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**OPEN YOUR EYES SHUT**  
**EDNA O'BRIEN YOUNG WRITERS AWARD 2024**

# QUARK

/kwa:k/

noun PHYSICS

*Any of a number of subatomic particles carrying a fractional electric charge, postulated as building blocks of the hadrons. Quarks have not been directly observed, but theoretical predictions based on their existence have been confirmed experimentally.*

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# FOREWORD

**Simon O'Connor**  
Director, MoLI, *October 2023*

# A NOTE FROM THIS YEAR'S MENTOR

This July, just two weeks prior to Edna O'Brien's death, sixteen young Irish students celebrated her life, her voice, and her spirit as they gathered at the MoLI to shape words that, in many senses, had already been shaped by her.

We get our voices from the voices of others. Every young Irish writer who puts a pen to paper has, consciously or not, already inherited Edna's ferociously beautiful sense of language, as well as her unmatched ability to see deep into the beauty and turmoil of the world.

So, in effect, Edna was present in the room as the young people wrote themselves into the beginnings of their careers. She stepped across the room and opened the windows. She sharpened the pencils. She clicked the apps of the imagination. She encouraged them to embark without any sense of fear. She gave them access to truths which were uncomfortable, diverse and profound.

She remained alongside them for the course of five wonderful days, embodying a sacred rage which pierced their work. And then she released them – like she released herself -- to go on whatever journey they desired.

In her release from this life, Edna surely smiled as these young people placed words down on the page. Stories of loss. Stories of anguish. Stories of love. Stories of doubt. Stories of beauty and violence.

It was a wonderful week, and I was privileged, as a teacher and mentor, to witness it. The students shone. Each and every one of them. Alana. Annie. Cate. Cuan. Daniel. Esther. Laura. Lyla. Mary. Oisín. Ola. Patrick. Philippa. Pix. Tom. Valentine.

The primary theme they ended up with was related to Quarks, because, in essence, they recognised that their energy was coming from somewhere original and spare. There was beauty and there was truth and there was charm and there was spin.

The students worked alongside one another for five days. They debated intensely. They shared and they argued and they laughed and, in the end, they came together in the most extraordinary way.

There are so many people to thank for such a fine week – not least the MoLI staff Jennie Ryan, Lily Cahill, Abbie Millar and of course the incomparable Simon O'Connor who operated at the nucleus; also the UCDALL Access leaders, Joanna Wylie, Mohammad Aslam; and of course the tireless interns Jojo, Kathryn and Amanda. It is not easy to do such a job. There are so many small and intimate details to take care of, but they were handled remarkably well. Deepest thanks to all.

But most of all, the most profound thanks has to go to the visionary Susie Lopez whose generosity has allowed not only this week to happen, but each of the past five years of bursaries. I recall the time, in 2018, when Susie first said that she wanted to honour Edna and, at the same time, help change the landscape of Irish literature. Susie and Edna met in New York. They hugged one another. They recognised each other's spirit. Edna was flattered by the idea of the bursary, but more than that she recognised the wider intent behind it: the connection of voices across the decades and the insistence that no voice will ever be forgotten.

In her novel, *Girl With Green Eyes*, Edna once wrote: "We all leave one another. We die, we change—it's mostly change—we outgrow our best friends; but even if I do leave you, I will have passed on to you something of myself; you will be a different person because of knowing me; it's inescapable."

Edna O'Brien's fierce and loving pen was inescapable.  
The passing of it to another generation was, and is, an inspiration.  
I líonta Dé go gcastar sinn.

**Colum McCann**

*October 2023*

## Fractions of Existence

The streets are rain-washed and painted in grey under the low-hanging sky. In watercolours and blurred edges, the city rises in corners of stone, the buttery glow of warm light emanating from the squares of curtained apartment windows. The footpaths are slick and strewn with puddles, surfaces twitching as they are met with the steady and ongoing drizzle, a constant misty shroud veiling everything.

He walks through the maze of streets, footsteps unhurried, rain dripping into his eyes. Huddled figures dash past him, bundled in coats, the puddles shattering beneath their footfalls. All of them rushing to some undecided destination, some distant place that they have not yet reached. An unknown future that they think they are late for.

Or perhaps they simply do not want to linger on this dismal street, rain streaking down from the crushing grey sky.

He lingers.

He watches the cascade of falling water from the open sky, showering in shining fountains from gutters, rivulets running down the roadsides. He watches the hurrying people, dodging pointlessly through the whirl of rain. He watches cars roar past, puddles whipped into flinging sheets by their screeching tyres.

He wonders if the world is any bigger than what he has already seen of it. Or if this is all there is, and now is all he gets to have. He turns his coat collar up against the wind and shoves his hands deep into his pockets, glasses flecked with rain, and keeps walking.

When he reaches the café, no one is sitting on the dripping furniture on the pavement outside its lit-up windows. He dries a chair off with the sleeve of his coat and sits down, back to the wall, face to the rain.

Umbrella-laden walkers bustle past, rain droplets clinging like scattered diamonds to the dripping surfaces of their brollies. His solitude comforts him, and he sits as a pocket of stillness amongst the swirl of umbrellas and rain and drumming feet.

His notebook is his sole companion at the table outside the café. The pages are soon damp and soggy under the weeping sky, ink running in blue streaks.

The world closes in around him, and then peels open softly, like an unfurling flower. The paper beneath his fingertips hums with his pulse, a rhythmic beat. It thrums delicate and wavering, the flame of a candle. One day, he knows, this candle will burn low enough to drown in its own wax, as all candles do. It only frightens him when he thinks too deeply about it, and the inevitable reality crashes over him.

These people rushing past him are caught up in their own realities. Is there something beyond that, he wonders, or are they all cursed to remain wrapped up in infinitesimal issues?

He sits there until the streetlamps flicker to life along the footpath. They daub the falling dusk in pools of blooming orange, illuminating the rain dashing down beneath their lights.

He feels, perched on the cold metal of the café seat, that he is teetering on the edge of the real. That there is something hanging above him in the darkening rain clouds, something that carries a weight of unknowable answers, and he cannot quite reach it. It lurks beyond the rain and the shadowed streets, the land, the sea, stretching to the edges of the world.

Chasing such an elusive thing seems to him like the rain beneath the streetlights. Flickering, fleeting, ablaze for a glorious fraction of time.

