
Opening Extract from...

A Line Made by Walking

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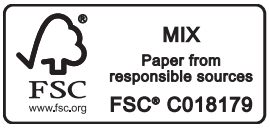

For M, Em & Mum

The worst that being an artist could do to you would be that it would make you slightly unhappy constantly.

– J. D. Salinger, from *De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period*

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ROBIN

Today, in the newspaper, a photograph of tribesmen in the Amazon rainforest. The picture taken from a low-flying aircraft. The men naked but for painted faces, lobbing spears into the air as high as they can lob them, trying to attack the largest and most horrifying sky-beast they've ever encountered, ever imagined. The caption says they are believed to be from the last 'uncontacted' tribe.

What a thing, I think, that there are still. People. Out there.

And almost immediately, I forget.

A smudged-sky morning, mid-spring. And to mark it, a new dead thing, a robin.

Somehow, they always find me. Crouching in the cavernous ditches and hurling themselves under the wheels of my Fiesta. Toppling from the sky to land at my feet. And because my small world is coming apart in increments, it seems fitting that the creatures should be dying too. They are being killed with me; they are being killed for me.

I decide I will take a photograph of this robin. The first in a series, perhaps.

A series about how everything is being slowly killed.

Only it isn't. The white strata are bunching into clouds. The bunches are competing with each other to imitate animals. A sheep, a platypus, a sheep, a tortoise. A sheep, a sheep, a sheep. The leaves are breaking out, obscuring the white

strata, the sky animals, the irregular spaces of cerulean between everything. The fields of the daffodil farm on the other side of the valley are speckling yellow and yellower as I watch. Why do I feel as if I'm being killed when it's the season of renewal? Cars don't crash when the days are long. Rapists don't prey in the sunshine and old folk don't catch pneumonia and expire in their rocking chairs. Houses don't burn down in spring.

But these things aren't true; Walt Disney lied to me. The weather doesn't match my mood; the script never supplies itself, nor is the score composed to instruct my feelings, and there isn't an audience. Most days I make it to dark without anybody seeing me at all. Or at least, anybody human.

I've been here in my grandmother's bungalow a full three weeks now. All on my own. Except for the creatures.

My grandmother died during a gloomy October, as one ought, three Octobers ago.

On the night she died the tail of a hurricane made landfall. It was called Antonio and had travelled all the way from Bermuda. It felled a tree which dragged down a wire and put out the lights across half the parish. Then the tree lay wretched on the ground, strangled by electric cable and blocking the road which led up the hill to her bungalow. My mother and aunts were trapped inside, but I wasn't there and Mum didn't phone until a couple of hours later. I was at work in a contemporary art gallery in Dublin. Painting over the previous day's scuff marks as I did every morning. Transforming the tarnished white into brilliant again.

Even though I had been expecting the call, I didn't pick up immediately.

Even though I had been expecting my grandmother to die, I couldn't believe it might happen in the morning.

For several rings my polyphonic 'Radetzky March' echoed irreverently around the exhibition space. When at last I answered, my mother confessed she hadn't called me straight away. And so my grandmother died in the night after all, as one should.

No change in the light. A temporary sleep becomes permanent.

Antonio passed on and men from the County Council came in their dump truck to clear the road. By the time my Fiesta climbed her hill there were only broken bits of tree left scattered and a great wiggly hole in the earth where it had stood. I stole a branch from amongst the mess; I stole a branch because I loved that tree; I loved that tree because it had acknowledged the ending of my grandmother's radiant yet under-celebrated life by momentously uprooting itself.

'When exactly did it fall?' I asked my mother. 'When she died or while she was dying, or after?'

'I don't know,' she said.

'But didn't you hear?'

The sound of the only tree I've ever heard falling began with a thunderous crack, the snapping of a monolith. The fall itself was unspectacular in comparison; it sounded like a thousand softer cracks in tuneless concord. There was no rustle and brush of leaves because it was winter and there

were no leaves, because trees know in their heartwood that if they don't surrender their foliage in autumn, high winds will sail them to the ground. They know they must expose their timber bones to increase their chance of remaining upstanding through to another spring.

The only tree I ever heard falling I also saw falling. It was in the Phoenix Park beyond the place where elephants and tigers and oryxes are enclosed, before the place where deer rove, and I was roving too. It was an ash and it had dieback. It was felled not by high wind but by men in helmets and luminescent overalls.

'No,' my mother said, 'I didn't hear a thing.' And when I asked my aunts the same question, they also said no.

Works about Falling, I test myself: Bas Jan Ader, 1970. The artist rolls off the roof of his house and lands in the shrubbery, a filmed performance. His house is so American: clapboard, with a veranda. It doesn't look like the sort of place a Dutch conceptual artist would live, but perhaps this is the point he was trying to make by climbing onto his roof to fall. I am not sure at what instant the film ends. The way I remember it: the screen blacks out at the moment of impact. The way I remember it: Jan Ader chose not to show himself getting up again.

Why must I test myself? Because no one else will, not any more. Now that I am no longer a student of any kind, I must take responsibility for the furniture inside my head. I must slide new drawers into chests and attach new rollers

to armchairs. I must maintain the old highboys and sideboards and whatnots. Polish, patch, dust, buff. And, from scratch, I must build new frames and appendages; I must fill the drawers and roll along.

When I was five, I had the flu. Sitting up in bed, watching my bedroom wall. I must have had a soaring temperature which was causing me to hallucinate, but I didn't know this at the time. I believed that what I could see was as true as the wall itself. What I could see was the whole of the world rolled flat. Each of the continents, every island. And they were swelling, stuffing up the sea, and I was screaming, because I believed I would be squeezed away, that there would be no space left for me to perch on the grossly overextended earth. Back there and then, this made certain, chilling sense, so I yelled until my mother came, and when she came, I couldn't explain why I was yelling. For twenty years I couldn't decipher what it was that had frightened me; it's only now I understand.

