

# The Fountain

*Eddie Shillue*

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“Oh,” said the man with a smile, “it’s bangers and mash.” He was referring to the café’s daily special, spicy Italian sausage with tomato sauce.

“Well, not exactly,” I answered. Then I described the dish in the fancy language of the restaurant world, where spuds are “fresh baby potatoes” and gravy is a “tomato, olive oil, and seasoning” dressing.

He wasn’t fooled. It wasn’t a beef gravy but it was still gravy over sausage. This lack of pretense was typical of people I met during my time in Northern Ireland. I arrived in the summer of 1998, just after the Good Friday Agreement was passed, and stayed on through the fall, writing and paying my grocery bill with money earned from a nearby café. By now Christmas had come and gone and cloud cover and rain seemed the order of the day. I took his order to the kitchen, then came back out front and stared out at the gray sky.

In winter the café was a schizophrenic combination of hyperactivity and deadly quiet. During the busy periods we were snapped out of our winter fog with the preparation of hot dishes like baked pasta or leek and pancetta risotto. Spicy lentil soup went down well with customers, as did the carrot and coriander, with its warm orange tone and sweet smell.

A woman pushing a pram, lurching along with an infant and two toddlers, made her way through the door. The look in her eye said she was begging for adult conversation and relief from what was already a long day.

“Cappuccino?” Annie called out from behind the counter.

“Yes, thanks, Annie,” she replied.

An older woman entered quietly and hellos rang out again.

“Coffee for Mrs. McCluskey?” I asked.

“Yes, and a fruit scone.” Annie answered. “We’ll be with you in just a minute, Mrs. McCluskey,” she called across the room.

“Ach, Annie, you’re all right,” Mrs. McCluskey replied, lifting a newspaper and pulling out a chair so she could sit down. Annie relaxed immediately.

Though it was sprinkled generously throughout conversations in Ireland, it took me some time to catch on to the social courtesy “Ach, you’re all right.” In the café I’d try not to keep people waiting, particularly at lunch, try not to hold people up as I worked in

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my different rhythm. But whether the gesture was error or, in Annie's case, the desire to make someone feel at home, the response was always a reassuring "Ach, you're all right" and a wave of the hand. For me it came to represent the complete unpretentiousness of people in the north. The more I heard it, the larger the scenarios it encompassed. Not just a simple embarrassment or failure prompted the phrase; sometimes a collision with egos or a simple loss gave birth to it as a way of reassuring others. It reminded me again and again that here, underneath it all, situations were a complicated web of circumstance, power, poor luck, misunderstanding, and desire and we — well, we were only human — we would just keep going, regardless. It said, "You'll get a new job, a new lover, go to a different school, try a different course of study. You're a child of God — Ach, you're all right."

I brought Mrs. McCluskey her coffee, then walked back behind the counter. The door swung open and a chilly breeze swept in; the toddlers fiddled and fussed in the pram as a deliveryman tried to manage a crate of vegetables around them. Papers unfolded, voices rose in caffeinated chatter, and chairs scraped against the tile floor. I moved around slightly startled by the customers. Winter often sends people into hibernation, and my mental state could best be described as, well, a bit of a snooze. But the physical nature of physical work awakens those of us so often stuck inside our heads. Lift the boxes of Colombian coffee, stir the cumin-filled soup, reach over to keep the sugared cranberries from overboiling, and you can feel your blood begin to move.

As the winter days trudged on, Annie ran around the café, moving as if she was dribbling a soccer ball and calling out dramatically, "*I'm beehind yoo!*" It was a running joke, bringing to mind the theater cry "He's behind you!" from holiday pantomime. It always brought a grin. An Irish winter may have set in, with gale force winds, power outages, and hospital closures, but panto season must go on. Pantomime, or panto, is Britain and Ireland's People's Theatre par excellence. It is larger than life cartooning. It is referred to as children's or family theater, but still full of bawdy punning and drag. There's a dame who must be a man and a male lead who must be a woman. There are tacky sets and a narrator who harasses the audience, who, naturally, yell back as an unapologetic foil. In every piece, be it *Snow White* or *Jack and the Beanstalk*, there is a moment when the hero is approached from behind by the villain. The audience, in its vital role, must warn the poor fool so the great chase can start.

