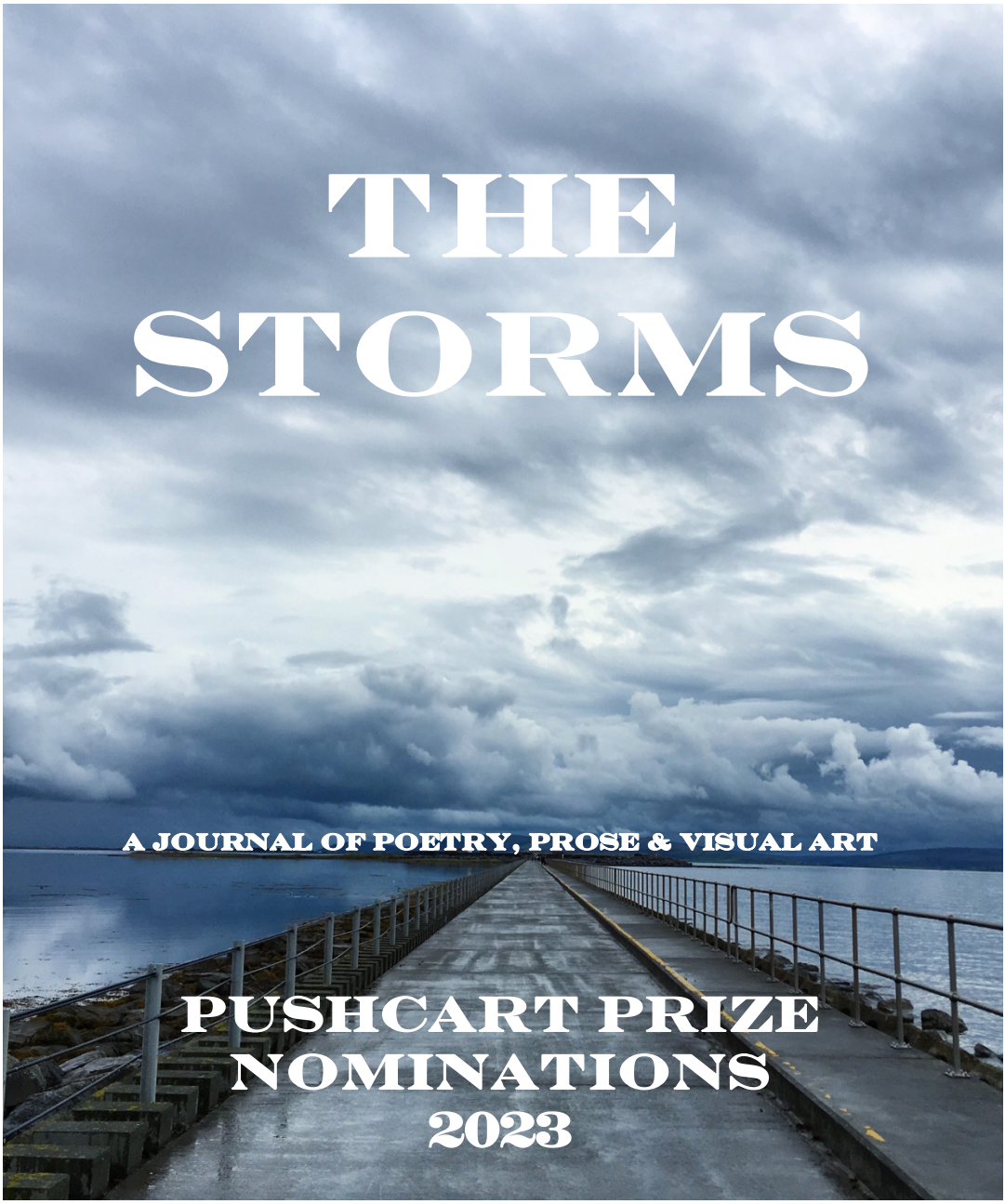
THE
STORMS
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2023

The Storms
Pushcart Prize Nominations 2023

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Contributors

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I AM AFRAID OF DRIVING A CAR

I am afraid of driving a car -
by myself.
I am afraid of seeing
the picture on my license, and
my reflection in the mirror,
and seeing the
slowly changing eyes,
look away, avoiding mine.
I am afraid of the power
I will feel as my fingertips trace
the edges of the key,
and as I hear my breath mix
with the soft sounds
of the engine.
I am afraid of being
seen, by a stranger at the
traffic lights, who will look me
in the eyes-
and think about me
for a moment.
I am afraid of my memories,
and watching the road go
blurry, when I miss her-
I will have to roll down my
windows, as the music presses
against the doors, so that
it doesn't suffocate me.
I am afraid of my thoughts-
and watching them mix with
my daydreams as they fog
up the windows.
I am afraid of when I crash-
and go up in flames,
to finally know the feeling
of warmth, of a hug,
of being touched-

EMILY ROYS

THE SQUIRREL AND FAINTING

I think the corpse is of a bigger animal, try to work out which,
in the split second before seeing and knowing.
It is like how the moments before fainting, or after dreaming,
last much longer inside us than they do outside,
and are looser as to what can exist. I picture giant rat,
tiny badger, or a creature I have somehow never encountered.

