

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)

Untitled

Untitled by Amanda May, 07.06.2020
(read at my sister Kathy's funeral)

There were two highlights of the day throughout those weeks of the CV19 lock down.

One was a walk in the Wild Wood with the three dogs: Sula, Kathy's 12yr old Alsatian; Mum's wee Jasper, a 10 year old miniature Jack Russell now in my care; and my Kai, a Dalmatian/Collie cross aged 2 ½ years with boundless energy and so swift.

Kathy and Sula would take it slowly; Jasper and Kai might be off the lead and running free, Kai's freedom run a delight to see. Everybody, dogs and humans both, happy under the speckled green light and the strong, bright sun flooding in where there is a break in the tree cover. Dappling light on rippled water and the little river singing its song.

Soothing
Carefree
Happy Time

The second highlight of the days when I managed to call in at my house, into the back garden for a tete a tete with Kate and sometimes her daughter Rhiannon. Coffee in the sunshine, sharing songs and singing along, sometimes our own words sung.

Her son, Caiman's choice sent to his Mum from his sickbed:
"Bacach Shiol Andai"

In English, "The Lament of the Hare"

Kathy's theme tune and the song of the moment: "Love and Hate" by Michael Kiwanuka.

I miss my sister Kathy.
My heart aches.
My soul weeps
My intellect struggles
I miss my sister
Kathy

Untitled.

Eden
despoiled
the cottage
now
All apple trees cut

bar two young saplings
& logs made
Stacked reproachfully
against the out-house
that would act as garage
or keeper of things.
Anything that didn't
mind weather
but needed to keep dry.
Bicycles in there
Now all open
to wind and rain
at the far corner seen
best from the back
And a weird moat
around the loft shed.
Everything marred
and
broken.
If I'd wanted to enter

there was the side window
of the lounge
open
space enough for me
to manoeuvre
inelegantly
through
access granted
but declined.

No wonder
the strange train
of events
that led
to
such
unhappiness

by
Amanda May
04.03.2021

The Border Between Us

The Border Between Us was a project run by the Glens Centre in Manorhamilton.

It took place over the lockdowns of autumn and winter of 2020 and 2021.

While centres and halls closed down, this project allowed people from different cultural and religious backgrounds, in Leitrim and Fermanagh, to come together in a virtual space; a space, which as the weeks wore on became a safe, vibrant and creative place. Every Wednesday for 12 weeks Monica Corish challenged us to explore the notion of Border: borders which come from within ourselves, borders which are political, cultural, imaginary and the borders which Covid 19 was creating. The stories, poems and images which emerged were varied, personal and diverse.

Rachael Webb taught us new creative skills, encouraging us to bring together words and images using the every-day technology of mobile phones. The result was this visual storytelling event, a screening of 11 micro personal and individually made film-poems. It is well worth viewing.



Guarded Travel

I grew up knowing borders
conversations layered into childhood
bikes, motorbikes, checkpoints
unapproved roads, closed roads
my mother and father smuggling cigarettes
travelling dark roads on a motorbike
she, pregnant, young, ambitious
clinging to my father, her lifeline to a future.

On Sunday, after Mass
selling tobacco through the kitchen window
money building in a tin box
on mart day, left in a bank.

Our house was built on smuggled cigarettes
stories of a mother who faced anyone, anything
a heroine, a storyteller, a mover among people.

The Troubles came
nights crouching under windows
my father pacing the farmyard
shotgun at the ready
I wondered and worried
how he, myopic and clumsy
could defend anything, anyone.
I grew up knowing borders
Shadowy sentinels over my childhood.
Borders deepened
stories darkened
half whispers and , eyes grew untrusting

thoughts were buried
silenced themselves into the ground.

Teresa Kane was born in Fermanagh and has worked for many years in education.

She has been published in several books and on line magazines. She was shortlisted for The Seamus Heaney New Writing Award (2016/2017) and again in 2021.

In recent years she has begun to facilitate creative writing workshops for CAP.

She has been funded by the Arts Council to develop several projects. In February 2021, she received funding from Future Screens NI to develop new forms of poetry using AI.

Shiny Side Out

You taught me
It was fine to dance alone
push back the terrors
explore my inner minx
dig deep to excavate buried joys
permit the lightest fingertip trickles
on sun kissed skin
trace the nape, slip hips, tap heels
in sync to heart stopping beats
sing, dream, let go.

You taught me
it was time
to express ideas stored in recesses
long since forgotten,
to experiment, find merriment,
I used to be strong
you reminded me I still am.

You taught me
I didn't need permission to be
rather more pressing to remain, free
question everything
have the courage of conviction,
see life from an alternate view
through a different lens
to stay awake
speak from the soul
stand for the self

and how not to be cold.

You taught me
to walk and talk again
whipped me gently from afar
sometimes I talked to excess
that desperation to express
long-locked-in notions of woes
gifts, all-seeing eyes, loss, moonlit words
in blue-black skies, love.

You taught me
it was just grand to have a hand held
grasped and warm
basking in yonder glow of yearning
for yesteryear contentment.

You re-taught
then brought back my smile
it's still there,
every time your initial flashes up
on screen
and I pick up to hear you say,

"One foot in front of the other."

***Kate O'Shea** is a poet and photographer from Enniskillen. She has written a first book of poems titled *The Human Condition* and is working on a second book during these stay-at-home days of lockdown, though she admits it is something of a work in progress.*

*Kate is a proud co-founder of *The Thing Itself*, a social event which supports artists from far and wide in poetry, spoken word and song.*

Somebody Must



Somebody must look for rainbows

under leaden skies –
work furloughed, playgrounds empty,
plans cancelled, there's no excuse.
We've read, drew and danced
cooked and home-schooled
played on the iPad
streamed and then...

we stopped.

