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EMILY DEDAKIS

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HOUSEHOLD

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TWO BY TWO

by Emily DeDakis

Take a stack of magazines and tear out photographs of all the animals you find and arrange them on the table in scenes of peace and harmony.

Now make them all eat each other.

-Nick Laird, "Fun for One"

Seeing sharks. That's what Ella came to Sailortown for.

Sneakers slippery on the dockside, hair ricocheting around her skull, Ella saw plenty, but never sharks, no way. The ferries. The sea ducks who bobbed and crested the tiny waves, shmerrrrk-ing at each other. Rubbish in the water; new collections nestled in the corner of the deep dock everyday. The sailors smoking on deck, who smiled and shouted to her, maybe started a game of toss-to-me, back-and-forth, with whatever they had handy that a sailor and a little girl could both catch and throw, if they were bored enough and the chief mate wasn't close:

tennis balls

starfish

tinned beans

teddy bears

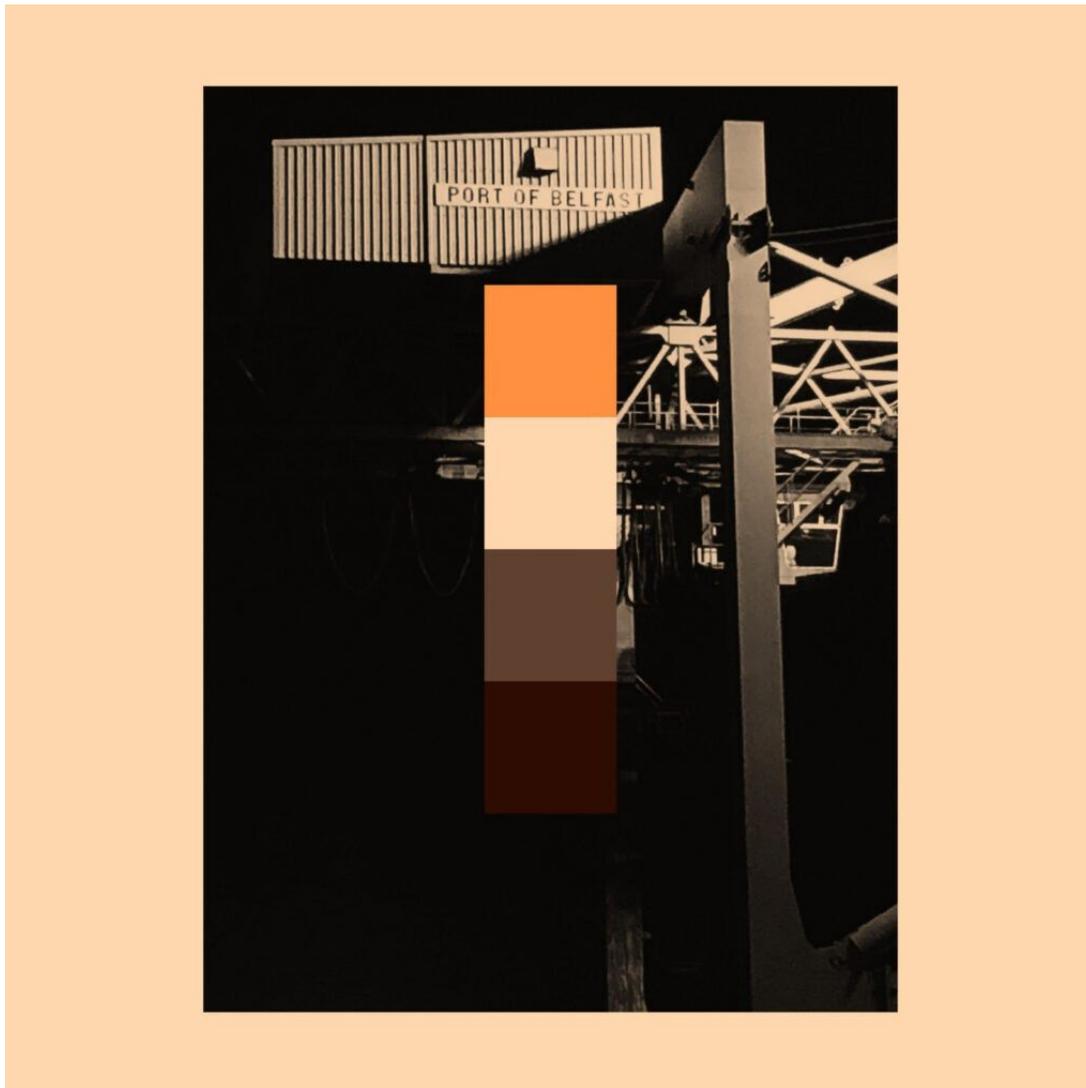
Sometimes they weren't allowed on land. On those days, she was the only animal they saw. And sometimes sailors were the only ones she saw.

Never sharks. No way.

But the ducks and the sailors must have been enough, 'cause she did keep coming. Most days, really. Even though she wasn't supposed to.

Ella had to walk a pretty long way to get to the docks — away from the castle on the mountain, crossing the big street then winding down the rich road, past the deepgreen walled-off gardens, then landing in the concrete front yards, past the leisure centre that looks abandoned but is full of people swimming in rows

(wearing goggles and breathing under their arms), skirting the McDonald's parking lot, bee-lining through Tiger's Bay (never seen a tiger there yet), skipping across the rough interchanges where the people with needles in their pockets stood (not looking at her), past the supersized superstores and petrol stations (one used to be the cigarette factory Granny got rich working in), under the railroad bridge, past the bars where the dockers used to wait, round the roundabout, down the long road with the Port of Belfast crane towering at the end, and the shipping containers and the warnings of rabies, under the chain (not very secret), and over to the flat water-slapping docks, rimmed by ships.



