

A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing

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PART I

LAMBS

1

For you. You'll soon. You'll give her name. In the stitches of her skin she'll wear your say. Mammy me? Yes you. Bounce the bed, I'd say. I'd say that's what you did. Then lay you down. They cut you round. Wait and hour and day.

Walking up corridors up the stairs. Are you alright? Will you sit, he says. No. I want she says. I want to see my son. Smell from dettol through her skin. Mops diamond floor tiles all as strong. All the burn your eyes out if you had some. Her heart going pat. Going dum dum dum. Don't mind me she's going to your room. See the. Jesus. What have they done? Jesus. Bile for. Tidals burn. Ssssh. All over. Mother. She cries. Oh no. Oh no no no.

I know. The thing wrong. It's a. It is called. Nosebleeds, head aches. Where you can't hold. Fall mugs and dinner plates she says clear up. Ah young he says give the child a break. Fall off swings. Can't or. Grip well. Slipping in the muck. Bang your. Poor head wrapped up white and the blood come through. She feel the sick of that. Little boy head. Shush.

She saw it first when you couldn't open your eye. Don't wink so long wind'll change and you'll stay that way. I'm not Mammy. It's got stuck. She pull it open. Hold it up. I can't it's all fall down.

And now Holy Family on a Saturday night. He is leaning you are sleeping she the chair me whirlabout. Listen in to doctor chat. We done the best we could. There really wasn't much. It's all through his brain like the roots of trees. Sorry. Don't say. That. He's running out I'm afraid. I'm afraid he's running down. You should take him home,

enjoy him while you can. He's not. He is. Can't you operate again? We can't. Shush. Something? Chemo then. We'll have a go at that.

Gethsemane dear Lord hear our prayer our. Please. Intercession. Night in hospital beds. Faces on the candlewick. Lino in the knees. Please don't God take. Our. Holy Mary mother of all, humbly we beseech thee.

You white-faced feel the needle go in. Feel fat juicy poison poison young boy skin. In your arteries. Eyeballs. Spine hands legs. Puke it cells up all day long. No Mammy don't let them.

Weeks for you. Weeks it. Scared and bald and wet the bed. Dark trees outside for me when it weather rains. She praying in a coat until I am froze. Hard chapel kneelers bare-kneed real repents. She does. And our father was. Where? Somewhere there. I think.

There's good news and bad news. It's shrunk. He's saved. He's not. He'll never be. So like it lump it a short breath's what you've got. Jesus in her blood that minute. Rejoice sacred heart of Christ. But we'll never be rid do you understand? he says. Shush now she says shush.

Your pink face make that sitting up the best thing she's ever done. Watching you going growing hair. Scabby over slices where scalpels were. Don't look. Telling what's the time and where you are. Makes her happy. Makes our father. Walk down corridors alone.

He says I can't be waiting for it all the time. I'd give my eyes to fix him but. The heart cannot be wrung and wrung. And she like calmest Virgin Mary sitting on the bed. Hands warming up her sides for. What're you saying? Breath. Going? Leaving? But he's just stopped dying. This one's to come. Please don't no I won't stop you. Could never make you do a thing. You'll support us. Aren't you great? Oh the house is mine. It's for the best. For who you me? Board my body up. I'm not for loving. Anymore. I'll live for housework. Dressing kids. And you for mortgage new shoes spuds. Can't live short hope but gas bills long and paid on time too. Oh so kind. Aren't you the fine shape of a man.

He left her with a fifty pound note. Take care! Stroke combing full untidied hair. Thinking I think of you and me. Our empty spaces where fathers should be. Whenabouts we might find them and what we'd do to fill them up.

But didn't time continue still. Where's Daddy? Gone. Why's that? Just is. And yelp she at the strength growing to your tips. Poke belly of baby that's kicking is me. Full in myself. Bustling hatchery. And I loved swimming to your touch. Lay on the lining for your strokes for you secret pressed hello's. Show my red foot. Look. Look there. Baby when you're born I pick your name. See you and me were busy with each other long before I came.

