

INTRODUCTION

This little collection comprises some of the pieces written by the ME Writers' Group during 2007-8. It includes stories, poems and non-fiction anecdotes as well as several accounts of what it's like to have ME, a much misunderstood condition. There's humour here too, a very important constituent for survival.

The value of the Writers' Group lies not only in the writing produced. It has provided a forum for people to share experiences and express their feelings and frustrations over a friendly cup of tea and biscuits. Because of the nature of the condition, not everyone can attend every session. People drop in when they are up to it, which is fine, since we are very informal.

It has also been a learning experience for me, the supposed teacher. All I knew about ME before attending the group was that its sufferers were chronically fatigued. I had no real perception of the degree to which this affects their lives and I have been very impressed with the determination of the group's participants to carry on as best they can, to work around the condition, to refuse to give in.

This collection is a small indication of what can be achieved. Our thanks to Michael O'Reilly and Declan Carroll for making it possible. Onwards and upwards.

Susan Knight

June 2008

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Rachel Brew

The Hand of Life

"Pump number 5. Yes, that's right. €38.70. And I'll take an Irish Times and a Mars bar," I said.

"Do you want cash back?" she replied with a polite smile, as she accepted my debit card. I couldn't help but notice how attractive she was, tall and slim with wide expressive eyes and the most luxuriant shoulder length brown hair.

She was obviously not Irish.

"Where are you from?" I enquired.

"From Poland, from Krakow," she smiled. And yes, she does love Dublin, she thinks the Irish are very friendly and she is making lots of new friends since she came here.

"And were you a student in Poland? What did you do before you came to Dublin?"

"I have finished my studies in Krakow and then Gdansk. I studied Science and then Oceanography. But now I must work to improve my English."

As she handed me back my card and my receipt with a charming "thank you" I pondered it is little wonder that so many of our young Irishmen are attracted to these Polish girls that seem to have invaded our country.

And now, over three years later, here I am in Krakow on the eve of your wedding. My husband and I will be privileged guests at your celebration tomorrow. Tomorrow you will marry that Irish boy who is so in love with you - and you with him. Both of you seem ideally suited - well matched in disposition, in intelligence and spirituality.

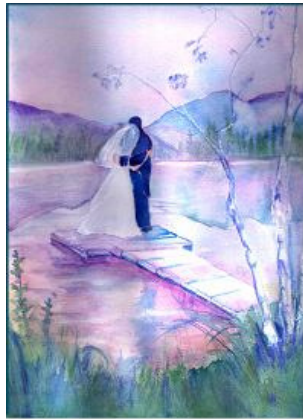
But no marriage is easy. In Medjugore, the bridal couple vow to take one another to be their cross, which is a sign of both sacrifice and redemption. This young Irish man, who is king of your heart today, is no plaster saint, my child. I've known his father for a long time and in many ways he is a chip off the old block. I imagine he would be a bit of a selfish, untidy, undomesticated Irish male; but remember, given time and patience, most men can be trained to do most things!

He will also swear to you that he loves you more than he can say, you mean all the world to him. Remember, he truly believes this himself, but really he loves you only as

much as it is possible for him to love another human being. However, I suppose that is a universal limitation anyway.

Nevertheless I believe that your marriage, like his parents' before him, has been made in heaven. When I married his father - how long ago? - I was "in love" with the most wonderful person in the whole world: this was merely my rose-tinted projection of him. I was largely in love with my own hopeful expectations. Now, thirty-two years later, I am no longer "in love" with my idealised image. More realistically I have learned to genuinely love, both sacrificially and redemptively, a man with all his goodness, kindness and ability interwoven with impatience, selfishness and foolishness.

You are the daughter I never conceived but inherited. Together with my son, this new world is your oyster. In the words of Kahil Gibran, "Give your hearts but not into each other's keeping. For only the hand of life can contain your hearts." Darling daughter, I love you. Please look after my son.



Bríd MacSweeney

MY FATHER'S GARDEN

He sits on the old tree trunk, feet crossed.
The chirping robin atop the handle of the planted spade.
He drags deeply on the John Player cigarette
and wipes the loose tobacco from his tongue
with smoked stained fingers.
He surveys the fruits, veg and spuds of
his labour. With satisfaction.

So well he might! A patchwork of
well banked potato drills, neat vegetable beds
and fruit bushes heavily laden with
black, rasp and goose, betties
Rows of hot, fat juicy strawberries in
their jam jar mini glass houses.

Lovely leafy Savoy, small greyhound hearts and
dark wrinkled curly kale cabbage. All stoutly
defended through the seasons from pigeons,
wriggling caterpillars and large white butterflies.
Other enemies engaged and routed, potato blight
and carrot fly. Weeds wouldn't dare!

A living salad bowl of crisp lettuce,
baby spring onions, ripe red tomatoes,
radish root, deep burgundy beetroot, and
fresh savoury herbs. A harvest of
orange tapering carrots, sweet tender peas from
plump pods and pungent onion bulbs. Potatoes,
his favourites, British Queens, Kerr pinks, first sown
by St Patrick's Day. Tradition.

Just a few foot prints from that well-tended
Fertile garden to the kitchen table of a wonderful cook.
There is a time to sow, a time to reap,
a time to live, a time to die.
Ar deis De go raibh a anam dilis
Ni beidh a leithead aris ann.

Bríd MacSweeney

Habitat Blues

Ova,
Larvae,
Pupae,
Imagines.

Metamorphosing
down seventy
million years.
Becoming

Adonis Blues,
Clouded Yellows,
Peacocks,
Tortoiseshells.



Camberwell Beauties,
Painted Ladies,
Purple Emperors,
Grizzled Skippers.

Sunshine Flying,
Flower Perching,
Mating, Migrating,
Butterflies,

Flitting towards
Extinction,
through habitat
destruction.



Bríd MacSweeney

Metamorphoses

I am tired of being a woman

She-Kingfisher, small but beautiful, I dart,
flash of iridescent blue and flaming lightning,
over fish full plopping water.

- a soul lifter.

Lime green Willow, I stand, deep rooted
in mother earth. Grounded but swayed
by the gentle breeze.

- a soul relaxer.

Water, I fall, spurting liquid crystal
over smooth worn rock, through pure air,
becoming fast flowing river.

- a soul refresher.

She-Swallowtail, Winged Wonder, I flit, free,
pausing only to draw nectar from the ragged robin.
Wings still quivering as I sip.

- a free spirit.



Brid MacSweeney



The Cloud-burst Ceases

Listen. In the stillness tiny twitters
give way to loud bird cheers.
Puffed-ball blackbird bathes in puddle tub.
Thrashing her fanned tail.
In the calm after the storm.

The willow weeps upon the pond.
Its tears pygmy fish ripples
on her now smooth lustrous face.
Short shrill moorhen call.
In the calm after the storm.

Mallard drake and his mate waddle by
on four vivid orange webbed feet.
Grubbing in shallow pools at grasses' edge.
Satiated! They toddle home. Quacking contentedly.
In the calm after the storm.

A rambunctious three-year-old boy
Escapes. Plunges. Splashes gleefully
in miniature knee-high lake.
Drenched. Scolded. But well worth it!
In the calm after the storm.

Grey squirrels scurry in the muck.
Bushy-tailed rodents. Greedily gnawing fallen nuts.
Two chattering magpies war. The booty
body of a baby bird. Winner takes all!
In the calm after the storm.

In the calm after the storm.

Bríd MacSweeney

Fisher Bird

The eel slides through the
Sun-warmed, smooth stream
Lazy. Languid. Listless.
Suddenly trapped in the tight
grasp of sharp, unyielding pinchers.
He is swallowed whole, in one
gigantic, neck expanding gulp
by his ever vigilant, silent enemy,
the motionless, long-legged grey heron.
The tall, sombre, quiet, patient
Stalker.



Brid MacSweeney

Brief Encounter

Your dimmed brown eyes
look at me with the
intensity and passion of
their first time.
Many Decembers fall away.
This is my blue May.
I germinate
and bloom again.



Brid MacSweeney

Breakdown

My bedroom mirror insulted me yesterday.
 'Pull yourself together,' it said,
 'for my sake, if not your own'.
 'An inappropriate phrase to use
 to a woman in my condition'
 'Some condition! Old, Fat and Ugly.
 Definitely not much to look at.'
 'You ageist, weighist, aaaa-pearanceist
 freak' I shrieked.
 'Just you wait!'
 (It didn't have much choice).
I rummaged for my most elephantine photograph,
had it enlarged, copiously copied and pinned to the walls.
 My mirror is silent.
 It is in shock,
 from exposure to such multiplicity of
 enormous unwelcome sights.
 'Now you pull yourself together' I advise.
 It can't. It's beginning to crack up.

Squeak

Squeak lives in my kitchen door
 We chat on entry/exit.
Each day she gets friendlier and friendlier.
I enjoy her company. But when the neighbours
can overhear our loud conversations, I sedate
her. But not completely. I would miss her!

Alan Murphy

The Devils' Children?

It was a calm, cloudless few days in 1979 and almost inevitably an air of hushed anticipation pervaded the streets of Dublin. All along our road, posters and smaller photographs of "the Mighty One" were plastered on windows, facing outwards to receive that familiar wave with friendly jubilation. In another day, a moment of unity would supplant the general greyness of a moribund era as the whole of Ireland was ushered en masse into the hallowed papal presence. Pope John Paul George and Ringo the Second, yes, the Church's answer to Beatlemania himself!

As an impressionable nine-year-old I was somehow swept up in all the excitement. Whether it was due to some obscure feeling of piety or the sense of occasion - the urge to celebrate by waving a flag no matter what its colour or stripe - I found myself picking out a poster from a magazine (a sort of Catholic equivalent of a Playboy centre spread for the sexually inchoate religious fanatic) and, like a lovesick teenage girl, taping the image to my bedroom window, sunny side out. I cheerfully absorbed the jeers of my brother.

A moment later we rushed downstairs to survey my handiwork. As I paused in the doorway of 192, Niall sped past me into the garden and craned upwards. Suddenly, he collapsed in a fit of laughter and began rolling around on the lawn for what may have been hours.

As I looked upwards with pride and reverence in my heart, I began to realise the cause of his mirth. The picture was upside down.

Alan Murphy

CREATION

In the beginning
it was just a word
sitting pretty
on its page
doing nothing
going stale
and cold

Then the germ
jumped off its jail
was given spit
and substance
fired up
with fury now
we have creation

Alan Murphy

Abundance

To rise and go
and read this breezy hymn
in a come-and-go place
of easy commerce,
cars exhaling outside...

To see this endless text
unfold itself - a clockwork flower:
petal by petal, word by word,
mind machined...

It's like a clandestine
bridge
for slavery and song.

Nothing like loss to wake and woo
a lone and hungry heart.

Some folks grow up
and go to work,
no gall or pang
to stop their swathe...

To subsist in this amber sun
which mothers crime and cure alike...

Nothing like life to leave you nowhere,
dragging your heels and hoping for lees.

Nothing like love to make you see
the gouged-out hole you're in.

Viz the irony of fate.
Viz the dialogue of souls.
That poem would pull me back to land...

Careful not to take my place at sea.

Alan Murphy

Two Tears

drop lets
in a wasted lake

(...river run backwards, river run backwards...)

cornered water
will not yield to force

Alan Murphy

Transformations

I went for a swim
And turned into a fish;
Some day I might just wind up on your dish.

I jumped in the air
And turned into a bird.
If I told you how it happened you'd think it absurd.

I went for a walk
And I never came back,
And that's about all I can say...

The sea was so blue as it sparkled and swam,
Surrounding and swallowing all that I am.

The sky was so vast that it went on for miles,
Boosting and buffeting me.

And as for the walk, well, that gave me a fit!
That was the really interesting bit;

As I strolled a great hurricane blew me away,
Right into outer space for the day.

This treacherous tempest put me down soon,
And left me to finish my walk on the moon!

Alan Murphy

Hell is Homework

Hell is Homework and Homework is Hell,
I dash from our school at the sound of the bell
But what greets my feet when they make it back home?
A cruel clutch of hours with a mountain of tomes.

Hell is Homework and Homework is Hell,
I scream it, I shout it, I whinge and I yell!
A blizzard of bad set by Satan himself,
Skulking in our teacher's mind like an elf.

Maths is a miserable mystery:
It's gruelling, it's galling, I'm doodling and dawdling,
Geography jumps all over me;
It's a pain in the neck, like being stretched on a rack!

Weekends are wondrous when they arrive,
No need to suffocate, no need to strive,
Just sit back calmly from nine until five,
After you've buried your schoolbag - alive!

