

FOUNDED 2010

Live encounters

POETRY & WRITING

Children's Edition

FREE ONLINE MAGAZINE FROM VILLAGE EARTH
MAY 2019

NESSA O'MAHONY
Allowing yourself to imagine

COVER ARTWORK BY IRISH ARTIST EMMA BARONE



©Mark Ulyseas

Girl of the Hmong Tribe, Luang Prabang, Laos PDR.

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Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

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ALLOWING YOURSELF TO IMAGINE

GUEST EDITORIAL

NESSA O'MAHONY

I had two encounters in class rooms recently that made me question how children are currently being encouraged to develop their imaginary worlds.

The first was in a small community school in west Dublin. The class was made up of students from all over the world; that area of Dublin is particularly culturally diverse, and new schools have been opening to offer an educational experience that goes beyond the traditional ethos of Catholic education in Ireland and that recognises multi-culturalism in all its forms. This was a group of lively 9 year-olds; they were already well practiced in writing poems, as their teacher regularly dipped into the online resources available for teaching poetry. Beautifully illustrated examples of sausage poems and acrostics graced the walls of the classroom, and the children proudly pointed out their own contributions.

Because I knew that English was not the first language of every child in that classroom, I'd come prepared with exercises on imagery and simple word games that might develop into rhyming stanzas. They proved very adept at following my lead and quickly out-ran my own suggestions with increasingly wild and wonderful suggestions of their own. One child was determined to get the word Bugati into everything he wrote; I knew that there was probably an in-joke at the back of it, because everyone else thought it completely natural that he'd want to reference a high-status car in his poems. I think it unlikely that he returned home each day after school to a gleaming red sports car in his driveway. The point was that he was entitled to imagine anything he wanted, no matter how removed from his own immediate experience. The role of the poet, I stressed, was to imagine the far off and distant and to make it your own; imagination could bring you as far as you wanted to go, and further.

The second classroom was in a private university in Dublin city centre, with students who were internationally diverse, but in their late teens and early twenties: very much the typical undergraduate mix. I'd been working with them on poetry for the past ten weeks and we'd covered a range of poetic techniques. This week we were discussing persona, and I'd brought in a few examples of poems where the poet had written in the voice of a created character, a persona. The first example, a poem from Anne Stevenson's verse novel, *Correspondences*, didn't attract too much controversy. I had couched it in a discussion of how the poet wanted to discuss issues of culture and formation but without the overtly confessional mode that many of her contemporaries, such as Lowell and Sexton, adopted. So she had invented a fictional family – the Chandlers – and had created a family tree, a biography spanning several generations and had introduced a cast of characters who allowed her to explore issues she had a personal interest in. The students agreed that this was a clever strategy, because it had given her creative distance to explore highly personal subject matter.

The next poem, 'Selling Manhattan' by Carol Anne Duffy, got a rougher ride. This poem retells the famous apocryphal account of how the island of Manhattan was originally sold by its Native American inhabitants to European settlers for the equivalent of beads, whiskey and trinkets. The poem opens with the voice of an imagined purchaser of the land, and is followed for the rest of the poem by a speaker who adopts the lyrical register of the Native American. It begins:

*All yours, Injun, twenty-four bucks' worth of glass beads,
gaudy cloth. I got myself a bargain. I brandish
fire-arms and fire-water. Praise the Lord.
Now get your red ass out of here.*

I wonder if the ground has anything to say.
You have made me drunk, drowned out
the world's slow truth with rapid lies.
But today I hear again and plainly see. Wherever
you have touched the earth, the earth is sore.

Selling Manhattan, Carol Anne Duffy, 1987

It's possible that my students couldn't get beyond the italicised text of the first stanza, because they were already bristling at the suggestion of racism and disrespect it suggested. The possible irony of those lines, that we weren't expected to accept them uncritically, was not considered. But what angered them more was the appropriation of the voice in the second stanza; in their eyes, a Liverpool-Irish poet had no right to imagine herself into the identity of another culture.

The only way this poem would have been acceptable to them was if it had been written by a Native American. They would not accept that a writer often finds themselves imagining lives that they could not have possibly lived and that it is an act of empathy that encourages them to make the attempt.

The next poem, 'Song of the African Boy' by Leland Bardwell, went down even worse with the students. Bardwell, who lived in Sligo for much of her life, is imaging what life must have been like for a child of mixed racial descent, living at a time when people of colour were a rarity in that part of the west of Ireland. It begins:

Oh Sligo, my Africa,
I am black
and my mother
brings home the shopping
in two Quinns' worth bags.

Oh Sligo, my Africa,
I own a donkey
and a pair of runners,
did I tell you I was black
and my mother does the shopping?

Song of the African Boy, Leland Bardwell 1998.

Here too I couldn't convince the students that the poem was an act of empathy, an attempt to get other readers to see the connections that join us rather than the differences that divide. They were firm, but unforgiving, these splendidly sure of themselves young men and women.

