

Bringing the Meadows Back to Life



Viewed from above, the “Emerald Isle” is indeed very, very green. Unfortunately, from a conservation point of view, the lush, uniform grassland that dominates our 21st-century landscape is the wrong shade of green.

A traditional hay meadow, seen from a distance, has varying shades of brown, green and even grey. This mottled sward is created by a variety of grasses, sedges and rushes, all co-existing with one another. Mixed in are colourful wildflowers such as Lady’s Smock, Ragged Robin and Oxeye Daisy. Each of these species occupies a slightly different ecological niche that fulfils their varying requirements for light, soil moisture and acidity. These meadows are a haven for wildlife and, on a fine summer day, they are brimming with insects, birds and small mammals, all finding food, shelter and even a home here.

A traditional hay meadow was cut at the end of the summer when grasses, sedges and flowers had completed their annual life cycle and produced seeds, which were scattered during the haymaking. This laid the foundation for next year’s colourful carpet of flowers, grasses and sedges.

Once the hay was gathered farmyard manure was spread, which continuously improved the soil structure and replaced the nutrients that were removed with the grass crop.

The key to this rich and diverse meadow plant life lies managing the nutrient levels of the soil. If these are kept relatively low a great number of plant species will co-exist in competition, and no single species becomes dominant. In our best hay meadows, up to 30 different plant species can be found per square metre. The sward never becomes too thick, allowing light to reach the ground, where moss thrives and ground-nesting birds make their home.

Compare this to an intensively managed silage field. A seed mix is sown which often contains a mere two types of highly productive grass varieties. Continuous application of chemical fertilisers creates extremely high nutrient levels in the soil, resulting in a uniform, lush and often very thick sward. Our more delicate native plants do not have a chance. As few as four plant species can be found in one square metre of highly productive

agricultural grassland, and none are nectar-producing flowers.

These emerald green silage fields are replacing our meadows one by one. Unfortunately, they are largely devoid of life. Intensively managed grasslands have little value as habitats. Without flowering plants, there is no nectar or pollen for butterflies and bees.

As our meadows disappear, so does the wildlife that depends on them. Ground-nesting birds such as meadow pipit and skylark struggle in the overly thick, impenetrable grass sward. With up to three silage cuts per year, the likelihood of successfully raising their broods is low, even if they do attempt to nest there.

Only 2% of the species-rich meadows that existed in the 1930's remain today in the UK. They have been lost mostly to intensive agriculture. This is not just a loss to the rich biodiversity of our land, but also to our cultural heritage. Just think of how many poems, songs and paintings were inspired by butterflies, flowers, meadows and haymaking.

How do we get our meadows back? It can be done, but it is neither quick nor straightforward. Once nutrient levels are high in the soil, especially in clay soil, they tend to stay that way for a long time, even after the application of fertiliser has ceased. Simply planting 'plugs' or scattering seeds of wildflowers will not work in the long term, as the more vigorous grasses will out-compete and smother them.

The nutrient levels of the soil need to be permanently reduced for lasting success. One rather severe method is to mechanically remove the upper layer of topsoil, which is where the nutrients are concentrated. A far gentler way is to continuously remove the 'biomass' from the area. With extremely species-poor and uniform swards several cuts a year can be carried out initially. All cut material is removed and no fertiliser of any kind applied. Gradually, the plant life will naturally become more diverse. If necessary, it can be encouraged by planting 'plugs' of wildflowers or application of seeds. Make sure you use a trustworthy supplier of native material!

There is also an amazing 'helper plant' for the aspiring meadow restorer: Yellow Rattle or Hay Rattle. It is a semi-parasitic species of native flower. Underground, it seeks out the roots of grass species and quite literally steals nutrients from them. Once weakened, the otherwise dominant grasses will lose some of their vigour, allowing a more species-diverse sward to develop once again.

Whether you are a farmer working on many hectares of land or only call a small front garden your own – restoring a piece of meadow to its former glory is a challenging, but worthwhile undertaking.

