

the martello

lessons from loneliness

issue III



2022

Foreword

Hello, friends!

Thank you kindly for picking up this copy of *The Martello*. You've made an excellent choice, if we do say so ourselves.

A few months ago, we asked writers and artists from both Ireland and beyond to share with us their reflections on loneliness. We were overwhelmed by the responses we received: poetry, prose, art, and photography that beautifully explored a feeling we've all become far too acquainted with over the past few years.

The thing with loneliness is, it can feel crippling. It can feel like the only thing you may ever feel again. And the worst part is, that by definition, you think you are feeling it uniquely- alone. As well as this, the old cliché has some truth (in our opinion anyways), sometimes we learn things from the worst parts of life.

This edition is yours now: whenever you need it, crack it open and take these messages with you for whatever you need them with.

We began our *Martello* journey in the same house that we love dearly, only separated by a few doors. *The Martello* is now a part of us: and thanks to it and the wonderful work we've collected, no matter where we go, we are linked. And therefore- hopefully, not quite so alone.

We wish all our dear readers will feel the same way perusing these pages, that these slices of other people's experiences, small enough to carry around, are nonetheless powerful enough to remind you that, no matter what you are feeling, you are not alone.

Happy reading,
With love,

Úna and Jack

List of Contributors

Written

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Noel King

Lorelei Bacht

Adrienne Rozells

Stuart Flynn

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Oz Hardwick

Christina Bagni

Diarmuid Cawley

Kristen Chapman

Charlie Bowden

Declan Coles

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Trying to Keep Warm

Megan O'Driscoll

Much of human history has been all of us trying to keep warm. That's how it all started, I don't know if that's where we end. This room is cold and you're putting another log on the fire. This is the place where I warm my hands. This is the place where it comes in waves. This is the very last place where things make sense.

This is a very old dog. This is you singing when you think no one can hear. This is your heart beat. It's still beating, even if you can't hear it.

I want to sell you something funny. I want to feed everyone. I want us to eat well together. I want us to eat the stars so the sky stops getting brighter and meaner - we're not going anywhere.

This is nowhere,
and it's fast.

Way to England

Noel King

I shuffle in the stretch of the geansai you knit me, sister;
wonder how you'll like the bedroom all to yourself, brother;
eat the last of your sandwiches, Mother;
think over all your do's and don'ts, Father
and how I will really get on with Aunty Joan in London.
I light a smoke at the bar; no smoking ban here yet,
no need to hide my habit
till I'm home again, I suppose.
There'll be no need to hide my bit of gayness either,
except from Aunty Joan and her factory-husband,
till I'm home again, I suppose.
A man from Woolwich starts to talk,
he runs a museum of old cars and stuff,
gives me a card to visit if I'm in the area.
I hope Customs won't find the magazines
with pictures of naked girls, harmless stuff (no bondage),
I could hardly have left them behind for mother to find.
Over and over again, I check the bit of paper
with the name of the man who's giving me the job,
his phone number and my PRSI number from Ireland.

Geansai: jumper/sweater

**Badgers in Fenit
(for Bridie)**

Noel King

Your brother tells me
a badger has wandered
into your back garden,
eating all the cat food;
that after some time
has befriended your cat,
is now sharing the food.
Last night I dreamt you phoned
telling me the badgers were
“going mental” in Fenit,
that on a whim you’d poured Vodka
into the animals water dish.
On Saturday I drive out to visit you,
you’re to dog sit my golden Labrador
till Sunday week.
As my car slows down
I catch your helpless look
at your front gate,
the badger squashed dead
by a vehicle just before me.

The Gate Upon Which I Have Stumbled

Lorelei Bacht

Yes, there is sustenance in this garden:
in all varieties of green, the soft bodies
of snails in the morning.
Yes, the dotation of hidings is generous:
here a stone, there the curve of a tree
stump, a lump of soil, the coil
of a root, motherly. And yes, it does come
in too large a multiple of my own size
for me to measure it in strides: I lose
count. Also, it is replete with the queer song
of birds, crickets, in overlapping sonatas,
replete with life, ardent.
However, I have found:
the edge. I have stumbled upon
a gate. What is it that lies behind, keeping
silent, testing my resolution? I would like
a simple life. But the gate is
calling its obsidian, calling
to the unknown within. And so, I spend
my days sat by that gate, a wait
destined to lead nowhere,
as I have neither hand nor key.

