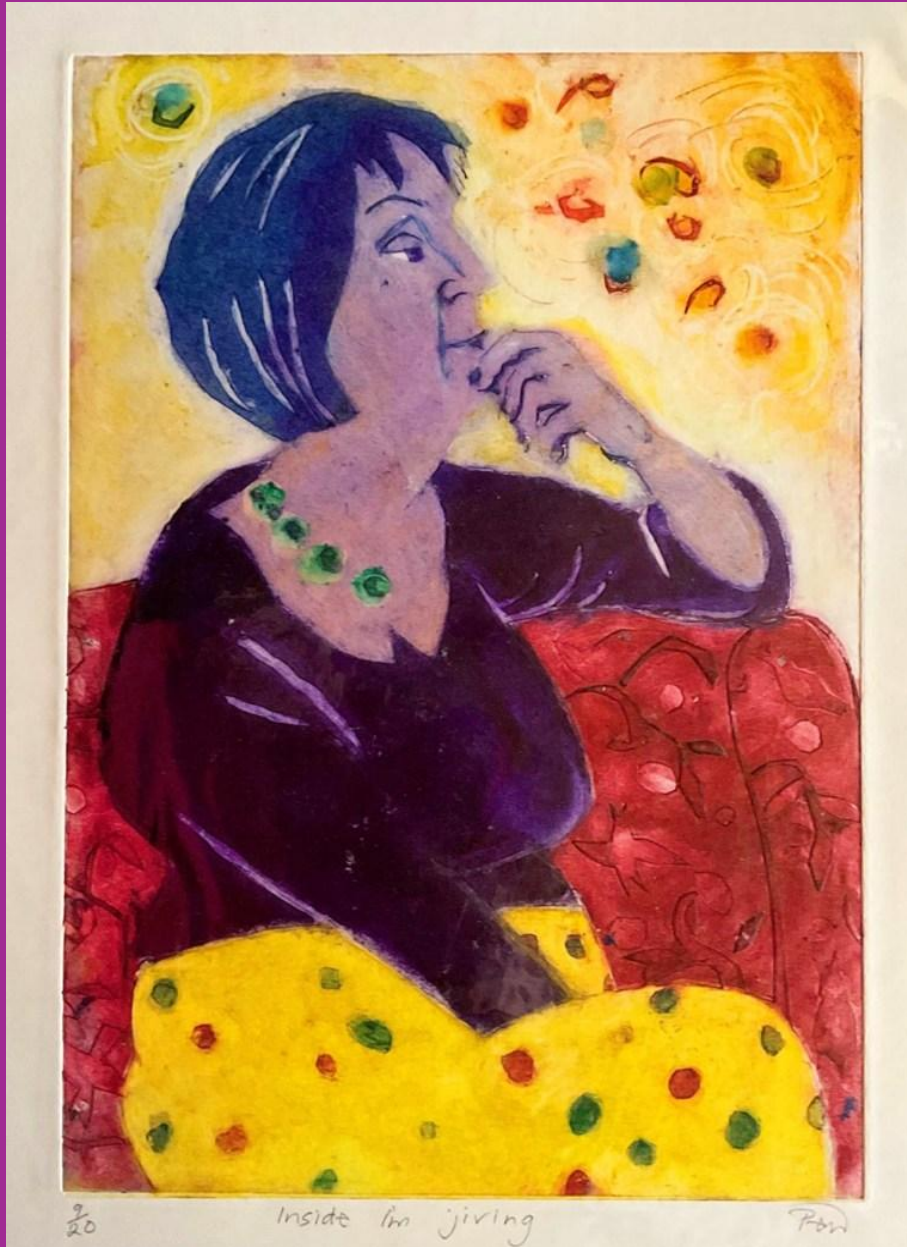


# The Bangor Literary Journal

Aspects Edition      Issue 23



Featuring the shortlisted and winning poems from The 12th Annual Bangor Poetry Competition; A feature on award winning poet Kendra Reynolds; The winners of the Ekphrastic Challenge based on Pen Jones' artwork, a focus on Ross Thompson's latest collection; AND fabulous art and words from our contributors.

# Editors' Welcome

What a wonderful Aspects Festival Launch we had in Bangor Castle. We were beyond impressed at the standard of submissions for The 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Bangor Poetry Competition, receiving hundreds of entries from all parts of the globe! It was a joy to read the array of poems sent to us, based on the Aspects Festival theme of 'Time and Place'. We never take our job for granted and yet again, we have to thank you all for entrusting us to read your work and select a longlist and shortlist each year.

The ten shortlisted poems were showcased via our online gallery on the official Bangor Literary Journal website, and members of the public worldwide took the time to carefully read all ten pieces and then vote on their top three poems.

The points system allowed each voter to allocate their six points to their three favourite poems, with their first choice receiving three points, second choice—two points and third choice—three points.

Thank you to every single one of you who entered, voted, shared links and posts; and came along to the moving awards ceremony and launch at Bangor Castle.

We were delighted to crown the hugely talented Anne McDonald as the Winner of the 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Bangor Poetry Competition with her powerfully emotive poem 'Your side of the Bed'. Jen Herron was our runner up with her poem 'Before and After Picture' which clearly resonated with so many people. Mary Howlet with 'Birdcage' was highly commented and Rhona Stephens was commended in this year's competition with 'This Place'.

What a delight to listen to the poets read their poems in person at the event, adding an even deeper dimension. Huge congratulations to each and every one of you who made the shortlist- it was no small feat! And to those who also made the longlist this year—well done.

This issue showcases the ten carefully selected shortlisted poems, in a special feature. Alongside this, at the event, last year's winner Kendra Renolds joined us to perform her winning poem 'a reclaiming' and to read some of her current work which had the audience mesmerised. You can read a fantastic interview with award-winning poet and academic Kendra in this issue, and she has also selected some new work for you to enjoy, these have not been published anywhere else—so you are in for a treat—lucky you! Thank-you Kendra—you are an inspiration.

In addition, the Winners of our exciting Ekphrastic Challenge are showcased in this issue, and it was a wonderful experience to hear many of the writers read their winning Ekphrastic pieces at the launch event. These writers faced quite a challenge, with limited time to write and edit their creative responses to the distinctive and intriguing collagraph artwork seen on the front cover by artist and printmaker (and member of Seacourt Print workshop) Pen Jones. Please check out Pen's highly skilled, yet completely intuitive pieces, elsewhere in the journal, and in

person at Seacourt Print workshop in Bangor, Co Down, NI. She is a prolific and intriguing multi-media artist whose work you should get to know.

Award-winning poet Ross Thompson (who read at the launch event) has two of his poems included in this issue for you to enjoy, and he has offered us some wonderful insight into the poems and his writing.

Finally, thank you to the rest of our contributors and supporters— we cannot do this without you, and we are indebted to you for all your support and kindness over the years. Thank you to all at NDABC and Aspects Festival... and to Maeshine for the hauntingly gorgeous music at the launch celebration event.

We have one mission at Bangor Literary—and that is to showcase, amplify and support as many people as possible on their creative journey: from new talent, to emerging artists and writers; to experienced and established voices and visual creators (and beyond). Breaking down the notion of gatekeeping and creative hierarchy within the arts scene is very important to us.

On a closing note, we would like to apologise for the delay in publication; and to thank you for your patience and friendship in what was a challenging year for us—we have appreciated it beyond measure.

