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## GERALDINE MILLS

### Daring Little Instruments

COVER ARTWORK BY IRISH ARTIST EMMA BARONE





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Live Encounters is a not-for-profit free online magazine that was founded in 2009 in Bali, Indonesia. It showcases some of the best writing from around the world. Poets, writers, academics, civil & human/animal rights activists, academics, environmentalists, social workers, photographers and more have contributed their time and knowledge for the benefit of the readers of:

*Live Encounters Magazine* (2010), *Live Encounters Poetry & Writing* (2016), *Live Encounters Young Poets & Writers* (2019) and now, *Live Encounters Books* (August 2020).

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Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

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Geraldine Mills. Photograph by Peter Moore.

## GERALDINE MILLS

### DARING LITTLE INSTRUMENTS

Once again it is a real honour to be part of the Live Encounters experience, and I want to thank Mark Ulyseas for giving me the opportunity to introduce this issue dedicated to the short story, flash fiction and creative non-fiction.

We all love a good story. As children, we listened avidly to the ones that were read or told to us, and when we were old enough, we searched out books so we could open the door to that magical world ourselves. For many of us that gift has stayed with us throughout our lives, so much so, that we become storytellers ourselves. The oral tradition is still very much alive where I live on the west coast of Ireland. There are neighbours who can have me so enthralled by their ability to tell a tale about themselves or indeed against themselves that I easily inhabit the world that they paint.

As writers, these are the moments that fuel our imaginations. We become gawkers, nosy parkers, eavesdroppers. We go back into the past to discover storytellers that have fed the creativity of writers over the centuries. To ancient Greece with Homer's tales of Odysseus and Iphigenia. We have stories from the New Testament of the woman at the well or the man who rises from the dead. Aesop's fables of the Fox and the Crow or the Hare and the Tortoise. Even Boccaccio in the 14th century, leaned heavily on myth for his own 10 tales of the *Decameron* and we in turn call on many of these different tales to enrich our writing, to reimagine their themes.

Looking back through our own Irish history, the arrival of St Patrick to Ireland in the fifth century was a pivotal time for the country, not just because he brought Christianity with him, but he also brought the Roman alphabet. This allowed the possibility of recording the stories that had come down by word of mouth. As a result, we were able to develop our own literature. Vivien Mercier in his anthology, *Great Irish Short Stories* (Abacus, 1999) says that the Irish distinguished between ‘sean-sgéal’ or the long story, which was a fairy tale, and the ‘seanchas’ which was shorter and stressed realistic detail rather than the mythical. The person who specialised in the ‘seanchas’ was called the ‘seanchaí’. One of our fine short story writers, Seán Ó’Faolain, for example, developed his style out of the oral tradition of storytelling as well as being influenced by Chekov, the great Russian short story writer.

While the moral tales of the 14th and 15th century were more for instruction rather than entertainment, the 18th century was the time when periodicals came available to the middle classes and people started reading for enjoyment. The 19th century saw the beginnings of the short story as we know it when short fiction became popular with educated readers. Imagination was now becoming valued in fiction as opposed to tradition and reason.

The short story matured even further, with Maupassant and Chekov being the most influential and modern because they focussed on the here and now quality of ordinary human existence. In the U.S., Washington Irving read European tales and created American versions of these tales. Romanticism gave way to realism.

The beginning of the 20th century saw the greatest changes in how we view the story today. Most writers up to then were influenced by Chekov. James Joyce brought the short story to another level. Instead of constructing his stories around a dramatic climax in the action, he heightened the climactic moments of self-realisation that he found in Chekov stories. This inner revelation he called *epiphany*. This is what we look for in the literary genre as we know it today.

I like V.S Prichett’s description of the genre as ‘something glimpsed from the corner of the eye in passing.’ A certain mystique hangs around it; many writers believe it is one of the hardest literary forms to master because it is as tight as poetry. There is no room for mistakes. No clichés, no hackneyed phrases; every word must meet the story’s intent. The writer implies things rather than stating them outright, revealing more by what is left out than by what is said. A character must have something to lose and some weakness in themselves that threatens to make that loss come about.

The short story writer sets out to explore that vulnerability and see their protagonists work towards a fitting conclusion. If there is no flaw, then it is mere anecdote. What happens to characters as a story progresses depends solely on what the writer discovers about them as they go along; how their protagonists develop, how they change outwardly or inwardly and become a different person at the end of the story. This change must touch us emotionally and intellectually in some way or as Seán Ó’Faoláin said that ‘it must lead imperceptibly towards its point of illumination...’ That is a tall order to achieve in such a short time.

When I started writing first, I attended a workshop given by John McGahern. One of the most important things he said was that when you are writing short fiction you must lower the temperature of life. What he meant by that was that sometimes things happen in life and if we wrote about them exactly as they happened, the reader would find them unbelievable. In his Preface to *Creatures of the Earth* he writes that:

*Among its many obligations, fiction always has to be believable. Life does not suffer such constraint and much of what takes place is believable only because it happens. The god of life is accident. Fiction has to be true to a central idea or vision of life. The imagination demands that life be told slant because of its need of distance.*

We are taking the crises and lacerations of everyday life, transforming them until they become something new and believable, something that rings true to the reader.

According to American writer, Richard Ford, in his introduction to the *New Granta Book of American Short Stories*, 2007, he writes that by nature short stories are:

*...daring little instruments and almost always represent commensurate daring in their makers. Short stories want to give us something big but want to do it in precious little time and space.... And they make us believe that entire lives can change on account of one little manufactured moment of clear-sightedness.*

Having read the stories in this issue it is clear that all of them are daring little instruments and give us something big in precious little time and space. While there is nothing new to say about the human condition, there are only new ways of saying it. And this is what happens in this issue. Each writer has the verbal facility to imagine a character, construct an inner world, breathe life into it using the senses and whatever emotion is within themselves to get the story written.

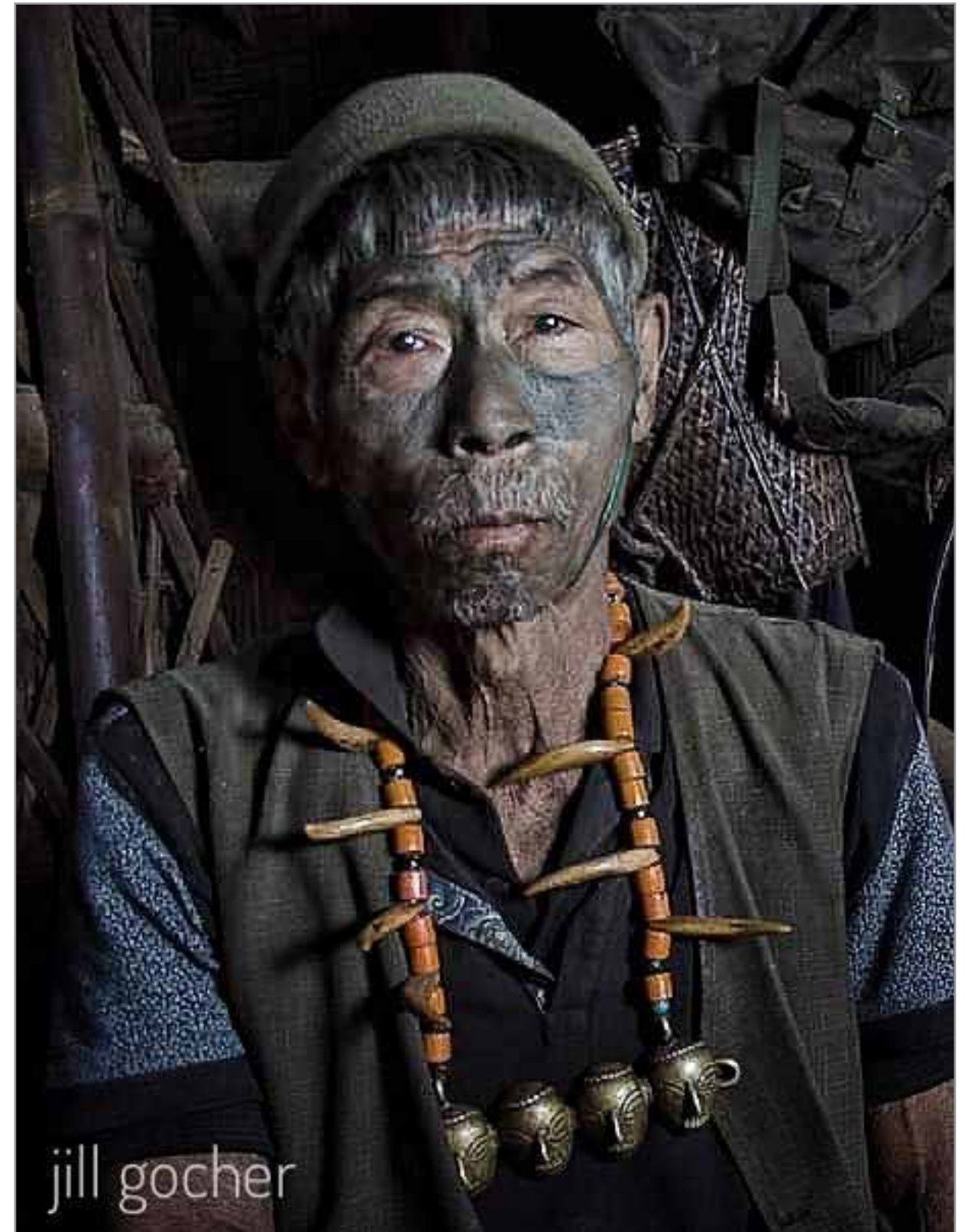


Each one is written in a unique voice, we are presented with slices of life captured in Mexico, the US, India, Australia or Ireland, the middle-ages, or the future. We experience what it is like to suffer locked-in syndrome, the trauma of a child who has seen something too tough for their young life, what is seen from the attic window or the significance of a talisman like a bear's claw. We learn that there are 'things about the heart we'll never know'.

There is the richness of location and sacred places, and we travel from Renaissance Italy, Aboriginal Australia, an Indian Festival or the arrival of spring in Mexico. Even with the different locations, local themes become universal and echo off one another, as in the issues of infidelity, domestic violence, the insidious scent of it, loss and pain. Richard Ford also said that short stories are:

*...the high wire act of literature, the man keeping all those pretty plates up and spinning on skinny sticks.*

What a wonderful experience this issue is with so many high-wire acts showing us that the short fiction form is in such good hands.



Wang Cha is 77 and has also seen his life change. Like the other elders, he spends much of his time with the pipe and sitting discussing earlier times. Nagaland, India. Photograph by Jill Gocher.

## HEAD-HUNTERS

Gran was scrunched in on the hob, scrying the turf smoke. Her crinkly skin was grimed with soot as she followed the stories that spiralled up the chimney. Years back, she had foreseen our cow fall into the bog hole. She foretold the night of the big storm that lashed the coast and only for her, Tom Tony's curragh would have been smashed against the rocks. Mammy said she'd even read in the curlicues the potato flowers withering once again.

This time she pulled her shawl away from her face and told us that she could see men with big contraptions coming to the island, the likes we'd never seen before. The chickens were scrawbing outside the door. Mammy took the tongs and stacked more glowing sods neatly on the top of the cast-iron oven. I didn't need to be a scryer to imagine the bread rising inside, the golden crust on each side of the cross, slathered with butter when it was cooked. Gran said no more but curled herself into the settle bed by the fire and soon she was snoring her head off.

Next day, the schoolmaster came to the door in his Sunday-going-to-mass-suit. The men that Gran saw in the smoke were coming from the big university to take our snaps, our likenesses, to measure our heads. Head-hunters he called them. Gran said she wouldn't be going near them.

I watched behind the small stone wall as the boat pulled up onto the pier. Three men climbed out with all their instruments and walked up the beach to the village. The wind came in from the Atlantic and whipped their words towards me. I heard them say they would prove that even with our white, weather-beaten skin we had come from Africa.

All the islanders gathered outside the schoolmaster's house. Himself was sitting on a chair. One of the head-hunters set up a stand with three legs and placed his light-box on it. Mary Doe was carding wool by her door. Mr Haddon (for that is what they called the other man) was getting all set up with his tools. The schoolmaster who was very attached to his hat, had to part with it so they could measure his head. They made him turn this way and that, his full face and then his side view, from head to chin, from jaw to jaw. The man in uniform had his notebook at the ready and wrote down all the numbers that were called out to him. Mr Browne, the man who held the likeness machine, slipped in some glass plates, made a big snap. And took his picture. Then it was Seamus the Briar's turn to be measured. With all the information, they could prove that the west coast of Ireland was the wildest place in the whole wide world.



Anne Walsh Donnelly lives in the west of Ireland. She was recently appointed as Poet Laureate for the town of Belmullet in Co Mayo. Her full length poetry collection, *"Odd as F\*ck,"* was published in May 2021 by Fly on the Wall Poetry Press who also published her poetry chapbook, *"The Woman With An Owl Tattoo."* To find out more go to her website : [www.annewdonnelly.com](http://www.annewdonnelly.com)



Anne Walsh Donnelly

## MY FATHER'S DAUGHTER

Grab phone. Hit his name. Still not answering. Last time Mike was only gone for a few days. Then back - tail between his legs once he'd had a bit of a rest and some spoiling from his Mam. I was remorseful that time.

