

The Year the World Stood Still



The end of 2019 was a busy time for Fermanagh Writers. We had been involved as writers and performers in two dramatic presentations directed by Paddy McEneaney: our own *The Ghost of Christy Past* for the Fermanagh Live festival, and *The Gods of Sound and Stone* in the Strule Arts Centre, and we were looking forward to a new project *Better Together* in conjunction with Ballinamore Hens Shed. I had been in hospital with a clot on the lung, and we all needed a rest before the next issue of *Corncrake*. There would certainly be plenty to write about.

Then Covid arrived.

I had made a half-hearted attempt to bring an issue out last March, but with only a few articles promised and no new events to review, it was clear that was not going to happen. Even before lockdown started, I went into isolation for the sake of my damaged lungs. I began to hear stories of others who were less fortunate than myself. Caiman O'Shea, co-founder of *Corncrake*, became critically ill with Covid, one of the first casualties. When we gathered at a safe social distance for Kathy May's funeral, it was the first time we writers, who used to meet weekly, had seen each other for nearly three months. At that time, everyone seemed to be writing about their experience of Covid, but really – what was there to say? It was too soon to tell.

The year rolled on. Summer became winter, and we all became accustomed to the peculiarities of Zoom. Caiman, thankfully, has recovered well. New projects started, and we began to make new friends who we never had met in the flesh. As Anita Gracey has pointed out in *Valuable Not Vulnerable*, for some this is normal – indeed, an improvement on normal. The cyberpunk future has at last distributed itself as far as Fermanagh.

So now it is a year later, and the worst that we feared has not come to pass. If not yet the beginning of the end, it is at least the end of the beginning, and there is much to talk about.

Here again are Teresa Kane, John James, Ken Ramsey and Kate O'Shea, and established poets new to *Corncrake*, with Amanda May's *Untitled*, a tribute to her late sister; Anita Gracey's *Somebody Must*; storyteller Paddy Montague's

whimsical *Do Things a bit Different* and Brendan O' Tuathalain's *Ghosts*.

Many books have been published over the past years and we feature three by writers familiar to Corncrake: the second part of *The Blossom or the Bole* by PHEME Glass, *The Lost Garden of Garraiblagh* by Jenny Methvyn, and *Limelight and Shadows* by Tony Brady. We also have two works by debut authors: Jean McQuade's poem *The Longest Day of the Year*, written about the closure of Magheralough Primary School, and *Valentines*, a flash fiction by Deirdre Harvey of Ballinamore Writers Group.

Jenny Brien

Editor

Kathy May



These words were written just after our friend Katharine – Kathy May – died. I wrote them down without thinking of grammar or meter or sequence or refinement.

They are from my first thoughts as my wife Ann McNulty and I were, and still are, trying to come to terms with our grief at the tragedy of Kathy our lifetime friend being dead. Perhaps I thought they were going to be the kernel of a poem or a piece of dandified prose. Not yet, I am not ready to disturb them.

When Jenny Brien, the editor of Corncrake, asked me to write a piece about Kathy, I almost rushed headlong into them. The words and thoughts there stopped me.

I am very pleased Jenny and Fermanagh Writers through the medium of Corncrake are doing this memorial. It is a wonderful way of keeping Kathy's memory alive.

Ken Ramsey March 2021

My words for Kathy

A hot sun shone down
a beautiful day in the empty Buttermarket.
I was thinking, wondering, about this dreadful virus.
Thirty eight thousand feet above me
a Dreamliner was en route to Los Angeles,
its vapour trail tracing white in the clear blue sky.
I should have envied those on board
but not this day.
Frances told me Kathy May was dead; by her own hand.
Shock and pain sucked my breath away.
The day drifted off somewhere.
I sat in the hot sunshine thinking
of Kathy for a long time.
A friend came and sat near me
I told her about Kathy
She gave me a cigarette.
She was shaking by the time
I smoked it.
We talked as friends and friends of Kathy,
how she had come to death.
We talked of Kathy's battles with her mental health.
Then we talked of her titanic talent as an artist
of her gift of words and poetry,
about her being long listed for a Heaney Poetry Prize.
We talked about her love and defence of the earth,
her loud public outrage at human rights abuses of
people with mental health issues.
We talked of her crusade for equal rights for women

and her support of the Palestine people.
We talked of her beautiful smile
of her resolute honesty
and her joy when she met you.
We talked, we parted devastated.
Kathy, you left a fabulous vapour trail.
On clear evenings I still see you,
on dark evenings I still mourn.

