

City of the Lowlands

By Robert Davidson



Too bold a development to be ignored, too powerful an ambition to be taken for granted, the new Glasgow Museums Resource Centre at South Nitshill was presented as a sidebar on the BBC Scotland web page. That is to say, as a dead end station on a branch line. Something off to one side and more or less ignorable and so much like the housing scheme itself. I lived there with my parents and brother through the Swingin' Sixties, between the ages of 10 and 20. It was my brother's arrival, 10 years after mine, which triggered the Corporation's housing mechanisms and moved us out to the periphery.

Let me outline the natural history of this part of Glasgow. There is the old City that began mostly north of the river and grew. On the south side there are Gorbals, Dixons Blazes, these places. The ancient burgh of Govan was absorbed and the shipyards built, Fairfield, Yarrow. The Co-operative movement constructed its industrial complex at Shieldhall. Harland and Wolff extended their operations from Belfast. Housing was established in Plantation and along Paisley Road West. Time passed and it all rotted. World War II did a forest fire's work. Homelessness and human suffering were the most immediate and obvious legacies of the bombs.

Here is an early memory: washing blown by the wind high up on ruined gable ends. Bombed out, homeless people took shelter where they could.

Another memory: at the junction of Edmiston Drive and Paisley Road West a woman with half her face torn away.

Another: bed bound Mrs Sunter, who had no legs and that my mother worked for as a sort of private Home Help.

Half a century on these memories remain vivid. New tenement schemes were built at every point of the city's compass but here I am looking mainly at the south.

Nitshill was a mining village complete with pit bings and quarry and pub until Pollok Housing Scheme reached out towards it, and then Priesthill touched it and then West Nitshill, the Valley as we called it. South Nitshill was built, actually up on top of the hill, and the surrounding was complete. When we moved from Ibrox I stood on tiptoe to peer over the windowsill and what I looked on was the great sprawl of the Second City of the Empire.

Reading the BBC Scotland web page I knew I would have to visit eventually, but the Ol' Home Town ain't what it was when I packed my worldly goods and shot the craw. Decades have passed and the family are all either dead or moved away. There's no family to stay with any more but circumstances gave us, as Sandstone Press Ltd, a hotel night on Paisley Road West at a point within a few yards of the sheltered flats where my mother spent most of her last 12 years, the nursing home where she died, and the room and kitchen we left in 1960. South Nitshill was only a 20-minute drive away. With Moira in the passenger seat of her own car I negotiated those old familiar roads.

More and more it seems that Rio is the model for the world's cities, centres of hedonism surrounded by shanty rings of poverty. Okay, that's a caricature, but caricature is only truth exaggerated for emphasis. There are no overcrowded wooden shacks in this place I am writing about, but no sturdy construction of sandstone and slate either. The building fabric is breeze block. There has been public investment that replaced the original flat roofs and the better houses have been bought by the families who live in them. There would be few, probably no, such buys in South Nitshill.

The schemes were dry when they were conceived. This important element of social control resulted in a concentration of pubs in older burghs such as Nitshill and achieved the opposite of its intent, unless its intent was to focus policing. For some time before



my visit Glasgow's crime scene, energised by the drugs trade, was in turmoil and a new power structure was in the making. It was in the Nitshill pub where I watched the third Ali-Frazier fight that an attempt was made on the life of a wealthy, middle-aged man, a competitor in this struggle. In fact his bodyguard took the bullet. Yes, guns have arrived in the ol' home town.

It used to be knives and axes and belt buckles and home made weaponry known as 'chibs', a word that never found its way into the *Concise Scots Dictionary*. If it had it would have read like this:

chib *la20-* **I** *n* improvised stabbing or slashing weapon carried by young males. Less likely: a club. **2** *vi* to utilise such a weapon in an act of violence against another human being.

Nowadays Glasgow is the knife capital of Europe but really the preferred weaponry is a fine point and sorry about the pun. What is essential is in the people not in what they carry. What is there in the actions of the boys is also there in the attitude of the girls. There was never anything unusual about the girls carrying the boys' weaponry. They are on a course that not all will complete but too many will, and very few will renounce. That gunshot in the pub isn't an end either; it's just another significant milestone.

I am groping around for a keyword for my youth and, really, it's not too difficult to identify. It is difficult to write down though. It feels like an admission but the keyword of my early teens was 'fear'. I was afraid at school, of other pupils and of teachers. I was afraid in the streets where they hunted in packs and were more vicious than I could have been or ever wanted to be. I was afraid in the home.

