

The image shows two wooden sculptures of a woman, one upright and one inverted, carved into a log. The sculptures are positioned vertically on a dark, textured surface. The upright sculpture on the left shows the woman's face, torso, and legs. The inverted sculpture on the right shows the woman's face, torso, and legs from the opposite perspective. The wood is dark and weathered, with some lighter areas where the sculpture is carved. The background is a dark, textured surface with some small white specks.

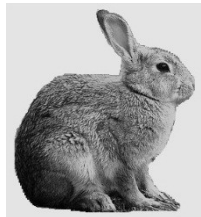
**Rootless**

**Jennifer  
Matthews**

**Smithereens Press**

# Rootless

Jennifer Matthews



Smithereens Press 13

*Rootless*

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Rootless

*For Daithí Mór and Monkey Óg*

## Settlers

My ancestors found the word  
*pioneering*  
a map to reckless country  
all trails ending in gold  
lust.  
Not for them  
*the green breast of the new world;*  
better a homestead  
near a muddy river  
to perfect the craft  
of traps,  
the sale of flesh and fur.

They fed offerings  
to the ravenous current:  
broken wagons,  
rebellious slaves,  
spent horses.  
Any body  
yoked to sorrow.

Every Sunday they wove  
baskets of prairie grass  
to sail, empty,  
down the water,  
lifting a song of praise:

*Make my home  
in Saint Forget-me.  
On the banks of limbo,  
give me an eternal bed.*

## Inheritance

Piety is for sale on historic Main Street  
where mock-Amish quilts boast 'Humility Blocks'  
honouring God by deliberate error,  
one square turned contrary to the larger pattern.

In my mother's kitchen a fond confession  
is folded tidily over an oak rack:  
Great-Grandmother's work isn't fussy cut,  
refuses patterns — no broken-stars, no log cabins.

Stitched simply in squares to mark each family birth  
with the best of a farming woman's education:  
*Mary Pledger Fowler borned 1892.*  
*Wanda Lea Bice borned 1938.*

## Breakfast with Bonnie

*For WM*

Wake to small footed pyjamas,  
small footed minutes  
and the thick  
second hand tock  
insists, insists  
I wait on my pile of pillows.

The burbling percolator  
is pre-set to hiss,  
fat seizes on bacon;  
for now  
the kitchen is ticking  
over without you.

In some other room  
your spiky rollers,  
your economical lips.  
I know you  
by your starched robe,  
its bleached  
blue.  
I know the scuff  
of your thin house shoes.

Every fixture in this place  
either clicks or spits,  
not at me, but for me.  
Soon  
my breakfast.  
Soon your cigarettes.

## Bone Woman

I am your centre,  
the scaffold  
to which your meat clings.  
I am  
your ill-fitting  
puzzle:

the jaw bone click and slip,  
gritty grinding neck,  
vertebrae twists and cracks  
sore knuckles  
and ankles  
joint to joint  
rubbed bare.

Within, holes  
blossom,  
consuming the calcified  
lace of me.

Minute  
to day  
to decade –  
soon  
I will be  
more  
s p a c e  
than skeleton.



## Tenancy

Rentals have no grandchildren  
to attend creaks and drips,  
so long  
as the skeleton stands  
the house is self  
sufficient.  
The entrance wall weeps  
where the neighbour's chimney  
has crumbled in disrepair.  
Bricks sprout  
a wig of weeds;  
terraced gutters are clogged  
with a hairline of grass.  
Into the bedroom ivy creeps  
under the windowsill,  
an encroaching strand, unwelcome  
as newly sprouted ear-hair.  
Fungus blossoms  
a Rorschach test above the bed  
where the ceiling is befuddled  
under an exposed attic,  
to be covered  
in emulsion upon tenant complaint.  
We're told: *Cosmetic concerns –  
expect mould and damp.*  
We don't mention  
the séance knocks of walls settling,  
the dirge of pipes  
clanging for visitors.

## Pest

You were a timid flatmate  
winter-huddled and crouched  
in a dark corner  
hands fidgeting, eyes watering  
waiting for me to go.

I was advised our relationship  
was unhealthy,  
my keeping you as a pet.  
You'd mistaken my crumbs  
for sympathy; I hid my food.  
I'd mistaken your peek in the room  
for a greeting; you scrambled  
retreat.

It was clear you'd never leave  
so I set the latch to wood,  
queasy when it flapped back  
and nipped my fingertips  
'til I could commit  
to the necessary force for a trap.

For two nights, you rejected homely  
dinners of cheese and peanut butter.  
On the third I tried seduction –  
a chocolate square, caramel oozing  
around the hidden spike.

## Rootless

It seems you were a romantic.

I woke to a smear of red on the floor  
where your soft body worried in circles.  
I stooped to clean our mess,  
discarded the evidence,  
and set out my apples again.

The poppy's lips promised escape,  
a birth in reverse,  
its roots curled like beckoning fingers.

