Contributors:
Paul Bradley
Lorraine Carey
Patrick Deeley
Freda Donohue
Mary Dympna
James Finnegan
Kevin Higgins
Camillus John
Eamonn Lynskey
The Man in the Black Pyjamas
Una Mannion
Angela McCabe
Éilis McClay
Averil Meehan
Neil Slevin
Guy Stephenson
Joan Sullivan Grey
Christine Valters Painter

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EDITORIAL

Welcome to the Autumn/Winter 2017 North West Words magazine. Thank you to all our contributors who have enabled us to compile another interesting and varied issue that showcases writing talent in Ireland and beyond. It has been a real pleasure to armchair travel with the writers who submitted to Issue 8. It is never easy to make that final choice. In the end, we chose poems and stories that seemed to answer the questions that haunt our present day. We hope you enjoy this cornucopia of words, and that they guide you on your own journeys, wherever you may be. We are a team of three editors, and we particularly wish to welcome and acknowledge the contribution to this issue of our new North West Words team member and co-editor, poet and playwright, Deirdre Hines.

Issue 8 contains eighteen poems, three short stories and an interview with the award-winning writer and academic, Dr. Una Mannion.

The poem which introduces the first sequence of poems in this issue throws our readers into a relationship with landscape, of which sheep, a grey cat, daisies, a mine and land clearances are the symbols chosen by the respective poets to explore their concerns. History of place is often the subject matter of a poem. Rare is the poem that can traverse the ages with imagery that deviates away from cliché. We open with Patrick Daly’s *The Tops of Seven Houses*, that we believe will stand as a classic of the genre. The overarching house of the sky looks down on a house in Easkey, a cottage in Myode wood, a caravan, a hollow ash tree where a weaver works his loom within, a Galway mansion, an abandoned farmhouse and our own houses. In each of those houses genes are passed down the line, unless born out of wedlock. Freda Donohue’s *Genes* tells the tale of this underbelly at a slant. And like everything that is told at a slant, it makes you question everything you assumed to be true about received wisdoms.

Dystopian worldviews have been commonplace in literature in recent times. The need for it has not lessened. In a world that divides itself ever more vehemently along diametrically opposed sides, relationships of every hue, gender, faith, and politic disintegrate. Kevin Higgins, *Prologue* prophesies the future as ‘Back when there was still an internet..’ James Finnegan interrogates the genesis of all of this. It is loaded with tragedy: Primo Levi’s suicide, the Second World War that is the subject of Longley’s poems and the Great War, which as all historians can attest have brought us to where we are today. Eamonn Lynskey’s *The Where* is a chilling evocation of a missing woman the poet searches for in ordered lines on some brambled mountainside or fen. Higgins regains his sardonic wit in the face of all this nihilism in his handling of the comic trope of the mother in law, that gargantuan leviathan in the groan reflex of many a heterosexual male. That he manages to raise a wry grin in the wasteland is testament to his craft. Camillus John’s *The Cakeland Republic* also exhibits clever craft. On one level, we have a story about a freedom fighter for cake whose death is heroic. On another level, it serves as
metaphor for these disintegrating times.

As life is so fleeting and so wrought with struggle are we without power? Christine Valters Painter’s *I Want to Know* looks for the earth and heaven in self, wants to know her life as both flame and distance and wonders how mountains can bear to live for ever. This poem segues quite beautifully into Paul Bradley’s *Communion*, which on one level is a rage against the religious divide that keeps a couple apart and paradoxically celebrates that same religion. Friendship is one stay against the dark, and Angela mc Cabe’s *Miho* celebrates hers using food as bonding agent. Eamonn Lyskey’s *American Diner* is cinematic in its intention and is well worth the unreeling. Guy Stephenson’s *Lucie Rie* achieves that rare combination of formal excellence in the form of a villanelle and as a type of ars poetica. Knowing that the poet has also worked as a potter adds validity to the reading experience. Nothing is appropriated here. Lorraine Carey’s painterly perspective exalts in the natural in November *Reined*. Less exuberant is the onset of old age for the speaker of *Lucidity*. If Carey’s speaker bemoans the loss of walks, the final poem in this selection chooses a walk to remember her absent companion/friend/relative, on a hill above Carrowkeel. This is the transformative power of poetry. It can reclaim the dead, the misfit and the outcast. As such it is the best palliative against the flag wavers. The intriguingly authored *Saturday Night* also turns expectations on its Medusa head. Instead of disintegrating under the heel of the misogynist central character, the twenty five something girlfriend butterflies off into the night as her erstwhile lover shivers in the shadows, afraid of what he might see: ‘….the early morning streets are as blue and as still as an unbroken swimming pool, and it’s no longer Saturday night...’

We hope you enjoy Issue 8. North West Words wishes to thank all our ongoing sponsors of our monthly reading series and annual poetry competitions: The Arts Council, Donegal County Council, Earagail Arts Festival, Ealaín na Gaeltachta, and our wonderful host venue Florence Food Co. Letterkenny. We run readings in Florence Food Co. Letterkenny on the last Thursday of each month with open mic at each session. You are welcome to drop in. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter and on our website at [http://northwestwords.com/](http://northwestwords.com/)

Nick Griffiths, Deirdre Hines and Deirdre McClay
The Tops of Seven Houses

From here, he says, you can see the tops of seven houses – but he’s not talking about the house at Easkey, down whose chimney big westerlies blow seawater, and sometimes a few herrings, according to the brochure.

Nor does he mean the cottage in Myode wood, through whose gable window an old hippie feeds a tree while foresters – come to cut, come to sow – marvel at how, both winter and spring, his smoke holds good.

He doesn’t have in mind the caravan squatting on beer kegs under a steel pylon beside a busted sluice gate of the Grand Canal – rain pell-mells via its funnel onto the stove, and up a boy rises, some nights to rove.

I doubt he’s referring to the hollow ash tree that stood long ago at Duniry – a weaver worked his loom within, while his children climbed at evening to gather a fire whose only chimney would be the open air.

Nor to the Galway mansion that has swallowed a bellyful of centuries – melodies were sung, poems declaimed, but it’s rumoured the ghost of a forgotten terror echoes still behind a drawing-room chimney breast.

Nor is he speaking of the abandoned farmhouse above Ballyboden, its door forced by a mare seeking shelter from a hard frost, her foal finding his first legs in the ashes under the open fireplace where he is birthed.

Such houses, being far flung, all out of range, leave no rooftops showing; he simply means there’s me and him here on a hill, with Lough Derg – wearing blue today – below us, and the countryside fresh in its verdance.

So we chat, and the chat comes round to how our own houses draw the jackdaws, uncivil servants of spring, to drop stick after stick, though as yet nothing catches except for the grate’s ready-made, sure-fire pile of kindling.

Patrick Deeley
Clearance

Budless, stripped of leaf and bark, trees sizzle and tick, become charcoal effigies with smouldering hoofs and cauterised antlers

that puff smoke as they twist away from us into blistered distance. Bits of them flake off, flap smoky winglets before sinking.

Or they crack apart, their trunks flinging sparks, grinning red-grained and open.

It takes days for the clearance to cool.
The farmer who owns the wood emerges, stepping side to side, sees the land as forever, the land as his. Shrugs at the good riddance of scrub. Meaning willow and hazel, that spar in dens, nests, horizontal understoreys. Meaning tall, pliant poplar,

and aspen, the whisperer. Velvet dust squeaks where we step. Our chainsaws rebound off the heat-tempered trunks. We turn back when rain runs the ground into a morass.

There will be growth again – lichens, hummocks of moss, raddled foundations

in their renewal restoring us. Birds will pipe up, spiders build. The only blaze will be of furze blossoming. Some other April

will find a living wilderness here, incineration covered over as if it had never happened.

We stare at the ground and we tell ourselves this.

Patrick Deeley
Mine-Wind

*For all who mined in Arigna*

I breathe into you and yours
as you work towards earth’s core
and carry the love you leave behind
on days spent digging for life.
You leave your own
to battle coal, war stone,
smother foes with explosions of rock –
*bullets* that streak like stars slain by *sky* –
prostrate under the weight of water,
to drown in *sumps*, shelter in *gob*.
Your weapons are not the sword or gun
but *clips* and *caps*; *hutch* a cart for those
mourned only by the foreman’s truce,
their funeral your trek into darkness,
the wounded day’s retreat.

