

WORK/HOUSE

Honors Thesis

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in English**

**In the School of Arts and Sciences
at Salem State University**

By

Meghan Miraglia

January Gill O'Neil
Faculty Advisor
Department of English

Commonwealth Honors Program
Salem State University
2023

“What good is a body when the body is half-gone?”:

Exploring Famine, Femininity, and Bodily Autonomy in “Work/house”

Work/house is a hybrid creative-research project that explores the narratives of Irish workhouse pauper inmates during the Great Famine. The project takes on multiple forms: a chapbook printed by Salem State University, a longer manuscript draft, and a digital story told through the coding platform Twine. Research on Irish workhouses was conducted independently after partaking in a free, audio-visual tour of the former Kilkenny Union Workhouse site in July 2022, the writing happening in conjunction with research. The sixteen poems included in the chapbook (and the roughly forty poems in the manuscript, still a work-in-progress) incorporate Irish poetic forms, Irish mythology, and real narratives of pauper inmates who resided in the South Dublin and Kilkenny Union Workhouses.

These inmates include Eliza Dalton, a young woman who arrived in the South Dublin workhouse at age nine, and incited uprisings with other workhouse girls; Jane Kane, who drifted in and out of that same South Dublin workhouse while working at her mother’s brothel; Thomas Kelly, a deaf and blind inmate living in the Kilkenny Union workhouse, whose death circumstances were extensively investigated by workhouse Guardians; and James Heam, who, at fourteen, appealed his unjust corporeal punishment. Other phenomena typical of the time – contraction of venereal diseases, infanticide, poverty and starvation – are referenced throughout the poems. Artistic license (such as the blurring of timelines) has been taken in the creation of themes such as hunger, reclamation of femininity and humanity in oppressive social structures, bodily autonomy, complex relationships to/with land and language, motherhood, and female friendships.

Acknowledgements

There are many people to whom I must extend my gratitude and appreciation.

First and foremost, thank you to my mom, Robbin, for providing literary fuel in the form of coffee, books, and bagels. Thank you for building a home where literature is cherished, and thank you for listening to my daily research reports, where I shared whatever gut-wrenching Work/house information I dug up the night before. Thank you to my dad for enduring all those trips to the bookstore.

To my sister, Katie: thank you for creating the chapbook cover, and for letting me move into your room. It's a pretty nice space to write in. And thank you for telling stories with me all along: be it through our backyard games, or doll dramas.

Thank you to Ben Finnegan and the summer staff at Maynooth University. Studying abroad in Ireland changed my life, and I am eternally grateful to have been able to explore and cherish such a beautiful place. And thanks, of course, to Patrick Hosey and Julia Ryan, who came to America in the late 1800s in the hopes of finding a better life for themselves, their children, and their descendants. Who knew I was carrying bards with me all along. Up Tipp!

Thank you to my thesis advisor, January Gill O'Neil, for working with me to bring this project (and its many forms) to life. I am tremendously appreciative of your time and support: your guidance is invaluable, and I have learned so much from you about how to be an artist.

My thanks as well to all of the faculty who have (perhaps unknowingly) helped me get here. J.D. Scrimgeour, Kevin Carey, M.P. Carver, Alexandria Peary, Al DeCiccio, Scott Nowka: thank you for reading my poems, sharing your wisdom, and providing me with life-changing opportunities. Without you, this thesis would not exist. Thank you for believing in me.

Thank you to Liz Gibeault, who supported me at every reading. You have made my time at SSU so fun, and the joy our friendship brings keeps me afloat through each storm of stress.

Joseph and Mae – thank you for listening to me describe this project about 7,000 times. I am so proud of us. Thank you for being my friends.

Foreword

In 2005, while excavating the grounds to build what is now a mall, construction workers in Co. Kilkenny, Ireland, uncovered a mass grave containing the remains of nearly 1,000 Kilkenny Union Workhouse pauper inmates. Over half of these remains belonged to children. This mass grave, left unconsecrated by the clergy, was erased from the community's collective memory. No one wanted to talk about the workhouses, the trauma that disrupted their families and damaged their loved ones. It was not until researchers began analyzing the newly uncovered skeletal remains that these workhouse stories were restored.

17 years later, in July of 2022, I studied abroad at Maynooth University, Ireland. Our program's final weekend excursion was a trip to Kilkenny City. After admiring the cathedrals and castles of the "medieval city," I asked my friends if we could take part in the Kilkenny Famine Experience, which had been advertised on a poster near the train station. This proved to be a free audio-visual tour of the Kilkenny Union workhouse site.

I found myself consumed, haunted by the things I learned on this tour. I continued reading about the Union workhouses, exploring databases and digital archives. I began a cycle of research and creative writing that continued upon my return to the United States. This chapbook, containing a mere fraction of the research and poetry I have completed, is one step in a longer poetic journey intertwining multiple pauper inmate's narratives, with a digital component.

In narrowing the scope of such an undertaking, I was most drawn to the story of Eliza Dalton, a twenty-something woman living in a workhouse. She arrived in South Dublin when she was nine years old, living at a workhouse institution and trying to find work during a socio-economic drought. One of the few literate women in the workhouse, she took on the role of rebel and instigator, starting several uprisings. The poems contained within this chapbook are my attempt at exploring and uncovering what her story might have been. Most poems make reference to Irish myths, and some are even loosely written in Irish poetic forms. Nearly all poems have notes included in the back of the chapbook.

Is mise, le meas (I am, with respect),
Meghan Miraglia

Table of Contents

I.	
Front Gate	2
Work/house Test	3
Eliza Dalton's Girlhood in the Work/house	4
Famine Prayer	5
Girls' Yard	6
Boys' Yard	7
Eliza Dalton as Sister	8
Famine Prayer II	10
Eliza Dalton Teaches Her Friend to Make A Fist	11
The Black Hole	12
Men's Yard	13
Eliza Dalton Speaks to Work/house Master	14
II.	
Our Lady of the Famine	17
Girls' Room	18
Famine Prayer III	19
Men's Infirmary I	20
Men's Infirmary II	22
Eliza Dalton's Dream	23
Famine Prayer IV	24
Women's Yard	25
Eliza Dalton Tends to Her Friend, Jane Kane	26
Men's Infirmary III: Thomas Kelly Speaks to the Night Nurse	27
Eliza Dalton Mourns the Men of the Hunger	28
III.	
Dead/house	30
Jane Kane Sings to Work/house Babies I	31
Famine Prayer V	32
Chapel	33
Jane Kane Sings to Work/House Babies II	34
Eliza Dalton Speaks to Her Child	36
Famine Prayer VI	37
Jane Kane Sings to Work/house Babies III	38
Nursery	49
Eliza Dalton Speaks to Work/house Girls	40
Anatomy Act	42
<i>Afterword</i>	43
<i>Notes</i>	45

This is my body...Do this in remembrance of me
1 Corinthians 11:24

Maireann lá go ruiag ach maireann an grá huiagh
A day lasts until it's chased away, but love lasts until the grave
Common Irish saying

I.

Women and children composed the majority of workhouse inmates. For instance, in 1858, able-bodied men were only 6% of South Dublin workhouse inmates, *but children were 34%*.

