

walking wounded

it's a blackened heart that christopher feels beating spitefully in his chest. through stinging eyes he looks out on a ravaged landscape, at people doing their daily thing seemingly unaware that the world is a fucked up place, full of promises made to be broken, full of beauty artfully designed to conceal the ugliness of human frailty; concealing it long enough to fool you into a brief forgetfulness before the door opens and your childlike vision gets ripped into pieces, torn and tossed to the gutter of a pretty street overlooking a sniggering bay. yachts bobbing on the gentle waves singing 'hey ho, there she goes!' back to college and her self and settling back in to the oneness of the single life, while christopher still feels part of two, and therefore suddenly less than half. time alone he is used to, but there was always the recording of details that would be shared later, the looking forward to words and kiss and touch and tongue, a union of selves that made him feel stronger, lighter, wanted, and with a place in this world that he had always thought beyond him, reserved for others with better looks more money talent confidence. corla gave him something more than all these things, and in loving her he found the ability to love himself and all the world and to fall in love with the very act of breathing, drawing life from the air, inhaling both sustenance and inspiration, the necessary and the desirous, the mundane and the miraculous. every exhale was a prayer of thanks, a refusal to slip into the sin of complacency, of ever thinking that the gift of corla was somehow an entitlement, an eternal endowment. and now of course, despite all his efforts, his beliefs and gratitude and fidelity, she had made the decision to leave him. christopher can't bear to look at her, to see no love for him reflected in her eyes, to feel no yearning for him from her fingertips. he can't understand how it could have happened so quickly – to go from joyously locking tongues and bodies to saying she won't she can't it wouldn't feel right it wouldn't be fair. to find himself rejected emotionally and physically leaves

christopher reeling, sends him spinning violently towards the darkness, towards hating himself and this life and all who ride in it; all, strangely enough, except corla, who he still feels is a beacon of wonder, an angelic glow in a world of shadow and sin and cynical abasement. dylan was right – the dream of a better day died; was trampled in the mud of pointless festivals, was bloodspilled on the streets of riot-policed marches, was eventually sold to t-shirts and global music industry promotions. thatcher is still in power; her mantra that a rising tide lifts all luxury yachts still voted for by the sun-reading clever and classless and free; fucking peasants as far as john lennon could foresee. and america ruled by reagan’s lacky, some bush ranger neanderthal loved by the god-fearing gun-toting repugnants of a vengeful christ, and here in ireland, it was just plain embarrassing, lord haughey maintained by the cringeful grab-what-you-can of the cretinous all-things-to-everyman party, a smiling luciferous approach to politics that was so despicable and see-through and successful. christopher pukes just to think about it, seeing it set against the blonde hair and lip-filled smile of his corla now denied him. she still calls him on the phone, and they talk and talk and christopher happy to let it flow, this interaction with a voice on the line that he loves so much, so completely and beyond what others can imagine, even her faults, even her infidelities, even her failure to comprehend what he could possibly be trying to express, even his doomed attempts to quantify and qualify exactly how much his heart fills with her existence, her appearance in his life, her somehow one day acceptance of his hand. and after the phone call he deflates with sadness when realising how freed she is to talk only when they are separated by miles, with no chance for him to reach out for her, no danger of her responding. such phone calls invariably end with him trudging to his room, battling his broken spirit with ineluctable sensory indulgence, or poetry, or both. writing poems makes him feel angry and abandoned; ejaculating makes him feel angry and spent.