She was careful of you. Saying let's take it slow. Mind your head dear heart. And her guts said Thank God. For her gasp of air. For this grant of Nurse I will. Learning you Our Fathers art. And when you slept I lulled in joyful mysteries glorious until I kingdom come. Mucus stogging up my nose. Scream to rupture day. Fatty snorting like a creature. A vinegar world I smelled. There now a girleen isn't she great. Bawling. Oh Ho. Now you're safe. But I saw less with these flesh eyes. Outside almost without sight. She, asking after and I'm all fine. Hand on my head. Her hand on my back. Dividing from the sweet of mother flesh that could not take me in again. I curled there learning limb from limb. Curdled under hot lamps. Sorrow lapped. I'm so glad your brother's lived. That he'll see you. It'll all be. But. Something's coming. Wiping off my begans. Wiping all my every time. I struggle up to. I struggle from. The smell of milk now. Going dim. Going blank. Going white.

Two me. Four you five or so. I falling. Reel table leg to stool. Grub face into her cushions. Squeal. Baby full of snot and tears. You squeeze on my sides just a bit. I retch up awful tickle giggles. Beyond stopping jig and flop around. I fall crack something. My head banged. Oop. Trouble for you. But. Quick the world rushed out like waters. Slap of. Slap of everywhere smells kitchen powder perfume soap of hedges in the winter dogs and sawdust on a butcher's floor. New. Not new. I remember. Patterned in my brain. I feel the carpet under that scratch me when you drag my leg. I know its gold and turquoise coils. Flowers on. Leaves for green. The couch leg I drawn red biro in the grain. Digging. Singing long long ago in the woods of Gartnamona I heard a blackbird singing in a blackthorn tree. Oh. That's come from. Come from where? I can't remember any before.

You bent over. Don't cry don't cry. Trot it out. I think I might. Don't. Whinge get beats for you or me. Wooden spoon worse than hands or clip on the ear. I'll give you something to cry about. Making a holy show with that big lip. Stop your gurning. Sorry Mammy. I won't cry so, though something's happen in my head. I woke up. And stare at your brown hair. Soft boyish bob on your round face. Must be the washing brushing combing of it. Attentive loving mother. I remember. I have seen. Such a pride and joy in him. Those doctors nurses said it would not. Dead in follicle dead in root. But there it is she says sprigging away. Don't pull it you, giving slap hand for me.

I flee from washing brushing. Get the teeth in good and deep. Too much. That knuckling scrubbing. Like soap suds scalp scratched in. She'll work her arms out. No lice here. No disease. No psoriasis or dandruff for many miles to see.

I'll jump the bath when she has me. Running with my headful of shampoo shouting no Mammy no no no. Cold chest where water hits windscreen belly in the rain. Down those stairs fast as I can. Shampoo on my forehead. In my eyes. Nettle them. Mammy. Yelling Lady you come back or you'll get what for. A mad goat I'll be. Rubbing bubbles. Worse and worse and hotter like mints I'll turn my nose at. Always get me. In the hall. You by wormy bit of hair. Lug me rubbing ankle skin up the stairs. She in sudgy ocean. You just settle down. Quicker over the quicker's done. I am boldness incarnate, little madam little miss. Put back your head I'll wash it down and off your face. Haaaa wat. Blow spit. Thhh. Bubbles. Muckle face with a cloth. There for your bubbles. Eejit. Don't you want hair like your brother's? See that lovely shiny bright. I do. Out in handfuls but two years on – as good as you. Doctors nurses. So now so. For little limp and tunnel vision aren't bad when you are well.

