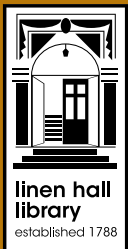




CHANGING THE STORY



extra
ORDINARY
women



**CHANGING
THE STORY**



Across the Barricades

The year I turned thirteen, our English teacher arranged her classroom in alphabetical order. Front to back. A to Z. My surname landed me right under her nose, sharing a table with two girls I didn't run around with. *Allen. Boyd. Carson.* Also present, Davison, Black and Knox. It went without saying, mine was a very Protestant school. Which is not to say it wasn't open to exploring the other point of view. The curriculum decreed it, alongside a bus run to Cultra with the Catholic school. Key texts included *Romeo and Juliet*, *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry* and - just in case we needed reminding that prejudice could happen here too - Joan Lingard's *Across the Barricades* by Jan Carson. We did not read it like a statement of what was going on up the road. We read it like something strange and exotic, savouring all the salacious bits. We were thirty odd teenage girls. We'd recently discovered *Just Seventeen*. It didn't take much to provoke hysterics. *Poor Kevin. Poor Sadie. What sort of monsters would drive them apart?* We wrote monologues to vent our anger. We made cartoon strips from the plot, (*I'm Catholic. I'm Protestant. They'll probably shoot us. It doesn't stop me fancying you.*) Then, as a final, *piste de resistance*, we rearranged the classroom furniture, to make a literal barricade and presented our teacher with a series of themed tableaux. *Sectarianism. Division. Love.* We entitled the final one *A Future of Hope*. Half the girls were Sadie.

The other half were meant to be Kevin, (voices dropped, and ponytails tucked inside baseball caps). As was always the case in drama, we fought for the right to play the man. Over the weekend we wrote essays entitled, *Everybody Should Get On*, and, *Catholics Are Just Like Us*. So impressed was our English teacher, she got the principal in to hear us reading our essays aloud, blushing and stuttering at the front of the class. This would've been 1993; a full five years before Good Friday. It would take the boyos up in Stormont several decades to catch up with us. For we were already big advocates for peace. And reconciliation. There were felt-tipped posters pinned all over the noticeboard bearing witness to this. It was great to be thirteen and so enlightened. We carried our confidence out of the classroom and into the separate worlds of our lives. Six weeks later, our English teacher used Ian Paisley as an example of what a bigot was and one of the Free P contingent put in a complaint. Then the Allen girl, who sat next to me, got suspended for throwing a coke can at the Catholic school bus. I wasn't that surprised myself because she came from a housing estate. And I done a course called How to Convert the Roman Catholic with a rake of ones from church and afterwards shoved tracts through the letterboxes of all the Catholics in our park. But none of this was prejudice like you got in Joan Lingard's books. We wouldn't have got on like that.

New paths, new families, new lives

Looking back it all seems idyllic, but I'm sure that we had our ugly moments as well as our beautiful ones. Real friendship admits recognition of the ugly as well as the beautiful. I remember the moments that snatched me from the passive solitude of my normal life, warned me of the pleasure and the fear of living.

This is a quote by Jennifer Johnston

By Amanda Verlaque

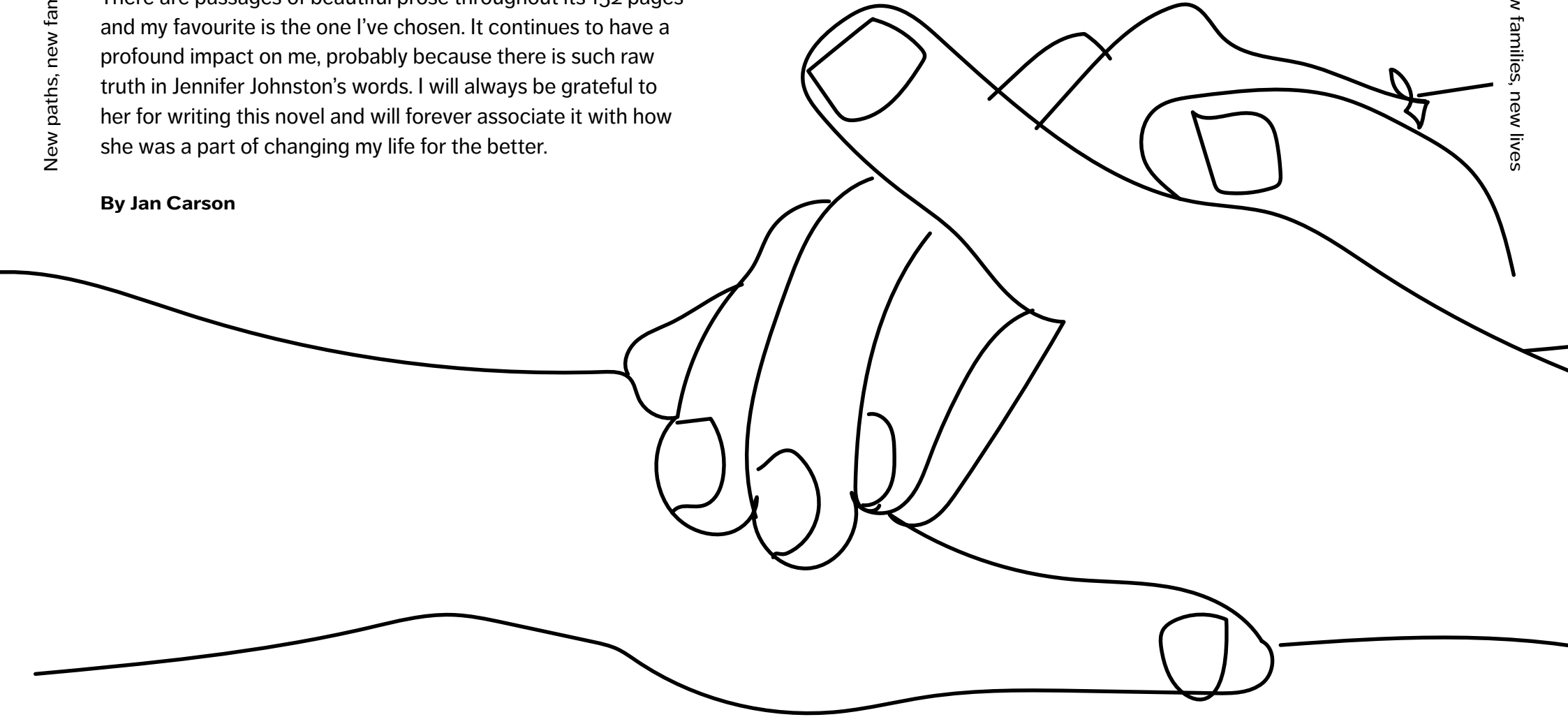
How Many Miles to Babylon?

