

## **Cuttings**

by Sandra Johnston

*Since years the performer Sandra Johnston is producing texts which can accompany her exhibitions but are also totally independent from them. Printed on cards in different shades of grey and measuring 21x15 cm.*

*Here you can read 4 of her **Cuttings**.*

*Only those images that your mind will slowly build while reading the texts are allowed.*

### **CUTTINGS 1**

The crab pear tree marked itself out in my childhood imagination as a signpost in the centre of invisible pathways. Standing alone in the middle of the backfield, its fruit never ripened beyond embryonic bitter nodules: thick skinned and coarse, the colours on each fruit graduating from insipid green to mottled shades of russet brown. Each year we tentatively tasted the pears yearning for edible fruit. We fought with our fingers, piercing through the lower branches and twisting off the sturdy stems. Persistent in our investigations, we used our childish teeth to scrape away small slithers of the grainy flesh. However, the tree never succumbed to our desires for sweetness, each crop merely swelled into hard kernels before dropping decisively to the ground.

Whoever had planted the tree must have realised that they had left to the land something with a blighted future. It grew in a waterlogged part of the field, surrounded by a bank of nettles and crushed bricks. In among this debris we found old iron horse shoes and a rusted 'Rovers' biscuit tin, which we imagined had, at one time, held an illicit stash of money. However, this was all the treasure that the field offered up, so we grew content to plunder the tree for whatever pleasures it could provide. Whacking nettles with the gnarled fallen branches in some semblance of a 'Star Wars' laser battle, largely achieved through sound effects.

In our house it was never discussed. The carpet was heavily patterned in autumnal shades and I played in front of the coffee table with my back to the TV. In the schoolyard or in the homes of family friends the crisis was picked over and digested in fragmented conversations. Everyone had their hold on what it meant that ten men were slowly and interminably dying. It happened in the full glare of the media, yet without any images of their suffering and with the voices of their representatives masked by lip-synced actors.

It felt as if these deaths were occurring in a distant vacuum far removed from normal experience, and in a sense their deaths have always remained unimaginable. Not a shadow of a doubt was expressed in relation to the manner of their deaths. The politicians calmly spoke away each of the days that were counted out in numbers on the edge of the television screen.

Charles Haughey was elected Irish Taoiseach in December 1979. The election campaign was designed by the London-based advertising company Saatchi & Saatchi. They provided a new image for Haughey, modelled on the one that had brought Margaret Thatcher into power earlier in the same year.

Our parents brought us back swimming suits from America: one each. Mine had a leopard skin print in a silky material, the other one came in a curious silver foil fabric. We immediately named this costume 'Wonder Woman'. My sister and I both held fantasies that wearing it gave you superpowers and the capability of swimming faster than anyone else in the world. No amount of evidence to the contrary dispelled this theory.

David Bowie recorded the song *Jean Genie* in New York on 6<sup>th</sup> October 1972. Bowie described it as "a bit of a smorgasbord of imagined Americana". It was Bobby Sands' favourite song and for a while he took to wearing denim in homage.

Our fingers used to handle unwieldy litre bottles of coke. The excitement of pouring and feeling the spasms of the bottle as the liquid exploded from the small plastic mouth. We would hold the bottle at crazy angles: drinking it while rocking backwards and forwards between gulps, enjoying each burst of sweetness. We had competitions swallowing it down, a kind of bravado for the burning aftermath of the bubbles spewing up in the throat and back into the passageway behind the nose and ears. Our eyes sparkling with the effort of giggling and holding down the sugary phlegm stuck in the throat, while tears squeezed out in eruptions of happiness.

Visitors to the wing of Maze prison where the "Hunger Strikers" were hospitalised, reported how, in his final days, Bobby Sands' eyes had turned bright orange.

