CRANNÓG MEDIA

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PROSE: Stories should be under 2000 words

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About The Cover

The images on the front and back cover of this issue of Crannóg are from *in absentia*, a web-based writing project that uses the Google Maps API to address issues of gentrification and its erasures in the Mile End neighbourhood of Montreal.

In recent years many long-time low-income neighbours have been forced out of Mile End by economically motivated decisions made in their absence. The neighbourhood is haunted now, with their stories. Our stories. My building is for sale; I may be next. Faced with imminent eviction I've begun to write as if I'm no longer here, about a Mile End that is no longer here. The Mile End depicted in *in absentia* is a slightly fantastical world, a shared memory of the neighbourhood as it never really was but as it could have been. *in absentia* is a map of the sudden disappearances of characters (fictional or otherwise) from the places (real or imagined) where they once lived.

What traces do people leave behind when they leave a place?
What stories spring from their absence.

"To you our newest not-yet neighbours, in response to the letter you left in every mailbox on our block: yes, of course, we understand that there will be some noise – we might have bought the place ourselves had it not needed so many renovations. Your note didn't mention that there'd be trucks blocking the alleyway for four months. All day we listen to your contractors cursing in between bursts of jackhammer and bandsaw and we mourn the passing of what used to be. Your back-yard used to have an ancient wooden door sagging blue askew amidst a retinue of vines clinging to a crumbing cinderblock wall guarding an oasis of lazy Brown-Eyed-Susans. All that's left is a backhoe clawing after a basement. Every day we walk the dog through the mud from the hole you've dug. We remember the first time we met you. You told us you bought the place because you'd fallen in love with the garden."

J. R. Carpenter, *in absentia*, 2008.

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POETRY

SOLITARY BIRDS **GUY CRANSWICK**

Beth Sales took a bus to the park. Ordinarily she would have walked, some, if not all of the distance. At fifty-eight she liked the independence of walking, and it helped clear her mind.

The weather had turned, it was colder; she had taken her overcoat from the cupboard and given it a brush before putting it on and checking the cuffs to be sure they were not threadbare. She was like that all her life, careful. Her routine was strict. She rose at the same time each day, and went to bed at the same hour. In the late afternoon, as it merged into evening, she sat on her balcony and looked out to the street, over the buildings; the two churches in the area occasionally peeled their bells for services. Near her apartment the birds sing, if it is singing, as they call out noisily in the evening; she watches them, on the eaves, on the point of the roofs. The day closing to the sound of church bells leant an eternal air to the days.

Being outside for thirty minutes before it became too dark stretched her eyes. She read consummately and widely, rarely fiction, which did not entertain her, but mostly history, biography, travel and natural sciences. Peter Sadler was an author she admired. They had been students together and friends within a close group at that time. Friendship was the extent of their past. Beth had chosen the most handsome boy in the group; their wedding had been glorious but the marriage had only lasted three years. The boy disappeared leaving her with a daughter and an overdraft. She became a teacher, she cared for her child; and although there had been several other men in the years since, she never married again. Gradually time passed, her habits became as regular as seasons, as balanced as the equinox. Since her daughter had moved keeping the same exact hours seemed unnecessary, but she could not break the habits of so many years.

When it became too cold as it was now, she slipped inside. From on high in her apartment the movement of people below was remote; her eye would fix on a man and woman meeting, his arm brushes hers, she kisses him, and they seem to form one broad body as he guides her on; to somewhere else, where they will be together for a few hours.

This afternoon she was meeting someone, Peter Sadler, and she wanted to be presentable. She ensured her hair was in an attractive chignon, a style Americans call a French twist. After some period of consideration she had written to him. Beth could not name the reason for wanting to meet with Peter Sadler after such a long time;

they had not seen each other for over thirty-five years and friendship could not be called on. No, instead, she wrote to him in plain terms and said she would like to meet with him, having enjoyed his books for so long, and she promised not to raise memories of student life. He replied quickly that he would. She felt slightly honoured as he had recently published a new book, and would be hectic with social appointments, busier than Beth was on a normal evening.

The agreed to meet in a park near the main city station. It had been his suggestion and she was a little perturbed by it initially but on reflection it suited her well: she could leave without too much trouble if the encounter was not pleasant, or they had little to say to each other, without the embarrassment of being in a café or restaurant.

She arrived at the park a few minutes early and sat on a park bench in an avenue of plain and chestnut trees. The air was thrilling, mixed with her own anticipation. Opposite her was a portion of grass, neatly trimmed like a sandwich with its crusts removed; and besides it several flower beds with pruned shrubs ready for winter. It was quiet, the distant roar of traffic reminded her where she was, but she was far away from the city, almost alone, only some fast paced commuters hurrying on to the station, walked past her.

Then slow footsteps came towards her, and Beth turned to see it was Peter. He was carrying a book; he smiled a bland impersonal smile, and slipped onto the bench beside her, though not too close. Her first impression was that he appeared older and more tired than the photos she had seen of him, and nervous, but she could not think why he would be.

Just then a bird sang four notes. In the park their sound is sweeter, or perhaps Beth interprets it that way, out of their concrete eyries, in the midst of large trees. Autumn leaves on the ground, golden yellow, husk and russet and mottled brown.

After a brief pause, the bird sang the same insistent four notes, again without an answer.

Peter gives her the book; they talk and the words come easily, not of their youth fortunately, but easy talk and they make plans to share a meal together, as Beth leaves through the pages as they talk not reading any of them, but showing her interest by doing so, and Peter explains how he wrote the book and where he travelled to write it: in deserts and jungles, the names and exotic places swirl in Beth's imagination, his broken disordered life is another world and she is happy she wrote to him, but Peter is not vain in the way he tells the story and that makes her comfortable.

In her fingers the book's pages shuffle back and forth until she falls on the dedication page. She has read this many times before; Peter always inscribes the books: *to ES in everything* which is also always written in italics. It appears as if written by hand, with a favourite pen.

Looking at Peter she asks how him, how is Eleanor; but Peter seems confused. Beth remembered that the last time Peter had sent her a letter; he said something about Eleanor being well despite everything that had happened. Whatever it was that episode had happened on a long voyage. She assumes that the initials ES were for Eleanor Sadler. Beth had remembered this information and it served her when she read his books. That was how Peter Sadler had made his life she had thought to herself, with a woman called Eleanor.

Her eyes fell to his ring finger. It was bare with no sign of a tan line.

Peter shifts in his place and then in a dry hesitant mouth, while glancing somewhere to the side, he says that ES is for Elizabeth Sales: her, Beth; how is it she had not realised, he asks.

Since the last time she saw Peter, she has not used her given name, had almost forgotten it; the name belonged to another.

At that moment it falls into place; any explanation is wasted, any attempt to fill in the time, the unfulfilled and incomplete love since they had been young, its meaning and its endurance is clear to Elizabeth.

She stares at him, more alert than reason and memory might inform her; the stare is firm but full of regret.

Peter turns from Elizabeth, he is still.

She observes his profile and the creases formed by sun and wind on his face and she imagines that she had witnessed them form over time.

She turns away from him to look ahead; his book is closed in her hands, her finger has marked the dedication page.

The park is quiet, the world is quiet now.

Elizabeth remembers thirty-five years; she can say nothing, she has nothing to say, but sit still, beside him, accepting what is and what could have been.

AXE **MICK RANSFORD**

As soon as she drove out the gate Martin took up the axe. He carried it to a bare patch of ground and dropped it there. Chrissie had offered to take Jack to the beach. The MG only seated two though and she was nervous driving with Jack in Martin's lap. She'd met them off the train the day before; she was prepared to leave them back to the train in the morning. But that was as much as she'd risk, she said.

'Rural Ireland isn't what it used to be.' She put on an accent she thought sounded local. Outside a train station festooned with hanging baskets. An accent Martin couldn't resist raising an eyebrow to.

They climbed into the scorching MG. 'Seriously though.' She flopped onto a black bucket seat, peered into the mirror, fumbled behind her for her seat belt. 'We've Guards skulking in lay-bys round here at all hours of the day and night.' She got the belt into its buckle, a blush flushing irresistibly through the sunburn on her cheeks.

'They've no qualms about dishing the penalty points out either.'

There were four pallets left. Three under a hedge in a corner of the garden. One against an old elm whose yellowed leaves prematurely littered big roots that went deep in the ground.

He dragged a pallet from under the hedge. Carried it to where the axe was. He dropped the pallet and took up the axe. He could have pushed it. He could have convinced her to take all three of them to the beach if he'd really wanted to. But the truth was he was glad to get a break from Jack. Anyway Jack had been going on about the beach since they arrived.

Martin mentioned it to keep him quiet on the train. Widening his eyes with talk of soft sand, creamy surf, an endless turquoise sea. He hadn't even known if a trip to the beach was on the cards. He knew the sea was close to where Chrissie lived, that was all. 'Would he go with me?' she'd asked, smiling uncertainly when Jack started up about the beach again at breakfast. Banging the table with his spoon, 'Beach! Beach! Beach! Beach!'

'Jack!' He turned away from his son in order to return her smile. 'I'm sure he would. He likes you. You're good with him.'

'You've enough firing there to get you through the winter.' This was on the evening of their arrival. Jack had been put to bed and he and Chrissie were drinking beer at the picnic table. He stared across the garden to the timber she'd ripped out of

the cottage when she was renovating. Floorboards, beams, laths, rafters. Strewn the length of the hedge now. 'That stove of yours will burn through that no problem.'

'I thought about taking the saw to it; then I thought: Why not buy an axe and chop it up? I made a start on those pallets over there. See.' She pointed her can of Budweiser at the pallets. At a little pile of wood then near the gate.

In a few minutes he'd smashed all the diagonal laths.

Splitting the pallet into three sections.

Sometimes he had to swing twice or more because he struck short. The blade only glanced off the timber when he did. Or cut into it a little. Sometimes chips spun up into the air around his head.

He gathered up the chips, threw them on the woodpile Chrissie had started. He dropped the axe and bent to yank the severed laths out where they were held in place still by rusted nails. He threw the laths onto the pile too.

He was still staring at the timber when Chrissie stood up abruptly and went into the cottage. He remained seated at the table. Conscious now of the hard fold of fat around his middle. His soft double chin. Breasts that jiggled like a pubescent girl's whenever he moved with any pace. Watch, he told himself, she'll come out with another painting. Her interpretation of what the timber represents. The soul of Ireland plucked out to satisfy the whims of its Celtic cubs. And she the one ripped it out in the first place.

He'd nodded, made the right sounds, but he couldn't see any difference in the stuff she was doing now and those indefinable daubs on drab backgrounds her teachers in the NCAD had encouraged her to do.

Only the three beams that had supported the laths were left. He leaned one against a concrete block he found under the hedge and chopped it in half. The next one he leaned against the block bounced from beneath the blade and he had to set it up again.