Reading Jennifer Johnston's novel coincided with my return to education, which triggered a new life path and an introduction to the friends and colleagues who would become an extension of my biological family. At 19 I decided to rectify a reckless decision (leaving school three years earlier without sitting any exams) and enrolled part time in my local tech. I sat among the uniformed 15 year olds in the GCSE English Literature class, where *How Many Miles to Babylon?* was on the syllabus. I was captivated by the story of two boys in pre First World War Wicklow whose forbidden friendship couldn't be curtailed by class, or later as young men in Flanders' trenches. It is the ultimate tale of loyalty, told with grace and flair.

I've read the novel about eight times in the last 30 years, as my extended family grew to include new, non-blood ties: university, queer, sisterhood, creative.

There are passages of beautiful prose throughout its 152 pages and my favourite is the one I've chosen. It continues to have a profound impact on me, probably because there is such raw truth in Jennifer Johnston's words. I will always be grateful to her for writing this novel and will forever associate it with how she was a part of changing my life for the better.

By Jan Carson



Come Let Me Clutch Thee

There it is, smooth, slim, silver, sparkling in the sun, lying nonchalantly on the writing desk with not a care in the world.

A multicoloured eight petalled flower wrapped round it, Sellotaped.

Love emanating into the ether like a translucent haze.

The lingering smell of *Parma Violets* gently assails the bottom of my nose.

Breathe in *Parma Violets*, breathe out frustration.

This pen of such importance, greatly loved by Anna, her prized trophy, huge achievement, awarded at her senior assembly.

Given to me, in a dark, unproductive period of wasteland.

When I look at her, my utmost creation.

Love shone a light into an incomprehensible blankness.

Sitting in my writing chair with the loved pen, warm in my hand.

Allowing myself to be.

Images began to appear, like cracks in the horizon.

A thought sprang to the fore, I think I have got a very good sense of humour, other people don't, but I do.

I laugh at my own jokes.

With this revelation I burst into kinks of laughter.

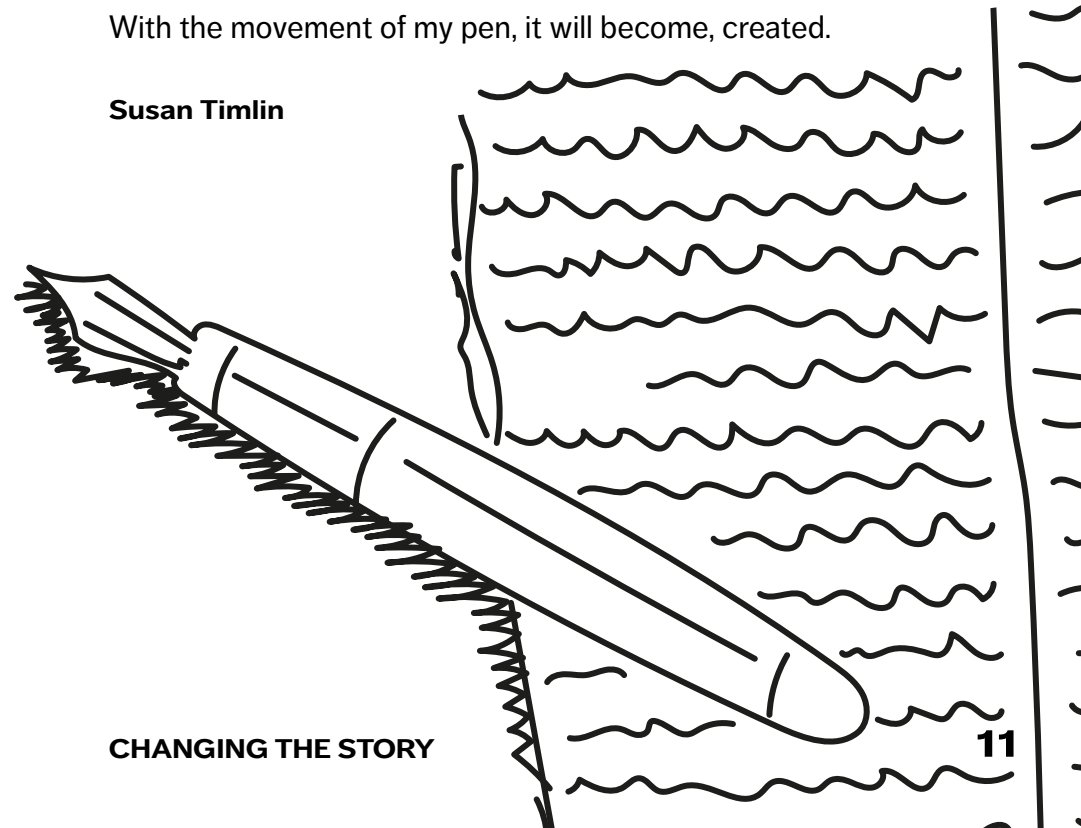
I was ready to begin, step into the life of another story.