"It won't happen again. I was under a lot of pressure at work. And I shouldn't have taken it out on you," I'd told him.

"We missed you. They found it hard to sleep in Mam's," he said.

"I missed ye, too."

Then the twins filled the chasm pulling us down onto the carpet to play with the Lego, their Nanny had bought them, and Barney sang about 'Happy Families' on the television as we built a red and yellow brick house.

Too quiet now. Remote. Flick to Simpsons on Sky and then turn on Mid-West Radio. Still, all I hear is silence. No clattering of saucepans to signal that dinner might be ready. No screams:

"Mammy, Mammy, lift me up."

I'm not hungry but I open the fridge, more out of habit than anything else. A half empty jar of black olives, some eggs. Mike's Benecol spread. Twin's organic yoghurts. Bang the door shut. I'm freezing. Haven't the energy to light the fire. Wouldn't have to, if he was here. Heat and food. Usually his department.

"You're at home all day now, surely you can find time to tidy up and cook a dinner," I'd said to him, one evening when I came home to a plate of salad.

"Do you realise how much time it takes to look after two toddlers?"

"Of course I do. Didn't I have to mind them when I was on maternity leave?"



MY FATHER'S DAUGHTER *...contd*

"And you couldn't wait to get back to work."

"Who was going to pay the bills if I didn't go back?" I asked, as tomatoes, lettuce and coleslaw splattered the tiles.

Cupboard door beside the fridge hits the floor as I open it. It's been threatening to fall off for weeks. Last time I slammed it, was the night before Mike left. The noise had stopped the twins playing drums with the saucepans and they had fled to the sitting room and the comfort of Postman Pat on television. But Mike hadn't escaped so easily that evening. What would he say now if he saw the solid oak door? Dead on the kitchen floor.

Grab a Rioja from the rack, fill the biggest glass I can find and bring it to bed. Stale odours torment in the bedroom – my Chanel and his Calvin Klein. I look at the un-made bed. Should have stayed in the hotel again tonight. Gulp some of the wine before trying to sleep.

"Christ."

Just after rolling over on my side forgetting about the hand I hurt when I hit my desk a few days ago at work. After reading a bad review of the hotel on Trip Advisor.

I shout into the night.

"Stop hiding behind your mammy. Come home."

That's where he is. Where else could he go? Who else would believe him? Never thought on my wedding day, that he was the type of man who would leave with our children and not even as much as a goodbye note or text. He stood waiting at the altar that day, straight body, head erect ignoring his mam's tight face. He was no Mammy's boy, he'd told me. He would marry whoever he wanted. Where did it go wrong?

The expression on his face last week was very different to the one he wore on our wedding day.

"Lamb chops again. And hard as rocks. How do you expect me to eat these?" I asked.

I stabbed the lamb chops with a knife and threw them in the bin. His shaking hand rubbed my saliva from the corner of his left eye as he forced words out through thin lips.

"Why didn't you text to say you'd be late?"

"I work all the hours I can to keep a house over our heads. What more do you want?" I asked, clenching the knife in my hand.

"You don't have to work so hard. You could delegate a bit more," he said, edging towards the kitchen door.

"To who? The duty manager left last week and the new one's not much better. And what's wrong with the twins? I can't hear myself think with the racket they're making."

"They're tired waiting for you to come home."

Can't be thinking about that now. Need some sleep. A customer's child vomited in the lift today. It was so bad we had to replace the carpet. Nearly choked on my own bile as I smiled and accepted their apologies. It's hard being the perfect hotel manager and then coming home to the twins crying and the house in a mess. If I can't let off a bit of steam at home, then where? My eyes close and lead me into darkness.

Dreams of the Blackwater River threaten to drown me. My nails leave scars on my palms as I release fists and put my hand on his pillow. The pain stops me from hitting it. Maybe I should I get up and take a Nurofen. I went to the doctor yesterday, it hurt so bad.

"Nothing broken," Doctor Murphy had said as he examined my hand.

I wondered if I should let the tears in my eyes fall.

"He left me."

MY FATHER'S DAUGHTER *...contd*

The doctor looked at me with school teacher eyes.

"He's taken the twins."

I searched his face for compassion, but he started typing. So, I stared at his bent head and raised my voice just enough to stop him.

"Did you hear what I said?"

I could feel the heat in my cheeks. Doctor Murphy looked at me for a moment, then reached for the blood pressure monitor and unrolled the cord to put it on my arm. I pulled it away and leaned towards him, hissing.

"He can't just take my kids, tell him that, tell him this is madness...He'll listen to you." Doctor Murphy let the cord from the monitor lie on his desk and started to write on his prescription pad.

"It's that therapist's fault, isn't it? The one you sent him to after he was made redundant."

I jumped up and grabbed my handbag from the floor. He stopped writing and looked at me.

"Would you think of going to one yourself?"

His conciliatory tone raised my voice even further.

"How is that going to help? All I want is my husband and kids to come home."

I didn't bother going to the pharmacy with the prescription. Instead, I stuffed it and the psychotherapist's business card Doctor Murphy gave me into my handbag, thinking that I had managed on my own this far and no bloody therapist was going to drag up the past and make it worse.

As I got into the car, I rubbed the bruises on my hand just as I had seen my mother do when my father wasn't watching but I wasn't Mam, I didn't do weak; I was in control.

Sweat dampens my forehead, armpits and groin. I throw off the duvet. Sit up. What the hell am I doing in this bed alone? I could tell Mike that I'll go to that marriage counsellor he was on about last week. That might bring him back. Dad never got the chance to do something that might have brought Mam home. Too busy farming. There was no way she could have come back from the bottom of a dirty river.

Oh, Christ, am I going to get any bit of sleep tonight? Maybe I'll escape like Mam did. Mike would be sorry then. The guilt would taint the rest of his life. He'd have to try and explain what happened to the twins. I can see him at my funeral, in his black suit, the one with the baggy trousers that I hate and a creased shirt underneath. My stomach retches and the Rioja is in my mouth again. I spit into the glass on the locker and reach for my mobile.

Come home pleez ure wife needs u

Send the text, then another. And another. Mike probably has his phone off, but the texts will be there in the morning, waiting to remind him of what he's doing to our family.

I'm sure he will respond – eventually. He'll get tired of his Mam's smothering love and claustrophobic house in the middle of nowhere and he'll come back. And the twins must be missing me. Maybe I should buy him the new iPhone. That might persuade him how sorry I am and convince him that I'll do what it takes to make our marriage work. I'll stop working long hours. Hire another duty manager if I have to. If I delegate more at work, like Mike says, I won't be as tired. I'll have more patience with the twins and him. There's something gnawing in my tummy.

Mike's dressing gown hangs on one of the wrought iron bed posts. I get up and wrap it around my body. I stop at the twin's bedroom door on the way to the kitchen. The pink and blue walls. The Barbie and Bob the Builder duvet covers. The talcum powdered air creeps into my breath. I hold it, not wanting to let go.



MY FATHER'S DAUGHTER *...contd*

In the kitchen I put some spaghetti into a saucepan. Fill the kettle. Then mute the television. The song on Mid-West Radio tries to slow the beats in my heart.

"When I fall ..."

I sort through the pile of mail on the worktop while the kettle boils. A white envelope addressed to me in Mike's handwriting is the third one down. I tear it open. The envelope drops to the floor. My head spins and hand lashes out knocking the wooden frame that sits on the shelf over the worktop. Bits of glass scratch the photo of Mike and the twins as it lands on the tiles. I scramble over the mess and sit at the table. What does he mean he can't take it anymore? The news on the radio interrupts my thoughts.

"Eyewitnesses saw a man drive off Killala pier earlier this evening."

Screams in my head - Mam's, Mike's. My babies. He wouldn't. Would he? Mobile. Contacts. Scroll. C'mon. Where's her name? Bloody phone. Finally. Hit ring button. C'mon. Answer. Ring again.

"Is he there?"

"What?"

"Just tell me he's there and the twins."

"What in God's name are you doing - ringing at this hour? Leave us alone. You've caused enough trouble."

"IS HE THERE?"

"Yes."

Phone hits table. Body convulses. Keep breathing. I look out the window. The full moon illuminates the narrow path from the garden to the nearby lake. I barely recognise the woman in the darkened window pane. My ulcerous grief bursts and I taste blood. Mascara runs. Its black-salted streaks cut through my porcelain foundation.

I stumble towards the front door. My handbag is where I left it earlier on the small table under the stairs. I empty its contents on the floor. Lipsticks, tampons, loose change, car park tickets and receipts. Finally, I see the white business card. There's a picture of a rainbow over the psychotherapist's name. A damned rainbow. But I know I can do what needs to be done to get my family back. It's not too late for me to save myself, to save Mike, to save the twins. I'm not my father's daughter.

Dominique Hecq is a poet, fiction writer and scholar. She grew up in the French-speaking part of Belgium and now lives in Melbourne. Hecq writes across genres and sometimes across tongues. Her works include a novel, three collections of short stories and ten books of poetry. Her poems and stories have been published internationally. Among other honours, Dominique is the recipient of The Melbourne Fringe Festival Award for Outstanding Writing and Performance (1998), The New England Review Prize for Poetry (2004), The Martha Richardson Medal for Poetry (2006), the inaugural AALITRA Prize for Literary Translation from Spanish into English (2014) and the 2018 International Best Poets Prize administered by the International Poetry Translation and Research Centre in conjunction with the International Academy of Arts and Letters. *Tracks* (2020) is her latest book of poetry. With Eugen Bacon, she has co-authored *Speculate* (2021), a collection of microlit. *Songlines* and *Smacked* are forthcoming.



Dominique Hecq

## PAYBACK

Throb of bugs in the air. Clickety-click of stick insects. The pulse of the night drops with a kite's whistle. Chatter of columbines. Song of curlews. Swell of bats crying, screeching, squawking.

The curtain of light lifts. Lorikeets squabble in the gum trees. I lace up my boots. Red letter day. Twenty years I've waited for this. I wake up the child.

I hate it here.

What is it you hate?

Angry babies crying.

They're bats, not babies.

The child's eyes widen. Will they suck my blood?

Come on, poppet, they eat fruit.

Don't call me poppet.

Sorry, Ella. Now get dressed. I'll fix us some brekkie.

The child licks the Nutella off her fingers. I gather the plates, wash up, make sandwiches for lunch. Fill water bottles. Juggle four apples. Pack.

Okay. Let's do it, I say. But the child who refuses to call me mum sulks. I will coax her with stories.

Wait, she says, my notebook.

Camera?

I thought you said...



## PAYBACK ...end

You're not allowed to take pictures of the rock art, but you can snap a bat or a snake.

A Rainbow Serpent?

Best be prepared.

We drive off on a blood red track. Rocks hit the car as we swerve to avoid potholes, carcasses, crows.

Slow down.

I take my foot off the accelerator. Better?

She opens her notebook. Feeds me back my own words:

According to Aboriginal belief, ancestral beings created the landforms, plants, animals and people while travelling along Dreaming Tracks at a point out of western time called The Dreamtime. Many rock paintings relate to these ancestors also known as creator figures and Dreamtime spirits. There are hundreds of painting sites in the Kakadu region that encompass a huge stylistic variety and time span - some sites are over twenty thousand years old. Two ancestral beings left their imprint at Ubirr as they travelled the land in the Dreamtime: The Rainbow Serpent and the Cockatoo Lady. At Burrungu, or Nourlangie, The Lightning Man and other ancestral beings shimmer on rock walls and in shelters.

The language sounds so condescending in her mouth. I sigh.

Ubirr. We fan out with the crowd of tourists in shorts and sneakers, T-shirts and baseball caps, past art galleries, and past polychrome paintings with underlying monochrome designs: crowded palimpsests in shades of ochre, red, burnt sienna, umber. Groups of stick-like figures sweep across the rock face, running, hunting, burying the dead, chasing ghosts.

Dynamic Mimi, I say. The child ignores me.

We pause in front of more recent paintings in graphic x-ray style that show the external and internal parts of the body.

Look, I say, the Cockatoo Lady. Ah! Nardarmbul, the Cockatoo Lady, not with beak and crest, but as the Serpent!

Okay. I know, says the child, ventriloquising my words. It seems the myth of the Cockatoo Lady overlaps with that of the Rainbow Serpent. A case of split personality. She chortles.

Wait, I say. Is this a game?

Give me a break.

Give *me* a break. Anyway, Ngalyod is an avatar of the Rainbow Serpent who created the Dreamtime.

At these words, the child stands to attention. Go on.

I glean information from posters planted along the galleries. And yes, I go on. Unlike the Cockatoo Lady, Ngalyod never changed form. Long ago, Ngalyod cut a deep gash through the escarpment, moved through a ravine that ends at a waterfall and chose that place for a home. A rock shields the entrance.

And?

I'll ask Google.

Gotcha!

