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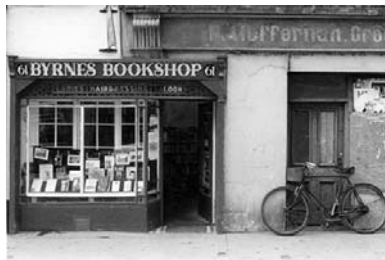


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FICTION

She didn't know what she'd done, but something about her had caught his attention. He turned fully towards her and looked at her. She wanted to run, not wanting another man in her life. Her feet wouldn't move.

He came up the steps and said things to her. The words strained through the tumble of noise that passes for an echo in a railway station. She understood the word "missis", and the words "okay" and "lost" with a question mark, but couldn't tie them into phrases or sentences.

The man reached to take her suitcase. She wished she'd taken time to walk through a spray of fresh perfume. He must get the smell off her. She supposed she did have perfume. She supposed she did have a handbag.

The words became more insistent. "Tell" and "where" and "need".

The weight of a strap lay across her chest. She traced it down to bulk at the end, and thought that it must be her handbag. She sensed her coat gape open with the movement and his face register shock even as his nose twitched.

He touched her blouse. She let him. Men always hurt her when she tried to stop them. The blouse crackled under his fingers. Maybe she'd used too much starch. She never used starch, except on his dress shirts.

She tried to open her handbag to get at her perfume, and he stopped her. Was very insistent about it. She let him win because all the men in her life were like that: wanted their own way.

A woman arrived. The woman was dressed like the man, with white shirt and clip-on tie and a hat. Again, words came at her. Words maybe taken at random from the dictionary: "What" and "home" and "how". Now every one came with a question mark.

The woman unbuttoned her blouse, even pulled at her bra for a better look, and shook her head at the man. She understood the wordless communication. No visible wounds, no fresh blood. They examined her hands.

Words flowed between the man and the woman as they discussed the blood under her fingernails. The man and the woman sounded concerned for her.

That was nice.

She went with them because they got on either side of her and held her elbows. The man lifted her suitcase. The woman carried the handbag. Her keys were in there. She hoped the woman wouldn't lose it.

The words sounded blurred now. “Gun” swirled in the air with “no.” No, no gun, not since her fourth birthday when her uncle Damian bought her one. She’d played with it all day, ignoring the doll and the new clothes her mother and father had given her, and made all her party guests play dead. That night her father stood on the gun and broke it.

They were in a small room with a shaking floor. The walls were metal, with lines of circular scores spoiling the shine. No words came now from the man and the woman. Then a wall slid away. People crowded the doorway and the air became thick with words. Some she’d heard before from the man and woman, and other new ones. A muffled “Helen.” sounded vaguely familiar.

Beyond the people she could hear the dry click of computer keyboards and was aware of a host of words not directed at her. Some she heard, others she saw as they came out of the people’s mouths. The words came in different typescripts, depending on how the people dressed and their skin colour. Women’s words floated higher than men’s.

She shook her head at any that came close. They floated away down the long narrow room and she didn’t have to bother with them.

The people crowding her seemed to think the shake meant something because all of the nearby words stopped. Their silence wasn’t a real silence. It reminded her of an old record player, after the music stops and before the stylus clicks off.

They kept opening her coat, this way and that, talking among themselves. Words bumped together and she could make sense of them at last. No she hadn’t been shot or stabbed. No, she wasn’t bleeding. She rolled her head too and fro to indicate the no. Anything else seemed too much effort.

Her mouth hung slack. She breathed through it and felt the back of her throat burn from dryness. The brightness of the room hurt her eyes: the cream walls, the white of the ceiling.

She wanted to be sick.

They floated her after the words. Floated her through the long room and down a narrow corridor. The corridor had lots of doors. One door hung open. The room had a toilet, but now the feeling of sick had left her. It also had a bed. Clear plastic sheets covered the bed and the floor.

The painters should have covered the good carpet like that, but they didn’t of course and not all the paint came out. He said it was all her fault, that she didn’t care

about his things, and he punched her around the apartment. She'd only wanted him to stop.

The woman came in with her, and another woman. The man left and a different one arrived with clear plastic bags. It reminded her of Ranger camp and using plastic bags to keep out the rain. All the Rangers ganged up on her that last night, because she wouldn't take a drink. Because she wouldn't make out.

The girls stripped her. She screamed and clawed at them, but they pinned her to the ground. The boys dared each other into exposing themselves in her face, then Uncle Damian came and she ran to his tent. Uncle Damian followed her, but he'd been drinking as well. After that she hated her Uncle Damian and, for some reason, rain.

Thinking about that night, she wanted to cry.

She must have because the first woman said, 'Don't worry about him, love, the wife says he hasn't got it up in years.'

'Thanks,' said the man.

The words now meant something, but they didn't reach her as sound. They had become solid things that banged off her head and flew on. She didn't know whether to be relieved or not. All that banging would give her a headache.

They insisted that she take off her coat and helped her slide it down her arms. She felt cold without it.

Another man came in carrying a camera. People told him what photographs to take. Some were very close. She squared her breasts the way her husband had taught her and tried to forget the flashes by counting the number of people in the room. Her bathroom was bigger.

The coat went into a bag. They went through the pockets first, shouted out what they'd found and put them in smaller bags. She thought that very rude. They wouldn't like it if somebody did that to their private things. They took an interest in her blouse, forming a shape with their hands. Not actually touching

More flashes.

More questions. The words bumping off her face made it tiring. Now the words didn't bump cleanly but had to un-stick themselves. That gave her time to make sense of them if she looked carefully enough. Blouse" and "blood" and "whose".

She ached to sit down.

They took her blouse off. Not button-by-button. They used big scissors to cut the sides and up the sleeves as far as the collar. It seemed a funny way of doing things, especially when the rest of her clothes went the same way. The scissors were cold on

her thigh and her breasts made a damp, sucking sound when they pulled away the bra.

She closed her eyes against more flashes. Her husband used to do that before he left, take photographs. He put them on the computer and sold them. Sometimes he invited people round to watch him make video clips. Look but not touch. He wasn't that generous with her.

These people touched her with ear tips. They rolled them over parts of her body, and cut at her hair with the tinniest of scissors.

If she saw all that she must have her eyes open. She closed them again as they worked at her hands, cleaning her nails for her.

One woman said, 'There's a ridge where there used to be a wedding ring.'