We are back in action and ready to take on all the new challenges and opportunities that the new season brings.

Love and best wishes

***Amy and Paul***



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12<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL BANGOR  
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# FEATURE

## 11<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL BANGOR POETRY COMPETITION WINNER

### KENDRA REYNOLDS



Kendra Reynolds is an international academic, award-winning poet, and former Fulbright Scholar with a passion for creative writing and contemporary literature.

Kendra received her PhD in literature from Ulster University in 2018, with her research focusing on anti-tales, radical revisions of fairy tale narratives by feminist writers. She has published widely on various literary subjects including ecofeminism, social justice literature, and resilience narratives. Her first monograph, *The Feminist Architecture of Postmodern Anti-Tales: Space, Time and Bodies*, was published by Routledge in 2020. Kendra's poetry has been published in various anthologies and journals, including *Abridged*, *Honest Ulsterman*, *The Bangor Literary Journal*, and *North Star: An Anthology of Literature by Northern Irish Women*. She was the 2025 winner of the 11th Annual Bangor Poetry Competition and is passionate about the wider relevance of the arts and humanities in our society, promoting the important role of the arts in fostering greater understanding of socio-political contexts, critical thinking, and as a catalyst for pursuing meaningful social change.

Kendra, thank you so much for speaking with us. Your poem stole the hearts of thousands of voters all over the globe in the 11th Annual Bangor Poetry Competition. Could you tell the readers a little about what inspired it, and how it felt to know that it resonated on such a deep level with so many people?



written in the space of one day and I just had fun writing it with a bit of headspace in the wilds of Donegal – that doesn't normally happen, where I can write something that doesn't need to be tailored and edited afterwards.

I couldn't find the right home for the poem until I submitted it to the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Bangor Poetry Competition in 2024. I saw the theme was 'In the grand scheme of things.' I knew that the style of the poem suits better being read aloud and the format of the competition really appealed to me. I was extremely shocked, delighted and humbled that it had the response it did and never in a million years did I think I would have a shot at winning. To know that something you've written has resonated with even one person makes it

'a reclaiming' was inspired by a wonderfully unusual project I was lucky to be a part of in 2018. It was one of my first times writing something to perform in public! I was a member of an organisation that advocated for female writers in Northern Ireland called Women Aloud NI and a group of us were asked to write a poem on one of the letters in the organisation's name to perform at Belfast Culture Night. I was given the letter 'A' and hence 'a reclaiming' was born! It turned out to be a gift of a poem to write and unexpectedly it just flowed. It was

#### a reclaiming

a reclaiming of A, aptly named for the Greek  
 – Alpha – male servant from the start.  
 A: beginning of the alphabet,  
 of life in Africa, birthplace of humanity,  
 where man came down from the trees  
 started walking as Adam in the garden.  
 Female servant pulled from his rib,  
 but not side by side they say  
 (though literally pulled from his side),  
 she lies as the horizontal line to his triangle,  
 the capital A they both complete,  
 for woman is the lesser part  
 deemed vital for the whole.

A is for apple I learnt in school  
 the alphabet our building blocks for life.  
 Eve earned her knowledge too,  
 plucked her apple from the tree  
 and maleness was threatened:  
 a learned woman is a dangerous thing,  
 best to keep her from the As, Bs, and Cs.  
 So they used it to punish her:  
 the blood-red letter staining a dress  
 – Adulteress – stamper of the powerful,  
 for A denotes a lack, as in asymmetry,  
 out of balance.

yet, a, when not capitalized, boasts soft feminine curves,  
 a is female, giving birth to all persons, places and things,  
 introducing all nouns to the world:  
 a woman, a child, a daughter, a son,  
 Mother Nature birthing a rainbow, a flower, a star.  
 a protects our individuality  
 defining each of us as one from the masses,  
 shattering stereotypes that keep us powerless,  
 lumping us together in a faceless mist.  
 a in algebra means a known quantity;  
 it will not compromise, a knows itself and supports us all.  
 we will reclaim it, for a tells us that we, as women,  
 are allowed to speak aloud.

By Kendra Reynolds

all worthwhile and winning the competition really came at the right time for me. I'd been struggling with confidence in my writing and some self-doubt - I haven't really had the space to focus on my poetry as I would like, but it's my dream to make it my main focus eventually - and it was so moving and important on a personal level to give me a little boost and belief. You always worry if your writing speaks to anything, or anyone, beyond yourself and I was delighted to see that this piece did that as it's a poem that's dear to my heart.

I'm really passionate about how writing can speak to and effect social change and challenge injustice. Women's rights are something I'm really passionate about. In 'a reclaiming' I wanted to capture how such a small element such as a letter, and language systems more broadly, can be exploited to support abuse of power and uphold oppression and yet also harness the potential for transformation and positive social change. I'm so happy and grateful that it seems to have done that and the feedback has been overwhelming. Thank you to everyone who reached out and to *The Bangor Literary Journal* for making this little heart happy and giving my poem a wonderful home!

### **Who and what have been your biggest influences in your writing?**



I only really started writing in 2018 after completing my PhD at Ulster University. My academic research definitely has had a massive influence thematically on my writing. My research revolves around feminist revisions of fairy tale narratives, what I call anti-tales, and particularly how twentieth and twenty-first century feminist literature addresses the themes of space, time and bodies. These ideas are at the core of many of my poems and I also find myself exploring the themes of identity, oppression, and injustice a lot. Much of my writing is also focused on the idea of revision, particularly alternative voices and perspectives on dominant

narratives of History, fairy and folktales and myths. Of course, many of my poems are feminist in their approach.

It might be a bit obvious but the poet who really sparked my love of poetry was Sylvia Plath with her raw and unapologetic confessional style. Before encountering her work as an undergraduate, I didn't really enjoy studying poetry to be honest. School can tend to make us see poetry as something highly intellectual and abstract, each piece there to be dissected and a meaning wrestled out. However, Plath's work speaks to pure raw emotion, resonating for me on a much deeper level and showed me that poetry is not stale and archaic but powerful, important and relevant. It was Plath who broke that ignorance in me, and made poetry much more than an exam piece or intellectual exercise - it's unbelievable to me that poetry is now my passion!

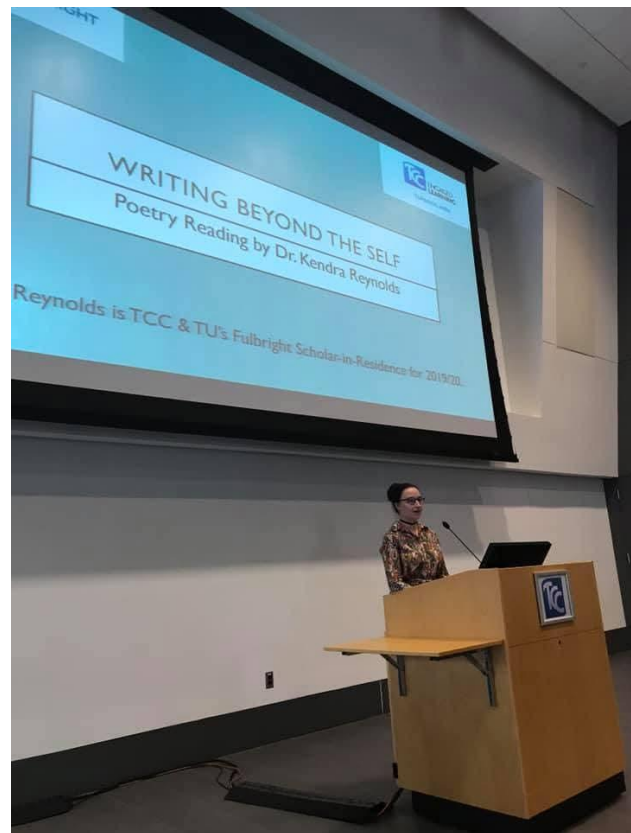
My personal life and experiences are a massive influence, of course, on my poetry. For me I really passionately feel that the personal is political and that every piece of writing should stem from something within myself in order to ring true. I am an identical twin and this has been something I've written quite extensively on as it's a huge part of who I am and for me resonates with questions of identity, sisterhood, and otherness. A huge part of my life is my animal companions: three cats who rule the house, one excitable cocker spaniel who is the focus of every holiday, and a horse who I spend hours with each day. Therefore animals, nature, vegetarianism, and climate change tend to filter into my writing and is all wrapped up in the bigger purpose of my writing to address social questions and problems.

