

John McAuliffe

# NEXT DOOR



Gallery Books

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*for Nancy*

## *Interference*

I step into it as it surrounds me,  
a patch of earth so hemmed in by trees  
the branches meet over my head.  
Another person, like a curtain in a sick ward,  
draws the little light into her interfering voice.  
What she says is nothing new:  
'It will all come out in the wash.'  
A stout short woman, of high colour,  
she must drink alone at night  
with that same narrow look of desire.

Will she still be there — a secret keeper — afterwards?  
She'd said, 'I'm keeping my eye on you.'  
I thought I saw her at an uncle's funeral,  
and that day we moved house. I like to hear  
little or nothing about her.  
All this time, too, I feel  
the damp heat rising out of the earth,  
the wind shaking down the trees.

## *Tinnitus*

My father's tinnitus is like the hiss off a water cooler,  
only louder. And it doesn't just stop like, say, a hand-dryer —  
the worst is  
it comes and goes. Or you shine a light on it  
and it looks permanent as the sea,

a tideless sea that won't go away. The masker  
he's been prescribed is a tiny machine, an arc of white noise  
that blacks out a lot  
but can't absorb the interference totally

any more than you or I — taking the air,  
stirring milk into coffee, daydreaming through the six  
o'clock news,  
trying to sleep on a wet night —  
can simply switch off what's always there, a particular  
memory

nagging away, the erosive splash off a little river  
wearing away the road, say, on the Connor Pass,  
a day out, through which he'd accelerate  
in the flash, orange Capri.

## *Shouting Match*

### I DADDY-LONG-LEGS

I'm upstairs when I hear a sound grow  
into screams and laughter:  
his hilarity is caused not by the spider  
but by his sister's terror.

His wincing 'Oh no', though,  
is caused not by the spider  
or my heavy step on the stair  
but his sister's low, harmless blow.

I might as well be the dangling spider  
when I intervene between brother and sister  
who grab my legs, eye one another  
and shout themselves hollow.

### 2 SHOWER

Over the gush of the shower  
I make out  
the howling duet  
in the corridor.

She has sat on her brother's old toy,  
the 'really useful engine',  
and her cry  
is more of a crowing

which he takes in hand  
by drowning her out  
with a shout  
almost as loud as my own.

### 3 SPORT

What I cannot hear  
as the ball crosses the line  
on the bar's big screen  
to a gale of beery cheering  
is the voice I use  
on Sunday afternoons,  
the voice of Law,  
as I chastise

my children  
when they ask  
for coke then milk then water  
while I try to concentrate  
as the radio commentator  
reaches one climax after another.

### 4 THE YARD

The yard can no more be split in two  
than the house it backs onto  
or is backed onto by.  
In one corner a small, red-cheeked boy  
looks through the fence's eye-sized hole  
as if his yard is no more the whole  
of the wide world  
than the ball his red-haired sister has whirled  
over the washing line  
which acts today as a dividing line  
across the muddy, green, uneven ground  
and gives him grounds  
to turn his back  
even as his sister calls him back