But one step, then one more, and there it is: a grey squirrel,
still perfect, intact, tail and body equally big and lush,
tiny face fixed forever on the next challenge. Car outrun,
is there a fence to scale, a birdfeeder to jiggle, a cat to dodge?
You can only live this way, otherwise you would just stop,
sit in your tree, never know.

I think of burial, the words *replant* and *repot* coming to mind.
The squirrel is a spring bulb, fossil fuel, a mass
of minerals and starry matter. It will give, as it sleeps,
and the earth will drink. Later on, I faint, thinking
about the blood test I am expected to book, about invasion,
about a *me* coming to exist outside of me, in a red tube.

Flat on the floor, I stare at a ceiling unit like a square frog
stopped in time, mouth gaping. I am gently told,
why get so worried about something you haven't booked yet?
I don't know how to live other than to keep moving.
When I stay still, I get so scared of dying. I am already
forgetting the squirrel. Somebody should remember.

SWIMMING LESSONS

If you are reading this
I'm not sure how
but I have left you my
Tesco Club Card

You see I saw this man
back bent
gnarled
like a root of a forgotten tree
jump into the sea

I watched
as each step he took
his back straightened
eyes wild as he hit the water

Remember with me
how the rolling slap of every wave
became his voice
that voice
in the back of my head
crashing forward
relentlessly

Below me
the voice calls out
come into the water

I do not answer
(again) come into the water

I look behind me
wait
but still I see
nothing to walk back to.

Before you head to the Gaeltacht for the second time, your mother half-jokingly/half-not says, don't let any boys drag you behind a hedge. You redden and duck your head to read the ingredients on the Cornflakes box like you're intensely interested in Riboflavin. Stop thinking of me in that way you want to say through gritted teeth.

At the checkpoints, the soldiers eye the minibus driver. What are they thinking? What's a priest doing with a pile of school kids? Your teacher has organised Gaeltacht scholarships because no one can afford the college fees. The soldiers peer in the side windows like it's feeding time at a zoo. For a change they don't say *Awright darling, you sixteen yet?*

One week later. A tall lad from Ballymun monopolises the dashboard radio, skims channels till they shriek like needles when ripped off vinyl. In side profile a brown fringe hides the colour of his eyes and tiny pink scars arrow his cheeks where acne used to be. He has the start of a rough beard. He's far too old for a thirteen-year-old, but he's good for scrounging a smoke off. The priest in the driver's seat casts a glance at the languid Dub. If the glance had a sound, it would be a tut. Even the holy man's specs are glinting at this denim-clad youth slouched in the passenger seat. The song *Boogie Nights* explodes into the minibus while the Dub claps his hands at finding a station. He ups the volume and lowers his window. Beats the rhythm with fingers on the bodywork.

The song is pure funky, like one that will be banned. You remember Da rustling the newspaper when Top of the Pops made *Yes Sir, I can Boogie* a hit, and were told off by teachers for singing it in school. Something about the word boogie drives adults demented. Something about "boogie" means it's not about dancing. From the radio a deep voice is insisting *Got to keep on dancing, keep on dancing* while you and other girls sway and sing in agreement.

Then the priest punches a button and Radio na Gaeltachta diddly-di music fills the air; the disco is over. You take a fit of the giggles with the other girls, what is he like, it's only a bloody song? and catch the glint of the priest's stare via the rearview mirror which he adjusts with his left hand, showing a perfect band of white skin that bracelets the tan on his arm.

The rest of the journey is punctuated by disappointed glances in the mirror. This time last year he would glance in the mirror and say, "hands up who wants to drive my car?"

It's to do with reaching the eye roll stage about speaking Irish. It's to do with no longer wearing knee high socks. At your first Gaeltacht the previous year, it was the end of primary school, now it's the end of first year of secondary school, the end of being the youngest again.

This year you don't stay in the Bean an Tí's front room where Custard Creams are presented on doilies for his night time visits. You go up to the bedroom shared with three girls and smoke out the window while singing about heartbreak and substitutes. Changing "substitute" to "prostitute" you girls cackle wildly. One Dub girl remains downstairs and tells you you're very rude for not staying to talk to the priest who made the visit specially to see the Nordies.

The priest was a bit of a hero in the Northern town where you grew up. Legend had it that when he coached hurling and camogie in the council playing fields, a grim-jawed Unionist came to the field to protest about Irish games being played on British soil. Said the Unionist: "If you didn't have that dog collar on, I'd go over there..." The story goes that the priest removed his collar and beat the tar out of the Unionist. Is the story true? It doesn't matter, it makes browbeaten people glow with secret victory.

