

A rural landscape with rolling green hills. In the foreground, two brown cows are grazing on a grassy slope. The middle ground shows more rolling hills with some trees and a line of trees. The background is hazy, showing distant hills and a small building. The sky is a pale, hazy blue.

# **Voices from the Land**

**Writing by Irish Farmers**

Cover photo by George Hiles

## Editor's Note

I spent most of my life talking to farmers. If it wasn't my parents then it was our neighbours or other families that we ran into at shows, marts or feed stores. These people folded their arms and asked how the cows were milking and made the same jokes about all the money that none of us were making. It was an old communion, and one we all took up.

As I got older I started writing about farmers. It took me travelling to different countries to see different farms. Most visits started with a tour of the owner's operation and the farm's history: what changes were made, when that happened, and how they farmed now. It was a narrative that was probably rehearsed, if not out loud to other visitors then in the farmers' heads as they went about their work.

Sometimes I stayed at a farm for three or four days. It allowed me to get to know the farmers better. Often they opened up more about who they thought they were and how they saw themselves in the larger world. It was in these moments that I learned a truth likely to be universal: that everyone has a story to tell that matters to them.

*Voices from the Land* is a collection of those type of stories. The fiction, essays and poems on the following pages are honest and sometimes unrelenting. Some are from writers who farm or have farmed; many are from farmers putting words to paper for the first time. Some of it celebrates Irish farming, while some pieces point to its problems. All of it is powerful. Together, the work in *Voices from the Land* puts forth a complex, reflective and thorough consideration of what it means to be an Irish farmer.

There's plenty of attention on the changing nature of agriculture, but maybe not enough on those who must deal with the consequences. We don't always get to see the people behind the industry, and if that doesn't happen, we'll never get a complete picture of it. However, these writers have allowed us to visit with them. They're taking it upon themselves to share who they are. They've invited us all to pull up a chair to the kitchen table, because they have something to tell us.

***Ryan Dennis***

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## **The Life of Rain**

**Patricia Donnellan**

Without a radio for a weather forecast my father recognised the signs of rain. The dark clouds gathering, a random spatter on the windowpane, the sound of a boil in the river, the distance between us and the land on the far side of the lake. In fine weather the distance seemed very far away but when rain was due it appeared nearer.

My father, Thomas, known locally as Tom, was born in 1900. My mother, Christina (or Chris, as my father called her) was from Caher, near Feakle, where Brian Merriman dreamed his epic poem *Cúirt An Mheán Oíche*, *The Midnight Court*.

As a child, I used to stand at the back door of the farmhouse listening to the drops of rain beating on the galvanised roof of the cow house. They formed rivulets that ran down the channels and into the chutes along the edge of the roof. From there it flowed into down pipes, entering the barrels as a flow of water. When the rain was heavy, the overflow washed the cobbled yard into a shining piece of stone art.

As there was no piped water in the home, we needed to collect rainwater in timber barrels located at various points under the outhouses. The water supplied the animal needs of the farm. It was also used inside the home for boiling small potatoes for hens, ducks, and pigs, as well as for washing buckets and the milk tanks.

At weekends, my mother heated water in an iron pot on the open fire. One by one we children were lined up for the weekly bath in an iron tub. It was the same tub she used on Mondays to wash our clothes with washboard and Sunlight soap. She sang while she worked. *Lay Down Your Arms* made popular by Anne Shelton was a favourite, as was *Ave Maria* and other church hymns.

The haggart was a small garden at the gable end of the house. Apple trees and blackcurrant bushes grew there. It was also a holding area for cows that were near calving. It was easily accessible during the night when my father, flash-lamp in hand, went to check their progress. Other times he was woken by the cow lowing, and he went over to find the cow had managed to give birth without help.

At the bottom of the haggart, a well was created where three drains converged. The water eventually drained away but when it was full, it was deep. When my parents were working in the fields, it was my grandmother's task to keep us children away from that area of ground. She kept a fistful of sugar in the deep pocket of her long black dress. She had only to call the straying child to her, reach into the pocket and bring up a fistful of sugar in her hand to entice us away. I remember eating the sugar out of her hand while she kept us safe. We were four young girls ranging in age from three to eight. She was eighty-six.

The spring well for household use was in a field a short walk away from the house. It was called Gleeson's Well. The reservoir for the parish is now built on the site. My father drew two white enamel buckets of the water daily that served the cooking and drinking needs of the house. As we grew older we went in twos to fetch the water with the warning *No fooling around the well*. The well was located under a blackthorn tree with rocks protecting it, a stone slab at the mouth serving as a foothold. We used to lie flat, reach down, cup water in our hands and drink the pure spring water.

Farmers were dependent on the water in the drains to supply the drinking needs of the cows and cattle. The streams above our farm ran into our drains and continued on to the next farmer's land. They were kept clean, as sand often lodged and stopped the flow. The work involved

manual labour clearing the drains with pick and shovel, as well as cutting the overgrown briars with a slash hook.

There was a pond in the centre of a field. It was called the Coarse Field as rushes grew there and rocks were lodged in the soil. The cows drank from it in winter. In summer it was a breeding ground for tadpoles. As children, we threw pebbles into the water to create ripples and watch them swim. In summer when it dried up the tadpoles disappeared.

Other fields also had names: the Middle Field, Long Meadow, Big Field, Three Corner, Hill, the Cill and the Mare's Field. Some of the fields were for hay while others were for grazing. Stone walls and sod ditches with blackthorn hedges separated the fields. Gates were made from timber poles fitted into a wire hoop. It was enough to lower three poles on one side to let the stock walk through to the next field.

The Middle Field was in the centre of the farm. It was a dry field with fertile ground suitable for growing all the crops needed for the family, fowl and animals. Crops were rotated so that they were not repeatedly sown in the same area of ground. Oats, cabbage, turnips, mangolds, carrots and parsnips, onions and potatoes were sown annually.

A common annual ritual was the blessing of the households, animals, crops and farm on May Eve. My father sprinkled the family members with Easter Water before he began the blessing. The purpose was twofold: for protection and to welcome the summer.

The spraying of the potatoes was an important event. The mare was tackled to the cart in readiness for bringing barrels of water to the field. Two wooden barrels were filled almost to the top. They were covered with jute bags and tied around the rim with twine to prevent spillage. The mixture of bluestone and washing soda was prepared on the headland and stirred into the barrels of water. My father filled the budget with the mixture and attached it onto his back.

He walked between two drills. Left and right he sprayed, the spray covering the green leaves of the potato stalks. Walking back to the headland, he stirred the mixture in the barrel, refilled the budget and started down the next set of drills. The process was repeated until the entire crop was sprayed.

The potatoes were sprayed at least once more, depending on the weather, before the crop was ready for harvesting.

As the various crops grew and flowered, the tillage field became a kaleidoscope of colour. The golden ripe oats, the white flowers on the potatoes and the many shades of green from the variety of crops sown.

Although the farm overlooks Lough Derg and the river at Derrycon Lower runs behind it, depending on the season, there was either no water for the stock or an abundant supply. On hot summer evenings the cows and yearlings bellowed in the field.

My eldest sister Mary would ride the mare bareback to the river at Derrycon Lower Bridge and let her drink her fill before the cows arrived. I used to run after her to wave a stick and direct them down into the water. All the activity was accompanied by shouts of hup and go on and waving sticks. Our father gave us time to be in our places before he opened the farm gate. They were still a way off when we heard them running.

As the summer days lengthened the cows got used to it and we had only to open the gate and they went themselves. As the weather was very fine we took off our shoes and got into the water beside them, playing, lifting rocks in search of minnows. And when the cows had drunk enough we strolled back together.

In the mid 1950s the Rural Electrification Scheme was in progress in our area. The lorries loaded with poles arrived on our land. There were several men, and one came to our door with a kettle asking that the kettle be filled with water and boiled for their lunch at one o'clock. It was a daily request until the poles were set in the ground and the wire connected.

As they moved from field to field an electrician followed to wire the house and install switches and sockets. The same man brought our first Bush radio. I remember coming home from school

and our mother turning on the light switch. The wonder of the white bulb lighting the kitchen remains.

The village was only a short distance from the farm. Most of the houses had cold water on tap. The reservoir was almost a mile from the farthest point of the farm. In an effort to ease the workload my mother ran a hydrodare pipe from the farmhouse across the field to the mains on the Millpool Road. With the approval of Clare County Council, she succeeded in tapping into it.

Overnight, drops of water came by gravity to the bottom of the garden. The electricity installed meant that an electric pump could drive water to the house. It was 1958.

I remember the inspector coming to visit and awarding my mother a grant to install a pump. In a short time my father, with horse and plough, dug a drill across the field. A roll of hydrodare was unwound down to the main connection point. Once the pipe was attached to the mains and the new pump installed, water flowed into the house where a single tap had been attached to the white Shanks sink in the kitchen.

It was such a joyous achievement. As the houses on the road above us and some in the village did not have water on tap, the neighbours came to see the new development. My mother was delighted. She stood beside it talking to the neighbours, turning the water on and off as she spoke.

As with all visitors to the house, a cup of tea and buns fresh from the oven on the open fire made her achievement memorable.

The future potential of water in the home presented itself in the Woman's Own magazine as a stylish bathroom with hot and cold water taps. But at the time it was a dream presented in the occasional magazine that passed between our mother and her friends.

Being connected to the reservoir changed the course of our lives. Even though it was one cold tap, the days of drawing water from the well were over. Gone too was the summer shortage of water for the cows and visits to the river. A hose was attached to the tap to fill their drinking troughs. The water in the home and farm was the first indicator of modernisation, but that only became clear with reflection.

Though the farm has changed and farming methods also, rainwater still runs down the galvanised roof into the barrels. In the fields it runs through the streams, into the deep gravel tunnel mole drains and is piped into the drinking troughs for the stock to drink. Throughout the years, the life of rainwater remains a constant in our human lives. 🌧️

## Handiwork

*Michael Durack*

We mended fences, my father and I,  
during the off-season, in the Well Field.  
Now, whether good fences made good neighbours  
or merely kept our cows out of Ahern's meadow  
it didn't much matter. He stood on a boundary ditch,  
half-sliced angry whitethorns with his billhook,  
bent them to his will, trained them across gaps.

Come night time his rough hands chafed,  
infested with splinters and micro-thorns.  
He handed me a sewing needle, deferring to my keen eye  
and sure touch. I eased the needle's point  
under the skin, probing, pinching, nudging  
until I had teased the buggers out. He never flinched;  
I had his unconditional trust.

The barbed wire fences were another thing,  
the strands of wire stapled to stakes he cut and shaped  
and rammed into the earth, using no mallet,  
but the blunt iron of a heavy crowbar.  
I balanced each paling post between my hands,  
braced for the impact, praying he'd not miss,  
knowing he never would.

Handiwork of long ago: my frail hands at his mercy,  
his coarse hands in my care.



## **A Dying Breed**

*Neil Tully*

Con Gallagher wakes and turns from bed. Staring at the ceiling, trying to remember dreams, is a waste of time. There are a few seconds every morning when he's sitting up, blistered feet planted on the wooden floor, that he's ahead of the pain—as if it has slept on. He stands and the floorboards creak and wake it and the pain jumps from the bed and wraps itself around him. His knees, his hips, his lower back, his neck and his left wrist. He looks to Marie's picture on the mantelpiece, says a silent sorry, a silent you were right, and remembers all the times she told him he wasn't looking after himself. How dishonest youth had been, with its promise of invincibility, its well-oiled joints and its body jumping right back up after falls from bales or fences.

He goes downstairs, the kitchen washed in grey. A cold morning, but not as cold as was promised, the forecast wrong again. There are people who won't start their day without turning on lights and heaters and radios and televisions, working themselves into readiness, as if the very act of living is something that needs building up to. A glass of milk and buttered bread at the table. A glug of glucosamine tonic, tastes like TCP cut with lemon juice. Bought in bulk by Marie more than a decade ago, he takes the occasional sip in her memory, the stuff now rancid as the well water over on Coakley's farm, riddled with VTEC, and still the man won't do a thing about it.

Marie was a great one for looking after joints. With her straps and ointments and Epsom salts and glucosamine tonic. Off she went to heaven, joints intact, breasts, lungs and liver ripped apart. They weathered it as best they could, with treatments and pain relief, and she went gently. Though if she'd been in pain, she'd never have said, the same way she kept quiet even though his falling out with Liam had broken her heart. Con had been stubborn as bindweed, making no move at peace until after Marie was dealt her terminal hand. She spared him judgement right up to her last drag of air, in a show of grace he scarcely deserved.

A few scraps of last night's beef, tossed to the collie by the door, who stirs and sniffs the bowl. Any meal could be its last. As soon as it stops eating, that'll be that, and Con will put it out of its misery, free it from its own burning joints. There was a time when it would trail Con down the yard every morning, but it no longer has the energy. He leaves the door open a few inches, just in case, and heads for the field to check on his girls, following his breath across land that's been Gallagher land as far back as Gallagher blood can be traced. They're waiting for him: heat from their bulk, hooves in wet earth, decent and orderly as always, well set in their ways. His herd is a quarter of what it once was. Any more is for a man whose back isn't set with concrete and whose wrists aren't braceleted with barbed wire. He opens the gate and calls them after him.

The parlour is where Con remembers Liam most clearly, before school as a young lad, hair standing up on the back of his head, hands working like pistons, his school uniform on, even though Marie had warned him. And Jesus, that laugh, the first belt of it like a donkey's bray, then spurting from him like water from a half-blocked tap while he tried to get his breath, until the blockage cleared and the sound flowed freely, filling the huge space and amplified by it. There's rarely a day that Con doesn't step into the parlour and see his boy there, smiling back. Rarely a day he doesn't hear that laugh.

He lets the girls back out after milking, sweating and breathing heavily while he cleans the place out, the power hose getting stronger by the day, or so he tells himself. That it's a length of growing musculature and it isn't his wrists and hands getting weak. He sits and steadies his

breath, wiping his forehead, the sounds of the cattle in the field, machines groaning to a halt and water dribbling across the concrete floor. It was in here too, that he found Liam, 20 years old, all over another young fella. Christ knows why they came here, to this place, with its stale stink of milk and shite and sweat. Con, not a man of romance or delicacy, but a man who knows the countryside offers a thousand better hideaways where couples can spend time in love. He lost control, flying off the handle, the other young lad darting out past him like a spooked cat, Liam standing up saying We were only fighting. 'Fighting, is it?' Con said, and landed a mallet of fist to his son's jaw and then was on top of him, saying things that no man should say to another, let alone his own son. He once allowed himself the excuse of being a younger man, a different man in different times. It wasn't just what he saw that troubled him, but who he saw Liam with. A young lad of 16, and likely to cause enough scandal to keep a small town in gossip for years. The lad's father, Terry Fahy, the greatest bollocks to draw breath west of the Shannon, with his 50 hectares and Mercedes upgraded every year and his ready mocking of dairy farming, which he called a fool's game.

Con crosses the yard and rounds the south field, walking the long gravel drive to the main road, between hedgerows of hawthorn and blackthorn, elder and dog rose. Black crows look on uninterested from telephone wires. Nothing in the post box by the gate, though they aren't as regular as they once were. There was a time you could set your watch to Tom Kearney coming up the road in his green van, with bills and letters. Now they do it when they're good and ready, if they feel like it at all. Con still hopes a letter might arrive one morning, from Liam. Even though letters are gone the way of the sickle, and he has no reason to believe Liam ever even thinks of him, some desperate hope keeps bringing him out to check.

There was no great drama when Liam left. They tried for a while to carry on, working side by side, but the mood was like a patched-up ceiling that could never hold. Liam was gone one morning. Marie told Con at the kitchen table that she'd given him some money to get started, and Con didn't argue. She'd head off to Dublin for a day, bringing back bags from Grafton Street shops and lies that Liam was asking for him. After a couple of years, the daytrips turned into weekends, over to London, and then nearly two decades passed and they grew old and she got sick and Con finally saw Liam again while Marie withered in the front room. His son had grown into a broad and stubbled man, strong enough to let on, for Marie's sake, that water had long passed under the bridge. Making small talk about the farm and the neighbors, while she smiled at their reconciliation. The day they buried her was the last time Con saw him, when Liam told him that he'd robbed him of years at home while Marie was well.

Through the kitchen window, Con watches a distant plane cross the midday sky, maybe on its way to the climate summit in Scotland, pumping out its kerosene clouds, before landing with hundreds of other so-called leaders, to talk about how men like Con Gallagher and his few dozen Friesians need reigning in if the world is to be saved. Coakley darkened his door a few weeks back, asking if Con would join them in taking their tractors up to Dublin to protest. He told Coakley he'd think about it, then shut the door and thought about the industrial sewage and metric tonnes of poison pumping out of factories in India and China and America and every corner of the earth, every second, and how a few Roscommon farmers in their tractors would be shaken off like a bull shaking off flies. How they're really nothing but feed for men in suits to consume, then shite out as words on paper, so they can claim to be doing something of impact and get voted in again and let the whole process keep turning as surely as Earth itself. He felt no regret that the Gallaghers would take their leave from farming when he took his leave from life.

After a second milking and feeding and cleaning and torturing every joint one more time, the evening turns to silver and the girls are calm and settled and Con walks his land, as far as the lake. Late evening notorious for playing tricks on a man—the mirrors of lake and sky, the smoke

coming from the chimneys on the opposite shore. Coakley's daughter's new build, whose solar panels, granite island and wraparound porch were pictured in The Herald one week. Herself a schoolteacher, the husband an accountant. A modern farmhouse for modern farmers. Con's sigh is strong enough to cross the water and reach their door. Late evening makes him see Liam round the west shore of the lake, waving an arm, or coming down the field towards him, suit trousers tucked into wellies. Or at the edge of the copse of ash, he sees Liam sitting, taking a load off, until he disappears. He looks across the lake and thinks as he's thought for years, that he'd be as well off at the bottom of it, the land and its worth left to Liam. It's all been sorted, with McElligott in town.

