

ISSUE 1:

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**Roscommon County Council  
Arts Office presents**

# Autumn Leaves

A Broadsheet of Poetry,  
Flash Fiction & Song Lyrics

**Editors: Gerry Boland & Jane Clarke**



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# Abandoned Homes

I put names on silent forebears –  
birth, baptism, marriage,  
death, some cut short too young.

I grapple with each entry – sorrows,  
stones in my pocket –  
ponder their shape, texture;  
rub my thumb over them, imagine

their embedded stories; a few, inexplicable –  
water slipping between my fingers,  
traumas unaccounted for. Dwellings

filled with ghost of solitude –  
two generations of emigration enfolding  
my bones in wide arms. Holding

their worlds makes me tremble.  
They show me God too, the One  
who speaks so often

in small things –  
hazelnuts, scurrying hares, nests  
in hayfields, the abandon of abandoned  
homes, throbbing in my chest.

**Mary Lee**

# Hands

I found myself crying in the condiments aisle,  
remembering your hands holding fondant potatoes.  
White barrels under palm.  
You lost half the spud  
cutting them to perfection.  
To my mind wasteful.  
It was the goose fat,  
looking down on me  
mountainous from the top shelf.

I think of your hands often.  
The length of your nails.  
Slim fingers. A flutter of digits  
as you spoke from the wrist.  
Mostly you assassinated the air  
with a swift cutting motion.  
Frequently slicing open  
the space between you and I.

I should like them to be still,  
To rest.  
To sleep.  
To steal them away from your wrists.  
Lay them in taffeta and paper.  
Silent, white and harmless.

**Aisling Bradley**

# Storm

Spent all evening alone on the strand  
watching a storm's elbows resting on the horizon,  
but now its shoulders are rising.

Once, God's eye was the centre of every storm;  
even now these Himalayan masses of charcoal-coloured anger  
seem to throw the earth to its knees.

The sea, wearing requiem black, is a writhing mass,  
the birds have all disappeared down a hole  
and the cattle in the fields are humming nervously to themselves.

I feel the molecules of air around me are like fireflies;  
as the clouds roll in on the wheels of their blue undersides,  
even the rocks appear to be sentient.

I must hurry, lock myself away, shiny white conductor that I am.  
I must dig myself a burrow;  
hide myself from the angry God of the sky.

**Michael O'Dea**



# Wall

Suppose somebody asked you to make a wall of your life.

You're going into solitary in prison. A hospital isolation room. Rocketship to Mars. They, you, want something to remember you by. You gather materials. Photos of loved ones, the scrap of fabric you called *usey* for reasons no-one ever knew, teased between your fingers as a toddler to coax you to sleep, a medal or trophy that meant more than others – sport, dancing, it doesn't matter. It's glitter you remember.

You'd tear a page from your favourite poetry book, Gus Martin or Soundings, but books are sacred. You can't even bear to fold a page because it weakens the fibres, so you daub the words in paint. When you are old and grey... your handwriting isn't what it was. You think of headline copybooks.

And you discover things you can't build into a wall. The strain of your favourite parent singing while tipsy, the scent of your first pet snuggled up to you in bed on a school day lost to 'The Big Snow'. Then things you don't want to: loss, grieving, how occasional pains became chronic, mortality's certainty, the words of ghosts you dimly recognise calling you mam or da, as fits, but it's a strange greeting from your mammy or daddy and didn't daddy leave the year of the apocryphal snow? Or was it summer?

Hello, dear. How are ... all at home? You guess, smile at visitors, it's expected, and gather your possessions behind a wall they can't see. It's there anyhow.

Suppose. Nobody does. And you're sleepy, full of sleep and nodding by the fire in a room you don't know but it's from your childhood, you're sure, and here's your *usey*, love, you're cold.

You prefer old concrete to these vexing abstractions.

**Kevin Hora**

# Bitter Sweet

The rain slaps across the windscreen in thick myopic sheets. My neck is tight, taut as a balloon, as I strain to see beyond the dark moon-silver of the wheel. I fumble at the pillow with one hand, try to double it up beneath me, keeping my eye to the line of trees that swirl and ghost about the ditches on either side of the narrow road.

I glance over at Molly. Her head is on her chest, her 'huggie bear' hanging out of her grasp as though struggling for air.

We haven't gone that far. I could still go back.

