

NOTES TO SELVES

READING (UN)MOTHERHOOD WITH EMILIE PINE

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EMILIE PINE

1978

Professor of Modern Drama (UCD)

- *The Politics of Irish Memory: Performing Remembrance in Contemporary Irish Culture* (2011)
- *The Body in Pain in Irish Literature and Culture* (2016)
- *Moving Memory: the Dynamics of the Past in Irish* (2017)
- *Notes to Self* (2019)
- *The Memory Marketplace: Witnessing Pain in Contemporary Irish and International Theatre* (2020)
- *Ruth & Pen* (2022)

In *Notes to Self*, Pine depicts her life as a twenty-first century woman. Within her family, she appears as a daughter, a sister, a wife, and an aunt. Professionally, she is a writer and a lecturer. As she considers these roles, Pine neither idealizes her achievements nor vilifies her failures; rather, she allows herself to inhabit a wide, unstable spectrum of affect—both luminous and shattering. *Notes*, in other words, becomes a record of what emerges in the intimate, often contradictory space between the personal and the everyday experience of living in a female body. A case in point is how the author navigates her desire of becoming a mother while being confronted with its very impossibility.

NOTES

TO

SELF

EMILIE

PINE



(1) "Notes on Intemperance"

→ addiction

(2) **"From the Baby Years"**

→ menstrual cycle, miscarriage, infertility
(or Involuntary Childlessness [IC], stillbirth,
and birth

(3) "Speaking / Not Speaking"

→ divorce

(4) "Notes on Bleeding and Other Crimes"

→ menarche, perimenopause, body hair,
and sexual harassment

(5) "Something About Me"

→ eating disorders, first sexual
experience, sexual assault, suicide, and rape

(6) "This is Not on the Exam"

→ gender discrimination in the
workplace, burnout, and depression

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In this lecture I begin by tracing a brief **chronology of women's reproductive rights in Ireland** to contextualize how **public vulnerability**—embodied in essay writing—has been made possible by these social changes and how those are, in turn, directly influenced by artistic productions. I focus in **(un)motherhood** to reflect on the wide spectrum of experiences outside the traditional, "compulsory" motherhood.