Funny, with her eyes closed she could hear the words properly. She opened them again and saw the word "Divorced" come out of the other woman's mouth.

They put a blanket around her, but instead of letting her sink into the bed they took her by her elbows and again carried her off.

The water hit her like a blow. She gasped and choked. The red on her body ran down her legs. The women were in the shower with her, wearing white plastic overalls. Their bra and panties showed through. The man with the camera hovered in the doorway.

The women with the words that bumped the hardest said, 'Take one of us and we'll tell about you being seen in a gay bar.'

The man backed off.

She thought that nasty, and let her mind drift as they washed the blood clots out of her hair and towelled her dry.

More flashes, she kept her eyes closed, and a woman said. 'Look at those old bruises. She must live with some bad bastard.'

'Maybe she's a whore, and into the rough stuff,' said the other.

They gave her fresh panties, encouraged her to lift her legs one after the other so they could slip them on. She'd always wanted to do that with a child of her own, but found nobody willing to share her life with a child. It would never happen now. She keened at the loss.

'Hush, love, hush. It's okay.'

But it wasn't "Okay."

They wrapped a fresh blanket around her and took her back to the room. All the plastic on the floor and the bed had been taken away. Thank goodness she'd thought to pack a change of clothes. The old ones, wherever they'd got to, weren't even fit

now for the charity box.

The photographer sat on the bed while the man with the plastic bags made stabbing motions at his neck.

They made way for her. The photographer looked embarrassed. She crawled onto the bed and curled in under the blanket. Set her face tight against the wall.

All those words flying around. Maybe if she lay quiet they would settle in her ears and become hard. That way she would never have to listen to again.

Idle on the frigid porch, Ted breathes the night Atlantic through his cigarette. He feels how close the ocean has drawn up tonight and how high the wind intends to range before the dawn. In the distance, on the hillside opposite, chestnut skeletons are moaning. Moonlight has made them hideous and real, yet Ted adores them; their coarse bark, their twiggy fingers stretching towards oblivion. Every night he swears they've moved a little close to the house. He imagines how they tear their freedom from the soil, how they crowd his little cottage in the dark and knit their limbs together overhead his vulnerable bed. He imagines a madwoman dancing after them, sparse with words, naked and distraught.

With a final drag he douses out the cigarette and steps inside. The door closes heavily behind him. Winter makes the house sound empty, reverberant and dull. There's nothing to be done for it, he knows, only to add his cold voice to the infinite of loss for which the cottage is but a hollow drum.

'Quiet out,' he says, standing in the doorway of the kitchen. He must bend his head to do so, a crooked stance to which he's now become accustomed. In the first weeks that he lived here, the height of Connemara lintels was his greatest bane. The doors of his own house aggrieved him, their shallow jambs cursed a thousand times; the stain of blood upon them too, and their marks upon his scalp. Only lately has he come to feel at ease beneath their burden, his head dipped just that reasonable degree, his shoulder slouched against the post. He has come to stand like that especially at morning, with the grey light sweeping off the ocean and colouring the stone flag floor, never quite to reach him at the door.

'I've made soup,' says Tom. 'There were vegetables. I thought you wouldn't miss them.'

Ted seats himself across the tiny table from his visitor. Above him, on the loft boards, shoeless steps paw their way across the bedroom: Ted's wife, gone on ahead.

'Tired?' Ted asks.

'The tower did me in, I think' says Tom.

'But worth it?'

His guest agrees, ladling from the contents of the pot. 'A delight,' he says, enraptured with his handiwork. 'Yeats's tower; I wonder how he didn't madden there with his mortgaged stonework in the floods, all of it raged against his inspiration.'

'The company he kept, I suppose.'

Tom nods, his movement vigorous for the hour. 'Do you think it was the wife that kept him sane?' Reflexively he looks toward the ceiling and regrets it.

Ted smiles weakly. 'I think it was the ghosts and phantoms.'

'I'd heard that.' Tom laps at a spoonful of soup with no particular desire. 'Automatic writing, wasn't it?'

'Became almost his imagination in the end,' Ted says. 'Drew all sorts of fancy from the fugue.' He considers his meal for a moment. 'As a writer, I thought it would have roused your curiosity.'

Tom rests his spoon on the dish lip, pondering his host for longer than necessity or interest can excuse. Behind him, beyond the window's antique glass, the night has fully closed and the squall rakes the contents of the wiry garden ceaselessly against the eaves. Tom straightens himself: 'It sounds to me that, as a writer too, your curiosity's already been engaged.' He smiles. 'Tell me you haven't tried it?'

Ted pulls back the rapid skin already curtaining his soup. 'Maybe once or twice,' he says. In his head he has a number far greater than any simple dalliance, but he's not willing to admit this, not to Tom, who laughs a fiery, raucous bellow of a kind with the storm outside and demands to know if Ted's investigations ever yielded anything of worth.

'Mixed results' says Ted, who sighs. 'There was a presence which we came to know, gloomy and macabre, but not without a certain wit...'

'And by "we" you mean...?'

It is Ted's turn to look toward the room above. 'Herself and I,' he says. 'It seems a second person's necessary. I haven't had much luck on my own.'

Tom takes his empty bowl to the stained Belfast sink. He washes it quickly with a dirty cloth in which he sees the last two days of hospitality. 'Trances and the like,' he says, braving the window and the howling darkness which surrounds them, 'it seems a strain.'

'Not trances, Tom. A marked surface, a Ouija board.'

Tom laughs again, but this time the noise is wary, verging on the altogether bleak. 'The alphabet spread out across a table? My dear Ted, those must be the nights the wine has truly taken you.' His gentle mockery restores a drive he thought that tiredness had vanquished and he feels the evening recede a fraction further with each fresh jibe.

'That would be the end of me, wouldn't it?' says Ted. He concedes a smile, strained but indisputable. 'Not the case however, though we might use a wine glass for to nose the letters -'

'Get a glass then,' Tom says, interrupting. 'We have two people and we have the

time. Introduce me to your spirits, why don't you?

'You're mocking me,' says Tom, 'and I your host.' A brief gust whistling beneath the door comes close to dampening his accusation.

'Not you, my friend,' says Tom, 'but maybe Mister Yeats with his sashes and his systems, all in black like a very mad man... But not you...'

'Alright,' says Ted, speaking slowly. 'Fetch me a glass from the cupboard while I get the board.'