The crowd of coat-clad people continues to bustle past, heads bowed, oblivious.

He wonders again if this is all there is, and notices the rain trickle down his face. His eyes dart to the gleaming puddles and the buildings hunched under the sky. Is everyone possibly living the entirety of their lives without being fully awake at all? He sees everything in sharp detail, how he is not separate from this world, from the heartbeat drumming softly through the streets beneath his shoes.

Even if his life is as brief as rain under streetlights, he will exist blazingly in the short fall to the pavement.

---

**Lyla Stenson** can usually be found in her hometown in Wicklow, either painting, drinking tea, or lost in the pages of a fantasy book, which is most likely her own or one of her unwavering favourites.

## The Quarks of light and dark

1

I don't know how.

I don't know why.

There are so many things I do not know but there is one thing I do know.

He didn't deserve this.

2

The sky looms above the open court. The grey clouds thunder, threatening to lash out. The judge drones on. *My son. A disgrace to the kingdom. Unnatural. Evil.*

I watch the boy below. He kneels in the centre of the ring, chained. The blood staining his clothes. He's hurting but his ember eyes pierce the judge, the crowd, defiant, proud, unbroken. His eyes find me among the crowd and for a moment he's asking me a silent question. He looks away all too soon.

Seconds turn to minutes, minutes to hours, hours to eternity. Until the Judge makes his final call.

They drag the boy away. He struggles, he fights. One of the guards hits him and he falls slack. Finally defeated. My heart twists. There is silence in the room. Most sickeningly smile, few glare at the judge until the boy is out of sight. The judge stares, uncaring, unloving, unfaithful. The muttering starts, soon turning to cheers and shouts. I stay silent, staring at the door.

3

Those born with magic in their veins are discriminated against. Abused. Attacked. Destroyed. The boy knew this. Yet, he gave himself away, risking his life to save every ungrateful person in this room, in

this kingdom. Without him this kingdom would be in ashes. People see what they want to see, hear what they want to hear. Magic is a monstrosity and the boy is a monster. His father has created this lie.

4

They don't see what I see.

5

When I was trapped, broken and terrified under the rubble, a selfless boy offered me his hand and pulled me out. When I lost everyone and everything I loved, it was a caring boy that put his arm around me and offered me comfort. When I was alone and lost in this woeful world, it was a smiling boy not a monster that gave me love. He never wanted anything in return. I was falling and it was him who caught me, him who dared to care. Not the judge. Not the guards on their high horses. Not the pretenders.

6

If there are any monsters in this world, it is these people jeering. They smile, cheer, and hug. Thankful of being saved from another threat. I reach into my pocket and pull out the small hourglass. I watch the grains of sand fall. That night was beautiful. We had been alone, just him and I. We talked idly and laughed. We got to be the teenagers that life never gave us the chance to be. He reached into his pocket and gave me the hourglass. "Count the time, Éabha, I will be there." We smiled and said our goodbyes.

7

*I will be there.* I realise then what I must do. It seems so obvious, how had I not seen it before? It's crazy. It's reckless. It's stupid. I must try. He would try.

I leave the room of the blind behind.

He saved me now, it's my chance to save him.

Two ways this will end.

If I beat the clock, get him and me out of this mess, alive.

I have till dawn.

If I fail, he hangs.

If he hangs, I fail.

I fall to my knees. Helpless. His eyes find me among the crowd. He smiles at me and turns his gaze to the sky. In my mind I hear his silent promise. *Until in the sky, we meet again.*

I clutch the hourglass. It rips my hand. I whisper "I'll count every second."

---

**Esther Tyther**, 16 years old, from Kerry. She finds joy in reading, creating stories and her pets. She spends most of her time lost in enchanted fantasy realms.

## The Descent

*The desire to wander into descent is his greatest vice. He lusts after his own contempt, falling over himself to find something new, something invigorating to cure the empty feeling contained within him.*

### ONE: LIMBO.

He began with God. He felt the love, and the kindness, and in turn, he worshipped. He knelt at the altar and begged for all that he wanted.

*'I pray for money,'* His brother said.

his father said, *"I pray for glory,"*

*'I pray for true love,'* He said.

He waited months upon months for his bride. He searched in every person's eyes, looking for the gleam that foretold their great romance. But she never came.

All of his worship and prayer and sacrifice had been worthless. And so, he turned his back on God.

### TWO: LUST.

Further down he went, leaving home to chase his dream of his soulmate. He faced dangerous storms, winds blowing faster and harder than he had ever seen before. But still he persevered. On the ninth day of his travels, he came across a clearing in the woods. The gale blew him about as he stumbled through the trees into the eye of the storm.

There stood a girl. From first glance, he knew that it was fate. They were each other's. When her mouth first opened, her sweet lips parting to whisper mellifluous words that swirled around in his mind more ferociously than the violent winds that brought him here, he met them in a wicked embrace, fast and lustful and perfectly flawed.

Francesca was her name. Each night he ran his hands through her hair, and kissed the skin on the nape of her neck. For aeons they were happy, swaddled in their blissful ignorance. But then he remembered. Remembered his father, his brother, his God. He remembered how unhappy he was, and how empty his life was. He became consumed with the thought of his existential ennui. Armed with his newfound worldview, he set off in the dead of night with nothing but the clothes on his back, leaving his sweet bride alone to face his desertion.

### **THREE: GREED.**

He arrived at the forum at sunrise. The deserted building captivated him, drawing him inwards to his next fatal attraction. Old, thickset politicians loitered around, eating endless grapes and drinking the finest wine on offer. Each politician spoke loudly, in love with the cadence of his own voice. The room was a swell of noise and warmth, and, for a brief moment, he was content. Then he thought of his father, his brother, his God, lovely Francesca, and his newfound subjects in the metropolis, and his satisfaction dissipated. He set off once again, ignoring the protests of the politicians who wanted more and more and more.

### **FOUR: TREACHERY.**

The weather changed from arid to frozen and harsh in an instant. He dragged his feet along, feeling as if each step demanded more, added an extra weight to his satchel of stolen items and regrets. He felt his legs grow numb as ice crept up his calf, his knee, his thigh. By the time the ice reached his waist, he gave up fighting. What was the point of carrying on if each new town would be the same torturous tedium that he had just escaped? As the ice covered his chin, his mouth, his nose, he took one final look around him at the

barren earth. And, for the first time since he had left his father, his brother, his darling Francesca, the patrons and the politicians, he felt complete.

