WRITERS MOSAIC

Objects of Love

Rosaleen McDonagh

Spring of 2022. The train trip was booked immediately after the Covid restrictions were lifted. My destination was the death camp in Bernburg, Saxony-Anhalt, Germany. During October 1939, public health authorities began to encourage parents of children with disabilities to submit their young children to one of a number of specially designated paediatric clinics throughout Germany and Austria. The program's functionaries called their secret enterprise 'Aktion T4'. In August 1939, two weeks before the invasion of Poland, doctors and midwives filled out a questionnaire that would identify children born with various deformities or disabilities.

Friends had told me. Usually in demented states of rage. Rage at my ignorance. Rage at my apathy. Bodies. The atypical aesthetic. The Traveller body. The Sinti Roma body. My train journey, the jolts, the doors

opening at various stations, the fresh air, my deep breaths. My disabled family, my blood family, Roma and Travellers. My eyes are drawn to the news story of Ukrainian Roma people in Moldova. State-run reception centres segregate Roma refugees. Segregation, even in humanitarian responses to war; racism always has a role.

By June 1940, the mobile gas vans were being replaced with gas chambers that resembled showers. By 24 August 1941, when the first phase of this 'Euthanasia Programme' was brought to an end, over 70,000 patients from more than one hundred German hospitals had been killed. The operation would turn out to provide a model for the subsequent murder of millions of Jews, Roma and Sinti. Some of these children and adults with disabilities also had Roma and Sinti and Jewish identities. This part of the train journey was over. The information in my head. The reminder that the euthanasia movement in Germany was a throwback to the American eugenics movement conceived by a cousin of Darwin, Francis Galton, in 1883. In contemporary times, controversial, tricky, messy conversations about abortion and euthanasia are when people like me come into focus. My journey is to bear witness, tell the testimony, and interpret the debris of our universal eradication.

The cab driver nodding with familiarity as the address of the museum is handed over. The driver has driven many people like me here. To bear witness, to remember, to be part of that infernal history. A history that embodies shock, shame, at times, denial. The curator narrates the different impairments. The diverse ways of killing people. My body. My hand is pressed into my stomach. The bile sliding around inside me. Making its way up to my throat. Cramps in my stomach, any moment my bowels will open. The crowd moves to another room. It's overwhelming. Thirty thousand bodies like mine were taken, experimented on, and then incinerated. The litany includes Jews, the queers, the Roma and the crips. Each group having an intersectional relationship with others. My gender, my ethnicity, my Cerebral Palsy body – echoes that give meaning to those who were rendered to ashes. These bodies are objects of my love.

Rosaleen McDonagh

Rosaleen McDonagh is a playwright, performer, columnist for The Irish Times and a member of Aosdána. Her plays include *The Baby Doll Project*, *She's Not Mine*, *Rings*, *The Prettiest Proud Boy* and *Mainstream*. Her most recent commissions were *Walls and Windows* for the Abbey Theatre and *Contentious Spaces* for the Project Arts Centre. Rosaleen holds a BA, two MPhils from Trinity College Dublin and a PhD from Northumbria University. She is a board member of Pavee Point Traveller and Roma

Centre and was appointed a Human Rights Commissioner in June 2020.

Her first book, *Unsettled*, was published by Skein Press in 2021.

A recording of this text can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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