back into mine with openness and honesty; there are no barriers, no defences. The initial shock is a collision of the blemished with the unsullied.

The work of both artists is rendered with empathy and dignity, and the message is clear: stare as much as you like, and you will not fail to see these people are as human as you and I. Their intention is laudable, but I can't help wondering whether these exhibitions genuinely change viewers' perceptions, or whether they merely stir feelings of pity. Do they reinforce the disfigured and disabled as spectacle for the public gaze, and enforce the right to stare?

In their collaborative essay, 'What her Body Taught (Or, Teaching About and With a Disability): A Conversation,' Garland-Thomson discusses such questions with Brenda Brueggemann and Georgina Kleege, each of them disabled and professors of English. Brueggemann makes the point that being accepted into mainstream society has its risks for disabled people. She refers to disabled models in high fashion, claiming that whilst it is certainly a positive move, it also means that 'disabled people are being commodified, fetishised, conformed and exploited in advertising, too'. If modelling in high fashion empowers some disabled individuals, it must surely be a good thing. But putting imperfect bodies centre-stage in an unscrupulous industry founded on unrealistic concepts of idealised, able-bodied beauty can also be read as titillation bordering on the carnivalesque, rather than promoting genuine acceptance. The emphasis is unbalanced, focussed on the body, not the person.

It's ironic that I came to university to escape disability, and found myself in a disabilities studies class. I came here to study English, to read books

and to write essays, to lose myself in pretty patterns of words on a page, in the rhythm and rhyme of poetry. I came to escape my reality. But the study of English has broadened to include contemporary literary theory, new important texts and ideas that scrutinise the human experience. Suddenly, the two worlds I inhabit have collided. New concepts have entered my consciousness, new words I never knew I needed.

RETARD

Sparked by words uttered by a woman at a university lectern, my mind is racing, jumping back and forth between memories, straddling time differences, driving one experience into the next: my younger self is sitting in a café just off the main road in Skerries. It is almost empty, because the morning is still new. I am meeting a friend after dropping the boys at playschool. My body is still raw from childbirth, my emotions even more so. Going into a café with Carys is a big deal. The sun is shining in through the large bay window, highlighting the honey tones of the wooden floor and gleaming off polished chrome. The rich smell of coffee swirls through the air as the hiss of steam foams milk for my cappuccino. A single pink carnation pops in a glass on the table between my friend and I. It looks real. It would all be so perfect, were it not for the baby crying. My baby. Carys is propped on my lap; despite endless visits to hospital and an ever-increasing team of medical specialists, she is still a mystery to us all. She cries and cries, and I can't stop her, and I don't know why or what to do.

There are only a handful of customers in the café. Other mothers sip their coffee, oblivious; the great and varied cacophony of childhood is simply the soundtrack to their daily lives. But to those who have forgotten, or have never raised children, the grating sound of a child who will not stop crying is anathema. I intercept irritated looks and meaningful exchanged glances. In a similar episode some years in the future, a woman will approach me and say, 'Will you not *do* something for the poor child?' before walking away sadly. Back in Skerries, I am caught between a stubborn determination to enjoy a thing so mundane as a cup of coffee made for me in a café and an overwhelming desire to be anywhere but here.

And then the matter is taken out of my hands.

'She's RETARDED,' my friend announces to the café loudly.

I am stunned.

The R-word, said of my daughter, hangs in the air between us like a solid entity.

Carys… a Retard. I must be naïve; I have never considered her in such terms.

It's just a word. But words encode a variety of social meanings which can morph way beyond the boundaries of their original intention. If words weren't important, scholars wouldn't spend so much time arguing over them. We wouldn't have debates over 'political correctness'. We wouldn't have to amend the Oxford English Dictionary every year.

So I resort to the Oxford English Dictionary online, and find that the definition for the word 'retard' is: 'Delay or hold back in terms of progress or development… A person who has a mental disability (often used as a general term of abuse).' Like other abusive terms, this one is a word hijacked from its original meaning and used as a weapon against the disabled: an abuse of language, and of person.

Sometimes, words are uttered with the intention of bringing solace, comments that I know are well-meaning, but which break my heart all the same. Words of wisdom like, 'Special children are only given to special parents.' The reality is that all our children are special. Carys is not made more special by means of her disability. She is as special to me as each of my two boys. As for me and Conor, we are as ordinary and average as most other parents. We struggle with the responsibilities of parenting, make mistakes, love our children, and do the best we can, just like everyone else. Calling that out as in some way special only highlights our inadequacies, reminds us that what we are doing is different, that our daughter is different. And that is ostracising, not accepting.

It is dangerous to use words like 'special', and here's why. One day, when my oldest son was about five years old, I picked him up from Montessori. He sat in the back seat of the car, strangely quiet. Usually, he was full of chat about his day. Then his lip began to tremble, and the story burst out of him in a tumble of words and tears: there was a disabled girl in his class and that day she had hit him and pulled his hair and his teacher said it was because she was special like his little sister Carys. For a second, I found myself inside his vision of a future with a disabled sister whose bad

behaviour was accepted and never dealt with because she was 'special'. I pulled the car into the kerb, and sat beside him in the back till he calmed down. How to explain this to a five-year-old? I did not want him growing up to fear and dislike anyone with a disability. All children are special, I told him; and we will all teach Carys not to be naughty and not to hurt others. But sometimes, children like Carys don't understand that hitting and pulling hair hurts, so we have to be kind and patient, and not be angry with them. And because he was a beautiful, innocent, forgiving five-year-old, he accepted this, and felt better. What we tell our children, and each other, matters.

When people say to me, 'We're praying for a cure,' I just smile and say, 'Thank you.' I want to say how useless prayer is, that if there is a God, he chose to make Carys this way and is therefore guilty of child abuse and should be punished in whatever way gods are punished. I want to tell them that Carys's condition is genetic, affecting every single cell of her body; there is no cure. But I bite these words back and swallow them, where they fester.

Possibly the most shocking comment I have ever received is this one: 'What a blessing to have a disabled child.'

It is no blessing to watch your child suffer and be unable to protect her, to know she can never have a normal life, to watch people recoil from her because she is different, to know that she will probably die before I do. What kind of a blessing is that?

Topping the charts, though: 'I don't know how you do it; I couldn't.'

Do what, exactly? I never thought I could 'do it' either, but I didn't have a choice. I can't help but wonder if these comments bring comfort to the giver rather than the receiver.

When I posted these experiences on the CFC Facebook page, I was astonished by the responses, which came in faster than I could type replies.

'I was told, *She'll grow out of it*. Hello! She has a genetic disorder!'

'My family tell me to treat him normal and he'll *be* normal.'

'Yes, my family says my boy is special needs because I let him be like that, that I'm looking for a label. They say he'd progress if I stopped babying him.'

'I was told, *He looks like he hates his life*. Actually, he's more laid back and happy than my *typical* child.'

'Someone once said to me, *All you can do is love him like your other kid and hope for the best*, which really upset me. Why the heck wouldn't I love him like my other kid?'

'Someone said to me my child was born with special needs because of the IVF treatment.'

'I was told, *She will run one day, and then you'll wish she couldn't*. Um, I don't think so!'

'A relative once said to me, *Take more photos in case he dies*.'

'Your child is a gift from God.' (Many people had been told this.)

'I was told to pray, and Jesus will heal her and make her normal again.'

'Someone said to me that God had made a mistake, that my child should never have been born alive.'

'God needs to know that a gift is a bottle of wine or a holiday, not a child with disabilities. It's hard, isolating, exhausting, upsetting, pushes people to their limits.'

My heart sank reading these comments, but strangely, there was also solidarity. These words we had been given had created more upset and outrage than comfort. We were shocked, reading each other's experiences, but the sharing drew us together, creating a buffer against future words to come.

Back in that Skerries café, in the awkward silence which follows, I wait for an apology which doesn't come. Our eyes slide past each other, and we can't seem to find any common ground. We drink our coffee, and leave, our friendship eroded by a single word that revealed how very different our values are, a word which becomes a barrier between us we can't tear down.

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NON-VERBAL

Technically, Carys is non-verbal. She is also non-mobile, and dis-abled. In almost every aspect of her life, she is defined by words which express that which she is not. This peculiarity is not found anywhere else in society. Other minority groups are defined by who they are: black, gay, pagan, etc., not by what they're not, non-white, non-straight, non-Christian. To make things worse, all people with a physical or mental difference are lumped together under the one banner—*disabled*—yet not all disabilities are the

same. Someone with a missing limb can still function normally in society, hold a job and a conversation, own a home, drive a car, have and raise children, become a great athlete: how is that disabled? Someone may have little control over their physical body but hone a great mind, and contribute fully to society, inspiring us daily, like Stephen Hawking. Some have invisible disabilities, like autism or ADHD, and others have mental disabilities of varying degrees requiring more care and attention than others. But they are all still human; they share our same need for love, nurturing, shelter, sustenance, acceptance, belonging.

Carys is *not* non-verbal. She can make lots of sounds, and she is extremely vocal. There is nothing she loves more than a vocal exchange. She understands turn-taking, and how to respond when I ask her to 'say' a sound I make, though she often chooses not to comply, or makes a game of it by 'saying' the wrong sound, and then laughing at my reaction. Carys has a lot to say about the world around her. She makes eye contact and babbles, her intonation rising and falling for all the world like any child telling me something they think is important. I have no doubt that for Carys, every sound she makes has meaning, just like the sounds I make have meaning. She speaks in tongues I don't understand, a language I can't learn because there is no Rosetta Stone. Instead, speech therapists try to force her to learn our language, but the same problem exists in reverse: no translator, no Rosetta Stone to help her. To Carys, the sounds we utter are as nonsensical as hers are to us.

But I know she understands when I ask her to 'hug Mammy', because she does; she understands and responds appropriately (most of the time, depending on her mood) to other commands too, such as sit down, stand up, come to Mammy, give me a kiss, clap hands, and so on. When I tell her it's time for bed, she knows to walk to her bedroom, although she will often try to delay the inevitable by visiting every other room along the way; when I tell her it's time to clean her teeth, she turns her face away; when I tell her we're going for a ride in the car, she heads for the front door. I suspect she understands far more than she can demonstrate, so I always try to explain where we are going, what we are doing, and why. When I ask, 'Carys, are you a happy girl today?', she performs her little 'happy dance' in confirmation, and I say, 'Good dancing!' and she shrieks with delight and waves her hands excitedly. She adores praise. When I say, 'I love you', she replies, 'voo voo voo'; it sounds like 'love you too'.

OTHER

May 2010. I am sitting in the psychologist's office. Carys is playing on a mat beside me on the floor. She is four and a half years old, and she has come to be assessed

before starting school. The assessment involves observation and filling in questionnaires concerning her behaviour. The psychologist is a gentle man who asks probing questions. He is easy to talk to. After an hour or so, he looks at me and says, 'You're still grieving.'

My mouth hangs open as my tongue stumbles over potential responses, none of which make it to words. Although I had never put conscious thought to it until that moment, I know instantly he is right. Instead of celebrating the living flesh-and-blood being who fought her way into my life against all the odds, I was mourning the perfect imaginary daughter I had lost.

The heat of shame steals through me. How can one grieve for a child who has never existed anywhere but in my head? How will I ever I lay this wraith to rest?

2006. A stormy November night. Darkness is total, whipped into place by the fury of wind and rain lashing at the kitchen window. I don't want to go outside, but Conor is strangely agitated, and insists we ask our neighbour to mind the kids for half an hour. He says nothing in the car, as we drive along the seafront into Skerries, the white caps of waves on the left disembodied by the dark, floating like ghosts. My heart, normally so unobtrusive, is beating hard and fast, my fears surge, wave upon wave. My fears are manifold—that by doing nothing but existing our strange little daughter is controlling our lives, our family, Conor's ability to do his work, my libido; that I am depressed; that I am pushing him away; that I am losing him; that he has found someone else; that I might have to raise Carys and my boys on my own, that I might suddenly be all they've got—but Conor himself has never been one of those fears. Tonight, however, his uncharacteristic behaviour makes me uneasy.

The truth is, I barely know him anymore; he buries himself in his business, I fade into the persona of Carys's carer, and these coping strategies alienate us. We don't talk. We don't go on dates. We don't have sex and we don't talk about not having sex. Most nights, I sit alone in the top of the house with a book and he sits downstairs until late, glued to the TV. He wants to be intimate, and so do I. But I just can't, because deep, numbing exhaustion has stolen from my body into my thoughts and emotions, has turned me into

something scarcely human. And so we retreat further from each other. The need to talk this disconnect through feels urgent, but how do I articulate something I don't understand? Instead, we dance around the issue, pretend it's not lying between us in our bed at night, as I face the window and he faces the wall, our backs almost but not quite touching. Somehow, we are surviving, managing day by day to shape some semblance of happy family life for our boys and Carys. We both instinctively know how much we each need the other, how we couldn't do this alone. A need like that doesn't require words. Does it?

Conor parks the car on the deserted harbour front and we walk. His arm is wrapped tightly around me, protecting me from the storm's clutches. Or sealing off escape. Everything around me feels stingingly alive, and there is a frisson of excitement rippling through my blood. For too long, life has shrunk to the size of getting through each day with Carys, surviving each new disaster the doctors uncover, like going to the dermatologist for a routine examination of the haemangioma which has grown so big it hangs over her left eye, only to be sent to an ophthalmologist who says emergency surgery is required or she will go blind; like going into surgery and discovering she has a new heart condition no one knew about; like going to a heart check-up, and the cardiologist looks at the movement of her legs and says, 'Has she ever been seen for her hips? I'm just going to make a referral… '

There are too many moments when my muddled logic betrays me, and I dissolve. Like when Conor rings me at the end of a long day and says he has a meeting first thing in Galway, so he's going to drive straight over there from work and stay over. I know his work takes him all over Ireland, that he must stay away overnight often, but it is the suddenness of this which catches my breath, and my warped thinking concludes he is with a woman. I barely sleep, and when the grey light of dawn steals between the drape of my curtains, I give up the pretence, and get up. Over coffee, the stillness of early morning creeps into my turbulent mind, bringing calm and reason to my disordered thoughts.

But now this storm has stirred something dormant in me. Conor pulls me up onto the old bandstand and turns me to face him. His arms are around me, his chin on my shoulder, his mouth beside my ear. I melt against him because this feels like it always used to. He is speaking. The wind rips

much of it from his lips, but I hear enough: what has happened to us… we have to fix this… I love you… let's get married.

It is a surreal, pivotal moment, a suspension of time in which I confront myself. I had been married before. It hadn't worked. Never ask me to marry you, I'd told Conor when we both realised that our relationship was more than just fun. And he never had, not through the transplanting of our lives from London to Ireland, the making of a home, the births of three children. So why now? What does this mean? A bit of paper and some legal language is not going to solve this. And then it comes to me: Conor has fears, too. He thinks he is losing me, and that matters to him. In my heart, I know that the other woman I have conjured for him is everything that I am not, the parts of me I have lost, like desire, spontaneity, fun. Whatever I think I am or am not, I am enough; he still wants me. We are like the apple tree and the yew which grew from the graves of Baile and Aillinn; we cling together and make each other strong.

So I say yes.

KISS

June 2019. On a Greek island, in the early morning sun, Conor and I are sitting at a roadside taverna, Carys sandwiched between us, queen presiding from the head of the table. She is watching Peppa Pig on her DVD player and guzzling freshly squeezed orange juice; we are slowly coming to with small cups of strong coffee. An old Greek man approaches, puts his hand on Carys's curls, and says to us, 'Beautiful, beautiful.'

Then he cups her face in his hands and kisses her on both cheeks. Carys is so taken by surprise she hardly reacts. Conor and I are astonished.

