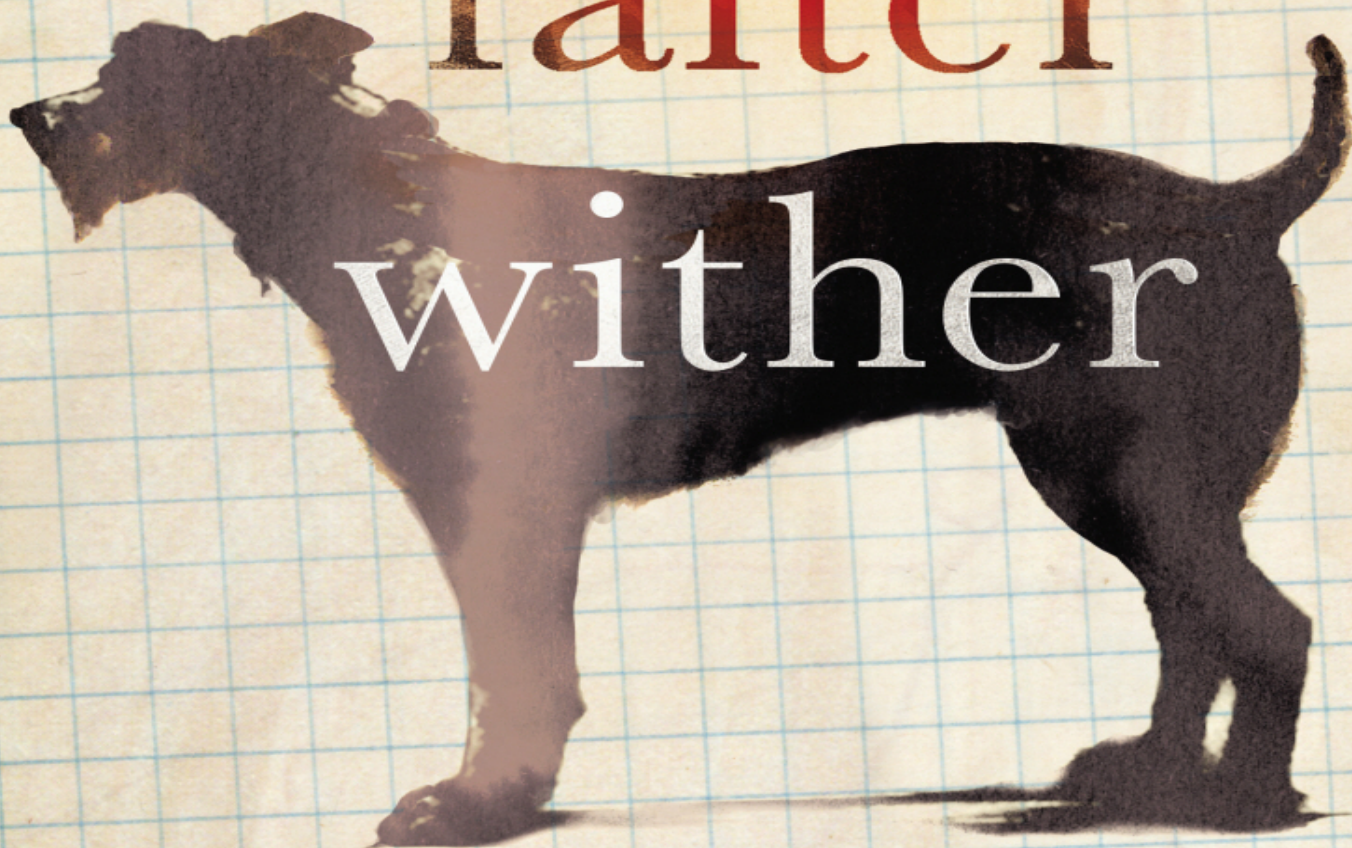


'A stunning and wonderful achievement'

JOSEPH O'CONNOR

spill
simmer
falter
wither



Sara Baume

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About the Book

You find me on a Tuesday, on my Tuesday trip to town. A note sellotaped to the inside of the jumble-shop window: COMPASSIONATE & TOLERANT OWNER. A PERSON WITHOUT OTHER PETS & WITHOUT CHILDREN UNDER FOUR.