I'd burn all the books but I'd just get bad looks
And a fresh batch of blight for my sins, you can't win!

So listen Old Nick, a quick word in your ear,
If you're big on cruelty, torture and fear,
Don't bother with hellfire, tridents and whips,
Instead why not try these few quick handy tips:

Set the damned essays and sums and the like,
Make them intolerably hard for the tykes,
Soon they'll change seamlessly from sinning cheats
To snivelling wee schoolkids with you as their teach!

Alan Murphy

Your Common or Garden Martian

Your common-or-garden Martian has three eyes in his head,
Seven ears and twenty limbs a-dangling from his bed,
He holidays near Jupiter and breakfasts on the Moon,
And he visits his scaly mother-in-law in the month of June.

Your common-or-garden Martian thinks that life is a beach
With silver sand and purple shells and waves that really greet a fella,
He sails the stellar on a sea of galaxies and such,
And smokes without a cigarette (but doesn't drink too much).

He's perfectly at home, in London or in Rome,
But he really likes to swim the stars
So he's not on the phone...

Your common-or-garden Martian is a happy-go-lucky chap,
With kids, a wife, a house, a bug-eyed monster in his lap,
He has a steady job that wobbles once in a wee while,
But by the way he gibbers you can tell he has real style.

All common-or-garden Martians think that flowers are a food,
And gravel is jewellery and valuable to boot,
They're frightened by our circus clowns and laugh at horror films,
And don't go giving them medicine as it only makes them ill.

They're perfectly at ease, in Paris or Berlin,
So long as they've got a shiny pot,
A ship to fly there in...

Your common-or-garden Martian hangs with earthlings now and then,
He's not in with the in-crowd but he has a pal called Ken,
He's weird as worms, it's true, in fact there is no doubt
That your common-or-garden Martian is pretty spaced out.



An Encounter Alan Murphy

Intelligent? Such a comforting word of praise. Such an unlikely morsel of real encouragement. Offered by - a distinguished peer? A supportive relative? A friend? Glimpsed in a warm review of one's first literary effort? No, this honeyed epithet, this nugget of blithe reassurance came out of the mouth of one Joseph Tobias Soap, esquire, proud owner of one park bench and acres upon acres of nothing else.

I was on my way to see a witch doctor. Or rather, the contemporary equivalent: a healer/clairvoyant/hairdresser who had in certain respects the aspect of a witch and none of the qualifications of a doctor. But she had been recommended to me. In addition to this, providence seemed to favour the encounter; clouds were assuming the shape of arrows pointing the way to her lair; tea leaves were grabbing me by the lapels and urging me to get there on time.

And it was with grave, resolute steps - those of someone anticipating death or rebirth or both - that I was endeavouring to do this. And then I met Joseph Tobias. No soap.

"You look like a very intelligent sort of chap," said No Soap.

The interjection seemed, under the circumstances, faintly ridiculous and almost a non sequitur. Fate taking the piss, having a bit of fun at my expense. Ya see, No Soap wasn't one of your break-off-a-long-and-vituperative-conversation-with-the-wind-to-perform-keyhole-surgery-on-a-passerby-with-a-broken-bottle sort of hobos. No, he was one of those genteel, old-world tramps, surely a rarity these days. He was all charm and deference, exuding something genuinely carefree, or so it seemed. A sort of anachronistic paean to the joys of poverty.

Having nothing to say in reply, I made my excuses and continued on my journey.



Apple Baskets

Mary Catherine Murray

My grandfather, his father and his father's father were all traditional basket weavers in Fermanagh. By the time I was old enough to wander round in their darkened workshop, Papa only made the occasional wastebasket or apple basket, as the importance they once held for people in their everyday lives was no longer. The beautiful workmanship and subtle variations in shape, texture and pattern were not much appreciated by a small



child. Each man in my family had produced baskets with tell-tale signs of his hands; the way the handle curved, the smoothness or roughness of the weave, the length of rushes chosen.

But life was busy and the few baskets left scattered around the workshop that were made by previous generations gathered dust and developed mould; some had been left lying in the corner of the little Victorian glasshouse at the bottom of the garden. I remember a vixen sleeping on one as I crept fearfully past the raspberry bushes, nervously avoiding reflections of the fox and myself one summer's day.

Papa had always been a fit and active man. His life had been one of narrow confines; that of the farm and the baskets, but I realise now that he had wanted the basket-weaving to be a means of spending time with me, and passing the knowledge onwards. Of course, it would have been a great source of happiness to him to have the skills carry on into my generation, but more importantly he wanted me to remember him and our little banter as he sat with me, hunched over the slowly emerging basket.

But children do not understand the concept of ageing, and I was never very good at sitting still. I found the swing in the garden much more tempting. He had put it up when my father was a little boy. It hung from the heavy bough of a giant oak and could reach amazing heights, in the opinion of a six-year-old.

"Sit down there, Marcus, and we'll do a small basket for you to keep your bits and pieces in," my grandfather said one afternoon.

"What bits and pieces?" I demanded, in truth not terribly interested.

"Little pebbles, bits of string, pennies, small cars, the apple, all the little things filling your pockets," he indicated, pointing to my jacket. "I'll show you as my father showed me, and his father showed him," he continued, pushing a small stool for me towards his chair and reaching for a handful of rushes he had collected for my basket. My gaze as usual, wandered out to the big tree in the garden, with Daddy's swing hanging from it. Rays of bright summer sun were streaming down through the green branches and illuminating the seat.

"I'd rather swing," I remember saying bluntly, and I wandered out of the workshop without looking back.

My parents were rushing that day for something completely inconsequential, and I didn't kiss him goodbye. I never saw him again, as he caught pneumonia that autumn and was carried off faster than anyone could have imagined.

My wife asked me to go to the Sunday organic market for apples yesterday and handed me a plastic bag.

"What? Never ever," I told her. "I will always use an apple basket."



Brief Permission Granted

Mary Catherine Murray

It had been the twenty-first of March of that year. With the advent of spring, the lawns and gardens in Wicklow were just beginning to respond to the warmer temperatures. The natural world was racing forward for its appointed rendezvous with summer.

But before Rosemary O'Loughlin could move forward in her life, there was one very important thing that she wished to do; Rosemary knew well that she could do it only once, that she would have to accept the time given her, and that this permission granted would have to last the rest of her life.

That Sunday had been very breezy, very cloudy, and a bit chilly. Rosemary was still dressing, but was nearly finished. Someone had come to the door, and she could hear two voices clearly, the sounds travelling up the stairs in the small flat.

'That is Jack downstairs with Emmet' she thought. He must have come up early in the morning. It seemed that another postal anecdote from the Bray office was making the rounds.

'So, Emmet,' Jack was saying, 'Father Hale had come down to tell me of a box that would be arriving from the North. Very important theological books and rare Bibles, he told me. Gave me all kinds of detailed instructions on where to find him when they arrived.

So, I was on the watch, anyway, for these books. When the lads told me the box was there, I had a look and rang Father Hale myself this morning.

'Father Hale', I said, 'it's Jack Murray here. I just wanted you to know that your books have arrived from Antrim. I knew you'd probably be wanting to start the studies immediately', I told him.

'Good, good, excellent!' he was saying. 'Bring them over to me, will you?'

'Well, Father,' I said, 'unfortunately there's a bit of a problem.'

'What's that?'

'Actually, Father, your books are leaking.'

Jack with this sentence lost his capacity to speak, the words gone in an uncontrollable explosion of laughter. Emmet was no better, and Rosemary could hear the

sound of his teacup being set down quickly on the kitchen table. He was undoubtedly laughing too hard to hold on to it any longer.

Rosemary smiled. The two had been carrying on like this since they were babies sharing a garden.

When Jack had recovered sufficiently to continue, he added, struggling to get the words out, 'The other end of the line was dead silent. So, I said to him, 'Father, you'd better ring Dr. Kennedy and tell him that there will be a problem with the biblical refreshments at the cards on Saturday night.'

As the last sentence drifted up the stairs, Rosemary felt an electric shock of pain in her stomach and caught her breath. Emmet was no longer laughing and Jack was remembering that he needed to cut his grass before it rained. She closed the bedroom door.

Picking her way carefully around all the boxes packed for London, she then sat down at the dressing table mirror. She hovered just on the brink of being late. Her short dark straight hair was smooth and well-brushed, but her hazel eyes looked darker than usual and her skin paler. She hadn't slept well at all last night, and ever since rising that morning, it had been an effort to get her breath. But although she was still somewhat breathless, she could speak normally. She fervently hoped that this would allow her to get through the afternoon. She put on her small pearl earrings, arranged her hair once again, and adjusted the collar of her blouse. Perhaps it had been a mistake to choose a suit over a dress...perhaps her light turquoise wool would have been better than this severe navy suit...what about a brooch...?

Emmet called up the stairs. 'Are you ready, dear? We should be on time.'

Rosemary felt the familiar pain in her stomach again when she heard the word 'time.' She rose from the dressing table, collecting up her navy gloves and her bag. Now, where was her hat? She scanned the room quickly, her panic rising. There! On the top of a box. Through the inside wall, she heard the car door slam and the engine start.

She hurried down the front stairs and out the door. 'You look smart' he said to her from the car window, adding quickly, 'You look very well.' He had realised after a year of marriage that 'smart' was not a compliment.

Emmet reached for her hand as she got into the car. 'Don't be worried about a thing.' he said to her.

'But there is nothing to worry about.' thought Rosemary. 'I have agreed to be invisible.'

It was normally about forty-five minutes from Dublin to Bray. They made the journey quietly, Emmet knowing it would be useless to try to make conversation and Rosemary unable to speak because of all the fright and anticipation chasing each other round and round inside her head. As they drew closer and closer to the seafront, Rosemary felt her heart hammer ever more insistently against her ribs. It was only with great effort that she could even move.

They had by now passed through the centre of Bray, and were only a minute or two from the house. Rosemary gazed almost in a trance out of the window, and tried once again to control her breathing. High fine trees surrounded comfortable houses. Two freckled little girls, one dark-haired and one fairer, in navy plaid skirts, were playing with hollyhock dolls they had made on the pavement. A beautiful smiling baby with soft, curling brown hair was taking the air, pushed along in its pram by doting parents. A mother with a large multi-coloured ball played catch, her little girl rushing to retrieve it in a light pink playsuit.

'The house has large front windows, with a white Renault in the drive' said Emmet. 'There it is', he gestured, indicating a neat, comfortable house on the right. The white net curtains were arranged at right angles. The lawn and bushes were well-manicured. Emmet didn't want to be presumptuous enough to pull into the drive. He stopped the car on the street a little distance from the house, and took the key from the ignition. He put his hand again over Rosemary's as it lay on the seat. She took a deep breath.

'How are you feeling?' he asked kindly.

'I feel ill' she whispered, in so low a tone that he could barely hear her.

'You could reconsider even now.' Emmet's was the voice of reason.

'You don't have to go in, Rosemary. We could go home now...'

'No!' Rosemary woke suddenly, as though from a long sleep.

'I want to go in!' she said firmly. 'I will never, ever have another chance.'

'All right,' Emmet replied, 'it's your decision', and they both stepped simultaneously from the car.

The synchronised slamming of the two car doors made her wince, and it seemed as though the house then also moved in alarm, like a baby awakened from a deep sleep by an earlier-than-expected rousing.

She and Emmet followed the path leading to the house, and it was then that Rosemary thought she saw a sudden movement from the window. There were two small steps with a railing at the front door. It was Emmet that rang the bell, as Rosemary couldn't bring herself to do it. The overly-loud buzzing of the bell seemed to resound through the entire house, and Rosemary's courage seemed to desert her as she heard the keys turning in the lock. She had a sudden memory of Sister Mary Frederick, the keys jangling from her belt, handing her a small, insubstantial square envelope containing thin, almost transparent paper, the kind they offered in public libraries as scrap paper. The note had been very short, with no real explanation. Sister Mary Frederick's voice seemed to be swimming above her even now, as she remembered herself bent over the note.

'This is a story as old as the hills...', it sounded as if Sister Mary Frederick were repeating... 'and it seems this young man no longer has any interest and now he has left you on you own to deal with the disgrace...but, believe me, Rosemary, God hasn't left you and neither have we...'

Dr. Kennedy answered the door. 'Mr. and Mrs. O'Loughlin, please come in.' He was very courteous, but he didn't smile. Rosemary felt keenly the air of someone carrying out a business obligation, or perhaps he was also a bit nervous. He was a small man of dark complexion and wore a very crisply ironed white shirt, and a black waistcoat with large buttons. His manner was gentle but he took in everything around him.

