

TBG+S WRITING COMMISSION 2018

Temple Bar Gallery + Studios Writing Commission 2018

The TBG+S 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 Temple Bar Gallery + Studios. In 2018, TBG+S has commissioned Doireann Ní Ghríofa to write a piece of short fiction inspired by each of the exhibitions in the gallery programme.

Previous TBG+S Writers have included Sara Baume (2015), Claire-Louise Bennett (2016) and Gavin Corbett (2017).

Each written piece is available to download from www.templebargallery.com.

Doireann Ní Ghríofa is a bilingual writer living and working in Cork. Her fifth book is 'Oighear' (Coiscéim, 2017) and a collaborative book of poetry and art with artist Alice Maher will soon be published by The Salvage Press. Among her awards are the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature, the Ireland Chair of Poetry Bursary, and the Michael Hartnett Award. Doireann frequently participates in cross-disciplinary collaborations, fusing poetry with film, dance, music, and visual art.

Doireann Ní Ghríofa

Essay #1

Handwritten

(The Electrolier's Granddaughter Speaks)

This prose poem was written by Doireann Ní Ghríofa in response to 'The Time-Travelling Circus: The Recent Return of Pablo Fanque and the Electrolier' by Katrina Palmer.

I didn't visit its canvas peak, I never witnessed its crimson skin all flagged and fluttering, singing the lost scent of candy floss. Lost. Long-lost. I never heard the applause, how the audience's hands rose to a spitting boil, summoning her body as oil demands meat. There's so much in those moments I cannot reach. Still, I dream it up and watch its re-birth: the circus bulk, its edifice splitting the horizon at dusk, the elephant's hulk, the jostle, the warmth. Glimmer-glimmer, my dark sings her back into her lamp-lit past. Poised over many heads, she grins, my grandmother in her crystal dress – slender, calm, suspended.

Every night, my eye conjures this dream-scene trapped in time, lets me wedge myself in her *endless present*, her held breath. I see her swung up again, up, up, suspended over a ring. Swing, swung, sing: sing a song of sixpence, of subsequence, of gasp and fall and consequence.

Of all the chronicles of bodies lost in motion, hers is a lesson in how to balance bones in implosion. She held a past tense wedged in the small gap of atlas and axis, her neck swan-elegant. She held the future tense in her fist, gripped in every shred of muscle and cartilage. Closer, now, my sleeping eye moves closer, until every watch on every wrist begins to glitch in time with the line of her spine. She stands over this trembling crowd – an awful pause – and then, the fall – in which her fractured limbs, her sliced skin all become peripheral. This cursed moment twitches before me, a choreography of horror, her body tumbling again, brittle now, fallible. Crushed to dust, his precious circus flung sawdust on her tongue. They rush to touch her, but will never save her, not grandfather, not father, not me. My useless sleeping eye stares. How fast, flame devours hair.

In those cold moments, before her body crumples under rubble, the circus floor is flat as a palm, the palm of a hand born with no mark, no map, no line. Mine. I inherited none of her tightrope tricks, none of her light, no pattern of her palm. No. I hold only her sigh. Mine. My palms were born blank: no heart line, no life line. In school I tried to fit in by scrawling forgeries there in ink. No-one noticed when my ballpoint leaked, blotting my pocket.

The circus which visited our town wasn't grandfather's, but I still skipped school to sprint past caravans and horses, past the Valventi twins ironing their silk bindings, past the plate-spinning Brennans, Big Jack the bee-bearded marvel, Foolish Jude the juggling buffoon, past Scarletta the bearded lady, in her frilly pantaloons. I ran past them all, past the candy apples at the sweet stall, only to pause, breathless, at the fortune teller's room. *Rap rap*. The door was opened by a different woman each year, although she always blew the same sweet mouthful of smoke at me, glamorous in silk scarves, hooped earrings, kohl smudged on eyelids, and always, always, a set of red claws. My routine was to dawdle, stutter, feigning naïveté until she'd prompted me wearily to cross her palm with silver. I'd slip her my single coin, smile shyly, present both hands, gaze away. Always the same. Faced with my blank palms, the fortune teller would gasp, or glare, though the younger ones were brazen, delivering their usual patter through pinched lips, o *handsome strangers*, o *happy ever afters*, o *long-lost keys*. The older ladies demanded I leave, and slammed the door after me: Madame Janine, Honey-Lee, Mary Rose, Miss Lucy... Only Darlene spoke truthfully. Her brow flinched when she whispered, *Girl, I can't help you, you have no story to read*. Only she handed back my money and shrugged, *You alone will map your own road. Let yourself be guided by crows*. Behind the tent, a sack of spilled popcorn kernels had black-wings pecking. I didn't go home that evening.

In this circus, I longed to be an electrolier, but the men say I'm too sturdy, so they made me the knife thrower's girl. I specialise in silence, in stillness, trembling a little in time with the crowd's lilting whispers. Every night, I wait, back pressed against the stabbed platform, teeth bared in lipstick grin, gripping his knives tight in my fists, until thin slivers of blood come trickling. Every morning, new marks raise themselves through blood to scab to pale. Every day, the blades. Every day, *Ta-dah, Ta-dah*, until I tattoo myself a life-line of scars. Every day, I carve until my palms are cast with a map of their circus peak. The electrolier dangles here, see, in the middle? Heart of my hand; ~~written~~ written ~~over~~written.