

"STARS"

At night, before you go to bed, you like to sit in the window watching the stars. Your mum thinks this is sweet. I think it's just another one of your delay tactics – anything to avoid bed. Tonight, you are insistent that the stars look different.

“Do you mean brighter?” I ask. “No Dad,” you say, “they’re not brighter. They’re a different pattern and there’s more of them.”

I do my best to explain the stars away with science.

“It just looks like there are more of them,” I say, “because there are less cars outside now; fewer lights ruining the stars.” But I can’t talk you down. You are one determined wee lady. You get this from your mum.

“Watch this, Daddy,” you say. You take your finger and drag it through the condensation on your window, joining one dot star to the next. You make words from the stars. “See,” you say, “the stars are speaking to us now.”

I lean in, look closer, read what you’ve spelt out on your window. Two short words. LOOK UP.



"Stars"

"BIRDS"

“The birds would like you to think that they sound louder these days because there is less traffic outside. Fewer cars. Less lorries. Almost no planes thundering overhead.

The birds would like you to think that they’ve always been singing and cheeping and chortling at this level; that you simply haven’t taken the time to listen before. The birds are trying to fool you. Birds can be crafty like that.

Every day this week the birds have been cranking their volume up. Slowly. Carefully. In tiny half measures, like rebellious teenagers turning their stereos up louder and louder. The birds have a plan. This quiet time has offered them a unique opportunity. They plan to make sure they are finally listened to. Oh yes, they’re only singing now, but give them a few more weeks and they’ll start stringing sentences together

They’ll make sure their birdy demands are heard.

Bird baths in every front garden! Cats outlawed! Extra thick insulation in every nest! Free, juicy worms for all!



"COCOON"

They told us we needed to cocoon our mum. They told us it was for her own protection. We did not have a choice.

So, we wrapped Mum up inside her house. We wrapped her in kind, gentle words whispered down a telephone line. We wrapped her in layers of letters and cards and a handful of scrappy crayon drawings pressed with love against the wrong side of the double glazing. Miss u Gran. Lots of love.

We wrapped her in songs, in laughter, in snatches of conversation squeezed awkwardly through an open window from a safe, but somewhat, shouty distance.

We wrapped her, oh so tightly, in our thought and our prayers and all the very many memories of smiling moments shared.

We wrapped our mum up in the hope of smiling moments to come; the anticipation of that first long hug; the way she'd be when we finally unwrapped her: safe, familiar, more appreciated than ever.

They told us we needed to cocoon our mum. They told us it was for her own protection.

They did not tell us that when she finally emerged, blinking from her cocoon, she'd be resplendent; more beautiful and precious than she'd ever been.

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"Mugs"

"MUGS"

Mary has not left the house in five weeks. Consequently Mary has drunk almost twenty seven gallons of tea.

Mary has used every mug in the mug cupboard, progressing through fine bone china numbers to novelty Christmas mugs and ones which came with Easter eggs, until finally she arrived at the back of the mug cupboard and the realization that now might be a good time to tackle the dishes.

Mary could not face the dishes and so began to drink her tea out of saucepans, buckets, empty margarine tubs, Wellington boots and hot water bottles, even, once, out of a colander, though this proved to be somewhat impractical.

By the beginning of the seventh week there was not a single clean drinking vessel left in the house. Mary was a resourceful woman. .

However, she still had no intention of tackling the dishes which were, by this stage, stacked almost six feet high on every kitchen surface

Neither did she wish to forego her tea drinking for Mary was mad keen on her Punjana. Driven to desperation she filled the bathtub with hot, milky tea. She climbed in, slipped under and drank her fill.

Mary could not believe she'd never thought of this before.

"COMPOST"

William had always intended to sort the garden out. The next few months would give him the perfect excuse to finally get 'round to it.

Before sealing himself up in his house he went down to Homebase, bought a nice new spade, a boot load of compost and one of those fancy gardening hats Alan Titchmarsh wears on the telly.

Back home, he tipped the compost into his garage. It went everywhere, spreading out to cover the whole floor in a dense layer of chocolate coloured mulch. The grandchildren's toys were now covered in muck, not to mention Maureen's good patio furniture and the barbecue they used in the summer. William went inside and made himself a cup of tea. He'd deal with the compost situation later. Later, he was tired and there was a good film on the telly.

