**From *Between the Waves* by Colin Walsh**

We are far from life now, on an unpaved road that makes the car hiccup like a heart in distress. The hedges and leaves all about us are coming closer, brushing like fingers against the windows, scrambling the sunlight till the road gets tighter, darker. I shout Buckle up! and accelerate enough for the car to hop about. Conor looks up from his Gameboy behind me and makes a long humming sound. The furrows and knuckles of the road make his voice skip like the jagged line on a life support machine. Fionnuala joins in from her toddler seat: aaaww-AH-aaaaw-AH-aaaaww. Soon the green is arching over us like a wave, swallowing the car.

The plan is to spend your birthday on the Secret Beach. To get there, we need to walk through the Hidden Woods.

The last time we were here, you led us in whispers and winks through the sun mesh of the trees. I was carrying Fionnuala in one arm, holding branches aside for you with the other. The shredded bracken shining around us, twigs crunching at our feet. Leafspatter flash flowing over Conor’s grin whenever he reached out for us, still young enough to let his hand be held, here, where no one else could see it.

Today he won’t take my hand, and Fionnuala is doing her stomp-walk after him, trying to keep up. I’m behind them, carrying the picnic gear, the towels, your ashes.

Two years ago and we’re drying Conor and Fionnuala in the heartbeat and steam of the bathroom on a Saturday. Pyjamas fetched from the hot press, walls beaded with condensation. It’s like being in the hot core of love. You cocooning Conor in a giant thick towel. Fionnuala swaddled on the floor beneath me. Tiny fingers that reach and grab the wet in my hair. I sink silly faces into her barrel belly and blow raspberries. The silk of her skin runs in ripples along my cheeks. She is screaming laughter and the chuckle and hop of her giggling makes the rest of us laugh too. Fionnuala sees that, so she laughs harder. This back-and-forth – us laughing at Fionnuala laughing at us laughing back – see-saws itself upwards till the room spins, till you’re wiping your eyes and Conor’s moaning and Fionnuala’s kicking in the middle of the floor, pudgy-legged ringmaster and fulcrum of lunacy, conducting the laughing world in a bounce around herself. I catch myself smiling at this later, when the kids are in their beds. I go to say it to you but you’ve fallen asleep on my shoulder. At the time, I don’t notice how exhausted you’re getting. I just turn the TV down and keep watching. There’s no sense of the world readying its tilt.