As she and Emmet stepped through the front door, Rosemary realised that they were stepping directly into the main room of the house. which ran the length of the ground floor. The room was like an early daguerreotype in its furnishing, with many combinations of light brown and sepia, dark brown and green, with spare, well-made Edwardian furniture and lightly-washed watercolour prints on the walls. The air carried a mixture of scents; old books, fresh greenery, cigar smoke, furniture polish, sweet bread baking, and strong tea. The room was comfortable and furnished in good taste, but by no means ostentatious. It seemed to invite one to settle in, unnoticed. Walnut bookcases lined the far wall. Two small armchairs, one in a yellowish-gold print, and the other in gold velvet, a tea table, and an upright piano faced the front door. To the far left, a

staircase presumably led to the bedrooms, and to the right, a small chest of drawers with a mirror above it stood beside the front door.

'Please, sit down' said Dr. Kennedy, gesturing toward the armchairs. He himself pulled over a small red leather chair with wide arms. Starting to step over to the armchair, Rosemary's foot knocked against a tiny object glistening on the carpet. She bent down to retrieve it. It was a tiny pearl earring. She placed it on the chest of drawers. The lowest little drawer was slightly open. There was nothing on the top of the little chest but one small navy leather glove and a couple of hairpins. Suddenly, Rosemary heard a small scuffling in the kitchen beyond the larger room. It was like something being pulled quickly across a linoleum floor. She went rigid in all her limbs and had to force herself to sit down.

In the leather chair, with the tea table between them, Dr. Kennedy turned to Emmet.

'Not a bad day for driving.'

'Indeed' answered Emmet. 'We've been quite lucky for this time of year.'

Emmet's vocal cords appeared to be working normally, thought Rosemary. But he passed his hat nervously from hand to hand, and finally placed it carefully on his knee. Both Rosemary and Emmet were still wearing their overcoats.

Dr. Kennedy shifted his weight uncomfortably in the chair. There was an awkward pause.

'Would you like some tea?' Dr. Kennedy asked.

'Thank you very much,' Emmet replied quickly, glancing at Rosemary.

She only managed to nod and smile. Although arrangements had been made several days ago, she still felt unprepared.

Dr. Kennedy turned then, and called into the kitchen. It was an unexpected sound in such a quiet house.

'Catherine, could you come in?'

Quick as a flash, a little girl of about ten appeared beside her father's chair.

'Ten and a week and six days' thought Rosemary.

She was a lovely little child, keen to please her father and his visitors. She had a light complexion, with hazel eyes, closer to a violet green than brown. She had long

straight dark brown hair, well-brushed, which she wore in two plaits falling to each shoulder. Thin and very tall for her age, she wore what appeared to be a new dress, as Rosemary could see the deep creases running across the sleeves, where it had probably been folded into a bag. But there were no corresponding creases anywhere else in the dress as it had been ironed. Of beautiful quality, it was striped in turquoise and white. A matching hair band in cotton was tucked behind her ears.

'Catherine, can you say hello? This is Mr. and Mrs. O'Loughlin.'

'How do you do?' said the child politely. She was a bit shy, and held firmly to the arm of her father's chair, but she looked at both of them steadily.

'Catherine,' Dr. Kennedy continued, drawing the child up to him and around the chair arm, 'would we organise some tea for Mr. and Mrs. O'Loughlin? And then we will all sit down together.'

The child nodded, delighted to be treated as a grown-up, and scurried into the kitchen. There was a heavier, slower step heard on the kitchen floor, and the child was speaking to someone.

'Can you lift the tray by yourself?' he called to her.

'I can, Daddy' she answered him from the kitchen.

'Only the smaller tray,' a woman's voice added.

'I'll be bringing in the teapot, Dr. Kennedy. It is a bit too much for her.'

Catherine appeared a couple of minutes later with a round rosewood tray with brass handles, holding the cream jug, sugar, and her own glass of orange.

It was in fact a bit heavy for her. Rosemary sat forward instinctively, but Dr. Kennedy had risen and he placed his hand under the tray to guide it to the tea table; the child was still holding the handles, eager to show that she could do it. A stout woman in a red flowered dress and a full white apron followed her out with a larger tray.

The freshly-filled cream-coloured Wedgwood teapot stood steaming on the table. The Grecian cherubs in relief on its surface were covered in condensation and weeping bitterly, separated from the dancing ladies on the opposite side. The tray held three matching cups and saucers, and four neatly pressed yellow linen luncheon serviettes. A delicate porcelain plate, edged in gold with hand-painted violet pansies, held thickly-sliced buttered brack. This took up the last remaining space on the tray. But Rosemary couldn't eat.

The lady began to speak like a fast-flowing river.

'I hope you won't mind if I don't pour out, Dr. Kennedy. I have to get to the last mass... not normally baking on a Sunday, I hope I won't be late...my brothers were asking why I wasn't at home today, being a Sunday of course...if it is raining when we come out, I'll ask for a lift... but what will Mrs. Kennedy do if it rains? You could have knocked me over with a feather, out at this time, and little John will be wanting his lunch... she cares nothing for the outdoors, Dr. Kennedy, as you well know...

Dr. Kennedy got to his feet in a flash.

'Isabel, let me introduce you to Mr. and Mrs. O'Loughlin, who are visiting us this morning.'

Isabel, who loved nothing better than new faces, new pieces of news, and new opinions on her fresh brack, began to relax and looked with interest at the two visitors. She appeared to have put aside concerns over spiritual obligations for the moment.

'The gentleman I have seen before,' she said plainly, nodding toward him. 'I believe you are Donal O'Loughlin's son from Kilbride...Now, the lady...'

'Don't let us keep you, Isabel, we will delay you and we don't want you late for Mass. I'll open the door for you...'

'But who will answer the phone for you, Dr. Kennedy?' Isabel continued, looking over her shoulder at the two unknown quantities at the tea table.

'We'll manage somehow, Isabel. I'll ask Catherine to do it.'

'Yes, Daddy, I will do it for you.' the child said eagerly, while Isabel was saying simultaneously, in an incredulous tone, 'Catherine! Why, she's only a child! What if it is an emergency? Well, if I'm needed, I'll certainly stay...'

'I couldn't allow myself to be so selfish, Isabel, much as I appreciate your kind offer. I will ask your brother to bring you home from the church. See you on Monday. Thank you for everything.'

Dr. Kennedy closed the door firmly and sat down.

'His courtesy never seems to desert him,' thought Rosemary.

He reached for a spoon to stir the tea. 'I haven't much expertise at this', he said, colouring slightly, 'but hopefully the tea will end up in the cups.' He seemed grateful for the distraction that arrangement of the teacups seemed to bring.

Emmet looked at Rosemary as if to say, 'Modest enough, a fine surgeon worried about spilling the tea.' He clearly wanted Rosemary to offer to pour it out, since she had been given the afternoon tea shift at the Gresham Hotel for two years, but she

resisted. She did not want her attention distracted in any way. She ignored the ritual of pouring out the tea. She was trying to memorise looks, movements, expressions; just breathing in the same room was giving Rosemary a strong pain in her chest.

There was a small mahogany chair with thin, graceful arms in the corner near the bookshelves, and Dr. Kennedy pulled it over for Catherine. The child sat down politely, her hands folded in her lap like a lady-in-waiting at an official function. All the adults turned toward her.

'Tell Mr. and Mrs. O'Loughlin about school, Catherine,' said her father.

'What is the name of your school?' asked Rosemary

'Immaculate Conception' replied Catherine.

'Do you like school?' asked Rosemary.

'Yes' said Catherine, nodding.

'Are you in the fifth...'

'Yes,' said Catherine, anticipating the question.

'What's your teacher's name?' asked Rosemary

'Miss Wilkie' answered Catherine.

'How many children have you in your class?'

'I'm not sure.'

There was an awkward pause. Emmet cleared his throat.

'What do you want to be when you grow up?'

'I want to be as beautiful as my mother and read as many books as my daddy.'

'But this is not a profession, Catherine,' said her father, slightly sternly.

'Well, a doctor wouldn't be a good idea,' Catherine said, thoughtfully. 'Doctors work all the time, even on Sunday mornings, in the hospital with Father Hale. That's where my father usually is, until eleven o'clock. Why are you here, Daddy?' she said, asking impulsively and immediately, as children sometimes do, without waiting for a response. 'Or other doctors call them from houses for help with difficult babies... Dr. Halloran calls you, doesn't he, Daddy?'

'Once he did,' Dr. Kennedy agreed, 'for one very beautiful little baby, but he is a very good doctor on his own.'

'I understand that Mrs. Halloran is ill' Rosemary said quietly to Dr. Kennedy. 'Is it serious?'

'We hope Therese will recover,' Dr. Kennedy said gravely, 'but complete rest is certainly needed.'

'What was the problem?'

'Overextended kindness', replied Dr. Kennedy, smiling ruefully.

'She is certainly that ...' Rosemary spoke almost to herself. 'She did so much for me...please pass my regards to her.'

Catherine had turned her attention to Emmet. He was not accustomed to children and seemed to stiffen in their presence.

'What are you?' she asked him.

'What am I?' Emmet asked, confused.

'Yes', repeated the child. 'What are you? You asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. What are you? Are you a father?'

'Oh, no,' said Emmet quickly, colouring from embarrassment. 'I'm a stockbroker.'

'Not mutually exclusive.' quipped Dr. Kennedy, and the adults laughed.

He looked down quickly at his hat and looked up again, having regained his composure.

'I'm to work in London. We're leaving tomorrow.'

'Oh,' said Catherine, nodding sagely. 'That's hard work. Do you have Sundays off?'

'Yes, definitely' replied Emmet with relief, knowing these were questions he could answer.

Catherine had finished her orange in two gulps, as the adults were just starting to sip their tea. She had inhaled a slice of Victoria sponge in one breath, and a warning look from her father informed her that it would be lethal for her to reach for another.

She sat patiently, her hands again folded in her lap, waiting for the adult conversation to resume.

She was clearly waiting to be allowed to get up.

A very difficult thing for a child to do, thought Rosemary.

'Daddy, may I be excused?' she asked him quietly.

'Yes,' he answered her, 'but stay in the room with us.'

Rosemary tipped the rim of the teacup toward her face, watching Catherine wander over to the bookshelves against the far wall. Following her every move, Rosemary could just discern a photograph at the child's elbow, showing Catherine herself, a tow-headed, freckled little boy, and a very petite, fair woman with curling hair.

There was an awkward silence as the child wandered aimlessly along the bookshelves, occasionally pushing the spine of a book back into place. She then moved toward the staircase, where Rosemary saw a blonde bisque doll in a red Stewart tartan dress lying on a step. But she stopped in her tracks when her father called her over to him again.

'Would you play the piano, Catherine?'

The little girl sat down obediently at the piano. She played a short nursery rhyme and a simple Bach minuet. She did not do it out of enjoyment, but because she had been asked. Rising quickly from the piano, she approached her father's chair again.

'Very good, Catherine,' Dr. Kennedy said quietly.

Emmet had smiled at the little girl and murmured 'My goodness!'

Rosemary wanted to praise her as well, and it was only with the greatest of effort that she could will the words from her throat.

'You have a nice touch, Catherine' She smiled then at the child but Catherine was already at her father's knee and never saw the smile.

The little girl was becoming a little bit restless, Rosemary observed. She was looking longingly at the lawn outside. Dr. Kennedy could see this.

'Catherine,' he asked her, 'shall we sing something? Do you want to sing something you've learned in school?'

Rosemary was doubtful that the little girl would agree, but to her surprise, Catherine nodded.

'What will it be?' her father asked. 'Down by the Sally Gardens?'

She nodded again.

Her father began the first line, but her sweet, high voice was soon following. She stood with her back to him, the palms of her hands on his knees. Her love of the singing with her father overcame any self-consciousness about the presence of strangers.

As they moved into the second verse, Rosemary heard Emmet's voice begin as well. This was all the encouragement Dr. Kennedy needed.

'How about a second one? Good! Let Mr. O'Loughlin choose it.'

'Do you know 'Will you go, lassie, go?' asked Catherine enthusiastically.

'Yes, I believe I do.'

After three verses of this, all beginning 'I will build my love a tower' since the first line was eluding all the singers, Dr. Kennedy then proposed Fields of Athenry, which ended the impromptu concert, since the little group of three could not recall any of the lyrics to make the words rhyme. Catherine was relieved as her repertoire had already been exhausted.

Rosemary drank her tea as slowly as possible; the finishing of her tea would be the death knell of her happiness in this room, and she wanted to prolong it as long as possible.

