

UNIVERSITY OF WALES  
TRINITY ST DAVID

## **Containment and Creativity**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements of the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Creative and Script Writing

by

Rosalind Hudis

\*

September 2013



**Master’s Degrees by Examination and Dissertation  
Declaration Form.**

1. This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed.....Rosalind Hudis.....

Date ..... 15.9.13.....

2. This dissertation is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of .....

Signed ...Rosalind Hudis.....

Date ... 15.9.13.....

3. This dissertation is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated.

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references.

A bibliography is appended.

Signed candidate: Rosalind Hudis.....

Date: ..... 15.9.13.....

4. I hereby give consent for my dissertation, if accepted, to be available for photocopying, inter- library loan, and for deposit in the University’s digital repository

Signed (candidate)Rosalind Hudis.....

Date..... 15.9.13.....

**Supervisor’s Declaration.**

I am satisfied that this work is the result of the student’s own efforts.

Signed: .....

Date: .....

## Abstract

In offering a collection both of poems and short prose fiction, my intention is to demonstrate my exploration of certain motifs and poetics across the two genres, specifically in respect to my core discussion of the creative interaction of structure and imagination. I am interested in how the playing out of this dynamic, in both genres, might influence the deployment of form and the way content is experienced by the reader. In particular I focus on how three fundamental aspects, figurative language, thematic preoccupations, and formal/theoretical parameters, intersect and thereby influence, their respective expression in the light of this dynamic. In addition, I have highlighted the way criteria foregrounded within the MA have influenced my practice and contributed to the shaping of a personal aesthetic founded in the belief that formal constraints can enrich the reader's reception of a piece, and in a manner that is both liberating and democratic.

## Acknowledgements

In the creation of this portfolio and critique I am greatly indebted to the inspiration, guidance and feedback of my supervisor, Dr Dic Edwards and also to Poetry Fellow, Samantha Wynne-Rhydderch, for her editorial precision with the poems. Also for the thoughtful comments and encouragement of my fellow students on the MA in Creative and Script Writing and to the existence, at Lampeter campus, of a supportive and engaged writing community.

Acknowledgements are also due to the editors of the following publications, in which some of the pieces here submitted have previously appeared, or will appear: *The Journal*, *The Lampeter Review*, *Agenda*, *The Interpreter's House*, *Envoi*, *Dead Ink*, *Jericho*, *The Book of Euclid*, *Cinnamon Press*, *Stand Magazine*, *Magma*, *Rack press*, *Poetry London*, *Poetry Review*, *Seren Books*, *Ink Sweat and Tears*, *Salzburg Review*, *Parthian Books*.

## List of Contents

### Poems :

Ascension.....	Pg 1
Viewpoint .....	Pg 2
Lead Mine .....	Pg 3
Cheap Pianos.....	Pg 4
Summer in Powys.....	Pg 5
Italy in Gwalia.....	Pg 6
Palate.....	Pg 7
Ultrasound.....	Pg 8
Disclosure.....	Pg 9
Photograph.....	Pg 11
Heart Patch.....	Pg 12
Topography.....	Pg 14
Colour Field.....	Pg 15
Oil in Blue.....	Pg 16
Not Said.....	Pg 17
East.....	Pg 18
Rupture.....	Pg 19
Translation in Avocado.....	Pg 20
Rolling the Soul.....	Pg 21
The Women of my Childhood.....	Pg 22
Nash I.....	Pg 23
Nash ii.....	Pg 24

Terra Ignota.....	Pg 25
North.....	Pg 27
Bordered.....	Pg 28
Seasons.....	Pg 29
Migrants.....	Pg 30
Sound Notes.....	Pg 31
Paint Chart M-O.....	Pg 32
Open Field.....	Pg 33
The Atomist in Exile.....	Pg 34
Paint Chart U-W.....	Pg 35
West.....	Pg 36
Skin Recollection.....	Pg 37
Llyn Brianne.....	Pg 38
Language Death .....	Pg 39
Words were what we travelled through.....	Pg 40
Erosion.....	Pg 41
Skomer.....	Pg 42
 <b>Stories:</b>	
Falling.....	Pg 43
Inishbofin.....	Pg 45
Love in the Time of Codeine.....	Pg 49
Useless Air.....	Pg 53

Malley's Yard..... Pg 56

Eating Round the Margins.....Pg.58

Too Far.....Pg 62

**Critique:**

Containment and Creativity.....Pg 65

Footnotes.....Pg 79

Bibliography..... Pg 80

WORD COUNT: ( creative pieces and essay ) 20689

Dedicated to Peter Hudis (1925 -2008 ) who made this possible.

\*



## Ascension

Think of those paintings in the bee-waxed silence of galleries,  
where sunlight is meted out, always higher  
than where you arch to see.

There is such strain in the tissue of necks,  
in their brush-strokes, how they tug on the bone's anchor  
to follow the christ in lift-off – already  
his whitened hands are beyond the frame.

Yearly now the present tense clings higher up the mountains.  
Its oxygen pulls forest roots, a labour of particles clued  
to North, nosing for its cool humus, its constellations  
that frost-out the bear.

Yearly now, the calculations climb, numbers whitening  
out of grasp, the bear's tracks  
lost beyond the frame.

## Viewpoint

Up here  
nothing but the scratch  
of reeds  
in wind and the bright  
plate of sea. The Llyn

parts water from sky  
like a soft knife;  
a red kite arcs -  
becomes the rhythm  
of my boots on turf.

Even the peat is light  
underfoot, healed  
after ice and windmills  
lift their girders as breath  
disturbs the kestrel's feather,  
or the small life of streams  
continues

through the mist  
from Chernobyl.

Trefoil, sphagnum,  
heath-orchid  
stars  
of meadowsweet  
memoried with owl.

Beneath me, the earth's  
a map, its roots  
spores, seeds, twigs,  
small bones, stored

like codes. Today  
in the farm downwind,  
I saw Menna and Robert  
driving their cows

to the top field. Their son  
tossed and pined  
in his wheelchair.  
Robert is slow,  
his shirt loose.  
Already the leukaemia  
that took his neighbour  
is taking him

## Lead Mine

For miles  
a stream shadows us, bog  
sucks at our nerves, the weight  
of wrapped-in heat, as we push  
through the gut of Cwm Ystwyth.

Until this sudden lengthening,  
a spread of lodes  
from what's become river  
with its surface low, gun-metal,  
splitting  
ruin from ruin, the dust  
galena,

sulphite, antimony -  
words gutted and toxic  
still, with their vein of heat.  
Our shadows pick their way  
over the rubble in a held  
breath of themselves.

Everywhere, the rattle of leats  
where water's crashing  
sluiced down muscle  
and memory  
of soil, would leave

only what was usable,  
and what leaked  
through oxidised years  
like a betrayal.

## Cheap Pianos

come and go  
like marriages – the brief  
heady ones balancing  
a sediment of whisky  
in a re-used tumbler  
at the end, or the keys  
stress-cracks have inched up,  
like party nails eroding  
weeks after the event.

We kept one  
for its *fin-de-siecle* inlay,  
its candle-holders mottled  
with vintage wax,  
an old queen, feathered  
by echoes of gas-lit bawdy.  
It played a boozed,  
coquettish slide around  
the sex of a harmony.

Another seemed too stern  
for its small iron bones,  
all black-stained mahogany  
thick as scripture. We'd humped it  
from a dank chapel, unprayed in  
for years. It took five  
good men to raise, but its rhetoric  
was nearly gone - mothly  
and thinned as an old heart.

I thought of the duty of voices,  
suited, gathered in  
from the last farms  
beyond electricity, the echo  
and cannon of them  
in the chromatic sunlight,  
how they might seep between  
the piano's staves of wood  
and wire, their pitch blurring.

## Summer in Powys

We were driving over the border,  
that tipping point of day when hills wash  
into the skyline, and the last rinse  
of low sun tells you there is still a handful  
of time left to gather in the sight of cattle  
steering towards a gate. It smelt like a festival,

smoke, hog-roast. When darkness  
lapped across them, field after field  
spat and flickered with bonfires.  
Except this was the cull: all day  
without break the work, the livestock  
shot between their ears.

As their line grew, the chemical telegram  
of fear would have shipped from beast to beast  
while their farmer stood on, everything  
out of his hands and his exits  
taped off, spelled with disinfectant.  
We passed a yard of sheep

rigid on their backs, black  
legs in the air like mechanical twigs,  
the vet slow motioned in a protective suit  
like one sleep-walking through a film  
where all the trees look burnt  
and the sky is no longer a roof.

And to think like this  
is to make anything permissible.  
You told me how sheep trust  
the call to be rounded up, won't  
sense that this is other than the next  
pasture ahead. But that's how we kill,

it makes no difference that it's summer,  
the lenient time, chestnut trees  
candled and over-arching, the rivers slow.  
In line there is no season, only  
the fall of hooves or feet  
on tarmac, air pushing like a hand.

## Italy in Gwalia

*After the Baroque Chapel built by Italian POWs in Henllan, including Mario Ferlito, who created the wall paintings.*

Lead and corrugated light made this,  
rain slashing across sleep hut roofs.

Tins for corned beef or cocoa, newspaper  
furred with bombed skylines, cans twisted

into column groves, cement sacks poulticed  
to walls with water and flour, painted

the cream of a blank shroud, a separate country  
tidal only as Ferlito's hand moved, wrist aching.

His charcoal hailed those who would rise towards him  
through their pigments of onion, beetroot,

cabbage leaves, coffee, charred, grit flecked, smudged  
gore of blackberries, trenches of fat and tar

on an improvised palette. They came as Christ  
and apostles, eyes greyed, averted,

but their skin fruited out of garments, was warmth,  
wheat fields of it, apricot of wives, lovers babies.

## Palate

She scrapes mackerel out of the tin,  
dresses it with olive paste, cloves,  
ewe's cheese, basil. She hungers  
more than the last time. Her belly  
is like an exile, strapped  
to the life-raft of herself.

Later, in the bath it is marbled  
with hyacinth, peony, a fugitive  
dark red. It rises from the fogged water  
with a kind of authority, self-willed,  
detached from the seabed of her hips.  
The doctor has mined it

for meanings he preserves  
in an Oil of Ellipsis.  
He floats round the hard pebble  
of one word, the little embryonic fist  
of it. She's already guessed:  
In her mouth 'Downs' tastes metallic

with the clang of tongue  
on palate, is declarative, weighted  
as a lintel, as Deus, Decibel, Dictum.  
It segues into the long  
sea tunnel of *own*, of syllables  
every pigment of her bloodstream.

## Ultrasound

This is the cave where they will heat  
the screen until a future hardens  
out of the liquid wax  
of light, like a scrambled text.

It must mould to dichotomy  
it seems -  
the good baby  
flickering in and out  
of a perfect equation,  
or the bad one  
who doesn't add up:

a chromosome too many,  
a glitch in the smooth  
running chain.

Clearly my pendulum is pulling  
towards glitch – the sonographer  
calls and calls again for the same  
echoes, interrogates my belly  
as if it could roll open and confess.

But what I want to confess to  
is enchantment – how held  
I am, a hostage  
in my own womb

watching the signs for *child*  
leap like flood-lit salmon -  
their rebel arc  
across the loose, any way dark.



## Disclosure

When the consultant entered  
the talcum-sweetness  
of our corner in the maternity ward,  
when he shone his bright, verbal torch  
into our faces and said that in his considered opinion  
(and I considered where unconsidered would have  
taken us) our baby was a Downs  
and how sorry he was  
to bear *such tragic news*,  
I looked at our freshly-labelled daughter  
who was busily engaged in getting  
a full supper out of my breast,  
and wondered at how quickly  
two words could dissolve  
the constituency of motherhood.

I hung for sometime on a cliff-edge  
outside the borders of this constituency,  
hearing the sea break  
its bones against granite and the backlash  
panic through a gale, as if losing oxygen.

Meanwhile our daughter unfolded  
her repertoire of instructions for mealtimes  
and more mealtimes, as babies do,  
and studied us, her eyes  
flecked like a sea gull's egg,  
her *almond eyes*  
as the nurse described them, pointing out  
that thus shall you know a Downs.

With one hand I held her, and with the other  
I clawed myself back.  
But only to find that now  
a charter of precaution and exclusions  
was glued to the glass nest  
where our daughter mouthed  
at our milky circlings.  
Nowhere did it say  
*welcome*, nowhere how familial  
the neat arcs of her mouth,  
or babble like light rain  
with which she woke me at 2.00 am  
among the heart scraping cries  
of other babies.

That was the time  
an acquaintance brought in a leaflet  
on plastic surgery  
for the child who was a *Downs*,  
because to fit in we must have beauty,  
and anyway we can do anything  
these days, so why not that?

It listed the defects  
of a *Downs*:  
*epicanthal folds, slanted  
palpebral features, a flattened  
nasal bridge, an undefined  
mid-facial region, a down-turned  
lower lip.* It was like a geography  
of some pacific island, its primordial  
haze fragile and studied  
only from the air. I saw

epicanthal folds  
dipping and surging  
like the arch of a whale's back,  
steam, trellised by dawn fire,  
rising from palpebral features, how  
they might glisten like mica  
a long bridge of white rock  
that lanced through the quiet forests  
of the mid-region, the plunge of their branches  
towards the sun.

## Photograph

This is my daughter asleep in the morning,  
one hand between the silvery poles  
of her cot, that remind me of birch trees.

She's going to theatre soon:  
the surgeon will snap her ribs  
to reach a heart which can't wake

itself properly inside its blue forest.  
She mustn't eat. So when she stirs and calls  
my arms down for the first feed, I turn

to the wall. She beats a fist,  
the size of a large bee, into air.  
Her feet swim faster as if racing

a blind snow flood,  
and I am the snow. Later  
it's I who can't reach

my child so far under,  
her face a locked, white egg  
In the thicket of tubes.

## Heart Patch

For him to sew a patch  
across the tiny abyss  
in your four month heart,

the surgeon  
must have you chilled,  
your breath postponed

in a pause  
outside the beat  
you were set to.