An imaginary world where endless possibilities exists.

Line by line, a story is made, given life to the characters within.

With the movement of my pen, it will become, created.

Susan Timlin



Sinead Morrissey: First Day Of Teaching In Japan

I awoke from a restless sleep, blinked open my eyes and looked around the bare room that was to be my home for the year. The light oddly different, the sounds unfamiliar, a piercing quiet interrupted by a distant hum of heavy machinery. I struggled off the futon, and searched through my still packed suitcase for toothbrush and comb, and wondered what on earth was I doing there.

It was a long way from the familiar sounds of the Cavehill Road and a long way from the camaraderie and friendships of Trinity college.



It had seemed a good idea when I applied for the teaching post in a small village in Japan, and a great opportunity to learn more about Japanese culture and the art of haiku. Now it all felt strange and disorienting.

There was a rap at my door, Akari, the owner of the house where I was renting a room reminded me, *The girls are waiting*. I hurriedly ate a small bowl of rice and miso soup Akari had prepared and made my way through the small village to the nearby schoolhouse. I passed few people, most of them elderly who looked at me with friendly curiosity.

It was April, the start of the new school year and Spring, the cherry blossoms at the entrance to the school were beginning to flower.

The old school house had clearly seen better years, the classrooms, once full now, eerily empty. The small class I was to teach was located close to the entrance with windows looking out on to the row of cherry trees.

Ohayu the children chorused, and bowed as I entered the room. *Ohayu* I replied, thinking it sounded more like *hey you* than good morning in Japanese.

I looked around the small class of eight girls, aged between 7 and nine, the same age I was when I first started to write poetry.

I wondered if I could read the first poem that entranced me, *From a Railway Carriage* would they understand, would it sound like a train moving, were they familiar with faeries and witches?

I started to read... *faster than fairies, faster than witches...* After a few lines I noticed one small voice accompanying mine... *here is a child who clambers and scrambles* she echoed. I looked down to see little E mica, looking up at me smiling, eyes wide open, reciting from memory as I read.

How on earth did she learn the poem, in almost perfect English?

At the end of the class she handed me a note...

Welcome Kanishi
We hope you love our village
From all your students
A welcome note in Haiku?...

I smiled as I passed the elderly ladies sitting in the sunshine as I walked back to my room.

How was your first day Kinashi? Akari asked when I returned. We have an American just arrived today, I'd like to introduce you, you might get on, his name is Joseph.

By Eithne McIlroy

Another Station, Another Train, Another City, Another Season

The dining car is quiet with just a few policemen enjoying their rest and cigarettes beside a no smoking sign. We order noodles and they taste of chillies, dried and diced with delicious Sichuan pepper. The waitress is dressed in a white apron and black dress more suited to a Victorian tea room. She serves us at our plastic table. I'm here, really here. I think of my parents and their time in the Communist Party. How they would love China. I thought I would see people in Mao jackets riding bicycles. How wrong was I. The number of cars shock me. I expected the China of ten years ago. The North Building of the Peace Hotel in Shanghai where we stayed at the start of the trip was originally owned by Victor Sassoon who made his money from selling opium of all things. I imagine what it was like when Bernard Shaw stayed here.

I agree with what Ye Yanbin, a travelling companion and a renowned Chinese poet said at the start of the journey *writers from both countries should have the courage to review the past while looking forward to the future*. I feel a connection between Britain and China.

We travel from Shanghai to Beijing. It was warm in Shanghai; 27 degrees according to the hotel. A Chinese couple stop at our table. They speak in fluent English with smiles as broad as their faces. They tell us it is snowing in Beijing. Elderkin and I are glad we packed winter clothes. We share a carriage which is the highest grade the train has to offer. The sheets have that freshly laundered smell and I am grateful to our hosts. The journey is long, yet the 23 hours passes quickly. I open my notebook and my pen takes over.

