

# Shame

In memory of Eileen Robins

Catching her breath as if it could escape her it should have been a reflex and yet there was nothing more certain to bring on the vertiginous foreboding of near death nothing surer than this tightening of the chest this feeling that your body was closing in on you and whatever it was that had defined you was about to go let down by the shell of flesh the lungs somehow failing to inflate constricted by the bones the tightening ribs and soon well maybe it would be a blessed release the end you have prayed for so long and never it came but now it feels like panic this halting arrest this gasping for survival the rhythm you do not want to let you go not yet

Like an alien thing hunched in her living room sucking in the vapour from the nebuliser while the steam fissured around the lines of her face she pressed the mask against her chin and cheeks feeling the air go through her again the air around wet and hissing with the noise from the cylinder the relief the relief.

It was done. She let the mask fall back with her hand from her face, her hand gone claw like with arthritis, watching it as it lay against the folds of her nightdress on her lap. She thought, this is not my hand, it's like some animal has been here. She rocked her arm and watched the hand move. There was no escaping it and she looked down with her eyes half closed, continuing to draw her breath carefully, catching her breath, recovering.

She had never wanted to live this long. She felt so tired, and often so bored, but some instinct drove her on, the will to be, feeding herself, relieving herself. She lifted her eyes from her hand and lap, looking across the room at the photographs ranged over the back of the desk. From here she could see no more than the shapes of the frames but she could picture well enough the images inside them, her daughters as girls and then again in age after age. There were her grandchildren and great grandchildren, the colours getting brighter with every generation, snatched moments from the lives that had flowed from her, going beyond her, the precious things. She had been so lucky. It was not that everything had turned out well. Her brother had killed himself in despair over a younger woman. She knew the failure of her own first marriage had scarred both her daughters, in itself and through the alcohol-fuelled misery which had followed. The damage had passed on to some of her grandchildren, her fault, her guilt. It did not show in those smiling faces. She knew in truth what she had done, but still all things considered they had come through, or at least enough for her to feel she had done her best.

Perhaps it was not good enough, but it was the past, not something real to her, not something she could dwell on now. What kind of people lived in the past? They fooled themselves. The real was this mask and struggle to breath, the equipment laid around her. The real had always been like this in one way or another, an imposition. She flicked up her hand and the mask fell from her lap to the floor. Now she would have to pick it up: someone else would have to pick it up.

She let it lie, pulling herself forward against the arms of the chair, feeling the strain in her legs as they took her weight. Everything was an effort, and she knew that. She wanted a drink, something harmless and milky, and so she reached for her Zimmer frame, moving her balance onto her forearms as she gripped the rubber handles on the top bars, easing herself up and forward, shuffling across the room into the kitchen area at the back of the terraced house, holding onto the frame as she reached into the opened fridge.

With her claw fingers pushed against the bottle she tipped the milk into a mug, spilling a little over the side so that when the mug moved on the microwave plate it left white rings of fluid. She wondered whether she should wipe it up, and sighed and closed the door, jabbing her knuckles against the pressure switches, bringing up the figures on the display, jabbing start. The machine hummed with motion and she watched the turntable go round, as entertaining as the television she would often say, weary with her voice as soon as the words had come out of her.

This was her life on her own, bequeathed to her by the death of her husband some twenty five years earlier, a third of a lifetime she had not wanted, not like this, feeling left behind and emptied, not knowing what else to do. She stood by the microwave hunched and sore, noticing that the milk was beginning to bubble around the rim of the cup, knowing she should press the cancel button before it billowed over the rim and she watched its little gush and flow, the seconds running out, the machine making noise at her, the window gone dark, waiting for her. She lowered her head, leaning forward against the edges of the worksurface, gathering her strength.

She looked around quickly as she heard the front door open. Her daughter, the one who lived next door, the one who carried with her the burden of her continuing life, was stepping through the doorway, looking across the room for her and her face changed as she saw the old woman, an old woman herself now, her daughter the old woman.

