

THE HURT WORLD

SHORT STORIES OF
THE TROUBLES

Edited by
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THE WAY-PAVER

ANNE DEVLIN

I rang my sister on the morning the baby was due and said:
'How are you feeling?'
'Bored.' She said.

I wondered then if I should tell her.

My sister has the habit of sadness. She was the second-born. The first-born child was me. My mother said the births were difficult – my third sister was left too long in the birth channel and suffered... they didn't have the equipment, they locked the forceps in a cupboard and couldn't find the key... was kept too long – that's when the brain damage occurred.

We were driving to the hospital, between the prison and the hospital, when I said: 'I must get some flowers.'

'Try Kennedy's at Carlisle Circus,' my mother said. 'We get all our wreaths from there.'

'I don't think that's quite the right place, is it?'

'It's still a florist.'

I tiptoed through the lily wreaths and told the girl I was looking for a spray for my sister.

'She's just had a baby', but I stood looking round.

'Why didn't you tell Maeve she was one of twins and the other was born dead?'

Eight months in the womb and the other dead. My sister is bitter about that sharing.

'It's none of her business. And it's certainly none of yours.'

My mother is secretive about her births – she has not prepared us.

'But you told Michael McMullen.'

'I told him when I thought they were going to get married.'

'She found out from him! Before he left her.'

'You're not suggesting –'

'No. I'm not.'

'Christine – that's a – stop!'

Red lights don't seem to signal stop.

'If you don't drive more carefully, I'm getting out to walk.'

At the hospital my sister was weeping. Her face flushed and hot. I pulled the curtains quickly round her bed, shutting out the other women in the ward – not their first time – who stared without emotion.

'I'm sorry we're late.'

'I thought no one was coming.'

'We stopped to get some flowers.'

'The baby's been awake all night. Every hour I've fed her.'

'Isn't that too much?' my mother said. 'Why don't you give her a bottle? I never breast-fed any of you.'

I wish she wasn't so triumphant about it.

'It's all right, Maeve,' I told my sister. 'I was just the same.'

'Eamonn's mother was here. She doesn't like the baby's name. She thinks we should have called her after Eamonn's wee sister. She just kept saying: "My Mairead's come back."'

'I wish that woman wouldn't say those things. You can't call the living after the dead; your granny always told me that.'

Eamonn's sister was killed when she was four. The dead child calls the living after it.

'You called the boys after Grandpa and Uncle Pat.'

They died in '46, and after that, in '47, my mother married my father.

'That's different. They weren't killed in an explosion.'

She still talks about that summer, at Malahide, away from the war; when Grandpa walked her up and down the shore collecting shells – his youngest and his favourite daughter. And Uncle Pat, her eldest brother, used to walk her home from dances. Many of them, her partners, she'd leave at the Scouts' Hall door: 'My brother's waiting.' He'd walk her home from dances.

'What did Uncle Pat die of?' my sister asked.

'Tuberculosis.'

'And Grandpa?'

'A heart attack.'

'I never knew that.' More secrets. She puts on weight when she thinks about it. No one ever made it up to her.

'We went on holiday in August – there were German officers at that hotel . . .' My father never believed her. ' . . . Ireland was neutral.' She insisted. 'They were both dead by Christmas.'

'Can I look at the baby?'

It was the sister from Waterford who got me through it.

'Use your pain,' she said.

'Push if you want this baby, you have to push it out away from you.'

That voice made me angry.

'You're four centimetres dilated,' they told me half an hour before.

'Let go! Let go of it!'

I remember the stillness of the room in between the calls to push – they thought I'd gone to sleep – but it was only my habit of breathing with my eyes closed.

'Ah, I don't think this is going to work,' I said when they tried to get me to breathe again.

'It's worked for thousands of years,' Sister Paul, a West Indian nurse, said.

My favourite brother is called Paul, so I grabbed her hand for comfort.

'Remember your breathing!'

'I can't do it! I can't do it!'

That's when they brought in the sister from Waterford.

'Now listen,' she said, using my Christian name, 'remember you are an Irishwoman.' I hated her for that. The person I hated most of all was Mother – who was not even there. She had not prepared me. And Frank was helpless and beside himself. Earlier, Dr Hussain, the registrar, said: 'I think I should break your waters now.' I was alone in the room with them and the pains were coming so fast I said: 'Yes. Help me!'

