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## Contemporary Irish Women Poets

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Vona Groarke

## Memory and Materiality

Since her earliest poems, Vona Groarke's exploration of what it is to create meaning in the world has highlighted the importance of the place of her speaking subject and its relationship to the cultural moment out of which she writes. Her philosophical enquiries are always aware of that subject's location in time and space – their moment in history, their place of birth and belonging. These are not elements that contain or limit Groarke's poetics, but rather provide the creative moment from which complex investigations unfold. Though many of her poems have an identifiably Irish setting and material, Groarke does not see herself as an 'Irish poet' and resists a single cultural location as a central enquiry of the poetry. America, in landscape and language, is glimpsed fleetingly in poems from the period, first in *Juniper Street* (2006) and then in *Spindrift* (2009); Northern England emerges in *Spindrift* and *X* (2013). Though these collections see Groarke extending her versatility of form, it is her treatment of time that is especially noteworthy. As well as mediating between present and past, these poems also offer important insights into Groarke's negotiation of the moment of experience and its assimilation in the finished poem.

The relationship between experience and aesthetics is a complex and interesting one in Groarke's work as a whole. Since her third collection, *Flight* (2002), there has been an intensification of her engagement with existential concerns, yet this process has occurred without loss of the vividly specific world for which her work has been justly praised. In *Juniper Street*, experience remains an important formative element, yet, though the specifics of Groarke's life in America shape her art, these are never straightforwardly personal lyrics. While the immediacy of

experience is rendered directly in language, it is also transformed by it, so that a significant temporal gap opens between experience and representation. Time itself becomes a key concern: so that a transnational reading of her poems must take into account not only the visual and linguistic inflections of American and British cultures that emerge in her work but rather her extended preoccupation with ideas of the secure and the transitory – a concern that has been intensified in *X*, her most recent volume.

Her early work is especially attentive to the concept of home, most notably the poems of her second collection, *Other People's Houses*. This does not suggest, however, that the process of re-engagement with such material is an endless reaffirmation of belonging, but rather offers evidence of the many ways in which this concept requires to be reimaged and extended in language. For Groarke, home is an important site of personal and cultural memory.<sup>1</sup> In the title poem of *Other People's Houses*, the space of relationship is deconstructed by the passage of time so that the shape of the house – and of the poem itself – is radically altered: 'There's been a fire and the roof's caved in'; 'The ceiling of the sitting room is upended / on the floor' (*OPH* 52). The revival of the house as an emblem of cultural survival reveals its potential as a repository of emotional meaning, especially in connection with forms of self-determination in language. In the private context, the house also provides an essential creative space within which to think and write. This metaphor offers an enduring structure for Groarke in her exploration of the relationship between memory and language and her investigation of the limits of knowledge.

### North American Time: *Juniper Street*

The title poem of *Juniper Street* gives Groarke's journey to America a domestic shape, but the poem is principally concerned with the passage of time as an important determinant of the transnational experience. Implicit in the newness of this situation, and the impact of its sensory detail, is the memory of a previous existence; the unspoken other in this text. Seasonal change – the transition from a harsh US winter – is the central trope. The increasing use of run-on lines creates a surge of movement in the poem from the bare landscape of floodlights, gutters and flagpoles to the optimism of 'the gilt-edge of our neighbour's forsythia' and 'our own trim laurel shrub' (*JS* 52). From the start, natural and man-made processes overlay one another:

We go to sleep by artificial moonlight.  
The floodlit stadium times itself out at midnight  
and a thicker weave of darkness plies the room.

We sleep under the eaves, where nights of late  
have eddied in the wind's plump, elevated arch.  
We wake to only the dawn's blindsided glaze.

(JS 52)

The complex interweaving of conscious and unconscious states is indicated here – sleep combining with a sensory awareness of the weather outside. Structure is prominent at the opening of the poem, as stadium and eaves create different spaces of engagement. As the movement from night to morning suggests, the passage of time is central to this poem's purpose, and the narrative continues with the children's hasty disappearance to school. Meanwhile, seasonal shifts see the snows recede and animal and birdlife become newly visible: the strangeness of this observed world is key to its power to arrest the observing speaker. Not only the actual but also the metaphorical is determined by the new American experience – its squirrels, orioles and hawks. Here the framing of seasonal change within the shape of the single day helps to contract the larger patterns into an experiential mode. Yet in spite of the seeming importance of the temporal progression here, the poem finally doubles back on itself to remember a moment when the spring was framed as an imaginative projection from the winter months:

Or tell you now  
that even in January, with our snow-boots lined up  
in the hall, I slipped your leather glove onto my hand  
  
and felt the heat of you as something on the turn  
that would carry us over the tip of all that darkness  
and land us on the stoop of this whole new world.

(JS 52)

This 'whole new world' conflates the idea of America with the transformation of spring itself, but in doing so it suggests that it is not just the environment that is susceptible to endless change but that the language that describes it is also in flux. As Catriona Clutterbuck has observed, 'Juniper Street, unlike Groarke's preceding work, proposes that loss of sustainable coherent meaning can both be acknowledged and recuperated, this by integrating the available remnants of that meaning with lived life as play'.<sup>2</sup> As we saw in Sinéad Morrissey's collection *Between Here and*

*There*, a temporal shift indicates the poet's ability to hold different states of being in imaginative connection: here in 'Juniper Street', just as the warmth of March does not eliminate the experience of snowy January, so the transnational movement suggests not one culture overshadowing another but the simultaneity of different imaginative influences.