The man has few English words. He points to himself and says, 'Cousin,' then points at Carys. 'Fifty,' he says, then points at the sky. Then, 'God,' a shrug, arms thrown up in the air, and a sad shake of his head. But his eyes light up when he looks at Carys again, and he smiles. Halfway around the world, a stranger sees Carys and sees beauty, and he is not afraid to show it. After that he comes every morning to see Carys.

And then, sitting in a taxi, heading back to the airport, chatting to the driver. After a time, his eyes meet mine in the rear-view mirror, and he says, 'You know what is the message of your family?'

I stumble here; something has changed. This has moved away from the realms of light-hearted chat, and I don't know how to respond.

Seeing my confusion, he provides a gentle answer. 'It is love. Love for each other, and respect.'

This is the island which birthed the Goddess of Love. I should have known this journey would be special.

And then a few weeks later, early August, sitting in the café at the Loughcrew Megalithic Centre with my friend from Galway, Carys on my knee. Despite the grey sky and sting of rain it is warm, and there is a relaxed, holiday vibe in the air; walkers in shorts and boots come and go, en-route to and from the cairns crowning the hill. Carys is all eyes; she has never been here before, and she watches the waitress who has brought her a big slab of chocolate cake with great interest. I only notice the three men who come in for lunch because one of them comes up to Carys and says to her, 'Hello beautiful, and who do we have here?'

Bemused, I supply her name. His friends pay us no attention, settling down at their table, chatting amongst themselves. My skin tingles. I can feel time slipping, slowing. Something is about to happen, and everything feels different. The man is tall; he has grey hair and a kind face, and there is something about him that I can't place, a stillness, maybe, like a rock in a river that water flows smoothly around. But he is not looking at me or my friend, only Carys. He takes her face in his hands and places a kiss on the top of her head, then smiles at her and returns to his friends. And Carys, with her multiple sensitivities around her head, accepts his touch, his kiss, with calm indifference, like a queen accepting the attentions of an adoring crowd.

It is a glittering moment, both beautiful and strange, and it remains with me long after the day has passed. It is a lesson to me that words can be powerful, but they will never have the atomic impact of a simple demonstration of love. Demonstrations like that can change lives, alter the course of history.

VOO VOO VOO

Carys loves herself. I know this because in her room there is a mirror, and Carys will crawl up to it and spend ages gazing and cooing at herself. She

is not concerned with the huge scar left behind on her forehead by her retreating haemangioma; she doesn't even give it a glance. She stares into her own eyes, at her curls, twists her head this way and that so she can stare at it from all angles, opens her mouth wide, examines her tongue and her teeth, pulls funny faces and laughs at herself. She kisses herself in the mirror, leaving a cloud of dribble on its surface. She never looks at her clothes; along with the scar, they are not who she is, and she appears to know this. Carys has a particular tone of voice when she's talking to herself in her mirror; it is soft, muted, gentle. We all recognise it, and know what it means. When I approach her, she smiles at me in the mirror, and then turns to me with a hug. She knows that the mama she sees in the mirror is not her real mama but a reflection, that the girl she's talking to and smiling at is a replica of herself, just like the photos and videos I show her on my phone. She adores watching videos of herself, chats back in response to the sounds she hears herself make. Perhaps it is the only way she manages to have a sensible conversation with anyone. Carys loves herself, but without conceit, consciously and unconsciously. Despite her imperfections, she is comfortable in her skin. I wish I could be more like that.

Ali Isaac lives in Cavan. This is her first piece to be published.

Desertion

edge of life
the sturdy corn is green

(there is no green darker
than a cornfield in the rain)

every dream I have is of a woman
where I crouch down

her body sunk in clay
I'm in want of an amulet

against loneliness
I pray and the body decays

—these mountains
tell the distance

through mist and
foam to desire—

beyond the muscles of the river
is a widespread country

I see my mother as a buzzard
and tour this land in bewilderment

Dylan Brennan lives in Mexico City. He was the Ireland Chair of Poetry Bursary Award winner for 2019. Publications include *Atoll* and *Blood Oranges*.

This Happy (an extract)

Niamh Campbell

How is your wife? I asked Harry when he got back. I didn't even intend to ask it: it came out, meanly.

Quite well. He looked at me. Why do you ask?

Oh, I don't know. Being polite.

I have something for you, he said. I got it in London.

How was London?

Ghastly, he smiled.

He had bought me a mobile phone. It was much like an old one; I thought to say, Let me give you money, but then I thought better of it; I felt bad. I felt immensely unwell. I felt dizzy, but rooted to the spot. He had bought me a phone to replace the one I tossed into the sea, on our first day in Ireland, when we'd finished eating the oysters; I had made a gesture, on a whim, of surrender, but he was plugging me back in.

Harry told me gently, You're a complicated girl.

But, he said, you know you should be careful with yourself.

He said, I like you a lot. Your complexity. I just hope that all of this, coming here together, waiting around while I'm working, is good for you. Is not, you know, harmful to you.

I want to get out of here, I said quickly. I want to get out of here, for a break, today. Just for a break. I felt savagely light-headed. Can we go into town?

I have work, but I will drop you if you like.

No, no, I'll take the bus; drop me to the village. I'll catch a bus. I felt that I needed to move, to agitate, even though the day was hot and stillness lay, listlessly almost, over everything. The rain had stopped but there was still a ripe weight to the air, something scum-rimmed and fecund at once.

This is a day I am trying to explain. This is a day I look back on, I looked back on—at thirty, trying to prise the fan apart, to isolate, to find something (moments like hinges): a hook—this is a hard day to put away: this is a hard day to explain to you.

Very much like other days in the cottage, since we'd arrived a week before. But not.

I felt kind of *caught*. I felt kind of *on display*.

There is a notebook entry for this day—a pink notebook, with a ribbon tongue—and the entry reads 13.05, 14.05. These are bus times. I must have looked them up on my laptop. I know that I was dropped to the village, on the motorbike, and caught the bus, and that the bus was stuffy and empty and swayed slapdash all the way, the driver completely heedless, the radio playing death notices. And when I dismounted in the bus station at Drogheda I thought for one burning moment that I was going, in fact, to be sick—I marched straight to the toilet, on which there was a leaflet reading PATRONS ONLY, so that I had to go to the man in his punch-proof booth for an old-fashioned key, clammy in my hand, to let myself in, to a cubicle of pickled spit-balls, where I did not throw up: where I panted and swore, for ten minutes, over the bowl. The light went out. I stayed in peaceful darkness for a while. I stirred and tripped the sensor once again.

I left. I'm all right now, I thought. The air smelled of cooking oil. I went into the town I suppose. Some of it was familiar to me and some of it was new-seeming, like the Starbucks perhaps, and the art gallery. The old mall was the same, seedily lit and lined with try-your-luck vending machines. I thought I might go to the cinema. I thought that I might visit the relic's head. In fact I went into a large department store and drifted between aisles of summer clothes. I fingered synthetic lace g-strings. I bought myself one. It was, I recall, rolled up and secured in the centre like a shoelace or a dressmaker's measuring tape. I felt faint. I went into a café and began to fiddle about with the phone Harry had given me.

I want to say that there was no sound. That there was nothing but the underwater bulging of my pulse, steady and unending, in my ears. But of course this can't be true. It is a contortion of memory undergone for effect. It is a blurring or a burr or some other kind of opacity. A lull in courage. Because, I quite think, I had so much courage at twenty-three.

In Drogheda, at twenty-three.

I saw myself everywhere, as a teenager, looking for something to wear to get into a nightclub—something crunching with sequins, cutting me under the arms—or failing my provisional driving test. The drama of the river and the tower, like a silver sandcastle, in which, we'd always been told, the prisoners of Cromwell were kept. Outside of which there was the terrible Catholic massacre. I was a plain and heedless teenager, without any guile whatsoever, without any protector. The youthfulness I played up for Harry now was prosthetic and sometimes tiring, but also I wanted to curl up—only to curl up—like a child or an animal, cosily meagre, and be held.

I was there, that day, in Drogheda, because I suppose I wished for a little bit to escape scrutiny. To relax. I was so used to being ignored. It was strange and erotic to be watched by Harry but also fatiguing, frightening—a form of power that could oh so easily be lost. Womanhood generally had lately dawned on me as a source of extraordinary power, right out of nowhere, without virtue or labour at all. Weaponising it was so easy I sometimes stared at Harry and wondered if he was playing along, if this was simply some burlesque, only to see that it was real, the weakness and the hunger, the queer solipsism of man as pioneer beholding you, intervening angel, executioner, devouring trap; you are an archetype, a sign. Then when it's done they go deep into themselves. Or else they burrow into you, laying their head on your chest, like nothing so much as a little boy.

Harry did not do this—the burrowing: Harry lay stiff in the bed next to me and stared wildly at the tongue-and-groove ceiling. I would burrow into him, into his coarse curly hair.

This was how power slid back and forth between us.

I was in Drogheda to escape scrutiny—browsing now in a pharmacy, buying razors and shea butter—but why, when he'd only just come back from London, when I'd had twenty-four hours of invisibility? I was jealous, of course: I thought that he had stayed there with his wife. This was pain and not performance. It disturbed me.

And I knew then, in Drogheda, that I could run—I could leave, I could never get onto that bus and never switch on this brand new phone, into which I had not yet snapped the old sim card—I could disappear in a subtle

huff, return to London, but this was bluff of course, or fantasy, because by the time I'd left London I was no longer living there at all.

I was living there materially but, in my mind and in my heart, I had departed, I was finished with it, even though I still had a year left at least to complete my dissertation.

I have always had friends who say, Oh, in London you can be anything, and I have always said that I am already anything and that we can be anything anywhere: if all you mean is making money, I say, well, probably. Yes. I never had any money in London. I was a student. Sometimes I went hungry and sat up watching my screen, hitting refresh until my stipend would appear in my account. Sometimes I temped. I worked at London Bridge for five psychiatrists. When I put out my hand to introduce myself to one he recoiled in disgust. Really it was amazing, as if I were soiled: those men are so ignorant, really—tubby yoo-hoo types, half the time they couldn't change a lightbulb; they'd emerge from their office and say, Halloo reception-girl, yes, I'm terribly sorry I don't know your name, but my light has gone out!

It was also around this time that the helicopter came spiralling down over Vauxhall, like a boreal event—a blast that grew and shrank, the blooming of a rose in video. A spectacular crack. All at once the underground closed like a throat. There was, I suppose, what you call a wartime air, giddy and comradely: within hours of something the city healed over it, though, as if nothing had happened at all, like the morning my friend emailed to say a pathologist's tent could be seen in Trafalgar Square and all day we watched headlines and search-engined it but found nothing, nothing to explain a pathologist's tent in Trafalgar Square.

I studied art history—I wrote about art. I was good at it. I thought hard about deeply abstract things. There is a painting, a painting by Patrick Swift, one of his Portuguese trees, and I gave a paper on it via Aquinas and Augustine: honestly, I told my husband later, I was permitted to do this and petted for it, at a lectern in one of the solemn salubrious rooms over Malet Street. I was twenty-two. The Portuguese tree is obscenely complex and sunned and salted, the more and more you stare the more details emerge, the more brushstrokes, which are interchangeable in the world of the painting with the seethes and knots and amplified aspirations of

the tree; which represent proper bafflement and arrestment, as you would try to riddle out a mosaic or the face of someone you adored, willing to exchange places with them, finding yourself in their inflections—finding yourself in the fork of the tree's canopy.

Finding yourself in the blenching hands of Christ or the Virgin startled among her marrows and gladioli. Finding yourself in the corner of the image, an optical trick, a memento mori—finding yourself otherwise. Halfway metamorphosed.

Do you see what I mean?

And then, lying under trees. Hungover. Soho Square. The little gingerbread cabin in the centre of Soho Square. All the people, always, lying like victims in Soho Square.

Soho!

At the end of a party when everyone and the room itself were in pieces all, a fleshy editor sat next to me and asked, my dear, who did you come with? I gestured across the room. My word, the editor nodded, how nice for him. I would like one of you.

You know, I said mock-severely, there is only one of me.

Well then, replied the editor mock-severely, I would like some of you.

I want to understand and I want to explain and I want to be unambiguous but I had such little information, so little, only the slight number of things I had been given and the speculative deductions I'd made about Harry, about his life, and the men I'd met afterwards, the types, in my twenties. My husband as he appeared thinly to me, almost phosphorescent, both an energy and a projection, both the real thing and something contrived.

Winding back as I can—all these images! Do I even want them? Can I sell them? Will they ever tremble out?—to London, always London. I go back now and it's not the city I knew. The city of my imagining, my collaboration, my libido. My misery.

What it was then: yes. Winding back. To the studio, which Harry kept in—where was it? It was not Bethnal Green, it was not Hackney: it was somewhere between. Shoreditch? I emerged from the underground and examined the map I'd printed out. I'd been to the studio, on the back of his bike, but never made it there, before, on my own. And it was hot. It was June. I was wearing flannel shorts and canvas flats.

The studio was always cool, because it was located in an old factory: there was a curling stairwell, a frightening coffin-like lift, and lots of doors along spartan corridors. Next to Harry an artist who made, it seemed, exclusively big-bellied abstract sculptures usually had his door held open widely by a brick and he would wave, mindlessly and cheerfully, at me when I passed, because, I suspect, he thought I was somebody else.

All along the large window of Harry's studio there were cactus plants. On a nail on the wall there hung an ushanka-hat. He had pointed to this, once, and said, I got that in literal Siberia. There was very little else—a desk, a laptop, paper cards with points and plot-twists thumb-tacked to corkboards—but its austerity anticipated the cottage; its austerity was potential, not sterility. I found my way to the studio alone that day, tugging out my earphones as I climbed the curling stairs, and I was happy.

Yes, said Harry as I entered. He was finishing something on the computer. He made coffee in earthenware mugs, and, because there were no seats, we sat cross-legged on the floor.

Sometimes when I met Harry he was quiet, watchful, and horny in a writhingly reptilian way; sometimes when I met him he was briskly distant and paternal. This was a day of the latter.

Tell me about your Orpheus, he said.

The Poynter, I said, the painting—do you like it?

I do.

Orpheus, I said, is a story I love.

The lyre.

Yes. I stretched out my legs. Are you ready?

I am.

Orpheus is married to Eurydice, but she is bitten by a snake, and she dies. Orpheus travels down to the underworld to rescue her. In a Middle English version there are walls of ice—a kind of ice-tunnel, and people trapped in ice at the moment of their death, glamoured by fairy-ice. Anyway. Orpheus plays the lyre and persuades Persephone to let his wife go, to let Eurydice leave the underworld. There is just one condition, and it is that he cannot look at her. He needs to lead her by the hand from the underworld, from Hades, you know, without turning around. He can't turn around to look at Eurydice until they are safely back in, like, the world of the living.

But he looks?

He looks. He turns around and looks at her, halfway up. So she dies again. He takes one look at her, one glance, and she tumbles back into the underworld—I imagine, like that. I put my hands up in a pose of melodramatic horror. I tilted backwards. It was prayer-pose or surrender: it was the cowboy's stick 'em up.

She is lost.

She re-dies. She dies twice.

Why do you like it?

It fascinates me. I lifted my mug and drank my coffee. I reached over and stroked his hair, which was bushy curls, as dry as a shrub and seamed unevenly with grey. Because, I said, the question is always, why did he turn around? He had one job, you know?

And he failed.

But did he fail? I think. And this is my theory. I laughed to show self-deprecation. This is my theory of Orpheus: actually, a part of him wants Eurydice dead. The point of the story is Orpheus's grief, Orpheus as hero, as the one who brings Persephone round—he's so brave, that is the substance of the story. But really Eurydice can't come back. So he has to get rid of her. The urge to turn, to basically kill her, is, I think, like the urge you have at the top of a tall building, on some height, to jump. The things you do to self-sabotage. The thing you say that is the one thing you shouldn't say. He wants her back but really he doesn't want her back so he kills her again. He can't really decide if he wants her or not.

Very interesting, Harry said.