As you slip  
below the heat-line,  
an arctic incubus

wells up through  
your skin. We run  
at the speed of death

down corridors  
rimed with day-break  
while nurses course alongside

like snow-geese migrating,  
unstoppable and urgent  
as they press you

between thermals of wool.  
When the wind lifts her  
out of my arms to theirs

I remember this is the day  
of solar eclipse.  
The moon will defer the sun,

muffle its pulse,  
draw night's simulacrum  
through the lunch-hour

of junior physicians  
while they settle off-time wings  
on the courtyard benches.

Their sandwich foil  
that unmeshes the sun  
into fractions of a rose window,

will smoke over,  
like a moment known  
to all the work-force of hearts

in partial eclipse.  
Later I'll forget  
even to remember this,

subtracted from the daylight,  
in a waiting room  
on the rim of your theatre,

I'll think of the surgeon's hands,  
dough pale and trimmed,  
between butcher's and tailor's.

## Topography

*More delicate than the historians' are the map-makers' colors.*  
Elizabeth Bishop (The Map )

She can't read but likes to crackle her fingers  
over the surface of a map she has opened  
batted and flattened into position beside me.

She wants to draw along the contours  
of a story that flows out from her key place:  
New York, home of *Friends the Sitcom*.

She thumbs it dead centre of everything,  
even though her chosen terrain  
hovers between bog-wastes

and Llandoverly. I read somewhere  
that ancient cartographers planted Jerusalem  
at the kernel of every chart, the steady state

in a swelling floret of land mass,  
tiny, angle-conflicted and garrisoned  
with roofs, like an ageing mother

who always got taken along and always  
had something to say about the menu.  
My role is path-finder not giver

of the habitual view. When I trace  
a meek thread and call it ditch, she storms  
at me, no, that's where Ross kissed Rachel;

she means: lead me, lead me *there*  
into the heart of this pale green valley of paper  
in safety, go where I go, without history

getting between the lines.  
Bishop was right – it's how you colour it  
and on this webbing of routes across earth

that's skin deep wherever you go  
my daughter paints in the chiaroscuro  
episodes of a self she will be.

## Colour Field

### *fantasy on Rothko*

At sixty he was still glad of the greenhouse  
for its dirty panes and webs that hid him.

The tomato smell was like a reflex  
to his hands, even though couched in alter-skin,

fossilised touch – one moment  
charging another. He'd wanted that much

for paint – the breach of it beyond  
edges, uncertified, the way it glowed

behind sight. Or like the dark plum odour  
of another person, close range, and the just

audible tack of their pulse, intimate but boundless  
like the self, or a road, say – highway 287

that carmine route whose promise  
is Texas, brokered on a loose horizon.

\*

If he dozed, invisible, it was to expand  
his vanishing point while traffic burred

on a freeway and somewhere barking  
frayed at the dead who convoy by

when the field is left open and the mind  
loosened, sheds a Cadillac trail

for their grave, night-baked feet,  
their croons of redemption.

## Oil in Blue

Outside this room it's summer, but dad paints  
snow, over everything, and most of it blue.  
I climb the scarp of his back, peering in.

He's left all the people out, although roofs lock  
together like the wall-mind of victims.  
The traffic light is a red nerve, the street dead

end, no stilled cars. You'd find it hard  
to move down the bone-white streaks of path  
among all that blueness. There are windows

lit; I beat dad's neck and ask him  
what the people are doing, the people he lit.  
I don't yet understand each room

is a past tense, has lost its keys, its hot cells  
guttering out, one after one.



## Not Said

A child on the doorstep scanning the path for ants  
or bugs. She won't launch  
into the wideness of not inside, her flight-path hijacked  
by particle zaggings, by tiny unsettlements.  
Or a child taken on walks that pull the hours across  
wind-stripped hills. She won't step over  
the sheep dung, not for the horizon  
her father chivvies into view. She's stalled

by something so small so multiple. What is embedded  
in those soft bullets, blackened and clustered  
in the dips and runches of grass, their fume  
of smoke in the mouth ?  
They cover the earth, like crossing  
a stony beach bare-foot, sand beyond  
bearing distance.

That time they camped. A coarse field. Cow breath.  
Awake at dawn she unclips the flap. She hears  
her father weeping, the sound  
flattened behind canvas.  
By the river she sits down. If she lowers in her feet, they eddy  
dis-bodied as gloves. She's never been told what the weeping  
means. It's her toes she recalls  
floating as if unstitched, and the fume of dung in ground mist  
and the distance beyond bearing back.

## East

My East is a tin drum sea,  
a horizon that leaves the sky  
with too much scope. We're there,  
tiny on a mat of sand, the only one  
on flinty beaches that keep putting  
the same hands down like a pun  
with no punchline their curve  
softening to a paste, sea-kale,  
fog, and the tern white  
of Shingle Street, straight  
as Lego, shorn off as if it can't finish  
its sentence in the wind  
from Russia. Close up

we're bunched under towels while dad  
frets out a fire from sticks pulpy  
with brine. He's telling us  
the shaggy dog tale again, the one  
*where the Captain of the Ship*  
*calls his men about him*  
*to tell them*  
over and over  
how the captain calls them  
about him to call them  
into the loop of a storm  
with no eye. Sometimes dad tells us  
the other one, the one where fuel

is piped under this beach, under  
records of war, burns on the sea,  
through the enemy, won't go out.  
Nights after that I sweat  
out of the same dream, the one  
where the fire blends me down to bone  
no matter how many times  
I jump into water. To get me  
back to sleep dad tells me  
the shaggy dog tale, loop over loop,  
its curve softening to a paste.  
He keeps circling with the same hand  
as if through fog.

## Rupture

There are days she stares  
at the kettle, but can't retrieve  
its connection to water. Or days  
when the dry bristles of her brush  
remind her of a cactus that flowered  
every ten years, if she cared for it,  
but how that brush could sooth,  
re-wake her face, is lost.

There are days the phone rings,  
but she can't re-map the way  
her hands could bridge a room  
to open or close the tap of speech.  
Sometimes, she's forty years  
back in a war-time booth,  
upright among the broken  
knuckles of the street,

scrapping with her boyfriend,  
the moment when  
the glass sides shower out  
and, all around her, tenements  
flower into a once in a lifetime  
spasm of absurd heat.  
She watches bloodied women  
pour out, still in their aprons.

One carries space where her baby  
was swaddled in a shawl,  
while the city settles  
in ashes across her hair.

## Translation in Avocado

i.

At the sink I scrape fat from knives  
and remember how, before she slid  
through a crease in the story,  
my great aunt buried her best ones  
under the chicken poked earth.

I keep for her a scrag of moon  
cut loose from its gossipy orbit  
of anecdote and silence. Cleansing  
is not a word it's equipped for. Nor  
night at a bare table.

What would it take to leave nothing  
for the risen meal ? They hid pans  
below the cabbage, plates,  
tins of salt, flour, treacle  
dried fish, a violin, a compass.

ii..

My grandmother, the survivor, stands  
at a sink in her Wembley kitchen  
and what I mostly recall is how lost  
she is in avocado – all her walls  
toned to it, all without portraits.

Granddad grows a swatch of mild grass  
to imply *lawn*, three foot square  
installs a bell that intones a perfect fifth  
elongates the sound as if their rooms  
had pulled themselves through

sliding doors, multiplied.  
Behind them, new carpets, fittings  
hang geometric in one dimension.  
My grandmother composes the knives  
from Marks, cushions them on Satin.

## Rolling the Soul

...and there's the one about Perel, my Lemberg forebear,  
who thought her mother's soul had rolled into the samovar,  
heard her pursed, upbraiding, voice inflected in the stream  
of tea from spout, hairpin straight, sourdough black.

Not quite a dybbuk, but irritant - the gleam of her one  
gold tooth snarking within the silver. Maybe through the night  
of the crossing to London, great great Perel, leaden with great Perel  
in her womb, vomiting salt, found comfort in that thought:

her mother co-tossed, blaspheming among the trunks.  
In the blitz their samovar was seized or smelted – and where  
her grandma rolled then was a jinx great Perel disowned,  
rolling herself into the name of *Pearl*, and minted curls,

her tongue new polished to somewhere between Brent  
and Queen mum, her unstained tea spoons bright as *Lewis's*.

## The Women of my Childhood

as I veer out of the fog  
of play in a brick-deaf yard,  
back through a kitchen door,  
are always bending  
away into another act.

Their hands vanish into bowls  
that loom like chapels,  
or raise a coal bucket,  
or wring dry the space  
words have walked out on.

It's always their backs  
that meet me, the dissolving shape  
of things just done, the reel of bones  
under house-coats, phrase  
chained to phrase, pulled

ahead as I reach to grip  
a pocket, laundered and empty  
of the side-tracks a man might keep:  
a dice, a coin, or pen-knife,  
the glint, the cut, the leap.

## Nash i

Winter afternoon, the gas fire hisses,  
drugs us into flock-papered quiet.

Our post-austerity street lies  
in permanent recovery, chestnut leaves

smudging the pavements. There might have been  
a line breached, a row drifting away

in another room to sulk itself out – dad's tetchy;  
if I nest against his will-power he might give,

show me a book of paintings - I want Paul Nash  
- that picture where the harbour leaks

through a deserted house as if inside  
has crossed a different line, or ones where fields

are milky as fog or mushrooms, except the trees  
have gathered too closely, like watchers on a cliff.

Nash ii

after *Landscape in a Dream*

What I always came back to was this:  
how the cliffs, flexing in and out of sea,  
like a swimmer, and the fudge brown tops,  
rolled out the shape of a falcon. And was it  
tide pulling in or the land flying out ?

There was sun that made the essential day.  
I tried not to look at the other sun, a core  
of glistening red like an injury, an exposure,  
although it looked at me in the mirror  
on the cliff that kept the falcon in view

of himself, and ( I thought ) unable to fly.  
His eye was pitched to the rolling orbs  
that began like nested hearts, bindings of twig  
or tumble-weed which the mirror ate, calling  
them inwards across a burned savannah.

I longed for him to close that view, but he held  
open, to the edge of sight, those doors  
of shale and spray I stood between.



## Terra Ignota

After your funeral, father, I asked what, in the years,  
saddened you to a man who couldn't leave his house

without going back to check the locks three times?  
Or whose feet picked over the stair-treads,

at 3.00am, sniffed into darkness for smoke, whose hands  
felt for the kettle to unplug it yet again?

Was it a habit of secrecy turned inwards,  
interrogating the plaster work, the carpets?

Or that instability of those born Jewish  
on sliding land – that gene-locked fear

you nursed and battled and tried to sail from  
in a mind stashed with tins for emergency ?

\*

My father, in his final illness, adrift  
across an armchair, barely able

to tack the crucial space from hearth  
to toilet, would watch each night

*In Shackleton's Footsteps*, the foraging  
of one obsessive man beyond the skyline

of himself. Metal and snow  
blistered light lanced

across his face, like a fractured  
mayday from *terra ignota*.

But he locked eyes to the plot,  
mapped with it strategies to push

beyond stalled ice-anchors and feet  
whose nerves were shot. He had so many

years found relief in logic- a way to get  
through, a compass for the blizzard

that falls and keeps on falling.

\*

Through his last year as a sailor, he sat for nights  
in the cabin of his small yacht that never

left the marina, hurricane lit, scratching  
in a logbook the minutes of heft

to make sail out of the river-mouth,  
as if he could slide

over the skyline of his bones,  
hear the North Sea

break its free verse, saline,  
across his skin. Or was it to be ready

for the sea-lock  
to part, the current pull him

into unboundaried  
open sea ?

## North

travelled within us  
- a bronze weight  
in its crate of polar words.  
We stored it in darkness, certain  
we could crank open  
the lid, slip into its folkscape:  
glass sky, charcoaled fir.

There were sensations troved  
in the book of childhood.  
How intimate it was, air  
like cold river water  
in our throats, sugar dawn  
so brittle you could snap  
a twig of it, eat. Snow tastes

of iron, leaves a pang  
on the tongue like a fox wail.  
My father was addicted  
to north- each summer driving us  
up primitive motorways  
to its argued outposts. Pebble-dash  
estates, then granite, Atlantic.

## Bordered

We were in one of those hollows  
in the weather chart where frost  
crimped the verges, but left snow  
wherever we were not.

We could see it across the hills,  
shipping its tonnage of light  
back to us like a promise.

For once it was everyone else  
time-locked on a motor-way,  
trucks stalled in an arctic smur,  
night circling like a border guard,  
heavily coated and fingering  
the myth of wolves in his pocket.  
We'd been there in other years

so near home, with nothing to look at  
but crows staking out glacial fields,  
headlamps left on like a question,  
and us, out of conversation. It was  
the way everything stills at an edge,  
becomes dangerous although no one  
can tell you who is untrusted.

And for a time you are not banded  
or identified, or known by lights  
melting to a destination. You are  
inconsequential as stone-crop  
a beam crosses, or the ribboning  
shadows dropped by a storm rise  
of the crows to flight.

## Seasons

We'd conjured the shape of them,  
their symmetry,  
like folded napkins, above

the heads of all evidence.  
We wanted to shake them out  
for our children, as keepsakes:

the way you'd smell snow  
before it fell, the length of cold  
to unroll before spring.

Sometimes they'd ape the theme  
of themselves, as that year ice  
roped the ends of our hair

when we cornered the gulf  
between blizzard and door. Later  
my sister in Boulder flashed a text

like a trick of mind: they were watering  
roses in December, in such heat, it felt  
like a new brand of loss.

## Migrants

They homed in across the valley, cleared  
a cottage, decades empty, shovelled  
owl shit, sheep mess, leavings  
of disused time. They painted a tonic

ascent, deep ocean to pale blue  
in a roll from living room to attic,  
dug a pond in their reclaimed meadow  
for the day to hinge its changes.

When the geese came, trouble-  
shooting in formation, their cries  
a circus of saxophones tuning,  
a gun was borrowed, birds

downed for ruffling the surface.  
But sky sharpens and softens  
between rain-strokes, can't be  
rooted, is never the same

hope twice. Nothing really settles,  
No two harvests. No word that isn't  
migrating from another. Here  
one morning two hundred households

had signed up for a boat, sailed to Ohio.