A misfit man finds a misfit dog. Ray, aged fifty-seven, 'too old for starting over, too young for giving up', and One Eye, a vicious little bugger, smaller than expected, a good ratter. Both are accustomed to being alone, unloved, outcast - but they quickly find in each other a strange companionship of sorts. As spring turns to summer, their relationship grows and intensifies, until a savage act forces them to abandon the precarious life they'd established, and take to the road.

Spill Simmer Falter Wither is a wholly different kind of love story: a devastating portrait of loneliness, loss and friendship, and of the scars that are more than skin deep. Written with tremendous empathy and insight, in lyrical language that surprises and delights, this is an extraordinary and heart-breaking debut by a major new talent.

About the Author

Sara Baume was born in Lancashire and grew up in Co. Cork. She studied fine art and creative writing and her short fiction has been published in journals such as *The Stinging Fly* magazine and the *Dublin Review*. She won the 2014 Davy Byrnes Short Story Award and the 2015 Hennessy New Irish Writing Award. She now lives in Cork with her two dogs.

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SARA BAUME



WILLIAM HEINEMANN: LONDON

For Mum, of course

PROLOGUE

He is running, running, running.

And it's like no kind of running he's ever run before. He's the surge that burst the dam and he's pouring down the hillslope, channelling through the grass to the width of his widest part. He's tripping into hoof-rucks. He's slapping groundsel stems down dead. Dandelions and chickweed, nettles and dock.

This time, there's no chance for sniff and scavenge and scoff. There are no steel bars to end his lap, no chain to jerk at the limit of its extension, no bellowing to trick and bully him back. This time, he's farther than he's ever seen before, past every marker along the horizon line, every hump and spork he learned by heart.

It's the season of digging out. It's a day of soft rain. There's wind enough to tilt the slimmer trunks off kilter and drizzle enough to twist the long hairs on his back to a mop of damp curls. There's blood enough to gush into his beard and spatter his front paws as they rise and plunge. And there's a hot, wet thing bouncing against his neck. It's the size of a snailshell and it makes a dim squelch each time it strikes. It's attached to some gristly tether dangling from some leaked part of himself, but he cannot make out the what nor the where of it.

Were he to stop, were he to examine the hillslope and hoof-rucks and groundsel and dandelions and chickweed and nettles and dock, he'd see how the breadth of his sight span has been reduced by half and shunted to his right side, how the left is pitch black until he swivels his head. But he doesn't stop, and notices only the cumbersome

blades, the spears of rain, the upheaval of tiny insects and the blood spilling down the wrong side of his coat, the outer when it ought to be the inner.

He is running, running, running. And there's no course or current to deter him. There's no impulse from the root of his brain to the roof of his skull which says other than RUN.

He is One Eye now.

He is on his way.

spill

You find me on a Tuesday, on my Tuesday trip to town.

You're sellotaped to the inside pane of the jumble shop window. A photograph of your mangled face and underneath an appeal for a COMPASSIONATE & TOLERANT OWNER. A PERSON WITHOUT OTHER PETS & WITHOUT CHILDREN UNDER FOUR. The notice shares street-facing space with a sheepskin overcoat, a rubberwood tambourine, a stuffed wigeon and a calligraphy set. The overcoat's sagged and the tambourine's punctured. The wigeon's trickling sawdust and the calligraphy set's likely to be missing inks or nibs or paper, almost certainly the instruction leaflet. There's something sad about the jumble shop, but I like it. I like how it's a tiny refuge of imperfection. I always stop to gawp at the window display and it always makes me feel a little less horrible, less strange. But I've never noticed the notices before. There are several, each with a few lines of text beneath a hazy photograph. Altogether they form a hotchpotch of pleading eyes, foreheads worried into furry folds, tails frozen to a hopeful wag. The sentences underneath use words like NEUTERED, VACCINATED, MICROCHIPPED, CRATETRAINED. Every wet nose in the window is alleged to be searching for its FOREVER HOME.

