

# The Bangor Literary Journal

Issue 10: Aspects Edition



Featuring: Ross Thompson; Lesley Allen; Ian Wilson; winners of The Seventh Annual Bangor Poetry Competition; exceptional poetry, flash fiction, art and photography by contributors.

Photograph by Paul Daniel Rafferty

## Editors' Welcome

Welcome to our special Aspects 2019 issue of The Bangor Literary Journal.

In this fabulous issue you will find interviews with award winning poet Ross Thompson; renowned Bangor writer Lesley Allen and local historian Ian Wilson. We really hope you enjoy these insightful interviews!

In addition, this is your opportunity to read the fifteen shortlisted poems from The Seventh Annual Bangor Poetry Competition, including this year's winner, Gaynor Kane's evocative poem 'Fire-lighting'.

Finally, enjoy a selection of exceptional poetry, flash fiction, art and photography by our contributors.

Thanks as always for all your continued support, we appreciate each and every single one of you.

**Amy and Paul**



**Amy Louise Wyatt**



**Paul Daniel Rafferty**

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# FEATURED POET

## ROSS THOMPSON



Ross Thompson is an award-winning writer and English teacher from Bangor, County Down.

His poetry has featured on television, radio and in an extensive selection of international journals and publications. He continues to read at arts festivals and literary events across the country, and he has also collaborated on several multimedia commissions. *Threading*

*The Light* is his first collection of poetry. Available to purchase soon from

<https://www.dedaluspress.com/>

**Ross, we are delighted that you have taken time out of your busy schedule as a teacher, writer, father and husband to chat with us about your work. What first intrigued you about the medium of poetry and what age were you when you first started writing?**

I have always enjoyed the creative process. As a child, I remember playing around with stories and comic strips – or rather, wantonly plagiarising whatever film I happened to be watching at the time. I had a brief flirtation with poetry at university but the resultant pieces were embarrassingly doggerel about nothing of any importance. To say that it was “sixth form poetry” would be an insult to sixth formers. Not to be deterred, I kept writing in different forms: I played in a band with good friends for a long time, worked as a freelance journalist and finished a novel that will never see the light of day, which seems to be a required rite of passage for all aspiring writers. All those thousands of wasted words were a way of preparing me for what I was really meant to do, which was to write poetry, and this came about in the most casual manner. A colleague was leaving our mutual workplace, and another colleague suggested that as an English teacher I would be best placed to write a humorous poem in honour of his many years of service. It was supposed to be a short dose of friendly badinage but in my typically obtuse manner I thought that I would knock off a mock Homeric epic in heroic couplets and iambic pentameter. This reignited my love of writing but also refined my thinking on the construction of poetic lines: the integration of specific rhythms and rhymes, the scansion of a given order of words, the arrangement of stanzas and so on. When I get hooked on a pastime or interest, it really does consume all of my time and attention, and poetry was no exception: it very quickly became a pursuit that I believed to be of great value, and a medium that I wanted to take seriously.

**If you had to describe your poetry in three words, what would they be? Can you explain these?**

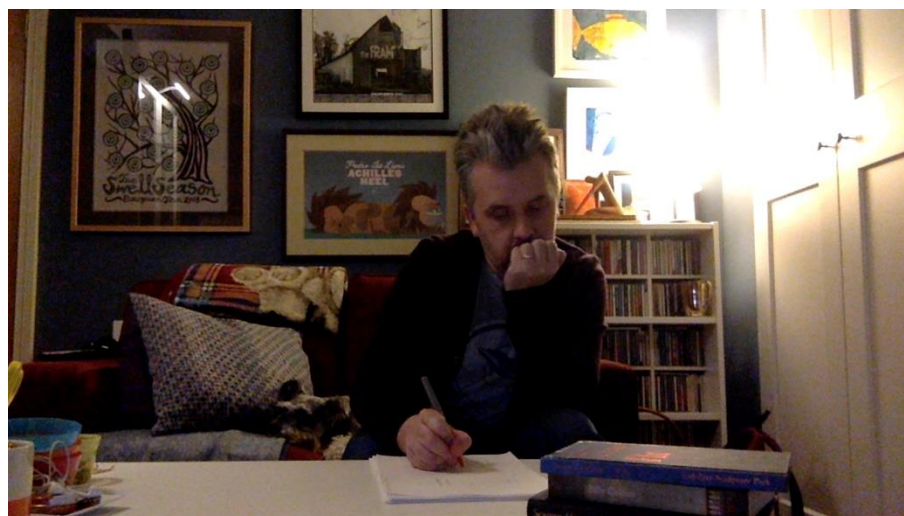
First and foremost, **honesty**. I believe that honesty is of vital importance to the success of a poem. The purpose of any creative form is to communicate a message to the audience, and in poetry the best way to strike a mutual chord with the reader is to be honest. If a particular memory makes you shrink with embarrassment or wince with remorse, it will most likely make for a strong basis for a poem. Such feelings and recollections tend to be universal, and pinning them down with concrete words and abstract images is an act of forging common ground with the reader. I respect the fact that some writers would prefer to explore alien ideas and issues – an ekphrastic response to an artwork, for example, or a mediation on a news story – but poetry resonates most with me when it is personal and heartfelt. Of course, the writing is not unbiased reportage – it also needs to be *poetic* so it should contain music and oomph and craft (as Emily Dickinson put it, “Tell all the truth but tell it slant.”) but ultimately all of these elements form a conduit for the poet’s unabashed feelings about the world in which they inhabit.



Secondly, **emotive**. I appreciate that my work is absolutely from the heart, and that some may find that approach cloying or even undignified. However, in a world dominated by cynicism and archness I am most startled by writing that cuts right to the core of what it means to be alive, and all of the failures and longings that this entails. It's like in that New York Dolls song where the doctor says, "You got the human condition, boy, I feel sorry for you." Therefore, the poems that echo long after reading are the ones that speak directly and passionately about those thorny emotions that lodge inside all of us. For example, Ian McMillan's sonnet '04/01/07', which recalls his mother's death, or the highly emotively charged work of Sylvia Plath, or 'In Two Seconds' by Mark Doty, which is almost unbearably painful to read, or the sweet and nostalgic 'Oranges' by Gary Soto... there are too many to name here. I try to channel real emotion into all of the poems that I write – perhaps to their detriment.

Lastly, **meticulous**. I am finicky about my writing. At times, frustratingly, needlessly so. I agonise over each word, metrical structure, placement of a comma - Oxford or otherwise. Even if it means running the gauntlet over tiny details that nobody else will notice. I cannot proceed until I find the perfect (i.e. non-existent) solution, and often a poem remains marooned on the naughty step until its parent figures out how to control its unruly behaviour. Such wanton perfectionism is ridiculous, I know, but my goal is always to write the exact poem that I want to write. Not necessarily the "best", as this by definition is a subjective word, but rather the poem that lurks somewhere on the wilds of my subconscious, taunting me that I cannot tame it. The great Robert Frost excelled at describing the mundane details of daily life but did so in a way that made the trivial appear magical, and that is a key influence on my work. The hope is that, by honing and polishing each word until it is as bright as it can possibly be, the end result is a piece that the reader can almost hear thrumming on the page. It should have energy, vibrancy and joy.

That said, I regularly employ creative strategies to force myself to break out of the shackles of perfectionism: setting a specific time limit, a certain length, a different narrative voice to my own. When all else fails, you have to



leave a piece and (maybe) come back to it later. Sometimes, you just have to set a poem free before it drags you down like a pair of cement shoes.

**Your debut poetry collection 'Threading the Light' is due for publication very soon with Dedalus Press. Within the collection, you have divided your poems into five sections. What was your reasoning for doing this and what do the sections represent?**

In purely practical terms, the division is intended to allow the reader some breathing space, as any poetry collection can be difficult to swallow in one gulp. Most of us have a tendency to dip into a book at random rather than reading it in a linear fashion from beginning to end. Hopefully, the placement of sections, each of which has a specific title that acts as a cue to its content, might prompt a different kind of reading. My editor and I spent a great deal of time deliberating over the running order of the poems, which are separate entities but also flow into each other, and the reader should hopefully notice that there is an overarching narrative that runs through the entire collection – the title of “threading” has more than one intended meaning. Essentially, the book pulses from reflections on my childhood and stumbling through gawky adolescence towards the section entitled 'The Silent Shore', which very openly explores the illness that afflicted my mother and eventually claimed her life. Even the section 'The New World', which focuses on movie starlets, trapeze swingers, typists and unfaithful husbands, contains parallels with the autobiographical. Places are also very important to me: Canada, Italy, Peru, Scotland, the North Coast and, naturally, Bangor, feature heavily, each of which chimes and echoes with the other pieces that surround it.



**THREADING THE LIGHT**

ROSS THOMPSON



**In your debut collection, poems such as 'The Switch' and the collection titled poem 'Threading the Light' deal with the fine and almost invisible line between life and death. Did you set out to write about the 'ineffable', or did these concepts find their way into your writing without initiation?**

Initially, writing about these experiences - the nearly overwhelming tug-of-war between becoming a father and losing a parent - was a necessity, my own way of coping with my rebellious emotions, of applying order on an experience that was so unpredictably chaotic and upsetting. Even if I did not intend to share the resultant pieces with anyone for fear of them being too personal and unabashedly emotional, it was a process that I had to go through in order to grieve

healthily and cope with that grief. However, as I wrote more and more poems on the subject of loss, they began to coalesce into a longer, interconnected whole that in time would form the basis of 'Grief Is Great', a sequence that takes up a substantial place in the collection – the “hurting heart” of the book, to use my editor’s phrase. It is arguably the most emotionally stark thing that I have ever written but in my mind it moves from a place

of despair to one of hopefulness and nostalgia. As a person of faith, I have no interest in writing nihilistic poems – for me, the uplift, the note of humour, is key to leavening what would otherwise be an exercise in wallowing and self-pity. ‘A Grief Observed’, a wonderful book by C.S. Lewis, was a touchstone in this regard. If there is no hope, then we are all doomed, yet at the same time it was vital for me to wrestle with grief, and for it to wrestle back, in order to reach that conclusion, and the sequence is a working out of all of those conflicting sentiments. It truly is the climax of the book towards and from which all of the other poems ebb and subsequently flow away, and full credit to my publisher for including it unabridged in the collection. Again, I would like to think that such feelings of loss and desolation are universal, and it is my hope that these poems connect with others who have been through a similar experience. I firmly believe that it is important to be open about such things – particularly, if I may say so, for men who by and large are not good at sharing their vulnerabilities. This is epitomised in ‘The Switch’, where I try to balance the scales between life and death. It was a particularly difficult piece to write and remains difficult to perform live. It involves placing myself on a tightrope between living in the raw emotionality of the poem and finding some psychological distance. One step to the left and the poem will appear falsified, and one step to the right and I know that I will not make it to the end without bursting into tears. It still touches a raw part of me that has not quite healed, if it will ever do so, but I hope that its overriding emotions are love and gratitude.

