

# **BLACK ICE**

**by Manuela Pacella**

*When dealing with the present, a continuous argument is not possible; the whole has to be assembled from fragments. It is the constellation, not the logical sequence, which produces the idea. Slavka Sverakova, 1993*

## I. Those Green Hills

*First, the site. A Corridor between hills, a shallow trench rather than a valley.*

*The trench lies on the axis south west to north east, with high hills along the northern and western sides whose names form a litany; Black, Divis, Squires, Cave, Carnmoney.*

*To the south and east of the Lagan there is another steady roll of lower hills.*

**Belfast** is one of the few cities that can be taken in at a single view. David Brett (p. 19)



Belfast from "Those Green Hills". November 2013.  
[at the end of Cregagh Rd, after the A55, with Manse Rd behind]

I think I was 18. No, that can't be, it doesn't add up... I was at least 20.

My hot rod was a blue SH scooter. I went everywhere with it, it took me kilometres and kilometres away from Talenti, a suburban area of Rome. This is how I got to know Rome: the centre, the suburbs, at night, at dawn, in the heat, in the rain. That endless Via Nomentana to return home - I never ever managed to hit that famous streak of green lights.

A return home always framed by a tree-lined boulevard that takes my breath away even today.

That boulevard has always had the air of a Japanese print. Those trees, with their perpetually fresh foliage, create a green trellis that has always, in my imagination, referred back to the blooming apple trees of Proustian catharsis in *The Heart's Intermissions*. The only thing I've ever wanted to reproduce visually. In fact, I created an exhibition, or rather: I asked a few artists to illustrate that catharsis for me, yet none of them dared to represent those apple trees in bloom.

Anyway, where was I... Yes, my blue SH that was so "in" during the second half of the nineties and that, let's be honest, was a bit *pariolino*, snobby [disguised by me as "alternative"], it took me everywhere and often took us everywhere, me and a friend. My best friend at the time, who always sang his heart out with me on our rides, lived on the Serpentara. Incredible, even then I would always go to pick friends up and take them home. Deep down, I can say now it was a kind of syndrome of control – basically, I didn't trust anyone.

Just before getting to his house, it was almost dawn of a nearly-spring night, revving the gas at a green light, in a moment of suspension of all sound, I hear a chirp. That typical chirping that signals the end of an evening out for all the night owls. It distresses some, and makes others happy.

I don't know why, but that chirp spoke the language of separation and it told me that my first great love had gone. It had a revelatory ability that my conscious apparently didn't want to recognize. Since then, inevitably, that sound has become tinged with nostalgia, of the tender and sweet kind. It neither distresses me nor makes me happy, it simply always takes me back to that exact moment: the green light, the gas, my great friend behind me, a few seconds of silence and then... that flash of sound.

*As to place, let us say only that it seems to be somewhere in the northern hemisphere. As to time, this is even more difficult: not only because time itself is of its nature a fluid: nor merely because the City often seems to exist in an alternative stream of history: but mostly because, in the time-dimension, the City seems constantly to be slipping and sliding backwards, and never quite able to make up what it has somehow lost.* Albert Rechts (p. 9)

So shall we talk about that? About birds I mean?

There are amongst the animals that have most frequently tried to tell me things and now I swear by them.

*There, by the overflowing litterbin, a mature turdus merula with a Twix wrapper clamped tightly in its beacon-bright orange beak; the gold and red of the wrapper, together with the colour of the bird's beak, suit each other well. I wonder if the bird has actually eaten the Twix, or just likes the look of the wrapper. I'd like to see the nest that that wrapper becomes woven into: shiny.* Maria Fusco (p.45)

We went inside. It was one of the first vacations. The house in the mountains.

It only happened that one time but, like all the house floods that characterized our relationship in 9 years, I can say that we understood immediately that this was not a good sign at all. But we never said it clearly, only thought it.



All the windows of the house had the signs of a great struggle between life and death. A few birds, having entered from the fireplace (or fallen from the nest of a careless mama bird?) had tried in every way to escape through the windows of a closed-up house, uninhabited for months. I don't know why we always left the shutters halfway closed. Taken by the light they smashed, smashed, smashed... but the closed-up house had become their cage, and then their grave.

I don't remember how many there were. I left him to deal with them, like in every situation of death. I said I couldn't do it. Who could imagine that after that, one day, all I would have to do is take death, that bastard, in my hands give it a nice bang on the head. But, I did it. Sure, a bit bruised, but for the moment I had escaped.



Giovanni De Lazzari, detail of *Il cimitero dei commedianti*, 2014. Photo mounted on wood, 18x12,7x2 cm. Ed 1/3. Courtesy LaVeronica Arte Contemporanea, Modica (RG).

*When the bird eventually manages to stand up, it looks very confused and just stands there stock-still, blinking for some minutes. Can it remember how it got from the tree's branches to the ground? Was it pushed, or did it forget how to fly? M. F. (p. 46)*

How nice it is when animals play dead to protect themselves from an enemy. Now I remember that as a one of my favourite games was to play with our household cat, Virgola, who became anxious, paced around me, not knowing what to do, sniffing me. She nearly had panic attacks. Of course, what kind of game...

Once a swallow got my window mixed up with the sky and slammed into it. Obviously, one of my cats ran to get it, but I managed to pull it out of its mouth before it could break its neck. But the swallow played dead, enclosed in my hands. When I opened them, it defecated in fear and flew away. A huge relief, because I had never before been able to save any animal, once caught by my cat.

Recently, a bird confused the sky with my window again; this is why I always lower the shades; which is difficult to explain to a virtual stranger who doesn't accept others' habits. A loud sound, a thud, while I was making the morning's coffee, left a stain on the glass, the stain of a warm body on a cold and hard surface; just like in the mountains, so many years before. No, not a good sign. I didn't find the bird but I followed its advice straightaway. Why wait? Times flies when the first life is gone.

**You Tube video [Cardinal Flying Into Window Again and Again](#)**

*Counting its suburbs, its outliers, and its dormitories, the City has a population of around half a million humans; about the same numbers of rats; a rather smaller number of cats, dogs, parrots and budgies; a much larger number of bed-bugs, fleas, bluebottles and cockroaches. A. R. (p. 11)*

Oh God... what a shudder I get from cockroaches. And the stag beetle? I get that it's rare to see it and beautiful but I've seen it one too many times.

That morning that I squashed a cockroach with my foot.

The satisfaction of being able to get crickets and huge spiders out of the house, alone, with your eyes closed. The price of having plants.

Even Arturo, my black and white cat, was afraid of a mantis "daughter" on the terrace. Well... who can blame him. Animal instinct. That one made her own self extinct from my terrace; she ate not only her partner during intercourse but I think even her offspring, or so Wikipedia informed me.

*The City is bounded to the north by a mountain range of high fantastic pinnacles of hard black basalt. (...) The tumbled plateau beyond the mountains affords a measure of shelter from the icy winds which, in winter, rush down from the polar north.*

*However, in exchange, it attracts a shroud of murky cloud which too often strays southward and clings clammily to the northern quarters of the City.*

*To the east, the sea: grumbling, ebbing, flowing, sometimes overflowing, in the narrow channel of its fjord. A. R. (p. 11)*



At one point I saw a lot of foxes. One even during the day, who stopped and watched us for a long, long time and yawned. It had its portrait taken and it left.



The Fox, Monte Sirente, Abruzzo, Italy. Summer 2011.

*To the south, rolling hills and downland, punctuated by the strong farms of stout loyal yeomen; then broad inland lakes; then a sky-high range of rounded granite mountains whose peaks are usually hidden from the City by cloud. Beyond those mountains, another country: to some of the people of the City, a Promised Land; to others, a foreign and menacing Unfriendly Power.*

*To the westward, the valley floor with its winding river leading to the mysterious and sinister interior.*

*The arena, tier upon tier, contour upon contour, looking down upon the open stage which is the heart and the centre of the City. A. R. (p. 12)*

It wasn't a dream; I swear, two times, with two different people, that at the cathartic shriek of a nighthawk from the top of the mountain, clouds and bad weather arrived.

*A familiar feeling. Not entirely unpleasant.*

*Belfast has this way of raining that's peculiarly Northern Irish. I've never been soaked anywhere else the way I've been soaked here. It's subtle. It's persistent. It's drenching. M. F. (p.53)*

Frightened, the first time we ran away and saw a surge of lightning.



In memory of that lightning. Abruzzo, Italy 2000.

*People and cars have learnt to deal with this relentless patter. They have short lives. They decay rapidly. They expire before their time. Both, however, have developed long memories to compensate, tracking their way back and forth across a saturated city that's really too small to be a city at all. M. F. (p.53)*



The second time, instead, a white wolf came close, David Lynch-style.



Emiliano Maggi, *Jack London*, 2011, oil on paper, 100x70 cm.

*Third: there is also a Belfast weather and a Belfast light. Unpredictable in the extreme, shifting three seasons in the course of a day.*

*The light, in consequence, changes by the hour and either blinds us or obscures, and obscures by its brightness. D. B. (p. 19)*



The Belfast light. Winter 2011.

Look how many birds are on those roofs. Like the Roman starlings... but we're not in Rome, no, we're in Milan. But they're big, are they pigeons? I don't know. My mother, as usual, sees beauty in their taking shelter from the rain right on our window, but doesn't fully understand what kind of calm we need.

Finally the relatives leave us alone. I have yet to understand why they're all convinced that their presence does us good. They make me nervous.

The noises of their little feet on the window in the end comfort me/us and I dream that the girl and I go away, we take the liberty of going out, with those absurd nightshirts that they forced us to wear, even if we have to wait hours, and we walk hand in hand. It was a really nice dream, that one. I believe that you, that girl whose name I didn't even want to know, have had the same dream. I'm sure of it. An intimacy that will link us together forever, for this reason we didn't want to exchange contact details.



Impossible view and birds. Patients' Room, IEO, Milan, Italy. 2014.

*The City, physically if not spiritually, enjoys a temperature climate.*

*The amphitheatre of the City is roofed and ceilinged by an ever-changing kaleidoscopic canvas of over-sailing clouds against a farthest blue.*

*The people of the City are well acclimatised to rain.*

*Its absence for a longer-than-usual dry spell sets their nerves on edge, and gives rise to almost sexual tensions.*

*Within historic memory, no tidal waves, earthquakes or tsunamis; nor is there any active volcano near the City; which, in truth, has no need of one. A. R. (pp. 21-22)*

An April morning. My sister is driving. I open the window. On the Lungotevere. There's traffic. I feel her pain, her incredible never-managed anxiety. I'm sorry. I am the cause of everything and I'm the one that, deep down, is suffering the least. I open the window, a lovely breeze comes in, I lean my face into it and the wind attempts to tussle my short fringe. I don't hear the noise of the traffic any more, I don't feel the anxiety of my sister.

I only feel that wind in my hair, and I feel a profound sense of peace.

I think of the bird's chirp of that dawn and I feel the same sweet nostalgia. Nostalgia of life, but sweet, beautiful. I savour the end but then I think: "What if I never saw a bird fly again?" I sink back into reality and I tell myself that deep down, I still want to be here.

*There is a propaganda drive to make Belfast appear normal, and this is lead by retail interests and their architecture: well and good! But at the same time the population has become even more divided into sectarian segments, or increasingly separated by gates. Architecture and planning are absolutely powerless to prevent this because the problem is political, and beyond that, constitutional, and beyond that, ultimately, a question of legitimacy. Belfast is not and can never be a normal city until all its citizens can walk all its streets. D. B. (p. 26)*

Here's why. Because I fell in love with this absurd city [Belfast] and because over the years this emotional correspondence between her and me has resonated ever more.

Those that have taken that bastard [death] in their hands many times, and many times they have given it a good bang in the head.

Those green hills in the distance make her so beautiful, special, dreamy, with their rainbows, that light... Those open wounds at every step. A city that, if you go around with your chin held high, lets you see the blue and green, but if you insist on walking with your head down it will tear you apart at every turn. Unfortunately, like many Romans, I've taken to walking with my head down, to avoid potholes and, especially, the countless droppings from dogs belonging to owners more doglike than they are. Could it be for this reason that I don't love dogs? They remind me of their owners?

#### References:

Albert Rechts, *Handbook to a Hypothetical City*, The Lilliput Press, Gigginstown, Mullingar (Ireland), 1986.

David Brett, *Geologies of site and settlement* in Nicholas Allen & Aaron Kelly, *The Cities of Belfast*, Four Court Press, Dublin 2003, pp. 19-26.

Maria Fusco, *The Mechanical Copula*, Sternberg Press, Berlin 2010.



## II. Black Ice

*'Belfast, I live and breathe you. Belfast, you are etched deep within my soul. Belfast I have become you and carry the stink of your corpse like a cause'. A.F.N. Clarke (in Aaron Kelly, p. 173)*



During a very British breakfast in the dining room of a B&B in North Belfast, lit up by Nordic winter sunlight, I was chatting with my travel companion, probably trying to convince her to eat something, in the minimum respect for a tradition that seemed very important in those four walls. But she by then had already taken on the wrong attitude, of closed-mindedness, of disgust. Her judgments were becoming ever more frequent and biting, especially when compared to my enthusiasm. In fact, they often followed immediately after my joyous exclamations in a clear and shrewd way. More than judgments, they were prejudices. I understood this. She, perhaps, never understood.

I realize that I can go overboard with my enthusiasm, but she seemed to want to kill it before it even took form. But I had already been through that. I had been born with that kind of mental closure, in the guise of healthy reason. By then, however, I was back in touch with myself and I had no intention whatsoever of leaving again. That enthusiasm was the first clue to my true realization.

*The history of the island of Ireland consists of several phases and is characterized by countless military invasions by external populations. Wikipedia*

From the window I see a couple go out from the entrance of the B&B.

*The Viking invasion and extended stay, however, did not change the religious attitude of Ireland...* Wikipedia

The woman, as soon as she puts her foot out the door, slips and falls to the ground.

*The particular geographic proximity of Ireland to Great Britain has always favoured the presence of the English on Irish soil.*

*The first significant contact between the two peoples came in 1170, when a group of Normans from Wales arrived in Ireland, with devastating consequences to the Gaelic world.*

*Very soon, however, the Normans assimilated into the culture of the place.* Michela Arienti (p. 5)

They call it *Black Ice*. A treacherous ice, because it can't be seen.

It was the last day of our short stay in Belfast.

On that very day, I had decided it was necessary to begin to understand and we plunged, with a useless map, into the North of the city.

*Maps petrify the potential for historical transformation. By rendering a cultural space static, they are inherently past-tense, because the present, for Carson, is dynamically open to the future...* Alan Gillis (p.185)

We walked very slowly, grabbing onto whatever we found along the way: grates, gates, trees.

*The English kings tried in vain to stop the process of assimilation, even stopping mixed marriages, prohibiting the adoption of Irish clothing and hairstyles, the use of Gaelic and the use of Irish law by those that were considered "Englishmen born in Ireland".* M.A. (p.5)

The situation was really peculiar. Beautiful light. Snow on the peaks around the city. The constraint of a careful step and watchful eye. The very few cars on the road went even slower than we did. Very often, however, we met children who played happily on those slippery paths, taking advantage of the ice.



*The Gaelic Irish and the old English, in any case, did not convert, but continued to profess Catholicism and opposed the officials of the Crown and the English settlers recently arrived on the island. M.A. (p.5)*

The night before, I had checked online for the right streets to take or, better yet, where to find the Peace Lines, the famous barriers that divide the Protestant communities from the Catholic ones.

No one, in fact, despite our requests, had brought us to see them yet.

*The vast bulk of those who had never known a life in Belfast without the Troubles, simply switched off. They effectively dumped the past and now inhabit the strobe-lit present with extraordinary fervour: and who would blame them? Gerlad Dawe (p. 201)*

At the time, I was only at the beginning.

Even today, I'm surprised to discover how many kinds of walls and how many zones there are, how many areas can't be crossed.

Everything is so fragmented and really incomprehensible for a foreigner, especially on the first visit.

*In the Troubled Times of three to four centuries ago, the then town was fortified: girt about with stone-faced walls, twenty feet high, with inner wall-walks, guarded gates, and polygonal bastions. Although these walls were, by degrees, dismantled over the years at the instance of over-optimistic men of commerce, they have in more modern Troubled Times reappeared in slightly different guise, but along almost precisely the old lines. Now they take the form of tall steel arrow-tipped railings, topped by coils of barbed wire, interrupted at intervals by heavily padlocked gates for ingress; and clattering seven-foot turnstiles for egress; so that the innermost circle of the city can be garrisoned, isolated, and protected from intruders.*

*There are, scattered throughout the City, other defensive structures of various kinds and degrees of permanence. At some periods, the citizenry in their embattled enclaves have built barricades of paving-stones and cars, lorries and omnibuses, often burned or burning, around the sacred boundaries of the indicated territory. Such obstacles have mostly been transitory. More permanent, more linear, are the Eirenic Walls staking out the boundaries between tribal homelands. Sometimes, these are high corrugated-iron fences. In such cases, they may (on both sides) provide the groundwork for the embellishments of graffitists. Elsewhere, they have become genuine walls, usually of brick, often as much as fifteen feet high, usually treated with some form of surface graffiti-deterrent; intended accordingly to shield and protect those who must live, so to speak, in the shadow of the wall, from the greater exuberance and pugnacity of those who live on what must be (by definition) its upper side. Albert Rechts (p.13-14)*

Later I understood that I would never completely comprehend. But I have always felt a great empathy for the city and partially, piece by piece, I started to grasp it, even if, just when I am most sure, everything gets away from me again and becomes confused. This chaos, this blurred vision, this puzzle seems to compose itself in a different way every time. But I'm starting to put the crucial points into focus. Maybe.

