

ISSUE 2
2021

Roscommon County Council
Arts Office presents

Autumn Leaves

A broadsheet of poetry,
flash fiction and non fiction

Editors: Gerry Boland & Jane Clarke



Comhairle Contae
Ros Comáin
Roscommon
County Council



Strokestown, My Town

Steeped in your rushes and bogs, a town to pass through on the way to the west
your Big House stands alongside the new Famine Museum.

Strokestown, you shaped me, giving me the run of your wide streets,
my young legs sweeping from your Bawn Gates to the inkwells of Scoil Mhuire,
your long incline to the Turn of Farn
the perfect runway for your Westward fleet of Scania trucks.

My town. Fashioned by a straight rule, home to processions, confessions,
fair days, show days, holy days, the witness to all my firsts: kiss,
fall, medal, loss. First place to leave, first place to miss.

Up the town, from Tanner's Turn,
I'm four year's old, my milk can
spilling as I roll down into your
Hollow, where Bernie Feeney
leans forever over his farm gate.
Arm in a sling puts a short halt
to the schoolyard hopscotch
among your melody of McCormack,
McDermott, McPhillips and McHugh.

Out of town I cycle, at seventeen, with
phrases of Virgil, Kavanagh and Parnell,
gleanings from Morahan's printing
press, lilting from Thady's on fleadh day,
jigs trebled on the stage in the Magnet,
embroidered with threads from Donlon's,
taps and laces in Shevlin's, Connolly's
shiny buttons and hemlines refashioned
in Molly Larkin's smoke-filled room.

On days the Rossies win, John McManus pours his smile across his butcher's block,
the long length of his cigarette ash between his lips, a mesmerising trick,
just like the zipline of money whizzing across the ceiling of Jimmy Henry's hardware store
and *Nell Flaherty's Drake* that floats away over Anthony Beirne's bar.

Sweetness lingers in the paper-coned bonbons from O'Neill's;
the promise of a barley stick from Sheehan's; endless ham sliced across Greene's counter
and sleeves of scallions and ribbons of rhubarb, fresh from Pat Collins' garden.

In Berna Chapman's mural, *Paddy Reilly* sits alongside Percy French,
He'll never make it back to Ballyjamesduff,
never leaving you..... Strokestown..... never leaving me.

Noelle Lynskey

Poet Laureate, Strokestown, Poetry Town 2021

The Gold Rush

Assylin Cemetery, 5th of September, 2015.

My ancestors are blurred images, developed from my mother
on sweet-martini evenings, eating olives.

My size, tone, hair colour, the way my nose turns up—
that overbite—my small feet, how pale I was as a child
and why my hair always finds a middle part.

In Assylin I place a stone on the graves of those who came before
trace their names, now fading, into the granite.

Grand-dad, a tall man often mistaken for a war hero,
his arm blown away playing dangerous, childhood games.
Granny, four-foot-ten, an orphan who reared nine alone,
waiting for his return home, each year from London.
She lived through the Great War, the Spanish flu
and Ireland rising, all before her 20th birthday. Granny was gold plated.

Then there's her grandfather next grave across, born in Sligo,
a year before the cholera outbreak. A teenager of famine. How did he thrive?
Small statured, pale like me. How did he survive more than 80 years?

My granny said he brought the sun back from Australia,
carried it home in his pockets—bright, yellow and blinding.
Placed it in a drawer and only took it out on dreary Boyle days
when soft rain drenched The Crescent.

In Assylin I place the stone for my mother.
Lay a piece of her beside them.
Gilt quartz reflects the river light

and the quiet wind blows a single strand

Sinéad McClure

The Messiah of Mount Temple

He is alongside the pitch just like you,
shouting at the ref and sucking at fags.
You pass the time of day and frown together
at bad decisions and poorly-sighted referees.
He smiles as you complain of the stress of work,
about working the Saturday,
nearly missing the match,
some kind of a rush-job.