'Jesus!' He'd heard movement behind him and turned from the picnic table. Chrissie was holding the axe over his head. Chuckling, trembling with laughter. Staggering a little with it. With the few beers she'd had too maybe. Or the sudden weight of the axe. He took the axe off her. Laid it across his knees. Ran a hand along the shaft. He recalled the mucky smell of woods in winter. A lumber shirt his uncle sent him from the States. Dark red with navy check. He'd never been able to find that exact pattern again. He remembered the tranquil wordless work.

A habit his father had of winking as the Bushman made that last rasping stroke before a log dropped at their feet. The sloppy thud. The pulpy flesh of an opened tree.

It was a good axe. Single-bitted. Long. Well balanced. It had a black rubber grip

on the lower handle. The upper handle was yellow. There was a rubber guard on the blade. 'Where'd you get it?'

'A little tool shop in Carnew,' she said. 'A few miles down the road,' she added when she saw the question in his face.

'You don't know how sorry I am,' he said then. 'The way it happened I mean. The way I handled things.' He'd wanted to broach it ever since he and Jack arrived and this seemed like a good time. In the evening quiet with wood pigeons cooing themselves to sleep in the trees around them.

'Forget it. I got over it a long time ago.' It felt as if muscles that had been clenched for years were finally uncoiling inside him. He hadn't been completely comfortable with himself since they split up. For years actually he lived with the understanding that he'd behaved like a complete bastard.

Now he believed the future might finally open up for him again. Beneath the table he squeezed the fat around his middle. You can lose that if you want to, he told himself. It isn't a permanent thing, like it is with Chrissie there. If you really want to you can lose it.

He was sweating by the time he started on the second pallet. Whenever he bent forward sweat ran into his eyes. Stinging. Blurring his vision. When he took his glasses off to wipe it away the lenses became smudged. In the end he took the glasses off for good and left them on a stack of roof beams.

He never would have phoned her but for a chance meeting with her younger brother Willie. 'Water under the bridge, man.' Willie said, emptying a bottle of Bulmers into a pint glass. The ice on the bottom of the glass hissed and cracked as the foaming cider struck it and the dissolving cubes started to spin towards the rim. Willie was thinner than he remembered. Paler. His dark hair slicked back. A really talented singer according to Chrissie.

Though Martin had never heard him sing. He thought about her now and then, wondered where she was. He wouldn't have called though if Willie hadn't told him she bore no ill will.

It took three blows before the beam he'd placed against the concrete block cracked enough that he could break it. He lifted the fractured piece of wood and snapped it across his thigh. His hands were so weak from the work now he had to use the back of the blade to halve the two remaining beams.

When he did make the call she was okay about everything. They talked for a long time. She explained how she'd sold her place in the city after they split up. Bought the cottage, the MG. She described the local scenery. 'Inspirational,' was what she said it was. She told him her painting had never been better.

He told her the woman he'd left her for had left him in the end. A woman who lay beside him while Chrissie knocked on the door of his city centre apartment. The two of them barely breathing. Sweat drying on their interlocked limbs. Terrified and thrilled all at once.

A woman who had so much power over him she could talk him into fathering a child.

By the time he finished the third pallet blisters were coming up on his palms. Seeping. Soap-coloured circles beginning to sting. The pile of wood behind him had risen noticeably though.

'I'm glad I called you.' Looking across the table at her the evening before - her fleshy face burned shiny by the sun - he couldn't help feeling he'd gotten away with something. He knew he'd been right to break up with her. He was genuinely sorry it happened the way it did but their break-up was inevitable really. She reached across the table. Clinked her beer can against his. 'Me too.' A pair of moths tick-ticked against the dusty oil lamp.

The last pallet had been treated with some sort of preservative, colouring the timber a streaky turquoise. He thought about leaving it. It wasn't lying where the others had been. It was constructed differently. It looked stronger.

Finally he dragged the pallet away from the big diseased elm and dropped it on the battered patch of ground.

He wondered how her and Jack were getting on. He pictured two dark shapes. One big and bulky. The other small. He pictured them racing along a golden strip of sand. A sliver of sparkling sea beyond.

He thought about going into the cottage. Running the tap for a cup of cool water. Then he was longing for something fizzy. He hoped Chrissie might think to bring a bottle of Coke or something when she came. They'll be back soon, he told himself. Suddenly he felt he should be with his son. It was a beautiful day. A real scorcher. 'I'm gonna teach you how to swim, Jack,' he'd promised long before the summer overtook him. But this rush of guilt was connected to something other than an unfulfilled promise. To something deeper. Beyond his naming.

The last pallet didn't hop around like the rest had when he struck it. The solid way it was built made it easier to demolish. He'd just separated the first section when the MG bumped into the yard.

Sand yellowing its tyres. The black leather top folded back. Chrissie smiling out.

The car kicked up gravel that thudded against his jeans. Chrissie climbed out and shut her door without looking. Her beaming red face was moist with little silver beads of sweat.

He'd been ready to give in to his exhaustion, to lower himself onto the stack of roof beams and drain whatever drink she might have brought. But muscles and sinews all over his body retightened at the expression on her face. Shameful and triumphant. As if she'd done some awful thing and would hold to it.

He looked past her to Jack. Jack was just sitting there in the passenger seat staring through the windscreen. He still had his blue baseball cap on, his starfish sunglasses. He was absolutely quiet. 'All right, Jack?' Martin said, as everything inside him tumbled through his feet. And then Jack looked at him. The way his son looked at him!

THE SEVENTH VEIL **TOM SIGAFOOS**

Everyone suspected that the carnival truck was up to something. Carnivals and sideshows were welcomed during the County Fair in October to keep the kids busy while their farmer-fathers exhibited prize hogs and their mothers competed in pie-baking contests. But the truck rolled into Jeromesville in July of 1938 – three months before the Fair. The worn-out sign on the side proclaimed:

TERPSICHORE – EDUCATION FOR ALL!

"What the hell is *terpsy*-core?" demanded Leo Atterholt. Nobody at the general store knew, and it wasn't in the dictionary. The farmers asked the schoolteacher, who thought it had something to do with a Greek myth about Pyramus and Thisbe, but he wasn't sure. The men went out grumbling.

The skinny man who drove the truck put up his tent single-handedly, and he kept to himself. The farmers were pretty sure that he had a wife ("Well, a *woman*, anyway," said Clyde Bunyan) because he bought a bottle of Lydia Pinkham's Compound at the store. But the lady, whoever or whatever she might be, was nowhere to be seen.

As dusk gathered, the skinny man put up another banner:

TONIGHT'S PERFORMANCE – THE DANCE OF THE SEVEN VEILS
ADULTS ONLY!

The Jeromesville women phoned each other to cluck and scold, and one of them rang the Sheriff's office. *You can't let this sort of thing go on in the middle of a respectable God-fearing community.* The Sheriff said he was keeping an eye on it.

One by one, the Jeromesville men made vague announcements that they'd decided to go coon-hunting that night. My grandmother told my father, who was fifteen, that she'd wring his neck if he went anywhere near that tent, but while she was busy with the dinner dishes he dipped into the jar of egg money and took a handful of dimes and quarters. He met Red Allenbaugh by the creamery and they asked each other – *Do we look big enough to be adults?*

After dark my father and Red slunk into the *terpsy*-core tent, handing over their coins to the skinny man at the flap. The tent was full of farmers sitting on folding chairs, staring at a wooden platform that was half-lit by a dim spotlight. One corner of the platform was screened off by a well-worn curtain with oriental designs. The skinny man stepped behind the curtain, cranked the handle of an ancient Victrola, and

intoned, "*Presentin' Miss Salami and the Dance of the Seven Veils.*"

The nose of a fireplace bellows emerged from behind the curtain, and puff of smoky powder whooshed out over the wooden stage. The Victrola crackled as the needle slipped into the groove of a spinning phonograph record, and a scratchy snake-charmer's tune filled the air. Through the back flap of the tent a quivering mass of fluttering scarves and pink flesh appeared. She began to dance, and her breasts, half-concealed in a satiny sash, undulated with the music. It was definitely not her first performance. She clomped around the platform in a decent rhythm, but Good Lord, there was a lot of her. She moved in and out of the circle cast by the spotlight, and the spangles on her costume reflected a dim cascade of light-freckles across the farmers' faces. She plucked a silky scarf from her generous cleavage and flung it into the air while the men held their collective breath.

The phonograph record stuck, *dee-doop, dee-doop, dee-doop*, and the skinny man moved the needle back to the beginning. The woman kept moving, and the men could hear the swish-swish of her stockings as her thighs rubbed together. When she paused to shimmy, another scarf dislodged and floated languidly to the floor. *By God, Luther*, somebody said, *she ain't got any underwear on.*

Dee-doop, dee-doop, the phonograph record stuck again. This time the skinny man moved the needle past the scratch and further into the song. While the reedy orchestra piped and screeched, the woman shimmied and shook and performed a back-bend that launched several scarves into flight. The song crescendoed to a conclusion, and she skipped off the stage without taking a bow.

Is that <u>it</u>? Red hollered.

"Oh, no," said the skinny man, appearing from behind the curtain. "That ain't <u>it</u> a-tall. You boys want some more?"

Hell, yes! everybody roared.

The skinny man leaned forward over the edge of the stage. "Well, I'll tell you now," he confided, "Miss Salami don't usually do this, but since you boys been *such* a good audience…"

Cheers and whistles drowned out the rest of his sentence. *Whaddid he say?* yelled somebody in the back.

"Since you boys been a good audience, and so *en*-thusi-*astic*…"

You got that right, brother! There were more cheers and whistles.

"*Miss Salami's gonna show you the whole works!*"

Yeeeeooowww!!! Everybody stood up and cheered and slapped each other on the back.

"And it ain't gonna cost you but another fifty cents!"

Awww!! The tent fell into a disappointed silence. But then somebody hollered, *Oh, what the hell! Here's mine!* Two quarters sailed over the heads of the crowd and landed jingling on the wooden stage.

Okay! Me too! And me! A shower of silver coins cascaded onto the stage. The skinny man dropped to his knees, raked the coins into piles, and stuffed them into his pants-pockets. *"That's right, boys!"* he shouted. *"Y'all don't want to go home disappointed, do ya?"*

The men whistled and stomped. His pants bulging with egg-money coins, the skinny man shouted, "All right! Y'all sit down, now! You're gonna see the dance that turned the crowned heads o' Europe!"

Everyone crunched back into their folding chairs, and the skinny man stepped behind the curtain again. The Victrola crackled, the music blared, and the sides of the tent fell down with a loud canvassy flop.

The farmers jumped up to see a ring of uniformed deputies surrounding the tent. The music stopped, and the Sheriff's voice cut through the silence. "All right, boys. That's enough of this-here nonsense. Y'all go home, now."

Now, just a minute! Red hollered.

"I said y'all go *home!* Anybody hangin' around here one minute from now is gonna git locked up for Public Nuisance!"

