The Mad Road: A Creative Exploration of Irish Diasporic Experience

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This thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.
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Abstract

The thesis is in two parts. The first part is a collection of short stories on Irish Diaspora – *The Mad Road*. There is, I believe, a distinct lack of short fiction about Irish lives lived in England, and I felt this gap needed addressing. These stories engage with the Irish community and the nullifying grind of work. They examine the social pressures of diasporic existence experienced in England and Ireland. The collection is written from a second generational Irish working-class perspective and the stories tackle urban realities in a dark-realist way. The stories deal with issues including emigration, derelict life-style, alcoholism, loneliness and corruption. Because of my lifelong immersion in Irish culture, both in Ireland and Leicester, I feel uniquely placed to capture hidden aspects of Irish expatriate experience.

*The Mad Road* is accompanied by an extended reflective analysis where I argue that critical theory and creative writing can inform each other. My dual perspective as both a writer and volunteer with The Emerald Centre has been of fundamental importance to my creative process. I discuss some of the interactions that I have experienced volunteering at the Centre, and their effects on my writing. I argue that my inside/outside-writer/researcher perspective has furthered understanding and helped shape my stories.

Each chapter of the commentary examines one aspect of diasporic experience, and how it has influenced and inspired my creative practice. Writing from inside Leicester’s Irish community has offered me a unique insight into diasporic life, which triggered story ideas and offered other useful lines of research. It also became clear, once I started absorbing primary and theoretical texts relating to Irish Diaspora and post-colonial theory, that there were visible and invisible forces at play behind individual experiences. These forces have impacted on the first, second and third generation Irish emigrants. My thesis attempts to come to terms with these cultural, social and economic forces through creative practice.
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The Mad Road
PREFACE

From swinging a shovel on a building site to a PhD in ten years was precipitated by the credit crunch of 2008-2009. My journey through education was down to chance and circumstance. The construction sector is always the first place that is hit when banks tighten their finances and recession strikes. The boom and bust cycle of capitalism had me in its grip again because this was the third recession I had experienced. It soon dawned on me that I needed to dynamite my life. I decided to enrol on an access course as a mature student that led me into university. And I was determined to pursue what interested me for a change.

*The Mad Road* and accompanying Reflective Commentary are the result of that single mindedness and the culmination of my academic journey. I have drawn on a lifetime of reading and an avid interest in drama and culture to bring this text about. I noticed that the second-generation Irish voice was under represented. I felt this needed addressing in an authentic way.

I set out to engage with the forgotten and scattered voices from the various waves of Irish diaspora. These voices are largely working class in nature. In many instances my narratives give voice to marginalised characters that are in crisis – voices that are not often portrayed by the fictional mainstream. These staged voices are often in conflict with each other and the resulting tensions are loaded with post-colonial resonance and potential meaning. Importantly, these short stories have been fired from bits of experience, emotional memory, observation, research and my interaction with Irish communities near and far. I felt it was imperative to capture a semblance of Irish life lived in diasporic motion that steers away from cliché and stereotype. I wanted these stories to be fresh, tough, gritty and above all, representative. Enjoy!
The Bottle and the Trowel

You’ve got to hear this, Gerry! I was in the launderette this morning staring at my washing, wondering why people seem so up-tight over here. Look at the loonie-goons, you’d always say, with that twisted smile plastered across your mug. Remember that first day we hopped on the bus and the tube, Gerry? That mad sprint to work; green to the bone; carrying all our kit; lost in the bowels of London; creasing up with the laughing; bumping into all those shams.

Fresh off the boat, weren't we? Clueless. London’s a bastard of a place sometimes ... Listen, Gerry; those two dossers were in the launderette again. They were hugging the machines for warmth, god love them. And they were halfway to pissy heaven at 10 o’clock in the shagging morning.

Latchicos, you whispered in my ear, when we did our first wash in there. A stain on our nation, Lorcan. I loved the piss-taking way you said that. You sounded like the Taoiseach. Sure, they’re harmless enough, I whispered back to you. We’re only one pay cheque away from living in this launderette ourselves. Life was gas back then, wasn’t it, Gerry? Now I realise there are millions who’re only a cheque or two away from the street.

Anyway, you’d not blame those dossers today, sham. If ye had a heart at all, that is. It’s perishing out there. It would snap the bones off ye, so it would, as they say back home. The cement was freezing on the trowel yesterday. The yellow jacket brigade kept looking at the thermometer. But it was only for show. The job’s way behind so it is! They’re bending all the rules, now. Remember how strict they were at the beginning, hey?

I’m still sending bits of money back to me Ma and the quare one.

“Lorcan, you’re as soft as shit.”

Did you just speak, sham? Are you smirking, Gerry?

Wheeze, wheeze, wheeze.

The sound of your ventilator still freaks me out.

Staring into the dirty suds this morning got me thinking about Achill. How desperate things are back there. All us young bucks splitting. You can’t eat
mountains, can you? You said that to me once. And you were dead on. There’s nothing in that place, now. Nothing.

Wake up, Gerry! Tell me to shut the feck up. I’m missing you, ye bollix.

That dink nurse, who was in here, five minutes ago. The one with braided hair. What a dolly. She’s got a cracking smile, so she has. She says I need to talk to you like this, as much as I can. He needs to hear talk from people he knows. It’s crucial, she says. Well I felt a bit stupid at the start, with this talking malarkey. But that dolly keeps encouraging me every time she comes in to check on your ventilator or calibrate it — or whatever else she does. I still clam up when she’s about, though. She’s ever so flirty, Gerry. She seems to like ye. Keep talking to him as normal as you can. Speak to him as if nothing’s happened, she keeps saying. It’s hard, though, Gerry. Hard. I still can’t get used to seeing you like this. All these tubes and wires you’re connected to — does my head in, so it does.

Sorry …

I’m trying to tell you how it is ...

Top-notch staff, over here, Gerry. I’ll say that for it.

Wheeze, wheeze, wheeze.

The bankers have been let off the hook, Lorcan. They’re thieving gobshites, the lot of them; simple as. You said that to me, Gerry, when we started that Hackney job. If it was the likes of you or me we’d have been flogged, flayed and banged up for life. We were thrown to the dogs, weren’t we? Collateral damage. I didn’t see it back then. No wonder there’re so many Irish piss-heads roaming this town like lost wildebeests.

The dossers went to a different level, this morning, Gerry. You’d have loved it. Things move fast in London, don’t they?

I love the pong of powder in that launderette. You sit in there with the weekend ahead of you and it calms your nerve-ends. I know it sounds daft, but it’s kind of soothing. And the drivel from the dossers can be entertaining as well. But this morning was mental. I’ll have a go at doing their voices for ye, Gerry. Their patter was mad, so it was.

“Thunderbird wine’s the tipple of tipples, Mick-Mack.”

“What ye on about, Bert, ye bampot.”
“Getting the fucker is the hard bit. I had to walk miles to get this. My tootsies are fucking killing me.”

“Plenty of choice out there, Bert, why get zonked on one brand?”

Is that realistic enough for ye, sham? They were at each other’s throats. It was gas – you’d have creased.

I’ll paint the picture for ye, Gerry. That Mick-Mack fella’s as bog-Irish as they come, a solid lump of skin. You called him Ox-Man, didn’t ye? Those purple thread veins in his brick-red face, like you’d see in an old road map. His mop of wild hair’s still crying out for a groom. Remember when we tried to get a fix on his accent, and I was willing to put shillings down that he hailed from Kerry and you swore blind that he had a Sligo lilt. All his years on the booze have pickled him through and through. We both agreed on that. Sure his Ox-mug could be oiled into a masterpiece if it caught the eye of a prowling artist, Lorcan, I remember you saying, in your whiny mock TV voice, as we necked a few pints in The Rose and Crown. You should be on stage, ye bollix! Oh, the laughter was on us, then. Their silly slobber cracked us up. We vowed we’d never end up like them, no matter what this town threw at us — ye remember that, don’t ye?

You should have seen me necking those shots last night. I was in The Bell with a gang from the site — acting the eejit. Showing off, so I was. It’s more to do with your mangled self, Gerry, boy. More like I was trying to drink it out of my mind. Maybe trying to talk it out like this is a wee bit better. To think I was gassing to you about the Man U game as you passed blocks out to me on the scaffolding. It could have been me. That’s what keeps jarring me mind, Gerry. Your shriek is on playback 24/7— that sound of splintering board still fucks my head up. The thud of everything hitting the deck in one mighty vapump. It shook the building, raised a mighty cloud of dust, so it did. You poor sod. We told them that MDF was fucked as well – but they still made us stack the bricks and concrete blocks on it. I’ll never forget the mad scramble to get the stuff off of ye. Now the bastards want me to lie about the board. They want me to sign a fecking form. Cunts.
All of this was rumbling in me mind, Gerry, as I was getting my clothes ready for the dryer. I could still hear the dossers blubbering away in the background as well, mind you.

“Thunderbird is the mother of all wines, comrade.”

“I’ve told ye, don’t fucking comrade me, ye blackguard.”

“Some days you want me to call you comrade.”

“Well, today’s the fecking day I don’t.”

“Maybe I’m a slave to taste, Mick-Mack.”

“A thirst for the exotic, hey, hey?”

“If you say so.”

“I don’t say ... he says! The MESSIAH says! How many times do ye have to be told, ye twerp.”

“What’re you on about now?”

“Are ye deaf as well as stupid?”

“Don’t start going weird on me, Mick-Mack.”

“Give us a swig, ye Philistine cunt.”

“That machine doesn’t work, me old flower,” the one called Bert shouted across at me, Gerry. He always looks twitchy and ready to dart, remember? We’d seen him zipping about the place. Ye said, he’s on booze business, Lorcan. Ye said it in your David Attenborough voice. We were coming back from a shift. Both of us sitting in the king’s seat on the top deck of the 53b bus. He’s still wearing that same shit-up tweed jacket that shines with grime. And his filthy canvas knapsack is still slung on his old back.

“Thanks, pal,” I shouted across at him.

Ye’d have said, the lunatics are running the asylum now, Lorcan.

I’ll have another go at their voices for ye, Gerry.

“I love the look of it, Mick-Mack. There’s something about its name that I’m –”

“Give me a slug, cunt-face.”

“A working man’s wine, this is.”

“American loony juice, you mean, brewed to keep us down, that’s what this piss is for, ye old fart.”

“Now don’t be like that about me favourite tipple, comrade.”
“I’ll stick this in ya face if ye call me that again, ya fecking wind-up merchant.”

I looked across at Mick-Mick to see if it was banter. I wasn’t sure, Gerry. He looked edgy. Things kick off so easily in this town, don’t they? Anyway, I pushed a load of 20p coins into the spin dryer. The clicking of buttons on the glass door and the rumble of the machine triggered more thoughts of money, rent and food. The struggle to keep it all going: I’m homesick to fuck, to tell ye the god’s honest truth. All this was bubbling in my mind. And when ye think things can’t get any worse that’s when they usually do!

I’ll try and put me best drunken slur on for this bit, Gerry.

“Thought you were into revolutionary stuff and all that blah, blah, blah, Mick-Mack.”

“Betrayed, that’s what’s fucking up, if ye really want ta fucking know.”

“By who?”

“Bosses, ye thick fuck.”

“Those bastards keep threatening me with work.”

“Jesus CHRIST Almighty, ye wouldn’t work in a fecking iron lung,” Mick-Mack snorted.

“I’ll drink to that”

“And so will fecking I.”

I think that Ox-Man’s had his snout in a few books, Gerry. I think we might’ve underestimated him. Am I taking them off well enough for ye? Are you getting the gist of it?

That smarmy safety officer sidled up to me the other day, Gerry, as I was setting me profiles up. A firm’s man through and through: ‘Look, lad, we all know how you feel. It’s agreed that there was a glitch in McLain’s system, that wasn’t picked up. Which has now been rectified. New stratagems are being put into place for the next build. Is that OK, my old son? I don’t think recrimination is the way forward, do you?’

“Yeah, and my mate’s up shit creek without a paddle. Will ye cop on for feck’s sake!” I fired back at him.
He stormed off with the huff, “You just can’t talk to some people, you’ll never …” full of chunter, so he was – those yellow fecking jacket boys do your head in, don’t they, Gerry?

Then a soft union skin came in to the canteen, as I was eating me scran, “Look, Lorcan, it’s not worth rocking the boat over this,” he said, in a hushed sort of a way.

I know they’re shitting their knickers over the Health and Safety Executive’s visit next week, they’ve got wind of my bolshie mutterings around site. I should’ve been keeping me head down. Now they’re really pressurising me to sign. What would you do, Gerry?

Hughie Cairns, my old tradesman, used to slag our gaffers off to fuck: Mushrooms, that’s all we are to them. They like to keep us in the dark and feed us shit. Mushrooms. Then he’d laugh his head off, Gerry. I learnt stacks from Hughie. Super glue that into your mind, gosser, he’d say, as we pointed our brickwork up. Hughie would have seen this coming a mile off.

I don’t want them to get away with this; I really don’t, but the way things are …

It kicked off, big time, Gerry! The dryer was winding down from its cycle when Mick-Mack went ballistic. Straight out of the blue, he started going ape shit. Mad. You’d have loved it.

“Ahhhh ... HE’S DYING FOR US EVERY DAY, DO YE NOT KNOW?” That mental fecker started screaming his head off.

I nearly jumped out my skin, sham.

He was staring right at me. I was feeling dog rough myself. I looked at him across the aisle and he’d gone as rigid as a standing-stone. The lava red face on him was blazing. He looked as mad as fuck. It looked like some sort of fit, Gerry. Then his body started jerking a bit before he took a few steps towards me. He kept slugging at the dregs in the bottle. He gripped that Thunderbird bottle like a baton as if he was conducting his own orchestra. I was twitching a bit as the crazy fecker came towards me.

“How’s blood’s dripping on the whole world,” he squealed at me like an old pig in the queue for slaughter. He was in a bad way, Gerry.

“On your fucking knees, heathen,” he yelled at me.
He was having a vision, I swear to ye, Gerry.

He looked mad enough for a section. His index finger was pointing at me, all his focus was trained on me, as if I was the devil in his crazy episode.

“Gaffers have sucked all the goodness out of me. I’ll tell you that for naff all, gossoon,” he hissed at me. It felt like he was reading my fecking mind.

He kept eye-balling me. A mad paddy preacher in my face. His eyes were as big as duck eggs and they were locked on to me. Saliva and snot was drooling off him. He was twisted with righteous rage, Gerry. It was pouring out of him, sure it was.

“Can’t you see? The Redeemer’s blood is dripping on the whole world, lad.”

I thought about getting the hell out of there, Gerry. Feck the washing. I didn’t want this on me day off, I wanted the hair of the dog myself, for feck’s sake.

“He’s dying for us every day, can’t you see, heathen?”

It reminded me of people wailing and crying on some fecking mountainside, back home. I tried looking away; it was too painful to watch. He was breaking up in front of me. They’ll take him away at this rate, I thought, as I watched the spittle building up on his face.

Then the lump collapsed to his knees.

“Rejoice, rejoice, rejoice,” he roared.

“Cool it, Mick-Mack, they’ll clear us off again,” Bert pleaded with him.

“I’ll go and get some more grog.”

“I’ve forgot more than you’ll ever know,” Mick-Mack snarled at Bert.

“Please, Mick-Mack –”

“Look at me for fuck’s sake, ye snake.’

“We’ll get chucked out –”

“I’ve been kicked out from better places than this!”

Passers-by started looking in, Gerry.

“Bring it on, bring it on!”

It was intense, sham, intense.

“Cru cify me, crucify me, ye Philistines.”

Is this what rock-bottom looks like? I asked myself, Gerry.

“Sinners, rejoice in the wounds of HIS majesty!”
Then something clicked in my head. Mick-Mack’s babble about bosses hit home, Gerry. I’d been warned off the other day by that safety officer. That’s what it was, but I didn’t take much notice then, it didn’t make sense: “You’ll never work in this town again, if you keep carrying on like this, me old chocolate teapot.” That smug fucker was hinting at the ‘List.’ A list never entered me frigging head.

There’d been whispers about a blacklist. I’d heard about it in a pub, ages ago, but I hadn’t a notion it would touch me. How these things come at ye. Maybe it took what was happening in front of me at the laundrette to see what was really happening. I mean ... what does a fecking blacklist mean anyway, and who the feck cares, sham? Well, what was I to think? After all, this is England, holier than holy, incorruptible, unlike shagging Ireland. That’s the way I’d been thinking anyhow.

The laundrette notched up another gear, Gerry. I’ll do my best with the voices.

“Oi, what’s this then? I’ve told you two,” someone shouted from outside.

Bert darted for the door at the sound of officialdom. He zipped past Ahmed, the owner.

“I’m off, bugger ya, Mick-Mack. Sort ya fucking head out, man, if ya want to fucking drink with me again, you toss-pot,” he wheezed, on the hoof. He’d done a St. Peter on him.

I nodded at Ahmed. He always asks for ye, Gerry.

“No drinking in this place,” he shouted, as Bert flapped down the street. Then Ahmed walked up to Mick-Mack, who was still on his knees screaming:

“Rejoice, rejoice, rejoice!”

The business man looked vexed to fuck.

“How many times do you have to be told? You fucking ruining my place? Out, fucking ... out!”

I looked across at Mick-Mack who had the faintest of smiles on his mug when he clocked Ahmed raging above him. Then the crazy fecker started singing.

Then off to reap the corn and leave where I was born
Cut a stout blackthorn to banish ghosts and goblin
Brand new pair of brogues to rattle o’er the bogs
And frighten all the dogs on the rocky road to Dublin.

What a voice. The finest of airs on him. Mick-Mack rattled it off, better than the shagging Dubliners. One Flew Over the fecking Laundrette, Gerry. Mad or what?

One, two, three four, five
Hunt the hare and turn her down the rocky road
And all the way to Dublin, whack-fol-lol-de-da.

“No karaoke in here. Go. You must go!” Ahmed yelled down at Mick-Mack. “I phone the police OK, go now.” He reached for his mobile. “He’s with me,” I said, as casual as a gunslinger in an old flick. Honest to god, Gerry, that’s what I said.

Ahmed froze mid finger-push. He turned and weighed me up.
“What?”
“Yeah, he’s helping me with me washing.”
“You having a laugh, mate?”
“No, he’s having a bad day, that’s all,” I said.

And as we looked at each other, that weird night in Stockwell flashed through my mind. We’d been on the piss all day and that Achill sham tagged along with us for a while. The pain etched on that sham’s face made us laugh. The shower of fucks won’t give me a start anywhere, he kept saying.

Remember him? He kept whingeing about work to us. We ended up in The Swan over in Stockwell. We were langers, he was one of the Gallaghers from Keem. Been over here for years. Down on his luck, so he was. He kept harping on: I’m on this bastard of a list, so I am, lads. We didn’t take much notice. You mocked him: Another paddy on the rocks, Lorcan. Both of us cracked up, didn’t we?

Ahmed kept weighing me up.

It was like High Noon. A shagging stand-off, sham.
“Finish your wash and get him out of here. This isn’t a fucking mental hospital, it’s a launderette.” Ahmed snarled into Mick-Mack’s face: “I’m trying to run a fucking business here.” He turned and walked out.

Wheeze, wheeze, wheeze.

Gerry, oh Gerry!

Wake up, please, for feck’s sake ... talking it through, like this, has straightened it out for me, sham.

He’s dying for us every day.

Turns out that mad paddy cut through all the bullshit this morning.

Because, here’s you, all smashed up. And here’s me, thinking of signing.

They want me to be their fecking CHOCOLATE Jesus!

Feck McLain’s, feck the list and feck Jesus …
“… Irish soccer’s smashing our marriage. That’s what she says, anyway…”

Dermot Kelly stared out of the window and his cheeks were in full flush.

A jackhammer thudded outside from a city building site.

“It’s good that you’re unloading some of this, Dermot,” Jules Summerfield said, in a neutral tone.

Seagulls were squawking over the take-away mush that was littered below the plastic windowsill.

Troubles were leaking out of him after the usual monosyllabic start.

A distant siren wailed.

Press the right buttons and you get to the bother.

Jules had had that drummed into her continually on her course. And the twaddle she’d listened to since then was testimony to it. She was into her fourteenth week now: bedding-in nicely. She saw herself as the secular sponge of the high street – a confessional box for hire. There was a sense of satisfaction and a tinge of anticipation wrapped up in that perception as well.

Let the silence do the work …

“Nob, she often yells at me,” Dermot whispered. “Emma knows I hate talk like that.”

“Do you yell back at her?”

“No … there’s not an aggy bone in my body.”

“How does that make her feel?”

“Angrier.”

Listen and listen and listen.

Stretch it out as far as you dare.

She was peeling him – they’d taught her well and Jules smiled.

His face had a leathery scuff to it like an antique football. How odd, you really do start to resemble what you truly love, she thought, weighing Dermot up. “What is it like for you when you’re at the soccer, Dermot?”

Jules imagined gears cogging inside this man’s head. Soccer sparked his pistons! She stared into his soccer-eyes and knew Dermot was revving-up. All Jules had to do was prime him.
“It’s such a beautiful game, isn’t it, Dermot?”
“I love it … it’s mega … it’s … I mean … That night in Paris … 2009!”
“Yes?”
“Probably the best night of my life … I’d never tell her that, though. Whenever I’m on a downer, I think about that glorious night. And it still sends shivers through me. I was nestled in amongst thousands of bouncing tri-coloured Irish fanatics going bonkers in the Stade de France. And it was brilliant. That’s where I feel truly alive! Don’t get me wrong – I love Emma to bits, as well.”

Jules hadn’t had to deal with anything juicy yet. Her clients so far were people struggling with grief, debt and addiction. And as she listened to this man’s dribble, she thought it was just another run-of-the-mill case.

How many times has he reeled this yarn off? Jules wondered.

Children’s giddy voices penetrated the room from a far-off school.

“How many times has he reeled this yarn off? Jules wondered.

“Dermot, what do you mean by feeling alive?”

“Following Ireland through thick and thin. Being with the lads. Screaming the songs out. Being Irish and proving it! That’s what counts.”

Seagulls still skirmished outside.

“Feel free to let go – this is a safe space, Dermot.”

“That match in Paris – I mean … for once on our travels we’d managed to outplay a side – but we lost in the process. We’re used to out-singing and out-drinking them, but never outplaying them. When we’re belting out: ‘Come on, you boys in green,’ there’s nothing like it. That night was even more special, though. Qualification was snatched away from us by a cruel twist of fate. And that’s what really fired our souls – what a night. ‘… We’re on the one road sharing the one road…’ Being robbed was our real victory ‘… a nation once again …’ losers on the lash through the streets of Paris, ‘… Where once we watched the small free birds fly …’ Oh, how we sang that night! I know those songs inside-out.”

“You seem nice and relaxed, now. That’s good,” Jules said.

“It was after that game that my Emma started sticking things into me.”

Explore trivia to crack the core was another mantra Jules had absorbed on her tedious course.

“Go on,” she said, controlling the silence.
“It started with drawing pins planted in the carpet.”

She stared at Dermot and thought of how her ex had once said to her: your hair looked a lot better before that haircut, Jules. He knew how to hurt.

“What?” she said. “Your – your wife deliberately planted drawing pins in the carpet for you to stand on?”

“Sounds pathetic, doesn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t say that -”

“It was funny at first, I just took it as payback – I didn’t half yelp when I hopped on them, though. First blood, if you know what I mean. I don’t think she means anything by it.”

This man’s a punch bag, Jules thought. It’s how it used to be for her. Making excuses for him all the time. Oh… how he’d dominated her for years with put-downs and smarm. Not much violence, mind you, although more slaps might have been easier to take instead of that scathing tongue of his.

“You get very animated when you talk about that Paris game, don’t you?”

“Well … it was mind blowing, for me. In all the muddy battles I’ve seen Ireland play – and I’ve seen a few – I’ve never experienced such joy. Shame was all over those French supporters’ faces: footballing shame. When we hit the streets of Paris, after cheering Ireland off the pitch, we felt like champions even though we’d failed to qualify. It felt like all my birthdays and Christmas days had been rolled into one, what a crazy night. French flags and pendants had been folded up out of respect, for us! French supporters shook our hands, they hugged us and fed us wine. They kept coming up to us, sighing, with the shame of it, saying, ‘Pardon, Irelande’ as we walked through the boulevards of Paris. They sang with us and they cried with us. France qualified but they hated how they’d done it. Thierry Henry’s helping hand for their qualifying goal shamed that proud nation.”

What tosh, Jules thought, now he’s in tears. He’s so-soft-so-soft just like she used to be. Watching him crack made Jules think about her hell before she grew claws.

“She can’t help it, it’s me, it’s me, it’s me,” Dermot sobbed.

Jules passed over some tissues.

NEVER STOP LISTENING
That had been pinned on the college wall.

Jules had been mopping up her life when she was on that course. Her break-up had been messy. Her partner had milked her dry. She was still paying his debts off, now.

Bastard.
Joint-this-joint-that, what a fool she’d been!

Focus Jules, focus, she shouted to herself as she listened.

All the red flags about abuse and remit, her facilitators had discussed, so elegantly, during seminars – it meant nothing to her today.

“Please, go on – when you’re absolutely ready – take as much time as you need, Dermot.”

“When my lies unthreaded a few days after I’d got back …” Dermot snuffled, wiping his eyes with tissue, “… when she rumbled me …, ‘Twenty-two men kicking a stupid sack of air around,’ she screamed in my face. ‘You spent our money, on that! How dare you, Dermot?’ She went ape-shit as my lies went tits-up one after the other.”

Is this the one? Jules thought, and her heart thumped. She hid her hate well. She didn’t care who it was; as long, as it was a man. That was her only criteria.

“Was that the first time it got serious, Dermot?”
“Suppose so.”
“Please, go on.”

Dermot started unbuttoning his checked shirt.

“Look at what she gave me for the Ireland and Spain game in 2012.”
He pulled his collar down and pointed to a four-centimetre diagonal scar.

Jules put her best shocked face on.

“My wife walked by me as calm as you like a couple of hours after one of our rows and stuck a pair of scissors in my neck.”

Jules stretched the silence out to the point of awkwardness.

“That must have been terrible for you, Dermot?”

“Yeah, it took a bit of explaining at the hospital.”

“I bet it did. Why was she so vicious?”
“She hates my love of Ireland. My Irish roots. She’s English, you see, I mean … that time, I lied about a three-day job I was supposed to be on. Emma doesn’t do lies. I told her I needed to be away – with the gang. She knows the lads. And I do work away often. But she sussed me. She smashed all our dinner plates. She even threw her prized high-heels at me. ‘You said you were working – you treacherous bastard.’ She went mental. And one of her shoes actually stuck in the partition wall where my face had been before I ducked.”

“Is there any way of being more truthful with her, Dermot?”

He smiled, all teary eyed. He’d had his doubts about coming here, but he felt so much better now. And as he unburdened his troubles to this compassionate woman, Dermot felt salvage was a possibility.

“She doesn’t get football or the Irish, not one iota of it. Doesn’t even try to get it! I’ve tried to educate her, though. It’s a beautiful game, darling, I keep saying to her, but she doesn’t get it, doesn’t get it at all.”

Jules gazed at Dermot for a long time – sizing him up before she took the leap. How vulnerable he looked. She must have appeared the same way after her miscarriage. “You can’t even do that properly, can you, luv?” her partner had said to her, as she lay, barely alive, on that smelly ward bed. And for days after those cruel words kept repeating in her head. Losing her child and being humiliated like that had worked like acid and burnt all her softness away. And that’s where something obsidian and twisted took root. She came out of that hospital with the bitterest of intents.

What a gift, Jules thought. Let’s face it, they’re all shit. Men. Yes, Jules was still very much in her all-men-are-bastards phase. She’d kept that very close, very close indeed. How easy it was to slip into this position.

Trust me, trust me.

And then she smiled at Dermot, with all the reassuring empathy she could muster.

She’d show him shame

“Have you ever thought about involving the police?”

“No, they’re next to useless,” Dermot said, as his head twitched slightly with the shock of such an outlandish suggestion.

Then Jules reached out and squeezed his hand.
More red flags, she smiled, as she looked at him with an air of cool professionalism.

“I promise I will get you through this, Dermot, but you must trust me, heed my advice, OK?”

“Yeah … whatever it takes. I just want us to be happy again.”

Jules knew there was no going back, now. She felt blessed. Her wait was over. This man would be her plasticine to model all her pain into. Yippee!
The last caravan careered down the shallow slope making soft pops and crackles as it went, its silver curves shining with elegance as it traversed the gritted slope that led down to Glebe Meadow.

A faded maroon Mercedes followed with its windows down. It was a lovely day – the sun was cracking the rocks. Insects whizzed the air currents. A day to bask in – crows squawked from a bit of a spinney beside the gate of the council fields. And an intoxicating smell of freshly mown grass permeated the air.

At the same time Aidan Murray was walking up with fish and chips tucked under his arm. For fuck’s sake! He yelped, when he clocked the vehicles and the unsnapped padlock hanging off the gate.

Bollacks!

Glebe Meadow ... on my fucking watch.

*Shit.*

Why didn’t I *snap* that shagging padlock?

For the sake of two minutes struggle with stiff metal and sore fingers. *Idiot.* His Memorial Park position – ripped to tatters. How long had he promised that *bastard* lock a squirt of WD40? Rushing. This would fuck his chances right up. How he’d strived for that park. Grovelled, even. Snookered now though. He took pride in how thorough he was. Bastard hellfire! What was he going to say to The Yard? Hardly ever ate fish and chips, either. Why today? Stupid, stupid, *stupid*...

Hexed, or what?

All this whisked through Aidan Murray’s mind in the seconds it took him to run at the Mercedes.

“Hey... *hey,* you can’t do this.”
A hunk of a man with boozed cheeks and curly ginger hair was smiling from ear to ear and looking at Aidan’s befuddlement with a satisfied air. His mastiff-looking head was lolling out the window, savouring it all.

“Thanks for cutting the grass for us, young fella,” he said, in the broadest Irish brogue that knocked Aidan back a couple of inches. For a second or two it felt like he’d just been cross-bowed in the chest with a bolt.

_Smarmy_ fucker! Aidan kept thinking of the ribbing he’d have to endure because of this trespass. _Not good, not good_... They’d rip the shit out of him. There’ll be a feeding frenzy for Christ’s sake. He’d been on a high for weeks, as well. Lame excuses wouldn’t do up at The Yard, not for something as stupid as this.

Jesus Christ! Is someone messing with my _effigy_? To make matters worse the lower half of his body had the jitters in the worst possible way.

“Look mate, you can’t come on-”

“Calm down young fella – you’re all aerated – sure we’re only having a little holiday. We’ll only be here a day or two,” the driver of the Mercedes said, looking ahead now and smiling at the mown area that Aidan had been working on all morning.

“Anyway, what does it matter to you, young fella?”

“But ... this is council property, pal. You just can’t-“

“Exactly – me old buckeen,” the Irish traveller said, with finality, wearing the boss of smiles across his pugnacious mug.

Aidan was flummoxed by the brass neck of this _lump_ that sat before him.

Then out the back window came another insouciant voice, “Sure the gods are shining on us today, lad.” A hunched-up female sidled across the back seat of the spacious Mercedes. She locked her scarecrow eyes on Aidan Murray. She was all withered and cracked. Life’s hard decades were etched into the leathery skin of this woman’s face, as if it had been worked on by an over-enthusiastic tanner. She was toged out in faded black like the
garb worn by batty widows in Greece. Aidan had walked through mountain villages in Crete when he’d mooched around Europe, as a youth. Withered women scurrying about their white and blue houses, screeching nonsense. Dressed head to toe in black, as mad as March hares.

“Never worry worries until they worry-worry you, boy,” the old crone croaked at him.

“Will ye pipe down, Ma, let me do the gassing.”

Aidan felt a stab of shame for what he’d been thinking.

Then she grinned at Aidan, as if she’d surveyed his thoughts. She stared hard into him. Her manky teeth were bared: odd sheens of slotted gold lay between the rot. She winced with pain when she spoke.

“You look as if you’re carrying the whole world on your shoulders, boy.”

“Will ye -”

“Arrah, the place will be spruce when we’re gone, boy. Sure, the sod will be greener than it is now. And that’s the god’s honest truth!”

“There’s no telling ye -”

Then the ginger lump engaged the clutch and gently throttled on. She gasped with the jolt. But she still managed to look back at Aidan Murray, with her head sticking out the window with raven-like intensity, which must have caused her more gasps. There was something eerie in that hag’s stare that sent a shiver up Aidan’s spine.

Outsiders, prickly fuckers, he hissed.

He was forty-two, and being addressed as ‘lad’ and ‘boy’ rankled – fucking with his machismo, weren’t they?

Aidan was gob-smacked. What a fuck-up. He stood between the posts of the steel gate transfixed by the brazen spectacle unfolding in front of him.

It was like watching a cowboy flick, seeing the vehicles form defensive positions that blocked in his tractor and mowing tackle. Noisy kids swarmed out the vehicles like a cloud of flying ants in July: yelping and bounding about,
testing out their new space. They started clambering and acrobatically exploring his marooned equipment with hoots of wild glee.

Aidan’s brain felt addled. Fuck it, he kept cursing at the crows who were still squawking in the spinney. He stomped about for a minute or two, then he decided to eat his soggy fish and chips before facing his doom. He flopped into the shade of the trees and munched the grease and batter, zombie style. As he ate, he thought about The Yard and Pickles.

Most of the lads, nine of them altogether, worked from The Yard. They went about maintaining the district’s verges, roundabouts, dual carriageways, grassy nooks and crannies, patches of green on countless estates, marked out various football pitches and athletic tracks, emptied dog-shit bins; litter-picked and cultivated anything green that was deemed council responsibility – he shouldn’t have wandered off the job, simple.

He’d only been away fifteen minutes, for fuck’s sake. They must have been scouting. One of those conundrums that would puzzle his mind for many a day to come. He’d been mowing all morning, not a soul about. And he hadn’t noticed anything untoward, it must’ve been a fluke, had to have been. He’d got a good bit done as well, perfect weather for it; blades set just right for scything through a few acres of grass. He’d been way in front by noon. All their jobs had been time-and-motioned years ago. He thought he’d earned his little treat. His hand shook as he accessed the numbers for The Yard. He also giggled darkly to himself realising he was deep in poo-poo land now.

“What ... are you serious?”

“Yeah – some Travellers have moved on –”

“Come again?”

“They’re setting up –”

“Stop prattling about!’ Ted Pickles said at first, before he got the gist of Aidan’s blubbering, “Tell me you’re fucking joking – Aidan ... How many?”

“About fifteen cara –”

“Holy shit-street! Hold the fort, I’m coming down,” Pickles shrieked.
Aidan pictured him hanging up with a slam and morphing into Mr Angry. Aidan knew he’d spit his dummy out and throw a wobbly. He pitied the unfortunate bastard that crossed his path up at The Yard, right about now.

Despite the fix Aidan Murray found himself in, he laughed at the dramatic irony of it all, as he watched the scene on Glebe Meadow unfolding in front of him. He sighed. What goes around comes around; maybe it wasn’t to be. Everything was going tits-up. Kids were screaming; dogs were going berserk; clothes lines started going up; awnings were being levered into position; men were sauntering about in string vests; generators were firing up outside caravans.

They weren’t wasting any time settling in.

Aidan remembered that glorious day when he’d got the nod from Ted Pickles concerning Memorial Park. He’d been in The Yard loading up one afternoon, months ago. “You’re the sort of bloke we want down there,” Pickles had said, all matey, tapping the side of his bulbous nose with his index finger, as he leaned closer, stinking of Brut. “Somebody with a bit of brio, someone with a bit of go-go, do you get me? Mum’s the word, though, Aidan, mum’s the word.”

Aidan had felt hyper for weeks after that – no bull shit with Pickles. He couldn’t believe his luck. He was buzzing.

A position.

No longer an operative.

Status.

He’d always yearned to be a park-keeper from day one.

That’s why he’d applied in the first place. All his arse licking hadn’t been in vain, then. His own man at last.

You beauty!

How he’d strived towards this day.