Front Gate

A quarter of a million people died in Irish workhouse institutions between 1846 and 1851.

What to do with a name/a fragment/a date of birth
what happens to our/proofs of life/when we are done
with them/my baby's tooth/a shard of glass/my last meal
ringed with blood/softened skull/broken lattice of spine
how inadequate language is to convey a just idea/of this
poverty and suffering/they will put me in the dead house
they will forget my name/cradle me in a six-foot coffin
at least I will be held/by the trees of my youth/why can't you
remember me/when I was beautiful/when I was far from decay
when you could look me in the eye/and not feel the need to
turn from me/in the middle of the night/warmth of your body
hot on my back/our bed of dust/our home of ashes

Work/house Test

By making conditions in the [workhouses] intentionally harsh, it was believed that the poor would be naturally encouraged to improve their economic situation by themselves - a principle that was generally referred to as the 'workhouse test'.

AND THE GENERAL COST OF AN INMATE FOR THE WEEK WAS
 choosing to forget many of the children orphans having already lost their families
 having lost parents or other relatives remained unmarked covered over a
 deliberate intention too painful to be buried

THE COST OF PROVISIONS AND NECESSARIES CONSUMED WAS
 utterly unmanageable we have known such girls who were the ruin of other
 children defiant and half-starved they do not fear death when it comes she
 may earn her bread become utterly changed that defiant look denotes an
 evil take this matter to heart young girls will sever the work house

THE NUMBER OF APPLICANTS ADMITTED TO THE WORKHOUSE
 ate off a common plate drank out of cans chained to the table absence of
 consideration indifferent enough sent out to the harvest in the summer, and
 forgotten in the interval no one knew nor cared some bad enough to corrupt held
 punishment a complete absence of the answer they were brought up in habits of
 idleness

DISALLOWED

another and a darker side of the picture in the haunts of vice the pauper driven to
 end his days in a workhouse defective, diseased, and deformed their minds are
 plastic- and easily molded pauperism breeds pauperism these children pass from
 the almshouse to the prison the young soon lost fall prey wreck

THE NUMBER OF APPLICANTS FOR WHOM RELIEF WAS NOT ORDERED
 let them learn music give them a livelihood blot out every trace of their fault
 send them forth the ground is clear before you children might be saved but
 this was not enough to show them a love for the hand that
 might be god-fearing

Eliza Dalton's Girlhood in the Work/house

Almost twice as many 9-15 year old girls were incarcerated in the South Dublin union as boys, and many of them spent their lives there...

Stumbling into hunger's trance, haggard arms writhe around pennied pieties.
Ladies are no good for praying to - their eyes unused to shaping the dark, arms unused to

pulling shrouds over forms that once heaved with stricken breath. Show her a
saint who knows of dust motes caught on splayed shoulder blades, is well-

versed in rote gestures: brushing nets of cobweb from waxen collarbones, batting
away the mice and their incarnadined appetites. Keeping watch for a ghost that never
comes,

too famished to witness its own wake. There is nothing virginal in notching
weeks of womanhood onto walls dropletted with urine, floorboards begrimed with

blood that came from bodies that once had names. Girls palm lard onto cracked scalps,
make ringlets and coils from hair gone stiff, smoothing over gray strands that feel

like premonitions. Flashes of early silver tucked into braids, patterns worked into
muscles that still soften enough to warp and weft, plait and pleat. Girls brandish combs

like swords, resurrecting old conquests, cheap abalone clacking against
wrists, knuckles: tender spots left uncovered. In the cool-dark of the girls' yard, Eliza

laces songs together, stabbing at rhythms with the needle of her throat, her knees tucked
between the knobs of someone else's back. Bodies, stale with movement, still to sleep

around her, as she aches for a song she cannot remember. will not find, no matter how
many times she strains toward it.

Famine Prayer I

The mother tongue/rots in my mouth/starvation comes, a ship
a casket/a single blade of wheat dissolved on an acid tongue

every unfed morning/an albatross I shoulder/to steal, to sleep,
to steal, to dream, to steal, to die/no songs for miles

the last time I smiled/my jaw went numb/my eyes/are bowls of dust
I see us splitting/for a thousand years/your footsteps/cloven in two

and what are we waiting for

brother

we are waiting to live

Girls' Yard

The Irish 'girls' were much maligned...as immoral dregs of the workhouse, unskilled and ignorant.

Is it not enough that I have been picked clean? Look, I am a new creation: pin-pricked, riven. If there is not enough room for a girl, you make it. Take

a seam ripper between your teeth and undo her. Whispered myths laced with dying candles. We are each other's oracles, reading renunciation in every offered

palm, ring of filth. How much can you divine from such scant bodies? Bedclothes snarl, thrash in shapes we don't understand. There is never enough fabric to know we are

wholly covered. I want it wrung from me, whatever it is. I need to know I don't owe anyone anything. To wake up when it is light out, to go to sleep when it is dark.

To feel the froth of the ocean move against me, to know all that strange and awkward fumbling is over. To reach in the dark and not have anything reach back, to lay

knowing there is nothing to deny, nothing to answer for. Do you really think there is a place for us? I move in traces of myself, tug snarls from my hair, and I remember

being small, still being my mother's child. I remember a house with many rooms, a tree hewn to make space for a dying field, the leaves burnt at the tail of summer, just before

the world cooled its breath. I remember that, too. The fragile warning signs our mothers unearthed from clouds, those divinations in broken beads of dew. Remember when it

used to rain and it felt good to be blessed? Remember when our days weren't struck down, saved for kindling? Remember when I could weave stories from the air and it didn't

hurt to bare my throat? How easy it was to fall asleep - all I had to do was close my eyes, knowing someone would come for me in the morning. The broken-necked

swans in my dreams would bleat by dusk, the druids would wrench themselves from their trees, and nothing, not even the reining in of one thousand horses,

could keep me from stirring, from wanting to rise.

Boys' Yard

Boys between 2 and 15 were the only class in the house that could be subjected to corporal punishment.

Transgressions were reported in the punishment book. James Heam appealed when he was flogged by his schoolmaster. His appeal was denied.

I tried to avoid the bludgeon,
backed away from each curled fist.
father, listen: I was mild
your voice echoed, "Child, whist".

Would you have called me strong, noble
no sob shuddered, no tear shed?
You said Diarmuid was not teary,
though his heart was weary-dead.

But you taught me bow and arrow
are two friends, like sword and shield -
I must point to what has hurt me:
but of these lashes, three healed.

Father, listen: I was honest.
on the books, they wrote our name.
no *geis* stood over me:
like the stories, we'd be reclaimed.

Would you love me if I couldn't
cut the curse above our heads?
Would you still love me if I cried
just that once? I tried, I did.

But you taught me "speak and listen
like the world belongs to you" -
I must speak like I won something:
bruises, your name: nothing new.

Eliza Dalton as Sister

Dated 20 October 1852, a brother anxious to be reunited with his sister, whom he left behind in the workhouse, writes enclosing costs for his sister to be sent to him.

My letter
was clear - still, you missent her,
this girl I left and write of,
love.