**Aside from writing poetry, can you tell us a little bit about your other academic or creative outputs? Do you think that they inform one another?**

As I've mentioned, my background is in research and academia and my book *The Feminist Architecture of Postmodern Anti-Tales: Space, Time and Bodies* was published by Routledge in 2020 and is my first full-length study. The themes in this monograph definitely heavily influence my creative output and both my academic and creative writing certainly overlap and are in conversation with each other.

In 2019-2020 I was lucky enough to be selected as a Fulbright Scholar in Residence and taught both creative writing in poetry and social justice literature in Oklahoma at the University of Tulsa and Tulsa Community College. It was the first time I taught both creative practice and literary study together and so it was at this point that I really started to write more poetry and that both the academic and creative outputs started to converge.

I'm in a bit of an unusual position in that my full-time employment is working in libraries and I love promoting reading and supporting the accessibility to books and learning resources in the wider community. At the same time, I guest lecture for Ulster University from time to time on a range of topics spanning from eighteenth-century literature to dystopian fiction. I also work hard to continue my academic publishing and conferencing as an independent scholar, publishing in academic journals and collections – the most recent outputs being a conference paper on 'Women, Selkies and Adolescence' at the *Fairy-tale trouble and the art of fluidity*:



*gender, genre and media* conference at Cambridge University in March 2025 and a chapter in *The Routledge Companion to Fairy Tales* published in December 2025.

So, it's a bit of an eclectic and varied little mix of outputs and sometimes it feels like there's lots of different hats I juggle between each day, but ultimately all of the different elements shape, and hopefully compliment, each other! It can be really difficult to get time and headspace to work on my poetry and this is something I am very consciously working on at the moment. I am Chairperson for the Burnavon Writers' Group in Cookstown and this really helps me to carve out some time to focus on creativity in a very supportive environment. I have had poems published individually in various journals, magazines, and collections including *Abridged*, *The Honest Ulsterman*, and *North Star: An Anthology of Literature by Northern Irish Women*, but my focus now is on working towards publishing a longer piece of poetic work.

### What other projects have you on the horizon?

I am delighted that I will be joining the team as an Editorial Assistant with the amazing *Abridged*, alongside Gregory McCartney. *Abridged* is a kind of curated space combining experimental poetry and contemporary art. It's great timing as I'm trying to make more space for creative projects moving forward. The aesthetic and commitment to pushing boundaries that characterises *Abridged* very much fits with my interest in dystopian themes, anti-fables, and focus on contemporary concerns in a rapidly changing society. The schedule for *Abridged* outputs in the year ahead looks absolutely amazing and I'm very excited to be a part of the journey in 2027.



The main focus for my own poetry at the moment is on trying to put together a larger piece of work; I'm thinking a chapbook or pamphlet, in order to get a body of poetry out there that can give readers a better flavour of my creative practice. I've been saying this for a while now so talking about it here might give me the bit of accountability I need to push this forward! I'm very much at a point now where I need to very consciously make more space for my writing no matter how busy life can get, so here goes nothing!

**Finally, if you had one piece of advice to give writers on their creative journey, what would it be?**

That's a good question! I think it's so easy to doubt yourself as a writer surrounded by a lot of pressures and success stories on social media which can make you feel inadequate. Particularly if, like myself, you really struggle at times to make space for your writing and life gets in the way. My advice would be to focus on what it is you want to say, why you are writing and stay true to your own voice and story. Everybody's journey is different. Whether you have published several collections or you haven't yet published anything, if you are writing and honing your practice, then you are a writer. Nobody can write what you write, everybody brings their own essence to the blank page, and that's what makes poetry and creative writing so magical. Perhaps a more grounded and practical piece of advice is also to find your writing tribe – I find having a group of poets and writers that are supportive and encouraging helps us to build up the courage to keep going. I'm part of a brilliant *Third Thursday* group of poets who help with feedback and editing over Zoom each month and I'm also lucky enough to be in the wonderful *Burnavon Writers' Group*. Every fortnight we listen to each other, laugh, cry, lift each other up, and this is our medicine for facing the rejections and challenges that inevitably come with the vulnerable and brave pursuit of being a writer and sending your words out into the world.



## Twin Reflections

|                                  |                                  |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| I love you                       | you love I                       |
| perfectly reflected              | reflected perfectly              |
| but sometimes we are not so neat | neat so not are we sometimes but |
| symmetry is there                | there is symmetry                |
| in the feet peddling             | peddling feet in the             |
| butterfly wings expanding        | expanding wings butterfly        |
| soles touching                   | touching soles                   |
| bottles on mouths                | mouths on bottles                |
| feet conjoined in movement       | movement in conjoined feet       |
| a comforting womb rhythm         | rhythm womb comforting a         |
| connection tested                | tested connection                |
| everything doubled troubled      | troubled doubled everything      |
| but not here                     | here not but                     |
| one two moving parts             | parts moving two one             |
| only small differences           | differences small only           |
| yet growing                      | growing yet                      |

***By Kendra Reynolds***



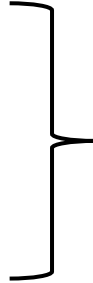
## **Unbecoming**

I,  
faceless,  
embodied,  
primal infant  
not yet fractured by  
glass mirrors revealing  
some other, external you;  
a social container waiting  
to be topped up with meaning; a few  
labels and signs, so simple and concrete,  
ward off complexity, save you from drowning.  
But just think how freeing it might be for  
the self to implode, surrender to  
a quantum chaos, the atoms  
free to coalesce and fracture  
as you forever build  
and dismantle the  
selves you create,  
embrace a  
fluid  
i

***By Kendra Reynolds***

## Edible Woman

1 whole woman



Slice the fatty excess (plus a little more), tasty bite-sized morsel.

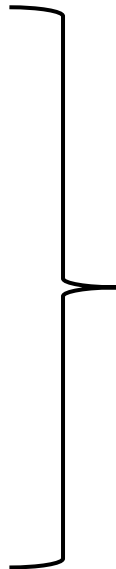
Tenderise by pounding slowly, consistently, leaving your desired pattern on the flesh: malleable, softened, subdued.

3 tsp honey

2 tsp anger

1 whole heart

1 cup breadcrumbs



Juice the unforgettable tang of bitter words slowly from the heart.