*Sweet.*
Memorial Park's position became vacant when Ernie Hamilton, the park-keeper for the last twenty years, decided out of the blue that he was throwing the towel in. He announced it at the works do last Christmas in front of the whole squad, crammed in Travinos, a posh Italian. "I'll miss me petunias, but Memorial needs young blood. It’s time for me to be put out to pasture, lads. The park needs new eyes on it now." Ernie’s declamation to the table was as melodramatic as an old luvvie doing the early morning TV rounds. And that’s what shook the hornets’ nest right out the old oak tree. Ernie was only 57; nobody expected him to jack in. Rumours abounded that he’d had a lucky touch on the lottery. Typically, he stayed shtum. As steady as they come was Ernie Hamilton. A plum posting: up for grabs. Hang on tight, was Aidan’s initial reaction to Ernie Hamilton’s curveball. There would be a lot of jockeying to get the keys off Ernie’s belt, though – no question about that.

Aidan parked these thoughts as he caught sight of residents and dog walkers congregating at the far end of Glebe Meadow. It was where the residential housing backed onto it. Residents were milling. Some paced about. Others shuffled in nervous huddles, while some stayed alone at the far end that backed on to their houses. Mobiles were on the go. Comfort toys. Useless wands when facing a situation like this when sod’s law lands temporary settlement on your own doorstep.

NIMBYs!

Recurring thoughts of being hexed started flashing on and off in his mind. He’d been a dead cert for Memorial Park before today. Now everything was skew-whiff. But another overriding fear kept bubbling inside Aidan’s head. One of his work crew had ammo on him. He knew that this work colleague had been sitting on it, biding his time. Noel Adams – known to everyone as Kipper – was as patient as a monk touching the cusp of nirvana.

Aidan’s deep dread was that Kipper’s time had cometh.

He’d only ever told one person at work about his Traveller blood and that was Kipper, who was as slippery as his moniker.
Big mistake.

When Kipper heard about this trespass he'd do the Highland Fling. He wanted Memorial Park as much as Aidan Murray did.

Aidan had always kept his Traveller blood quiet. The stigma of his blood-line weighed heavy on him. Taunts from childhood had seen to that. Aidan never made a rod for his own back; he was careful. But alcohol creeps past the best defences.

He and Kipper had got kaylied when they went out on the lash, last year. Kipper started going on about his conifer trees: how these two Irish blokes had knocked his door. “I could tell they were pikey but they said they could cut and get rid of my out-of-control bastards for £240. You know the ones I mean...? Those ginormous fuckers out the back. I knew there was three full days of tough slog sorting those shit-sticks out, so I said, go for it. Nothing to lose! Know what I mean? And do you know what? They did a great fucking job. I was that pleased with it I gave them a £20 tip.”

And as they chewed the cud about how easy it is to misread people – blah-blah-blah – stereotyping folk – getting it all wrong, and all that drunken baloney, Aidan loosened up. The demon drink worked its black magic. He was ossified. Male bonding. Soul brothers. Him and Kipper! He squirmed at how stupid he'd been. Well ... it just slipped out.

“I'm from a Traveller background, Kipper.”

“What? Ha-ha, that’s why you’re so flighty.”

“Ha, ha, ha ...”

“Well, fuck me backwards.”

“Nothing wrong with that – is there?”

“No, mate, of course not.”

And to be frank, there was a time when him and Kipper had got on. They went on a few pub-crawls together. Tight buddies, what a laugh! Funny how friendship can turn sour over the most trivial of matters.
A polite peck on his wife’s cheek, that’s all it was, just saying hello. Like everyone does nowadays, courtesy, totally innocent. Nothing in it.

But Kipper took the arse.

Anglo-Saxon sensibilities? Aidan had often asked himself, trying to crack the core of it. Or was it because of his background, and the kiss was merely an excuse to excommunicate him?

Whatever – they were ice, now.

For sure – Kipper, the vindictive bastard, would use that drunken knowledge to kick him while he was down. He could hear his stupid slobber already:

“What?”

“Didn’t you know?”

“Really?”

“Yeah – a settled knacker.”

“The sneaky fucker kept that quiet.”

“I bet he waved the fuckers on.”

Why hadn’t he kept his gob shut?

“Once a diddy always a diddy. Know what I’m saying?”

“Yeah, they all piss in the same pot.”

“Too fucking true.”

They were a small squad at Oxon and Wootton County Council Parks and Recreational Department. And a balls-up like this causes a lot of grief for everyone. The last thing a council wants is ‘Travellers’ on its doorstep. It brings heat down from all quarters: nearby residents, newspapers, council high-ups, do-gooders and agencies galore gadding about the place.
He knew there was no wriggle room, he’d fucked up. AWOL doesn’t hold water, even if the chips are brilliant at Marios. Someone had to take the fall for this.

A sharp honk-honk snapped him out of his reverie.

Then Ted Pickles and two policemen arrived simultaneously, pulling up in front of the main gate, right beside him.

“Well, what’s the story, Aidan?” Pickles said, as he heaved his bulk out of his Peugeot

“They must have been watching me.”

“What do you mean, man?”

“I was only away fifteen minutes.”

“Opportunity knocks by the sounds of it,” one of the policemen said, as if he’d solved a major crime.

“Crafty bastards,” the other copper chimed in.

“An element of planning, quite possibly,” Sherlock Holmes said.

“He’s only down here once every six weeks,’ Ted Pickles exclaimed.

“Never underestimate the workings of a tinker’s mind, Mr Pickles.”

“Best get over there. See what we can sort out before they start making themselves too comfortable.”

“I’ll speak to you later,” Ted Pickles said.

And with that the three of them went off towards the caravans on Glebe Meadow and the ginger lump walked out to meet them. They won’t get much change out of him, Aidan said into the breeze. He’s been hardened and tempered by a lifetime of travel, that one. He’ll bamboozle them with paddy-schmooze. Tell them what they want to hear and then he’ll do the opposite. As thick as they come, Aidan thought. Road-tough. Cantankerous arse-hole would be a polite way of describing that curly-haired fucker.
Another wobbly was forming, Aidan could feel it. And he was right in the eye of it.

*

A few days after the Meadows incident Aidan walked into The Yard’s messroom for a coffee, and the buzz of banter suddenly died down mid-stream. As he walked to the sink area where the hot water urn was positioned Aidan heard someone murmur, “He’s not lodged up Pickles’s arse anymore, is he?” Then there was hush. Whoever said it had his back turned. “Ouch.” The voice was shushed by a kick under the table, by Kipper more than likely. Then the nervous giggling started. It was obvious they’d been ranting on about him, which meant Kipper had offloaded his ace, but that wasn’t enough: “How do you confuse an Irishman?” Kipper said, with real smarm. Silence. “Put him in front of two shovels and ask him to take his pick.”

The gang roared with laughter.

Snide and sleazy does it, comrades.

Undoubtedly, his balls-up at Glebe Meadow had stoked the fire at the Yard. There’d been a whispering campaign going on for a while. It was all to do with him being pencilled in for Memorial Park. Pack mentality. Aidan knew what that was, but he also knew it was good to know your enemy.

“Better to be envied than pitied,” Aidan Murray couldn’t help mutter. He walked out of the messroom with his coffee as their hubbub gained momentum again, with hoots of laughter and derision.

“What’s he -”

“He’s off his trolley -”

“Thinks he’s -”

“Same-old-same-old!” Aidan wailed back, laughing, as he walked towards his crew. They weren’t all against him.

His carefree nature really wound his adversaries up, though. Aidan was keen. Their chores were dictated by a rota. They were on the move all the
time. Different places every day or every other couple of days. After a few years the job’s transient nature starts grinding you down. When a static position like Memorial Park materialises there’s a stampede for it.

Their constant whingeing peeved Aidan off: “This place is getting worse.” “It’s not got a ticket on it.” “I’m not taking that out, full stop.” “We can’t work in this weather.” “I’m ringing the union, fuck this.” “Not sodding Denworth Estate again!”

Aidan was tuned into a different frequency compared with most of them. He’d been drifting before he got on the council. Rave culture had had its effect. He’d bummed about the world a bit. Whenever they whinged about work to him, he laughed: “You don’t know how lucky you are, lads.” Maybe it was because he had something to compare it against. Hardship. And they’d glare back at him with disdain and mock-horror. The way his mother sometimes looked whenever he broached family matters. “Nothing good comes from talking about that shower,” was always her stock response.

He’d got the memo this morning: Oxon and Wootton County Council Parks and Recreation Department request the presence of Aidan Murray for a disciplinary meeting ... This formalised his bollocking, his first verbal warning by the looks of it. His chances seemed to be diminishing for Memorial Park. It couldn’t get any shittier could it? From odds-on favourite to rank outsider in a matter of days. All his arse-licking, in vain: “Of course I’ll work Saturday, not a bother.” “I’ll do that for you, Mr Pickles.” “It’s not out my way, no hassle.” “Don’t worry I’ll manage with this, no worries.” “Not a problem I’ll cover, you know me?” But all the good faith in the world vanishes when you fuck up. People always remember you at your worst.

All this was going through his head as he worked his strimmer on an embankment. He was teamed up with Blue today. They were out strimming verges near a motorway. It felt like a punishment job. He was dripping. His mask was sticky with bits of debris and spit. His frontal guard and padded trousers weighed him down.
Blue’s formal name was Jake Groves, but he got called Blue because that’s how he addressed one and all: “You alright, blue?” “There you go, blue?” “Can you fix that, blue?” So Blue stuck and he didn’t seem to mind.

They were having a breather after a two-hour session of swirl and toil. Both sucked hard on their rolled snouts looking back at what they’d tamed. Then Blue started telling him an anecdote about Rambo, a screw-ball from Kipper’s clique. “He scared the living shit out of me. Prancing around our local park as if he was on a parade ground,” Blue said. “He was smoking skunk. He had this old-fashioned ghetto blaster blaring marching music strapped to his stomach.”

“That bloke doesn’t need skunk, he’s off his rocker anyway,” Aidan replied, as they leaned on their machines.

“Too true, blue!”

Gulf-damaged, carcinogenic overload, so the whispers went. All those inoculations and insecticides they used sent him doolally. No compensation for the likes of him, though. Borderline case.

“He follows Kipper like a little lamb.”

Aidan’s mind had been in overdrive since the event. Memorial Park was his, had to be his! He couldn’t let it slip away. He had big plans for his park. He needed to bring it back up to scratch, get it used more, that would be his priority. Aidan visualised a sensory garden with a little rockery; a pond facing the main road; get the bowling green reseeded; encourage OAPs to play again; contact schools for planting days; radically prune the hawthorn and shrubbery. They’d moan of course, but he would talk them around. Open the space up a bit. Ernie had let it bulk out too much, it needed hacking back. Let the light back in. Half a dozen ancient Lebanese cedars dominated the dinky park that was snuggled between two main roads. Decaying Victorian industrial red imperial brick dye works; an engineering factory and a plastic manufacturer surrounded this green-lung-cum-refuge. There were fine mature elm, beech and fir that needed his attention. It held so much potential, he was itching to get at it, lift it up! Oh, how he relished the notion of getting stuck in.
Aidan was only half listening to Blue’s waffle.

“... such shit music, as well. His dog was going radio-rental. He looked a real loon prancing about in the moonlight. He was really going for it, Aidan.”

“Yeah, as daft as a brush.”

“Perfect council fodder, though” Blue laughed. “Ex-military, practical, used to taking orders, almost brain-dead.”

Random thoughts stormed Aidan’s head as he half listened to Blue. Then something big clicked.

*Wallop* ... you beauty!

In a flash, he knew what he had to do. He felt that high coming on again.

Blue’s patter had ignited connections.

“Yeah... P.C.’ Aidan yelped, ‘P fucking C.’”

“What did you say, blue?”

Aidan could see his trigger-point now.

“Something’s just jammed into place ... *yee-fucking-ha*. Let’s get these beasts cranked up and crack on, hey?”

Then Aidan saw that old crone’s leathery smile flash across his mind as his strimmer roared in to life.

*

Several days later Aidan was heading for his mother’s house, buzzing with thoughts of what he’d been doing. He felt more in control now. He who laughs last, laughs longest, he chuckled to himself, as cocky as you like, cutting through the estate with real bounce. He was starving. Eileen Murray lived in a compact council bungalow, neatly fitted out. He often went up there for his
dinner of an evening. Her home was filled with religious tat and bric-a-brac that she’d picked up over the years on coach trips back and forth to Ireland.

There were blue and white icons of the Virgin Mary in all shapes and sizes, dotted around her rooms. Some were on shelves and others on the top of a chest-of-drawers. But the bigger ones stood on the floor. Shiny rosary beads were reverentially draped around some of them. There were ceramic figurines of agrarian Ireland on the mantel-piece: men smoking pipes; a wind-up musical box shaped like a thatched cottage; donkeys; one large horse and trap; hens being fed by a red-haired colleen. Kitsch and corny some might say, but real homely on the other hand. It took her an age to dust it all, but dust it she did with diligence, as if she had something to prove.

Her place was spotless.

And her garden was garish. Dead neat like her house. There were gnomes pushing wheelbarrows; one gnome riding a motorcycle; two gnomes fishing; gnomes looking through binoculars. They looked dapper, brightly turned out in red, green, yellow and blue. Aidan had fixed up all sorts of garden lights for her. It was like the Blackpool illuminations when they all went on. She loved it. And there were flowers ablaze all year, he made sure of that.

Aidan always hummed David Bowie’s ‘The Laughing Gnome’ when he walked through his mother’s front gate. And today was no different till he clocked a ginger head plonked pride of place in his mother’s living room.

It stunned him for a second or two, before rage kicked in and he flew into action.

“What the −”

His mother was in the kitchen fussing with cake when he stormed in. She looked at him with pleading eyes and signalled hush with her finger to her lips. They stood looking at each other for ages. Silence between them was unusual. Nothing stopped them nattering. But this thing was seismic. Natter was useless now. Aidan could tell by the mortified look plastered across her ruddy face. That tousled ginger lard-arse had rumbled in and cracked surfaces. Aidan caught sight of him over his mother’s shoulder and the brazen
lump winked at him. His mother sensed animosity straight away; before he started to move, she indicated garden and led him out the back. Aidan’s forehead veins were fit to burst. She needed to channel his temper somehow.

A shit-storm was raging in his head. She’d brushed off his questions for years. “No good comes from talking about that shower,” her catchphrase. His cowardice, for not getting beyond that. Her sulks; his anger; their kith and kin. Years of denial sloshed inside him. Not knowing – wanting to know. Shame. He’d never felt anger like this before. Yet he gazed into the ice-blue of his Traveller mother’s eyes and uttered nothing. Gyp bo y, pikey, scumbag, knacker. He stared in to his mother’s cracked surface and guessed who that lump was. Tears streamed down his cheeks and hit the crazy-paving where they stood, years of cold-silence. “Why?” Eileen Murray instantly moved forward and threw her arms around him, blubbing, “Sorry son – I’m so sorry son – I wanted to tell … But he ... hurt me, son, he hurt me. Your daddy hurt me ... I didn’t know what to do ... Your grandmother’s come over. She’s very ill – she wants to see us …”

* 

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to give you your first verbal warning, for not being at your place of work within your specified working hours,” Ted Pickles said. “Which is stated in the Conditions section on the contractual document that you signed with us, during your enrolment.”

Sanctimonious dickhead, Aidan thought, as he sat facing the head of Oxon and Wootton County Council Parks and Recreation Department.

“You know I take no pleasure in performing this task.”

For protocol purposes, Les Dilks, his union representative, sat beside him. Dilks was next to useless, though.

There was an enormous monochromatic aerial blow-up of Oxon and Wootton hanging on the wall behind Pickles’s head. Aidan located Glebe
Meadow and looked south for Memorial Park. This photograph must have been taken in the 1970s. There seemed to be fine patches of space dotted about then. Aidan kept focussing on his park.

Nobody at the yard realised he was related to the Irish Travellers encamped on Glebe Meadow, yet. And that’s the way he wanted to keep it. He went down there with his mother to see his grandmother the night she passed away. He didn’t know what to think. Overpowering or what? Instant family. Dozens of cousins in his face. Uncle fucking Ginger! A lot of them were in tears. Aidan had already done his crying. No more blubbing. After all he didn’t know the old crone, did he? Stories to swap. Handshakes. Bear hugs. Thumps on the arm. Endless wailing. Lots of mooching about. To think he’d been looking down there a couple of days ago, judgemental and sour. Now he was embraced within its familial bosom. It’s a funny old world, chimed through his mind, as Pickles rambled on ...

“There’s a right mess down there, now, Aidan. Fire brigade was called out last night. Outrageous – I tell you. Burnt one of their own blooming caravans, didn’t they – a right carry on. Apparently, an old woman died. So, her caravan’s classed as next to useless. Haunted. Superstitious nonsense if you ask me. It’s the bleeding 21st century, for Christ’s sake.’ Aidan could feel the heat coming off Ted Pickles’s face. “In this sodding day and age, I ask you! The residents down there are going bananas.”

“Are they still there then?”

“No, thank Christ. Bastards torched it as they left. Nice way to say goodbye, hey? Now we’ve got to clear that metal carcass up, and all the other shit that they’ve left behind.”

He knew Pickles would have heard whispers about his ‘gypsy’ blood by now. His words were vile from where Aidan Murray was sitting. Aidan had come full circle since meeting up with his estranged family. He could see the other side of things.

On his way out of the office with Les Dilks, Aidan made his mind up. He turned around, his heart pounding.
“Any chance of a quiet word, Mr Pickles?”

“Of course, come back in.”

Les Dilks gave him a funny look as he closed the door on the two of them.

“What’s on your mind, Aidan?”

“Nothing much, I just want you to have a little listen to this.”

Aidan took his MP3 player out, already set, and he placed it on the table between them. Then he pressed play. He’d practised the timing of this tech: over and over.

“Yeah, he had the lot, the greedy bastard.”

“Lovely-looking slabs. I wouldn’t have minded a few of them myself.”

“He always gets the good stuff.”

“Did he give you enough wonga? I heard Pickles is a right tight cunt.”

“Ha, you heard wrong then. He had those choice saplings, as well. Do you know how much they are at the garden centre?”

“I’ve cut it a bit,” said Aidan, “but I think you know what they’re on about. Have a listen. This bit is food for thought, as well.”

Aidan pressed play again and stared straight at Ted Pickles.

“Murray, the pikey bastard –”

“They’re fucking scum, mate, full-stop. If it was down to me, I’d Napalm the lot of them, starting with Aidan Murray.”

“Leeches, simple as.”

“Yeah, Hitler had the right idea, didn’t he?”

Aidan reached over and switched it off.

Ted Pickles glared at him with his mouth agape. Sweat was dripping off him. “That’s just for starters. I’ve got a couple of hours of this: all edited and
backed up. You want to hear what they say about you and the diesel – mind blowing!”

“You’re too clever for your own ... If you think –”

“No, it’s not about me being clever, Mr Pickles. We live in a PC world now. And political correctness rules the roost, get me? I can live with the verbal warning, but –”

“What do you want?”

Aidan looked at Ted Pickles for a good few seconds and smiled.

“It begins with M.”

Aidan had every right to feel elated. He should have been dancing a hornpipe on cloud nine, but he wasn’t. He jumped two footed on top of his hefty spade, slicing deep into the worm-rich sod of Memorial Park’s central flower bed. This was his fifth week down here. Oh, how he’d looked forward to sitting in his own little snug that was tucked in the rear of the Victorian brick toilet block. His own little stove. He could make tea whenever he wanted. Sheltered heaven. The joy of being his own man: with a big rung of keys hanging off his belt, plus the nous to make a go of revitalising this diamond park that he was now custodian of.

And as he ruminated over this, his two adversaries sped in through the front entrance of his park, muddying up the place the best way they could. Aidan felt nothing. He should have felt victorious. This was the first time he’d seen them since moving down here, but he didn’t react. He felt zilch.

They were driving the mustard-coloured council works transit and were here with his daffodils, hyacinths, crocus and tulips for the ritual planting-up. Aidan could see that both were still sour about how things had panned out. You could see it in their body language as they clambered out, slamming
doors, looking around for anything amiss to report back; throwing things about as rough as you like, the curtest of greetings. And the way they started slinging the sacks of bulbs at his feet.

“Good day for it Aidan, hey?” Kipper said.

“Not bad.”

“You’ve ordered a lot of these,” Rambo muttered, “They’ll be on to you!”

“Why are you pruning everything back so severe? It’s savage looking.”

“It’ll grow back.”

Aidan felt detached. Every day seemed meaningless, now. He’d been on a downer since the funeral – lost his way. He couldn’t get his mother’s confession out of his head. The way she had protected him. Her years of emotional evasion. It all spilled out of her when Augustine O’Toole left. Aidan’s new-found uncle begged and begged, apologised and apologised. There was entreaty after entreaty for Aidan and his mother to visit. “Let bygones be bygone,” he kept saying. “Grant her the peace she deserves, I’m begging ye. Show some mercy …”

Aidan kept thinking of the stress and bother his mother must have faced when she was younger. Thinking about her on the run, kept sending shivers through him. He’d never forget her voice that evening; even now, with these two goons in front of him, he was dwelling on it.

His mother’s words had been repeating through his mind, day-in-day-out: “He went animal when there was a drink inside him. Your father’s name was Pargy O’Toole. And the funny thing, Aidan, my darling boy, it was over an animal that he went for me, that last time. It was on a fine summer’s evening, as we walked down from that holy mountain, forty-three years ago. We always made our way to Croagh Patrick in County Mayo for the weeks either side of Reek Sunday. We’d set camp near the beach of Bertroy right below the mountain. We women would walk up the mountain barefoot a few days after the Sunday rush. To get rid of our sins. Tradition. We’d say Hail Mary after Hail Mary to cope with the awful pain. The men would drink themselves silly in
Cambell’s pub at the foot of the mountain. We’d be up and down in five hours. Our feet in bloodied bits, sore – shreds of our bloodied skin stain the rocks of that sacred mountain. Anyways, the menfolk had been riling Pargy about his upset stomach, saying, “Sure the badger’s got the better of ye, Pargy boy.” “Poisoning ye sure she is,” and such like. And Pargy O’Toole wasn’t taking the ribbing well. We’d found an old badger and cooked it, nothing wrong with that, sure we’d be eating badger a lot in those days. But he got it into his head that I’d made him sick, and that was that. With the drink and the ribbing from the clan, he was getting angrier and angrier, as the hours wore on. So they told me, when I woke up from the beating in Castlebar Hospital. They said he dragged me by the hair and kicked and thumped me for a good five minutes in front of the pub till some locals intervened. Not a soul from our clan jumped in, so I was told. Your father was good with his fists. I was in hospital for a month and I nearly lost you, so I did. A woman’s refuge got wind of my beating and someone came in to see me. That was the best thing that ever happened to me. I was offered sanctuary, and I took it. I’m not saying they’re bad, son. It was the drink that brought out the badness in him. And the drink killed him in the end. My family shunned me when they heard I’d run out of the marriage. England seemed an option. I took it. Like a badger – I went underground.”

Kipper threw another sack of bulbs at his feet.

“Are you fucking listening to me, Aidan?”

“Yeah, hyacinths itch, you’re dead right.”

“We’ll be off then, Kipper, hey?”

“Yeah! Brackmead Park is beckoning. Hey! Rambo, bell Alf, ask him to stick the kettle on – seeing as we’re not going to get one here.” And with that, they got back into the van with more doors slamming and plenty of grunts. That pair will be smarting and licking their wounds for many a day to come. There had been a hell of a bollacking dished out up at The Yard, apparently. Should be revelling in all this, Aidan thought, as they revved and rattled out of his park with the hump still on them.
Missey O'Toole’s funeral was massive. Travellers from the four corners of the land turned out to say their good byes. Respect. There was gridlock in and around Oxon, as hundreds of vehicles headed for Gillglade Cemetry. Vans, trucks and cars parked on pavements and grass verges, anywhere they could get. It was mayhem. The notorious Old Porcupine on Denworth estate opened its ramshackle doors for the thirsty afters.

She commanded respect, did Missey.

“Not many Travellers reach her age,” his cousin Declan whispered to him, as the casket was lowered down.

And the words in the church were monumental: “Missey was a character, a real sparkler, old-school, not a bad bone in her body …” her grandson Dermot half-sobbed, as he read out her moving eulogy.

It was at her funeral that Aidan started seeing that he was really part of all this. The ginger lump, his Uncle Hughie, wouldn’t let him out of his sight. Kept introducing him to this one and that one: “See that fella you just shook hands with, bought a great yearling off him in Appleby: class horse, real potential. You’ll have to come to Appleby Fair, lad; it's gas.” And as the pints started flowing, a singsong started. The best stepped forward. There were songs about exile, songs about war, songs about hares, spiritual songs that nearly reduced Aidan to tears. Goose pimples all night. He’d never heard the likes of them before and probably wouldn’t ever again. Priceless gems that stretched back centuries. They were sung with such emotion, such honesty of heart.

The council van rattled and then paused before the road as Kipper wound his window down.

“Hey, Aidan?” Kipper yelled back. “You got it then, shit-head.”

Aidan looked around at his green oasis.

Had he got it? Had he really got what he wanted? Yeah … of course he had … hadn’t he?
Mountain Men

Burn the bastards, Tommy Giblin used to bark at anyone unlucky enough to cross his path, as he slinked through his territory like a town fox. Every day he’d pop into Coral’s for his daily bet then to Joe’s Corner for a bacon cob. And then he’d spit and curse his way down to The Rose and Crown for a solitary pint.

He slowed as the years caught up with him. He died without fuss or visitor in his smelly low-tier OAP home. Even his death sigh was burn the bastards.

Matt Evans sat in the next-to-empty church at Tommy’s funeral, mulling over his caseload. Matt’s job was starting to bite bits off of him. Maybe he was too sensitive. “Our selfish society; the false economy of it all,” he’d often mutter. He was part of the Social Action Pod that oversaw cases like Tommy’s. He’d been doing it for two years now. His colleagues up at County Hall always pulled his leg: “Better ask Matt, our Corpse Supremo ...”

Only last week they’d had to force their way into a house where a body had been decomposing for six weeks. An eighty-six-year-old Indian man, abandoned. It was the stink that finally alerted the postman’s attention.

The coroner’s report indicated that he was lying helpless in his own piss and shit for days before he died. “He must have been yelling till his voice gave out,” the dead man’s doctor whispered to Matt. “Our failure, I’m afraid ...” Matt heard those yells, now and again, as he went about his work. “Lessons must be learnt from this case” – that was always bandied about after dissecting the facts, but Matt knew the words were hollow. Nothing ever changed: if it cost – kick it into the long grass. The horrors of the job sometimes played on his mind. Maybe that was down to the K he sniffed most weekends, though. “Purely recreational,” he often kidded to himself.

“Cases like Tommy are a pain in the balls,” he’d said to his line manager over a pint the other night. “You’re playing a blinder, Matt,” his boss said, with passion. But Matt knew it was a stock response. Nobody wanted to hear his gripes. No one wanted to take his role on, either.

Tommy had been a character, mind you.
Maybe it was the culmination of recent cases. Or was he glimpsing what might be awaiting him in the decades to come?

Matt had put out a circular:

Appealing to relatives or friends of the late Tommy Giblin who hailed from Old Ross, County Kerry, Ireland, who left Ireland in 1951 and settled in Leicester, please contact ...

He’d expected zilch from his press circular. But last night, out of the blue, a Kathy Grimes phoned from Birmingham. She was a few pews behind him, now. He was eager to have a natter with her. Catholic ritual had started boring him and as he looked around, he nodded at her.

“Such fine threads that hold us all ...”

Matt was one of half a dozen mourners. Most were frontline service providers showing they cared. Perks of the job, hey! he scoffed. Irish funerals were notoriously big. Not this one; not for this loner, poor sod. Matt wondered which cosmic address Tommy Giblin was bound for, as Fr Dolan droned on:

“... the protean nature of human existence; the bond of family; our eccentricities; our peculiarities; our human foibles; our weaknesses, truly link us all ...”

There were two obese workers from Merry Thistle Care Home in front who were itching to spark up. The smell of fag was all over them. Duty-sent. They were full of fidget – no doubt sore-buttocked on their hardwood pew. Penance. Unused to Catholic rites. They kept giving each other the how-much-frigging-longer look.

Matt started thinking about Tommy’s catchphrase again. Possibly the sort of thing the SS would have snarled to the Sonderkommandos at Auschwitz: “Hurry up and burn the bastards!”

“... Irish in work camps in 1950s England ...” A life summed up in a couple of minutes, Matt thought, “… sure the Irish would have flocked to big jobs like the building of the M1 and similar infrastructure projects in post war England. Men like Tommy Giblin worked for many a year on such projects. A lonely existence you might say, but maybe there was a beauty in it as well ...”
Matt visited Tommy when Fr Dolan was there, and they’d exchanged looks when Tommy kept shouting, “Burn the woolly bastards!” He’d been getting his whiskers trimmed in bed a couple of months back. “Posts are for pissing on, Father.”

He thought Tommy was talking gibberish. The Irishman looked very frail by then, and the barber sheared him without resistance. But Tommy’s words clicked when Matt passed by the Rose and Crown a couple of days ago. He spotted a bollard on the corner of Clyde Street that was dressed in a woolly outfit. It made Matt smile. That woolly bollard must have lodged in Tommy’s mind: guerrilla-knitting. The multi-coloured wool against the surrounding brick and concrete looked surreal. Not to mention the skill and the craft that lay behind the act. Matt burst out laughing, as he touched the soft post when he walked by it.

Tommy had spent the last part of his working life as a gravedigger up at Rosemount Cemetery. Matt had found that out about him, but not much else. Tommy’s cantankerous nature was a mystery. What had made him so bitter? Matt had often thought about that.

When the incense started wafting around and holy water was splashed on Tommy Giblin’s coffin, Matt knew they were on the last lap.

“May the angels lead you into paradise; may the martyrs receive you at your coming, and lead you into the holy city ...”

Later, at the graveside, a decade of the Rosary was said: Hail Mary after Hail Mary chanted in a machine gun style. Tommy was not what you’d call holy, but he had squirrelled away a fist of money. He’d left instructions for an Irish funeral with all the trimmings. As he was lowered down Matt suppressed a laugh when more of Tommy’s words came back to him: “Me plot better be square and snug, I’m telling ye! If it’s off kilter, I’ll be back to burn ...” Tommy’s vitriol had all but drained away by then. He was drifting in and out of morphine-land: all hoarse and whisper.

After putting Tommy in the ground, they regrouped for the buffet. It was then that Kathy Grimes started filling in the gaps.

“He had dazzling charm once upon a time, believe it or not,” she said to Matt, as she sloshed back her second sherry. They were nibbling semi-stale sandwiches in the presbytery.
“Really?”

“Tommy and my husband Joe were like brothers. He was our best man.”

“It’s hard to imagine Tommy being sociable.”

“Oh yes, he was a joy to be with before he went on the bottle. They were great trench men. Mean men on the spades, fierce reputations. Tommy went stupid with drink after striking that wretched cable in 1974, that killed my poor Joe – God rest his soul. Tommy took to the drink like a thirsty camel. He couldn’t get over Joe’s death; blamed himself, no matter what was said. It was the steel in Joe’s shoes that killed him, though. That’s the trouble with electricity; it’s a silent devil.”

“I’m sor - ”

“Time is a great healer – there’s nothing truer than that, Matt. They were always joking and larking around – saying the daftest things in company, like ‘Burn the bastards,’ excuse me French, God forgive me. Oh how we used to laugh, when one of them said that. Usually at the gangerman, when he was out of earshot. They were such characters – horsing around all the time. No harm in them at all.

“Real Kerrymen – mountain men. Great company altogether!”

Kathy was spurred on by Matt’s soft-manner. She felt his compassion. And his hazel eyes reminded her of her lost sweetheart.

“Tommy suffered for far too long. It’s cruel to let them linger, do you know that? No one wants to be a burden; I know I don’t. When I was a young one, back home in Kerry, you’d often hear of old ones taking a notion and walking off. They’d often be found in a ditch a good few miles from the house, up a quiet lane. They would let the weather take them. Somehow they knew when the time was right ...”

An image of Tommy’s head tangled in briars, staring into the gloaming, flashed across Matt’s mind.

He looked at Kathy and smiled in sympathy. But what he really thought was how open to abuse a custom like that must have been: “Now’s the time for your wee walk ...” Oh yeah – I bet many a walk was suggested on the coldest of days, as well, Matt thought.

“More nibbles, Kathy?”
“I’ll burn the bastard who sold you this shit, son.”
   “I’ve been stu –”
   “Shut the feck up or else I’ll cut your fecking ears off.”
   “But Tommy –”
   “It’s bog-simple, son: short back and sides, OK?”
   “Can I –”
   “You’ll look good with no ears, son.”
Tommy’s scissors were zinging like the sound of a jazz cymbal being brushed.
   “Sit still, son!”
   “But –”
   “Ears, son?”
Matt was K-ing his tits off! He’d never experienced hallucinations as wild as this before on Ketamine. He’d sniffed too much. This new stuff was pure. He was almost K-holing for fuck’s sake! He was way out his head. An alien jukebox was playing a scratched Johnny Cash number, which was jumping all over the place: “And found my cleanest dirty shirt” – scratch-scratch-scratch – “I’m wishing, Lord, that I was stoned” – scratch. Matt knew he was in a dog-rough pub; a dead man was cutting his hair; everything felt sticky; he could smell stale piss. There was menace in the air. Territory meant something here. An assortment of dossers were scattered about the place. He could hear their mutterings: “Who’s yer man?” “Looks a right cunt.” “A wee tot to start the day is the only way, sunshine.” “Slainte!” “Down the old Gregory Peck, then.” “Too fucking true, Jimmy.”
Matt tried to get out of his chair, but it was useless; he felt cemented in – “And Sunday morning coming down” – scratch-scratch-scratch-scratch. These punters are as rough as arseholes, Matt thought, trying to get a grip; he felt jittery. Is this hell?
   “No ... ” he yelled out.
   “Everything’s upside down,” he screamed.
Matt was deep in the K-hole. Idiot. He’d only wanted a buzz … not the full fucking Monty.

His dealer had dropped some stuff off the other day: “This is dynamite sniff, geezer – mind how you go, hey, toodle-oo.” Why hadn’t he listened? Toodle-fucking-oo! There’s no eject button in the K-hole. Shit. Tommy’s scissors were really whipping around his head, now. And the squeaky-snip of them was tearing tufts of Matt’s hair out. Tommy’s scissors were blunt for fuck’s sake!

“Why horse anaesthetic, anyway, son?”

But before Matt could answer he felt himself being winched up and up and up until he was looking down on his own body. He could see Tommy snipping away. And a ‘terrible beauty’ started filling the boozer as he floated above all the grot. Where had he heard that?

He’d never felt like this before – gone this far …

Matt was spiralling about – zipping through matter: he was being sucked deeper and deeper into the K-hole.

He was air – a particle of air … zinging between the notes that filled the pub. Matt was passing through people – passing through flesh! Passing through the bar, zooming through the jukebox. He whizzed on the scratches. He was the scratch. Matt felt he was in on everything; felt he had a handle on all things. He could move through anything. But as he zoomed through Tommy he pinged back to the ceiling.

Tommy looked up at him.

Zooming into Tommy’s hovel of a farm, from the sky. Flying. A patchworked quilt of places. JESUS CHRIST!

The spirit of Giblin’s old fireplace entered Matt’s soul as he hovered over Tommy’s family’s thatched house on a sunny day in Kerry seventy years ago. He could see Tommy as a young buck heading for Dingle. Tommy was skipping down the hillside on his way to hurling practice. He looked in fine fettle, not a bother on him. Bliss. But he’d forgotten to close the lower gate. The cattle were running amuck on the family’s vegetable patch. Then his father stomping down to Dingle after him with a belt clenched in his hand and a thunder-puss on his face. Tommy’s beating in front of Dingle’s finest. “You
won’t leave it open again will ye,” his father kept shouting, as he belted and belted him on that windy field.

“I can see why you left, now,” Matt said.

“A stone Buddha deserves all the bird shit it gets. I’m a firm believer in that, son.”

And tears rolled down Tommy’s cheeks onto his scissors. “If I’d only taken the notion and waved my skinny arms like a tall flower in the wind – but who would’ve burnt the bastards then? You want to give that flower malarkey a try, son. It could’ve worked for me.”

“What is this paddywhackery?”

“Peel back the letters, son.”

“What?”

Matt was clinging on.

“I’m Astral-fucking-travelling through a shit-hole,” Matt wailed.

“Right enough, son, right enough!”

“Am I being broken by the bodies I bury, Tommy, is that it?”