I'm on my way to purchase a box-load of incandescent bulbs because I can't bear the dimness of the energy savers, how they hesitate at first and then build to a parasitic humming so soft it hoaxes me into thinking some part of my inner ear has cracked, or some vital vessel of my frontal lobe. I stop and fold my hands and examine the fire-spitting dragon painted onto the tambourine's stretched skin and the wigeon's bright feet bolted to a hunk of ornamental cedar, its wings pinioned to a flightless

expansion. And I wonder if the calligraphy set is missing its instruction leaflet.

You're sellotaped to the bottommost corner. Your photograph is the least distinct and your face is the most grisly. I have to bend down to inspect you and as I move, the shadows shift with my bending body and blank out the glass of the jumble shop window, and I see myself instead. I see my head sticking out of your back like a bizarre excrescence. I see my own mangled face peering dolefully from the black.

—

The shelter is a forty-minute drive and three short, fat cigarettes from home. It occupies a strip of land along the invisible line at which factories and housing estates give way to forests and fields. There are rooftops on one side, treetops on the other. Concrete underfoot and chainlink fencing all around, its PVC-coated diamonds rattling with the anxious quivers of creatures MISTREATED, ABANDONED, ABUSED. Adjacent to the diamonds, there's a flat-headed building with unsound walls and a cavity block wedged under each corner. A signpost rises from the cement. RECEPTION it says, REPORT ON ARRIVAL.

I'm not the kind of person who is able to do things. I don't feel very good about climbing the steps and pushing the door, but I don't feel very good about disobeying instructions either. My right hand finds my left hand and they hold each other. Now I step up and they knock as one. The door falls open. Inside there's a woman sitting behind a large screen between two filing cabinets. There's something brittle about her. She seems small in proportion to the screen, but it isn't that. It's in the way the veins of each temple rise through her skin; it's in the way her eyelids are the colour of a climaxing bruise.

‘Which one?’ she says and shows me a sheet of miniature photographs. As I place the tip of my index finger against the tip of your miniaturised nose, she ever-so-slightly smiles. I sign a form and pay a donation. The brittle woman speaks into a walkie-talkie and now there’s a kennel keeper waiting outside the flat-headed office. I hadn’t imagined it might be so uncomplicated as this.

He’s a triangular man. Loafy shoulders tapering into flagpole legs, the silhouette of a root vegetable. He’s carrying a collar and leash. He swings them at his side and talks loudly as he guides me through the shelter. ‘That cur’s for the injection I said, soon’s I saw him, and wouldn’tcha know, straight off he sinks his chompers into a friendly fella’s cheek and won’t let go. There he is, there.’

The kennel keeper points to a copper-coated cocker spaniel in a cage with a baby blanket and a burger-shaped squeak toy. The spaniel looks up as we pass and I see a pair of pink punctures in the droop of his muzzle. ‘Vicious little bugger. Had to prise his jaws loose and got myself bit in the process. Won’t be learning his way out of a nature like that. Another day, y’know, and he’d a been put down.’

I nod, even though the kennel keeper isn’t looking at me. I picture him at home in a house where all of the pot plants belong to his wife and the front garden’s been tarmaced into an enormous driveway. His walls are magnolia and his kitchen cupboards are stocked with special toasting bread and he uses the bread not only for toasting, but for everything.

‘Any good for ratting?’ I say.

‘Good little ratter alright,’ the kennel keeper says, ‘there he is, there,’ and now I see he is pointing at you.

You’re all on your own in a solitary confinement kennel beside the recycling bins. There’s a stench of old meat, of hundreds and hundreds of desiccated globules stuck to the inside of carelessly rinsed cans. There’s dust and sweet wrappers and cardboard cups whirling in from the

whoomph of traffic passing on the road. There's the sound of yipping and whinging from around the corner and out of sight. It's a sad place, and you are smaller than I expected.