The next day, it rained, and the next, and the next. By the time it had finally stopped raining William had forgotten all about the compost in the garage and the garden, which was slowly being conquered by weeds.

Some three months later when he emerged, blinking, from his house, William discovered himself to be a better gardener than he thought for the compost had done the business in the garage. Several new plants had sprouted in his absence: vines and trees bearing strange fruit. A child's bicycle. Miniature barbecues. A series of collapsible deckchairs. If William had known gardening was this easy, he'd have tackled the backyard years ago.

"MOUNTAIN GOATS"

Meanwhile, in Wales, the mountain goats have come down from the mountain to investigate the quiet town.

They roam in packs along empty streets, munching on hedges and ornamental shrubberies. They clamber over parked cars and leave little hoof-shaped dents in the bonnets. They dander through the drive-through lane at McDonalds in search of a Big Mac and, finding it closed, are just as happy to devour the empty burger wrappers now littering the car park.

At the play park they go 'round the roundabout and swing on the swings and cannot believe the head rush which comes from sliding down a particularly slippery slide.

They run amok in the farmers' market, upsetting all the empty stalls and then collapse, exhausted, in the bush shelter by the library. They do not think to eat the books in the library. Even mountain goats know right from wrong.

They agree that this has been the best day ever. The only thing missing is a spot of human chasing for there is nothing a mountain goat enjoys more than chasing a terrified human across fields of down a country lane.

They will return to the quiet town tomorrow in search of humans to chase. They will search and search and find no humans present and eventually conclude that they have been run out of town by a previous gang of mountain goats; a quicker and more vicious crew.

"BINOCULARS"

Some afternoons, when the sky is clear and I am missing my gran more than ever, I climb up to the top of the house. I open the spare room window and lean out. I press Dad's binoculars to my eyes, and I peer across all the rooftops and chimneys, the satellite dishes and telephone wires which stretch between us, until I finally spot Gran's house. Then, I turn the dial on Dad's binoculars until they focus on Gran's face, smiling from her upstairs window. She waves. I wave back.

For a few minutes, there is no distance between us. All the streets and second and miles shrink down to nothing. I can smell the buttery baking smell of her kitchen. I can feel her papery hand in mine. I can hear the sound of her whistling along to the Archers' theme tune. We are so close we might as well be touching.

I put Dad's binoculars carefully back in their box. I go downstairs and turn the telly on. I carry the feeling of Gran with me, into the evening and the night beyond. I do not need binoculars to be close to her.

No, I definitely do not need binoculars, but sometimes they help.



"Mountain Goats"

"CHICKEN"

Mammy says we should get ourselves a chicken then we'd have a constant supply of free eggs. Daddy says everybody's trying to get their hands on a chicken these days. There's not one to be had for love nor money in the whole of Belfast.

Last year in school, we learnt that chickens come from eggs. All you have to do is keep the egg warm and after a few weeks, out pops a wee yellow chick. This morning I lifted an egg from Mammy's baking cupboard. I've been carrying it around all day, really carefully.

I have it tucked into my armpit. It's warm in there – just what you need for hatching chicks. I've been standing funny all day, just to make sure I don't smash it. I can't play football or ride my bike. I even had to lie when Daddy asked me what was wrong with my arm; why I was holding it at a funny angle. I told him I'd bumped it off the fridge door.

I know it's wrong to tell lies. Daddy would be cross if he knew. It'll be worth it though in two weeks' time when the wee baby hen pops out the end of my jumper sleeve and we have free eggs every day. Daddy will understand then. He'll see how clever I am.



"Chicken"

"SURPRISE"

"Did you ever find a fiver you'd forgotten about crumpled up at the bottom of your handbag or a packet of chocolate buttons slipped down the back of the biscuit cupboard?"

There's no word for the feeling of rediscovering something you already own, but if it were a colour I think it would be bright, egg yolk yellow and if it were a taste, something like lemon sherbet, fizzing on the tongue. This week, as I move around the rooms of my house, I am trying to remember to forget small, precious things in the hope of recovering them later.