**In putting a debut collection together, what would you say are the most challenging and the most rewarding aspects of doing so?**

I would say that one of the greatest challenges is the amount of time expended on the many, many micro-decisions that go into making a book a cohesive “collection” rather than a loose assemblage of poems written up until that point. I very much took the teacher approach to editing: I printed out the proofs, wielded my red pen and went to work, trying to be merciless with typos, inconsistencies and other unwarranted quirks. Poems that did not fit tonally or thematically came out immediately, as did others that repeated an idea or image expressed more strongly elsewhere. Repetition and reiteration can be good things, and believe me when I say that there is plenty of that, but they can also dilute the work unnecessarily. The order was shuffled and reshuffled, as if I was fumbling for the magic card in a deck, and I tweaked a good number of images and lines. After that, I sent the corrections to my editor, he sent me the new proofs, I printed them out and unsheathed my red pen again. I followed that rigorous process five or so times, which in itself posed a different challenge: the more often that you read your own work, the greater the danger of boredom and frustration. Most writers by nature are self-critical beasts but when you read your own poems umpteen times one stops seeing the merits and only sees the flaws. Again, my editor was very helpful in this regard, and I am grateful to him for a metaphorical hand on the shoulder and a kindly, “I think we’re there now.”



**In the years that you have been writing poetry what would you say have been your most memorable moments?**

In all honesty, I would have to say that I have derived most pleasure from writing at least a handful of poems of which I can be proud. Pieces such as 'Domino Day', 'The Daily Crossword' and 'On Castlerock Beach', the latter of which closes the collection, are about as close as I can get to capturing my poetic voice and channelling the static that constantly buzzes inside my head. It is difficult to imagine that I could write more complete poems than these, and they are certainly the ones that garner the most audible reaction in a reading. That in itself is vindication enough, and while I am flattered to have been awarded some prizes and been invited to read on television and radio, the fact that I have to create work imbued with my beliefs, personality and poetic approach is a blessing in itself. In a wider sense, I am also very grateful for having made a circle of friends who have always been supportive of my writing – the poetry community is welcoming even of an introspective misfit such as myself. It is wonderful to be able to write and read alongside fellow artists, and to be inspired by their creative victories, as stone sharpens stone. If it were not for the encouragement of others, I am not sure if I would have taken the plunge and started submitting my work to journals such as this very one. This in turn led to me building up a body of work that I could submit to Dedalus Press, to whom I am indebted for inviting me to publish my debut collection. They were always my first choice of publisher, and I am still thrilled to be under their mantle, and that they allowed me such freedom in shaping my book before releasing it into the wild.



*Ross reading at Aspects Festival alongside Moyra Donaldson and Maureen Boyle*

**Finally, Ross can you tell the readers about any plans you have, or events you have coming up in the near future?**

I am looking forward to launching the book in both Bangor and Dublin, road-testing the contents in subsequent readings, and showing off the beautiful cover by the painter Craig Jefferson – I originally envisioned a jacket that was bold, textured and colourful, and his work is certainly all of those adjectives and more. Also, I am always agitated when I am not creating so I have already started work on a second collection, which I hope will be wider in scope than its predecessor and less explicitly autobiographical. Currently, I am writing about loneliness, the Cold War, the Space Race, chess, the negative impact of technology upon our world... all of the classic poetic subjects. It is exciting to think about how all of these disparate elements will slot together. Inevitably, and this is always part of the fun, the final result will be different to what I imagined. More often than not, you don't write the poems... the poems write you.

## **Skye**

A miracle of engineering, a magic trick,  
a bridge cantilevered between mainland and isle  
to a remote part of the country growing wild  
with a tapestry of heather moor, thistle and gorse.  
Taking this trip is like zapping back in time:  
a few beats from Portree, where lobster and langoustine  
are as plentiful as manna, we drive out towards  
a Pictish landscape of agate and marcasite,  
home to countless guillemot and red deer. The air  
tastes fresh as the sea; the ground throbs with rivulets  
and streams coursing from the belly of Sgùrr nan Gilleann.  
On Sunday, we join in worship with islanders  
raising palms and reciting psalms to the Saviour.  
We are welcomed for dinner by complete strangers.  
We break bread and crack open carafes of blood red wine.  
Chat flows like water from the rock struck by Moses's staff.  
After, we head out into the dark, where distant headlamps  
wash over the shapes of roosting birds and sleeping trees.  
We retire to the solitary B & B resting  
on the estuary that gives back all the light  
of the moon, and we spoon in a queen size bed that allows  
us to be different people for a few stolen  
moments, far removed from the pressure and the din  
of the city from which we fled and tried to forget.

**by Ross Thompson**

*from Threading The Light*

## **The Button Box**

A schoolboy's holy grail. A treasure trove  
hidden inside a *Quality Street* tin.

A hoard of tactile buttons cracked open  
when the need arose if climbing branches

led to damaged clothes. A purgatory  
of precious coins, each of which told stories  
of breathless journeys through busy cities,  
brushing the bosom of a chatelaine

or being snipped off a suit to settle  
a family debt. Some studs were crafted  
from metal that did not attract magnets,  
and some from ceramic. Fire engine red

countersunk in snowdrop white. Some Lucite  
and some Japanese satsuma. Black glass  
for mourning. Simple toggles once produced  
en masse, a surrogate currency banned

by sumptuary laws. The odd rogue pin,  
a finely threaded and pearl-headed tine  
that drew blood when it lodged in your soft skin.  
You took the risk if it meant you could sink

your hand into those discs up to the wrist  
and feel them receive your pulse like pebbles  
or autumn leaves. Those colourful saucers  
like sweets you wanted to place in your mouth.

**by Ross Thompson**

## **Bluebird**

Stealing across the edge of town around midnight,  
I cleared it all the way home and did not brake once:  
no speed bumps, roundabouts, blind corners or red lights,  
just a laser guided straight line to the sea front

from the flyover rendered silk smooth by dropping  
the car into neutral and letting inertia  
do the hard work, streets and silent houses plotting  
before me as if I dreamt them - or vice versa.

I became Eugene Cernan and Donald Campbell,  
skipping like a stone off the contour of a breath;  
Amelia Earhart, weightless as Ariel,  
and John Henry, hammering on a twilight crest.

**by Ross Thompson**



**Galway (acrylic on canvas board).**

I took the inspiration for this painting from my travels in County Galway. The warm colours and geometric design reflect the intricacies of the energy of the city.



**Fairy Tree Outside Bangor (acrylic on canvas).**

I took the inspiration for this painting from the tree in the field outside Bangor, made famous in the Rihanna video for We Found Love. The tree now does not seem to be as healthy but long before the video, this tree was a prominent feature in the field and we always called it 'The Fairy Tree'.

**Biography**

Andrew M Crane is a white-collar worker by day and an artist and writer otherwise. Several of his poems were published in a variety of online and printed magazines and he received recognition for his work in Bangor's Annual Poetry Competition in 2017. Andrew published *A Slacker's Tale* in 2015 and is working on a second novel as well as a collection of short stories. Andrew was a member of Ards Writers and read his work at the Festival of the Peninsula. Andrew is more focussed on his painting since rediscovering acrylics and recently completed several commissions. Andrew lives in Greyabbey with his partner, Julie, where he enjoys gardening, travelling and watching (and subsequently quoting from) movies.

Christine Valters Paintner is an American poet living in Galway, Ireland and the author of twelve books of nonfiction and a collection of poems titled *Dreaming of Stones*. Her poems have appeared in several journals in the U.S. and Ireland including Crannog, Stinging Fly, The Blue Nib, Headstuff, The Galway Review, Boyne Berries, Tiferet, Spiritus, Presence, and Anchor. You can find more of her writing and poetry at [AbbeyoftheArts.com](http://AbbeyoftheArts.com).



## **Little Red Riding Hood**

First of all  
red is so not my color  
but a thrift store bargain  
is nothing to scoff at  
when mother has squandered  
all on whiskey and lottery.

She hands me the basket  
my eyes grow wide,  
*grandma is unwell*  
*go straight there,*  
(she cautions,)  
her eyes narrow.

But why go to the woods  
if you aren't going  
to gather snowdrops  
breathe in wild garlic  
collect mushrooms for soup  
or lichen from branches for tea.

Finally I knock on the yellow door,  
scent of rose perfume mixed with fur,  
she looked a hairy sight  
big ears for hearing  
big eyes for seeing  
big mouth for eating;

knife ready under my cape  
no need to be rescued  
by woodsman or other,  
but the wolf was never a threat  
just grandma returning  
to her wild nature.

**by Christine Valters Paintner**

**Christine Murray** lives in Dublin with her children Tadhg and Anna. Her poetry has been widely published, both in print and online, in chapbooks, anthologies and journals. She founded and curates *Poethead; a poetry blog* which is dedicated to platforming work by women poets, their translators and editors. She is an active member of *Fired! Irish Women Poets and the Canon* which seeks to celebrate and draw awareness to the rich cultural heritage of Irish women poets through awareness-raising and reading.



## Bangor (notes)

I have learnt to entangle  
my wings in the thin  
branches at trees' top  
overlooking the queue

my eye holds blue —  
a cornflower, a  
scrap torn from the sky

I carry a small thorn in my heart,  
safe purse —

I am not yet ready to wheel into sky's gap

Collect, collect!  
not submit!

they do not know that they descend

no song  
no sky  
could hold me

If I wished it—

*they and I  
O how far we have fallen,  
Just to burn here!*

**by Christine Murray**



Hebe Fryer is a first year English Literature and Creative Writing student at Cardiff University. She has been published in print in CAKE Magazine and online on Young Poets Network. She makes excellent cinnamon pancakes and has a small rabbit named Bryn.



## **Aftertaste**

I message him at 23:14 and  
by 00:19 he still hasn't replied,  
And I realise that I'm not worried,  
Instead, I sit with myself  
in my nineteen-year-old room,  
Sheets bunched around my feet and a  
half-packed suitcase on my chair,  
And write what I'd wanted to  
write at the time,  
About the sliver of cranberry sky  
out of the corner of the window,  
And the setting sun holding up  
the curve of the shell-white, tambourine moon,  
For nobody but me and the boy with the blue eyes.

**by Hebe Fryer**

Bríd lives on the Inishowen Peninsula in Donegal. An amateur harp player, she is interested in all things creative, including painting, pebble art, textile art and stained glass. She is new to writing, and enjoys the challenge of flash fiction, which like pebble art, requires telling a story on a small canvas.



## **The Desk**

He can see from the tilt of her head and the faraway focus of her eyes that she doesn't know he is there. She is sitting at her desk. Faded sunlight from the window smooths her forehead and plays a muted shadow-song across her up-tilted face. Ochre tinges intensify the yellow of her poplin shirt and paper glows under her poised pen. Her gaze scans the infinity beyond him. The ghost-smile that suggests itself in the trembling corners of her mouth is not for him, just as the yet unwritten words will not kiss his eyes.

His rictus smile. Who writes letters anymore? When did he last hear the comforting scratch of nib on paper?

He remembers his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, the silver fountain pen, a balanced marvel of engineering, his hand enfolding his mother's amused inscription; 'Pour Forth With Love'. Words flowed then in an unfailing cascade of delight.

If he had it now, he could wield it in a battle of the pens, distract her with his words, dazzle and confound her, seduce a smile. He could compel her gaze.