To summon
a sister, now a woman,
is to send for your heart back,
track

its crossing
beyond the sea, sun dawning
over land i chose to hate,
fate

a spirit
beneath the deep. I fear it.
Her slow return. What she'll take,
make

of leaving.
We lived, back then, off grieving.
What will we live off now? Our
hour

for hunger
has passed. She is my other.
She is my only. This sea
we

look across
will swallow us. We recross
our chests, check our names to know
how

we belonged
to our mothers. We wronged

our fathers. My sister. I
try

to avoid
wronging her, each letter devoid
of anger, and now, she waits,
late

to cities
we whispered about, gritty
floors turned to gold streets, our dreams
seem

so beyond
us now. Has the sun dawned
over the work/house walls? My
cry

now drifting
across smoke, sunlight shifting.
We have the same eyes, same laugh.
Have

you spotted
her? She is fourteen, knotted
brown hair, in good health. Send her,
sir.

My sister
is smart. You could have called her
by name. Could have checked her eyes
twice.

My sister
is all I have left. Please, sir.
send her, without any delay.
x

(his mark)

Famine Prayer II

gra/abhainn

mathair/paidir/file/ar dteanga

They pushed us/to the very edge
they watched us sweat/they watched us make

 makeshift/worlds/spat in our open mouths
 where is our language if not between their teeth

to steal, to sleep, to steal,
to dream, to steal, to die

it's okay/I'll slit blood ties/until you drift off
no, remember,/you can't/ask your mother

to bend her ear down to your mouth/if you sleep-talk
 she can't translate/when you wake

maidin/fiafraigh

 seasmh in aghaidh/leat/sinsir/cailin/fasach

Eliza Dalton Teaches Her Friend to Make a Fist

Bridget Healy, who had been in the workhouse for six years, said that as the female officer searched them, the male officers “never took their eyes off the women while they were searching”. Official Brady, she claimed, tossed Eliza Dalton on the floor “and pulled the clothes completely over her head...” Catherine Bergin said the master grabbed Eliza Dalton by her breast, and then Brady kicked her on the floor, leaving her almost completely exposed.

Right so, Jane, yer to start with yer hand open. Palm flat. Straighten those knuckles out, would ye? Ye act like ye've never kept a steady hand a day in yer life - with that godawful stitchwork, I'd believe it, wouldn't ye, Kitty? Oh, 'gwan, don' give me that look. Bit uptight, that one. I'm jus' playin' at ye, Kitty, just coddin' ya, like. Ach. Anyway, ye're going to roll yer fingers, jus' joint by joint. Easy does it, like. Yer not 'gwan to hurt yerself now, don't play like ye want to break your own body. Listen, take it from me, a'right? Les' get it right, the grab felt like this. Damned dirty paws. No, Bridget, y'aren't doin' it right, it felt like this. I mean, really, ye've got to leave a mark. 'Gwan, ye won't really, I'm made of tougher stuff. Oh, best believe it. 'Til yer nails cut yer palm, really - Jaysus, ye can't make a fist? She really is culchie, Kitty, by god! No, really, where'd ye come from? Ah, so, I'm jus' playing, don't make a thing of it. Aye, now that's what everyone thinks to do, takin' that thumb and tuckin' it 'round like that, no, my fist looked like this. Don' hook yer thumb. Ye've got to lock the joints in like yer fightin' for something, Jane, like. I mean, really. Now punch me. Ah, 'gwan, I promise, ye won't hurt me. Aye, it's nothin' to me, swear't. Haven't felt nothin' in years, got skin thicker'n most, promise. Aye, really. It means nothin'. I won' feel it. Won' mean a thing. Swear.

The Black Hole

...paupers who showed any signs of an independent spirit were quickly and severely punished, almost invariably it was the female pauper inmates who were accused of insubordination. They were punished inside the workhouse by being forced to go without rations, or by being placed in solitary confinement in the 'black hole'.

Troubled women/danger women/girls of glass/and broken benches
sent for by no one/asked after by no one/who watched you as you slept at night

who gave you the name/that no one calls you by/and now/who prays for you, girl
when you come back with bloodied knuckles/fighting god knows who

for god knows what/when you leave with no clean clothes/and come back with new
scrapes/bruises you try boasting of/but press down on/with your fingers

trying to reach at the bones beneath/when was the last time you were looked at in the eye
when was the last time you were believed/when was the last time/you were not

a problem to be fixed/a riddle to be solved/ a house to condemn
a pair of hands or thighs

you came to this place/at seventeen
or sixteen
or thirteen
or nine
five

you came with HELP on your lips/and they made you swallow it

Men's Yard

If men of myth were to return,
rave across that final sea,
come to this mire, behold
their lore sung in a strange, cold key -

would they deem us worthy brothers,
barren and starved though we be?
Diarmuid, did you not have lesions
too, did you not hear treason's plea,

feel a curse's gash long before
blade of prophesy cloven?
Much you know of a panting soul,
where is truth in bowls, omens?

Amid the ruins, our lovers
longed for rest we could not find.
Our homes were both made and unmade,
hearts shells that betrayed, and pined.

What war-songs will their throats utter,
our men of myth we knew when
we were young, guiltless aglow,
so sure the crops would grow again?

Eliza Dalton Speaks to Work/house Master

Although we were mendicants and in the South Dublin Workhouse, we were not to be treated in so barbarous a manner.

So, you spoke of me after all:
pale skin exposed
by your unbitten tongue. Your
sworn oath mauled, you

made a fool of. My fear is great
for you - turned backs
will be broken. Bad grace awaits
us, our fates crack

against floors you throw us upon.
is my body
still not my own? Flesh from flesh drawn,
face gone soddy -

I steal, am accounted for. Life
a sunken feast
you chew with sullen mouth. Where
is this wife you speak of,

where is her knife? Who do you tell
of my violence?
Who will toll your one final bell,
let knell silence

work/house cries from work/house girls? May
you be blessed
with girls who chip teeth, feel new frays
in blazed breast,

blood they spill staining unpulled skirts.
May your hands fall nowhere
near their hemlines. Tell me it hurts
when we, dirt-bare,

testify from between split lips,
eyes blinking at
wounds we could not dress. Cowslips
bloom, our hips flat

against cots we can't call beds. I
hide my body.
Unexposed. Made decent. Deny
this blood, my

curse still unuttered. I protest
in empty halls.
Work/house cries still cannot unwrest
you. Let these brawls

between us rest. You need
to look me in the eye.
You need to watch
my palm land as it strikes,

rises.

II.

...the guardians continued to regard the girls as disruptive forces...

Our Lady of the Famine

It is surprizing how in the cheapest times, they can struggle for existence, unaided as they are by many little help they meet with in the country.

O Lady of the Famine/with belly full of rice/full of affliction
though we are empty/with cracked stomachs/and acid tongues

our broken bodies bend/unto thee/faith and devotion of our souls
we beseech thee for blessing/O Lady of Blight/what can we do to be saved

to wake and find tables laden/with unrotted meals/cups runneth over
with unspoiled wine/O Supreme Woman of Mealworms/since thou

has worked so many cures/can't you lift my whisper/above the walls
of this woman's yard/tie black ribbons around my words/to hold them together

I can't find any
other words for hunger

can't you find my displaced hip/and set it right/take your virgin hand
and bless me/change my walk/O Lady/why didn't you make me younger

why didn't you uncrease the plane of my brow/why didn't you steady the waters
so I might burn in some unknown place/can't you lift the head of my husband

O Lady who never knew touch of man/I give you permission
to place my kiss/on the lids of his eyes weave his fingers/into deadened prayer

heavenly wake

on celestial table/my kitchen is barren

tell me there's room

Girls' Room

...finally those young women who were abandoned as young infant-foundlings and who were subsequently reared in the [work]house.