I have misplaced my favourite novel. Perhaps it is under the bed. Perhaps it isn't. I have accidentally spilled a whole packet of wildflower seeds in the window box outside my kitchen. I've left an unopened bar of Dairy Milk at the bottom of the muesli and a bright red lipstick absentmindedly shuffled behind the paracetamol in my medicine cupboard.

I have already forgotten about the handwritten note, pinned to the inside of my wardrobe door. "You are stronger than you think," it reads. It might be my handwriting. It might just as easily be someone else's.

Imagine my surprise, days or weeks or even months from now, when I stumble upon these forgotten treasures. By then, they will be so old, they might as well be new. They will seem like encouragements from a far and distant stranger; someone who already knows exactly what I need.

"STATUES"

"I'll be honest with you. I lost my temper with the children. It isn't easy, you know: keeping up with my own job, home schooling the pair of them, putting food on the table three times a day AND making sure the house doesn't disappear beneath a mountain of laundry. This morning, when my youngest started moaning that she didn't want Weetabix for breakfast again, I snapped.

"Right, that's it," I said. "Outside, the pair of you. Go and play in the back garden." "But, what will we play, Mum?" whined the eldest. Without thinking I fired back, "play statues. The one who stands still for the longest will be the winner. There might even be a prize."

Cheered by the prospect of winning something, they trooped outside. (My children have always been extremely competitive!) I put the kettle on and enjoyed a quiet cup of coffee in front of the telly and fell asleep and woke three hours later to the horrifying realization that my children had been standing, perfectly still, in the back garden, all this time. I went outside to check on them. Both were damp from the drizzle and a magpie had begun to build a nest in the youngest's hair. They were not as traumatized as I'd expected.

I wondered then if I might get away with another round of statues tomorrow.

"EXPEDITION"

On Wednesday morning Susie set off on an expedition.

She packed a small duffel bag with sandwiches and a flask of tea, a magnifying glass and torch in case the night should creep up unexpectedly. Susie did not require a map or compass. She was already familiar with the route. She paused for a moment in the doorway, forcing this familiarity to the back of her mind. She wished to be a proper explorer; seeing each new detail for the very first time. She began in the furthest corner of the living room, lifting framed photographs from the mantelpiece, lingering over faces, remembering and savouring each memory as it came fluttering to mind.

She paused by the bookshelves, turning her head sideways to read the names of all the novels she'd lately read. Though she couldn't remember the plots exactly, Susie could take some small pleasure from recalling a much-loved character or favourite line. She tucked the good words away and adventured on.

By early afternoon she'd arrived at the Chesterfield suite where she ate her lunch in segments, consuming one mouthful of sandwich on each plush seat before moving on to the next. She allowed her mind to recall all the conversations this sofa had been party to. They sat sweetly in her mouth like boiled candies. Susie was tired by this stage, overwhelmed by all her expedition had revealed. She was inclined to build a fire in the grate and spend the night sleeping in front of its comforting flames.

But there was so much more to discover: the record player in the corner, the frail spider web hanging from the window frame, the light filtering through the Venetian blinds to fall in shadowy slices upon the opposite wall, the curtains' tiny floral pattern repeating over and over again like a summer trellis. Susie's expedition was over for the day, but she knew she could begin again in the morning, rediscovering her world all over again.

"CLOCK"

The clock on my living room mantelpiece is running out of batteries.

As it slows down, the time inside my house begins to feel different. Everything takes longer than before. Last night, I found myself brushing my teeth for what seemed like two hours and it must be almost a day now since I placed this chocolate cake in the oven, yet it's hardly risen at all.

I am scared that when the clock's batteries finally run out of energy, time will stop altogether and I will be frozen like a statue, caught forever in the act of reading a book or eating a sandwich or staring at the birds outside my window.

If this is the case, and I replace the batteries with fresh one, will time begin to move quickly again? Will I be able to run up and down my stairs and sing all the words of my favourite songs, fast and furious as a runaway train?

Would it be possible to move the clock's hands forwards, spinning them quickly through the coming hours and days, to arrive suddenly on the other side of this slow time, ready for whatever comes next?

"BUTTERFLY"

This morning I received a butterfly in the post. The postman pushed a thin, white envelope through my letterbox. It was ordinary enough looking, no different from all the bills and business letter I usually receive, but I could tell there was something special about this letter.

