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Photograph by Mark Ulyseas
Celebrating 6 years 2010-2015

Guest Editorial and Poems

Geraldine Mills

Geraldine Mills has published three collections of short stories and four collections of poetry. She has been awarded many prizes and bursaries including the Hennessy/Tribune New Irish Writer Award, two Arts Council Bursaries and a Patrick and Katherine Kavanagh Fellowship. Her fiction and poetry is taught in universities in Connecticut, U.S.A. She is a tutor with NIU Galway and an online mentor with Creative Writing Ink. Her first children’s novel titled Gold is forthcoming from Little Island in 2016. www.geraldinemills.com

After Midsummer’s Day

Eileen Casey

Eileen Casey is based in South Dublin. Her poetry, fiction and prose is widely published in literary anthologies, journals and magazines. Dedalus Press, Faber and Faber, New Island, Jelly Bucket (Eastern Kentucky University) are among inclusions. As publisher and editor, recent collections include: Circle & Square (2015) and Reading the Lines (2016), a joint venture with Live Encounters. She received an Individual Artist’s Bursary from South Dublin County Council in 2016.

As Moon and Mother Collide

Mary Melvin Geoghegan

Mary has four collections of poetry published her last Say it Like a Paragraph with Bradshaw Books, Cork (2012). Her work has been widely published including Poetry Ireland Review, The Stinging Fly, The Shop, The Moth, Cyphers, Studies, The Sunday Times, Skylight 47, Grannan, Boyne Booke, The Stone Thursday Book, The Oxfam Calendar amongst others. In 2013 she won The Longford Festival Award for Poetry and in 2015 was shortlisted for the Curt New Writing Award. She has edited several anthologies of children’s poetry and is a member of the Writers in Schools Scheme with Poetry Ireland. Her next collection When Moon and Mother Collide will be published with Salmon Poetry in 2017.

Conflict

Lynda Tavakoli

Recently returned from the Middle East where she has been working towards her first poetry collection Lynda Tavakoli is now based back in her native Northern Ireland. Her poems and prose have been broadcast on the BBC and RTE and included in a range of publications such as Templar Poets’ Anthology Knein, Abridged, The Incubator Journal, Panning for Poems and Circle and Square. Lynda has won short story and poetry prizes at Listowel and featured as The Irish Times, Hennessy, Poet of the month in 2015.

Shipping News

Dr Greta Sykes

The poet, writer and artist Greta Sykes has published her work in many anthologies. She is a member of the London Voices Poetry Group and also produces art work for them. One of her own volumes entitled The Intimacy of the Universe focuses on the environment. She is a member of the Exiled Writers Ink group. She is a leading member of the Socialist History Society and organises joint poetry events for them at the Poetry Café. Greta is a trained child psychologist and has taught at University College London, where she is now an associate researcher. The present focus of her research is women’s emancipation and anti-gender.

Nothing is Fixed

Jean James

Jean James was born in Portadown, Co Armagh but lives in Swansea where she recently completed an MA in creative writing, with a particular focus on nature writing and poetry. She won The British Haiku Society haiku competition (2013) and came first and runner-up in The British Haiku Society tanka competition (2015). She has been published in Abridged and the Welsh Arts Review.
Unlike Paplo Neruda, I do not know when poetry came in search of me though it seems as if it was there from my first breath. I was born with a caul over my head. The nurse told my mother that it was a very lucky sign and that I would never drown; but she had to hide the little scrap of amniotic membrane up in the rafters for me so that it wouldn't get lost. Sailors would have paid her good money for it. Sadly it got thrown out somewhere in a house move. Yet its legacy still stays with me. Throughout my life there have been many times when I thought I was drowning. I never have. Each time there was that danger, I was saved by the lifebelt of writing that was thrown to me.

When I first started to write it was clear that I was going to be a ciotóg. The word ciotóg, an Irish word, not only means left-handed, gauche, sinister but it also refers to someone who is awkward and a little different. School knocked the left-handedness out of me. The sinister hand of the devil was locked behind my back, the anaemic tentacle that was my right hand given the pencil that tried to shape a fat sluggy 'B', a matchstick 'K' as letters stumbled off the page, collided, became a dirty hole on the page when I tried to erase it.

Being child number ten of eleven pregnancies, there was always a lot going on in our household, mouths forever opening and closing like swallow chicks in July waiting to be fed, to be heard. Quieter than the rest of them, it was much easier for someone like me to watch, to observe, than to try and compete with the constant vying for attention. Somewhere in the midst of those living encounters, pictures started to form in my mind as I looked for a way to express myself.

Geraldine Mills has published three collections of short stories and four collections of poetry. She has been awarded many prizes and bursaries including the Hennessy/Tribune New Irish Writer Award, two Arts Council Bursaries and a Patrick and Katherine Kavanagh Fellowship. Her fiction and poetry is taught in universities in Connecticut, U.S.A. Her first children's novel titled Gold has just been released and is available at http://littleisland.ie/shop/gold/ www.geraldinemills.com
Cack-handed

When a left-over scrap of fabric falls from the airing cupboard, something about its selvage and frayed threads lands me right back in sewing class battling with a square of calico, the making of a handkerchief.

I fold each edge into hem as I have been charged to do, measure out the elbow to fingertip length of thread, moistens it with my lips. With the silver spear between index and thumb, I prays that more than all the camels in all the world this white cotton will march triumphant through its eye.

I anchor the first binding stitch to fabric, and sweating fingers start to sew, my stitch going in the wrong direction, slanting away from what is right. The hand chastised. A shame.

I am no Joan of Arc a sword in my left, ready to take the blame for the milk turned sour, shield myself from the names spat at me, gauche, sinister, cackhanded, to take on the flame.

(From Urgency of Stars Arlen House 2010)
Attachment
(for Evelyn)

Living as we do without broadband
the photo of you downloaded
byte by snail’s pace byte. First
a pixel or two of hospice chair;

a line of stitching, before strands
of violet thread unwound,
a petal hinted at, grew to tulip,
stamen by brightening stamen.