Ken Ramsey June 2020

Kathy's poem for the Seamus Heaney Award can be found here. (Thanks to Community Arts Partnership)

Playing by Ear

D D D F ED F G A E E
When you walk through a storm, hold your head up high
E G A GF A F E
And don't be afraid of the dark
E F G E E E E GB G G
At the end of the storm, there's a golden sky
A B cn B d A G d F
And the sweet, silver song of a lark

F B A B C
Walk on through the wind
c d c d e
Walk on through the rain
d e f d A F B
Though your dreams be tossed and blown

c d d d d c d e
Walk on, walk on With hope in your heart
d e f f f f e a f d BA
And you'll never walk alone You'll never walk alone

I was never a musical child. As the saying goes, I couldn't even carry a tune in a bucket. Once, in my twenties, I bought a tin whistle and a book of folk songs with music, and I tried to pick out tunes in that.

Music theory was a locked book. I did not have the key. I did not even have a clue what a key was.

Move on forty years, to my present self-isolation. I found the old tin whistle again. It was cracked and dented, but I repaired it with some Sellotape. I put it to my mouth and blew, moving my fingers at random to try to recapture some once familiar tune. The notes were strange, but there was no one else to hear and so I persevered. I searched the Internet for simple whistle tunes, and I discovered Letter Notes.

Letter notes are the simplest form of notation you can get – just the letters to indicate the pitch of each note: D E F G A B C d e f g ... Remember which fingers you need for each note, and you can play any tune, or at least any tune that can be played on a penny whistle – anything in the key of D or G that only needs one note to be played at a time. There are just seven letters to worry about. D and d, for example, are the same note, only an octave apart. The fingering is the same – you just have to blow harder.

I soon had a whole notepad filled with the letter notes for familiar and unfamiliar tunes. It took little practise to play a tune that I already knew well, but it was often impossible to make sense of a new one without first hearing it. Letter notes correspond roughly to syllables, but give no indication of rhythm or pacing, unless you happen to know lyrics that go with it. Sometimes I would mistake what I was reading, and try to play one tune to the rhythm of another. The effect was – interesting.

Letter notes are like those ancient forms of writing that have no spaces, no uppercase, no punctuation, no vowels even. They were not designed to be read sight unseen, but as an aid to memory. Unless you know what they represent, deciphering them is a slow process, like picking a lock tumbler by tumbler, note by note. No wonder that, even in the fifth century, after a thousand

years of classical Greek and Latin learning, Saint Augustine was astonished to find someone who could not only read silently, but do it *without moving his lips*.

My lips do not move when I play a tune from memory; but sometimes my throat does, as I sound the names of the notes in my head. With practice you begin to remember with your fingers and your breath as well as your mind, and then you 'hear' the sounds of the notes instead of their names. At present this takes so much effort that when I 'get' a tune in my head I know I have remembered it right, but it is probably not the tune I was first thinking of and I am unable to tell which it is.

The ideal, of course, is to be able to write the letter notes for a tune you have only heard, so that you can study it and pass it on, or improvise a new tune around it. Fortunately there is a key to help.

How can you tell a tune in the key of D major from a tune in the key of G major? Both use the same notes, except for the fingering of C; in D it is sharp and in G it is natural. But a tune like *Amazing Grace* can avoid C altogether and still be undoubtedly in G. If you look at the letters you will see that a tune in D has a lot of F and A notes where a tune in G has more Bs and Ds. These are the major third, two notes above the key note; and the fifth, two notes higher still.

