

Angharad Williams

McDonalds

2018

There's a strange taste in my mouth and I haven't been able to shift the flavour for some time now. Maybe I over-did it last week when I went to the mainland, four McDonalds in - I kind-of knew it was a bad idea, still, it tastes so good.

McChicken sandwich - I'd wait for a response.

Meal? They'd offer.

Large. I'd punctuate.

Then some awkward nodding, fumbling our way through the drinks and condiments options.

I can't understand these girls who work over there, their voices - those accents!

It's as if their voices broke at 13, but the adjustment didn't take, the phantom balls didn't drop all the way. I can see in their eyes that they think I am some kind of embarrassing blip in their otherwise polite, sanitised youth-share-spectacle.

I'm still gonna eat what you're peddling honey! Just make sure it's hot. And the fanta is wet. And the ketchup is sweet and the mayo is tasty.

But: there's only so much you can do about that sweetheart. So that's ok.

No reply. I take a seat.

They inhabit their own language, their mouths contorting in this way, that whilst adorable, is also repulsive to me. *Won't stop me going in though, no way. Won't stop me looking though, no way.*

Ooops! That noise. I dart my eyes around.

Just reached the bottom of my fanta!

Time for a McFlurry.

Heart racing a little on the way back to the counter - stomach kicking, I lean two fingers directly into the pain, shouldn't have speed-eaten those fries. I segue hurriedly to the bathroom, my stomach's about to fall out of me!

In the unisex bathroom, someone has attached a blood-drenched sanitary towel to the wall in what can only be imagined as a high-five action. Some kind of feminist carry-on because I've noticed this all over town. In the pictures last night, I went to the toilet in the middle of Eraserhead quote-and-sing-along at the Prince of Wales cinema and there - again! High-fived bloody, gelatinous sanitary towel attached to the wall.

At eye level.

One finishes locking the door and rotates inward within the cubicle, and of course, it is hard to know what to do when faced with it.

Of course, it's a shock!

Initially I would stand there, twisting on a 180 degree pivot, tutting, glimpsing, blowing through an open mouth and a scrunched-up nose, sighing, just generally grossing-out. But now, after the umpteenth time it stops being this grotesque wet whisper and indeed, becomes something else.

Now I sit and wonder in what kind of state the hand (which administered the bloody blow) must be in.

It's time for that McFlurry.

Wait a minute baby! I gorra take my pills, I gorra take my pills.

Remember that time when my parents and I stopped talking? My mother, with her Prosecco addiction had broken into my studio and set the place on fire. So, for a while we did not speak. Two years it was; it was just about the time it took for her to make the money she owed me. And the time it took for her to partially suppress her addictive personality. The summer marking the close of that second year coincided with a savage outbreak of foot and mouth disease. I travelled on the slow train, across the Island, the beige and ash grey barely-magnetised carriages stop repeatedly, up to 17 times on a 30-mile stretch.

Field after field was dotted with dark mounds. I tried to focus, but it was impossible to gain a clear perspective and work out exactly what was going on. I lost count of the sprawling fields, blurry mounds. Dark patterns emerged behind us as the train circled around a hill. The track still warm from the trains pass, seemed as if it were drawn by a child's free hand, connecting the mounds to form the outline of a blob.

The mounds, a steaming matt black were somehow more quizzical because of their juxtaposition to the white jagged strips of luminescence bouncing back off the tacky, UV protected, black, wrapped hay bails. Tidily stacked into pyramids.

These matt mounds were devouring by their very essence. Once I could fix my gaze to one for a longer stretch I stared into the steaming pulsating heart of it.

The land was lush that day, aggressive greens blotting and absorbing the horizon line as we crawled, rolling in and out of valleys. It was August.

Through a frown my nose twitches, as though second-guessing a stroke, and by some sudden primordial instinct I inhale repeatedly through my nose. I exhale disappointedly – unable to locate the smell. The next sniff stings my eyeballs to their very core. The train had filled with the putrid stench of burning cattle. I caught glimpse of a young farmer, a boy, standing disheveled on his father's trimmed land. Approaching him slowly was the royal blue family tractor, loader full, with three or four of their felled livestock. I watched the loader tip the carcasses onto the decaying smouldering nipples. The dark mounds. They were burning their spent animals. They were burning piles of their money. And it stank.

*When I get my hands on some money I'll kiss it's green skin
And I'll ask it's dirty face*

"Where the hell have you been?"

I take a huge shit. It felt like I was giving birth in there. And the relief when the thing pops out on the cheap 1-ply crash mat, and I can sigh, the relief is intense.