ARTWORK: *PORT OF BELFAST*, BY NONGRAPHIC WITH ORIGINAL IMAGE BY EMILY DEDAKIS.

Things that could get rabies. That's what Ella wanted to see.

Granny said *Everything turns up in Sailortown eventually. Everything that arrives in Belfast comes here first.* She'd been a girl and a woman in Sailortown. Granny had all the stories: All the free cigarettes a factory girl could carry. Crates of pineapples lugged in on stevedores' shoulders. A parade of elephants trailing off the ship on the way to the circus.

Mum said *You can't go there without Granny around. It's dangerous, Ella.*

It's where Ella's da turned up too — a sailor from the upside-down part of the globe. Ella balanced on her head beside the big globe that sat on the gold stand by Granny's piano. *There's where Da came from,* Ella said and pointed with her big toe at the underside of the world. *Mind you don't kick my gin,* Granny said, flicking Ella's foot away and fetching a bottle from the globe.

Da was from Oz, so he didn't tell fish tales, he told shark ones — like the time he was sitting on his surfboard in the ocean riding massive swells and a Great White breached right beside him: *It flipped right over my head, mate, tail just missed me!* The trouble with Belfast, according to Da? No decent representatives of the animal kingdom. Da said that in Oz, seeing a shark a day kept the doctor away. He said the smallest spiders were the size of his hand and lizards lived in all the cupboards. He told about huge furry animals that could see perfectly in the dark and jump higher than basketball players and strangle you with their tails.

What the fuck are you even talking about? Mum would say, laughing anyway.

Da was a messer. Ella liked that he looked different from most das. You could always see him from ages away at the school gates: that long loping walk, the fact that he had a Greek tortoise called Dorian in his arms instead of a Jack Russell on a lead. A real messer.

He did love that tortoise, though. Da was the only one Dorian didn't pee on.

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It was an accident.

There was lemonade.

It was fierce hot in the granny flat (which was not where Granny actually lived; it was a wee shed at the back of the garden, full of weird left-behind things). Dorian hadn't moved in ages. Usually right when Ella put him down, he'd make for the half-door and crawl into the garden. Dorian was the only exotic splash in their humdrum teakettle nonesuch wisecrack bungalow — but today he was dead boring.

The doorbell rang; she could just hear it through the kitchen window. Ella perked up. A doorbell-ring was something.

Mum shook off her wet hands in the kitchen sink and went to answer it. Ella and Dorian lay on their tummies, blinking at the grass beyond the door. Ella dipped her fingers in her glass of lemonade (lemonade!? the sun when it showed up was like everyone's fanciest grandad — all the nice never-usually stuff came out and you could get away with murder) and baptised the tortoise with a few drops. Dorian flinched. Licked his lips.

“Cara's here!” Mum shouted around the side of the house.

Cara was always bouncing in six directions at once. She was like Ella sped up. As a rule, an only child like Ella never gets a twin, but Cara was something close.

Ella left a saucer with lemonade in the grass just outside the granny flat. “Enjoy it when you get there,” she said to Dorian, who was sizing up the doorframe, weighing up his chances of making it to the lemonade. Ella ran to the side gate and looked back at Dorian. He hadn't made a move yet. “C'mon, wee lad,” she urged. It was kinda class that when you called a turtle you couldn't tell if it was listening: solid like a rock but pure mystery too.

Cara's ma had cleaned off the trampoline and bought ice cream from the shop — not just wonky lollies off the man in the truck. The ice cream truck man drove really slow and did jerky stops. The music came in short blasts:

All around the mullbe-

-rry bush, the mon-

-key chased the weas-

Stop-start. Start-stop. Jesus. You couldn't sing along.

“You know what that lad really sells?” Cara’s big sister Rita asked. (She was fourteen, and acted like she’d been on earth since the Jurassic period. Ella pictured Rita as a pterodactyl.) Cara nodded but Ella could tell by her big eyes that Cara knew nothing beyond 99s. Ella and Cara were twins in some ways, but they were different types of 11-year-old. Once, Ella told her friend about the folks with needles in their pockets — how they wouldn’t hurt you, they were hunting for something else. Cara wrinkled her nose and said she wouldn’t believe what Ella couldn’t prove. Fair enough; Ella said the same thing to Da all the time. Ella might be a messer too, she realised.

“What does your da sell? He has that big van,” Rita said.

“Nothing, he just does building stuff,” Ella said.

“They say some guy drives around in a van just like that, and he kidnaps kids and sells them.”

Heat leapt from Ella’s toe tips to the ends of her hair in one flash. She got ready to pounce — but in came her twin to the rescue.

“Shut your hole,” Cara said, squaring up with her sister, as seriously and sturdily as she could while kneeling on a trampoline.

Rita coiled her hair around her finger and stared Cara down. “You know rightly he’s not from around here, Cara.”

The pit in Ella’s stomach was big enough for six sharks.

“Aye, and you know rightly that bad guy drives a grey van anyway. I seen you with him and all.”

Rita backed down, laughed a little. “Just saying. You gotta watch ones like her da. Not from around here.”

Even once Rita was back in the house (“gone to muck about with her hair straighteners and her fake tan,” Cara said), Ella still didn’t feel right. Once they’d bounced the ice cream around in their bellies enough, and lay on the trampoline watching Tik-Toks and fancams for a while, Ella did her secret handshake with Cara (over, under, click-click, slide) and hopped down and walked home.

“Are you okay?” Cara called from the gate.

“Sure,” Ella shouted back. “Whatever.”

On the way home, she noticed something in the middle of the street, like a basketball with no air.

Squashed flat. Shell polished like a dinner plate. Flies were starting to gather on her da’s Greek tortoise Dorian.