When I held the envelope in my hands it pulsed gently as if a tiny heartbeat was trapped inside. When I'd unsealed it, slowly peeling back the flap and slipping the contents out, I held a gorgeous butterfly in the palm of my hand. Its wings were perfectly folded like a picture book's pages, edges neatly aligned. The butterfly unfurled in my hands, spreading its wings wide to release all its rainbow colours.

It was loud and lovely as a stained glass window as it flew round and round my living room, singing the outdoors into every stale corner. I watched my butterfly for an hour and thought about you, on the other side of the city, choosing this particular slice of wonder, folding it carefully, slipping it into an envelope, all the time knowing that I, in my dark room, might require something wild and beautiful this morning; something freer than myself.



"Butterfly"

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"Butterfly"

"EGG"

You were born with a bird's egg tucked inside your hand. It looked like a starling's egg, but it could just as easily have been a robin's. They are a very similar shade. Your eyes are the same high August blue. You are also lightly freckled.

At first, I did not notice the egg. I was drunk on the just-born smell of you. Your foldable arms, your ears, and feet –which were just like adult feet, only greatly reduced. I was worn out from all the pushing and shoving. Then, the sudden rush of you, coming in a flood at the end.

'This is really happening,' your father said. And just like that, it was already over.

You came thundering out of me fist-first. Fingers curled round your thumb, tight as a walnut shell. After your arm came your head, a second arm and a single torso, a pair of pancake-flat buttocks and two legs with feet like full stops clamouring on either end. You were all there. Every bit of you in the proper place and working. Every bit but your left arm, which stayed stubbornly up for almost a week.

"He's ready to punch anybody that gets in his way," your father said, and laughed like this was a good thing. I didn't think it was. You seemed far too furious for a brand-new person. "Is this normal?" I asked. It was not normal. The midwife had never delivered a fist-first baby before.

"Don't panic," she said. "He seems fine. I'll just check him over to be sure."

Then, she whisked you away for weight and length and swaddling in a clean, white blanket.



When you returned, you looked exactly like babies are meant to look. All blink-eyed and freshly pink. If I held you right I couldn't even see your strange arm sticking up from under the blankets.

'Isn't he perfect?' I said.

Your father didn't reply. His face was trying not to fold.

'What's he holding?' he asked, unpeeling the blanket to examine your curled fist.

'Nothing,' I said. 'It takes babies a while to uncurl. He's been bunched up inside me for nine months. No wonder he came out funny.'

'I think he's holding something,' your father said. He could see the pale of it glowing between your fingers.

I took your little nugget of a hand in my own and began to unpeel your fingers.

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'Egg' was originally performed on BBC Radio 4 on 12 March 2017.
It was read by Roisin Gallagher and produced by Michael Shannon.

I went at you slowly, gently, like tiny steps on ice. Baby fingers are brittle as bird's legs. I didn't want to snap you. It took a minute, maybe ninety seconds to prise your hand open. Your father and the midwife hung over me, holding their breath as if just the thinnest puff of it might break you. I could see parts of the egg straightaway but I didn't say anything until it was fully exposed.

'It's an egg,' I said. 'The baby's come out holding a bird's egg.'

No one spoke. There wasn't even a peep out of you.

I lifted the egg up and held it, very gently between my finger and thumb. It was almost like holding air. So light. So easy to ruin.

'This was inside me,' I said. 'How did it get there?' My own voice was swimming away from me. I thought I might faint.

'Did you swallow it?' asked the midwife. 'No, that makes no sense. How would the baby get hold of it?'

Your father had gone a funny shade of gray. Like a thing that was once white, then washed too often.

He perched himself on the edge of the bed and asked to see the egg. I tried to place it directly into his hand, but he insisted on a tissue. He would not look me directly in the eye.

'You don't think there's another baby inside it?' he asked.

'It's a bird's egg,' said the midwife. 'Probably a starling. Babies don't come out of eggs.'

'A starling,' your father repeated softly. He lifted the egg to his ear the way you would with seashells, listening for the ocean. The egg didn't make any noise.

He looked disappointed. Then, he shook it, reasonably hard.

'Stop,' I yelled, 'you'll kill it.'

'It's only a starling. There's hundreds on the telephone wires at the end of the road.'