There is no more poetic trope—and this, by the way, is Edgar Allen Poe—than the death of a beautiful woman. I winked. I sipped. Orpheus is the proto-troubadour. The proto-breakup-album. Blood on the tracks and all that jazz. You know?

You, Harry told me then, are intelligent.

Of course I already knew I was intelligent. I had been called *precocious* and *little madam* since I was a child. But at this point it didn't seem compromising; in his eyes in that instant I did not feel smart-alecky. I suppose I felt seen. It was new and strange and it made the blood rush to my face. How ridiculous to reflect on this now but—oh—how I held the

man, such high esteem! My Elektra complex. Sexual electricity. I must have been easy quarry. Though I cannot so easily dismiss it, I cannot condemn him outright, you know, because it was precious to me, this chemistry, this thing I could be for him, as I imagined it then—how proud I could make him feel. Giving him this share in my development.

Which is what I did, really. Great slices of myself.

And so I wouldn't run from Drogheda, from the cottage, from Harry, because I had nothing to run to and anyway anything I could run to would be boring: anything that I could run to would be death. I wanted to wait and see, I suppose, how it would turn out.

That evening I finished the charcoal portrait and presented it to Harry.

I look like a satyr, he complained.

You look like a mystic, I said. But I like you, immensely.

———————————

Niamh Campbell's work has appeared in *gorse*, *The Dublin Review*, Tangerine, *Five Dials*, *3:AM*, and *Banshee*, and is forthcoming in *Granta* and *Somesuch Stories*. *This Happy*, Niamh's debut novel, comes out with Weidenfeld and Nicolson in June. She lives in Dublin.

Eavesdropping

Stories came down like ceiling water:
gorges of narrative slipping the slate
and felt of a learned guard;
slosh and pool, glimmer in low wattage—
I took to the shapes in them.

Starlings then: a thousand
typewriters thrashing.
We looked out on acres of quiet.

Haunt the kitchen table
like a Sacred Heart,
strain against clip of mug
or a visitor's cough—
casting out always for an anything
but the muck and wet of farm.

Cold water shock of a parent's pause:
a voice dropping from the air
with the terrible completion
of a well shot bird

sending me sock-slipping,
tip-toeing in retreat
to the corner room;
head a wild canvas of words,
impenetrable code
of adult;
a Rorschach fumbled over,
a language not yet learned.

Michael Dooley's poems have appeared in *Poetry Ireland Review*, *The Stinging Fly*, and online at RTÉ Culture. He has been shortlisted for The Strokestown International Poetry Prize, The Doolin Poetry Prize, and The Cúirt New Writing Prize. He is a teacher, and lives in Limerick.

The Little House

Yan Ge

Outside the Little House, Old Stone was talking about geese.

'Their intestines. That's the best part,' he said. 'The best goose intestines come from White Family Town, do you know why?'

'No idea,' I said.

'The women there have strong and slender fingers. The perfect kind of fingers for plunging into the goose's asshole and yanking out the entrails while it's still alive. They do it with precision and determination. They do this in a flash to preserve its tenderness.'

'I'm a vegetarian.'

He shook his head. 'Why?'

I thought about how to reply.

'That's no good,' he said. 'Plus, I don't think I've seen you eating since you came here.'

'I don't feel hungry,' I said.

He turned around to the table next to us and shouted, 'Small Bamboo! Can you talk some sense into this girl?'

Small Bamboo had fallen asleep in his chair. It was almost 3 a.m.

'Anyway,' he said, turning back to me, 'guess which part of the cow the yellow throat comes from?'

'Its throat?'

'Ha!' He reached for his beer and took a long pull. 'I've asked more than a hundred people this question. Nobody's got it right. It comes from the cow's coronary artery. And it has to be the right one. Because the right one's thinner than the left one so it gets cooked very quickly in the hot pot. Do you know how many seconds it takes to cook the yellow throat?'

'Uh-uh.'

'Eight seconds. Lots of people overcook it. That's why you should never throw a piece of yellow throat into the pot. Hold it with chopsticks and dip it into the soup. Count to eight and take it out. Only this way will it be crispy and chewy.'

'I need to go to bed now,' I said.

'Sure. You go.' He took another mouthful from his beer bottle.

'Aren't you going to sleep?'

'Ah no no, I'm fine. When you are old you don't need to sleep. I'll just get another beer.'

He stood up and walked into the Little House. The light was still on. Sister Du curled up on a booth seat, snoring. I watched through the window as Old Stone went behind the bar, grabbed a Tsingtao and returned.

'I'll ask her to put it on my tab in the morning.' He slumped back into his chair.

'I'm going now. Good night.' I stood up and walked back into the tent I shared with Vertical.

Small Bamboo had brought me to the Little House three days earlier. When he bumped into me, I was sitting on a bench outside my apartment compound, reading a book.

'Hey, Pigeon,' he said, coming swiftly across the street towards me. 'What are you doing here?'

'Just reading,' I said, waving my book at him. 'To kill some time.'

He tilted his head and read: 'The Plague. I didn't know you kids still read Camus.'

'Some of us do.'

'Where are you staying these days?' he asked.

'I'm camping in the courtyard, with my neighbours.' I pointed back over my head.

'That's no fun,' Small Bamboo said. 'Why don't you come with me to the Little House? We're all staying there in the square: Old Stone, Young Li, Six Times, Vertical, Chilly and lots of other poets.'

'But I don't write poems,' I said.

He grinned. 'It doesn't matter. Just come with me.'

We walked to the Little House. The buses hadn't been running since the 12th and there were no taxis. Small Bamboo had smoked three cigarettes by the time he finally remembered to offer me one. I told him I didn't smoke.

'You're sensible. Cigarettes kill you.' He nodded, taking out another one and lighting it up.

We went across the Second Ring Road and turned into Ping'an Square.

'Wow,' I said.

The sunken square was brimming with tents, of various sizes and spectacular styles, their colours ranging the full visible spectrum. Small Bamboo pointed at the building at the far end of the square and told me the Little House was on that corner. We descended into the square and wove our way through it. The tents were clustered closely together and cast shadows over one another. People sat outside, eating, chatting, bartering. Vendors elbowed past with their baskets, selling food, magazines, t-shirts and cosmetics. Kids chased each other, laughing. We steered through, Small Bamboo nodding at acquaintances and friends. Ahead of us, I saw a gigantic scarlet tent. It looked like a castle.

'That's Young Li's,' Small Bamboo said. 'One big living room and three bedrooms for him, his wife and two kids. There's even a kitchen inside. God knows where that prawn got it from!'

It was a warm late May afternoon. The air was stale and humid. We walked from the sunken square up the steps and arrived at a run-down pub. Above, three big white characters hung, which said: The Little House. A dot in the first character was missing. A large group of men and women—poets—sat outside, drinking beer. Small Bamboo introduced me: 'This is Pigeon.'

'Pigeon!' they called out together, like a choir singing.

'I've heard about you,' one of them, a man in his forties, said. 'You're the kid who writes fiction.'

A middle-aged woman in a red floral dress looked me up and down. 'You seem like a smart kid,' she said. 'You should write poems.'

'Ignore these old drunks,' Small Bamboo said apologetically. 'You go sit with Vertical.' He pointed me to a table on the side, at which a young woman and two men in their twenties sat. They waved at me gleefully.

Later I realised they were all in varying degrees of drunkenness. Some had been drinking since Monday; some had started on the evening of the

12th. Sister Du, the owner of the Little House and Small Bamboo's cousin, had driven her mini-truck to the wholesale market outside the city three times to restock beer. The supermarkets nearby had nothing left.

'And all of these rats here, they don't even bother to pay,' Sister Du said. '"Put it on the tab," they say—but nobody ever opened a tab!'

'I'll have a tea please,' I said, taking out my wallet.

'Ah come'n take a beer,' she said and opened a Tsingtao for me. 'I'll put it on the tab.'

I took the bottle, walked outside and sat down at the table with Vertical, her boyfriend Chilly, and Six Times. A woman with a basket approached, wondering if any of us would like to buy some turtles. She lifted up the lid, revealing the little turtles inside. They were luminous, as white as pearls.

We were admiring the turtles when the alarm rang out in the sky.

'Always this time of day,' the woman said. She covered her basket and went away.

That night I washed my face for the first time since the 12th and slept in Vertical's tent. There was moaning coming, off and on, from different directions. Someone sang until the small hours. Eventually, I slept like a dead person and did not dream of anything.

It was 2008. My father had been dead for six years. My grandfather had died in 2000 after having a stroke outside a convenience store. My first aunt, she'd lost her life in 1998 due to a haemorrhoid removal operation. My uncle had broken his neck in the summer of 1990, when going for a dive in the river with his friends.

'Both of my parents died in 1989,' Small Bamboo said, 'my mother at the beginning of the year because of diabetes; my father at the end of year, in prison.'

'My girlfriend has been dead for ten years now,' Old Stone said. 'She struggled with anorexia for years and killed herself in the winter of 1998.'

'You prawns!' Young Li puffed out a mouthful of smoke. 'Can we talk about something else? Haven't we had enough of dead people?'

'Shall we have a game of Mahjong?' Old Stone suggested.

After they left the table, I took out my book and began to read. The TV was on in the next room, and Sister Du and the waitresses were watching the news. They wept.

Six Times wandered over and sat down beside me. 'What are you reading?'

I showed him the book.

'Camus,' he said, 'Interesting. Do you like him?'

'He's alright,' I said.

'You should read Márquez,' he said, 'Love in The Time of Cholera is a better choice.'

I put down the book and looked at him. 'What are you getting at?'

He smiled shyly. 'Vertical and Chilly are having sex in my tent. Shall we go to Vertical's tent and have sex as well?'

I thought about his proposal for a while. 'Okay,' I said.

We walked into Vertical's tent and removed our clothes quickly. He touched me briefly before entering. We hugged and moved towards and away from each other repeatedly. I felt cold the whole time because I was lying on the ground. He cried when he came.

Afterwards, we sat outside the tent, sharing a cigarette.

'Four days ago I was a non-smoker,' I said.

'Five days ago I had no idea there'd be an earthquake,' he said. 'What were you doing?'

'I was giving my cat a bath,' I said. 'And you?'

'I was trying to fix my laptop,' he said. 'How's your cat?'

'She ran away wet. Hope she's dry now. How's your laptop?'

'Dead.' he said.

'I heard earlier on TV,' I said, 'that the number of casualties is now two hundred and sixty-two thousand, three hundred and fifty-seven.'

He took the cigarette and smoked. 'You have a good memory,' he said.

The alarm rang again. It rang sharply and ceaselessly across the city.

Sister Du rushed out of the Little House and shouted: 'Another one is coming! The news just said there's a big aftershock tonight! A 7.8 to 8-magnitude one. The government is telling us to seek shelter.'

'Relax, cousin,' Small Bamboo said, half-turning from the Mahjong table. 'We are already in a shelter.'

That night, nobody could sleep. We went into Young Li's tent and sat down in the living room. It was surreally spacious, furnished with a pair of ivory

four-seater leather sofas, one white armchair and a cream chaise longue. There was even a bookshelf.

Small Bamboo sat down in the armchair. 'Bloody hell,' he said, slapping his thigh. 'This is a palace.' Young Li and Six Times walked in, carrying a square table. They put it down and flipped up four curved extensions. An enormous round table emerged.

We all stared at it. 'Bloody hell,' Small Bamboo said.

'Old Stone asked me to get a big table for dinner,' Young Li said.

'If this is the table we're sitting at, I'll need a telescope to see the dishes,' said Chilly.

'When the aftershock comes, we can hide underneath it,' Six Times said, knocking the tabletop.

While Old Stone was busy cooking in the kitchen with Calm—Young Li's wife—and Sister Du helping out, we talked about him. Apparently, after his girlfriend died, Old Stone immersed himself in the study of how to make the perfect twice-cooked pork. From there, taking it dish by dish, he had become a chef and a reputable food critic. He had published three books: *Love and Lust in Sichuan Cuisine*, *The Pepper Corn Empire* and *The Night We Ate Armadillos*. The last one was a collection of poems.

'I actually have the books here.' Young Li stood up and searched on the bookshelf. 'Here.' He took a book out, leaned on the bookshelf and started to read: '"When language becomes corrupt, we need to talk about fish. Are fish happy? someone asked, a long time ago. You have no idea because you're not a fish. If a tomato knows a fish well…"'

'Is this the poetry book?' I asked.

'No, it's his cookbook,' Young Li said and pushed it back.

Everybody laughed. I laughed with them. We drank beer.

Calm came out from the kitchen. She wore a purple apron on top of the red floral dress. She dropped a stack of bowls and chopsticks on the table and said: 'The food is coming.'

We pushed over the sofas and each grabbed a bowl and chopsticks. As we took our seats, Sister Du carried out the starters on a tray and put them down one by one: chicken feet with chilli pickle, fried fish skin with coriander, marinated pig's tails and thousand-year eggs with green pepper.

The poets cheered and dived in.

'What can Pigeon have? She's vegetarian,' Vertical said.

Young Li examined the dishes. 'Fish skin? There's no meat in it.'

'It's fine,' I said. 'I'm not really hungry.' I drank some more beer.

The starters were gone within minutes and Sister Du delivered more dishes: hot, steaming and aromatic. Old Stone's signature twice-cooked pork was served, followed by braised pork belly, stewed pig feet with fermented black bean, sautéed pig kidney and liver and braised pig knuckles with bamboo shoot.

'Where does he get all this stuff?' Chilly marvelled, jabbing a knuckle with his chopsticks.

'Old Stone has connections,' Young Li mumbled between chewing. 'Do you know who his father is?'

Chilly shook his head. 'No, should I?'

Young Li spat out a bone and disclosed a name that I had learnt in my Local History class at elementary school.

'Seriously?' Chilly said.

'Yep.' Small Bamboo nodded. 'This prawn could have been sitting in an office in the central government now if he hadn't got the wrong girlfriend and joined the protest with her at the wrong time.'

'Our generation is just fucked,' Young Li said.

'We're fucked too,' Chilly said competitively.

They continued arguing while the second round of food was brought out. This time: sliced beef in chilli oil, stewed beef brisket in casserole, spiced calf ribs with Sichuan pepper corn and beef offal soup.

The room was filled with hot steam. I sneezed.

'Can I get you anything?' Vertical said. 'Poor Pigeon, you must be starving.'

'I'm fine,' I said.

She looked around the table. 'How about the soup? I can get you some soup without offal,' she said.

'Uh, okay,' I said.

She ladled me a bowl of offal-free soup. I stared at it and drank. The soup flew into my mouth and diffused into my guts, like a long, soft exhalation. It made me think of when my grandfather carried me on his back to the cattle market to see the cows. They smelled like manure and peat. Their eyes were the eyes of Buddha. They looked at me.

'Can I have another one?' I said, 'with offal please.'

We were all devouring like wretched beasts. It began to rain outside. The rain fell, drumming the roof with an urgent rhythm while more food was served. We had a round of poultry: chicken, duck, goose, quail and ostrich; and then six kinds of fish: rudd, sea-bass, mandarin, silver jin, golden chang and fugu; afterwards some rare delicacies whose names I learnt from the others: boar, abalone, soft-shelled turtle, muntjac, and armadillo.

'Bloody hell,' Small Bamboo said, his chopsticks gnashing. The rain fell in torrents.

A group of beautiful women walked out from the kitchen, wearing shiny silk dresses embroidered with pearls. Their hair was embellished with small crowns and colourful feathers, their lips glossily red. Together, they held a huge brass pot, in which a dense and hearty chilli stew bubbled, exuding a brawny fragrance of meat, chilli pepper and Chinese five spice. It was head stew, and had been extremely well-cooked so the heads cracked, mushed and melted together—some eyes were missing, some noses crooked, lots of tongues stuck out. They were the heads of men and women.

My stomach turned sharply. I bent and threw up under the table.

