

IMMA

Magazine

Us by Helen O'Leary

By Helen O'Leary
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Kiliane, 1965

Helen O'Leary's work has been described as an un-writeable novel. Her paintings draw on the experiences she had growing up on a farm in rural Wexford in the 1960s through the 1980s; "I revel in the history of painting, its rules, its beauty, its techniques, but fold them back into the agricultural language I grew up with. I'm interested in the personal, my own story, and the history of storytelling." Two of O'Leary's paintings were acquired for the IMMA Collection in 2018: [Refusal](#) (2014), and [The Problem with Adjectives](#) (2017), which was bought with support from the Hennessy Art Fund for IMMA Collection. The following short story is O'Leary's first published piece of writing. She was awarded the prestigious American Academy in Rome Prize 2018-2019.

US

We had a kitchen table in Kiliane. It was half old, with a new formica top that had been added in the fifties when they married. The table held our history, the worn color where Mam made the bread, the steady geometry of where we sat, her at the head with her

back to the Aga, the rest of us sitting in order of birth, my father and I nearest the door. The certainty of seating arrangements slowly expanded to the accommodation of strangers, tourists, renters with their stories of America, of lives we couldn't imagine, tourist board inspectors with their stern lists of improvements that would later sterilize and sanitize the house of any of its memory or signs of our family. We huddled under it in a tornado, as it circled the farm — all six of us pressed into the cement floor — as if its age and certainty could save us from the raging noises in the exterior world.

She had stopped the train as I headed off, with my red padded ski-jacket and blue backpacks, the color of their flag. *You're leaving us already* she said.

It was dark as the car headed down the hill of the harbour, other cars parked, children off to college, taking the train to Dublin or the boat to England. Dark, cold, engines off and on to give quick blasts of heat, the steaming windows, and the wipers scraping back and forth to keep a clear view of the station. Goodbyes, the unmentioned, unsaid in the way that only we know how — with mirth and without sentimentality or tears. *You'll mind yourself now*, she said as she handed me a roll of ten-pound notes from her cardigan pocket. *We're always here*. We could hear the train on the track and walked slowly towards the platform that we knew too well. It had been the two of us, taking on that world, rain or shine, carting tourists from that harbour in the back of the car, meeting the trains, facing the platform, reading faces. I had become good at spotting them, that lost look of the traveler, people with no plan or place to go, and I would walk up to them and offer them a room. We had kept the place going, when most said it should have been sold, and now it was time to step into the train with the same look I had become accustomed to spotting. Maybe all those trips down there in the dark, night after night, had been a rehearsal for leaving.

I sank into the seat, into the quiet steady beginning that trains have, across a table from a young German couple, just in off of the boat. I imagined I looked like one of them now, travelling journeyman people: light, youthful, expectant. I wanted to fit in and be their sort. I looked out into the black of the car park, searching for our car, imagining her loneliness at my leaving. We had been a team, working the harbour, each train, each boat — like the traders I knew later in Indian train stations.

The train stopped suddenly and without warning, before it got up any speed. I heard her hands on the window, knocking, a blue and white plastic bottle tight in her fist, mouthing something, eyes mad with urgency. She had given me what she could to protect me — the roll of money she had collected from selling knitted jumpers to tourists, medals on a safety pin sewn to the lining of my red coat, and a small bottle of Lourdes holy water I had forgotten on the dashboard. She slipped it in through the gap at the top window and I felt the eyes of the carriage upon me, marking me as local. I often thought of that bottle and my raging embarrassment. I left it long ago in a pile in one of many places I had rented those first few years in Chicago and what money I would give to have it back! I could see her as we left, one hand up above her head, reaching to the sky, a salute, lost in the bigness of the harbour.



Helen in the Studio – work in progress, from the series Safe House, Photo credit Eva O' Leary

January. I arrived into O'Hare with the searching look of hundreds of young tourists that had eaten at our table. I had seen the city on a map spread out there, explaining the scholarship, and what had been said about the college. It was an inch from Detroit, where Uncle Ben had gone in the thirties and came back with TB to a family that had too little already to take him on. Three inches from New York, where other relations had settled. They had returned once as tourists, with smiles and cameras, better dressed versions of ourselves. The map had been folded and unfolded, weighing the pros and cons of letting me go. She had heard tell of the city's weather, its ice, wind, heat, and stories of roughness and murder. We watched re-runs of Starsky and Hutch, and knew of the EL on Wacker Street. We listened to songs by Frank Sinatra, and imagined wealth, lights, snow, cars, people smiling over tables groaning with plenty. Tourists knew of the school — told her it had a reputation and I was lucky to get in, let alone get a scholarship. Some said wouldn't I be better off staying for a job in the bank, or taking over the farm and renting rooms as she had done?