Ella’s stomach already hurt from ice cream and lemonade and the sister; now tears were leaping out of her eyes. She didn’t know what to do. Leave him? Tell someone? Let the birds or the ants come?

— *the monkey chased the weasel* —

Ella felt the world spin quietly away, and let the herky-jerky ice-cream song pick her heart apart. She picked up Dorian and (un-peed-upon) carried him back home, walked through the gate she’d left open, and hid him behind the granny flat, to keep him safe for now.

She ducked Mum and Da, told them nothing. Even though they kept ransacking cupboards, looking under the couch, lifting the dust ruffles on all the beds. How do you tell someone what they’re looking for is long, long gone? Da was taking boxes and bags down from the wardrobe — things she’d never seen. They didn’t seem angry; they didn’t seem to notice.

So Ella pretended to feed Dorian, and hid in her room under six pillows, like a turtle.

Her folks talked half the night.

Finally Da went quiet, sleeping, and Mum sneaked downstairs and had a cigarette out in the backyard. Ella loved watching the curlicues of her mother’s smoke. Mum didn’t look in Dorian’s hut, or behind the granny flat. She had her chin up towards the Milky Way galaxy.

*

Breakfast. Everyone sat almost still; Mum scrolling her phone; Da saying things like *It'll be fine*. Ella started to get up, to go pretend to check on Dorian, then Da's hand pinched her shoulder.

"Listen. I have to go to Oz. I have to ... check on things." He said it sad.

"When?"

"Now. I'm all packed."

Da hadn't been to Oz for Ella's entire life. This was not normal.

"Are we all going?" Ella buried berries in her porridge and squeezed back tears.

Da rubbed his thumb on his fingers. That meant money. "Flights, girl. It's over a grand just for me to get there."

"You said we'd go see the animals."

"Not this time."

"Will you be gone really long?"

"Could be. You take care of Dorian, okay girl?"

Take care.

*

Leaving Da at the airport was the biggest extinction event of Ella's life so far. Two guinea pigs had gone. Sixteen goldfish, nearly always in pairs. They didn't seem to last long without each other. Even losing Granny didn't count — das only came in ones. And Da had never left. And Oz was the furthest you could get.

Ella felt lost all morning. She wanted to pick Dorian up from his hut and try to put him down in the yard before he peed on her (Ella's own mini Olympics-for-one-athlete-with-tortoise), to watch him snuffle for the weirdest weeds, to let him chew her orphaned socks.

Da thought Dorian was still okay.

Well okay. Before Da got back, Ella would bring back Dorian. Or find something just as good.

Sailortown was the place to go. Where Granny saw the elephants — *and not just once*, she swore. Mum said not to listen to Granny either. But Ella was great at not listening to Mum.

Ella made her way down to the docks. It was a furry-grey day from the start, and by the time she got there the mizzle was serious. So Ella started at Benny's on Short Street. She ate chips with gravy and asked for extra milk with her tea.



ARTWORK: *SHORT STREET*, BY NONGRAPHIC, WITH ORIGINAL IMAGE BY EMILY DEDAKIS.

She flipped back through her notebook, looking over her lists of Sailortown animals:

fish

maybe a seal? (just one, just once)

pigeons

seagulls

cats

magpies

squirrels (grey, never red)

pigeons

pigeons

pigeons

The waitress read over her shoulder. "Those pigeons are holy terrors," she said.

"They go in the holes in the roof of the old bar. It scares me."

The waitress tutted. "It'll be the church next. They're coming for our gods." She cleared the dish. Empty dishes made Ella nervous now, flat and polished clean. She closed her eyes to stop the picture of Dorian.

"Did you ever see the elephants?" Ella asked the waitress at the till. "My granny said they walked off the ships and passed here on the way to the circus."

The waitress shook her head. "I heard the stories, though."

Outside the door, Tess (who ran the café) was loading up the sandwich van. She leaned down to Ella and said, "You still on the lookout for wild beasts?"

Ella stopped short. Blinked up at her.

"Well in case you never heard, Noah's Ark docked here once," Tess said.

Noah's ARK? Ella's eyebrows called the woman a liar. Granny would have told her for sure.

Café lady made the sign of the cross with a corned beef sandwich. "God's truth! Back in the sixties. Just once, mind you."

Noah's Ark ... Ella's heart was skipping slapdash down the docks, witnessing the animals promenading down the gangplank and pouring into Belfast through the funnel that was Sailortown. "Were there animals?" she asked. Ella saved her questions very carefully. Sometimes she looked abandoned, but the questions swam inside her till they needed a breath.

Tess staggered like Ella'd shot her in the heart, like she'd told a big effing whopper or said the dumbest thing ever. "Animals, she asks?" Tess held up a finger for each as she listed them: "Elephants, lions, zebras, chimpanzees, emus, tortoises, giraffes? Those sound like animals okay to you, missus?"

Tortoises. Shy wee pointy gurning face. Shell cracked flat like a dish. Her tummy flipped. "Two by two?" Ella asked.

"That's it," Tess said.

"Did they say if they were ever coming back?"

"Well let me think now. Did they?"

"Don't you be letting her wind you up!" the waitress shouted from inside.

Ella touched her left ear, the one her da used to wind her up. He was only making creaky clicky noises with his mouth, but when he crank-cranked her left ear she felt it down to her toes.

Tess stacked the last of the sandwiches, swizzled her lips sideways and looked at the sky for a clue. Ella held her breath. Then Tess brought her hands together — a thunderclap — and pointed. "There!"

The wet haze had broken out towards town and there it was, stretching over the Dockers Club to the far shore of the lough. A rainbow.

"That there is the Covenant. Noah's coming again!"

“You’re messing.” Ella struggled to remember church with Granny, anything about Noah.