*Frozen he stays, deep within the frosted arms of Treachery. He serves as a reminder to those who dare to stray from their comfortable lives. Within tedium, there is familiarity. Within lust, there is love. Within adventure, there is a contented danger.*

---

**Laura Dermody** lives deep in the Westmeath countryside, where she is usually playing with her cat or sleeping (because what else is there to do in the countryside?)

## Unknown Forces

“Kit?” Theo whispered from the inky darkness. It was pitch dark in the sewer, except for the streaks of yellow light spilling through the grate.

Kit’s voice was frail, only able to produce a croaking whisper. “Yeah?”

Footsteps passed overhead, and Kit’s grip on her brother tightened, covering his mouth with her shoulder and shushing him so quietly that even Theo might not have heard it. Even after the footsteps were gone, she kept him a few seconds longer before releasing him and letting him speak.

“I’m tired.”

“I know. I’m tired too.” Kit knew he wanted permission to sleep, but she couldn’t let him. Not while the monsters were still out there, searching. They could be any one of those footsteps.

“When can we go home?”

“Not yet. It’s not safe.”

“But I want-” Theo whined too loud. Kit immediately clasped her hand over his mouth as the sound reverberated into the street. A set of footsteps stalked slowly toward the grate until they eclipsed the yellow light. Kit gripped Theo again, taking in a breath of musty, wet air to hold as tight as she held her brother.

More footsteps came, like they were crowding around the sewer grate. Kit clutched him firmer and crushed his face into her so hard her entire body shook. Theo cried out in pain loud enough for them to hear it. They *must’ve* heard it.

“Shut up!” she hissed, tears in her eyes. She whispered it over and over, barely audible. They started asking each other about the noise. Theo was still whining and yelping. Kit gripped him even tighter.

“Just shut up! Please.” She was sobbing now, her own voice loud

enough for them to hear. She bit down on Theo’s ear, only making him whine more.

Kit’s grip loosened and Theo escaped, pushing her away. She reached for him weakly, but he slapped her hand off him. There was blood on her tongue.

The people above had stopped talking. Kit looked up at the grate. Yellow light streamed through the gaps again. They were gone.

The two went quiet again.

---

**Daniel Molyneux** is a 15 year old writer whose career as an author consists mostly of sitting around, thinking about how nice it would be to be writing.

## BEAUTY FACTORIES

a human truth is souls snapping  
up and down the world in lines  
of neon throated glow crisscrossing the globe  
the hydrogen peroxide and tert-butyl alcohol collision of the soul  
words commingling and erupting  
into the firework-neuron light  
of word and word combined  
whole sentences booming across the sky  
that's life.  
a brain has the capacity to expand  
swell to the moon like an outstretched hand  
it holds the world.  
you are mind and body.  
where is the line?  
perception is physicality. world and soul leaking  
spilling towards each other. you speak yourself alive.  
you have no proof  
but the shine of fish in the dark  
under miles of crushing sea  
water weighing on the earth then  
brilliance. light from life.  
a deep sea explosion  
of wordless noise  
lifesightbright.

-----mirrored/doubled/bisected-----

Science puts forward a world in which even the smallest  
particle is accounted for. We have yet to discover them all, yet

to fully understand them, but they exist. They are real. But what  
biology textbook can locate for me the exact position of an emotion  
as it moves through your spiritual digestive system before ending  
up, sometimes sitting undiscovered for years, in an ever-hungry  
warm fold beneath your stomach? Turn instead to poetry. Miles  
beneath the surface, fish like clouds dart glowing. Lit by their own  
biological processes, they have no conception of the world above.  
Reality to them is crushing weight, whale falls, and dark. They  
float like thoughts. What world lies unseen above us? Science  
tells us only the known exists. Progress will roll all things to  
comprehension in the end. But there is an ocean in every head.  
You feel it sloshing as you walk. As you talk. As you swallow the  
known air, your skull drowns. Domhantarraingt. World-draw.  
Gravity. The promise that, the more present you are in the world,  
the more things will come to you. Physicality, bodies pressing  
on the world, tugging and tugging, planets rolling to each other,  
marbles in the sky.

---

**Valentine Jones** is a 17-year-old writer from Limerick. Places Valentine  
has been published include the Paper Lanterns literary journal, the Irish  
Times, and the Poetry Ireland Review.

## Voodoo Girl & Ragdoll Boy

The Voodoo Girl with burlap skin  
And matted woollen hair  
Her heart is sewn upon her chest  
With needles everywhere.

Her mouth is stitched into a grin,  
She sports a sewn-on nose.  
Her limbs are filled with soft stuffing.  
And fabric scraps for clothes.

She whiles away the hours,  
Each day from end to end.  
Contriving and obsessing,  
Thinking about *THE* "Boyfriend".

But Voodoo Girl's stuck in a mist,  
This man of hers does not exist.

You see, she suffers from a curse,  
A curse she cannot win.  
For when she grows too close to one,  
The pins stick farther in.

It didn't stop her though, from thoughts,  
From dreams of her true love.  
To have his hand upon her cheek  
"O that I were a glove."

Then, one September 24<sup>th</sup>  
She met a charming fellow.  
A Ragdoll Boy with bluish skin,  
Whose eyes were slightly yellow.

He smiled at her, she blushed at him.  
He asked if she was well.  
And while she batted button eyes  
She said, "I feel just swell."

Voodoo Girl, in some queer way  
Thought they must have been twins.  
As in the stranger's sewn-on heart  
She saw a hundred pins.

You see, *he* suffered from a curse,  
A curse he couldn't brave  
For if he ever fell in love,  
He'd be sent to his grave.

Then suddenly, the Boy and Girl  
Both felt a little pinch.  
Because the needles in their chests  
Had deepened by an inch.

In the park, both arm in arm,  
They wandered with another  
And realised they'd, for all their lives  
Been looking for the other.

Another inch, the pins went in,  
They shortened by and by.  
But Voodoo Girl, she didn't care,  
'Cause she was with her guy.

Through the yellow trees they walked  
To Autumn's serenade.  
With the beating of their hearts  
Sweet music there, was made.