She groans, turns towards me. Her pyjama sleeve rides up. I pull it down, not wanting to see the shadows on her skin. My own scars hum silently in their secret places. I grip the wheel and squint into the storm.

I think of Mam. She'd lied and said she'd fallen over some of Molly's toys.

He'd smiled,

shaking his head at our carelessness as he carried her up the stairs and away from us. But it was Mam's smile he wore. He'd stolen it from her eyes. They are dead now, dark and glazed, like the black pebbles around the pond. The fish are dead too. She stays in bed. He brings her sweets, little coloured things. She hides them in her bedside locker.

Molly stirs as something catches in the wipers and scrapes across the glass, flapping and straining like a mad thing.

'Kiki, where we goin? she whimpers, pulling her huggie bear close.

'Hush, Moll, it's okay. Be at Aunt Maggie's soon.'

'But I'm hungry,' she moans.

I rummage in my pyjama pocket, pull out a handful of colour.

'Here, some sweets.'

She smiles a toothy smile, and reaches for the rainbow.

**Anne Byrne**

# The William Maddox Museum

'You want to visit the museum?'

She stood at the top of the basement steps, at the front of number twenty-two. An old woman, slightly bent, with a shuffling walk.

'Museum?'

'The William Maddox Museum, down here.'

I followed her down the stone stairs. The basement room was full of labelled exhibits. She lifted a chipped mug.

'His favourite cup. He left it behind when he moved.'

I'm not surprised, I'd have done the same.

She pointed at the cluttered table.

'The last library book he borrowed.'

'Is that important?'

'It tells us how he was thinking.'

'How to Adjust an Electricity Meter' only spoke of somebody who was up to no good, but maybe that's her point.

She lifted a torn shirt from a shelf.

'He dumped this one time, I saved it from the garbage.'

She moved around the small room, lifting and replacing various items on shelves and hooks. Here a bundle of unopened bills, there some photographs she'd found under the carpet in his room. They were old, and faded, and most showed a bearded young man with long hair and colourful clothes.

As I browsed and she moved stuff, I began to get a sense of the man. I wondered about him.

'So, who was he, this William Maddox?'

She didn't answer, seemingly lost in her own thoughts. Then she suddenly appeared to remember that I was there.

'So, you want the room or not?'

I didn't have much choice; it was cheap and convenient.

'Yes.'

'You got the deposit?'

I counted notes from the bank envelope and paid, crumpled the envelope into the bin.

'Come back at six for the keys.'

As I climbed the steps I glanced back. She had retrieved the discarded envelope, and was slowly smoothing it out between her hands.

# Contained

After a fall-out many years in the making,  
my disappointment at having to grieve

the living allows me to parcel up the past,  
take down dusty photographs, reminders,

memories, confining them all to a box, set  
on a high shelf so I cannot stumble across

them by accident. I have chosen a pretty  
box that's easy on the eye, if not the heart.

**Louise G Cole**



# Forest Fire

for Carol Jane Wilson

The night is out  
it swarms the air  
jackdaws swim against  
    a current of stars  
        sing like mermaids  
if mermaids had their throats cut out  
    and stuck together  
with tar and gravel

They sing and swoosh  
    we sit and stare  
    at her painting as if  
    nothing's changed

Dive into the moon  
    this is what we used to do  
    in writing group  
    and no one knows now  
what to say

Crows skim the stones of themselves  
>>>all fins<<<  
    over treetops  
        skip >>>  
            <<<tip  
                >>>spin  
all along a length of wire – stretched – tight  
they sing  
a deep-sea stony song  
and we perch and write about birds  
    stars  
        fish  
anything else  
and she reads out what she wrote

How it feels  
to be told  
you're dying

**Jessamine O Connor**

# The Shed

The old potting shed is empty:  
some shelves moved elsewhere,  
no shovels or spades left to show  
the presence of a gardener's hand.

The glass roof has lasted well, but  
at one side, some ivy found its way  
past a side-window's missing pane;

it slyly coiled a path along the slabs,  
sent shoots between fine crevices  
to soil spilt from a careless barrow.

I peer through cobwebbed windows,  
see a world of growth now dormant  
waiting for energy: a breath, a voice,  
a hand to plant the seeds of beauty.

