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SF PERUSALS

BELFAST GIRLS

BY JAKI McCARRICK



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Between the years 1848 and 1851 over four thousand Irish females took passage on ships from Ireland to Australia under the Orphan Emigration Scheme, established by Earl Grey. This action had the effect of relieving many of the workhouses and poorhouses of Ireland (already full to the brim with people seeking respite from the ravages of the 'Great Famine'), and of providing 'new blood' for the Colonies – wives, servants, farm-workers. The women who left were more generally known as 'orphan girls', though many were neither orphans or, strictly speaking, girls. The most notorious and riotous amongst these – both in transit and on arrival in Australia – were known as the *Belfast girls*.

There is a perverse pride in being on the side
of the fallen angels and refusing to get up.
DEREK MAHON, Spring in Belfast

MALONE My father died of starvation in Ireland in the Black '47.
Maybe you've heard of it?
VIOLET 'The Famine?'

MALONE (*with smouldering passion*) 'No, the Starvation. When a country is full of food and exporting it, there can be no Famine.

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW, Man and Superman

"It Must Be the Way the World Works I'm Angry At" – *Belfast Girls*

Jaki McCarrick's *Belfast Girls* is a materialist feminist play in the tradition of Caryl Churchill's *Fen*: an unflinching exploration of the lethal combination of colonialist class hierarchy, patriarchal oppression, and the female misogyny generated in women trapped between the two. Like the women working the East Anglian potato fields of Churchill's *Fen*, McCarrick's mid-nineteenth century refugees, fleeing the "famine" of Ireland for the promised land of upward mobility in Australia, aboard the *Inchinnan*. They fall to snarling and snapping at one another like starved, caged animals after initially forming an uneasy sisterhood born of perceived common cause. Age, education, marital status and employment history ultimately stratify McCarrick's Belfast "orphans," causing them to destroy the quasi-familial bonds they have initially forged on shipboard.

Materialist feminist analysis explores the matrix of class, race, and gender oppressions. With a Jamaican-born woman of mixed-race descent onboard the *Inchinnan*, along with former prostitutes and a degraded member of the bourgeoisie, McCarrick covers all of these bases with deft characterization and subtle exploration of the social systems that work to circumscribe everyone escaping the famine on the *Inchinnan*'s ark.

Molly Durcan – a maid from Sligo who longs to be an actor, and who turns out to be turning in a stellar performance on shipboard – introduces the contemporaneously-published class analysis of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to her traveling companions, along with the first-wave feminism of the suffragettes. A little knowledge proves a dangerous thing for the group, as several of the women have their consciousness raised just enough to turn on one another. Molly longs to play Puck; in a bit of meta-theater evocative of the meta-theatricality of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Molly instructionally performs the role of maid for the other women, teaching them how to raise their class positions in service to those far above them in the social hierarchy.

The lone setting is the *Inchinnan*, a ship slicing through the Atlantic and Indian Ocean, passing by the African colonies of England on its

way to Australia, another site of English colonialism and enforced servitude. Bodies of water are liminal zones: sites of passage from one place, one state of being, to another. McCarrick is preoccupied by liminality throughout, with a cast of characters who are supposed to be nineteen year-old orphans (or younger) in order to secure their place onboard, but who are, in reality, far wiser in lived experience of the casual cruelties of life. They are prostitutes, mothers guilty of infanticide – all, ultimately, are actors within the play, shifting between their "real" identities to the identities they have needed to assume in order to earn a place on the ship, all the while dreaming of new identities for themselves in Australia.

Shortly before they dock, a rude awakening: the realization that the "system" in Australia will not be liberatory for them, but a different version of what they have left behind. Having realized on the *Inchinnan* that it is "the way the world works" that they must fight against, they discover, before docking, that this time out of time, this life out of life on the ship has been the greatest freedom and self-actualization that they have yet known, or, perhaps, ever will.

Their eyes wide open, McCarrick's *Belfast Girls* are not defeated: "If it's not us who will have those freedoms you talked of . . . then maybe our daughters will. That's the important thing."

Regina Buccola
Associate Professor and Chair, Literature and Languages
Roosevelt University, Chicago

Regina Buccola is Professor and Chair of the Department of Literature and Languages at Roosevelt University, Chicago, where she also serves as core faculty in Women's and Gender Studies and Creative Writing. She has published several books on early modern British drama and culture, most recently as editor of *A Midsummer Night's Dream: A Critical Guide* and co-editor of *Chicago Shakespeare Theater: Suiting the Action to the Word*, with Peter Kanelos. She serves as the scholar in residence at the Chicago Shakespeare Theater, and is one of the Midwest American reviewers for the online journal *Reviewing Shakespeare*. Buccola's creative work can be seen with the Chicago political sketch comedy show *Democracy Burlesque*. She is also a published poet and author of the chapbook, *Conjuring*.

Belfast Girls was first presented at the Kings Head Theatre, Islington, London on August 1st 2011, as part of the theatre's Monday Night Without Décor season, with the following cast:

JUDITH NOONE. . . . . Chereen Buckley
MOLLY DURCAN . . . . . Amy Molloy
SARAH JANE WYLIE . . . . . Martha Barnett
HANNAH GIBNEY . . . . . Angela Costello
ELLEN CLARKE . . . . . Victoria Armstrong

Director. . . . . Svetlana Dimcovic

The play was further developed at the National Theatre Studio, London, in January 2012. A staged reading of an alternative version of the play had the following cast:

JUDITH NOONE. . . . . Rhiannon Harper-Rafferty
MOLLY DURCAN . . . . . Clare Dunne
SARAH JANE WYLIE . . . . . Charlene McKenna
HANNAH GIBNEY . . . . . Rhiannon Oliver
ELLEN CLARKE . . . . . Jess Murphy
VIOLET LACKIE . . . . . Kathy Kiera Clarke
MARY BURNE . . . . . Clare Louise Connolly
ELIZA CONN. . . . . Mairead McKinley
MARY BURKE . . . . . Sophie Robinson

