

At Home
in Fermanagh and Omagh District:

A Literary Atlas

Nancy Cook





Artsland



Artsland, co-funded by Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's Local Government Challenge Fund, was delivered under three themes; 'Arts for All', concentrating on health and well-being, active ageing and inclusion; 'Multiple Identities', focusing on musical cultural traditions and 'Loughs, Bogs & Mountains', addressing rural arts, traditional skills and the environment. The programme, which ran from October 2017 - December 2019, was delivered in partnership with a number of organisations, including South West Age Partnership, Royal Scottish Pipe Band Association (NI) and Dún Uladh (one of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann's seven regional centres), Sliabh Beagh Arts, An Creagán Arts & Culture Centre and a number of other venues, local organisations and individual artists.

Since 2018, Fermanagh & Omagh District Council's Arts Service has been delivering its Artsland International Artist in Residence programme, bringing distinguished artists to the district to undertake a wide range of activities, engaging with local schools, businesses, community groups and local artists. Two centres were selected to host the programme: Aughakillymaude Mimmers Centre, Derrylin, County Fermanagh and An Creagán Centre, Creggan.

Artists from five different countries were selected to participate in the International Residency programme, including Canada, USA, Netherlands, Ireland and Scotland. Art forms represented in the AiR programme included: creative writing, film, community cinema, storytelling, puppetry, embroidery, print, textiles and bookmaking. Nancy Cook (U.S.) was the first artist in residence at An Creagán from January -April 2019. This 'Atlas', edited by Nancy has been produced mainly by workshop participants from across the District.

Artsland delivered a total investment of £250,000 across the district. The programmed activities resulted in the creation of new artworks, development of new skills and expertise, exhibition and performance opportunities and increased capacity across the arts and cultural sector in the Fermanagh and Omagh.

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Introduction

For the first four months of 2019 I was honoured to serve as Fermanagh and Omagh District Council International Artist-in-Residence. An explicit purpose of the residency was to “raise awareness of local traditions through arts and literature.” Part of my time was spent in community, teaching and facilitating workshops with poets and writers in age groups ranging from 8 to 10 years-old to “over 50.” We convened in the Strule Arts Centre, at Lisnamallard House, at An Créagan, in the primary schools, and at Enniskillen Library. In all of these settings, we challenged ourselves to capitalise on our strengths, discover talents we didn’t know we had, and draw from history, memory, and experience to capture the richness of life in the written word. In all, nearly 200 children and adults participated in the creative writing programs sponsored by the Arts Council N.I..

I was welcomed to the district of Fermanagh and Omagh by everyone I met. People opened their homes, fed me, escorted me near and far, shared folklore and personal stories, offered “don’t miss” suggestions, and tolerated my endless questions. It quickly became clear what a special place on earth I was lucky enough to be inhabiting for a short while. At the same time, I became aware of how little known to, and even misunderstood by, the rest of the world this corner of the planet is. In conversation after conversation, I heard a wish for the region to be recognised as the beautiful, ancient, complex territory that it is. I heard not the desire to be inundated with tourists, but a longing for truth. And so the idea of a “Literary Atlas” was born. The goal of this project has been to create a poetic picture and storytelling map of Fermanagh and Omagh District as seen through the eyes of those

who know it best. It is not intended to be comprehensive or a necessarily proportional representation of the region; as curator, I had to work with the submissions I received. It is, however, intended to be non-exclusive, and as inclusive of multiple outlooks, personal experiences, writing styles, and points of view as possible. In the end, each of the contributors to this volume is addressing the essential question posed by Rebecca Solnit in her book *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas*: “What makes a place?”

A fair question is why an outsider should be tasked with pulling together this compilation of works about Fermanagh and Omagh District. In a land where rhythm flows with every rise and dip in the landscape, and where poetry is in the very water, what need is there for an American who can barely speak the English language? It may not be a wholly satisfactory answer, but sometimes it takes fresh eyes for us to see and sense all that is around us and to understand what we already know. In seeing the loughs, the bogs, the hawthorn and the rowan trees; communing with faeries and the little people; walking narrow roads against hurricane-strength winds and truly understanding the meaning of the old Irish blessing “may the wind be ever at your back”; unravelling the threads of “The Troubles” and absorbing the ceaseless news about Brexit; at gatherings to honour the earth, the courageous, the arts, traditions; at memorial sites both ancient and days-old; passing landscapes in fifty shades of green, in weather consisting of fifty varieties of rain, under skies changing shape fifty times a day; and in experiencing all this for the first time, I bring to the table the element of surprise essential to the writer’s work.

When I ask myself “What makes a place?”, I think the answer is “who makes the place.” It is not events, not history, or even geography that defines a place. It is the people, at work, at play, in love, caring for the children and for each other, struggling to find meaning, to help, to heal, and to preserve and grow the language of the poets in the name of future generations. It has been a great honour to be part of this ongoing enterprise, and I hope with this publication to give a little something back to the place that welcomed me.

Nancy Cook

August, 2019

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The Observed

John Llewellyn James

We live amongst the observers
In cul-de-sacs of our own making.
People are curious about ourselves
Our lives and our lifestyles
On the Living Lough - the Lough Erne.
Some are merely passing through
Others make us their destination
Seeking that immersive experience
Away from their ordinariness
To sink into the extraordinariness
Of our normal, everyday lives.

For us, the *extra* ordinary
Is something we often take for granted;
We scarce see the flowers in the fields
Or hear the sweet birdsong in the trees.
We sit and we blether with each other
Over *tay* and a wee buttered scone
As our visitors order their food to go.
We offer our friendly assistance
To the lost, the bemused and confused
Ensuring that our welcome is warm;
It isn't just for the coin in their purse
Rather it is simply the way we are.
We share our lore with those who'll listen
And wax lyrical over a tall tale or two;
Sing songs of love, loss and rebellion
Sometimes dance in our peculiar fashion.

Last House on the Left

John Llewellyn James

6 pm. New Bridge Junction. Enniskillen
The Angelus bells ply their plangent tones
As bifurcating streams of traffic diverge:
West to Donegal; North to Omagh and Derry;
East to Belfast; South to Cavan and Dublin.
I sit here in my house at the crossroads
People travelling on to anywhere but here.
Headlights pierce the crepuscular gloom
Searchlights that don't take any prisoners
Just pirouette on magnolia wall behind me.
Sedans, saloons, estates, hausfrau runabouts
SUVs, people-carriers and working Subarus;
Soberly dressed in polite and muted hues
Of white, silver-grey and remorseless black.
A splash of tomato red of hot-just-now Hatch
Blazes like ketchup on a bland plate of chips.
Taxi cabs ferrying passengers to parts unknown
Crowned by their lighted-yellow barrettes
Advertising the tribe to which they belong.
A whistling man with a jaunt-some walk
Carries a playful tune that I do not recognise;
He is disguised by a coat zipped to the chin
And peaked cap jammed down to his ears.
Chorus line of white van after white van
Filled with myriad of men prone to wolf-whistle
And idly ogling pyjama-clad young women
Who drop their little dears off at kindergarten.
A canvas-topped Land Rover from a busy farm
Back from an infrequent furlough to the town;
Ferrying the farmer and bonny-bosomed wife
Home from Supermarket with their groceries.

She does the shopping, he just sits and waits;
Rolls a hard-boiled egg up and down his thigh
Before denuding half, reaching inside his jacket
For a salt cellar, widowed from an old cruet set.
Somewhat evolved man, showing his colours
Parades perambulator with a bounce in his step
Hurrying homewards to make the evening tea.
Large Merckx shipping lorry ponders hairpin
Waiting to borrow space from the second lane;
To manoeuvre the behemoth around the curve.
Leaving amber-light chancing drivers marooned
In verboten yellow box to an angry hail of horns.
A large truck carrying both fuel and lubricants
Barrels into the melee sending cars a-scurry;
Oiling the traffic flow back to its serenity.
I close the heavy curtains on the night-show
The traffic can continue now, in private.

Jamming at Blake's

Nancy Cook

The strings might have dominated, but Tristan's guitar kept a low profile and Jack's fiddle wove in and out. The hurdy-gurdy kept a melody going, though at times Frank couldn't resist a roguish riff. In the background, the dulcimer hummed a gentle high note. Apart, Norah smiled, to herself it seemed. Her left arm stayed busy pumping air through the pipes and her eyes remained fixed on her fingers, traveling the uilleann's keys.

Like children exploring the world, the instruments laughed as they ran open fields, then quietly conversed as they tiptoed paths unfamiliar, paused to listen for clever new sounds, searched for hidden musical treasure. They followed a few tracks they knew well, boldly competed and raced to those finish lines. Sometimes, for rest, they'd take turns, sliding or swinging; sometimes they'd all talk at once, excited, irate, enthusiastic.

We patrons at tables, gathered at the bar, lounging by the door, clapped or hooted or stomped our feet as the mood struck and clamoured for more: more treble, more bass, more improv, (more ale!), more dueling, faster beats, wilder plucking. Until late that night

near 2:00 AM, the kitchen closed up, fish plates and stew crocks and flatware put to bed. Welders and truckers and store clerks and tourists nursed one last pint. The cloud of stout and ale that saturated the room now began to lift, replaced by a light even mist of nostalgia. Then the uilleann's soft bellows brought us all back together, and those resonating pipes finally took us to a place somewhere like home.

The Parson's Dog

Kieran Mc Gurk

No deeper gaze has ever probed
the labyrinths of my eyes
than sits behind the Parson's rails
to judge the passers by.
While Curate's eggs are bashed and whisked
and spooned from steaming bowls,
his black-sheathed sentinel of sin
can smell the rotten souls.

I strive to keep my mind as snow
til the Vicarage starts to loom
then that hound in all his righteous might
evokes the hiding sins.
Bare ladies, frothy tankards and hoards of filthy lucre
come cajoling from my back-room thoughts
in a bawdy protest group!!

Never a flicker on his black stone face
as my sinful steps hush past,
the Parson nibbling nips of yolk
behind the lacy glass.
No doubt his inner sanctum is a pious, holy place
with the guilty pilgrims on the street
and his Cromwell at the gates.

Rivertalk

John Monaghan

I stood on the jetty looking into Lough Erne perpetual amber
in the place that is known as Drumcrow.

But with waters that dark I couldn't see much
so I'd just moved and was turning to go,
when a voice from the deep penetrated my mind,
"You understand nothing you see."

I looked all around but there wasn't a soul,
just the smell of the woodland and me.

The voice came again, much stronger now,
"You stand there in awe of the beauty on show,
knowing nothing at all of the work I must do
before resting in here at Drumcrow.

There are fish who must live and birds to be fed
and boats floated homeward to quays.

There's land to be watered and people amused
on that journey from source to the seas.

I slip quietly here to this backwater place
to gather my strength for the fight;
two dams yet to cross and miles still to flow
before the last of my goals is in sight.

My rest time is over and I'm on my way;
so I bid you goodbye and must go,
but, mark my words well, you'll meet me again
when the clouds bring me back to Drumcrow."