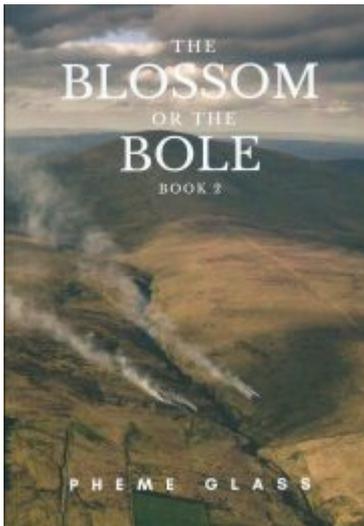
The first stressed note of a tune will almost invariably be one of these three notes and, like all good speeches, the last stressed note will be the keynote. Once you know which key you are in, you can be sure that a jump to one of these notes will sound good. You know which notes the tune will contain, unless it throws in an 'accidental' for contrast, like the single C sharp in *Abide With Me* (Lord with me A-bide).

There are other literary parallels too. There are motifs, like the repeated AGFEd in the *Star Wars* theme, and 'rhymes' where a passage ends on a different but related note – or is inverted, going up where before it went down. A tune generally establishes its key quickly, and therefore sets up an expectation that it will resolve to the key note. What makes it interesting is how it gets there. Halfway through there often comes the bridge – what I call the "Glory, Glory, Hallelujah" – where it changes most spectacularly from what has gone before, before order is finally restored.

I may never be musical, but for now, while there is no one to complain, I shall continue to have fun learning to play by ear.

Jenny Brien

Friendships



As some of you may or may not know, I have recently self-published my second book of a trilogy 'The Blossom or The Bole'. Book 1 was a huge success in 2017, so with encouragement of the amazing reviews from my readers and my fellow writers I embarked on writing Book 2 in 2018.

I had often heard of writers block but had never experienced it until I quite literally lost the plot halfway through. I was on the brink of giving up altogether.

I was attending an excellent, Women Aloud talk in Enniskillen with like-minded writers and asked if they could recommend anyone who might be interested in helping me out. Jenny Brien approached me after the talk ended. Jenny and I had met before through Fermanagh Writers and Omagh Open Door Poetry, so I was delighted when she offered to work with me. After a further meeting we discussed fees and agreed a working contract.

Jenny was a very patient and exacting editor. She immersed herself in the story and her unswerving help right up until the final draft of the book was excellent. She has agreed to work with me on what will be the last of this trilogy.

I am delighted that we are to have the spring edition of Corncrake Magazine and I wish Jenny every success.

Keep safe and never give up, good friends are priceless.

PHEME GLASS

Friendship is very much a theme of *The Blossom or the Bole* as it traces the story of two neighbouring families in the Glenelly Valley of Tyrone through the period of the First World War. The childhood friendship of William and Paul is tested not only by sectarian prejudice but by their new responsibilities as soldier and father, by secrets told and untold, and by their fathers' involvement with the UVF and the IRB. Interspersed with contemporary cuttings from the local papers, the story builds to a climax with clandestine preparations for the Easter Rising. In its aftermath new

friendships are formed and old ones come under pressure, until the secret that the two young men share leads to inevitable tragedy.

PHEME has a talent for portraying the humanity of her characters even when they hold conflicting positions. I may be biased, but I think it is a good read and I am looking forward to working on the final book of the trilogy.

Jenny Brien

Editor

Books 1 and 2 are now for sale direct from the author .

If you have a story you need help with, you may email me at editor@corncrakemagazine.com.

Borderlines



I remember the Border when it was a Border before the Common Market as we called it then when everyone had tales about the old times smuggling the everyday – butter, sugar – shopping bags hung on the outside handles of train carriages. Jokes about *wetting the tay*.

We were the Protestants who crossed the border each July to avoid the bands heading for the sea in Donegal or all the way to Cork, my uncle's farm.

The green triangle on my mother's Morris Minor showed that we would return.

We hoped the weather would be fine,
the Customs men at Pettigo be sitting in the sun
and wave us through, for Pettigo
was easy that way, as we knew
not like Belleek.

And then
we'd keep an eye for green An Post vans
or signs that said *Go Mall* to show
that this was not our land
though otherwise, it was the same
round humping hills and winding lanes
and sudden loughs.

