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Cockle Picker (Morecambe Bay)

Leeanne Quinn

I came in from a cold rain
burying deep into the bed of the ocean. Far
from where I was born, a stranger sat in my silent

un-moneyed language.

The sea rose and dipped butterfly
waves, unsettling the working day,
masking the creeping tide.

I went out into the shallow water –
sought the heart-shaped shells, lifted them
as if catching currency and not the sea

itself. I made the familiar line,
a bearing in a chain, my outline cast
against the blackness of the waves.

But the sea deceived, took back
its wares, and cut me
off like a door slammed tight and bolted.

I fell in with the tide, became scattered
in my salt stricken panic.
Struggled from my clothes,

clung to nothing, felt the swell
of suffocation, the blood explosion,
bursting. Gave myself up, naked and poorer,

my body brimming full as the sea.

Quickthorn

Siobhán Campbell

Don't bring haw into the house at night
or in any month with a red fruit in season
or when starlings bank against the light,
don't bring haw in. Don't give me reason
to think you have hidden haw about you.
Tucked in secret, may its thorn thwart you.
Plucked in blossom, powdered by your thumb,
I will smell it for the hum of haw is long,
its hold is low and lilting. If you bring
haw in, I will know you want me gone
to the fairies and their jilting. I will know
you want me buried in the deep green field
where god knows what is rotting.

Lure of Volcano

Sandra Bunting

For Malcolm Lowry

You did it to yourself,
walked too close to volcanoes,
ended up like the mangy dog
you used to kick
when you were someone else,
the same old faded posters
of disaster films in Spanish
haunting your head.

I didn't make it up Pacaya,
stayed instead in Antigua
drinking wine and speaking Spanish.
Still I felt the hot lava
under my feet, melting my shoes.
I knew all the danger signs,
PELIGRO, but went ahead
and bathed in the luxuriant,
destructive heat of red.

Not Drowning, But Waving

Niamh Madden

You grabbed.

I stared at the letters for a few short seconds. My head was heavily fuzzy. My eyes felt as though they had lost all colour. As I stared through cold pupils, the words changed shape again before my eyes.

You're robbed. Grave bed.

The letters were shifting, the characters blurring together until Times New Roman seemed no longer a font but a tiny picture of dead Roman Emperor's eyes on a serving dish.

I shook my head, trying to tighten any loose cogs. Roman Emperor? Times New Roman? More than some thing was muddled up inside. Why was I seeing the dead, even within words, around letters, between the lines, beyond the pages? Shirley had bought me a book, to take my mind off of it. A horror. A horror! What was she thinking?

Oh! The horror!

Thanking her, I smiled, and every time I looked at the first page, I never got past those two words.

You grabbed. You grabbed. You grabbed.

A close friend of Shirley's and mine, Topsy they called her, was reading James Joyce's "The Dead". A good one, she'd been told. The best of Joyce's stories. I would never write a book about it. Imagine – dragging it all up, dredging up the corpse and resurrecting it, only to kill it again with words, hurting it with the language it learned as a baby. Reading "The Dead" would never bring him back. Nothing would.

I sat up in bed for the first time in a few hours. Plumping up the moist pillows behind me, I attempted to look around the room. The flowered wallpaper was glassy and fogged up. The book's pages were moist like my cheeks. I forgot how not to cry.

"The funeral was lovely. Wasn't it just? A lovely memory," Sr. Anne had whispered to me over sour tea and cardboard sandwiches. She held a tight grip on me, as if all of a sudden I would slip away too. The sandwiches were displayed in perfect little triangles, stacked up and up and up on a chipped plate. My stomach spun. A triangle was placed in my hand by Sr.

Anne and I pressed it into my mouth. The triangle just tasted of salt and dough and wet and cold.

I barely heard the nun, but felt her cling to my arm, chewing up turkey and bread, open-mouthed. My body and mind felt nothing and everything in one instant. All mixed up. Sr. Anne repeated the words, this time more loudly, bits of food spewing out between her teeth and lips. Wasn't it lovely. Lovely. It was like she was speaking bad taste and I was hearing her touch and feeling sound. My senses, oh, what was happening inside, and how could I retrieve his lost touch?

Lovely. There was nothing lovely about the funeral. The flowers were not lovely. They were dead. The candles. Their light seemed forlorn and lost amongst a great, wet darkness. The priests. The incense. The bells. The crowds and crowds of people. Some just heard, and came. Didn't even know him. Nobody did. Except me.

Nothing was lovely. The only thing that was lovely had been taken away, grabbed from life too soon. Much too soon for anyone to understand. Too soon for a funeral to be lovely.

"He was a lovely lad," she continued saying. Only then did I realise how I must have sounded in funerals gone past. All the chitchat. The attempts to say something to help; to lay a hand on a mourner's arm, to give consoling glances at the family. There was nothing to be said. Neither James Joyce nor the nun's spitting nor the priests' words nor the endless flow of tea and sandwiches could ever bring him back.

Back to where I lay thinking. Back in my bed. Fresh, dark memories of funeral bells and earth continued to sprinkle dust over my mind. I smelt salt and mucus.

You grabbed. Brave dead. Grave bed. Your bed.

This was it. I was going to stand up and walk there. Walk to his room, which felt miles away, though it was just next door. I had no courage to go there before. It was too familiar. I glanced at the book. Your bed.

Your bed, where you will always be hidden beneath the covers, two bare feet pushing through the sheets. The bed was getting too small for you. You thought you were nearly a man, but you were my little boy. I never felt I would have to let you go. I will never let go of you. They grabbed and you tried to hold on to something, probably, before you slipped. I wasn't even there. I could have been there to catch you, give you breath, give you life. It was my fault. I should have taught you how to swim.

Sighing, I curled the duvet cover back over my head, so that everything was black and clammy. Hearing my breath all of a sudden, I realised there was sobbing now, not just silent tears, but heaves, and each rising wheeze was caught by the next, so that I wasn't quite breathing at all. What if Mum held her breath forever? What if she drowned under the duvet, smothered by her own parental weeping?

I stuck my feet out and giggled a little, though with down-turned lips and sunken chuckles. You hadn't wanted to wake up, not ever wanting to wake up and get to college that day. There had been an exam. You hated doing exams, but I pushed you. I just wanted to help you be the best you could. Your friends didn't care. Didn't listen. They got you drunk. They may as well have pushed you in.

Why did I wake you that day? Why didn't I leave you resting? Your snoring and sleepy sighing before you wake up with a weary, slight snort...why can't I keep that image forever and pretend time never moved on and that day never happened and you never died? Why? Why did I let my boy die?

Grave. Topsy always had a fascination with what she called "the power of words." Grave. Now, I understood what she meant. Grave. This word was haunting me, throughout these days and nights which melted seamlessly together, which held no meaning any more, which hurt my head and my bones and paralysed my joints.

He drowned. That was what happened. Shirley shook me one day, a few months afterwards, and said this to me. He drowned. He got drunk and fell and drowned. He will not be back. Move on.

Move on. These words were the second most feared most dreadful most horrific words after that first one, grave. No, I will not move on. I will drown. Drown just like he did and then we will be together.

Suddenly I became aware of my arms under the covers, and raised them to my throat. I wanted to know what it was like.

Drifting into a sleepy silence, my sobbing subsided, and I flattened my hands around my throat, pulling tightly around my neck...

Water gushed and zipped around me. Air could not get in. I was drowning inside my mind. All of a sudden I melted. My hands were no longer slender and smooth, but hairy and manly, the hands not of a boy, but of a man. I felt my hands slide away from my throat and sensed a force gently pushing them down to my side.

The gold...there it was, gold, shining, with a plaque, the sharp wood with his name on it. His coffin, gleaming – brightly reflecting my dark clothes, my black tears, my shadowed eyes, my hair – how was it shining so brightly through my tears? My glass eyes were becoming clear, and there he was, he was out in the canal, but his head was above the sloshing muddy water.

I heard him, and not the water, and watched his mouth move, like he was real. My boy was real. He was reciting the poem he had learned for the exam that day.

Oh, no no no. It was too cold always. The words – how often I heard him quote them at the kitchen table; I forced him to do it, forced him to learn them, even though he was not a boy anymore, no no no, not a boy, not a schoolboy...No more larking around. What had I done?

But something was different about the poem. He sang the words. He hummed to the tune of some song I'd heard him whistling, through his teeth, around the house that week. I'd never paid attention to the melody before; good god, why hadn't I listened?

The words...You grabbed. Grave bed. Brave dead. The words he sang were muddled up! Mixed up like my senses. Like my head. Like the mourners who couldn't help me get out of my mind.

The coffin shone. He sang. Not drowning...not drowning mother, but waving. Son, please be happy now for you, and not for me, no more pleasing, no more senseless reasoning.

Everybody hears me...I'm closer now...I'm much happier now than you think, and not drowning, but waving...and now I love larking, and now I'm alive...and not drowning, but waving. Not drowning, but waving.

I waved back.

Granite Flint

Tony Bailie

Hollow clang of chapel bell,
darkened cloisters, candle-lit,
footsteps on the cobbles clip
like hammers on an anvil.