One night in a storm the tree was blown over, half of its roots were torn out of the ground and left exposed as sharp white limbs stripped of bark. Yet, despite the odds, the tree continued to live on for several more years. The upper half maintained an indignant and resilient crown of greenery, while the leaves on the lower branches withered prematurely, as the branches gradually became imbedded into the earth. White blossoms came and went in quick succession. Shroud-like, the petals spread over the ground. The fruit again made its stubborn appearance, forced on early by the drought in the trunk, then falling and fermenting in the cage of branches left barren beneath. Gradually these dying branches were gnawed away by grazing animals in the height of summer, encased by clouds of tiny flies hovering among the raw animal smells of greasy strands of sheep's wool snagged on the coarse bark.

The last thing that Bobby Sands ever ate was an orange. He said that it tasted bitter.

## **CUTTINGS 2**

Just moments after the Queen Mother died the BBC closed down broadcasting. For several minutes the television became a blank screen. I sat staring at the electronic object, so dense and funereal, vibrating with empty passing scenes.

The ceremonial preparations for her death had been kept waiting on standby. An entire state funeral held in cold storage. All the trappings of the public procession were lined up in rows of antique carriages, harnesses and uniforms. The news cameras scanned around the warehouses of preserved stately relics, waiting to enclose her passing into public memory.

I remember too the nightly watershed. The allure of adult television as the National Anthem pummeled the sitting room walls, floorboards and the wooden sides of the television cabinet. The Queen was sitting up high and immaculate in a uniform of reds and blues, diluted by the watery pixilation of the screen. What colour was the horse? The band kept playing, then the band stopped. The broadcast dissolved into the centre of the screen, dispersing the colours into a halo of grey light, separated beyond the eye's reach. I always found it mysterious to experience this ceremony, the Queen's departure from the room: her presence amongst us so familiar, but always distant and outside of us.

In a dream I am eating death. I devour it as a black liquid syrup from a white bowl. Each spoonful diffuses on the metal of the spoon into an oily brown ink stain. Lying in the dark liquid are images the size of negatives seeped in the juice. I poach them out onto the spoon, one image at a time, not salted, not sweet, slippery to the tongue. Before and between each mouthful I experience a memory of someone, a pause – a forgetting, a pause – a remembering – a likening to and a distancing from each person that forms the taste. Every one of these disappearances yields an indescribable flavor, dense and fetid clinging to the tongue.

Bobby Sands died in the Maze prison on the 5<sup>th</sup> May 1981. On the 20<sup>th</sup> July 1982 the IRA carried out two bombing attacks in London in Hyde Park and Regent's Park, which resulted in the deaths of eleven soldiers of the Household Cavalry and seven horses. Consequently, on this day at the end of the main evening news the BBC decided to implement a brief deviation from broadcasting protocol as an act of commemoration. The usual sign off was replaced by the Marine's band performing while a young boy wearing a uniform was shown, in slow motion, laying a wreath at the site of the bombing.

It was the fate of Sefton, one of the Cavalry horses critically injured in the car-mounted nail bomb attack that became the focus of national attention. The horse had been bred in County Waterford in Ireland in 1963 and bought by the British army as a four year old. Sefton's recovery was reported in news stories over several months, charting his gradual return to health, while the British public sent donations, get well cards and mints.

At the Comber cinema we observed the playing of the National Anthem at the end of every film. There was a certain inadvertent humour when the illusory worlds of *Jaws* and *James Bond* were replaced by the images of an ever-youthful Queen. Still, the Queen's horse flickers within my mind, hovering at the epicenter of the image, hooves raised alternately and irreversible. The reality of whether it was walking or trotting has become blurred into inert consciousness. She effortlessly glides across the screen, among a perfectly synchronized choreography of geometry and colours.

