

Afterburn
Seamus Scanlon

'And that auld triangle went jingle-jangle
All along the banks of the Royal Canal'
Brendan Behan

In Galway City on a warm August night my mother looks across the lake at house lights reflected off the black still water.

- Those lights are beautiful.
- Yes Ma.
- Isn't America beautiful at night?
- Yes Ma.
- I was beautiful once and Brendan Behan asked me out.
- I know Ma.
- Brendan Behan asked me out but he drank too much.
- I know Ma.
- Brendan Behan wrote the *Auld Triangle*.
- I know but you preferred Da though in the end.
- Da was a great worker.

She sits at the table and rearranges the cutlery. She folds the serviette and uses it to wipe imaginary dust from the table top. She rises to tidy the table as she does every night for the last year. I turn the radio on and she sits at the table and eats her supper. At times I have to intervene to make sure she finishes her tea before it goes cold. She forgets everything.

She forgets she was married for forty years.
She forgets the house where she lives.
She forgets Aran and being pitched in a Curragh by choppy seas.
She forgets Renbrack and Meelick and Callow Lake.
She forgets Winnie Battle dying.
She forgets Callow School and walking barefoot on summer days.
She forgets pulling a boiling pot of water on herself.
She forgets the scars that puckered and deformed the skin of her back and stomach.
She forgets working on open TB wards in Dublin.
She forgets cycling as the wind from the Atlantic blew cold hard rain into her face.
She forgets her grandchildren, Emma, Marie, Tom and Eve.
She forgets her sister Bernie who died.
She forgets all her brothers and sisters.
She forgets my name-her firstborn and favorite

She forgets everything, except Brendan Behan.

When I bring her upstairs to bed I put the radio on and leave a light in the bathroom for when she wakes in the night. I listen at the bottom of the stairs to the low hum of the radio and her garbled hieroglyph of prayers before she sleeps.

Sometimes she startles awake and calls out to me and I go and sit with her for a while. Sometimes she cries out and I do not go to her because I am exhausted from watching over her.

When the disease started first she would say - I am tired I can't think - to deflect attention from her memory deficits and mental stumbling. I noticed slight changes in her memory and reasoning many years before but these were minor and transient and she was able to function in the world without anyone noticing. I noticed though - how she wrote messages to herself, how she ended phone conversations quickly in case they strayed into any territory where the fault lines in the underpinning of her verbal and mental reasoning might be detected. The decay of her once luminescent intelligence is startling and irreversible.

In the morning her minder, Kathleen, calls for her. They take long walks so my mother is fit and lean. Sometimes at lunch hour I call out to see her and when I walk up to them I hope she will recognize me but she just stares at me with a frown as if the scattered after-burn of her mental debris can somehow this last time summon the name with the face.

She smiles and says hello.

I say

- Hi Ma, it's me, Seamus - you look beautiful.