*One of the events that has most influenced Irish history up to the present was the so-called "Plantation" (1608-1610), the systematic transfer of English and Scottish settlers into various zones of Ireland in order to consolidate English rule. The new settlers, mostly Protestant, were placed mainly in the Counties of Tyrone, Donegal, Derry, Armagh, Cavan and Fermanagh (Ulster), depriving the local population of the lands and forcing it to take refuge in the hinterlands. M.A. (p.5).*

The first time, I just flushed out – stubbornly, given the hostile day, and surrounded by indifference – which streets could absolutely not be missed. I headed towards Shankill Rd, with the help of the map and with a travel companion close behind who, perhaps, that very day decided that she would never again be submitted to such a systematic study of suffering.

I, however, had missed it. I had been atrophic and anesthetized for too long.

*The walls of the City of Derry-Londonderry were constructed between 1613 and 1618 to protect the English and Scots settlers in the new town that was established here as a part of the Plantation of Ulster.*

*James I of England ordered this colonisation of Ulster with loyal, Protestant subjects in order to bring this rebellious Gaelic region firmly under the control of the English crown, following the defeat of the Gaelic lords in the Nine Years' War (1594-1603) and the Flight of the Earls in September 1607. NIEA's Guide (p.3)*





That condition has never been part of me. Above all, I have especially always known that it's not good for you; that sooner or later the traumas, if removed, will re-emerge. You can't sedate them, in fact, you must dominate them.

*In 1611 The Honourable The Irish Society was founded to take charge of the plantation, and in particular to oversee the settlement at Derry, and financing was obtained from the City of London to build the walls. Today the walls are still owned by The Honourable The Irish Society. NIEA (p.3)*



And here we are.

We are in front of the **Crumlin Road Courthouse**. I found out a lot about this place afterwards, including how they are desperately trying to sell it. Obviously they can't.

It is the picture of everything. Walking along side it, observing it in its abandon, in its wounds, it seems to be overcome by a huge amount of sentiments and sensations: uneasiness, curiosity, suffering, anger.

The silence around it is deafening. That ice and that light make that moment unique, the start of my affection for this place.





*In 1641, a rebellion broke out in Ulster, organized by the Gaelic Irish and the old English, Catholic, in order to recover the lands that had been expropriated from them. The revolt escalated into violence and brutality against the English settlers. It was a historically important event: for the first time, Irish Catholics had risen up in the name of the Catholic cause. The division between the two communities of different religions was emerging. M. A. (p.6)*

We carry on. We find ourselves very near Shankill Rd. We are struck, again, by the absence of humans. Then, by the types of houses. Then, by the many churches that seem to be closed.

Again the picture of something escapes us, from a time we don't even know.



*In August 1649, Oliver Cromwell disembarked in Ireland and violently took control of the island. It is estimated that, in his raids, more than a quarter of the Irish population was massacred. The lands owned by the Irish were expropriated and distributed among English soldiers and the new settlers, while the Irish were forced to emigrate west of the river Shannon (Act of Settlement).*

*The subsequent victory of William of Orange over James II, the Catholic King, had a catastrophic effect on the lives of the Catholic community: at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, only 14% of land belonged to Catholics and, through the "Penal Laws", they were denied access to property or political power. M. A. (p.6)*

We desperately want to take a break. To stop for a moment. To rest our legs and our eyes.

In what seemed to be a neighbourhood literally without a soul around, we enter a prefab and find ourselves in a place where there is everything: cafés, a theatre... and, above all, people, mostly children and teenagers. Is it a parish?

**The Battle of the Boyne** was fought in 1690 between two rival claimants of the English, Scottish, and Irish thrones – the Catholic James VII & II and the Protestant William III and II – across the River Boyne near Drogheda on the east coast of Ireland. The battle, won by William, was a turning point in James's unsuccessful attempt to regain the crown and ultimately helped ensure the continuation of Protestant ascendancy in Ireland.

The battle took place on 1 July 1690 in the "old style" (Julian) calendar. This was equivalent to 11 July in the "new style" (Gregorian) calendar, although today its commemoration is held on **12 July**, on which the decisive Battle of Aughrim was fought a year later. William's forces defeated James's army of mostly raw recruits. The symbolic importance of this battle has made it one of the best-known battles in the history of the British Isles and a key part of the folklore of the Orange Order. Its commemoration today is principally by the Protestant Orange Institution. Wikipedia



Who knows where we are. Who knows what exactly it is or what function it has for the community. I'll never know, but maybe it's not so important.

Great fires are built, too, as a mode of communal celebration.

At certain seasons, and at the time of certain feasts, these fires assume astonishing proportions.



*However that may be, on a stated name-day, throughout the Mongol quarters of the City, enormous bonfires blaze all night at every street corner.*

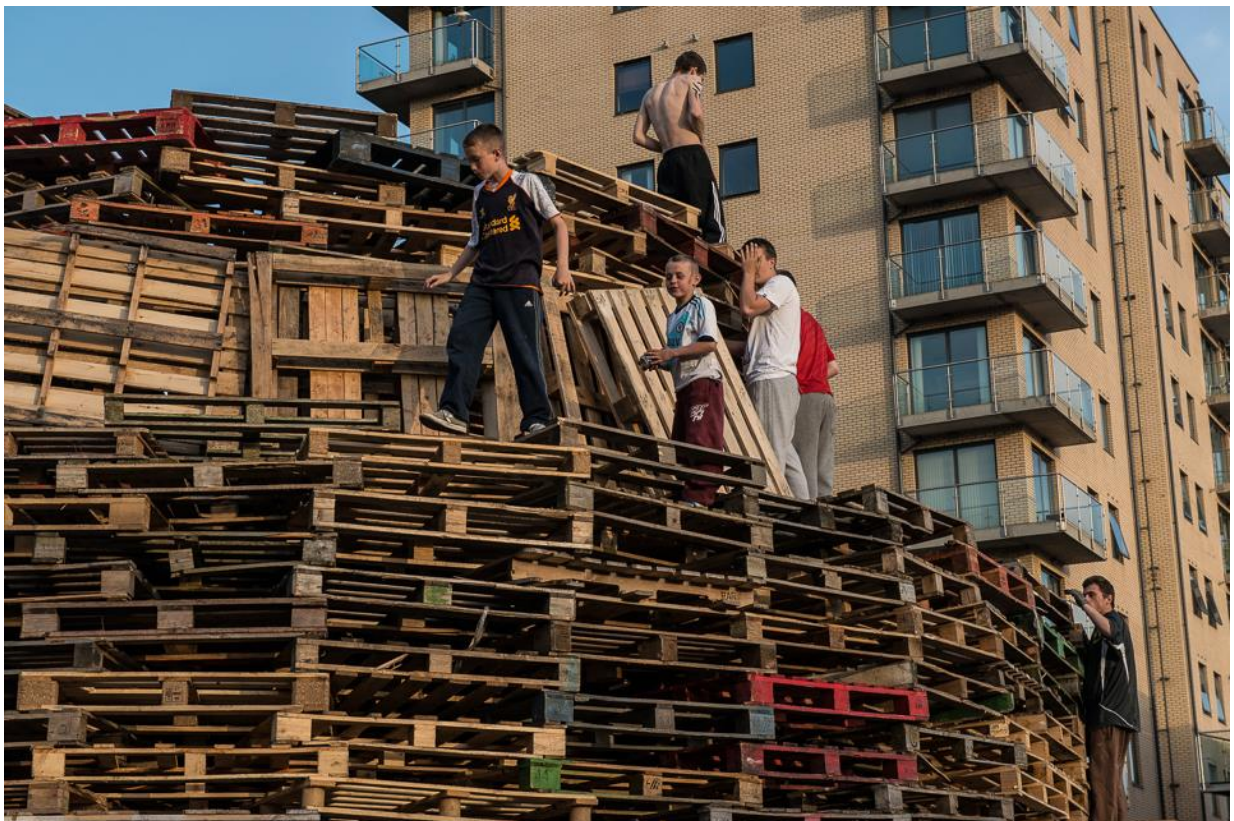


*Their construction takes many weeks: they may tower twenty or thirty feet tall, built by children and adolescents of the quarter out of old chests and boxes, beams and rafters, motor tyres, broken furniture and strayed sofas, paper, and the branches or even trunks of growing trees.*





*Small boys, fallen asleep on sentry-duty, are in many years thus roasted alive in their nests.*



*In most years, a perceptible number of citizens – adults, adolescents or children – will be mutilated, or charred, or lose their lives, or their homes, or their belongings, as a result of these bonfires (or malfires). A. R. (pp.31-32)*





We go on, following the map.

We want to see the other street, of course. Falls Road.

*The failure of a revolt organized in 1798 by the United Irishmen alarmed the London government, which then decided to abolish the Irish Parliament.*

*Through the "Union Act" (1800), Westminster regained the power to legislate on Irish matters. M.A. (p.7)*

We turn the corner and, astonished (this time she is, too), we find ourselves in front of a wall.

The first Belfast wall that I saw is one of the most disturbing and violent.

Tall, dark, long.

The map shows streets that, in reality, are quite clearly broken.

Around us, there are many small fenced areas, in a clear state of neglect.

We nearly panic. Now what do we do?



*Daniel O'Connell, who in 1823 founded the "Catholic Association"... M. A. (p.8)*





We encounter reality, more absurd than a dream.

A taxi stops in front of the wall and lets two tourists out, who take photographs in front of a few famous murals and leave again.

We chase after the taxi. It stops. We ask the driver how to get to the other side.

He tells us simply to follow the wall; at some point we would find a gate.

And so it was.

An enormous gate with the doors open.



*Between 1845 and 1849, the island was hit with famine: more than a million Irish people died and many others emigrated, all to the indifference of the London government. M. A. (pp.8-9)*

In fact, in the late afternoon, they still close them.

*The fear of losing privileges they had enjoyed up to then made the Protestants organise a Convention, in which they declared themselves against any attempt to break the bond with Great Britain. **The Unionist Movement was born.***

*James Connolly organised the Irish Republican Socialist Party and Arthur Griffith founded the newspaper United Irishman, which supported the theory of the so-called “**Sinn Féin**” (Only Us). M. A. (pp.11-12)*

Some of them don't even know, they deny the reality of where they live.

It's true however, even though there are no longer police around the gates, the doors are closed every evening.

*The unionists were opposed to any form of self-government, fearing, through the creation of the **Ulster Volunteer Force** (the paramilitary branch of the Orange Order), even the use of armed force.*

*The pressing threats of the unionists made the London government nervous, and it agreed, with the support of the conservative party, to exclude the six Counties of Ulster, where the Protestant population was largest, from the application of the Home Rule.*

*Not all the nationalists accepted the political compromise proposed by the Irish parliamentary party, and a group of dissidents created the Irish Volunteers, better known as the **Irish Republican Army (I.R.A.)** M. A. (pp.12-13)*



IRA, 1922.

The gates are closed every night.  
And I have to repeat it over and over, to accept it.  
Just like all the other things that are considered normal here.

*April 24, 1916 was a crucial date in Irish history. Some revolutionaries, led by James Connolly and the poet Padraig Pearse, staged an uprising in Dublin, known to history as the **Easter Rising**.*

*The news of the death of the leaders of the revolt stained the conscience of the people... Many nationalists abandoned their support of the parliamentary party and joined the Fenian cause. M. A. (pp.13-14)*



Dublin, *Easter Rising*, 1916.

To go to Donegal, a coastal region of the Republic of Ireland geographically located to the North, they say: let's go South.

*It was a commonly heard and wearisomely repeated joke in Derry in the 1930s that people heading to Inishowen, the most northerly part of Donegal, would say, 'We're going south politically but north geographically'. Sean McMahon (p.13)*

They have several kinds of North Irish pounds.





*In 1918 general elections were held and the Sinn Féin, under the leadership of De Valera, won seventy-three seats, against twenty-six won by the unionists.*

*Following pressure from the liberal party, the government issued the **Government Ireland Act** in 1920, which dictated the division of the island into two separate legal entities and the institution of different parliaments and executive branches. M. A. (pp.14-15)*

*Derry is so close to the border with the Republic of Ireland that after just 2 kilometers, the euro is used. A text message pops up on your mobile phone with the enthusiastic announcement that you are in Ireland!*

***[The First] Bloody Sunday** was a day of violence in Dublin on 21 November 1920, during the Irish War of Independence. In total, 31 people were killed – fourteen British, fourteen Irish civilians and three republican prisoners.*

*The day began with an Irish Republican Army (IRA) operation organised by Michael Collins to assassinate the Cairo Gang, a team of undercover agents working and living in Dublin. Twelve were British Army officers, one a member of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) and the last a civilian informant.*

*Later that afternoon, Black and Tans of the Royal Irish Constabulary, supported by members of the Auxiliary Division, opened fire on the crowd at a Gaelic football match in Croke Park, killing fourteen civilians. That evening, three IRA suspects in Dublin Castle were beaten and killed by their captors, allegedly while trying to escape. Wikipedia*

**A clip from the film [Michael Collins](#) (1996)**



We go through the gate and we are in Falls Rd., on the other side.



On December 6, 1921, the **Anglo-Irish Treaty** was signed, which established that twenty-six of the thirty-two Counties that would make up the **Irish Free State**.

As for the six Counties located in the northeast of the island, the sovereignty of the Irish Free State was suspended pending the decision of the population, earmarked to be two thirds Protestant, as to whether to adhere to the new State. The will of the people was expressed against this possibility and, in 1925, the Boundary Commission confirmed this choice.



The Irish negotiating team who signed the Treaty.  
Michael Collins is in the centre, with his head down.

***Ireland was divided.*** M. A. (p.15)

That same day I returned to Rome.

My heart stayed on there, in that space between Shankill and Falls, between Protestants and Catholics, between the murals, between the memorials with dates and names unknown to me, slipping and sliding on desolate streets, surrounded by breathtaking nature.

*'Belfast, I live and breathe you. Belfast, you are etched deep within my soul. Belfast I have become you and carry the stink of your corpse like a cause'*. A.F.N. Clarke

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### III. The Gates



*Dying Gaul*, Roman marble copy of a lost bronze Greek sculpture, c. 220 B.C.E., Hellenistic Period, Capitoline Museum, Rome.

*Illness is the night-side of life...*  
Susan Sontag (p.3)

I have to massage my right breast for at least 5 minutes a day.  
But 5 minutes is a lot...  
Think of it as a meditative act!

***Apprentice Boys of Derry:*** One of the Protestant loyal orders set up to commemorate the Siege of Derry and named after the apprentices who closed the city gates against the besieging forces. The Apprentice Boys hold two main marches in Derry every year, in August and December. Adrian Kerr (Glossary)

How do I do that?

*The view of cancer as a disease of the failure of expressiveness condemns the cancer patient.*  
S. S. (p.49)

My thoughts slip into the past.

***B Specials/Ulster Special Constabulary (USC):*** The USC were a 100 per cent unionist police reserve force set up after partition. The A and C Specials were soon disbanded, but the part-time B Specials, a notoriously sectarian force, was not disbanded until 1970,

*when it was replaced by the equally sectarian Ulster Defence Regiment under the command of the British Army.*

A. K. (Glossary)

A massive sense of guilt comes over me. Towards myself, towards what I caused myself, towards something that tastes like a wilful castration of motherhood and its iconic gesture, breastfeeding.

*Nothing is more punitive than to give a disease a meaning – that meaning being invariably a moralistic one.*

S. S. (p.59)

Fortunately this mutilation is only partial.

*The difference between sanatoria (that is, exile) and surgery (that is, crematoria).*

S. S. (p.83)

**CS Gas:** *Form of tear gas used by the RUC and British Army in the North during riots in the late 1960s and early 1970s.*

A. K. (Glossary)

Then I look at the other breast, which now looks so strange, so absurd.

So, do I have to massage this one, too?

**Dáil/ Dáil Éireann:** *Parliament of the Republic of Ireland.*

A. K. (Glossary)

Actually it seems like it needs it.

Compared to the right one, it seems almost emptied out; even though it's the real one.