Our Alamo

inspired by the Hill Fort at Braden's Farm, Cooneen

John Llewellyn James

Playing Cowboys and Indians
Amongst strewn and scattered stones
Of the Old Fort that sat in silent repose
Garnished with marrow-grass
In the field at the top of the Hill.
It was our Alamo.
The kids who lived on the Hill
Would gather there on balmy summer days
After fidgeting in our Sunday-best
Through the Service that
Seemed to go on forever.

Freed from the confines of Church
We would fling off our clothes
Down to our undies
And leave them in piles
On our bedroom floors
To be picked up and shaken out
By our tired and cross mothers.

Attired in holey corduroys
And t-shirts that rode above the waist
As we grew quicker
Than our fathers' wageslips allowed.
We would pick hay-straws
Of differing lengths
To see who played the hapless Indians.
(Morrison would cheat as always

But he was bigger by far than us.)
Mais' would stamp her feet
At being a "squaw" - for the zillionth time.
Blakey being the doziest would die first
He would go into theatrics
And we'd fall about at his antics.

I don't remember when it ended - or how
All I know is that life became too real
We no longer had time for make-believe:
Morrison joined the Police Force;
Blakey went off to find himself
Out there in the big old world;
Mais' courted a smooth sort from town
And left for marriage and babies;
Others dribbled away to college and jobs.
I stayed on the Hill to work on the farm
Casting occasional glances up to our Alamo.

Killyclogher Burn

Vincent M. Brogan

The mention of Killyclogher burn will incite a range of emotions in the minds of a generation who grew up around Omagh in a more gentle age. The stream from which it derives its name is relatively short, some 7 kilometres long. Its catchment area is the southern slopes of Mullaghcarn, in the Sperrins. Rising in the townland of Slieveard (the high mountain), it is initially called Glencordial Burn. Even this name can cause confusion, as linking back to its Gaelic roots, it is pronounced “Glenhordial”, which has led to it being erroneously spelt even by the local Council. This high land was part of a 5,000 acre estate owned by the landlords called MacMahon who lived at Faccary, near Mountfield. When tenants won the right to own their own land, it was a certain Daniel O’Donnell who acquired these 1000 acres of mountain land on which he grazed his sheep. He did not live long to enjoy his newly acquired property and as he was unmarried the land passed out of the family.

By the late 19th century Omagh had a growing population which demanded a piped water supply. The solution found was to build a reservoir at Glencordial from which the waters of the burn were piped to Omagh town for distribution. It was perhaps from this time that the pathway from Glencordial to Killyclogher village became established. The countryside – even after the ravages of the famine – had a bigger population than now, with large families. Children from the surrounding area went to the nearest school which was in Killyclogher. There was nothing more natural than to take the short route down the Burn, since the route via the road would have been more than twice as long. On Sundays people going to Mass would also take this route to Killyclogher church, as well as to the public house and shop. Over time people came to use the path as a recreational facility with access to the burn. Young people built a temporary dam in which they could swim and the overgrown wooded banks gave shelter to courting couples. In the days before cars it was seen as a Sunday outing, with families taking picnics there.

With the introduction of school buses and people having access to cars from the 1960s it was not used very much. When the local council became

responsible for public rights of way in 1984 there was a demand for it to be for it to be legally recognised as such. There were objections from some of the landowners, and it took a court case to determine that it was a public right of way. Six older residents gave evidence of their continued use of the path as a public right of way and were very pleased to have it recognised. The Council replaced stiles and provided signage and a map.

Omagh has a long tradition of drama and in the 1950s, songwriter Frank McCrory, immortalised the burn when he wrote the humorous “Catching Minnows in the Killyclogher Burn” for one of the pantomimes which were held in Omagh Town Hall. This was in recognition of the esteem in which it was held by the local community.

Most people consider that the Killyclogher burn finishes in Killyclogher village. In fact it travels for another kilometre largely unseen through suburbia until it emerges at the Lovers’ Retreat where it enters the Camowen river. This recreational area was purchased from the Stack Estate at public auction in the 1920s by the then owner of Knocknamoe Castle, a Mr Campbell, a butcher from Omagh. The Stack family at one time owned all of the townland of Mullaghmore and one of them had made his fortune working for the East India Company and financed the building of Knocknamoe Castle. The agreement was that the local council would then purchase the land from Mr Campbell at the same price plus his expenses, once the council got permission from central government. Thus the area became a public park on the banks of the Camowen River and it remains an important asset as part of a riverside pathway.

Gallows Hill

Nancy Cook

They hung rebels
high on this hill
where from the scaffold
the condemned could see
the whole town
below and in that town
below onlookers
would gaze up and see
the vast and mighty heavens
and be reminded of
an avenging god
so they could not avoid
thinking on the coming
Judgments Day.
Flowers grow here now
and trimmed grass
and lovely children walk to school
oblivious.

Alternative Scot

PHEME GLASS

I'm an alternative in many ways I come from planters stock
with a kaleidoscope of heritage where men wear tartan frocks
I'm a displaced Scottish lassie supplanted years ago
in Scotland I'm a cuddy - that's cutty in Tyrone
My maiden name was McLean because my father was a prod
the R.C's spell it MacLean but we still worship the same God
now I'm a Glass of Dalriada fame meaning 'Son of the grey haired lad'
It's very true when I look at me that definition is not so bad

Being alternative is very useful you have a foot in every camp.
When Brexit hits it won't matter whose head is on the stamp.
What matters in the long run is how we treat each other
respectful of our neighbours and in harmony with one another

A State of Uniform

Helen Quinn

8.30 am. Omagh Bus Station. Tuesday morning.
The school bus arrives to offload its passengers.
They shuffle off the bus in an unbroken line, barely awake.
All in school uniforms of various colours
Sacred Heart, Omagh Academy, Loreto Grammar,
The High School, CBS, Drumragh College.
All born and bred in Tyrone
All being educated in Omagh
And all will later head out into the world of work
In Omagh and beyond.

There they will mix
With those of other religions and other beliefs.
But for now they will remain segregated
By the colours of their uniforms
By the ethos of their schools
By the tradition of their backgrounds.
A town divided
A province divided.
A future uncertain.

Early in Spring

Anton McCabe

Black-coated Joe
Shuffling bent from the Chapel
The cross of Ash Wednesday
Stark on his forehead

Nancy Cook

The Ides of August
Omagh's crows remember still
Sing in the graveyard

Forgiveness

Brian J. Mullan

Forget the unkind words
Offending as they were
Row back from hurt and notions of redress.
Give thought to the other point of view.
Ignoble thoughts abandon.
Value inner peace and calm
Enjoy the growing freedom.
Now let the healing process start.
Engage in a quiet gentle way,
Slowly let the contact grow.
Soon a sound relationship will show.

The Monk's Tale

Vincent M. Brogan

It all began as a dare. Now that it was happening I wasn't so sure I wanted to go along with it. We had agreed to spend a night at the old monastic ruins at Cappagh. I'd never spent a night alone, even in my own bedroom. I was supposed to be spending the night at my friend Peter's house. He was supposed to be spending the night at mine. We didn't like deceiving our parents but they wouldn't have let us do it. As it was St John's Eve we were able to cycle the 4 miles in daylight even though we didn't set off until 9 o'clock. Although I had passed the old ruins many times, as they were on the way to my grandparents' farm, I'd never been inside. Nor had Peter.

The old Church had been there for 1000 years. It had been the site of a monastery until 1603 when it was closed down by the English. We had heard gruesome tales of sacking and burning. There were stories that some of the church's treasures had been hidden before the soldiers had attacked. The church was dedicated to St Eugene who was a disciple of St Patrick and his Bell had been lost. At first glance we were a bit disappointed by how little of the monastery was left. The church itself was practically falling down and the walls surrounding it were crumbling. But one corner of the Church walls looked more inviting than the rest, and that is where we decided to set up our base. The night was warm so we used the heavy coats we'd brought as pillows. I had managed to grab a few biscuits in case we were hungry and we had a bottle of water each.

Wandering around in the fading light we were able to read the tombstones. Some were graves of boys our own age, which unsettled us, while others had verses from the Bible which reminded us of death. People from all sections of the community had continued to be buried there until quite recently and their headstones made us feel especially uneasy. About eleven o'clock we went to our corner and told each other ghost stories. As it came up to midnight I could see that Peter couldn't keep his eyes open and soon he was fast asleep. The stories we had told each other had set me on edge and I got up and went for a walk to try and stay awake but soon I returned to our spot.

When I sat down I felt my head swimming. A shiver went up my spine as I saw a strange light approaching through the remains of the east door. As it approached I could see that it was a figure dressed in a white robe carrying a very old type of lantern. The figure pulled down his hood and I could see that he was an elderly friar. At first when he started to speak to me I couldn't understand what he was saying. Then I understood that he was a Franciscan, Brother McNamee. He explained that he had remained behind when all of his younger fellow monks had fled to France on discovering that they would be put to death if caught by the English soldiers. He explained that he was too old to face such a difficult journey and who have put the younger monks at risk. He decided to take his chances in the place he knew.

Speaking to him I felt a sense of calm and he led me to the place where he had hidden St Eugene's Bell, in a small niche under one of the old tombs. When the English soldiers came, Brother McNamee calmly accepted death for his faith. He brought me to see his tomb. The chalice inscribed on it had been carved secretly by his followers to honour his memory. Slowly the old monk drifted from my sight and I fell into a deep sleep.

Dawn came early and I woke to the sound of birds singing. I shook Peter awake and told him my story. He didn't believe a word of it and said it was all a dream. I doubted it myself but I got up and led him to the grave and found the chalice engraved on it. Then we went to the grave where the Friar had said he had hidden the bell. It was overgrown and with some difficulty I put my hand into the small hole and pulled out St Eugene's Bell!

You Begin Again

Nancy Cook

The way to begin, always,
is with the simplest language-
Hello. What's your name?
Can I help? Each easy
phrase a gossamer thread ≈≈≈≈≈≈≈≈
What is trust if not
a braiding of these threads
into friendship bracelets
that amplify into ropes ∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞

thick and tightly wound
strong enough to ford
a river, an ocean, a new culture-
and survive

Sliabh Truim

Ambre Burt

How many times my feet have walked
Upon your hills and heather
How many times my heart has sung
To your glory in all weather
Your grassy slopes and heathered top
That in the summer purples
Where curlews sing and sparrows wing
And circle in their purpose
My eyes have roamed the valley over
To the slopes of Carnaveagh
But my heart is ever yours Sliabh Truim
Always each and every day

The eerie call that shivers send
In the darkening of the day
Of heatherbleat that lonely calls
In twilight hours bleakly grey
The fog that falls like a blanket
And cloaks the world all in white
Turns the mountains into islands
In a drifting ocean bright
O Bessy Bell with grace you rise
Above the Strule carving clay
Curving and delineating
Betwixt you and Mary Grey

(Sliabh Truim and Carnaveagh are the older names for Bessy Bell and Mary Grey)

Beyond the Back of Beyond

Zoë Reid

It was May when we arrived beyond the back of beyond and the bluebells were shimmering all over the glen turning the forest floor their own particular shade of not quite purple, not quite grey. Hovering above the ground they seemed to quiver and shiver with every changing breath of wind creating an ethereal eiderdown from the detritus of the forest floor.