His shoes are the same as yours, his coat a little worn.
You don't know it but his hands carry the scars,
deep nail marks scabbled into his palms.
Under his hat he hides the marks of thorns,
little cuts and scratches in his flaky scalp.
His Dunnes Stores jumper over a shirt and v-necked vest
hide the old gash in his side where some Roman fucker
tried to lance him, and he already dangling
from his cross on wood-splintered nails.
You'd never know he had been through all of that,
until you see him struggling to get
the children into the car and you ask a friend.
Then you hear how she died young and him with three
still in short trousers, some sort of problem with reading a smear,
a poorly-sighted lab worker or
some kind of rush-job.

Rory Duffy

What the Birds Know

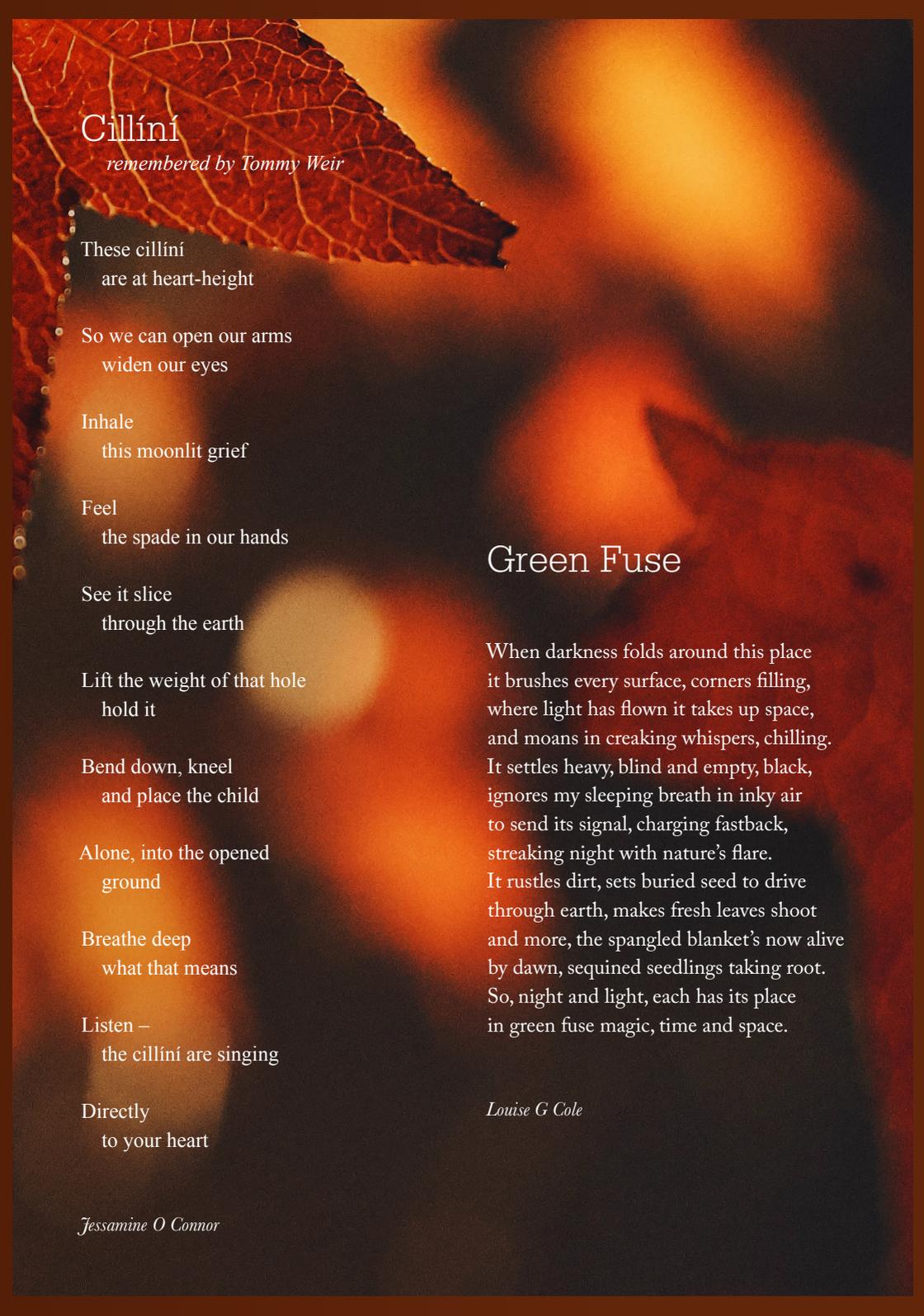
On this hazy, chalk-blue day every sound carries. The rise and fall of hedge-trimmer engines. Lawnmowers labouring through a late cut of wet grass. My spade scrapes against the little stones that litter the damp loam of our kitchen garden. The rustle of wilted stalks in my gloved hands.

