

'Complementary and yet contrasting, clamouring to be heard.' DERMOT BOLGER

An Anthology of poetry, prose and fiction

Caught In Amber

Edited By Eileen Casey

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*An Anthology of Poetry, prose
and Fiction*

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Dermot Bolger, Novelist, Poet and Playwright and Writer-in-Residence, South Dublin County, 2005.

Dermot Bolger's contribution towards renewing and re-invigorating the literary life in South Dublin County is enormous. Those who participated in his series of workshops held throughout the County in 2005 are much enriched by the experience. We thank him for his ongoing support.

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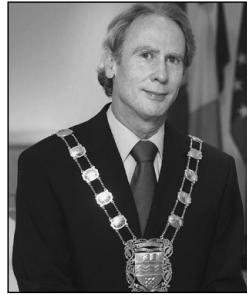
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Ireland's Own, where 'The Trunk' first appeared and *Sunday Miscellany* where 'A Winter Break' was first broadcast.

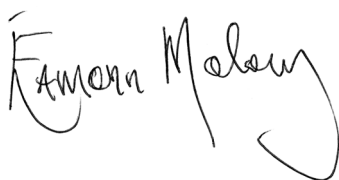
A welcome from Mayor Eamonn Maloney

As Mayor of South Dublin, it is my pleasure to welcome readers to this vibrant, energetic anthology from Lucan Writers' Group. Indeed, the poetry, prose and fiction in this selection are the result of each individual writer's attention to the craft of writing itself.



Some of the writers in this anthology are being published for the first time. Others have had work published in outlets such as *The Sunday Tribune*, *Ireland's Own*, *County Lines*, a portrait of *Life in South Dublin County*, published by New Island and edited by Dermot Bolger, successful novelist, poet and playwright and Writer-in -Residence, South Dublin County, 2005. Work has also been broadcast on R.T.E. radio, *Sunday Miscellany*. This anthology is edited by Tallaght based writer Eileen Casey who facilitated the Lucan Writers' Group in its formative period. It is a mark of the high esteem in which she is held by the group that Eileen has been invited to edit *Caught in Amber*.

It has long been the tradition in South Dublin County to nurture and support the arts. *Caught in Amber* is a worthy recipient of the faith South Dublin County Libraries have in the artists in the community. I congratulate all concerned in bringing this anthology to fruition, particularly the writers themselves. May they enjoy continued success.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Eamonn Maloney". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end of the name.

Mayor, Councillor Eamonn Maloney
South Dublin County Council
November, 2006.

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Introduction

Eileen Casey

In autumn, 2003, on the invitation of Librarian Deirdre Priestley, I came to Lucan Library to facilitate a number of Creative Writing sessions. Surrounded by the comforting presence of books, the writing journey was eagerly begun. It seemed the most natural thing in the world for these writers, to be thus engaged on a Saturday morning. There was tremendous vibrancy in those early morning sessions and a huge burst of that creative energy very necessary to ensure that “beginning at the beginning” is an enjoyable pursuit and not a chore.

Going back to that first morning however, I remember reading a piece from Michael Viney’s ‘Another Life’ column, published the previous Spring in *The Irish Times*, about looking for a brambling, a rare breed of bird. In beautifully evocative language, Viney described how he searched for the very distinctive markings of this bird and how, on sighting one amongst a group of chaffinches, there was no mistaking its orange gorget and pure white plumage. My intention in reading this piece was to highlight the lens through which the writer views the world, that writers are always on the “look-out” for something startling or out of the ordinary.

Over the weeks, I thoroughly enjoyed my visits to Lucan Library, such was the enthusiasm and willingness of each member of the group to fill up those blank pages and to engage in stimulating ways of stoking up creative fires. More often than not I was rewarded with a satisfying sighting of a “brambling” in the wonderful plumage of a powerful image, the tilt of an unforgettable phrase or the drawing-up of a memorable character. The journey home to Tallaght was made lighter as a result. There was lots of laughter to be ferried homewards also, thanks to the camaraderie shared over cups of coffee.

In completing the pieces published here, the writers have been generous in opening the storehouse of memory. Themes of characters trapped in unlived lives or coming to terms with untimely death, love lost and rediscovered, the forging together of different characters from different worlds, are poised between accounts of personal history (some of which take us as far away as America and to Australia). Here also is found the poignancy of growing older in a hostile environment, the cut-throat world of big business, the slow but agonisingly sure build-up of natural disaster but also, that very important element, humour. Indeed, it is the latter which often serves as a prism through which darker tones can filter,

demonstrating that as O'Casey knew only too well, with shade there is always light.

Although coming together as a group, the individuality of each voice in *Caught in Amber* is indelibly marked on the work. Indeed, this is a strength which I find so heartening about the writings here, that holding fast to one's own identity, one's own way of looking at the world. In this regard, these writers have got it right. Respect and an enduring friendship have allowed each 'voice' to flourish.

In 2005, some of the writers in this anthology participated in a workshop facilitated by the then Writer-in-Residence for South Dublin County, Dermot Bolger. The encouragement and the experienced guidance of such a much admired and well-respected writer, has contributed enormously towards advancing these writers further along their writing journey.

Triona Walsh's short story 'Caught in Amber' gifted the anthology with its overall title. The warm colour of the amber stone with its ability to reflect various falls of light, make it a perfect choice. The qualities of preservation, which the stone possesses, have caused amber to be likened to a time machine. I have no doubt that these short stories, prose pieces and poetry, will continue to startle, surprise and delight for a long time to come.

The Common Market

Joan O'Flynn

I know a woman who loves supermarkets. Well, it's not just supermarkets she loves. It's her own supermarket, the one where she shops every week – and more often than that, if the truth were told. It's not really the food, (although she really loves looking at mustard-dressed, pepper encrusted beef on the bone, the red, yellow and green apples, and oh, the wonderful cheeses) nor is it the cleaning materials. And it's certainly not the toilet paper or the often-wonky trolleys. It's just the buzz of the place, the people she meets. There's a whole life going on in the supermarket that energises her, that kind of rounds off her week.

The Fruit & Veg section is always ablaze with colour. Apples shine as if polished just minutes ago. She once saw a white aubergine, imagine that! And another time, bananas so small that a bunch of them was like a child's hand with eight fingers. She always feels that the horrid pink insipid looking things they call tomatoes bear no resemblance to real tomatoes; certainly not at all like the ones she used to pick in her father's greenhouse when she was young. When she comments on this to whoever happens to be standing beside her, they always agree.

The woman hates to admit it but she really doesn't like the fish counter. It's not that she doesn't enjoy a piece of lemon sole, or a prawn cocktail served in a glass dish with lovely Marie Rose sauce. But the open-mouthed ugly monkfish and the unnatural red slices of tuna make her avert her eyes as she passes. She's relieved that there is never a "fishy" smell from them and wonders how they manage that.

She's very fond of the people that work in her supermarket. There's the gentle fellow at the deli counter, with very long curly hair neatly enclosed in a hairnet. She herself would never be caught in public with a hairnet on her head, but it kind of suits him. He's definitely not Irish. She had thought he might be Romanian or Arabic, but someone told her he was French. She would have thought that a French man would have looked more romantic or arrogant, not shy and gentle. When she asks for nine slices of Billy Roll for her grandchildren, she notices that he always makes sure to mix the slices, so that there is a dinosaur and a footballer and a teddy bear. Not many assistants take that trouble. She doesn't like to tell him that actually, she doesn't have any grandchildren. She buys the meat for the dog, his Friday treat, but the young man mightn't understand.

She never even glances at the ready-packed meat because there's Jack at the counter in the butchery, who advises her on how to cook the different joints and who always makes sure she knows what is the best value this week. Then there's Bill, the security man, who was so kind to her some years ago when her arthritis was bad. He always made sure that someone would help her get the trolley to the car and the messages safely stashed inside. Bill is great. He makes time for a chat and seems constantly to be in good humour. She wonders if he is like that at home, but thinks that he probably is.

She worries about the woman who does the yoghurt samples who is always rather withdrawn. She wonders if she has an ulcer, or corns on her toes perhaps? It must be hard to have to go out to work if your health is not good. Now the lady at the cheese counter is another kettle of fish entirely, always eager for her to savour the Cambozola or Gubbeen. Quite often she will press her to sip one of those dainty little plastic containers of Italian or South American wine. South America – such a long way for wine to travel. She supposes it comes by sea; it would be too heavy to fly all the glass bottles across those miles. Maybe the wine comes in huge barrels and is bottled here.

One of the nicest things about the supermarket

is that she meets other shoppers. Some of them she thinks of as friends, but they are really just people she sees almost every week and passes the time of day with, or asks how their children are getting on these days. And there are others, people she hasn't seen for years, who only come to her supermarket at Christmas or Easter. Most of them don't seem a day older than the last time she met them, but have lots of news of other old friends who are married or dead or gone to the Canaries for the holidays.

There are hardly ever any children in the supermarket. Thank goodness for the on-site crèches. She doesn't like big children much. Well, not in the supermarket. They're noisy, you know? It somehow ruins the rhythm of the place. But often there are babies; tiny ones, little eyes shut tight; bigger ones reaching for things from shelves. And they seem to come in all colours nowadays; heads of tight black curls, dark skinned with almond-shaped eyes, brown-eyed pale faced beauties, sloe-eyed imps with ornaments in their hair, blonde pink-cheeked bundles.

In fairness, she knows that there are people who hide when they see her coming, afraid that she will delay them for longer than they want with idle chatter. But that's OK. She herself has to hide sometimes when she's in a hurry, or in bad humour and doesn't want to inflict her ill temper

on others. It's so easy to get into the habit of telling and retelling the story about one's sore toe, or how she couldn't find the car keys for ages the other day. Some things are better kept to oneself.

When the shopping is all done, she goes down the escalator with her small trolley full to the brim tilting ahead of her, and sets off home. Sometimes she's glad when she forgets some of the things she meant to buy. She can always go back again tomorrow!

Seagulls and Oak Trees

Joe Mc Kiernan

‘Seagulls and oak trees.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘I said ‘Seagulls and oak trees’.’

Christine, the relationship guidance counsellor was taken aback at Damian’s response to her question, which was a staple of any mediation: ‘What do you want from this relationship?’ And this was his response? Sarah, his wife, could not hold back.

‘Jesus Christ Damian. This is serious! After two years I finally get you to mediation and when you get here all you want to do is treat it like a big joke! Do you just want to leave, is that it? Do you want to call it quits? Is that it? Well if you do I wish you’d just tell me straight ...’

Christine interrupted. ‘Sarah. Hold on! Let’s just step back a little.’

Damian had not reacted in any perceptible way to Sarah’s outburst. Though she had glared at him unblinking throughout he had not turned to make eye contact, choosing instead to gaze out the French doors behind Christine.

‘Let’s take a little break,’ Christine suggested, partly to relieve the tension of the moment but equally to give herself time to think.

Damian spoke.

‘Can I take a stroll in the garden?’ he asked. It was the first meaningful sentence he had uttered.

‘Sure,’ Christine replied and got up to open the doors.

The grounds of the institution, on this most glorious of summer days, looked nothing short of magnificent. The lawn was a beautiful luxurious green carpet interspersed with manicured circular flowerbeds. But Damian hardly noticed these things, transfixed as he was on the oak trees that formed the perimeter of the grounds. The slow swaying of their leafy branches brought him inexorably back to Granny’s house in Dalkey, and to that summer, eighteen years previous.

Her garden had been also been surrounded by fine specimens of this most noble of trees. And in the centre had stood “Old Faithful” fully a century old, granny had once told him, during one of their many lunches under its shade.

He would go to Granny’s three or four times a week during that summer. The sun had shone incessantly from the start of June until the end of August, or so it seemed. His parents could see no reason to stop him though they would have preferred if he had socialised a little more with people of his own age.

He would help Granny bring out food for the

seagulls: crusts of bread, coconut halves and bowls of water. Some people saw the gulls as useless scavengers but not Gran. We all need someone to look out for us was her philosophy. Within a minute of the fare being laid out, the garden would be invaded by dozens of gulls, gobbling and scrapping for the food.

When the birds had gone on their way the main event would take place: lunch. Every day, Gran would prepare sandwiches, which were somehow always of a different variety. In addition she would proffer fancy pastries, something that Damian's mother must not find out about. But the centrepiece of lunch was the tea, served as it was in her ornate, flower-adorned porcelain teapot.

Inside Christine and Sarah sipped cups of coffee. Christine went to say something, checked herself and then asked: 'How long is it since your little girl..?'

Her sentence trailed off – even a euphemism is loaded when speaking to a mother about the death of her infant.

'Three years now. Three years last month'

'And she was – how old?'

'Seven months. It was a cot-death.'

Christine said nothing hoping Sarah might volunteer more.

'It was Damian who found her,' she continued.

‘She died during the night.’

‘And how did you deal with her death?’
Christine asked.

‘Well y’know. You just have to deal with it.
What else can you do?’

Damian had thought that the summer would never end. But end it did and more abruptly than he could have imagined. He was laying the gulls’ lunch out on the lawn one day when he heard a crashing sound in the house. He ran into the kitchen to find Gran lying on the tile floor, face down and motionless. Beside her, in a dozen pieces, lay the teapot.

After the funeral the house was put up for sale. Damian tormented his parents about the need to feed the seagulls but they could not understand the importance of this. He was back at school now and even at the weekend they would not let him go to the empty house on his own.

When a buyer was found the final contracts were to be signed at the house. Damian saw his chance and begged his parents to bring him. He brought all the usual food items in a bag and spread them out in the traditional feeding place. But no birds came. Eventually, after much cajoling from his parents he left.

The purchaser of the house turned out to be a local developer who had cannily noted that two

houses could be built on the grounds. Of course for that to happen the oak trees would have to go.

For reasons that he could not explain even to himself Damian would regularly cycle by the old house. On one of these reconnaissance missions, he saw a team of men go to work on the trees. Though he had held back the tears at Gran's funeral he could not restrain himself now as, one by one, those noble beings were humbled by the savagery of screaming chain saws. "Old Faithful" was the last to go.

Damian was roused from his reverie by the unexpected taste of saltwater on his lips. He wiped the tears from his face and turned towards the open French doors.

'What do you want from this relationship?' the counsellor had asked.

Simple: he wanted seagulls and oak trees. He wanted things back as they had been. His head told him this was impossible but nevertheless it was the non-negotiable demand of his heart.

So many things that he loved were now gone and his marriage to Sarah, who he also loved, was now in serious jeopardy. He would try to save it but he did not feel optimistic as he trudged back towards the open doors.

Family Fortunes

Dympna Murray-Fennell

Jimmy would have been on the Titanic – if he could have raised the fare to travel. But in 1912, his job as a pork butcher's apprentice in Cork did not pay very well, so he began to look elsewhere for better prospects. When the recruiting officer for the Royal Irish Rifles was in town, Jimmy gladly signed on. A year later he was in India. It was to be a short visit as the clash between King and Kaiser called for his presence in Flanders. Maybe he regretted leaving the job in Cork, when he experienced the butchery and bloodshed on the Western Front, but at least he survived the carnage.

Back in rebel Cork, the welcome home was lukewarm – Jimmy was in the wrong uniform. Even the family did not receive him with open arms. But there were open arms back in Picardy – a petite mademoiselle called Marguerite and soon French wedding bells replaced the bells of Shandon.

Three-quarters of a century later, as I stood by the graves of Jimmy and Marguerite for the burial of their son Jacques, I mused on the chance happenings that shape individual and family lives. Surrounded by the heavy marble statuary in the

traditional deep purple of French cemeteries, Jimmy's descendants gathered from all parts of France, together with a handful of Irish cousins. From Marseilles there was Sebastian, a rugby player with a shock of red hair and a physique like a Munster forward. Chatting with him was Michel, an athletic gendarme from Grenoble – he was renowned in family circles for his liqueurs made with alpine plants, a French version of poteen but perfectly legitimate, since he had “married into” a farm which had the right to distil their own spirits.

Apart from them stood Philippe, the Parisian grandson – Charvet-shirted and suited, exuding success and urbanity. He winced, just a little, on hearing the broad vowels of the cousins from Languedoc and looked slightly pained at the determined efforts of the few Irish relatives to bridge the linguistic gap. His handsome face froze when confronted with an olive-skinned in-law from North Africa. Fortunately, someone from his own world rescued him from that embarrassment -Cousin Patrick- wasn't he in banking in Lille? But no! Patrick had taken up painting, and like Gauguin, had left the bank, and was now working on his art in a village in Brittany. He was planning to move to West Cork – if he could afford it- and immerse himself in Celtic mists and imagery.

This, to Philippe, was madness, a reversal of the normal social instinct of upward mobility. He turned away to admire the tall willowy figure of his favourite niece, she had all the under-stated elegance of the true Parisienne. Now she was chatting in broken English to a third cousin from Cork, investigating the possibility of a visit to Ireland to improve her English!

I wondered how long it had taken Jimmy to learn French when he settled in Boulogne in 1918. Certainly his family had little trace of their father's mother-tongue. I remember when I first visited Jacques' home and the champagne was opened, he confused 'cheers' with 'cheerio', and for a moment, I thought it was a parting-glass rather than a welcoming toast! But he had just enough English to deal with the tourists at his stall in Boulogne market, where he was a consummate salesman. I watched him handle three or four customers at once – advising one on the best saucisson, passing a sample of camembert to another, identifying a potential new customer with a special 'bonjour Madame'- a real Bill Clinton at charming his audience. He was a connoisseur of food and wine and knew where to find the best, whether simple croissants or top-class foie gras. One taste survived from his father's homeland and that was an appreciation of well-aged Irish

whiskey. After his funeral I watched his old friends savour tots of 15year-old Jameson as they reminisced about the ‘good old days’ of their youth and complained about the youth of today, plus ca change!

I wondered what Jimmy from Cork would have made of the whole thing; I think he would have been rather amazed and maybe a little amused.

The Flower Box

Louise Phillips

Millie was the last to know her Mam was pregnant. Her brother said she had too big a gob for her own good ‘Tell that one nothin’, unless you wanted it on the six o’clock news’. It was 1966 and Millie had just passed her eight birthday. It bothered her that she had not noticed the bump, but then again her Mam was a little on the plump side, well actually a lot on the plump side. Millie liked her Mam being plump; she had seen photographs of her before she met Millie’s Dad, before she had babies. She looked beautiful, like Audrey Hepburn. Millie didn’t want her Mam to look like that again, she didn’t want men to fall in love with her the way they did in movies. If Mam left, she would be stuck with Dad and that would be no good at all.