Here we are. Today, the Gagudju people still know where the Rainbow Serpent lives; a place called Djuwarr, where water flows along cracks atop a plateau and cascades to the base of a rock face. At the foot of the waterfall is a dark pool surrounded on three sides by cliffs. This is Ngalyod's home, I say, showing her the picture. It won't be on our map.

PAYBACK *...end*

Why?

It's a sacred place.

You mean secret?

I guess. Look: here.

I can't see.

Here. Ngalyod's hiding in the yams. See? A circle figure I name Uroboros, the serpent that eats its own tail.

As the child peers at the rock face I key in Uroboros on my screen. I was wrong! The image of Uroboros, or Ouroboros, crossing itself into an infinity symbol is a modern idea that harks back to the Egyptians, Google tells me. But it does retain the meaning of endless cycle.

Too many errors of nomination in this story. How easily I make the other mine. Assume the white version of history. Now the child has lost interest.

Let's push on, Ella.

In the main gallery I point out pale figures. Tell her they are probably whites because Aboriginal people used to call them ghosts. I remind myself to check that later.

We follow the signposts past an ancient Aboriginal shelter. Some people have as many as three cameras around their waists or necks. Most ignore the NO PHOTOS signs. iPhones are handy.

I eavesdrop. The paintings gathered here were restored in 1962.

I wasn't even born, says the child.

Neither was I.

And who's this guy with the big, you know...

The Lightning Man, I whisper in her ear. He brings the wet season and controls the lightning storms. We'll see more of him tomorrow at Nourlangie.

The child nods.

A closer look. The Lightning Man is well-endowed, indeed. He is surrounded by sparks, and has stone axes fixed to his head, elbows and knees.

Two Swedish women request a photograph. My hands sweat and shake. Click! The child glances at me accusingly.

I redeem myself with a story she may not have heard:

The Lightning Man came out of the sky riding storm clouds. See? Take a look. He didn't come with a hammer, like Thor, but with stone axes pinned to his head, elbows and knees. He struck the clouds and made thunder. If he caught men and women disobeying the law, he'd hiss and crackle. Sometimes he'd even throw blazing spears at them. He still lives in the sky. He comes out every year in Gunumeleng, the pre-monsoon season, announcing rains the Rainbow Serpent brings. It reminds people not to make Spirits angry.

I'm in the way. Step aside for a selfie. Apologise. Look around. The child is gone.

Ella, I whisper. Try not to look conspicuous as I retrace my steps, calling out her name louder and louder. The crowd of tourists is thick. People stare. Whisper. A park ranger grins. Points to a fissure on the rock face I just walked past.

There she is, petrified, her camera trembling in her hands. High up the crack in the rock is a threesome of bats hanging and silent.

Come on, I say. It's Okay.



## PAYBACK ...end

When's dad coming?

It may be a while, love. My hand reaches out for hers. She shakes it off.

We follow the trail of artworks, oblivious to time and space. Suddenly we're climbing a steep hill. Flowstone shawls spread under our feet. A whistling kite circles above our heads.

I try explaining the Dreamtime. A worldview, I stammer. It refers to Aboriginal concepts of *time out of time* or *everywhen* during which the land was inhabited by ancestors with supernatural powers. I'm proud of the word *powers* but struggle to convey how the Dreamtime extends to *now* and *happenstance*. I get lost in songlines. My mind is such a predator.

Is this the Bardedjilidji walk? asks a woman.

I nod.

She looks up. Frowns. Any idea how we're going to get down?

Oh, easy, I say, the track loops around the lookout and leads back to the carpark. It doesn't.

I pay for my hubris. Distraction. Carelessness. Cultural cannibalism.

Eyes fog. Legs turn to jelly. Back a river of sweat. Heart a stampede. My breath cascades. Trickle. Stops. Don't look back, I say inside my head. I do.

Layered sandstone outliers crumble under my feet. I crawl to the middle of the outcrop. The Nadab Lookout. The call of the void. The terror. Focus. Remember that Baudelaire was partial to the adjective *vast*.

Wherever you turn, cautiously, there are views across the floodplains eight hundred metres below. I remember the child.

Come, she says, offering a hand.

In my voice, I hear a wee thanks.

Soon the child breaks off and gambols downhill like a wild goat. I, feeling legless, shuffle down mostly on my ass.

Back in Jabiru that night, a dip in the pool.

Come on, poppet, let's get out, I say. Too cold.

No answer. The child towels herself dry. I want to abscond. Walk off my shame, guilt, rage.

As the child showers back at our cabin, I sneak out into the dark. Lie on the gravel path, surrounded by scraggly bushes. Look up at the sky. The Southern Cross is as bright as ever, Venus and Jupiter adorning it.

The light on the porch is off. But the door is unlocked. I let myself in. The child has fallen asleep on the coach, an empty packet of Tim Tams by her hand. I pull the doona over her bare legs, dab some lavender in the crook of her arms, and check the fridge. Eggs. That'll do. We have a long drive ahead of us after Nourlangie.

Pine Creek. Not much water in sight. A gold mining town that stumbled into existence when the Overland Telegraph Line uncovered gold in 1870 as men dug holes for posts. The Lazy Lizard Tavern advertises booze along with Pizza and Parma Night. Holy beer, here I come. I order pizza and chips, a Pale Ale and a lemon squash. The child scrunches up her nose. The beer will see me off to sleep.

Oh, Leichardt, Giles, Simpson. Puny mortals, so much more driven than us, mere tourists in this country. We look for Umbrawarra Gorge, site of a disused tin mine we might never find. We bolt along the unsealed track now trickling into a narrow path with dried up creeks crossing underneath. Hot. Thirsty. Out of range. The car swings hither and thither. Dips. The child takes off her earplugs. Grabs her seatbelt with both hands.

PAYBACK *...end*

It's okay. A little exploration, I blurt out.

Huh?

A little explore.

The child laughs. She knows from previous travels that I use the term when we're about to get lost. May be lost.

Florence Falls at last, with its deep plunge pool surrounded by black hard rock cliffs the child ascends. We spend the afternoon lazing inside the shallow, bubbling pools of Buley Rockhole, where a stream tumbles down the hill, bouncing between water-holes. The child dives from the edge of the largest rockpool. I commit to memory the names of plants we come across: cycad, grevillea, turkey bush, Kakadu plum and Eucalyptus koolpinensis, resurrection grass.

When's dad coming?

Look, he might be a while yet, Ella.

A swamp on the way to Bachelor. Not a croaking sound. The ground is dry, parched. As water builds up, frogs and tadpoles will thrive. We see plenty of dragonflies. And, oh! I spot a tiny blue-winged kingfisher dismembering a frog in a gumtree.

Isn't he adorable?

You're so...

On the side of the road, brumbies. Look, I say, they are so beautiful in pied sunlight.

You're *sooo* full of shit.

I can't think of an answer. Promise something special for tomorrow. The child plugs her ears. We drive on. Reach Bachelor where I buy curly pasta, Neapolitan sauce and two Golden Gaytimes.

We settle for the night in silence.

Edging Litchfield National Park, ours is a lonely car on the track. But as none of us was hungry, here we are at break of day.

Look! A surrealist installation: Dali and Magritte with termites.

I hate you so much, says the child.

I don't understand.

You never listen.

Yes, I do.

Dali and Magritte with termites, she sneers, throwing her hands aloft.

I thought you'd like the termite mounds. They are geophysical artworks.

You talk crap. Not listening.

Oh, look, a horseshoe bat. Isn't he cute?

When's dad coming?

Not sure, to be honest. Plus, we're kind out of range, I say, pulling the map out of my pocket.

She snorts.

In any case, Ella, I've left my phone in the car.

When I take my eyes off the map, the child is gone.



PAYBACK     ...end

Notes and Sources

I acknowledge that I have respectfully invoked Indigenous concepts. I am aware that the term ‘Dreaming’ which conveys an ongoing process is not preferred to ‘Dream-time.’ However I chose to use ‘Dreamtime’ to facilitate the narrator’s task of explaining the concept with reference to western conceptions of time and also to highlight her limitations in understanding Indigenous culture - no doubt a projection of my own limitations.

I have drawn on David M Welch ‘s *Aboriginal Paintings at Ubirr and Nourlangie* [Aboriginal Culture Series No. 11] Coolalinga, Northern Territory, 2015 in the discussion of rock art.



Quarter Moon. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

Eunice Yeates is a freelance writer from the Republic of Ireland, now based in Northern Ireland. In addition to spending some years in Japan and South Africa, she has also lived in London, Brussels, and Boston. Her work, which often explores identity and sense of place, has appeared in a variety of publications including *The Irish Times*; *The Dublin Review of Books*; *Flash: The International Short-Story Magazine*; *Ink, Sweat and Tears*; *The Bangor Literary Journal*; *Aerial Magazine*; *Coming Home*; *Jawbreakers Flash-Fiction Anthology*; and *Live Encounters Poetry & Writing*.



Eunice Yeates

## SETTING THE BAR

Without looking, the barman stops pouring when he reaches the brim of his stainless steel measure. He tips 175 millilitres of Chardonnay into a stem glass and pushes it across the counter. Justine stares.

He knows that stare. Would you prefer a large?

How much larger would that be?

She glances at Neil, who makes no eye contact but his face is registering London prices.

250ml, the barman tells her.

The number means nothing to Justine. She passes the glass back to him. Go on, so.

Neil settles up, grabs his pint by the neck, and makes for a high-top in the corner. Justine follows. The barstools are backless and she doesn't like them. Position readjusted, she raises her glass, but Neil has already downed a long draught and is burping softly into the palm of his hand.

Lovely, says Justine, as if she were talking about the pub.

When the first swallow disappoints her, she quickly takes another. Better. Then another, just to be sure. Her fingers relax, her jaw softens. This wine, she thinks, is worth every ha'penny of its nine quid pour; 13% alcohol earning its keep. She sips again.

A man passing their table misses his footing and stumbles into Neil whose pint sloshes but does not spill.

Mate, sorry. He raises his hands in apology.

Before her fiancé can react, Justine chimes in. No worries, you're grand.

With a flourish, the man turns his two hands to thumbs-up, then heads to the bar.

The fuck'd you do that for?

Justine shrugs. Say nothing. Don't set him off. After all, it's the first time they've been away together.

The wine's gorgeous, Neil.

Fucking want to be.

She stalls a moment. Only words, she tells herself. Not his fault, knowing what she knows. Will I get you another beer?

He pretends to adjust the strap of his wristwatch, taking longer than he needs to refasten it. After a while he sighs and looks away. I'll go up in a minute.



## SETTING THE BAR *...contd*

The bar is busy. Near the door, a pianist plays notes that rise above the hum of conversation and the staccato of sudden laughter. Justine sees three pals sharing a bottle of fizz. She likes how they lean in to listen to each other. Easy friends. In the candlelight, she reaches across and touches Neil's arm. He stands so abruptly that his stool scrapes the floor. Same again, he grunts. It isn't a question.

She turns to watch him walk away. Observing his gait, anyone else might perceive a hostile man—something about the set of his shoulders—but she knows this for a vulnerability. No one likes Neil. Her friends can't stand him. Don't marry him, her mother pleads. Thinking about it, she feels suddenly sad. A tap on the shoulder startles her.

Excuse me, a middle-aged woman is saying.

Yes?

I'm sitting there—the woman indicates a table close by—look, it's none of my business, but I can see that he's not very nice to you.

Justine tenses. Absolutely none of your business.

I know. Sorry. It's just, I've been where I think you are. You don't have to stay, you know? I had to tell you that.

You know nothing. Justine raises her voice. About me. About him.

No. Okay. Sure. I'll go. But please be careful.

There are tears in Justine's eyes when Neil returns from the bar. He doesn't notice because he doesn't look at her. Nine fucking quid, he says, slamming her drink down. Then he necks half of his pint in one go.

Cheers, she replies.



©Mark Ulyseas

Lady. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



Frances Browner lives in Greystones, County Wicklow. Her short stories have been published in Ireland's Own, Woman's Way, the Blue Nib, Bray Arts Journal, Sixteen and UCD's HCE Review. One was longlisted for the Fish Publishing Award; shortlisted for Trevor/Bowen, Francis McManus, the RTE/Penguin prize and Cork Library's 'From the Well'; won 2nd prize in the Dromineer Literary Festival 2010, and was highly commended for the Costa Book Awards, 2020. Poems and memoir have also been published and broadcast on radio.



## MOTHER DEAREST

The stream rippled, a blackbird cawed, and cars swished up and down the main road. Paula plucked at daisies, and purple flowers she didn't know the names of. The local children used to play under the small stone bridge - tig, chasing, hide 'n seek, their mothers sitting on the grass, smoking and shouting at them to be quiet. If they weren't, there'd be hell to pay. Or the promise of an ice cream withdrawn. Not that Paula's mother would have told her about the treat until it was taken away and that sense of what could've been hung over her the whole rest of the day.

She crossed the bridge into the village, not recognizing its residents anymore. The women with flowing skirts and long silvery hair could be girls she went to school with, or those new-age arty types that had started to stream into town, just as Paula was on her way out. Full of nonsense they were, Mammy would spit out the words, not doing a tap of work between them. Crusties, Dave called them. He always had more in common with Mammy than Paula ever had. That should've been a sign, if she'd been looking for signs.