In a literally breathtaking moment, we stood transfixed as we got out of the car. Where normally there would have been talk of how cold or how hot it was, how good to stretch one's legs, how we were dying to go exploring, this time it was different. We both took time to delve into the beauty all around us and no words were necessary. Somewhere a stream trickled enthusiastically creating a counterpoint to the raucous caw, caw, caw of the crows.

My experience of Gortin Glen was limited. An uncle had been based there in the fifties and each year around November time we would set out religiously on our odyssey to the place referred to by our father as the back of beyond. As children we knew that at the end of the titanic trek would be early Christmas presents and a festive meal, but my aunt was not one for excess so the excitement was muted. We also knew that getting ready to go to this land beyond involved all sorts of forward planning. As for the journey itself, it conjured up all sorts of fears and fairy-tale dangers. There were rugs to be shaken out of the boot and a flask and some sandwiches, just in case. A spade was included to dig ourselves out of snow or ditches or whatever hazard might present itself. You never could tell what we might come across in the wilds of Tyrone. It was a different country, Tyrone; people spoke differently, used expressions that made no sense, drove their tractors exactly where they pleased and stopped them suddenly in front of you if they felt like having a chat with any random passer by.

The first time we made the expedition we set out from Armagh at the skrake of dawn, my sister and I tucked securely in the back of the grumbling old Austin 10 with enough lagging and insulating material around us to keep out the worst excesses of winter, my mother nervous in the passenger

seat and my father, the Captain Scott of the whole affair, setting his not inconsiderable jaw against the rigours to come. We got as far as Caledon and all was well. We knew Caledon; there were girls at school who lived there. Caledon was definitely not the back of beyond. After that though, things got a bit iffy.

Bundled up in the back we could see very little through the steamed up windows and mitten-scraped clear patches soon misted over again leaving everything blurry edged unclear. The car trundled slowly past endless fields housing cold looking sheep and cattle, farms with their buildings grey and forbidding looking as only an Ulster farm in winter can appear to the eyes of a town-bred child.

The monotony broken only by the one or two villages looming out of the November mist, the journey seemed to go on forever. After rounds and rounds of increasingly desperate I Spy and Ten Green Bottles just when it seemed it would never stop, my mother eventually turned to us and in a voice artificial with cheer-up-the-children warmth would say, "We're coming to Omagh now. We'll soon be there."

To my father in a not so cheerful I'll-kill-you-if-you-ever-make-me-come-here-again voice she whispered, "My God Sam, this really is the back of beyond!" To which he countered, "Remember, we're not at Gortin yet; would you call that beyond of the back of beyond?"

So that was what Gortin came to be known as and now, here I was some two decades later with my nearly new husband and my brand new baby, spellbound by the beauty of the place that had once seemed so threatening and alien. Gone were the starved looking fields with the skin-and-bone animals of my memory. Gone too the unwelcoming farm houses. In their place was only the sense of peace compounded by the woodsy smell of the forest with its gracious trees and ferns that looked high enough to lose ourselves in. The going underfoot was soft and giving and we felt as if we were the only people ever to have found this green and silver paradise.

Before leaving home that morning I had pleaded with him to promise me, promise that we were not going to end up living in Omagh and he, as was his wont, had havered and been non-committal.

"A job's a job," he had said, "and the place might not be too bad. Why not try it out for a few months and then we'll see?"

Sulky in the way that only a self-righteous new mother can be I had harrumphed myself into the car and barely looked at the road as we drove. "

“I’ve been here before you know. We used to visit Uncle Tom every Christmas! I know what it’s like!”

Well clearly I didn’t.

The charmingly friendly people we’d met as we stopped for a bite in Omagh, The huge open skies on the road down, the haze-shadowed mountains patchworked blue, brown and green as by some careless paintbrush in a Sperrin sepia I’ve yet to see elsewhere, the gurgling streams and rushing waterfalls, the overarching trees with their nose-tickling scent and always and everywhere – bluebells. If this was truly the back of beyond then why would I want to live anywhere else? Where would be a better place to bring up our baby than this idyllic place?

All that was 40 years ago and I am still here, my baby grown and flown her nest as have her babes in turn. I make a point each year of visiting Gortin Glen in the middle of May to see again the magical sweep of the bluebells that first caused me to fall in love with this heavenly spot. I am only too delighted to admit to anyone who asks that yes, I come from the heart of Tyrone and yes, you’re right, it is the back of beyond.

That makes me happy; it makes me beyond happy. It makes me feel at home.

Curraghchosaly, Gortin

Bernie Kirrane

The track winds uphill, sheltered by tall larch trees, branches still brown and bare. The air is scented with the tang of pine from the higher slopes. The silence is profound. Rounding a bend, a russet hind gazes back steadily, then bounds into the darkness.

In forest silence

Chance meetings with wild creatures

Free the captive soul.

Beaghmore

Bernie Kirrane

The sun is rising.
Through rings of stone, a hare leaps
Into a March day.

Untitled

Teresa Keaveney

Virgin Mary blue
Reflects the white hare's leap
And I miss the sight

Sloughan

Bernie Kirrane

Roaring waterfall
Swollen with winter ice melt
Cascades into pool
Contained by strong guardian rocks.
Rest. Who knows what lies ahead?

Three Rules

Andrew Maguire

Three rules for a village where everyone knows everyone. Well, two rules and a consequence, but anyway, number one: expect that the stranger standing next to you will know who you are.

“Isn’t that right, David?”

“I’m sorry, who are you?”

“Nathan’s apprentice. Well sort of, I’m just out of school really.”

“Is that so?” I ask, peering across the party, planning a route I could take to the dessert table without having to shake too many hands. Cheesecake is worth three handshakes, maybe four at a push.

Number two: when you’re from a village where everyone knows everyone, you have to do everything that everyone else is doing. I was only home for two nights, but if the O’Donnell’s weren’t in full attendance at Gerry O’Mallachy’s retirement party, it’d be the talk of the village. So get a babysitter, wear a brave face, and prepare to put up with the village’s sixth grade teacher, the girl who walks O’Mallachy’s dogs – though she fears he can do that himself now – and Nathan’s apprentice, well sort of, he’s just out of school really. Everyone does everything in a place like Glenfergus; people moving through life like beads across an abacus.

“So stand over there, David.”

“Where?”

“Beside your father... very nice... everyone say cheese!”

“Cheeesssse.”

“Lovely... one more. Lovely!”

“Great.”

“More wine?”

“Yes.”

“Say when.”

And the consequence: in a place like Glenfergus, where everyone knows everyone, and everyone does everything, it’s impossible to hide.

“James is over by the fireplace, David. You two really must catch up.”

I wasn’t sure who the camera woman was, or how she knew who I should be catching up with. I smiled and made off in the opposite direction, disappointed that James had positioned himself in front of the dessert table, ruling out any chance of cheesecake.

Poet of True Aim

for Seamus Heaney

Nancy Cook

Son of division, a mayhem of ancient
Gael fables, Victorian class trusses, edicts
of serial popes, tugging the soul inward,

outward, one side crashing into another,
a reverence for it all, history, knowledge,
the lure of mystery, mischief, and design,

a reverence for the past, however dark,
however deeply buried, child of story
and silence, lowing cattle in the fields

companionship enough to bestir passions,
inspired rhythms in his scribbling hands proof
of inbred honest industry, a soul in constant,

in endless agitation, a soul in constant,
in endless negotiation with itself, resolved
to discover, to hold, to keep. A clear-sighted
David with his slingshot, daily chipping
at memory, shaving slivers from privilege's
false, cast-iron narratives, fortified by daily
draughts of truth, pledged to take true aim,
to brandish stones buffed to gloss and washed
in blood, poised to turn so many centuries

of intimate, cruel, and inescapable violence
into love.

Borderlines

Jennifer Brien

I remember the Border when it was a Border
before the Common Market as we called it then
when everyone had tales about the old times
smuggling the everyday – butter, sugar –
shopping bags hung on the outside handles of train carriages.
Jokes about wetting the tay.

We were the Protestants who crossed the border
each July to avoid the bands
heading for the sea in Donegal or all the way
to Cork, my uncle's farm.

The green triangle on my mother's Morris Minor
showed that we would return.
We hoped the weather would be fine,
the Customs men at Pettigo be sitting in the sun
and wave us through, for Pettigo
was easy that way, as we knew
not like Belleek.

And then
we'd keep an eye for green Post Office vans
or signs that said Go Mall to show
that this was not our land
though otherwise, it was the same
round humping hills and winding lanes
and sudden loughs.

And I recall the Border when it was a Border
once again, with concrete blocks
and corrugated towers
and helicopters hung like moths –

beating the sky
above the humping hills and winding lanes
and sudden loughs.

The Customs sheds were gone, but borders now
closed round us tight
with kerb-side colours, tattered flags
X marks the spot
and, Don't go out tonight.
You don't know who might be about
and don't trust anyone who says
Brits Out does not mean you.

Yet, even in the worst of times
when no one drove
round humping hills, the lanes still wound
past sudden loughs
to stop in block or crater or in broken bridge.
If you knew where to look, you still might find
some footstick or some tractor track
to bind it back.

It's not a Border if there's no way through.

H & W

Zoë Reid

They stand sentinel over their city, feet firmly planted deep in the mud of Queen's Island as they have for nearly half a century now. They witnessed the start of the Troubles when the people tried to rip the heart and soul out of the place, but the cranes stood firm with their blind gaze directed across the Lough towards the Shore Road.

The city over which they brood still has changed almost beyond recognition since they first appeared on the skyline but they have remained in place unfazed by anything that has happened underneath their un-judgemental regard: a constant in a changing world.

Like their Biblical namesakes they seem immutable, champions of our state, to be regarded with awe. But no David will come to slay this Goliath, no Delilah unman this Samson. They are part of the beating heart of Belfast, prepared, it seems, to do battle for her favour. It is hard to imagine any aspect of the city that is not informed by them.

To fly over Belfast Lough into George Best Airport and see the cranes looming up out of the mist or sparkling in the sunlight, depending on Ireland's ever changing weather patterns, is to know that you are home. The big banana fingers point you straight into the centre of town and remind you that this is a place where heavy industry once held sway and where the skills it generated are still regarded with admiration. You land and there they are, in your sight-line all the time. You cannot arrive at Sydenham and not be moved by these reminders of our manufacturing past.