'This one was inside me. It's mine. I want to see what comes out of it.'

Later, looking back I would realise this was the precise moment I began to love the egg.

We had not been expecting an egg. It hadn't appeared on any of your ultrasound scans. We'd printed them all out and stuck them on the fridge door so our friends would see and know you were finally a real thing. Not just wishful thinking or fingers crossed for the next try. Your scans are still up there, next to the grocery list and the takeaway menus. Next to a photo of the egg on its fifth birthday. Apple-sized you, curled up into yourself like a neatly tied lace. Banana-sized, with your feet scratching the ceiling of my belly. And finally, you, swollen to the size of a large turnip, staring straight at us, as if to say, "I'm ready for out now." Later, your father would stand in front of the fridge for hours, forgetting what he'd come for, as he stared at these grainy images. I'd find him there, just standing with a glass or empty bowl, his eyes microscoping across the fridge as he tried to see an eggshell ghosting through your clenched fist.

It was harder for him. He hadn't carried you. Or the egg.

No one had expected an egg. It was not normal. When the consultant arrived, he was unable to contain his shock. He called it a deformity, clamping a hand over his mouth to keep the disgust from creeping out. I could have clawed him for bringing such a dirty word into the room. I opened my mouth and howled. I couldn't stop.

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'Now, you've gone and upset my wife,' your father said. 'Did you have to use that word in front of her? If you ask me it's not a deformity at all. It's more of an oddity.'

Oddity was not much better. This was how we spoke of your Great Aunt Lil who did not believe in washing or speaking to anyone who wasn't close kin. Shortly after this, your father would revise his thinking. Then, he'd call the egg a "miracle," and wonder if we shouldn't get the papers round for a photo. There was money to be made, he said, referencing the family down the road who'd found the face of Mary looming out of the muck on their Land Rover's windscreen. Hadn't they made a fortune selling their story to the press? Enough for a conservatory, or so the story went locally.

The word deformity hung sourly in the air. The consultant carted you down the corridor to a room where you were examined for other extra parts. Wings. Horns. Halos. The possibility of a second heart, murmuring softly behind your ribcage. Of course, they found nothing. You were just a normal baby, born with a bird's egg. No one knew how it got there or why it had not shattered beneath the pressure of your fingers or the force of being born.

After a week they let us take you home. The egg came too. I know you wish we'd left it behind. Your father felt similarly. He was all for throwing it in the bin.

'Nothing's coming out of that egg,' he said, 'let's go home and get the baby settled.'

But I couldn't shrug the feeling that there were two of you to look after now.

'I can't leave the egg behind,' I said, 'it grew inside me. It might still hatch.'

Your father could see the strain of this stretched into my jaw. A tiny nerve flexing just beneath the skin.

There was no turning me, not when I dug my heels in. We took the egg home and made an incubator for it. An old shoebox lined with tinfoil, some cotton flannels and a desk lamp angled down like a drooped tulip. I hoped the heat would bring it on.

'I'll set it up in the utility room,' your father said, but I insisted upon the nursery. I wanted the two of you in the same room. Together. Equal. Neither child favoured. I dragged an old armchair into the space between you, measuring the distance so I was not a centimetre nearer to either one. I dozed constantly, waking to feed you, to bathe and change you. I told you you were the most precious boy in the whole world and meant it. Please remember that. I woke to turn the egg, back to front, to back again, shuffling the heat gently round its shell. I leaned over the incubator and whispered soft, coaxing words, 'Come on out now. We can't wait to meet you.' I meant it. Every whispered word.

When I dreamt, it was mostly of the egg. The way the shell would one day split in two, fracturing and peeling in strips, to reveal a small creature inside. Something which required care. Sometimes this creature was a bird, sometimes a very small child, no bigger than a bottle top. Mostly it was a warm but indefinite impression, not quite a ghost, but similar and equally hard to describe when awake. In the early days, I told your father these dreams, explaining each one in detail. Then I stopped. Your father wasn't interested in the egg. He never had been. It was all just an oddity to him. All for the need to humour me.

You thrived. You slept all night. You sat up, moved on to solids, took your first fumbly steps. You made noises, then fully formed words. The egg didn't. The egg grew no bigger or smaller. It simply sat there on its flannel, occasionally vibrating when a large truck drove past the house.

