

Into the Family Garden

Jennifer Matthews

I lost a limb on Independence Day
when an aunt embraced me
 You don't mind of course you don't
gripped my wrist and pulled
 my arm clean out of its socket
and she cradled it, cooed
 the softness of my skin
 then gave it to my cousin
where it slipped in his greasy fingers
 slicked with corn-on-the cob butter so
he winced and passed it
 hot potato to our grandmother
who admired my fingers
 perfect for the piano!
 and she called to my uncles grilling outside
lifting the arm to her chest,
 my fingertips peeking over her shoulder
and the fingers of my lonesome hand
 drumming against a sweating glass of lemonade
 as muffled cheers washed in, I stiffened
and moved to look out the kitchen window,
into the family garden
 and my brother began to laugh:
 They're playing catch!
and I saw
 the missing piece of me in flight
tossed and tossed again in arcs
 and here my queasy pride watching the frantic
 Goodbye! Goodbye!
of what was mine now waving back to me.

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My development as a poet came largely after I left the USA. My first poem published was in Mslexia, based in Newcastle in the UK where I had been pursuing an MA in writing. While the majority of my poetry-book reading is of Irish writers, I struggle to write about Ireland. Whenever I set pen to paper on something having to do with my experience here, I have the cartoonish voice of an American tourist in my head declaring 'I'm Irish too! My great great granny was from Mayo!' and then I've put myself back in my own box from sheer embarrassment. I sometimes write about what it means to be American, and try to explore some of the uglier elements within the identity. I think this poem tries to gently address how it feels to be outside a group which you also belong to, which is not dissimilar to my experience both here and in the USA. As an expat, you're usually 'at home' everywhere and nowhere. I've been in Ireland for over 14 years and have citizenship, but very much still feel I'm a blow-in. I don't feel this has limited my publishing opportunities, and often people have been interested in what I've had to say about my own identity and experience. I attended a writing workshop once on the theme of 'The Home Place', where the tutor urged us to think about what was exotic about the home we take for granted as commonplace. This has definitely been a helpful signpost for how to write about the USA. I'm not sure when I'll feel I can give myself permission to write about Ireland.

Biographical note

Jennifer Matthews writes poetry and is the founding editor of *Long Story, Short Journal*. Originally from Missouri, USA she has been living in Ireland since 2003, and is a citizen of both countries. Her poetry has been published in *Poethead, Poetry International — Ireland, The Stinging Fly, Mslexia, The Pickled Body, Burning Bush 2, Abridged, The Irish Examiner, The Penny Dreadful, Banshee, Cork Literary Review* and more. Her work has been anthologised in *Landing Places* (Dedalus, 2010); *New Planet Cabaret* (New Island, 2013); *Looking at the Stars* (Southword Editions, 2016); *Deep Heart's Core* (Dedalus, 2016); and *Washing Windows* (Arlen House, 2017). In 2015 she was selected for the Poetry Ireland Introductions Series, and her manuscript *Home, Body* was highly commended in the Patrick Kavanagh competition in 2016. *Rootless*, a chapbook of her poetry, is available to read free online at smithereenspress.com.

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