Anja Rosler

More information on how to restore meadows can be found at magnificentmeadows.org.uk

Seasons of Seeds



Seeds strewn on eager soil

*seem to die into dust
dissipate into air
over the meadows.*

*Seeds burst open
creeping green stems
stretch advancing out
covering the ground.*

*Time passes:
stems form stalks,
they sway in the breeze,
rainfall, and sunshine.*

*Time passes:
countless colours,
emerge as green carpet
covering the meadows.*

*Buds burst into flower,
grounded in roots,
fragile yet firm holding
they dance in the wind.*

*Meadow mown hay
In verdant swathes
lie in snaking wispy lines
new seeds will germinate
harboured until Spring.*

Tony Brady

Late April-early May: for green-winged orchids (pictured) and cowslips

Late May-mid June: for meadow buttercups, yellow rattle, red clover, sorrel and oxeye daisy

Late June & early July: for greater burnet, pepper saxifrage, wood cranesbill, bird's-foot trefoil, dropwort and many other species

2nd – 3rd week July: for the “purple” phase of common knapweed, also ladies bedstraw and meadowsweet, sneezewort and devil's-bit scabious

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

[Bidly Lee](#) For more information on the problems hares face from modern farming, see the [Hare Preservation Trust](#)

The Old Fort

*How many men climbed up this field – and saw the land as we do now
How many families joined them – in the settlement upon the brow
A place of safety on a hill – with Druid stones above the rill
That marks the place where once there stood – a Celtic fort*

*To see the far horizon – shapes of valley, hill and fell
Three thousand years have passed and yet – we see those scenes as well
The sunset comes at end of day – they too would see the final ray
As darkness fell, the gates were locked, protecting those within*

*When danger knocked upon the door – The strong men faced the foe
And held at bay the hungry wolves who would not easily go
No threats allowed for rich or poor – All safe today and evermore
The Celtic fort stands firm and strong – upon the hill*

*And as we stand upon this land – thinking of those who lived here then
Put down the sword of strife as we take courage from a pen
And yet the families living here – lived comfortably free from fear
We think we are so different but we're very much the same
The hill remains – a constant – then and now.*

Bob Baird

FARTHER FIELDS

*I reclined by the river in borrowed chair
and while the breeze off the meadow ruffled my hair,
Frankie amused and regaled us with tales of the hay
and how it used to be “won” way back in the day.
Anecdotes, amusing, informative, yet sometimes so sad:
how day-to-day life was lived in times that went bad.*

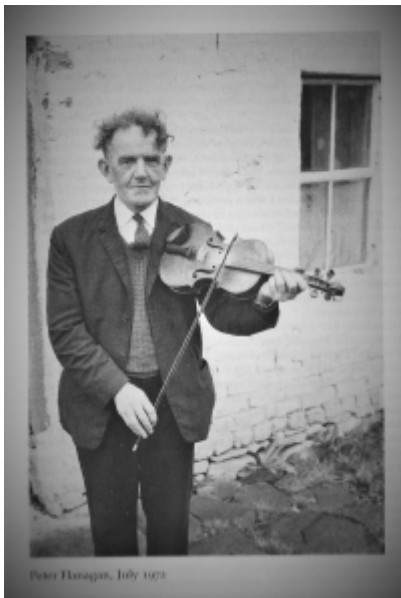
*My mind flew away south and miles to the west
where I too saved hay and felt I was blest.
His Auntie Tess and his Uncle Charlie*

*Could swap for my Uncle Frank and my Auntie Sadie.
My body was there but my mind wandered free
in tribute indeed to a great seanchaí.*

John Monaghan

While Frankie's stories of how the hay used to be won in [Tempo](#) reminded John of his native Mayo, Pauraig, Dermot and I were inspired to think back to our childhoods in [Cleenish](#), [Rosslea](#) and [Balinamallard](#).