I get to the counter, the place is empty and only one girl seems available – currently occupied at the drive thru window. I recognise the driver, we nod. An old school acquaintance. He was a good few years older than me. I used to buy my hash from him. He was a weird guy and I never felt too comfortable around him. Maybe that's because my teen brain was unable to cope with reading the air at any kind of social situation – stoned or otherwise. His name was Mike.

Once I was at his place scoring a 8th and, well, he always had these teenage girls wasted, strewn around like scatter cushions. Completely irrelevant. I was uncomfortable and of course, I'd smoke a spliff with him before leaving. I've no idea if it was the custom: that it was ok to stay and have one, but he never seemed to mind. He'd have reggae on constantly. I hate reggae, still.

So I was rolling this little one-pop and he's lining up streams of ketamine, and he's rolling a note on this teenage girls thigh, her skirt practically around her waist I can make out the nickered crown of her vagina. He's assembling line after line and he tells her to take a hit. She's reluctant. He laughs, encouraging her some more.

My thumb is getting hot from flicking at the lighter to get this soapbar to give way so I can crumble it on the worm of tobacco, smoke it and get out of there. My head down, I watch via the surface of my forehead; now he's got hold of her limp body, by the shoulders, he shakes her a little bit. Her face – she's high and I expect to see a distressed look on her face but she just seems disgruntled.

In one action he pins his open palmed hand to the back of her head like a scalp tingler. He's a small guy but built. Now, in the smooth action of an

oil derrick, he's got her left nostril down there, in line with the paper tube he holds proudly with his other hand. She's moving in slow motion – shaking her head. It's no use, I think. But I don't say shit. He jerks her head.

Strands of her limp, rat-tail hair falling on to the mirror plate. How did she get here? She knows how this is going to end. His right hand caging her head, his left hand rigid with the note. She snorts the line.

As if nothing happened he turns to me, grinning as he rises and changes the music. We move from some unnamable reggae to Smashing Pumpkins. 1979.

His music set-up in that place was insane: huge black speakers, 5 CD deck, vinyl and cassette deck. He picks up the electric YAMAHA guitar from next to the sofa and starts strumming along to the song. I swear it was the most beautiful thing I ever heard. Him strumming along, for the duration of the song and he's staring at the bevelled glass that makes up the main panel on the living room door.

I'd always found this arrangement strange because the front door is a shitty wooden door that really needs replacing. The door connecting the tiny hallway to the living room is a robust vinyl door you'd find on the external of all the other houses on the estate. It must be a diversion tactic. But still, it sticks out – like the house is being coy, pretending to not be filled with a good salary's worth of class-A drugs and other paraphernalia.

Five fleshy points press with the persistent pressure of some one-legged person steadying themselves into my back.

I break my gaze with Mike and I turn around and it's a blind guy. Standing gleefully, slowly retracting his hand. I say he's blind, he could not be!

He has the gloves I left on my table in his hand. He says, *I believe these are yours?*, he's correct. And we get chatting.

He tells me he likes to come here too, that he's smelt me there before and we talk about heightened senses for a while. I've experienced heightened senses when I suffer from migraines. He tells me he's

German and comes here to visit friends, none of whom are with him now of course because he's waiting for them to call him but his phone needs charging.

I direct him to my booth, he instinctively rests his hand on my forearm and I plug him in underneath the linoleum table. He asks me to repeat my name to him, again and again. I say it about 7 times, *got it*, he exclaims affirmatively with an abrupt nod. After the 7th attempt, I haven't the patience to say *no mate – you don't got it*.

Although not conscious to me at that moment in time, I must have let my guard down because I start confessing some serious thoughts and feelings to this guy. We settle on my main concern, that being my distain at the local council for their glib tearing down of the last remaining Welsh castle to erect this momentous McDonalds.

Quite frankly an act of violence in my opinion.

His response after a long emotional struggle of having to explain why I think it's immoral that the local council did so is *Why worry about things that are outside of your control?* After this, let's face it – rhetorical question, I stare at his face *You're staring at my face aren't you?*, we sit in silence and I'm staring, like Mike staring at the glass on his door. Just looking at him, his expression never changes, like he never learned how to translate word to tone to muscle to facial expression. Blank as he sways his head gently. He's not looking straight at me is it? Of course he sees nothing, or at least I assume so.

I'm pissed off, he's cut me off – I was on a roll, digging deep to share my concerns for the appreciation of history and roots and national identity and he couldn't give two shits.

Probably because he's German.

They may have torn down their icons but the plinths still stand. They go around as if their love will last forever and as if the roads were paved just for them. *I guess you look into your past and see something brutal and you're ashamed of it?* I ask him, insist rather. Another example of a thought which I had fully intended on keeping behind sealed lips, *I see nothing*, he replies solemnly. And now we're back to staring again.