Camouflaged by falling night,
you pause in thanks to Him,
embrace the sanctity of votive light
then let it fade with distance,
wait for dawn.

Neil Slevin
Wool from the Sperrins

Clinging to the back of sheep
you have been sprinted
over these hills, balanced
on a crag over a steep drop,
swollen with drenching mist
that hugs along the valley
splashed by a waterfall, dried
in sun warmth, pierced by briar.

All this toughened your fibres:
you could be spun into yarn,
wound round needles, join
other wool to make an aria
of stitches that still hold
the warmth and hug of wool.

Averil Meehan
Grey Cat

I meet the grey cat again
the one who nudged its head into my hand
    a few weeks back when on a run
I go down on my hunkers again and sing my hello
    the cat strides by me carrying a shrew
    manages to meow a hello in return
    a multitasker   probably female
on her way to show honour
    to the people she keeps trapped
    in the dormer bungalow

James Finnegan
Fleeting Beauty

I picked daisies
with tiny fingers,
strung them in a crown
through my hair,
but their stems broke
with the fury of play,
hung ragged
from my locks,
petals tangling
in the threads
as they fell

I picked up
their broken necks,
buried them
where they were picked
and I learnt
sometimes
beautiful things break

Mary Dympna
Genes

The clip of heels on the polished tiles. Voices echo in the gallery. The light, translucent through the high windows, makes her feel it is early summer outside, alive with its promise, rather than another November. A group of Japanese tourists gathers around a guide a few feet to her left, phones aloft, rain hats flopping in their other hands, their glossy black hair smooth like a magpie’s feathers. Opposite her, a painting leers, mouth open, teeth snarled, eyes tight and mean. She shifts on the blonde timber bench and re-crosses her legs.

That first time waiting, her stomach in cramps, sitting on her hands so their shaking wasn’t obvious. Everything she’d dreamt about for years walking towards her. Seeking physical resemblances, a curve of cheek, a slant of jawbone. Trying to ignore her disappointment at the close-set eyes, the replication of his hair and his height. Realising that she’d never anticipated the clipped tones, the fricatives, the long sighs of the vowels.

‘You’re the first person I’ve met in my whole life whom I’m related to, genetically,’ the young woman had said.

The catch in her chest when the young woman touched her arm, remembering the ribcage fitting into the clasp of her palm, the chubby heels, the bow lip opening in search of the nipple. Not hers to give, despite the throbbing and leaking.

Afterwards in her hotel room, she’d pored over the photographs. Tried to match herself against the growth of that stranger who looked familiar. Whom she loved, or was possibly in love with. Those lost years of want. When she’d followed a little girl around the supermarket, who tottered on chubby legs, thrusting her chin forward as she aimed for the brightly-coloured lollipops; the mother’s suspicious glance when she’d been too eager to help the little girl choose. When she sat in the playground at home one winter morning, watching a ten year-old on a swing, breath fogging, high giggling; the cold of the bench seeping in to her bottom, petrifying her. When she’d been mesmerised by teenage girls gaggling on street corners, the flick of their hair, the strut of their hips. When she’d bought a twenty-first present for the young woman in the front office at work whose birthday she’d anticipated with an anxious stomach and a what-if eye; she’d dropped it into a charity shop on the way home instead.

She likes the venues the young woman chooses. Cultured, posh. Earl grey tea in a china cup, a silver-plated fork for her madeleine, the first time. Followed by champagne in flutes, sitting on a satin-striped couch that tried to swallow her up, large windows facing onto the gardens, somewhere in Bloomsbury. One glass was enough but she’d been persuaded to have a second, the heat in her chest, the flush on her cheeks, making her feel vivacious. All the while, watching, trying to understand the young woman opposite her, get under her skin. She’d gazed out the window at a different London
from what she’d experienced before when she’d descended by the posters on the underground, knowing it was too late.

‘I’m so glad,’ his mother had said, as he’d weaved across the street in Kilburn to the off licence. She’d wanted her son minded, recycled.

On the second bottle of champagne that first meeting, a credit card waved at the waiter, she’d switched to Perrier. A knot in her stomach, her heart quickening. The questions faster, the eyes narrowing, as the bottle emptied. She’d apologised, said how much she’d regretted it. Tried to explain, Ireland in the seventies, priests, shame and dirt; supplicants and slaves. To a young woman who was brought up without any church. You were meant to be mine, she wanted to say.

‘There were lots of us, you know. That was the way things were.’ Those girls in the home run by the nuns, feet up, bellies protruding. Sweltering in her narrow bed in the hot night of the city, traffic loud outside her open window, the still air, her hands on her bump, marvelling at the tic of the kicks underneath. Around her, the sighs and moans of the others in their cubicles. An only child, she’d found the company strange but was also shell shocked at the twist in her life when she should have been home sitting beside the fire, serving her father his nightcap of a single glass of whiskey.

Before he’d died he’d turned his gimlet eye on her. ‘That time in London, I thought you’d left me. But that fella deserved the bum’s rush.’ She’d poked the fire, slipped in the old photograph she’d kept of herself standing by a hospital bed in a red dressing gown. Flames licked the white border, melted the gloss, the colours bleeding into black. She’d thrown another sod of turf on top. ‘He was a useless fucker,’ her father had nodded to himself.

She has arrived early this time, to think, decide. She feels anonymous in the crowd, a space of her own, until somebody sits too close beside her, bitter coffee breath and the rustle of a raincoat. She twists away, jogs a foot, irritated.

In the toilets in the hotel in town that November afternoon long ago, she’d pulled out what looked like a wrinkled deflated balloon. She’d emerged into the clatter and chatter of the café, dazed. She’d laughed along with her friends, oohing over their new jeans, her heart racing. She knew she had to keep her mouth shut but he hadn’t had the same qualms. ‘I needed money for drink,’ he’d said. ‘The shock of it, you know?’ The nudges and winks of the lads in the town. ‘He’s some boyo, huh?’ The same boyo gone long ago to America.

‘His mother died a few years back,’ she said to the young woman.

Kind. But besotted. The older woman’s cheeks flushing, her eyes flitting, when she’d bumped into her coming out of the chemist’s one afternoon, the glare of the sun blinding, the bus to Dublin screeching into the bus stop beside them. Her son hadn’t been salvageable; always one more for the road.
‘But do you have an address for him? He might have other family, related to me.’ The young woman’s snarled face, too much a reminder of him in the knobble of her knuckles, the glitter of her eyes, the sudden shift in temper and the reach for the glass.

She watches the group of Japanese tourists move away, chatting to themselves, glossy heads bent, pointing at their brochures and then at the walls. A little girl breaks free from her mother and toddles after them. Her saggy nappied bottom on its short legs waddles in an effort to run before she is yanked up into the clasp of her father.

She’d marched for the X case, cried at the film on the Magdalene laundries, envied the young Brady girl down the road, strolling by with her child in its buggy. She’d lugged her shopping home past broad-chested youths, slouchy youths, floppy-haired youths. Such wasted sperm, she’d thought, feeling the want in her soft body, upholstered in a safe bra.

‘You’ve no other children?’ The persistent whys.

The letter arrived out of the blue that spring. Her eyes stretching and her heart quickening as she’d perused the neat writing in black biro. She’d read it over and over, pocketed it in her jeans for indulgence as she’d pottered around her small vegetable garden. She’d agreed to meet up, eventually. Then again. And again. Believing it was going to make everything better. The folds of the letter wearing and tearing. Credit union loans covering the cost of the trips to London. A grandiose picking up of the bill, counting her coins afterwards strewn on the hotel bed.

‘It’s what parents do,’ the young woman said, disdain on her face, waving her hand in the air to order another bottle.

She stands up from her bench, wanders towards the leering face on the painting. The accents grate on her, the crush of people bothers her. She turns in the direction of the café, weary of yet another pull back to then, the hurled questions that lie ahead. Her stomach clenches at the anticipation of the pounce, the retorts to keep her sob stories to herself, the slam of the glass on the table; the chatter in the café dying, eyes sliding towards them. She’d wanted her baby back but now she misses the comfort of her dog. She scans the knots of people. Descending the escalator at the far end of the gallery, she spies the bounce of blonde curls, the tall slim body, the straight shoulders. She ducks into the doorway beside the leering painting, counts to twenty, then thirty, her hands on her belly. She slides one foot to the edge of the door saddle, peeps around the architrave, sees the young woman pulling open the large glass door to the café. She turns on her heel, marches to the exit, towards the crisp light of the cold November day. She doesn’t look back.