We who had no rings to bare, no jewels to fan across satin sheets in an attempt to outdo our lovers. We knew nothing of pillow talks, conversations scoured between thumbs needle-pricked, corners of mouths tucked shut with frayed stitches, teeth snapping skeins into manageable lengths. We measure by unraveled instinct. Nerves cut to the quick. In the dark, we fumble to pinch waistbands, act as each other's thimbles: sister, I wore your dress and sister, you wore mine. Brocade of body sutured as it strains against the tatting. The sky a hunched back stooped over these work/house walls. We keen and keen. They keep us busy with burial shrouds. These mourning notes ring mangled. Our mothers come to the edge and drop their black veils, like river water, over the crowns of our heads. We touch each other's temples, grazing ghost lace with hands our mothers might've kissed had they given us names. The moon is a rib, rib a bow. We are indecent. We pilfer, skin knuckles. We trade arrowheads in the wash, wonder if our bodies would make good homes. Wonder if our bodies would make good anythings.

Famine Prayer III

It's a makeshift border/this empty river
do you think/they count blood droplets

do you think/this will really divide us
like we won't resist/somehow we've made it this far/unmaimed

do you have enough arms to carry him/beyond the reach?
why open windows at this hour/no joy/no excitement/no theatre

if everyone needs beauty/they will crawl on their knees through the river
to get it/they will cut albatrosses from the sky

and beg them for profanity

Men's Infirmary I

... when [Thomas Kelly] came to Callan, he usually came to my house; he was a labourer, and was deaf and dumb; [he] made signs to me by cutting his name on a board, and pointing to himself, and it was in this way I knew his name to be Thomas Kelly. I saw him point towards the county of Tipperary, as the place he was from ... I made signs to him of what ailed him; and he put his hand on his neck and began to cry.

When these fields have gone cold/where will the harvest go?
surely it cannot remain/it cannot go on/growing in secret

who will guard it from the ravens/the doves/cannot sow
peace in an unmarked pasture/tilled by the same pairs of hands

belonging to the same
broken bodies

this blood, fresh-spilled, will go on/unheeded/this skin will pale/and tremble
like snow about to be blemished

they marvel at how long the pain lasts

I shaped my name/held it between my fingers/watched its letters settle
and I knew it would outlast me/unfettered tongues/loose apologies like buttermilk

pretend the stains of remorse
can be blotted out

I nick myself with old blades/blame myself for not knowing the handle
for not cradling it closer to my chest

What language can I cobble together/from these shells and traces of a life
I pat my body to make sure it remains/has not slunk off/into some dark corner

gone to the moors and buried/itself/in the peat longing to be discovered
in some grand gesture/they will take the smallest parts of me/and testify on my behalf

lay me to rest/on some razed hill
unhook hip/from joint/marvel at my own displacement

the people come and go/they pass from this place/they do not come here to stay
the veins of their dreams pulsing/can a breath ever steady/can its aftershocks
not kill

I have lived in the wilds/long enough/traced its ruins for the impression of a safe haven
for the outline of a voice/swollen fingers fumbling through first blushes of silhouetted

pine/cutting teeth on the water-stained stones/my father should have dismantled
I was raised to disinter songs/long-crumbled. Derelict/in her distress, my mother

held my hand to her lips/hoping the slow arc
of her hungry mouth/would spill its sorrows/into mine
softly, softly

each thread of our lineage stitched a veil/between the world and me
oaths and omens/made unbreakable

for though I could not vow/I could still shatter

Men's Infirmary II

...found [Kelly] partly out of the bed, one of his legs being out, and after breathing twice he died. Mr. Power, a patient in the ward, said he saw Kelly get out of bed and walk about and throw himself into the bed again...

If you part my lips, mother, it may be that I can sing after all.
Your cupped hands, the heaving of your chest, knees pressed

with all the indentations of a forest, splayed ferns and thorns of
Irish rose etched on work-hardened bones: I know well the marks

of a body close to coming undone. Am familiar with a longing
for land, the need to carry its grains of sand, clots of dirt in the

pockets of your elbows, the spaces between the strands of your
hair. I drink knowing I will thirst again, watch ash-strewn water

seep over dusty floorboards, ache for flooded pastures, the strange
second skin that forms when I used to dip my palms into the earth's

too-red clay, closed my fist and felt each wrinkle multiply, make new
borders of a body I knew would deceive me. In the wake of each

uprising, I am left defenseless. What else to do but rise, speak without
speaking, carve initials into benches, trace your name in the overworked

earth with the toe of a boot that I will be buried wearing, wonder what
to do when the gale passes. Watch the roses wilt, or collect their crowns

before they are gouged from their skulls, before the casket closes, before
the seeds try to burrow into the remnants of the same withered ground

they were wrenched from. empty the water into the stream. Don't worry
about the droplets on the surface, the ripples washing

over your face. Remind me again, mother,
of what will happen when I wake.

Remind me if your heart has been moved.

Eliza Dalton's Dream

Once, she dreamt she had eaten her friend. Linen of uniform brash against slip-skin of stomach, teeth on her teeth, eyes soft on her tongue, lashes fluttering on tastebuds like the spokes of a dandelion. She swore she could taste the bitter lisp of her friend's speech, the lilt of her misshapen words, their contours made smooth by the hammer of her jaw; the pulse, even, between her friend's legs. She sucked marrow from her friend's bones, the rot of calcium coating her lips, welding them shut. Her tongue whorls against the concaves of her friend's joints, the ball of her hip bone rolls into the pocket of her cheek, settling at the molars that, in her waking life, are tangles of dead nerves. When she wakes, she places both hands on her stomach - feels it steady, as if full. She sighs, feels for her friend's slender arm, the spot at her inner elbow where the veins pop through: a map, she thinks. Her stomach swells, then aches with the sink of emptiness, desolation's chilled throttle.

Famine Prayer IV

Burn brush

make breathing room

make agony of empty bottles

your name/is on every rusted penny

in the morning you will fill them/'til the cup runneth over

oh albatross/oh Irish imagination/did you know they call this

the land of saints and scholars

did you see them waiting

for a perfect cross

Women's Yard

Even amongst utter poverty and misery, mothers of the poor of Dublin would shower their children with kisses and caring love.

a chara/a stór/a ghrá/a chroí/a mhurnín/a cuishle/a leandbh
my pearl/my grain of sand/my rosary bead/my thumb of salt
my treasure chest/my dappled fawn/my stolen child/my pixie girl

a rúsearc/mo shíorghrá/m'fiorghrá/is ceol mo chroí thú/a ghrá geal
my bowl of milk/my thimble/my raindrop/my blade of grass/bath
in a kitchen sink/my speck of dust/my miracle/my holy one/my

a chumann/mo shearc/a pheata/seanleannán/a chéadsearc
blessed daughter/my diaphanous son/my flash of lightning/my
heartbeat of thunder/my jagged cliff/my hazy emerald/my river tide

trí na chéile a thógtar na cáisléain/an luifeása le mo mhuintirse?
my pulse/my mouth to feed/my light heart/my empty plate/my crooked
cradle/my shredded rose/my

baby/m

y/bab

y /my ba

b

y

to the grave/to the grave/to the grave

Eliza Dalton Tends to Her Friend, Jane Kane

It is stated that [Jane Kane's] mother kept a brothel, and that the girl was in the habit of going to her mother's house when she was out of the workhouse.