I finished my shift and walked from the café downtown, passing the opera house just as the panto matinee let out. Families wandered down Great Victoria Street toward restaurants or sweet shops, toddlers being teased by their older siblings.

"You were scared, weren't you? Yeah, ya were!!" an adolescent yelled.

"No I was not!" his brother protested.

"Just a wee bit?" the Granny adds, initiating a consoling hug.

"Aw, ya baby!!!"

The child turned his face away and I caught his eye. I smiled at him as he discovered I was within earshot of the taunt. Taking out his frustration on me he screwed up his face and stuck out his tongue. Granny gasped.

I made my way into Belfast center each week to do any number of things. Often I went to the Linen Hall library or wandered around the city center to run errands and linger in bookstores. I walked to the waterfront area, passing the courthouse, moving back up around the city hall, where I often stopped to admire a simple and beautiful memorial to the victims of the Titanic disaster, and then onto Royal Avenue. I went in and out of shops while people yelled out sales of the street magazine *The Big Issue* and listened to

the mournful sound of bagpipes played by a white-haired man wearing a green tartan kilt. I wandered around Boots the Chemist thinking about makeup and hair care products. I fiddled with little perfume bottles and smiled graciously as salesgirls floated toward me with an offer of assistance.

I lingered too long in bookstores. I breezed into the Tesco supermarket and bought some fresh vegetables or a sandwich. If the weather was clear I would sit outside the city hall and watch people or read a newspaper. The headlines were full of stories of recent winter storms knocking down power lines and subsequent controversy over their slow repair. I found it a welcome relief from the “Peace Process in Peril” hyperbole. Politicians were arguing over the ancient red herring “Decommissioning.” Would the men of terror hand over their guns or wouldn’t they?

“They won’t,” I said to a newspaper. “It’s too emasculating a gesture. Now get down to business.”

I couldn’t see any man addicted to violence giving up his drug. Never mind that in Ireland, Britain, and the United States the governments themselves are the biggest weapons dealers in the world. In fact, without so much as a nod to irony, John Hume and David Trimble happily attended a ribbon cutting for a Raytheon facility less than a year after winning the Nobel Prize. In Northern Ireland, the majority of sectarian crimes being committed each week were largely done with homemade weapons anyway. Pipe bombs went through windows, bats were used for punishment beatings, houses were set alight with fuel. Decommissioning was a demand that reflected something other than a desire for peace. Even David Ervine, a Unionist Assembly member and former terrorist, referred to the debate as hypocritical focusing, as it did, on the IRA and Sinn Fein. Among my small circle of friends and colleagues I was the only one who even thought about the subject; everyone else, having handled it their entire lives, simply rolled their eyes.

By arguing over the implementation of the agreement, politicians were creating a political vacuum. Matters that affected ordinary people on the politically mundane level of the everyday were running along outside the debate over weapons. The National Health Service in Great Britain and in the Republic of Ireland were said to be in dire financial straits, and hospitals servicing rural communities were closing. In the meantime, patients were told surgery would have to wait.

I put the paper away, then moved on from City Hall up the Dublin Road to Donegall Pass and into the weekend antique market. It’s a rather nondescript building holding three flights of dealers who trade in everything from Edwardian trinkets to picture postcards to fireplace mantels and ceiling fixtures. I walked up the narrow staircase to the second floor, through a room full of cabinetry and wrought iron, farther on to the back, which was an array of collectibles, textiles, and furniture. Cast-iron Victorian coat racks stand like oaks beside a glass case full of antique medicine and perfume bottles, one marked, seductively, “blue poison,” old tablecloths and linen napkins, crocheted tea cosies and table runners. I wandered around the dusty clutter with the other bargain hunters. The floorboards creaked on occasion and tables wobbled. It was hardly a scene from *Country Living* magazine, with estate furniture laid out unpolished and chipped, chandeliers abandoned and looking like wilted lilies. I loved it. People poked and prodded the ragged goods. Mother of Pearl tile letters spilled across a mahogany side table were piled up — some scamp arranges four of them to read TITS and no one looks at it. All the suburban customers, in for an expedition in their Land Rovers, pretend it’s not there. A blond woman with a black headband walks by, sightly dazed, and stares at the table until she realizes what she’s looking at, then moves on. A man in a tweed sport coat