The Night We Ate Armadillos
By: Old Stone

About five in the afternoon Small Bamboo asked me
to have dinner with him and his friend Boss Huang.

Huang has got some rare delicacies he told me.
In a private dining room Huang locked
the door and served us a huge pot of braised
armadillos
Dig in, said Huang, it's a first class national protected animal
so we are all committing crimes together.

Speaking of criminals, said Small Bamboo
The armadillos were Chairman Mao's favourite
when he was a guerrilla
in Jinggang Mountain
back in the old days

The day after the dinner party, a real crisis set in. It had rained so much the previous night that the water had swept through the wreckage, where hundreds of thousands of bodies were still buried, and into the reservoir.

'Now we'll have to drink skin-flavoured water,' Chilly said.

'Ew,' Vertical said.

We were sitting outside the Little House. Old Stone had advised us earlier to relax and not to worry about the water. There were at least eight or nine cartons of beer stocked in the Little House so we should be well-hydrated for another couple of days. 'Trust me, before we finish the beer somebody will sort the water out,' he concluded, and went to join Small Bamboo, Young Li and Calm for a game of Mahjong.

The rest of us sat, drank beer and smoked cigarettes. In the centre of the square, a man was standing on a table, looking down at the crowd and shouting: 'One last ticket to Beijing! The train leaves at ten tonight! Any higher offers?' In the opposite direction, a young nurse held a megaphone, calling: 'Volunteers needed! Volunteers needed! The bus leaves eight a.m. tomorrow at the community medical centre!' A group of teenagers chased a boy out of a convenience shop a few doors down. 'Give us the milk you cocksucker!' A woman walked by in front of us, weeping, holding a small child in her arms.

'It's like watching a movie,' Six Times said.

'I feel troubled that I'm not really sad,' said Chilly.

'I'm not very sad either,' Vertical said. 'And you? Pigeon.'

'I've been thinking,' I said slowly. 'All of this is great material. But I don't think I'll ever write about the earthquake.'

'I'll never write about it either,' Six Times said.

'And what do we say when many years later people ask us about the big earthquake in 2008?' Vertical said.

'We can talk about the aggressive beer drinking,' Chilly suggested.

'And the endless sounds of intercourse at night,' Six Times said.

'And the banquet Old Stone cooked for us,' I added.

Vertical looked at me and smiled. 'Is everything alright, Pigeon?'

A woman screamed in the square. A tent fell. Some young men shouted loudly.

'What do you mean?' I said.

'You've mentioned that dinner a number of times already,' Vertical said. 'And you're reading Old Stone's poetry book.'

'Young Li lent me the book,' I said. 'But I find it difficult to understand.'

'Poetry is not for understanding,' Chilly said.

Six Times drank some beer and said: 'Think about it this way: when you write a story, you're essentially creating a dish. You want people to see the meat and the veg and even to smell the fragrances. But they can't actually eat it. They can only imagine the taste of the food by interpreting the image of it.'

I thought of yesterday's dinner again. They all seemed to have forgotten what happened.

'But none of these matter to us,' Six Times continued. 'We poets come into the room and we simply chomp on the fictional dish you'd created. We eat up the food and shit it out later. And the shit is poetry.'

Chilly laughed and clapped. Vertical and I laughed as well.

That night, I stayed in Six Times' tent and we made love like primitives. There were no condoms so he came on my belly. Later, to help me clean up, he poured some beer on my belly and wiped it off with his socks. I told him I would prefer to have dried sperm on my belly than cold beer and dirty socks. He said he was sorry.

Afterwards we slept. A series of 4 to 5 magnitude aftershocks came, rocking us into deeper dreams. In my dream I had a conversation about the earthquake. I remembered it clearly even after waking up. My deceased father sat in front of me, his face stained by a thick tawny paste, his nose crooked. And he asked me: 'How do you know this is all real and happening? How can you be sure you haven't already died in the earthquake and are just living the afterlife?'

I told Old Stone about my dream and he laughed for quite a while. 'That is a very Zhuangzian dream,' he said.

'You could say that about every dream,' I said.

'Have you ever eaten butterflies?' he said. 'I haven't had butterflies per se but once in Kunming I had caterpillars. They were nicely deep-fried, lightly seasoned with chilli pepper power and cumin and tasted like crispy air.'

We sat outside the Little House, facing the square. Nearly one third of the

tents had disappeared, leaving discoloured spots on the ground, like the surface of the moon. Young Li's giant red tent remained erected.

'How much longer do you think we can last without water?' I asked.

'Not long,' Old Stone said. 'But you might surprise yourself… When I was about your age, I went with my girlfriend to a protest and we sat at Tianfu Square for three days without eating and drinking.'

I imagined the landmark in the centre of the city and Old Stone and his girlfriend being young and bony. 'And then what happened?'

'I began to shake around lunchtime on day three. The horror was in my gut and I suppose I just lost it. I cried and begged my girlfriend to leave with me because I thought we were going to die. Eventually she caved in. We left the square and got back home. Then I made us noodles with tomato and fried egg.' He smiled and signed in satisfaction.

Before I could answer, he continued: 'My girlfriend threw up at the sight of the noodles. She could not eat for days, only sips of liquid. In time, she developed a sort of eating disorder and it went on and off for years. When it was good, she'd devour whatever I cooked for her. But when it was bad, she couldn't at all stand the idea of food. If I mentioned breakfast, she'd scream.' Old Stone looked at me. 'You remind me of her, sometimes.'

I was about to say something when the others came back in Sister Du's mini-truck, carrying boxes and bags of bottled water, milk and other stuff. Small Bamboo sat down by us, unscrewed a bottle of water and gulped down half of it. 'Motherfucker!' he exclaimed. 'I'll never drink beer again.'

'Where did you get these?' Old Stone asked.

'The community medical centre,' Small Bamboo said. 'Sister Du heard a new batch of volunteers arrived from Xi'an, so we called over.'

'You prawns,' Old Stone said. 'These are for the victims of the earthquake.'

Young Li sat down and started taking cartons of cigarettes out of his box. 'We are the victims,' he said. 'We're all enduring.'

A man walked by. Young Li whistled at him and threw him a bottle of water and a carton of cigarettes. He caught them swiftly and trotted away.

Later, Chilly, Vertical, Six Times and I sat by the flowerbed, eating tins of braised pork and sweet chilli fish.

'These are not very good,' Chilly said, exerting himself to swallow.

'Xi'an people don't know how to cook. They live on noodles,' Six Times said.

'Taste fine to me,' I said.

Six Times turned to me. 'Since when are you eating meat?'

'I think Pigeon has a crush on Old Stone,' Vertical said.

They all looked at me and I said: 'What?'

'You're reading his book all the time. You put it right beside our pillow,' Six Times said.

'Because I'm trying to understand poetry,' I said. 'Plus, I finished Camus.'

'Can I have Camus? I've always wanted to read The Plague,' Chilly said.

We then talked about The Plague and The Myth of Sisyphus, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes. Not far from us, Old Stone, Small Bamboo, Young Li and Calm were playing Mahjong on a square table. Calm wore a green cardigan on top of the red floral dress. She cheered, pushed down her tiles and clapped her hands. The three men handed in their money. The others were watching TV inside the Little House. The volume was loud, announcing that the government was installing a new water filtration system in the reservoir. '… We are fighting minutes and snatching seconds,' it said.

For the first time in many years, I felt a tingling of contentment. I ate meat and drank water. I had a bed to sleep in. Soon, I would go to my bed and have a dream about butterflies, and, just like Zhuangzi, I would not be able to tell if it was me who dreamt about the butterflies or a butterfly who dreamt about me.

Two days later, the water filtration system started working and people began to return. By the end of July, there were four hundred and sixty-two tents accommodating one thousand two hundred and fifteen campers at Ping'an Square.

In the beginning of August, the police came with loudspeakers and hoses. 'The earthquake is over! Go back to your own residences! Stop disturbing public order!' they called out. After two days' fighting, they dispersed the campers and cleared the square.

I went back to university and began to apply for overseas PhD programs while finishing my Masters. The following year, I got an offer from the United States and left China in September. In the East Asian Studies department, I met a fellow student who cooked the best braised pork belly

and later became my husband. In 2013, we moved to Minneapolis after he was offered a postdoc position in the University of Minnesota. We both became addicted to Korean food there. Two years later, we bought a small house near Victory Memorial Park. It was quite a drive to the university, but the place won us over with its proximity to a popular Dim Sum restaurant. Instead of getting my doctoral degree I got pregnant in the autumn of 2015. My gestational craving was marinated pig's tails and it persisted even after the baby was born. We had another child in March 2017.

I didn't go back to China in all that time, not until October when my cousin called and told me my parents' old apartment was going to be demolished because it was on a planned light train route. So I flew back to handle some paperwork with the Provincial Land and Resource Bureau.

During my one-week stay, I heard from a mutual friend that Old Stone had just died in hospital, nine months after being diagnosed with stomach cancer.

I took a taxi to his wake. At the Chengdu City Crematorium, a white marquee was set up in the courtyard and inside Old Stone lay in a red coffin. On one side of the coffin, three Sichuan opera actors were performing traditional plays while two professional keeners cried on the other side, knocking their foreheads to the ground like hungry chickens.

There were quite a number of people in the marquee but I didn't know any of them except for Old Stone. I stood in silence, bowed in front of the coffin and went to the registration table to leave some money. When I got there, I saw a man in his forties sitting behind the table. He looked extremely like Old Stone back when I'd met him in the Little House.

'Hi.' He looked at me and smiled. 'Are you a friend of my big brother? Thank you for coming.'

'Yes. I'm sorry for your loss,' I said and handed in six hundred kuai, hoping this was still the market price for a death.

He took the money and smiled again. 'There is refreshment outside. Have some food.'

'Thank you, but I'd better go now. Again, my condolences,' I said.

I was on my way out when I saw a short and stout man in his late thirties walking towards me. I looked at him and he looked at me.

'Pigeon!' he said. It was Six Times.

He paid his tribute of two thousand kuai and we stepped outside together. He took out a pack of cigarettes and asked me if I still smoked.

'No,' I said. 'But I'll have one.'

We sat down by a flowerbed. 'Where have you been all these years?'

'I went to America,' I said.

'I thought you might have. Small Bamboo went there as well. Have you met him?'

'No, I didn't know he was in the States.'

'Maybe he wasn't. Maybe he ended up in Europe,' he said. 'A lot of us have left, and I've lost track of who went where.'

We chatted, updating each other with the basics. I told him I was working on a historical novel. He said he was involved in the Chengdu-Beijing maglev high-speed train project.

'When it's finished, it will take less than four hours to go to Beijing,' he said through a puff of smoke.

'Wow,' I said.

'This is the future,' he said.

We smoked and showed each other photos of our children. When we finished the cigarettes we put them out on the ground.

'So,' I said. 'Do you want to go somewhere and have sex?'

———————————

Yan Ge is a fiction writer in both Chinese and English. She is the author of thirteen books in Chinese, including six novels. Yan started to write in English in 2016. Since then, her writing has been published in *The New York Times*, *TLS*, *Brick* and elsewhere.

FEATURED POET

Nidhi Zak/Aria Eipe is a poet, pacifist and fabulist. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Banshee*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Rattle*, and *Winter Papers*, among others. She is currently co-editing a commemorative anthology with The Ireland Chair of Poetry, celebrating creative relationships between established and emerging Irish poets. Her first book of poetry is forthcoming in Autumn 2021.

Innocent
or you said you really needed coffee

so we walked into the first place with display pastries in the window
and while you stood there indecisive in front of the chalkboard menu
I looked so carefully at the posters plugging those coconut oil espressos
ran my fingers through the handpicked fairlytraded artisanroasted brown
beans sourced direct from the farmers co-op in Guatemala even waved
my phone over the QR code which showed a short film of Jose's highland
farm in Huehuetenango with its gleaming cherryred berries and all this
simply to avoid meeting the gaze of the dark fluteboned cashier with
the letters I-N-N-O-C-E-N-T embedded on the gold badge on his chest
a bright star blazoned across his jersey striped with the colours
of Cameroon who was asking you now what you wanted
but the thing is it didn't sound like talking it sounded
as if his throat was melting
and so were you
and me me too

A Myth of Horses

Say a horse is a myth:

as big a myth as the bigness of a foot
or the tooth of a sabre-toothed tiger
like a lion *feliform social carnivore*

like a lie
extending so far as bone
from a cornered mouth, long in the tooth,
even when closed.

Say a myth is a horse.

Say a myth is a band is a herd
is a harras of horse.

Say we harassed a horse—
say we whipped it, kicked it,
say we *broke* it.

Say we broke a horse
how would we put it
together again?

Say there were only ever five
of horses five of anything.

Say we set them up let them all loose thirst tearing through their throats in a torchered desert gave them leave to find drink and right when they came in sight
of that glitterdark
oasis
pierced a whistle like a falcon bird
of prey hunting them down calling them forth, commanding
their return.

(*poem continues*)

Say only five of them did, so we called these

al khamsa
—the birth of all horse on earth.

Say a horse did not need water
for it could hit a fisted hoof
upon any surface and draw ~~blood~~
~~like~~ constellations.

Say a horse did not need water
because it had wings, say,
a horse is a mountain
is a fountain
of life.

Say horses were born to run
even though they were not

say they sleep standing up
not lying
down

say they move towards pressure
not spurred on by pain

say *they shy*
away.

Say a queen made love
to a dead horse.

Say a queen was made to lay down
love with a slain stallion,
stallion worth a thousand cows, under
the sign of Sirius four-eyed dog star say
this horse flew like a bird over a kingdom
fleeing men, survived a whole year before
being welcomed, bathed, ritually slayed
by the king
of men.

(*poem continues*)

Say the day that we burned the body of love
the flames wouldn't go out

Love was just a boy with a sugarcane bow
and five flower arrows

so we put him in the mouth of a weary white mare
and drowned her there, beneath the waves, where

she still waits with a doomsday womb,
breathing bloody fire.

Say a horse is not a horse but a giant
trap,
wooden war toy besieging the beaches of Troy
soldiers armed to the teeth
in the belly of the beast
two spies sewn shut in its lips.

Say a horse is a gift, don't look it in the mouth,
say a horse is the rift between us—say
we flung a spear sprung a leak in its side
yet it did not bleed, say that's why
the bat-blind sooth-seer died for saying:

Equo ne credite / Do not trust the horse.

Say riding a horse
for the horse
is like feeling the jaws of a pride of lion
close around the flared boat of your throat
the lecherous grasp of a human predator
grappling with your jugular:
imagine

the horror! the horror as horse—
and what if this lion could speak?

Say we would not understand him.

O

egg is over
easy sputtering
is curate good-bad
unknowable
.
egg is broken
egg is white-no
brown-no
wine-speckled-trips-in-a-truckle-bed-of-twigs-o
.
comes first comes after
mostly oval
o but that's a kind of circle
is unknowable
.
comes on a hee-haw
panniers sombrero
bobble hat knitted by
the-jam-&-marrow-&-how-to-wear-scarves-well
.
this a scooped inverted shell
grandmother trick
for the late
to the table
.
little girl doesn't know
dear little baskets
nestling inside her
oops another circle
.
dig-dig with a stick
these eggs are miniscule
carried by wait
dig again
.
there!
there they go!
umbrellas!
parcels!

Ruth Wiggins lives in London, her poem is an exercise in Martianism. Her work has been recently published in *Poetry Review*, *POETRY, Blackbox Manifold* and *Perverse*. Her pamphlet *Myrtle* is published by the Emma Press, and her collection *a handful of string* is due from Paekakariki Press in May.

