

## Betsy

God's curse on ya, Betsy!  
That was a regular cry of my Dad heard throughout the house back in the day,  
that day being the 1990's.

Upon recently remembering Betsy, her memory forced a smile. The grievances the clunky VHS player had provided were recalled fondly as I browsed the films offered by a streaming platform and by one title in particular: Carlito's Way.

Looking at the thumbnail of the movie, I returned abruptly to the Summer of '94. The picture was the same as the film's theatrical release poster had been. The silhouette of Al Pacino's titular gangster, poised and ready to strike, had me recalling how the young film buff that was me was filled with excitement to watch the newest mobster opus. The over eighteen certificate had meant seeing it in the pictures wasn't an option. Sneaking a video tape home was though. But there was Betsy.

At that time, Betsy was wreaking havoc, responsible for unravelling two new rentals along with numerous Scotch recording tapes.

The repairman had said she might give no more hassle following his third time fixing her. I felt the risk was worth the reward. The bored-looking girl in the shop passed no heed on the tall-for-my-under-aged self renting the tape. My folks were out and it was time to give Betsy Al's latest, the shady actions making me feel akin to the undesirables the film depicted.

After such machinations, it felt very unfair for me to get caught out by Dad over a fifty pence fine that was imposed on the account for not rewinding.

The over-eighteen me pressed play on Carlito's Way and began watching it on my no-name phone, Dad and Betsy warmly in my thoughts as the credits rolled...

Wayne Denniston

## Bonfire

From the porch at dusk, I watch sparks rise from the bonfire,  
Rust yellow and gold flames dance and swirl upwards,  
Lighting up the evening sky  
The stinging aroma of burnt wood wafts into every corner,  
Anointing us with a Solstice Blessing.

A small group crouched and gazed into the flames from old chairs and bales of hay.  
Some threw branches onto the fire, others drew back.  
A song broke out occasionally, unsettling the night air.  
The red-haired woman sang a lilting song.  
Her son watching, smiles to himself.

They raise their glasses to health and long life.  
A few get up and dance, moving lazily to an ancient rhythm.  
Two black alpacas stand, hypnotized by the fire and heat.  
Their silhouettes add a middle eastern flavour.  
While up above, the space station moves slowly through the air.

Anne Rigney

## Do It Yourself

My father lived in Paris during the war,  
and spent 30 years after playing Linguaphone records,  
trying to master the dialect,  
in a non-Parisian setting.

'Ferme la Port' sounded different,  
in a loud house in Castlereaa,  
where upstairs the Pistols were screaming,  
'We're so pretty oh so pretty, yeah'.

I ignored my father's request to close the door,  
went back up to my room,  
put on my dressing gown,  
and smoked a Gitane.

Ger Jennings

## The Dying Fields

Black crescent moons of dirt glistening beneath their fingernails –  
torn, cropped to the quick, some ragged sustenance,  
soiled green flesh and tongue –  
the wretched fall upon their knees,  
scrape and claw into the weeping earth,  
beg for their oats and corn and grain,  
the fatted calf to be returned;  
watch their timbers, broken, thrown,  
the thatch give way to sky,  
while men look down,  
and children try to catch the spinning moths,  
and women gather what they can,  
in soot-scarred hands.

In the dying fields they'll roam,  
along the blackened putrid veins,  
plucking, splitting open their disease;  
the raised beds rippling like polluted rivers across the land,  
throwing up their withered stalks to flutter in the breeze,  
like wasted scarecrows.

Some will make it to the ships,  
haunted by the life they might yet live.  
Some will make just one more day,  
in the hope it might just be enough.

Most will die;  
rotting gently in their dying fields,  
in some dark hold, in ditch or bog,  
on some dark road,  
alone,  
beneath the stars.

Anne Byrne

## Fermented

A Christmas present you would love,  
the jar was right up your alley,  
you dipped your spoon in fruit fermented  
in turmeric, black pepper, and ginger,  
stirring it into your porridge with satisfaction.  
All this is left behind you now.

Transported to my fridge and cupboards  
amongst the remains of your intended food  
the fermented jar looks lonely.  
Holding the cool glass in my hands  
I linger where your hand touched, see again  
your finger dipping into these broken down raisins.

My daily porridge is topped with these crushed fruits,  
a savouring and a toasting of you,  
while my ravening belly consumes with no  
mind to best before and after dates.  
Spoonng a little less each day  
making it last and last.