A stone in the eye,
granite flint chipped from a tomb:
I'm blinded to death.

Bookshop Romance

Kevin Higgins

The girl behind the counter whispers: “Yes, Mother”,
then puts the phone down with a cosmic sigh.
You look up from your D.H. Lawrence.
Something rustles in your corduroy trousers.

You want to shout: “Let me through!
I’m an existentialist”; to take her hand
and tell her: your own family Christmases
often resemble the aftermath of an embalming;
that your brother’s a fully paid-up member
of *V-neck Sweaters for the Bomb*;
that most years you honour them
with your absence.

That you’d like her to come up
this evening to see your haiku
and the life you keep
in the shoebox under the bed.

That you’ve been admired
by women with bad judgment
all your life...

Garcia's**Lindsey Bellosa**

The summer I turned twenty, I got my first waitressing job. My friend, Alicia, and I went out to Lake George looking for jobs. She had gone to the same high school as me and we were college roommates that year, our first year at Albany. Lake George, a resort town nestled at the base of the Adirondack mountains, was the best place to work in the summers. Although it was a forty-five minute drive from my parent's house in Argyle, it was a tourist trap and it was where all the money was. There were fireworks every Thursday, steam-boat rides out to see them, glow-sticks on the street. Every other weekend was a festival: Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, Americaid weekend when Harley bikes and leather-coated, bearded men and skull-tattooed women littered the street. There were two arcades on the street, two haunted houses, at least six ice-cream parlors, rows of bars with balconies overlooking the lake and scores of restaurants. We found jobs in a little Mexican place called Garcia's, right on the main street.

Garcia's could sit about fifteen tables inside, and another four on a small, covered balcony just outside. It had a small bar that specialized in Margaritas: frozen Margaritas, salted on the rocks, strawberry Margaritas, peach Margaritas, any kind of Margarita you could think of. A woman named Linda hired us. "I'm old but I'm still hip," she kept telling us. Her face was leathery from years of sun. She showed us how to make Margaritas. Pour the tequila for 1,2,3, the triple sec 1,2, sour mix 1,2,3,4. Shake or blend with ice. We rolled the glasses in lime and then rock salt. She said to always taste before you serve. We said no problem. Tequila was ripe on our tongues that summer.

Alicia and I were the lunch-time waitresses. Our shift started at eleven and ended at about five. Almost no-one came in. The sun was pounding the pavement and people ate ice-cream and sub sandwiches. No-one wanted enchiladas and sit-down burritos at that time of day. Some days we only made fifteen or sixteen bucks. "Not even worth the gas money," Alicia said. We took our payment in alcohol, over-measuring portions of strawberry dacquiri or frozen margarita and sneaking them into kid cups to sip at our tiny soda station in the kitchen. We worked together on my birthday. I'd

seen an Absolut Vodka ad in a magazine, vanilla vodka with coke on crushed ice. “God, I want that,” I said. Absolut Vodka was top-shelf liquor. Alicia mixed a drink up for me quickly that day, her eyes darting around the place wildly. She’d even gone downstairs and used the ice-crusher to make it picture-perfect. Alicia had a heavy hand with the liquor. We sipped the drink fervently, our backs turned to the hot kitchen and our heads throbbed. We had to dump half of it out. The sweetness was cloying and we chewed gum voraciously, trying to clear our breath and our heads.

If Linda was there, she put us to work. In the mornings, we’d come in and cut limes. Mike, the head cook, made fresh tortilla chips and the smell of them filled the kitchen, soft flour and the crisp, bubbling oil of the deep-fat fryer. We used small serrated knives to slice the limes and they’d always slip, the lime juice stinging the cut. We snatched chips from baskets all day, our fingers tart with lime. Mike made his own salsa too and we filled buckets up from the fridge to serve to tables with their chips. We filled up the bar with ice, carrying two buckets at a time up the rickety stairs from the basement. The ice-machine was there, with two silver scoopers. It was a small machine and the ice was continuously re-filling, falling on our hands as we scooped.

If it wasn’t raining, we set up the tables outside- put up the umbrellas and vacuumed the green, plastic rug. There were bits of chip and tomato sauce crushed into it from the night before. I could never get the umbrellas to open; I’d pinch my hands in their metal clasp and Alicia would come out and help me. Linda made us scrub the toilets every morning too and she went in to check that we scrubbed hard enough. We never did, in her opinion, and she always sent us back in to do it again. “It’s disgusting, people that serve food scrubbing toilets,” I said to Alicia as we waited by the bar, “I’m not doing it tomorrow; it’s ridiculous.”

“I won’t do it either,” she said and, at home, her mother would say the same thing.

“Tell that lady you won’t do it,” she said indignantly, “That’s just not sanitary.”

But still, every morning as I came up with another bucket of ice I’d see Alicia emerging guiltily from the bathroom. “You scrubbed them,” I accused and she shrugged. “The old shitters; I just can’t resist them.”

Since no customers were coming in, Linda would make us do other things: scrub the brass polls, wash the outside windows. If it were just Mike there, he’d turn on the tv at the bar and we’d sit, sipping Diet cokes. If

people came to the door, it surprised us. We had so little experience that we were afraid of them. “Do you have anything that isn’t that spicy?” they would sometimes ask.

“No,” Alicia said, “You’d better go somewhere else. There’s a place that does burgers down the road.”

Usually one of us would get sent home early. If we got anyone it would be a big Indian family, having an early dinner at about four. There would be twelve or thirteen of them and we’d push the tables together. They all wanted virgin Pina Coladas and virgin Strawberry Dacquiris, appetizers and then enchililadas, burritoos, the spiciest stuff but all vegetarian, hold the meat. Mike would curse at the orders. Alicia liked doing the bar and never spoke loud enough for the big tables to hear her so she made the drinks and I did the serving. Deciding how to split the tips was never an issue. They never tipped.

We’d walk out to the car together down the hot street, complaining about the money. “We should quit,” I told Alicia and she would nod, dragging on her cigarette. She had just started smoking that year in college and now she had to have one right away after our shift. I had been trying to take it up myself, but I couldn’t stomach them in that heat. The next morning we’d come in together. We pooled our quarters to pay for the metered parking all day.

We got nasty notes from the night waitresses, saying we never did enough side-work, that we left things dirty or forgot to do something. There were five night-waitresses. One of them, Jackie, was the bouncer’s daughter. He was a huge man named Bill, but did most of his work at Garcia’s sister restaurant, Christie’s, which served food but was primarily a bar and a nightclub. Jackie was a big girl too, with a large toothy smile. Her voice boomed and she always wanted more hours. The main composer of the nasty notes was Caitlin, a tall broad girl with white blonde hair and furious blue eyes. I never saw Caitlin when she wasn’t angry about something. She was trying to take classes at the community college during the day and waitress at nights. She said the money at nights wasn’t good enough either, but Jackie always bragged about making a hundred, sometimes even two-hundred on a Friday night. She said the trick was to keep smiling and keep the Margarita’s flowing.

In July, nine Lithuanians joined Garcia’s as busboys and hostesses. Some of the boys washed dishes. They all lived upstairs, right above the

restaurant. We went up to see them a few times. The mattresses were on the floor and there were no carpets. The whole thing was dusty and hot but there was a lot of bare space. They said they didn't mind it, except that Brett, the owner, wouldn't let them cook or eat upstairs. They had to go out for all their meals or eat downstairs in the kitchen. Some of them had almost no English but they were always smiling and never left a table unbusbed for more than a few minutes. Usually they were standing by with a bucket before desserts had been finished.

Alicia and I had crushes on two different boys. Mine was a busboy named Jan, but he was there with his girlfriend- a tall graceful girl named Klara. I told Alicia I only really liked him because of how quick he scrubbed a table. Really, I liked Mike and the way he yelled for me to take the jesus-christing enchiladas out before they congealed, his grumpy blue eyes and his hot tortilla chips.

At the end of the summer, we had a work party out at a bar in the mountains. We drank Corona's with lime and I did about five tequila shots with Brett, the owner. He posed for pictures with all the girls, squeezing our shoulders. I tried to flirt with Mike a little but I was too shy. Alicia pounded beers with her busboy. I puked on my jeans on the way back to town in a taxi, and big Bill carried me upstairs to one of the beds above the restaurant. I woke up with Alicia and Bill's little white dog beside me. Alicia drove us home and I tried to sneak in the house before my parents caught me, reeking of vomit and tequila.

The next summer I worked there one day, Memorial Day weekend. I got stuck doing a shift with Caitlin and she complained about me the whole time. I took out the wrong drinks and sloshed a bowl of black bean soup all over one of the tables. I scooped ice with the soda cup instead of the silver ice-scoop and Caitlin caught me, her pale eyes flashing wildly, "What the hell is wrong with you Lindsey? What if you break the cup?" The new daytime bartender, Vicky, heard her and clucked to me later, "You really shouldn't let Caitlin talk to you like that. She's a complete bitch."

After that, the restaurant closed down for a couple weeks and I didn't hear anything from them. I left two messages on the answering machine and finally got a daytime job working at Sears in the mall, making six bucks an hour. Mike called me a few days after I'd gotten the job. He had taken over managing after Linda had some kind of falling out with Brett. Alicia and I had joked that the shitters must not have been sparkling hard enough that day.