That seemed the worst time of all, because I wasn't expecting it; afterwards when they went out I cried. Frank had gone to phone my mother – when he came back he didn't know anything had happened. I felt so betrayed; he promised he would be with me. I knew then that I was on my own. I thought of my ex-husband and Frank's wife – about whom I had never the slightest remorse: if I have committed any sins I am paying for them now. And God! Can this get any worse? The nurse from Waterford held my hand again and said: 'Now push! Use your pain.'

Another voice, a small nurse, English, I think, said: 'The baby's heart is tired.'

The red pulse on the monitor dropped.

'Her pelvis is so strong.'

'I can see the head,' Dr Hussain said.

'Push!'

'I am pushing.'

'Shush. Shush. There's no need to –'

I was yelling.

'Good girl, now use your pain.'

Again.

'Push harder.'

'Will you let me cut you?'

'The baby's heart is weakening.'

'Push harder.'

(They tried to stop me shouting, but I had to.)

'Yes. Please.'

Each time I pushed the head appeared; each time I stopped the head withdrew. Immediately they swung my legs up into a strap, and placed Frank at the other end.

'Stand there now, and hold her hand.'

'The head's out!'

I cried out in shock. The head's free! And the long seal's back dived after it. Was there so much after the head? All that inside me? A genie uncorked from a bottle. The room was quiet, the baby quiet, only I was wailing. A woman's voice, I can't remember who, said: 'It's a boy.' I knew it would be. And Frank took up the chorus in awe and whispered in my ear: 'Oh love, it's a lovely little boy.'

Frank says, when it was first born, the child blinked, looked again, blinked, looked again, blinked and then stared. I remember only, they held him close to my face, he was folded in a blanket, like a letter peeping out of an envelope.

'He doesn't look very happy to see us!'

Worse. He didn't even look surprised.

And Sister Paul said: 'You've been here before, my lad.'

Once cutting, they pulled the head away from my body, with a stroke they held this head up with its long slippery tail. This seal, is my – son. These are the executioners.

‘I don’t remember any of that,’ Maeve said at the hospital. ‘When the doctor said: “It’s a girl”, I said: “How do you know?” And then I looked and he was holding her.’

‘Everybody’s different,’ my mother said uneasily.

‘I’m glad you told me it was going to be awful, though.’

‘When did she tell you that?’

‘When she phoned up. She said I’d feel like the survivor of a nuclear attack.’

‘That’s an awful thing to say!’ My mother was livid. ‘Why did you say that?’

‘Because it’s the most shocking thing that ever happened to me.’

Heart pain. Head pain. And after all these years – this: I went into hospital a proud, ambitious, talented professional, and I came out a snivelling schoolgirl, a crushed face in the mirror, a moveable feast with leaking breasts, I felt suicidal at every suck. I didn’t even like cats before. I was eight and a half stone when I found out I was pregnant; when I got past eleven I stopped counting. Angry? I am raging. It breaks out in gusts and I have to be restrained.

Yesterday, Oona and I took the baby for a walk. We could see the post van coming for miles. We pushed the pram into the hedgerow to let it pass; and caught up again at the next house along the road. He passed us and we passed him again and again during the walk, until, finally, we caught up with him when he stopped at the crossroads postbox.

‘Good morning.’ We smiled.

‘It’s well for the women,’ he said, getting back into his

van and moving on to the next house.

Angry? I opened my mouth and shouted down the lane: ‘Then let men have babies!’

Oona, the third-born, looked nervous, she’s very wise in her way: ‘Oh don’t, Christine! Mr Delaney’s a friend of my daddy’s.’

A nurse came and pulled the screens back.

‘These flowers have just arrived for you. How’s Maeve today?’ She placed them on the bed. They were delicate, not brooding like the flowers I’d brought.

‘She’s nice,’ Maeve told my mother. ‘It’s the night nurse I don’t like.’

‘They’re from my sister,’ my mother said, touching the corner of her glasses as she reads the card. Touching the corner of her pride.