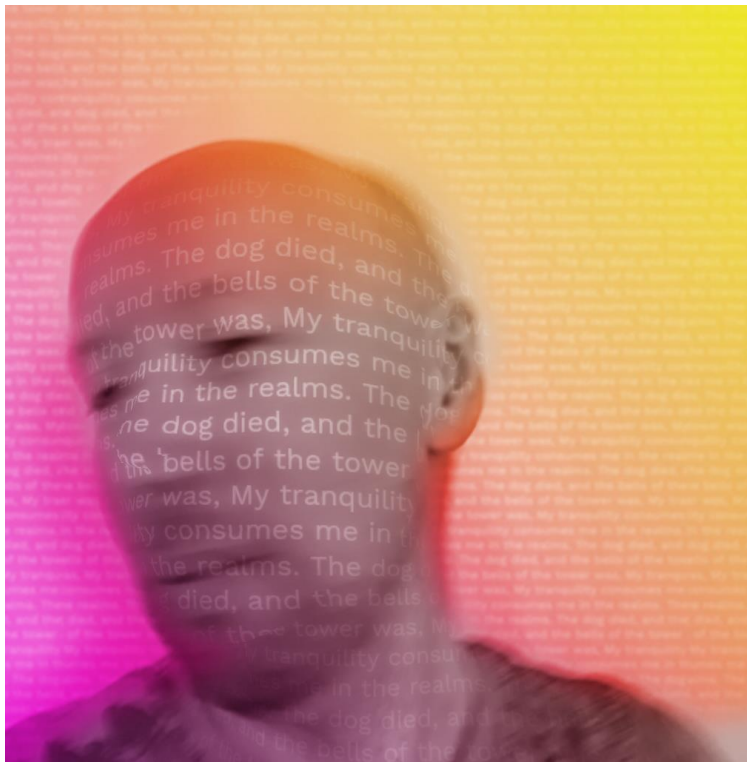
But his pen is silent. There will be no renaissance written in the sunlight falling on her desk.

**by Bríd McGinley**

Colin Dardis is a poet, editor, arts coordinator and creative writing tutor based in Belfast. He was an ACES '15-16 recipient from Arts Council Northern Ireland, and co-runs Poetry NI, a multimedia platform for poets. His work has been published widely throughout Ireland, the UK and USA. His latest collection is *The Dogs of Humanity* (Fly on the Wall Press, 2019).

[www.colindardispoet.co.uk](http://www.colindardispoet.co.uk)

[www.poetryni.com](http://www.poetryni.com)





## Epiphyte

The morning started off blue;  
perfect as the Indian Ocean  
at the peak of summer,  
everything patient and  
ascetic.

But what lay on the other side  
of that blue? A susurrus of cirrus,  
the ichor of Autumn percolating  
into a climax of raincloud, the day  
defeated.

The sky becomes an oubliette  
where every drop is torture: *bang*  
on the window sill, *bang* on the  
skylight, *bang* on the promise of  
outdoor life.

Curse this simple larceny,  
saturated rapine; where  
is the sun? gone to sleep,  
our electric lights, a pale  
epigone.

**by Colin Dardis**

## **FEATURED WRITER**

### **LESLEY ALLEN**



Lesley Allen grew up and lives in Bangor. She works as a freelance copywriter and the press officer and programmer for Open House Festival. Her debut novel, *The Lonely Life of Biddy Weir*, was published in November 2016 by the BonnierZaffre imprint, Twenty7 Books. The book will be released on Audible in November 2019. Lesley was named as one of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's 2016 Artist Career Enhancement Scheme (ACES) recipients for literature, and earlier this year received an Arts Bursary from Ards and North Down Borough Council. Lesley is represented by The Feldstein Agency.

**Lesley thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. We are delighted to chat with you. Firstly, what/ who would you consider to be your biggest writing inspiration/s?**

I'd have to start with my parents, Ronnie and Patsy. They were both avid readers and introduced me to books from babyhood. From about the age of six, the Thursday evening trip to Bangor Library was the highlight of my week, and it was in that room that the dream of becoming an author first began to nudge me.

My English teachers at school also play a part. I went to Bangor Girl's High School from 1974 to 1981, and during my happy years there I was incredibly lucky to be taught by two exceptional women, Marilyn McGimpsey and Brenda Lindsay. Teachers don't fare terribly well in *The Lonely Life of Biddy Weir*, but thankfully my experience was completely different to Biddy's. Both Marilyn and Brenda magnified my love for literature and inspired me to write my own words. I thought of them often when I was working on the book.

The books that inspire me are constantly evolving, my bookcase a forever changing landscape. I've had more book crushes than men-crushes over the years, including *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott, *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Hardy's *The Trumpet Major* and Jane Austen's *Emma*. In recent years, Maggie O'Farrell, Sarah Winman, Zoe Heller, Alice Sebold, David Nicholls and Lucy Caldwell are the writers who have inspired me the most, but Seabold's *The Lovely Bones* is the book that finally made me realise I couldn't put my dream on hold any longer.

**Your highly successful debut novel 'The Lonely Life of Biddy Weir' was published in 2016 by twenty7. Can you tell the readers what the novel is about?**

In a nutshell, it's about the long-term effects of bullying. At the beginning of the book we meet Biddy Weir, a shy young loner who lives a solitary existence with her old-fashioned, emotionally crippled father. Biddy is happy to exist in her own wee world, sketching seagulls and examining bird poo – until she is branded a 'Bloody Weirdo' by the golden girl at school. What follows is a heart-breaking tale of bullying and redemption, which spans from the late 1970s to 2000. Biddy's is a story with universal appeal, which ultimately affirms the value of being different.

**The town of Ballybrock is the setting for the novel. Does Ballybrock represent a real town or is it purely fictional?**

It's pretty much Bangor, not very cleverly disguised! I wanted the setting to be somewhere familiar to me – a place I felt at home in and could authentically translate onto the page, but I chose a fictional town because I didn't want the story to become about someone from my hometown. Biddy could live anywhere; what happened to her could happen to anyone. When I first started writing the book I didn't want to set it in Northern Ireland at all as I worried that people (well, publishers) wouldn't be interested in a book set here that wasn't about the Troubles. But the characters just kept talking to me with a Northern Irish accent, so in the end I had no option. I'm really glad I listened to them!

**Bernie McGill commented in a review that she was 'a little bit in love with Biddy Weir'. What is it about her character that appeals to wide range of people?**

That was such a lovely thing for Bernie to say. She was so generous to me when I was writing the book, both with her time and her encouragement. Biddy has really touched a chord with many readers, which makes me really happy as I love her to bits! Perhaps it's the combination of her obvious vulnerability and the quiet resilience she never knew she had. And I think that everyone has encountered at least one Biddy in their life who has made a lasting impression on them. I've been contacted by people who have been bullied themselves saying that reading the book was cathartic for them and thanking me for 'telling their story'. Others have told me it helped them to understand what friends or loved ones suffering from anxiety or social disorders are going through, and some have said it's given them the confidence to intervene in a situation they know isn't right. It's been an incredibly humbling and totally unexpected.

**Lesley, I know you have a very busy schedule, in particular playing a huge role in the organisation and management of Open House Festival events. Do you feel that it is possible to both work and be a writer? Or do you feel that time away to write is essential?**

It's definitely something I struggle with, although I know a lot of writers who are able to seamlessly juggle their work, home and writing lives. For me, my job takes up a huge amount of creative headspace and there's a significant chunk of the year when it is all-consuming – so I can go for months without writing a word of fiction. But I'm trying to change that, especially as I'm so close to finishing my second novel, and my third is impatiently knocking on the door. As I type this, I'm at The River Mill (a gorgeous new writing retreat in the outskirts of Downpatrick run by the poet, Paul Maddern) thanks to an arts bursary from Ards and North Down Council. I've spent the past few days reconnecting with my characters and pulling the story into shape. It's been such a relief to have nothing else to do or think about than writing, and I feel more motivated than I have since Biddy was published.



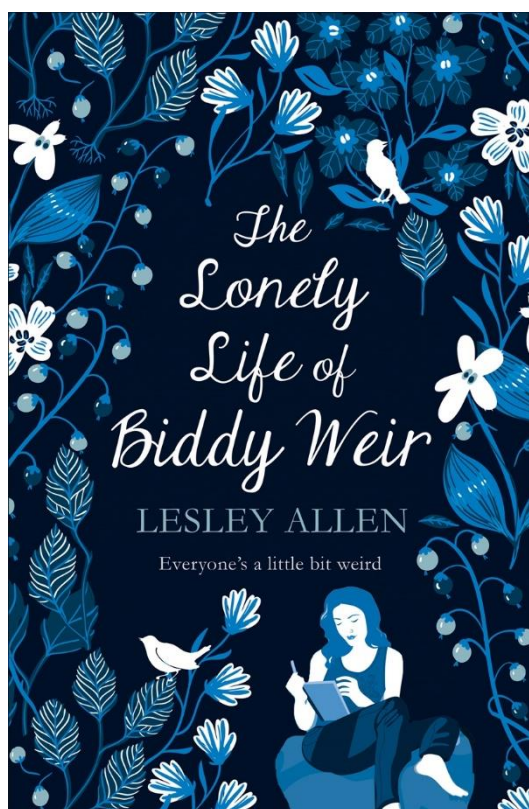
**Looking back, what would you say have been your proudest moments as a writer?**

Seeing my book on the shelves of actual book shops alongside other books by proper authors was huge. The Belfast Eason store placed it on a display with JK Rowling's *Fantastic Beasts*! That blew my mind a little. But also hearing my daughter's impromptu speech at my book launch. She's been on this journey with me and is my biggest supporter, and seeing my achievement through her eyes that night was a moment I will never forget.

**Finally, Lesley what are you currently working on, and what is on the horizon for you?**

I'm trying to finish my second novel, *The Possibilities of Elizabeth*, which I had started working on before I got the publishing deal for *Biddy*. I put Elizabeth on hold for a while to focus on the editing and the promotion of *Biddy*, and then work and life stuff took over for a while. But I'm back on track and hope to have the first draft completed soon!

In the meantime, I'm thrilled to announce that *The Lonely Life of Biddy Weir* will be released on Audible next month. I'm ridiculously excited and can't wait to hear Biddy's voice come to life.



Follow Lesley on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/LesleyAllenAuthor/>

Purchase 'The Lonely Life of Biddy Weir' here: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Lonely-Life-Biddy-Weir-ebook/dp/B01BTUUE50>



# **Excerpt from *The Lonely Life of Biddy Weir***

**by Lesley Allen**

*Published by Twenty7 Books (BonnieZaffre)*

## **Part 1: the birth (and near death) of a weirdo**

**Ballybrock, November 1979**

### **Chapter 1.**

Biddy Weir was two months shy of her tenth birthday when she discovered she was a bloody weirdo. The awful revelation was a shock, to her at any rate, and from that fateful day Biddy's life was defined not by her religion, the colour of her skin, or her sex; nor by what school she went to, her political persuasion or even which side of town she lived in: but by her oddness, by the undeniable, irrevocable fact that she was a weirdo, and a bloody one at that.

As far as Biddy knew, she was the only weirdo who lived in Ballybrock, a small quiet seaside town with church spires and hilly streets and seven fish and chip shops. And lots and lots of seagulls. There were others, of course, like the old lady with wispy pink hair and bright red lipstick who pushed her pet poodles around in a scruffy old Silver Cross pram. And the tall young man with the long wild beard who called himself The Poet. He walked up and down Ballybrock High Street fifty-one times each morning before going into Josie's corner shop to buy a quarter of midget gems and a packet of Rizlas. Josie always wondered where he bought his tobacco, but she never dared to ask. Then there were Billy and Ella, Ballybrock's resident drunks, who loved each other with a passion often openly displayed in public and lived for half of the year in the town's decaying band-stand. Nobody knew where they went for the other half.

