



FAN ANSEO¹
An Anthology of Fiction and Poetry

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Aine Healy

English Dissertation: Creative Writing

Supervisor: Dr Spencer Jordan

¹ 'Fan anseo' is Irish for 'stay here'.

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Your Own Two Feet**A Short Story**

*

... time, time to go through the mud and the squelch and the thump thump thump and the cows in the shed not long now, not long now ... but no, no, no, it's time, time to go and the squelch and the thump and the mud in your toes, let me race, race, race you, time to go, time to go...

*

September, 1986

There are two shoes pushed together in the hallway. Black, patent, gleaming aside from a slight scuff on the left heel which she meant to polish.

'Won't be long! Won't be long now...'

Her voice is like music; she has always been a good singer, even when she is not singing. But she has been singing now. You have been listening to that old melody, waiting in the hallway beside her black patent shoes.

'Tis far away I am today...'

It is a song she sings often: when she is sad, when she is happy, when she is rushing around, as she has been now, opening and closing drawers, moving with a swift slipper-tread across the carpet above, telling you she won't be long now, won't be long at all.

You are just about to shout when she appears, at the top step, slightly out of breath, calling over a mountain of pink silk.

'I have it, I have it...'

You envy the rhythm in her voice, the energy, the fearlessness.

'I'm Irish,' you said once in the school playground. Nobody believed you. You never said it again.

She comes down the stairs, quickly, lightly, tossing the gown into your arms.

'I'll just get a bag,' she calls, already in the kitchen.

You can hear the creak of a stool, the scuffle of slippers kicked across lino, the slap of bare feet on the seat as she climbs up and reaches for the top shelf, still singing, but talking in the breaks between lines, the words that she forgets.

'Mammy, we're late!'

'Sure, isn't college meant to be awful relaxed?'

'It's university.'

'Isn't it all the same?'

She reappears, rustling, with a crumpled carrier bag, slips the folded dress inside, and slides her feet into the black patent shoes. As she opens the front door, you realise she has stopped singing.

That evening, dump your cases in a musty room, stare at the peeling walls and hum her favourite tune. Think of how you always seem to fight with her, like you did the whole way here, whining accusingly, the unpacked brown boots, letting her turn up the cassette and telling you to grow up for God's sake. Think of the way you arrived, the way you must both have looked, emerging stiff and red-faced from the faded blue Cortina, lugging cumbersome cases up three flights of stairs, throwing nervous, aching smiles to the faces around you. Think of her driving home in the empty car, the thin ribbon of road dissolving into distance.

Eat dinner in a silence cold as the bacon that has been slapped onto your plate. Somebody asks if you know what you're wearing to the ball and you nod, saying nothing. You should probably save your money so you ignore the telephone on the corridor below, the one you must share with three floors of students. You couldn't speak to her anyway, there is nothing much to say.

That night, lie in the low, creaking bed and hear other people laughing, their shoeless feet thumping the carpeted floor.

*

... today we go, all aboard with our big cases, let me race, race, race you, loud feet on deck and my face is all wet, far far away and looking for faces, that man and melodeon, not sure where I'm going yet, more faces and smiles, and anyway, child, where is it you're from, not far, not long, just south of Clifden, and ah that's nice, right by the sea then, and the horn and the fog, and my stomach dancing, dancing so will I go over, will I ask him, 'tis far away, 'tis worth the chance, this...

*

October, 1986

Walk all day in the brown boots she posted, alone and rustling through the leaves by the river. Find a damp bench, sit on a carrier bag and try to write poetry, eating soft grapes bought days ago. Miss three lectures and decide it doesn't matter.

Eat dinner with people you now call friends in the old, draughty dining room, laughing about last month's ball.

'That dress. You wore. Gor-geous!' says a dark-haired girl with a strong Northern accent; you have already forgotten her name, there are so many people. 'I just loved it.'

Give up trying to decide if she means it.

Lie awake on your creaking bed for hours, half-dreaming. Think of home. Of the kettle, steaming, even though nobody wants a cup of tea.

'Just habit.'

You can almost hear her slippers in the hallway, the quick, whispering shuffle of worn soles across old carpet.

*

... far, far away and where am I going and where will I stay, losing sight of the crowds, but me and this tall girl, County Down, we'll manage somehow... doors and slabs and streets unpaved with gold, no dreams but we're fine here, we're sold, out feeding our souls with bags of chips... no blacks, no dogs, no Irish... still laughing, singing old songs, telling ourselves the next one, the next one, surely be to God the next one after this... no Irish, no Irish, no Irish... tell me, is it worth the price, this...