Then your cap, its baby pinkness,
the frailty of your jaw,
your eyelid opening wide and clear,
the stained glass behind you becoming itself.

We sat out the thirty minutes it took
for the mauve rib of your cardigan to knit,
the startle of your fingernails holding
the clean outline of blueberry on cloth,

patient for you to network the broad
band of coloured threads to it.
Making us believe for a short time
that you were being born again.

(From Urgency of Stars Arlen House 2010)

The Sea
(For J.H)

Born where the world looked out
to Aran and beyond
it was the first sound she heard

before her birth-eye opened to its pulse
its up-swell, each wave washing
over her like amnion.

She grew to its cadence,
liquid scent of blue, of green,
its shape of salt on light.

Drawn to the silver pull
of neap and flood she looked beyond
as it fell into the ends of the earth,

then lifted itself out of the deep
to course through her
from hand to brush.
Brush  
For Rebecca

It’s proper name is Callistemen but I say bottlebrush. Choked by other shrubs – mainly lilac - its brief season spills over a neighbour’s fence – who has the best of it - seeking out space and air; I am left with remnants, days of sipping red.

The last time I saw you daughter, there was a bronco stallion of a moon, bucking neon skies above Times Square. Young men in doorways sleeping rough, their stilled faces beautiful as any sculpture. I could scarcely bear the city noises in my head like thrums of squabbling wasps. The apartment in Brooklyn, hot as an oven, your cat watching birds swoop by the window. He’s seldom been outside - yesterday in his carrier - which he pissed with fright on the subway to the Vet, Brooklyn to Coney Island. You told me in a text and I could almost hear the hiss of it across time and light, all the way from you to here.

With taut washing line, I could strain back my straying mare, a lasso made on midnight plains where worries and regrets roam free – but its tendrils are shaped the very same as wiry filaments that washed your baby bottles – my fingernail skimming rims for soured milk. Last Friday’s blue moon - named for two full moons in the same month – curved a memory of my nursing breast, the soft sucks of your breathing. I kept your airwaves clear.

After Midsummer’s Day  
For Maeve

The longest day has come and gone.

On Bray beach, a miracle of weather bakes loaves of multitudinous rock car bonnets blister, rivulets of ice-cream run over sun-creamy fingers and chins. A sky blue ocean is a world away. We scan its dimpling folds.

A child has gone missing, the aftershock distorts the frame. Dressed for winter, a man sits by the sea wall, oblivious to sentinels strung out along the shoreline; this sudden drama of prowl between gaps in booths hung with buckets and spades for summer sands. Motionless windmills.

We telescope laneways that lead to the town shadows darting like minnows. A black ribbon winds around his Panama hat, reminds me of a mourning band.

The cry goes up, the wanderer found, a fresh white wave rolls in. Returned to us the mysteries of present time ebbing and flowing its fathomless rhyme.
Black Ball Gown

It’s Wednesday, that in-between day. I buy milk, bread, ham (enough for two) and a black ball gown.

Black skirts billow swan feathers, a black swan. Rare sightings among old jumpers, reeds of widows’ weeds in the second-hand clothes shop.

Old shoes with loose tongues bring to mind gossiping women in Mr Bohannan’s (at least that’s how the name sounded to a child) sorting through the rubble of others’ leavings, searching out what was worth keeping, the way Mr Bohannan must have sorted through the rubble of Europe.

I want to bury my head in its folds, smell the smell of tulle. I carry it back to the bed-sit beyond Leonard’s Corner. A stream of black flows through my arms, through the mouth of a paint peeling front door (No. 8) up the stairs into the one room where my sister and I sleep and cook and dream (the ceiling has a black disc of smoke we burn so many meals, smoke so many cigarettes).

My black ball gown hangs across the wardrobe for the whole of the year I stay in that flat. I am barely eighteen not wanting to leave the nest of my Midlands home.

There is no work there and besides I have learned to type and take shorthand.

I walk to work each day, down Clanbrassil Street down the diving dip at Christchurch onto the quays; screams of gulls skim beneath black cloud balloons bounce off Liffey waters, summer smell of the river wending me towards Heuston Station, to the typing pool, no place for swans.

My black ball gown. how it lifts those black balloons softens the black discs on smoky ceilings.

While my fingers stammer over the typewriter strange Van Hool McArdle words it keeps its shape, is always exactly as I left it.
Octagonal, trapezium, kite, rectangular –
bracelets are collars too. Snares for images,
metaphor. Sometimes they’re porthole
or telescope;
rooftops studded by moonlight
slanting sleep across memory maps
purchased in exotic sites.

They leave a band
between the layers
deep enough so we can sink
into white spaces.

At day’s end, cooling from her heat
her bracelets jostle together on the bureau,
traces of them still breathing on her bare arms,
luminous in the dark.

Jorie Graham’s Bracelets

Behind a podium, the microphone turned on –
nothing coming back across the footlights –
her bracelets tell Ms Graham she is not alone
even if – sometimes – they snag her silks,
tangle up her gorgeous hair.

They catch the eye and then the ear,
a branjangle of sound each time her wrists
turn around, like the Volta in a sonnet,
scarce time to summon Baba Marta’s new born spring.

Such sliding in and out of place,
plays hoop-lay,
stacks and restacks
style and grace
or
like Sisyphus
rolling bone on bone;
leather, metal, shell
up and down
the white slopes of her arms.
**The Lost Fields**

She reads, her home place
the fields with names
running down to the river.
Listening, I get lost
as I climb over the gate
looking for our fields.
Till, I remember
how our parents spread the cloak
so each is never
without shelter.

**The Pigeons Helicopter**

over Sackville Street, mindful
of a retrieved Easter Monday
straight from 1915 -
the year before all changed.
My grandfather up from Roscommon
parents still waiting to be born.
The carousel spins
the ‘Road to the Rising’
swollen with a crowd
borrowed from another century.
And the whole day long
the sun shines down on children -
high on their fathers’ shoulders -
peering into the distance
remembering where they were
when Ireland will celebrate
fifty years on.