1. CHRONOLOGY

OF WOMEN'S
REPRODUCTIVE
RIGHTS

2. (UN)MOTHERHOOD

AGENTIVE CHOICE,
SOCIAL PRESSURE, AND
STATE CONTROL

3. ESSAY WRITING

GENEALOGY OF
WOMEN WRITERS

4. NOTES TO SELF

FINAL THOUGHTS

5. A LITTLE INCIDENT

BY ALICE RYAN

6. EVES. & WEEKENDS

BY OISÍN MCKENNA

1. CHRONOLOGY

1918
Representation of People Act

1922
Equal Franchise under the Irish Free State Constitution

1932
Marriage Bar

1935
Criminal Law Amendment Act

1937
Constitution of Ireland (Bunreacht na hÉireann)

1973
Entry to the European Union
Removal of Marriage Bar
Unmarried Mothers Allowance

1974
Anti-discrimination employment
legislation

1977
Employment Equality Act

1979
Health (Family Planning)
Act/Contraception Act

1981
Maternity Protection of Employees Act

1987
Status of Children Act

1990
Mary Robinson elected as President

1993
Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act

1996
Family Law (Divorce) Act

2013
Eighth Amendment of the Constitution
*X Case (1992)

2015
Marriage Act

2018
Repeal of the Eighth Amendment

2019
Divorce Referendum

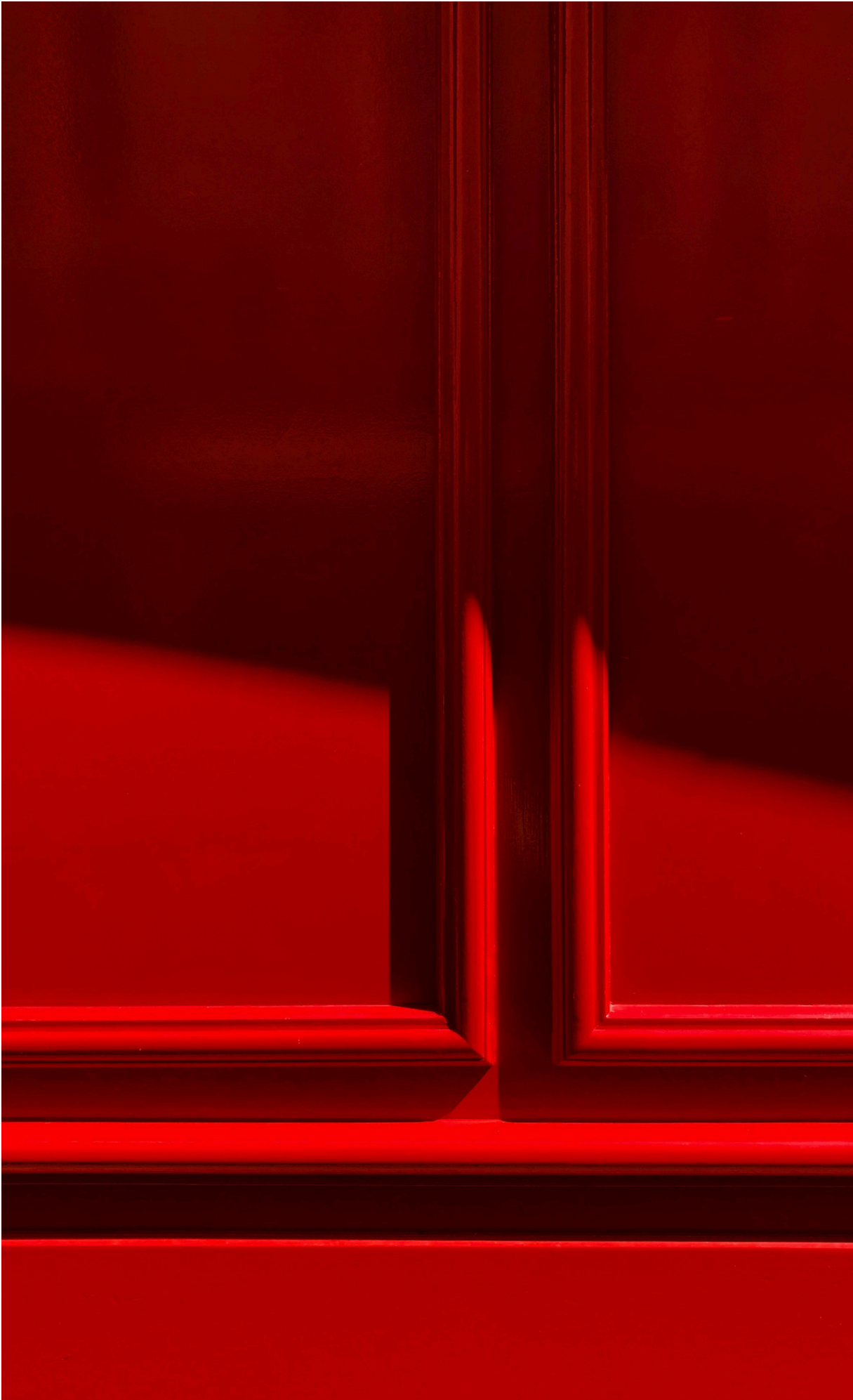
CONSTITUTION

"The State recognises the **Family** as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law."



"The State recognises that by her **life within the home, woman** gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that **mothers** shall not be obliged by economic necessity to **engage in labour** to the neglect of their duties in the home."





"[R]epresentations of female desire and of masculine violence and abuse of power are no longer considered threatening. Indeed, they have become a necessary part of a society's reckoning with its own past. ... the role of Irish fiction which touches on these issues has changed. No longer working against the pull of a society unwilling to acknowledge its own investment in a corrupt and unequal sexual system, fiction that exposes sexual abuses of certain kinds now finds itself flowing with the cultural tide. ... The climate for contemporary Irish women's fiction has, from this perspective, caught up with the fiction itself."

(WILLS 35)

2 (UN)MOTHERHOOD

WIFE/MOTHER | VIRGIN/NUN

IVANA BACIK

1. Mother Ireland (Mother Éire) – symbol of the nation
 - motherland; stereotypically self-sacrificing; power over the children and demanding of them; in/fertility
 - paradoxically nurturing and destroying
 2. Motherland
 - “the territory over which power is exercised” (the colonized female)
- ∴ The “mandatory” maternalization results in “women who do not conform to the Church/State model of married motherhood are subject to legal and social sanction” (103).