So where did that leave them, I longed to ask them, and probably should, though I was too busy privilege-checking myself that I missed the opportunity. Will they only ever write about themselves, and their lives, and the communities that they feel part of? Will they never use writing as an opportunity to open out, to make connections with cultures and experiences that aren't their own? Is reading the work of other cultures the only real answer here, the making sure that there is sufficient work available across the cultural spectrum to read and understand?

Perhaps I'm old-fashioned, and haven't kept up with these carefully thought-policed times, but I can't accept that the writer shouldn't have the right to range wherever they will, into whichever mind, culture, attitude they want and need to.

There's always a purpose, after all. Leland Bardwell didn't just gratuitously choose her subject matter; she observed the isolation of a minority and made the most generous gesture she could in the circumstances, which was to imagine a voice. And yes, you can certainly argue that she could also have done what she could to change the environment for people like her African boy, created educational opportunities, creative writing classes, given such a boy his own writing voice. And I'm pretty sure she did – she was a great educator and supporter of other writers and was embedded in the community when others were safe in their ivory towers and university departments. But she also recognised the gift she had with her own words, her own observational skills, and she used them where she felt she needed to.

Something has happened to bring about a shift from the innocent, unfettered imagination of those nine-year-olds in a West Dublin classroom to the careful, judicious imaginings of those undergraduates. I'm not sure I can fully answer what that is. One can blame the internet and social media for pretty much everything these days, and it does seem that as a society we are quick to blame and denounce anybody that steps out of the agreed line. Cultural heterodoxies solidify on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, and God help the person who puts their head over the parapet in disagreement.

But shouldn't the writer always be in disagreement with heterodoxy? Shouldn't we be free to dream and imagine and invent voices and explore our stories through whichever prism we choose? Sometimes they are our own stories, sometimes they belong to other people, but we've chosen them because we resonate in some way. We've found an idea or message in another person's existence that helps us make sense of the world in our own way. Sometimes we use our own voice, sometimes we need to don another mask and use another tone.

There's a famous story that Patrick Brontë encouraged his four precocious children to tell their first stories whilst wearing masks; he believed that the mask took away their self-consciousness and freed up their wildest imaginings. Those wild imaginings produced some of the finest novels of the 19th century. We cannot allow an environment that limits a writer's imagination to what society, or social media, deems appropriate. I truly hope those 9-year-olds remain free to imagine whatever, or whoever, they will.



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas

Ella Skye Hackney is nine years old and lives in New York with her parents and dog Owen. She loves ice skating, creating graphic novels, and political activism.



Photograph by Claudine Nash

WARRIOR

I will not worry.
I will not cry.
I will be a warrior
not a worrier
and I will help the people
who cannot fight.
I will fight
to make things right.
I will be a warrior,
not a worrier.

Isabelle Boyle, 7yrs, 1st Class, Glinsk N.S., Via Castlerea, Co. Galway, Ireland.
I like cooking at home & baking, reading books.



Photograph Pixabay.com

COOKING

Cooking is fun,
On weekends I help with cooking.
Oven is hot so ask an adult to help,
Kitchen must be clean.
In the kitchen we make buns
Never burn yourself,
Get cooking.

Donnacha Donoghue Miskell, 8yrs, 2nd Class, Glinsk N.S., Via Castlerea, Co. Galway, Ireland.
I like farming, building Lego and swimming.



Photograph Pixabay.com

FARMING

Farming is one of my favourite things to do,
And driving tractors too.
Remember to be safe on the farm.
Machines sometimes cannot see you, so be careful.
In case you're on the farm, wear a reflective jacket.
Never go out on the farm on your own, always go with a grown-up.
Grass has to be cut for the cows, so they make milk.

Aibhilín McDermott, 7yrs, 1st Class, Glinsk N.S., Via Castlerea, Co. Galway, Ireland.
I like cooking & learning to play the fiddle.



Photograph Pixabay.com

LOL DOLLS

LoL dolls are fun,
On Christmas day I got a LoL.
LoL dolls change colour,

Dolls can be glittery.
Often very popular.
LoLs can cry,
LoLs can spit,
So now, you know!

Nicole Sudol, 7yrs, 2nd Class, Glinsk N.S., Via Castlerea, Co. Galway, Ireland.
I like knitting, visiting my family in Poland and playing on my piano.



Photograph Pixabay.com

PIRATES

Pirates just love gold.
I like pirates.
Remember to give gold to the pirates.
“Arrgh,” said the pirates.
Take the swords with them.
Even if they’re mean, give them gold.
Save the world from pirates!

Kyle Doherty, 9 yrs, 3rd Class, Glinsk N.S., Via Castlerea, Co. Galway, Ireland.
I like playing football, going horse-riding, playing on the play station.



Photograph Pixabay.com

JESSE LINGARD

Jesse is a Manchester United player,
Even the best I would say.
Still my favourite player for Manchester United I have to say.
Still got speed, still got the skill
Every Manchester United fan likes him.