As well as exploring aspects of American experience in detail, the work in *Juniper Street* considers issues of belonging and estrangement in broader ways, and in doing so returns to the personal past to probe the passage of time from that vantage point. 'The Return' evokes a house in which the speaker once lived and wrote, using a single stanza of seventeen lines to create the bridge between present and past. In choosing this compact framework for reflection, Groarke not only intensifies her return to the space of personal memory but engages too with her earlier work – especially the poems of *Other People's Houses* (1999) – in which the representation of the home, and its emotional and aesthetic significance, is a central aspect of the poetic enquiry. The poem begins by halting the reader at the bricked-up door of the house, impeding our access to the interiority of the domestic space. Instead, language leaves us outside, drawing attention to its own power in constituting the structure we witness – even the attempts at renovation read like a punchline to an old and tired joke. Yet the creative impulse that has shaped Groarke's choice of material here is also seen as in the past – 'I know this house: I wrote our summer here / into words that closed over years ago' (*JS* 26). Here language is like a wound, sealing as the experience that inspired it grows more distant in time. The speaker's return does not just explore the experience of early domesticity but the complex relationship between the past and its layers of representation. Placed at the centre of the poem, the line 'Even your hand stops as I unhook the gate' could belong to either past or present, invoking the freezing of time in the stopped hands of the clock:

Even your hand stops as I unhook the gate  
and there it is, our young day, like the blue of your eyes,  
a noticed, simple thing that leaves me dumbfounded  
in a half-hearted ruin

(*JS* 26)

This movement qualifies the earlier assertion 'I know this house'; the past is in fact a shared one, and the speaker's lover is cast here as both observer and the thing observed. 'Our young day' is not quite 'like the blue of your eyes' as the shared past must be witnessed and understood by both

of them. Though the joy of the past leaves the speaker dumbfounded, the half-hearted ruin hints that this is a singular feeling, encompassing – though not necessarily complicit in – the emotions of the lover. His apparent act of holding back ('Even your hand stops') is balanced by her movement forward ('My hand on the door'), and by her willingness to open the past to scrutiny. In her mind the layers of the past cannot be uncoupled (a word suggestive of a return to a singular state) any more than the narrative of their love can be remade.

The light that memory sheds on the growth to understanding is a recurring preoccupation for Groarke and in *Juniper Street* is inflected by investigations of history and its narrative retelling. Again, the nuances of language and vocabulary shape subjective perspectives in key ways, highlighting the important intersection between history, memory and language in understanding the self in a specific national and cultural context. 'To Smithereens' begins by signalling the challenges of this journey back in time: 'You'll need a tiller's hand to steer this through / the backward drift that brings you to, as always, / one fine day' (*JS* 16). The patterns of memory can be traced back to the clichéd childhood summer holiday, the 'marvellous haul of foam' and 'buckets of gold' exaggerating the simple pleasures of the beach life for children. Already this seems impossibly idyllic, however, and though the 'scarlet dye' hints at the graphic flow of violence through the poem, it gives way to a more knowing and complex perspective on the event. By the third stanza, as the radio brings news of the bomb that killed Lord Mountbatten further up the western coast,<sup>3</sup> language begins to approximate the explosion: 'the news that falls in slanted beats / / like metal shavings sprayed from a single / incandescent point to dispel themselves / as the future tense of what they fall upon' (*JS* 16).

Suddenly the scene shifts, reminding us of the need for careful steering indicated in the first line of the poem. Now the speaker is in the cinema – at the Ritz in Athlone, 'a modernist / western wall away from the Shannon' (*JS* 16).<sup>4</sup> The film is *Gandhi* and its world begins to merge with the scene outside the cinema, Ganges and Shannon presenting a 'slipknot of darkness'.<sup>5</sup> The 'she' accompanying the speaker is undisclosed, but presumably one of the 'mams / and aunts' that feature earlier on the beach. Here the Foxford rugs are replaced by the crimson plush of the cinema seat, but the sleeping woman is not drawn into the imaginative world of the film but rather to 'where all the journeys terminate / with the slump and flutter of an outboard engine' (*JS* 16). Though the 'heat and dust' of the locked projection room evokes another classic film of

Indian independence, it is the postcolonial condition that links Ireland and India.<sup>6</sup> Woken ‘by words that spill over the confluence of the Ganges / / and the Shannon at our backs’ (*JS* 16), the woman interprets what she hears – the word ‘Smithereens’ – as Indian, ‘It means / to open (like an Albertine); to flower’ (*JS* 16). This flowering, which links the petal-strewn waters of the Ganges with the Albertine rose, named after the husband of Queen Victoria, Empress of India, shows the anomaly of these colonial connections. More ironic still is the misinterpretation at the heart of this conclusion – ‘smithereens’ is an Irish word, meaning shattered fragments, an explosive version of the opening out envisaged in the poem. Yet the muddling of beauty and violence, of potential and destruction is an important part of the post-independent state. It echoes W. B. Yeats’s awareness of these dichotomous responses and alerts us to the manipulation of language in the staging of both private and public histories.

In this collection Groarke is often concerned with the importance of the auditory in the construction of meaning; this encompasses not only the sounds of words but also the accent of the speaking voice. In exploring her new life in America, and the ways in which it shapes her poetry, vocabulary and tone prove as important as identified location: ‘The Local Accent’ is a poem that draws voice and topography into particularly close alignment. This is not the first time that Groarke has juxtaposed the fluidity of water with solid ground, but here the relationship between these states, and the extent to which they define one another, is marked.

This river is pronounced by granite drag.  
 It is a matter of inflection, of knowing what  
 to emphasize, and what to let drift away,  
 just as a slipping aspen leaf makes barely a flicker,  
 one gaffe in the conversation between the current  
 and the flow; a stifled yawn, a darkness reimbursed;  
 while, underneath, the thing that falls through shadow  
 is full of its own occasion. Weighty and dull,  
 it longs for water, the lacquer and slip of it,  
 the way it won’t allow for brightness on its back,  
 but flips around to where its fall is a wet-wool,  
 sodden thing about to break at any moment, and undo.  
 Something is coming loose like aspen leaves, or froth.  
 Or maunder, letting itself down like rain into a river  
 immersed in getting on with what it separates:

the sulk of damp soil; the stiff articulation of the shore,  
 the giddy vowels sprayed over the drag and ebb  
 of voices leaking through the rain over the town.

