

THIEF OF FIRE

ISSUE II

“THE HEEL OF THE BATCH”



With special thanks to the contributors of this issue:

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HEEL
OF
THE BATCH

BACKWARDS BUTTERED

20/08/24

Dear Nick,

How lovely it is to be writing you another letter and apologies for how long it has been since the last one! For my birthday¹, I was gifted a subscription to the New Yorker. I have since learned how much time and diligence is required to stay on top of a WEEKLY (really it is impossible) publication. So, in fact, I am doing you a favour by taking so long between letters - this way you have months to read and read ... and read again the wonderful prose, art and poetry that fill the pages of these letters. YOU'RE WELCOME².

This issue explores moving from home and growing up. It is an enormous and hugely individual experience - the individuality of it all can result in an isolating feeling at times, so, as many gear up for another reshuffling of the geographical cards this August, I thought it was the perfect time to explore this theme and give those lonely emotions some company.

It was at this point in the letter I wanted to write something cool and slice-of-life to show you how life has been fun and exciting in ordinary ways. But I can't, I keep re-writing it, and now, have run out of time and have to go to work (the Royal Albert Hall waits for no man). I am currently working many many extra hours to make up for the time I spent running around Ireland with the band playing multiple exciting and memorable gigs, including our first ever shows in Galway and at Electric Picnic!!

Yours, from under a pile of half-read New Yorkers,
Lucy.

¹ May 27th for your information - I haven't received a gift from you yet but am assuming it's just in the post still.

² God I forgot how fun footnotes could be. They are the participation medals of essays really aren't they. But sometimes they contain really good and cool stuff like secrets!! Secrets like that I have a sneaky massive concert unlike anything I've done before this December. But that's a secret so don't tell anyone - it is purely for the footnotes.



MISTER MOUSE

John Armstrong

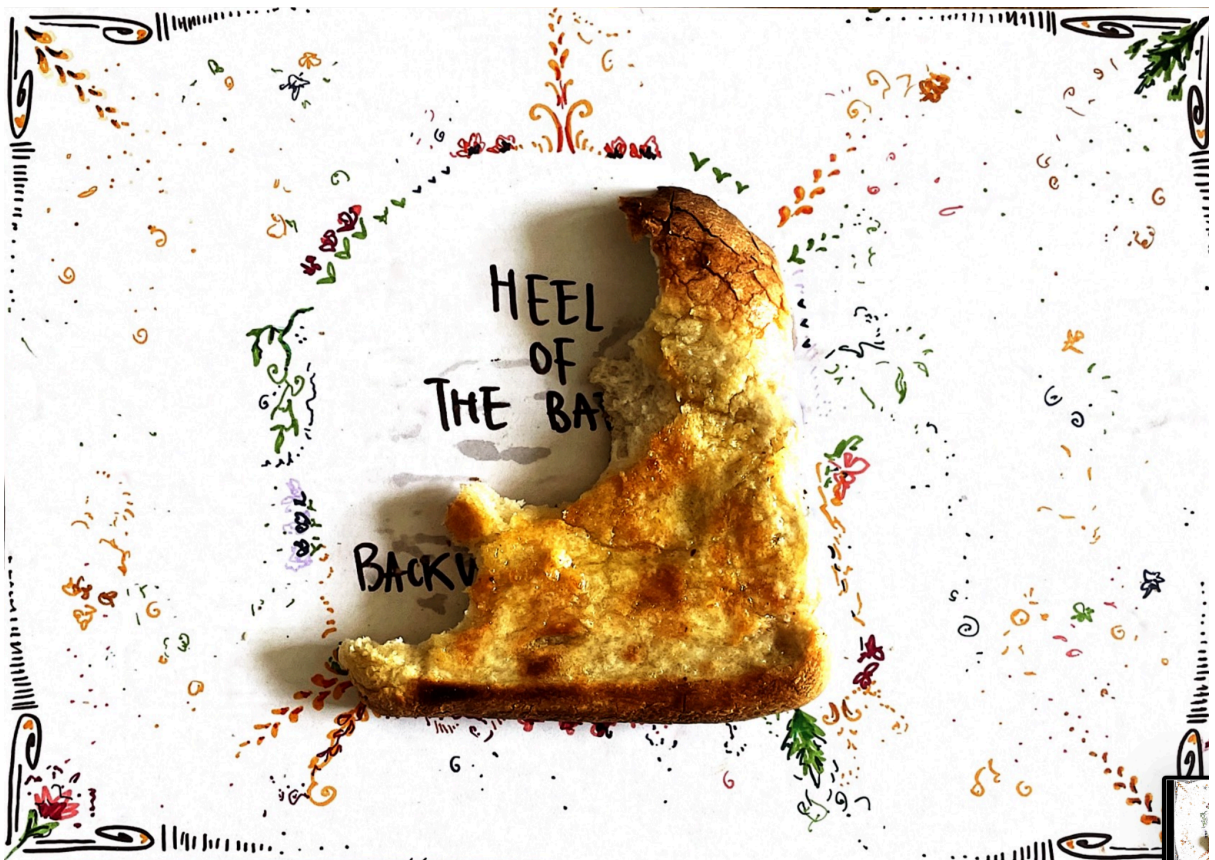
mister mouse I love you but get out of my house