**Democratic Unionist Party (DUP):** *Hardline unionist political party formed by Ian Paisley in 1971. Currently the largest unionist party in the North.*

A. K. (Glossary)

Before, it was the part of me that I loved the most; or, the only part that I had always accepted.

I was almost proud of it.

**Internment:** *Imprisonment without charge or trial, used against nationalists and republicans by the Stormont Government in every decade of its existence from the 1920s to the 1970s.*

A. K. (Glossary)

So?

You got yourself a disease that took away your only pride?

*Evoking a manic-depressive character type almost the opposite of that forlorn, self-hating, emotionally inert creature, the contemporary cancer personality.*

S. S. (p.54)

Maybe this way you're forced to appreciate the rest.  
The rest. A body that has never felt part of me.

*Patients who are instructed that they have, unwittingly, caused their disease are also being made to feel that they deserved it.*  
S. S. (p.56)

Now the only part in which I have almost no sensitivity is that one, the right breast, especially the area around the armpit and under the arm, where the drainage was, where they took out the famous Sentinel Lymph Node.  
What an absurd name. What a beautiful name. That Sentinel was healthy.

***Irish Republican Army (IRA):*** *Irish republican military organisation set up to fight against British rule in Ireland. The name was first used in Ireland during the 1916 rising (although it had previously been used during a brief skirmish on the American-Canadian border in 1866). The IRA split in 1969 (see below).*  
A. K. (Glossary)

Here's another sense of guilt. Towards all the women that didn't save the all-important lymph of their arms.

***Loyalists:*** *General term used for those who wish to retain the constitutional link with Britain and are prepared to resort to violent means to do so. Mainly Protestant.*  
A. K. (Glossary)

Can I be the only one? The only one to have her arm safe and sound? To have her life completely sound, without even one hormone treatment through her mouth?

***Nationalists:*** *General term used for those who wish to re-unite Ireland using constitutional (non-violent) methods. Mainly Catholic.*  
A. K. (Glossary)

Sometimes I wake up with a start.  
The anxiety that comes, comes from afar. It's the sum of all my anxieties, of an entire life. Then, luckily, I remember the anxiety of death, and I calm down. That, I no longer have. It's gone. For this reason I believe I will never again suffer from panic attacks. As I feel them arriving, I dominate them, like puppies.

***Northern Ireland Civil Right Association (NICRA):*** *Formed in January 1967, the Northern Ireland Civil Right Association (NICRA) 'evolved from a diverse set of political aims and ideals which slowly came together to forge a unity based on a common frustration with unionism, a broad rejection of crude nationalism and a growing awareness of the need for an effective vehicle for political and legislative reform'.*  
*Despite the organisation's origins, in a proposal forwarded by the Wolfe Tone Society, and later unionist accusations that NICRA was merely a front for active republicanism, the organisation was never republican, and for fourteen original NICRA committee members, only four were members of republican organisations.*  
*From 1967 to 1972, NICRA engaged in a programme of street demonstrations and civil disobedience demanding universal adult suffrage in all elections, an end to gerrymandering, allocation of housing on the basis of need, repeal of the Special Power Act and the disbandment of the B Specials, the ending of discrimination in employment*

*and, later, the ending of internment. NICRA's use of street protests as a tactic virtually ended after thirteen people were shot dead and a further eighteen injured on a NICRA-organised anti-internment march in Derry on 30 January 1972, Bloody Sunday.*

A. K. (Glossary)

And yet the jolt that awakes me is still there.

Sometimes it arrives because I'm suddenly aware of the loss, because of the the nostalgia for myself, for how I was.

Could it be that I liked myself so much?

**Official Irish Republican Army (OIRA):** *Formed after the IRA split in 1969, the OIRA was comprised of those who supported former IRA leader Cathal Goulding's attempts to steer the IRA towards a more left-wing political path and end abstentionism (refusal to take seats in London, Dublin or Belfast parliaments, or local councils, if elected). The OIRA declared a ceasefire in 1972.*

A. K. (Glossary)

Don't be ridiculous, you detested yourself!

That's an idea you have of yourself that goes back much further, to before it all happened, to when you were 22, or, even further, to your happy childhood, before the age of 9.

**Paras (Parachute Regiment):** *Elite parachute regiment of the British Army responsible for many deaths during the conflict in the North, including the Ballymurphy Massacre in Belfast and Bloody Sunday in Derry.*

A. K. (Glossary)

Someone told me recently that those who live through painful childhoods are better at surviving setbacks, in the end; and those who have happy childhoods less so.

**Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA):** *Formed after the IRA split in 1969, the PIRA was comprised of those who opposed the attempts to steer the IRA towards a more political path, believing that military tactics were still necessary. The PIRA was the largest republican paramilitary organisation in the North throughout the conflict.*

A. K. (Glossary)

I'm sometimes proud to see how often I've got back up.

**Republicans:** *General term used for those who wish to re-unite Ireland and are prepared to use military methods. Mainly Catholic.*

A. K. (Glossary)

Even though I'm so tired, even though this time it seems to take me longer, even though it seems like I'm fighting half-heartedly.

I feel like I'm in the same position as the *Dying Gaul* (although he is dying)... still on the ground, about to get up again, but putting a little too much effort into it.

And I always feel that pectoral muscle too much when I push...

**Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC):** *Police force in the North of Ireland, set up after partition and regarded by most nationalists and republicans as being a partisan unionist force. Renamed as the Police Service of Northern Ireland in 2001.*

A. K. (Glossary)

At other times, though, the jolt is from the sense of guilt towards all the other sick women that I would like to embrace, but I can't because, well, I feel guilty. How can I say to them that I escaped two of the most frightening things?  
And yet on my side I have age and amputation.  
It doesn't seem to be enough.

**Sinn Féin:** *Political wing of the IRA; its split in 1970 mirrored that of the IRA in 1969. The wing linked to the PIRA launched its political strategy in the aftermath of the hunger strikes in 1981 and is now the largest nationalist/republican party in the North. The wing attached to the OIRA eventually became The Workers' Party.*

A. K. (Glossary)

Are we sure I did the right thing?  
But am I the only case in the world?  
Or did I convince myself that I shouldn't take those pills? For 5 years?

*It is impossible to avoid damaging or destroying healthy cells (indeed, some methods used to treat cancer can cause cancer), but it is thought that nearly any damage to the body is justified if it save the patient's life.*

S. S. (p.67)

Last August, those 5 years seemed long, endless. And yet I scolded myself for not thanking my good fortune; I scolded myself, thinking about my various hospital roommates.

**Special Power Acts:** *Draconian legislation enacted by the Stormont Government in 1922 giving it extensive powers of repression.*

A. K. (Glossary)

The very idea made suicide seem like the only real option.  
And who committed suicide? The one closest to me, in that same long, long August.  
He understood my psychic danger, because he was in it up to his neck.

**Stormont Government:** *Term used to describe the one-party Unionist government parliament at Stormont in Belfast.*

A. K. (Glossary)

Why, though, did I not have any inkling of his loneliness, his depression? Why did I let him?

**Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF):** *Unionist/loyalist paramilitary organisation. Named after the organisation formed to fight Home Rule in 1912, it re-emerged in 1966 around the period of the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 rising and remained active throughout the conflict.*

A. K. (Glossary)

I was caught up in the selfishness of a genuine love that instead was sucking away my life.

**Ulster Unionist Party:** *Unionist political party that formed the government in the North from partition until 1972. Remained the largest unionist party in the North until it was overtaken by the DUP in the early part of the twenty-first century.*



A. K. (Glossary)

A devil of different forms. It seems like I've passed through purgatory and hell in the last three years, and there are still some hiccups. The beauty of it is that nothing surprises me any more.

**Unionists:** *General term used for those who wish to retain the constitutional link with Britain using non-violent methods. Mainly Protestant.*

A. K. (Glossary)

They seem like all the various aspects of my past that constantly tap at my back.

A disease and an infinite death. A need for love that screams from deep inside but will never have the courage to reveal itself. As soon as it reveals itself it will fall into false loves, which are everywhere.

So it's better to take refuge, wrap myself up in the unconscious where I speak to myself from another world, magic and mysterious. The oneiric world that saved me.

*'Consumption in the commencement is easy to cure, and difficult to understand; but when it has neither been discovered in due time, nor treated upon a proper principle, it becomes easy to understand, and difficult to cure.'*

Machiavelli (S. S., p.77)

And yet I'm still sure they're coincidences...

Dreaming of something so similar to reality; unconsciously hearing your own body speak...

Or, poor thing, who knows how long it was screaming for attention... and behold, body and soul interacted with each other, without my noticing, and pushed me to go through hell, to save myself.

I'm safe, yes.

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#### IV.I

##### The Noise of the Flag

*Fully to understand the North requires some knowledge of the ancient province of Ulster and its seventeenth-century plantations. The Irish as a nation – Ulster being no exception – are accused of being obsessed by history. The truth is that the Irish know very little history but are imbued from childhood with much visceral propaganda. S. M. (p. 146)*



##### THE KINDEST CUT OF ALL

Welsh Wizard. "I know proceed to cut this map into two parts and place them in the hat. After a suitable interval they will be found to come together of their own accord – at least let's hope so; I've never done this trick before."

"Punch" magazine. Cartoon by Bernard Partridge, March 10, 1920.

We proceed, waiting patiently, draining.

We resist the traps of fear despite the cement, the mosquitos, the criminals around the corner.

We accept our bodies with stoic endurance of the pain and yet, in our thoughts, we still believe we are not able.

We romanticize our angels and saviours to whom, instinctively, one would give his or her own life – soul and body – and TOTAL loyalty.

We are privileged with awareness and those who watch our red appendages know it deep down. Those who pity my youth, instead, don't know that I will not waste any more time.

*But Belfast, as ever, bore the brunt. It was the scene of recurring sectarian conflict over the next two years (1920-1922). In that time 453 people were killed; of these thirty-six were members of the security forces and the rest civilians, 257 Catholics and 159 Protestants. More than 10.000 Catholics were driven from their jobs and 23.000 (a quarter of the total number of the city) were forced to flee their homes.*

*By the end of 1921, the total number of killings was 109.*

*It was **the killing of the McMahon family on 24 March 1922**, however, that shocked even those most hardened to the cruelty of the times. Sean McMahon (pp.24, 29)*



On the floor, dark marble streaked with white and beige, in the lamplight of the living room, I was intent on playing, probably with a toy car. For a long time I preferred games for boys, like marbles, to be raced along paths created on carpets of childhood winters; games to play in company.

The late afternoon warmth of that living room still melts my heart today; a sign that my childhood was filled with warmth.

As I watched the toy car move, fuelled by my imagination, the phone rang. My mother's voice became icy cold and caused a shiver to run down my spine.

This was the first time that death entered my life. This is one of my first memories. My maternal grandfather had died. He had been dying for years. I remember that I took care of him, rocking on a small teal chair, when we went to visit him at my mother's house in her hometown. I was convinced that, being near him, I could speak to him. I wasn't afraid at all.

Still today, when I have the flu, I prefer to eat mashed banana with a bit of sugar and some freshly squeezed orange juice. It's not that it brings me back to my childhood, but it reunites me with my grandfather who, paralyzed by a stroke, could not eat solid foods.

***The Special Powers Act***, as it was usually known, was kept on the statute book long after the threat of civil war was past and was made permanent in 1933. It was regarded with envy by the apartheid leaders in South Africa.

*The most dramatic use of the special powers occurred with **the incarceration of 300 IRA suspects on the prison ship Argenta in 1922...***

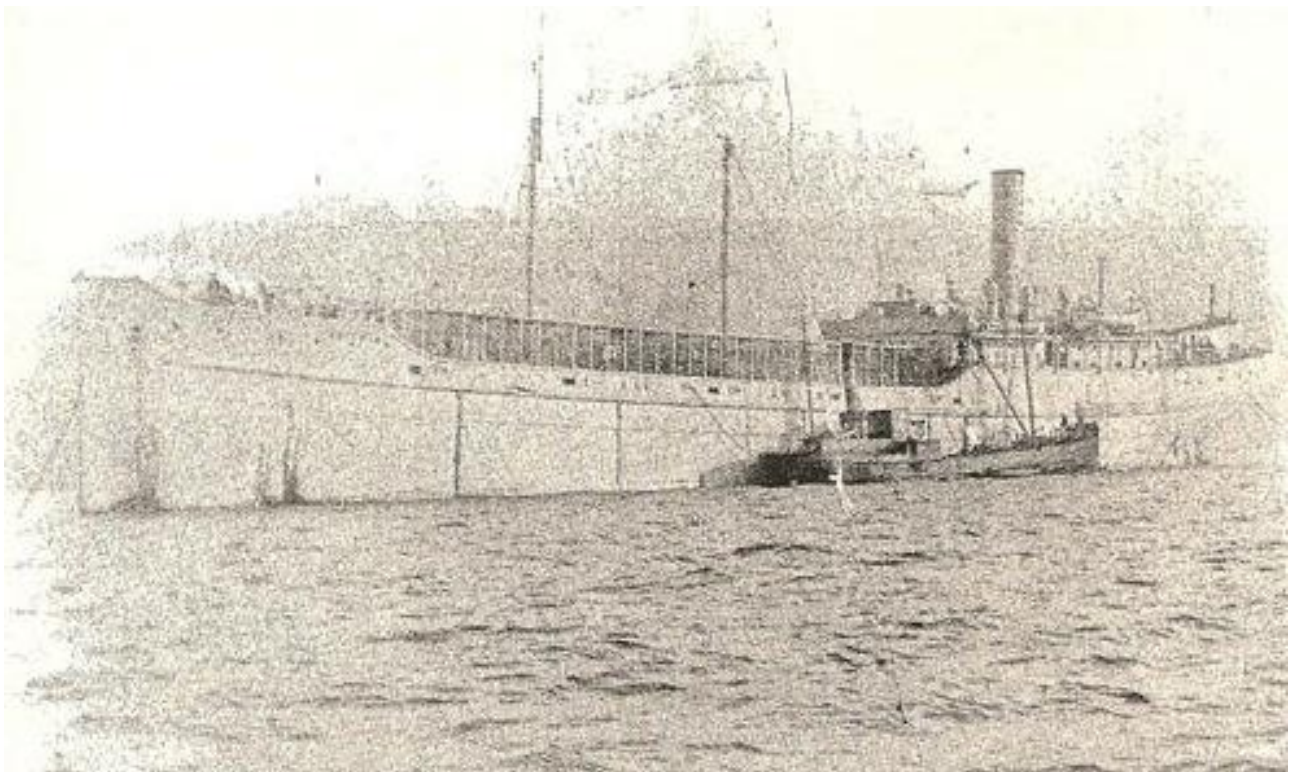
*The Argenta was a wooden ship of American manufacture ...*

*The internees were kept in cages forty feet by twenty feet by only eight feet high....*

*Tuberculosis, pneumonia and other infectious diseases...*

*The internees were mainly middle class professionals who kept up their spirits by publishing the **Argenta Bulletin**, a samizdat, handwritten production wryly describing their imprisonment.*

*It was not until 1926 that all the internees were released and the hulk scuttled. S. M. (pp.33, 35)*



The *Argenta*, moored in Larne Lough to hold internees, 1922.

Not long ago, in the same room, I beheld another dying man. My uncle, my favourite uncle, who I always saw as tall, strong, eternal, with his moustache, his nobility, his cigar, his everlasting light-heartedness. He enjoyed life, though didn't move much.

For my part I wanted, at a distance, to understand why I was always so attached to him, so I studied my family history. Still today I am the keeper of his photographs. I created a memory of my uncle for myself, as if I had seen him be born, grow and then leave us.

The last memories I have of him are his heartrending cry of pain, his thinness, his attempt to speak to me. Fortunately, some time before, I had broken the reins that had always harnessed my family with a strange fear of showing affection, and in the hospital I took his face in my hands, I caressed him, I got close and our breathing merged, I kissed him and I told him that I loved him. I love him. The goodbye was sweet, as sweet as his voice and as his life, where I saw the keys to serenity.

*In practice there was little territorial segregation. In most towns members of the tribes were next door neighbours. For historical reasons the poorer areas tended to be Catholic though there were poor Protestants as well. Middle class areas were what in the Gaeltacht – with, of course, a linguistic and not a political sense – would be called breac ('speckled'). Catholics and Protestants lived in formal amity. There was no colour bar nor were physical tribal characteristics all that reliable, in spite of boasts by both sides. Orange, crimson and black marches were seasonal events and where it was safe there were also green ones, notably St Patrick's Day and on 15 August, the feast of the Assumption. Outside of Belfast there was general support of local soccer teams, golf clubs had mixed membership, and the dole queues were non-sectarian. S. M. (pp.38, 45)*

I remember my father's "first" heart attack through an image: a deer, fixed on eating the leaves of a tree, surrounded by greenery. It is the front of a postcard sent from Switzerland, dated the 1<sup>st</sup> of December 1983 and addressed to me... I was only 6 years old.