Paula wished she could sit around all day, wearing a long cheesecloth dress, writing poetry. But she was far too fat for such a rig-out. It's hiding her figure she should be, Mammy would say. Paula had written a poem once. The teacher thought it was good and told her to send it to the Evening Press, but Mammy wouldn't give her the price of a stamp. Tore the envelope into tiny pieces. Rubbish, she hissed, as the words fell to the floor in confetti.

A warm breeze left a whiff of silage in its wake. Paula drew in a breath and inhaled the familiar childhood smell. Dave could never understand her love of the farm. Something else he and Mammy had shared - a disgust for the countryside. That had been the real reason he'd whisked Paula off to Dublin after they were married, not because he'd wanted her all to himself. Ironical that he was the one who had ended up back there.

"You won't hang onto him too long in the city," Mammy had smirked.

MOTHER DEAREST *...contd*

Paula had smiled back, beaming, she was that proud; proud to be pulling one over on her, at last. It had been embarrassing at school, her mother the school secretary, flirting with all the boys, and they, idiots, flirting back. So what if she was thin and petite, with blonde highlights, looking ten years younger, bouncing around the place, her loud laugh shrilling the corridors.

Paula opened the door of Sullivan's chemist. A glass counter has replaced the old wooden one. Shelves held scented candles, fancy frames for photographs and dried flowers in decorated pots. Gone was the musty atmosphere, the medicine bottles and tablets, the jars of face cream. Everything was shiny and gold, in tubes and colourful packages, displayed on chrome. Paula wandered around, in awe at the size of it. They had knocked a few walls, dug into the kitchen and dining-room of the old house, where she used to sit with her friend, Maire, after school.

"Can I help you?" A salesgirl was handing a paper bag to a customer.

Paula turned around, caught her breath, and backed out the door without replying. Shaking, she staggered towards her jeep. The customer exited and eased herself into the same old red Peugeot she'd been driving for years; fixed the rearview mirror, and took off. Paula revved the jeep and followed the car out the road towards the marina. For the first time in a long time, she had missed Dave beside her in bed earlier, the beat of his heart next to hers. Coming home had done it; coming back to the town where they'd both grown up. And the letter. The first one since the day he had walked out and left her.

The envelope curling at the edges, his handwriting instantly recognizable. "I'm never coming back to you," it began, no greeting, salutation, nothing. "I just want to see the kids. I'll get a solicitor if you don't let me." She'd swallowed a gulp of wine. "You won't get away with this." His tone was vicious. She poured what was left of the Merlot over the page, watched it blot out the words. Returned it to its shabby envelope and placed both into a larger, padded one; didn't have an address to send it to, had decided to hand deliver instead.

When he told he was going, she hadn't pleaded or begged him to stay, had been too sick to even talk at the time. As the years passed, she got over him.

She'd tell him calmly, without any fuss, that he can't have access to the children as long as he's still with . . . with . . . her. Having kept her dignity for so long, she was not about to lose it. All around were shadows of a time gone by, happy times too; it wasn't too late to grab at happiness again. She'd look the two of them in the eye and ask "why?"

Everybody said she was owed an explanation, but Paula hadn't wanted one, at first. Then, she became filled with wanting to know why he had abandoned them? Not just her, but their three children too. How could he have walked away from them? Knowing what he was risking? They were so small and fragile then, and needing care. Especially their son. Didn't a boy need his father? Didn't a father need his son? That's what she'd been led to believe. But, the natural order had been turned upside down and nothing had gone right since.

She'd put up weight, due to lack of exercise and too many take-outs. Comfort food, they called it. Even Slimming World hadn't delivered on its promises. The minute the diet ended, the pounds piled on again. They'd cut back on her hours at work. It was only a County Hospital in the small town she had moved to, and was not bringing in the numbers needed to justify full-time staff. The girls were at that difficult age too, full of teenage angst, blaming her for their Dad running off. She should've tried harder to keep him. Should've, should've, would've, could've.

And what about Grandma? She'd wanted to scream. Why don't you blame her? It was all her fault, had been from the beginning. Always finding fault with her only daughter, criticizing her on her appearance, her poor results in school and her lack of a successful career. Why hadn't she gone and trained to become a real nurse when she was at it? Her mother's harsh words had contributed to Paula's lack of self-esteem and, in the end, to her inability to believe someone would love her.

"I still love you," she always replied to her girls' admonishments. They might appreciate it someday. And she was glad they were not afraid to speak their mind. It was the boy that worried her. He never uttered a word, about anything.

She'd been seeing a therapist, to get a handle on things, to try and get an explanation as to why she had manifested all of this. Oh, how Mammy would laugh at that.

MOTHER DEAREST *...contd*

The therapist had encouraged this visit too. "Jump right in," she'd told Paula at her last session, "no dilly dallying. Confront them."

When the marina came into view, Paula felt she might be able to do just that. The sun was setting, and in the distance, she saw the willows and long river grass where they used to play 'catch a girl, kiss a girl' - her, and Dave and Maire.

"Don't tell me it's Maire Sullivan," she'd said when Dave announced he was leaving and was then filled with guilt. Her friend would never have betrayed her like that.

She stopped the car and grabbed her phone; tapped out the number she still knew off by heart. She used to do this, at first, to hear her voice. Nobody ever answered.

They'd have known it was Paula, number unknown. Nobody answered this time either. She alighted the jeep, squeezed by the red car, and strode towards the barge.

The Ann Margaret, her father had christened it, even though everyone had warned him that a seaman never named his boat after his wife. Poor old Dad had learnt the hard way. Paula knew she should ring him. He'd have heard by now that she was back. His heart had been broken too; as had her younger brother, Kevin's. A young man, still in his twenties, having to stay in this small town and face the humiliation.

The three grandchildren were three more hearts broken. Mammy may not have been a great mother, but as a grandmother, she'd shone. And then Paula, her heart had been broken twice. She stepped on board, her bulk causing the barge to sway, then to tip to one side, like a see-saw.

"Who is it?" a familiar voice called from below deck.

"It's me."

She wished she'd worn something nice, what, she didn't know, nothing nice fit her anymore. Even if she'd washed her hair, put on a lick of lipstick, she might feel better. Be prepared, Mammy had always taught her, you never know the day nor the hour. How true those words had turned out to be.

A swarm of gulls swept down, screeching, picking crusts off the ground and soaring away again. A breeze lifted her tent dress; there was a tangy taste of salt in the air.

Paula recalled days on the river. Dad letting her steer. Feeling in charge. Holding onto the wheel of the Ann Margaret. It was the film star he'd named it after, Dad had insisted, but no one believed him.

Footsteps approached the barge door and she lost her nerve. That familiar dread seized her. Caught in her throat. Stopped her breathing. She stepped back off the boat and into the water, felt it fill her up, a feeling she hadn't had in a long time. She flailed her arms, fought for air, and broke through the surface, took one last gulp and sank again, hitting her head off the harbour wall. Just as well. What do you say to the mother you haven't spoken to in years? What do you say to the woman who stole your husband?



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Jose Varghese

## THE MAN UNDER THE FIREWORKS

"There's a man there, doing that!" Keya says.

She wriggles, digging her fingernails to my hand. A moment ago, her hand had almost slipped out of my clasp. It was then that I lifted her up, pulling her close to my chest. I'm used to this, waiting for her desperate gasps and grunts to subside. She would then stop hurting me and I would begin to feel the two of us merge into each other, with the disparate thoughts in our brains turned off, moving forward just by instinct like a unicellular organism, with those awkward limbs that aren't limbs but the will to move forward.

"Don't let her go, Kamala," Jai says, as he tries to weave a way out for us through the unruly crowd.

"I know, Jai. I won't," I say.

He doesn't even turn his head to our direction. He's obsessed with the idea of getting out of this place. It was his decision to visit the temple on a festival day, but now he's the one getting impatient. He's always guided by extreme reactions to situations that can't be foreseen.

I hadn't seen that reedy man below the fireworks before Keya spoke. And then, his silhouette and swift movements registered for a brief moment, as we moved against the tide of chants and slogans.

I close my eyes for a moment, imagining us swimming like small fish in the odor of sweat and saliva that the bodies in motion spread all around. Keya's breath falls in irregular patterns against my neck. As she turns her head to face what's ahead of us, her hairband comes off and slides down my saree to the ground. I let it go, after a moment's consideration. It's not a good idea to retrieve it, with this frenzied crowd that might trample us if I halt or bend down.

Keya is back to her elements now, silent and weary. It was the first time she spoke after two long years, after our lives were altered by that fatal car crash.

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## THE MAN UNDER THE FIREWORKS *...contd*

Everyone had kept telling us that we shouldn't expect Keya to connect with the world the way she did earlier. Even the specialists were dismissive of our hope that she was perhaps too young to retain those memories and be damaged by it forever.

"Memories matter a lot more to children than to adults", one of them said. "A three-year-old would take in every single detail. She won't know when to look away. And there's no filtering once she's seen it... no rationalization within such limited logic to save her, by writing it off as a bad dream."

It was another wild idea of Jai that had landed us in that head-on collision with two speeding motorcycles that came one after the other in a fraction of a second. It's true that the riders had compromised on their better judgement to take the wrong direction in a short stretch of the one-way street, for some kind of emergency, in the late hours. Three men and a woman. They struggled for their lives right in front of our eyes, and failed.

The police, and then the people and the court, made their judgements in our favour, and were relieved that we took all the safety measures and were lucky that there was no injury to speak of, thanks to the slope that worked in our favour. But I knew that it could have been avoided, and four lives could have been saved, even if they did break the rules, if we weren't there on the road at the wrong time. Jay kept saying that those four people were the ones who took the wrong decision and were in the wrong place.

No one had any idea then about the fate that awaited us in the form our daughter, scarred for life from the horrible sight of the lost struggle she witnessed.

Things would have been better if she had cried out in frustration, but she hid her horror in uneasy silence, her eyes flitting from one object to another. Words that were once forming within her were all discarded with no second thoughts. Her fast-developing intellect and her consciousness of life died that day, leaving her helpless body to carry on, only because she couldn't stop breathing on her own. The endless struggle began then for Jai and me, to make sense of her silence.

I'd tried my best to cope, but Jai had always been waiting for the impossible, to alter our reality with incurable hope and faith, which he was never brought up with in the first place. He began to believe in the power of the unseen and seemed more obsessed with making her speak than to care for her distress. For me, the instances of my existence merging with hers became an everyday reality. I knew that we, her parents, weren't supposed to lose the common ground in our fight for survival, but that was the ultimate result of our strange obsessions. All that we knew was that we were not in control of what would change Keya.

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I am blinded by a sea of colours spreading outside the temple. The hysteria of drum-beats drowns Jai's voice. He has to pull us, hard and rough, to get us out of it.

"Did you hear her speak, Jai?" I say, as he opens the door of a wheezing taxi.

"Yes, I did. But let's escape from this madness first," he says.

The procession from the temple merges with a waiting crowd in the street at an intersection. They start dancing on the road, looking tipsy. I search on their faces, in their eyes, for something – happiness, devotion, or faith. I fail.

Keya is too weary of it and begins to fall asleep. Her fingers loosen their grip on my arm, as her head finds a comfortable spot to rest on my shoulder.

"This wasn't a good idea, Jai," I say.

He doesn't say anything, but puts his arm around us as the car moves to a narrow lane. I hear his heart beating fast to a sob, so clear yet unreal, the way Keya must have seen the man under the fireworks.

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Kate McNamara is a Canberra based poet, playwright and critical theorist. Her plays have been performed internationally. McNamara delivered the opening address to the Fourth International Conference of Women Playwrights in Galway (2001). She was awarded the H.C Coombs Fellowship at ANU (1991) and elected to the Emeritus Faculty. She won The Banjo Patterson Award for her short story Verity. Her published works include *Leaves*, *The Rule of Zip* (AGP) Praxis and *The Void Zone* (AGP). Her poetry, short fiction and critical theory has been published in a number of anthologies including *There is No Mystery* (ed. K Kituai, 1998), *The Death Mook* (ed. Dion Kagan, 2008) *These Strange Outcrops* (2020) and *The Blue Nib* (2020) She has also worked extensively as an editor and has only recently returned to her first great love, poetry. McNamara is currently working on *The Burning Times*.



Kate McNamara

## IN THE CITY OF GIANO

It was a city of sculpted light and clarity, constructed on a bedrock of lies and intricate webs of deceit. And Leon Battiste Alberti had built it himself, almost single-handedly. His advisers had been cynical as he drained the city-state's treasury in pursuit of his splendid vision, this edifice that would outlast the measure of his life and his law. They predicated an early demise. Many had come to rule before this small, unprepossessing man, whose origins were less than illustrious, and been defeated by the shining, complex world of Giano. It required subtlety and brutal strength and when he had first risen out of the military ranks to lead a punishing action against a new schism of popular democracy, few had believed he would have the stamina for rule. Giano destroyed as it created, brilliantly, casually and with caprice.

