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

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Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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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.
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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, antinomy -
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 raddle 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 - mothy
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 
stearing 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.
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 Llandovery. 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 soothe,
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.
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.
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 plastery, 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.
Umber was less than umbra, less than the taut negotiations
of black, was the zone of moths and scrabbled 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
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;
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 brittled, 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 nudes 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 other’s 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 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 fifteen 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 getter 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'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 jigging 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 slagging 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.

48
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 fisted 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 ungrips 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.

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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 if 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 mantelpiece and shoot every one of them. But for now they haunt the barns and his ankles, sniping vermin, Mammy's cats.

You shoot those kittens, 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.

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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 handbag. Grease gets onto the cuff of her tweed jacket. For the kittens, she says, making sure Sean is listening, the poor kittens. 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'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 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 mongrels. 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 then 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. Jeeez, 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 bear 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*, 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, underpinned debate around poetics from the time of Aristotle 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. Now, in the 21st 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 Forche and Jane Hirshfield. Forche 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.

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, 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 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...'

( 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,' 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.*

'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 in 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 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 metaphorical pivot of the relationship between what precedes and
what follows the implied surgery. In a manner similar to the Petrarchan sonnet, 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: I believe a poem becomes more resonant
for its correspondence to 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 can't 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.'

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, while still maintaining a basic adherence to narrative and formal expectations. In his remarkable series of ice poems, for example, poet and playwright, Dic Edwards, deploys thee 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 overspill 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 that controlling.

I have cited these to 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. 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, 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, 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.' 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.


*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.


Tamar Yoselof blog *Invective Against Swans* xii

See *The Lampeter Review* issues 5&7 www.lampeter-review.com

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.

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).

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.

*The Mask of the Red Death* is a salient example, where the masked figure pursued by Prince Prospero 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.


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