You growl as the kennel keeper grabs you by the scruff and buckles the collar, but you don't snap. And when you walk, there's no violence, no malice in the way you move. There's nothing of the pariah I expected. You are leaning low, nearly dragging your body along the ground, as though carrying a great lump of fear.

'Easy now,' the kennel keeper tells you. 'Easy.'

—

What must I look like through your lonely peephole? You're only the height of my calf and I'm a boulder of a man. Shabbily dressed and sketchily bearded. Steamrolled features and iron-filing stubble. When I stand still, I stoop, weighted down by my own lump of fear. When I move, my clodhopper feet and mismeasured legs make me pitch and clump. My callused kneecaps pop in and out of my shredded jeans and my hands flail gracelessly, stupidly. I've always struggled with my hands. I've never known exactly what to do with them when they're not being flailed. I've a fiendish habit of picking the hard skin encircling each fingernail, drawing it slowly down into a bloodless hangnail. When I'm out in the world and moving, I stop myself picking by flailing, and when I stand still I fold my hands fast over my stomach. I knit my fingers in restraint. When I'm alone inside and unmoving, I stop myself picking by smoking instead.

In certain lights at certain angles, reflecting certain surfaces, I am an old man. I'm an old man in the windshield of the car and the backside of my soup spoon. I'm an old man in the living room window after dark and the narrow mirrors at either side of the tall fridge in the grocer's. Whenever I go to close the curtains or lean in to reach for

milk or margarine or forest fruit yoghurt, I'm an old man. My brow curls down to tickle my eyeballs, my teeth are stained ochre, my frown lines are so well gouged they never disappear, not even when I smile. Although I'm impervious to my own smell, I'm certain I smell old. More must and porridge and piss, I suspect, than sugar and apples and soap.

I'm fifty-seven. Too old for starting over, too young for giving up. And my name is the same word as for sun beams, as for winged and boneless sharks. But I'm far too solemn and inelegant to be named for either, and besides, my name is just another strange sound sent from the mouths of men to confuse you, to distract from your vocabulary of commands. There's a book on one of my book shelves, now its pages are crinkled by damp, but it's about how birds and fish and animals communicate, and somewhere it says that animals like you are capable of learning to understand as much as one-hundred-and-sixty-five human words, roughly the same as a two-year-old child. I'm not so sure, but that's what the book with crinkled pages says.

There was a time when my hair was black as a rook with flashes of electric blue in certain lights at certain angles, now it's splotched with grey like a dishevelled jackdaw. I wear it fastened into a plait and flung down the stoop of my boulderish back, and sometimes I think that if I had people I bantered about with, they'd nickname me CHIEF for the wideness of my face and the way I wear my womanly hair, for the watery longing in my wonkety eyes. Only I don't have anybody I banter about with. My confinement has walls and windows and doors instead of PVC-coated diamonds, but still it's solitary. Still I'm all on my own, like you.

Everywhere I go it's as though I'm wearing a spacesuit which buffers me from other people. A big, shiny one-piece which obscures how small and dull I feel inside. I know that you can't see it; I can't see it either, but when I pitch and

clump and flail down the street, grown men step into the drain gully to avoid brushing against my invisible spacesuit. When I queue to pay at a supermarket checkout, the cashier presses the backup bell and takes her toilet break. When I drive past a children's playground, some au-pair nearly always makes a mental note of my registration number. 93-OY-5731.

They all think I don't notice. But I do.

—

'In!' The kennel keeper tells you.

We are three of us standing on the compound's concrete, and you are refusing to climb into the car. The triangular man is beginning to bristle. It must be almost lunchtime and so his mind's already sitting in the canteen, already eating fat sandwiches on his mouth's behalf. He hoists you from the ground and plonks you onto the back seat.

'Right you are now,' he says, his voice is toneless, insincere. 'Best of luck.'