SLUT



2 (UN)MOTHERHOOD

WRITING THE IRISH MOTHER

ÁINE MCCARTHY

1. Good Mammy

→ Idealized figure: dutiful, self-sacrificing, devoted (to God and family), provider

2. Moaning Mammy

→ Negative counterpart: whining or silent martyr, drained by an alcoholic husband, full of children

3. "Smother Mother" (Farrell)

→ Dominant matriarch who insists on her children's adherence to her principles

The "Irish Mammy possesses an unvarying set of characteristics: she is **pious**; she is **pure** (i.e. **asexual**); she is **devoted to her sons** and **demanding of her daughters**; and she is the **repository of her society's ideals**, being much concerned with respectability and what the neighbours think" (114).



2 (UN)MOTHERHOOD

"LIVING OUTSIDE OF MOTHERHOOD"

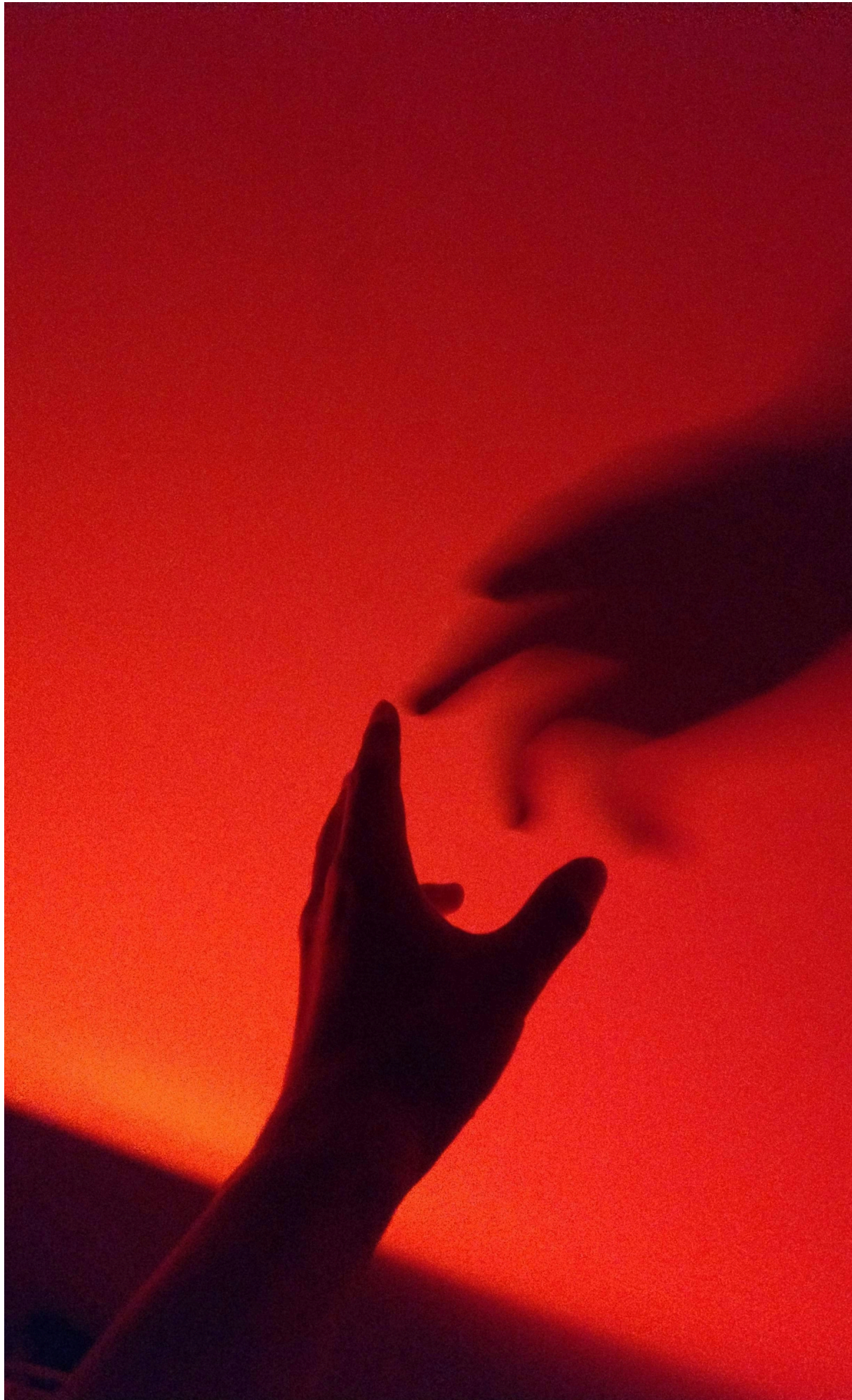
KATE SCHNUR

Constructed state in and of itself, beyond the presumed negative, passive state of the "not" or the "not yet"