Fantastic Babies: Notes on a K-pop Music Video

Lisa McInerney

An owl perches by a chain-link fence. A beautiful man wearing a Beetlejuice suit and a 15-foot orange wig eye-fucks the camera from a cement throne. A battalion in riot gear assembles to 'stop music' and is reproached by people wearing neutral colours and gas masks. Someone throws a Molotov cocktail. The owl nopes out of there. Elsewhere, a second beautiful man thaws out from aesthetic refrigeration, then chair-dances. Then a third beautiful man descends from a picture frame in opulent regimental dress. A fourth beautiful man flexes in chains, then bellows an astounding musical bridge in a scrap yard. Women dressed as cats scratch a fifth beautiful man for asking politely if he can be your lover. There's lazy lip-syncing. There's a warehouse rave attended by two huge puppets, whose presence prompts the rebels in neutrals to joyfully remove their gas masks. Our five beautiful heroes are awarded with a throne each. They sit in strategic order—leader in the middle, his right-hand man, his left-hand man, the two least interesting on the outside—and eye-fuck the camera. This is the music video for 2012's 'Fantastic Baby', from K-pop monsters Big Bang. Big Bang are G-Dragon, Taeyang, Daesung, Seungri and T.O.P, and I love them.

I woke one morning in 2014, realised I was in my 30s, purchased a pair of runners and went for a graceless shuffle through the woods. Because I am a music fiend, and because the brain needs distraction while the body's trying to improve itself, it was imperative I find appropriate jams for my 5ks. They had to be the right rhythm and at the right BPM; with some foreboding I realised they had to be kind of sugary too. Slick, optimistic, viciously capitalist,

and bad for me. Someone in the comments of *The Guardian* running blog suggested K-pop—Korean pop music—and so K-pop became my running partner. K-pop is tightly arranged and beautifully produced. Its songs are delivered by the world's most indefatigable heartthrobs and are rarely over four minutes long. It makes excellent company.

I keep playlists for particular moods, seasons, genres, and, at last count, ten different kinds of house party I might be called upon to host. K-pop found its way from my running playlist onto my everyday playlist, my summer playlist, my self-empowerment playlist, and the playlist I keep for energetic-but-relatively-sober gatherings. Monsta X alongside St Vincent. Daft Punk to HyunA. I needed to know what I was listening to, so I found English translations for the lyrics. I needed to know who I was listening to, so I read about the idols. I needed context, so I read about Korean pop culture.

All my life I've had obsessions I thought said something integral about me: ponies, Raphael the Turtle, Pulp, Steve Buscemi films, Manchester United, *Wuthering Heights*, Sir Henry's, Final Fantasy VIII. Some were reflections of values and ambitions, some tracked a burgeoning understanding of the world. Ergo, I thought it must have been that my new love of K-pop was in some way revelatory. I considered it a sort of rebellion from the worthy music I'd been self-prescribing since my early teens, where each song had to have strictly defined artistic merit and each band public stances I could get behind. I used to be in the Radiohead fan club, for God's sake. Listening to K-pop could, I decided, be an exercise in exquisite pointlessness.

But I was not giving the industry its due, and I was not being fair to its idols.

Hallyu—the Korean Wave—began in the 1990s with K-pop, K-dramas and Korean cinema surging in popularity throughout Asia, then the rest of the world. This was not an organic phenomenon; the rest of us simply didn't wake up one day, realise we were in our 30s and decide it was time we fell in love with Korea. South Korea has long invested in its own cultural products.

A quota system was enforced in South Korean cinema in 1967, restricting the number of foreign films that could be shown so as to ensure the health of the domestic industry. This didn't suit Hollywood, so American studios lobbied their government and the American government compelled South

Korea to relax the quota, which had a detrimental effect on Korean cinema. In 1995, President Kim Young-sam, a reformer and internationalist, finally enacted policies providing support and subsidies to the Korean film industry, which, revived, didn't quite go on to flatten the Hollywood bully but did at least give us *The Wailing* and *Train to Busan*. Chinese television broadcast a number of K-dramas in the 1990s, and Chinese viewers went cracked for the stuff, leading to further adoption of Korean cultural products and Korean actors becoming household names across Asia. Also in the late '90s, South Korea relaxed restrictions on Japanese cultural imports, leading to (reasonable) fears about Korea's youth drowning in a sea of manga and J-pop, and so the Korean government pumped more money again into domestic entertainment. It worked, and J-pop now looks like a typo.

South Korean politicians know the value of soft power. The rapid modernisation and growth of the South Korean economy in the second half of the 20th century is known as the Miracle on the Han River, with the arts an integral component, not a happy side effect to industrial wealth. Indeed, President Park Geun-hye said in her 2013 inauguration speech, 'In the 21st century, culture is power.' (This is tempered by the fact that Park Geun-hye is currently serving a 32-year prison sentence for being crooked as a dog's back leg.) As a result of the Korean wave, there's been a massive increase worldwide in people wishing to learn the Korean language, classified as a language isolate, and notoriously difficult to master for an English speaker: in 1998, something like 163 US students were studying Korean; in 2018 that number had risen to around 14,000. It turns out that it's difficult not to like the country that gives you 10-step skincare routines, Bong Joon-ho and BTS.

BTS, or Bangtan Sonyeondan, or Bangtan Boys, is the most successful Korean cultural product, a boy band estimated to be worth trillions of won to the South Korean economy. My teenager's peers never showed interest in second-wave K-pop stalwarts like Girls' Generation, Super Junior, Shinhwa, TVXQ, Wonder Girls, 2NE1 or Big Bang, but now you can't cast an eye at a school desk without spotting a smitten three-letter carving on the Formica. BTS finally moved K-pop into the international mainstream. Built around the rapping prowess and undeniable charisma of Kim Nam-joon, or Rap Monster, or Rap-Mon, or now just RM (if BTS had strategically ordered thrones, his would be the one in the middle), the band was debuted in 2012, the year we were blessed with 'Fantastic Baby'.

I say 'was debuted' because, like the wider hallyu movement, nothing about K-pop is organic. K-pop's 'idols' are managed by the entertainment companies that run K-pop with a by-the-numbers iron fist. A Korean entertainment company is a record label; a talent agency for musicians, dancers and actors; a music production and publishing house; and an event management company. On top of all that, it will often produce its own merchandise; YG Entertainment, Big Bang's company, even has its own beauty and clothing lines.

Developing new talent is integral. Not only does everyone want the Next Big Thing in perpetuity, but K-pop bands—specifically boy bands—have a shelf life dictated by compulsory military service. Every able-bodied Korean man is bound to service of between eighteen months to three years, depending on military branch. That's a long time in pop music. While there have been calls to reduce the length of compulsory service, make it voluntary or make more exemptions available, the Korean people generally consider enlistment something a young man should be proud to do. Responding to calls for their exemption, the members of BTS said that they are happy to enlist. And these mandatory two-year breaks, during which the idol will retire from public life entirely, means that the K-pop machine is in need of constant refuelling.

Wannabe idols begin as trainees in the system, often before they've hit their teens. They balance school with dance, voice and language lessons for however long it takes for their entertainment company to decide they're ready for debut or dumping. Because of this training period, K-pop idols are more Ginger Rogers than Fred Astaire: they do everything that a great pop star should do, but in multiple languages across multiple platforms (backwards, and in heels!). But performing music is only one part of the full-time job; idols are also required to participate regularly in television entertainment shows, be brand ambassadors for some of Korea's biggest exports, create incessant social media content, and cultivate meaningful relationships with fans. It is very much a 24/7 appointment, as the fans certainly demand.

The video for 'Fantastic Baby' may work as evidence that South Korea loves its anti-authoritarian imagery; what's odd is that South Korea also takes great pride in its regimented customs, whether it's military service or

the competition encouraged in Korean education and business. Don't strive to be great, strive to be the greatest. In some cases, K-pop trainees endure years of straining to reach impossible standards, years of restrictions on their personal lives and free time, before being told they're cut. They put themselves through this because there is no reward without effort, and because duty is more than a concept in South Korea. BTS's RM, clever at school, reportedly only convinced his parents to allow him to try a career in music by asking if they'd rather their son be the best rapper in the country or the 5,000th best student. Rebellion is an important idea, especially when it pertains to personal strength and self-actualisation, but for the most part it remains as imagery to be played with, aesthetics to be flirted with. Almost as if it's just a sort of fetish on the whole country's part.

'Fantastic Baby' is an electropop bop about bopping-as-revolution, written by producer Teddy Park (Park Hong-jun) and Big Bang members G-Dragon (Kwon Ji-yong) and T.O.P (Choi Seung-hyun), and it is incontestably one of K-pop's megahits, with about 7 million unit sales across Asia. Its music video, in which the five members of Big Bang deal sexily with various symbols of oppression—shackles, shards of ice, women dressed as cats—is an explosion of colour, mangled metal and power-to-the-people imagery. It's got artfully smudged kohl eyeliner. It's got lustrous shoulder armour. It's got T.O.P in a 19th-century red velvet military coat and breeches.

Big Bang was formed by YG Entertainment and debuted in 2006, pacesetters for the second generation of K-pop idols. Its 'leader', for K-pop boy and girl bands must have a leader, is G-Dragon, or Kwon Ji-yong. For those about to roll their eyes, 'yong' is translated as 'dragon', so Ji-dragon is actually G-Dragon's name. He's a singer, rapper, fashion designer and androgynous dandy, the man in the 15-foot orange wig, in the centre throne, a genuine Korean superstar. Taeyang (Dong Young-bae) is known for his smooth vocals, his Christian tattoos and generally for being the glue that holds every Big Bang banger together. He's the one that thaws out in the 'Fantastic Baby' video. Daesung (Kang Dae-sung) is another nice Christian boy with a rare pair of lungs; he's the beefcake in chains. Seungri (Lee Seung-hyun), the youngest of the group, is the one scratched by the cat ladies. This is not the worst thing that's ever happened to Seungri. And

T.O.P (Choi Seung-hyun) is Big Bang's surprisingly deep-voiced rapper, the one in the velvet military coat. He is the oldest of the group, an award-winning actor, an art collector and furniture designer, and a bit of a mess by K-pop standards. He is definitely my favourite.

I'm cautious about watching music videos, because they can play havoc with my interpretation of a song. A great music video manipulates me into liking a song I'd otherwise think mediocre; a bad music video puts me off a song I should adore. I am not sorry I watched the video for 'Fantastic Baby'. And the moment I realised that Big Bang's deep-voiced rapper was in actual fact the fop in the breeches is the moment I decided T.O.P was my favourite.

T.O.P should be everyone's favourite. Of the K-pop genre, he says things like, 'We don't say "white pop" when white people make music.' He wears Mondrian print suits on stage. The music video for his solo track 'Doom Dada' was inspired by Stanley Kubrick, Antoni Gaudí and Salvador Dalí. He's into Pink Floyd. He raps lyrics like, 'Francis Bacon in my kitchen.' He was initially rejected by YG Entertainment because he was chubby, so he reportedly lost 20 kilos in forty days before auditioning again; he's since said, of filming a topless scene for his lead role in the action movie *Tazza: The Hidden Card*, 'I was so embarrassed that I screamed.' His Instagram account was a parade of surreal, Technicolor non-sequiturs, before he deleted all of his photographs. He admitted to smoking cannabis in 2017 and was sentenced to 10 months in prison, which was suspended. He begged the Korean public for forgiveness: 'I have no excuses,' he wrote, 'and deserve any kind of punishment.' The day after being indicted on these charges, he was found unconscious after an overdose of benzodiazepine and was hospitalised.

Oh. Did that get a bit dark?

This is not the worst thing that's ever happened to Big Bang.

The least interesting role in the 'Fantastic Baby' music video is Seungri's. He stands still, surrounded by models in latex and cat ears, and growls five unchallenging lines, cast as the mature, sexy one in a bid to combat the fact of his being the baby of the group. This is something I've never given much of a shit about, but something that is apparently noteworthy. Seungri is the

youngest of the group, and so Seungri will never be as accomplished as his colleagues.

Seungri's distinct 'thing' became his business ventures: 'Business was the one area that I could try without overlapping with the other members [of Big Bang],' he said. He successfully launched a dance academy, a ramen franchise and a record label, among other projects. In the summer of 2018, as his older band mates enlisted and withdrew from public life, he released his debut solo album, *The Great Seungri*. Its title riffed off his growing reputation as the Great Gatsby of South Korea, his love of the party lifestyle, his extravagant spending. In 2018 he became one of seven directors for a luxury Gangnam venue called Club Burning Sun.

In 2019, police investigating the alleged assault of a 29-year-old clubber at Club Burning Sun uncovered evidence of sexual harassment, date rape, and illegal drug use. There was immediate and significant media attention due to Seungri's role as director, and in February text messages purporting to show that he had not only been aware of the illicit activities taking place on the premises, but had directed staff to secure prostitutes for foreign investors, were submitted anonymously to the Korean Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission. On the 10th of March 2019, Seungri was booked as a suspect. He announced his retirement from entertainment the next day.

As I write, the investigation is ongoing. Seungri has begun his military service, and his case will now most likely be heard at a military court. He has been indicted without detention on charges including procuring sexual services for investors, distribution of illegally filmed sexual content (known as *molka*) on social platforms, and overseas gambling (gambling is illegal for all Korean citizens, regardless of where in the world they partake). It's difficult to say what will happen next, as the Korean courts do not agree with the Korean police on which charges are valid; Seungri maintains his innocence.

It's ridiculous what can pass for scandal in K-pop fandom—google any idol and the word 'controversy' and you'll find specious nonsense—but Burning Sun is a real catastrophe, one that's had a profound effect on the finances and reputation of YG Entertainment and its competitors. Tourist numbers in Gangnam fell. For Korean women, Burning Sun proved that

misogyny and corruption are as rampant in K-pop as they are elsewhere in Korea's patriarchal society. As for Seungri, he's found himself out of a job, his image scrubbed even from Big Bang's merchandise. Some fans have made statements of support. *Big Bang will always be five! Seungri, you are not alone!* More again have scorned him on social media, picketed YG Entertainment's offices demanding an explanation for his behaviour, and issued death threats.

Amber Liu of girl group f(x) noted of K-pop fan communities, 'For girls, you have to go for the general public popularity. For boys, you need a fandom. Like a big, passionate fandom.' You fuck with that fandom at your peril.

We must assume Seungri hasn't read the book. It didn't work out great for Jay Gatsby either.

The various fandoms across K-pop have their own names: *Army* for BTS, *EXO-L* for EXO, *Shawol* for SHINee, *Kamilia* for Kara, *MeU* for f(x), *VIP* for Big Bang. A person who's obsessed with Korean pop culture in general is known as a 'koreaboo'—a twist on the derogatory term 'weeaboo', referring to a fellow Westerner infatuated with Japanese pop culture and stereotypes—and obsessive fandom, not specific to K-pop, but in any sphere, is called 'stanning'.

This comes from Eminem's song 'Stan', Ireland's Christmas No. 1 for the year 2000; the titular character is so obsessed with Eminem that he murders his pregnant girlfriend when the rapper fails to answer his correspondence in a timely fashion. Rather than have a good, hard look at themselves when accused of Stan-like behaviour, fandoms tend to celebrate the overzealous. Stanning is not exclusive to screaming teenage girls and hysterical Marshall Mathers enthusiasts. *We stan a fierce queen*, cry the fans of *Rupaul's Drag Race*; queens insufficiently fierce get racist abuse and death threats. Then there's the case of DJ and presenter Zane Lowe, who found himself besieged by furious netizens for daring to laugh at Lauren Laverne's breathless canonisation of Beyoncé during live coverage of Glastonbury 2011, because *oh my God we stan Beyoncé*. Rihanna, Frank Ocean and Grimes are three musicians who endured pressure campaigns on social media when new work wasn't produced according to what their stans felt was a reasonable schedule. *Star Wars* stans, livid at some perceived feminist agenda in their

favourite movie franchise, organised to manipulate the Rotten Tomatoes score for 2017's *The Last Jedi* and harassed its star, Kelly Marie Tran, till she deleted her social media accounts. After making *Leaving Neverland*, a documentary about two men who allege they were sexually abused by Michael Jackson, director/producer Dan Reed received death threats. Of Jackson's stans, Reed said, 'You can't challenge them with facts because it's an article of faith for them and any challenges to that belief are blasphemy.' Then you have football hooliganism, religious cults, US politics . . . surely the feverish devotion to raving liar Donald Trump is stanning of the most omnicidal sort. This is a time of trial by social media, cancel culture, and poisonous hyperbole. Stans expect, stans demand, and stans can be brutal when storylines or album release dates or critics' responses don't develop the way they believe they should.