‘No cards from his side?’

‘Mother!’

Nobody is good enough.

‘I couldn’t help noticing.’

She insists that she married down; my sister did as well. She scrutinises my brothers’ friends, delights in Paul’s promiscuity and in Pat’s timidity. Oona, the third-born, moves heavily around my great-grandmother’s mahogany with a duster and the noise of the TV in her head. ‘Oona will always be with us,’ Mother says.

No one is good enough. I had to run away.

‘Can you bring me a vase?’ The nurse didn’t hear.

‘I must get water for these –’

‘Mummy, leave them. The nurse will do it later.’

‘The ward’s too hot to leave them. I’ll just go and get a vase from the kitchen.’

'Let her go. She likes hospitals. She knows what to do,' I said.

My sister and I have not been friends. The distance between us is too great to cross. Maeve once described it as not dislike exactly, more indifference. Only this confraternity of motherhood keeps us talking.

'How's England?' she says.

'I like it more and more.'

'Mammy says you have a lovely house.'

'We spent some time doing it up.'

'She seemed to enjoy herself that time she was over with you.'

'She was very good. I couldn't have managed without her.'

'Though she said the neighbourhood made her nervous.'

'We live in a red-light district.'

'Oh.'

'It was the only place we could afford to buy a house that size.'

'You know she lights a candle every night to Saint Martin' – hopeless cases? Or is that Saint Jude? – 'that you and Frank will get married.'

When the baby was ten days old, my mother answered the door.

'There's a lady in a sari and a boy. They want to come in,' she said.

'It's my neighbour.' Asha and Sultan; she has never called on me before. Asha looked into the cot and spoke in Urdu to her son.

'How big is it?' the boy translated.

'He's eight pounds,' I said.

'Would you like a drink?' my mother asked.

'A cup of tea or a glass of orange juice,' I explained.

'No thank you. I too fat. Too much sugar.'

'My mother has diabetes,' Sultan says.

'How many children have you?' my mother asked.

'Eight. How many you?'

'Five.'

I made friends with them when we arrived – Sultan and his sister Tswera were playing at the gate.

I said: 'Hello. I'm Christine and this is Frank.'

'Have you any children?' Tswera asked.

'I have a child in here,' I said, pointing. I was five months pregnant. They fled indoors laughing.

'For baby,' Asha said.

Sultan handed over a gift-wrapped parcel and a card. They had printed the names of all the children.

'Thank you. It's very kind.'

'She wouldn't have visited you, if you'd had a girl,' Maeve said when I told her.

Perhaps. At Ramadan, they sent us in a feast of chicken, rice, chapattis and pakhora. At Christmas we return the gifts. We don't know them any better than we did at the beginning. Asha makes my son laugh; when she sees him she always asks the same question: 'Baby all right? You all right?' She does not ask about Frank. And I have never seen her husband. Occasionally a ball comes over the fence or food is offered. We carefully wash and return all her dishes. She speaks in Urdu to her children. She comes from northern Pakistan and she says abruptly 'Goodbye' at the end of a conversation. She goes along the hall and disappears indoors for another six months. She has eight births to consider and I have one. This is not her country, either. My mother picks up the gift she has left: a white woollen jacket and pants. 'It's expensive,' my

mother says, surprised – the neighbourhood we live in is rather poor. The council owns the house next door.

‘When are you going back?’ Maeve asks, as my mother comes along the ward with two vases of water.

‘Not for another week.’

‘Where’s the baby?’

‘Oona’s looking after him.’

The third-born. The one and the locked door. My father kicking the door, the cupboard door, throwing the whole weight of his body against it, he told me – swearing, punching, the dull metallic cupboard banged like a drum against the wall. ‘Open the fucking door!’ Oona. That’s when the brain damage occurred.

‘Oona loves him. She watches all his little ways and tells us everything he does,’ my mother says, arranging her sister’s flowers.

‘She’s going to look after the baby when I go back to university. I didn’t ask her to. She offered.’

‘Yes, she told me.’

‘You’ve got an au pair?’

Renate. ‘Yes.’