On this first day of WinterMoon, the 20th anniversary of his YearRule, he is perched on a window ledge, somewhat precariously, to observe the gathering chaos below him. Always secretly amused that the nobles believe he appreciates their adulation, he retains a precise view of their aspirations, their hatreds and their desire to destroy him. Not much has given him pause in the long, bloody years in the *Palazza de Medici*. Even above the furore of the courtyard below, he hears the door behind him open, his instincts are close to paranormal and he shifts his balance imperceptibly as a whirling darkness launches itself at him. Pivoting, he turns and catching her by the arm he uses her own momentum to pin her to the floor.

*One day you will be too sure, Battiste, one day.*

For a moment he allows himself the luxury of appraising her; the black depths of her hair and those remarkable eyes that have never conceded anything, to anyone. He smiles.

*But not yet awhile, Isabella, it would bore you. Does this unprovoked attack upon my person indicate that you are unduly pleased with me?*

*I would rather please a dog. Take your hands from me, peasant.*



## IN THE CITY OF GIANO ...contd

He laughs despite himself, she often has this effect on him, and perhaps that is why he keeps her. He lets her move fractionally and then allows her to get up slowly, very slowly, he has never underrated her venom. The chamber vibrates as she slams the door after her, a small crystal chalice explodes off a shelf. He sighs wondering again if his passion for unusual ornaments will finally destroy him where all else has failed.

The origins of Isabella Maria de Medici could be traced back across a thousand years. It was a feat few could match in these decadent days and Battise valued her as much as his other priceless antiques, his galleries, his subject cities, all of which had been purchased at unnatural prices. But he is a man who knows the true depth of an obsession, and this relentless pursuit of the fragmented and tattered beauty of an era now totally surpassed by technological hegemony pleases him, by the very nature of its oddity. He likes to imagine that he is the last in a line of *cognoscenti* who have tirelessly pursued the dying mysteries of long gone ages. This thought amuses him for, in many ways, he knows exactly what he is, a bandit-king, little more than a *condottiere*. He had purchased Isabella in an off world buying expedition on a small planet that specialized in aristos slavery, although it was never described in such a vulgar way. She had been enhanced, of course, but there remained a significant quantity of her genetic codex that made her something of a rarity. The GeneTech had been concerned about her violent, indeed pathological, propensities and had cautioned Battiste against buying her in her original condition. With some splicing and careful re-sequencing work the Genetech believed he could modify some of her alarming behaviour. Battiste had laughed.

*I am not purchasing a painting to match my existing decor, Dottore, she is classified as human I believe, I want as much of the original gene material as possible, complete with murderous tendencies.*

*Seigneur, it is cruel to keep her locked up, even here we find she is practically uncontrollable.*

*On the contrary sir, I will allow her to go free.*

Battiste transported her back to a replica of the *Palazza* her family had once built in their era of greatness. He is aware that Isabella, in as much as she is capable of coherent thought or imagination, hates both him and the *Palazza* without reservation.

Sighing he turns from the gallery of portraits, the Giotto's and Torrigianos and wonders again what ails his spirit for it seems to him, of late, that there is little of genuine pleasure in his life. He is not bored, the intricate dance of power shifts in Giano keeps him more than occupied, something less easy to describe besets him. Perhaps it's time to die, he muses, though that may well be nigh impossible to achieve. Mortality is not an easy option in a body that has been constructed to last.

As the last of the great bio-engineer Technocrats, he thinks of himself as the Vesalius of his age and whereas Vesalius had demystified the anatomy of the human heart, Battiste can now control that heart, its passions, its loves and hatreds. All this appeals to his sense of an ordered universe, and he believes he has constructed a path towards the ultimate expression of humanism. However all this does little to solve the immediate problem of his ennui, lesser mortals than he have despaired when the flame that drove their lives had fulfilled its singular purpose. He is unaware that Isabella is planning to solve the tedious dilemma of his mortality.

Isabella Maria is not entirely human nor is she a clone, she is something far more subtle than either. The world she delighted in, that marvelous creation of her brother, Lorenzo Il Magnifico, no longer exists. The *Palazzo* is both utterly alien to her and disturbingly familiar. It is an endless maze of lies, and yet it calls to her, there is no peace in it. She has been striving for an unbroken sequence of memory, for a functional intelligence since Battiste had purchased her, but she keeps getting lost somewhere in nebulous spaces, dreams, and images that unravel like the fabric of fragile lace. It seems anything can betray her grasp on her purpose, a deft thread of music, a portrait, the smell of wine and she is back in a world where far flung lights glimmer like a cobwebbed tapestry. She is sea-bound with monsters waves and fish. The sluice gates in her blood open and shut to some iron clad rhythm. And yet there is an imperative in her, a drive, she cannot say what it is for it seems to hide beneath the mountains that are piled in her mind.

Lately, she finds herself drawn back repeatedly to a statue of Piero de Medici; she is entranced by the power of his gaze, the unseeing eyes that seem to see her alone. Conversations float around her, and if she is very still she can hear them, words drifting like mist. The sonorous voice of Marsilio Ficino, a sadness born outside of time, as if he knew the thousand year future of his people.

## IN THE CITY OF GIANO ...contd

*All of it lost, the beauty of eloquence, of art... all of it expressed, alive, here in the Palazzo. Yet we are as fleeting as a storm, my Prince, so soon we will vanish under the heel of the barbarian.* And then Lorenzo's marvelous laughter, rippling through corridors hushed with power and powerful men. She understands that silver world of music, the cadence of poetry, the sway of dark eyed women dressed as fabulously as exotic birds. She knows it like her own skin, the skin which does not quite belong to her and yet it does. She suspects that Battiste controls her through manipulating some instinctual level of her being and although she resists, she is as sleepless and hot as the artificial sun which fills the courtyard beneath her.

But now it is time to leave the gallery, her presence is required to adorn the Chamber of Reception for the arrival of Battiste's guests. As if on cue De Orca arrives to escort her to the dignitaries waiting below. De Orca is an even greater mystery to her at times than Battiste, she distrusts him completely, and he bears a rather large scar on his left arm due to her skill with a knife. But there is something unfathomable in his eyes, something glimmering beneath that perfect exterior. Suddenly she decides to confront him.

*De Orca, you are a pig, I know, but why do you minister to the Battiste despot?*

*Why do you think I have a choice, Lady?*

*Lorenzo would say there is always choice. That complicity is choice.*

*Il Magnifico, God rest him, remains undisturbed in his long sleep.*

*Do not evade, De Orca.*

*Lady, say nothing of this to anyone.*

*Say nothing of what?*

*You should not have these memories, Isabella, they were not part of your original programming.*

Below them the music of lute and pipe ascends like gilded birds and she feels as if the feathered touch of wings could brush her, as if flight were as easy as da Vinci had once made it sound. Air and warmth. Memories glide and coalesce like river fish on a summer's day and for the first time it seems that they belong to her. That growing within her, like a child in utero, there is an emerging synthesis of what she has been and what she will become: Isabella Maria, darkest rose of the Medici. Proof of their splendour and their hope, a woman who was renowned for both her intelligence and her beauty. As she descends the stairwell, she is aware that Battiste is watching her, oblivious to his subjects who cavil beneath the dais like hunted animals. She despises them both, Battiste for his arrogance and his subjects for their abject cowardice. A conversation with Ficino drifts through the doorway of her memories.

*The basest despots contrive to rule by division, they fatten themselves on plundering their people's lives, their very souls. And the people are frail, they are unable to withstand such power...*

She realizes now that she has never had Ficino's compassion for the powerless. Only now, as one of them, is she able to begin to comprehend just what it is that Battiste has made of her. And it is so much less than what she was and now is capable of being. He had wanted an original, a pet Medici, like the miniature monkeys they had once kept on gem-encrusted leashes in the Palaces of Spain. She smiles as she glides towards him through the avenue of cowered subjects, and notes the hint of surprise around his mouth. Like the tiny primates she too is vicious, unpredictable and entirely devoid of gratitude.

Through the long, arduous afternoon Isabella appears to listen to the sycophantic speeches of the nobility and the poor, all in the same key of gratuitous praise for a benevolent ruler. On a deeper level she is more preoccupied with the changes in the composition of neural gases that Battiste is having pumped into the Chamber. Every reaction can be heightened, every emotion can be extended and purged. Given the magnitude of the occasion she notes that Battiste has gone to some pains to orchestrate the emotional fervour the neurals are promoting and that he is not immune to the collective reaction. As the sunlight crosses the Chamber and the light from jeweled chandeliers fractures into dancing prisms, Isabella arrives at her decision. It occurs to her that although she has always been a woman of contradictions, she has never willingly conspired in her own subjugation.

## IN THE CITY OF GIANO ...contd

Thus it was, in the city of Giano, that Isabella de Medici fulfilled a prophecy that had been made about her almost a millennia before her re-creation. As the denizens of the city celebrated the rule of their tyrant with an induced sensual frenzy, Isabella descended the levels of the *Palazza* until she arrived in the BioTech High Sec. Zone. There she efficiently murdered the guards and gained entrance to the centre of Battiste's power. And as the cloned servants of the GeneTechs mindlessly fulfilled their duties, Isabella accessed the acquired memories of four years of captivity on the aristos slavery planet where she had been bred. Armed with that knowledge she constructed a neural recombinant gas that would ensure the death even of Battiste, along with every living carbon based creature within a substantial radius.

Although she was not a woman to suffer unnecessarily from remorse, she could not resist a sense of sadness that the beauty Battiste had assembled in that place would decay before humans would risk entry to the *Palazza* again. As her world lay dying around her Isabella remembered Ficino's prophecy before she succumbed to the sweetness of a death from which she could never be resurrected. Ficino had written

*Your beauty is our greatest weakness, and you despise us correctly for only perceiving a canvas of perfection... the symmetry of your features, the luminosity of your skin. Beneath that is concealed the most lethal woman of our age, you are capable of destroying us because we cannot acknowledge what you truly are, we are incapable of imagining what lives beyond the surface.*

It was time now for the future.

### Note

With the exception of Isabella, all the character in this story have been resurrected from the Italian Renaissance. In some cases I have reshaped personal lives for the purposes of this story, in other cases I have built on what I know of their personal histories. I hope they are more forgiving than Isabella.

### Appendix

Leon Battiste Alberti 1401-72, Marsilio Ficino 1454-1501, Lorenzo de Medici 1448-97, Giotto 1266-c1337  
Torrignano 1483-1523, Piero de Medici 1373-1446, Versalius 1514-64, Leonardo da Vinci 1452-1519



Wedding portrait of 16-year-old Isabella de' Medici by Alessandro Allori, private collection, England.



Lisa C. Taylor is the author of two collections of fiction, *Impossibly Small Spaces* and *Growing a New Tail*. She also has four published poetry collections. A new poetry collection will be published in the spring of 2022. Lisa's honors include the 2015 Hugo House New Works Award for short fiction, a Spotlight feature in January 2015 for the AWP, Pushcart nominations in both fiction and poetry, and, along with Geraldine Mills, the Elizabeth Shanley Gerson Lecture of Irish Literature at University of Connecticut. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in numerous literary magazines and anthologies. Lisa offers private writing workshops through Whitewater Writing and she has twice been a mentor with AWP (Associated Writing Programs). A recent transplant to a tiny mountain town, Lisa has awkwardly learned to mountain bike. She's still nervous about bear encounters. [www.lisactaylor.com](http://www.lisactaylor.com)



Lisa C Taylor

## BEAR CLAW

In June, when my husband bought a leather vest with buffalo nickel buttons, I had a moment of wanting one, too, channeling my fifteen-year-old self on the back of a motorcycle with a boyfriend I was forbidden to see. I had set up a decoy boyfriend who'd pick me up for school in his Chevy and drive me to the wild boy on the Suzuki 500. My inner badass has been dormant and wants to be awakened.

Decades ago, Herman gave me an authentic bear's claw, and that was a cue to call up that fifteen-year-old in short shorts on the back of the bike, no helmet, waist-length hair flying behind me. *For your writing*, is what he said. He was my co-worker in an end-of-the-road program for troubled teens, and would turn out to be one of the best colleagues in my long professional life. Sporadically we'd run into each other, promising to do better about staying in touch.

For years, I kept the bear's claw on my writing desk, moved it upstairs when I switched offices after our son moved out. Not soft like a rabbit's foot, it had tufts of coarse brown fur next to an alarmingly sharp claw. It unsettled me. *I'd maul you for sport*, it seemed to roar.

When we moved across the country, I found the silver acorn a friend gave me at graduation, shells and geodes, the beaded hummingbird, a Mother's Day gift from my son, and an embroidered sunset over mountains my daughter made and I framed, but no bear claw. I emptied boxes, ripped apart taped bubble wrap that cradled chipped prisms from my great-grandmother's chandelier. How could it have escaped my careful packing and labeling?

*You need to be more bear and less dog*, I told myself when I put it on that first desk, just an old table. We all became bears with my last desk before we moved, ripping it apart with a sledgehammer and taking pieces to the landfill. Now I have a new desk, made by a local craftsman. I can visualize the bear claw. How did it become separated from the bear? Was it a hunter, roadkill, or did it die a natural death and someone removed the claw with fur intact? I don't know how met its death but it carried an alchemy I feel still. The thing is: we borrow objects for a time, move them from apartment to house or condo. Eventually our attachments grow smaller to coincide with diminishing space.