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I had made a life in Chicago. The cold hit me now as I left the train, walking up the rise at the UIC stop. Paul had been mugged there when we were in college twenty years earlier. Maced as he walked up to Halsted, he had curled to the ground, blinded while they went through his pockets, twenty dollars and his fly-fishing rod, bag of paints, and a few clothes. I had fallen in love with his love of the rivers, his gentleness, how he took to Ireland and his understanding of how much it meant for me to go back there. We found a house in Leitrim, took it apart stone by stone and reassembled it into a home where we spent our summers. There our daughter Eva had learned the fiddle and how to catch a donkey and each year we added something to talk of our summer — a sweathouse, an outside bath, a house for goats, whitewashed walls, mosaics with glass dragged back from Venice. The house was down a lane and up a mountain, away.

The locals had been warm to us, perched up there on the hill — mud, clay, bushes bent into the wind. *You can't live on a view* was told to us again and again as we would pause in front of someone's house and admire the spread of Loch Allen underneath. We had learned to love the land, its worthlessness, how it had been abandoned, sold off to forestry, plot by plot, the geometry of their invasion clearly marked in black squares on the mountain. The drive down to the village was a winding descent into warm, moist beauty — the rushy land falling away from the road, the damp, a cloud of midges marking the arrival of the evening. Dinny, our neighbor, taught us how to read the sky, signs of rain a page long. He said it was so wet there that the birds have to crawl up onto the road to take off. We had taken Eva to Leitrim on our sabbatical, placing her into the local school, *to round the corners off her* the master had said, alluding to her soft American upbringing.

Each year we would close up the place with sadness, piling our books into plastic tubs to preserve them from the damp, putting things away as we imagined returning for good someday. We were called *the Yanks*, *the blow-ins*, and people would call by, with advice on the water schemes and grants, cows, the un-sticking of frogs from our taps, fences, forestry, cars, donkeys, jobs and (mostly) about our return to the US.



Helen O'Leary, *Refusal*, 2014, Bole clay, oil paint, polymer and pigment on constructed wood, 30.5 x 35.5 x 6.35 cm, Collection Irish Museum of Modern Art, Donated by the artist, 2018

I would tell stories of Kiliane to Eva, of how life was different in the place I had come from, and in many ways, escaped. She would hear stories of the tornado, the fire, the death of my father, how we had rented rooms, one by one, slept anywhere we could — *people*, and *us*. *People* were anyone other than *us*: peoples' food, peoples' rooms, their needs that were more urgent than ours, 'people' did things we didn't, had shining cars, holidays, suitcases. You couldn't get close to them, with their well-dressed children, Easter eggs, foreign holidays and smiling wives, intact families, other religions, languages. '*Us*' was just our reality. I'd tell her how we survived, Mam and me, hawking tourists at the ferry, reading faces, skipping school, of Mam's meningitis, bankruptcy, poisoned animals, books hidden and read while we milked the cows, old men with their leering looks and straying hands who cornered us against walls, how unbreakable our

spirits seemed on that shore, how we knew we belonged and would never sell it, no matter what the cost. I would tell her how I had learned everything I needed to know on the farm; painting in the cow house to the hum of the milking machine, drawing each cow in tar and black paint on the white walls, dusting blue chalk on their backs to mark which cow was done as we milked them until they all glowed Prussian blue against the sky in the high field.

I'd watch the pattern of milk clot into cow dung and the streaking white webbed patterns of Jeyes Fluid flowing down the yard as we hosed it off each morning. I told her I had learned of colour and kindness from animals and the power of repetition from labour, watching Mam square butter on the marble slab in the scullery, collecting eggs in the dark from the acrid cubicles in the hen house. With two roughened hands my father would hold me around my chest, lifting me above the keel of the boat, letting me slop warm tar from the big horsehair brush in long, rhythmic movements up and down the planks to keep out the leaks.

Whenever we drove down to Kiliane, with the sea on the side of the lane and Tuskar light house illuminating the lower field with the slow searching rhythm that I knew by heart, I would have a lift of return in my heart that soured as the days passed — the restrictions of boundaries, gates and lanes would press in on me, and the local men I had no respect for would soon have me scouring the estate agents pages of the papers for a house of our own, elsewhere.

Drumshanbo, and our house in Leitrim, was different from Kiliane, poorer — the same battles existed but they weren't our battles. It held a history, but not our history. The sky was bright until after midnight, and we could see the northern lights as we drove home from surfing in Sligo. There was no darkness to face, the black of the forest down the lane had the constant illumination of Mauds' light above on the mountain which told us she was home, safe, constant. We knew every star by heart.