Standing for the anthem. There was a certain formality in that unbidden gesture. We learnt to rise up as we watched the same unchanging piece of film, The Queen, the horse, the soldiers on display. In the darkness, we too were on display. No command came to rise to the anthem, but still we learnt to do it. Obeying the invisible order, all of us with our faces hidden in the darkness, standing after the credits among the crackles of crisp packets on the floor and the sounds of coats being pulled on. The Queen rode by, immune to our efforts, never blinking: a displaced person traveling through the unnatural stillness of a mass of men ranked and featureless.

Eyes shut, I believe the horse was white. Polarized, reticent, it floats ghosted across the proceedings.

The night my grandmother died I stood in the bathroom watching for some time a small fruit fly trapped in the room. I watched it flying in circles in front of the mirror, illuminated by a long strip of fluorescent lighting. The insect floated as if on a carousel moving from visibility into invisibility, in and out of the light. All the while the circumference of its flight was never greater than ten centimeters away from the mirror that gently pulled it back magnetically towards the hollow brightness of the glass surface.

On 30th September 2012 police were alerted by a member of the public to the location of a navy Saab car parked in a bridleway. Beside the car, investigators found three mutilated bodies. One of the deceased was Michael Pedersen, a former Sergeant in the Household Cavalry. Pedersen had been the soldier who had ridden Sefton on the day of the Hyde Park bombing. On the ground beside him were the bodies of two of his children, Ben Pedersen, aged seven, and Freya Pedersen, aged six. Pedersen had fatally stabbed the children before taking his own life as an act of revenge on his estranged wife who had filed for divorce.

### **CUTTINGS 3**

Margaret Elizabeth Wright, single, 31 years old, murdered on the 6<sup>th</sup> April 1994 by members of the Red Hand Commando, a Loyalist paramilitary organisation in Meridi Street, Belfast.

The person formerly known as Margaret Wright is only available to me through two forms of information: the first, a memory I retain of the newspaper report the day after her murder. The press printed a family image of Ms Wright in a green bridesmaid dress. In this the victim was offered to the public gaze as a banal pixilated presence, washed free of fear, with no meaningful expression other than that of pleasing the wedding photographer. Her bridesmaid's face was helplessly shy in front of the camera, completely implausibly linked with the body described in the report. This becomes then a newsworthy skin, a victim dredged into public consciousness, the photograph displayed between the facts of the murder and testimonies of relatives. An ordinary, loved daughter, given to the disinterested eyes of a populace anaesthetized by the longterm effects of mediated terrorism.

A second portrait of Margaret emerges from the archived court documents concerning the trial of her murderers. In this the victim is embedded within the text as a series of body parts; actually a graphic sequence of descriptive glimpses from the murder scene in the storage room of a band hall. Here, Wright is described only through the dispersal of her bodily fluids; blood gathered forensically from the drainage pipes, a broom handle, or the incriminating smear on a pair of jeans. Frequently she is described as in various states of 'aliveness': numerous speculations note at which point in the process of torture she finally lost consciousness, even beyond four bullets in the skull. The fixing of this moment proved pivotal for the court case in determining the degrees of guilt of those implicated in her murder. So the victim is fundamentally a non-presence, lost in the statistics of circumstances, which are exhaustively re-constructed and cross-examined, re-enacted partially in the mind as the reader scans the page. Although the legal documents aim to neutralize her individual human characteristics, in effect, the omissions serve to animate the evidence into a horrific choreography. This then is the banal residue of an unimaginable death.

To write, here, now, about her death, is inadvertently to draw fascinated attention again to the notorious facts. Perhaps it was the final degradation enacted by the terrorists of dumping her naked body into a wheelie bin, which became the memorable detail provoking unexpected public reaction. This final action, indicative of complete dehumanization by the attackers, aroused a groundswell of public sympathy. Over the following weeks, Wright's murder was remarkable for the jolt of revulsion it transmitted through Protestant communities. Ultimately, this directed disgust back to the terrorists themselves. Her appearance within the frame of the newspaper reverberated so radically within extreme Loyalist circles, they shot dead two members in response: Ian Hamilton and William Elliott.