'A glass it is,' says Tom, moving to the bank of seasoned cabinets behind him. His process of selection, a determined and near-musical clinking of glasses, follows Ted across the hallway to the sitting room. There he stands on the threshold and observes an emptiness untamed by throws and books, a space unmolested by companionship. 'Not forgiven yet,' he says, picking up the Ouija board from where it leans against the sad, damp fireplace, and retreating quickly from the room. Passing back to the kitchen he sneaks a glance toward the bare, unwelcoming stairway to the loft, to the bedroom, and imagines his wife's perfumed hair let stray across the pillow, careless and American, like it used to be.

In the kitchen Tom lets out a wail of gratitude and joy. He meets Ted in the doorway clutching an expensive crystal goblet, an inheritance from one relative or another. 'Now just where's the other end of this cup and string attached to?' he asks.

Ted tells him that he doesn't know.

'Well then,' says Tom, taking the board from his host and unfolding it across the table, 'let's find out.'

Ted frames himself in the door again. 'Are you sure?' he asks. 'There's never good news from it.'

Tom nods.

'Alright,' he says, instructing Tom on where to place the goblet, how to hold it and conduct it. He watches the expression on his friend's face change from suspicion to discouragement and back again. He remembers his own first time, how she marshalled his initial intervention on the wineglass with knowing elegance and perfect, unencumbered fingers. Their's had been a complex courtship, played across a board like this with foolish spurts of stubbornness and guile, but tonight is different, much closer to the stylings of a practical experiment.

'It's cold,' says Tom, allowing his fingers settle on the glass, 'surprisingly so'.

'It takes heat from your hand and your arm,' says Ted.

'And my heart, I suppose, if I leave it long enough.'

'Your heart if you let it,' says Ted.

'Like a woman so,' says Tom.

Ted makes an absent motion with his head. 'Concentrate.'

'I am,' says Tom. His eyes are closed, his nose and his forehead wrinkled in intellectual frustration. Suddenly the glass stirs, in fits and splutters first, but in seconds it acquires an ease of movement. Tom holds his eyes wide open. 'My God,' he says, at once aware how meaningless a plea it must have sounded. He watches, open-mouthed, as the glass wanders randomly, circling the empty centre of the board beneath the arc of gothic lettering and numbers, between the panels marked as YES and NO. It scrapes the cardboard surface of the game, a piercing noise, steady and relentless, as if picking out some theme of violence from the rhapsody of wind which shakes the house.

'What's it doing?' he asks.

Ted tells him it's finding its way. 'It needs to be sure of the place of the letters.'

Tom nods solemnly and slowly. 'A ghost?' he asks. 'Something otherworldly?'

'Something inspirational,' says Ted. 'It comes to the sufferer, but don't mistake it for a god or ghost. What came to Hamlet was a ghost. This is about what came to Shakespeare.'

Tom smiles, his chauffeured hands stilled finally as the wineglass comes to rest.

'Ask it a question,' Ted suggests, his voice grown low and sombre in a manner Tom has never heard from him before. 'Go on,' he whispers.'

'Let me think,' says Tom, his mind hesitant and his mouth far dryer than he likes. For an instant, blue light douses the room quietly in adoration as the moon breaks through the storm and levels its intent upon the window. This one bright moment passes rapidly, and as the small kitchen darkens once again Tom asks the presence who its favourite writer is. At once the glass drags back and forth across the field of letters, spelling out a name well known to them. Ted smiles approvingly from his chair, auspicious reverence colouring his face.

'An opinionated spook,' is Tom's concession. The glass moves immediately to the marker titled YES, Tom's stiffening fingers carried with it. He lets it go in fright, and the wineglass teeters briefly from his rash abandonment.

Ted sits up. 'Don't leave off of it,' he says.

'I—'

'Put your hands on the glass least you anger it,' says Ted again, sterner now, and darker despite his move toward the light.

Tom reaches out, tentative and riled, but as he sits his fingers on the glass again it shatters, its noise not a crumble but a loud *snap*. Tom curses loudly.

'No,' says Ted quietly, 'no, no, no'. He mutters something else beneath his breath, a sad inclement keening at their failure. A whistle of wind, unkind and overlong,

obscures the words from his hung head. 'I'll get a brush and pan,' he says at last, resigned now, and moving to the hall and the closet there beneath the stairs.

Suddenly his wife is there, halfway between the hallway and the loft, shivering in her tatty nightdress and with her arms wrapped tight around her dissipating frame. He cannot see a focus in her eyes, locked as they are beyond him, watching something that he cannot see.

'All these voices,' she says at last, 'can't we keep them out at all?'

Ted watches her frail hands whiten as they clutch the cotton. He tells her he'll take care of it, this mystifying horror, but she has already turned and climbed the stairs again, closing the bedroom door behind her noiselessly.

On the drive today she wore no shoes; he remembers that with a jolt. No shoes, and she didn't even speak to him. Despite all else he cannot leave her oddness be, and, taking the dustpan in one hand, he fingers the buckled cigarette box in his pocket. It is the brand he took to smoking when he met her, rich and uninhibited by filters. He craves now the grey cloud of its incineration to take him, his last real connection to her, and he sets about lighting one in the doorway even as he sees how Tom has folded closed for good the board and holds it still, very still, between his red-veined hands.

“I love you” said the man at the book signing.

He was one of the last. The shop was closing. The staff were starting to turn off the lights. She was sitting in the glow of a table lamp with her latest novel in stacks around her. There had been a respectable turn out, her nerves had faded once she’d seen a queue of several.

“I’ve read all your books” he said. “I feel I know you.”

“That’s nice” she said. “Who will I write it for?”

“For me”, he said. “For Tom.”

He loved her. He must mean her work. “I just love you, you’re brilliant,” they’d gushed earlier.

He stood aside momentarily. He let the last two ladies with their plastic shopping bags hand over their books and ask for a personalised message.

She was distracted; she had to ask them twice what she should write. She was aware of the man at her shoulder, his presence in the dark, rubbing out the edges of her on that side, melding her with his shadow.

She wasn’t afraid. She stood up to get her things, the back of her neck felt vulnerable, virginal but the air was still warm from the press of people. The sensation she felt was from the inside, not from air.

He came forward, lit up. “The things you say” he said. “I know what you mean.”

“It’s fiction” she said, looking at her bag as she rummaged for her keys.

“Never do anything to alienate your readers” her publisher had told her. “Be courteous, friendly and uncontroversial – try and hide your frown lines.”