→ Within the parameters of agentive choice, social pressure, and state control

1. A state mediated through medical knowledge, objects, spaces, and authority figures
2. An experience narrated through vocabularies pulled from phenomena closely associated with 20th-century modernity
3. A role dynamically shaped through compulsory heterosexuality embedded in familial relationships
4. A permanent, transient, chosen, enforced and—contradictory as it all may be—a legible and definable experience





"I PEE ON STICKS and into sample cups. I pee on my own hand when the stream won't obey. I open my legs wide for sex, for the doctor's speculum. I hold my arm out for needles and blood pressure monitors and sometimes to grasp onto my partner as he sits next to me. I am fearful and hopeful and shameful. I worry that I am empty, or that I am full of the wrong things. I worry that I am disappearing, eroding, failing. I do not know what to do with all these feelings. I only want to be a mother. Why is that so easy for some people and so hard for others? Why is it so hard for me?"

(PINE 35)

2 (UN)MOTHERHOOD

"A PARTICULAR KIND OF LONELINESS" (PINE 41)

FLO DELANEY

1. Infertility < Involuntary Childlessness (IC)

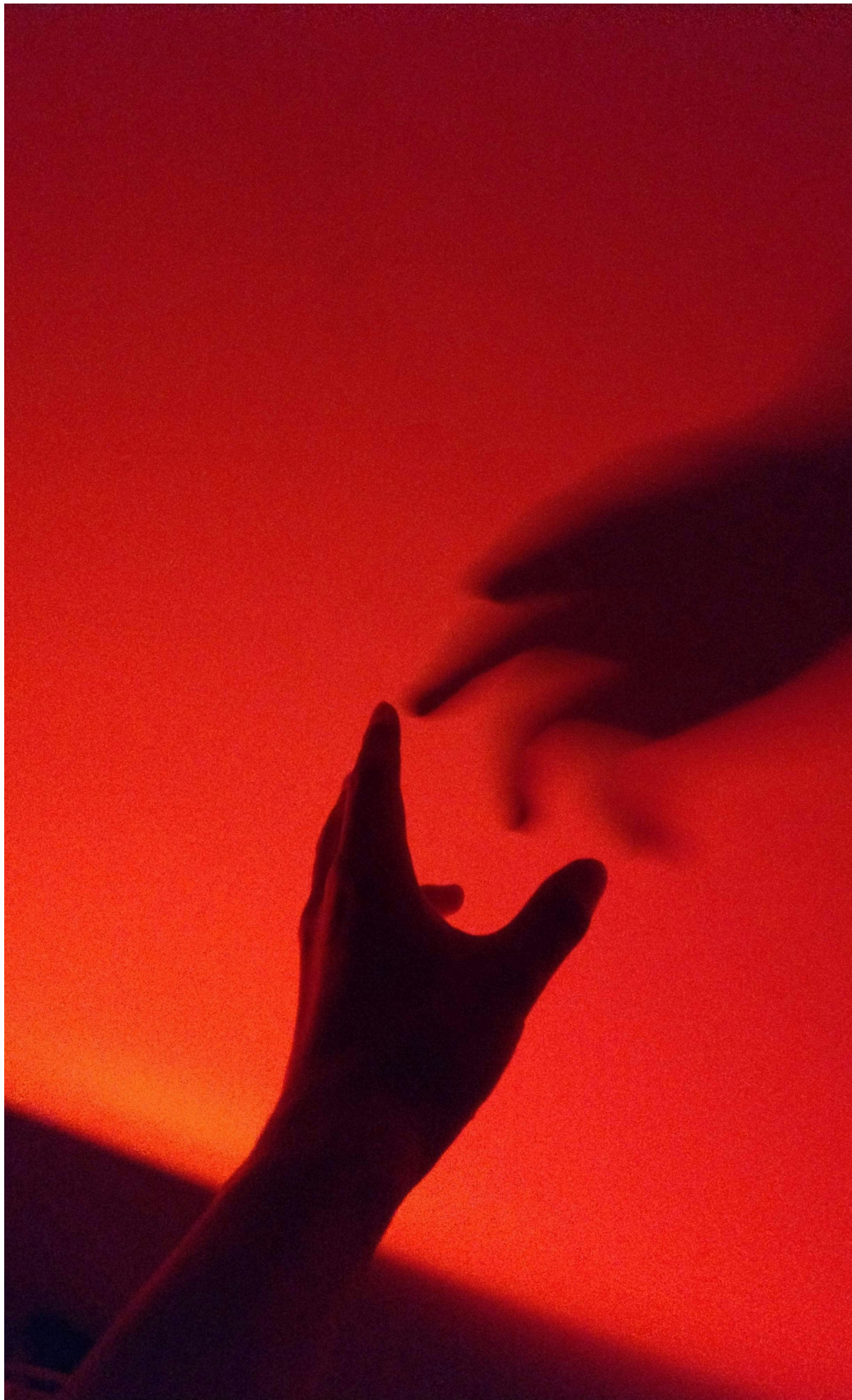
→ Lens of deficiency, of absence, "otherness," failure, and banishment—to the borderlands of "deviancy"