When Millie finally discovered the truth, the thought of having a baby brother or sister filled her young heart with such flights of fancy that it almost burst. Being the youngest of four, she longed to push a pram and talk “baby talk” the way her friends did. Betty Maguire was the worst; she came from a family that had reached double figures. Every feckin’ year she had another one to parade in front of her. Sometimes it was a girl,

sometimes a boy, but always a baby. When Millie asked her Mam, ‘Why can’t we be like the Maguires?’ her Mam would snap, ‘Because we’re not’. Millie hated the way adults gave the most pathetic answers to thoroughly brilliant questions. She accepted them all the same, despite the fact that they explained nothing, secure in the knowledge that a push for a second answer would have produced a good clip around the ear.

When her Mam went into hospital, Millie was forced to encounter that brand new world with her Dad as the parent. Quite soon into the experience, she caught her smallest finger “pinkie” in the bedroom door; it was a terribly painful event and left her little finger throbbing to the size of a fat banana. Millie had expected love and sympathy, but got none of it, instead her Dad roared at her as if she had committed some hideous crime against him. His reaction defied all intelligent understanding, after all it wasn’t her fault she happened to be standing holding the doorframe just as her brother decided to slam the door shut.

But it wasn’t all bad; for one thing, they didn’t have to have Saturday night baths. She hated that long ugly piece of galvanised steel, the way it sounded when it was dragged across the tiled floor, like someone’s fingernails scratching down a blackboard. But most of all, she hated those

three dingy inches of lukewarm water that had serviced her older sister. It was no fun taking your clothes off in the middle of winter. Dublin in the sixties knew nothing about central heating, and the closest Millie ever got to it was a tiny shovel load of coal in a distant fireplace. Millie did not get on with her older sister, she was far too much of a “goodie two shoes” for Millie’s liking. In her house Millie was known as “the scourge”. She loved when her Dad came back from the pub and he was in good form. He would wake her up and say, ‘Millie who are you?’

And she would say ‘the scourge’.

‘And Millie where are you the scourge of?’

‘I am the scourge of the North, the South, the East and the West’, and she would stick out her chest and he would place an imaginary badge on it. They would both laugh.

The other upside was that each night they got fish and chips from the local chipper for tea. Gorgeous they were, long fat lumps of potato wrapped in soaky newspaper, oozing with lashings of salt and vinegar. A feast for a King which ended in the finger licking ritual, each one got attention, even “pinkie”, which had finally finished throbbing.

The news came from the hospital that it was a baby girl, her name was Monica. Millie practised saying her name out loud.

‘Monica, Monica, Monica’.

‘Hi everyone, look at my baby sister, her name is Monica’.

She jumped and skipped and dreamt her way through a maze of baby thoughts, big sister things, testing the baby’s milk on her arm just like Betty Maguire did, singing lullabies whilst standing in front of the mirror, or practicing holding Monica the way Our Lady held the baby Jesus, all saint like. When the coming home day came, Millie felt like she was expecting Santa when it wasn’t Christmas and she knew she had been a good girl for eight years. It was cold and wet outside; Millie sat with as much patience as any eight year old could muster, staring out of the window at the rain. Sometimes the rain became hard and tiny hailstones pelted at the pane. She didn’t want her sister to get a chill and worried that her Mam would wrap her up well. Millie counted to one hundred many times then counted back again. She stared at the paint cracks in the windowpane and made up imaginary stories from exotic lands. She prayed to Holy God that Monica and her Mam would come home soon. When praying didn’t work, she opened the front door and jumped down the one stone step to the street. The step was like their front garden and her Mam was very proud of it, scrubbing it every morning. Sometimes she let

Millie help and she would run the steel brush up and down the white suds or make circles that became galaxies. But that afternoon there was no Mam to make things right and Dad wasn't around so there was no one Millie could ask. Her brothers told her nothing and her sister never knew anything anyway. She looked around the room as if somewhere held the answer. She waited and waited as the walls became darker and night time came. The bread and jam sandwich she made herself filled her empty belly but took none of the worry from her heart as she sensed something was wrong.

The atmosphere in the flat hung huge and quiet. A small lamp lit the front room with the orange glow of its shade. Millie sat cross-legged below the kitchen table and watched car lights pass like torches as they lit the flowery curtains against the dark. She heard her older brothers whispering and tried to make out the words, but it was no good. Then the ambulance arrived, a big white thing with flashing lights, it pulled up right out front. Millie's Mam, a dark stooped shadow, filled their front doorway and drifted witchlike into the back bedroom. Millie wanted to cry. Why had her Mam not seen her? But Millie's Mam saw no one, she had seen enough.

There was no baby and no mention was made of one either. The flat was horrible that night, no

one really spoke and when they did, it was in hushed tones. Millie knew for sure there wouldn't be a little sister. Monica, Millie found out later lived for just three days; then died of a cot death in hospital. That was the worst kind of death, because nobody knew why. When Monica died, Millie's Dad was asked to identify the body. He couldn't do it and her Mam would never forgive him for it. It wasn't long before he learned to hate himself and his visits to the pub became even longer than before. Sometimes Millie heard her Mam crying and she'd feel sad for her, but soon, Millie's life continued with the trials and tribulations of Millie's world.

One day when she was out of school sick, Millie lay in her bed alone. A fabulous novelty as she normally shared it with her older sister, Millie at one end, and her sister at the other. It was great being able to stretch out without having to hear a moan that her foot was stuck in her sister's face. The bedroom was shared with their parents, the boys were luckier, having a whole room to themselves, they never had to listen to her Mam and Dad snoring. Hours and hours it would go on for, just as her Dad breathed in, her Mam breathed out. Their snoring had fantastic rhythm, at night their bodies becoming miraculously in tune in a way that escaped their daily lives.

Millie's eyes travelled around the room, taking in all the bits and pieces and then she noticed it, a big brown cardboard box sitting on the top of her parent's wardrobe. It looked like the boxes that held flowers in the markets; it was the same shape and size. She wondered how she had not seen it before but soon calculated that during the day she missed it as she couldn't see up that far, unless of course, she was lying where she was right now! Millie heard her Mam moving in the scullery. She had checked in on her a while earlier and it was unlikely she would revisit very soon. Millie crept out of bed and pulled her Dad's bedside chair over to the wardrobe. Her hands reached up as high as they could; but only her index finger touched the box. There was no way she was going to be able to see what was inside even if she got the lid tilted off. The sickness and temperature of the early morning disappeared fast with the arrival of such a great adventure. Knowing life and limb were being risked, Millie made her way into her brother's bedroom; convinced that she would find what she wanted there and she was right. Piled in the corner was a load of books that would do the trick just nicely.

Millie didn't leave straight away; she savoured the thrill of being somewhere that she shouldn't. No one was around, other than her Mam working

in the scullery and the experience filled Millie with as much adrenalin as being left alone inside a sweetshop with no need to pay. This once in a lifetime opportunity had arrived and she was well and truly going to swallow up as much information as the room had to offer.

There was a huge map of the world on one side totally contradicting Christopher Columbus's view of the planet. One of her brothers had started to put together an Airfix model of an aeroplane. It was way bigger than any she had ever seen, her longing to touch it, just about surpassed by the absolute fear of reprisal. At the end of her eldest brother's bed was his tape recorder; it had two large six-inch spools feeding into one another. Millie touched that, because she knew it wouldn't break and the "look and listen but don't touch" motto held by her brother when it came to Millie and her relationship with the device required rebellion. Finally she carried four of the largest books she could find into the back bedroom. Making one return trip to the area of enquiry was vital, any more could instigate capture, and this was turning into too much fun by far.

Millie piled the four books on top of her Dad's chair and gained at least six inches in extra height. The brown box on top of the wardrobe was covered with dust. It made her sneeze and Millie

worked out that by touching it; she left lesser dust marks in the shapes of fingers. Millie waited a few seconds as she prayed her Mam hadn't heard the sneeze. With no sounds other than the movements of pots, she carried on and lifted the lid off, allowing it to slide back behind the box. The inside was filled to the brim. Millie wiped ten dusty fingers down either side of her vest and spread both hands across the top as she felt the softness of baby clothes.

They lay like a pink and white ocean, smelling of baby powder, and were far prettier than anything she had ever seen. Millie built up the courage to lift a small pink cardigan, which spread out like a skirt at the end; it had a narrow pink ribbon laced near the top of miniature rows of knitting which met in the centre with a perfect bow. There were mittens too, along with items that weren't clothes, a rosette in the shape of a heart with the "Virgin Mary" on the front, a rattle also, that was slightly battered, so she figured it was hers. As she stood on top of her Dad's chair and four stolen books, Millie, alone with the clothes that her dead baby sister never got to wear; she thought of her all small and soft and gurgling. In her imagination they met somewhere between hope and loss. Part of her little sister was there, part of what she might have been. Gone were the

dreams of pushing prams and bottle-feeding, replaced by a connection with a sister that she would never get to know in any ordinary way. She cradled herself back into bed and cried, not the way her Mam cried but cried all the same.

Coats
Colm Keegan

My daughter lost her temper
And swung her little white coat at me
Making me laugh.
You should have seen her face
When it slipped from her arms
And took to the air.

I caught it for her.
But for a heartbeat
It was as if she thought it might keep going,
Fluttering away from the playground,
And over the Wicklow mountains
Escaping to the sea and the sunset.

It might've met my jacket out there
My little black jacket
Size 3-4
With the gold Benson and Hedges logo.
The one I took from the wardrobe,
And slept in one night.
I used to live in it
and chew the collar
I loved how the fabric felt in my mouth.

Until that day on O'Connell bridge
When I was sat beside it
The wind was raging
And whipped it from me,
Flung it into somersaults over the Liffey
Where it landed gently on the oily water,
And floated away.

One Kick
Colm Keegan

One kick, one tiny flick
Of his two year old foot
And I was hooked.
No matter what
His mother did
My chubby, soccer mad little kid
Would feel my care
Forever.
But I never,
Saw a day like this
When his broken mother's courtroom kiss
Would be all he'd have
For the next ten years.
No sun filled summers,
No glittering careers.
Just tears
And regret
For the man he bet.
And the way
One flick,
One drunk and deadly,
Too strong kick,
Can crush a skull.

Caught in Amber

Triona Walsh

Nora's world, now mapped by the flat four wall contours of this room – no oceans, nor mountains – barely noticed the outside sun. What rays accidentally found their way to the inconspicuous window browsed disinterestedly around the room, and then shuffled off. The scuffed and paint-chipped reading lamp, on her mahogany veneer bedside table, was the new centre of her existence. When it was off, her life suspended, and when it was illuminated she would participate once more.

Katie found a chair, and manoeuvred it with as much grace as her eight months pregnant belly would let her. Settling with relief at the bedside, she looked at her shallow slumbering grandmother, unsure what to do. She could wake Nora, but that didn't seem fair to the old lady. But, leaving her to wake and just find Katie there, sitting and staring, might frighten her. Katie was now regretting creeping into the room so stealthily.

But a coughing fit took hold of Nora's shoulders and rudely shook her into consciousness. Katie reached over to the cup of water on the bedside table, and proffered it to Nora. She took it, and by the time the spasm left her, she was awake, though

drained. Katie managed to haul herself out of the chair and helped Nora to sit up, pillow bolstering her. Nora took some time to talk.

‘Thank you child,’ she said finally. Then she slowly reached over and turned on the lamp. Her fingers felt and fumbled for her glasses and a tissue. Katie knew better than to help now. Nora dabbed her mouth before putting her glasses on, bringing her one-roomed universe into focus.

‘Katie,’ she said, as if only now confident of her visitor’s identity.

‘Hiya Granny,’ smiled Katie, infusing her first words with as much happiness and optimism as ten letters could hold.

‘Oh please stop that at once,’ Nora griped.

‘Stop what?’

‘Your cheery cheery. I look a fright, stop pretending I look like some Hollywood starlet. You never did when I was well.’

‘I’m always happy to see you, Gran,’ replied Katie as she fought not to sound like a sullen five-year-old.

‘Perhaps, perhaps,’ conceded Nora, ‘I’m just so sick of these grinning nurses visiting me, they pat my hand and turn up the volume to tell me I’m looking great. I feel like replying, “Yes dearie, I’m looking so good that the undertaker will have little to do making me look great in my open coffin!”

‘Oh don’t say that Gran!’

‘Now, Katie, we all have to go, and my time is well and truly up. I’m eighty-five, that’s about forty years longer than my sins should have let me have. I’ve done well.’

Katie chose to say nothing. She knew her grandmother well enough that in this sort of mood, there were no winners. She smiled at her instead. Sat and smiled.

‘Good girl. I’ve taught you well,’ chuckled Nora at her granddaughter’s silent protest. ‘So, how’s the burden?’ she gestured at Katie’s tummy.

‘Burdensome,’ she replied.

‘And that boyfriend of yours, how’s he shaping up? Going to last the course?’ As she spoke Nora leaned a little further back into her pillow. She raised her glasses up, closing her eyes as she did so. She rubbed the bridge of her nose and her eyelids, careful not to smudge the mascara she once wore. She left her glasses resting on her head, and kept her eyes shut, allowing Katie’s voice to be her solo sensory stream.

‘I don’t know. One minute he’s happy about the baby, the next he isn’t. I don’t know how I’ll cope if he leaves, but what can I do to stop him?’

‘Don’t even try, dearie – he’s not one of life’s winners, that boy.’

‘Gee thanks Gran, but he’s all I’ve got. It’s not

as if Mum is going to be any use.’ Katie attempted to move herself in her chair, desperate for her distorted shape to fit the space’s unforgiving dimensions. Defeated, she slumped back again, resigned to discomfort.

‘How is that unloving daughter of mine?’ Nora summoned the will to open her eyes a little.

‘Mum? The same. Like lice at a primary school: virulent and dreaded by all.’

‘How poetic,’ grinned Nora.

‘Oh, I’ve got a million of them. So, she’s not been round to see you then?’

‘Well, she made her pitch for her share of the will. No need for her to visit her dear old Mammy again.’

‘Does that not make you angry Gran? Why do you keep smiling?’

Nora’s face retained the wryly amused stance it had taken since her daughter had been mentioned.

‘Why darling? Is it not obvious?’

‘Not really. Not to me’

‘It’s because I deserve it all. I was a loathsome mother to her, just like she was to you, and my mother was to me. Just because age has mellowed me – well, knocked a few rough edges off me now – doesn’t take away the fact that I neglected her, and emotionally abused her as a child. If she didn’t hate me now I’d be very worried about her.’

Katie looked hard at her grandmother. Like a sound track played to the wrong pictures, Nora's description did not match the woman Katie knew. She had never been a woman of soft landings and comforting murmurs, but her intelligence and consistency had been the shelter of Katie's emotionally perforated childhood. To portray herself now as guilty as her daughter, a co-conspirator of neglect, was as unsettling as it was unbelievable.

‘What? You expect me to believe that?’

‘Oh honey. It's the truth. She hates me because she should hate me. And maybe as my mother lay dying, she too understood and forgave my absence from her bedside.’

Katie felt wounded.

‘So, what is this? We're some sort of family of genetically messed up mothers? Am I going to ruin my child's life as well?’

Nora ignored the question. Uncomfortably she rolled slowly onto her side, so that she was looking at her bedside locker. She pointed to its door.

‘Open that, take out the small brown box you find inside.’

Frustrated, but well conditioned by her grandmother's ways, she did as she was told without expecting her unanswered questions to be answered any time soon.

‘That’s for you. It was for when my body finally did with its torturing of me. But I want you to have it now.’

Katie undid the clasp, and opened the lid of the box. Inside was a pendant, an amber teardrop, on a gold chain.

‘It belonged to my own mother, my father gave it to her. That amber is twenty-four million years old. I offered it to your mother when she turned twenty-one but she didn’t want it. She hated its flaw, thought it was ugly.’

‘Flaw?’ asked Katie, incredulous that this ancient arboreal gold could have inspired anything but awe in its beholder.

‘Hold it up to the light. You’ll see.’

Gently taking it from its case, Katie dangled the gem in the light of the table lamp. It took the stone a minute or two to stop spinning, all the while Katie and Nora stared, like hypnotist’s victims, transfixed by it. As it settled Katie saw what her grandmother had referred to. A moth, distorted limbs and collapsed wings, was caught, right in the centre of the glowing transparent amber.

‘Entombed forever. Such a beautiful piece tainted. I’ve often thought it was a sick joke of my father’s, presenting my mother with this. It’s more of a scientific curiosity than a token of affection. And unsurprisingly she never wore it much, but I

took a shine to it. I never actually liked it but it annoyed her to see me wear it. Most of what I did was to spite her.'

Katie took the warm stone in her hand and felt its smooth shape mould her palm. Then, she bowed her head and placed it around her neck. The chain was long, and the teardrop nestled on her pregnant tummy.

'Don't be insulted Katie that I've given you such an undesired family heirloom. I just know that your mother would just get rid of it after I die, and even though its an ugly piece, I thought it didn't deserve that, and that maybe, you could love it. You could break the run.'

Katie eased herself out of her chair and moved stiffly to look at herself in the long mirror that leant propped against the far wall. Now standing, the amber no longer rested on her belly, but gently swayed just above it. She looked at her reflection.

'I think it's beautiful.' Her fingers rubbed it like a genie's lamp, and she smiled, happy with what she saw.

She looked at her grandmother's face in the mirror. Nora was smiling at her, a smile not tainted with a vicious bite or sarcastic word. Katie turned immediately and went to Nora's bedside. She took her hands, wasted, used up hands. Gently, she held them, careful just to touch her grandmother and

not to add to her pain.

‘It’s you, my dear, that’s beautiful. You can make even a nasty thing like that,’ she looked at the pendant, ‘look stunning.’

A cough then took hold of Nora. She grasped Katie’s hands as her body used what pitiful energy it had to writhe and convulse. Finally expelled, Nora lay limp and defeated. She closed her eyes, and her breathing was audible in its efforts.