What good is a body when the body cannot be bartered,
bargained for? Open sores mottle paled arms, burrow between
swollen fingers. The thirty silver pieces change hands,
transubstantiate into pills, fogged bottles. Corks unstop, flake and crumble
in a wavered grip. Broken gashes press
into fibers of a shared bed. Femme fatale in a mercury cloud,
lungs beaded. Brittle hips crack, ease open unnoticed. The bed,
an abrasion. The doctor waits by the front door,
last testament penned in his hand. A candle, puddled
and flickering, shivers against its own wick. A cough
loosens from a vapored chest. The blood already let, shed.
The door, key in its lock, pulls itself shut. Hair cut, spooled
on unwashed pillowcase. Dawn pulls its thread over
the horizon, unobserved. Eliza waits for the cross to find her
shoulders, the center of her chest. For the final jewels of
water, clouded with sickness, to perfume the disfigured
eyelids, wet the unshuddered breath. Eliza unfolds the shroud.
Floats the gauze over the body. Ignores how much fabric
hangs off the bed, disregards how little of her there is
to cover. To keen.

Men's Infirmary III: Thomas Kelly Speaks to the Night Nurse

... [Thomas Kelly] died in the Callan Union Workhouse, in the county of Kilkenny, on the night of Thursday the 19th, or morning of Friday the 20th of August instant, from the effects of the rupture, internally, of a tumor on his neck, which caused suffocation, by the infusion of matter into his chest and lungs.

There is not much else to say about a life. I, too, saw the
changing of animals, counted bloodlines as they vanished,

melted into pockmarked landscapes. *I remained up all
through*, waiting for the arcane to be revealed to me, throat

exposed to every gale. Was the door closed, or was it not? Was
the light on, or did you leave the room dark? Where, now, is that

perfect willingness, a readiness eclipsing understanding, the
hand stretched out across the bay? I told you my greatest griefs

but you turned from me when I opened my mouth. Or was it when
I laid myself out on the table, prostrate, in preparation for what was to

come? Still, I come sibilantly. Somnolent in the coiling of black ribbons,
shrouding of stolen mirrors. I wonder that I'm still alive at all, with your

vane at my back. *To cry was more natural to [the Irish] than to any other nation.*
And so, you wept. This, your duty. You remained up through, expectant,

glistening with questions and choruses you ultimately abandoned, shredded
with nervous fidgets, smeared with an unsteady palm. I believe you when

you howl, try to mourn at every grave, though every grave is but one.
It is nothing. I made a sign, and they did not see it. I held myself, carried

my own bones to my own field, kissed that earth I could not make give,
that ground I could not scrub from beneath splintered nails.

Eliza Dalton Mourns the Men of the Hunger

For from the flowery meadows, you came. Up from the verdant hills. Shovels and spades turned over shriveled riverbeds, waiting for living water, for the thrush of clover to push through the banks. A bell around your neck, you came over fruitful fields to find the underbrush, to cut the last clearing. Crumpled arms slung over the culling. Your mother's house reduced to clay and flax, your father's name reduced to a marking, a single stroke of a borrowed pen. A striking by any other hand. Wrists, tallow-slickened, wrestle sheaves together. My heart cries like a blackbird's. Thickets reap briars, thistles gnaw on ankle-bones. In front of the fire, your faces are almost undamned. Clothes stain with unripened berries. You could not wait, even then, for the darkening of shades. For the green to blush, then bruise. Your voice braids into cattle cries, the lowing and swelling of a throat unclosed. What if the hunger never found you, its long fingers never finding the threshold of your door, never prying open the ridges of your valiant body? And the scythe, never having gouged the apples of your cheeks, stands sentry for the hawk, who never pilfers?

III.

Indeed, some of the girls who were marked as “contaminated” had actually been the victims of sexual assault.

Dead/house

...many died without the immediate presence of their families.

...the bones of these individuals are often the only testament to their lives.

I have not stolen anyone's land/I did not beg the soil to grow
 did not lean my face over the earth/so my tears might salt
 its open wound did not count callouses on my palms
 to help me sleep at night/did not wonder if these schisms meant
 I'd always go hungry/I did not envy the plants/with their curled leaves

lo, am I not owed a death that wilts/I have not behaved
 with violence/did not hold the spade in my clenched fist
 and ask for forgiveness

yes/I only find patience/in the knots of my back
 in the crook of my arm/may my name
 be a dinner bell/a silver spoon/they burn their mouths on.
 I have not been an eavesdropper/did not listen when/dry throats
 called out dry songs/did not fall asleep/to hunger pang arias

crumbed crescendos/what else is a body made for but crying out
 if I am good at anything/it's begging
 I did not hear the thousand natural shocks/the thousand flogs
 I did not wait for the sting of skin/that wasn't mine

and no/I did not sit in the cool-dark anticipating the nursery cry
 for a mother/who wasn't me/but who might've been. I have not swindled
 offerings/no/each slice of bread/has not been consumed in vain/not by my hands
 no/I can make things last/can stretch out a tendon/to its breaking point
 I can make last suppers of every meal/can break fasts like rib bones

I deserve this/I put my fingers to my mouth/to smell the flour
 to taste a pooling sun/as it wafts through

 the only stalk of wheat in a rotting field

Jane Kane Sings to Work/house Babies I

The startling discovery in the Ballinasloe Workhouse was one of a sample of 4,645 suspected infanticide, attempted infant murder and concealment of birth cases that occurred in the latter half of nineteenth-century Ireland...

O you babes/Union-labeled/river-thawed
 O you wheelbarrow children/no one mourns
 your scrap-swaddled fists/signs of struggle

proofs of life/no soul to lay down, to keep
 no head to lay, crush sideways on grassy pastures
 straining to hear/the green heart of the earth

galloping/O you lowly children/no one wants you
 until you're dead/until your body/is made a remain
 cause of death found/hand of protection

raised up/against you/unguarded, you sway through
 thresholds/wait for them/to find the gold band/the thicket marked/

with uncurved cross
 the bow that could not bend

Chapel

... The workhouse mass burial ground was never consecrated... This was a decision to be made by the local clergy, who evidently decided against [consecrating the grave].