Recently I found that postcard again.

Things that are kept over the years, brought from house to house, left at the bottom of a drawer and then, suddenly, found again, always have the taste of rediscovery and omens. Certain far-off documents are often found again in moments of tidying up, ordering. True order, which makes you dig through, sort out and throw away whatever has become too dusty, in the bottom of the drawer or in the darkness of a cellar, is usually driven by a need for renewal, in one's surroundings and in one's soul.

Renewal, by force of circumstances, must also review history.





*There came a time in 1932 during a period of high unemployment (...) led to united public disorder with both sides briefly joining forces to demonstrate against the system.*

*It began on the first Monday of that month [October] and lasted for about ten days. There were protest marches, torch-lit processions and rioting in both Catholic and Protestant areas when, on 11 October, the RUC tried to ban a march.*

*Unsophisticated Protestants found themselves afflicted again with atavistic fears and it was comparatively easy to revive militancy. S. M. (pp.50-51)*

That postcard, with various writings on the back.

My mother, whose handwriting I recognize, could only write the date, evidently not being able to resist, even in this case, affixing a chronological mark, some order, a fact.

Now, she has this date confused, master as she is of the removal of pain.

I, however, have the proof and with it a picture of what I was like; I was 6 years old, and I remember that postcard, that deer.

They were in Switzerland, a place I've never returned to... because I've already been, with my childlike imagination, projecting great fragility on that greenery and on that poor deer, the same that can be read in the rest of the handwriting. The address (mine) – my mother

wants to give me independence already at age 6? – and the sentence “Many kisses / Mum / Aunt Gina / Dad” is absurd, to say the least. It seems to be written by another child. Myself?

In those weeks had they simply gone on holiday?

Perhaps I perceived it almost in this way: they had decided to take a holiday from us.

*The Westminster attitude had, since 1920, been, and would continue to be until the end of the 1960s, rather like that of the headmaster and staff of an English public school. They left matters of discipline to the senior prefects who would have the power to keep junior common room under control.*

**...new parliament buildings at Stormont...** on 16 November 1932. S. M. (pp.53, 55)



The next memory I have, though, is a nightmare.

A nearly naked body, wheezing, aching, with deep and long scars.

That body calls to me.

The view is obscured by the vision of torn flesh and that pervading smell of disinfectant.

A nauseating smell.

That body is my father.

He calls to me because he wants affection and he wants to comfort me.

Did I give him affection? I have no idea.





From that point, my dreams were never the same again.  
My relationship with the body was never the same again.  
Display of affection was never the same again.  
Fear of disease had completely replaced the fear of death.

*The outbreak of war on Sunday, 3 September 1939 was used by several interested parties in Ireland as an opportunity for advantage.*

*The IRA declared war on Britain after the four-day period and between then and July there were 127 explosions, seven deaths and 200 serious injuries. As with later campaigns the only real victims were the exiled Irish who bore the burnt of complaint from their neighbours.*

*The ports became less significant with the entry of America into the war after 7 December 1941, when Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. The port of Derry became central to the war effort... On 30 June 1941... nearly 400 American 'technicians' arrived to prepare for the US forces that were certainly going to come and whose presence on Irish soil would be predictably objected to by Valera as 'occupation'. The built a submarine school...., accommodation camps and new quays.*

*By May 1942 there were 37,000 of these generous exotics and the terminally depressed town became for a few years a lesser Babylon on the Foyle. S. M. (pp.58, 61, 64)*



Many years ago, as a teenager, I think, in the living room of our house in the mountains – the house of redemption – I remember my uncle and my father laughing, smoking and playing cards. My uncle came often, to gather mushrooms. It's the only memory I have of a father that enjoys life.

*In spite of the politician's self-reassurance... that the north would never be a target for aerial bombardment, Belfast came face with the terrors of modern warfare on four spring night in 1941.*

*The raid on the night of 7-8 April 1941 that badly damaged part of **Harland & Wolff** and the docks, and killed thirteen people, was just a taster. Easter Tuesday, 15 April, brought 180 German bombers that devastated the civilian areas of the lower Shankill and Antrim Roads. The destruction of the main telephone exchange cut off communications with the anti-craft placements and with Britain.*

*Nearly 800 people died, and since the city mortuaries could not house them, the Falls Road swimming baths were drained and 150 bodies were laid out there. Two hundred and fifty were taken to St George's Market and the unclaimed bodies were buried in a mass grave on the following Monday. S. M. (pp. 64-65)*



Harland & Wolff cranes seen from East Belfast, 2014.

Once I went with my mother to do some shopping. She parked in front of an electronics shop and she asked me if I wanted to go with her or wait for her in the car. I wanted to read some comic, which I only remember as having green characters, perhaps aliens? So I chose to stay and wait for her. I finished the comic, I read it again... I read it again. In the end, the wait seeming like an eternity, I deduced that my mother would never come back and, with seraphic calm, I got out of the car and approached another nearby car where

another mum and a teenage son were getting in. I started to tell them that my mother had died. I wanted to be adopted. My mother returned. For a long time, whenever a member of my family was absent, he or she was dead to me, and I managed to remain calm.



Electronics shop, Rome, 2014 (closed for years).

One summer day, my sister left. I asked where she was going and my parents told me she had gone to buy milk.

I hope this habit of lying to children has passed...

After one day, I finally took the trouble of announcing my sister's death. At that point they told the truth: she had gone to a friend's house by the sea. They hadn't told me because they thought I would want to go, too, but my sister didn't want me there. I remember the time I spent on the ground very well, in front of the door, waiting for her.

*It was such a deliberately partial allocation in the village of Caledon in County Tyrone that led to the first civil rights march, the initial step that led to the domino sequence that brought **the conflagration of the 'Troubles'** and the fall of Stormont. S. M. (p.72)*

Constantly dreaming, I bumped into everything. In London, at the age of 9, stuck in my dreams or attracted by some real punk (it was 1986), I bumped into poles and mailboxes all the time.

That was why everyone always believed that I was absent-minded... they never understood that I always observed everything attentively and that I remember everything. The best part is that certain memories have truly been removed from others. This creates

infinite pain for me because, in this way, there is no respect for life, for those who have passed through it, for all its protagonists. It's not fair.

*And many were hardly aware of the cessation when the IRA called upon its members to dump arms on **26 February 1962**. S. M. (p.75)*



IRA Volunteers, pictured around the time of the Border Campaign  
(12th December 1956 – 26th February 1962)

*The decade of the 1960s was different from that of the 1920s and certainly the 1930s. Because of the safety net of Welfare State life was easier. The 1947 Education Act, which provided generous grants for those who wished to attend universities and polytechnics, had produced a generation of young graduates... **John Hume and Bernadette Devlin** were typical of a new breed of nationalist who understood what was happening in the North and anxious, if in different ways, to change things for the better. They were aware too of radical movements elsewhere, in the southern states of America, in South Africa where the remote beginnings of the end of apartheid were just visible and, towards the end of the decade, in Prague. S. M. (p.81)*





John Hume



Bernadette Devlin

*O'Neill's gestures to Catholics, visiting Catholic schools, shaking hands with priests, offering sympathy to Cardinal William Conway when John XXIII died were looked at with mild interest by Catholics but with growing suspicion by grassroots Protestants. They had found a new champion in the **Rev Dr. Ian Richard Kyle Paisley**. Ordained by his Baptist father in 1946 he founded his own denomination, the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster, in 1951.*

*He was tall, strong and loudly effective in rhetoric of attack, and soon saw O'Neill as the enemy of the people. S. M. (p.82)*





Ian Paisley (recently deceased, aged 88)

For a few years, now I can assert with certainty, I suffered from panic attacks, between the ages of 10 and 11. Every time I was alone, I went crazy. It all started with the massive mistake of sending me to Catechism to take First Communion, even though my parents weren't believers... though they were married in a church... the contradictions of Italy.

For some time, I don't remember how long, I went to Catechism once a week and on Sunday mornings, very early, I went to mass instead of watching cartoons.

As would happen to me soon after with rock stars whom I worshipped as gods, I began to believe, in a morbid way. Fortunately my Catechism teacher was not very good and I started first to doubt, then to be afraid. One day, my mother was late in picking me up.

Coming down the stairs I did not see her in her usual place. My heart started to beat faster and faster, in the confusion of other parents and other children. My head started to spin. I don't remember anything else. My mother later told me that the Catechism teacher had had to take me home.

I don't think I went to Catechism after that, but for years I didn't understand if I was supposed to be a believer or not, with catastrophic consequences.

The day I managed to free myself from the obligation of making the sign of the cross when I entered a church, I felt free. Practically everyone here does it, even those who aren't believers at all.



San Ponziano, Rome, 2014.

*Paisley's first star appearance was during the 1964 Westminster general election when during the campaign Jim Kilfedder – later Sir James – was standing in West Belfast. Paisley heard that a small Irish tricolour was displayed in the window of the Republican office in Divis Street, the link between Falls Road to the city centre. He threatened to bring enough of his followers to remove it if the authorities did not. It was removed by RUC under the problematic Flags and Emblems Act. There was some trouble with the totally Catholic inhabitants. A few nights later, on 1 October, another tricolour appeared in the office and the police used pickaxes to break the door down to remove it. The riots that followed lasted two days with stones, petrol bombs, water cannon, burning vehicles, including a bus, and sirens wailing reminding older people of the civil trouble in 1935. It was also a 'coming attraction' trailer for many similar confrontations with the RUC facing the nationalists as if to defend the Protestants.*

*Kilfedder won the election and thanked Paisley for his help. S. M. (p.83)*

For a long time, I carried on with television and bread and Nutella. They were my parents. Japanese cartoons taught me attraction towards the other, sometimes towards the frightening, eroticism, a fascination towards androgyny, a terror of catastrophes.

My television was the television of 1980s Italy, where cultural, satirical or high quality musical entertainment programs were slowly being replaced by cheap irony with ever-more-naked showgirls. Luckily there were also some thrillers and series like *The Twilight Zone* and *Twin Peaks*, although they were not approved by my mother. I was often forced

to change the channel, then finishing off the story in my own mind, often making it even more disturbing.

A few of those he unofficially spoke for, probably feeling the same fear of the possible dissolution of Protestant ascendancy, exhumed the **Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF)** that was going to fight and be right in 1913.

The simplistic equation 'Catholic: IRA supporter' led to attacks on Catholic property... O'Neill, hearing of the murders, declared the UVF illegal... They had their revenge with explosions in electrical sub-stations in Belfast in March, post offices and buses set on fire on the Falls Road, and the explosion at the Silent Valley reservoir cutting off a large amount of Belfast's water supply. Ironically the IRA was blamed but the outrages had the desired effect: **O'Neill resigned as leader and the North headed resolutely into its Troubles.** S. M. (p.84)



On 24 August NICRA [Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association] called **Ireland's first civil rights march from Colisland to Dungannon**... all passed peacefully until the 2,500 participants reached the outskirts of Dungannon where they were met with 4000 RUC men with dogs and a makeshift barricade of ropes slung between three tenders. Paisley's band of followers, the Ulster Protestant Volunteers (UPV), had organised a counter-demonstration and had taken over the Market Square. In the pattern of many similar confrontations the RUC stood with their backs to the Protestants and faced the NICRA marchers.

In the weeks that followed the Derry Housing Action Committee (DHAC) laid plans for **the next march to be held in the Maiden City on 5 October**. Craig banned the march... NICRA wanted to cancel... DHAC insisted to go ahead. S. M. (p.87)





Video from RTÉ Archives: [Derry Civil Rights Demonstration - 05/10/1968](#)

*Batons, boots and water cannon were used indiscriminately against protestors and onlookers alike, and all was recorded by television camera, especially those of RTE. People who had not attended to march but had heard the details commented, 'So it has started, then!' It had. The RUC's attack was followed by two nights of rioting – and looting – setting the pattern for many similar nights and days of urban violence.*

Reference:

Sean McMahon, *A Brief History of Northern Ireland*, Brehon Press, Belfast 2011.



## IV.II

### The Noise of the Flag

*Only the wisest prophets knew that it was only the end of the first act of the long, long drama...*

S. M. (pp. 87, 89)

**Video from RTÉ Archives: [15,000 March in Derry - 16/11/1968](#)**

When I thought of myself as much more adult, instead, I had almost no reaction to his second operation. I opened the door and he was standing, proud to show me his Frankenstein-like suture... the new metal staples.

His pride came from the fact that, besides being a doctor and researcher, he had also become a case for the advancement of science.



*... to hold a 'long march' of seventy-five miles from Belfast to Derry... Most members of NICRA were against it... Still they marched, avoiding with difficulty and re-routings set pieces of antagonism from Paisleyites who had harassed them from the outset when they began their journey at 9am on New Year's Day 1969. The march was legal – O'Neill refused to ban it – so the students were under the grudging protection of the RUC, or so they thought.*

*On the morning of 4 January the marches left the village of Claudy and headed down the main road to Derry. They were joined by some supporters and numbered seventy by the time they reached Burntollet Bridge, about eight miles from their destination. They were advised by the RUC that a gang was gathered in nearby fields but they accepted the police assurance that they might just manage to get through. That was the impression the marches gained but in fact they were being led into a well-organised ambush. ... The marchers were hailed with these bottles and stones. When some tried to escape into the*

*fields nearby they were driven back on the road by policemen using batons. S. M. (pp. 90-91)*

He actually tried to show us the video of his operation at lunch.

Today perhaps I understand. When one is subject of the surgical tools, they are no longer frightening.

At the time, the attempt to show us the operation video (my mother was against it; but my sister was starting to be like him) brought me the same discomfort as always. Weakness in the limbs and incapability of doing the task at hand, eating lunch at the table.

Because, unfortunately, this happened regularly, certain discussions about their patients and about various cases always took place at the table.

*Darkness comes early in Derry in January and as night fell the RUC attacked shoppers in a city centre store and smashed glass counters. Later that night the RUC Reserve invaded the Bogside, a nationalist part of town... They turned on people in the streets, throwing stones and attacking buildings, including the new offices of the Credit Union. That night 'Free Derry' was born. The words '**You are now entering Free Derry**' appeared on Sunday, 5 January on the gable of a house in St Columb's Wells. The words presaged the 'no-go' area that the Bogside was to become on 12 August. Though the house has disappeared the gable-end stands free, a permanent symbol of defiance.*

*O'Neill made a blustering attempt to put all the blame on the young marchers but journalists in the posh papers and television pictures told another story. Up till that moment the RUC as a force had been again getting a sort of acceptance by the nationalist community but now they were totally execrated. The ferocity of some of their members that night in Derry had a kind of millennial temper as though they instinctively believed that this was the end or the beginning of something in the North. S. M. (p. 92)*



An innate predisposition to forgetfulness. This seems to be my parents' virtue, especially my mother's. This is how she removes pain.

An innate predisposition to confuse the faults of her two daughters, so she didn't have to scold the daughter that seemed more fragile.

I, rather than not going to school, went and got 3s, since I got them whether I studied or not. No one had ever understood my real problem: the ability to dream. I believe I have

lived incredible, countless adventures and for this sometimes I confuse my dreams, because I have formed, in blinks of an eye, many personalities inside.

*The spring came, surely the most eventful in the history of Northern Ireland.*

*Since Fenian times or even earlier the 'armed struggle' had been part of Republican mythology as the only reliable means of defeating the British. Now smarting from the failure of Operation Harvest they began to regroup and the month of December 1969 was to see a split in their ranks into the '**Official**' IRA, known as 'Stickies', and the more militant, rather right-wing group called '**Provisonal**', who remained obstinately abstentionist in opposition to the Officials who had had some aspirations to constitutional, if rather radical, politics. The Official IRA declared a ceasefire in May 1970 after a number of atrocities that they claimed weakened their cause but the Provos, as they soon came to be called, continued their campaign until 1994. **The reinvigorated IRA was a product of the end of the year 1969.** S. M. (p. 93)*



In the end they always believed that I was the strongest; the one that set out defending the other two women from an apparently troublesome father... a father that simply could not express emotions any more – they were stuck, choked together with his illness but always there, in the vicinity.

*July came with the chief Orange celebration of the 'glorious, pious and immortal memory' of William of Orange... on the '**Twelfth**'...*

*There was trouble in Dungiven and Derry but what people dreaded was the Apprentice Boys of Derry's celebration of the end of the famous siege in 1689. The society has been founded in 1814 in token to the thirteen London apprentices who had symbolically shut the Ferryquay gate against the Jacobite troops of Lord Antrim in December 1688. Their day was **the other 'Twelfth', 12 August**, and the ritual included a circuit of the carriageway on top of the city's walls. Trouble was almost a certainty considering the temper of Derry nationalists, especially those who lived under the west wall. In the past they had greeted the marchers with black smoke from their chimneys. S. M. (p. 94)*



Video [Apprentice Boyce March - 12th August 1969](#)

You have no way of knowing this but I remember many “couples” discussions you had. You were convinced that I was watching TV but instead I was listening to you. I’m very good at this!

