



Together or Alone?

The turning of the year is always a time for decisions. Breughel's painting *Hunters in the Snow* (which examined more closely in [this article](#)) is part of that tradition, and the upper part of it seems to echo a common theme: the city or the mountain?

Together or Alone?

The trend of the last five hundred years has favoured the lonely right-hand choice. Think of the religious tracts illustrating the Broad and Narrow Ways; the broad way leading downwards to the cities of the plain, and the narrow ever upwards into the light. We have seen the emergence too of the idea of the Great Man (and it nearly always is a man) – the Artist as Lonely Hero.

But that is too easy an answer. Mountains are great for inspiration, but it's what you do with the inspiration that matters. Art has to relate to other people. Seamus Heaney's last words of advice were: *be kind to each other*, and that was also the theme of Paula Meehan's speech in [Kindred Spirits](#).

It is also evident in John James' elegy [Some Other Rainbow](#) and Kate O'Shea's debut anthology *The Human Condition* launched in November (and sold out). Stephen Murphy's [Foreword](#) and her poem [Threads](#) are here. [The Thing Itself](#) sessions that she started were a great success last year, and look set to continue. Tyrone writer PHEME GLASS also launched her first novel [The Blossom or the Bole](#), and no doubt there will be more to come this year.

Each year, thanks to a grant from the Arts Council NI, Fermanagh Writers hosted a series of workshops. Malachi O'Docherty, who led a workshop on Memoir, has contributed *The Moving Finger*, the previously-unpublished script of a story he told at [ten9](#) on the topic of Change. [The Healing Story](#) was inspired by a workshop given by Anne McMaster, who has just launched her own kindness-themed [project](#).

To be kind, it helps to have kindred – family and homeplace – whether by birth or adoption. Angela McCabe's [Dad, 1930](#) and Bernard Calgie's [Remembrance](#) explore these roots, while Tony Brady ponders an [epitaph](#) and shows how writers, artists and craftspeople can support each other at [Collage Collective](#), and Kathy May's [painting and poem](#) remind us that kindred does not have to be confined to those who walk on two legs.

There are reviews too – of the [Star Wars](#) series and blues/country girl band [Wookalily](#).

Corncrake is going quarterly this year, so the next issue will be out in mid-April.

Jenny Brien

Editor



[Kindred Spirits](#)

Drew University's fifth [Transatlantic Connections Conference](#) was held in Bundoran from January 10–13 to celebrate the many ties between the United States and Ireland. The cover image features the Choctaw Nation memorial that commemorates how they, though suffering greatly themselves following the Trail of Tears that drove them from their own land, sent money to buy food during the Great Famine.

In that same dark time, according to family tradition, Paula Meehan's family left Leitrim for Liverpool, only to remain stuck in the Monto district of Dublin for the next century. These are a few notes from her final keynote speech which was, she said; *just an excuse for giving out poetry*.

The speech was titled *The Kindness of Strangers*, and she began by saying how much she relied on that in her early wandering years.

The bad stuff you met, the negativity, the aggression – if you have a path as an artist, all that can be turned into power for the good... That's the only truth I know.

She dedicated the reading to [Alicia Suskin Ostriker](#), who was also present.

[Her book [Stealing the Language](#)] gave me a kind of an armour to survive the world that I was heading back to here in Ireland... I knew I would get the poems I needed here on this island, in my native city.

While she had been away, heroin had hit the city. In her latest book,

[Geomantic](#), Paula took her inspiration from the commemorative quilts that communities made for their children lost through addiction. Especially hard hit was her own community:

the descendants of O'Casey's tenement dwellers ... they knew story and they knew song. They gave it with such generosity.

There are 81 short poems designed as patches, each with nine lines of nine syllables each.

The Promise

I won't do it. Not today. I won't
do it anyway. Not today. No.
Not because I can't do it. I won't.
Fallow fields lie dreaming under snow.
They won't be ploughed; not this spring they won't.
On the fencepost, a grey hooded crow
is part of some mystery I won't
fathom now. Though I'm really quite low.
I won't do it. Not today. I won't.

It interests me that the imagery in material that's suitable for children is often ferocious and violent and terrifying... If we learn to feel fear in what should be a safe place, maybe then when we're in the 'real' world and encounter fear, our bodies won't close down in the face of it.