In your first year at the Gaeltacht, three of you Nordies stayed at the same house, and the priest would drive you with three Dub girls to a beach, instead of joining the main Gaeltacht activity, a walk to a different strand. The thoughts of a lift in a car instead of hauling a bag of swimming togs, especially when they'd be damp and sandy, double the weight on the return walk, and the certainty of crisps and fizzy drinks without causing a dent in your own small pocket money made it a treat. You'd all pile into the car, two squashed into the passenger seat, four lined up in the back.

The offer of the day trip was a given; there was no invitation, nor decision-making on your parts—it was an arrangement made between adults.

Once parked behind sand dunes you scramble from the car and run to the deserted beach. Change into swimming togs with awkward acrobatics beneath inadequate towels.

The priest emerges from behind a sand dune and lollops about, bare feet pounding the sand, hairy back and chest on display, a trail of dark hair reaching the band of his swimming trunks.

He commandeers you all into camogie teams. Calls you "fat head" for missing a shot and your face blazes with shame.

Maybe it's to work out who are his favourites, the best at camogie, but he saves the promise of driving his car until the last.

He has not dressed yet and sits on the driver's seat with a belly overhang on the waistband of his black trunks. Who wants to go first? Not you. Instinct says this is wrong. In the same way that gyrating beneath a towel to make sure no one can see a stray body part is a necessity. Excitement at the opportunity to ricochet a massive car around a stretch of sand cannot cancel out your absolute belief that your swimming-suited backside should not go anywhere near his bulging swimming trunks. He lets each bikini-ed girl sit on his knee, then pushes them forward with his torso, closer to the steering column to let them "drive", his arms circling their tiny bodies, his hands on theirs gripping the wheel.

At one point, there are two girls on his lap, while he squeals like a twelve-year-old boy. "Watch out for that rock, you fat-heads!"

In the second year of the Gaeltacht, you know that the only usual way for young underage people to drive cars is for it to be a stolen car. At home, you have an innocent version of joyriding. Like when you and your brother and the neighbours' boys rake about in Da's clapped out Mini. Or the boys "borrow" their parents' Datsun and do some damage to the door with a misjudged reverse. You live on a country lane and can always lie about a herd of cows that dinted the car. None of the adults back home ever offer driving lessons by putting children on their knees.

There is a photograph in your parents' house, taken in the first summer at the Gaeltacht. You standing at a gap in a hedge, arm around a donkey's

neck. You could be in a tourist postcard. Hair ragged, after drying in the sun and wind. You have clothes on, a red tank top and brown skirt, knee length socks and Moses sandals. After being for a swim, after being rubbish at camogie, after not driving the priest's car. The priest took that photo on one of his many trips with children to the sea.

OUTLINE

There is the ghost of a house by my bus stop.
Once a solid semi-detached, the other now stands
alone with the outline of its twin on a side wall.

A triangle of roof-stain like an open envelope,
the imprint of a chimney the colour of dried blood,
the cove of a fireplace with rubble at the roots.

The house seems to sag into the scar,
exposed brickwork red and raw
where its shadow was ripped away.

Each morning I stand at the bus stop, my back
to the empty, aching space. Ten years it's been,
but I still feel the outline of his body on my skin.

SAYING GOODBYE #22

In the After

We write ourselves into memory. We write, write ourselves into existence. Water in the canal, shape beyond the windowpane. Our heart-anxious-self in mirror. Water. Memory. You are Gone, having left. Going through your papers, affairs, prints, drawings. How can everything be so still? How can everything be still. In movement, in the endless movement and repeats of brush strokes, of notebooks, of notes, of remember to do this, remember to do that. Simon says, "do this, do that." I put you down. Pick you up. I forget to spell, words. The world is full of strongmen, the world has become an international wrestling competition. War – a few hours away – by airplane; Berlin, no, Kyiv, yes, it started as you were dying, leaving us, leaving words, language, textures, drawn gestures, new visions, behind you, a hairpin turn. Speaking of the light, your hair falling out radioactive snow, the radio waves of ice floes and dogs barking with pitchforks, staffs, walking stiff, walking sticks, oxygen tanks, bluster of winter. The sound bytes of lyrical song, goodbye, goodnight, good morning, speaking to one another in last conversations, heads on shoulder. Turning you in a soiled bed, cleaning you up. What is dignity, how fortunate to have known, and are you warm enough, are you cool. Enough. Bang bang bang knocking on the door, hail in the skylight, trees scratching the sides of abandoned houses, the new rapid transit beyond the planning stages, house prices dropping, the market falling out of commodities and Tylenol. Pain meds, little white capsules like rat poison, canticles, strychnine. We write ourselves into dreams; we have no other way forward. Bone white wooden sticks left on the steps make a toy cabin for the table.

The Storms

A printed journal of poetry, prose & visual art

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