(JS 18)

The word ‘pronounce’ draws early attention to the sound of language as shaping of its meaning. The granite drag that determines the pace of the water’s flow here is suggestive of the cultural bedrock shaping the deployment of language, the material circumstances of words. If ‘knowing what to emphasize and what to let drift away’ defines pronunciation – the intonation required to make language meaningful – then it also mirrors processes of understanding: what requires attention, what can be relinquished. Here Groarke toys with the practice by which what is other to language becomes absorbed within it. Just as the aspen leaf slips downriver virtually unseen, the ‘gaffe in the conversation’ may be unnoticed by others but meaningful in itself, ‘full of its own occasion’ (JS 18). Water is a space of undoing for Groarke, where objects may lose their sense of coherent identity, yet can be understood to be in transition between states.

It seems, then, that the speaking voice within this poem records this point of transition as a linguistic one. The transnational subject is therefore in a productive state of undoing, where the established expectations of language and form loosen to allow new modes to emerge. This loosening of form is also an enquiry into what is coherent and identifiable in linguistic terms: what comes loose here is ‘aspen leaves or froth’ – the first a thing ‘other’ to the water, the second an organic part of it. The merging and separation of similar forms (the froth that comes adrift from the body of water, and the rain that enters it) mimics the natural ways in which forms of expression are absorbed within the body of language, while others are lost. The context suddenly enters the poem, reminding the reader of the particularity of experience from which these ideas emerge. The word ‘local’ suggests a version of Irishness is at stake, but given the American inflection of *Juniper Street* as a whole, its implications for the understanding of the relationship between place and spoken language, and in turn between spoken language and meaning, have a much greater significance. For the first time in Groarke’s work language is linked directly to materiality, and with this connection comes an increasing sensitivity to the temporal dimension of language – its powers both of endurance and of adaptability. In this way, the poem text exemplifies the continuity of tradition and the breaking of this lineage to create new ways of reading the past in the present.



### Losing the Past: *Spindrift*

Groarke's fifth collection, *Spindrift* (2009), retains much of the particularity of *Juniper Street* but goes further in its dispersal of the continuities of form that offer sustained and sustaining meaning so that the gap between the intense reality of the observed world and the contingency of the observing self becomes ever wider. This dispersal is captured in the energy of the volume and in its rich interleaving of past and present. The recognition of this contingency emerges through the formal strategies of these poems. *Spindrift's* transitions of perspective, therefore, speak not only of loss and change but also of the imprint that these leave on language.

Groarke has long exhibited a sensibility attuned to loss and to the significance of absence in exerting a shaping force on present meaning. The figure of the absent father is important in her early work, helping us to read the voice of the speaker as a singular one; even enduring relationships are shadowed by the demands of self-knowledge. If *Spindrift* marks a transition, it is surely to the realization of radical discontinuities in the construction of meaning itself – of language's shortcomings in helping us to understand the full significance of the past. Paradoxically, though, this realization helps Groarke to push language and form towards an apt expression of this contingent position. As Richard Rorty argues, a poet 'is typically unable to make clear exactly what it is he wants to do before developing the language in which he succeeds in doing it'.<sup>7</sup> Thus, we may see the dislocations of language in *Spindrift* as the cause, as much as the result, of a loss of faith in the continuities of experience.

In common with the poet's second collection, *Other People's Houses* (1999), *Spindrift* has a unifying image, but instead of the grounded representation of the house, this collection engages with the unceasing movement of water and singularity of past, present and future that this suggests. *Spindrift* itself is defined at the opening of the book as 'spray blown from the crests of waves by the wind' and this is a collection shaped not only by the motion of water but by its dispersal and evaporation. Thus it becomes an apt motif for the fear of lost selfhood in that it replaces the safety of domestic happiness but also challenges the possibility of poetic containment in conditions of personal and cultural uncertainty. The title sequence, significantly placed last in the book, dwells on the return of the past through the materiality of the present

I

What is to be done  
with a past tense  
that, once recalled,  
presents itself again?

You might as well  
throw a stone in the sea  
and be taken aback  
when the same thing  
is keeping you from sleep

(SD 62)

As well as crossing the boundaries between present and past, the poem signals the merging of literal and imaginative worlds and the paradox of what is cast away remaining with us. As in so many of Groarke's earlier poems the house holds past lives – 'all manner of old news' – and we are especially alert to forms and structures here and their impact on both present mood and memories of the past: the sea, the house, fields, stones. The landscape is revealed gradually through the poem's numbered parts, through its expansion and contraction of lines. These parts emphasize ideas of progress and chronology at the same time as they privilege ebb and flow, so that time may be conceptualized in linear fashion, even as it carries the past with it. The reopening of the house marks a telescoping of time as the immediacy of domestic tasks provoke memories that confirm all that has changed since these tasks were last performed. Thus it is fitting that this sequence is the final one of the book, drawing together both the speaker's memories of place and the reader's of reading. The impressions of sea and land become more intense and subjective as the speaker opens to these new-old experiences and tests the power of language to evoke them truly: 'The colour of the sea today / is nothing like the name / of any colour / I can think of' (SD 63). The poem then opens out to combine botanical observations with brief narratives of the children's experiences, bringing a different energy to the sequence. Memories of past summers are balanced by projected futures: the planning application that might pave the way for bungalow and landscaped garden gives a larger cultural context to the changing landscape. As the materiality of the past is lost to a new, commodified Ireland, the role of personal memory changes. For now, though, wave and sky predominate, revealing a different order of change – the endless shifts of the coastal landscape and the mutability of memory and mood.

Observation and reflection are keys to this poem, so that when night falls light floods the scene: lit windows, a lighthouse beam, headlights of cars – all are suggestive of the patterns of human life, intersecting with the speaker's own daily routines but also exposing them to the gaze. This sense of being at once on the margins and moving within a web of life is important: all this variety is 'a kind of love song', yet not one written by the speaker but heard by her. This profound sense of witness with which the book ends at once unifies and clarifies the poems of contemplation and doubt that precede this in the book.