One of the deputies switched on a high-powered flashlight that cut through the crowd like a hot knife through butter. The farmers turned and ducked and held their hands up to avoid the glare. Half-scared, half-excited, my father and Red were swept along with the crowd of men scurrying away from the tent and into the night. Looking back, they thought they saw the skinny man dividing up handfuls of silver coins with the Sheriff, but nobody had the nerve to protest.

AFTER THE WORLD ENDED

GIANNI SKARAGAS

It is easy for a woman to become ordinary. Marguerite, or a woman like Marguerite, would never waste time to polish a silver tray in the darkened kitchen, and a man like her husband would never have such fused silver plate sets—not sets actually but pairs of diverse pieces—nestled in burgundy velvet boxes. She has rubbed the knives and the forks, the intricately detailed shell designs on the handles. She loves the dessert and the teaspoons, their subtle scrollwork at the tip and the triple banding at the throat: She's always had every good reason to believe that her husband is a discerning host.

Before she knew who he was, and what he was, she sensed that he would take care of her. For more than twenty years, he was a professor of classical studies in the Iowa state university; he spent the entire day, engaging in scholarly discussions with his students, handsome in his impeccable trousers, his impeccable manners and the silver hair at his temples-only adding to his charm. Now, in his 50's, his eyes are still young, unbearably young, as they were when they first met her eyes, and in the dim corner of his study, Marguerite can see them more clearly, than she does in the bright sunlight.

She sits cross-legged on a hand-woven rug and polishes the tray, thinking that it really is her job. Men know nothing about glow. It takes a real woman, a woman like her, to trick time. She has to insist. That's all she has to do. She will make that tray shine again and then, there will be nothing to remind her who has touched it.

Women like her would never deal with little things like that. She used to believe that her voice would always be enough to satisfy men, not just her voice but also the way she sang for them. Marguerite didn't need any lyrics to promise them that she would always love them.

She was not just a singer. She was a woman in love with love. That is still the nicest thing a man has ever told her.

In December 1999, Marguerite was rehearsing for the Millennium Show in Las Vegas, while she was wondering if it was a good year for the world to end. The NASA ended a spacecraft's mission to detect frozen water on the moon's surface; her favorite soap opera aired its last episode; and the Supreme Court in Southern Carolina—where she was born and raised—ruled that the video poker machines in the state had to be unplugged. The thing that worried her the most, however, was that her dear President Clinton—she had sung for him a couple of years before—was

acquitted by the Senate for a stained dress scandal. Marguerite felt that the world didn't know what to wish for the new Millennium. She was afraid that hope, extended for another 1000 years, would easily become its own accomplishment.

Marguerite kept dreaming that the world was about to end. She was not scared of those dreams but used all kinds of pills to get rid of them: she would rather they were nightmares and not dreams. She woke up in the morning and examined her face to trace the leftovers of the tension on her skin. There was nothing other than the ridges that gave her performance the special quality of pain while she sang. It was the wrinkles in her smile that made men believe they were no ordinary lovers.

Three days before the show, she was waiting in her dressing room and it was the first time that she started rubbing her fingers up and down the ridges as if to erase them. She was sad for absolutely no reason as if she were going through some threatening changes she could not even suspect. What if the world was really coming to an end? What would she do if she had no one left to sing for?

After the rehearsal, the stage was still full of light and Marguerite stood there for a while thinking of the excited crowd that would gather on New Year's Eve. She had not found yet what to wish for the new Millennium (did it have to be for the new or just the next?) and suddenly thought that her ideal close-up would be if the world ended during one of her songs.

In the far corner of the stage she noticed a young man watching her, wide-eyed and hesitant. His grin broke wide and he walked closer announcing politely he was a journalist. Marguerite was about to tell him she was not in the mood for an interview when he made clear that he only needed to talk to her. It made her wonder why she always found it hard to follow the thread of any conversation that was not about her.

And then, the young man said that he had been diagnosed with malignant cancer and that the only relief he could find was in her songs. He had never thought, he said, a voice could prolong his life and help him go through the treatment. Her voice was sent from heaven to melt into his being and make him accept his fate.

He said nothing else. He kissed her hand softly and walked away. Marguerite faked a smile that froze her face, trying to acknowledge the emotional richness of his confession. But instead of making her feel special, he left her with a seriously diminished sense of her voice and herself.

As she watched him leaving, Marguerite tried to picture the young man's life, his passions or anything that would help her understand why that particular fan had influenced her so much. This was not one of those cases in which she just felt sad for a dying person. Marguerite had lost many friends and spent much time trying to recover from the pain of their loss, with tears streaming ceaselessly down her cheeks.

During the 80s, when fear spread faster than AIDS, there were weeks packed with her friends' funerals. She was well acquainted with the unexpected and undeserved absence of the people she loved.

The twinge in her stomach implied that there was something more than human sympathy. The young man's reverence, his reserved frailty and his intrepid helplessness had been transformed into the air she breathed. He was a messenger, a stranger who inspired suspicions which she felt she should have paid attention to in the past. They could be a vague but ominous warning of what was to come, like when she looked through old photographs; details that had been waiting there unobserved suddenly became present and justified the course of events.

She used even more pills to ease the suspicions. The dreams about the end of the world disappeared but his face remained a torment. She hoped that the strict adherence to her daily routine would help her forget about him. She was sitting in silence, waiting for the moment when the pictures around her would resolve themselves into a reasonable warning she could perceive as intuitively as would have done a prophet.

And then something happened. It was right before she appeared on the New Year's Eve concert. She followed the stage manager and, all of a sudden, the closer she walked to the stage, the harder it was to breathe. She gazed round the crowd and instead of feeling the warm sense of excitement, the rush of her accomplishment to have all those people cheering, in that greedy, self-centered way of a star, Marguerite felt nothing. Nobody was missing her. She glanced over her shoulder at a couple of anorexic teen singers (what were their names anyway?) waiting for their acts. They smiled at her, their eyes burned as if in her they recognized a mother.

Marguerite tried to focus all her attention on the light. It was a celebration and every single wish had been repeated until it lost all meaning. She started to sing, conscious of her public as a diva, but the lyrics were stacking up in her head as though she finally understood what she had been saying all those years, only now there was no beauty or tenderness. In her early 40's she felt too old and deprived of any contentment.

Her fans were real people, hurting and dying and soon there would be no one to love her because there was nothing else for them to love in her other than her voice. She would keep on singing words that in real life meant nothing other than a wish; but no wish could mean anything without the attention of a stranger who is eager to believe and make it come true. She didn't want to be admired and worshipped in the distance. She wanted to witness her own decline as a common woman, who longs for a man without the beautiful words to express her despair. She wanted to pray for a

life of her own.

Glancing back to that distant celebration, she saw that her life was just beginning. That New Year's Eve was the last time the world saw Marguerite. She took some of the money she had invested and decided to disappear. As a kid she heeded her teacher's words that when a real prima donna stands in front of her public, she is offering herself. She belongs to them. But when she withdraws herself, the public belongs to her.

YESTERDAY, PERHAPS

REYNOLD JUNKER

Once I was young, yesterday perhaps - Lorenz Hart

I love this morning walk. I love feeling the trembling creak of the burled, steel bolted planks of waterfront boardwalk under my faux boat-shoed step. I love hearing the Sausalito, California gull song fill the air - a song that was a dream shattering screech less than an hour ago. I love the way the blue sky melts into the green water and the sailboat hulls groan against their moorings and shimmer their ghost reflections into the tide. I love the smell of salt and tar and oil and the sensory cocktail they make. I love the slapping canvas shudder sound of filling and emptying sails and the overheard conversations of boat people, language alien to me in both its muscular energy and the poetry of its boat names.

But I also hate this morning walk. I hate it for its solitary emptiness. I hate the void beside me. I hate not hearing her turn to me and say, "Not so fast. I can't keep up." I hate not seeing her turn to smile up at me or touch my face. I hate not holding her hand and I hate the numbing static of the just out of reach scraps of old music and dream conversation that fill my head and drive everything else away. Most of all I hate the void her death has left inside of me.

I'm sitting on a bench in the Sausalito waterfront square, a favourite tourist photo opportunity, down from the ferry terminal and the end of my walk. I'm staring out at the bay into what used to be early morning fog listening to the still gathering but now complaining scavenger chorus of what used to be gull song but is now a pigeon enjoined battle for tourist dropped and tossed food scraps. Across the square somewhere there's a violin playing a Bach fugue - struggling against the cacophony of the squawking bird chorus.

"Excuse me, sir." She's a very pretty blonde girl – looking glass remembered china blue eyes. There are dreams in her eyes. There's moonlight. He's standing several feet behind her, a darkly handsome young man wearing a Trinity College, Dublin sweatshirt. From the distance I can't see whether there are dreams in his eyes. There certainly should be.

"Yes?"

"Could I trouble you to take a picture of the two of us?"

I pull myself up from the bench where I've been sitting. "You'll have to show me how. My wife always took the pictures in our family."

She hands me the small digital camera. “Sure. You just look through here and click on this button.”

Concentrating - on the camera and not her eyes. “Will I hear a click?”

“You’ll hear a click and then a buzz.”

“You’ll want the bay and the boats in the background?”

“Please.”

Click. Buzz. Whirr.

“Thank you,” she says extending her hand.

“Are you from Ireland, then?” I ask adding what I think is an Irish lilt to the “then” and listening for any hint of a lilt in her response.

“No. Just the sweatshirt. We’re from Missouri,” and after a pause, reaching for her camera “thank you.”

I look down at the camera I’m still holding, thief-like, “Oh, sure. Sorry.”

“Can you tell me,” she asks, turning and pointing out at the bay, “is that Tiburon?”

“No. That’s actually Belvedere. Tiburon is around the other side of the peninsula. That’s Belvedere, then Angel Island, Alcatraz, the Bay Bridge and San Francisco.” Missouri, the “Show me” state. Since you asked.

“Well. Thanks again. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye. Enjoy your visit.”

They walk away colt briskly, laughing, nudging then holding hands. I turn, sit back down on my bench and return my stare out into the bay. Somewhere Baroque violin has morphed into Irish fiddle. Bach’s Fugue in A Minor has morphed into Yeats’ Down by the Sally Gardens. I reach back into memory for a yesterday, or, rather, more correctly, a yesterday reaches forward from memory for me…

“Excuse me.” There are two of them, a very pretty blonde girl with looking glass china blue eyes and a dark young man.

“Yes?” he responds, nodding. He’s tweed capped and jacketed against the Dublin spring chill - smoking – a fag they call it. He’s a thin man, fragile looking with clear grey eyes. He smells musty, sweet and sour – a mixture of old tobacco smoke and damp wool.

“Could we trouble you to take a picture of the two of us?” she asks. The young man stands off a ways behind her, nodding, enjoying watching her - watching his young wife.

“Ah. Sure.” He pulls himself up from the bench where he’d been sitting and, in a single practiced motion , flicks the stub of his cigarette into the road.

She hands him the camera. He takes it, weighing it carefully in his hand, as

though studying the complexity of it.

"You just look in here to focus and then click here," she says.