Director . . . . . Svetlana Dimcovic

Artemisia, A Chicago Theatre's American premiere of *Belfast Girls* is to be presented at the Den Theatre, Chicago, on May 16th 2015 – June 14th 2015. Cast and production details are as follows:

JUDITH NOONE. . . . . McKenzie Chinn
MOLLY DURCAN . . . . . Cassandra Schiano
SARAH JANE WYLIE . . . . . Patty Malaney
HANNAH GIBNEY . . . . . Caitlin Chuckta
ELLEN CLARKE . . . . . Lindsay Tornquist

Director . . . . . Julie Proudfoot
Lighting Designer . . . . . Ellie Humphrys
Sound Design . . . . . Kallie Rolison
Costume Design. . . . . Alice Broughton
Set Design & Technical Director . . . . . Ann Davis
Assistant Director, Dramaturg . . . . . Jen Poulin
Stage Manager . . . . . Mackenna Marie Geary

CHARACTERS

JUDITH NOONE – 20s

MOLLY DURCAN – 17/18

HANNAH GIBNEY – 20s/early 30s

ELLEN CLARKE – 20s

SARAH JANE WYLIE – 19

A stroke (/) denotes the point of interruption in overlapping dialogue.
Words in square brackets are not to be spoken.

ACT ONE

Scene One

Belfast docks. The sound of a foghorn, dockyard business etc, giving way to the sound of the sea quietly lapping the sides of a boat. Upstage centre, the prow-end of a long dormitory of a ship, the 'Inchinnan'. No windows or portholes. Stage-left are four bunk-beds (like wide cots) arranged beside each other. On the furthest (downstage) top bunk there are numerous pieces of luggage and hatboxes piled up – as if to create a division from the rest of the dorm. Downstage right is a table on which there are buckets of water, bread and a bread-knife, laid out on a board; between the table and bunks is a rail with hangers and some hung clothes (coats and dresses), beside it a small chest of drawers. The way in or out is past the table and along the corridor of the dorm. A door, downstage right, leads upwards to the deck. As this boat has been hired by the Crown to transport its cargo, and is not strictly a commercial vessel, conditions are slightly better than those of the 'coffin-ships' (which contained long undivided dorms, usually sleeping four to a bed). A dark-skinned girl, **JUDITH**, *wearing standard-issue blue 'orphan girl' dress, is adjusting the cases that make up 'the wall'. A song is sung from the other end of the boat, 'The Lark in the Clear Air'. As* **JUDITH** *goes about strategically setting the boxes, also blocking off the bottom bunk, we hear the voices of women from the other end of the boat as they approach her. Cackles; low, threatening (Belfast-accented) tones.* **JUDITH** *leaps for the knife on the table and turns (downstage-facing) as if to warn*

the approaching women off. The voices recede, the song continues. Three girls burst into the room, laughing and jumping onto the bunks. **JUDITH** *stabs knife down into the board. The song fades.*

ELLEN Did yez smell it!

HANNAH Half a pint a coal-tar, surely.

ELLEN That'd knock the dirt off.

HANNAH Wouldn't a harmed them to perfume it a little, a hint of rose…

ELLEN A hint of rose: whan's the las' time you smelt a rose, hah?

SARAH But two bars? We're goin' to need more 'n two pesky bars.

HANNAH Here, Judith. One a the matrons asked me give – *(holds out a towel and soap)* Oh. Ya changed already.

JUDITH Aye. Got my smelly soap, my towel, an' haven't I gone to the devil with the style that is in this dress?

They all laugh.

Which matron give ya that?

HANNAH Crooked Nose.

JUDITH Aw that figures. The right hand'll not know what the left does on this boat, so./ Let's have it. *(takes the towel and soap etc)*

SARAH But yer beautiful white dress –

JUDITH Won't stay beautiful down here, will it?

HANNAH But we're not ta set sail for hours yet, Judith.

JUDITH Longer youzens are in yer finery, further the land of plenty is off from yez.

HANNAH *begins to cry (at the thought of wearing her standard-issue dress – and of leaving Belfast).*

Did yez see inta the kitchens?

SARAH *and* **ELLEN** *look at each other and burst out laughing.* **HANNAH**, *quickly forgetting her sadness, makes a loud, raucous cackle.*

ELLEN Aw Judith. You should see our cook. Why, he's a man carved from the whitest marble –

HANNAH Alabaster.

ELLEN How'd you know alabaster from marble?

SARAH He has the shiniest hair.

HANNAH An' the biggest –

SARAH – hands.

ELLEN 'Austin's' his name.

HANNAH An' he's all mine. I'll ate him up, I tell ya. Each an' every schrap.

ELLEN Aw, ya done that stonemason from Madrid Street, didn't ye? That's how ya know about stone.

HANNAH We had ta talk about somethin', didn't we?

ELLEN He was old an' ugly. Not be rapin' him anyway.

JUDITH Well, I heard they'd fine cooks on these boats. That's somethin'.

SARAH Aye, while isn't it a shame about them up on land who have nothin'?

Slight beat.

JUDITH So, he's a looker is he?

HANNAH Aye. He fucken is, Judith.

JUDITH *quickly goes up to* **HANNAH** *and grabs her.*

JUDITH How many bairns you give birth ta?

HANNAH Three.

JUDITH An' how many of them bairns could you feed, fat Hannah?

HANNAH *cries.*

How many?

HANNAH None. Two dead, one, one… get your hands off me troath, Judith.

JUDITH Want another bairn on this very boat?

HANNAH No.

JUDITH Then keep away from the men on this ship. All a yez. Or do ya want to be out to here *(performs this, sticks piece of material up her dress)* by the time we reach the Colony? Walkin' off the deck of this boat – an' all them rich Australian farmers standin' on the docks lookin' out for a wife. Ya think they'll go for the big huge pregnant fat girl, do ya? Do ya, Hannah?

HANNAH No Judith, No.