They learned about each other's hopes,  
They learned about their fears.  
And each word said by Boy and Girl  
Was met by tender ears.

Both Voodoo Girl and Ragdoll Boy  
Upon a bench were lying.  
Love's tender, kind and warm embrace  
Had kept them both from dying

And when the sun rose in the morn,  
The lovers lay there struck forlorn.

On Voodoo Girl's unmoving chest,  
Rested her lover's head.  
But when the sunlight reached the two.  
They lay there, stone cold dead

---

**Tom Farragher** loves nothing more than an orthodox crime story -  
murder, inquest and suspicion falling on everyone in tow.

## GRAVITY

I lay down on the dirty carpet and feel its fibres below me wanting  
it to suck me in. I think about what it would be like to sink into the  
floorboards and just stay there, not dead, not alive but something else.

I know I can't stay laying down here. It's 2 o'clock now and I  
know the shrill sound of the doorbell will fill the house in under an  
hour; Liam hates being late. I wonder if the doorbell even still works.  
I've mostly forgotten the sound of it. It hasn't been used in years.

Years, I let that word fill my head and I'm almost shocked by  
it, three full years since anyone has entered my house. It's not that  
no one wanted to, they tried but I'd either ignore the call or make  
some excuse or lie when they asked for my address.

I don't know why I refused to let anyone in. It's not that I didn't  
want to see them,

I just couldn't.

I was drunk last week, as I usually am after I've gone to the  
shop. Liam called me for the first time in over a year and maybe it  
was my head spinning or I was more drunk than usual or maybe,  
although I didn't want to admit it,

I was lonely.

So I answered the call. Yet I didn't speak, didn't say hello. I just  
listened waiting for him to talk

He didn't.

I heard him breath for what could've been seconds, minutes,  
hours.

Eventually I decided to break the silence

"Hello?" I said my words slurred and unsure

The silence continues

"Liam" I shouted down the phone almost sounding like I'm  
begging him to talk to me

The silence continues once more  
“Fucking hell Liam just speak to me”  
He breaks his silence  
“Let me visit you” he demanded, his voice almost foreign to me,  
completely different to what my brother’s voice had been when I left.  
It’s my turn to fall into silence now  
“This is the final time I’m calling you Marceline or you’re never  
going to see us again, want to spend the rest of your life alone in  
that house then do”  
My head began to ache at that point and I felt as if my eardrums  
were going to burst, bright flashing lights darted around my eyes  
and I felt as if I could throw up. My head was going to explode if I  
didn’t speak, I was sure of it.  
I shouted my address down the phone and told Liam to be here  
in a week. Then I slammed the phone back into place, cracking it  
in the process. My legs gave way and I crumpled onto the floor  
sobbing from the guilt I’d been confronted with.  
I continue lying on the carpet now,  
The doorbell rings.  
I feel sicker than I’ve ever been as if I could throw up my  
organs on the carpet now and still not be finished. I get up  
almost involuntarily as everything in me is willing me to stay yet  
something is forcing me to move. My legs shake violently and I beg  
for them to collapse so I can sink into the carpet once again.  
I reach the door and stand there for a moment searching for any  
excuse not to answer.  
I do not find one.  
I answer the door, again feeling like my body is moving on  
its own unlocking the door all by itself not listening to my mind  
begging it to stop.  
And then stood in front of me is someone I barely recognise, my

younger brother now not the little boy I left behind but a man, his  
eyes which I remember being full of life and spark are now dull  
Just like mine.  
We stand there for a moment staring each other down and I am  
completely confronted by what I have done, my stomach sick with  
guilt.  
I realise I regret inviting him. I want desperately to grab the  
door and slam it in his face and stay here alone, forever. But I don’t,  
I just keep standing there like an absolute idiot.  
Out of nowhere, Liam wraps his arms around and begins to  
sob yet we still stay silent. Once he lets me go I lead him into the  
kitchen still staying silent. He sits down at the table, I make tea  
although he doesn’t ask for any.  
Liam is the one to break the silence  
“Tell me why you left Marceline” he says, shattering the silence  
into pieces.  
And there it is, right in front of me praying to be explained.  
Why did I leave?  
I know why I did, in a way, I couldn’t be there anymore. I  
needed to leave not wanted to,  
I needed to.  
I think I would have died if I stayed. I couldn’t breathe in that  
house anymore, I needed a future, some hope, something to cling  
onto. Everyday when I lived there would be spent with others  
depending on me.  
My mother fell sick when I was twelve years of age. Her lungs  
had turned black and she retreated into her bed rarely getting up.  
From then everything was my responsibility. In charge of a sick  
woman and four younger children.  
I never even wanted kids.  
So I know why I left, it’s obvious, Liam knows why as well.

What he really wants is for me to put it into words, own up to it.

I can't,

I don't know why I can't. I'm well aware of the reasons I left yet they float around in my head not forming real sentences. I can't put it into words, though I know I owe that to Liam.

I open my mouth. No words come out. Tears do instead.

I try and fail to control myself and my knees finally give way though I don't want them to this time. I'm left in a lump on the floor crying pathetically. I try to choke out my words interrupted by my sobs.

"I-I'm sorry Liam" I continue sobbing my eyes out

"I'm so so sorry Liam I genuinely am. I couldn't be there any more. I couldn't, my entire life was taking care of all of you. I couldn't stand it any longer, I'm sorry. you wouldn't understand how it felt I had to leave"

Liam's crying now angry sobs escaping his eyes

"I wouldn't understand?" He screams

"You left me there, completely alone to do exactly what you did and your saying I wouldn't understand?"

"I couldn't be there anymore." I cry "I had no future, I wanted to become someone achieve something, I couldn't spend the rest of my life taking care of four children and a dying mother, I couldn't breath in that house, I needed to leave I just needed to"

"A future?" He screams "you call this a future?"

He stared around the kitchen empty drink bottles and rubbish scattered over the filthy carpet, the curtains ripped and drab not doing much to cover the grime covered windows, In the corner lies the only indicator that I ever belonged to my family; a photo of me at ten years old. Liam standing on one side of me and my mother standing on the other; her arm wrapped around me

Back when nothing bad had ever happened.

I'm embarrassed by the state of the kitchen, feeling Liam eye it down in disgust.