You try to resist the slam of the door, spinning your head around to check for other ways out. What does my old car smell like? Like salt and oil and dust mites, stale popcorn and wizened peel? The back seat is covered by a red blanket and the fibres of the blanket are embedded with sand. Have you ever seen sand before? I don't expect so. You bow your head as though contemplating all of these most minuscule and pearliest of stones. In the driver's seat, I'm fastening my belt, slotting key into ignition. As the engine begins to putter, you lift your head to the rear windscreen. You watch as the flat-headed cabin shrinks to the size of a photograph on a postcard, a picture on a stamp, and now gone.

Now we are driving from the city and into the suburbs. There are cherry trees lining the roadway in full flower, spitting tiny pink pinches of themselves into the traffic. See

the rhododendron and laburnum getting ready to rupture, the forsythia and the willow, weeping. There's enough laurel to hedge a stadium arena, and every time we speed up, everything is transformed to a mulch of earthy colours and overstretched shapes. But you back away from the mulch, and stretch. You clamber into the front of the car, over the handbrake and the passenger seat. You crouch beneath the dashboard with the heat of the bonnet pressed to your back and the gush of tarmac just a fine layer of steel beneath. Now the suburbs become dual carriageway, the cherry blossoms subside to central embankments of overgrown lawn. The shorter grass is frothed with daisies. And it's a handsome little piece of wilderness, a tiny refuge of imperfection.

But you won't come out to look. You stay beneath the dash with only your nose protruding. The particular way it moves reminds me of a maggot squirming. What are you whiffing through the air vents? Pollen and petrol and painted plaster? Now we are passing houses with people inside and shops with goods inside and churches with chalky gods inside, now we are rounding a roundabout and pulling off onto the back road for home. Brace yourself for the potholes and corners, the bump and slide. You hit your head against the glove compartment and grunt, a perfectly hog-like grunt. Now if your lost eye was inside your maggot nose you'd see a field of rape at its yellow zenith against a backdrop of velvet grey, which is the sky. You'd see the rape caving into neverending blue, which is the sea. Has your maggot nose ever seen the sea before? I don't expect so. We're following the curve of the bay, we're parking with two wheels abutting the footpath outside a salmon pink house, which is my father's salmon pink house and my solitary confinement, which is home.

Sometimes I think if I took the handbrake off, anywhere in the world, the car would roll itself back here, to the footpath outside the terrace beside the bay, grudgingly yet

irresistibly. But I've never been anywhere in the world. I wouldn't know how to get there in the first place.

Now you're refusing to climb from the car. I squat on the ground and you glower from your crawl space. I push the door wide to let the salt air in. It's rich and giddy, cloying with rot and fish and tang and wet. Your maggot nose catches the cloy and wriggles to life. Now it tugs your front paws forward and your front paws drag the rest of you after them. You grunt, but this time it has a different pitch; this time it's an inquisitive grunt. Grudgingly yet irresistibly, you step out of shelter, and onto the sea front.

Welcome home, One Eye, my good little ratter.

—

I don't know exactly where I was born. A hospital, I suppose. Surrounded by spotlights and freshly laundered bed-sheets and a trolley of sterilised birthing tools. I find it hard to picture some scrubbed-up stranger wielding my naked, squawking self about as though I were a broiled ham. Instead I like to pretend I was born all alone without any fuss, without any gore. And right here, in my father's house. I like to believe the house itself gave birth to me, that I slithered down the chimney, fell ignobly into the fire grate and inhaled my first breath of cold, swirling ash.

My father's house is one of the oldest in the village. It's two storeys tall and capped by slanting slate. Some slates are broken and some slates displaced and each is dusted with green down and rimmed by tiny hedgehogs of moss. The facade is garishly salmon and the roof is a manmade hillside all shaved and pressed out of shape from the creep of soil beneath its surface. Most of the ground floor is taken up by shop space, that's the reason for the signboard between hanging baskets. It's a hairdressing salon, which means the sounds that push through the floorboards are rushing water and hood dryers, pop music and high heels,

the slicing laugh of the Polish hairdresser as she fakes friendly with whoever has just walked in.