“Ok, Lindsey, you got a pen cuz I got a full schedule for you. Monday: eleven to five, Tuesday:eleven to five, Wednesday-“

I interrupted him: “I can’t do lunch shifts, Mike. I got a daytime job. I can do nights.”

There was a pause on the end and then a frustrated sigh, “Ah, Jesus Christ. Ah. No, you know what fuck that. I need waitresses who are really going to commit to this; that’s how it is this summer.” There was a click on his end.

I spent the rest of the summer folding sweaters. Alicia got a job at the mall too, in the coffee shop next door. They were stricter about her giving out free drinks. I couldn’t even get a cappuccinno. Alicia wondered if the Lithuanians would be back that summer. We both missed the tequila.

Karma The Cat

Susan Millar DuMars

Spring without your nose
burrowed in white star jasmine
blossoms, breathing in.

Without your muddy
paws printing dark galaxies
across the pink sheets.

We used to sprawl out,
queens in green communion,
two sun worshippers.

Your triangle ears
ladling liquid silver
sound of our windchimes.

Your so certain eyes
wise as the grass.
I watched them close.

The Therapist is Everybody's Favourite Aunt

Liam Guilar

Not the slow one on the farm
who tears the skins from rabbits
in a kitchen full of blood and steam
but the one who gave you sweets
then took you to the zoo
and wondered why you screamed.

No one warned you
that your favourite aunt
objects to walls, and cages.
Dressed in her Sunday best
she infiltrates the zoo
to liberate the claws and teeth,
the snarling lust and hunger.
Liberty or death she rages,
not caring whose.

But you've never been so calm.
No really, you've never felt so calm
She's saying you can speak your truth:
that magic word which will unlock
the princess from her tower,
consign the changeling to perdition
and free the true prince from captivity
in some coffee stained bed sitting room
where a naked beauty, lying on your bed
speculates about your suitability
for the next moon landing. Perhaps
you'll find it next time. You pay her,

calmed, and step outside.
The day is full razor blades
and the unmistakable sound of a carnivore
free at least, running you down.

the day I fell in love with a housecoat

jarlath fahy

the day I fell in love
with a housecoat
in otool's supervalue
tuam the haberdashery section

i couldn't believe my eyes
there between the mops and the
buckets the coal shuttles and
the delph with the wee small
cottages on them beside
the sets of black cats you know
the ones one cat standing two
sitting all joined together
by a chain around their necks
there it was a small rail of
housecoats my god just like my
grandmother wore you could have
knocked me over with a
feather duster the air was
diffuse with lavender you
know the polish they used to
use for polishing floors
i couldn't help myself i
couldn't take my eyes off it
small red flowers the navy
colour over whelming the
feeling unbelievable
the store detective didn't
seem to think so what are you
doing he asked me are you
some kind of transvestite or
something what are you at no
i says it's the housecoat my
grand-mother used to wear try

one on it feels bloody mar-
vellous are you serious
he says jeeze, it is my gran-
ny wore one of them too and
he tried one on then the man-
ager arrived what the
hell is going on here he
says and we convinced him to
try one on too and before
we knew where we were weren't
we singing there were three love-
ly lassies from bannion and
dancing down the aisles

Door

Mary Madec

What unhinged me was my mother
who insisted on closing the door.

I waited, planned to open it,
fell asleep,

sleepwalked to resolve the unfinished business,
the ghost of me searched for a way out

of the darkness ,palpated in panic
the coldness of the old stone walls.

I circled the room, tripping
into the wardrobe, the mirror throwing

the opaque shadow
that awoke me.

I heard the soft breathing of my siblings,
the racket of my parents' dreams,
the wind in the pines in the plantation,

made a mental note of the position
of the door.
Its handle shining in a ribbon of moonlight

Lap Dancing

Alan McMonagle

Eventually, as I knew would happen, we get around to talking about women. We don't know a lot about them, Jules and I, but every time we meet up Jules says we should try to chat about things we know nothing about. The other day, for example, we had a conversation about lap-dancing clubs. In spite of many protests, one has opened up a few doors down from where Jules lives. Jules has no problem with the dancing girls – after all, they have bills to pay like the rest of us. He is just dismayed that they have chosen to take over what was his favourite pub. 'I used to drink there all the time,' he keeps saying to me. Now all he wants to do is sip coffee and protest.

'Jules,' I plead with him, 'the pub is gone and it's not coming back. It's time to move on. There are other pubs.'

But it's like talking to a stone.

In fact I'm surprised at how far Jules is taking his protest. After our conversation about lap-dancing clubs, he went to Penney's and bought several white sheets. He then bought a tin of red paint, a bristly brush and painted a slogan - *GIVE US BACK OUR PUB*. He pierced the sheets with holes and put a lathe across the bottom. 'I hear that stops them blowing all over the place,' he said. Then he hung the sheets outside his upstairs windows. He called around to his neighbours and gave them sheets. 'We need to form a human chain,' he said to anyone who would listen. 'We must bring the street to a standstill. Let these guys know what we think of their seedy plans.'

Usually, I'm as willing as the next man to follow a worthy cause but I wondered is it not a little late in the day for all this? After all, the new owners have already moved in, held auditions and plastered posters of tempting dancers across the windows of their new club. But, as I say, Jules doesn't want to know.

The new owners are among the first to notice Jules' sheets, which, in spite of all the holes, are flapping passionately about and wrapping themselves up in twists - so much so that the slogan is illegible. Nevertheless, the new owners feel urged to approach Jules.

To encourage him to simmer down about their seedy plans, they promise Jules free admission to the club for the first three months. Every hour, they put exotic fliers in his letterbox, tease him with slogans of their own and ply him with photographs of popular dancers – a different dancer for each night of the week, according to Jules. They even hint that there might be a private audience in it for him when he storms down there to tell them precisely what they can do with their ‘brochures.’ ‘Come inside. Take a look around,’ a guy wearing shades says to him.

But Jules remains determined never to set foot inside the place – not after what they’ve done to it. I feel a bit sorry for him, especially after all the effort he has gone to with the red paint and sheets full of holes. To rub salt into his wounds, it’s also becoming apparent that his protest has actually attracted people to the dancing club – that is, if the lengthy queues every night are anything to go by.

‘No wonder they’re keen to throw you freebies,’ I say when we next meet up.

‘I’ve a good mind to torch the place,’ he says, gulping a mouthful of coffee.

‘And where will that get you?’ I ask.

‘Things just aren’t the same,’ he laments.

‘Have you ever met a lap-dancer?’ I ask him, hoping to steer our conversation in a more interesting direction.

‘No, but once I had a conversation with a masseuse,’ he replies, and I see my plan is working.

Because I know Jules has wanted to have a chat about women for a long time. He doesn’t have one himself but he thinks the world of them. Every time he sees one he says something charming. Or at least he thinks he does. Either way, he claims he always means well. ‘I want them to feel good about themselves,’ he says, ‘so why wouldn’t I say something charming?’

Take what is a typical day for him – at least until this lap-dancing business began. What should amount to no more than a straightforward stroll to the old sweet shop for his paper always becomes an epic voyage of discovery. En route, if he sees a girl shopping indecisively for a new blouse, he quickly forgets about his paper, saunters into the shop and tells the girl that the blouse looks great on her, that it really suits her milky complexion or draws out her mermaid eyes. It doesn’t end there. When he enters a shop with queues he deliberately joins the longest queue because it contains more girls. ‘We’re having a lot of weather lately,’ he announces to

the queue. ‘Can you believe it’s only four months to Christmas,’ he muses, shaking his baffled head. ‘What is your favourite film?’ he might ask the girl standing closest to him.

This forbearing attitude involves him in all sorts of delays. Not so long ago, he spent an afternoon buying a Prize Bond in the Post Office. ‘Today, I talked to a girl from Tanzania,’ he said by way of explanation, when he finally showed up to meet me. As a matter of fact, it was the last time we were to meet up in his beloved pub. And all Jules could talk about was this girl from Tanzania. ‘She had unspeakably beautiful eyes,’ he continued and I gave him a funny look because it’s not often he is stuck for words. ‘You know Jim,’ he added, huddling up to me in the dark-lit atmosphere he had come to love so much, ‘there just isn’t enough time. I wish there was a bit of me everywhere.’

No doubt, this helps explain why I often find him chatting away to the girl at the Credit Union’s foreign exchange desk. He doesn’t have any Dollars or Pesos of his own to convert but he likes saying hello to the various nationalities that pass through. It’s also a good place to witness him listen – one thing he doesn’t do a lot of. Of course, he hasn’t got a clue what anyone is saying and I find it strange that the only people he listens to are those he cannot understand. But he says he likes the sounds of all the foreign words. ‘They’re comforting,’ he says.

The opening of the lap-dancing club, however, has changed things. Post Office afternoons are just not the same. He has been on the receiving end of funny looks in the Credit Union. His morning strolls no longer coax easy smiles, delicate grins or lingering clinks of admiration.

‘I’m not hitting the right notes,’ he tells me.