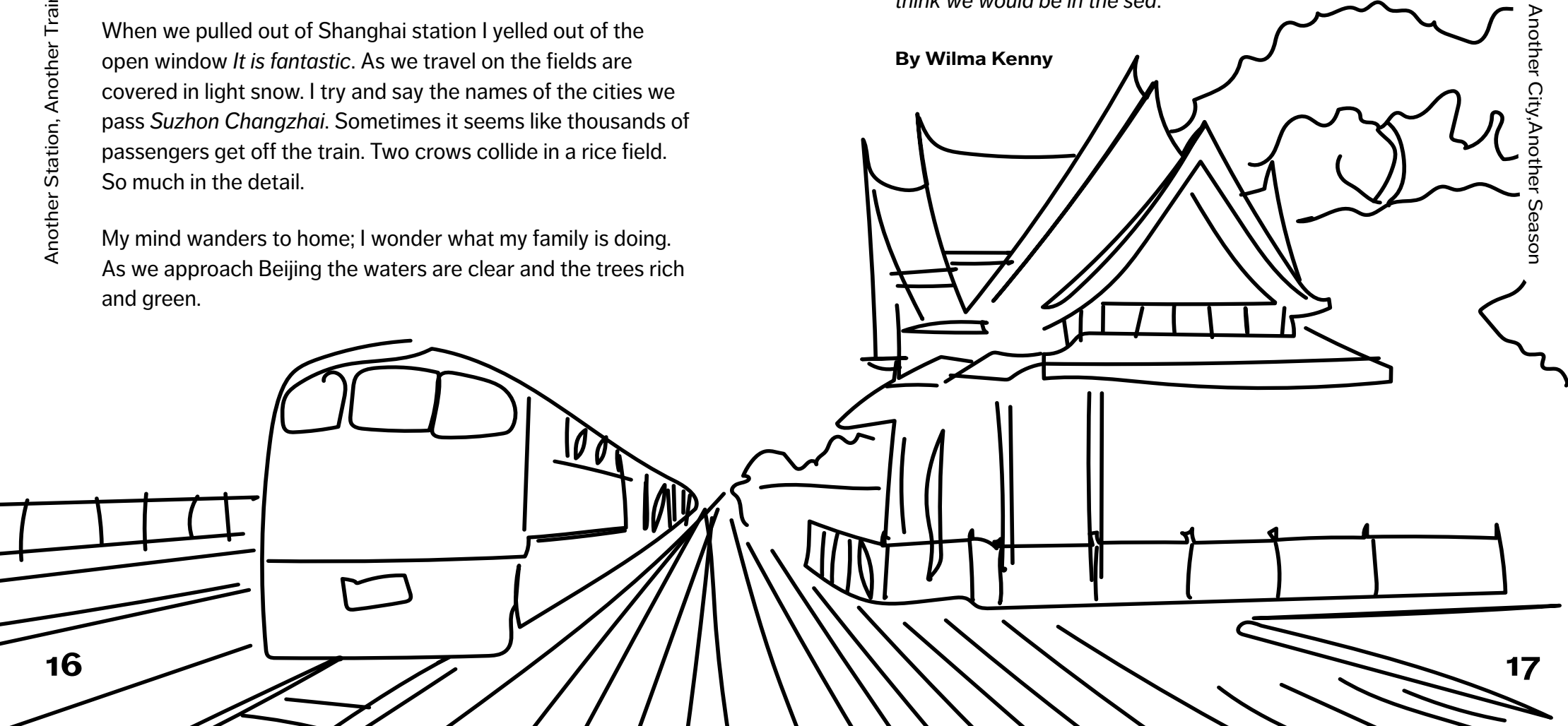
When we pulled out of Shanghai station I yelled out of the open window *It is fantastic*. As we travel on the fields are covered in light snow. I try and say the names of the cities we pass *Suzhon Changzhai*. Sometimes it seems like thousands of passengers get off the train. Two crows collide in a rice field. So much in the detail.

My mind wanders to home; I wonder what my family is doing. As we approach Beijing the waters are clear and the trees rich and green.

In Beijing it is drizzly and misty and cold. I knew China was large but its vastness astounds me. We have travelled from summer to winter. Imagine if we had flown we would have missed all this.

Soon we will be heading to Hong Kong and I will be homeward bound to Ireland. We disembark to explore the Republic's capital city where awaits a rich history and old and new combine. I tell my companions, *If we travelled this far in Britain I think we would be in the sea.*

By Wilma Kenny



Week 4 Piece

The first time I saw it, I thought that it would be warm to the touch, as if there were some ancient heat radiating from deep inside it. Instead, it was cool, like the winter rain that had soaked it for thousands of years, before I brought it inside. Its darkness drew my eye, its colour burnt and charred like turf. Its surface is covered in ridges, like a mountain range, worn down by the weather, and being turned in hands, over and over. It almost smells like where it came from, mossy and damp.