These fears were not imaginary or paranoid. They were well founded, but what is worse than the violence and fear is the suction effect of the culture. Just as most people would rather be thought a rogue than a fool so most would rather be thought a thug than a coward. In this way it is self-perpetuating, and it spreads like a virus because when people leave and travel, through geography or across social divides, they tend to take a respect for violence with them.

It's difficult, maybe impossible, to write about violence without it seeming glamorous, or brave, or challenging, or as some kind of solution. Getting the tone right is

just too difficult for subtlety. Direct experience tells me violence is simply sordid.

The building that is the Glasgow Museums Resource Centre isn't quite as shining as it looks on the web site but it's still pretty good. It sure looks like a strong commitment by Glasgow City Council to maintaining a positive presence in the schemes. Located in the industrial estate between the Valley and the rail bridge at Nitshill Station it is close by a Council Utilities Store, offices, manufacturing of various kinds. It's easy of access, really.

Quite some time after the family arrived, a considerable feat of civil engineering lowered the road beneath the bridge. The significance of this was that the 49 bus could then pass underneath and journey on from the village to a new terminus in the heart of the scheme. Now working men, like my father, did not have to walk to the village in the morning and back, up hill, in West of Scotland winter weather. Black as pitch, strong west wind and teeming rain would be situation normal. The difference would be an hour, easily, on an already long working and travelling day.

A word about my dad isn't out of place at this point. He liked art. In fact, he was a pretty good amateur in his earlier life. Later though, he didn't have time or energy or whatever it took and the talent deserted him. Very little he produced in South Nitshill was any good, not by any standard. In youth he was also a pretty fair cross-country runner, coming second in the Scottish Championships. He was a very convinced Socialist and I'll give that word a capital 'S' to indicate the faith that was invested in it, its shared and unquestioned values and power to transform. That is, its religious nature. Later he liked walking and solitude. What I recall most strongly though, is the graceless dive into loneliness and hate.



When I turned from the bridge in 2005, and looked beyond the Valley I saw the skyline of tenements marching up the hill towards our old home. All the windows were blinded by steel sheeting. The place was being torn down.

A few minutes later we parked where the scheme's few shops had once stood.

More memories: not far from here is where a friend of mine got his head kicked in, a brutal assault that went uninterrupted by passing adults. It just wasn't that unusual. Also near is the site of the one telephone



box that served our end of the scheme.

After I left the parental home my wife and I visited on a more or less weekly basis and we used the box as a gauge of the scheme's decline. On successive weeks the glass was removed from each of the four walls in turn and the door ripped off. When the phone was destroyed we felt that was it, the ruin was complete. Of course we were wrong. The following week the frame was burned down to four charred verticals sticking obscenely up from the concrete base. Remember, this was long before mobile phones, when private phones were rare. For most the call box was the only direct connection to the emergency services and family.

Walking in the other direction I looked between buildings, across the Back to where our tenement used to stand. The building was already demolished and the site cleared. To my right a mechanical dinosaur stood in the gap it had eaten in a surviving tenement, munching at the floor timbers and joists, dumping them on to a pile of wood that stood to near three times my height.

It began to rain and Moira returned to her car for her coat while I walked on and out on to the remaining frontage of what had once been Whitehaugh Quad where a footpath hydrant had been opened and left gushing, making a river of the roadway between the kerbs. Continuing to the corner for a better view of the empty space that had been our home, and of the city itself, all the way to the Campsies, the artificial river brought me to a halt. Dead ends amount to the same old story. It was the same old graffiti too.

And now I must report that Duff claims this ground. That'll be THE MIGHTY DUFF!!!

Duff informed the world of his territorial mastery by writing his claim in ornate letters on the broken walls and in huge letters on the road.

Now from nowhere a small man appeared with a huge dog, the dog's lower back marked with the tiger stripes of the fighting breeds. It looked at me suspiciously and, I admit, my blood froze.

The man pointed to the high flats at Ibrox where he stayed, and told me that his mother still lived in the Valley. We agreed on the significance of Duff, that he was just the latest manifestation. Here's hoping, we agreed, he gets through this present phase without getting his hands on a gun. We also agreed that it's easy to take a benign overview when you aren't down there and in it. Extending the conversation from The Mighty Duff he told me the following story.

One Saturday night in the industrial estate a security

guard moved four youths on. The youths bided their time, a week, and returned mob handed. Before he could call assistance they had broken down the door. He locked himself in the toilet but they broke that door down as well and left him a hospital case. Still not content they did £50K of damage in the half hour before they fled.