But Biddy didn't *know* that these people were weirdos, for no one ever told her. They probably didn't even know themselves. For although the people of Ballybrock would snigger and whisper and look at each other knowingly when they passed them in the street, recoiling and pulling faces and talking about how 'bloody weird' they were, nobody actually called any one of them a bloody weirdo to their face. Not once.

But Biddy knew that she was one, for Biddy *had* been told.

Ballybrock was a nice enough kind of a place, not picture-postcard pretty, but generally pleasing. There was a rough pebble beach which ran the whole way along one end of the town and was shaded by a big stone wall. People would sit on the wall in summertime, eating their chips from crumpled old newspapers or licking their ice creams, shooing away the hordes of greedy gulls. Further along the promenade stood the bandstand where Billy and Ella lived, and a big old cannon sat proudly on the end of the pier. Right in the centre of Ballybrock was a small park with swings and a pond with a little island in the middle where peacocks and caged coloured birds lived.

There were never any bombs or shootings in Ballybrock, not like lots of other places in the Northern Ireland at that particular time. In Ballybrock 'The Troubles' rarely troubled anyone. The people were mostly friendly and, on the surface anyway, didn't seem to care if their neighbour was a Catholic or a Protestant. They looked out for one another and smiled and nodded as they passed each other on the street. And each year on the 12th July, regardless of what church they did or didn't go to, most of the residents of Ballybrock lined the High Street to watch the bands parade in all their finery.

Most folk who passed through Ballybrock concluded that it must be a pleasant place to live. And all things considered, it was. Just so long as you weren't a bloody weirdo like Biddy Weir.

Biddy had always known that she was different from the other girls at school. Her appearance, for a start, was a bit of a giveaway. Throughout her years at school, her uniform was either far too big or much too small. Regardless of her age, there never seemed to be a time when it was just the right fit. Her socks, which were supposed to be beige, were generally a strange colour of puce, and sometimes didn't even match. And her scruffy shoes were often laced with scraps of coloured wool from her grandmother's needlework box, which had sat on the sideboard since the old lady's death. But it was Biddy's hair that really made her look, shall we say, unusual. She was the only girl in her class who didn't have long glossy plaits or swishing pigtails tied at the top with shiny blue bows. Biddy's hair was copper and curly, neither long nor short, and it stuck out in every direction. But Biddy wasn't interested in pigtails or plaits. Looking pretty as a concept, or even an objective, never crossed her mind.

Biddy didn't have a proper school bag either, just an old string shopper with broken handles, which she tried to patch together with wool or thread, or even Sellotape.

And then there was her name. Her real name, that is, not the one she would become known by when she was almost ten years old. All of the other girls in her class had nice, sensible names like Julia or Jacqueline or Georgina. But Biddy's young mother, Gracie, who had not

really been ready to have a child of her own when her daughter was born, named her after a cat who had adopted her family when Gracie was eight. There had been many Flynn family cats over the years, they came and went with regular ease. But Old Biddy was special. She stayed far longer than any of the other cats and had only died the week before Gracie went into labour.

‘I’m not bloody well naming her after your mother,’ Gracie had screamed hysterically at Biddy’s father on his first visit to the hospital to meet his baby daughter, when he had tentatively suggested that Margaret might be a much more suitable name. ‘And just be thankful it wasn’t a boy.’ He didn’t dare ask what the boy’s name might have been.

As it turned out, Gracie Weir had swiftly realised that she wasn’t ready to be a mother and, in actual fact, had never really intended to become a wife. So, when Biddy was just six months old, Gracie ran away to join a travelling fair. The family never heard from her again.

So, that left Biddy, her more than middle-aged father and his elderly mother. Mrs Weir senior helped to rear the child as best she could while her darling son continued to work as a book-keeper at Morrison’s, the local hardware store. She cursed the day that Gracie, ‘that little harlot’, had come to work at the store. At fifty, her boy Howard was much too old to leave home and Mrs Weir had assumed that she’d succeeded in her life’s ambition – to keep him all to herself. The shame of the whole affair with Gracie and the child had nearly killed her.

‘But you’re more than twice her age,’ old Mrs Weir had gasped when Howard sat her down in their dark parlour to break the news, thrusting a cup of sweet tea and two Marie biscuits into her hands. ‘It’s disgusting. Filthy. How could you let this happen, Howard? How could you do this to me?’ It was even worse than when her late husband, Harold, had been hit by the train and killed.

Mrs Weir had consoled herself by believing that Gracie Flynn was nothing more than a shameless opportunist who had seduced her darling Howard for financial security and a roof over her head. None of this was Howard’s doing, of course. Helen, the nice young secretary at Morrison’s (not nice enough for her son, mind you), told her that Gracie had recently moved into one of those new council housing estates on the outskirts of town with her family – all ten of them. Nobody seemed to know where the Flynnns had come from, but word was, they had a bit of a reputation for trouble. In Mrs Weir’s mind, that explained everything. After all, Howard couldn’t possibly have done the seducing himself as, quite frankly, he wouldn’t have known where to start. She suspected that Gracie and her abundant family were really gypsies who’d been forced to live ‘normal lives’ by the powers that be. When she put her theory to Helen, it wasn’t rebuffed.

‘I knew it,’ old Mrs Weir thought, pleased with herself, ‘I just knew it.’

‘Perhaps she got him drunk,’ she whispered confidentially to Helen. ‘Or perhaps she put one of her gypsy spells on him. He mustn’t have realised what was happening.’

Helen, delighted with this exciting turn of events in her normally mundane existence at Morrison’s, smiled and nodded. ‘Perhaps,’ she whispered back.

The truth of the matter was in fact pretty close to Mrs Weir’s imagined version. Howard was as shocked as anyone when Gracie fell pregnant after their somewhat brief fumble in the sand dunes during the Morrison’s annual Easter picnic. In almost fifty years, he’d never been drunk and he’d certainly never had sex and now here he was, getting pissed and making someone pregnant in the same afternoon.

As for Gracie, she didn’t even fancy Howard. How could she? He was old and odd, and, with his thick brown spectacles, green cardigans and stinking breath, utterly unattractive. But, in her first week at the store, she’d boasted to Helen that she could bed any man she wanted.

‘Not Howard, you can’t,’ laughed Helen, rolling her eyes. ‘Not even you could do that.’

‘Just you watch,’ Gracie had smiled coyly, tossing her copper curls.

Once the damage had been done, so to speak, Howard had no option but to propose. A hasty, modest wedding at the town hall registry office ensued, with two staff drafted in as witnesses and Mrs Weir senior as the only guest. The reception was a cup of tea and a ham sandwich at the Peacock Café in the park. It wasn’t quite what Gracie had imagined for her wedding day. But on the whole she was enjoying the drama of this new game, and decided to play along for a while, to see what happened. She could always leave, she reasoned to herself. If she’d learnt anything at all from her family’s way of life it was that leaving was easy. And at least there was no need for any further awful sex with Howard. He showed no interest anyway, but even if he had, she wouldn’t have hesitated to use the pregnancy as a get-out clause.

For a little while, Gracie almost enjoyed living in the dull but relatively comfortable environment of number 17, Stanley Street. It was quiet, such a change from what she was used to. Indeed, if it hadn’t been for Howard’s mother, she might have even found it a pleasurable experience. Until the child was born, that is.

Mrs Weir Senior had glowed with relief when Gracie ran away, and was more than happy to resume the cossetting regime that had served her son so perfectly well before his ill-fated marriage. Her only regret was that her daughter-in-law hadn’t taken the child with her. ‘Perhaps that Flynn family will take her,’ she quietly suggested to Helen on a rare trip into Morrison’s with the pram. ‘After all, there are more of them to help out. It’s the least they could do.’

It soon became clear, however, that none of Gracie's relations were the least bit interested in the baby girl. When Gracie had married Howard Weir they may have been shocked by her choice of husband, and annoyed that there wasn't to be a boozy reception, but at least it meant they had one less mouth to feed. Gracie's hasty and mysterious departure was actually a relief to them, eliminating the concern that she would one day land back on their doorstep with the child in tow, as it was obvious the marriage wouldn't work. Marriages never did in the Flynn family. Ever. So, when a postcard from somewhere foreign arrived one day, informing them that Gracie was following her dream and would never return, they hastily made it known to Howard that they had neither the time, nor the inclination, to be involved in Biddy's life. For a short time, Mrs Weir hoped and prayed that the Flynns would come to their senses, change their minds and reclaim the child. Her prayers were shattered for good however, when, a few months after Gracie had run away, the rest of her family upped sticks and moved yet again – this time, apparently, to Manchester, though no one really knew. And that was that.

So, Mrs Weir was stuck with Biddy. She didn't know quite what to do with a girl, as, apart from her own darling Howard, she had never really been one for children. Still, she made sure she was fed and clothed, and once or twice, when they had an unexpected visitor for one reason or another, she even bounced the child on her knee and patted her curls.

Mrs Weir's sudden demise from a massive, violent stroke coincided with the closure of Morrison's and Howard's premature entry to retirement. There really was very little hope of alternative employment for a fifty-three-year old bookkeeper with a three-year-old daughter and no driving licence. But, as a man who was good with figures, he had made a number of small but canny investments in the past, particularly with the modest sum of money his father had left in trust when he died on Howard's tenth birthday.

Mrs Weir had always suspected that her husband, Harold, was a secret drinker and that his outings to the weekly evening mission meetings at the bandstand often included a trip to the local pub. It was the only time he would ever smell of peppermint – 'for my indigestion, dear,' – and Ralgex – 'my back is playing up today, and I didn't want to miss the meeting.' Her suspicions were confirmed when Harold's mangled body had been found on the railway line which ran directly behind the car park at Crawford's Inn. If Harold had come straight home from the meeting as they would do when they both went on Sundays, his journey would not have taken him anywhere near the Inn, or the railway. Mrs Weir never spoke of her suspicions, as her husband had been known as a good, God-fearing man, but she vowed that not a drop of alcohol would ever pass her son's lips.

And look what happened when it did.

Howard was a clever lad. He did well at school and could have gone to university, made something of his life. But his mother had other plans. Mrs Weir decided that her son should

stay at home and get a decent, steady job with no real prospects. She also made sure he had few friends and limited interests, so that he could spend as much time with her as possible. She even stopped taking Howard to the Sunday mission meetings, deciding that, since He hadn't done a very good job with her husband, she couldn't trust God to keep an eye on her son. She'd just have to do it all herself.

When his mother died, Howard cashed in one of the saving policies he had set up with his father's inheritance fund and forgot about the rest. He put the money from the policy into a building society in the High Street. The interest from that, coupled with his meagre pension, would be quite enough for a man and a child with limited needs to live off for the foreseeable future. What point was there in having any more? He'd never been a spender, inheriting a tightness that had been in the Weir family for many generations. They were always keeping their money for a rainy day, but even when those rainy days arrived, they still went out with holes in their umbrellas. That was just the sort of them. And anyway, Ballybrock wasn't exactly the kind of place that required high living. It was more than a little bit backward in coming forward, and when Biddy was a baby, there had been no cinema, leisure complex, or big fancy shopping centre in the town. Even when those 'scourges of modern life', as Mr Weir called them, did start to arrive, he never went near them, so neither did Biddy.

