

The Rest of the Story

Transforming Trauma to Voice, Agency, and Leadership



A Project of Participation and Practice of Rights &
New Script for Mental Health

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New Script for Mental Health

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IN the Spring of 2019 I worked with a cohort of Participation and Practice of Rights activists who had been organizing around the mental health crisis in the North of Ireland. I had been teaching a course on *Storytelling and Global Justice* at Queen's University as part of my Fulbright Scholar Award. I was honoured to team up with PPR to implement the transformative storytelling project, *The Rest of the Story*, which I had been doing over the previous decade with survivors of homicide victims, of suicide, and of the overdose epidemics in Boston, Massachusetts.

The Rest of the Story is a trauma-informed writing and storytelling program designed to help survivors process trauma into voice, agency, and leadership. Using Restorative Justice “circle process” along with writing prompts, the experience has been proven to be deeply therapeutic for both individuals and coalitions in Boston. *The Rest of the Story* works within a trauma-informed framework, prioritizing safety *before* the remembering and reconstructing of one's personal narrative (meaning safety from the immediate threats of violence, abuse, war etc ought to be dealt with before the remembrance or reconstructing of one's story). In addition, facilitators emphasize the need for each participant/storyteller to remain in charge of one's story at all stages, from remembrance and reconstruction of one's story to the ultimate decisions about whether one will share their story, and where, when, and how that sharing might happen.

In a compassionate space emphasising mutualité, participants have the opportunity to reclaim their stories—all while actively listening to the writing and storytelling of others. For many participants this is the first time they are able to share the stories that inform who they are

as well as to find deep intersectional connections with others of their survivor affinity groups.

They are able to gain valuable perspective and healing as they talk and write about events that impacted their lives so deeply. Over the course of five weeks, a supportive space for sharing and listening is developed and maintained collectively. Sharing is always optional, the golden rule being: *Always invitation, never invasion. Always opportunity, never demand.*

The Restorative Justice process connects groups and individuals working toward common social justice and community-building goals. In this way, *The Rest of the Story* is rooted in age-old Mutual Aid-style grassroots organizing, wherein individuals gravitate to each other around a particular need or issue, find out that they are not alone (that “this is bigger than me”), and work collectively toward a greater goal of community and systemic change alongside their own personal agency and healing.

The pilot project with PPR in the Spring of 2019 was truly joyous, resulting in a collaboration with the organization Glór na Móna and Upper Springfield Youthworkers, and culminating in a celebration event at Belfast City Hall, hosted by Belfast Mayor John Finucane. When the world was hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, we were undeterred, continuing to build our community with four more cohorts of *The Rest of the Story* over the following two years. From there the coalition grew and by the time we all climbed out of our Zoom screens, participants were ready to forge their next stage of organizing: the #NewScript for Mental Health.

Michael Patrick MacDonald

“Too often, the lives of those who have been systemically impoverished and marginalized are reduced to a ‘single story’--one crafted and propagated by dominant classes of people in media and policy-making positions. The Rest of the Story is about reclaiming our narratives, in all their nuance, multiplicity, and complexity. It’s about the empowerment that comes from owning our stories on our own terms. When each of us is in charge of our own story, we gain the agency to transform—to integrate trauma and hardship in ways that support healing and growth. Ultimately, we are able to use our individual stories to connect with others, build solidarity, and nurture communities and movements rooted in both justice and healing.”

Michael Patrick MacDonald

Editors' Note

These stories offer an invitation—a chance to witness the powerful journey of individuals coming together in community to reclaim their narratives. Some explore topics that are difficult to talk about, and harder still to hear. Others are pensive, bittersweet, joyful, even hilarious. But stories, when shared, can become windows into our own lives.

As you read, take care of yourself. Notice what arises within you, and pause if needed. Ask what you might need to stay emotionally grounded. Remember: *always invitation, never invasion; always opportunity, never demand.*

Stigma and silence often leave people feeling alone or ashamed. But in the act of sharing, something shifts. Connection happens. Healing begins.

We are deeply grateful for the courage and generosity of every storyteller. Their words call us to community and solidarity—to shared laughter and tears, and to our enduring hope and possibility

These voices roar with radiant, redemptive healing. The Rest of the Story is very much needed—now more than ever! Trauma busting draoícht.

Damien Dempsey, Singer Songwriter

I Am My Own Sun – is the title of one of the writings here: and this book is radiant with truth, warming the ground of being so that radical change might happen. It honours the often painful process of pushing through from the darkest of underselves into a flowering of compassion. It reminds us of the power that language has when a person tells their own tale— tell your own story or someone will tell it for you and there's a good chance they'll get it wrong. This is a deeply moving read: my heart was broken and mended, often in the same poem or story. I came away from reading these testimonies stronger, changed.

Paula Meehan, Poet & Playwright

A beautiful, heartening testament to the transformative powers of art and community!

Louise Kennedy, Author, Trespasses

Intimate, incessantly human and international, this anthology is overflowing with pruck and pluck. It reminds readers what we go through and how we get through . Its yarns and verse are authentic emblems for the undefeated – ‘Kintsugi,’ lost ‘thingamajiggies’ of a former self, birds not ‘stopping for borders.’ I was impressed and inspired. And you will be too.

Scott McKendry, Author of *Gub*, a Sunday Times Book of the Year

The Rest of the Story is a radical act of reclamation. In a world where human struggle is so often reduced to diagnoses and disorders, this collection insists on honouring people as the storytellers of their own lives. These pages are full of courage, creativity, solidarity and resistance. They remind us that healing and change are not found in pathologising labels, but in community, connection, and the power of our shared humanity.

Jo Watson, Founder of adisorder4everyone.com and editor of the ‘Drop the Disorder!’ book series

Profound, painful and often traumatic experiences conveyed with love, warmth, generosity. Powerful uncompromising testimonies of resilience, hope, recovery, and resistance. A remarkable collection of beautifully written personal disclosures shared in a spirit of collective openness and respect, reminding us all that we never walk alone.

Professor Emeritus Phil Scraton, Queens University,
Belfast

Truth telling! Validating! Within The Rest of the Story rises the voices of our people, our wounds, our suffering, and our silence. They hold our courage, and our humanity. A powerful reminder that it is in community we transform trauma into voice, into memory, into healing and into hope – “the song of life is in our bones.”

Denise Bradley, Corrymeela Community, Northern
Ireland

The Rest of the Story is a powerful anthology of brave, bold, fragile, words from warriors piercing the walls of our very hearts. Stories of heartbreak, resistance & resilience echo through fractured chambers, banishing ghosts of the past & welcoming guardians of light, love & hope for the future.

Noelle McAlinden, Co-chair NI Mental Health Arts Festival

There is old proverb in the Irish Language: 'Ón osna is troime, tagann an ceol is binne' which translates as 'From the heaviest grief comes the sweetest song.' This remarkable anthology captures the essence of this proverb. The hauntingly honest yet eternally hopeful message of this wonderful anthology is that peace, joy and solace can always be found, even in the most excruciating and challenging circumstances of personal pain and loss.

Feargal Mac Ionnrachtaigh, Executive Director, Glór na Móna, Author, Language, Resistance, and Revival

This is also how artists should be—we should be creators and also teach the public how to be creators, how to make art, so that we may all use that art together.” So said the famous Brazilian dramatist and innovator, Augusto Boal, whose ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ emphasised spectator (or ‘spectactor’) engagement in theatre performances. Boal wanted to ‘conscientise’—to transform lives and societies through the arts and the special capacity they have to help us explore, interrogate and contextualise our experiences for radical personal and social change. The Rest of the Story does just this, and as MacDonald writes in his foreword, the results are “truly joyous”.

The rootedness of each piece, the strength of experience and passion, jump from each page ... The poetry fuses the old and new, and in doing so, presents an antidote to the dark turns of these divisive times.

Dr Micheál Mac Piarais, Reader in Irish Literature at Queen’s University, Belfast; Author, Writing Ireland’s Working Class.



Take A Chance

Let that spoken word take you on a journey.
Let the tears of joy run down your face
Don't hold back on that feeling.
Let the song of love run through your soul
Let it make each cell anew,
Let the people hear your laughs and cries.
For they need that just like you do,
As this life can be a rough old track
And although each day is brand new,
There are traumas that keep coming back
And so many held inside you.
But the song of life is in your bones
So sing and speak that song,
With every single word you say
It will make that spirit strong
And always know that You an' Them
Are forever at the helm
Though at times it does not seem that way
With so many boogeymen
And also know it's not a battle, everything's a dance
So rest your legs, praise your heart
And then forever take a chance.

Sean Fitz

I am from inner city streets
With kerbs washed in red, white and blue;
From gable walls plastered with murals
Of men in masks pointing guns at you.

I am from a street full of women
Hung over garden walls,
Gabbing for hours, streets strewn with kids
Swinging round lampposts and kicking balls.

I am from a house full of absent men
Too busy and tough to feel.
Walls splattered with booze and blood
Painted with fists and boots of steel.

I am from escaping to Granny's house.
From *awk come on in, have a wee cup of tea.*
From extra tin foil wrapped dinner plates,
For people next door and down the street.

I am from Saturdays climbing Cavehill with Granda,
Feeding the swans at the Waterworks Park.
I am from Boyzone blaring from the ghetto blaster,
And summers out playing *hunts* 'til dark.

I am from, *Sure you're the eldest!*
Sunday nights stuck in ironing uniforms and Granda's shirts.
I am from *Boys don't tidy their rooms,*
You can study but you need to cook, clean and work whilst
Looking pretty in that skirt.

I am from chants of *Stop the killing!*
Placards screaming *LET THE BOMBS CEASE!*
Amid yells of *Get that room tidied!*
And *Would you give my had peace!*

I am from the sweet smell of the biscuit tin
Where chocolate digestives and Kit Kats were got
That were only allowed after dinner
Amid warnings of *Now that's your lot.*

I am from days at the police station,
The rancid smell of my vomit on Granny's new settee.
Twelve years equals six behind bars for him.
And safe until eighteen for me.

I am from *She'd give you her last penny,*
But here I wouldn't mess with her!
From weary women, never too tired
To let you know they cared.

I am from schools where teachers were chased
With flame-throwing lighters and hairspray,
From teachers who stayed evenings and weekends,
For rambling clubs and cross-community trips away.

I am from the glow of library books,
Illuminated by the streetlights outside.
From the first in my family to pass my exams,
With the hope of escaping someday.

I am from *Could you not have gone to uni here?*
And *You need to slow down wee girl!*
From volunteer hours and jobs to help me give back,
Travel and experience the world.

I am from a chorus of *Are you away again?*
Amidst whispers of trauma and pain.
I am from living a life on the hoof,
A new adventure to keep me sane.

I am from the sharp breakthrough of burnout,
From *You didn't cause it, can't control it or cure it, you know*
I am from *We're here for you,*
Please, will you just come back home?

I am from my place at the dinner table, set
Like I'd never been away
I am from courage to find peace at home.
And *You know you're going to be ok.*

I am from *Home is where ever you are,*
For home isn't merely people and place.
I am from Home is within you.
Rest up. You're home. You're safe.

Magz Gibney



I am from

The Bog meadow,
From The Black Mountain,
The roar of the M1
...and the headstones of Milltown.

I am from ...

The scent of earth just before it rains,
From Bobby Sands,
Black taxis
...an urban farm

...an adventure playground

...and now the *Balls on the Falls*.

I am from ...

Infectious laughter and tears,
From an eerie silence,
...and the breathing of the earth.

I am from ...

Sirens and blasts,

From broken glass

... tiptoes

... raised voices

... and bottles and glug.

I am from ...

Pounds and Punts,

Euros and strap.

From *Ooh and Ahh and Up The Ra*

... and "Touts? Well we know what happens to them."

I am from ...

John Powers, Carlsberg and Tennents (the cans with the half
dressed women on them),

From soup, stew, and spuds, yellow packs and chip fat oil

... and every Sunday staring at something on the plate
resembling meat: chicken, pork, beef?

、

...all taste the same—burnt to a crisp.

I am from ...

Eiru is My Queen,

From *Free Palestine*

... and *Remember My Noah.*

I am from ...

An Gorta Mor,

From a great hunger

... a hunger for justice.

M.P.



I am from

Cornbread and soup beans
Apples baked with cinnamon on winter nights.
And from corn meal ground by hand, worked into a ball,
Turned between your thumbs, stretched,
Slapped from palm to palm then tossed over the fire.

They smell of wood smoke.

An old woman laughs, tells me I'd best hope to find
A good man with love in his heart - he'd need it to stick my lumpy
tortillas.

I am from spring greens and summer peas,
Eating watermelon slices, seeds disposed of discreetly in a paper
napkin.

And from mangoes rolled between our hands til they squished,
And we'd poke a hole in the end to suck out the juice.
From crunching raw sugar cane and spitting out the stalk.

I am from 'horses sweat - ladies glow.'
And from Grand Central Station at the corner of Park Avenue,
Where a woman whose accent I know in my bones
Stands informing passing commuters she could do with their
change.

They look right through her and keep moving.
She shoots out an arm through the crowd, grabs me, pulls me
in -

Whispers, "baby girl. your slip is showing."
I stop, I check, I blush, I fumble.
She pats my arms and shoos me on my way.

I am from a place where people casually use racist names for
children's sweets.
From crosses set aflame in the darkness behind the Friday night
football game.

And from a Kings Cross bus where I'm watching a man with a
shaved head and tattooed knuckles ...
As he eyes the couple on the pavement who are slowing us up.

He twitches. He huffs. He leaps from his seat, stomps to the front of the bus in his heavy boots, leans out, and says,
“Here - will I hold the baby while you fold the pram down?”
Turning back from the door, he’s got a wrapped bundle in the crook of his arm.

He perches awkwardly on the edge of the priority seating at the front while they load their gear all the while keeping an eye on their child. He hands the bundle back.

I am from green fields that turn rust coloured in autumn,
From mist in the morning, and birdsong.
From a red dirt road through parched hills,
A village standing empty, sprays of bullet marks on the walls.

The sun bakes.
And there, like a blessing - a lone shade tree
The earth under its branches packed hard.
There are hollows carved into the ground there, in two straight lines.