It was only half true. The family was gifted with good and enduring looks. She had enjoyed this herself and now it was all gone. The daughter was in her sixties but on a good day could have passed for ten years younger, perhaps even more. This was not a good day. She looked drawn and tired, her shoulders hunched and the mother thought, her posture was always bad

but it is surely getting worse. There was a tension about her, unsurprising perhaps since the poor thing bore the weight of her mother's discomfort, her bitter words and it was as though she was hunched in readiness for the onslaught. The older woman could not help herself. Thinking things over, or talking with her adult grandchildren she hated nothing as much as the trouble her failing state was causing her daughter, her one good daughter. So much for what she thought; when they were together it was like the milk in the cup, her self-pity and anger welling up to overwhelm any finer feeling and so she let the torrent of words spread into the air around her, like the steam from the nebuliser a pungent nothingness which surrounded them both. She hated herself for causing this much pain. Her daughter was crossing the small room towards her. She did not look well, the poor thing.

A poor life, but it would not be long now. The cancer was eating away at her guts. She hoped the pain would not be so bad, or at least that it would take over and kill her quickly. It was something to look forward to, that darkness, or the moment she faced her God. She had been raised a Catholic, in simple belief. She had always said she was a simple woman, and so she was, a thing of the flesh. So it was the failing of her flesh was bitter to her now, a gall in her mouth, the unstilled flapping of her tongue in its saliva. What did God know of this decay? She asked herself, what was he playing at, letting her go this way? She asked herself, why did he not let her go? She pushed herself back from the work surface, letting her weight come on to her legs again.

Julia pulled the door of her mother's house to a close, carefully, letting the latches fall into place without banging the door. She was carrying the pot she had wanted to fetch from the house, a small burden compared to the sting of her mother's abuse, however much she hoped she could shut that memory away with the closing of the front door. She had done what she could, wiping up the spilt milk, not rising to the old woman's taunts. Knowing she meant little by the things she said was not much comfort, but it was all she had. Their relationship had seldom been easy, and was fraught for Julia now by the awful consciousness that she had come to wish her mother dead. The old woman said she wished it too, but like the abuse she may not have meant it. Death would be a release for them both, which is not to say it would be the same release, and so Julia came back on herself, unhappy she could find herself thinking this way about her mother. She wanted to be a good daughter. She wanted to do her duty.

A few steps up the road and her own house embraced her, its warmth and the comfort of its familiarity, the place she had made for herself. Her younger son was by the wood stove, reading a magazine and sitting in the high backed chair which had come down from her grandmother. He looked up from his magazine, concerned.

“How was she?”

Julia put on her brave face. She felt like her voice was rattling around her mouth.

“A bit grim. You’d probably do best just to leave her for now.”

He had wanted to say goodbye. Julia had suggested she should test the old woman’s mood first. He nodded, accepting his mother’s words.

“It’s a shame. I know there’s nothing we can do.”

“Will you go straight home now?”

He stood up, looking away from her and out through the window to the street, perhaps looking at his car.

“I might stop by the sea for a while ... get some air on the beach.”

He looked back at her. It was her turn to nod.

“I envy you that.”

He stepped towards her, and put his hand on her shoulder.

“You look tired Mum. I think you should try to have a break from all this.”

She knew it. She agreed.

“It’s just so difficult to find the time.”

His hand dropped back to his side.

“I’ll say goodbye to John.”

He slipped through to the other room. She waited for him to come back, and tilted her face to receive his kiss. He paused before he went out.

“Look after yourself Mum.”

She did not react. She had never listened to advice. She did what she wanted. Perhaps that was why his father had left her; that, and her affair with John. It was easier for the children. They loved her regardless.

He had always been her most vulnerable child, clever and sensitive, sometimes neurotically oversensitive. She knew too that this made him in his grandmother’s eyes the least approachable (and least loveable) of her children, and that he knew it too, but this did not make the visible decay of his grandmother any less painful to him. Julia stood still while the car started, and watched it draw away.

She carried the pot through to the kitchen, and then returned through the front room to the study where she knew she would find John. He did not move much any more, not without help.

If he had been awake to say goodbye to her son he was already dozing again, sitting sideways to his desk, a half drunk glass of wine by the little pile of books on the desk. She wondered that he could sleep this way, his head unsupported and hanging down towards one shoulder,

the strain visible on the open side of his neck. It must have hurt. But his eyes were closed, the lids just reaching to the lower line of his lashes, relaxed and his breathing even, a small dribble slipping from one corner of his mouth. He had been a big man once, when first she knew him, but now seemed shrunken in the chair. He still had some dark hair, but it was like some mocking shadow of his youth, matted on his forehead, by his ears where it was turning white, mocking her because the rest of his face was so gaunt with age and the rigours of this final illness. Then there was the smell.