The level steadily lowers.  
A little less of you remains,  
your remains I have within me.  
I press my mouth to the lid,  
twist, return it to the fridge,  
and fling a fervent kiss into the air.

Mary Hennigan

## The Right Time to Pick Fruit

The land my childhood was built on  
had first been home to an orchard.  
I remember our loose stone walls and the horses,  
drawn by ancestral memories of apples,  
nuzzling instead their cool aloofness.  
I remember what was left: a lone apple tree  
we sat with each summer's day  
but yet never seemed to notice the moment  
flower turned to fruit; a barren pear tree  
(if a thing can still be what it failed to become),  
a plum tree so bejewelled we feared  
the boughs would slump to the earth.  
One by one, they ceded as our footprint grew:  
the apple to a lawn that never took hold;  
the pear to a boiler house where  
spiders that spun webs to span loss  
hankered in the dark for branches;  
the plum tree, angry with wasps  
and our expectations, gave way to a shed for turf,  
a lawnmower, yard brushes. When I was fifteen,  
economic forces squalled through our town  
and we were windfallen then.  
We heaped what we could into a removal truck,  
followed my father to his next job elsewhere  
and I was a scion grafted onto new wood  
wondering what might have bloomed  
where my roots had been.  
It has taken half a lifecycle for me to know  
we all bear a piece of childhood  
within us, unripened, wherever we go.

Tadhg Carey

## The Forest

It's not just green, it's viridian, vermilion, it's emerald and ochre.  
The sky not blue but cerulean, cobalt and ultra marine,  
The ground not brown but umber, sienna, mossy and soft,  
hiding the busy bugs beneath the fallen fronds.  
Delicious colours intertwining,  
a kaleidoscope of patterns,  
changing with every blink of your eye.

The wildwood cacophony is all around;  
crisp and crunchy underfoot,  
birds chittering as they soar overhead  
and the swirling breeze rustling,  
almost caressing the tree boughs,  
as they carry life into the world in its leaves

Anne Marie Brogan

## The Sparrows Explain

How to be fine spring rain: fall to earth  
in single drops, collect with others of your kind  
in shallow pools reflecting daybreak's clouded skies,  
allow squabbling sparrows to splash and splutter  
without drowning. Do not remark our inability to swim,  
we have the gift of flight.

How to be sparrow: embrace the concept  
of communal bathing, chatter, clatter, call, wet  
our feathers in tea-coloured puddles, let  
the puzzle of tree, house, hedge hang loose in the air.  
We know who, what we are.

Louise G Cole

## All the Pasts Yet to Come

The day before Brendan Forristal gave me the shiner, Beirne the Butcher was apologising.  
'It's the Old Timers she has. I've phoned the family. That right, Maisie? Home soon?'  
'My Desmond will take me home.' She said it over her shoulder, intent on a poster showing joints of pork. 'When I met Desmond, you were lucky to get meat at all.'  
'God rest the man, dead thirty years.' Beirne tapped his breastbone, a perfunctory sign of the cross. He scooped stewing steak into a plastic bag.  
'The Emergency, you know. Desmond's a fine man in uniform.'  
He rolled his eyes. 'A pound, gossoon?'  
'We're going to Casablanca in the Royal.'  
'Please,' I said. 'And lean, not too fatty.' I repeated Mam's incantation.  
'Aye, Maisie, Bogie and Bacall.'  
'No, Mr Beirne. Ingrid Bergman.' She began humming a tune.  
'Couldn't tell you what day it is.' Beirne sealed the bag with red tape. 'Now, young man. Be sure and tell your mother. Lean. Not too fatty.'