“God’s truth. Sure ask the animals. Y’know before the rain, how cows sit down in the fields? If they know the ark is coming, they’ll start turning up in pairs to meet it. They’ll just know, sure they will.”

Ella imagined Dorian crawling right past the lemonade. He knew exactly what he was doing. He was going to meet his match in Sailortown, with the rest of the misfits. The Covenant was something written under the eyelids of the bears and between the wingfeathers of the birds and inside the shells of tortoises. The ark would come sailing in, and there would be one lonely tortoise on it. And Ella would get it and carry it home, somehow. She bet Noah was a sly one, but maybe he’d be game for a swap...

Ella eyed a couple of pigeons strutting through smashed glass on the traffic island.

“Here.” Tess handed her a BLT. “You’ll need this for the hunt.”

*

To kill or catch something, it helps to know what it loves.

All I need is two ...

Hunting pigeons was a place to start. They liked the bacon sarnie okay, but the minute you started at them they’d bob away like eejits, straight into the street, or do their crappy flying and just about make it to perch on the angel statue. Ella tempted and chased away at least six of them.

She was supposed to be great at this. *You come from generations of hunters*, Da said. *We lie in wait and pounce. We go out and get what we need.* Da was a sailor; Mum was a fixed point. If some people didn’t stay put and some didn’t move, Ella wouldn’t exist. Mum didn’t come to Sailortown anymore, though. *Ask Granny if you care about there, I don’t want to talk about it*, she used to say, when she even talked about it. Mum was still angry about the motorway. Angrier than Granny even. But once she let slip how she met Ella’s da in the old pigeon bar. *Met me?* Da scoffed. *Strewth! Sounds more like stalking.* There was music at the Rotterdam Bar. You had to pay out on Pilot Street and get a stamp on your

hand. It'd be sweated off by the end of the night — everyone was always so packed in. *We were standing so close. I put my arm around him. Didn't know who he was at all ... but I did, too*, Mum said, which didn't make sense, except it did. *It was the last time I went there, swear to God. I got what I needed and sure that was me.*

Granny said there was one thing to remember about the Rotterdam: It's where they kept the convicts before they sent them on the ships to Australia. *I reckon your mum found the key and cut him loose before they could ship him home.*

Da said that was all bull dust. He had lived in the zoo with all the other animals, stolen from their natural habitat. (*Did your ma really carry you in her pouch? Ella had once asked Da. Of course! For a whole year, like any creature of Oz.*) Ella could look up pictures of wombats and dingoes and Tasmanian devils. There were videos of potoroos, bilbies, and pademelons. But there was no Da's ma or Da's da on the internet. Da said he came to Belfast as a convict and became a freedom fighter: Mum smuggled him out of the zoo, like the little boy in France who took the penguin. And it was him who helped all the other Australian animals escape too: the saltwater croc went to the sewers as a surprise for NI Water; the sugar gliders flew up to the adventure playground by the castle. That's why there were none of his tribe left in the zoo. The only thing he left was the kookaburra: *They're right bastards.*

Whether it was the zoo or the bar, Ella liked thinking of her folks as ones who found out they were a pair. Escapees on the move — and all the beautiful things they run towards.

Pigeons never seemed to stay still, or get anywhere. Ella needed a new option. She had one morsel of bacon left and a safety pin in her pocket: halfway to a fishing pole ...

*

Catching salmon was a job actually. Ella knew a lot about that from Uncle Aris, Da's brother. Well, she didn't know him really — he was a story, like all Australian animals, like all Da's family back home. They were movers. They came from Greece before Australia — *and we haven't quit moving yet.* Da was in Belfast. Uncle Aris went to Alaska.

Alaska all the way from Oz? How far is that?

As far as you can get without running into a polar bear.

Why did he need to go so far?

There was a barney. He lost.

Why did you fight with him, Da?

Nope, it was him and my ma.

Ella's mum said, That's why you don't fight with your mum. You'll be sent to the North Pole to fish for salmon. If you're lucky.

Emma imagined crawling out of the envelope she was sent to the North Pole in. She'd have to eat it to keep up her stamina so she could crawl across the icy tundra to the coast and find a fishing boat and some sailors.

Every time they ate salmon, Ella would ask, *Did Uncle Aris catch it?*

Da would squint at the bite on his fork. *Not this one. They tangled for a minute but he got away from Aris. It was another guy got this one.*

Or girl, Mum said.

Fish always looked lonely on their plates. Plates. She closed her eyes.

When she got to the docks, she scanned the decks of the ships for Uncle Aris, just in case.

"Do you catch salmon?" she shouted at a pair of sailors on a nearby cargo ship.

One shook his head. "Too fast for the likes of us."

In her head, Uncle Aris appeared as a cheetah, surfing like a bullet through the foamy tall curly waves of Alaska, catching fish in his jaws one by one.

She looked at the safety pin with the bacon on it. *Sigh.*

*

Outside the American Bar, three guys were smoking by the door, roaring about rugby. She took out her notebook to make a tally of the pigeons on the roof. The guys looked at her. One of them had eyes that made her stomach feel kinda good-funny. *Three minus one is two*, Ella thought — but then a pair of them walked back into the bar.

Back to the pigeons ... *six, seven, eight, nine, ten* ...

“No luck yet, Ella?” called the waitress, smoking outside Benny’s.

“No.”

The guy with good-funny eyes hadn’t finished his cigarette. “So what’s the craic?” he asked.

“I gotta catch a pair of animals, and quick. Seen any around here?”

“Only the two-legged talky sort, I’m afraid.”

Ella stared at her notebook and sighed. “I tried to catch pigeons. They’re awful.”

“Why do you need them? Not for eating I hope?”

“Noah’s Ark is coming, and I need to ... make a trade.”

“Wow! Noah’s Ark next week?” He was done smoking, but he didn’t go in. “Tell you what, I do remember something a long time back ... Okay if I see that?”