Dr. Kennedy was then noticing a somewhat large grape-flavoured lollipop in the shape of a rabbit, wrapped in cellophane and stuffed in the pocket of Catherine's dress. The rabbit's head was clearly broken into two pieces.

'Was that me, knocking him off at breakfast?' he whispered, pointing at her pocket and looking at her closely.

'That's all right, Daddy,' the child whispered back, unconcerned. 'Don't worry; I can still eat him anyway.' She sat down again in her chair, and Dr. Kennedy leaned back on his seat cushion, smiling at her.

The child had been so patient. She went to him and whispered something, he nodded, and she moved toward the stairs and picked up her doll.

The room had darkened as the late morning sun slipped behind clouds and faded from the sky. Dr. Kennedy had finished his tea, but still held the empty cup in his two hands. Emmet was finishing the last of his tea with a loud swallow. He replaced his cup into his saucer a bit too loudly, Rosemary thought, giving it an air of finality. As Emmet lifted his hand off the cup, Rosemary felt an uncontrollable rage rising in her against him for this thoughtlessness.

Dr. Kennedy then set his cup into his saucer with a decided gesture. Placing his hands on his knees, he slowly stood up. Emmet reached for his hat. Dr. Kennedy turned and gazed out the front windows.

'I think the rain may hold off this afternoon. The clouds may clear.'

'No,' thought Rosemary, 'they will never clear.'

Emmet and Dr. Kennedy moved the few short feet towards the front door, one murmuring something about the next election results, the other the next days' weather forecast.

Catherine rose from the steps and moved toward them. She came to Emmet, leaning her cheek against his long legs. He went down on his haunches and gathered her up to his chest, smoothing her hair.

'You're a lovely little one, Catherine. Be a good girl and keep singing your songs.'

As Dr. Kennedy turned the key in the lock to open the door, Rosemary had a sudden image of the morning she had stood at her own door, leaving the farm at Killala in Mayo. Her father had been standing in front of her, turning the key, as Rosemary waited, holding her small suitcase. She was frightened; she had never been away from home before.

She had wanted to kiss her father good-bye, and had reached for his cardigan, turning one of the large wooden buttons round and round. Her father had pulled it carefully out of her hands and had opened the door...

Coming out of her reverie, Rosemary turned round, sensing that Catherine was behind her. Looking quickly at Dr. Kennedy, Rosemary put her hand out to Catherine. The little girl smiled briefly and put her hand into Rosemary's, but she left it there only a second and withdrew it quickly, as children often do.

'It was a pleasure to meet you,' Rosemary said, looking directly into the child's bright hazel eyes, the words catching in her throat.

'Thank you, come again' said the little girl, polite but distant.

Rosemary again found it difficult to catch her breath.

Dr. Kennedy cleared his throat.

Afraid her resolve would fail her altogether, Rosemary decided to hasten her already imminent departure. Looking very intently one more time at Dr. Kennedy, she touched his arm.

'Thank you very much.'

'Not at all,' he said simply, but his eyes were full of kindness.

Passing over the threshold and down the small steps, Rosemary walked down the path from the front door as quickly as possible. She could see nothing now but a blur of hollyhock bushes. She heard only the heels of her shoes clicking on the cement pavement. Going through the gate and down a bit, she and Emmet were then at the car. Emmet opened the door for her and then quickly got in on the other side. They had not been in the house an hour.

Little Catherine was still standing at the open door with her father. Dr. Kennedy lifted his hand, a last gesture to them as the engine started. As the car pulled away from the house, Rosemary took one glance back. It was then that she saw it; Catherine had reached for one of the large black buttons on Dr. Kennedy's waistcoat. She was twisting it round and round as she leant against her father. Rosemary watched them as if she wanted to imprint their silhouettes eternally on the surface of her mind, until they were out of sight.

Emmet, concentrating on his driving, leaned forward over the wheel and peered up into the sky.

'Dr. Kennedy is right', he said with forced cheerfulness. 'The rain will definitely pass over us. The clouds will clear.'

'Everything is clear for Dr. Kennedy,' Rosemary said slowly, her sadness so deep that it had altered her voice. 'But it will never be clear for me. Nothing will ever be clear for me.'

Emmet, also sighing in sadness, could think of no reply. He had a sudden memory of Father Hale during his schooldays, going through the Latin lesson, and repeating lines from Seneca. 'It is a wise man who perceives the truth and does not refute it.'

The remainder of the journey was passed in silence. Emmet and Rosemary both knew that this was necessary. The permission had been brief, but it had been granted. They would never speak of this afternoon again, so that they would be able to continue in peace with the rest of their lives, but Rosemary would remember always.



Autumnal Equinox

Mary Catherine Murray

Autumnal equinox to winter solstice: beyond prime, withering.

The approach of winter for Petra never signalled the darkness of winter but the happiness of an internal life. The winter solstice when days became progressively shorter and nights longer, only signalled a drawing in, a drawing closer, a drawing near. She built up the fire, heated up the oven, lit the candles, and opened her books. The summer was warmer the days were long, but life was more superficial. It was the autumn days that whispered to her to get her pens out, her notebooks, her paints, and her papers. It was in the cold snap of autumn, the chill bite of the air, that forced her into action, that got her to produce results. She loved the spring and summer but it was in the autumn of her life that she felt the satisfaction of work completed.

"Another dark day!" her neighbours sighed.

"Yes, indeed," Petra would reply, knowing this would be the recipe for further progress.

Autumn is wonderful, she thought. My favourite, as she outwardly commiserated with the neighbours' dreading of autumn as the harbinger of winter.



Mary Catherine Murray

Arms in the Mourning

It had happened before in a similar way
How could you remember
That long ago day
I find the small bird
Beneath the pine's sway
We are told that God giveth
And God taketh away

We can sell them more arms in the morning

The little grey form
Honoured my life
Its small body broken
Caught in mid-flight
I struggled to save
Its soul couldn't stay

We can sell them more arms in the morning

This was the logic, the reason, the day
He came to me from Iraq in a similar way
I struggled to save him
But a soul can't be grasped
Life's nature confronted
The end came at last

We can sell them more arms in the morning

Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori - we are the best
I pleaded with God
As I knelt through the flight
For forty-three days
And forty-three nights
We were told all the targets were very precise
It was simply a matter of surgical strikes

We will sell them more arms in the morning

We're killing them outright
Death in the sand
Hot suffocation
Anguish, choking, no honour
With the weapon's hot brand

It's absolute murder
Don't look any more
But applied science has uses
Tell us what are tanks for?
I shouted at God
As I cried with fright
Through the hellish bombardment
Called a surgical strike
But remember, the targets are very precise

We can sell them more arms in the morning

The shrieking
The strafing
The bombing
The strife
They must learn their lesson
By losing their life
You are my father
I am your child
Yet all those cameras
Don't transmit all the cries

We can sell them more arms in the morning

Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori -- we are the best
I viewed the destruction with horror and shame
We all marched to war
And we are all to blame
It's not clean, it's not bright
Do this not in my name

We can sell them more arms in the morning

You said all their targets were very precise
My brother
My best friend
My baby
My wife
But it has to be done
All just wars have their price
Yes, they're Iraqis
Are they threatening your life
If you're sitting in comfort
You've no need to think twice

We will sell them more arms in the morning

I watched the remnants of this in dismay
A horrible war with a victory parade
 In anguish
 In torment
 In terrible pain
Came over and over
The same sad refrain

We will sell them more arms in the morning

No race nor creed can love exclude
Where honoured is *God's* name
Our common life embraces all
Our *God* he is the same

And if these words be written now
What meaning would they take
I honour all who died for naught
Though my protest comes too late

Fathers hold out their arms in the mourning

Tom Roche - Thoughts and Questions

Five Roubles

How much is five roubles in Euros? What would it buy? Would it get me a trip on the underground? Or a long bus journey? Perhaps a night at the opera.



How long would I have to work in Russia to earn this amount? Could I purchase a rasher or a piece of steak with it?

Food

Talking and thinking about food at this time has made my mouth water and my stomach rumble.

So how soon do I wait until I eat, to satisfy my hunger. If I picture myself eating a particular food, will it relieve my stomach?

The Naturalist



Is this his swansong? What made Sir Peter Scott famous? With his statue and bronze swan frozen in time, protecting the live swans, he is still doing what he spent his life at.

In his life, how much wildlife is Sir Peter responsible for saving?

Tom Roche

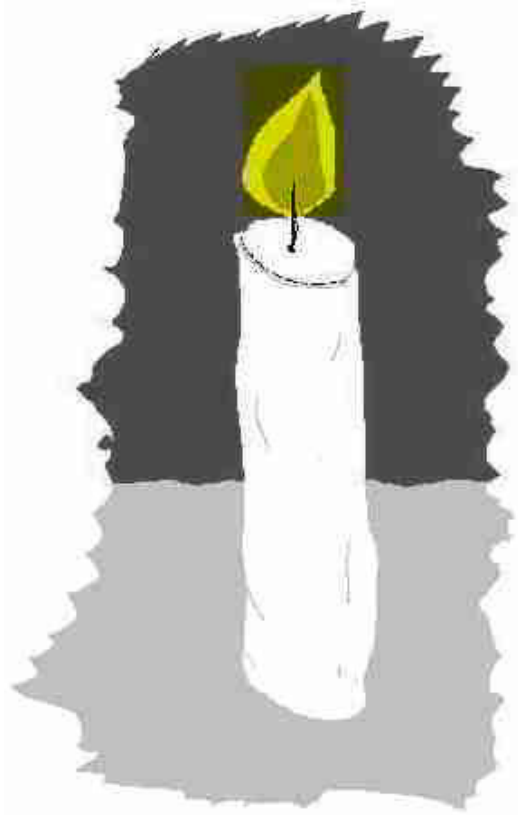
After a painting by El Greco

The glow of light from the candle
Reflected on to the faces

It is the middle of the night
As black as night without a moon.
Out in the country.

A quiet silence of aloneness

Little groups of people
Huddled around warming fires
I join the group for a warming.
Light in the cold night

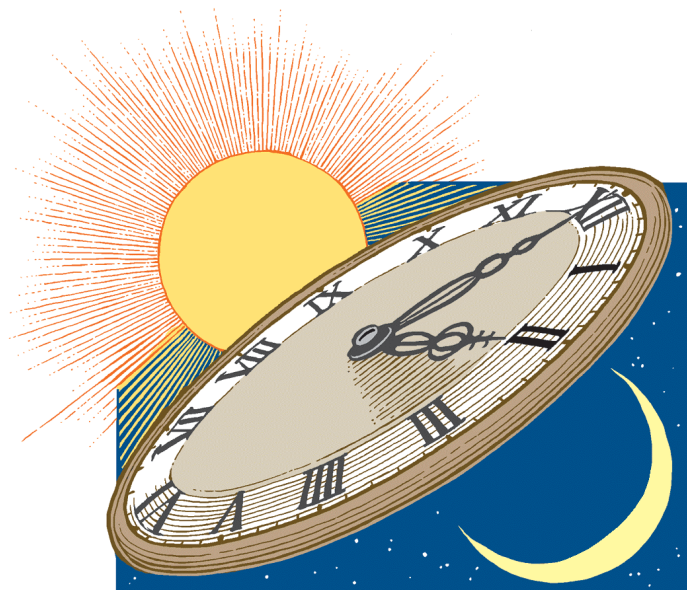


Tom Roche

Time passing, the tick tock of the clock
How long is a second really?
In one second we can die.
Or another person can be born.

Around the planet this world of humanity
– a billion souls -
Will be changed forever
In that second

Time never stands still
But it seems to slow down.
Or is it we who speed up?



The Spin

Bernadette Smyth

I steered through fantastic streets of boisterous traffic, past tall buildings and glittering shops, and footpaths where lanky streetlamps beamed on shoals of shoppers. I beeped the horn when I saw Mrs Sweeney.

"Can I've a lift?" she shouted.

"No problem!" I said.

"The town's mad today," she said, getting in.

"Packed!" I said "There's hundreds in town."

"*Thousands* more like."

"*Millions* even -- I'd say there's easily a million people doing their shopping today."

Mrs. Sweeney tightened her headscarf.

"You've plenty of groceries there," I said.

"Sure haven't I ten mouths to feed Petulia?"

"*Ten?* That's nothing -- I've fifteen."

"*Fifteen?* If I only had *fifteen* children I'd be laughing -- I've *twenty* you know."

"You said ten!"

"No -- *ten at the moment*: John-Joe, Jemmy, Jamesy, Josey, Bridie, Concepta-Mary, Mary-Concepta, Patricia, Ignatious and Alphonsus, are away on their holidays."