**As Moon and Mother Collide**

I take out my wedding dress
and the shoes my mother bought,
shake out the collapsed veil
and wind it round my throat.
I release the tension in the veil
and allow it fall all over the secret,
hoping my throat will open again.
Still, guilty of something.

Mary Melvin Geoghegan has four collections of poetry published her last Say it Like a Paragraph with Bradshaw Books, Cork (2012). Her work has been widely published including Poetry Ireland Review, The Stinging Fly, The Shop, The Moth, Cyphers, Studies, The Sunday Times, Skylight 47, Crannog, Boyne Berries, The Stony Thursday Book, The Oxfam Calendar amongst others. In 2013 she The Longford Festival Award for Poetry and in 2015 was shortlisted for the Cuirt New Writing Award. She has edited several anthologies of children’s poetry and is a member of the Writers in Schools Scheme with Poetry Ireland. Her next collection When Moon and Mother Collide will be published with Salmon Poetry in 2017. www.amazon.com
A Response to Hearing Mid-Term Break Again
i.m. of Mary Ellen Melvin

I see my mother crying
outside Holles Street,
waiting in the snow.
The green Ford van had broken down.
I sit beside my father
in the borrowed replacement
at the Baby Hospital across the road
looking down on Breda,
born with water on the knee
making one leg shorter than the other.
She was the eldest of the little ones
who spent years in and out of hospital
having surgery on both knees.
Now, each can hold its own.

Strand Road
for Marian and Pauric Melvin

Now, all your own.
I never thought
invited out to sea
from a favourite armchair
in your new home -
how, that window could frame
for all of us
the possibility of a future
as sure as the tide.
Beyond the fields of Roscommon
and the clear skies of North County Dublin.

In a Gift of Stickers
for Joan McBreen

Chagall arrived today
in a booklet of stickers.
Almost in the same way years ago
my father pulled out the artist
just as I was about to leave.
Flicking through -
I become his subject.
He invites me to choose a city
colour, century and time of day.
On reflection, I tell him;

'paint me in North County Dublin
in amongst the cowslips
sitting beside my brother
up in Kettle’s field on a Sunday;
our father and sisters down at the water
and our mother resting
on a cloud'.
Trying to Find My Whereabouts

in Madrid -
inside Museo del Prado
the light of Georges de la Tour
caresses ‘The Newborn Child’
and compassion enters.
Later, upstairs El Greco
catches my attention
in the gaze of ‘Saint Francis of Assisi’
and like a kite I’m blown.

Visiting my son’s apartment outside Madrid
we ramble through the noticeboard -
including photos from childhood
sitting on Santa’s knee in the Grotto with his brother.
Then he slips an arm around my waist
and I’m home again.

You Never Said -

That ladder in the camper van
leading to the bed
was narrow, unyielding
without a grip.
That I would have to hold on
with all I have
risk limb and skin
coming down.

Not unlike all that holds
wanting only
to draw us closer.

Ten Years to Pluto

along with a death, divorce and
the highs and hollows of expectation.
And then to our sheer amazement -
ahead of the calculated time
by two seconds
the New Horizons spacecraft
captured sight of Pluto.
And from billions of kilometers
Earth was brought closer
to the vast within
and beyond.

Caravaggio Finds Mary Again

the Magdalene after several centuries
he’d misplaced her behind all the gossip
scandal and just plain fascination.
Now, he slightly adjust the ecstasy
so it could be understood
or taken for childbirth.
Making her comfortable
he mixes the pigment
to moisten her lips.
The brush trembles
as he paints open
our eyes
While it Was Still Dark

*John 20: 1*

Returning from the Easter Vigil
and seeing how you’d rolled all
that dried Bluetack from the ceiling
of my son’s old bedroom, in neat
piles on the floor -

and the drug addict bear the GPO
not on heroin or crack anymore -
but, on pills bought off the internet
(benzies, lithium, dalmane).
Enough to summon -
making a dreary week-end
seem a paradise -

Where the city seeps its thousand colours
and there’s an angel in the sky
just above the Liffey.

Summer Grows

out in the garden,
Coming across blades of garlic
totally forgotten in amongst the weeds.
So bruised by my heavy hand
I hope they’ll survive -
while, I wonder at the rocket and mixed leaves
growing in the greenhouse
above the tomato plants.
In the corner the cucumbers remember
the father who passed on his love.

After Readings at Crannóg

*Crane Bar - 25th October 2013*

Next morning
full Autumn, in Eyre Square
the rain lashes down.
Looking out the window
the tree closest to me
is having a hard time
holding on to its leaves -
which, as we speak are being
collected by Leonardo da Vinci
while he’s thinking about the roots.
Roots, which will have to support
growth, spreading across centuries
quietly absorbing the sunlight
in the silence of Sforesco Castle.
Now, the world holds its breath
beneath layers of whitewash
as those leaves reappear.
CONFLICT

Recently returned from the Middle East where she has been working towards her first poetry collection Lynda Tavakoli is now based back in her native Northern Ireland. Her poems and prose have been broadcast on the BBC and RTE and included in a range of publications such as Templar Poets’ Anthology Skein, Abridged, The Incubator Journal, Panning for Poems and Circle and Square. Lynda has won short story and poetry prizes at Listowel and featured as The Irish Times, Hennessy, Poet of the month in 2015.

THE LEAVING

She left for school pretty in gingham
the heel of her socks half-way up the back
of skinny legs;
a ponytail’s auburn sway
waving its flippant farewell
at a mother’s angst.

That was leaving day,
the first and only time
I let her walk to school.
Alone.

Later I took a tear from the corner
of her eye where it waited
like a water droplet caught upon a leaf.
Surprised.