**Mary Turley-McGrath**

# The Sap Still Rises

Let no one ever say you're half a tree.  
It's true you lost nine limbs to hurricanes,  
and your loveliness, your strength had all but died.

We cleared the road of torn wood, could see  
your jagged wounds, and sealed them against rain.  
It seemed then you were only half a tree.

The shelter you give now is on one side,  
but the sap still rises, bud and leaf remain.  
Your loveliness and strength, they have not died.

You are as tall as any beech can be.  
Your loss is visible, but all the same  
you don't appear to us as half a tree.

Rooted, you stand serene and dignified.  
Each year your girth another circle gains.  
Your loveliness and strength, they have not died.

You are as whole as any beech can be.  
You are alive. You hold yourself with pride.  
No one thinks of you as half as tree.  
Your loveliness and strength have never died.

**Bernadette McCarrick**

# Lifer

He leaned his forehead against the bars, closed his eyes and took in the smells of prison, stale sweat, industrial floor polish, rollup cigarettes, and the scent of cooked cabbage that he had noted on his first day here many years ago.

His day of freedom had finally come, the paperwork had been sorted, he had seen the Governor this morning and listened to the speech he had doubtlessly made many times. Now that the day was finally here, he felt an emotion stir that he hadn't expected in all the times he had planned ahead. Fear: the fear that he wouldn't fit in, that settling into a world without order and routine would be difficult for somebody so used to having a timetable, a structure. How would he adjust to freedom, to all the changes that would occur once he walked through the gates and looked back at those high walls that had been home for so long? And how would he adjust to making new acquaintances, being used to the same faces every day, the same complaints over the conditions, the grumbling over allowances paid for working in various areas? Yes, there would be changes galore, but that was the price of freedom. He would simply have to get out there and make a new life for himself.

He sorted through his locker, arranging bits of clothing in a duffel bag. Some personal effects, surprisingly few, only a couple of family pictures. He had never married, and in a way, he wasn't sorry, as it would be difficult to adjust to the new reality.

He took a deep breath and began the walk down the corridor, squaring his shoulders. Prison officer James Robert Kelly, badge number 327, had worked his last day in the service.

**Anthony Baggott**



## About Turn

'If it was a thing that a man needed a lift, would you be leaving town any time soon?' Which was Ollie's way of asking me to drop him home. I said I had a bag of calf-nuts to collect first. He said he'd meet me outside Conway's, knowing he'd see me at the bar. Normally I'd never drink and drive, but Ollie had bought a round. 'Cheers,' I said, though I wouldn't exactly call us pals. Ollie found me a bit above myself and thought I could do with taking down a peg or two. Ollie himself barely had the wits to stand in out of the rain when we were in school. Burn him for a fool, though, and you'd have wise ashes. He'd lose and find smarter men at the mart in Elphin, and things had a way of coming good for Ollie that didn't involve luck alone. Plus, I enjoyed his company, especially when he got his words confused – asking if my sweater was 'Tommy Hill-finger'; and telling me how Homeland Security in the US gave his cousin a 'lie-detester' test. We drank up and then a mile out the road met a checkpoint. Well, I'd broken the law, taken a lethal risk, and my comeuppance loomed. 'Pull over,' said Ollie. 'I can't,' I said, 'if I do a U-turn now, they'll throw the book at me.' 'Pull over,' Ollie ordered, got out of the car, and lifted the bag of calf-nuts out of the boot. The guards looked on. I had no idea whose field it was, and neither had Ollie, but he called the cattle over and fed them the nuts. Then he returned to the car, threw the guards a parting wave, and we did an about turn.

**Brian Leyden**

# Then the Music Starts Again

*(song lyrics)*

*So I'll hang here on this oak  
The static toy of wicked folk  
A victim of some cosmic joke  
Vicissitudes of which she spoke  
I'll raze my face to meet the rain ...  
and then the music starts again*

*So I'll trudge this lonely street  
Avoiding eyes of all I meet  
An angry mob annex my feet  
And heaven is a plumped-up seat  
I'll make my bed where dogs have lain ...  
and then the music starts again*

*So I'll fling my life to chance  
My thoughts a floor where devils dance  
Held reckless in my torpid trance  
And bearing flesh for greedy lance  
I'll drink a toast to save my pain ...  
and then the music starts again*