*

November, 1986

You watch winter creep into the new city and meet a friend for coffee. A cheap place on the corner. Where you sit, there's damp, folded newspaper wedged under one table leg, but it still rocks when you put your cup down. Talk of lectures, that tall handsome lad who always sits at the front. Going to the hairdressers, there's this new style, like what's her name... have you seen *Dirty Dancing*? Exam stress and deadlines and would you ever miss home, like? Smile and arrange to watch *Dirty Dancing* sometime.

She sends a letter in the post; some notes tumble onto your bedroom carpet.

Hope you're looking after yourself. Get yourself some change for the phone calls.

Mammy

Go to the salon and let your guilt simmer beneath the dryer. Tell her on the phone how everything costs so much.

*

... away we go, away we go like these envelopes home, drilling screws in car doors to build their bones, but holy mother of God my money's all spent, only one shilling eight pence for Tuesday nights, Mickey Mouse and the melodeon man, catch me if you can, round the house and smash the dresser, know you, know you, know you better now, faces, shake this, smiles, laughter, remember after colours, darkness, not so hard this, city, pretty, pretty girl, lipstick, laughter, give us a twirl and laugh, laugh, all the while, smile but what, what, where, when and why, cry, cry, cry in the darkness... is it hard, this...

*

December, 1986

When you come home at Christmas, she doesn't like your new hairdo. Or those shoes.

'Doc Martens...'

'I don't care whose they are...'

Sharp mutterings. Arguments. Heavy thuds up the stairs. Somehow, it is not how you remember. Not quite.

She takes you for a meal and you sit in half-sullen silence. Something is wrong and the scrape of her fork against the plate annoys you. And there is work to be done. Lots of it.

'Reading in the dark! You'll strain your eyes...'

'I'm nearly nineteen, Mum...'

'Mum?'

*

...far, far away, dawning of the wedding day with them and you and us and all the trust, back home like an envelope and how will we cope, next year in the summer with the tight fear, all the way over here, having a baby, baby-having, having your baby, my baby, why baby, well I must say then Davy what a lovely surprise, opening my eyes to congratulations, action stations and white blankets, yellow blankets, then pink frills, pink dresses, any guesses and to think we are over here, now, putting roots in the ground like babies, melodeon sounds in the ferry-fog, no Irish, no Irish, no blacks, no dogs, going once, going twice, going, gone...

*

January, 1987

Go back up North in a car full of suitcases, loose quilts, tossed pillows, a lamp stand prodding you in the cheek. Stand your Doc Martens on the shoe rack beside your wardrobe. Nestle your notebooks back into the book shelf over your desk.

Fail your first proper exam. When you call, her voice hisses like electricity.

'What are you crying for? No point in crying.'

Hear the bottom step creak as she crosses her legs. She is sitting there; you can see her, twiddling the cord between her fingers like a strand of her own hair.

'The next one will be better...' she says.

Tidy your room, hanging dresses, straightening the fabric and watching the creases tumble out.

*

... don't go, don't go and I know, I know she is getting fierce big, so this, this is it, the year, tight, tight fear as she stands here, in the hall waiting for me, sing my song, then she is gone, gone, in the car with lamps and wires and Good Luck cards, and screeching tyres, won't be long, won't be long, hear him call across the boat, the rustling coat, sure, didn't I meet you once, back home, just come with me and build a house, with Mickey Mouse and huff and puff and blow it all...

*

February, 1987

Down by the river, walking out of a Modern Poetry seminar, you meet a girl with red hair.

'Dervla's an Irish name, isn't it?'

Her accent is strong, lilting. You ask her where she's from.

'County Limerick.'

'Ah, my lot are Galway. Not too far.'

'But you? You're from...'

'Born in Birmingham.'

Hum things like Tell Me Ma. The Black Velvet Band. Galway Bay.

'I always forget the words to that one...'

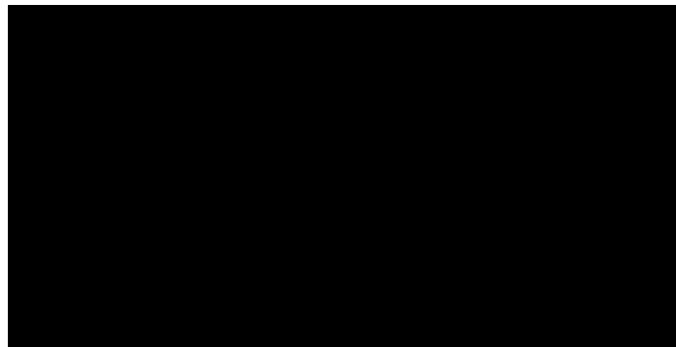
'My mum used to sing it. It goes...'

