

## ON THE MARGINS<sup>1</sup>

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Irish Poet

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SARAH CECILIA HARRISON, *Self-Portrait*, 1889

At the table after breakfast, ready for work  
my teenage daughter opens her compact mirror,  
deftly brushes her nose and cheeks.  
Mouth, lips, skin undergo inspection.

Green eyes inquisitive, hair gathered in a bun,  
roll-neck blouse and brooch, recalls  
this young woman's profile who  
became the first female City Councillor.

Where did she learn composition?  
Her frank, nonchalant gaze, dimpled chin,  
turns from a pitch backdrop,  
brushes in hand, palette under her thumb,  
  
survives a turbulent century  
to view us with an artist's discipline.

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*REFERENDUM* 1982

She arrived at Dublin airport, a guest  
for our wedding. Like young Lisa Minelli,

spiked hair, feather ear-ring, a child  
of Greenwich Village. Rolled her own.

Didn't get stopped at immigration.  
The photo is of her, lying face-down,

a windswept field. I remember the moment.  
As a country, how could we? Posters

rammed slogans along city streets.  
Showing her the coast, I wanted her to see

beyond our limits. Screeching gulls,  
a hair-raising cliff-path. We stopped to rest.

I was in love with the muskiness of gorse,  
and she, homesick for New York

flung herself in deep grass, inhaled  
the rainy earth, leaving me with camera in hand

and nothing between us but silence.  
Her red dress, burning a green ocean.

CONVERSATIONS

Four long fields from the house,  
I stood at our boundary  
looking across a paddock at the pebble-dashed gable.  
The girl, my age, waved from her open door,  
beckoning, as if she expected me, a stranger,  
to run towards her. I remember little,

some mention of a baby brother,  
the newness of her voice,  
dark curls and mild manner,  
how we sat on the rung of a rusty, iron gate,  
our feet threaded through the frame,  
in the vast emptiness of summer,

the sky an infinite blue, high clouds,  
on the horizon, a slow herd, whales and elephants.  
Nine-years-old, in the middle of nowhere,  
agreeing to play with our dolls,  
my blonde Crolly with forget-me-not eyes,  
her porcelain bride,

we worked out a code with a round smooth stone  
to say 'I've been here early and gone'  
or, 'I'll come back later to meet you.'  
She was never in my house nor I, in hers.  
At the beginning of September, we went back  
to our different schools and churches, and grew older.

VENUS ON SANDYMOUNT GREEN

She sits astride the bike  
in short shorts,  
on the margins of the gang

who stop to chat and lark  
at the street corner,  
their backs turned.

She waits to be addressed,  
blushes at the least word,  
twists handlebars

at an angle,  
rests her butt, ready  
to shove off on the pedal.

Long tanned legs  
stretched to tippy toes,  
she idles from side to side,

balances on the saddle,  
holds still  
by tapping the earth.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

CATHERINE PHIL MACCARTHY's books include *Emblemas* (USP, 2024); *Daughters of the House* (2019) and *The Invisible Threshold* (2019) Dedalus Press, Dublin; Suntrap, (2007),

*One Room an Everywhere* (a novel, 2003), and *the blue globe*, (1998), Blackstaff Press, Belfast; *This Hour of the Tide*, (1994), Salmon Poetry. A graduate of *University College Cork, Dublin University (TCD)* and *Central School of Speech and Drama London*, she received the *O'Shaughnessy Award for Poetry* (2014) and *The Yeats Thoor Ballylee Poetry Prize* in 2023. She has lectured in Drama at *University College Dublin*, and *Thomond College* in Limerick, and taught at *Waterford Institute of Technology*. Her poems are featured in *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies (CJIS, 42, 2025)*. She was born and grew up in Co. Limerick and has lived in Dublin since 1987.  
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