*So I'll stretch out on the tracks  
My limbs wrung by six hundred racks  
The train hauls dreams in cotton sacks  
Thus making up for what it lacks  
I'll yank the lever not the chain ...  
and then the music starts again*

*So I'll drown in pools of white  
All choices vanished with the fight  
One silly grin, convinced I'm right  
Then blow a kiss to fading light  
I'll let the water drink the stain ...  
and then the music starts again*

*So I'll sing this lullaby  
The tune is muffled by the sigh  
A relic on which to rely  
For swoops and swoons to deafest sky  
I'll stroke the spirit horse's mane ...  
and then the music starts again*

**Darragh Mc Manus**

# Every Foot A-Tap

*(In memory of the blind Roscommon Piper, Johnny Gorman)*

He took the flat white air  
of north Roscommon  
and squeezed it through  
his piper's hands.  
Somewhere inside the pipes  
the sound began to grow.  
It became round and curved,  
soft and light.  
He teased and drew it,  
coaxed it through the bag and chanter.  
The air spilled out across his knee  
into the throng of the moving room.  
It thrummed with bee wing  
and rattled with meadow hum.  
It burbled with goose clank  
and summer crake call.  
Under the parlour lamps  
from his dim lit corner  
he set the wedding room ablaze,  
every foot a-tap.

**Rory Duffy**

# The Key

The house looked like home that evening  
in May: honeysuckle entwined in hazel,

oak breaking into leaf, the kitchen warmed  
by a stove, windows facing the hills.

It rains the day we're handed the key –  
linoleum curling in corners,

damp patches on ceilings, blinds we can't raise.  
A marble rolls in an empty drawer.

Heads down, eyes not meeting,  
we sweep and scrub, turn up the radio,

place our books on shelves.  
Darkness tells us it's time to rest.

Lifting the bedside lamp from the car,  
we hear the Avonbeg at the end of the road,

smell hay in our neighbour's field.  
A horse whinnies. Venus unlocks the sky.

**Jane Clarke**



# Photograph

Forgive me the frailty of my memory,  
I know I should remember you better.

Was there something in the air,  
or were we simply friends for a while?

Could we, *should* we, have embraced?  
Would anything have come of it, do you think?

You were awkward and I was shy,  
no argument there.

All I have to remember you by  
is this photograph I hold in my hand –

you, taken by me, back in '93,  
February, near Killadoon, County Mayo.

Barefooted, you paddle towards me,  
jeans rolled to your kneecaps,

black shoes in your right hand,  
your left stuffed into the pocket of your jacket.

You are looking at me and you are laughing  
and now I remember what a lovely face you had.

I was with another then,  
which would explain your distance,

if that is what you were doing,  
maintaining a distance.

Or maybe you were game and I wasn't,  
simple as that.

Or, that I was game and you were not.  
That, too.

# After Light

It was the light brought back the memory. The light the sun sometimes leaves behind after it has lowered itself beneath the horizon.

Sheep trap the light in their wool. Stuck and entangled, unable to escape, the late light radiates from the fields. Why, he wondered, is he remembering now after, what, sixty years, he supposed?

Primroses trap the light, too. And daffodils, and yellow water lilies. When the light races towards the west and dusk moves in, some colours have the power to hold a glimmer, house it for a time and delay darkness. The yellow flower of the Flagger does it best of all. The Flaggers and the sheep.

Sixty years. Time flies. It didn't always. When he could move faster, time moved slower.

He remembered running from Roscommon Castle, through The Lough to The Square. Sheep glowed and the Flaggers lit a path. His heart pounding and the taste of a girl on his lips. He moved so fast and the moment lingered so long. The slower he moves now the faster time races.

What a baking hot day that was by the wall of the castle. Kissing and kissing. To hold on to that moment now. Maybe if he ran, maybe if he moved quickly again, like sixty years ago, he could slow time. Stand it still. Yes.

He pushed his body forward. His legs slowly followed but out of step. Out of time. He pushed. He faced the west where the light raced. Slow down the light, slow it down.

He ran. When his face hit the grass, he smiled. He knew he had won. Thin as his silver hair was, it held the last of the light.

**Brian Farrell**

# Burdened Bog

O burdened bog,  
What lies beneath  
Your sodden store of history?  
Whisper in your windswept tones,

Speak to me of spirits starved  
Under your purple furze,  
Drowning in your acidic drink;  
Final quenching of human thirsts.