I understand how it can be that I am being killed when it is spring. I am being killed very slowly; now is only the outset. My small world is coming apart because it is swelling and there's no place for me any longer, and I still want to cry out but there's no point because I am a grown individual, responsible for myself.

My mother will not come.

Anyway, what's the point in perching on an earth without sea?

Once I saw a jackdaw flying amongst a flock of gulls. I was on the top deck of a bus, level with the flock. I

witnessed the member of the family *Corvidae* who wanted to be – who maybe even trusted that he was – a seabird. I thought: I am that jackdaw. At home with the sea even though the sea is not my home, and never has been.

Works about Sea, I test myself: Bernard Moitessier, 1969. In promising position to win the first ever single-handed round-the-world yacht race, he chose to abandon the competition, veering off course for the finishing line, continuing on around the world again, going home to the sea.

But he was a sailor, and not a conceptual artist. I always forget about that.

DO NOT BE AFRAID, the angel Gabriel told the frightened people.

At midnight mass on Christmas Eve last year, the priest told us that DO NOT BE AFRAID is the phrase which appears most frequently in the scriptures. 'It appears three hundred and sixty-five times,' he said, 'once for every day of the year.' He was a man in his late sixties or early seventies and I cannot think of a single word to describe his manner and appearance other than 'priestly'. He was so priestly it was hard to think of him as a person made from hair and limb and skin. All I could picture beneath his cassock was another slightly smaller cassock and another, and another. It was easier to believe the priestly priest was a matryoshka doll of cassocks rather than a man. I pictured him trawling through his bible, carefully shaping this vaguely radical message, appointing an occasion for its delivery. Christmas Eve is his busiest mass of the year,

his sell-out gig. At quarter past midnight, in a pool of candlelight, the priestly priest delicately suggested that for too long the Catholic Church has instilled fear – that now it needs to spread a message which is old but was there all along: DO NOT BE AFRAID.

How laudable, I thought. But then, at the end of the service, he sent an altar boy down into the congregation carrying a wicker dish, collecting money from pew to pew, and I was so angry about this intrusion that his laudable message, his small concession, didn't matter any more.

But mass hadn't changed; I had. There was always a wicker dish. I even used to be the server who carried it down. And on all the Sundays I went to church as a child, the collection of money was as meaningless as everything else that occurred between the hardwood pews and fibreglass saints.

Objects don't seem incongruous if they've been there forever; doings don't seem ridiculous if they've always been done that way.

Why is it only now that I can see how many ordinary things are actually grotesque?

This robin is the first of the dead creatures I'll record, but there were others before it; if there hadn't been I'd never have thought to begin. Beaked and scaled and furred. Struck and squashed and slaughtered. Shape-shifting into plastic bags, sugar beet, knolls of caked mud. Blending into the tinctures and textures of the countryside. The tree which falls without any human hearing still falls, as the creatures who die without being found by a human

still die. But it's too late for them now. It begins today, with this robin.

There used to be a dainty woodland at the far end of my parents' garden. No more than a copse of straggled pines, their topmost branches so densely laden by rookeries that the red bricks of the garden path vanished from sight beneath splattered shit during nesting season. There was also a skinny hawthorn and an alder, but no tree was sturdy enough to hold a structure, and so my father built a Walden-esque hut on the ground between trunks instead. The hut had tin walls, a tin roof and timber pallets on the floor. It was too cold in winter and too dark in summer, then one day an enormous spider dropped from the door lintel into my sister's hair. She screamed and screamed and refused to play in Walden again after that.

But I'd still go and sit there alone, to sulk. In the hut-which-should-have-been-a-treehouse, I listened to the sound of twigs falling from the rookery and striking my tin roof. A great rippled drum being played by tens of different drumsticks. Sometimes I'd hear a duller sort of strike and find an eggshell and baby bird with a busted neck. Eyes the size of its feet, as yet unopened, never to open. I'd bury the baby and steal its broken shell for the classroom nature table.

Almost every time I sulked alone in the hut, a robin came to me. It would hop between the spindly trees and sing like a battered xylophone. It would speak to me in its language and I would speak back in mine. I'd tell it the unedited version of what I told the priest in confession, profess my pathetic sins. As a child, I used to believe that robin was my guardian angel. I didn't like the idea of yellow-haired girls

in mini wedding dresses with wings, but I wanted there to be some inhuman thing which was looking out for me, and it made sense that my guardian might be a bird.

Most of the time, it was too high up, too far behind, too obscured by surroundings to distinguish, but in the boughs of our dainty woodland, my guardian would always reveal itself.

Today's robin has been thumped by a speeding windscreen, launched into artificial flight, crash-landed. I'm only a hundred yards from my grandmother's gateposts; this is why I decide to go back and fetch my camera.

I drop to my knees in the undergrowth. Old rain seeps through the shins of my trousers, smears across the screen. I point my lens at its motionless plumage. Click.

My mother says that robins are resolutely territorial; no more than one is likely to occupy an average-sized garden. If you want to summon a robin, my mother says, you should dig, and one will soon arrive to inspect your freshly turned earth for worms. Back in my grandmother's garden, I take a trowel from the greenhouse and hunker down in the strawberry patch. I dig and dig, but no robin comes. I pick the earthworms out myself and lay them on the surface.

'Here,' I say aloud. But still, no robin.

So now I know for sure that the dead one was my guardian. I place my trowel down.

You're on your own now, I am thinking.