Graduation Day

Adrienne Rozells

I make my way offstage and through college-sponsored photo opps. I am smiling uncontrollably behind my black surgical mask, and I am shaking on high heels I haven't worn in a year, and for once since the pandemic began, or maybe even since the beginning of the pre-pandemic portion of my senior year of college, my mind is silent. Blazingly, gorgeously silent. Even as Dean Kamitskua continues to read the names of graduates over the loudspeakers, I am alone in my mind, in my elation. I follow my peers, the ones who came earlier in the alphabet, and loop around the front of the stage. They march back down the aisle towards our alphabetically-assigned seats. I see you two then. The audience members representing me.

When I imagined graduation day, I imagined it like this: my mother and my stepdad. At least one stepbrother, maybe both of them. Maybe my Nana with them too. Definitely my grandparents, who helped to raise me. And my Aunt, who is scared of flying, but would do it for me, I know. I thought most graduates would bring in family in similar or larger quantities, and I imagined all of my fellow grads would be there. I imagined a lot of underclassmen would stay to

celebrate with us. I envisioned the line of my favorite professors in their silly doctoral robes and puffy caps, clapping as we walked by.

It didn't happen that way. But I still have you two.

You're sitting in the front row. I didn't expect that. In my daydreams, there was a crowd too big to pick my loved ones out of, by sight or by sound. Today, there isn't actually that much of a crowd. I think the members of the Class of 2020 outnumber the audience. Most people didn't bring any family at all.

It's been a year and a half. We're all dressed in whatever we could find on short notice. I did find time to decorate my graduation cap. It was supposed to rain all day and I worried the paint would run, but instead the sun is shining down, and it's autumn, so the sun is a nice soothing warmth rather than the hot muggy heat of my imaginary May.

