

ABRIDGED 0-97  
STRANGELETS

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AOIFE MANNIX



# BLACK HOLES

A man who was dying for years. Full of silences,  
always watching. He went to the train station  
where soldiers tattooed stars onto his eyeballs.  
He never came back so they put his marriage  
up for sale. They said his corpse was nothing  
but a doll. Such evidence of grief.  
Babies bombing their own homes,  
paid actors in the opera of an X on your door.

I found the box of our promises in the attic  
with the scrabble of mice feet. I never understood  
why you were always leaving me. I hid the coffin  
of our wedding rings deep in the tea chest  
of stolen songs. What can never be given back.  
That Christmas they stopped all the aeroplanes,  
I was a prisoner in Venice following the dwarf  
in the red coat. I ate the clifftops to get home,  
arriving by taxi into a room of permafrost.

The fluency of letting me know I was foreign.  
Mutations in the blood. I wanted to say  
how the streets were full of masks, how I met  
an angel in a wheelchair in a garden beyond the fountain,  
how the neighbour's wall collapsed on a small boy,  
how a house burnt down with three generations inside,  
but it is unlucky to sing of children dying. Each war holds  
the matryoshka of the next. This diary of Amsterdam,  
a translation of barbed wire, my lips stitched into a smile.

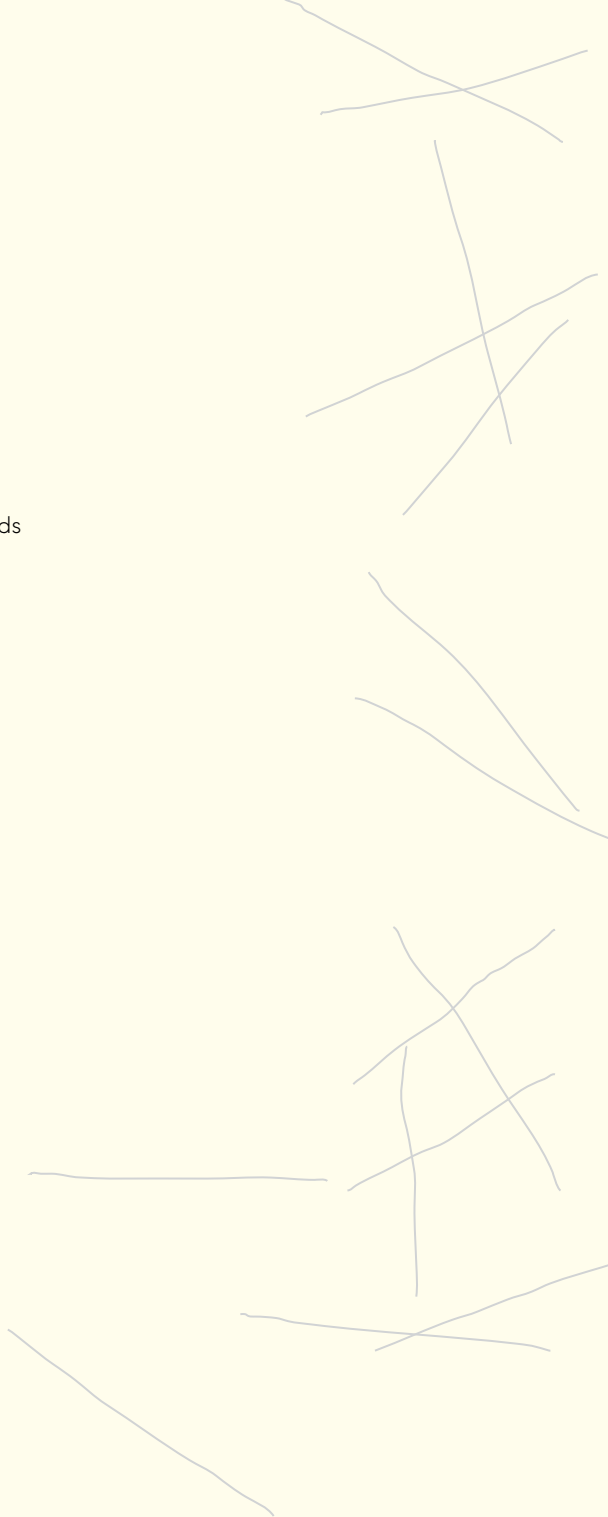
They removed my womb, yet every night I dream  
of giving birth in the city of refugees. Their knives speak  
the unspeakable. Hunger is a small boat capsized  
in a cardboard ocean. I read each envelope engraved  
with the names of the dead. Once there were weddings  
and wine. Now Bethlehem crawls towards the shore.  
I am trying to catch the headless horseman, snatches  
of the apocalypse on the radio. It makes no sense  
to murmur of rubble. I am praying for the roof to hold.

