

William Trevor, *Cheating at Canasta*.

I remember reading Katherine Mansfield's story *The Garden Party* during a sixth form lesson and finding its indirect, impressionistic style haunting and yet real. Mansfield's young protagonist Laura discovers death's centrality to her existence one summer afternoon and the story's slow, elegiac tone reveals her maturing acceptance of life's final inexpressibility. 'Isn't life -' Laura attempts to say near the end; her inability to add a question mark, an acknowledgement of her sudden humility.

William Trevor is a writer celebrated for his short stories and novels which explore the problematic and uneasy relationship between the past and present. Things are only ever finished, never finished with in Trevor's chronicles of change and revisitation, and it is this subtle but enduring truth that illuminates all the stories in this haunting collection. People are enmeshed with each other in ways that escape direct translation and such dependencies may silence yet define them.

In *The Children* a grieving daughter subtly sabotages her father's attempt at a new marriage through reading her dead mother's books each day. 'Time would gather up the ends, and see to it that his daughter's honouring of a memory was love that mattered also and even mattered more.' Some departures must be respected for their unutterable finality and hierarchies of affection must be observed.

Trevor's apparent exploration of adultery in *The Room* unnervingly reveals that a wife's affair is an attempt to communicate her unresolved fears that her husband murdered a woman nine years before. Instinctive loyalty precipitated her alibi for him yet such loyalty is finite and corrosive. People just leave in Trevor's world. Their words and worlds, run out on them. 'The best that love could do was not enough, and he would know that also.' When love turns to irony, then Trevor's protagonists seem more isolated and lonely than ever.

This latest collection of short stories also includes one of the most casually cruel tales I have ever read, a story concerned with the contamination of a childhood friendship, through silence and complicity. In *Folie a Deux*, two estranged childhood friends accidentally meet again in a backstreet Parisian cafe and barely acknowledge each other. Trevor bleakly unveils the childhood incident which seemed arbitrary, pitiless and

beyond evaluation. The two boys, Wilby and Anthony had once put an old friendly dog named Jericho on a Lilo one summer day and had watched him float out to sea. 'Far way already, the yellow of the Lilo became a blur on the water, was lost, was there again and lost again, and the barking began and became a wail.' We are spectators here upon a literal 'lost' horizon of innocence. Trevor's protagonists say nothing and neither does he. He simply shows us what the boys did because they could. Wilby grows up and becomes a stamp collector, his cruelty a mere 'aberration'. By contrast, Anthony has left all his allegiances behind, and is believed to be dead. 'I haven't died,' he says. Yet of course, he has.

Every story in the collection explores the ways in which we depart from each other and from ourselves. Yet Trevor's stories are also humane and testify to the enduring power of intimacy even after death. Promises are made and respected and Trevor's title story *Cheating at Canasta* follows a grieving widower to Venice where in a favourite cafe he remembers his wife's love of cards even when her mind was progressively lost to Alzheimer's. His reflections are interrupted by a married couple arguing at the next table and his conversation with them as they depart offers them all a healing change that Trevor's narrative intuitively acknowledges but does not denigrate or reduce to mere certainty and 'knowingness'. 'Shame isn't bad, her voice from somewhere else insists. Nor the humility that is its gift.' Trevor's gift is to listen to such revisitations and discover their power.