It assaulted her senses, filling her head. He looked fine. He was in the clothes she had put on him that morning (she refused to let him stay in his pyjamas), an open-collared shirt with a fine checked pattern, hanging loose around his thin neck, some old grey wool trousers closed round his waist with a belt. She had conceded the point on his slippers, telling herself it was normal enough to wear slippers around the house. It gave little away, and she wanted to think of him as he had been for her. She needed to be able to see that in him still. This was why the reek of his shit so assailed her. It was not just the thought of what she must do next. It was the relentless kick of the moment against the images she held to sustain her.

She reached down for his shoulder, squeezing gently on the shirt, the bone beneath to wake him. It was like there was nothing between the fabric and the bone, the cotton, some loose cool skin. He grunted and his head stirred, his eyelids trembling open, half open. His words were a mumble through the spittle.

“Uh, hello.”

It sounded like a question. She kept up the pressure on his shoulder.

“Come on, John. You have to get up.”

His eyes were fully open now, the lids still heavy as he tried to focus on her.

“Uh?” He hesitated. “Has it happened again?”

She nodded, carefully.

“You fell asleep.” As if that could explain the loss of control. She wanted to believe it. The sight of him was against her. She reached down under his arms, pulling him forward, upwards out of the chair.

“I can manage,” he was saying, and she ignored him, keeping up the pressure under his arms. She knew she could not take all of his weight, but she could guide him across the lobby into the bathroom. He struggled, leaning on her hands, the strain threading down her forearms. He had lost so much weight and still she could not carry him. She did not want to carry him. He had found his feet, and he began to shuffle uncomfortably, perhaps conscious for the first time of the matter around his groin. She moved herself to one side, shuffling with him, bearing him.

He was fully awake by the time they reached the bathroom, but blurry with the alcohol. She had given up trying to stop him. He did not have long enough left to worry about his drinking. Probably not. Nothing was certain, apart from the end of course. It might have been a month, or a year, or something else. The effects of the alcohol were like a further mockery, promising that all would be well in the morning. He swayed uncertain like a drunk man, and he was drunk, but he would have swayed anyway, his balance all but gone with his bowel control. He veered into the basin, steadying himself with a clutch on the side of the basin. She took his upper arm, saying hold still, and then she reached for the top of his trousers, the fastenings, feeling her stomach grow tense, knowing what she must do. He did not move to resist her, holding himself steady on the basin. Her fingers pushed around the button, the top of his fly zip, tugging it down and his trousers fell open, sagging vaguely away from him, the reek renewed.

She had put him in pads. The paper edges pushed out beyond the elastic of his underpants. The smell of it clawed at her nose, and then further, right up into her head, the sweetish reek of his shit and then some ammonia. She pulled down on his pants and the pad stayed in place, stuck up between his legs. He grunted, registering his discomfort for all his distraction, and his eyes caught hers briefly, the flickered reproach as she began to tug at the paper edge of the pad. It peeled then fell away to land on the bridge of his pants stretched between his calves. The excrement peeled with it, falling here and there like cobwebbed dust from his thighs, there, on the pad and the pants, the smell of it. She would have to put him in the bath, but wanted to clean the worst of him first; she did not want him sitting in his own shit while she tried to clean him.

She absorbed that reproach from his eyes. He meant only to register his discomfort. She understood that much. She had wet a hand towel so her own skin would be at some safe remove from his shit and with it she reached between his legs, her face lowered, feeling the tension in her nose and cheeks as she tried to will away the stench, her nausea, pushing as much of it as she could away from his skin and into the open pad between his ankles, then wiping at the legs, the thin hair and the paper-like skin. As she worked her nausea ebbed. It was almost done.