Works about Flight, I test myself: Yves Klein, 1960. A black-and-white photograph which shows the artist lying in

the air several feet above a Parisian street. Deserted save for the flying man and a bicyclist in the distance. At the time, people couldn't figure out how Klein had made the image without being seriously injured. Now, in this era when any illusion is possible, tedious even, nobody cares about the photograph any more, which was, of course, a photomontage, and the artist was, in fact, hurt, despite being trained in judo and landing on a tightly drawn sheet. *Leap into the Void* it was called, and so maybe it wasn't a work about flying after all, but a work about falling. About how flying and falling are almost exactly the same.

As a toddler on a toddler leash, I used to grasp onto my mother's skirt, a fistful of pleated corduroy in either paw and holler: MUMMY I LOVE YOU AND I'LL NEVER LEAVE YOU, and she would laugh kindly in the face of my ferocious devotion and reply: 'Of course you will, once you are old enough. That's just the proper order of things.' Now that my sister and I are both older than old enough and gone, we joke about how we had such a quintessential childhood that nothing since has ever quite lived up to it. We agree we'd both surrender everything we have now in an instant if it meant we could return to being kids.

It's a joke. Just a joke.

I am twenty-five, still young, I know. And yet, I am already so improper, so disordered.

There is a sentence I chant, compulsorily, inside my head. *I want to go home*, it goes, and has been going, at intervals, since as far back as I am capable of remembering. As a child,

I chanted it mostly during bad days at school, but also during trips and holidays and sleepovers at friends' houses: places I went in order to enjoy myself; places where I ought to have been content. Later on, I chanted it during college lectures, job interviews, and in every room I've rented since I was nineteen years old.

For a week before I came here, I stayed beneath my parents' roof, and even then, I continued to chant it. *I want to go home, I want to go home, I want to go home*, even though I was there. But that house doesn't feel like the place I grew up any more. Last year my mother replaced all the curtains, tore the old wallpaper away and painted every stripped surface a different shade of white. The dainty woodland is also gone. After my sister and I left for college, my father started buying clapped-out vintage cars. He razed the garden and erected a compound of haphazard sheds in which to shelter his steel children. He ploughed away the flower beds, chopped down the pines, sawed up the swing-set for scrap, sealed the rootlets and bulbs beneath concrete foundations. Whenever I visit, there is always some new structure flattening what used to be a patch of pleasant green.

Hunkering in the strawberry patch, I poke my worms back into the earth where they belong. I close my holes, return my grandmother's trowel to the greenhouse.

I find my grandmother in the greenhouse. The shape of her kneecaps in the old foam board, the mud-print of her right palm around the handle of the rusted secateurs. The

compost in the flowerpots has turned hard and sprouted green crud. No one has emptied them since they were filled by her and so I wonder what my grandmother planted, three years ago, and why it never grew.

I knock the mud from my boots against the doorstep, lever them off with the mahogany shoehorn. I never used a shoehorn before I came here; I never needed one. But nowadays I deliberately leave my boots half-laced so I have no choice but to ram the tiny paddle down to shovel up my heel. It's a way of nodding to her customs, of recreating the rituals of her day. I find my grandmother in the shoehorn, and again, as I wash my hands, I find her in the kitchen windowsill curios. In a row above the draining board, there's a weathered wood St Joseph, a plastic flamenco dancer, a three-legged camel, a panda-bear-shaped pencil sharpener, an oblong pebble painted with the features of a mouse and each one of these silently onlooking objects are immeasurably precious to me, because my grandmother can be found in them.

When the house finally went on the market, Annika the auctioneer told my mother and her sisters that it would stand a better chance of selling if it wasn't so cluttered with the belongings of the former inhabitant. 'It ought to look as much as possible like a show house,' Annika said. The dead woman's worn furniture and weird trinkets will only freak out potentially interested parties, she didn't say, though this is what she meant. Because people don't want homes; they want show houses – only by means of a show

house can they be distracted from the generalised going-nowhereness of their perfectly pointless lives.

Piece by piece, my mother and her sisters catalogued the bungalow's contents according to value, necessity and sentiment. Six months after my grandmother died, Mum emailed me an inventory of the objects that still remained. *Let me know if there's anything you want*, it read, and I got so angry about that message. Because I wanted everything, from the chaise longue to the velvet curtains, but my life wasn't large enough. At the time, I didn't have a car or a bedsit. I was renting a box-room in a shared house in the city with barely enough space for the things I already owned. By the time I arrived to stay, the bungalow was a neatly looted version of its former self. All that was left of the inventory were the things that everybody else in the family had unanimously rejected.

My aunts didn't want the windowsill curios; nor did my mother. She dug a shallow hole beneath the garden hedge and buried them. In spite of my substantial capacity for strangeness, this still strikes me as bizarre. My mother couldn't explain it. 'I just didn't want to throw them away,' she said, and yet, instead of keeping St Joseph and his flamenco wife and their personal menagerie, she treated them as if they were the dead creatures my sister and I used to come upon when playing in the garden. As children, we buried ladybirds and bees and beetles. The shrews our cats laid out on the doormat, the birds that plunged from their nests or dashed themselves against the windowpanes. Only the wasps which drowned in our jam traps were deprived of a dignified disposal.

I asked my mother what part of the hedge she'd buried the curios under, then I dug them up and rinsed the mud off and stood them one by one back along the sill above the draining board, and they leaked tiny brown pools which have since dried into tiny brown rings of sediment.

I cannot stand the thought of prospectively interested parties coming here and picturing a new life for themselves. Here is where my grandmother's life ended, and mine is ending still. I will not allow Annika the auctioneer to exorcise us.

But it's been almost a year now, and she hasn't scheduled a single viewing since the FOR SALE sign was nailed to its post and planted in the rose bed beside the cattle grid.

'It's because of the turbine,' my mother said: 'people don't like the idea of living so close to one.'