# NOCTURNAL

If I could steal a word from death,  
I think it would be scritchng.  
Claws sunk into soft flesh.  
How you could be running through fields  
when without warning your world  
becomes a whirl of feathers.

You are plucked into a sky of vast stars  
where there is no light left on  
to drive the shadows away.  
A place far beyond the trees  
from which it is impossible  
to send a postcard.

The solitary hoot  
of the owl as she whispers  
we will not pass this way again,  
we will not pass this way again.

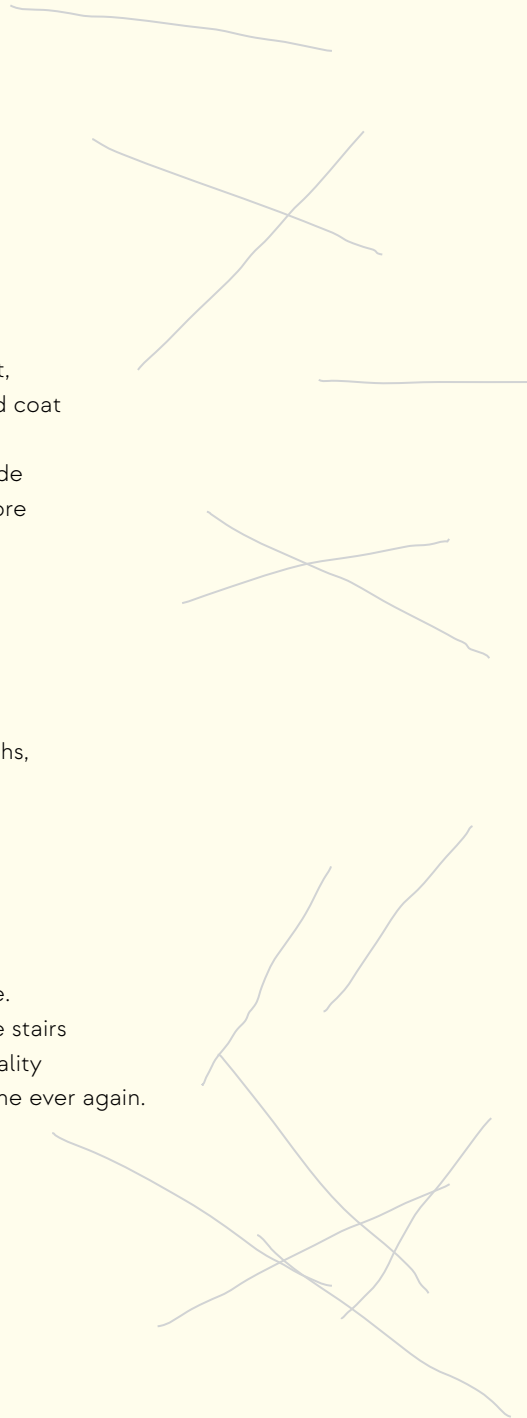


# SUPERNOVA


The sky is the ache of firecrackers,  
glimpsed Catherine Wheels, shooting stars.  
You take my hand as we step out into the night,  
the glitter of grief between us. A man in a gold coat  
conducting the orchestra of lost mothers.  
I have never been more naked. Rockets explode  
the tunes we used to dance to back when I wore  
a Jack 'O Lantern in my rib cage.  
My bones polished with white dust.

You wouldn't go to the funeral,  
though you sat in all those waiting rooms  
listening to the slow dripping of goodbye.  
You didn't recognise yourself in the photographs,  
but I remember that train station,  
how you smoked your cigarette, the flurry  
of your flaming leaves, ash upon the tracks.

Now a small boy sobs in my arms.  
He asks about palaces in the sky,  
parallel universes where the dead are still alive.  
I never had any answers. I was standing by the stairs  
holding my brother's denial. The absolute brutality  
of that song, when there would be no more time ever again.



# THEORIES OF RELATIVITY

The page is decorated with several thin, light blue lines that are drawn in a sketchy, hand-drawn style. These lines are scattered across the page, some crossing each other, and they appear to be part of a larger, faint drawing or doodle that is not fully defined.