I went back to the steering.

"How's Paddy's leg?" I enquired.

"It's gone."

"Gone?"

"Chopped off!"

"And how does he manage?"

"He has to hop."

"That's desperate!"

"It is Mary-Brigid, especially with twenty children knocking him over."

"Still, it's better to be missing a leg than have an extra one. There's my Johnny and he's awful bother with the three legs."

"*Three?* That's nothing -- I've a brother with four."

"*Four legs Mrs Sweeney?*"

"Four -- he has to crawl so he does."

"And has he a tail?"

"No, just..."

Mrs. Sweeney's voice collapsed as she looked towards the house. Mammy was standing at the kitchen window.

"I TOLD YOU TWO ALREADY!" she shouted, "NO PLAYING IN THE CAR -- GET INSIDE NOW!"

Michelle scrambled out of the car, leaving behind Mrs Sweeney and her imaginary groceries, Paddy and Johnny, and the other deformed characters who lived in the space between the car's upholstery and our imaginations.

I ran after her, over the path and into the house where our tea was waiting.

Sharon's Drive to Work

Bernadette Smyth

Sharon pulled out of her driveway in the indifferent manner that typified her attitude to the working week. Work was a necessary inconvenience to Sharon; it wasn't something she derived any great meaning from; she didn't feel defined by it; or empowered by it; she wasn't oppressed by it or stressed out by it; she just *did* it.

It took Sharon approximately forty minutes to get to town in the mornings, and another ten or fifteen minutes to walk to the office, depending on where she got parked, which meant that she needed to be starting up the car at no later than five past eight. The journey was by now a series of automatic responses to junctions and traffic lanes, with particular adherence to speed limits on those stretches of road which were known to contain cameras; beyond that, it was a forty minute space in which Sharon could gradually emerge from the drowsiness of night and position her mind towards the tasks ahead.

It was a magnificent morning; sunny and bright. Tracts of gleaming sky slid across the car's rear-view mirror as it sped through the countryside. Sharon didn't notice how beautiful it looked, or how lazily the bloated clouds ambled in the distance ahead; she was thinking about what she had to do that day; go to the chemist at lunchtime to pick up that prescription; have that report she was working on finished by four, and what was in the freezer for dinner? A slice of vegetable lasagne that could be microwaved from frozen. Good, it would mean that she wouldn't have to call to *Tesco's* on the way home.

A row of daffodils along the roadside signalled Sharon's entry onto the motorway; they were lined up in a glistening guard of honour for motorists on their way to work. Sharon didn't see them, the way they swooned in the breeze; the way their cheerful heads bobbed and shone; giddy with the delight of spring. She was concentrating on the current affairs show she had tuned into on the radio, in which two opposing politicians were contradicting each other and themselves for, what they assured listeners, was the sake of the national interest.

They were still arguing as Sharon approached the end of the motorway, and even as she was navigating the hills and bends on the Ardee road, there was still no clear winner of the debate; the radio commentator had apparently given up on getting any sense out of them, and brusquely cut off the discussion with a commercial break.

The cell of trees that surround St Oliver's shrine were blushing with fresh blossom that morning; the same network of knobby branches that had shivered against winter rain only a month ago, were now garnished with an encouraging sprinkling of pink. But Sharon whisked past the shrine; she didn't notice the trees at all, or the sun that was trickled through them, peeping through the petals and branches as if playing a kind of game.

The influence of the sun was everywhere. It lived in daffodils and trees and grass and hills, intensifying nature's palette as it shone. If Sharon had glanced out of the passenger window before she turned at Macken's cross she would have seen how beautiful it made everything look; the different notes of green it sprayed onto the fields and hills surrounding the old workhouse; shades that contrasted, but yet found an affinity with one another.

It wasn't far now. The junction at the Friary church brought Sharon into town. Traffic was thicker there; cars swelled the length of the street. Buildings emerged. People grew onto footpaths; humans of different colours and shapes walking at various speeds to their destinations. Sharon felt more alert now. Her eyelids sat upright without straining. She saw some empty spaces in the car park at the marketplace as the traffic crept up towards the main throng of the town. She turned in the entrance gate and reversed neatly into the nearest space. Then she turned off the engine and looked at her watch. Good; twenty minutes to nine exactly.



Deciding

Bernadette Smyth

Jim Sloan stood at the top of Cross Hill, surveying his property. *God*, but it was beautiful. It always gave him pleasure to stand on this spot of the farm, admiring the fall of the lush fields below. Impossible to imagine now, looking at the landscape around him, at hills and trees that seemed to frame his very existence, to think that he had ever hankered after another kind of life. But he'd been young back then, he hadn't had any value on things; going to America was what all of the young people seemed to be doing. P.J. was going; Mickey was going, and of course, Siobhan. How could you remember the eighties without thinking about Siobhan Sullivan?

Jim let himself shrink back into his younger self for a moment, let himself re-live that time with Siobhan; the desire, the naivety, the passion, he remembered it all; the jumble of frustrated emotions that had crystallised in his mind over the years into a single drop of pleasure amid a decade of hopelessness. He remembered how set he was on going to New York with her, how serious he was about it. Sure he had the visa and all. But there was the farm to think about. A hundred acres. You couldn't just turn your back on it.

He wasn't sure where Siobhan was now. They'd kept in contact in the beginning, but it became harder to write as the years went on; the impossibility of being on different continents frustrated their communications -- it clogged the ink on the letters. Eventually they just stopped writing.

There were different rumours about her; she was in Upstate New York, Tom Breen said, running a children's adventure centre; she was somewhere on the West Coast, someone else told him, doing something in real estate. Jim didn't know which was true. But the very fact that people kept up-dating him was annoying. I mean it had been over fifteen years! Did people not see that he had moved on with his life?

All of the cattle were in the far field, and they had water in their drinker. Jim watched as they munched contentedly on the sun-mottled tufts of grass growing along the ditch. Pat Monaghan's milking machine purred in the distance. Jim climbed the gate and started walking along the tractor track. He could take his time now that his own milking was done; he could stroll on home at a pace that allowed him to breathe in the beauty of a summer's evening. Jim was always alert to the presence of beauty; he found

it every day in the ordinary details of life; beauty was in the slant of a hill, or the glint of a cloud, or the sleek hide of a Friesian heifer gleaming against a blue swatch of sky.

At home, the dishes were stacked up in the sink. The remains of the dinner were still on the table. If Karen had been there she would have tidied the place up. The house had an abandoned air without her.

A melancholy mood circled around the kitchen table; it seemed to cling in a depressed fashion to the last words Karen had spoken there:

It's up to you Jim. I'm not going to hang around for another five years.

That was two weeks ago. He hadn't seen her since.

The sitting room was tidier. Jim leaned on the old armchair beside the fireplace. It was where Karen liked to sit in the evenings, bunched up with a cup of tea, flicking the telly. The chair-cushion still held the echo of her shape. He picked the portable phone up from its stand. Holding it made him feel closer to Karen, knowing that a certain combination of its numbers would lead the way to her voice. But he also knew what dialling those numbers would imply, what he'd have to say. Marriage seemed so certain, it felt like the end of something.

The dial tone gave way to an engaged one. Jim hesitated as it beeped impatiently against his ear. Outside, night was falling; darkness was squeezing the sky down towards the ground in a magnificent display of diminishing orange. Jim stared at it pensively, and then, as if the darkness had squeezed out the urgency needed for the occasion, he put the phone down.

Things became clearer the next morning when he was out calving the cow. He'd been watching her for a few days now; the three-year old Holstein that he'd bought as a calf in Ardee. He hadn't liked the look of her; the way the calf seemed to be lying to one side of her belly. He thought she might have trouble calving; thought she might need the vet even, but in the end she'd done it all herself, without much bother.

It's always beautiful to see a baby calf stand up for the first time. His legs stumble and stutter until he realises what they're for, until hunger drives him up. In the end, both cow and calf just do what comes naturally to them. It's that simple.

It was while he was watching the calf that Jim decided. He loved Karen. She loved him. There was an ease between them, a gentle trickle of unspoken contentment that infused all of their togetherness. It would be the most natural thing in the world to marry her. He understood now what had been holding him back; he had been confusing love with passion; happiness with pleasure. He had stumbled over the word 'marriage'; had regarded it as some sort of alien temple dedicated to romantic perfection, when really it was just a way of formalising the happiness he'd already found.

Jim rushed into the house after the milking. Now that he had decided, why wait? He'd ring her now. No, he had a better idea. He'd write her a letter. It was a way of stretching out the moment; it would elongate the bliss of the proposal until Karen received it in tomorrow's post. Jim imagined Karen's reaction as she opened the letter; the surprise that would flush her face, the happiness that would ignite her eyes.

He found a writing pad by the phone, and in neat deliberate handwriting wrote:

Karen, How would you like to become Mrs. Sloan?

Marry me

Jim.

The drive to the village was glorious; the sky an unblemished blue; the hills a patchwork collection of giddy yellows and opulent greens, swaying to the rhythm of the sunny winds that shimmered through them.

What did he need in Mackens? A stamp for the letter of course, and a packet of cigarettes. Jim had given up smoking two years ago, but he'd allow himself the luxury of one today, to mark the occasion. It's not everyday you make a proposal of marriage, after all.

The post box stood expectantly on the outside wall of Macken's shop. Jim smiled as he walked past it.

"How's Jim?" Geraldine called, from behind the counter.

"Not so bad, and yourself?"

"Oh, sure there's no point in complaining. What can I get you?"

"Ten *Benson and Hedges*, and a postage stamp please Geraldine"

Jim felt for the letter in his pocket as Geraldine turned around to get the cigarettes. It was exhilarating, to know something in the world that nobody else knew;

to be here making small talk in the local shop, while he embarked on one of the most important ventures of his life. If Geraldine only knew the significance of that stamp!

"Did you hear about Mrs Sullivan?" Geraldine said, placing the cigarettes on the counter.

"No."

"She died in her sleep last night."

"Ah no..... Mrs Sullivan of Meehan's cross?"

"No, up here on the Balltown road. The funeral is on Wednesday, on account of Siobhan having to travel from the States"

"Oh..." Jim felt his hand loosen in his pocket; felt the letter dragging on the lining of his jacket.

"Yeah, she's coming home to stay this time, so John was telling me... Sorry Jim, what else did you say you wanted?"

Jim stood for a moment, immobilised. A small queue started to gather behind him. Geraldine coughed awkwardly.

"Jim?"

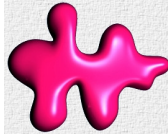
"Oh, em.... Sorry, Geraldine," he said finally, making his way back into the present with a twenty pound note, "just the fags will do."

Pat Monaghan was at the back of the shop, holding a newspaper and a loaf of bread. He opened his mouth to say hello, but Jim swept the greeting out of his mouth with the gust of his clumsy departure. Pat felt snubbed. What's up with *him*, he thought, as Jim pushed past him and out onto the footpath. It must be all off with the woman or something, Pat finally decided, as he watched Jim pull off and turn the car for home.

Bernadette Smyth

Niamh

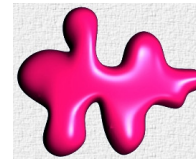
"What's your favourite colour Auntie Bernie?
- Mine's pink!"
Pink's for girls and not for boys,
It's for the millions and gazillions
Of little girls' toys.



Pink's for the smiley faces
That kiss my bedroom door,
It's for my unicorn, soft and squidgy,
Who lies sprawled across the floor.

My first ever shoes were pink,
Now they're tincy on my feet,
And my jammies -- they've pink hearts on them
To love me off to sleep.

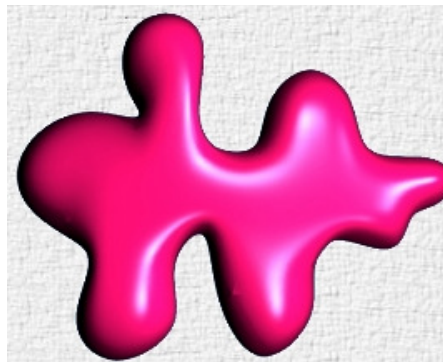
Pink's for fluffy diaries --
Want to know what's inside?
A butterfly, an ice-cream cone,
And the giant letter 'I'.



Pink's the colour of the world
That keeps me safe from harm,
I won't grow up, leave, do bad things,
As long as pink still holds its charm.

If colours could be flavours,
Then pink would taste of something sweet,
Like a marshmallow, or the sugary buns
That mammy lets me eat.