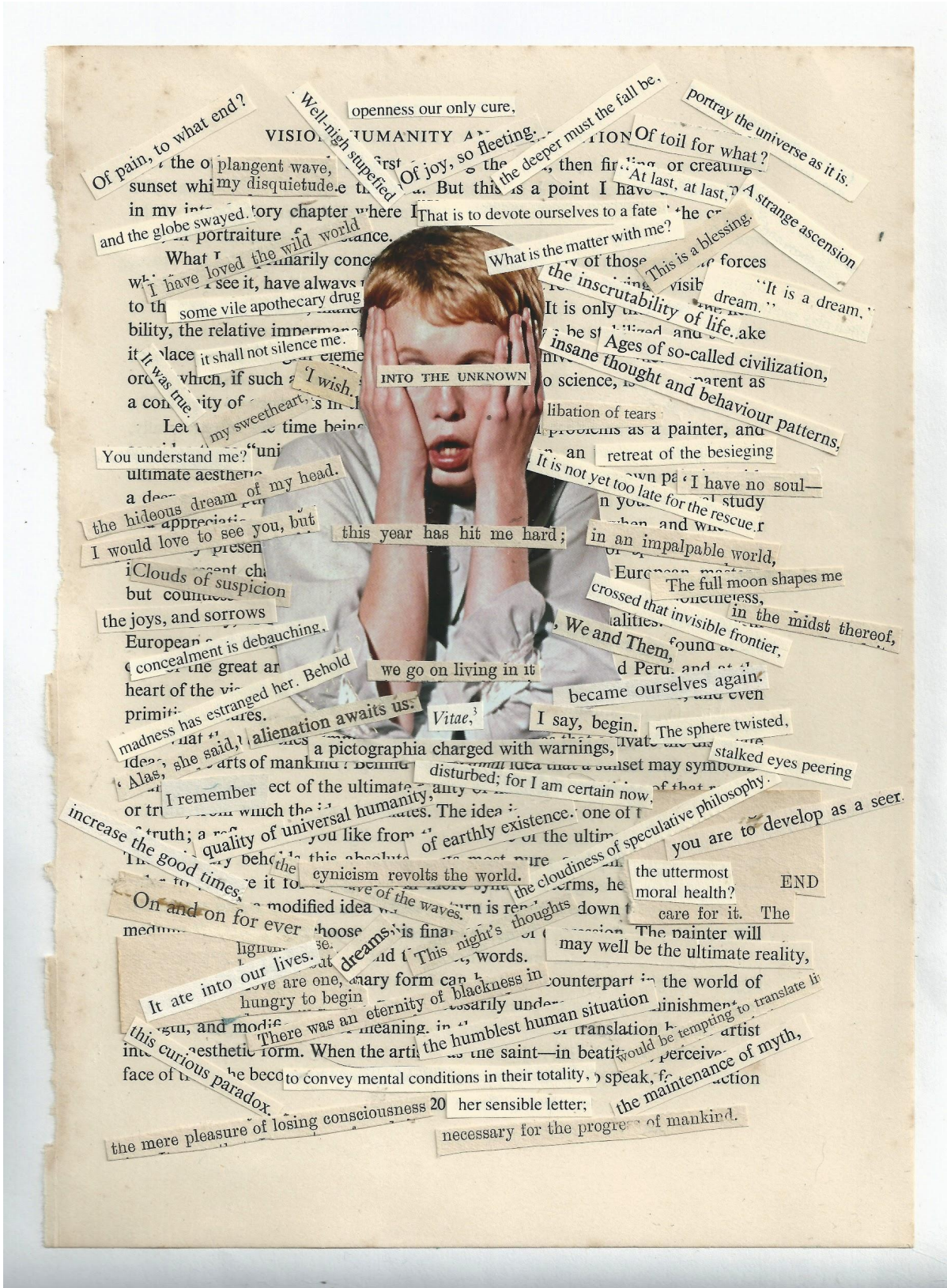
I see you two sitting at the end of the first row, right in front of the stage. I could see you from up on stage too. I am aware that I'm supposed to keep marching along past. I think to myself, nothing has gone according to plan anyway. It is a joy to kneel down and press my face in between the two of you, putting my sheer tights in the damp grass as you each grab one of my hands tight.

I have spent much of the time between actual graduation and this belated ceremony feeling low to the ground. In a world that has become so heady, what else could I do? I pressed my body into the dirt and breathed in deep. I slipped underwater, belly to the sand, and let the waves rock me. I collapsed on multiple bathroom floors in tears and snot and broken pieces. More than once I did the same thing in the shower. I bent down to hold onto myself, and to hold others close. To pick up my dog, or my belongings, or my heart. Mostly I did this when no one was looking.

Now, here I am, in the dirt in front of everyone. You each kiss me, at the same time, one on either cheek. My mother on my left, my boyfriend on my right. You are both speaking words of care and congratulations. I blurt out, "I love you guys," and think for a moment it's a strange thing to say, but it's just the truth, true love, through and through.

And I don't know how to articulate it in the moment, but I think this now, quite often:

Of all the times I have fallen to my knees, this is by far the most beautiful.



Vitae
Michelle Granville

STRAW MEN IN THE FIELDS OF THE MIND

Stuart Flynn

Nothing stays the same when you look at it
for long enough. There always remains
an empty reality in the centre, a little town
abandoned by the imagination;
as soon as someone has been there,
they tend to talk a lot less. It's a feeling
of being in the middle of something,
only you don't know where you are
or what surrounds you:
a swinging pendulum
that touches the extremes
but never reaches equilibrium.
I want to lie down in the snow
and let it blissfully cover me,
like a lost, exhausted soldier.

Summer of 2020

Jane Newberry

changed our sensibilities.
I almost missed the elderflower –
those layers of creamy pollen
and heady scent like the
embrace of a lacey great aunt.

How those days morphed into
pale, dusky June nights
without our noticing and the
pendant moon kept watch.

Cycles of lettuce came and went;
at bends in the lane neighbours
swapped trivial moments and June
slid lazily on without the bunting
or the raffle.