and cap looks twice and mutters, then backs away. The room filled with a polite quiet. The silence was enough to send me into a suppressed giggle. I moved away from the table, but social courtesy pushed in on me and I couldn't stop giggling, or, as I told the story later, "tittering," until I was red-faced and, finally, laughing out loud at a framed copy of the Sligo, Leitrim, and Northern Counties Explosives Act of 1875. Finally, I moved away like the others and began thumbing through postcards.

Amid all the postcards filed together in the antique shops on Donegall Pass, up in the market off Pump Street in Derry and at the occasional Antique Book Fair, was what I called *The Veronica Series*, a set of cards written to "Koko" from Veronica "with best love and kisses." They were never posted, but I assume from the handwriting that they were hand delivered to a granny nicknamed Koko. I picked up one written from Lough Gill in Sligo, home of Ben Bulbin and resting place of Yeats and his muse. Veronica notes, "It was a lovely day, and the lake looked beautiful." It's a beautiful card, a color photo made in the fashion of the early part of the century, with the colors painted onto the negative. Veronica is eager to write her adventures, you can see it in the expansive lettering and thick ink. On her journey she expands with the pen, the love, and the kisses. I bought the card, then made my way back to the street for a ramble.

To make your way around the city or the countryside towns in northern Ireland is to engage willingly in a walk through a civil engineering maze. Roads were frequently laid out in patterns that defied logic and didn't encourage ease of movement. Donegal Square, in the heart of Belfast, led in all directions to dead ends or turns that wound on to a wall or one-way street. Standing in front of the city hall facing the waterfront, you could see the new modern design of the concert hall. It hovered like a spacecraft between buildings, but you couldn't reach it without driving *around* the block in front of it. The city courthouse was wrapped in metal fencing and barbed wire, Victorian gates stopped cars and rerouted them to the Queen's Bridge or forced them down around the St. George's market and back over toward the Lower Ormeau Road area, formerly known as Murder Mile, where a housing estate had only a few entrances and all those led in to closed areas where you had to stop or slow for the many speed bumps and stop signs.

The stops and starts you engaged in were the point of the exercise. Joyriders were stopped and gunmen couldn't escape. But it was a strange and terrible reasoning that built these estates. It was as if they were painting people into corners. The West Belfast community had a much more creative response to the problem of joyriding; it was said that women wrote up posters identifying joyriders, then pasted the names on lampposts. "Name and Shame" is the consummate expression of the village. But that, like many gestures of village policing, became brutal too, as photos of the tarred and feathered of the 1970s testify.

I tried to reason that it was no different from the older cities and towns in the United States, where nineteenth-century planning was insufficient for twentieth-century traffic patterns; in fact, Boston was famed for its cowpath streets. But in Northern Ireland none of the topography came across as a clash between ages. They were a huge, painful bungling of civil engineering in areas where working people lived.

David Beresford, a British journalist with the *Manchester Guardian*, had exposed the government's dark agenda on civil engineering in a series of article in 1981. In them he revealed the influence of military civil engineering in rebuilding war-torn neighborhoods. Sidewalks would be designed to sustain the weight of military tanks — they had to be *invasion friendly*, if you will — but they would not be citizen friendly. They would not be laid out to ensure easy access to the city center for pedestrians. Thus the Westlink,

leading to the M-1 and M-2 highways running thick with traffic, is a further isolating factor for West Belfast.

The urban and suburban landscape is one final, lasting tribute to war: a trap in a trap. Crossing these ugly, clumsy streets on foot it occurred to me that attention to such fine details is the cornerstone of what is elsewhere called oppressive regimes. At any rate, people encountered walls and borders at every turn. So I became aware at a certain point in my stay that I could no longer explain away the multiple three-point turns I made while driving or the infinite number of times I was forced to stop walking and turn around because I had encountered a dead end or found myself on a road to nowhere.