→ "barren"

2. 'Infertility has no symptoms, causes no disability and is invisible to the naked eye. It is defined medically as the inability to conceive after one year of unprotected sexual intercourse. In fact, infertility begins when a couple begins to fear or suspect that something is wrong. It is the effect of this worsening fear and growing apprehension that is the real "disease" of infertility' (87).

CHOICE



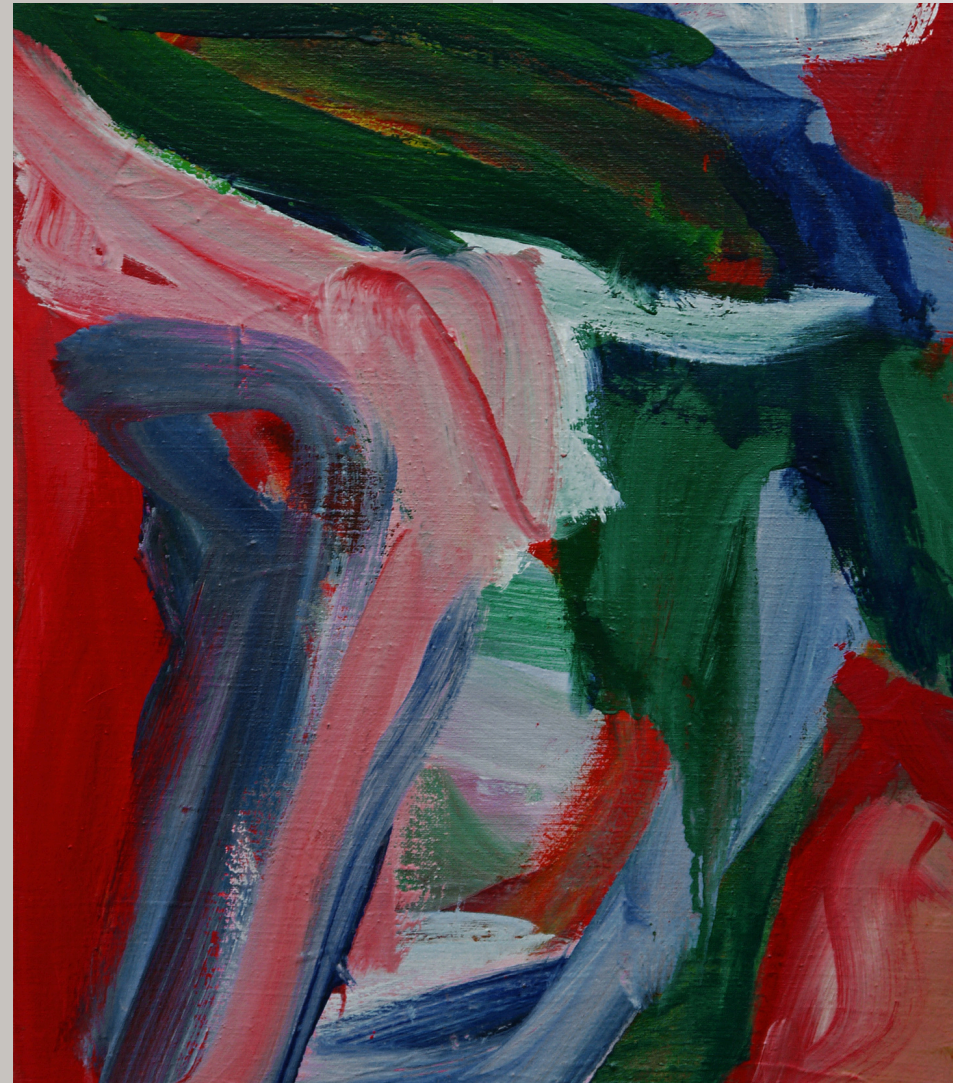


"Growth means life. But no heartbeat means no life. It is only with a great degree of hindsight that I think I understand. There is no life, but somehow there is growth, and growth means **ambiguity**. In Ireland, the equal status of the foetus and the mother in the constitution represents more than simply a ban on abortion. It means that in the case of any ambiguity, **the life of the foetus is prioritised**; and in our situation it means that it is illegal for the midwives to pronounce the pregnancy over. Ambiguity does not mean that there will be a baby. Instead, it means the total disempowerment of us as 'parents' of this ambiguous pregnancy. The midwives' silence, though it is completely uninterpretable to us in the moment, actually speaks volumes"

(PINE 48)

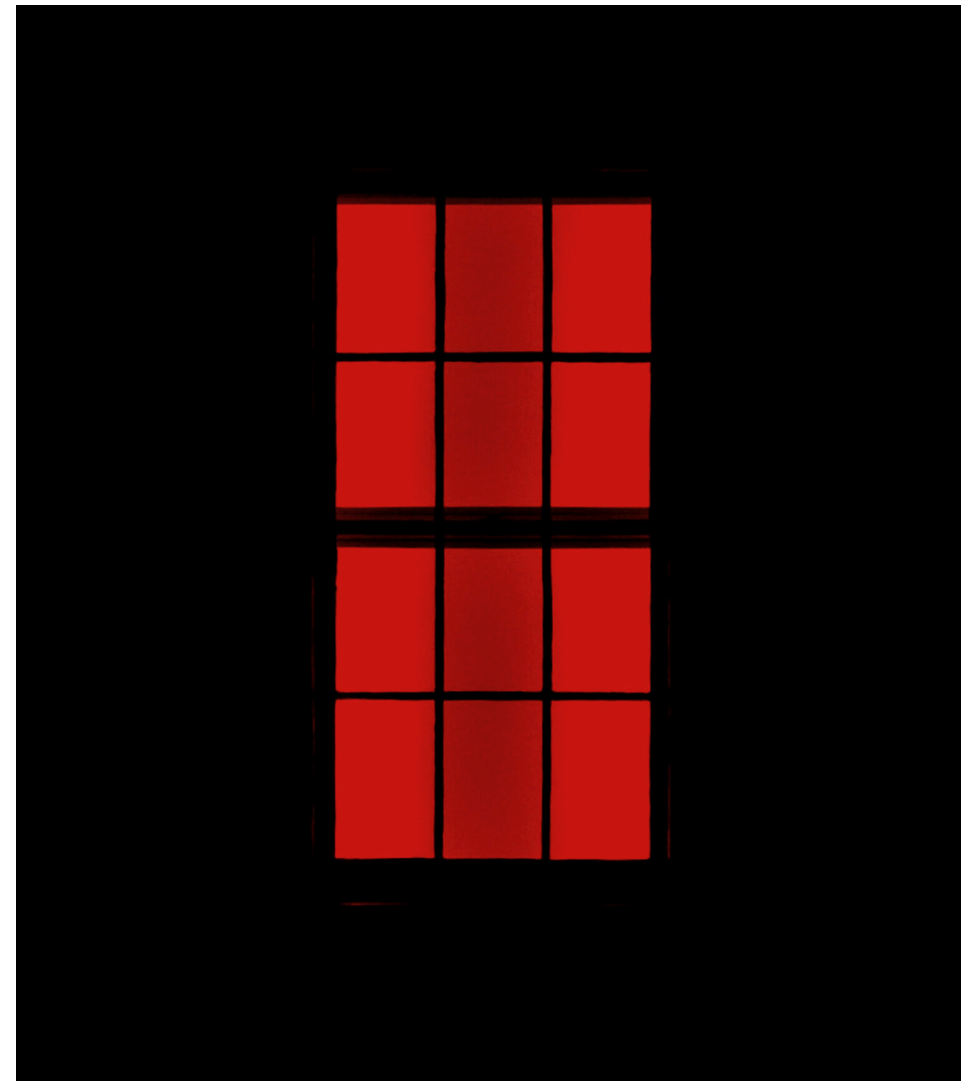
“FROM THE BABY YEARS”