Each year we would come back to the lunacy of the University, where we both had jobs, and tell stories of the characters we had met, or the follies we had added to the house. The plastering, the stone work, the leaks that were fixed, the roof that was patched up, the fences that shored us up against the rot of the world and could hold our spirits over for another academic year. Each spring we would count down the days and buy the tickets, Eva would pout at the prospect of yet another summer on the mountain, protesting with silent sulks at our nostalgic intoxication with the place.



Helen O'Leary, *The Problem with Adjectives*, 2017, Egg tempera, bole clay and silver leaf on constructed wood, 48.9 x 48.9 x 14 cm, Collection Irish Museum of Modern Art, Purchase, Hennessy Art Fund for IMMA Collection, 2018

January, it always marks beginnings ... my coming to America, the move to Pennsylvania, the leaving of Paul and my life for a life with Neil in Chicago. A time of year for starts, new year resolutions that would wear out with the coming of spring, exhausted by fall, lost and re-imagined the following January.

Neil kept his suits in the cupboard in the spare room that we had marked as my studio, picking his steps over the plastic we had taped atop the grey carpet to dress each morning, avoiding fresh splashes of paint color and the sharpness of stray staples. I would watch him dress, sipping coffee from a cup he liked that we had bought in Dublin, holding on to each moment before he left for the office. His suits were well-tailored, freshly pressed and recently taken in at the waist to accommodate the weight we had both lost with the blossom of new love and the strain of the divorces. The loft was near his firm, we could see its pointy tower from our table.

I had met him even before I met Paul, when I had first come to Chicago, twenty-five years earlier, looking for a job in an Irish bar that had a reputation for hiring straight-off-the boat people like myself. He was a lawyer, one of the handful of professionals working an occasional night at the bar to augment his salary. Each shift he would tell me stories of cases he was working on — murders, gangs in the inner city, crimes I had seen on *Starsky and Hutch* on our rounded television back in Kiliane.

In the bar, I was yet another emigrant of the eighties, another illegal, quick with her mouth, working her way back home. In school, I had a name, not “Irish” as we were all called, but a classification of my own: foreign student, with a student visa, motivated, one of many people from elsewhere that had an affinity and affection for difference. Neil had shown me respect, admiring my determination, noticing that I didn’t linger after my shift was finished, instead tipping out the bar and the door, drinking a half glass of wine and leaving the rest on the counter, then quickly slipping out into the night. He told me of his young children, his wife, their house in the suburbs of the North shore. I knew their names. I would talk of books I had read, the house I wanted to buy in Ireland once I had graduated, before the prices went up, the paintings I needed to make. He was marked by difference — intelligence and mirth, ambition, quickness, fullness of spirit — above everyone else in that world of easiness on Rush Street. He was nothing like so many of the barmen who would leer at women, over-serving and then screwing them in the beer cooler downstairs.

The years working the harbour had given me skills with crowds, reading faces, hustling, and I served more drinks than was humanly possible, and lived on less sleep than most people could manage. I had her determination and would wake each morning and walk to the school carrying a fresh shirt on a hanger ready for the evening’s work. I had learned tricks to keep the paint off my hands — soap under what nails I had, Vaseline, gloves — keeping a safe distance between love and money.

Working at the bar was like being back at the harbour, the ‘people’ and ‘us’ mentality that we had imagined to survive, the roughness of it, the other worlds that co-existed, the drink, the coarseness, facing the blackness of the door through which the gaudiness of that glitzy Chicago night world would enter. At the harbour other hawkers had jeered at us for thinking we were a step above buttermilk — who were we to think ours was different from the raw desperation of others, with our chins held in a way that insisted this was temporary? But once we stepped back into the shadow of the car and drove down the lane to Killiane, the certainty of our normal life would be resumed over cups of tea at the kitchen table.

It was the same in the bar — I would leave and take a taxi home in the black of night, showering thoroughly to rid myself of the clinging smell of smoke, changing hats for school in the morning.

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Years later I took Eva back to the bar on Rush Street, when she was home from art school for the holidays, to show her the ornaments at Christmas and the signs in curly arabesques of fake Celtic calligraphy that Paul had painted above the door for money before we left. The old man who owned the place was a legend in Chicago, part of the fabric of the city, as much a grandfather as Eva ever had. I had made a habit of visiting him when we could and was genuinely fond of him, my American father. He was the home I had over here, and had flown to Dublin for my first Irish solo show, and had

come to Pennsylvania to visit the University and see how and where I was living. When we visited, new girls from home would wait on us and he would tell them stories of how he had found me, stories of the legend I had created for breaking glasses and selling liquor.