It's good to get out of the city of an evening, and down below lay the city sending up puffs of smoke, and cutting into it was the blue of Belfast Lough with its ships and gantries. There is no where better to go to get away than the Cavehill. I remember sitting in the wet dress, the rock in my hand, and looking out at the thousands of lights, feeling breathless from the climb. There must be so many more lights now, as the town has grown. I came here many times as a teenager, to escape the noise and the danger of the city. I would always wonder why Belfast could never look this beautiful close up. From far away, I couldn't see the burnt out houses, the gates and the police vans.

I took the rock from the Cavehill with me at the age of eighteen, on the slow ferry to Scotland, reassuring and firm in my pocket. It sat on my desk in my room as a student, and then on my writing table when I had a home of my own. My characters, teenagers from different backgrounds would go where I had been, walk the streets that I had been on, and then they would climb the Cavehill, and look out over the city. Sitting at the edge of McArt's fort, the sheer drop of the cliff face below, as they would gaze at each other, and out over the lough, the layers of history beneath them.

By Hannah



Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament Badge

I know I saw it here somewhere, between ticket stubs, old postcards and half-dried pens. The final drawer slides open and the badge bounces into sight. It ricochets off the wood with a hollow ping. It seems smaller now as childhood mementoes often do. My CND badge. A black and white peace sign, like a negative. I hold it to my nose, it still has the coppery smell of pennies and a ghost of cheap rose Bulgarian perfume. Both bought with my own money from Ingrid at the Party bazaar.

Encased in metal and plastic and explosive in content. What could be more inflammatory in Northern Ireland in the Eighties than the idea of peace and disarmament? Even if the *détente* I was looking for, was thousands of miles from our splintered city. It's amazing how scared people can be of a symbol.

My grandfather's life was changed by a lapel pin. A policeman asked him to remove an Easter lily pin and my grandfather refused. Arrested, imprisoned and, later, interned because of a single badge. His university years, he called them, where he gained an appetite for reading and Socialism. Infected with radical ideas, colouring the lives of his children and their children with Red. How far he travelled from the Crumlin Road Gaol to the Kremlin and back again. All on the head of a pin.

There is a photo of me somewhere. My banner, my balloon, my badge and me marching for nuclear disarmament. I wore my own badge with pride. The loose click-clack of the safety pin was the rhythm marker of my childhood. Tapping out a personal timer, my own iambic pentameter, when playing hopscotch or running, always running. The frigid Belfast air entering my lungs. As though no time at all had passed since the last day I wore it and now. I fasten my badge to my daughter's crimson cardigan and wonder where it might lead her.

By Kerriann Speers



A China Cup

Belfast 1982

I was rushing around as usual before going to work, clearing breakfast dishes and tidying up. How three wee girls eat so little in the morning and yet still make such a mess I'll never know. A quick brush of the floor and with luck I should make the 9.15 bus. The phone began to ring. I thought twice about answering it. Then sighing I lifted the receiver.

Hello, may I speak to Christina Reid please

Speaking oh I hope this isn't one of their teachers Hello my name is Aidan, I am ringing on behalf of the Irish Times, I just want to congratulate you on being awarded the second prize in our competition for your play Tea in a China Cup...

The voice faded into the background.

My heart sank. I had really hoped to win first prize. I had put so much of me into that play.

Thank you for phoning, I am sorry I am in a terrible rush, just on my way out the door. You are very kind letting me know so soon. Yes I look forward to the invitation to the award ceremony. Thank you again.

I sat down on the hall chair and bit my lip, a tear trickled down my cheek. My play had got second place but my heart still hurt.

I went into the kitchen and automatically put the kettle on the stove. A cup of tea will settle me. In the dining room, where I sit at night to write, my eye falls on the china cabinet. So old fashioned now, I could never get rid of it. It was my link to my granny, my mother and her sisters.

When the girls were small, there was always hand prints on the bow shaped glass, they spent hours looking at it. Hoping that one day I would turn the key and let them play with all the treasure inside.

I went over took the key from the plant pot on top and crouched down. Turning the key the door opened and slowly I put my hand towards the back and lifted out the China Cup and saucer.

I swirled some boiling water around the brown earthenware pot, spooned in two teaspoons of tea and filled the pot, left it to settle.