“It’s fict...” she repeated, more softly, looking at him. But she saw in his eyes. He knew. She had always been better at atmosphere than plot but she thought it had been enough to distract them; the narrative was the shiny neon light guiding them to the playhouse. They weren’t meant to look too closely at the subtext, duck into the alleyway or the authentic cookhouse on route, or some red light backstage dressing room where she sat half-undressed in front of a mirror, all shallow breath and heaving breasts, rouge, heart on sleeve. I solemnly decline to let you read between the lines.

She thought he would kiss her, he came so close but he thunked closed the book and made for the door. She chatted with the bookshop manager, thanked everyone and stepped into the street, black, damp, quiet.

Her car was parked just down the now empty city centre thoroughfare. She walked. Under the tyres of a moving vehicle water whished like shorebound waves.

He was sitting in the café window. She recognised the shape of him without truly seeing. The glare from the café flared in her face, like a blush. There was the quickening of her footbeat heartbeat footbeat. The light subsided, dropped. There was a gap between the buildings, all dark, wet on the inside, up the walls. The next building was shut up, gloomy. She saw her car alone on the street.

He was not the only one in the café. There was a couple holding hands, tightly, in anticipation of separation. The owner was staring into space. He had a moustache and a head of black, oily hair, flat on top. He looked like he'd just slid out from under a car. He was sweating, wiping his hands with a cloth. He wasn't staring into space. He was looking at his own reflection in the café window, against the night. He was seeing what he had come to after all these years. He didn't sigh.

She sat down across from him. Behind his head were plumes of smoke. A heavily jowled woman puffed and coughed in the corner. She had a chin mole. She was out of a fairytale. She was eating the gingerbread. She rummaged in a canvas bag and took out an apple, green on one side, red on the other. She plonked it on the table and continued to rummage. She looked at the owner. His lip quivered slightly.

The author looked at Tom. She wasn't sure of the name yet. The oil cloth was greasy but someone had put forget-me-nots in glass vases on each of the tables. He began to tell her how he had come across her books, which one he had liked best but in the end she took his hand and they held on tight, in anticipation of separation. After a while they went out, he kept holding her hand up the steps to his flat.

He wanted to meet her, tomorrow, again and again. He said they had so much in common, so much to talk about. He said this while he traced a line from her fingertips, along her arm, across her shoulder and neck, up to her cheek over which he laid his warm palm. She rolled against him with familiarity. They lay along the length of each other, restful, as if they had always done. But they didn't talk then. They played music instead which they made love to, then didn't, just listened, the notes playing in and around their heads, all joy, and then he kissed her and it all began again.

Later his eyes tired from the fill of her and his eyelashes dipped.

She slipped from the bed while he dreamed of them walking in parks, watching movies, buying mince.

She was naked but warm and she saw the bookcases and CD racks with the books, not only hers but other authors she loved, music she was into. She looked into his wardrobe where he hung his clothes with the same sort of absentmindedness as

her own. She took out a shirt and breathed him in, as if he was dead, as if she was saying goodbye.

She got dressed and went into the kitchen. There were two cups where they'd had tea and bourbon biscuits. They were facing each other on the otherwise empty table, just the tiniest residue of crumbs spilled during laughter.

Before she left she went to look at him, searing him into her memory. She already felt nostalgia, the first sharp flickers of pain. She felt in her pocket for her notebook and pen. Then she went outside into the same darkness, the same rain.

Memoir extract

The wind from the Burren is against me as I take my bicycle from under the thorn tree at Kilcolgan crossroads. Head down, I push and push on creaking pedals towards the cut-stone school, framed by a cut-stone wall in Ballinderreen. The air is needle-sharp with sleet on my face and limbs.

“Just because I’m leaving the Novitiate, shouldn’t mean that I’ll lose my position in the convent school, Mother Superior!” I’d protested.

“Once you leave, we’ll have nothing more to do with you, Sister. You’ll never get a teaching job in this diocese.”

Waxed floorboards, incense, starched veils, custody of the eyes are in another world.

Without the protection now of white coif and veil, I pull my woollen scarf down over my ears and starting-to-grow auburn hair.

Ballinderreen is on the edge of the diocese of Galway and Killmacduagh. Ballinderreen is on the edge of the Burren.

“You say you wish to leave our Novitiate! You’ve no vocation, Sister! No vocation!” Mother Superior’s six-foot frame had overshadowed my kneeling figure.

“There are different kinds of vocation, Mother Superior!” I said and stood up.

“On your knees, Sister!” she said. “You must wait for permission from Rome. You mustn’t tell anyone of your intention. I put you under obedience! A mortal sin if you tell!”

Truth disappeared like water from turloughs in Burren limestone.

The walls of the classroom are a sludge-colour, the floorboards do not fit together; soot falls from the chimney with a thump.

The children are bright and happy. They bring gifts, bags of turf, pieces of driftwood and oysters from the sea.

I light a fire.

I encourage them to paint their stories on old newspapers with their fingers, sticks and feathers, with ashes and soot bound with paste.

When boxes of powder-paints, I ordered from Dublin arrive, we cover the

classroom walls with their story-paintings. Ultramarines, chrome yellows, alizarin crimsons resonate and blaze in fractured sunlight.

I post their paintings to a Children's Art Competition in Dublin. They win first, second and many other prizes. When this is announced in the *Connacht Tribune*, a member of the local branch of the teachers' union objects to the fact that the success of another member is publicized. Though this causes me pain, I continue with my own teaching methods and the children win prizes annually at local and national levels.

We sing Plain Chant and Irish ballads.

One stormy morning the Cigire sits in his grey Volkswagen outside the school gate.

From Kilcolgan, I push and push creaking pedals against the southwest gale, but I'm still two minutes late.

"Are those your own paintings, a mhúinteoir?" the Cigire stares at the classroom walls. The children raise their hands and point,

"Mine, that's mine, that's mine, a dhuine uasail."

"That's King Guaire and his soldiers eating a big feast in his castle beyond in Kinvara!" Seósamh comes forward.

"That's King Guaire's brother, St. Colman, and his holy monks in Kilmacduagh. His holy monks are starving with the hunger," Carmel points with both hands.

"St. Colman is down on his knees praying to God to send food for his holy monks. All of a sudden, every one of King Guaire's dinner plates, packed full of sausages and Christmas pudding and ice-cream and jelly, rise up and fly away to St. Colman in Kilmacduagh," she continues.

