

Cathy Sweeney

The Nature of Things

Written in response to **Lucy Stein**, *Lunula*

Cathy Sweeney is a short story writer and novelist. Her fiction has been published in *The Stinging Fly*, *The Dublin Review* and *Granta*, and has been broadcast on BBC Radio 4. In 2020, her collection of short stories, *Modern Times*, was published by The Stinging Fly Press, Dublin, and by W&N, London. Her debut novel *Breakdown* was published by W&N in January 2024.

In 2026, she works on a novel based on the months Oscar Wilde spent in Naples following his release from prison in 1897.

The **Temple Bar Gallery + Studios Writing Commission** aims to expand ideas around writing about art by inviting Irish authors to create a series of pieces inspired by the exhibitions at TBG+S. In 2024, TBG+S has commissioned Cathy Sweeney to make a piece of writing inspired by each of the exhibitions in the gallery programme.

Over the last twelve years the commission has featured ground-breaking Irish writers to respond to the gallery programme. Previous writers include Sara Baume (2015), Claire-Louise Bennett (2016), Gavin Corbett (2017), Doireann Ní Ghríofa (2018), Annemarie Ní Churreáin (2019), and Ian Maleney (2020), Nicole Flattery (2021), Thomas Morris (2022), Pádraig Regan (2023), Nidhi Zak/Aria Eipe (2024), Gustav Parker Hibbett (2025).

The texts are available to download from www.templebargallery.com and printed copies are available in the gallery.

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The Nature of Things

On the journey home from work, the woman began to feel sick. The bus crawled through traffic, braking suddenly, slithering forward again, and, from beneath her seat, an old heater spewed yellow fumes. Around her neck, a lanyard hung heavy as an iron amulet. She pressed the bell, got off the bus, and walked the rest of the way home in twilight. In the kitchen she made herbal tea and held the warm cup in her hands as she stepped into the floodlit garden to look for signs of life under the oak tree. Buds, spiders, worms, pomegranates from next door fallen over the wall. But the garden was empty. She called her daughter from her bedroom and took her for a walk along the headland, past the orchard, almost to the summit of the hill. A white night now, with a black moon. Holding the girl tightly by the hand, she warned her never to eat the pips of an apple, or a tree would grow in her belly. The girl shivered in her muslin dress and stared at her, as if to say, How could anything like that happen to me? But the woman knew. Twice she had thrown a strip of apple peel over her shoulder; twice, instead of making the initial of the child's future husband, it had made the coil of a snake.

Years later, when the worst thing happened, the woman recalled that night in the garden, the artificial atmosphere in which the world felt suspended in nerveless limbo, and wondered what other signs she had missed.

It was an ordinary dawn when her daughter had hobbled through the door, clutching her belly and crying that all she remembered was a voice in the orchard saying it did not wish to hurt her, and then a sting, like an arrow, before a heavy numbness seized her. The girl screamed as shoots sprouted from her abdomen, thin bark closed over her stomach and breasts and gnarling crust began to coffin her womb. In a flash, the woman grabbed her daughter, felt her heart still beating, and, just in time, managed to carry her into the garden, position her under the protective branches of the oak tree, while roots were already forcing themselves from her toenails, burrowing deep in the soil, fastening to the bedrock.

It is hard to remember, when things are bad, that they may become good again. For a year, the woman was frozen with pain, until, glancing through the window in the kitchen one day, she saw that the worst thing in the world had turned into the best thing in the world. For there was her daughter, hair flowing in new shoots, radiant joy emanating from fresh buds coming into being, her dress a blossom of pink swaying in the breeze. Her arm-branches and sun-hardened feet were dancing, her canopy beaming at the canopy of the great oak tree, whose sturdy bole had transformed itself into a human arm and stretched itself to hold her. They had fallen in love, the great oak tree and the young woman, over four long

seasons, and their love had created, as if by magic, an elegant horse prancing over verdant grass, a golden bird singing overhead, a giant earthworm capable of transforming the leaves that fell dead in autumn into new life in spring. Overjoyed, the woman ran to tell her neighbours of the miracle that had happened, but, resistant to alternative endings, they pursed their lips, went home to spray chemicals on driveways and chop down trees that blocked the light into living rooms.