Overlooking the vibrant new Titanic Quarter, designed to bring tourist money into a country which had virtually written its own obituary over 30 years of mayhem, the cranes stand full square, titans in a titan's world, their giants' arms, aim straight and true, brooking no nonsense. They are lacking in frills, in character not unlike the generations of people who lived and worked in the warren of mean little streets surrounding the docks, a warm spider's web community or a viper's nest of bigotry depending on your point of view.

Stark black initials, painted huge on both sides of their gantries point out that these cranes are Harland and Wolff and, guarding the gateway to

the city and the country beyond they seem to shout out for all the world to hear,

“This is who I am. Take it or leave it!”

Almost, dare I whisper it, “No Surrender.”

I love the cranes. To me they sum up the spirit of all the Belfasts, stubborn, resilient, defiant. The sunshine yellow of their paintwork belies the brutal functionality of their structure, and reflects again the nature of the people – warm and friendly but with backbone of steel. Each crane stands there full of moral rectitude reassuring the other that he’s got his back.

North West Passenger

Eddie McClenaghan

The morning had a bite to it. A playful nibble at the tips of the face to make sure you didn’t sleep through it. The sleet slalomed along to the rhythm of the breeze as it made its way to the cracked concrete platform at our feet. A cacophony of coughing and sniffing coloured in the space around overheard mumble rap from the other side of the oversized headphones on the overdressed girl waiting beside me, staring at her phone.

Cascading thoughtless
Scrolling thumb over cold glow
hypnotic displays

The large windows let the dim grey light filter in on the grey morning faces. Adjacent in their silence. A baby cried out through the clouds of breath from the people in their seats. A 3 piece suit in the seat in front of me read a book of shivering pages. The hedgerows ran on for miles. The occasional hole broke them up. An occasional stop in the small villages normally passed through.

Red, white, blue kerbstones
Then green, white and gold lampposts
Neighbours make their mark

Lively streets at the final destination. An Eastern European couple argued with such ferocity they gained an uncomfortable audience around the depot. The iconic bridge between both city sides stood proudly in the background of the argument. The sun beamed as best it could through sheets of cloud drifting across at the pace of the coastal wind. Silver ripples danced all along the river with a group of runners adding a splash of colour in both language and garish attire that left little to the imagination.

Sitting on the cool cast iron bench, I breathed it in. The aroma of my first ever flat white filtered its way through my nasal pathways along with the fresh water and ... a tinge of sewage. Impatient horns rang out from the hectic roundabout from taxi drivers who know better about which lane to be in and how fast they should go around it. The accent made famous most recently by Channel 4 bounced around my eardrums from the runners, dog walkers, tourists and couples.

Back in Stroke City
Days and nights of naïve joy
Never were they dry

Donegal

Helen Quinn

As soon as we jump out of the car, we are greeted by the glorious scent of salt from the bracing sea breeze, and overcome by a familiar feeling of being home again. My grandparents' quaint house overlooks the sea and after a short tussle with the nettles on an overgrown path way, we reach our longed-for destination - the beach.

On calm days, we skim stones on the still water. We fish in the rock pools which are rife with sea life. Later, back at the house, a nature book helped us identify the creatures we have surveyed.

On colder days we make sandcastles and forts and gather seashells and other beach quarry to decorate them, or keep warm by playing ball games. We once built a shelter on the beach – just in case any lost sailor would ever wash up there in a shipwreck.

As we grow a little older, we learn to swim in the waters of Lough Foyle (thanks to the patient efforts of my parents), and later on, to row a boat and handle a kayak on the choppy waves. We attend lifesaving lessons on the beach in July. It is on this beach that I learn to snorkel.

On the surface, on a calm day, the water appears lifeless and motionless. But as soon as I put my face into the still water an entirely different world is revealed to me. A place teeming with a myriad of fish, creatures, crabs and shrimps, all scurrying hither and thither, appearing to live in a ‘rat race’ similar to the human world above!

In winter, the place is so cold my mother has to pile us all up on the big couch with coats, hats, hot water bottles and a big soft blanket to keep us warm while we sit by the fireside drinking the best hot chocolate I have ever tasted.

Here too in the large ambling and overgrown garden we become intrepid explorers using our vantage point in a dilapidated treehouse to survey the untamed jungle all around us. On a clear day, we can see the western isles of Scotland.

One day in the dead of winter we arrive to find the electricity off. We have to boil water in the teapot on a gas stove to heat our hot water bottles and read by candlelight. We pretend that we are shipwrecked on a desert island devoid of electricity. It’s a lovely adventure.

Older now, I await the summer with the same fervent anticipation as I did as a small child. My grandparents’ home is Donegal is still a magical place for me where I can go to when I feel the need to escape. It is my ‘Innisfree’.

Insight

Brian J. Mullan

Workmates Seamus and Bob were rugby fans
They supported Ireland, travelling far and wide
To cheer their heroes on, O'Driscoll, Best, O'Connell,
Trimble and other stalwarts of the side.

At a post match celebration in a famous Dublin pub
A jovial Irish supporter called for another round,
"Pints of Guinness for our friends, these two black northerners."
Seamus and Bob ignored the joke/jibe. It was ill found.

At Twickenham as they searched for their seats,
A boisterous, good natured English fan called to his mate,
"Move up, these seats belong to Paddy and Paddy here."
Another joke/ jibe. As such for Seamus and Bob it did not rate

Reflecting on their experiences, the workmates concluded that
They had encountered stereotyping, born of ignorance.
"We are not understood or respected by these people," they said.
"These are the people to whom we might show allegiance."

We in this wee place know and understand each other,
Let's be friends and to each other show respect.
Share this common space that god has sent.
Our neighbours are or should be our greatest asset.

Fairy Tailspin

Kieran Mc Gurk

A jaded jester trudged back home
Motley headpiece dragged along
Limp in every joint that moved
His confidence bereft, unscrewed.

He noticed not a nearby blink
Of gossamery crimson pink
A wing that snagged upon a thorn
A grounded fairy so forlorn

Soft beatings brought his senses to
She heard his softly falling shoe
Held her breath but felt his palm
Gently raise her from her harm

A needle from his cap he drew
Silken thread out from it too
Through squinted eyes a careful darning
Then puffed her back into the morning

From an eyelet in the sky
She watched him daily passing by
Bestowed on him her every blessing
And got herself some flying lessons.

Butterflies

Brenda Humphrey

On a lovely sunny day
we went walking in the fields
my brother and I with nets in hand.
What were we going to find
with these nets?
We were looking for butterflies
But what fun we had
running along long grass,
chasing each other as we go!

The sun was in glow
as we just let go.
A fairy tree was there to see
and my brother said I wonder
are there any fairies and to our amazement
we saw a fairy and what joy!
We could not believe our eyes
our imaginings on that
our special day.

Evensong

Kieran Mc Gurk

At the honey-melon sunset
when the trees begin their Vespers
I take solace from the twilight veil
that rests upon the eskers.

No dread of dusk or fear of dark
or shying back from shadows,
for I am one who feels at home
in silhouetted meadows.

I love my shape to blend within
the foxgloves and the rushes
and tuck my thoughts with settled birds
in nighttime's gentle hushes.

But more than that I get the sense
that Nature does not protest,
that none of us are small enough
never to be noticed

Lost Opportunity

Nancy Cook

Night clouds cast their images
on the still surface of the Camowen.

The river lies dormant,
a silken sheet, quieter than the trees.

On the sandy bank two seekers
reach for one another.

The air is black as forgetting.
It seems nothing dares challenge

the perceptions of the moment . . .
Until, like fireflies,

stars shift in the heavens, a cloud
slips off the shoulder of the moon,

light escapes, and love fades,
love fades.

Still

Dianne Ascroft

Brilliant blue sky against
Muted hues of a newly cut field.
Towering trees form its windbreak,
An isolated square, still and tranquil.

Coarse reddish fur against
Burnished yellow of a dropped bale.
The fox fiercely scans the field,
Sniffing the breeze, still and taut.

Dusty, faded denim against
Cropped hay squeezed by twine.
I recline on my hard-won seat,
Under a rising moon, still and tired.

Winter Wonderland

Kathy O'Donnell

In the hours before the snow fell
Stillness sat above the earth
Something paused; air waited
Birds held their breath and rodents fled.
Tiny fluttering flakes appeared. One, two,
Weaving to dry ground.
Soon they joined with others
Inching over bare trees
And cotton cover grass looked lovely
When the sun shone on that winter morn.
Children rushed into boots and coats
Running to plant their feet
In virgin snow.

Le Petit Marchal

Kieran Mc Gurk

There is very little known about Le Petit Marchal. Some experts insist it was a creature of folklore, others believe it to be extinct. The smallest bird on earth has never been pictured or filmed in its whin bush habitat even with fibre optic cameras, and because of the microscopic nature of its eggs it has been impossible to rear any in captivity. Le Petit Marchal is also known as the Irish Thicket Cricket because of its chirping call and the increasing intensity of its pitch when the weather gets warm.

Pious Crozier had a population of them behind the byre on his farm. He could hear them most evenings in the summer, but the pleasure was his and his alone. Pious had invited over a dozen ornithologists and wildlife people in on many occasions to listen to the chirping, but every time

the visitors came the birds fell silent, and with each disappointment, the bachelor farmer feared gaining a reputation as a hoaxer. For that reason he stopped talking about them.

After Brexit, Pious's hill farm subsidies dried up and it became impossible to make any money. Meal, fuel and equipment became more expensive. He sold his jeep and cut away all his personal expenditures. It made no difference at all to the conclusion of the meeting with his accountant.

'Your farm is just too small,' advised Mr Crouch. 'Economy of scale, Pious. Get out now when the land is still worth something. You're lucky you never married. Agatha and I can only afford childcare three days a week.'

He bounced his daughter on his knee as he spoke. She had become fed up with her toys on the office floor.

'Gwoooome,' blurted the toddler. 'Gwoaard... gwoome.'

'It's something she's heard on the television,' explained Crouch, blushing. 'Go hard or go home. Funny how they pick things up.'

'Is it?' said Pious.

The saying pinged inside the farmer's head as he walked up the lane to his farmhouse. As soon as he went in he fished out a writing pad and composed an epistle. It fit inside the last envelope of the packet. He gave it to the postman that afternoon along with a handful of coppers for the stamp. The postie chuckled with the local postmistress as he passed the letter across.

'Poor Pious,' she sighed as she fixed on the stamp.

The addressee sliced the envelope open. His secretary opened his mail but she balked at this one. It looked different, personal, she said, like something that was lost for a while. Perhaps it was the grubbiness of the edges, the old-style handwriting; she felt justified when her boss became engrossed in it.

Pious waited a calendar month, then rummaged out an aerial picture of his farm for the estate agent. He slept badly; piggy in the middle between self-criticism and memories. At first he thought it was a dream, but then heard, for the second time, a creak at the bottom of the bed, and definitely, most definitely the sound of human breathing. He lay rigid, regretting now that he never locked the door.

Then the strike of a match, the outline of a gaunt yet kindly face and a flame merging onto a candle in the intruder's hand. 'I came as quickly as I could, and as quietly.'