and we're out the front door and onto third avenue like a couple of bad burglars me and mister mouse and it's not even early yet but I've never felt more awake like maybe instead of caffeine they should do instead: adrenaline! and I'm holding my dislocated sock drawer way out in front of me like a tray of eels containing 1. my socks and 2. you mister mouse cosy and hidden and scrabbling softly and it's misting softly down like you'd imagine it would do under the late night lights of london town and my socks are already damp both in the drawer and on my feet because I didn't even think to put on my shoes and I'm resisting revulsion at what my toes might be meeting down there on the street just as I resisted revulsion at you mister mouse when I first saw you hesitating by the bin and your tail! even if based on the way sorchia first squealed I expected a forearm rat with fingernail fangs and not a dumpy marsupial less cunning than a box of fish fingers but you instantly became our house mascot mister mouse because after all in the beginning when things are new and hard you're supposed to have mice and everybody wanted to call the man with the traps because of all your little shits by the weetabix but I convinced them to let me sort it maybe because I hate the thought of somebody's home filled up with traps so I lay in wait for you mister mouse lying awake rolling slowly sleepless around my bed because you became my responsibility mister mouse and what is responsibility if not a 5am mission under a bleary sky and how far is far enough that you can't find your way back home but look at us! I'm usually so terrible at leaving the house I'm almost late for every audition because I have to stand there looking at the hob and then go half way to the door and then turn around and go back and stand there looking at the hob and then go three quarters to the door and then turn around and go back and stand there looking at the hob counting one two three one two three one two three one two three one two three so that even if there's this sick certainty in my stomach that flames will burst up the second I turn my back at least I've counted to three five times so when the firemen are busy wrapping my housemates in tinfoil blankets out on third avenue at least I can say I tried my best mister mouse I counted to three five times! now look at us stepping out without a second thought like brand new babies with soft beautiful brains not even worrying whether we pulled the door behind us because I'm too busy worrying about honestly you mister mouse because how can you expect to survive out here in this city full of ois and mates and are you having a laughs and you like a soft pouch full of tiny mouse bones and me in my soggy rotten socks how will we survive mister mouse when I catch a chill and have to lay in bed for weeks and miss all my auditions and who will bring me tea and toast

and rub my head? I used to imagine life like a piling up but now I think maybe it's more like a gentle gnawing away because I'm losing pieces just as fast as I'm gaining them and I don't think I ever had to properly say goodbye to anything until I was already too old to learn how so now even the tiniest departures are painful but there's no time for that now because now we're approaching the park railings and what better place for mister mouse to build his house than among the bushes and crisp packets so I stand in my pyjamas in the rain trying to decide how best to separate you from my socks without flinging everything all down around me like depressed confetti because respectfully mister mouse I'm still not sure I can stand the sight of you and your tail so I set the drawer down on the pavement and look up into the streetlight hoping that you'll make a run for it while I'm pretending to be distracted and I even give the drawer a soft little kick with my big toe but when I look down I can still see the tremble of you beneath my socks and I think mister mouse we should make a pact to worry about each other as much as possible because I think the more we worry about each other the less we