He heads for the house, carrying a foolish murmur of hope that Liam will be waiting at the door. He thinks of his small attempts at penance. The day of the gay marriage referendum, going in to vote Yes, his pathetic tick small compensation for how he'd made his son feel. Coming out of the booth, feeling proud all the same, with a young one from The Herald asking people how they'd voted, even the ballot box no longer sacred. Inside in Dwyer's after, with the celebrations from Dublin on the telly and some in the pub raising a toast, while Terry Fahy leaned against the bar, next to his cronies, shaking his head, saying 'This is just the start of it, who knows what they'll be doing next.' Con finishing his pint and saying 'I'll tell you what they won't ever be doing, Terry. They won't ever be standing at a bar with little else to talk about but the likes of you,' then walking out, while Dwyer called after him from the till, 'Good man yourself, Con.' The results on the nine o'clock news then, learning that Roscommon was the only county in Ireland to vote No, and thinking wasn't Liam better off out of the place, wondering was he still in London, or in Boston, or in love, or in pain, or in a doorway, or a board meeting, or up in heaven next to his mother?

The dog is inside the door, looking up at him, when he gets in. The bowl is empty. Eating to live another day. He bends and rubs its head, hardly worth the effort and he uprights himself, uneasy as a newborn calf, pain roaring through him. Marie looks at him from another picture on the dresser in the kitchen and her eyes tell him he didn't look after himself and he says I know love, I know, but sure it's too late for any of that now and he sits and pulls across the electric heater and puts a blanket over his knees and for whatever reason, the dog comes to join him for the night, while he watches telly with the volume low, the crowds protesting in Dublin, the world leaders shaking hands in Glasgow, the phone on a chair close to his own, just in case Liam ever rings. ☞

## **Pleasantries**

*Danny Galvin*

On my day off from the restaurant,  
I rose at dawn to join my father  
on the short drive to the farm.

I rolled my window down.  
It had been a pleasant January.  
The sky in all its clarity

rang out before us like a chime,  
sunlight tinkled down as brittle  
as the panes over the potholes.

And though it was cold (the air  
might have been laced with glass)  
legs of bramble hung limp,

as if they'd simply nodded off  
the night before, and had yet  
to be disturbed by so much as a breath.

'Nice weather we've been getting'

He thrust his chin over the wheel  
to regard the sky's blue eye  
as one regards a friend

who's let them down too many times,  
or a man who makes a show  
of being jolly, and always

has a good word for the staff  
but never leaves a tip  
and is fond, on his walk home,

of kicking passing cats.  
Then he put his gaze back  
on the road, unimpressed

perhaps imagining  
how it might one day feel  
to wash his hands of the weather.

'We'll pay for it yet'

## **Leaning on a Gate**

*Mary Rourke*

I watched them leaning on the gate, as  
they watched the stock, just released after  
the long winter. Four Belgian blues, three  
Aberdeen Angus, two Frisians, overjoyed  
with their freedom, raced each other up  
and down the field, admired by the man  
and young woman. 'When will the rest go out?'  
she enquired. 'That's it now Julie.'

I sensed the shock in her reaction.  
Father and daughter continue their  
gazing. Each with their own thoughts. He  
of years of work and toil, trying to keep  
ahead of the many demands of his  
growing family, always with their help.  
Some willing, others having to be coaxed,  
cajoled, bribed even, into helping. His  
workload reduced now, less demand for  
money, less available help. Arranging  
animal tests and movements, around far-  
flung childrens' ability to get time off, or  
willingness to do so.

His daughters' thoughts.  
Of racing through fields to the next gap.  
Fearing the chasing herd of forty or fifty  
cattle would beat her to it, and race the  
wrong way. Fear they would not stop, just  
because she was there, bouncing up and  
down like a spring just broken its ties.  
Disputing with brothers and sister who  
would stop which gap, run through which  
field. Happy carefree days, with  
intermittent calls to farming duties.

Working in an office in the city now  
Arranging functions and meetings for  
dignitaries and business people.  
This day, so at ease and relaxed  
leaning on a gate, with her farming father.

My Story

Some years back the family decided to have a reunion. Down through the years some had emigrated, mostly to America. Now was a time to bring them and their family members back to a county called Leitrim.

Our original and shared birthplace was situated at a crossroads called 'the Nailor's,' after a person called Mick the Nailor. He carried steel rods on his back from the local town Mohill and crafted steel nails that replaced the wooden pegs that were used in the construction of thatched roofs in the locality. Alas, while I was given a gift of such wooden pegs, I did not preserve them to my regret. Some of the nails were still in some of the houses when they converted to slate or galvanized.

Most families around had some land, with the exception of a few. Here each generation would have walked the same fields and travelled by foot the boreen to school or to the local church, often barefooted. As there were no proper pathways through some farms, even the adults often carried their shoes in their hands so as to save them for attendance in church. Some had ponies and traps, others a donkey and cart. I do remember one farmer had a jennet. As children, we had repeated the same tasks of saving the turf, hay and oats. Such tasks brought us close to the soil and the importance of the seasons in harmony with nature.

We did some research on our genealogy and were able to establish that the family name has been around this area for over two hundred years. The area is called Fearglass North in the parish of Gortlettra. Like the county name itself, it shares a derivation of the muddy grey soil of the West. Due to ample rain, it struggles with an abundance of rushes and whins that compete with grass growth, thereby restricting the rearing of cattle and sheep and classifies the area as disadvantaged. As a result, we continue to be subsidized, making the task of keeping people on the land more difficult. Our national schools are struggling with numbers and other local services are dwindling. However, new adaptations are on the horizon and the rollout of broadband makes it possible to work from home in a rural setting. When I look back on my ancestors and how they lived I feel privileged to walk in their footsteps and to resonate the tradition and culture that adds to the voices of the land. 🍀

**John Flynn**

## **Transfer**

*Niall O'Sullivan*

Rest your bones on my bones  
Sink into me and feel our beating hearts  
Within the dry stonewalls  
Of the Haggard field  
Gazing outwards.

A calming palm along a cow's spine  
Planting new roots in my bountiful skin  
Adept placing of a moss-clad flag  
Bringing new life  
Into this world of ours.

Turning with care my crumbling sod  
To make more; give more  
To you, and to flitting folk  
Mending your depths  
And you, mine.

Watering eye of an old wise ewe  
Beckons you to a place  
Where your fathers settled  
Their outward reflections towards  
A haloed ope to the next.

Sit still.  
Look; you will see.

## **Dairy Cow Smooth**

*Rena Fleming*

Cathal O'Searcaigh heard  
A thousand milking cows  
In rain hissing on thatch.

Seamus Heaney's Queen Mother  
Played the harp strings of milk  
Into a wooden pail.

At home, the milkers made that music  
Tucked close to their kyne.  
A triangle of head, flank, thighs and back.  
Plato would have found  
Pure form in the byre.

The peaks of their caps were worn smooth,  
Akin to the smoothness of the cow-stalls.  
But I have found no smoothness exactly like that-  
Somewhere between a lover's skin beneath the  
ribs  
And the 'liquifaction' of silk  
You might come close.

As close as you might come  
To Lorca's Archangel Gabriel-  
'Between a lily and a smile'.

That close to the memory, lodged  
In the skin of my fingertips,  
Of those wooden posts  
Worn by the necks  
Of numberless being milked cows.  
It qualifies my heart.

## The Blue Cards

*Margaret Fitz-Cahill*

It was ten years ago since Jim became wheelchair-bound following that terrible accident on the farm. Of course, it shouldn't have happened. It was a case of being too confident with the machinery and rushing to get too much done. Jim survived, thank God, and I can still look after him. He can still be a father to his children. And, in many ways and with many adaptations he can still be a farmer, the one career in life he is passionate about.

Today we are getting ready to sell cattle, so I push the wheelchair up to the sheds. 'Hello boys,' calls Jim to the cattle, who look back at him with big doleful eyes. I call out the numbers from the big yellow tags as he carefully notes them down. Job done, we go on a little further to view the calves. Jim just loves these animals. They don't judge him.

'You know prices have dropped for beef cattle, Jim,' I say.

'Oh, I know that!' he says. 'But hopefully we'll do well. They are nice cattle, well finished and with nice markings.' We go to find their blue cards for tomorrow for Clonora Mart.

I pull out the big box of blue cards and go to the appropriate section. Thank God, we use those little red stick-ons to correspond with the yellow tags. It saves reading their eartags all the time. 'I've found and ordered the fifteen blue cards in a few minutes,' I tell Jim.

'Give them to me,' says Jim.

'But I'm selling them, aren't I?'

'No,' Jim replied. 'I'm going to do it myself. It's time I got back to dealing with these blue cards.'

Morning breaks and by seven the cattle are loaded and ready for the mart. I help Jim to wash, dress and get settled in the Jeep. We arrive at the mart at ten, just as the mart gets busy.

Jim is very nervous. He is snappy and anxious and tries to relent on his challenge. Manoeuvring through and around the mart is almost impossible in the wheelchair. The ground is uneven, wet and slippery. Obstacles are everywhere. Loose cattle are dangerous. Reversing trucks and tractors are hazardous. I stick close by Jim as we battle our way towards the sales ring. Jim hasn't been here in ten years and the shock is etched on his face. He clings tightly to the blue cards.

'Would ya look at yer man in the wheelchair,' murmured one dirty farmer. 'Is he out of his mind coming in here on that yoke?'

'Sure, he's a danger to others,' his companion said.

'God love his poor wife. She'd be better off if he died,' replied the other.

Jim's eyes filled with tears.

I looked both men in the eyes and said 'You are ill-informed and ignorant about disability. To me and the children Jim is the world.' I grabbed the handles of the wheelchair. 'Now Jim, let's go sell some cattle!'

Jim handed the blue cards proudly to the assistant and haggled with the auctioneer as he sat outside the sales box that day in Clonora Mart. He couldn't go in. The steps prevented that. The farmers eyed him with a mixture of pity and disdain as he sat in his wheelchair and carried out his business. I stood beside him, careful not to cramp his style. He sold his fifteen cattle for a good price. On the way home he relaxed into the seat and hummed contentedly as I drove. He knew he was a good farmer but he also felt valued and loved as a person, a husband and a father. He would maintain control of the blue cards from now on. 🐄

## Family Farm Survivor

*David Lynch*

My dad told my older brother that it was time for him to get rid of me. This started the worst period of my life.

As the heir apparent to the farm, it was also my brother's job to serve as my dad's enforcer and carry out all the less pleasant aspects of the 'family farming' job as well—including clearing the way for his succession by removing any potential obstacles to that process (i.e. me).

This was nothing personal, of course. My usefulness on the farm had simply come to its natural end. My continued presence there was now starting to become an inconvenience to what my father saw as the natural order of things. This natural order meant that the chosen successor (my brother) needed to establish a clear and non-contestable claim on the farm by becoming the sole male occupant there apart from our father. The first step in that process was getting rid of any other males whose unwelcome presence might complicate the firm establishment of such a claim (me again).

To be clear, I had no problem with my brother taking over the farm from our dad. It was no secret that I had zero interest in the farm or in ever becoming a farmer myself. In addition, by that time, I was already 22 years of age, so wasn't it high time for me to be moving on anyway?

In normal circumstances, yes: It would indeed have been time for me to be on my way. However, life growing up on the farm had been anything but normal for me. At best, it was hostile. At worst, it was abusive. Correctly predicting that my existence as the third boy born into the family (the third wheel) would one day prove to be a threat to his highest priority (an orderly farm transfer), my dad had treated me accordingly from Day 1 and demanded that everyone else do likewise.

At every turn I had been scapegoated, demonized and isolated. It was like there was the rest of the family—which was legitimate—and then there was me, an uninvited guest who had turned up late to the party and grudgingly been allowed to stay, although no one was very happy about it. In fact, oftentimes my presence alone seemed more than enough to disgust and enrage my father. It seems that my birth had been a point of deep bitterness and contention between my parents from the start. As a result my father resolved that whilst he might just barely tolerate my existence, he would never truly recognize or accept me as one of his own. For the unforgivable sin of my birth he would see to it that I always remained an outsider in my own family. Of course, he would never tell me this himself directly, but then again he didn't need to when all such hateful messages could be just as effectively communicated to me indirectly via my siblings.

More directly, he would often simply ignore me or give me the silent treatment for long periods of time. I never had even one normal conversation with the man. He remained as opaque and unknowable to me as The Sphinx all my life. Nor was he interested in getting to know me any better. It seemed as though his mind was made up about me from Day 1 and there was nothing I could do to change it. He would often explode in a rage at me for little or no reason. Or bark constant demands for me to do ever-more jobs around the farm. Then explode again because his deliberately vague instructions had not been followed to a tee. This left me anxious and always walking on eggshells around him. I eventually became so fearful of setting him off that I started to mumble every time I would talk to him—which would set him off again. 'Speak like a man!' he would then roar at me.

Without consulting with me, my teachers or anyone else, my dad cut short my education at the earliest opportunity. He unilaterally decided for me that I should drop out of secondary school



without any qualifications in my mid-teens to come home and work on the farm for him. No one raised any objections to that on my behalf. My own thoughts or opinions on it were neither sought nor required. In fact, they were irrelevant. While such a practice may have been common on farms in the 1950s, by the 1990s it was unheard of for anyone coming from a supposedly 'good' family not to at least finish their secondary schooling. Although I didn't realize it at the time, this action narrowed my options considerably for escaping what would ultimately become a very abusive situation.

As a direct result of all that constant contempt, discouragement, and rejection from those closest to me, by the time I had reached maturity I was far from being ready to go out and take on the world. Instead, I was at my lowest point—emotionally crippled, deeply confused, hurting badly inside, shamed to the core of my being and in desperate need of the one thing I was never allowed to have: familial love, understanding, and support. In classic carrot-and-stick Irish family farm tradition, I was always led to believe that all these things were constantly just around the corner for me—just as soon as I proved myself worthy of them. Of course none of this was ever stated explicitly—it was merely implied. Or maybe it's just what I told myself in order to stay sane in the face of unrelenting rejection and disappointment. Somehow, though, the acceptance I craved always remained frustratingly just out of my reach. Unfortunately, things were not about to get any better.

Before, life on the farm had always been lonely and miserable for me. Now, it quickly became utterly unbearable as my brother began a relentless campaign of bullying, threats, smears, vicious ridicule and physical intimidation against me at our dad's bidding. Although my dad was careful to ensure that my brother's abuse never escalated to actual physical beatings, his treatment of me was still brutalizing and traumatizing. Again, I was in absolutely no shape emotionally at the time to deal with any of this.

My brother's daily diatribes against me had a varied quality to them in that one day could be obscenely brash and bombastic: 'Get the fuck out! Get a life! Get a job! We're fucking sick of carrying you!' The next day, however, he could be quite delicate and almost seemingly sympathetic: 'Life isn't fair. This is the way things are. We all have to go out and make our own way in the world sometime.' On another day he would be dismissive and full of ridicule: 'No one cares! Get over it! Stop moping around like a loser and get lost, you fucking retard! Hahaha!' The intensity of his verbal assaults was always modulating up and down as a way to keep me off-balance and inflict the maximum amount of uncertainty and psychological distress.

My mother and older sister were also resident on the farm at the time, so they were aware of what was going on too. However, they both lived in fear of my dad just as much as we all did and so would not intervene on my behalf. I also had one more brother (the eldest), but he had wisely emigrated to Australia years earlier. Besides, 'officially' my dad had no idea that this abuse was even taking place. My brother would always wait until he was safely out of the room before starting another one of his tirades against me so that our father could always maintain plausible deniability. My dad liked to keep his hands clean so that he could never be accused of being too cruel and heartless, and thereby maintain his moral authority over us.

That was also why my dad couldn't just kick me out or even get directly involved himself—it would make him look bad. Up to then, despite frequent and unfounded accusations to the contrary, I had remained a good, loyal and hard-working son for him, so if he tried to kick me out now without a good justification he would look horribly two-faced, cold-hearted and hypocritical. He needed a good pretext to get rid of me. That was why he was sending my brother to antagonize and provoke me beyond all endurance in the hope that I would react violently or make some other mistake and thereby give him a legitimate reason as to why I had to leave the family.

At this point, I should have simply cut my losses and walked away from the farm and my family for good. The writing was on the wall: My time was up. One way or the other, no matter

what else happened from there on out, my family and my place in it were finished for me. I was no longer welcome there. It was no longer my home. It had already been decided by the only person in our family who mattered.

Unfortunately, my bond with my family, toxic though it was, was still primal in its strength and could not easily be broken. I could no more suddenly sever my connection to them than I could cut off one of my own limbs. That just left my brother to clumsily hack away at that connection as a butcher might swing at a stringy piece of meat with a blunt cleaver.

What followed were months of psychological and emotional violence that took a huge toll on my heart and mind. I felt like I was being slowly destroyed from the inside out. Everything I had ever thought was true or hoped for or believed in was all being taken away from me and I was being left with nothing. Worse than that, all my worst fears were coming true. I had lived in denial about how much my dad hated me all my life. Now that protective shield was being forcibly ripped away from me. A dam wall of deep agonizing pain was being breached inside of me. I was not ready to face this horror. I knew it would kill me as surely as a knife through the heart. There was no way I could survive it. I felt my self-control begin to slip away as my thoughts turned dark and murderous. I was terrified of what was going to come next.

In lieu of being able to walk away, now would have been a great time for me to reach out to somebody—anybody—outside the family and ask for help. I needed to admit that what was happening to me was more than I could possibly deal with alone. I needed to let someone know that I was suffering badly and desperately needed some support. But it all felt so pointless at the time. What good would it do? What the hell could they do about it? Say 'There, there' as they patted me on the shoulder patronizingly? Besides, who really cared anyway? People had their own problems to deal with. In any case, a deep sense of shame prevented me from telling others about it. Also, I was still mired in denial and confusion about what exactly was happening to me, so that made it hard to communicate it coherently to others. Once or twice in sheer desperation I even attempted to convey to my abuser himself how badly I was hurting, but he assured me that I was just fine and to stop being such a big fucking baby about it.