For a moment I can see the figures around them
Squatting, leaning on elbows, laughing.
The bowls are worn silky smooth by generations of fingers at play: scoop, sow, sow, sow.

Paige Jennings

I am from the shadow of the Black Mountain. Divis. Dubh.
I am from the old oak tree out the back, who has long passed.
I am from Beechmount and Hillhead, and the whole road in
between.
I am from Shepherd's Pies and Homemade soups.
From Sunday Roasts, Saturday Night Salads (easy on the salad),
and Friday's Butter Balls.
From Crunchy Nut Cornflakes sandwiched between school and
dinner.
I am from My Boy Lollipop on Vinyl, Patsy Cline whilst polishing,
and practising When the Last Teardrop Falls for a wedding per-
formance that never was.
I am from Ned and Sally, Michael and Ellen, and Sheila and
Gerry, to name a few.
From the Sullivans, the Dohertys, the O'Neills and the Murphys.
From Tailors, Blacksmiths, Millers and Joiners (if I see someone
going into a pub I'll join them)
I am from the Beara – wild and raw.
I'm from hunger and struggle, but also from music and dance.
From storytelling, and from community.
From 'Don't go there,' 'Don't say your name,' 'Don't get involved'
and 'Keep your head down'
Yet from 'All I want is for you to be happy,' too.
I am from where I am, and I am where I am from.

Lynda Sullivan



I am from...

the western part of Nigeria,
where Yoruba is spoken,
from Odo-Ere, West Yagba in Kogi State,
where our dialect is Yagba.

I am from a Christian family,
a life shaped by strong beliefs,
deep faith, and unwavering morals.
I am from a family of six—
two boys, four girls,
and the loss of one brother in May 2020.

I am from a place where education is a priority,
from a family where “child training” can feel like discipline on the
edge of abuse.

I am from weddings, naming ceremonies, and burial rites,
all accompanied with a bounty of rich foods:
pounded yam with egusi and efo-riro,
Amala with gbegiri,
ewedu with assorted meat,
jollof rice, fried rice, plantains,
and moimoi with chicken or fish stew.

I am from a country that flows with milk and honey,
a land rich in resources,
resources that are mismanaged and misallocated.
From a country burdened by insecurity,
bad governance, and greedy leaders,
(where politicians built septic tanks to hide currency!)

I am from place
where nothing ever depresses,
where we turn every struggle into joy,
every hardship into laughter,
no matter how heavy the weight.

I am from that mighty giant—
Africa.

Oh how I love and miss that place where I am from.

Christiana Abosede Olujomoye

Growing a Resilient Heart

There were five children in our family, like steps and stairs. We had a childminder called Caroline who lived with us. She had strawberry blonde hair, wore black eyeliner, and smiled a lot. Her favourite song was *Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da*, and she sang it well:

*Happy ever after in the marketplace,
Desmond lets the children lend a hand.
Molly stays at home and does her pretty face,
And in the evening, she's a singer with the band.*

I wanted to be in the marketplace as well as in the band. Fear of missing out. Caroline was the adored big sister I'd never had.

Out of the blue, she disappeared from our home, never to return. I asked Mammy where she'd gone, and she said she'd married a soldier. I imagined one of the bearskins you see on TV, guarding Buckingham Palace. How would Caroline and her husband fit into that tiny box the soldiers lived in? Would she like London? Would she have children of her own and forget me? I missed her terribly—but even that couldn't prepare me for the loss to come.

Until I was seven, I'd been taught by stern, tweedy matrons. Then came Mr Tierney, my first male teacher. He was handsome, jokey, a great storyteller—and he had a dashing black moustache. He was my first crush. Having just moved back from Canada, he told us tales of long, deep-snowy winters, wide open spaces, and how you could get a house by a lake and not have any neighbours for miles.

I played with my neighbour Jane every evening. She was posh and went to a Protestant school called Richmond Lodge. She was obsessed with ponies. We had great fun pretending we were riding horses across the prairies of America, dreaming of a vague freedom in the sunshine.

I was glad Mr Tierney was safely back from cold, vast Canada, and I was sure I wanted to marry him when I was old enough. But he was engaged, and I was only seven. I was jealous of his fiancée, even though I'd never met her. Why couldn't he see my potential as the perfect wife—and just wait until I grew up?

At the end of every week, Mr Tierney gave us a story to write as homework. Once, the topic was “Changing Yourself into an Animal.” Monday came. Mr Tierney had marked our work and announced that I'd written the best story. He read it aloud, including my line: *“I changed myself into a tiger and stalked downstairs.”* Oh, how my young heart swelled with pride!

That week, my Granda Fitzpatrick came to visit and gave me a ten shilling note. I was thrilled, although I'd no idea what to spend it on. As with every Sunday, after Mass, my parents brought my older brother Cormac and me to the newsagents. They bought the Sunday papers, and we children got to spend a shilling each. We bought stamps for his collection. When we got home, he placed them carefully into his album. I admired the pretty colours of the African flowers on the ones I'd picked.

Years later, though, I'd wonder—what was all that about? Why didn't I buy something for me?

That school year was coming to an end, and we were moving from Belfast to the country. There'd be no more Mr Tierney as my teacher. And just before we left, a barber came to our house, and Mammy lined me up alongside my brothers for a brutal short-back-and-sides haircut. I hated it.

The next day, I was mortified when Mr Tierney announced that there was a new boy in his class—and asked me my name. How could he humiliate me like that, when my love for him must've shone out of my eight-year-old eyes?

When we drove away from Belfast in our battered old car, I knew I would never love again.

Luckily, my new school held a charity walk the following month, and I fell for a smiley boy from the Christian Brothers called Gary. He walked beside me and held my hand.

There would certainly be many more—and much worse—bumps and breaks to come. But looking back on the now-quaint loves and losses of childhood, I realize that somewhere between Caroline's song, Mr Tierney's stories, and sweet, smiley Gary, I began my lifelong work of growing a resilient heart.

Letitia Fitzpatrick



Ray

We sang a lot of songs, but we never listened to the words in elementary school.

We'd sing "let my people go" - and then we'd sing "I wish I was in the land of cotton, old times there are not forgotten", with no sense of discord at all. We sang "I got shoes" and "swing low" and we might've wondered why there was so much about heaven in those old songs—but then it would be time for 'my old Kentucky home.'

Kentuckians always have to sing that one. Heartfelt and misty-eyed, that's how it's done. One verse of that song has these little children left behind when the master sells their mother down the river because he's short of cash. You're not meant to think about that when you sing it, it's meant to be a nostalgic song, about being homesick. They even sing My Old Kentucky Home in Arkansas.

We had an annual peculiar ritual in our school. Maybe at some point they called it *educational*. But I think it was another way of making sure we never heard what those old gospel songs were actually talking about. It was called “Slave Day.” Upper school students were told to stand up in front of the assembly one by one while our peers ‘bid on’ and ‘bought’ us. You were ‘owned’ for the day, and you had to do whatever your ‘owner’ said you had to do - within reason.

There was no history lesson taught with this, that I can recall. No reflection on what these things actually meant in actual lives, and no listening to the voices of people who did know. It made slavery into a popularity contest among children, that’s all.

And it very nearly worked. If my first Slave Day caused the 12-year-old *me* any grief, it was only because I was timid and never spoke—not if I could help it. I’d arranged with a friend to ‘buy’ each other but that still left me the hurdle of having to raise my voice enough to name her price.

That year Ray had joined our class. He was a big, round-shouldered boy. Thinking back, he’d maybe suffered an accident at birth? -- like maybe how my own first baby might have been, if the alarm on the heartbeat monitor hadn’t gone and made them knock me out quickly and rush her out the sunroof so they could get the cord from around her neck and let her breathe. Maybe there was no alarm for Ray—I don’t know. No one ever asked about him, and no one told us anything. He just appeared, and stayed, and tried to make himself as near invisible as he could.

And that day—that *Slave Day*—they stood that boy—bewildered, totally uncomprehending, shaking—alone on the block, in front of a hostile room.

Our teachers said nothing. The silence stretched on and on. I saw the mean boys in our class start to snigger and nudge each other forward. Suddenly, for the first time in my life I couldn't stand it. I had to make it stop. I couldn't think for the need to speak and fill that empty space.

So Ray became my millstone for the day. I didn't say much to him, I don't think I was particularly kind. But at least nothing worse happened to him -- at least not that day.

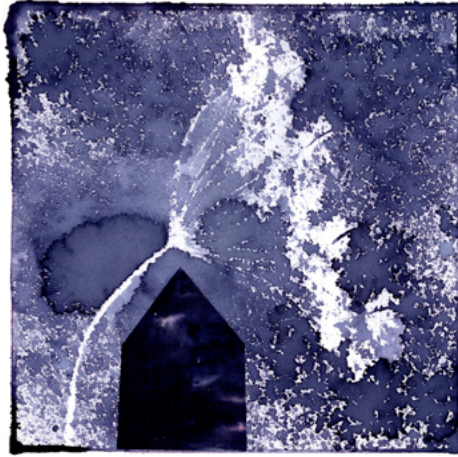
Postscript:

I left that place as soon as I could. I put oceans and continents between myself and there and I rarely look back. These days? When people ask "how in God's name in this day and age can a woman be shot dead, in her own home, in her own bed, at the hand of the police, and no one brought to book?"

I know how.

Saying her name: Breonna Taylor, 13 March 2020, Louisville, Kentucky.

Paige Jennings



Sanctuary

The Groovy Chick-painted walls and bedspread.

The corner desk he built for me from an old door.

The fish tank that housed the black fish with bulbous eyes.

I liked the shape of that room.

I liked that I could hide myself around the corner at my desk.

I liked the space built into the wall where my TV and video combi sat, and how I could store things behind it.

I remember spending an entire day lying on my bed, reading a book about horses. I finished it that day.

I liked having signs on my door, warning others to keep out—marking the room as my own, and nobody else's.

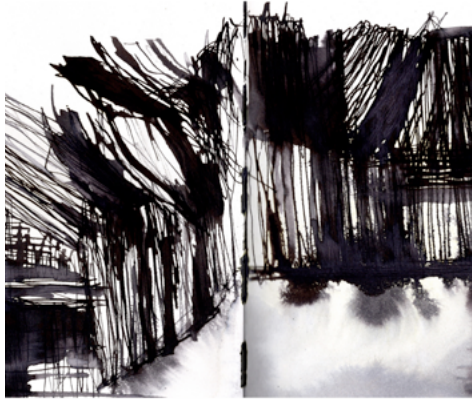
A daily routine in that room involved sitting on the edge of my bed, listening to hear if he was shouting. If he was, I knew it wouldn't be a good day—a day to keep my head down. If it was quiet, there was hope that today might be okay.

I remember my room being very tidy. Everything had a place, and I could tell if someone had been inside and moved something—a physical manifestation of my attempt at control and order.

I remember my room being very messy. Chaos. Things everywhere—a physical representation of my inner thoughts and feelings.

I remember Sasha scratching at my door, wanting in. I pinned orange peels to the doorframe to stop her from marking the wood. Thinking about it now, I wonder if the cat had recognized my room as a safe space and simply wanted to hide away with me, or to check if I was okay.

Sophy McFarlane



A Homecoming

Dander up the terraced street, houses packed like sardines.

I stop at Number 26.

Hall door wide open to the world - an ode to times gone by, back when, as my Ma says, “neighbours were neighbours”

A Palestinian flag rustles in the wind and the red bricks face outward like a gallery of the past.

PABLO STIFF LITTLE FINGERS written in white Tipp-Ex, then etched in brick HEGGARTY LOVES DENNIS, while UP THE RA sits beside FTP (Fuck the Provies), and my wee contribution: Me-Me OTT.

I put my foot under the gate, green paint peeling - Ping it's open.

Right on cue Truffle bolts over to the door.

His bark, shrill, piercing and relentless.

The chatter inside turns to fuzzy muffles.

I sense the sighs and rolling eyes that await me.

I carry on, tentatively turning the door handle.

Life starts to move in slow motion.

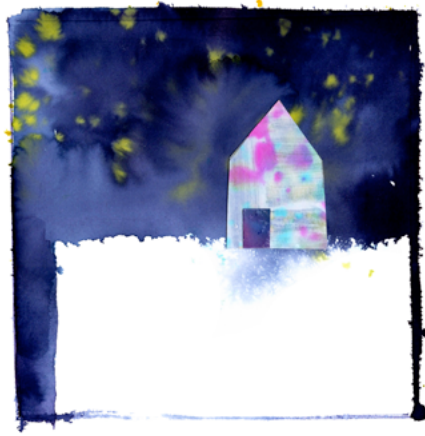
My Ma boots out from the kitchen, back hunched over - eyes bulging.

“Shut that dog up - bastard, he’s going to have to go”

Her eyes meet mine, they lock for a brief second. I sense them saying “and you can fuck off too”

I breathe in and let go, whispering to myself a resigned
“Welcome Home Maria.”

M.P.



Finding Voice

For a good while, I had wanted to sing at a well-known Glasgow open mic night. Years of working an intense and emotionally demanding job left a gap in my life—one I knew could only be filled with music and the chance to show another side of myself.

Determined to make it happen, I rallied some friends. We decided to make our open mic debuts together and arranged practice sessions with the friend who would accompany each of us on guitar. I had a strong desire to sing but also a tremendous amount of nerves. Much time had been spent agonising over what song to sing, what song would give me the inspiration and confidence to do this.

On the day of the performance, I had to travel to Dundee for work—the only time I’ve ever been there—but I was so full of

nerves and anxiety that I was wishing the hours away, as if waiting for a job interview. My mind was filled with anxious chatter. *Why was I putting myself through this agony? Does anyone even care? Why do I feel the need to get up and sing alone in a bar? Could I not just be content with singing in a choir?*

That night, the bar filled up quickly, as usual. We had a few drinks to steady our nerves. The open mic crowd was a mix of the weird and wonderful—complete amateurs alongside professional musicians—which is what made it so special. Since I was one of the last performers, I had plenty of time to let my nerves build. When my name was finally called, I stepped onto the stage, time slowing to a crawl. *Would my voice hold out, or would it crack under the pressure? Would I remember the lyrics? Would I be out of time with the guitar?* Despite the anxiety, I knew I had to do this—I had to find my voice. I now understand why some actors give up live performances. The fear was nearly unbearable.