No Phidian beauties trod their hungry way  
Down deep into your darkest bowels,  
But slips of girls, hollow-eyed,  
With arms that pulled groping mouths

To arid breasts.  
My back can feel the labour  
Of long-lost turf gatherers.  
I taste the rough, unbuttered bread

They shared, just after twelve, when  
Distant bells rang out the Angelus.  
I dare not walk your wet wilds  
Alone, nor without Irish moon;

Your spongy mass of brown  
Could bounce me up, draw me down.  
For they call to me;  
Your voices, through the heather,

And ask whether anyone had come  
To offer morsels from their larder.

**Deirdre Anne Gialamas**

# Night Birds

Night birds, tiny creatures of the night,  
Dark twilight angels,  
Small winged mammals of flight,  
Death notice deliverers from the underworld.  
Silent and shadowy,  
Flitting on the periphery of our night vision,  
Guided by sound, echoes and echoing.  
Nocturnal swallows swooning in the dusk and dark –  
Bats at night, man's ancient fright.

Skimming past my window on skin-stretched wings,  
Dipping and rising, falling and gliding  
So swiftly between wall and tree, house and gable.  
Joy expressed in their defiance of gravity  
As they echolocate their winged-insect prey.  
How they must relish the night's hunt.  
Innate aerial skills,  
Ephemeral aviators of the nocturnal realm –  
Night birds, winged mammals of the dark.

**Michéal Coughlan**



# Turn, Lift, Stack, Foot

Turn, lift, stack, foot.

Another row footed. Twenty-three minutes, that one.

She sweeps hair back from her face, replacing it with sweat and the turf mould's dust. Not to mind. That row has her a few quid – ten, maybe twenty – closer. Closer to going. Closer to being gone.

Turn, lift, stack, foot.

There's a box buried in the bog. There's money in it, her money, earned for getting out of here. No small sum. A ways to go yet, but Fifth Avenue beckons. The Statue of Liberty too. And perusing Tiffany's window at dawn, coffee in one hand and some sort of bun in the other.

Turn, lift, stack, foot.

It was genius really, taking to the turf. No one wondering what someone like her wanted with working. No accountability, comment or payslip, just approval for being 'a great worker' – a woman's highest accolade around these parts.

Getting away. It can't come soon enough.

Getting away from curtain-twitchers and nosebags, away from endless washing and potatoes with every dinner, from going to Mass for the want of something to do, from gripe water and the price of beef, from the surname she never liked, never wanted. From weariness she's too young for.

Turn, lift, stack, foot.

She cannot stay. He's a good man. He'll find another. He'll recover.

Turn, lift, stack, foot.

Though it'll take him a long time.

Turn, lift, stack –

Her parents too.

Turn, lift –

There'll be no coming back

Turn, lift –

Not even for funerals

Turn –

Not ever.

# Johnny Reilly

*(song lyrics)*

Birds they are a chirpin' and the water is high  
There's a brown canvas tent down by the riverside  
There lives Johnny Reilly, a gypsy and a scribe  
Boyle's constant Traveller camped by the riverside

A tinsmith and a trader of pots and cans  
A gypsy, a chimney sweep with blackened face and hands  
Oh on goes Johnny Reilly, a gypsy and a scribe  
He was a constant Traveller down by the riverside

*Ah Tipping It Up To Nancy and The Raggle Taggle Gypsy  
Up in Alesiba Glancy's, how the music would flow  
For Johnny was a minstrel, of music so sweet  
A wanderer, a traveller, old friends would always greet*

Sittin' by the campside, down the river road  
Johnny the tinsmith loved to work alone  
Using aluminium, making pots and tins and cans  
He sang of days of long ago, on the roads round Ireland

*Chorus*

Around Aleisha's fireside, I remember times so well  
Johnny singing hand-me-downs, he held us in his spell  
Through many winter nights, we gathered young and old  
The spirit of the evening, keeping out the winter cold

*Chorus*

Today, I hear his music, and hold him in esteem  
For melodies he left us, the rhythms of our dreams

Oh on lives Johnny Reilly, in verse and melody  
The raggle taggle gypsy-oh, of my memory

A rag-a-lin, a tag-a-lin, a gypsy melody  
A rag-a-lin, a tag-a-lin, the bold John Reilly

**Kevin Regan**