BEAR CLAW *...contd*

What if I discovered a bear claw where my forefinger should be? What if the bear claw never existed as anything but a concept. What if I don't need a leather vest to kick up dirt and fly down a mountain? What if one day I am face-to-face with a sow and her cubs and I have to write myself out of it?

There are infinite endings to stories but all of them ask me to look, jump higher than I thought I could, get dirty, thirsty, hungry. When I hated holding the bear claw, I loved holding the bear claw. Discomfort is my familiar.

I'm sorry I lost it. I regret never telling Herman how important it was to me. I also know that the bear claw exists, on some realm, in a box, in a landfill, in my old backyard. Its shadow rests on the bookshelf in my office. I don my invisible leather vest with the buffalo nickel buttons and get to work.



Gold painting depicting creatures of the earth on the wooden ceiling of a Buddhist temple.  
Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



Moya Roddy's most recent collection of stories *Fire in my Head* (Culture Matters) was published in October 2021. Her first collection *Other People* (Wordsonthestreet) was described by writer Eilis Ní Dhuibhne as "Beautifully written ... the stories multi-layered, subtle ... with the sensitivity to language of a poet .." and was nominated for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. Her first novel *The Long Way Home* was described in the Irish Times as "simply brilliant" and Books Ireland editor Ruth McKee said of her latest novel *A Wiser Girl* (Wordsonthestreet 2020) "In these chilly uncertain times it is a blast of Italian sunshine, a sparkling glass of wine." Her poetry collection *Out of the Ordinary* (Salmon 2018) was shortlisted for the Strong/Shine Award. Moya also writes for TV and film.



Moya Roddy

## THINGS WE'LL NEVER KNOW ABOUT THE HUMAN HEART

'I saw him.'

'Where?'

'I went to the new exhibition at the National Museum-'

'You never go to exhibitions!'

'I went in for a coffee. They have a nice-'

'I don't believe you.'

'All right, I saw him going in. I recognised him from the photo you showed me.'

'I wish I'd never-' Elaine crossed to the large bay window. She'd no right to be annoyed. Once Fintan had sworn her to secrecy she should have kept her big mouth shut. As it stood, her mother had taken it remarkably well. Naturally, there'd been buckets of disapproval but underneath all the dire warnings Elaine had sensed something else – curiosity, a voyeurism even. She gazed at her mother's rhubarb: if only things could be different. If only she could walk down Grafton Street with Fintan-

'He couldn't have known it was me,' her mother intruded. 'I was wearing dark glasses.'

'He's never met you!'

'If you ask me he looks like the Devil!' her mother hissed. 'That dark hair and little goatee! He's put a spell on you. He is the Devil.'

'It's the 21st century Mam, there are no devils.'

'To think you're living in their home. Her home. I'm glad your father isn't alive.'



## THINGS WE'LL NEVER KNOW *...contd*

'You know quite well it's a self-contained studio in their garden! The last tenant was a boy who went to Trinity.'

'I don't care where he went. It's wrong and you know it. Wrong, wrong, wrong! He's too old for you anyway! Must be at least forty-'

'I love him.'

A meadow brown landed on the nearest rhubarb leaf. A moment later, a second one appeared, fluttering above it, the first butterfly whirling up to join it. Watching the pair circle higher and higher, Elaine wondered if her feelings for Fintan would be quite so intense if he was available?

'What do you know about love at your age! And where does his wife fit in? Or don't wives matter these days?'

'Fintan's a musician.' Elaine stopped; the rationale behind the affair didn't bear a lot of scrutiny. 'They're not like other people. The same rules don't apply,' she ended lamely.

'I wonder who told you that! Does she suspect?'

'I don't think so.'

Catherine was an archaeologist and Elaine thought her beautiful, accomplished. It was obvious Fintan hadn't the least intention of leaving her; Elaine wasn't sure she wanted him to: ridiculous as it seemed she had this absurd fantasy of the three of them living together. Mostly, though, she wished the woman didn't exist but since they only 'saw' each other when Catherine was away her existence and whereabouts loomed large.

'I brought you up to be a good Catholic, to have standards.'

'You brought me up to be afraid.'

'Why aren't you afraid?' her mother retorted.

'Mother recognised you the other day from a photo I showed her,' Elaine confessed. Elaine and Fintan were having a meal in an out-of-the-way restaurant, one unlikely to be frequented by the kind of people Fintan knew.

'Jesus, Elaine! I thought we agreed-'

'I'm sorry, I had to tell someone. Don't worry, she'd die rather than breathe a word.' Elaine toyed with her spaghetti. 'She followed you into the National Museum.'

Fintan smiled. 'Women follow me all the time. They can't help it.'

Elaine marvelled: his insouciance always amazed her. Most men would probably have asked what she'd said but Fintan's reactions were never commonplace.

'She thought you looked like the Devil, that you've put a spell on me. She thinks you'll lead me astray then dump me.' Mrs Caffrey hadn't said the latter but Elaine was in need of reassurance.

'Your mother's obviously a very perceptive woman.'

This time his retort wasn't quite so appealing. Elaine's antennae picked up a warning in the throwaway remark, one he probably intended her to notice. Draining her wine, she met his gaze with her own bright eyes. They laughed. Under the table, his hand found her knee. How adult she felt sitting there, adult and naughty. But his remark had spoiled the evening and later when they made love she turned the churning inside into a kind of passion hoping to fool him. Fool herself.

Some weeks later, Fintan and Catherine left early one Friday morning for a short holiday. The previous day Catherine had waylaid Elaine asking her if she'd mind keeping an eye on things while they were away – water plants, check the answer phone, take calls if any came while she was in the house. Her husband, she'd confided with a laugh, refused to have a mobile. Elaine, who knew all about the holiday and Fintan's attitude to mobiles, feigned surprise. Dropping off the keys, Catherine had told Elaine to make herself at home, use the guest room if she felt like having someone to stay. Wishing her Bon Voyage Elaine felt a twinge of guilt.

## THINGS WE'LL NEVER KNOW *...contd*

Arriving back from work, Elaine went straight to their front door, let herself in. Tentatively, she stepped into the sitting-room. The room was how she remembered it from the day she'd come about the studio flat – modern in a low-key way with pale walls and furnishings, everything minimal. Now, she tried to read it for clues about Fintan and Catherine's life but apart from a large nude above the fireplace which she thought a little risqué, there wasn't much to go on.

On a small shelf of books she noticed a framed photograph. It was taken outdoors, the couple grinning at one another. She studied it carefully, then, covering the eyes so only their mouths were visible, tried to gauge if the smiles were genuine but the photo was too small to really tell. Replacing it, she turned their faces to the wall but a twinge of superstition made her switch it round.

When she couldn't stand it any longer Elaine mounted the stairs. Their bedroom looked out to the back garden and even before she got to it her pulse had begun to race. Poised on the threshold, she put off the moment when she'd actually see the bed they slept in. It wasn't as if Fintan had made any bones about their sex life, pretending he wasn't getting any or that Catherine was frigid. He loved his wife but he needed Elaine – or so he claimed. The bed had been hastily made, twin humps of nightwear visible. She'd never seen Fintan in pyjamas; suddenly envied Catherine her right to watch him undress, put a pair on, undress herself, get in beside him, feel proprietorial.

Sliding open the wardrobe, Elaine selected one of Catherine's dresses, a green silk she'd seen her wearing, held it to her body. Examining her image in a full-length mirror she was taken aback at how like Catherine it made her look. Perhaps all Fintan saw in her was a younger model. Carefully she put the dress back where it belonged then crossed to the dressing table. Picking up a bottle of perfume, she sprayed a little behind her ears then feeling reckless squirted some on her wrists, down the neck of her t-shirt. It was as if Catherine had walked into the room. Spooked, Elaine fled – taking Catherine with her.

Locating the bathroom, Elaine tried to wash off the perfume but it persisted; in the end she decided to take a shower. Quickly, she removed her clothes. Stepping into the glass enclosure she felt as if she was breaking a taboo.

As the cubicle filled with steam she closed her eyes, wishing Fintan was there, their naked bodies slipping and sliding against one another. Sinking to the ground, water cascading over her head, she melted, groaned.

Opening a bottle of wine, Elaine perched on one of the high stools in the kitchen. Mentally, she placed herself on the opposite one. What did Fintan really feel when he looked at her? Could he love someone who was carrying on the way she was? Then acting the innocent in front of his wife? Could she truly love him? Trust him? Sniffling back tears, she shook away the thoughts, refilled her glass. The thrill of being in their home was wearing thin, her earlier high spirits evaporating. Drifting back to the sitting-room, she curled up in an armchair, feeling lonely, abandoned. Half-shutting her eyes, she stared into the distance not focusing on anything in particular. Around her objects began to blur, colours and shapes growing fuzzy, the room darkening and lightening in succession. It was a trick she'd taught herself as a child; something she'd done when things became unbearable.

Elaine jumped up. She'd go mad if she didn't have someone to talk to. Who could she invite? She hardly saw any of her old friends: it had been easier to drop them than lie. That only left her mother. Better than nothing, she decided, she'd ring her in the morning, invite her over. Before going back to the studio Elaine went upstairs to their bedroom – reaching under the quilt she eased out Fintan's pyjamas.

Cradling the pyjamas, Elaine lay in her narrow bed. The street lights shone through the curtains and she could hear voices, laughter; it was Friday night, most people her age were going out pubbing or clubbing. What had her parents' relationship been like, she found herself wondering. She was seven when her father died. Her mother would have been thirty-eight, a couple of years younger than Fintan. She'd only ever thought of her mother missing her father as a 'man about the house'. For the first time it occurred to her she might have missed him sexually. In the darkness, Elaine held Fintan's pyjamas to her nose, breathed in his smell, trying not to think of him with Catherine, what they might be getting up to.

'Crystal,' Elaine's mother pronounced holding the glass to the light. Since arriving, she'd spent her time opening cupboards, scrutinising cutlery, exclaiming over the fineness of the china.

THINGS WE'LL NEVER KNOW *...contd*

'She has taste,' she added, 'not just money.'

Elaine made a face, annoyed her mother hadn't shown the slightest interest in her studio, hadn't even asked to see it. Besides she wanted her to sit down so they could talk. The soup was ready, the garlic bread beginning to smell.

'Aren't you going to show me?'

'My flat?'

'Later. The bedroom.'

'Their bedroom?'

'It must be upstairs,' Mrs Caffrey said, pushing past her daughter.

Elaine overtook her on the stairs, got to the room first. As she flung open the door, sunlight flooded through the floor-length window, honeying the walls.

'Ahhh,' Mrs Caffrey sighed, 'what a lovely room.' Taking her time she explored – out-stretched hands caressing the long silky curtains, plump embroidered cushions, trailing one of Catherine's many colourful scarves. It was like watching someone play blind man's bluff with their eyes open. Eventually, she came to a stop by the foot of the bed, her fingers lightly touching the cover.

'They're still in love.'

'How do you know?'

'Can't you feel it?'

'You're just saying-'

A ringing sound interrupted and Elaine rushed downstairs to answer the phone. She should have known not to invite her mother; she always spoiled things.

When she picked up the receiver a male voice asked for Fintan.

'He's away on holidays.'

'That's not Catherine?'

'No, I'm a friend, I mean I rent-'

'Oh yes, the lodger!' The man on the other end laughed before hanging up.

Rushing to the bedroom, Elaine was surprised to find it empty, wondered where her mother could have got to. Then she noticed her court shoes by the bed, her bouclé jacket crumpled on a chair.

'What on earth are you doing?'

Mrs Caffrey didn't answer. Tucked beneath the duvet, Elaine's mother lay perfectly still, eyes closed, a dreamy, far-away expression on her face.



Nidhi Srivastava Asthana worked as an instructional designer in the computer software industry in India, loved sharing historical stories with her students in Myanmar and Thailand, lived in the USA as a student and was an accompanying spouse to her peripatetic husband in Germany, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Mexico. She is presently in Laos. Similarities and differences between cultures have always fascinated her. Here are links to some other pieces she wrote inspired by foreign cultures:  
<https://indiacurrents.com/a-village-on-the-tonle-sap/>      <https://literallystories2014.com/asthana-nidhi-srivastava/>



Nidhi Srivastava Asthana

## HOLI – A NEW SPRING

There I was, sitting in the bottom of a huge bowl whose sides were made up of the surrounding mountains. Had I arrived 500 years ago, I would have been drowning in the waters of this natural basin. For what were now grid-planned streets and neighbourhoods had once been the lake from which emerged the great Aztec capital: Tenochtitlan.

It was very frustrating to be encircled by the peaks, but not being able to see them – unless one traveled to the outer fringes of this big flat megalopolis that actually was very high up on a plateau; so, the bottom of the bowl was the top of a plateau. It was exactly the sort of thing that happens when development gets out of hand and turns into an urban sprawl. Huge office towers, high-rises and totally uninspired and globalized buildings had the effect of limiting the horizon to the neighbours' walls in my part of the metropolis; the mountains had become hypothetical.