At two and a half months I unhooked him from the nipple, gave him a bottle and handed him over to Renate. ‘I have to work!’ Occasionally I pass them in the hall or on the stairs – like two playmates, both new to this house; he’s beaming, she talks to him in German – he’s become ‘*mein Schatz*’ – while I watch and hope he’ll remember something of me at the end of the day. And think of my own mother picking her way through her children’s lives with her lighted candles and her prayers.

‘Would you ever have another?’ Maeve says.

‘Another what?’

‘Another baby.’

The prostitutes stand on the corners of the streets on the road

to the maternity hospital, shivering in the sunlight in twos and threes. A few hundred yards away a group of Asian men are waiting outside the ante-natal clinic. They do not look at the prostitutes. They do not see them. The waiting room is full as Frank and I enter.

‘Number twenty-two next!’

‘Where’s your co-operation card?’

‘I’m post-natal.’

‘Oh! You’ve had it,’ the woman said. ‘I still need a urine sample.’

I was peeing into the neck of a small bottle when she opened the hatch above me and called out: ‘Are you Irish?’

‘Yes.’ I handed her the bottle.

‘I’m from Tyrone myself.’

‘I’m from County Down.’

‘You had a difficult time?’

‘Yes.’

‘A boy, too?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, the boys are always the worst. They’ve bigger heads than girls. Next time it will be easier. He stretched you, you see.’

‘I’m not going to have another one.’

‘Ah, go on. They all say that. You’ll be back in two years from now. It’s much easier. The first one always paves the way.’

I went in to see the consultant and had a coil fitted.

The nurse came back: ‘Excuse me – but you’ll have to go now. Visiting’s over.’

My mother looked around the ward to protest.

‘Only fathers can stay,’ the nurse said.

‘Where is Eamonn?’ my mother asked.

‘He has an exam today,’ Maeve said. ‘Here – did I show you

the photos? The baby ten minutes old. I bought Eamonn a camera for Christmas so he could take pictures of the birth, but we haven't got any – he fainted.'

When I looked up the three of us were laughing.

The woman next door weaves the names of her children on antimacassars in Urdu: my mother does not understand the country I have chosen.

'We thought you'd come home and have your baby here,' she says as we leave the hospital. I decided then that I should tell her.

'Mammy, Frank's just lost his job.'

'When?'

'Three weeks ago.'

'Why didn't you say so before?'

'Because I was hoping it wouldn't come to this.'

'But he seems so well set up,' my mother says. 'I don't understand this.'

'The grant to his department has been cut. He's the newest member of the staff so he's got to go.'

'Is his the only job that's been affected?'

'Yes. I think so.'

'You don't think he's been victimised because of us?'

'Because of us?'

'Your daddy's an ex-internee.'

'Mammy, that was in 1943.'

'Yes, but in '51 –'

In '51... they came back.

'That time I went to visit you when the baby was born, and I didn't have any identification, I forgot the family allowance book and your daddy had to send it on.'

'I remember.'

'Well, I told the plain-clothes policeman when I got off the boat that Frank was coming to meet me. And he asked who Frank was. All I could say was he's my – he's my – I couldn't find the right description and that made them suspicious. They weren't going to let me go until I said: "Frank's a professor of poetry." I think I even gave them his work address. Your daddy said I shouldn't have told them, they'd put Frank's name on the computer.'

'For what? Because he lives with an Irishwoman!'

'But your daddy said –'

My father joined the IRA when he was fourteen, was interned at seventeen, released at twenty-one and met my mother at a swimming gala in 1947. He stopped seeing the republicans after that. They lived above a doctor's surgery in two rooms for a while and then Grandma took them back to live with her – when Mother's elder sisters' opposition died down, or was too far away to matter. Aunt Eileen had gone to South Africa and Auntie Mamie to the London Civil Service. In 1951, when the King and Queen were visiting Belfast, they came back for him again.

'He's on night work,' my mother said – 'he's not involved.' I go back to that moment many times in my dreams, in the womb and on the stairs my mother stood, two hearts waiting, unable to move up or down to answer the pounding fists of the police on the door. Or was that sound her heart-beat and mine, in that safe dark place next to her breast? He was on night shift, so they went to his work looking for him. She did not see him for a week after that until the royal family were safely back in London, and they released him. My father lost his job.