"Focus. Yes, sure. That's easy enough, then, isn't it?" he says shifting his gaze between her and the camera. He must see the dreams in her eyes. They're certainly there. The dark young man is certainly sure of that. There's moonlight. "And you'll be wanting the bay and the boats in the background, I suppose?"

"Yes. Please."

Click. Buzz. Whirr.

"Thank you," she says extending her hand.

"You're from America then? The States?"

"California," she nods.

"Ah, well, yes. A long ways, surely." And after a pause, "enjoy your visit."

"Thanks again. Goodbye."

"Goodbye and God bless."

They walk away briskly, laughing and holding hands. He nudges her. She nudges him back. The man turns and sits back down on his bench lighting a second cigarette…

Noon, morning gone. I'm still sitting looking out at the bay. At the clang of its arrival bell, I shift on the bench to get a better look at the slowing San Francisco ferry. Belvedere, Angel Island, Alcatraz, the Bay Bridge and San Francisco fill my view. Long ago fills my heart. A girl with dreams in her china blue eyes will forever be at my side – banishing my hurt – filling the void of my todays with remembered yesterdays.

GODS AND ANTS

STEVE WADE

Standing on the harbour quay, Barnard saw how he could get the temporarily blinding effect of the evening sun spilling across the water's surface. Dispensing with preliminary sketches, he pencilled the outline of the harbour and its berthed fishing boats onto the 16 x 20 canvas, which he had fastened to the wooden easel. Squeezing colourful blobs of paint in an ordered array around the kidney-shaped palette, his inner vision was already framing the finished painting.

The Parisians and visiting art-connoisseurs encountering the painting during Barnard P. Parkinson's first major art exhibition, which would one day be staged in Sacre Coeur, would experience the scene's essence. He saw them marvelling at the paradise-island blue sky and the more sombre blue reflecting in the sea below into which the overwhelmed sun bled white-gold. On their tongues the coastal-air saltiness blends with the plaintive sound of the gulls screaming their interminable plea before the endless sea.

And the boats - patient, rusting leviathans, whose white, multi-eyed cabins have witnessed countless fishing adventures far out in the cormorant-black sea, watched over by a yellow moon, hours before the dawn spills across the horizon. The painting bids them draw near! No, nearer still! There! Close your eyes! Tighter! Now draw in through your nose the salty, fishy, fuel-mingling, no-nonsense reek. It's the smell the fisherman smells, but he no longer smells it, as he no longer feels the cold. He, the fisherman, is a rough, capable, self-contained man, as much a part of the sea as the razor-shell winter mornings and the toiling boats.

Open your eyes. See again the boats and look at them creak and groan. Reach out – you can almost touch the remorseful murmurings made by these floating, ancient giants who have ferried hardy fishermen to their deaths.

The few aimless evening strollers who had gathered tentatively around Barnard and his easel pulled in others. They swarmed about him like ants crawling over a fallen raptor, flightless, though not yet dead. Their presence and proximity interfered with his concentration. Time and discipline was his defence - Gods were not peeved by ants.

"I'm telling you," Barnard overheard someone in the crowd remark. "The colour, the blue. He's got the blue wrong."

Barnard studied the blue pigment he had mixed and smeared across the upper

and lower parts of his canvas using his palette knife. Should he have applied more white? His sky was a darker hue than that of the painting in his head. Trying to ignore the bodies around him and their increasing babble, he squinted upwards at the altocumulus clouds that were drifting ominously towards the spreading sun.

"Are you a painter, mister?" a small boy asked him, pulling at the side of his jacket. "Are you mister?"

"I like painting," Barnard said. "What about you?"

The boy giggled through the mesh of his splayed fingers.

Mister, the kid had called him. Did he look like a mister? Like his father?

"Leave the man alone, son," a man's voice said, a daddy's voice.

"Sorry bud," a younger guy who'd been scrutinising his picture said to Barnard. "And I'm sorry for asking you."

Barnard waited. The young man, whose prominent nose was peppered with blackheads, looked from the painting to the scene it represented and back to Barnard. His dull, unblinking eyes locked onto Barnard's.

"So," Barnard said, "what do you want?"

The set expression on the young man's face was the stupid, animal confidence worn by a creature perpetually undaunted because it lacks the terms of reference to know any better.

"Ah, don't be like that," he said. "Now I'm only asking, mind." He fired a quick glance at the harbour. "Do you see that boat there?" He aimed an index finger beyond a cluster of people and into the water. "The red and white one, it's got rust all over the shop."

"What about it?" Barnard said.

"Well, there's five roundy windows in the box part."

"The cabin, you moron," one of his mates corrected him.

"Now in your picture," he went on, "there's only four. Look it." And he counted them.

"That's because in this picture," Barnard said, "there are just four men on the boat. They don't need an extra window."

The gently mocking laughter of the people gathered nearest them made the young man look unsure. Maybe he was realising that his attempt at ridicule had somehow backfired.

"On your bike!" someone shouted after the young man who was sprinting after his three pals on his stunt bike. His mates cursed and jeered him as they rocketed away, all of them on these stubby bikes looking like men who imagined they were boys.

Going through the motions of tidying up, cleaning his brushes and knife with a rag soaked in turpentine was Barnard's way of letting the crowd know that the show was over. They dispersed. Some towards their cars, while others filed across the path and out along the pier, a perfect spot from which to de-mystify the magic of the setting sun by gawping communally at the horizon.

Barnard's unfinished painting was no masterpiece. Masterpieces were limited. His flawed work was far superior to perfection. Once perfection was attained, there was nowhere left to go. Genius lay in conception and the striving towards an original dream.

Leaving the canvas perched on the easel, he reversed away from it until the departing light dulled its colours and weakened its forms. Behind and surrounding his presumptuous dabbling, the day's fiery symphony reached its skin-tingling crescendo, clutching Barnard by the throat, its cool, slender fingers bringing him to submission.

As though in genuflection, he collapsed to one knee. The phantom fingers released his windpipe and ran their crimson claws along his bare arms, burrowed beneath his T-shirt and tore lustfully at his torso. Even the nearby canvas shuddered at the evening's touch.

A squeaking sound coming from the plastic crates filled with dead crabs a few feet away made him more aware of the feted hum of overripe fish. A crab moved. The creature was alive. A survivor. Barnard would grant the crab its deserved freedom. Maybe there were others, too.

An oily, black-furred creature popped up from beneath the solid crab carcases. A rat. It seemed to look Barnard full in the face before pulling itself free of the crate and kind of stumbling when it hit the ground. Scuttling away, it dragged an unseemly, long pink tail with it.

Barnard felt nauseated and sidled away from the fish stench. The wind shifted, and the sickening stink followed him.

Probably it was the same serpentine streak of wind that tentatively prodded his canvas, which clattered like a boat's sail, before toppling. The easel and canvas appeared to swoon face-forward in slow motion, flip sideways, clip the lip of the quay, and slide resignedly over the edge.

The gratifying splash as it slapped the water's surface pierced the evening's swelling contentment the way a rifle report punctuates a perfect morning.

CROWN OF THORNS

MALCOLM DIXON

"What did you say your name was? Jesus?"
"Not yet," I replied, cautiously…
Malcolm Lowry – Letters

Fr. Caffrey says our souls are bright shining white but that they suffer a black mark whenever we commit a sin and this makes God feel sad. We are not allowed to eat anything before school on a Friday anymore because we all take communion now at the 8:30 a.m. mass at Holy Ghost Church every Friday morning and so we all bring cold toast from home in shiny silver foil and eat it no earlier than exactly one hour afterwards outside in the yard. Waiting just one single minute less than this would be a sin and God would be sad to know our toast was mixed up in our bellies with the body of His Only Son, Our Lord.

When we go inside this morning to the school hall I have got to come in all by myself from the front before everyone else has sat down and I have to address them like we have practised, Miss Danforth and I. Miss Danforth told the whole school once at assembly that I am the best boy in the school on account I am so very well-behaved all the time and the best boy or girl by far at reading. She and I spend time alone in her tiny dark headmistress's office every day when she sits back in her big chair with her eyes closed and listens to me read to her out aloud from a grown-up book or the bible. Afterwards she tells me I am the best boy in the school and last week at assembly she told this to the whole school. Later in class Cathy Crist told everyone in class that when she grows up she wants to marry Stephen Matteson and I had to come out to the front and stand with her and the teacher and tell her that this was impossible as I will most probably be a missionary in Africa or Melbourne when I grow up.

In actual fact I know I will never marry Cathy Crist when I grow up because of how she let Kevin Cutter show her his willy in class one time at the back and even though everyone said it was just his finger I do not think she should have looked at it anyway.

Kevin Cutter is my adversary. One time he just came right up to me in the school yard for no reason and said that Our Lady was a cow! and then he laughed out loud right in my face after he had said it too as if what he had said was something clever or funny instead of just stupid and not to mention highly blasphemous. I know he is

going to go to hell, via Australia, at Easter, where he is emigrating to then with his parents. His soul must be very nearly blacker than the rotted soul of the devil himself.

Another time going over the hills on the way home from school Kevin Cutter hit me in the eye with the muddy fallen branch of a tree and it became infected and I had to wear a black eye-patch over one eye for longer than a week. He and his gang had been threatening my best friend Philip Daniels and when I asserted myself between them Philip shouted Watch out, Stephen! and Kevin Cutter swung the branch fast with both hands and it hit me hard in my left eye and they ran off. Philip's father is a policeman but he could not arrest Kevin Cutter. They emigrated to Australia themselves last Christmas and I sent Philip a letter I wrote on special see-through thin paper but letters take a very long time to travel all the way to Australia and back even when they are written on the special paper.

I can see Kevin Cutter right now while I am eating my cold toast. He is running wild and shouting and playing like all the other children are. There are so many I wonder how I will ever learn to spell all their names exactly correctly. I am learning how to spell all the words in the dictionary. Every day I learn how to spell all the words on one page of the grown-up dictionary and my mother tests me before bedtime because I asked her to do this for me. We are still on all the words beginning with the letter A. Mother believes in me being a special good boy as much as Miss Danforth believes in me.

Except one time Mother asked me to go into the house because she was arguing for a long time over the front garden fence with old Mrs Vache next door who said a very bad rude word to Mother out loud and when I shushed Mrs Vache and said straight to her that she should be ashamed because her Guardian Angel could hear her saying that bad word right then she became quiet and just stood looking at me as if she were very cross indeed and Mother asked me nicely to go inside. We used to like doing jigsaws together Mother and I because she says it proves I have a lot of patients.

I can also see Cathy Crist and her friends playing over by the railings. She looks at me eating my cold toast and I turn away. Now I can see Bugsy Baker, the boy whose loose tooth I took out for him when he was crying in the boys' toilets that time because it was bleeding and he was scared. I said I could take it out for him and it would not hurt. He let me do it and it didn't hurt him not one little bit and afterwards he was very happy that it was out. And there too is Mrs Traynor in her coat who does not believe in me. She said I was a thief. That I had taken something from her classroom that I was not supposed to take and it was in my bag but I had not put it there. Someone told her that they had seen me put it in my bag but I did not. I got

very upset and Miss Danforth came and said it was all nonsense and what would a clever boy like me want with a number of old wooden blocks on a tatty piece of string anyway and Mrs Traynor said that wasn't the point. I heard Mrs Traynor say to Miss Danforth that I was just like everybody else really and Miss Danforth tutted loudly to her and walked off.