*

... 'tis far away, 'tis staying here, 'tis tight, tight fear, the baby, crying, all these nappies, I don't know dear, are we happy...



... the empty house, sounds of being gone, Maureen, love, come on, we need the money, baby having, baby coming, dusk till dawn, dusk till dawn...



... cows in the shed and the thump thump thump, before we met, before the bump was born, dusk till dawn, dusk till dawn...

*

March, 1987

Start going out. Lots. Drink pints and feel your head spin. A world of colours. Don't You Want Me Baby. Material Girl. Everything I Own. New songs and ways of moving your body. Just keep dancing.

There are things you don't say down the phone.

*

*No sleep.
Left in me.
Rescue me.
Davy, please!
Where is she?
'Tis far away...'
'Tis hard to say...'
But anyway.
Why.
Am I.
Talking?
To myself?
'Again.'
'Again.'
'Again.'
Long night ahead.*



*

April, 1987

There is a Smarties egg left in a basket in the empty hallway. And a torn scrap of paper.
Gone to the doctors, won't be long. There's some bacon and mash on a plate in the fridge. Should only take a few minutes in the microwave.

Mammy X

You insisted on getting the train this time. Nineteen, you see. It's no joke. But now you can hear the stillness, the quiet hum of the fridge, the warble of the radiator, the old house breathing and creaking. Your stomach twists, tightens in angry fear.

Her face is drawn when she comes back. She eases into her slippers and flicks the kettle absently.

'You told me nothing!' you hear yourself screaming. 'Nothing.'

'I just haven't been sleeping much,' she says, fingers stroking her temples. 'That's all.'

The silence rises like kettle-steam.

'How is college, anyway?'

*

...shoes made of kettles did you ever, did you ever... Mickey Mouse, build the house, forget the dresser... baby shouting, could do better...



*

May, 1987

Spend days hunched over your desk with blank pages. Walk downstairs and stare at the telephone for a long time.

Let the month pass. Sit exams. Write essays. Your room feels too small and the sky is too crowded with clouds. It is supposed to be spring.

Start talking to lots of people who don't believe in God and wonder why you still go to Mass. Skip a few weeks. There is too much to do. And she never asks anyway.

One Sunday night, questions crackle down the line.

'How was Mass?'

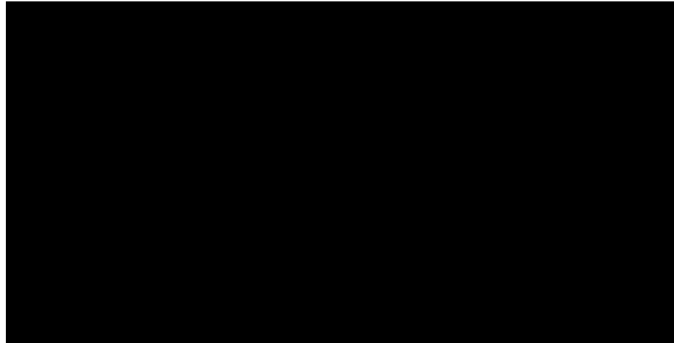
Wince into the empty hall and wonder how she knows.

'Sleeping better?'

'Bits.'

*

... thump, thump, thump, they're closing the ground, Brum is burying him down, down, down, calling my name across the sound of crying nights, cry baby, why baby, don't you want me here and now, or far, far away, down, down, down...



*

June, 1987

Look yourself in the eye, the mirror misted with breath and warm air. Consider a new haircut. Think of the money. Decide against it.

Shout at her, that night, down the phone over the hole in your new skirt, your uncultivated sewing skills.

'You never taught me!'

'It's not for want of trying!'

'You don't understand!'

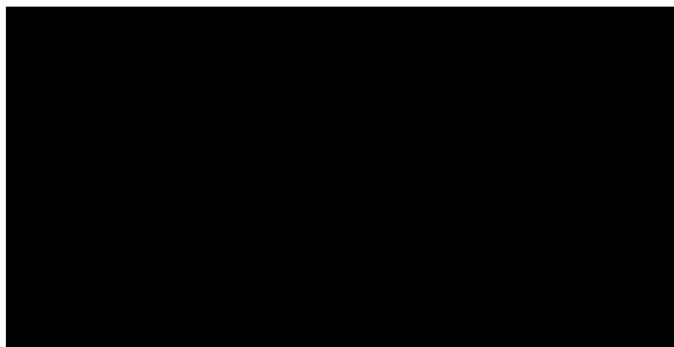
'What?'