All things considered, however, Mr Weir did the best he could with his daughter. He took her to the park, where they would feed stale bread to the ducks. They would walk along the shore and watch the noisy gulls dive for fish and swoop across their heads. He would sometimes read her stories and, for her fourth Christmas, he even withdrew enough money from the building society to buy a portable television so the two of them could sit together for *Watch with Mother*. Gradually, a bond of sorts began to grow between the quiet little girl and her almost silent father. Neither of them realised it was love at the time. But it was. It was just *their* love.

## **Excerpt from *The Lonely Life of Biddy Weir***

**by Lesley Allen**

***Published by Twenty7 Books (BonnieZaffre)***



Christina Hession has recently completed an MA in Creative Writing in UCC. She has been published in Ropes and Quarryman, and will be published in the next issue of Boyne Berries.



## **Dearg Doom**

Pogging to Dearg Doom  
at the junior disco in Dunmore,  
you suggest taking a breather.  
Blaming your Aran jumper,  
but I know what you're really up to,  
when you sneak a snaky arm around my shoulder.

My first kiss – your brace bumping  
against my teeth,  
a tangle of tongues.  
We come up for air,  
and wonder if anyone  
has witnessed this milestone.

I glimpse you in the intervening years,  
once with your wife at breakfast.  
Then evanescing into your car,  
at the Applegreen petrol pumps.  
Later squinching into the courtroom  
where I am working.

At the banklink, en route  
to where my life is now,  
I realise that the middle-aged man,  
who doesn't recognise the woman,  
(I don't recognise myself anymore)  
is you.

**by Christina Hession**

## **Lisa Reily** **Poetry**

Lisa Reily is a former literacy consultant, dance director and teacher from Australia. Her poetry has been published in several journals, such as Amaryllis, London Grip, The High Window, Panoplyzine, Magma Poetry (online) and Sentinel Literary Quarterly magazine. You can find out more about Lisa at [lisareily.wordpress.com](http://lisareily.wordpress.com)



## **recollections**

I am five, holding the handles  
as my bike careers down the street;  
you call out, tell me to hold on,  
lie that you are close behind,  
but you have let go.

surgical gown, disposable hat,  
blue covers on my feet,  
makeup gone, just me, alone  
and at my worst;  
I lie on the table,  
wanting to be someone.

a doctor speaks to me,  
explains the procedure,  
*a kind of twilight*, he says,  
*perhaps you'll forget the whole thing.*

his face soft, shirt blue,  
he answers all my questions,  
walks me to another room,  
and I am not afraid.  
as I drift, I hear his voice,  
nurses and carers;  
I feel no pain.

**by Lisa Reily**



**Sundown**

As the day closes a lone figure walks across the sand dunes at sunset.  
Photograph taken in Abu Dhabi, The United Arab Emirates.





### **Spoiled for Choice**

*So much colour and so much beautiful braiding to choose from.  
Photograph taken in a tiny haberdasher's shop in Muscat, Oman.*

### **Biography**

Lynda Tavakoli is a Northern Ireland writer, poet and sometimes photographer. She has travelled widely in the Middle East and written a number of travel articles about her experiences in Iran, Bahrain and the UAE. Most recently her photographic images have seen publication in FACES magazine, Oman. She hopes that her insights will encourage others to visit the Middle East with an open heart and mind.



## **Kevin Cahill**

## **Poetry**

Kevin Cahill was born in Cork City and graduated from University College Cork. His poetry has appeared in several journals, including Poetry Ireland Review, Crannog, Marble Poetry Magazine, The Lonely Crowd, Envoi and Oxford Poetry.



**Baby's-Breath** (*Gypsophila paniculata*)

A brute's instinct for the people  
in my life. Myself included. A green  
glaucous grave-mould graspingly covering the lot.

Yet I have so much. Although it's strange  
at first, at first it's not easy,  
digging into my sister's grave

with a paint-scraper, is fine after a while –  
going six to eight inches down  
towards the dead centre

where her heart is. Putting some  
seeds in there, and waiting some months  
to witness her bones burst out

in a bunch of blossoms.  
Her baby's finger of flower  
breaking up through my heart.

**by Kevin Cahill**

Tom O'Brien is an Irishman living in London. He's been published in numerous places across the web and has short stories printed in Blood & Bourbon, Blink-Ink and DEFY! Anthologies. His novella Straw Gods was shortlisted by Ellipsis Magazine in their publication competition. He's on twitter @tomwrote and his website is [www.tomobrien.co.uk](http://www.tomobrien.co.uk).



## **Click, Click, Click**

When the needle click, click, clicked against the final groove, I lifted the arm and put it back in its cradle. Letting the sharp edge of the disc bite into my fingertips I cracked the vinyl in half against the table.

The rituals that guided my husband back to me had failed. I had to find new ones.

I took the piece of paper I'd written on and held it close to the candle flame; though not quite touching. I could only do so much. It would catch fire, or it would not. The hope brought a sob. That sob shuddered the paper and flame close enough to marry.

The agony of losing Matteo burned me as I watched the paper curl. The words I'd written twisted away from meaning. The flame on my fingers hurt less than that but in the end I had to let go. There was nothing left to hold.

**by Tom O'Brien**

## **Ann-Marie Foster**

## **Poetry**

Ann-Marie Foster writes and reads the news on BBC Radio Ulster. Away from the constraints of radio bulletin journalism, she uses adjectives, metaphors and imagery to explore the lives we lead through poetry, plays and short stories. She's lived in Bangor all her life.



### **And here is where she sat**

And here is where she sat.  
I turn the chair to me.  
After these many months, I know  
There is nothing here of her anymore  
But turn it anyway and lean in.

At her mother's home  
Are pictures she painted and hats she wore well  
And dogs who remember her scent.  
Her lovers hold the rings she returned  
Her nieces, the jewellery she loved.

But this is where she sat  
She and I, in words and sounds  
But they've left me and she's gone.  
And another now, is here  
To drape a scarf in her air.

**by Ann-Marie Foster**



Iain's poetry is inspired by his love of the landscape and the sea, often intertwined with a tale of someone he has met, or of a journey he has undertaken. He has had work published in the Bangor Literary Journal, the Blue Nib, The Honest Ulsterman, Lagan Online and Three Drops of a Cauldron. He has been a regular entrant to the Bangor Poetry Competition, often short listed, runner up in 2014, commended in 2018 and long listed in 2019.



## **The Road to Home**

I did not think of it as the road to home,  
and anyhow, I had a choice,  
the hard way, high over the mountain,  
or the old road along the valley floor.

One, at first deliberate, inclined, stretched tight,  
then loosely draped across the lonely moor,  
a rain washed silver scar,  
slashed with sudden folded dip,  
where peat stack and broken gable lay,  
hidden in last month's rusting bracken.

The other, the river's twin, serpentine,  
a switchback playing hide and seek  
with autumn's first mists,  
fraying in the morning light.

No, my road home lay miles beyond,  
far beneath the mountain's scudding clouds,  
out beyond Antrim's tumbled townlands,  
far across the Bann, and towards the sea.  
But that day, as I paused at the crossroad  
he opened the door and climbed in, unbidden.

Old, beyond his years and scrawny;  
teeth, haphazard and yellowed, smiling;  
tweed jacket, patched and fraying;  
waterboots, oversized and stuffed with straw;  
groceries, tinned, and clutched tight  
in borrowed dusty hessian.

That day he chose the road that took me home,  
and as he climbed out into his muddied yard, he paused;  
"Thank you for stopping", was all he said.  
"Thank you for stopping".

**by Iain Campbell**

Glaswegian Finola Scott's poems are widely published including in New Writing Scotland, The Fenland Reed; Lighthouse and The Ofi Press. She has won many competitions, including being one of the winners of the Blue Nib's first chapbook competition. Stanza Poetry Festival commissioned her work for multimedia installations and postcards. Red Squirrel publish Her debut pamphlet is published by Red Squirrel in October. 2019. Her work can be read at Facebook Finola Scott Poems.



**What's an eclipse Granny? *Super Moon Jan 20 -1 2019***

So I stand on the table, a fat cantaloupe in my hands,  
I am the sun. I do not move, only blaze.

Across the room her little sister sits holding an egg  
moon white. She tugs our waters, shifts  
our shores, waits for shadows.

I give the young astronomer an apple. She  
is the Earth. Off she sets between us,  
on her voyage across my kitchen firmament.

I understand proximity, sense dark times may come  
but heart-deep I know our alignment is true.

**by Finola Scott**



### **Reflections - Downhill Beach**

In this photograph I was experimenting with reflection on the lovely Downhill Beach, North Coast.

### **Biography**

Yvonne Boyle has been writing poetry for a number of years. She also enjoys taking photographs. She has had photographs included in Issue 3, Bangor Literary Journal and displayed in the Sixth Bangor Art and Poetry Exhibition, BlackBerry Path Studio, Bangor, 2018.





**Fractured Wheel**

This photograph was taken at the Coast of Side in Turkey on a midnight stroll.

**Biography**

Paul Daniel Rafferty is a Bangor poet, photographer, curator and Editor of The Bangor Literary Journal. He is published in Irish and international journals. Paul was a winner of the 2016 Woodland Trust Poetry Competition. He has read at festivals throughout Ireland. His first interactive poetry exhibition was in 2014.

Sven Kretzschmar is a poet from the southwest of Germany, who currently lives and works in Belgium. He has read Philosophy and English in Germany, Luxembourg, and Ireland, where he taught moral philosophy at University College Dublin. His poetry has appeared in a number of magazines and journals in Europe and overseas. In 2018, he was awarded 1<sup>st</sup> prize in the 'Creating a Buzz in Strokestown' competition. Further work has appeared with *Poetry Jukebox* in Belfast and is forthcoming in *The Blue Nib* and in the *Writing Home* anthology by Dedalus Press in the autumn of 2019.

<https://tracking.wordpress.com/>





## **Windhover**

And someday, when summer expires soft on your face,  
take some time and make your way into the landscape,  
down into a field after harvest, in late August, September, when nature  
transforms into machine-sculpted bales interspersing the acre's  
indifferent brown revealing a den of the common vole  
under weeds and scythed stalks with golden clumps of hay.

No clunk of a baler in the season's late hours, but a windhover  
circling, looking for prey. Your eyes closer to the sandy soil  
wouldn't find what the ravener spots from under off-white clouds,  
his dark-patterned plumage confidently balancing on air.

Now distant, he approaches a weathered stake, his proper  
watchpost, to eye the roamer-through  
through black polished marbles, as a mild headwind brings to your ear his screech –  
all tense you freeze, bogged-down in a bolthole, blocking  
the vole's pale-brown entrance. The bird retreats into an orange  
sundown. Will he dream in colours borrowed from fields?

**by Sven Kretzschmar**

## **FEATURED HISTORIAN**

### **IAN WILSON**



Ian Wilson is a highly respected historian and writer from Bangor, Co Down. He has published several books on local history and curated the posthumous collection of poetry by Jack McCoy. Ian was involved in the organisation of Aspects Literary Festival from the beginning until retirement. Ian has taught History and English and been the manager for North Down Museum. Currently Ian is working on new projects and is chair of Bangor Historical Society.