Mrs Traynor does not like me because I stopped her from picking on Keith Mercer in class because his nerves are bad. Keith Mercer is not my cousin but his mother is a very close family friend of my mother's and we say he is my cousin but he is not. But I do know his nerves are very bad from his home situation and one time when we had to sit absolutely still on the floor in class before a story he could not prevent one of his legs from moving quickly up and down all the time and Mrs Traynor insisted in front of the whole class that he keep his leg still before she would start to read the story to the class and when he said he couldn't stop it because it was his bad nerves she would not believe him and tried all the harder to make him stop it. I put up my hand then and said to her that I knew for a fact that Keith has very bad nerves because of his home situation and that I would tell Miss Danforth at break when I was alone with her in her headmistress's office what she was doing in class to Keith and Miss Danforth knew that I would not tell her a lie. Mrs Traynor did not like that because her face went all a bit twisted but she stopped it all the same.

I do not know why it is called Good Friday as it does not seem to me to have been a very good day at all. When Mrs Traynor blows her whistle in a second everyone will first stand still and then walk quickly without running or talking to stand in their lines for class before coming into the school hall. I will not line up with the others but am to go directly to the hall where Miss Danforth will be waiting for me at the front with the crown of thorns on a red tasselled cushion. The caretaker made it from real thorns and twigs and it looks like a bird's nest with a hole in the bottom. When the children are all sat down I have to take it off the cushion and hold it up high above my head so that everyone can see it and announce in a loud voice so everyone can hear the words clearly even at the back that This is my crown of thorns and I wear it so that your sins may be forgiven. I am not at all afraid or nervous and I go in when the whistle blows. But when I am waiting at the front of the hall by myself the long curtains at the back swing open at once and all the children seem to burst in together with the blinding bright shining light from outside and there is so much murmuring loud noise suddenly that I feel like I am lifted up off my feet and am looking down on everyone from very high up and even Miss Danforth standing besides the piano looks quite small.

FALLING DOWN

ORLA HIGGINS

It's the same dream as before. The one where she and Joe are drinking tea from giant, pink Alice in Wonderland cups they have to hold up with both hands. Her legs are twisted around his as they half-sit, half-lie on her grandmother's green tartan picnic blanket at Ocean Beach. The sound is turned down but they are laughing and spilling tea and then laughing at spilling tea. A red and white polka dot umbrella protects them from the sun while Marcel Marceau performs a private show for their eyes only. He is Joe's favourite mime artist but only because he doesn't know any others.

Jade's eyes flicker open and see nothing but black. She shuts them again waiting for something to register. She waits but there is just a vague realisation that she isn't meant to be lying here on damp, cold concrete ground. Something makes her think she has fallen and she tries to shift her limbs around to see if anything is broken. She's sure she has seen people do this in films. Her right leg is bent under the weight of the left. Both arms are splayed on either side of her body and her neck is twisted in a funny direction to the left. Slowly moving bits and pieces of herself she completes a mental check-list to see if everything is present and correct. Stale dusty air hovers around her nostrils and she wonders if her new skirt is torn. Her arm starts to make its way down towards her leg to find out but it gives up half way there and resorts to lying limply across her stomach. She feels numb.

Jade, she thinks to herself, you have to get up, find out where you are. Jade. The name everyone thinks is so exotic but is really only the result of an atrocious handwriting mistake by the midwife that filled in her birth registration details. It was supposed to read Jean after the women on the maternal side of her family. When she was younger her mother always tried to call her Jean but Jade always refused to answer to the name. And with no other daughters to right the official wrong, her mother had to accept there would not be another chance to continue the family tradition. Jade smiles as she thinks how much she likes her name. She likes the sound of it when people say it out loud, the images it conjures up in other peoples minds. She thinks her life would have been a bore if she had been called Jean. Then again, if she had been called Jean, perhaps she wouldn't have ended up here.

Moving her head to the right, Jade looks up and becomes aware of two lines of light projecting into the dark from a narrow window high up on the wall. She squints trying to make out where she is but can only see lumpy outlines in the darkness. She

realises she doesn't have her glasses. She needs her glasses. She isn't sure how long she has been lying here but, at this stage, thinks she should probably shout for help. She wills her voice to work but her throat contracts and she can only manage a hoarse whimper. The effort makes her drowsy and she closes her eyes. Pictures start to flit around behind the naked lids. A rainy funeral. Attic antiques. A small white house. Ocean spray. It reminds her of…she doesn't know…she can only see glimpses. She can't work out what going on.

Then something rips into her consciousness causing her eyes to jump open. Up until this minute she wasn't aware of feeling anything. Now, her muscles are starting to tighten as she feels sensations returning. Pain sears through her lower body. She doesn't know what it feels like to be stabbed but thinks the feeling can't be too far removed from this. Jade feels hot, cold, sick, faint, everything together. She wants to find her glasses and she wants to cry. Her theory about movies and checking limbs seems stupid to her now. The pain tells her she must be broken. She must be broken in many places. It becomes almost beyond her to tolerate the pain but there is nothing else she can do.

She tries to call help again but it doesn't work. It doesn't do anything for the torturous hurt and it doesn't bring rescue. When she tries to move her right leg out from under her left, the pain sends excruciating volts of agony through her body. She is afraid to take anything other than shallow breaths and squeezes her eyes shut trying to remember something good. Maybe if she thinks happy thoughts it will help. Happy thoughts, Jade, there's got to be a life time of them in there. She settles on Granny Jean's rose garden. She loved the sweet smell and the peony petals that trailed around the outside of the house through the higgledy piggledy garden and back to the side porch.

Jade thinks about how she used to sit out there on the porch with *Ballet Shoes*, her favourite book, when she was told to keep out of the way. Keeping out of the way meant avoiding Uncle Tom. He went on the war-path once a week when he got rent from his tenants and blew it all in one monstrous whiskey binge. She tried to shake away his ravaged beard from her memory. Something else now. Another rose garden. From her favourite class. From English. *Footfalls … down the passage we didn't take ….toward the door we never opened into the rose garden*. Something like that. She can't remember the full verse. This isn't happy. Those lines always make her sad. Jade shivers, tries to move to get more comfortable and is rewarded again with the prize of pain.

Tears spill and her memory starts to return. She remembers a train journey, a coffin, not feeling sad when she knows she should have been. She thinks for sure she

was up there somewhere and now she is down here. It all seems like so long ago, but how long was it? Searching, she remembers an open trap-door. Did she come through it? It must be fifteen feet up to the roof over her head. She looks up but there is only a faint glow in the gloom. Nothing to indicate anyone is up there trying to save her. The notion is strange to her. It's the first time in her life she wants to be saved and there is no other word to use because the pain is inside her head now and she wants to sleep. Sleep and be saved. Anything but have to tolerate …

Screaming. Someone seems to be screaming her name. She finds a small voice to reply *I'm here, but I can't find my glasses*. The voice shouts back that someone called James is coming. Why does everyone always have to shout, wonders Jade? And who is James?

Rattling then. She is aware of rattling to her left from what sounds like a steel door. Keys, chains, pounding. Is the pounding outside or deep within her head? There are no individual parts of her anymore, they are all just blended pain. Should she be afraid of James? She knew a James once and he was a bully. Or was that a Jean? She doesn't care anymore. She wants the door to open, the rattling to stop, the pain to go away. She just wants to be back in the white house by the ocean.

The door crashes open. Bright light splits through the dark and she sees a man dragging a black case with him. He stands over her. Jade presumes it is James even though he doesn't look familiar to her. He thrusts a syringe into a tiny glass tube and empties the contents into her leg, straight through her new skirt. She thinks he's smiling at her but she can't be sure. Something flows through her veins. She recognises him, but it's too late. Jade feels rushing relief. Then floating. Then nothing.

THE PICTURE **BILLY O'CALLAGHAN**

I keep a box of photographs in the bottom of my wardrobe, probably a few hundred in all, black-and-white mixed in with gaudy Kodachrome, all stored in an old green cardboard shoebox. Everyone in our family knows they are there, but they seem of little or no real value to anyone but me. I suppose, when it comes right down to it, they are like so many things in my life: clutter hoarded away for a day that never seems to come. Perhaps once a year, or once every four or five years, someone will come up with a reason for me to take them out, some relative suddenly in desperate need of a copy of our great grandmother, Nora Twomey, or long lost cousin Dinny, and then I will empty the box out on the bed or carry it downstairs and spread the pictures out on the living room table, and we will sit for a while, Melanie and I, and the kids, and maybe my bother, Jim, if he happens to be around, and we'll pass an hour or so fumbling our way through them, me smiling all the time, smiling at memories, the children braying with laughter at the old-fashioned clothes and the terrible 'sixties and 'seventies haircuts, and Mel asking, over and over, who this is, and this, and this one.

The box of pictures is the perfect hiding place. Most of the faces are from many years gone by, and most can be identified only by me. When asked to attach a name to an image, I could give almost any answer and it would probably be accepted without question. I don't, though, except when it comes to one face.

"I think that's a distant cousin," I say, when my wife holds up a particular photograph, a faded six-by-four inch colour snap of a smiling young woman, perhaps twenty years old. "A daughter or a granddaughter of my grandmother's brother, Mata. He emigrated, settled somewhere in England. Probably Dagenham. That's where most of the Irish went. Ford's had their factory there, didn't they, back in what? The 'fifties? Maybe even earlier. I think that for a while he used to send photos back. You know, to keep a kind of connection with home, I suppose. We had a lot more of them once, probably had an entire album's worth, but it seems that they've been lost in the shuffle. And you can't keep everything, can you? Mata's been dead for years now. I wish I could remember the girl's name."

It makes me uncomfortable to watch the way Mel stares at this picture, how she studies the details of the paper face in search of some tenuous family resemblance, but if I am honest, I have to admit that it thrills me, too. She is oblivious to the fact that what she is holding in her hand is actually the ghost of my first love. And after a

moment she sets it down again, laying it gently once more into the mix, and sometimes I will reach for it and pick it up for a closer look, other times I will just let it get taken again by the slow avalanche of the pile. I hardly need to look, knowing as I do the details of that face by heart, those wide glassy-golden eyes, every line and dimple, every chestnut-coloured hair in and out of place. The picture is merely a suggestion of a deeper truth, and one that only I can understand, but it is enough, really, for me to know that it is here, within easy reach, that I can find it any time I wish. I feel clever about keeping it mixed in with all the others, so that it is openly hidden, if such a term makes even the least bit of sense, but this is the only picture of Anna that has survived the years and I understand that the safest place for it is as part of a pile. And there is nothing in my experience of the world like the feeling of uncovering snaps of grinning children and long-gone trips to the seaside and then suddenly finding it there, as if by happy accident. I expect it, of course, yet it never fails to surprise me. With the picture in my hand, the years between mean nothing; in a heartbeat, the intervening decade and a half falls away and I am transported back again to that other time, my senses tingling on the warm edge of overload.