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But I couldn't bring myself to give up on it. I kept turning it front to back four times an hour for months. Then years. I put my back out leaning over its incubator to whisper stories and sing happy songs. I took photos of the two of you together on birthdays and at Christmas, ringing the egg's box in tinsel or birthday banners so it might know it we were celebrating and take some small pleasure from this. I refused to go on holidays. 'We can't take the egg,' I said, 'and we can't leave it here by itself. It might hatch.'

'It's never going to hatch,' your father said and, when you were old enough for the rides, took you to Euro Disney. Just the two of you, for a long weekend. I stayed home with the egg. Reading. Sleeping. Hoping it might hatch while you were away and justify my absence. The egg did not hatch, and now I am in none of the photographs from your earliest holidays. Later I would also miss out on sports' day, Edinburgh, Legoland and parents' night at your new school. There was no one else to sit with the egg. You grew old enough to find your own tongue.

'It's not fair,' you said, over and over. 'You love that egg more than me.'

'I don't,' I said, 'it's just that it needs me more. It can't do anything for itself.'

"I need you too," you said. But the truth was, you didn't. You'd learnt to do almost everything for yourself. Your father was there for the rest: shoelaces, doctor's appointments and the like. You went to him first for everything. I was proud when I saw you using the toaster and washing your own uniform and sometimes, even, fixing dinner for us all. I was also utterly ashamed. You were six then and already refusing to stand next to the egg in photographs.

'It's just an egg,' you said. 'It's not an actual person.' Even though I told you the story of how you'd come out of me, holding it gently, in your left hand. You did not seem to see the miracle in it, only the oddness.

'Please,' you'd say, 'can you just get rid of the egg?' Your father would be there too, looking at me like I was the sort of soap opera character who is always saying, 'I don't have a problem. I can give up, any time I want,' and is actually addicted to alcohol or heroin or takeaway food.

In the end, the egg broke. It was not your fault exactly. Your father has said this more times than I can count. You were only playing in your room, only getting on like normal boys do. You knocked into the box. The egg fell out and cracked itself on the floor. You didn't tell me immediately. You waited until we were all sat down for dinner.

'Sorry mum,' you said, 'I broke the egg. There was nothing inside it.' I kept myself from crying in front of you. Your father would not let me punish you. Not even bed without supper.

'It was an accident,' he said. I could see he wanted to smile.

Later, when I went to clean the egg up, I noticed that it was not entirely empty. There was a tiny fleck of blood in the middle of the white, peering up at me like the eye in an overflashed photo. I thought of you then, tucked inside me with an egg in your hand and an eye inside this egg. One precious thing inside another, like Russian dolls. Or how we all are, secretly inside.

Jan Carson is a writer and community arts facilitator based in Belfast. Her work has appeared in numerous journals and on BBC Radio 3 and 4. She specializes in running arts projects and events with older people, especially those living with dementia.



"SEAGULL"

Every morning a seagull lands on Karen's windowsill.

He taps the glass with his beak until she comes into the kitchen and opens the window for him. The seagull brings Karen tiny thimblefuls of the ocean, carried carefully inside his beak.

The seagull understands that it has been weeks since Karen last saw the ocean and she is missing it dreadfully. The sound of the waves breaking.

The salty tang of the seaweed. The sand sliding around beneath her feet. Karen keeps every drop of ocean the seagull brings her in a bucket by the sink. There is almost enough to run her fingers through now.

In a month's time she will be able to stand up to her ankles in the bucket and feel the cold saltwater lapping between her toes.

She will be able to close her eyes and pretend she is paddling at the seaside. She will ask the seagull to stand on the windowsill screeching while she paddles.

She will fill her lungs with damp, salty air. It is not that warm in Karen's kitchen, but then again, when is it ever actually hot at the seaside here?

It will not be as good as the real thing. Karen understands this. So does the seagull. But it will be enough to keep her going for a little while longer.



"NEIGHBOURS"

I have become nosier and nosier the longer this Lockdown lasts. There's nothing to look at but the neighbours so I've been taking a long, hard look at the folks who live around me.

On one side they're all business. He's gone and installed a fountain in their front garden. A fountain, indeed! I don't know where they think they're living but this definitely isn't a fountain-y kind of neighbourhood.