The realization of paramilitary goading, responded to by the government's "practical and necessary measures," occurred to me early on as a purely intellectual observation. It passed then into a justice-seeking alarm — the moral outrage of the political consciousness — and finally, after some time had passed and the place was peopled with friends and folk, it became a heartbreak, a spine-breaking nightmare. I slumped in defeat and bitterness as I realized what was creeping up into my consciousness: I would follow a single path to only certain corners of the city. I had a mental border, a set of blinders that kept the landscape limited to certain routes. It began to impinge on my curiosity, kept me from looking down roads, since they led only to a block of brick housing, or a small factory. It got me thinking ahead only so far and so much. For me, as a long-term guest, it was an annoyance, but I believe for the citizen, Catholic or Protestant, it is the enemy silently outposted in your head.

The other alienation for the outsider was the intimidation of Ireland's panoply of symbols and colors used as war cries. It finds its expression in flag flying, graffiti, and painted sidewalks. These symbols have been analyzed to no end by people inside and outside the conflict, but I recall them only as the thing that cut my stride, slowed my pace, and alerted me to dangers real or imagined. The painted sidewalks of cities and towns were a reflection of local sectarian borders. The red, white, and blue of the Union Jack ran through Loyalist areas, and the green, white, and orange of the Irish tricolor ran through republican areas. They intimidated me as much as the gang colors of the United States and when I came across them as I walked I was unnerved. Painted sidewalks were, essentially, a line in the sand for other people, and they were coupled with murals and flags that reflected, more than loyalty or courage, a desire for violence. Often men wearing balaclavas stood pointing guns at the viewer, or republican soldiers were shown killing members of the British army. In one mural on the Donegall Pass, "King Billy" (William of Orange) rides a white horse and wears a smile as he tramples on the body of a dead Irish man.

Since the murals were speaking to the entire community, they had none of the mystery messages of American graffiti writers, nor did artists choose to dress up the letters so they were indecipherable to the reader. "Lest We Forget" was a typical memorial phrase for fallen paramilitaries, but if it was painted aside a gun carrying "guardian," the reader was reminded not of any heroic gesture but of exactly who ruled the roost in the neighborhood. I often walked by these murals and wondered how women could raise sons in such an environment without fear of losing them at an early age. I suppose they didn't.

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Later that evening I met with friends rehearsing for performance in a weekend Dublin panto. The Shankill Theatre Company was run by my friends Dennis and Rene Grieg.

They were invited to perform the intermission entertainment in Dublin's Shankill Theatre — that Dublin has a suburb called Shankill came as a surprise to me. In Belfast they rehearsed in the Woodvale Cricket Club off the Shankill Road. For this evening the group was relegated to a locker room to rehearse an original piece, and the small space quickly filled with a fog of cigarette smoke.

Rene, who was directing, is stout and matronly, a dame of the theater without any of the pretentiousness that goes with such a title. She smoked like a chimney but held her cigarettes like a forties Hollywood star, gesturing in a way that brought to mind some dramatic black and white film about espionage in World War II. It was that same hand that pointed a finger at a Loyalist gunman who accused her of ingratitude for denouncing violence.

"Don't you tell me about 'The Cause,'" she answered. "I didn't put the gun in your hand."

Rene wrote poetry, plays, and stories prolifically and recited one of her favorite poems easily over cigarettes and beer in a local pub.

*The sun came to visit me today.*

*It shone through my window and warmed my desk.*

It was written by her son Malcolm when he was six. Like a simple haiku, it also brings a smile to my face. The evening I watched their rehearsal Malcolm, now an adolescent, walked about the room on benches, reciting lines, making wisecracks, and sizing me up. At one point he looked me in the eye and said that he collected exotic pets and how did I feel about snakes and tarantulas. He was showy and dramatic with many of the same physical gestures of his mother. Walking around the benches with his tall, skinny frame, he announced his genius to me, evidenced by his epilepsy with which it is frequently associated. He explained this correlation as clear proof of his bright and successful future. I smiled, thinking of Oscar Wilde's pronouncement, "I have nothing to declare but my genius."