The Broken Bough

We held our breath when you were a boy,
Out on a limb of the old oak tree
Helpless below as you shimmied up
Into its shadowy canopy.
That day the bough broke and you hung there
Alone through the sudden thunderstorm
We came upon you after, unafraid
though drenched to the bone. The pattern set;
all those times since, we wasted our breath.

The American poet [Gwendoline Brooks](#) was the first person of colour to receive the Pulitzer Prize for Literature. Her book *A Street in Bronzeville* gave Paula:

models and clues as to how I could write about my own community without patronising them, without making excuses, without 'on-behalf-ism' ... How do you negotiate your own demons and your own road with the responsibility of singing to and for your community? ...

This poem was inspired by a line of hers; *the singers and workers that never handled the air.*

The Ghost Song

From a dream of Summer, of absinthe
I woke to Winter. Carol singers

decked the halls of some long-lost homeland.
Late-night shoppers and drowsy workers
headed for the train. The night you died
was two-faced. June light never far from
mind though snow fell. I handled grief like
molten sunshine; learned to breathe your high
lithe, ghost song from thinnest air.

She was asked to write a suite of poems for the [Museum of Tenement Life](#) in Dublin.

I really do believe that Poetry is a sovereign state; it's not History, it's not Sociology, it's a state onto itself. Unless we take those freedoms ... we may be .. co-opted by various agendas and gangs... If poetry is to be always an exploration, so you don't even know your own agenda till you've written it, it can lead to some strange arguments... I think I alarmed them slightly when I presented the finished piece, which is called Museum.

She discovered that the word originally meant *a place to put things that please the Muses*, so she wrote a sonnet for each of the Nine Muses. The house that is the Tenement Museum was built for Lord and Lady Molesworth. It was one of the earliest and grandest Georgian houses on the North Side. It went from being a family mansion of the ruling class to being a family to a room. The classical Georgian iconography was still there, but its meaning didn't become apparent until she studied poetry.

In the tenement where she grew up the front door was always left open so homeless people could come in, to sleep under the stair or in any nook and cranny they could get into. There were ex-soldiers of the Great War, and the displaced women of Monto, the old red-light district. She remembers being sent out with a cup of tea for them in the morning.

To Polyhymnia, the Muse of Sacred Poetry

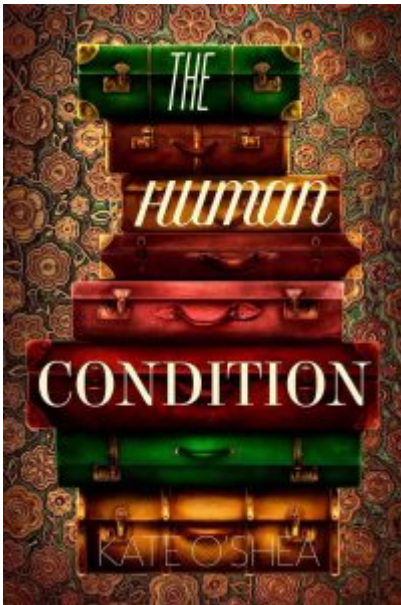
Our Lady of the Apocalypse

Our Lady of the Apocalypse, who never closed your heart
to the dissolute; pray for us, who gave shelter
in broken-down Georgian tenements
Who kept the doors open to the demented ones,
those who came in rags and miasmas of foul odour,
in delirium tremens, the worn-out old spunkers,
the displaced relics of Imperial trauma.
Oh, sweet daughters of Memory, veiled in Enigma,
who brought longed-for oblivion to the meths-drinkers,
the dipsos, the alcos, the put-down no-hopers,
those who came in from Chaos, from cold, from winds,
from rains, to sleep it all off in hallways and stairwells.
Who rent the long night with sobs, who cried out to you
in the throes of their last agony.

Grant them eternal succour.

Jenny Brien

[The Human Condition](#)



'They would have thrived on our necessities.'

– Eavan Boland, *The Emigrant Irish*

Whenever I've thought about the honour of writing this over the past while, the line from Boland won't leave me alone. Poetry has that strange habit of hitting me when I'm wandering along minding my own business. Often, such as now, as a line removed from the context of its original poem. For a while, I wasn't sure why I'd been possessed by Boland's words. But the more I thought about it, the more I realised that these are poems that thrive on our necessities. Kate has a wonderful gift to take moments and sculpt poetry from their essential self – a gift I'd likely be wildly jealous of if I didn't feel so privileged to call her one of my closest personal friends.