Even my sister got drafted into the war-effort against me as a spy and informant. She would keep tabs on my movements and rifle through the drawers in my room in an attempt to find dirt on me while I was out. Admittedly, it was nothing she hadn't done before, but whereas previously it had all just been for fun, now there was a renewed impetus to it. My dad wanted me out of the house sooner rather than later and one way or another he was going to find a way to make it happen.

I often thought that if my family spent even half as much time talking to me as they did about me then we would have had a great relationship. The strange thing about it was that all this cloak and dagger psychological warfare was so unnecessary. We were not a poor family. On the contrary, we were a well-off family. Our grandfather's claim to fame was having once been listed in *Stubb's Gazette* as the largest landowner in the county. Even then, at 300 acres, we still had one of the largest farms in the locality. We had options. We had alternatives. Ways and means. My sister at home and my brother in Oz had both attended prestigious colleges entirely at our father's expense and with his full support. All their futures were assured. So why was I the one being left with no way out? It didn't have to end like this. We didn't have to resort to this kind of vicious back-stabbing, cut-throat behaviour.

In a last-ditch effort I even tried to confide in my poor little mouse of a mother as we were driving in the car one day, but I was too late. My dad had already got there first, of course, and warned her off giving me any support whatsoever. She sheepishly volunteered that perhaps it would be best if I just did what they wanted and went on my way. I lost it then, roared at her in frustration, and my poor mother got a big fright because she thought I might crash the car. It was then that I hit rock-bottom.

At that point I acquired a gun.

It was a shotgun, to be exact. I did not want to hurt any member of my family with it. On the contrary, I wanted to protect them. From me. From the massive rage, violence and agonizing sense of betrayal that was boiling up inside of me. As the pressure on me inexorably built up I knew it was just a matter of time before all those things exploded out of me. Either I or another member of my family would get seriously hurt or killed as a result of it. I desperately wanted to prevent that from happening at all costs, but it was like we were stuck on a runaway train that we were powerless to stop.

But if I couldn't stop it, maybe I could swerve it? Maybe I could make it so that when that violence finally did spill out of me my family were no longer the intended targets of it? I could displace the violence and instead use it to set myself free from the painful trap that I was in. I could use the gun to get what I thought I needed to become independent from my family: I could rob a bank with it. Then the pain would be over. Then I could show my family that I didn't need them anymore. That I could be strong without them. Instead of the nothing that they had reduced me to. Then I could finally leave them on my own terms without feeling so wronged and betrayed by them.

To be clear, I have never in my life been a violent or aggressive person. In fact, I am the exact opposite of that because I always went out of my way to not be like my dad. I never got into fights. I never got into arguments. I never even raised my voice. On the contrary, I carefully avoided any kind of confrontation or conflict all my life. I always wanted to be as accommodating, understanding and respectful of other people as possible. This was partly down to nature (I took after my mother—another reason for my dad to hate me) and partly due to an upbringing that caused me to struggle with intense feelings of shame and worthlessness. As a result, any kind of fight or rancor within the family was always unbearably painful and upsetting to me because it destroyed the idealized (and completely false) image that I had of us in my head at that time.

Exactly how I planned on making the transformation from a quiet farm boy who wouldn't say boo to a goose to a hardened criminal was not at all clear at that point. Perhaps I assumed it would all just come naturally to me on the day. Nor did I have any experience or proficiency with firearms, so that too would be a steep learning curve. And of course, I was somehow going to pull all this off completely alone, in perfect secrecy and without any outside assistance from anyone else.

Although I still appeared to be functioning normally from the outside, internally I think my rational mind was long gone by that stage. I had lost all touch with reality and was now living out some kind of strange and deadly fantasy. My thought process was not very clear at the time, but somehow in my mind having that gun enabled me to lessen the unbearable psychological pressure I was under. To reduce the sense of intense victimization I was feeling to the point where I could continue to survive and believe that my family was not really falling apart at the seams. To feel like I could take action and have some agency over my own life instead of just being endlessly acted upon and broken down into ever-smaller pieces all the time.

Of course my 'plan' to become an outlaw was the poorly-imagined fantasy of a damaged and lost child who had watched too many Hollywood movies. It was pathetic and doomed to tragedy and failure. I was a shy and backward farm boy without the knowledge, temperament or ability to even attempt the insane and desperate act I was contemplating. I was about to make the biggest mistake of my life and in so doing, ruin not only my own life, but my entire family's lives too. Maybe not directly as I feared, but the consequences of my actions on their lives would still be devastating to them.

I didn't want to do it. But I had to do it. If I didn't do it then everything would be destroyed. I had to do it. Didn't I?

And then it was all over.

Normally when your own family spies on your every move it's generally considered intrusive and unhealthy. However, in this one instance it proved to be a literal lifesaver for me. As

instructed, my sister followed me one day and saw me with the weapon. She went straight to our father to tell him about it. At first they thought it must be some kind of joke. Then he searched the outhouse nearest where I was seen with it, discovered the gun, immediately realized the deadly seriousness of it and figured out it was no joke. He confronted me. I reluctantly told him of my 'plan' for the gun. For once in his life, he was left shocked.

The gun disappeared.

The relentless hate campaign against me came to an end after that. Everything went quiet again. Life went on after a fashion, but things were never really the same for our family. We were finished. There was no more denying it now. I left first. Then my sister. In the end, my father got exactly what he wanted.

I no longer have any contact with any member of my family. My father died a few years later. I was already estranged from him for a long time by then. All the trouble and trauma we went through back then was all for nothing in the end as, by the time he died, he still hadn't gotten around to the task of making a clear will that named a definitive successor. That led to a protracted inheritance battle between my brother and my other two siblings that dragged on for years. I couldn't have cared less by that point. It was never about the farm for me. I left Ireland for good in 2007 and haven't been back since.

I live somewhere a lot warmer now. However, every time I think about how close my family came to the brink of disaster back in those days a chill still runs through me.

I try to keep up with the news from rural Ireland. Nonetheless, there are too many stories about our family farms ending up in violence and tragedy just like ours almost did (four such examples in less than one calendar year from 2020 to 2021). Each incident not only destroys a family, but tears the heart and soul out of an entire community. And those are just the most serious incidents that make the papers. How many hundreds more incidents that are less serious happen every year that no one ever hears about?

I was wrong to pick up a gun back then. Violence or the threat of it is never the answer to any problem. But if I hadn't picked it up, if I hadn't somehow caused an interruption in the path of that runaway train, where would I be now? I wish I could have been strong enough to just walk away from that horribly painful and messy situation before then, but I wasn't.

The Irish farming industry always presents a very wholesome, family-friendly image of itself to the world. It's useful for marketing, if nothing else. However, it is important to recognise that some families have had a very different experience. People always seem to think that it's wonderful that so much of our farmers' sense of identity is bound up in the land. However, it can also be dangerous to those who, through no fault of their own, come to be perceived as a threat to that all-important sense of identity. I think my experience on the farm is far more common than people like to admit. It may not play out in the exact same way for others, but the underlying themes, narratives and lethally toxic culture remains the same. Sometimes the good of the farm becomes more important than what is good for those who are on it. Every generation there are farm kids who suffer in one way or another to safeguard a legacy. For their sake, we can't ignore their stories or pretend that they don't exist.

Although I still carry a lot of scars from my upbringing on the farm, in many ways I am lucky to actually live a pretty good life these days, although that's more down to luck and choosing the right partner than anything else. We are raising two beautiful kids who get on well with each other and rarely fight. We also have no scapegoating, favouritism or divide-and-conquer-type mind games going on in our family. It feels good to break the cycle of abuse. I still feel angry about the past sometimes, but I know now that it is pointless wishing ill on those who wronged me. The only true healing or redemption for me now rests solely in doing right by my kids and refusing to repeat the same mistakes that my dad made with us. 🍀

## **The Dog**

**Mary C. McHale**

On my last shopping day before Christmas  
searching and scurrying for suitable gifts  
the dog caught my eye in the antique shop.

My mother is dusting down the mantle  
gently placing her cream and golden spaniels  
at each corner, to guard red berried leaves.

It is Christmas Day nineteen sixty two.  
My father bounces a rubber ball high  
I am shrieking in great joy.

My mother found him beneath the fodder:  
for his cattle, in the meadow field beside the  
river.  
Her screams scattered the herd of calves.

My grandfather saw neighbours gathering,  
Heard them say Patrick has passed away,  
saw me run and hide in the old hen shed.

Under the Sacred Light along the table wall  
he lay in a wooden box. Although I had just  
turned four  
I was tall enough to see my father's still  
sinewy hands.

From the parlour room I heard the sudden  
shatter  
saw my baby sister grab my mother's  
cream and golden spaniel from her mantle.

Spread beneath her feet in the fading light  
her golden and cream spaniel in smithereens  
I looked up, saw the other spaniel

still cream and golden, upright and safe.  
Beside me, my grandfather clasped  
my searching hand.

## **Traonach**

**Mona Lynch**

My scratchy melody on summer evenings,  
curtains billow as I lie in bed,  
blundering moths tuned out, by the sound of  
his call  
from tall grass flecked with cuckoo spit.  
A calm comforting pimpernel,  
hides, hatching, hoping for late haymaking

We did not cherish him, or let our nettles  
grow.  
Harvesting cash crops twice yearly,  
flailing him out of existence.  
Will he come back?  
His rasping krek, krek  
Trashed

## Stages of Delivery

Anne Marie Kennedy

I watched her during the day stray away from the others, the udder full to bursting, colostrum leaking from swollen teats. Walking awkwardly, legs buckling under the weight of an overdue calf. I get the barn ready: spread clean bedding, top up the water, fill the feeder with nuts, drive her in after dark, up to bed, the alarm clock set for midnight.

**First stage:** She's standing, staring, ignoring the nuts, moaning a little, black eyes look intently at me in circles of torch light, nothing to worry about, hasn't she a history of three previously uneventful births?

**Second stage:** Half two, leave pyjamas on under jeans, two jumpers, a wax coat, gloves and wellies, nostrils hurt when I cross the open part of the freezing yard in February winds.

She's pacing, tail swishing, the water bag pops out, drops halfway to the ground. I leave her a while, go inside, make tea, fold laundry.

**Third stage:** Meringue-like froth all around her mouth, the eyes wild. She kicks the concrete wall with a back leg, tosses straw agitatedly and flops down, straining, groaning, pushing futilely.

**Intervention stage:** I wake Tom up. He's decisive, phones McGowan the vet.

I bring my mug of tea out, sit near her on an upturned bucket, listening to the river lap over rocks, against the whirr of the cooling system in the milking parlour. A fox barks in the distance, another one answers. She stretches herself out full-length, exhales loudly, the massive belly mound causing her legs to splay. Her teats leak, from the front left a squirt of clotted, yellow milk, the colostrum tap turned on.

**Assessment stage:** 'Not looking good from here, how long is she down?' McGowan asks, looking at her carefully, judging, before stripping down to a t-shirt and plastic apron.

'Maybe an hour,' I said.

'Ye'll have to get her up.'

With wet, soaped-up arms, he opens the gate latch, comes towards us, kicks her lightly on the rump with the tip of a boot. She stirs. Tom catches her dirty tail as if to lift her, but she gets up unaided, front-loads herself onto bended front knees, then straightens up on all four, unsteady for a minute but the body weight allows her stand solidly once established.

Tom puts a firm hand on her hind quarter. McGowan puts his right arm, up to the elbow, inside her.

'The head's twisted back. We'll do our best sure, tie her up if ye can.'

Tom puts a head collar on, I link a rope to it and tie it to a wall bracket, the two men talk about rugby while McGowan rummages inside her. She lashes back, lands a hoof on his knee. He fuck-fucks her but continues working.

'Ropes, quick. Hand me the ropes.'

His body, pressed to her left rump, his right arm all the way inside her. Using his left hand he grabs the tail and twists it up on her spine. She groans, sways a bit away from him.

'Feckin' tight in here, could be the side door. Might have to section her.'

**Emergency stage:** His arm hair wet with shit, blood and slime, his beard and cheeks muck splattered, he leaves her, soaps up again. Her front legs buckle. She wants to lie down but Tom anticipates it, pushing her deftly against the wall. She relaxes, relieved, grateful for the solid support on one side.

'Perfect, keep her there now if ye can, lie into her,' McGowan shouts.

I lean into her neck and shoulders. Tom stretches strong arms out to spread himself across

the expanse of her belly.

'Gimme a hand Tom. I've turned him. A big bastard of a calf. Here, take the rope.'

Tom leaves his post and I move to where he had stood, my chin level with her backbone, my bra-less breasts and body snug against her belly, feeling her hide tense up, go rigid, the pain, like a stultifying paralysis, ripping through her.

**Resignation stage:** The men take a rope each and pull down. She throws the head back, roaring, resigned now. I move towards the rear and see an alabaster hoof appear, a blue rope tied around it, another hoof behind it. Tom lights a cigarette nonchalantly, lets it dangle from lips while waiting on a contraction or an instruction.

Like colleagues on a tug-o-war team their pull is choreographed: a pull, a wait, a pull again until the calf's head appears, the neck flattened by the cervix.

**Dead or alive stage:** The calf's eyes are closed tight, bits of amniotic sack stuck to its long lashes, tongue hanging out, bluish and limp.

'Leave her to me now,' McGowan says, the calf sliding down the length of him. He kneels, lays the body gently down on clean straw. I untie the ropes and pour cold water on her head. She shakes, her hide hot and steaming against cold night air.

'Pick her up there Tom, give her a swing,' McGowan says.

'Or a jive,' says Tom, laughing, throwing the cigarette butt out into the yard. He grabs the hind legs, swings her back and forth, dangles her for about thirty seconds until she coughs, spluttering to life. He leaves her down.

I wipe the gunge from her rough tongue, rub her head and neck with straw. Her mother turns, nearly knocking me over in a mad rush to lick to life every square inch of her fourth, healthy, heifer calf.

**Back to bed stage. 🦄**

## The Land *Ger Duffy*

(i.m. my father)

Taking up painting aged seventy two, shadow  
then light came to dominate his thoughts.  
His topic, the mountain. Glassed in frames  
his paintings were the sloppy work of a schoolboy.  
Later, his brushwork revealed cumulus clouds,  
lightened gold fields surrounding grey glassy  
lakes. Stroking the plane of the mountain,  
his knife laid layers of navy, ochre and purple,  
burnt umber bushes flecked with orange, veiled  
islands of sage and olive marooned in aquamarine  
seas all with vermillion sunsets. All this came  
to him and the incantation, the land, the land, the land.

## **Silage Time**

*Laura Swift*

They looked so snug  
All four bundled together  
Fitting into each other  
Like a feathered jig saw puzzle.  
Tiny yellow beaks, not squawking now.  
I could see that their bellies were full.  
Thin fragile skin stretched around  
A frame of tiny wish bones.  
They were almost perfect.  
You could barely see the mark  
Where the soft tractor tyre had rolled  
Over their universe.

## **Father and Son**

*Ann Marie Foley*

In a thread of light he reaches to the rust crusted  
barn  
that once held hay and straw  
for horses, cows and cattle.  
He farmed like his father and father and father back  
before tractors and 'ways of doing things'.  
Trailing dung, seed sacks, and feed  
in and out the yard as long as there was light,  
and after, propped by a bale,  
or leaning over the stable half door,  
chat with neighbours, time to weigh  
the pros and cons of the local team,  
some finer points of growing beasts,  
the cost of feed and prices at the mart.

Now the empty barn and fields await,  
the next farmer from travels and college returned,  
his car comes and goes  
leaving the dust of the lane behind.

In a ray of light on a spring evening  
father reaches from the past,  
to feel the 'bit of kindness' in the air  
the first growth of grass,  
to feel the plough and reins,  
see steam rise up from the horse  
and brown shiny soil in his wake.  
He wills his son to start full of hope  
for warm days and soft rain  
and a harvest to feed all,  
turf to warm dark days.



My name is Patrick Mulcahy and I am The Mindful Farmer. I would like to inform readers on the passion that existed in rural Ireland in my community for 'early summer hay'. This was a ritual. If you could not save hay in early summer then you were not considered a real farmer.

Our community consisted of a group of close-knit, small-farmer, families from the parishes of Milford, Ballyagran and Feenagh. It consisted of likeminded people born into the land and of the land, lived and reared families often from a very small acreage. The unity of cooperation was built on trust and loyalty and even though it had a mix of Cork and Limerick farmers in the group, that never mattered when it came to working together. However, when it came to the Munster Hurling Championship, well then, the hay forks, or pikes, as we called them, could have been used for a purpose other than turning or piking hay. Still, on Monday morning all would come back to normal and we would get on with whatever work was at hand.

Like in all communities there is always a leader and our man was Dinny Madigan, a man you could rely on to name the next pope, his knowledge was so respected. He, himself, had a smallish holding and advised all other farmers on grass growth and type. I heard him say many times that if the pasture wasn't colourful the cows would not be happy when they arrived into the fields and always insisted on a grass sword of mixed clovers, chicory and plantain. 'Isn't this all the talk now.'

Now back to the hay and early summer fresh green hay full of seed variety cut and turned often by hand in small two-to-three-acre fields all individually divided by double ditches of native trees and shrubs. After much turning, it was the rowing with the wheel rake and the tumbling, Paddy bringing it all together to make 'winds of large cocks' that were trimmed and tidied and impeccably finished by the women and children. You could have a group of up to 50 people in the field at any one time.

When I look back now, I can still feel that inner power of happiness and how it fills my senses six decades on. I still carry that guilt that if our hay is not saved by the 20th of June in any one year I can hear the elders from the parishes questioning my farming abilities. Nonetheless, the amazing thing here is that no matter the weather, since 1985 I have always saved the hay between the last week of May and the 15th June, and I pray to God that we will manage to do so again this year. Thanks also to PJ Crotty and his family and his great team who cut and bale for us. We do our own turning, as this is a very specialised job, or so it has been instilled into my brain.