This bungalow sits on the brow of a yawning valley. To the rear there stands a solitary wind turbine. Sleek, white, monumental. It has always seemed to me more like a thing that had been shot down from space than raised up from the earth.

'I've heard about that,' I said, 'Wind Turbine Syndrome. People think the noise and shadow-flicker keep them up at night, make them sick. But they're only suffering from it because they believe they are.' And then my mother laughed. 'Sure how many days of the year do we have enough sun to make shadows anyway?'

My grandmother got on just fine with her two-hundred-foot neighbour; she admired its immensity.

*

With or without the turbine, it's no surprise the bungalow is unappealing to house hunters. The view of mountains comes and goes depending on the weather, the view of valley is filled with melancholy cows. The garden is terrifically overgrown, and everything indoors has fallen into disrepair. The avocado-coloured bathroom has a soggy carpet where lino ought to be. The water comes out of the taps in a series of tiny explosions. Each electric hob takes a full ten minutes to heat up and glows disconcertingly orange as soon as it has. One in three plug sockets are defunct and all the TV channels are tinged green no matter how many times I tweak the aerial. 'The whole house reeks of dog,' my father says, and though I cannot smell it, I suspect it smells like dog to people who do not like dogs.

So little happens, here in the bungalow on turbine hill, that however little the thing that happens, it throws me off kilter. Even though it's evening now and I'm usually at my best in the evenings, because of the robin I know it will be hard to realign what remains of the day. I go to the sun room where my laptop is. I press the power button and wait for the screen to ignite. My laptop has spongy plastic stars stuck to the lid. As it boots up, it makes a sound like the keyboard is chewing cotton wool.

Works about Wind, I test myself: Erik Wesselo, *Düffels Möll*, 1997. The artist is strapped to the blade of a traditional windmill and spun for several minutes, a performance. I look it up on YouTube. The camera follows Wesselo's rise and drop and rise and drop and rise and drop. Yet again, I think, flight and fall.

*

The sun room is at the rear of the bungalow, facing south. I spend most of my time in between its slimy panes, and I find more of my grandmother here in the sun room where she lived than in the bedroom where she died. I find her in the mould-speckled sofa, the Formica tabletop, the red geranium, the barometer, the owl-shaped paperweight, the upholstered chair. Some people call these rooms 'conservatories', but this one isn't a conservatory, it's a sun room, definitely.

I keep the branch pressed into the soil of the red geranium's pot. The branch broken from the unidentified tree which uprooted itself on the day she died. It looms over my keyboard, casts its shadow across my screen. What sort of tree was it? Because the branch will never come into leaf again, I cannot tell.

I plug my camera into my laptop and download the photos I took today. My robin looks angry, much angrier in reproduction than it appeared in life. Perhaps the Native Americans are right; perhaps the camera stole its spirit. I open my robin in Photoshop. I select Brightness/Contrast. I restore the vibrancy lost along with its spirit.

I check my emails: no emails. I knock a knuckle against the barometer beside me on the table. The needle doesn't move. I shut my laptop down and stand up. My phone doesn't ring and the doorbell doesn't either and I begin to wonder whether I am still alive.

I go to the back step and see the mud I knocked off my boots a little while ago. It's wet and soft and fresh,

and so I know that I must exist after all – that I must still be here.

Works about Being, I test myself: On Kawara, beginning 1966. A series of paintings showing nothing but the date upon which they were made. He also sent missives to acquaintances and friends which simply read: I AM STILL ALIVE, followed by his signature.

For two months after my grandmother died, her morbidly obese and chronically arthritic golden retriever continued to live in the bungalow alone; this is the reason for the dog smell. He was called Joe, and my grandmother had owned him since he was a puppy. She was all he knew and he worshipped her and refused to be removed from the house in which they'd lived together for twelve years. During the wake, he lay in the corridor outside her bedroom, and once it was over and the door opened again, he lay on the floor in the exact spot where he'd last seen my grandmother.

My mother wanted, and tried, to bring Joe home with her. She managed to drag him as far as the driveway but then he cowered and whimpered and wouldn't climb into the car. He was too fat and arthritic to lift; my mother conceded defeat. Joe remained in the bungalow alone and the old man who lives halfway down the hill called in every day to check on him. Joe would take his medication and eat his meals and amble around the garden to cock and squat, then he'd return to his spot on the floor in her bedroom.

One day, he didn't get up when the old man came. His

heart had stopped. A soft, pink clock nobody remembered to wind. I go to my grandmother's bedroom and lie down in the place where her hospice bed used to be, on the patch where the dog died. I lay my cheek against the floor. I smell the carpet.

I remember: this is how it started.

It started with the smelling of carpet.

The carpet it started with covered the floor of my bedsit in the city, the place where I lived before I stayed in my parents' house for a week, before I came here. For my first several months in that bedsit, I barely noticed the floor. Then one evening, I lay down on it, and in the weeks that followed, barely an evening went by that I didn't resort to the same position at some stage or another. I became intimately acquainted with that faded pile, the scent of mouldy timber rising up from the boards, the particular shade of amber it had faded to, the colour of watery cider. I'd dig my fingernails down and scratch the lining, as if it was a short-coated pet.

My mother says that a male dust-mite lives for an average of ten days. If he is exceptionally robust, he could make it as far as nineteen. But this has as much to do with luck as with strength. The male mite might fall victim to a vacuum cleaner or an allergen-blocking bedcover and all his hard won good health will come to naught. There are people who think that they can see dust-mites or that they've been bitten by a dust-mite, my mother says, but these things aren't true. Dust-mites aren't able to eat skin scales unless they're already dead, dropped, partially broken down by fungi.

Because they are extremely small and transparent, dust-mites aren't visible to the human eye.

They are everywhere, yet they are nothing.