I hope it isn't too dramatic to say that we might not be here if it wasn't for words. Obviously in the literal sense; this book simply wouldn't be, but we often overlook the catharsis of words, and in our rush to quantify and respond to the world around us it's easy to forget the music that brought us to the dance. Poems carry within them their own hermitage, and as poets we seek refuge from the world in the word, and the word refuses to turn us away.

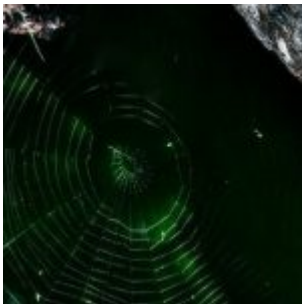
It's all too easy to turn to art in the darkness though. We all do it, often in spite of ourselves, but as artists we have an obligation to the alchemy of hope. We're fated to what Kate calls *the art of being still* and *still being*, to the sublime intimacy of *connecting whispers in the shadows of the soul*. At

the heart of art is the heart of one's self, and at the heart of one's self is often a terrifying realisation that we are all inexorably bound to one another by the spectrum of our human condition.

Over the past number of years I've felt deeply honoured to have seen these poems stretch their tentative wings and take flight, and to witness growth and deliverance as they've taken their rightful place in the world. Somebody once told me that whenever I released a poem it felt like I'm birthing a child into being. In that context I feel now like an unqualified midwife holding a newborn; wholly in the way, unsure how I came to be here, but deeply humbled all the same to have the pleasure of playing a small part in the birth of this book. I'll leave you with the words, and in the hands of a wonderful woman, a beautiful mind and a truly precious soul.

These hands have a remarkable story to tell they have travelled an unknown, unforeseen journey, conquered it, little by little carrying out, these most unlikely, unexpected tasks of motherhood well, and now they write.

With love,
Stephen Murphy
Limerick 2017



Threads

She lies, sad with loss and grief
blankets tucked under chin
Her. Knee. Aches.
Simply can't face it, she decides
permits herself to say no, this once
No. Funeral. Today.
It isn't usual to climb back in,
this once in a life time, she affords
herself the luxury of a by-ball
Another friend given to the earth
they, left numbed with shock
at the swiftness of departure
He lies, sad with loss and grief
beside her when he returns

from the intimate-sincere-farewell
As viewing through a glistening cataract scar
she speaks of a spider's web in the frame
of the cobwebbed window
Back-lit by mellow autumn sunshine,
they reflect, discuss time and effort gone
into this carefully woven work of fine art
He, talks to her of the silk miles,
of energy expended on the weave,
they watch, as a fly trapped in the lost place
awaits its fate in the bracing November air
All but gone unseen by failing eyes
without this back-light of sun to hone their view
They lie as one, sad with loss and grief
nodding to this beauty
an all-too-often unsung hero, that is nature
She later tells of this precious time,
in measured detail, weaving an intricate,
artistic view of her own
Leaving. Nothing. Out. Not a word!
The notion of time scarcity pushing to the fore
of late
For they. Are older. Now.

Kate O'Shea

Image: eberhard grossgasteiger from [Pexels](#)



[The Moving Finger – A Memoir](#)

We don't really know our parents until we look back and do the sums.

My mother was born in 1916.

She was Maureen O'Halloran. Her father was a sailor.

There was a war on. There were a lot of wars on.

In 1935, at 18, she wrote an article for the school magazine about a day trip

to Rathlin Island. It's witty and includes little rhymes she composed. I think rhyming *island* with *dry land* was quite clever.

She was twenty in 1936, training to be a nurse, 23 in 1939 when World War 2 began, and she was a young nurse in London when the bombs came. She was, of course, smoking by then. It was the smoking that would kill her. An ad in the Picture Post of 1941 features a young nurse smiling because she enjoys the benefits of tonic wine when she needs a pick-me-up to help her get on with her work.

Values have changed. We no longer commend to nurses that they drink Buckfast in their breaks. Anyway, mum preferred Vermouth.

She didn't talk to me much about the dangers she faced though she mentioned the war a few times. She told me how they distinguished between two different kinds of rocket or Doodlebug. Their engines had different rhythms.

One went: *here we come, here we come, here we come*. Another, more fearsome, went: *we're coming to get you, we're coming to get you, we're coming to get you*.

My mother had a favourite poem or verse about how we have to accept change.