I remember the hand-holding and the laughter. The kisses crackle in my mouth like sugar-candy, sweet as any childhood. What we had was brief and to the point, and even in old money it was probably never worth very much, but every new thing leaves a mark. Our time together wasn't exactly music, but every bump and turn felt like a new colour added to the day. We were learning about the world, and about life, both of us, together. That made the falling into love like swimming on a breeze, and it made the broken heart that followed a belly wound that never properly heals. I don't forget that, the pain that followed the kisses, but I am older now, old maybe, and I have learned that I can choose what to remember. Looking back now feels like a safe and harmless vice, as long as I am careful about the doors I open.

"Who is this one?"

I take the picture and smile. A young boy, with a severe short-back-and-sides haircut exposing butterfly-wing ears, and a grinning mouthful of stumps. "That," I say, "is my uncle Jerry."

Equine bleats of laughter. "What happened to his teeth?"

"What do you mean?" I tell the children. "Nobody had teeth in those days. All they had to eat was sugar. And toothbrushes hadn't been invented yet."

We continue our search for nothing in particular, lingering to laugh again over wedding snaps full of flared trousers, string ties and sideburns to beat the band, but everything for me now is an anticlimax, now that I have seen and put to bed the picture of Anna. One snap has me, as part of an extended family day out on a rainy

day trip to Dublin Zoo; a real adventure, in those days, a two-way train journey and the kind of wild animals that you just couldn't make up. Another catches me, at age six or seven, with a Tanora-stained mouth, at a birthday party, my own or someone else's. Then, here I am again, as little more than an infant, this time, with my grandmother, outside, on sunny day, she looking a hundred years older than the cancer-ridden sixty that she must have been, but with her kindness and love for me still shining flames through her stretched and tortured features. Finally, I pick up a black and white still of my father and mother, looking young and lovely and not yet married, at a Woollen Mills' dinner dance. My mother has the sort of beautiful eyes that Liz Taylor on her very best day would have happily sold a dozen husbands down the river in order to possess, and my father, ten years too late everywhere in the world except for Cork, is trying to pass himself off as 'fifties cool, with his jet black hair greased to a sheen and a home-rolled cigarette caught in the pinch of thumb and index finger. They are smiling, not just for the camera, and they look happy, as if they have both found their place in life. Which, of course, they had.

All of these pictures have their own particular place in my heart, each opens up a small, remembered joy, even those that feel tinged with the sadness of lost times. But none resonate with the depth of emotion stirred awake by the refreshed glimpse of Anna. I understand the reason why, of course. All the other images represent single frozen instants in a life of bigger pictures. With Anna, there was unfinished business. Our dalliance, which at the time felt all-consuming and, in its way, eternal, actually had more in common with a shooting star. Brilliant, beautiful and, all too soon, gone. Burnt out.

Occasionally, usually after having my mind refreshed by her picture, I will wonder about Anna, about where and how she is, these days, about how she has spent her life in the years since we have been apart. Did she marry, have children, was her life all that she hoped it would be? Did she find happiness? These are probably natural questions, but I always quickly stop myself from exploring or imagining too deeply, because that is a road that can lead to nothing good. If I have any rights at all, it is only to the memories of the time we shared. Nothing more.

We wouldn't have worked together. I know that what I am remembering is the silver and the gold, because that is what the mind holds dear. There is rarely room in our recollections for chaff. We weren't perfect together, Anna and I, not in any measure of the word, not in the way that Melissa and I fit one another. Anna was demanding, for one thing. She took as though it was her right to take, and she had a miserly grasp when it was her turn to give. Looking back now, she wasn't even beautiful, not really, a fact confirmed, more or less, by the photograph. Pretty, yes,

the way that every girl is at that moment when she is blossoming into womanhood, but she was never going to threaten the magazine models or the movie stars. The bones of her face had an angular severity and she needed to smile a lot more freely than she did in order to offset that always bitter-tinged stoicism. Also, she was waif-thin, which heightened a sense of helplessness and fragility that really wasn't all the way true. Twenty years old and strong as a plough-horse, I was sucked in by that, or by the myth of that. I suppose I was chasing shadows. The biggest problem that our relationship would have faced, I think, again with the benefit of hindsight, was that she wore the pains of her past like a cloak. They were part of who she was, and that would have been too much for me to bear. So, we were in love, yes, but it was a struggling sort of love, one that could never have weathered the storms of our being together. Of course, knowing as much still didn't temper the hurt when she put out the light. We didn't even talk about breaking up, at least not that I can recall, it simply happened. All of a sudden there was someone else. And I was too soft, and maybe too sensible, to put up anything in the way of a fight.

Luck, though, can be seen in the roll of a dice, and it can be seen in love. I had to be free when Melanie happened along, looking like a goddess on a summer afternoon. I remember the way the breeze caused her long blonde hair to spin and coil in tendrils across her face and how she smilingly pulled them back in place with such a practiced touch. And I remember how happiness held to her, turning everything light. When I could speak, I cleared my throat and said just the right things. She looked at me and then she eased back her head and laughed at the sky, and even the heavens seemed to smile. If there is one thing that I have learned in all my years, it is that love has many strains. A first anything seems to hold a notable importance, but first doesn't have to be best. I keep the picture of Anna in a green shoebox box with all the other snaps that encapsulate moments of my life, because our time together was a big part of who I was, once, at twenty. And I keep it because it is nice to remember. It is my own private memory, and only I understand. But mostly, I keep the picture to remind me just how lucky a man I always was, and how lucky I still am.

VISITORS **EAMON GRENNAN**

At first it's a distant persistent barking, like dogs in a city after midnight. Growing closer, a falsetto yapping fills the air until the cold December sky is darkened by them, a hundred or more wild geese on the wing. In one slow glide they are an arc of brown wings down to where I know there's water, a pond paling in late light that will at their landing blacken with floating goose bodies. Out of some northern nowhere they've wind-sailed to settle overnight this station on their way south, a surface that will take their reflections, the eager image of geese that know by the feel of air and tilt of wind the cold season sniffing at them, ice-teeth snapping. Come morning, the pond will be under blue sky and harried cloud only a vacant ragged circle of water reflecting blue sky and harried cloud, the sun a blind white eye blazing in it. It will wear an air of bleak abandonment, be a winter feeling that will start from the surface to harden and harden, thickening to its own opaque, glassy silence without them.

LAKE SUPERIOR **SEAN CARABINI**

When she thought of it, she could still see the view
From the Jefferson Street living room
Down
Through the gaps
Between the old wooden houses
On the London Road.
It was not snowing. It was not raining;
Nothing but endless lake –
More than she could see in any direction –
Like translucent glass

Beneath the haze of a clear evening.
The city had since razed the houses
And extended the I-35
Out to this lakeshore property
Attracting grey industry, cheap food and loud cars.
Standing here now, I can still see the lake.
It hammers out towards all that is distant
As if steel in a foundry
Poured from the summer heat of her memory
And worked to the brittle winter of my own.

She swims
Beneath the summer sun
While the ice forms
On my heavy winter coat.

STANDING AT KARNAC

SANDRA BUNTING

on viewing prehistoric standing stones in Brittany

We've become stones in a field
solidly planted in a seafaring land,
standing tall and still so long, so long a time
we've forgotten what we're supposed to do.
Are we clues to ancient mysteries
or signs of future wonders? I don't know.

I only remember the old days when I
used to dance and make eyes at the one
called 'La geant', our child laughing by the fire.
We hunted well, were good gatherers.
We loved when the sun went down,
made the Gods lonely because of that.
And now we stand.

I have watched women dancing
in their velvet robes and lace coifs
and try to join in but I can move less
than a tree, can not sway with the wind,
fail to hear the rustle of leaves around me.

I refuse to believe it is a punishment.
Though hard, the world and its beauty
renewed our happiness daily.
I prefer to think we have a purpose,
whatever it may be, protecting perhaps
this one little green world
until all danger has passed
and we can dance, dance, dance again.

MEDITATIONS IN THE CANYON **MICHELLE CAHILL**

You could walk for miles between sandstone walls or waterfalls
where the canyon is a womb, a wound

Carved out by wind, which sweeps away bits of mallee, wattle,
buttongrass, my wasted thoughts.

Scarcely have I felt such a presence, we follow daylight's meridians,
invisible stars guide.

And we're fooled once more into taking all this for ourselves;
the ribboned trees, the secret stones.

Though the currawong does follow us a little of the way; he is
sharp-eyed, short necked.

I've seen clutching in a bird's flight: pinions fastened, wings glued
to a timorous breast.

Yet from here the view is pleasing: cliff shadows, light gauze
are worth the effort.

How I wish the birds would carry away my words, scatter them
into the bruised mouth of this gorge.

BOG MEN **ANDREW CALDICOTT**

Our ancestors apprehended,
when they brought a fellow into the bog,
into the in-between of not-water, not-land

where they pulled back the resined topknot,
bared the pulsing throat to the edge
of a keenly honed blade and opened its gush

to the dark receiving mire
then pushed the not-alive not-dead body
through the profane and sacred surface

and staked it under with hazel withies
that we stand on shaky ground-
that the present is a gift

forever disappearing;
the future a promise
contingent on our sacrifice.

BEACON

MARY DEMPSEY

for Luca and Vivi

My story begins in a village
gripped to the side of a mountain
in South-West Italy.

My father climbs on horse back
to plant fagoli and green lentils.
A plot for each family,
a packed lunch of foccacia and fritate.

I jump from rock to rock to find him
in the boiling sun bent over drills,
follow a procession at evening
till the village becomes a beacon.

When my father moves to Milano
he packs in with village men
seven to a room, works in a factory.
I follow him at fifteen,
join the lotta communista.

In the West of Ireland I make foccacia
for a roomful of kids. I wait for the rain to stop
on flat uncultivated fields.
In the clearing I see the incline of a hill.

LOCAL HISTORY

TOM DUDDY

The men there, then, were most at peace
when they clashed with the land itself,
making light of the cut and thrust
of the thistle in the cornsheaf.

The women worked harder still, closer
to the breath of animals, further
removed with each passing year
from their first dream of largesse.

Their farms have been swept clean
into one far-reaching field, like
a great clarifying idea inferred
from a muddle of small dark thoughts.

The man who bulked large against
the sun as he pranced at the top
of the harvest cart, fetching sheaves
off the prongs of forks flying up

from below, is dead, his house rented
to a young commuter ‘who keeps
himself to himself, as he’s entitled.’
The woman who was famous

for her hearty management of dogs,
pigs, calves, and roaming flocks of birds
is dead, her house for a time a barn,
now itself disused, grass up to the sills.