For people who can't hear it,
Pink sounds a little like my giggle,
And when I use my magic pen,
Pink pours out as a squiggle.





Reflections Linda Sullivan

Sometimes if we want to find ourselves, we have to lose everything else, but what are we with nothing?

Mark let the bubbling noises travel into the small room from the street below. Italian streets seemed to be busier than in other countries. The people appeared louder, the aromas more pronounced. In Venice the noise was different again, compared to Rome or Milan, the noise here seemed to exist against a backdrop of silence. He wasn't sure how long he had been lying on this bed. If he never got up, no-one would ever know.

Something about that thought thrilled him, sent little pulses of excitement through his veins. He had created something; his own environment, a choice, a destiny. Power boosted his thoughts, egging him on, pushing for self absorption.

He moved across the room and down the stairs quickly, his limbs snapping into action abruptly, as the thought filtered from his brain. Once outside he pushed through traders and stalls, striding forward as if someone with a mission instead of being no one with nowhere to go. After walking until the market sounds left his ears Mark slowed and strolled along the endless maze of mysterious backstreets. There was something about this city that comforted him, a deconstructed mass of islands and canals, tarnished and sinking, yet not just existing but beautiful. A submerged city reflected back at itself daily in the fluid mirror that filled its hollows. The tourists were mainly found on the long Grand Canal. Mark liked the small alleys where the Venetians moved through

shortcuts with ease. The only way to get around was on foot or on water. There were no cars or trucks and the lack of traffic noise left a hovering peace. The pedestrians all moved together and Mark walked with them, entering into the stream of Venetians.

The satisfaction Mark got from believing he was doing something worthwhile trampled memories of guilty notions. It reinforced the belief in a need for freedom, exploration and discovery. He knew he was doing them a favour. One way or another he had to get out of that life and the chaotic city of London. He had semi existed those days in a web of noise and anxiety, cowering behind a facade and crouching lower and lower. He had two options. One option ensured they would never see him again. The other meant a chance remained. He opted for the latter. He had chosen the braver, slower option. He could have chosen a quick end to everything but he didn't. He had left them with hope, left them with that, and then moved on. He was too far gone to realise that the first option brought closure. He could now only see his path. Occasionally Mark hesitated when passing net cafe, a thought striking his mind, but then other thoughts tumbled along, what can he say now? He has no words.

Mark peered into the water, seeing his murky, dirty reflection. Something was floating in the canal, bobbing along carelessly, unaware that a gondola could crush it instantly. The waitress placed his coffee on the outdoor table, smiled and picked up the tip. Mark looked at her, drinking in her features. A flicker of loneliness made him want to touch her. When she laughed he felt something inside and when she asked him if he wanted anything else, her expressive Italian face focussed on him and his needs.

He glanced at her after each bite, scrutinising her manoeuvres through the tables, delivering food. He ate slowly, watching her, drawing out each chew, savouring the Venetian flavours. She placed a pot of sauce on the table. Mark noticed how she didn't smile at the others customers when she placed the sauce there. She took orders from another table but walked back to the kitchen past his table. Mark acknowledged the signs storing them carefully.

He knew she was finished work at six. Mark moved to a small park beside the cafe. It overlooked a canal and he could watch the ebb and flow of the water. He could also see her, watch the way she worked. The bench he sat on today was typically Venetian; peeling and old. Taking out his sketch book, he began to draw. His pencil created carefully but purposefully, immersing Mark in her hair and hands and shoulders

and lips. The sun met Mark's skin and began its own task of slowly adding colour to the gaunt pale flesh.

When a paler sun shone over Venice and the evening mist arrived. Mark watched as she walked past the park and slipped into a side street. He rose and followed, his moment here. He knew the route. Knew where she crossed, knew where she turned, he knew her. Her hair was different today, he liked it like this, maybe she knew in some way. He walked with her but behind her, she was his focus, and her path became his path. They reached her street but she kept walking, she didn't turn off. Excitement was born in Mark's belly, squirming around his body as he followed her. Where were they going? She had always gone straight home. Stopping at a bar, she pushed open the door. Mark followed, trusting her. He stared as she joined a group of friends, kisses exchanging, smiles overflowing. Mark felt irritated. Suddenly the interest which had consumed him vanished and he no longer cared.

As the waterbus rested on the canal, floating over its reflection below and Mark began to be moved away from Venice, he had no idea that he was never really there at all.

There are things out of our control. If we chase them we will lose either them, or what we have left behind. Both cannot be ours.

Water cascaded down Jim's body, washing away a grimy flight and a crowded waterbus. His mind purred with activities and arrangements. Drying his body and dressing in clean clothes revitalised him, and like a suit of armour made him feel ready for battle. Locating his backpack he checked his leaflet supply and his map. He was always great at orienteering and knew exactly where he was. It had taken him a while to ascertain locations in Venice's intricate backstreets. Consulting his schedule he saw he would not have enough time to cover the whole area for information, so instead decided to stick to the Grand Canal and try to get Mark's poster in as many shops, hotels and bars as possible. He read the email again, skimming the words,

"On holiday.....certain it was your son.... beside us on waterbus.....saw poster in London..... that distinctive tattoomentioned it to my husband at the time.....it was him....I am sure.....good luck...."

The breakthrough. Jim folded it and put it in his pocket, close to his skin. Standing and securing his backpack on his back, Jim checked the unfamiliar room for any forgotten belongings, hardly recognising it, even though he just spent the night there.

Entering the lobby Jim paused at reception to enquire about internet access. Sitting at a computer he emailed his wife and daughter promising to call before four. His fingers moved; tapping keys cautiously but quickly, wanting to press send on the screen and in his mind.

Stepping outside Jim felt like the temperature was higher than it actually was. Holding the leaflets in one hand and sticky tape and a travel scissors in the other, he moved through cafes, bars, and hotels leaving behind his son's face wherever he went. The email was folded in one pocket, the map in the other. He had worn his combat shorts so a phone was in another pocket; a wallet in another, each pocket had a function, carrying another piece of Jim's ammunition. His eyes moved like a machine, scanning faces. Once the face was not recognised, the memory was discarded. Jim scanned hundreds of faces daily. At night in bed he tried to recall the faces but he can't. They are gone from his mind. There is only room for one face in his mind, one focus, everything else has faded.

Sweat glistened on Jim's bald patch. Pushing open the door of the last bar he could visit, he moved inside, the cool interior swallowing his uncomfortable frame. The sun had weakened but Jim's face was hot. His shorts kept falling down because he had lost weight, and the uncomfortable sensation nagged at him persistently. He must stop and buy a belt. He chose a table bordering the canal, looking down at the water. He watched as a gondola glided by, a gondolier steering his vessel, steadily moving it through the water, navigating it and its occupants, guiding them through the greyness below. After ordering a meal Jim spotted a pay phone in the corner, his wife and daughter and earlier promises called him. He dialled the number with a heavy hand.

"No nothing yet, but I have done the whole main street, tomorrow I will move to the smaller islands. Chances are he is moving around....How are you?....Look don't worry....I met a lot of helpful people...if he is or was here someone will get in touch...." Annoyance began to creep into Jim's tone.

"I can't come yet. There is more I can do, I won't let Mark down, and no I'm not saying you are but he needs me now and I will find him...."

Jim hated explaining it to his wife. He had to. His son was down and he would not leave the field without him, dead or alive. He detested hearing his daughter pretend to be in control. He wished he was there to lead them through this but those wounds would heal with time when he found the closure they all yearned for.

Leaving the bar, another supply topped up, Jim began to walk to the waterbus stop. Forty five minutes later, upon realising he had taken a wrong turn, he cursed and scoured the map. Angry now, he began again. In the humid evening perspiration poured out of each one of Jim's orifices. His feet stuck to the leather of his sandals and with each step he took he slid around in sweat. Still he walked on.

And then there are those who are left behind.....

Rose looked at the clock. Ten past six. Ten past four in Italy and Jim had promised he would phone before four.

"Mum relax ten minutes is not anything to dwell on"

"Who said I was not relaxed?"

Rose replied with a raised eyebrow, aiming to look in control and as if she was dealing with the situation. She hated when her twenty year old daughter detected how every fibre of her being was a nervous wreck. She saw the fear in her own eyes every time she looked in a mirror; she knew Sarah could see that. Her insides felt twisted, coiled up in pain, confusion and terror ever since that realisation. Her son was missing. Two months on, no clues, no answers and now no husband. The cup of tea Sarah placed in front of her stole Rose from her reverie. Uncomfortably she murmured thanks, and let the warm tea console her insides. She stood and started to search the freezer for something to eat, absentmindedly taking out a lump of meat and lobbing it on to the counter.

Sarah picked up her pen once more, and tried to concentrate. Equations. Complex little creatures which demanded absolute attention. Again she thought of her brother and sadness and fear raged against confusion and anger. She heaved a sigh and tried to breathe out all the tension that clung to her body. She moved and walked down the hall. The house felt empty, her footsteps made too much of a noise, echoing against the wall

of cold silence that permeated the rooms. Here half the family semi existed, lying awake at night, constantly thinking, and churning over conversations and movements.

The ring of the phone shook the house. Eileen reached first. The words that reached her deflated her heart. Would there ever be a release. Jim's far away grainy voice explained and reasoned.

"Maybe you should come home?", Rose's voice disintegrated on the word home. Sarah took the phone, her voice firmer than her mother's. She felt clammy and scared and just wished it would all end.

The Prize of My Life

Amelia Earl



I never thought I would be on board a cruise ship. Me who gets seasick at the sight of water. I had entered a competition where you just wrote your name on the back of your till receipt and thought no more about it. Nine months ago I received a letter from the competitions organisers to say I had won first prize, a three week cruise - but to take up the prize I had to be one of the passengers. Help! I thought I cannot go, I will never survive that long on a ship. I was allowed to take three friends as well so when they got to hear about it they told me even if they had to drug me I was going so they could also. With friends like this, I stood no chance.

We left home at 3am on that Sunday morning with me still having fits, even though the doctors had prescribed me tablets to help. It was not yet bright and no-one else seemed to be moving, every movement we made sounded like an earthquake. We got a taxi to the railway station. The 4.15am train was ours. It would take two hours to get to our port which I felt had a very apt name "Green Face Port". On the way down we slept on the train.

Arriving at Green Face Port we were guests of the port officials for breakfast. I cheated and did not have the fry. I thought this might just be asking for too much. I certainly did not starve. The best of all was they had apple juice as well as orange. My friends did themselves proud. Now that we are on our journey, I think it is safe to introduce them to you. Paula, an accountant without much idea on how to save her own money. Paula is 24, tall, black hair, good figure with a quiet personality. Gwen - a bit like her name might lead you to think, is medium size, slightly overweight, long fair hair with a beautiful shine. Gwen works with children and so with this temperament, no matter what I say, nothing will arouse her to clobbering me over the head. Rebecca - a nurse with thought for others, but with bounce and devilment in her. Rebecca has what you might say is a well groomed body, short hair with a great kick in it. As for me? Of course I'm perfect in every way!!! Or so I say, others might not agree, but they must be wrong.

We boarded the ship to music playing on the deck. They were playing marching tunes, I am not sure - was this a gentle hint to hurry us up or an extremely pleasant way to greet the passengers. Either way I really did enjoy the music and forgot where I was. We were given a two bedroom suite with a sitting room. It was as if we were entering a palace. I would hate to think of what it would have cost. The taps were gold in colour and the couches a beautiful deep creamy colour. The bedrooms were colour co-ordinated - one in lemon the other in heather. You would find it very hard to believe just how much one can do with a ship's cabin.

We sat around talking and laughing at just about anything, we were in great form, nothing to worry about - all our expenses were paid with extra money for the ports and best of all, no work and no-one to want things done by yesterday. Suddenly there was a huge gurgling sound and we rushed on deck - we were leaving on our great adventure.

The sun had risen and was now high in the sky, the birds' tunes were as gay as my heart. We decided to explore the restaurant as we were now feeling a little bit peckish. The atmosphere was one I had never felt before. We were out of our league, as far as money was concerned. There were people of all sorts of titles, business owners and those whose bank balance did not need to have the monthly salary coming in.

After lunch we went our separate ways. I went for a stroll around the deck. I sat down at the very top, it was like the nearest thing to being in heaven. The ocean seemed to stretch for an eternity with the sky meeting as if a young child had coloured the whole page in with different shades of blue. Suddenly I was brought back with a bang. A really delightful, strong masculine voice said - "could he tempt me to a drink". Of course he could. This was the beginning of a really, really happy time. I might even say the start of a new chapter of my life.



