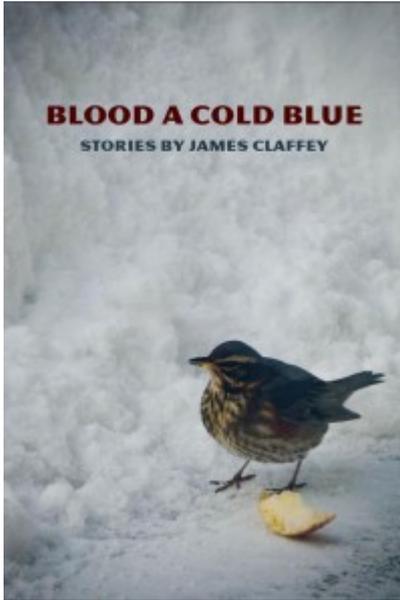


[Blood a Cold Blue](#)

written by Guest Contributor | October 22, 2014



Blood a Cold Blue by James Claffey

Press 53, October 2013

[Press 53](#) / [Amazon](#)

I've recently dug deep into James Claffey's first collection of short, short stories, *Blood a Cold Blue* (Press 53, 2013), reading and re-reading the book several times. I have followed Claffey's work for years, reading him in numerous journals, meeting him in writers' forums, and featuring him in *Blue Five Notebook* and *Flash Frontier*. Claffey grew up in Rathgar, Ireland, around the corner from James Joyce's birthplace, and spent important early years in Dublin and London. He later moved to California where he's been ever since – first in San Francisco and now in Carpinteria, where he lives on an avocado ranch with his wife, their daughter, and an Australian cattle dog. In his fiction, Claffey draws a great deal on his immediate surroundings. In that way, this collection is much like reading a fragmented sketch of the writer's life. It's not directly autobiographical, but it contains intimate details of a life well lived, including the standards of love and heartache, and also unflinching examinations of death and decay, broken limbs and healing headwounds. Plus soaring hawks and stippled landscapes – there are plenty of those, too. The stories move back and forth in setting and time, taking us to complicated memories in faraway Ireland, navigating the heated terrain of Louisiana (where the writer earned an MFA) and exploring the mountains and plains of California. The last story leads, not surprisingly, back to Dublin and ends, in a flare of irony, self-awareness, and beauty: "...and Da declares there to be 'no place like home.'"

Looking at the book as a whole, I begin, as the author does himself, with an epigraphic quote from *Ulysses* – "Hold to the now, the here, through which all future plunges to the past." – and the first story, "Blood a Cold Blue." These provide a sort of summary of the collection: a view into the whole world (past, present and future) captured in one small space. If I could only

read these two things, I'd treasure them as gifts. I could ruminate on either for weeks, months. I could read and re-read each small thing and find new inspirations every time.

Look at the opening lines of "Blood a Cold Blue":

Inside my head the cracked shells of ochre-tinged crawfish litter the place. At night, I wear a knit cap to keep the shards from falling out and staining the pillow. More than my fear of dirty pillowcases, I fear discovering the contents of my mind.

I am immediately drawn to the chaos captured, and the way this opening suggests all that is lurking, waiting to pour out. A man's head on a dirty pillowcase, a man's world with all its messiness. Past, present, future. The reader can't help but wonder about the contours and texture of those contents, and soon we find ourselves making connections in unlikely places, from the banks of the Liffey to a long-lost tennis racquet.

Claffey is a master at juxtaposing particulars – things we can understand, like lint or a racquet – with bizarre details that can only come from his imagination, like the relationship between that lint and that racquet or the short afterfeathers fluffing outward on a girl-seagull's neck. We may not understand the girls' transformation, but we know it's because of things we can't understand – and that is how it should be. We don't know what happened in the clinic on the Beara peninsula, what caused this girl to return "with a seagull's head where her own lovely one used to be," but what matters here is the boy's careful attention to the girl, and that wispy afterfeather. The tenderness and the bizarre – those go hand in hand here (I want to see the tennis racquet strung with collected bellybutton lint).

Beyond that, the story contains poetry ("Shimmer, shimmer, the seashells summon the answer from her silent lips"), metaphor ("My words are knots, tied fisherman's"), quaint ruminations on love ("her feathers remind me that we are not the same, that we cannot..., and shall not be together, no matter how much I want for us to fall in love and live happily ever after") and a classically Catholic slant on the human condition, full of guilt, longing and regret:

Stained glass windows. The sun in blue, in green, in red. Jesus falls a third time. In the shadow of the confession box we sit close, her thigh against mine, her pinkie touching mine. Love is sacred, love is a dream, some form of penance for thinking we might work out in the end.