"Liam just listen to me" I plead with him

Liam continues to cry, he couldn't escape if he wanted to. Lily and James are the next oldest after him; seven year old twins. It hits me suddenly just how much I miss them.

"I'm sorry Liam please, I missed you you know. I really did, I missed all of you."

Liam continues to cry, yet he's not angry this time, at least not at me. Maybe he is angry at something else, the world, my mother or even at nothing at all.

Or maybe he's just sad.

"It's not fair." He sobs "it's not fair marce, you left when you were my age I can't leave you got to, you got to leave, you had a chance. You blew it, but you had a chance. I don't get that Marce I just don't."

I think at that point we realise, in a way, that we are even, both been through the same thing and something entirely different at the same time

Yet we are still even.

We cry together on the carpet together and don't say a word, as if we are toddlers again and soon our mother will come to comfort us.

She doesn't.

I tell Liam he can stay the night, make him up a bed on the sofa and then sit myself down on an armchair opposite him. We speak for hours about how things are going to change, we tell each other lies about how things can be perfect, how neither of us will have to give up our lives and how we can both finally begin living again.

We don't know it now but things won't change, we will both go back to our old lives and won't see each other again for another

five years, reuniting at our mothers funeral. We won't speak then; it would feel too fake. We will continue life alone and it will stay that way.

But now as the warm yellow moonlight shines through the shabby curtains of the living room we have a chance, one we will throw away when the sun rises but it keeps us alive.

Even just for tonight.

---

**Cate McCashin** – writer by day, at night the rizzler comes out to play .

## ***matter***

The storm raged as the streetlights reflected from the growing puddles,

The weather locked me from the once ignited stars,  
raindrops, silver knives, cascading from the heavens,  
standing there drenched as I searched for solace,

the wind, a sleepless spirit, blustering between the narrow alleyways,

wailing in the foggy night,  
carrying the essence of my collapsed dreams, hopes, out of sight,  
there I found myself, standing in central Dublin city,  
anticipating a cab to arrive out of pity,

The storm, relentless and wild, a reminder of the beauty and fury that life can hold,

sharp golden beams of light startled me as it arrived,  
an old, crimson-colored bus, I want to paint it black,  
nostalgia echoes in my mind, my childhood, it takes me back.

A gloomy old man perched behind the steering wheel,  
occupied by traffic lights, he forgot to look,  
abandoned in the ecstasy of rain, as the blades embrace,  
I ponder life's twists, in this lonely place,

45 in the distance, my savior is here,  
an unfamiliar, white bus approached near,  
a quiet display, two passengers anticipating their stop,  
I stepped forward, ready to board.

The driver, a frail man with a stern gaze, blocked my path.  
His deceiving eyes, shadowed by a musty-green flat cap,  
“Not today,” he murmured, leaving me puzzled and stranded,  
acknowledging an unseen force that kept me from my journey.

Bickering with the stranger, discontented with the existence of the truth,  
longing for an easy solution to the wrath of the outside world,  
when it was right in front of me, peace, just out of my grip,  
a final message was spoken, a goodbye, leaving me in the crisis that consumed me.  
As my coach faded into the mist, the needles of realization struck me,  
my cognitive dream, etching its justice into my mind,  
now standing in a starry field, the feeling of death shrouding my thoughts,  
I wanted to die.

In the depths of my brain, the darkness grows,  
a heavy heart, a silent cry, the world slows.  
On the edge, where hope seems lost,  
life’s burdens weighed, a heavy cost.

At the end of the line, a voice so divine,  
the bus driver told me it was not my time.

---

**Patrick Dungan** is a young musician, writer and friend that likes to express strong emotions in his creative work. He gets inspiration from his life and the stories of others. ‘Oh my JJ’

## Spin: shoes and ceilings

I have realised that when people are anxiously awaiting for something to happen, they tend to study and analyse their own shoes: their colour, their shape, the specks of dirt engraved on the sides, the slight tear at the front of the left one.

I’ve done this plenty of times in my life, alongside hanging my head low as I absentmindedly claw at my arm, repeatedly scratching. Possibly I was compensating for the part of the situation which is inevitably out of my hands. The future is out of all of our puny hands, right here, sitting in the hallway of the extension at school, before 9:00 on a Monday, human hands, attempts have been made to control the past and its consequences. But right now even the present is useless in my unskilled hands.

The sounds of bustling students are distorted as I pay them little to no attention.

Staring at my old Nike runners, my vision is wavering between blacking out or holding attention for just a couple more minutes. A couple more minutes before *he* bursts through the door, arms outstretched and eyes blazing with rage. A couple more minutes before I face him for the first time in weeks, look him in the eye. A couple more minutes before we get this ongoing tsunami of blame washed away. A. Couple. More. Minutes.

There is some time between the before and after . A collection of scenes that turn into flashbacks as the days pass by.

Spasms of rage radiate off him as he waltzes in with the window background of a downcast day, the pathways riddled with rain water. Instantly, greetings are thrown at him from many jeering friends, this makes me feel immensely guilty for a reason I cannot comprehend. A ringing begins in my ears as I launch off my chair to become as far away from him as physically possible in

the busy room. A teenage boy and girl at opposite ends of the room, filled with students, with a great big wall of unforgettable words and a looming journey to the principle between them. My shoes seem meaningless now but I hold my head high up towards the ceiling, with hope.

After something you anxiously awaited is resolved you notice the slight cracks on the plaster, the fact that the left bulb has blown and that worrying stain above where you are sitting.

I have only done this a small number of times in my life.

Staring at the ceiling means breathing a sigh of relief, it means that the boulders on your shoulders have been reduced to feathers. My hands are clasped firmly, still, as I no longer feel a need to claw the agitation away.

The minutes do pass quickly since I was seated in my world of distortion just simply penetrating my black shoes with my hard stare. I now notice his eyes no longer blaze with rage but his shoulders sag with defeat.

I do not laugh, nor grin, nor smirk. I simply acknowledge my victory, a new version of myself, as I truly know his actions were not justified. I have people standing behind me against someone who caused me to stare at my lifeless footwear for quite a long time. The world spins in a new direction.

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**Annie Donnelly** is a visually impaired young writer who enjoys swimming, horse riding and of course reading and writing. She is fascinated with dreams and often reflects on them for inspiration for her creative works.