summer's end in galway

that night christopher is out on the town with his friends and it seems most of the world is in a relationship – couples everywhere; kissing, dancing, arguing, walking the nightstreets holding hands, disappearing into the shadows or their eden bedrooms, while the single seem to be busy flirting, chasing, living as their instincts demand and their senses whisper *can i please?* he wonders where is ciara tonight? out with her friends, or at home with her boyfriend, making love, lying there hoping it will be better this time, that he will try harder, that he will understand who she is and what she offers and what she needs, then closing her eyes at the sound of his pleasure; before she was ready, before she had even begun to be ready and knowing now he will just want to roll off and sleep, and will do both. christopher, looking at his friends in a noisy hole-in-the-wall, hearing them laugh and seeing their youthful joy, tries to shake off the images of a relationship he cannot know, but through the smoke and the craic of a summer's night, he sees ciara lying in bed awake alone, the skin of her perfect breasts glistening as they rise in girlish hope and fall with womanly resign. he wills her imagined hand to cup one of them and caress it with the tenderness it deserves, before the other hand slides down to finish what her boyfriend has gracelessly started, but christopher knows she won't – this is ireland, not a french novel nor a feminist broadside, and irish girls don't know how to get what they want – they don't even know what they're supposed to want. and for every one straining at the leash of the way things are, there are a thousand ciaras who are fast learning it's best not to expect too much, just to hope for a wedding ring and babies and a man who'll do least harm.

next day christopher goes to monroe's on time and ciara is waiting at the door. she smiles excitedly and walks away, calling for christopher to come. he follows

and sees that she is skipping along, carrying a carpet bag. *we're going to have a picnic!* she sings back at him as she weaves through the cars on the fairhill road. christopher lags behind to look at her, with her hair bouncing in tune with her steps and her summer dress flapping excitedly like the flag of a new nation. on raven terrace she slows to wait for him, holding out her arm that they may link, before quickly walking again and speaking. *yes, a picnic! it's the perfect weather for it, out on the claddagh, we'll find a spot where we can see the sea and maybe some boats and i've made us sandwiches and there's some cake and some wine – i hope you don't mind it's already opened but i couldn't take a full bottle and i know you like white and i've asked for an hour off so that's perfect...* and on like this with christopher trailing along trying to keep up with her skipping and torrent of songwords and more so, trying desperately to decipher the resolve behind her actions.

and on she goes, on the curving seafront road, with a swing of her hips and a bounce to her breasts, chatting in happy soliloquy with christopher the nodding chorus, on she goes, smiling gladly like all human happiness resides behind her eyes and infuses everything upon which she gazes. some grass is found and her bag emptied to reveal a bucolic feast and she's handing him an egg sandwich while unwrapping actual glasses and attempting to reopen the bottle of white wine. christopher is enthralled by it all, her energy and lightness and belief that now is perfect and tomorrow may yet be even better. gone is the frightened girl of cautious breath whom he first met a month before, and of whom he caught glimpses yesterday when she spoke of her boyfriend. *i have decided* she declared at last, *i am going to give my thomas a chance; a chance to rise to my expectations, to what i know you think i deserve.* to christopher's raised eyebrows she continued: *and i have decided that i want you and i to be friends, to help each other. you are still a poor wounded boy and you need someone soft*

*to heal you. and i am frightened and pessimistic and i need someone like you who never worries; who believes in freedom and friendship. this is what i have decided. if you find these terms acceptable please raise your glass. christopher was stunned; he couldn't believe the transformation and the confidence. he was also hooked; wanted absolutely to be part of whatever it was this girl was going through. he raised his glass to hers and they clinked with a chime and a sparkle of sunlight. they drank and put the glasses down and ciara leaned forward, cupping the back of christopher's neck and kissed him, on the lips – no tongues now – but three four now five even six seconds long of a closed eyes kiss right on the lips that christopher received with shock and elation and a whirl of butterflies in his stomach and a jolted hardening in his groin. ciara pulled back an inch or two, looked him straight in the eyes and said *thanks*, before sitting back and picking up her sandwich. *err*, said christopher, wondering where to start, *and what if thomas had seen that* he asked, disappointing himself with such a mundane response. *he won't*, replied ciara, *he works in a warehouse out on the tuam road. and if he did, i don't care – i've told him i have a friend called christopher who'll be around for september and he can take it or leave it. it was just a kiss christopher. a long one, a very nice one, but just a kiss. we're friends, remember. now eat.**

christopher picked up his sandwich and ate.