Katie felt a tear well, but knew better than to dare offer words of sympathy or comfort. She once again got water for her grandmother, though this time she helped hold the cup to her lips. Nora made no effort to open her eyes and engage once more. Her breathing became more regular, and Katie hoped that sleep might insist she rest and take her into its comforting arms. Katie smoothed the blankets around her grandmother, and found an extra one, which she placed over the end of the bed.

She was sure Nora was asleep, but she stopped when she heard her whisper.

‘Katie,’ she said, barely audible. Katie came round the bed and knelt on the floor, her face inches from Nora’s.

‘Shush now, Gran. Time to get some sleep. I’ll wait here and make sure you’re okay, but rest, please rest.’

‘You won’t...’ began Nora, still a sleepy whisper.

‘I will wait,’ said Katie softly.

‘No, listen to me,’ said Nora, eyes still closed, and sleep impatiently tugging at her conscious self. ‘You won’t be like your mother. Or me. You’ll be a good mother to that baby. You can make an ugly thing beautiful.’ And with that she struggled no longer with sleep and let herself be led away to its rewards.

Katie smiled, and still kneeling, reached up and switched off the table lamp. Using the nearby chair, and bedside locker for help, she raised herself off the ground. Keeping her word she didn’t leave, and wandered over to the window to begin her watch. She considered briefly closing the thin curtain that hung there, but realised that there was no need as it seemed to make no difference to Nora’s sleep. Instead she stood there and looked out at its small snap shot of the outside world. A couple of horse-chestnut trees carelessly maintaining loose grips on their last few leaves. Cars sped by and people hurried on foot. The vast ice blue of the late Autumn sky was deceptive in its clear vibrancy. Unconsciously Katie rubbed her tummy as she looked out. As she did so a stray wisp of sunlight found its way to Nora’s room and stole in through the uninviting window. It passed

through the amber pendant that Katie was still wearing, making it glow, before it retreated to the larger world outside.

God (and everyone else) Calling?

Patricia O'Shea

I cringed inwardly. Not again! I rooted around in the bottom of my bag for the phone that *always* seemed to ring at the wrong moment and always very loudly – even when it was supposed to be on silent. As I found it and shut it off, I smiled apologetically at the assistant who was attempting to conclude the transaction with me. At least I no longer felt compelled to answer and try to explain where I was or what I was doing that I couldn't take the call.

I recalled the time shortly after I got the phone when I was at, of all things, the official opening of a new school. A long awaited, much publicised and well-attended event. A mobile phone began to ring. Needless to say, it was in the moment of absolute silence just after the main speaker was introduced. I looked around with everyone else, in shared, righteous indignation, to find the guilty owner. This turned to mortified horror with a growing realisation. For the first time, but by no means the last, I rooted in my bag and found it just as it stopped ringing. My relief was short-lived. About to turn it off, it began to ring again. To my mounting horror I was unable to figure out how to stop it nor how to turn it off. Time, and everything

else, stopped as I made my way, cheeks flaming guiltily, under the cold accusing gaze of the visiting dignitaries, school board, parish priest and all my neighbours, out of the front row of seats and out of the building. My next, equally public, disaster occurred a short while later. I was at the opening of an exhibition. A smaller, but more select audience. The famous writer, who was doing the honours, was speaking entertainingly and at length. A phone rang, putting him off his stride. Red-faced, this time unable to move, I eventually found and switched the traitorous thing off. Phones always seem louder and more intrusive when it's your one.

That night I sat down and learnt how to work the phone properly. All went well for a while. Until one night I was at a play in town. A phone began to ring. I looked around, secure (I thought) in the knowledge that I had left mine in the car. I had learnt my lesson well. It was very close. In fact it seemed to be just behind me. By this time the principal actor was quite upset. It stopped! And just as the actor began again, so did the phone. Meantime as my searching hand failed to find my bag at my feet, my sense of impending horror grew. The actor stopped and, loudly and quite rudely, shouted for the phone to be silenced or he would leave. I found it before he left but it

was just as well the play was not being reviewed that night!

I began to notice that people seemed to fall into two categories. Those who were embarrassed by mobile phones and those who seemed oblivious of any intrusion. At a funeral, recently, a well known classical air began to play. I was thinking it was a strangely light-hearted choice for the occasion, when it began to repeat and the penny dropped. The owner, a well dressed man in his forties, spoke firmly in carrying tones. 'I'm at a funeral, I'll ring you back' and put the phone away. A short while later it began again and the same thing happened. This time, however, the man beside him leaned over and whispered something. The first man reluctantly turned the phone off before returning it to his pocket. Outside, afterwards, the first thing he did was switch his phone on and from then on, anytime I saw him, he seemed to be on it.

When the music being played at a concert developed a slightly offbeat echo, this rather eerie coincidence turned out to be – yes, you've guessed it, a mobile phone ringing its version of the same air. Studying in the local library, the silence was shattered by the jangle of a mobile phone. The man answered it and turning his back, went behind one of the bookshelves. He then proceeded to have

a very loud and very personal conversation. He continued apparently completely unaware of his embarrassed, albeit unseen, audience. A staff member finally found him and ended the ordeal, to general relief. He was quite miffed. Another day, this time in a hospital, despite being surrounded by big red notices requesting that all mobile phones be switched off, three phones began to ring, one after the other. Each of the owners turned and moved a couple of steps away and began to talk as if the person was in the same room. The other conversations in the room withered away. All three were quite affronted when the matron appeared and, pointing sternly at the notices, stood waiting until the phones were switched off.

At a talk recently, where the speaker had just started, the doors opened to admit a woman with a number of bags. As she failed to find a seat at the back the speaker pointed to an empty seat at the front and waited courteously while she made her way there. When she was ensconced he began again. A few minutes later, her phone rang. Again he waited while she searched through pockets and bags before triumphantly answering it to explain at length why she couldn't talk. When she finally switched it off, she beamed at the still patiently waiting speaker and began to explain that it was great to have the confidence to deal with these

things now, as a year ago she would have been mortified. His, still courteous, silence eventually stopped her and the talk finally continued.

At a wedding reception, the speeches were, very sensibly, held after everyone had finished their dinner. During the second speech a phone rang two or three times and stopped. Then another phone did the same. Then a third. The three continued alternating despite everyone searching for phones and shaking their heads, with obvious relief, as they each found their own, silent, phone. As the ringing was definitely located somewhere around the top table, the search intensified. All pretense at continuing the speeches stopped and ‘Hunt the Phones’ took over, with everyone joining in. When the culprits were uncovered – literally – the entire room gradually erupted into laughter as the story spread. Three, very young, guests were found sitting under a table, playing phones, blissfully unaware of the rest of the world.

When my daughter was in Australia, she rang me one evening while she was out with friends. Obviously forgetting the time difference, said daughter had the brilliant idea of introducing me to all her new friends. Still half asleep (it was twenty past three in the morning here!) her bemused and increasingly amused mother was passed, via the mobile phone, from person to

person. Each in turn introduced themselves and said how great it was to meet me and chatted as if I was really there beside them. One of them even offered me a drink, to general hilarity. It was an extraordinary experience. When I eventually met some of those friends in person, it was more like meeting them again rather than for the first time.

Phones really have infiltrated everywhere. A friend once got an urgent call from her son, perched on the side of a French mountain, miles from civilisation, asking could she top up his call credit as he was about to run out and there was nowhere around for him to do it. Another, very brief, phone call and within minutes he was back in communication with the whole world. Getting away from it all in the technological age! Meanwhile, as my own youngest son approaches his twenty first birthday and the end of his formal education, I am waiting with interest to see will I fulfill my oft repeated vow: 'When he's finished, I'm getting rid of this thing'. This thing being my own much used, very useful and equally annoying mobile phone.

Finally, at another funeral a phone began to ring, loudly, at the top of the church. The priest glared down angrily at the congregation. He was well known for his intolerance of interruptions in general and mobile phones in particular. The

phone stopped and began again immediately and insistently. When this happened for the third time a peculiar look crossed his face and he began the familiar rooting through his pockets. In his case, hampered by his vestments. The phone was eventually found and continued ringing, gaily and insistently, while buttons were pressed. It was finally handed to an altar boy who stopped it instantly. The congregation managed, more or less, to keep a straight face while the red-faced priest apologised profusely.

I now suspect that God not only has a sense of humour but also – a mobile phone!

Moments
Maurice Flynn

‘Pious Aloysius, did you know that was his real name? I mean everybody called him Tony.’

‘Tony was his father’s name.’ Brendan said in reply to Paddy’s question.

‘His aul’ fella had been working in England and he didn’t get back in time for the christening. When he found out what they’d called the baby he went fucking spare. But you know what Tony’s Ma was like; religious in the extreme.’

‘Yeah,’ said Paddy, ‘anytime you met her she was either coming from or going to the church. I suppose she got Pious from the Pope. But where did she get Aloysius?’

‘St. Aloysius, of course, the patron saint of people with crap names.’

‘Nice one Brendan. But still, when the priest read out his name at the church I thought I was at the wrong funeral.’

‘You were. You should have been at John’s. What’s the matter with you?’ Brendan turned to John.

John had heard them but he hadn’t really been listening. He had been looking at and thinking about the widow, if widow was the right word. It was fifteen years or more since she’d separated

from Tony. She looked well but Julie always did with her small, neatly proportioned body. Petite, that was the word to describe her. Yeah, she looked good; she was holding back at least a decade.

He remembered her standing on the little bridge in Stephen's Green, calling him to look at the swans. She turned to face him as he walked towards her. The sun was behind her through the trees. She seemed to be caught in a halo of light; it had been a heart-thumping moment, like a scene from an old movie. He'd kissed her and she him. Even now he could almost taste the sweetness.

'John, are you with us?'

'Yes, Brendan, I am. That's the problem. I'm an aul' fella sitting in a pub I've been coming to for more years than I should've.'

'It's your local. What pub did you want to go to?'

'Shut up Paddy. John, I think you're losing it. Lately you've been acting like a menopausal aul' one.'

'Maybe you're having a mid-life crisis.'

'If only I was Paddy. I'd be living to a hundred and twenty eight. But I'm afraid I, we, are at the burying age.'

'What the fuck is that?'

'It's when, Brendan, you start going to more

and more funerals, including your own. Look, three months ago we were at Wacker Cullen's and then, what was it, five weeks ago we are at Billy Smith's. Today, here we are at another one.'

'Wacker Cullen fell off the roof of his house,' said Brendan. 'He was trying to reconnect the pipe television because he was too fucking mean to pay for it. And Billy was eighty-three. He was dying for years.'

'And Tony,' said Paddy in a whisper, 'was an out and out alcho. Sure wasn't that why his wife threw him out?'

'The drink didn't kill him. He fell down the stairs and broke his neck.'

'I know Brendan, but he was drunk when it happened.'

'I take your point, Paddy.'

'No you won't, you'll buy your own.'

'No I won't, it's John's round.'

John smiled at them and looked up to catch the barman's eye, which he did almost immediately. He held up three fingers and the barman nodded. Yeah, he thought, this place, I'm at the stage where I don't need to talk, sign language will do.

He looked again in the direction of Julie; he couldn't quite see her, people sitting at her table were blocking his view. He felt disappointed. Jesus. John checked himself. Here I am mooning

over a woman I've only met twelve or so times over the years. I must be losing it.

But still the memories came. They were walking down Thomas Street, heading for the Tivoli. She was telling him he was lucky to be an only child. There were seven in her family and how she couldn't wait to move out. He told her then he was going to London. This had surprised and seemed to upset her. She was quiet for a while and then Ö. Shit, he thought, it was a long time ago and these are my memories. What are hers? We had only gone out with each other for about two months. I remember nearly everything, she probably a whole lot less and probably a whole lot different. She'd asked him, 'Why John? Sure you're a qualified electrician; you'd get plenty of work here.' He remembered telling her it wasn't just the work. In London he could go to night classes and get better qualifications, and he wanted to travel. Travel, he thought, now that had been a joke. He'd gone to Spain once; the rest of his travelling had been between London and Dublin. By the time he had decided to stay home she was married to Tony.

Mostly over the years they had met at weddings and funerals. There was one wedding in particular. Julie was still with Tony at the time. He was at the bar with some of the lads. Tony was with them,

telling a story about the one he'd had on the side that week. That was Tony – flash bastard, and not much flash either. He remembered Tony making a derogatory remark about Julie. He'd felt like smacking him one. 'Who am I kidding? I never did anything on impulse in my life.' This, though he hadn't meant to, was said aloud.

'What...what are you on about?'

'Steady, being steady, that's what I'm on about Paddy. I was just thinking, I never did an impulsive thing in my life.'

'What do you mean?' asked Brendan.

'I mean... look, my Da used to always say, no matter what I was doing, take it steady son, and that's what I've done all my bleedin life. I checked up steady in the dictionary the other day. iNot faltering or wavering, controlled, sensible and reliable.î That's me to a tee. Isn't it an awful description, sensible and reliable?'

'No it isn't, it's...'

The drinks arriving interrupted Brendan. John paid for them and started to speak.

'Hang on a minute John, I think you'd want to start counting your blessings.'

'I know the good things I have Brendan. Lately, I've been doing a lot of thinking.'

'Always a bad sign, that.'

'Shut up Paddy. Go on John.'

‘I got myself the good job with a pension. But I planned on starting my own business. I just wouldn’t take the risk. When I bought my house, the plan was that in a few years I’d sell it and buy a bigger one. Never happened. Don’t know why. Got too set in my ways I suppose. When I went to London that first time, it wasn’t to work or whatever; it was because I wasn’t going to get married and wind up with the life my Da and all the other aul’ fellas around had. What happened? Except for the married bit, I’m exactly the same.’

‘No you’re not. I mean our aul’ fellas were aul’ fellas. Anyway, sixty four isn’t considered old these days.’

‘Well it’s not considered young Paddy and our fathers probably said the same about theirs. In any case I don’t care about being sixty four. I mean, we all get old, lose a bit of hair and –‘

‘Or in Paddy’s case a lot.’

‘Don’t start with the bald jokes, Brendan, or I’ll start with the fat ones.’

‘Ooo, sensitive, aren’t we? Sorry John, you were saying.’

‘Ah, I don’t know. Forget it.’

‘Go on. We want to hear it. Don’t we Paddy?’

‘Yeah, just one thing. You sound like you’re regretting you never married. If you were me you’d be regretting you did.’

‘You don’t regret getting married Paddy, or you either Brendan, for all your guff about it. You two spent years boring the arse off me about your kids and now it’s your grandchildren.’

‘At least we’re not boring the arse off you about our mid-life crisis.’

‘TouchÈ, Brendan.’

‘I was only joking, John.’

‘I know, Brendan. I amn’t that bad yet.’

‘Here,’ said Paddy, ‘this thing you were on about, being reliable. That time I got myself in hock up to my eyeballs you bailed me out. That’s a good thing. I mean, you can always be depended on.’

‘And me.’

‘What? All you did that time, Brendan, was tell me to ask John for help.’

‘I know. And you never thanked me you ungrateful fuck. Here’s another thing, you talk about being sensible; we’ve known each other a right long time and I can remember times when you went a bit wild.’

‘Brendan’s right John, you had your moments.’

‘I don’t remember ever being wild. But you’re right. I had my moments. Not many and they’re all in the Had file. I’m not having them now. That’s the thing I think about most. Moments. You know those times when you can feel life. The joy of it,

the feeling that things are good, that you have a reason for your being. Even if you don't know what the reason is. I want to feel like that again. Jesus I want to feel anything but the sheer poxy lethargy I've been feeling lately. When I look back, my life wasn't bad; it was worse than that, it was mediocre, and what's even worse is – I planned it. I was always planning ahead. The second pension, the best, safe, low-risk savings schemes. What I'd do when I retired. Shite, I'm retired now and all I've done is swap the rut of a poxy job for the rut of no poxy job. Memories, here's the thing about them. At my age, they're supposed to be the icing not the whole, full fucking cake. And, if you're using them to fill your day, then it's a bad day no matter how good the memories. There is nothing wrong with being old; it's only wrong when you stop being, when you stop feeling life. God, but I've let my life get stale.'

John stopped. Paddy and Brendan said nothing. They'd both noticed John's eyes mist over as he was speaking. John stood up from the table.

'I'll be back in a minute.'

As he walked away he wiped his eyes and thought, Christ I'm an embarrassment. I'm turning into a right fucking eejit.

'Hello, John. How are you?'

He'd almost walked straight into her.

'Julie, how are... I'm fine. How are things going with yourself? God that's a silly question to ask you on a day like this.'

'John, you and everybody else knows Tony and me were finished for years. Sure I'm only here for the kids' sake. As bad as he was he was still their father.'

'Yeah Julie, I was going to ask you...' John's voice trailed off.

'What John. What were you going to ask me?'

'Em, nothing really. I was just thinking –

'Ma, sorry for interrupting you but we're ready to go when you are.'

'All right, Mary I'll be with you in a minute. Oh sorry, John this is my daughter Mary.' And turning to Mary, Julie said, 'John's an old friend of mine.'

John said hello. Mary nodded and remained standing there.

'Go on with you Mary, I'll be over in a minute.'

'It's okay Julie I have to be going myself. I'll see you around sometime.'

'Alright John, it was nice seeing you again.'

He thought she sounded disappointed but he said nothing. Julie said goodbye and as she turned away the words blurted out of him so fast he

almost shouted them. ‘Julie would you like to go out some time?’

Julie looked at him. Julie’s daughter looked at him. Some people nearby looked at him. He could feel the embarrassment flood over him but he could feel something else as well. He could feel his heart thumping.

Long live the lost things

Colm Keegan

Deep down in my dreams
Where memories play
A strange crowd sings
Of lost things.
In chorus their voices
Lament failed choices.

Somewhere near the centre
The poet stands raging
anger never aging,
Words spun round his head
Like a crown of thorns
Around him old people gather,
Young faces wrapped in wrinkles
My memories wrapped in sleep
Celebrating a release from isolation.

Outside in the wilderness
Lies a trail into the past,
Into some forgotten estate.