Add the honey over a gentle heat before seasoning with anger for desired bite.

Leave to stew in her hate, to overthink, marinated in emotional juices (one hour in a covered bowl ensuring the clingy film traps her in airtight).

Remove once dripping with tears of succulent longing, for your hands to clothe in a layer of sequined breadcrumbs.

Add cooking oil to a non-stick pan and sear. Watch her sizzle and shrink, desperation spitting hurt and hate for the cooking to stop, as you continually rotate one side, then the other. Well done, too well done: burnt black love, overbaked and crumbling. Leave to cool before serving.

***By Kendra Reynolds***

# A FOCUS ON POET ROSS THOMPSON



*The Slipping Forecast*  
ROSS THOMPSON



Ross Thompson is a writer from Bangor, Northern Ireland. His two poetry collections: *Threading The Light* and *The Slipping Forecast* are published by Dedalus Press. His work has appeared on television, radio and the Poetry Jukebox alongside a wide range of publications.

Purchase them here: [Dedalus Press](http://Dedalus Press)

## **Ross Says...**

When putting together this collection I was reflecting upon the theme of disappearance: the realisation that people, objects, places and even the past itself can vanish from one's life leaving a faintly ringing absence in its wake. Sometimes we barely notice their disappearance, and sometimes we are suddenly and painfully awoken to their removal.

During the creative process, I had an accident at home when I took the expressway down the stairs and sustained a fairly complex fracture to my left arm. This necessitated several surgeries that in turn resulted in my inability to go to work for an extended period.

I felt as if I was also disappearing but this experience taught me a renewed sense of gratitude: I believe that it can be a positive thing to be humbled now and again, to be reminded of how reliant we are on the love and care of those around us, not to mention the expertise and compassion of those in health services who put us back together when we fall ill.

Gratitude, as I argue in the book, is a choice, and in a profound way I am glad that I learnt this lesson, as painful as it may have been.

## **Falling in the Dark**

Not my finest moment, I have to say:  
misjudging the number of stairs to go tumbling  
downwards as if into a dunking pond,  
to feel the floor beneath my feet give way, suddenly,

before dropping swiftly like a faulty lift,  
soundtracked by the snare drum crack of my left  
ulna snapping like kindling, the cymbal  
crash of a rash of curses as my wrist

locked into a mechanism on the fritz  
with molten hot rods and springrazor cogs,  
the same gammy arm I broke as a child  
that never healed quite straight, and rightly nixed

my ability to play power chords, perform  
conjuring tricks or embrace my girlfriend  
without hearing my joints click, a lifetime  
of calamity that has since cast me

adrift on a sinister sea of codeine  
and troubled daydreaming, with frequent trips  
to the moon from which vantage point the world  
below appears dim and slow yet the echo  
of breaking my feeble bones still makes me wince.

I fell as a child and have been falling ever since.

***By Ross Thompson***

## Ross Says...

And for something a little lighter in tone, the following is a poem about my parents, specifically my Dad.

My first collection, *Threading The Light*, closely focuses on the women in my life: my late Mum, my wife and my daughter. So, perhaps as an act of balance, when putting *The Slipping Forecast* together, I found myself thinking about male friends, my relationship with my Dad and indeed about the innate awkwardness that often exists between men in our inability to vocalise our emotions.

At the end of Seamus Heaney's 'A Call', one of my favourite poems, the speaker recounts, "Next thing he spoke and I nearly said I loved him." It is a line that continues to haunt me, so starkly expressed in blunt monosyllables and given real poignancy by the inclusion of the rueful adverb "nearly".

This conceit of things left unsaid or unexperienced, the things that we have allowed to slip away from us, is at the heart of my second collection.

However, the following piece, a poem of bittersweet levity, concerns the exact opposite: an encounter that actually happened.

## **Tokens**

At the youth fellowship Christmas party,  
my dad, in his footloose prime and giddy

with postwar energy, wins a bumper  
bar of chocolate, its regal wrapper

bearing a cursive script reserved for cards  
from the Palace. Considering this hard

slab of contraband swaddled in embossed  
foil, he pays no mind to either the cost

of the precious ration or his sweet tooth,  
choosing instead to offer it as proof

of his true affection to the comely  
girl across the aisle, holding this relay

baton with a hand scarred by the shipyard  
but confident, inviting her towards

a life together and this simple twist:  
without chocolate I would not exist.

***By Ross Thompson***

# **ART FEATURE**

## **PEN AND MERVE JONES**

### **PRINTMAKERS AND MORE**

The art of longtime team Pen and Merve Jones mainly feeds on observations of 'ordinary' life - whatever that is!

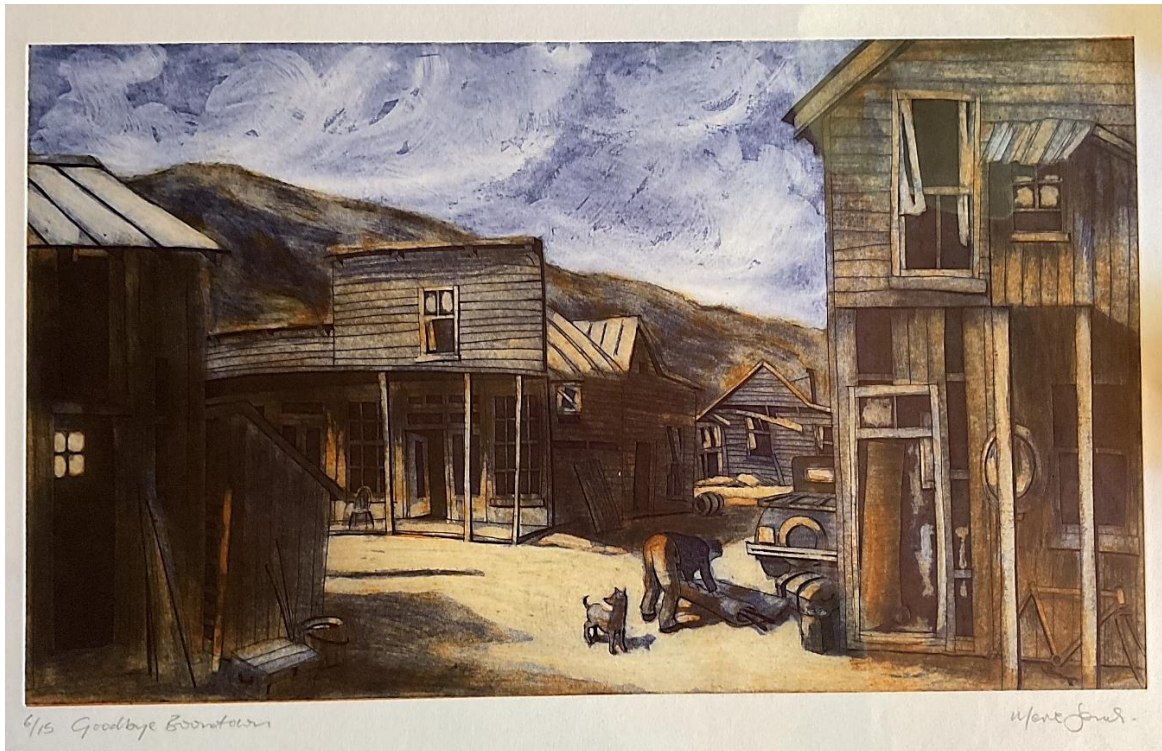
Fuelled by people watching, light falling on structures in the landscape and timeless Biblical truths, they work mainly in print (Linocuts and collagraphs) and also (Pen only) ceramic reliefs and painting.