worry about ourselves and the less we get caught in our household traps and the more we can work to build better things for each other because if it were me instead of you hiding in that drawer I could never have carried it out of the front door without even putting on my shoes so here's my decision mister mouse I'm giving you my drawer and all my socks as a gift because each sock for you is as big as a sleeping bag and I can always buy new socks mister mouse but you cannot because you are after all a no money mouse who never made rent and this way I can shut the front door behind me and drape my wet socks over the back of a kitchen chair and climb the stairs back into bed and lie there worrying about somebody else safe in the knowledge that somebody else out there is worrying about me.





BRUNCH

Lucy Rice

It is filthy and relentless in the cafe. It is filthy and relentless outside it too.

Service in London is filled with rats and hustlers and artists. Burrowing through the city fighting for scraps and running past each other without pausing to look up.

Head down and scrub and write.

It is filthy and dirty and I am settled into a Saturday shift. I am new to London and even newer to the job so have settled towards the bottom end of an unofficial hierarchy. Sometimes allowed to run food, sometimes allowed to take orders, *occasionally* I get to make coffee. Mainly, I clear plates and polish cutlery.

The water is so hard here. In Ireland, you only need to look at the water and it lathers. The people are hard here too and do not feel the need to apologise profusely while placing an order. They do not lather in conversation, their words are coated in limescale, making it difficult to perceive anything.

I scrub until my hands are cracked and scaled and stinging from the soap and vinegar used to polish the silverware. I keep my head

down and listen, ready to hear the right customer talk about the right thing. The ultimate hustle - the coveted right-place-right-time mindset that goaded me all the way to London in the first place.

There are 4 hours left in my shift, and I have just been given out to for changing the music to ‘Rum, Sodomy & the Lash’ for the third time (Shane MacGowen has just died and people are still ordering poached eggs and salmon).

“at least listen to this song, this one is actually really nice”

I plea, full of desperation and Neurofen, to the head barista while deftly exiting the ‘Coffee Shop Chill’ playlist to put on ‘A Pair of Brown Eyes’. People here don’t know how many times I played that song this summer in pubs to afford to come to London in the first place, they don’t know how many sessions I played it at - the chorus never failing to fill me with ecstasy, they don’t know the Pogues and the annual festive argument about whether or not the F-word belongs on national radio. They don’t know of the lathering!

“And I heard the sounds of long ago,

From the old canal.

And the birds were whistling in the trees,

Where the wind was gently laughing.”

But, against all odds! They let me play the song, the *whole* song, the whole way through. In a cafe on Primrose Hill, I hear Mossy Ryans and Naoise May chewing out the lyrics, I see bar stools and sitting room couches packed with friends all listening, blood in their cheeks from the heat of it all. Half-drunk pints, torn-up beer mats, cups of tea, a demolished packet of digestives. I hear all of my friends joining in for the chorus while I nearly fall off my stool playing the fiddle - a piece of rosin being passed across the table.

It is filthy and dirty in London but it was filthy and dirty in Dublin too, and that was the best thing about it.

TRAVEL WRITING

Nuala Whittle

A land of saints and scholars, a land that calls me home.

A land that has nothing for me, a land that owns everything I hold, dear. It's queer, the sheer seasons changing

Derange me here, but when I'm there, I can't stand

To be near, I fear, there's no steering life, but I try,

And I don't want to resent you Ireland but -

These are the thoughts in my head as the plane touches down.

Each footstep brings the drenching love and call of soil ever closer, and ginger steps down metal stairs feel refreshing. My imagination says that the ground beneath my feet feels different, homely, and my nose prickles with the smell of turf fires and mountain air, before quickly registering two facts:

1) It is impossible to feel any ground under shoes with a three-inch platform and,

2) I do not smell a turf fire, I smell engine smoke and a blueberry vape.