The wistfulness of the whisper was exactly as Pious remembered. 'No. Don't get up,' said the man, and he sat on the bottom of the bed. 'Tell me all about Les Petit Marchals.'

Pious told how the whin bush got the full belt of sunrise, how it was sheltered from the North. He mimicked the birds and conducted out their summer crescendos, then finished with the disappointment of how they became muted whenever any strangers went near the byre. 'It's the roots,' commented the visitor. 'Their hearing is excellent but it's by sensing the teeniest vibrations through the roots of the plant that they know they're being observed and by golly they hate that. I brought your farm up on Google Earth and approached from the opposite side to the byre. I wore special Wellingtons, spring and rubber sole, and hushed across the fields in the dead of night.' 'Was all that necessary?' asked Pious, 'surely you ...'

'Emphatically yes, and I'll leave the same way. I have a proposition first though.'

'It's nothing to do with bed is it?'

'Oh heavens no. I want to appoint you as Guardian of the Whin Bush and the little kingdom within it. This could be the only chance of finding out more about Les Petit Marchals. We honestly don't know where they are and it'll be some time before our equipment is sensitive enough to record them ... if it ever is. We have minute systems for recording insect life but I would guess that what we need here could be two or three years away. We have to keep this secret though. You operate your farm the way you always have but really, the less disturbance around our little friends the better.'

'The thing is,' confessed Pious, 'I'm broke ... the farm loses money... I'm ready to sell.'

'Oh no no. That can't happen. Goodness knows what would become of them. Because there is no evidence of Le Petit Marchal's existence we can't invoke any sort of protection order. I can pay you though ... from my foundation ... forty thousand pounds per annum. How does that sound? To make sure nothing happens the birds or their habitat? Alright?'

'It sounds better than alright. Will you do something else?' Anything I can.'

Pious put on his pyjamas underneath the duvet, then padded to the kitchen. He returned with a pen and two box-sets, Planet Earth and Blue Planet.

'I didn't know what to call you... Sir... or Lord or... Is there any way you could sign these?'

They both stifled a laugh. Husky chortles came through all the same.

You afraid I'll croak soon?' said the visitor. 'Just call me David.'

He wrote a personal message to Pious on each cover.

'I've always been a fan. I'll be wondering if I've imagined all this... if these are autographed at least I'll know you were definitely here.' Never forget it Pious.'

With that Sir David Attenborough left Pious's farm.

Three years later the filming was accomplished and is the opening programme of Tiny Wonders on BBC One this Sunday evening. The location of Pious' farm has been kept secret to protect the birds.

Rain

Leonard Mullin

Rain rain washing away trouble and
flushing all my worries down the drain
cleaning and cleaning,
I'm refreshed again.

Rain, rain here you come again
showers or drizzling
heavy or sizzling
replenishing
bringing life to seed and grain
rain rain.

Rain rain beating on my window pane
greet the grassy plane
turns the grass a lovely new mane
rain rain

The Clarity of Rain

Jenny Methven

You would think
with rain
that everything would be a little blurred,
less sharp.
But the sky this morning
is that greyed brightness that hurts the eyes
with its clarity
Everything in sharp focus.
Scents held, captured in the moisture
like an insect caught in amber.
Unsettling.
Memories, words said and unsaid.
Sounds echo through the trees as the rain
shakes its way through the canopy.

A feather flutters down, softly,
landing on a leaf,
like some peace offering after an argument.
Dropped from a grey dove's flight path
a fluffy under feather, innocent.

A slow dripping over centuries
of mist and rain,
soaking into the landscape and the psyche.
Almost imperceptible.
We have so many words for rain
in our Celtic languages,
it's in our being.

But our vision is often blurred,

difficult to see beyond our world.
I look for that greyed brightness,
a clarity and honesty that hurts the eyes
but clears the mind of ancient fog.

Looking Skyward

Kathy O'Donnell

All stars along
The Milky Way
Burn bright
Far above the earth
Polka dots at random
Dance
And we are
Lost in wonder
Speechless.
All stars along
The Milky Way
Burn bright
None belong
To you
Or me
We exist
Tiny specks
Below.
All stars along
The Milky Way
Burn bright
Far above our earth
Polka dots at random
Dance.

Shamrock

Niall Toner

Your beauty has been foretold
To a people which were awaiting
To a people wanting
To a people knowing
And the ground
In which you dwell
Has been awarded
With your presence
We've seen the power of your glory

A vision whose stem is formed by you
Live forever oh shamrock of Ireland

Live forever 'n keep the secrets
Which have been witnessed
You have a natural spirit that transcends
Onto a people of your holy land
Protect us, help us, keep us on the path...
To our neighbour
Where we dwell and build
And sing and shout
Talk out loud 'n reminisce
Of them we owe, Reminisce to our foe
The ground you have enriched
Provides its comfort through your roots
And through your roots
A world turns green

Dewdrops

Paddy Montague

Early one morning
Before the sun had shone
I stood upon a mossy bank
As it was breaking dawn

The sun shone gently on my back
My shadow did appear
I saw a crimson dewdrop
I dared not venture near

I froze and stood in silence
Cherished it with awe
The beauty of a dewdrop
So delicate and small

But the pleasure that it gave me
It's colours changing still
Purple green and yellow
With love my heart did fill

I treasured every moment
Fearing for its end
Contentment from a dewdrop
I saw it as a friend

Then a gentle twinkle
Sending rays that sparkled bright
Like a star on some horizon
On a cold and frosty night

It was then I felt a shiver
A gentle breeze began to blow
My dewdrop started shaking

My mind was saying no
It was then it happened
Into oblivion for evermore
Vanished into mountain moss
My dewdrop was no more

Springtime

Paddy Montague

It was a most beautiful morning
Springtime had now come to the fore
Lambs hopping, skipping and jumping
As each grassy mound they'd explore

The wild birds were busily building
Dawn chorus was now in full swing
I watched a kingfisher diving
And saw the red glint of its wing

High above a lark it was calling
I watched as it soared out of sight
Two magpies had been busily chatting
My presence made them take flight

The newly mown grass had a fragrance.
That nature could only demand
The farmer contented and happy
For his living he made from the land

Mist in the valley was moving
Ascending up from the brown lea

Small buds their heads were now peeping
From the limbs of the old chestnut tree

A hawk on wing I saw quiver
In hunger no time for delay
Far below a mouse was in motion
In diving he swooped up his prey

The horizon had seen the sun peeping
White clouds floating vivid and clear
A new day had broke in the valley
As long shadows began to appear

The dew on the grass I saw shimmer
On far off hills sun beams did explore
I stood and gazed at the splendour
Springtime had now come to the fore

Bog Oak

Briege McClean

You sit there solidly
Immobile and out of place
A sacredness to your form

Hauled from an abyss of antiquity,
like the veritable phoenix you ascended from pitch black earth
Manhandled, cracked and damaged in the fray

Your silence is of times long past
lives long lived, hands that used you.
For what?

I touch your elemental form
with certain reverence
Inhaling a sense of ancient deity,
a surface full of story
Now you are here among us
No longer in the deep dark belly of this place we call
The Bog.

Exposure

Nancy Cook

whispers
under the willow --
wind rises, branches part;
the moon reveals a change
of heart

Invocation

Bernie Kirrane

Rowan, Spirit of Mountain Ash,
guard our pure clean air and all who fly there
Protect our mountains and all who run there
Nurture our woodlands and all who creep there
Save our natural springs and all who swim there
Watch over our homes and communities and those who stand together
Keep us strong, limber and deep rooted in your sheltering shade.

Endurance

Nancy Cook

The trees will always be here I thought,
the lake vista will remain true
and I'll always roam these woods, these fields,
in long white winters and as lazy Augusts slowly
quietly draw to a close.

I meant to be the right kind of lover.
He didn't find me so.

You have an ugly scar he said, the first thing he said
on the morning following, the only thing he said
in that moment and many times after.

The blackthorn bends and twists, dark and mangled,
and yields tiny white early flowers.

The hawthorn with its ancient mythology stands
alone in field's centre, bereft of greenery,
thorns nearly gone.

On the lough trail last Sunday a man came to walk
beside me. Awkward of speech, a wee disheveled.
Yet witty, and knowledgeable. He wrote to me,
care of the local post office. I recoiled, not in horror,
yet I recoiled.

The hawthorn with its ancient mythology
stands alone in field's centre, bereft of greenery,
thorns nearly gone. The blackthorn bends
and twists, dark and mangled, and yields
tiny white early flowers.

I thought I would be loved by many,
certainly by one, the one whose love would be forever
deep and meaningful as the woods, the lake. In our
cleverness and happiness life would be beauty
in all its confusion, its chaos, its struggle to endure.

I was wrong, as we all are wrong,
not understanding the labyrinth of time,
the asymmetry of love.

Ulster Hands

Nancy Cook

Listen: to the winds.
A sound like rushing water
the sound of forgetting.

Open fields
tell the story
of renewal. Hands

make life,
moment to moment,
as sunswept days

slow-travel
toward tomorrows.
With work, regular,

routine, focused,
memory slips
into open furrows.
God made hands
to be outdoors,
free, not cuffed,

nor clasped
in church
reaching for grace.

Hands are honest.
Committed to hard work
in open fields, they

hold no secrets,
have no need
to speak.

But listen:

to the rush of air,
a tempest brew,
winds that signal

a return:
to winter, darkness, cold
hands, sorrow, regret.

A Chant of Labour and Reward

Ambre Burt

Pare the bank and lift the sod,
firm it on the ground,
to reconnect with the peat.
Push the spade into the black
and make the first cut,
one of many to come.
The fillers arms await
and barrow or box
lies empty to be filled.
Work all morning
til sun is at it's peak.
Rest, relax, rehydrate, eat
and back to cut and fill.
A rhythm that warms now
and warms again in winter.
The spreaders attack each
barrow load like ants,
hungry for food and labour,
who scatter with their spoils
and lay the wet turf down
in row on row on row;
to dry in the mountain breeze
only to be turned again
and again til all sides are dry;
wizened up like the ancient sticks
Which were its source.
Travel home weary

under a clear star-filled sky,
that offers free wishes
to the gazer below.
I wish for warmth in the winter
and it will be so.

Bobby

Kieran Mc Gurk

Bobby and his sheep.
They grew so well together.
Hardy, black-faced Cheviots
and him out in all weathers.

They must have worn his coat,
took turns to wear his beret
for I counted more than forty holes
plugged up with wool and heather.

I saw him wedged in the phone box,
a big ewe between his legs,
both of them talking to the vet
in man-sheep language blend.

He never took a woman,
married to the end
to carrying bags of Miller's feed

Saturday Morning

Andrew Maguire

I'm outside the gates of Frank O'Connell's yard, rubbing my hands together and jumping up and down. O'Connell's is in the centre of the village, and the air here is colder than anywhere else. I've been in it all morning, at my Saturday job, following O'Connell around the mart, before he finally said, as he does most weeks: 'this is the one, son,' and sent me back, with his newly bought cow, while he stayed behind and handled the payment. I've just put the cow in the small shed in the yard, where they're kept for hours, days or weeks at a time, and I almost envy the animal for its warmth.