Glasgow's deprivation is appalling. Father Willy Slaven is recently quoted (by his friend Ian Galloway in *Coracle*, the Magazine of the Iona Community) as follows: 'If you were to take Glasgow out of Scotland you'd be left with the statistics of any other small, northern European country.'

According to the Scottish Executive, 16 of the 20 most deprived council wards are to be found in Glasgow. Will I name them?

Keppochhill.

Drumry.

Parkhead.

Hutchesontown.

Bridgeton.

Queenslie.

Royston.

Glenwood.

Braidfauld.

Ibrox.

Barlanark.

Ashfield.

Milton.

Wyndford.

Easterhouse.

Summerhill.



We do well to consider these figures alongside another, produced by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. In Scotland as a whole 1,200,000 people live in low income households, a figure that represents about 23% of the population. Included in that number



are 310,000 children. Exact numbers are difficult to isolate from about this point but it is apparent that a sizeable proportion of those 1,200,000 souls reside in the City of the Lowlands in vast tracts where violence is endemic and crime is the alternative government.

Of course, it's not just as simple as 'poverty is the cause'. Poverty can be transcended as can prejudice. Good and bad are everywhere, but Glasgow has marked itself out as special. For all its Smiley campaigns, for all its art collections and universities, Glasgow's respect for violence is as integral to its culture at the levels of power as it is in the 16 circles of deprivation.

And it has the same big city arrogance as Paris and New York and London that see all other ways, all other identities, as inferior variants. But Glasgow isn't really a big city any more. Not in that league. Second City of the Empire meant second city in the world. Kiss that goodbye.

Those who wish to eradicate poverty, and I am one of them, would do well to look over their shoulders. No need to travel to find a place where the keyword is 'fear', or where ignorance is strength and literacy levels are absurdly low. To find mindless, brutal violence and brief life expectation don't head for Africa, just visit my ol' home town.

About this point the dog worked her head under my hand and I gave her a little scratch behind the ear. Appearances are deceptive. It turned out she was a gentle old thing.

There was more graffiti, but only one to bother ourselves with just now. I'll give it a line to itself, and the block capitals of the original. Brace yourself.

FUCK OFF FENIAN SCUM!

My new friend and I shook our heads, guiltily aware that we've each done our bit over the years to promote intolerance and schism. Like its blood brother, the culture of violence, it has a powerful suction. Pervasive as it is in the City of the Lowlands its keyword isn't 'bigotry' or 'hate'. Its keyword is 'conform'.

So; 'Fuck off Fenian scum'.

It's a serious piece of writing whichever side of the message you find yourself and we should give it as careful a reading as we would any other serious piece.

Only four words, shouldn't take too long.

The noun should be the most important word. Not this one though, it's too general. 'Scum' doesn't even tell us if the subject is singular or plural although we can assume plural, male or female although we can assume both. It doesn't tell us much beyond author Duff seeing them as different or 'other'.

'Fuck off'? No ambiguity here. Duff wants his elaborately staked out territory exclusively for those who are not different, or at least not 'other' in the sense that the Fenian scum are. He wants it for his own tribe, with whom he claims a leadership role.

But it's the third word that draws me up, so used am I as an editor to deleting adjectives, so accustomed by my background to equating 'Fenian' with 'Catholic'. Of course it means no such thing. It's a word that resonates through the British and Irish overlap and a heritage that somehow, stubbornly and against the tide of this nation's history, remains with us in West Central Scotland. But it's not merely 'Catholic'.

In this area religion is just another symbol of difference. That's the reason why the positive arguments for faith schools don't work here. In this place, out of our imperial history, they foster the Lowlands' destructive tribalism.

A few years ago I had the honour of sharing a platform in Kerry with the great Irish novelist Brian MacMahon. A significant commentator on modern Ireland he took the opportunity in his speech to identify another form of Irishness he called 'Stage Irish', identifying it as an enemy of truth and aspiration.

The Janus-faced tribalism I am talking about here in Scotland is also an unreal form, also the enemy of truth and aspiration. One mask scowls out of a De Valera style Irish nationalism and extreme reaction to the British State, the other fawns its exaggerated loyalty to a British Establishment that wouldn't touch it with a bargepole. Conjoined cultures; integration is anathema to them, the betrayal of heritage and death of identity.