‘Killed in Crossfire’
a twenty second sound bite
on the local news,
yet every second
marked a year
of absence when a tissue
waited in a drawer
and one dried tear
remained the only thing I had,
but even that
evaporated now
to nothingness.

WAR AND WANT

The dust is first - always,
before the sun crisps the skin
or sand moulds molten heat
between our toes
there is always and ever
the dust to welcome us.

No orifice hides from its gritting
no spit or piss protected from
the chaff of misted rock
that scrapes its way inside –
the powdered bones of the dead
ghosting their revenge.

Yet in the sleeping hours
I still dream of you
beautiful even in the way
that angels are
who smile their enigmatic smiles
among the bloodied spoils of war.

For I feel the rise and fall of us
lusting my nights like the killings
that also lust my days
and will you forgive
my need for you
when you learn
of my hunger for both?

But you are not to know
these soldier’s thoughts
that scar my days and nights -
for the thing that was first is last, always,
disintegrating again to the fineness of dust
welcoming us all.
CONFLICT

LYNDA TAVAKOLI

First Day at School
For the children of Beslan

I remember it - my first day at school.
The smell of new cut grass,
the soap inside my cotton bag
from some old dress my mother made,
a tang of polished wood from classroom floors,
or cabbage and potatoes
that waft down corridors.
The sight of it, the grey and
crumbling walls of chiselled stone,
so big for one so small to fit into
or so I thought when I was four.
A touch of mother’s hand,
the sound of my own breathing in my chest.
These things I memorise within my mind,
the day I started school.

I remember it – their first day at school.
A day as filled with hope as any other
when they had smelled the grass
and touched their mother’s hand,
or heard the bell and tasted
the sweet promise of success,
until their dreams were sacrificed
upon the altar of a stranger’s cause
that shattered and destroyed
a thing as fragile as an angel’s wing
and left our souls bereft.

But we can hold their
missing futures in our hearts
to let those wings take flight
and gently soar upon the softer winds
of summer days or in between
the corners of our sleep.
These things we keep
in memory for what they lost
the day they started school.

In Syria the shooters
choose themes for target practice,
a living video game of
entertainment for the week.

On Saturday it’s chins -
anything below the nose, above the neck,
and rifle sights explore
a quivered lip
as points deduct for errors –
cheeks and ears are left
for Sunday’s sport.

On Monday, it’s the old,
their leech-peeled progress
over desert skin the easier
to track,
points deducted for impairment
but added for an outright kill.

On Tuesday, pregnant women.
Two for the price of one (but scarce)
with double points for primary executions,
only if you’re in the zone.

On Wednesday, barrel metal
rests on gaping sills,
trigger fingers slack
for mobiles phoning home
while someone calculates the points
but lets the stretcher bearers
live upon a whim.

Thursday’s dawn will drone
unblinking and unlit,
sheltering the snipers’
bull’s-eyed sleep from heavenly foe.
Anonymous the joystick thumb
that strokes its target from
behind a foreign screen,
one final arbitrary theme,
the sum of all its parts,
no worse, no better
than what’s gone before.

Friday now and Holy Day.
Notch up the scores
before the credits start to roll
and silence sucks its permadeath of souls
into the black hole of a VDU.

First Day at School
For the children of Beslan

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**The Shipping News 1**

Night fell on Faeroes, when the shipping news
Were read, the views
Of local people most confused:
northerly wintry showers give way to
sunny spells, warm summer breezes,
mainly good.

Hebrides children ran out to play, when
Mainly west north westerly showers,
Fog patches followed by snow
Did not arrive, but southerly
Soft air flowed, temperatures rose
And rose, to 35 degrees.

Lovers on Lundy beach felt full of glee.
The Irish Sea had warmed and lay
In soft and shimmering sunshine, the violent storms
A distant memory.

Finisterre's green palms were no more stirred
by violent storms
Much later a yellow fog did not arrive,
It stayed just mainly good,

At German Bight the sandcastles stood bright
Against the sky,
Occasional violent storms did not materialise.
Yellow beach baskets, with fabric of red and white stripes,
sometimes blue and white, shone in the crystal air;
Seagulls shrieks grated
And tourists watched blankly
Eating cake.

**The Shipping News 4**

Copenhagen Climate conference

Viking Forties
3 to 4 pervasive fog
Cromarty
5 to 6
Nil visibility
In Copenhagen
The men in suits nervously haggle
Like marketenders
the price of fish at stake.

Dogger Fisher
7 to 8, grizzly rain, showers
Deteriorating,
The Jet stream
Relocated,
Shifting further to the north,
Gulf stream warmth culled,
Hope culled.

In Copenhagen hedge fund managers
Pull their money strings,
The climate change doubters
Like marionettes
greedily tear apart
the body of the plan
to rescue earth,
limb by limb.
There are no melting ice bergs,
no arctic disappearance of the ice cap,
there is no carbon dioxide increase
no rising floods, sea levels,
there's money to be made.

Humber, Thames, Dover
Irish Sea,
9 to 10, poor to dismal,
Blistering snow
Rising sea levels
By several meters,
London adrift, the city stock exchange
Drowned yesterday,
Our paper money washed up
Valueless
And without meaning.
Jean James was born in Portadown, Co. Armagh but lives in Swansea where she recently completed an MA in creative writing, with a particular focus on nature writing and poetry. She won The British Haiku Society haibun competition (2013) and came first and runner-up in The British Haiku Society tanka competition (2015). She has been published in Abridged and the Welsh Arts Review.

Dawn Chorus

You are the waterfall in my ears filling my bone temple to the rafters  
What is it you sing of?

The constant is no constant.  
Each dawn a new choir croons perfect notes perfectly.

I do not know why my eyes are open and others are not.  
I do not know who has left.

Perhaps it is I who have gone, and she is still humming in the kitchen, sifting flour in her fingers,

watching the blackbird at the window, dreaming of Drumacken and a young man in uniform at the bend of the road waiting casually, knowing she will come with a wave in her hair and her voice.