Pen and Merve Jones are integral members of Seacourt Print Workshop on Main Street in Bangor. They are prolific artists and printmakers who are valued members inspiring other artists, art collectors and never fail to touch the hearts of viewers- in a way that proves difficult to put into words.

They approach art in a positive and optimistic manner, stating: 'If our work has a theme, we hope it is: 'Joy in the everyday of what's around us''

# ARTWORK

# MERVE JONES



'Goodbye Boomtown'



'Return of the Prodigal'



‘(Not) noticing’

# ARTWORK

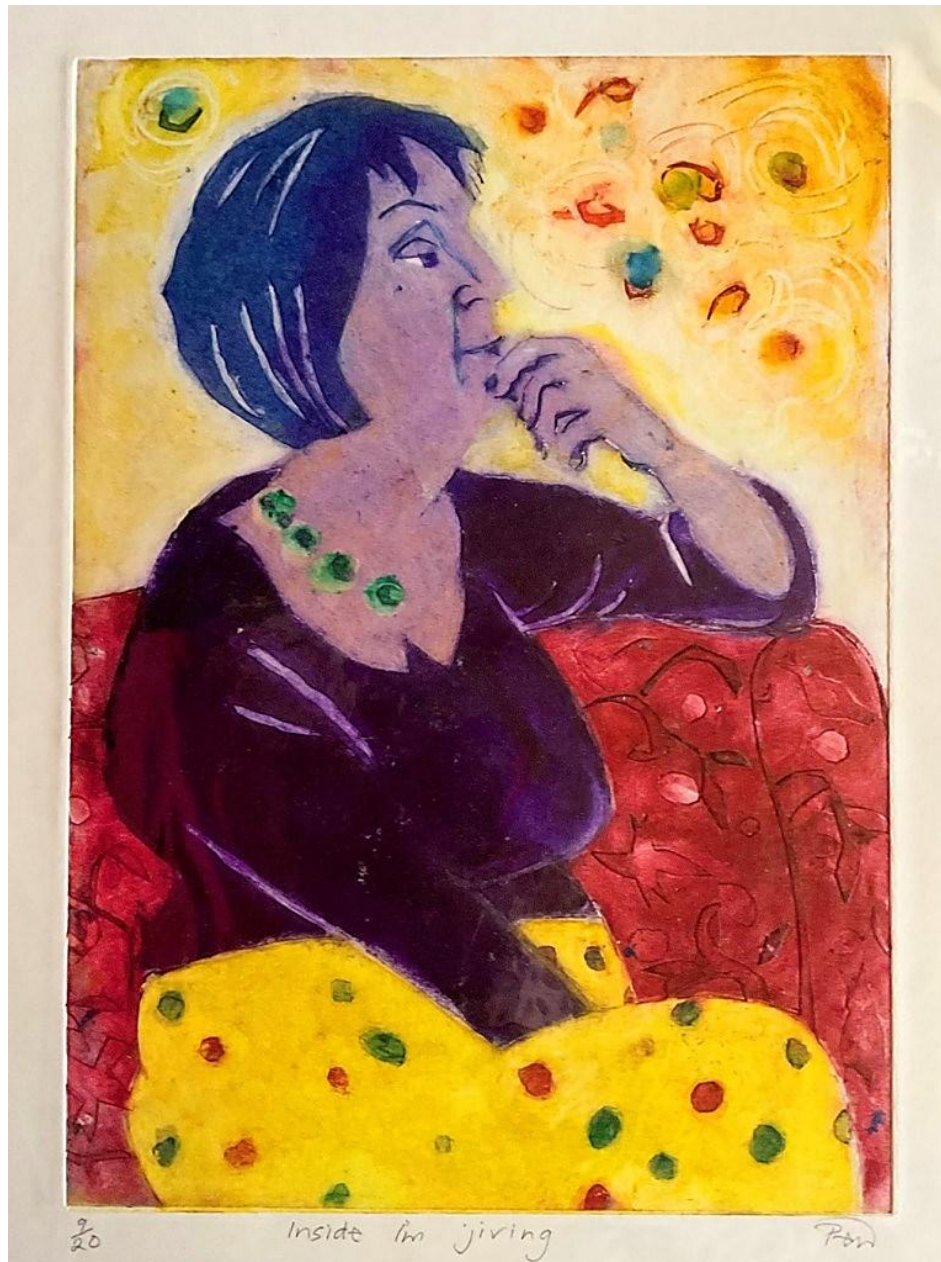
PEN JONES



'Throw me a stick'

# FEATURE

## EKPHRASTIC CHALLENGE



‘Inside I’m Jiving’  
Collagraph  
by Pen Jones

## **THE CHALLENGE**

We challenged you to respond in writing to this beautifully intriguing fine art print titled 'Inside I'm jiving' by Seacourt Print Workshop artist and printmaker Pen Jones.

The challenge was as follows:

Writers were allowed to take fifteen minutes to make some immediate notes on the piece of artwork.

Then, using these notes, they were to spend no longer than one hour writing a first draft piece of original poetry, short fiction or creative non-fiction in response to the artwork.

The writers were finally allowed one additional hour, to edit their pieces.

We are delighted to showcase the Winners of this year's Ekphrastic Challenge.

Congratulations to you all. And thank you to everyone of you who took part!

## **May I Have This Dance?**

Inside she is jiving.  
Meanwhile I'm dying.  
Joy personified,  
While I'm teary-eyed.

Goes through life striving,  
While they desperately try reviving.  
Lives her life, content.  
Mine, a torment I can't prevent.

There's no respite in sight,  
Still—she shines so bright.  
I can barely cope,  
Yet, somehow, she brings hope.

If she can jive inside,  
Then maybe so can I!  
Will I take this chance?  
May I join the dance?

***By Sarah Greer***

## **William and Me and the Monsters**

On Tuesday afternoon, there's a battered leather sofa next to the oak tree outside No.9. The leather is neither brown nor red, but oxblood. It is ripped, like mother's fur coat. 'For collection by council,' says the label taped to the armrest. Bobby is sniffing the yellow primroses blooming around the tree's base. It's all coming back to me: William and I bouncing from sofa to armchair to escape the fire-breathing dragons; us jiving with mum to the Mastermixers, collapsing together on the sofa; father tutting, nursing his whiskey in the armchair.

A couple walk towards me, the man muttering how the street is 'all fur coat and no knickers'. His younger partner glances at me as if to say, take no notice. The next day, the sofa is joined by a matching armchair, the arm flopping sideways like a badly set fracture. Where father sat, yellow foam spills through the broken joints like body fat oozing over guts. The couple don't come.

On Thursday, a second armchair appears and completes the suite. A bright blue rug runs between sofa and chairs to the flowers by the tree, like the sea touching shore. Whiskey sits in a glass on a side table. The man drops into the armchair and drinks the whiskey. The partner and I watch the council van park down the street. Two men climb out in their high-viz jackets and boots, pulling on gloves. When his parents split, the partner says, taking the sofa, his mother took William back to Australia. They arrived too late for the father's funeral, the family home is already sold. The new owner wants the tat gone, the lawyer said yesterday. She was adamant, 'no more monsters.'