It makes sense for the entertainment companies of K-pop to pander to their bands' stans. Devoted fandoms promote for free and spend like there's no tomorrow. Devoted fandoms are worldwide movements. They are also largely anonymous, certainly without hierarchy, and utterly unmanageable.

We are *EXO-L* and we stan EXO. Three members of the Korean-Chinese supergroup—Lu Han, Kris Wu (Wu Yi Fan) and Tao (Huang Zitao), all Chinese —filed lawsuits against SM Entertainment in a bid to terminate their contracts, citing overwork, mistreatment leading to serious illness and injury, and ethnic discrimination.

We are *Shawol* and we stan SHINee. Kim Jong-hyun of SHINee was recruited by SM Entertainment at the age of 15 and took his own life in 2017, aged 27. He had suffered from depression and had struggled with the enormous demands the industry made of him as an idol. In his suicide note he said he felt broken from the inside.

We are *MeU* and we stan f(x). Amber Liu's bandmate Choi Jin-ri, known by her stage name Sulli, joined SM Entertainment at the age of 11 and took her own life in 2019, at the age of 25. An outspoken feminist, Sulli was criticised and ridiculed by Korea's deeply conservative media and harassed by social media users. Before her death, she had repeatedly asked SM Entertainment for help managing the hatred directed at her.

We are *Kamilia* and we stan Kara. Goo Hara joined SM Entertainment's girl group Kara in 2008, at the age of 17, and took her own life in 2019, at the

age of 28. Her ex-boyfriend, Choi Jong-bum, secretly filmed as the couple had sex, then threatened to upload the video to the internet. Hara took him to court. Though the court agreed the sex tape was filmed without her consent, Choi Jong-bum was acquitted because Hara had stayed in a relationship with him. Mercilessly slut-shamed and harassed on social media, Hara died by suicide just weeks after her close friend Sulli. It was not her first attempt.

Tailor-made for young girls with disposable income and social circles driven by the need to find a place and fit into it, the ultimate pop product might look something like a cute, slim, straight, cisgender boy with big eyes, nice hair and a balladeer's larynx. Or perhaps a cute, slim, straight, cisgender girl with big eyes, nice hair and a message of empowerment. Ostensibly this is the kind of idol Korea's entertainment companies churn out: girls so polished you can use them as filter templates on camera apps and lads who wouldn't look out of place on the front cover of Lisa Simpson's *Non-Threatening Boys* magazine. Ostensibly, then, the fandom come to expect this kind of product, rely on this kind of product, and respond appropriately when the product meets or doesn't meet these expectations.

Idols are supposed to be non-threatening in that they're meant to be beautifully groomed and perpetually amiable, but they are not supposed to be sexless. K-pop music videos may surprise those expecting bubblegum East Asian *kawaii* shit; they're high-octane, expensive, and raunchy. Those assuming that female K-pop idols will lean in to Western ideas about Asian women's submissiveness will be dispossessed of such creepy notions by the music videos for Ga In's 'Fuck You', Blackpink's 'Boombayah' or CL's 'Hello Bitches'. Those assuming male icons will neuter themselves for tween appetites will be scandalised by the videos for BTS's 'Boy in Luv', in which the boys, dressed in school uniforms, manhandle a terrified classmate into a room they've just thrashed because they think she sure is pretty, or G-Dragon and T.O.P's 'Zutter', in which the rapping duo partake in various extremely illegal activities and then literally piss all over one another. All of this immodesty and immorality is, of course, flawlessly performed.

The flawless performance of sexual energy means that the idols' sexuality is also a product for fan consumption. Management companies do not permit their teenage idols to date at all; adult idols' relationships

must be kept secret too, because fans need to believe the idols are theirs till they're ready to move on. When asked about marriage in a live interview, Big Bang's Daesung confirmed he would like to get married some day, only to be booed by aghast fans. 'I'm human too!' was his indignant response. 'Are you going to remain single forever? No? That's strange . . . You can get married and I can't get married.' The idols are there to serve; every facet of their lives is packaged for fans to pore over, every moment choreographed to enchant. The ability to create personal narratives around these polished characters is a significant draw for fans. There are almost 113,000 fan-written stories about BTS on fanfiction site Archive of Our Own (Big Bang trail with a miserable 2,362).

In her column for *The Guardian* in January 2020, Hadley Freeman examines the 21st-century propensity for imposing our own morals and sensibilities on pre-existing characters. 'This tendency to overrelate to any fictional character, whether it's Jo [March] or Fleabag,' she writes, 'is less about art and more about narcissism.' This is undoubtedly a facet of K-pop fandom; in the same way I used to assume my fleeting obsessions said something about me, stans like their idols to function as an extension of their selves. And so it is quite possible that the bile directed towards Big Bang's Seungri was generated because he broke this contract between idol and stan; in his very adult indiscretions, he brought real life into the K-pop fantasy.

It strikes me as the most unpleasant incongruity that if an idol is suffering from depression, or suicidal ideation, or injuries they're not permitted to rest enough to heal, or social media harassment, their fandoms seem entirely impotent. There was mourning, of course, for Hara and Sulli and Jong-hyun. Fans still celebrate their birthdays and politicians and management companies talk about necessary challenges to the online behaviour of gossip sites, fans and anti-fans (the stans of an idol or group's perceived rivals. A BTS stan, for example, might think it her right to harass members of EXO or their fandom). But in general, idols dying by suicide is seen as a personal tragedy rather than emblematic of a punishing system reliant on feverish fan engagement. It's more perfectly beautiful that way. It's easier. Burning Sun, on the other hand, was grubby. Unlike Hara, Sulli and Jong-hyun, Seungri was not suffering from too much attention. He was greedily looking for more. And so here we have a fandom eagerly taking on a punitive role; Seungri, awaiting trial, is asking for it.

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With guerrillas in gas marks defeating their similarly faceless oppressors, the 'Fantastic Baby' music video is heavy with anti-authoritarian imagery. This is not unique to 'Fantastic Baby', nor is it unexpected. The South Korea of the 20th century was marked by political and social oppression. President Rhee's One-People Principle read as egalitarian but proved closer to fascism. President Park Chung-hee (father of our old pal Park Geun-hye, the one serving the 32-year prison sentence) presided over the Miracle on the Han River but declared martial law when his people proved ungrateful. He was assassinated by his friend, Kim Jae-gyu, paving the way to power for an even worse despot, Chun Doo-hwan, whose brutal suppression of the Gwangju Uprising led to his being sentenced to death and then pardoned by President Kim Young-sam, and Kim Young-sam's successor, President-elect Kim Dae-jung. Chun had, in the course of his career, sentenced Kim Young-sam to house arrest and Kim Dae-jung to death; South Korean history is wild. We don't have time to get into the division of Korea, the Korean War, the armistice and the Sunshine Policy, but you can take it as a given that the whole thing remains fraught and wounding and disruptive. The point being: the South Korea of *hallyu* is relatively new, but K-pop has a long memory.

Thus, South Korea's experience with, if not proclivity towards, authoritarian systems is perhaps evident in the way its K-pop idols engage with anti-authoritarian imagery while being beholden to disciplinarian entertainment companies and a judgemental public. It's hard to know whether the music video for 'Fantastic Baby' reflects on Big Bang's power and instrumentality or is simply selling glossy imagery that appeals very naturally to young adults; industry observers would confidently claim it's the latter. K-pop idols get into trouble a lot, though. For ostensible ciphers.

The great K-pop contradiction is how such a profoundly moralistic and conservative industry—which demands its idols conform to particular physical ideals: sexy, but not too sexy; lively, but not too spirited—gives us so many insubordinate characters. BTS's RM blurbs challenging novels; his endorsement of Cho Nam-joo's *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, a bestseller slamming the South Korean patriarchy, sits proudly on the cover, right under a quote by the *New York Review of Books*. His band-mate Suga is brazenly ambiguous

about his sexuality, a massive statement in South Korea. Soloist Ailee has been brutally honest about the pressure to be thin in an industry dependent on the pass-remarkable, and the effect her diet had on her voice. And if Big Bang's G-Dragon is famously androgynous, f(x)'s Amber Liu has from her debut exuded gloriously queer energy. Having left SM Entertainment in the autumn of 2019, she's been candid about the stresses and strains imposed on idols. In an interview with American news show *CBS Good Morning* in January 2020, she said, 'My skin was too dark . . . and I had to brighten [it]. I lost a lot of weight. I developed a lot of really bad eating disorders.' It is an incongruity indeed to hear a gamine idol like Amber Liu disclose that she too had been subject to draconian beauty specifications. That K-pop can have such punishing standards and still gift us characters like Amber, Psy (of 'Gangnam Style' über-fame), BTS's RM and Suga, 2NE1's CL, Super Junior's Shindong, and Big Bang's G-Dragon and T.O.P is a fact almost too disconcerting to admit: the system will hurt you, but the system works.

I re-watched the 'Fantastic Baby' music video probably a dozen times as I wrote this essay and I'm still not sick of it. I think that's important. There's a lot going on, but all of it's dashing. The choreographed insurrection. The five distinct stunners. The velvet military coat. As I was putting this piece together I sent a link to the video to a friend and, at a loss as to how to succinctly describe how I felt about it, I just said, 'It's like all of my migraines having an orgy.' And even after being commissioned to think seriously about what 'Fantastic Baby' does so right, or how K-pop manages to sell itself off the beautiful backs of its idols even while being so unashamedly exploitative, or what the fuck fandom means in this day and age, I haven't been able to come to any useful conclusions. In its anti-authoritarian imagery, is 'Fantastic Baby' a celebration of defiance, or by sanitising and monetising the concept of revolution is 'Fantastic Baby' actually a clever exercise in compliance? Are G-Dragon, Taeyang, Daesung, Seungri and T.O.P in on the joke? We could assume that they are, having taken control of their musical direction early on in their careers, writing and producing much of their own work, and easily being in a position now to tell entertainment companies, Korean conservatives or the most demanding elements of their fandoms to fuck away off for themselves. But then didn't Seungri,

who in his transgressions almost sank an entertainment giant, prove that idols have more fates than their own in their hands? Take a closer look at T.O.P—so astute and talented and brittle—and wonder if his lackadaisical lip-syncing and dancing hide very poorly his fear of the hand that feeds him. I don't know. Post-Sulli and Hara and Jong-hyun, post-Burning Sun, post drug convictions and disclosures of eating disorders and BTS on *The Tonight Show*, 'Fantastic Baby' feels like a moment in K-pop we're never going to get back. My running times have improved, and tech-trance is the current soundtrack for more graceful shuffling through the woods. I google T.O.P from time to time, just in case. It's not easy to be a non-stan K-pop fan. The further it travels, the more idols suffer, the harder it is to ignore that it's not the most ethical of my obsessions. I hope it says nothing about me at all.

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Lisa McInerney's work has featured in *Winter Papers*, *Granta*, *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, *The Irish Times* and numerous anthologies. Her debut novel *The Glorious Heresies* won the 2016 Women's Prize for Fiction and the 2016 Desmond Elliott Prize. Her second novel, *The Blood Miracles*, won the 2018 RSL Encore Award.

Sonnet to a SoftBoy™ (He Microwaved My Heart)

Tell me what you're hearing, what's tilted your weak chin down
To the greasy terracotta tiles to match a down-turned lip?
Has your oversized jumper sealed you up, in a lemon hem,
Dusted down to vintage like those Levi's grate your hip?
Beneath headphones, a maroon cap sits, casting crescent shadows
Over robin down and blackbird curls, over crow's feet bordered eyes.
Tear-drop blue, they simmer in the steam, crying avocados,
Rank. Your couscous on rye sogs up when it cries.
The melancholy is silenced by the ping. The pop. And it's done.
It bleats its blunt goodbye. Back to anonymity he retreats,
Re-joining the background actors, intrepid, he eats alone.
The spotlight finds another nursing pasta and cold meats.
And I wonder is it advisable to be so pathetic
As to find yourself enamoured by such a bland aesthetic.

Katie O'Sullivan is a Creative Writing student at NUI Galway. She has had poems published with NUIG's Writer's Society, *SIN*, and *The Galway Review*. She is currently working towards her first collection.

The Good Kind of Green

after Federico García Lorca

As children we ate leaves and let on
they were anything else. That heat
of believing. Swimming out to kiss
your thinning digits, I was happy
to get it wrong. Mistook your waving
for drowning, foregrounding the sun
set into a thumbprint. Your steady gaze
above the waves—a stilled field of eyebright.
Locked me in an uncertainty of cool tones.
Artichoke. Bitter. Bud.
Cabbage. Citrus. Cucumber.
Dill. Douglas Fir.
Eucalyptus. Evergreen.
Grass. Kale. Kiwi.
Lake. Leek. Lime Peel.
Mint. Moss. Nile. Nori.
Olive. Pea. Pear. Peppermint.
Poison Ivy. Prairie. Reef.
Sea Mist. Shiso. Silt. Snow Pea.
Soft Moss. Spearmint. Spinach Dip.
Surf Spray. Sweet Pea. Tender Yellow.
Tinted Mint. Treetop. Undersea.
Your hand creeping up the inner seam
of my wide legged slacks. The heavy
duster folded away for summer. The stout
pen lifted from the bookies. Quick twisting
my pubic hair with the garden gate hiccuping
after you. All in the same breath.
Verde, que te quiero verde. You wake
to go quietly. Your shadow hangs hungry
in the doorway. Known from the inside.

Jess McKinney is a writer from Inishowen, County Donegal, currently studying for her MA in Poetry at Queen's University Belfast. Her work has appeared in *Abridged*, *Bloomers Magazine* and *Poethead*, with upcoming poetry in *Banshee*. She received the JHS Summer School Bursary 2018, was selected as a Cúirt 2019 Young Writer Delegate, and is co-founder of the Not4U Poetry Collective.

Caledonia Whipping Boy

Alex Bell

The day I arrived in Edinburgh, Kylie Minogue played a massive gig at the castle. Drunkenly, with a friend, at around midday, I sat in the bath and shaved my head. And in the evening I passed out on the floor of my bedroom, just as Kylie took to the stage I like to imagine. The morning after, I woke up on our couch and my legs were stained with piss, so I took a shower and accidentally pulled the shower curtain to the ground. I screamed in anger at myself, turned off the shower, and punched my right thigh until it was shining like a slow-cooked honey-glazed slab of pork. Then flew around the flat rooting through cupboards and drawers for a manual to fix the shower curtain and couldn't find one. And then the panic. I realised that without a flimsy piece of paper, I was lost.

In Edinburgh Castle you can queue to enter a small room where, you will be told, King James VI was born. A plaque on the wall notes that the screams of Mary, Queen of Scots would've echoed loud around that very room almost five hundred years ago. There is another building in the grounds of the castle—large, white and filled with poppies. Chiselled into the marble walls are lists of the dead from the world wars, which Americans in kilts stand around and photograph. There is a cannon that is fired once a day at one o'clock. We missed it.