And I recall the Border when it was a Border
once again, with concrete blocks
and corrugated towers
and helicopters hung like moths –
beating the sky
above the humping hills and winding lanes
and sudden loughs.

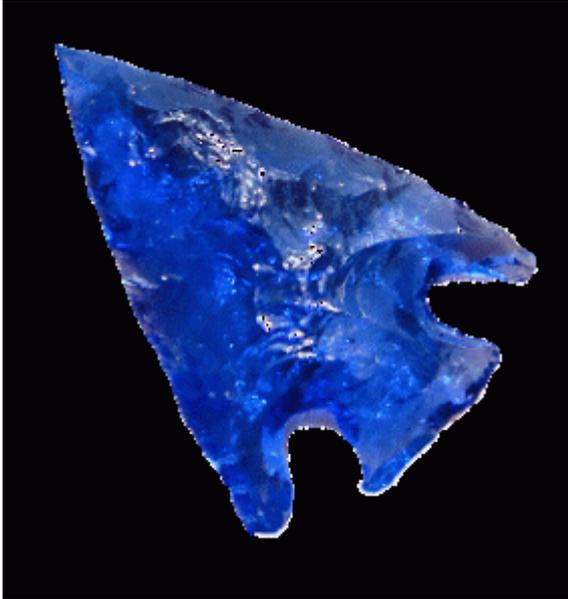
The Customs sheds were gone, but borders now
closed round us tight
with kerb-side colours, tattered flags
X marks the spot
and, *Don't go out tonight*.
You don't know who might be about
and don't trust anyone who says
Brits Out does not mean you.

Yet, even in the worst of times
when no one drove
round humping hills, the lanes still wound
past sudden loughs
to stop in block or crater or in broken bridge.
If you knew where to look, you still might find
some place to pass a bike, some tractor track
to bind it back.

It's not a Border if there's no way through.

Jenny Brien

The Glass Arrowhead



The Dead, they see a little at a time.

They go South. They jump through the hole into the other world.

They walk around on the ground. Then they whirl. The whirlwind, people say.

They go up in the sky on a rope, the Dead.

The man they called Ishi did not wish to disturb the Dead. He would not talk of them or say their names, though Kroeber asked him many questions. For forty years he had seen them die. He could count them all, and there was no one left for whom he would singe his hair in mourning. These were his tribe now; Kroeber and Watterman and the doctor, Saxton Pope. He liked his room at the Museum in Berkley, and riding on the tram, eating with Watterman's family and playing with the children in the park. He did not even mind the Sunday mornings when he was on show. He would sit in front of the wikiup that he had built in the grounds and knap arrowheads out of blue seltzer glass. So many arrowheads – more in a day than he would ever have used in a year of hunting. When each was finished, he would hold it out to one of the many watching children who would come forward, shy as a deer, and sometimes hold it up to the light and exclaim how pretty it was. But to Ishi the glass was simply good to work, hard and true, not like the black obsidian stone. He'd learned that many years before he came to this place, and he remembered the risks he would take for one glass bottle.

This was his home now. So many people, past counting, like the swarms of butterflies that arrived each spring. This was where he would happily choose to die, but as he remembered it came to him that one day the city's swarm might vanish like the butterflies and he would be left alone again. Perhaps that is why at last he yielded to his friends' request that he bring them to his old hunting grounds, back to the Dead.

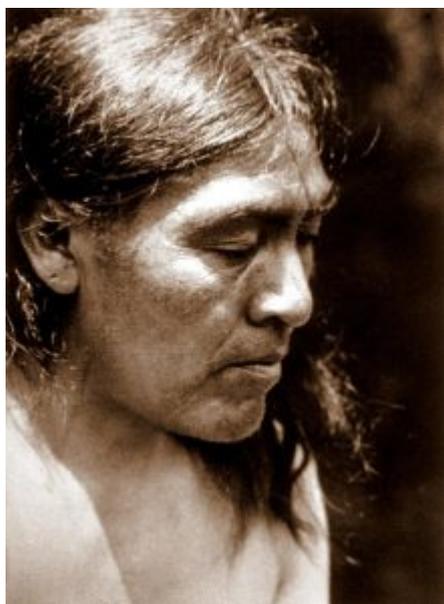
On horseback, they followed the rushing waters of Deer Creek, up from the Sacramento Valley and into the foothills of the snowcapped mountains. There were five of them: Ishi, Kroeber and Watterman, the doctor and the doctor's young son. He watched the back of the rancher who guided them, and he remembered the names. He raised his eyes to the faraway ridge of Bear's Hideout. It was six years since White men had last been there, late Fall, surveyors, who found the wikiup of Ishi's people.