“Smash your solar-yoke, son!”

“Hey?”

“Knock on the sky and listen to the sound.”

Then Matt started whizzing around the pub again.

It was all too much!

It’s coming on again! FUCKING HELL. He thought he was losing his mind entirely when he started zipping through things again. But the K was waning a bit now. He felt the drag of being forced down into his own body again. And the dead weight of it thwacked his mind. He felt his body’s uselessness once again. CHRIST! Then the K-hole spat him out. And as he lay there, panting, sore and bruised, aching pain came. He felt as if he’d been walking on his elbows and knees for ages. His head was pounding. Matt was scraped and shook up like a small dog that’s just been clipped by a car’s undercarriage and knows it’s had a lucky escape. He stared up, all blurry-eyed, from the carpet – at his wrecked flat.

“What’s all this red stuff?” he mumbled.

*
Matt's cosmic haircut would stay with him forever.

He was in casualty. He'd been lying on a gurney for hours. He'd often tell jokes about time wasters. Now he was one.

“Never again,” Matt grunted.

To cap it off, a nurse with tweezers was painstakingly picking shards of glass out of his gashed scalp before they stitched his head back up.

Matt was still getting the odd K- flash, which caused a weird shiver or two.

“Try and stay still,” the nurse said.

_He’d burn his bastard chattels. Kick his job into touch. And vamoose! Let go, he’d just let go …_

His heart raced at the simplicity of it. Nothing would grind him down again.

_Compassion, compassion, compassion._

An orange glow of a robe near a pagoda and a path of weeds lit his mind. The East was calling him. Matt’s heart pounded like a tabla being put through its paces.

Cheers, Tommy; cheers, MOUNTAIN MAN, Matt yelled, deep inside himself.

“You said you tripped over in your flat? Always happens when you least expect it, doesn’t it?” the nurse said, with a knowing smile.
**Black Beret Brigade**

Bleep, bleep, bleep …

…. *Democracy my friends, democracy …* Switch him off, for fuck’s sake …

tumble dryer

Can’t breathe properly – drip, drip, drip, drip, drip, drip …

My ears are spurting blood

What a WHOUSH

I’ve been ...

need to get my head around this, *now!*

I’ll be late …

ripped open – giblets?

Snagged, on metal – like a maggot. Sound – seconds ago.

I’m all goo now!

Worm-hole … in a worm-hole. How did I end up here?

**DEMOCRACY**

*

“You look like Ian Curtis,” she said, brushing herself against me at the bar. I should have smelled a rat, then, not knowing who the feck Ian Curtis was. That vixen in the Five Bells was as curvy as Le Mans and she’d been eyeing
me up all night. Her Mohican hair-do and the faint whiff of patchouli off her sent my cock hard. She was as wild as briar and that was as plain as the punk music blasting through the place. The way she pranced in that black studded outfit, those shredded fish-net tights; every eye in that pub was on her arse. She took a shine to me for some reason. She kissed some speed into my mouth, when I was on my fourth pint of Tennent’s Extra. She corrupted me, but I was in on it.

* 

A blast … caught in a blast

I'm crippled up for shit’s-sake!

hate the smell of burnt hair.

My legs, my fucking legs.

SPARKS
gore… crumpled carriage
Some of its mine, I bet …

not good,

not good,

not good …

* 

She whispered, “I want you, big man,” right into my ear-lug. Then I became her beast for a few hours. She dragged me to The Harp Club, where she
dumped me in the middle of a frenzied mob of psychobilly’s who were going berserk to The Cramps. Why did she do that?

  *

Don’t want to die not here.

* Please, not here!

Too much to do still. People are groaning.

Piles of pain every time nearly passed out a second ago.

I try to move Stay awake I must stay awake.

Everything seems so distant except that Yank.

... Clash of civilisations ...

My ears are zinging the way they do in a fire-drill.

... There are known knowns ... There are things we know we know ...

A radio’s playing in my head.

Bullshit sticks deep, doesn’t it?

Blinding flash, hot air shrieking…thud-thud-thud steel folding in on itself.

Life-changing injuries, amigo!

You’re having a laugh, aren’t you?

Fight the sleep for fuck’s sake. People by me are in a bad way, “Help me – please help me.”

I’m starting to say it as well, now.

Metal has grown through me like knotweed … Where’s that stench coming from?

... But there are also unknown unknowns ...

Please GOD. Switch that shagging Yank off.
... New Cross is scorched into your mind, sinner boy ...

* 

I found out who The Cramps were later, much later. Why this bit; why am I just getting this frigging bit? I thought your whole life flashes in front of you when you’re at death’s door. Doesn’t seem fair, does it? Sowing my wild oats, twenty years ago, on the lash, in South London is haunting my death; why? How fucking bizarre. Sure, I was greener than a wet banana leaf, back then; I’ll own up to that. A young skin, gagging for the wild side; it didn’t take me long to find it, either, did it? Yes, that night would have been the catalyst that nudged me leftfield, if I had to put my finger on it. She abandoned me when I was speeding my tits off. What a dolly, though. Her name was Roxy. She was a convoy child. Never was the same again, after her. Someone said she went to Berlin to sculpt scrap metal with a tribe of whacked-out welders. I’d never done gear as good as hers before. The speed she kissed into me sent me bonkers. I went whizzing around The Harp Club like a dog with two cocks. I was pining for her and talking the ears off of anyone who was willing to listen. If you never went to The Harp Club in the 80s, you missed out. A fine space for the indie crew to thrash about in. They were all dressed in black garb with berets on their heads. What a tribe. It blew me away. That’s where she took me. Culture shock or what? Upstairs in The Harp there was an Irish club in full swing, as well. Even weirder down below there was a blues-reggae club secretly operating: Heavy dub, man. And I was the misfit that popped in to all three of them on that particular night – acting the bollix, smashed, out of my brain-box.

* 

I can taste blood in my mouth now

    stay cool, stay fucking cool …

    I can’t shake this shagging Yank’s voice off, though …

    ... That is to say there are things we know we don’t know…
Mobile ringtones zing and zing and zing... and thatYankkkkkkkkkkk

... Our freedom, stupid! Our freedom ...

*

She found me below in that Blues Club arguing with a dreadlocked Rastafarian. She led me back upstairs, giggling her arse off. “Relax, Irish boy,” she whispered in my ear. Everyone knew her. She kept saying she was going to “fuck my brains to bits.” But every time we tried, we kept getting disturbed. Roxy was banging speed out; she was the most popular person in the Harp Club that night. “Where do you live?” she asked me, as we sneaked in to the ladies’ toilet. But even in there we got rumbled. “Roxy, Scud’s outside with some gear,” a cockney girl’s voice shouted in at us. Roxy went into business mode; she slinked away with promises of finding me again. I was left with a stonking bone-on. I waited and waited …

*

… Restore freedom in the Middle East; surely, they deserve that ...

*

How I ended up on the piss with a navvy still bugs the fuck out of me. I landed upstairs drinking with some Irish when The Cramps finished their set down below. I was wired, still hunting for her, soaking with sweat. How did I lose her? A ride missed: always regretted. Cocky, wasn’t I? To think I used to think like that at the time. She’d dumped me again and I was into the dregs of the night – wanting to carry on. I remember talking a right load of old shite to a bunch of suited paddies from the bog. I even joined in their sing song – like an eejit. My tongue was as loose as a goose and I was spouting loads of old patriotic shite. Naive or what? Hunger strike songs hissing out of me like a fast
puncture. Eugene latched on to me. A big buck with a fine voice. He was thirty years older than meself, for fuck’s sake. Back at my gaff, hours later, I remember looking at the scrunched up Guinness cans on the kitchen table. Ashtrays full of stub-ends, fast-food wrappers scattered all over the kip. My living space had turned into a toxic wasteland. What was I doing? I was totally zonked.

Christ, this country’s destroying me was rattling through me head. And I’d only been in it twelve weeks. That’s what I kept saying to myself, back then. If the ones at home could’ve seen the cut of me, Jesus wept! A sixteen-stone-buck, suited-up in paddy-blue-pinstripe, slobbering on about hurling and the taste of praties, plonked in the middle of my gaff. And me: out of my shagging head, on drugs. They’d have been mortified!

*  

... I believe what I said yesterday ...  

“Hang on, just hang on,” a voice yells through the metal-tangle carnage on carnage  

“Help is on its way!”  

I’m starting to doze  

I can’t cling on...  

... I don’t know what I said, but I know what I think, and well, I assume it’s what I said ...  

*  

Where’s me standards? I kept asking myself as I looked across at him swigging a newly opened can. He said he was from Mayo. Hang on – get a grip – you’re helping someone out, for god’s sake. A fellow countryman and all
that old bollix. His voice is still as clear as a train whistle on an icy platform. “Holy mother of fuck,” Eugene said, “those heebie-jeebies had me by the goolies back there. You’ve pulled me back from the gates of hell, lad. Sláinte!”

I remember smiling at him and had a long slug myself and rebounded ‘sláinte,’ back at him. Sure, Eugene, it was like being at home, listening to you singing in The Harp Club.

*The Holy Ground once more -
fin girls ye are!

Which I sang at the top of my voice. He gave me a twisted grin. “You’re an awful thick fuck, so you are!”

What! Did he just say that, in, my gaff?

My Guinness spilled onto my knee.

* ...

... We know where they are. They’re in the area around Tikrit and Baghdad and east, west, south, and north somewhere ...

I can see search lamps, now, high-viz yellow

there’s two-way chatter: “TANGO 1 ...”

Don’t sleep!

for fuck’s sake ... don’ fall asleep, now ...

* 

Why did I bring such a screw-ball back in the first place? I’m not a saint or anything. Pack animals, the lot of us; simple as. I’ve worked that one out
anyway. Slaves to our ego. We’re all on the make, even the do-gooders. Took me years to suss that fucker out. I’ll never forget his sly grin after he insulted me, how he slugged on his Guinness tin, weighing me up. His words still burn me after all these years.

“Open your lugs, lad,” Eugene said, changing tack slightly, getting me back on board, “and I’ll tell ye about the Holy Ground. Holy ... me hole! They’re a shower of cunts back there: beasts were treated better than we were. The best leave, sure they do, and that’s a fucking fact. Come here and I’ll tell ye; the Irish over here, in England, have this romantic notion of what they left behind, in the back-of-beyond. They’ve got these airy-fairy notions of Irish valleys and vales dripping with honey and buttermilk, where there’s a grand hello from everyone everywhere you go. Shite. They’ve forgotten the reasons why they left in the first place: diddled, abused and worked to death, if the truth be rolled out onto this table. It’s a load of bollix. The place is stained with our blood, sweat and tears. And then there’s the shame ...”

“Now, that seems a bit -”

“Bit, me arse.”

“But there must have been -”

“It’s rotten, lad, rotten.”

He really meant it, as well. The way he stared across at me shaking his booze-weathered head: snorting like an old horse. Toil was etched into his gravelled cheeks. His squint of a look suggested our generation would never know his generation’s hardship. But I was too vain to see it twenty years ago.

* 

.... Death has a tendency to encourage a depressing view of war ...

Who is that fucking Yank?    He’s on the tip of my tongue.
Lights, people are milling.

“The cutting equipment’s on its way. Can you hear me? Keep taking deep breaths. This oxygen will help you.”

Drifting,

drifting,

drifting ...

*

“Now, listen well, lad; when I say shame, I mean a shame caused by the guilt that’s in all us Irish. The Irish condition, that’s what I call it. I’ve thought about this a fucking lot over the years. Anyhow, it’s the shame that comes down from the Great Hunger and the closing of countless doors on the roaming hungry; that’s the wringing shame I’m talking about. The shame of surviving the hunger. Not many Irish people realise they’re walking around with it, but they are; believe you me. Sure, isn’t the ‘Fields of Athenry’ being sung by every man and his dog now? You hear it everywhere ye go – it’s a new song, lad. The shame that’s passed down is sewn in those very lyrics.”

Nothing matters, Mary, when you’re free
Against the famine and the Crown
I rebelled, they brought me down
Now it’s lonely round the Fields of Athenry

Is that why we sing it, then? I asked myself, as Eugene sang. No wonder I’ve been walking around with a puss on my face all my days, I cynically thought. I nearly laughed aloud at one point. Was this man for real? Eugene’s words sounded nonsense. I remember being a bit more on edge by his way of thinking, mind you. I thought he was a bogtrotter for fuck’s sake. And him shagging well philosophising – at me – in my own gaff – fair play and all that.
Now, that was also spinning in my head as I pondered his words. The man had dug deep, so the man had. There’s more to this shame than meets the eye, whizzed through my mind, as I stared over at him, with the speed she kissed into me still drilling in to my brain. The weight of his words made sense. Irish hunger, looking the other way, trying to make do. Dog eat dog, back in the day. I mean, how many times had I chanted along to that song, never clocking the full force of those lyrics?

“Arrah, the Guinness gets me ruminating, so it does, lad.”

“How did ye learn ‘Rocky Road to Dublin’, Eugene?” I said, trying to make small talk, “it has an awful difficult air, hasn’t it?”

“Tunes and bits of songs stick in me head like stamps, lad, so they do; always have.”

“Do you graft, Eugene?” His hands looked like worn shovels.

“Sure, isn’t graft me middle name, but booze is me major preoccupation now.”

“How do you make a crust then?”

“Like all farmers, sure, I jumped on the machines. But me speciality is fixing the fuckers. Hydraulics is taking off in a big way; I’ve ended up a mechanic. And I’m good at it too.”

“Yeah, farmers and spanners; I know what ye mean.”

“Can I use the jacks, lad?”

“Yeah, just through that door, Eugene, on your right.”

Where did Roxy fuck off to? I picked up the paper when he’d gone and started to scan the football. I heard the flush of the toilet and Eugene’s heavy footfall coming back in.

And that’s when it went apeshit! An almighty clank from behind me made me jump. It must have been my toaster hitting the deck. I felt this almighty burn from my neck as my head was wrenched backwards. Holy fuck! I’m being throttled in my own living room. I tried to get a grab on his arm, but he’d pinned me, the pain was crippling. I kicked out and tried getting a hold of anything, but it was useless. He throttled me back all the harder the more I
struggled. I could feel life leaving me. My airway! I can’t fu… He was choking me.

My whole reality shifted. So, this is how terrible things happen? When you think you’re safe, in control, that’s when it happens. My mother’s voice: “Keep in touch, son. Find a nice parish, stay safe!” Stupid thoughts. I felt wet, oh no. I thought you only did that when you’re dying; oh shit, so this is it, where it ends? Fuck …

* … How do we know we don’t know …?

CAN YOU HEAR ME?

“Tell me your name. I’m going to slip this silver blanket over you. You’re going to be fine. Do you understand what I’m saying?

We’ll have you out of here before you know it.”

… You mean the ones we don’t know we don’t know …

* …

“Questions, that’s all you’ve fired at me since I’ve met you, lad. Where do ye hail from? Why did ye leave? Do ye graft? Do you know such and such? Is that why…? You’re too fucking thick to be old bill. You think you’ve got it sussed, know all the answers, got a handle on London. Culchie! You know fuck all. You’re a greenhorn. I used to work on a farm back in Mayo, forty years ago. I got used to killing. You’re only seconds away from God now, lad. I’m going to ask you one question, gossoon. Now open your fucking ears. What’s the lightest thing on this earth? Come on, lad, fucking tell me; think.” He snarled into my left earhole. The same one Roxy had whispered in, but his whisper sent a death shiver through me. I could smell the bile from his stomach, and a urine-cheesy stench coming off his clothes, as he yanked my
head back even further into the fabric of him. He released the pressure slightly, so I could splutter for air. I tried to answer. He sniggered and snorted menace as he pulled tighter again.

I invited him in: kept flashing across my mind.

Eejit!

What a shit way to die, I’m fighting for every breath. There’s no two ways about it. This fucker’s strangling me and he’s enjoying it. The cunt’s as powerful as a bull. The shagging irony of it. A fucking Irish psycho in my own living room – throttling me, you couldn’t make it up.

“Will I tell ye, lad. Will I, will I …?”

“Urghhha …”

“It’s the single thought that makes a man’s prick rise up. That thought’s the lightest thing on this earth, lad.” He whispered Zen-like into my earhole, sniggering like an ogre in your worst nightmare. “Pick the fucking bones out of that!” He was raping my head, on every level. It’s Greenwich, for fuck’s sake, a safe leafy suburb, I remember screaming in my mind, as I struggled for life: twenty years ago. And as he kept increasing and decreasing the pressure, I realised then, how precious every breath of life truly is. I was weakening. I felt life leaving me. I don’t want to die, not like this, my mind whispered over and over.

“Stupid fucker, harping on about home and IRA things; you’re a mug. Grow up, lad. Cop on! My lad would have been about the same age as you. About twenty-five, I’d say – am I right? Nod your head then! You remind me of how he might’ve turned out. That’s why I’m having a few words with ye. Putting ye right, having a fatherly confab. I thought I’d better plant a few words in ye. My lad’s birthday would have been yesterday. Well, ye can’t have everything can ye? I’m still grieving, lad. Me and my Kathleen had just got back from the Galtymore. Danced our hearts out, shook our stuff, we were a great couple. It was our first time out since the birth of our beautiful Conor. We had a great time. We took wee Conor to bed with us, all smiles and giggles, that gorgeous baby smell of him, we had him in with us before, mind you. My
life hasn’t been the same since. They said it wasn’t our fault, but we knew it was. It knocked the stuffing out of us. Not a day goes by, not a day goes by …”

I was on the brink of passing out. Then Eugene kicked the table over with a mighty splatter. Ashtrays, cans and all my life’s other odds and sods scattered across the manky carpet, including a framed photograph of us all in front of the house back in Ireland, one fine sunny day a couple of summers ago. He released the pressure slightly. I gulped in life’s air, and then the pressure came back. Topsy-turvy images of life racing through my head, flashes of euphoria, intense light, just the way I’d heard people harp on about when relating their near-death experiences.

* 

... I feel the hand of history upon our shoulders. I really do…

* 

Then the pressure eased, and I was sucking in air, again. “I’ve just played you like an accordion,” he whispered into my earhole and I shivered, barely conscious. “Here are some words of advice, lad, before I naff off. Never, ever, ever, let a cunt like me into your gaff again; that’s if ye want to get by in this town. You’re as soft as baby shit. Get rid of your halo. Tighten your tongue, lad. Use your noodle! Its dangerous times we’re in, that’s the nub of it. Tricky times, lad …”

I heard the door bang on the latch; I was on my knees, choking. That fucker nearly killed me. He could have killed me! I’m still alive, though. I’m alive! I’m breathing, fucking breathing. I looked at the shattered photograph. He’d messed with my head. Part of me wanted to grab the bread knife from the kitchen and tear after him. But I stopped and slumped back in the chair. Halo? What fucking halo? I grabbed a half-empty can and took a slug. My
mouth filled with stale Guinness and something gritty. The bastard had used that one as an ashtray.

Then suddenly Roxy burst into the flat, screaming.

“I saw The Bear coming out your door, laughing his fucking head off,” she bawled. There was an amazed grin plastered across her scallywag face.

“How did you find my gaff?” I choked at her.

“That geezer’s radio-rental.”

“What?” I snapped, trying to get a grip.

“No one goes near the fucking Bear in South London,” she said, as streetwise as they come.

Then we fucked and fucked and fucked on my detritus like wired maniacs. I kept plucking little glass splinters from the cheeks of my arse for weeks afterwards. My South London baptism was messy.

* 

Sparklers

Wrenching

pull-tug-pull-tug-pull-tug-pull-tug …

Numb

Fresh air

Sirens.

… Donald fucking

Rumsfeld ...
Do you want the shamrock on the cream, Davey?"

“What?”

“Brewery directive.”

“Just give me the fucking drink, Hughie.”

“We’re like Sainsbury’s now. We have to ask.”

“Brand Ireland, eh?”

“Now you said it.”

There’re just the two of them in The Angel. Hughie O’Connor’s been the landlord there for the last fifteen years. It’s an Irish pub that’s tucked in the back streets of Hackney and traditional music thrives within its walls.

“Was I missed?” Davey Murray whispers, trying to gauge Hughie’s mood.

Hughie gave his old friend an odd look followed by a sort of a shrug. He liked order, liked being kept in the loop. He kept a tight rein on things; a no messing policy; barred meant barred. No early-doors; no late ones. But Davey was the exception to his rules. Hughie often wondered why. Maybe it was because the two of them had been on the shovel together during Hughie’s early days in London. Demolition. Dusty and dangerous work. And most of their wages went on drink in and around the pubs of Cricklewood.

“There were a few asking for you, come to think of it.”

Davey hadn’t shown his face for ages. Unusual. Not a sight or a whiff of him. Hughie had scratched his head a good few times during the past few weeks.

“Look… I had to split, alright?”

“Going off grid is a mortal sin, nowadays.”

“Am I daft or stupid, Hughie?”

“Now – that, might take a long time to answer, Davey.”

“Ruffled a few feathers?”

“You could say that.”

“Who?”

“Your manager – coming in here, making a show, Where’s the fucking bollix?”
“Eejit.”

Davey’s manager, Rory Higgins, was a character who handled Irish showbands and other novelty acts. The Impresario of Kilburn High Road – that’s what they called him. He had the knack for smelling money. He was always bucking the trend. Davey would still be busking tube stations if Higgins hadn’t chanced upon him.

“Now, that’s one fella that deserves to dangle.”
“He had the right huff on him,” Hughie snorted.
“Serves the fecker right.”
“The lads got a great laugh out of it, so they did. Him strutting in like a peacock.”
“I’ll smooth Higgins out with some schmooze.”
“You’ll need more than that, by the cut of him.”

Hughie had kept The Angel clean over the years and his beer had a reputation for being good as well as the music played in there. The Angel was a fixture on the London folk circuit; it had even been listed in Travel the Planet:

– Great sessions! The Angel’s an Irish gem that’s worth hunting out –

Davey loved offloading his troubles onto Hughie. He knew he was Hughie’s only punter allowed in early-doors. ‘Privileged fucker,’ regulars muttered behind his back. But it wasn’t just for the booze that Davey knocked Hughie’s door. He got a kick from watching his friend work. And Hughie didn’t mind Davey’s eyes on him, either, as he stocked his bar; rinsed out dirty glasses; cleaned surfaces down; made ready for the trade ahead in his meticulous way. He knew that this watching soothed Davey’s nerves.

“It’s all in the prep.”
“Now you said it, Davey.”

Hughie played his tunes with the same care and diligence. He squeezed his box every day. His red chrome accordion sat pride of place on a shelf behind the bar. And it was him on that box that dragged the punters in.

“I was sipping a Guinness in the Elephants Head in Camden a few weeks ago, Hughie, feeling as rough as a donkey’s arse.”
“A man in the evening; a man in the morning,” Hughie sighed. That was his stock phrase when anyone harped on about a hangover. Hughie polished a glass until it gleamed. Then he placed it with a deliberate chink above his till. Davey loved the way he did that.

“My head was banging, so it was. I went in for the hair of the dog. Such is the musician’s life, I’m afraid.”

“Now, hasn’t someone got to do it, Davey boy.”

“Yeah, I wish the fecker wasn’t me, sometimes.”

“Not a bad way of making a crust, all the same.”

Davey’s first pint of the day went down in two large gulps.

“Breakfast,” he gasps.

“A full Irish, by the look of it. Shall I pour again?”

“Yeah, give me a Whiskey-Mac, as well.”

“The water of life.”

“By Christ, I hope so.”

Hughie turned around to get the right glass for the short.

“England’s been good to me, Hughie. I don’t mind saying it. I’m in demand! They can’t get enough. Working with them electronic lads has been the making of me.”

“That fecking shampoo-advert has minted ye, lad.”

“It’s bringing in a few shekels, Hughie.”

“A mighty tune: ‘Mrs Flaherty’s Bunions’.”

“Some say so.”

“It’s your humming that makes that tune shine, Davey. And that’s a fact.”

“They’ll never take to my lilting, Hughie. Now – that’s another fact.”

“Davey Murray with Warped Synergy puts folk music back on the map.’

Sure, wasn’t that in the fecking Evening Standard a month ago?”

“Ah, some think I’ve sold out.”

“Let them think away.” Hughie opens the ginger wine and pours a good smidgen into the whiskey.

“The whole world’s digging the Irish vibe, Davey boy!’ That’s what Higgins said to me when we were on our way to meet them electronic lads, Hughie.”
“And wasn’t he right?”
“Smart-arse, so he is. No wonder I feel like Judas.”
“Think of the times when you didn’t have a pot to piss in, Davey.”
“There’s coin to be made from disco-Irish, lad,’ Higgins kept saying.
He’s a bloodsucker, Hughie.”
“You’re looking at it the wrong way, Davey.”
“We’ll tweak the old formula, Hughie. We didn’t just tweak it, we fecking well stomped it into the shite!”
“Don’t be daft!”
“I can’t handle the flak, Hughie.”
“There’s nothing wrong with tweaking. Jealous is what they are, Davey.
Fiddle and lilting are sound by me. Putting it on top of electronic music. Now, that’s class.”
“Electronic-folk isn’t seen as fecking class in West Clare, Hughie. I’ll tell you that for feck-all – they ripped me to pieces-”
“Arrah, don’t mind them gobshites.”
They caught each other’s eye and laughed. Then an easy silence developed between the pair, as Hughie continued with his bar-prep and started wiping a surface or two in his methodical way: “Ye were over in Clare, then, ya bollix?”
“It was spur of-”
“And here’s me thinking you were being carved up by a psycho, somewhere.”
“I’m-”
“Enough!”
Davey could tell he’d bruised his friend’s ego by vanishing off The Angel’s radar; without a word.
“Well, the long and short of it, Hughie, there were these two shams by me in The Elephants Head who were gassing on about home, ‘It’s buzzing, man. The town’s heaving!’ I remember this sham saying: ‘I heard Freda O’Callaghan’s there.’ That’s when my beer shot into me lungs. That name – dropped as casual as a barrel bomb. ‘Janey Mac, that woman’s a fecking legend,’ the other sham says. Then me shagging legs got all tangled up – me feeling as delicate as a hatched duckling.”
“Quack-quack.”
“Do you want to hear this, ya bollix yeh?”
“Not a sinner here,” Hughie said, as he skimmed the cream off the pint under the Guinness tap with loving care. “I’m all ears, me old duckling.”
“Are you sure?”
“Blast away, Davey.”
“You see ... I knew Freda O’Callaghan … knew her well – back in the day, Hughie.”

The Angel’s landlord smiled at his patron in a quizzical way.
“We were almost an item once,” Davey said, in a confessional whisper.
“Janey Mac, ye kept that awfully quiet.”
The two men stared at each other for a good few seconds as they figured out how they were going to navigate this new landscape.
“A Guinness and a Whiskey-Mac,” Hughie said, in a miffed tone of voice, breaking the silence, putting the drinks in front of his friend in a cack-handed way.

Davey knew he’d pissed his friend off. And there was an awkward moment …
“Well, there I was, on the fecking floor, with carpet fluff in my mouth. I hadn’t set eyes on Freda since she dropped out decades ago. But she’d stuck herself on to my heart like a prized football sticker, Hughie ... I’ve been trying to peel her off, ever since.”
“Peel her off – you’ve been holding out on me, Davey.”
“Stuck down, fast, for far too long – now you know.”
This time the silence dragged … both men fidgeted, as they tried to get back on solid ground again. But Hughie had the upper hand. He was going to let his patron stew for a good while yet …

“It takes a lifetime to know someone, Davey, and even then … there’s something you don’t fecking know about them. Now, that’s an old saying from around our way, so it is!”

Davey looked embarrassed, before he took a sheepish slug from his second pint. “There’s truth in that, Hughie.”
“Sure, I know there is, that’s why I fecking said it.”
“Aye.”

Hughie was a great believer in straight talk, no bullshit. And he had always wondered why his friend was vague about how he’d gotten into traditional music. Davey would shy away from talk about how he became a musician. He’d fob you off with some old shite, Hughie thought. Now, after all these years it was finally dribbling out of him.

“So?”

“Them two bucks in the Elephants Head helped me get back on to me perch. Turned out one of them was from Milltown Malbay and they’d been gassing about the music festival.”

“Jaysus ... is that thing still going?”

“That’s where I’ve been for the last couple of weeks, Hughie.”

“Your whiskey’s making sense, now.”

“And another thing—"

“The skeletons are piling up, Davey.”

“Freda was the skin who turned me on to traditional music.”

Hughie took another hard look at his friend. He’d always had an inkling there was heavy baggage inside this man – baggage he’d never been able to get a handle on.

“And here’s me thinking you’d sold yourself at the crossroads the way those old bluesmen used to do.”

“Don’t take it to heart, Hughie.”

The publican grunted again and carried on wiping his tables down. He controlled the silence ...

“It’s a late confession, Davey, all the same.” Hughie smiled, in a half serious way ... “I’m not going to fecking well absolve ye if that’s what you’re after.”

“There’s something I want to ask you.”

“Fire away.”

“She’s going to be in London next week. She wants a few tunes in here, for old time’s sake.”

“What?”

“She wants to record the session.”
“Freda O’Callaghan wants to play in here? Jaysus, Mary and Joseph and all the angels!”

*  

Two days after his confession, Davey was in The Angel again, watching his friend graft. And County Clare was still vexing the fuck out of him. They’d slaughtered him over there with their dry wisecracks. He sipped at his pint in a forlorn sort of a way.

“Higgins ripped into me yesterday, Hughie.”
“I’d loved to have been a fly on the wall for that one.”
“The mouth on him, ‘Never SHIT on me, Davey, that’s what I said, remember? A tour’s in the pipeline and festivals are being lined up, as I speak. And you fuck off. Cop on to yourself, man!’ I had to grovel.”

“What’s new?”
“I hate the hold they have on you.”
“That fella takes no messing.”
“He calmed down a bit when I mentioned Freda.”
“Money always calms that fucker down.”
“Now you said it.”

The clank of barrels being rolled back and forth filtered in from the back cellar. Hughie had just finished wiping down the optics and was starting to stock up.

“Cider and ice is all the rage now,” Hughie said, as he loaded his noisy fridge with stubby bottles from a crate.

“Fad.”
“Maybe.”
“I took some stick over there, Hughie.”
“So you said.”
“They chopped small bits off of me, so they did.”
“They hate to see anyone getting on, back home,” Hughie said, on the hoof bringing more crates out from the little cooler-room. Then he stopped and looked at his friend, “Small-minded is what they are; they’ll never fecking change. They cling on to things, so they do.”
“All I wanted was to sit in a session and play a few tunes with Freda.”
“I thought ye went way back.”
“We do ... but ...”
“But what?”
“She’s a diva for fuck’s sake!”
“Diva, me left fecking buttock.”
“Everyone wants a piece of her, Hughie. Queuing up so they were.”
“That’s the price of fame.”
“I lost my rag in O’Grady’s, Hughie.”
“Did ye?”

“All the rumours of her playing here and playing there. And me with the fiddle sitting in session after session like an eejit! Waiting. And not a sight of her. In one session they started getting precious about jigs. We’d been playing ‘Whelan’s Old Sow’, ‘Coleman’s’ and ‘The Rolling Wave’. They started whingeing about me tootling and noodling in and out of the tunes. I was raging, Hughie. I was there a good hour or two, taking this shite about my chart success. ‘Betraying the tradition’ one of them said. Snide comments all frigging night, Hughie. In the end I snapped. ‘A bunch of philistines is all ye are! I can’t limit my fecking harmonic palate for snobby traditional sensitivities, I said, on my high horse, Hughie. You know the way I get?”

“I do,” Hughie said, as he started loading his fridge again.

‘You want me to be shagging well locked inside CF and fucking G, with a possible A-minor. It’s Neanderthal playing, that’s what it is,’ I said. ‘No, it’s East Clare,’ this tin whistle player fired back at me. ‘Is that so,’ I said. That thick nasal brogue of theirs does your head in. Gobshites. They sound bunged up all the time. You’d get a better welcome in North Korea than you would in fecking O’Grady’s, Hughie.”

“It’s only opinion, Davey. Trad-snobs, that’s all that shower are.”

“They think I’ve sold out!”

“Purists, Davey. Pay no heed.”

“I don’t know about purists – more like goat-fuckers.”

Both men laughed above the zinging of the fridges and the chinking of crates sliding into the cellar.
“I’m buying big for Freda; I’ve ordered five extra of everything, just in case.”

“Sound, no harm in that.”

“There’s a real buzz, Davey.”

“Grand.”

“The Angel needs a jackpot like this now and again, so it does.”

“Those trad shites got a shock when Freda walked into O’Grady’s, Hughie. She strolled in just as the shit was flying and she made a beeline for me. That shut the feckers up.”

“Every dog has its day.”

“Now you said it.”

“Another?”

“Aye, one for the frog and toad.”

“Sound.”

“We had a great catch-up. She kept going on about The Angel, Hughie. Everyone was badgering her for songs. But she kept talking about this place. She knows all about you and your afternoon sessions with the old groan-box. Her Kiwi relatives passed through here last year.”

“Is that so?” Hughie said, sounding a bit mystified. That woman could fill the Albert Hall for god’s sake, why play here? The thought had crossed Hughie’s mind more than once. Odd. But he wasn’t complaining.

“It’ll be a cracking night, Hughie. That manager of mine is all excited. He’s sorted the paperwork out with Freda’s people. He’s getting pros in to film it, if that’s alright with you?”

“Sound, Davey. A rare singer is Freda O’Callaghan.”

“She’s rationed herself well, Hughie. ‘There’s a demand for her product,’ Higgins kept saying that, yesterday.”

“I’ll need bouncers.”

“There’ll be a gathering, no two ways about it.”

“Someone phoned from fecking Helsinki last night, for fuck’s sake.”

“Sure, she’s the genuine article, Hughie.”

Davey looked into his pint of stout and remembered the first time he’d ever set eyes on Freda O’Callaghan. It was 1973. He was a gossoon sitting on the Idle Wall on the edge of Kilrush in County Clare. He was catching the
late rays of summer sun with a few of the town’s characters. Not much traffic in those days. Not much work either. Not much of anything. Dead. Ireland was desolate. A backwater – just waiting to be branded. His Ma would give out to him for sitting down there: Davey Murray, you’ll get nowhere fast, hanging off that wall, with that shower of latchicos. She was always giving out to him like that. God rest her soul, he thought, as he supped his pint. He watched his friend stock the fridge as more teenage memories resurfaced.

“I’ll never forget the day Freda trotted down our lane. She was astride a shire horse, Hughie. Her long locks of auburn hair tied in red ribbons bouncing off her kaftan coat. There’s animal in that colleen’s eyes, Old John-Joe said, under his breath, as she passed. She was travelling in one of those Traveller wagons, mooching around Ireland, on the sniff for songs. She’d been on the road for weeks. That was thirty-five years ago. She was visiting my cousin Fitzy who played the mandolin at the time. I hadn’t a notion about music, until I heard her play her hammered dulcimer in Biddy’s. What a sound, Hughie, it cut through me, so it did. I’d never heard traditional music sound like that before. She sang ‘The Wife of Usher’s Well’. And that noisy pub hushed like a church at benediction. The way Freda’s two little hammers found the tinkling notes on her dulcimer blew my mind. Her hands gliding over those taut strings like dancing dragonflies.”

“She vanished to India, didn’t she? That’s the yarn I heard.”

“Aye.”

“Another exile, god save us!”

“When trad went overground, she split. ‘I’m away East,’ she whispered in my ear one morning in 1979. We were all crashing in in a wee barn just outside Milltown Malbay.”

“You’re codding me.”

“No, we were an item for a short while.”

“Jaysus.”

“Too much drink in those days, Hughie.”

“Goes with the territory, I’m afraid.”

“The music floats on it, sure it does.”

“Never a truer word said, Davey!”
“It took me four years of hard graft to conquer the fiddle well enough to hold me own in a session. Hundreds and hundreds of hours of practice. Night after night after night, sitting in pubs soaking it all in. I listened to them all. What a great time for music, Hughie: Planxty, The Chieftains, De Dannan, The Bothy Band and Clannad. Christy, Dónal and Kevin playing in pubs all over Ireland. And Freda blazing the trail up and down the thirty-two counties, pure heaven.”

“Sure, she’s a musician’s musician, Davey.” Then to Hughie’s astonishment Freda’s song poured out of Davey with elemental force – it stopped The Angel’s landlord in his tracks:

There lived a wife at Usher’s Well,
And a wealthy wife was she;
She had three stout and stalwart sons,
And sent them o’er the sea.