[Philosopher in the Ditch](#)



*He pushed the empty dinner plate away
Knife and fork lay respectfully side by side
And picked up the child's blue stocking-filler flute
Huge hands gripped where small hands fit
Fingers swollen fat as cows teats at evening milking
Ooze blood from countless thorn and briar lacerations
Each knuckle bent; etched deep with wrinkles as a thinker's brow*

*Remembering each tiny muscle movement from which with each breath
Eighth and quarter notes rose in a flurry of sweet sound
Mingling with the aroma of boiled spuds and cabbage, fried bacon and egg*

*Children appeared from all directions and circled the music
Caught like moths in strong light
The baby, not walking, shuffled beneath the table in prime position
Between grass-cleaned wellingtons
Picks green to her mouth
My mother stands spellbound on the sandstone flag
Wide eyed, smiling, her hands frozen in the lifted apron*

My father spooning semolina

Spit it out

*The music stops, the baby cries, tiny hands rush to grab the
disintegrating flageolet*

*P tips his mop of shaggy hair into his cloth cap and disappears out the
door leaving*

Imploding space in the melee

I follow awestruck behind

*Until he is astride the sheugh**

As more music flies to the hills from bill-hook and slash-hook

Echoing in time with each stroke

I pull at the thorny bush and briar

Proud my hands are scratched and bleeding.

Pauraig **Uí Dhubhshláin**

* from the Irish *siothlaigh* The open drain by the roadside or between fields. In Fermanagh the ditch is only the raised bank.

Peter ('P') Flanagan (1906-1992) lived as a landless labourer in Drumbarney townland near Bellanaleck. He began playing the flute at the age of eight, and later the fiddle and tin whistle, on which he developed his own complex rhythmic style, influenced by recordings of the great Sligo fiddle player, Michael Coleman.

He played for himself and his neighbours, but only after the farm work was done. *If there weren't spuds in the ridges, he would say, I couldn't take down the flute or the fiddle. Until I know things is goin well, I don't feel well at all. So I don't. But when the spuds peep, I can take down the flute and play.*

He developed his art as a member of Kinawley band in his younger days and, like his father before him, in the local troop of mummers. By the Sixties, the time when this poem was set, his style of music was out of favour, but he still continued whenever he had the opportunity. A measure of recognition came with the revival of the '70s and the work of American anthropologist Henry Glassie. Cathal McConnell of the *Boys of the Lough* called P *my first teacher*.

Glassie wrote:

In a lifetime of study, I have been blessed to know three completely realized artists. The first was Peter Flanagan, the others Ahmet Şahin the Turkish master of Islamic ceramics, and Haripada Pal the great Bangladeshi sculptor of Hindu images. While their works remain Peter Flanagan's art has gone into the air, though I am comforted that my writings gained him some belated local recognition before he died. All three of these masters brought benefit through art to their communities. All were gifted, and all devoted themselves, working to their own exalted standards before the prime witness of God.

Tessie and Charlie



I wrote the following two short poems recalling memories of my Aunt Tessie and Uncle Charlie. A sister and brother of my father's they lived in a thatched cottage at the end of Tempo Main Street in County Fermanagh. They were the last to live in the cottage where my grandmother and grandfather had raised fourteen children, seven boys and seven girls, born from the mid-1890's to 1919.

The farm existed right up until the mid-1980's and as children in the 1960's and 1970's we spent our summers in the hayfields in Edenmore, in the hills above Tempo village. The route to the hayfields from the cottage was in parts a steep uphill walk, Conolly's lane, which ran for half a mile. It was hedged all the way with hawthorn, beech and at the top hazel and a stream with a waterfall crossed the lane about midway to the hayfields. This stream ran from the top of Edenmore and was crystal clear. We all drank from it, the cool water cupped in our hands, or carried in bottles to thirsty workers in the hayfields.

An old disused well sat near the bottom of the lane just opposite the waterfall and above Nixon's small pig shed. It was hidden in the Summer behind long grass and when we peeped through this we could see it was the abode of many pond creatures like frogs, waterboatmen and pond skaters.

Aunt Tessie made the tea for the hayfield workers and carried it up the lane. It was a great relief to see her emerging over the brow of the hill, a basket in each hand and Lassie the sheepdog at her side. We knew that soon we would be sitting down, resting our tired limbs and enjoying slices of buttered fresh fadge bread and jam, washed down with cups of warm sweet tea.