She gave him the notebook and pencil. He flipped to a clean page and started to sketch. Like Da with his charcoals, drawing Dorian: *He’s the only thing around here that sits still.*

The waitress came over too. She and Ella leaned in close to see.

“I swear.” The guy talked while he drew. “I was walking down here. On the way. To a gig. And I looked up. And there. Was a couple of dinosaurs.” He showed her. Two long tails. Thick tall legs. Tummies and flanks. Their bodies reached so far they crossed the page.

“Brontosauruses?”

“Bigger. They were so massive you couldn’t see the end of them,” the guy said.

“He’s not lying,” the waitress said. “I seen ‘em too.”

Ella took back the notebook. “Where were they?”

He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Over by the skatepark.”

“Where were they going?”

He shrugged and smiled. “Well, I bet they left footprints.”

*

On the way, Ella passed St Joe’s and peeked in through the gap of the cladding. Granny would always peek in too when they walked past. She used to stand on the stairs and pray on Sundays, years after they shut the doors. She’d say *We’ll all get married here someday — a big wedding spilling out into the street, for everyone and whoever they love most.*

Granny liked pairs too.

She told Ella about a guy — a gangster really — who walked around with his two pet lions, strolled with them on leashes right through Sailortown, *like they were spaniels. He was a mad one.*

You fancied him, Mum said.

Ach he was an aul fella. We were barred from talking to him... I do like a spot of danger, Granny hedged.



ARTWORK: *SKATE TIME*, BY NONGRAPHIC, WITH ORIGINAL IMAGE BY EMILY DEDAKIS.

Not even a squirrel all the way down Corporation Street. And unless the big bowl at the skatepark was a lone footprint, not a whiff of dinosaurs either. Granny's house had been close to here. Ella squeezed in the gate of the park, carved into concrete under the motorway. She liked to watch the skaters zooming around. Today it was a youngish man and an oldish boy.

The oldish boy skidded to a stop nearby and bent to fix his kneepad.

"Why are there never any girls?" she asked him.

“There are sometimes.”

“Where are they now?”

“Where’s your board?”

Ella pushed her back against the pillar and looked away.

He laughed and pushed off again.

Ella closed her eyes and tilted her head back as she listened to the soft rumble of the skate wheels, and the rumble of traffic on the lanes of the motorway overhead — and when she opened her eyes, she saw the dinosaurs: the leg she was leaning on, the two long flanks stretching away, hip joints high above, tails so long you couldn’t see the end. Her heart ba-bumped. She would have to tell Mum: *Here’s why it’s gone. Something ate Sailortown. Two things...*

But the dinosaurs were definitely too big for the ark. No good to Ella.

“Where you off to?” the skater boy asked.

“Hunting.”

“Hunt yourself a board and bring it next time.”

*

On the way back toward Pilot Street, pondering how she could trap a pair of squirrels, Ella noticed another animal: parking lot guards. Portly men in matching yellow jackets and navy flat caps. One by the harbour offices, one over by Benny’s. Their job was to stand alone on the cusp of the parking lot and talk shite to all the people and cars that come in. They were great. They coulda been twins. Even though Ella usually stayed near the docks, and these were land mammals — very rooted to their habitats — she could tell they were crucial to the ecosystem.

Unfortunately, they were having none of the ark lark.

“I’m afraid I can’t move from my post, miss,” the one by the offices said when she casually suggested he and his fellow guard board the ark together as a trade for

the lone tortoise. It was perfect in Ella's eyes: them holding hands as they walked up the gangplank, her introducing them to Noah. Every time she tried again, with a better story, a deeper reason, he pushed his lips into a flatter and flatter line: "I can't, I'm afraid, miss. Mustn't move from my post."

His head was like a bingo jumbler with only 10 numbers.

Miss, I'm afraid my post mustn't be moved from.

Post afraid I'm miss can't from mustn't I move.

Well okay. Noah wouldn't love this lad anyway.

She tried the next guard down by Benny's, just in case he had some sway.

"Noah's Ark? I would be wanting nothing to do with that carry on. I worked as a guard at the zoo already."

"That's perfect!" Ella said. "Noah will need someone to guard the animals, in case they escape."

"With my luck, he'd have me guarding the naughtiest monkeys. They were forever sneaking out and making havoc in people's back gardens. No thank you."

Ella was full of zoo questions: Who were his favourite animals? Had he ever hugged a monkey? What's the weirdest thing he'd ever seen?

"I remember one day," said the guard, "there was a little girl there, below your size. She kept tapping the window of the penguin tank. A real messer. I told her to quit but she's saying *There's a man in there swimming with the fish, he's swimming with the fish*. Aye right. Finally I looked and there he was, frog-kicking between the penguins."

"Who was he?"

The guard shrugged. "Mystery central. It was a nice day. Rumour had it one of the keepers from the reptile house had a liquid lunch and decided to take a dip, or fell in. I saw wet footprints coming out of the tank and out the gate, but never saw who. This was before CCTV and all that malarkey."

Da's jailbreak. Freeing the duck-billed platypuses. Swimming with the sharks.

The guards seemed like a pair — both watching, same yellow coats and navy flat caps — but it was their job to stay where they're at, on opposite sides of Sailortown, coming no closer to each other, wanting nothing to do with the sea. As Ella walked away from the second guard at his post, she felt like her Australian granny, who let the two boys out of her pouch and away they flew to opposite ends of the earth. Some people are magnetic poles that can't ever match up.

*

Benny's was almost closing; time for one more snack. Tea and toast.

The beardy guy walked in a few minutes after Ella. Shoulders slumped, he looked jagged and forlorn like a torn cloth. She knew the beardy guy from about. She'd see him with a bag of groceries or an umbrella and most often with his camera. He lived on top of the tallest building in Sailortown, the one with the ladder that sticks up to the sky. She'd looked up and seen him there once, camera aimed at Scotland. You could probably see whales from there.