Love oh, love him, everyone should
I love Jesse Lingard I must say.
Natural dribbler of the ball I must admit,
Good player obviously.
After matches he shakes hands
Really nice
Devine player that everyone likes!

Finn O' Mahony, 7 yrs, 1st Class, Glinsk N.S., Via Castlerea, Co. Galway, Ireland.
I like playing and watching soccer.



Photograph Pixabay.com

LIVERPOOL

Liverpool are the best.
I love them.
Very, very, good.
Every time they play, Mo Salah scores.
Red is the colour of their jersey.
Purple is the colour of their jersey too.
On the table they are first,
Oh, playing really well,
Liverpool will win the league!

Conor Neary, 6 yrs, 1st Class, Glinsk N.S., Via Castlerea, Co. Galway, Ireland.
I like playing and watching soccer. I am a big Liverpool supporter. I like swimming also.



Photograph Pixabay.com

FOOTBALL

Football is my favourite sport,
On sunny days I play football
On windy days I play football
The best football sport is soccer.
Boys and girls can play football,
All the time and anywhere,
Lots of fun,
Lots of goals too!

Brían McDermott, 3rd Class, Glinsk N.S., Via Castlerea, Co. Galway, Ireland.



Photograph Pixabay.com

THE THREE ADVENTURERS

Once upon a time there were three boys named Kyle, Patrick and Brían. One day they went to The New Camp in Barcelona to see them play Tottenham Hot Spurs. Barcelona won three-nil. Then they went to Man City to see them play Man United. Man United won three-two. They met Paul Pogba and Kyle got his jersey signed. Then Patrick met Leroy Sane and got his jersey signed. There was only one person to get their jersey signed and that was Brían. Brían wanted to go and see Liverpool play Crystal Palace. He got his jersey signed by Jordan Henderson. Afterwards they were very hungry and went to the chipper to get a cheeseburger and chips. They were very tired and went to a hotel in the city for two days. They had a very good sleep. In the morning they went to Man United to see them play Wolves and it finished one-one. They got a tour of the stadium, saw all the trophies and met Alex Ferguson who used to be the manager of Man United. After they went to the pub to have a drink and met their friend Ethan.

Kate Devaney, 7 yrs, 1st Class, Glinsk N.S., Via Castlerea, Co. Galway, Ireland. I like reading books and eating strawberries!



THE GIRL WHO LOVED HORSE RIDING

Once upon a time there was a girl called Lily. She loved horse riding and her cousins loved horse riding too. Her Dad didn't want to bring her to horse riding. Lilly asked her Dad, "are you taking me to horse riding?" "No," said her Dad, "Mum is taking you to horse riding." Lily's horses name was called boomerang and her teacher was very nice. On Sunday, her cousins came to her house and Lily had a very special secret, but she never told anyone. Her cousin begged and begged but she still never told her. It was time for her cousins to go home.

"Mum," said Lily "when are we going to horse riding?"

"Now," said her mum.

"Yes," said Lily.

"But first pack your lunch ok Lily."

"We'll be late, come on," said Lily. "It is a long way to horse riding practice and I'm bored."

"Lily go to sleep," said her mum.

"Ok," said Lily. They reached Lily's horse riding practice and what did she see but her friend Ellie.

"Hello Ellie," said Lily.

"Hello Lily," said Ellie. "What is your horse's name? My horse's name is Ginger.

"I like that name," replied Lily.

"Thank you," said Ellie.

"Go on," said Ellie's Mum.

"Ok," said Ellie. "I really like horse riding when you are in it with me."

"And I like it too. I had no friends when you weren't in horse riding practice. Now I have a friend." Replied Lily.

"Yes, now you have a friend. Home time now and I'll see you later."

"I'll see you later too," Lily shouted as her Mum was coming.

"Ok?" asked her Mum.

"La, la, la," said Lily.

"Hurry up Lily, I have an apple for you."

"Yum, said Lily. "I love apples.

"Ok, said her Mum.

Lily got into the car they finally reached home. Mum looked in her pocket, but she could not find the keys." Oh no," said Mum. Lily remembered the key in the shed. Lily ran towards the shed to get the key. "Lily, slow down," said her Mum. Lily came out of the shed.

"I got the key," said Lily. "Oh good," said Mum." Now we can open the door. "Oh no," said Mum. "What? Now it's the wrong key."

"Oh no," said Lily. By the time Dad came home he asked, "Why are you standing out here?"

"Well, we had the wrong key. Now we can go in."

"Ok now go to bed but remember to brush your teeth and you can read for a little while in bed." In the morning Lily got out of bed. She tip-toed down stairs to watch a movie. The movie was about Santa and his reindeer. It was a good movie and her mum got up and went down stairs. Lily, it's too early. Go back to bed. You'll wake your Dad."

"Ok," replied Lily and she went upstairs. Lilly went back to bed. In the morning, Lilly ate her breakfast and she went to school. She lived happily ever after.

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