*The moving finger writes and having writ moves on,
nor all your piety nor wit shall lure it back to cancel half a line,
nor all your tears wash out a word of it.*

I grew to love Omar Khayyam in later life, perhaps because it connected me to her. Its attraction is that it expresses tenderness, devotion and cynicism and it celebrates wine. The attitude changes from verse to verse as some people, like my mother, would change.

You failed an exam; *The moving finger writes and having writ moves on...* She could reassure you there was nothing you could have done or she could excoriate you for having missed a moment and all with the same line.

So, born 1916. Young nurse in London in 1941. Married late, everything delayed by the war. One big change around that time was the National Health Service allowing her to get all her teeth taken out and replaced with dentures. My mother and father went together for their extractions in Derry and then downed whiskey together afterwards in Donegal to help them get over it. A lot of their generation, the adults I knew as a child, had no teeth, thought they were better off with dentures.

I was born in 1951. She was 36 years old. And I was one of twins and she had two children before us and two after us. She had all her children, in fact, between 1948 and 1956, between the ages of 32 and 40. That was some decade. As a child you live in a perpetual present. In your 30s time seems to be whooshing past. As a child you do not expect things to change.

When I was seven years old – 1958, the year Pearl Carr and Teddy Johnstone won the Eurovision Song contest with *Sing Little Birdie* – she would challenge me to run as fast as I could to the shops for five Park Drive and tell me

when I came panting back that I was the fastest thing on two feet and had a great future as an athlete. But sometimes I came back without the change, or worse, the fags, and my mother had a temper and would make me walk back to Gilroy's shop and search every inch of pavement, though there was little hope of finding what was lost.

Ach, she would say, in a tone that said she expected to be disappointed in me, as in everything, for the moving finger, and all that. It has its way.

But she went back to work, nursing in the City Hospital and there was a bit more money for pleasures. Wednesday night was their drinking-out night, and she would sometimes come into the boys' bedroom and wake us up by showering packets of Tayto crisps over us.

But her fatalism was also a tendency to depressive thinking, whether because she was missing the war years in London, felt she had taken a wrong turning, was shocked at suddenly being lumbered with all these children, having got into her 30s with her options still open, without the moving finger having written so explicit and binding a future for her.

She was fifty in 1966. There were times then when she was cheerful, playful, affectionate. We had holidays in Donegal in a little cottage that belonged to my father's sister Ena. There was low water pressure. We would save up going to the toilet until we got to the hotel at night for a drink, or go in the field.

She was fine with basic living. The war had taught her that. Toilets hadn't always flushed during the blitz either. At home, she might have moaned about not having the nice secure life she would have wanted, but on holiday she could almost take pleasure in the simplicity of cooking on a turf fired range, washing her smalls in the sink. She would get tiddly rather than drunk. One morning she laughed about having passed out the night before and shocked me by complaining that my father had not put her to bed properly.

A gentleman always opens a lady's bra for her when she passes out on him.

I had a sense that that was a line she had heard in a London play, perhaps a joke from among the nurses. This had happened before to someone, for sure.

She was 53 in 1969. The time of change. I didn't know about menopause. I was only just learning about periods. I had seen the red stain in the toilet bowl and learned not to ask, wondered if we were harbouring someone with an addiction to beetroot. And the bombs were back. And there were soldiers on the streets. And I heard gunfire and explosions for the first time.

My mother had loved British soldiers, had nursed them before. She worked in the Geriatric wards now but would go down and see young men in uniform, young men not in uniform, come into Casualty with bullet wounds, shredded limbs, bloodied. The moving finger had written over them all right, had made a right bloody mess of them.

One night soldiers stopped her round the corner from our house and told her she couldn't walk down the road to the bus stop at the crossroads because

there was shooting down there. She ignored them. Maybe she didn't care by then if she got shot or not. What was a smattering of rifle fire to someone who had been bombed from the air?

I saw change in her, but wonder now if the sneering and the disappointment was disillusionment, a sense that nothing changed, that the world would always let you down. I didn't know about depression. But I was beginning to be familiar with the fixity that was clamped on her then by the tranquilisers of that time, and realising that these were what provided the insulation against the shocks of gunfire, ageing, dispiritedness.

I sat with her watching Coronation Street a couple of days after Bloody Sunday when rioters set fire to the Busy Bee supermarket and we heard a cascade of explosions such as I had never heard before.