Our father/who art of broken bread and stale wine/Our Father/of an ungranted heaven,
unpearled gates/take this name of mine/and transubstantiate it/take this body/unleavened
and pray over it/until I am made/a fang of rock serrating a too-clear morning/an
unclouded

pool of unnoticed water/a mountain/with its soil untilled/thou doth vouchsafe to feed us
O Father of a thousand names ready to be blessed/the hungry have come/as they have
every
dawn/for the past thousand years/have you prepared a place for them/after all of this/have
you

prepared a place for me/have you kept the sabbath holy/after a thousand days in the
desert
after one thousand nights spent rending dust from lips yet to be perfumed/I swear/I have
not
borne false witness/I swear/I have turned both cheeks, I have run out of peace to
keep/you must

be accepting of our alms/left unsaid/what other crosses do you wish us to take up/O
father of
mine/I have reconciled myself to you a hundredfold/have severed self from hand/a
hundredfold/have denied this body/all it begged for/am I not still a poor dead thing/have I
not

shed enough blood/take this sinner/and cut her down from her cross/take this
daughter/make of
her a myth/they will pass down in folklore, this child among the paupers, this child
without
name/what wrath and indignation/are we owed/that mercy cannot be its balm/what
substance are

you made of/that you cannot take these bones/and call them up from the ground/hold
them as
your own/O Father/I never did see you come on bended knee/I never heard your servant
heart
wail/do this/as if the remission of your sins/relies on my name/sunk in your chest/like an

unsanctified ghost/an impious spirit/let me lie among the thieves/ye who have stolen/that
which/you swore/was promised to us/in such divine communion/as this

Jane Kane Sings to Work/house Babies II

Several weeks later on 29 May 1865 . . . a fourteen-year-old pauper resident, was engaged in cleaning out the men's privy in the workhouse yard [when he encountered a parcel in his wheelbarrow] . . . As the dirty black cloth finally gave way, the dead body of a female infant fell out.

The boy, fourteen, uncovered your webbed face/placed his palm/on your downy back
hands hot with work, body still pitched forward, rippled and strained with task/arms
pulled

to set down, wrists begging for release/his mouth, chapped and spring-blessed, sheltered
a cry
he was too afraid to uncover/the back of his neck pricked with mangled labor-breath.

The boy, fourteen, stared into where your eyes would have been/the lids river-pruned,
skull bloated/skin blue-blushed, crimped and circletted/proofs of life/around your

fattened elbows/the divots of your knees/flowered with purple/you went quickly
your voice caught on the jagged edge of each riptide/back arched, gone under

The boy, fourteen, had peered into the caverns of death's mottled face/and had not turned
away
he waited/for your ribs to billow/before he called you/by his sister's name/your blood

cried out/from that tired ground/and he proclaimed you keeper/he removed his cap/from
his head
with blushed fist/fingers stiff with effort/wheel of barrow still spinning/against crushed
hay

lips fumbled for a prayer/he heard, once/the scent of your form ribboning the air/between
you
who knows what else he has seen/this boy, fourteen/he will find your face/in every corner
of

sleep/catch the perfume of your iron-wet body/in every pocket of wind/as spring laces
seeds
through the countryside, he will not think of what was planted/but of what was
smothered.

O water babies/how were you to know/to gasp/to give way/beneath blunted spade
you bowed/your unconcealed head/ringed with peat/to accept the other end/of a weapon

O you babes/of frosted streets/children of faltered cures/and tepid water

brown paper gathered/to sop up your spill/fistful of stolen virtue/O baby/O banished
child

of/guilty conception/who would raise a rock/at the top of that mountain and/use it to slash
your downturned gaze/your mother/bludgeoner/the forest bears idle

and quiet witness/to a fissure, fracture/too deep to name/beneath its tangled roots,
like a clotted heart, it thrums/waiting for curse/to loose from quiver/for myth's thin
needle/to

pierce your bastard mouth, bitter and strange

Eliza Dalton Speaks to Her Child

Blood of my secret, secret of my blood. I learnt to run so I could set your name above the rot, the sunken harvest horizon. Fang of white heat fingerprinted the spaces between my spine, and I knew you were coming. Looked up from beneath veil-tangled lashes to find your yet unsung aria, your salt-strewn refrain. I paid no mind to the faltering crescent, its wavering hook scooping stray stars in fistfuls. Nine dreams unslipped from moorings. Nine nets of mourning torn. I had waited under too many moons for you. Said goodbye to the hooked waistline, the crumpled cap stuffed beneath the wrong side of the cot. The sun is rising, and it is nothing new. My water baby, my love, my pearl. Remember not to make a shroud of dawn's break. Remember not to use the cusp of twilight as an excuse to find me. This gloaming is too thick for a real reckoning, and you are too wild to know how gently I tried to hold you. The sun is rising. These tidepools are too shallow. I wish I could explain to us why it was that I peered into looking-glasses after dark, never leaned into the threshold to watch your sleep-soaked body ripple, crest like an unfurled wave. But the sun is rising. My jagged cliff, my thimble, my driftwood heart. The sun's fetters will come undone - this curtain between us will float down, restless. I have nothing left to set down at this pyre. My arms, pelagic and unyielding, gather this body, your body, will settle hands over chest, ignore the birth-slickened hair, the chest that should have been heaving, now pressed with the shadows of a thousand broken shells, a thousand relentless pebbles.

Famine Prayer VI

I spit out the mother tongue/what is left to scavenge
I've picked you all clean/I've picked it all empty
 what do you mean look at the reddened sky

the trusting and the maimed/the unset bones
the spine left crunched

I hope to god/the dog days are over
to air the soul, throw all the windows wide

confess I am breathing/in this overloaded ark
counting heat waves in an alleyway

"I have come that they may have..."

O lord/how much longer
 until we hit the marrow

Jane Kane Sings to Work/house Babies III

Nineteenth-century Irish coroners generally... [examined infants'] lungs, [with a method] known as the hydrostatic lung test [in order to charge a woman with infanticide]. The floatation of the lungs in water could be taken to indicate that air had circulated and life had been established prior to the death of the infant.

Umbilical cord/cut from me
 meconium/washed from me
 afterbirth/tore from me
 your lungs hover/in a pool of water
 trees of blood/buoyed in salt
 I abstain from you/heart compressed
 absence of air/your form, untended
 your form splayed, spread/in the whorls
 of a singed field/cattle approach,
 nose the shells of your hands/they catch
 the single shallow pant/taken with your milkless
 breath/hitched/on lungs that sink/in a watched,
 cracked bowl

Nursery

A new-born infant was carefully placed in the crook of the right arm of an adult female,
presumably its mother.

Lips wet/with buttermilk/tongue split/on sour love/nightdress soiled/skin curdled
with unwash/how will you learn to sing/will your first words be/of hunger

of mother's hemorrhage/or of father's arthritis-mottled bones/limbs fumble
to be swaddled in cheap linen/rash on baby skin/tattoo of tiny heart visible

from print of ribcage/you did not ask/to be born into idleness/to cry out for lethargy
soon your spines will melt into candle-wax puddles/vertebrae/flattened into shells

soon you will be shamed/for using your left hands/the muscles of your right arms
will grow taut with disdain/misuse/you are young now/too young for anything

small body passed around the girls' yard for waned rockings/recovered nursery rhymes
thick on work-dampened air/this is no manger/and you are no savior/a pity/they prayed
for you

this is not your mother/is not her heartbeat/this isn't your father's fist/dropping crumbs of
earth onto your closed eyes/your brittle cheekbones/no one to flatten the tuft of milkweed
hair

that grows, defiant, on the top of your head/kiss the soft spot/on your skull

but at least

there is room to be held/there is space
enough for you/in the ground

Eliza Dalton Speaks to Work/house Girls

Oh, you girls pulled taut, forgotten
 in the knotted
 thrall, misstepped into myth often
 told sullen, if

uttered at all. He will not wait,
 will not linger
 by work/house wall, rattle gate
 for you, wait there

in the hush of dusk, name vanished
 into river
 like sunken stone. Body brandished.
 Each lesion wished on,

touched, then flitted over in last
 dregs of daylight.
 Your face, a candle, flickers over
 his glassed gaze,

flame wandering, then gone. Your skirt
 will prick with blood.
 You know this story. Know the hurt
 before first swell,

cloth submerged in cloudy water,
 carmine catches
 on ragged stitches. Sew a father
 from copper rings.