## Sound Notes

You will know by now the cave-suck groan, like anemones  
under saline pools : these were from *Joe Davis*

who wished to transmit the topography of our genitals  
and therefore recorded a dancer's vagina

pulsing onto discs to inform the stars. He later engrafted  
a map of the milky way on the teeming glitter

of a mouse's ear. Silence sounded out  
can hurt : radiation plays a guitar

into hollow, tin pan non-sequiters. Lies create space  
for the sunrise and dusk of narrative – in films, the unbearable

unfinish of a thermal blast was arced between two  
strings of the heart: a wall falling, a waterfall.

## Paint Chart M-O

*Malachite* was a landscaped pledge, the turquoise verges  
between wilds and estate, landowner and his wife forever  
foregrounded, stiff with ascendancy and silks. Or the mallow green  
skirts of Egyptian slaves, line-danced across a tomb.

*Navajo* was the temperature of boom years, popcorn with a hint of satsuma  
was red-neck cosy, the lounge light of Ontario suburbs, was  
upwardly mobile towards Magnolia. It was plaster, tribal  
but souvenir safe. Stains vanished into it.

*Orpiment* was how gold used to haunt, like the glow inside boiled sweets  
or amber, resinous and in-lit as if a tiny, excited cell fermented  
on the other side of its shelling. It was the rare egg of a quest  
laced with difficulty, search-light departure zones, warning.



## Open Field

This is the month our paths become a green butter  
in which you sink, while your boots fill with the night's rain  
and you come in bearing news of unripened sweet-corn,

how nothing can be secured. Our daughter  
is on a plane to Colorado, where the High Peak is burning  
down into the epidermis of cities as it hasn't for years.

I think of the engine's effort, the way it forces  
completion across an open field of unstable drift.  
It's compelled as DNA - like the willow arches

you'd bent for the French beans, told me they'd grow to form,  
because to throw an arc between known and other,  
repeat it often, is to reach homeliness.

I will put on my coat, my hood of tunnel vision  
where the plane will return, the fires  
time out, I'll sweep leaves – the furnace bail

of them, seismic as I tread them into ruts  
become wells, lean in, pull back, like a child  
rocking on the hip of darkness.

Above me vapour deepens, braids into smoke.

## The Atomist in Exile

That crash wakes him: heart bullying  
his ears, but night flaps only  
waste bags in the yard. Somewhere  
a fox cry ghosts the slip-road  
off his mind. Later, their diagnosis:  
a syndrome - *exploding head*

*heard only in the head.* Benign  
and untrackable and *what were you on ?*  
his wife says. Just the usual suspects,  
but often now the sense of not  
quite getting it, or a name crossing  
the junction ahead, then slurred

through a riddle of headlamps.  
He's guessed his obits, his precision  
lauded, 'patience' - no glamorous stunts.  
Knows he should calibrate himself  
to himself, to the void, find himself  
out, his flicker along

the decay path, or blend himself  
into the weave of his own effort,  
work-out in thin, sample light  
of dawn, ( his muscles packed so long  
into the microscope's pin-hole  
dwelling among atoms ).

Jews do tight places, he'd joked-  
those years he'd pitched a lamp  
into the belly of a coal mine, needing  
oppressive air to breath.  
Einstein, he'd say, had wanted that,  
a tight answer, a lit particle

like a nail to hang reason from.  
But often now the ratios slip  
his reach and so much easier to sit  
dumb and lose on wicker chairs  
by the ocean, his North ocean, the vellum  
churn of it there in his wife's eyes.

## Paint Chart U-W

*Umber* was less than umbra, less than the taut negotiations  
of black, was the zone of moths and scabbled earth,  
of a dryness at the heart of things, a sanity, in its own way  
alive with quiet politics, eyes sparking behind smoke.

*Verdigris* was unimaginable – how that tone could be vernal  
verifiable, verdant. The ways it was dying as a sense. How little  
subtlety could still be afforded. Botticelli spread luminous  
layer on layer, as if time was the achievement of greens.

*White* was its sources – titanium, lead, lime, zinc, carnation, cancer, cream,  
was the sheet over a crime scene, a portal  
of negatives, of shades of not saying the same  
thing, or its reversal, its vanishing eye.

## West

was where the mainland floated its babies:  
downy, off-shore landlets. You could take boats  
to play among them, sample that edginess  
of their DNA, hovering, but loosed from the chewed  
mothering home-bulk. In this configuration  
you could stray into thinner air, the magnetism  
of brinks, cliffs the terns plunged for you.  
This was our atmosphere, always in relation,  
always within, and not within, our skins.

The hermits knew that, barnacled to a God  
mostly composed of weather. Wisdom  
was earned by the hundred ways skin soaks,  
smarts in gales or nourishes itself on light.  
Rock stayed them, carved out a tension  
the mind could surge from. Bedrocked,  
they patched bridges, mended the ferries,  
were keepers of the lighthouse - edge men,  
nursing life through its elements.

## Skin Recollection

Undressed, we are never less so:  
Your skin when I touch it

is maritime with hormone and tart  
with the juniper oil you thumbed in

for strain – under that a sweetness,  
a boyish pink muddied by scrum

and remembered punches  
in the fog behind corrugated sheds.

Skin tells us and keeps us secret.  
Your man-skin larded

with deodorant puts on the press  
of subways and agendas.

It wears the world, grows it; I trace  
its casual continents. Love,

our bones are graphs of stretch  
from first dawn, echoic joints. Here

now, a weak rose sky - all night  
jet trails have scored it. We surface

there above the ancient distresses  
of tissue, of muscle, press

as if pressing could dissolve the world,  
its coating, reach only ourselves

## Llyn Brianne

The reservoir stalled us, a shield  
of quiet  
after catastrophe,  
as if that blanketing sealed in  
water's coal flatness, its playing  
out of inertia, glassy  
with secrecies,  
reversed firs  
laid over, sky polished as a lens  
for probing intimate structure.

And maybe aftermath is all you get,  
however deep into the hollows  
of stomata you peer, however many layers  
you call a journey: *Outer bark, inner  
bark, cambium, heartwood,  
pith*. The roots are anchored  
to shadow, the branches opaque  
as a stem word,  
radical,  
theme.

We walked there, hunted the affixes  
drowned with one farm and a fist  
of valleys, broken, gloved  
in sheen - limned out from text  
the lost ferns,  
globe flowers  
tuned to less light, their fruit  
silt-brown, their leaves  
keel ridged, *ovaries  
stigmata, pistils*.

## Language Death

*The speech* won't crumble fast; its vowels will break bread  
between gums the way tectonic plates  
will go on speaking and shifting  
the world's long gossip.

It will burrow for millennia if it has to,  
in grit-stone, slag, a hare's pellet  
below smoking heather,  
takes the shape of what's to hand -

lets the transitions of ridge to sky  
become syntax, water mutate  
its wind-scurried particles, elide  
into the river's throat. It washes

those old teeth ripped  
from the hill face, those dung  
and gold-spined pebbles  
to fit a palm.

## Words were what we travelled through

stations of the voice  
that named the road, its dust  
wrote it ochre, ineffable.

Words shivered the mirages,  
slow-shuffled cattle  
through peripheral sight.

Through words we climbed  
paths of limestone and assonance  
into sea's hearing and it translated

us. Surf on sand  
seemed an agreement  
given, withdrawn and given.

In this steely/tender negotiation  
borders could touch, breach protocol, lap  
through each other like phosphorescence,

latte pale, spilled from nursing plankton  
when the ships horned among them.  
or currents tangled lines. Their milk glow

was deception and guidance;  
a lie of shallow surf,  
a proof of fish, We breathed on risk.

Words were our medium, were not the water  
named, nor the salt, nor reflection.  
But oxygen to push beyond them, always.



## Erosion

A year since we last climbed this path  
to where the field's sentence  
falls, unfinished, to a speechless glaze.  
Sea; a single boat hovers  
like a pause-mark. Already edges  
are closer, there's less of anything  
that stands for firm. Cliffs fritter  
into air as if addicted  
to an ease of giving  
themselves away.

Balanced here, ruins of Monachty'r Graig  
behind us, we could be something  
salt-air has brittle, so porous,  
time could funnel through.  
And it seems effortless to be this,  
almost generous. The farm  
eating itself from the inside, half-gone,  
not empty, but spacious, loosening out  
through a breach in the roof  
where sky leans in.

## Skomer

Distance gave us rock.  
But what I remember  
is the strata of bird cries  
how cliffs poured from them  
like a hungry psalm.

There is nothing rooted  
here that does not shape  
to the life underfoot  
a subsoil of wings,  
of eggs sunk like ashes.

Catacomb of bird hearts  
each an intention  
each powered by exodus,  
where salt is a marker  
staining the wind.

## Falling

It didn't bother me at first. As I look at this photo of us - myself, my brother Luke - in the sand, legs splayed in mirror image, both of us tunnelling with a small-handled trowel, I could easily pretend that we'd cosied down together in the same womb, knocked cheeks, swapped winks and nudges about the quickening of our mother's heart-beat when she trespassed into darkness for a fag. We'd have shared memories - a whole slide-show of pre-natal quality time, as we competed for the first hints that our nascent fins were setting into fingers. Long, ironic debates about whether - from what we could infer of her character - our mother, Maeve, would stir the custard lumpy or smooth. We'd have traversed a developmental universe before so much as a peek of the world beyond her legs. I could pretend.

Most people have baggage. All siblings have additional baggage and enough tangled wool to keep them spinning around each others knots for a lifetime. My baggage is the weight of void that preceded me. I think of myself as an MMS - a miracle of modern science. A boy child in a Petri dish. Grown from wholly manufactured cells. My 'brother' on the other hand, was an unexpected miracle of nature, bobbing through all the odds to sink an anchor into Maeve's flesh shortly after I began to solidify behind glass.

I believe I was planted later - much later. Maeve always maintained there was no difference - but her love wasn't the issue, although only now have I come to realise this. There is no ancient template for the lack I feel, no Drama for the absence of drama. This is what I envy - inheritance, the mess of random connections, the ability to fall, for isn't that what a rooted person can do ?

There is this photo - the one taken at the same beach, probably during the same over-heated, over-priced week in August. Luke and me in sun-hats, thin, eight year old torsos, shorts patterned somewhere between camouflage and dolphin. An hour maybe later, I took Luke to the hollow of a dune, told him the game was to see who could keep still the longest, and buried him to the neck in sand. I ran back to Maeve and whichever, now forgotten, relatives she was with. I see myself, hot faced, waving my arms: *Luke's gone; I can't see Luke !* He was found within half an hour. Long enough to live; long enough to suffer. Long enough for this memory to kick back at me sixty years later. Did I know what I was doing at the time? - did I know that I was creating a past to come back and sting me with its sand prints of of guilt . Its evidence of life?

Time shortens and we soften that pain by lengthening the past. I work the small, immediate past. The swift kicks of regret. For some time Luke has been forgetting things. His hands are setting into gnarls. All the humanity he trails behind him like a string of dried candy, and he can't hold onto it. Yesterday I took the tin with his biscuits, hid it behind the kitchen dustbin. I saw him reach into remembered space, falter, mutter. Today I will hide his pillow. Time is short; the memories of his stricken face beside the bed will comfort me, will tell me the past is only as wide as the slits I make for it.

Luke's been living with me since June, his wife, died. Myself, I never married. June, they said, was like Maeve's mother; she had the slight squint and the taste for bingo – and the rare cheekbones in a otherwise well fatted frame. I studied Luke and June when they came for visits. I thought, Luke likes the same old tricks, the jigsaws of flesh and memory he fits to. For me it was – is – merely flesh. I take walks round the village, call by on the easier going women. There are three now I can kiss on the cheek. One whose hand I brush with my lips – sententiously – feigning an accent. The young woman three doors down – once or twice I've patted her bottom. It adds to my store of time. Nothing is lost, nothing is broken. Nothing takes me deeper. Where is there for me to go ?

Luke became helpless after June's death, sitting in the front room in the same creased shirt for days, face creased too and puzzled with it. He wanted me to take the power, that was obvious. It's when the games started. First just to rile him a little, to taste a reaction. Banal stuff – adding salt to his tea, turning over an extra page of the calender. I'd watch him stiffen, look at me sideways. Never fight back. Then I saw what he could do for me. So daily then, the pricks, the little abuses. I never hit him – only the one time.

I have this trunk where I keep the documents: all the articles cut from scientific journals, the photo copies of research papers, the accounts of Nobel prize winners, pictures of the first cells bubbling apart like lunar frog-spawn in their half-moon membrane of glass. When you look at it all, you can piece a jigsaw that's an epic of a victory. There's a beauty to it. I come here to look when Luke's sleeping, when I can hear his plaintive, gravelly breath through the thin wall. I switch on the lamp and go under. I feel pride. Luke found me once; he picked up the paper on cell fusion. He said: We always knew you were a bit not quite there. I hit him in the mouth. There was blood on my knuckles; I felt alive. For a moment I had a place from which to fall.

## Inishbovin

Mackie.

When my daddy drowned, I thought death might be infectious. I thought my mammy might catch it – that she might walk out of the kitchen one day, leaving the potatoes boiling and baby Siobhan bawling for her soother, walk out into the lake under Erigal mountain that's as still as an owl's eye. I thought they'd bring back her body, like my Da's, but with less to know her by – perhaps just bones. I thought, if I took my sights off them, mammy and Siobhan and the twins, Rose and Teresa, they'd slip away into the silence that came down, soft and relentless, with our Donegal rain.

\*

People say I'm the ghost of my Dad. *Mackie, poor Jimmy Curran's boy – the living image.* There's a second's panic when they see me. I was fiveteen when he went. That morning I'd been walking along Mamore Strand with Evie. I had an arm around her waist. I wanted to find somewhere hidden in the dip of the dunes where we could lie down and I could stroke under her shirt. We'd reached the stretch where a stream cuts across the beach. You could always smell peat rising off it like a tang that shouldn't be there. And sheep's piss as well. The mountain smell, leaking down onto the beach. I was trying to impress Evie, make her think we were somehow heroic, me and my daddy - going out on the flood-tide to fish for flounder between Gola Island and Inishinny, setting the lobster pots in all weathers. I was lying. He didn't take risks. Not the sort of risks that take you up to an edge.