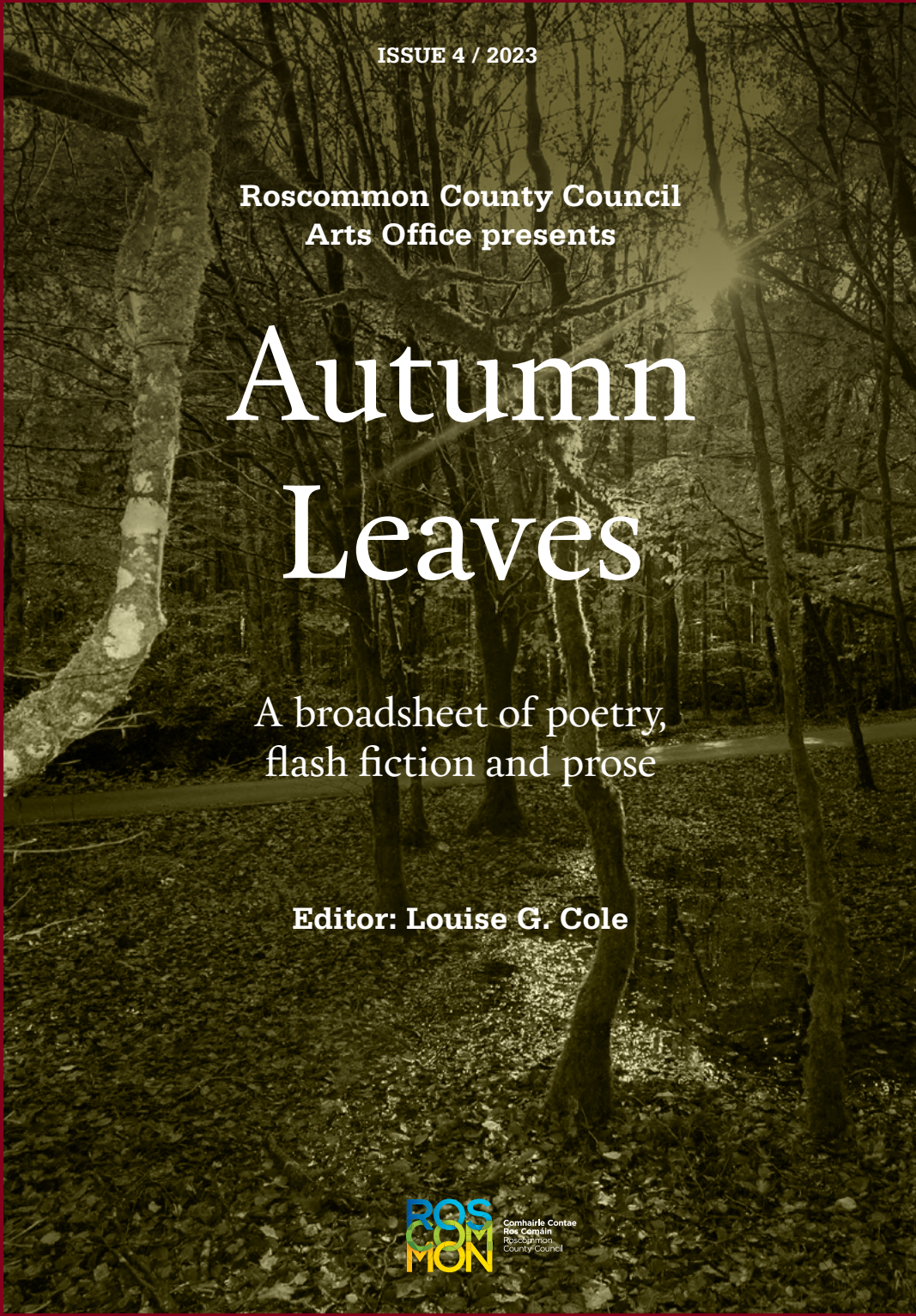
The door chimed and I glanced over, sorry I did. Brendan was the year above me in the Tech, a psycho. Cross him once, you'd wind up measuring your length on the floor of the school ball-alley. No-one crossed him twice.

'You,' he saw me. 'Sorry, Mr Beirne.' He touched Maisie's elbow. 'Nan?'  
'Desmond?'  
'No, Nan, I'm Brendan.'  
'Are we going to the pictures?'  
Brendan took her hand. 'If you like.'  
'Sing the Casablanca song, Desmond.'  
'Nan, please.'  
'Please you.'

Brendan glared at me – I kept my head down counting Mam's change closely, no tales out of school from me. He cleared his throat and danced her to the door while he sang. She waved a film star's goodbye.

Brendan glanced back at me from the doorway. 'Ball-alley. Tomorrow.'  
And I couldn't not go, could I?