Sometimes this is a good job and sometimes it isn't, and that depends on whether or not O'Connell puts a shilling in your hand. I'm waiting for him to come round the corner with my wage for the day, and as always it's an anxious wait. There's only so much time that can be spent lingering; the shilling is a luxury, but being home with a newspaper under my arm by the time Ma puts the breakfast out is a necessity, and there is never much time to waste between the two. If O'Connell is late, it's the shilling that will have to be sacrificed.

'Because it's good for him, it helps him,' I heard my father say to my mother, months earlier, when I returned home one particularly cold morning.

'I don't see how having Liam stand out in that cold could be good for him,' she replied, and he said: 'I didn't say it was Liam it was good for.'

I'm waiting for O'Connell to come down the three-quarter mile stretch. My house is a mile and a half long jog in the other direction, meaning my job involves at least four and a half miles of combined walking, running, strolling and leading a cow, between leaving my front door and returning to it.

'And what odds are four or five miles to a fit young cub like yourself?' Ma said that morning.

'None,' I said, as I took the cup of tea and plate of toast from her. 'I'm getting faster and faster. I can get home in ten minutes, now, maybe in less than that this week.'

I ate the toast even though I wasn't hungry. 'It will warm you at least,' Ma said, like she did every week. 'And you're to be home in time to have a proper meal with your father later.'

Being home on time has nothing to do with eating with my father. It's that if O'Connell's late, it means he's in the pub, and though my parents would never say it, I'm not to see him after he's been there. Part of me knows that. But it doesn't matter today, because here he comes, stumbling slightly, as he makes his way towards me. I jump up and when he gets close and takes off his cap I do the same.

'Young man. You're still here. Another good morning's work done.'

It's usually now that he presents a single coin, so I hold out my hand, but he only shakes it, like he would my father's. His palm is warm and sweaty.

'Any trouble with her?' he asks, nodding towards the shed in the yard, and I shake my head, putting my hands in my pocket, afraid they might still look presumptuous.

'C'mon then. Since you're still here, we'll have a look at her.'

I could hesitate and say no, I have to go home, but I don't.

O'Connell's yard always feels bigger than you'd imagine any yard in a town centre could be, and as we get closer the stink of the shed presents itself again. His house is beyond it. It's a waste I think, because it's big, but he has no wife or children. The curtains are always pulled, and his dog sits gloomily in the yard like he wants a child to watch over.

'What're you thinking about, boy?'

'I like your dog.'

'She's a tired old thing, God bless her.'

'Ma says she's older than me.'

'And what age are you, cub?'

'Fourteen.'

'And what about your father these days?'

'He's thirty-eight.'

O'Connell laughs. 'I mean how's he keeping? Has he much work on?'

'He says there is no work.'

'Ah,' he whispers. 'Well anyway, here we are,' and he pulls at the shed door, which I had pulled shut an hour earlier.

The only light the cows get is from the cracks and holes in the metal sheeting and the door opens up like a revelation. But do cows feel sensi-

tive to the light like we do? This one doesn't seem to react, and O'Connell notices the same thing.

'You can always tell in the first few seconds, son. If they're calm and have settled into this shed, and don't react when you come in, then it's a good cow.'

He takes my silence as an invitation to explain, and says, 'anyone that can react to what happens around them, and adapt, is useful. Why should a cow be any different?'

He looks at me, and after a second, when I've said nothing, he laughs.

'I'm sorry, son. I haven't paid you for your work.'

He digs into his pocket, pulls out a crunched up note and sets it in my hand.

'I can't,' I say, instinctively. I've rarely held a note before, and I wish he would just give me a shilling like usual, which I feel deserving of, entitled too. Above all, allowed.

'And why not?' he says, turning and leaning on the fence of the pen, looking in at the cow.

'You mean to give to my parents?'

'No, son,' he says. 'For you.'

I look down at the crunched up note in the palm of my hand and it seems almost alive as it gently opens; expanding in my hand like a magical creature that is only just waking up.

The Well

PHEME GLASS

The well is dry Granny said
dry as a bone not a drip or drop
to fill the pot.
Take the buckets and go up to Stark's
tell them that our well is dry
and I'll call myself bye the bye.
Be sure to rinse them at the head
of the well they should be clean
but you never can tell.
Don't fill them up to the very top
or you'll spill the half of what you've got.
I'd go myself but the pains are bad
and you're a healthy strappin' lad.

The buckets filled
he headed down the road
his wellies fillin' as he strolled.
He stopped beside a blackberry bush
the berries ripe and tasty.
In his haste to go he spilt the lot
the wellies full the buckets empty.

My Childhood Memories

Paddy Montague

I remember the dog
I remember the bog
The well the river and valley
The thatch on the house the call of the grouse
The hazel the birch and the sally
The bump on the bridge the big pirdie ridge
the bend where the road took a turn
Down the river we'd travel the stones and the gravel
The eels the salmon the burn
The work at the hay on a hot summer's day
Goats the sow and the hens
All these things when I was a boy
I remember them now once again
When the holidays would come
Then home we would run
For two months we would ramble and play
If a neighbour would shout
We would help them all out
To win a big field of hay
The first tv we had it was too bad
The screen was just black and white
We were content to the pictures we went
On board of an owl rally bike
The corncrake at night and the sound of the snipe
The moon the plough and the stars
Then on command at Maggie's turn we would stand
And count the all on coming cars
The neighbours' big horse the heather the gorse
We played too long after dark
We stood at the dawn when darkness had gone
And heard the sound of the lark
The memories that last are things in the past
Will never return back again

The fun that we had with our mum and our dad
When we were children back then

Teresa Keveaney

Stitching winter warm
To while away lonely nights
I prick my finger

Shadows

Kathy O'Donnell

In the early morning somewhere
Between four and five
When the wind is howling
Like a lonesome dog
And leaves crash land,
The latch springs apart
Moving curtains aside
And shapes enter
To flatten out walls
Poke into corners
Slitter along floor boards
Sneak under door
Pause for a moment
Before fleeing the light.

Old Faithful

Briege McClean

Local history has it that after the Famine in Ireland, the first small crop of healthy spuds came from the townland of Clougnakerny, County Tyrone, from a scraggy two-acred field behind the homestead cottage of the O Connathi family. Cassie, a mother of seven, farmed this scrub of land single handed, eking out a living for herself and her family. Her man was next to useless.

Old Faithful was Cassie's speciality. It was a special recipe, a secret one paying homage to the potato. It has never been written down. Rumour had it that not even her own blood relatives had the secret of it. But they were wrong. Some indeed observed and learned and passed down the magic of Old Faithful.

Today it is referred to as Purdy Pudding and appears in my household once a year for three days. At Halloween. It's made of apples, spices, potatoes and brown sugar. Baked overnight in the oven, this delectably delicious smell has caressed my morning-time senses for as long as I can remember. Its aromatic nostalgia permeates and fills the house when evenings outside are crisp dark and cold. Apples hang from string in our hall or float in basins of water awaiting ginger heads to dunk and bite their target. Apple tarts are eaten hot out of the oven as the same kids race each other to find the first tuppence in the tart! Numbers swell as other village children join in the fun ... until Old Faithful is presented.

It's always the smell that gets me first and I salivate as the smouldering spice seeps into my nostrils. Then I watch hungrily as Mother ladles it into the bowl, steam rising from this dark brown sticky pudding until a big dollop of butter is flung in, slowly melting into its very belly. I swear to you a deep moan of sheer pleasure resonates in my throat as Old Faithful works its magic on yet another generation.

This year, I got to make the Purdy Pudding with my Mother.

Teresa Keaveney

Turning mountain turf
To dry in summer breezes
Face below looks back

Untitled

Teresa Keaveney

Robin is watching
Foot cutting the clay with steel
Worms that have feasted
On dead men's dirt are thrown up
Recycling at its best

A Poem

Seamus Quinn

I see a clear black sky with no clouds
A full moon with hundreds of stars.
I hear slow melodic music relaxing and calming.
I feel happy and content
in my bed, watching TV just before I sleep.
My hero would be my father because
he was strong and loving.
What I would love to be.
I would love to be happy all the time
just like how my father was
and probably still is.

Home

Nigel

on the fire, tv in the background,
brother beside me, rain on the window,
birds on the feeding table, good food,
something nice to drink, house tidy,
smell of the wood burning.

Her House

Kathy O'Donnell

She thought the world
Of her two roomed house.
In September, as the winds freshened,
Up to the roof she climbed
A hammer in her hand
A handful of nails in her teeth.
Every slate was inspected and repaired.
She sawed and split firewood
Filling the shed tight.
Gaps around windows,
she lined with putty,
Thumbprint on thumbprint,
Testament to years past.
If I close my eyes I can see
A flagstone floor familiar
As the lines on my hands
And pots and crooks
In their all time places.
An armchair beside the hearth

Three legged stools, a bench,
A black press where she kept
Snow white linen, the heavy candlesticks
And the brass crucifix; ready.
On recessed window sills
Tall lamps threw shadows
That flickered, and settled below.
When the fire died, shapes danced
Out the half door like ghosts
Going home before light.

How to stay sane in an insane world

Jackie Reilly

Sean O Riada helps me
in the past, present and future,
reading in chapel a long time ago
and the music of Sean O Riada helped me cope.

Old style housing
also the foliage and the tree
old times symbolised in the building
and in shrubbery
relaxing walking in the garden

She Wore Black:

Nancy Cook

I remember, she wore
black, our neighbor,
she wore black, a mood,
the deceptive finery
of a lace mantilla falling,
falling like an avalanche
will fall, careless, as
the hard grain of rosary beads
slipped through ringed fingers,
counting not the mysteries,
but funerals. She wore black
like the maw of a silent scream.
I remember she wore black,
more than a mood, an identity

The Funeral

Paddy Montague

Neighbours gather
On the street
Tears are shed
Women weep
Dark brown wood
On shoulders high
Hardened men
wipe an eye

Consoling words
Embraceing share
A muttered silence
Fills the air

Footsteps heard
Little said
A passing life
A soul has fled
Firm handshakes
Of disbelief
The atmosphere
A sea of grief

Coffin gone
An emptiness
No one else
Can replace

The Match

Brian J.Mullan

A group of boys approached the makeshift pitch,
Excited by the prospect of their Saturday morning kick about.
Some harboured thoughts of playing on more hallowed turf,
Old Trafford, Anfield, maybe even Wembley.

Their upbeat mood quickly changed,
The pitch was already in use, a kick about in progress.
“They are from the other side,” Johnny said,
“The afternoon is their time, this isn’t fair.”
The huddled group was observed and overheard
As tactics were discussed.
The dog walker paused and suggested, “Join up,
Play together and have a proper game.”