They had not been from Usher’s Well
A week but barely one
When word came to this carline wife
That her three sons were gone

I wish the wind may never, never cease
Nor flashes in the flood
Till my three sons return to me
In earthly flesh and blood
Earthly flesh and blood.

“A fine song,” Hughie said.

“That song’s haunted me through the decades, Hughie. When I heard her sing that in Biddy’s all those years ago, I wanted to be her.”

Hughie had never heard Davey sing that unearthly classic before. He’d sing ‘The Croppy Boy’ or ‘James Connolly’ but nothing like that. He’d never seen this man open himself up like this before. This was parish priest stuff …
“It’s what Freda said to us after she’d sung her clutch of songs that still floors me, Hughie. ‘Why waste your time on old songs?’ someone asked her. ‘Because old songs offer us other ways of seeing things.’ I’ve never forgotten those words, Hughie. The hair stood up on the back of my neck, honest to god. ‘Wisdom packs an old song; a folk song will never stop giving.’ Tears rolled down my teenage cheeks. ‘Folk songs have diamond truths sewn into them.’ Freda was like a lightning rod, that night. That session went on for hours. It lives long inside me, to this day. I skimmed my rock records down the road after that.”

“How about it?”
“Another?”
“Why not! – Remember when Folkways cobbled some of her old recordings together and released them as ‘A Wisp of Tunes from the Underground’. That record flew out the shops, Hughie. Genius move, altogether. Every man and his dog’s singing her songs now.”

“A folk-goddess, playing The Angel. Now, that’s a miracle, Davey.”
“Think of all the thirsty pilgrims that’ll come after, hey?”
“Amen to that!”

* 

Hughie’s working his trusty Guinness pump; his red and chrome accordion shines pride of place, on its usual shelf directly behind him. The Angel is absolutely heaving. There must be over two hundred people crammed, wall to wall. And there’s more trying to get in. Plus, they’re all thirsty, god love them, Hughie mutters to himself. All the tech was sorted out in the afternoon. Higgins has been fluttering about the place all day, liaising. Hughie wishes he’d liaise somewhere else, he’s far too pernickety for Hughie’s liking. And a right sleazeball, to boot, sniffing around Freda. Showbiz shite. Making a right show of himself; eejit. A slimy fucker, Hughie says to himself, as he pours pint after pint trying to keep up with demand. He’s made them feel as comfortable as he can. He’s dished out soup, bread, and cups of tea, all afternoon, as they
set their camera gear up and the guest musicians jammed and worked out their set-list.

*

Freda is sitting amongst the musicians – thinking of what she’s about to say. How to phrase the foulness that has musically reawakened her. Defiling her once had been bad enough, but slaughtering that beautiful Irish tune was totally crass; it went beyond the pale. To think she was sorting avocados out in her packing shed in the Antipodes, six months ago. That was when she first heard ‘Mrs Flaherty’s Bunions’ pounding over the airwaves. It shifted Freda off her axis. They’d mangled it that badly that she threw one of her avocados at a brick wall. She swore blind that that first listen had made her ears bleed. “Oh, yeah … ye bastard! That lump on top of me all those years ago!” she says, psyching herself up, internally, for the words ahead. “I gave him that tune.” Some bread-head has used an algorithm on it. Even from New Zealand she’d figured that one out, as she remembered that DJ’s cheesy voice: “… that’s Warped Synergy with Davey Murray! What a groovy take on folk music, listeners. A new crossover sensation that’s storming the world’s dance floors …”

It felt like the whole tradition was under attack – like that time before … “Drink was no excuse, for that – animal!” she hisses, to herself, as released adrenalin thumps her heart harder. Freda needs to cleanse herself and the tradition.

There are faces here that Freda hasn’t seen in donkey’s years. Pat Dolan the piper from Leitrim and Tipperary Jim ‘Flea’ Murphy the madman of whistles. Even Liam Collins and Kate Boyle and the Kelly sisters have turned in. Freda’s pleased; she’s already sung a few folk-hymns that went down well. They say that revenge is a dish best served cold: she hopes they’re right. The tunes were rousing, a great advertisement for the tradition. But it’s words she really wants to give them, tonight. And Freda isn’t going to disappoint; not after all this.

“Will ye give us another song, Freda?” “Come on, girl.” “Freda, Freda, Freda, Freda …”
“Thank you, I feel deeply honoured to be amongst you all tonight. As most of you know I’ve been out of the scene for a good while now. Someone damaged me a long time ago. I thought I’d gotten over it, but I haven’t. There’s something deeply troubling in ‘A Bunch of Thyme’ which has always haunted my soul . . .”

And as she starts to sing its mournful air, The Angel hushes . . .

Once I and a bunch of thyme
I thought it never would decay
Then came a lusty sailor
Who chanced to pass my way
And stole my bunch of thyme away
The sailor gave to me a rose
A rose that never would decay
He gave it to me to keep me reminded
Of when he stole my thyme away

She twangs her hammer dulcimer and catches Davey Murray’s eye across the room. Everyone is standing, cheering and yawping, as she puts down her hammer dulcimer.

Doyenne.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you . . .”

Freda smiles; her time has come.

“I want to say something to you about responsibility regarding the protection of our wonderful tradition, but first I want to say a few words about my relationship with Davey Murray, ‘Mrs Flaherty’s Bunions’ and Milltown Malbay . . .”

*

The next morning Davey banged his code on The Angel’s door. Rat-tat-rat-a tat – rat-a tat-tat-tat – tat-tat. “Hughie . . . open the door, for fuck’s sake!” He
needed to talk things through. He needed to talk to his friend … his only friend! He needed to tell him it wasn’t …

Why did she say those things? He felt dog-rough. Davey needed to sort his hangover out, this instant – needed to douse Freda’s words from his mind. He’d be *scum* in people’s eyes, now … “Hughie, she got it wrong. It wasn’t like that … in that *barn*, honest to god …”

There was no answer. He tried one last time, before he shuffled off towards Bargain Booze on Equity Road. Davey swore he saw a shadow moving behind the slatted venetian blinds, in the room above. He shouted at the sky, “Hughie, I need to talk to you!”
A Doc Marten boot met the crack of Desmond O'Hara's arse. “That's from all of Ireland,” one of them whispered in his ear. He grunted when the sharp pain shot up his back, which made his blindfold dig further into his scalp.

They were tattooing something on to Des’s forehead. It hurt like hell. That’s when he realised, they weren't going to kill him. Men were cackling in the barn as if they were at a soccer match: “That’ll teach the gob shite.” “Knacker.” “Ghost fucking estates!” “Shall we cut his nipples off while we’re at it, lads?” “Thieving toerag.” “Scumbag!” “Where’s our money, cunt?” “Hard-earned Republican dosh, dickhead.” “Guess the words, bollock-breath.”

And that damned ink machine kept scratching their message.

*Carving off their pound of flesh*, Des kept saying to himself, as the zinging sound of needles hammered. A new reality was opening-up for Des; his life would go on, but their sniggering would haunt him for the rest of his days.

He’d never forget the way he’d been lifted off that Dublin pavement, four days ago – like a beast selected for the plate. Shoved into a van, roughed up, coshed and blindfolded. And Des thought he could look after himself! Joke. It probably took those bastards less than fifteen seconds. A screech of tyres and off! One minute a carefree citizen and the next trussed up like an old sow slung on a hook for slaughter. “There’s plenty worse than me,” Des whinged to himself, constantly. “Why me, for fuck’s sake?” In broad daylight, in the centre of Dublin. The sheer audacity of it gnawed into his mind, hour after hour. He thought of those who disappeared during the Troubles – who probably ended up in a place like this; shivering with fear and dread.

Des knew he was chained up in a hovel – a place where no one would ever hear him scream. The putrid stink of farming slurry was overpowering. A relentless draft tortured him day and night.

And when they barked at him during his food and toilet rituals it literally scared the shit out of him.

Des kept hearing that twanging banjo tune from the film *Deliverance*. It kept taunting him. He'd even started humming it aloud. And thoughts of those twisted hillbillies from that film messed with Des’s head. Bleak. All he could
see was a brown haze through the cotton blindfold telling him it was day. The only thing he heard was the occasional clanging of corrugated metal flapping about when the wind changed direction.

Today was different, though. Party time. “Let’s cut his dick off.” These men seemed well satisfied with the way things were panning out. Deliverance on a plate. And as their blows and insults rained in on him, Des started blacking-out. He drifted back to his childhood and strangely to his dad harping on about the family farm. That was thirty-years ago, though, back in Hackney.

His dad swore blind he was swindled out of that farm. And every time he had a skinful he’d rant about his land back in County Mayo. Sean O’Hara was navvy-tough and had hands like shovels and shoulders as wide as a door opening. But one night, he bawled his eyes out like a baby in front of them all, by the fire. He’d been on the poteen after work with his pipe-laying gang. He came home absolutely langers, which was rare, because he usually kept it together. He never made an arse of himself on drink. But that night a torrent of guilt poured out of him. He kept harping on about the piseog that he’d done before he left Ireland. Des didn’t understand what that meant, but that word stuck in his head, as he grew up. His mother kept giving out to him. “Sean, belt-up! Don’t be bothering the kids with such silly talk.” But he carried on …

Des had never seen his old man in such a state before.

“Your Uncle Liam built himself a nest in your grandad’s ear, so he did,” Sean said, in a temper. “That farm should’ve gone to me! I was the eldest, but because I took up with your mother … caused ructions, so it did. It would’ve calmed down, but your Uncle Liam wouldn’t leave him alone, the sly fucker. He kept twittering in your grandad’s ear: saying this, that and the shagging other – about how I reneged on a good match and how I should’ve married that Kelly colleen with the land and a bit of a dowry. He wouldn’t leave it alone! Turned him against me and your mother, so he did. And the graft I put into that place, all for shag-all … well – it’s no wonder I went off the rails and cursed them all to fuck!”

“Now, Sean, ye can stop right there,” my mother pleaded with him, but he wouldn’t …
“I regret it, now,” Sean bawled, full of poteen, to the amazed O’Hara kids sprawled around him.

“I went up to a renowned second cousin of ours who lived up in the hills.”

“The piseog always works, son, she croaked at me. She knew some of the old ways, superstitions and such like; she told me what to do.”

“Sean -"

“‘Go out and find strips of rotting flesh,’ she rasped at me. ‘Make sure ye place them on the north, south, west and eastern boundaries of your land – during the witching hour. It must be that time,’ she snarled. ‘Then face towards the east and say a decade of the rosary. Whilst you’re saying it, make sure you think of all the bad things you want your land to do to them,’ she cackled, ‘that’s if ye want the piseog to do its work.’ I’ll always remember her cackle. ‘Those thoughts will come to pass,’ she said. ‘Mark my words. But, be sure, Sean, be sure …’ ”

Des opened his eyes again when someone started slapping his face with a newspaper. “Those worthless estates you fecking built, ye old bollix. O’Hara’s ghost estates, rot in the bogs of Ireland! Maroons families in houses of misery, in this fucking paper today, shithead!”

Des groaned, barely conscious. He was getting used to their brutality. And he soon drifted back to Hackney again, back to his dad’s poteen rant.

“And the night before I left for England when I found out the farm was going to Liam, I did the piseog and cursed them all to fuck …”

Des had never seen his father cry before, and he didn’t really understand what all the fuss was about.

“But another word, Sean!” his mother screamed.

Des came to again when he felt globs of spit hitting him. The machine had stopped its work and the men were laughing. “Now Ireland will know!” They were hacking up phlegm and spitting at his newly tattooed forehead. Some of it landed on his face and hair. Target practice.

“Who’s the big man, now, hey?”
“For the ones ye fleeced, shithead.”

“Turn it around the O’Hara way.”

His TV tag-line snarled back at him with such vitriol hurt him more than any kick or slap they’d dished out that day.

*

Des woke up with a heavy sweat and was panting again from his recurring nightmare. He’d not had a decent sleep since his release. Most nights he was entangled inside a rotting rhinoceros. He dreaded going to sleep nowadays. In his dream-world he was forever trapped inside that stinking beast which had been ceremoniously laid out on the nation’s table. Irish citizens held their noses in repulsion as they filed by its putrefying carcass, which had him entwined within its rot. They watched in fascination as he squirmed and struggled inside its decomposing flesh. Des would desperately try clawing his way free from its slippery bone, but the more he tried freeing himself from its rotting marrow the more he slipped back into its fleshy sinew, again, time after time after time.

As this horrid dream image faded away, Des’s breathing steadied up a bit. He started thinking about the gang that lurked behind his kidnap. The way they went about his scarring and his public humiliation bothered him. His life was a perpetual nightmare, now. A bullet in his head would have been a lot easier. But the warped bastards who put all this together wanted to send a message. Irish society was spooked. The Gardaí didn’t have a clue. Muppets. And the newspapers were mucking him up good and proper. He was set up as sure as seasons transition into each other and soft rain falls on Irish fields. The fecking paper-boys were having a field-day:

*Bankrupt TV Property Guru: Disfigured, Tortured and Traumatised*
They dumped him out of a van in Rosscloo into the arms of the tipped-off paparazzi. Now, that was another masterstroke, Des thought. Bastards! A feeding frenzy ensued in the freezing drizzle. They backed him into hawthorn and briar; hacks firing endless questions in his face, before he came to his senses:

“What’s that on your forehead?” “Who do you think-” “Mr O’Hara-” “Those letters spell-” “How long have you-” “Can you comment on …”

And the next day their copy nailed him to Ireland’s Celtic cross.

*O’Hara Crawls Out of the Bog.*

He snuggled closer to his wife Niamh who was still fast asleep and thought of how different things had been before Ireland hit the buffers. His weekly cameo stints for the TV on Niamh’s *Relocate* show had propelled him into the nation’s firesides. It was a fluke; Niamh was the executive producer for *Relocate* on RTE 5. She’d begged him to appear on her show when some other developer had let her down at the last minute. “It’ll be a cinch, Des. Sure, you talk the hind legs off a donkey most days anyhow.” And that was that. They both giggled at the brass neck of it. He was parachuted in front of her cameras the next day. That’s how compliant Desmond O’Hara could be. He smiled at the recollection, as he stroked his wife’s back. His audition was a joke. “Just be you!” the director kept saying. And that’s what he did and they said he was a *natural*.

The viewers loved his corny phrases. The TV people said he had telegenic charisma. “One in two hundred thousand,” an executive remarked. “He’s tapping into Ireland’s zeitgeist.” And Niamh winked at him from behind a studio monitor. “A voice from the centre of the boom: we’ve found our Joe,” another high-up whispered with awe. His famous catchphrase came from that first pilot shoot: “Nothing’s safer than houses, people! Turn it around the O’Hara way.”

His business snowballed after his TV exposure. “How much did your house earn you today?” was another catchphrase that went national. His fame generated greater demand for his houses. Ireland was booming. “Bricks and mortar will sort ya.” His bluster seemed bullet-proof. Ireland was on the up –
there was no stopping it. And he was telling sellers, owners and wannabe owners what they wanted to hear: “You can’t lose, folks! Get both feet on that ladder, now! Speculate to accumulate, people.” The Celtic Tiger was roaring, and Desmond O’Hara roared with it. His fall from grace had been spectacular. But they’d weather it out! He still had mattress-money stashed. And he drew strength from his wife’s steely resolve.

Niamh yawned from the en-suite as she flushed the toilet. “The Afro-Cuban Highlife have reconfirmed,” she shouted, through the half-opened door. “We’re so lucky to get them, Des.” It was his 50th birthday bash tonight, his return to society. “Sure, that’s down to you, darling,” Des replied.

Niamh had been planning it for weeks. But the thought of it had been grating on his nerves for the past few days – having to glad-hand that slippery lot this evening made his stomach churn. “I don’t have to be at the laser clinic till three. I can swing by the airport and pick Rory up, if that suits you, sweetheart.” His son hadn’t been back to see him since the incident. It irked Des a fair bit; Rory’s excuses seemed lame. “That’ll be brilliant. Are you sure you’re OK …?”

“Niamh, I have the headscarf; it’s not a bother, honest.”

“Are you sure, Des? I’ve so much to do! Flowers … check on caterers, table places, working lunch, phone calls, dry cleaners, taxi timings, security. Tonight; must work! It’s our bounce-back, Des.”

“It will, love, it will. I’m sound. It’ll be gas,” he laughed. Des was toughing it out for her, but he knew the incident had affected them, on many levels.

“It feels good to be busy. We need this, Des.”

“Too true, darling.”

His wife had threatened Rory with a visit to England, before he finally caved in.

Students … What’s up with that boy? Odd. They couldn’t work him out. “After all, there’s no generation gap, now, is there?” they often said to each other, in exasperation …
His wife seemed shades off her usual pallor. Maybe it was Rory? More likely down to all this public exposure they’d both had to endure. She had every right to be down, though … GREEDY CUNT tattooed, jet-black, on your husband’s forehead would knock the emotional stuffing out of anyone. Pick yourself up after that – it’s a tough ask. Des wasn’t blind. She’s good at hiding things, though, Des thought, as he put his trousers on, remembering last night’s rare fuck … which was all pretend. She’d groaned in the right places, but that was about as good as it got. Her heart wasn’t in it. Her half-kisses told him that. Their intimacy had shifted since his ordeal. He knew it was only a blip, though. She adored him; that’s what really counted …

And all the sleeping horror of that rotting rhinoceros sank further into his unconscious mind.

* 

Rory O’ Hara was coerced back to Dublin, but he thought it might be a blessing in disguise now, as he waited for his dad at the airport. He’d been reading Edward Abbey’s *The Monkey Wrench Gang* on his way over. He’d also been dipping into Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine*. Activism had swept him up like a twister. His involvement with The Occupy movement meant everything to him – *everything*. He was getting his real education there: camped outside St Paul’s with people who cared. He’d thrown every morsel of himself into the cause and wanted to tell his parents that a new age was coming. Change. But Rory was ashamed of his parents’ social position – ashamed of what they stood for. And when he heard about his dad’s ordeal, he felt even more shame. Occupy was mapping out an alternative future; the possibilities seemed limitless and Rory was in on it from the ground up. Chomsky told them that *if the tinder is ready a spark can set off a conflagration*. Oh, how the world needed new thinking – brave people, prepared to stand above the parapet. People like him! He needed to tell them what togetherness can do; show them what personal sacrifice can achieve.
“Where is he?”

“He’s gone into Dublin.”

“Why?”

“I gave him 250 euros, Niamh, to get some new clobber.”

“What’s wrong with the stuff he’s already got?”

“He stunk, Niamh.”

“What?”

“He’s lost weight, none of his shagging stuff fits him.”

“Holy mother of Christ! It’s not drugs … is it, Des?”

“Worse.”

“What’s worse than drugs? For god’s sake!”

“Activism.”

“I need to sit down.”

And as she sat, Des thought of that day Rory talked about his results and his university plans: “Well Dad … it’s Archaeology for me at Bournemouth.” Desmond O’Hara just gaped at Rory’s smiling mutt – for a good ten seconds or more, testing it for seriousness. The shock felt like his son had just kicked a football straight into Des’s mush from the half-volley. He tried to understand his son’s infuriating nonchalance. Would Des have spoken to his old man as blunt as this? No, way! His old man would’ve picked Des up by the ears and told him why he’d ended up in fecking Hackney. That was when Des lost his cool altogether: “Archaeology … for fuck’s sake, Rory? Bournemouth shagging University … Raiders of the Lost fucking Ark! You’re
having a laugh, aren’t you? Jesus Christ, Niamh, tell me, he’s… taking the piss.” Niamh sobbed in her chair.

Déjà vu… Des thought, as he looked at his wife crying in that very same chair, again. “Why, oh why!” she squealed.

“He’s got caught up with a bad lot, sweet heart.”

“I’m confused, Des. What have we done to deserve all this?”

Des stared at his distraught wife and thought about his old man and his wretched curse: “It always works, son. It always works, son. It always works, son …”

*  

Niamh seemed unflappable when she was gadding about town. Togetherness and love radiated from her. She often thought how hilarious and surreal this incident must seem to others. How she would have giggled, gossiped and ridiculed, such a public scarring, over a few Proseccos, if the same thing had happened to another wife’s man. But this foul thing had happened to her man! And she was dousing the flames with all her might. But their misfortune had burned the love for him out of her. Those stinking letters on his forehead have trashed us. This thought whizzed through her mind constantly. She couldn’t stand the sight of him now. Outcast husband. Did she just say that?

The sacred sacrament of marriage. Holy Mother of God forgive me. My vows! Our sanctity violated. Sweet Jesus, King of Kings! Why has it come down to this? Niamh kept saying things like this to herself all afternoon, as she dashed about Dublin. Last night’s ordeal … make-believe. Men.

She felt zilch.

All she could think about when he was grunting on top of her was his pathetic whingeing: “Why me, Niamh? I’m nowhere near the top end of Ireland’s gobshite list.” If she heard that once more, she’d crack. “Why did
they pick on me, for fuck’s sake?” It was another grim ordeal of grin and bear it, for her. She gave way to him because of tonight. His lily-livered tone sickened her. If they could salvage something from this party – all well and good …


Tonight, thanks be to god, things were passing off in spectacular fashion, Niamh thought, as they finished off their meal and the toasts were about to start. She wasn’t too sure about Rory’s Colonel Gaddafi outfit, mind you: desert fatigues and sandals, but he was behaving himself. And he’d turned up, which was a bonus. She’d given him a good talking-to, earlier, as well. Although, now, Rory kept going out for periods of time. He looked fidgety. Was it drugs after all? Guests kept coming over, wishing them well: “What a wonderful meal, Niamh.” “That Chablis was exquisite.” “Where did you conjure those musicians, darling?” “Your dress is absolutely sensational, sister.” “Doesn’t Rory look pukka.”

And as Niamh endured these pleasantries, she thought of how she’d first fallen in love with Des. She remembered liking him from the off. He was different from the local flash-bucks. Streetwise. His style stood out – a slick dresser with an eye for chic clobber. There was a bearing about him. And he had a good mop of blond hair on him, as well. Bonus. And Janey Mac, could he talk! “This country’s booming, Niamh, this is boom-time … it’s incredible, the possibilities, we can mint it!” Daddy was on about him all the time. That was how she first heard about him. Daddy was struggling to man his firm up when Des first came over and his contacts and expertise in London proved invaluable during Trinity Build’s expansion.

They clicked on the dance floor, messing around to Olivia Newton John’s ‘Summer Nights’ at Trinity Build’s Christmas bash. All his cockney slobber and his stiffy sent shivers through her when they smooched to Marvin Gaye. Looking back on it now Niamh could see how she’d been matched up;
funny how she couldn’t see it then. Her daddy … beaming from ear to ear on the periphery.

Now, Des and Daddy talk about the negative headlines concerning their ghost estates. “Let the fuckers stew; we won’t react; they were eager enough to get into those sodding houses.” They often talk like this to buoy themselves up. “We’ll mothball everything and ride it out, Des.” Niamh was embarrassed by such talk, but she realised you must protect what belongs to you, no matter what. Then Des stood up to make his toast.

“… I want to thank everyone here tonight for…”

She knew they could ride it out, but still … all the slights, nods, looks and whispers that she endured and chose to ignore were chiselling away at her psyche. The words were almost lasered off Des’s forehead now, but those words were in the public domain, out there – they always would be – that’s what really hurt.

“… Trinity Build will march on! Projects are in the pipeline. Bricks and mortar will sort ya, people. Of course, my darling wife Niamh has been my rock, my beacon, during these darkest of days. Three cheers for Niamh O’Hara …”

After the last cheer dies down Rory kicks the door open and walks in from the top end of the banqueting room. He’s holding a serving platter with a butchered pig’s head placed on it. Fifty flickering candles are stuck in its skull. The pig’s head has seen better days. “This silly party is nothing more than a celebration of ignorance,” Rory exclaims in a revolutionary baritone, as he theatrically waltzes through the tables of Dublin’s elite. “Think about it! Look what you’ve done to this country. Open your eyes; look. Grabbers.” All that can be heard from the glitterati is a nervous giggle or two, as Rory moves towards the top table. “You’ve raped Ireland. Wake up. Through Occupy and its heroic stance, means, we have the possibility for change. Change. The words that were put on my father’s head are a call to arms! A CALL TO ARMS! Happy birthday, Dad.”

Des faints … pandemonium …
As he starts coming to from the smelling salts that a quick-thinking member of serving staff has put under his nose, Des thinks about that *piseog* and the curse again – how it had wracked his dad and his dad’s brother …

Every calamity had fallen upon his Uncle Liam: his cows got the pox; his horses went lame; ragwort plagued his fields; two sons committed suicide; Liam hit the drink and boozed his farm away; his wife went insane. Coincidence or curse? That was what tortured Des’s father all his days as that slow chain of events unfolded back in County Mayo. Even on his deathbed, his Dad couldn’t find peace, poor sod. His Da sobbed with remorse as Des watched him die.

Could you pass on a curse? whizzed through Des’s mind, as they fuzzed about him.
“Nobody cares! Everything’s turned to shit,” Helen Higgins shouts. She mopes through her flat, as another episode takes hold of her. “Stupid, stupid, STUPID.”

Thumps come from next door.
“How dare you!” she screams at her bedroom wall.
“How belt up, you old cow,” a muffled voice yells back.

She walks back into the living room and slumps down by the radio.
A panel’s discussing Trump on Radio 4. She’s been riveted to Donald for days now.

... his screen message is resilient. He tells people what they want to hear, Norman. Undoubtedly, his message is populist. That’s all there is to it ...

Their talk reminds Helen of her granddaughter.
... Oh, come on, Geoffrey, don’t be simplistic. You can’t be serious about how screen savvy he is ...

Helen was taking all this in. Nodding her head and tutting.
“Yes, yes, YES,” Helen screams.

... Trump’s ahead of the game. He’s worked out how you can dumb things down even further ...

Helen’s face is alert. Their talk is screwing further into her head.
... That’s utter rubbish, Geoffrey ...

“Before Facebook and Twitter, we were more human, weren’t we?” Helen says, joining in the radio conversation.

... Attention spans are in decline, Norman. People relate to screens far more readily than book or newspaper, nowadays ...

“Something’s being sucked out of us,” Helen shrieks at the radio.

... Are you suggesting screen-time is subverting our humanity ...?
““Yes... STUPID oaf!”

Helen starts thinking about her granddaughter again. How distracted she’d become. Her little thumbs in motion all day long: “You’re brainwashing her
with those gadgets,” she’d snap at her daughter. “She’s connected to everything, but she doesn’t know what’s happening around her.” Her daughter would tell her she was talking rubbish. “Mum, that’s the way of the world now.” Then there’d be a bitchy scene about fresh air, play and boundaries. “You’re taking your tablets, Mum?” her daughter nagged. That was always match-point. Helen would storm off after that.

“Why aren’t we stopping all this?” she screams at the wall. Helen’s been slowly winding herself up for months. She feels desolate.

She’d clocked her old combat jacket a few minutes ago hanging in the far reaches of her wardrobe. She’d been rooting round for a blanket:

“Should’ve slung that damned thing out years ago. Clot-heads the lot of us, we didn’t change anything, did we?”

… *It’s unprecedented! How all the mid-states and the Rust Belt votes went his way …*

She stares at her magnolia wallpaper and tuts. She hasn’t slept properly for a long time; her appetite is zero.

… *You could say, he’s the most dangerous man in the world, now …*

Then something climactic clicks in Helen Henry’s head.

… *Poppycock …*

She sits up straight and has a stretch. She walks over to get her old combat jacket in the next room. She takes it off its hanger and puts it on.

“That’s the first time I’ve worn it in thirty years,” she whispers. It feels loose on her. She looks at herself in the full-length mirror. Old CND, Greenham Common and Troops Out of Ireland badges remain pinned on its camouflage collar.

Then Helen hears an ululating wailing she hasn’t heard in years. It’s the keening sound that the women used to make at Greenham Common. It starts to fill her Clapham flat as she remembers the tears, wire, cold and the mud of her time camped there. Should she be dwelling on her past like this? Guilt. Maybe she should start taking her tablets again.

Listening to Donald Trump on this and Donald Trump on that for days on end had exploded something deep in her mind like a fire-door that’s been blown
off its hinges. “The sheer stupidity of it all!” Helen yells at the mirror. “What made them do it, what MADE THEM DO IT?”

As she looks at herself in her old combat jacket, memories of her last march, thirty years ago, well up inside her. Skin-head fascists filled with hate, snarling, “Commie scum” and “Fucking traitors.” Thugs jostling with police, corralled outside The Crown and Thistle, surging at her and her comrades, as they chanted: Troops out of Ireland! Fascists off the street! A pipe band from Derry led the way down Lambeth Walk through The Oval and Stockwell into the centre of Brixton.

That evening they all rallied in a front-line pub with the best jukebox in South London: “Two Sevens Clash,” “Police and Thieves,” “Pretty Vacant” and “Breakfast in Bed.” The landlord, Derrick, was Jamaican. He was down-to-earth, decent. He’d feed you when you were hungry; let you run up a tab; cash your dole cheques when you were desperate. That night changed Helen’s life, though. Derrick cracked.

A Socialist Workers Party official was rounding the day up on the pub microphone. She was thanking this one and thanking that one. Then she started bad-mouthing the British and praising the struggle in Ireland.

But the final straw for Derrick was when she unfurled the Union Jack flag and set it ablaze to raucous cheers. “Pull di plug. Yu nuh hear! Mi she bloodclaat plug man,” he yelled, storming out from his bar, tears streaming down his cheeks, as the British flag burned in front of his eyes, “no flag burnin here. Tek disrespectful rass outta mi place! Disrespek mi fahdah dat mean seh yu disrespek me, so di paaty dun, unou need fi leff right now.”

They had to find another pub after that.

And when Helen found out how Derrick’s father had died, she felt shame. He’d met his maker in the Second World War: fighting close quarters with Nazis, in bombed-out rubble. Helen saw through it all, when she was told that. The Afro-Caribbean’s tears pointed another way for her.

She forged a career on stage; dropped her old comrades, after the Derrick incident. Her name was in lights for years until her mind-peeled like an onion with the intensity of it. Maybe she took too much Pinter and Beckett on, over her career. Mind-bomb after mind-bomb. An endless interrogation of text: maybe that’s what chiselled her nerves, maybe, maybe, maybe.
Helen Higgins needs all her theatrical skill now. She knows there's a gathering at the American Embassy today. Such things are predictable. “A left-wing idiot is as dangerous as a right-wing idiot,” she yells at the wall, as she gathers what she needs.

Helen’s sure she’s right. She’s blinking well going to do it. No one else will!

“Fuck the tablets,” she yells. She feels good, real-good. She smiles as she makes ready to shave off every hair on her body. “I need to be meticulous about this,” she says to herself. “I’m actually doing something, doing something.”

It takes her a long time, but she glows with certainty.

It’s early afternoon when she arrives. All the usual suspects are there. She half recognises a few old wrinkled-up punks who are shouting abuse at the embassy.

“Images, images, images,” she keeps saying to herself, “I’ll give them fucking images.”

She strokes the bottle of petrol inside her combat jacket and knows she’s right. “I’m a concerned idiot! I demand a voice, I demand a voice,” she whispers over and over. Then Helen moves out onto the road and owns her space like the old luvvie she once was.

She pours the bottle over her head. The liquid soaks into her combat jacket “RESIST, RESIST, RESIST,” she screams. The TV cameras across the street sniff blood. She sits down like a yogi. Then she flicks her lighter.

Gadgets flash all around her. Helen’s last thoughts are of her granddaughter’s stubby thumbs: pressing, pressing, pressing.
Strays

My daughter’s just come into the house singing a snatch of Gaelic:

\[ \begin{align*}
    \text{Crochfaidh mé seolta} \\
    \text{Agus rachaidh mé siar}
\end{align*} \]

“Singing in Irish now, hey?” I say, looking down at the egg I’ve just dropped on the floor. My heart’s galloping. She sounded just like them for a second or two. I’ve been thinking about them a lot lately. They used to sing that same song.

\[ \begin{align*}
    \text{óró mo churaichín ó!} \\
    \text{óró mo bháidín}
\end{align*} \]

“You know it, Daddy!” Sinead says, full of cheer, as the lyrics lilt off my tongue.

I wonder where those poor creatures are now?

“We’re singing it at school, Daddy. Our town’s the wettest place in Europe.”

“Now you said it,” I laugh, as I grab kitchen-towel to absorb the goo.

“How do ye know that song, Daddy?”

“A couple of blow-ins used to sing it. They used to knock about the town, years ago.”

Rain starts pelting down on the flat roof that juts from our house.

“Set the table, Sinead,” I say, as I throw the mess into the swing-bin.

Those two blow-ins have been plaguing my mind lately. I’ve even mentioned them at my AA meetings.

“Mr Gallagher is teaching it to us, Daddy.”

“Is that so.”

Sinead’s teacher worries me a fair bit, too. And that slipped out at a meeting over at Claremorris the other week. “You’re being over sensitive, don’t you think?” a snobby woman from Kiltimagh said to me last Wednesday afternoon; firing verbal bullets, so she was. She was slightly pissed from her morning tipple. Wine, I’d say; I can always tell when someone’s fallen off the wagon. She was on the right track, mind you. Maybe I am too shagging sensitive. But it’s more than sensitivity, this time. Driving me daft, so they are.
Those blow-ins are haunting my head. They won’t shut up. Always demanding things. There’s no telling them to go, either. “Where’s our reckoning, Sean?” they chide. “Surely it’s our turn now?” “Be brave, Sean, be brave,” they snigger, as I dawdle about, undecided.

I whisk more eggs and add ingredients.

“Will ye cut some bread too, Sinead.”

“Aye.”

Those blow-ins used to sing to each other when they first washed into our town twenty years ago. Washed down from the mountains of Connemara. They looked as rough as ancient bog-oak. We’d be doing laps of the town – to be honest, we weren’t far off semi-feral ourselves. And the two of them used to shelter in doorways in their ripped blue and red anoraks. Slating rain, day after day. We would sneer at them when we passed. Bog-waifs. We’d sing and giggle as we swaggered by. New beginnings for them. Bright lights, big town – bedraggled, but happy. Happy to be away from the horrors of their mountain hovel, that’s the look they had about them sometimes. But when the weather changed, they huddled together for warmth; tatty and forlorn looking like windswept bags of drying peat you see out in open bogland.

I look at my Sinead and I smile. I’m proud of her well-being, which I take for granted. She’s had stability and love, unlike those two creatures from my youth.

“I don’t mind the singing, but I hate the grammar, Daddy.”

“Irish was drilled into us, colleen.”

We had it rough in the 1970s. But not as rough as them two strays. They were groomed from the first day they set foot in our town. They say every place has a brothel operating somewhere, don’t they? No one dared call it that, though. Not in those days, but it was. “Places like that don’t exist in the west of Ireland,” I heard Kathleen Daly say, when the court case was going on. And she lived next door to Tom Fahey. Tom was our town’s brothel keeper – it was as simple as that. An odd-ball of a man who didn’t have a moral in him. I walked down to the Garda Station last week. “This happened decades ago, Sean. Why drag it all back up now?” Sergeant O’ Rourke said. “Because I can and because I want to,” I said. That changed the puss on his face. “Right enough, so,” he said, and let me be, at my scribbling. When he
read it, his face started to twitch: “You’ll let loose a sack of snakes, if you sign this; do you know that, Sean? Have a good think about it, hey. Fahey’s in hell, now. Isn’t that enough?” I sort of nodded. Then there was an awkward moment before I stirred. “Right, so …” I sighed, as I moved through the counter-door of the station, “If it’s OK with ye I’ll call up to the house in the week,” Sergeant O’ Rourke said, as he walked out with me and I stepped down the three bluestone steps in front of the Garda Station. “Hold off and have a think, Sean, hey. Water under the bridge and all that,” he said, in his measured way. So, I have; I’ve held off. And his words have been hissing through my head ever since. 

Atoning for their raw deal, that’s all I’m trying to do. But O’Rourke wouldn’t understand that. Not many people would. When you’re in tune with a higher power – prayer is key. Serenity is my improver. I say these words all the time:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{God grant me the serenity} \\
&\text{to accept the things I cannot change;} \\
&\text{courage to change the things I can;} \\
&\text{and wisdom to know the difference.}
\end{align*}
\]

Saying it injects me with strength and helps me right the wrongs of my life; it also helps me guide other poor souls to do the same. Transforming, that’s what it is … I flip the bubbling omelette over in the pan and it holds.