My voice started with nerves, but I grew confident during the first line. I belted out the song, supported by my accompanist. I got through the first two verses and then thought, *What are the lyrics of the next verse?* I wasn't even sure what words came out. But I got to the end of the song and as soon as I did, the anxiety that had built up all day vanished. I felt elated. I felt like a champion.

Anonymous

From Silence, A Song

I came into the world silent. The cord wrapped twice around my neck. *Not uncommon*, they say. My mother told me that story many times, and then, more recently, she forgot.

I only remember that part.

And how I was taken to the doctor a few months after because she thought I might be deaf. I was that quiet! Should babies be that quiet?

My first child came into the world silent. Both of us were traumatised. I was never so glad to hear a baby cry.

We had only been living in Northern Ireland for two years. I told people she had been *rubber-necking* on her way out. Everyone laughed, especially friends and family who didn't know that phrase. She remains fiercely curious and doesn't miss a thing.

There are gaps in my memory. Big ones. From my own childhood. From my children's. But I've got loads of photos. And I have those stories.

I tell them about how they used to sleep on my chest, their tiny ears pressed to my heart.

Recently I pulled out their babygros to show them. So tiny and precious. I watched as their eyes grew wide with wonder and delight.

I marvelled at the miracle of life standing before me. My son, unafraid to tell me he loves me, wrapping me in his big, gentle arms. My head now rests against his chest. And once again I hear and feel his heartbeat next to mine.

Hannah. She is petite like her Dad's Mom. But don't be fooled. She can fill a room with her generous, kind, and funny presence. A young woman present in herself, proud to proclaim that good food is the way to her heart.

When they were small—Hannah about four, Matthew two—I would massage them together because neither wanted to wait their turn. Unblemished, soft skin. Wiggles and giggles. Complete and total trust.

I knelt between them, one hand on each, moving in rhythm. Sacred moments.

I'm quite sure there were nights when all I longed for was sleep or quiet or some help. But I'm learning now that the sacred exists in the messy and ordinary. The broken. The quiet. The unfinished.

How many of these moments do we miss, lost in the search, striving for an elusive something we think will bring happiness? Yet peace and joy—knowing, even when our hearts are breaking, that all is okay—breathe all around us and within us. If only we are willing to open ourselves to hear. To see. To feel.

I am a woman. Born and bred into silence.

But even the silence finds a way to speak.
We hear it all around but don't understand its story. We see it all
around yet write others' scripts. It's called many things. Mine was
called *madness*.

But maybe, it was longing.

That's what it feels like to me. A disconnection from the sanctity of
life. From the core. The precious. The untouched.

I am only now learning to speak. To know the sound of my own
voice. To hear. To see. To feel.

Our stories—the words we weave to be known—are only one part.
Perhaps we must learn to listen with different ears. To see with
new eyes.

Because it has all always been there.
We were just too scared to listen to the silence, to see in the dark.

Lisa Morrison

beforelife

a small hand slipped into mine,
to be guided over uneven stones,
steered through the drunken dark,
up stone stairs, to safety
in a cold and ancient room.

when we first touched,
you ricocheted through
my childish pregnant dreams,
so wondrous and illogical,
I held you with arms extended,

then shyly pulled you close,
as the silent motherly chorus,
moist-eyed and smiling,
nodded me towards acceptance,
of my joy and pride.

the intangible lightness of limbs
and the beauty of your unseeable face,
coalesced into bonds of purest love,
the very moment the chorus
broke apart and stepped away,

to leave me, bereft and shamed,
by a kitten shrugging off its shawl,
a piglet wrenching free,
or a flat-eyed doll lying stiffly

in my yearning childless arms.
I stretched through years towards you
but, as the darkening thicket of
never grew, I seeded you,
a dormant secret hope,
deeply, within my core.

kept close to forgetting,
and displaced by love
for your full-born brothers,
I let go, only for you
to slyly germinate,
then slip
away.

Deirdre Hawthorne

The Gift

It was the gift I never wanted: to be a Mummy.

No not me - I'm not cut out for that.

But at 12 weeks gone I felt different about it—

Like a thing I'd secretly wanted all along had come to pass.

I felt an inner joy I'd never experienced before and set out to do all the right things:

No partying, no drink – I was gonna look after this wee human inside me.

I pictured the scene in my head, where they'd hand me my child, wrapped in a wee blanket like the most precious gift ever given.

Then on Halloween night I'd had "a show."

All natural, normal and nothing to worry about.

But when I got to The Royal, I surveyed the midwife's face. "I'll need to call the Registrar – I can't hear the baby's heartbeat."

I felt it all slipping away just as the tears streamed down my cheeks.

"Come back on Sunday for a D&C."

Appointment card in hand, My stomach churned as I left the Royal Maternity—not with my bundle of joy, but an empty nothingness. I'd failed at the very first hurdle.

The day passed in a blur with friends and family calling to the house.

Biscuits, flowers and plenty of laughs - but every now and again, those tears would break through. You know the ones – the ones that come from the very pit of your soul. Made it feel like a proper Irish wake.

As night drew in, I was just done in.
A slight twinge in my stomach now had me buckled in two.
My sister Róisín rushed me back to the hospital.

“Somethings not right.”

She was right - we both looked like people not right in the head.

One minute I was pissing myself laughing, the next screeching in pain.

I leapt up and that's when I knew I'd actually wet myself as moisture ran down my legs and my denim skirt turned navy.

The midwife arrived, and I was shown back into the same room from earlier. “Get yourself cleaned up, then I'll examine you.”

The door shut behind me, and I was left alone in that mauve bathroom, the bright light nearly piercing my eyes, I slowly rolled off the black nylon tights and there it was—the tiniest wee baby in its sack. It looked like it was sleeping.

I held it gently, cupping it with my hands like I was about to get Holy Communion.

I called our Roisin, uncovered my hands.

She came in and stood there – frozen, not a word.

Don't ask me why - but she wrapped it in that blue roll from the hospital use to clean up spillages.

It was like a comfort blanket, without the comfort.

We said a Hail Mary.

My wee baby; I got to hold you after all.

M.P.



Lost

She couldn't feel a thing. For the first time, she understood what it meant to be a shell of oneself. It was as though part of her had simply evaporated. She wondered when that missing part would return to her—and if it did, whether she would feel the same as before.

She had heard others talk about numbness, but she never imagined it would feel like this—so hollow, so empty. There were things she needed to do, work to get through. If she could just survive the work day, she could return to the only thing that felt bearable—sitting in the nothingness, waiting for some form of feeling to return. For that was all that she wanted. Not to do, watch, listen, or even think—just sit and be in the nothingness.

It struck her that she couldn't remember the last time she had showered. That was new. She had never forgotten something like that before.

She really didn't want to do anything, but she knew that if she wanted to avoid getting lost in this numbness, she had to move. Perhaps if she could summon the energy to move her body forward, her mind would eventually follow.

So she left the house and walked—slower than she ever remembered walking before. To her surprise, the world outside remained unchanged. The grass still grew, the rain still fell, the sun still shone, and the birds still sang. She breathed the outside into her body, hoping to absorb some of the life she could see around her.

There was a time when she had looked at trees, birds, and flowers with such wonder. They had once brought her joy and calm. She was reminded of the words of that Dermot Kennedy song—*“my sense of wonder is just a little tired”*. *Will I ever feel that again?* she thought.

Sophy McFarlane

Aislinn

I dreamt of you last night, again.
We spoke no words.
Only smiles: reflective, broad and wanting.
We Embraced—breaths and heartbeats
Merged into one.

Your eyes, Atlantic blue and deep,
Held memories of another time.
Hair glowing like Silver Birch leaves
In late Autumn sun.

We Celts, we ancient people,
A sea apart, now closer than ever.
Mo anam cara.

Sunrise approached, and you had to go.
Upon awakening... I cried.

I dreamt of you last night—again.

Anthony McCaffrey

Through the Gates

My mind is now racing like a teenager's. The day has come at last. Will I be able to cope with the big change in our home and lives? Sure, the children are leaving for university now. Where did those years go? I will have new company in my home to go out socialising with.

House cleaned to perfection, goodies in and everyone dressed for the occasion. Early rise this morning and very little sleep last night. Today is gonna be the day. As I travel up the motorway, so excited, I realise this is a departure of sorts for me, too. Anxiety comes to the fore. Will we get on? Will I and the children accept this person into our lives again? All of our personalities and goals in life have changed immensely in those 9 years. Children grow into adults so fast. Will he and they be able to adapt to their strong personalities and points of view? Oh the whirlwind of thoughts and emotions.

I get closer to those big gates behind which my partner, confidante and lover has resided for the past nine years. A whole different world. No worries of the everyday pressures of the outside world but I am sure he had his own worries inside that big concrete building. The excitement and nervousness are with me in equal measure. Waiting for those gates to open and the now familiar turnstile to move. I won't miss those short impersonal visits with several eyes gazing on us, no privacy. All those journeys in all sorts of weather for such a short visit. Oh no.

At precisely 11 AM he walks for the last time through those big gates and I run to greet him and welcome him back into our family unit again. As we travel down the road to Fermanagh I am only concentrating on the moment we are in, and not dwelling on the future, just yet. We have the big fry when we come home, chats between ourselves, fire lit, relaxing and getting to know each other again and watching each other's every move—seeing the wee moves and quirks we had forgotten. Telly on for Grand National which we used to love to watch every year but alas this year it is cancelled at last minute because of a bomb scare. The reality of the war comes into our home again. But not to worry: the first day home has been good. This is indeed the beginning of the life that I have dreamed about for the past nine years. We will take each day as it comes.

Postscript:

Twenty-four years later still *Only her rivers run free*. Long Kesh is a distant memory now, but hubby is still here, the children have flown to various parts of the world, and soon I am *Leaving on a jet plane*. Well the both of us! Post Covid.

Some of our dreams really can come true.

Mary Murray

Willesden Green

A room like no other -
hypnotic remnants of paint
and paper, scarring the walls
until sky blue burst above
the picture rail, pigeons
walked on the other side
of the ceiling and the floor
was painted a glossy
brick red, reaching

a mattress in the corner,
milk crates for shelves,
a rattling sash window
overlooking waste ground,
with street noises and
drunkards and a cairn of tyres.

He put on Nancy and Lee
and looking out the window,
made clicking sounds
summoning the happy
yowling staccato
of a running tomcat,
past the drunks, clanging
up four flights of
fire escape, in through
a cat flap, peeled
back like a sardine tin,

in the barricaded door,
charging down the corridor
and leaping fluidly onto
his comrade's shoulder,
a gentleman of London,
lip curled like Elvis,
eyes ready to love.

And I thought: I want to
keep these two boys,
I'm not home
though I might be, but
the cracks in the walls
that showed me
glimpses of sun
in winter, also let in
a lonely draught.

Deirdre Hawthorne



Fairytale in Ward Three North

The proposal I got wasn't one of secret planning. There was no whisking me away to some scenic spot, no grand down-on-one-knee moment. No lavish hotel. No ring hidden in a gift or stuffed inside a food. In fact, at the start there was no ring at all.

It happened in a tiny twelve-by-twelve side room in Ward Three North of Belfast City Hospital. The stench of sickness mixed with the sharp bite of disinfectant was enough to turn your stomach. The sound of other poor souls suffering was hard to bear. That room had been my home for five weeks, and there was no sign of me getting out anytime soon.

Damien arrived that Sunday on his own. He knew I'd had a rough night, especially after what had happened the day before. I was lying there, emaciated and weak as a bird with a broken wing, stuck in that hospital bed unless I was dragged off for scans or tests. Every day, I'd stick my earphones in, listen to songs, and try to escape—back to childhood memories, back to anywhere but here.

This wasn't my first rodeo in hospital but it was by far the longest. My two pregnancies had been complicated, both babies born premature. During the second, they discovered a massive staghorn stone in my left kidney. The pain was unbearable, but they couldn't deal with it until after the baby was born. After that came surgery after surgery, lithotripsies, stents in, stents out—one thing after another. And here I was again.

But this time, it was different. I was in agony, like a cat on a hot tin roof, writhing and vomiting. They told me they couldn't find a reason for the pain. I screamed, cried, and yelled for help. The medical team would ask me endless questions, some of them ridiculous, and even soul crushing. One nurse even asked my parents if I was anorexic because I'd lost so much weight. My mother blew her top. She demanded to speak to the consultant—this wasn't the first jibe from some wannabe "Nurse Ratched." When you're at your most vulnerable, comments like that cut deep and take a toll.

Then, that Saturday afternoon, the chaplain came round. I'd not seen him before. A round, red-faced man with messy grey hair, he looked angry but had a belly that suggested he at least enjoyed his food. As soon as he sat down, I got a bad vibe from him.

He asked me all about myself.

“I’m Siobhán. I’m 24. From West Belfast but living in Lurgan. I’m a primary school teacher at Christ the Redeemer in Belfast. I have two children, Eoin and Aoife, and live with my partner Damien. I’m a reader in Clonard Monastery”.

His face hardened. He raised his brows.

“Well, as an unmarried woman living in sin, I can’t possibly offer you communion. You are a sinner”.

The words hit me like a slap. I screamed. The ward sister and a male nurse came running and made him leave. I was shaking, gutted at his cruelty. That evening, my mother phoned Clonard, and four or five priests arrived. They blessed me, gave me communion and the sacrament of the sick. It helped, but my spirit was weak.

Damien came that Sunday, and it was like medicine for my soul. He was the only doctor I needed. He assisted me, removing my TED stockings as if they were made from the finest silk, and emptied my nephrostomy bag and catheter with such care. Then, he washed me down with care and compassion, softly dabbing around the raw skin near my cannula, trying not to hurt me. Moving me forward, he swung my legs off the bed to undress me. My ribs were sticking out and my face gaunt like a skeleton. My bottom was like a pin cushion from all the morphine and anti-sickness jabs. My arms were like two battered twigs, black and blue with drip lines still holding delicately in the bend of both arms.

I sobbed as he washed me that day. Each tear washed away the shame that priest had tried to put on me. I felt wrecked, angry, broken.