*Spindrift's* opening poem, 'Some Weather', heralds an emotional turbulence that shapes the present of these poems, but that also indicates the fragility of the apparently stable past: 'Among the things / (though these are not things) / I did to pre-empt the storm were: / upturn, stow, disconnect, / shut down, shutter, shut' (*SD* 11). The poem immediately draws attention to the inadequacy of the well-worn phrase in favour of a more purposeful relationship between nouns and verbs – the word for things and the word for actions. It is the first evidence of the unobtrusive search for newness that is present here and still more pronounced in *X*, Groarke's subsequent collection. This relationship draws attention to the dynamic between an existing material reality and the contingent nature of human intervention in this reality. The actions listed in the poem invite various interpretations: they are the precautionary measures taken in a boat entering storm conditions, but, in a larger sense, they indicate human modes of self-protection in time of crisis. The line 'shut down, shutter, shut' improvises meaning from a single word but is also suggestive of declension – a verb moving through different tenses, and as it does so linguistically mimicking its own meaning, that of defensive reduction. The contest between the human figure and the elements here is an investigation of the tension between stasis and movement, between withdrawal and expressiveness that is also the dialectic of human relationships and of the creative process. These are reminders too of the distancing effect that so many of these poems enact: the noted significance of what happens elsewhere and can be only imagined by the speaker.

From its opening poem, then, water imagery flows through *Spindrift*, not only emphasizing the uncertain processes of writing itself but allowing the distinctions between surface and depth to inform our reading of the work. The second poem in the collection, 'The Jetty', considers reflection (in both senses of the word) as creative of new frames of meaning, even if these perspectives exist only 'for a moment'.

Summer-bleached and swaddling the paddle-boat  
 and tin canoe, the jetty shoulders, for a moment,  
 clean right angles, lichen seams heavy as voices  
 tacking now across water, calling 'Don't' or 'Boat' –  
 it hardly matters to me. The way I scribble  
 is like the way a squirrel or a cardinal  
 is fumbling in the thicket to my left:  
 at least he knows what he's looking for.

(SD 12)

Groarke's imaginative attention rests on the jetty – that man-made construction that protrudes into the existential mystery of the lake, here 'swaddling' the paraphernalia of American literary fiction.<sup>8</sup> The voices overheard here are discernible only by their vowel sounds, not by what their words connote, and are in any case of little interest to the poet intent on her own creative labours. This is ironic, of course, because these voices form part of the poem's final meaning, again showing that what is at a distance constantly impinges on the poet's mind. In addition to this covert attentiveness to her immediate surroundings, Groarke's poem is alive with the memories of earlier texts and as the poem progresses these may be seen to hint at a range of literary contexts, from Twain's American adventures to Wordsworth's *Prelude*. There are resonances here too of poems by both Thomas Kinsella and Bernard O'Donoghue, who have found analogues for their writing process in the avian world.<sup>9</sup> In 'The Jetty', the creative breakthrough occurs at a point of ambiguity in the natural world: 'I think I've found it when the opposite hill / throws down another version of itself / on the lake's gloss' (SD 12). As well as seeing the landscape inverted in the water's surface, the speaker also records how the acts of reading and writing add layers from the imagined and observed worlds to the text-in-process. The doubling of representation in this poem is potentially disturbing, though, as it exposes the process of repetition even in the singular space of the newly created poem.

This reaches to the heart of the tension in this collection, between, in Rorty's terms, 'the attempt to represent or express something that was already there and the attempt to make something that never had been dreamed of before'.<sup>10</sup> This tension exemplifies the working of memory as both a reclamation of the past and an imaginative creation that may help us better to understand what we have experienced, either personally or collectively. Groarke sometimes uses the breaking of surfaces as a way of investigating the coexistence of a shared material memory and an

original perception. The poem 'Trapdoor' records water's relationship to its environment, and how its appearance shifts and changes according to circumstance:

It fools no one.  
 Not the dragonflies or midges,  
 not the pine trees or the moon,  
 not the swimmer, me, breaststroking out  
  
 to immerse myself at its dark heart,  
 to witness how nothing, not even silence  
 or my own dim company, can disturb  
 that practised and accomplished suffering.

(SD 35)

In keeping with a reading of water that privileges it as a metaphor for subconscious states, the 'dark heart' of this lake is the repository of suffering and of concealed life. Here Groarke envisages a lake not as a continuous space of water, though, but rather one divided into different states of experience: in this way the distinction between past and present can be made clear, even as their capacity for remaining undifferentiated is also expressed. The underwater descent, so much a part of the investigation of self and psyche, is linked here to observed detail (the pike), to tragic memory (the two young deaths) and to the surreal (the dock that 'unhinges itself') (SD 35).

The concept of doubleness acquires new significance too: right through this collection Groarke dwells on the past, not only the lost past of personal experience but the pastness of her earlier texts. Many of these poems reprise ideas and images from previously published work with new or intensified meaning. The metaphorical structure of 'Trapdoor' marks a return to Groarke's first collection *Shale*, which is prefaced by a quotation from Elizabeth Bishop's 'The Riverman': 'I waded into the river / and suddenly a door / in the water opened inward'. Some of Bishop's ambiguous treatment of the movement between water and land, between different states of being, informs this early book, especially a poem such as 'Sunday's Well' that explores the relationship between individual identity and domestic space in ways that also disturb the existence of clear boundaries. Groarke's return to this scheme of images some 15 years later indicates a need to explore the development of her creative perception and to disturb any sense of easy progression towards new forms of understanding. Instead, this strategy of doubling back affirms the disjointed ways in which meaning is made.