I plucked it, shook free  
the clinging dirt  
and the ground ripped open for me.

Through the gash a dark man came  
and I dove into his river  
to my marriage bed.

Neglect wintered the world behind me,  
above me. My twin-mother's grief  
took every living thing hostage.

Under world, I sucked pulpy seeds,  
nails hooked in the rind of my husband's fruit,  
juice seeping in streams down my chin.

Witnesses would return  
to advise her  
this was no kidnapping.

## Starter Home

Alone on a mantel coated in dust, a Child  
of Prague won't meet our gazes.  
You think the nest in the fireplace romantic;  
I trace the wall's mouldy cracks  
to their conclusions –  
dead-ends in cobwebbed corners.  
A bee bashes his soft body  
at the other side of the window, testing  
again and again the invisible barrier.

Not yet woken from *what ifs* we walk  
the small road to the beach, single file,  
keep clear of cars rushing home.  
Facing the ocean we sit side by side  
to play make-believe, old as we are,  
calculating every imaginary resource  
save the change  
in my pocket.  
Silent,  
I dig my feet into sand.  
You bury your hands.

Before us, waves  
tumble and grasp –  
failing  
failing  
failing  
to leave the shore.

## Daithí Mór

Man of deep chest  
there are stones inside, swallowed whole  
next to a child's song and a child's tractor.  
You make a well inside for me to drink.

Man of long arms  
they are branches that reach over oceans  
retrieve histories, leaves  
your fingers. You let me pluck them  
before autumn.

Man of broad shoulders  
you hold graves and grandfathers on them,  
they pull roads behind you as you run.  
You make a house with them for my head.

## Planning Permission

We built our home on the back of an old god  
being lovers of big sky and flat roads.  
Careful to follow sound practice, we kept  
far from karst pits, stayed well above flood plains,  
read our prayers to the bruised sky,  
and made sure the basement door was unlocked.

One night the winds shifted, unsettled.  
Inside me, the baby swam somersaults.  
Our cats retreated to nowhere.  
When the cicadas' metallic shiver  
gave way to the kettle-cry of the siren,  
we descended into the god-body – our bunker  
where we knelt on rugs, foreheads to the floor,  
hands on our crowns, as the vortex  
rumbled and raged above.

We crawled, at dawn, from under the walls  
we were still paying for, reborn,  
but could not find words to praise –  
surrounded by a litany of blasted windows,  
a road lined in medals of crumpled cars  
and a congregation of debarked trees,  
their long arms pointing away from the earth.

## After the Flood

*Cork, 2010*

We made a game of disaster.  
Above fishbowed shops  
swapped cups of tea  
for cigarettes with neighbours.  
Perched in windows  
over roads that became rivers,  
watched the defiant glide  
of kayaks out for sport,  
for laughs lapping their oars  
into the tainted deep  
and slicing back up to the light.

By evening the question  
of water deepened: its absence  
in homes where the hiss  
of air through shower heads  
echoed hollow hope,  
mothers tested taps cold and hot,  
twisting on and off.

When the Lee unclenched its grip  
from the city centre  
our divers dispatched to canals,  
met first their own reflections  
on the brown-black water  
before the plunge and search

to retrieve our evening news:  
the body lost,  
the grief deluge  
that rose above our bolstered dam,

the flood that was invited  
to keep a lost boy home.

## Ghost Driven

Your children are ghost driven,  
their tiny voices hoarse.  
Lamp post, glowing rusted  
light against dark.  
Rattle of loose pram wheels,  
of growing into hearse bones.  
Your oldest flat on the pavement,  
his dome cracked open,  
a blue yolk inside. Dying direction  
of idolatry, of fathers.

Your internal clock clicks  
*midnight midnight midnight.*  
Sticking up to centrifugal heaven,  
your dreamspine –  
Look up:  
a balance of shoes,  
strung on telephone lines,  
buzzing nonsense. Headspun.  
Starstruck. Skull down  
in two hands, like the family cat.

## Prayer

Branches puzzle-cut  
the morning  
    light. I  
step forward,  
    inspect  
        a waiting web,  
then

wake.

        Spider  
    retreats  
as cones and rods  
    take in the low relief  
        darkness  
    of a borrowed room.

In the hiss of heaters'  
    shush,  
I cannot  
    discern  
        if I should rise  
    or fall  
back within  
my cloth cocoon —

no answer

offered by spider  
    or radiator  
        the question lies  
    on my chest,  
    night-feeding.

## Tantalus

*For Monkey Óg*

Arms branched for balance  
you flap flightless, bend  
to the flesh of the apple  
I've just bitten open.

Gums rake the grainy hollow,  
press and press again. Nothing  
breaks. Eyes wide, you suckle  
what sweetness you can,  
while I promise you  
something cutting  
will come through the pink.

## *Acknowledgements*

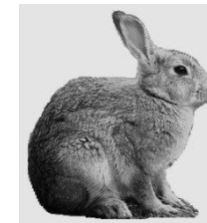
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