“Can I go to the Gaeltacht in the summer, Daddy?”

“We’ll see.”

“You keep saying that!”

They must have run away from something horrendous to rough it out in our town. When we were gossers we used to pass them by in shop doorways and we’d sing The Police’s ‘Giant steps are what you take / walking on the moon’ to mock their arrival on our streets. We’d be larking about, full of teenage prank. Territorial, so we were. And they’d answer with óró mo churachin ó / óró mo bháidín. Their talk was as coarse as Kelly’s pebble-dash wall, cursing the world in English, acting tough, but Janey Mac – they had great Irish singing voices on them, as sweet as any nesting wren in full twitter.
The way Tom Fahey groomed those two blow-ins right in front of everyone’s noses is a crying shame. No one gave a monkey’s about grooming in 1970s Ireland. “Why don’t ye come on up to the house for a bite to ate?” I’ll never forget the way Tom Fahey said that to those blow-ins one drizzly night, as we passed by a shop doorway, doing a lap, as another ghostly sea-fog drifted into our town. He sounded more persuasive than the parish priest.

We’d seen him chat to them for a few evenings, but it didn’t seem that odd at the time, didn’t seem odd at all. Tom was one of those characters that had time for you. Made you feel special. He knew a little about everything, knew everyone around him and he knew all about their business, too.

“God’s spitting again, lads! Fierce weather altogether,” Tom Fahey said to us as we approached. He’d always speak and would never talk down to you. “How’s Tom?” “How’s it cutting?” “Any craic?” we shouted back as we crossed the street to McLachlan’s.

I watch the mixture thicken and hiss in the frying pan.

These thoughts of Tom Fahey have been messing with my head for a while now. I can still hear that old fucker’s voice: Once the likes of me is gone, you’ll never meet the likes of me again, he’d often smirk to all and sundry, as he mooched about town gathering bits of news. Tom was a tall, gangly man, all lopsided; his bones stuck out of his elbows and shoulders; his face was a series of creases and folds, an inherited condition apparently. He had a proper gargoyle look about him. But what he missed out on in the beauty stakes he made up for in cunning, guile and charm, which served him well, when it came down to his other speciality: blackmail. Tom was a dab hand at that too. He had one or two of the town in his pocket; prominent people. It probably took him years to do – but somehow, Tom managed it. Now, that man’s as patient as a sparrowhawk, my daddy would often say.

After all these years Tom Fahey still haunts my head as I gently flip the omelette over with a spatula. Everyone had more than an inkling of what was going on in Fahey’s house, but our town turned its head the other way.

Ned Gallagher, a farmer from out on the Quay Road, warned my father about him years ago: *Sure, there’s a streak of waiting that runs through the Faheys that the Chinese are blessed with. Whether that’s good or bad is another matter.* God rest ye, Ned, my father used to say, when mimicking
Ned’s drawl. Daddy would perform this whenever we’d spot Tom lolloping down Holly Street. He’d make us kids go wild with the giggles.

I dish the omelette up as Sinead cuts the bread.

Now, Tom was the town’s tongue. He had that special knack of talking and listening that would draw something out of you. He was the only one in our town who offered them poor things any kind of help, mind you. The abuser is always kind at first, so they say.

“Are you listening to me, Daddy? Mr Gallagher needs a deposit this week.”

“Sinead eat ...”

How the times change, I think to myself, how I’ve changed, as I dig into the omelette with my fork. I’ll never tell my Sinead the half of it, though. She needs love and positivity. Why am I about to scrape the town’s scab off, then? Because it only takes a snatch of song or a voice on the shagging telly or the blinking radio to set me off, that’s why! Then it all bubbles up like primordial slush after an earthquake. I get worked up over my inertia, my years of silence, my powerlessness. I keep thinking back to the time when me and Jamie Malone watched Ted Gallagher beat one of them sisters with his belt in Fahey’s place.

I was sitting on the ledge of Jamie’s bedroom window that was angled higher up the hill, and which ran parallel with Tom Fahey’s house on Holly Street. My street. We were looking for tawny owls through his father’s binoculars. But instead of owls we came across other creatures of the night, toying with their prey. We took turns watching Ted Gallagher beat that poor mountain girl through Fahey’s threadbare window sash. A single light bulb was swinging in the room where Gallagher’s belt must have clipped the hanging cord. And as he beat her he pulled her across Fahey’s front bedroom, by her hair, slapping her as he went. Then he raped her. We giggled at first, but we soon fell silent when we saw how brutal he was. “The dirty fucking bollox, Jamie.” I’ll never forget the sight of her blood and that bewildered look — never. “Not a word, not a fucking word,” Jamie said, we both spat on our palms, before we shook hands. Jamie’s father had just become a new Guard.

Times were hard, and Ted Gallagher was the duty sergeant of our town’s
Garda Síochána. His sergeant’s hat never left his head and it was on his head as he pounded her, his buttocks going ten to the dozen, in Fahey’s room of gloom.

“Daddy, do you know the earth’s moving through space at sixty-seven thousand miles per hour?”

“If only you’d move that fast in the morning, Sinead, I’d be as happy as a pig wallowing in shit.”

“Daddy!”

“Oops.”

The way she comes out with her learning makes me glow inside. She gives me one of those despairing looks and carries on eating the chunk of omelette that’s on her bread.

All this endless talk of historical abuse on the TV and banging people to rights has stirred something up inside me. And them bog-waifs are at me all day long, as well. “Even the score for us, Sean.” “Heal us, help us.” “Punish them, punish them … please.” “óró mo churachín ó / óró mo bháidín.” And my daughter singing that shagging song, as well. Plus, all the sodding rain, rain, rain, rain fucking rain …

“Why are you so keen on learning Irish anyway, what’s the use in it?” I say to her. Then she gives me her special look. Sinead knows how to shut me up. Irish wasn’t popular in our day. Only the posh and the dirt poor spoke it. And those sisters weren’t posh. The Christian Brothers tried beating Irish into us when we were at school, but it didn’t work.

Fahey was calculating back then because it wasn’t too long before those washed-in-bog-waifs from the mountains were staying up there with him, all the time. And not a word said against him. “My two little fishes,” he’d say, in passing. “Sure, I’ll always help out where I can, that’s in my nature,” he’d brag. “What’s good for the goose is good for the gander,” I remember him saying to my father, as he passed our front step one sunny afternoon. I’ll never forget the dirty old wink he gave me when Daddy wasn’t looking, as he slithered by, either.

They were as shy as moles for the first few months. But when Fahey started bringing drink up the hill that’s when my father started giving out:

“Three big bottles of cider sticking out of his pockets. Jesus wept, hasn’t that
man any shame?” My daddy used to yell at my mammy. He’d be up for his lunch from Kelly’s the chemist on Davitt Street. That’s where he worked all his days, god rest his soul. “Now daemons will roar in the wind, gossoons,” he used to sigh with disgust. “Mark my words.” We’d keep asking him what he meant by that, but he’d only laugh. “He could do with a good wash by the cut of him,” my mammy would yell back, when Tom waltzed by our window the odd time.

“That man needs more than a good wash! He needs a good boiling.” Oh, how we laughed when they talked like that.

“He’s like Frankenstein, look at the cut of his gait.” My mammy would say in hushed wonderment.

“That creature’s getting away with merry hell, do you know that?”

“There’ll be ructions yet.”

“Now you said it.”

“A monster in our very street, god help us!” Mammy would yell.

My sisters and I would be in stitches on the settee. But behind my parents’ pantomime-horror there was a darkness they didn’t fully understand – but I did ...

“Daddy are you listening to me?”

“Sorry, Sinead, I was miles away.”

The rain’s bulleted off the roof now.

“Are there mushrooms in this, Daddy?”

“Sure, why would I do that to you, Sinead?”

I love the way she giggles. She’s getting more independent by the day.

Teenager soon. She was the cutest thing this side of the Shannon River when she was a toddler. I wanted her to stay at three forever.

“Why can’t you destroy energy, Daddy?”

“Search me, sweet pea.”

“I can make my own way back from school.”

“Sure … I’m -”

“It’s embarrassing, Daddy.”

“But -”
“I don’t want you down there, I’m old enough.” We looked at each other … till I turned back to my food. No point upsetting her.

Tom Fahey had the knack of getting people drunk. No one had ever seen him worse for wear himself, though. The cattle-fair once a month was his pimping ground. People scattered far and wide would head for our town and the pubs would be heaving. Market day was hustle and bustle: serious money crossed hands. Beasts would be herded down the main street. That’s where Tom hunted his quarry: old bachelors, widowers and young bucks.

“That’s frontal rain, Daddy.”

“I’ve never heard it called that before.”

“Warm air and cool air, coming together, causes downpours like this.”

“Is that so?”

“Aye.”

Before Sinead, I was cursed with drink. I propped up the bars of this town like dozens and dozens of others that still do – right through this land. And I was driven by a devil of a thirst that couldn’t be quenched.

And indirectly it’s the consequences of drink that’s dragging all this up again. Am I being selfish? No, it needs airing, for fuck’s sake. How he got them sisters twisted on drink to do his bidding is still gossiped over, now. But not a finger was lifted. Hypocrites. Fahey ruled the roost for a while. A stream of men passed through his door over the course of two years. And Ted Gallagher led the fucking charge. And the whole town knew.

That son of his teaches my Sinead, now. What am I supposed to shagging well think? How can I trust an unpunished paedophile’s offspring with my Sinead’s education? I look across at my precious daughter and I smile as tenderly as I can. Thank god she can’t read my fecking mind. That man is retired now. A pillar of the community. You would think butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth. Fourteen- and fifteen-year-old girls for god’s sake! If I scrape this scab off – sign that statement … there’ll be a shit-storm.

“The Fellowship of the Ring is coming to the Scala, Daddy.”

“Is that a frontal hint, is it?”

She cackles and some of her omelette hits me on the cheek, which makes her laugh even more.
“Sinead!” I laugh with her as I wipe it off my face. But inside I’m chanting my mantra: … courage to change the things I can … I’ve been fighting my boozy past for thirteen years now. Coming to terms and atoning for past deeds is liberating. Making up for the shame and emotional pain of burning my life to the ground, time after time, is humbling.

_Rat-a-tat-rat-a-tat._

“That’s the door. Come on, Sinead, get your coat on.”

“Daddy, what about the deposit?”

“Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow, colleen …”

As I watch Sinead and her two friends sing and skip down to school under their umbrellas, I think of Mr Gallagher again. When Sinead turns for school, Sergeant O’Rourke starts walking up the hill. I feel that gut-wrenching twinge again. Stand firm, focus on their pain; hear their pain; act on their pain. I chant the Serenity Prayer to steady myself: … Courage to change the things I can, courage to change … courage …

“Looks as if it’s settling in, Sean.’

“Aye.”

“I said I’d drop by.”

“You did, so.”

“Well?”

“Come in out of the wet, Sergeant, and sit yourself down.”

“She’s a credit to ye, Sean, now … that’s a fact.”

“I’ll mash a pot of tea.”

“Sound.”

I know Sergeant O’Rourke’s sitting in there scanning our hallowed photographs and peering at our precious mementos on the fireplace. But as I boil water and prepare things, I think of all the doors I’ve knocked. All the people I’ve begged forgiveness from. Forgiveness for all the hurt that I caused when I was on the piss. “I’m sorry for being such a heartless bastard that night.” “I screwed you over because I was a selfish arsehole, I just want you to know that …” “Please find the grace to forgive my bullshit, I’m truly …” “I fucked your girlfriend because of drink. I pissed on our friendship. I was an alcoholic bastard who was full of shit …” If it wasn’t for the 12-step programme
I don’t know where I’d be. Making amends is the best hit. It’s high risk, though. Those two mountain sisters nailed in my past need clawing out. They’re screaming for justice.

Screaming!

I whack all the bits on a tray and walk in.

“Before we go any further, Sean, it’s come to my attention that you’ve been peering in at the school, during break times.”

“Tea … sweet enough, is it?”

“Now there’s -”

“Tittle-tattle. Pay no heed, Sergeant.”

“Didn’t you have a blazing row with the town’s traffic warden, last week?”

“He was acting the bollox.”

“Outside the school, Sean.”

“Now I have -”

“Mr Gallagher, by any chance?”

“You want to rubbish my statement.”

“It’s more than that, Sean, for feck’s sake. And you know it.”

As he read my face, the way police like to do – I remember the day when that sweet pong started drifting up from the bottom of our garden, twenty years ago. Daddy started getting suspicious. He used to draw water from an old spring in the far corner. He went down there every couple of days filling up old plastic containers with the spring water he loved. He believed it was an elixir. “I bet a dead sheep has washed down and wedged itself further up in the creek,” my daddy said, one night. It was around that time that I bumped in to one of them sisters at the telephone box at the bottom of the street. She was in a right state, bawling her eyes out. Her gaudy crocheted poncho was wrapped around her stubby self. And she had an old-fashioned headscarf on her head, knotted at her neck, bog-style.

“Is everything -”

“Fuck off and leave me alone,” she sobbed.

So, I did.

Tom Fahey’s head was found wedged at the bottom of our spring. My father had spent several evenings poking around with a grafting spade to get
down to the source of the stench. “Awful rough old ground,” my father said to me as I lent a hand. There was a gulley that drained into the creek. And Tom’s corpse had somehow wedged itself up there instead of washing down to the fast-flowing river below.

“Are you trying to stink-think yourself back to drink, Sean?”

“What?”

He knows AA lingo … bastard.

“You look surprised, Sean?”

“Do you remember when your mob went into Fahey’s house?”

“I do.”

“They were singing their Irish song, óró mo churaichín ó / óró mo bhádín. My daughter’s singing that, now, Sergeant.”

“Sergeant O’Casey told me there was a massive fire in the hearth. And the two of them were at their knitting. Ponchos half-finished and little crocheted rugs piled beside them, as neat as you like. They only spoke Irish. No one understood a fucking word. Humming and carrying on like a horror film. And him half rotted. They were dead ringers. But the autopsy showed an overdose. A bit of a note was found in the house, as well.”

“The town expected murder, am I right, Sergeant?”

“Aye.”

“No one was satisfied with suicide. Bastards. I remember the gossip. A hush-up, people sneered. That’s why those girls were shipped off to the Magdalene Laundries – in such sharp fashion, Sergeant. And we all know what happened inside them. This town rid itself of its shame. They were used and abused, for Christ’s sake! Ireland can be the cruellest of places, my mother used to say, and how right she was, god rest her soul, how right she was.”

“Sean, let it go … it’s beyond you. Don’t let yourself slip into all or nothing thinking …”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m on the same road as you …”

“I need to do this, Sergeant.”

“I’ll be blunt – one or two have noticed you looking in at the school, Sean. You’re the one who’s looking like the paedophile, now.”
“But I …”
Introduction

In this reflective commentary I explore my diasporic relationship with the Irish community and its culture. Oona Frawley’s work on memory, diaspora and identity contextualises this in succinct fashion:

Cultural memory in the diaspora is often about the search for consciousness, the quest to fill in what are felt as blanks, losses, in the landscape of cultural memory. This loss is particularly profound in those who are not themselves immigrants but the descendants of immigrants: for second-, third-, and fourth generation Irish, cultural memory is not a given, but must be constructed and worked toward.¹

Each chapter works towards filling in these ‘blanks’ and addressing such ‘losses.’ I outline my community role and discuss Irish diasporic experience in a sociological way by discussing the hardships involved with making a life in the UK. I draw comparisons with Afro-Caribbean diasporic experience and argue the strengths of the short story for articulating and dramatizing diasporic moments and dramas. I also hint at a correlation between The Irish Famine and epigenetic behaviours and psychological traits inherent in Irish people and their descendants. Indeed, each chapter explores this correlation to some extent in multifarious ways.

I also discuss the importance of a writer being connected with community and argue how authentic writing comes from being both writer/researcher-insider/outsider-participant/observer; and I discuss how they can inform each other. I argue that critical thought and creative practice merge in the construction of narrative through ‘dual consciousness’ that come together by being immersed in artistic space − and for me such a space is submersion in my community.

My major themes engage with and explore alienation, loss, addiction, politics, work and music. I argue that my short stories come about from

interaction with Irish community users and personal experience which is reimagined through my writing practice. Empathy and the short story are also discussed alongside the literary theory of Mikhail Bakhtin. I suggest the equality of ‘voice’ and ‘voices’ in narrative can generate meaning and engender understanding: for reader and audience alike.

The commentary also probes darker reasons for leaving Ireland from recent revelations regarding Irish state abuse and widespread American ecclesiastical cover-up. Post-colonial theory is discussed throughout as connections and meaning are teased out regarding the legacy and impact of colonialism on the Irish today.

Karl Marx underpins most of the theorists that I have utilised through this thesis. Political activist Joseph Choonara stated in 2012 that ‘the revival of interest in Marxism, especially for young people comes because it provides tools for analysing capitalism,’2 which I concur with. Moreover, the Irish Celtic Tiger economy which hit the buffers in 2008 has acted as a creative backdrop for story and analysis. It caused exile and severe economic hardship and pain for its citizens that Irish people are still coming to terms with. As most of my Irish characters are in working situations or in different environments because of stark economic necessity; Marx’s critique still seems relevant and appropriate for examining our times and the plight of the working migrant.

Addiction, alcohol and music are also explored in relation to Irish diasporic experience where further epigenetic connections are alluded to. Finally, the literary and critical texts that influenced and inspired me through this thesis are discussed and analysed. Working class texts are looked at in detail where comparisons, connections and contrasts are teased out to glean newer insight and meaning.

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1. My Community

The notion of diaspora also incorporates those left behind as well as those who choose to leave.

−Tony Murray

For the past five years, I have been volunteering at The Emerald Centre a lively community hub, located between The Northfields-Humberston area, on Gipsy Lane, Leicester – which is leased from Leicester City Council.

I drive elderly Irish and Asian clients to the Centre on Wednesdays and Thursdays, and I am also involved with projects and activities that take place there. The Evaluation Report on the centre reads: ‘The Emerald Centre’s primary role is to meet the needs of the local community, particularly those people who are most in need.’

The community centre’s user-base is predominantly Irish but reaches out to all communities that surround it. I also participate in Irish language classes and cultural events that take place there. The Centre’s mission statement is inclusive:

The Emerald Centre seeks to provide activities for vulnerable people of Leicestershire. The Centre also exists to enhance the understanding of and participation in Irish culture and sport. Although it is recognised that many service users will be of Irish heritage, the organisation positively welcomes and encourages people from all sections of the community to experience and learn in this way, bringing with them their own contributions of culture and lifestyle.

My involvement within this community has provided stimuli for writing these stories and has been a major source of primary research.

Immersion in a community is also immersion in a language – active listening has been a key tool for me as a writer. I interacted with centre-users

4 Kieran Kala, Community Development Manager ‘The Emerald Centre: Another Tale to Tell, Evaluation Report.’ (Leicester: The Emerald Centre, 2016).
to convey their experience into creative text. I was reminded of what sociologist researcher John Williams concluded in his 1963 sociological study of the Irish living in the UK:

The experience of the Irish in Britain amply demonstrates the need for studies of immigrant communities, not in isolation from the host society, nor divorced from the continuing influence of past origin, but in relation to the total experience of cultural, historical and social aspects of personal experience.6

I suggest the short story can capture such diasporic ‘experience’ by listening observing and reimagining. In London Irish Fictions (2012), Tony Murray argues that life ‘demands to be narrativized in order to be understood and texts replicate what we as individuals do mentally day to day.’7 As a member of The Emerald Centre, I felt I was in a unique and privileged position to creatively respond to this community’s diasporic existence. I have built a rapport with community users through committed involvement.

Murray argues that migration continues to ‘impact on the individual’8 long after leaving, as migrants try to make sense and attempt to come to terms with their ‘communities of origin, communities of destination and other communities encountered along the way, therefore, all affect (and are affected by) the phenomena of migration.’9

My short stories explore Murray’s notion as they specifically investigate diasporic encounters and the tensions that surface from them. And this ‘impact’ is a two-way phenomenon as Hunter points out: ‘The migrant is as much a challenge to the society which fails to hold him as he is to that which he comes.’10

Frank O’Connor, the Irish short story writer, argues in The Lonely Voice a Study of the Short Story (1962) that short fiction suits ‘submerged

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7 Murray, p.43.
8 Murray, p.3.
9 Ibid.
10 Jackson, p.161.
population groups.'¹¹ I suggest the Irish residing in the UK operate below the surface of ‘the host’ population and their diasporic narratives and are often underrepresented where realism is concerned. Murray cites Luke Gibbons in alerting us to how narrative might best articulate and portray real diasporic experience:

Understanding a community or a culture does not consist solely in establishing “neutral” facts and “objective” details: it means taking seriously their ways of structuring experience, their popular narratives, the distinctive manner in which they frame the social and political realities which affect their lives.¹²

The short form has the capacity to ‘frame’ such fundamental ‘realities’, such as alienation, loneliness, addiction in stark realistic ways, which can provoke debate and create newer meaning. As O’Connor states:

There is in the short story at its most characteristic something we do not often find in the novel – an intense awareness of human loneliness. Indeed, it might be truer to say that while we read a familiar novel again for companionship, we approach the short story in a very different mood.¹³

He tackles the notion of loneliness in critical terms and points out that the short story is particularly suited for portraying the human condition in this mode. O’Connor’s notion of ‘loneliness’ if applied to urban contexts resonates with me somewhat. Working with such an ageing Irish demographic at The Emerald Centre helped spark the stories in The Mad Road. I have encountered degrees of alienation, lonesomeness, sickness, and despair as well as death, whilst constructing these fictions. Indeed, The Centre evolved because Leicester’s submerged Irish population yearned for a location to

¹² Murray, p.4.
meet and nurture its cultural needs. I believe immersion in community generates material that can best represent and capture these undercurrents of submerged diasporic experience. I believe the short story form has the capacity to focus in on diasporic life with an intensity that informs, entertains and helps document hidden aspects of diaspora. Being embedded within community offers ‘insight’, which generates narrative and informs writing practice. Murray states that Irish diasporic ‘literature and narrative in particular, is uniquely placed to provide insights into collective, as well as individual, consciousness.’\(^{14}\) And through these ‘insights’ and storytelling the workings of power are often revealed.

Other submerged communities rub up against hidden power structures and share similar diasporic experience, as they, too, come to terms with their own diasporic travails. Nikesh Shukla remarks in *The Good Immigrant* (2016) about what poet Musa Okwonga said to him concerning diasporic attitude and social perception:

> The biggest burden facing people of colour in this country is that society deems us bad immigrants – job stealers, benefit scroungers, girlfriend-thieves, refugees – until we cross over in their consciousness, through popular culture, winning races, baking good cakes, being conscientious doctors, to become good immigrants.\(^{15}\)

Many of the older Irish people I spoke to at The Emerald Centre had gone to London before eventually settling in Leicester. When I talked with them about their experiences about coming to England, it often elicited a clichéd response about looking for digs in 1950s-1960s England: ‘No Irish, No Blacks, No dogs.’ Invariably, their arrival was tough. Many would have felt Okwonga’s ‘burden’ because of their Irishness. My story ‘The Bottle and The Trowel’ deals with work, alcohol and dereliction, which reflects a new wave of Irish migration, but also acknowledges an older migrant experience.

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\(^{14}\) Murray, p.4.

‘The Bottle and the Trowel’ was inspired by Sam Selvon’s diasporic novel *The Lonely Londoners* (1956). He offered me a diasporic framework to creatively tackle Irish diasporic life. His novel sparked a starting point for this thesis. Selvon explores the joys and sorrows of arriving and settling whilst negotiating and making sense of community and place. Selvon’s text still feels relevant. New communities take root around us today. They face similar obstacles that confronted Selvon’s characters. The signs outside boarding houses have disappeared, attitudes have changed; but under the surface animosity still bubbles. Although his text does not dwell on such prejudices, his text is more bittersweet in tone than combative. “You must be have on bags of wool under that suit,” he say. You can’t fool an old test like me.’ In the same way Selvon negotiated patois in his text, I, too, was also aware of dialect and vernacular that Irish people use with each other in my community. ‘The Bottle and The Trowel’ reflects this:

We’d been on the piss all day and that Achill sham tagged along with us for a while. The pain etched on that sham’s face made us laugh. The shower of fucks won’t give me a start anywhere, he kept saying. Remember him? He kept whingeing about work to us. We ended up in The Swan over in Stockwell. We were *langers*, he was one of the Gallaghers from Keem.  

I realised Irish youth speak in different registers to older Irish people. Talking to young native Irish Gaelic football players at the Emerald Centre helped me get an idea of how Irish youth spoke to each other. Listening to them use words such as ‘sham’ and ‘langers’ in conversations was informative. I used these Irish slang words to authenticate and denote their demographic and capture their voice.

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Psychological researcher Liam Greenslade comments that ‘Irish people sustain themselves through their communities, in formal and informal gatherings, through the “craic” in pubs, through the gatherings of “lads” after work and at weekends.’\textsuperscript{18} Most of my stories explore aspects of Greenslade’s observations in one way or another. Writing from within the heart of Leicester’s Irish community imbues me with a sense of pride. I feel honoured to be its ‘memory-banker’ – retelling their ‘craic’ – deciphering their tales and insights – reimagining their words and experiences. And as I witness the older first generation gracefully fading away, I recognise their value and contribution to English society. Immersion in my community as artist/researcher necessitates focus and dual-engagement. Capturing a realistic snap-shot of expatriate life allows my community’s voice to live on.

2. Writing, Community and Voice

In some cultures, the idea of a writer not being of a community would be simply bizarre, since the writer is the carrier of their community’s story through history and times of change: its maker of tales, its memory-banker, its time-traveller.

– David Morley\(^\text{19}\)

Afro-Caribbean writer Courttia Newland states that his stories derive from ‘The world around’\(^\text{20}\) him. Newland’s assertion seems reductive at first glance; but on reflection it is a good answer to the tricky question that Newland and fellow writers are invariably asked during their careers: Where do you get your stories from? In Heather Ingman’s introduction to *A History of the Irish Short Story* (2009) she states that ‘Irish authors of short fiction often use the form to convey a message to their community.’\(^\text{21}\) Such messaging harks back to the oral tradition, which Walter Ong argues was ‘dictated by the need to organize and conserve knowledge’\(^\text{22}\) before the technology of print was readily available.

Writer Ra Page states that printed ‘short stories are teleological in their form; that they continually build towards, and are forever conscious of, an ending.’\(^\text{23}\) They are largely formulaic for mass consumption, it could be argued. An ending is engineered to make the reader reflect. Writer Alison MacLeod states a story’s ending has an ‘afterlife. The ending raises questions and issues about the future.’\(^\text{24}\) Page argues that, ‘The short story occupies that strange transitory airlock between losing something and understanding what that loss means.’\(^\text{25}\) Page’s notion of loss resonates from a community perspective as writing reflects community.


\(^{22}\) Ibid.


\(^{24}\) Ibid, xili.

\(^{25}\) Ibid, xili.
Writing is solitary by nature, but I suggest worthwhile material comes from grass-roots involvement with community whilst engaging with relevant theory. I suggest the well-crafted short story demands engagement with both. Short story writer Tobias Wolff states that creative ‘work for most people is very social, and the actual thinking is often done in community.’ Morley points out that ‘You cannot be a good writer without conducting your life with a degree of care, with a kindness, a kind of accounting for oneself within a larger community.’ Indeed writers hunt meaningful stories and details from what is around them, which layer and embellish the short story when it is at its most dynamic. I suggest original story threads lie within the heart of community and communities across the UK, but rooting worthwhile stories out takes commitment and active engagement.

If the writer interacts with community, as well as simultaneously engaging with different ideas and concepts, meaningful subject matter surfaces. This dual approach offers sub-textual depth to the text. When the two modes (creative and critical) fuse, arguably, the narrative strengthens. By engaging with community through this duality – but at the same time keeping a critical distance from it – these modes can inform each other and layer the creative text.

Clare Hanson states in her introduction to Re-reading the Short Story (1989) that ‘The short story is a vehicle for different kinds of knowledge, knowledge which may be in some way at odds with the “story” of dominant culture.’ By being both writer and narrator for a community, one is actively listening and analysing, which is not unlike the Irish traditional seanchaí of old, who would have been the oral storyteller and guardian of mythology and lore. He, too, would have been positioned both inside and outside of clan and community.

In his paper ‘The Known World’ Ross Gibson asserts that an artist, ‘goes consciously and interrogatively into and then out of an experience, knowing it somewhat by immersion and then somewhat by exertion and

26 Morley, p.235.
27 Ibid, p.234.
reflection. By positioning myself inside and outside of community, I, too, gained an insider-outsider perspective that fed into my creative practice. I have endeavoured to construct and reimagine narrative that both informs and entertains from incorporating this artistic stance. Gibson argues that dual consciousness needs to be activated when the creative meets scholarly research in the artistic space. My creative muse has been The Emerald Centre alongside an interrogation of ideas and concepts. Gibson states that:

Artist-researchers have the chance to woo two modes of knowing: the implicit and the explicit. They have the chance to entwine the insider’s embodied know-how with the outsider’s analytical precepts. The attraction between these two modes of knowing must be both felt and spoken. And as the world blooms in the artist’s consciousness, the mutual commitment of the two modes can abide and provide.30

Engaging at close-quarters with subject matter (community) is essential for new creative and critical thinking to emerge. Gibson asserts that an immersive active approach instils art with authenticity, meaning and ekes out ‘tacit knowledge.’31 This is especially the case when it is undertaken in tandem with creative and critical analysis. In my case I, too, was both inside and outside of community as artist/researcher where these ‘two cognitive modes can inform and enrich each other – the implicit and the explicit’32 as Gibson states:

Inside – but also outside – but also inside – but also outside – but also inside. The rhythm of this narrative acknowledgement is restless. And it’s necessary. Because the world of lived experience and discovery-based research is restless like this, not simple, static, or stable.33

30 Gibson, p.11.  
32 Ibid.  
33 Ibid, p.10.
Gibson asserts that dual consciousness is activated when the creative and critical rub against each other. I recognised this happening over time as I made sense of theoretical contexts and concepts as my stories started developing. Through my creative practice and interaction with community I noticed this coded knowledge layering the text in an implicit, decoded way. In combination these two modes helped contribute to a new ‘tacit know-how that has been accrued in the creative process’, which Gibson believes, ‘can be made somewhat communicable through language.’\textsuperscript{34} By working in such a way, newer understanding can be gleaned. Importantly, such tacit knowledge won from active experience generates wider meaning. These stories have been informed by critical reading and creative thinking working within these two modes.

I believe literature constructed in this way can enrich community by helping readers make sense of the systemic complexities and constraints that surround us; as Gibson argues:

You need to generate an involved set of narratives that account for the changes and encourage speculations about the endless dynamics of the system. Infiltrating the experience in this way you become not only a witnessing participant but also a diviner, someone who begins to distil some brittle definitions about the tendencies that are pushing through the system.\textsuperscript{35}

It is the job of an artist to make interventions and interrogate systems. Gibson states that ‘An artist makes a fulfilling conjunction and causes a turn in matter, time, space or events’\textsuperscript{36} when a work is fully realised and is finally released into the world. And only then can a reaction be expected; as Morley argues: ‘You cannot create or challenge a community through inaction or silence.’\textsuperscript{37} Gibson understands this challenge and realises that the finished

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, p.9.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, p.4.
\textsuperscript{37} Morley, p.236.
piece of art is the writer’s unique take on the world in all its complexity and this is the complexity that plays out when individuals, their environments and their communities insinuate each other. And by experiencing it, you have the chance to know it, to know it in the manner that is appropriate to complexity.  

I suggest the creative writer (or artist in general) is particularly alive to the complexity of the systems they write about. Creative writing can indeed capture complexity and diversity in a unique fashion. It does this in a way that theoretical texts cannot do. I believe quality narrative can open up and show complex concepts for what they are. Narrative offers the reader an understanding of theory when it is applied to creative scenario and situation; then it actually breaks through complexity.

Gibson states that when working towards this dual process of writing and researching you have ‘to synthesise and espouse some newly known proposition which can be drawn out from the fleeting hunches and implications’ by the artist making sense of gathered raw material, theory and practice; up ‘until the proposition can be explicated privately to oneself first and then be communicated to the scholarly world, the outside world.’ My finished stories inside this thesis reflect Gibson’s ‘dual consciousness’ operating through this kind of fusion.

Morley insists a writer should not back away from difficulty and ‘a creative communication implies a heightened regard for community, however unknown or (unknowing) that community may be.’ Furthermore, the writer’s artistic experience and the artistic outcome may even be artistically at odds with community. Morley suggests fiction can ‘carry’ a community’s ‘message forward’ as they ‘look to writers for their own voice and story; for a choice of

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38 Gibson, p.8.
39 Ibid, p.5.
40 Morley, p.235.
41 Ibid, p.236.
conduct; and even for a way of thinking about our interpenetrating cultures.\textsuperscript{42} A yearning to make sense of lives lived.

Being closely involved with the ‘Another Tale to Tell’\textsuperscript{43} heritage project at the Emerald Centre during 2015 was creatively inspiring. The project set out to explore and record the memories of Irish people resident in Leicestershire, who had come to the city in the 1950s. I was part of the interviewing process, which documented and filmed Irish elders in a talking-head format, which very much encouraged interviewees to talk about past social issues, such as employment, socialization and the impact migration had on them. Taking part in this community project demonstrates aspects of Gibson’s ‘dual consciousness’ regarding the ‘tacit knowledge that is won from active experience.’ I was genuinely surprised by some of the responses that I elicited, which initiated ideas for character, register and voice in my stories. Writer Joyce Carol Oates states the value of such a voice when it enters a story in her interview with ‘Paris Review’:

Through the local or the regional, through our individual voices, we work to create art that will speak to others who know nothing of us. In our very obliqueness to one another, an unexpected intimacy is born. The individual voice is the communal voice. The regional voice is the universal voice.\textsuperscript{44}

The Emerald Centre takes a group of Irish elders back to a different Irish region for a week’s holiday every year. In 2013 we took John Kelly with us to County Donegal. He was frail, and he was accompanied by his elderly development worker. It was thought that it would do John good to reconnect with Ireland again because he had not been back there in forty-five years. But John was anti-social and shunned all and sundry when he was in Ireland. In fact, he showed no interest in being in Ireland whatsoever.

Observing John’s isolation was harrowing. He was a bitter and twisted man. The experience prompted thoughts about the negative side of Irish

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{43} http://www.emeraldcentre.org.uk/another-tale-to-tell/4592071995  
\textsuperscript{44} Morley, p.235.
Diasporic experience. There was a lifetime of suffering and hard toil etched on John’s face. Witnessing his curmudgeonly manner whilst in Donegal fired the back-story for Tommy Giblin’s character in ‘Mountain Men’. I explored John Kelly’s backstory from a fictional perspective from diasporic sources, which entered the story’s subtext. Tony Murray’s ‘Navvy Narratives’\(^{45}\) helped contextualise the period and employment. Also, Murray’s chapter enabled me to build expatriate detail that reflected Tommy’s era with appropriate realism. ‘Mountain Men’ was directly inspired by my voluntary involvement with community and my active engagement with Irish-elders – objectively and creatively. The notions of ‘surplus labour,’ ‘addiction,’ ‘psychological damage,’ and ‘diasporic angst’ were inspired by research and personal reflection.

Morley states, ‘A writer is a community whose story is told through their books.’\(^{46}\) Regarding the genesis of ‘Mountain Men,’ Gibson’s ‘implicit’ and ‘explicit’ forms of knowledge emerged from an interaction I had with an elderly Irish volunteer called John Harkin. John maintains the gardens around The Emerald Centre. He is never shy of a joke or a reminiscence as he goes about digging and planting. He asked me one day if I’d ever come across a Scotsman who used to frequent the Irish clubs of Leicester during the 1970s. ‘He was a bit of a character,’ John Harkin said to me. ‘He always used to greet you with, *burn the bastards*. He’s long dead now. Sure, that was his catchphrase, he was harmless, enough, god rest his soul.’\(^{47}\) That interaction sparked thoughts for ‘Mountain Men’, which were already fermenting within me from my Donegal research trip. At that moment with John, I was not only ‘a witnessing participant – but also a diviner’, as Gibson states – I felt both outside of this Irish tribe and very much inside it. And from this insider-outsider perspective I have been privy to anecdote after anecdote from Centre-users, which I have absorbed through this thesis. John’s tale offered me a key phrase, which inspired the start of ‘Mountain Men’: *burn the bastards*.