So I tag along to see if there is anything different in his approach.

In the morning, upon complimenting a girl’s mobile phone ring-tone, she glares at him and says *get a grip*. Later, in a hair salon, when he asks a lady what she thinks of his hairstyle, she suggests he keep it short – the conversation and the hair. But the last nail in the coffin arrives when he offers to help an old lady cross a busy road and she goes for him with her handbag. ‘I’m a married woman you pervert,’ she says and lets him have it.

‘Where is it going wrong?’ he asks me in the coffee shop and I’m stuck for an answer.

It’s as if part of him has disappeared – along with his favourite pub. Yet when I put this to him, Jules refuses to accept that the arrival of lap-dancing

on his doorstep is a factor. And when I gently rile him, he's adamant it's not down to his faltering charm. Then he waves me closer to him, into one of his familiar huddles.

'It's women,' he whispers to me, blowing the froth off his creamy coffee. 'They're changing.'

'How do you mean?' I ask.

'For one thing they have plumper lips.'

'OK, but I can't say I've noticed.'

'And I'm pretty sure they can now go invisible. Yesterday a man was jailed for stealing anti-wrinkle cream. I was into the court to see for myself. During cross-examination he said the cream was for his girlfriend. But she was nowhere to be seen.'

In truth, I think Jules' past is starting to catch up with him. Shortly after he walked out on his employer, Jules began life as a handyman. Every Thursday, he puts an ad in the paper saying he can tidy neglected lawns, patio unwanted gardens, put caps on chirping chimneys. That sort of thing. He also lays claims to being quite good with a hedge strimmer and in possession of an uncanny knack for hanging doors and fitting side gates. After a brief plunge into the world of pianos, he is even well on his way to convincing a rich spinster he is the man to tune the baby-grand Steinway for which she desperately seeks an expert. Now all that remains is for him to convince her black wolfhound.

Black wolfhounds aside, for a long time he received the benefit of doubt. But gradually people have to come to realise that Jules isn't quite what he says he is. In a quiet moment, Jules is the first to admit he's a bit of a chancer. Sometimes in fact, he is way too hard on himself, and I'm quick to remind him he's human like the rest of us. As usual, there's no talking to him.

'They must be on to me,' he concludes sadly.

Several days pass before we meet up again. Through the grapevine, I've heard that Jules is keeping to himself. Especially, after only one other person showed up to form a link in his human chain. So I'm a little anxious myself – as it completely slipped my mind. Nevertheless, he is very excited.

'I met one of them,' he tells me.

'Who?'

'A lap-dancer. *Do you think I am any good?* she asked me.'

‘Did you go?’

‘I did not. I was moping around there, trying to think up another protest. Then I stepped into the old sweet shop for a Mars bar. That’s where I met Veronica. She was on a break and thought I’d been to her performance. Think again, I said to her. Then she told me the sweet shop is closing and a casino is opening – right across the road from the lap-dancing club.’

‘I suppose the war paint and holy sheets will be on display again,’ I say.

‘Christ no,’ he booms, throwing an Espresso into him. ‘This casino sounds like a great place. I really like the idea of a midnight game of cards. It beats playing Old Maid at home and listening to those useless sheets.’

‘What about the old sweet shop?’

‘Sweets will only get you so far. Besides, that place never stocks Mars bars.’

‘I didn’t know you could play cards.’

‘Veronica showed me. Rumour has it there’ll be free coffee for poker players. I can’t wait. Veronica says as soon as it’s up and going, she’s going to hang up her thong and become a croupier. She promises me the occasional good card. So I told her I’d see her there, and do you know what she said? *I like a man who is willing to take a risk.*’

He’s had an interesting week, my friend Jules. One moment he can’t properly hang sheets. Now he’s gambling with a woman who wears thongs. I wonder what we’ll talk about the next time we take coffee together.

Safe Landing

Mary Dempsey

My brother has jumped out of the sky-
Icarus untrammeled-
avoiding lines of fire for twenty years.

Ice breaker, fire cracker, his diet stories (from the elders),
his bliss impossible to touch.

We enter a cathedral of light and shade
buttressed to a giant birch, a profusion of leaves
echo in its chamber. He places a table and two chairs,
at home in the billow and tug of silk,
the scent of miraculous skies.

In The Crane Bar (20th December)

Eoghan Garvey

Maybe most fathers do not charm
their children. Mine did his.
This stormy night, he is on the wind
and inside, too, in this calm
station, both welcoming and wintery.

He saunters through my mind,
who often was a puzzle to himself
and yet enjoyed being himself.
He could never hold back a smile
at the flourishes in his own comedy.

Conversation is soft in the pub,
the light dim, or dirty gold.
He has gone, now, quietly, unbowed.
I can't unmiss or unlove

Pre-Natal 1

Breid Sibley

The blue haze
Covers the lake and mountains
Abbey Tower, Cathedral Spire
Town and Field.
From out of the lake
The hump of stones rise.
Waves of out of season
Confused mayflies
Like smoke on the breeze.
I am cocooned in this blue
As my grandchild is cushioned
In my daughter's womb.
The swans glide by
Among the stones.
Stories I will tell the baby
Shape shift in my mind.
The Children of Lir,
The Crannog dwellers
As the sound of Sean Nos
Wafts toward the shore.
The crows hip-hop in front of me
Jolting me back to the present
Away from the icecaps
Melting on the great mountains.

Pre-natal 2

Breid Sibley

I croon to my story
It sings back to me.
A gossamer veil shimmers
Between now and then.
My pen glides
Through different worlds.

Notes on the Claddagh
On a balmy April day
The breeze around my ankles
Drumbeat, heartbeat
Feet hugging the earth.
Notes on the fishing bench
Kestrel hovering
Over Coorheen woods.
Tear-drop on the mallards head
Iridescent purple, violet, blue and green.
Petals of the purple magnolia
Perfume of pink camellia
Love birds singing, a flutter of wings.

My dream, vibrant waiting for the light.

A Memoir With Grykes And Turloughs

Patricia Burke Brogan

(Excerpt)

It's Catechism Time and we're preparing for the annual Plain Chant Festival in Gort, We make and decorate a banner with our school's name, *Scoil Náisiunta i mBaile an Doire*.

We chant the Gregorian Missa de Angelis, Kyrie eleison, Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, Christe eleison.

'They're funny words, muinteoir!'

They're Greek words from a far-away land.'

'Muinteoir, muinteoir, is that the Holy Land where Jesus was born?'

'No, it's not the Holy Land. It's a place where, long, long ago, people made beautiful statues. — Sculptures they're called. They made great buildings with marble columns and wrote wonderful story-plays. They were able to run faster and jump higher than anyone else in the world. Who wants to visit Greece when they've grown up?'

'Me, me, me, muinteoir!' We find Greece on the globe and then point out the Holy Land.

'Can we pretend we're in Greece now and dress up, muinteoir?' With scarves draped around our shoulders we chant, Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison.

'Now children, we're going on a visit to the Holy Land. It's Palm Sunday. Jesus rides through Jerusalem on a donkey. That's why every donkey has a big mark like a cross on its back. We'll stand on each side of the classroom and, with the people of Jerusalem, wave our copybooks like palm-trees. Take a deep breath and we'll chant the Latin words.

'Latin words? What's Latin words, muinteoir?'

'Pope Gregory used Latin words every day. He lived in Rome and his choir sang in Latin. Our Sagart Paróiste uses Latin words at Mass.'

'Gloria in excelsis Deo. Et in terra pax hominibus. —

Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus', we continue.

'Can we pretend we're in Rome now, muinteoir?'

Tomorrow we'll talk about Pope Gregory and Rome. We'll take another deep breath for Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini.'

A sharp knock on the front window distracts us.

Lady Amphill. her blonde hair straying from under a crimson scarf, her sparkling eyes outlined with lime green eye-shadow, beckons. I open the

window. Her red sports car with horse-box attached, is parked at the school gate.

'Tell the little wretches that I'll give them a party at my castle in Kinvara! Next Saturday at twelve noon my coach will pick them up here.'

Leaving a whiff of lavender and cigarette smoke in the air, she bounces out the gate and into her car.

'A party with Lady Amptihll if you're here at noon.', I repeat.

'Lady Amptihll, Lady Amptihll, lives in a castle.

She gives us lollipops and banana sandwiches.', the children chant.

'She's a very kind lady and she takes great care of her castle, Dun Guaire.

We must practise the Credo. The Plain Chant Festival takes place in three weeks.' With the tuning fork, I find the right note and we chant,

'Credo in unum Deum, Patrem omnipotentem, factorem caeli et terrae, visibilium omnium et invisibilium. Et in unum Dominum —

'My Daddy says that Lady Amptihll is a desperate bad driver, muinteoir!

She's afraid to pass out anyone cycling on the road,'

The children wear their Sunday clothes for the Plain Chant Festival in Gort. Knitted berets, patent buckled shoes and navy anoraks on the girls, boys in navy Confirmation suits with green rosettes. Holding our banner high, we march through decorated streets. Towns-people wave as we turn towards the church hall.