On the other side, she's out at the crack of dawn every morning scrubbing, polishing, cleaning the windows with a wad of newspaper. You could eat your dinner of her front step. Not that you'd want to; she'd be hanging over you the whole time, mopping up your crumbs.

Across the road, they're equally busy. They have the whole front lawn ripped up. Rumour is they're putting in some kind of ornamental shrubbery. I've told the husband he needs to up his game. We can't have the neighbours showing us up. He's going to do me some window boxes and a couple of hanging baskets for either side of the front door.

I've ordered a gnome off the Internet; a cute wee fella with a funny hat. I've opted for overnight delivery even though it's an extra two quid. I know the neighbours would all deny it, but there's clearly some kind of competition going on round here and if your front yard's meant to reflect how well you're coping, then let's just say, the pair of us have a fair amount of weeding to be getting on with.

Inside's different. I'm nosy enough to peer through each window I pass on my daily dander to the shop. I can see past their fancy gardens. Every house is the same as ours inside: piles of laundry on the sofa, dirty dishes stacked up on the coffee table, the TV perpetually blaring.

Sure, it's easy enough to put on a show for the neighbours. It's what goes on behind closed doors that tells the actual truth.

"LOCH NESS MONSTER"

The Loch Ness Monster is thoroughly enjoying herself these days.

After almost five hundred years of hiding - only ever daring to duck her head above the Loch's black surface when she is absolutely desperate for a dose of fresh air- she is finally able to clamber out of the water and sun herself on the banks of the Loch.

Now there are no inconvenient holidaymakers to spot her; no curious men with binoculars and zoom lenses attached to their enormous cameras. Now, even the scientists have been forced to stay away. There has never been a better time to be the Loch Ness Monster.

She is enjoying the world above water immensely. She is sunning her fat belly and long, elegant flippers. She is making friends with the birds. Birds, it turns out, are much chattier than the glum fish she's been stuck with for so long. She is even experimenting with new foods: nuts, berries, wriggly earthworms and crunchy insects.

The Loch Ness Monster hopes this quiet time will last forever. She already feels much better in herself. It has not been easy, hiding from everyone, for such a long time.

"FOX"

Fergus is not like all the other foxes. Fergus does not want to live outdoors in a cold, windy forest with the rain always coming down in sheets.

At night, when all the other foxes are off hunting mice or stealing the farmer's chickens, Fergus sneaks into the big city and watches the humans through their big, glass windows. They are almost always indoors now. They hardly ever come outside.

Fergus like to watch the way the humans live.

They have warm, bright burrows and a constant supply of food. They do not have to work hard to survive as foxes do. They spend their time eating and lying around their strange, square burrows staring at the moving box in the corner.

Fergus thinks the humans are on to something. He would love to live like them, but he knows he'll never pass for an actual human. He can't walk on his hind feet. He doesn't know how to shape his growl to make human sounds. He is covered all over in fur.

Fergus has noticed that many humans keep a lazy, always-sleeping dog in their burrows, and this gives him an idea. Every morning now he pauses in front of the big pond to stare at his reflection. He lets his tongue lollop out. He rolls around the ground. He barks.

"Yes," thinks Fergus, "if I pick an old human with bad eyes, I might pass for a dog. I might be invited to come indoors out of the cold."



"TSUNDOKU"

Every time something terrible happened, (and terrible things were happening with increasing frequency), Jim went straight to the bookstore and bought himself a new book: mostly novels, occasionally poetry collections, once a hard-backed cookery book because the cover looked good enough to eat. (He tried nibbling a corner. It did not taste at all nice).

Having bought a book, Jim felt instantly calmer but this calmness hardly had time to settle before a dreadful panic seized him and he began to wonder how he would ever have time to read all these books.

Still, Jim continued to buy books and pile them in towering stacks around his bed, hoping there would soon be a time for reading. By the time the truly terrible thing finally happened,

Jim's bed was entirely encased in books. He crawled inside. It was like a house in there and smelt of paper. He breathed in and out, drawing in the dry scent of unread words.

He did not actually read the books. Just knowing they were there, in his house, accompanying him through the truly terrible thing was enough. Jim felt safer and less lonely than he might have felt without his books.