I note the scabby and blemished potatoes. And more disappointingly, the ones holed and hollowed out by slugs. It's a wonder any survived. And yet I'm compelled to finish this humble harvest. It's a deeply ingrained instinct at this time of year to harvest and to winterise. To take comfort in home-grown provisions in safe storage.

In the fields the greening force of late September, lush as the blackberry crop on the hedgerows, is spent. The turning has begun. The wren in the shrubbery knows it. On the handle of my spade a robin-redbreast rehearses his winter song. And in a couple of weeks' time, we'll have the barnacle geese, like a prophecy carried on the north wind. The birds have anticipated the mind of winter.

In the twilight the starlings regroup on the chattering telephone wires. Boisterous and animated ahead of their performance. Their freeform, air-borne evening ballet on the wing. They rise in unison. And round and round they go in a ball that lengthens and compresses in formless perfection. Low in the sky, and still lower, above the reedbeds. Then with a single mind they plunge. Vanish. To leave behind an after-impression on the retina. Autumn itself sculpted from the air.

Brian Leyden



Cillíní

remembered by Tommy Weir

These cillíní
are at heart-height

So we can open our arms
widen our eyes

Inhale
this moonlit grief

Feel
the spade in our hands

See it slice
through the earth

Lift the weight of that hole
hold it

Bend down, kneel
and place the child

Alone, into the opened
ground

Breathe deep
what that means

Listen –
the cillíní are singing

Directly
to your heart

Jessamine O Connor

Green Fuse

When darkness folds around this place
it brushes every surface, corners filling,
where light has flown it takes up space,
and moans in creaking whispers, chilling.
It settles heavy, blind and empty, black,
ignores my sleeping breath in inky air
to send its signal, charging fastback,
streaking night with nature's flare.
It rustles dirt, sets buried seed to drive
through earth, makes fresh leaves shoot
and more, the spangled blanket's now alive
by dawn, sequined seedlings taking root.
So, night and light, each has its place
in green fuse magic, time and space.

Louise G Cole

Forbidden Fruit

There is a low shushing sound in the Italian room of the gallery. Painting Number Thirteen, 'Temptation', is a portrait of two women posing with baskets of peaches and apricots; Eva, a dark-haired voluptuous woman and Sarah, a fair-skinned girl with roseblush cheeks. They whisper to each other.

'We have to make it work today,' Eva says. 'I'm so tired. We've been here three weeks.'

Two businessmen have strolled into their section. It is their first visit to the National Gallery. One of them is yawning. The other, a tall blond man, is pointing at painting Number Five, 'The Meeting'.

The other yawns again. 'Boring, Adam! It's just like that classical painting you bought in London. Let's get some lunch. I'll wait outside.'

'Ok, ok I give up. Go and have your cigarette. I'll just be another few minutes.'

Eva is excited. 'The blonde one. He's exactly what we're looking for! Good looking, successful, cultured.'

'Quick, get him to come over.'

Eva lets out her subliminal keening call. He is drawn to the Thirteenth painting.

He has to touch the surface. Eva focuses all her energy on the velvety flesh of the peaches. Touch me, feel me, they plead. He leans forward, his face so close that she could reach out to him, but that is against the rules. Sarah sends him a telepathic image of the ripe flesh under the skin, the bitter sweetness. He moistens his lips, raises his hand, drops it again.

'Oh please, please.' Eva almost forgets to breathe.

He glances furtively around, then slowly lifts his hand again to stroke the peach flesh.

'Yes!

In the Mothership the welcoming committee have their earthly female bodies on.

