

probably the only responses you need in life. She is an alter ego for me. I really would like to have her kind of character, one that doesn't stand for any nonsense. I am always getting involved in nonsense.'

The walls are not quite the right shade of blue, at least not to my eye, but maybe the more she penetrates the heart and soul of her Book of Books the closer she'll come, with the next coat, or maybe the one after that, to achieving that special Greek flag blue. She was quietly amazed when I told her that in 1984 I handled the diagonally striped blue-and-white tie that Joyce wore, which he presented to the printers of *Ulysses* as the blue of his choice. The tie he later gave to his close associate, the Jewish-Russian émigré, Paul Léon, and decades later, after its stopover at the London antiquarian booksellers for whom I used to work, it is in Tulsa, Oklahoma, along with such treasures as the corrected proofs of *Finnegans Wake* and a white porcelain lion, a punning gift which Joyce gave Léon, who only a few years later perished in one of the Nazi death camps.

A chunk of Irish landscape crackled in the fireplace, one of the *Bord na Móna* (The Board of Turf) peat briquettes that Martina buys here in London. When I looked out the window onto Balls Pond Road, what Peter Ackroyd in his *London, A Biography* describes as 'an area of manifest greyness and misery', a phrase which Martina adopted for the title of one of her poems, I wondered at how in a very few lines she manages to set the tranquillity of inside against the noise of what goes on outside.

I sleep high on the bird's nest.  
Trucks and lorries shake the house  
and make the bricks tremble,  
roaring tidal waves rock the bed  
and put me to sleep.

There are odd wrecked Georgian houses  
beached between tyre shops and takeaways.  
Sometimes people are murdered.  
Police sirens shriek up and down all day  
like seagulls chasing sandwiches.

Disquietude is never far away, just an ably thrown pebble's click against the boarded-up front of what used to be the Turkish community library directly opposite, TOPLUM KÜTÜPHANESİ, where not so long ago a young man working there hanged himself. Martina spoke of the ambulances, the police, the young Turkish men in black walking up and down the street, sorrowing for one of their tribe. Meanwhile, in her poem, 'the uniformed Catholic children / slip along the wet pavement / like blue fish / swimming down the Balls Pond Road'.

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She comes from a village not far from Mallow in County Cork. One might be forgiven for thinking Burnfort is a mythical place. So small it has escaped the cartographer's eye, it takes its name from an ancient ringfort known as *Ráth an Tóiteáin* ('Fort of the Burnings'), of which all that remains is a souterrain – unless, of course, one wishes to include the shield on the BP sign that swung throughout the whole of her youth beside the Cotter residence, which was home, shop, bar and petrol pump all rolled into one. The



family lived upstairs, a child's fantasy of a place, which in the 1940s had been owned by a scrap merchant who added all sorts of curious features – a fireplace edged with black-and-white tiles of Grecian figures, wooden panelling from a luxury liner that had been wrecked off the coast of Cork, with the cabin numbers 118, 117, 116 still visible, in black against ivory plates, a section of railway track holding up the kitchen ceiling and other oddities. And with it being Burnfort's social and mercantile centre it is also the setting, although nowhere does it say so, of Martina's as yet unpublished book, *Petrol, a Poem in Three Acts*.

A couple of things make this image special: the extensive creases and the long shadows of those who are no longer about to throw them. One of the major strands in Martina's work is that by making them talk, talk and talk she brings those shadows back to life.

'There is a lot of sound in it,' she said of her new work. 'The BP sign, the big one in the picture, swings all the time. What made me think of it is the opening scene of the movie *Once Upon a Time in the West* where all the different noises make their own music. The cowboy setting, the Deep South, the music and everything, can be related in so many ways to Ireland, to Burnfort in particular. It's about voice too. Voice is everything for me. It was Joyce's favourite instrument. I'm nothing like him, of course – I'm so simple and he's so complicated – but my first novel *Midnight Feast* is very much about voice. There are true incidents in *Petrol*. A magician came to the school once. I was grown up to the size