“It wouldn’t work, there would be fights,”
Johnny said, “we are from Eden Glen,
They are from Eden Hill, they call us name.s.
“Do you ever call them names?” asked the man.
Johnny mumbled, “sometimes, but they start it.”

The man secured his little dog by the fence
And called the other group across.
Reluctantly both sides agreed to play
And lined up to face each other.

“Ah no,” said the man, “lets mix and match.”
He picked two teams, each with boys
From Eden Glen and Eden Hill.
As referee he suffered the usual cries of
“ah come on ref” from both teams.

The game ended in a draw.
Both teams had given their all.
Children who had been learning to hate
Now bonded with their team mates
Whether from Eden Glen or Eden Hill.

Colloquialism

Ambre Burt

When I was young
and going to school,
our language was highly praised -
mainly for its antiquity.
‘The closest you’ll hear to Shakespearean English’
was a common phrase.
With cubs and cuttys and weans
(Boys and girls and children);
heading over yonder
and watching you don’t founder (get cold)!
Make sure you don’t get scundered (bored)
With all the odd talk.
Gríosach (greeshay) we used to light a fire
or the cinders from the day before
and amadan was a fool -
sure couldn’t you nearly tell!

Boycott, brogues, the ubiquitous craic,
clock, gob, hooligan,
smithereens and slob:
all find their source in Irish.
Blackmail, clan, lassie,

golf, gumption, minging,
wee and pernickety:
Scots gave them birth.
We are an amalgamation
of languages and nations;
our blood and heritages interwoven.
Enjoy the diversity
rather than berate and revile it!
We mix our languages in a fanciful world
of images and emotions:
English, Scots and Irish intermingle happily.
A pity the human counterparts
couldn't do the same.

Reflections on Music

Helen Quinn

Music has a strong tradition in our family – my father's uncle Patsy was a self-taught musician who played the mouth organ and was, for many years, the chief entertainer at all family gatherings. A sure sign that a musical performance was imminent was when he was seen to discretely remove his false teeth. He would then be seen to take his mouth organ from his breast pocket, give it a little wipe with the palm of his hand and begin to play. He could play any tune the audience requested. Even if he hadn't heard it before, all he needed was someone to sing or hum a bit of the tune and off he went.

In his later years, Patsy became frail and not very mobile and spent his final years in a care home where he continued to entertain the residents with his musical talent. When he became too weak to play, I used to visit and bring my violin and play for him and the other residents – and give him back a little of the joy his music gave to me. Music has a wonderful ability to touch parts of the soul and mind that are beyond mortal reach. I am amazed

to see the effect it can have on elderly people whose mental agility may have diminished. Even if they sit motionless and appear to the outside world to be oblivious to their surroundings and unresponsive to outside intrusions, I have seen how my tunes can bring a glimmer of light to their eyes and evoke a smile or sometimes a tear as the music awakens in their soul a long forgotten memory. At times, someone begins to sing along – someone who may not have spoken in a very long time, but the melody has somehow jolted a mind into action and awakened a voice that was long silent. I feel very privileged to have this musical talent and to be able to share it with others and help bring a little happiness into their lives.

When my uncle Patsy passed away peacefully in his 93rd year, I was saddened by the loss of the musician and the man, and yet I felt honoured to be asked to play the music for his funeral procession as his coffin was carried from the church to his final resting place. I stood solitary in a quiet corner of the graveyard and played the tunes that Patsy knew and loved, and played as his final farewell ‘Nearer My God to Thee’. It was a bitter-sweet experience as my sadness and sense of loss at his passing was intertwined by my joy at being able to give him the send-off he would have wished for. And now that Patsy is no longer here to play his music, the baton has been passed on to me and I have become the musical entertainer at family gatherings.

The Master

Anton McCabe

In memory of Stevie McKenna

1.

He opened a window into boys' minds
Through it he shone
Shakespeare and Dickens
Half a century on
Their characters strut sometimes
Through memories they believed had lost
The lessons of school.

2.

The old streets of Omagh
Stood brick by brick in his mind.
They are nothingness now.
There will be no one to walk them in thought again.

3.

“All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players:
they have their exits and their entrances;
and one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages.”

4.

He left the stage too early in his seventh act.

Personal Reflection on Joseph Given

Vincent M. Brogan

Sacristan of the Sacred Heart Church Omagh from 1942 to 2002

I first would have seen Joe (we all referred to him as Joe) when I was attending Mass on Sundays with my family. He would glide about the church dressed in a long black cassock, tall and straight, with a bald head, of an indeterminate age. It was only after my older brother became an altar server that I came to realise that he was not a priest but the church sacristan. He never got to put on the colourful vestments that priests wore at Mass. At nine years old I joined the corps of altar servers. All boys of course, and first we had to learn the Latin responses. This took place under the tutelage of a principal of a country primary school from another parish; I learnt later that it was considered a disgrace that they could not find a teacher from our own parish to do it. Of course we didn't know what the words meant; we just repeated them parrot fashion from a printed card until, with repetition, they became automatic. Then we had to learn how to serve Mass and this was under Mr Given's instructions. There was no messing when he was around and we followed his rules. As we grew in experience we were given more responsible roles. At this time there were four Masses on a Sunday, requiring four teams of six, and we were on a rota. If you were on the Mass which coincided with the 12 o'clock Angelus Bell, two of us were sent to the tower to ring it manually. If Mr Given heard the double peal which occurred when we held on to the rope and let the weight of the bell pull us up, we would get a scolding from him. Easter was a busy time with lots of different ceremonies and roles for us which required extra practice. We were rewarded for a job well done when he took us as a group to the Royal Arms Hotel for a feast of chocolate buns.

Joe never married, devoting himself to the Church, and was there longer than any of the priests. When new priests came to the parish they would rely on Joe for their induction. He was friendly with my two maiden aunts who lived opposite the church. When I visited them I was given a

spoonful of Joe's honey as they thought I needed building up. They also had beeswax from the Church candles which they used to make the fire blaze up as they huddled around their small open fire. I did hear that he had a brother who used to "walk out" with my aunt but it fizzled out and she remained unmarried. There was one woman who fancied Joe and had tried to get him alone in the church after he had closed in for the night. She had deliberately left her house keys behind and called on Joe to fetch them with her. However he would not go into the empty church alone with her and he called with my aunt and got her to accompany them both to retrieve the keys.

After he retired and had to go into a nursing home I visited him a few times. He told me the story of how he got the job as sacristan. He left school at 14 and like many others of that age became a message boy in a general store in Market Street, Omagh. It was called Harvey and McGraths. When he was 17, the previous sacristan retired. He would have been well known to the clergy as he had been an altar boy and was a regular churchgoer. The parish priest came to the shop where he worked and spoke to the proprietor. The deal was this: Joe would have a trial period as sacristan in the Sacred Heart Church and if he didn't like it, or he wasn't suitable, he could have his job back in the store. Joe's mother, who by this time was a widow, didn't like the idea as she thought that Joe would not be able to handle the demands of the job, especially as at that time the Church was heated by a coke boiler which had to be fed by manually shoving the fuel into the boiler. She didn't think he was strong enough but encouraged him to give it a try. However it turned out fine and he remained there for many decades and became part of the institution, outlasting many parish priests in that time.

He was also able to tell me about my own father purchasing a piece of waste ground behind his house. Joe lived in Brook Street and the open brook flowed behind his house. They had a small yard where his father kept hens. Each morning the hens were let out the back door and crossed over a wooden plank to feed on this waste ground. Joe's father arrived back one evening in 1937 to report that this practice would have to come to an end as a Vincent Brogan had bought the land in order to build the house where I would be born.

He also told me about the time he had to remind the parish priest about Canon Law. Joe had his own beehives in the extensive grounds of the Parochial House. Not much room for them in the small terrace houses of

Brook Street. A swarm of bees came into the grounds and Joe mentioned it to the priest. The priest said he was going to telephone a neighbouring priest, who was also a beekeeper, and get him to come and collect the swarm. Joe thought about it for a while, consulted the text and went to tell the PP that he would have to report him to the Bishop for breaking Canon Law No 136. The PP was perplexed but Joe told him that it stated that no property of one parish could be transferred to another parish without the express permission of the Bishop. He got to keep the swarm. Joe was well respected as a beekeeper and used to travel widely, sharing his knowledge and experience. He also used to process his own honey and sell it as a sideline in Brook Street to supplement his salary.

When he died, aged 88 in 2014, there were numerous priests to concelebrate the funeral Mass, such was the esteem he was held in. The retired Bishop of Derry, Edward Daly, also made a point of coming as he would have met Joe when he came to confirm the children of the parish. Another fitting touch was that the funeral procession made a point of taking the route along Brook Street, now devoid of any houses, and stopped for a moment's tribute at the spot where his house had been. He is buried at Drumragh Cemetery.

The Girl With Rainbow Hair

John Llewellyn James

for Shauna Reilly in memoriam

I never really knew you
That's the sad truth of it;
Just a smile and a chat
In my morning 'paper shop
When you were on shift.

You would colour your hair
In a range of bright hues;
A rainbow formed a halo
Around your fair head.

I would have liked to have
Known you so much better;
But we never met outside
The shop where you worked.

I still see you now and then
In the sunshine after the rain;
A bridge where dreams are cast
Between far, far away worlds.
Your light diffused in a rainbow
Never to be extinguished.

Seeds of Memory

PHEME GLASS

When I think of Granny now she is not
In the shadow of a cold grave
But a loving memory

Her tall frame, always the same
Wrapped in her pinny
The clog boots covered
In orange soot from the wide hearth
As she baked with the hot coals
On the lid that hid the golden bread

Her head bent in the paraffin glow
She cleaned the eggs
Row by row for Doherty's egg man
Who came in the red van
His money bag rattling over
His back as he stacked
The boxes up on the rack
Those familiar boxes that made my bed
Where I laid my head

Patching and mending
The thimble pushing the needle
Through coarse cloth
Her thoughts her own
In that warm home

She sewed these seeds of memory

Perpetual amber

John Llewellyn James

inspired by meadow at Braden's Farm, Cooneen

in days of perpetual summer
you were there in the meadow
with your long chestnut hair
in hippie-style
with long, thin plaits seeded
amongst rushes of loose tresses

you were trailing your hands
through the lambs-tails
gathered around your slim waist
like children in the yard
playing 'ring-a-ring-a-rosie'
the flowers' woolly heads
bobbing and weaving
through your long fingers

your mouth was agape
as if caught in a laugh
and yet in my mind
the laugh has been dubbed
taken from somewhere else
as I cannot recall the sound
from that day
my father dismissed it as fantasy
bitter as he was in his cups
I was too young, he said
she was gone before her time
before I could possibly know her

yet, I would not let it go
little I have of her
that I may call my own

the stories that I stole from my father
when in an infrequent mellow mood
are but second-hand roses
that I was grateful for all the same
were as nothing in compare
with this precious fragment

thus it is preserved as if in amber
with a golden hue
blessed by the celestial Sun
never lessening in its brilliance
until my own night comes

They / Them

Brian J. Mullan

“They didn’t treat us well
When they had control.
They saw us as a threat
To their way of life and role.”
“What’s that you say, they had a
Right to feel this way?”
“Well you always made it clear that
You would sweep their kind away.”
“There may be truth in this, but old atrocities
By the other side are in the mind.”
“Ah but which atrocity by which side in a
Catalogue of atrocities? Now there’s the bind.”