The water imagery that emphasizes processes of movement and readjustment in *Juniper Street* here becomes an apt motif for the fear of lost selfhood, not only replacing the safety of domestic happiness but also challenging the possibility of poetic containment in conditions of personal, and cultural, uncertainty. In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva suggests that for many exiles the homeland may be represented by a time rather than a place, ‘a lost mirage of the past which he will never be able to recover’.<sup>11</sup> ‘Away’ (the second of two poems with that title in *Spindrift*) presents the transnational experience in a manner that dramatizes the geographical separation of the speaker from her children. Her ability not only to speak to her children but also to glimpse their lives by technological means opens up new possibilities in the realms of virtual experience. The performative dimension of Groarke’s treatment of technology is again to the fore but temporality is the most crucial factor in determining the fragility of the connection across space:

I am three thousand miles ago,  
five hours in the red.

What would it take –  
one crossed cyber wire,  
a virtual hair’s breadth awry –

for these synapsed hours  
to bloat to centuries,  
for my background

to be rescinded  
to a Botticelli blue,  
my webcam image

ruffled and pearled,  
speaking vintage words  
into spindrift?

(SD 26)

The order that time represents is easily disturbed, Groarke suggests, and with it the codes of connection are meaningless. These codes relate both to the past – in the shape of a family unity now lost – and to the uncertain future. The simultaneity suggested by the use of Skype is refuted when the speaker contemplates viewing her children’s lives on Google Earth – a visualization that is at once intimate and frozen in time. In this scheme, the distinction between past and present is problematized. It suggests that Groarke’s poetic progression is an

assimilative one, always turning back on itself to produce new meanings and perspectives. Although her work is acutely attentive to the individual moment of experience, it often gives the impression that the speaker has already absorbed this experience; that it has been reflected upon not only deeply but also in an enduring way. Thus, Groarke's openness to American culture, here and in *Juniper Street*, is not a dynamic of change and development, but rather one of return, as the core concerns of her poetry find new materials of expression. It is in illuminating the complex temporal modes of Groarke's writing that her transnational experience is most valuable.

The sense of isolation, even of fear, that shadows the subject position in this collection is also reflected in its changed domestic representation. For Groarke, the interior or domestic space has always been a site of investigation, one in which the relationship between self and world can be explored. Even where the domestic space has been signalled as apparently secure, the relationship between the singular viewer and this space is often one of disturbed vision. A striking example of this is the poem 'Orange' from *Flight* (2002), which sees a fissure open through the centre of the poem as the speaker surveys the brightly lit family home from outside in the wintery dark. The separateness that enables the speaker to look at her family from a distance, yet closely, also creates apparently contradictory feelings of belonging and being excluded. It is a strategy that Groarke employs in increasingly complex ways in *Spindrift*, where feelings of estrangement are ironically accompanied by some of the closest scrutiny of the material world we have yet seen in this poet's work. Capturing a moment of perfect attention is by now a hallmark of Groarke's poetry and in *Spindrift* it finds particular significance when set against the wilfulness of natural processes that storms and tides invoke. Within these states of uncertainty and flux are to be found the most resonant of features – a tear in the satin lining of a handbag, the sound of scissors cutting, a car headlamp reflected on a gatepost – details that are not just evocative of an instant of human experience, but confirm that our relationship to the world is often cast in just this fleeting way. It is as though the awareness of mutability brings the impulse to record in detail, to lay down memories for the future. Now the space of the house is no longer a place of security but instead one that is breached or darkening. A poem such as 'The Stairwell' uses wordplay to generate the imagined well at the centre of the house, the deliberate rise and fall of the machinery marking a strange state somewhere between sleeping and waking. The absence of

the speaking subject from this mechanistic process, and her abdication of future responsibility, is a significant indication of the future loss of meaningful involvement in shared domestic processes. The instability of the boundaries of the home is evident in the shape of the collection as a whole; in the way the poems resonate with one another, just as ‘the open plan of this last house / pulses and contracts’. This poem, entitled ‘The Box’, concludes in fear that shared experience and understanding may be irretrievably lost: ‘that all the years we lived here drain away’ (*SD* 31). This is ultimately the fear that discontinuity and meaninglessness lie at the core of human existence. Both the fear of loss and its acceptance mark *Spindrift*, yet it does not simply represent emotional responses to lived experience, instead it engages fundamentally with the making and the loss of meaning.

The rich possibilities of the material world are also present in the poem ‘Beyond Me’, where again what is beyond the bounds of human subjectivity and understanding is the subject of scrutiny. The interwoven nature of time and space is immediately apparent: ‘The hours stack up like saucers’ (*SD* 43). The poem, like several others here, progresses by means of association – the image of saucers is followed by that of knives ‘resting on their polished sides’; the ‘*stream*’ of light leads us to ‘Rain falls in *reams*’ (*SD* 43) (my italics). The ability of language to guide our thought-processes by sound and association lends particular significance to the act of writing and to its role in making, rather than describing, meaning.

Rain falls in reams: whatever else there is allays  
a loneliness plump with your absence, that balances,  
tightrope and fall, to either side of me.

What do I ask? To make something of these lines  
extend to you; to have you turn in my direction;  
the long-life bulb by my front door illuminate your hand.