Freda Donoghue
Prologue

Back when there were still income tax and traffic lights. When people still put things in microwave ovens and ate them afterwards sat on what they used to call sofas, while watching outtakes from The Apprentice on that other, second-most-important mid-twentieth century invention.

Back when there was still an internet and people could access electricity by just plugging in the kettle, didn’t have to stand under a rare tree in all-too-frequent storm and hope for the worst.

Back when two small people spent what would be their final years in a gorgeous pre-World War Three house, built on land that’s now far beneath an ocean there’s no one around to name,

in which the bacteria and an occasional three eyed fish nightly celebrate their victory.

Kevin Higgins
Stairwells

leans on the banister     waits for the mail
falls through the air     no whistle     no sound
     until the end-stair

was it a jump or a fall     no one knows
though the police     within an hour
     favour the former

this     a long time after the sale of caesium rods
for cigarettes and food     in one of the camps
     Primo Levi gone

in another stairwell     Longley and Lucy
smitten by acoustics in late October
     whistle a Great War song

     birds circle high into the air
but dark clouds still hang in Turin
     long after the war     after the Great one

James Finnegan
The Where

Late that evening and her bus missed
and no lift, she hitch-hiked straight
into oblivion, left no rumour,
clue, no fingerprint, not smallest,
faintest trace of her departure.

Unremarkable that day
that dawned like any other but
a mainstay in its superstructure

didn’t hold— a bolt came loose,
a strut, a fret inched out of place

or if it be that happenings
are mapped out for the best beforehand,
something cloven intervened
to turn her step out of the path
ordained to guide her safely to us.

Hard the waiting year on year
the doorbell, phone bell, feel the sorrow
welling in the throat, until
we come to hope to hear the words
we never thought we’d hope to hear.

And darker than the deed itself
the heart that hides it, will not tell
the how, the where, the when. The where
is all that matters now. What bog?
What brambled mountainside? What fen?

Eamonn Lynskey
Photograph by Éilís McClay

Photograph by Paul Bradley
Your Mother Calls Long Distance

Big news is
I had the puppy I got for my birthday
put to sleep. It wasn’t working for either of us.

And when I saw him last Wednesday
the faith healer said,
it’s the stress that’s been making me sick.

So I’ve taken up
smoking again. About four
per waking hour, for now.
Come the New Year I hope
to work back towards
my traditional sixty a day. Though

it won’t be easy with all
that’s going on around here.
Husband, like his predecessor,
and indeed, before that, your father,
has started aggressively
eating spaghetti off the kitchen floor;
pausing only to shriek
like Kate Bush, and tell me I
should see a psychiatrist.
If things don’t improve, I will as usual
come live with you.

I hope you appreciate,
last time I stayed
that tumour of yours created
certain difficulties for me.
With so much less of you to shelter behind,
I felt the ill wind, as you dragged
my flat feet around a bewildering
variety of shopping centres.

Especially the day after
I woke in the night
to find that sixth slice
of Black Forest Gateaux
declaring itself
the worst mistake
since the head of raw broccoli
catastrophe of two thousand and four.

Must go. Give my best to the cat
and whatever his name is.
Hope your latest scan
came back not too bad. Kevin Higgins
Photograph by Ellis McClay

Photograph by Paul Bradley
The Cakeland Republic

Cream Clare heard the synth-poppy alarm sound on her phone and finger-flicked it off during its first electronic beep. She didn’t want to wake anyone up. They wouldn’t let her out of the house on her own this early. And she wasn’t having any of that. They’d be brutal and would gob at her for sure. Drench her hair soggy at the very idea. She had cakes to free. They would die horribly and cruelly if she didn’t get a move on.

She slipped silently out of the sheets and put her clothes on in the dark. No light was needed. She could do it blind-folded like a circus knife-thrower if required and would punch you in the face hard and fast if you tried to stop her. With a knapsack grabbing her back tightly, she went out the front door making less sound than a small muzzled mouse. Just in case though she held her breath and reached the corner of the street soon thereafter. Finally, she felt free and easy enough to suck and gasp footballs of fresh air inside her throat at will and swallow. So far so good.

It took another twenty minutes to reach the industrial estate. She hid behind a bush and watched. ‘Crap!’ she shouted inside her head when she copped it. ‘Early! How could they? It’s a Thursday for God’s sake. They never do this on a Thursday. I’ll gob at Cherry when I see her.’

She rushed over to the Industrial unit’s front door. The knob turned in her hand. It was open. Moving from the outside darkness she tippy-toed inside, stopped in the foyer and ear-cocked. Up the first corridor she crept and heard a chair shift to her right, in the small canteen provided for the bakery workers. She stood still and ear-cocked again. Singing, she heard singing coming from inside. Unmistakeable.

It wasn’t the voice of a human being, it was the voice of a cake, no doubt in her mind at all. She could identify a cake’s voice from at least a mile away. It’s a gift she had, inherited somehow. Pushing open the canteen door she saw an industrially-made Rice Crispy Bun filling up the kettle with a half-eaten cheese sandwich sitting on the table behind her, beside a newspaper and an empty cup of tea.

‘Hi, I’m Cream Clare.’

The bun turned, ‘I’m Rice Crispy Bunny. But everyone calls me Bunny - so you can too. Fancy a cup? Don’t touch that sandwich though, it’s mine.’

Cream sat down.

‘Yeah, go ahead.’

But she kept flicking looks at her watch. She stood up. Too fidgety.

‘Look Bunny, I’ve come here to save your life. To set you free. Here’s your passport. I’ll take you to the Californian Hills of Ballyfermot right now. You’ll be safe there. It’s the independent Cakeland Republic. They can’t touch you in there. It’s only a twenty minute walk from here at most. Come on, finish up your tea before the night workers get back.’
Bunny stared into Cream’s eyes and sipped tea from her cup. It was still quite dark outside, early morning. She was groggy and had no life in her head or legs yet. She didn’t really want to think until it got brighter. Never did.

She said, ‘I wasn’t born yesterday little Miss Clare you know!’

‘Call me Cream please, Bunny, everyone else does - and you were born yesterday. Last night, actually. You came out of the oven at around midnight I’d wager. Come on! Let’s move!’ said Cream.

Bunny stood up straight then leaned back into the canteen table. Some chocolate flaked off her chest as she did so.

‘Look Cream, you’re not making sense. I need a lie down.’

‘No you don’t Bunny. What have they told you?’

Bunny was trying to recall the circumstances of her very brief life so far, to put it into some sort of order. It was hard for her to stifle the yawns that screamed silently to escape her guts.

She said, ‘They didn’t tell me anything. I missed the delivery van. I had to go to the toilet. Take a leak. I bloody well missed everything. They went off without me. They’ll be back soon enough though. It’s Bobby’s tenth birthday and he’ll need all the Rice Crispy Buns he can get his hands on. And I’m Rice Crispy Bunny herself! He’ll love me! They’ll be back for me alright.’

Cream popped her eyes like fireworks and put her two arms on Bunny’s groggy shoulders, shaking them back and forth.

‘And what do you think they’ll do to you at Bobby’s tenth birthday party?’

Bunny said, ‘What do I think they’ll do? Stick me up their arse? No. No. No. They’ll enjoy my company. That’s what they’ll do. They’ll listen to my songs and stories. And they’ll applaud me. That’s exactly what they’ll do.’

Cream said, ‘No they won’t Bunny. Wake up and smell the hundreds and thousands! They’ll eat you! You’re a cake for God’s sake. You were born to be eaten within the week or you’ll go stale.’

Cream punched Bunny smack in the face and sent her sprawling over the canteen table crashing all the cups to the floor and leaving today’s newspaper sodden and useless. A wake-up-and-cop-onto-yourself punch in the face.

Cream then tossed a bunch of photographs over Bunny on the floor, walked outside and stood there waiting for common sense to bloom up this early morning before that delivery van was back. Cream wasn’t going to be taken alive, trying to rescue a cake. She’d stick pencils in their faces if they came at her. Gob them. And wouldn’t regret it either. But hopefully they still had time in their pockets yet. Before the truck came back. Listen for the truck. Always the truck. Ears fully cocked.