TWO UMBRELLAS **KEVIN GRAHAM**

All night the wind lashed rain,
stretching our tender ears out
into that whirlpool of weather
beating its fist at our door.

The morning brought calm
like a mother's hug, the sun
its warm afterthought, soothing
the mess of wet on the ground.

A mesh of metal lay twisted
in the flower-bed corner,
slivers of steel prodding from
the angry and torn black cloth:

two umbrellas lay embracing,
entangled by the nature of things;
like what foul weather brings
together, and love: that thing.

LITTLE ARROWS **JARLATH FAHY**

if there is a heaven then ye will be there
and it will be the sixties permanently
auntie ann over from england
will pick you up at the shop
in her triumph car

and ye will drive towards galway
the square clean and empty
the town-hall resplendent in the sun
the roads are yours alone
the sky high and blue

i see ye then in an ice cream parlour
in salthill looking out through
great windows at the sparkling sea
the attendant an angel
in a white apron

goes to the jukebox
presses two buttons and
little arrows begins to play
here they come riding out of the blue
little arrows for me and for you, you're falling in love again

JANUARY GARDEN **NICOLA GRIFFIN**

Winter dark pond.
Unfurl of frost fronds
snared in blocks
of ice amber.
A lily bud caught by December
is trapped,
suspended between seasons.
Snow lies on arrowheads,
bent at the knee,
sinking.
Frogs, paused,
are burrowed in mud.
From the Hollow
a challenge of robin song
answered.
Crocosmia's green blades
Startle, pushing
up
from cold earth.
The year has turned.

NIGHTWATCH ON ERNE

MAIREAD DONNELLAN

I hear them breathe below deck
cradled in the crook of the river
it is not the waxing moon
dog's worried yapping
or halyard frapping
that keeps me from sleep.

The fear we'll slip our mooring
has me out this night
keeping guard
water shadows and old ghosts
for company.

With a heron's wide wing beat
dawn sounds arrive
the rise and flop
of feeding fish
coots calling their brood
early cars on a far off road.

Cattle come to the edge,
take stock
I come to this morning
untethered.

DICHOTOMY **KEVIN HIGGINS**

Answering the door, the face
which says its owner
down the years
has done great work
for unworthy causes;
time and again sided
with Death against Life
and lost.

In the garden, a young cat
having its first summer. Now
picks a fight with its own tail
in the unkempt grass.
Now climbs a tree
to debate world affairs
with the crows.

WHY I AM NEVER LONELY

STEVE LONGFELLOW

No matter where I am, the knife and fork are there
to keep me company. More than familiar,

they are family. My hands are only clubs
with out them. Thus it is that when

I grasp the knife and fork and the faces
of my clever thumbs look up at me with expectation,

I feel the strength of the earth's deep waters
rise through the sharp stem of my body's hunger

and into my clenched hands. The earth sings,
Red! The earth sings, *Bloody!*

It's such a happy party! And the meal: the quotidian
cut short, arranged as tiny fingers pointing

everywhere; a bowl of the oracular,
stewed to sky blue blindness; three amusing monkeys,

stuffed, hands placed in the traditional manner
over the mouth, the eyes and the ears.

When I am done, I don't just lick my fingers clean
and leave the knife and the fork behind as though

they were strangers at someone else's table. No.
I tuck them safely away next to my heart

where they sleep until the next time.

WHEN I AM NO LONGER YOUNG **MARY MADEC**

I pray that I can still stand straight,
that no disease contorts my spine

so that when you come to visit,
I can look you in the eye.

And when you look at me, you see an orange,
not a prune, an old lady with stippled interesting skin.

I pray you will not spare me
the outrageous thoughts of your generation

and that my arsenal to rebut
remains intact.

I pray for a long life
but not to outlive my tribe.

When I die, I pray that it is midwinter
so I can go unobtrusively into the cold

and when you feel sad for me
the world will respect your grief.

By the time summer comes
you will have warm and happy memories.

THE VIRGIN STATUE **NUALA NÍ CHONCHÚIR**

And she will still be there, tall as a toddler,
static in her wooden cave, table-bound,
queening it over the piano where mice tinker,

over an empty, many-coverleted bed,
the clock, hollowed out of chimes,

over a sea of mats, the black-and-white TV
– conduit to this century – blank-screened, silent.

Her eyes mad with sorrow, she misses, maybe,
the mingle of fried spuds and Coty, the ghosts of dogs,
the May-long worship at her shrine.

UNFINISHED **MONICA CORISH**

Stains on the dust-covered floor of the studio,
Madder Rose and Viridian Green,
catch on the soles of my sandals,
I trail paint through the house
searching for the phone.
You are calling from Morocco
speaking of apricots and nightingales,
a fever has entered the marrow of your bones.
At the beep of the phone you stumble
you do not have enough credit to continue
with this call, I am left
with the phone still held to my ear
and something else --
a faint scent of sandalwood?

I squeeze Titanium White from the tube,
I gather it up with the knife.

COCKLE PICKER

RACHAEL HEGARTY

6.2.2004 Morecombe Bay

The waters are rising my love,
soon the waves will lap brittle
cold around my ankles.

Night is making its way
across a cloud stirring sky.
The moon is hidden from us.

We have abandoned our buckets,
full to the brim with cockle shells.
The sea reclaims all its creatures.

You must not worry. We have eaten.
Gua Bin and I are tethered together by rope.
I will not die hungry or alone.

With a stick, I score out a note in the sand.
I know others won't read my letter and
the tide will wash this message away.

Yet I believe word will reach you.
I close my eyes and see you,
straightening up from the vegetable patch,

our infant daughter swaddled on your back.
You are preparing for the typhoon season.
A warm wind blows soft on your face.

You are there and night is here.
Water surrounds us, claims us.
I will be with you, in Fujian, soon.

DUSK **HELENA MULKERNS**

The drapes of the old Kabul house rustle in the breeze
as the muezzin sounds
leaves brush against the darkening windowpane
a child tumbles across the garden lawn and
the sun sets behind a cedar tree

The muezzin has a haunting, gone-thus sound
evoking something ineluctable
waiters gossip by the glassware and a boy in white lights a lamp
but the call wins over, persuasive
it creeps up over the veranda like a fine silk veil

Calling the spirit to attention
reminding you that you are in a place
where Allah's word prevails
no matter how many humvees and APCs abound
it is a sound

That has nothing to do
with selective interpreters of verse
and the bomb at dawn this morning near the airport
it is something more ancient and transcendent
filled with comfort, power and fear and love

It is the song of God on the evening wind
the call to prayer

THE VISIT

PETER BRANSON

Nomad encampment,
high plateau, E Tibet

Stillness, sward crisp beneath the horses' feet:
above larks bubble, dancing spots before
your eyes. Beyond the fence that holds the wolves
at bay, a far flung plume of dust appears,
headlines a shimmering, white, long-distance bus:
after the hawks and doves the scavengers.
It bounces off the dirt town road, counts down
a century of bumpy track towards
the tents. Sound catching up, dogs hurl upright.
Eventually, exposed through tinted glass,
montage of dragon travelling tourist class.
It points and laughs, breaks up, aiming snap shots.
The shaman welcomes them within. Two men
sit on the tsampa gamtuk, stripping off
tired shoes and socks, twin acts of sacrilege.
Nothing is said, of course: they've no idea.
Cloud sheathes the holy mountain. Wives shy-smile
hospitably, subvert their gaze, serve tea.
Before they go they ask their host to pose
for photographs; turn sour when they're refused.

MAPPED OUT **NORMAN DARLINGTON**

My relationship with maps
has been intense
and even physical

Via cartography
I occupy a landscape
my knight errant free
to ghost across the heath

Thanks to the warriors
of the OSI I
inhabit crustal motion
populate the mysteries of geodesy
and sundry earth sciences

You'd think
I might have been
the lad
for orienteering
scrambling through brambles
one eye on the compass
hell for leather for that double
circle

But my youthful eye was drawn
to the distraction of fixed stars
and gyroscopes,
the weight of the plumbline
…dangling

Even now that eye
untired from years of staring out
horizons' empty promise
maintains its dogged dream
of some final
ultimate
meridian convergence

THE FLAMENCO SKIRT

LIAM O'CLÉIRIGH

After Inge Morath

I grow dizzy at the thought of you
in my Flamenco skirt;
your slender waist and hips,

your strong, slim legs
sucking the dark penny-hosts
of men's eyes towards you,

like a magnet,
like laughter,
soft and masterful on unkissed lips.

I am envious, too,
of your neatly-cut shoes,
their songs of streaky protest,

the swirling music of your deft step,
the world you dare suggest
wearing my Flamenco skirt.

My fat thighs ache.
Between thimble silver
and needle eye the dim light pricks.

Nights, awake in bed
beside my sweaty, snoring husband
I imagine you celebrating brightness.

Your communion moment comes
with a flurry of black dots,
and drinks standing on tables.

I notice the hairy backs
of hands fallen idle, their longing raw
all the while you dance.

THE GRESHAM HOTEL **DAVID STARKEY**

It was in one of these high-windowed rooms
that Gretta confessed to Gabriel
her long lost girlhood love
for Michael Furey, while the snow
was general throughout Ireland.

Richard and Liz stayed here
when he filmed *The Spy*
Who Came in From the Cold.
(Some say the late night halls still
echo with their drunken fights.)

I must tell you, however,
that this hotel has gone to crap:
the window latches are rusting off,
the toilets don't flush, the carpets
are a cacophony of blotches and spots.

The buildings across once grand
O'Connell Street are all to let,
their windows blank with dirt.
A drunk sprawls out in a doorway. A Roma
woman shakes her paper cup of coins.

It's no place to go but up,
my taxi driver said as he deposited me
at the curb, but as I pack my things
to leave, I think: Possibly
that's the perfect place for anyone

or thing to be: bottomed out, and the world
knows it, so that, like the men
whose statues line the Dublin streets, afterwards
everyone recalls you much more
fondly when you finally ascend.

MARRYING THE EARL OF SILENCE

LAURA CHALAR

And so I left home's ragged dawns,
my high-sailing balconies

and the boisterous love of friends
for his cold fiefdom.

He'd had our bridal bed strewn
with pine needles –

I froze at the touch of his hand.
Birds sang alarm at blue windows,

and when I tried saying his name
my mouth filled with briny water.

But that was a long time ago.
Now the sounds of my old language

turn to ash inside my letters.
No one writes any more.

I rustle along the grey lawns,
don't shy from his wood-moss fingers.

From the dull eye of the pond
a bloated face stares back blankly.

I am countess of thin air
and carry winter inside me.

Biographical details

Peter Branson lives in Rode Heath, South Cheshire. A former teacher and lecturer, he now organises writing workshops. Until recently he was Writer-in-residence for "All Write" run by Stoke-on-Trent Libraries. He has had work published, or accepted for publication, in *Acumen, Ambit, Envoi, Magma, The London Magazine, Iota, 14, Fire, The Interpreter's House, Poetry Nottingham, Pulsar, Red Ink* and *Other Poetry*. He won first prize in *The Envoi International*, a second place in *The Writing Magazine Open* and highly-commended in *The Petra Kenney* and *The Speakeasy* competitions. His first collection, *The Accidental Tourist*, was published in May 2008.