First steps falter in an unwatched
 room. You make fists,
 press them into thighs. Hours notch
 on blotched panes.

Yes, I came and went, but what did
 I bring with me?
 How many breaths had run ragged,
 set

roving in my hollow chest? Take
 your mangled hands
 and use them to shape air, shake

the dust, wake your

sleeping form from where it lies, ask
if you were loved
or seen. Trace the difference. I'm
going now. I mean it.

You
can follow. You can leave the gate
unlatched.
Let's not wait for the glass to
drop, shatter.

Anatomy Act

The 1832 Anatomy Act allowed the use of unclaimed pauper corpses for dissection in anatomy schools . . . The possibility of ending up on the dissection table would further discourage people from seeking relief and also posthumously pay the debt that paupers owed to society for their failed lives . . . In reality, the dreaded cutting, dismembering and displaying of body parts become another punishment for the sin of pauperism. The pauper's remains could be put to good use for society, rather than yet a gain costing society in terms of burial.

What good is a body when the body is half-gone? Coccyx disintegrates into indecipherable slew, choke of syphilis-chipped skulls crumbled into nothingness. Sacrosanct and unkempt, crushed underfoot. Pilfered mandibles survived by whittled rosaries, medallions flickering against abandoned metacarpals. Sternum bevel edges of vertebrae. Sacrum, unfused by the taut flame of adolescence, dissolve on the table. Facial bones rattle and hum. No one comes to translate their pining. What good is a promised land when the promised land has been razed. Fragments of femur, humerus. Ulna and radius wrap into each other, caressive new inverses to collapse into, wishbones pulled apart. Foundered carpals line up like necklaces, their fragile shuddering hushed. Fibulas find fibulas. Tibias seek out tibias. In a coppered desert, bleached fingers would return to the sand, reabsorbed by dry heat. Stagnant. A body cannot rest when the body is always punished. Always panting. Iliac crests cave, palatine bones whisper, then silence themselves. New-dug graves wait, splintered soil unwilling to yield just yet, the lips of the dead still wet from begging, the mouths of their tombs gaping, exhausted, knowing what taking is to come.

Afterword

The process of working on a long-term project such as *Work/house* is deeply complex. So much of what we do know about the real people who lived in these workhouses are but fragments, shards of splintered stories. Immersing myself in those stories, chasing after details, and uncovering names was and is a spiritual act. It was not enough to read the research and be done with it, to set aside the bones. Eliza, Thomas, James, and Jane linger. In many ways, I felt as if I was, and am, haunted. I often read and wrote these poems into the late hours of the night, and when I finally went to bed, my mind would reach toward new poems, ideas, arrangements, edits.

It feels important to acknowledge that in the creation of this work, I have taken some artistic license. I took scant facts, and, as if filling in the outline of a ghost, tried to make stories that felt real and possible based on the other information I had. Jane Kane was a real person who really did work at her mother's brothel when she was not living in the South Dublin workhouse. But we do not know if she ever met Eliza Dalton, though it feels likely that they perhaps, at least unknowingly, met. We do not know if Jane ever contracted syphilis, but I knew from my other research that these diseases were common in the workhouses, and sex workers frequently "crashed" in the workhouse hospitals to receive treatment before returning to their places of business.

I twist timelines and add details, knitting together people who likely never came in contact: James Heam might've never encountered Jane Kane's baby, if she ever had one. I have been exploring the ethics of writing this way. A purist, I often struggled to define my relationship to the readings I was immersing myself in: *am I too close or too far from the facts?* I have come to realize that the act of storytelling often demands the blurring of boundaries, the redefinition of who we are as artists in relation to the art we are making. I was writing not only because I felt compelled, but because I recognized Eliza, Thomas, James, and Jane's stories as resistances against oppressive structures. Their revolutions in response to the injustices they experienced – be it through literal rebellions, as was the case with Eliza, or appealing unfair punishments, as with James – are illustrative of our ongoing attempts to assert the humanity of ourselves and others in a world that actively works to deny that humanity. I humbly ask for forgiveness and grace if this artistic license offends.

I also saw traces of myself in their stories, fragments of my own family and its ancestors. I think, for instance, of my mother, my sister, and I, who are often identified as "canaries in the coal mine" because we can quickly identify brokenness in systems and relationships. This fieriness is resistance, too: it reminds me of Eliza, Thomas, James, and Jane. And I was reminded that these stories might've been the stories of my ancestors, had they not left when they did. Patrick Hosey and Julia Ryan were able to leave because they had enough money to do so: they were (likely) young and educated, and could afford to make the voyage to New York City. But who were they abandoning? What family members could they not take? If they had stayed, what might've become of them?

Suffice it to say, *Work/house* is an ongoing project. There are storylines I have yet to write, names I have yet to uncover. There is power in being able to say, “this narrative is not finished”: that, too, is a form of resistance. I step away from my undergraduate years with Eliza, Jane, Thomas, and James reminding me that my work is not done. I walk, always, toward Ireland.

Notes

I.

“Women and children composed...” comes from “Wild Workhouse Girls and the Liberal Imperial State in Mid-Nineteenth Century Ireland”, a 2005 article written by Anna Clark, and published in Vol. 39, no. 2 of Oxford University Press’s *Journal of Social History*, pgs. 389-409.

Front Gate

“a quarter of a million people died in Irish workhouse institutions between 1846 and 1851” comes from Johnny Geber’s 2016 article entitled, “‘Children in a Ragged State’: Seeking a Biocultural Narrative of a Workhouse Childhood in Ireland during the Great Famine (1845-1852)”.

“how inadequate language is to convey a just idea/of this poverty and suffering” comes from Chapter Two of Johnny Geber’s book entitled, “Victims of Ireland's Great Famine : The Bioarchaeology of Mass Burials at Kilkenny Union Workhouse”, published by the University Press of Florida, 2015.

Adult pauper inmates from Union workhouses were buried in six-foot coffins, with infants buried in two-and-a-half foot coffins and children in four-foot coffins (Geber, 2016).

Work/house Test

“by making conditions...” comes from Johnny Geber’s 2016 article entitled, “‘Children in a Ragged State’: Seeking a Biocultural Narrative of a Workhouse Childhood in Ireland during the Great Famine (1845-1852)”.