When I was a boy, the ground floor of my father's house was a ladies boutique. The lady who ran the boutique always stood two decapitated mannequins in the display window, and I couldn't understand why she dressed them so fashionably yet never bothered to fix on their heads. I used to be afraid that the mannequin's forgotten faces would chew their way out of a cupboard by night to rove between the sleeping clothes rails. I'd swear I could hear them, gnashing and dragging themselves across the carpet by their eyebrows. After the boutique shut down, the estate agent used the window as a billboard for advertising his properties. For several years I got to snoop inside every house for sale or rent within a three village radius without ever travelling beyond the front footpath. As a boy, I imagined I lived in every last one. And in every last newly renovated semi-detached with off-white walls and a fitted kitchen, I imagined I was a different boy, a new boy, a better boy.

Apart from the salon, there's a Chinese takeaway, a grocer's, a chip shop and two pubs. It's a village of twitchers and silly-walkers, of old folk and alcoholics and men dressed in high-visibility overalls. There's a hummock of fat tanks at one end, that's the oil refinery. There's a chimney painted in red and white stripes like a barber's pole at the other end, that's the power station. In the middle, it's a nature reserve. Mallards and grebes paddle cheerfully through the drizzle. Herons stand stock-still and knee-high in tidal mud, pretending to be statues. Because of the oil refinery and the power station, the village murmurs. Sandwiched by the tunelessness of industry, the birds shriek and sing, defiantly.

Follow me past the steel gate and down a laneway to the front door. Here's the hall, which looks like the inside of a clothes recycling unit. Wool and tweed and oilcloth spilling off coat hooks onto my wellingtons and the radiator, the banister. Almost none of the coats are mine, or at least they weren't mine to begin with.

Now here's the kitchen, dark and poky with chipped tiles on the walls and unidentifiable stains on the lino. It smells of garlic and coffee and cigarette smoke and bins, and the bins smell of garlic skins and spent coffee grounds and cigarette butts. Leave the bins alone, okay? You're not allowed to pilfer tin cans and chicken bones, tissues hardened into abstract shapes by snot. Here's my mug with its indelible coating of black sludge. If I was a gypsy I'd read you my sludge like tea leaves, and if I was a visionary I'd show you the shape of a Jesus face on the base. Can you see it; can you see the Jesus face?

Now follow me up the stairwell past the salon's partition into the upstairs hall. See my ornamental plates covering the decomposed plasterwork. They come from every snicket of the globe. This one with a picture of St George is Bermuda. The kookaburra is Australia and these two moustachioed men bartering their cockerels hail from Puerto Rico. Now Andorra has a cable car and Mallorca has almond trees and Hawaii has HAWAII embossed in gold letters, but Djibouti is my favourite. I've no idea where that is.

This room with the carpet concealed by rugs is my bedroom. Each rug is made from the ripped and re-bound rags of strangers from foreign lands. The rug strangers have bigger families but fewer belongings, brighter clothes but dimmer prospects and I feel somehow closer to them than I do the people deflected by my spacesuit in the street. Here's the bed, the rocking chair, the wardrobe and the fireplace, the grate into which the house delivered me. The buckets either side are one for coal and one for the logs I

axe up on an ash stump out the back. Ash is the solidest of all wood; the log against which all other logs will inexorably split. What does my bedroom smell of? Damp spores, fluffed dirt and dead sap? See the black mould on the end wall, how it's mushroomed into a reverse constellation: the night sky a white wall and the white stars black and wet and furry.

This curtain of wooden beads hides the bathroom, and when they get stirred up they make a noise like a landslide of tic-tacs, like a leak in a button factory. You're not allowed in the bathroom, okay? You're not allowed to lick splashes from the enamel. From every other lintel, multicoloured ribbons dangle from a thin strip of pine. It wasn't until after my father was gone that I nailed the rainbows up. Sometimes I tread on the ends and they snap back like a tiny riding crop. Sometimes they get tangled around my limbs as I pass and I rip them clean down, without meaning to. They are annoying. I know they're annoying. And yet, I nail them up again, every time. The bowerbird within me insists.