Loyalists also issued instructions to other defendants charged with offences relating to her murder not to seek legal defense in court, but to plead guilty. These instructions were obeyed.

Fundamentally, however, this violent internal paramilitary resolution serves only to heighten the vicious sectarian truth beneath this case. If Margaret Wright had indeed been a Catholic, and not just mistakenly identified as one, the consequences of her death would never have aroused this sequence of controversy and repercussion. The death of a Catholic woman would have been accepted, whatever the brutality, as what she 'deserved' for the unforgivable act of crossing onto Protestant territory.

The name signals discomfort. It is not the death that is remembered, but the mistake of killing 'one of your own'. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Margaret Wright remains one of the relatively few victims of the terrorist atrocities whose name continues to agitate in public memory. In some respects her name became shorthand, no longer denoting the actual victim, but the manner of death. In effect, the violent depravity of the perpetrators was not denied, but reflected covertly into the community as an otherwise unspeakable glimpse of self.

Alternatively, for many, the carrying forward of Wright's name is a small, flawed, but sincere form of remembrance. I realize I still search internally for Margaret Wright. I sense the need to reinstate her as a human being, beyond the gaps in image pixilation and forced silences. Her humanity remains a guest inside those of us still sufficiently disturbed by her death that we are compelled to carry her further within us, as a reminder of the hypocrisy of the sectarian categorisation of legitimate targets. No commemoration is possible without pausing the momentum of my own breath and posture, measuring the distance between her fate and my own, the possibility that we are linked. I have had to accept Margaret Wright as an ever-returning presence, existing beyond the facts and timescale of her physical death.

Her human remains are circulated still as myth, as rumour. They articulate the intricate invisibility of victims rendered opaque through misconception of their religious identity: one of a number of estranged entities, recoverable only in fragments from the delayed trauma of the community responsible for her death.

## CUTTINGS 4

Loyalist paramilitary nicknames: *Johnny 'Mad Dog' Adair / Jim 'Doris Day' Gray aka 'Brigadier of Bling' protected by 'the Spice Boys' / John 'Grug' Greg / Andre 'The Egyptian' Shoukri / 'Gusty' Spence / John 'Bunter' Graham / Billy 'The Mexican' McFarland / Michael 'Stoner' Stone, dubbed 'Rambo' by the press /*

Scraping back her ripe hair from the hairline, dragging out the wisps, each tough fibre filtering through the fingertips. The taut hairs hiss, a fire in each hand cunning and lingual, the speech exact in tense longing.

*Jackie 'Hard Bap' McDonald / Robin 'the Jackal' Jackson, / Samuel 'Bo' McClelland / Wendy 'Bucket' Millar / James 'Sham' Millar / Gary 'Smickers' Smyth aka 'Chiefo' / John 'Fat Jackie' Thompson / James 'Jimbo' Simpson, aka the 'Bacardi Brigadier'*

Memory, as if that was a simple word. I remember we were apart. We slipped, then righted the imbalance. We were alone in thinking that it was possible. No reply. I put your goodbyes inside packages. I dreamt of smelling your wrist. I washed up after the cats. I washed away the blame, but still something remained, stuck in the pockets, or in the seams of the shell-lining, shrunken into clots. A bloodstream operates between the memory of what was possible and the sum of what was expedient. You remember the account number. You kept it in your head – the resemblance of your birth date in digits. The mattress protected the bed frame, the carpet protected the floor stains, the walls protected the cries, the neighbours protected themselves. Nothing travelled. Nothing went further than the back door scratched raw by the cousin's dog and manoeuvring of the last pram. The paved yard – a dark enclosure of shapeless plastic toys, mutations of childhood lost into corners. What did you say? Signatures mean futures. What did you sign away? The glass covering the coffee table, smashed at the edges. A remote control on the arm of the sofa. The cherished portrait of the first son, oversized on the wall, almost life size, dressed in the yellow outfit the mother-in-law bought him, sitting upright against a bright blue background of benign simulated sky. He rests on the horizon looking over the room.