Too often religion carries the can when, really, it is little more than a symbol, an identifying characteristic and a taunt. Combine this with the West of Scotland love of violence and, believe me, you have hell on earth.



Wherever oppositional identities are required to coexist in the world they attach themselves to football. Serbia and the Belgrade clubs are an example. Here they attach themselves to the Old Firm and, although the clubs make gestures in the direction of eradication, the relationship is symbiotic.

But now I see the road I am travelling has come round to oppositional identities; identities that exist 'apart and outside' of any higher aspiration, and that is to say 'alienation'. Conventional thinking running along the lines of sectarianism and hate and violence sees them as negative cultural forces that must be overcome. It sees alienation as a symptom. My experience suggests the reverse.



When we moved into our new tenement flat we naturally had new neighbours. Ten years old, I couldn't then understand what problems this presented to parents who were a bit older than most. Peering over the windowsill

I felt as if I had been propelled not so much away as *into*, that's into the new. That's not simply new to the 10-year-old boy, but literally *new*. It was strange, plain and uninteresting at first and slightly threatening, soon actually frightening. For the man approaching 50 it must have been a very different experience.

My father had most certainly been removed from all he had known, no matter that he had adventurously cycled here as a boy, travelling across a landscape of rivers and trees at the same time as he was absorbing the faith, Socialism. When he placed his hand on my shoulder he looked back through time as well as out through space. What he saw was a recent phenomenon, the Schemes; Glasgow's hinterland of low income and youth violence.

Let me record another piece of social engineering that went, I think, badly wrong. When the flats were allocated a great invisible hand determined that each landing would have an Irish name on one side and a British name on the other. As you ascended the stairs the sides reversed thus, Irish to the left and British to the right, Irish to the right and British to the left.

Depending on your degree of entrenchment this meant either you were surrounded by the 'other' or, worse, doughnuttled by the enemy. Effectively it meant being boxed off, total isolation.

If this was social experiment it failed. I had no Catholic friends in those years, Irish or otherwise. This had not been the case in Ibrox.

Then as now, we had religious segregation of the schools; effectively, tribal segregation. Nowadays this is positively spun as 'faith schools' and attendance is described as 'by choice'. Choice of course, was what was denied. There had been no real choice of locale, no choice of neighbours and no choice of schools. There were few shops to choose between and little choice of goods.

Effective coercion in location, low quality construction, and movement from family to state ownership, were all in close accordance with the Soviet model.

My mother put up a successful fight to have me finish my primary education back at Ibrox, thereby ensuring least disruption but condemning me to the long journey there and back. Dad took no part in this struggle with authority, possibly because it wasn't in the masculine area of activity of 1960, possibly because work and travel didn't allow the time. Come to think of it though, it might have been the first practical indication of how pointless his existence had just become.

His was the greatest loss. Apart from the joy he took in the late addition to the family, my brother, there was little now to live for. That's bad enough, but if only it could be left at that. If only it was that simple. The fact is, lives die hard this side of the actual end of living. He changed. The worst sides of his nature took over and hardened. His Socialism concretised into intolerance and became a 'one way' faith, meaning there is only 'one way'.

He told me once that his generation was aware of Soviet repression but that it was 'worth it' to achieve the workers' state. Conversation without argument was impossible and argument boiled down to reiteration of his opinions without allowance of reply or qualification. His was a clever and determined stupidity that couldn't survive an examination of his life's experience.

Put another way he forcefully laid down the sort of personally realised dogma Calvinist patriarchs, with female tolerance, have been laying down to their children for centuries, and for much the same motivations: the continuation of hierarchy in the family; the maintaining of a 'strength' figure at its head that at one time might well have been necessary; emotional and intellectual binding as social and economic necessities.

Of course, by the time I am writing about, these requirements were diminished or gone. The Welfare State had put an end to the male position of provider and protector at least as an essential.

Having no real leadership or authority in the home



he defended the pretence to the death. I mean that literally. In a fit of frustration and pique he once attacked me with a table knife. It wasn't simply a sudden outburst, immediately controlled and regretted. It was a sustained assault and only Mum putting herself in harm's way brought it to an end.

My mother escaped into romantic novels and television and chocolate. I was driven further into books and imagination, my natural home. The breach between us was never mended in his lifetime and is not mended now.

Why go on? This is how it was. This is the reality of alienation.

Here is another story from my friend with the dog.