'Is this heaven?' Adam says. He looks dazed. His mouth is filled with the taste of ripe peaches.

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Two days in every seven
I go without her laughter,
no seeking reassurance
from my hand holding hers,
as she stays with him.

A void appears in me on repeat,
and as each septet passes
a point of loneliness is left
as I, like a watchman,
lie in wait
for it to expand its radius.

I fill it,
with the pink noise of my hairdryer
driving thoughts from my mind,
softening the silent echo of lost questions
and rhetorical conversations.

I fill it,
with endless hours bent across a desk
and files of lives elsewhere,
caught up in dramas of correspondence,
slipping on their shoes
for just a minute –
to escape my own.

To hang my soul on a coat hook,
awaiting the moment
when I journey to the clock
to pick it up
again.

She was mine.
I bore her from myself.
Now, I must grant her time with him.

This time repeats itself,
as the fraction of her loss
repeats in kind.

Niamh Molloy

Sea Bones

Ambling over wave-smoothed stones
Separated from the sea by a row of uprooted kelp
Their long stalks like old, bleached bones
Woven by the winter tides into a seaweed tweed
A roughly hewed lattice, pungent sulphur to the nose
Lashed upon the beach
A tidal marker between golden sand and rock
Uprooted and disconnected, left to the elements
Where once they stood, steadfast and strong
Swaying to the moon-pulled tides
Now their life's work complete, left to decay
All nutrients, stripped and returned
To replenish and replete, the cycle...

Michéal Coughlan

The Rain on the River Suck

For once, I don't have
to look at my watch. You talk,
re-live memories of the river.

The dark water sparkles
in the moonlight, reeds sway
with orchestral harmony.

A sudden rain
like a force of a pebble
strikes my wide hat.

You laugh,
pushing up the limp brim.
Kiss me.

Amy Barry

Storyteller

There's a story my grandfather never told that I know for a good one. It was an evening at harvest time, about a year before he passed, and he was still in the old family home, stoically doing his washing and cooking and cleaning, staring into the wedding photo on the mantelpiece when he thought no-one was looking.

'I met a woman who says she knew you years back,' I said. 'Birdie Devane.'

'Birdie. Birdie Devane. A name I haven't heard this long while. She used always be at the dances. If you see her again remember me to her.'

It wasn't what he said, but how he said it, an odd tilt of his head and a half-smile, gauging my reaction.

'I will.'

He didn't look at the wedding photo the rest of the evening, not even for his ritual goodnight to nan before bed. I did, and saw his untold story stoked in a field of memories, the man of twenty, the young buck I was trying to be.

Kevin Hora



Dargle River

This river is damned
with trolleys, brollies, sofa parts,
a bridge for boys,
a perch for ducks and dippers.

She feeds two haggardly herons
who hide in the shrubs
of tiny gardens
as coy as pigeons on daisies.

This river gives me berries
when I warm her cold stones with my feet.
She smells of turf
from all the chimneys nestled near the bank
and exhaust fumes
from her dry neighbour.

On stormy days
swollen with self-importance
she gushes her message
about the playing fields
for winter gulls who take a break
to play their plodding
chess with crows.

Marian Griffin

Atonement

I heard a story today
about a woman and her dog
out walking near their home
past a ruined cottage
where the dog barked and barked
but would not pass or go in

but the woman did

and she stood
among the nettles
before the hearth
beneath the sky
between the walls
wherein she felt such sorrow

that she went home
to cook potatoes
in their skins
and she left her offering
served with butter
milky and soft

at the hearth
beneath the sky.

Jo Nestor

Climbing Trees

I stand at the bottom of the tree and I pull myself onto it and upwards, moving slowly from branch to branch, sizing up my reach and whether or not a branch is strong enough to hold me. I hug the tree trunk and linger on a branch quarter way up. Looking at the view from there I already feel a sense of achievement. I carry on.

But before long I am stranded on a branch more than half way up. I can't move forwards. I can't go back either. I press my whole body into the bark, and breathless now, I ease myself down onto my hunkers and sit on the branch.

'Why did I start this?' I ask myself.