Hay saving was just one part of our great community life as we all worked in the fields together. We worked off our own frustration, our anxieties, we counselled each other, we laughed and often the children would sing for us as we worked away merrily. We farmed alongside nature and was watched over by Mother Earth. We were mindful and caring to each other. The soil beneath our feet is our biggest asset. It is only farmers who are the soil owners that can sequester carbon, which we are doing now, but not in the same scale and with the same feeling as our Dinny Madigan- led community in the 50's, 60's and 70's in West Limerick. We must all move with time, but I firmly believe we can relearn some of the old practises and work together mindfully, peacefully and in step with Mother Nature, thanking her again for another successful hay making season that fills my senses with an unrivalled aroma of mixed dried grasses. If you can, catch a fistful of dry hay and inhale it and we all can together pray for a successful and safe harvest for all farming families. Bless all those families and power healing to all who need it and be sure to wear your summer smile no matter the weather. 🍀

***Patrick Mulcahy***

## Show and Sale

*Dave Kelly*

A spear of sunlight cut through the curtains and landed on the face of Ned Nolan, sleeping in his sitting room. He loved to be woken by the sunlight on his skin in the morning and had positioned the couch in the right spot. He never needed an alarm clock, his 79 years of living alone on the farm had made him an apostle of the seasons, rising with the morning sun and retiring with the dusk. He threw his legs onto the floor and leaned forward until the weight of his torso came off his legs, enabling them to straighten.

He winced as he felt the sharp stabbing pain in his right hip. He needed an operation, but that would have to wait at least until the end of September when he would have all the sheep gathered from the mountain. He limped along the hall to the toilet under the stairs. After he had urinated, the walk back seemed a little easier as the rigidity of sleep left him. He thought to himself how lucky it was that he got a downstairs toilet installed since he now found it too difficult to climb the stairs. He pulled on his jeans, socks and boots, a t-shirt and overalls. He knew he didn't need a jacket. He didn't need to check the weather forecast or look outside.

Ned flicked on the gas under the frying pan and went to the fridge. He took the sausages and rashers out and put three of each on the pan. He realized he had forgotten to go to the shop the previous evening. There was no butter and only enough milk for one cup of tea. He always had a fried breakfast in the morning. It satisfied him until dinner time, having only a couple of ham sandwiches for lunch. The meat hissed and cracked in the pan while he looked out the window onto the slopes of Mount Leinster. He could see the sheep grazing around the yellow banks, just below the plantation of spruce trees. He knew most of them were his. He knew every inch of the 1500 acres of commonage land. Only fifteen farmers had grazing rights to the mountain, which were passed on by inheritance or bought from the estate of a deceased farmer.

Ned had learned the craft of herding sheep on the mountain from his father and could identify all the landmarks used by generations of farmers to mentally map the mountain. These names would sprinkle the language of local farmers whenever they met. An overheard conversation in a pub or at a gathering outside mass on Sunday would often be relaying the fact that while a man was checking his sheep on the mountain, he saw ten or twelve of Mat Murphy's sheep around Molls Rock or a few of Tom Kelly's near the Giant's Chair. The ebb and flow of information between farmers made the job of herding a communal thing, a forged connection that made each man look out of himself and know that his was not a solitary experience. Not so many men graze sheep on the mountain now and the younger men use quad bikes and drones to gather information.

Ned took the food from the pan and put it on last night's dinner plate. He cleared a corner of the table and sat down. The knife was with the plate and now he surveyed the table looking for the fork. He leaned over and probed with his long bony fingers through the empty milk cartons, tin cans, a bottle of engine oil and a veterinary syringe. He then remembered that it had fallen to the floor during last night's meal and his hip had told him to leave it. He located it now under the table and dragged it out with the handle of the brush. He wiped it on his trousers and began to eat. Before he finished he was summoned to the door by a scratching and a low bark. He let in the dog and put out a tin of food for her. Man and beast finished eating and Ned locked the door behind him and they both headed for the mountain.

Today he was bringing his twenty best hogget ewes in from the mountain to put them on good pasture for six weeks. Then they would be ready for the annual show and sale in Borris on

August 15th. Hoggets, being one and a half years old, were ready for breeding and would always command the best price. Ned had gotten third prize a few times and had been improving his stock every year by crossing the heavy-boned purebred Suffolk ram with his lighter-boned cheviots. He had already identified the best twenty and marked them with blue paint on the back of the neck. He knew what the judges wanted to see: a sheep with jet black freckles, snow white wool that was a little on the coarse side, ears that stood erect and faced front, and good strong feet.

He opened and closed the gates behind him as he crossed the fields of his farm. Each one was identified now by satellite and given an accompanying serial number but known to Ned as the Kill Field, the Top Pasture, the Middle Field and of course the Chapel Path. This was the field where neighbours would take a shortcut each Sunday to go to mass before many of them owned cars. Many farms had a field called the Chapel Path when Ned was a young man. As he walked he felt the familiar rise and fall of the ground under his feet, his body anticipating each bump and hollow, the muscle memory of many years of dedication and toil. He liked the feel of the land under him, like an extension of himself, an anchor to his soul, the centre of him. He never wanted to live anywhere else, go anywhere else; this was his land, his home.

Ned arrived at the Top Field and opened the gate onto the mountain. He always turned to look back down the valley and every time a feeling of contentment and belonging came over him, like the feeling of falling asleep or holding a girl's hand. It didn't always happen, but today she came into his mind. He knew she wouldn't marry him once she had spent the first summer in America after going to college. He knew his farm was too small and her parents wouldn't want a life of struggle for her. Her father Billy died a few years ago and Ned bought his farm. He was standing now in the field where Marie had thinned turnips with him as a boy. Her long black hair glinted in the sun as they crawled along the drills, pulling out the surplus plants and leaving only the strongest there, well-spaced with room to grow. He also bought Jack Murphy's small farm when he died, but still the hunger burned in him as strong as ever. Pat Kelly's farm of 30 acres was up for sale and he would pay over the odds to keep Sean Kavanagh from getting his hands on it. He could see Sean from where he stood, bringing in the cows for milking. They walked robotically along the gravelled roadway that split the 80-acre carpet of grass in two, each side like a patchwork quilt of varying shades of green. With not a tree or a ditch in sight but separated only by invisible wires, it appeared to Ned as a creeping glutinous machine feeding the voracious appetite of some far-off soulless metropolis.

He understood well the ambition that drove Sean. He felt and thought it himself every day from when he began farming as a young man with a 40-horsepower Ford and 80 sheep. Each year he squeezed the margins tight as a drum. Find the best feed at the lowest cost, watch the markets, watch the weather, harvests must be perfectly timed, losses are certain, get the best price for the sheep, buy back better ones than you sold. The tractor needs tyres but not this year, there is still an inch of rubber. Always watching, calculating, hoping, rolling the dice. You don't pay mechanics, vets, electricians, plumbers—every farmer is all these himself—but more than any of these he is a gambler, a fighter, a realist and a pragmatist. Whether he farms wheat on the great plains of America or sheep on the foothills of Mount Leinster in Ireland, it is the ownership of land that conveys a sense of freedom, belonging and possibility that is the essence of what it is to be a farmer.

Ned reached behind the gate post and pulled out the ash stick he used on the steeper slopes. His pace slowed by infirmity, he headed for the yellow banks. The sun rose high and the heat reflected back up from the hard, bare ground along the sheep paths as Ned climbed towards the ridge. Many a time Ned was caught in fog on the mountain and followed one back down, no need of a compass. He reached the ridge about one o'clock. Always better to drive the sheep downward on the slopes lest one would be startled by an overeager dog and go over the top.

'Go around.' He snapped out the instruction and the dog shot out through the grass and heather.

The first sheep that moved set off the alarm and soon they were funnelling down the slopes towards the valley floor. Ned paused at the crossing stones near Molls Rock. With cupped hands he scooped up the cool water and let out a sigh as it settled in his stomach, loosening the salty tightness of the fried food. From a distance he moved the flock up and down the slopes with the sheepdog, avoiding the thick brush and marshy bottomland. Like a conductor at the head of an orchestra, he cajoled or commanded the dog to keep the sheep on an even course, controlling the easily startled animals.

As he approached the Top Field Ned took a high line above the flock and put the dog sitting on a prominent rock to discourage any wandering. He drew a wide circle around the flock and opened the gate. Now he drew nearer and encouraged the sheep towards the gate. Like a flock of birds they began to gather and move as one formation. Slowly Ned allowed them the forward motion, but then he strung them out and almost in single file. He watched as they passed and with the dog to his left and the stick in his right hand he directed the line back up the slopes, interrupting at the appearance of each blue-marked sheep and directing her towards the Top Field instead. This was the true skill of herding sheep: to be able to separate forty from a flock of 300 on open ground, to interrupt the passing sheep at just the right moment and to provoke simultaneously the required reaction in one animal and also the entire flock. When all had passed the selected sheep were already sprinting towards the gate. A few unwanted ones had gotten into the mix, but they would be easily dealt with later.

The boy would be finished with lunch now and soon he'd be on his way home from school. His brother's lad Jack was going to help him with the worm dosing before putting the hoggets to pasture. The boy was a strong young lad and having just turned eleven he would soon be on the mountain with him. Ned had already trained a young sheepdog with him. Before the summer was over he intended to bring Jack out and show him all the landmarks on the mountain. Most people knew Molls Rock and the Giant's Chair, but only Ned himself knew Molls Churn, a cavernous dry riverbed running deep underground, the entrance amounting to a crack between two rocks and obscured now with gorse bushes.

Ned closed the gate and followed the sheep down towards the farmyard. They could smell the fresh grass on the breeze and needed no encouragement. They hopped over the jagged stones at the entrance to the gathering field, just beside the house. From here Ned would herd them into a shed and get lunch while he waited for Jack. He placed the stick up against the pier and walked backwards, bringing the gate with him to close. He winced as his hip stabbed at him and instantly threw his weight onto his left side. At the moment of doing so he stumbled on the dewy grass.

He knew it would be bad. His right side collided with the sharp stones and it felt like his arm was being ripped from his body. Pain radiated through every inch of him. He felt his heart pounding and the sweat was cold on his forehead. He lay still.

A gnawing fear took hold of him. He was helpless, alone. He feared his hip was broken. Every breath was excruciating. The dog licked his face and whined at his master's distress.

Ned looked up as the horse chestnut trees swayed in the strong breeze, silently rebuking him for his folly. He saw the farmhouse. The long fingers of ivy were greedily clawing through the broken windowpane of the kitchen and lifting the blue bangor slates from the roof. From a place he hadn't visited for an eternity he saw his mother standing over him. He closed his eyes to banish the vision but was pulled back to account. He saw the farmhouse of his youth and the beautiful garden tended by his mother. He smelled the wild dog roses and honey suckle that she allowed to grow alongside the dahlias and begonias. He saw himself as a child sitting at the kitchen table eating apple tart and his proud mother smiling as she poured the tea. He remembered the long staircase he climbed every day to the bedrooms upstairs with vases of

flowers in every one. Now he was looking at the fruits of his life's effort, his inheritance, his accomplishment. In his pain now he saw a punishment for his sin. The sin of waste, the sin of failure—of failure to go out and make his mark on the world. His body shook and he felt his chest almost explode as a voice came out of him: 'I'm sorry, Mother.'

The tears came relentlessly until at last he was still. The dog licked his face again. He thought he might die here. He saw his life now as it really was. He was alone on the land. He had spent his life digging rocks out of it, fencing it, saving money to buy more of it. He had forsaken education, travel, enlightenment and love. The land had drawn him in and taken all of him, and now it would take his very life. He closed his eyes and a quietness came over him. He heard only the sound of his heart. In the darkness of his mind he lost all conscious thought.

'Ned! Jesus, Ned!' A flash of sunlight stung his eyes. He heard Jack's voice and saw a blurred outline. 'Ned, what happened?'

'Ahh Christ Jack, I fell on the bloody stones.'

Jack fussed about on his feet. 'Dad is ringing the ambulance. Can you get up?'

'Don't touch me Jack, I'm all broke up. Just get me a drink of water.'

Ned's brother held his hand. 'Where is the pain, Ned?'

'The ribs and the arm are shagged on my right side, Billy.' He squeezed Billy's hand.

'Rest now Ned, I'll get a blanket to put over you.'

Ned thought he must have fallen asleep again, but he didn't remember. He nodded in submission as a series of instructions were given by the paramedic. He winced as they rolled him onto the board and up into the ambulance.

Dr Murphy stepped in beside him. 'How are you, Ned? I'm giving you something for the pain. You may have broken your pelvis.'

'Grand doctor, thanks very much.'

Ned lay on the stretcher and felt a sensation of warm water flowing over him and his body began to relax. He felt very sleepy again. He heard the snippets of conversation outside the ambulance. Billy and the doctor were talking. Billy nodded his head with arms folded. Ned strained to hear. A few phrases came across on the breeze. 'Underweight, long term, living conditions.'

Suddenly it came to his mind. 'Jack!'

Jack came to the door of the ambulance.

'Jack, will you get Billy to help you and dose the sheep?'

'Sure I will Ned, or maybe Sean Kavanagh will help me.'

'Put them out on the six acres of pasture and check on them after school every day, will you?'

'I will surely, Ned.'

'When I get back I'll show you Molls Churn and we'll get the hoggets ready for the show and sale. We'll have to pare their feet and I'll show you how to do that as well.'

Jack was already walking backwards by now and he gave a thumbs up as the ambulance door was closing. Ned looked at the instrument panel beside him and watched as the green and red lights flashed. He began to drift off. He remembered the auction for Pat Kelly's farm would be on soon. He might have to get somebody to bid for him. He would have over 100 acres if he could buy it, not bad for a man that started with thirty, and maybe then he would do something with the farmhouse. Then he would be a big farmer, a man of substance. His thoughts melted into each other now and he was back in his childhood, running through the fields with Marie, stacking bales of hay and following his father on the mountain. He tasted the cool water from the mountain river in his mouth and saw the stone ditches rising out of the fields, himself and his father placing stone upon stone. He thought he would make a great man of himself yet. He wondered if he met his father and mother now what would he say to them. And just then, in the distance he heard an announcement, as if opening a door to heaven. First prize, hogget ewes, Ned Nolan. 🐏

## Margaret and Me

Mary O'Shea

'You could hear her shouting as far as the gate of the road.'

It is April 27th 2021, the second April of covid. This month a hundred and one years ago the last woman before me to run Shea's Farm of Raheen died aged 80 or so. She didn't own it, of course; she was the lessee. The Earl of Bessborough's former Big House stands out on the horizon as I look down from the height of my Case tractor parked at the roadside entrance gate. From my perch I sweep across the Suir Valley, from edge of Wexford to the left of my vision, to South Kilkenny in the middle, to East County Waterford on the far right. The mist is unmasking Comeragh Mountain over Crotty's Lake, overlooking the townlands of Graighrush and Kilrossanty. That's where Margaret Power was born and reared and saw wretches drawing their last breath, thrown down on roadside ditches as she walked to school in Kilrossanty in the 1840s. An Gorta Mór, the Big Hunger: She, in a 100-acre farm, wasn't hungry herself. Pandemic was not new to her either. She lived unscathed through the 1918-19 flu epidemic. She is quoted as saying 'the worst never happens to anyone.'

My trail of thought is interrupted by the barking of my German Shepard, Michael, as the thundering sound of the first timber lorry comes up the hill to sweep into my gateway. The driver waves at me. I have the forest gate opened for him beside the middle gateway, a good half mile from the same house and farmyard that Margaret came to for first time as a new bride in April 1872 with her 27-years-old widower husband Geoffrey, aged 62, my great grandfather. She came into a house that was full: nine children from his first marriage, and an elderly brother-in-law named Laurance. The spare money had run out at Graighrush. She had only £100 of a dowry, so getting a home was everything in order to get out from underneath the feet of her married brother. Like her husband she spoke Irish, but she couldn't write it. She spoke English too: what Michael Hartnett describes as a 'good language to sell pigs in.' Irish wasn't fashionable either in 1872, as it was no good for clerk work, for a government job or more importantly, for emigrating. Instead, it was the language of the poor and the backward.

A proud power of Kilrossanty, Margaret would certainly have lost that great temper and be heard shouting at gate of the road if anyone made such a remark in her company. She revelled in talking Irish to the local blacksmith Nicholas who hailed from Fenor in County Waterford, and with whom she shared a dialect. Her children and others had no idea what they said to one another.

The lorry trundles down the trackway, swooshes to a stop, carrying three bays of spruce logs for the mill in Ferrybank, South Kilkenny, out of which is made material for tables, shelves, floors, roofs and much more for export as far as California. He waves and says out his cab window, 'Very heavy timber, you are an early riser. '

'Must count the loads,' I say, keeping a check. I have a memo on my smart phone open, writing down the number plates and the time.

The first lorry has just gone down as far as Jamestown Cross and past the deciduous Mountain Grove wood originally planted by the landlord. A second lorry swooshes to a stop before turning into the open gate to load a second batch.

In Margaret's time, it was horse and cart and shank's mare, no Jeeps flying down the road or big tractors. She drew water from the well in a bucket balanced on her head from the bog where the plantation is now growing. She pulled turnips by moonlight for horses and people.

I have to keep an eye that lorry drivers do not leave the road gate open, as suckler calves

can run underneath the electric wire and end up on the road to delay someone rushing to work, bringing children to school, or worse, cause a crash and fatality.

There is a half hour of hiatus between lorries as mid-morning arrives, so I drive up to see how much timber is gone from the stack. I pass my sad ash crop to the left of the forest road. Dying dead on its feet, a victim of ash dieback disease. The reconstitution scheme is just that for a twenty-year-old crop with the annual Forest Service premiums gone. Wait for sixteen or eighteen years for first the thinning, and for a few euros from the new crop. Ash dieback disease is not of a farmer's doing. The misguided policy of importing ash saplings from European nurseries did the damage. I, the powerless farmer, had no say whatsoever in the nursery stock or its providence.