The ghosts of King Guaire and his horse-men ride beside us. Lady Gregory, Yeats, Synge and a host of famous writers, holding quills and ink-spattered notebooks, glow amongst the shadows.

Lady Amptihll's sports car is parked near the church. One of the Gort boys jumps into the driver's seat and tries to start the engine.

Lady Amptihll, scarf flying, jumps into the passenger seat and asks his name. In her notebook, she writes his answer, Colman O'Guaire.

'I'll report you to the police, young ruffian!' She pushes him out, slides into the driver's seat and, engine roaring, rushes towards the Garda Barracks. (The young ruffian is the son of a local Garda.) As she approaches the Barracks, she sees our Sagart Paróiste and brakes abruptly. Our Sagart Paróiste listens to her complaint and gives her his blessing.

For three minutes Lady Amptihll, scarlet gloves on steering wheel, sits statue-like in her sports car.

Does she see the spirits of King Guaire and St. Colman as they ride past?

Suddenly, she puts on even more crimson lipstick, turns her car and slowly drives towards the church.

While the first choir chants the Credo, I hear

'Muinteoir, muinteoir! That choir made a mistake! They sang, Visibilum omnium instead of visibilium omnium, muinteoir!'

When our choir chants the Credo, I spot Lady Ampthill at the door of the church hall. The adjudicator praises us and says that our voices are sweeter than those of the Galway choirs. Lady Ampthill applauds and announces,

'Another party for the little wretches!' 'Lollipops, lollipops.', whisper our little angels.

'Say, Thank you, Lady Ampthill.'

Thank you, Lady Ampthill.', they smile. I remind the children that another Lady called Lady Gregory had lived nearby.

'Lady Gregory did not live in a castle. But, in her big house at Coole Park, she gave parties for famous visitors, people who wrote poems and story-plays. W. B. Yeats, Sean O'Casey, Douglas Hyde and John Millington Synge stayed with her. Lady Gregory wrote story-plays too. Lady Gregory will be remembered forever.'

'Will Lady Ampthill be remembered forever, muinteoir? Does she write story-plays?'

'No, she doesn't write story-plays, but she takes great care of Dun Guaire.'

The Príomh Oide treats us to lunch of chicken and chips in Glynns' Hotel beside the convent's cloistered walls. We eat, not in novitiate-like silence, but with peals of excited laughter. The ice-creamed faces of the children are reflected in the wall-mirrors.

On the road home, we pass Coole Park and wave to the spirits of Lady Gregory and her famous visitors.

'Lady Gregory with her special friends founded The Abbey Theatre in Dublin. On our next outing to Dublin, we'll visit the Abbey Theatre.'

'But muinteoir, why can't we go to the Zoo? I want to see the huge big elephants, the stripey tigers and the monkeys with funny faces. Please, muinteoir.'

'Of course, we'll visit the Zoo. But we'll also pass by the Abbey Theatre and wave our hands in memory of those great writers.'

'Muinteoir, muinteoir, Lady Ampthill is driving after our bus!'

'She will not pass!', says the Príomh Oide. 'She was furious, when two of our boyos cycled slowly, one on either side of the road, all the way from Kilcolgan to Ballinderreen. She couldn't or wouldn't overtake. When our two boyos reached the crossroads in the village, one swerved off on the road to the

left and the other took the road to the right. I had to allow her check an identity parade in my seomra ranga, while her green eye shadow melted with emotion. Later, I found the two boyos hiding under coats in the girls' cloakroom! Of course, I didn't report them to her Ladyship!

'Lady Ampthill's gone off down a side-road to Kinvara, muinteoir!

As the sun sets in Galway Bay, the sleeping-elephant forms of the Burren are melting into crimson cloud-shapes. From the honeycombed limestone grykes, a tide of gentian, bloody cranes bill, bee-orchid spills towards our school walls.

To the south, flows the River Shannon on its way to meet the sea.

The Bonsai

Maureen Gallagher

She gave us each a tree, so high.
The race was on to see who'd win,
whose lissom plant would best survive.

I watered mine all day, all night,
and watched the guzzler sluice it in.
It's hard to quell a thirsty cry.

The sudden news that his had died.
What *shadenfreude* that 'twas him
whose shoot had ended high and dry.

But still the task to encourage my
pint-sized charge, keep moist & trim;
the winner, half a twinned bonsai.

Each day that passed now found me tied
to a gluttonous lush, a summer sin.
Would you ever *fade*, my hapless sigh.

Distraught, I traveled far & wide
'til I found a home for the wretched thing.
She gave us each a tree, so high,
but neither tree the course survived.

Marginalia

Jerm Curtin

My books, which lined one wall,
have recently turned a corner;
my shelves are a horde,
irresponsible with joie-de-vivre.

Self-taught and gruff, I read
the way a brutish populist
turned dictator leads
a former Russian republic.

He wrestles in bare chest
with bare-chested villagers,
lacing victory and defeat
in back-slapping and vodka.

I'm pinned to the page by words,
their havoc and their magic,
while he drowns in his cups
on nights of rumours and assassins.

8 (from) Under the webbing of the Moon

Martin Burke

The first crop of stones
yielded nothing
that I would disown.
They spoke the old

tongue of constancy
and appraisal
and I was judged and weighed
as much as I

judged and weighed them
in my hand.
In my hand?
Surely I was weighing them

in the crevices of my mind,
surely I assayed them
for purposes older
that constancy and appraisal,

surely I was judging them
by what they could give
of forward motion
and what I could learn from them

to face the cold streams
of the present and the future.
No, they did not disown
and neither do I

nor will I rebuke them
for their silence
when, lifted from streams
in the cold places of the world

I expected them
to warm in my mind
at fire at which
much could be gathered and measured.

Nothing disowned
all names claimed and known
they spoke a constancy which I
measured out in heartbeats of stone.

*

They yielded up
but I was yielding also-
into that core
into that flame

that like the pilot light
of the world
showed me a way
through the dark

towards truths of stone
that cannot be told
except with those words
that offer up

constancy and appraisal.
They yielded up
and I was yielding also,
assayed as much as I assayed

and essayed into
configurations of the mind
that had no parallel
nor precedent.

Not that I wanted one
as I travelled there -
as if I came on the
perfect landscape

for all the verbs
to mend the broken light.

*

And so Daniel
this poem is offered
back to you
to move us from hesitation

into credulity
of what we may have spurned.
I also see the broken light
I also hold the hollow word

yet strike these words
on the flint of the world
to offer them to you
in celebration.

Words nest in my mind-
they are like birds
taking the first flight
and where they fly

I follow –
also from hesitation
to credulity,
doubt to faith

even though faith
seems to offer little to the world

at this severe junction.
Even so, even so

the words fly out
and credulity opens
to the virtues of a stone
which I carry about

and carrying know
some virtue of the world-
a stone
a simple stone

such as might be gained
from the core of that world
flecked and grained
with indelible wounds

portable piece
of a personal meaning
tangible
as the cold weight of itself..

Spray Paint

Margaret Irish

Years later it'll come back to me in another life. I'll be sitting in a pub with a few guys and someone's friends who're visiting from somewhere and it's a big multi-way conversation. Then one of them mentions the suburb I grew up in and a house he rented there once and how there was this huge writing on one of the walls. I'll stare deep into my pint and put on a laddish grin and he'll say the house was fairly posh, in a pretty affluent area and then this screaming thing in the bedroom, taking up a whole wall, sprayed black all over the magnolia and even over the curtains. And he'll straighten up to repeat it, twisting his face in adolescent angst:

O Set Me Free From This Excruciating Conformity!

We'll all crack up laughing and cringing and asking how the hell it got left there and I'll laugh too and show amazement and pretend to gag. And he'll be only a little bit wrong. I never actually sprayed the curtains. And I'd never be able to spell a word like 'excruciating'.

*

So I'm fifteen and my parents are Pushy and Grabby – I mean, those are their names. You could say they're both totally pushy and totally grabby but I reckon she's really the G-factor; he's the P-word. Pushy and Grabby are kind of like cartoon characters, always yelling 'More! More! More!', stopping for a minute to stuff their faces, then shoving and shouting again. Not that they're that different from any of our neighbours – who are hell on earth – or any of their relatives or friends, except my cousin Bob who is Cool.

Grabby likes to buy things, throw them out and buy more. That's kind of her life. There's a lot of stress involved at each stage so she has to have spa treatments to help her cope. Her only real joy is when she clears out wardrobes, which is very often because they fill up. She dumps everything on the bed and swears if she hasn't worn it for six months it's going. I once explained there weren't enough days in six months to wear that much stuff. And I didn't get how you could have seventeen handbags when you only have two hands. Oh, how she yelled! But came downstairs as usual with a smug smile, announcing:

‘There! That’s done!’ like she’s just climbed Everest.

‘There’s a great sense of space!’ she coos, like we don’t live in an enormous house. She knots the bulging sacks for the charity shops and then we get the line that wrecks my head:

‘Well, it’s all in a good cause!’

I race upstairs and play something very loud.

Pushy has a better excuse – he has to be pushy because that’s his job, getting people to buy things. Only on his days off he can’t revert. There can’t be a car in front of him on the road and he’s not able to wait in a queue. Once he gave me ten euros to go to the top of a line of people in a café and push in a grab him a sandwich. I said why and he said there was no way he could wait.