When a hand stretches down to pull me forward, I take it. When I reach that place where the hand came from there is nobody there. Mystified, I lie down in a canopy of leaves. They rustle and lull me to sleep. When I waken, I realise that I must press on if I am to be back on solid ground before nightfall.

Rosaleen Glennon

Boss White

In a round white tin with red lettering, it looked like a thick grey cream but smelled of lamp oil. On winter evenings we worked before badminton games in the school gym; my task was to hold the gas light steady and have the boss white open. Often it was hard to find in the dark newly sealed house; it rolled under old cement bags, wood cuts, or vanished under lengths of damp course.

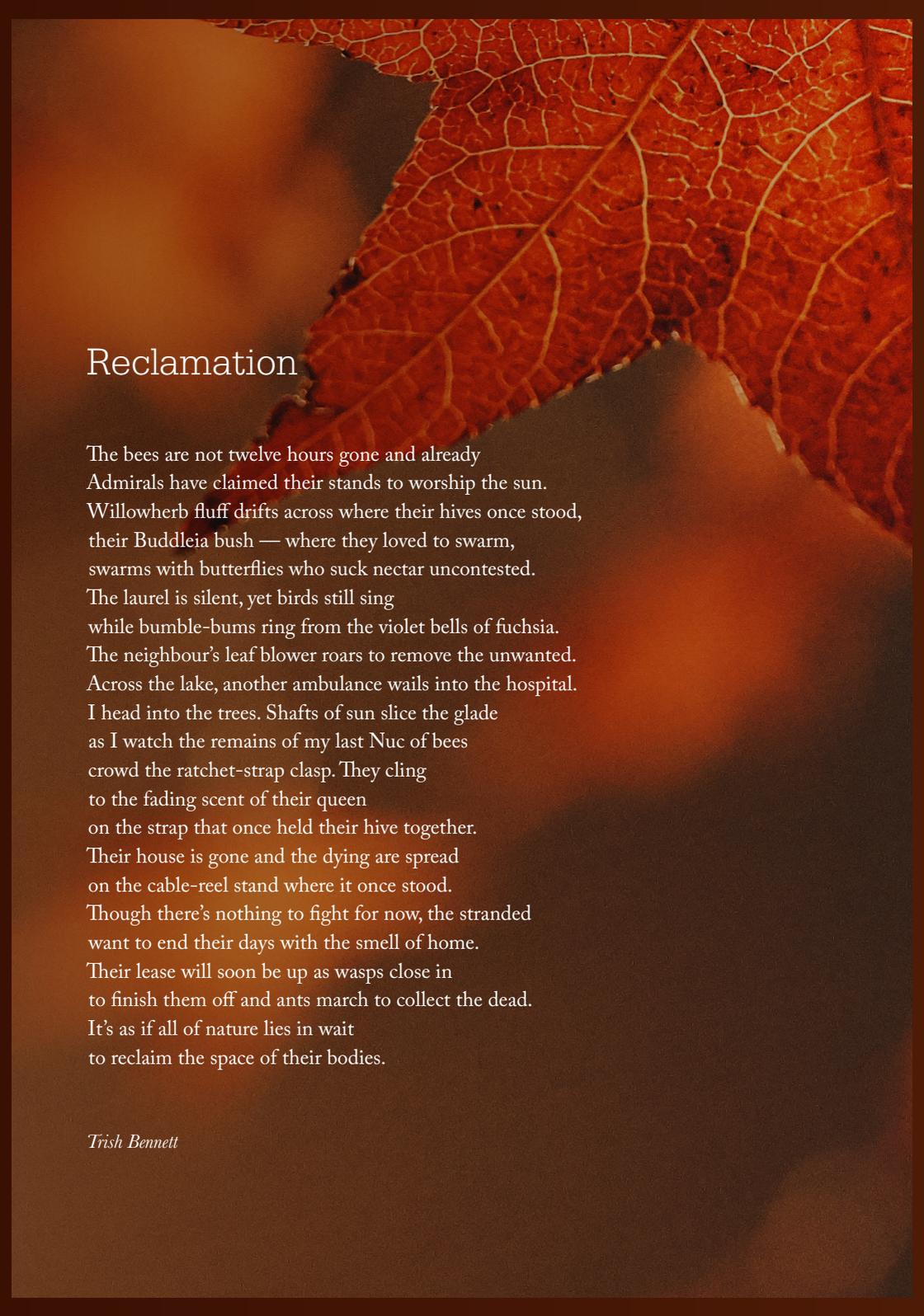
You always had flax in your jean's pocket in little curls, like old coils of sheep's wool Daddy kept in mugs in the barn. You wove threads of flax round cold, thick, iron pipes or thinner ones, as you connected every radiator, keeping winter at bay that year.

