We need reasons to be bleak

**WATTLE & DAUB**
Brian Coughlan
Etruscan Press €15.99

Brian Coughlan is originally from Navan and now based in Galway. His debut anthology of short stories comes heartily endorsed by Billy O’Callaghan (My Coney Island Baby) and Alan McMonagle (Ithaca) and it’s a curious, if well-written, mixed bag.

There’s the infertile couple, desperate for a baby, eventually giving birth to an alarm clock. There’s the Happily Married Man whose ex-friends all turn up on his doorstep in the wee hours, footloose but insisting on continuing the party, much to his chagrin. There’s the abattoir worker, leaving his job for a better one after 23 years and feeling nothing. But there’s frequently a lack of engagement between character and author. For instance, we’re not told why the abattoir worker doesn’t engage personally with a single colleague of his. After 23 years? Nor are we informed why Happily-Married-Man calls his wife a bitch.

Coughlan has two leitmotifs; entrapment and isolation, with some occasional black comedy sprinkled on top. But I’m not sure it’s enough to present the reader with such hope-free interior bleakness without at least a nod towards the possible reasons why.

**ALL BETTER**
Inese Zandere
Catherine Ann Cullen