Of course, however, from there I came up with some real films about it; other films, about you, about sexuality. But you never wanted to talk about it.



*The day's events were almost over when trouble began. It was said that some of the marchers had tossed pennies down from the walls; others claimed that nationalist youths had thrown stones at the marchers. Whatever the spark the **Battle of the Bogside** began not long after five o'clock on the evening of 12 August and lasted until about the same time on fourteenth. During those forty-eight hours much had happened elsewhere. S. M. (p. 95)*





Bogside, Derry, 2013.

*The call by the DCDA to nationalists about the North to show support to Derry resistance had direct effects to Belfast. It was interpreted incorrectly by Unionists as a general call for insurrection.*

*All Catholics were the enemy and the actions of hooligans on both sides made the old enmity lethal. S. M. (p. 96)*



How many times did you run away when faced with the evidence of my femininity? Why didn't you accept it? Why did you run away like that? Did this happen only with me? I perhaps was trying to throw reality in your face. You, hiding behind the possible paternal reactions and also weaknesses of heart, you made it so for years I lived it like you did. What a liberation to know that it's no longer like that.

*PIRA, as the Provisionals now called themselves... had agreed to begin the long war that would surely lead to the desired reunification of the country.*

*The government officials, the army, the RUC, and the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) that replaced the B-specials on 1 April 1970, all seemed to the IRA to be the means of perpetuating the partition of the country and so were regarded as 'legitimate targets'. No one seemed to understand the determination of IRA recruits or their courage.*

*Their support by their communities was based on the belief that they were the only defence against the UVF and, from August 1971, the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), the RUC, and the BA (British army), as the once welcome soldiers came to be called. **The piece lines in Belfast were not simple marks on the link roads that led, say, from the Falls to the Shankill, but high wire fences set in concrete.***

*The first action by the security forces that increased enrolment in the PIRA was the illegal, no-warning curfew imposed on the Lower Falls on 3 July 1970. It lasted thirty-five hours, during which there was no means of obtaining food and 20,000 people, including children, were kept confined while 5,000 homes were searched with much damage to property. S. M. (pp. 98-99)*

Believing I was strong, they never saw my real weakness that was there, between that smell of anaesthetic, those scars that my sweatiest nightmares gave me.

*Rioting and bombing became a part of the daily life in parts of Belfast and Derry... S. M. (p. 100)*



A Piece Line in Belfast.



Science, science, science that invaded my ears. Blood and disease that seemed to absorb me. So I pushed myself towards the spirit, embracing all that I believed to be worthy of my attention. Sometimes I even invoked death, to free myself. I was a slave of my imagination, of my dreams – there were too many of them and they were too strong. Slowly I tried to live out all of them.

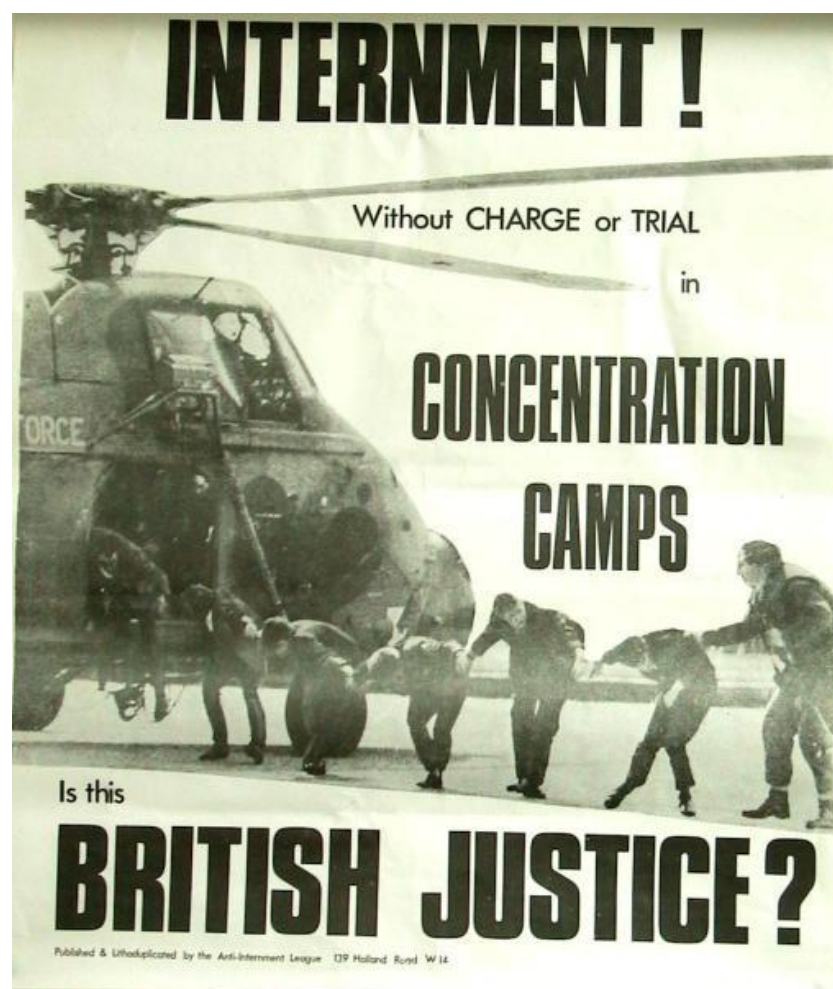
*Now Faulkner decided to hold another recruiting drive for the IRA. Obviously he had no such idea but his action in introducing **internment without trial** had precisely that effect.*

*... of the 343 internees who were brutally lifted and badly treated at 4am on 9 August 1971, there were very few Protestants...*

*Fewer than eighty of those interned in **Crumlin Road jail and the Maidstone**, a converted troopship, were PIRA members and none significant. Those retained were subject to the technique of modern interrogation: torture, sleep deprivation, white noise, hooding and starvation.*

*Many young nationalists rushed to join the PIRA, assenting for better or worse to the presence of paramilitaries in their communities.*

***Internment was to lead to one of the blakest days in the history of the Troubles.** S. M. (p. 101-102)*



My body spoke to me in a dream.



For some time, in fact, I was a bit too tired, exhausted, weakened.

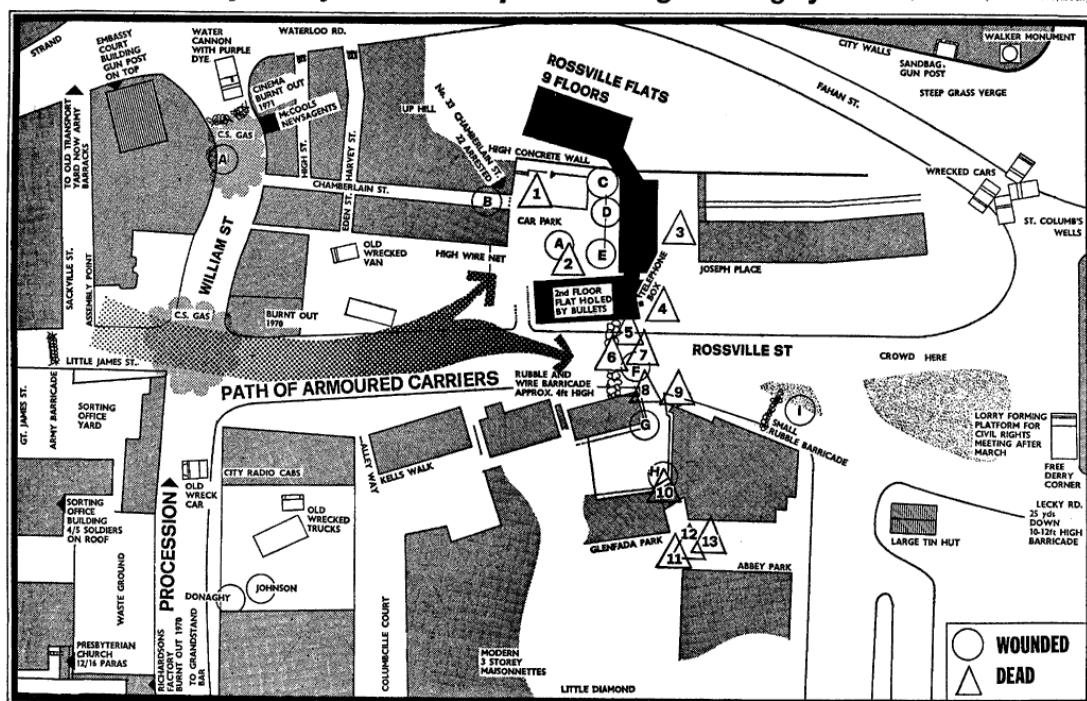
I dreamed of “giving up”. I decided that all that noise, the people, the rules had deeply tired me out; I wanted to make them all inactive. I lay down beneath a bench to switch everything off.

Immediately after – awake in the dream – I witnessed a complete surgical opening of my chest. Doctors and nurses; the lights of the operating room. I saw everything but I didn't feel pain. Afterwards, the doctors were amazed at how I managed to see everything and not feel anything. There was no need for an anaesthetic.

*Another anti-internment march was fixed for the following Sunday week, 30 January. A few stones were thrown that day and then, in spite of advice from the local head of the RUC, District Inspector Frank Lagan, the members of the Parachute Regiment and the Green Howards shot twenty-six unarmed people, thirteen of whom died in the streets and a fourteen later of his wounds. S. M. (p. 103)*

### The scene of Bloody Sunday—a sketch map for following the Widgery Tribunal

Drawn by John Butterworth, in Derry



#### Dead (triangles)

- 1 Jack Duddy, 17
- 2 Kevin McElhinney, 16
- 3 Patrick Doherty, 21
- 4 Bernard McGuigan, 41
- 5 Hugh Gilmore, 17
- 6 William Nash, 19
- 7 Michael McDaid, 17
- 8 John Young, 17
- 9 Michael Kelly, 17
- 10 James Wray, 23
- 11 Gerald Donaghy, 17
- 12 Gerald McKinney, 35
- 13 William McKinney, 27

#### Wounded (circles)

- A Michael Bridge, 25
- B Margaret Deery, 37
- C Patrick McDaid, 24
- D Michael Bradley, 22
- E Alana Burke, 18
- F Alex Nash, 52
- G Paddy O'Donnell, 40
- H Joseph Frid, 20
- I Patrick Campbell, 53

Other Wounded  
Damien Donaghy  
John Johnson

### Video [Full unseen footage of British Para's killing 14 men+boys 1972](#)

This time I damn awake.

That pulled flesh, that horizontal patient.

To see around oneself doctors, nurses, relatives.

To not be ashamed of your own body.

There is no sexuality at all. I undress easily.

I accept that I am a body and nothing else.

It's useless to argue about this. It's useless to wage a battle against a certain kind of doctors.

I simply created distance between us.

This time NO. The matter is serious. I'm not dreaming. You, however, all seem completely out of control.

I yelled out my rights and, alone, I took back a life that wanted to leave, by the hair.

*It caused countrywide rage and grief, and led so many young people to flock to join the PIRA.*

*Whitelaw met members of the PIRA secretly in London during a short-lived truce in early July 1972 and after the carnage of 21 July called accurately 'Bloody Friday', ordered Operation Motorman which on 31 July ended the so-called '**no-go**' areas in Derry and Belfast. S. M. (pp. 103, 106)*



The body is mine. I decide and I speak only with those that show it respect.  
I never would have believed I could fight so for my body.  
I never would have believed I loved myself so much, I was convinced that I despised myself.

*On 29 May 1972... the OIRA announced that they were calling a ceasefire because 'The overwhelming desire of all people of the North is for an end to military action by all sides.' The PIRA and the UDA were unmoved.*

*The latter numbered 40,000 members by the end of 1972 and began shows of strength with marches in combat uniform and bush hats through Belfast city centre....*

*In fact the UDA was a legal organisation until it was proscribed by Sir Patrick Mayhew...*

*They were one of the number of organisations dedicated to the preservation of the Northern Ireland state, which they obstinately called Ulster... Closely associated with the UDA were the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF).*

*The PIRA was similarly not the only active force on the Nationalist side. In 1974 some members of the OIRA formed the **Irish National Liberation Army (INLA)**. It had left-wing tendencies and developed a reputation for greater ruthlessness than the PIRA. The killing on 30 March 1979 of Airey Neave, the close associate of the new prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, and their spokesman on Northern Ireland, by a car bomb... got them world attention.*

*On 6 December 1982 their no-warning bomb at a pub-disco in Ballykelly, County Derry, called the **Droppin' Well**, killed seventeen people (eleven soldiers and six civilians). S. M. (p. 107)*



When you become so respectful and symbiotic with your own body, pain is no longer frightening, if you need healing.

Never again, though: people that discuss my flesh in front of me without thinking about me.

Never again: fingers pointing as I sit in a corner, confused, with a headache, tortured by constant hands that palpate, mechanical instruments that press, bruises that re-emerge blinded by so much insensitivity.

Never again: the looks at a screen, trying to understand the inside of me, when I already have, by myself, first, long before you.

*One last IRA atrocity should be mentioned: on 15 August 1998, four months after the Good Friday Agreement, the **Real IRA**, a dissident group that did not accept the terms of the agreement, exploded a 500lb bomb in Lower Main Street, Omagh. It killed nineteen adults and nine children (a twenty-ninth victim died on 5 September). Though the Real IRA, accepting responsibility, said that all military operations were being suspended it was believed that some of its members joined the **Continuity IRA**, the only Republican paramilitary group not on ceasefire.*

*Loyalist paramilitaries were not idle... As with the Republican groups the campaign to save Ulster and prevent a united Ireland was kept to a general, almost quotidian, level of violence with occasional spectacular atrocities. The killing of fifteen people by the UVF in **McGurk's bar** in Belfast on **4 December 1971** marked the culmination of a bleak year. S. M. (p. 109)*



Yes, the body cries, it cries blood.

My skin is grey. My smile struggles and my face hides my thoughts even less than before. Insensitivity, uselessness, superficiality is everywhere. I already knew that, but now the last mask is no longer there, and it hurts me greatly to see the world for what it is.

*The total number of fatalities in 1975 was 247, of which 217 were civilians... On Saturday, 5 April a bomb thrown into McLaughlin's bar in north Belfast killed two Catholics; it was answered by a bomb three hours later in Shankill Road pub that killed five Protestants.*

*The killing continued, extended by the PIRA to England. The '**Birmingham Six**' case involved six men sentenced to life for their alleged responsibility for the bombing of two pubs in Birmingham on 21 November 1974 in which twenty-one people died. They were freed in 1991 after seventeen years in prison after the longest campaign against a miscarriage of justice in legal history.*

*The release of the '**Guildford Four**', who had also been sentenced to life for the pub bombs in Guildford and Woolwich on 5 October and 7 November 1974 on the basis of confessions later retracted, gave greater impetus to the Birmingham Six agitation. S. M. (pp. 110-111)*





The real operating room. The lights, the screens. Those that try to comfort me. To do that, they always ask the same questions.

Three anaesthetics in total. Operations of various durations in which, three thrice in an incredibly short amount of time, I went through the four phases of Sedation, Hypnosis, Analgesia, Complete Relaxation.

General anaesthesia is a condition of reversible coma, induced artificially.

I hardly remember the first awakening; I remember more the panic of the staff's entrance and the unacceptable lack of understanding.

The second and third I remember very well, in the Awakening Room.

The third time I have a good memory also of the preparation, of the man that I had next to me, of the discussions of my anaesthesiologist with a nurse.

Now I look at needles that go into my veins with a certain tranquillity and, perhaps, curiosity.

I actually started talking about the grey Milan weather in the operating room and, as they immobilized my arms and legs, I even indulged in comparing the aesthetic of the various operating rooms I had been in. Then there was no need to make me sniff any calming agent.

I am perfectly calm.

I know my body.

I know it will rebuild itself.

I've seen it heal itself like no one else could.

I was shocked and amazed by such talent.

*The PIRA continued to believe that it was a useful and, of course, legitimate part of campaign. One of their more notorious 'spectaculars' was the attempt to kill Margaret Thatcher, then prime minister, and her cabinet at 2.45am on 12 October 1984 in the Grand Hotel, Brighton, during the Conservative annual conference.*

*The return of a forth Conservative government on Friday, 10 April 1992 was commented upon by the PIRA with a 1000lb Semite bomb at the Baltic Exchange in the City of London*

*that killed three people, injured ninety-one, and caused 700 million pounds worth of damage; and the 1994 PIRA ceasefire was ended abruptly at 7.01pm on 9 February 1996, with a bomb at Canary Wharf which killed two people, injured more than a hundred, and did more than 85 million pounds damage, slowing the peace process and causing Sinn Féin to express surprise.*

*Security gates became a feature of urban life as also were often unpleasant body searches.*

*Army and police checkpoints were imposed without warning... S. M. (pp. 110-112)*



©

*Especially having escaped from the greatest danger.*

*Especially, thanks to that danger, after having had delicious banquets with a present without a future.*

*'Criminalisation' meant that prisoners could not longer wear their own clothers or have the privileges granted by Whitelaw. They were housed in the new **Maze prison** near Lisburn, County Antrim, that had blocked buildings in the shape of the letter H. (p. 116)*



*Protests began almost immediately: prisoners draped themselves in blankets and began the 'dirty protest' that meant no use of toilet facilities. Their cells, which they refused to leave, were often smeared with excrement. (p.116)*



First TV footage of the Dirty Protest in the Maze prison, made by Robin Denselow for BBC. Video still.