They’re slightly less awful on their own; it’s really together that they combine to form something toxic. Like, Grabby takes me shopping sometimes and I hate it but I know she’s trying in her own pathetic way. Pushy will come fishing if I nag him enough. Deep down he likes doing manly things with his son but fishing is slow and doesn’t always get a result. In science class Mr Clarke talks about environmental disasters that could happen in our lifetime. ‘Or sooner!’ I sometimes gasp, but by then he’s deeply furrowed and doesn’t even notice. But I think even if sea levels rose up to the garden gate, Push and Grab would still be inside doing their online shopping and trying to get it delivered by boat.

My sister Fat Girl is a little apprentice Grabby – and boy, is she progressing well. I call her Fat Girl cause she’s a stick insect but it totally bothers her. She calls me ASBO – like I care. She’s got piles of pink things in her bedroom – I mean, clothes and walls and furry toys – like someone got sick after jelly. She got her room painted pink and that was fine but when I wanted mine black I was told no. That’s cause she’s a sweet little thing and licks up but mainly cause Grabby loves dressing her up and having this miniature version of herself.

I took up smoking in March 2004 right after it was made illegal. That was such a great summer, with everyone out on the streets. I was too young for pubs but I got to stand outside loads of other places with the rest of the cool people. Of course, Grabby was over the moon about the ban. She simply *adored* cafés now! And the restaurants! She could *breathe*! Like, what did she do before? Pushy just made a disgusted face, like smokers were filthy scum that should have been shoved out in the rain years ago.

And I didn't like the smokes at all at the start but you have to stick to what you believe and after a while I could flick ash with the best of them. Anyway my cousin Bob smokes and plays in a band and works in an Internet Café, which is Three Point Cool.

Sometimes Grabby sits me down and says 'Damien...' and I think 'Oh-oh'. She tells me I've got problems but she's willing to work with me on them. That kind of talk sets off my gag reflex, I roll the eyes a bit and she gets mad. And even madder when I tell it like it is: 'Mother, your mouth is moving but all I can hear is "Conform! Conform!"' Once when she was ranting on I told her – with a real straight face too – told her she had anger issues. Boy, did she go ballistic then! Oh yeah, that's what happens when I talk the kind of crap to them that I have to listen to all the time.

How I stay sane I do not know. There's a lake I go to sometimes on my bike or I might go over to Bob's. What I like most about Bob is that he doesn't talk much. We just play music or watch a movie. Grabby doesn't approve of him and I also like that. Push thinks he's a complete waster cause he only works a few days a week. But he has to rehearse with the band. And he never asks me anything but I know Bob is the only person in the world who understands me.

So we're all hanging around after dinner looking out the window when Grabby says, 'that garden's got to go.' Even Pushy is surprised.

'What's wrong with it?' he says.

'It's old fashioned. It's horrible. Hydrangeas, for God's sake!'

'Mother planted those!' Pushy says, but even that doesn't rate. She has that brisk and determined look on her face that I've come to know and hate. She knows a designer who could do a complete re-vamp. It's such a great *space*.

'It's a bloody garden, not space!' I shout.

'He'd have to work around the apple trees,' says Pushy.

'Oh we'll get rid of those!' she says back, 'they've got too big. We'll get new trees!'

And so the last little snowflake fell and the avalanche started and I swore and threw a few pots and plates and ran out and danced around the apple trees with a bit of howling. They yelled and screamed at me so I darted past them up the stairs and into my room where there was peace and quiet. And I tried to concentrate on the lake and how still it was and the smooth black water. The spray paint was just there cause I'd been interested in getting into graffiti as a way of expressing myself. I kept looking at it

and at the creamy wall while the threats mounted up outside the door. Then I stood on my desk and moved it around so I could spell it all out evenly from ceiling to floor. I didn't think much about what I wrote. It just came out.

Scrucifying Conformitty!! I sprayed. Set Me Free!!

Oh look, it made sense at the time. The best thing was that it was so big. And then I felt better and got out the window and slid down the pipe and it really did feel good running as fast as I could down that street. I was thinking about the lake and that peaceful thing, so quiet even with all that lap lapping. I could still hear Grabby shrieking but that was in my head and I thought how nice it would be down in the soft mud at the bottom of the lake where everything would be muffled and all the misery sinking deep into the silt.

But the lake was five miles and it was nearly dark so I ended up at Bob's. Can't say he looked happy to see me. He got kind of odd when I told him what happened and said he was going out and what was I planning to do. Stay with you I said, and he didn't like the sound of that at all. Which isn't fair because I know his flat is small but I'd said I'd sleep on the floor no problem. You'd better call them, he said, they'll be out looking for you. I wondered then did he understand me at all. I started swearing and he did too and I wished I'd gone to the lake instead and then this kind of sobbing started and I couldn't stop.

He didn't freak out. He opened a beer and poured me half. We sat down and said nothing for a good while and that was so cool because my head was bursting. He put on a CD and gave me a cigarette and we chilled. Then he started dialling. I wanted to jump up and stop him but I felt woozy and tired.

'He's staying here,' Bob was saying, 'we'll sort it out later,'

I could hear cackling on the line.

In the morning he wouldn't let Grabby in but argued with her through the door and somehow made her go away – no mean feat. A fair bit of negotiating went on over the next few days. I spent a lot of time on my own in the flat, which really was very small. Bob asked me what it was I wanted and I tried to tell him.

One of the conditions of my coming back was that the writing would stay on the wall. For the sake of that and the apple trees I agreed to a whole list of things, including psychiatric assessment. I went back to live with

Push and Grab and we all tried not to talk about it. Two days later my sister Natalie, who I used to call Fat Girl, got knocked off her bike by someone opening a car door. She was unconscious for four days and we spent all our time in hospital with her. They were way more bearable people when things weren't going well for them.

Natalie was in wheelchair for a long time and my parents got frustrated with the house and moved us to a bungalow. Somehow the old place got rented out. Somehow with all that happening we forgot about the graffiti and it was left there in my old room where the furniture was stored. Tenants came and were amused. And so my rage passed down into pub talk.

But I still have the bit that I kept.

Three Chinese Girls Walking In The Rain

David Rowell

They are singing sadly
in high pitched voices,
thin clothing wet
with slanting rain,
small feet brushing
sodden leaves.

I cannot tell
whether the song is sad
or only the singers.

Perhaps it is a song of love
for boys they used to know,
or a wish for home
like the prayer of Hebrew slaves,
or lament of the exile
who longs to walk
the old bog road.

The west wind
disorients them,
but lifts their song
high over the Urals,
Siberian plains
Mongolian desert,
each note held
then released
above their homes,
drifting slowly down
in harmony with the leaves
drifting slowly down.

Halt

Arun Gaur

Pick up your cap and broom and
sweep the platform clean.

Pick up your painting brush.

Or your broom.

Cut the dark.

That golden girl has sipped again her tea
and pitched a half-baked tumbler
down the bars.

I should now switch the green signal light—
there are stars in the sky.

Train would go into golden wheat,
smoke into air
and voices nowhere.

Pagans At The Bank
Kristiina Ehin (Translated by Ilmar Lehtpere)

I wanted to make a money transfer, but it turned out that not a single machine for the movement of money in the centre of Tartu was working. I was given to understand in three languages even by the last machine in the lobby of a tall bank building that it was out of order. The bank workers were bustling around it like vergers around a priest who had fainted in the middle of his sermon. People were standing in the queue, all of them holding bankcards between their fingers like prayer books. But the priest just didn't want to come round. The bank workers-vergers had no time for even a word to their congregation and most of the people in the queue went away swearing. I observed with interest how this machine is able to faint in such a young-lady-of-the-manor way. Must be tired, I thought, startled that I could attribute such human feelings to this lump of cables, iron and glass.

I stepped in beneath the high arches of the bank. In front of me there was a countryman, cap in hand, who didn't know which button to press to get a number for his turn, or confession. I explained that the first button is the safest.

We stood meekly against the wall like a father and daughter and looked up at the brightly flashing numbers, which were very reminiscent of hymnal numbers on the wall of of a church. *Don't even dare to start daydreaming here, or your number might slip by without you noticing*, the old man mumbled. But I started watching the clouds anyway, which by some miracle were glowing through the darkly opalescent stained glass window of the bank. I gave a sudden start, as if waking from a dream, when my number came up.

What sins have you committed, my child? I heard the cashier, who was much the same age as me, ask.

None, I heard myself answer.

But why have you come, my child? One comes here with one's troubles.

Oh, yes, I heard myself answer again, fingering the pearl pattern stitched onto my purse as if it were a rosary, *I don't know how to make a money transfer if the machines for that purpose are out of order.*

Very well, my child, give me the money.

I handed the money over. *And then three kroon service charge, as you must be over twenty-five, and then twelve kroon for the transfer.*

I looked nervously for cent and one kroon coins. *Ah, I've got it!*
So, to the poor belongs the kingdom of heaven. Who would you like to send the money to?

I gave the person's name and account number.
So, excellent, he is also a member of our bank's congregation. What would you like to put as the purpose?