The airport is grey, and the ruddy faces speak in accents that come from bogs and valleys, and cliffs and trees and secrets, and they all look me in the eye - they can tell I've come from away, that I'm playing tourist. Can't they? I push the mountains and valleys aside, moving through security and approaching the bus.

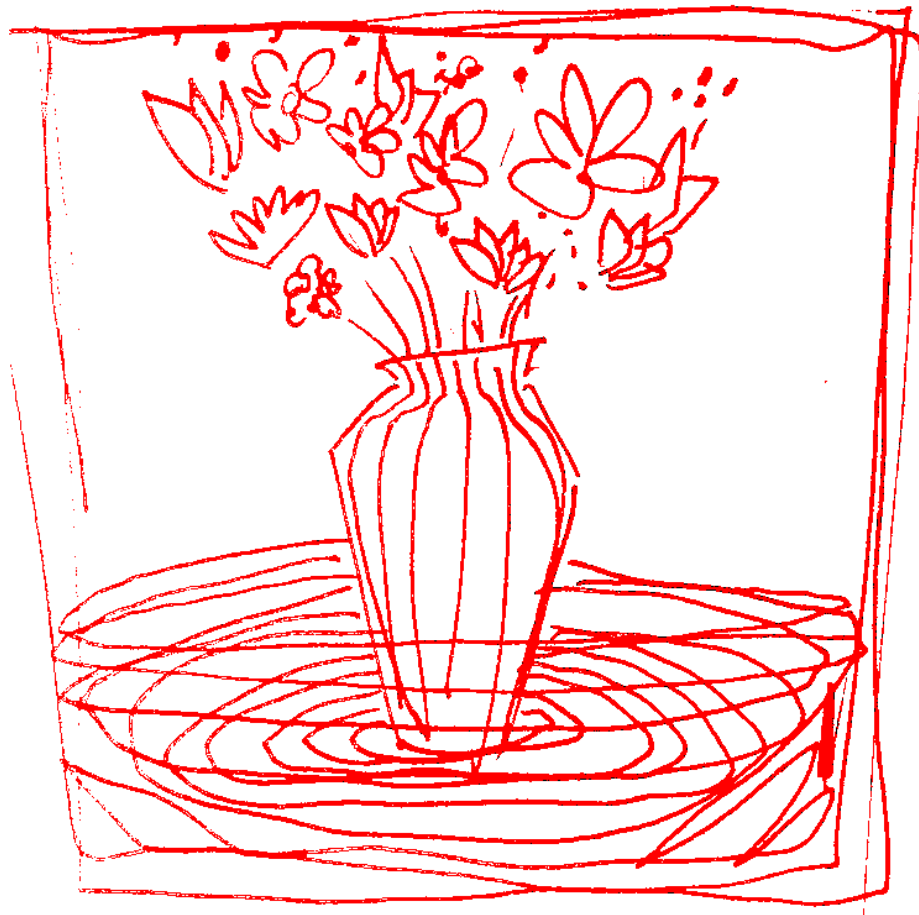
There is no bus. Well, there *is* a bus, but that bus only comes when the bus-man decides that it's time. We circle like hens, picking and scratching at the wet concrete as we wait for the Big Green Bus, going to Naas, an hour after it said it would. When it eventually decides what its own version of 'half past four' looks like (it is nearly six), the Bus Man opens the door without looking; he knows he will have passengers.

We all trundle on, at the mercy of John/Willy/Diarmuid the Bus Man, and then we set off into the landscape and the night time, going to a mid-size town. Small drops trickle into traffic, and are only eased by blurred orange indicators of cars turning off into whatever Ballysomething follows their chosen roundabout exit. We never exit, and move and move, and drive and drive. It has been so long since I have been in a four wheeled vehicle that I am desperately sick. My closed eyes imagine fields of clover, and my ears pretend they can hear the song of my ancestors, but this is fanciful, and cannot compete with the rousing rendition of 'Dance Monkey' coming from the radio. My mother laughs to hear about this journey, and reminds me that this is not Berlin, there's no point relying on the buses, a smile in her voice.