Short story writer Raymond Carver cites Pritchett in his essay ‘On Writing’:

\(^{45}\) Murray, pp. 42-56.
\(^{46}\) Morley, p.235.
\(^{47}\) Part of a conversation with John Harkin in July 2014 at The Emerald Centre.
V.S. Pritchett’s definition of a short story is: “something glimpsed from the corner of the eye, in passing”. First the glimpse. Then the glimpse given life, turned into something that will illuminate the moment and just maybe lock it indelibly into the reader’s consciousness.\textsuperscript{48}

John’s anecdote offered me Pritchett’s ‘glimpse’; our interaction offered me that important starting point due to my inside-outside role in this community. Because of these interactions at The Emerald Centre creative possibilities were set in motion. Carver’s ‘illuminate the moment’ happened when my creative attention was focussed on what really matters: quirky detail; idioms and words; interesting things that people say to each other.

‘Mountain Men’ starts with the words: ‘\emph{Burn the bastards}, Tommy Giblin used to bark at anyone unlucky enough to cross his path, as he slinked through his territory like a town fox.’\textsuperscript{49} By changing my character’s nationality and his name to Tommy Giblin and by appropriating that overheard catchphrase, writing emerged. I wanted that phrase to stick in the ‘reader’s consciousness’\textsuperscript{50} as Raymond Carver puts it. Robert Coles states that a quality short story must be, ‘A reminder, a source of entertainment, a warning, a lesson, a moment’s diversion, or a life’s experience of rescue.’\textsuperscript{51} And community has all these experiences within it waiting to be teased out. Short stories come from community and they are often about communities. ‘Mountain Men’ strives to achieve this, as it highlights the danger of recreational drug use and a diasporic life that is almost forgotten. Such marginal lives resonate with community and communities alike.

In ‘Mountain Men’ I deployed the literary device of repetition for effect. Tommy’s catchphrase: ‘\emph{Burn the bastards}’ repeats like a refrain throughout


the narrative which repetitively builds to ‘lock’ ‘indelibly’ in the reader’s mind, as Pritchett states. In the opening paragraph I wanted the reader to engage and connect with Tommy immediately: ‘And then he’d spit and curse his way down to The Rose and Crown for a solitary pint.’\textsuperscript{52} I wanted the reader to feel how alienated Tommy was from community during this opening passage. To do this I researched social history to create Tommy’s itinerant working life. Books such as Timothy O’Grady and Steve Pyke’s \textit{I Could Read the Sky} (1997) helped contextualise the era and the necessity to work and the conditions of the workplace. Such research informed my narrative regarding the alienation and loneliness of migrant life. One example in ‘Mountain Men’ is the priest’s eulogy during Tommy’s funeral:

\begin{quote}
“...Irish in work camps in 1950s England...” a life summed up in a couple of minutes, “...sure the Irish would have flocked to big jobs like the building of the M1 and similar infrastructure projects in post war England. Men like Tommy Giblin worked for many a year on such projects.”\textsuperscript{53}
\end{quote}

A striking passage in O’Grady and Pyke’s diasporic novel dramatizes the harsh reality and cruelty that Irish people might have faced as they settled:

I wait there for work with Francis and Martin and the others. Most always I get it even if it’s only sweeping. Ivan came with us when we first went down, a scarf and a woollen hat on him and the donkey jacket so big he was like a clothes peg holding up a tent. When the Animal stepped from the van and saw him, he knew he could have sport. ‘And what can you do man of straw?’ he said. The voice would just cut you. ‘I can dig,’ says Ivan. ‘You couldn’t dig the shite from your own arse,’ says the Animal. He leans over with two hand on his knees

\textsuperscript{52} Cusack, p.40  
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, p.3.
and lets out a roar. Anyone he spots not laughing doesn’t work that day. ‘I’m going to work on the buses,’ says Ivan to us.54

Fictionally exploring loneliness and isolation in ‘Mountain Men’ reveals the negative side of Diaspora and how some of these men struggled to fit in and remained outsiders. Tommy’s story is tragic and poignant – lives such as his need investigating and dramatizing. Men of his ilk made a massive contribution to the UK. I wanted to engender empathic responses and render a tacit understanding of two dysfunctional men and their foibles. The other character, Matt, is also in spiritual crisis and this culminates at the end of ‘Mountain Men’ in his epiphany inside his ketamine flashback, at the hospital – the nurse’s empathic intuition is on show, as she mends his wounds.

Cheers, Tommy, cheers, MOUNTAIN MAN, Matt yelled, deep inside himself.

‘You said you tripped over in your flat? Always happens when you least expect it, doesn’t it?’ the nurse said, with a knowing smile.55

In ‘Mountain Men’ I wanted the reader to feel empathy. I also wanted this empathy and understanding to extend to the Irish Traveller community through the narrative of ‘Council Wallah’. And like Tommy in ‘Mountain Men’, many Irish Travellers also came to Britain during its post-war reconstruction boom and mucked in with the rebuilding of the country. But nowadays Irish Travellers are often treated with disdain and are vilified: ‘sadly they are frequently victims of racial prejudice as well as suffering the intolerance of settled communities.’56 Perhaps this is down to laws like The 1995 Criminal Justice Act and the Caravan Sites Act of 1968 which ‘effectively criminalises nomadism as a way of life in the UK.57 It made Traveller life a lot tougher as attitudes hardened because of the impact of such legislation. Despite such

57 Ibid.
draconian laws and rough treatment, though, Irish Travellers continue to make a traditional living from scrap and rubbish clearance as well as ‘operating tarmacking gangs, selling carpets, landscaping and doing light building work.’\textsuperscript{58} They keep their social cohesion intact because of their ‘ability to adapt to changing circumstances.’\textsuperscript{59} It is also troubling to note that mortality and suicide rates within the Irish Travelling community are still much higher than settled communities: ‘The life expectancy of a male Traveller is currently 61.7 years, which is 15.1 years less than men in the general population. This is equivalent to the life expectancy of the general population in the 1940s.’\textsuperscript{60} And the suicide rate is seven times higher for the Irish male Traveller compared with the general population according to an ‘All Ireland Traveller Health Study’. Irish Travellers move back and forth to England regularly, and in ‘Council Wallah’ I attempt to empathise and give voice to this disparate community. I suggest the short story is the perfect vehicle for such responses and gives a voice to a community that is often misunderstood and underrepresented.

Psychologist David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano believe that empathy is enhanced through the reading of literary fiction. They suggest that, ‘Reading literary fiction enhances the ability to detect and understand other people’s emotions, a crucial skill in navigating complex social relationships.’\textsuperscript{61} This correlates with past conceptual thinking concerning the short story. David Miall states in relation to the short-form, that if emotion plays a central role in social understanding, as research has shown, then it makes sense to suppose that emotion is central to reader response too.\textsuperscript{62}

Kidd argues that, ‘In literary fiction, the incompleteness of the characters turns your mind to trying to understand the minds of others.’\textsuperscript{63} The

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{David Miall, ‘Text and Affect: A Model of Story Understanding’, in \textit{Re-reading the Short Story}, Clare Hanson, ed. pp.10-21 (p.12).}
\footnote{Ibid.}
\end{footnotes}
New School of Research in New York have carried out research utilising, ‘a variety of Theory of Mind techniques’ which demonstrates through experiment that reading literary fiction increases empathic responses more than other texts do. Perhaps, what is emotionally left unsaid in literary fiction, arguably, retunes our human understanding of each other.

Miall argues that in the literary world: ‘We are a community only in the shared knowledge we bring to the text; in the transforming effects determined by emotion the literary text speaks to us as individuals.’ As critic John Carey comments, ‘The imaginative power reading uniquely demands is clearly linked, psychologically, with a capacity for individual judgement and with the ability to empathise with other people. Without reading these faculties may atrophy.’

As psychologist Kidd argues: ‘The same psychological processes are used to navigate fiction and real relationships. Fiction is not just a simulator of social experience, it is a social experience.’ However, this social experience may not translate into actual behavioural change or altruistic behaviour.

Keene argues that the reading of empathic material by itself does not necessarily prompt altruism:

Readers, which is to say living people, bring empathy to the novel, and they alone have the capacity to convert their emotional fusion with the denizens of make-believe worlds into actions on behalf of real others. That they rarely decide to do so should not be taken as a sign of fiction’s failings.

Despite the uncertainty of empathy’s real effect on the reader, literary fiction and the short-form certainly reflects our state of being and social reality. Literary critic and Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s early thinking on empathy informed his literary theory – he ‘insists that each person is unique and

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64 Burley, ‘Reading Literary Fiction Improves Empathy’.
65 Miall, p.20.
67 Burley, ‘Reading Literary Fiction Improves Empathy’.
68 Keen, p.38.
irreplaceable," according to political theorist Andrew Robinson. And my stories share this sensibility, in that they have a plethora of voices, which often compete for attention. There is a sense of having or sharing the ‘craic’ in all my narratives. ‘Craic’ means: happening, situation, news or gossip and it is often used in Irish diasporic vernacular.

Aidan Arrowsmith makes an important point in Frawley’s collected text concerning second-generation Irish fiction, stating, ‘That confused, second-generation experience is often evoked far more successfully via fiction’s heteroglossic quality than by the more monological mode of much life writing.’ Such fiction and critique lends itself to Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia or its equivalent ‘Russian term raznorechie ( “different speechness”).’ His theory suggests that voices are juxtaposed within literary texts, which all have ‘specific points of view on the world’ “and will thus” mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically. I feel Bakhtin’s theory can make sense of intertwining, conflicting and overlapping voices. Many voices inhabit my stories and Bakhtin’s concept helps contextualise them politically and sociologically. He puts his concept in these terms: heteroglossia represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between different epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, school circles and so forth, all given a bodily form.

Bakhtin argues that it is through heteroglossia that literary characters come into existence. Vice states that, ‘It is heteroglossia, in other words, which gives novelistic characters the opportunity to exist, not the other way round.’ According to Robinson, Bakhtin ‘emphasises that particular themes cannot

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70 Frawley, p.17.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid, p.25.
be separated from their place in genres and structures of texts. Phenomena should be composited, theorised and understood, not simply seen as single instances. He further states that for Bakhtin the author is secondary to the text. Bakhtin’s heteroglossia emphasises that ‘The originality is in the combination, not the elements,’ as the author performs a ‘syncretic expression of social heteroglossia,’ only.

Contextualising my stories and grounding them through this concept opens them up ideologically. Terry Eagleton argues that Bakhtin’s idea of language is ‘a field of ideological contention, not a monolithic system.’ He states the semiotic sign ‘for Bakhtin was less a neutral element in a given structure than a focus of struggle and contradiction.’ And for Bakhtin the importance of meaning is open, as Robinson states:

In a situation of heteroglossia, the dominant perspective, or one’s own perspective, is itself defamiliarized. This happens because it is made visible from the perspectives of others, as well as one’s own. It ruptures the mythological relationship to language, showing the gap between words and their meanings.

Community at grass roots level has an air of heteroglossia, as it has an egalitarian quality about it. It tries not to discriminate – not unlike Bakhtin’s concept of language which does not privilege one voice over another. His concept contains a certain utopian resonance, it could be argued. As Robinson points out:

A Bakhtinian utopia would be a space of abundance of dialogue, of coexistence of differences, of the absence of any overarching regulation of the free self-actualisation of different perspectives. It would be something like a permanent carnival.

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75 Robinson, ‘Bakhtin: Dialogism, Polyphony and Heteroglossia.’
77 Robinson, ‘Bakhtin: Dialogism, Polyphony and Heteroglossia’.
78 Ibid.
In some respects, community centres and inner-city adventure playgrounds have this carnival ethos about them. Moreover, Bakhtin’s overarching concept concerning ‘the many-voicedness of text’ where ‘characters and narrator speak on equal terms’ also resonates with me. From operating in community as writer-researcher and insider-outsider, I, too, recognised an equality of voice, which runs through the stories. Bakhtin upholds a democratic model of this ‘many-voicedness’, which has permeated through my writing practice. It helped me reflect upon and contextualise my place, as writer within this community. His theorising also alerted me to the equality of voice that is expressed through text.

Dialogism allows diversity of voice regarding the ‘refracted’ view of the author. It also permits voices to challenge and contradict one another within the text compared with a monoglot approach. Robinson states that ‘Bakhtin emphasises that it is not enough to simply understand the other’s perspective. Only if it is made other than itself by being seen from outside can it produce something new or enriching.’ Bakhtin’s theory is still a useful tool for analysing texts for empathetic meaning and understanding.

Again, I suggest the short story grows out of community. It helps reflect and celebrate parts of community through its aesthetic. One of the ways it does this is through the reader identifying with themes, which provoke debate and discussion. As Joyce Carol Oates states: ‘By honouring one another’s creation we honour something that deeply connects us all and goes beyond us.’ Stories about community help promote tacit understanding of each other. ‘A writer is a community whose story is told through their books,’ Morley argues. A short story reconstructs community, as well as staging it, through its narrative dynamic. Morley asks: ‘How many times have you read books of fiction for answers about your own life or, found yourself and your dilemmas reflected in the mirror of a novel?’ The short form shares the same tropes as the novel and arguably its reflection is sharper because of its brevity. A community can come together to ask questions and share answers

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79 Vice, p.6.
80 Robinson, ‘Bakhtin: Dialogism, Polyphony and Heteroglossia’.
81 Morley, p.255.
83 Ibid, p.236.
if the creative work is strong enough and it echoes lives in a meaningful way. Importantly, fiction both reflects a community and serves to recreate or reconstruct that community.

One example of this ‘reflection’ is demonstrated within ‘Ghost Estate’ concerning superstition and curse. In *Irish Superstitions* Dáithí Ó hÓgáin states that words in Irish culture had a deeper significance in bygone days for Irish people:

Speech, with its immense social potential, was highly valued and greatly feared. There was a very strong belief in the power of a ‘bad tongue’ – that is, the tongue of a malicious and unscrupulous person. ‘Envy would eat away the hills,’ went an old saying.  

And in an older Ireland such was the power of the ‘word’ that ‘some words could cause harm, even if uttered without bad intent.’ My characters in ‘Ghost Estate’ share that same sense of awe and fear of ‘words’ concerning the family ‘curse’ that may or may not have passed down which is ever present through the narrative. Indeed, it is envy that is at the root of this story, too. I got the idea for the *piseog* (superstition) from Lilly O’Brien at an Irish language class at the Emerald Centre: when talk steered to old traditions and folk customs from the provinces of Ireland, on a winter’s night, learning Irish. Lilly, an Irish elder, talked about the *piseog* that related to land and a local belief, from her area of Ireland, that rotten meat thrown on someone’s land could bring about bad luck and cause bad harvests and lay-up animals. She said ‘*piseogs* were mainly done on May eve and farmers sprinkled their land with holy water to bless the crops but also to ward off the evil of the *piseogs*.’ She heard people discussing such things around Cnoc Fiarna the highest point in her area when she was growing up in County Limerick in the 1940s. As soon as I heard this conversation, I knew straight away it would make a great backstory which I extrapolated upon and further reimagined.

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85 Ibid, p.113.
86 Part of a conversation overheard at the Emerald centre in November 2018.
Morley points out that: ‘Writers carry a community’s story in the voice of their memory.’\textsuperscript{87} Through my continued involvement with The Emerald Centre my fiction aims to put these scattered diasporic voices back together again in a meaningful way that entertains and has something relevant to say about culture reflecting past and present.

From my interactions with first-generation Irish elders, who have offered me phrases and shared their priceless anecdotes, unique insights have come into creative being. In fact, The Emerald Centre has provided me with a creative platform to give voice to the voiceless and the marginalised. It has also allowed me to shine a light on the Irish diasporic masses that have manned the machines of commerce: battled with cloth, metal, brick and stone, throughout the UK. I wanted to recognise their sacrifice and acknowledge their contribution.

Morley points out that ‘Writers are nobody and they are everybody.’\textsuperscript{88} I have experienced industrial hardship myself: pain, joy and comradery in equal measure. I empathise with the remorseless elemental toil of migrant work – I wanted to write these experiences out of me, as a means of catharsis. As Tobias Wolff succinctly points out: ‘Only story can express the most difficult, paradoxical, unparaphrasable truths of life as it is actually lived.’\textsuperscript{89} Work and the workplace feature in my fiction because it connects with the Irish community and resonates to a wider audience also. Work piques interest because it relates to lives, lived. After all, the lack of meaningful work is why people left Ireland in the first place. Writing about such a contribution that the Irish made and their issues, is important, as fiction generates wisdom, insight and knowledge. Morley states that: ‘Reputation begins locally and grows globally: it must start within the local community’ first and foremost.\textsuperscript{90}

\textsuperscript{87} Morley, p.255. 
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid, p.234. 
\textsuperscript{90} Morley, p.247.
3. Memory and Diaspora

Narrative both underpins and disrupts diasporic identities across a number of binary oppositions, such as exile and escape; leaving and arriving; staying and going; past and present; and perhaps most important of all memory and imagination.

−Tony Murray91

The Irish emigrant often remembers a fixed memory at the point of departure. A cultural snapshot of Ireland is internalised. Invariably, it lodges with them as they forge new lives in England, America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand or Europe.

It has been argued that this memory is often a nostalgic take on Ireland, which is passed down. And this memory becomes unstable through its remembering, telling and re-telling. As Oona Frawley states in Memory Ireland Volume 2: Diaspora and Memory Practices (2012): ‘Settlement abroad necessitates the production of a new kind of memory of “home”,’92 which is often false and unreliable. Frawley argues that the migrant ‘no longer relies upon daily physical interactions with a landscape and people.’ Memory ‘distorts and stretches, invents and alters as it constructs a new Ireland.’93 Such distorted memories become romanticised and ingrained through time. They are often unlike modern Ireland today. Such distanced and reinvented memories are often agrarian; often an idealised version of an Ireland rooted in the past. This notion is clearly portrayed in my dark-short story ‘Black Beret Brigade’ where Eugene rants about the Irish living in England fabricating memory. Frawley’s ‘memory practice’94 regarding this reimagined Ireland can clearly be seen in action. Eugene challenges this prevailing perception because he has broken through his conditioning and sees this selective ‘memory practice’ as being false and unreliable:

91 Murray, p.3.
92 Frawley, p.4.
93 Ibid.
94 Ibid, p.129.
Come here and I'll tell ye, the Irish over here, in England, have this romantic notion of what they left behind, in the back-of-beyond. They've got these airy-fairy notions of Irish valleys and vales dripping with honey and buttermilk, where there's a grand hello from everyone everywhere you go. Shite.95

Clearly, the short story has the breadth to explore these notions of unreliable memory and this contentious state of Irishness and community. Cathy Galvin does this in her story ‘Prohibition’. Her narrative explores memory, perceptions and realities of failed emigration. Coming back is an interesting way of exploring Diaspora: ‘Tom thought of other voices: of women he’d walked beside over twenty years before, when he and Anne’s father had crossed the Atlantic from Ireland to America.’ Galvin’s dark story shatters halcyon notions of lovely Ireland as Tom plans to abuse Anne.

Jonathan Taylor and Karen Stevens state in High Spirits: A Round of Drinking Stories (2018) that ‘the loss of ideals and subsequent disillusionment for displaced Irish workers living in fleeting and unstable working communities’96 is creatively fashioned and realised in Galvin’s text. Indeed, Frawley’s memory practice is enacted through this bleak agrarian text:

At least that was how Tom remembered Michael’s words. He recalled feeling only an empty sickness, as he listened. Hopes never fulfilled. Thoughts of the dead, hanging in their twelve-dollar rooms in Boston, never spoken of, and of the unseen descendants buried in unmarked graves along the roadsides at home, forgotten.97

James P. Byrne asserts that Irish-Americans in the nineteenth century went about ‘refashioning memory to suit their present situation,’98 when they were

95 Cusack, p.54.
96 Stevens and Taylor, pp.29-30.
faced with stark American reality. Immediate assimilation on arrival or return was usually the norm. They had to adapt and adjust if they wanted to survive and settle. Importantly, they had to fit in, which Byrne suggests most Irish were more than willing to do. Byrne states:

While physical alienation from Ireland played a large part in the Irish American reimagination of Ireland as a mythical homeland (distance affording the conditions to replace the real with the simulacrum), social alienation from the largely Anglo-American populace played an even more crucial role in the Irish American mis-memory (in the Barthesian sense of misreading) of the past, by creating conditions which memory offered a salve to current historical conditions.99

Such reimagining helped Irish people integrate, thrive and prosper throughout the American continent. There were some who did not, though. Galvin noticed this in ‘Prohibition.’ Not every Irish migrant managed such adjustment successfully. Byrne argues that the Irish-American needed to ‘reimagine the past to moderate perceived otherness.’100 That might help explain why there is no significant trace of famine artefact left in America. Irish texts and critical testimony concerning the horrors of famine are scant, almost non-existent.

Furthermore, the Irish language vanished quickly, considering an estimated one third of settlers would have spoken Irish before the famine, 101 according to Byrne. Despite such rapid assimilation the Irish-American nurtured an overriding sense of nostalgia for ‘home’ which superseded old-norms and a nostalgic yearning for an older Ireland took root and prevailed in the Irish-Americans. Such fragmented memories are often framed in pre-industrial memory, which is at odds with the Ireland of today.

Paul March-Russell asserts in The Short Story: An Introduction (2009) that the postcolonial short-form accommodates fragmentation particularly well. He cites Jacques Derrida regarding the ‘dissemination, the scattering of

99 Ibid, pp.54-55.
100 Ibid, p.51.
101 Ibid.
knowledge into new and provisional fields of meaning.' Documenting the Irish who have settled in the UK through my community also feels fragmentary from a writing perspective – but putting disparate pieces of their experience back together again through the short-form radiates meaning. 'As Rushdie has observed, the postcolonial writer “is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost” but that what remains acquires “greater status, greater resonance.”' March-Russell further states that ‘The short story as fragment elegantly corresponds with memory and desire.’ The short story, as a form, is ideally suited for capturing diasporic experience. And a collection of short stories specifically dealing with this experience generates meaning and furthers understanding.

In ‘Black Beret Brigade’ Eugene disparages the Irish in England for romanticising their past and distorting their rationale for leaving: ‘They’ve forgotten the reasons why they left in the first place: diddled, abused and worked to death, if the truth be rolled out on to this table...’ I was reminded of recent historical sexual and physical abuse within the Catholic church in Ireland when I worked on Eugene’s dialogue. Another issue that demands response is the cruel Magdalene Laundries and the shocking abuse inflicted within the Irish state child-care system, which has outraged the people of Ireland. Canadian song writer Joni Mitchell’s lyrics in ‘The Magdalene Laundries’ from her fifteenth album Turbulent Indigo (1994) continue to shock, awe and inspire in equal measure:

Most girls come here pregnant
Some by their own fathers
Bridget got that belly
By her parish priest
We’re trying to get things white as snow
All of us woe-begotten-daughters
In the steaming stains

103 Ibid, p.258.
104 Cusack, p.54.
Of the Magdalene Laundries.105

Horrendous abuse and hierachal Catholic cover-ups have also shocked Irish-American communities across the USA. The film Spotlight (2015) impacted on me as it portrays investigative journalists working for The Boston Globe painstakingly uncovering abuse in 2002. These acts were committed by Catholic priests and the church’s cover-up of such behaviour beggar belief. Moreover, watching Irish institutional horror unfolding in the film The Magdalene Sisters (2003) was a harrowing cinematic experience that also provoked a creative response. These dramatizations and revelations influenced and inspired my writing within ‘Strays’:

That’s why those girls were shipped off to the Magdalene Laundries, in such sharp fashion, Sergeant. And we all know what happened inside them. This town rid itself of its shame. They were used and abused, for Christ’s sake!106

Indeed, such horrific memories have surfaced within the Leicester Irish community, too. I was inspired by interacting with a survivors’ group that meets regularly at the Emerald Centre for support, counselling and consolation. Importantly, The Emerald Centre provides a safe space where a submerged community can reminisce, reflect, heal and support each other.

Again, this is another instance of how Gibson’s ‘implicit’ and ‘explicit’ modes of ‘tacit know-how’ are ‘accrued’ through immersive community experience. Through immersion and reflection, insight is gleaned from experience and then turned into text that resonates with newer meaning. And such a text might make uncomfortable reading for some. ‘Strays’ for example is all about small town corruption and collusion in rural Ireland; its narrative explores how a town can be undermined by one or two bad apples and lose its moral compass.

106 Cusack, p.102.
Indeed, there are numerous examples and instances of alleged and proven Irish *garda* (police) collusion that are noteworthy. However, one recent headline in the *Independent* typifies what I fictionally address in my stories concerning collusion and complicity in small-town Ireland: ‘Sex, collusion and coercion in a midlands town: How Disclosures Tribunal will probe garda’s “relationship with drug dealer”’.107 This does indeed highlight one element of collusion that seems all too prevalent in Irish society today. Whereas my story ‘Strays’ is set in the past before our technological revolution the same underhandedness was still taking place last century in the 1970s and 1980s which resonates with what lies behind this headline. Another scaled-up example concerns Chief Superintendent Harry Breen and Superintendent Bob Buchanan who were murdered by the IRA in 1989, which forced an apology from the Irish state: ‘The Irish government has made two separate apologies after an official inquiry concluded that Irish police leaked information to the IRA that led to two of Northern Ireland’s most senior police officers being assassinated.’108 This horror is also reminiscent of the drama that takes place in ‘Ghost Estate’. There are many more examples of such collusion and malpractice occurring in Ireland over decades which provides a rich seam for tension and drama. Community needs story to make sense of such horror and complicity. I suggest that reading different perspectives helps victims and citizens to heal, understand and forgive.

As Tony Murray points out: ‘Communities of origin, communities of destination and other communities encountered along the way, all affect (and are all affected by) the phenomenon of migration.’109 Frawley insightfully states that: ‘Even for the first-generation immigrant, though, there is a sense of having to construct cultural memory anew based on the lived experience of Ireland and the new country.’110 In ‘Black Beret Brigade’ you get a sense of this confused duality being played out through Ally’s thoughts and memories.

109 Murray, p.3.
110 Frawley, p.10.
He is ashamed. Ally strives to settle in and culturally adapt to London’s surroundings and his new set of circumstances:

Christ, this country’s destroying me was rattling through me head. And I’d only been in it twelve weeks. That’s what I kept saying to myself, back then. If the ones at home could’ve seen the cut of me, Jesus wept! A sixteen-stone-buck, suited-up-in-paddy-blue-pinstripe, slobbering on about hurling and the taste of praties, plonked in the middle of my gaff. And me: out of my shagging head, on drugs. They’d have been mortified!\footnote{Cusack, p.52.}

I have memories of being amongst tough, suited Irish men in smoky Irish clubs and pubs when I was a boy – invariably, a sing-song was never far away, either. Mining these formative memories helped inspire this section of narrative. Eugene’s persona was realised from being in the company of such Irish men. Proud looking men that propped up bars in pub and club; men who were hardened by remorseless toil on building sites that spanned the length and breadth of England.

However, memory becomes more problematic for some second-generation Irish. When they grow and develop, they recognise their duality and begin to nurture a ‘desire for Irishness.’\footnote{Aidan Arrowsmith ‘Imaginary Connections’, in Memory Ireland Volume 2: Diaspora and Memory Practices, ed. by Oona Frawley, pp. 12-23. (p.13).} Once they become aware of their roots, confusion kicks in. Some embrace this reaching out for Irish identity, some do not. They are caught between two cultures. The feeling of not belonging to one thing or the other disorientates the sense of self.

Aidan Arrowsmith argues that the second generation’s search for Irish authenticity is problematic. They have ‘imagined their connection to it,’\footnote{Ibid.} through the nostalgia that surrounds them – therefore such ‘imagined’ ‘connections’ are spurious because of this non-authentic cultural
appropriation. Arrowsmith suggests their claims to Irishness are ‘cliché’ ridden.\textsuperscript{114}

He links this search for Irish identity both to film and to Benedict Anderson’s empirical text \textit{Imagined Communities}. For Arrowsmith, ‘national identity is stereotypically little more than extensions of John Ford’s pastoral fantasy \textit{The Quiet Man} (1952).’\textsuperscript{115} Such notions of Irishness are riddled with cliché. As a boy I succumbed to this film’s nostalgia. Ford’s clichéd Irish caricatures and comedian Dave Allen’s work were seductive, I found, during my formative years, as I groped for a sense of identity. Frankly, my burgeoning Irish identity was largely ‘imagined’ from the diasporic Irish culture that surrounded me. My primary socialisation was Irish catholic and such harking back to \textit{the old country} was never far away. Indeed, Arrowsmith’s assertion resonates because it typifies the nostalgia to which I was exposed.

Arrowsmith’s critique reminded me of how my own nascent Irish identity started developing. I was regularly exposed to recitations, songs, music and dance at house parties. There were also repeats of John Ford’s film as well as annual holidays back \textit{home} to agrarian Ireland. They all played their part. I remember my father tuning into Ireland’s Radio Athlone all the time as a boy, which was always static and hiss, barely audible; a kind of analogy, perhaps, for my own \textit{inbetweeness} during those adolescent years, when I was trying to tune into my ‘Irishness.’ Being caught between two cultures is often confusing and makes you act irrationally. Proving who you were seemed important and vital. This proof was often demonstrated and displayed through Irish culture that was performed inside community: at dances or parties through demonstrations of dialect, song or recitation. Such conditional behaviours, I suggest, are the result of colonialism. Post-colonial writer Homi Bhabha cites Frantz Fanon in relation to this condition:

\begin{quote}
The colonial subject is always ‘over determined from without,’ Fanon writes. It is through image and fantasy – those orders that figure
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
transgressively on the borders of history and the unconscious – that Fanon most profoundly evokes the colonial condition.\textsuperscript{116}

These cringing memories of identity and this remembered sense of wannabee ‘Irishness’ creatively inspired ‘Ball-Ache’. Dermot goes to every Irish international soccer game. He is blinded by his loyalty to Ireland and goes to extraordinary lengths to get to every international game, to prove his Irishness. The subtext might be construed as Dermot continually trying to prove his Irish credentials through this blind loyalty. He realises he needs counselling to address his irrational behaviour, which could be viewed as another form of addiction:

That match in Paris – I mean… for once on our travels we’d managed to outplay a side – but we lost in the process. We’re used to out-singing and out-drinking them, but never outplaying them. When we’re belting out: ‘Come on, you boys in green’, there’s nothing like it.\textsuperscript{117}

My formative sense of Irishness was undoubtedly patriotic and romantic in nature. When I analyse it, now, undoubtedly, the dark days of conflict in the north of Ireland were always in the background. Arrowsmith acknowledges this impact on identity and memory as being a complex one; ‘A history of the meanings accrued by the signifier would be long and complicated, especially in the always fraught-context of Irishness in Britain.’\textsuperscript{118}

My parents’ memories and songs were stuck in time. They took a snap-shot of Ireland when they left in the 1950s, which in turn nourished my hybridity. And as I fell into subcultures, I took that sense of Irishness with me.

Ireland’s current president Michael D. Higgins succinctly articulates the importance of memory and how it played a part in forming Ireland by a ‘refashioning’ of ‘what it meant to be Irish’\textsuperscript{119} through global diasporic

\textsuperscript{117} Cusack, p.13.
\textsuperscript{118} Arrowsmith, p.13.
\textsuperscript{119} M. D. Higgins, When Ideas Matter: Speeches for an Ethical Republic (London: Head of Zeus, 2016), p.91.
contexts. These refashioned memories were fed back to the home country. And through this refashioning ‘served a grand purpose,’\textsuperscript{120} which eventually worked its way into the realisation of Irish nationhood. As Higgins suggests: ‘The impact of the Irish immigrant experience on Ireland itself was creative, profound and lasting. Modern Ireland was constructed as much in Edinburgh and New York as in Galway or Dublin.’\textsuperscript{121} Frawley further contextualises this evocative Irish memory refashioning from abroad:

\begin{quote}
In fact, it is possible that the symbolic, absent state of Irishness in Ireland was what contributed to its supreme ability to be symbolized and remembered with such fervour abroad: in a colonised country, any sense of national identity must be compromised, challenged.\textsuperscript{122}
\end{quote}

What Frawley suggests is that this exiled sense of Irishness and its traditions grew stronger when it left Ireland and was ready to nourish Ireland when needed. As Frawley asserts: ‘Irish cultural memory in the diaspora is displayed and performed’\textsuperscript{123} and Irish cultural recall is not something of which you happen to be a bearer of, but something which is performed and transmutable. And Irish performance through cultural memory is constantly in motion, globally. As Higgins states: ‘Only through the restoration of the integrity of individual histories, through the work of memory, can solid foundations for a shared, peaceful future take shape.’\textsuperscript{124} The Irish short story is part of that foundation and is well capable of capturing insights and gleaning knowledge from any quarter, no matter where.

\footnotesize
\begin{enumerate}
\itemsep-0.5em
\item \textsuperscript{120} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{121} Higgins, p.91.
\item \textsuperscript{122} Frawley, p.6.
\item \textsuperscript{123} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{124} Higgins, p.131.
\end{enumerate}
4. Irish Diasporic Communities

Everything will be done to wipe out their traditions, to substitute our language for theirs and to destroy their culture without giving them ours.

−Frantz Fanon\textsuperscript{125}

I first became aware of my Irish heritage and its difference in the late 1960s, when we moved from the inner-city Highfields area of Leicester to affluent Wigston, which is one of the many suburbs that surround Leicester. A new Catholic junior school had just opened its doors only half a mile from our new home. I remember being taunted by other children as we walked to that school: ‘Irish twats’ or ‘Catholic dogs’ would be shouted from the other side of the road, as older boys skipped along to their own school further in the village. It did not happen every day, but it happened. Their parents did not seem bothered and they gave us dirty looks, too.

Arguably, civil rights marches in the north of Ireland at the beginning of The Troubles contributed to this animosity. Liz Curtis states that the ‘regeneration of ancient prejudices’\textsuperscript{126} was also directed towards the Irish community living in England through the 1970s and 1980s. These lasted in one form or another until The Good Friday Agreement, which was signed in 1998. The anti-Irish joke thrived through these troubled times, which belittled and bothered me from time to time. Everyone you met seemed to have an arsenal of them to tell you. They were derogatory and widespread. Curtis argues that ‘Humour is seldom “just a joke”’\textsuperscript{127} and as we all know jokes are invariably loaded with subtext. Those jokes were racist in nature and manifested from a mistaken belief of superiority, which was the culture of the day. Arguably, ‘people laugh at the character’ portrayed within the Irish joke ‘because he is either incredibly stupid or self-deceived.’\textsuperscript{128} Such attitudes and

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{126} Liz Curtis et al. \textit{Nothing but the Same Old Story: The Roots of Anti-Irish Racism} (London: Information on Ireland, Box 189,1984), p.95.
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid, p.89.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.
\end{footnotesize}
beliefs are part of state ideology. It is dormant most of the time, but I suggest it comes into being when political and social circumstances shift.

Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek’s theories helped contextualise this way of thinking for me. He argues that ‘antagonism’ is societal. ‘Society blames the demons it has created for its own inevitable tensions.’ Targets of hate will always change with political expediency. Žižek states that society always ‘Believes that their elimination will make it whole’ again. Extreme examples of this litter history: The Holocaust, The Killing Fields, Islamic fundamentalism and the Irish. Žižek’s ‘ineradicable antagonism’ is inherent in human-nature. He views it as being a constant in society. It is always inside us, as we are always looking for a scapegoat. Community becomes that scapegoat for such antagonism. He suggests that theorists and societies need to ‘Take account of this “antagonism” instead of setting out to suppress it, in the way of totalitarianism, or trying to civilise it, as liberal democracy does.’

From experiencing and recognising elements of this ‘antagonism’ at various points of my life has creatively informed my writing practice. Demonising domestic targets, such as drug dealers, paedophiles, Irish scroungers in newspapers, documentaries and radio used to be normal. I remember many negative headlines concerning the Irish community, as I grew up.