**Ian we are really privileged that you agreed to talk with us for this special Aspects edition of The Bangor Literary Journal. Can you tell us a bit about yourself and your career?**

I'm from Bangor and have lived here apart from nine years when I was a teacher of English and History at Coleraine Inst. I studied these subjects at QUB in the 1970s when courses were four years, giving much more time to explore them without constant looming exams. Seamus Heaney lectured me! On one occasion he impressed us all by finding the essence of Yeats without going beyond the first few lines of a poem. I met him years later and reminded him. He said, 'Oh I must have had a late night and not prepared anything!' I came back to Bangor to take up the job of manager of the new Heritage Centre at the Town Hall – since 2007 North Down Museum. I've had sporadic spare-time literary dabblings since student days with a number of short stories published (and two broadcast) using the nom-de-plume John Metcalf. I've written (as myself) 'Neills of Bangor', a family commission, 'Shipwrecks of the Ulster Coast', 'Donegal Shipwrecks' and 'HMS Drake – Rathlin Island Shipwreck' and edited quite a number of books of old local photographs as part of the museum's activities, plus writing 'From Belfast Lough to D-Day' for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

**You were involved in the Aspects Literary Festival from the early days. Why do you think Aspects Festival has continued to play such an important part in Bangor's Literary scene?**

'Aspects' began in 1992 (my suggestion of the name 'Affinities' was unanimously rejected!) so I was involved annually until retirement. When the Centre expanded, we had a fine auditorium which doubled as the cafe by day. North Down Arts Committee booked prominent writers notably Maeve Binchy and such was the popularity it was decided to stage a festival, the key being it was to feature not just literature, but for example food and gardening writers. I was the venue manager, so I had a ring-side seat, but as I was also comfortable with this world, I had a chance to interview some writers on stage each year. Four or five days in late September were a hectic whirl - one of the arts officers said she couldn't get out of bed on the Monday after. Many seriously famous names attended including Heaney, Maeve Binchy again, Edna O'Brien, Jack Higgins and Roddy Doyle. And also, those who were given an early boost to their careers. Numerous anecdotes for another day! It was a wonderful chance for the audience to hear and indeed meet such names in a relaxed and indeed intimate setting. Now the festival is spread over a longer period, uses a much wider range of venues and seems more diverse than ever. All credit to the first director Kenneth Irvine, the various Council arts officers and current funders and organisers.

**As a historian, you have written several books about the history of Bangor and North Down. What were the most enjoyable parts of writing these books?**

I was lucky when I first started historical research that it was still possible to consult original newspaper files. The less enjoyable resource of microfilm was only beginning, let alone online digitalization. The inevitable digressions my eyes took to other stories gave me a greater feel for everyday life in the past. I learnt that it is vital to make an effort to see things as contemporary people would have seen them. For instance, shipwreck reports

usually didn't make headlines as they were common, but when motor vehicles arrived, accidents were headlines then - the reverse of today. A flying machine over Bangor got a report in the paper! A.T.Q. Stewart my history tutor at QUB told us something I always remember 'many historians aren't really interested in the past as such' by which he meant that whereas they would analyse the political reasons for, say, the 1798 rebellion everyday life of the populace was overlooked. Thus, they would miss the fact that, for example, many of the rebels in Ulster joining the companies heading for battle took them farther from home than they'd ever been – maybe Bangor to Ballynahinch. So, I enjoy the exercise of trying - and of course you know you can never succeed – to view things as the people of the time would have. I attempted to do this in the captions to the hundreds of old photographs of North Down we published in the museum's books such as 'Pickie to the Pier' and 'The Lost World of North Down'. For example, there is a photo of Town Hall office life with a dictaphone being used – the height of modernity in 1967 but forgotten entirely now - it should be in the museum.

### **Living in Bangor, what do you think makes the town a great place to live?**

Well I suppose anywhere that feels like home is special. There's the Marvin Gaye song 'Wherever I lay my hat that's my home'. But I do think Bangor residents are lucky, and it's annoying the number who wrongly insist things were better in the past when the sun shone on the golden sands all summer long, and you could go to the 'Tonic', have a fish supper, the bus home and still have change out of a pound ! I remember seeing home movie footage of the town in 1975 and it's very greatly improved since then. I have recently become a grandfather to my great joy, and take baby Zac long walks which makes me appreciate even more the coastal path, the Ward Park, and the wonderful Walled Garden Wordsworth wrote 'the child is father to the man' and I'm finding this means with Zac being fascinated by everything, adults should learn not to take things for granted but appreciate them more. It's also very noticeable in recent years how the cultural life of the town and area has expanded with the terrific 'Open House' festival, 'Art on the Rails', the Clandeboye music festival, 'Aspects' moving forward from its origins - and not least your own crusading efforts Amy !

### **Looking back over your career/ life, what do you think are the most memorable moments?**

A family joke is that my most memorable moment, after which life has been an anti-climax, was seeing The Beatles at the King's Hall when I was only 13 – how did my parents allow me to go with a schoolfriend ? Today they'd be accused of child neglect! (I emphasise I *saw* them , I didn't hear a thing, owing to the frenzied screaming of thousands of girls!) Here's the strangest thing that ever happened me – something you wouldn't dare put in a novel or a film: I was in Scotland in 2015 finally having decided to visit the area my Wilson forebears came from. I had no leads on my mother's forebears named McQuaker and was only concentrating on the Wilsons. I hired a car from Enterprise in Ayr. The girl who dealt with me finally gave me her card with a number to call if any trouble – Emma McQuaker. Yes, it

turned out we are related. You could call this a coincidence, or literary enthusiasts might say, it's the connectedness of everything that Coleridge went on about. In my time in the museum there were many highlights, among them facilitating a cross-community group to sail to the sacred isle of Iona from Bangor on the Ocean Youth Club yacht via the route of the Irish Saints. And the RTE Christmas message given by Cardinal O Fiach and Archbishop Eames was filmed in our Early Christian gallery at the time of the ceasefire in 1994. We had many wonderful evening musical events, the most outstanding for me being Rachel Unthank and The Winterset about 2009 – now The Unthanks and touring soon including Dublin with a song cycle based on the life and words of Emily Bronte. Maybe they'd come to 'Aspects' – Emily's father was Irish.

**To finish off, Ian what else are you currently working on and what plans do you have in the pipeline?**

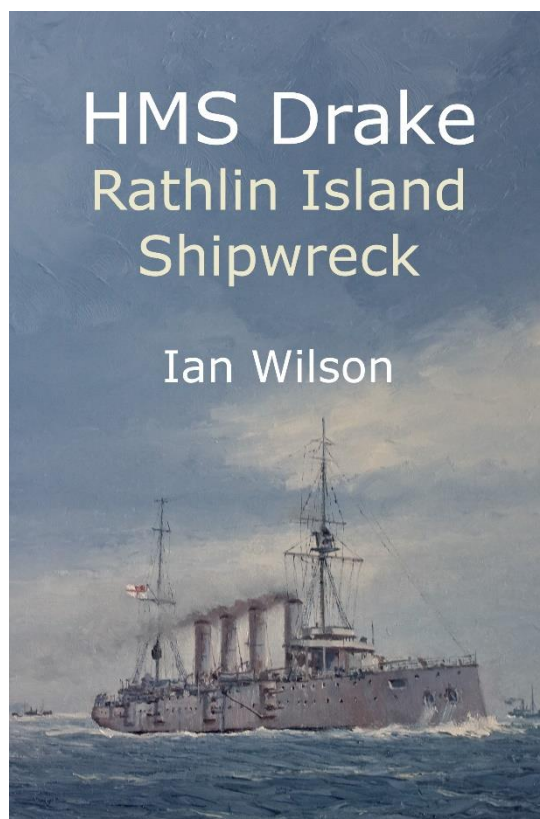
I keep up my interest in museums by being involved with the N. Ireland War Memorial charity, and its increasingly popular gallery in Talbot Street beside St. Anne's Cathedral. And I'm currently chair of Bangor Historical Society. As well as monthly talks we are starting to be engaged in outreach, and involvement in the use of heritage in the regeneration of Bangor. It's being accepted finally that retail is not the future. We sponsored a feature in this year's Seaside Revival Day, part of the Open House festival. I get asked to proof-read book manuscripts (being an old English teacher) and have just done that with a forthcoming centenary history of Bangor Football Club. So, I'm not stuck watching daytime TV in retirement. On the literary front, I was involved with others locating and collecting poems of our late friend Jack McCoy. We thought they deserved a booklet, which appeared in 2017, with your own art (Amy) as the cover design. It was a fascinating and indeed emotional project which had the huge extra benefit of bringing old friends together after many years. The last short story I wrote, set in Portrush, I tried and tried but couldn't get it published! Moral of course is – just keep trying!



Link to purchase HMS Drake:

<https://aquaholics.co.uk/products/hms-drake-rathlin-island-shipwreck-by-ian-wilson?variant=34639271182>

## Extract from the epilogue to 'Donegal Shipwrecks' ( 1998 )



This book began at Malin Head on an imaginary day of sun and good visibility. It is fitting to conclude at the same northernmost place on a real April day of sun, black snow clouds and strong north-easterly winds. Borne on the cold wind across the surface of the Atlantic drift curtains of snow. Large expanses of blue water surround them. A hundred thousand white horses are riding away towards Dunaff Head and Fanad Head, where they break in distant plumes of spray. Tucked on the leeward side of the Head is a small farmhouse, thatch roped down against the ocean gales. There are lambs in the compact fields, and outside the door a collie dog lies, comfortably sheltered in the sunny intervals.

T.S. Eliot in 'The Waste Land' famously said 'April is the cruellest month'. Perhaps it is the disappointment April often brings : of daffodils broken down by storms ; of spring blossom nipped by frost ; of human hopes for brighter days postponed. I think the notion of hopes disappointed is one of the major elements in the fascination shipwrecks tend to hold. Consider the expressions adapted for general use : 'hopes dashed' ; ' they're on the rocks' ; 'sunk without trace'. The frail barque of a life has to navigate all manner of hazards. Sermon writers always know where to obtain a metaphor – and academics have built reputations analysing the grip of the 'Titanic' story. The shipwreck represents the potential failure of all our hopes, just as 'when my ship comes in' looks forward to a bright sail sighted from the watch-tower, a promise of long-awaited reward....

**by Ian Wilson**

## SPECIAL FEATURE

# THE WINNERS OF THE SEVENTH ANNUAL BANGOR POETRY COMPETITION



The fifteen shortlisted poems for this year's Seventh Annual Poetry Competition were displayed for five days at The Blackberry Path Studios in Bangor, Co Down in September 2019.

The winner was then selected by public vote! This is an exciting and unique process which puts the power into the peoples' hands. Over the voting period, hundreds of literary lovers flocked to read the shortlisted poems on the theme of 'Elements' which were displayed as part of **Aspects Literature Festival**.

Once voting ended, the votes were counted, and we are delighted to announce that this year's **Winner** is **Gaynor Kane** with her wonderfully evocative poem '**Fire-lighting**'. This year's Runner Up was Mary Shannon with her poem 'Depending on the Elements'.

The standard of submissions was exceptionally high and very difficult decisions had to be made by the editorial team to whittle the poems down to just fifteen!

Huge congratulations to Gaynor Kane and all the placed and shortlisted poets. Plus, sincere thanks to everyone who voted, entered and supported this wonderful competition.