The last full day that I lived in my city bedsit, I went out only once, to return a DVD to the rental store. Nothing of significance happened while I was out. It wasn't raining and I didn't see anyone I knew or find that I'd forgotten to clip the disc back in its box. It was for no reason at all that as soon as I returned to the bedsit, my legs buckled and I lowered my cheek to its resting position against the carpet.

I don't know how long I'd been lying there when my mobile phone began to quake against the page of a sketch-book I'd left open on the table, a blank page. It started chirping out its cheerful 'Radetzky March' and I forced my face up until I could see the screen. JESS it said, and so I lay back down again. Jess was just a friend and she would only have been calling to see if I was okay, and seeing as I wasn't, I decided not to answer. I pressed my right ear into the carpet as hard as I could and suctioned the palm of my left hand around the up-facing one.

My eardrums sounded like the inside of a conch shell. Like what my mother told me, as a child, was supposed to be the sea, but was actually the wind.

Through the floorboards, I could hear the man who lived directly below me moving purposefully around his bedsit. I heard a cupboard door bang, a saucepan clank against a hob, the screech of curtain hooks against rail. I heard the soles of his boots stepping from the kitchen-zone lino, tap tap

tap. To the carpet, scuff scuff scuff. And back again. I wondered if his carpet was redder than mine; I wondered what it smelled like. Then I heard a saucepan tinkling and I knew that the man who lived directly below me was having hailstones for dinner again.

He was Russian, though I can't remember whether this is something the landlady told me when I moved in or something I decided for myself and remember as if it were a fact. He looked like a tin soldier: black leather boots and a jacket with symmetrical buttons and gold-trimmed epaulettes. I thought he was marvellous, far too marvellous to speak to, and because he had never spoken to me either, his mystique endured, uncontaminated by hallway chit-chat. On the last full day I spent in the bedsit, I listened to him taking cutlery from a drawer and clearing his throat in a Russian sort of way and I longed, how I longed, to have such purpose.

At six o'clock on the last full day, through my suction-cupped hand, I heard church bells and knew what time it was against my will. I heard somebody else from the building arrive home and climb the first flight of stairs to my door, and then pass my door and continue to climb. My bedsit was sandwiched between the ground and top floors. Because its sole, small window faced backwards into the communal yard, even after several months I wasn't able to recognise most of my housemates on the street. They came and went invisible to me. In the yard, there was no grass, just a couple of bicycles, a gargantuan wheelie bin and the low roof of the shed where the washing machine slumbered.

There wasn't a dryer and there wasn't a washing line and oftentimes I'd see clothes slung over my neighbour's curtain rails, trouser legs dangling, like a footless person hanged.

I never kept a bicycle there. The only time I ever cycled in the city was at the very beginning of my first year in college. One morning my front tyre bounced off the side of the footpath at too great a speed. My wheels skidded out in front of a taxi and I fell face first against the concrete, splitting my chin and fracturing my jawbone. The taxi driver drove me to hospital. He didn't charge a fare but he didn't wait around either and I had to get the bus back to my bicycle. I remember the other passengers staring at my swollen face and fresh stitches, the splashes of blood down the front of my coat. An old woman asked me if I was okay and when I replied my voice sounded wrong – weak and crumpled – as if my distended cheek had squeezed it away to practically nothing.

By the time I got back to the place where I'd left my bicycle, it was gone. Of course it was gone.

When I was a child, I used to believe that everyone experienced childhood in the countryside and simply chose or didn't choose to abandon their rural beginnings later on; that there was nobody under eighteen in the city at all.

I wasn't very good at living in Dublin. Every day I walked an unnecessarily circuitous route from my bedsit into the gallery simply because this was the way I walked the first day. I knew there were any number of shortcuts, but I refused to find them.

My sandwiched bedsit with its backward-facing window and faded carpet seems now like a good place – a fitting place – to have lost my mind. The walls were smudged in places by the greasy fingerprints of people who lived there before me. A spooky draught intermittently rattled the air duct, spindly spiders nested in the folds of the curtain and made a scuffling sound in the dead of night. There were three switches, one for the immersion, one for the cooker, one for the heater, and every time I set out anywhere, I used to recite: *watercookerheater watercookerheater watercookerheater* because I was so afraid I might have neglected to turn one off and the whole building would burn down in the time it took me to walk into the city centre and home again. Too often I turned around and went back. I added a half hour to my circuitous, unnecessary journey just to check a switch I knew was off, but couldn't trust myself.

And I never once used the communal washing machine. I don't know how to work a washing machine and I was too shy, when I first arrived, to ask anyone, and almost a year later I was too shy to admit that I'd never used it and still needed to ask. Instead I washed everything in my kitchen sink. Even the bedsheets, even the towels.

It started slowly, with the switches and the rattle and the spiders.

I spent most of the last full day with my cheek against the carpet. Just after six o'clock, I made a disconsolate attempt at snapping myself out of it. I heaved my head up, sat with my spine against the side of the bed and started whispering, earnestly, angrily:

There are women and children in a central African country nobody's ever heard of and they are being raped and slaughtered by their countrymen, I whispered, *YOU have NOTHING to cry about. There are people behind these closed doors and net curtains and they're old or blind or cancer-bald, they've been brain damaged by a car accident or tenderised by one of those horrible degenerative muscle-wasting illnesses. They're confined to wheelchairs or reduced to sippy cups or they have to re-bandage their entire bodies every other day just to stop their skin from falling off*, I whispered, *YOU have NOTHING to cry about. And then there are the people who love the people who are old or blind or cancer-bald or brain damaged, the people who look after them, who push their wheelchairs and replenish their sippy cups, who bear the brunt of their perfectly justifiable rage* – I had raised my voice a little by then, from a whisper to a mutter – *YOU have NOTHING to cry about. You have NOTHING.*

Then I thought about Kylie.