Evie believes most things. She looks more Irish than most of the real ones, although it's only on, Keiren, her dad's side, the thinness and the red, curling hair. She hates it. When I first met her she tried to straighten it, or dye it black, but the red always shone through and I liked that. She was touchy about her da – defending him one minute, raging the next. The locals gossiped about him. He'd left when she was four and she told me that even that young she'd felt like she was the one taking care of things.

Her folk are blow-ins; they split almost as soon as they settled out here. He's an artist, living up by Gweedore, under the mountain. I snuck up their once to see his paintings. He was holding an open day. There were some pretty straight-forward ones – local lakes and hills, for the tourists. That kind of thing. But then we went into a different room, very light, smooth, bleached walls like the sea had got in there. Someone said this was where his real stuff was. All the canvasses were huge.

There was one of him, up close, all blacks and dark reds. He looked scared - tormented. But the other paintings were different: like you were looking down on the sea from some height that kept changing, as if you were a gull or someone falling very slowly. And what you saw wasn't the way a fisherman sees or feels the sea – it was like you were just seeing the pattern of it, the ebb tide coiling out to the horizon and disappearing. It made me feel free.

I tried to talk to Evie about the pictures; I thought it was a way to get more hold on her, but she'd shrug or ruffle my hair and tell me I sounded like a poofter. For some reason I thought of them as we were standing by the stream, kicking a flattened coke can around.

I said : we should go see your daddy sometimes,

What for - so he can show off his new girlie ? Get a life, Mackie.

And she pulled me over the stream and into the dunes. Later the clouds moved in - dark, banked sheets. Salty drops of rain began to spit into our eyes and mouths.. I pulled my jacket over both of us and we carried on. We didn't hear the men calling for me, down the beach.

Every other memory of that time flips about like dying fish - as if the days themselves were struggling to breath. I don't know what came first. There's rain, shouting, the Guardia crowding into our kitchen; there's the newspaper report that keeps flashing up in front of all the other memories like a bad weather warning. No one really knows what happened or why his boat went under. He was out crabbing for the Dolan fishery . He didn't take risks. I thought over and over about what he would have seen and heard and felt in the boat as it headed out - smells of fish-guts and petrol and sea and salt and his own sweat under it all, the waves up-close, slopping against the boat, spattering against his cheeks and his hands red raw and freezing, guiding the motor, thinking moment to moment. I couldn't get further than that; I'd start to feel giddy and a bit sick and then a black panic hit me so I stopped thinking of the death at all, just that I needed to watch everyone. I needed to be careful for my whole family. I thought, I have to keep everything the same, so death can't leak in, like the bog smell from the mountain, and smuggle us away. No risks. No going on the sea.

\*

Evie said: my dad's getting married – would you believe that. That hippy chick from the States. She's six years older than me. I don't want to go up there Mackie.

It's his birthday, Evie – you should go.

Jesus, Mackie, when did you get to be so holy?

But then she wrapped an arm around his neck and pushed her face into it.

Mackie, she said, come down Roarke's with me tonight. Have a drink! Your mammy's getting stronger.

Mackie kissed her hard to drown the ghost of salt and fish and petrol that blew out of nowhere, slapping against his heart.

\*

Evie

Evie's pissed. She knows she is. She must be. Some joker, one of the Sweeney boys maybe, must have spiked her juice. Somehow she's come outside the bar. There's a taste of chips in her mouth; her lips sting – so at some point, earlier, they must have eaten, her and the crowd from Dunlewy. Party night, someone celebrating – what? What the hell's to celebrate? Too much vinegar. It's rained again, The pavements shine, lights jiggling in the puddles. A man lurches out of the doorway behind her, veers towards her, splurts out something offensive then vomits near her feet, before folding up against the wall. The sharp stench clears her head for a minute. She needs to get away, down to the shore.

The sunset has spilt itself over the sea like treacle, leaking from shore to horizon. It looks strange: close to, there are dark patches on the water – stormy looking. But further out it's a luminous, cradle blue. That's how she thinks of it. Evie can see the Islands – they look painted on, almost transparent. But she doesn't want to think about paintings. Her dad's had an exhibition in the posh new gallery out near Gortahawk. He called it *The Fall of Icarus*. Evie had looked at the brochure – it showed one of the paintings; very faint, milky, patterns in the sea as the tide folded back, but seen from this great distance so that everything seemed slowed and unreal. It made her feel weird, as if he'd moved ways away from all of them, gone beyond an edge. Gone beyond her. With a violence she remembered playing on the beach with him and all the kids from John and Siobhan's – years ago. Before he left. He'd built a boat of sand, big enough for them all to clamber in; they were shouting, jumping in and out, him acting the maggot, pirates, waving invisible machetes. And then, as suddenly, he was gone, bored, beyond them, ways away up the beach. She can still feel the joy drain out of her.

That other time – out with him in the strip of goat-chewed grass and reeds that did for their garden. She must have been very small because she was racing between his legs, first one way, then the other, screaming her laughter. And then the shock, her world withering to a gasp as water poured over her face, into her eyes and mouth and ears. He'd thrown the rain bucket over her. In the stillness before she cried - which seemed to last forever but was maybe only a few seconds – she smelt peat and sheep's piss all around her. She'd retched.

There's a small boat up on the sand, the oars pulled in. Mick Sweeney's. She still feels dizzy, but not so much that two plans can't get into the space between daytime sense and a wilful spark - *a bit of da* is how she thinks of it – the prankster, the risk taker, wriggling up out of her bleakness. She's almost certain now it was Mike put something in the drink. She'll take his boat out – it's calm, there'll be enough light for a few more hours. Mackie's told her it's an easy row to Inishbofin Island, twenty minutes at the most, easy to pull up on its shingle beaches. They were going to do it before the accident. Before Mackie changed.

It takes her longer. Her hands are beginning to blister as the island looms up ahead. She sees tooth shaped rocks jutting out from the west side; there's spume flying off them, flame edged in the dwindling light. She thinks the currents must be powerful on that side - it wouldn't take much wind to nudge the boat towards them. When she climbs out onto the beach she's sobered enough to know she can't make it back before dark. And the wind's getting up; there are white-caps now, riding further out across water that already looks blacker. The beach rises to a scrub of sand and maram grass and sea thrift riddled by holes – rabbit tunnels, their dried, sweet smelling pellets everywhere under-foot. Evie sees a ruin, not much more than a doorway and two windows, with the remains of a corrugated roof. We could have done it there, she thinks, me and Mackie, lying down there on our coats, risking it. We' could have made a fire and sat there looking back at the mainland.

It was hard to reach him, ever since his daddy went. It felt like she was always slugging him to get out of himself.

There's still a taste of alcohol at the back of her throat: the edges of the rocks and shingle are dancing, nothing quite settling.

Mike Sweeney.

She pushes his boat back out into the sea, watches as it's tugged away, dipping, distorted towards the rocks, then she walks unevenly towards the ruin. There's her other plan. She wants Mackie to find her. It's as simple as that.



## Love in the Time of Codeine.

Graham says: Lou always falls for the kind of men who should come with the number of a help-line attached.

Shut up Graham, says Nessa, - this isn't funny. And Patrick wasn't like that.

Who?

You know – the guy she was with before she moved to Ipswich.

Oh – the Russell Tovey look-a-like. He wasn't dangerous enough, was he ?

She got bored after a month.

God, you cynic. Why you being so hard on Lou anyway?

Could be something to do with being dragged half way across the country when the Cup Final's on.....don't suppose she watches football... oh the whims of women!

I don't believe you sometimes, Graham. She needs us. And its got nothing to do with danger – it's their vulnerability that hooks her.

You mean the mental derangement. Didn't she have an affair with one of her clients? Very naughty !

That was AFTER she finished counselling him – you *must* have known that -she's just – compassionate, open to people. Men take advantage.

All very professional, says Graham, - do you think there's any beer in the house?

Graham and Nessa in Lou's kitchen, grimed and savage after their long journey, travel bags still piled near the door. They'd left Aberystwyth at 6.0 in the morning, had to creep along the Llangurig road behind a caravan, through an apocalypse of rain. On the M6 there was fog that slowed them further. Outside Huntingdon, Graham hit a hedgehog. Nessa saw it spin across the road in the spasm of orange light from an on-coming car. She felt as if they'd run over a baby. When they stopped at a Little Chef for coffee, their order was too long coming; Graham walked out. Because of Lou. All this because of Lou. Because of the appeal, skinned and desolate, in the voice-mail message they'd come home to yesterday. It was Nessa who'd listened to it, while Graham unpacked the shopping. She always went for the messages first. Like a drug.

Graham, Nessa had said - Lou's in a mess; something's happened. She wants us to go over there.

What – just like that ? - what kind of mess ?

She didn't say. Can you get time off ?

Fuck it, Ness. We don't hear from Lou from months, then as soon as there's trouble she's all over us – you. She uses you. Like that time her kid ran off.

That was years ago. And its not like that. She's just involved with lots of people. And her work.

\*

Colm feels like his own aftermath. On the threshold of his flat, legs and arms skinny and twisting in like a pipe-cleaner man from Infants. That's how he thinks of himself . A twisty pipe-cleaner man, shy in the face of his own walls and floor-boards. When he left this place he was sick. Now he's clean. Signed, sealed and re-habed. Where the fuck does the man who lives here – the HIM – keep the bowls and spoons? Where's the socket for the T.V? So much of himself feels homeless. How can he squeeze them in *here*, the heaped , damp fistled memories ? He feels too thin and too immense for his own life. An ordinary life. An ordinary grave in the cemetery wind. You'll grow into it, Lou said. You'll wake up one day the size of ordinary.

Graham is fiddling around in Lou's fridge. Nessa looks out of the window. There's a lull in the rain, sifting thin East Anglian light in stripes across the rooftops. Lou's small garden looks over them and backs onto the railway line, azaleas and golden rod giving way to nettles and barbed wire. And then the drop to the track. Shadows, rankness, broken glass. Last year had been the serial killer. Five street girls, strangled and dumped in a copse not far from Lou's street. They'd caught someone. The kind of man, Nessa thinks, Lou might have collected. And then left when she came to her senses. Damaged, edgy – or maybe not, maybe just someone who fell into murder the way other people fall into internet gambling.

Where the hell is she? Graham says. You'd think, after the trouble we've gone to, she'd at least be here to meet us.

They'd arrived to a note on the door: *back later – key under red tub.*

*Lou xxx*

And speculation. And bickering. And then the sore quiet in which Graham finds and breaks into a bottle of Adams and into which Lou walks out of the re-gathering rain.

I'm sorry, you lovely people, Lou says – there was someone who needed to see me. And that's it. Nessa and Graham are back in love with her, sitting her down, making the tea, then opening the bottle of wine Lou has forgotten to chill. Nessa finds a packet of chicken thighs which she coats in seasoned flour. She chops onions and green peppers, swills them in heating olive oil, adds the meat, coaxing it over, and then over again to crisp it evenly. Graham pours boiled water over rice, sets it to simmer, checks a light-fitting Lou thinks is faulty. As he passes behind Lou he reaches out to touch her shoulder. Their bags stay piled in the corner.

Later, in the spare room, Nessa sits, legs bare, on the edge of the bed. Graham undresses with his back to her. After hours of talking, the loss of Lou to her bedroom is like a paralysed sea between them, Nessa feels high on Lou. She doesn't want to turn to Graham, pull him close and into her. She leaves the lamp on, stays upright as Graham climbs into the cold bed. He at once rolls towards the wall. It's Lou he wants to hold – to keep on holding through the slip of reason into softness, and through the shiver of trains and the deep night warning of helicopters tracking the sodium streets for every shape of fear.

Nessa grips and ungrrips the duvet. She says:

How could he do it? Colm I mean. Just use up all her goodness and dump her? She's really hurting.

She's an easy target, Ness – like you said, she's too compassionate. I feel like shooting him. Seriously, if I had a gun I'd find him and shoot him. It'd be worth prison.

That makes me feel weird Graham – you saying that. This isn't a soap opera. We've got to keep our balance in all this – for Lou's sake. I feel really strange now. And Nessa switches off the light, turning towards her wall to hide the tears.

\*

Heroin, morphine, methadone, oxycontin, dimarzipan, codeine, tea. This is the way you come down, Colm thinks, while the lights go up. The lights which say stop here, go there, obey the signs, buy the goods, dream the dream. Coming down in *The Ordinary Lights of Day*. Small step by step, Lou said: *praise yourself every time*. Learn where the water turns off: praise yourself. Buy milk for the freezer: praise yourself. Argue with Swalec. Get a hair-cut at Geoff's round the corner. Praise yourself. Oh praise the lord.

If you ever leave me, Nessa says to Graham the next morning, tell me why. Graham is hunting through a bag for his electric shaver. He pats Nessa on the head.

\*

They had sex when he reached codeine. Colm had been seeing Lou for counselling once a week at the re-hab centre. She came down every step with him, telling him about the man he would be on hard ground. About his creativity – he'd take up guitar again, write songs. He could volunteer at the centre. They'd help him with benefits. Twelve years on heroin and he could still come back to life, Every word she said was like a hand-rail glinting in a black stairwell. They'd been for a walk in the park – to talk about his future, Lou said, in the free air – it would help him feel positive. There were chestnut trees either side of the path, families, mothers with buggies. They bought ice-cream from the van near the play-ground. She wanted to see his flat, make suggestions. When he let her in, the walls made sense. He felt the right size. She kissed him.

Lou is nowhere to be seen. Gone for a walk probably, Nessa says – I wonder if she's OK? I'll look for her, Graham says. Nessa runs hot water into the sink, scrapes crusted sauce from the plates, hunts for the re-cycling bin, opens a window to let out the old wine and trauma of the night. This was how it was the last time Lou had a bad time. Up all night going over and over things, disappearing, returning. She's one of those people, Nessa thinks, who puts their whole self on the line for someone and then – crash. And she hadn't even been with Colm that long. He must have got under her skin. Nessa goes back over Lou's tale: He was a musician. He'd come to her for counselling for a while. Just getting himself straightened out after some problems. She wouldn't say more. Confidentiality. They'd become friends. Afterwards. She'd loved him – really loved him this time. And then he went. No word, no argument, no hint of another lover. Not knowing, said Lou, is worse than death.

