

Self-possession

by Alison Wells

Fiona stepped around a dead bird in the road. By the railings and the rush of the buses, she became aware of implausible nausea, olfactory conspiracies of street tarmac, cafe onions. She saw Jack. The momentum of her body checked. Inside her the tiny astronaut unravelled, tethered to the mother ship; a jolt under the skin.

Self-possession. He had it. In his arctic white t-shirt; blonde haired, broad shouldered, unburdened. "I will make you love me," he had said, in a bar.

In the street she reached him. He kissed her, leaning in. He possessed her neck. At dusk in the flat he tore at her clothes under milk white window sills. In the entrance hall his hand at the small of her back.

The figure in the painting stared at the caged bird. She had been proud of herself before meeting Jack.

Jack was an architect. During lovemaking he considered her geometry, their wall shadows thrashing against each other; parabola, rhombus, polygon.

"The bird — it's beautiful don't you think?" Jack stroked her hand. She didn't answer.

"Look at it," he commanded." She did as she was told.

She leaned her other hand against her stomach. Her midriff was becoming convex. Soon he would notice, insist.

"You don't know what's good for you," he'd said, that first time at her flat.

Even the bars of the cage were lovely.

His fingers loosened. She made her arm bird bone thin and slipped it from him. Eventually he would turn his eyes from the painting, his face dark against the outline of her absence.

Fleeing to Pearse Street, a feather stuck to her shoe.

In the train she watched the framed shapes of her possible lives flicker. In the bleached air an arrow of birds headed south.