Kylie was the only kid in my primary school who could not walk. Her arms and hands and fingers were twisted up. Her legs were manipulated into the most untwisted position possible and strapped to the special supports of her wheelchair. Her head was permanently crooked to one shoulder; her mouth hung open. She could not speak or write or participate in PE but Kylie still came to school every day. She still understood everything in her books and on the blackboard. And then, one rainy playtime, when the supervising teacher had stepped out of the classroom to attend to something, a couple of the bigger boys started to mess about. Gallivanting between desks, over chairs, knocking Kylie's wheelchair sideways onto the ground.

She fell against the carpet and then she cried, and because she could not move her face or speak like the other children, her crying was a terrible sight, a terrible sound. Distressed, despondent. The bigger boys righted her wheelchair immediately, lifted Kylie back up again. She was uninjured, but still she continued to keen and wail and bay until the teacher came back, until her mother was summoned to fetch her. She couldn't be consoled. It became as if Kylie was no longer crying over the fall, but over the cumulative indignity of every compromised schoolday gone by and yet to come, by the week after week after week of unspeakable unfairness which would not stop, not ever.

For a while, those thoughts succeeded in making me grateful for my youth, my sight, my mind, my family, my mobility. But gratitude was soon pressed down by the fear that I might contract a disease, or lose someone, or be involved in a horrible accident and then that fear was pressed down in turn by disgust at myself for being so selfish, so petty, so inadvertently ungrateful.

I am not supposed to be one of those people who cry easily; I was not one of those little kids who snuffled and gasped and blubbed at nothing. I was grubby and scab-kneed with a bedroom full of caged animals, and in college I learned to use all the big electric drills and wood-saws in the sculpture department and to weld. I've never been a crier and I've always prided myself on this.

Until then. Until there. Lying on the amber carpet.

What was it about the sound of a DVD case striking the bottom of a DVD deposit box on a drizzly

day in spring that made me feel so abruptly and inexplicably bad?

Encounters at the End of the World. This was the DVD inside the case. I watched it the night before the last day I lay down on my bedsit carpet; I watched it alone and in the dark. *Encounters at the End of the World* is a Werner Herzog documentary about the South Pole. The setting is vast and white and barren. The cast are people who feel compelled to travel to the extreme edge of human existence, who believe that, for whatever reason, everywhere else on the entire planet has squeezed them away. It was a piece of art made expressly for me; which I had made myself in a previous existence.

And then, close to the end, there came the penguins.

The film is almost over when Herzog conducts an interview with an ornithologist alongside footage of a colony migrating towards their feeding grounds. The camera zooms in on a single penguin that has broken away from the group and set off in the opposite direction, towards the mountains. The ornithologist explains how it often happens that there is one member of the colony who becomes deranged. How, even if he fetched the misdirected penguin back, reunited it with its fellows and pointed it the right way, as soon as he let go it would immediately turn around again and resume its own course towards the hostile, boundless mountains which mark the southern limits of the Earth. 'The deranged ones couldn't possibly survive,' the ornithologist says, and in all his years of study, he still doesn't understand why they do it.

Was it from the deranged penguin that the huge and crushing sadness came? His pointed tail dragging the snow. His useless wings thrashing. Falling on his front. Pushing himself on again. Waddling, stumbling, waddling.

'But why?' Herzog asked. But why.

The world is wrong. It took me twenty-five years to realise and now I don't think I can bear it any more.

The world is wrong, and I am too small to fix it, too self-absorbed.

Cheek against the faded pile of my bedsit carpet, I stared and stared into the darkness beneath my bed. After a while, my eyes adjusted and I could see boxes outlined against the pale wall, a miniature horizon. It made me remember how I used to draw pictures at Halloween. Of buildings silhouetted against skylines with a big white moon in the middle and a witch on a broomstick, tilting her hooked nose back and into space. I remembered how most of those boxes contained rolls and sheaves and pads of paper either with drawings on or waiting to be drawn upon, and I wondered when – I wondered if – I would ever feel like making another picture.

I raised myself up again. I took a deep and cathartic sniff. I lifted my phone from the table. Cradled it in my lap. Then I called my mother.

Works about Carpet, I test myself: Mona Hatoum, 1995. An expanse of silicone rubber entrails fitted impeccably around one another to form a flawless floor. Our intestines

are several metres long; a fact which has always astonished me. So maybe Hatoum's piece is about the astonishing capacity of the human body. Or maybe it's about how extravagantly attached we are to the things we own, as if they were the insides of our bodies and not just the insides of our houses. Furnishings, ornaments, even the upholstery. Such that we end up devoting more effort to preserving the carpet than we do to preserving our intestines.

On my grandmother's bedroom carpet, there is a chest of drawers, a fitted wardrobe, a tattered beanbag which belonged to the dog. High up on the wall, there are a few timber shelves and empty hooks where picture frames used to hang. Stacked beneath the windowsill, there are four cardboard boxes neatly duct-taped shut. When I first arrived my mother told me not to open the boxes and that she'd be over in a couple of weeks to collect them. I didn't ask what she had taped inside. At the beginning, I didn't care. My mind was so bunged up by all the sudden changes. But in the three weeks I've been here alone, my mother has yet to come, and now I am beginning to wonder.

Every morning my grandmother used to open every window in every room. Her houses were always cold, and even in her eighties, she didn't appear to notice. She valued fresh air above all forms of comfort.

And so this carpet is surprisingly luxurious for the bedroom of a woman so averse to luxury. It is intensely green; I cannot imagine a factory that would manufacture such a hue in such deep pile. I backcomb it with my fingers. It's

almost fluffy. All the other carpets of the bungalow are flat-weave, though now I come to think of it, they are also green. Lime, pine, emerald, moss. As if my grandmother needed the illusion of flora as surely as she needed the outside air.