We made that trip by train, over the years, back and forth from the depths of Pennsylvania, cutting a line across the country with bags of books, through the never-ending stretch of Ohio. Gary, Indiana, was the marker that told us we were close, with its stench, children fishing its stagnant chemical pools, a bleak existence held together with clouds of smog. That first January, when we moved to Pennsylvania, we had the car packed with our belongings, Eva strapped in a baby seat, surrounded by bags, pots, pans, paintings and books. We hadn't much to move — things we had collected in thrift stores had been left on the curb in Wicker Park, and we had contained the move to a small trailer towed behind the car. I was fiddling with the dial as we approached Gary, panning between Christian radio and traffic reports, I let it rest on a rock station. The Doors came in loud and clear, *this is the end* blared through the speakers between the garbled pauses of interrupted channels. We didn't speak as we snaked our way through the town, the dank oppressive stench matching the darkness of the song and our own apprehension about leaving Chicago. In many ways it was an end of sorts, this leaving of our loft on the west side, with studios in the city. We were trading our scrappy life of imagination — our young bohemian days, our early marriage — for the meager security of a University job with health benefits.



Helen O'Leary, *The Shelf Life of Facts*, installation view, MAC Belfast, 2016, image courtesy the artist

I had wanted to write and ask Neil how much paint had crept inside that plastic on the studio floor in Chicago. Had he lost the security deposit because of it, or had he filled in my colour with new carpet, replacing me with new modular industrial squares? Had any of me leaked in, indelible, worming its way to a hole or a tear, had it been found later with annoyance when all had been packed and removed into a storage unit in the suburbs? The boxes were labeled HO, like a third of a Christmas card. I had worn red patent shoes to the partner ball, glinting scarlet at the end of my long black dress, *bed*

shoes he had called them, as we dressed that evening, when I pinned his tuxedo with the blue sapphires from his grandfather's wardrobe.

Blue and red, I should have known it signaled another leaving. We had stood in my studio putting our bits of finery together, paint at his feet, bracing me for the night ahead. We were 'us,' both of us, together the same species, heading to a party of 'people.' Names of partners, names of their wives, who to avoid, seating arrangements. The pecking order of the firm, arranged by power, and our table was at the centre.

Bad luck to put shoes on a table my mother would have said, *a death in the house*. He had sent a box of clothes at my request before I left for Paris, the red shoes on top with a note.

It's hard to get vomit out of leather — by rights you should just throw it away. Wine takes a bit of doing but you can manage it if you get to it early enough. I had loved the jacket, found in a little second-hand shop on my way to the metro, piles of clothes, like dung hills closing in on the room, the thin man with his dreadlocked dog shared the same walk of a broken mechanical toy. There were two paths in the shop, one to left leading to larger piles of clothes and one to the desk where the man sat and sorted through his inventory of sundries. The dog lay on a pile near the desk. I had watched him try to walk one day, stumbling and tripping on his long-matted hair, hobbled by ornament, stopping and starting, unable to maneuver beyond the pile of clothes that had become for him an upholstered cage. I'd go in for a root around on my way home, invariably finding a deal, and the blond leather jacket was the jackpot. Five euros. I had just enough French to barter, not enough to ask the man why he lived in that shop, or who he was, with his lame dog, and his bedraggled customers carrying mysterious bags which he would then carefully label and pile against the wall. I had wanted to take photos but was always too embarrassed to ask. Four months in Paris, I had got the hang of it, the Metro, getting lost and found in happy rotation, unconcerned by clocks or the logistics of maps.

The studio was in the courtyard at Culturel Irlandais, a quiet solitude amongst the tortured trees and raked gravel. I had moved with two suitcases, ordering supplies of pigments from Germany. I painted with plastic on the floor, deliberately dripping paint on shredded canvas, *to find where it'd settle*, I said. I would count the days when I didn't think of him, didn't check my email for hours on end, falling in love with paintings in the Louvre, with Le Corbusier, with my colleagues. The five of us from our different lives gathered around the kitchen table in the smallness of the kitchen and at Teddy's bar with its leopard skin decor after a day's work. I fell in love a million times that summer, first with Eva as she made it from the airport alone, arriving from San Francisco with no French and a disabled iPhone, indignant at my direction to make it downtown to me alone. Visiting to spend her twenty-first birthday and sharing my bed, we walked miles each day arm-in-arm, taking photos of each other, of odd things. I watched her eye as it developed a view of its own, the pictures she would take of me in front of couples making out, writhing in their own world of absorbed love, a backdrop to my singularity. I fell in love with my new camera — bought with the grant the University had given me before I left — with copper pots I collected at flea markets, with solitude, with the slowness of my routine, with people who sold me bread and with kindness. And finally,

after four months of walking, silence, forgetting — there was forgetting I was trying to forget.

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Neil skyped me, at my insistence, two days before I left, while I was packing to come back, and told me some of what happened. I asked had he married, he said he had. I asked was she younger, he said she was. I asked him if I knew her, he said yes. I asked him if he had a baby, he said he did. A boy, with blue eyes, he said. I asked if he could pack my things and send them back to Pennsylvania. He promised he would.

People.

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