When she had removed the pad and the towel, bagged them for cleaning or disposal, she stood back from him to run the bath and for a moment looked at him. His pants and furled trousers were still around his ankles. He was standing steadily, his hands by his sides, looking back at her and waiting to be told what he should do next, his shirt tails hanging over his genitals like some vestige of dignity. The smirched cloth around his ankles denied his dignity, but it did not matter. She still saw the man she had loved, she had wanted to touch all over and

take into herself, like he was part of herself. Withered and defeated it seemed they had little time left. She wanted to have all she could of the time they had left. She did not need to say this. It went with the reproach in his eyes, the understanding between them. She saw it was a reproach to himself, his regret that they could have come to this mixed with the knowledge that in wanting to grow old together everyone came to this. Sometimes she wanted to cry but for the moment she had too much to do. She turned back to the bath taps, the steam rising from the water's fall to the pastel plastic of the bath.

He told his mother he was going to the sea to give himself some time. He did not want to go home, and he did not want to answer questions when he got home about where he had been. Still he found himself here on the line of rocks, his special line of rocks a backbone splitting the pebbles down to the sea. He had given himself the time so he could call on the woman he loved, because after the anxious afternoon with his mother he wanted the reassurance of being with this other woman he loved. He had tried to call her as he got into the car but her phone was switched off. He came down in the hope of a change, to her little house by the seafront. There was no answer from inside when he rang the doorbell. He tried to call her again. Still the phone was switched off. He repressed the surge of frustration and irritation. It was not her fault. It was the misery of their circumstances, or if he was more honest with himself, the price he paid for his adultery, snatching what moments he could with Sarah from the routines of his family life.

He could not go home now, not yet. He did not want to face them and he could hear the sea, catch the smack of the salt in the air. He walked down to the next break in the buildings, a passageway through to the beach immediately beyond and so he had come to the line of the rocks. It was warm and bright, the day, but there were few people around now. The line of rocks pushed up from the hide-like surface of the pebble beach, a bony finger crossing its face reaching into the hushing of the waves on the shore. He moved down to be beside the rocks, his favourite shaped into a ledge where it was comfortable to sit, drawing breath.

When he was a boy, he remembered sitting on a beach like this, on his own as he often had been, dreaming of a future adult life shaped around the warmth he felt at that moment, the sense of harmony with the motion of the sea and the calm of the still and reddening sky. He felt special in those days, different from the other boys at school who seemed mostly interested in sport or having fun. He did these things, but he was more serious too, thinking it mattered how the world was, how you placed yourself in its landscapes and then what you did with your life. He was reading Wordsworth at the time, a mark of his seriousness.

Sitting on these rocks he knew he had not lost that sense of himself. It was crusted over by all that had happened since, but in these moments he could find it again, untouched in itself, and he knew himself as the same boy who had sat on the beach, wondering how he would be in the future. Now the future was not a place of promise but only of decay, and he imagined that even then this sense of himself as a boy would be with him still, the common sadness of decay.

Perhaps it was a quiet desperation at this prospect that had driven him first to Sarah, or perhaps it was ordinary lust. He could not be sure. Certainly they had been drawn together at first by lust. She was a little older than him. He thought she was beautiful, animated, something stirring him from the half sleep that was his middle aged life. He was compelled by her, by what he saw as the radiance around her, and could not help himself. She was divorced and had been for years. He did not pretend he was free, and at first they had skirted each other, becoming friends, telling themselves they could be no more than friends. If they had been ruled by their heads they would have settled for this friendship, taking what they could from it, but it was not what they wanted, not from the beginning.

The first night he went back to her flat, before they had ever kissed, she told him that five years earlier she had been diagnosed with breast cancer. The doctors had caught it early and removed her right breast. She was now, or for the moment, free from the disease, and in the intervening years had been through several treatments to reconstruct the breast. She told him she had been urged to put on weight, so they could cut fat from her stomach and use it to plump out the new breast. She was a small woman with large breasts, and she said she had been proud of them, sometimes feeling that the cancer was like a judgement on her for her vanity. He told her that this was no way to talk. In the public spaces where they met he would never have guessed at her mastectomy. Recently, she said, they had operated again to improve the shape. It had meant more cutting into her, but it would be worth it..

That night he could not help himself. He had gone back to her flat for coffee and he had thought she must expect him to kiss her. He thought, why is she telling me all this about her body if she does not expect me to see it? A little drunk, it had been enough to compel him, and so he had asked her to kiss him and she had refused, telling him what he knew, that he was married.

It did not matter. It did not hold them back. It was what they both wanted. And the time came round, when they had kissed and touched each other enough, when they were sitting on the sofa in her living room where there seemed no further reason for restraint. There would always be a nervousness at such a moment, and he felt her tension.