Every year during the summer holidays, she would take my sister and me on trips to peculiar places. An old gunpowder mill, a former women's prison, a deserted beach house gutted by a storm, an allegedly haunted graveyard and – over and over again – some coastal outcrop which got cut off at high tide. She could never resist straying from the designated path, racing against the rising sea. In her company my sister and I always ended up briar-scratched, muddied, wading, lost.

We thought my grandmother was glorious. We looked forward to those trips all year.

There are more of her weird trinkets here in the bedroom. A miniature Eiffel Tower, a wobble-legged beetle in a wooden nutshell, a foot-shaped beach stone. What was it about these that persuaded my mother to spare them from the hedge-burial? Was it because these were the ones which kept my grandmother company in her final weeks? And so they are full up with her gazes, infused by her dying thoughts. Out the window, there's a short expanse of gravel, a short expanse of grass, the garden hedge. Over the hedge, there's the valley. Tiny cows in the distance and normal-sized cows up close and the closest one of all is stretching his neck across the electric fence to munch on my grandmother's cotoneaster.

In her fitted wardrobe, there are fourteen naked hangers. In the bottom drawer of her chest of drawers, there are two tattered handkerchiefs, and on the top there's a coaster and a solitary picture frame squashed full of black-and-white photos of my mother and aunts as children in bell-bottoms and bare feet. There is just the one of me; I am chasing the dog who preceded Joe across the lawn of her old house. These are my inaugural steps; the very first time I chased something.

Without her teacup on top, the coaster looks abandoned, as does the chest of drawers, without her bed beside it. On each of the timber shelves, there's a row of books. There are books in the living room as well, books in the dining room she used as a study, books on the coffee table in the entry hall. My mother and aunts have long since divided between them and taken away the ones they want and yet there's still a whole bus load left behind, a whole library bus load. I get up from the floor. Stand in front of the shelves. Place my finger on a spine and draw its cover out. *A Concise History of Modern Sculpture: 339 Plates; 49 in colour.*

I pick a plate at random. Helen Phillips, the caption reads, 1960, *Moon*. But it isn't a moon. It's a great lump of bronze. Brown and hard and twisted like the moon never was.

I tuck the book under my arm, pull the bedroom curtains.

Is the valley full up with my grandmother's gazes too? The hedge, the cows.

I catch the reflection of a figure in the wardrobe mirror, turn my head to face it. A person too old to be a child but

too young to be an adult. Hair falling limply yet somehow wild, short yet somehow knotted. Baggy eyes, blotchy skin. I notice for the first time all day what I'm wearing: a woolly winter cardigan that hangs down to my knees, even though it is warm, even though it is spring.

I picture my grandmother in the mirror instead. A hazy effigy in tweed skirt and tracksuit jumper, levitating above the fluffy carpet, shimmering. How glorious that would be. I summon and summon my grandmother's ghost. But nothing happens.

Even the cows she gazed at are dead now too, of course.

I step out into the corridor, close the bedroom door, and, almost at once, open it again.

If my grandmother is in there, I don't want to trap her. I want her to waft free, and find me.

For the last few weeks I occupied my city bedsit, I didn't cook an awful lot of meals. It wasn't that I didn't want to eat; I just couldn't face all the rinsing and chopping and stirring and tossing that cooking entails. It seemed to me only the same sort of a waste of time as lying on the carpet.

Just a few feet beyond my bedsit, the streets were lined with cafés, grocers, takeaway joints. Most evenings I'd stop by the posh supermarket on my walk home. I always shopped there even though I could only barely afford it. There was a Lidl a few streets away but I hated Lidl; it reminded me of the dole queue, only with vegetables. I'd pick up a basket from the doorway of the posh one and drift the aisles. I'd stand perfectly still and stare at an item for

an uncomfortable length of time. Several other customers would come and go in the minutes it took me to remember whether I had any honey left, whether I prefer my tuna in oil or brine, whether or not I am able to tolerate wheat. Eventually I'd make it to the checkouts with a few random products sliding from side to side in my basket, and then at home again I'd lie on my floor for a couple of hours before going to bed on a bar of chocolate – something slightly revolting like a Double Decker or a Toffee Crisp – because only the slightly revolting chocolate bars were suitably evocative of childhood.

Every night I did this, I'd be woken by the angry burbling and sloshing of my almost entirely empty stomach. I'd get up and sit at my breakfast bar and eat bowlfuls of muesli and curse myself for having forgotten the one thing I always needed and always forgot. The milk, the milk, the fucking milk.

The point of being here, alone in the bungalow on turbine hill, is to recover. This is what I told my mother before she agreed to let me care take, and the only thing I can do to stop her from worrying is to try and look well when she comes to visit. Because she cannot see inside my head, outside my head I must be nourished and calm and bright. The straightforwardness of this comforts me: body over brain.

With only a poorly stocked village shop, the absence of choice is liberating. I buy whatever they have and challenge myself to cobble it into something. They always have milk and I always remember. Here on turbine hill, meals are the only thing that structure my days and so I force myself to

maintain their pattern. Because structure and maintenance and pattern, and broccoli, are what sanity consists of.

In my grandmother's kitchen I measure three handfuls of brown rice into a pot. I heat oil in the only frying pan. It has a great dint in the base and I have to push my irregularly chopped vegetables to and fro across the hot part to ensure they, irregularly, fry. I place a tray of peanuts to roast beneath the grill. They are red and pointy and I suspect the shop woman had intended them for bird feeders.