Last week my 19-year-old quad was having one of its sulky gear days. I cursed underneath my breath, all the money never to be recovered in valuable hurley butts gone for good. They are not rotten spuds, yet to me, one of the non-commercial farmers in the country, the loss matters and heading for 59, I do not have the years to collect any bounty from the replacements. The quad needs a push as the electric reverse shift misses its signal, so I manoeuvre it to get it to where I can put it into a forward gear. The Honda does not owe me anything. It is wearing with the years, like my right knee that aches in the dampness of winter and my lower back as it twitches when I push the heavy quad.

Will it always be so, managing with things? Margaret knew what it was to manage. The landlord did too in late the 1880s, giving her time as a widow to pay the rent. She needed an extra six months. The corn could be good by then, the price of beef cattle might rise. She made her own butter, no co-op then, and certainly no Glanbia or Kerry PLC. And beef farmers are still price takers.

On the days when the shoulders are tired and I am ready to fall, I hear Margaret say to me: 'The worst never happens to anyone.' And I sincerely hope she means me, her great-grand daughter. I want my cries to be heard much farther than the gate at the road. 🚗

## **Elegy For a Hay Man** *Patrick Deeley*

A fairy fort fringes the field. A streamlet  
winks in sunlight, laughs me out of it.  
The man with whom I pitched hay  
last August is dying in his small cottage.  
Neighbour, what should I say  
to suddenness, streamlet, lios, to the lurch  
of a big yellow frog across my boot?  
Only that our road carried us  
through summer, 'cutting a swarthe'  
and saving it, the children in every meadow  
already as tall as we were. "Jez,"  
you swore. "There must be new methods  
of making them." Then we scanned  
the far, blue apparition of Aughty's hills.

## Lambing Season

*Selina Bracken*

The alarm finally permeates my subconscious and I wake up enough to stop the incessant noise. I hit the five-minute snooze button and snuggle back into bed. Is this the first snooze or the second snooze? And why had I set my alarm for the god-awful time of four am?

I sit on the edge of the bed and rub the sleep from my face. Yawning, I pull on my farming gear, which I'd stepped out of a few short hours earlier, over my pyjamas. I shove my hair into something that resembles a ponytail and yawn again. In the hallway I grab the first jacket that comes to hand and step into my wellies.

Outside the cold air is like a slap in the face and I'm instantly awake. I pull the hat further down on my head, trying in vain to stop the cold finding the back of my neck. My breath creates small clouds as I pull my jumper over my fingers in defence of the cold. The just-past-full moon throws enough light to guide my way across the yard to the lambing shed. Not that I need it. I've walked this path for years and know it like the back of my hand. I love the sound of the gravel under my boots when the temperature drops to near freezing. It's as if the world is encased in a cocoon of cotton wool taking the edge off all the harsh sounds.

I enter the shed as quietly as possible, trying not to disturb the raucous pet lambs, and take a moment to listen to the sounds emanating from the main maternity unit. This shed houses the ewes scanned for doubles and singles. I hear the faintest of bleats and a mother's answer. The pet lambs have noticed my arrival and start to loudly demand their morning feed. I ignore them and peer into the main shed looking for the new arrival. The ewe is licking the lamb and talking to it. The lamb is doing its best to get to its feet. All perfectly normal behaviour and exactly what I want to see at this hour of the morning.

I pick up the lamb by its two front feet and use it to lead the ewe into the newly erected pen in the corner of the shed. I spray the lamb's umbilical cord with iodine to prevent infection, noting that it's a lovely little ewe lamb, and squirt two doses of anti-diarrhoea medicine down its neck. I put in a bucket of water and a bucket of feed for the ewe along with some extra bedding for the lamb to snuggle into. I prop up the lamb on some of the dry bedding while the ewe devours the food. This particular ewe has been scanned for twins, but there's currently no sign of the second lamb.

I lean back against the wall and consider my options while observing the other maternity ward occupants. None of them are showing any active signs of labour, but one ewe is pawing the ground on the opposite side of the shed, as far away from the rest of the sheep as she can get. I check my phone and see that it's a quarter to five. The lamb is on its feet and looking to feed in the completely wrong end of the ewe. I set a thirty-minute timer on my phone; if the second lamb hasn't made an appearance by then I'll have to intervene. I check the water and feed buckets before I leave, ensuring they have enough of both.

I duck my head automatically as I enter the next shed. My father is six-foot-four and yet the entrance to the shed is about five-foot, makes no sense to me but there must have been a reason for the short doorways fifty years ago. Many an almost concussion has taught me to automatically duck when entering. I look in on the triplet and quad-expectant mothers, my last stop before I can take a break. I instantly spot a ewe with afterbirth hanging out, but no sign of a lamb. I hop the wall and make my way over to the ewe, doing my best to disturb the others as little as possible. I scan the ground as I go, trying to spot the lamb. I get to the ewe without finding her lamb. I quickly put together a small pen for the ewe with the gates that were left in the



walkway for just such an event. One of the few allowances that my dad made for lack of upper body strength was to buy four-foot gates instead of the bigger and heavier six-foot gates. The rest of the ewes decide to stampede around the shed while I try to corner the ewe I want.

Now that all of the ewes are in the opposite corner to me, I finally spot the newly delivered lamb curled up in the smallest of spaces between the water bucket and the wall. No idea how I've managed to spot it, as it's almost the same colour as the wall. I pick up the lamb and check its mouth and its sex: a little ram lamb. He's cold and has a very weak suck reflex. Hypothermia and starvation are the biggest killers of lambs in the first few hours of their lives. I rub him with straw to get the circulation going and put him under the ewe's head. She ignores him, not a good sign. I run my hand down his tail, collecting as much of the birthing fluids as possible. After one or two attempts I manage to wedge the ewe into a corner and keep her in place with my knee. I rub the lamb's fluids onto the ewe's mouth. I keep rubbing until she licks her lips. While I have the ewe wedged into the corner, I reach into her to see how her labour is progressing. I can just feel two feet, but no sign of a head yet. I release her and wonder what to do about her first lamb. My phone starts to buzz in my pocket: the thirty-minute alarm is going off.

One of her lambs will have to be petted anyway, as a ewe can't rear triplets, so I bring him with me to the main lambing shed. I give him a shot of steroids and sugars, which we have on hand for such events, and put him under the infra-red lamp. At least he'll be warm.

I check on the ewe from earlier and she's cleaning her second lamb while the first one tries to feed in the right location this time. I dose the second lamb as I did the first and as my father would say 'Leave them to God!'

I pull my phone out of my pocket. It's half five. The tiredness has temporarily burned off. I reset the thirty-minute timer and head back towards the house. I stop on the patio and take a minute to observe the glorious night sky above me, the silence around me and the instant calm it bestows inside of me. I sit in an old garden chair, stretching my feet out and despite the cold, I take a moment to myself. No work demands, no farm demands, just me and the dazzling night sky. One of the many things I love about living in the country is the night sky, how it blazes with stars and the moon is my constant night-time companion. I look for the Plough and Orion, the only two constellations I know by heart.

It's in moments like these that I evaluate the life before me, a life that technically never should have been mine. My father wasn't the oldest son; the farm was never meant to be his.

I love this life, I really do, but I haven't always. My fondest childhood memories revolve around sheep and farming. I hated it during my teenage years, but then I hated everything during those years. My father didn't really farm during my twenties due to his bad knee and subsequent knee surgery. It was my decision, once my thirties hit, to do the Greencert, ensuring I could inherit the farm without the massive tax bill. I always knew I'd do it, somewhere in the back of my mind; the farm was always mine, as much as I had railed against it. I knew my father would never sell it, since even when things were at their worst that was never an option. And there had been some very bad times, but I was only six when these events had happened. I'd pieced together most of the how's and why's over the years from overheard conversations and passing comments. And what does it matter now, it's all just history?

I rouse myself from my musings and check the time and the date, trying to figure out if I need to get ready for work or if I can go back to bed. Thank the gods, it's Saturday. I can go back to bed.

I smile to myself as I recall the conversation I had with my boss the day before, was it Friday or had it been Thursday? The days were all starting to become one indistinguishable blur, punctuated only by sleep and sheep.

I knock on the meeting room door and wait for my boss to nod before I enter. 'Hey Catherine, my dad just called and I need to go home. It's an emergency or I wouldn't ask.'

'What kind of an emergency?'

'So . . . basically one of the pregnant ewe's vaginas's fallen out and I need to go home and push it back in.'

My boss just stares at me; I can see the look of confusion, disgust and horror that flashes across her face. 'Her vagina fell out.'

'Yeah, it happens from time to time with pregnant ewes and it can be fatal, which is why I need to go home.'

'Isn't that something that the vet should take care of?'

'Actually, we have the kit to take care of it. It's just a two man job. My dad needs to hold the ewe while I push it back in and strap her into the harness.'

My boss shudders before saying 'Sure, just bring your laptop home and make up the time.'

'Thanks.'

It's not the first time that my farm life has impacted my work life and my boss has made it very clear that 'Work comes first!' I'm not stupid: I try to tow the company line and not let farming impact my work life too much, but on occasion it does, especially when I injure myself. Over the past few years I've ended up needing medical attention at least once a year for a farming related injury, usually around lambing time. My dad likes to say I'm soft and I suppose I am compared to him and other farmers of his generation. I also like to think of myself as a tad smarter in that I will go and get an injury looked at before it becomes a chronic issue, like needing a full knee replacement in his forties. Or like my uncle, who's had two new knees and a shoulder all thanks to a lifetime of farming, and he's only in his early fifties. Every so often I'll come across a bruise or a cut and have absolutely no recollection of how I've gotten it. If its mid-thigh or lower, chances are it was caused by a sheep. I'm always amazed at the colour palette that the human body has to work with when it comes to bruises. A sheep is never happier than when it's standing on a farmer's toe, which is why I wear steel toed cap wellies on the farm.

I rub the bruise on the back of my hand, the result of a big lamb and a small ewe with a pointy hip bone. A wave of guilt rushes over me and I try to reason it away, but in reality it had been my own hubris that had killed the lamb. I'd been too cocky—convinced that the successes of the lambing season so far would continue and that we'd be able to deliver the lamb ourselves. Forty minutes of strenuous gymnastics later and the lamb was well and truly stuck. I'd held the hogget while my dad had pulled so hard that he'd dragged both the hogget and I across the shed floor in a last-ditch effort to get the lamb out. The lamb's leg had been broken, shoulder dislocated, skin torn and the poor little bastard was still alive. I should have called the vet as soon as the lamb was stuck. Now the vet was coming in the hope of saving the hogget. I had held out a small kernel of hope that the vet would somehow miraculously be able to save the lamb as well.

After the initial examination of my glorious fuck up, he'd returned from his jeep with a butcher's knife and I knew what was coming. The only occasion in my entire lifetime that I haven't been able to stomach the vet's bloody work and so, coward that I was, I left, couldn't stay to witness the result of my mistake taken out on the now dead lamb. I watched the bloody water stream off of his wet gear; I followed the usually societal protocols and then watched him drive away. At least the hogget was still alive. It wasn't a complete disaster. My father's words still echo in my ears 'If you have livestock, you'll have dead stock. We'll do better next time.' He was right: it would only be a total failure if I didn't learn from this and next time I'd call the vet earlier for a C-Section.

My alarm goes off again and I realise I'd dozed off for a few minutes despite the cold seeping into my bones. I stand and stretch and yawn in an attempt to wake myself up. Back down to the lambing shed and the ewe has delivered her other two lambs. One is active and trying to stand, the other is lying motionless on the ground—not a good sign. Cursing myself, I wonder if I

should have checked on her before the thirty minutes was up. I examine the dead lamb and realise there was nothing I could have done: the lamb is just wrong. It looks as if a litre of water has been pumped under its skin and its eyes are sunken in. I've seen this once or twice before, no idea what causes it but the lambs are always stillborn. Some weird genetic mutation or who knows what has caused this poor lamb's demise before it was even born. Even with everything done right, it can all still go wrong for no reason. The ewe is licking her second lamb, a little ewe lamb, as she should have done with the first.

I pick up the dead lamb and make a mental note to dispose of it later, but first I retrieve the ram lamb the ewe delivered earlier. I hold the live lamb between my knees and rub the dead lamb all over it, transferring the birthing fluids from one to the other. The ram lamb is now full of the joys of life and loudly demanding food. I return him to his mother and sister. I lean on the gate and stretch out my back while I observe the ewe with her twins. She's licking the ewe while the ram stumbles over to her back legs looking for food. He pokes his head into the right area and the ewe tilts her hip forward to give him better access to her udder. After a few seconds I can hear him sucking and he wiggles his tail. The ewe looks at the lamb feeding from her and sniffs his tail before she starts licking him. I straighten up with a groan, happy that the ewe has accepted the lamb she rejected earlier.

I make one last round of the other lambing shed before heading inside, automatically cleaning my wellies on the grass as I go. My mother is a tiny woman but not one to be trifled with, especially if I've dirtied her clean floor. Another life altered drastically by events outside of her control. Working mostly on autopilot, I step out of my wellies at the backdoor and place them onto the matt in the hallway. Jacket, trousers and hat all land on top of them. I grab a drink from the kitchen and leave my dad a note announcing the recent arrivals. I crawl back into bed and shove my phone under my pillow with a sigh of contentment, knowing I won't wake to an alarm in a few hours. Not for the first time, I wonder why I do this to myself. Usually at the same time of year, in the middle of lambing with no end in sight and a tiredness that makes my bones ache. No one in their right mind would voluntarily take up farming. What sane person would sign up for a job with a constant workload, long hours and very little return? I'm fully convinced that you have to be born into farming to truly understand it and to keep doing it. Kind of like a cult: get them young when they don't know any better. But then there are days when the sun is shining and the lambing is a distant memory, I stumble across a perfect moment. The lambs will bounce around like they have springs in their legs or run like racehorses across the fields, for no other reason than they are alive. It's these moments that keep me farming, the joy at seeing happy healthy lambs doing what they were meant to.

Farming isn't something that can be taught in a classroom. Instead, it's a lifetime of observations with each generation building on the knowledge of those that have gone before. As a farmer you never really own the land: You're simply a caretaker of it. We try and improve what we've been given so that the next generation has it a bit easier than we did. It's passed from one generation of family to the next, working and connected by the land over countless years. Not that I have anyone to pass it on to.

I'm just on the verge of sleep when it suddenly occurs to me that I might have a date later in the day. Was today the 11th or the 18th? Groaning, I fumble under the pillow for my phone. I squint at the bright screen and try to make out the words. I tend to not have much of a social life during lambing season, but I make up for it the rest of the year. My eyes finally focus on the screen and I sigh in relief as I realise I pushed out the date a fortnight. I thank my past self and snuggle back into the bed. Dating in your twenties is hard; dating in your thirties is soul destroying. My social circle consists of exactly one single friend who lives in Dublin that I rarely get to see. My social life consists of game nights once a month to catch up with my friends that have tiny humans and zero nights out. Trying to juggle a fulltime job, farming, a social life and

dating is impossible. Something had to give, so I called in the professional matchmakers and paid them a small fortune to find me someone. Three dates in and mister right now is still eluding me. Hopefully four will be my lucky number from now on. That thought puts a smile on my lips as my wearing body forces my brain to finally succumb to sleep. 🍷

### My Story

It's the 30th of January, 2022. Snowstorms have called for states of emergency in the USA, Russia is advancing on the borders of Ukraine and covid is unrelenting. However, if you are a rural farmer in Ireland, you are probably more concerned about the weather, grass growth, the value of livestock and dare I say it, the price of fertiliser. Farming, eh?

Let me introduce myself: I'm Ruth Parkes, a fifth-generation farmer from Co. Armagh, Northern Ireland. I farm alongside my dad, which as you can imagine, leads to plenty of arguments. If you farm with family, you know the craic, but we wouldn't have it any other way. I have my own herd of pedigree beef Shorthorns, whilst my dad farms commercial Limousins.

As a teenager, I always swore I would never get involved in farming. The hours were long, I certainly didn't want to work 7 days a week and I was repeatedly told there was no money in it. I would be wise if I stayed well away from it. When I graduated from university with a degree in modern history, I didn't have a career in mind, so whilst I took some time out to decide what I wanted to do in life, I helped on the farm...a farm that ended up igniting a passion that I didn't know existed. I fell in love with farming again. At 24 years old, I was acting like my 6-year-old self, wanting to help on the farm in any way I could. In 2020, I purchased eight shorthorn heifers to start my own herd. In 2022, I have a herd of thirty pedigree beef shorthorns. Never say never.

Farming isn't a job; it is a passion and a way of life. I farm the land my nanny and granda tolled over when my daddy was a young boy. I hear the stories of my grandparents breaking ice in the water troughs, carrying hay on their backs to feed the cows in the back fields and milking cows with their hands. I wonder if they were still alive, what they would think of me farming or the world of farming we live in now, with robots milking cows?

I'm carrying on the family tradition of farming as well as playing a vital role in helping to produce food for the country, 'from farm to work'. Being a farmer is about breeding and rearing livestock to high standards and the best of your ability, but its more than that. As a farmer, you are a vet, administrator, nutritionist, mechanic, accountant, producer and teacher. You are voices of the land.

In each new farming day, there is hope, thankfulness, resilience and prayers of better days to come. 🍷

**Ruth Parkes**

## **Autumn Mart at Kilmallock**

***E.M. Condon***

There's a sliver of a window in September  
When flesh on the hindquarters of full-bellied cattle  
jiggles.  
Not so in October, as grass becomes scarce.

It's 6:00 am.  
I stand sentry alongside the reversing jeep, guiding the hitch towards its target:  
a cattlebox heaving and swaying with weanlings.  
Am I right? he asks  
Another inch towards me, (I guess).  
Actually, an inch and a half, maybe two.  
Jaysus, can't you see?  
Instead of answering, I hold up my uncharged torch- its bulb an amber pinprick in the  
surrounding darkness.  
On his next attempt, there's a coupling.  
The metallic clunk and click signals we can take to the road.