The canteen door eventually swung open. Bunny said, ‘They’re the most disgusting pictures I’ve ever seen in my life. Who are these people?’
Cream said, ‘They’re ordinary human beings like myself. Eating cake. They love eating cake. Cake for birthdays. Cake for Sunday dessert. Cake for any special occasion you can mention. Cake for cake’s sake. You will be eaten at Bobby’s birthday party today if you’re not careful Bunny. We’re all cake-eaters!’

Bunny pressed up close to Cream and grabbed her blouse up into her fists. She lifted her off the ground, legs dangling.

‘Then how can I trust you bud? Tell me that? I should ram your head into the giant mixer back there with some flour and water on top. Fancy turning into a loaf of some nice banana bread, buddy boy?’

Cream said, ‘I know a way out Bunny. The Californian Hills of Ballyfermot. The Cakeland Republic. Cakes live free there without prejudice. And humans can’t get in – they’re locked out permanently. In fact, cakes eat humans for their dessert on the Californian Hills. Human beings are treated like cakes out there. They don’t matter. That’s why I can never go there myself. I’d die. I’d be eaten alive like a cream cake – by a cream cake. And even if I wasn’t caught - humans go stale on the hills within two days, faster than cakes in this ‘real’ world actually.

‘I can never meet my father because of this, Bunny. Everyone takes revenge without thinking these days - even the cakes on the Californian Hills. We all need to hate - they tell us. And it’s all wrong! And always will be in my recipe book. But no one will listen - not even the many cakes I’ve saved already. The bastards.’

Bunny punched her to the floor and peeped out the front window as more and more light began to piddle into the bakery.

Bunny said, ‘Your father is a cake?’

‘Yes, a Chelsea Bun from London originally. A real cake about town in the eighties I gather. He left my mother when I was too young to remember. He emigrated to the Cakeland Republic. People wanted to fill him with cream and put a cherry on his head and eat him on their birthday. They didn’t treat him well. He had to go. He had too many close shaves in this ‘real’ world. It wasn’t his fault. Humanity is to blame, Bunny. My mother moved here to Ballyfermot to be near him in some small way. She’s nuts now, of course. Almonds I think.’

Bunny zipped through the photos once more getting faster and faster as she finger-flicked. She saw teeth coming at her head, clouds of cream surrounding her and the new day outside poking her in the back and defibrillating electricity into her like Doctor Frankenstein.

‘I feel alive Cream. I’m tingling like crazy. I’ll trust you. I don’t know why. Never trust a girl wearing purple Docs. But I’ve no option. I’ve already missed my ride on the delivery van - that piss I took might have saved my life.’
The traffic on the nearby main road was now clearly audible. The day was stretching its arms and legs and having its breakfast. Six o’clock in the morning and cars and vans and bikes and pedestrians were starting to appear like ants around a blob of sugar on the grass on a summer’s day. Bunny kicked Cream in the stomach and left her sprawled on the floor.

‘You deserved that. Come on you’re just wasting time. The delivery van will be back soon. Take me to the hills. The Californians hills of Ballyfermot.’

They slipped out the door together. There was no sign of the van or the two night workers anywhere. In the shop around the corner probably, Cream guessed, stuffing their cake-holes.

Bobby’s birthday party was happening later that evening. It made her sick and runny in the arse just thinking of all those cakes getting killed. Without a thought. It never occurs to people that cakes have feelings too. That they even exist. No one. No one even believes. That was the maddening aspect of the whole thing.

Cream found that this pushed her to the edges of the balcony at times but as a crutch she was always a busy buff-tailed bumblebee. Collecting the passports. Breaking into bakeries. Freeing cakes. Giving life. Yes, giving life. Free the scones, the tarts and the muffins too!

She smiled, felt warm inside. She knew she was right. In a hundred years people would read about this cake holocaust and know better.

At the boundary to the Californian Hills Cream gave Bunny her passport. When he was off-balance and teary, Bunny, however, pulled her inside by the hair. She wouldn’t let her go. Bunny pulled her through security with a fierce and determined yanking. The grass spread out over the multiple hills. No people. Cakes everywhere, living out their free lives joyously.

‘I can’t stay here Bunny, I’m not a cake! They’ll eat me!’

But she couldn’t get out. A Swedish Tea-ring tipped Bunny on the shoulder. He came out of nowhere. They walked over to a tree together and talked, leaving Cream all alone. Before she knew what was happening a strange look came into Bunny’s eyes as they darted back and forth in her conversation with the Swedish Tea-ring.

A breeze started to blow hard and two Finger Buns came from nowhere and grabbed her arms.

They said, ‘Keep quiet and come with us Miss Cream.’

Cream was dragged a hundred, maybe two hundred metres towards a small hill, with smoke pluming behind it. Bunny appeared beside her left ear and said, ‘Cream, sorry about this, and thanks for saving me, but apparently you’re all scumbags; humans. Every man jack. Including yourself. Even if you’re technically half Chelsea bun, I have to hate you. It’s only right. They tell me.’

Cream nodded and let the two Finger-Bun guards lead her away towards the smoke. She saw a grey-haired Chelsea Bun in the distance, crying his heart out. Camillus John
I Want to Know

I want to sit among trees
and hear the secrets
they whisper in the rustling darkness
to one another,
how they tower so tall
while the world unravels,
roots deep in loam
branches erecting the tent of sky.
I want to know myself
as both earth and heaven.

I want to go down to the shore
on a sunlit October evening
water’s cold tongue
edging across land,
a flotilla of minnow
swim by with purpose
and sun suspended
above the horizon.
I want to know my life as both
flame and distance.

I want to climb the mountain
even as bombs drop over faraway places
for here the hawk soars above,
even as a gun is fired on a lonely street
a dandelion shoots up now
through granite cracks,

I want to hear the stones
tell their stories of endurance.
I want to know how it is
that they can bear to live forever.

Christine Valters Paintner
Communion

I follow you through that doorway, the walking sin
That stalks your waking, infinitely slowly;
And though the hands dividing us were weak,
Yet they were many; yet they were fists, and holy.

But my hands have slipped your rosary. I can see
Your penitence-shaken shoulders as I enter
This emptied wormwood theatre of judgement,
A sepulchre where the spat prayers splinter.

And if we spoke now, would the altar shatter,
And devils spring from sanctums we have broken?
Still, it is late for sacrifice or speech.
I cup old silence; forgiveness goes unspoken.

Every poisoned thing is in our hands,
The rent, the rootless. Everything obscene is
Configured as a father and a son
Bent before the god who came between us.

Paul Bradley
Miho

We had a plan to keep Miho in Ireland. Four of us, me the ring leader, drinking her kukicha tea.

All she did was touch an avocado and she cast a spell, every mouthful of sushi fed our needs.

We brought her to Sligo, Knocknarea. Would she sense this ‘Hill of Kings?’ where Queen Maeve intoxicated men.

Malaysia was on her itinerary. Marry her, we told Maximo, our nervous Italian.

She said she missed her cockatoo, showed us a video. ‘Jo Jo and Miho Miho’ he said.

We could buy one for her, let him wander about, sing and whistle hang upside down on the clothes horse.

Our friendship subjective pray to the drug of Miho’s cuisine.

She left with a promise. I practice deft fingering and casting spells on food.

But I’m heavy handed, always in a hurry. Gamasio burns.

Origiri rice balls don’t stick, and we’re left with a Miho longing.

Angela McCabe
American Diner

Looks like you could pick it up and move it anywhere, some other town or city if the business wasn’t brisk enough – could even plonk it on a movie set, this self-contained American diner. Did it make its way to Castleton, Vermont, out of my torrid youth spent hanging round with Mickey Spillane and Otto Preminger?

Inside, the scene is straight out of The Killers – Are the cook and kid tied up together in the kitchen there behind the waitress doing as she’s told and ‘acting normal’ as she lists me out the day's specials? Which of those mean-looking guys who sit up at the counter wait to nail the Swede? And is that Dana Andrews sipping coffee? Is that Alice Faye now swaggering over, swivelling up beside him on a stool, and showing off those great legs?