There were only four of his tribe left then; Ishi, his sister, their mother and her brother. The old man was so frail he could only move with help. Ishi's sister took him to the hiding place by the river at Harpoon Landing. Their mother was too old and sick to move. Ishi covered her with a hide blanket and hid himself. One of the men had a kind voice, she said later. He told the others not to kill her.

The rancher brought Ishi and his friends to his home and made them welcome. He showed them Indian artefacts that he had found, so he said, in an abandoned hut. Ishi watched Kroeber bargain for them, to bring them back to the museum. He knew each one – the bows, the salmon harpoons, the stone tools and the blankets – all that they had prepared to survive the coming season. It was a hard and hungry winter when his mother died. The others never returned. He had searched for them for three years before fire and hunger drove him South.

They travelled on towards Bears Hideout the next day, leaving the ranch and the rancher behind. That night, Ishi told the doctor's son he heard the spirit of his sister calling and walked off alone into the bush.

He walked until he came to Harpoon Landing. He sat and watched the waters of Deer Creek as they rolled away in the moonlight. He remembered when he was a child. He remembered the night the hunters came, and the sudden strange barking of the rifles. He felt again the chill of the water as he floated downstream among the dead bodies of his kinsfolk. He wondered why the white men were so anxious to pull them out again; then he saw the knives. Heads five dollars apiece, scalps fifty cents.



He closed his eyes and pictured the distant sea, and the great city by its shore. Whether it was vision or memory, he did not know – he saw a child with a dark, flat face like his, holding a blue glass arrowhead up to the sunlight. And it was beautiful.

He listened. He heard the coyote call and the wood duck, and he was at peace. He called the Dead by name and they came to him. Each greeted him by his name, the name that was not Ishi. One by one they came to him. His mother was there, and her brother, but his sister was not with them.

In the morning, he told them, I will go to my friends and show them what I may of this land. When we are done, we will return to the city by the sea and I will never speak your names again. But tonight, let us sing the old songs together.

So they sang.

They sang the songs of Coyote and of Wood Duck, though there was no one else in the world of the Living who could understand.

Except, perhaps, somewhere in the city by the sea, an old woman and a child with a blue glass arrowhead.

Jenny Brien



The Watch has Ended

And what a great watch it has been! A decade long in the telling of the story: characters we have loved and those we have hated have met their fates; some got what they deserved, many had surprises, others seemed to have been ill-served by the cruel hands of the author. *Game of Thrones* has been an epic tale, told over many years, both for the characters and the viewing public.

From childhood I read Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* books and Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonriders of Pern*, slavishly following the chronological order in which they were written – testing the patience of many a Librarian along the way. Into my teenage years, I found the likes of David Eddings, Raymond E. Feist and Stephen R. Donaldson and lived half my life in magical lands of swords and sorcery. However, I was unsure whether such outright 'fantasy' if televised would attract a mainstream audience. Yes, people avidly follow soaps, despite the obvious contrivances employed, or detective series where the maverick loner always get their men – or women. Actual fantasy with swords, magic and dragons was generally considered to be largely enjoyed by nerdy loners who spent far too long living at home with their parents.

Game of Thrones broke so many moulds that the rules of television have come to have been re-written. One of its the signature characteristics was the multiple theatres in which the characters performed; from Winterfell to The Wall; Kings Landing to Dorn and to Marine and the roads, my goodness the

roads that led between them, so much of the show could be classed as a 'road-movie'; characters were travelling hither and thither, exploring the vastness of Westeros and beyond. The characters were intricately drawn and, whether you liked them or not, at the very least you understood them and the reasons for why they did what they did. Their motivations were revealed in their actions and in what they said; there was very little folderol in the dialogue, the spoken word developed the characters and the relationships they had with each other.