The mart is menswarm; the office is womenswarm.  
I'm sent there with the paperwork.  
Unfamiliar with the routine, I open the wrong door, stand in the wrong queue.  
Menswarm stride past me, sure of their place here.  
I'm invisible in this space of the hunter-gatherer.  
No special treatment, no gender quota when the focus is on buying and selling food.  
Fair enough.  
A woman wearing authoritative glasses checks my cards  
Dehorned? Tick. In test? Tick. Castrated? Tick.  
She guards her patch of power  
No tick, no sell.

I open a scuffed door and climb heavy wooden stairs to a platform.  
Below, a hive of stewards  
poke, prod and crack their sticks against the broad backs of beasts  
moving them through mazes of pens and railings.

This is Man Lego, Man K'nex, made of iron, not coloured plastic.  
Young men hurdling over rows of metal gates stop errant bullocks.  
Older men roar from a distance.  
No doubt, they've earned their safe spot over the years.  
I listen, unoffended, to the clamour of menswarm shouting and swearing.  
Necessity eradicates judgment.

In the canteen, before the sale, steaming plates are stacked:  
sausages, beans, eggs and chips.  
The auctioneer sits at the table with the stewards, all friends like.  
But I see how he keeps a gap between them  
Their wellies glistening with fresh dung.

Voices from the Land

A Limerick/Cork accent announces over the loudspeaker:  
Sale starting at ten a past eleven, that's ten-a past.  
The auctioneer brushes crumbs from his Gant jumper before standing up.

We open the door to the belly of the mart.  
I pass the curved wall surrounding the ring.  
Menswarm stand close together, conversing without facing each other:  
Capped, uncapped; overalled, unoveralled; wellied, unwellied.  
They are not here to impress me.  
I take my seat high above them on a narrow wooden bench.

I imagine a celebrity architect being filmed from this location.  
He gushes on cue:  
The décor of this mart is utilitarian chic!  
The owners have opted for lots of white high gloss paint covering every possible surface, for ease of cleaning.  
The floor is an intriguing blend of sawdust and dung!

The sale starts.  
I watch and respect the subtle signs of purchase- the tilt of a cap, the tap of an index finger.  
A wall of providers, buying and selling, bringing home food.

Weeks later, I read headlines:  
Marts Face Closure!  
Men too close to the ring!  
Health and safety risks!  
Crippling insurance!

Castrated?  
Tick.

I  
**Vanessa B. Woods**

I is for Ireland  
The country where we are proud to live  
We are famous for our green grass and yellow butter  
And our beautiful green fields  
Where our animals eat the lush green grass  
For most days during the year  
Turning the fibre in grass  
Into great food and cheer  
We have a great Irish rugby team  
With many farmers on board  
They play for our beautiful country  
And produce food for the world  
Ireland's natural beauty and its landscape  
Attracts the great and the good  
To enjoy our beautiful Emerald Isle  
And taste our nutritious food  
Visitors come to soak up our beautiful scenery  
Our clean rivers and lakes  
To meet our warm and welcoming people  
And to eat our grass-fed steaks  
To meet our Irish farmers  
Who care for our land so well  
Passing it from generation to generation  
With great stories to tell

**Springtime**  
**Brian Miller**

I stand upon this earthly spot of mine, a low hill that in truth does own me, and gaze round as though I had not seen before her sights.

A pensive mood brewing, since I watched the kettle barely simmer on the aga's heat during early breakfast.

Now the tongues of familiar cattle like rough sandpaper massage my knees and my mind too and all I can think to declare from this beauty filled, profound place I have reached is

'The swallows are back.'

## Tommy from Westmeath

*Louise Nealon*

Tommy Conroy was the son of a farmer with plenty of road frontage down in Westmeath. There were three sons in the family, and even though he was the eldest, he wasn't guaranteed the farm because his father was a bollocks. Tommy played football for UCD. And he was lovely and tall.

'Isn't he lovely and tall?' Mam goes. 'And he always brings his plate over to the sink when he's finished his dinner.' He didn't go as far as putting it in the dishwasher yet, but that was beside the point. She was smitten. Mam had just come back from the airport that morning, dewy-eyed after waving my brother off to go on his six-week holiday to Australia and Thailand, and returned to find a substitute son waiting for her in the form of a strapping young lad from Westmeath. The closest thing to a son that she could get was a son-in-law. That was where I came in.

Sitting at the breakfast table waiting for him to come in was like being on the set of Glenroe. The door squeaked open, the poor unsuspecting fecker walked in and lights, camera, action: everybody turned into a caricature of themselves. Dad showed affection in the only way he could by playing games that involved mild torture, like the How Long Can You Keep Your Hand on the Scalding Hot Teapot game, while Mam showed affection by disapproving of such games. They got his life story out of him at breakfast the first morning. The fact that he had a long-term girlfriend didn't matter. He would have to get over her. They had a single daughter on their hands, and together, we could monopolize Glanbia.

I tried to sneak looks at him and decided that he looked like a twelve-year-old that had been stretched—a little boy's face on a lanky body that was coordinated for the specific purpose of milking cows. Dad was explaining to him that the names of the fields are called after the people we bought or rented them off—Crowe's, Nancy's, Christy's, Mary Dillon's, Neilly's—all except for the stretch of fields out of the back of the slurry pit called the Scribeen. It took me a couple of mornings at the breakfast table listening to Tommy's vocabulary of our farm expand to realize that I was jealous of him. After only a few days, he knew more about the farm than I did. I resist working on the farm the way some people avoid jury duty. I always have an excuse up my sleeve. It is only on very rare occasions that I'm dragged out of my pyjamas and into a pair of someone else's wellington boots. I never invested in a pair of wellies, because it would have given my father hope.

Dad came in one night after checking on a cow, muttering the wrong lyrics to Shakira's Hips Don't Lie. 'Hey boy, I can see your Mammy moving, and I have a caravan. I don't, don't even know where I'm going, but you seem to have a map.' I heard his overalls drop to the ground before he summoned me to the kitchen.

'Yeah?'

'Come here, will you make brown bread for tomorrow mornin?'

'Dad, it's ten o' clock at night.'

'Ah you will.'

'I will not.'

He wanted Tommy Conroy to see what I could do in the kitchen. He wouldn't mention all the batches of bread that went horribly wrong at the start—the ones that he still ate, even though they were burnt on the outside and pink in the middle.

'Here, I gave Sean the evening off tomorrow. Will you do a milking for me?'



'Do I have a choice?'

'Ah you will.'

Of course, he arranged for me to milk with Tommy. It would have gone fine if Tommy left me alone. He did leave me alone for the most part, except for when he put an extra red yoke beside one of the cows.

'She's a three-spinner,' I shouted over the milking machine, putting down the extra yoke.

He came over to see what I was on about, and put the red yoke back up. 'That's what I thought, but she kept sucking so I checked. Two of the teats don't work. She's a two-spinner.'

I put the red yoke back down. 'She's always been a three-spinner.'

'Suit yourself. She'll only keep sucking air.'

I continued down the line, putting the machines on, ignoring the loud sucking sounds coming from the three-spinner who was really a two-spinner and the smirk on Tommy Conroy's face.

'She was always a three-spinner,' I frowned.

'Ah don't worry about it.' He looked at me. 'You've a lump of shite in your eye.'

'Thanks,' I said, trying to wipe it away with my dirty plastic glove.

He laughed at me. 'You'll only make it worse, come here to me.'

'Fuck off,' I said.

'Suit yourself.'

I opened the gate and let the cows off and power-hosed down the sides. I continued milking, trying to spot two-spinners and ignoring the lump of shite in the corner of my eye. 🐄

## Calving

*Jimmy O'Connell*

There she stands with her broad back and a birth-  
bulge stomach. We wait an anticipating hour,  
leaning at the door, patient as a January night-star.  
But no stir of the calf inside the belly is there;  
she just stands at the post, her head rattling the chains,

her black globule eye curious at our restlessness;  
and the dog, hind-leg sits by the dung-stained door  
in the feathery drizzle of rain.

Then you decide to force the birth,  
and you plunge into her, up to your elbow

and up the narrow passage of her;  
and two slimey-creamed hoofs you drag out,  
and we wait for her to heave a birth push,  
but she just stands there in calm insolence,  
her black square head askance,

her eyes insouciantly squinting at us.  
We loop the hair-ragged rope both ends to a hoof,  
cleaned now, jerk tight behind the hocks,  
and we pull and hold. A sudden wind  
whooshes from the back of her, the water burst

of her membrane-thread hangs to the soiled hay.  
We pull again; but she holds, rock-planted to the floor,  
head straining at the post and we heave  
and hold again 'til a mouth snout sneaks out  
and his black frightened eye gapes at us screaming: NO!

And we pull low and hold to the strain  
until the full wet head slides out so fast her  
belly sucks in with the strain, and he  
still screeching: NO! his rump and back plops  
onto the bed of hay, soiled in womb-slime.

With deft speed of hand you cradle his head  
onto your knee and forcept your thumb and forefinger  
into his slit mouth, and clear the gung-filled gap of his nostrils  
and stand him up on unsteady legs to taste  
the teat of beastings; but he slips and slithers,

a grey glob of wet soap on four hoofs crying: NO!  
and NO! again, until the mother licks into the long  
wet back of him and ruffles the coal blue coat with  
her grey sand-paper tongue; then he stands up,  
unsteady still, his mouth groping for the teat

and the gulp-suck of yellow milk. Crouching by them  
I gaze out to the darkness, into the drizzling rain  
drifting across the beam of light over the cow house door,  
and wonder how our dog conjectures the scene:  
this wet-matted calf sucking into the emerging dawn.

**20 Acre**  
*Richard Quinn*

You would not listen.  
You would not heed.  
Over stocked, over stretched.  
With no feed to carry you through that cold winter of 75.  
You, and only you could look after old mother swan.  
For it was not easy.  
She in the depths of despair and depression.  
Would turn the Ark Angel away.  
But you stuck it out.  
You bit the bullet.  
Sold the old house.  
First built in 1790.  
You felt guilt after.  
But the house is still standing.  
Maybe for another 100 years or more.  
And within its walls the laughter of children.  
A few more sites.  
And you are still standing.  
Feel no shame.  
Stand proud.  
You tired, Brother.

**August Cadence**  
*Phelim Kavanagh*

Dear Mick,

The year is moving on and we are busy keeping the scavenging birds off crops. Unsettled weather has meant harvesting hasn't started yet, and turmoil in the beef industry is an added problem. The Taoiseach has said publicly we should cut down on red meat consumption and this has had a big impact on beef sales. Lodged corn and no sign of weather to salvage, coupled with cattle being difficult to sell means farmers have to deal with stuff. Many farming families nowadays see family members move away to the city. This depopulation is felt by those left, felt intensely when the going gets tough. My neighbour's kids live in the city and he is on his own now, and his financial situation is being tested by the current beef crisis. He needs something to redirect his mind.

We have decided to put some of the lodged corn into a silage pit for cattle feed. This product is called whole-crop silage and is part of our salvage plan. The rest of the corn (malting barley) will be left to ripen fully and harvested. Unlike the whole-crop silage, this will be very weather dependent. It's a couple of weeks away yet, so for now we are focused on the whole-crop. Vladimir and the silage crew are called in. They have specialist equipment for the task but are down a driver and I think I have just the man. I get Vladimir's attention and we move out of the crew's earshot. Vladimir knows my neighbour and understands the double usefulness in my suggestion. He phones Pa immediately. After the niceties Vladimir puts it to Pa.

'Pa, I need someone for some days, a man who can fly straight, to harvest whole-crop, in this disaster year. The pay is only ok, but there is good craic, most of the time anyway, and mostly we get fed. Who knows, Pa, a guy like you may meet nice girl on our travels. What you say, Pa?'

Pa is a sixty-four-year-old divorcee. Vladimir has picked up on the Irish way of persuasion.

'God, it sounds good, Vladimir. When will you want me?'

'Every dry hour, Pa. I'm starting at Dwyer's.'

'I'll be there, Vladimir.'

Vladimir and myself make our way back to the crew, no need for a big discussion. I say that a little help is worth a lot of sympathy. Vladimir says sympathy is dry ash to a choking man. Chernobyl is echoing in his voice—it is loneliness twined with strength, the strength to stand up to disaster.

So the silage crew is burning diesel again, cutting a crop that is not ripe, for a job it was not sowed for. Pa is flying straight, interested in his new purpose, a hero of sorts, helping to salvage crops for near-desperate men. A pheasant bolts skyward just in front of the silage harvester. In a split second, Vladimir stops the machine dead. He climbs down and searches in the lodged crop for the chicks he knows are there, scoops them up with his giant hands. The chicks are tiny. He ambles to the headland and releases them. He understands them, their right to live. I

am thinking about modern farming again, thinking why we are not doing something about it, why I'm not doing something about it.

The loneliness of creatures on the cusp of extinction hits me; a missing for the creatures we have made extinct is misted over the farm. It infiltrates and explodes into an awareness, expanding outward like the Chernobyl explosion, not stopping. I don't really know how to pray, so I walk through the corn and kneel down to see if it has sprouted: It has. I frighten the birds and wave to Pa. I think of my family and nod to the scarecrow. It is lonely in the corn with just one scarecrow. I am thankful for his company and tell him if humans extinct themselves there will be a lot of corn and cattle on the planet. I say it's scary. The scarecrow is wearing an old coat and hat that belonged to my father, and it is comforting.

The whole-crop is safe in the silage pit and the crew are having a well-earned supper. Afterwards Pa helps Sinead clear the table and they chat. It is good to see him in better form. We have a cow near calving and I head out to check on her. Floss comes with me. It is dark now, the blackness cut by thin streaks of intermittent moonlight. A fox barks in the distance. Floss, my dog, answers, their echoes ringing through the night haze of August, a congruent sound emerging from invisible echoes. It sounds demonic. If it were a demon we could blame it for bad weather and lodged corn, maybe even greenhouse gases. Floss senses my mood and looks into the black mist. She barks again, moves from one foot to the other, looks at me, unsure.

*I will chase that demon away. I will chase him into stardust, bark him into a black hole.*

I say 'Floss' and she understands my tone, relaxes again, lays her body toward me, resting her head just above my knee. She loves me. She is conscious as I am. If she wasn't I wouldn't love her any less.

It's silent now and I hear the fields working. It might be root noise of a crop trying to stand up, or maybe it's just shrews hunting insects that I have not made extinct yet. And as the moon strips of cloud the silence ends as it starts to rain. In the dim light, a scarecrow in the adjoining field frightens me, him wearing dead man's clothes. It makes me think of my own father and how it goes, remember him saying, 'God does not discriminate between the living or the dead, as far as I know.'

Here, in this grass field and intermittent moonlight, a cow has given birth. She is heavy-breathing, her calf unveiled. This is an early August evening on our farm and I am responsible, even for the weather that bears down its testing weight—that climate we are changing. The fields hear me thinking through gentle rain, and it seems they are withdrawing from me, a landscape moving into itself and toward the outward darkness of the night, as a sort of symbolic protection, a dignified protest, telling me—telling everybody: You can destroy everything with indifference.

I look into that outward darkness of this August evening, an infinite expanse of black space. Loneliness is empty space expanding around us, an extinction of what could be there. I hear the cow heavy breathing—hear her breath over her new calf. She is breathing into our inward darkness: I knowing now, that she, a gentleness of blessing on this farm, giving us a new calf to love, always giving, cannot be replaced when she is gone. To do so would be an act of killing our planet.

This is how it is, Mick. What's happening isn't simple. 🐾

**Nivea Soft**  
**Jack Rogers**

This,  
Where we are  
- A dirty afternoon.  
Beneath esteemed clouds,  
Each approaching with nose upturned at the concealed smell.  
Through my window,  
I watched them pass,  
Alluded by the hourglass.  
Guarded by walls stained with  
Impossible mould, blue tack, chewing gum.  
Time unmoving.

And behind the closed door can be heard  
A sound where no sound should be.  
Sound where no sound was before.  
Perhaps the rattle of a draught.  
Listen.  
Or the settling just of sun and dust  
On the landing still not carpeted, after all these years.  
Sound of things to be done.  
And still I lay  
Unmoving.

While out, in the garden,  
My father greets a man  
whose name I should recall but do not.  
There they stand, amongst the bowing snakes heads.  
Where once I spied a hare  
dance into the night with a pheasant.

Father Mullen,  
The parish priest,  
Lived up in the parochial house  
With a curate,  
And it's said they didn't get on.  
That their shouting and roaring  
Could be heard from Ardballon.  
Well  
One day a woman comes to the door,  
With a message for Father Mullen.  
'I've some bad news for you Father,' she says,  
'I'm afraid your sister has died.'  
To which he replies,  
'Leaves will fall and so will we.'  
And then he promptly shuts the door.

Leaves will fall and so will we.

The words,  
Like driftwood  
softened by the tide  
and softened twice more compulsively.  
It's then that I go out  
To dig half-heartedly,  
Or to arrange pots in the old coal shed.  
Out to deliver an awkward nod  
To the man  
Now leaving.  
And so, the day goes on.

Out,  
Until those yellow windows usher me back inside,  
Where I will imagine I am crossing the Carragh Bridge once more.  
Tracing past routines.  
A feeling  
Long lost.  
But now  
It's getting late  
And I've forgotten what I was trying to say.

## How Many Planes is A Cow?

*Gayle Moore*

Imagine if there were a question you could ask things that cannot talk. About the moral implications of who gets to rip a fart-shaped hole in the protective layer between here and space.

On a foggy day maybe you'd set out with a charged phone and the sound recorder going, as well as bad shoes, a good hat, a medium jacket, an uncertain smile.

The first victim of tentative investigative journalism: a fragment of elbow bone in a fallen down dolmen. Its JCB-whacked cosmic dimensions serve as an ivy-torn parasol for a calf sunshade pit. You get down close, feel the tangle and tingle of weak electric fence, and get the microphone right up against surviving carbon.

'Good creature, can you tell me how many planes is a cow?'

The reply, deep, a whisper, a riddle of concentric spirals and mashed blackberry paint.

'The cow is worth a thousand plains the eye cannot see.'

Enough, the next witness.