***By Bernie McQuillan***

## **Transformation**

**(for F. who found the courage to be)**

(i)

Age four, Miss Irwin tied a pink ribbon in his hair,  
for *behaving like a sissy*.  
At fourteen he tried to end it for the first time.  
Holywood Secondary was an inhospitable place  
for anyone who was different.  
Working class protestant boys didn't read books,  
certainly not poetry books.  
Too-clever upstarts were put in their place.  
His English teacher was a lifeline –  
drama club an escape from bullying peers (and teachers).

(ii)

At seventeen, 1970's London called –  
belonging was found at 'Blitz' in Covent Garden,  
Roxy Music and Boy George at 'Billy's' in Soho,  
where androgynous, otherworldly,  
magnificently beautiful Bowie cut like diamond.  
There was the dark side too of course –  
friends lost to Aids. Grief. Fear. Stigma.  
Pulpit-thumping, spittle-flecked preachers,  
pouring down judgemental hellfire damnation.  
There was Gloria Gaynor's anthemic *I Will Survive!*

(iii)

Life is quieter now. Contentment. Selfhood.  
Home to the place she was born,  
the bullies are still here of course,  
but she ponders the future unafraid.  
Inspired by Jenny Joseph's poem she wears purple.  
No more trying to hide away, shrinking into anonymity,  
so she will clothe in bright primary colours –  
dancing orange, yellows, reds.  
Bold. Vibrant. Strong. Free.

Tomorrow she will tie a pink ribbon in her hair.

**By Gifford Savage**

## **Dress to impress**

‘Dress like the woman you long to regain!’ The Midlife Mayhem podcast had espoused.

And that Tuesday, heading for a date she had never expected, she had gone all in! Archiving her drawers she found a satin plunge bra. A present from her now defunct husband.

Scooping flesh into too small cups, plunging and perking until she succeeded. Covering her erect chest in a lush vivid top, flashes of long-ago waywardness danced about her dull, pedestrian head.

She considered the skinny jeans; a present from her daughter. Ever the optimist.

On reaching her hips though, the jeans’ zip jammed; ripples of thigh undulated over belt loops.

Short on time, she scanned her wardrobe. Palazzo pants in vivid yellow peeped out, their colourful spots dizzying her.

That Venice rendezvous had been memorable. The palazzo pants hadn't stayed on much that weekend. A bitter chuckle escaped her.

In the coffee shop she tried to settle herself. The App man had sounded pleasant or at least less axe-murderly than she’d imagined. She glanced at her Kindle; the self-help book title in bold font.

‘Let Your Dance Begin...’

Poking at her stale Bakewell she tried to conjure the woman who would discard plunge bras with fervour. Looking up, she caught her reflection. There sat a middle aged, middle-sized woman in flamboyant clothing. The groove in her brow had become a permanent fixture.

Who was she kidding?

Cursing herself for abandoning Pilates, she rose, awkward in her escape.

‘May I?’ He offered her a large, long-lived hand. Glancing upwards she saw sensible denim paired with non-descript plaid.

Ah but the shoes!

Peeping below his jeans were gold Doc Martins with faded, but obvious still to an appreciative eye, bold polka dots.

Maybe the dance wasn’t over after all?

***By Catherine Kay***

## **A little bit about our winners**

### ***Sarah Greer***

Sarah started writing poetry as a way to release emotions. Over the years she has become enamoured with writing and now writes consistently. Sarah has never entered a competition before, but thought she would give it her best shot.

### **Gifford Savage**

Gifford Savage is from Bangor, Northern Ireland. His poetry has been published in various journals, including Honest Ulsterman, The Storms, Flight of the Dragonfly, Lothlorien Poetry Journal, Agape Review, The New Verse News, and previously in The Bangor Literary Journal. He was winner of the Aspects Festival Poetry Slam 2022.

### **Bernie McQuillan**

Bernie McQuillan was a PEN Ireland Freedom to Write awardee 2024, her short stories are listed and published in a range of journals and her first novel *The Lobster Pot* publishes April 2026. It's 'a riveting family saga of high drama and tension, of intrigue, lies and suspense' (Bernie McGill).

### **Catherine Kay**

Catherine Kay lives in Inishowen, Donegal. Her writing has been performed in the Waterside Theatre and at Ten x 9 events. Her poetry has been published in the Storms Journal Anthology 4, Caught Alight: An Anthology (publisher: Impspired) and Dark Winter Press.

# FEATURE

## THE 12<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL BANGOR POETRY COMPETITION



What a wonderful Aspects Festival Launch we had in Bangor Castle. We were beyond impressed at the standard of submissions for the 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Bangor Poetry Competition, receiving hundreds of entries from all parts of the globe! It was a joy to read the array of poems sent to us based on the Aspects Festival theme of 'Time and Place'.

# THE RESULTS

We would like to offer our heartfelt congratulations to Anne McDonald on winning The 12th Annual Bangor Poetry Competition, which is part of Aspects Literary Festival. Anne's powerful poem 'Your side of the Bed' was voted the winner of this year's competition, by public votes from all over the globe. Jen Herron's 'Before and After Picture' came Runner Up in this year's competition, which asked poets to send their best poems on the theme of 'Time and Place'.

## **Winner**

|               |                      |
|---------------|----------------------|
| Anne McDonald | Your side of the Bed |
|---------------|----------------------|

## **Runner Up**

|            |                          |
|------------|--------------------------|
| Jen Herron | Before and After Picture |
|------------|--------------------------|

## **Highly Commended**

|              |          |
|--------------|----------|
| Mary Howlett | Birdcage |
|--------------|----------|

## **Commended**

|                |            |
|----------------|------------|
| Rhona Stephens | This Place |
|----------------|------------|

## **Shortlisted**

|                    |              |
|--------------------|--------------|
| Victoria Melkovska | Black Friday |
|--------------------|--------------|

|               |            |
|---------------|------------|
| Cathie McKimm | Via Crucis |
|---------------|------------|

|             |              |
|-------------|--------------|
| Ronnie Keys | Quantum Leap |
|-------------|--------------|

|                  |           |
|------------------|-----------|
| Mary E. Ringland | Punctured |
|------------------|-----------|

|             |              |
|-------------|--------------|
| Sue Steging | Secret Roads |
|-------------|--------------|

|              |                                  |
|--------------|----------------------------------|
| Yvonne Boyle | The north has always been moving |
|--------------|----------------------------------|

## **Longlisted Poets**

- |                       |                                     |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1) Mel McMahon        | Paris: July, 2025                   |
| 2) Siobhan Ward       | Too Late                            |
| 3) Maurice Devitt     | Tara Street Baths                   |
| 4) Colin Hassard      | Coughs and Sneezes                  |
| 5) Geraldine O'Kane   | Realisation                         |
| 6) Chris Cottom       | Cruising                            |
| 7) Christopher Murray | At Summer Camp He Missed His Mother |
| 8) Chad Norman        | There and Then Not There            |

# WINNER

## ANNE MCDONALD

Anne McDonald is an award-winning poet, prose writer, playwright and artist. Her poetry collection "Crow's Books" was published in 2020. She has also had short stories and poems published widely in print and online journals, and her work has been reviewed and broadcast on RTE National Irish Radio.