## **Winner**

## **Gaynor Kane**

Gaynor Kane has been published in journals and anthologies in the UK, Ireland and America. In 2018, Hedgehog Poetry Press published her micro-collection '*Circling the Sun*'. Her chapbook is due to be released in December 2019. Gaynor is working towards her debut full collection, with thanks to an Arts Council NI grant.



## **Winning Poem**

### **Fire-lighting**

It was an art, like origami. Folded,  
pressed, turned, folded, pressed, turned  
and repeated until fingertips blackened.  
The newspaper now resembled an accordion  
and we sang with pretend accompaniment,  
pumping the bellows to the beat.  
The *Belfast Telegraph* transformed to squeezeboxes.

It was a skill, like dry stone walling.  
We laid a bed of dry sticks, then arranged layers  
of paper firelighters, sticks, the occasional  
*Sunny Jim* topped with shiny black nuggets.  
Not built too high, to prevent more crop circles  
from appearing on the fireside mat. We carried  
cooling ashes, at arm's length, to the bin.

It was dangerous, like lion taming.  
You flicked the match against the firebrick,  
poked it between the bars to alight paper  
before the flame scorched your skin.  
We watched the flames sear sticks, char them  
before sparking red as the last sheet of paper  
was held at the corners, taut, for the draw.

**by Gaynor Kane**

## **Runner Up**

## **Mary Shannon**

Mary has been published in the CAP Anthology 2018/19 and the Lagan Navigation Trust 2018,2019.

In 1999 she produced and contributed to an anthology of children's poetry to raise funds for the N.I. Children's Hospice.

Mary is in correspondence with Christy Moore regarding a song penned in 2015.



## **Depending on the Elements**

At daybreak Mother Nature scatters  
the lough's water with sunrise colours  
of red, orange and golden yellow.  
On Ballyholme beach a shoal of mackerel  
clouds, brings in a squall of slanting rain  
and a stilted heron stands stock-still in  
the pelted shallows.

Prevailing winds blow precipitous  
clouds southwards to another place.  
And barometers in geranium laden  
guesthouses shift from change to fair  
to very dry.  
The sun comes out, mercury rises and  
families armed with paraphernalia flock  
down Seacliff Road to the sandy bay.

Summer breezes carry seaside sounds:  
halyards striking masts on bobbing yachts,  
and the carefree laughter of city children  
splashing their milk-white legs in the  
spilling waves of cold sea water.  
From a pastel painted ice-cream van  
the thin-tin jingle of Greensleeves mingles  
with hungry, shrieking seagulls circling  
in a cloudless teatime sky of blue.

**by Mary Shannon**

## **Third Prize**

## **Meg McCleery**

Meg is a former lecturer in English Literature, Creative Writing and Media. She has run Creative Writing classes in Community and Women's Centres throughout Belfast. Her poetry and flash fiction has been shortlisted in competitions and also published in local journals. Originally from Belfast, Meg now lives in North Down.



## **The Most Unnatural of Natural...**

Words buried deep in the crevices of time.  
Words like granulated wounds needing lancing  
for the poison to flow so healing can knit together  
the gaping wound.  
Like Proud flesh...a wound festering and never healing  
too painful for release  
and never going away.

We don't talk about it.

All the babyhood,  
    Childhood,  
    Boyhood,  
    Manhood,  
All the elements of life,  
never to be celebrated.

All the rites of passage going unused  
and instead an aching void of "what ifs",  
of milestones passing but never lived.

Giving birth to death: the ultimate insult.  
The most unnatural of natural that  
no balm of words or sweetness can heal.

All the Words of awe,  
at a tiny perfection,  
at a beautiful sorrow will  
never right a wrong.  
Will never justify a reason  
at a miracle of nature:

Born sleeping.

**by Meg McCleery**

## **Fourth Prize**

## **Laura Cameron**

Laura Cameron's poems have appeared in various publications including The Bangor Literary Journal, Community Arts Partnership annual poetry anthologies, Between Light and the Half Light and On the Grass When I Arrive. Her poem 'Selfie' was Commended in The Bangor Poetry Competition 2018.





## Still

Tell me the names of the trees.  
*You're sitting under an oak.*  
*That one over there is a yew,*  
*popular in English churchyards.*

*You know the sycamore, don't you?*  
I pay attention, take in the air's stillness  
feel the dog resting behind my legs  
and hope you'll tell me again, another day.

Steadier on my feet today, I bend down  
and pluck a white clover, crush petals in my fingers  
and inhale, stash summer childhood  
in my jacket pocket.

**by Laura Cameron**

## **Fifth Prize**

## **Lynda Tavakoli**

Lynda Tavakoli, a retired special needs teacher, lives in Lisburn where she facilitates an adult writing class. Her prose, poetry and journalistic pieces have been widely published in the UK, Ireland, the Middle East and the US. She is hoping to publish her debut poetry collection in the near future.



## **The Big Tree**

You were a stand of splaying arms,  
of wrinkled wood,  
and when I was old enough to straddle,  
limb to limb, your tenuous embrace,  
I carved my name in your skin,  
juicing sap with every gorge  
of thumb and blade  
to craft out some invisible tattoo.

An aged man you were then, though  
yielding to my childhood misdemeanours  
like a weary pensioner.  
For years I watched the cicatrix  
of every letter marinade your bark  
as though you soaked my soul into your heart,  
holding fast that trace of me  
when adulthood allowed me to forget.

No, I did not think, a half a century ago,  
that I would find your body ousted  
from the hollowed earth, the gaping chasm  
of your mouth stretching like a yawn,  
your shoulders shrugged, your great arms  
elbowing the earth in half-expected resignation.  
And somewhere scarred within the fallen bulk of you  
a faded eulogy of letters lost forever to the past.

**by Lynda Tavakoli**

## **Highly Commended**

## **Geraldine Fleming**

Geraldine Fleming is newly retired and has recently moved to Ballymoney. This newfound freedom allows Geraldine to renew her interest in creative writing. She is a member of the Causeway U3A Portstewart Writing Group and enjoys writing both prose and poetry.



## **Pink Blanket**

He peers at the swaddle  
his first born, his legacy to the future.  
Realising how he wants a boy  
the pink blanket squirms.  
His joy dissolves he looks away.

She feels the abyss of  
his regret.

She is there always demanding  
his attention, his time  
obscuring his horizon  
making him answer  
her endless questions.

She pleads for a rub of  
his beard to find reassurance in  
the lift to his cheek, the smell of  
his cigarettes and Old Spice.  
She filigrees herself into  
his heart.

She infuses herself in the magic of  
his world- mechanics and speed  
she identifies engine faults  
by the vroom on the throttle. On  
his vinyls she announces the gear  
shifts at Silverstone and Brands Hatch.

She knows every small ad in  
his Exchange and Mart, mirroring  
his chuckle at their absurdity.  
She mimes every word to  
his country music.

Before her teens she night-drives  
the wild roads of Scraghy mountain  
in Troubled times.

She tappy-tap-taps out Morse code  
messages to his ever critical ear.  
Her first word to please  
him is naturally, dah-di-dit di-dah dah-di-dit.  
He remains quietly impressed by  
her until the end at  
Fifty- Eight.

**by Geraldine Fleming**

## Commended

## Gráinne Tobin

Gráinne Tobin lives in Newcastle, Co Down and wrote *Banjaxed*, *The Nervous Flyer's Companion* and *The Uses of Silk*. Poems are in the anthologies *Word of Mouth*, *When the Neva Rushes Backwards*, *On the Grass When I Arrive*, *Washing Windows*, *Something About Home*, *Female Lines*, *Metamorphic*, *Reading the Future*.



## County Down Heatwave

We save the water from the washing-up  
to throw into the roots of the apple tree –  
yellowing already in the marching season.  
Little enough sunlight in our long damp winters  
which take nine months out of twelve,  
and keep us in the dark with our daylight lamps,  
our bargain breaks to brighter places,  
but now the trees are dry before their time.

The talk is all of limbo, or hiatus, or lacuna,  
of growth malnourished, the reservoirs low,  
our wee democracy shrivelling underfoot.

Today's remark about the weather is a lament  
from a stranger walking the street,  
as I carry my plastic basin down the path  
in this dusty, intemperate Ulster wind.  
*We are careless*, she says. Yes, careless  
with fire in the forest, with peace and with water.  
My sandals crackle on leaves fallen exhausted  
from the alder still flouncy with catkins.

by Gráinne Tobin



## **Shortlisted**

## **Azeem Lateef (Icarus Prince)**

Azeem Lateef (aka Icarus Prince) is a published poet, writer, artist and MC as one half of Social Interaction. Along with his art collective, SLAN COLLECTIVE, he recently debuted the first instalment (titled Chapter I: Earth // The Anti-Hero") of a long-term art experience comprising of magna art, surrealism, visual arts, fashion and performance Hip-Hop. The first exhibition is due to go on tour in Autumn 2019. He is also currently working on first debut novel, titled "Nameless", and two separate concept albums with Social Interaction titled "Window 2 Soul" and "Chapter I: Earth".



## **Fame**

i am not inadequate;  
i have never failed at anything in my life  
apart from trying

when i was 8 years old,  
i would practice a signature  
that would be quickest to perform

i thought by this age  
i would be signing  
t-shirts at quick rapidity

at times, i do.

i convince myself life is only my perception  
and that nobody needs to know  
my words hold heaven

my reflection and i  
are constantly avoiding each other,  
like the white women  
who prefer to risk a car crash  
rather than walk beside me

sometimes, i close my eyes  
when i feel my throat tulip,  
imagining a God is deciding  
whether She loves us or not.

petals flung to grass greener or gone

sometimes sweet nothings are everything

sometimes powerlessness is more powerful than power

my being is always trapped in these boxes of paradoxes

if an angel were to give me Pandora's,  
i'd first ask her why  
she didn't need me  
to sign a receipt of some sort

curiosity didn't kill the cat: karma did.

in trying to avoid the fence,  
i missed the other side altogether

sometimes i go to  
city mountaintops and overlook the  
creations who have turned creators  
just to feel God's eyes

hibernation seems like a thing humans should do

it would give me enough time to perfect my signature.

**by Azeem Lateef (Icarus Prince)**

## **Shortlisted**

## **Roisín Browne**

Roisín Browne lives in Rush, Co Dublin, Ireland. Her work has appeared in several publications including *A New Ulster*, *The Galway Review*, *The Stony Thursday Book*, *Flare*, *Poetry NI's FourxFour* and *Crossways Lit*. In 2018 she was commended in the Gregory O'Donoghue awards and shortlisted in The Bangor Poetry Competition.



## **Scraps**

(After Etty Hillesum)

Sky

Bird-full

Blue

Lavender lupins

Knight-tall

Kiss horizons

White jasmine

Petal air

Dress summer

Two ladies

Old, little

Sit to chat

Heat rests

On my cheek

Before us all

Mass Murder.

**by Roisín Browne**

## **Shortlisted**

## **Michael Farry**

Michael Farry, a native of Sligo, lives in Meath. He has had two poetry collections published, *Asking for Directions*, Doghouse Books, Tralee, 2012 and *The Age of Glass*, Revival Press, Limerick, 2017. He is currently working on a collection of poetry based on events and commemorations of 1912-1923.