Tessie McPhillips

*Tessie,
I still see your smiling face,
hear your soft voice calling
"Hello Frank"
watch your light graceful step in a flowered dress*

*up Conolly's lane and lighter over Conolly's stream
past the deep glen, your arms straight with the weight of two baskets.
Through the gap now and a lilt of a walk across hay felled meadows
smelling of summer.
Teapot steady, tucked in with crushed newspaper
milk swishing in a bottle
newly baked and buttered fadge
and jam for "anyone who wants it"
and Lassie at your heels panting from the heat.
Seated under the big beech
we drape ourselves on humps of hay
and wait
and eat,
no talk,
we feed the hunger first
then the dog with dunked crusts.
You join us, bring laughter to the work
while Lassie sits in the beeches shade, moist tongue quivering.*

Charlie McPhillips was Tessie's brother, and the last to work the farm. He had worked in the era of horses pulling "tumbling paddies," old metal hay turners and rakes. In the early 1970's he bought a Massey Ferguson tractor. Starting in his later years he was not the best of drivers and indeed his driving ability was probably well summed up in a comment from my father, *He never learned to drive until he wasn't able to.*

It did not stop him though and he took to it with great enthusiasm. His hand signals would be followed by an immediate turn in the pointed direction and God help any vehicle that was behind him trying to pass. He loved passengers, and as children sometimes three of us would join him, one on each mudguard and the other holding on to the back of his seat standing on the tow hitch. We did not think it then, but it was probably not the safest place to be – especially when Charlie let the clutch out like a rocket. We did not care, we loved the excitement of driving with him and he continually fooled us by saying hello to imaginary people in the ditches and fairies peeping out of glens. He caught us time and time again. We loved him.

Charlie McPhillips

*Charlie, the waterfall still flows but the well is gone
and diesel smells from phutting pipes on Masseys no longer linger,
caught under the beeches canopy.*

*I still feel our fingers,
tight to painted mudguards,
hold on for dear life,
waiting on the clutches slip,
Our knees tight, reddened,
peppered from bedding rucks
on brush bristled crew cut hay.*

Through binder twine bound gates we go,

*careful, slow,
squeezing rucks on ratchety hay shifters*

*Then screams of joy,
we rocket forwards with you, Charlie, in command,
past piles of twisted straw hay ropes
wound in balls like giant spikey wool
through clouds of grey/blue smoke,
our shoulders brushed with hazel leaves.*

*Then freewheel let her go
Yooooo!!!!
And make a breeze at last to cool our sweaty bodies.*

Conolly's lane still exists and parts of it remain the same as in the 1960s. A walk through the dark tunnel of hazel at the top will bring you into the old hayfields. Anthony Mc Phillips (the youngest of the Mc Phillips family) is alive and well at 99 years of age and living in New York.

Frankie Mc Phillips

[A Field](#)



Photo by Rob Durston (www.durstonphoto.com)

A lot has been written about place, the importance of it in our hearts and souls. We all come from somewhere. The places of our childhood are indelibly pressed into our psyche. Fields are particular places, defined by the boundary hedges around them. When we 'go into' a field that it gives us a strong sense of having left one space and entered into another. It gives off its own ambience; as with people, we relate to each field in a particular way.

Fields come in all shapes and sizes. There are flat ones, sloped ones, bumpy ones and every kind in between. There are small fields designed long ago to suit handiwork and the donkey and cart, and larger fields sculpted out of those smaller ones to make way for the mighty tractors and silencers of today. There are upland fields and low-lying bottom fields, water meadows and rough grazing fields. There are fields hidden away behind high hedges. There are open fields with their faces to the world. There are dark, shadowy fields with their backs to the sun. There are roadside fields and there are back fields that never see the hustle and bustle of life; pleasant, green and grassy fields and grim, grey-brown rushy fields. There are fields that draw you in and ones that discourage closer acquaintance.

There are fields you can approach suddenly and take by surprise. There are others you see long before you enter. Some can be read quickly and easily while others are tasted in a piecemeal fashion. Like people, they can take a

lot of getting used to or that grow on you slowly over time. A familiar field may hold a special place in your heart because of its shape. It may be its aspect that attracts you or the way in which it is curtained with an abundant and varied hedge; its green sward or gentle slope or strange hump. It may be because of a story handed down the generations, or the poetry of its name.