## WINNING POEM

Your side of the Bed

Anne McDonald

I have books on my bedside locker, and a copy of  
Dostoevsky's plays I will never read.  
You have pills and tissues, cartridges for a nebuliser,  
a copy of *Angela's Ashes* I bought to cheer you up.  
You said it made your eyes bleed.

In our bedside locker drawers, I have underwear and socks,  
you have letters for appointments, tubes for oxygen generators,  
instructions for prepping for scopes you hope you won't need,  
and a few stubby bookies' biros.

I have single earrings in a glass box, hoping the matching ones  
will reappear if I pull out the bed to Hoover the carpet.  
You have blister packs of pills, some there so long we have no idea  
what ailments they alleviate, some are, I'm sure, by now,  
well out of date.

My side of the bed has summer sandals and a pair of boots  
I love the colour of, but are a bit too tight.  
Yours has a nebuliser in case you can't breathe in the dead of night.  
It isn't right.

I used to hate the ashtray on your side of the bed.  
The chipped mug with builder's tea gone cold,  
the newspapers on the floor, a week old, with tips for horses  
marked in biro, never backed.

These were to be golden years, grandkid years,  
years to take up line dancing or buy a camper van,  
to drive the Wild Atlantic Way, to park anywhere we liked.  
Not here.

Not a dingy hospital café, paying over the odds for slop coffee  
in a plastic cup, where I bring my pen, and with each lukewarm sup  
try to take back days consumed with endless rounds of appointments,  
scans, and bloods for tests,  
little rest in between.

Now, all I see is evidence of illness.  
And I cry for days when I could see instead,  
a chipped mug, a tin ashtray, newspapers scattered on the floor half-read,  
hopeful horses marked with bookies' biros,  
on your side of the bed.

## **RUNNER UP**

### **JEN HERRON**

Jen's work has been featured in The Honest Ulsterman, Poetry Jukebox, The Waxed Lemon, Skylight 47, Trasna, The Irish Times, BBC Radio and more. She won the Seamus Heaney Award for New Writing, 2022, and is an editor for the Belfast Review. Jen is currently working on her first poetry collection. She has also been awarded a nine-month mentorship at Faber Academy funded by the Arts Council Northern Ireland.



## Before and After Picture

Ex-pro rugby lad turned personal trainer,  
Brian 'The Beast' O'Boyle wasn't there  
to babysit, he was there to sculpt a legend.  
He can lift more weight than a front-end loader,  
squat harder than a celiac on a Delhi toilet,  
knows more about protein than any physicist,  
and can drop a pound just by thinking about it.  
Every day, he drinks a dozen egg whites from  
a shaker bottle engraved with #NO EXCUSES.

He saved you from yourself, Stacy, all fifteen  
stone of you, hauled your bulk through the post-  
partum blues: stronger, better, thinner.  
Before was bad, you know that, and pizza  
never loved you back, neither did the hubby.  
But boy, he'll be sorry! Quads shredded,  
abs popping, booty on point—calves, toned AF.  
Two years of push-ups, pull-ups, planks and cardio,  
curls and HIIT, eating clean and training mean  
because sweat is happiness in liquid form.

The camera ring sits by the dumbbell deck,  
full length mirrors hunger for every angle  
of your hot bod. That outfit is banging:  
Barbie-pink sports bra with racerback straps,  
Lululemon leggings, Ultraboosts with neon soles,  
a scrunchie for the slicked-back bun, barely-there  
make-up—folk can't think you're trying too hard.  
You're thirty-five and ready to thrive. Hell yeah.

At home, you sit on the sofa, feel proud scrolling  
through every comment: *absolute unit*, *deadly*,  
*proper-fit*. And Fidelma is low-key jealous.  
You ignore the hole you used to plug with buns,  
filled now with wheatgerm shots and seaweed thins,  
binge watch *The Biggest Loser* until you fall asleep.  
Next day, you notice the wee one is getting tubby—  
too many of granny's sweets. You put on Joe Wicks'  
Teddy Bear Workout, try to forget Johnny Stirling  
poking your stomach in the playground, grunting  
like a pig as you ate your Cornetto on sports day.

**By Jen Heron**

## HIGHLY COMMENDED

### MARY HOWLET

Mary Howlett is a poet and artist living in Waterford. Her work has been published in The Waxed Lemon, Comhnasc, Drawn to the Light Press, Bangor Literary Journal, Poem Alone, Shamrock Leaf, (Canada) Swerve Magazine, Poetry As Commemoration UCD, The Ireland Collection (UK), A New Ulster, Tinteán (Au), Poetry Bus 12, The Get Real (UK) and elsewhere. Her art work has also appeared in numerous journals and magazines.



## **Birdcage**

In the undergrowth at the bottom of the hay  
field I find it. His birdcage, rusted, weathered,

its frame buried in mud. Smothered in brambles,  
stinging nettles and creeping ivy, it's not the cage

but the memory of the cage. Discarded,  
when they stripped his house of books,

spades, faded photographs, bits and bobs -  
the ordinary of life.

In the rewilding a flurry of ragged robin,  
pink flowers transforming brown, boggy soil.

Dog-rose scrambling through fine mesh wire,  
thorns protecting delicate white flowers, red hips

of Autumn. In the silence I hear the echo  
of his linnets, their flurry of twittering calls.

The blossom of his hair, tweed flat cap, and him  
cycling to early morning mass come hail or shine.

And underfoot, dry, brittle leaves of an oak,  
fusing with his blood, his sweat, the memory of him -

left behind in clay.

***By Mary Howlet***

## COMMENDED

### RHONA STEPHENS

Rhona Stephens grew up in Northern Ireland and now lives in Scotland. Her pieces have been short-listed for *Wells Festival of Literature Open Poetry Competition*, long-listed for *Bangor Literary Festival* and *Rialto Nature and Place Competition*, and appeared in *The Honest Ulsterman*, *Bangor Literary Journal* and a number of anthologies.



### **This Place**

Half-hung, your grieving gate stands sentry to no-one.  
Windows, eyeless now, glint only in the frost.  
The garden lies quiescent, ribbed drills where spuds  
and spinach thrived pursued now by ground elder.  
Sunken ears of barley while away their days, adrift  
from harvesters. Lost in ivy leaves, a quiet rose buds.  
Once, summer's door stood open to a fragrant breeze  
and smoking chimneys summoned generations back  
to flour-flushed mothers making griddle cakes  
and lentil soup to fill the midday gap.

Each visit, there is less of you: a shoulder dropped,  
a footing slipped, a hip dislodged, a lintel angling  
for escape, your ruined stones now comforted  
with moss; a shrinking at the heart of you, as step  
by stealth new owners lay their claim. I clear your spring,  
drink deep on memories of a time when all roads led me  
here, to this place where I was known, where now  
none but a robin makes your hearth a home.

***By Rhona Stephens***

## **SHORTLISTED**

### **SUE STEGING**

Sue Steging lives by a quiet river near the Giant's Causeway. Her poetry and short fiction have been published in national and international journals and anthologies. She received The Seamus Heaney Award for New Writing in 2023.



### **Secret Roads**

Keep watch along the winding roads,  
the old, untrafficked, secret roads,  
the ones that pass by rush filled fields,  
an unclaimed copse. See relics  
of monastic lives, the sisters' lives,  
the way they portioned out the ground,  
their ways of sharing gardens, orchards,  
mills or milk; access to the riverbank,  
the shade of trees. Look past the giving  
of a woman's hand, forced choices  
of a younger son. See how they made  
the best of it, surrendered to the earth's  
soft power, the secrets of their silent lives  
remembered by these winding roads.