She remembers walking up Cavehill and seeing the wee shipyard cranes, skulking around Samson & Goliath like a herd of giraffe skeletons.

The bearded guy reminded her of Da because he was brownish, not pinkish like most people in this town. He was even darker brown. Mum said, *Don't think you know a person because you can see what colour they are. All you know from that is you have eyes.* Da said, *There's always less to people than you'd like to think.* Ella felt snagged between them sometimes, her ribcage pinned and straining, the spread-outness of her homebody mum and sailor-soul da.

Tess brought her tea. "Any luck?"

"The pigeons are eejits. I didn't see a single squirrel. The parking lot guards were no help."

"Would those bloody so-and-sos not go on the ark?"

"Nope."

“Pure tragedy. What’s your plan?”

Ella shrugged.

The beardy guy ordered a fry-up. He had a tattoo on his neck: ZEYNEP. It didn’t sound like any name Ella knew, but she could tell it was a name by how the word curved, huglike. He was listening to them, over the waitress singing to Billy Joel on the radio.

Well I’m sure that I could be a movie star

If I could get out of this place

“We’re all endangered species, aren’t we?” Tess said. “We should all get on that ark when it comes. I’ll go if you can’t find any takers. Can’t remember my last holiday sure.” She patted Ella’s table and went back to tidying.

And he’s talkin’ with Davy, who’s still in the Navy

And probably will be for life

Ella said her first-ever words to the beardy guy: “Can you see whales from the rooftop?”

The beardy guy didn’t grin like she expected, like it was funny. He said, “Maybe. Either I can’t see them, or they are too fast to see. It is impossible to tell.” He doesn’t talk like most people in this town: also like Da.

A worker in high vis stood at the till, counting coins. “I never knew this place was here.”

“We’re here thirty years, swear to God,” the waitress said.

“Now I know.”

“So you do.”

It was funny.

Man, what are you doin’ here?

“Do you need a whale or something?” the beardy guy asked.

“I need to find two somethings to trade to Noah for his tortoise.”

“When is the ark coming?” he asked.

“I guess it comes in time for the storm,” Ella said.

Tess was passing by. “Did you know Titanic was three times bigger than Noah’s Ark? 900 cubits.”

“Yeo!” shouted someone from the kitchen. “Get it right up ye!”

“Which one hit more icebergs?” the waitress quipped.

The beardy guy tucked into his fry-up.

“Would you and Zeynep want to go on the ark?” Ella asked him.

He chewed and swallowed and crossed himself with his fork hand — forehead, chest, shoulder, shoulder. “I am no pair, I’m afraid,” the beardy guy said.

When he got up to leave, he smiled at Ella and tipped his hat before he put it on, even though it was just a baseball cap. His neck scrunched into his shoulders. There were jagged parts of him. He had a lone-puzzle-piece look.

Ella brought her pound coins up to the till. Tess shook the front page of the paper at her. “Look at that. Storm coming tomorrow. Just in time for the ark. Best be ready, wee girl.”

Heartbeats rose in Ella’s throat. *Tomorrow.*

Just out the door, Ella heard Tess say, “Her granny lived here back when.” Ella stopped. “She passed not long ago now. Maryanne, you remember? Ella keeps wandering back like a stray dog.”

“Ach the wee pet.” (The waitress.)

Ella stared at the mural on the side of the café, the dog painted at the bottom like it’s peeing on the wall. *Where’s your mate, wee pet?*

“It’s like she’s come back to haunt it.”

“She’s not a Snailortown kid, sure she’s not?”

“Aye. Well she’s half dock rat anyway.”

Ella looked at her hands. Left. Right. *If all of me is here right now...*

On the way up Dock Street, she saw a woman walking two dogs — one tall and plump, one short and skinny. In Tiger’s Bay, beside a scraggly tree, she saw a cat about to make a meal of a little brown bird chick with funky tufty hair. She was staring at the chick, thinking if she should save it, but a man came and stomped at the cat and it streaked away. He looked at Ella; she looked at the grey van he was standing beside and walked away fast.

Ella thought of mum’s brother’s farm. The donkey was a loner, the dogs were too swift and the horses were nutjobs, but Uncle Greg would never miss a couple of sheep. But how would she get up there tonight? And how would she get the sheep to the port? Every time a window opened in her mind, the door slammed shut again.

*

Mum was smoking on the front stoop like a racing, raging stormcloud when she got back.

“Where have you been?” she snapped.

“I um — ”

“And what happened to Dorian?”

“What?”

“He’s gone.”

Ella’s mouth hung open; she hoped it looked like shock. So much for Uncle Greg’s sheep.

“Where is he, Ella Geraldine?”

“Maybe on a walk? Or — or you know how Da escaped from the zoo?”

“Cut the nonsense, wee girl.”

“Mum! One of the guards saw Da swimming in the penguin pool the day he got away. He told me so today.”

“Well did the guard spot Dorian too? ‘Cause he’s gone and he can’t get out of that hut alone. He needs carried — you know that.”

Ella felt the heat flash up her body again. “Well ask Cara, why don’t you? I have no idea.”

“Really. You think I should ask Cara?”

“Aye, she’s always ogling him.”

“I thought you and Cara were a pair,” Mum said.

“I’ve got no pair,” Ella said. “I’m an Oz animal. And sure there are none of me left here, and now Da’s gone too. I want to leave.”

Mum was quiet but poisonous. “Tough. You will stay here. All weekend.”

“I’m grounded? From when?”

“Right now. I need your help with Da gone and all. And we need to look for Dorian. We’ll need to be here if he comes back, won’t we? Imagine if you went for a walk and came back and your house was locked up and everyone had gone?”