Moreover, if Irish communities complained about anti-Irish jokes during that time they were ‘often accused of lacking a sense of humour.’ But I was never subjected to jokes about English people being scroungers, stupid or permanently drunk – never. I often wondered, why? When I heard people justifying Irish jokes in such a fashion, I felt ‘resented in some way’ by people’s laughter. I shrugged off the slights. The teller’s punch-lines were often wounding, especially if the teller knew I was from an Irish background – it always felt like a double whammy. Cathie Lloyd argues that, ‘Stereotypes

130 Ibid.
131 Ibid, p.96.
133 Ibid, p.103.
supported by “jokes” act as a sort of latent resource which is ready to be called up in irrational response to triggers at any given time.\(^{134}\) In my short story ‘Council Walla’ the second-generation Irish protagonist Aidan Murray walks in on colleagues talking about him inside the work’s depot where a stereotypical joke is played out and weaponised:

Then the nervous giggling started. It was obvious they’d been ranting on about him, which meant Kipper had offloaded his ace, but that wasn’t enough: ‘How do you confuse an Irishman?’ Kipper said, with real smarm. Silence. ‘Put him in front of two shovels and ask him to take his pick.’ The gang roared with laughter!\(^{135}\)

It could be argued that colonialism prospers with such weaponry stored in its arsenal. By reinforcing these stereotypes through its cultural apparatus, colonial power controls attitude and mindset. Colonial history suggests such tactics work when state ideology utilises such methods to maintain its power and interests. Cambridge anthropologist Edmund Leach backs up Lloyds’s assertions. He suggests Irish jokes act as an ideological vehicle for reinforcing stereotypes. Leach studied some ‘best-selling anti-Irish joke books’\(^{136}\) in detail, during the 1980s. He concluded that historically the ‘prototype of the stage Irish man’\(^{137}\) struts through these Irish jokes – time after time. He

is not so much a figure of fun as an object of contempt merging into deep hostility. He is a drink-addicted moron, reared in the bog, who wears his rubber boots at all times, cannot read or write, and constantly reverses the logic of ordinary common sense. His female counterpart


\(^{135}\) Cusack, p.27.

\(^{136}\) Curtis, et al. p.89.

\(^{137}\) Ibid.
shares the same qualities, except that she is sexually promiscuous, rather than perpetually drunk.\textsuperscript{138}

Leach's empirical research corroborates Frantz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre's post-colonial thinking concerning power and control of both the spiritual and physical self of the colonised subject. Musa Okwonga observes such ideology in motion in his personal essay on diasporic experience: 'I began to notice more and more that the very moment that immigrants were seen as contributing anything less than wholesomely to the national effort, they were viewed with contempt.'\textsuperscript{139} I feel from my own experience that Okwonga's observation of such a 'contempt' was directed at the Irish residing in England during the bloody civil strife of the 1970s and 1980s, when state ideology was operating unchecked. Okwonga further states that, 'It was as if, even though we had been born here, we were still seen as guests, our social acceptance only conditional upon our very best behaviour.'\textsuperscript{140}

Arguably, racial targets change because of events and circumstances, as Žižek suggests. You can see this 'ineradicable antagonism' operating within my stories. Where once the Irish were under the cosh, now it could be argued it is Muslim and Eastern European people who bear the brunt of this antagonism.

Karl Marx observed hatred between English and Irish workers back in the nineteenth century. He states, 'This antagonism among the proletarian of England is artificially nourished and supported by the bourgeoisie. It knows that scission is the true secret of maintaining power.'\textsuperscript{141} Cathie Lloyd argues that such 'scission' regarding anti-Irish feelings can be culturally weaponised through coded propaganda: TV, newspapers, books. Lloyd states that, 'Given the history of anti-Irish racism it is possible to see how such ideas persist (and possibly change) over long periods of time.'\textsuperscript{142} She argues that this

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{141} Lloyd, p.26.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.
propaganda is often codified in the form of ‘Cartoons and jokes, which, can act as a conduit (passive and active) for the production and reinforcement of racist beliefs which are reproduced over the generations.’

Talking with Irish community users about work and different working situations at The Emerald Centre partially inspired ‘Council Wallah’. Many of them commented on the hurt they felt when the Irish were always the butt of the joke. In ‘Council Wallah’ Aiden thinks about his work mates talking about him, in relation to racial assumptions, as these ideological positions start to come into the foreground. I wanted to explore how quickly racism can rise to the surface. I believe such ideological assumptions are expressed overtly when political situations and social circumstances change. Such change can invoke this ‘ineradicable antagonism’ which is often verbal and vindictive.

The short story, when it is at its best, can make these ideological fault-lines visible for us. It can capture snap-shots of ideology at work within family, community and the work-place. Dr Angela Maye-Banbury’s post-war research into Leicester’s Irish community suggests they were marginalised and powerless:

They were citizens on the margins and strangers in the shadows, occupying an ambiguous position whereby they were invited into some established settings to service ideological goals but were, for the most part, excluded from the professional classes.

French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser argues that ideology is everywhere. Colin Counsell and Laurie Wolf state that ‘for Althusser ideology first provides a distorted view of ourselves and our place in the world’ in that it ‘Represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.’ Althusser sees the ‘family’ and ‘community’ operating in ideological ways. Althusser states that the ‘family’ is an Ideological State

143 Ibid, p27.
Apparatus (ISA) and that these ISAs are plentiful and operating all around us. He theorises that ISAs are the realities that make up our world. These ISAs can be categorised: churches, schools, political institutions, trade unions, media and the arts.

In all my short stories you can see these ideological fault-lines coming into play. My stories deal with family, unions, media and the political arena. Althusser’s theory could be applied to them all in that the stories could be asking questions of the reader. What sort of society are we living in? Are we happy with our value systems? Do we really care? Is change possible?

Althusser viewed these ISAs operating in ‘private’, not in public ways, unlike The Repressive State Apparatus that is all too public.146

Terry Eagleton argues that fiction is also ideologically in flux as well. For Eagleton, ‘The text does not merely “take” ideological conflicts in order to “resolve” them aesthetically, for the character of those conflicts is itself overdetermined by the textual modes in which they are produced.’147 It is worth noting that the ‘incompleteness’ of the text is ideologically important for Eagleton: ‘The text is never at one with itself, for if it were it would have absolutely nothing to say.’148 The short-form demonstrates this incompleteness which is at a short story’s very core. Clare Hanson’s short story introduction states that:

The formal properties of the short story – disjunction, inconclusiveness obliquity – connect with its ideological marginality and with the fact that the form may be used to express something suppressed / repressed in mainstream literature.149

Hanson states that the short story ‘gives us the other side of the “official story.” ’150 For a community this is significant. I suggest the short story dramatizes hidden aspects of power and breaks down complex theoretical

146 Ibid.
148 Counsell and Wolf, p.36.
149 Hanson, p.6.
150 Ibid.
jargon. Marx’s sociological thinking and the inner workings of ideology can show up within narrative. Althusser’s ISAs are creatively explored in ‘The Bottle and the Trowel’. My narrative utilises the construction industry as its backdrop and Althusser’s ISAs are in evidence through trade unions, media and the arts that layer the narrative. Young Irishman Aidan is dealing with the aftermath of a work accident on a building site involving his Irish co-worker, Gerry. The management are apprehensive about Aidan’s concerns, as rules have been breached and short-cuts have been taken, by the construction firm he is working for. The safety officer remarks to Aidan: ‘You’ll never work in this town again, if you keep carrying on like this, me old chocolate tea pot.’ This implicit threat-cum-warning demonstrates Althusser’s ‘interpellation’ at play here through a series of ISAs that are interwoven through the work-place, which are there to remind Aidan of his position as ‘subject.’ Althusser states that:

Ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing. ‘Hey, you there!’

Althusser’s notion of ‘Interpellation’ reminds the individual that he is a subject through the ISA. Through specific social interaction like the one between Jerry and the safety officer, ideology is on display and implied through dialogue. Jerry’s identity is brought up; his position within the structure is held up to him. Althusser’s ideology functions to maintain state power. And for Althusser, its function is always unified. Althusser states ‘There is no ideology except by the subject for subjects.’ Despite its diversity and its contradictions power is always maintained through this unity.

151 Cusack, p.9.
Importantly, what maintains such unity and state power is the Repressive State Apparatus: army, police and courts, which Althusser theorises ‘functions by violence.’\(^{154}\) Together they enhance capitalism’s longevity by equipping populations with skills and behaviours that feed capitalism’s status quo. Linguist Noam Chomsky defined his notion of capitalism for Kevin Doyle in an interview conducted in 1995:

What is called “capitalism” is basically a system of corporate mercantilism, with huge and largely unaccountable private tyrannies exercising vast control over the economy, political systems, and social and cultural life, operating in close co-operation with powerful states that intervene massively in the domestic economy and international society.\(^{155}\)

Elements of Chomsky’s definition operate within ‘The Bottle and the Trowel’. The story was inspired by a notorious blacklist, which was operating throughout the UK building industry and through tireless campaigning ‘the existence of blacklisting in construction was revealed in 2009.’\(^{156}\) It culminated in a court case that dragged on for years, as these massive firms closed ranks. Finally, justice sided with the plaintiffs, who were eventually vindicated and were awarded compensation under ‘The Construction Workers Compensation Scheme.’\(^{157}\) Tradesmen had been victimised over many years; however, this scheme was viewed as contentious and tight fisted. Through creative writing I wanted to address this injustice and blacklisting happening in such a situation, as BBC news and other reporting soon fades.

Eagleton argues that the text, is ‘A process of becoming at one with itself – an attempt to overcome the problem of itself, a problem produced by the fact that the text itself is the production, rather than the reflection, of an ideological “solution.”’\(^{158}\) Either an ideology is ever present or the ‘not-said’ in

\(^{154}\) Ibid, p.36.
\(^{156}\) https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-28155936
\(^{157}\) Ibid.
the text is the prevailing ideology. For Eagleton the unsaid is the text’s real ideological core and he argues that the critic has the job of fathoming this out. The texts incompleteness is loaded with ideology that can be fathomed out. Eagleton states that text can ideologically define ‘separation,’ ‘absence’ and ‘contradiction’. He states that:

Ideology exists because there are certain things which must not be spoken of. In so putting ideology to work, the text begins to illuminate the absences which are the foundations of its articulate discourse. And in doing this it helps to ‘liberate’ us from the ideology of which that discourse is the product.159

Therefore, the short-form has the capability and the capacity to uncover newer meanings about life and community. Hidden power structures are illuminated when specific situations are dramatized. Highlighting real-life injustice in ‘The Bottle and the Trowel’ is an example of this liberation. Ideology is on show. The tradesmen that my story explores were based on Irish men or men of Irish descent who were notoriously blacklisted from projects across the UK. Blacklisted because they might have raised flagrant safety concerns or insisted regulations were adhered to. Companies ignore regulation when big penalty clauses kick in, especially if projects overrun. I have personally witnessed such breaches of safety law. Companies incur astronomical costs if a job runs over; so sometimes corners are cut, as reflected in my text: ‘I know they’re shitting their knickers over the Health and Safety Executive’s visit next week, Jerry.’160 Aiden confides this to his friend who is seriously hurt, from an accident on site caused by negligence. ‘Now the bastards want me to lie about the board. They want me to sign a fecking form. Cunts.’161 When bourgeois interests’ are threatened, vested interests’ close ranks to maintain power and wealth. Creating ‘scission’ is a bourgeois tool that is used to maintain power and exert control, Marx argued, which is reflected in this story through its dramatic dialogue.

159 Ibid.
160 Cusack, p.4.
161 Ibid.
Community: interrogative text

In February 2018, with the support of The Emerald Centre, I co-ordinated a script reading of a play by Jimmy Murphy called *The Kings of the Kilburn High Road* (2001). An Irish elder by the name of Jimmy Finnegan asked me to source a play for them to read. The dialogue in Murphy’s play is darkly comic and deals with diaspora, drink and work. It is set at a wake, where five burly Irish men gather in a pub in 1980s London to pay their respects to a dead friend, whose coffin is being flown back to Ireland that same day. And as they drink, inevitably their masks slip. They, too, talk about going home, but home has changed; they are in a state of denial; return is just talk. Murphy dramatizes the dysfunctional lives of Irish men who have worked on construction sites for years on end. It spells out the dilemmas, pretence and the rituals of what return means to these men.

GIT: Well I’m definitely not goin’ back so! Fuck that, the shit, the abuse we went through.

JAP: That's only ‘cause we were Paddies.

GIT: An’ what’ll we be back over there.

JAP: Hah?

GIT: We’ll be as much strange fish over there as we were an’ we settin’

foot off’a the boat here for the first time.

JAP: Hang on Git, maybe I’ve confused yeh. It’s Ireland I’m talking about, not Timbuck-fuckin-too!  

162 Jim Murphy, *The Kings of the Kilburn High Road* (London: Oberon, 2001).
163 Ibid, p.22.
The only way back to Ireland for these men, now, is in a box, which is the implication that is left hanging. Murphy’s characters talk about the possibility of return, but it is only beer talk. And deep down, they know their fates are sealed. Their banter hides less and less as their drinking increases through the evening.

I read the play with five staunch Irish elders from the community. These men were not used to sight reading and had no experience of performance or play reading of any sort. But every one of them had a tale to tell when we put the scripts down. They talked about people they had socialised or worked with over the years. Irish people they had once known well. Men who had fallen on hard times, just like Murphy’s characters. It was a memorable exchange. I first read this play in 2010 and it influenced my protagonist in ‘Mountain Men’ somewhat, as my protagonist Tommy Giblin mirrors the character profiles that are scripted in Murphy’s play. Also, my plot shares similar tropes: Tommy left Ireland for England; he worked on construction sites and lost contact with Ireland, as Murphy’s characters certainly have in The Kings of the Kilburn High Road.

Banbury points out the realities of existence for post-war Irish men who hailed from Leicester’s Irish community:

In the words of Foucault (2006: 11), they were prisoners ‘in the midst of the ultimate freedom, on the most open road of all, chained solidly to the infinite crossroads.’ On the one hand, as their services were called upon by the political economy, notably in low-skilled, manual labouring positions, the city of Leicester invited them in. On the other, they were imprisoned by a form of colonial Otherness, manifested in a racialisation of their migrant labour.164

Tommy Giblin is chiselled from the same stone as Murphy’s men but situated in a Leicester setting. Jimmy Murphy’s 2016 interview in the Irish

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164 Maye-Banbury, p.129.

166 Ibid.

167 Cusack, pp.59-60.
to render differing experiences of the diasporic condition.'

The men that inhabit these books are the same men that inhabit Murphy’s drama and inhabit my stories. Murray states that these Irish men were once ‘a familiar sight on the streets and building sites’ of English cities. And to a large degree, they remained ‘a hidden and somewhat mysterious sub-sector’ of a city’s ‘population in the post-war years.’

I remember seeing Irish men in 1970s Leicester wearing dirty suit jackets and work boots; Irish men belonging to work gangs laying slabs and kerbs; men being paid in pubs on Friday nights; men at Irish dances still wearing their work clothes.

In Frank O’Connor’s essay ‘The Lonely Voice’ he discusses the short story in terms of a ‘submerged population group’, which fits the representations of Irish life portrayed throughout my collection. O’Connor also makes an important distinction between the novel’s reach and the short story’s aesthetic. He states that in the short story, ‘A whole lifetime must be crowded into a few minutes, those minutes must be carefully chosen indeed and lit by an unearthly glow, one that enables us to distinguish past and future as though they were all contemporaneous.’

O’Connor states the short story writer must be much ‘more of a dramatist’ than the novelist to capture that unique snap-shot of life. He also asserts that the short story by its very nature is ‘romantic, individualistic and intransigent.’ My subject matter and the tone of my material in ‘The Bottle and The Trowel’, ‘Mountain Men’ and ‘Black Beret Brigade’ encapsulate the qualities O’Connor discusses, as I have tried to capture the drama and aloofness for which the short story is renowned.

But good dialogue is required to dramatize the essence of this ‘sub-sector’ of Irish men that I write about and Tom Murray identifies in London Irish Fictions: Narrative, Diaspora and Identity. Indeed, these men reminded me of older Irish men that I had once worked with in Leicester and socialised
with in The Harp Club in New Cross down in London. It shut its doors years ago but features in ‘Black Beret Brigade’ because of its uniqueness.

Jim Murphy dramatized these men as they entered their twilight years within *The Kings of the Kilburn High Road* and this has creatively fed into my writing practice. Significantly, when his play resurfaced in 2016, Murphy noticed that Irish culture seemed to have shifted – this once visible Irish ‘sub-sector’ in the English city was in sharp decline and these men were literally a dying breed: often dying alone – in abject poverty. The work they used to do had vanished because of the advance of hydraulics and technology, which may have driven many to drink. Murphy’s men and the men I write about represent and symbolise the death of that first generation, which my stories explore and pay homage, too. Murphy states that:

> in the bars and sites of Kilburn, they found shelter, from whatever it was. Either way, they’re all gone now, the Kilburn High Road isn’t what it was and you’ll be hard pushed to see a Paddy these days, sober or drunk, the length and breadth of it. All that’s left are their stories, and for that we’re all the richer.\(^{175}\)

Murphy articulates this urban landscape where my stories take shape: pub, site, club and Catholic mass. These men’s vital stories need telling and their sons’ and daughters’ stories need telling, too. I realised some years ago that Irish working-class narratives are scarce. I felt that their lives and their community needed fictionally addressing and their contribution to society acknowledging.

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5. Addiction and the Irish

Drinking in Ireland is not simply a convivial pastime; it is a ritualistic alternative to real life, a spiritual placebo, a fumble for eternity, a longing for heaven, a thirst for return to the embrace of the Almighty.

−John Waters\textsuperscript{176}

The Irish are renowned for drinking – indeed the Irish pub is a welcoming place: replicas of it adorn the world, but many Irish scoff at such renown. They take umbrage to these replicas, duplications, depictions and caricatures of themselves. However, Garrett O’Connor states that there is evidence to suggest this stereotype is grounded in fact: ‘A 2009 Irish Health Board Report showed that 54 percent of respondents (about 2.14 million adults out of a population of 4.2 million) engage in harmful or risky drinking each year, compared to a European average of 28 percent.’ Irish journalist John Waters sees ‘evidence of a deep hole in the Irish psyche which only alcohol can fill.’\textsuperscript{177} Paul Muldoon cuts through the maze of statistics with aplomb in his reflective essay on alcohol and Ireland:

A much more realistic statistic may be garnered from the list of rules for attendees of the three-day Electric Picnic music festival in 2008. ‘The admission of alcohol into the event site,’ we’re instructed ‘will be limited to 48 cans per person.’ Then comes the admonition to ‘Please use alcohol in moderation.’\textsuperscript{178}

Alcohol and drug use are prominent themes throughout this collection, which attempts to fictionally explore this ‘deep hole in the Irish psyche’. Utilising alcohol and recreational drug use as themes helped me highlight the social damage they inflict on community. Reflecting on my own alcohol


\textsuperscript{177} Ibid.

experience helped spark ideas for narrative. When I lived in London, for example, I used to use launderettes regularly to wash my clothes during my stay in Brixton in the 1980s. That is where I witnessed manic behaviour: habitual street drinking and recreational drug use. It was invariably sad and funny to witness such behaviour happening around me. These experiences are hard-wired in my memory. Gibson states that

An experience is a dynamic and complex system that must be known through engagement with the system’s organising tendencies and through attentiveness to the entropy and change also coursing through it.\(^{179}\)

I was very conscious of such past experiences when I constructed ‘The Bottle and the Trowel’. Writing this alcoholic raw experience out of the self into art through ‘The Bottle and the Trowel’ was painful. Alcohol has impacted on my life, also. But involvement with community has helped me, realistically, to transfer the horrors of addiction into narrative.

Besides, I wanted to highlight the derelict condition and the human cost of failed economic policy, as well. My inside-outside position of artist-researcher helped in this regard, too. I wanted the reader to know that the protagonist might be looking at his future self. When Lorcan is observing the two derelict drunks in the launderette, he ironically says to Jerry: ‘No wonder there’s so many Irish piss-heads roaming this town like lost wildebeests.’\(^{180}\)

Lorcan’s monologue in ‘The Bottle and the Trowel’ refers to Ireland’s economic crash and the fall of Ireland’s Celtic Tiger economy, which roared from the 1990s and crashed spectacularly in 2008. Ireland’s crash precipitated massive emigration of youth and caused untold misery and it also left countless housing estates unfinished and abandoned. These so called ‘ghost estates’ were visible scars, reminders of Ireland's mighty crash. In the space of a few years the country turned itself from Europe's miracle into its economic basket-case. Germany commented that it was not going to pay the

\(^{179}\) Gibson, p.5.
\(^{180}\) Cusack, p.3.
bill for Ireland’s party, in the aftermath of Ireland’s economic crash. Historian and critic Fintan O’Toole commented that ‘The European Commission in Brussels publicly rebuked the Irish government for failing to control the public finances during the boom years.’\textsuperscript{181} Garrett O’Connor makes an important connection with colonialism regarding Ireland’s economic train wreck:

the ghost of colonialism back in the guise of unemployment, eviction, forced emigration and unconscionable national debt which has, once again, plunged large segments of the Irish population into a state of terror, despair and cultural malignant shame not seen since the post-famine years of the mid-nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{182}

Such history impacts on the present, O’Connor argues. He suggests that part of Ireland’s propensity towards drink ‘has been carried down in the Irish cultural-DNA as a sort of unspoken dispensation for Irish Catholics to regard hard drinking as a justifiable consolation for 400 years of extreme poverty, shame, starvation and persecution.’\textsuperscript{183}

Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiong’o puts such historical baggage into brutal perspective.

But the biggest weapon wielded and daily unleashed by imperialism against the collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of the cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves.\textsuperscript{184}

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\textsuperscript{182} O’Connor, <http://irishamerica.com/2012/01/breaking-the-code-of-silence-the-irish-and-drink/> \textsuperscript{183} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
I suggest fallout from this ‘cultural bomb’ is still being felt by the Irish and it manifests itself through risky behaviours. And I write with these *behaviours* in the front of my mind regarding my creative practice.

Eugene rants about this hidden shame in ‘Black Beret Brigade’. Ireland’s recent political, institutional and economic shame are also tackled in ‘The Bottle and the Trowel’, ‘Ghost Estate’ and ‘Strays’. These were constructed in direct response to revelations concerning abuse, shame, silence and massive corruption throughout Ireland, which has been happening over many decades. Now we are trying to make sense of it.

But how can such ancient suffering and recent shame affect modern Irish people? O’Connor states that it manifests itself through ‘cultural malignant shame’, which leads to this predisposition to drink and other risky behaviours. O’Connor argues that ‘chronic fear, suppressed rage, self-loathing, procrastination, low self-esteem, false pride and a vulnerability to use alcohol as remission for suffering – past and present,’ are all part of the Irish-condition. In other words, O’Connor is stating that the Irish use alcohol as a national coping mechanism. Socially documenting this condition is paramount to understanding alcohol use. When these histories inform narratives, they impact on the present. We can learn from them. For Muldoon, Ireland’s relationship with alcohol has ‘became the order of the day in so many Irish families and, in terms of Irish cultural memory, has itself become a topic on which we have long kept silent, suppressed our true feelings.’ Such ‘silence’ begs understanding through creative engagement and original narrative. It is worth reiterating that the short-form increases understanding and contributes to intellectual discussion.

Ireland and the UK are still locked in a symbiotic relationship. Arguably, imperial and colonial tactics were tried, tested and perfected in Ireland over hundreds of years and are still impacting on Irish people. After all text was in the hands of the coloniser for centuries. As Abdul Jan Mohamed theorises, ‘The dominant model of power and interest-relations in all colonial societies is the manichean opposition between the putative superiority of the European

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186 Muldoon, ‘Getting the Measure of Treasure Island’, p.249.
and the supposed inferiority of the native.’ If you are told something for long enough, you start to believe it. Mohamed’s post-colonial thinking regarding his ‘imaginary binary’, which draws on Lacan’s psychoanalytical work that theorises that the coloniser perceives the colonised in the ‘form of dichotomised pairs: subject versus object, self-versus other’ and so on. I suggest Ireland and its people once fitted this binary model and its impact is still being felt subliminally, symbolically and epigenetically. As Mohamed theorises about the:

central feature of the coloniser cognitive framework and colonist literary representation: the manichean allegory – a field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between white and black, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilisation and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality, self and Other, subject and object.”

This array of binaries still haunts the Irish from its colonial heritage, it could be argued. And it could be said that these historic binaries have an epigenetic impact on mind and body. Muldoon cites William J. Smyth’s harrowing testimony of ‘trauma of conquest and plantation’ from centuries ago in Muldoon’s essay on alcohol where he contextualises how the past still impacts on the Irish. Smyth’s voice still resonates from those brutal times, long ago:

Levels of repression, shaming and humiliation invariably shaped a range of long-lasting cultural responses. The oppressive environment that came with military and legal rule brought with it the lifesaving need

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187 Counsell and Wolf, p.99.
188 Ibid.
189 Ibid, p97.
of not speaking up, the fear of confrontation, the dread of persecution from a whole panoply of laws.\textsuperscript{190}

Such experience of past horror is locked in the cultural DNA of the Irish, O’Connor and Muldoon assert. And Frantz Fanon states that the coloniser’s ‘most horrible’ crime ‘was committed in the heart of man and consisted of the pathological tearing apart of his functions and the crumbling away of his unity.’\textsuperscript{191} Fanon backs up what O’Connor and Muldoon suggest about alcohol, drug abuse and other addictions regarding the Irish experience. Such epigenetic musing does not seem that outlandish when historical contexts are considered.

In ‘Mountain Men’ recreational alcohol and drug indulgence feature as a major theme. Tommy’s youth in Ireland is explored through Matt’s ketamine experience. Through hallucination the reader is offered other reasons why people might have left Ireland to work in England. The reader is also privy to Matt’s hallucinatory experience and witnesses his horror as his trip veers out of control. Matt loses all his coordination when ketamine takes hold of him in a frightening way. His hallucination takes him to Tommy’s boyhood home in Ireland. Violence is meted out in public view: ‘Tommy’s beating in front of Dingle’s finest. “You won’t leave it open again will ye,” his father kept shouting, as he belted and belted him on that windy field. “I can see why you left, now,” Matt said.’\textsuperscript{192} It could be construed that ‘Mountain Men’ acts as a literary reminder to community and the wider world that men belonging to Tommy’s generation exist but are on the wane. Men like Tommy left Ireland in their droves in the 1940s and 1950s for all sorts of reasons, mainly in search of a better life. Not all were successful: some of these men fell through the cracks.

The ketamine scene was partly inspired by Irvine Welsh’s drug fuelled-writing in \textit{The Acid House} (1994). Welsh’s collection of short stories is rooted in working class angst and urban-realism. The stories were published after his

\textsuperscript{190} Muldoon, p.248.
\textsuperscript{191} Fanon, p.254.
\textsuperscript{192} Cusack, pp.44-45.
notorious novel *Trainspotting* (1993). Welsh’s text exudes a certain post-colonial resonance, which broke new ground in the early 90s. ‘THE ACID HOUSE’, the collection’s title story, is bold and experimental with page after page filled with capital-text and text boxes, which surreally maximises the story’s effect:

LIGHT LIGHT LIGHT LIGHT LIGHT LIGHT LIGHT
LIGHT LIGHT LIGHT LIGHT LIGHT LIGHT LIGHT
LIGHT LIGHT LIGHT LIGHT LIGHT LIGHT LIGHT

Welsh’s textual experimentation influenced the way I approached text in ‘Black Beret Brigade’. His story gave me the confidence to take licence with convention and explore a different approach to form, narrative and a willingness to experiment with format. I wanted to convey the immediacy of being caught up in a terrorist atrocity. Portraying the shock and horror as the brain tries to make sense of the initial pandemonium of an explosion’s aftermath. And this became my springboard for examining a formative moment in the life of my protagonist.

… *Democracy my friends, democracy*…

  tumble dryer

  Can’t breathe properly,

  My ears are spurting blood

  What a WHOUSH

  I’ve been...

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Welsh utilises repetition in ‘THE ACID HOUSE’ through this interspersing of text boxes. He utilises them page after page for effect. It textually captures Coco Bryce’s LSD trip in a park. He is struck by lightning – at the exact time Jenny Moore is giving birth a few miles away. Surreally, a switch takes place and Coco’s personality miraculously inhabits Jenny’s new born baby and the baby’s personality inhabits Coco Bryce. As this is happening Coco says: ‘This fucking gear isnae real. Eftir ah come down, that’s it, that’s me fuckin well finished!’

Coco’s hallucinations are not dissimilar to Matt’s in ‘Mountain Men’. They both experience a bad trip. “I’m Astral-fucking travelling through a shit-hole,” Matt wailed. Matt consumes recreational drugs at weekends in the same way Coco does. But Matt is in a responsible position: ‘The horrors of the job sometimes played on his mind. Maybe that was down to the K he sniffed most weekends, though.’ By contrast, Coco is a football hooligan recreationally taking LSD: ‘…one ay the Hibs boys. Coco Fucking Bryce, ya radge…’ Arguably, they are representative of hundreds of thousands who recreationally indulge in narcotics across the UK today, but such reality is seldom fictionalised.

My past interactions with alcohol and drug recovery clients, whilst volunteering at The Emerald Centre, helped inspire material when it came to the writing of this section. The Centre has worked with alcohol and drug recovery services before. A client came in all bruised up with stitches in his forehead in 2014: ‘I was Kaying my tits off! I had a fight with this car, and I lost,’ Cam said, laughing his head off. Then he told us about his awful night on

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194 Cusack, p.47.
195 Welsh, p.155.
196 Cusack, p.39.
197 Ibid, p.41.
198 Welsh, p.154.
Ketamine. ‘I went down the K-Hole, man, it was fucking terrible, I'll never do that shit again,’ he said. Recollecting some of these crazy conversations with recovery clients at The Emerald Centre ignited ideas when I wrote about ketamine and its effects.

Liam Greenslade suggests in his research concerning psychological distress among the Irish in Britain that, ‘Alcoholism, depression and schizophrenia constitute the largest problem areas met by Irish people in Britain.’ 199 Feelings of ‘Loneliness and isolation even within the Irish community’ 200 are not an unusual phenomenon. Frank O’ Connor’s essay ‘The Lonely Voice’ suggests that the short story can articulate this ‘attitude of mind that is attracted by submerged population groups, whatever these may be at any given time – tramps, artists, lonely idealists and spoiled priests. 201 Irish drunks, abusers or drug addicts and the mentally ill could be added, if we wanted to contemporise O’ Connor’s list for the 21st century.

Greenslade also draws on Frantz Fanon’s analysis regarding mental health and colonialism’s legacy, which is clearly fertile territory for the creative writer:

At every level the colonized subject is induced to devalue his or her own culture and adopt the values of the colonial power. S/he is confronted by a series of dichotomies that oppose the positive qualities of the Other (the colonial) with the negative qualities of the self. 202

Shame is part of an Irish migrant’s make-up, as I have already argued. Survivor’s shame is one facet which I have dramatized. It could be said that this shame is part of an Irish person’s psychopathological disposition. Greenslade asserts that the Irish are ‘tinged by an historical sense of inferiority’ 203 concerning their identity, which arbitrarily impacts on them:

199 Greenslade, pp. 201-225. (p.218).
200 Ibid.
202 Greenslade, p.213.
203 Ibid.
because of the cultural, political and ideological effects of colonial history, no Irish person, migrant or not, has a full cultural or existential sense of “being for oneself” and thus every Irish person is potentially subject to psychological pathology. 204

Greenslade also suggests ‘psychological distress’ is inherent in Irish identity too, and considers that ‘its realisation is dependent largely upon factors outside the individual migrant’s control, as is its simultaneous substantiation in the psyche, conscious or unconscious, of every Irish person.’ 205 Greenslade’s ‘psychological distress’ and O’Connor’s ‘cultural malignant shame’ feature in many of these stories, particularly in ‘Black Beret Brigade’, ‘Down Town’, ‘Mountain Men’, ‘Ball-ache’ and ‘The Bottle and The Trowel’. They demonstrate how critical research informs fiction both explicitly and implicitly as it reflects ‘post-colonial’ theory and theorising in fictional terms. It generates newer meaning through creative practice. Theory informs story and the short story shows the visible workings of theory in textual motion. Dramatizing characters in tension, speaking dialogue to each other, governed by circumstance, shows up power dynamics, ideology, psychology, sociology and philosophy, eking out newer understandings. Short story writer Jenn Ashworth states: ‘A really great short story doesn’t lead us by the nose; it provides us with the essentials and sends us on a journey.’ 206 It asks the reader to think about that journey and learn from it.

204 Ibid, p.219.
205 Ibid.
6. Musical Identity

Irish traditional music can be seen as a weather vane for cultural debates in Ireland over modernity, tradition and the past.

– Ona Frawley

In ‘Ball-Ache’, ‘The Bottle and the Trowel’, ‘Mountain Men’, ‘Black Beret Brigade’ and ‘Usher’s Well’, Irish traditional music and song are integral to the stories. Song and tune have been sewn into my narratives because Irish musical tradition reflects and refracts the cultural soul of Irish community. The past is ever present, Frawley observes:

When the Irish language lost its centrality to Irish culture under the impact of the Famine and massive emigration, music stepped into the breach to embody modes of cultural memory eclipsed by the displacement of the Irish language and its culture.

Irish music and song act as a cultural memory-bank and folk-connector. When traditional music is performed in diasporic contexts, it provides a direct cultural conduit back to Ireland. Frawley comments that Irish music is a ‘container of cultural memory.’ Irish traditional music has a ‘quality of pastness’ which is intrinsic to it. Steve Coleman’s anthropological examination of the ‘non-synchronous’ aspects of traditional music suggests it exists ‘in multiple time frames’ both ‘invoking and bearing the past, while actively transforming it in the present.’ Coleman points out that Irish traditional sound can be ‘interpreted as embodying history and memory, through the performance over time of that which is perceived as rooted in the past.’

This idea of music being ‘rooted in the past’ is contentious because

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207 Frawley, p.133.
208 Ibid, p.132.
209 Ibid.
210 Ibid.
211 Ibid.
212 Ibid.
this very quality that is built into Irish music, acts as its constant, which is both prized and contested.

In ‘Usher’s Well’ I explore the snobbery and protectiveness that exist within certain Irish traditional circles. Irish traditional music or song composed today has a *pastness* which is integral to its form. If you listened to a tune it would be hard to distinguish if it was composed three hundred years ago or if it was composed yesterday. Coleman argues that ‘

> These two modes of listening necessarily co-exist for the Irish traditional musician, which puts her or his practice at odds with modernist sensibility. Irish music is both valorised and denigrated as belonging to the past, existing in more than one time, even at the time of performance.\(^{213}\)

Moreover, the Irish traditional scene has all sorts of spoken and unspoken etiquette and codes that operate within it. I set out to explore these codes, values and traditional sensitivities, for tension and possible dramas. My recollections of past interaction with musicians, over many years of sitting in sessions throughout Ireland and England triggered creative thoughts for story-lines. Also, participating in Irish cultural activities at The Emerald Centre, such as Comhaltas sessions, proved beneficial. Comhaltas is part of a national organisation referred to as Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, which strives to preserve and promote Irish traditional music by nurturing and mentoring musicians of all abilities. I soon recognised musicians and purists feel precious about this ‘quality of pastness’ and realised I could extrapolate such tensions and explore these feelings within the short-form.

I did this during the construction of ‘Usher’s Well’ which probes such sensitivities, conversationally, from a musician’s perspective. Davey gripes that he has sold out Irish tradition, which he partially regrets, whilst still living the good life on his advertisement royalties. Davey experiences this guilt because of the sacred way *tradition* is revered in Irish circles. He is removed

from its centre. Davey feels the symbolic weight of musical heritage and the past bearing down on him. Davey is profoundly affected by his return to Ireland and his reception in Claire by native Irish traditional musicians, who scoff at his success, and this irks him.

Stuart Hall discusses *identity* in his post-colonial writing on culture: ‘Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation.’  

Davey has been away from Ireland for years. He is seen by his fellow traditional musicians in Ireland as *other* because he has exiled himself in England. And he has also commercially collaborated with a hybrid tune that is anathema to them and the tradition.

Because Davey has been in England for so long, he does not consciously feel the subtle influence of the coloniser working on him. Hall argues that our cultural identities are ‘far from being eternally fixed in some essentialist past, they are subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power.’  

I suggest this ‘play’ is working on Davey, in several ways. Michel Foucault argued that power is more effective when it is hidden from view. Another example of Davey’s assimilation and how his *otherness* is portrayed is in the way his speech has cockneyfied: ‘Aye, one for the frog and toad.’