The sagely poet points and warns
‘Out there you’ll find madness’
Cradling conkers like eggs
He says ‘never go back’
The sentence slithers through my mind
Like snakes down a spiral staircase
I argue after it

‘Long live the lost things’ I shout
‘The smashed souls
The dark things
From the deepest places
The light shines clear
And everybody knows where they’re going,’
Skipping through the frozen grass
Naked, but for my lunatic’s coat
My last words like dead birds
Hang from me,
As I Chase Hope and faith
Back to the past.
‘Look!’ I sing ‘They dance before my bright
frantic eyes
Like feathers on the breeze!’

The Wind
Elizabeth Reid

Narrow, bustling streets
Air still, expectant,
No rain for weeks, when
Will it break?

Ice cream melting, straight
Out of the fridge.
Air heavy, waiting,
Sky monotone, blank canvas

At last a puff.
Heads up, thankful for relief
Hearts lighter, minds cooler
Anxiety lifted.

The puff grows stronger,
a breeze cooling cheeks.
Still no concern.
But leaves are still, grasses wave.

A mother holds on to her child,
Her steps quickening, chivvied along
By a relentless, unseen presence.

People worried now.
Looking to the sky for answers,
Nothing comes, but the wind,
Stronger, yet stronger, rattling shop fronts.
People run for shelter, roofs give
Up their slates. Shop fronts crash!

Wind's keening song hides frightened
Cries for help
People huddle together.
A child presses to her mother's bosom

Quiet. Silence. People
Crawl out of ruined buildings
Faces drained, shocked, beaten
The wind goes by,
Uncaring.

A New Beginning

Joan Byrne

She stands on the threshold of his bedroom observing the detritus of his life. The bed with its vacant mattress is pulled out from the wall, revealing ruffles of dust and an old once white sock. Blue tack litters the walls, reminders of posters and flags from his travels. A half filled dirty glass of water sits on the windowsill, left there, after a night out with the lads.

She had great plans for this room. Her bookcase would go against that wall and her sewing machine in that corner. All her memories, from christening robes to photographs of birthday parties, could be stored neatly there. Her own bedroom would then be a quiet sanctuary; she had dreamed of that for years. This could also be a guest room for visitors, who were bound to come, her sister from England or her brother from Canada.

He had finally found his way. No longer a modern statistic, an adult son living with his mother. She hoped the girl would suffer his untidiness and his belligerent impatience. And his electric guitar playing, which would tremble the glasses in the kitchen, when he wanted to play it loud. She hoped he would be happy, she really did.

Determined to make a start she drags the vacuum cleaner up the stairs. Shuffling it around the floor she has to stop as there is something rattling in the hose. Taking it apart she discovers a plectrum. She holds it between her fingers, sits on the bed and is overcome with unexpected despair.

Phoenix Risen

Patricia O'Shea

I came across them while I was looking for something else. Searching through a box of old books, I had pulled them out of their half-buried, half-forgotten 'temporary' resting place. I'd pulled them out and was putting them aside when the titles registered – *The Sun is My Undoing, Twilight on the Floods and Phoenix Rising. The Flood Trilogy!* By Marguerite Steen.

Suddenly, I had a flashback to the kitchen I grew up in. My mother arriving home, triumphantly waving a book. A look of delighted satisfaction spilling out of her eyes. The words tumbled out:

'I've got it! I've found the third one. Now there's only one to go. When I find *Twilight*, I'll have the set.'

My mother loved books. Books on crafts like knitting and sewing, crochet and leatherwork, G.A.A., taking photos, gardening – the list went on! And that didn't include the novels! She usually had a few books on the go at a time, a habit she passed on to me. She fitted them in around the demands of rearing six kids and running a house, practising said crafts and attending her beloved G.A.A. (matches *or* meetings) whenever she had

the opportunity. She'd read when we were gone to bed. She'd read with her cup of tea after lunch, after we'd gone back to school. Sometimes we'd burst in to find her still reading. The kitchen was never bright enough because there was a return on the back of the houses, so the light was permanently switched on. Her favourite place was at the kitchen table, in front of the window. The book was, at first, propped up on a few others. Later she used a wooden book rest. Ever practical, she doubled the lip to hold one of her bigger volumes. On the wall beside the window, overhead, she had a shelf which held her current collection. Whichever novel she was reading would be next to a G.A.A. book, an anthology of poetry and/or a collection of songs. Some aspect of history, particularly Irish history, and often a biography would be awaiting her attention beside the next volume of some series. Stephen Hawkins hung around for years in a fascinated struggle for comprehension. But there was more to books than just reading.

For as long as I could remember, my mother had a book treasure hunt on the go. The list changed as she found one and crossed it off, or more frequently, grew as she added yet another one that caught her attention and interest. Usually, but not always, part of a series. I remember coming home with one of the 'Jalna' books from

the library. When Mam saw it, she went upstairs and came back with the first in the series and handed it to me saying

‘The first book often contains background information that you don’t get in the rest, so if you can, read it first. After that, it doesn’t matter so much. It’s more satisfying to read the series in order but not usually necessary. There’s more of these upstairs.’

Already an avid reader, that marked my introduction to the joys of pursuing a series. I’d wait impatiently to see who’d have the next one first – the library, or Mam in her sporadic forays to second-hand bookshops or sales of work. Bread, cakes, occasionally plants, but mainly books were what arrived home from whichever school or local sale of work she was helping to organise. Organising provided a preview and facilitated the putting aside of a particular prize before opening to the public. One of the perks!

She always had a list of books she was watching out for. After I started working I once made the mistake of buying her one from the list, new, for Mother’s Day or her birthday, I forget which occasion. Never again! The delighted interest that usually greeted a book was decidedly subdued, and I learnt that reading the books was the last and not always the best part of the enjoyment. The

searching. The waiting. The finding of other, unsought and unexpected, treasures on the way. And finally the finding it and the taking it home, triumphantly, to read. The hunt was every bit as important as reading the book.

The feel of the plastic that she covered all her books in brought me back to the *Flood Trilogy*. Sitting there I looked at its torn dustcover, like a jigsaw with pieces missing, held in place by the plastic. The hunt for that second volume, *Twilight on the Floods*, was to continue much longer than could have been foreseen that far off day in the kitchen. Out of print for a long time, the search was to span over thirty years. As she got older her forays became less frequent, especially after she had to give up her beloved bike. But one day, as we both moseyed around her local bookshop, she found it. Her face, lit up with a mixture of delight and disbelief, lost the thirty years and, just for a moment, I was no longer the mother of teenagers but a teenager myself again.

She re-read *The Sun is my Undoing*, read *Twilight on the Floods* and, finally and at last, the long held and long unread *Phoenix Rising*. Not too long after she had finished reading it she died, peacefully and at peace, leaving me with warm memories, her book rest and my own equally wide-ranging and ever-changing book list.

Them
Eileen Casey

He has no mention how the Africans
-especially the women -
walk with a sway to the hip by Jesus
that would knock the eye out of your head,
shame the best jivers in the place;

or how the multicoloured rig-outs they wear
light up jaded streets and though
double Dutch and rameis at the best of times,
the sounds they make have a rhythm to it
that would do the heart good
and when all's said and done, wasn't it gas,
all the same,
how a man from as far beyond, it might be
Timbuktu,
could have a mind for ceili music?

Nothing of the journey that brought them,
how it might have started like many another
before
-and not too far from him either -
with the prick of a knife against a throat
or a belly swollen up from hunger.

Nothing, after spitting on the pavement,
except that a body couldn't get up or down the
streets
without being blinded by the sight of them.
'It's like the Congo now' he says,
'this poxy town'.

The Trunk

Dympna Murray-Fennell

The middle room was a good place for the girls to escape to when there were lots of jobs to be done. It had their parent's big brass bed with a huge patchwork quilt, where with a bit of imagination, you could rig up a passable tent.

There was a heavy wardrobe which Mammy said was a converted settle-bed; whatever its past life, it was a great place for hide-and-seek. High on top of it, was the double-barrelled shotgun that Daddy took down occasionally, to shoot ducks or rabbits. Beside it was a rusting toy gun that no one ever spoke of – the girls had vague memories of the small brother who died years ago. Mammy always cried when she heard the song “Little Boy Blue” on the radio.

The Virgin Mary in the heavy gilt frame had a sad face too, even though she had a chubby Infant Boy in her arms, and a couple of angelic cherubs guarding them. The Infant had a rather supercilious look on his face – he must not have known what was going to happen to him eventually. That was graphically depicted in the crucifix on the opposite wall.

Not that the girls were concerned about such theological niceties – there was a much more

interesting object in the far corner of the room, Mammy's trunk. This was the nearest thing in their experience to Pandora's box or Aladdin's cave. All those years ago, before any of them were born, it had come to the house with Mammy. It was already a much-travelled trunk, having come originally from Argentina where Mammy's older sister lived. Judging by her letters she led a very exciting life, though Mammy always referred to her as 'poor Bridie' – something about her hopes of re-settling in Ireland not working out. There were still labels on the side of the trunk, faded and peeling, but you could just make out the name of the liner that had carried it across the ocean ... s.s.

Mauritania

It was hard to open the clasps on the trunk, but it was worth persevering with. Such treasures were in there – wrapped in tissue paper, smelling of a mixture of lavender and camphor. Maura's favourite were the soft fox-skins with dangling paws. She loved draping them over her shoulders and snapping the clasps in the fox's mouth on to the bushy tail. One fur was the deep auburn of a fully-grown fox, the other the honey-colour of a cub – this one had been part of Mammy's honeymoon suit.

In the hatbox there was a jaunty red hat with a curling feather; with the fur stole it made a very

glamorous outfit – Maura loved to parade in it before the flaking mirror on the creaky old dressing table. Then there were a couple of pairs of long sleeved gloves, and flimsy blouses with rows of tiny buttons, but you would need lots of time to dress up in those.

Not that Mammy ever considered wearing any of these lovely things any more, except for the colourful silk scarves that she sometimes pulled out of the trunk to dress up the “serviceable” coats that she wore nowadays.

Another fascination were the little velvet-lined jewellery boxes; one had Mammy’s five-stone engagement ring, (a couple of the stones were missing), another had a little gold brooch with a spider’s web and fly, which Daddy had given her as a wedding present – though the girls could not imagine their parents having any romantic history. There was a string of pearls with a broken clasp, a heavy silver fob-watch permanently showing six o’clock, a vividly coloured fan from South America – all the memory-laden bric-a-brac of a variety of lives.

Sometimes when the girls were exploring the contents of the trunk, Mammy would discover them. If she were initially cross with them for shirking the jobs to be done, usually she could be mollified by getting her reminiscing about the

past. Old photographs would be pored over, serious-looking wedding pairs facing the camera – and the future – with a look of grim determination, family groups posing self-consciously for a special occasion, wide smiles squinting into the sun on summer outings.

But the past would soon have to give way to the pressures of the present. There were endless farm chores to be done, cows to be milked, calves to be fed, missing animals to be tracked down.

So the trunk full of memories and secrets would be closed; the old room which had seen conceptions, births and deaths over the generations, would return to its brooding and the moths and mice could re-appear.

Jump into the Unknown

Joe Mc Kiernan

Airlie Beach, Queensland, 1997

The “OZ Experience” bus reached the outskirts of Airlie Beach. It was there I saw the sign. If only I had been looking the other way, or been having a nap or been chatting to someone. But no, I was looking out the window and I saw the sign: “Highest bungee jump in Australia”.

Damn! Now that I knew of its existence I would have to do it. It would not be my first jump – I had done the one from the bridge over the Kawarau River in Queenstown, New Zealand, as had Teresa. So why did I feel unable to ignore it? Simple – this was the highest one in Australia – there was no way I could leave behind the biggest adrenalin prize in the country. In my mind it would have been the equivalent of going to the town of Niagara Falls and neglecting to have a look at the local waterfall.

We arrived into the town and I booked into a hostel (or “backpackers” in the vernacular). After claiming a bed by dumping my stuff on it, I went down to the office and asked about the jump. Now you might think that the world of budget travelling is not synonymous with efficiency or customer

service. Wrong! A phone call was made and an hour later a minibus arrived to collect me. The Aussie backpacker circuit was a finely tuned and well-oiled machine, which ensured that any backpacker who required a product or service received it. The oil in the machine was commission.

The minibus brought both prospective jumpers and observers to the jump site. Among their number was a girl and a guy from Northern Ireland. She planned to do the jump while he was there as photographer, observer and moral support. The girl had short spiky hair that was snow white due to the merciless application of bleach while the guy sported a metal rod that had been inserted through the skin of his temple.

The jump site was not quite what I expected. The setting at Queenstown had been a raging river overarched by a bridge – weren't all jumps the same? Well, no is the answer – the highest bungee jump in Australia consisted of a crane, from which dangled a metal cage over a small inflatable swimming pool.

I went through the standard bungee jump protocol, which consists of signing a disclaimer (if anything happens it's your problem mate), paying over a significant wad of money and stepping on a weighing scale. This bit is damned important, as

the bungee cord must be adjusted to compensate for each person's weight. Otherwise you may fall too far, putting a distinct crimp in your day.

Which reminds me of Garreth, a mad Kiwi guy I had met a few years earlier while travelling in the U.S. (to describe a Kiwi as mad is a bit of a tautology really). He told of the time he did a jump in Auckland. Due to a miscalculation on his weight he had fallen further than intended; until he hit the concrete ground that is, breaking his wrist. I asked him what he had done: had he sued them for criminal negligence, had he put them out of business? 'Nah mate,' he told me. 'They gave me another jump.'

After the preliminaries were dispensed with, I went into a dressing room and five minutes later emerged, wearing a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. Let the games begin.

I was led to the cage where I was trussed up turkey-style. Padding was placed round my ankles before they were bound together with some plastic webbing (the material used in seat belts). To this was attached the end of the bungee cord. While this was all being done the people doing the trussing made reassuring sounds regarding the breaking strain and other technical things, that went in one ear and out the other. All too soon it was time to go.

At the risk of stating the obvious, your mobility is distinctly restricted when your ankles are bound together. As a result the only way I could enter the cage was to hop in. The jumpmaster, an Aussie guy, shut the gate and within seconds we were ascending. I had crossed the Rubicon.

We chatted amicably over the ominous whirring of the winch. I suppose he was just waffling to another punter with the intention of minimizing my nervousness – thus reducing the possibility of a refusal, which no one wants. In my case I was just responding as expected but the primary focus of my mind was the up-coming event and no amount of chitchat was going to change that.

The mechanical whirring stopped with a jolt and all was silence. The jumpmaster then gave me my last minute instructions. He wanted me to jump outwards, not just to fall off the edge. He could have described what he wanted using purely verbal means but that would not have been in any way surreal or bizarre. So instead he chose to show me the desired technique by use of a small plastic frog, which was in jumping pose with a piece of string tied round its ankles. With that he opened the gate, and helped me to hop over to the edge. At a height of sixty metres the only sound was that of a gentle breeze.

There are a few pieces of advice I would offer to anyone doing a jump and the primary one is not to look down. Unfortunately there was no one there to give me this advice and so I decided to survey the scene below me. Allow me to describe it. There was an area covered in grass with a couple of buildings which, in size terms, looked like those little plastic houses from a monopoly set. A miniscule white object was, I realized, the van in which I arrived. But the *piece de resistance* was the swimming pool. Imagine you place a blue postage stamp on a floor covered in green carpet, stand up to your full height and look at it. That was the target into which I would supposedly be dunked. I seriously questioned what reason there was to believe that we were positioned over it.

The next piece of advice I would offer to any prospective jumper is not to hesitate. If you go to jump and then you baulk then all is lost – it becomes all the more difficult to do on the second attempt. The jumpmaster offered to give me a countdown from five to one followed by the ubiquitous ‘Bungee!’ but I declined his offer saying I’d prefer to do the countdown myself. That’s exactly what I did. I bellowed out each number as loudly as I could and by the time I got to ‘one’ I was so pumped up that I jumped off without thinking.

While you live with gravity all your life, it's only in this sort of situation that you really appreciate its power. While I did my best impression of the plastic frog, jumping outwards, I found myself immediately heading in a downward direction. The ground below loomed into sight with unbelievable speed. For a couple of seconds the sensation was of uncontrollable acceleration. The sound and the feeling against my face were those of a strong gale. Before I had time to think I was face to face with the stark blueness of the swimming pool. The cord had kicked in, initially slowing and then stopping me.

I was whipped upwards and as I reached the apex I could see the clear turquoise Queensland sky. Almost immediately I was descending again. A few more bounces and the motion stopped. Although I had asked to be dunked, in the event I never actually touched the water, getting no closer than a metre or two from the surface.

People who haven't done a jump think that the actual fall through the air must be scary but in fact it's not. The scary bit is the lead-up, the mulling it over, the preparing to jump. The fall itself is exhilarating, a rush. Hanging upside down I was close enough to the ground to hear some spectators cheering. After a minute or two I was lowered gently to the ground where I was untied.

When I stood up it felt like the area was being assailed by an earthquake but this was all internal to me – the combination of adrenalin and dizziness.

Many people think that bungee jumps are a pointless waste of time and money and I can understand their argument. What's the point of jumping off a height with an elastic band tied around your ankles? Having said that, the feeling I had was one of hard-to-describe euphoria – the feeling I imagine you experience after a close scrape with death.

There is one final piece of advice I would offer to any potential bungee jumper – make sure to take everything out of your pockets beforehand. Unfortunately I had left the key to my room in the pocket of my shorts. It was now sitting at the bottom of the pool, probably with dozens of other keys and coins. This oversight cost me five bucks and a scowl from the girl at the office.

Now I don't agree with those who consider bungee jumps to be dangerous. However I would also take issue with those who would say they are perfectly safe. As the evening arrived I became aware of a slight twinge in my back, due presumably to a twisting motion somewhere during the jump. In the event it was gone a day or two later.

Notwithstanding this I was on a high and felt compelled to ring someone and tell them of my daredevil exploit. I considered the options: my sister, one of my brothers, one of my mates. Certainly this was not one for my mother who would simply rack it up as further evidence that I had lost my marbles. None of my potential communicants had done a jump themselves and I felt I needed someone who would empathise, who would actually feel the story. Slowly it dawned on me: Teresa.

But was the time right to ring her? It had been a week since I had last spoken to her, two weeks since we had separated in Bali. Our last call had been very awkward – she had been very upset. On the other hand we had agreed we should keep in contact. We had shared a lifetime's experiences in just a year, or so it seemed, and despite our parting, I still considered her to be my closest friend where certain matters were concerned. In the end, unsure if it was a good idea, I called her.