JUDITH Aye. They won't. All a youse, get your heads round the plain fact we're leavin' an' we won't ever be comin' back.

Beat.

Look, I know some of youse an' youse know me. We have this one an' only chance. An' in all the kingdom of Ireland aren't <u>we</u> – us women – aren't we damned lucky to be gettin' out of it?

SARAH Aye. Ya should be ashamed ta think you'd not make somethin' of your chance now, Hannah, ta get yerself a good an' decent life an' you ready to throw it all away on the first buck that looks at ya.

ELLEN Who said he looked at her?

HANNAH He fucken did.

ELLEN He fucken didn't. He looked at me first, y'oul bitch. It was you bored yer eyes into 'im like an oul animal.

Fight breaks out as **HANNAH** *goes for* **ELLEN**. *They roll around the floor and up against the beds.*

JUDITH *(separates them)* For Jesus sake, enough! Fat Hannah an' stupid Ellen. Do yez want 'em to separate us? Because that's what they'll do. Yous'll en' up banished to Maitland or Moreton Bay with the likes of Eliza Conn an' Violet Lackie an' them mill workers down there. Youse might not get off this ship alive if yez en' up down that end. So keep a hold a yerselves. Yez are actin' no different than when we were in the workhouse, nor up on North Queen Street of a Saturday night. Hey Sarah?

HANNAH *and* **ELLEN** *laugh at* **JUDITH***'s insinuation.*

SARAH Sure, I never knew youze before this day. I came to Belfast from Cooley only last week.

JUDITH Didn't take ya long then.

ELLEN *and* **HANNAH** *walk teasingly around* **SARAH**.

SARAH Long for what?

JUDITH Get yerself accustomed to the mucky back streets of Belfast. Or Bel*shaft* as some of us like to call it. *(makes a sexual gesture,* **ELLEN** *and* **HANNAH** *laugh)*

SARAH Don't know what youze be talkin' about half the time. Sure we don't speak the same language you an' I, Judith.

JUDITH So, that wasn't you on North Queens Street I saw drunk an' blusterin' out of ya at the peelers, only what, one week or so ago?

SARAH No, it bloody well wasn't.

JUDITH Well alls I'll say is: you have an awful familiar face *(she checks* **SARAH***'s luggage tag for her full name)* Sarah Jane Wylie. An' an awful, awful familiar *(***JUDITH** *walks around the back of* **SARAH***, examining her rump)* –

ELLEN Aw, aren't we to forget all that now, Judith, the terrible mucky past an' all? Isn't that what you're always sayin'?

JUDITH We are. An' we will. From now on on this ship we're to be mistresses of our own destiny. Unlike the poor cunts we've left behind – who will never know the rich an' sun-drenched lands we're headed ta.

SARAH *looks like she is about to cry.*

HANNAH You've made the country girl cry, Judith. Aw, the poor wee thing.

SARAH What d'yez know about the country people, hah? Youze were fine up here. Didn't even *need* the workhouses. Yez have mills an' shops, a hundred ways to find food. I lost my mother an' father an' more. I seen people crawlin' on their bellies through fields like snakes. Seen 'em eat grass an' leaves an' half poison themselves with it. You seen none a that up here, I know yez didn't. Well, the mind goes quick when there's no food; the reason goes an' the shakes come, so that I seen mothers lookin' insanely, insanely you hear me ya bloody bitch, Judith Noone, at their own dead bairns.

JUDITH Well, I'm sorry now, Sarah. Indeed we heard the stories ya speak of. But yer wrong about the city, isn't she girls?

ELLEN Aye.

JUDITH Belfast has its fair share of horror stories, too, let me tell ya. But it's not for now, this talk. Not now we're about to sail. Though there's still time.

ELLEN For what, Judith?

JUDITH For any one of us to abandon our chance.

HANNAH What you sayin' that for?

JUDITH We've not set sail yet, have we? Go up on deck an' you'll see yer still lookin' out at Black Mountain an' the grey gulls of Belfast. So long as we're docked here any one of us can leave the Inchinnan. No one's holding a gun to our heads. We were none of us made come.

ELLEN But we were urged ta.

JUDITH Urged ta an' made ta are two different things, Ellen. Ya can always say no to 'urged'.

HANNAH She never said no ta 'urged' in her fucken life.

ELLEN Shut up.

HANNAH She never said NO in her fucken life.

ELLEN Sticks an' stones may break my bones –

JUDITH Jesus! Leave it, will yez? I'm not finished me point! Me point being we have to talk it up. The Colony. And what we'll do an' how we'll be when we get there. We have to make sure we're ready. Fit. Up here *(points to her head)* an' in here. Not like them ones down there from the slums of Ballymagerrett, don't know what they're at, half outta their minds on gin. We're to be ready for the good things comin' in the promised land. Because its not every wench can quit her misery, ya know? I seen plenty like ta roll aroun' in it like hogs.

HANNAH Well, it's the promised land I'm wantin'. I'm no damn hog.

ELLEN Nor I.

HANNAH I hear there's fine English farmers in the Colony with thousands of acres, Judith, an' more cattle than ya could dream of seein' in the whole of Ireland, just drippin' wit need for female companionship.

ELLEN I want no damn Englishman. Haven't they been trouble enough in this country? Why in the name a god would I travel halfways across the earth ta find one of them when every self-respectin' Irishman is tryin' to get them outta the place?

HANNAH Oh, it's an Englishman I'll get for meself in Australia, Ellen. Not an Irishman. An Englishman will look at me an' see a grand cook an' a great worker in his scorched Australian fields. But he'll also see in me the bit that is all frozen an' closed in my English counterpart: I'll be his exotic flower to dream about all the long day – an' so he can fuck the livin' daylights outta me all the long night. But an Irishman? No. An Irishman will know ya. He'll see through to yer soul an' ya'll never be good enough for yer Sean or Patrick. He'll know yer father an' everythin' about ya, an' soon enough he'll be applyin' all that information – up here where it counts. An' another thing. As it's a Sean or a Patrick I'd probably love more for the very reason he *would* know an' undershtand me – I won't want him. Because I don't want ta be known or undershtood. I want ta be dead inside. For haven't I heard it's only the dead survive in Australia?