Kevin Hora





Perception
<p>This has to be the worst day of my life!</p> <p>This was my feeling on that balmy August evening in 1966 when I was out in the field with my father making hay ropes. It was not my favourite task but was usually completed in companionable chit-chat but not today. My father sat completely relaxed feeding the hay to the home made twister which I then turned and turned until the hay was made into a tight rope then rolled up and the process started again. The screeching of the twister as I turned the handle echoed the deep ache in my stomach. I did not make conversation with my father, preferring to work in sullen silence as the sounds of the 60s were carried by the wind over the bog and fields from the Carnival in Lanesboro. The Kinks, The Beatles, The Dave Clarke 5, The Rolling Stones and my favourite group Manfred Mann...each song stoking the longing in my heart to be there with my friends on the Chair-O-Planes and the Bumping Cars singing along happily. My father gave no indication that he noticed anything different, just sat there with his pipe in his mouth, occasionally stopping to press down the tobacco or spit out the dark residue from the Murrays Warrior Plug, his tobacco of choice. I know that if I had asked to go he would have allowed me but I didn't and my only regret is that I worked in silence alongside this man of wit and wisdom who I miss to this very day.</p> <p>I had a lot to learn.</p>
<p>Susie Spallin</p>
Northern European Sky
<p>A print by Jacob van Ruisdael reminds me of the sky outside my window in October.</p> <p>Here in Roscommon leaves are flying into sunlight now, colours that I can't paint, so my camera will have to compensate for my inability to use brushwork to emulate those clouds, which loom above seventeenth century Haarlem.</p>
<p>The tranquil landscape in the frame, which belies the turbulence of the time and the sky beyond the window are almost four hundred years apart. So in lieu of brilliance and the eye, I use high tech to compose and reproduce that sky.</p>
<p>Eamonn Gordon</p>

## Lough Key: An Elegy

Lough Key, the swan lake  
where I left the last of you.  
A dusting of ash in a tiny ship,  
voyaging to some mythic Valhalla.  
Or Ithaca maybe—  
but you never read that poem.  
Poetry's flotsam was never for you.

On that farewell day,  
Lough Key was blue.  
The blue of distance.  
The blue of far horizons.  
The blue of loneliness.  
The blue of sorrow songs.  
The blue of infinity.

Blues flamed with a blackened ending.  
I set fire to the little vessel  
as if conducting a Viking funeral.  
A bright flared moment before it sank  
into the water's womb. Silence.  
I stand here at the shore again,  
locked into our shipwrecked past.

Kristine Harvey

## The Violin

When the weeping of the violin begins  
dark fish swim under the rivers of my skin.  
Birds stitch their down with song and pattern  
my name in the fragrance of the moss.  
Where soft rains dance in rhythmic measure  
in harmony with the emotion of the melody,  
chiffchaffs will wear their feathery fine,  
warbling their whims on a low washing line.  
The heartbeat of the grass pulsates as it grows  
in unison with every pluck of the strings  
and the whispers of the trees as they cradle  
white aphids gathering to listen  
to the weeping of the violin.

Carol Beirne

## The Day After the Rain

The day after the rain and  
a dense grey quilt hangs over  
the sullen Connaught town.

The river is in a frenzy.

It cascades through the old stone bridge,  
ferries odd tokens from the uplands.

This, for instance: a battered handbag  
snagged on the bough of a snapped alder,  
its precious contents long gone,

except for one trapped gem,  
a gleaming pearl,  
polished by the currents,

winking at the riverbank,  
a memento of a moment in time  
before it all turned sour,

when expectations were high,  
when hope was in the ascendant,  
when things, against the odds, were looking up.

Gerry Boland

## Snowdrops in Hanlys Field

**Driving that long road early and late.**

Heater humming, radio voices, lost in thought.

Glance to the right at Hanlys field  
and see that flash of white that heralds the awakening.

It's been a long winter,  
longer as the years pass.  
Older wiser as the miles clock up.  
But this spring morning the heart still leaps  
like a love-struck teen  
at that carpet of white  
snowdrops in Hanlys field.

Anthony Baggott

## The Fortune of the Day

A frivolous thing,  
it was bought for no other reason  
than it was beautiful.  
Two ruby glass hearts,  
entwined and framed in bronze,  
a spiral below cocooning a marble,  
the whole thing threaded in gold,  
looping down into a tinkle of tiny bronze stalks,  
pushed apart but linked through their jingle.  
Chimes without an ounce of practical nature,  
too delicate to be hung outdoors,  
already, their passionate hearts have begun to fade  
in our sun-beamed window.