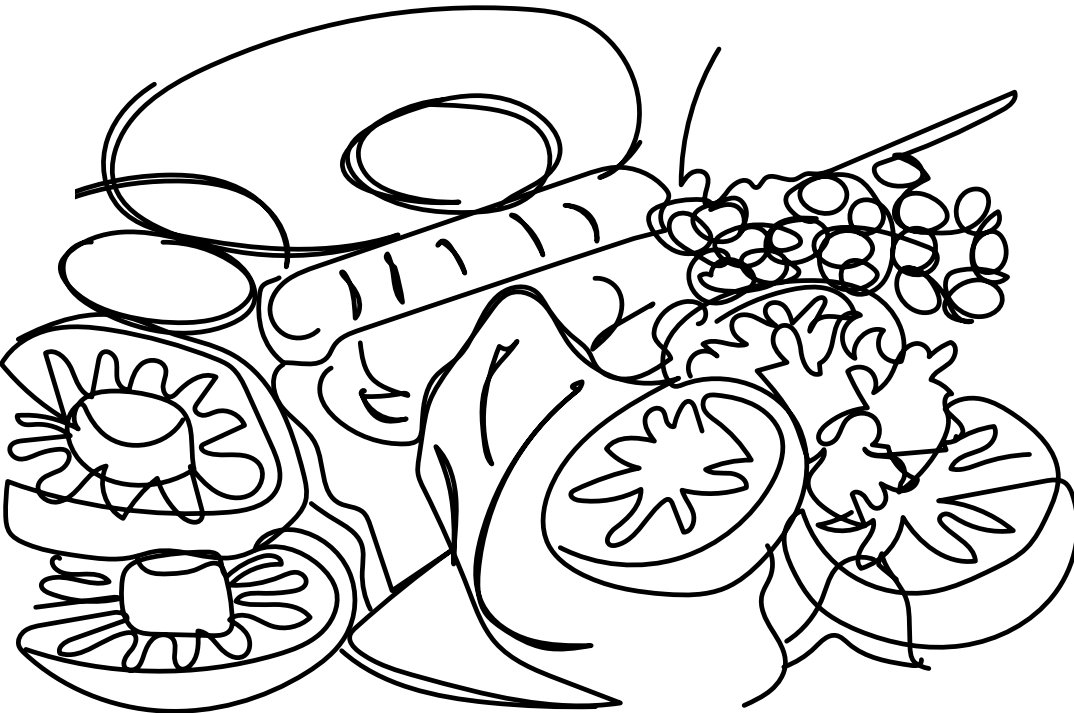
I gave the cup and saucer a rinse under the tap dried them with love and poured in a small drop of milk, then tea. Sitting at the table I sipped at the hot tea. My family's cure all.

Belfast 1983

The phone's ringing and ringing, couldn't get the key in lock, finally got it opened as the phone went to answer machine. *Christina, Jane here from the Lyric, just ringing to say congratulations we are delighted to tell you Tea in a China Cup starts rehearsals next week. Give me a ring to finalise the details.*

I bit my lip, smiled, then I laughed out loud and went and put the kettle on.

By Jean Sansome

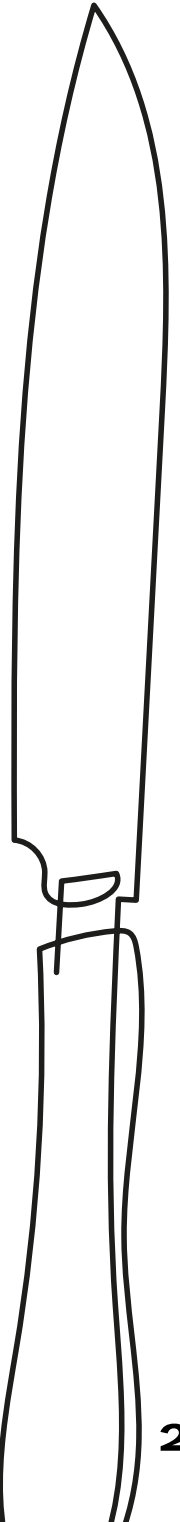


Letter Opener

It sits on my desk in a patch of sunlight streaming in through the window of the study. The glaring light reflecting in the smooth silver handle, piercing into my eyes. It is pleasantly warm to the touch as I brandish the naked blade before the stack of unopened letters. My weapon of choice, to fight against deadlines, postal delays and the infernal bills. Today is a day of victories, the jabberwocky's of administration lifeless by my hand.

The next week I receive more letters, this time from the children. I leave my sword in its scabbard, no weapons needed today as what was once an instrument of war is now my portal to the outside world. I am transported from my study to see my grandchildren play at the seaside, to the rolling plains of Donegal, to Clare's new office overlooking Dublin City. I'm abruptly taken out of my letters by the deep gong of the grandfather clock in the hall, jolted back to reality. I set down the letter opener I had been absent-mindedly fiddling with and pick up my pen to write back with my own stories. After all... my pen is mightier than the sword. It sits on my coffee table where I'd left it the night before.

By Becky Figueira



Changing the Story Rosa Damascena



This tiny tower of fragrance sits humbly in my collection of things.

The smooth wood has lost its shine but not the beauty of its form.

A simple, wooden vial hand carved with love in Bulgaria offering a perfect rose inked in muted reds and greens on the front.

I remember Christmas mornings, cross legged among the pine needles, tearing paper off wooden boxes. The thrill of uncovering a trio of perfume vials nestling.

Close together like lost children. Releasing the stopper took me

instantly to a garden I did not know yet but would one day find in the Valley of the Roses just South of the Balkan mountains.

The scent of the beautiful Rosa Damascena still lingers faintly in my tiny tower like my childhood memories.

Warm and honeyed with peaks of cinnamon, clove and lemon – a precious gift from our cousins in the Soviet Bloc.

The aroma takes me back to hazy evenings and ...

I remember smoke and faces that I knew and the fact that I got in free; my mother taking money by the half-collapsed sink;

Posters proclaiming *AN EVENING OF BRECHT*
And subtitled: *Bring Your Own Drink;*

Too much conviction to see through.

My father met my mother at a Communist Party meeting in Belfast in 1968.