Now for the living room, which lives up to its title and is the room where most of life takes place. I heard on the radio once that animals like you see in the same way as a colour-blind human, that your world is yellower and bluer and greyer than mine. If this is true then my living room walls will sear your lonely peephole, I'm sorry. They're painted the colour of purest egg yolk. Now the front window faces south and touches the roof beams. Here's the sofa and the coffee table and the television set which is mostly switched off with its screen turned to a dark mirror instead, to a tiny replica room all drained of its vibrancy. I look old in the switched-off television screen. It's one of the places I am an old man. Here are the curtains and indoor hanging plants and pictures in picture frames. I always forget to water the houseplants until their compost is so dry that the water trickles straight through and drips into

the carpet. Or sometimes the plant's famished and gulps too much, drinks until its leaves go limp and pale and spongy, drinks until it drowns itself. Here's my aloe vera, see the bubbles through its translucent skin. See the picture frame. These smiling strangers inside, I don't know who they are. I just buy the frames and accept whoever comes inside them. They're just models chosen by the frame company, told to pose.

Bowerbirds are the artists of the creature kingdom; impossibly susceptible to prettiness, they deck their nests like vortex-shaped Christmas trees. There's a picture in one of these books on one of these bookshelves laden with spines of all different heights and colours and states of decay. Here are spines and spines and spines, raised to towers on the coffee table, queued into rows along the skirting boards. What do they smell like? Paper-worms and crackled glue, stale toast and aged sellotape.

Now here, at the furthest end of the corridor, is the final room, the room with the trapladder reaching up through the trapdoor and into the roof where the spate of rats took place. See the well-worn knob and the keyless keyhole. See the draught snake laid across the threshold with its pink felted tongue sticking out from its untidy stitches in a menacing fork. You don't go in here, do you understand? I don't go in here either.

—

I see how you watch me closely, startle at the slightest of sudden shifts. I see you're still frightened, even though I haven't even raised my voice. Are you waiting for me to whip out a choke chain? For a backhanded nose slap, the butt of my boot? Now I have to put you out the kitchen door and shut you in the backyard, just for a moment. I have to go and buy groceries and I'm not sure about leaving you in

the house alone just yet. Spaghetti hoops and gingernuts, a carton of milk and some tinned sardines.

The backyard is a misshapen square with a stone fence the whole way round and a timber gate into next door's garden. It's floored by cracked cement and limestone chippings with weeds in places. Here's herb-robert, spurge, fumitory, a few other species less beautiful. Most of the green or brown or barely leafing plants in the pots lining the perimeter wall are the skeletons of last summer. Here's some purple sprouting broccoli, the stems already gone to bolt, the heads to seed. Windmills spin furiously amongst the skeletons. Elsewhere wind-broken blades lie twitching on the gravel. Beneath the sheet of marred tarpaulin is the axing stump, the log pile, the garden hose. Here's the rotary washing line, the glass-topped table, the plastic patio chairs, and these are tens of bashed and fractured buoys in bleached shades of orange and yellow, and tens more shards of broken buoy, some still sharp but mostly sanded harmless by the sea. These are a collection, my collection. Please don't piss on them while I'm gone.

As I leave, you're sitting on the mat. You're sitting with your whole body tensed as though in preparation for a blow. You look so mournful and helpless as I leave. You raise your head and watch as the kitchen door closes.

Out the front and into the village, there's a blast of salt wind off the bay, an empty crisp packet gusting down the footpath, a string of bunting flapping from a telegraph pole. The grocer's girl, April, talks loudly on the telephone as she scans my goods, forgetting to proffer a paper bag. I've always imagined April was born in April and has three sisters called May, June and July, perhaps an only brother called December because if the summer is a woman, so the winter must be a man.

I'm back at the gate and fumbling with the door key, milk and biscuits in one armpit, fish in the other, when I see you, when I see that you've escaped. You're on your way out of