I take a seat along the window side so’s I can keep an eye out for James Cagney who is keeping both eyes out for me (a bit of money trouble, not to mention Rita Hayworth) and who’ll burst in any moment looking for the rat that double-crossed him, spot me right away and pull his gun. There will be shouts and screams. There will be frantic divings for the floor but I’ve already seen his ugly mug across the parking lot as he dodged in and out between the Fords and the Buick Sedans. What happens next sure won’t be pretty. But

the eggs and bacon are delicious, pancakes topped with maple syrup simply awesome. And the waitress chatty with the refills, business-like, her pencil in her hair, her flirty quick-fire repartee amazing and I have to say she’s playing up this walk-in, walk-off part so very well she’s bound to land a better role soon, maybe something opposite Edward G?
And what’s the story with that handsome guy
who took an end stool, leaving others empty
near the till? – I’d bet a couple of bucks
that he’s a plain-clothes or a private dick
the way he has of leaning forward, peering
now and then across his paper. Bet
he’s casing up the joint or watching someone?
That chap getting up to leave now? – Yep!
Handsome waits a couple of frames and then
he’s stubbing out and strolling towards the exit,
right hand moving towards his right-hand pocket ...

Now I’m on the run myself with Cagney
on my tail (I only winged the bastard),
tearing down the highway, only one hand
on the wheel, the other shot to bits
and wondering how I got mixed up in this
when all I meant to say was – What a place!
Where anyone from anywhere (or even
anyone from any time) can walk in,
find that everything is just as was,
except in colour, not in black and white.
No suits or neckties, smart fedora hats,
but still the feeling if you took a stool
along the counter maybe Myrna Loy
would sit beside you, cigarette unlit
and giving you that look …

No, better not.
Just order coffee, try to shake the feeling
that you’re just another extra, hired
to give this opening scene a bit of normal
just before the door swings open, someone
tries to bolt and bullets ricochet –
Don’t move! American diner sequences
are short, precursors to the car-chase.
Customers who keep out of the way
are safe. But still, it’s best avoid the seats
along the counter. Take one by the window.
Watch the door …

Eamonn Lynskey
Traces of Lucie Rie

I turn you over, trace with fingertip
the circles of your foot and then your rim
in wonder at the depth of craftsmanship

next follow swell as belly leads to lip –
which, needle held by cork, you used to trim;
I turn you back and trace with fingertip

a navel-foot, a font that springs to hip
with knuckle-grooves that catch the glaze's limn
and wonder at your depth of craftsmanship.

Ground feldspar, talc and copper formed a slip
with crystals fused to body's kaolin;
I turn you over, trace with fingertip

the softly cratered silky flecks that pit
with manganese and iron your jade-ish skin,
absorbing through my pores ceramist's scrip:

I prize that hour's unique apprenticeship
– my fingers trace LR that's pressed within
the mark that raises clay in authorship –
you opened up your kiln, gave tea to sip.

Guy Stephenson

Photograph by Guy Stephenson
November Reined

The rain lashed its windy sheets,
washed all Hallows from the air.
From the kitchen window,
a blackbird bobbed on a skeletal,
browning briar, its thorns
mimicked taut, clawed feet.

Yesterday, seven hundred starlings
performed on a telegraph wire,
waited as I edged closer
before they stormed into the air.
Their wings like laundered sheets,
shaken with evening’s vigour,
crackled in air sweet with conkers
and sun baked brambles.

Silent, crispy, leaf piles, sit in mounds
until chased by the coarse bristles
of the school yard brush.
The pristine grounds and planters dotted,
colour splashes allotted until winter calls
with dawn’s frosted doilies.
Pumpkins and paper ghosts floated
back up into attics, face paints sidled,
as fairy lights and baubles,
anticipated their drop
through the roof space,
to inhabit our December.

Lorraine Carey
Lucidity

No more pier walks with my cane
carved from blackthorn,
reverberating sunbeams
as we strolled together.
No more banter at the jetty wall
watching the salmon come in
with their bleary-eyed captors.
No more Sunday dinners
delivered by my daughter,
who now feeds me with a spoon
and sadness.

My teeth now sit
in a dark drawer
and I in this leather chair.
Its fat arms and imposing form
moulds me, holds
and keeps me upright.
That's enough - hunger's
sloped off to the vacant room
which I suspect,
has been prepared.
My lips are pursed,
the drawstrings pulled
you retreat with the bowl and tears.
Nightfall brings them all
with their awkward
goodbyes.
I'm aware
I'm ebbing away,
tired and helpless
in this snare,
the voices rise,
float off like chiffon veils
with noise before sleep.
Lucid and light,
I exhale triumphant
and escape into my deep.

Lorraine Carey

Photograph by Paul Bradley
Transfiguration

This is how I want to remember you,
the way you were that summer Sunday
when you led us up the hill from Barroe North
to Moytura, Plain of Pillars, where Lugh
once vanquished old man Balor,
and his eye of darkness.

A difficult trek it seemed,
but nothing a farmer’s daughter
couldn’t manage. Dressed
not for battle, but for a visit,
a cup of tea and a bit of chat,
you grasped a walking stick,
a big old branch trimmed down
like you by time.

On top, you rested, quieted.
At last sun broke through
the western clouds, beamed
over Carrowkeel, streamed
over the Bricklieves and Benbulben.
On Knocknarea,
Maevé rose up, saluting you,
one warrior woman to another.

Transfiguration. We were all there
with you, Theresa, happy to keep you company,
not wanting it all to end,
and you to shoo us down the hill
and home, to Monday.
This is how I want to remember you.

Joan Sullivan Gray
Saturday Night

He goes out to deliver the letter even though the second round of the 2010 World Cup is about to start. Ghana are playing America. He has a big bet on Ghana to win in ninety minutes. The pre-match build-up is on in every living room he goes by. The hum of it echoes out of open windows as he walks from the couch he’s sleeping on to the house he used to share with Aoife and her friends.

Ghana score after five minutes, he hears it on the radio of a car stopped in the traffic closer to town. He listens while strands of blond evening twist in the warm Saturday air and the shade turns as dark and as warm as oil and crosses the street like a slow tide of it coming in.

There’s a game of cricket finishing up on the grass at Trinity College. The trees around the field tingle under the first drops of night. Students sit on blankets and watch the white uniforms gather and scatter against the plane-striped, navy sky. They drink and smoke and move from the rolling shade, or gather up their stuff to head towards home, or to drink and smoke outside pubs in puddles of leftover sun.

The footpaths are full tonight and glittering with voices, but when it’s quiet the fear hangs around in the weeknight dark between the streetlights, and in the empty shops and in the kitchens of unfinished houses and by the doors of unrented offices. Everyone around his age, 25, is going or talking about going. Aoife is too. He needs to find a job soon so he can quit it and go with her.

Before the crash, he could get any job he interviewed for on the back of his height, his handshake, and the way his voice boomed out from the bottom of his throat. Even when he was fired, they tried to fire the other—much shorter, much quieter—guy first, until they realised that he was the one doing all the work.

South William Street is narrow and crowded. It takes the taxis fifteen minutes to angrily push from one end of it to the other. The pubs have all been turned inside out, with couches, chairs, drinkers, and staff all arranged facing the street like the set of a play. The air is a cocktail of aftershave and hairspray and penny-candle smoke and late-evening sunlight. He used to spend a week’s wages here back when he was sure he was about to be rich, that with time he would move to better and better paying jobs and bigger and bigger houses. He listens to bits of perfumed conversations as he passes, lost to that world now too.

The sky above is wide enough for Harcourt Street to be only half-cooled by shadows. The offices in the renovated buildings are silent, they laze in the heat or sleep in the dark. The tram rings its bell at teenagers coming out of the park, their clothes creased from lying on the grass flirting all day. Further up, smokers finish their cigarettes and take their drinks back inside to watch the second half kick-off on the big screen with Ghana still ahead. The evening sun on his face as he comes out of the shade.
reminds him of the summer when he was first working after college and everything was aligned just right for him as he walked this way home from work, a large man in a boom economy.

They had started their careers—her as a trainee accountant, him with the online marketing company. He had moved in with her and her friends while he looked for his own place, and he stayed for nearly three years. He got round and jowly on the steak dinners she cooked for him. He bought two sirloin steaks every day as he walked home with the rest of the after-work crowd, his tie loose, his shirt sweaty, his fourteenth or fifteenth cigarette in his hand, kicking out those big wide steps on the same footpaths he walks now and ringing her to say, “Aoife, I bought steak”.