Even a single hair on your pillow knows all there is of you:  
even more than I, though I have thought of you,  
made much of your fern eyes and speckled wrist

(*SD* 43)

The absence at the core of this poem is expressed in the image of the tightrope and the corresponding fear of falling, yet the finest line between meaning and emptiness is of course the poetic line. The word ‘line’ itself offers multiple meanings and the speaker here makes clear that her poem is a means to reach the absent figure and to draw him



back into the very world the poem inscribes. In this way the ideal reader is the absent 'you' of the poem, and our awareness of this missing figure prompts us to consider the distance that has opened up between speaker and reader throughout the collection, suggesting that uncreated meanings shadow every poem. The limitations of knowledge have become integral to the poet's awareness of the process of writing itself – that it can be no more than one version of lived experience. The DNA to be found in a single hair reveals more of the individual than the creative act. To press a version of the person 'between unyielding sheets' is to preserve in the manner of the pressed flower and to render as a text – unyielding because printed, ineradicable. The absent figure both opens up and closes down creative response: the speaker must 'rest' from the labour of representation and attend to the material of her own poem. At this point, 'Beyond Me' begins to turn back on itself: the speaker becomes the poet tinkering with the first images. The earlier question – 'What do I ask?' – is answered: 'I have nothing to ask' (*SD* 43). The line of the poem extended to the absent figure is cut in two in the truncated final line: 'It is not over. I will not again' (*SD* 43). These syllabically balanced yet strangely incomplete sentences test the relationship between present and future, being simultaneous expressions of continuance and finality, hope and despair.

### ***X*: No Curve or Arc to Double Back?**

Many of the preoccupations of *Spindrift* can be traced again in *X*, published in 2014. Its elusive title – the definitions of which are more numerous than for *Spindrift* – alerts us to the further fragmentation of meaning in this volume. The title poem signals the juxtapositions that the book as a whole creates: 'straight lines only / no curve or arc / to double back' (*X* 14). This sense of forward motion is belied by the extent to which this collection is in dialogue with Groarke's last volume, especially in its depiction of the crucial intersection between space and time. John McAuliffe sees it as marking an important transition for Groarke: it 'inhabits the empty space it describes in a way that feels new in Irish writing: the poems tell a story of reclaimed and recovered spaces, albeit haunted by memory'.<sup>12</sup>

*X* becomes a puzzle not easily revealing how its parts fit together, and in this way it alerts us to the significant relationship between the individual poem and the volume as a whole, as well as between the human being as a singular and relational entity. In the absence of the

‘O’ that would confirm this letter to be a kiss, we are given – but given to question – the sensual image of the slipping shoulder strap of the dress. This seems to be a glimpse of the past, the tangled nature of which takes years to unpick. But the parts are also indicative of the relationship between lovers, intersecting at the point of intensity then moving in opposite directions:

as if here and now  
 were equal lines  
 fused the way lovers are fused  
 for as long as it takes  
 to pass through the eye of love  
 to recover, to egress.

(X 14)

The intersection of time and place is important here, as it will be in the volume as a whole. They are seen as ‘equal lines’, briefly conjoined yet divergent in meaning; their identical shape before and after this moment of unity suggests both a purposeful movement and an ‘egress’. Here the nuclear family represents the state of completeness, making the four-sided shape ‘full of itself’ before being ‘cornered, quartered, hinged’ – a depleted condition reinforced by the dwindling stanza that follows. The uneven shape of the poem as a whole belies the exact symmetry of its central image; later in the text the prevalence of single lines marks the opening up of blank space and the slowing, then the cessation, of shared time. This process has some affinities with changes that sites of collective memory undergo: when these memories fade, Jay Winter suggests, ‘the sites of memory decompose, or simply fade into the landscape’.<sup>13</sup> In Groarke’s poem, though the speaker contemplates the interdependence of presence and absence: ‘as crosshairs train on a blank page / / as arrows turn in on themselves / / as the blades of a bedroom ceiling fan / come to / / a perfectly obvious stop’ (X 15). The loss of momentum seems, after a certain point, inevitable. It brings our focus back to the present moment much as the speaker in ‘Fate’ rejects the conflation of past and future that a fairy story represents, in favour of the chance to ‘walk in the room / of my own breath’ (X 23), a containment that paradoxically expresses the potential for personal liberation.

Other poems in this volume continue the engagement with domestic materiality that is a defining feature of *Spindrift*. These texts produce light – they are full of reflective surfaces, from ‘A Pocket Mirror’, with which the book opens, to the glass bowls of ‘Where She Imagines the Want of Being Alone’, ‘3’ and ‘Midsummer’ (X 17; 18; 36), to the

antique silver box and ‘unscheduled silver’ of the photograph (*X* 31; 75). White – all colour and no colour – predominates in the first half of the book, speaking of the urge to embrace the world yet also expressing a profound sense of emptiness. As Sherry Turkle has argued, the meaning of objects shifts according to time and place: ‘objects speak in a way that destroys any simple stories we might tell about our relations to nature, history and the inanimate; they destroy any simple sense we have about progress and our passage through time’.<sup>14</sup> This places the volume, as its title poem suggests, at a pivotal point between past and future, where the radical break with an earlier existence has not yet yielded a transformed existence. The signs of renewal can be glimpsed in the second half of the book; at first, though, this potential is tentatively expressed. The opening poem begins with the image of a snowdrop, which finds its analogue in the white poppy from the garden sequence; interiors have ‘white door handles’ and ‘off-white walls’ (*X* 17; 18). ‘The White Year’ is explicitly concerned with the dynamics of remembering and forgetting:

I am told that memory can't afford  
to care less about what it brings to light  
just as I'm told the table does not

occupy itself with cleanliness  
nor the made bed with desire,  
but it is difficult to believe.

(*X* 12)

Here memory is linked to the material world – it resembles an object more than a process, suggesting that it is prompted by the sensory stimulus that everyday life provides. The speaker resists this apparent arbitrariness, but the touch of irony does not negate the imaginative significance of material objects for the poet, or the creative necessity of reading these objects as an important part of the individual’s negotiation with the world. In this poem, the light / dark binary indicates the shifting mood that grief for lost love induces: what memory ‘brings to light’ prompts a ‘contingent darkness’; trees ‘toy with shadows of themselves’ (*X* 12). Ultimately, the speaker judges, neither memory nor forgetting is randomly linked to the materiality of the present tense. Instead, time moves gradually onward, confirming the sequential character of making meaning: ‘night after night, city after city, / word after functional word’ (*X* 13). The past self is not subsumed into the present, but neither does their coexistence rule out the demand of the ‘whole body [...] to be in possession of itself’ (*X* 13) and capable of unfettered action in the world.