Now the air has a bite to it, raindrops bounce  
and quark in gutters, flooding into cosmic rays  
that charge the morning with the question  
of whether the crossing will ever open.  
As I drive my son to school, he asks me  
if the universe is infinite. How do we know  
ninety five percent is dark matter?  
Perhaps it's like casualty figures.  
They count spaces in windows, gaps in photographs,  
whispering from the rubble. How do we measure  
the missing? How do we keep track of lost appointments,  
poor nutrition, heart failure, cholera? The unknown cost  
of suicide in slow motion, the contagion of grief.

So much of war is waiting. Bombs do not ask the ages  
of children, what religion their parents prayed in,  
how many goodnight stories they were read  
or what they hoped to be when they grew up.  
The arithmetic of dreams, the insomnia of hunger.  
How much fear there is in the tunnels. I tell my child  
we must heed this winter warning. As space accelerates,  
stars retreat. The radio speaks of Armageddon, an apocalypse  
of robots. I slow the car so as not to frighten a young deer  
trapped by the fence. The pause of breath as we beg for it  
to vanish into the safety of the woods. The tiniest mercy,  
a young boy's love for aliens, how we save what we can.

# BACK TO BLACK



In the inner space of tiny astronauts,  
we float down a long tube that holds  
diamond bubbles as they spin and pop.  
I no longer have a lining, I am a room  
that has been stolen. They say it won't hurt  
but there are knives in their tongues.

A woman curled beside a toilet,  
the cruelty of hormones, children starving.  
It is not just a question of holding on,  
it is the miracle of cherry blossom swirling  
in a midnight storm. The truth of vodka bottles,  
veins injected. Whether music makes us sick.

The denial of rehabilitation, how she sang  
of losing love as if it were a building collapsing.  
I remember the lions in the square, that Christmas  
I believed in babies, wedding rings, resurrection.  
Hope is the counting of cells under a microscope.  
I cannot give you what you want.

# ROCKET SHIP

Let the sapphire of the sky seep under my skin  
so that the blue of January is not bitten through  
by grey rats. They scurry through my mind  
with their nibbled question marks. Their teeth  
gnaw at the pipes under the floorboards. My nights  
are pockmarked with lost babies, indigo starfish.

You are dreaming your own murder mystery.  
Tiny glitches between parallel universes.  
Time pours through my hands. I am losing you to my phobia  
of being in two places at once. How we are both in this city,  
yet neither of us are at home. I write you letters about teeth  
because I don't know how to help you get the words out.  
I worry all these long car journeys through the storms  
of broken trees are stripping away your singing  
in the morning. Your turquoise melodies.

Do you remember when we both understood the tune?  
Before all these miles got lost in translation because I broke  
our house in two. I swear I only ever wanted to keep you safe.  
The waters rise around us. Noah made some tough choices  
between unicorns and the price of swimming. The lightness  
of dove feathers long after they've soared over the horizon.

# STATISTICS



The rain in April is cruel with casualties,  
emaciated children in long lines  
of decimal places, how much rubble  
weighs, the price of tents.  
I am running through the mud,  
trying to remember it is a privilege  
to have a roof over my head.  
To feel solid earth beneath my feet.

I have lost my fluency in suitcases.  
Starvation is a weapon of bureaucracy.  
A man drowns grasping  
a sky box of food for his family.  
It's not a gift if you're also buying bullets.

How can I tell my son this world is safe  
for him to question when other people's children  
cannot sleep for the whistle of missiles.  
How is this happening right now  
as I swerve through the last  
of the daffodils, their ragged petals  
open mouths of accusation.

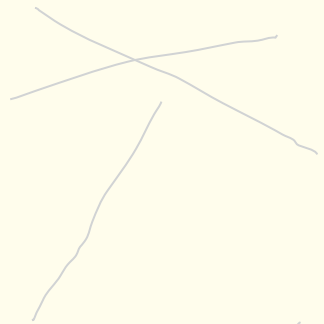


# BLOWN AWAY

The slaughter of confetti, pale pink pages floating  
from a photograph album you wished you had kept  
along with some of your father's books.

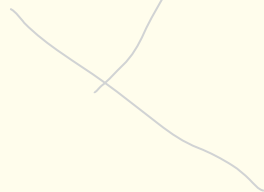
Once you were sipping sweet tea in the evenings,  
the taste of blossom on your tongue. Now you are  
on the road heading away from the rubble,  
the children so thin they are translucent.