Blackout.

Scene Two

A few hours later. All now in – or changing into – standard-issue dress. Sounds of activity above deck as the ship prepares to leave. **SARAH** *unpacking, looking through her clothes and bonnets and letters. More subdued than before; an uncertain note.* **HANNAH** *sitting by the prow end of the boat singing 'Slieve Gallon Bray.'*

HANNAH

AS I WENT A WALKING ONE MORNING IN MAY
TO VIEW YOUR FAIR VALLEYS AND MOUNTAINS SO GAY,
I WAS THINKING OF YOUR FLOWERS ALL DOOMED TO DECAY
THAT GROW AROUND YE BONNY, BONNY SLIEVE GALLON BRAE.

SARAH Soon we'll be far from home.

JUDITH Soon we won't have much use for that word. We should forget about it.

SARAH I think we'll never be able ta do that, Judith. My brother for instance. *(shakes her head)*

HANNAH How long's he gone?

SARAH Two year an' more.

HANNAH How canya miss home after only that?

SARAH Australia's different. Nothin's the same, he says.

JUDITH Isn't that the point?

HANNAH Aw Lord.

JUDITH What?

HANNAH It'll happen me, too, I know it. The homesickness. I wish I could root out all my memories an' songs an' throw them in the damn sea.

JUDITH They wouldn't drown, Hannah. They're a part a ya.

HANNAH Well, I'd like ta drown them – for I fear they'll haunt me surely.

ELLEN *bursts down into the dorm.*

ELLEN Judith, Judith – ya'll never guess what I just heard –

HANNAH Primed for tittle-tattle an' us not even left shore yet.

SARAH Well, ya know what they say. Ya can take the biddy from the bog/but ya can't –

ELLEN Shut up about bogs. Never saw bog in my life that wasn't burnin' on a fire. Belfast pure born I am, born to the sound / of the looms and the shipyards.

JUDITH What ya hear Ellen an' get on with it.

ELLEN Austin. Ship's cook. He told me.

HANNAH Now isn't that typical of you, sneaky Ellen, knowin' he had an eye far me…

ELLEN Aw, yer deluded –

JUDITH What ya hear for God's sake?

ELLEN Five more girls have come in from Sligo an' they're to be spread this way an' that amongst the dorm, so we're ta…

JUDITH Don't tell me ya mentioned the bunks.

ELLEN Didn't I just say to Austin we'd a fine sized part of the dorm this way, an' sure we could fit in a girl, two, three girls maybe…

HANNAH Oh, your mouth could fit a whale in it. You'll be in great company when we get to the South Seas. Maybe I'll even throw you in.

ELLEN Shut up y'oul bitch…

JUDITH Shut up both a yez.

MOLLY *enters the dorm, coughs. They all stop and stare. She is a beautiful, very thin girl. Her gaze fixes on the bread on the table – though she averts her eyes from it as much as she can.*

Austin wasted no time, I see.

Beat.

And you are?

Beat.

MOLLY Molly. Molly Durcan.

JUDITH Well, I suppose you better come in, Molly.

SARAH Five's an awful crowd up this way, Judith, surely there's another part of the boat she…

JUDITH Do ya intend spendin' the rest a yer life here, do ya?

Beat.

The trip is what – two, three months tops? An' who knows – maybe none of us will arrive in Australia alive, for I hear there's plenty a diseases ta catch on these ships, not least the fucken clap off ship's cook.

ELLEN Sure Hannah'd give it ta him.

JUDITH We can be five – or six down this way, I reckon, for a few months. Anyone else with ya, Molly?

MOLLY No. They just sent me here.

JUDITH Good. Now, Ellen, seein' as yer so in with the staff on this ship, why don't ya get 'em ta bring down the girl's mattress an' bedclothes for her, huh?

ELLEN *is reluctant to go, dallies.*

Go on, go.

Exits.

SARAH Ya look tired, Molly.

MOLLY I'm fine, thank you. Is there a space for my –

JUDITH By those bunks. See the rail? Might be a spare drawer in that cupboard. An' put yer cases an' boxes up here when yer done. We're building a bit of a wall on this one, see? *(***JUDITH** *moves boxes from the bottom to the top)* We don't want to see them ones up that way. Take the eye outta yer head they would. So you have the bottom bunk, if that's all right.

MOLLY The bottom bunk is fine. Thank you.

MOLLY *moves to the rail with her luggage.*

SARAH *(rushes to the rail)* Not here. For I have things here. Mementos an' such from my mother – an' brother. Take that end, Molly. Sure, Hannah an' Ellen – they have nothin'. They came with nothin'.

MOLLY *opens her suitcase, the others look. It is mostly full of books and papers, hence the weight of it. She closes the case, puts it to one side. She looks around for something to hold on to – she is about to collapse.* **JUDITH** *pulls a chair towards the prow end, sits* **MOLLY** *down.*

JUDITH Here, girl. It's colder here. Put your face against the timber. *(to* **HANNAH***)* Jesus, she has the look of the starved all right. Let's loosen this.

JUDITH *and* **HANNAH** *loosen* **MOLLY***'s corset.*

(quietly) She's all bound up in it, as if it was the only thing holdin' her bones together! Sarah, get her a cup a water will ya? An' her soap an' plain dress while yer at it.

SARAH I don't see why she can't get her own… didn't we all have ta…

HANNAH She's a bloody walkin' skeleton – are ya blind, woman?

JUDITH Maybe after ya seen that woman in the field lookin' greedily at her own dead baby somethin' switched off inside ya, Sarah, hah? Empathy it's called. Ya know, that thing where ya break out of your own clannish mentality ta do somethin' for someone else!