I wonder is it them out yonder quickening the heart of my garden on a morning in June?

After the war

we begin

by breaking into derelict buildings  
breaking open blind windows  
breaking up oak pews  
breaking down doors to secret locations with maps scrawled on walls and empty gun-cases

we continue

by breaking bread cutting the crust crumbs falling through fingers like seeds

we end

by breaking the sod to grow buttercups  
dog daisies  
violets roses
Under Magnolia Skin

a patina of pale silk
licks the old walls
skeining catching
the sun’s last rays
birth cawl dreaming
memory membrane
cradling

a whitewash to cover sin
with hasty strokes
gauzing stretching
over insults etched
into rough stone
each word cut carefully
suppurating

a bandage of sweet flowers
dead petals fall
glazing sealing
marble tombstones
over the past
bearing faint barbs
bleeding

under magnolia skin

Captured

We brought his jacket back
ready for the year’s hard rains,
a shame to let it go.

Six months settling on the peg
its weight of winter shoulders.
Sunday we pulled it out.

I pressed my nose in close, snared
in the scent of some far country
its bog land sluicing my heels.

You shrugged it on,
and then, him, dog at his side, striding that
far hill, clamped in the damp.

He dwelt inside yon coat, wore
the weather in Fermanagh’s sodden fields
captured in green.
Rules of Engagement

‘The minstrel boy to the war has gone,
in the ranks of death you’ll find him...’ Thomas Moore

Rule number one
Do not accept tea from the woman in number three
She wears your number on her back

Rule number two
Doors banging in the night
May not be the drunks coming home

Rule number three
The only good shepherd here
Is busy looking after sheep

Rule number four
The Boyne is not just a river
Its banks run red and deep

Rule number five
A train can be derailed
Even when still on track

Rule number six
A cenotaph is no place
For the dead

Rule number seven
A barking dog knows
Something you don’t

Rule number eight
Who you talk to
Is not always who you talk to

Rule number nine
A child can lead a man
Down the wrong road

Rule number ten
What makes you think you
Speak the same language?

Rule number eleven
When they ask the foot you kick with
They don’t mean the ball

Rule number twelve
A balaclava
Is not a fashion statement

Rule number thirteen
Try not to get left with the clearing up.
Small things get lodged in your throat.
Out to pasture
I have shrunk
to a speck
in a cow’s eye
across the crusting fence
she mirrors me
every breath
my halter.

Tanka
the chill
of an owl’s hoot
in the dark
I move closer
to your back

Tanka
after the funeral
an atlas on the table
open at Africa
you were always hoping
to see other worlds

Letter from Shenandoah
From the hedge of her mind
she sends letters back to the island.
She writes
that here nothing is fixed
that life climbs up from the roots,
that nothing is separate,
that you can tell a wood by chewing it
that days stretch out kite-tailed
that this country rolls on back and back
quilted in blue grass and fractured greenstone.

She talks of how a woman
can feel lost here
looking
that bushes are wired with swallowtails
that Queen Anne’s Lace mantles the fields
that fruit cellars groan with apples
that the mare is fetlocked in moonlight
that pine and oak and chestnut
proffer their limbs for homes and barns.

After dusk she sits
in the oil lamp’s circle
with Joseph in the corner asleep
mumbling something about judgement
and she feels the house moving within them
in the powder of earth after rain.

Later,
settling her head on the flanks of night
she can see the shadow of
her empty rose-sleeved dress, still warm,
its arms outflung on the back of the chair
waiting to surprise her again.
Asi por el Destino Conducido

Reading Neruda in Spanish I tremble slightly.

Asi por el destino conducido, So drawn on by my destiny.

This morning the proud roosters, the doves, the small birdsong,
but last night coyote’s howl set loose wild communal cries against destiny.

Before he died the teacher’s eyes were deep pools of eternity,
empty of all, even the fierce embrace of his destiny.

Without rain, everything in the land changes, even
the leaves of desert plants harden to adapt to their destiny.

When lizards appear snakes are not far behind. As I
clean off the dead yucca leaves, I consider my destiny.

People keep filling the emptiness with ideas. I am
parched without silence, the soul’s voice and its destiny.

Everything Remembers Them

Riding the border of liminal spaces - dawn, dusk, love,
a hoard of ripened yucca wave seed pods high in the desert air
near the border, not too far from the road.

Even the yucca speak their names – the ones who hide
with the snakes in arroyos far from the sun and the border patrol.
With luck they find the jugs of water hidden beside the road.

The heart opens to something new and unexpected
in nameless territories without passports or certificates of birth,
but the tongue is silenced with sorrow by the guards along the road.

When the wind blows, the yuccas quiver from their center,
light playing in them like rays of the sun. Some planets
whirl around unnamed lights like moths on a spiraling road.

On her feast day we pray to Guadalupe on both sides of the border,
We cry out her names, La Morenita, Boundary Crossing Mestizo,
undocumented virgin fleeing through a desert road.
The Hind Leg of the Dog

Wrapped in a teal blue Turkish shawl I sit against the concrete wall colored adobe sand and bright rose. I don’t know why I am here in the unrelenting sun with my pale Irish skin and lack of Spanish.

The mariachi band begins to sing. Gilbert’s horn rises to the Mexican sky. At the sight of a child dancing the old woman next to me cries. I place my hand on her hand, smile. We are in a dry land called the hind leg of the dog, eighty miles west of Juarez and El Paso.

Marcelina, a Tarahumara weaver woman fingers my shawl the way women weavers do. We both nod at its fine work. I say, Turkey, meaning some woman in Turkey, who is somehow our sister, wove it. Marcelina stares. I say, near Iraq. Why do I even mention Iraq, but I do. Marcelina smiles, not understanding my language. I put my hand on her hand. She puts her other hand over mine. Now four children are circle dancing, then spinning and spinning in folds of white muslin.

Somewhere, somehow I lost a supporting part of myself, this thing called language, another called love. In a dream my friend is sewing back on the fallen off hind leg of her dog. Her husband tells me I have forgotten I am a woman who is still lovable.