A woman in her headscarf saying,  
'Yes, I survived, but there is no joy anymore.'  
They never came back from that march  
through the woods. It is spring when the birds believe  
in forgiveness. A chill wind shakes the branches.  
The petals swirl into gutters of snow  
and you know you will never go home.



# ETERNITY

You said you'd give death a one star review,  
not recommend it to your worst enemy.  
The ragged breathing, the prison breaks,  
the sitting in windows for weeks  
while the glass rattles, the regrets.  
You stopped to watch a fox turn slowly  
on a low broken wall, the flame of his tail  
in the last of the evening light.  
You said you didn't have time for this.  
The horse drawn carriage, the careful politeness  
of strangers. Time as a trapeze artist.  
The fox winks to let you know  
he has all the time in the world.



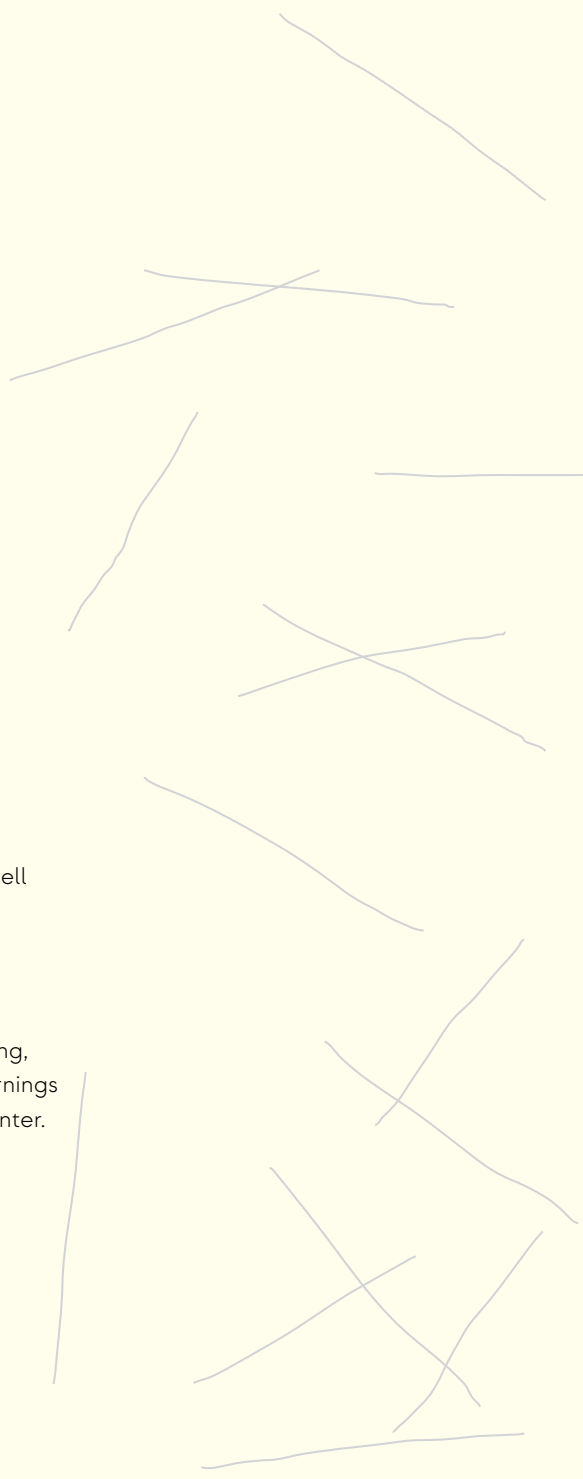
# MENDED

Once I was broken,  
my body a series of removals  
as they demolished my womb,  
my ovaries, packed up my breasts  
and shipped them to the South Pole.

I was under the ice in Antarctica,  
struggling for breath, then flushed  
with fire. My brain a rushing fog  
of panic, small black holes in my head.

My hands cracked and twisted,  
my lips blistered with the fear of 4am.  
Silence in the house, the absurdity  
of toe cramps as I limped through the shell  
of a marriage. My skin a thousand wasps.

Thick ash falling in front of my eyes,  
I was blind to the possibility of birth.  
Now the mirror has become more forgiving,  
my teeth ache with snowdrops. Most mornings  
I am apple blossom after the harshest winter.





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