SARAH *storms out.* **JUDITH** *goes to her own luggage, fetches a brown bottle (gin or whiskey).*

Here. This'll sort ya.

Wafts the liquor under **MOLLY***'s nose.* **MOLLY** *drinks some down, coughs and sputters.*

HANNAH She's not had a dose a that before, begod.

JUDITH There Molly. Keep to the timber. The cold an' pine smell of it will help. Aye, that's it. Should get out of that dress as soon as ya can.

HANNAH *goes to a silver locket around* **MOLLY***'s neck;* **MOLLY** *grabs it back towards herself.*

Stop maulin' her, will ya?

MOLLY *sits, catching her breath, staring at the bread*

HANNAH Bread, is it? *(***HANNAH** *grabs a piece of the bread and gives it to* **MOLLY** *who devours it.* **HANNAH** *and* **JUDITH** *laugh.)*

JUDITH Slow down or ya'll choke.

Pause.

That's it. Easy. Believe me, it's not that nice.

HANNAH Are ya from Sligo then, Molly?

MOLLY *nods*

I'm from up that way myself.

MOLLY *glances at* **HANNAH** – *a flicker of a glance.*

Where is it yer from in Sligo?

MOLLY North. Strandhill. By the Rosses.

JUDITH Were ya in the workhouse?

MOLLY *nods*

What ya do?

MOLLY I dyed muslin.

HANNAH An' what did ya do before that, Molly?

MOLLY I – I was a maidservant.

JUDITH They let ya go?

MOLLY *nods.*

HANNAH A maidservant? Now 'nt that strange.

JUDITH What?

HANNAH Just I knew of Durcans up by Strandhill. One a them worked as a maid I think on the de Courcy Estate. *(thinks)* But ya'd not be her a course. You'd be a totally different Durcan for she'd not be the cut a you.

MOLLY No, I'd not be her.

HANNAH But strange nonetheless.

MOLLY A popular enough name in Sligo, Durcan.

HANNAH Tis I spose.

JUDITH Ya travel all the way from Sligo, Molly, for the Inchinnan?

MOLLY Aye.

JUDITH Things must be bad by your way.

MOLLY Things are. Things are very bad.

HANNAH You should've come up ta Belfast before, Molly. Can always get a gentleman in Belfast to buy a girl a meal, a sup in a bar…

JUDITH Come all that way for a fella to buy her drink? Shut up Hannah, ya fool.

MOLLY Actually, I was in Belfast once before today.

HANNAH Were ya?

MOLLY Yes. Aye. It was – to see a troop of Belfast players perform in a play.

HANNAH What kind of play?

MOLLY Shakespeare it was. It was in a great hall with all men acting the women's parts.

HANNAH That'd be Belfast fellas for ya all right.

MOLLY And then after it – I, I went to a talk.

JUDITH Did ya?

HANNAH A talk? You came up to this shmoky hole all the way from Sligo for a play *an'* a talk? Jesus, Sligo was never that short of talkers, surely. You must have been livin' in a quiet place so that you needed to travel that far for a play *an'* a talk.

JUDITH What kind of talk was it, Molly?

MOLLY A talk to do with women. Modern women. You see in – in – America –a group has started – two years they're going – and well, meetings have sprung up in London and Dublin and Belfast. They believe… I believe…

JUDITH That the time of women is coming.

MOLLY Exactly.

ELLEN, *huffing and puffing, crashes into the room. She is dragging in mattress and sheets.* **JUDITH** *is thinking about what* **MOLLY** *has said.*

HANNAH A dozen ship mates, a load a cooks, two matrons an' a ships surgeon – an' ya'd to bring that yoke down here all by yourself?

ELLEN I wouldn't ask that shower ta piss on me if I was on fire. Now give us a hand makin' up this one's bed. You best take the bottom bunk, Molly. Ya see we're buildin' a bit of wall –

JUDITH She knows.

ELLEN Now here *(jumps on the mattress she and* **HANNAH** *have placed on the bunk and on all fours proceeds to tuck in sheet)*, isn't this comfortable?

HANNAH *laughs.*

What ya laughin' at?

HANNAH Most familiar position I ever seen you take.

ELLEN Aw, I'll tear yer hair out by the roots ya lice-ridden jezebel –

JUDITH D'youse ever think for one minute that there might be some women on this boat don't like to hear youze cat-fighting? Women who've done real jobs, maybe *(indicates over to* **MOLLY**), who might not want ta hear yer shite? So give it a rest, will yez?

MOLLY Oh ladies. I'm, I'm very grateful to you all.

SARAH *enters with the water – and standard-issue dress, soap and towel for* **MOLLY**.

SARAH I'm sorry about before, Molly… I [didn't think]... Here. *(***SARAH** *gives water to* **MOLLY**, *followed by dress & soap etc).*

HANNAH Ya took yer time.

SARAH Didn't I get caught up in a scrap down by the door? Had to step over three women kickin' five colours of shite out of each other.

JUDITH That's because they've put all us Belfast girls down this way. Word has it they did the same with the orphans on the Earl Grey. Had them sectioned off like Bedlam.

HANNAH Orphan my hole.

ELLEN Well, I'm an orphan. An' so is Judith.

MOLLY But aren't we all orphans or foundlings on this boat?

ELLEN Aye. We're all under nineteen an' as pure as the driven snow.

HANNAH *(to* **ELLEN***)* Been a long fucken time since you saw nineteen. Nineteen fucken inches maybe.

ELLEN Sticks an' stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me, *fat Hannah.*

JUDITH *(to* **MOLLY***)* Let's just say one or two of us – in order to acquire passage – may have told a couple of white lies…

HANNAH … an' the thing about the Belfast girls is, they are, let's say, more *familiar* ta the likes of the captains, ships surgeons, the peelers…

ELLEN … the priests…

JUDITH So it's best the other country girls, the farm girls, don't get a gist of how some of us may, or may not, have got here.

SARAH Are ya jokin' me? Further along I seen girls from the country talkin' about childer an' fellas they were wed ta.