Mary Turley-McGrath

Home From the Pit

Paddy Reynolds, on his last run of the day from the pit, drove up Mill Hill and pulled to a halt in the middle of the square, in front of Jimmy's and in front of Shank's, and across from Kielty's where his metal sided tipper truck discharged its cargo – miners. Miners with black caps, black clothes, black faces with white eyes peeking and black lunch bags strapped across their shoulders carrying black sandwiches to be eaten with black hands and white teeth. One by one they jumped off the back of the truck and got onto Honda fifties or into cars or went into Kielty's, or McMorrow's, or into Missus Mc Kenna for a paper or a cone or Silvermints or into Shank's for a steak, and up to Tom Joe's for the onions to bring home. And Paddy, a tidy, short, square, pipe smoking, tight bit of a man in suit and boots dulled from coal dust, calm and consistent, drove off and parked in his usual spot across from his house just at the top of Hilly Road facing the town and would walk down and go into Mulvey's for a half-one and water or two. I could see his lorry from the High Street. It was always there, the very same spot, teetering on the top of the hill it seemed, just planked there, turned and ready for Arigna in the morning. What if the handbrake ever went, I thought.

Conor Mc Manus



Reclamation

The bees are not twelve hours gone and already
Admirals have claimed their stands to worship the sun.
Willowherb fluff drifts across where their hives once stood,
their Buddleia bush — where they loved to swarm,
swarms with butterflies who suck nectar uncontested.
The laurel is silent, yet birds still sing
while bumble-bums ring from the violet bells of fuchsia.
The neighbour's leaf blower roars to remove the unwanted.
Across the lake, another ambulance wails into the hospital.
I head into the trees. Shafts of sun slice the glade
as I watch the remains of my last Nuc of bees
crowd the ratchet-strap clasp. They cling
to the fading scent of their queen
on the strap that once held their hive together.
Their house is gone and the dying are spread
on the cable-reel stand where it once stood.
Though there's nothing to fight for now, the stranded
want to end their days with the smell of home.
Their lease will soon be up as wasps close in
to finish them off and ants march to collect the dead.
It's as if all of nature lies in wait
to reclaim the space of their bodies.

Trish Bennett



Klimt Moment

We'll sit where we sat before, above the stream,
watching the golden eels of sunlight dart and shimmy
above bronze-coloured stones to the sound of water searching
out all the possible solutions to the conundrum of strewn rocks
while somewhere beneath us a hollow-sounding tock tock
drums our time away.

Let us weave time and stream into a cloak, a Klimt creation:
magnificent flowing, yet enveloping us in a precise moment
of pleasure. Let us hold it in our eyes so we may see it, wear it
when times are harder, these moments scarcer and the glint
of gold more precious.

Michael O'Dea

Everything Flows

The droplet born on the airless peak
blends into the fresh, unspoiled stream
first seen in bubbling infancy,
hurrying over rocks of which it is ignorant,
growing rapidly, impatient
to reach the surging river,
but even the river finally slows and calms,
becoming a sedate brook
set in its ways and laden with matter
but which still dreams of the boundless, eternal sea
and when the brook approaches the delta
with many alternate routes,
it meets the walls of a dam
and rests in aged acceptance,
waiting for the sluice-gates to finally open
onto the sea which becomes ever more audible and desired,
while a trickle of hope seeps out through a crack
and with transparent, tasteless fingers
touches the salted, white-capped expanse
into which everything flows.

S C Flynn