I'd heard somewhere, perhaps in a dream, that it's safest to say a debt.
It's a debt. I cast my eyes down discreetly.
Ah, so that's how things stand, peace be with you my child, in twenty minutes he will receive your money.

My friend who I was sending the money to was, suitably, in America. I imagined how the winged bank horses would gallop over the ocean, their golden horseshoes flashing, my banknotes in a golden bag around their necks, how they would foam, and stop to rest in Greenland, then rear up and storm on.

My daydreams were interrupted by the cashier's voice, which had suddenly become insistent: *And have you become a member of our cumulative pension scheme?*

I strained my brain but had no idea what she was on about, although I seemed to have heard somewhere that this was a good thing. But the cashier's voice frightened me. She almost screamed at me: *At the moment it's FREE OF CHARGE!!! Do it without fail! Do it now! Sign here. Ah, you don't know, my child? What is there to know, it takes just a second and it's done. Of course we can't force you, but give us your signature anyway. Ah, you have no time now? How is that?*

I backed away in alarm. The cashier's black-fingernailed hands stretched out towards me holding a sheet of paper and a pen, and her beautifully painted eyes looked at me full of sympathy, as if I were an idiot who had turned down a free lunch.

Give us your signature! she called once more.

Give us three drops of blood! I heard, and closed the door, bumping into the shy countryman, and we walked together towards the main door with our fingers securely at the bottom of our empty pockets.

Good-bye, God bless!

God bless!

Cumulative pension scheme? What is to be gained from that by anyone - as young as me? As old as him? As poor as the both of us?

Ammonite

Jonathan Thurlow

(from medieval Latin cornu Ammonis “horn of Ammon”, from the fossil’s resemblance to the ram’s horn associated with Jupiter Ammon.)

What to us was merely stone,
to you was a rich treasure of the earth –
modelled by the stirring of lava flow
or the settling of sediment in ocean depths.

To our untrained eyes
dull, mud encrusted rubble came to mind
like the scree slopes of a mountain-side
or the many pebbled beaches of the south
caught in Worthing’s groynes -
all shingle and shale.

So what brings you to pan the streams
for precious stones,
kneeling for hours with a trowel
picking through dirt and gravel beds?

Is it something of the magpie in you
that calls your eye to settle on a glint –
the sudden flash of colour in the rock?

No, only the past –
the draw of what has been,
pushing out and up to be discovered,
to be held and cherished or piled high –
a cairn that sends you back through sodden fenlands,
to stare the birth of time full in the face.

Money Can't Buy

Kathleen O'Driscoll

Money can't buy
this clear cold sea,
bread and cheese
and peaches,
basking like seals
on Inveran rocks
high blue sky
our heaven.

Trying to find
the meaning of
this earth and
what's beneath her
while swooping seagulls
watch our prayers
and seem to know
the secret.

Midmornings In Winter

Christodoulos Makris

Midmornings in winter,
when the cold sun battles through frosted windows
and ice on grass starts to melt
before it forms again,
and you strike stones together
for fire,
seem a thousand lifetimes
from what you were born for:
daysleeping in the sun
with the taste
of oranges, the juices of impulsive love,
tingling in your mouth.
But the sparks,
when they grow tired of teasing you with rumours
and blossom,
obliterate notions of perpetual summers
and command the winter
to its knees.

Driving Into Paul Henry

Gréagóir Ó Dúill

Winter nears its close.
Lime green tendrils from below
finger through smashed bracken.

Sun, behind the mountain
casts hero-light on highlands,
darkening what it haloes, blindingly,
or softens browns to purple, melts lilac.

Waters name this landscape as they stand or fall,
water takes all shades and textures,
washes to a coat of many colours,
adds interest, quickens silver.

Massed clouds bulk, rounded, slabbed or drawn,
neighbours of the mountain, each reflecting other
or in free state, in dry walled indifference, calm perspective
or willed concealment, townland conspiracy.

The horizon surges, falls on the moving frame, lurching easel.
In cardiac crisis the centreline of sky and hill climbs, tumbles.
Turfstacks the size of houses loom, stack-shaped houses shrink.
A donkey stands by, perishing in the cold.

I drive on, adjust the heating at my feet,
know I've reached home when, as I breast the gap,
the line steadies, flattens out with the sea
and tarred canvas curraghs face out to the waves.

The Schoolyard Wall

Eilis Foran

The schoolyard's boundary wall is
A thousand years old and there are places along it
Where bone-tired soldiers froze,
Standing in niches - toes curled and calves and bows
Tensed, where now children hop, skip
And jump during the morning break -
Where they bang blackboard dusters on the
Grey stone. Plumes of chalk dust provoke
Sneezes - the kind of noise which would once
Have unleashed all hell from above is now just another
Echo in the lee of the wall, birdsong-drowned.

They play by day on the silent mound where, five hundred years ago,
A champion stood after he'd scaled the grey height,
Sacked the town and stolen the prettiest
Woman from amongst the women;
Where fire raged and plague spooled its
Deadly threads into the water - so
Old men and children were shrouded and thrown by night
To putrefy in the ditch below.
They play hopscotch there now,
Jumping to and fro
On the sun-stippled pavement; the evening blazes.

Night is falling; the Novena bell is ringing. Footsteps
Sound on the tarmac, small girls and boys running,
For a bet, through the darkened space. Like blinded rats
Following an invisible piper, panic seizes hold - to be
Forever lost among the old
Ghosts, the wrapped up children, the stinking mazes -
To go where
In the end everyone must go - the terror,
The cold and creeping fear
Goad them on to reach the streetlight near
The church, where they assemble
Trembling, minutes closer now.

The RAF Hangar

Noel King

was a shed in a field
 once used to house meal
 for my uncle's cattle
 a muck and dirt floor
 sparkled in blues
 and disputes that nurtured our dream
 wishes
 that helped the lift of spirits housed too long in school
 we burst brown cardboard boxes in a calm way
 used watercolour pots of paint
 then had to be patient
 watching our Royal blues dry
we housed them in rows
 and while we slept the odd rat
 would nibble into our factory
 gnaw our wings
 and desert on sweets and biscuit crumb
 the film speed of my big cousins' camera
 and library-book pictures of planes
 showed the real shape and size
 statistics that scaled our visionary thinking
that only resources i.e. our small pocket
 money put a hold on
 we made far more of course
 than we could ever fly.

Precipice

Gerry Burns

Encased in ice,
Enfolded in the mountain's
Clear embrace,
Here is where his dread
Of growing old had died;
Inside the pockets
Of his old tweed coat,
The kind of things you might expect,
A penknife, lozenges,
A letter from his lonely wife;
The compass that he left behind
At final camp tells more, perhaps,
About his state of mind,
Heedless, simply climbing out
Into the void,
Each hob-nailed step
Towards the brim
As fearless as the next;
When you have sent men
To their deaths
What's left to fear?
Save this, the pain
Of watching in a room
As dust on dust builds up
On all the pointless junk
You've gathered round you
As you've grown old.

Country Boy

Paul Jeffcutt

Dun-ye worry - her's gonna ask
an wen her duz, I'll shrug -
I dunno, wat-ever tis.
Her piggy eyes'll peer (fur a second or too)
an I'll ave to trap that gaze -
musn't dodge it or I cud giv me-self away.

'I ..dun ..no', sez I, tongue slabberin;
quiz-ical, her do smirk
an turn slow besides (wild yappin dogs be skelterin roun me loaf)
swingin back, her grasps I at the throat,
'tell me now, you worm'.
'I dun' - her clouts they words inside me gob -
'remember, you heathen,
I'll make you understand'.

You'll Know

Deborah Tyler-Bennett

When encountering the real thing,
face to face
(no heritage version, all shiny visuals and
recorded footfalls, 'scratch and sniff' replacing
yesterday's boiled bones and tallow fat).
That alley, where boarded out -
houses seem derelict till you're
breathing chimney smoke, shadow men
loitering doorways like unwanted dogs.

You'll know when you bump into the real thing,
ghost treading a step
no longer there, turning key within absent lock,
red headscarf vanishing in sunlight,
leaving certainty time tapped your shoulder
and where to put this sense
she was more solid?

It happens when out shopping,
in the pub, queuing at the bank -
Figure in the crowd, someone once familiar,
lost a second found now lost again.

Come certain nights, the real thing buttonholes
on promenade, doorstep, hotel foyer,
face distinctive as a thumb-print,
dress un-televisual (though why is hard to say).
Flash of worn hands, told tales,
evaporating sea-spray.

Reading the message in their eyes
you know you'll never be the same:
Face to face,
they seem more solid,
you're lost, a second found, then lost again.

Home

Wendy Mooney

One day you'll find yourself again
inside the town
within the city of your thinking

and say "I'm home",
and hang your hat up by the disconnected phone
and listen to the sea roll on the salt-bleached shore -
the split of concrete thought
on summer pathways, lost and hammered
into a thousand truths brought to your doorway;

the milk van leaving, winding down the hill,
the still high delft, the blue and white jug on the table –

nothing changed but all changed:
waiting for your knitting fingers
to pull the wool out from your eyes,
The ball of memory kicked sky high

(the little lies of it - the child that never sang in the attic,
the girl who left and never returned)
all silent now, all leaving, retreating down the pathway –

the latch unlocked, the man in black socks
getting closer with the parcel,
the honesty of his strong straight back
that does not turn as you unwrap before him,

peel the layers off,
saying, "I'm ready now,
come home."