Teeth is though. Worse you than me. All rotted yours. Nothing even like milk. Just keep an eye it's normal after all he's had. His news'll come in and should be fine. Not black, she said and threw them out. Spoiled not washed or washed enough. And would not keep them in a matchstick box. Mine are safe. Don't touch. Safely in my head. When yours weren't you wouldn't like to see the look on her face. Being reminded. So you make secret seconds in Wrigley's spearmint gum. Stick in the gaps in case she said open up. She says wash your teeth God's sake every other child has theirs. But the doctor said. You could have kept a few I'm sure. Yes Mammy. Don't just yes Mammy me. Mammy yes. You said always yes when I did no. Poor teeth yours and not the fifty p's I'll sue. For no good reason either. Lucky. Blessed I was. Your second lot were hard sturdy. And you take care. Though you'd have liked them better then, I'd say, than now.

We're living in the country cold and wet with slugs going across the carpet every night. Now when you are seven eight. Me five. This house, green growing up the outside.

You and me having slug scum races from the doorway to the source where is it. Get that dirty thing out of this house I don't know where they get in. We wondered ever, seeking slug nests in the sofa. Under the grate and found a lizard running hell for leather in the ash. Come in with the coal black buckets but it was hot too hot. Under the fire in cinder we rake back and forth. It bolt out you were faster still than me. Scoop it up in time it might have been a newt I think. Get a jam jar get it. Stuck in that twig. I wallowed in its turning eye. Sickish in my throat, thinking it feels scum like slug roads. Never you ever touch it. A slap for every word of warn we get. Never. Ever. Touch. That. Dirty. Thing. It'll. Give. You. Warts. That. Is. Di. Sgust. Ing. Still we kept its jam jar in the shed until I broke it it died of fright you said and threw it at the cat who ran. Fat cat full of shit. Oh-e oh-e oh-e what you said. Yellow squirting if you touched him. Don't. Pick. Up. That. Dirty. Cat.

Blasted in the winter. Pelted and rain rush under the kitchen door. She slap it with a broom away. Bunch up papers under there. Look at that. Streaming down the walls and windows full of damp. God forsaken house it is look out it's lashing down.

You and me swimming star wars in the puddles of it. Lino reefs of other worlds. My dirty fingers picking bigger holes. And made the stairs Niagara Falls and threw men over tied with wool. Lie on

our stomachs eating piece of bread with butter sugar on top. A glass window Mammy I want one. Don't get it on my floor.

Howl winter all through the night that year in the trees where we climbed on and the hedges on the road. No cars here. No one comes. Things crying in the fields for me. Say they want me and coming down the walls for. She's coming Mammy. Who? The banshee. Don't be silly. Sure isn't your brother here? Won't he mind you if anything comes along. Should I close the door or leave it open? I don't know. Shut bad out or shut it in? Worse you. And said They are coming. For you and me. Stop it. Coming for us and we're without the knife. What knife? The one that goes with the magic machine. What is it? Makes the noise for killing bad things. A big dark tunnel bangs. How do you know? That's what I had, me shouting it burns awful ahhhhh. The doctor said fire came out my eyes. He didn't. He did and these aren't mine. They are so. Mine melted. These are goat's. Goat eyes and the devil wants them back. My throat's closing. Shut up. Ugh shut up. Mammy? But wakes me in the night. Goat eyes riding off into the sky.

Always in the house, drifting round the stairs or sitting by our puddles little beast in your head. Sleeping happy homed up your brain stem now and fingers only strumming on your bad left side. Don't you knock your brother's head. You stumble. Not that bad. And walking into doors a laugh. Is blind eye at side like in eyelid? No. Lake water? No. Like glass? You said it is like nothing at all. It must be something what? And words, trace stammer of. At school why do you talk like that? Notoriety it likes maybe. It's in your sums X and red lines through a copy book for no no no. Wrong, the teachers writing, I explained this all to you. Wrong you do not understand. Wrong not listening paying attention in class. Again. No, you were not.

It's clear it's clear it's there it's there. Cosy kernelled in your head. It must have strings pulling all the time. Sly in affection. Nasty thing. Having a chew. Nails dug for claws. Her blind spot I think when you were small. No you're better. No you are, turned her good eyes blind.