I don’t know the meaning of love anymore, either in its giving or receiving. Osvaldo, my new godson, is eight years old and we both know we are now somehow related. ¡Hola, Osvaldo! My hands touch his hair, cradle his face, kiss his cheek in the Mexican way. He looks up at me suspiciously. Two trucks of armed federale soldiers drive by.

Speaking in Tongues

After years of silence the wild poppies were yellow suns quivering in the winds, then they returned to silence again.

The century plant finally bloomed its one flamboyant show of flowers, then died into a bed for its own seed.

Christ’s thorn, jujube, sweet date like fruit, juniper berries, seeds of pomegranate, figs. Speech of bird, beast, flowering verbs.

The desert speaks in these tongues of the deep light, intense enough to help me die into the silence and rise once again.
Reading Barren Land

Once ocean bottom this desert is now
a ground coral reef of snake ridden sand.
Outside in the shade of the adobe church
the persistent light is a visible wave I ride
though the broken windows of abandoned cars,
into the garden next to the green
nineteen fifty six trailer where children
play not ten feet away from the shed,
the hole under it, the scorpions’ nest.
Here in the desert, light is clean,
unrelenting like prayer
and the darkness has its own place.

Marcos, a lean fifteen with a six inch statue
of Guadalupe about his frightened neck,
is on the drug cartel hit list, as are his
uncles, cousins, brother; two already dead,
gunned down in broad daylight, their faces
shot off in this other kind of night.
One hundred and sixty five bullet casings
found around them. At the cemetery eyes
scan the horizon. Our protectors, the federales
are mysteriously gone. We are on our own now.
A woman points to the holes in the ground,
Careful, she whispers, they sometimes come out-
the rattlesnakes.

Against drought, barrel cactus, prickly pear,
organ pipe, thorny tough skinned succulents
hold water. Eight months with no rain,
then a few drops, this surprising flash - they flower.
Yesterday lightening, thunder, a small mist,
today the pallos verde sings in yellow buds.
Speaking in green the sands tell of secret seeds.

Where is the place the lost gods gather?
Are they on their own, tumbleweeds dancing,
their voices in ruin with only the wind, and art,
dreams and the clear starred night to remember?
Are they merely ground bone gone to sand?
In the wind hewn rocks of the Floritas
the breeching whales hover over seas of desert.
In dreams and in the deep night winds we hear
their arching singing flesh breaking waters.

Letter to My Son

The unremitting desert sun,
the blood of the dead in the streets of Palomas.

A field of fireweed ripening,
a sky bloodied over Mexican mountains.

Washing Daniel’s effects in the water;
his dried blood alive again, singing on my red hands.

A world lit only by fire,
the month I bled after you were miraculously born.
Tiger

sleep is the only respite
my longing for You
rises with the sun
gaining strength
on the heat of the day
demanding
that its gnawing hunger be fed

a mighty tiger
behind the bars of my ribcage
that needs the open spaces of
Your Presence
to breathe and be free

i am astounded:
how did it end up here?
did You make me a promise
at some beginning
that i have forgotten
and only
the tiger’s insistent hunger remembers?

why else
would Your absence make me suffer like this!

10th june 2010

Sarmad

they say
the mystic sarmad
fell in love
went mad
tore off his clothes
why, you wonder,
do lovers roam naked?

it’s not for the union
you think they want

it’s the union inside union
they seek

Real Love calls you all the way in
all the way back
to answer this call
lovers would,
if they could,
tear off not just their clothes
but also their skin
their muscle
their bone

anything that binds
holds them together

because every cell
in their bodies
yearns to answer
the call of Love

is desperate
to be free of solid
separation

so it can experience the
everything! everything! everything!
it is

7th september 2011

Shahbano Aliani is a Shaykha (spiritual master) in the Shahdili-Darqawi Sufi order. Her quest for purpose and meaning brought her to the Sufi path in 2009. Soon thereafter Shahbano started writing poetry, a collection of which has been published by Intent Publishing South Africa and Na’layn Publications, Pakistan entitled, “Set My Heart On Fire”. Though written in English and in a modern voice, her verse is both a timeless chronicle of and a manual for spiritual transformation, in the finest tradition of Sufi poetry.
Miraculous

we sit
you and i
under a translucent
grainless tent
of blue described only
by one word:
sky
as far, and farther than,
the eye can see
trees on patient vigil
birds bursting suddenly
into flight or song
ants rushing
to their daily chores
on pebbles and grass
that slowly hand over
to the day
little bits of dark-damp
cling to the earth
from the night before
an enormous round
slice of lemon
hangs high in the east
raising unseen breaths of air
that kiss a fine,
almost invisible,
curl on your cheek

you breathe in
you smile
your eyes light up
words roll off your tongue
liquid, sweet flowers
that i taste deeply
beyond my senses

you breathe out
and the
fragrance of your breath
mingles
with the breath
of silent trees
blue sky, hot sun
birds, ants
pebbles, grass
and all other things
we cannot see

this effortless
simultaneous
connected
being
as miraculous
as surrender
in a single drop of
rain

28th december 2010

Find Your Love Story

the One
who created you
wrote your story too
a masterpiece
of love

hurry!
go find the love story
written for you

leave this windowless room
do you think trees and butterflies
worry about security
or reputation?

you have grown cold here
and lonely
alien,
even to yourself

in flashes, sometimes
i have seen the exhilaration
of pure joy and freedom
on your face

there is nothing more precious
more beautiful
than this inner light

nothing the world gives you
or keeps from you
nothing!
is worth this total
dissolving into
what you really love

there is another world
immense
richer, more beautiful
than where you’ve ended up
take a risk
open your heart
fall in love

watch how everything wakes up
spins and sings
taste the world
like never before

what’s there to lose
but a lifetime of imprisonment?