Waiting For Nothing

Ron Offen

“The people are waiting. Not for something.

They are just waiting”

Gordon Meyer describing the Plaza San Martin in Buenos Aires

Beyond the ornate gates of horn,
which are carved ivory, you'll find
you've lost the lure of sight's delight,
the urgency of sound's demands;
your hunger's now numb as a limb
that's gone asleep, and all you sense
in this white world is that your heart
is pulsing with that of the sun.

Biographical details

Tony Bailie works as a journalist in Belfast. He has had poems published in *The Black Mountain Review*, *Revival* and *Books Ireland*. His chapbook, *Coill*, was published in 2005 by Lapwing Publications and a novel *The Lost Chord* was published in 2006 by Lagan Press.

Lindsey Bellosa is originally from Argyle, NY and is currently pursuing an MA in Writing at NUIG. This story is part of a collection of stories she is writing about experiences involving food

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.

Martin Burke has lived in Brugge, Belgium for many years. He has published numerous collections in print and as e-books. His most recent collection *The Easter Ballad* was published by Wordsonthestreet in 2007.

Patricia Burke Brogan is the author of the internationally acclaimed play *Eclipsed* and *Stained Glass at Samhain*. Her collection of poems and etchings *Above the Waves Calligraphy* was published by Salmon. She received a 2005 Arts Council Bursary in Drama. Her monologue *Requiem of Love* had its World Premiere at the Town Hall Theatre, Galway in November 2005 prior to moving to the Pavilion Theatre, Dun Laoghaire. It was staged as part of Galway's Project '06 in July 2006. The script of the play was recently published by Wordsonthestreet, Galway.

Gerry Burns won the English-language section of this year's Feile-Filíochta in Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown. He has one collection of poems published, *The Dust of All the Dead* published by Lapwing in 2006 and he is currently working on a second collection

Siobhán Campbell's second collection of poems is *The Cold That Burns* from Blackstaff Press. Recent publications include *Magma* magazine and *The Southern Review*. She is Director of the MA in Creative Writing at Kingston University, London and Director of Kingston University Press.

Jerm Curtin was previously published in *Crannóg* magazine, *WOW!* and a number of anthologies in Ireland, the UK and Italy, and in *Stranger*, the anthology of the Poetry on the Lake competition. He was a recent prizewinner in the 2007 Kent and Sussex Open Poetry Competition.

Felim Egan Major solo exhibitions of Egan's work include the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester and the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin in 1995/6 and at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam in 1999. He has participated in exhibitions at the Sao Paulo Biennale 1985, Third Eye Centre, Glasgow, the Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, the New Art Gallery, Walsall, 'L'Imaginaire Irlandais', Paris and Holstebro Kunstmuseum, Denmark. Large-scale commissions include works for Dublin Castle and the National Gallery of Ireland. He is represented in numerous collections, both public and private, including those of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and the New York City Public Library, the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery, Dublin, Deutsche Bank, London, Fritz-Winter-Haus, Moderne Kunst, Ahlen, Germany, the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam and the European Parliament.

Kristiina Ehin has published four volumes of poetry and a volume of short stories in Estonia, and has won several prizes, including Estonia's most prestigious poetry prize. Her work in English translation appears regularly in leading literary journals in Ireland, and *The Drums of Silence*, a collection of her poems in English translation is published by Oleander Press in England.

Jarlath Fahy is a former member of The Focus Theatre Group. His first collection is forthcoming from Wordsonthestreet.

Eilis Foran has been published in *Boyne Berries*, and she has been shortlisted for the Fish International Poetry prize, 2007.

Maureen Gallagher lives and works in Galway. She's had poetry and prose published in literary magazines worldwide and broadcast on RTE. Her work has been anthologised, including in *Van Gogh's Ear 2007*. She's been long and shortlisted for awards many times, most recently the Aidan Higgins Prose Award. She was a prizewinner in the 2002 *New Writer* Competition. Maureen's website can be viewed at www.maureengallagher.net.

Eoghan Garvey was born in Monaghan but spent primary school days in Barna before moving to Dublin. He now lives in Galway.

Arun Gaur lives in Panchkula (Haryana, India). He has taught English at Mizoram University, Aizawl, where he was the Senior Reader. His work has appeared in *Ariga*, *Sol Magazine*, *Poetry Magazine*, *Ygdrasil*, *Eclectica*, *42opus*, *Orbis*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *3rd Muse*, and *Boyne Berries*

Liam Guilar was born in Coventry, England and moved to Australia in 1986. He has two collections published, *The Poet's Confession*, a chapbook, and an award winning book called *I'll Howl Before You Bury Me*, available from Interactive Press.

Kevin Higgin's 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 for Best First Collection by an Irish poet. Also in 2005 he was short-listed for the Hennessy Award for Poetry and awarded a Literature Bursary by the Irish Arts Council. A collection of essays and reviews, *Poetry, Politics & Dorothy Gone Horribly Astray*, was published by Lapwing Press in December. A second collection of poems, *Time Gentlemen, Please* will be published by Salmon next year. He has new poems recently published or forthcoming in *Magma* (London), *Poetry Ireland Review*, *The Antigoni Review* (Novia Scotia), & *Vallum* (Montreal).

Margaret Irish's stories have been published in *The Sunday Tribune*, *Fish Anthology*, *Stinging Fly*, *Panurge*(UK), *Metropolitan* (UK), *Grain*(Canada), and broadcast on RTE and BBC radio

Paul Jeffcutt is a member of the Writer's Group at the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry in Belfast. Poetry Ireland recently selected him for their Introductions Programme. His poetry has been widely published in journals and in anthologies.

Noel King's poems, stories and reviews have been published in journals and magazines in twenty-eight countries. He is editor of Doghouse, a poetry and short stories imprint.

Ilmar Lehtpere's translations of Kristiina Ehin's work appear regularly in leading literary journals. *The Drums of Silence*, a collection of his translations of her poetry is published by Oleander Press. He is currently working on a volume of her short stories.

Alan McMonagle's work has appeared in *Southword*, *The Cuirt Annual*, *Ropes*, *west47online*, *Crannóg and WOW!* He took second prize in the 2006 Sean O'Faolain story competition and was also short-listed for the Fish Story award. He is currently taking an MA in Writing at NUI Galway

Niamh Madden was recently appointed as Editor of *Tribe Vibes*, Galway City Community Forum's quarterly newsletter. She has previously published work in *Blinkzine*, *Xposed*, *Moments*, *The Spanner* and *Backpacker*, amongst others, and holds an MA in Writing from NUI, Galway.

Christodoulos Makris's poems have previously appeared in *The SHop* and *Cúirt Annual* among others. He is co-founder of *Poetry Upfront*, a forum for new poetry, and run a creative writers' group in Balbriggan library

Susan Millar DuMars's first collection of stories, *American Girls*, was published by Lapwing in April 2007. Her first collection of poems, *The Wellspring Wife*, will be published by Salmon in 2008.

Wendy Mooney lives in Dublin. She has a BA in English and Sociology and an M.Phil in Anglo-Irish literature. She has previously been published in *Poetry Ireland Review* and in *Stet*.

Kathleen O'Driscoll's poetry collection is *Goodbye Joe*, Caledon Press. Her short story collection is *Ether*; Caledon Press. She has been published in the anthologies *Pillars of the House*, Wolfhound Press and *The White Page*, Salmon Publishing. She has had five short stories broadcast on RTE and she wrote and directed the short film *Berlin Blues*.

Gréagóir Ó Dúill teaches creative writing at the Poets' House, Waterford Institute of Technology. Educated at Queen's, Belfast, UCD and Maynooth his eight collections were followed by his selected and a volume of translations by Bernie Kenny into English. He has also published a collection of short stories, a literary biography and two anthologies. His recent work is in English.

Ron Offen's work has appeared in over 100 literary journals, including the *The Salmon* and *The Burning Bush*. He is the editor of *Free Lunch*,

Leeanne Quinn lives in Dublin and is pursuing a doctoral thesis in Trinity College on Contemporary American Fiction. She has been published in *West47* and is working towards a first collection of poetry.

Breid Sibley has been a prize-winner in the Baffle and Cathal Buí poetry competitions. She has been published in *Ropes*, *Crannóg* and *Time Haiku*.

Jonathan Thurlow lives on the edge of the Mendip Hills in Somerset. His aim has always been to capture a sense of the place, both through its landscape and its people.

Deborah Tyler-Bennett's first collection was *Clark Gable in Mansfield* published by King's England Press, 2003. A major selection of her work appeared in *Take Five* published by Shoestring, 2003. She takes part in many educational projects including the *Organwork's Project* for Eton College. She is co-editor of the Victoria and Albert Museum's creative writing web package. She edits the journal, *The Coffee House* and is the author of a book on Edith Sitwell.