JUDITH Well, we're here now. An' when this boat leaves what will it matter who or what any of us have been

on this damn island? Because from now on we're to be what?

HANNAH, ELLEN, SARAH, JUDITH 'Mistresses of our own destiny'.

JUDITH So yez can start wavin' yer handkerchiefs, ladies.

SARAH Well, I'd like to go up on deck. Isn't it the best way ta say goodbye on a boat? Come away up with me Hannah an' Judith, an' Ellen, an' you too, Molly. It's still bright. Let us go up on deck to wave goodbye to Ireland for it's likely none of us will ever see it again.

HANNAH *starts to cry.*

HANNAH Don't say it.

SARAH Say what?

HANNAH That we won't come back. Sure if things – if – wha' if we don' like it in Australia? Won' there always be a boat home we can take if we want ta?

JUDITH Home? Ireland is not yer home now. I thought we got that straight.

HANNAH It is. Ireland *is* my home. Oh God, I'm confused now. Isn't it here I've buried bairns, watched the pink sunsets over Knocknashee as a child…

JUDITH Knocknashee my shite! Remember, an' remember it right, an' stop puttin' a false tint on it and you not even left the place yet. Remember why it is you left oul Knocknashee! Go on! Tell Sarah here, an' Molly!

HANNAH *shakes her head.*

ELLEN Some of us know, Judith. Maybe you should leave it at that.

JUDITH Her father sold her, that's why. Sold her like fresh meat to a Belfast pimp – so he could buy himself porter. Not even for food he sold her but for drink. Ya

see this *(goes to a scar on* **HANNAH***'s lip)*? And this *(lifts* **HANNAH***'s right hand, shows another scar, folds the hand back onto* **HANNAH***'s face)*? He went for her with a knife. Oh, she's an orphan all right. For who could call that a family?

Beat.

There's nothin' for ya out there now, Hannah. Alls that's out there is the old – an' the dead. An' best ya think on that.

HANNAH *cries.* **ELLEN** *comforts her.*

SARAH Have you no heart, Judith? Isn't there songs in all the books about the beauty of Ireland an' the sorrow it is to leave it? I mean, do you even know those songs? About Wolfe Tone an' him comin' over from France to Killala Bay ta try an' free our great an' beautiful land?

JUDITH Oh it's a great lie! The whole lot of it.

SARAH It isn't! If it wasn't for the English and their agents/ we'd have grain at least –

JUDITH 'Oh if it wasn't for the English!' Wise up. Youse think the English poor are any better off than us? They're not. An' besides we're *women*. An' we'll never be anythin' here. For we are as the peat; to be used up an' walked on. So forget about your pink skies over Knocknashee. An' yes Sarah, I do have a heart, an' I'd rather it was made of lead than shed one tear for this island of betrayal an' hopelessness.

MOLLY Sarah's right.

JUDITH Ha?

MOLLY She's right. Food is leaving the ports. Some of the landlords are laying claim to the cattle and grain.

SARAH Aye. Haven't I seen it with me own eyes? But what would she know, hah? *(meaning* **JUDITH***)* I mean, what kind of Irishman fathered the likes of you, tell me?

HANNAH None. Judith was born in Jamaica.

ELLEN Her mother was a whore an' her father a drunken exporter of tobacco. Or was it the other way roun', Judith?

JUDITH Who knows? Who cares?

HANNAH She was adopted.

ELLEN By oyster catchers!

JUDITH We all have our stories. Don't we Ellen.

ELLEN *walks off at this; we see that* **JUDITH** *has touched a nerve (and that* **ELLEN** *also has a past – and a tale to tell).*

Listen, do yez think I wanted to come on this boat? Believe me I was doin' fine where I was. But I knew this girl. Dipso, she was: ether, absinthe, laudanum, the lot. Doing North Queen's Street since she was ten. Mother knocked her teeth out – here an' here. So when I got my ticket for the Inchinnan, I thought: fuck it, I don't need to go, she needs it more than me. Anyways, no one had seen her for days, so I goes lookin' for her. I go ta her digs one last time an' hear this scuttlin' in the coal-shed. I wander down the stairs, an' there she is: dead. Lyin' out like a sack of spuds, empty bottle of ether hangin' out of her hand. Rats everywhere. Fourteen that girl was. An' I thought to myself, a land that lets its young die like that, with the rats, in the darkness of a coal-shed, is not a country I wanta stay in. So to my mind I've got nothin' ta say goodbye ta, Sarah.

SARAH Well I have, an' I'm goin' on deck to say it. Hannah? Ellen?

HANNAH *shakes her head.*

ELLEN Aye. I'll say goodbye. The land is innocent. It's us people that fuck it up. *(Exits)*

SARAH An' you Molly?

MOLLY No.

SARAH An' why's that? Don't tell me yer father sold ya for porter, too?

MOLLY No. But I agree with Judith. Ireland is no longer a country for young women – but where we're going to is.

Slow fade of lights.

In the fade, we see the following montage (candle-lit): **MOLLY** *unpacks some books, shows these to* **JUDITH***;* **JUDITH** *brings the candle to the table and sits poring over the books;* **MOLLY** *undresses into her standard-issue blue dress;* **SARAH** *(returning from deck) goes to her papers and keeps them close (in her corner position);* **HANNAH** *drinks from a bottle of something, gin or ether;* **ELLEN** *manically washes her hands again and again in a bowl of water on the table.*

Scene Three

Five hours into the journey. Night. A candle flickers inside a lamp. The sea is very rough. The ship rocks from side to side. The dorm is full of moans and screams and the sound of puking, crying, winds, waves crashing and creaking timber. Another passenger – (off – further down the boat) – sings a ballad, 'The Lark in the Clear Air' – as in Scene One.