"WARDROBE"

Yesterday evening, while I was preparing dinner, I received a strange phonecall from the manager of the furniture store.

"I'm just ringing to ask if you've noticed anything odd about your wardrobe," he said. And, as a matter of fact, I had noticed something very odd about my new wardrobe.

I'd bought it just before the Lockdown began and moved all my clothes inside. It was a huge wardrobe with plenty of space for jumpers, trousers, skirts and dresses.

Now, eight weeks later, I'd noticed the wardrobe had done something strange to my favourite clothes. The shirts no longer buttoned. The jumpers were a lot snugger than they'd been two months ago. Some of my dresses wouldn't even zip up. I knew the wardrobe was to blame. I'd never had any problem with my clothes before it arrived.

I explained all this to the manager. "Don't worry," he said, "it's our fault. We've accidentally sold a batch of magic wardrobes. Some customers have received a time travelling model. One lucky man got a wardrobe with a door to Narnia in the back. You've unfortunately received the wardrobe that magically shrinks everything you put inside. We do apologise."

Hearing this, I felt much better about my clothes.

I actually wondered if I might spend a few weeks inside the wardrobe myself; it would be nice to be able to fit into my clothes again.

"TESCO"

Andrea looks forward to her Tuesday morning Tesco run all week.

Tuesdays are now her favourite day. She gets up really early on Tuesday morning, takes her multi-vitamins and has a hearty breakfast in preparation. Then, she heads down to Tesco.

In the line, as she waits to get in, Andrea fastens on her helmet, her knee and elbow pads, then she does a few quick stretches to warm up. When the security guard on the door gives her the signal, she is off like a rocket, through the doors and down the aisles.

Does Andrea follow the arrows printed on the floor, picking her way carefully along the designated route? Of course not! Where would be the fun in that?

Andrea goes against the flow. She barrels down aisles the wrong way, knocking other shoppers down and shoving old ladies out of her path.

Andrea is in her element when faced with a bottleneck in frozen foods or on the cereal aisle. Then, she puts her helmeted head down and, like a Spanish bull facing down a matador, charges on through.

Andrea is desperately missing her rugby. She can't wait to get back to practicing with the rest of the team. Andrea, it should also be said, has now been barred from all but two of the Tescos in Belfast. She is not bothered. She will move on to Asda if necessary.



"HOOVERING"

This morning I decided to clean the house. It was greatly needed.

I began with hoovering. I started at the top of the house and made my way, stair by stair downwards, from the third floor, to the second, to the ground floor.

There was something rather satisfying about the tiny clicks and shudders of grit and little pieces of debris thundering up the hoover's hose. When I arrived at the front door with a dust-free house behind me, and the entire day ahead, I decided to keep right on hoovering.

East Belfast was far from spotless and as I progressed down the Holywood Road, sucking twigs and crisp bags and individual leaves into my hoover I couldn't help but picture myself on the front page of the Telegraph, solely responsible for cleaning up East Belfast.

I was just wondering whether the West might also benefit from a quick run over with the Dirt Devil, when the extension cord ran out. There was still so much cleaning left to do and I was not the sort of girl who accepted my limitations easily.

I would come back next week with a cordless hoover; a fancy Dyson ideally.

"DISGUISE"

This evening, I grew so bored with my own company, I decided to eat dinner with someone else.

I lifted the big mirror off the wall in my bedroom, carried it downstairs and propped it up on the chair opposite mine at the dining room table. Then, I went upstairs and disguised myself carefully.

I tucked my long hair under a hat. I drew a mustache and beard on to my face with an eyeliner pencil. I wore a sweater I'd never worn before and a pair of old sunglasses with the lenses poked out. I came back downstairs and made myself a microwave meal.

Then, I sat in front of the mirror eating. Each time I looked up, I was confronted with a stranger's face and it was exciting to be here, in my own house, enjoying dinner with someone who wasn't me for a change.

The evening would have gone swimmingly if I hadn't felt the need to talk. As soon as I spoke, I was confronted with my own voice. Even if I'd been able to muster up a different accent -a Derry twang, or Fermanagh lilt- the conversation would have been somewhat one-sided. It is no fun knowing what the other person will say before they speak.