“Mum and I are allowed into the delivery suite. V is lying propped up, holding her daughter, who is swaddled in the blue cotton blanket all newborns are wrapped in. V looks up at me and smiles. I say ‘Beautiful baby girl,’ not sure who I mean, my sister or her child. We hold V as she holds **Elena**. Elena looks perfect, only impossibly still, and there’s a tiny little rip on her eyelid, with a little blood, where her delicate skin was damaged during her birth. When I take her, her compact little body is too light, but she’s warm, still holding the heat of her mother’s body. ... Remember this. This is the only time you will ever hold your niece. **This is the moment when she is the closest she will ever be, out in this cold world, to being alive.** This is the end and the beginning. Remember this” (Pine 57-8).



“Very soon, V’s maternity leave is over. But soon too, with joy, relief and nervousness, she tells us that she’s pregnant again. **This is a pregnancy that goes well, that doesn’t have a sad ending, that results in nine months’ time in a healthy baby boy.** This is the pregnancy that she should have had the first time around. It’s bittersweet. It’s hard. It’s **healing**” (Pine 60).

3 ESSAY WRITING



"This is the golden age of essay writing in Ireland and it is being spearheaded by women. What they all have in common is strong female voices telling their truths."

RÓISÍN INGLE (IN MCMAHON)

A MOTHERED HISTORY



(PINE 30)

"[W]riting is a way of making sense of the world, a way of processing – of possessing – thought and emotion, a way of making something worthwhile out of pain."



SINÉAD GLEESON

1974



EMILIE PINE

1974



**DOIREANN NÍ
GHRÍOFA**

1981

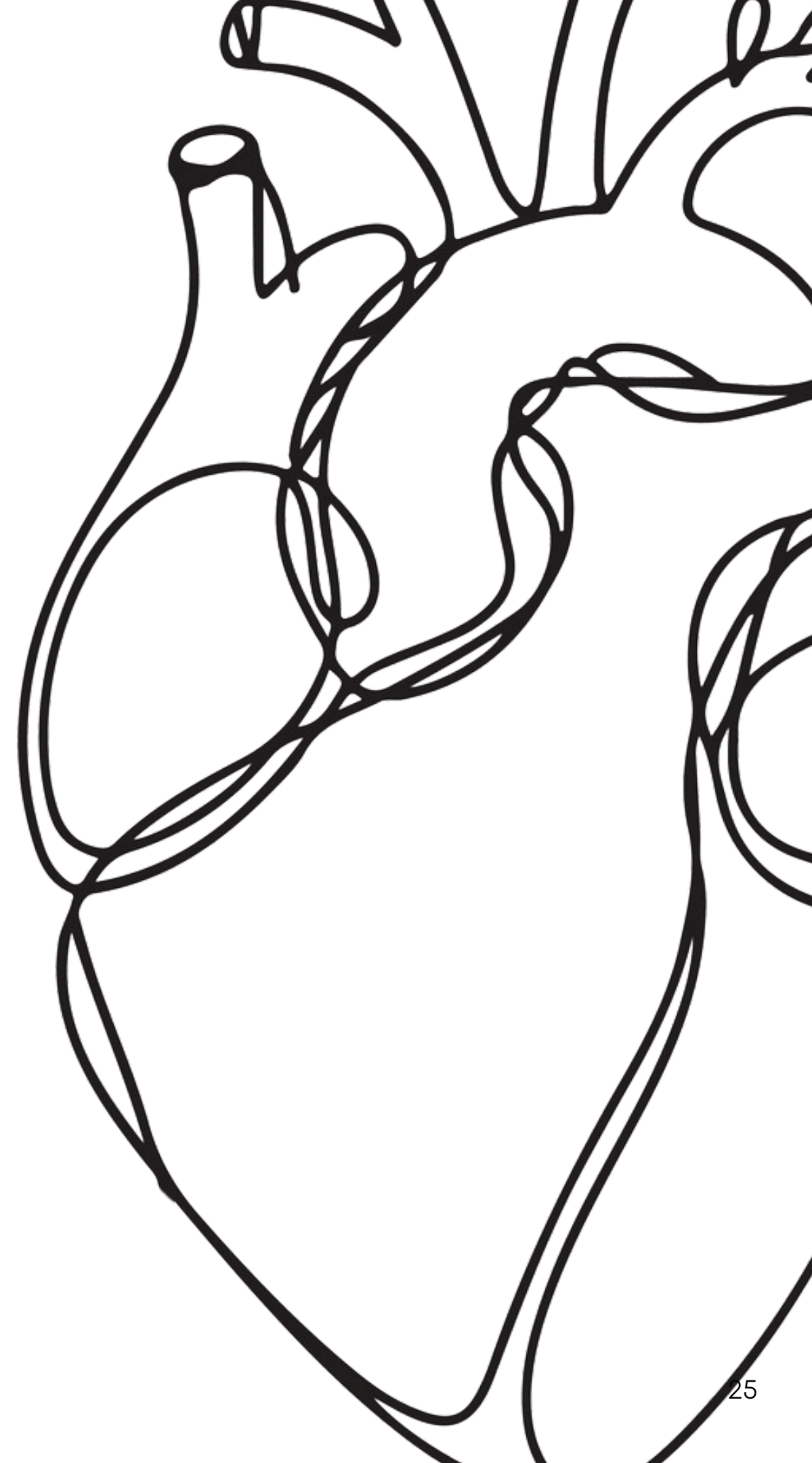
"FAMOUSLY, THE TRICK TO GOOD WRITING is bleeding onto the page. I picture the male writer who coined this phrase, sitting at his typewriter, the blank sheet before him. What kind of blood did he imagine? Blood from a vein in his arm? Or a leg? Perhaps a head wound? Presumably it was not blood from a cervix. I have so much of this blood, this period blood, this pregnancy blood, this miscarriage blood, this not-pregnant-again blood, this perimenopausal blood. It just keeps coming and I just keep soaking it up. Stuffing bleached cotton into my vagina to stem the flow, padding my underwear, sticking on the night pads 'with wings', hoping not to leak on some man's sheets, or rip off too much pubic hair with the extra-secure adhesive strips. Covering up with 'period pants', those unloved dingy underwear choices pulled out from the back of the drawer every month. And all along, I was wrong, I should have been sitting down at my desk and spilling it across the page, a shocking red to fill the white."