The conversation was strained. Yes, she said encouraging things as I rabbitted on about the jump but her underlying tone was undisguised gloom. Our break-up had hit her hard and she told me as much. I put down the receiver very much sobered. My feet were well and truly back on the ground.

Mannin Woman

Joan O'Flynn

When Sheila left the house that morning she had no intention of being out of doors for very long. She was delighted to waken so early while the house was still silent and when she slipped from beneath the bed covers and pulled on her jeans and bright blue top, she had no thought other than to steal a half hour of peace before the daily bedlam erupted around her. No fear of waking Jim. The second bottle of claret he'd opened last night had left him snoring vigorously until she nudged him over on to his side. He would sleep for some time yet. She crept past the open door of the big bedroom where three tousled-headed faces made a peaceful picture that would be shattered once the boys opened their bright eyes and faced another day. One glance at last night's debris in the kitchen was enough to make her swiftly tie a chiffon scarf around her long auburn hair, reach for an apple and open the back door.

It was early. The sun had just climbed over the Twelve Bens, brushing their misty peaks with lemon glaze. Birds were rustling and chirruping, hidden in the reeds on the edge of the fresh-water lake. A diver bird was motionless, like an Ethiopian statue carved from ebony, on a white

rock, way out in Mannin Bay. The pebbles on the drive crunched noisily underfoot but soon she was on the sandy path that led down the hillside past Nora's empty house and heading for the coral beach. Climbing over the rusty barbed wire, she abandoned her sandals beside a mound of stones. The glow of the fossilised remains surrounded her and filled her with wonder at their beauty, as her feet sank into the coarse, receptive warmth. Already she could hear activity from the fish farm around the headland. She was unwilling to let her blessed isolation be invaded, or to view the ugly feeding containers. Salmon that should be weaving and diving majestically through the waters of the Atlantic were caged instead, writhing and twitching from the fleas that formed beneath their silver scales. Turning in the opposite direction she started to walk along the shore. The sea sparkled in the sunlight as the tide began to fill. The winking reflections formed a flickering mosaic as Sheila meandered along the curving coastline. Coral was replaced by dry seaweed and then by hard golden sand.

She must have walked a mile or more. The silence was almost tangible as she sat down on an upturned boat to savour the scene. She could see the occasional car passing on the road that twisted its way between the inlet and the lake, the sound

of their engines swallowed up in the vastness of the scene. Even the huge truck that careered dextrously around corners as it headed for the fish farm made not a sound as it raised a dusty cloud in its wake. The smoke from Fahy's house on the lakeside went straight up in a thin blue line from the broad chimney, without a puff of wind to make it falter. Alice would have already kneaded the dough for the brown bread that she sold to the shops in the town. Sheila could almost see the crusty loaves that were puffing up in oblong shapes in the oven and would soon be placed carefully to cool on the windowsill; she could almost smell their nutty flavour. Half way up the hill was a plain white cottage, with scarlet door and window frames. At the gable end a man sat, brush poised, before an easel bearing a large blank canvas. Tubes of oils were strewn on the seat beside him. High in the heavens white wispy clouds hovered against an azure sky.

The birds seemed to have given up on the idea of rising at all this morning, for not one was to be seen except for the diver who, like a mime artist, had changed position but was once again immobile, black wings stretched in the growing warmth of the sun. Sheila pulled at her scarf and released the chestnut coloured curls, shaking her head from side to side in a burnished cascade.

Shrugging the straps off her shoulders, she stretched her arms wide, mirroring the diver's stance and like him, she felt the warmth across her back and neck. No tension could remain after such a glorious spiritual massage. It was as if time stood still, so lost was she in the beauty around her.

The sun climbed high in the sky overhead and drew her back from her reverie. She must get back. The children would have woken up ages ago and God only knew what havoc they would have wreaked on the house. Jim was willing enough, and capable of pouring cereal into a bowl, but he was not gifted in keeping three lively lads amused and out of trouble. She smiled as she thought of how he, an only boy spoilt by two older sisters, sometimes found it hard to cope with his lively family. It would be easier when they were big enough to join him fishing at the White Lady or helping to bring in turf from the bog. Her morning had been so refreshing that she now felt more than ready to face her all-male family and embrace them, full as she was with the beauty of the day. Sheila never felt the call of Greek Islands, or golden Spanish beaches. She was quite content with her annual holiday in this isolated part of Connemara where they were seldom disturbed by anything more exciting than a fresh westerly wind,

or a storm that blew itself out in a day or two.

That was in August, the first day of their summer holiday. Sheila thought back on all the years they had spent in this spot and all the memories she had stored up. They had been coming to Connemara for ten years now, ever since Jack was a baby. He had been wheezing and the doctor said not to worry, that a spell by the seaside should clear matters up. And it had, almost miraculously. A couple of days sitting on Omey beach with Atlantic breezes wafting around them and the wheeze had been silenced. Jim and Sheila had fallen in love with the ever-changing skies and the peace of this western tip of Galway and had come here regularly after that as their family grew in number. Two years later Donal, born in the previous November, was only creeping by the summer holidays, and had spent hours sitting among the rounded grey pebbles on the drive, cascading himself with them as he launched handfuls into the air over his head. Sheila remembered sitting in the big picture window of their holiday home with Neil snuggled in her arms sucking lustily just six years ago, only one month old but already sturdily enjoying his accession to the kingdom he was to hold on to as “His Highness The Baby”.

This year’s holiday more than lived up to

expectations. The weather, often fickle in the west, remained remarkably warm and sunny. There were only two wet days, one of which they spent in Water World in Galway city, taking the opportunity to do some shopping and visit Burger King. The fourteen days flew past and, as they packed the car on Saturday morning and drove through the town and on towards Maam Cross, the Twelve Bens had never looked more beautiful. For once Sheila was impervious to the squabbling coming from the back of the car, almost enjoying the pang of sadness she always felt when the holidays were over and they were forced to face back to Dublin and the bustle of city life.

It was the last week in September when their lives were shattered. The boys had settled into their new classes in school and the excitement of pleasing their teachers had not yet faded. Jim complained of a headache one evening, so Sheila gave him some tablets to relieve the pain, kissed the top of his head where his hair had started to thin, and went off to bed. Sheila was an early-to-bed person; one has to be when there is morning chaos to be faced. She was in a deep sleep when she woke to find him standing beside the bed, hands pressed tightly to his temples as if trying to squeeze away the pressure within. His face was ashen, eyes glazed with pain. He could only groan

as she coaxed him to lie down beside her, it was obvious that this was no ordinary headache. Sheila punched in the numbers of the emergency service before dragging on jeans and sweater and running next door to rouse her neighbour, somebody would have to mind the children if she had to take Jim to hospital. It seemed an eternity before the blue flashing light cruised down the road and up to the door. Neither Jack nor Donal woke, but little Neil was disturbed by the commotion and wandered onto the landing, eyes befuddled with sleep. Seeing strangers everywhere he opened his mouth and wailed for his mother, before crawling between the legs of the paramedics and wedging himself firmly under the bed.

Stretcher, oxygen, blankets; her husband was whisked into the ambulance and Sheila followed, no time to comfort her baby. It broke her heart to go, but she had to be with Jim. The next few hours were hectic. A brain haemorrhage was diagnosed and an emergency operation performed. Sheila sat in the corridor, frantic with worry. She phoned her sister and told her where she was and why. Eileen wanted to come to the hospital to keep Sheila company, but the pressing need was for someone to go to the house and care for the children. She undertook to pass the dreadful news to Jim's family. Hour after hour dragged by. The nurses

were very kind and when Jim's family arrived they too were full of concern for her, but Sheila was cold to the bone, stunned with this sudden passage of events.

The operation was a success, but the damage had been done. The patient didn't recover consciousness. Day after day Jim lay in the Intensive Care Unit in a coma. Sheila sat beside his unresponsive body, the rhythmic suction of the ventilator ticking away the minutes. She refused to believe that the damage to his brain was irreversible and she sat beside him for hours, and held his hand, and talked to him, urging him to respond. After a few days the doctors thought he might be able to breathe unaided, so they removed the machine. It was more peaceful then, although the ward he was allocated was small.

As the weeks went by, a new routine became established at home. Her mother, leaving Dad to fend for himself, moved in to mind the children and be some company for her. The morning dash to school was followed by a crawl through city traffic to the hospital. All the time during her daily visits she talked to him. She told him how the children were, and how much they all loved him. Work had not started on the house extension they had planned, but Sheila told him that she was thinking of making a bedroom there, so that when he was better and came home she could chat to

him in the afternoon while she cooked his dinner. Sometimes the silence from the bed was oppressive and Sheila stood at the window, the tears that rolled down her face mirrored by October rain that flowed down the outside of the windowpane.

On All Souls Day when she got to the ward the nurse told her that Jim had been very agitated during the night. They were monitoring him carefully, and had changed his medication, but it wasn't looking good. They feared there was a possibility of another haemorrhage; they would call her if there was any change in his condition. When the children were settled for the night, Sheila placed her mobile phone on the pillow where Jim's lovely gentle face had lain beside her for twelve short years. She didn't undress fully, but stretched out on the large double bed staring at the blank panel on her phone. Every so often she feared the battery had run down and pressed one of the buttons to reassure herself. The digital clock disappeared almost instantly, but not before she saw that only minutes had elapsed.

The call from the hospital came at 5am. It was over. The frantic hope she had clung to for five long weeks dissolved into cold black despair. She could feel her heart break in pieces and her hoarse moans of agony awoke her mother and the boys.

Not even the children could help Sheila through the months that followed. She was lost without Jim. She retreated from a world that now held nothing for her. She cried hardly at all, not even at the graveside, her misery was too deep for tears. Her mother stayed on for the first few weeks and it was almost a relief when she returned to her own place, because then Sheila didn't have to make conversation or even eat if she didn't want to, and mostly she didn't. How Santa found the house at Christmas was a mystery, but Sheila went through the motions of admiring the presents, later dutifully joining the rest of the family at Eileen's for Christmas dinner. They all tried very hard but their conversation failed to rouse any response. If they hadn't loved her so much they would have been rebuffed by her monosyllabic answers and given up trying to entertain her, but they accepted that she needed more time to come to terms with the fact that Jim was dead.

The boys squabbled a lot as the new year took hold, she hadn't the heart to divert their energy to something more productive. Jack's schoolwork deteriorated and Donal wet the bed a few times. Only little Neil, ever her baby, demanded his share of attention. Occasionally she felt some warmth creep back into her body but she never quite managed to catch hold of it.

When the envelope with a Galway postmark dropped in the letterbox at Easter, Sheila was really not interested. It was confirmation of their annual booking of the holiday house. She meant to reply, but the letter somehow lost itself in the clutter that reigned these days and it was weeks later that her mother found it when she was trying to bring some kind of order to the chaos. She wouldn't hear of Sheila cancelling the reservation. She insisted that the boys needed a holiday and that she herself would bring them if Sheila wouldn't. They agreed to compromise, and that is how one damp August day they arrived at the last stage of their journey, the long road from Oughterard to Clifden. The blue-grey mountains kept their distance as they headed west and the boys started to point out places they remembered.

Neither Sheila nor her mother spoke, one lost in memories, the other understanding how difficult this must be. For some inexplicable reason, Sheila swung off the main road at Ballinahinch Castle and approached the town by the old ribbon-like road through the bog where she and Jim had often cycled; the younger ones strapped behind and Jack's plump legs going round and round on the pedals of his first bicycle. The sun burst from behind a cloud as the wilderness unfolded around them in a riot of colour. Brown peaty lakes, the

stony ground between them dotted with fluffy white bog cotton and tiny purple and yellow flowers. The scene resembled a carpet woven by angels, a magic carpet that could carry you off effortlessly, weightlessly, all cares forgotten. The beauty overwhelmed her and her eyes filled up as she pulled the car over onto hard ground. Her mother encouraged the boys out of the car before the tears began to fall and drew their attention to two lambs that were bounding from rock to rock in pursuit of their mother. The children were in no hurry, glad to stretch their legs after the long drive. By the time they clambered back into the car Sheila had recovered her composure, and there was an air of tranquillity about her. As the two younger boys continued chattering, Jack placed his hand on her shoulder with a gentleness reminiscent of his father.

Before collecting the key to the house, they decided to lay in some provisions. Parking was difficult, but they eventually found a spot and Sheila and her mother got out, the three boys in tow. The bags of food got heavier as they trudged their way down Market Street back towards the car. 'Hey, Mum,' cried Jack. 'Look, look.' She called to him to hurry up but he refused to be dragged away from the window of the Art Gallery. 'Look, I think that's you!'

There in pride of place, complete with broad gilt frame, was the most wonderful painting. The scene was clearly Mannin Bay. The central figure, slight, clad in bright blue jeans, had copper coloured hair haloing her head, untamed curls tumbling around her bare shoulders. Her arms reached out and upwards to sea and sky, like a diver bird, and from her fingers trailed a long chiffon scarf, like a banner of hope.

A Place in Time

Louise Phillips

It was three o'clock in the afternoon and Rachel watched her mother Eileen sleep. Apart from the wrinkles that told of Eileen's seventy years on earth, she looked more like a baby than an old woman, resting, temporarily at peace with the world. For Rachel, the loss of her mother had started long before that afternoon, although over time, she had managed to lie quite successfully to herself. She wanted to believe that things would work out, that this woman, whom she had loved all her life, would soon come back.

Eileen had stopped remembering the simplest of things, the names went first and then familiarity with places, soon what happened ten minutes before just disappeared, one moment it was there and then it was gone. Everything became a victim to the loss of memory, falling off an imaginary cliff and ending in the gulf of nowhere. Two weeks earlier Rachel found her mother lying unconscious on the floor. A fractured arm was the result of the fall. Eileen had mislaid her keys and her attempt at acrobatics using a kitchen chair to find them proved a futile one. Today her mother had taken a carving knife to the plaster cast that was in place to repair her fractured arm. Eileen did

not remember the fall, she did not remember fracturing her arm, she simply had an itch and it required scratching. Why that moment was different to all the others Rachel did not know but as she sat at the kitchen table alone, her only company a large kitchen knife and a discarded plaster cast; she came to the hardest decision of her life.

The nursing home Rachel found for Eileen was an eighteenth century building with beautiful landscaped gardens. She hoped her mother would think of it as a hotel, somewhere pleasant to stay just for a little while. She had largely taken on the responsibility of finding the right place on her own and it had been a long and agonising search that finally led Rachel to be standing in the huge hallway of a place in which she could find no fault. Everything looked ship shape and up to the mark, but even on that first encounter, there was something surreal about the place. Rachel had looked around her carefully; had watched the old women as she was escorted past the lift, through the expansive kitchen and finally upstairs to the corner bed where her mother would take in the loveliness of the garden. The strangeness Rachel felt that first day repeated itself over and over, as each time she entered that tiled hallway and the

heavy wooden door closed behind her, so too did the rest of the world.

The inhabitants of the nursing home were mainly women. There was Lizzie who chain-smoked all her adult life, the home had a special place for her to light up. Underneath her wheelchair was a decade of burnt tobacco stains. Lizzie could only ever smoke in one place, her worn and dishevelled piece of three foot by three foot carpet held the higher ground against her so called sad addiction. But to Lizzie, her world was a perfect place and it was with great joy and fondness that she sucked on her Benson and Hedges, each intake of breathe savoured as if it were her last, heaven on earth right down to the last piece of fag end.

Emily believed her son owned the nursing home and wondered why he let so many people stay. She would stand alone, staring into rooms or bend her head sideways, as her eyes followed strangers up the stairs. 'What are you doing?' she would ask 'Who are you?' No one bothered answering. Emily sat at a table shared by four and growled through gritted teeth 'My son should not allow this'. Her companions at the table spread butter across their bread and happily accepted a second round of tea.

Eileen settled into the nursing home far quicker than Rachel might have hoped. Her chair and bed located right next to a woman called May. May was Eileen's life long friend and spoke endlessly about their years together laughing on the beach or climbing trees in her Granddad's orchard. May had known Rachel's mother Eileen for just four weeks, but they held hands like lovers and Eileen nodded, smiling, compliant in this newfound life long friendship.

Kathleen sat just inside the hallway; winter or summer she would be found creating intricate rows of knitting patterns. 'Is it cold out there?' she would ask when someone entered from outside, looking up at them; her needles like magic would carry on without her as she waited with the eagerness of one embarking on a great adventure. If the answer was yes, Kathleen would shiver and fire herself into the knitting with even more vigour than before. Somehow this small act of creativity made sense to Rachel, as with each passing day most things became hinged on either nothingness or madness. No one knew who Kathleen knitted the jumpers for. In the visitor stakes, she had very few. Once Rachel saw a well-dressed man come to visit, he was accompanied by a little girl. The man appeared awkward and the girl with two identical

yellow plaits sat silently as she swung her legs beneath a high mahogany chair. Rachel wondered why neither of them wore jumpers.

Bridget was the crazy one, God could she scream. When she got going, dinner plates, cups, knives and forks, would all be sent flying. Rachel believed Bridget fought hard against giving up the fight, part of Bridget knew things were different and she didn't much like it. Bridget's outbursts were mainly ignored, much like Emily's questions or Annie's cigarette stains. Everyone just carried on in their own little world as if Bridget wasn't part of it. One afternoon Bridget went completely wild, kicking out, screaming hysterically at the top of her voice. Rachel watched the saliva as it spat from Bridget's mouth, sliding down the crevices of age either side of her chin. Rachel saw the look of the unknown in Bridget's eyes and felt scared for her. Eileen stole Bridget's jelly that day, she roared at Eileen to give it back. Rachel sat petrified for her mother's sake, as she figured she would have to jump in like a referee at some prizefight. Rachel had visions of having to beat up an old woman in the need to defend her mother's life, she shouldn't have worried. Eileen just stared right back at Bridget. 'You could fry an egg on your face' she roared. It was the most Eileen had

said for months and stopped Bridget dead in her tracks while Rachel sat wondering, how her mother had become this stranger.