Dennis, his father, was someone of whom I eventually grew excessively fond. However, his first words to me, from behind a clenched fist, were, "Suppose the Native Americans wanted their land back, eh?" We were having a drink at The Four in Hand, a pub on the Lisburn Road. When we met I knew they were Unionist in their political beliefs, but I felt that if he were choosing sides in U.S. history, that of land-grabbing, treaty-violating, disease-inducing white people was certainly not the right one.

Of course, that was not the point. The point was that Americans are only partially informed and, as they say, a *little* knowledge is a dangerous thing. I agreed with the underlying challenge, but put it in terms of civil rights. White Irish America can't have it both ways. They can't see Northern Ireland as a civil rights fight or a battle against injustice, but look away when it comes to matters of class and race in the United States. It is another hard-edged debate. In fact, Irish tourists to America found themselves "shocked" when encountering racist white opinion and de facto segregation in the United States. They occasionally confronted me with this observation as if I could provide an answer to the mystery of it. What could *I* say? Particularly from an Ireland in the middle of a surge of anti-immigration sentiment and a United Kingdom exposing itself as riddled with "institutionalized racism."

Since Dennis and I had met only five minutes previously, I stayed silent.

"Dennis, I told you we weren't going to talk about the Orange and the Green today!" Rene snapped.

This attempt to rattle my cage still brings a smile to my face. All the more because I caught him looking sentimental over Belfast's still ratty waterfront and market district and later, in one of the province's poorest housing projects, playing the prince to a roomful of women.

At Woodvale, around nine in the evening, they began rehearsal of a piece they'd performed at theater festivals the previous summer. Helicopters hovered over some not too distant spot. Their voices rose to compete and I could feel a frustration rise inside me. The title of the play, *Article 25*, was a reference to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with particular focus paid to Article 25, section 2: "Motherhood and Childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection."

It was interesting to consider such fundamentals in the western world, with its obscenely high incomes and medical advancements. In the United Kingdom, 1999 began with the overt rationing of health care. Hospitals were closing, including the Jubilee Maternity in West Belfast and South Tyrone Hospital's maternity wing, (Tyrone is one of the north's largest counties, but it is predominantly rural and, like elsewhere in the world, the word *rural* has begun to connote the idea that it is without value). In addition, people were being put in unreasonable queues for orthopedic surgery, largely repair of hip and thigh fractures among the elderly. In the meantime, people were doped up on painkillers and asked to be patient. Eventually a stopgap measure was employed with patients being taken across the water to Glasgow, Scotland, since it was cheaper than extended hospitalization. I had a hunch, as the stories were told in the media, that both mothers and grandmothers in Northern Ireland were not entitled to "special care and assistance."

Rene wrote *Article 25* in 1989 out of concern for the lives of her children and a sense of despair over the harsh realities of life for street children in São Paulo, Brazil. It is both harsh testimony and beautiful tribute. Dennis adds his touch to the end of the play as the rehearsal finishes. The actors sound pyramid and experience, voice, and form bounce around with the shifting light. I pulled my knees up as I sat on a corner bench and watched. I smiled weakly, trying to escape the sour irony of the helicopter's presence nearby.

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In addition to running the theater group in Belfast, Dennis and Rene worked regularly with The Fountain Women's group in Derry. They drove the two hours from Belfast every Wednesday evening, grabbing a takeout dinner on the way and swallowing it quickly before the workshop started. The Fountain is a housing estate in Derry that lies immediately outside the gates of the city. It is the last of the Protestant community in Derry to remain on the west side of the Foyle River. The others have moved across the river over the years, effectively segregating the city. The location and architecture combine to make the area a ghetto.

The brittle feel of public housing makes itself known in voice and gesture. The scarred existence of what we call "kids from the projects" was magnified for me in The Fountain, where I felt, in a physical sense, trapped. There is only a single road entrance, the city wall rises up behind you, the army security tower is always within sight, and the estate itself is a set of dead-end blocks. You can, quite literally, go nowhere. This is the heart of the "painted sidewalks." Here the colors are red, white, and blue, over there they are green, white, and orange.