I like how Claffey pays close attention to rhythm, too. The way threes work in the above passage is wonderful. *Stained glass windows*: three simple words to open. Then the sun in triplicate color, through the aforementioned windows (and with the repetition of 'in' creating a staccato sequencing keeping us on edge). Then there's Jesus – always Jesus. No need to bring in the triumvirate of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; we know they are lurking in the shadows. And love? Love is: 1) sacred, 2) a dream, and 3) penance.

We can take the opening story as a map of what's to come, with signposts and

markers hiding around corners to help us find our way. We don't always know where we're going, and that's okay too; this is dense stuff from one man's relationship to the world and to his provenance, Ireland, after all.



James Claffey

And so, map in hand, I read on, with discoveries along the way. I admire the experimental writing in "Jam Jar," its fragmented opening catching my attention visually and sonically, and "Skull of a Sheep," closing the collection with a break-neck speed and almost non-existent punctuation.. I like the sing-song verse and interlocking events of "The Blow" that make me squirm: "Here is the hand that dealt the blow that ended the marriage that made the baby..." Death intertwines with birth, decrepitude contrasts with vibrancy and color.

At the end of my exploration, I'm left with haunted boys ("Bedwetter," "Witness for the Prosecution," and "Her Shoulder an Enigma") and bird boys ("Birdcage"); reminiscences full of melancholy ("Return to a Watery Life" and "Solemnity of Our Lady of Guadalupe"); and glimpses of small kindnesses and fragmented happy moments ("Work Week" and "Prehistory"); landscapes of harsh existence ("The Sky is a Prairie"); and dreamscapes where present smashes into past ("Crumbs of Darkness" and "Dew on the Stalk").

And there is, of course, Ireland, an Ireland Claffey views simultaneously with intimacy and distance. Take "Ireland in Four Facts," which takes us from 1) a fact-driven orientation to 2) a writer struggling with syllables and letters ("Cry, cringe.") and voices in his head ("Dry your hands in future. Wash my hands of the lot of you.") to 3) an injured boy confronted by an overwhelming grief ("I let go of the sound – the kept vowels and consonants of grief. Watch them escape into the air, like a cages creature given an open door.") to 4) a dreamscape containing falling and confusion, disappointment and regret.

And there are birds. Always birds.

There are flaws, of course. If I'm looking closely, I find the titles of "Nylon Folds of Oldness" and "Autumn Tinged with Mud" overly descriptive and revealing too much. I like Claffey best when the story emerges *between* the folds and *in* the mud – but I prefer more oblique titles that don't point me so directly at what's to come. There's also is a misplaced phrase here, a

dangling modifier there. But those are things that can be reworked and edited and need not get in the way of the whole. For me, bigger issues arise in the smallest of stories. Some stories stick a little less than others; some feel like they are part of a whole, almost too fragmented and leaving the reader wanting more. I'll likely remember phrasings from "Liver Spots" more than the story itself. The same can be said for "Bark of Coyote," containing Wilde, Blake and Three Dog Night all in a mere 128 words. I love the play in "the impudence of being earnest" and the closing image: "Into thin air, the step off as easy as tying an opened shoelace." But I'm not sure whether to call this a *story* or a simply *scene*, a philosophical suggestion – as colorful and vibrant as it is.

Even so, what I see here is the writer's desire to play with language, and so I don't find this a major blemish. Indeed, the idea that some of the stories are mere fragments is not necessarily a bad thing; glimpses are sometimes more beautiful than the whole. But in "Her Father, a Tombstone," for example, I wished for more, right there on the page. I am given the tiniest impression of two figures (girl and father) but I have a feeling this would fare better as a short story as opposed to two small paragraphs. This story falls short of other one-page selections, like "Losing My Voice," which paints a complexity of emotion over distance and time and tells a *whole* story, or "Hellfire," which is merely descriptive, with nothing fancy beyond declarative sentences – "The Old Man turns the change in his pocket and the jingle rings in my ears. Mam is in the kitchen, making brown bread." – but creates an intimacy in its attention to detail and language. I'm there in the kitchen with the narrator and his family at the end of the day as the sun falls in the sky, and, at that moment, I don't want to be anywhere else.

For me, this collection constitutes an exemplary, heartfelt introduction to James Claffey's work. It's also a promise of what's to come, rich in content, poetry and imagery, offering a glimpse into the human condition – strange and startling and beautiful all at once, much like the passage I leave you with, which takes us back to the opening story and its striking close:

Her hands are paler than snow, the blood a cold blue layer beneath the sin. On a garden gate a thrush perches on a silver fleur-de-lis. The breeze brings salt water mortal sin.



Michelle Elvy lives and works as a writer, editor and manuscript assessor based in New Zealand, currently traveling in SE Asia. She edits at *Blue Five Notebook* and *Flash Frontier: An Adventure in Short Fiction*. She is also an associate editor for the forthcoming *Flash Fiction International* (W.W. Norton, 2015). More at michelleelvy.com, [Glow](#)

Worm and Momo, her compact traveling home.