'I'm innocent,' he told his employers. 'My wife's expecting our first child.'

I was born then. I can hear that pounding yet.

'That was held against your father all his life. Only Catholics would employ him,' she says on the way back in the car.

'England is different,' I insist.

'Not at all. Everywhere's the same. Sure my sister Mamie was worried when I married your father that it would block her promotion in the London Civil Service.'

'And did it?'

'No. I don't think so. She did very well. But things have changed for us in England since the Troubles.'

I knew she would say all this. Bring out the old stories, the old suspicions. That's why I wouldn't tell her.

'The new job didn't have tenure. The grant was cut. That's all. It's happening all over. There is no financial security any more.'

'What will you do?'

'Sell the house, send Renate back to Germany, go and live in a council house somewhere... how should I know!'

'Maybe something will turn up,' my mother says. 'It always does - and then you won't have to sell your lovely house.'

Habitat curtains and cork tiled floors.

'Mammy, Frank pays for everything. I have no money at all.'

'But you work!'

'Aye. The odd poetry programme on Radio 3 isn't going to pay the mortgage.'

'Well, I think it's time you gave up that writing and got yourself a proper job. You've a family to think about now, you've got to give your children some dignity.'

'I'm a poet. I don't want a proper job. Oh, I could work as a shop assistant, but I had rather hoped to use all my intelligence.'

'You could teach somewhere. You've got an English degree.'
I was waiting for this.

When my mother's eldest sister Mamie died in London, I was twelve, the money stopped coming to pay for Granny's big house. Aunt Eileen came back from South Africa to bury Mamie and bought her mother a two-bedroomed house in a quiet non-Catholic part of the city, two buses far for us to visit. We moved to a new housing estate on the lower slopes of the Black Mountain, Belfast West. Aunt Eileen gave us plenty of warning of her intention: she said for years we were too much trouble for her mother. My mother remembers it all. It was the first time we'd had to live on my father's income. The boys were born there, my mother had to give up her job, besides there was a rent to pay. For the first time we had to live on Father's income and of course we didn't. My mother remembers it all. It was three miles to the nearest bus. It took five years before the city boundary was extended - before a red bus passed our front door. My mother didn't like the housing estate. My father promised he'd look around for something better. She wanted a nice house on the lough. My mother remembers it all. She pinned her hopes on her first-born finishing school and getting a proper job, so they could buy a house at the sea. I couldn't take the responsibility of it. After six years I ran away to university - England - and I never came back. Me. The first-born. The way-paver. The one who ran. I married a man who was careful with money, a teacher, with a house of his own. I was so desperate to marry that man. I wrote and told them I was getting married and could they lend me two hundred pounds to pay for the wedding. I kept him away from my family until it was too late. I was so desperate. And I was successful. They found the money. We were married in England: only my father and mother came. They got off the plane at Heathrow

on the day before the wedding and left by the following day's flight. I remember how they hurried away at the airport.

I never took him back to see the house, on the side of the Black Mountain, with the battered front door – my brothers kicked it when they wanted in – the brunt of so many small tantrums. Andersonstown, my mother lived there for eighteen years. I put the Irish Sea between me and that memory. And I wanted so much to be a poet. Except once when Maeve was getting married, seven years after my own, we went back for the wedding. And he saw it all. The house, the battered door and torn garden. The estate graffiti, the flags and emblems of resistance. The wedding was massive. My mother saved her family allowance for years, for the peach two-piece she wore, the orchids, and the singer at the Mass; the two hundred sit-down in a local hotel. I knew it was going to be like that. My husband said: 'Your father doesn't spend his money on the house, does he?' He'd expected so much more. I had not prepared him. When we went back to England, I gave up my job; I'd been threatening to for years. I want to be a poet, I said. I invited him to abandon me. Which is strange, when I was once so desperate to marry that man. Desperation runs in generations in my family.