Sure, the Mexican capital had its wonderful compensations and pretensions in the form of clusters of colonial architecture, parks, fountains and the very vibrant culture that expressed itself in a million interesting ways, or a billion - for speakers of Spanish I suppose. There was never a dull moment even as the heart craved raw natural beauty. But that Holi, Mexico City held out a few surprises for me ...

Not that the Mexicans celebrate Holi. So, it was left to us – a few expat Indians – to herald the arrival of spring to this ancient land. A handful of us drove to a get-away 45 minutes from Mexico City to what could be described as a ranch in the mountains.

On the windswept mountainside, cans of foam-spray that the children started using to spray each other were just one of the many distractions – amidst horses for joyrides, kites being flown, the mandatory dancing to Bollywood songs and a cricket match that soon started. Even though bright Mirinda became the colour of last resort, it was more a picnic than Holi. Spring hadn't received its due acknowledgement and welcome as far as I was concerned. Till I received Mexico City's sole English-language newspaper the next day. 'Spring has sprung,' it declared.



## HOLI – A NEW SPRING ...contd

Apparently *thousands* gathered at El Tajín in Veracruz, in the lowlands of south-eastern Mexico, to celebrate the first day of spring. Where they dutifully performed ‘purification rituals’. Suddenly, I felt less alone even though the accompanying picture of the celebrants showed a bunch of very serious looking people against the backdrop of a historical Mesoamerican pyramid; there was none of the crazy revelry of an Indian Holi celebration. The Mexicans were facing away from the ancient structure. Dressed in white, they had raised their hands as if in a hold-up. This seemed a very solemn welcome, totally in contrast to the mad rainbow Holi of North India. Since both the Mexican Indian and Hindu calculations for the timing of such a celebration have been based on traditional systems, I got a rush on realizing that they had coincided.

Meanwhile, Mexico City had sprung another surprise. For me, many little things add up to the experience called Holi in my part of India. Holi for me is creeping languorousness that the colours and increasing heat induce at home, which is a reminder of the departure of the cold season as well as of the hot summer in store. In a simultaneous contrast, Holi for me is also hypnosis that the orange and flame flowers of *tesu* and *gulmohar* exert as they try to stun a lazy consciousness into alertness. What would Holi – and indeed spring – be without these signature trees running riot at this time of the year back home?

As if in affirmation, a corresponding variant was blooming in Mexico City to herald the arrival of *primavera*, as spring is known in Spanish. Hundreds of trees lining the streets, which had so far been a refreshing but unremarkable green, had suddenly transformed the city because they had bloomed. If the heart craved natural beauty, it was now never more than a short walk away.

For speakers of English this spectacular tree, *primavera*, is jacaranda. I had often read about jacaranda trees little realizing how magical they could be. They seemed to be the equivalent of a dazzling smile that can transform the most ordinary of faces. The skies at this time of the year were clear and a serene blue, and the mesmerizing delicate leaves and tubular blossoms of the jacaranda stood out against the heavenly azure.

At the turn of the 20th century, the then Governor of Veracruz travelled from Mexico to Brazil and saw a tall tree with stunning lavender flowerets and abundant branches reaching towards the sky. He brought back its seeds to Veracruz, and the tree slowly spread to other parts of the country. Jacaranda trees can be found in Mexico’s central and tropical areas. The variety found in Mexico’s capital city is *Jacaranda mimosifolia*, which is native to Argentina and Brazil. But numerous varieties of jacaranda now grow in many parts of the world – in Africa, Australia, Europe, the Caribbean, the United States of America and Asia; and indeed, they are found even in India where I had never seen or noticed any. Mexico City’s jacarandas bloom between March and May.

There *were* kill-joys who complained about the shed blossoms destroying sidewalks, drainage systems, plumbing systems, fence barriers and garage floors. I suppose they couldn’t wait for the blooms to disappear. Hard as it was to empathize with those who complained about the nuisance-value of beauty, I wondered how they would have reacted to the sticky colours and the sheer mess and chaos, including loud music and revelry, of a Holi celebration half-way across the world if they ever were to see it. As for me, I planned to make my Holi away from home last till the last jacaranda flower gently floated down.

Note: Holi is a Hindu festival for the celebration of the arrival of spring. Although it has a religious rationale and a justifying mythological tale, the serious aspects of Holi end on the eve before: with a bonfire-based prayer ceremony. And crazy revelry begins on the day of Holi. It is known as the ‘Festival of Colours’ because family, friends and even strangers douse each other with coloured water and rub coloured powder on those who cannot escape. Specific types of food and folk songs are special Holi highlights. In modern times singing and dancing to Bollywood hits belted out at high decibels is quite common. Not surprisingly, getting high on *bhaang* and blatant flirting are also some people’s idea of fun. Holi is *not* a pan-Indian festival.

Peter O'Neill is the author of six collections of poetry, the most recent *Henry Street Arcade* ( Éditions du Pont de l'Europe, 2021) was translated into French by the poet Yan Kouton and was launched as part of the bicentenary celebrations for Charles Baudelaire as part of the Alliance Francaise celebrations, early in April this year. He also headlined the spring issue of *Pratik* with his fellow team of poets and translators who appeared altogether in a virtual day- long celebration of the French icon whom O'Neill has also translated, *The Enemy – Transversions from Charles Baudelaire* ( Lapwing, 2015), and he has also written a hybrid novella *More Micks than Dicks* ( Famous Seamus, 2017) which is a satirical account of his time presenting at an international Beckett conference. As well as French, his writing has been translated into German, Italian, Arabic and most recently Spanish. He has a degree in philosophy and a masters in comparative literature ( DCU). He lives in Dublin with his family where he prepares international students of English for the IELTS.



Peter O'Neill

## REK

A shithole!

That is the term he had used to describe the reference point in the local park which as a prominent member of the Local Chamber of Commerce he would have been suitably in the know to know what he was talking about.

“A shithole!”

Having only just recently been made the Writer in Residence in the local community, White had been engaged in research into local knowledge on the ancient Roman remains in the area and on seeing Padraig walking towards him, while passing the local library in the mid-afternoon, White had decided to just throw the question out at him. He had had dealings with him before and he had always proved himself to be a rather dependable fellow. However, on this occasion, and to White's utter incredulity, when he actually quizzed him there and then about the extent of ancient Roman influence in the area on the street under the towering edifice of grey granite with the circular clock, Padraig had looked at him with a face of total and utter confusion, which was unusual for such a figure who was usually so vocal on any matter that someone might happen to bring up, particularly concerning local matters.

He stood there frowning for some time, looking around him on the streets. Then, checking the horizon, as if the answer might somehow be found there, thought some more, and then, in almost complete and utter consternation, gave up and turning his attention to the small park that Padraig was mainly responsible for purchasing and gentrifying, pronounced the judgement with absolute gravity.

“A SHITHOLE.”

“I'm sorry?” White uttered in total and utter confusion.

“A shithole dating from the early nineteenth century is about as far back as we can go in this town,” he confessed, and in an attempt to further clarify continued.

“Yes, we were excavating there in the park, you know. Digging our way down to the back wall you can see there now.”



## REK ...contd

White turned and looked in the direction that he was now pointing at.

“That wall there, you see! You see that door at the very back which leads you out then onto the lane?”

White nodded his head to signal that he did.

“That is where we came across it. A shithole! A shithole from the early nineteenth century erected by the local Bigwig who lived up there in the local manor.” He let fall a name.

“That is as far back as we can go, in this town.” He said, rather neutrally. It was a kind of admission, of sorts, which had caught White completely by surprise as he realised almost immediately that it offered him an incredible insight into the kind of people that he was living amongst and which was that they were only capable, by their own admission, to be able to see themselves in respect to the Other who had lived among them for the greater part of over five centuries. And there was White going back over twenty! Here lay the whole problem. He shared the same place with them, he thought, but they were inhabiting very different timescales. As you will soon see.

Rek, the small town where he was living, had originally been founded by the Viking. Rekfjord had been the original name, but which had been shortened to simply Rek. That was over a 1000 years ago now. White had travelled through Norway in the spring of 89 and while wandering through the south- west coast of the country he had come across a small town with an ancient Norse church build on wooden wheels which the locals used for transportation purposes. The local archaeologist had been standing outside it and after White had introduced himself to the man the archaeologist had embraced White as a long- lost brother. How many Irish would have reciprocated in fashion? White remembered thinking. And here he was trying to get them to consider the ancient Romans who had also been in these same parts approximately 2000 years ago! Their vision was completely obscured by the events of the last 100 or so years. It was all about independence. Independence my ass, thought White. The truth of the matter was, they couldn't stop thinking about the bloody English, that was the truth. Whatever about the British!

*We hug our little destiny again.*

Heaney's line then hit him with full force, taken from the so aptly named poem *Whatever You Say Say Nothing*. White saw himself again sitting at his school desk in class, he must have been preparing for his Junior Cert, and the old incontinent teacher who had taught him Irish had been explaining a point in the Irish poetry book about the old poets who served the old Irish kings back before the plantations when the Irish actually had, to some degree, their own culture. *Filí* they were called. Highly respected and powerful figures in the local communities who acted as both lawyers, priests as well as cultural guardians of the place. When White heard mention of these figures who could terrify the local prince our king as in the eyes of the immortals as they could fashion their legacy to some degree by recording whatever apparent misdeeds they had done and which would then be passed down to future generations, such was their power. They shared the same meals as the local gentry and were looked after, for they were feared as their reputation for eternity was in the *filí's* hands. White had always been struck by these figures.

What were poets now? A dime a dozen! The title had virtually no meaning anymore as they were so prevalent in contemporary society as everyone was allowed an 'Opinion'. Art was subjective, after all. So, why should art, poetry for that matter, be the preserve of a few when ALL were equal in society, now. It was all so beautiful! So lovely, thought White. The Brotherhood and Sisterhood of Man. Finally, it had been achieved in rainbow coloured magic! All happily suckling from one another's nipples like a merry band of boppers that the sun had never before aligned its precious rays on before!

What a lot of absolute SHITE. Or, potatoes, he should say. If you didn't mention the bloody famine at some stage, or the accursed tubers, you didn't have a word to say. Oh yes, in priestly voice incantatory. They had replaced priests too now, in some parts. How they loved their rostrums. THE CUNTS. Oh, how White would show them, how he would show them. The *weltschmerz*!

Susan Condon is currently an MA Creative Writing student at Dublin City University. Her writing has won numerous awards including first prize in the Jonathan Swift Creative Writing Award. Publications include Ireland's Own Anthology, My Weekly, Boyne Berries, Flash Flood Journal, Spelk, Flash Fiction Magazine and The Flash Fiction Press. Susan blogs at: [www.susancondon.wordpress.com](http://www.susancondon.wordpress.com) and Tweets @SusanCondon



Susan Condon

## THE GOLDBLOCKS SYNDROME

I still find it hard to believe that I am a centenarian. 100 years old. But that may be my downfall.

Having reached this milestone, which, let's be honest was always unlikely, I'd forgotten the most important rule; to set another goal. I'd overcome the possibility of picking up any number of illnesses and not surviving them, of being electrocuted, drowning, falling down the stairs, getting mugged or even just becoming another road statistic. Luck, I feel, always has a little to do with it too. Although I'm not a lucky gambler, and for the most part don't even try, I've always been extremely lucky - in life.

Like many people, I've spent most of my life goal-setting. For the first fifty years, I hadn't even realised that's what I was doing - at least not until I attended one of those courses which helps you to achieve your potential. By that stage, it had become so addictive that I never stopped. Forgive me, I lie. I did stop; and that's why, I believe, I'm lying here today. But I digress.

My mind, normally so sharp, seems a little scattered today. But if you'll allow me, I'll do my best to teach you a life lesson which I guarantee will serve you well. Now if I'd only remembered that myself, I would soon be within reach of my next goal.

It's important - so find a notebook and in extra large letters, preferably red, write this down:

**ALWAYS HAVE A GOAL!**

The trick is not to just have one goal, but many goals. Have your far-reaching goal: the ultimate goal that you strive for. Set a realistic time-frame to achieve it and set yourself smaller, achievable goals which will point you in the right direction. This will prevent you from becoming disillusioned and will, surprisingly, draw like a magnet the people and opportunities to help you reach it.

## THE GOLDBLOCKS SYNDROME ...end

No matter what the goal, if you want it badly enough, you will achieve it.

Look at any successful person and you'll find that hard-work, dedication and focus are three of the things that have delivered their success – and don't forget goals – they plan, they execute and ultimately they deliver. Go ahead and prove me wrong!

Blocking out memories is much more difficult than it sounds. I have tried, unsuccessfully, to stop my mind drifting back over the past 24 hours. When it decides to rewind again, I do my utmost to wind back, even just a little further to where I am sitting in my favourite armchair sipping my customary Saturday night glass of port and reading one of my favourite books; *War and Peace*. My glasses are perched on the end of my nose and my eyes are threatening to close. That's what happens when you reach my age – no more late nights – instead it's early to bed and early to rise and up to now that old proverb, *makes a man, healthy, wealthy and wise*, had been working just fine for me.

