

Under the pillow (short story)

The pinefloor groaned, and the foam of the mattress made a smacker. The bed seamed to open itself under Aoife, the sheets divided up and crashed onto her like waves. The pants of her pyjamas had ridden up as she slipped in, and Aoife felt the cold linen wrap round her legs. She perceived the familiar scent of lavender soap on her pillow. Cathal sighed as he dozed off, turned round and clutched at her hips. The pillow slid away and fell down to the floor. On his side the bed smelled of cold smoke. His lips were chapped from the weather. He kissed her slowly. His tongue smelled of malt and mould. Aoife ran over his remaining teeth, covered the stumps with her spittle. She tried to imagine clammy clods crumble from his fringe of hair onto the linen. You already have one Wellington in the grave, she whispered to his ear. He hugged her and stroke her moth with his thumb. His skin was moist and greasy. Aoife bit in the side of his hand, giggled. The rain beat the tiles. Sooty drops splashed from the chimney to the carpet. Jesus looked down from the cross and cast his sad eyes on the old wooden bed, under witch blanket the married couple slipped off their flannel pyjamas. True the wall they heard their grandchild breath, the youngest murmured in his sleep. A cat cried outside, later they heard the tom.

Cathal had asked Aoife years ago to send the animals outside at night. She obeyed and knew it better. He did not want to know what she was doing while he worked outside, digging holes with the tractor, ploughing strips in the soft soil and laying pipes and wires up to their farmhouse off the beaten track and down on the other side of the hills to the holiday homes at the beach. He never had to ask her any questions. While he roved through the bog at nightfall and looked after his sheep, she bent over the willow basket in the kitchen. Two bulges appeared over the waistband of her jeans and it looked like she had no waist. She grasped one little plastic bag of turf after the other and put it into the cast iron cooker, prepared dinner and fed the birds. She scattered breadcrumbs on the windowsill as soon as the cats fell asleep beside the fire. The Belleek porcelaine she got from her mother hang on the walls, redbrown tearims had settled in the cups. Aoife remembered the annual rings of a cut tree. She sat down at the worm eaten kitchen table and waited. Years ago Cathal had stuck the tabletop with a flowered plastic foil to hide the labyrinths of the woodworms caked with dirt, the scores of notches and the imprint of a glowing safety pin in the oakwood. With that pin heated up over a candle Aoifes grandmother had pierced her earlobes, and to the first communion Aoife got two gilden studs with inlaid crystals. Diamonds pretended Aoife in the schoolbus, and the other girls giggled. Silence hissed Cathal from the backseats where he was brawling with the other boys and rattle off the gaelic football teams, Mayo lost against Meat, why does Mayo loose again. The last bit of the way they walked Aoife and Cathal alone. He banged a stone and

said nothing. A strip of light appeared between the clouds and she saw his pimples as purple craters in the sunset changing his face into a forgotten hilly landscape. Why do you stare at me he asked and took his hands out of the trouser pockets. Black moons flared up under his fingernails. Come on she said and he came closer. His school uniform smelled of dung and lard. Come on lets go. He saw her naked calves, looked at her feet put into selfknitted woollen socks and too heavy hiking boots. With every step she sunk in the loamy path and her soles made a smacking noise. He kicked the stone between her feet and she stopped. The wind whirled up the skirt of her schooluniform and he saw her thighs. They were pale and blushed from the cold. She tried to run away. Her feet sunk in the mud over the insteps but he had the impression that she was walking on air. The tweed flapped like wings and she got a few inches off the ground. Behind the hedges the wind broke off and she fell down. He caught up with her and looked at the guttering skirt soaked with soil. Her naked legs were shining. She was puffing and panting. The moist sound of her breath remembered him the newborn lambs with their wet coat and he wanted to hug her and rub her dry. He conjured up a candy from the pocket of his uniform trousers. It was warm and sticky and larded with straw. He put it in her mouth. Her lips were pink from the berries she ate during the break. She remained and it was as if the time would stand still and they were located under water. He closed his eyes and felt her laboured slow breathing. The slightest motion surged against him as a breaker and he was sure he could even feel her heart beat. He loved never to open his eyes again. The candy tasted of dung and grease and was so tough that it still stuck on her teeth when she came home. She fished it out and formed the brownish mass to a lump and hid it under her pillow. It glued there as a nothing, overflowed her in a dream and hurried through her body as a shudder. As she woke up in the morning she could not remember of what her fingers were smelling. Tree weeks later her mother changed the sheets but it was too late. Aoife dreamed from there on to warm her calves up on Cathals legs.

He was left with only his ardent desire. To renew it he crept under the desk and tried to take a glance under Aoifes skirt, longing to duck out in the unknown dark like he sunk in the bog in his Wellingtons cutting turf with his father. He wanted to cave in those secret worlds with his feet foremost and get lost.

The rain rushed n the windowpanes and the house was full of dripping noises. He grabbed at her breasts. His hands were horny and she knew that the rims under his nails were brown from the soil he broke and filled dup, brown as the water coming out of the tap since last year. He loved her fast and whooping. Under his heavy belly she rode through the bog. Gorseflowers dropped from his hair. Horsetails and reeds tickled the hollows of her knees. Fern lined her way. The outermost leaves crinkled and became brown and rusty as the soil.

The storm tore out the purple blossoms of the rhododendrons and they fluttered all over the moorland like exotic birds. The gutter ran over and the water splashed at the windows. The cat cried outside. Cathal came at the same moment. Then he turned round and slept on. He saw up again all the pines Aoife had burnt long ago. She remained awake praying and listening, her hands burrowed in the sheets, and she asked herself why it went always down falling asleep, it was a slow headfirst subside. It goes always headfirst into the dark. Cathal moved in his sleep. He stroke her hair and everything went quiet in her head.