A very small voice behind Nessa's memory of Lou's last-night voice, behind the sea-flow of sympathy Lou drew from Nessa, wondered if Lou was just offended. It had been sometime since she had been the one who was left.

Write it down, Lou said to Colm. Make it into a song. What heroin meant for you. He left it on her desk. His whole heart. It's the only thing you think you need, he'd told her - to bear anything. Then it's all there is. He reached hard ground. And he found he could do them, the ordinary things. She'd taken him there. And that was when her kisses began to brush the surface, and she started to criticise. And he knew she had grown bored.

## Useless Air.

Sean wouldn't stop the clocks.

Bridie said : you'd think that, with our mammy laid out on the Sunday cloth, you'd do that for her. You'd think that.

Sean said: they'd never go back. They'd trick you ever after into too late or too soon.

Bridie said: I know you Sean – you're lazy. You always were. You think I'll just carry on now, no decent breath, doing for you what Mammy did. Go drown yourself !

She'd have seen to the clocks herself, except that was Sean's job. Up in mammy's room just now, so quiet but for the one carriage clock ticking. It still smelt of piss in there, like the whiff of an old she fox. Gone into morning fog. But not the dried out, caked on, rattling bitterness of her family, like old tarmac after frost with all the unsaid and the dead bits sticking to it and never free. Sean swanning away, she thought, getting away with it, golden boy,

The time, when he was twelve and she thirteen, he'd thrown the porcelain Lourdes Madonna, with the little well by her toes for holy water and her cream cheeked, cross-eyed blankness. The one their mammy kissed when the uncles came in reeking of whisky. It had cracked into three jagged pieces she'd expected to be solid – even muscular and warm-beating, but were hollow – and she was blamed for riling Sean and him petted and forgiven.

The rebellion in her, like a tucked away tumour, waiting. *You'll be moving in then ?* - Kathleen, widow from the next farm, pursing a sandwich between manicured nails, the loudest clock behind her. Bridie says nothing. Sean never left, stepping in for their dada when he went. Waited on.

She knows what the village thinks. With the mother gone, it's for her to cure the ham, mind the space, keep it in the family, every last acre of it, the farm that's always been called The Island although what cuts off from the roads away isn't more than a black trickle overhung by thorn bushes. *I'm the horse*, Bridie says to Kathleen's back. Snorting and back-stamping in fear rather than cross a stream.

She's nearly fifty. Her ankles ache. Irish sea eyes, older girl from The Island, Sean's big sister, hopes long gone, never grew up. Waiting. But when she looks in on the mother, laid out on a table in the parlour, she feels a furtive protectiveness – the sort a corpse can kindle as the person never did in life. Her mother seems smaller than the last time she looked in – as if she's slowly deflating. Bridie goes over to the window to open it a little further. Let out all that useless air she thinks, let it get away. And deep down, deep down, look how I can do you right mammy, the way Sean never did, the way you never saw in me. Look at Sean, shaking ice for that woman's whisky.

Will you take Kathleen in to mammy now, Sean ? she says.

Sean shrugs. He's a big man in a small suit. He gets by on a loud charm bleakened at the edges by years of off-side alcohol; he's at it now, hand on Kathleen's shoulder, eyes down the breach between buttons on her silk shirt. Bridie sees her future: The alcohol soaking up more and more of Sean, his face reddening, whisky breath at lunch-time, the farm sliding. Kathleen closing in. And no way, no way to jump across the stream.

Except for the cats. They've always been there, like the clocks. Scrawny, glint eyed, darting out of the reed clumps that crack up through the concrete outside the house, bristling away into the shadows. Sean hates them. Bridie knows how his eyes stream when they brush his legs, how he curses and itches. How sometimes he struggles to breathe. It's a small footfall – a cat's footfall – from their fur to full blown asthma. One day Sean will take the heavy rifle from above the mantel-piece and shoot every one of them. But for now they haunt the barns and his ankles, sniping vermin, Mammy's cats.

You shoot those kitties, Bridie says to Sean, and you'll have a dozen more the next day. There won't be any peace Sean, don't go thinking you can win.

\*

It's a week from the funeral. Bridie faces Sean across the fake oak Sunday-laid table in the King's Hotel. There's an after Mass hum, suits, heels, Sean's eyes drifting over to Kathleen, who's by the bar – he's waiting his moment to reel her in, get a touch of her waist. Bridie picks up a slice of beef with her bare fingers and begins to wrap it in some of the tin-foil she's packed into her hand-bag. Grease gets onto the cuff of her tweed jacket. *For the kitties*, she says, making sure Sean is listening, *the poor kitties*. She follows Sean's eyes as they come to rest on Kathleen's buttocks in a fitted navy skirt. Bridie thinks of those buttocks on her mother's furniture, sidling across the double bed – the death bed – the one Sean will take over if he has his way and marries Kathleen. As she

seals the foil, she imagines the slippery brush of cats against her legs, their mewling that does for love.

Sean looks hard at the pub T.V as a race-horse mashes its way to a victory, half blocked out by the men pressed up against the screen. There's a cheer, but Bridie's voice still cuts across it:

*She won't put up with the clocks, Sean.*

\*

Under the eaves, under her mother's salvaged sheets and eiderdown, under the nagging, unfinished silence of all the dead, Bridie hears Sean coughing in the next room. Earlier she'd sat on his bed, her tweed skirt covered in light hairs from the cats which circled up against her as she shredded the beef. Moonlight. Sean will be feeling for his inhaler. Tomorrow she will take her over-fried bacon into the yard, draw the cats close.

Later, she'll note the hairs she leaves on the arm chairs, the towels, the pillows. She sees herself burying the inhaler among the nettles round the back barn. She Imagines the grit working under her finger nails, a dog barking downwind. Her stiffening fingers and her blue-veined, stiffening feet, climbing out of her boots, softening at last as they wade the narrow, black stream. And Sean, choking under the eaves.

## Malley's Yard

Cathal knew he he'd lost the tiff again - the one he and they kept having about the Brotherhood . It was a problem of time essentially. They had drunk up their time. He was still detoxing his. They had finished putting the case. He was still inventing it. They were ghosts. Repeating themselves was in the job description. So was obtuseness, prominence after midnight, a whiff of sulphur and tweed-crotch urine, their insistence on circularity. He went outside.

There were peelings of moonlight in the tyre ruts. He could hear Malley's deer snuffling behind the rents – the long, stone milk-parlour Malley and Ann had turned to holiday lets. He'd been in there once to poison a rat. Furnishings picked off from the sale of Doyle's Hotel/Bar down at Gilmuckridge. A job lot – even the doors, which bore random room numbers. The place was musty and still in its undercoat. He didn't look too closely at the wiring. He knew how Ann got away with it, greeting new arrivals with her offers of 'complexion' soap and eggs. She probably mentioned him as local colour – the widowed uncle born on the farm, still tinkering at their dairy herd. She wouldn't have mentioned his days in the chemical factory at Carnew. Or his politics. That was the thing about ageing; you faded into other peoples' dismissal of you. He was the the old paddy on the yard who limped across it sometimes in vest and braces and was handy with a spanner.

Opposite him, a single orange security light glazed the over-large sign that warned *Beware Alsations*. In fact Ann kept several antique and inoffensive mongrols. Cathal could hear them now, beginning to howl brokenly from behind a shed door. He thought of their chains. During daylight they circled the holiday 'terraces' – an assemblage of remaindered garden furniture, where the visitors sometimes sat outside to eat from the remaindered plates. Cathal knew their itineraries: Gory Sands if the rain lifted. Into Ferns for the castle. Or down the road to the 1789 Rebellion centre, a place too sanitized by dettol spray and scones to let the ghosts in. On one wall they'd admire a large tapestry by local women, celebrating that most Irish of Irish fiascos, the Battle of Vinegar Hill. Outside they could walk round a maze that had never quite got going, the cottage where the fool who started the rebellion was raised, various out-dated agricultural implements, cemented to the ground. Small scale disaster tourism on European money – with a toy-shop ambience. By about day three – when they were acclimatized – Ann might tell the visitors that their cottage was on the site of a particularly bloody battle.



Ghosts. Perhaps that was age as well. The fact that his most urgent hours were spent in their company. That they left him roused and vulnerable as dawn floated in the Wexford hills and smoke from the sparse patches of industry.

The deer were restless. They were liked by the visitors who didn't know Ann bred them for meat. Occasionally she sold one on to one of the several farm theme parks that could now be followed as a dedicated trail. *What else to do ?* Cathal asked aloud. Last year some joker or fanatic had loosed the deer. They ran into the road in darkness. Cathal had hit one as he rounded a bend too fast in skittering rain, Always rain these days. He found it, yards from his pick-up, in a ditch. Its belly had burst open. It was the rawness you feel when you tear away a scab. It was still pulsing. It glistened. Not the first time Cathal had looked hard into a wound. He'd remained armed; he shot the deer in the head.

## Eating Round the Margins

What usually happens is that I lie quiet for a bit, listening to the clock, I know it's morning from the pale light running round my curtains; not that you can rely on that mind – it could be the moon. After a few minutes I'll get my hands on a peg: it must be Tuesday, for example, because I remember pushing stuff into the washing machine; that's always Monday. Then I'll find another peg, a face with a name attached like a balloon – Charity, yes, that's important. Charity's– my daughter. That's quite a big peg. I colour in the face like they used to make you in infants: keep inside the lines, pink for skin, blue eyes, yellow hair, except Charity dyes hers now, ash blonde. There, I've got a fact as well as a name, and then I'm alright, the lights go on and I see all the memories clicking to attention. I know I'm safe. I can push myself off the bed and if I go into another room I'll know where the kettle is. I'll know what my scissors are for and how to switch on the radio.

Sometimes though, the clock ticks and I can't give it a name. I don't know which day, which hour, which year of me. I could be the last person on earth, and no one would come and I would see water in a bottle and not know how to bring it to my lips.

I'm so scared.

Funny thing, you know you have those days, the really bad ones, when you're not having them. But when you're having one it's always for the first time. So what usually happens is I pick up something my fingers know how to do – like a piece of embroidery; I suppose its like taking your mind off it, except my mind's the problem. Sometimes I get cold; the heater's right beside me but nothing tells me how to get it on. And I'm hungry but I can't remember where the food's kept. So usually my fingers keep going and its like rubbing away at a dirty window. After a while you start to see through.

Sometimes though I'm looking into the wrong window.

But what usually happens is I put my pills out on the little saucer, where I'm going to have breakfast. One big one and two little ones. I just have a piece of fruit, because of the diabetes although Charity keeps telling me to have carbohydrate. I always have a glass of milk. It's funny, what you eat. When I was a girl, and didn't like something, I'd eat round the margins first, the potatoes - we didn't have pasta in those days - or the pastry. If I took long enough, there wouldn't be time for the bit in the middle, the black bit, that's how I thought of it. And now its as if all the outside bit of my mind's firm, but the further in you go, the soggier it becomes until you

know its going to fall away into .. so you see I cling on to the outside bits, but all the time I feel the blackness, just out of reach, a big nothing, I don't know what's in it, I no longer know and I'm so scared the dry crust I'm on is going to soften and break away, piece by piece until. So I turn the telly on.

Charity says I had a husband. He died. But I can't see through that window.

And yesterday a girl came to see me, well, I say a girl, she was probably in her forties, dyed hair – you can't tell these days. She said her name was Charity and I was her mother. And I thought: what's mother? It's like when you try to remember a tune, you have a feeling about it like a patch of sun under a window and if you stood in the sun long enough the music would come to you a bit like not trying to think about breathing just doing it. She kissed me; that was nice.

So what usually happens is after a while the window starts to clear. You see down the street except today I was looking into grass. We were down by the railway; it was very cold but I couldn't wear gloves because of picking up the coals. I felt scared in case of the trains coming and the steam choking and biting my eyes. Dad says keep your eyes on the job Lily; my fingers feel furry with the coal dust; it's to keep us warm Lily, dad says. I know something bad's happened. Dad isn't leaving every morning for the Motor Rim works and when I go into our little front room there's no fire. Then I hear it, a long deep bellow – it's the train coming. I start to scream because the steam will take dad away and when I look up there's no one there

There's no one there. So what usually happens is I turn on the telly.

Charity, I say, where's Harry? And she looks at me with that look somewhere between iron and cotton wool or maybe I've got the wool in my eyes not to see the door won't give it won't let me in. Wipe the window Charity I say its fine she says, there's nothing wrong with the window have you taken your pills and I think what's pills? She's iron now; she's got these little white pebbles in her palm. Eat. No no no don't put things in your mouth don't let Harry he'll choke. The little white faces they've got teeth but no eyes a tooth for every one of the bad fairies she keeps coming back like a bad fairy to cover the window cover the widow cover the window.

Mother, she says, sit down, we'll look at the pictures – it'll help you. So there we are, she's made tea, not too much milk, no, no sugar – I can't have sugar. Can I? Look she says – that's when you lived in Coventry– that house there in the middle of the terrace. It survived. And that's Harry's christening. And that's your sister, Kathleen. Yes I say, do you know what we did? We dug holes in among the ruins; they filled up straight away with water because of all the rain, sooty rain. We'd splash about and we got in such trouble when we went home. But we never stole anything, never, even though we were hungry.

I can't take sugar. Can I?

So afterwards I sit here. I might listen to the radio. Sometimes I just think. We'd have bread and butter pudding on Sunday. Me and Kathleen while Harry had his nap. We'd butter the slices and we'd always get in trouble for putting too much on. I didn't like the raisins though. After it came out of the oven, the bread was soggy, sweet and golden – but the raisins were always burnt. I gave some to Harry and he burned his tongue. I got a slap for that.

Then I might turn on the telly. We had to put tape over the windows. Me and Kathleen, it was our job to do the kitchen. You couldn't leave even a crack - you'd get in trouble for that. And there were no street lights. Harry got out once – while we were taping. We were so scared. Mother had to go out in the darkness; she found him in five minutes he couldn't go very fast on his bottom, but she banged her head on a lamp post she couldn't see it could she? There was blood all over her face and all over Harry. Dad says the canals are helping the bombers anyway more than street lamps and houses ever could. They shine in the moonlight just as if someone had given them a map.

That's how they found the car factory.

Mother she says, did you take your pills?