DEAR THOUGHTS ARE IN MY MIND
AND MY SOUL SOARS ENCHANTED
AS I HEAR THE SWEET LARK SING
IN THE CLEAR AIR OF THE DAY.
FOR A TENDER BEAMING SMILE
TO MY HOPE HAS BEEN GRANTED
AND TOMORROW SHE SHALL HEAR
ALL MY FOND HEART WOULD SAY.

JUDITH – *who is used to the sea – has been up all night reading at the table – so the books are still there.* **ELLEN** *is passing a bucket from girl to girl to puke in.* **MOLLY** *stands by the edge of the space, hand on locket, listening to the ballad singer's haunting song, her mind cast back to the life she has left behind.*

Fade lights.

Scene Four

Same night. An hour or so later. A big wave as the ship turns into port. Sound of the ship's bell. A candle flickers inside a lamp. **ELLEN**, **SARAH**, **JUDITH** *on beds, alert.*

SARAH Where are we?

JUDITH Comin' into Plymouth.

HANNAH *(moaning from the bed)* Are we there yet?

SARAH No Hannah. Go back to sleep. It's a long way we've to go yet.

JUDITH They put in here for supplies an' the mail, that's all.

HANNAH Are ya sure we're not in Australia?

ELLEN We're fucken sure, all right?

HANNAH It's just that it's awful warm. An' I hear tell of a great heat in the Colony the like of which means there'll be no warrant for the wearin' of corsets nor undergarments.

ELLEN We're near England, Hannah. So you can keep your knickers on. No different this way to Ireland in temperature.

HANNAH Then isn't it the only similarity between England an' Ireland? The bloody weather.

JUDITH Though I've heard England cannot beat us for rain. An' that one year of Irish rain would mark ya more gravely than a score of English winters.

MOLLY In Sligo we would play games in the rain. My mistress and I. Games like – I-spy.

HANNAH Aye. I shpy the rain.

SARAH Oh how I used love the smell of turf burnin' on a wet day.

HANNAH Stop it will ye? You'll set me off.

ELLEN An' cobblestone has a way of makin' the rain smell of metal. Sometimes, in Belfast, the rain on the streets –

JUDITH Would yez listen ta yerselves. Aren't we well out of them? The wet streets! If I never see Irish rain again in my life it will be a day too soon.

MOLLY *screams, and is out of her bed.*

HANNAH Christ, you put the heart outta me, ya mad wench.

JUDITH Jesus. What is it?

MOLLY A rat! I saw a rat!

HANNAH *then screams, jumps out of bed and climbs on to* **ELLEN***'s bunk.*

ELLEN Get away the fuck, fat Hanah. Ya'll crash me bed!

HANNAH I'm not shtayin' on the bottom bunk wit no rat runnin' round.

JUDITH Probably only a wee mouse, Molly. For god's sake get back to bed before we have Matron an' Ship's Surgeon down on top of us.

MOLLY It was no mouse. It was huge and hairy and had big bug-eyes.

HANNAH *screams again.*

ELLEN Isn't it you Judith said there was no end of diseases on these ships that had killed plenty on the Earl Grey? I heard it myself.

HANNAH You heard the rat?

ELLEN No! The rumours of diseases, I meant!

SARAH A rat is no harm ta ya, Molly. Isn't it only a piteous creature?

MOLLY Ellen, can I –

ELLEN No, ya can't. Hannah, get out of my bed an' into yer own.

MOLLY Sarah, maybe you'd think of swapping –

SARAH I'm sorry but I do need my privacy, Molly. Which is why I took the corner here in the first place.

MOLLY Maybe tonight I could just –

SARAH No! Bad enough five of us stuck down this end, Molly, but I have to draw the line at one person per bed.

JUDITH I hear there's four to a bunk on the ships that sail to America.

HANNAH I'm not gettin' back into that bed.

ELLEN You're not stayin' up here.

HANNAH Well, we'll just have to move the wall.

JUDITH No! Ya think them Ballymagerret ones wouldn't kill us all in our sleep ta get inta this corner? This end of the boat is the Royal end of the boat an' don't youse forget it. We keep the wall.

HANNAH *cries.*

ELLEN Aw quit yer bloody conniptions, will ya?

JUDITH Alright, Hannah. Have my bunk.

SARAH Aw please Judith, no. She'll land on top of me an' kill me stone dead.

JUDITH *gets into* **HANNAH***'s bed, and* **HANNAH** *gets into* **JUDITH***'s.* **MOLLY** *stands looking at the bed by the end of the bunks.*

MOLLY But I – I can't get back in. I simply – I just – can't.

Pause.

JUDITH Here Molly. Come in with me, Lord's sake.

MOLLY Are you sure, Judith?

JUDITH Aye. The beds are wide enough.

ELLEN The rats won't go near ya now, Molly. Once they see Judith protectin' ye an' her eyes able to put the fear of god into man or beast.

MOLLY *climbs into* **JUDITH***'s bed.*

HANNAH Are ya sure it was a rat now, Molly, and not a, a shpider maybe?

ELLEN A spider? She's not fucken blind.

SARAH Stop movin' about Hannah!

HANNAH I can't help it. I'm restless.

ELLEN A spider!

JUDITH Though wasn't it 'shpider' she said? *(they laugh.)*

HANNAH Oh shtop sayin' it, will ya.

ELLEN You brought it up.

HANNAH I'll not sleep now with all this talk of shpiders an' rats – *(starts squeeling).*

JUDITH Well, maybe ya'll let the rest of us give it a go, huh Hannah?

The deck door blows open. **HANNAH** *screams.*

ELLEN Ach, look Hannah! The ship is haunted!

JUDITH That is not fucken helpful, Ellen!

SARAH *gets up, goes to close the door.* **MOLLY** – *on the edge of* **JUDITH***'s bed, ready to help if necessary, though*

her fear of the rat/mouse prevents her walking directly over to **SARAH**. **SARAH** *lingers for a while and stares out, wistfully.*

SARAH I never seen England before. Scotland I seen once from the Glens but not England.

JUDITH Ya'll not see England in the dark, will ya?

SARAH There's lights. An' look Molly, look – how a great fog hovers over us. Come.

