The Meaning of Things
Also by Elaine Randell

Songs of Hesperus
Telegrams from the Midnight Country
Untitled
Seven Poems
A Taper to the Outward Roome
Early in My Life
Long Hair for Birds
This, Our Frailty
Larger Breath of All Things
Hard to Place
Songs for the Sleepless
Beyond All Other: Poems 1970–1986
Prospect into Breath
Gut Reaction
Selected Poems 1970–2005
Faulty Mothering
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Dedicated to my parents,
Daphne Pauline Randell
12.2.1927–20.9.2005

Henry William Randell
8.5.1919–12.2.1979
SAMPLER
SAMPLER
Day’s work

Face

Turning to me he says that Father Christmas had not known what they had wanted so he hadn’t come that day but still it had been the best day of his life The boy looks at me for a long time studying me he says he knows why I have come today “It’s about the baby, he’s cute” he says The boy’s long white thin arms are like glass His face his face his face is totally opened to me Is the baby dead now he asks I tell him so
Day Centre

In the damp condemned Methodist Church hall
I visit Susan.
Her varicose legs in bobby socks
fold under the broken chair
as we speak of her children
now 6 and 9 she has not seen for
two years.
Susan’s
16-year-old boyfriend cuddles her
calls her Mum.
Above us on the wall there is Jesus
in a faded print
“suffer the little children”.
We wait outside together
passing the font, the hymn books are
under dust sheets. The nurse calls them
back for their ‘medication’ time.
Susan grabs my arm,
“You will tell them won’t you
that I’m marrying Pete.” She
nuzzles his neck.
“Only I want the boys to
make me a card.”
O abnormal lunatic giant of the world
I stand with life explained.
Air

I was there
Just by it
When it happened. He said to look away and he shouted but I
didn’t. It sort of compels you doesn’t it when someone says don’t
look. I wasn’t the same after that.
It probably took only seconds and I could hear mum’s voice in
my head that tea was on the table. Odd isn’t it, the things that
go through your mind. I remember the edge of his trouser leg
that’s all I could see. The noise reminded me of air going out of
balloon like the day when Sonia had the party and dad couldn’t
tie the ends up and she laughed a lot. Only she didn’t laugh
when it happened. She was still, very still and dead quiet. Dead
dead quiet and very still. I shan’t forget how still she was. Years
later I’ve thought of that.
When the police asked me what I saw I told about his trouser
leg and me being on the top bunk all the time and him knowing
that.
Hard to Place

‘Hard to Place was written while working for “Children need Families a project of the Children’s Society which places children with special needs into adoptive families.

I
His mother, a petrol pump attendant, was said by those who knew her to be far less than bright. She had not wanted the child but had wanted his father. She grew very fat with the pregnancy but told no one of the forthcoming child inside her. On the forecourt of the garage she went into labour while delivering three gallons of four star. They stifled screams with the rag that wiped the dip stick and mopped her waters with the sponge that cleaned the windscreen.

Now eight years later he’s a tiny child and the doctors write notes about his tiny head circumference and his stammer. He has moved foster homes eight times in the last three years. He is a difficult boy. The woman from the children’s home writes on his review form that he’s a nice enough child but that he often uses situations to his own advantage. His gait is odd, she comments, and he frequently limps to attract the attention of adults.

II
It must have been an odd thing from the start. The way they had met, the differing backgrounds from where they both came. He was from a strong Jewish family, his father had been murdered by the Nazis, his mother was said to be beautiful but no
one could recollect what became of her. It is known that he was proud of his Jewish heritage and that he played the violin. He was nineteen years old when he met the girl who later became his wife. She was a farmer’s daughter who developed an addiction to heroin; later she became a prostitute. There is a photograph of her on the file wearing a tiny black mini skirt and holding one of her sons in her arms; her face is tear stained. A few days later she killed herself.

The two sons have no living memory of her, they have, throughout their lives met their father on three occasions but the interviews were brief and his whereabouts are unknown.

The boys don’t form relationships very easily and they tend to test adults out to see how far they will go before they snap. They rarely smile and say they want to live in a family where someone can teach them to play the violin.

III
After her brother had been killed by swallowing bleach she came into care. Her mother had asked that she be taken away before she harmed her. The last she saw of her mother was never to be forgotten, she has no recollection of her father at all but it is believed he works on a fairground. She frequently has terrible nightmares that wake the whole home. The staff say she encourages the boys to come into her room. She has absconded on two occasions when the Fair has been in town.
Her mother is now in prison and she had written to her but received no reply.

The staff at the home would like her to live in a family to be taught some discipline since everyone believes she is promiscuous and could be in moral danger. She is nine years old and calls her dolly ‘Mummy’.

IV
It is noted that at the age of four years he possesses a very full and foul vocabulary. His toenails were broken and bleeding caused by his walking with his toes curled under. He is a very anxious and tense little boy. It is rare for him to show affection but he is keen to please. His birth occurred an hour after his father had kicked his mother and subsequently he was three months premature. She is now an agoraphobic, quiet, sullen with bleached hair; she has the appearance of a clown. It would seem that she cannot read and did not attend school from the age of twelve. The boy's father has toes missing from his left foot due to an accident at work; he has a sister who is blind. He was a baker who became a miner. It is fair to say that neither parent wishes to have care of the child but both will fight through the courts.

His foster parents say that he is most unsettled and appears to be worried. He has pulled out handfuls of his hair but he is an attractive boy who will respond to constancy.
V
The first meeting the couple had with the child they hoped they would learn to love was brief and during their stay they were told how wearing he could be and how he pestered for new activities every few minutes. At this meeting he kissed and cuddled them both and as they said goodbye he refused to watch their car draw away.

At the second meeting they took him out alone to a café and he told the waitress that she was beautiful. They took him to the seaside and he jumped into the ocean fully clothed.

When they took him home for a weekend he sat up all night and picked the stuffing from his mattress. The next day he was taken to the Dreamland amusement arcade and rode on the dodgems; he ate ten Bounty bars and was not sick. Later in the afternoon he pulled the chandelier from the ceiling and threw the standard lamp across the room, he kicked all the chairs and dented the washing machine. He told the couple that he loved them and could not face life alone in a children’s home. Their efforts to control him failed, their efforts to love him collapsed. At the next visit they told him he was too much for them. They were distressed and disappointed. “Who will take me to Dreamland now?” he said just before he was driven away.

VI
“Sometimes he holds on to me so tightly at night I fear his heart will burst.”
The infant is three years old and suffers from Down's Syndrome. He is a strong happy
boy whose eyes can barely focus. He is partially sighted.

At the hospital after the delivery was over his mother was heard to continually shout “Don't let me take that monster home, don't make me, don't make me.” His cries were quickly stifled from the other mothers but they knew. His father, a large stocky friendly man, an ironmonger's assistant, wanted to keep the infant but later conceded to his wife's rejection.

“Sometimes I feel the harder he holds on to me it means the stronger he loves. No, I rarely think about his natural parents, only once perhaps when he was dangerously ill and they thought his little heart would give out—then I thought, “They don’t know about all this and the fight that’s in him. We are delighted to have adopted him, he's our own angel.”

VII
Late one January night when the whole house was sleeping the young mother put her careful plans into action and slipped away from her family and its life. The three tiny children remained asleep until 7.00 a.m. and their father until 9.00 a.m. It has long been agreed that the woman has returned to Ireland and all efforts to trace her through the newspapers, police and Salvation Army have now been terminated.