THE VISIT

Amelia Earl

It was a cold winter's night. I had just arrived home tired from the shops. I placed the messages on the chair and floor as I could no longer hold them due to the pain in my arms and neck.

My cat Diddles arrived home looking for his dinner. I fed him first and started on my own dinner. Satisfied he curled up on my bed for his evening snooze.

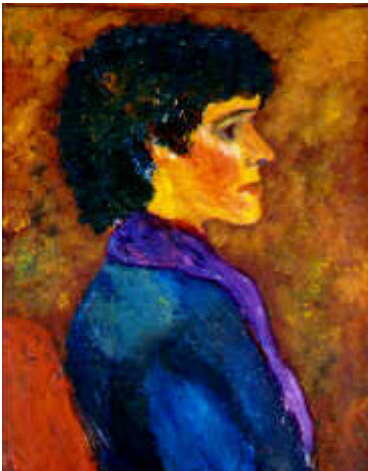
The room I live in is extremely small, cold and damp. The walls are so damp the pillows have to be dried each day, which leaves me unable to make the bed in the morning.

I turned on the television. Suddenly there was a knock on the door. I was not expecting anyone as no one had phoned to say they were coming. It could only be the landlady.

There was nothing I could do to tidy the place. Why did she pick now and not yesterday, when things were tidy?

The room is lilac in colour, with the walls covered with a variety of pictures. To most people it is dark but not to me.

As I opened the door, I knew it was bad news. It was night and a fog was coming down, extremely cold and I could smell heating fumes. My eyes immediately began to burn due to the fumes, my heart was racing and I tried to look calm. I felt sick inside as if someone had turned on a switch and every part was shaking, but no one looking at me would have known. My face was bright red as I was extremely tired and in pain, which made opening the door very difficult.



As I let the landlady in all I could see was her vivid blue fleece. She could have been naked otherwise! My eyes hurt to see this colour blue. It is the one colour I cannot look at, due to an illness. Her hair colour had changed again like the leaves of autumn - all different shades of brown.

I said, "Sorry about the mess."

She said, "I have some bad news for you."

I knew before she told me. I had known since

the knock.

"I am selling the house. You have two months to leave."

My heart was still racing and I tried to be calm about it but that blue fleece was really causing me to feel faint.

We spoke about other things but it was all polite conversation. My head was spinning - no home! Where would I go? I had already been looking for over a year for a place.

Life looks very bleak. The black cloud is growing around me. No home. My life looks even more uncertain...

A CHRISTMAS STORY

Amelia Earl

One Christmas day many years ago when I was a little girl I saw a sight I will never forget. We were walking home on a crisp winter's morning, my parents, brother and I, we had been to midnight mass. The ground had a little frost which made the grass gleam, houses had their Christmas trees lit and candles lighting in the window. It was all very plain and simple yet breath taking. Nothing like today where the word gaudiness springs to mind.

As we turned into our driveway I looked up and there among the twinkling stars I remember I saw it, as if it was yesterday. The red and white flickering lights dazzled me, but I could firmly see the shape of Santa's sleigh. I came to an abrupt stop, started completely mesmerised. I have never seen anything like this before nor since, I was only five years old. High above the rooftops in a clear bright sky there I saw Santa's sleigh, it was spectacular. The lights were of all different shapes and sizes. They were in clusters of red, white and red and white at the back. They looked so beautiful as if polished that very day. The lights marked out outline of the sleigh, the sleigh itself blended into the sky or so it seemed. I could just about see the beginning of the reins before they too entered the sky. I strained my eyes but I could see nothing more through the clean clear clouds. As the lights twinkled I turned to my mother to get her attention but when I looked back the sleigh was gone.

Nothing or no-one will every tell me I did not see Santa's sleigh. To-day I still watch for Santa in a different way ... Yes he still comes maybe not always on Christmas Eve.



A SECOND MEETING Amelia Earl

I met him first over fifty years ago not long after he returned from the jungle. When I was told I was going to meet him I thought he would look like a monkey. Well, I was only four years old! Television was in its infancy and books were not as pictorial or colourful as today nor did we travel anything like people do now. What was I to think, jungle meant monkeys, elephants, trees, Tarzan and Jane. Okay looking back I now see why everyone laughed, but hey he was thirteen and thought he was coming back to concrete city full of flats with no pets of any kind.

John is his name born in the jungle in Africa, son of Anna and Gerard Brighton. The Brightons had gone out for one year after their wedding but actually stayed twenty-five years instead. As they were both teachers they felt they could use their talents to set up a school out in Africa in 1932. The trip out to the part of Africa from England had taken twenty-nine days. The Brighton's had received a collective wedding present to help fund their school. By the time they came home again, six schools and five orphanages were going strong.

Over the years I remember hearing stories of their adventures, of John having an elephant as a pet. He would ride around and play with it as I would play with our dog. The elephant was his chauffeur it would take him to school and be there to collect him. Imagine instead of all the parents nowadays in their cars a long line of elephants, well at least the Green Party would be pleased. Monkeys would play on their veranda taking things and hiding them. This was a great game of hide and seek as far as John was concerned, not so according to the adults.

The hard work and dedication of Anna and Gerard John often found overwhelming. He would say that growing up he had had to share his parents a bit too much. Though it did also feel like having plenty of brothers and sisters to spoil him. Even though Anna and Gerard worked so hard they both lived well into their eighties. Maybe that is the secret to long life -- plain hard work, strange food, joy in your work.



Anna and Gerard had taught John till he was thirteen years old but felt it was time they returned home for him to finish his schooling. School in Britain was far different to Africa. In Africa you were lucky to have one book, a slate and a piece of chalk. You sat on the floor and the things were not so strict. John is no saint -- the term rascal would suit him far better. Imagine a uniform, table and chair, strict timetable -- difficult was not the word. The teachers did not find the task any easier. Though within days John had managed to find a way around students and teachers alike, his adventures and knowledge of the wild life of Africa could keep everyone on the edge of their seats and make them completely forget they should be in maths or history lesson. He had won them over.

John and I would send the usual Christmas and holiday cards. It had all started with our parents, we had the odd telephone conversation usually with family news. Out of the blue one day John rang, he had been invited back to the first school his parents had opened to celebrate the seventy-fifth anniversary of its opening. Would I like come too?

I am shaking with happiness as I now sit in the airport about to fly to London to meet up with John. He now lives in Scotland. Then a journey of twenty-nine hours including a night stop over to where we are to be welcomed in Africa. How times have changed, I wonder have we !!!

The Perfect You

Amelia Earl

You enter the world
Everyone has hopes for you
As you toddle around
No one is as perfect as you

You grow and learn
Things are hard and difficult
You realise you are you
Your perfection is special to you

You may not get your wishes
Others may seem to have it all
Illness is your stumbling block
But does not take from the perfect you

Your dreams are taken away
Alone and sad you sit at home
Your fight should never go as
Your friends only see the perfect you.



TIME OUT

Amelia Earl

It all started after I moved to Clondalkin and became the proud owner of Max. Max is a mixture between a Jack Russell and several other breeds, but he is perfect as far as I



am concerned. There is no better medicine than your faithful "four extra legs".

Each morning we walk the short distance to our time out - we enter a world where sound is mostly only broken by nature. The scene is one of tranquillity. The setting is of calm, peace, hope, change,

growth and renewal. You enter into a land that's away from everyday hassles, fears, worries, noise, illness and man-made items. As I pass beneath the trees of welcome into an open space of greens and browns, the eye can see various shapes and types of trees. No two leaves are identical. I wonder just how much colour is out there? I walk along with my faithful friend beside me, leaving the benches, bushes, behind me, down the pathway to the crossway. Now I turn to the right, pass by the granite stone to mark the opening of the park, over the old bridge where the water ripples underneath. The mature trees give me shelter and a sense no one else is there. I am at one with myself. The light sparkles at me as the sound lifts the last of the darkness from my heart.

There they stand very proud as if scrubbed with bleach, the mother and father and three little ones, the first family of swans.



The variety of ducks you meet is quite breathtaking. Not only are they a lively bunch but their colouring is so varied from all shades of coffee-chocolate to the ones we all grew up with. D is for DUCK in our ABC books.

Passing these swans was at first very nerve-racking but now they appear to know us. Yes, I probably need the men in white coats: I talk to swans, ducks, birds, squirrels and hares, but I am making progress. Now they all just keep on at what they are doing or pretend to listen to me.

I then move into the new part of the park, much more open, passing the second family of swans, far less friendly, hostile actually and very scary. Up to the old ruins which are being converted into craft workshops, apartments and a restaurant for the council workers, who, I have to say, do a wonderful job maintaining the park. Around by what could have been the old garden, now laid out for fishing. You can meet up to twenty anglers there at a weekend, all happy as they sit back and wait. The bridges here are both old and new. The third family of swans lives up here.

This is Max's favourite spot, not mine. There are mice to chase, overfed mice at that. He has great fun trying to take down the side of the bank, but he is not yet sure when things pop out of the water, what they are. Everybody around this part is so friendly, time is not watched, care is taken of others, the real meaning of "back to nature".

Now we turn left, past where all the hares are living. I could stand there for hours if Max and my legs would let me, just watching these creatures. Their tails are so white, the ears upright and listening. They hop around without a care in the world. I can get near enough to see their eyes as they munch the grass. It is completely fascinating, particularly now as all the families appear to have come together. Thirty or forty hares together is a sight worth seeing.



No matter how many times you see them, it's like the first time.

Now down past the rose garden where the colours are soothing and pleasant to the eye. We often sit under the next tree and rest before making for the last homeward stretch back to the reality of 2007.



A Selection of Haiku poetry by members of the group

The Haiku is an ancient Japanese poem, a miniature that give expression in simple language to fleeting moments of heightened awareness.

In Japanese this "one-breath poem" consists strictly of seventeen syllables. However, when written in English, the form of three lines arranged in 5-7-5 syllables is not an essential but a guide.

Traditionally, the subject matter relates to the natural world, haiku being "a natural scene outlined in three strokes of the brush for the imagination or the memory."

Bernadette Smyth

In between the reeds
One blue for sky and sea
Slices of the spring

Darkness swallows hills
Mist nestles into trees
I sink into sleep

Amelia Earl

One would think they know
But in fact they know nothing
We know from our pain

Why did he do it?
He was qualified to know
Shakes, tremors too much

Bríd MacSweeney

Ginkoless city.
They look down at the pavement
not up at the sky

No life with M.E.
I open another door
accept the new me



Golden barley field,
bloodied by invading red
passionate poppies

A Spring breeze.
Under the cherry trees
it is petaling



We bridge the chasm
Defy the tug of gravity
Without wings, we fly

After the storm
Bare cherry tree
Petal soup beneath



Alan Murphy

Rise up like a fire
Cleanse the world with soot and sun
Leave it emboldened

Waves move like music
The land stands still and listens
Notes tumble like surf



Bacon Sandwich Haiku

The meat lies between
Bread that has chosen to wed
Rest in peace porcus!

IT'S ALL ABOUT ME

With contributions by

Bríd MacSweeney

Mary Catherine Murray

Alan Murphy

Tom Roche

Bernadette Smyth

Linda Sullivan

Amelia Earl

Susan Knight

I

It's All About M.E.

Myalgic Encephalomyelitis.
The M.E. Monster.
A neurological disorder, causing
chronic fatigue,
chronic pain,
chronic depression.

II

ME Before M.E.

Young(ish)
Bright(ish)
Mother of a beautiful daughter.
With a well paid job
Nice home (Bird's nest)
Bibliomaniac,
Born to dance.
The bead Bird.

III

The Battle

ME v the M.E. Monster

M.E. won in 1998.
The Monster took over my life,
my body, my mind. Stole my job.
I fought and fought but lost, dismally.
Eventually I could fight no more.
I surrendered.
The Monster was caught off guard.
I escaped his clutches for brief periods.
Reinforcements came in the form of support
from my daughter, the Irish M.E.Trust
and its members, my special friends.
The battle is not won.
An uneasy truce reigns,
but after nine lost years
life goes on, although at a much
slower pace and in a somewhat
different direction.

But inside I'm dancing!

Brid MacSweeney

The Home Coming

I have lived too long
alone, on a pain filled,
desolate, alien, planet.
Isolated, tired, sore.
Confused. Depressed.
Belittled. Misunderstood.
We connect. July '06.
We find our own kind.
Together. We suffer, share,
support, cry, laugh. Dare
to crawl forward.
A metanoia! Dragging
our broken wings.