A different sort of meeting for a city starting to crumble. They stood outside the chaos inspired by a vision of another motherland and for that I am so grateful.

I stood at a Communist Party Christmas bazaar at the Duke of York in 1988 and was inspired by the speaker selling the Soviet dream of an idyllic, advanced society.

And even though the spell got broken and the darkness beneath the Soviet bloc seeped out, I am still fascinated by Russia. The Moscow Puzzles. How to be a good citizen ...

Natasha on her collective farm working out the most efficient way to harvest cotton.

I'm sitting in a darkened, paper room in a Belfast bookshop thinking of Natasha and her family. I turn my tiny tower of roses over and over in my hand. My worry stone, my comforter born in a Bulgarian valley like thousands of others. Carved and moulded by kindly hands and filled with the Rose oil they called liquid gold.

The deep, floral fragrance lingers faintly in the night air as my audience gathers for the reading. I close my eyes for just a moment and give thanks to the angels

For the beauty of my childhood. The hush descends and I stand up to read my father's in my fingers, but my mother's in my palms.

I lift them up and look at them with pleasure – I know my parents made me by my hands.

**By M Doyle Sept 2020
(Sinead Morrissey)**

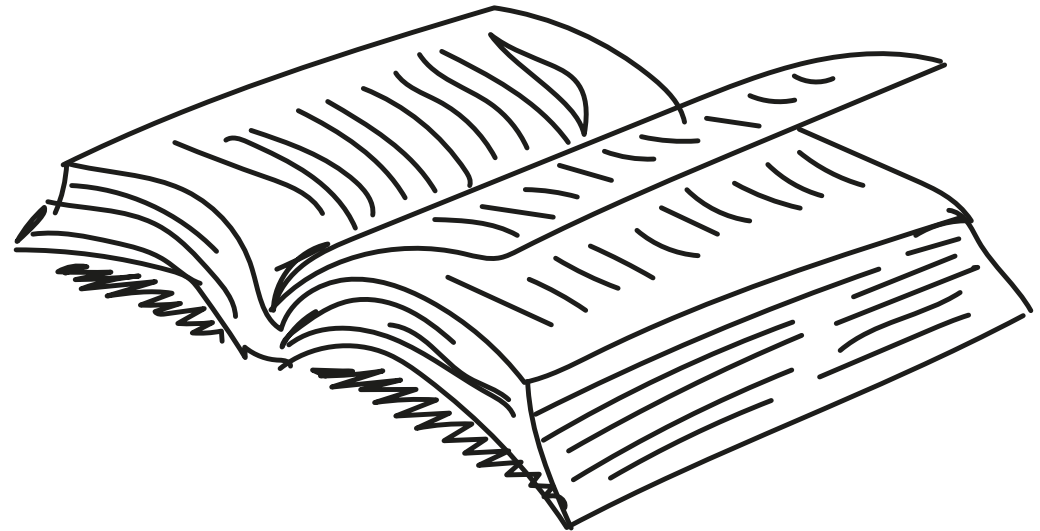
Quotes are from

Paperback

I lift the paperback from the rug where it's been discarded and squeeze its soft thickness with one hand. The covers have long gone, lost forever at the bottom of a toy box somewhere. The spine is barely held together by the strings of its binding and just one strap of Sellotape.

It's already been quite battered when I bought it that lunchtime on Botanic. At first, I'd wanted it for just a single poem – the one with the railway carriage going *Faster than fairies, faster than witches*.

I patter through to page sixty and read it again, and I fly back to being eight years old in a classroom that smells of pencil lead and buttered white bread.



Back then, it's transported me to a new world; one of splotchy pen and scraps of paper, rhythm and rhyme, words and lines for me to clamber and scramble over.

Now, of course, this little book means even more. I turn the dog-eared pages to my son's favourite, and breath in the comforting smell of dust and damp. He preferred the gallop, gallop of the horseman to the charging ahead of the steam train. I run my hand over the coarse, pulpy paper and wonder at the words and sketches, still clear and black like my memories.

I flip back to the contents page to see my daughter's scribbles beside her favourites – *At the Seaside*, *The Cow*, and *The Little Land*. So very like her *To go sailing far away to the pleasant Land of Play*. I hold the book between my two palms and smile. So very like all three of us to love this tattered, threadbare book.

By Judith Millar

What's your line?

You can become a nothing so incredibly quickly. We all have to take great care that we don't become nothings. It's the easiest thing in the world to do...

...I had to get a new passport and I had writer on it, rather than housewife, or nothing. It was wonderful.

By Jennifer Johnston, 2009

* * *

What's your line, Ed?

My grandfather was once asked this question by an American man, all rolled up sleeves and burnished forearms, impossibly clean. His foreign confidence was a story in itself, eclipsing Edward's own story of a number on Corporation Street after his stint in the war put a small but significant dent in his head.

But did you see him flicking his cigar on the rug? said my gran, who had not been asked the same question. Because there was no question about her line of work, about her business which was, naturally, growing human beings cell by shining cell. Before then she had joined the shawlies on the daily trek to Gallagher's cigarette factory, but that had been given up (along with the smokes) to focus on the business of the family line.