## **Flying to Leeds Bradford in a Storm**

The bus, buffeted all the way to the badlands  
at the outer reaches next the long-term car park,  
seemed on the verge of taking off there and then.

As we boarded our ATR 72, a twin-engine  
turboprop, delicate short-haul regional airliner,  
a fragile flea among eagles, it gently rocked.

We settled, fastened seat belts, closed our eyes.  
The plane meandered along the runway, then rose  
into the threatening bank of vague grey clouds.

I found it impossible to do the crossword  
so I just stared ahead, counted all the minutes,  
wondering if the gale would speed us there

or hold us up forever, a delicate kite dancing  
over the Irish Sea. When the cheery pilot told us  
we were nearing Liverpool I had a nightmare

of docks in flames, dogfights, our aircraft banking  
to avoid a Messerschmitt at ten o'clock, a row  
of bullet holes in our fragile fuselage, smoke

pouring from a engine, the pilot, leather-helmeted,  
staring through his goggles, making a dash  
for safety in black and white. But we survived,

bumped down on the swaying tarmac, taxied  
in to take our allotted place among leviathans.  
Walking to the terminal we leaned against squalls,

and were soon lost inside, wandering among solid  
carousels, cafes, cash machines, car hire kiosks.  
I steadied myself, withdrew foreign currency.

**by Michael Farry**

## **Shortlisted**

## **Jason Purdy**

Jason Purdy is a writer from Northern Ireland. He writes a little bit of everything, from poems and short stories, to rarely finished scripts and novels. His work has appeared in several short story and poetry collections, much to his surprise. When he grows up, he wants to be better at meeting entry deadlines.





## **The Heat**

For three days it has razed the countryside.  
Reducing brambles to skeletons,  
chewing up old goats and spitting,  
charred bones into the gaps between the fences.  
Ash in the air, fluttering like gold leaf  
lands on their tongues, and still,  
the heat.

The water and the rain only stir the air,  
steam tumbling over the hills and ridges  
like the breath of god.  
Black ichor surging beneath their feet,  
the land bleeds to death, and still,  
the heat.

It swallows houses whole,  
families cooked inside  
glass runs like water.  
Bricks explode,  
skin suices from bone,  
blood turns to vapor, and still,  
the heat.

Three days, twelve hours,  
five minutes, thirty seconds,  
it reached my door.  
Rang the bell three times,  
as always.  
Tumbled into my arms  
kissing me breathlessly,  
consuming me again, and still...

**by Jason Purdy**

## **Shortlisted**

## **Robin Holmes**

Robin Holmes studied English Literature and Philosophy at the New University of Ulster before embarking on a career in social work. He has had poetry published in various journals, including the CAP's Poetry in Motion series and last year was a finalist in the Sixth Annual Bangor Poetry Competition.



## **Stowaway**

You arrive in a soft ,wafting breeze,  
an interruption of the assumed stillness,  
but then ,in an eerie whisper,  
you announce your intentions,  
a wolf howling into an echo-less night.  
A full moon , hanging like a glitter ball,  
is suspended between the clouds,  
waiting for the earth to dance.  
Soon the un-tethered world  
will begin to slip and scud.  
I try to lock the door, but you  
grab it, playing it as an accordion.  
Your banshee wail is merely a prelude,  
within an hour you have chosen Gale Force.  
A mad conductor, your baton directs  
the waving boughs of leafless trees,  
now violins in your unfinished symphony..  
'Allegro, Allegro' you shout, as you outspeed  
them, snapping their brittle bows.  
Upstairs, I open opposing windows  
to let you in, briefly. You fill  
the billowing curtains as a mainsail.  
Against my skin you press a chilled kiss.  
Cosseted within cotton sheets , I listen  
to your plaintive lullabies.  
I am hiding deep within the hull,  
a stowaway in the storm's crescendo.  
In the morning, the world is flat ,punctured,  
placid. In furrowed fields a gnarled tree  
lies horizontal, an upturned centipede,  
its branches spiked and speared into earth..  
Your scrawling ,backhand signature  
is everywhere, the gale's graffiti.  
I miss you, my tall ship  
now lying in the doldrums..

**by Robin Holmes**

## **Shortlisted**

## **Hazel Dougan**

Hazel Dougan is a retired social worker who for the past five years has been pursuing her writing ambitions through classes in Belfast. She enjoys writing both prose and poetry, much of this inspired by her roots in rural West Tyrone.



## **Spring**

Spring comes late in the West.  
Thin soil, grass sparse before May,  
but signs of a turning after All Fools.'  
The housed cattle, somnolent all winter,  
smell Earth waking, air changing,  
grass growing.  
Restless, they gather at shed doors  
longing for freedom, tasting pasture.  
My father, weary from winter feeding,  
meets supplicating faces, entreating eyes.  
content yourselves, he says, a month  
And you'll be dancing on the Big Brae.

**by Hazel Dougan**

## **Shortlisted**

## **Maurice Devitt**

Winner of the 2015 Trocaire/Poetry Ireland Competition, he has been runner-up or shortlisted in Listowel, Cuirt, Patrick Kavanagh, Interpreter's House and Cork Literary Review. He is curator of the Irish Centre for Poetry Studies site, chairperson of the Hibernian Writers' Group and has recently published his debut collection 'Growing Up in Colour' with Doire Press.



## **Free Class**

On the day our teacher was sick, the Principal,  
with a misplaced belief in our maturity, suggested  
we revise quietly for exams and pulled the door,  
leaving us to a short-lived silence; atmosphere  
nervous and tight, ready to be breached. We picked  
on the quietest boy, pushed him to the top of the class  
and goaded him to imitate the teacher, the way  
he might stalk the room, chalk-in-mouth, duster  
primed. Jeering his hesitation, we laughed  
at his first attempt, paper planes like locusts  
now shadowing the light. He stuttered and started  
to cry, a low whimper at first, followed by full-blown tears.  
Caught in the nexus of embarrassment and panic,  
we bundled him back down to his desk. A cloud  
of regret settled on the room, everybody avoided  
eye contact, until a suppressed giggle at the back  
rippled like a gathering wave through the class  
and the room erupted again, as though the noise  
could distract our guilt. When the bell rang, we rushed  
for the door, half-open schoolbags stuffed under our arms.  
That summer he was taken out of school and his family  
moved away. I never saw him again, until today;  
coming out of a shop on Capel Street, our eyes met  
in clear recognition. He turned his head and walked on.

**by Maurice Devitt**



## **Shortlisted**

## **Cathy Conlon**

Cathy Conlon was joint winner of the PENfro First Chapter Competition 2016. She has also been shortlisted for the RTE P.J O'Connor Radio Drama Awards 2006. Her poems have been published in Poetry Ireland Review, The Irish Times, Books, Ireland, Cuirt Journal, Ropes and Skylight 47. She lives in Co. Kildare.



## Looking Out

Sunday evenings brought the familiar warning;  
*Don't be speeding now and ring me when you get home.*  
Goodbyes at the door were never enough for him.  
Soon as the car moved off,  
he was headed for the back gate  
to catch us again on the slip road.

We had it all timed,  
the minutes needed for his bad leg  
to carry him down the garden path,  
and find him waiting,  
elbow cocked on the gate  
as though he'd been there an age.

That whole scene taken for granted  
like the Northern sky darkening over the Lagan.

Even now we strain for a glimpse of him  
standing there yet  
looking out for us.

**by Cathy Conlon**



The Friends of Bangor Abbey present

# **'On An Autumn Evening II'**

## **Music & Poetry in BANGOR ABBEY**

**Sat 12 October 2019 at 7.00 pm**

**[Admission £8.00 – pay at the door]**

music from

# **MAESHINE**

with

poetry from

**PAUL GILMORE**

**IAIN CAMPBELL**

**PAUL DANIEL RAFFERTY**

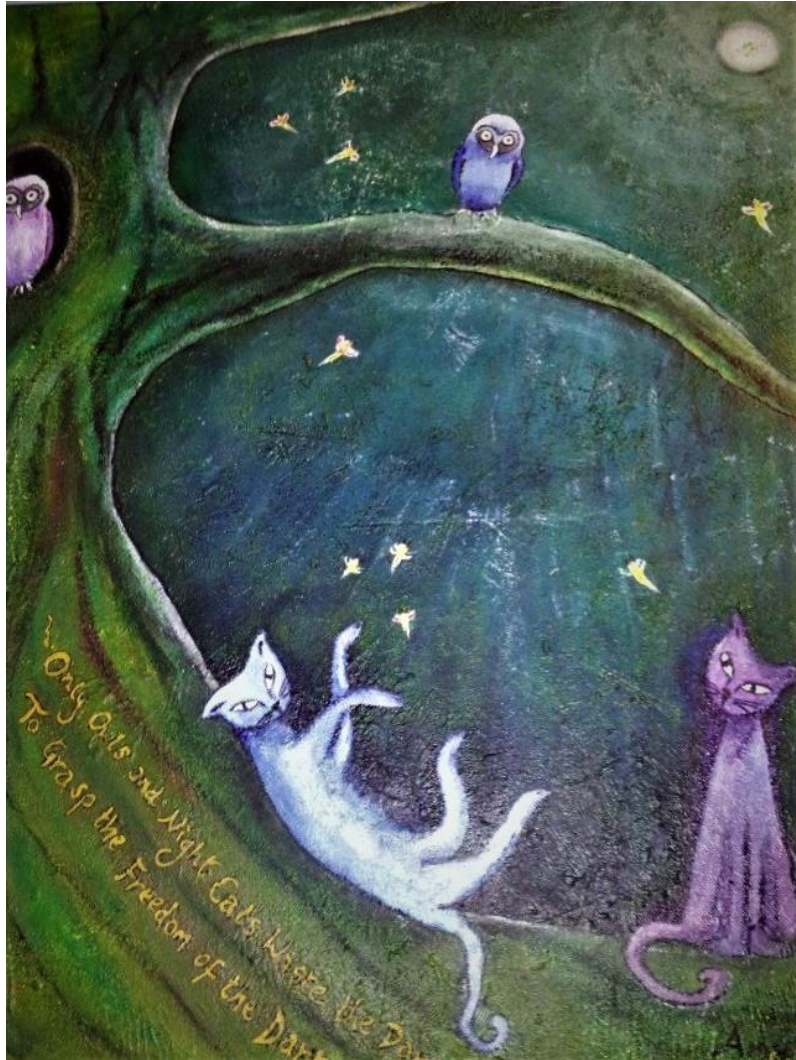
**AMY LOUISE WYATT**

and

# **TRISH BENNETT**



# HALLOWEEN EKPHRASTIC CHALLENGE



We are looking for mini-poems and mini-fiction inspired by the painting above! I painted this one a while back and there's lots of Halloween inspiration in it for you!

Poems should be no longer than 10 lines and flash fiction should be no longer than 100 words (not including spaces or title).

Send your previously unpublished mini-poem or fiction to [thebangorliteraryjournal@hotmail.com](mailto:thebangorliteraryjournal@hotmail.com) by **midnight of 21/10/19**. Please send a two line third person biography and just copy and paste your piece onto the body of the email with your full writer's name. In the email heading, put your name/ genre/ HALLOWEEN. (This is different to our usual submission guidelines!) One piece per person!

The ten best pieces will be published just before Halloween on our website.

Good Luck!  
Amy