Then it started. We went into the big cellar under the Catholic school. Kathleen put a tea-cosy over her head. Where's Harry? Mother where's Harry?

There was something bad on the telly. There was a tower block, very high and a plane went into it - it poured out thick thick black smoke and my mouth felt dry and furry . I thought: Is it the war again ? I didn't say anything in case I made a fool of myself. Charity kept telling me where it was, but the names just slip off me like when you're a child and you try to climb a slippery cliff by the sea but you can't get a hold, not one. I closed my eyes because I knew the bombers were coming. Wake up mother, says the girl but when I open my eyes the air is full of falling – all the people are peeling out of the glass windows; they look like black scraps drifting out of the bonfire and I think they won't ever stop falling. Some of them are on fire. Every time I open my eyes they will still be falling and all the bright glass and the steel and the lifts and the stairwells will buckle and give way and it scares me because soon there won't anything to cling onto. Nothing at all.

Where's Harry?

Sit down mother she says I'll make some tea.

After they re-built the cathedral we went to see. I liked the stain glass, but it was sad as well. It was like looking in at that tower; the panes made a black grid; they kept everything in place and I felt safe. But behind, everything was on fire and you could see the shapes of people – they were burning too. Only it wasn't reds and oranges, it was rose and violet and plum like my embroidery silks. I think he wanted that, the artist; he wanted us to see silk shifting about, catching light the way a river does when you swirl it with your foot. That's what I thought. He wanted to give us beauty when we were hurting.

What was his name?...and I think I'm going to fall and this time I won't stop falling – every window will burn, there will be no floors to land on, no years or days or hours of me, no steel to cling. There was something bad on the telly. There was a tower block, very high and a plane went into it, it poured out thick thick black smoke and my mouth felt dry and furry . I thought: Is it the war again? I didn't say anything in case I made a fool of myself. Charity kept telling me where it was but the names just slip off me like when you're a child and you try to climb a slippery cliff by the sea but you can't get a hold, not one. I closed my eyes because I knew the bombers were coming. Wake up mother, says the girl but when I open my eyes the air is full of falling – all the people are peeling out of the glass windows; they look like black scraps drifting out of the bonfire and I think they won't ever stop falling. Some of them are on fire. Every time I open my eyes they will still be falling and all the bright glass and the steel and the lifts and the stairwells will buckle and give way and it scares me because soon there won't anything to cling onto. Nothing at all. On to no names no footholds no potatoes no pastry no rose or lilac or violet threads....

## Too Far.

In the pub we chat about boundaries. Me and Jen and Jen's husband, Adam. I don't mean what you think I mean. I'm not talking about adult negotiation, freezing someone gently with non-permission. I mean when we go too far – when we choose to go too far. How we plan for it. It's early in the evening, early enough to listen and retort. We're still wearing coats because the doors keep swinging open as Ewan, the night's live musician, brings in his gear.

Jen puts one small hand, colour of plaster, over the top of her beer glass, and leans back. I know, when she does this, she's working up something to shock us with: Jen's an American in a diffident land. Forty three, my neighbour, and sometimes the closest I get to an on-hand sister.

She says: Jeez, Lynne, that popemobil – the mother-fucker can't actually move in all his skirts. Once they're on, he's like a weighted balloon with a blessing arm attached. Impossible to have a slash - he must wear astronauts nappies. You know – those ones they go into space with – there was that case, wasn't there, that girl who used to be an astronaut, and drove a thousand miles 'cross the states to shoot her love rival. She wore astronauts nappies so she wouldn't have to stop for a pee.

Adam, says, - when you go that far there's a heroism to it. We need our fools, our bringers of permissive disaster!

Jen stages a half-grimace for me. I wince. Adam doesn't deserve the mockery Jen applies to him. She scratches out to deflate him. She invites me to enjoy the wounds with her. Except Adam is cased in a mental bubble-wrap that deafens him to sarcasm.

In a corner near the door, Ewan is warming up. He's curled across his guitar; his song sheets are spread around the floor like limp children. We know him – wiry, parch-cheeked, sardonically elfin. We're on top of the speakers, but too settled, too locked in a prickly intimacy to shift tables. Ewan's voice has something female in it; it belies you, it leads you in down the long, wailing paths of lay-offs and backlash and revolt and betrayal. Until you're suddenly aware the volume has risen and the voice, has hardened into something like rage. Jeez, Jen mutters, that bastard can sing.

The pub's filling up now; the light's turned puce, sweat flecked, darker, voices pressing in. It's too hot. It's always been too hot. No one in Louisiana had a brain, Jen is saying, before they invented air-conditioning; everyone just drank beer and drifted in a mental swamp. The poverty too; too hot to break the poverty.

A paradox, Adam says. Nappies, air-conditioning, invented stuff like that, they plug our interior space, they close off our vulnerability to heat and air-pressure and bodily functions so our inner world has no limiting context – it swells and pushes us beyond where we'd normally go. They're evolutionary catalysts.

Oh, come the lecturer ! Your logic sucks, says Jen. She pushes past us, heading for the door. *Fag-call* she shouts, over her shoulder. *Chance for you two to get closer.*

Adam looks sideways towards the next table where an older couple, dressed to please each other, are reading the bar menu. I'm glad he has a glass to wrap his long fingers around. I'm glad of his bemused patience with Jen. Although I know he maddens her; when he sets their breakfast, she told me, he always forgets a knife, or her vitamins, or a glass for her super-juice. Jen thinks he doesn't understand the ordinary rules, or the plain tenderness of finishing a task – or even bloody remembering to do it, she tells me. I think, every time it happens Jen feels Adam doesn't see her. But I don't touch her shoulder. Because of Adam.

Not what you think. He pushes open doors and I want to run through them.

It's not always a good thing, I say – I mean, cutting yourself off from the messages of your body. But Adam isn't listening. He cups two beer mats into a rough pyramid. He says:

Jen's smoking six a day now. She was off them for a nearly a year – and fucking ratty with me the whole time ! I don't know what started her again; it hasn't improved her mood.

I say: Well, you know. Jen told me you'd given up the IVF ?

Adam nods. One great invention that didn't work , he says. We were kidding ourselves.

Think of them, Jen and Adam, entering into a contract with chance, as if stepping onto a silver, arc-lit space-capsule. They must have left the ground, let the cocoon of tests and advice and promise engine them. Maybe Jen imagined the baby, a rosy nucleus becoming membrane, fin, then fingers, a subway of arteries, a vacuum assuaged. Maybe Adam paid attention, googled sources of Dead-sea minerals to strengthen her. Maybe Jen saw the possibility of the grown man taking shape in the child-savant man she battled with.

It was a long road not to confront our grief, Adam says. We let science take us too far away.

I'm quiet. This is new – this Adam almost talking about feelings. I feel the low pub-seat rubbing into my back against a burn from a recent fall on ice: the night-sky tipping, Venus pummelling a white fist into my eyes as my feet swam out of control. I want Adam to bounce back into his theories. His beautiful theories. I say: drink? Same ?

Ewan has finished. He's left a vacuum. I feel a draft from the door, pull my jacket round my shoulders as I get up. It's Jen, pushing back in, fag in mouth. Smoke gusts into my throat ; someone is shouting at Jen from the bar, but she takes no notice. She is hot skinned and glittering from the night. She's staring at us. She shrugs, yells *sorry mate* towards the bar, stubs the flame out inside my empty glass. But I know she was on a brink.



## Creativity and Containment

'.. poetry exploits time to define an intense inner space, an intimate arena, where the imagination is both contained and at liberty. The paradox of what sets the imagination free. '

In these lines from *The Poetics of Space*, <sup>(Pg 109)</sup> the French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, expresses what is, to me, a fundamental condition of creativity both in poetry and the short story – that fertile interaction between the boundary making of form and the 'freedom to roam' of imagination – between structure and mystery, tradition and innovation, stability and flow.

This frequently conflictual relationship has, to some extent, under-pinned debate around poetics from the time of Aristotle<sup>i</sup> to the experiments of post modernism and beyond. Our thinking is still conditioned by expressions of this dualism shaped in the Romantic period, by the debate it inspired and the defining texts it generated.<sup>ii</sup> Now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have a legacy of multiple discourses through which to assay such a recurring pre-occupation. It would be beyond the scope of this dissertation to enumerate and discuss them in depth. My object, rather, is to examine my own creative strategies behind a selection of poems and stories developed during the MA, in the light of my desire to situate my practice within the poetics of this crucial dynamic.

There is an interpretive extension of these ideas into a resistance to the practice of rigid categorisation and all that implies. It raises questions of how far the writer's creativity is limited, or extended by, his or her own awareness of the effect of cultural/political context. I have found myself to be profoundly triggered by certain 'social issues' as a writer– often those arising from personal experience, – and hence to be concerned with how polemical rhetoric can be avoided – how such a starting point can be given vitality within, the 'intense inner space' and linguistic fecundity, of poetry in particular. The approaches of two very different contemporary writers have influenced me in this regard: the Americans Carolyn Forché and Jane Hirshfield. Forché writes:

'We are accustomed to rather easy categories: we distinguish between "personal" and "political" poems ...The distinction between the personal and the political gives the political realm too much and too little scope; at the same time, it renders the personal too important and not important enough...We need a third term, one that can describe the space between the state and the supposedly safe havens of the personal. Let us call this space "the social." ...the social is a place of

resistance and struggle, where books are published, poems read, and protest disseminated. It is the sphere in which claims against the political order are made in the name of justice. By situating poetry in this social space, we can avoid some of our residual prejudices. A poem that calls us from the other side of a situation of extremity cannot be judged by simplistic notions of "accuracy" .... ..Poem as trace, poem as evidence. <sup>iii</sup>

Such a perspective foregrounds the power of language both to preserve experience and to animate it creatively in the reader's/listener's mind – and in all its resonance, that may be different yet equally valid, for every reader. Something poetry, as indeed the short story, is uniquely able to do.

Forche has said, in an interview with the poet Sandeep Parmar,<sup>iv</sup> that 'Writing is a means of retrieving from consciousness a knowledge irretrievable by other means.' In striving to bear witness it also reaches beyond inherited or prescribed limits into new, or previously unarticulated, perceptions. In this sense, Forche's position accords with that explored by Jane Hirshfield in her essays and lectures. Hirshfield has a specific understanding of the role of form – the physical manifestation of certainty. For her it is always in the service of its antithesis, a means to help articulate the underlying complexity and polyvalence of experience. In this, she, like Forche, invests language with a liberating potential that transcends rigid definitional structures and polarities. She expresses this in terms of the relationship of clarity to subtlety, yet another aspect of the dualisms outlined.

' Subtle thinking liberates its subject from the expected and assumed, from ordinary versions of what is assumed true..Clarity is factuality that looks and feels more widely, letting in more than it knows it knows. It is as good a name as we may find for the combination of attentiveness, accuracy, and permeability to subtlety's undertone and shadow that we recognise in good poems...'<sup>v</sup>  
( Pg 32 *Hiddenness, Uncertainty, Surprise* )

Both these writers, and others besides, have taught me how the particular nature of poetic expression, and equally, the generic characteristics of the short story, can be both integrative and revelatory in the ways described and actively engage the reader in creation of meaning. The language of poetry at its most potent, may well be plain, condensed, but it is never transparent: meaning is more often than not implicit, and arrived at by a personal journey through its associations and resonance. It may follow maps – the conventions of syntax and grammar, common

vocabulary, the agreed characteristics of a particular genre, or form - but these are like rails to hold on to for the descent into a cave; they are a pragmatic means to reach what we didn't know we knew – to proceed in Keat's state of 'being in uncertainties,'<sup>vi</sup> of being surprised into revelation. This is, or can be, an essentially transformative process, both for writer and reader. In other words, what is offered is experience, not digesis.

The same principle can be applied to short fiction. Flannery O'Conner expresses this famously in her collection of essays, *Mystery and Manners*:<sup>vii</sup>

'The meaning of a story has to be embodied in it, has to be made concrete in it. A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way...The meaning of the fiction is not abstract meaning but experienced meaning..'

Critical feedback and the foregrounding of certain principles during the MA, have had a role in the evolution of my writing against this backdrop. I will seek to show how they have refined my creative strategies in both genres. I will consider first a selection of the poems in the light of the preceding discussion, locating my analysis within a traditional, close-reading methodology. I will focus particularly on the practical application of formal aspects as a means of enriching meaning and its reception by the reader. I will then go on to discuss some of the short stories, exploring my unifying topic through a consideration of thematic elements and their impact upon story-structure, voice, characterisation, and language. In this way I hope to demonstrate how the dynamic of 'imagination contained and at liberty' informs all aspects of my process.

\*

In considering the poems, by 'form' I mean the physical organisation of the poem, be it into a traditional model, like the sonnet, into regular stanzas, or into free verse and its variations. I use the term interchangeably with 'structure.' This is not, of course, a discrete category, but inter-blends with use of a range of poetic devices like prosody, lineation, and imagery, which I will consider in parallel.

At the thematic heart of several of the poems lies a rupture: a catastrophic event, or sequence of events, that propel us outside the fold of daily structure and into 'otherness' – an exile. The poem titled 'Rupture' for example, (Pg 19) considers the unravelling of a normality

that comes with dementia, where the relationship of object to purpose is no longer a given – 'Some days she stares at the kettle, but can't retrieve/its connection to water.'

By forcing re-definition of the known, these moments of rupture are implicitly creative, but never comfortable. At times they reverberate anamorphically within the referential domain of the poem, distorting the supposed perspective. For example, in 'Viewpoint', at first sight a nature poem, the pastoral-mode ecology is subverted by the slipping of references to Chernobyl into the image world, without a significant change of tone or register. The intention here is to unsettle the reader out of a partitioning, through literary expectation, of an aesthetic view of the landscape from one that is more complicated and compromised, without recourse to issue rhetoric:

the small life of streams

continues

through the mist  
from Chernobyl.