When I arrived here, there were two bags of flour in the cupboard. One wholemeal, one cream. The flour had set into bag-shaped blocks and a posse of weevils were gnawing the paper. The flour and the weevils were kept company by a few leftover jars. Bovril, mustard, pickled beetroot and maple syrup, none of which I remember my grandmother eating. I dumped everything into the standard waste wheelie bin without emptying the bags or rinsing the jars. Because right at that moment, I did not – could not – care a shit about recycling.

I carry my dinner plate through to the living room. On the coffee table there's an open bottle of wine and I pour a generous glug down on the burgundy stain at the bottom of last night's unrinsed tumbler. In the village shop the wine bottles are positioned on the highest shelf behind the counter. The only choice is red or white and then the shop woman brushes the dust off before squirrelling it away in a brown paper bag. She does the same with toilet roll and paracetamol. By means of her brown paper bags, the

shop woman shows me which purchases I ought to be ashamed of.

Now that it's evening, I push the power button on the tiny television set. I don't really care what programme I'm watching; I just like how it chatters softly from the corner, requiring no particular response. When I was growing up, my parents didn't allow the set to be switched on during the hours of light. Daytime television was for incapacitated or lazy people, not for us, not for our family. Even now that I'm free to watch it whenever I want, I don't. I wouldn't dare.

Nowadays most people on the telly seem to have recently recovered from either cancer or depression and feel compelled to talk about it, to add their personal nuggets of wisdom to the broken taboo. First it was only ambiguously famous people: Gaelic sportsmen, celebrity chefs, traditional musicians. Then the spouses of ambiguously famous people began to pipe up, and now any civilian who can spin a decent line about their horrifying struggle is deemed worthy of airtime. Away they yammer all week on the talk radio programmes – and then at the weekend I get to see them in the unremarkable flesh on *The Late Late Show* – until it seems to me it would be more taboo not to talk about it at all, but to hold back and suffer in decorous silence.

If each one perceived their respective illness in a unique and interesting way, it wouldn't bother me so much. But they each say the same slim range of things and end on the same slim range of messages: 'Be Sure To Get Your Balls And

Boobs Checked,' they say. 'It's Okay Not To Feel Okay And Ask For Help.'

As soon as my dinner plate is empty, I pick up *A Concise History of Modern Sculpture* and drink another generous glass of wine. It must be Friday because here it comes now: *The Late Late Show*, and the first guest is a millionaire who suffers from depression. The angle, I presume, is that even people with obscene amounts of money are not immune to bouts of tremendous sadness; that tremendous sadness does not necessarily target the poor. To be fair to the depressed millionaire, he describes the nature of his bouts with a lucidity I haven't heard before; with poetry, almost.

He describes how, when he feels bad, every colour drains from his surroundings.

He describes how, when he feels bad, he can't taste food – even garlic, even spice.

He describes how, when he feels bad, all of the things that usually animate him suddenly don't. He describes the whole dead world and how he feels as if it has died for no one but him.

'Now I can spot the signs it's coming,' he says, meaning the cartoon cloud of desolation which appears from nowhere and remains for an unspecified spell, hovering above his head, following him everywhere he goes. A coffee cup left unwashed is a sign, a misplaced set of keys, an unmade bed. When the depressed millionaire walks past an expanse of fresh-cut grass and forgets to inhale, this is the most irrefutable of signs, the point at which he knows it's time to start extending the metaphorical stretchers of his

metaphorical umbrella of defence. 'I run,' he says, and for just a moment everybody in the audience and everybody watching at home thinks that he is speaking figuratively, but now he starts to espouse the healing power of exercise and we realise he means it literally. The depressed millionaire literally runs until the forward thrust has caused his cartoon cloud to disperse back into ordinary life again, into ordinary feeling.

Works about Running, I test myself: every winter, a Dutch performance artist and musician called Guido van der Werve runs thirty-two miles from an art gallery in Chelsea to Kensico Cemetery in Valhalla, upstate New York. Where he lays a bouquet of chamomile flowers at the tombstone of Sergei Rachmaninoff, the Russian maestro composer who died in 1943. *Running to Rachmaninoff*, the piece is called, and van der Werve runs because Rachmaninoff suffered debilitating depression for three significant years of his life. And running. Ah yes. Is supposed to make depression go away.

He brings chamomile because chamomile is Russia's national flower, but also because it is supposed to alleviate the symptoms of hysteria. From which Rachmaninoff, apparently, also suffered.

It's half past ten and would be entirely dark if it wasn't for this clear sky, this perfectly completed moon. In the hall I kick off my slipper-boots and pull on my sneakers. Throw the front door open. Hurdle over the gate.

I run.

And for approximately the first three minutes of running, I feel spectacular.

Through the dark, the grey road stands out faintly against the black ditches and guides me. I run like I ran when I was a child, without realising I am running, without considering that I might at any moment twist an unsuspecting ankle or be stopped dead in my tracks by an undetected heart defect or trip over and fall flat on my face and smash my nose away.

I run.

Like my sister is racing after me. Like she is only a few strides behind and I am in with a viable chance of winning a perfectly pointless round of Chase.

But after another minute I'm losing puff. The weariness of adulthood nips at my heels. I notice how the sole of my right sneaker is flapping loose, how my hair is batting my eyeballs, how my cardigan has slipped from my shoulders to dangle annoyingly off my elbows, to sail in my wake as if it is a cape and I am trying to be a superhero.

I never beat my sister at Chase. She was always taller than me, faster than me.

Because my grandmother's bungalow sits on the hill's brow, every outing is always down on the outward journey, up on the way home. I turn around and begin to plod up the hill, limping slightly in order to accommodate my flapping sole. I remember that I hate running, that I can't stand any form of exercise unless it has some purpose other than exercising, unless I have arrived somewhere by the time it is over.

I remember that going back is always the hardest part.