A word about the violence: Game of Thrones featured many acts of violence, some quite horrific and shocking and gruesomely realised on the screen; but in the context of the situation that the characters found themselves in, they were never without a reason, however dark and disturbing the justification. I have never enjoyed the mindless shoot 'em ups of many a Hollywood action caper, nor the reflexive shock and gratuitous gore of horror movies; nor have I ever indulged in the dubious pleasures of explicitly violent electronic games. I have always felt that the author has to justify the portrayal of violence by the strength of the story and the characters involved; the story or film cannot be used a fig-leaf to shovel inane depictions of violence to its audience. Game of Thrones trod the line between thrilling graphic representation and gratuitous 'red-meat' baiting of its audience, rarely if ever, falling the wrong side.

The other issue was the portrayal of sex and nudity; many critics felt there was too much of it and that it was largely from the heterosexual male gaze. In the light of the #me-too movement, we are looking again at the industry that produces much of our moving-images, rightfully asking searching questions of it and the products that are created. I felt that this was a valid criticism, however, placed within the context of the quite demonstrably patriarchal society that is depicted on the show, it was not without justification. However, it is positive to note that Game of Thrones has produced so many incredible, complex and strong female characters, like Daenerys Targeryan, Cersei Lanister, Sansa and Arya Stark and Lady Brienne of Tarth amongst many others.

Many critics said that the action in the final season was were rushed; story and character arcs took abrupt pivots and journeys that were shown at length in previous seasons were now curtailed to bring about the denouement. I think that criticism is valid, but you could not help being awestruck at the scale of the logistics involved in the making of the series, to bring the audience the spectacle they craved. A whole army of technical, artistic and creative people was employed over many locations to produce the show. One of the producers commented that they could not logistically take the show any further. If that is a failure, then it is a noble one.

The endeavour to bring such a story to us has been inspirational. For me, as a writer, it always comes down to the story. As Tyrion Lanister said – what matters is not who won and who lost, who lived and who died, it is the stories that were created.

What will follow Game of Thrones? I have no idea. But I can hardly wait.

John Llewellyn James

The featured image is a closeup of the *Game of Thrones Door* in Blakes of the Hollow, Enniskillen



At the Margins

Common Ground can be found in overlooked places, where rich land and poor entangle. The farmers of Tempo looked across the valley, past the orderly estates of Brookeborough, to the wild and barren heights of Slieve Beagh and Mullaghfad. Tattenabuddah lies between, a hidden, intricate place, not well suited to large schemes or great plantations of either trees or people. The boundaries here are wide, and each a world in itself.



Photo by Rob Durston (www.durstonphoto.com)

A river forms the southern edge of Common Ground. It sparkles and gurgles under arching trees, dappled light reflecting from its surface and piercing clear through to its sandstone bed. The tree roots support the bank on which you thread, providing steps and footholds down to tiny gravel beaches and back up again. Little improvement has been made to a path once trodden by

cattle. Little needs to be done: this is not a place to rush. This is a place to pause at every step, to smell the damp earth, to feel the filtered warmth, eyes alert for heron, trout and crayfish, or whatever other hidden wonders there may be.

Turn away now, through the lush green water-loving sedges that, despite the drought, flourish in the tree-shade, out to the flatness of the water-meadow and the open sky. As you step out into the open a pair of buzzards wheel and drift silently far above. Things happen at the margins.

Beyond rise little drumlin hills, left there by a glacier ten thousand years ago. Atop the nearest, just out of sight beyond the crest, is a standing stone. The Fort Hill was the old name of this mound, and lately, evidence has been found of Iron Age settlement there. In those days perhaps the whole valley was flooded, and the water reached across the meadow to its very foot. Even then, the true history of the stone was perhaps long forgotten.