"But, King Guaire's soldiers jump on their horses and race and race and race after the plates," Padraig says as he pretends he's riding a horse. "When they come to Bóthar na Mias, the horses' hooves get stuck to the rocks just outside St. Colman's monastery. They can't move an inch, no matter how the soldiers shout and roar at them,"

"St. Colman and his holy monks have a huge big party and they don't forget to say thank you to God for the sausages and Christmas pudding and ice-cream," Caitlín insists.

"And jelly!" shouts Pádraigín.

"You can still see the tracks of the horses' hooves in the rocks, if you go over to Bóthar na Mias!" the children point towards Bell Harbour.

Seán is wide-eyed with wonder as he says, “That’s what múinteór told us,”

On the next stormy morning, the Cigire’s grey Volkswagen splashes past me as I pedal against another southwesterly. When I reach Ballinderreen, the Cigire, spectacles down over his sharp nose, stands at the school gate. He writes in his diary and says,

“Three minutes late, a mhúinteóir!”

Suddenly his hat flies off towards Kinvara.

I pray to St. Colman of Kilmacduagh to send a tornado.

We sing our new song, *Va Pensiero*. The Cigire doesn’t understand Italian and cannot sing.

“It’s the *Slaves’ Chorus* and Verdi made it up and wrote it all down beyond in Italy!” Tomás tells the Cigire as Pearl points to Italy on the globe beside the fireplace.

He writes in his diary and drives away in his grey Volkswagen.

The children paint pictures of the Cigire’s hat lost among the grykes and turloughs of the Burren.

“That ice-cap must be very huge, a mhúinteóir, to make such great big scratchy grykes in the Burren as it squashed away into the sea. Was it huger than our church across the road?” asks Seán as he pushes more ultramarine mixed with burnt umber around his grykes painting.

“It could’ve been ten times, maybe a thousand times, bigger than our church, a Sheáin,” I answer.

“It must have reached away. up , up, up to the sky, mhúinteóir!” Caitlín says, raising her arms.

“A monster of an icy-cap, so it was,” shouts Tomás.

I cycle to Kilcolgan and park my bicycle once again under my thorn tree. I give it a goodbye pat as I remember that it’s the bicycle my parents bought me for my tenth birthday.

A lay teacher, cousin of the Superior, sits at my desk in the convent school.

Her Ford Zephyr is parked at the school gate.

In Galway City my mother battles with cancer.

Ten years later, the Árd Cigire himself will introduce me to the ‘three-minutes-late Cigire’ at the Department of Education in Dublin. I feel like smiling, but instead I look him in the eyes and say, “How do you do?” before I turn to the Árd Cigire to be congratulated on my commitment to the Arts in Education.

Novel extract

Optimism carried me back to the house and then deserted me. To woo it back I had a few tipples of gin. Tiredness took over and I tucked myself into bed fully dressed where I dreamed, not of David, nor Rita, nor even Deborah or Rachael, but of my mother.

I woke in a heavy sweat and threw off the duvet and sitting up in the bed, snapped on the bedside light, then lay down again. I closed my eyes, but the relentless power of memory thrust deep into my past, and goaded into life the half-retained scenes and whispered diatribes of distant histrionics.

I was back in my bedroom with its flowery wallpaper and mahogany furniture. The door swung open before me and I stared at my mother as she bounded in, with her holy water. Hands fumbled at my clothes. She took off my pyjamas top.

Defiantly, I opened my eyes. I had always told myself that I was fully clothed when she went about her ministrations. This was another booze induced hallucination. Nothing more.

Two more empty hours elapsed as I reclined on the couch in the front room. It was not yet four o'clock. Still no Granny Goldstein, no Rachael. No David. No Rita. What I expected, I didn't know.

I had gone three quarters into the bottle of gin when the phone rang. A long pause met my greeting.

"Hello ... Is that Teresa?"

The voice was male, low, ingratiating, and instantly recognisable. "Who is this?" I inquired, convinced that either the alcohol or pique that nobody from school had rung me up to this, had driven me to delusion.

"It's Kieran, Teresa. Kieran Crawley."

The room danced before my eyes; the Boglands painting, in all its blacks and browns, led the floor.

"Is this supposed to be funny?" I asked, making my voice prim. "Who is it? And how did you get this number? I am ex directory."

"It's Kieran Crawley," the voice repeated, this time in a less conciliatory tone. "You gave me the number yourself."

My mind steered away from unwanted likelihoods. I had forced myself not to

think of him since I stopped going to school, had not spoken his name or Pamela's for weeks, and now here he was, the personification of my most bizarre nightmares, ringing to torment me.

"How did you get this number?" I repeated, knowing through my haze that it was a ridiculous question. He could have asked any of the teachers with whom I was friendly. His voice became more strident. "*You* gave it to me."

"When?"

"You know when." His voice wheedled. "Don't pretend that you don't remember."

The room was now spinning at an alarming pace, and I grabbed at the edge of the telephone table. I stared at the phone. Whatever the reason for his ringing, I did *not* want to know. The weaving room twisted faster, the 'Boglands' began to darken. My clasp on the table loosened, as did my clasp on the door I had so meticulously bolted against memories of drunken deeds.

The incident with David and Rita and the desertion by my kids had made me drink too much. I had spent too much time alone. Time I got some air.

Without uttering another syllable, I slammed the phone on Creepy Crawley, and faltered from the sitting room to the kitchen where I gulped three glasses of water.

Roamy looked expectantly at me and I remembered my promise to take him for a walk when I returned from Ballymadden. As I pulled his lead from the top of the fridge, Rachael's skipping rope and a tennis ball belonging to Deborah fell on my head. The diamonds on the lino became round as I bent to tie it around his neck.

I'd have preferred to go for a walk on my own but I had promised. Bringing him was the last thing I should have done, I knew, because he would spend his time straining on the lead. Dusky, the bitch up the road, was in heat. Though I suspected Roamy had paid a visit to her kennel already, it had only peaked his appetite for her. Still, this was one promise I could keep.

I put on my Burberry and threw a scarf around my head against the swirling freezing fog. Stepping out the hall door into the density, I felt blessedly ill-defined. The light was strange, greyish-white with a bluish tinge. Dampness seeped up my nostrils, curled into my mouth, enfolded my face. I decided to walk down the private road by the river. I'd taken this walk many times before. There would be no cars. The people in the big house were not there and it was a different direction from Roamy's Dusky. The arguments were convincing.