That'll be the soup cans bursting, she said. There was expertise here that I could have been drawing on.

She gave the impression that she wouldn't duck if an RPG came through the window. Maybe that was how she had responded to the doodlebugs, *coming to get you, coming to get you*. The moving finger had either written your name on one of them or it hadn't.

Her normal was war, and experience confirmed that it always came back, and that sickened her, that peace was a respite from it that could not be relied on. That hope was folly. That nothing really changed at all.

Malachi O'Doherty

Dad, 1930



Wears St. Patricks Academy

school uniform.

Striped tie, pen in pocket,
wool socks, strong leather boots.
Nordic good looks,
a confident gaze.

Soon his mother
will ask him,
the eldest, to find a job.
They are hungry
and help is needed on the farm.

He must leave behind his beloved
Latin, Literature, and Mathematics.
Take to the road on his bicycle,
sell insurance.

On the mountain
he will see a girl

pumping up her bike,
fix the puncture
and fall in love with her.
Pursue her till she says yes.

He will build a house nearby.
His family will love her.
I will be the last born,
and go to St. Patricks
to be taught by his teacher,
'Rusty' Ryan.

They will meet one day.

'Rusty' will say:

Your daughter is wild, never does homework.

My father with his confident gaze will ask me:

Why?

Angela McCabe



[Hunters in the Snow – A Perspective](#)

Three hunters trudge wearily homewards through the snow: it is by far the most popular non-religious Christmas card image scene, and with good reason. Pieter Breugel the Elder painted it in 1565, yet we feel it is a world we can

understand. Not long ago, men very like these hunted on Boxing Day, and wood was gathered for the fire, and the winter was cold enough to safely play on frozen ponds. You could easily imagine a local artist fifty or so years ago, painting such a scene from life or memory.

Despite the bitter cold and the hunters' evident lack of success, it seems a place well cared for and worth living in. No wonder the painting features as a symbol of Earth in the Science Fiction movie [Solaris](#)

But appearances can be deceiving. Breugel was no provincial; he was a famous and well-travelled artist. This is not some rural backwater, but the outskirts of Antwerp, then the richest city in Europe. The painting was one of six depicting the changing year, painted for Nicolaes Jongelinck, a wealthy merchant banker of that city. It is a traditional theme, once common in illuminated manuscripts, but done painted for a new market, to be displayed in a suburban villa. In many ways, this picture marks the start of an era that we are now leaving. Phillip II of Spain was the new ruler of Antwerp, more profitable to him than all his possessions in the Americas. In England, his wife Mary Tudor was burning Cramer at the stake and preparing the first Plantation of Ireland.

The strong diagonal lines of trees and houses draw your eye over the busy village below to the fantastical mountains in the distance. There are no such mountains near Antwerp; they are a memory of the Swiss Alps through which Breugel passed on his way to Rome twelve years before. There Michaelangelo and Raphael were painting, but his work is very different from theirs. Some parts seem still medieval in their uniformity of scale for houses and trees, but he has succeeded better than them in conjuring up the overall shape of the landscape and its space. The winter of 1556 was the harshest in living memory, near the start of what is now called the Little Ice Age. You can almost feel the cold.

Look again. In perspective, the horizon is always at the observer's eye level, so we are looking down on the hunters as if from the upstairs window of a house across the way from the inn they have just passed. The family outside has lit a fire to take the bristles of a pig they have just killed or are about to kill. The man who is carrying out the table on which it will be scraped is the only person in the whole painting whose face we can clearly see. He looks across at the hunters, but plainly no greeting has passed between them. Your eye is drawn to the mountains, and then back to the left. Behind the black trees, on a frozen yellow river, lies Antwerp.

The hunters are not going there, or to the mountains; otherwise, they would have taken the road on the other side of the inn. They can only be going one place; zigzagging down the steep slope in front of them, perhaps to the house across the bridge from the mill, where no fire is lit. Is the old woman carrying a bundle of sticks across the bridge going to prepare a fire for them? Perhaps. The pollarded trees show the importance of firewood, and on the road a full cart of wood is headed away, probably to light the fires of Antwerp. Yet the family up at the inn are burning straw, and what is the little man at the bottom right of the picture doing?