This contemplation of multiple selves finds later expression in two poems invoking ghostly presences. 'The Ghost on the Road' conjures a figure from shadow and rain, a presence moving towards the house from which the speaker watches. His relationship to the past is ambiguous, though; he is created by, and from, an act of observation. He looks up at the speaker's window just once: 'but I know that look / and everything that will come of it / given ink and time' (*X* 62). This contemplation of self and other emphasizes not intimacy, as is more commonly the case in Groarke's work, but an enigmatic distance and an awareness of the power of writing to create from almost nothing: 'the ghost on the road / is a ghost on the road // for all I make of him' (*X* 62). Yet if this ghost is conjured by language, he manages to acquire an identity independent of it, suggesting once more the coexistence of multiple versions of the past, each one created by a separate attempt at understanding. In the poem that follows this one, simply called 'Ghost Poem', the revenants are not singular but multiple, and they have the same effect of slowing time 'so one minute is cavernous // compared to the next' (*X* 64). Unlike the ghost on the road, these invoke bodily memories – 'your wrist / on my breast', 'your veins in silverpoint mapped / on my skin' (*X* 64) – yet this shared life is 'made up', conjured by words. This has important connotations for the relationship between language and memory, suggesting that both the original emotions and the memory of them exist primarily in language.

Centrally placed in *X* is the 'Garden Sequence', comprising thirteen poems in varying forms. Though in Renaissance times the garden was construed as evidence of fitting authority, its modern representation is suggestive of physical and mental renewal. For Groarke, it combines the energies of growth with questions of structure and form and marks a significant transition from her earlier representations of nature. Though landscapes have played a prominent part in her work, she describes herself in a recent interview as 'more given to investigating how nature might mirror human psychological experience and states, than to the act of description'.<sup>15</sup> Earlier, indoor and outdoor spaces were often presented in oppositional ways, signalling divergent perspectives on both present and past. Here her invocation of the imagery of the garden doesn't assume unity of perspective but reflects more deeply on the passage of time and on the complex and contingent character of human perception.

Although the representation of gardens offers Groarke an opportunity to engage with the non-human habitat, in these poems she is concerned with forms of understanding that encompass contextualized human

relationships too. Breath is a recurring trope in these poems, obliquely considering the different relationships between human and plant life. It appears first in the opening text: ‘Only a roofline tin whistle / practising “The Parting Glass” / construes the gap / between lupin and rose / as possible held breath’ (*X* 41). Here the interaction between human sound and plant life sets the tone for the oblique and fleeting contact that the sequence will explore. The shape of the stanza – which is without punctuation – is itself that of the held breath, and the subject of the barely heard song is of closure.<sup>16</sup> This draws attention to the poet’s choice of the sequence mode,<sup>17</sup> as well as to the ways in which they revisit earlier themes and images in her work.

From this opening poem, Groarke acknowledges the pivotal role of the poetic imagination in interpreting these plants, but in noting its deliberate character she also confirms the power of symbolic meaning and its significance for how we read the world. The poem she places second in the sequence, ‘The Garden in Hindsight’, carries this idea over to a direct exploration of past and present. Imagining a garden that belonged to her years before, the speaker frames this memory in a particularized present. The poem recalls an earlier theme of Groarke’s – that of a visit to a previous home – encountered in such poems as ‘Other People’s Houses’ (*OPH* 52–3) and ‘The Return’ (*JS* 26). In contrast to those poems, however, ‘The Garden in Hindsight’ is not a poem of intimacy. Rather, it invokes a refusal to connect with the world; the black tulips are remembered as ‘close in themselves’, they ‘turn embittered / hearts against all possible sky’ (*X* 42). Yet these are balanced by more recently planted bulbs that ‘yield / as to remembered light’, suggesting an inherent desire to bloom (*X* 42). The tension here between a dark inwardness and a disposition open to growth and change shadows a number of poems in this sequence. This capacity to look in two directions – towards the past and the future – is a distinctive feature of this collection, helping both to connect it to her previous work and to suggest new aesthetic departures.

The metaphorical power of garden imagery reinforces the concept of unity in this group of poems. In ‘The Garden as Event’ we pick up echoes of W. B. Yeats’s root, blossom and bole in the relationship Groarke traces between skyline and sky, between branch and cherry tree.<sup>18</sup> The dynamics of part and whole are important both in the sequence and in individual poems, and have spatial and temporal resonance too: as all these poems indicate, time can be both fleeting and expansive. In the unchanging kitchen scene of ‘The Garden as Event’, with its barely moving square of light, we see reflections of poems from

*Spindrift* (2009) – ‘The hours stack up like saucers. The knives / are resting on their polished sides. A widening stream / from the back-door light is the last thing sure of itself’ (‘Beyond Me’, *SD* 43). Now the act of making becomes even more deliberate than in earlier poems, so that just as the ‘fruit in the fruitbowl glosses / a composed version of itself’ (*X* 46), elsewhere too there is a concern for the realistic detail that alludes to artful creation. Groarke has acknowledged the challenge of negotiating ‘between the life one lives and the life one writes’, and in the garden poems the subtleties of this relationship are probed in images that emerge from earlier texts: the cowslips in ‘their borrowed pot’ grow from the convergence of life and art in *Spindrift*’s ‘Cowslips’, and take up the strands of its discussion (*S* 61).