She normally got back first because he put his bets on after work, but she wasn’t the stay-at-home-wife he pretended she was. To his surprise and his terror, she did not fall apart or rely on him or reject the new role society had given to her with all its contradictions. To him, she was choosing the short-term thrill of career ahead of the long-term satisfaction of life as his second in command.

He did his best to stop her growing. He undermined her. He was tortured by her success but he acted unimpressed. He mocked the work she did and accused her of over-reacting to the joke when she challenged him on it. He made her defend her long hours of audits, stock takes, end of year reports, drinks to make contacts, and lectures in preparation for professional exams. He shut down every thought, every new friend, every opportunity; everything which didn’t lead directly back to a life with and under him.

She was unhappy but happy enough to work on it, until, after months of suspicion, she went into their room to confront him one evening in May. He was on their bed with her laptop rising and falling on his stomach. A jogger panted on the street below. She said, “tell me the truth, do you have a job?”.

He had lost his job six months before, in November 2009. All the talk then at parties and in taxis and in the papers and online and on the radio and was of how much we had lost and how much more we had to lose. The country was a carcass being picked clean. Everyone was losing their job or taking pay cuts of 10% or 20% and were prepared to suffer more, and even more prepared to let everyone else suffer instead.

His company were at it too. They called him into the glass office in the middle of the open-plan floor. The others stared at their screens pretending to work, listening like prey. He knew he’d be fine. He filled out a suit well, his was the first hand people shook in meetings. The CEO said, “it’s tough out there, we need you on our team” and they called the other lad in to let him go. He leaned across the table, “me? have you seen his internet history?”.

He had been living his dream of being a professional poker player by playing online all day at work. They fired him with the history printouts still warm in their hands. He had two hours until he was supposed to be home. He stood under a bus-stop as wintry dark blanketed the city and the street filled
up with rain through its potholes. When it was time he sat on the couch, itchy and dripping and saying nothing as Aoife fried a steak in the kitchen.

His plan was to get a new job, or, ideally, to have a big enough poker win to turn professional. By May, he was still unemployed. He had been caught in the wrong place at the wrong time by her friends, by his friends, by her landlord, by her housemate’s boyfriend, by her boss, by everyone watching the one o’clock news the day after the IMF was called in, and eventually, by her, when she checked her internet history and saw that he had been playing poker online at home when he was supposed to be at work. “Of course I have a fucking job”, he said, and took the laptop off his stomach and walked out of the room. He came back in, and stood by the window. He watched the people passing below on their way home from work or the gym, and said, “alright I don’t”.

He slept on the lads’ couch that night and he’s been on it every night since, falling into their womanless world of gambling and drinking and smoking and sport, like those men who moved from rural Ireland to London in the fifties and sixties and found no community to compare with what they’d left other than the pub where they cashed their cheques and the bookies where they gave back their winnings. He’d seen them in a documentary. Their apartments were caked in smoke and rotten from never being cleaned, full of old newspapers and calendars from years ago. They were men of the old school, like him, waiting around for a woman to come in and put order on their lives, they waited so long that usually she turned out to be a policewoman or a social worker or a nurse or a cleaner hired by the council to empty out the flat.

He had to clear a month’s worth of takeaway boxes and tobacco and skins from the table this afternoon to write her the letter. It gave her an ultimatum: get back with him by midnight or he’d never speak to her again. He reads over it as he walks on the slim, summery avenues between Rathmines and Rathgar, where rich old people water their colourful patches of garden in the light before dark.

‘The Stranger Song’, by Leonard Cohen, is playing on a radio by a flowerbed. The song is as pure and as sweet as the first taste of fruit and hearing it is like lying down with her in college in the spring term of their first year when they were eighteen and had no idea of how long life could be or how quickly that sweetness comes and goes when you’re tasting it through a song.

He speeds up when the song ends, shaken by a beat or two of chest pain. A park in the middle of a square inhales what dark there is from the sky. The houses overlooking it are that perfect shade of Georgian red to hold the heat, though around the square yellow lights come on upstairs and downstairs in a pattern like a chess board.

The match is on nowhere here. He looks in the front windows all the same to see if there’s a future him inside, putting a glass of red wine on a marble counter, or stir frying with the half nine weather
on the radio, or checking himself in the mirror before he goes out, or coming back in from the garden as it gets more properly dark, shivering in the sudden shade of the kitchen. These are settled lives, no one here is afraid of the humiliation of going broke two days before they’re paid. They are fully at home in Dublin.

He’d last been up home in Leitrim last week, for the first game of the county championship. It was an evening like this evening, one of those where he could imagine staying there. The hills behind the goalposts were as green as apples and ripened in the June breeze. The crowd stood in small groups around the pitch like un-knocked bowling pins, their arms crossed thoughtfully over their round stomachs, talking about other things as the ball rose into the thick, red sky. There was hay being cut in a nearby field. The call and response of men working together on a roof rang out in the silences between the shouts and the referee’s whistling. He got a lift back into the village after with lads he knew from school, and spent his dole money for the week in the local pub.

The closest he’s found to a real home in Dublin is this street of rented suburban houses, semi-detached and built in the seventies, where he lived with her and where now a paintbrush slurps along a wooden fence—the last bit of the job being finished in the dark—and a woman with a bottle of wine rings a doorbell and waits for a light to come on inside. The match is on in four or five of the houses.

Through dark windows he sees that America have equalised and the game is heading into extra time. His bet is done. He had wanted to get the letter in the door and be gone with enough time to watch the end of the match somewhere. The lads are back in the flat by now, delighted the game is stretching so far into the night. It seems like everyone watching it across the city is hunkering down together, cancelling plans and putting off going out or going home, getting to the end will feel like an achievement for everyone who’s been watching from the start.

He missed nearly all of it walking here, and he’s still out in the open. He goes towards her house. The cool night lands on his neck like a kiss. A taxi waits, heels rush and stop and get in. A bin lid slams. What breeze there is turns over in its sleep, brushing against the flowers in the baskets hanging by the few front doors where the owners still live in their houses. Here and there barbeque smoke the same purplish colour of the almost night sky rises in spirals; a curl of it rises from her garden. He walks up the driveway as quietly as a man his size can, slips the letter in the letterbox and starts walking back to where they’re watching the extra time and hoping for penalties.

The only light in her house comes in from outside—white hairs of moonlight and the photocopier flash of passing headlights. Her friend finds the letter on her way from the garden to the bathroom. She knows what it is as soon as she sees it. Excited and pretending to be scared the two of them turn off the music and take the kebabs off the barbeque, leaving them half cooked in tinfoil. They run in
and, for effect, lock the door behind them. They look out through the white-lace curtains to see if he’s standing there in the orange tinted dark of street.

Aoife reads the letter aloud, tilting it towards the outside lights. Her friend listens with her sunglasses still on her head. She had grown to hate him in the years he lived there. He didn’t pay an equal share of the rent, he never cleaned, he smoked inside, he took up too much space on the couch, he acted like—and called himself—the man of the house. She sees her chance to be rid of him for good. She warns Aoife not to fall for what’s in the letter. In it, he threatens to forget her forever, and begs her to come back to him, or to at least pull away a little slower.

Where it’s busier the concrete under his feet vibrates with stored solar energy. From the bars and restaurants the shrapnel of a hot Saturday night in June—laughter and legs in dresses and biceps in t-shirts and flirting and angry phone calls and rushing and crying and lonely cigarettes—blows out into the traffic. Everyone turns at the noise of a goal being scored. He stops and watches the rest of the game through the sweaty window pane of a busy pub. Ghana win in extra-time.

She sends him the text in the taxi. They turn up the music and roll the windows down to let the possibilities of the night waft in. They walk into a cocktail bar. The barman shakes up their first round of drinks. In their heads they’re already going out in Australia or Canada. The crowd is pumping like its one heart moving blood from body to body. She can kiss the next man she meets. She is 25 and drunk and about to emigrate and she’s never felt younger.

He searches for her but stops, afraid of what he might see. He turns away from the messier streets of town and faces into a new decade of turmoil and a long, ruinous journey back to a normal life. He walks past the lads’ place because he can’t face the smell and their questions, and goes on to where the early morning streets are as blue and as still as an unbroken swimming pool, and it’s no longer Saturday night.

The Man in the Black Pyjamas
North West Words Interview with Una Mannion

Thank you for talking to us Una.

When and how did you first know that you had an interest in writing?