On my last night in Scotland, I sat in a pub and talked for hours with people I would probably never see again. I had a few pints bought for me but mostly I bought my own. The pub was a dive—the only cheap pub in the expensive

area where we worked—so on the advice of a friend I inserted a Fisherman's Friend mint under my upper lip to stomach the taste of the shite Guinness. Surprisingly, it worked. A pint every half hour, a piss after every pint. Late in the night, I went out for a smoke with another friend. While we were out there a lad asked me if I was from Dublin and I told him no. I felt my arse get wet through my jeans on the slick outdoor chairs. It was cold but I stayed out talking, arse damp and stout stuck to my beard. I gagged on my cigarette and thought about my damp arse and wished that we could stay seated forever. But we stood up and I know she saw that damp arse—it's all in mind forever, my hairy hole pasted to my boxers with Scottish August rain off a sodden plastic chair. I went home and spent an hour clearing out the empty wine bottles that I had stored in my wardrobe for months, and I woke up shivering then at 5am and puked.

One day when walking through the Meadows, a vast gusty expanse of common land near the centre of the city (so says Muriel Spark) I saw beside me an elderly woman, sitting on a bench, walking stick set on the ground, looking at Arthur's Seat (a lump of distressed earth, remnant of an ancient volcano), with tears streaming from her eyes. She soon left and hobbled away, and I looked at the bench and saw on the bench a small plaque paying tribute to a dead man. The plaque did not look new. I looked to my left then and a child on the grass tripped and fell when trying to catch a frisbee. It cried too.

That summer I worked at a festival where the managers were (in their own words) the greatest cretins in bookselling in Scotland. It was to be a wild month, so we were promised. The night before opening we stayed on hours after our shifts ended, gorged ourselves on cans of Tennent's and pizza, kept the receipts, claimed them as expenses. Our manager was in his forties and had osteoporosis. On some days he walked with a cane. He took twice the recommended dose of morphine every day.

Down a back alley in Leith, a gentrifying docklands town a short walk from Edinburgh's centre, there was an empty warehouse that had been converted into a community art space. Sometimes during the day, it would host events for families. But once every month, at midnight, two

people would attach hooks into their flesh, winch themselves up on wires, and bleed until unconscious. One was a woman with dreadlocks who swallowed swords on the Royal Mile. The other was a man in leather who I never saw again. A friend from work brought me along, even bought me the ticket. The warehouse was huge, so even though the crowd was large each person had ample space between them. Nobody ever explained to me the purpose of the event. Maybe it was a cleansing ritual. Despite my confusion, as I saw them hang and bleed I was jealous, aroused and upset.

One night myself and a friend met an old married couple in a pub. He was a professor of German literature; she was a dietician. He told us, shouting, voice filled with stout, the correct way to pronounce *Brecht*. He told us about translation work he had done. When leaving, he handed us his business card, so my friend looked him up and found a *Huffington Post* article. In 2011, or some year like that, the professor had exposed himself, while erect, to a mother and her 17-year-old daughter. However, as this was, according to the judge, only a minor sexual assault, he kept his job. When we'd been drinking with the two of them, his wife had told us, smiling with eyes of mischief, that she had met him, her future husband, several decades ago, when she was a high school student and he was her newly-qualified teacher.

Red lines like tire tracks laced my back. I get ahead of myself.

In late August, or maybe early August, I can't remember, my abdomen started to hurt. I didn't expect it to happen so soon, I must admit. I went to the doctor. She told me that it was nothing too serious, that I should lay off the drink for two weeks and see how I feel then. She wrote me a prescription for something but it didn't help. Subsequently, my liver began to hurt.

Olivia Laing appeared at the festival to promote her book, *Crudo*. She had short, brown hair. In the blurb of *The Lonely City*, it says that the book illuminates 'not only the causes of loneliness but also how it might be redeemed and embraced.'

I met them in a pub. I had been drinking on my own after work, leaning against the bar counter. They sat down beside me. We got talking. They introduced themselves as Tim and Jill. Husband and wife. Originally from Swansea, they worked in finance. They were older than me, well into their thirties. They told me that their lives were so much more enjoyable, looser, more powerful, now that they had cast off the shackles of marital convention. I was drunk, and I told them my idea. I told them what I wanted done to me, why I wanted it done to me. I told Tim and Jill how much longer I was staying in the country. They were thrilled. They offered to meet me once a week, at their home, until I left.

Whiskey breath, damp arse. Look at the eyes looking at you, feel the pain on your back, but don't think of your damp arse. Looks like you've forgotten to take off your name badge from work so better do that; I bet your cheeks are red from drink, or mortification, or otherwise, but think of the pain of your back and the lines of the cane lacing your spine. Crowded bar, filled with a few friends and many strangers. The night before, whipped for the first time. First time upon the rack. Maybe a friend says something or offers to buy you a round but your mind is elsewhere. The pain of last night. The drink feels pointless now. Why talk? You want to feel the lash.

I ran alone through the Meadows at night. It was raining, not heavily. The benches were damp. I passed by the stump of a felled tree. Two months prior, myself and a friend had held each other by the hip and stood on that stump and danced to Earth, Wind and Fire. I was crying this time and tomorrow I would leave the country.

They strung me up, Tim and Jill. In their house, a rambling pile in the hills near Edinburgh, beside the start of a lovely hiking trail. They had a shed set aside from the main house. Small, but well furnished. A hook attached to the ceiling, ropes in a box in the corner. They took turns lashing me with my own belt. Strung me up. What of it. Strung me up. It was all pleasure, a laugh. The last night I spent with them, Jill told me to neigh like a horse. Flog the horse! He'll run faster! Until his legs finally break! We had a meal together afterwards. They had a broad knowledge of craft beer and knew

how to cook a steak. As I filled my cheeks with potatoes like a squirrel, Jill said that she wanted to kick my balls.

And what if Arthur's Seat erupted again? I saw it happen. I saw the lava rush down the hills. I was pulling myself, pulling my hair out, pulling my cock off its hinges, when I saw the eruption. And an end in failure, all failure. No nothing could be beaten from me, no nothing no envy no lust no greed no sin. All remains within, all in the skull and the feeble arms, all in all, no confession no pardon, no none at all, none at all, all in all a failure. I cried every time they struck me but ultimately nothing changed.

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Alex Bell is a bookseller who has worked in Dublin and Edinburgh. This is his first publication.

Minotaur By Proxy

The entrance fee was a golden coin I had exchanged for euros
At the bar. A hooded man escorted me to a door that was coin operated.
I asked him repeatedly if I was to insert my coin-from-the-bar
And he was forced to end his silence with an irritated *yes, that coin*.
Inside there was no music, but it felt like there should be music
A specific fairground music, which I endeavoured to play in my head
Accentuating the experience that I had paid for, not handsomely,
But with a significant enough amount that I wanted my experience
To be nuanced and to involve an appropriate soundtrack.
I slid down a slide and observed many hazards. Sharp edging
On the metal mesh constructions, low ceilings with no signs.
I could sense other people around me, so I took the most unlikely
Route I could find, round a blind corner towards a dimly lit room.
Here I considered what I wanted from this experience. Was the goal
To stay inside as long as possible, to get my money's worth, or to
Solve the labyrinth and leave with a sense of competitive achievement?
I continued walking around and noting the hazards that I would
Recount to my friends later. A hidden step, a nail protruding
From the frame of a window that was glazed with plexiglass,
A nod to safety consciousness that made me think that
The constructors of the labyrinth had an awareness of safety
Which made their lax attitude even more significant.
Feeling my way along a wall in the dark I felt a gap
And sidestepped through it, considering that its narrowness
Represented a bias towards those of a smaller frame. Unsafe
And sizeist. The gap had a bend in it and transported me into a room
Painted white and lit by a single strip light that was flickering.
No warning sign about seizures. The floor was concrete and empty.

Emily S. Cooper's work has been published in *Banshee*, *Hotel* and *Poetry Ireland Review*, among others. She was a recipient of the 2019 Next Generation Award by the Arts Council of Ireland and her debut pamphlet comes out with Makina Books this year.

May be stopped there

I might hurt you if I let you in
we did scant more too late I shut
myself together lonely at the lack
of depth lost in the imagination
not collapsed cold perhaps without
your hands I am content with

all I feel I have keine Lust
as the German has just left
an impression of the impression of
dumb desire laugh abstracted

love blabs a history of hands
though you deny it I knew by

the greedy pressure of your thumb
in my mouth the focus was local

Kathleen Heil's poetry, fiction, and literary translations appear in *The New Yorker*, *FENCE*, *The Threepenny Review*, and many other journals. A recipient of awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, she lives and works in Berlin. More at kathleenheil.net or Instagram @kathleen_heil.

Corpse Paths

Above, there are ghost signs,
messages from another time
carved into sandstone
set atop Palladian frames.
Below, orange moonglade—
mångata, rain-made,
cast of streetlights
and damp tarmac,
stretching out in the mist,
causing stray walkers to dance.
The air is thick with the smell
of rain and wet stone—
it takes you back,
to dry patches beyond the Grove,
beneath the chestnut trees
and tumbling structures—
this was where we'd shift,
feeling brazen with our wet hair
and mute phones.
There are whispers everywhere,
each lamp and brick a reminder—
down there, that's where the Gingerbread
used be, where you could score a nodge—
even your voice would twist
in the telling, searching
for where *that fucker* used live—
they have all become myths,
even yourself,
once the lord of nameless streets.

(*poem continues*)

Was any of it real?
Did you really see that runner's
face smashed in? Is his body
still there, out beyond the Scout Hall,
buried in some leaves and twigs?
The paths lead beyond the streets,
to where the curbs are broken,
and the bounce of leather guides you down,
content you had escaped,
but eager to return,
to tell stories of your nomad existence
in the places you always tell stories—
you would speak of the emptiness,
the sheer and lifeless cliffs,
the uncontacted peoples
who set about you while seeking diesel—
hello, old friend, your mantra,
the words that bring some comfort
out of those myths, marking the way.

James O'Sullivan lectures at University College Cork. His most recent collection of poetry *Courting Katie* was published by Salmon in 2017. James is also the author of the critical text *Towards a Digital Poetics* (Palgrave 2019). His poetry has appeared in various magazines, including *The SHOp*, *Cypher*s and *Southword*. See jamesosullivan.org.

My Life In The City

Philip Ó Ceallaigh

A small backpack was open on the bed. I was filling it with items of clothing. Morning sun hit the bedspread and the varnished floorboards. A 1930s art-deco block, fourth floor. Out the window, a view over a promiscuous jumble of buildings, various ages and styles, afloat in early summer green.

When I lived there first, three years before, the room was empty. A mattress on the ground. I would read there in the evenings, pillows against the wall, in a pool of lamplight, as the birds in the trees went quiet and the sky turned dark.

Then I met Carmen. The mattress became a double bed. A dressing table with a mirror appeared and then a chest of drawers, and a massive wardrobe.

Now I was getting out.

I rented, cheap, from an old friend who lived abroad. His father, the previous occupant, had died. Before moving in, those three years earlier, I had helped the relatives bin and burn and scrub. We hauled out papers and books and furniture and fixed leaking taps and replaced cracked windows. And as we did this work, I thought of the books the man had read, left stacked and yellowing on their shelves, worthless even for second-hand bookshops, and of the sheaves of letters he had received and kept, the correspondents now dead, and the boxes of black-and-white photographs of people dressed like 1950s movie stars. The pictures on the wall, the worn and mismatched accumulation of furniture, all the useless knick-knacks and souvenirs—you couldn't tell what they once signified or if an antique shop would hang a tag on them. I'd read that in India a man of good family prepared for death by shedding his

burden of household possessions and obligations, and withdrawing to a quiet place to reflect. It seemed a better way to go.

And so I moved in, carrying my single bag of belongings. On my first night alone there I crept about like a nervous guest, afraid to make a sound. The apartment still held the imprint of the dead man. The parquet was eroded at doorways by a lifetime of his footsteps. The walls were yellowed by nicotine and the ancient dust of the city. I lay down on my mattress on the ground and had trouble falling asleep.

But I slept deeply and when I woke the room was flooded with morning sunlight and I felt immortal. I was making my way, claiming my own space. In that city of brutalist apartment blocks and screaming boulevards I had got myself a touch of class in a quiet neighbourhood close to the centre. I thought I might stay there forever, or until I got something even better.

I sanded the boards by hand and varnished them and painted the walls. I turned up the music and had friends over. I brought women back. Had long evenings alone reading, and stood on the balcony and watched the rooftops and the yards and distant blocks under different skies, different lights, imagining myself the one stable element in the ever-shifting world, there to give it wholeness by observing and remembering it.

I met Carmen at a reception. I was telling somebody about a play I'd seen and then she was standing next to me in a black dress, a long string of pearls looped to fall between her breasts, and she was saying theatre was fine, but what about illiteracy levels among marginalised groups? I had no interest in marginalised groups. My life in the city was moving along nicely. I had written a prizewinning play and then a movie screenplay. I was covering my meagre expenses until my next big break by co-writing a TV soap with three other people. She told me about her NGO. I told her I wished to learn more about the poor. She offered her card.

She moved in three weeks later. By then the pearls had been returned to their owners, and I learned she was broke. She was a volunteer with the organisation I'd assumed she directed. I was proud to support her good work.

My first lesson about the poor was that Carmen did not wish to live like them. She insisted I buy a washing machine. That was when I first noticed

the apartment closing in, as I stepped from the shower, squeezing between the newly installed machine and the toilet bowl. I had been content to do my laundry manually, steeping it in a bucket in the bath and stirring it with my foot when I showered.

Then wardrobes were required for Carmen's clothes. So many clothes she could not get around to wearing them all. Not enough days in the year. It seemed as though every time she left the house she came back with more frippery. And wanted to know what I thought. I always thought it was fine. Everything looked good on her. But these items needed to be stashed somewhere. Same with the shoes. Soon I was tripping over them. They even turned up on bookshelves.

I bought a drill and a hand saw and put up shelves from floor to ceiling in the alcove in the bedroom. I was proud of my handiwork and it solved the shoe problem for a while. Then there were new shoes.

And when we took a trip together we needed keepsakes, souvenirs, trinkets. Kitchen implements and appliances were a practical requirement. And then there were presents for birthdays, name-days, Christmases, or as spontaneous gestures, and since we already had everything, we had to get it twice. We had a teapot, so we got another one, so ornamental and delicate it was useless for brewing tea and just sat on a shelf. Decorative jars and bowls multiplied throughout the apartment, on windowsills and shelves and ledges, and they filled up with shells, hairclips, cosmetics, nailfiles, bangles, perfume bottles, earrings, ticket stubs, ribbons, pens, pencils, coins, matchboxes, feathers, face creams, essential oils, buttons, pins and coloured stones. The apartment was a vortex, a black hole, sucking in shoes and fabric and baubles from throughout the universe.

The neighbours were mostly elderly. The basement, where they pickled cabbage in vats in the winter, was not vast enough for their junk. It spilled into the common landings and the stairwell. One day, a widow on the second floor clutched my elbow and drew me into her apartment to climb on a chair to retrieve a box from atop a wardrobe. Her balcony was clogged with cupboards, boxes and old fridges, blocking out the light.

That night I woke abruptly. Carmen woke too and asked what was wrong.

'I can't breathe,' I said.

'Open the window.'

'It *is* open.'

Her organisation helped victims of domestic violence. I got involved too. I'd arrive home after an afternoon concocting love-complications for TV and the papers would be laid out on the kitchen table for me or a document open on the laptop. I became skilled at making pitches to the PR departments of banks and luxury hotels for a few drops of their 'corporate citizenship' budget.

The money from the screenplay was gone and I wasn't writing any more prizewinning plays. When not occupied with TV drama and philanthropy, I was cooking and cleaning and shopping and doing the laundry and paying bills. Carmen reacted acidly when I suggested she might take a turn washing the floor. She was not a servant and if I was neurotic about dust—'anal' was the word used—then I could hire a cleaning lady.

Sometimes, when cleaning the toilet perhaps, or scrubbing a stovetop, I would become quietly angry. But I had to acknowledge that she was not lazy. She was fighting the evil in the world. She was busy putting everyone else's house in order.