### [Robin Denselow video](#)

True fear leads to endless nausea.  
True fear leads to endless freedom.





*Thatcher, already demonstrating the right-wing inflexibility that led to her being called the 'Iron Lady', was determined to increase security, having no obvious desire to find a political solution.*

*Atkins' term of office produced one of the greatest crises in the whole of the current troubles. The one traditional weapon that the PIRA prisoners had not yet used officially in their struggle against 'criminalisation' was the hunger strike. Seven prisoners, dismayed at the lack of success of the 'blanket' and 'dirty' protests, began strike on 27 October 1980. It lasted until 18 December when Atkins seemed to have offered some concessions of clothing. The offer was not what the prisoners took it to be and **Bobby Sands**, OC of the H-blocks, began another **strike 'to the death' on 1 March 1981.***





*He was to be joined by another striker each week. His election in Fermanagh-South Tyrone three weeks before his death, defeating Harry West, the former leader of the Unionist Party, by 1,4446 votes, gave a great boost to the campaign. **His funeral on 7 May** was attended by 70,000 mourners and... there was serious rioting in Belfast and Derry.*

*All during the summer of 1981 deaths in the H-blocks blighted life in the North. The sequential nature of the protest meant that, in spite of protests and recommendations by Dublin to other governments to intervene, the ghastly regularity continued.*

*The campaign **had led to the deaths of sixty-one people**, including thirty members of security forces. Three days later James Prior, the new Secretary of State, announced that prisoners could now wear their own clothing. S. M. (pp. 117-118)*

*When you are faced with the colour of your own blood and you caress your scars like children, time no longer has any meaning.*

*Though Thatcher's hard line on the strikes seemed to have prevailed there was no decrease in violence. **The long-drawn-out sequence of slow dying, death, emotional funerals and concomitant rioting made it the most depressing time of the Troubles.** Yet for a number of reasons it marked a turning point in the process. Catholics and Protestants became even more polarised. S. M. (p. 119)*

*When you have a second chance, you discover that time is infinite.*

Reference:

Sean McMahon, *A Brief History of Northern Ireland*, Brehon Press, Belfast 2011.

## V.

### Remembering and Forgiving

*The destruction to workers' health by the dampness and flax dust or 'pource' in the linen mills, the 1886 rioting, which produced the highest death toll of any political event in Ireland in the nineteenth century. We remember the Famine, the great paid in the United Kingdom, and we remember the violence of 1922, as well as the Outdoor Relief riots of 1932, and their brief moment of working-class solidarity. We remember that the death rate from typhoid in 1906 was the highest in the United Kingdom, and we remember the Troubles of the last more than thirty years. Part of the cultural memory is represented by Paddy Devlin's remark that in 1930, 'children with shaven heads, bare feet and rickets were commonplace in Belfast streets'.*

*All this, and much more, is remembered, but it is an expression of the sceptical, questioning, often querulous, temperament of the city, to carry both a doubt about the efficacy of possessing a cultural memory, and a doubt about the presentist, practical or pragmatic outlook which shrugs such memory off. Tom Paulin (p. 241)*



Lately, often, too often, my head spins. It doesn't just happen when I get up suddenly, though. It can happen even when I'm sitting down.

I feel like I can tame this malaise too. I feel that, like anxiety or panic, it is something sly that wants to instil a new fear inside me. Incredible, have I still not grasped that, after the most frightening months of my life, surrounded like satellites by other sublime moments of loss, hypochondria or the pointless anxieties of death will never come to me?

I never had them before, go figure that they'd come now.

**New Ireland Forum:** *a conference of the four main constitutional nationalist parties Fianna Fail, Fine Gael, Labour and SDLP. Sinn Féin was excluded because its support for violence... It was the first stepping stone on the yellow brick road to the Downing Street Declaration of 15 December 1993 made by the British Prime Minister John Major and Taoiseach Albert Reynolds.*

*The Forum report was published on 3 May 1984 and made three alternative proposals. The first was a unitary thirty-two county state, which was unlikely in the current situation, the second was for some kind of federal arrangements, and the third indicated a joint authority in Northern Ireland by the British and Irish governments. These propositions were rejected by Thatcher on 19 November 1984. 'Out! Out! Out!' S. M. (p. 120)*

I'm surrounded by hypochondriacs.

I don't know if it's me that attracts them or if it's a universal reaction to the successful propaganda of pain removal. The more you remove, the more fear grows inside you.

At the smallest acceleration of your heartbeat, you go straight to cold sweat and ineffective breathing. At that point, fear comes out with all its irrational power. You are dying.

Nothing can convince you otherwise. And yet it's so obvious that you just drank a coffee – which you almost never drink – on an empty stomach and you have some gastritis. It's so obvious that the weather is really hot and the air is heavy and humid, that your heart inevitably must reset itself.

Is it possible that we are so out of sync with the body that we pass from conviction of its absence to its presence only as a death threat?

***The Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) of 1985.... Unionists reacted negatively... S. M. (p. 121)***



In the end, I decided to give a fake number. I asked for a pen and paper. Astonished at my positive answer, they carried out what seemed almost like an order and then went away satisfied, convinced that the day after I would respond to that phone number.

This happened at night, often at Trafalgar Square, I think, where I waited for the bus, alone, ready for a bus trip that sometimes seemed eternal, but often satisfied by my night out. Never really drunk, especially after that one night that I watched the bus pass in front of me twice and managed to miss it twice.

I believe that was the moment I decided to never again go to too much excess. It's like I saw the exact line bordering the dangerous red zone, and I stopped. Yes, London, after my high school exams, alone, for a few months, definitely helped in this.

Since then, I've not once gone around without some form of ID, after passing out in a bus that was too hot (a summer as hot as Rome... and I had gone for the cool weather!), due to beer and certainly a long stay under the Camden Town bridge where there is a guy who wanders around, asks for a cigarette, rolls a joint, takes two hits and leaves it for you, going away. It's not a legend. Or maybe it is? Someone else mentioned to me afterwards that they had heard of that same episode happening. A story that circled and made it back to its teller?

Anyway, I felt ill afterwards and the guy had the opposite effect: instead of going back to ask him what it was, I didn't smoke – almost – ever again. I'm terrified of it. It was the only time in my life that I passed out, that I lost control completely.

*The socio-linguistic and political circumstances in which Irish has survived in Belfast are distinctive; a small organic Irish-speaking community within an urban network of language learners within a large disaffected Catholic / nationalist minority with a high birth-rate in a Protestant / unionist city in an unstable Protestant / unionist state within a Catholic / nationalist island. Aodán Mac Póilin (p. 129)*

The arrogance of the names some men think they can call us forever just because they got away with it once... we are the ones that did you a favour! Calling us "Baby" or "Honey" is unpleasant because it assumes a possession that no longer has any place and probably never did.

*The Downing Street Declaration, eight years later... could not have taken place without the preliminary talks between John Hume and **Gerry Adams** who had become president of Sinn Féin in 1983. Adams was a Falls Road Catholic, interned in 1971 but released in 1972 to take part in the talks with Whitelaw that led to a brief ceasefire.*

*The man was prominent in persuading the PIRA to become a participant political party.*

*Adams needed to persuade his people that just as they could not be defeated, equally they could no twin. The seizure on 31 October 1987 by the French of an old ship, **the Eksund**, with an Irish crew, containing 150 tonnes of armaments, including guns and the new Czech explosive Semtex, made it clear that **Colonel Gedaffi of Libya** was the PIRA's chief supplier. When it was further established that this was the fourth such cargo it was obvious that the PIRA had enough material to carry on war without end. S. M. (pp. 121-122)*





The Etkund

Slowly, I taught my mother to love orchids. She hated them, like she did so many other brazen flowers. They inspired a reaction of irrational fear in her. Today, though, she loves them, or at least she has learned to accept them, from seeing them at my house, from bumping into them. Unfortunately I did it, I had to do it. And I know I made you suffer.

Isn't it said that one has to kill – metaphorically – one's own parents in order to progress? I saw too much repressed desire and clear reactions of fear to every one of my curious questions.

I remember clearly the first time I ever asked my mother about that gift between my legs. We were in the car, coming home from my fantastic, colourful, elementary school, full of greenery, – the legendary *Parco dei bambini*. And I think, out of nowhere, I asked her why I had felt a strange sensation down there.

I remember her profound embarrassment and her ability to skirt the issue.

But why didn't you just try to explain it to me then?

And my discovery was so healthy and genuine.

Unfortunately, this meant, for me and for you, a continuous face-to-face with my sexuality that screamed to be accepted.

It had to pass through discoveries in the act, hidden visits to the gynaecologist and two operations; honestly dear, thanks to your negligence. One saved me from having problems in the future; the other, well, the other... I'm still working on it, given that I had to admit how, deep down, it was one of your requests.

I had to pass through hate and anger to be able to free you, but since then I am ecstatic and you can, finally, grow orchids.

*On Sunday, 20 March 1993 'shopping' bombs in litter bins in Warrington killed among others two young boys aged three and twelve, and caused such a wave of disgust in both*

*Ireland and Britain that it is believed that PIRA chiefs warned local activists against attacks that would prove politically disadvantageous.*

*Even as late as 15 June 1996 a 'mainland' target proved irresistible: a bomb wiped out much of the city centre of **Manchester** injuring 250 people. S. M. (pp. 127-128)*

#### NAUSEA [Compulsions]

As usual, like any romantic passenger, I have the window seat. Next to me, I have an American couple. One is reading on a Kindle, the other goes back and forth between a paperback book and iPad games. Completely immersed in these activities, they don't realize that for three straight hours they graze like herd animals. Crisps, sweet snacks. The flight attendants come by and they take about 10 minutes deciding what to get. They discuss as if they were involved in a high-risk diplomatic undertaking. They order. They don't care that they're spending three times as much as they'd spend on the ground for the same things. Then they return to silence, reading, playing and grazing, continuously. Physically, they're actually thin and good-looking but it's just that contradiction between their appearance and what they eat that I find disgusting. I was nauseous for hours after we landed. I pictured them slowly turning into two armchairs, not at all conscious of the universe moving around them. These are choices some make. No, my nausea is driven by the fact that, unfortunately, they're not even away that they've made that choice.

*One of the constituent elements of dust is soot; another, ash. '**Ashes to ashes, dust to dust**'. The combustions of the city contribute their share to its overburden. Not just the bonfires...; not just the output of domestic and industrial chimneys; but also the slow fires of rubbish-tip, burning-ghat, and crematorium. A. R. (p. 15)*

#### NAUSEA [Depression]

I was so happy with my plan. What could be better than visiting my little nephew, full of energy, vitality and curious smiles?

As soon as I open my door to go, I have an urge to vomit. I get over it and, laboriously, tread towards my sister's house, fighting against this lead in my chest and stomach. An infinite gravity.

I gag again as soon as I open the elevator door on the floor where my nephew lives. I get stuck, I lean against the door... I start to have trouble breathing...

Then my smiling nephew opens the door and, full of timid curiosity, yells: "Auntie!"

The nausea slips away. I did it!

*In different quarters of the City, the colours commanding local loyalty are often daubed on the walls, the roadways, the individual kerb-stones. Some, and these do not flaunt their colours, are genuinely secret societies; others say they are open societies with secrets; other again assert that they are hermetic religious organisations. A. R. (pp. 17-18)*

*All, capable of striking man, woman or child very dead indeed; just as dead, indeed, as lies within the capability of nuclear explosion, or cholera, or hypothermia, or an agonising cancer of the bowel, or just old age: for dead is dead is dead: and we shall all, without doubt, be dead, sooner or later.*

*But: sooner: or later? That is the question. Because in most other places, people prefer later; but here in the City, a good many people express a preference for sooner; at least, insofar as concerns those whom they do not like. A. R. (p. 25)*

## NAUSEA [Addiction]

This strange attraction towards everything that hurts. It's no longer curiosity, it's not longer fun. At a certain age it's real addiction.

Whenever I catch, in a fleeting glance of a friend, a trace of revelry that's kept him awake for more than 24 hours, my stomach twists. My mind returns to certain scenes, to certain conversations, to certain almost film-like "classics" when you feel like a kid, even though you're convinced you're an adult. The not knowing how to say no. But today it's so easy. So why does it hurt to see you like this? How can you not see yourself? They call this escape from reality. And so it is, indeed. I can't and I don't want to help you. It's already too painful to see you like this. I'm afraid that your mind will soon give way and there will no longer be room even for the conversations with a clear call for help, which you allow yourself every once in a while. I can't help you until you run away. I can't afford to chase anyone any more. Look, stop. If you turn around I'm right here behind you.

*But for those with well-tuned ears, there are other things to be heard.  
The sullen crash of a bomb.*

*The sound of shots, near or far, and then perhaps the sound of answering shots.*

*Home-made mortar bombs, ...  
The sharp crack of nail-bomb, blast-bomb, pipe-bomb, booby-trap.*

*And, by way of accompaniment to all these sounds, the clanging bells and screaming sirens of ambulances, fire engines, security vehicles...*

*Not all these sounds are to be heard every day; or even, very often; yet, too often. A. R. (p. 33)*

Can of lemonade-beer, DJ Shadow, theatre, two hours on the couch, fancy dress parties, bunker, cibucka, 1977 surrealism, either artist or madman, work or you're out, Czech fast food, glasses, lenses, blurry, "I didn't see you", bars, DJs, bars inside the apartment, factories, flood, gypsies, "where am I now?", silk-screen, Eliska, Gustav, Ivosek, Jacob, shelves, "you should have told me", tekival, Lars Von Trier, psychoanalysis, Marxism, Jan Svankmaier, non-touristy Jewish cemetery next to the TV tower, games in the square with paper, incomprehensible sentences, sleeping in the car... but it's not a car..., happy neighbours, spying neighbours, Czech nationalism, names of the months created by a poet, the leaves that fall, Prague-Hamburg-Rome, "love... no?!?", "sorry", drinking whatever is in the glass closest to the bed in the early morning, tent with the fish man that folds the branch, there's no light, dressing in layers: t-shirt, sweatshirt, jumper, another sweatshirt, jacket, hat, but baggy and holey jeans... the jeans, the jeans didn't exist, ticket controllers on transport, no, in the tube nooooo, I can't... he's coming, you defended me, you were right, nothing, cultures too different, my pasta, your pasta: onions (that as a child you ate by the mouthful instead of apples), all kinds of beans, tomato pulp, tofu, cream, more cheese, fresh tomato (what do you mean fresh...?), "do you fry olive oil?" Radio 1, Russian soup, "it's up to you, you choose, it's your trip", "if I remember I'll bring you slippers", "it's cold here", "if you're cold here, never mind there", houses with gardens, pilings, tram drivers' houses, HOME, "which home?", compulsive shopping, resignation to globalisation, from here to Venceslao Square they want to make a single street full of shops, everything will disappear, "there we had an exhibit", the posters of Ivosek everywhere, center-center, that he'd never conjugate the third person, attempts in vain to pronounce *díky*, the woods, villas, fountains, cemeteries, onion domes, hills everywhere, weeping willows, knees, eyes, teeth, bruises, the pirate and a frightened Smurfette, words

words words words words words, no bicycle, the multi-floored club, Toy-box, everything translated and explained, Avant-Garde theatre of the 1980s, puppets, my acquired grandparents, French-Czech pronunciation...

*But all this is partially redeemed by the fondness of the citizens for paint. As previously remarked, each faction has its own identifying colours, and provided the observer has been trained to interpret the colour-coding, there are few places in the City where he need be long in doubt as to the sympathies of the locality. At the appropriate seasons of festival, gaily painted banners (their poles sometimes surmounted by wreaths of emblematic flowers) are escorted through the streets. Flags, gonfalons and pennants are hung from the house-fronts.*

*At all seasons, there are to be seen crudely painted kerb-stones, cabbalistic signs and exhortations on the carriageways, ritual emblems painted on gable walls. Some of these paintings are tribal – their iconography, like their execution, is primitive and unsophisticated; but they are vigorous, colourful... A. R. (p. 34)*



*Others, however, are the work of more skilled hands – usually, art students; and represent, with embattled realism, scenes from local mythology, hagiography, or military history. The artwork is often supplemented by letterpress – exhortation, abuse, piety, vindictiveness; threats, aspirations, objurgations, manifestos. Many of these messages reappear as aerosol-brushed or crudely scrawled slogans on whatever vacant surfaces may offer themselves throughout the City. A. R. (p. 35)*





*There is always, of course, the ever-present green-grey-blue scrubby backdrop of the surrounding hills. A. R. (p. 35)*



Belfast 2013

After turning onto my home street, every pothole, every parked car, every door, together with the early and violent darkness of the time change, hurt my eyes and hit me like poisoned arrows, clouding my mind and senses.