The road, the ditch, the smell. Hot cack launched in a field on a cold day. Through the gate, noisy, the rear end of a monster stalled. Dribbles. Once sold as red. The bad shoes ruined. Cab empty, the driver occupied with soul straining and a ruined sock himself in a near hollow. Must take the initiative and pounce on a moment of unguarded honesty and relaxed demeanour. Put the phone in the splash zone.

'Good tanker, can you tell me, how many planes is a cow?'

A rumble in the bowels, a spit of dirtiest water, the fumes straight for the skin above the nose.

'The cow is only mere litres to me.'

The driver shouting returns, afraid to be caught one socked. Worm-hangry crows negotiate devilment, heckles in chorus. Reverse. Back within sight of the road again.

Off with you, onwards, another.

An egg, hedge cut disturbed. Nestless, it rests there speckled. White and blue in tile fashion. Plucked up. Atomic cold in the hand, happy warmth from a palm. Will the bird who laid it miss it and think and weep? Or merely destined to repeat arse-straining effort amongst chopped shoots. At present, the chance to find an answer perfected out of innocence, uncorrupted by shell from wavering notions. The phone tapped against the pointed top.

'Good ovum, can you tell me, how many planes is a cow?'

A faint shake, the side to side of consideration. At last a crack, warbled albumen words seep.

'The cow means nothing if I cannot fly.'

Sadness, the dead potential left back on the ground.

The last, the best, the worthy.

Going further, a falling shed. Broken fan belts whirl. Concrete steps up, ancestral cats sprawl away. The roof, tilting galvanized and woodworm structure calling and responding to itself. Silage on the ground soaks the taste of concrete, gross contamination traced in on shoes. A dead branch of holly anoints thirty broad heads turned at the door. Eyes sided in need of hiding on the open slats. The fierce nonchalant leader, chewing. Molasses lips the same shade as shite on the hoof. Approach with pretend purpose, work the hand, phone, shoulder, all vulnerable through the feeding rails.



'Good cow, can you tell me, how many planes are you?'

Huddled in for the response the other udders, the line of thinking they must adopt until she goes from farm to fork to heaven and they are led by another.

'How the feck would I know, I've never been on holidays!'

This truth, it often stings the eyes when heard, breath of rotten burgers, and the infernal plop of abyss underneath.

The shed left far behind.

Alas, you got to ask your precious question, what difference did it make? Go home. Where it's foggy no more and there's no use for a sound recorder either.

The stale air clings to bad shoes, good hat, medium jacket, a certain smile.

Besides: Up there — chemical clouds and ripples.

Down here —your battery's nearly gone. 🚗

## **Massey 35** *Fergal Anderson*

I'd heard your name before I met you

And the first time we bounced down a boreen in 3rd gear – NO ROLL BAR –

I thought that it was all over

That was twenty years ago or more and now we're better acquainted and I sit hunched

Over your levers and cogs which crunch and spin and watch the turning

-but not the clock-

Which measures your hours of labour

It sits broken at 9003 and who knows it could be twenty years broken and the toil since then is unrecorded

And only your inner chambers might remember

Remember the storms of 74 or when the US invaded Vietnam and you sat there

Resolute in your field

A constant in changing times

Remember when Galway won all-Irelands and you could hear revelry under starry skies

Remember bangs, strains, grunts, spittle sweat dripping around you

The thick smell of sheep and the hay brushing underneath you

Remember

But it's not the romantic soft green fields and hawthorn blossom I love you for

It's something else, that day when you had a part replaced after 50 years of grinding no doubt

And you sat in the mechanic's yard with monster tractors all around

The mischief crept into a round eyelight and I could see your diminutive shape framed against a banjaxed behemoth and I knew

You weren't built to break

In these times of temporary throwaway plastic moments  
Petrochemical million year anthropic inventions scattered under our feet and  
Cracking/popping/scratching/humming/snapping/melting mysteries of system failure surround us  
As we fill our bins and shake our heads I thank you  
Thank you for reminding me  
You weren't built to break

And we, the great tool makers even though we've lost our way  
We sometimes made real things  
Not consigned to this obsolescent whirlpool of wastage and consumption  
We weren't always planning a future market share based on habitual use patterns and  
demographic changes  
Weren't always watching stock prices of rare earth metals and Youtube videos of workers  
jumping from factory floors  
Weren't always digging deeper into our own fair earth to fill our lives with needs we don't want  
and wants we don't need

So thank you, Massey 35  
New friend but old companion to many  
For giving me hope that one day  
We can remember what it is to make things for real  
That what we create is sacred and precious and the art of the tool is not dead, not lost  
But standing there  
Painted layers fading and cracking  
Repairable  
Reusable  
Resolute  
Not built to break

## My Story

It's only a short distance from the motorway, but the distant hum of traffic does not detract from this enchanted place. The magic of its hills and hollows holds you forever in its spell. At the heart of all of it is the seven acres, Bog of the Gallagher. When turf was cut here long ago the antlers of the Irish Elk were found. It's a bog no more, claimed by willow, reed, and bullrush, and above it all Jack Snipe performs his strange mating flight. Over the fields that fringe it, Kitty O'Rourke grazed two or three cows in the summer months and carried the milk home on the handlebars of her bike.

In spring, the air is full of the sweet scent of primrose, as they mingle with bluebells in the dappled shade. Clumps of golden furze with their spiny leaves and branches are impenetrable to both man and beast. The wren, however, takes shelter in its thorny undergrowth. For a few weeks in May and June the whitethorns are the star of the show. Gnarled branches heavy with blossom outdo each other to steal your gaze.

Carraburren and Phillip's are the names of its woods, tightly surrounded by a curving necklace of stone walls. There is one magical beech tree here that could come straight out of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Its stunted form clings to a rocky outcrop with its roots spread out like a giant octopus.

Sometimes in the evenings when his work was done, Patsy Byrne played the French fiddle with only the songbirds as his company. It was under the stars they slept when the lads on the run hid out here in the autumn of 1922. A few weeks later the bitter Civil War had claimed the lives of two of them, the rest in prison or on their way to America, never to return.

I sometimes wonder what the future will bring to my paradise. Will the woods, hedgerows and lone thorns all fall victim to the sharp blade of a saw? Will the outcrops of rock be quarried and carried out as shale to fill the foundations of another cattle shed? What will happen to the wildflowers that have for centuries colonised the thin soil and its boggy bottoms? But away with such melancholy thoughts. Mother nature will still prevail.

***Bryan Rogers***

## Getting in the Cows

Kevin O'Byrne

*Kevin O'Byrne remembers a scene from his childhood.*

My mother has persuaded me to go and get the cows in with her argument 'you'll do what you are told'. So here I am on my way out to what seems to be the furthest corner of the farm with what seems to me to be the most reluctant dog in Ireland to bring in the cows for milking. My own reluctance, however, gradually wears off as I run out through the fields. The furze bushes glow in the sun, and the flowers on the bushes have a great smell.

I come to the gate leading to the group of fields where the cows are. I open it. There are the ten cows and twelve dry cattle spread out over three fields. Why can't they just be in one field, the nearest one? A lot of the cows are lying down chewing the cud. I call out 'Bail up, Bail up, Bail up!' Some of the nearest cows, Starlight, Grey Cloud and Primrose rise up slowly, but most of the others ignore my calls, so I run down and rouse the others up with my shouts. Then I lie down in one of the beds a cow has just left. It's warm and cosy, surrounded at the borders by higher blue-green grass that has a summer smell. I lie on my back and looking up I see the blue sky with little clouds of all shapes and shades dawdling along at different speeds heading for the sea. This is where I can forget the anxiety of being sent to hell for offending God. I can also forget the slaps and smarting snide remarks I had to endure from my teacher today and other days. I look forward to the time when I am a grown-up and can sail like the clouds at my own speed and wherever I want.

Finally I get up and continue getting the cows to move on. But here's the tricky bit. I have to separate the milking cows from the dry cattle. Most of the latter have no inclination to go up that hill with the milking cows to the yard, which is great. But there are always a few trouble makers. I manage to turn some of them back down the field and at the same time move the cows up in the opposite direction. But two yearlings, Mutt and Jeff, are determined to go on with the cows. I am doing my best to separate them before we get to the open gate. And we are getting very near it now.

Suddenly I see a black and white blur slipping through the gate. It's Towser! And in the blink of an eyelid he is in among the cows, body close to the ground, ears cocked and moving at great speed. He nips the heels of three cows in quick succession; he drops his head to the ground each time as their hooves kick back at him, missing his head by a mini-fraction of an inch. Does he get a thrill out of risking his life? Then he turns sharply to face Jeff, barks at the top of his voice. Jeff almost jumps out of his hooves, panics and races back down the field with his sidekick Mutt running after him.

Towser gives me a sort of 'Job done, look and learn' glance.

I say 'Good dog Towser, well done'. But I feel ignored as he moves off back to the yard with only the slightest hint of a tail wag. Towser leaves me to get the cows into the yard myself and probably goes back to his place in the cow house. I make no attempt to stop him. There's no doubt about it – Towser is a professional with a sense of duty, but a grumpy ould so-and-so. 🐕

## **A Summer Drive**

*Ger O'Byrne*

Along the narrow road I drive,  
Bordered with wild flowers, grass and ferns,  
Green and white with bluebell hue.  
Topped with tall majestic trees, oak, ash,  
And horse chestnut, laden with large white flowers,  
Like ice cream cones among the leaves.

Horizon dotted by small groves of trees.  
Reclaimed green fields stretching to the summit of the hill.  
Rushes bushes undulating land.  
Divisions marked by hedgerows, with mature  
Whitethorns dressed in flowing white,  
Like a lighthouse in the sea.

Cattle lazing in the fields amid the yellow buttercups,  
Sounds of silage making in the air  
Mixed with wild bird song, an all inclusive choir.  
As the farmer for the next long winter does prepare,  
The beautiful natural woodland scent  
Is tinged, with pungent piggery odour.

But on along the road I go  
Amid the sycamore and beech,  
Manicured gardens, stone walls with forged gates.  
Many shades of green in every field,  
An orchestral symphony of beauty  
I am enraptured.

## Some Creatures Great and Special

*Lorna Sixsmith*

Every society has people who are special and extraordinary. It may be because of their position in society, their talents or their work within charitable institutions.

Every herd has cows that are held in high esteem by their owners. In our herd, we have many special cows such as Lucy (17 years of age), Red Leader, Red Clover, White Clover, Delilah, Sansa, Amelia and Little Lucy to name a few. Others have names but aren't revered quite so much. Becky almost always poos in the parlour. The Camel is a bit of an eyesore in our herd of black and white square Friesians. Lottie is incredibly flighty and has never appreciated me for staying up all night to keep her hydrated when she was sick as a calf. In our herd of 160 Friesians, Garrendenny FR 4020 Primrose, aka Claudia, is one of the special ones.

However, that wasn't always the case. As a young calf, she didn't merit any special attention. She only received her pet name Claudia at about four months old. When herding close to one hundred calves in the field, whenever I was one short, it was always Claudia. Smaller than the others, she was usually hiding behind a taller comrade. She always seemed scruffy in appearance, some part of her coat streaked with dust or mud, and the quiff on the top of her head was always tousled. The exact opposite to Claudia Winkleman's perfect fringe, hence the choice of name.

I had a love-hate relationship with her because of her ability to hide so effectively. When we were discussing which heifers to sell at a year old, I insisted Claudia be included in the batch.

'She's too small,' Brian protested. 'She'll never sell.'

'She'll make the others look big,' was my response. But Brian was right. The buyer purchased every one of the heifers that were available for purchase, except Claudia.

We began to notice that her eyesight wasn't great. When moving the heifers, she followed the others very closely yet seemed to be managing well. As an in-calf heifer, and on the small side, we used to treat her to handfuls of ration daily and she became a bit of a pet. She was the first of that year's heifers to calve and although the new parlour wasn't completely finished, she adjusted quickly and didn't try to kick the cluster off even once. She was beginning to redeem herself.

Her zest for life always put me in a good mood. She skipped along the parlour stand, dipping her head into the occasional trough if she spotted nuts left by a cow in a previous row. When I'd say 'Move along there Claudia,' she'd toss her head and continue on her way with a hop and a skip that made me laugh.

We had to use a temporary exit from the new parlour for a few weeks. I escorted each row of cows from the parlour to a cubicle shed, passing the dairy enroute, which was still minus its front door and shuttering. I don't know how she managed it, but one dark evening I encountered Claudia coming out of the dairy licking her lips. She'd had a drink of milk (milk intended for calves) and had a good rummage down the length of the dairy and behind the milk tank (as evidenced by her hoof marks).

Despite being only about 400 kgs, she provided a very respectable volume of milk in her first year's lactation: 6300 litres at 510kg of milk solids.

Still on the small side that autumn, we decided to move her to a straw shed to be with some elderly matrons, including the herd matriarch Lucy, to enjoy some special treatment and extra comfort. However, moving her on her own proved a challenge and it was then we discovered she was almost completely blind as she walked into a gate, then broke a wire. We eventually got

her there but said never again. When taking her out of the shed that spring, we brought the other cows down with her so she could follow them.

Claudia is five years old now, and entering her third lactation. She doesn't skip as much but manages extremely well. We keep an eye on her in case she is bullied by others. She has a long narrow face and she sticks her nose out as far as it will go, ready to stop when her nose touches something. She walks close beside others when walking to or from the field, yet manages to find tasty grass and the water trough when in the field. She knows her way around the cubicle house and can almost always be found at one end when grazing silage, knowing we will probably stop to give her the occasional handful of tasty meal if we spot her there.

There are health and safety implications in keeping Claudia. Might she be unintentionally dangerous? As long as she is never moved on her own, there shouldn't be any problems. Having said that, moving her and eight others out of a cubicle shed the other day, I was so intent on checking that she was in the middle of them and wasn't left behind, that I left one cow behind in the shed!

Claudia still has bad hair days. She's still on the small side but holds her own. She is a firm favourite and all going well, she will remain in the herd for many years to come, as will her daughters. 🐮

## Untied

*Phelim Kavanagh*

Dad spent years training him to tie his shoelaces.  
Tom loved the showing, his head always nodding.  
When he managed his first, it was loose-lace butterfly.

Mam made his favourite pancake, Dad took a day off  
and spent it opening laces, we clapped as Tom re-tied.  
Mam went to the garden alone.

Tom always wore a tie. The next four years Tom  
and Dad played the knotting game. One Sunday,  
Tom managed a windsor beauty.

We had fizzy orange. Tom rocked backward  
and forward, Dad played his jazz record over and over,  
Tom wore his tie outside his jumper.

When he fell a few days before his fortieth, we shook him  
and shook him, begged him to nod, told him, 'Mam  
has fish-fingers,' but we knew.

Dad has stopped playing jazz and mam spends her time  
in the garden, nodding. A missing that is sharded glass –  
infusing, inside them.

## A Farm, a Lifestyle

*Joe Conmy*

The morning was dull as dark clouds swept over the bay. An Atlantic swell was running with waves intermittently white, lashing against the rocky coastline. Flaggers and rushes fluttered in the common field beside the shore. From the kitchen window I could see the haggard, bare and empty.

It was summer and I was on holiday in Belmullet, my birthplace. I listened to Joni Mitchell's voice on the radio as she sang, 'I looked at life that way.' The song made me think back on my youth on this scenic and peaceful farm of twelve acres.

I awoke to the sound of Mother raking ashes from the grate of the black range. When the fire was lit Mother came into the bedroom, shook my shoulder firmly and whispered 'Joe, wake up. It's time to bring in the cows for milking.'

After dressing, I fetched my overcoat, which was hanging from a nail on the porch door, and I walked out into the howling wind. Rain pelted against my face. The cows were huddled in the bog field, sheltering among the whin bushes. Shouting 'Hup! Hup!' and the dog barking, I got the cows moving towards the byre.

The cow byre at the back of our house was a neat, stone-slatted building. The three black cows would enter the byre without assistance, but the red cow had to be coaxed in with a bucket of meal. After tying the cows with the rope halter, I fed them hay that was pulled from the reek the night before and left in the byre path.

Mother would milk the quiet cow in the corner. Martin, my brother, would milk the other two cows in the big byre. Father, who had a way with cows, milked the red cow tied in the single stall. He could handle her giddiness and stop her from kicking the bucket. Often I saw Father, head pressed against her back leg as he hummed a tune, trying to coax the cow to stay quiet and free the milk.

When the milking was finished, the white frothy milk was strained into the enamel can in the back kitchen. A clean muslin cloth was used for straining the milk, which was left to cool before it was strained into the creamery can.

Now it was my task to put the harness on the ass and tease him between the shafts of the cart. Father would lift the creamery can up on the ass cart and I would lead the ass to the top of the road. Later the can was brought to Carne Creamery Station in Mick Lally's tractor and trailer. Sitting in the cart, feet dangling between the shafts, and with one jerk of the reins the ass would gallop home. In the cart as the ass trotted along, I felt like a Roman warrior in a chariot.

In the kitchen Mother had the breakfast ready.

We scooped hot porridge from the large bowl on the square kitchen table. Sweetening it with sugar, we devoured it. Father sat at the top of the table gulping tea from a saucer.

As children we always had jobs to do before and after school. In June the hay was cut in swards with Paddy Lavelle's finger blade tractor. The swards were turned with the timber rake and when dry made into small breast cocks. Súgáns were made with the casadóir. As I twisted the casadóir, Martin, with intricate movements of the wrists, made the súgán grow longer as he fed it with hay from the cock. The súgáns were used to secure the cocks from wind. Later the cocks were pulled into the haggard for reeking. This involved a day's labour by the meitheal from the village.

The sea at the back of our house was full of shellfish. In April when the tide retreated out we picked oysters on the green bed way out in the bay. During the summer we picked periwinkles



for sale. A hundred weight of winkles fetched a red ten shelling back then.

In the Autumn we picked potatoes from the drills dug by Father and tossed them into the potato pit. The potato pit was lined with rushes and covered with clay when full of potatoes.