I never wanted to marry Frank. He was my lover. I wanted to live with him sometimes and then I found I was pregnant and everything changed. Frank was a professor of literature and the editor of a poetry review. I walked into his office, when he'd read some poems I sent him, and he'd asked to see me. I walked into his office and I thought: No, I am not going to fall in love with this man. Frank's wife said, when he left her, I'd hardly made a disinterested choice of lover, a professor and the editor of a review. He published my poems. The accusation stuck. But

I didn't care. He changed jobs when I was five months on, to get away from the gossip. We moved to another part of the country. And he gave up the review. I didn't expect or hope anything would last. We always seemed to be just minutes ahead of destruction before the baby was born. But I went on writing and then everything changed. When he came home late that Friday night three weeks ago and told me he'd lost his job, I knew when he got out of the car in the rain, two hours late for supper.

I once asked Asha where her husband was; she had a year-old child on her knee. He goes out, she told me, every morning early, he takes his bicycle and he comes back after dark. 'What work does he do?' I asked.

'No work,' she said. 'He no work.'

The journey from the hospital in Belfast takes about an hour along the coast. The road runs past the cottage a little onto pebble, then grass, then rock; below, the waves of the Irish Sea wash the ridge of the peninsula – the first vanguard of the land into the sea. On this unofficial headland the house stands.

'You can see Scotland on a clear day and just over there the Isle of Man,' the estate agent told my father three years ago when they retired to the cottage on the point. He kept his promise. My sister Oona is waiting at the door with my son in her arms when we drive up. They are watching the gulls. He cries out when he sees me. His new voice catches me unawares.

'That's a strange sound.'

'He thinks he's a gull,' Oona said.

My mother looks depressed by this sudden insecurity. I didn't tell her about the tax assessments for more than the price of our house; or the appeal we won in the spring; or the burglary – not surprising in our neighbourhood... always minutes ahead of

destruction . . . I didn't tell her . . . England is the country I have chosen for my son – and like Asha and Sultan, I need to believe in it.

Then I say: 'I'm thinking of getting married – when Frank's divorce comes through.'

She looks out across the water.

'I like Frank,' she says.

Fifteen years ago I put more than the Irish Sea between myself and my family.

Further up the estuary on the other side of the peninsula is a seal colony. Once in a while one or two swim out and make for the open sea; we watch for these from the rocks in front of the cottage.

'They look so human,' my mother says, as a head breaks the water, paving the way. We concentrate on that stray seal.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

LINDA ANDERSON was born in Belfast and educated at Queen's University. An award-winning short story writer, she has written two novels, *To Stay Alive* (1984) and *Cuckoo* (1986). She is currently teaching at the University of Lancaster.

FIONA BARR was born in Derry. She has had a large number of stories and articles published and broadcast, and has worked as a television critic for the *Irish News*. 'The Wall-reader' won the 1979 Maxwell House Women Writers' Competition.

MARY BECKETT was born in Belfast and taught in Ardoyne for many years. Her stories first appeared in *The Bell*, the *Irish Press*'s 'New Irish Writing', and *Threshold*, and were broadcast by BBC radio. 'The Master and the Bombs' dates from 1963 and appears in her fine collection of 1980, *A Belfast Woman*, published by Poolbeg Press. More recently she produced an acclaimed novel about the North, *Give Them Stones* (1987).

SHANE CONNAUGHTON was born in Cavan and raised in a police station on the border with Fermanagh, where his father was a sergeant. His first collection, *A Border Station* (1989), draws upon these childhood experiences to powerful effect. A highly regarded screenwriter, his credits include the Oscar-winning film, *My Left Foot*.

ANNE DEVLIN was born and brought up in Belfast. A distinguished playwright and screenwriter – her plays include *The Long March* (1984), *Ourselves Alone* (1985), and *After Easter* (1994) – she was awarded the 1984 Samuel Beckett Award for Television Drama and in 1985 the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize. 'Naming the Names' was memorably adapted for BBC television and appeared in her short story collection, *The Way-paver* (1986).

MAURICE LEITCH was born in County Antrim and educated in Belfast. After some years as a primary school teacher, he became a BBC radio producer. His novels include *Liberty Lad* (1965), *Poor Lazarus* (1969), which won the *Guardian* Fiction Prize, *Silver's City* (1981), which was awarded the Whitbread Novel Award, and *Gilchrist* (1994). 'Green Roads' is a story taken from *The Hands of Cheryl Boyd* (1989).