The art of weaving full-grown people out of thin cloth and just enough potatoes.

So, what's your line?

They don't talk that way these days, but they ask the question just the same. My line of work is, I suppose, a sort of juggler. A juggler of tasks which are like glass balls that bounce everywhere when you drop them, which I do.

There are no limits nowadays, they say. You can be anything you want to be. Or do they mean everything you want to be? Be everything.

So, a second-rate juggler of everything - there are quite a few of us. Together we look with jealousy at those enchanters of time whose spheres hang effortlessly suspended and never seem to fall.

My other line is the one I can never cross. On the other side of this line is where I could admit that I'm bored of keeping the balls juggling and the plates spinning and of putting things away, over and over again into their boxes. I could crawl inside one of those boxes, square and safe and with only enough space to be grateful for the good things, to luxuriate in the luck I already have without wanting more. In a box like that, there's no room to go wrong.

But something keeps me from staying in there because I know that if I don't push and push, the things that were supposed to happen to me are just going to happen to somebody else.

You are what you do, they say, and what if all you do is dream?

Outside of the box it feels like I'm in the sort of deep, deep water where the enormous shadows of things already known, and stories told too many times lurk just below the surface. But I know that somewhere, shimmering invisible in the water is a line for me, and all I can do is keep on reaching for it.

Tea

5 foot 2 and barely tall stooped in scullery light,

Many rings of cameos and kings adorn her tea cupped hands,
Clinking clunking against the clay like distant St Anne's bells,

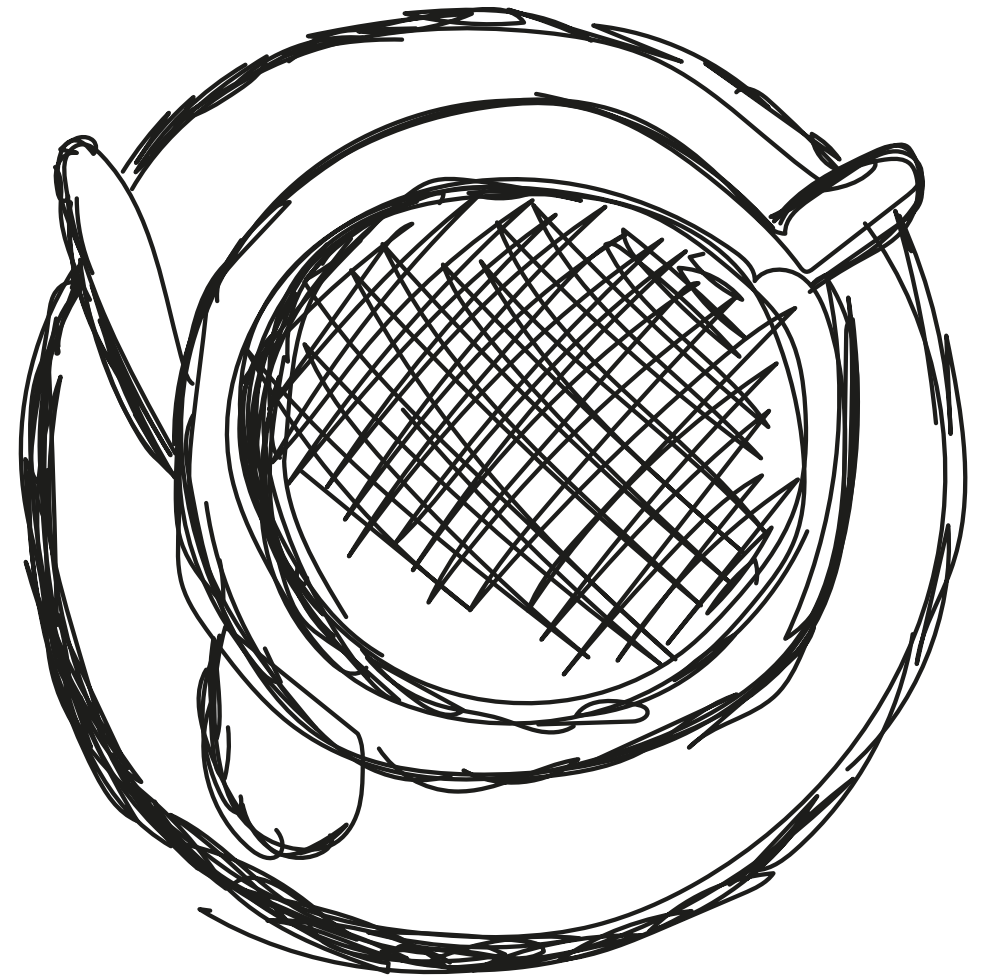
Waiting perched for younger hands to join,
For milky tea and Jaffa Cakes and stories from the farm

With lambing season hard this year and no water from the
mains,
I think she is doting and needs to move is the general turn of
affairs,

More tea for me and news declared how busy it has been,
With moving house and broken cars and emails piling up.

Time goes on and calmness falls with a happy satiety,
These scullery moments and grannies' hands,
Wrapped up in a cup of tea.

By Steph Lismore





HERITAGE
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An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha agus Trádála
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade