

## GEESE IN THE HAMMER

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*Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.*

*Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.*

—Mary Oliver, 'Wild Geese' (1986: 14)

*Walls have ears. List'ning to the tale that this wall  
Tells from one side of our sectarian sprawl.  
A tale told in blood, to the restless music  
Of the ceaseless Rave which floods the double-deck  
Of the next-door house, commandeered for evil.  
The commander-in-chief is a muscle devil.  
Here, each rented row is chimney-topped, each row  
A funneled Titanic from the shipyard show  
That is Harland & Wolff, not more than a stone  
Throw away, down the Crum, and across the town.*

—Adrian Rice, 'Walls Have Ears' (2019: 290)

In 2017, BBC NI environment correspondent Conor Macauley published a report on the thousands of greylag geese which had flocked yearly from Iceland to a Belfast council estate. The geese, the piece reveals, grazing on scraps thrown out by residents, were 'afforded a particularly potent layer of protection' not by a conservation group, but the local unit of the Loyalist paramilitary organization the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) (Macauley 2017). The article continues the trend of media fascination with Loyalist husbandry in north Belfast, where animals owned by certain figures attain legendary status: the toothless lions kept by 'Buck Alec' Robinson (1901–1995), the beloved Alsations, 'Rebel' and 'Shane', of Johnny 'Mad Dog' Adair (1963–), and the pair of chihuahuas, 'Bambi' and 'Pepsi', owned by the late Sammy Duddy (1945–2007) (see O'Connell 2014; Cowan 2003). The ironic thrust of Macauley's piece rests upon on the assumption that an armed and largely reactionary militant group – responsible for over 260 recorded killings during the 'Troubles', and currently involved in criminality – is incapable of invoking ecological ethics (see McKittrick et al. 2001). Today as new houses go up on the Estate, the geese no longer winter there. But still fascinated by their yearly return over the past decade, and intrigued by the lyrical potential of their relationship with the district, I wonder: what's the meaning of these geese?

The rumour that tourists who come to see political murals in working-class Belfast are ‘safeguarded’ by paramilitaries lends itself to a cynicism where we guess that somebody, somewhere, is making a profit. But why protect these geese? The article’s subtext alludes to how the greylags were territorialized. In a place ostensibly closed to the outside, their presence was *okayed* by people with no mandate to warrant such an assurance. Regardless of the report’s critical nuance however, I’d contend that by presenting a positive narrative where one can’t exist, the geese story has the capacity to destabilise moral and ideological predispositions, to rupture what French thinker Jacques Rancière calls *le partage du sensible*, the apportioning of ‘what is visible and audible within a particular aesthetico-political regime’ (Rockhill 2013: xi).

Owing to two centuries of systemic negligence and recent paramilitarism, the inner-city district where the BBC story is set, historically called the Old Lodge and now referred to locally as the ‘Estate’ to differentiate it from the Shankill Road and environs proper, is one of the most deprived in Belfast.<sup>1</sup> Despite its relative academic obscurity, this district has been at times the nucleus of the province’s tumultuous and contested history. Reporting on the 1886 Home Rule riots, *The Leeds Mercury* counted ‘fifty people [...] injured’ and two people shot dead by police in the area. In 1899, the Army’s Royal Irish Rifles and North Staffordshire Regiment were deployed in order to quell clashes (*The Belfast News-Letter* 1899).<sup>2</sup> As the 1920s ‘Troubles’ flared, the Old Lodge Road was described as the ‘storm-centre’ of violent disorder (*Belfast Newsletter* 1920). Throughout the 1935 Belfast riots, eleven people were killed and nine men from the ‘Hammer’ – a neighbourhood which takes up over half of the district – were charged for unlawful assembly (*The Irish Examiner* 1935). And the Old Lodge district was the setting of the first high-profile sectarian killing of the recent conflict, the murder of Catholic barman Peter Ward on Malvern Street in June 1966.<sup>3</sup>

I lived in the Hammer when I was a child. Some of my family live there still. Although we moved when I was in primary school, the place will always be home to me, my primal scene. Our street, the optimistically named Hopewell Place, is a cul-de-sac for cars but not people, with various entries running off it. Most notable of these entries is ‘the Lane’, which runs west – past the primary school, the nursery school, and playing fields – out onto Agnes Street, a stretch traversing two of the city’s arterial routes, the Shankill Road and the Crumlin Road.<sup>4</sup> These three thoroughfares along with the Westlink dual carriageway to the southeast comprise the limits of the contemporary Estate.

There were always pigeons and seagulls, but never geese, when we lived there. The streets of the Hammer were considerably livelier in the early 1990s than they are today. The kerbstones were painted the typical red, white, and blue, bunting in the same trichromatic swayed throughout the year and, of course, there was a miscellany of flags tied to lampposts and draped from staffs above residents’ front doors. Hundreds of mongrels were *put out* in the morning and let in at night: dogs of every shape and colour with nothing about them conforming to a pedigree, each with their own vivid temperament which every neighbour seemed to know intimately. After school, children played football, rounders, and hide-and-go-seek. British Army patrols traversed the district daily, usually en route somewhere else or on regular beat, but sometimes on exercise. It wouldn’t have been strange to look out the window and see a camouflaged back in your front garden at any time of the day. You could walk right by a crouching squaddie on your way out the front gate to work or school. I recall one with a hackle (feather plume) in his cap letting me look through the scope of his SA80 assault rifle. I didn’t see any geese, but I remember this recurring dream: a policeman’s combination cap bobs above a wall, back and forth – he’s looking for someone ... me; he’s on his way to arrest and question me, to leave me to

rot in 'the Crum' – the prison less than two hundred yards from our house. I'd go shopping on the Crumlin Road with my mother, a stretch which then (and until quite recently) had an aura of what I can only describe as doom about it. One time, as we walked past the gaol on our way to the butchers, we witnessed a prisoners' protest (McKittrick 1994). They were on the slate pitched roof; some crept along the ridge like tightrope artists, others sat in the gaps where tiles had been smashed in. Some were lobbing tiles down at the policemen and soldiers watching amused from the road below. They looked happy, the prisoners; stubbly, tired, but happy. I asked my mother why they didn't escape while they had the chance. She said she didn't know. Sometimes when a prisoner had escaped, they'd sound the World War Two air raid siren, which on greyer days must have been alarming to the Estate's older residents and their film buff grandchildren.

We lived under the cosh of paramilitarism, but this had by the 1990s become a familiar cosh. Things were normal when settled, when life seemed stable, as things are everywhere. As is common in lower-class communities across the Global North, throughout the year some older kid would lift a manhole cover and burst the water main to create a ten-foot fountain that we'd dance through. It was certainly no place for flocks of unaccustomed migratory birds. I would have happily thrown stones at a goose then. We threw stones at each other for fun, as the scars on my forehead attest. One of the by-products of paramilitarism is an ostensible level of street safety. We knew instinctively to never leave the area alone, and sensible strangers knew through repute and practice to never come in. The furthest I got was the youth club on Denmark Street at the north-easternmost corner of the district. I didn't attend – having a visceral antipathy towards strictly organized 'activities' – but the surrounding area used to flood with heavy rain, so we'd build wooden rafts from the teenagers' bonfire hoard. Children would go *out to play* from around the age of three. They'd be sent to the shop for what was needed: a loaf, brown lemonade, potatoes, ten cigarettes. Our nearest convenience store was 'the van', an illegal sweetshop-cum-tobacconists operated from a wheel-less blue box truck in the front garden of a house on Florence Square. Conveniently, a man would also drive around in a Vauxhall Cavalier at night, stopping every few streets to sell all manner of things from its boot – from videotapes, to firelighters, to tampons. Truant boys would knock doors of a weekday afternoon and try to peddle their booty – toys stolen from Woolworths and Leisure World. My mother used to say she felt sorry for them. My first Lego set was a raft with pirates, my second was a Robin Hood scene with Robin himself and two Merry Men posing at their tree HQ; this is even less believable and just as true as the fact that my fervidly law-abiding grandmother on my mother's side, who lived a few doors down from us, once bought from a car boot a pirated copy of Andrew V. McLaglen's *The Wild Geese* (1978), starring Roger Moore as suave international mercenary Lieutenant Shawn Fynn.

Before I reach for my violin, I should say that I was lucky. They sent me to the *good* school, Cliftonville Primary, which was officially 'integrated' but attended mainly by Protestant children. We were Protestants, just about. The local Anglican church, St Michaels, was used before the real event of the drink-fuelled afterparty of christenings to give proceedings a slight whiff of spirituality rather than respectability. I was sent to Sunday school on only a few occasions. The man who drove the bus was a bag of nerves and would shout in the children's faces. I had to be restrained one Sunday morning when I caused a scene after trying the church hall door handle to find it locked. I wanted to go home. How strange I must have looked to the congregation, with my curly blond hair and rosy cheeks, an angel bawling and cursing in the House of the Lord, the Immanuel Presbyterian Church on Agnes Street. Nobody in the area ever got married. My parents didn't, and I wasn't christened either. Christmas was for Santa Claus – usually my father's friend Big Roy with a goose-feather pillow up his red jacket – the God of Plastic Commodities and Noddy Holder's raspy Walsall voice: *Do the fairies keep him sober for*

*a day?* Parents spent more than they had, got into debt even, buying presents for their kids. They were sprawled over the sofa on Christmas Day. In school, they made us sing ‘Once in Royal David’s City’ and dress up as shepherds, wisemen, and sheep.

My grandfather on my father’s side would pick me up on Friday afternoons, and we’d buy nectarines from the fruit shop or potted herrings from the fishmongers to eat in the park, whether it rained or not. As I said, I was lucky. We’d stop off at the Carnegie library to take out books to read when we got there. He’d go for something on the Spanish Civil War; I loved Barbara and Ed Emberley’s *Drummer Hoff* (1967) and Dick Roughsey’s *The Giant Devil Dingo* (1973). We’d walk the mile or so uphill to Woodvale Park with our books and nectarines, and when we arrived – beyond the bandstand and the bowling green – a bevy of fluffy dirty-white swans would be sailing around the pond; but I don’t recall seeing thousands of greylags on the grass. When we finished reading our books, I asked him hundreds of questions.

Before the ‘slum clearances’ (1968–1974), the Old Lodge district had mainly comprised a familiar grid of redbrick kitchen house terraces such as those of the industrial north of England. Although only half-a-mile from the town centre, at the turn of the nineteenth century the area remained largely unurbanized. The arrival of migrant workers from rural parts of the country coming to work in the linen mills, many of whom had escaped *An Gorta Mór*,<sup>5</sup> saw the population of Belfast – which was no more than a village in the early seventeenth century – soar from 53,000 in 1831 to 115,000 in 1853 (Wiener 1976: 13). During this time, between the arterial routes of the Shankill Road and the Crumlin Road foundries were busy. New brick was left out to cool on land soon to be covered with ‘rows of tightly packed two-up-two-down’ houses, which for thousands of years had been a grazing place for cattle, attended in the late autumn by flocks of greylags. The upper end of what is now North Street, running northwest from Belfast’s centre, was once named ‘Goose Lane’ – a nomenclature which indicates that before the nineteenth century, wintering geese had been a fixture in the town’s calendar.<sup>6</sup> Throughout most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there were no wide grassy spaces in the Hammer to graze on. Prior to redevelopment, barring a piece of waste ground unimaginatively called the ‘Waste’ and the gravel football pitch-turned-playpark, there was very little unused space, never mind an unused grassy space (Simms 1992: 60). Owing to on-pitch brutality, the local football team that played on the gravel pitch earned the nickname ‘Sledgehammer United’; the pitch being their home venue, it became ‘Sledgehammer Park’; when the city corporation built a playpark on the plot where the pitch had been – perhaps to put an end to gory bouts – this name was shortened to the ‘Hammer’ (ibid.: 9). The streets east of the swings and climbing frames eventually took this name.<sup>7</sup>

Ron Wiener’s *The Rape and Plunder of the Shankill* (1976) details the governmental maladministration and corporate corruption that hung over the late-sixties redevelopment, which he characterises as a ‘horror story which just ran and ran’ (p. 9). The streets were redrawn. Once one of the city’s arterial routes, the Old Lodge Road – which ran diagonally through the eponymous district from the junction of Agnes Street and the Crumlin Road southeast towards North Street – was cauterized at the back of the courthouse at Florence Place and redesignated a street. Apart from two dozen houses on Forster Street and Malvern Street (which still stand today), the terraces were levelled. In their place, typical late-twentieth-century style council housing and blocks of flats went up. Catholic and Protestant neighbours were separated by the Westlink dual carriageway, ossifying local sectarian disintegration. Many families moved to the suburbs, others to Australia, South Africa, and North America. Many young fathers left to work in Great Britain and never returned. Commercial premises along the Old Lodge

Road and Agnes Street were demolished. The local economy was decimated. Prior to redevelopment, facilities had generally 'met the living needs' of inhabitants (ibid.: 87). 'There were numerous shops and [...] meeting places such as pubs and halls', but redevelopment 'greatly reduced' the number of premises from around seventy to twelve 'in a community of some 3000 people' (ibid.). The number of shops were reduced due to a planned district shopping centre which was never built. The removal of amenities such as 'coal dealers and scrap dealers', Wiener writes, accommodated 'an economic strategy based on the needs of large industrial corporations' (ibid.: 87-88). The motives of the 'authorities' were 'diametrically opposed' to the interests of 'working class communities' (ibid.: 8). This situation persisted when we lived in the Hammer, and persists still. Within the Estate today, there's one corner shop, two petrol stations, and a few small businesses on the periphery.



Figure 1: Before and after redevelopment: Old Lodge district and the Estate.

John Young Simms' memoir *Farewell to the Hammer* (1992) recounts his upbringing in the district from the mid-1920s through the Hungry '30s. Simms describes the depressed but content existence of a dispossessed and disenfranchised community afflicted with sporadic bouts of sectarian violence. Populated with indifferent political charlatans, damaged war veterans and semi-feral preteen children, Simms' Hammer wasn't unlike its late-'80s palimpsestic heir, the council estate where I spent my first years. He might have disagreed with such an assertion, however. My maternal grandmother, born in 1929, was reared in the old Hammer, in a kitchen house on Conlig Street. They'd have porridge three times a day most days, porridge pie sometimes, or boiled rice with raisins. On Sundays they had soup made with celery leaves, carrots, barley, and a shin bone. At Christmas they got an orange (as the cliché goes) and, of course, chocolate. Nobody in the old Hammer ever bought a goose for the holiday season. Having moved away before the 'slums' were cleared, Simms' memoir ends with a mournful account of his first visit to the newly-built Estate. 'I was lost in the Walks and confused in the Ways', he writes, 'the bulldozers had removed forever the old tumbledown houses' and 'gouged out the heart of the place' (p. 144). As he 'roved around' what was for him with its pebble-dashed walls and barking dogs an 'alien quarter', he writes that even the 'starlings' mocked him 'from the tower of St Michael's', but makes no mention of geese (ibid.).

After redevelopment, in contravention to its objectives, further social deprivation ensued. Wiener writes that in the old Hammer, because ‘the street was seen to be an extension of the house [it] belonged to everyone in the neighbourhood’; it was thus difficult ‘for anyone to commit delinquent actions behind the cloak of anonymity’ (1976: 91). The corridors, courts, and staircases of the new six-storey blocks locally known as the ‘Weetabix Flats’ (which were ‘full of rubbish and dog shit’), ‘became free play areas for young people [who] for example [started] throwing objects over the edge [–] including a jack handle which fell on a woman’s head and she had to be rushed to hospital’ (ibid.). It’s important to remember that Wiener was writing this less than two years after the redevelopment’s completion. I remember being in the Weetabix Flats in the early-1990s with my brother. Their concrete forecourts and quadrangles were perfect for playing Duck, Duck, Goose. Even as a small child, I recall being surprised, pleasantly surprised, at the chaos of the flats. Shouting-matches and the din of crying babies were constants in the background. Everyone left the doors of their maisonettes open and we would wander in and out as we pleased. None of the residents ever asked who we were or what we thought we were doing. There would often be a gaunt, tired-looking man spread over an armchair smoking in the living-room, sleeping-bags on the floor, plastic cider bottles lying around. In such instances, we’d turn back and try the next door along the deck access corridor in our search to find the home of our new best friends who were playing a Commodore 64 or an Atari. I’d get goose bumps at the prospect.

Because *something very very bad* had happened, out of the blue my brother and I were ordered one day by our mother to never visit the Weetabix Flats again. If, as Wiener writes, ‘social control’ on the new Estate was already diminishing by the mid 1970s, two decades on, the situation had deteriorated still (ibid.). The six-storey blocks, which were mainly inhabited by damaged young adults of the community, had by the 1990s become emporiums of a new type of entrepreneurialism. Unemployment crises across the archipelago, government funding cuts, the testosterone-fired moral fugue of the ‘Troubles’, mixed with the ‘breakdown’ of community ‘ties’ following the ‘70s redevelopment, brought about the perfect conditions for a new form of ultra-paramilitarism by the early 1990s (ibid.: 92-97). Engaged in all manner of gangsterism – ‘shebeens, drug flats, brothels, extortion rackets, robberies’ – these *up-and-comers*, epitomised by the UDA’s then C Company, under the command of Johnny Adair, made their presence known by commissioning a new series of menacing murals and stepping up ‘violence against Catholics’ (McKay 2009: 189).

From the early 1970s to the present day, numerous community initiatives have existed beyond paramilitary infrastructures. A host of grassroots associations have been successful in limiting the worst of unconsulted housing redevelopment; social schemes – such as youth clubs, parenting support groups, and anti-drug campaigns – sought to and did curtail further social deprivation. But given the disconnect between communities and political structures, between people and policy, ‘community development work was like pushing a big rock up a hill’ (Northern Visions n.d.). Jackie Redpath, one of the central figures involved in these initiatives over the past four decades, has said in interview that given the political backdrop, community workers were always working ‘against the odds’ because ‘the Troubles could undermine what you were doing’ (ibid.).

When I was young, the Shankill Road on Saturday afternoons was always packed with shoppers. Many were there for the nostalgia, they or their parents having moved away during the redevelopment. My father and I would take the Lane most weeks up to ‘the Road’, which invariably meant long spells in the smoky bookmakers, followed by the payoff of a packet of crisps and a bottle of Coke in the pub.

On one such Saturday afternoon in October 1993, we were in the card shop. Daddy had tasked me with choosing a birthday card for my grandfather. Someone had rented a bus so that the whole family could be driven out to my uncle's house in rural County Antrim. I was excited. Doagh was another universe where people went for long walks for the sake of it and took wicker hampers into fields to eat hard-boiled eggs on tartan quilts. The sound too much for my six-year-old right ear, I heard only a short *phut* like a fucked football under the wheel of a car. I wasn't frightened, until my father let go of my hand. He wrestled his way past the other customers and moved through the door to the pavement. The last in the shop, I hemmed and hah'd – but I needed to go to the toilet, so I went out. Sawdust chips like those I'd kick about the butcher's floor came down at the rate of snow. Hands and jeans flitted in and out of the mortar dust fog like goldfish in dirty water come to kiss the glass of their bowl. They dodged me as they came and went, in and out of the grey. I needed to go to the toilet. As the wind cleared the air, I saw a rush of black soles, white soles, perms, curtains, baubles, baggy shirts, and baggy jumpers. They were running uphill towards it.<sup>8</sup> I needed to go to the toilet. My father swooped out of the murk, picked me up and followed them.

None of the adults spoke on the bus to Doagh. We moved out of the Estate into the suburbs a few miles north not long after the Shankill Bomb. Ballysillan, though leafier, was just as entangled in the petty social mechanics of the 'Troubles' (McKittrick 1996). The children of our new street seemed naïve and gentle – wouldn't have said boo to a goose – which suited and probably softened me. I didn't leave the house much. We'd take the bus weekly to visit family in the Hammer. Afternoons on the Shankill Road were less jovial after the carnage of October 1993.

Two years after the Good Friday Agreement, the BBC reported an 'Exodus' from the Estate (*BBC News* 2000). By the end of the year 2000, a bloody intra-Loyalist feud instigated by Adair's C Company had claimed the lives of a dozen men (McKittrick et al. 2001: 1473–1487). The district became once more the 'storm-centre' of violence in the city. Hundreds of families, whose houses had been subjected to machinegun and petrol-bomb attacks, were forced to leave. In 2002, amidst the second Loyalist feud of the century, the leading members of C Company were expelled from the UDA by the organisation's 'Inner Council' (McDonald 2003a). After Adair was imprisoned in January 2003, his supporters were exiled to Great Britain where, harboured by neo-Nazi militants, they continued their various criminal exploits (Cowan 2002; *The Bolton News* 2005). Given the increasingly public revelations into collusion between British security forces and C Company during the final decades of the 'Troubles' (McDonald 2003b), we might contend that their expulsion forms a late-modern analogue to the Flight of the Wild Geese, the martial conclusion to the Williamite War in Ireland (1688–1691). In October 1691, William of Orange defeated his uncle and father-in-law James Stuart to take the Kingdom of Ireland, having already secured England and Scotland during the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688–89. After the Treaty of Limerick, 14,000 Irish soldiers (the eponymous 'wild geese') who'd remained loyal to James fled to mainland Europe, where they were integrated into the armies of France, Spain, and Austria.<sup>9</sup> James Murphy asserts that the epithet 'wild geese', which has come to denote soldiers (as well as civilians) who've fled Ireland over the centuries, is 'so entrenched in the Irish consciousness that it seems to require neither explanation nor quotation-marks' (1994: 23). Citing literature which references these Jacobites as a symbol of Nationalist aspiration – from pre-nineteenth-century Gaelic poet Seaghan Ó Cúinneagain to W. B. Yeats – Murphy asserts that the cultural memory of the messianic 'wild geese' has, in the intervening centuries, been used to reap 'ideological capital' from 'Irish history' (ibid.: 27). Although the contemporaneous origin of the phrase is now lost, we can speculate that the exiled Jacobites were characterised as goose-like due to shared associations with migration and the promise of repatriation. The behaviour of wild geese then, we might crudely posit, can represent hope.

Conor Macauley's 2017 report on the Estate's 'protected' greylags (perhaps unwittingly) taps into the trope identified by Murphy, where the goose – because of its tendency to habitually depart and return, not to mention its hissy impertinence – mirrors the volatile ethnic flux of the Hammer's history. Or maybe it's just a hopeful story from a district which has had more than its fair share of hopeless stories since the laying of its first brick.<sup>10</sup> Over the past few years, new houses have gone up on the Estate; it boasts a daily influx of tourists, who come to take snaps of the many political murals. Although 'Troubles' tourism is now a vital aspect of Belfast's economy, you'd struggle to find an elected representative who'd live within this particular attraction. To paraphrase that well-worn phrase which politicians are wont to use: is sauce for the goose ever sauce for the gander?

Redpath has spoken mournfully of how the Loyalist feud of 2000 all but 'destroyed [...] a community' (Northern Visions n.d.). Though he isn't sure which elements of social cohesion might remain 'intact' within the district, there's optimism in his description of the place as 'a work in progress' (ibid.). Susan McKay writes that after

*decades of paramilitary dominance, in the early years of the new century the [Estate] was a desolate place. A local research project showed significant mental-health problems, high rates of assault against children in their own homes and a level of education attainment that ranked among the lowest in the UK. Less than 1 per cent went on to further education (2009: 190).*

By the middle of the first decade of the century, the last of the late-'60s redevelopment flats had been torn down. Grass had grown on the acres of empty space and, as there weren't so many children to play on it, one November the geese returned.

**Maladministration***for Sinéad Morrissey*

She does the windows, scrubs his childern, steeps and boils his oily rags  
 – rinses them, rolls them through the mangle in the yard.

And he works, aye, but never buys a thing of worth. ‘This is delft  
 my eye,’ her late mother’d gulder, staring by her tealeaves.

And since he’s barred from every pub in the district  
 for not shutting up about union business,

she’s to sneak up the entry with the big steel flagon  
 – his people’s heirloom, hardly *oh là là* –

she’s to have the barman fill to the spout  
 with the demon *drink*. ‘New! Exotic! Free State Stout’

the bill by the door reads at Hanratty’s Inn.  
 It must well be, she thinks, the way he puts in ‘im.

At the end of the alley there’s a couple of youngsters at it,  
 so she turns onto the Old Lodge Road, where two men in overalls

lunge at each other with hammers; and the rabble yells, ‘Hit it n’head!  
 Fight w’yur hands!’ And if they can break the rules

she can. So she slips by the rage, into Hanratty’s emptied lounge,  
 lights a Woodbine and tells the man: ‘Fill ‘er up, and mine’s a gin.’

She blows smoke in his ruddy face, curtseys to the NO WOMEN sign,  
 and before she’s even had a sup, she has a number in mind.

*April showers come yur way, bringin’ flowers to bloom in May. If it’s  
 rainin’, no regrets, it’s not rainin’ rain, it’s rainin’ vi-o-lets ...*

*North Belfast, 1922*

## Helen of Foreman Street

To this day, wherever there's an ottoman,  
my da sees his ma on it in her nightie

cradling a forty-ouncer of Vat 19  
the way she'd held him. The favourite child

of a dozen, he'd chase the loanshark from the door –  
down Killarney, across Conlon,

round the Henhouse and by the swings –  
often only in his socks and trunks.

My da's ma drunk called him a dirty rat  
when the headmaster sent her a letter:

*Your lad, who hasn't been to class in weeks,  
ran through the playground in the altogether ...*

Jesus, he has some funny stories,  
like the one where she stabs him.

He lives; but today he sulks between rooms  
like a guilt-tripped ghost. And having lost

the taste for the sauce altogether  
after a spate of pratfalls this year past,

he now can't sit apeace when we're on it,  
so we send him up to his cart.

Because he can't stomach velveteen cushions  
or the voice of that man on the BBC,

he has his breakfast, dinner and tea  
standing at the counter in the scullery.

**Zawba'ah, Lord of Friday, the Planet Venus,  
the Colour Green and Iron**

So I'm about to light-up a tutti-frutti cigarillo wrap  
stuffed with Alaskan Thunderfuck  
when Our Gordie walks in with a Mormon elder;  
I hid it under the Mekong bamboo calendar.

How do you do? I sez, for the first time in my life.  
No, how's you? sez he, plonking himself on the settee  
as if he knew me from Adam.  
Not too bad, I sez—as if to say,

You're ruining my Friday afternoon lad,  
after a bastard of a week – now skedaddle.  
Your brother here tells me you're an addict, sez he.  
Well I near fell off my jute stool.

There's no payoff dude, he sez. So I crooned,  
*Abba Zaba go-zoom. Babbette baboon—Babbette baboon.*

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Media also often refer to the district as the 'lower Shankill' or 'Hopewell'.

<sup>2</sup> The article's (decidedly optimistic) title – 'State of the City: Peace and Tranquilly Reign' – toys with the notion of the district as a microcosm.

<sup>3</sup> Socialising with friends after work, Ward was shot by the UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) as he left the Malvern Arms; see McKittrick et al. (2001: 26).

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps indicative of how young a city Belfast is, roads are normally referred to with the definite article.

<sup>5</sup> During the Great Hunger (1845-1852) over a million people died of starvation and disease. Though millions migrated to America and Great Britain, many survivors, evicted from their land, moved to the burgeoning urban centres of Belfast, Cork, and Dublin; see Kinealy 1994.

<sup>6</sup> 'Victoria street was Cow lane, the street through which cows were driven to graze in the Point fields at the foot of Corporation Street. North street was Goose lane and was named for a similar reason' (Pierce 2000: 524).

<sup>7</sup> The post-redevelopment playpark is still referred to as the Hammer. There's now a 3G pitch called The Hammer Playing Fields, home to amateur league side Shankill United F.C., a team founded in 1971 as 'Harland & Wolff Rec'; see Scott 2019.

<sup>8</sup> At 1pm on Saturday the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October 1993 two members of the PIRA (Provisional Irish Republican Army) disguised as deliverymen carried a bomb into Frizzell's fishmongers on the Shankill Road. The bomb exploded prematurely, killing eight civilians, a UDA member, and one of the bombers; see Duffin and Mendick 2014.

<sup>9</sup> This continued a trend over the preceding and succeeding centuries where alienated Irish soldiers left for mainland Europe; see Doherty 1998.

<sup>10</sup> The area has a long history of social deprivation, especially regarding inadequate housing. In 1882, *The Belfast Newsletter* ran a story about two dilapidated houses which, as the reporter writes, just ‘suddenly fell’. Several children who were playing in the house were injured, two of whom – Alexander Gault, aged 8, and David Leary, aged 9 – later died of their injuries. One boy, Samuel Shaw, aged 10, was killed outright; see *The Belfast News-Letter* (1882).