Look closer. All is not well in this seeming idyll. Axe marks on the tree next to the lead hunter and a bird trap set at the last house in the ridge show how well Breugel knows that every bit of this land is exploited. The nearest hunter bends to examine a track in the snow, but it is only that of a hopping crow. The pig-killers have built their fire very close to the inn. If you did not know what was happening, you would almost think they were looting it. The broken sign shows that it is dedicated to Saint Hubert – the patron saint of hunters. Strangest of all – look at the house in the middle distance, between the church and the bridge. Its chimney is clearly on fire. Someone has climbed on the roof and thrown a bucket of water to try to douse it.

What does it all mean? We can only guess how much of that detail was painted expressly for Jongelinck. As to what it meant to Breugel – that is another matter.

There is only one thing more to say: the year after Breugel finished this painting, religious riots broke out in Antwerp, the prelude to a general revolt which led to Dutch independence and the sacking of the city by the Spanish, in 1576. Not so very different from the first Christmas after all.

Jenny Brien

For a more detailed image of the painting, see [Google Arts and Culture](#).



Remembrance

We ran the hazel byways he and I
And chased the morning glory down the lanes
And tumbled through the meadows on the way
To lay our tousled locks in secret glades.

#

And oh the bluebell bowers where we played
Mid slumbering pastures sheltered in the fold
Where nodding shires slowly turned the fields
To scented earth beneath our wayward toes

#

And through the lengthening shadows fleet we sped
Before the harvest moon had shed her light

To four strong walls where hands would gather us in
To draw us near and keep us through the night.

#

And innocence reached up to touch the stars
In strong brown arms that often raised us high
Where smiling faces took us by the hand
And led us down to dreams by candlelight.

***Bernard J Calgie** was born on the Necarne estate near Irvinestown and spent his formative years there. He has lived in England for sixty years now but still remembers his childhood days in Fermanagh with affection.*

Photo of bluebells at Necarne by the author.



[The Healing Story](#)

Seventeen writers each take a theme: a middle-aged woman, two kids, is packing her bags in the supermarket. Seventeen stories emerge, each different. Those who know the writers can tell – this is John's story, this is Bob's; no one else would have taken the same approach. Yet our stories are not always simply our own, nor are they merely commonplace. The best stories take their life from the twilight zone between the individual and the universal. They bring with them the sense of something both unexpected and inevitable.

How many women, shopping on some long-forgotten errand, contributed unknowingly to those stories? The memories of how many other incidents, seemingly unrelated, added their own twist? And why are some writers addicted to rhetorical questions? No one knows. The point is – writers do consciously, and for fun, what other people do unawares. We all live in a sea of inspirations so vast that we are hardly aware of it. No one, at any time, is aware of, let alone understands, one percent of what goes into the stories they weave. Those strange, familiar patterns seem to emerge of their own accord. For some of us, those patterns, the things we notice about ourselves and the world that we can understand, are comfortable and reassuring. For some, they are threatening – even incomprehensible.

In either case, they are not the whole story. No one story is ever the whole story, for the whole story can never be told. Or, rather, the whole story is

in the process of being told, in all that was and is, and is to come. As with all the best stories, we may guess at how it will unfold, but all we can hope for is that we will be both surprised and convinced by twists we had not imagined.

We can only manage the little stories, the stories that are small enough to fit inside our heads, though no story ever told remains there. Stories connect – writer to reader, listener to hearer. Stories have consequences. Perhaps that is why there are some stories we will never tell. We invent other stories to wrap them up, to keep them safe, and only bring them out when we are alone. Before we are old enough to understand, our imagination fashions the mundane into the stuff of dreams or nightmares: the organ-playing wood, the jolly-rogered sea.

But there is only room in one head for so many untold stories, so many unfulfilled dreams, and those we feed are the ones that grow. There is a name for stories and images that feed such cuckoo dreams – porn. Not only sexual porn: there is also revenge porn, religious porn, house porn, car porn, bike porn, even writer's porn. As the old saying goes, *It increases the desire and takes away the capacity.*

Sooner murder a child in its cradle, said the poet William Blake, *than nurse unacted desire.* Untold stories have their consequences too. They become deeper and stronger, more out of touch and more resistant to change. People seek help from a healer when their stories begin to be threatened by inexplicable reality. They may want someone to take that reality away, so that they can go on doing what they always did, telling themselves the same old, familiar story – or they may realise that will not work; they need a new story to make sense of the world as it now is.