The workmen, who were dredging on the other side of the river, were far enough away not to disturb my proposed plans. As everything slotted into place, I felt like an actress whose sets were ready and whose debut had come but who was not quite sure

of her role.

I remembered why the workmen were there. The river had become swollen during the bad weather following my mother's funeral, and they were still draining the low lying houses of water. The ganger was taking shovels from invisible men so it must be near knocking off time.

Seeing the effect of the fog on the workmen, and sedated by the volume of alcohol I had consumed, I fell in love with the idea of becoming invisible, too. Behind me, the lights of neighbouring houses barely penetrated the gloom. In the middle of the road two men chatted, their yellow Macintoshes glittering with drops.

Roamy, as I expected he would, dragged me along sniffing as he went. Too late, I remembered that there was a short cut this way towards Dusky's house. The cold aggravated the blotches on my fingers and made it painful to keep a tight lead on Roamy. A slight wind occasionally lifted the fog. I bent to stroke my Don Juan whose hair had turned a pearly colour. He appeared fat in the fog and I could feel the humid heat of his body. I hoped someone would be kind to him, and take him home.

The trees dripped as I stood with both hands on the balustrade of the wooden bridge. The serrated wood pained my palms as I squeezed. I suppressed the compulsion to laugh. I had been brought up to pretend that everything in my life was, as Rachael would say, hunky dory.

To behave like I did then, bawling, shouting at the sky, banging my hands on the rails like a madwoman as tears ran down my face, shrieking at the unfairness of a life that took my family from me, and caused obnoxious men to ring me out of the blue, was contrary to anything I had previously done.

The pattern had been set by my mother. Always keep the flag flying. Helped by my liquid crutch, I had spent years doing that, but now I was lame, drained, crippled.

Very slowly, I walked towards the barbed wire, adjoining the bridge, which hindered walkers from strolling abreast of the river. The inappropriate shoes, chosen to match my outfit earlier, slid in the wet, between clumps of dead grass. Here and there, the path was under water.

Behind the wire, the river flowed strongly and on its surface bobbed something wrapped in a black plastic bin bag. A dead cat, a dead body...?

No matter how slowly I walked, I still arrived at the wire. Feeling its spiky coldness against my knees, I paused. Roamy licked my wet face as I bent again to hug him. I righted myself and looped the lead halfway down on a post. There would be no danger of him pulling it off and coming after me.

My mind felt as murky as the surrounding air. A half a yard separated me from the hazy indistinct water. I pulled up my skirt, and stepped over the fence. A spike

tore my tights and broke the skin on the back of my calf. The trickling blood, running down my leg, didn't jolt me from my confused state.

I was shaking, abhorred by the thought of the dirty water and the clogging death, which seemed to be my only escape from addiction, betrayal, abandonment. At the same time, I despised the idea of going back into a life, which had become unbearable.

David was my *raison d'etre*. If he weren't there ... Even my kids had taken sides with him. They would have Rita as their stepmother. Coquettish, kittenish Rita.

A voice said, "Good dog. There There. It's all right."

The voice sounded far away at first, then close to my ear.

A hand clasped me by the shoulders and the same accent said, "And what in the name of Jesus do you think you're doing?" The man's hard hat tilted as he looked down at me.

The question was so pertinent that my mind stood still. The face, I turned towards the voice, was full of yearning and indecision.

"You forgot your dog missus." The voice was kindly now. "Fancied a walk on yor own?" While he spoke, his hand was outstretched.

Millions of thoughts spun through my head and my mouth framed an answer, but no words came. I took his hand and he helped me back onto the safe side of the fence.

He wore a contractor's waterproofs. I stared at his midriff. The silence lengthened. Roamy barked again. I forced myself to look at the ganger I had seen earlier. The roughness of his manner didn't cover the concern in his eyes.

I didn't know what to do.

"You gave me a fright," he said without inflection, like a news reader imparting information. "You must have got a fright, too." He looked at me from questioning eyes. "The fog led you astray. It's dangerous to be out in a mist like this. 'Twas luck you had the dog with you."

When I continued to look at him as if he were a moron, he said, "You should get something hot inside you. You're shivering."

I let him lead me. He supported me over to a small caravan on the other side of the river where a careworn man in grubby overalls gave me a mug of hot tea.

"You the one who came home from America a while back? Your husband's Jewish. No offence, Missus. Just trying to place you that's all." He looked towards my rescuer. "I think you gave Jim here a fright."

I closed my eyes and took deep breaths. The red spots disappeared. I felt cold. I couldn't banish the thought of water closing over my head as I went to sleep. After a

minute or two, I opened them and raised my head.

My rescuer smiled reassuringly. "Well, now, you're all right." He looked at me carefully. "And don't step over that wire again." He turned to the hovering youngster holding Roamy. "If I hadn't heard your dog barking, you might easily have slipped and fallen in. What would have happened then?" His eyes were watchful. "Go home and have a good rest. Things will look brighter in the daylight."

"Thank you I will."

I drank the rest of the tea appreciatively and at the urging of the second man, sat for a while to rest. Bit by bit my deadened brain became alive but I was still half drunk and my limbs felt as if they were weighted by rocks. Slowly, with deliberate movements I got up from the chair. My eyes brimmed as I thanked them. I would do as the man said. Go home to bed. Where else was there to go?

POETRY

SOUP

DOMINIC CONNELL

Someone's done the sums and says
a speck of Caesar's final gasp's
sucked in each time you take a breath,

your lung a litre's-worth of Earth's
collected babies' cries, last rasps,
recycled, filtered through your clay,

and noble as it sounds to live off
leftovers of emperors
they're swilled in less impressive things,

the everyday of distant coughs,
the molecules of droplet spores,
eventless strokes of insect wings,

and nothing swimming in this gamut
soup, no vestige of some Latin
speaking man's demise, is brooked

besides the idea that has hooked
me lately, that a breath might let in
some stray bit of you, and stay put.

A thousand miles away, it is still under your skin –
a place that displaces even the sun
and strips the colour away from everything.

Take your place on the boat dully rocking,
charcoal line through nothing as a dawn.
A thousand miles away, you are still under its skin.

Watch get swallowed by grey: marigold flames floating,
moving collages of the dance of worshippers –
colour getting stripped away from everything.

On fires piled high by men, see women burning.
Beside them children play cricket – watch their thin legs run.
A thousand miles away, this is still under your skin.