Sandra Bunting grew up in Canada and now lives in Galway. Her poetry collection *Identified in Trees* was published in 2006 by Marram Press. Besides poetry, she writes fiction, works in journalism and is involved in printmaking, batik and silkpainting.

Michelle Cahill's poems have appeared in *Poetry Ireland Review, Asia Literary Review, Island, Southerly* and *Drunken Boat.* Her collection of poems, *The Accidental Cage* was shortlisted in the 2007 Judith Wright Prize.

Andrew Caldicott has won poetry prizes in Ireland and the UK, and his work has appeared in a number of journals including *Crannóg, The Stinging Fly, West47 Online, Revival, Boyne Berries, The Dawntreader* and *Trinity Poetry Broadsheet.*

Seán Carabini is a Dublin-born and bred author. He had his first book, *Sticking Out in Minnesota: A Dubliner's Journey* published by Appletree Press in Spring 2009. Seán's writing resumé also includes writing for The Irish Times, being selected as a winner of the 2006 Weekend Blend short story competition on Newstalk Radio and having a (very!) short script selected as part of the Vertigo Theatre short script festival in Oregon.

J. R. Carpenter is a Canadian writer of poetry, fiction and electronic literature, originally from rural Nova Scotia, now based in Montreal. She is winner of the QWF Carte Blanche Quebec Award (2008), the CBC Quebec Short Story Competition (2003 & 2005) and the Expozine Alternative Press Award for Best English Book for her first novel, *Words the Dog Knows*, published by Conundrum Press (2008). "in absentia" was created with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts. It was presented within DARE-DARE's Dis/location: projet d'articulation urbaine 2008. Her electronic literature has been exhibited internationally and can be found online at: http://luckysoap.com

Laura Chalar, a lawyer, writer and translator, was born in Montevideo, Uruguay in 1976. She has published a poetry chapbook and a volume of short stories; two new collections, of poetry and stories respectively, are forthcoming in 2009. She is Contributing Editor of *Versal* magazine, published in the Netherlands, and coordinator of a Uruguayan poetry blog.

Monica Corish worked and travelled widely in Africa. before moving to North Leitrim in 2005. She spends her time writing, painting, and leading writing and visual arts workshops in the North-West. She is the Featured Poet in the Spring 2009 edition of *The Stinging Fly*; her memoir writing was featured on the Quiet Quarter and on Sunday Miscellany; and she is currently working towards her first collection of poetry, with the aid of Writing Bursary Awards from the Arts Council and Leitrim Arts Office.

Norman Darlington lives in Bunclody, Co. Wexford. He is Renku editor at *Moonset Literary Newspaper*, and his work has been published in *Crannóg, The SHOp, The Scaldy Detail*, and numerous international journals and anthologies, both in English and in translation. He runs the online collaborative poetry centre The Renku Group renkugroup.proboards.com. Samples of his published work can be found on his website Xaiku.com.

Malcolm Dixon is originally from Liverpool, but now lives on the Kent coast. His fiction has appeared in numerous literary magazines such as *Ascent Aspirations Magazine, Literary Salt, Grain, Aesthetica,*

Mairéad Donnellan lives in Bailieborough, Co. Cavan with her husband and two children. She is a member of the Cavan/Meath Lit. Lab. Some of her work has appeared in this year's *Windows* and *Boyne Berries* publications.

Tom Duddy lives and works in Galway. He has had poetry in a number of Irish and British magazines, including *Magma, Poetry Ireland Review, Smiths Knoll, The Dark Horse,* and *The Rialto.* A chapbook, *The Small Hours,* was published by HappenStance Press in 2006.

Jarlath Fahy's first collection is *The Man Who Was Haunted By Beautiful Smells* (Wordsonthestreet 2007).

Kevin Graham has a poem forthcoming in *The Stinging Fly*. He lives and works in Dublin.

Nicola Griffin lives in East Clare with her husband and dogs. When not working she spends her time writing, playing flute, gardening and boating. Her freelance work includes copy editing, website design and teaching traditional flute. She has just completed an MA in Writing at NUI Galway.

Rachael Hegarty was born and reared in Dublin. She was educated in Holy Faith, Finglas, University of Massachusetts, Boston and Trinity College Dublin. A recipient of Arts Council Bursaries and writing scholarships, she was nominated for the 2004 and 2006 Hennessey Prize and short listed for 2009 Francis Mac Manus Prize. She teaches at Parnell VEC and the Trinity Access Programme. Her most recent publication was in *Our Shared Japan*, an anthology of Irish poetry.

Kevin Higgins is co-organiser of Over The Edge literary events. He facilitates poetry workshops at Galway Arts Centre; teaches creative writing at Galway Technical Institute and on the Brothers of Charity Away With Words programme. He is also Writer-in-Residence at Merlin Park Hospital and the poetry critic of the Galway Advertiser. His first collection of poems *The Boy With No Face* was published by Salmon in February 2005 and was short-listed for the 2006 Strong Award. His second collection, *Time Gentlemen, Please,* was published in March 2008 by Salmon. One of the poems from *Time Gentlemen, Please*, *My Militant Tendency,* features in the Forward Book of Poetry 2009. A recent poem of his, *Ourselves Again*, appeared in *Best of Irish Poetry 2009*. His work also features in the *The Watchful Heart – A New Generation of Irish Poets (*Ed Joan McBreen, Salmon Poetry) & next year will appear in *Identity Parade – The New British and Irish Poets* (Ed Roddy Lumsden, Bloodaxe, 2010).

Orla Higgins lives in Galway city and has recently completed the MA in Writing at NUIG. She won the 2009 Over The Edge Fiction New Writer of the Year competition and was a featured reader at the Emerging Writers Showcase at the 2009 Cuirt International Festival of Literature. Orla is currently working on her first novel

Reynold Junker's writing has appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine.* His story, *The Volunteers,* was included in the anthology of Hitchcock's personal favorites, *Tales To Make You Quake And Quiver*. His short story, *Dancing With The Jesuits,* was awarded first place in the Catholic Press Association's Best Short Story category for 2008. His memoir, *Subway Music,* about his growing up Italian and Catholic in Brooklyn, New York was awarded first prize in the Life Stories category of the 16th Annual Writer's Digest International Self-Published Book Awards competition.

Steve Longfellow is a graduate of the Vermont College MFA in Writing Program and teaches a little composition and creative writing at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. His poetry has appeared in *Café Review, Diner, Edgz, Locuspoint, Talking River, Underground Voices,* and *Drunken Boat*.

Mary Madec lives in Galway and has published widely in Ireland and recently in Britain and the USA. She won the Hennessy award in 2008 and her first collection, *Maeve's a Legend* is due from Salmon in 2010

Helena Mulkerns lives in Co. Wexford, Ireland. Her short fiction and poetry has been published internationally in anthologies, magazines and literary publications. She spent the best part of a decade working as an writer and editor with UN peacekeeping missions in Africa and Afghanistan. Her most recent work was shortlisted for the 2009 Francis MacManus short story award, and she is currently completing a novel.

Nuala Ní Chonchúir lives in County Galway. Her third short fiction collection *Nude* was published by Salt in September 2009. She has poems and an essay in *The Watchful Heart – A New Generation of Irish Poets*, edited by Joan McBreen (Salmon, 2009). Nuala was chosen by The Irish Times as a writer to watch in 2009. She was recently shortlisted for the European Prize for Literature and she was one of four winners of the Templar Poetry Pamphlet and Collection competition. Her pamphlet *Portrait of the Artist with a Red Car* will be published by Templar in November. Website: www.nualanichonchuir.com

Billy O'Callaghan is the author of two short story collections, *In Exile* (2008) and I*n Too Deep* (2009), both published by Mercier Press. Winner of the George A. Birmingham Award, the Molly Keane Short Story Award and the Lunch Hour Stories Prize, his fiction has appeared in *Absinthe: New European Writing, Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, Bellevue Literary Review, Existere, Pearl, Southword, Versal*, and numerous other literary magazines and journals around the world.

Liam O'Cléirigh has been published in many periodicals and magazines such as *Poetry Ireland Review, The Antigonish Review, Cyphers, The Stinging Fly* and *Orbis.*

Mick Ransford has been published in T*he Sunday Tribune, Cuirt, Comhar, West47, Poetry Ireland* and the US magazines *MeThree, Whim's place, Able Muse* and *Down In The Dirt.* He's a regular contributor to Irish radio. His work has appeared in school textbooks and in several anthologies, including the critically received *These Are Our Lives.* He won the Galway Now short story competition, was shortlisted for a PJ O'Connor Award and a Hennessy Emerging Fiction Award.

Tom Sigafoos writes novels, short stories, scripts, and travel articles. Five of his radio essays ("An American Scrapbook") have been broadcast on RTE Lyric FM. His crime novel *Code Blue* is distributed on amazon.com. His work has appeared in *America's Horse*, the magazine of The American Quarter Horse Association, in Ireland's *Horse & Pony* magazine, and in *Creative Holidays Magazine.* He has lived in County Donegal since 2003.

Gianni Skaragas was born in Northern Greece, Macedonia. He graduated from the Drama School of the National Theatre of Greece and studied at the Aristotelian University of Law. He has published four novels in Greece, including *Surface*, which recently appeared in French translation. His short stories, essays, and other writings appear regularly in literary journals and newspapers throughout the Hellenic world and Europe. His English play *Prime Numbers* premiered in New York on February 2009.

David Starkey directs the creative writing program at Santa Barbara City College and has published several collections of poems from small presses, most recently *Starkey's Book of States* (Boson Books, 2007), *Adventures of the Minor Poet* (Artamo Press, 2007), *Ways of Being Dead: New and Selected Poems* (Artamo, 2006), *David Starkey's Greatest Hits* (Pudding House, 2002) and *Fear of Everything*, winner of Palanquin Press's Spring 2000 chapbook contest. He has published in literary magazines such as *Antioch Review, Beloit Poetry Journal, Crannóg, Cutbank, Faultline, Greensboro Review, The Journal, Massachusetts Review, Mid-American Review, Nebraska Review, Notre Dame Review, Poet Lore, Poetry East, South Dakota Review, Southern Humanities Review, Southern Poetry Review, Sycamore Review, Texas Review, and Wormwood Review.*

Steven Wade received an honourable mention in the Lorian Hemingway and was a finalist in the Glimmertrain Short Story competitions (2006). He was awarded second prize in the Biscuit International Short Story Competition (2008), and received an honourable mention in the Short Story Radio Competition (U.K. 2009) He was shortlisted for The Fish Short Story Prize and West 47 Online Short Fiction Prize (2009) and was nominated for The Hennessy New Irish Writing Prize (2008).

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