Poets and healers have this in common: both know that a story is not reality, but it can reflect a deeper reality, one beyond immediate appearance. Both can make their way between dreams and visions, following the thread that binds them, not knowing yet what lies at the other end. Both are ruthless – prepared, if need be, to murder their darlings.

There is this difference between the poet and the healer: the poet works outwards – a multitude of different stories may emerge from a single point of inspiration. The final poem is whatever it wants to be, and takes whatever inspirations it needs to make it so. The healer works inwards, towards the hidden, untold story, searching the sea of inspirations for any thread that may lead towards it, gently unwinding the stories that surround it.

This is an art, not a science. The forms of divination: analytical or Jungian, palmistry or tarot – are as seemingly arbitrary as the forms of composition: sonnet, sestina or villanelle. They serve much the same purpose – to provide the practitioner with a framework and point of departure, and to suggest possibilities that might otherwise be overlooked. There is of course bad healing as well as bad poetry: work stretched and distorted to fit preconceptions about the framework.

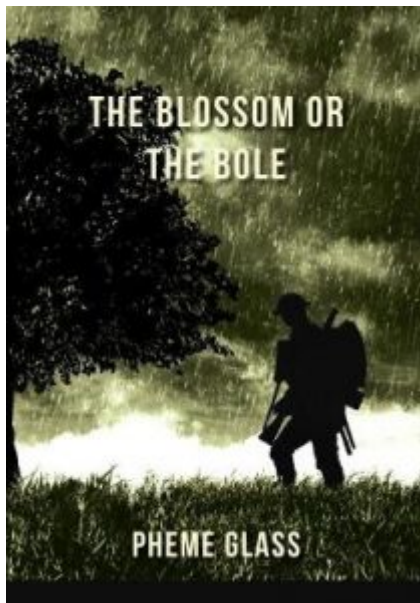
Poetry makes nothing happen, says Auden. *It survives, a way of happening, a*

mouth. Sometimes finding a way is enough, a way for a mouth to tell a story it could never speak. Patience to wait for the mouth to find its own words. Courage to hold the story to the light – and let it go.

Jenny Brien

Image: TED Talks [Before Public Speaking](#)

[The Blossom or the Bole](#)



The original idea for this book came from a short story I wrote as far back as 2008 about two boys growing up in the Sperrin Mountains at the turn of the 20th Century. Later that year I was given the opportunity to visit WW1 Graves in Belgium and France, and it sparked the question, why did so many young men go so readily to a war-torn country and how did their decisions impact on the families they left behind.

The Blossom or the Bole is not about the war in Europe but instead tells the story of the two boys, one Catholic, one Protestant, and what happened to them when they made the momentous decision to join the army in 1914.

My characters were very much led by the events which were unfolding around them, as they come to understand fully the implications of a divided community and are forced to acknowledge and deal with them in the midst of turbulent times.

In order that my reader could keep abreast of the Home Rule debate, the War and other news, I decided to insert newspaper headlines from two of Tyrone's leading publications of the day, *The Tyrone Constitution* and *The Ulster Herald*.

The Blossom or the Bole – Prologue

A full moon cast four shadowy figures into bright relief as they climbed up the side of the mountain carrying a long box between them. The night was still, apart from their short white puffs of breath, which filtered into the cold air.

Halfway up they stopped at a low wall surrounding a cairn and left down their burden. An owl hooted three times. One of the four put his hands to his mouth and hooted three times in reply. They waited, neither moving nor speaking.

A blanket of fog rose from the valley further down, creeping closer to where they stood, swirling around them like a veil. Out of the fog, four more figures appeared. The box was passed across the wall to waiting arms.

No words were spoken. The first four turned and disappeared into the fog. The new bearers moved slowly up the mountain and were soon lost in the shadow of the thick gorse that surrounded them.

The first light of dawn broke on the muddy street of the small thatched house. A dog growled but was silenced by a low whistle from a man as he crossed the street to the front door. He lifted the latch gingerly to avoid its noisy clatter.

Stepping into the kitchen, he stooped to warm himself over the dying embers of the fire. The night had been successful.

The guns had come at last and were now in safe hands.

PHEME GLASS

The *Blossom or the Bole* is available locally through Enniskillen Castle Bookshop; Collage Collective; The Carlisle Bookshop, High Street, Omagh and Sheehys Bookshop, Cooktown. It may also be ordered from Waterstones or other good online bookshops, or from Amazon UK.

PHEME is currently working on a sequel.