9th july 2011

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I Can Endure Anything

the time for words
is over

(they usually convey nothing
but the platitudes
of habitual disquiet)

the fearful one is dead

this lioness here:
she has seen
floods and raging fires
been prey
and predator
both

she can endure anything:
the radiance of your face
your slaughter-house eyes

come!
Look at me!
i tell you:

i can endure anything

18th February 2012

Your Scars Make You Beautiful

it’s your scars
that make you beautiful
the places you have been torn
and broken
that’s where your radiant compassion
grew
that’s from where
it shines through
melting stony guardedness
uprooting secret thoughts
destroying habits
making people forget who they were
before they met you

in an instant
setting ablaze a thousand souls

it’s your scars that make you beautiful

18th June 2012

© Shahbano Aliani
A Scar Of Place

If love is always
a rediscovered one,
war too must be
relocated binding,
when we part
the grasses of the earth
that are our mother’s hair,
and find a scar of place,
a vulnerable site,
the bell shape
of a grief that always
returns to ringing.

The Angels

In the room
where the soul stops
to rest before traveling,
the beds are full
of children.
And the angels,
kneeling in lab coats,
are working at folding
their wings like flags
for the fractured families.
Green Umbrella

My body begins to cry slowly.
A book so truthful I cannot read
the final pages.

The room grows quiet.
A place so deep inside the flame
I cannot map it.

Your cathedral appears,
in a language so kin that hearing
is a green umbrella.

The God of The River

I met you
in a dream
and loved
your dreambody,

and saw on it
the light patterns
of flower petals,

visible to bees
and to the faithful
to the god of the river,

winding as
snakewater,
half animal
and the other
half tears.
The Soul’s Five Sadnesses

Thank you for your translation of the night it is in my native language.

And I carried the bottle of soil from that lost yard over every border.

Letters forgotten like tablets on a wheel. And the colors alternating in waves that arrive on the sands of the soul’s five sadnesses.

And the jar is always full of questions. And the garden grows beckoning

One Heart

If there is one heart, think how we care for each other; the bones like lace, and songs like first time breath of velvet skin, new dawn lullaby in a world where nothing has happened yet.
Lavender Scented Memories

Lavender heads burst forth, topped with purple feathers, catching my eye as they dance in the morning breeze. A gentle squeeze: powerful aromas permeate the air, as childhood ghosts’ dance behind tired eyes.

My grey-haired grandmother sucks a blue, thread end, pulling it straight, as she holds it out before her. My young, mesmerised eyes, watch in fascination her squint, as she feeds the eye of a shiny, silver needle.

Heads bent, we sew small, squared pouches, from remnants of my mother’s favourite ball gown. We fill the small corner gap with dried lavender and soap chips, before sewing them tight inside.

A crocheted hook; the final stage arrives; we hang our lavender scented pillows, through clothed, wooden coat-hangers, in the old mahogany wardrobe.

Returning frequently, I press my face inside its dark interior; close my eyes, inhale its sweet, safe, scent.

Homeless

Oblivious, I shop in this busy city. Warmly lit windows show their wares; amidst the hustle and bustle of busy lives.

I watch you sit on ice cold concrete.

A young man, scrunched forward, a woollen hat low on your head, your shivering palm held upwards.

My heart reaches out to you.

Thin jumper pulled over knees. Skinny, bare legs folded tight; long feet flat on the ground.

Sockless, shoeless, homeless.

Susan Condon, a native of Dublin, is currently working on her second novel. She was awarded a Certificate in Creative Writing from NUI Maynooth while her short stories have won numerous awards including first prize in the Jonathan Swift Creative Writing Award. Publications include My Weekly, Ireland’s Own Anthology, Flash Flood Journal, Spelk and Flash Fiction Magazine. Susan blogs at: www.susancondon.wordpress.com or you can find her on Twitter: @SusanCondon or check out her crime fiction interviews on www.writing.ie
Lady Cassie Peregrina

This is the title of my next poetry collection, which is due for publication in September. The book is based on our experiences with Cassie, a border collie we got from an ISPCA centre in Ireland.

The whole collection is really just one poem in six sections - three allocated to Cassie’s point of view and three to mine.

The following is the introduction to the collection and a further three poems from Cassie’s point of view.

Introduction

It all began in July 2013. Matthew, our son, persisted in his wish to have a dog and, seeing as we were going to be in County Mayo for a year, we were pleased to comply. The Ballyhaunis branch of ISPCA came up trumps and we met a border collie, Cassie, for the first time. She seemed timid and unsure which would indicate she’d not always been well-treated.

We fostered her on a trial basis, but the trial came to an end after about two hours and fostering became permanent. She very quickly got to know the roads, lanes and routines within a radius of seven kilometres of our house in Cill Aodáin, Kiltimagh. We struck up dog-walking friendships and I began taking notes and scribbling a few lines here and there, but it was only when I realised that Cassie must have memories of her own and definite opinions on her current lifestyle, that my scribbling began to shape into poems. Our routine brought me into contact with childhood experiences and memories - people I’d been to school with and grown up alongside. I got closer to the boy hiding within me.

Just after Christmas, the question of *quo vadis* arose and when we decided to return to Hamburg, Cassie’s future became an issue. Seeing as we were in this together, provision had to be made for a dog in our Golf estate. Months passed quickly and when summer came we set out with a carload of *stuff* and an inexperienced dog. Our journey took us from Cill Aodáin via a ferry from Larne to Cairnryan, to Newcastle by road, to Amsterdam by ferry and, finally, by Autobahn to Hamburg where I began the first draft of this poetry collection.

I am indebted to Cassie, my family, childhood gallivanting, lifelong friends and experiences, the ongoing struggle with life and mortality, my two sons, Seán and Matthew, granddaughter, Emma, and, especially, to Joanna for her support.
Rabbits

When I open an eye
to watch a pair of baby rabbits
nibbling at dandelion sprouts
in the front garden,
my single wish is to
snap this picture and frame it.