Mags was a tiny woman with soft delicate white curls that allowed you see right down to her pink scalp. Mags liked to suck her buttons, a habit Rachel remembered doing as a child. She had glazed eyes that could dance and everyone was her mammy. ‘Are you me mammy?’ she would ask and laugh. When Mags wasn’t sucking buttons she picked imaginary spots off her clothes. The spots never went away and all the searching for them kept her busy. She was lucky, Rachel thought, having a purpose, something to do.

Most weekdays were spent watching Live at Three, an absurd name, when placed in a room filled with geriatrics. Once in December, there was snow outside and the grounds adopted a picture postcard pose. Rachel sat in the grand hall looking at the large Christmas tree, the lights twinkled and the white flakes drifted across the windowpanes. It reminded her of a scene from some old movie with all the bits mixed up. But there was no Ginger Rodgers or Fred Astaire or Judy Garland for that matter, just Lizzie holding centre stage amongst the burnt tobacco stains. Then Bridget started shouting at the top of her voice ‘fuck off, fuck off, fuck off’. Emily began to

sing and the words of “Auld Lang Syne” floated through the air, its soft tones lingered overhead as the notes seemed to waltz with energy around Bridget’s latest outburst. Emily had a voice of honey; both sweetness and innocence combined. That afternoon as Rachel watched Emily dance to the rhythm of her song, she saw her as she might have been, a young pretty girl beaming with life, bringing in another year. Eileen fell asleep and Rachel wondered how she could, what with the shouting, the singing and the fall of snow happening all around her. May headed off to find her Granddad’s orchard, content in a quest that would lead her to the downstairs toilet. The sight of snow speeded Kathleen’s knitting as Live at Three ended for another afternoon.

There was a different world inside that nursing home, one that defied the logic of the human race hiding just outside its front door. Rachel would go about her daily life, shopping, school runs, endless lists of things to do, then she would enter that tiled hallway and everything changed. Time stood still, the women all had different lives; none of them connected with the other. The only common bond a nursing home and having reached the end of their world together. Aged bodies with minds that had left before their time. There was nowhere else for them to go, no hills to climb or children to

keep safe. Rachel had learned about Purgatory at school, a place of suffering where souls were sent to undergo punishment for their sins, a place to wait for entry to heaven. As Rachel watched these women exist within a shared bubble of space, lost lives before lives lost, she saw Purgatory in all its glory.

As the days passed, Bridget soon stopped saying ‘fuck off’; soon, she said nothing at all. Every day became a shadow of what went before; they all seemed trapped, trapped in a spell that was only ever broken when a new visitor came to stay. Once that new visitor was a lady called Melissa. Those in the room that could, smiled in greeting. Mags sucked her buttons and Emily babbled on about her son. Eileen had grown to hate change; it scared her because she had no way of knowing what it meant. Anxiously she held Rachel’s hand with the same fight and might as you would hold a trophy or fire the “last throw of the dice”. Melissa got introduced to her new two foot by two foot chair as Rachel herself frantically tried to remember who sat in it the previous year and wondered if she too had been taken by the spell of emptiness. Melissa had lots of visitors; she was in that early stage when people came in groups. The new faces felt like change. Melissa rocked in her chair, her upper body like a pendulum, moved

back and forth in that hypnotic way that kept you staring. Mostly she looked content; mostly she knew very little. Melissa's daughters spoke about the past week's events; they fetched drinks and wrapped a napkin up tight around her neck, underneath a large plastic scoop was placed to catch the food that missed its mark. As the spooned food was eagerly placed inside Melissa's mouth, her tongue pushed upwards as she rejected it much like babies do. Rachel could sense Melissa's daughters had given up the fight. Melissa did not last long; she died well before the group visitation faded and long before winter hit the nursing home for another year. Melissa came and went so quietly, it was as if she never really happened.

Mostly the days were like Melissa, quiet, sleepy, forgettable. They were soaked in routine, the time you woke, the time you slept, days and nights made up of breakfast, dinner and tea. Your bed, your chair, photos of loved ones just about remembered. It was often the complete absence of anything new or different that sent you mad. Everyone needed a Bridget to fire some dinner plates around so they could feel alive again. 'Where am I?' Eileen would ask and Rachel would say 'Mom, you are home'. Eileen had forgotten most things, most things except Rachel. Somehow

the daily visitations had just about managed to hold the last cobwebs of memory together. Rachel became to Eileen a part of life much like Kathleen's knitting or Mag's imaginary spots, familiar, constant.

When Rachel changed Eileen's nappy for the first time Eileen cried softly and whispered, 'I'm sorry' over and over. Rachel had protested, told her mother it was nothing. 'I am only doing what you did for me'. The repeated act and words finally rested gently on Eileen's shoulders. When the vacant look came in her eyes it was easier and she allowed the task to be completed and assisted initially like a willing doll, but finally as she followed Rachel's commands she became more like a well-tuned machine.

The summer before Eileen died she made friends with a toy monkey called Charlie. No one knew where the monkey came from other than he was Eileen's new best friend. When she cuddled him, a part of Rachel worried if she'd lost her place, replaced by an ugly monkey with a plastic face that would send most innocent children running for their lives. Then Eileen gripped Rachel's hands in that "last throw of the dice way" and Rachel knew she had her small place for a short while yet. That afternoon they watched *Bridge over the River Kwai* together. Eileen stayed

awake until the second interval; as she snored Rachel pulled the blanket past her mother's chest and placed her own head against the stone wall behind. She watched as Lizzie fumbled in her bag for her Benson and Hedges and Kathleen too went off to sleep, the right arm of another jumper temporarily abandoned for a greater joy.

The following winter Eileen died. Rachel collected her mother's belongings in a black refugee sack. She carried the black bag out to the boot of her car, her mother's things seemingly disposable like the trash. She looked at the plastic bag for a long time before finally placing it at the back of a wardrobe. After the funeral she thought about many things. The pain and loss, enormous at first, gradually hid itself, only to reappear at the strangest of times. Standing at a bus stop, out shopping, or in the dark of night, the tears would flow without fear of being seen and Rachel's pillow became a sponge for all the loss. Then finally the afternoon came when Rachel thought only about the contents of the bag. She opened it and became instantly engulfed with her mother's smell. It was not the smell of years before, that beautiful mix of sunlight soap and cooked vegetables, no, it was the smell of old age, it fired right up through her nostrils and her mother lingered. She removed the contents of the bag,

garment by garment, item by item and placed them around her in a protected circle. The pain in her heart took on the physical sensation of an ache deep inside her chest. Rachel went down on her hunkers and held herself like a baby, embryonic as in a mother's womb and cried until she could cry no more.

Later, as exhaustion and grief joined the passing of the day, her mind drifted back to another afternoon. Eileen had stepped out of the lift, a bunch of flowers in her arms, the remaining gift of a recent hospital stay. The lilies covered her mother's upper torso, Eileen had forgotten she had been in hospital, forgotten who had brought the flowers; she just stood there on that beautiful Spring afternoon, her smile erupting from above the white petals as she saw in her near eye her daughter Rachel and her smile spread further still. It lit the room just as the sun shot through the velux window above and created a white speckled path that reminded Rachel of a roadway to heaven. It reached down and touched them both. Rachel smiled through the tears as she savoured that small piece of memory, holding it close so she could feel her mother once again and grab those few fleeting seconds of joy before death finished what life had begun; the separation of mother and child. But somehow sitting there, surrounded by her

mother's things Rachel finally understood. Little by little she had lost her mother in life, but by being there in those final days, months and years, life had gifted Rachel tiny moments of a love that had once filled every hour. She knew to have been there, to have seen her mother smile, happy, however briefly, was all that mattered.

Blood

Marie Tarpey.

Blood as in sweat and tears. I bet you know what that means. You know where you spend your whole life trying to achieve something and at the end come to a realisation that the Holy Grail that you were seeking, the quest for success, is not yours. Well, in my case, I found actually that I had achieved very little but sadly instead was left clinging to life by the barest of barely remaining stubs of fingernails and not a lot else. I worked for the firm. The real deal. The big white whale kind of a firm. The kind you most certainly have heard of or know. That may also be the company where you work yourself perhaps. The same company or a carbon copy of the one I am wandered into. They are all the same to me now, you see. I am somewhat disillusioned and their margins and their subtle differences have blurred. I do not see the firms now with any of the new untainted, young or even idealistic new designer shades that young graduates starting out in life experience year after year as they begin their journey. These companies deal in stocks and commodities, whatever the hell they are. Marketing departments, what on earth do they do? I never did manage to find out. I think that a lot of those types

that are commonly known as professionals or business people are just doing, well little more than nothing in reality. It's little more than illusions to keep some of us off the streets and out of the bars preferably. For example, project managers I think are quite simply having us on. They are not programme managing at all. Oh no, they are just bloodsucking, albeit very successful bloodsucking. From their lowly but well established and well respected work colleagues more commonly known by such terms as the worker bees. I was a worker bee. That was stupid of me to take on that role. Oh yes. I chose my role. I was not conscripted nor dragged along. I was not imprisoned by the big bosses (that is the programme managers to you and me). Oh no, I misguidedly chose the worker bee role. Silly me.

As to what type of worker bee I was, that is almost irrelevant at this stage. I was a burnt out worker bee if that gives you any idea of my state, not that it matters now. The end is near for me so I am at peace with my final days and my final lying in, of state, as it were. Yes, I am resigned to these my final days on this earth. Strange you may think that I am so disillusioned at this late stage, why didn't I sort this all out years ago? I will explain if you can bear with me while I try and take a few breaths before I attempt to continue

with my small but still important, at least to me, tale if this is what this is all about. It is a huge effort just to breath as this moment. The dull pain in my lower back and my stomach eat away at my gut so much so that I try by deep breaths to expel the pain. I pray I hold your interest so I can continue this, my tale of betrayal and some mediocre woes. I hope I will not bore you too much. The only light in this dark mood I find myself in is my little grandson is here in my room today and as he is playing happily with his train on the ground I am hopeful his mother will leave him here with me for a time. Every second with him is precious to me. So today is a good day. The quiet one who has stolen into my heartstrings without even my realising he was there.

Getting back to business though for that is what we call it. As if it's God. As if our lives depend on it and for some of us it appears it does or at least in my case it did. More than just a living for my family you may ask? For a very long time, yes, I admit it, it was. The business world as you know or may have guessed can indeed be dreadfully dull almost all of the time. Foreign trips to China or big sweet pay rises do actually occur now and then. In order to get these trips or alternatively hear all about them if you cannot go, you must keep your

eyes peeled and your ears firmly to the ground and listen to the rumblings of those far off horses. Smoke signals, now that's a myth. Well almost all of the time anyways, these occurrences are extremely rare in the business world). Stock price rises and falls effect us all, you know this.

Again I digress. Forgive me, I am just a lonely old man. I am getting near the end and my mortality is too close. If I may use further hyperbole and exaggeration to which I am prone, my mortality is deafening me. Yes and I am indulgent, of course I am. I led a pampered existence. Pampered from the point of view of abundant financial success and security since I joined that world of international business and finance. I have allowed my life to become one where I worked all the hours that were possible to me and as a result I have ended up starved of love and real companionship through my own fault. No one forced me to do anything. My wife is sometimes like a stranger even though I do love her, as best I can. It's just she learned years ago that in order for her to remain with me and survive she had to learn to keep her distance or I would hurt her severely with my complete indifference. Cruel perhaps? It's just the way I am. She knows that. We have discussed it on at least one occasion.

Briefly. She tells me she is not unhappy with her choice. Maybe she has regrets? I try not to think these thoughts. They will severely cripple me and I am not able for any more now. I have to accept myself and the way that I am. It is too late for me to change. I don't have any time left for that now, let's face it.

Getting back to what I am trying to do here. That is to pass on my small wisdoms before I die. I am dying as we speak. Stomach cancer they told me and that was six months ago. The first few weeks I was able to pretend it wasn't happening to me but I can hardly do that now. The last two full weeks I have been in bed and I have faced the fact that this may be it. I may never walk outside in the fresh air again. I may never dance or hear music again. The cancer has spread and my cards are marked. I dare not ask how little time I may have left. I don't need to. I can feel death in my airways, the pain that comes more and more frequently and by the amount of time I am able to even stay alert before I must top up on morphine again before I loose my mind and weep with the searing pain that rots my body more each day.

Let me give you my plain observations on the business world; that I built around myself for the last sixty years now. My work friends, my family

are but secondary characters in this play that became my life. I wish only to tell you of it because it was a dreadful mistake on my part. To have lived only to have worked. This is all I am trying to say, honestly. Pass on my feelings and hope that when they are older my grandchildren will know them and understand me a little better. For my sons have no interest in anything I have to say now. They haven't for a long, long time. This too is hard for me to accept. Now the end is coming I wish with all my heart that I had their love. I don't. I must be brave. I must in order to enjoy these last precious weeks as peacefully and happily as I am able. I have to try. What else is left?

Yes. Business managers. That near and dear species to all of our hearts. I will let you in on a little secret. They are actually very small bit players in the big picture of a day-to-day existence of a company. They are but puppets. Puppets to their teams firstly; who pull their little strings located just below their armpits at least twice on average on any given day. Puppets to their demanding families. Now that they have the appearances of a taste of some small success; their children will crucify them with demands for this and that. Various luxuries they want and need but

dare not ask for directly. Instead they needle and whinge hoping to get some big crumbs if they keep it up long and hard enough. That or they ask for a job. That happens. You know this. Puppets to their superiors. God no. For they are but more colourful puppets themselves of the whole Punch and Judy show. The big bosses. I think not. It's those bloodsuckers the project managers who call the shots. The real troublemakers for us all. Us being the poor and abused worker bees who might lose their place in the queue at any moment. Yes, I am bitter. So I tell you about it in the hope it will clean my soul. It won't. My soul is too far-gone now to hope for much reprieve at this point. I have sinned too much, too hard and too happily. I am still hopeful of leaving this stage with some small grace at least I hope so. Why did I do this to myself? I know I haven't even come close to answering any of these questions in full yet. How did this sad life which was mine come about exactly? Was it a conscious decision on my part or a gradual erosion of a man's soul? I have barely touched the surface of how and why I threw my life away in this fashion. It is too long a story to tell you further today. I will have to break into pieces to even try to begin to explain myself. For my beautiful grandchild I also want to leave this

story in safe keeping for when he is older so until tomorrow when I shall continue from this point of my tale when I hope to have regained some small additional strength to continue for another day. There is still enough time tomorrow for at least one more go at recording the story of my life. Until then, I must rest.

The Washing Yard

Louise Phillips

Rows of dance on washing lines
Beneath one hundred sheets a child can fly
Curl metal bars and catch blue sky.
Turn snowstorms to a Milky Way
Laugh and play too young to know
The children blow at Jinny Joe.

And as the night light fills its sky
Banshees wail and babies cry.
Strange voices haunt the Washing Yard.
Windows switching on and off
Each pane a different story told
A zillion words bound metal poles.

Then in morn all night sounds forced to hide
When from its sky come seagulls high.
Hoard of birds create such clatter
Swoon and squawk discarded matter.
Magic, to a young child's eye
As adults watch their lives pass by.

Buried in some human tomb
A child's joy,
In an adult's gloom.

Eleanore, Fame and the Evening Herald

Triona Walsh

My ambitions for greatness were stirred again. I could only blame the Evening Herald. As I sat in traffic, assaulted daily with their wonderful headlines, I began to fit myself in there. Don't get me wrong, nothing too sensational, but perhaps on a slow news day they could trumpet a job promotion I got, or my new flattering haircut. I can see it now:

ELEANORE O'BRIEN – NEW JUNIOR
OPERATIONS MANAGER HORROR!

Ever since I was a small child I wanted to stand out, to be really noteworthy at something. I was probably only five when I realised that wasn't really going to happen. Perhaps it was having two brilliant older sisters that did it – it's hard to delude yourself that you're the next big thing when you're related to Flora, eight (prodigal violinist and science fair winner category 5-6 and 6-7 years) and Lilly, ten (gymnast extraordinaire and junior Nigella). If I'd only been a little less maudlin about my mediocrity I might have seen my precocious perception as my elusive talent.

As it was, when I ran out of the typical activities to shine in, I got a little desperate and took to looking for some more, shall we say, unconventional ways to be special. I tried my best to conjure up some short-sightedness – glasses could make me different! But my perfect sight just let me down. Next, in vain, I searched for some exotic and exciting allergy. I could be all mysterious and interesting as I pronounced to my fellow class mates – ‘Sorry, I can’t eat bananas – I’d be dead in minutes!’ But again nothing. I could eat a prawn smeared with peanut butter, sprinkled with cat hair, and I’d remain fit as a fiddle.

And as I’ve grown older life hasn’t produced any hidden surprises. No phenomenal characteristics have lain dormant only to burst forth to life when I least expected them. No, life has plodded that middle course, no significant highs, no lows. My sisters never even had the decency to hit burn-out in their teens, and are today disgustingly fulfilled and happy.

So, here I was, 30 and single, employed in a job that a trained monkey could do and utterly, utterly unremarkable.

‘Eleanore? Wakey wakey.’

That voice woke me from my self-pitying daydream like a sloth with M.E. On the PC screen in front of me were the first two words of a 5,000-

word report I had to compile for the end of the day for my boss. Some big wig upstairs wanted a run-down on the domestic retail sales figures for the past 5 years. Dan Brown would be quaking in his boots when I got through with it.

‘Oh, sorry Kathleen, I was miles away.’

My colleague Kathleen Prendergast, a well meaning if bossy girl, was peering down at me, a thick folder in her hand. She waggled it in my face. I sat upright, and took it from her.

‘It’s the figures you wanted. I hope you appreciate them now, I had to drop everything just to get them ready for you. And why you didn’t ask me for them last week I just don’t know. Really, you should be more organised Eleanore. Really.’

‘Yes, Kathleen. You’re right. I’ll be sure to work on my personal development, just once I have this monstrous waste of paper finished.’

Kathleen didn’t like my flippant attitude. She made tea as if her life depended on it. Filing had the urgency of an emergency helicopter delivering a much needed transplant organ. But it did have one advantage, she never hung around very long. Always busy busy busy.

Like a flower gradually following the sun I returned my gaze to the PC screen. The cursor flashed after the words “Sales 2001”. My jaw unhinged itself in its rush to yawn. And before

another word was typed my attention skipped gaily off.