Alan Murphy

It's all about ME

Two cultured denizens of the capital are on a tour of the art galleries. On their travels they take in a wide variety of shows from the bewitching to the bewildering. Unmade paintings, unmade beds, opaquely cerebral installations that seem to spring from some alien mind: they've seen it all. Finally, half-exhausted, they enter a previously unexplained room - a sanctum in a lesser-known corner of the Hugh Lane - and find themselves in front of some bold new thing, by some up-and-coming Picasso, no doubt. The picture, a few arcane symbols embedded in a jungle of paint, sits defiantly on its perch, demanding a reaction.

Together they peer myopically at its tumultuous shapes and swirls.

"Well, well, well, what's all this then?"

"The title reads: *It's all about ME.*"

"Ah, I begin to comprehend. That mysterious illness. What does it stand for again? Myalgic...?"

"... Encephalomyelitis, Miserable Endurance, Mystical Enlightenment. Take your pick."

"Quite."

"A friend of mine has it. It's bad news."

"That's... terrible, Joe. But... I begin to see what's going on here. The artist is expressing the profundity of his predicament as an ME sufferer and in so doing has triumphed over his sad fate for several miraculous moments. Yes, this is a masterly piece of work, feral yet articulate. One might almost say that the painter has reinvented fire here, conjuring up a new world that is yet an ancient one, filled with luminous truths and magical possibilities. The gods still walk this strange landscape. Did I say landscape? I meant vision."

"Painted by Mary Ellis, aged five and a half."

"Oh."

ALL ABOUT ME

Mary Catherine Murray

Caroline had not been feeling well for about six months. She had strong flu symptoms but yet it seemed like a flu that wouldn't go away. She had been falling asleep at work and with bad headaches and joint pain, she knew that she would soon exhaust her sick leave. Her GP was soon to retire and had done nothing but ask her if she had been around children with runny noses.

She thought it might be a good idea to consult a female GP with some good experience. But this lady she had consulted made her heart sink to her knees.

"So tell me," the doctor had demanded, "do you have boyfriend problems?"

"No," Caroline had replied, more than a little taken aback.

"Because girls of your age often develop headache and stomach problems with the stress of boyfriends," she continued.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you." Caroline was very forthright. "I don't have any stress to report there."

Caroline's dad was very helpful. He did a lot of research in libraries and on the Internet. He helped her to source consultants with a good knowledge of the immune system and how it could react to environmental or internal stressors. Together they discovered that she was suffering from a condition called Myalgic Encephalomyelitis. This name was chosen because there was a theory that neurons in the brains of those with immune system difficulties seemed to be wrapped in a sheath that differed from the neurons of people with no symptoms. In Canada and the US it was often known as Chronic Fatigue and Immuno-deficiency Syndrome (CFIDS). Caroline learned that the best route back to good health was good food, plenty of rest and pacing oneself to know what the immune system was or was not capable of on a particular day.

A neighbour called to see her mother for tea one day. Caroline answered the door. She was feeling happy and optimistic because she had been feeling much better and was looking forward to getting back to work. She missed her colleagues and the rhythm and feeling of satisfaction she had when at work.

The woman was curious as to why Caroline was at home on a weekday at four. Caroline tried politely to sidestep the questions but this persistent neighbour was having none of it.

"Are you ill? If not, why aren't you at work?"

"I have a condition called ME," Caroline tried to explain. "Sometimes it's called chronic fatigue."

"Oh yes, said the neighbour breaking into a long hearty laugh, "I know all about that. I have three children."

Caroline sighed and remembered the best life lesson ME had ever taught her. Patience is a virtue and will always be rewarded, however trying a situation may seem.

My Experience of M.E.

Tom Roche

This is my 40-year experience and 30 year fighting the symptoms that are known as Myalgia Encephalomyelitis Syndrome, and 133 other names over the last 300 years.

The myalitis affect may not be brain swelling but brain contracting when the atmospheric pressure is low and the air/gas mix tries to escape. Five years ago when I recognised this I kept some notes. At high altitude 800 feet -- high atmospheric pressure 1025hPa -- with high anxiety as a result of being left in charge of my brother's business, I did not pass wind or belch once in five days. Where would all this air/gas be stored in the body? It was when I was on my way home to 100 feet that my "panic attack" occurred [icy cold, panic, sweating, headache, pain in stomach, light headedness etc.].

I guess this is the same thing that struck me in the 1950/60s. On occasions when I would go into the city centre [sea level] from Finglas [190 feet] my breakfast or dinner or tea would end up in the Liffey, when I got off the 34 bus. It was only this route it happened on. It possibly took only fifteen minutes to travel, not being many cars and no traffic lights to get through. It never occurred on other routes. I was told it was "motion sickness". Yet I could travel all day, and never got sick until I went up hill and down dale. It must have been changes in atmospheric and in altitude.

Myself and my friends are so severely affected by this that it makes us physically, nervously, mentally ill and confined to bed for months and existing on psychiatric medicines. The syndrome has over the last 400 years been giving at least 133 names depending on what parts of the body were most infected?

In the Sunday People in the 60/70's I can remember reading of people who took a bit and brace to each others head and drilled a hole through the skull and they said they felt great in doing this? Were they releasing this build up of "gas" from their bodies? On other occasions I read about people whom "spontaneously combusted". Is this the result of a massive build up of methane in the upper body? A neutron or proton from a thought might set it off. Methane gas burns at 1500* C. It would take a few seconds at this temperature to kill.

Whatever Myalgic Encephalomyelitis is, something is affecting the brain, nerves, muscles. But it is not *in* the brain, nerve, muscle, blood. The only thing that seems to be a constant, is a slow blood flow, through the brain and the enzyme in short supply in the digestive system?

Since I entered psychiatry in 1981[as a patient] with depression and then elation in 1987 [bipolar 3] I have attended hundreds of lectures. And having attended an AWARE Support group for 15 year, I have learned what Psychiatrists call my symptoms if they are clinical [ie: if the symptoms persist for three week or more.] These include among others elation, depression, the Fuge state and hypochondria -- a mental [real to those suffering with it] disorder, in which one is tormented by gloomy views, especially about one's own health.

What can't be argued as that the brain is in pain. So is it in the mind? Physician, heal thyself, it is said. We Myalgia Encephalomyelitis Syndrome sufferers, have to heal ourselves as well. Our doctors, families, friends, not going through these brain, neurological, muscular symptoms, cannot know how not being listened to hurts. All we are ever offered are: anti-depressants, drugs for elation, psychosis, epilepsy and schizophrenia for our "mood swings".

Is this the end, or the beginning of the start????



M.E.

No, I'm not mad

No, it's not in my head
No, I'm not exaggerating
No, I'm not a hypochondriac
No, I can't work
No, I'm not lazy
No, I'm not a sponger
No, I'm not able
No, I can't meet you today
No, if I could I would
No, it's not just a flu that's going around
No, you can't see it
No, nothing showed up on the blood tests
No, I haven't given up.

Yes, I am tired
Yes, I am in pain
Yes, sometimes I need help
Yes, this is real
Yes, I am coping
Yes, I am pacing
Yes, I've learned a lot
Yes, I have good days
Yes, I still have dreams
Yes, I'm as human as you
Yes, I've a lot to give
Yes, I still love life
Yes, I am fighting
Yes, I've got M.E.

Linda Sullivan

Diseased

I toss and turn

And turn and toss

As skin removes from bone,

Experiencing such agony

As I go through this alone.

Images conjure in my mind

Death feels never far,

Disease infecting, ravaging,

Trying to ruin, to scar.

I need to escape, to run away

But if I choose death it wins,

The only way is to stay and fight

But even at that it grins.

Because as I stay

It eats away

Marrow to bone to soul,

Taking over what once was mine

Lost in an endless hole.

The light I wish that I could see

Instead of the gaping abyss,

Somewhere pain and disease don't exist

Some other kind of bliss.



Linda Sullivan

Saviour

I did value things before

Now I value me more,

I come back to life with a whole new perspective,

Different, stronger in the way I live.

I say come back, because I went away,

Was not living, merely fading from day to day.

Illness soaks up everything, nothing is left

I was left floating, entirely bereft.

Love hope happiness could all be crushed

Faith resisted and could not be touched,

Constant is stayed, prepared to fight

Inspiring in sorrow, overwhelming in might.



Linda Sullivan

Moving Statues

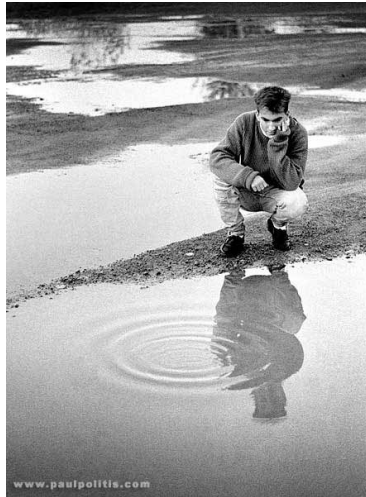
I see they are in the wrong place

I can tell from seeing each face

I know they want to move

Vacate this rotten groove,

Love is something not showing



Realising seems different to knowing,

People locked in a phase

Hours minutes becoming days,

Years passing living lost

Emotions frozen feelings frost,

Overflow, ripples spread,

Nothing acknowledged or ever said.

Resembling a kind of imperfect stone

Afraid to stand or be alone,

Statues moving, but no one breathes,

Afraid or just not seeing needs.

IT'S ALL ABOUT ME

Amelia Earl

Gender: female

Name: well, that all depends. Is it the one most people know me as, the legal kind, or the one I write under?

Age: a lady never tells

Hobbies: crochet, writing, painting, trying out new craft ideas, mixing in small groups, having a dog or cat if not just borrowing the neighbours' ones

How long have you lived with ME?

At least 36 years, probably 40.

What do you think of Irish doctors?

If I said, at least 90 per cent of them would try to sue me or at least have me up for libel. Let's just say they are not my most favourite profession. Most need to learn how to listen and not reply on tests so much.

Can you say how much impact ME has on your life?

A huge amount. It has robbed me from a young age of being able to mix with people, being able to cope with noise or light etc., do the job I wanted to, having a family of my own, which is the greatest loss of all, making and keeping friends. These are some examples.

Has anything good come out of the illness?

Yes. I have met extremely kind and helpful people over the years, understood from an early age the importance of being much more open to others, realise that money/possessions are not a big thing in life. On the funny side, I have learned the ground is hard and cold, that I could never be put in charge of lighting or sound, as no

one else would be able to see or hear. Also, I should have got an illness I could either pronounce or spell.

When do you see the illness being recognised in Ireland?

In my lifetime if I live to be 300. The sad part is, it will cost money and medical profession have to admit they do not have all the answers.

It's all about THEM

Susan Knight

Them and us - a phrase often used to indicate the divisions between people. We are glad to be "us" and not "them", the slightly dodgy, the outsiders, the different ones.

Often the difference is obvious -- the colour of the skin, the accent, the clothes, the perceived deformity. But this isn't always the case. In Nazi Germany, because the difference wasn't always apparent, "they" had to wear badges - a yellow star, a pink triangle, a black triangle, for Jews, gays and the "mentally retarded" respectively. Because they looked like "normal" people, they had to be distinguished in some other way. What colour triangle would they have given people with ME, I wonder.

Ah, that tongue-twisting disease Myalgic Encephalomyelitis. Its sufferers not only have to contend with the fact that they look like anyone else in the crowd - perhaps sometimes a little paler, more strained, that wonderful Victorian word "delicate" - but they are constantly coming up against the ignorance of those relations, friends and even certain medical professionals, who think they just need to pull themselves together and snap out of it.

Before I came to teach a creative writing class to a group of people with ME, I had limited knowledge of the illness. But I did know something. My son Leo had a school friend who suffered from it and I was able to discuss it with his parents. Leo accepted without question that Robin was genuinely ill. His frequent absences from school, the fact that he could only take a couple of subjects at Junior and Leaving Cert, were never put down to skiving off, and his extreme fatigue was regarded with great sympathy by his fellow students, who still tried to include him in as much as possible.

Since January 2007, it has been a privilege for me to work with ME sufferers and to deepen my understanding of the disease. They write movingly about their various experiences of an illness which is still largely a medical mystery. But they also write about butterflies, travel and pet dogs and encounters with eccentric tramps and apple baskets and Polish beauties and El Greco. In fact, the sorts of things that "normal" people write about in my other classes, that anyone might write about.

I hope and believe that our sessions over this past year have been a positive experience for the participants even if all of them can't attend all the time. The friendship and support as well as the release of creativity encouraged by the group can surely only have a beneficial effect on its members, and perhaps their writings can help the rest of us understand a little more what it means to suffer from ME and to see that after all **they** aren't different from **us** in any fundamental way.