I knew where I was but I didn't know when any more. How old was I? How much time had passed since the last time I had felt this way? And moreover, had I ever felt this way?

The dizziness caused by this violent sensory vision – which Proust probably would have appreciated but certainly feared greatly (it's not exactly involuntary memory; here various pasts merged into one single present, without a future) – suddenly joined pain together with pleasure, with joy, and captivity with freedom.

*The principal recreations of the people are, in order of estimated popularity, watching television or videos; preaching or practising religion; copulation; and (despite the prohibitions of the Prophet) indulgence in alcohol. A. R. (p. 38)*

On a shiny, red Plexiglas catwalk, dressed in black leather with an upright posture and confident gait. So they saw me, so they dreamed of me, so I really am.

*So: what then? If this is a story, has it an ending? If this is a riddle, has it an answer? If this is an enigma, has it a solution? What is to be the fate of these extraordinary people? A. R. (p. 43)*

We were in school, in the countryside, isolated, divided into groups. I was coming down the stairs, back from a boring lesson, a lesson about responsibilities - and I see a teacher with his students running like children out of the classroom in front of me. He, the teacher, is bare-chested; a chest shaped the way I like. His face is animal-like; he's a kind of ram, white with horns. I'm terribly attracted to him. In fact, I get wet. And the same happens to me even now, as I'm writing it down. This dream, this desire, this reality around the corner, never spoken, never written, never thought, only dreamed.

***The Downing Street Declaration*** indicated a tremendous leap forward on the part of the two governments and both John Major and Albert Reynolds must be seen as significant peacemakers. Their joint statement comprised five principles that finally reconciled Republicans to the idea of talks that would lead to a ceasefire, and convinced constitutional nationalists that things were moving in the right direction. Unionists needed more persuasion...

*The active search for solution known as the 'Peace Process' began its lumbering advance.*

*Town centres became alive again, most notably in Belfast. S. M. (pp. 129-131)*

*A Parades Commission, set up in March 1997, to determine whether contentious parades should take place, demanded that the 1998 Garvaghy Road march be re-routed.*



***The deaths of three Catholics children in Ballymoney after a loyalist arson attack were blamed on heightened emotions over Drumcree. S. M. (pp. 132-135)***



I gave myself some rules. Simple but strict.

To avoid those pointless fears that I absolutely didn't want to be dominated by, like everyone else.

To counteract the nausea that reappeared without fail a few seconds before carrying out any plan I had made for myself.

It turned up to try to keep me from succeeding. But instead, it did not succeed.

By walking, I discovered many dark, hidden corners.

From walking, now I've moved on directly to dancing, but this is another story, full of light and lightness.



**Tony Blair** had such a majority that he had no need to depend on Unionist members, and already he had formed an ambition to seek the final solution of the centuries-old Irish Question. His joint announcement with Mo Mowlam on 30 January 1998 of the setting up of the Saville tribunal into Bloody Sunday greatly increased nationalist confidence in the new regime. This was one of the positive results of **a new PIRA ceasefire that came into force on 20 July 1997**. S. M. (p. 135)

Finally I was able to spend some time in Belfast, without rushing.

I put down my bags, grabbed the keys and went out.

So began the small, big discoveries, full with ice cream trucks that announced their approach with musical tunes, children on the street, ladies with typical Sunday hats, men with dogs that smiled and waved at you, parks, backstreets with garbage bins, the sudden changes from working class zones to more residential ones... the long twists and turns to get to the other part.



Belfast 2013



There are a thousand obstacles. There are a thousand shortcuts that you feel it's probably better not to take. There are myriads of photos that I felt I should not take. My excellent orientation, here, had to go along with intuition.



Belfast 2013

*Blair, (...) set 15 September as the date for inclusive talks, with **May 1998 as the deadline** for agreement. He also announced the setting-up of an international body to supervise the decommissioning of Republican and Loyalist arms under the chairmanship of the Canadian general, John de Chastelain. It was Mitchell who nominated 9 April 1998 – Holy Thursday – as the final date. In fact when the Belfast Agreement was finally signed it was five o'clock on **Good Friday**.*



*For a start Paisley and his DUP, soon to become the largest parliamentary party, walked out of the conference.... The PIRA as well. After a meeting in Gweedore a breakaway group was formed assuming the mantle of the 'Real IRA' and joined the '**Continuity**' IRA in carrying on the 'armed struggle'. The most notorious of their actions was the **Omagh bombing** of 15 August 1998.*



***Over the next nine years there were to be many go-slows...*** S. M. (pp. 136-137)

I only had the courage to enter certain small residential areas when I was with a local. But that meant passing over the gap of memory and I felt that our path tread slowly on a barely-healed wound. Yours. And among all those memorials and false windows I instead relived my first anniversary.





A long Wall, East Belfast, 14 April 2014.

“But could I have crossed that little park alone?”

“Well, yes, but with speed and confidence, as if you knew exactly where you were going.”



East Belfast, 14 April 2014.

*With a reassuring report from the International Monitoring Commission on 30 January 2007 that criminality had virtually ceased Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern were able to announce that elections for the assembly would indeed take place - ...- on **7 March 2007** with the first meeting of a few power-sharing assembly on 26 March. S. M. (pp. 139-140)*

We thought it would be easy.

We slipped along the chasms of our memories, trying to superimpose new ones, together. We came out bruised, incredulous that we were still here, incredulous that time could still be so fierce, incredulous to find support in a stranger. I hope that you, like me, have at least felt the warm embrace that connects us and I hope you can smell the scent of a sweeter future.

Happy to see you walk away with apple pie from the best bakery in East Belfast, which survives to this day, for you and for your family, to reassure you that the good has remained; you've survived and I'm honoured, happy, thrilled to have had the privilege to share something so deeply.



Jordans Traditional Bakery, East Belfast, 14 April 2014.



*Jimmy McKenna is a man in his sixties that lives in Augher, a town in the area of South Tyrone, in Northern Ireland.*

*Going along Greagh Road just outside of Augher, McKenna stopped at an enormous hole, about twenty metres long and four metres deep, that British soldiers and the local police had dug right in the middle of the street.*

*"This is the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic", McKenna pronounces. "Beyond this there is the county of Monaghan, one of the twenty-six that make up Eire. My daughter's house is there..."*

*In the last year, Greagh Road has been closed and reopened six times.*

*The inhabitants of Augher, in fact, launched a challenge to security forces. They organised themselves into an association, with McKenna as spokesman, that groups together people living on both sides of the border. So that, when the soldiers arrive and open up a "crater" in the middle of the street, the local people, working the entire day, fill the giant hole with whatever they find nearby: tree trunks, dirt, scrapped cars, old and bulky objects, stones.*

*The soldiers come back and make the street impassable, but after some time it is back in use, thanks to any bulldozers and tractors that the inhabitants can salvage. And so on indefinitely, like the weaving of Penelope. Silvia Calamati (pp. 88-89)*

Loss is something else. Or I should say, abandonment.

Why is it that when I pull away from someone I care about, on whom I projected all the love that I can't manage to give to myself, I get so hurt? Why am I convinced that I won't see that person again? Why can't I simply believe that it is, as indeed it is, just a goodbye? Even if I see that person again, I don't believe it. The idea of that loss has been instilled in me, and every time I see that person again, it's like seeing a ghost. This overlap with the past is sobering. An incredible thirst for presence brings me back to the anxieties that I had in the summer, those absurd, senseless anxieties that occasionally seized me. I was so overwhelmed that my best friend from high school suggested that I analyse my anxiety deeply and note every possible cause, however stupid, that came to mind. I never did it. I will never understand how my friend, the same age as me, had developed such a rational and incredibly useful method, at that age. She was like that. At least 20 years wiser than me. I, on the other hand, was overwhelmed by those anxieties. Maybe they were too painful to be able to analyse them. They required a trip back into the past to when, for many years, I could not be left alone. Of course my family members didn't help; my grandmother was even more alarmist than me but, like me, when she thought of the worst, she almost calmed down.

There. When I concluded the worst, the anxiety ceased to exist. Death did not scare me; but disappearance and absence without a reason did. If you are there, you have to be totally there, because I am not invisible.

Today, often, the same thing happens to me. At the moment I resign myself to the worst, I calm down.

Clearly that's not ok at all. Because I have been so good at developing this technique, but not any technique to counter the sense of abandonment, where even a simple turning of the shoulders is a demonstration of indifference and goodbye, as if I were the cause.

But I never ask it.

I mean, affection.

Not explicitly.

My body is starting to ask for that by itself. Poor thing, it couldn't take it any more, but everything else I see is behind in following it, it doesn't admit it, it's proud. It's easy to ask

for attention from whoever is leaving and then feel rejected, right? That person had to go away, what should he have done? Should he have turned his life upside down for you? Yes. Should he change his plans for you? Yes. Should he understand what you don't say? Yes. Have you ever told him this? No.

*...the City may bring about its own utter downfall. Babylon, that great city, is fallen, is fallen. The walls of Jericho tumbled down at the blast of a trumpet. Troy lies hidden for ever under its nine-times mound. Deleta est Carthago. The sands of the desert, and the thin grasses of the steppe, have buried half the cities and half the civilisations of central Asia. Pompeii is buried under ash, pumice, and soot. Sodom and Gomorrah were utterly consumed, and even their refugees were turned into pillars of salt.*

*If all these are fallen, how: and why: and for how long: shall our City survive? A. R. (p. 48)*

*Yet Belfast with its lough, hills and surrounding countryside remains rich in possibility. One need only think of the cultural mix upon which the city is built to identify that human potential. Irish, Scottish, English... Gerald Dawe (p. 201)*



The New Lodge towers, Belfast, October 2013.

*The nightlife and pub-life of the city is today indistinguishable from Bristol or Birmingham, or, for that matter, Dublin's custom-built Temple Bar. We all live, more or less, in the same post-modern heaven. Gerald Dawe (p. 201)*

Now the birds no longer try to come into the house.  
I see them fly high in the clear sky from my terrace.

Finally I saw them from outside, numerous. Perhaps they would like to come inside to console the patients. They glide around the pain and perch above those rooms. That's what that noise was that bothered me so much at the time. Their little feet on those roofs. But that's their way of not letting us slide away: they reassure life.



Birds on the IEO roof, Milan, 2014.

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RETURN EVERYTHING, OR REMAIN AT A LOSS  
by Sandra Johnston

11 April 2014, the distances between things that I trust – the spacing of words in a quietly spoken sentence, cars in an evenly-spaced line beside a row of churches, charity shops and bookies, candy coloured petals from cherry blossom trees, newly planted along an avenue of derelict terrace houses. Across the road, blackened windows of new apartments face the other direction. There is an impression of mountains uncovered by clouds today, naked in the remnants of winter light, ‘old as the hills’ as the expression goes. A circling, screeching flock of seabirds hover over a single field, undisputed reactions to changes in the air. A stack of paper cups on a bench, beside me a man manipulates an empty coffee cup roughly between his fingertips, it fissles as if alive. Heads turn in unison in conversation, empty of want, a figure blocks the speaker from view. I listen to her voice coming steadily through the cracks in a row of listening backs.

The myth of the city is perhaps greater than the sum of its parts.

Being alive somehow to the uncertainty of air, climates of intimate possibility spreading down the passages of the lungs, a virus of necessity. I bleed porous into the spaces between myself and you, falling indeterminately into lost expressions; words lie cupped in my throat, stalled for direction.

Sometime in the afternoon it was all over by chance.

On 31 August 1994, when the Provisional IRA declared a cessation of military operations in Northern Ireland, not one of us knew a ceasefire was imminent. My sister and I were driving in a car towards Belfast when the news broke, through. Set casually between pop songs, the

words were delivered in the matter of fact voice of a newscaster. I experienced a sense of shock and fear – we considered turning the car around and driving back out to the village where my parents lived. That night the city erupted into contrasting scenes of rampant triumphalism in some areas, whilst in our streets the atmosphere was characterised by animalistic despair. Cars of armed men drove through the night, firing indiscriminately, emptying their guns into the blackness. The security forces absented themselves, standing back from the riotous outpouring of fury, disbelief and euphoria. Then a day, maybe two after, there was silence. A deadening silence shaped by exhilaration that had turned to exhaustion. It was a unanimous wordlessness that heralded in the new political reality, for as yet, no one had imagined a two-tongued language that could bind that most unyielding word- peace.

13 April 2014, the scent of lilies seeps in from the dining room through a half-opened door; dense and petulant, the smell awakens unkempt memories. Disorganised thoughts of events pry their way into the present without merit or order. She switches on the kettle behind closed doors. Rain beads against the window, scattered thin by wind gusts cutting around the corner of the bungalow. A stream of light crosses the carpet, exact and rectangular, leading to the hallway. Voices come through amid the clattering of china cups. Sunday evening approaches in a ball of sunlight blazing through a hole in thick grey cloud, pulling its way to the right of the window frame before bracing the distant hill at an angle. They sit down to drink and the chairs shifting fractionally beneath their weight on a tiled floor. The chimney roars with wind trapped in the hollow. They talk of a neighbour sent to prison for fifteen years a series of murders, a gang of paramilitaries, a feud.

The timing is wrong for remembering, why would I choose to remember it all now? The drab little streets that marked four years of my life, tightly

boarded up houses and shops. The bravest of developers wouldn't touch them. Even now, the 'For Sale' signs have worn out into blank plastic while the roofs buckle in a long unruly line of collapsing chimneystacks. These terraced houses stand back and front, side to side, all the way down the valley to what was formerly Harland & Wolff shipyards, now a theme park and retail zone rebranded as the Titanic Quarter. The two giant gantry cranes, Samson and Goliath still stand over East Belfast. The local people here always say they live "in the shadow of the cranes" as a statement of pride. When I lived here, I would lie in bed each night listening to the sounds emanating from the shipyards <sup>1</sup> and the omnipresent sound of military helicopters circling the sky above in grindingly slow, torturous circles.

The sadness inside me seems endemic, enclosed inside folds of heart, an unending sickness that travels within me.

As the satellite housing estates of Belfast spread outwards, they gradually disintegrate at the edges into bog land unfit for building. From this point onwards, arbitrary bungalows line the lonely roads, drilling outwards up to and beyond the mountains. A mangle of arterial roads quickly shrinking into B scale roads, sluggish with hedgerows growing tight to the margins of the tarmac. She spoke from the passenger's seat, "God help you both when I'm dead, because your mother is a hoarder." She followed on some moments later, "well I suppose you will just do what my sister did when granny died - put a skip under the upstairs window and haul everything out through it." I sit silent in the backseat, the fields flash past, a row of oversized mansions cut into a lowly hill, each a degree higher than its neighbour. I think of this coarse womb, a window blindly emitting a lifetime's possessions in a stream of ragged,

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<sup>1</sup> Shipbuilding ended at Harland & Wolff in 2003.

lifeless forms. Objects no longer recognisable or complete, dislocated from the labyrinth of her mind, which gave each thing its sacred place in a delicate order.

After she died, I kept a blue silk blouse with a high collar that had belonged to her. Or, more likely, it was polyester. I put it in a plastic bag with a handful of costume jewellery; the only remaining trinkets after her watch and wedding ring had been distributed to her two daughters. Of this granddaughter's trove of possessions, it was of course the blouse that mattered. The way it carried the last residue of her smell deep in its fabric, captured in the threads. I remember the smell of it and the comfort taken from the smell of it.

On 7 December 1982, the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), exploded a bomb in the Droppin' Well Bar Disco in Ballykelly. Seventeen people were killed in the attack and thirty injured, including one British soldier of the Cheshire Regiment, identified in an interview as 'Peter'. This soldier remembered how he had been sitting in the disco drinking a pint when he saw a white light like a camera flash, followed by a sound, which he compared to the cracking sound of a ruler flicked against a school desk. As the explosion ripped through the building, he recalled that the record playing was 'Mirror Man' by the Human League.