The first lines of each stanza, indicated by completely capitalized text, come from the Co. Limerick Guardians Minute Book #4, reference no. BG/71/A/22, entries dated 18 April 1861-3 Oct. 1861. All language from the first two stanzas comes from an article entitled, “Youth in Workhouses”, which appeared in the *Ragged School Union Magazine*, Jan. 1849-Dec. 1867, pg. 199. All language from the last three stanzas comes from a speech entitled “Treatment of Children in Irish Workhouses”, delivered to the House of Commons by Arthur J. Moore, Esq., M.P., on August 15, 1878.

Eliza Dalton’s Girlhood in the Work/house

In a Union workhouse in Co. Cork, girls were known to have used kitchen grease to smooth and oil their hair, in an attempt to “[assert] not only their femininity, but their humanity”. This information was gleaned from Clark’s “Wild Workhouse Girls”, cited in an earlier note.

Girls' Yard

"the Irish girls..." comes from Johnny Geber's 2016 article entitled, "'Children in a Ragged State'", cited in an earlier note. For further reading/context, investigate the "Earl Grey Scheme".

This poem makes allusions to "Children of Lir", and the mythological figures of druids. For further reading/context, check out Bard Mythologies, or W.B. Yeats's "Irish Fairy and Folk Tales". The Modern Library offers a fantastic edition of the latter, with a foreword by renowned Irish poet, Paul Muldoon.

Girls in the workhouse were taught needlework (an already oversaturated market, meaning they often did not find jobs or were exploited for extremely low pay), while their male counterparts were taught cobbling and other more useful trades.

Boys' Yard

A *geis* or *geas* is a vow or curse common in Irish and Scottish mythology. Grainne, for instance, puts Diarmuid under several *geasa* so he would stay with her.

Eliza Dalton as Sister

"Dated 20 October 1852..." comes from a book entitled, "The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Volume V: Irish Women's Writings and Traditions", edited by Angela Bourke, Siobhán Kilfeather, Maria Luddy, Margaret Mac Curtain, Gerardine Meaney, Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, Mary O'Dowd, and Clair Wills. It was published by Cork University Press in 2002. The original letter, sent by Michael L. Ryan, has been taken from the Limerick Union minute book, located in the Limerick Regional Archives, Limerick. Eliza Dalton was not actually Michael's sister.

This poem is written in the Irish poetic form known as Deibide Baise Fri Toin. Featuring quatrains with lines of 3, 7, 7, and 1 lines (respectively), as well as an AABB rhyme scheme and complicated syllabic rhyme, this form proved to be a welcome intellectual challenge.

The Black Hole

"...paupers who sowed any signs of an independent spirit..." comes from "The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Volume V: Irish Women's Writings and Traditions", referenced in the previous note.

"girls of glass" references the fact that Eliza Dalton and many other workhouse girls often lashed out at their superiors by breaking benches and windows (Clark, 2005).

"at thirteen/or sixteen/or seventeen/or nine/or five" makes reference to specific ages real workhouse girls were when they entered the institution. Eliza Dalton was nine when she entered the workhouse (Clark, 2005).

Eliza Dalton Speaks to the Work/house Master

This poem is written in the Irish poetic form known as Dechnad Cummsaic. It features four-line stanzas, with the first and third lines composed of eight syllables. Second and fourth lines rhyme, and are four syllables each. The last word of the third line must rhyme with the second-to-last word in the fourth line. However, in considering Eliza Dalton's penchant for rule-breaking, it felt appropriate to cut off the last line of the final stanza, thus breaking the form.

This poem uses the Curse of Macha as its mythological lens, as made apparent through the first line, "so, you spoke of me after all". The line, "my fear is great/for you" makes reference to a poem translated by Lady Gregory, from an anonymous eighth-century Irish poem. This poem is featured as part of an interactive storytelling exhibit at the Museum of Irish Literature in Dublin, Ireland.

"Although we were mendicants..." were actual words spoken by Eliza Dalton, as mentioned in Clark's "Wild Workhouse Girls". Eliza Dalton was one of few literate girls in the workhouse, and this statement was made in testimony of a police search in which she was indecently exposed by police officers. Her skirt was pulled up over her head.

II.

"...the guardians continued..." comes from Clark's "Wild Workhouse Girls".

Girls' Room

"Finally..." comes from "The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Volume V", cited in previous notes.

Men's Infirmary I, II, III

All three epigraphs come from an August 1852 Callan Union Workhouse Minute Book, published by the University of Southampton. Callan Union Workhouse was located in Co. Kilkenny.

Women's Yard

"Even amongst utter poverty and misery..." comes from Geber's "Children in a Ragged State", though there, he is quoting French journalist Paschal Grousset in an 1888 account of a Union workhouse in Dublin. The first line of each tercet consist of Irish terms of endearment, and common Irish sayings in regards to love. The lines "to the grave/to the grave/to the grave" make reference to the chapbook's second epigraph.

Eliza Dalton Mourns the Men of the Hunger

“My heart cries like a blackbird’s” comes from an ancient Irish lament song mentioned in the 1790-1792 volume of “The Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy”, in an essay entitled “Caoinan: or Some Account of the Antient Irish Lamentations” by William Beuford.

III.

“Indeed, some of the girls...” comes from Clark’s “Wild Workhouse Girls”.

Dead/house

“Many died without the immediate presence of these families...” comes from Geber’s 2016 article, “Children in a Ragged State”, cited in earlier notes.

“The bones of these individuals...” comes from an article entitled “Death and burial in the Poor Law Union workhouses in Ireland”, written by Linda G. Lynch and published in Volume 23 of The Journal of Irish Archaeology, pgs. 189-203.

The structure of this poem, and the first line of each section, is borrowed from the Egyptian religious text known as the 42 Negative Confessions.

Jane Kane Sings to Work/house Babies I, II, III

“The startling discovery”, “Several weeks later”, and “Nineteenth-century Irish coroners” come from the chapter, ““A very immoral establishment’: the crime of infanticide and class status in Ireland, 1850-1900” written by Elaine Farrell, published in a book entitled “She said she was in the family way: Pregnancy and Infancy in modern Ireland”. This book was published by the University of London Press’s Institute of Historical Research.

Eliza Dalton to Her Child

The mythological lens for this poem is The Curse of Macha. References to this myth are found in the repeated use of “nine”, as Macha cursed the Ulstermen to nine days and nine nights of birth pains for forcing her to run whilst pregnant. Some of the terms of endearment in this piece parallel the terms of endearment written in Irish and English from “Women’s Yard”.

“said goodbye to the hooked waistline, the crumpled cap...” references the ways in which girls modified their “sexless” workhouse uniforms by cinching their waists. Girls also rebelled against workhouse authorities by refusing to wear their caps (which were part of their uniform). This is discussed in Clark’s “Wild Workhouse Girls”.

Eliza Dalton to Her Child, cont'd.

This poem makes references to ancient Irish customs of keening and mourning, which were discussed in the 1790-1792 volume of “The Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy”, in an essay entitled “Caoinan: or Some Account of the Antient Irish Lamentations” by William Beuford.

Nursery

“*A new-born infant...*” comes from Chapter Four of Johnny Geber’s book entitled, “Victims of Ireland's Great Famine : The Bioarchaeology of Mass Burials at Kilkenny Union Workhouse”.

Anatomy Act

“*The 1832 Anatomy Act...*” comes from “Death and burial in the Poor Law Union workhouses in Ireland”, cited in an earlier note.