Point of View

Cosy stuff can be a bit excessive:
over here on the Foxford blankie, Cassie.
over here on the granny rug, Cassie.
And if I get wet – which is natural in rain,
they even resort to drying my paws.
You’d imagine a drop of rain was smelly.

All I want to do is to go speedo
about the house
to really amuse myself
but I don’t because they are okay.
Though I really enjoy pure wet.

I often give them that doggy look,
lackadaisical like,
casually offering a submissive paw.
It works: good Cassie, is Cassie fed?

It’s organic for me. I wish I could tell
oaf-dog-down-the-way
of my tasty morsels jangling
like new coins in my dish.

I’m a quick learner. I don’t bark much
and I’ve no intention of running away.
It’s because she’s a Collie.
They’re so intelligent.
Thanks people, couldn’t agree more.
Must keep that in mind.

Between ourselves, a friend’s dog
is a terrier type – all bark and snarl.
I’d prefer a path without pity to his comraderie
– any day!
Nothing is as it Seems

I'm only a dog but I see what I see
and hear what I hear
from my very own space
under stars, tables or starter's orders.
I do try to be in tune
with the chimes of our planet.

I could be losing compassion
but some adults roll out
such bizarre rhetoric
they seem to be out of touch.
Lose me, they do – going on
about education and politics
in that relentless, encore way
when their pool of arty banter
deserts them –
when silence seems unbearable.

I see children and teachers
trundle off each morning
like
swarms
of
bees
heading for artful pollen fields.

Noble thoughts about school
often seem out of bounds – a bit
like a love-affair with a mink coat,
being happy in hospital or
exposing your fantasies in church.

I'm jealous: my hope of dog-school
seems slim – I'm more dog
at back door type
or dog in photo
unless, of course, a thoughtful pupil
smuggles me in or a sensitive teacher
appreciates the role of a border collie
when skirmishes are about to blow up.

I was rescued by ISPCA – caring people.
I got fed, could stretch my legs and learn
to open my arms to welcome a new family.

At times, when contemplating my past,
I vanish into a grey cloud,
rattle like a poltergeist
or rip at beech-tree-bark and howl.

I often lie there thinking
nothing is as it seems.

Even if I can't read or write
I can imagine sun flooding a page,
an armchair out on high waves,
a mouse whistling in an attic
or I can tune in to the true note
in a creature heart.
Walking On Water

On the lip of a fading dream
The blue landscape dissolves,
White lines of trees remain -
Frozen like memory.
The swan-lined shore has gone now
And everywhere the voice of the wind
Speaks to me like an old lover
Reminding me of all I didn't do,
Didn't say, didn't feel, didn't wish,
Didn't hope, didn't want.

I have opened my palms
And let lines flow into the blue,
Dripping drop by drop
Into the still water, I walk on.
Soft now as down, my skin glows
In the last light,
Between worlds I walk, suspended,
Put palm on palm upon my chest,
Hold down my heart
Swelling with waiting.

Should I turn back into the dream
And trust the journey to the vortex of night
Where rocks become wolves
In the moonlight
And owl-wings serenade
The sabbath of sadness?
Then deep into the very heart of grief
Where love is a stranger
And forgiveness an emigrant
In an unknown land;
There, sunk into the granite core –
The cold breath of nothingness?

Or should I follow the way my feet tread
Gently on the water’s skin,
Towards the creaking barge of light
That ploughs the blue mist,
And climbs aboard and floats into my life
Crowded with living, breathing,
Hoping, loving, clinging, lying,
Hating, praying, killing, dying, burning,
Ashing, losing,
The breath of time smelling of sweat and longing?

Reborn

From the moment we are born they say,
We are on our way to dying;
But I, sitting here in the eye of a cicada storm,
Feel I am being born again
As evening shawls about my shoulders
And the fragrance of oranges blesses the air.
The Dead Rise Tonight

The dead rise tonight
From graves
From pyres
From tombs
From slept-in beds
From dreams
From memory
From dust under carpets
From the surgeon’s knife
From obituaries
From eulogies
From ancient wreckages
From the hands of assassins
From prisons
From Gulags
From the pogroms of Gujarat
From Vietnam
From Cambodia
From Hiroshima
From shredded strips of Gaza
From the continent of chains and hunger
From the burning backstreets of free America
From bombed Berlin
From hunkered London
From genuflecting Jerusalem
From the last hour of Gomorrah.

The dead rise tonight
Returning to squalid homes
Returning to frozen hearts
Returning to helpless prayers
Returning to faithless lovers
Returning to streets in faceless crowds

Returning to Judas embraces
Returning to unanswered questions
Returning to opiated hospitals
Returning to firing squads
Returning to tolling bells
Returning to unfinished sentences
Returning to holiday resorts for singles
Returning to filing cabinets
Returning to drought-burnt fields
Returning to floods
Returning to earthquakes
Returning to hurricanes
Returning to cry on rooftops before the last leap
Returning to pubs
Returning to salons
Returning to waiting
Returning to their nakedness
Returning to themselves like strangers.

Love, in the great whirls of coming and going
When do we lie down to savour
What we have and who we are?
Cold rain rattles on panes
And the skyline is burning.
Shadow

I hang up my shadow
On the peg outside the door
Then walk into the dark house
Pushing through the thick air
As a swimmer does through water,
Inhaling dust of lost summers,
Breathing out soft wisps of light
Escaping from the glow
That dissolves in my stomach's pit
Where old hungers quietly burn themselves
Like young widows of dead dreams;

I leave the house behind,
Slip on my shadow like a second skin,
Feel the trail behind -
Dragging over street bodies
Cobbled with the living
And the urgent cry of hawkers
Selling hopes
Circling like halos over the living
Waiting to die;

To see myself as I really am
This is my hope.

I hang up my shadow
On the peg outside the door,
Walk into the house beyond the river
Raging with mysteries,
Swamp smells,
Curlew cries,
Worms working
In the dank flesh of sadness;
Live encounters
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