Mum was the same angry as when she talked about the people who took Granny’s house and moved them up the hill, before they knocked down all the houses of Sailortown. She wanted to tell her about the dinosaurs, but Mum was too angry.

Well okay. Mum could tell her to stay put all she wanted; this zoo was down one keeper, and Ella knew Mum wouldn’t follow her to Sailortown.

*

In Granny's old kid bible, Ella paged and paged till she found the man himself:

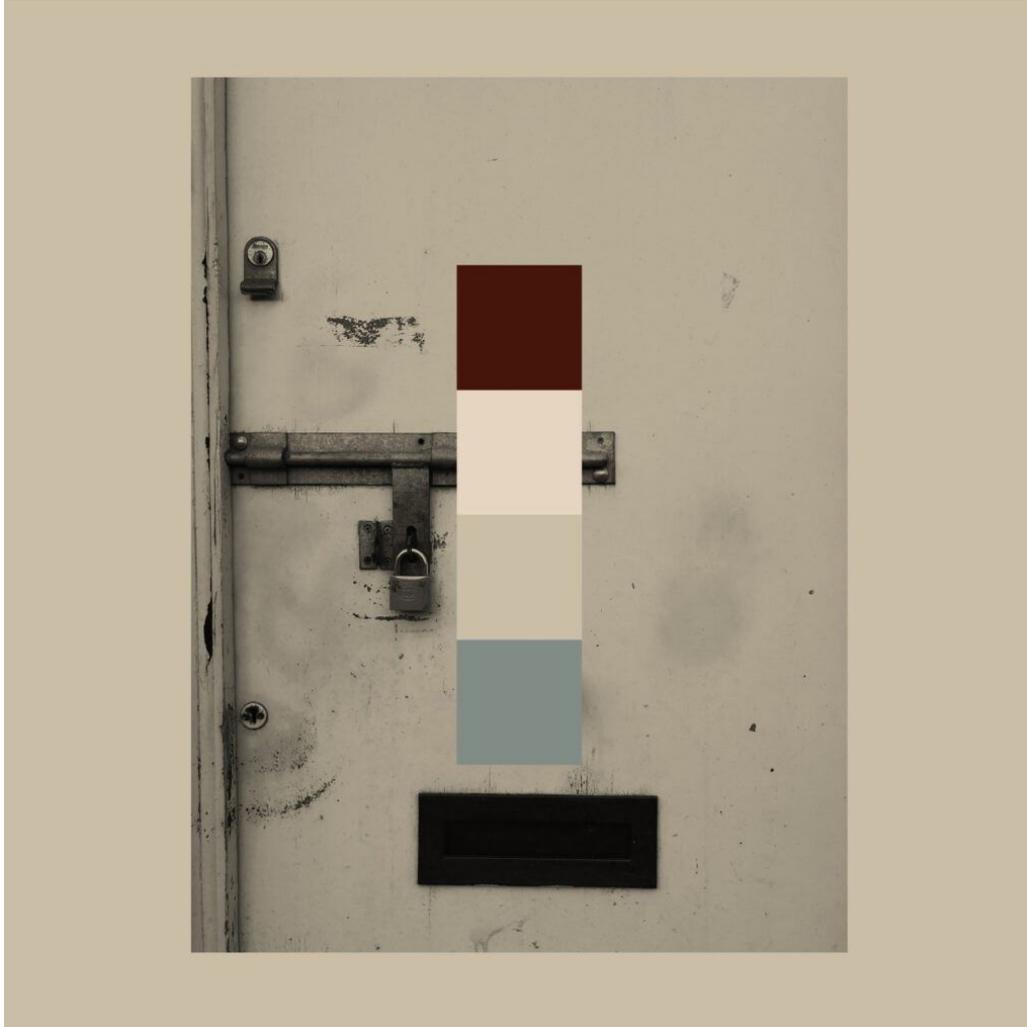
God told Noah, I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens. Everything on earth will perish. The weather app said 90% chance of rain tomorrow. All day. And wind.

Pairs of all creatures that have the breath of life in them came to Noah and entered the ark. The breath of life. Poor Dorian.

And rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights. That's it? Sure that was any old Belfast summer. Jesus.

By the first day of the first month of Noah's six hundred and first year, the water had dried up from the earth... Noah must be three thousand now – far beyond OAP. He'd be blind for sure. Which reminded Ella of who lived in the bathroom: yellow rubber ducks, a perfect couple perched on the bathtub. Ancient Noah would be none the wiser.

*



ARTWORK: *REGENERATION LOCKS*, BY NONGRAPHIC, WITH ORIGINAL IMAGE BY EMILY DEDAKIS.

It's the kind of storm with a name.

It's beginning, with gusty breaths and a darkening grey, when Ella sneaks out at six o'clock in the morning. Not even Mum is awake. Ducks in her rucksack. Locks the gate behind her. Not a soul in sight all the way to Sailortown. Passing the corner where the dockers stood, Ella hears a howl starting high in the air, like a car alarm made of bees, empty cans clattering down the street on the back of a long-passed just-married car, bagpipe drones carried from somewhere on the wind. A battalion of bats (or windblown pigeons?) are scattered away over the square beyond the old bar.

By the time she reaches the edge of the deep dock, the wind is like a palm pressing flat against her. She has to hold the fence to stop from blowing in.

She's waiting

and waiting

and waiting

and losing her breath in the wind

and waiting

and the ark will not come.

There's a tiny pink plastic flamingo on the grass. Waiting for its mate too.

When Ella feels a hand on her head she hopes it's God, there to keep his promise. But that's Mum's dark-blue perfume smell, Mum's shape hiding her from the wind, holding her, bringing her feet back to earth in a way she hadn't felt since Dorian, maybe since Granny. It's a long hug.

"You were asleep," Ella says finally.

"I heard the ducks squeak. What are you doing here?"

"I need to get to the ark. This was where Dorian was trying to go. Granny said everything turns up in Sailortown eventually."

Mum doesn't try to understand with a lot of questions, which helps. But then she says, "Da isn't coming back for a long time. His ma died this morning."

Ella squeezes her eyes, salty stinging in the wind. Ella imagines her grandmother, then erases her. Makes her, then disappears her. She can see all of this in her head but not in a way she could ever talk about. It wouldn't be real anywhere else.

"He needs to stay there and take care of the house. Uncle Aris is going there too."

Be the point everything returns to, Granny told anyone who'd sit still. They sailed away and came back enough times. It'd only give you faith. Stay put long enough and everything comes back.

Both her grannies are gone now. Aris sails from Alaska to Oz. The fierce wind tilts the world below them. The pairs of animals shift, meld and vanish.

"I need to call Da."

"You do." Mum digs her phone from her pocket and they step in by the fence to block the wind. Suddenly his voice is there too, part of the storm. "Da? I have a thing to tell you, about Dorian."

"Oh?"

"He ... escaped. I baptised him in lemonade, but it was radioactive, like magic dust. And ... he flew away."

"He flew," Da says. He says it flat, drained-out.

In Ella's pause, Dorian is flying-saucering over Cavehill, over the zoo. He magic-dusts all the other tortoises and they escape too — the air fills with an airborne creep of red-footed tortoises, Mediterranean tortoises, common box turtles and pancake tortoises.

"No," Ella says. "I'm winding you up."

Mum tries not to smile. She's as angry and tired as Da.

"I'm sorry. I left the gate open. He went into the road."

Da doesn't say it's okay. He asks, "Did you take care of him?"

"I hid him."

Mum closes her eyes. Ella is glad they hadn't seen Dorian like that. He was just a normal little tortoise. He lived with them and he got lost and he got killed.

"Well, take care of him, girl."

“Okay, Da.” Ella can do that – dig a place for him in the yard, or take him to the docks and leave him in the sea. Make him peaceful.

“I need to go check on your grandpa.”

“Watch your ears. Don’t let him wind you up.”

Da only grunts. He’s still angry. This isn’t the end of the story.

Mum wipes rain off her phone and tucks it into her pocket. “Home now. You’re still grounded, you know.”

“First I need to show you something. Two things.”

And this one time, mum follows her across Sailortown. The storm soaks them and Ella shows Mum everything: the blue gate that swings all day in slow circles right by the bar where Mum met Da, the parking lot guard standing tall whatever the weather, the empty square like a stage with an audience of pigeons, the orange Orphan Aid bin that Ella wants to play like a drum for passing cars, the church that ate an entire ship, the giant footprint in the skatepark ...

The beardy guy is walking a-ways up the road ahead of them, hunched into the storm, heading towards town. She can see all the way around him — his clean, tall, wind-blown shape — whole all on his own — as they walk beneath the dinosaurs.

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AFTERWORD

I made TWO BY TWO (and the flash fiction that spun off of it) as writer-in-residence in Sailortown with Household Belfast. Between January and June 2020, I spent time exploring the neighbourhood from the skatepark & Little Italy to Short Street & Duncrue. I took photos. I talked to people. I sat and smoked and watched.

It made absolutely tons of sense when Alissa Kleist from Household called Sailortown “polyvocal yet silent – a tapas of voices – many ingredients, but no one dish”. Except for late mornings at Benny’s & the heavy trucks rolling through this is one of the quietest places in the city – but it’s noisy with weird all the same. Stories just leak into the streets. Everything that eventually became this story was written around the neighbourhood – especially at the Seafarer’s Mission, the American Bar and the Sailortown Regeneration Trust. These were the places I missed the most when lockdown started. Writing elsewhere wasn’t the same.



Heartfelt thank-yous to the following people who helped me along the way:

-Jane Butler, Ciara Hickey, Sean Greer, Alissa Kleist & Tom Wells at Household Belfast - smart, generous artists/curators/designers

-Terry at Sailortown Regeneration Trust – for literally knowing everything

-Colin & Trevor at the Seafarers’ Mission (T, I will beat your ass at pool next time)

-Brendan at Benny’s – for letting me hang around your class establishment acting sketchy as fuck like Harriet the Spy – and most of all for the Noah’s Ark idea

-Parking-lot guards – for great fish tales

-All the lads at the American Bar

-Alastair – for a chat in the skatepark

-Bethany – for the prompt

-& everyone I’ve danced with in Sailortown.

To the pigeons who own the Rotterdam now: Give over. I bet you'd rather be dancing too.

For anyone who wants to visit (or come back to) Sailortown:
<https://www.sailortownregeneration.com/>

ABOUT EMILY DEDAKIS

Emily DeDakis is a writer, dramaturg and producer. She's from the Southeast U.S. and has lived in Belfast since 2005 – now in the north of the city. She currently works with Accidental Theatre, Belfast's only independent fringe theatre & Book Bar and Fighting Words, a creative writing centre for young people. Emily has taught writing at Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University and developed new performances in multimedia, immersive, dance and 24-hour theatre. She has written for radio (*ORCHESTRAL GROUPIES WITH SHAVED HEADS*, Radio 3 2017) and television (*LAST NIGHT IN BELFAST*, BBC 3's 'The Break' 2019). She is a member of the experimental choir HIVE and as a writer she often collaborates with sound artists, like Úna Monaghan (*F R E A K FLOODS*, 2016) and Michael McKnight (*STOWAWAY CITY*, 2019).

ARTWORK BY SEAN GREER AT NONGRAPHIC

(WWW.NONGRAPHIC.STUDIO)

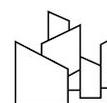
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