We entered the basement of the community center. I looked up uneasily at the turret that hangs over the neighborhood. A dark-haired woman began pulling chairs together, setting up a table for tea and a snack. Another woman locked the door as she entered, then someone joked, "Wasn't Dennis the lucky one, locked in a room full of women?" After milling about for a few minutes, Rene graciously introduced me and everyone said a polite hello. Then it got quiet for a moment and a woman with dark, cropped hair and a hard-edged look to her face, said, as if she had thought about it for some time, "Welcome, we're honored." I stared in shock. *Was a visit rare? Did no one ever come talk with these people?*

Sitting in that circle in the basement of a housing block made me realize that even more than being loved, people want to be understood. Ministers and priests exhort us all to "love one another," but those words sound so simplistic in the face of harsh reality. More times than I can count I've heard stories begun with a gesture that says, "I'll try to explain." Invariably the storyteller begins by apologizing. She starts by apologizing for her inabilities, then ends up apologizing for her existence, her presence, her life. I can't tell some of the stories that came to me from the painted sidewalks; they would be too much to bear. But the bits and pieces will sound familiar. Voices of the violence of urban poverty, people labeled "disenfranchised" or "marginalized" by sociologists, here they are the poor relations of both Great Britain and the republic. They have tough edges and fractured, unfaithful, bleeding hearts. They speak in the cryptic lines of those accustomed to not being heard and look at you with eyes like hawks, open wide, as if they were lidless, robbing the women of the luxury of looking away.

*I married a British soldier and he beat me and my kid. . . . I married him and he took me to England. . . . I thought it would be great . . . he took us to England and beat my kid until he was dead. He killed my son. . . . I married a British soldier . . . I was a British soldier . . . My son died and the doctor thought we had beaten him, when it was him wouldn't take my call when the baby was sick days before.*

"You travel?" they asked me at one point.

"Yes," I answered, hesitantly, for I knew what was coming.

"Sure, we only travel by looking at the pictures, right girls?"

I thought of my rental car sitting outside, my casual drives around Sligo and Donegal, my weekend rambles. Freedom of movement is a complex layer of things beyond my worldwide trip taking. It's about money and confidence and starting your car and not getting stopped. It's about curiosity and welcome and freedom from fear. It's about "getting out." In the Republic of Ireland it is currently fashionable to reject your "Irishness" in favor of a European lifestyle. Among young elites everywhere physical mobility allows them to transcend borders and, if they're willing, escape the intellectual myopia that might come with village life. However, people without the economic freedom to move about are constrained and their bitterness is understandable. Who are we to tell them to love thy neighbor? Wasn't our house that got burnt, wasn't my kid who got beat.

Chain smoking, coughing, and sipping gallons of tea, the women smile at nasty jokes and share a dirty laugh like it's jam sweetening dull bread.

*Beatings, dirty buggers, paras, fucking social workers, teachers, burned buildings, hits, hands, red hands, across the divide only for the cameras, What are ye? Taig bastards, prods, what about us? All these big politicians walking 'round the city, what about us?*

*Them soldiers, everyone thinks them soldiers is so great. . . . I wouldn't hurt anyone, so I wouldn't, my boy died suddenly and the social workers and doctors thought WE did*

*it? Our boy's a soldier. . . . my boy's got epilepsy, she's got asthma, oh, my lad has asthma, too. I can't walk down the street without being harassed, called a stink'n' prod . . . This is such a damn bigoted city. . . . You can't go anywhere without gettin' it . . . We just were out for a bit of fun. . . . What about us?*

Everyone's broken by war and violence, but some are more broken than others. And middle-class citizens can't hear these stories without imagining it's something from another country. In basements of community organizations, at wobbly tables and sitting on broken chairs, people talked and scratched out hundreds of stories, trying again and again to get it right, to make sure they were understood, to make it clear that something *really did happen*. So we know it is true that a woman was beaten on her way home from work for no reason whatsoever, except the chance to bang her head against pavement and call her a stinkin' prod. So we know that a small boy was blinded by a bullet, that an old woman stood up in her own home only to have her face smashed by a plastic bullet through the front window.