(PINE 92)



4 NOTES TO SELVES

Notes to Self is an exercise on **vulnerability**. Pine erases the boundaries between the private and the public—and she does so with a pristine prose and a very welcome sense of humor. As Paige Reynolds put it during *The Turns of the Centuries: Irish and Latin American Literature and Culture. 2025 International Symposium*, Pine's writing demonstrates fearlessness, for "**Bravery is hope in action.**"



5 ALICE RYAN

The eccentric Black family reunites after the mysterious disappearance of young adult Molly.

→ [Anne Black](#)

"She would need to find a way to communicate the development without saying the word. It felt so heavy, so final. She knew you couldn't be a little bit pregnant but that's how she felt – a tiny bit pregnant. One of these moments, it would hit her and she would have a meltdown. She – Anne Black – was pregnant. Pregnant, unmarried and the father was a slight English accountant who talked incessantly and whom she had only known for a matter of weeks. Unlikely didn't cover it. Unfathomable. Impossible. Only true a little bit. Only a small bit pregnant" (159).



THERE'S
BEEN A
LITTLE
INCIDENT

CAOISÍN MCKENNA

Set during a sweltering June weekend in 2019, the lives of a diverse group of Londoners navigating the complexities of love, identity, and personal transformation interweaves.

→ Maggie

"THE WEEK AFTER THE ABORTION, MAGGIE WENT TO Berlin. A friend of a friend wanted someone to sublet their room for the rest of the summer, and Maggie, exhausted and desolate, needed to get out of London. She's been in Berlin ever since, and only came back for the wedding.

She's been living with a German called Deborah and an American called Marco; she barely sees either of them. They both come back to the flat on occasion, hauling their bikes up the stairs and taking big gulps of water from the tap, on their way to and from various parties and never staying home for longer than thirty minutes" (147-8).





THANK YOU!



EMILIE PINE

at *The Turns of the Centuries: Irish and Latin American Literature and Culture. 2025 International Symposium* delivering her Reading 1, where she graciously and generously shared fragments from *Notes to Self*, *Ruth and Penn*, and a work in process (CASUL, UNAM, CDMX, 17 Sept 2025).

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