Anyone that is involved in the rearing of animals treasure their life span. In 1958 Father got a sow from the Department of Agriculture under “Scéim na Muca.” Before this, Dad reared bonhams. The bonhams were reared in the little slated shed, next to the cow house. The shed had its own walled yard and gate entrance in front of the small timber door.

Inside the pig house, many of father’s farming tools were stored. The scythe hung along the timber rafters. Along the wall ledge, the sharpening stone, the Tilley lamp and the seaweed hook could be seen. An old rusty iron rested over the door. A ball of brown hay—rope was stuffed in the corner ledge. When the sow arrived the little pig house became her home.

Now a yearly ritual had to be adhered to. First the sow was walked over to Pat Reilly’s farm. Pat was the only farmer who owned a boar in our village. Nine months later our sow would farrow, giving birth to a litter of ten to twelve piglets. My brothers and I used to keep a nightly vigil, minding the piglets.

We sat on a timber plank that was secured to the wall about 20 inches from the straw floor. It was our task to shuffle the piglets under the board whenever the sow turned. This was to prevent the sow lying on a piglet and killing it. Minding the sow and her litter was very exciting for us. We had to stay up all night, while mother brought us red lemonade and biscuits. The only other time we got treats like this was the day of the reeking. Beneath the Tilley lamp we played a game of 25.

With the sow safe, Father would go to town for his pint or two of Guinness. On his way home he would look in on us. He always brought us goodies—long black licorice pigtails and a bag of bullseyes.

‘She did,’ we all answered at once.

‘All the pigeons are safe,’ Frank added.

‘Ye two can go to bed now,’ Father said, looking at Martin and me.

‘No, were not tired,’ I said.

And with that Dad went out the small door.

With the heat from the sow and the straw-bedded floor, the little pig house was warmer than our own bedroom.

Those are my memories of a small farm some 50 years ago. 🚗

## Contributors

**Fergal Anderson** is from Loughrea in County Galway. He runs Leaf and Root farm which supplies restaurants in Galway City, including the Michelin-starred Loam. He is a founding member of Talamh Beo, a new farming organization in Ireland that works for Food Sovereignty and to support Agroecological farming systems. Leaf and Root farm was made a Farming for Nature Ambassador in 2021.

**Selina Bracken** lives in the middle of the countryside with a hyper puppy, a cat with no tail and far too many sheep. Although Selina works full time in the pharmaceutical sector, she is a keen farmer and writer, having completed the Green Cert in 2017 and a Certificate in Creative Writing for Publication in NUI Maynooth in 2020. In her free time, when she's not working full time or farming part time, Selina is an avid crafter. 'Lambing Season' is a story that Selina never thought she would write, never mind get published.

Thirty years ago, **E. M. Condon** swapped the alternate side of the street parking in Manhattan for farming in the Knockmealdown Mountains, Co. Tipperary. She has raised her family and works alongside her husband, while also trying her hand at writing. Her stories have appeared in several anthologies: *Original Sins*, (published by Maynooth Adult and Community Education), *Knife Edge*, *The Edge of Passion*, and *By the Light of the Moon* (Marble City Publishers). Her story, 'Stronger Than Any Flower,' was adapted for radio by Orla Murphy. Answers to life's mysteries are made clear to her every day on a farm, once she is willing to look for them.

Born in Belmullet, County Mayo in 1950, **Joe Conmy** was reared on sixteen acres of mixed farming land. Completed his Leaving Certificate in Belmullet, and a Certificate in Agriculture in Mountbellew Agricultural College in 1971. Joined the Department of Agriculture in 1972 and worked for 40 years in different sections. Married to Anne in Loughrea with three children. Played Gaelic football in his youth and later coached underage football teams. Always enjoyed poetry and literature and in 1990 joined a local creative writing group. Retired since 2012 and now enjoys gardening and golf as hobbies.

**Patrick Deeley** has published seven books of poetry with Dedalus Press, including *The Bones of Creation* and *Groundswell: New and Selected*. His most recent collection, *The End of the World*, was shortlisted for the 2020 Farmgate Award. His works of fiction for younger readers were published by O'Brien Press, and a bestselling memoir, *The Hurley Maker's Son*, appeared from Transworld in 2016. His awards include The Dermot Healy International Poetry Prize, The Eilis Dillon Book of the Year Award and The Lawrence O'Shaughnessy Award.

**Patricia Donnellan** was born in Mountshannon, East Clare where she has farmed most of her life. She returned to education as a mature student completing a Diploma in Community Development, University of Maynooth followed by a Diploma in Applied Theology, NUI Galway and a Masters in Theology, University of Limerick. A member of Portumna Pen Pushers Poetry group, Patricia's poems have featured in publications including *The Works*, *Sliabh Aughty Magazine*, and the *Walk With Me Anthology 2020* as well as Shorelines Arts Festival, Mountshannon Arts and Scariff Bay Community Radio. Her work was Highly Commended at SiarScéal Festivals 2014/2019.

**Ger Duffy** lives in Co Waterford. She received a Mentoring Award in Poetry from The Munster Literature Centre in 2021. Her poetry has been published in *In the Midst* Anthology (US), the *Cathal Bui* selected Anthology, *The Waxed Lemon*, *Vox Galvia*, *Drawn to the Light Press*,

*Southward*, *Local Wonders* *Dedalus Press Anthology* and *The Ekphrastic Review* (US). Her poem won 2nd Prize at the Goldsmiths Poetry Competition 2021.

**Michael Durack** lives in Ballina, Co. Tipperary. His poems have appeared in publications such as *The Blue Nib*, *Skylight 47*, *The Cafe Review*, *Live Encounters*, *The Poetry Bus*, *The Stony Thursday Book*, *The Honest Ulsterman* and *Poetry Ireland Review*. With his brother Austin he has recorded two albums of poetry and guitar music, *The Secret Chord* (2013) and *Going Gone* (2015). He is the author of a memoir in prose and poems, *Saved to Memory: Lost to View* (Limerick Writers Centre 2016) and two poetry collections, *Where It Began* (2017) and *Flip Sides* (2020) published by Revival Press.

**Margaret Fitz-Cahill** is a farmer's wife, living in the Golden Vale. She has been married for the last thirty years to a man who is genuinely passionate about farming and animals. She has been, by default, drawn into this magical world. She lives in the country and couldn't imagine living in the city anymore. Every morning, the world lies outside her door, fresh and new, waiting to be explored.

**Rena Fleming** was born in Co. Limerick, on a farm near Ardpatrick, which she left at sixteen. She studied and worked in weaving and textiles for most of her working life. She studied art more recently, painting especially. She began to write a few years ago. She has been writing poetry during the last two years, encouraged by the members of Martin Vernon's Friday Lunchtime Poetry on zoom. She now lives in Connemara, Co. Galway.

**John Flynn** lives in the countryside beside the River Shannon in County Leitrim. He farms with his wife Elizabeth. He has been involved with rural development and the promotion of tourism and the natural heritage. He has a keen interest in technology and welcomes the role out of the National Broadband presently. He has an interest in local history and the role that photography can play in presenting the folklore and way of life of the various generations. An avid reader, he finds the local library a great source of information.

**Ann Marie Foley** writes poetry, prose and non-fiction. She works as a journalist and on the family farm in Laois. Her writing come from the everyday occurrences in life, be it jumping on a quad on the farm or feeding calves, or paddling and sometimes swimming in the sea in Waterford where she originally comes from. She has been published in: *Forever Young*, *The Cormorant*; *Outburst 16&17*; *Words UnLaoused*; *The Sea*; *Ink Sweat & Tears*, Writing.ie; *Cyphers 73*; *Acorn 5*, and more.

**Danny Galvin** is from Co.Cork. His writing has been published or is forthcoming in *The Moth*, *Acumen*, *Honest Ulsterman*, *A New Ulster*, *The West Texas Literary Review*, *Quarryman*, *The Cork Words Anthology*, *Rock & Sling* and *Ofi Press Mexico*. He came first place in the Spoken Word Platform at Cuirt International Literary Festival 2017 and was shortlisted for the Red Line Poetry Competition, 2018.

Felix Gerard Kavanagh (Alias: **Phelim Kavanagh**) is a farmer and conservationist. His writing documents our everyday living and its connection to the natural world. His poems have been published in journals including *The Stinging Fly* and *Southward*. His current work is a collection of love poems, titled *Love is no Toll Road*. The collection earned commendation in the 2020 Southward international fool for poetry competition. Phelim's chapbook, 'From a Green Headland' was one of two Irish finalist in the 2018 international fool for poetry competition (Southward Editions). His poem 'Tea' is currently in issue 37 of Southward.

**David Kelly** grew up on a sheep farm at the foot of Mount Leinster in the village of Rathanna near Borris, County Carlow. He completed training with the Farm Apprenticeship Board in 1987 and subsequently worked in farming until he joined An Garda Síochána in 1994. He now works and lives in Kilmacthomas, County Waterford and is married with three children. He is still involved in farming sheep.

**Anne Marie Kennedy**, MA in Writing, 1st, NUI Galway, is an award-winning writer, performance poet, freelance journalist and creative writing tutor. She lives in rural Galway with her husband and a menagerie of four-legged people. She blogs at [www.annemariekennedy.ie](http://www.annemariekennedy.ie).

**David Lynch** grew up on a tillage farm in North Cork. He now resides in Southeast Asia. Although he is no longer physically present in Ireland he remains a passionate online campaigner for the rights and protections of all the children who live and work on Irish farms—both past and present. He can be found on Facebook at the 'Farm Abuse Support Group Ireland.'

**Mona Lynch** graduated with an MA in Creative Writing in UCC in 2018 aged 78. She is a poet, a short story writer and memoirist. Her work has been published in *The Irish Examiner*, *The Echo*, *The Quarryman* and *The Holly Bough*. While working with Travellers in Cork prison, she produced a book of stories and poetry which is in use in Traveller's literacy classes in prisons throughout Ireland. She was awarded a Munster Literature Centre Mentoring Fellowship in 2021 with Afric McGlinchy. She is a featured writer in Lime Square Poets.

**Mary C. McHale** was born on a small farm in county Mayo and still loves the farming life even though she has spent all her adult life living in a big town. She wrote the poem 'The Dog' in a creative writing class in her local retirement group.

**Brian Miller** is a full-time drystock farmer in Co. Laois. Having qualified with a degree in agricultural science from UCD in 1994 he decided to keep life's pace as easy as possible and returned home to farm, where he enjoys observing nature, while still doing enough to make a living. Being married with three teenage daughters also helps to keep the Wonder alive. This is his first published piece.

**Gayle Moore** hails from Co. Laois. Having studied Creative Writing at NUIG, she is now juggling her time between an M.Phil at TCD and the Green Cert. This is her first published work.

**Patrick Mulcahy**, aka The Mindful Farmer, is the owner of Ballinwillin House Farm, with farmed venison, wild boar and goats. His business interests include a boutique B&B at Ballinwillin, a vineyard in Hungary and 'RetrEAT' a weekend experience to nourish the body and mind. At age eight Patrick was practicing mindfulness, which he acknowledges helped him during his work in his first career as a Garda. Patrick created a 'Thinking Path' on the grounds of Ballinwillin House Farm with a holistic garden with areas dedicated to mindfulness, meditation and forgiveness.

**Louise Nealon** is a writer from Newtown, County Kildare. In 2017, she won the Seán Ó Faoláin International Short Story Competition and was the recipient of the Francis Ledwidge Creative Writing Award. She has been published in *The Irish Times*, *Southword*, and *The Open Ear*. She won the An Post Newcomer of the Year award with her novel *Snowflake*.

**Ger O'Byrne** lives in Ballinacor just under the mountain of the same name close to the village of Greenane, in the Garden of Ireland. He retired from the Department of Agriculture a year and a half ago. He owns a small piece of land on which he keeps some sheep. He started writing poetry about four or five years ago. He writes mostly about some event in peoples' lives or maybe a throw away comment by somebody. His ambition now is to be able to write a short story.

**Kevin O'Byrne** was born 1947 in Rathdrum, Co. Wicklow—worked on family farm till age 18 and during summer holidays as a university student—studied philosophy at St. Tomas's University, Rome and modern languages at UCD—taught English in Spain and worked as guard on London underground trains—has lived permanently in Germany since 1976 and worked as a teacher and translator for business and technical English in various German companies till retirement in 2018—has been writing poems since age of nine.

**Jimmy O'Connell** was born in Dublin, but spent his youth on the family farm. A rare breed: a 'culchieised Dub! He is a graduate of U.C.D. He has been writing and performing his work for many years in the Irish Writers Centre, Sunflower Sessions and other venues. His poetry has appeared in *The Baltimore Review*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Stepaway Magazine*, *Flare 7 & 10*, and *Poetry for a New Ulster*, among others. A collection of his poetry *Although it is Night* was published by Wordonthestreet in 2013. He has recently published his first novel, *Batter the Heart*. He is at present working on a play based on the life of Margaret Cusack, The Nun of Kenmare.

Born in 1962, an only child, **Mary O'Shea** has lived and worked all her life on a family farm in South County Kilkenny. Started writing creatively aged 15, with poetry, has been published in many outlets in Ireland and one in America down the years. A second keen interest is history, namely, local history. Since 1992 she has published many articles in local papers, in *Old Kilkenny Review*, and have published four local history publications, *Parish of Templeorum, a historical Miscellany* (Raheen,1999), *The Marrying of Bridget and Christ in the Parish of Templeorum* (Rahhen,2000), *A Hundred Years of Piltown Co-operative Creamery and Its Branches* (Piltown, 2001) and *Templeorum Church 1814-2014*, a study from pre-history to 21st Century of a rural area in South County Kilkenny (Raheen, 2014).

**Niall O'Sullivan** lives near Allihies at the tip of the beautiful Béara Peninsula in West Cork. He is a fifth-generation farmer of a tidy holding of sheep, cattle and goats and he also grows organic vegetables. He has a keen vision for green, extensive farm practices showing particular respect for the environment and wildlife. Niall is a primary teacher and works in a job-share arrangement which allows considerable time to be devoted to farming, as well as visual, performance and literary arts.

**Ruth Parkes** is a 30-year-old part time farmer from Co. Armagh, Northern Ireland. When she's not farming, she works as a dispensing assistant in a community pharmacy.

**Richard Quinn** grew up on a farm in Middle Third, Maree, Oranmore. The eldest son from a family of seven children. The farm had been in his family since 1790. They raised cattle for milk and grew vegetables. There wasn't much money to be made from the farm and as a young man Richard moved to Galway City to work as a jeweller. He set up his own business and married Maria Cloherty. They worked in Richard Quinn Jeweller's for over forty years and have two daughters, Christina and Edel. He is now enjoying retirement with his wife.

**Bryan Rogers** is a Co. Louth beef farmer, who also grows a small amount of grain and forestry. His main interest is in the area of local history, and has been a contributor of articles to publications including *Togher Topics*, *Clogherhead Through the Years* and *The Field Names of Co. Louth*. In the summer months, he conducts walking tours that include a wide range of local history related subjects.

**Jack Rogers** is an artist based in Co Louth working primarily in theatre. He holds a degree in Production Design for Stage and Screen from IADT, Dun Laoghaire, although he has always had a passion for storytelling and the written word. Jack has performed his poetry in association with Livestock and DCU Drag Race 2017, but more recently he premiered his original play 'Good Morning Mr. Moon' as part of the Monkstown International Puppet Festival.

**Mary Rourke** retired from nursing when her second child was born and became a farming housewife. With her husband Pat, they ran a dairy farm. She retired from dairying some years ago and now devotes her time to her grandchildren, writing about them and life in general. She also paints a little and volunteers a little.

**Lorna Sixsmith** runs a dairy farm in Co. Laois with her husband. She has written a trilogy of funny farming books: *Would You Marry a Farmer?*, *How to be a Perfect Farm Wife* and *An Ideal Farm Husband*. Her farming memoir *Till the Cows Come Home* was published in 2018. She is currently writing a novel in her 'spare time'.

**Laura Swift** lives in Tramore, Co. Waterford. She has always loved English, having studied it in UCD. She started writing after her husband Richard died in 2009. Richard was a dairy farmer and introduced her to farm life. She's now keeping suckler cows and pedigree Herefords. She loves the combination of the hands-on approach of farming and the more reflective aspect of poetry. For her, they compliment each other really well. Farming has become very scientific and technical, so she thinks it is good to also explore rural life from a creative and personal viewpoint.

**Neil Tully** won the overall prize and the short story prize at the Write by the Sea Literary Festival 2021. He also won the New Roscommon Writing Award 2021 and the Dock Arts Centre Short Story Prize 2020. He has been longlisted and shortlisted in many other competitions and his work has appeared in *The Irish Independent*, *Quillette* and elsewhere. He will complete an MA in Creative Writing at UL this year.

**Vanessa B. Woods** is founder and CEO of Ireland's first Science Communications Consultancy, 'Vanessa B. Woods Communications'. She also works with the EU Commission as Rapporteur & Vice Chair for Horizon Europe funding proposals. Vanessa also held the positions of Director of Communications-Devenish; Chief Executive-Agri Aware; Senior Scientist-AFBI; and Lecturer-Queen's University Belfast. Vanessa is author of © *Irish Food, From A-Z*, a science-based and illustrated book of poems that tells the story of Irish farming, food, culture and health. It celebrates nutritious Irish food and the love of farming in beautiful Ireland. Vanessa's book is now used in every Irish primary school as part of curriculum-linked education.

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Back cover photo by Jonathan Mabey



**Maynooth University**  
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The logo for Maynooth University is a shield-shaped emblem divided into four quadrants. The top-left quadrant is blue with a white book icon. The top-right quadrant is yellow with a white sailing ship icon. The bottom-left quadrant is teal with a white leaf icon. The bottom-right quadrant is red with a white castle icon.

**Comhairle Contae Chill Dara**  
**Kildare County Council**

The logo for Kildare County Council is a shield-shaped emblem with a red border. It features a white cross in the center, a harp on the left, and a lion on the right. Below the shield is a banner with the Gaelic motto "An t-Éanna agus Míneach".