A few weeks earlier the football season had come to an end and the Scottish Premier League had its closest and most exciting finish ever. Celtic had taken an early lead. Rangers had fallen dangerously far behind but over the course of the season persevered bravely. On the last day, almost at the last minute, they edged ahead and won. As a sporting contest it was brilliant, testimony to the character and determination of both sides but especially, of course, the winners.

The sense of disappointment among the losers was overwhelming, all the more so for supporters who live their lives through the colours. That night gangs of youths laid siege to the Valley, terrorising the inhabitants, terrorising my friend's mother. It went on for hours and ended as suddenly as it started.

This story I present not as a counter to Territorial Master Duff but as additional. When you are under attack it really doesn't matter what colour the soldiers are wearing. But look, what I am getting down to saying is that these quasi-nationalisms aren't the cause any more than religion is. Put a general alienation into the picture, the sort of alienation that's been around so long it isn't even noticed. See it at the centre with these other things held to it by a sort of social gravity. Now look again, they have become polar magnets for everything that lives on the shadow side of human nature. The point I am trying to make is a reversal of the usual thinking; but then, the usual thinking gives us the sectarian doughnut.

The tribes are with us for historical reasons that matter the less as the country becomes more autonomous. Still though, they offer an easy attachment, and a focus of loyalty, for the alienated. Those who tackle the problem directly, good people

such as 'Nil by Mouth', are doomed to fail. All they do is drive the elements underground where they become stronger. Don't doubt they are laughed at in their absence, down there in the caverns of hate.

Don't doubt either, that the tribes have able and eloquent defenders. My present fear for the Scottish Parliament is that such voices should enter it and argue on behalf of 'communities' rather than 'constituencies'. In Scotland we have something approaching a single Party state and a proportional system that admits timeservers and manipulators a truly selective electorate would not countenance.

Under such conditions opposition is likely to be by faction and conducted in the background.

I think most people will agree that 'multi-racial' and 'multi-cultural' are two different things. When I hear politicians and their camp followers agonising over multi-culturalism, aching, they would say, for the

arrival of this latest new dawn, making out those who disagree must be fascists or Nazis, or Neanderthals, I think of them as the ghetto makers of multi-culturalism.

What I want is a country that is as integrated as possible while remaining tolerant of difference. I do not want a country with areas where I cannot walk in safety because I stand or kneel to pray, if I pray at all, any more than because of the colour of my skin or the texture of my hair.

Integration means letting go. It means accepting we are not what our grandparents were, even our parents. It means saying things like: 'My grandparents were Irish but I am Scottish'. It means accepting that although your family have always felt 'British' and regarded the Union flag with moist eyes, a state made up of several countries will always be open to revision. There is no endstop on constitutional matters. There is no 'settled will'.

With the astonished pitbull as my witness, I raised my hand to high heaven and repeated my oath that when I am first President of the Independent Republic of

Scotland (not long now) my first move will be to bulldoze Ibrox and Parkhead into the ground and



integrate the schools. We'll bring them back when it's safe to do so.

My guess is no one will want them.

The dog and I by now were getting on very well. We had a lot in common. Tired old fighters we've just about had enough. The man-made river was still flowing and the mechanical dinosaur still munching and Territorial Master Duff was, as ever, present in spirit when Moira came to join us. It was time to head out if we were going to revisit the Glasgow Museums Resource Centre and get back to Highland this day. But her face said more. She was looking around in what appeared to be horror. It seems I had grown back into a state of acceptance without noticing. What she saw, she told me later, was like a war zone.

For 100 years or more Glasgow was Scotland's principal economic and cultural generator. It led the way in exploiting the Union and the Empire and its street names bear testimony to its past. Oxford and Cambridge Streets decorated the Gorbals. There is Bedford Street, Waterloo, Wellington, Otago, Alma, and a whole pile of Alberts to go with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra and the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall.

I'm not sure when the mantle of leadership fell from its shoulders, but I guess it was about the end of the First World War. What I am sure of is that neither Glasgow nor the rest of the country really noticed. But politics stagnated into class grievance and a deep conservatism, and art served it by providing a romantic and noble iconography, often with Christian overtones by painters such as Stanley Spencer, and poets such as the MacDiarmid of 'Skeleton of the Future', and the Sorley MacLean of 'Calbharaigh'.

This is the religion of Socialism, in which my father invested his unswerving faith, and whose transforming Saviour is an entity known as the People. Revolutionary thinking had it, still does I guess, that when the time is right the People will coalesce into a single unit, that is their pre-exploitation condition, arise as one to do battle and bring about the new and better society.