Perhaps we relate most closely to those fields in which we played or worked as children: a hayfield, a cornfield, a potato field or a carrot *bottom*. Grazing fields were less familiar because they were for cattle rather than for children. A flat field near the house was a football pitch; a sloped field was for sleighs in the snow.

I think of the day a corncrake flew out as the mowing machine was finishing off the grass in the middle of a field. I remember the rows and rucks of hay and standing up the bales. I remember the exact spot in a field the day a whirlwind took a wisp of hay up into the sky. I remember the ruck that fell and where it was in the field and who was to blame. As children we knew the dry places in the hayfield where the bees had their nests in the fog (moss). We remember the field of rucks that flooded and recall the year. We remember the field of hay we had to ted again because of the rain. We cursed the rain and the field we had to lap, but the same field renewed itself as the after-grass rose from the bare roots and a meadow was born again.

The cornfield blended in with the other fields until its green turned yellow and then golden. Then it held itself apart like a wrong colour in a patchwork. The crow and the pigeon circled and the pheasant came jooking. The often ineffectual scarecrow was erected. The mice and rats assembled in the stooks and the stacks until the threshing swept it all up and the field was left bare with its stubble and its straggle of straws.

The potato bottom *down at the lanes* was an isolated field and the only mossy one on the farm. Today the potato half of the field is the site of an abandoned house foundation, a symbol of the folly of the boom that bust in 2008. When we were young it was ploughed, harrowed, drilled and sown over many months. In September, on a Saturday or a Sunday, the potatoes were gathered up into long pits covered with rushes and a thick layer of moss. The rats invaded and had to be trapped. We herded away the cattle grazing in the other half of the field. The tiny potatoes left lying on the moss were stuck onto sally rods and flung to Timbuctoo, or at least towards the island of trees a hundred yards away. A lot depended on the suppleness and length of the sally rod and the size of the potato. When these were just right it was like the perfect meeting of a hurley stick with the ball.

The meadow became a hayfield in July or August and renewed itself as an after-grass grazing field in September. The rest of the fields were simply grazing fields, rougher grazing than the meadow. In 1950's Derrylea most were low-lying bottoms covered with rushes. Older people will remember the long rows of mown rushes piled up for burning and the heavy clouds of smoke filling the sky. Today many have been drained and resown, but here and there throughout the countryside we can still see those unredeemed nurseries of rushes.

The patch-work that is our fields is the product of many things; soil, use, weather, machinery, lie-of-the-land and even the whim of a farmer. Today the fields are bigger because of machinery, and greener because of drainage and the artificial fertilisers. The hedges are not so dense or sprawling. The cattle are in much better condition and sheep are seen grazing where they were never known before. Views have become vistas and green grass has mostly replaced the grey-brown of the heavy rush. But there is not the same connection that there used to be. A tractor and machinery can do the work of a whole family. Not even the lone driver of the tractor has to feel the grass, or the stubble or the moss under his feet. When people worked in a field they moved about it and got to know the character of its surface as well as a sense of each space. Standing in the middle of a field gives you a totally different feeling from that felt as you walk along its hedge or linger in a corner.

I am thinking now of the repetitive circling of the hayfield we used to do when turning the swathe with a fork or hand rake. You got to know every bump and hollow, the dry and the wet, the hard and the soft. It was an up-close tactile experience. There was the fresh smell of the new-cut grass and later the completely different smell of the won hay. We might come across a bee's nest or a squashed frog, or a big slimy snail and the different types of butterflies. The grass got cut, turned and maybe tedded, and then the won hay got rucked; all cleared in three or four days and only revisited a month or two later to bring home the rucks. It was was a short and seasonal relationship but an intense one, a liaison you did not easily forget.

Each year in the hayfield was a unique experience. Each hayfield was like no other, unique in both experience and memory. A favourite field is like a good friend; you meet with ease and you can commune without words. In a favourite field you feel at home.

Dermot Maguire



[A Brief History of The Thing Itself](#)

In the autumn of 2015 I found myself on a poetic pilgrimage, following the call to Ireland's biggest spoken word & poetry event, Dublin's *Lingofest*. Having attended the previous year as a newcomer to the idea of spoken word, I had come prepared. I wasn't alone.

Many will attend a visual arts or music event content in the role of observer, perhaps some quietly harbouring desires or even regrets about never picking up an instrument or a brush earlier in life, but there is something different about poetic affairs.

It's in the universal nature of poetry, in its accessibility and the quiet gnawing at the back of each unsteady mind. It's in the fact that if you can speak or write, you can form something poetic, be it on the tongue, the page or simply floating through the mind. And so spoken word events tend to be attended mostly by poets; established poets, retired poets, aspiring poets and very often secret poets.

Lingo was no exception; you wouldn't dare stop to tie your shoelace for fear of a distracted poet falling over you, especially with the price of a pint in Dublin. All manner of page poetry, spoken word and hip-hop infused the experience, with poets from every corner of Ireland and many from the far corners of the world. They had journeyed far and wide to produce and consume the spoke and the writ. Mingling at every corner, buying, selling, performing and exchanging – books, pamphlets, business cards and discs.

Of the many topics circulating, the more intrepid bards began to float familiar questions:

*So where is your night?
And where do you go to perform?
How would I get a spot up your way?
What do you mean there isn't one?*

There was a gap in the market, and plenty of poets looking to help fill it. One saw fit to quote *Field of Dreams* and *Wayne's World* at us:

If you book it, they will come.

So we booked it, and thankfully you came.

Beginning in February 2017 we launched our first spoken word event in *The Happiness Trap* café Enniskillen. Our mission statement was to give local poets a platform to have their voices heard, whilst providing another pit-stop on the Irish circuit for well-honed performers to come and showcase their work, helping inspire locals looking for something refreshing. Most importantly, perhaps, we could speak to that gnawing poetic feeling in the back of some minds and use our platform to help coax out a few of those aforementioned secret poets.

After a small adjustment period and a successful movement to a long-term venue in Mulhern's Bar, *The Thing Itself* was born.

Over the course of our first year, we have provided a stage for many of the local community and managed to convince a small handful of first-time performers to join us and to return again to build on their skill. We have hosted nine regular events, helped facilitate different stages of the All-Ireland poetry slam, hosted a special lunchtime open-mic on board the [Lovely Leitrim Boatel](#) and proudly held a launch night for the first book of poetry

by our team member Kate O'Shea, titled *The Human Condition*.

In our goal to keep the nights refreshing we have brought some of the most renowned spoken word acts, Slam champions and published poets to Enniskillen, hosting talent like John Cummins, Rory Jones, Mel Bradley, Cat Brogan, Stephen Murphy, Ted McCarthy, David Braziel and Abby Oliveira.

Each night features a set-list from an original songwriter to help break up the wall of words, with musicians such as Conor Phillips, Paul Corrigan, Luke Belvedere, Luke Burns, Andrew Train and Myles McCormack.

We hope we can continue to provide exciting and fresh spoken word experiences throughout the coming year thanks to the continued support of our performers, our audience and of course our ever-helpful and accommodating home at Mulhern's Bar Enniskillen!

If you wish to perform or attend any of our events we are accessible on all popular social media platforms where you can find event info, including a newly launched [Facebook group](#) that will serve as a community hub for our followers to share and discuss poetry and become more involved with 'The Thing Itself'

[Facebook](#) [Twitter](#) [Instagram](#)

Or you can check the Corncrake [Events](#) listing.

The Thing #10 will occur on Saturday 28th April from 7.30pm in Mulhern's bar basement. Spoken word by Michael Wilson & David Hynes, music by Katie Armstrong

I'll leave you with some poetic words from our team member Darren Reihill.

So
I'd like to stress
that This Thing
Itself
is us,
the many facets
that bring our senses
from the selfs
to ourselves,
the lone
beautiful moment
into silver
relatable lyrics
grown
on the smelting pot
on uniquely tarnished lives
on the petals
that wilt and die
on the telling
of the hope
of life

*that seeds eternal
the creation,
that stirs
in all of us*

*Thank you for your continued support,
You are **The Thing Itself**
X*

Caimin O'Shea



[Derelict Delivery](#)

To say things had been tight, lately, wasn't so much putting it mildly as telling downright lies. There hadn't been an order in weeks; not since the firestorm, when the bullets came, like mini bombs on the wind.

Uther had one of the very few businesses that hadn't been hit. He still had his little general store, and his van, which he could still fuel because almost all the other vehicles had either left or not made it, so there was no competition for petrol. He knew it wasn't exactly logical, but he kind of felt guilty about that.

Despite the stark lack of footfall in the shop, he'd opened it dutifully every day, sticking to his usual hours for the most part and even staying open later on some nights, just in case. All of the perishable items were gone within the first three or four days, mostly consumed by himself and his husband, Mike, with some having to be regrettably dumped – another thing to feel guilty about – but Uther still had most of the rest of his stock, and he knew people out there needed them; it was just that, with all the devastation, no one was exactly in a position to place an order.

Except, on this one day, a request came in over the radio, the signal weak and voice barely audible. Uther had to ask the person to repeat the list of items just to be sure he'd got it right. It wasn't a big order, or anything – in fact, it would have been considered tiny compared to what people would order pre-war – but here in the post-war place, it gave Uther hope. Where there was one customer getting back on their feet, more were sure to follow.

At least, that's what he reassured Mike. Uther wasn't sure he looked all that convinced, but he tried not to notice.

So here they were on the broken, potholed road driving to the delivery address with three cans of tomatoes, four boxes of powdered mash, a couple of small bottles of water, six bars of chocolate, and the largest bag of dog food they had – the customer had used those specific words when requesting that item; they were quite insistent about it, and Uther just had to hope that the food was actually being purchased for a canine, the alternative too unpleasant to consider.

Silently, he prayed it wasn't a trap laid by thieves meant to get them out in the middle of nowhere. That was another possible scenario he hadn't shared with Mike. There was no point distressing him, after all.

The van crossed over into the side of town that was mostly unscathed on the outside; where the road got rockier for a quarter mile, then evened out. The buildings on this side of the river were still standing but people had fled out into the country regardless, making the empty streets look like something out of a horror movie. Uther shivered. Mike looked over at him and he forced a smile before turning his eyes back to the road.

Up here, he said, mostly to fill the silence, *On the left. It should be...* he trailed off as the house in question came into view. Unlike all the rest, it was a shell, being held up by the buildings on either side. From the burned-out husk, three children appeared along with an extremely skinny-looking Great Dane that was still bigger than the combined size of the kids.

The tallest child approached the van. Uther rolled down his window and got her to confirm they were at the right place. He was pretty sure she was a girl, though it was hard to tell from the rags she wore. He hadn't been able to distinguish the gender of the person over the radio, either. The kid's face was obscured by a thick coat of soot that she'd clearly rubbed at but hadn't tried to remove fully, and there was a kind of darkness to her eyes. Uther had to look away to stop from staring.

Uh, you placed an order? he said, trying to move the transaction along. The kid nodded, holding out a small, tight roll of banknotes that were covered in grime. Uther took it, quickly unrolled and totalled the money – three five-pound notes; one pound less than the value of the items – and curled it up again to shove in his pocket. A fleeting thought occurred to him that maybe the money wouldn't do him much good anymore, anyway, but he dutifully ignored it.

He swallowed, exited the van, and walked around to the back where he tried to make small talk as he unloaded the items, commenting on the cold nights that had been creeping in, but the girl said nothing more. The longer Uther looked at her, the younger she appeared. His heart clenched when she had to drag rather than carry the bag of dog food. He'd have offered a hand, but the Great Dane was keeping a close eye on him, a low warning growl in his throat making it quite clear he wasn't to come any closer or make any sudden moves.

The three kids and the dog stood there, staring, as Uther got back in the van. He shared a look with Mike, and then started up the engine, heading for home – the flat above the shop that was void of life aside from themselves. Uther toyed with the idea of saying to Mike that they should take the kids and the dog back with them – putting it out there in a jokey way that he could deny really meaning if his husband took it badly – but that thought got discarded too. It wasn't a time for jokes, and three and half extra hungry mouths to feed was no laughing matter.

Eyes followed him down the road in the rear-view mirror.

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