

skull of a sheep

by James Claffey

You are in a car speeding through Dublin towards the West year after year the journey uncoils past the same landmarks Kilmainham Jail strapped to a chair bullet to the brain on by the Rowntree Mackintosh factory where the black and yellow and orange and red fruit gums and sugar-covered pastilles spit out of humming machines through the streets by the Deadman's Inn where in the last century the cellar was a makeshift mortuary for corpses carried in from stagecoaches and a little further up the road the Spa Hotel perched on a hillside like some angular magpie on a branch and out the road we whizz by the Hitching Post and the Salmon Leap Inn into the country the green sward dotted with black-and-white cows cuddling the grass tripartite stomachs long-lashed eyes lulled creatures the spire of the church in Kinnegad visible well before driving into the narrow-streeted town and Da stopping to wet his whistle at Jack's Roadhouse and Eamonn's butcher's shop next door where we bought beef and lamb and turkey at Christmas and on towards the West through pastureland with the distillery and the castle and Da's cry of "Goodbye Ireland I'm off to Kilbeggan" and Horseleap aptly named as in a blink the town disappears and with it the hillside graveyard where our ancestor's bones lie and into Moate of the widest main street in Ireland site of our family's bitterest defeat at the hands of bank manager and solicitors aided and abetted by the Sisters of Mercy later reputed to be torturers and abusers in habits and all wringing hands and uttered prayers Hail Holy Queens and the family business on the right the long low building and Da's mutters of regret and Mam saying bad luck go with it and out past Morgan Lane the vet's house on the left and the sight of him with his bordissio ready to geld the lily-white testicles of young boys through tree-lined arbors into Athlone—Mam's town and the narrowed streets houses falling in on one another the Prince of Wales Hotel and across the road Uncle Tom's shop and the room where you remember seeing Granny in the bed the lights dimmed

camphor and mothballs and the mutinous Shannon out the window at the bottom of the slipway and off across the river by Custume Barracks and Lough Ree where Mam as a small girl waited in the rushes for swans and salmon and Lecarrow and Castlereagh until the day stretches towards evening and tired voices recite Hail Marys and Our Fathers and the Rosary beads clack in the stuffy car and Da berates Mam for not teaching us our prayers and is it heathens she's raising and the air of summer full of ire and Castlebar turns towards Westport and the Wild Animal Park we never visit disappears as the Atlantic coast gapes in front of us and Rosturk fades behind us and over the humpy bridge where Loftus the postman will take flight years later on his Honda fifty and wind up dead in a ditch the motorcycle bent in half six children fatherless and the cottage by the dirt road owned by people named Coughlan awaits us without television and the fields lead to the edge of the water and the place where you find the sheep's skull and Mam won't let you take it inside and it rots on the window ledge and beneath the thatched roof Swallows and Amazons and Famous Five and Hardy Boys' mysteries mark the long days of summer until once more the Rowntree Mackintosh factory and Kilmainham Jail appear and Da declares there to be "no place like home."