The silence wails like a memory.

'What it's like.'

*

... try and try and try again, baby books and baby names, baby running through the mud, thud, thud, thump, thump, oh God, a fall, a bump and all over the bath would you look at that and what's that, what's that, blood, blood like a sea, so much, so much, and the boat, never wrote, talk to me, talk to me...



*

July, 1987

Wonder what you will write about for your poetry project as you absently kick the newspaper from beneath the table leg. Watch the coffee spill and stain the table cloth. Apologise politely as a waitress appears with a sponge and says never mind, these things happen all the time.

Walk along the river afterwards and try to write a poem, realising you are not very good and only ever thought you were. Wonder why people lie to themselves and what it all matters anyway, in the grand scheme of things.

When you get back, she is standing in the corridor.

'I drove,' she says.

She holds up a sandwich bag.

'They're bacon.'

Eat sandwiches and walk by the river. Hear things about her you never really knew. How she missed home for years and years, and still does, you know, from time to time. How she met your dad on the boat coming over and they watched Mickey Mouse in the Carlton on Tuesday nights. How it felt when the foreman came to the door and told her he wasn't coming home.

And tell her things you've never said. How you're scared, how your pen sometimes shakes when you try to write. How you feel guilty sometimes, with her all on her own back home. How you want to be amazing, popular, beautiful, intelligent, how you don't know if you can.

Watch the car drive away. Keep waving to the empty road, realising you are humming. Run upstairs and write some poetry.

*

... home through the squelch and the mud and the thump thump thump to the fire in the grate and the calves just been born, just been born, not too late, safe and warm, and bacon on plates, sure isn't this great, sure isn't she having a ball...

*

August, 1990

Graduate three years later. Take her with you to the big hall and touch her sleeve. In the evening, drink champagne in the living room, humming.

'Tis far away I am today...'

Let plans and possibilities fill the hot, summer air. Travelling? Teaching? Journalism?

The sofa creaks as she stands to straighten her skirt.

'He'd be proud, you know. Your dad,' she says, moving to the kitchen with the empty glasses. The silence is broken by the words she throws over her shoulder. 'I know I am.'

Listen to the brief clatter of glasses in the sink, the trickle of tap water flowing. Look at your knees as you call through the doorway.

'Will we go for a meal then, so?'

You know she is smiling as she calls back.

'I'll just put my shoes on.'

Lines Across The Tide

Four Poems

London, Spring 1951

Lay bricks and think of Kerry turf, the way the sods smell,
of how it could be worse, how sure as hell
you'll get used to the change
you haven't spent yet. Half-smile and let
the smooth cement start
setting

Birmingham, Summer 1955

Feel tight fear that's almost truth
and weep burnt bacon tears over
something new, as if the Youghal years
themselves have blackened, charred.
Now, we stand here welding in the dark
with golden eyes and learn to feed
new appetites on Friday nights,
heads reeling from the dancefloor heat,
laughter harsh as factory grease,
the walk half-lonely down the street,
the powder printed on my cheek,
the way we almost didn't speak,
but somehow always knew

Boston, Autumn 1960

They call it 'fall'. But you have a different kind of story
scrawled across the sea of years with all that half-meets the
eye, leaving all that falls behind that broken moment,

the day you stepped off the boat with muddied shoes
and sang cheap blues on street corners. They warned you not to
fall in puddles or get in the kind of muddle you deserved,

but you were green as the Clare hills that knew you, threw you
out across the sea with torn socks and melodies. Now, sing to me
those old songs, the ones moaned on deck in the ferry-fog:

Galway Bay, Spancil Hill, The Wild Rover. Read over every chapter,
asking what it matters to say 'autumn', to just fall short of
the right answer

New York, Winter 1987

I wake to the shape of a dream,
the late Brooklyn morning,
the way the snow falls,
quilting the street like a dim ocean.

I'm hoping, already, that you've read
the letter I blew like a kiss
across the star-lined sea.
Perhaps you're writing back

to me, already half-free
and wondering what it is
divides
the lines we write
like streams of distant emerald light

like fading dreams, like kisses,
wishes you were here,
that postcard pout on Dun Laoghaire pier.
I'm down and out.

The slow tears tickle my cheeks
like trout
we'd catch on Sundays at Lough Ree.
Now, you see

the snow falling softly over Mullingar,
murmuring Joyce and trying hard
to forget me.
One night last week,

I sat up, office-tired
to scrawl these lines across the tide,
our faint sketched hopes,
our dim green lights