As Damien wiped my face, he brushed my straggling hair behind my ear.

“We should get married,” he said in a soft but serious tone. “I was thinking of asking you anyway, but not because some priest dictates. Because I love you. And I want you to be my wife.”

The tears that fell then were different. They were happy, flowing free as a river.

“Yes,” I said. “Let’s do it.”

No ring, no means to speak of—but for the next seven weeks this gave me hope, kept me going. Family and friends brought bridal magazines and ideas. My daddy booked St Paul’s chapel and the Marine hotel, and everyone said they would help financially.

Then, in week ten, they finally took my left kidney out. It was black, shrivelled, and stuck to my abdominal wall. My consultant apologised for how I’d been treated. Those few who had hinted the pain was all in my head were proved wrong.

Each day after surgery, Jimmy, one of the auxiliary nurses, would say, “C’mon Cinderella, we must get you ready for the ball, we need you to take a few steps each day and we will have you dancing in no time”. After thirteen weeks in hospital, I was finally discharged, weighing just over five and a half stone but determined to skip down the aisle with my father to my beloved.

“Slow and steady,” Damien reminded me every day. “Slow and steady.”

The morning of the wedding, my parents’ house was buzzing. The bridal party had just come from Lorraine’s Hair Salon, all done up.

Ciara and Leanne Daly arrived with strawberries and pink champagne, doing our makeup while love songs blasted from the stereo. My daddy was in full voice, singing, “Going to the chapel, and we’re gonna get married!”

Then there was a knock at the door.

It was Gerard McFall and John McCallin—our best man and groomsman. My stomach dropped. Had something happened?

Gerard said, “Your fiancé asked, will you marry him?”

He produced a small box. I opened it up and there twinkling up at me was a beautiful diamond engagement ring.

Turns out, romance isn’t dead after all.

Siobhán McCallin

The beauty in a mismatched life

I don't want a house with matching dishes—
a collection of one kind,
Ever fearful each time they are used.
I don't want pressed tablecloths to hide the scratches
From cutting warm, homemade bread,
Or the specks of paint from art projects,
Or the heat marks from a tomato soup pot
left on the table, after we gathered, from a winter's walk
I want those memories—scratches, scuffs and all—
To remain a visible part of my home,
Just as my own scars are part of me.

Not whitewashed with this season's
Farrow and Ball color palette,
Or medicated by an apathetic healthcare system.

Memories shall be etched into each piece—
A history, a story told over and over:
Like the key that needs a little wiggle in summer,
When the back door swells in the heat,
Or that time the tallest sunflower contest was rigged,
So the youngest could stand proudly next to her Granda—
Both winners.

A home of mismatched plates and cups,
Collected from thrift shops,

Funny little craft fairs discovered on trips
Filled with laughter and wonder.
Beach art from random places,
Each piece is a tale unto itself.

Beds left unmade
When adventure calls louder than pressed sheets
and pillows scattered into place, just so.

Slips of plants growing on windowsills—
Ones snipped on nature walks and garden ambles.

Swimming gear hanging,
Perpetually damp or dry,
longing for the next dip—
Into a river, the sea, a waterfall, or lough—never fussy.

Leftovers in containers for quick meals,
or snacks on the way out, or upon returning home.
And always, *always* a fire—
in the hearth, the fire pit,
or in the hearts of our home's occupants,
Always welcoming.

I want a home that heals me,
Takes care of me,
One I can sink into, no matter my day—
Wide, comfy sofas,
Room enough for everyone and the dog.
Board games bringing out laughter, competitiveness,

And cries of “Does it really matter who wins in the end?”
Stories, poems, and songs at bedtime,
Late nights holding each other—
And a place for tears to land,
Not hidden or wiped away.

Eggshells added to compost bins,
Not underfoot, to be tread on in fear.

A place where hearts can become full again,
After being depleted by the cruelty of this world.

I don’t want to care about the state of the place,
Should someone pop in on a surprise visit.

Always tea at the ready, and something freshly baked
In an old cake tin,
A Christmas gift from the kids,
Hoping it will always be filled with goodies.

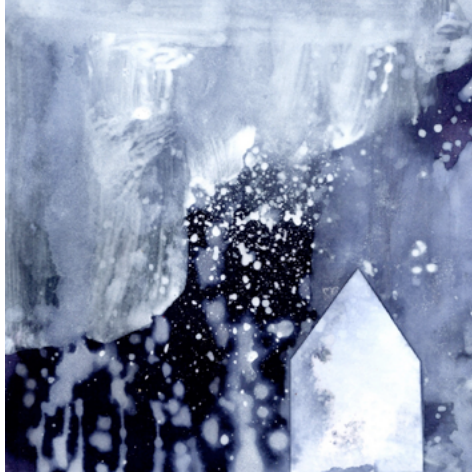
My home, a convergence of love—
From birthdays, first heartbreaks, losses:
Gifts galore.
Long summer evenings by a fire,
Nature hikes, winters curled up after warm baths,
Cocooned in oversized towels.

A place to wake, feeling held and safe,
Even if the nightmares have visited again,
Tearing at the soul.

Windows wide open,
Letting birdsong and freshness breeze through,
Knowing we are all connected.

A home is something created over time,
Not delivered by Ikea.
It's alive with a heartbeat,
A pulse felt by everyone who enters—
An inner sanctum,
A life stitched together, threads woven over time.

Caroline Boyle



It started with a thump

Actually, do you know when it really started?

Well yes there with the little putdowns:

“Are you wearing that?”

“How long will you be?”

“What have you been doing all day?”

The gradual decimation of the confidence you once had, chipped away bit by bit until you eventually believed it was all your fault.

It was shortly after the birth of your first child. Then again, the cracks were there before that, but you were only 21 and my God, you were so naïve

You had spent the second half of your pregnancy in hospital with complications from very high blood pressure. He would come to see you stressed and you knew you were in trouble. Everything, after all, was your fault.

You were in an induced coma for the first three days of Alex's life. When you and your first born eventually met, you bonded straight away. After 2 weeks you all went back to your parents house, back to a room you had known all your life, in the house you were born in.

Alex was not an easy child; he fed all the time and never slept.

At about 6AM the morning after coming home from hospital you heard Alex cry. You were wrecked and you took your time to get out of bed.

You felt the wind of his fist before it connected—BANG! His fist hit the right side of your face. You fell backwards and hit the wall with a thump.

"Never let my son cry, do you hear?"

Alex wailed loudly and you ran to pick him up and feed him.

"You're a rubbish mother." The words echo through your body and get lodged in your brain for years to come.

You sit there in a room that had once been your childhood sanctuary, your safe place and you ask yourself, "Did that really happen?"

"You ever tell anyone, I will know," he spat.

Today you can see it all so clearly but back then you were just a young girl who had never known violence and whenever Mum asked about the bruises, you said you fell getting up to feed Alex. "It was still dark and I was a bit dizzy."

Before that you had never lied to her, not even as a kid. She was the tigress who would have killed to protect you but you couldn't tell her the truth. It wasn't the shame that stopped you; it was the fear. Fear of failure.

By the time Alex was nine weeks old, on a mild Christmas Eve, we moved into our new house. He hadn't touched you again but the mental cruelty had begun—always when you were alone, and behind people's backs, there was the look that said “you dare ... nobody wants to listen to you anyway.”

Then, you dropped your friends, because he told you: “They don't like you, really.” It was not weakness or that you were spineless.

It was fear, fear of letting everyone down.

I was cocooned for twenty-seven years.

On the day he died, I said: “I forgive you.”

I don't know how or why those words came out of my mouth. But they did. And I was freed.

Kirsty Scott



Reclamation

On April 7, 2001, I thought I would be taking my first breath of Liberty. Little did I know, I was signing up for an abusive marriage. Sixteen months later, I became a mother –the first day I truly understood joy. The arrival of my son brought so much healing and washed away much of my pain. I thought, at last, this would mark the end of my emotional abuse. But no, it didn't stop.

I continued to endure, holding on to the hope that Liberty would come soon. Four years later, my baby girl arrived with a most beautiful smile. But again, nothing changed—nothing improved. The abuse continued.

Coming from a Christian background, I struggled to find the courage to leave. But thanks be to God, who kept me alive through those twelve years, we were eventually freed. My first day of true Liberty arrived on July 14, 2013 when he walked out to start a new family, abandoning me and our children. This was the first time in years I got to sleep with my eyes fully closed.

In those first weeks and months of Liberty that I knelt down by my bed and prayed, “God, please ensure that these children never feel that abandonment of their father, and that I never feel lack in place of a husband.” Oh, how I wept, with the song “The Goodness of God” by Jenn Johnson playing in my heart.

Today, I am stronger, free from abuse. My children can grow without the shadow of violence hanging over them. They are thriving, appreciating every sacrifice I’ve made for them. I am happy. I am free. We are whole. And that first day of true Liberty—it remains etched in my heart.

Here I am, eleven years later, ever grateful for the life I have reclaimed.

Christiana Abosede Olujomoye

Determination

I look up at the clock and it is 2am. I am thinking about how, being a single mother of 3 kids, I have had to do more than my share. Although my children have a Daddy, he is not worthy of being called a *Father*. Do not get me wrong, he tries to be a father figure, but only when it is convenient for him. Can I be a Mother only when it is convenient for me? Most nights, I do not get even 2 hours of sleep since I have a baby to tend to. Unlike him, I have no choice.

I am the cook, the maid, the doctor, the carer, the teacher, the confidant, the driver, the counselor ... if only men would take heed when the bible says:

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up.

What can a single Mother do other than take the role of both parents, to fill in the vacuum left by a negligent father?

As a young lady, I dreamt of a perfect home full of love and unity. But what did I get? A home filled with abuse and neglect and lacking love. I concealed the abuse for so many years before I finally opened up to my Mum when I couldn't bear it any longer. She tried her best before death took her in 2016, but the marriage was broken beyond repair.

Every day while in his house, I feared him and his raised hands. He beat me black and blue ... sometimes so bad I had to stay in bed for days because my bones would feel weak from the beatings. When I told my mum about the abuse, she didn't want to see me in a broken marriage. Hence her attempts at fixing, hoping she could put sense into him. But it did not help. In fact, he ended up beating me right in front of my mother and his mother when they both tried to settle the rift between us.

Then there were the numerous phone calls I would get from his concubines warning me to leave him. One of his concubine's boyfriends even sent a threatening message to me on Facebook, warning me to tell my husband to lay off his girlfriend or he will come for me and my kids. He went further, sending photos of my supposed husband and his girlfriend, as well as photos he took of me and my kids, warning that he knows our address and will come for us.

The Story would not be complete if I did not mention that I once reported him at a local police station in Nigeria one day when I had been beaten to a stupor. I had to meet with the Police Chief (DPO) who I begged not to take up a case against him but only to warn him not to lay his hands on me again. The DPO counseled him and he changed for a few weeks before he started beating me again.

I went into depression and began to self harm. Eventually, though, I found Counselling and was treated.

Finally, I escaped to Northern Ireland. Here I have stayed strong and determined for my kids. For them and for me, I have had no choice but to climb out of the mud, to stand up, dust off the rubbish, clean my stained garments and walk forward into a new future. Here I have met wonderful people who also have had their share of troubles but who work as activists to build a community of support and solidarity to bring social change. We all want the same thing: a life that is easier and Happier for all.

Always remember, never let your past pull you down. I for one will continue to rise up and shine, and to help the next person to find the rest of their story.

Kehinde Ahmed



When I Grow Up

When I grow up

I'll be stable

When I grow up

I'll turn the tables

I hear this song and I'm standing in my new wheelchair-accessible kitchen in Shepherd's Bush in London. All the details of the moment are there. Sunlight streaming in the barred windows, plywood cupboards, stainless steel, reclaimed bench, glass table, yellow rubber floor and me, totally alone.

I feel my own anger joyously reflected in the song, in its pace and energy and in the punch of its words. I want to act my age. I want to be difficult and rebellious, selfish and irresponsible, dark and free and released. I want my growing up to still be ahead of me. I want to turn the tables.

I feel so precariously balanced, yet rigidly held together. An endless shuffle of responsibilities, and maturity, and calm, and pragmatism, and grit. Relentlessly positive, forcing down terror and rage and pain. Blindly loving and clinging on to some long-lost plan for the future. Failing to stop two families being utterly destroyed. I don't want to be the next of kin, the grown up, the decision maker, paying the mortgage and owned by my employer. I don't want to be the dutiful daughter, shielding my parents from the one pain that they cannot bear. My pain. I don't want to be the dutiful daughter-in-law, minimised, despised, my needs disregarded, my behaviour scrutinised, my fidelity disbelieved, while I dodge stray hands and unwanted lips.

I long to let my righteous anger show, to tell the truth, to fall apart. I long to do what the song says...

Rip it all to shreds and let it go.

Deirdre Hawthorne

A Recipe For Disaster

I had just moved into the house up in Lagmore. The big one on the corner, with the pillar outside like you were in Ancient Rome. “You wouldn’t know you’re in West Belfast here,” I’d proudly say as the steady stream of visitors came to inspect.

The house was a far cry from the wee terraced house in St James, and that pokey outside toilet we had until I was in first year.

This house had three toilets and I was proud to show them off, so I invited the family to join us from the claustrophobia of St James to the green of Lagmore View Road for Easter Sunday dinner.

Trouble was, I’d forgotten I’d been invited to a wedding on Easter Saturday in Ballygally Castle. I’d have to be extra organised ahead of time.

So on Good Friday I braved Sainsbury’s—lamb, rosemary, potatoes, cream cheese, strawberries, icing sugar and, for the starters, lentils and a wee ham for lentil soup. I knew my da liked it. I’d made it once before and it went down well.

On Easter Saturday morning I was up early for my hair appointment at the Blow Dry Bar. Andrea done my lashes too and I had the nails sitting ready to be glued on once the food was prepped.

It was a roasting hot day and I couldn’t wait to get stuck into a cold drink. *Roll on 4 O Clock til I get out of here, I was thinking.*

So jittery and counting down the hours to freedom I boiled the ham in the pot, used some of the water for stock, and bunged in the lentils.

After I stuck on the black TK Maxx dress (sale rack at that, of course), that was me ready. I took the lid off the soup, it looked okay to me, and away I went.

I got back from the wedding at 4 in the morning and 10 bells came early when I had to get up and start prepping the leg of lamb for the family coming at 3pm.

Jesus, I felt grim. And looking at a raw leg of lamb wasn't helping, nor was the noise of the food mixer binding the cheese, fruit, and icing sugar for the cheesecake. At least for the starters I'd only have to heat the soup.

I battled on through and had just stuck the wee black dress on me and made myself presentable when the family arrived.

It was the first time I'd had the family all in my home and I was delighted to show them round—and how well I'd done for myself.

Course One and the soup was served — *delicious!* said everyone who had it. Our James didn't have any cos he was hungover too. *I'll give them a few minutes before serving the lamb*, I thought. And off they all went outside to enjoy the garden and the sun.

My niece Megan came to me in the kitchen as I was doing the dishes and blurted, "I don't feel well, it must be my period, can I go and lie down."

“Certainly you can,” I said and I was glad to have her offside cos she can be a bit of a hypochondriac.

I looked out the kitchen window at my family sitting on my garden bench and noticed my Ma didn’t look too good. In fact she’d turned a shade of white-ish grey.

She started boking and I ran out, hands still wet from the washing up. By the time I got out into the garden, she was boking full pelt, like the whole lining of her stomach was coming up.

My sister Roisin and niece Katie were jumping back to make sure no boke got on their new Easter sandals, and of course, our Catherine was over rubbing Mummy’s back to make sure she was OK.

Just as I got over to my Ma to see what was happening, she boked so hard her false teeth fell out and right into the pool of vomit.

The squeals from all over the garden—panic and hilarity all mixed up. I was buckled in two — then my Ma looked straight at me with daggers in her eyes and a mouth like a gummy bear. “Are youse bastards laughing at me?”—her jaw sticking out like Jimmy Hill, the S of *bastards* sticking as she lisped and hissed to get the words out without her teeth.

But there was no time to respond, and just like that I heard “ooooottt”! I looked up and standing with one arm against the house wall was my Da bent over in two, vomiting. He was more graceful than my Ma, but still, he was at it just the same. In no time it became like a Domino effect—people boking everywhere.

We didn't even get to the lamb, all my guests food poisoned and me and our James hungover.

I was told soon after that it must of been the soup: apparently if you put meat into a soup you really should put it in the fridge (especially if it's a warm day)!

Nowadays the answer is always No! when I ask if anyone wants fermented ham and lentil soup in a "Come Dine With Me-Me" experience.

M.P.



Losing My Mind, Finding Myself

It's hard to know where to start this story, but I suppose the turn of the millennium is as good a place as any. What should have been the dawn of a new era—when humankind might've been looking ahead to progress and possibility—was instead clouded by fear and uncertainty. With all our so-called technological know-how, no one could say for sure whether even our most advanced computers—never mind the ones we used just to get through the day—would be able to handle the change of date. We rang in the new millennium not knowing if everything we'd built would self-destruct and obliterate us at the stroke of midnight.

Meanwhile, back in Ballinascreen, South Derry, my own tale was no more hopeful. What was meant to be a sensible enough night—me staying off the drink and driving the lads in my beloved red Peugeot 309 to the Elk in Toomebridge—turned into something else entirely.

The Elk was quite paraochial—each parish had its own corner, and you'd always end up in your own wee crowd. I wasn't long in the Ballinascreen corner before I was persuaded to park the car and have a drink. Sure we'd just get the bus home.

One shot led to another and the night soon turned to a fuzzy haze. Next morning, with only fragments of memory and a head like thunder, I made the weekly pilgrimage of shame to my Uncle Benny's to see if he could help me piece things together.

He greeted me with a knowing look. "What is it this week? Have you lost your glasses again?" "Naw, Benny," I said. "I can't remember where I parked my car." He spat out his tae with laughter.

That was the beginning of a dark chapter in my life—though one, looking back, that had its own flickers of light: some of my best memories, including conversations with friends who've since departed. Those days shaped me in ways I'd only come to understand and appreciate years later. All the same, it was a hellish journey.

I was twenty years old in the year 2000. Ginger, overweight, shy and awkward—an introvert to my core. School had been rough. I was bullied, found it hard to make friends, and never quite knew where I fit in. At home, as the eldest boy, I took the blame for everything whether I was at fault or not. I got the brunt of the punishment. The whole thing wore me down. My confidence was shot, I had no idea of my place in the world, no real sense of identity.

The group I ran about with were much the same. Most of us left school with little to no qualifications, and were working hard jobs with little reward. We drank—hard—and eventually the drugs crept in too. First it was marijuana, then the more mind-altering stuff. At the start, it felt like a kind of rescue—taking me out of a depression I hadn't realised I was in. It gave me a sense of confidence I hadn't realised possible. Suddenly I could talk to people. I could connect, joke, even hold conversations about things I wouldn't have dared approach sober.

But that didn't last.

Burning the candle at both ends—working hard all week, partying all weekend—soon took its toll. I couldn't stop. I didn't know how. Weeks passed with barely any sleep and my body gave in. Something snapped. Reality started slipping. First it was the whispers—thinking people were talking about me. Before long I thought I was being talked about on the radio. The paranoia got worse and so did my grip on reality. Eventually I was sectioned.

I remember sitting in the back of the ambulance, my da beside me, surrounded by medics and police. He turned to me, calm as anything, and said: "It'll be okay. The worst is over. Don't panic. You'll get through this, and you'll be out before you know it."

Wise and comforting words. Just when I needed them most.

That was the start of my road to recovery—not a straight path by any means. I was admitted to Holywell, a notorious psych unit, where my freedom was taken from me and a nurse shadowed my every move. I was lucky, if you can call it that, that a cousin of mine was in there too. He helped keep me right. At the time it was hellish—being locked up, confused, watched constantly—but it was also the beginning of something new.

At first, I couldn't tell what was real and what wasn't. But I promised myself: never again. I thought maybe this was the wake-up call I needed.

I got out after three weeks, but it took six months of slowly sorting through my coherent and incoherent thoughts before I felt even half myself again. It wasn't the end of my struggles with mental health but it was a major milestone, a turning point.

I began to be more introspective. To care for and respect myself. To think, maybe I do deserve a bit of peace. To finally be one with myself.

In many ways this was the beginning of the long road from innocence to the harder truths of adult life. Learning that there's a weight that comes with being alive, with having responsibility. But if you're lucky—or stubborn—you find your footing. You keep going.

*Dedicated to Faith Brigid Bradley
and all those who left too soon.*

Shane Bradley

Approaching City

Monoliths to dead generations,
Through the salty Atlantic wind.
From coffin ships to steam ships—
Where are the hands that built these towers?
Where are the dreams they carried?

Blue skies blocked by rising tombstones—
Glass and steel, the only epitaphs.
Soulless blackened windows,
Rowed and columned like colonial soldiers.
Gaunt.
Faceless.

You, in the window!
Have you sat where I'm seated?
Can you see a future I cannot know?
Have you toiled in steel-toed boots?
With calloused hands?
A hunger you cannot feed?

Roughshod sleepers. Screeching-iron tracks.
Rivets wearing loose.
Dark, man-made cave—
Whose jaws could swallow us.
Smoke. Choke.
Is my soul in jeopardy?

Will I be one of the few who make it?
Or churned and spat out–
Industrial waste.
Banter, laughter, brawling.
Moths to a flame.

Steel and concrete.
Shuttered straight lines.
Nothing natural–
No curves, no ripples.
Twelve hours. Seven days.
Man-made for made men.

Midday: a glimpse of clear blue sky–
Just enough to patch a waistcoat.

Doorways strewn with those before me.
At night,
Gazing at that same sky
Those same stars.

Drunk. Eyes closed.
Thinking back,
To the only thing that soothes–
The smells of carefree summers:
Freshly scythed meadows.

Stems hissing and pissing,
Hypnotic chuffing.
The rhythm and beat of commerce:
More, more, more.

How many Paddy navvies,
Chippies and brickies,
Have passed along these same iron tracks?
How many dreamt our same dreams?
Now they lie in lonely graves—
Dead from drink and deprivation.

Impoverished souls,

From coffin ships to steam ships.

Anthony McCaffrey

Atlantic

Emotionally naked
eyes of flawless blue,
searched my own
charred and mossy gaze,
holding me in recognition,
promising turf fires
by the Atlantic,
chips and Guinness
in Shepherds Bush,
promising me a family,
beautifully redefined.

We should've left it at that,
sat on by the fire,
whiskeys amber in the light,
reaching out to touch
hand to hand, to hear
each other's stories
to their unfinished end.

Instead, I took his pain
within my own, and
the wounded part of me,
lay down with
the wounded part of him,
until the wave of belonging,
washed us apart and
left me stranded and repelled

Deirdre Hawthorne

Hey You, Refugee

You who fled your homeland in search of freedom.
You, whose country was ravaged—
by war, by calamity, by poverty.
You, thirsty and hungry,
who walked for days and nights,
beneath a burning sun, through storms and dust,
across the sands of the Sahara,
through rain and snow,
braving mountains, deserts, oceans, and seas.
You—with your courage, your fire—
always ready to stand against injustice,
in all its forms.
Neither heat nor cold,
nor storms, nor the threat of death,
can stifle your spirit—
your yearning to be free.
Free in your body.
Free in your mind.
Free in your voice, your thoughts,
your beliefs, your dreams.
Free—like the bird that soars the open sky,
never stopping for borders.
Free to write your story,
to shape your future,
alongside the rest of humanity.
Free to change the system
that tried to cage you.

Mamadou Diakaria Diallo

Hey you, my host country

You who opened your arms and gave me shelter.
I see in you the same struggle I have known.
You—with your bravery, your perseverance—
have also risen against injustice in all its forms.

But know this:
I still suffer in silence.
I carry wounds unseen—
from trauma, from rejection,
from inequality,
and isolation.

But like you,
I won't let it break me.
Neither heat nor cold,
nor storms, nor death,
could crush your own yearning to be free.
Free in your body.
Free in your mind.
Free in your voice, your thoughts,
your beliefs, your dreams.
Free—like the bird that soars the open sky,
never stopping for borders.
Free to write your story
beside mine.
Free to change the system
that cages us both.

Mamadou Diakaria Diallo

The Broadway

Tramping feral through Cricklewood,
With a fellow thief and a Brass,
Oblivious to our lives.
As each year comes to pass.

Hooking and crooking,
We three on the dole—
He and I shoplift,
She sells her soul.

A pipe in one hand,
A lighter in the other.
To that cracking crystal,
We're enslaved, we've no rudder.

Our bodies, minds, and spirits,
Pulverised to crumbs—
Two Paddys, a Biddy,
Now three London bums.

The lads from the Lucky
All head to the grind.
I hide in my hovel,
Going out of my mind.

Sat in my filth,
Keep smoking the rock—
Haunted, despairing,
On tin foil's my stock.

Condemning myself,
And the company I keep.
Despising my life—
A life that's gone cheap.

I'll skulk down the Broadway.
Toward Willesden Green,
Avoid those I know—
Don't want to be seen.

Averting my eyes
From judgmental stares.
I'll hawk in the pubs,
My ill-gotten wares.

The few who still know me
Try pleading with sense,
But I'll duck down an alley,
Behind hedge or fence

Heedless to the lives
I've torn asunder—
To tales of my antics
Their hearts cry like thunder.

Twenty-years trapped
An amoral affliction—
An epic of scourging,
No lies, no fiction.

Is this it for me?
My perpetual lot?
A waster, a scut,
In a hole time forgot?

Like many's before me,
Never making the most,
Living life in the shadows,
Another Cricklewood Ghost.

Anthony McCaffrey

Fear

This force drives the world,
Its power to camouflage... unmatched.
Slithering through the lives of individuals,
Crowds, politicians, the churches—
Its stench is everywhere.

It manifests as greed, envy, dishonesty, manipulation, false
pride...
“I cannot look a fool,” it whispers.
“I must brandish my sword,
Make them tremble.”
It echoes through the ages,
Continuously, relentlessly.

Fear taints every fiber of the human experience,
Touching all of us at some stage in life.
Among its trophies:
The destruction of people,
The shattering of lives,
The loss of little babies, young children,
Countries torn apart,
Our cultures, our peace—
And above all... our humanity.

But there is one weapon,
One greater force,
That can conquer fear and shake evil to its core—
And that weapon is LOVE.

Ger McParland

the always of it

the start of it
the telling
and listening
a hug on a platform
the promise
without speech

the now of it
an arm in the night
to pull close
into belonging
into protection

but also
a kiss under meteors
that fall still
on the wisdom of skin
the losing without loss

finding instead
the unrestrained
the reasoned
the fought for
the always of it

Deirdre Hawthorne

Blink of an Eye

As a scrawny fourteen-year-old at Rathmore Grammar, going home every Friday on the school bus was the one part of the week I looked forward to most. Shocker, I know. But most kids didn't have a Ma who worked in a bakery, one that had everything a kid with a set of sweet teeth and the appetite of a tapeworm could dream of. And even if they did, I doubt they had a Ma like mine who'd have their favourites waiting for them every Friday when they stepped off the bus.

The bus home from Belfast to Crumlin didn't take long, and on Fridays my best mate Sparky got it too. Despite the short distance between our houses, most of the time we spent was over Xbox Live. Both of us were obsessed – myself especially, since Da banned me from playing it on school nights. Before our three-day gaming binge began, though, we'd bolt off the bus into Bushe's Bakery.

Ma'd worked there since I was three, along with a few nights-a-week at the local bar and housekeeping on the side. Everyone called her, 'Sharon forty jobs.' She always laughed when she heard that one. She never stopped, though. Whenever she'd come home, she'd have the dinner made, washing done – ironing too, and even have it folded in wee neat piles on everyone's beds.

When me and Sparky'd dander into Bushe's, Ma'd call us to the side and slip a box of buns into our schoolbags along with a tin of juice.

'Yer Ma's a legend,' Sparky'd say.

But I already knew she was. Everyone in Crumlin did.

She was like the St. Vincent de Paul Society, except instead of handing out second-hand sofas and household essentials, it was sugary buns and fizzy drinks.

‘Yah never know what some wee ones are goin’ home to,’ she’d say. ‘That wee bun or two might be all they get before bed.’

I’ll never forget that one Friday after school – 11th January 2013. Ma had her back to me and Sparky as we bundled into Bushe’s. She looked like she was rubbing her eyes until she heard our shoes scuff and jumped out of her skin.

‘Oh—’ she sniffled as she turned around. ‘How are yiz, boys?’

‘All good, Sharon!’ Sparky grinned. ‘Buzzin’ to get home to bate yer son on FIFA da’night.’

FIFA was our favourite game. I didn’t know how it was Sparky’s too, because every time we’d play, he’d DNF. DNF stands for *did not finish*, which is exactly what Sparky’d do as soon as I’d go up three nil, putting on that Dalek voice as he’d try to craic his internet’s cutting out and rage-quit.

‘Cracker!’ I burst out laughing. ‘What will ‘at be, hundredth time lucky?’

Usually, Ma’d join in on the banter, taking turns who to egg on, but she just scooted around her counter and stuffed Sparky’s buns into his schoolbag, quicker than she normally would. After she zipped it up, Sparky fist-bumped me and sauntered on out. Ma followed him to the door and stretched her head into the street, then joined me over at the drinks fridge.

‘Listen, son, ah – ah needa talk to ya, about yer Da...’ she said.

‘Mah Da?’ I said.

‘He’s...he’s packed his ’hings...’

I think Ma expected me to say something back, but I just kept staring at her as my heart tried to process what my brain just told it.

‘He’s movin’ out for a wee while – just ’til he gets his head sorted, he says,’ Ma went on. ‘Don’t worry, son. After twenty-four years married to the man, I know what he’s like. For God sake, when we tried to emigrate to London at eighteen, he didn’t last a week! He’ll be back in the mornin’, son. Wait t’ya see...’

After that day, I dreaded going home on the bus. Preparing myself to face all the things school blocked out. Like wondering where Da was. What new dirt Ma’s solicitor had found out. Who the woman in his new profile picture was. Why he was telling so many lies about Ma in the divorce papers. How he could he run off with all the savings and leave me and Ma with nothing.

Ma ended up having to leave Bushes’ because they couldn’t give her enough hours to keep the mortgage. A nursing home in Andytown was able to offer her sixty hours-a-week, so she started working there. I was still getting the bus with Sparky, but once I’d find a seat, I’d plug my earphones in before he could start a conversation, blurring out the world and everyone in it.

Whenever I’d get home, I’d head to my room and wrap myself up in a cocoon of bedsheets, watching TV until I’d fall asleep. Most of the time, I wouldn’t even watch it – I’d just have it on so I wasn’t sitting in silence, thinking. Sparky still texted me to play FIFA, but with Ma working so much, and Da not around to tell me off for playing it when I

shouldn't, I ended up outgrowing the thrill I lived for on the weekends – a thrill Sparky still had. And rightly so. He was a kid. We both were.

But soon I began to feel like an old man growing up in dog years, losing interest in all the things we loved doing as best mates. Maybe things could've been different if I opened up more, but I'd bottled my emotions so much that I felt if I poured them out to Sparky, it'd only drown him to a silence that would be uncomfortable for us both.

The day Da left, Ma moved into the spare room across mine. Most nights, I'd hear her crying herself to sleep, even though she'd do her best to make I couldn't. She would've cried even more if she knew, so I'd say my Hail Marys into myself, asking God to help make her happy again. Ma started gutting the house too – clearing the attic, repainting rooms, tossing every photo that still had Da in it. Every now and then one would pop up, as if he'd put it there himself in pure badness, and I'd find Ma crying on the phone to her counsellor. Sometimes I'd see a photo of Da torn to shreds in the bin and it would hit me too, that my family – what it used to be – was gone. Buried in the blink of an eye, like the Pompeii and its people, frozen in time.

Every night, Ma would cook new dishes to lure me out of my room, but it wouldn't work. One night, she came to collect my plate, and after she picked it up, she wrapped her arm around me and said, 'Ah love ya, son.' But it wasn't all I heard her say. I heard her say, 'Everything's gonna work out, son. Cuz ya have me.' And as I looked into her eyes, I saw something had changed in her, something I never understood. But I didn't need to. All I needed to know was that she was back. *Sharon Forty Jobs. Legend. Ma.*

Matthew McCaughey

When the Road Won't Give Way

I was driving along a narrow road one night, with two of the children in the car. At a tight spot, we met another car, and there wasn't the room to get by each other. For me to reverse and turn, I'd have had to go back near half a mile—but the other car had only a few yards to go.

It made a feeble attempt to reverse, then pulled in off the road—but not near far enough. I knew full well it was too narrow to get past, but in an effort to resolve things, I tried. The front wheel of my car slid down off the road, and I was stuck.

The other driver just trundled on, didn't even look over, never mind check if me or the children were alright. (I might've got out and shouted a few explicit.)

I phoned my cousin to come lend a hand. He came, and we left the children with my sister. Then we borrowed a tractor to tow the car out. We got it sorted and left everything back as it should be.

Though I do wonder if there's a metaphor in the story. Is it wise to push on along a narrow path, fraught with hazard? Or is it better to turn back, even if it's the harder road to take?

I was lucky this time. I had help, and it all worked out. But next time, when the road won't give way, will I?

Shane Bradley

Some time later...

Silence descends upon the office. A heated discussion has suddenly gone cold. I had just revealed to my two male work colleagues my most deeply personal secret – one I hadn't before told to a single soul.

The discussion had been about the use of language – or more specifically, about the use of the word 'rape'. Victor had brought up an article he had read comparing the penetration of the Earth by a fracking drill to the violation of a woman by an unwanted penis. Can fracking also be seen as the rape of what some people consider their mother? There was disagreement. Emotions were high.

Both males deferred to what other females had said or felt – wary of being one of those men who deem to know better than a woman about her body. Tim knew of a number of women who were using those terms and felt fully justified in doing so. Victor was defiant; 'The Earth cannot feel, cannot experience pain, cannot give or refuse consent. You are belittling the experience of women who have been sexually violated and so on their behalf I object.'

'Well,' I interrupt, my voice shaky but loud. 'As a woman who has experienced sexual violence I agree to the use of the term.'

Both men continue to stare at me. Either waiting for me to say more or not knowing what on earth to say. But that is all I offer. I have already said too much. What I have never shared with anyone I'm now throwing in the ring to win the fight. And it works.

'Ok then.' says Victor eventually. Tim just nods, opens his mouth then shuts it again. I turn back to my computer and begin to type. I don't know what I'm typing but I need the distraction – from this moment, and from that one.

Some time later...

'It's just so infuriating how they speak about her,' says Jenny as we walk along a busy road on a cold, blowy November evening.

'She had blood on her jeans for God's sake. She's being victim-blamed so they can continue to play bloody rugby.'

'I know,' I say. I've tried to stay away from this story but all the women in my life are so angry about it and the trial seems to be going on and on.

'Just because she was drinking it doesn't mean they have a right to rape her.' She continues. 'Nor does it matter what she was wearing, or if she agreed then changed her mind.'

I nod. 'I know. I know.'

'Is everything ok, Mary? You don't seem yourself.'

As a best friend for over two decades she can tell something's up.

Jenny I haven't told anyone this, well.. apart from an accidental confession to my two workmates a while back.'

'What is it?', she asks, already concerned.

'It happened to me.'

'What did?'

I pause. This time the words don't fall out so easily.

'The night before I left Japan... it was my going-away do with all the other teachers... There was a lot of drink, like I was drunk. But I didn't say yes... Actually I remember very clearly saying *No*... trying to get out from under him... but he was so big and heavy. I can still feel him weighing down on my chest.' My voice cracks, I can't go on - nor, in fact, breathe.

'Oh no, Mary, you were raped.'

Those words. I'd never allowed myself to say them, not even really think them, even though that image had haunted me for years. At the sight of her tears my own emerge. I know there's a well full inside, I can feel it rising, I fear if I really let go I won't be able to stop.

All I can do is nod.

'Why didn't you say anything before?'

I swallow. 'I suppose I felt shame, blame even. I wasn't in a position to look after myself. I know that's a wrong way of thinking, I know it's his fault and only his and I want more than anything to feel the anger towards him that I should feel. But in fact I just feel angry at myself. I let him shake my hand. Stand there in front of all the other teachers and say to my face 'good luck'. I should have punched him in his big fucking face. But I didn't. He got away with it.'

I can see she wants to say more, to shout, to rage. But instead she hugs me and as I sob into her shoulder I allow myself to touch a bit more of the pain. God it hurts. But with it comes a little bit of relief.

Some time later...

'Time's nearly up, Mary.' says the funky grandmother with the red fringe. I'm taken aback. I look down at my customary tissue and it's dry. After six months of meeting every two weeks in Annie's sitting room I've finally gotten through one session without bawling my eyes out. I similarly look at the empty cup of tea - til now it had only served as a finger warmer as the liquid wouldn't have passed the big lump that settled into my windpipe almost as soon as I settled into her comfy armchair. I voice my surprise.

'You've come a long way. You've been very brave.'

Brave was not what I felt leaving those sessions. Raw, exhausted, devastated, yes. But, little by little, a lightness, perhaps a freedom? And looking back I see I was brave. Brave for turning up, brave for opening up, brave for trying all her exercises such as writing to my loneliness, having tea with my dead mother and punching a pillow that represented his big fucking face, his ugly soul. I was able to spit out that word - say it again - rape. And as my reward I found something precious - my rage. I scooped it up from where it shouldn't have been - namely anywhere pointed in my direction, or at the female co-workers who had left me with him, and focused it where it rightly belonged - at him.

Some time later...

I look into the many tiny flames, and into many wet eyes where their light is reflected. Another female life, more male violence. We hear about it so often these days - another attack, another rape, another murder. The pandemic has increased violent behaviour, and decreased many women's ability to leave. As I listen to this young woman's musician friends play a favourite tune of hers, the sadness rises in me, from the pool that's still deep yet doesn't threaten to drown anymore. And with that sadness, the rage. For her, for me, for all of us, for so long.

I'm there not only in empathy - to sit with in suffering, but also in solidarity - to stand with in resistance. I stand in solidarity with all the women who have been held down, repressed, oppressed. I am strong, we are strong, despite and in spite of, attempts to clip our wings. It took me some time, but I will be controlled by that story no more. Fuck shame. Fuck fear. Stand together.

I think back to that last line of that devastating book, devastating but defiant:

'RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY!' ... and
joy is an act of resistance.

L.S.

weightless

kept in a sweet tin
is a goldfinch nest,
a neat hemisphere,
edged like a geode,
but weightless.

fading moss swirls
through its galaxy
of filaments, spindly
roots and stems,
deftly bound by
hair and cobwebs.

at the centre, a quilt
of dandelion seeds,
layer upon layer,
so softly silken,
when I touch it
with a fingertip
it doesn't register,
close my eyes,
and it's gone.

Deirdre Hawthorne

Flip the script

You alone hold the golden quill to
flip the script within your mind.
Chapters must include themes of success,
failure, happiness and a sad kind.
Banish the ego's negative chatter
to the wilderness where it will die.
Without sunlight or water, intrusive
thoughts will perish beneath an iron sky.
You can take control of words spoken
by that internal voice.
Cultivate the seeds of positive affirmations;
a daily dialogue of choice.
In the garden of your mind
plant seeds of love, strength,
hope and courage to help you heal.
Root out weeds of fear,
anxiety and worthlessness
to change the way you feel.
At night, let the stars be your strength
as darkness creeps in,
remember, the dawn will come
Let gratitude be your centre, as
powerful and potent as the
radiant rays of the rising sun.
From the ashes of despair, rise
like Phoenix despite hardship, trouble and strife.
Flip the script each day and be
grateful for this wonderful gift called life.

Vision

Why did I die when I opened my eyes,
Why did I fear the sound that I heard?
The ticking of time was a lament of my soul
My purpose in life seemed like an empty goal

Where do I turn when all is done
I can't find the road when my vision is blurred
Where are the voices to show me the way?
Hush. I can't hear them. I have lost my way.

Life can be sad and play with your mind
The crossroads, the blind spots and the hairpin bends....
Why am I here, I ask each day
Please, brother, show me the way.

Well that's what happened, and here I am
A woman who is whole, happy and playful
When I was shown the way through love and respect
I knew why I was here..... to give the same back.

Ger McParland

Then She Came

Trauma visited in different dress,
I had no choice, no voice. No redress.
You don't know if you don't know.
Body battered, bruised, betrayed.
Head fucked up, confused.
Trapped and tried whilst
all around closed their eyes.
I'll never be untouched again.

And then again.
And then again.
And then again.

Shame too big to have a name, an all-consuming flame.
Piercing, slicing, penetrating, persistent pain.

And then she came.
Thank god she came.

Soft and sure a choice.
Quiet, soothing,
consuming, subtly cruel voice.
Like head-in-water, body held.
Rocked in rhythm with the swell,
Pain and shame she would dispel.
Freedom promised.

It felt like freedom from hell.

You just didn't understand
and labelled, packaged, risk assessed,
Locked up, locked in, just a 'thing'
Pills poured. Brain zapped.
Shut up. Shut down. Shut out.
You don't belong.
'Don't talk, it'll make you ill'
Raped, consumed, discarded in the garbage bin.

And then she came
Again, and again and again.
I know her well, her name.

So many tears fell unseen. Not heard.
No hands to hold or arms
enfold or 'Shhhh ... Shhhh ... I'm here'
One minute it can be ok and then we fall
Regress ... and ... and ... and
It overwhelms, fills my chest, no breath, escape
No place ... the world feels far away; me misplaced.
All the theories, brains and clout, 'better than' exclusive clang ...

She promised peace, release,
I know now why she came.

Lisa Morrison



Purple Light

Have the clarity to harness the healing purple light—
And the courage to become it.
Connect to that higher self,
The third eye—
Where body, mind, and spirit align.

You are a prophet, a poet,
A priestess, a messenger,
Sharing wisdom in rhyme.
Radiant, you shine—
Your words and melody move
To the cosmic rhythm of time.

A rhythm that seeks unity of purpose,
An alchemist of awareness, brave and bold.
Nourishment for the planet,
Reverence for life,
Collective consciousness, the true gold.

The aura around you like the Zodiac constellation,
Oh you shine so bright!
A harbinger of harmony—
An iridescent, fearless purple light.

A mystic current of consciousness
A higher truth to free you from pain.
The veil is torn asunder,
And strength and healing,
Your glorious gain.
Fear not failure or downfall,
We all make mistakes.
Get back up!

Speak your truth, let it out, even trembling—
And even if the earth quakes when you do.

Lift your head,
Raise your spirit,
Align body, mind, and soul.
Cross the threshold of pain—
Transcendence, the ultimate goal.

Have the clarity to harness the healing purple light—
And the courage to *be it*.

Siobhán McCallin

Emerging

She's a dreamer.

She's a loner.

She's shy.

She hopes, she dreams.

She's succeeded, she's failed.

She's fallen.

She's risen.

She's broken.

She's healing.

She's depressed.

She's blessed.

She carries a strength in her soul, unwavering,

She just needs to see it in herself more.

She's a mother.

She's not a mother anymore.

But she will always be a mother.

She's been restricted.

Now, she's free.

She's fought and released her demons.

And she holds hope that the

light at the end of the tunnel is near.

She keeps inching toward it.

She's scared.

She's fearless.
With every step she takes,
She breaks the chains holding her back.
She's attained clarity.
She's found purpose.
She trusts completely.
She keeps hoping.
She keeps praying.
She keeps healing.
She keeps transforming.
She's a mess.
She's on the edge of something loud and beautiful.
She's the butterfly emerging from the dark cocoon
She is me.

Stephanie Lopez-Herfield

I Am My Own Sun

Spat upon, kicked to the floor;
Spun around till my minds gone numb.
Hung out to dry,
But it's a sunny day.
I'm looking a little better instead of bitter;
Flying, swaying, soaring ...
My wounds open to the sun.
The spitting, the screaming,
It can't be undone.
Everything shut down,
Done being torn apart.
Bleeding, limping, I open my heart
To surrender.
Now quietness, tenderness
Over bloody endingness.
Healing, flowing, dancing—
Life soaring through my veins.
No time to spare, gotta get there from here.
Running, slipping, falling ... forward.
The world I was in was not meant for me.
Now I rise beautifully.
I run, leaving my clothes, my woes,
All the thingamajiggies behind,
Like a trail of lost living.
I rise free to be me
And all I can become
Now it is done.
I am my own sun.

Maura Campbell-Grace

Powerless

“Have you thought about the colours for the flowers?”

She sat in stunned silence, staring blankly at the man who had asked the question. After a moment, she muttered, “He supported Leeds United, so maybe yellow and blue?” Her voice trailed off, more a question than an answer. “I don’t know,” she added, her tone flat.

The corners of his mouth lifted slightly in a sympathetic smile, and he nodded gently as he made a note in his book, sensing he should pause on that detail for now.

Her gaze wandered around the room. It had been decorated to resemble a living room—designed to make you feel at home, to comfort.

“If it’s alright with you, we’ll take a look at the options for the coffin next.”

She couldn’t believe there were so many choices, each dependent on style, type of wood. She wondered who in their right mind was choosing the most expensive option when it’s either being burnt to dust or buried underground to decompose.

“The cheapest one is fine.” Something about these words leaving her mouth made her feel ashamed.

Days later, she found herself back in the strange living room, standing before the coffin she knew she couldn't afford. People were trickling in, some familiar faces, though she hoped she wouldn't have to remember any names. She had no idea what to do with herself and wandered helplessly from room to room, to make it feel and look like she was doing something. She'd never felt this self-conscious before. Each person who looked at her seemed to carry such sadness, such pity.

"He was a great man," they would say, offering hugs or shaking her hand. She forced her face into what she hoped was a smile, as she thought to herself, *Was he?*

She couldn't figure out what to do with her hands when she realised that she had been continuously wringing them out for God knows how long. Friends arrived and she felt overwhelming gratitude that they had travelled to be there for her. She made her way over to them but didn't know what to say, how to act.

She felt like a spectator in a dream from which she could not wake.

Sophy McFarlane



Vigil

This bedroom ought to be my sanctuary. But some nights it feels more like a prison. Since I returned to Belfast, after years in Australia, I've been living in my late father's flat. This bedroom was his.

Mind you, all my bedrooms have imprisoned me at one time or another. I have trouble sleeping. Every night I drag myself to bed, hoping to tumble into a dreamless, blissful slumber, and to awaken refreshed, eight hours later. It's been years since that has happened.

As a child, I shared a room with my sister, Alice. We'd turn out our bedside lamps, and she'd fall into a deep sleep almost instantly. But I would lie there, fidgeting and worrying, staring at the light on the landing, wondering, *What's wrong with me?*

When I got married, my husband slept soundly but my mind was tortured by what was happening around me, especially at work. As a journalist covering the Troubles I had to report on bombings, shootings, murders, funerals. Mothers in shock, recounting the deaths of their children. Lives shattered, families torn apart, dreams destroyed in the rubble of the place I loved and called home.

On a sunny Saturday, walking my children home from the park, I heard the news of the Shankill bombing and dreaded the days to come. Another time I held my young son and daughter close when a huge bomb shook our house, trying to comfort them and to somehow normalize the abnormal. And there was that time I arrived at a murder scene, recognizing the dead and wounded.

There was great hope during the peace process, followed by joy and relief with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. And then came Omagh—the largest single death toll in a day—shattering the fragile peace. Its devastating ripples reached across Europe, too, where some of the dead children had lived. Then another nervous kind of peace.

Now, in my father's double bed, with wooden lockers on either side, I keep his old black rosary beads close. They don't help me sleep, but they hold an ageless comfort. A print on the wall shows the holy family resting during their flight into Egypt. Joseph, weary and wary, holds a staff, his arm around the solemn, watchful Virgin Mary who cradles the baby Jesus. The image is peaceful, a sharp contrast to the restlessness I feel.

Around me are shelves, drawers, and wardrobes with my clothes

neatly arranged inside, hoping the order will somehow seep through the wooden doors into my mind, my unconscious, and bring some peace.

I read a novel, begin to doze, turn off the light, and pile the extra pillows on the floor. The whole flat falls into darkness and perfect stillness. Minutes later, though, I'm wide awake, thrashing around, trying in vain to find that elusive oblivion. A line from a Dubliners' song, Peggy Gordon, invades my thoughts: *A troubled mind can know no rest.*

Dejected, I get up. Maybe sleep will come on the living room sofa. No such luck. Onward to the kitchen to forage for something sweet. But late night snacking won't calm me, though it's a small, soothing reward

Eventually, my exhausted head is back on the pillow, now cool. The holy family on the wall are with me in my lonesome vigil.

A childhood prayer comforts me: "Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I give you my heart and my soul. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, assist me in my last agony. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, may I breathe forth my soul in peace with you, Amen."

Finally, finally, sleep comes. I'm relieved when it's morning.

What have I been afraid of all my life?
Why is my mind so afraid to rest?

Letitia Fitzpatrick

Labyrinth

She's an overthinker,
Lost in the labyrinth of her mind.
Why, when, how?
She scrutinises, overanalyses,
Her heart and head strings pulled by the weight of repeated
thoughts, moments.
Her feelings magnified,
Where simplicity is never an option.

She's an overthinker,
Lost in the perils of her mind.
Who am I, and why?

Her warm, kind heart seeks rest, tenderness, compassion—
Yet her light flickers, shifting from bright to dim.
Life's purpose, a blur—
Does she even know it's there?

She's an overthinker,
Running in circles of disillusionment and distraction,
Crafting multiple personas to fix her,
But never seeing the true self, the one that's always been there.
Drawn to the temptation of thought,
And it doesn't get easier,
As grief now claims her soul.

She's an overthinker,
In her hollowness, she searches for ease,
In meditation, she's still distracted,
As she ponders to start again.
She's an overthinker.

Kim Mead

Forged in Resistance and Love

How strange that the skills needed to craft this delicately carved wooden piece were learnt in a place that tore my family apart—a place that reinforced the brutality, injustice, and discrimination I was born into. An establishment wielded as a weapon to break the physical and mental well-being of the people of this land—my land.

Today, I look with gratitude at this sacred object, forged in resistance and love. Crafted just after leaving such a hellhole—once freedom was got—freedom from physical imprisonment and, I hope, freedom from mental constraints.

I know the emotion poured into every inch of this wood, carved by hands pained and swollen—a pain that was his as well as ours, from witnessing such injustice and terror. The swelling, too, was one of pride—borne of his inner longing to create a better, more just place for me and for everyone else caught up in the machinery of oppression.

This object, to me, signifies its maker: solid mahogany, shining brilliantly on the outside, with perfectly chiselled Celtic designs—symbols precious to me. Only the chosen will see the treasures inside, under lock and key. If you are granted a glimpse within, you'll discover a softness reserved for only the closest. And when opened, out pours culture, creativity, courage, and determination that only being born in this place creates.

See the strong green fabric lining the interior, representing his—and my—love for Éire. And though he'd hate to hear it, it might also represent my love for Glasgow Celtic!

When opened, the sweet tune of *Amazing Grace* belts out. When I first heard the crisp notes of that song from this box, I thought of that other love of mine: playing musical instruments. Does this represent another weapon of resistance, of protest and remembrance? A weapon chosen by a young mind, trying to play a productive part in the struggle that was brought to them?

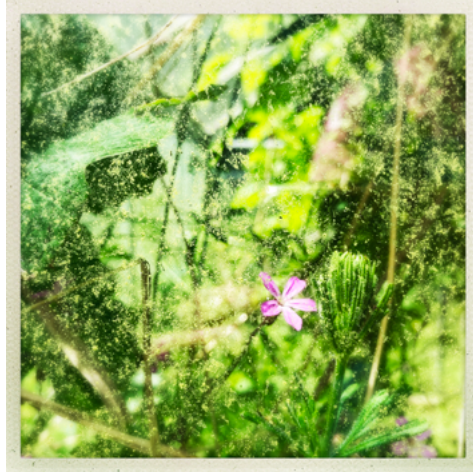
Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.

These words echo both a personal and collective journey through good and bad times—a journey that led people to places and situations they might never have known, had they been born elsewhere.

Twas Grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved, how precious did that Grace appear the hour I first believed.

Above all, this most sacred object represents that deep Grace that shall never be destroyed—the grace of a people determined to be free. A grace that will be passed on, both vocally and physically, within our clan.

Roseanne Doran



Earth

A wild, untamed place on a sloping patch, with nothing planted or planned. A little corner of an ancient Irish forest, my mum's neglected garden. I had spent so much time there as a kid—climbing trees, building dens—enveloped by the smell of earth.

Once I buried an old biscuit tin there, holding a story I'd written about magical beings who lived in the garden, and who themselves buried their tale as proof of their existence. I added small red berries to the tin. Recently, I tried to dig it up. I wouldn't have cared about such a fanciful idea if it hadn't been for my daughter, who was captivated by the thought of unearthing my old story. She called it a "time capsule." Thirty years ago seemed truly ancient to her eleven-year-old mind. Together, we spent time clearing nettles and brambles, digging shallow holes. There was no sign of the tin. Yet once I started, my determination to find it grew

stronger than my daughter's and the memory of that buried tale of magical forest dwellers felt all the more real and mysterious.

In my twenties, before I had kids, I returned to the soil—a first since those childhood days in my secret patch of forest. I volunteered to spend a few weeks digging trenches for water pipes in a village in Peru. I wasn't much of a labourer, but it felt liberating to step out of the life I knew, the "me" I was accustomed to. Upon arrival in Peru, we were welcomed with traditional dance. We then shared a communal meal, sitting in a circle on the bare earth, surrounded by mud-brick houses and sun-drenched vegetation. In the village, there was no running water, and we slept in an adobe hut. An elder told us he was proud to share their way of life with us, which was a lot for a Western mindset to process: a barefoot man in an impoverished, desolate landscape had something to teach us about how to live.

One evening, the locals cooked potatoes beneath the earth, in a smoldering fire covered by soil; I was stunned to see that food could be cooked that way. Near the end of my two-week stay, I sat on the hillside, gazing at the mountain peak towering over the village. I felt as though I had fallen into another world—a magical place that might have otherwise remained invisible to me, *disappeared* as it were. It was all so thrillingly new yet familiar. I had worked alongside locals who offered prayers to Pachamama before breaking the ground with spades, and I struggled to understand how they viewed the earth as a living being, deserving of respect and reverence. It had taken time for me to break free from all that I was accustomed to, but now, looking out at this expansive world of soil and sun with an ancient language that had no written form, I felt present—I had finally arrived.

Years later, digging with my daughter in our little patch of ancient Ireland, I wondered at her deep respect for the natural world, despite my lack of wisdom to teach her. She worries about the climate crisis on hot days, and once again, I realize there's a lot I don't know. That day, we gave up digging for my story of a magical people insisting on not being lost to memory. Instead, we planted a tree together—a way to channel her fear-driven energy into something hopeful. We don't know any druids, but we attempted our own blessing to the four directions.

Both my childhood patch of wild Celtic forest and the village in Peru might be considered ugly by Western standards. The garden might've been seen as a neglected, ruinous place. The village in Peru would be deemed “undeveloped” and far from picturesque. For me, both carry treasures galore. And I remain hopeful that this younger generation of activists will return us to the wisdom of reconnection to the soil. That they will teach us how to live in balance with the earth—always recognizing when we've taken enough, knowing how to give back, and ensuring that our descendants will be born from the same earth we dig, cultivate, and play on today.

Anne Darcy

Such A Perfect Day

Amidst music and shrieks of laughter,
Conversations over and across, calls and shouts,
One sits quiet in the shade, eyes down.
He's a biggish boy in this crowd - say twelve?
And his right arm is in a cast.
Other boys his age are waving giant bubbles into being and then
popping them - BAM!
In the girls' faces, leaving their fringes soaking wet.
Mock fury and shoving, giggles.
This lone man sits alongside a younger girl cousin.
I look a question towards his arm
and she answers, matter-of-factly:
"He broke it. He cried and cried."
"I would've too," I say, and he looks sideways.
In his good hand, a brush that he's dabbing carefully against a
stone -- a most vibrant, luminous turquoise.
I look across the mat all the children have sat on today, the
detritus of a bog-standard acrylic set: red, blue, green, white,
black, ugly mustard yellow--all the life squeezed out of it, brushes
hardening with the bristles splayed.
"That's some colour," I say. He looks full at me for the first time
but says nothing. "How did you get it?"
There's a silence, and I think to myself, *He'll not answer.*
"I started with white," he says. I nod. "Then blue, and some green,
and then - " he pauses.
"Then?" I ask.
He shrugs, half grins. "It needed yellow," he says.

Paige Jennings



Gold Among the Brokenness

The young woman clung to me as though I had pulled her from the depths of the ocean. She sobbed in my arms, hiccuping through the heartbreaking news that her beloved foster mother had passed away in England. She hadn't been told until much later, and now, she was left without the chance to say goodbye. She hadn't been able to attend the funeral or grieve for the woman who had rescued her as a lost, abandoned teenager. She felt broken, adrift. A lost soul.

My friends and I brought her home. I made tea, tidied her chaotic kitchen, then sat beside her, encouraging her to share her story. Slowly, she settled. I stroked her hair and whispered reassurances, telling her that everything would be alright. It was a gift to bring comfort in such a fragile moment. It felt good to remain calm while walking alongside another person through their storm.

Where did those words I spoke come from? I've learned so much through my own struggles with darkness. Fifteen years ago, I was in a psychiatric hospital recovering from a massive breakdown.

My friends at Windsor House, where I stayed for two months, kept asking me why I was there. I worked in television; surely, I was immune to such things. I joked that one in five people get dandruff, and one in four experience mental health problems—thank God I didn't have dandruff.

Like many of the patients there, I had hit rock bottom, convinced that my life wasn't worth living. I carried personal struggles and the trauma of covering the death and destruction of the Troubles since I was twenty. But God is good. By managing my illness, staying compliant, and accepting help, I slowly began to heal. It took longer than I expected.

I was off work for almost a year. I wasn't wallowing in self-pity, but I lived with a deep fear that I would never return to being the capable mother, wife, daughter, and journalist I once was.

As I slowly pieced my life back together—like a jigsaw puzzle—I was dealt more devastating news. My husband, Johnny, was terminally ill. What had started as stomach spasms was quickly diagnosed as pancreatic cancer, one of the hardest diseases to treat.

Yet, amidst the turmoil, I found gold. I became Johnny's rock, and my own depression became secondary to the needs of my family. I was getting better, but Johnny never would, and I had to walk with him on his lonely, painful journey.

For eight months, I stayed by his side, supporting his mantra that he would beat this. I welcomed friends and family into our home, took him on outings until he could travel no more, and gave him the same compassion that had been shown to me when I was at my lowest ebb.

When death stares you in the face, you don't yearn for exotic holidays or grand adventures. You long for normality: familiar faces, familiar places, and the simple pleasures that will be gone too soon.

As Johnny slipped away, I held his hand while waiting for the ambulance. He looked at me and asked, "You won't leave me, will you?" I promised, "No, Johnny, I won't leave you—day or night."

His family gathered, and we held him, prayed, and watched as he peacefully slipped away. Then came people, so many people—the waves of love and support that followed carried me through the shock and grief of losing my husband. The Irish way of death is remarkably kind.

Since then, I've helped my elderly parents navigate the trials of dementia and find care homes before they passed. It still astonishes me that, of their seven children, I was the one who took charge—found the right homes, arranged the 24/7 care. It felt good to be capable again. I don't take it for granted.

My grown children had emigrated, and I fell in love with an Australian man. I moved to the other side of the world, started a new

life in Wauchope, Australia, where I ran a country newspaper and became an integral part of the community, which I grew to love.

When my relationship broke down, I moved in with my best friend. Together, we learned rock and roll dancing, bought pretty frocks, and attended festivals across New South Wales. We hosted dinner parties where I played the guitar, and we sang and danced until the early hours.

But Home beckoned. I returned to Belfast just weeks before the pandemic. The life I envisioned upon my return didn't unfold as expected, but I've survived—and thrived.

I even completed a creative writing course and found a new tribe of writers, advocates, and healers.

And now, here I sit, in a Belfast café, inspired by my fellow writers to tell *the rest of the story*, discovering for myself that gold—my gold—that makes the broken bowl stronger and even more beautiful than it was before.

Letitia Fitzpatrick

A Room I Really Know Is...

A room where I laugh and I cry,
A space where I can simply be me,
A room that holds my vulnerability.
A room immersed in God's presence,
Where prayer and praise fill the air,
A room where my children bond with me,
A place of love, of memories we share.
A room where I can meditate on His Word,
Where body and soul find perfect peace,
A room that erases all shame,
And soothes with comfort, love, and release.
A room I really know is...
A place where I long to be,
A room that fills my heart with joy,
A space I'll forever cherish deeply.

Christiana Abosede Olujomoye

Freedom

From brokenness and sorrow,
I've found hope.
I've found strength.
I've found kindness and inspiration.
I've discovered self-respect and self-worth.
I've found my way.
I've found my voice.
I've learned to trust my mind, my body, my soul.
I've found light in a vast sea of darkness.
I've found love I never knew existed—
A love I never received before, but learned to give myself.
I've found an acceptance I will always protect.
I've found me.
My true and loving self.
My freedom.

Stephanie Lopez-Herfield



A Room I Really Know

In the heart of Lagos, Nigeria, stood a humble brick house that housed a family of nine. Among them was a young girl named Modupe—that's me! The youngest of seven siblings, and a twin, I shared one tiny room with all my brothers and sisters, my mother, and my grandmother.

Despite the cramped quarters and meagre possessions, that room overflowed with love, laughter, and happiness that defied the limitations of our circumstances. I cherished the nights listening to my grandmother's tales by flickering firelight and the meals cooked with love by her and my mother. That one room was our sanctuary, a place of joy, togetherness, strength, and solace.

As the years passed, tragedy struck—first my mother died, and two years later my grandmother followed. Their loss left a void that seemed irreparable. The once vibrant room grew empty and silent without our matriarchs. My siblings and I began to drift apart, each of us grappling with grief in our own way. Pride, sorrow, and unforgiveness weakened the bonds that had once held us together, and the voices of outsiders sowed further division.

Years went by. The room I knew—once filled with love and unity—became only a memory, as our once close-knit family grew estranged. Now a young woman with three beautiful children, I often found myself longing for those days of laughter that had once defined our lives. I reached out to my siblings, hoping to rekindle the bond that had sustained us in our youth. But the wounds of loss ran deep, and the walls between us proved hard to break. Still, I hold fast to the memory of that room—the cradle of my childhood, the wellspring of my fondest memories. Though my family has scattered and our ties have frayed, the love that once filled those walls remains etched in my heart. It stands as a testament to the enduring power of family, even in the face of loss and separation.

As I gaze upon that now-empty room, I vow to carry its love and laughter as a beacon of hope and resilience in the face of life's uncertainties. I pass these values on to my children, so that the spirit of that room lives on through them. Though we have drifted apart, the ties that bound us will forever endure—an indelible mark from the room I knew and loved.

Kehinde Ahmed

descendants

somewhere in our genes
is a glasshouse of geraniums

thriving in gentle inattention,
their colours blast lurid,
twentieth century salmon
and near neon red,
those sturdy balls of petals
that snap off when done.

Their descendants,
raised from slips,
still adorn windows, where
bluebottles bump against glass
and picked tomatoes ripen in the sun.

I breathe in their warming scent,
sweetly green and strident,
and then I'm with you all again,
in all the places we've ever lived.

Deirdre Hawthorne



Golden Repair (Kintsugi)

Broken, like Granny's most treasured,
irreplaceable delph smashed to smithereens.
A believer in cures, healing lakes, holy oils, relics
mitts and Faith healers I journeyed to Inniskeen.

Body, mind and spirit fragmented,
in need of much repair.
A debris ball in a tornado,
splintered pieces in a storm of despair.

I emerged from the little cottage recalibrated
on a mission to find my true self.
My scars became my roadmap in pursuit
of healing Granny's precious delph.

Slowly retracing my path through introspection
each scar illuminating like golden thread.
A tapestry of each battlefield, illnesses conquered,
survival, when told I should have been dead.

Grateful to the many physicians whose healing
hands stitched me together with golden glue.
To all who loved and prayed for me
your compassion was golden too.

But it was I this time made the golden joins,
each sliver, shard and wisp still fragile.
My own Kintsugi project, acceptances of cracks
and flaws enabling me to once again smile.

Like the wise men from the East,
I now understand the art of repair in gold:
In your brokenness you can emerge more beautiful
than before, a message to be shared and told.

Siobhán McCallin

The Rest of the Story

The Rest of the Story was created by Michael Patrick MacDonald, author of the New York Times Bestseller, *All Souls: A Family Story from Southie* and *Easter Rising: A Memoir of Roots and Rebellion*. MacDonald's thirty-four years of work—as a community organizer, Restorative Justice practitioner and writer—is anchored in his lived experience of poverty and personal loss to violence, the drug trade, and incarceration while growing up in South Boston's housing projects. Having learned to transform his own trauma to voice and agency through trauma-informed, survivor-led community organizing and having ultimately experienced the redemptive power of memoir-writing, he has developed this course to share the personal and community value of memory-work and story sharing.

The Rest of the Story was piloted in 2014 at Crittenton Women's Union (now Economic Mobility Pathways or EMPATH) with women in Greater Boston who were transitioning out of abuse and poverty. For several years, the curriculum was implemented at the Louis D Brown Peace Institute with survivors of homicide victims in Boston. Most recently, *The Rest of the Story* has been adopted by the Massachusetts Department of Youth Services, to develop a system-wide Parent Advisory Council from among parents of incarcerated youth. And this year, on the 50th Anniversary of Desegregation and Busing in Boston, we are working with multi racial cohorts of first-hand witnesses of that period of racial strife, which will result in a podcast of stories in 2025.

In Ireland, TRS has been implemented with cross-border “men’s sheds” in Fermanagh and Leitrim, as well as at Loughan House prison, an “open prison” in County Cavan. In 2019, as part of MacDonald’s Fulbright Scholar Award at Queen’s University, Belfast, *The Rest of the Story* was brought to Upper Springfield Road youth workers in West Belfast as well as to Participation and Practice of Rights. There, mental health advocates (both providers as well as survivors with lived experience) have used it as a grass-roots mutual aid tool, assisting in the development of a mental health advocacy coalition called the *New Script for Mental Health*. And in Dublin, the North East Inner City coalition (NEIC) is currently using TRS as part of a community development plan to train cohorts of trauma-informed youth workers who will be based at “Peacemaking Hubs” in a community impacted by generational poverty, substance use, and violence.

These groups come together via Zoom for quarterly transatlantic storytelling sessions as well as giving testimony in university courses, thus maintaining a network of global solidarity, inspiration, and strategy sharing.

For more info, see
www.michaelpatrickmacdonald.com

Afterword

“Life can only be understood backwards,” wrote the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. The same might be said of activism. Only in looking back do we begin to see the moments that shifted trajectories, opened new doors, and ignited movements.

For us, 2019 stands out as such a turning point in what is now approaching two decades of campaigning for a human rights-based, trauma-informed approach to mental health. At the time, we could not have imagined the global upheavals that were about to reshape our lives. Yet two encounters that year would continue to reverberate through our work and strengthen the movement that has since flourished in the North of Ireland and beyond.

The first was a visit from Professor Dainius Pūras, then UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health. Speaking on Belfast’s Shankill Road—a community profoundly marked by conflict and intergenerational trauma—he reminded us with clarity and urgency: “Little short of a revolution is needed in mental health.” The second was our introduction to Michael Patrick MacDonald and his transformative Rest of the Story programme, which placed storytelling and meaning making at the heart of healing and activism.

Storytelling has always been central to our campaign. It creates space for lived experience to challenge the outdated, medicalised, and individualised model of mental health—one that fails those in distress, their families, and even the frontline workers trying to hold a broken system together. Participating in Rest of

the Story deepened this commitment. It offered activists safe spaces of solidarity to share their stories, always with an eye toward reconnecting personal pain with social injustice. In recent years, trauma-informed approaches have gained visibility, but too often they risk being stripped of their roots in human rights and accountability. What inspired us in *Rest of the Story*—and what echoes through frameworks like the Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF), an alternative to the psychiatric, diagnostic model—is the insistence that personal distress is not a private misfortune, but a meaningful response to threat, trauma, and systemic injustice.

This anthology emerges from that conviction. The writings collected here are more than testimonies—they are acts of resistance, of truth-telling, and of imagining a different future. They remind us that activism is not only a matter of policy or protest, but also of reclaiming voice, dignity, rights and collective meaning. Within these pages are stories of pain and loss, of grief and survival, interwoven with the wisdom and humour that come from enduring and reclaiming what was once silenced. The *Rest of the Story* programme—and the anthology it has inspired—have been central to the rise of a movement of activists who, shaped by their experiences of pain and suffering, refuse to be silenced and embody a fierce collective determination to fight for a New Script for Mental Health.

Sara Boyce, Organiser, New Script for Mental Health

For more information about New Script for Mental Health go to
www.nlb.ie/campaigns/mental-health

*These voices roar with radiant, redemptive healing.
The Rest of the Story is very much needed—now more
than ever! Trauma busting draoícht.*

Damien Dempsey, Singer Songwriter

*I Am My Own Sun – is the title of one of the writings
here: and this book is radiant with truth, warming the
ground of being so that radical change might happen.
It honours the often painful process of pushing through
from the darkest of underselves into a flowering of
compassion. It reminds us of the power that language
has when a person tells their own tale— tell your own
story or someone will tell it for you and there's a good
chance they'll get it wrong. This is a deeply moving
read: my heart was broken and mended, often in the
same poem or story. I came away from reading these
testimonies stronger, changed.*

Paula Meehan, Poet & Playwright

*A beautiful, heartening testament to the transformative
powers of art and community!*

Louise Kennedy, Author, Trespasses



www.nlb.ie/campaigns/mental-health
www.michaelpatrickmacdonald.com/