

# Aoife Mannix

## *The Witness*

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AOIFE MANNIX, born in Dublin but raised all around the world, is an award-winning, lyrical but worldly poet equally at home with theatrical performance. A *Poet in The City* placement within a London school has informed her poems here, together with observations made from talking to future writers about their environment and their place in the world today. Aoife is widely published and has been broadcast on the BBC. After touring performances and workshops with the British Council in 2007, she appeared in her own poetry and music show *Growing Up an Alien*.

# Flaika

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Outside the school gates,  
the knife spins deep into flesh –  
some education

# Blind

The policeman in his black padded jacket  
asks if I've seen a zombie.  
His sniffer dog eyes me suspiciously  
as the helicopter whispers overhead.  
Sirens echo to each other,  
an ambulance screeches to a halt.  
Thick black smoke paints my lungs  
with fragments of stolen cars,  
idle afternoon explosions,  
a fireball glimpsed from a garden window.  
Glass hail, Samurai swords, barbed wire.

Now the suburbs are at war,  
the young sharpen their postcodes.  
Fear taps the streets, casual and cruel,  
recognising no one, but keeping count  
of the years unlived. A roll call of random tragedy,  
the Russian roulette of blind folded blades.  
Teenage mortality, grand theft soldiers,  
boys killing boys.

# come FORWARD

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A ten year old child in a stairwell,  
the broken glass pressed into his artery,  
a river of innocence flowing across dirty bricks.

Pigeons bearing witness,  
more willing to share their feather accusations  
than the neighbours plucking their curtains.

Their silence draped over a small white coffin,  
not wishing to admit this wooden graffiti  
spells the name of a killer,  
not prepared to identify their own terror.

# Joining UP gunfire

The thing is you need your mates.  
Late at night in the park, when you get pranked  
and your phone keeps promising revenge.  
They say they know who you are,  
where you are, which area you come from.  
The postal codes are battle lines  
so just walking across the street,  
you become a target in an unknown war.  
It doesn't matter that you've done nothing,  
that they don't recognise your address  
is cause enough to put fear into your teeth.

And they're kicking and they're cursing,  
the blows bitter bruises threatening gunshots.  
You wonder what it is they hate so much,  
but you don't have time for questions,  
not when the police don't understand protection,  
the cold sharp metal of your own terror.  
It's dangerous to be alone  
so you add some letters to your beef.

Now you're no longer a solitary wolf,  
but a pack, moving close and fast.  
Trouble howls your name.  
You haven't asked for this,  
but friends stick by each other.  
Their blood is your blood,  
only now it's some boy's blood  
smeared across the street.

The voices whispering we'll shank you next.  
The knife is in your hand,  
but you no longer know  
if you're the victim or the aggressor.  
Only that you're scared. Not tough or cool,  
you never wanted to be hard in the first place.  
The blade slipping so softly into flesh,  
some twist of fate, your fatal mistake.  
Can't they understand you're not a killer?  
You're fourteen and you only wanted to be safe.

# Outside the Bakers

It's a Saturday morning so sunny  
the streets beam at us  
as blossoms are swept from the gutters.  
We turn a corner into a ticker tape traffic jam,  
the policewoman on her walkie talkie  
whispering someone has fallen.

It catches in my fingers,  
this scene, for we all know  
soon there will be clutches of flowers  
clinging to a lamppost,  
and on the radio they sing  
that a boy has died.  
His throat sliced with pointless fury.

The smell of blood and baked bread  
hangs sweet in the air.  
Of course it wouldn't make so much difference  
if it were raining, or if he hadn't  
just celebrated his sixteenth birthday,  
but still it seems far too beautiful a day  
for a mother to hear the knock on the door  
that will wipe the sunshine from her life.

# On The Way Home

Every afternoon she gets this bus from school,  
sits at the back with her mates,  
singing and chatting whose kissing who,  
the secret language of text romances.  
Mostly she dismisses the boys  
with the corner of her eye, a flick of her hair.

But he gives her pause with his breath stealing smile,  
the fine velvet of his skin, the trust in his coffee eyes.  
He's a bit older than her, maybe seventeen,  
so practically on the cusp of being a man  
that she forgets to turn away.

She's still considering smiling back  
when three balaclava gangsters  
bound up the stairs swinging nunchuks,  
screaming blood letters.  
They grab the coffee eyed boy from his seat,  
a rag doll flung to the floor,  
and they're kicking and they're punching.

She sees a wink of steel  
and suddenly they scatter  
as the boy staggers to his knees,  
some dark shadow blooming across his stomach.  
He stares straight at her,  
the ghost of what might have been  
still haunting his lips.