Trefoil, sphagnum,  
heath-orchid

( from 'Viewpoint' Pg 2)

A key challenge was to embody these preoccupations vividly for the reader, with use of appropriate tone, and without slipping into bathos, rhetoric or self-pity disguised by the registers of confessional poetry. For example, I felt 'Disclosure' ( Pg 9 ) which evokes the emotional repercussions of giving birth to a disabled child, needed devices to shift the focus away from the mother/narrator's state of mind towards an exploration of the cultural context and equally needed a developmental arc which would enable the reader to travel with the narrator into a creative relationship with the new condition of apparent exile from 'the constituency of motherhood.' Hence, the poem journeys through stages that are linked to specific anecdotes ( the encounter with the consultant, the friend bringing a leaflet etc ) but that shift the narrator's interpretation progressively. The use of narrative shape as a means of

focusing and revealing purpose within a text, and of delivering a meaningful experience for the reader, was much stressed during the course and became a defining motivation in the way I have sought to develop my work.

In feedback it was suggested I use the poetry of Paul Durcan as a model for the purposes outlined above. This proved productive, showing me both how a loose blank verse structure embodying dramatic monologue<sup>viii</sup> and conversational delivery, could allow the emotional content to be foregrounded while at the same time expanding the confessional register to include humour, social context, purposeful anecdote and irony, as in the lines:

' When the consultant entered/the talcum-sweetness/of our corner in the maternity ward, /when he shone his bright,verbal torch/into our faces and said that in his considered opinion/(and I considered where unconsidered would have/ taken us) ..'

(From 'Disclosure ')

Another significant challenge emphasised on the course, was to find forms – and their extension into linguistic or stylistic devices and prosodic features - that supported and enriched each poem's available meaning. Form should be more than a parcelling of contents into digestible units, or even a mimetic echo of the content. It corresponds to a visual and aural ritual to let us enter and exit the poem's world, to find our way within it and to access its secrets. It should heighten alertness to the hidden resonance of content and also provide a bridge between the poet and the reader's interiority.

This is, of course, a fundamental project for many poets. For me it was all the more crucial to bring these elements in line with a clear narrative thrust – a structural imperative - because of a tendency, highlighted on the course, to be condensed to the point of obscurity, or to under sign-post a line of thought. At the same time I wanted to allow enough flexibility for the dynamic and unpredictable qualities of language - the imaginative imperative - to come into play and to enable enough openness in connotation and interpretation for the reader to be an active, empowered agent in creating meaning: creativity is dialogic, a conversation between the known and the yet to be known, both for writer and reader.

Thus, I have concentrated on writing poems which fall into equal stanza modes, often tercets – a frame which can accommodate the expressiveness of natural speech rhythm and emotional pacing to a structure whose terseness intensifies imagery – especially if each stanza contains a 'key' idea that propels forward a natural dramatic arc. These are qualities I have tried to utilise, for example, in *Photograph*, which, in some ways echoes the dialectical properties of the traditional sonnet.

Here, each stanza represents a stage in the narrative arc, the first two – equivalent to a sonnet quatrain – expand the core topic, the baby's impending operation, with a shift or complication occurring in the third stanza where the idea of not eating is introduced, and with a 'turn' literally occurring on the word 'turn' which encapsulates the dramatic and thematic axis of the poem and is the metaphoric pivot of the relationship between what precedes and what follows the implied surgery. In a manner similar to the Petrarchan sonnet,<sup>ix</sup> the imagery of the two subsequent stanzas is both an intensification of the emotional pressure gathering in the preceding stanzas and cathartic, a figurative release 'as in blind snow flood'. The final stanzas drop from this peak – partly by employing the temporal distancing of 'later' – to a closure that mirrors the 'asleep' of the beginning but in a very different context. This movement is underwritten by use of symmetry. In the first stanza I deploy images of awaking, potential, and expansion, and in the last, of retraction, the 'locked white egg.'

It could be said that the development through tercets, and the shadow pattern of the sonnet behind this movement, actualise properties of the imagery that would not otherwise have been accessed, and constitute a complete experience. The sometimes noted equivalence of sonnet form to sexual release should be mentioned here<sup>x</sup>: I believe a poem becomes more resonant for its correspondence to powerful physical experience. Structure, in this context, both exploits the fluid, associative, nature of the language and allows the reader to discriminate patterns and implicit narratives that themselves increment the meaning. Imagery always has this potential, that is, to both underscore the narrative and invoke further levels of meaning, stories within stories. Form aids this process; it carries deep patterns of expectation that can be put to the service of content and intimate additional layerings of association.

On a more detailed scale, rhetorical and linguistic elements reinforce the effects of the overall form. For example, the use of para-taxis to intensify pace from 'turn/ to the wall..' and

the use of simultaneous enjambment and line-breaks to propel the narrative while at the same time rhythmically highlighting each key image, as in 'it's I who cant' reach/my child so far under..'

In other poems I use, besides these devices, sound patterning, the familiar tools of assonance and alliteration for example, to reinforce meaning, as in these lines from 'Not Said' ( Pg 17 ) where there is an emphatic play on 'u' to link figurative associations, and symbolic use of alliteration in the last two lines:

What is embedded  
  
in those soft bullets, blackened and clustered  
in the dips and runches of grass, their fume  
of smoke in the mouth ?  
  
They cover the earth, like crossing  
a stony beach bare-foot, sand beyond  
bearing distance.

Lineation and stanza breaks, particularly, encapsulate the dramatic interface of structure and content in poetry. They simultaneously act as a container, or form of control, and as a ritual threshold to engagement with 'otherness,' or the not-yet-said. They embody surprise as a significant element of the poetic experience. The poet Tamar Yoselof puts this succinctly:

'The stanza break represents a moment when time can be altered, when the poet might clear his / her throat and start a new idea. The white space represents a silence, a moment in time captured, a freeze frame.'<sup>xi</sup>

Other contemporary poets who have influenced me evince a more radical, and indeed politicised, stance towards grammatical structure and lineation. They invoke modernist and post modernist practice,<sup>xii</sup> while still maintaining a basic adherence to narrative and formal expectations. In his remarkable series of *ice poems*,<sup>xiii</sup> for example, poet and playwright, Dic Edwards, deploys three line stanzas, with their epic momentum, and a slowly constructed

narrative arc, as a scaffold, or bass line, to support what might be described as a 'permissive flow' of content.

The spatial/aural impact of this is perhaps more important than its function as a partitioner of stages in the narrative. He rolls out extended lines, with multiple sub-clauses, free of traditional punctuation, that empower the reader to form their own chain of meaning. Physical constraints, like the vertical page edge, determine line breaks, rather than units of sense. They represent the collateral structure over and through which meaning must meander; the implicit tension this produces embodies the dynamic interaction of meaning with structural expectations. And typically, the imagery is full of shape-shifting – the constant disintegration of a structured image world as in these lines from ice 16 ( *The Lampeter Review 7 Pg 36*)

i've become the illustration of all i'm not all that matters not makes the illustration of me  
and so i have come to Paris inchoate Paris the imagined illustrated city as in Toulouse Lautrec's  
millboard in pastel and dilute oil of *Jane Avril in the entrance of The Moulin Rouge* the substance lost

in the falling rain of the brush strokes and i am become rain and the picture behind the rain  
insubstantial erasable to be imagined.....

Mark Tredinnick is another contemporary poet who uses architectural form to enclose diversely referential extended lines.

This extract from the sestet *Your Voice*, ( *The Lampeter Review 6 Pg 112*) illustrate his methods:

Your voice, saying my name, is the beach

when I first catch sight of it, down

Through the scribbly gums, nursemaids of this quiet light; your voice, an infidel,

Lies almost untouched—and, there, untouched again—

By the pale water, which is time. ..

Here, the imagery and syntax blend exterior and interior space and a flow of metamorphosing associations, nuances and concepts. Within this essentially auditory structure



we experience the containment and intensity of the lyric, but at the same time we are offered a paradigm of the endlessly porous, generative nature of poetic language – a sense that it could overflow the same, culturally reflexive, formal boundaries that heighten - by isolating - our experience of it. It is the paradox of the directed imaginative licence that both poet and reader need to operate in order to release the deepest potential of language. This poem works the periphery between the already known and the uncertain, between the solidity of structure and the fluidity of the imagination.

Structure - form – can also deny us inattention; the structure suspends us in a moment of equilibrium outside normal distraction, where we are enabled to experience the multiple echoes of the imagery without losing our way among them and to derive a narrative from them which we can make our own. In this sense, form can be seen as a democratic tool, illuminating, rather than controlling.

I have cited these two poets to illustrate some of the subtler and at the same time, more adventurous, ramifications of the form/content interface. The pool of variation, theory and experiment in this area, is of course, vast and, again, beyond the scope of this essay to delineate. My own use of lineation and structural/grammatical features, has tended to be more conservative, largely because, at this stage, I am very conscious of pressure to maintain accessibility. My practice counterpoints the absoluteness of end-stopped lines and the frisson of enjambment, that allows that literal moment of breath before an anticipated leap into mystery. I have tried to balance the two for best emotional effect. For example, in these lines from 'Oil in Blue' I fuse intense image-to-each-line with run-on-sense to build emotional pressure:

Outside this room it's summer, but dad paints

snow, over everything, and most of it blue.  
I climb the scarp of his back, peering in.

He's left all the people out, although roofs lock  
together like the wall-mind of victims.  
The traffic light is a red nerve, the street dead

end, no stilled cars.

Essentially then, I have favoured variants of conventional structure over more experimental forms. This has, at least in part, been a strategy for tackling obscurity, but also in the belief that structure can be a democratic tool to help access imagination for both writer and reader. The same could be said for a more conscious adherence to a basic narrative patterning: This need not be equated with linearity; the same journey can be taken through juxtapositions, inter-cutting of images and narrative threads, and parallels, through twists in the imagery and through leaps across the dialectical range from personal to historical. I use this technique for example, in 'Skin Recollection' ( Pg 37 ) where specific memory is inter-cut with more philosophical narrative to develop a premise:

..... under that a sweetness,  
a boyish pink muddied by scrum  
  
and remembered punches  
in the fog behind corrugated sheds.  
  
Skin tells us and keeps us secret.  
Your man-skin larded  
  
with deodorant puts on the press  
of subways and agendas.  
  
It wears the world, grows it; I trace  
its casual continents.

This is a technique which, as my competence grows, I would hope to develop. But what is necessary - and this was again a tenet of the teaching on the course - is that a journey is made - that the reader engages, with the writer, in discovery. The interaction of meaning and structure, its creation of surprise and capacity to unlock further meaning, is a key element, the means by which the full potency of the language can be released.

\*

Several of the stories also start from a position of brokenness, in the same way that several of the poems spin out from moments of rupture. The narratives trace ambivalent acts of restoration, that, in re-configuring a fractured reality, uncover hidden understanding, and resources within the protagonists. Their damaged world paradoxically becomes a stage for transformation. Often this is achieved by 'anti-heroic' moments of impulse, or transgressions against ethical and social constraints. Thus, the narrator of 'Falling' discovers his humanity in a moment of minor violence, Evie in 'Inishbofin' combines a glorious moment of revenge with

an act of emotional liberation for both herself and Mackie, when she pushes Mike Sweeney's boat out into the ocean. Bridie in 'Useless Air' carries through a perverse impulse in order to defy her suffocating rural Irish background and over-bearing brother.

Perversity, minor transgression – these are the routes to liberation afforded to characters whose lives play out against a tightly structured and limited background where the much more powerful emotional scenarios, below the social surface, are kept in the shadows and where injustice is coded into daily routine. Their worlds have ossified:

'Up in mammy's room just now, so quiet but for the one carriage clock ticking. It still smelt of piss in there, like the whiff of an old she fox. Gone into morning fog. But not the dried out, caked on, rattling bitterness of her family, like old tarmac after frost with all the unsaid and the dead bits sticking to it and never free.'

But these acts of transgression are also symbolic and equivalent to the transformational pressure of imagination against structure explored in my discussion of the poems. They intimate a pre-condition for growth and a means of augmenting and enriching available experience. And, in the same way that metaphors of catharsis are enacted through formal patterning in some of the poems, so these transgressions represent an often unpredictable release of energy within the story world, enabling movement and fluidity. I tend to express this on the level of imagery, for example when the narrator of 'Too Far' momentarily loosens her emotional guard in relation to Adam - a man she is drawn to, but whom she knows to be sexually out of bounds. :

'I'm quiet. This is new – this Adam almost talking about feelings. I feel the low pub-seat rubbing into my back against a burn from a recent fall on ice: the night-sky tipping, Venus pummelling a white fist into my eyes as my feet swam out of control. I want Adam to bounce back into his theories. His beautiful theories.'

Put another way, my characters are frequently in quest of the experience of 'aliveness.' And a pre-condition for this is often risk – stepping off from known boundaries, or a transgressive act that could engender change. However, my characters do not operate in a fairytale context where there are neat paradigms of quest, task fulfilment, cathartic action and resolution.<sup>xiv</sup> Their search for aliveness may frequently be compromised, ambiguous, or damaging to others. It may be complicated by their psychological patterning and the counter-

agendas of other characters. The risks may backfire In other words, the relationship of stability to dynamic flow, of apathy to risk, is, as it is in life, problematic, sophisticated and not always a means to resolution. This is the context out of which my characters create hope.

Thus, Colm, in 'Love in the Time of Codeine' puts his 'whole heart' in the hands of his therapist, Lou, seeing her as the agent of his return to aliveness after recovery from heroin addiction. For him, this involves a return to an ordinariness that is like a sought treasure because it was previously beyond his reach.. But the more he re-embraces these norms, the more bored Lou becomes. For her, the spark of aliveness resides in divergence from stable norms - in the dynamism of damage:

'..He reached hard ground. And he found he could do them, the ordinary things. She'd taken him there. And that was when her kisses began to brush the surface, and she started to criticise. And he knew she had grown bored.'

The theme of falling embraces the dualisms discussed; falling is at once a metaphor for liberation, for entry into a fluid and growthful relationship with life, for the transformative action of risk, for encounter with mystery. But it also connotes damage, loss of self, moral compromise, social eviction, exile. It combines desire and fear in equal measure and it is in negotiating this paradox that creativity is fired. In 'Eating Round the Margins' the narrator experiences this epiphanically in her double vision of the cathedral window :

' After they re-built the cathedral we went to see. I liked the stain glass, but it was sad as well. It was like looking in at that tower; the panes made a black grid; they kept everything in place and I felt safe. But behind, everything was on fire and you could see the shapes of people – they were burning too. Only it wasn't reds and oranges, it was rose and violet and plum like my embroidery silks.'