It was while rinsing my glass that I felt another of those nagging pains in my arm. I'd been having them, on-and-off for the past few weeks, but this one was stronger. Much stronger. I know I shouldn't have ignored those tell-tale signs; but that's hindsight. When I fell I must have cracked my head off the side of the kitchen table – or so I've heard them say, as they fuss with the dressing on my forehead.

The hospital door opens and one of my beautiful grand-daughters glides in. Annie must be close to forty-five by now. She never married. Not that it's written in stone that you should, but I just always wanted the best for her and a good man to share her life felt like part of the jigsaw I envisioned. No children either. Another piece of the jigsaw I got wrong. I love my three boys and my seven grand-children; four boys and three girls, they're all beautiful and kind and funny. But, if I'm completely honest, there's always been an extra special bond with Annie. Probably because she reminds me so much of me. A different me; one without a husband and children, with even more drive and ambition. And if you could take my fading beauty when it was at its prime, and multiply it many times over, then you'd see Annie.

'Hi Gran, how are you feeling today?' She fusses with my pillows, pulling one up, pushing one down. 'There, that's much better,' she says, as she stands back and looks me over, 'just right.'

'Thanks,' I say. But it's obvious that no words emerge.

Annie looks at me, she frowns, her right eyebrow raised, then takes a tissue from the box on the locker and dabs at the side of my mouth. I presume I must be drooling. How embarrassing. Over the past few hours, a nurse or a visitor has performed this ritual. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to work out why. Locked within my body, all I can do is listen intently to what they say, watch their actions and, even more importantly, their expressions, to find out how well I'm doing. I remember reading a novel about locked-in syndrome. That's me. That's how I feel. Inside I'm wide awake, screaming to be set free, while on the outside – well, I can only imagine. As a writer I have a vivid imagination to draw on. Right now, I wish I didn't.

According to the doctor earlier, it's still early days. Apparently, lots of physiotherapy awaits me and if I work hard, I have a chance of making a good recovery. I can't wait to start. That's my next goal; but until I write it down, along with a deadline, I feel as if it's out of reach. Unachievable. But just for the moment.

I feel tired. My eyes are heavy and it's a huge effort to keep them open. Before they close, they breathe her in; chestnut brown hair, shiny as the best conker, with sparkling eyes to match and ruby red lips which like to smile often. Annie has started to read to me, her soothing voice stealing away the frustration which had begun to encroach. Not too loud; not too soft; just right.

The words have just begun to permeate my brain. Tolstoy's, *War and Peace*. How appropriate. The last book I read and one of my favourites. I wonder if she was the one to find me. I hope not. Flashes of a rushed ambulance ride intrude, her pale face creased and worried, squeezing my hand as a medic attends to me. Maybe it was good that she was to the one to find me. Without her quick thinking and level headedness I wouldn't be here today - my goal to become a centenarian could have been my last. That would have been such a pity.

Annie is a journalist. Did I tell you that already? She works all over, but mostly in war-torn countries where she reports on their hidden worlds; the shames against people that their governments don't want the world to see. It doesn't seem so long ago that she spent her summer holidays playing in our back garden.



## THE GOLDBLOCKS SYNDROME ...end

The green, wooden shed had a door that opened in two halves, perfect for playing shop. She would cover the wooden crates inside with strips of remnant carpet to make shelves that would house potatoes, cooking apples and carrots. As I made dinner, I would watch from my kitchen window as she spoke to imaginary customers, using my old scales to weigh and bag their groceries.

Eventually, her granddad, Bill, would need to chop the crates for firewood. But by then the summer would be over; Annie would be back at school, with her real friends, her imaginary friends forgotten. Bill, for close to forty years, worked in the paper mills. While others had to make do with the gold foil and boxes from cigarette cartons, we had the good fortune to be able to choose a sheet of paper from the mills rejects. I can still see the coloured sheets, stacked neatly in the sideboard, like delicate sweet pea; pink, blue, green and white, patiently waiting for words to populate them.

But my mind is in conflict. It is so difficult to stay awake; yet I am too afraid to give in and allow sleep to engulf me; fearful in case I am unable to return to this world. I think of all the things I haven't done, the books I haven't read. The yellow cover of *Death Comes to Pemberley* springs to mind. Annie and I had the pleasure of speaking with PD James in Trinity College a few years back as she signed my copy. Although in her 90s, her mind was as sharp as a tack. I feel compelled to drop her a line; to warn her not to allow becoming a centenarian to curb her appetite for life. And then I remember, she's already passed. Aged 94, if I remember correctly.

The squeak of rubber soles jerks me awake. A nurse, the friendly one with the infectious smile, is bending over me. Taking the thermometer from my mouth she reads it and nods. She lifts my hand gently and takes my pulse, her fingers cool as marble. Annie sits on the other side of the bed. I catch her eye. Unlike the nurse, today, when Annie smiles, it doesn't quite reach her moist eyes. More than anything else, this worries me. Annie never cries, not even at sad movies. She's not crying now, but she's not far off.

The nurse places her hand on my forehead. It is soothing, perfect; not too hot, not too cold, just right. I don't want her to take it away. But she does. Before she leaves, she turns to Annie and talks softly - the only words I can make out are 'time' and 'physio'. I'm guessing it will take a lot of work on my part to get back on track. I ponder a moment; now there's a goal I never anticipated would be on my list.

'I need a pen,' I say.

Annie looks at me, her eyebrows raised, as she tries to decipher my words. I try again. 'Pen.' It sounds as if I have a head cold.

'Ben? Ben who? You don't know a Ben.'

I lift my hand but nothing happens. My arm is still on the bed. I try the other hand and miraculously it works. I imitate writing and I hear Annie laugh.

'A pen. You want a pen.' She kisses me on the cheek and tells me she'll be right back. I feel exhausted. I inhale her musky perfume and rest until she returns.

There is a bright light up ahead. It is so bright that I cannot even open my eyes. The rays try to penetrate my eyelids, but I squeeze them tightly shut. I'm not ready, not yet, I still have so much I want to do; that half-written book I've sworn I'll finish, I need to see my children and grand-children one more time, make that trip back to Donegal—'

'Come now, you must open your eyes,' the voice is sharp, not quite what I expected. Where's the harp music? The gentle voices of the angels?

Something is pulling at my clenched fist, opening my fingers, pushing something hard against my palm.

'Gran, here's that pen you wanted and I have your notebook here. Do you want me to write your next goal or do you want to do it yourself?'

I open my eyes, slowly. There is a collective sigh from my bedside. The young doctor smiles, 'so glad you could join us,' he says, focusing the penlight quickly from eye to eye and then away. It's not too bright now, not too dark either, it's just right; the Goldilocks Syndrome.

Maybe the title for a story ...

Tracie is an Australian high school English teacher living in the native bushland of Whangarei, New Zealand. She has an array of poetry and fiction published in Australia, New Zealand, India, Ireland, and Indonesia.



Tracie Lark

## GUMDONE

Over the threshold, feet first, then knees, followed by hands, hips, and head - stop, stay bent, the attic beams are low. Crouch, crawl to the A shaped window and peer out over the fire-red tiled roofs. See power lines cutting the pink sky like a knife through salmon. See graffiti spilled over the backs of industrial sheds donned with brick smokestacks skewering the sky. See the early evening wind hijack a seagull and watch as he swings in the sky before soaring east towards the water. See the earth's horizon in the distance, curved in a gentle hug, until darkness envelopes her.

What to do until the sun rises again?

Shift position to uncramp the legs.

Watch a spider spin a home then catch its dinner.

Open the box?

It's what you came here for.

Open the box.

The box is made from thin ply, with bronze metal corners and a clasp at the front. Lift the latch, lift the lid. There it is.

The insect's eight legs are spread evenly apart around the thorax, and the head and compound eyes glare from the amber setting as though it were startled when trapped. The invertebrate's exoskeleton is smooth looking, and broken into even segments, evidence it was about to undergo ecdysis before being time captured.

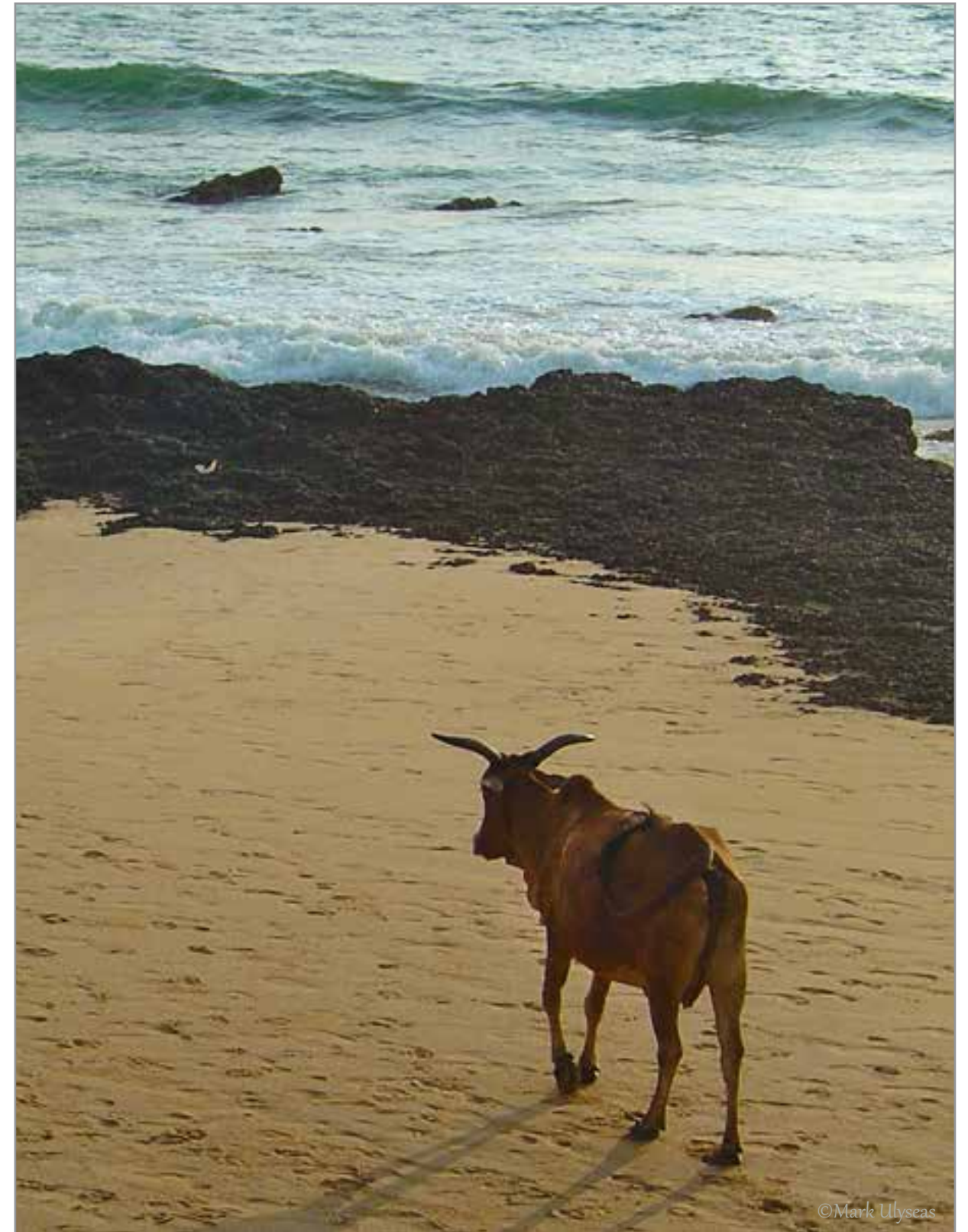


GUMDONE *...contd*

Stretch your legs and arch your back. See the warm orange lights glowing across the ocean of roofs in darkness. Imagine dancing upon them, toes tipping and hips lashing. Hold the amber fossil in two hands and stretch.

Breathe in, think tall, feel the breath press into every corner of your being, into kneecaps and elbows, into toes gaps and ear lobes. Exhale, feel your blood rush, feel your skin crack. Watch the chunks molt on the attic floor, smell the exposed microbes embracing the dusty cocoon air. Feel a new wind on your soft skin under night's blanket as you open the A frame window. Step out onto the fire-red tiled roofs and stand tall. Dance. Tip your toes and swing your heels. Frolic over the roofs of those shamed in their homes. Notice the tip tap tip tap of your spindly legs traipsing over the roofs of families sitting down to pea soup and bread and dripping, over 'no work tomorra' and 'union won't stand for it' and 'exploiting us, they are' and 'environmentalists at it again' conversations. Taste night's air in your mouth. Hear the seagull screech from the wooden jetty poles. Hear the fishing boats lean with the wind. Skim across the sea, reach the horizon, and return her hug.

Over the threshold, feet first, then knees, followed by hands, hips, and head - stop, stand tall in your old, rickety house. Return to the dinner table where your family awaits you with pale faces and heaving coughs. When they ask if you think you'll get a day's work tomorrow, you eat your stew, smile, hug your children, and your partner. Keep moving, keep dancing in your mind - do anything not to be trapped in these gumdone circumstances. Do everything to exist through the eons of darkness.



Cow walking on the beach after a day's work, Goa, India. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



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