We stand in the silence, and we watch. *Are there badgers here?* asks someone. Yes. Over to the right, in a tangle of trees, an equal tangle of burrows lies beneath the roots. Thirty badgers have been counted. This is ancient woodland, a tiny pocket left from the days when people lived next to the standing stone on the Fort Hill, the days when (so it was said) this island was so thick with forests that a squirrel could travel from one end to the other without ever touching the ground. Now Ireland, North and South, is the least-forested country in Europe, but here at least the ancient trees are coming back.

For generations, hay was cut in the meadow, raked and rucked and carted off. Then, for a while, and later here than elsewhere, silage cut earlier, still green, packed and fermented. But only for a while. Now the meadow is responding to the older rhythm of the hay field, and the flowers that once thrived there are returning. White butterflies swarm above the meadowsweet and meadow buttercup, rye-grass, bent and Yorkshire fog.

It survives because the farm was really too small to benefit from such modern improvements. No nitrates were spread, no subsidised concrete lane ever cut through the hills or crossed the river on a railway-sleeper bridge. What money there was to be made came from the country store where the locals of Cooneen came to swap stories.

Stories are being told there again, the out-offices of the farm busy once more with old and new uses. For this day only, the long-empty silage shed is an exhibition gallery, its sloping walls adorned with the paintings of Jeremy Henderson, while swallows fly through the corrugated iron arch above. The artists of Sliabh Beagh Arts have wrapped gates with coloured yarn, cut intricate patterns in scrap metal, and power-washed images on dirty walls.

It all needs money, of course, but not a lot – just enough to allow the love and attention that this particular place once had, and now has again, for in the end only that which is loved for itself will be preserved.

New connections are being made, new ideas planted, new minds engaged with

ancient history, new traditions invented. Things are happening at the margins.

Jenny Brien

The Hare



*The sky is clear tonight;
late frost sparkles the rushes, casting back
the light of distant suns
The moon, full as a silver thruppence,
shines the trackless grass pure white.
No shadow moves but one.*

*Lopsided loping leather-horn
crouch back, old-woman-wise, she comes.
This is her world, and yet
she does not sleep.*

*For she, of many forms and names,
long ears and head-top eyes,
always alert, living her life
beneath the churning sky,
never forgets the ancient rule –
when dangers come, keep watch;
you're fast enough to get away.
Lie still, for they may pass on by.*

*Last morning, with the dew still fresh
where once the plover made her nest;*

she sat beneath the rising sun,
she heard the distant rumble come.
Then she lay flat disappeared
although she felt no danger there –
only a sudden mist of rain
that wet her fur and tasted strange
then passed on by.

All places are alike to her, the meadow-cat
who has no home. She dare not keep an ounce of fat –
she feeds by night,
chews through the winter's roots.

But now she has forgotten cold,
the heat of mad March days
the buck she never met till then
whose ears she boxed, but let him mate.
And in a week the four
strong kits she bore,
eyes open, fit to run,
no longer hidden, disappear

But now... she gazes at the moon,
the shadows there that form
long ears like hers,
for now, her dugs are full.
The kits are hidden well.
She sniffs. She cannot trace their smell.
She cries, and waits, and cries again
hoping that three, or two, or one
will answer then.

But they are lying still, for with the rain
they used their tongues – as children do:
They licked their paws
and washed their face, like her
They wiped their ears and licked their fur.

and licked again, until there was no trace
– no outward trace –
of herbicide.

Jenny Brien

This poem was inspired by a hare seen at Common Ground. The painting is by Bidy Lee For more information on the problems hares face from modern farming, see the Hare Preservation Trust

The Milk Run



Back when we first joined the Common Market as it was then, a change came to the country. Concrete lanes snaked round hills to farmyards where once the track was so rutted they were more easily approached across fields and ditches.

Five-barred tubular galvanised gates began to replace alike the ancient wrought iron and the makeshifts of barbed wire, branches and binder twine.

It was the beginning of the end for the world I had known as a child. The new lanes bound people tighter to a new way of doing things, a way that they had previously kept at a distance.