I am not sure I can identify a particular moment when I thought about trying to write or whether I can disentangle my interest in writing from my interest in reading, but for a very long time, much longer than most, I think I was preparing to write. After I read Harriet the Spy, maybe when I was ten, I started keeping a notebook about people around me. Harriet had a skewed way of looking at the world and she noticed details. Later, as a teenager, I started interviewing older members of my family and writing down their stories. I read. I worked on literary journals. I started to collect lists – anecdotes, newspaper clippings, story ideas, even images – all stuffed into notebooks. But it took me a very long time to start writing story, that accumulation of word after word into something coherent and finished, even though it had become what I yearned to do more than anything else.

How have you fostered and developed your writing over time?

I sometimes think that I have stayed static as a writer, that nothing has changed and that the things I want to say now are the same things I wanted to say then. But when I look back at the first work, I do see a difference, maybe a voice or style that I am starting to find to say those same things. I still have a long way to go. For me, developing as a writer means reading, writing and rewriting (endlessly) as well as looking and listening. I don’t think I could take myself seriously as a writer without being a reader. I read differently now. I notice technical craft and language, the gestures the writer is making to tell the story. I try to write consistently. This is more like writing in spurts, but I try to keep working on it even though this doesn’t mean writing every day. The first time I sent work into the world I felt physically sick. But allowing your work to be read and critiqued and gaining a certain detachment from it is very healthy for the writing.

Did you find that the MA in Creative Writing helped to develop your writing? Did it add to your writing life and how?

I completed the MA in Writing in NUI Galway 2015-2016. I had only written short stories and poems when I started. I was challenged to write in forms I had never attempted before. Mike McCormack, my fiction tutor, told me at the end of the first term that he wanted me to start working on longform, no more short stories. The subsequent work became the seeds of a novel I am working on now. I wrote non-fiction. It was the most significant year in my writing life. I had ring-fenced myself to a certain extent, giving myself permission to write and taking myself seriously in that process. It gave me a community of like-minded people who were equally tormented by their writing. It was also very practical. Each week, writing practitioners from multiple genres gave talks about why they write, their
process, how much they write a day, where they write as well as practical advice, such as how they went about getting an agent and how they got published. The MA in Galway has a portfolio submission of 30,000 + words. This has served me as I have so much material to work from since I left.

You are a member of a writing group. How has that impacted on your own writing development?

I am in a writing group in Sligo with six other women. We meet every two weeks and have assigned triggers and readings. Once a month each of us submit a piece of writing for critique. The feedback is robust. It was through the group that I ever submitted anything. The poet Nora McGillen who is in our group encouraged me and some others to send stories and poems to competitions. We all made shortlists and even won competitions. It was overwhelming. The writing group is completely connected to my writing development. It not only provides deadlines (the usefulness of this can never be underestimated because at least once a month I have produced something), but they give honest critique and unconditional support. If I table a story to them and they say it’s not working, then it isn’t.

You have published both poetry and prose, why are you attracted to each? Have you a different approach to those genres?

I worry that this may sound like poetic sacrilege, but I have never started to write a poem. All the poems I have written began as prose pieces and, somehow, the subject matter altered language and syntax. It is like an internal pressure breaks apart the prose and the subject seeks a different resolution, the language is heightened, meaning clusters around singular images, there needs to be more white space on the page. It is not a conscious choice and this has given me some anxiety. I feel like a poetic imposter. I read poetry. I often read poetry before I start writing prose to move me into language. If I sit at the table for a day of writing, I might start with a half hour of reading poetry. But my prose style tends to be sparse, economical and not particularly lyrical. But it is in prose I feel I can find a voice, even if that ultimately leads to a different form. I am trying to trust this more and not worry if I start writing a sentence that grasps beyond the concrete.

You are a working academic, how does that complement and challenge you as a writer?

I am infinitely blessed to be working in the area of storytelling with students who have chosen creative practices. I work on the Performing Arts and the Writing & Literature programmes at IT Sligo. I teach Greek Theatre, Shakespeare, Film, Live Art, Facilitation and many other modules. They are all about storytelling whether this is in theatre making, performance art, literature or visual narratives in film. I think this has impacted my writing in very positive ways, seeing writing as picture making, having background in classical and early modern literatures. So that is all quite complementary. But then there is the problem of writing after decades of academic writing that basically has extricated ‘voice.’ I am really interested in cultural journalism but have to wrangle with this voice that is not mine, a voice that is stilted and hard to relate to that I am trying to relax. So while this has not been a problem in the fiction writing, I am still trying to find a more authentic voice in the non-fiction.
How do you find time to write?

With great difficulty. I work full time and have three children, so I can’t waste time. I write early and late. I write in my car. I write under duress. Writing is the most portable craft, you can do it anywhere. I try to make time although I am not always consistent. For the past few weeks I have hardly written at all and this creates intense anxiety. I have to accept that there are times where work gets intense and the writing has to take a back seat. But making time is healthy for me. I have learned to write more in spurts. I often will drive to the next place I need to be if there are a few hours so that I am there already and then just sit in the car with my laptop. In the car there are no distractions, dishes in sink or counters to wipe.

You have helped develop a new BA (Hons) in Writing and Literature, how did that come about and what are your ambitions for the course?

The new BA in Writing & Literature is a milestone for the college and reflects a new ethos that speaks to the North West and the creative legacy here. It makes complete sense that there would be a course committed to both writing and literature based in Sligo. The response has exceeded all expectations. We have had to run two groups in our very first uptake because of the numbers who applied. We have hired two writers this year to teach the writing modules. Eoin McNamee is teaching the creative writing workshops. He has 18 novels to his name and endless awards, film credits, BBC radio plays etc. He is giving the students such an immersive and special experience. On Dermot Healy’s 70th birthday they went out to Maugherow and spent the morning on that cliff face and then had tea in Dermot and Helen’s house with Helen. They recited poetry and played music. What a privilege and experience for aspiring writers. Yesterday he took them to some of the studios in the Model Arts centre and they met with Sligo based artists who talked about their practice and compared it to the writing process. We also have Gerard Beirne teaching writing on the course who read with north West Words a few months ago. We are so lucky to have such experienced and capable teachers. In addition to their writing workshops, the students are doing digital storytelling and have been to multiple events including the Dublin Theatre Festival. Rather than large scale survey courses, our modules opt for depth and consideration of form. I am so proud of this course, the students we have enrolled and the staff teaching on it.

What advice would you give to emerging writers trying to develop their writing?

Sometimes we are our own worst enemies because of crippling self-doubt. Humility is useful but not if it prevents you from writing or submitting. So write and write and write and submit. I know that I have learned most about writing through critiques in the writing group. It is a privilege to be able to give feedback to others because sometimes you can see habits in their writing it is hard to see in your own. Even as I write this I keep deleting ‘I think’ from the start of every sentence, a habit I was in with my fiction, starting scenes with ‘she remembered’ rather than just showing that scene. I only saw this from looking at the work of others and getting feedback. Writing groups are invaluable. Stepping into the writing world is important, too. I have learned a lot from workshops. While these are supportive
structures, nothing compensates for the process of being in the story and writing and rewriting and trying to find the right form.

You have been very successful recently in a number of writing competitions. Do you have any strategies or advice around entering competitions and seeking publication?

There are very useful websites about submissions and competitions: aerogrammestudio.com; Paul McVeigh has a brilliant blog that posts opportunities on a monthly calendar - paulmcveigh.blogspot.ie; poetryireland.ie gives regular listings in prose as well as poetry; bigsmokewritingfactory.com have a monthly round-up of writing competitions. I can’t say I have a strategy to share, I feel I have been very lucky. What I do know is that judging can be very subjective and that a piece of writing that got nowhere in one competition can place somewhere else. For the first two years, I submitted to competitions and I never thought about journals. It is only in the last year really that I have started to send work to journals for publication. I would advise writers to try both. It is very satisfying to find a home for a piece of writing and to let go of it.

You live in the North West. Do you think that living outside of the bigger cities in Ireland impacts on your life as a writer?

Living in Sligo and the North West is at the very core of my writing. My whole life, Sligo has been the source of poetry, creativity, loss, yearning. I can’t ever separate my writing from here. Even in my American stories, I think the North West of Ireland looms somewhere as a loss I suppose I always felt from my father who left Ireland but never settled in America. There are writers and painters who have spent the entirety of their careers looking at this place. The more you look the more it gives you. While I don’t necessarily write about Sligo, it is still there. So while I have moments of wondering what it might be like to live in Galway or Dublin, to be in an urban environment with ‘culture,’ I step outside and Knocknarea is there and the river and the lake and the Atlantic, and the grey town and it is good to have my feet on the ground right here.