*Mother Ganges, you old witch, I don't want your death breath stinking
in my hair, in my clothes, sinking down to my innocent lungs,
stripping the colour away from everything.*

Now long to hear water lapping, oars breaking it.
Want to breathe in again those vicious chemicals.
A thousand miles away, you are still under its skin
and it still strips the colour away from everything.

PEBBLE

LIBBY HART

I read water
as someone would a newspaper.

I spread its pages over ocean
until my dreams are soaked

and this bed is a boat
moving through night.

Such hungry darkness
nets a memory

of how my father once
threw me into the sea.

Just an infant, I sank like a pebble
and lived inside a liquid room,

its ceiling was the swell of wave.
And even though he changed his mind

I fear I became too full of tide
and much too storm-wild.

I had nothing to hold on to.

BEFORE

MÁIGHRÉAD MEDBH

It's night in the garden and the scent of jasmine bleeds heavy from the trees, sick from the day's swollen heat. The skin burns, but a cold current snakes up from the earth and seeps through the ankles, lining the long journey of bone that must walk, must.

She's stretched on the reposing ground with a stone in her belly that fell from the far stars bearing their history. She inhales and finds her breath snarled to a hammer pounding on the crux of tomorrow, its mountain, rehearsing each upward step and slip.

And knows that she will do it, yes, she will push the boulder from the entrance again and then again, until silence is the scent and sound of her heart and her rented garden withers in the gapped memory of the laughing race.

She must kneel, though every organ and sub-atomic labourer says *stop*, pipes the march of the ego, sings the power of moment and her limbs, glorious on the inside, black-widow treacherous. *You can be*, they intone, *the killer and not the dead*.

But there's a place of Bliss, she says, and tastes the grass, *where the generous go. Embrace happens there and fingers lace themselves artfully and bodies dissolve to the sweet unity of the right thing. I picture myself at the gate, ticketless.*

Only she and the jasmine know this, and the jasmine will tell, because scent and long fingers make the earth deliver. She heaves onto that stony belly and forces her knees to fold. All tomorrows, till sunburst, unwell and inward, hello.

EARTH TWO

BILL NEUMIRE

The street names are the same, slightly
greener, the trees. After a rain the air
smells softer. But the water is water
and the stones are stones. The old
earth is burning like a subtext,
and the other planets are exchanging
I told you so's. On the second earth
mountains aren't as miraculous.
There are fewer theists and longer sunsets.
The birds sing more operatically
and the girls cry a little harder
after the boys leave. It's understood
there will someday be a third earth,
which makes any true love
of earth impossible. Only
the citizens of the first earth
ever really loved, ever really
thought the world might end.

The inner ocean whispers in the shell
Unheard, unless we raise it to the ear.
Seeds in the wind contain the flower bells.
The days accumulate. Another year
And so much tentative, or unbegun,
Colours and brush potential aquarelles,
The sonnet sleeping in the fountain pen
Accuse us, and though all's to do again
Fine things in days to come will yet be done.
Who, midnight born, anticipates the sun?

Biographical details

Jeffrey Alfier lives in southern California. His poems have appeared recently in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Kestrel*, and *The Saint Ann's Review*, with work forthcoming in *Chiron Review*. His chapbooks are *Strangers Within the Gate* (2005) and *Offloading the Wounded* (2010). He serves as co-editor of San Pedro River Review www.sprreview.com.

A. J. Ashworth was born and brought up in Lancashire and is a former journalist who now works in publishing. She has an MA in Writing from Sheffield Hallam University and has short stories published or forthcoming in *Horizon Review*, *Tears in the Fence*, *The Yellow Room* and *Lablit*.

Sandra Bunting is originally from Canada but has lived in Galway for more than 20 years. Currently on the editorial board of Crannóg literary magazine, she obtained her MA in writing from NUI, Galway in 2003. She works at the Academic Writing Centre, NUI Galway, and leads a creative writing seminar for undergraduates. Her poetry collection, *Identified in Trees*, was published in 2006 by Marram Press. She also works in printmaking, batik and bookbinding and has had her work exhibited in Galway, Sligo and Montreal.

Patricia Burke Brogan is a poet, playwright and artist. Her play *Eclipsed*, about the Magdalen Laundries, is acclaimed worldwide. In 2002 a follow-up play, *Stained Glass At Samhain*, was also published. Her poetry collection, *Décollage*, and her play, *Requiem of Love*, were published by Wordsonthestreet.

Ger Burke is a novelist and short story writer. She has had many literary successes both in print and radio including the Francis McManus Short Story Award and the Fish Short Histories prize. Her novel, *My Father's Lands*, was recently published by Wordsonthestreet.

Elizabeth Costello lives in Dublin. Her writing has been published in *Msllexia* and *Southword*, and broadcast on the RTE Radio 1 programme, *A Living Word*. This year she was shortlisted for the Francis MacManus Short Story Award.

Kate Dempsey is from Coventry but now lives in Maynooth, Co Kildare. Her poetry and fiction is widely published and she has been nominated and won many prizes including The Francis McManus, Cecil Day Lewis and Hennessy New Irish Writing awards. She runs the Poetry Divas Collective who are available to read at all cool events and festivals.

Jarlah Fahy's poetry collection, *The Man Who Was Haunted By Beautiful Smells*, is published by Wordsonthestreet.

Mark Granier was born in 1957. His work has appeared in numerous journals in Ireland and the UK over the years including *The TLS*, *Irish Times* and *Poetry Ireland Review*. He won the Vincent Buckley Poetry Prize in 2004 and received his second Arts Council Bursary in 2008. His first two collections, *Airborne* (2001) and *The Sky Road* (2007), were published by Salmon. His third collection, *Fade Street*, was published by Salt in 2010.

Libby Hart's first collection of poetry, *Fresh News from the Arctic* (Australia, 2006) received the Anne Elder Award and was shortlisted for the Mary Gilmore Prize. She is also a recipient of a DJ O'Hearn Memorial Fellowship at The Australian Centre, University of Melbourne (2003). Her book-length poem, *This Floating World* was devised for stage and performed by Teresa Bell and Gavin Blatchford (2010). Publication of *This Floating World* is forthcoming (2011).