My father, like many others, had only six cows, still milked by hand. A machine would have allowed him to milk more, but their output filled more churns than enough when each had to be manhandled onto a Scotch cart or the link box of a new-fangled tractor and driven down the old track. In my grandfather's day, there was a cooperative creamery in the village a mile away, and the milk run was an opportunity to see how the world was going while you waited for your milk to be weighed and to get skimmed milk for the pigs and maybe a little butter as well. Only a few people churned their own butter, like my aunt up the country, who lived at the end of a lane almost a mile long. I understood why when I had to lend a hand with the churning and eat the result.

By my father's time the town creameries had taken over, so he only had to take the churns to the milkstand at the end of the lane. Every farm had one – a platform built of stone or dug out of a ditch and topped with sheet iron or sleepers from the now-abandoned railway. The milk stands provided a welcome relief for weary legs on Sunday walks, a place to sit and swing your feet and watch the dragonflies. There, each week, the milk churns waited for a flat-bed lorry to take them any and return them empty, their milk drained by strangers. Sometimes, if you knew the driver, other goods might arrive or depart from the milk stand, or you might get a lift to town yourself.

For us children, this thought had all the romance of hopping a freight train in the Old West. Every child was a cowboy at heart. We had no horses by then,

though they lived in our memories, like the redundant collars gathering mildew in the barn. My brother, aged two, had once rolled from one of the horses' back, slid down her hind legs and landed unharmed on the ground. The dividers in the milking parlour were about the same size, but we had enough sense not to repeat that experiment. Horses and cows were friendly and forgiving in a way that inanimate objects were not, no matter how our imaginations might try to bring them to life. We had a favourite cow, called Silver for the most unimaginative of reasons. The Lone Ranger had a horse, we had a cow. I don't know why we imagined Silver's milk tasted different, but it was always kept for the house. We drank it raw, cooled in a bucket of water, but it always tasted better with her warmth still in it. When the cows were sold, our neighbour made me a paintbrush out of hairs from her tail.

We knew even then the country was changing. There were few new houses yet – those had to wait for lanes fit for the cars of people who worked elsewhere. The land still emptying, as it had been for a hundred years. We were to visit houses where only old ones lived, and when they were gone, the houses too began to return to the earth from which they came. Thatch grew green and full of nesting creatures, corrugated iron encrusted with ivy, bushes growing from chimney stacks. Sometimes they were used for stores or cattle sheds, but often they were simply left – rotten doors opening onto cold hearths, beds mouldering back into the soil. Sometimes the odd picture was left hanging on the wall, or a rusted tool on the mantel, but we knew we should never take anything from such a house.

The lanes to these houses were so overgrown as to be almost indistinguishable from the fields on either side or else choked with briars and nettles. Sometimes we would come across a house unknown, with, it seemed no lane to it at all. Many years later I found that these were marked on old maps as herd's houses, relics of a time when children were sent to watch over cattle on upland grazing all summer long, only to return at Halloween, when the gates were removed from the tilled fields to let the cattle back. We too had followed cattle, driving them from field to field, turning them out of gardens. When we saw a stray cow we said it was grazing the long acre of the roadside.

Of all the changes that the new lanes brought perhaps the greatest was the milk tanker. The milk stands have vanished, the milk run is no more; milk goes straight from tank to tanker. In the long-gone time when milk was thin on lean spring grazing and wouldn't churn, some poor old woman might have been accused of casting a spell to 'draw the butter'. In more scientific times there was always a temptation to add a little something to the churn to pass the creamery's tests. Now such things are more tightly controlled, they say; poor milk goes down the drain. Milk is pasteurised, homogenised, sold in plastic bottles and cartons ('paper bags' one old man called them.) All this is expensive – far too expensive for the man with only six cows.

The problems of the dairy industry are too well known to recite. The milk tanker led to the mass stock unit, the slurry pit, the automated parlour, strip grazing and zero grazing. Fermanagh fields that once were full of cows now feed only sheep. The creameries have closed; Fermanagh milk is bottled in Donegal and Cavan milk is sold in Fermanagh.

I have no land to keep a cow, nor could I if I had. These days I can drink organic milk again – from ASDA. It's good, but it's nothing like Silver's.

Jenny Brien