Silage harvested – dry and perfect;
buses still rumbled up the hill
with anonymous passengers and
sweet pea scent mingled with yeast
in the kitchen

while in the silence of a
summer night we waited for
someone to
break the spell.

In Search of Motivation

Mercedes Lawry

I'm not sure what to do.
Hours are slippery.
Leaning to the left until my spine
cracks. Back to the window
scribbled with branches, I hope
for a bird. Is this doing? Active,
passive, death at the end of the line.
The same curtains, a blue-green
with sprightly trios of yellow daisies.
Hope between the seams.
Friday, clouds with a glove of blue.
The furnace kicks on and I think,
money. Fortress of books, rising.
God is on the shelf.
Moss in great clumps on the trees,
on the roof, perhaps on bones.
February stasis. In a basket, balls
of blue yarn gather dust, a dust
that sifts from the invisible to coat
everything in this room, gently, finally.
Later, a moon will rise.

Frankie - a meditation on loneliness

Chris McLaughlin

All that summer before I went to uni, I would see him on the old stone bridge white hair hidden under a blue beanie. He knew I was an avid red, so he often dispensed with formal greetings and called out fictional footy scores instead, “*And the score here at Goodison Park is Everton 2 Liverpool 1*”, delivered with the affectations of a seasoned pundit.

On one of our meetings on the bridge he asked me to enter a top-up into his new Nokia3210, I saw a phone number scrawled on the back of his wrinkled hand. He told me old age had turned the small numbers on the voucher into morse; a coded script he could no longer understand and yet here he was sending out this S.O.S for someone to talk to on the bridge. For someone who could have been his grandson to help him with this newfangled device. Before I left him I entered my number into his phone so that he'd have at least one contact saved in there.

Halfway through my first year of uni, I was surprised to receive a flurry of texts, that came like the sudden onset of rain on a summer's evening and dried up just as fast. They were old Nokia templates, preset in the phone;

Are you busy?

Please call.

Are you busy?

Please call.

Please call.

I sent the classic 'who dis' in reply and waited for an answer that never came. I racked my brain considering who it could be and kept coming back to Frankie on the old stone bridge.

In my mind's eye I see myself approaching him there and I go to open my mouth and speak to him of loneliness and quiet desperation; of old men who struggle to keep the pace with a world that keeps on spinning, but he puts his finger to his lips, cuts me off when I'm just beginning, “*This just in from Goodison, Everton are winning!*”

Doors within

Kim Whysall-Hammond

You tread on the tail of my eye
carving crosswise through the crowd
that flows into the airport
we greet with hugs, kiss cheeks
cherish our priceless opportunity
of a week together
after years apart

Later, rinsing sorrow away
we linger out
a hundred glasses of wine
and several of rum
the clarity of close friends
fills small talk with large import
under a lucid moon

And, long after we are drunk
we sleep
all heaven our blanket, earth our pillow

There are doors within that should not be opened
and open flowered meadows of joyous



Rome Comes Back to Life
Alice Florence

The Gift that will Keep On Giving

Oz Hardwick

Grief is in the post room, its corners drummed in and its side split, spilling accompanying instructions. As a wedding gift, it was a novel choice, but when it arrives thirteen years late there will be no room in the incredible shrinking house and everyone's tastes will have moved on. It'll have to assemble itself from what it remembers of diagrams and poor translations, and it'll have to fit in like it's always been there, loading the dishwasher, taking its turn on the school run, and hogging the remote for documentaries on Old Masters and suffering. But that's for the future. Now, it distils loneliness and filters it through stained lace from the dressing-up box; it shakes hands with passing postmen whose palms will sweat and tremble for the rest of their too-long lives; it thinks so far outside the box that it is observed as a crow or a crane in the ruins of a wave-racked village; and it is eyeing up the sweet spot in the bed, snug between two backs that curve apart like question marks afraid of answers. If there's one thing Grief has, it's time.

escapes my mother taught me

Christina Bagni

big girls don't scare so easy
but i am daily aware of my weakness
of the danger of self-confidence
in a weak female body.

i have to scream to be heard
but i don't feel like screaming.
it's easier to be silent
and let the ocean take you down
and live among the bottom feeders
and write your shitty memoirs in a starbucks 2000 miles from home
because you hate your home and everyone in it
and it's easier to take a vacation you can't afford
than be stuck in the zoo cage you can.

these are escapes my mother taught me.