## Degrees of Freedom

The white horses on the tips of the waves took a lolling canter to the point where the sea hit the sky. Harriet looked at that point and considered. It didn't really look like the world's end at all. She was sure she could see the white horses continuing to run beyond the line, and maybe even the whole way around the globe.

Harriet found it helpful to keep her eyes on the sea when trying to avoid being sick on the ferry. Others told her this was a bad idea, but surely looking around at the tatty lounge and the ordinary people in it, while feeling the great motion of the sea was too confusing for the brain. So she stared at the waves. Each one was moving in a different direction. They were slow, but mighty.

As the sky began to lose light it matched the magnetic blue of the sea. Harriet refocused her eyes and looked at her reflection in the window. She was the image of her mum. Her mum, who was at home with her dad, just the two of them. *Now* it was just the two of them. But she wasn't going too far away. Not as far as her sister went. Harriet was barely beyond Holyhead. Maybe she could stay there, rocking in the middle of the sea, waiting for the white horses to run towards her instead of getting farther and farther away. She stared at herself in the window and thought about how she'd left her parents with Nora and Joe, their next door neighbours. The ageing couple who looked like the male and female versions of each other. She remembered when her mum planted flowers in their back lane and Nora dug them up. She'd meant well. Harriet chuckled, showing the dimples her mother had given her.

There was food being served in the lounge. A ginger man was buying fizzy drinks for his wife and children. Harriet used to get chicken fillet rolls with her sister every Friday before school. It was always the same Spanish woman who served them at the deli.

'Plain chicken, southern fried or spicy?' she would ask. On spicy the corners of her mouth would lift hopefully, her tired eyes watching Harriet closely.

'Plain please,' she would answer. The woman's shoulders would drop as she selected the fillet. Harriet always felt a bit sorry for her, but the clarity of the crumb covered chicken on bread comforted her. Her sister would always get spicy.

The sea gave a jolt, the same sensation occurred in her gut. The smell of cheese and onion crisps overpowered any real air in the lounge. She turned back to the sea. Outside had become a complete sheet of blackness, the white horses had disappeared. She closed her eyes and slowly breathed in and out, matching their rhythm. She couldn't see them, but she knew the horses were still there. Running.

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**Philippa Molly Ellen Bernadette Lucey**, orange juice addict, storyteller. Been compared to a manatee (in the best way possible!)

## Forces of Nature

As a twin, I frequently sense an enduring incompleteness, as if I am merely half of a whole. This void cloaks my earliest recollections, casting a shadow of profound melancholy over my childhood years. From the moment my twin entered this world after me, our cries harmonizing as one, we became "Oisín and Fionn" or simply "The Twins"; a shared identity that was both a burden and a lifeline.

One of my most memorable moments occurred during our 6th Class awards ceremony. Our names were pronounced in tandem, and we walked across the stage in unison to receive our graduation certificates. It was as though the school deemed it unjust to acknowledge one of us without the other. The applause from our classmates and teachers bounced around the auditorium, and while everyone celebrated our achievement, no one truly understood its deeper implications. That moment reinforced our shared identity, making it ever more challenging to perceive ourselves as individuals.

As time unravelled, the complexity of our bond became more apparent, revealing its profound and devastating effects. Every step towards independence was met with an overwhelming sense of loss, an empty space reserved exclusively for my twin. Despite the world perceiving us as a formidable, unified pair, a silent ache lingered in my heart. The inevitable divergence of our paths lie in wait, the jaws of adulthood threatening to tear us apart toward separate destinies, carrying a bittersweet weight.

Recently, we faced a significant change: Fionn decided to enroll in a specialized summer program for young artists in another county, while I remained home, having no interest in the artistic world. The day Fionn left, I stood at the bus station, the distance between us stretching further with each passing moment. The

vibrance of our shared childhood seemed to unravel, thread by thread, leaving behind a monochrome existence. The duality of being a twin became ever more pronounced; instead of feeling complete, I bore the heavy weight of an empty soul.

Our periodic phone calls and video chats during that summer were bittersweet. The joy of reconnecting was tinged with the knowledge that these moments were fleeting, a temporary respite from the persistent solitude of our separate experiences. We would reminisce about our shared memories, laugh at inside jokes, and for a brief period, the world would seem right again. Yet, as each call ended, the impending separation reopened the wound that had barely begun to heal.

Being a twin is a unique phenomenon. Instead of granting a sense of completion, this bond imposes a heavy burden of emptiness—a soul constantly yearning to be whole.

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**Oisín “Foxy” Hughes** - “Rain drop. Drop top. My brother hit me with a flip flop.”

## Swansong

A lone swan drifts over the surface. Pale. It dances over the waves, beating against the current and kicking back the tide. I know this swan. I know this lake.

The lake is old, much older than anything human. The waters lap and ripple without end, constantly weaving their song. Primordial; ancient beyond grasp. The lake brims with deep pools of knowledge. The ebbs and flows hail to the rhythm of the pond. The current surges on the banks, forcing forward the beat. The harmony rings in foam and froth, bubbling on the shore.

Many have learned to hear this song. They come to the water’s edge, lower themselves to the ground, and listen. Some listen for hours on end. They lay there, warm and safe in the shallows, reaching down into the depths to pull from the abyss knowledge long forgotten. They listen until their fingers wrinkle, until their colour is washed out, until the chill seeps in. They plunge, deeper and deeper, unfazed when the cold begins to bite, and the current begins to slice.

The lure is too strong. Hooked on the promise of enlightenment and understanding, the listeners are dragged into the beckoning gorge.

Some come in the early morning light, when the sunbeams shred through the clouds and the first meek light glitters atop the waves. Some brave the wind and rain to feel the wet, reverberating pulse. The melody remains the same. The listeners arrive day and night to glean what they can from the lake-side opera. They all seek comfort in wisdom not theirs to claim. They never leave. None survive their own avarice. None but the swan.

The listeners have all seen the swan. The being who sails the azure steppe, untaken by the lake. What grasp they think it must

have; to hear the song, but continue to glide, ever the observer. They see only a tuft, a passing plume, wrapped in the aria of wave and tide. They do not see the dance. The flutter of kicks and trembling of limbs. My struggle. I do not tune in to the cacophony of rippling and splashing the way I am thought to. I do not seek the information that these wayfarers worship. Yet I know the fate that this wisdom grants. I have borne witness. After pilgrimage and journey, weary travellers rest on the looming banks. They cast their eyes across the scene and see. They see me there, though not the grapple against the flow, or the battle against the stream. Just a swan. And they are filled with hope. They believe that I am a symbol, that my persistence to stay afloat is inspiring, but I do this to warn them. I cry out to them, when they flounder and totter on the shore, but they hear only the song, feel only the pull.