‘The Garden, Over Time’ reflects on the transitory nature of belonging, balancing the contingencies of human existence against the unhurried pace of nature. Time is not marked conventionally by the passage of the seasons here, but rather by the erratic involvement of the human in nature’s rhythms, suggesting that we are both part of and other to this non-human world. The tree that would not thrive finds its analogue in the false starts of independent life before a new pattern of existence can be established; trial and error is the process foremost here. This sense of learning anew is also a way of refiguring the past to create meaningful connections to the present – even if these connections may conversely mark a decisive break in understanding. This disruption is expressive too: the barren winter halted language – the ‘bones of winter [...] ring hollow as words / / I would just as soon / shroud in darkness / as bring to / open light’ (*X* 58). Yet though the speaker seems to treat the future casually (the early arrival of summer is ‘fine by me’), she is not careless of the fragility of hope; reflecting on the speed of time’s passing she concludes:

Left

to my own devices,  
I would spend it, surely,  
  
cradling the only  
fact of winter  
coming in early,  
yes, this year.

(*X* 59)

Three-beat lines expand slightly to accommodate the disyllabic opening words ‘cradling’ and ‘coming’, creating the sensation of a shallow breath – a delicate pulse of life for which the poet is grateful.

The evolution of Groarke's response to the materiality of the past – and what it means for the future – has been considerable. Closely observed detail remains important in this work, but temporal continuities have given way to an acceptance of change. Since *Spindrift*, the uncertainties of history have been actualized in the domestic life of the poems and it is in this space that the growth of understanding must, and does, take place. The thematic unities of Groarke's work yield to an understanding of the past made complex both through suffering and through aesthetic refinement. So it is that the evolving precision of the poet's language leads to greater insight into our relationship with the past.

### Notes

- 1 The relationship between public and private readings of Groarke's work is a contested one. John Redmond argues that it is *almost* possible to supply a publicly oriented reading for the poems in *Other People's Houses*: 'The way in which Groarke allows her poems to brush against seemingly relevant public narratives gives them a necessary, extra charge.' *Poetry and Privacy: Questioning Public Interpretations of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Bridgend: Seren, 2013), p. 166. See also Selina Guinness, "'The Annotated House': Feminism and Form', in Justin Quinn (ed.), *Irish Poetry After Feminism* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2008), pp. 69–79.
- 2 Catriona Clutterbuck, 'New Irish Women Poets: The Evolution of (In)determinacy in Vona Groarke', in Fran Brearton and Alan Gillis (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 661.
- 3 Lord Louis Mountbatten was a British naval officer, the second cousin of Queen Elizabeth II. He was Supreme Allied Commander in South-east Asia during the Second World War and the last Viceroy of India. In 1979, he was killed by an IRA bomb at Mullaghmore, County Sligo. See Bew and Gillespie, *Northern Ireland: A Chronology of the Troubles*.
- 4 The Ritz Cinema in Athlone was built in 1939 and was designed by Bill O'Dwyer from the office of Michael Scott, the renowned Irish architect. Extensive glazing and white plasterwork, together with portholes and flat roofs suggested a maritime theme. After years of disuse, the building was finally demolished in the 1990s. '1938 – Ritz Cinema, Athlone, Co. Westmeath', <http://archiseek.com/2009/1938-ritz-cinema-athlone/>.
- 5 *Gandhi* is a biographical film directed by Richard Attenborough. It dramatizes the life of Mohandas Gandhi, the leader of India's non-violent independence movement. It was released in Ireland on April 22, 1983, [www.imdb.com/title/tt0083987/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0083987/).
- 6 *Heat and Dust*, a novel by Ruth Praver Jhabvala, was published in 1975 and won the Booker Prize in the same year. In 1983, it was made into a film from Merchant Ivory productions ([www.imdb.com/title/tt0084058/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0084058/)).
- 7 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 41.
- 8 'Paddle-boat / and tin canoe' evoke the culture of Mark Twain's *Adventures of*

- Huckleberry Finn* (London: Penguin, 2012), the quintessential text of American coming of age.
- 9 Poetic precursors include Wordsworth, terrified by cliffs in his stolen canoe (*The Prelude*, Book 1). In the Irish context, further resonances can be noted: Thomas Kinsella's 'Wyncote, Pennsylvania: a gloss' was first published in *New Poems* (1973), shortly after he had moved to America. It includes a sensitive description of a mocking-bird in this new environment. Bernard O'Donoghue's 'The Nuthatch' draws parallels between bird and observing poet, noting that the bird 'didn't / Lift his head as he pored over his wood-text'. See Bernard O'Donoghue, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), p. 17.
  - 10 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 47.
  - 11 Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 10.
  - 12 John McAuliffe, 'X marks a new place for Vona Groarke, and for Irish writing'. Review of *X* by Vona Groarke, *Irish Times*, March 15, 2014, p. 13.
  - 13 Jay Winter, 'Sites of Memory and the Shadow of War', in Erll and Nünning, *Cultural Memory Studies*, p. 72.
  - 14 Turkle discusses the work of Bruno Latour in Sherry Turkle (ed.), *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), loc. 2449 [kindle edition].
  - 15 Hedwig Schwall, 'How Do you Make a Teapot Be Intellectually Interesting? An Interview with Vona Groarke', *Irish University Review* 43.2 (Autumn/Winter 2013), pp. 288–306.
  - 16 'Oh all the money that e'er I had, I spent it in good company / And all the harm that e'er I've done, alas, it was to none but me / And all I've done for want of wit to memory now I can't recall / So fill to me the parting glass, good night and joy be with you all' ('The Parting Glass'). See Colm Ó Lochlainn, *Irish Street Ballads* (London: Pan, 1978).
  - 17 Four of these poems were printed in *Irish University Review* 43.2 (Autumn/Winter 2013), in the following order: 'The Garden from Above', 'The Garden in Hindsight', 'The Garden as Event' and 'The Garden as an Island Approached by a Tidal Causeway'.
  - 18 'O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer, / Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole? / O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, / How can we know the dancer from the dance?'. W. B. Yeats, 'Among School Children', *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, vol. 1, *The Poems* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2010), p. 219. Groarke herself has commented on the importance of Yeats to her as a practising poet: 'he's a great technician, he has great mastery of metre and music within a line ... he also has real intellectual ballast in the poems'. Schwall, 'How Do you Make a Teapot?', p. 290.