One week later, I watch from Berlin, to see the buses are in flames and the smoke drowns out the good voices of good people, people that draw me home but will never know what it feels like to leave.

'Ní mar a shíltear a bhítear'

(All is not what it seems)



I WILL BE LINT

Fiachra Larney

100 years from now I will be lint.
300 years this city rubble.
In 15000 my soul will walk these
streets once more,
Trying to recover what is never to come,
Unknowingly living what has
already passed.
Each step is a memory already
forgotten.
Every memory is cherished forever.



Helen O Beirne

FIELD JOURNAL EXTRACT

Jessica Bradshaw

12:10pm Wednesday 2nd May

The fields were ploughed about a month ago now - I think. I can never remember how long it's been since anything has happened, recently. Not without a rigid schedule, littered with reminders of the date, and real clocks that aren't just my phone.

The churning of the plough causes all sorts of bits and pieces to resurface, mostly little pebbles and broken golf balls. Most exciting to me, though, are the tiny pieces of pottery that sit atop the soil, winking at me in the light as I wander through the fields.

I collected these broken pieces about a month ago now, maybe two, and brought them back to the dam where I played when I was younger. I laid them out across a mossy rock to assess and choose my favorites. A tiny snail accompanied me alone.

The few most decorative pieces went back into my pockets to come home with me. Adorned with rich blue glazes and embossed with angels. I left the rest on the mossy rock with the snail.

As I retraced those same steps today, they were untouched, exactly as I'd left them, as I'm sure they will be next month, and the month after that, and the next time I'm home.

THE ATOMIC MODEL

Paul James Prior

When I was seven,
I stumbled downstairs in the middle of the night to
show my mother what I had been reading;
An encyclopaedia entry on the atomic model
What I felt looking at those pages was almost
worship
The notion that everything in the universe could be
described and explained moved me so much I felt
compelled to share it,
Even on pain of punishment for reading past my
bedtime.

That faith in facts, in certainty, in reason, in life as
input to process to product, stuck with me well past
the shock decision for me to become an artist.

At fifteen, a latecomer by any standard, I
discovered a talent for piano
The domain of art is often considered vague,
uncertain, even esoteric,
But my teenage self never saw it as such
The child that once tinkered with chemistry sets
now tinkered with counterpoint
To me they were one and the same;

Sodium hydroxide reacts with hydrochloric acid to
produce sodium chloride and water,
Cadencing in the third species of Fuxian
counterpoint requires raising both the sixth and
seventh scale degrees of certain modes to ensure
proper leading tone function to the tonic.

This is right.
This is good.
This is *correct*.

I took on art as absolute, with the same certainty I
had believed in science.

And so,

At twenty, at night, when the breath grew tight in
my chest and the room started to spin, long before
the words anxiety or autism were given to me, I
wondered;
What method here would be correct? How do I
cadence this?

All at once, at twenty-three, the answer came to
me,
After straining to stay a secret.
Composing, when a piece dug its heels and
described to me the truth;
I was wrong.
I discovered that to make was not really to create
but to excavate, to dig; discover not design.
A kind of trust came forward, and the piece
yielded.

What I had really learned was this;
Matters of the heart are not healed by the head
Thinking thoughts will not save a soul
And that the heart, though it simply feels, knows
things too.

This new world revealed itself slowly, gentle as a
sunrise.
Where I was taught with certainty, I learned with
trust,
A man of science found a faith (of sorts),
And saw paradox break bread with peace;
Calm, chaos, contradiction, all uncertain quantum
states in my own atomic model.

Now, at twenty-seven, I stand happily corrected.
Encyclopaedia entries are still fascinating, but I
know, or feel, or both,
That science does not bring salvation.
Life's meaning is revealed only ever in part; a
laugh, a sigh, a song, a tear
An upright ape, staring at the stars, mouth agape
with wonder
Knowing,
with the last shred of that same certainty I once
held so dear,
that I can never
know
it all.