It's a strong and recurring mythic presence, the returning hero. There are quite a few to choose from. You can have Arthur in his cave in the Welsh mountains. Then again you can have Cuchulin in Ireland or Shaka Zulu in South Africa. When the time is right, when things are at their most hopeless and can get no worse, out they will ride to overturn the oppressors and create the long awaited order of a better world.

This will be about the time Christ returns trailing

clouds of glory from his chariot in the sky. They're not coming back if they ever existed. Not Arthur, not Cuchulin, not the People, neither the Red Clydesiders nor Brave John MacLean nor the rest. It's time to put them in the same envelope as Bonnie Prince Charlie and post them in the same safety deposit box and weld it shut.

I would say the answer is with Glasgow itself, but the city isn't up to it.

New forms of home ownership and tenancy offer improvement here and there. Social Workers strive to their limits with an inadequate budget that is, anyway, directed at effects not causes. But the city's new middle class prefers to wring its hands over racism, sexism, the finer points of equal opportunities, something undefined called 'the communities', not least to be horrified by American foreign policy when they never were by the Soviet Union's.

Alienation isn't a failure of this new concept, 'inclusion', with its overtones of conscription and conformity. It's a failure of leadership.

I've found it impossible to isolate Glasgow's literacy figures, far less hone them down to the peripheral population. The global fraction for Scotland as a whole, of people who have reading difficulties, is 23%, a figure that almost exactly matches the Rowntree Foundation's poverty figures. We can take it that few of those will be in Bearsden, or Shawlands, or Kelvinside. Take these places out of the calculation and you'll see that the real figure, the 'figure-where-it-matters' soars far above that already frightening 23%.

In my angrier moments I ask myself how I would keep a mass of people subdued, should I so wish. The answer of course, is to keep them ignorant and divided.

I have ceased to believe the city can address its problems without external influence. It will take a wholly reshaped Scotland to oblige change, a new demographic, a new set of aspirations, a growing Scottish population in the other cities. For at least half my lifetime the debate has been about constitutional form and new institutions. Since the establishment of the Parliament we have been stuck, on the one hand, on a sort of rounding off of identity politics; on the other, on sticking plaster policies for the symptoms I have just now touched on.

These things are important, but now is the time to move the debate on to aspiration. What should the basis of our economy in the 21st Century be? What should our population level be? Should there be a wider spread? Where should it reside? Why should we remain within a pattern that formed after a similar



'change point' in the 19th Century? Together we can outgrow Glasgow's problems.

Meantime it's all so very difficult even to look. For Moira, for so many sympathisers, all they can do is note what they see and make witness. Those of us who can give testimony are hampered by loyalties to parents, to the Working Class and Socialism, and to the tribes. We walk about with our invisible smiley badges.

I belong to Glasgow.
I am a Protestant/Catholic.
I love and respect violence.
I am a Socialist the way other people are Wee Frees.

I had thought I could come back here and view South Nitshill with an artist's detachment, or an engineer's. How we fool ourselves. There's not an inch of this place but has a piece of my heart. I tickled the dog's ears one last time and shook my friend's hand. By the time we were back at the car the bonfire was alight and its flames at roof level.

The Resource Centre was open when we got down but we were too early for the tour and you don't get to wander round on your own. The uniformed troops in Reception were super. All we could ask by way of information and leaflets was quickly to hand. Around them in the concourse, using the dozen or so computers was a group of children involved in I don't know what exercise. I bet the tour is worthwhile but we simply didn't have time.

So, the morning was wasted. All it had done was stir up a whole pile of hindering memories and useless emotions. Outside I thought first of the children. Those few bright and lovely kids, for God's sake, don't let them be looked on as the answer. Better equip them to escape.

This being the age of the mobile phone I called my brother and described the scene. Really I was just keeping him up to date. He had visited earlier and has a fragment of concrete slab from the entrance

to our close in his garden. It reminds him of the feet that trod it, people who are gone, our parents' brothers and sisters and their children and a few others that grow fewer with the passage of the years. Like memories some were welcome, some less so, but when his children touch it they are, in a way, connected.



Behind the skyline of blinded tenements, black smoke from the fire rose above the roofs and was blown across the gap where our home used to be, thinning as it went and finally disappearing. I will avoid any contrived metaphors about dispersal and forgetfulness and stick to reality. You don't forget. My parents' lives are buried here. What's art against all this? What's literature but a placebo? I did the only thing I could – climbed into Moira's car, passenger seat this time, turned my back and hardened my heart and left.