In 2003 I visited the Droppin' Well Bar, still open, still bearing the same name. I spoke for some time with the bar owner whose sister was one of six local women killed in the bombing. These civilian fatalities were widely condemned by representatives of both communities. But, in a statement released by the INLA, the terrorists described these women



as 'consorts', as a means of justification for their massacre.<sup>2</sup> The conversation quickly faltered into an awkward silence and I exited to the ladies' toilets. The bar's interior décor was resolutely reminiscent of the 80s. Inside the toilets, the surfaces were entirely stainless steel, including the scratched metal mirrors bolted to the walls. A broken light fitting hung in the hallway entrance to the disco. The outside of the bar fronted onto a busy road, separated by a paved beer garden. Buried in the hedge were a few fairy lights left hanging as remnants of Christmas, and in the centre of the space stood a brick and wood structure mimicking a wishing well. All actions, regardless of how horrific, are eventually claimed and justified by terrorists. This is to say that justification is not an ethical act but one of ownership. An act of supremacy, in the sense of there being a greater need to destroy than to negotiate.

The actor Larry Hagman, famous for his role of JR Ewing in 'Dallas', was filmed at the height of his fame at a racecourse in Ireland with the then Irish Prime Minister (Taoiseach) Charles 'Charlie' Haughey. At one point Haughey cajoles the actor into removing a bank note from his wallet. The camera zooms in on the dollar bill Hagman holds up to show JR depicted as President of the United States. Haughey's delight in the joke is captured before the footage cuts.<sup>3</sup>

A photograph of bathers from 5 High Street. Two sisters crouch in a flimsy paddling pool, twisted together into one multi-limbed symbiotic

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<sup>2</sup> Seamus McKinney, December 6, 2007 edition of the Irish News, sourced-  
[http://www.nuzhound.com/articles/irish\\_news/arts2007/dec6\\_Dropping\\_Well\\_INLA\\_nearly\\_called-off.php#Top](http://www.nuzhound.com/articles/irish_news/arts2007/dec6_Dropping_Well_INLA_nearly_called-off.php#Top), accessed on 9<sup>th</sup> January 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Haughey held office in Ireland for three terms as Taoiseach, despite accusations of involvement in importing arms for the Provisional IRA. Later, there were recurring allegations of major financial misdealings resulting in damaging court cases, some never resolved. However, in spite of these charges he survived several leadership challenges, earning him the nick name of the Great Houdini.

figure. Both of us in that moment expressionless, unaware of the forces of conformity already pulling us apart.

Watching Brian Rowan, the respected Northern Irish journalist, as he speaks to an audience of academics.<sup>4</sup> Frequently, he makes the presumption that every person in the room knows the background information on the murders and policies that he introduces. He speaks through first hand associations with terrorists, but does not name names. In this way, he creates his own credentials as a valued insider. He alludes to, insinuates, criticises, and garnishes his opinions with the titillation of secrets. In a way, he enjoys his subject of spooks to such an extent he has absorbed the practices of indirectness. Watching his hands move as he talks, they frequently make a turning rotating gesture, as if to suggest the movement forward of a conversation or an idea. It also suggests a running cassette tape. There is prestige in describing meetings with terrorists, the arrangements of transport, the trappings of fear around the gathering of statements, and the issue of whether or not this action of gathering 'stories' in fact fed further deaths. In passing, he mentions Margaret Thatcher's infamous 'oxygen of publicity' speech. He describes seeing three executed bodies. His words are plausible because of the intense details of the circumstances, the blacked out glasses, the tape over the eyes, a statement written on a toilet roll. The game-like manner of his telling is exhausting, charting the collusion between all sides of the security forces, governments and paramilitaries, until the pieces collapse into an irretrievable vacuum of violence that can never be accounted for. His hands falter over written documents contained in plastic bags, their histories of passing

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<sup>4</sup> Brian Rowan, former Security Editor for BBC Northern Ireland, now freelance broadcaster and journalist. Rowan delivered a public lecture at Queen's University, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2011, entitled, *The Hidden Legacy Of Intelligence: The 'dirty war' in the north*.

ownership hermetically sealed even as they are exposed through words.

The nature of some memories arrives as ingested images, some act as irritants, pleasures or whimsy. Whereas the things so easily forgotten, so radically banal, announce themselves into full view jubilant with their victory over value or sentiment. The lilies congeal in a luminous display of golden-fringed petals; carnal and fully extended, they choke out their stamens into the travelling light of sunset. It's the smell that damages the emotions and makes the mind wander into churches and living rooms, and then finally into the last kitchen, humble in its dimensions and surfaces. Here a bunch of lilies sat discordant on the table top, wilting under the envious eye of my neighbour. Leaving that house, I cried at the touch of the door handles, knowing I would never feel them again. Plastic and worn, they had furnished my fingers with a sense of homeliness that I had longed for. This house, too, became another dream – a place to fall into and wander away from, full of misplaced persons and lost sentences, another home for half-spoken truths. I can't imagine who lives there now.

I remember the man who lived across the road from me in Belvoir Street. He was stoutly built and dour in demeanour. I watched him casually from my upstairs window for many hours. He would stand on the pavement at the adjacent street corner with two greyhounds released from a garage. Both dogs cowered beside him, slinking around his legs without ever touching. Immediately upon reaching the road, they would hunch over and piss long streaks down the tarmac. Scrawny and untrained, they gazed with sharp glances upwards at him in expectation of moving down the street. Often he would keep them standing for several minutes, immune to their nervous beseeching expressions, hovering on quivering legs. Their daily exercise followed

a wholly predictable route, turning left down the street and around the block to his local bar. Eventually they would stride off in his wake with their lean tails swinging low to the ground, long black nails clicking on the pavement slabs. Only after several months did I realise that I was one of his subjects of surveillance.

In dreams I awake, holding a shy handful of teeth crumbling to dust and falling between my fingers. The growth of deciduous teeth (or milk teeth) remains mysterious to me – the fact that we are born with two sets of teeth, one dormant, ghosting the other. The process is one of resorption where the roots of the primary teeth are absorbed by the incipient teeth beneath, by around the age of six. As I age, I have become fascinated by the crooked inner cavity of my oddly fitting teeth. The holes left from extractions, the ingenious ways that the synthetic gold crowns merge and knit into the organic. A complex process of erosion and compensation that has carved a broken front line from my mouth, hidden beneath a closed smile.

No memory of that day.

A Swiss artist once told me about an autistic boy she was working with as an art therapist. She described how, no matter what subject or theme was introduced to the class of children, this little boy had only one obsession, which he painted continuously and without alteration. The subject of his painting was the sinking of the Titanic.<sup>5</sup> Again and again, he faithfully recorded the descent of the immense black ship into the frozen ocean, lights blazing on deck, smoke climbing in grey spirals from the funnels as the mass of the liner slipped diagonally beneath the

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<sup>5</sup> RMS Titanic, was a British Passenger Liner built at the Harland & Wolff shipyards in Belfast. Regarded in its day as the largest vessel afloat, it tragically sank on the 15 April 1912 whilst on its maiden voyage. More than 1,500 lives were lost when the ship collided with an iceberg in the North Atlantic Ocean.



dense ocean waves. A sky sparkling with snow, each picture dominated by grades of blackness interspersed with over-scaled white blots hanging over the water but never placed below the waterline. The tragedy of the ship's fate may never have entered his mind. In his rendering of it, Titanic sailed to the bottom of the ocean: windows, doors, lights, funnels, engines, without sight nor sound of humans. No one could explain how he had arrived at this single image, where he had seen it or conceived of its composition, why it so rivetted his imagination. Leaning into the whiteness of the page, bleeding the black paint in a system of washes and lines, until the ship was again resurrected in its final moments, falling off the skyline with the crack of ice, into an emptiness measuring exactly half the page. This known and unknown world divided by the body of the ship, cutting through sky and water, night and day. Distance is suggested in the hovering snow, it places his vision always at a margin of safety, as if on a life raft, or sitting behind a screen.

Memories of places turn up in dreams unravelling each other. Rooms fall into impossible structures, containers and corridors that are inescapable. Sometimes I hear voices in these rooms brought back from the dead, warm and fragrant, disembodied. Neither they nor I can reach the landscape beyond the yard, nor the windows. The dream tightens into the membrane of a known place until, stifled by its aridity, I recoil and awake bewildered, carrying only the vaguest coordinates for its setting. The living and the dead populate these spaces in perpetuity. The solitude of that. Standing in infinite space surrounded by the residue of incalculable encounters.

The way a corner of the road can make me cry.

More and more memories emerge now from my parents; they are becoming careless with age, forgetting to guard their fears. They reveal being in a pub after a stock car race meeting on the night that two bombs went off in the building. Dull thuds, then all the electricity went out. As my mother tried to reach the doorway she was crushed by other fleeing customers. Two young soldiers picked her up, trapped, unable to move and frightened, by both arms and carried her through the doorway into the car park outside.

After the IRA bombing of the La Mon Hotel on 17 February 1978, the bodies of the dead were so badly disintegrated they shrivelled to the size of children and some could only be identified through their dental records. The twelve victims had been attending a Friday night dinner dance organised by the Irish Collie Club. I remember the Peacock room in the hotel where the bomb exploded. We went there often for Sunday buffet dinners, sitting close to the windows so we could watch the horses in the field outside. Some years later, I went back there to film on the anniversary of the bombing. Overcome by sadness, I sat down by a wall. The only thing I managed to record was dew on the grass in front of my feet, stretching out as a lawn towards the back entrance, listening to beer kegs dropping onto concrete and a bird in a nearby tree. The smell of roast beef from the kitchen, businessmen arriving for lunch. The normality of aftermath can be hard to reconcile. I imagined the CCTV cameras filming my solitary vigil with complete disinterest. The original BBC news report of the bombing was broadcast on the Saturday night advertisement break, just before 'Jim'll Fix It', <sup>6</sup> a popular 70s TV programme. As the opening music for the show began to play, I was suddenly violently sick upon realizing that the image on the screen

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<sup>6</sup> Jimmy Savile, the once popular British television presenter of the show, was subsequently revealed, after his death in 2011, to have been a prolific sex offender.

that I had mistaken to be a black plastic bag was in fact the burnt remains of a victim's body.

A photograph bent in two, the boy spilt into two parts forever standing on isolated rocks. The tide turned against the mother.

Watching Paulina Zielińska <sup>7</sup> in Norway, 'white voice' singing. She told us how the old women in the mountains of Poland were the last to remember not only the songs of this tradition, but also the vocal technique based on screaming. She explained that this performed screaming is both sorrowful and ecstatic in the same breath, a hybrid entwining of a craving for life. In this way, the women carry both the burden of birth and of mourning, a life-long seepage of beginnings and endings coded in the gravitas of a scream. Paulina stands beside a picnic bench, singing to us in the sunlight. She does not squander the old women's songs. Both arms hang calmly at either side of her body as she works slowly into the scream in her body. By the time it reaches her throat, it has the full intensity of a rapturous surrender. As it ended, it left us, her listeners, with an emptiness not easily brokered by gestures or platitudes. We scattered in different directions, stunned for some moments in our separateness. The song was a fragment of one traditionally wailed for several days unending, a torrent leaving the singer dry of tears, emptied. Someone once told me I had a scream inside me a mile wide. She said this to me while I was lost in days of anguish and I sometimes despise myself for regaining my voice still now. Some things don't bear repeating.

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<sup>7</sup> Paulina Zielińska, Polish performance artist working with archaic eastern-European singing traditions, performing as part of, *Between Sea & Sky 2014*, organised by Performance Art Bergen, Herdla, Norway.

Today I told a friend about the YouTube clip of JR Ewing and Charlie Haughey. He recounted that his brother had once made an advertisement for Ulster Television with Larry Hagman, where the actor spoke on camera, warning against the dangers of lung cancer from smoking. In one outtake, Hagman turned to the camera and jokingly remarked, “don’t fucking smoke”.<sup>8</sup>

The remains of the RMS Titanic were eventually discovered in 1985, off the coast of Newfoundland. The two split halves of the vessel were located some 12,000 feet below the surface, forming a debris field of approximately five by three miles that contained several thousands of items. In particular, pairs of shoes and boots remained, providing the last markers of where bodies had lain.<sup>9</sup>

2014 was a year of missing aircraft – days of news reports seeking to explain aeroplanes vanishing off screens or exploded out of the sky.<sup>10</sup> I remember again that this is the shape of terrorism: amorphous, paradoxical in its nature - both explosive and implosive, shaping cavities within and without.

I don’t remember which year, day or hour, although I do know it was late afternoon because I was walking towards the Bedford Street bus station. Turning a corner, I was confronted by a security checkpoint blocking pedestrian access. Behind this police line I glimpsed the devastating scene of an entire street, gutted and upturned by a series

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<sup>8</sup> As a teenager my classmates nicknamed me ‘JR’ – apparently I have an evil laugh.

<sup>9</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RMS\\_Titanic#CITEREFBallard1987](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RMS_Titanic#CITEREFBallard1987)

<sup>10</sup> Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH17/MAS17) international passenger flight, departed from Amsterdam on 17 July 2014 carrying 298 people. Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 (MH370/MAS370) international passenger flight that disappeared after taking off from Kuala Lumpur airport on Saturday, 8 March 2014, carrying 239 people. Indonesia AirAsia Flight 8501 (QZ8501/AWQ8501) international passenger flight, crashed on 28 December 2014, due to bad weather, with 162 people on board. Recovery of wreckage and human remains ongoing.



of bomb blasts. Everything that had been known in that place had been wiped out, its familiarity eclipsed by the awareness of a new consistency of air. Breathing in seemingly static air, glutted with glass and dust suspended in a slow, slow gyrating fall from the hole the explosion ripped into the sky. A world in reverse, returning inexplicably to surrender into a new dimension. Perhaps it is perverse to say it, but I saw in its chaotic heart a piercing beauty, as if the air had become crystal, a momentous darkness haemorrhaging with light.

During the 80s, my family owned a hotel in a small factory town. I remember acutely the bomb scares, when anonymous hoax phone calls would force us to empty the building of customers and staff. After everyone had exited out into the car park at the rear of the building, we waited under the trees until security forces arrived. However, the police and army would not enter the building. 'Key holders' had to check their premises themselves for suspicious devices. Many nights I watched my Mother walk alone into the hotel in darkness. We would stand waiting, watching, as the light from her torch would move slowly from room to room, threading her way through the cavernous structure.

My grandparents carved a steady bloody oblivion, out of every day apparently unfingered by regrets. I stand still and count the times the field returns to me - both awake and asleep. Upright, my Grandmother magnified the pursuit of exhaustive kindness. Standing with a glimmer of light captured in her grey hair, an unruly crown of thorns thinning to the scalp, her hands paper-thin with use. Every breath scalloped in the turning, striking blows of a sickle blade, as she broke the heads of thistles blown wide, carpeting the dry earth at her feet. I lost her in the melancholia of adolescence, lost touch with her eyes, her scent, the skin creases at her elbows unravelling in whirls of soft contours, a cosmology laid bare, riddled with a tide of steady arteries. The heart

gave out first, corroded by time and the chaos we preferred not to admit. Yet, everything dutifully ignored falls to the heart to witness. She had a knack for seeing forwards and backwards into spaces between the thoughts of others; she understood fear far too well.

The past keeps pace easily, a wilful child running alongside the mind's eye, filling in the vacant moments, opaque in turn, and then dissolving. She, faint with effort, breaks the shadow of innocence. Feeling alone with this spectre, I cannot displace this emptiness tied to an absent place, the landscape inside me that lays claim above all others. A fragment of a corner of a road that leaves me defeated by the lifespan of a memory, elastic and permeable. The future holds me with an unguarded capacity for returning.

2014 and Gerry Adams is released after four days of police questioning regarding the murder of Jean McConville in December 1972, one of eight victims murdered by the Provisional IRA subsequently named as the 'Disappeared'. Jean was abducted and killed on the allegation that she was a paid informer of the British Army. Her body was not recovered until the 27th August 2003, when a storm destroyed part of an embankment on Shellinghill Beach in County Louth, unearthing her remains. For her family the legacy of her abduction has been enforced silence, despite knowing the identity of her abductors. Jean's family of ten children were left starving in their home for three weeks before they received a visitor, who handed back to them her purse containing 52pence and three rings from her fingers.

The shame of it is, to know how things really are deep inside yourself but to continue to function everyday, every hour of every day, on the auto-drive, grim-dance of face-saving, time-wasting, energy-sucking, egocentric terrain of self-disgust.

The Troubles created a generation of escapologists. We of my generation became experts in the art of disappearances, denials and then ignominious returns. In myself, I carry an ill-fitting sense of guilt at my own collusion in the overarching sectarian hatred that engulfed Northern Ireland in my childhood. Then the greater guilt at not staying around to clean up the mess. My memory is fatally fractured; it divides and subdivides and disintegrates, but never outgrows its causes. Counting and measuring the spaces between cars, looking at a watch sideways on a turned wrist, the effect of today's light on today's skin, a bony wrist, blue veined, an unrepentant pulse, nails that disappear into a broken white line lost at the edge of a limb. This point of disappearance where the heat of my blood wells outwards, evaporating beyond the skin, or conversely, retracts chastened to the bone. All of this an intricate retreat before, during and beneath a graceless inner war.