The surface shimmers under lunar rays. Something is pulled into the shallows. I turn. Another interloper. He is swamped under shadow and entranced by the melody, but he is safe yet. The lake is still. All is calm and lazy under the inky, blotted sky. All, save for the swashing and wading in the farthest reaches of the wharf. The moonlight lingers and glimmers just enough on the tips of the ripples that I can discern the intruder. He stumbles carefully and trudges attentively. He tries to be cautious, but he is too far out of his depth.

His disturbance echoes out into the night. His movements erratic and scared, it vibrates over the pond, reaching the banks and resounding back, surfing over the wavelets. The struggle continues. I offer him my call, one that only ever falls on deaf ears, but he hears me.

He batters the current and spears through the flood. I try to tell him that his efforts are in vain, that a greater disruption will only cause a harsher riptide. I scream at him, searching in the

dark for the space between voids. He is unturned. He is set, still, piercing through the noise, heading for the deep. I retch and howl, screeching at him to leave, to float. My voice tears, but I scream, I cry out into the night, begging. The man's first ripples come rushing back. They invert their path, racing backwards to meet in the centre. They crash. They swirl. He is caught. The deep stirs. He is hauled forward, until we are face to face. I see him then. There, under the splayed, milky dim light, I see him. I see myself, reflected on damp, glistening eyes. The hope is there again. That same wonder which coaxes toward the lakebed, is there, again. He never heard me. He reaches out. The whirlpool grows. The splashing stops and he grasps at the open air. The liquid symphony deafens. I crane my neck down to him, but the moment has passed. The waters split and fissure, twisting, and pulling. The mid-night chorus. Another song drowned. Alone, once more. The only griever. I weep.

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**Cuan Woods**,<sup>16</sup> lives in a small sea-side town in Dublin. Current writer, former sceptic.

## Massless Particles

The dead drink deeply. Instruments scrape against one another, framing a red dance of temptation and despair. Florid lighting drowns the bitter zinc countertop.

Rivers of liquor flow across the bar, pleasure-seekers crashing, meeting them like frothing waves. Clear shots, cream liqueurs, golden whiskey dulling to a sad orange in the din. A flash of blue, dissipating as it touches the low stone ceiling.

The flambé twists into itself, fire on glass, and is drunk. Burning waters heal the damned.

Two spirits sit, facing one another, each a shade in a shadow. One phantom takes a shot. Vodka. The face scrunches like a sea anemone. Pain searing down the throat, cleaving the soul in half, fracturing the walls, allowing the ceilings to buckle as the second takes cover, a prisoner of rubble.

A woman with plumed, thalassic, monumental hair is wrested from the bar. The phantom pair turn away as lithe limbs writhe and run. Rage is spat, bouncing off yellow walls that crumble to sand. She wrestles against the arms of the bouncer, she drags all laughter from the room. The music hesitates. Hermes, they call her.

She sobs, begging, calling for Reason. The two onlookers remember her bringing them here. They have been drunk ever since.

The spirits both down a dark rum, sweet and stony. At the bottom of the rubble-prisoner's glass lies a truth, a sinking-stomach, an embracing murky depth, meaningless in its motherliness. The prisoner contracts. In one moment it languishes and regrows, pulsing, afraid. The vodka drinker finds a relief, not of soaring birds but of the disassembled invalide, reconstructed as a statue. Eyes opened, the drinker is forced to bear witness to the world. The drink was well aged.

Two whiskeys, on the Rocks, find their way to the table. The drinker sips slowly, taking in the sequined dancers, the buzzing of the locust crowd as they pick at the grain. The mouth twitches, an involuntary acknowledgement of the vivifying fray.

The time-prisoner waits for the first to finish, and knocks back their drink in one, knowing it is an acerbic cure, tossing it away and landing sprawling on the foot-flattened floor.

The drinker launches towards the bar, the second must roll steadily behind. Cigarette fumes invoke their nostrils, conquering them. Burn marks litter the bar like asteroid craters, as each smouldering stub hammers the metal, a new weapon is formed, the drinker swipes their fingers on the blade. They are singed by the undulating texture.

The leader grabs two burning glasses from the counter and hands one to the fear-prisoner. They move the inferno close to their faces. It licks their noses as they take a first sip. It is Honey, ice, chilli. It scintillates their lips - their tongue throats and stomachs in turn. It pours itself into the drinkers, filling out every nook, wiping clean every dusty corner.

A woman, possessed of a body flowing with sand and an air of electrified poison, sees these two drinkers. They look back at her, afraid of her lacy leopard print armour. Melinoë, owner, manager, empress, goddess. She walks calmly as people scatter around her. She presents them with two shots of a perfectly white nectar.

Walking on the Coals they just drank, they take her challenge. Both collapse. She carries them away from her bar, facing no questions or resistance. Both will be made new. Melinoë, life giver. Goddess of ghosts.

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**Pix Egan, 17;** a fascination with the dramatic and the dead has led to this piece. Pix is excited to further explore life and death in their art.

## Nuclear force

I awaken to the screams of birds. Their beautiful cries force me out of bed. I close my window, shutting off the chilling draft. Instinctively, I clutch my phone, bleary eyed, 04:50. With a sigh, I grab a hair bobbin and head downstairs directly for the couch. I lay nestling in warm cushions, gazing up at the ceiling's corrosive cracks that have accumulated over the years. I hadn't noticed them form over time, but now there are too many to ignore.

My silence is interrupted. The haunting of high-pitched screaming and crying claws its way into my ears and I glance to the window. The rising sun is breaking through the clouds, casting a golden hue.

I hear the familiar creak of my Mother's bed upstairs as she shuffles towards the wardrobe. Her feet pad softly avoiding the creaky floorboards, until she is standing on the other side of this ceiling. I can't imagine what she is feeling. The nostalgic screeching of her suitcase's stiff wheels – summer holidays, pools and sun and mirth. A pang of guilt stings in my gut as my jaw clenches. Dad's sleeping bag ruffles as he shifts sides on the hard oak. He impersonates sleep, letting her go. Not a word was spoken. There was nothing left to say.