My pal Ritzi had a bar. The owner was living on a beach in Thailand and Ritzi was in charge until he decided to come back. It was an odd watering hole. You'd take a stool and to one side of you were maybe a couple of girls concerned about the welfare of street dogs and on the other a biker with a greying ponytail who'd urge you to read *Mein Kampf* with an open mind. One afternoon we had the place to ourselves and Ritzi was behind the bar, polishing some glasses that looked already bright. We were both drinking red wine from tumblers and I was talking:

'See Ritz, a little boy on a beach, he'll pick up a rock and throw it in the water. The rock is an extension of his power. But the little girl will collect the pretty shells and stones, put them in her pocket and bring them home. Women want to possess beauty, make it their personal attribute. And men want to possess women. Beauty is just the language that expresses her fertility.'

Ritzi nodded. He played bass in a band that hadn't gone anywhere but he still gigged. He had been single for some time, as far as I knew.

'The biological imperative, you mean. So he can spread his seed.'

'The woman—reasonably enough—wants certain assurances before she'll consent to be knocked up. So the male, in competition with all other males, gets caught up in the world of activity to demonstrate he's a practical and capable fellow. Next thing, he's building cities, accumulating goods and there's holy matrimony, and he's goes around being civilised. How much of this did the poor bastard understand? He wanted to feel alive, and now he's in jail. He can recall begging on his knees to be let in the gates. And this constraint on the male, the deal he makes with the female to be permitted to stand at the altar of her beauty, erupts in orgies of violence. The armies of Genghis Khan, waves of horsemen, burning it all down, one city after another, breaking and entering, taking what they want without saying please or thank you or wiping their boots.'

I took a big drink at the end of this speech. You'd think I'd just ridden the long hot dusty road from Mongolia myself.

I placed my empty glass on the counter. Ritzi lifted an eyebrow. I nodded. He refilled. The bubbles swirled in the dark liquid and settled. We had not exhausted the subject. It was still afternoon.

The night before we split, Carmen accused me of being attracted to the wife of a friend of mine. We'd been out visiting this couple. They lived on an upper floor of a standard brutalist block with a view of other such blocks, and as evening fell the lighted windows looked like rows of TV screens tuned to the same show. Our hosts had queued with other young couples in the open-plan area of a bank to outline their credit requirements, and had as a result succeeded in jamming a lot of stuff under their low ceiling. It was mostly from Ikea, which had landed on the edge of town some years before like a giant spacecraft from another civilisation.

Carmen made the accusation, or bitter observation, in the street, as we were going home. I waved down a cab and we got in. We said nothing for the duration of the ride. The charge detonated at home as we were removing our shoes in the hall. The fight wore on through hours of darkness side by side in bed.

Once these sessions started, I could find no way to end them. Every word I spoke would turn out to be incriminatory, provocative and combustible. Afterwards, I could never remember exactly what was said. These fights

drew on another register of utterance, slick and darting, and when she'd demand I explain what I'd meant two comments back or two days before, I never had a clue—a hydra nightmare where you faced the monster bravely and decapitated it while mutant versions multiplied in the shadows.

Months before, burned out, argued out, I told her if she didn't shut up I'd strangle her and, in a moment of high dramatic vindication that made me detest her, she sat bolt upright and turned on the bedside light. I had said the unsayable, I had threatened her with physical violence, which was proof of my underlying aggression. The light was above my head and the lecture continued, but you would have needed a degree in clinical psychology to follow it. She'd veer off into these jargonised loony tangents, delivering horseshit fabrications as though they were the incontrovertible truths of the social sciences. It made no sense to ask if she believed her own rhetoric—the possibility, let's say, that my smouldering patriarchal rage could drive me to asphyxiate her. It was thrilling enough for her to articulate such things, to aggressively turn up the heat even as she posited her feminine vulnerability. She had proven on a number of occasions that my behaviour was 'abusive' and by the end of each inquisition I was so worn out the verdict seemed to stand.

Still, I regretted telling Carmen I would throttle her, and swore to her I'd never say it again. And I never did.

But I sometimes thought it, on those occasions late at night when I was so tired I could no longer formulate a coherent sentence, and she was in full righteous flow, and I would beg her to stop talking.

Please, Carmen, I would say. Please stop.

One night, several months before we split, I was leaning against the bar in Ritzi's. Carmen was there too, a touch of class against the background grunge, and Ritzi was posing me a riddle:

'What's the hole in a man's ass called? An anus, right?'

'Right'.

'So what's the hole in a woman's ass called?'

'What?'

'A bonus.'

We laughed, then laughed at each other laughing, and when it seemed to

be over Ritzi looked at me and said *bonus* and it started again.

But Carmen wasn't laughing. With a stiff smile she asked Ritzi if the joke meant the male was the anatomical standard and the female a deviation? Or that a woman was just a series of holes for the male to plug?

'Come on, Carmen,' I said. 'It's a joke… '

'Like Freud said, where there's a joke, there's a problem. It's a joke about women.'

Ritzi shrugged.

'I do have a problem with women,' said Ritzi. 'I don't have much luck with them and I suppose it's my own fault.'

Carmen was for a moment disarmed by Ritzi's lack of swagger. Then he asked her: 'How many feminists does it take to change a lightbulb?'

'I don't know.'

'One. And it isn't funny.'

Carmen smiled, but she did not laugh.

After that, I only saw Ritzi without Carmen. So almost never. I was busy with my job at the TV station and helping Carmen with her philanthropy. And I had my housework too.

We argued through the night, the final one we spent together, until we lay on our backs, exhausted, looking at the ceiling. At about four o'clock in the morning Carmen said to me, her voice now steady:

'What would happen if I got pregnant? You don't want to have children with me, do you?'

I saw how neat it had just become.

'No. I can't say I do.'

It's a long journey from the first night of passion to the first sleepless night arguing about how to raise the kids, as some wise man once put it. At least we would get to skip the bit with the kids.

The sun was coming up, illuminating the walls.

The apartment was no longer mine. It would have been unreasonable to ask her move all that stuff. Her shoes alone—overflowing from their alcove, poking out from under the bed, invading the bookshelf, lined up on top of the wardrobe—would have needed a removal crew. A brief exchange followed, concerning practicalities.

And still, it tore me up, standing in the bedroom that final morning, the small backpack open on the bed, looking at all her junk. Our life together, our love, had got terribly wrapped up in it.

I waited until after eleven so as not to wake Ritzi too early then climbed the dirty stairwell, past walls of flaking plaster and windows that were either cracked or broken. He opened the door in the shorts and baggy t-shirt he'd slept in. It was a one-room attic apartment with a kitchen nook with a counter and a stool. There was a little sofa and an oval formica-top coffee table, a tall lamp with a lopsided dusty fabric shade and a director's chair by the porthole window. The floor was unvarnished boards, covered with a patina of grime. A narrow mattress with a knot of bedding lay against one wall and beside the mattress was an acoustic guitar and an electric bass connected to a speaker. The surfaces—the tables, the kitchen counter, the top of the speaker and much of the floor—were invisible beneath papers, books, magazines, plastic bags, jars, empty food containers, plates and bowls and cups and other items. He had been breakfasting on crackers with peanut butter and strawberry jam. A joint was rolled and waiting in the ashtray. I rinsed out a cup and helped myself to coffee and hacked at sugar caked at the bottom of the bowl. I transferred some books and magazines from the sofa to the oval table.

I sat down on the lumpy sofa, told Ritzi I was homeless.

He lit up and puffed smoke.

'What happened?'

'It went sour.'

'Overnight?'

'Gradually. Then suddenly.'

'But that was your apartment.'

'I couldn't kick her out. She has no money. I threw in my job too.'

'Huh?'

'So I don't end up paying her rent. Or going back because I miss my apartment.'

'Smart.'

'And she said I had a thing for Dia.'

Dia was my friend's wife. The couple Carmen and I had visited the night before.

'That's crazy,' said Ritzi.

'No it isn't. It's true.'

Ritzi said nothing for a moment. He was embarrassed.

'Want some?'

'No.'

He took a few drags then stood up and went over to his bass and flicked a switch that made the speaker boom then hum. He put on his headphones and plucked his strings silently and swayed to inaudible rhythm. I lay on the couch, legs hanging over the armrest, and dozed off.

When I woke, he was gone.

My first task was to clean the toilet so I could enter without choking. Then I dealt with the empty blue-furred jam and peanut butter jars and other remains of food.

In the evening, after dark, I went round to the bar.

That night, after closing the bar, we went back to the attic together and I sat on the sofa and smoked my first joint in quite some time and the dozy medium-sized objects of the material world stepped forward and presented themselves with the clarity of the bed and chair in Van Gogh's bedroom in Arles.

Ritzi, sitting at the porthole window in the director's chair, gripping a little pair of binoculars, whispered urgently:

'Hey! Turn off the light'.

I flicked the switch on the lamp. We were in total darkness.

'Why the whispers, Ritz?' I asked, in a normal voice.

The little pair of binoculars was clamped to his eyes. He spoke in a low, throaty voice: 'She gets in around this time, walks around a bit, strips off. Perfect body, long hair, doesn't have a boyfriend. Walks around like that.'

I asked to take a look. I went over and took the binoculars from Ritzi. Across the street, one floor below and slightly to the right, was a lighted window.

'Here,' said Ritzi, surrendering his chair. 'You have to sit down and keep it steady or it shakes about too much.'

I sat and looked through and found the lighted window. An empty room.

'Nothing,' I said, almost whispering in the furtive darkness.

'Wait.'

I waited. Then she walked past the window, too suddenly. The angle was wrong and the window too small. She was gone before I could focus.

She appeared a second time. She was a young, slender woman and her hair was tied in a pony-tail. Beyond that, I could not tell much, and she was gone again. The lenses were tricky. Ritzi explained: first you shut your right eye and focused the left, then you closed your left and fine-focused the right. The waiting was a big part of it.

But when the girl did at last appear again she was for one luminous moment vast before my eyes as though projected upon a giant screen and I instinctively held my breath to fix my trembling vision as she untied her hair and shook it out. My eyes were so tired by then I did not know what I saw, only that it was a revelation from another world. There across the street, a girl who worked in a bar or a club, who came home late at night, alone, tired, and removed her makeup.

I passed the binoculars to Ritzi and went back to the couch and sat there in the dark, drinking. Occasionally Ritzi would say something.

'It's happening. She's undressing now.'

And finally: 'That's it. It's over. She's turned the light off.'

I pulled the cord on the lamp. Now lit, the air seemed hazy, as though blurred with glowing reddish dust. Ritzi stood up and stretched. His eyes were bloodshot and the binoculars had imprinted little semicircles beneath each swollen lid. He looked stunned. Like a creature habituated to gloomy depths—underwater or underground—that had been hauled to the surface.

'Ritz, I've got to introduce you to some nice women.'

'You know some?'

I did indeed know some women, really fine people in fact, and some of them were single. But when I thought about them some more, and thought of Ritzi, it no longer looked like a great idea.

In fact, none of my ideas looked like good ideas. I knew Carmen no better than Ritzi knew the girl across the road. She did say all that crazy stuff when she argued late at night, but really she was trying to get at something else. She was trying to get to the fact that I did not love her the way she wanted me to, the way I should have. And I pretended I did not hear what

she was saying, and that made me a liar. What I really loved was my own space, where I did not have to lie.

Now I had all the space I needed. I put a blanket on the ground and lay awake in the dark, eyes open, listening to the roaches clicking and scratching among the papers and upon the dusty wooden floorboards. They were angry because the peanut-butter jars were gone. I thought of them walking on me as I slept. I would have to get some spray in the morning.

I lay there on my back for what felt like a very long time, listening. Then I fell asleep very late in the only city I had ever lived in, and in my dreams found myself living in another city. I believed in its reality while I dreamed, and did not remember the city where I slept. I had a whole past life in my dream city, and complex memories of my time there, of dream-friends and dream-obligations. I had a task to complete, and a destination, and recalled the streets and the interiors of the buildings as I went, endless interconnecting rooms and hallways, and stairways to be climbed, new but familiar, as it is when you remind yourself of your own life, which forever runs away from you even as you live it.

———————————

Philip Ó Ceallaigh has published two collections of stories: *Notes from a Turkish Whorehouse* (2006), which won the Glen Dimplex New Writers Award for fiction, and *The Pleasant Light of Day* (2009). Both books were shortlisted for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. Philip won the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature in 2006. He edited the anthology, *Sharp Sticks, Driven Nails*, for the Stinging Fly Press in 2010. He lives in Bucharest. *Trouble*, his third short-story collection will be published by The Stinging Fly Press later this year.

They judged her tears as milky, for there was something in them extra to the tear

An unwillingness, a thing that clung.
Abolish woe. You cannot and
is it possible you like it? Liked living
with an it to fix. Oh behaviours. Ask
the question. Like lowering a necklace
down your throat: heavy, fine and cold.
A slick service—the water spills green
from the gap in the wall or clear
but virulent it greens the wall.
Aisle for vagueness, aisle for no, aisle for
bright crumbling coins of eye-shadow
that spoke up in their dream and said:
'It's here that one can toss oneself into
the shining pigments that reflect death
so verdantly.' They really said that!
Breathing like a human beneath the house.
I close my eyes to go there, but being there
is thin. Possums have unusually full jaws.
They are attracted to broken forms and
knowledge held back from itself. Inarticulate,
separated by images, ads, asides. Some teasing
some surprise, a knocking on the floor.
It doesn't matter how fucked the honour. Just
having been selected makes my heart beat harder.

Bridget Talone

Year of the Rat

He had a wound on his ear that oozed
orange blood. I tried to blot it away
but it kept reforming.

Recognition's silken feeling.

I didn't want to write it down.

Young fronds, poisonous, raw.
Grief's insistent whip.

A rough encroaching ocean
with bird wings sticking up
in triangles like shark fins
that never moved, not ever.

Forgetting is no small part of this.
Let it dissipate into a whistle.
On passion, on hotnesses fled.

I thought I could protect him
from knowing he was dead.

Bridget Talone is the author of *The Soft Life*. Recent work has appeared in *A Perfect Vacuum*, *Pouch Mag*, and *Elderly*. She lives in Philadelphia.

ADDITIONAL NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Pandemic Notes:

Maria Isakova Bennett is from Liverpool. She creates the hand-stitched poetry journal, *Coast to Coast to Coast*, and has collaborated with over 100 poets in the UK and Ireland. This year, Maria created a journal and stitch exhibition with John Glenday. She has three pamphlets: *… an ache in each welcoming kiss* (2019), *All of the Spaces* (2018), and *Caveat* (2015).

Camilla Grudova lives in Edinburgh where she works at a cinema. Her first book *The Doll's Alphabet* was published in 2017.

Louise Hegarty has had work published in *Banshee*, *The Tangerine*, and *The Dublin Review*. Recently, she had a short story featured on BBC Radio 4's Short Works. She lives in Cork.

Eva Kenny is a writer and critic from Dublin. In 2018 she finished her PhD in Comparative Literature at Princeton University; her essays have appeared in the *Dublin Review of Books*, the *LA Review of Books* and the *Journal of Beckett Studies*, among other publications. This is her first story.

Tim MacGabhann's first novel, *Call Him Mine*, was published by Weidenfeld and Nicolson last year. His second, *How to Be Nowhere*, is out with the same publisher this year. His writing has also appeared in *The Dublin Review*, *gorse*, and many major international news outlets. He lives in Mexico.

Anna Walsh is an Irish writer based in Glasgow. They have had poetry and prose published in *Fallow Media*, *Spamzine*, and *The Honest Ulsterman*, among others. They have work forthcoming in the *So Hormonal* anthology by Monstrous Regiment. They are currently working on a short story collection, and their debut poetry collection will be published in 2020.

Cover Artist:

Kirsty Woods, Geordie artist, has been keeping flowers in full bloom since 1991, by way of comradery with other worldly entities. She blogs her work at https://whenthecatcomes.blogspot.com/.

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