***By Sue Steging***

## **SHORTLISTED**

### **YVONNE BOYLE**

Yvonne Boyle has had a range of poems published in a variety of magazines and anthologies, including the Bangor Literary Journal, Dunfanaghy Writers Circle and Arlen House's Washing Windows Series. She is a Causeway Coast and Glens Councillor.



**The north has always been moving**

*after James Rebanks*

Is that why I feel close to Africa?  
Ulster was once in tropical waters,  
Antrim chalk deposits dramatically capped  
by volcanic basalt flows.

Is that why I feel close to North America?  
We were joined once, cheek by geology,  
the precambrian Laurentian shield  
echoing the rocks of Donegal.

Above Gondwanaland was Pangaea:  
North America, Europe and Africa  
together before we started drifting north.

As we traveled and all the time  
fissures and breakages in the ocean floors,  
tectonic edges breaking, fizzing.

I am weary of manmade boundaries,  
manufactured hatreds, wars  
and the weight of historical inhumanities  
within continents, across oceans.

The north has always been moving  
and it's always been home.

***By Yvonne Boyle***

## **SHORTLISTED**

### **RONNIE KEYS**

Ronnie has a degree in Psychology and a Masters in Social Work at QUB. She currently works part-time as an Assistant Lecturer with ATU and Associate Trainer in Trauma Informed Practice. She studied Creative writing at UL which encouraged her to share work again. She previously won for poetry and prose at the Allingham Arts Festival and has been published in the Martello Journal.



## Quantum Leap

Einstein called it "Spooky action at a distance,"  
you said. I'd pretend to understand as you waxed lyrical about  
gravity travelling at the speed of light

and acting locally in curved spaces. We lay entangled on the  
sheets in the golden, morning sun shafts.

I wondered at your mind, as mine wandered to what  
gravitational pull had me falling at the speed of light for you.  
Your mental acuity aroused my body and

soul and when you explored my curved spaces, my earth  
moved. Those were the early days, when

I circled around you like a sun-orbiting planet. Quantum  
entanglement persists for astronomically large distances if  
entangled states exist in a realm

where spatial distances and time intervals simply don't matter.  
The sun tugs on the Earth and us,

without touching either, and we tug on the sun and the Earth as  
well, you'd say. Now I tug on the quilt  
and pull it over my head as I rot in an oversized

empty bed. *Space is stretchy, Einstein said.*  
But why does matter attract matter?

And if we are all cosmic stardust, what does it matter? And why  
did that beautiful, brilliant mind attract a lump of matter that  
would negate

Everything. That. Mattered. Death is reasonable and amenable  
to rational explanation, they say, but they

can keep their TedX talks, because I know from all those early  
morning bed talks that entangled states exist in a place where  
time intervals simply don't

matter. A mysterious mass on your bright brain, created chaos,  
bringing random, unpredictable

behaviour to a system governed by deterministic laws. And a  
pause. Still, I knew the energy you emitted would merely  
shift space on the cosmic

horizon, even as I weep at your quantum leap.  
We were pre-determined, I believe.

In synchronicity, deja-vu and every red-breasted robin, I still  
see you and it helps me resist, the gravitational pull of an  
eternally unmade bed.

Somedays, in my grief, I think I still hear your voice.  
"Spooky action at a distance." That's what you said.

**By Ronnie Keys**

## **SHORTLISTED**

### **CATHIE MCKIMM**

I was born in Newtownards and migrated 20 miles south to Portaferry where I've been living a happy life as a blow-in for twenty-five years. I've a collection of half-finished poetry and a half-finished novel. I love to write. I hate to write. I am a mother and a grandmother.



### **Via Crucis**

A rose clings to its branch against a Levant wind;  
Cats stretch from sleep and inside El Barrio  
The old neighbourhood wakens; sweeping away the  
Evening voices with incense of bread, and water.

Whitebait caught in the night lie heaped by the harbour;  
Where the sea breaks a girl tussles with a young man;  
Surrenders with a kiss; slides his hand to where  
Blood mixes with ink to keep the feelings fixed.

On the Plaza shadows shorten; water leaps from  
Fountains as sand, blinding the eyes of lovers  
Who circle under the midday sun in suits of light:  
La Fiesta Brava, coloured silks, swinging skirts.

\*

All day I wandered, stopping finally beneath  
The Christ pinned up for centuries on the hill,  
Near the old Basilica, his imagined body  
Becoming a long shadow over my own at dusk.

Sitting in his shade, I watch the women come -  
In ones and twos at first, crossing as they enter,  
Then enter too, uncrossed; dazzled by light in dark  
Gold and incense; the relics of saints in cases

Beneath stations of the cross where old depicted  
Love moves from fabled image to fabled image -  
Pain, sweat, and blood all moving towards a climax;  
A pilgrimage of moments walking towards death.

And yet, I cannot pray; borrow from their liturgy;  
Their prayers a murmuration long practiced,  
Mysterious, like fingers across the rosary;  
The body and blood of Christ transmuted.

\*

I escape into faint and unsettling twilight  
The tall Christ half visible, half invisible  
And descend the hill with so many Marys;  
Finding no folded shroud or ruptured veil

Only the sense of something lost; an angel,  
Whose wings have grown too thin and small  
Her purpose forgotten, her name just a sound  
That still can make her turn when someone calls.

***By Cathie McKimm***

## **SHORTLISTED**

### **VICTORIA MELKOVSKA**

Victoria Melkovska is a Ukrainian-Irish broadcaster and poet. Her poems have appeared in numerous anthologies, on RTE, The Irish Times, Ithaca Magazine, El Pais, and The Guardian. Her debut collection, “For the Birds” (Dedalus Press, 2023), reflects on Melkovska’s Soviet upbringing, immigration, her battles with cancer, and the ongoing war.



### **Black Friday**

How kind of you, darling, to ask how I feel.  
Well, by day, may I say,  
I'm a breast as vast as Carrauntoohil  
and a pulsing Atlantic by night.  
I feed and please them 'til darkness arrives,  
traps me in candied candlelight —  
demanding that I  
make faces, excuses, and love.

Running down this slippery slope  
I allow my bloody well-wishers  
to chop off  
the pieces of me,

one by one.

Here (in order) is how they come:

Lumpectomy

Hysterectomy,

Bilateral mastectomy —

All that made me female

In this upcoming Black Friday sale  
must be gone.

Ever-demanding monster,  
Jump at this unmissable offer  
Of my discontinued/discounted body parts.  
Voila, mon ami, bon appetite!  
For whatever is left of me after,  
Needs not feeding, nor fiddling, or fucking  
but the silence of those like-minded,  
solitude-soiled, hard-boiled,  
beating to my unbearable music hearts,  
badly needed to practice the love  
of liberal arts.

***By Victoria Melkovska***

## SHORTLISTED

### MARY E. RINGLAND

Mary E. Ringland is a therapeutic counsellor based in Larne, County Antrim. She began writing poetry during lockdown. Her poems have appeared in *New Isles Press*, *The Morecambe Poetry Festival Anthology*, *The Bangor Literary Journal*, *The Storms Journal*, and most recently *The Community Arts Partnership Anthology 'Measure'*. Mary completed her MA in Creative Writing at the Open University in October 2024. *(Poem not published)*