Rapid intakes of breath like whispers escape my Mother as she staggers away. The wheels of her suitcase turn rhythmically with her as they screech along the floor. I listen to her crawling quietly down the stairs. I catch a glimpse of her pausing to trace her fingers over frozen faces, lamenting the loss of days gone by. Her gaze softens – our lightening in a bottle.

I hear her inhale sharply one last time opposite the front door. One final push, and she's gone. The keychain clanks metronomically as she leaves. My eyes trail up to the cracked ceiling once more,

envisioning her empty bed. My eyes flick back to the gentle lapping of canal water outside.

The many tents are what blind my eyes. My stomach twists as I watch the movement along the canal. A woman in a hijab is taping worn pages to a tree. "Family of 3 seeking place to stay." She is holding her child tightly, nestling his head into the crook of her neck. My own tears pool over my eyes. The child's wails are dulled slightly by the dividing wall between us. I allow them to pour over my mind. The water of time.

I didn't hear the arguing.

Now, I lie alone, a refugee in a haunted house I once called home.

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**Mary Groome, 17**, is a writer with a fond love for Irish and English literature. She finds comfort in the words of others and is inspired by them every day.

## shrouded until shattered

The stars of twilight sparkle through the silver glass panes of the window I am peering through. Vaguely, I can see tears streaking down the state of my reflection. I have long stopped crying, yet my breath comes out in short wheezes, my heart still feels just as heavy. The bus jolts. I never should have gone back to Ennis, there is nothing there for me, not anymore.

\*\*\*\*\*

What I remember is this: The early evening swallows swooped outside the house. They looked like broken shards of darkness in flight, blanketing my vision. A ringing filled my ears at the sound of their trills, like the torturous screeching of a violin's fractured melodies. My hands shook while entrapping the cursed crumpled paper, wrists turning white with the pressure of my grip. An agonized wail threatened to escape, the pins and needles limiting my ability to breathe. It had been hidden from me. My father had lied to me. For years I had lived in outrage of the world because I thought others were the ones to take her away from me, no, my blame was misplaced. *"I love you both so much and I am so sorry I must go. I just can't take this anymore,"* she wrote. But her drowning was never an accident. My sister. Nadine.

I fell to my knees. A shattered vase finally falling apart after being held together with nothing but glue and a silent prayer. The scream bubbling up inside, ripped out me as the taste of iron coated my tongue. A self-inflicted world.

Distantly, I could hear a concerned voice poking and prodding at my mind, trying to figure out what could be going on with me. Through the thick veils of tears flooding my vision, I caught

a glimpse at the concerned gaze of my father. He hid Nadine's music book, he lied to me, for all this time. Bile burned its way up my throat, threatening to dispose of the deceit he fed me alongside those frozen dinners. I snapped. I shoved Nadine's note into his wide eyed, wrinkled face. His movement became rigid; he knew exactly what he was looking at. He could no longer hide behind sympathetic glances and lies, he knew, I knew the truth. His concerned pleas finally silenced. I was gifted with the bitter satisfaction of seeing my father's legs threatening to collapse under the pressure of my accusations. I rushed out of the house, away from dad, away from Ennis, away from Nadine. I never should have returned, even just for a week; it was too much. My words still echoing. "You lied."

\*\*\*\*\*

The bus lurches to a halt. I gather my belongings and step off. As I walk back to my student accommodation, I do not look back at the bus heading back to my hometown. I ignore the familiar chill down my spine, as the deafening screeches of the dead greet me at my door.

My home is here now.

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**Alana Connellan** (17) is a curious soul from Clare, who reads and writes, to explore the vast universes of narrative voices, passionate beliefs and the tales yet to be told.

## Fusion

I know that I have always felt different.  
Not necessarily different in a peculiar way, but different in a particular way.  
I am unsure if I am able to comprehend the complexity of the atypical scenario which I was born into.

From my date of birth, I have been adorned in West Africa from head to toe.

My mother, 'My Love'.  
She taught me pride, she showed me independence, ensuring that I was indulged in my heritage.  
My mother's tongue, the words of the ones before us were always made known. Language is a form of communication through translation that has the ability to decode words, sentences and thoughts.

'Hair like wool and skin like silk', the things that I have endured.  
If my hair wasn't 'done' braided down then it was out and loud.  
I never really requested for such a permanent statement piece, that's just the way God made me.  
And everytime that my curls were free, they would have a unique word to describe her texture.  
Often that of farm animals or of a zoo.  
No, you cannot touch my hair because she does not hold power to you.  
She displays my history.  
My ancestors live inside me.  
Generations of tender, love and care on our hair have been lowly tiered, teared down because of a half-hearted nonsensical statement.

A disorientation begins, I am not one, I am two.  
Two souls in sole.  
An individual born, brought up, in this nation.  
Although as it seems this country is only accommodating me.  
But I am indigenous to the land of those that forebear me by blood.  
Lamentably, I do not know them as those that have adapted, inhabited amongst them.

Evidently, forever a foreigner.  
Dual identity, a goal to not to remould but grow.

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**Ola Lawal**, 17; was born in Dublin, Ireland, to Nigerian parents. She adores escaping into her own literary world through writing short stories and poetry.

# QUARK

*/kwa:k/*

*(slang) rubbish, tripe.*

*Coined in 1963 by U.S. physicist Murray Gell-Mann (1929–2019), who associated it with a word in Joyce's Finnegans Wake, read variously as English quark / croak and German Quark / curd*

LYLA STENSON  
ESTHER TYTHER  
LAURA DERMODY  
DANIEL MOLYNEUX  
VALENTINE JONES  
TOM FARRAGHER  
CATE MCCASHIN  
PATRICK DUNGAN  
ANNIE DONNELLY  
PHILIPPA LUCEY  
OISIN HUGHES  
CUAN WOODS  
PIX EGAN  
MARY GROOME  
ALANA CONNELLAN  
OLA LAWAL

'THREE QUARKS FOR MUSTER MARK!  
AND SURE ANY HE HAS IT'S ALL BESIDE THE MARK.'

JAMES JOYCE, 'FINNEGANS WAKE'

**MOLI**  
EDITIONS