We sang in cages
placed bears in windows
clapped on doorsteps

and heard each other.

We grieve for those lost,
each smarting raindrop.

But it will end,
and the children will teach us
to look for rainbows.

Anita Gracey grew up in Belfast but her mum is from Emy in Monaghan, so she has spent most of her spare time there. Anita has been published in Poetry Ireland Review, Washing Windows – Irish Women Write Poetry (Ed. Eavan Boland), Abridged, The Honest Ulsterman, Poetry NI, The Poets' Republic, Fly on the Wall, The Blue Nib, Culture Matters, CAP Anthology, Bangor Literary Review, Sonder, Utopia Project, Dream Well Writing, Woman's Aid Anthology, Waterways Story-making Festival, Pendemic and Monaghan County Museum. Her work has featured in The Poetry Jukebox, a tattoo and a PhD paper. She was shortlisted Over the Edge New Writer of the Year 2018, longlisted for the Hennessy New Irish Writing award in 2019, and shortlisted for Chultúrlann Poetry Competition 2020.

Anita is supported by an iDA award, managed by the University of Atypical on behalf of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.

Valuable, not Vulnerable

The shadow of Coronavirus has suffocated the world. But as a physically disabled woman, the world has opened up for me.

With a squeeze of a button I see National Theatre productions on YouTube. Daily I have rediscovered Melissa Etheridge rocking from home. Jason Byrne is sweating workouts through Instagram; I have dusted off my dumbbells and he is inspiring my exercise. I have collaborated with Gary Lightbody, beaming from his LA rental. I run a book club through Zoom; isn't it interesting to see other people's décor? Normally I cannot access their homes.

I am WhatsApp video-calling friends, friends whom I normally text. I have taken up jigsaws; the last time I did one was forty years ago! I have signed up for a writing class with Google Classroom. I celebrated *Poetry Ireland Day* with live readings on Facebook. I am wondering – what will I do next?

In fact, what I feel is given to me, in these extraordinary times, is choice. Normally I am limited by access, expense or transport, but now feel I am on a level playing field with everyone. It has been interesting to hear people complain about how they cannot go anywhere and have a fear of isolation – that is my normal!

There will have to be questions raised about how the UK government disseminates news and advice. A week into the lockdown I phoned a friend with a learning disability who asked me, "What is a pandemic"?

There has been a lot of new words bouncing off the tongue. But then I thought, what is offered to people for whom English is not their first language, and do not follow the mainstream media, or could not comprehend a flyer? What is good for disabled people has beneficial ripples for everyone.

My sister has been confined to bed in her nursing home since this began. She cannot use the phone, so I have been sending her letters. I got a letter from her, saying she is well. She thanks me very much for my letters and pictures, though I note, she did not mention my poetry! Wouldn't it be great if all care homes had internet access within each room, as a minimum standard? This pandemic has highlighted nursing homes as vulnerable in a financially driven society. We deserve more.

Businesses, I am hoping, will appreciate they can think 'outside the box' in identifying different ways they can run a service, so it can be more inclusive, that we are valuable not vulnerable. We will no longer accept a shrug of the shoulder, or pointing to the wheelchair as blame for not receiving a service. Spring 2020 is a turning point and we can see what can be achieved and should not accept less.

The Longest Day of the Year



The clerics stood
commanding, demanding, unending
the old walls stood
supporting, surrounding, upstanding.

The lonely figure stood
courageously, stoically, outrageously
with pride and honour and defiance.

No cleric there who defined reliance
but the people stood around those walls
and these people stood whilst the last bell tolls.

The ancient stones echoed yearning and learning
the lonely figure stood bravely discerning
whilst the clerics stood
so unconcerned
as if it were a place where no one ever learned.

The people sat around those walls
engrossed, engaged whilst the last bell tolls
the children sat and ran and went
where many more had childhood spent.

The lonely figure presided there
proud and willing, always giving

a stalwart ever there.

The cold breeze blew around those walls
of the lonely church yonder
the ghosts of ancient elders wander
the crickets darted aimlessly through gable cracks
the birds sang joyously, unknowingly above the people.

Whilst the lonely figure stood
in the eye of the storm
on the longest day of the year.

Jean McQuade is a civil servant who has loved writing poetry for years

She writes:

This poem is about my very dear friend who had lost a major battle with hierarchy in a place she loved and invested her soul. The poem was about the closing down, literally on the longest day of the year, surrounded by the community – and the hierarchy, who had no soul.

Standing Still



Here it is...

A finger on the pause button
– A figurative spoke in the wheel
Our lives on hold
Whilst we await release

*

Who are we to chip and moan
When other are working hard?
Saving lives, making lives better
We're the idle, the ones inside
Waiting out the endless storm.
We do nothing. What are we for?

Can a writer be so, without a pen?
A carpenter without nail or hammer?
A shepherd without his flock?
A fisherman without his nets?

So let me pick up my blade once again
To cut through this dense morass
Of uncertain futures, blank pages
Virginal until conjugated with ink.
Let us write for now; not wait
For the balming light of our audiences.

Are we still standing...
Or are we merely standing still?

John Llewellyn James originates from Wales, but having spent more than half their life in the Province, considers it home. A poet with many voices, often writing in the narrative prose-poem tradition. John intends on producing their first anthology, *Neither Fish Nor Fowl* very soon.

The List



This is not a love song, a love poem or a

love note

It is a list;

a way to organise things inside my head

I do insist we never kissed

Or saw each other naked

Or made dinner together

Or watched nights break across days

None of the above

But you sang and the September moon fell still

I pinned the lyrics to the sky

Words in silver, yellow, blood red

In the cradle of a dream

In all that is left unsaid
They are a postscript to a roll book of absences
A list of things I did not do with you.

Teresa Kane