It does nothing but make me smile each day  
when it snags the curtains  
and kicks off in a panicked tingle.  
Setting it free is like opening the drapes  
on a tapestried tent. I expect to look  
into the heavy kohl eyes of an exotic lady,  
swishing skirts and scarves, beads and bangles.  
Through the window, I watch the breeze  
shuffle the leaves on our cherry trees,  
press my palm to the glass  
so Madame Zelda can read the omens.

Trish Bennett

## Away with the Birds

My July visitor scrolls her smartphone and asks, for a second time, enunciating as if I'm hard of hearing.

*No, seriously, what d'you DO all day?*

I glance across the table, out through open French doors to a birdfeeder, catching the familiar red splash of a male woodpecker's undertail feathers. It's always a male, but a raucous juvenile clinging to a cordyline confirms a female's existence.

Six great tit siblings politely claim the other feeder, displaying no flared tail feathers, or territorial spanning of wings. Adolescent blue tits, with plumage like stonewashed denim, are forced onto the Waiting Branch. When backs are turned, an urchin coal tit, all scruffy feathers and creamy Mohawk, hops in to feed.

I notice a business-like wren dart inside the woodshed to gorge on spiders.

Another pole-dances outside on hogweed stalks.

Sparrows occupy an unkempt hedge, which I've nicknamed The Flats. Black-bibbed tweed-coated males strut around like gangsters; their harried molls have creamy streaks above each watchful eye. Collectively, they attend several dozen fledglings who squabble and flutter their wings, pleading with mouths like wide-open satchels. Everyone's strung-out on peanuts.

My attention's drawn to one sparrow who tilts back his throat to guzzle, headfirst, an iridescent blue damselfly. It looks like he's sucking spaghetti. He ruffles his feathers before returning to his clamouring brood.

Sudden panicked shrieks come from inside The Flats, and both feeders are abandoned. Then, I glimpse the silent gliding sparrowhawk, all innocent-looking soft brown back feathers and speckled breast. Her precision attack on this all-you-can-eat buffet is astonishing. She's in like Flynn, then gone.

When I gasp, my enquiring visitor looks up from her smartphone.

*Well? What DO you do?*

I check both feeders and smile, relieved to see it's already business as usual again out there.

Jo Nestor

## Microcosmic

Machinery is  
running inside, I feel it  
vibrating brightly

In strings, or loops, it  
quavers, creates symphonies  
of trembling sound

My body: billions  
and billions of notes, every-  
thing rumbles and rings

A five-foot-seven  
tuning fork, listening to  
the sound of myself

One small universe  
wrapped in skin, operating  
independently

There's very little  
supervision, the body  
mostly runs itself

Even in death it  
doesn't die, just starts a new  
decomposition

In the watchtower  
of the mind, no one hears the  
songs that bodies sing

Jessamine O'Connor

## Eighteen Miles Each Way

*You have a visitor* – the best words  
a boarder could hear  
on a Sunday in September.

Your father is outside  
removing his bicycle-clips  
and propping his bike in the shade.

*You made it! What time  
did you leave at?*  
*After First Mass*, he replies.

Down the empty town  
we find a place to chat  
over plates of salad

Madeira cake, and tea  
the way he likes it: hot  
and not too sweet.

Up the empty town,  
for a treat, he buys us  
ice-cream cones.

Soon, a folded ten-shilling note  
pressed in your hand.  
A lump in your throat.

*What time will you be home at?*  
*In time for the milking, I suppose.*  
And off he goes.

Bernadette McCarrick

## Joy

On the day you were born  
the last snowman had melted in the garden;  
spring attempted another foray on flower beds  
to find daffodils inches high or purple crocuses  
opened under tightly wrapped rose leaves;

the News on my phone told  
of a candidate planet in the habitable zone  
of Proxima Centauri, our closest star system,  
more than four light years away;

while below the Antarctic ice sheet, scientists  
discovered life on the ocean floor, thousands  
of feet deep: sponges, marine organisms,  
these unique species of the Filchner-Ronne  
will open another book of mysteries;

just as you will open a new book for us,  
your voice, hair, colour of eyes already open  
on the second day, before the first image from  
the Martian crater flashed across the screens.

Mary Turley-McGrath

## Thunder

A clap of thunder. The sound comes down the chimney and holds no fear. I'm just an ordinary person as we all are, special because I exist, like the thunder, like the rain. My span of life is short. Many questions, too many. It's easier just to listen, listen to the silence after thunder, after rain.

Mary Martina Hunt