What are your future ambitions as a writer?

I am working on a novel at the moment. Whether this is a practice novel or not, I don’t know. I suppose, like most writers, I would love to have a book published but feel very happy with how the writing is going and to have stories published in journals. I think my ambition is to try to keep writing.

Una Mannion was born in Philadelphia but has lived in Sligo for the past 30 years. She is programme chair of the new BA in Writing and Literature at IT Sligo. In 2017, she has won the Hennessy New Irish writing award for Emerging Poetry, the Doolin short Story award, Cuirt fiction award, and Allingham flash fiction. She came second in the Books Ireland short story competition. Her work is published in The Lonely Crowd, The Irish Times, Bare Fiction, Ambit, Bare Fiction and The Incubator.
Biographies

Paul Bradley lives in Letterkenny, where he normally gets his weekly writing “fix” in a local newspaper column. He has previously published a poetry collection called Utter, and is currently working on a second. Paul is a previous winner of the Donegal Creameries and North West Words Poetry Competition.


Patrick Deeley is from Loughrea, County Galway. His poems have appeared widely over many years and he has had six collections published with Dedalus Press, the latest being ‘Groundswell: New and Selected Poems’. His best-selling memoir, ‘The Hurley Maker’s Son’, was shortlisted for the Bord Gais Energy Book of the Year Award in 2016.

James Finnegan had a collection of poems highly commended in the Patrick Kavanagh Poetry Competition in Sept 2016 and was shortlisted for Over The Edge New Writer of the Year in October 2016. In 2016 he was also published in The Bombay Review and The Canterbury Anthology for Poet of the Year 2016. He had a poem in Issue 8 of Skylight47 (March 2017) and in CYPHERS No 83 (May 2017). James had three poems shortlisted for Canterbury Festival Poet Of The Year 2017 (October 2017) which appear in the 2017 Anthology. He holds a doctorate in living educational theory from the University of Bath (2001).

Freda Donoghue has been writing for the past few years. Her debut play, The First Punk in Oldcastle, and her second play, Wish You Were Here, were performed on the amateur drama circuit in 2015 and 2016, respectively, both of them winning awards. She lives in Co. Cavan.
Mary Dympna lives in Letterkenny. She hated poetry in school but after college she started reading it with new eyes. Currently working towards her first collection, she writes every day. She has recently been shortlisted for the Bailieborough Poetry Prize. She is also the owner of an award-winning writing blog, mdympna.wordpress.com. Twitter: M_Dympna

Kevin Higgins is co-organiser of Over The Edge. He teaches poetry workshops at Galway Arts Centre, Creative Writing at Galway Technical Institute, and is Creative Writing Director for the NUI Galway Summer School. He is poetry critic of The Galway Advertiser. Kevin has published five collections of poetry with Salmon. His best-selling debut collection, The Boy With No Face (2005) was short-listed for the 2006 Strong Award for Best First Collection by an Irish poet. A collection of Kevin’s essays and book reviews, Mentioning The War, was published by Salmon Poetry in 2012. Kevin’s poetry has been translated into Greek, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Russian, & Portuguese. He was Satirist-in-Residence at the Bogman’s Cannon (2015-16). '2016 - The Selected Satires of Kevin Higgins' was published by NuaScéalta in early 2016.

Camillus John was bored and braised in Dublin, Ireland. He has had work published in The Stinging Fly, RTE Ten, Headstuff.org, The Lonely Crowd, Thoughtful Dog, Honest Ulsterman, The Cantabrigian, The Bogman’s Cannon, The Queen’s Head, Litro, Fictive Dream, Silver Streams and other such organs of literature. Recently he killed the Prime Minister of Ireland in fiction in the Welsh literary magazine, The Lonely Crowd, with a piece entitled, The Assassination of Enda Kenny (After Hilary Mantel). He would also like to mention that Pat’s won the FAI cup in 2014 for the first time in 53 miserable years of not winning it. Website: Janey Macken Street.

Eamonn Lynskey is a poet and essayist whose work has appeared in many leading magazines and journals. He was a finalist in both the Hennessy Awards and the Strokestown International Poetry Competition. His third poetry collection, ‘It’s Time’, was published by Salmon Poetry in May 2017. www.eamonnlynskey.com

Angela McCabe works as a Neuropsychologist. She is the 2016 winner of the Listowel Poetry Selection Competition. Several of her poems have won prizes and have appeared in various anthologies. Angela has written screen plays and made an award winning short movie. Her third poetry book will be published in 2018.

Éilís McClay is a 4th year undergraduate student in Molecular Genetics at the University of Dundee. She often takes photographs of the mitotic spindle, and occasionally of the Donegal landscape.

Averil Meehan writes poetry, drama and fiction. Her fiction has won first place in the Spotlight First Novel Competition and been shortlisted in the Over the Edge Writer of the Year, and in the Flash500 Novel Opening Chapter and Synopsis competition. Her flash fiction has been shortlisted in the Fish Flash competition. Her poetry collection, "Until Stones Blossom" is published by Summer Palace Press. Her Poetry has been read at Cuirt and selected for Poetry Ireland Introductions in Dublin, won first place in the North West Words poetry competition, the John Player Cup at the Patrick McGill Summer School and the Charles Macklin Poetry competition. It has been published in various literary journals including The Stinging Fly. Her radio play, "A Family Christmas" was broadcast twice by RTE.

Neil Slevin MA, BSc is a writer from Co. Leitrim, Ireland, whose poetry has been published by various Irish publications, and international journals such as Scarlet Leaf Review and Artificium: The Journal. His flash fiction appeared in The Incubator. Neil co-edits Dodging The Rain.

https://twitter.com/neil_slevin

Guy Stephenson lives in Letterkenny. He writes, gardens, husbands and fathers. For many years he taught Ceramics and design-related subjects at the Regional Technical College, Letterkenny, now Letterkenny Institute of Technology. At one time, he made and exhibited pots with some degree of success, with pieces being bought for public collections. Now retired from teaching, he makes poems. Some of these can be found in: North West Words Magazine; NWW Poetry for Spaces series; Contemporary Haibun On Line; and In Between Hangovers. A piece is pending in LaganOnline, to be published on 30/11/17. He is a member of Station House Writers and North West Words.
Joan Sullivan Gray teaches English and Humanities at Boston Latin School, a venerable institution that predates the founding of Harvard University by a year. Over the years, however, she has come to think of Ireland and South Sligo as her true home and delighted with her relationship with North West Words. In 2012, she was invited to participate in a Week of Creative Practice at the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry in Belfast and has had her work commended for the Dennis O'Donaghue Poetry Prize, Cuirt New Writers, and in the Dermott Healey International Poetry Competition. "Winter Fire" was awarded third prize in the North West Words/Donegal Creameries Competition while "Immigration Policy" and Glioblastoma appeared in North West Words in September of 2016.

Christine Valters Paintner is an American poet and writer living in Galway, Ireland. She is the author of ten books of nonfiction on creative process and contemplative practice and her poems have been published in The Galway Review, Boyne Berries, Headstuff, Skylight 47, Spiritus Journal, Tiferet, Anchor, U.S. Catholic, and Presence, and are forthcoming in Crannog, ARTS, and Anglican Theological Review. Her first collection, Dreaming of Stones, is forthcoming from Paraclete Press in 2019. You can find more of her writing and poetry at AbbeyoftheArts.com.

Submissions welcome

North West Words is published in May and November. The next submission deadline is April 1st, 2018 and submissions will be accepted from 1st February 2018 until 1st April 2018.

Please submit no more than 3 poems or 1 short story (max 2000 words), non-fiction piece (max 800 words) or flash fiction (max 500 words) or jpegs of photography/art, as an email attachment with ‘NWW magazine submission’ and whatever category you are submitting to, as the subject of the email. Include a short biography (50-100 words) in the third person and a photo along with any links to your website/blog/twitter/etc.

All work must be the original work of the writer/artist and previously unpublished. Copyright remains with the writer/artist.

At the moment, we cannot pay for work we publish.

Email Submissions to: northwestwords@outlook.com