I Stand in the River

Nancy Cook

All around me I hear people talking
about their heritage, I hear them talk of patriotism,
of loyalties and identity and rights. Clichés

and sincere platitudes abound, but I think what
is being spoken of is attachment to the land.
Their land. The land of ancestors. And when

people speak of such things as their heritage, love
of country, when they sing their patriotic anthems,
the details are a little vague. In words

that sound like black earth, golden fields,
thick green grass, are buried other words,
words like fenced, acquired, tilled, and set afire.

All around me people feel their attachment
to the land as gravely serious, as visceral, embrace
the land as body with a heartbeat. We've crowned

the earth with borders, we've honoured vast expanses
by bestowing names. We've raised the status
of beloved ground by our attempts to own it, sell it,

set a wanted-poster price upon its head. With due
respect for this deep attachment to the land, we go
to war, betray our moral creeds, murder, suffer death.

I stand in the river, my feet lodged in mud, mired, yet
insecure, cold waters rushing past. All around me
I hear people talking, talking of their heritage,
their attachment to the land.

Contributors' Biographical Notes

Dianne Ascroft is a Canadian who has settled in Northern Ireland. She writes cozy mystery and historical fiction and she is currently writing two series: *Century Cottage Cozy Mysteries* and *The Yankee Years*.

Online she lurks at <https://www.dianneascroft.com>.

Jennifer Brien is a trans performance poet and local historian. Apart from running away to join the Circus and touring the whole of Ireland with them during the 1970s, she has lived most of her life in the village of Ballinamallard, having been born on a small nearby farm. Jennifer has worked as a transcriber of oral history tapes and editor of local histories. She began creative writing in 2013 with *Fermanagh Writers*, edits *Corncrake*, and now helps other people to tell their own stories.

Vincent Brogan was born and brought up in Omagh town. His parents had a small grocery shop at a time when Omagh had many residents living in its narrow streets which have largely disappeared. His father had a mobile shop and Vincent often accompanied him as he travelled the rural district around Omagh. These experiences gave him a deep interest in community life and for many years he worked in community development with the local Council. His passion now is local and family history. He contributed to the book produced by Cappagh Historical Society which has been well regarded. His interests include family, genealogy, vegetable growing and sustainability.

Ambre Burt lives and works in Omagh, Co. Tyrone. An avid reader who has written poetry for many years, it was only in recent years she started to read her work at a local poetry group, which then encouraged her to take on the challenges of NaPoWriMo and OctPoWriMo.

Writer and teaching artist **Nancy Cook** served as Fermanagh & Omagh International artist-in-residence from January through April 2019. She holds both an MFA in creative writing and a law degree, and has taught in a wide variety of venues, from prisons to college campuses. Nancy is founder of the “Witness Project” in Minneapolis, U.S.A, a program designed to enable creative work by underrepresented voices, and she is part

of a small group of artists working in rural Minnesota to design arts programs for adults in transitional housing. She also serves as flash fiction editor for Kallisto Gaia Press and is a manuscript reader for Coffee House Press. Widely published in literary journals and magazines, Nancy has recently completed a full-length collection of linked stories.

PHEME GLASS has been writing for a number of years. She is a long time member of ‘The Open Door Poetry Group’. She has self published a book of poetry ‘Seed of Memory’ in 2013 which was a great success. She went on to write and self publish a novel ‘The Blossom or the Bole’ which tells the story of two teenage boys, one Roman Catholic and one Protestant living and attending school together in the Sperrin mountains at the turn of the twentieth century. Their decision to join the army at the outbreak of World War I tests their friendship. She is currently writing the sequel to the story and hopes to have it completed by the end of 2019. PHEME has three daughters and two grandchildren and lives in Omagh.

BRENDA HUMPHREY lives in County Tyrone. She loves cats and all things beautiful. Brenda participated in a creative writing program in Omagh this past spring.

JOHN LLEWELLYN JAMES is a blow-in from Wales, but after twenty-seven years here, it is likely he will be around for a good while yet. He enjoys writing poetry, using the voices gifted to him from the brook, the brush and the breeze, relating stories in his own peculiar fashion. He is a long-time member of Fermanagh Writers in Enniskillen, who have given him the support he needed to grow, develop and flourish as a full-time poet.

TERESA KEAVENEY was born in Omagh. She has a background in nursing and currently works with older people. A mother of four, Teresa enjoys the company of her family, walking, reading and crosswords.

BERNIE KIRRANE lives in Omagh. She is inspired and restored by nature and feels very grateful to live so close to areas of great natural beauty.

ANDREW MAGUIRE has an MA in Creative Writing from the Seamus Heaney Centre, Queen’s University Belfast, and is employed at South West College, where he writes and edits Way Out West, which won best blog at the 2017 European Digital Communication Awards in Berlin. He’s a committee member for the Omagh Literary Festival, Honouring Benedict Kiely. His fiction has been published in journals including Blackbird, The Honest Ulsterman and The Bath Flash Fiction Anthology and his non-fiction has been published with the Irish Times.

Anton McCabe is a journalist living in Omagh. He is the author of ‘The House That Disappeared on Tory Island’ and ‘The Stormy Petrel of the Transport Workers: Peadar O’Donnell trade unionist 1917-20’.

Briege McClean expresses stories, tales and imaginings from her rural County Tyrone upbringing. Her writing is colourful and lively, reflecting keen observation and interest in the world around her.

Eddie McClenaghan is a Ballygawley based writer who writes poetry and short stories and is currently working on a novel. He has been published in collections of flash fiction and poetry and performs his work at various events across Northern Ireland as well as on his YouTube channel, EMC Reads.

Kieran McGurk was the NI Regional Winner in The Great British Write Off 2015 for his poem Endoline and was runner up in Omagh’s Open Door Competition the same year with Evensong. He has been published in three Forward Press poetry anthologies and has been included in the Belfast Community Arts Project collections in 2018 and 2019. He has read at four Flash Fiction events in Armagh this year; his short stories were very well received and three of them are featured in The Bramley publication. Kieran graduated from Queen’s University Belfast in 1984 with a degree in Social Studies. He is a member of the Burnavon Writer’s Group, Cookstown and The Open Door Poetry Group, Omagh. He has self-published two short anthologies of poetry, Two Dozen Eggs and The Parson’s Dog.

Jenny Methven lives close to the border in beautiful countryside from which she draws inspiration for her nature based poetry and art work. A return to academic life a few years ago to complete a Masters in Peace and Conflict studies convinced her that humans can connect and explore difference through contact with the natural world. She has had poetry published in both on line journals and print anthologies such as the Community Arts Partnership and The Curlew. Jenny’s poetry collection ‘Dancing in puddles with the Cailleach’ published in 2016 is a combination of her poetry and artwork. She is a member of Women Aloud NI which raises the profile of women’s writing and she is a member of Fermanagh Writers.

Originally from County Mayo, **John Monaghan** spent many years in Dublin and 25 years in London. He writes poetry which, much to his delight, he once heard described as Druidic and Bardic. John edited an anthology, “Tavern Told Tales,” for Fermanagh Writers. He has also edited an anthology of short stories, a book on healthy eating, a memoir, a sci-fi novel and two anthologies of poetry. He lives in Enniskillen and is currently Vice-Chair of Fermanagh Writers.

Paddy Montague started writing poetry about thirty years ago. His first published poem was about the Tyrone Donagal Ulster football final 1989 and he was surprised when the local press agreed to publish it. Since then he has written many poems. Paddy's book 'Beneath the Hat' was published in 2016, in hardback with full colour photography of his own. Paddy anticipates having a second book published in 2021. His poetry is generally about nature and comical incidents and he is often asked to write poetry for occasions.

After retiring from a career in the health service spanning 36 years, **Brian Mullan** joined a poetry group in the autumn of 2007. He was encouraged to write some poems of his own which he did and enjoyed the experience very much.

Leonard Mullen is a local resident and a lover of stories of all kinds. He put his tremendous imagination to use while participating in creative writing workshops sponsored by the Arts Council in the winter/spring of 2019.

Nigel doesn't like to brag. He's a poet who can be found in Omagh.

Kathy O'Donnell has been writing for a number of years with some local success. Her influences were always Paula Meehan, Louise Gluck, Patrick Kavanagh and Charles Simic. She is a founder member member of The Open Door Poetry Group. Kathy is publishing her first collection of poetry in October titled, 'No ribbons, No bows'.

Helen Quinn is a careers advisor living in Omagh who is originally from Donegal. She lived and taught in Zimbabwe for three years in the 1980s and still enjoys travelling. She is mother to four teenage children and had the privilege of carrying the Olympic torch in 2012.

Seamus Quinn is interested in all types of writing and arts. He finds many outlets for his creativity in Omagh and the surrounding area.

Zoe Reid has spent most of her life in Northern Ireland, apart from a three-year stint in the newly independent Zambia teaching English. Her life has centred on education, teaching English language and literature, media studies and arts foundation courses at secondary, college and university level. On taking early retirement Zoe went to work as Education Manager at an arts centre specialising in the verbal arts where she met and worked with poets, novelists, journalists and storytellers, all of whom were interesting and inspiring in their different ways. She holds a Teaching Certificate from Stranmillis College of Education, a Bachelor of Arts degree from the Open University

and a Master's degree in Irish writing in English from Queen's University Belfast. Zoe is married with three children and three grandchildren.

Among **Jackie Reilly's** many under-appreciated talents is his poetic skill. He participated in one of the Arts Council's series of creative writing workshops in early 2019.

Niall Brendan John Toner had a great upbringing and a fantastic family, both close and far out. He started to write after having gone through some very difficult times with depression.

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Looking Skyward, poem by Kathy O'Donnell, will appear in a collection of her poetry to be published in the fall of 2019

Rivertalk, poem by John Monaghan, was first published in the 'Tavern Told Tales' anthology published by Fermanagh Writers in 2015 and subsequently appeared in the Lakeland Life Magazine

Saturday Morning, nonfiction by Andrew Maguire, was first published in the online literary journal, The Incubator

The Match, poem by Brian J. Mullan, first appeared in the Shared Spaces Poetry Collection (Project of the Peace III Programme)

They / Them, poem by Brian J. Mullan, first appeared in the Shared Spaces Poetry Collection (Project of the Peace III Programme)

Three Rules, fiction by Andrew Maguire, was first published in the anthology, Bath Flash Fiction Volume Three

Winter Wonderland, poem by Kathy O'Donnell, will appear in a collection of her poetry to be published in the fall of 2019

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