Checking In

Diarmuid Cawley

You're driving in rural Wisconsin
needing an escape from single-minded

fields. I'm walking a dog in southern France,
our call clear-as-day in all this haze. Smoke

still rising from relationships, from islands
and places we love. Tell me your news, don't

hold back—circling the old wound, checking in.
Let's not leave it so long next time.

For sure you say.

An Evening at Sunset Senior Living Community

Kristen Chapman

When the phone rings, I almost knock over my dinner tray to get to it. It's a whole goddamned process - turn down jeopardy, don't burn my knees with microwaved chicken fettuccine, find the receiver, find my glasses if I can't.

"Hello?" I breathe into the phone. A noodle slips down my thigh, over my pantyhose.

"Grandma."

It's my granddaughter. The good one, the one I give two fucks about.

"Jessica," I smile. My teeth taste like estee lauder sculpting lip.

"How are you doing, grandma?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine, don't even worry about me. How are you? How's my little great-grandbaby?"

Alex Trebek is asking what point in orbit is the moon furthest from the earth. What is apogee, one of the contestants says before I can even guess. That's correct, Alex says.

"Do you have company?" Jessica sounds concerned.

"No, it's just jeopardy."

"Okay, because you know the rules. You're not supposed to have company."

Alex asks who wrote 'You Can't Go Home Again'. Someone buzzes in. Who is Thomas Wolfe.

"Jessica." I sigh. The younger generation is so goddamned compliant, until they're not. "I don't have company right now."

"Well, you shouldn't have company at all. You need to stay home. This thing could kill you, grandma."

The drugs in the 60s could've killed me. Or the unprotected sex. Or the liquor at Kappa Omicron fraternity house when I was in college. But I'm still here, dangling a phone cord around my finger, living endless days in the little condo I'd scraped together for at my son's insistence.

"I know it's dangerous," I tell Jessica. "Now tell me. How's that great-grandbaby of mine?"

"She's wonderful." Jessica sounds chirpier now. "Just starting to recognize letters. 'G' is her favorite."

"We did letters all the time with your father's playgroup. The kids loved it. We had all sorts of—"

"I get that, grandma. I really do. But I can't take her to playgroup. We're in lockdown." I mash my lips together. As if I didn't fucking know. As if every time I've tried to back

out of my driveway in my buick the guards didn't come running and ask where I'm going like it's a world war or something.

Jessica can leave, though. Jessica has a hell of a lot more freedom than I do.

"When are you going to come see your sweet old grandma?" I ask.

"Grandma..." her voice is short again. Snippy. Defensive. "We can't."

"Aw, come on. You can just stand outside."

Alex is asking for a seven-letter word for desperation. Misery, I think. But before I can count how many letters misery has, one of the contestants buzzes. What is despair, they say.

"I have to protect my family, grandma," Jessica says. "Look, Grandma, I have to go. I'll give baby a hug for you."

"Please do. And bring her to me when I can give her a kiss again."

"I will," Jessica says, and the line goes dead.

I settle into my recliner and twirl a fettuccine noodle around my fork. It's cold now, tasteless.

Alex asks for the flower known as the sword lily. A flower that resembles hope. Nobody buzzes in and the time beeps out. The answer is gladiolus, Alex says.



Cara na Mara

Aminah Hughes

A Window

Charlie Bowden

I gaze out into empty blue and wonder aloud,
is this what the world is meant to be?
A swindled shade of light, twisted by my dad's
double glazing, mocking the green ground before me?
Ground. Grounded. That's what I don't feel anymore.
I hop from the sill to a nearby hill, birds
shimmering around me, the happiest I've ever heard.
I do what I can to stay upright:
count sheep in my sleep before I shear them,
fill the void with deathly blank verse.
Plastic bags are filled up, thrown out. I feel bad.
The laughter is slipping through the cracks
but this window's all I have. I can close it, lock it,
surround it with electric fencing, but the wasps still come in.