MOLLY *tiptoes over to the door. She and* **SARAH**, *downstage, stare out, huddled together.* **SARAH** *inhales the night air.*

Even the English air is different somehow.

MOLLY *(inhales)* Oh, I don't know, Sarah – it's just – air. Thrilling, cold, sea air!

ELLEN Close the door! The tits are frozen off me!

SARAH *closes the door over (bolts it).* **MOLLY** *jumps back into bed followed by* **SARAH** *(into her own).*

HANNAH *(sings, nervously as she looks out for the rat, getting more nervous and louder as she goes on, the next verse from Slieve Gallon Brae)*:

OFT TIMES HAVE I WANDERED WITH MY DOG AND MY GUN
AND TRAVELLED YOUR VALLEYS FOR JOY AND FOR FUN
BUT THOSE DAYS ARE GONE FOREVER AND I COULD NO LONGER STAY *('stay' is on a high note and is held)*

ELLEN Shut. Up. Hannah.

JUDITH Shut up an' good night, Hannah.

HANNAH Goodnight Judith.

MOLLY Goodnight Sarah.

SARAH Goodnight Molly.

JUDITH Goodnight Sarah.

SARAH Goodnight Judith.

VOICE *(from the direction of The Ballymagerret Ones)* Shut the fuck up down there, will yez.

SARAH, JUDITH, MOLLY *(loud whisper)* Goodnight Ellen.

ELLEN Goodnight ladies. Sleep tight.

HANNAH *(very quietly sings)*
SO FAREWELL UNTO YE BONNY, BONNY SLIEVE
GALLON BRAE.

Fade lights.

Scene Five

A few days later. **JUDITH** *and* **MOLLY** *run from the Ballymagerret end of the ship towards their own quarters. They stop close to the door (that leads to the deck) to catch their breath. A book comes flying through the dorm at them.*

JUDITH *makes a fist at the thrower of the book, picks it up, offers it to* **MOLLY**. *They are laughing – a little hysterically.*

JUDITH Now what possessed ya ta offer this to a witch like Eliza Conn, huh?

MOLLY She beckoned to me – so I went.

JUDITH What class of fool are ya, Molly?

MOLLY Obviously, a first class fool.

JUDITH Either a fool or a loon! Keep well away from them ones, I say.

MOLLY I thought she wanted to ask me something. I looked up from the table and there she was…

JUDITH Beckoning.

MOLLY She said I'd better watch out, with my 'bright ideas' and my 'ivory bosom'.

JUDITH Aw Lord. *(burst out laughing)* Her face!

MOLLY Those teeth!

JUDITH What teeth? That face has been punched a thousan' times.

MOLLY She called me a pale-faced bugger.

JUDITH Isn't that what they call the English gentry? It means 'bugger' literally, as in buggery.

MOLLY It does. *(slight beat)* Of course it does.

JUDITH Even I wouldn't venture down that way, seriously, Molly.

MOLLY I'll know in future. Here, you take it. I see what pleasure you've had from these.

JUDITH *takes and opens the book, looks through it.*

You see, I just thought – as we're all here together, why not get to know each other. Now – I understand why you have the wall.

JUDITH *reads aloud an inscription in the book:* 'To my daughter, Happy Christmas, from Mama'

Slight Beat.

MOLLY My mistress – always so generous to a fault.

Beat. As if to move off:

Well, thank you, Judith.

JUDITH For what?

MOLLY Saving me from *(checks behind her, lowers voice)* – the charms of Eliza Conn!

JUDITH Isn't it you who's saved me? *(holds up the book – though* **MOLLY** *is perplexed by the idea of 'saving'* **JUDITH** *from anything.)*

Beat.

You should know, Molly, that what we've joked about on this ship – is true. I – an' some of the others here have lain with men for money. Does that shock you? *(***MOLLY** *shakes her head)*

Beat.

Nonetheless, I grew up with books...

Beat.

… but nothin' like… oh God, how did I live before Shelley, hah?! An' the new one you've given me! ? Every note you make in the margins… I agree with everything you write. What a light you've turned on inside me.

MOLLY I think it was already on, Judith.

JUDITH Even the matron, who you would think would be glad to have a cargo of absorbed readers, is lookin' at me as if I've sprouted horns.

MOLLY Then I'm glad to have been of service. *(they laugh)*

JUDITH An' ta think I dreaded the length of this journey.

MOLLY And now?

JUDITH I don't think I want it ta end.

Fade lights.

Scene Six

Two weeks or so later. Light is diffused through the dorm. **MOLLY** *is at the table, writing.* **SARAH** *is sitting, exasperated, on her bed – flitting from reading her letters to fixing her bonnets, and back. She tries to join* **MOLLY***'s tempo of 'calm and concentrated' but cannot.*

SARAH Oh, it already feels like an eternity. D'ya ever wish, Molly, that… aw, it doesn't matter.

MOLLY Do I ever wish what, Sarah?

SARAH That you stayed where ya were? In Ireland. The coolness of the nights an' not this awful swelter. The trees, the green land. All there is out here is sea, endless sea.

MOLLY Oh you'll drive yourself mad, Sarah. Homesickness you have, that's all. You must think of the place you're headed to. All your brother has said: the sun, the freedom; like a blank canvas on which to paint your own life. As Judith said: in Australia you're to be mistress of your own destiny.

SARAH Aw ya don't understand…

MOLLY Actually, I do. Perfectly.

SARAH I left so much. I'm startin' to forget myself.

MOLLY Listen. You are Sarah. Here on the Inchinnan – inching – towards Australia, yes, but heading to a new life nonetheless. And there you'll find a new, brighter Sarah. A bonnier Sarah. And you'll be glad you left that miserable island behind you – the place that made you low and sad – only you can't see it.

SARAH I had no idea how much leavin' it would torment me.

MOLLY You're tormenting yourself, Sarah. Looking in your old box, thinking of home. Go up on deck. That

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