When I'd hit my teens I had changed tack. I knew that I would have to make my own specialness. If I didn't have a talent nor an interesting affliction, then I would have to throw myself violently in luck's way, determined to have specialness thrust upon me. I bought raffle tickets, entered competitions, that sort of thing. I ran with scissors. I ate a few yogurts past their use by date. And unless you'd count a violent case of food poisoning or a useless holiday voucher a result, I plodded on with nothing more on my "Interesting" CV to recommend me.

By my college years I thought I would try thinking outside the box. I decided to surround myself with fellow nonentities. Having shivered in the shadows of Lilly's and Flora's greatness, I felt I could only glow in tedious company. But sadly this route only served to thwart me. Yes, I didn't have to feel the daily pain of inadequacy like when I was with my family, but – hanging around Clare, Gerard and Derek – somehow the whole pointlessness of our group was so much greater than the sum of our pointless parts. You won't believe me, but I used to witness people in the corridors of our college walk straight into Gerard or Clare, as if they hadn't seen them. They

couldn't have been more invisible if in fact, they'd been invisible.

The day a student walked right into me was the day I ditched "the gang" and disrobed my last vestiges of hope. While I can't say I embraced ordinariness, I at least made an uneasy peace with it. I only sighed a little when I got a pass degree. My lack of a lovelife only depressed me three nights a week rather than seven.

And so, for eight years I'd plodded along until I got this job here, at Dellutec, twelve months ago. The new job meant a new route to and from work. On the way home in the evenings as I waited at the lights I stared at the Evening Herald sellers, touting their newspaper up and down the rows of cars. My longings revived. Like those Jerry Springer type shows, which offered even the most lowly, unimportant person a few moments of fame, the Evening Herald with its often desperate attempts at sensational headlines, seemed to offer my own personal path to recognition.

'Bye Eleanore.' Kathleen's smug little smile swept past me. She had her coat on. Confusion seeped through me until I looked at my watch and was upset to see that it was 5.30. Already? And what about the report? The two words on my screen had managed to multiply themselves, but surely only by a process of asexual reproduction

as I had no memory of touching the keyboard in the last three hours. I focused my gaze and read what had been added to “Sales Year 1” ... ‘rdfjierperiotiopehtiophnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn’. Ah, I must have fallen asleep and rested my head on the keyboard. Still, it was an improvement on anything I would have written while conscious.

I picked up my phone and dialled Alan, my boss’s, extension.

‘Hi,’ his gruff voice answered.

‘Ah, great, you’re still there.’

‘Eleanore. Why am I not surprised? I’m still waiting on that report, I’m leaving in ten minutes, and it better be in my inbox by the time I shut down.’

‘Aha, of course, well, that’s why I was calling, just to tell you to head off home, I’m just spell-checking it now, it’ll be winging its way to you any minute.’

I stared at my monitor and winced. 5,000 words in 5 minutes. 1,000 words per minute. 166.6666666(etc) words per second. Even taking the four words I’d already written into account, my confidence was waning that I might meet my deadline. In the end I did what had to be done. I sent Alan his email, with the largest file I could find on my PC: the first chapter of a romance novel I had started but hadn’t finished, attached.

He was never going to actually check the document tonight, and by the time he noticed that the throbbing menhoods and heaving bosoms hadn't actually affected the net sales for Dellutec for the last few years, I'd blag more time to do the report tomorrow.

I clicked "Send", hit the "Off" button on my PC and legged it from the building. There was no need to hang around, because knowing my luck Alan would open the file tonight.

Fresh air battered me upon my exit. I pulled my coat closer and headed left out of the building rather than right to the car park. It was Wednesday evening and I always bought a lotto ticket. I would never admit it to myself that this was all part of my greatness agenda, I kidded myself that I was just like the teeming millions who bought a ticket twice a week. But lately I had been seeing my self in 96pt font: ELEANORE O'BRIEN – LOTTO WINNER!

The local shop was only a couple of yards from the office. A spotty youth worked behind the counter and I sensed in him a kindred spirit, but he never managed to look at me in the months and months I'd been going there. I presented him with my Saturday ticket to check and see if I'd won anything. Y'see, look at that, a ticket that was four days old and I hadn't checked it. This was the

facade I constructed to prove to myself that I wasn't still on the hunt. I so wasn't bothered about winning that I waited this long to check. Wasn't I marvellous?

So of course, when the spotty youth muttered that I'd won something, I was so cool and disinterested that I only erupted wildly with fervent excitement. Finally! The gods had listened, my moment in the sun. It had been worth the wait. I was dizzy, the little corner shop was spinning. Now I understood why fate had waited so long to bless me. Success would be so much sweeter now, after the years and years of anticipation.

Spotty was looking at me now.

'It's only a scratch card, Missus.'

The sound of perforations of the scratch card being ripped was, in my ears, the ripping apart of my very hopes and dreams. The gods were sick to toy with me like that. Or maybe I was the fool to think that there was another path for me than the hard packed mud trail that transported the herds of humanity through their forgotten existences. Not meeting his eyes, I took the scratch card and left the shop.

I guess I was probably blinkered by the emotions I 'd just experienced, otherwise I guess I would have been more careful. I stumbled on the

edge of the path, the scratch card fell from my hand, and I followed, right onto the road. Right into the path of Alan, my boss's, car. At least he had the decency to stop the car, and ring an ambulance. He also made quite a nice speech at my funeral. Lied about what a dedicated worker I was.

Of course I was tremendously annoyed by all that. What better than a hit and run to get me in the paper the next day? Couldn't he have been gripped by the fear and legged it? No, no, he had to do the decent thing. And the headline in the Herald the next day? Yeah, of course, KATHLEEN PRENDERGAST – FINDS SCRATCHCARD, WINS €250,000!

The Man who lost some sleep

Joe Mc Kiernan

I know a man who once lost some sleep.

At first he didn't think too much of it – assumed he had just mislaid it in the way you might mislay your car-keys. After searching the house he asked his wife if she had seen it.

‘Where did you leave it?’ she asked, prompting the obvious response: ‘If I knew that it wouldn't be lost now would it?’

The kids were brought in on the search as well as some of their friends who had been playing in the back garden. When it became obvious that the lost sleep was not to be found in the house or its environs there was nothing for it but to widen the search. The neighbours were only too happy to help. It was a tight-knit community and, as hedges were prodded and refuse bins inspected, each person counted their blessings that the loss was not theirs.

As the true gravity of the situation began to dawn on the man, he realised that he would have to speak to the Gardaí. At the station, his fraught wife at his side, he was told, to his disbelief, that the authorities could not become involved in a case of lost sleep until it had been missing for at least twenty-four hours. Somewhat in shock he

returned home. As night fell the number of concerned citizens began to swell. Every back alley was checked; every door was knocked upon.

At noon the following day the Gardaí became officially involved and the search went citywide and, soon thereafter, nationwide. Known insomniacs were hauled into stations and grilled. Those found shopping for bedding were leaned on for leads. At the airport all passengers bound for the Land of Nod were interrogated and then interrogated again.

Civil defence was called up to comb the Wicklow Mountains. They walked one hundred abreast holding hands, prodding the ground with sticks. It was said that the sleep might simply have run away but everyone knew the real reason behind this search. As time ticked by the realists began to outnumber the optimists.

On day three it seemed a breakthrough had been made. A boy in his early teens had apprehended some sleep that had been roaming wild on his parents' Kildare farm. A nation's joy turned to heartache when it was discovered that what he had caught was merely a catnap.

Similarly a member of the now-mobilised defence forces was said to have located the target but it transpired he had merely caught some "Z"s.

But the most dramatic moment of the search

was surely on the morning of day four. A routine inspection of a container truck at Rosslare, en-route to France, revealed the presence of forty winks. The driver was immediately arrested and the truck was cordoned off to await the arrival of detectives and forensic staff. In less than half an hour the media was on the spot. In addition to Irish television, radio and print media, there were crews from the BBC, CNN, ABC and NBC as well as crews from France, Italy, Australia and Japan. The story had gone global and locals going about their daily business were quizzed in an international media feeding frenzy.

Over an hour after the white-suited forensics team had entered the container they re-emerged. They spoke to the senior Garda of their findings. He nodded but in a grim way and could be heard to ask if they were definite.

‘Double-checked and triple-checked’ they were heard to say in reply. With that it fell to Chief Superintendent Malachy Gilhooley to break the news to the waiting world. From Singapore to Sydney, from Tokyo to Toronto, TV programs were interrupted for the announcement. Times Square came to a standstill. With profound embarrassment Chief Super Gilhooley announced that the container believed to have contained forty winks had, on examination, been found to contain

only thirty-nine. The search for the lost sleep would go on.

On the fifth day the senior Garda liaison officer, Susan Murphy, gave the man's wife the news she had feared. Garda headquarters had decided to abandon the search. No sleep had ever been recovered this long after going missing. The two decided to break the news to him together. They went upstairs to the bedroom where he had earlier gone. There he lay, in a deep slumber under the covers of the bed. The two ladies looked at one another and without a word they exited the bedroom. Closing the door silently the liaison officer gave voice to their mutual sentiments.

'There's no point in disturbing him now,' she said. 'We'll tell him the news when he wakes up.'

Old Man
Joan Byrne

Willie couldn't breathe. He sat up in bed and turned on his oxygen machine. As he grabbed the mask and sucked in the plastic air, the slow hiss faded away, leaving his bedroom totally silent. The bloody thing wasn't working again, what was he going to do now? Four in the morning, he'd no choice, but to call an ambulance. He didn't care what they said.

'Hello' croaked Willie, 'I need an ambulance'. The operator put him on hold as she tried to connect him. Willie took a fit of coughing and it took him a few minutes to get his voice back. 'I'm having an asthma attack, you've got to help me, I need oxygen, and I'm all alone'. The ambulance service eventually got his details and told him one was on the way.

He remembered the days when Eileen was alive. She would have got up and made him a cup of tea and they would have talked until the crows flew, almost silently, over the sky and gradual daylight calmed his anxiety. She had collapsed in the back garden while carrying in a bucket of coal. He'd been calling her, as he could hear the whistling kettle screaming in the kitchen. He uses

a pot to boil his water now and the kettle sits silently on the back of the cooker.

He'd get the nurse to ring Declan in England. That would put the frighteners on him. He hadn't been to see Willie since the funeral. Ungrateful bastard. He came running home when Eileen was in hospital but didn't care that Willie was too sick to go and see her. And he better not bring that stupid wife with him or those two surly brats, no manners, no respect for their elders. They wouldn't be getting their hands on this house. He'd made sure of that.

Willie struggled to put on a clean vest and to move the bucket he used for spits and constant piddles to the corner of the bedroom. He stashed his few bob under the mattress because the home help was due in the morning. He was convinced she was robbing him; the last time she did his shopping she didn't bring back the receipt, lost it she said. He knew better. She drove him mad with her cheerful chatter and the way she clattered around the house. Hopefully he wouldn't have to stomach that mush that passes for a dinner from the meals on wheels people for a while. Yesterday's dinner was in the fridge, uneaten.

Willie lit up a cigarette and looked out the window for the ambulance. The neighbours wouldn't notice what was going on. He could be

dead for all they cared. He would have to throw the keys out the window; he wouldn't be able to make it down the stairs.

'Well, Hello again Willie. Just calm down, you'll be all right' said the ambulance man. 'We'll get you up to the hospital. Hope you're prepared for a long wait. Casualty is packed out tonight. Just put your slippers on, that's it, sit in the chair, we'll carry you down the stairs, we'll take care of you'.

'Mr. Brennan, are you awake', said the nurse.

Willie had been on a trolley for ten hours. When he arrived at the hospital the casualty department was like a war zone. Drunks littered the corridors and car accident victims were rushed past him for urgent treatment. They had given him oxygen and he was still waiting to see a doctor.

'Mr. Brennan we are going to move you into a cubicle now', said the nurse, 'and a doctor will be with you shortly'.

The doctor opened Willie's file as he examined him.

'I see you have emphysema', he said.

'I can't detect any infection but we'll get some blood tests organised. I'll be back to you when we get the results back from the lab'.

The nurse came to take Willie's blood and made him comfortable in the bed.

‘Do you think they’ll send me to St. Joseph’s ward?’ said Willie.

‘The nurses were very nice to me there last time, and if I go soon I’ll be in time for tea’.

‘Lets wait and see’, said the nurse.

Angie was just putting the phone down as Declan came in from work.

‘That was the hospital in Dublin’, she said.

‘Your father’s in casualty and they left a phone number for you to ring’.

‘Is he alright?’ said Declan.

‘They said he was very distressed when he came in but he’s comfortable now and he was waiting to see a doctor’. Declan stood numbly holding his briefcase.

‘Well are you going to ring them?’ asked Angie.

Declan said nothing and turned to go upstairs to change. Angie sighed at his troubled face. She’d just leave him alone for a bit, she decided.

Declan sat on the edge of his bed. This was all he needed; he’d had a particularly bad meeting with his Sales Manager that morning. They had raised the quotas again even though he was working ten-hour days to reach the present ones. Angie came quietly into the bedroom and sat beside him on the bed.

‘Are you OK?’ She asked.

‘You look very stressed. I’m sure he’ll be fine, it’s probably his asthma again, he got over it before’

‘You’ve no idea, have you?’ said Declan.

‘Well I know you’re probably worried about him and being so far away doesn’t help, said Angie.

Declan put his head in his hands and took a deep breath.

‘He killed her you know. She spent her whole life looking after him. I remember when I was a kid, he would come in from the pub and Mam would jump up to get his dinner. I would run to bed and hear him shouting. She would hide her bruises from me but I always knew. That’s why I had to get away as soon as I could. I’ll never understand why she stayed with him. I used to try and tell her but she’d never listen. But he’s not well, she’d say, and look what happened. I can’t do it anymore; I can’t pretend to care about him. He’s always been sick. I really believe he only married my mother because his own mother died. Even when Mam had her heart attack he was “too sick” to go and see her in hospital. She died three days later and all he could say was what was he going to do without her. I’m not going over to see him this time. I can’t forgive him.’

Willie sat up in bed when he saw the doctor making his way over to him. He hoped they would give him pyjamas when he got up to the ward and maybe give him a bath and a shave.

‘Hello Mr. Brennan’, said the Doctor.

‘We’ve got the blood tests back and it’s good news. There is no infection and you can go home’.

The doctor went on to talk about getting a health nurse to call to his house. But Willie was no longer listening. He closed his eyes and cursed under his breath.

A Winter Break

Dympna Murray Fennell

‘Special offer — mid-winter break in the sunny south- east’.

‘Just what we need after Christmas’ my friend enthused. ‘Get away from it all. It’s a great place for bird-watching’

Not exactly a subject I knew much about. I knew a swan from a seagull from a starling, and not much more! But New Year being a time for new discoveries, I agreed to go along.

It seems that in bird-watching circles in Ireland, the slob of Wexford is the place to go. These reclaimed mud flats on the edge of Wexford harbour are the winter-feeding grounds for thousands of wildfowl from the Arctic. You and I might dream of wintering in the Caribbean or the Canaries, but these birds come to our “sunny south-east” from the cold north each October; up to ten-thousand of the white- fronted geese move from Greenland to survive here and enjoy our winter. So armed with a pocket guidebook and a pair of borrowed binoculars, I set off to make their acquaintance.

As soon as we arrived on the reserve there was a chorus of cackling and quacking from a reception committee of geese, ducks and swans,

(actually the swans being mute, don't contribute to the greeting). These are permanent residents, tame and well fed, almost like the ducks on Stephen's Green. But a few hundred metres further on, it's a different world out on the North Slob. Here, spread over a wide expanse of grassland and water courses, are thousands of wild birds of every shape and size; they say two hundred and fifty species have been recorded, of which sixty- nine are regular visitors in winter.

We settled into the "hide" to watch the display of activities, feeding, preening, strutting around, fighting (I watched a pair of godwits sparring – all wings and long rapier-like beaks – my friends debated whether they were bar-tailed or black-tailed, I was more interested in which one won the spat) Our seasoned bird-watchers whispered the identity of different groups – geese, brent and barnacle, greylag and pink-footed; ducks, waders and divers and dabblers.

I was beginning to get some bearings on the vast display, when a small boy just arriving, called excitedly to his mother and "whoosh", the air was full of departing wings, our cover was blown! A few birds stayed put; plump male mallards continued to preen their glossy feathers; even though they are residents, with their metallic green heads and purple wing inset, they look more

exotic than many of the visitors. A few magnificent native swans glided past, with a look of disdain for the lesser breeds around them; keen bird-watchers enthuse over the visiting Bewick and whooper swans, but for me, our own mute swan with its orange beak and elegant curved neck, is the king of the birds.

The flocks having moved on for the moment, it was time for us to do likewise. Bird watching on a January morning sharpens the appetite wonderfully, and while the Reserve has lots of food for its feathered visitors, it doesn't cater for the watchers. So we repaired to the restaurant at the National Heritage Park and over bowls of hot soup compared notes on what we had seen. Then suddenly someone whipped out the binoculars and all eyes reacted.

'Look, there, a heron'. Over in a sheltered spot on the riverbank, a solitary heron stood, hunched, motionless, with a long scarf of black plumes accentuating his upright posture. 'There's a curlew' someone else noted. They were all on lookout duty again, bird watching is that kind of activity.

Me, I think I could become an addict, but first I must invest in a good pair of binoculars.

38 Lower Buckingham Street

Joan Byrne

My mind is wandering through Stable Lane
then around by the creamery
to Masey's house for bananas
with the top off the milk

Dark stairs entice me down
to her wondrous kitchen
a giant pink conical shell
glistens on her wide windowsill

The old gas cooker with a stew
always bubbling
long scarred table laid with newspapers
ironing on one end
milk and butter on the other

She will allow me into the sitting room
to tinkle on her piano "Rooney Dooney"
bathed by the tasselled shade of the
curly standard lamp
inhaling lavendered furniture

Remembering her long grey hair
revealed unexpectedly
when she changed hats for Mass

Her scathing wit
Her elitist forward thinking
My Masey
My Father's mother
Me

Lakes

Colm Keegan

Chi-Hing walked along the main road which was bordered by interweaving oak and sycamore trees, dense with leaves that were moved by a wind he could barely feel on his face. He reached the top of a lane and looked around. Heavy clouds filled the sky, through the trees on either side the Blessington reservoir could be seen, dark and silent with orange light from houses sprinkling colour on its edges.