And this is an example of speaking the tongue of the coloniser and the immigrant bowing to what Hall sees as ‘the coloniser’s power to make us see and experience ourselves as ‘Other’. His music is seen as ‘other’ as well.

Another musical influence that helped me come to terms with my second-generation Irish identity was The Pogues. But their ‘rabble rousing music’ caused consternation in Ireland and they were vilified in Irish traditional circles. Sean Campbell argues that The Pogues ‘allowed the second generation to find expression’ instead of causing aggravation and it demonstrated that Irish migrants were not ‘thugs or weirdos.’  

Members of the band would say that their live performances ‘functioned as a pressure

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215 Ibid.
216 Cusack, p.69.
valve in which another “supressed” identity could be discharged.218 I identify with these sentiments, totally. But the purists had other things to say about such discharge. Tommy Makem, a doyen in Irish traditional circles, hated the Pogues and articulated his contempt for them in political terms:

You see, Irish culture was getting extremely popular (in the 1980s), and Mrs Thatcher’s government knew it – now this is my own view – but I am convinced they were released to do as much damage as they could to Irish culture. And they managed to do more damage than the British government ever could.219

Reflecting on these musical influences, and on the powerful draw traditional music has had on me over the years, informed and influenced the way I approached the narrative of ‘Usher’s Well’.

One song that was always sung in our household was Irish/American Teresa Brayton’s ‘The Old Bog Road’ which is a great example of Irish homesickness and Irish nostalgia. On many occasions it was sung during house parties or when we were out in a club or in a pub or at a dance. This song ‘still is a popular song with Irish immigrants.’220 What makes it so endearing and enduring is that: ‘It could relate to any old road in any county across Ireland thus making it popular among Irish people in places like Boston or Melbourne, Montreal or London, who find themselves far from their own bog road.’221 These Irish exile songs rebounded back to Ireland and Britain and became popular because they reflected the feelings of Irish people scattered across the globe. As writer and musician Ciaran Carson states: ‘The music is concerned with conversation, crack, diversion, passing the time. It is about being in one place at one time and remembering all the other times.’222

218 Ibid.
219 Ibid, p.81.
221 Ibid.
Byrne cites historian Thomas Brown’s remark that the Irish are ‘The most homesick of all immigrants’\(^2\)\(^2\)\(^3\) and countless popular songs and tunes stand testimony to this yearning. It is in the pub or tavern where this tradition is often enacted. And this has been politically significant, as Frawley states: ‘Ballads became containers and transmitters of a nationalist cultural memory.’\(^2\)\(^2\)\(^4\) Undoubtedly, these songs and tunes radiated to wider communities as they travelled back and forth. Frawley points out that Irish traditional music ‘crosses between Irish and English languages, the past and the present, oral and written traditions’ and lives on and thrives through ‘anecdote and oral narrative.’\(^2\)\(^2\)\(^5\) Orality and banter as well as anecdote fire the tradition. Verbal jousting is a staple during any informal music session, where funny stories, jokes and histories are exchanged. Something like this might be expressed between tunes:

An old West Clare fiddler remarked on hearing the news of a local old lady who had recently taken to learning the fiddle: She has a lot of tunes in her head. And the fiddler replied: Yes, and wouldn’t it be great if they stayed there.\(^2\)\(^2\)\(^6\)

Irish musicians have travelled back and forth to America depositing and collecting traditional songs whilst collecting new tunes from other cultures, which they absorbed, thus enriching the Irish tradition further. Steve Coleman argues Irish-trad music ‘is desired as a humanising corrective to modernity’s excesses.’\(^2\)\(^2\)\(^7\) It is universally recognisable. Irish-American nostalgia regarding its intense yearning for home played its part in fuelling this Irish cultural contagion. It could be said now that Irish culture acts as a sort of meta-culture for the wider world: St Patrick’s Day, Riverdance, Irish traditional dance, the Irish pub, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. This traditional transcendence

\(^{223}\) J. P. Byrne, ‘Cultural Memory, Identity and Irish-American Nostalgia’ in Memory Ireland Volume 2: Diaspora and Memory Practices, pp. 49-60. (p.57).
\(^{224}\) Ibid, p.132.
\(^{225}\) Ibid.
\(^{226}\) ‘The Session is a community web site dedicated to Irish traditional music’: <https://thesession.org/discussions/20661> [Accessed on 11/9/2018].
and cultural appropriation stem from generation upon generation of people leaving Ireland.

Utilising traditional sources wherever I could, gave me the means to authenticate, layer and contextualise my narrative. I slotted an extract from the Irish song: ‘Rocky Road to Dublin’ within ‘The Bottle and the Trowel’. I did this because it is less sentimental than other exile songs. It has a pugnacious quality to it. Moreover, it resonates with the pain of leaving Ireland, but in much darker, masculine terms. Such a song takes a competent singer to sing it, which surprises the protagonist, Lorcan. He recounts this psychotic episode to his friend, Jerry, who is seriously ill in hospital:

Then the crazy fecker started singing.

*Then off to reap the corn and leave where I was born*
*Cut a stout blackthorn to banish ghosts and goblin*
*Brand new pair of brogues to rattle o’er the bogs*
*And frighten all the dogs on the rocky road to Dublin.*

What a voice. The finest of airs on him. Mick-Mack rattled it off, better than the shagging Dubliners. One Flew Over the fecking Laundrette, Jerry. Mad or what? 228

James Joyce also utilised snippets of ‘Rocky Road to Dublin’ in his modernist masterpiece *Ulysses*. Joyce’s revolutionary use of his new literary device, ‘stream of consciousness’ underpins swathes of the novel’s text. In chapter two, commonly referred to as the ‘Nestor’ section, the bigoted headmaster Mr Deasy internally hums its chorus to teacher Stephen Dedalus, as they talk:

*‘Lal the ral the ra*
*The rocky road to Dublin*

228 Cusack, p.10.
A gruff squire on horseback with shiny topboots
Soft day, sir John. Soft day, your honour ... Day Day ... Two topboots jog dangling on to Dublin. Lal the ral the ra, lal the ral the raddy.'\textsuperscript{229}

\textit{Ulysses} is littered with snatches of popular song and operatic pieces from that period and before it. Frawley states that ‘one way of reading \textit{Ulysses}, then, is to see it as a reflection of a process of cultural memory that had happened in Ireland as a result of the demise of Irish in the mid-late nineteenth century.'\textsuperscript{230} It could be construed that Joyce is piecing together fragments of cultural memory to benefit future community. ‘Cultural memory’ survives ‘because of the active and archival intervention’\textsuperscript{231} of word-memory transfer through text. This abundant transfer survives through Joyce’s novel: geographically, musically and sociologically. It permits the ‘migration of memories across space and time’\textsuperscript{232} which lends the reader a real sense of Joyce’s cultural period, before the famine and post-famine.

Through insertion of music and song within my stories I am also reconstructing disparate snatches of memory, culture and voices of ‘submerged’ Irish community and putting them back together again through the short story. There is no denying that when Irish songs are performed, they reinforce and transfer notions of pastness and resound with this sense of Irishness that in many ways is very inclusive.

\textsuperscript{230}Frawley, p.131.
\textsuperscript{231}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{232}Ibid.
7. Literature Review: Reading is Writing

Short Stories

The wonder of the short story – not to mention its unique political power – lies in its pluralism, its sheer variety and flexibility as a form.

−Ra Page\(^{233}\)

In this review I am going to concentrate on specific primary texts that have caught my attention and will act as case studies. I have read widely over many years leading up to this point of study. These selected primary texts are the ones that fed directly into my creative writing practice. David Morley states that, ‘Imitation and influence are not anxieties; they are your early allies. Be open to influence and even ready to steal from other writers.’\(^{234}\)

Edna has influenced my stories. Her trilogy *The Country Girls* (1960) controversially blazed a trail in the 1960s. Writer John Banville’s introduction to O’Brien’s *Selected Stories: The Love Object* (2013) states that, ‘The mark of a genius writer is an ability to burrow deep into the consciousness of a disparate cast of personalities.’\(^{235}\) O’Brien’s short stories are renowned for their insight into Irish community; leaving community and a coming to terms with new communities. She certainly explores all three in the story ‘Shovel Kings’, which is in *Saints and Sinners* published in 2011. She mines loneliness and exile with precision. Her depiction of the character Rafferty is recognisable and symbolises marginal Irish life, lived in England. Banville points out that ‘Shovel Kings’ portrays (diasporic experience) ‘with accuracy and aching sympathy the grindingly harsh lives of Irish navvies who dug the foundations for the rebuilding of post-war Britain.’\(^{236}\) O’Brien’s navvy theme permeates through this thesis.

\(^{234}\) Morley, p.91.
\(^{236}\) Ibid.
What I admire in this story is the way belligerence and pride are portrayed. I also recognise how convincing and consistent her style is. O’Brien’s writing is self-reflective and operates with a Chekhovian naturalness: ‘He could have been any age, and he seemed like a man on whom a permanent frost had settled. He drank the Guinness slowly, lifting the glass with a measured gravity.’\(^{237}\) The economic way she uses exposition has caught my eye: ‘Three or four weeks passed before we exchanged words.’\(^{238}\) O’Brien’s first-person exposition lets the reader know that Rafferty and the narrator’s social intercourse builds naturally over time. And throughout *The Mad Road* I have also tried to build a natural rapport whilst paying attention to exposition and concise dialogue. I recognised the story’s location from the off. Indeed, pubs like Biddy Mulligan’s are London landmarks. People use pubs for all sorts of reasons; indeed, I was in it myself a few times during the 1980s.

My story ‘Usher’s Well’ revolves around The Angel, which is a fictitious Irish pub. It also operates as a springboard for narrative in the same way Biddy Mulligan’s does in O’Brien’s story:

There’s just the two of them in The Angel. Hughie O’Conner’s been the landlord there for the last fifteen years. It’s an Irish pub that’s tucked in the back streets of Hackney and traditional music thrives there.\(^{239}\)

In ‘Shovel Kings’ O’Brien’s narrator bumps into Rafferty out of the pub setting. He is sitting outside a second-hand shop on the Kilburn High Road, where he reminisces to her about his desperate scramble to get picked for work on his first working day in London, as a young lad: ‘I believed (Rafferty said) that a great future lay ahead of me, but the look of despair on the lads left behind standing in the street was awful, and one I can never forget.’\(^{240}\) I, too, have tried to capture this tough navvy era in a number of my stories. In ‘Mountain Men’ a sense of pride and belligerence is also transmitted through reminiscence: ‘They were great trench men. Mean men on the spades, fierce


\(^{238}\) Ibid.

\(^{239}\) Cusack, p.2.

\(^{240}\) O’Brien, p.405.
reputations. Tommy went stupid with drink after striking that wretched cable in 1974, that killed my poor Joe.’ Reading O’Brien inspired me to write more naturally where character and back story are concerned.

O’Brien builds these intriguing micro-stories through ‘Shovel Kings’ and this heightens the way Rafferty ignores the narrator at the end of the story. O’Brien’s story possesses psychological charge. I suggest it signifies the pride and shame certain older Irish men feel today. Isolated Irish men who have fallen through the cracks. Caught between things; not belonging here nor there. A life of drink and toil on the shovel. O’Brien recognises this dichotomy in ‘Shovel Kings’ where it is expressed by the bar-man in Biddy Mulligan’s: “He doesn’t belong in England and ditto Ireland,” Adrian said, and, tapping his temple to emphasise his meaning, added that exile is in the mind and there’s no cure for that.’ Rafferty’s offhand manner in ‘Shovel Kings’ is pride and belligerence rolled into one. I explore these feelings in ‘Mountain Men’ with more antagonism. Tommy’s catchphrase reflects this mode of thinking: ‘Burn the bastards, Tommy Giblin used to bark at anyone unlucky enough to cross his path, as he slinked through his territory like a town fox.’ These stories operate as reminders of what Irish working life once was. Such stories afford the reader a unique glimpse of these men’s character, sacrifice and tenuous ties with community.

John McGahern’s short story, ‘Hearts of Oak and Bellies of Brass’ (1970), operates in the same way. He situates Irish men on a building site, which he fleshes out in graphic detail. McGahern hones in on the tough nature of their job and the underlying belligerence that these men display towards each other. Tension is established from character exposition concerning the harm they would like to do to a visiting derelict. The tramp trespasses on their site daily, but they are wary of the consequences if they acted on their threats:

I want to be at no coroner’s inquest on his head, Murphy said and started to beat the back of the steel hopper out of boredom as the engine idled over. Jocko came every day, crazed on meths and rough

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241 Cusack, p.42.
243 Cusack, p.39.
cider, and usually made straight for the pool of shade and water under the mixer.244

McGahern’s text captures the despondency and bitterness that relentless toil causes. Hard physical graft performed every day is stultifying. Some men’s wages were invariably squandered on drink, gambling, prostitutes and expensive forays back to Ireland. Angela Maye-Banbury’s research on the Leicester Irish community is intriguing regarding accommodation and work. She utilises Foucault’s concept of heterotopic spaces and their impact on mind and body. Maye-Banbury explores notions of geographic ‘space’ or ‘heterotopia’ that these men moved through that might have controlled their movements and behaviours at certain times. McGahern’s characters would have temporarily inhabited boarding house and moved through pub and frequented brothel as Foucault argues. Maye-Banbury states that these heterotopic spaces loomed large for these Irish migrants; she suggests:

These places may challenge or even exceed our expectations, intensifying our life experiences in the process. They subvert temporal relations to the extent that we become disassociated from prevailing norms and instead are catapulted into surreal and existential worlds of otherness.245

McGahern explores their sense of otherness in a moving way. His text raises many diasporic issues. Nicola Bradbury states in her essay that McGahern’s writing stems from a long ‘Irish tradition, a specific short story tradition, working within these conditions, which provide not only obsessive themes, but also an attitude, a literary tone, poised between dispassionate control and deep engagement.‘246

245 Maye-Banbury, p.117.
Also, personal reflections about working away from Ireland are clearly drawn out in Donall MacAmhlaigh’s *An Irish Navvy: The Diary of an Exile* (1964). His moving testimony and micro stories about working on building sites is nuanced and detailed:

‘You’re new to the game so I’ll give you a break. Take over the bags you, and I’ll do the hard graft.’

I thanked him and did what he said but it wasn’t long before I found out that the rouge had tricked me for heaving the bags was slavery compared with what I had been doing. One hundred weight was in each bag and, while the weight was nothing to me, for I had often carried as much, it was the devil and all to be doing it again and again and again without a break while the dust from the cement would choke the devil himself.247

MacAmhlaigh and McGahern’s writing helped inform the way I contextualised and handled the material within ‘Mountain Men’. Like MacAmhlaigh, clearly, McGahern has experienced this diasporic reality to be able to write with such insightfulness about the gruelling drudgery and power-dynamic of actual site work in London and other cities. Accommodation would have been a priority – precarious, often stark and dank. Going to the pub for many of these men would have been like going into their maternal front-rooms, back home, in Ireland. McGahern writes ‘Full of beer tonight after the Rose and Crown we’ll go round to Marge and Kathleen like dying elephants in the condemned row.’248 The reader already knows that there is a brothel opposite the building site. Banbury’s research on heterotopic spaces points out that:

Foucault urges us to countenance that heterotopias may possess distinctive temporal qualities. Capable of traversing space, place and time heterotopias are, in the words of Defert (1997, 275), ‘spatio-

248 McGahern, p.37.
temporal units’ through which, in certain circumstances, rites of passage may be performed. Examples of such places are festivals, brothels and boarding schools.249

In a different sense Foucault’s concept concerning institutions and power/knowledge argues that rehabilitation and society require a ‘docile’ worker who is obedient and willing to man the machines of commerce. Colin Counsell and Laurie Wolf argue that Foucault’s notion of discipline ‘produces subjected and practised bodies, “docile” bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience).’250 The subject is being increasingly dominated, according to Foucault; not unlike the plight of McGahern’s men in ‘Hearts of Oak and Bellies of Brass’ and the testimony of MacAmallaigh and his experience of site work within An Irish Navvy the Diary of an Exile.

When McGahern’s Irish men think about or see the derelict, Jocko, in ‘Hearts of Oak and Bellies of Brass’ they are reminded of freedom, which they do not fully have because of the capitalistic needs that press on them. They want to do harm to him, but are reminded of punishment, which stops them from acting. Foucault’s notion of power is exerted and is impacting on their bodies, thus making them ‘docile’ and compliant – useable. Our fear of institutional violence keeps us in check, Foucault argues. It could be said that this invisible force keeps us subservient for capitalist ‘utility.’

In ‘Ghost Estate’ politics are also on show when the son of the protagonist rails against capitalism. By contrast, he upholds the value of community at St Paul’s with activists in the Occupy movement. He praises the intellectual Noam Chomsky: ‘Occupy was mapping out an alternative future and the possibilities seemed limitless and Rory was in on it from the ground-up. Chomsky told them that if the tinder is ready a spark can set off a conflagration, oh, how the world needed new thinking …’251 Mick-Mack’s character in ‘The Bottle and the Trowel’ is also political. He was partially

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249 Maye-Banbury, p.117.
250 Counsell and Wolf, p.131.
251 Cusack, p.82.
inspired by Jocko’s derelict lifestyle in ‘Hearts of Oak and Bellies of Brass’. However, instead of Jocko being a periphery figure, as he is in McGahern’s narrative, my derelict character is centre-stage. Mick-Mack is booze-damaged, but he has pertinent comments to deliver, unlike Jocko. My drunk is humorous and belligerent, but also dangerous. He is politically and sociologically aware. Mick-Mack can articulate his beliefs through a haze of booze:

‘Betrayed, that’s what’s fucking up, if ye really want ta fucking know.’
‘By who?’
‘Bosses, ye thick fuck.’
‘Those bastards keep threatening me with work.’
‘Jesus CHRIST Almighty, ye wouldn’t work in a fecking iron lung,’ Mick-Mack snorted.252

He rants about the proletarian position. The young Irish protagonist is impressed as well as shocked. Jerry is a bystander who is doing his weekly wash in the local laundrette and is intrigued by Mick-Mack’s political rhetoric, as he struggles to settle and fit into a new community.

Kevin Barry’s contemporary ‘collection’ of Irish short stories in There Are Little Kingdoms (2007) is filled with a psycho-dynamic that I continually strive towards within my own writing practice. ‘The Bottle and the Trowel’ was partly inspired by Barry’s darkly-comic prose. His dialogue impresses me because it is quirky and comically nuanced. It is also versatile. His take on small town Ireland is spot-on and is often shocking. However, his short story ‘Dark Lies the Island’ explores a landscape that creates an eerie atmosphere:

Each year it lost about a metre to the Atlantic – it was coming towards the house, the water. This was Clew Bay, in County Mayo, and hundreds of islands were strewn down there. They were inky blobs of mood against grey water. It was a world of quiet dimly lit by the first

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252 Cusack, p.6.
stars and a quartermoon. The house behind her was as silent as a lung.253

I know this area well; Barry mirrors the settings and moods I creatively mine from my own experience, as I have visited and lived in that part of western Ireland. In ‘Strays’ I also use landscape to set mood: ‘But when the weather changed they huddled together for warmth; tatty and forlorn looking like windswept bags of drying peat you see out in open bogland.’254

Another contemporary Irish writer, Claire Keegan, also shocks, but she does it through a detached voice to lull and not put off the reader. Her short story ‘The Parting Gift’ deals with the act of leaving Ireland and it begins in second person narration, which immediately creates this detached perspective. The female protagonist’s name is never mentioned. She is leaving for America and this pastoral tale starts with all the literary tropes of many gentler short stories about emigration that have gone before it: taking stock of surroundings; trepidation of leaving; last meal; last words; last smells; memories. Keegan builds on these tropes to suddenly punch the reader in the gut on the fourth page:

Your father moved into the other room, but your mother gave him sex on his birthday. She’d go into his room and have it there. It never took long, and they never made noise, but you knew. And then that too stopped, and you were sent instead, to sleep with your father. It happened once a month or so, and always when Eugene was out.255

This first revelation shocks, as the abuse is revealed in a matter-of-fact way. Her mother’s part in it is truly shocking. The cruelty embedded in this story resonates and stays with the reader long after the story has been put down:

254 Cusack, p.93.
It was around the same time your mother started sending you into his room. In the spout-house, your mother leant over the half barrel, and held the sack under the water until the whimpering stopped and the sack went still. That day she drowned the pups, she turned her head and looked at you, and smiled.256

My stories also deal with the mental pain of leaving Ireland and coming to terms with the act of leaving and its ramifications. It is constantly being played out through song, story and reminiscence, wherever the Irish have settled. Frawley states that, ‘Departure develops a consciousness of what has been lost, what is pined for, what has been gained, what will never again be the same.’257 Song and story may be an attempt to make sense of such loss in new places. Keegan’s dark story mulls all these future possibilities, as her protagonist prepares to leave Ireland. She is heading for a heterotopic space in America. Keegan’s narrative epitomises the short-form’s reach. Her text triggered creative responses which helped me tackle sexual, psychological and violent abuse which underpin and feature in my narratives. In my story ‘Strays’ abuse is evident when two juvenile runaways arrive in a small town in Ireland, where they are groomed and manipulated:

The way Tom Fahey groomed those two blow-ins right in front of everyone’s noses is a crying shame. No credence was given to grooming in 1970s Ireland. “Why don’t yee come on up to the house for a bite to ate?’ I’ll never forget the way Tom Fahey said that to those blow-ins one drizzly night … 258

Tom’s grooming could be construed as ‘interpellation’259 in action, in that it is reminding, instilling and equipping these two mountain girls with the

256 Ibid, p.27.
257 Frawley, p.4.
258 Cusack, p.95.
259 Counsell and Wolf, p.39.
necessary consciousness to re-assume their former servile attitudes for material production, which this town requires. The underlying subtext suggests the two girls ran away from domestic abuse. The town turns its back on their plight, as there is an obvious need for their services. In Keegan’s ‘The Parting Gift’ the narrator’s life and the abuse she suffers seems normalised, in tone, almost necessary. An agrarian reality. The parents raise their children like the animals they rear on the farm. The utility of each member is commented upon: ‘when he turned fourteen your father pulled him out to work the land.’ There is no love (whatsoever) in this family. ‘The others just came along, as nature took its course, were fed and clothed, sent off to the boarding schools.’

Another collection of short stories *A Slanting of the Sun*, by Donal Ryan, has influenced my stories. His stories are filled with a sense of loss, despair and bewilderedness. The title story ‘A Slanting of the Sun’ particularly stands out for its existentialist angst. Ryan’s nihilistic prose nails a character with economy: ‘There was a silence inside in Michael, like a space where nothing existed. A hole, kind of, or more than that. A vacuum isn’t it, where an empty space hasn’t even air in it?’ In ‘Down Town’ I explored the same existential trope: “Why aren’t we stopping all this?” she screams at the wall. Helen’s been slowly winding herself up for months. She feels desolate.

Both narratives violently shock and leave the reader with the incompleteness of narrative to piece together and glean meaning from.

Cathy Galvin’s historical short story ‘Prohibition’ is another example of diasporic ‘memory practice’ performed in narrative. A failed attempt at life in America of two Irish farmers and their subsequent ignominious return to rural poverty is a unique way of examining diasporic experience. Galvin deals with agrarian poverty framed in an historical context (1920s). Sexual abuse is unmasked in more of a covert way here, though:

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261 Ibid.
263 Cusack, p.89.
Anne emerged, pulling the shawl around herself as she said goodbye to Mary and began the long walk home. He would make no noise as he followed her into the palm of the valley. He would take his time, draw near enough to smell her warmth, to see the nape of her neck below short black hair.264

My story ‘Strays’, by contrast, tackles historical abuse in a less insular way than Galvin, as it explores a small town’s complicity and focuses on its collective guilt and shame.

They were groomed from the first day they set foot in our town. They say every place has a brothel operating somewhere, don’t they? No one dared call it that, though. Not in those days, but it was. “Places like that don’t exist in the West of Ireland,” I heard Kathleen Daly say, when the court case was going on.265

What I learned and found useful from reading Galvin’s text is the way she incorporates song lyrics within her text, which authenticate and validate her period narrative. Her use of ‘The Victory Loan’ shines a light on Michael’s pride and Ireland’s independence. Her text captures this era of indoctrination and nationalism. I also utilised lyrics by poet and Irish patriot Patrick Pearse throughout ‘Strays’: ‘Crochfaidh mé seolta /Agus rachaidh mé siar.’ 266 I wanted to capture an essence of the Irish language and the sentiment surrounding its compulsory roll-out. I wanted to make a comment on its standing in Ireland during the 1970s and express the antipathy many still feel about how it was taught.

Liam Harte and Michael Parker’s introduction to Irish contemporary writing (2000), points out dark aspects of Irish life that Irish writers were

265 Cusack, p.93.
266 Ibid, p.90.
addressing during the 1990s: ‘The sexual abuse of children, for so long a hidden, unnameable phenomena in Ireland, was thrust into the foreground of public consciousness.’ Nineteen years later, these revelations are still entering the public domain. Fiction can help make sense of this anguish and pain of the many Irish who left because of such abuse and shame. Murray argues that diasporic narrative ‘is the vehicle upon which authors and their characters rely in order to mediate, if not always resolve, the dilemma and paradoxes of the diasporic condition.’ The short story has the room and breadth to address and challenge such hurt and its damaging fall-out.

Another short story writer who has influenced my writing is American writer Breece D’J Pancake. His stories are set in a very different geographical location, rural West Virginia, where poverty is rife, and life is hard. His stories are rooted in community and place and reflect the hill and the hollow of The Blue Ridge Mountain region. James Alan McPherson states in his Foreword that:

Nothing is thrown away by people in that region; some use is found for even the smallest evidence of affluence. And eyes, in that region, are trained to look either up or down: from the hollows up towards the sky or from the encircling hills down into the hollows.

In Pancake’s ‘Trilobites’ community and its landscape are ever present and juxtaposed with the region’s geological significance:

I can almost feel the cold waters and the tickling the trilobites make when they crawl. All the water from the old mountains flowed west. But the land lifted. I have only the bottoms and stone animals I collect. I blink and breathe. My father is a khaki cloud in the canebrakes, and

268 Murray, p.187.
Ginny is no more to me than the bitter smell in the blackberry briers up on the ridge. 270

A sense of past and older values is invoked within Pancake’s terse prose. Hardship is never far away in his West Virginia community. His stories are filled with reckless behaviours and helplessness, which are intriguingly believable. Reading Pancake instilled confidence within me as a writer to fill my stories with the same energies.

Irish writer Dermot Healy does the same with his short story ‘Banished Misfortunes’ which alludes to a community under the cosh of terror. An undercurrent of civil terror layers this tale. The McFarland family from the North are heading to the Republic of Ireland for a holiday. But the tensions and tribalism that smoulder underneath are ever present in its subtext: ‘Peace is not necessary here, she heard that and … these people would rather endure. Who was it? Was it him? And again, I think it was St Patrick that started this campaign.’ 271 This stream of consciousness offers the reader another clue of a mixed marriage. It also hints at the sectarian strains that underlie such a union during The Troubles. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper remark in The Irish Times that ‘Healy has a unique way of phrasing that taps into your psyche, which widens your viewpoint of the local and the national.’ 272 Everything is hinted at in ‘Banished Misfortunes.’ It allows the reader to piece together background matters and underlying tensions. Again, such an incompleteness is the desired effect, which is further discussed through this thesis regarding the short form. Healy’s story partially inspired ‘Ghost Estate’ regarding his allusions to paramilitary undercurrents and the hard men behind the violence: ‘And when their northern drawl barked at him during his food and toilet rituals it literally scared the shit out of him.’ 273

270 Ibid, p.25.
273 Cusack, p.76.
Other Fiction

Reading texts such as Eimear McBride’s Irish novel, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, informed my creative approach. Her ground-breaking novel influenced me in numerous ways during the construction of ‘Black Beret Brigade’ and ‘Down Town’. I was impressed by the levels of psychological depth and emotional charge McBride’s text contained. I strive for that charge in my writing practice. Her writing is experimental and reads as a stream of unconsciousness rather than a stream of consciousness. McBride’s unique and challenging style, from the first page, speaks from inside the very womb:

For you. You’ll soon. You’ll give her name. In the stitches of her skin she’ll wear your say. Mammy me? Yes you. Bounce the bed, I’d say. I’d say that’s what you did. Then lay you down. They cut you round. Wait and hour and day.²⁷⁴

Reviewer Alice O’Keeffe states that McBride picks up ‘the experimental modernist baton from James Joyce and Samuel Beckett.’ McBride’s text is broken up and hard to follow. Its staccato style does make sense, but its unconventionality demands concentration in the same way that Beckett’s prose does. Paul March-Russell states that Beckett’s short prose was the ‘pursuit of writing as an undoing of language itself.’ In McBride’s prose there seems to be this same ‘pursuit’ and this ‘undoing’ going on also. The reader is confronted with the protagonist’s near-reality experience – this ‘undoing’ of language creates an intimacy. McBride’s intimate writing voice inspired me to experiment with text. The layout for the explosion in ‘Black Beret Brigade’ was initiated by *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*. The series of flashbacks and political soundbites was realised from daring to experiment with voice, form and juxtaposition. The layout of my text was also influenced by McBride’s daring. In ‘Black Beret Brigade’ my protagonist is caught in an

explosion and the narrator’s voice sets out to unnerve the reader, which echoes McBride’s stream of unconsciousness writing:

... Clash of civilisations...

My ears are zinging the way they do in a fire-drill.

... There are known knowns... There are things we know we know...

A radio’s playing in my head. Bullshit sticks deep, doesn’t it?

Blinding flash, hot air shrieking...thud-thud-thud steel folding in on itself.277

Glaswegian novelist and short story writer James Kelman’s character, Sammy, in his novel, How Late It Was, How Late (1994), also influenced me. Mick-Mack’s tough persona was fleshed out from reading Kelman. His working-class outlook helped shape ‘The Bottle and the Trowel’ and his prolific use of expletive is impressive. The reader is shown how people might really speak to each other in parts of Glasgow. Fuck and cunt, arguably, have gained multi-accentuality within this idiolect; they have been re-appropriated throughout Kelman’s novel: ‘Fuck it. He shook his head and glanced up the way.’278 Fuck is stripped of its sexual meaning, rehabilitated even. It is used multifariously for all sorts of other meanings; Kelman defends the way he uses the word fuck, saying: “fuck” can be used in about 17 different ways, one of which is the cause of its exclusion.279 But Kelman has caused ructions in the

277 Cusack, p.49.
past with his technique. The literary world has argued over him and class lines have been made visible because of him. Kelman is rubbing us against our class prejudices whether we like it or not. Maybe that’s what grates the literati so much. Kelman states that ‘they don’t want to see these people in literature.’

He’s plainly saying that elitism plays its role when confronted with his writing-matter and a text that deals with people on the margins in such a contentious way. He states that some of the elitist literati think the ones on the bottom of the pile in society ‘should be swept under the carpet.’

The downtrodden, artistically, are not worth writing about; aesthetically not worth the bother. Kelman accuses his detractors of these sentiments and attitudes when they consider his work. But I suggest it is the honesty and authenticity within his work that ultimately shocks. ‘I wanted to write and remain a member in my own community,’ Kelman writes in his essay ‘The Importance of Glasgow in my Work’.

Alan Hunter decodes this as Kelman representing 'the working-class condition in any city throughout the UK.' The psychological intensity in his text is raw and unforgiving. Hunter argues that Kelman explores the ‘fretful relationship between language, writing and belonging.’

Community is important to Kelman; he mines it for material and cherishes it.

Kelman avoids using quotation marks for direct or indirect speech throughout How Late It Was, How Late. This is disconcerting at the beginning but because his characters are so well realised there is no confusion or lack of clarity. Also, there is a noticeable absence of the word ‘said’ in the novel. You are often told as a writer that ‘said’ is invisible to a reader and he ‘said’, or she ‘said’ can be used as liberally as the writer likes, for clarity’s sake. Kelman ignores this convention and his writing seems stronger and clearer for it, because once it establishes itself the reader adjusts to it. And Kelman’s text seems tighter for these omissions. How Late It Was, How Late is akin to

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281 Ibid.


283 Ibid.

284 Ibid.
Joyce’s stream of consciousness in *Ulysses*. In Kelman’s world the bleak tedium of the everyday is rendered magnificent, or blasphemously defiled, depending on your viewpoint, but it honestly reflects the way working-class Glaswegians communicate and interact with each other. His textual honesty and authentic characterisations continue to impress and fire my writing practice. My character Tommy Giblin, cursing all and sundry, for instance, in ‘Mountain Men’, is a leaf out of *How Late It Was, How Late*. Situating Mick-Mack in a launderette undergoing a psychotic episode in ‘The Bottle and the Trowel’ mirrors Kelman’s protagonist Sammy, especially in the way expletive is used by Mick-Mack during his anti-bourgeois rants.

Sammy wakes up blind after a severe beating by ‘sodgers’, which is Glaswegian vernacular for police. Sammy’s battle with ISAs concerning state benefits and his broken social networks stem directly from the brutality he received from one of the RSAs for not conforming, which correlates with Althusser’s theory concerning this repressive tactic utilised by the state as a last resort ‘to ensure subjection to the ruling ideology.’

Althusser argues that even before we are born, destiny has marked us out. Our father’s ascribed name, for example, or the area we live in, or where we were brought up, determines our identity and journey. Althusser believes that everything is determined for us: status, role, name and gender before birth. Our lives are clearly marked out for us. Althusser states ‘the individual assumes the identity it offers him or her, a self-conception as someone who wants to behave in the required way.’ *How Late It Was, How Late* resounds with Althusser’s theorising. I suggest it vindicates and corroborates Kelman’s working-class text and demonstrates that social mobility is nil, especially in his community; through his fiction we learn this. In Sammy’s community environs, resistance to power is shown to be futile. Kelman’s text articulates this through Sammy’s interactions with community and state agencies. It demonstrates that compassion and understanding are lacking.

Another novel that inspired me creatively was Dermot Healy’s *A Goat’s Song* (1994). Healy is viewed in Irish writing circles ‘as a “writer’s writer” and

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285 Counsell and Wolf, p.34.  
286 Ibid, pp.39-42.
is certainly held in high esteem by his peers.²⁸⁷ I felt an intense joy from reading his text. A Goat’s Song is loaded with beautiful ideas that triggered a creative response within me. ‘One of the hallmarks of Healy’s own work is its unalloyed celebration of community spirit, allied to a strong social conscience.’²⁸⁸ Community certainly inspired Healy’s writing. Annie Proulx calls A Goat’s Song ‘an exceptional novel, one of those rare books that permanently colour one’s ideational map of place and human behaviour.’²⁸⁹ Indeed it did for me! And I felt all the better for reading it.

What becomes apparent when thinking about specific influences is how much actual material comes from the self through a lifetime of reading text after text, and through lived experience. As Murray states in his conclusion regarding his diasporic investigations into London Irish texts: ‘What is clear however, is that all the novels and short stories reveal some degree of autobiographical foundation and all the autobiographical texts betray varying degrees of fictional intent.’²⁹⁰ How right that seems.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.
²⁸⁹ Ibid.
²⁹⁰ Murray, p.189.
Conclusion

The past five years of study have culminated in nine polished short stories. Three of them have already been published. My ambition is for the nine to be published together as a collection titled *The Mad Road*. This was a daunting task at the beginning. Baby-steps. I soon realised that the thesis pathway is an incremental process. Good writing takes time. The psychological depth I aimed for within these narratives could not have been realised without honing in on Irish diasporic life and the context behind it.

Clare Hanson discusses the draw of the short-form, which related to me as a writer:

> The short story has offered itself to losers and loners, exiles, women, blacks – writers who for one reason or another have not been part of the ruling “narrative” or epistemological/experimental framework of their society.  

Hanson nails my working-class writing sensibility and why the short story attracts me. Therefore, by specifically writing from my second generational background, I have been able to generate new insight and offer a different perspective. What I constantly strive for in my writing is what Maurice Shadbolt discusses regarding literary aim: ‘is the personality able to make some sense of the untidy business of being human’;  

I believe the short-form answers this with gusto. Eyewitness revelation at the Emerald Centre has creatively fed these stories in tandem with active research, which is analysed and argued through this thesis. The stories demonstrate this intensity and depth.

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291 Hanson, p.2.
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