

Temple Bar Gallery + Studios New Writing Commission 2016

TBG+S New Writing Commission aims to expand ideas around writing about art. In 2016, TBG+S has commissioned the writer Claire-Louise Bennett to write a piece of short fiction inspired by each of the exhibitions in the gallery programme. This piece was written in response to the group exhibition 'My Brilliant Friend', curated by Rayne Booth, featuring artists Michelle Browne, Avril Corroon, Ella de Búrca, Lisamarie Johnson and Laugh a Defiance.

Claire-Louise Bennett grew up in Wiltshire and studied literature and drama at the University of Roehampton, before moving to Ireland. Her short fiction and essays have been published in *The Stinging Fly*, *The Irish Times*, *The White Review*, *Gorse*, and elsewhere. She was awarded the inaugural White Review Short Story Prize in 2013 and has received bursaries from the Irish Arts Council and Galway City Council. Her debut book, *Pond*, was published by *The Stinging Fly* (Ireland) and *Fitzcarraldo Editions* (UK) in 2015, and will be published by *Riverhead* (US) in summer 2016.

TBG+S WRITING COMMISSION 2016

Claire-Louise Bennett

Essay #2 How We Spend Our Days

At the end of spring 2014 I received two pieces of unwelcome news. First of all I was given notice to leave my home, a cottage where I'd lived happily and productively for almost four years. I'd always known the day of expulsion would come – if you're renting accommodation termination of tenancy is never far from your thoughts – all the same, despite its inevitability, I wasn't quite prepared for it. After inhabiting a distinguished abode made from fortifying and recognisable materials my heart plunged at the thought of returning to the unmoored homologous realm of slapdash walls, thick-skinned settees, shuddering drawers, clammy skirting boards and the sickly somewhat obsequious pallor of pandemic magnolia paint. The second piece of news came just a few weeks after, it was an email from a senior editor at a prominent publishing house in London who I'd been in correspondence with for almost a year. I'd sent the final manuscript of my book for his perusal and his response was less than encouraging – it wasn't entirely dismissive, not at all, but ultimately he was after a different sort of book from the one I'd spent a long time putting together. He wanted a book that had more things happening in it and more people involved in those events – in other words he wanted plot and characters and a story. But that's impossible, I thought, how can there be people and encounters in a book that's unabashedly about being on your own and not really knowing what to do? 'The book, what it contains, the way it behaves, it's shape, sensibility, and so on, is, I believe profoundly female,' I wrote, eventually, in response. It was a bit wide-eyed of me to have set so much store in our association, I recognised that almost immediately, and much of my despair over the ensuing weeks came from the realisation that my life had very little foundation. The rug had been pulled from under my feet far too easily, and just like that my book and I had nowhere to go.

Many years ago I worked my tail off several nights a week in the blazing kitchen of a very popular restaurant. I washed dishes and I washed pans, I washed big plastic containers, every kind of utensil, a terrifying mandolin slicer, shoals of knives and forks and spoons, and I washed wine glasses too. One evening towards the end of summer when things were quietening down I was introduced to an innately elegant woman who dined frequently in the restaurant with her husband. She was older than me and had pale green eyes and delicate skin, sometimes her voice quivered when she spoke, yet there was nothing slight or irresolute about her. When she gave her attention to something she did so fully, it did not waver or suddenly dissipate, her interest remained constant, alert, firm, and expansive. Firm, yes. Our day-to-day lives had little in common yet we became firm friends, quickly and instinctively. Naturally, since that first meeting, many transformations have occurred – I don't wash dishes in a restaurant any more, she no longer dines with her husband, and in fact the restaurant we coincided in no longer exists – but we have remained friends, firm friends, and so, when the bottom fell from out my rather precariously positioned world I wrote to her and told her.

I told her I was incredibly lost. It's difficult, I said, to find enthusiasm for anything, and without enthusiasm I'm not really going to bring about any change. I told her it had been pointed out to me that finishing a book, particularly a first one, can be quite painful. That's certainly true, I said, there's something terribly sad about the whole thing – once it's complete – only when it's complete - do you realise what it's really about, what you've really been trying to say. Plus, more prosaically, it's the thing that I've been

completely occupied with, without break really, for three or four years. I had something to do, every day, and now I do not. And when you're in it, I said, it is a world, an entire world, and so there is a sense of belonging, and of purpose, that I am currently lacking. As if that feeling of displacement weren't bewildering enough, the landlady has given me notice, I said. I have to get out of here pretty soon and I have no idea where to go.

I arrived in the south of France in the middle of June, just a few days before my friend's birthday. A few days after my friend's birthday we went to a big supermarket close to the mountains and I bought some clothes hangers. I remember holding two different sorts, one set in each hand, for an unwarranted length of time before taking the thin grey ones. Indeed nothing was automatic. I battled between trying to assert certain elements of a routine I'd gradually cultivated while living in the cottage and simply going with the flow so that a new, more apposite, shape to my days could emerge. I never got up at dawn and walked along the river like I so often vowed I would. I went to a café with my notebook and fountain pen perhaps only once. I disappeared before dinner and sat at my laptop upstairs with a glass of wine to do online French lessons perhaps all of three times. I did very little in the way of writing, just a cryptic page here and there, before resting my head back down on the bolster or hammock. My friend didn't seem to mind. She never once asked me what I was doing or what was I going to do. Activity, plans, any sort of contrived industriousness didn't seem to interest her. The garden was beautiful, large but nicely sheltered, and we didn't often feel the need to go much beyond it. Life was lived moment-by-moment with a bittersweet immediacy. In the mornings we sat by the smaller pond assessing the croissants, discussing what we'd read before going off to sleep, sharing what dreams came to us while we were sleeping.

'Are you doing that?' she said, one morning.

'Doing what?' I said.

'That, with your feet', she said.

'What, this?' I said.

'Yes!' she said. 'You are doing it, you're deliberately moving your toes!'

'Of course I'm doing it!' I said.

'I can't do that', she said. We both looked at my toes and then at her toes and then back at my toes.

'I'll show you some exercises if you like, but you'll have to do them every morning', I said.

'Oh yes please' she said.

Success is routinely gauged by the extent to which one is busy and productive, and also by one's ability to belong. But what exactly should I be doing, and to what or to whom should I belong? For many women the answers to these questions are taken care of and the months and years roll by before they've had a chance to even wonder what might be done with the present hour. I often think of Annie Dillard's adage, 'How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.' My friend and I occasionally joked that both of us were in exile, and in many ways we were: immersed in seemingly minor things far outside of the loop.