He carried his last three, most important sculptures with him, keeping each in a separate pocket to protect their polished surfaces. Two of the flat stones had been carved to look like boys, one like a small girl. When he arrived at the lake he planned to skim them across the water, bouncing the carved discs over the surface until the energy he'd flicked into them disappeared and they'd sink, making sweeping slow arcs all the way down to join the other stones he had thrown into the depths.

At the bottom of the lane a souped-up black car lay idle in the car park, its engine purring out exhaust fumes that crept towards the water. Inside the car Sarah sat between two young men in the back seat. She knew the man on her right, Aidan,

well enough and had spent the night by the lake with him last week. But his friend was a stranger and was starting to worry her. Especially since she caught him glancing at Aidan as he swigged from his can, frowning and nodding urgently towards her skirt when he thought she wasn't looking. No words had been said since they'd arrived, the men glugged alcohol and danced in their seats to the dance track on the radio. Sarah rooted in her handbag for a cigarette. She looked in surprise at Aidan getting out of the car.

'Where are you going?'

'The jacks. I'll be back in a sec,' he said.

As soon as Aidan left his friend moved closer.

'Jaysus you're a good lookin' bird Sarah.'

She faked a laugh and a smile that fell quickly from her face. She felt relief when Aidan came back but he got into the front seat. The friend trailed his little finger along Sarah's goose pimpled thigh and snickered. Sarah crossed her arms. She saw the men make eye contact in the rear-view mirror. A palm wrapped around her knee and she batted it off.

'Ah c'mon Sarah you didn't mind last week. Aidan said you're a right goer'

She knew where this was going. She put the unlit smoke back in her bag and reached over to grab the door handle. Her way was blocked.

‘Let me out’

‘You’re not going yet are ya?’ said Aidan. ‘Sure it’s miles from anywhere.’ There was a pleading tone worked into his voice.

Then his friend spoke. ‘The party’s only starting, gorgeous.’

‘Fuck you.’

Through a leathery smirk he answered. ‘Don’t talk to me like that. Slut.’

The too familiar word stung. She punched him. He lunged and grabbed her arms, the noise of their scuffle mixed with the beat of the radio. Sarah tried to hit him with a beer can but it was open and spilled all over the car. Aidan laughed. Sarah fought as hard as she could, and prevented him from pushing her arms over her head. His hands clawed at her dress, a button popped. She gave a small scream of outrage before her face was scrunched into the seat.

Chi reached the bottom of the lane and saw the car parked by the lake. There had never been anyone here when he’d done this before. It felt inappropriate to him. He checked his watch. It was five to four. Back home it would be almost midday. He took the figure of the young girl out of his pocket and gently rubbed his thumb across her tiny stone brow. He tucked her safely into his bomber jacket pocket and walked by the car.

Closer to the vehicle, he frowned when he saw that it was rocking. He bent and searched the tarmac until he found a pebble, which he threw at the passenger door. Through the steamed-up windows he made out two shadows. The car stopped shaking. A hand rubbed fog from the window and a man peered out. Content that he had stopped their activity Chi started towards the lake. Then Sarah flung open the passenger door and tumbled out of the car.

Chi watched her get up, expecting someone to come out to her. No one did. Not even when she began to beat the car with one of her shoes, screaming words Chi had never heard as she smashed a headlight. The car revved loudly and he ran towards it, thinking it was going to run the girl over. But it reversed, wheel-spun across the car park and tore up the lane, leaving clouds of dust and the leaves on the trees shaking in its wake.

Chi thought she hadn't noticed him and walked towards her to ask her if she was okay, one concerned hand out as if to touch her elbow. When she turned to him he said nothing. Her eyes were black with wet mascara, and her lipstick was smeared, but her face wore a certain clutched dignity. She saw his arm reaching and flinched.

'What the fuck's your problem?' was all she could say. Chi raised his eyebrows in bemusement

and stuffed his hands in his pockets. Sarah smoothed her dress and straightened her hair.

‘Do you live nearby?’ He asked, even though he knew by her accent that she was from the city.

‘None of your business,’ she stood on one leg to put her shoe on.

As she forced her heel into the shoe she went off balance a bit and was forced to grab Chi’s coat. He moved closer to support her. Realising what she was doing she let go of him and straightened up. Taking a bobbin from her wrist she tied her upset hair in a ponytail, flicking it from her neck when she was finished. Chi realised he was gazing at her. He checked his watch again and headed for the shore.

‘Nice to have met you.’ He said ‘Goodbye.’ and then he waved, and cringed.

‘Wait’ she said. He started back towards her.

‘Where can I get a taxi?’

He mimed making a phone call. She shook her head

‘I’ve no phone’

‘Walk that way’ He pointed up the lane and swept his arm to the side in a grand motion ‘Then round the lake over the bridge and left.’ The way he said round sounded long and tedious. He began to leave again.

‘Is it far?’

‘One hour’s walk.’

‘Are you going that way?’

‘Yes, but not yet. After’

‘After what?’

He walked on quickly. She looked at him becoming a shadow as he neared the shore, heard his feet crunching lightly on the coarse sand. She followed him.

Chi sat near the water and took the figures from his pocket. He scrunched his knees up close and held the stones together in both hands and closed his eyes. The dull knock of them off each other brought enquiry from Sarah who’d stopped nearby.

‘What’s in your hand?’ she said, as low as the lap of the water.

‘Little villagers’ He held out the figure of the eldest boy. She noticed Chi wore no socks.

‘Take it’

The stone was warm from his touch. The workmanship made it feel vibrant in Sarah’s hand.

‘Did you do this?’

Eyes still closed he nodded and placed the other two stones by her on the sand. A little awe crept into her eyes as she knelt and looked from the stones to Chi.

‘They’re gorgeous,’ she said. ‘Who are they?’ He didn’t answer. He didn’t really know, and didn’t want to say.

The breeze tickled ripples across the lake towards them and gently tugged at their clothes. She put the carving with the others and drew a circle around all three in the sand. Chi considered telling her the reason for the sculptures. Without knowing he chewed at his cheek as he sank into his memories.

He had had been standing on the side of a fertile mountain that tumbled into the churning waters of the Yangtze River. It had just stopped raining, and the memory of the downpour filled the air. Little streams formed to gurgle along the trail under Chi's feet and the leaves of the trees and ferns all around drooped and dripped water. He stood amongst a row of about fifteen men, all wearing grubby working clothes, some carrying heavy sticks. They stared impatiently at their employer, a local official, who was reading from a document. In front of them stood a group of four farmers and their wives, some grandparents and teenage children. Over their shoulders Chi could see the bamboo huts they'd built, with young children peeping from within.

Across the river Chi could see a sign reading 175M in large black letters. Further down the mountain the ruins of a village lay near the riverbank, torn down by government bulldozers, and then smashed to small pieces by migrant

workers. Just like hundreds of others, from small villages to bustling towns up and down the river, it was emptied and destroyed to make way for the reservoir swelling up behind the Three Gorges Dam, the most audacious building project in the world. Anyone below the future water line marked by the sign – almost two million people – were being encouraged to relocate. But these few families, disgusted by the quality of their new land, had returned.

The official finished by asking the locals to leave without protest. When no answer came he dropped his head and waved his hand. The workers walked towards the huts, the line of residents broke and ran at them. A crazed woman attacked Chi, scratching his face in her frenzy. Adrenaline surged through him when he pushed her to the ground as if she wasn't there. He reached her home and took out a knife to cut at the ropes holding it together. She ran towards him again and he braced himself. But she ignored him and pulled her children from their home, the youngest wearing only his underpants. All around was chaos. Workers trampled over a small vegetable patch, an ancient woman wailed and threw stones at them. Goats bleated and were kicked. A farmer started to cry. Pots spilt and vases smashed. Three teenage boys wrestled a stick

from a worker and beat him to the ground. But despite all resistance the huts came down easily, rickety walls crumpled and their plastic roofs ruffled in the air. It was almost over in less than ten minutes.

Everyone heard the howl soar up from somewhere near the river. The workers followed when Chi descended towards the sound. Near the village rubble he spotted the woman he had pushed over. She was soaked through and had her empty eyes on a muddy brown pond. Beside her stood her husband, looking at his children. The three of them floated face down in the water. An old couple took the woman away. As people spilled onto the scene it started to rain again. The drops fell like stones that made the trees shudder.

Silent faces watched the father take his children from the water. The official did not wait to proclaim they could not be buried here. The father slumped to the ground beside the bodies, his dignified face marred by mud and loss. No one went near him, too afraid of his grief. Some stared at Chi and his eyes dropped to his hands. He picked up some rubble that was splattered with red; stone broken from a wall that had stood for generations, until marked with a large red 'Chai', the symbol for tear down. He took out his knife,

and started chipping at the ink. Within a couple of days he would leave China forever.

He opened his eyes and looked at Sarah. He silently watched her curl a strand of hair behind her ear.

On the horizon the night-time gloom was being chased out of the sky. Sarah took the girl and cradled her in her palm. Chi picked up the boys and rose to his feet. He cast them across the water to meet the others he'd created as company. They sank slowly. He watched the ripples from each skip expand into the other, as if they sought to be one. When he did this he always aimed for the same area of water, hoping the stones would settle close together, imagining little groupings of them on the lakes bed. He pictured the old couple, on whose faces he'd etched tiny wrinkles, resting together, or his few well-sculpted mothers sitting close enough to gossip in the depths. The vision had nothing to do with the reality of their lives. But he had decided to honour them and this was his way.

'There are houses under there, sometimes a church steeple emerges from the water' Chi said, pointing out to the centre of the lake. Sarah was looking at the statue of the little girl in her hands. A child's innocence had been skilfully worked

into the stone. Despite the difference in features it was as if she was looking at herself at that age and cradling the girl made her remember her father, when he used to swing her around and the world had felt so big. So much bigger than the back of Aidans' car, she thought.

Sarah looked up as if she had forgotten he was there.

‘What happened earlier?’ he asked.

‘You don’t want to know.’

He nodded his head.

The crackle of gravel made them look towards the lane. Two cars turned into the car park, the second one with only one headlight. Both stopped, three men got out of the front car and walked towards Chi and Sarah. She closed her fist over the sculpture as the first man, a gruff frowning redhead, stopped in front of her.

‘You’re wanted’ he said to Sarah. After gesturing towards the cars he nodded towards Chi. ‘You’d be better off waiting here, bud.’

Chi looked over the lake. In the glare of the headlights mist danced like ghosts on the water. He assumed Sarah would make up with whoever was in the car and leave. She was an attractive girl and he was looking forward to walking with her, but if she was to leave it was okay, he thought. Then he

remembered the final sculpture and started after her. The big redhead stepped in his way.

‘I said stay here. Leave them to it’ Chi heard the engine start as Sarah reached the car.

Sarah stopped beside the driver door. Aidan smiled out the window at her.

‘You calmed down now?’

‘What do you think you’re doing back here? You’re lucky I didn’t call the police’

Aidan looked around the secluded spot and laughed.

‘Yeah they’d be here in a flash. Sure we both know you wouldn’t call the police anyway Sarah. You’re not that type. Listen I’ve ditched my mate. He was only messin’ but I let it go too far. Come back to town with me’.

‘Not in a million years.’

‘Here look’ He reached into the glove box and took out Sarah’s mobile phone. She snapped it from him.

‘And here take this as well’

His hand held out a bag of cocaine.

‘I can’t take that.’

‘Go on, it’s cool,’ said Aidan, shaking the bag.

‘I already owe you too much.’

‘Look it’s okay. That’s a freebie. My way of sayin’ sorry. I really enjoyed our time last week up

here Sarah. I really like you. We can work something out with your debt. C'mon back with me.'

Sarah looked at the bag dangling in his hand and felt a flutter of want. Her eyes dropped to the sculpture in her hand.

'No thanks.' She said. 'I'll find my own way and pay what I owe you.'

He let her see his face sink into disappointment, and looked at her for a long moment before closing up the window. 'Fuckin' right you'll pay. And you owe me for the headlight as well. You're lucky I like you so much.'

She went to say something but Aidan started beeping the horn.

The men left Chi and returned to the car park. They got into the second car and followed as Aidan drove up the lane. Before the second car disappeared Sarah saw Aidan's friend from earlier rise up in the back seat.

'Bastard,' she said and walked back to Chi.

'I take it you are waiting for this.' She said showing him the stone. Something about the way she held it made Chi not want to take it. He thought for a second, and then nodded at the lake.

'I would like for you to throw it in.'

She walked so close to the water that it licked

at her toes. She looked at Chi.

‘What’s your name anyway?’

‘Chi’

‘I’m Sarah,’ she said, and sent the stone across the surface.

He wasn’t surprised when she threw it as well as he could have. It bounced along the surface three times, scattering drops as it skipped before disappearing in a silvery glimmer. Chi told himself that sometimes, maybe, if the water moved right, the stones would be stirred into life and the children might move together, floating along the scar of the river that lay at the heart of the reservoir, skirting around the parents and other statues as if at play.

Notes on Contributors

Eileen Casey: Poet, fiction writer and journalist, originally from the Midlands, I've lived in Tallaght since the late 1970's. A part-time tutor with County Dublin V.E.C., it gives me great pleasure to share some of the writing journey with new writers. In February, 2007, my first solo visual art exhibition *Reading fire, Writing flame*, using encaustic art, photography and text, goes on show at Aras An Chontae, Tullamore.

Joan Byrne: Born in Dublin, I'm the mother of five grown up children and grandmother of two. I've always been a "scribbler" and started writing seriously five years ago after completing a Creative Writing course. I took part in The Fused Festival, 2004 (South Dublin County) where I read my poetry. My prose piece 'Fettercairn' was included in *County Lines, a portrait of life in South Dublin County*, published 2005 by New Island. My main creative influences are life experiences and my late father's love of words.

Dympna Murray-Fennell: I have dabbled in creative writing for many a year. My work has been broadcast on *Sunday Miscellany* and has been published in both recent editions of the

Sunday Miscellany anthology. My work also appears in *County Lines, a portrait of life in South Dublin County* and in that bastion of memoir writing *Ireland's Own*. I have gotten a new lease of creativity from a Creative Writing programme with Lucan Writer's Group facilitated by Eileen Casey.

Maurice Flynn: I'm a Lucan based writer currently completing a novel and working on a collection of short stories.

Colm Keegan: Thirty-one years old, I live with my partner and three daughters in Clondalkin, Co. Dublin. In 2005, I was short listed for the Sunday Tribune/Hennessy Literary Awards (First Fiction) for a short story 'Slaughter-house Rat'.

Joe McKiernan: Born in 1967 in Walkinstown I attended Crumlin CBS. In 1994 I began a period of living and working abroad, travelling during breaks in work. I've worked in England, The Netherlands and Australia and travelled in Europe, Australia, North America, South America and Africa. I'm currently writing a novel 'Here's to the Primary Colours' which tracks the experiences of three people who travel to Australia. I also like to

write in several genres including science fiction, fantasy, humour and drama.

Joan O'Flynn: I have lived in Lucan for the past thirty-eight years. 'Love Affair with Lucan' was published in *County Lines, a portrait of life in South Dublin County*. Currently, I am working on a collection of short fiction together with a number of short stories for children, inspired by my own grandchildren. I have had fiction published in *Ireland's Own* and I'm a regular contributor to the weekly 'Lucan Newsletter' where I'm a member of the editorial team.

Patricia O'Shea: Five years ago, having reared five wonderful children, I moved into the vicinity of Lucan. In Lucan Library I attended a Creative Writing course, facilitated by Eileen Casey, which revived a long buried ambition to write. The opportunity to participate in a writing workshop by Dermot Bolger, Writer-in-Residence for South County Dublin, provided further encouragement. While interested in poetry, I am currently focusing on prose, both in the short story form and finally, 'that' novel.

Louise Phillips: Married with three children, I live in Templeogue. I returned to writing a couple of

years ago when I joined a writing class (facilitated by Eileen Casey) in Old Bawn Community School, Tallaght. Following this, I completed a writing workshop with Dermot Bolger, Writer-in-Residence in South Dublin County, 2005. I have written a number of short stories and poems and, together with other local based writers, I read at the annual Reader's Day in the Plaza, 2005 (a South Dublin County Libraries' event). 'Another Road' formed part of the recently published anthology by New Island, edited by Dermot Bolger, *County Lines, a portrait of life in South Dublin County*.

Elizabeth Reid: Writing has been an important part of my life for many years. I have recently completed my first novel and have just started my second. I work as a full-time carer for my mother. The written word has always been my adviser and friend, my solace and delight.

Marie Tarpey: I live in Lucan, Co. Dublin and I'm currently working on a novel about adoption. I am originally from Mayo and work as an electrical engineer in West Dublin.

Triona Walsh: I've been writing since my teens and have been happily toiling over a novel for the

past couple of years. I write short stories for the instant gratification and to remind myself that I can finish something. My husband is very much looking forward to the day my first novel is published and he can retire. I try not to disillusion him.

'CAUGHT IN AMBER is a kaleidoscopic compendium of voices based in the Lucan area, complementary and yet contrasting, clamouring to be heard. Skillfully edited by Eileen Casey, it presents the work of a writers' group who have set about capturing their own lives and experiences and moving beyond those experiences into the realm of the imagination. It would be hard to imagine a reader not stirred by something amid the myriad lives explored here and the precious moments snatched from time.'

DERMOT BOLGER

Caught In Amber brings together rich and varied work from a group of writers based in Lucan Library. Some of the voices in this anthology are being heard for the first time. Others have already been published in outlets such as *New Irish Writing* (The Sunday Tribune), *Ireland's Own*, *County Lines*, a portrait of life in *South Dublin County* (New Island) and broadcast on R.T.E., *Sunday Miscellany*. All of them however, strive to achieve in their fiction, poetry or prose what Bryan McMahon, talking about the creative process, once described as, allowing the reader 'into the driver's seat of another's imagination and seeing the road ahead in a new way'.

'A story, a made up story will put you into a trance if it's half decent and you will lose yourself in the pictures that you create inside your head as you read. And there's no greater pleasure than to lose yourself in a story and it may even be better than sex.'

CARLO GEBLER



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Cover by Jennifer Phillips