When I stare out of a window all I see are little white lies.

The Trees of Spring

Declan Coles

Although the Spring has come,
Bursting in her vernal majesty,
The yew remains bare.
Surrounded by the blooming grove-
One of Rocco's pillars
A vestige of winter
The sorrow we must carry.

It is the plight of the liberated
To cast a pebble into the murky pond
And know it is not the mighty waves.

But who am I?
To declare myself
The mouthpiece of Luna
Or is it Artemus?
Or Catherine of Alexandria?
Or Chandra?
Or Elatha?

Those who claim to know, know nothing;
All we have is hope
To worship at the Ocean's grainy sands
To witness the firey red beams of Dawn

Let Suffering Be Your Master

Mary McCarthy

Accept, my friend,
Things you don't understand,
Why conversations of yesterday are done,
Why you must journey on.

Release the firm grip of old ways,
You are not a bullock in a crush.
Go easy, breathe,
Brave the next step.

Trees stand, grass grows,
Larks sing a new song
Of gladness. The beatings of your heart
Lift you on higher ground.

Hold firm as a diviner feels the pull of water,
A pulse of a new verse emerges,
Be led by the work
That flows through you.

Let your grief ease,
Transform its fears
Of more loss by a parallel story,
Stars in the vastness of the night sky.

Bedroom

Trelawney

Meeting the distance between
Just put a cup to your ear
Or slide under a postcard
Like when you were thirteen
Catching spiders
It takes courage

SUNBURN

Úna Nolan

Last Tuesday in the mid-May heat,
Curled in the garden where my cat used to
Stretch and strain and soak in sunbeams,

My skin turned red and radiator.
Each mirror I passed I blanched at the sight
Not recognising quite who that was

*She looked the same but different somehow
White spaghetti strap lines on her shoulders*

You would have told me to put on sun cream
Came easing down the decking steps with
Calm and smiles and brushed hair from my eyes

*You need to bathe in Factor 50, teasing- but helping me with my back, rubbing small circles
over my spine and kissing the mid-point between my shoulders, soft*

We would have fallen into an easy pile
Limb on limb on limb, groaning and grumbling when we had to separate occasionally for water,
food, bathroom

As the sun slipped away, you would have
pointed out each new freckle
(I would have loved you more with each one.)

But last Tuesday I got sunburned.
And I know the skin you knew will peel away over time little fraying strings and then big long
pieces

But for now, it stings.



Threat
Linda Robson

**BORIS THE BEAR, AND OTHER TRIALS OF LOVE
(for Anastasia)**

Helen Jenks

In our second decade, we begin to talk seriously
of the future, as if suddenly, overnight, it is no longer
cooly out of reach. Sitting on the canal, the sun

strikes your ashen hair, and you tell me you might
never marry, but you want three children
(two girls for sure, just like us, just like our sisters)

and that maybe your parents will leave New York,
but you couldn't, not yet, not ever. We wonder
if what gets us in the end will be cancer, like my

mother's, or dementia, like my grandmother's,
or if we'll pass peacefully next to each other
just like we planned when we were ten years old,

somewhere cushy, away from the world, in a box
or under a stone that blankets the edge of the sea.
Maybe you'll smother me, finally tiring of my voice

after all these years, and maybe I'll join you, and
we'll giggle like we've never left the comfort of
your birthday parties, the last ones up and whispering

all our plans into the sweet eyrie of the dark,
as if it was a witness hidden behind the pillows,
among the snores, above our heads. I would miss

your laughter, though, the ache of your presence
in my ribs, and I'd draw back, the silence confounding.
I promise you we'll move to Paris, and take a picture

of the spot where we sit, overlooking a sunlit city
and tired, happy eyes, where any dream spoken
aloud, here, in this place, in this moment,

becomes truth. On the way home, I pass tulips
and think of you.

I hope, dearly, that we're right.