Side effects wear off. The expressions too, fade from the lips, from the cheeks and especially from the eyes. The iris protrudes unflinchingly. Softly concave, it hovers beneath the act of gawking swiftly sideways. A flicker of orange glows from an artificial fire, streaming in mechanical waves of warmth. The fan, barely concealed, turns its slow trick. The inlay around the fireplace is a sheet of moulded brickwork, each brick grained identically in tones of beige and brown. Mahogany completes the mantelpiece, where a baby's bottle stands with a half smoked cigarette stubbed into the creases of a tinfoil biscuit wrapper. Net curtains

Net curtains shield the living room, preventing the neighbours looking – as opposed to glancing – in. It keeps them guessing. The green carpet, already a reminder of creeping debts, dilutes in colour at the centre of the room. New Year's Eve here in this room: baby-sitting, waiting for the bars to empty, I remember the blood on the door handle and the suffering expression. 'Meat Loaf' put on the stereo, stolen coats under one arm making idle threats, joking aside, spontaneous in a fashion, timed between talking and telling. He had a talent for insinuation, for leaving lifeless remarks spread thinly between the armchair and doorway. He stood in the hall wearing a blue Hawaiian shirt and a bomber jacket, in no hurry to leave, in no mood to be charmed.

*Stephen 'Top Gun' McKeag / John 'Big John' McMichael / Tommy 'Tucker' Lyttle / Sam 'Skelly' McCrory / William 'Winkie' Dodds / John 'Captain Black' White aka 'Coco' / William 'Muggsy' Mullan / Frankie 'Pigface' Curry / Mark 'Swinger' Fulton*

No matter how many times it was said, the words never changed, never shifted. Time did not heal the sentences or the intonation, or the pacing. Spoken again on another anniversary, timing returns meaning to the words. The script gets revived, except now she can tell it calmly, cutting vegetables or standing in the porch feeding cats, bending over, pronouncing each word without cause for thought. I watch her out-manoeuvring memory, making it tally with the present. She nurses the hurt of it into ordinariness, yet, keeps it's precise rhythmic pattern. Outside, birds meander in slow circles over hills blackened by weeks of snow. The thaw sharpens tongues after a lean spell of apathy.

*The UDA were referred to by rival UVF units as the 'Wombles' because of a fashion among gang members of wearing fur-lined parker anoraks and also called 'Japs', owing to their predilection for holding mass rallies in combat fatigues.*

For months there lay in the middle of the vacant yard, a large blue cushion, separated from the corpse of the sofa. It remained at a distance of a few feet, marooned upon a shallow raft of building rubble and fledgling weeds grasping at a thin layer of dirt. Along the bottom edge of the sofa frame threaded a green line of algae, vivid against the fading blue of the upholstery. Time and weather smoothed out the cloth, chastening the synthetic fibres into a silvery hue. It radiated on the eye in full sunlight, as viewed from the road. Around it lay debris of electric cables, a traffic bollard and wooden pallet, partially broken, all caught in the vast emptiness of a yard seeded with rotten packaging. In the background stood the last vestiges of walls and twisted steel girders, a shrivelled shell – all that remained of two warehouses burnt down. A long expanse of clear polythene straddled the base of a small tree, growing aimlessly on the perimeter fence. In the ensuing months, the wind orchestrated a sequence of re-positionings, as the sofa waltzed, almost imperceptibly, towards the centre of the abandoned yard.

Very slowly, softening and turning its back on the passing traffic, it's form eliciting a weary nakedness against the ripple of decrepit concrete.

*Leonard 'Lenny' Murphy, leader of 'The Shankill Butchers' / Billy 'King Rat' Wright, leader of UVF unit known as the 'Rat Pack' / William 'Frenchie' Marchant leader of UVF unit known as 'Freddie and the Dreamers'.*