Hugo Kelly has won many writing awards for his short fiction in Ireland and the UK. He has twice being short listed for both the Hennessy Award in Emerging Fiction and the Fish Short Story Competition. In 2009 he won the Brian Moore Award judged by Richard Bausch. His work has appeared in various publications including the *Sunday Tribune*, various *Fish Anthologies*, the *Cúirt Annual*, *Books Ireland* amongst others. RTE Radio 1 and BBC Radio 4 have broadcast his short stories. He lives and works in Galway.

Rebecca Leah is a graduate of the Humber School for Writers (Toronto) and is currently working on her Ph D in English at the University of Montreal. Her poetry and prose have been shortlisted for a number of awards in Canada, including *Arc Magazine's* Poem of the Year Contest. In Canada, her poetry has appeared in *Prism International*, *Existere*, *The Antigonish Review* and *Acta Victoriana*. Both her poetry and prose were featured in *The Nashwaak Review*. In the United States, her work has appeared in *The Orange Coast Review*, *The Emerson Review*, *Kestrel* and *Caesura: the Journal of the Poetry Center San Jose*. Most recently, her poem *Rosalind Franklin in Open-Toe Sandals* was selected by guest editor Lorna Crozier for the anthology, *The Best Canadian Poetry in English 2010*.

Quincy R. Lehr's poetry has appeared in numerous venues in the U.S., UK, Ireland, Australia, and the Czech Republic. His first collection, *Across the Grid of Streets*, was published in 2008, and his second, *Obscure Classics of English Progressive Rock*, will appear in 2011. He lives in Brooklyn, where he teaches history. He is the associate editor of *The Raintown Review*.

Patricia McAdoo was shortlisted in the Francis McManus Short Story Award. She has had a short story published in the anthology, *Do the Write Thing* (Poolbeg). She is the author of the children's book, *Claddagh, The Tale of The Ring*.

John McAllister has an M Phil in Creative Writing from TCD. He is the author of a novel, *Line Of Flight* (Bluechrome), and a short story collection, *The Fly Pool* (Black Mountain Press). Recently his story, *Bog Man*, was published in the anthology *Requiems For The Departed* (Morrigan Books, Sweden).

Deirdre McClay is from Lurgan, County Armagh and lives in County Donegal. She works as a lecturer in both law and accounting. She was nominated for the Hennessy First Fiction Award in 2004.

Moira McPartlin is from Stirlingshire, Scotland. She has had work published in *Storie, People's Friend, Countryside Tales, The Stirling Observer, The Scottish Mountaineer* and contributes book reviews and articles to www.laurahird.com. She has won awards in the Bournemouth Short Story Competition and the Scottish Association of Writers Novel Competition. She organises Weegie Wednesday, a monthly book industry networking event in Glasgow and sits on the editorial board of New Voices Press, the publishing arm of the Federation of Writers' Scotland.

Tom Mathews was born in Dublin in 1952. He has been a freelance cartoonist, writer and critic since 1975. His work appears weekly in *The Irish Times* and *Sunday Independent*. He has had thirty one-man shows and his paintings have been exhibited in Living Art, the National Portrait Show and at the RHA. He has illustrated a dozen books, written a novel and published three volumes of cartoons. His last book, *The New Adventures of Keats and Chapman*, was published in 2008. He has contributed poems to a number of small magazines and journals. *The Owl and the Pussycat* is his debut collection of poetry.

Máighr ad Medbh was born in County Limerick. She has four published poetry collections: *The Making of a Pagan* (Blackstaff Press, 1990); *Tenant* (Salmon Publishing, 1999); *Split* (jDivas!, Arlen House, 2003); and *When the Air Inhales You* (Arlen House, 2008). She produced a CD, *Out of My Skin*, in 2002, and her work has been included in a wide range of anthologies and journals. A new collection, *Twelve Beds for the Dreamer*, will be published in 2010, and Salmon will be publishing a new edition of *Tenant*. Widely known as a performance poet, she continues to perform at a variety of venues in Ireland and abroad.

Bill Neumire's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Los Angeles Review, Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, and *Rattle*.

Val Nolan teaches contemporary fiction and creative writing at NUIG. His stories have previously appeared in Sydney's *Cosmos* magazine and on the Futures page of the science journal *Nature*. He regularly contributes reviews and criticism to publications including *The Irish Examiner, The Sunday Business Post, Poetry Ireland Review, Southword* and *The Stinging Fly*.

Fiona O'Connor teaches philosophy at University of Westminster, London. She is a Hennessy Award Winner and has been published in *The Phoenix Anthology of New Irish Writing*, edited by the late David Marcus. Stories have also appeared in *The Big Issue Magazine, Time Out, Fiction International, University of San Diego Press, Hot Press Magazine*, and *nth Position Online Magazine*.

Alice Redmond was shortlisted in the First Fiction section of the Hennessy Literary Awards 2009/10.

Knute Skinner was born in St. Louis, Missouri. In 2000 he retired from teaching at Western Washington University and now is resident year round in Killaspuglonane, County Clare. His first book of poetry, *Stranger with a Watch*, appeared in 1965 and contained early poems written in Iowa. His second collection, *A Close Sky over Killaspuglonane* (1968), showed the influence of the people and the landscape of rural Clare. Since then, he has published eight more books and six chapbooks. His poems, which have appeared widely in serial publications in Ireland, England, Australia and North America, show a variety of styles, including both free and formal verse. He founded the Signpost Press was a founder and editor of the Bellingham Review. He was awarded a fellowship

by the National Endowment for the Arts and has received residencies from the Huntington Hartford Foundation, The Millay Colony for the Arts, The Tyrone Guthrie Centre, and Fundación Valparaíso.

Angela Small is an artist living and working in Galway.

David Starkey is the Poet Laureate of Santa Barbara and Director of the Creative Writing Program at Santa Barbara City College. His most recent full-length collection of poetry is *A Few Things You Should Know about the Weasel* (Biblioasis, 2010).

Lisa Taylor has or will have poetry published in *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Healing Muse*, *Hawai'i Pacific Review*, and *Kimera*. She teaches creative writing at Eastern Connecticut State University.

Ruth Thompson lives in Belfast. She has been published in a range of publications, including *THE SHOp* and *Southlight*, and also by Cinnamon Press. She participated in Poetry Ireland's 2009 Introductions Series, and was a commended prizewinner in the 2010 Wigtown Poetry Competition.

Alison Wells has had short fiction published in magazines and online and print anthologies and she has been featured on Sunday Miscellany. She was shortlisted for the 2009 Hennessy New Irish Writing Award and this year's Fish Prize and inaugural WOW awards.