He had pulled her T shirt over her breasts, over her head. When her face emerged she was biting her lip, looking hard into his eyes, watching his reaction. He glanced down at her shoulder, further, down the line of her bra strap and then to the bra itself, pressing against the flesh. From the press of the elastic on her right breast the bruising streaked out, and he lifted his fingers, laid them gently against the marks.

“It’s a good job,” he was saying. “He’s done a good job. From here you couldn’t tell the difference, once the bruising goes down ... and you really can’t feel anything at all in it?”

She shook her head, still biting the lip. It was like the years had dropped from her, and she was a young girl lost and anxious. He eased the bra straps over her shoulder, one after the other, and her breasts fell loose in front of him. He looked from her young girl’s eyes to the reconstructed breast, moving his hand over it, letting his fingers pause on the scarred lines, tentative as if he might break open the wounds, and then he let his hand slip across to the other breast. The effect was palpable, this flesh alive as he pushed his thumb over the one erect nipple, and she sighed with desire, and he squeezed the nipple and pressed his palm into her breast as her body tensed with that desire, letting his other hand pull her towards him, taking her towards him. He could not help himself. They made love with a passion he had come to think was beyond him, unsure of her body but able to move as she wanted, the scarred breast and stomach, the lines where the skin was loosening around her neck, all this no more than part of the flesh, the flesh he wanted to be like his own, the dream of one body. This togetherness changed his feelings about her.

It was something he had never imagined as a boy, making love in middle age. Why would you imagine it? And yet it had come to mean more to him than anything he had felt in his youth. He had seen pictures of her in her twenties, when her good looks were startling, when men had fallen over themselves for her. She had aged but not lost that allure, even in her cut body, and still he understood in his feelings for her there was a dream of the past, how it would have been had he known her then. He wished his past could have been otherwise, that somehow he could have spent that time with her, but then he wondered if she would have looked twice at him. It did not matter, he told himself. At least she was his now.

She was not home. It did not matter. As he sat on the beach he was disappointed, but he would see her again, perhaps tomorrow. He looked down the finger of rocks to the water, the waves curling themselves up over the fringe of pebbles, seething back. To his right there was a marker pole rising from the full tide. A cormorant had settled on it, and was watching the sea, its black body folded to a thinness like the pole, not moving while it watched for food. He knew it was a cormorant because his wife had taught him to recognise them, on holiday and years ago, before the children, when he had felt he was in love with her.

He remembered watching his youngest son Patrick, further up the shore towards the town, running along the edges of the water, throwing stones at the sea. He hardly looked back at his father while he stooped and often in one movement sent a stone skimming into the flashing waves, he was so intent on whatever was going on between his hands and brain. They had agreed to come and watch the sunset together. It was a warm evening, his boy wearing shorts and a loose T shirt. His arms and legs were like pallid sticks coming out of the baggy openings of his clothes, and he ran stumbling along the line of the shore, the stones giving treacherously beneath the fall of his sandals, while he himself had settled down into a ridge before the slope to the sea, pushing the pebbles into a hollow around his back and buttocks, leaning back and happy just to watch Patrick play.

Perhaps he grew bored with the game. He had stopped by a breakwater, and was looking out to sea. In the far distance a tanker made its way motionless down the Channel, but the warm light was hazy and there was little else to see. He could have been thinking of anything. He turned back to his father, a smile splitting his lips, and began to clamber up the sliding stones towards him, pushing his knees down defiantly with each step, as if challenging the stones to move further than they would, his arms working up and down with the force of his legs, grunting a little. He stopped breathless in front of his father.

Unlike his other children, Patrick was the image of him. Nine years old now he was tall already for his age, and most of all he had his father's eyes, their shine in this settling light, shining with his happy and trusting smile.

"I made one bounce four times," he said. "That's a fourer."

"I suppose it would be."

He had taken him in his arms, settling him into his lap so they were both sitting facing the sea. He could not remember sitting with his own father like this, but supposed he must have done. He had seen photographs of them out together, sitting on his father's shoulders, or with his brothers on rocks on some West Country beach. Perhaps his father would have felt the same, holding this other being, its little bones, the smell of his hair, sensing his trust in him.

He would grow to be like his father, flesh of my flesh.

On another beach, sitting alone he bowed his head.