A sense of the problematic relationship of hope to the reality of my characters' lives is something I have tried to embed in the structure of my stories. Inspired by the practice of many short fiction writers from Carver to Munroe,<sup>xv</sup> I try to make the occurrence of

'epiphanies' not so much a neat closing revelation, as interspersed moments that seem organic to a character's response to an unfolding situation. For example, there is the moment in 'Love in the Time of Codeine' when Nessa first allows herself to become suspicious of Lou's motivation:

' A very small voice behind Nessa's memory of Lou's last-night voice, behind the sea-flow of sympathy Lou drew from Nessa, wondered if Lou was just offended. It had been sometime since she had been the one who was left.'

Equally, I have tried to leave the stories on a note of suggestion, resonance, and open possibility – a sense that there is more narrative to come, that there has been decisive movement but not a defining resolution, and that something of the tension and possibility in the story arc is encapsulated in the closing imagery. 'Surprise' can be an element of this, in the sense of an encounter with a fresh aspect to a character's interior drama. But this is distinct from the 'twist' endings popular during Poe's Era,<sup>xvi</sup> where we can feel the author is withholding information in order to dominate our interpretation at the end.

Thus, in 'Too Far' the story leaves at an organic point of crisis and with a gesture that, my hope is, focuses character, metaphor, action and the past and future of the small story world created:

'She shrugs, yells, *sorry mate* towards the bar., stubs the flame out inside my empty glass. But I know she was on a brink. '

As in the poems, this approach is also in the spirit of more fully engaging the reader's own imagination and discrimination in relation to meaning. And like many of the poems, several of the stories attempt to integrate social concerns within the texture of the narrative. The challenge, again, has been to avoid didacticism. I have hoped to achieve this by firmly bedding the stories in character and their extension into narrative voice. Use of first person allowed for character-linked preoccupation with the wider themes, as in 'Falling' with its inter-linked focus on genetic science and twin psychology. In other stories, like 'Malley's Yard' I use third person but try to invest it with the thought and speech patterns of the protagonist ( while avoiding self conscious use of dialect ).

' Outside they could walk round a maze that had never quite got going, the cottage where the fool who started the rebellion was raised, various out-dated agricultural implements, cemented to the ground. Small scale disaster tourism on European money – with a toy-shop

ambience. By about day three – when they were acclimatized – Ann might tell the visitors that their cottage was on the site of a particularly bloody battle.'

The shifts among registers that this technique allows creates an effect similar to shifts around psychic distance, enabling intensification or reduction of emotional intensity and pacing. And hence, also, space for the reader's imagination to manoeuvre round the possibles layers of meaning.

Again as with the poems, I try to put story structure at the service of liberating the imaginative possibilities for the reader: short fiction shares, with poetry the capacity to tap into 'otherness,' what Julio Cortazar describes, in his essay, *Some Aspects of the Short Story* as ' that mysterious property of illuminating something beyond itself.' <sup>xvii</sup> Thus, even though I might employ parallel narratives, as in 'Love in the Time of Codeine' and 'Inishbofin' and montage effects, as in 'Eating Round the Margins' where the narrator jumps between present time commentary and flash back, my narratives tend to be housed within a traditional linear form and to have a basis in cyclical narrative arc and mimesis. To me, this provides the reader with the deep satisfactions of story and a frame within which to savour the more unexpected and mysterious rewards of surprise, imagery and sub-text. And, approaching story writing as I do essentially from poetic practice, these latter are bedded partly in techniques to enrich the resonance and suggestiveness. I try to achieve this, for example through a combination of concrete language with imagery and metaphor, as in this extract from 'Falling':

' I have this trunk where I keep the documents: all the articles cut from scientific journals, the photo copies of research papers, the accounts of Nobel prize winners, pictures of the first cells bubbling apart like lunar frog-spawn in their half-moon membrane of glass. When you look at it all, you can piece a jigsaw that's an epic of a victory. '

In both my poetry and short stories, then, the interaction between formal restraint and imaginative freedom, and its varied permutations, is key to my practice and many of my thematic preoccupations. The MA has fruitfully contributed to my understanding and deployment of this dynamic. I leave this discussion where I began, with the words of Gaston Bachelard: ' all values must remain vulnerable, and those that do not are dead.' ( *The Poetics of Space* Pg 59 ). Transposing this sentiment into the vocabulary of my thesis, structure can be a purposeful threshold to the immensity of imagination and the freedom of each reader to enter that immensity on his own terms. And all thresholds imply both the known, and the vitalising risk of encounter with the yet to be known.

- i Aristotle's *Poetics* propose the centrality of Tragic form as a vehicle for the necessary processes of significant communal emotion, thus instigating an important strand of theorising about the relationship of structure, emotion and imagination. For a recent translation and textual discussion see *Poetics*. Aristotle ( trans Anthony Kenny) Oxford World Classics. Oxford. Oxford University Press. 2013.
- ii Notably Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* – which Seamus Heaney described as 'the volume which initiates modern poetry. ' in his introduction to *Wordsworth . Poems Selected by Seamus Heaney. (Poet to Poet: an Essential Choice of Classic Verse )*. London, Faber&Faber. 2001
- iii From Carolyn Forché, "Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness," *American Poetry Review* 22:2 (March-April 1993) 17.
- iv 2008 bloodaxebooksblogs.blogspot.com/carolyn-forch-interviewed-by-sandeep
- v Jane Hirshfield *Hiddenness, Uncertainty, Surprise: Three Generative Energies of Poetry* Newcastle Upon Tyne. University of Newcastle Department of English Literary & Linguistic Studies in association with Bloodaxe Books Ltd. 2008.
- vi *John Keats: Selected Letters*. To George and Tom Keats 21, 27, (?) December. (Ed Robert Gittings) Oxford. Oxford University Press. 2002. Pg 40.
- vii Flannery O'Connor *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* Sally and Robert Fitzgerald ( Eds ). New York The Noonday Press, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux. 1997, Pg 96.
- viii A particular inspiration was Durcan's volume *The Berlin Wall Cafe* London. Harvill Press. 1995. Fine examples of his use of irony and dramatic monologue might include 'Le Poete Allonge' ( Pg 8 ) or 'The Pieta's Over' ( Pg 52 ).
- ix I am indebted to many sources in regard to discussions of sonnet form, but notably Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, revised edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1979), pp. 115-116. He states: The standard way of constructing a Petrarchan sonnet is to project the subject in the first quatrain; to develop or complicate it in the second; then to execute, at the beginning of the sestet, the turn which will open up for solution the problem advanced by the octave, or which will ease the load of idea or emotion borne by the octave, or which will release the pressure accumulated in the octave.' One should cite Milton for his mastery of this form in English.
- x See: *The Making of a Sonnet: a Norton Anthology* Ed Edward Hirsch and Eavan Boland. There is a specific discussion of this aspect in the chapt *The Making of a Sonnet: A Formal Inroductuin* Pg 52.
- xi Tamar Yoselof blog *Invective Against Swans*
- xii See *The Lampeter Review* issues 5&7 www.lampeter-review.com
- xiii There is a useful discussion of modern and post modern lineation in *The Art of the Poetic Line* James Longenbach. Minnesota. Graywolf Press. 2008. See Pages 91 -95. EE Cummings stands out as an influential, and individualistic, exponent of radical approaches to lineation and punctuation.
- xiv I am referring here to commonly identified patterns in story structure. I have found John Truby's *The Anatomy of Story* to provide useful summaries of this immense topic. ( John Truby *The Anatomy of Story*. New York. Faber & Faber Inc. 2008 ).
- xv The short story writer Lorrie Moore is a deft handler of 'scattered' epiphanies as for example in her story *People Like That are the Only People Here ( Birds of America*. New York. Faber& Faber Ltd. 1998. Pg 26.) where, as Elaine Chew highlights in her essay 'Endings ( *Short Circuit*. [Ed Vanessa Gebbie ] London. Salt.Publishing 2009 Pg 187) the narrator's life-changing adaptation to her son's terminal illness is delivered through a series of epiphanies that propel the story in close alignment to her altering perspective, enabling the reader's progressive 'co-immersion' in this process.
- xvi Poe's *The Mask of the Red Death* is a salient example, where the masked figure pursued by Prince Propero is revealed at the end to have no form within his costume – thus triggering the realisation that all his pursuers will succumb to the 'red death' they have attempted to escape from into a world of fantasy and privilege. The 'twist' initiates nemesis in terms of the logic of the plot, but adds nothing to our perception of the characters involved.  
See: *Selected Tales. Edgar Allan Poe*. London. Penquin Books. 1994.
- xvii Julio Cortazar 'Some Aspects of the Short Story' Trans by Aden Hayes *The Arizona Quarterly* spring 1982. Copyright 1982 by Arizona Board of regents. Originally appeared in *Cuadernos hispano-Americanos*,255(1971) Reprinted by permission of Instituto de Cooperacion IberoAmericana and Arizona Board of Regents in *The New Short Story Theories* Charles .E.May (ed) Athens, Ohio. Athens University Press1994

**Bibliography of Cited and Selected Texts ( although not exhaustive, this gives an indication of some the range of my reading over the period of putting together the dissertation ).**

**Books:-**

- Aristotle *Poetics*. ( trans Anthony Kenny) Oxford. Oxford University Press. 2013.  
Bachelard Gaston *The Poetics of Space* Boston. ( trans Maria Jolas ) Beacon Press. 1994  
Bates H.E *The Modern Short Story: a critical Survey*. Boston. the Writer Inc. 1941  
Bishop Elizabeth *Complete Poems* London. Chatto & Windus 1983  
Boast Rachael *Sidereal* London. Picador. 2011  
Boland Eavan & Hirsch Edward *The Making of a Sonnet: a Norton Anthology*  
Burnside John *Black Cat Bone* London. Cape Poetry 2011  
Burroway Janet *The Art of Writing Fiction* New york. Harper Collins.1992  
Carver Raymond ‘On Writing’ *Essays Poems Stories*. London.Harvill. 1985  
Carver Raymond *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* London.Vintage. 2003  
Celan Paul *Selected Poems* London. Penquin Books. 1972  
Cheever John *The Stories of John Cheever*. New York. Alfred.A.Knopp.1971  
Clancy Kate *New Born* London. Picador. 2004  
Cowan Andrew *The Art of Writing Fiction* Harlow. Pearson. 2011  
Cummins EE *Selected Poems 1923 -1958* Ed Richard Kennedy. London. Livewrite. 2007  
Donne *Poetical Works* Herbert Grierson (Ed) London.Oxford University Press. 1973  
Dunmore Helen *Out of the Blue* Tarsset. Bloodaxe Books.2001  
Durcan Paul *The Berlin Wall Cafe* London. Harvill Press. 1995  
Edwards Dic *Walt Whitman and Other Poems* London. Oberon Books. 2007  
Fenton John *The Strength of Poetry* Oxford. Oxford University Press. 2003  
Forche Carolyn *Blue Hour* Tarsset. Northumberland. Bloodaxe Books. 2003  
Forche Carolyn *The Country Between Us* New York. Harper & Row.1981  
Forche Carolyn *The Angel of History* New York. Harper & Collins. 1998  
Francis Matthew *Manderville* London. Faber & Faber. 2008  
Fussell Paul *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, revised edition.New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1979  
Gebbie Vanessa *Words from a Glass Bubble*. Cambridge.Salt Publishing.2008  
Gebbie Vanessa (Ed) *Short Circuit*. London. Salt.Publishing 2009  
Gioia Dana & Gwyn R.S *The Art of the Short Story*. Pearson Longman 2006  
Graham Jorie *Place* New York Harper Collins 2012  
*Great Short Stories of the Masters* London. Cooper Square Press. 2002  
Gross Philip *The Water Table* Tarsset. Bloodaxe Books 2009  
Gross Philip *Deep Field* Tarsset. Bloodaxe Books 2011  
Heaney Seamus *Wordsworth . Poems Selected by Seamus Heaney*. London, Faber&Faber. 2001  
Heaney Seamus *District and Circle* London. Faber & Faber 2006  
Heaney Seamus *Electric Light* London. Faber& Faber 2001  
Hirshfield Jane *Hiddenness, Uncertainty, Surprise* Newcastle. Bloodaxe Books.2008  
Hirshfield Jane *Nine Gates* New York. Harper Collins. 1997  
Hirshfield Jane *Given Sugar Given Salt* New York. Harper Collins 2001  
Keats John *John keats: Selected Letters*. . (Ed Robert Gittings) Oxford Oxford University Press. 2002.  
Kermode Frank *selected prose of T.S.Eliot* London. Faber &Faber.1975  
Leviston Frances *Public Dream* London. Picador.2007  
Longenbach James *The Art of the Poetic Line* Minnesota. Graywolf Press. 2008.  
Milton John *The Complete English Poems* John Leonard (Ed) London. Penquib Books. 1998  
May Charles .E *The New Short Story Theories*. Athens.Ohio.Athens University Press.1995  
Moore Lorrie *Birds of America*. New York. Faber& Faber Ltd. 1998  
Munroe Alice *Runaway* London. Vintage Books.2006  
O'Connor Flannary *Mystery and Manners* S& R Fitzgerald(Eds).NewYork.Noonday Press.1997  
O'Connor Flannery *The Complete Stories* London. Faber & Faber 2000  
Plath Sylvia *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* London. Faber& Faber. 1979  
Poe Edgar Alan *Selected Tales*. *Edgar Alan Poe*. London. Penquin Books. 1994.  
*The Best American Stories of the Century* John Updike(Ed)NY Houghton Mifflin. 1999  
*The Oxford Book of Short Stories* VS Pritchett (Ed) Oxford. Oxford University Press. 1981



Proulx Annie *Close Range* New York Harper Perennial 2005  
Sanson Peter *Writing Poems* Newcastle upon Tyne. Bloodaxe books. 1994  
Truby John *The Anatomy of Story*. New York. Faber & Faber Inc. 2008

**Magazines**

*American Poetry Review* 22:2 (March-April 1993) 17.  
*The Lampeter Review*: 5, 6 & 7 (May 2011/June 2012/ November 2012)

-----