But, as the disappearing man in the pub said, "Here's the craic, luv"; the stories match each other. And further, they match stories I hear in Boston, from Saigon, from Hong Kong, from Port-au-Prince and Medellin, from São Paulo. There are guns where there shouldn't be and paramilitary mafias, there are moments of safety violated by threats and the repeated phrase, "You're not wanted."

Here's a "wee something" I heard later from Creggan, another stronghold in Derry. But here the sidewalks are painted green, white, and orange.

*"I'm only twenty-one and I've seen sixteen people killed before my eyes." (I do the math: that's one killing a year since the age of five.) . . . "Oh I could tell you stories . . . these old folks, there were three old folks on our street, this one bachelor who used to have dinner weekly with these two other neighbors, they rotated meals. Well, one day he doesn't show up and they're worried about him, so they go to his door and he doesn't answer and they're very worried, so your man decides to climb through one of the windows and, well the whole place just blows. It was booby trapped for the police. That's three old ones killed right there. Oh geez, that was a bad day . . . and I've talked to the soldiers, too y' know. They don't want to be here. Some guys just break down and cry when their names are drawn for service here."*

For teens here, grocery store bread racks double as cages to keep rubber bullets at bay, milk bottles are filled with petrol to make bombs. You're thirteen years old and you've seen heads blown apart right in front of you.

As he talked I could feel myself back away and knew my eyes were about to glaze over as if I were listening to a foreign language. I hid in the topography of Derry, thinking, "Creggan is up above the Bogside, if you move toward Brandywell there's a soccer pitch, go up Creggan Street, there's the wall of St. Eugene's, move right away from it and you're headed toward Magee College. The Fountain is just outside Bishop's Gate, St. Columb's Cathedral is near there, and that fucking watchtower above the army base and moving around, I'm back at the Bogside . . . Blahblahblah." And all the while the testimony continues, but I'm too scared to hear it.

"I'm sorry, I can't describe it."

"I'm sorry, I don't know how to explain it."

"First, I want to apologize because I can't speak well."

"I don't know as much as others."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand."

"I got nothin' to do with anything, why the fuck do they want to kill me?"

Back behind the cameras and the towers in Derry is Londonderry, white knuckled and ready to fire, but apologizing to me first for their very existence and blinded by something no one can explain. In ghettos everywhere working people kill each other, and outside the walls others throw up their hands and say something about “small-minded people” or perhaps more frequently, “Let ‘em kill each other, the fucking bastards.” At any rate, it all became a blur for me as I passed through both neighborhoods and I couldn’t discern one face from another and I realized I have been listening to survivor testimony from around the world for close on ten years and I’m not sure I’m any better at it now than I was when I started.

The night of their telling, the women of The Fountain gave me small, delicate finger sandwiches, then, as I ate, generously encouraged me to have more. And I listened as the bread fell to pieces in my mouth and I swallowed the salty bits of ham and sweet butter, then sipped the tea with its creamy warmth. I lifted the Blue Willow teacup from the saucer resting on my knee and I watched as they finished their talking and began some stage exercises.

Dennis wanted to warm up with exercises that focus an actor’s attentions on the present moment, the body, and breath. This literal “return to the senses” was rejected and I felt an opportunity slip by everybody. But perhaps they have more wisdom than I do — peel away your thick skin and it feels like all you’ve got is a throbbing hurt.

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“You went to The Fountain!” a man said later in the evening. “That’s a good way to get yourself shot!”

“Look,” I snapped, “you’re kind enough to buy me a drink, but I’m not obligated to endure a lecture on safety as well.”

I sipped my drink while he stepped back and took my measure. I looked over and realized that in trusting my hosts I had confronted *his* fear.☘

*Edie Shillue lived in Belfast from August 1998 to July 1999. “The Fountain” is excerpted from her memoir, Peace Comes Dropping Slow: Seeing Northern Ireland.*