Poetic Inheritance: working-class women of the Liverpool-Irish diaspora and cultural and social hybridities

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For Ken

Abstract

This thesis comprises both creative and critical work which investigates the cultural inheritance of working-class women in the Liverpool-Irish diaspora and translates the resultant discoveries into the creation of a poetry collection which is conscious of such social and cultural realities as part of its province. The collection, separated into sections, explores the experiences of women in Nineteenth Century Liverpool and beyond: how they see themselves and how others might see them. The Irish poet Eavan Boland said 'I wanted to put the life I lived into the poem I wrote. And the life I lived was a woman's life.'[1] Boland strived to co-join the orthodoxies of 'woman' and 'poet' in Irish poetry, celebrating womanhood whilst unsettling the traditional representations of her sex. I share this outlook in my own practice where there is an acceptance that witness of women's lives does not always lend itself to traditional lyricism, but on occasion develops an edge, a jitteriness sometimes fuelled by the energy of anger. The critical commentary provides a series of connected critical engagements with specific aspects of the history of Liverpool-Irish women in the nineteenth century, an exploration of gender roles amongst their mid-twentieth-century descendants, and a broader examination of class and gender inequalities in education and academic society during the post-war years. The two thesis components are linked by an in-text examination of the influence of research and a chapter of literary criticism of my creative work, which work aims to provide realistic voices and recognises women who provoke the acceptable boundaries of how they are supposed to live.

[1] https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/eavan-boland

Poetry Collection

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Raw

Judgement 1. On a working-class woman,

on a child who had known both freedom and fear.
Knee socks around my ankles, a lad spat on me.
No escape, I tumbled back into high-school humiliations
and stumbled words as my confidence was negated.

He was disquieted, I think: all that talk of poverty,
and how I dared to question quite so much, so often;
but he rumbled me, that praepostor for the patriarchy.
I became a crab scuttling under a rock: in retreat.

Weeping away my painted imposter face I fled him;
dropped his derogation into a sinkhole, and slunk home
to bright blues, saffron and sunflowers - no shades here
of Farrow and Ball - and a squall of cats on the bed.

Oceans of goodbyes

We are all each of us this:
The salt that clings to sea-ropes,
the feral drinking at a dripping pipe.
People brutally winched away
for living in the wrong time.

We say goodbye and the sky is bleak
as the leavings of war; sunset streaks
of flame fading as the bloated moon
rises like a pale tambourine,
the bland face of a psychopath.

We women have stretched our faces;
grimaced in orgasm, childbirth, death.
Some smiled for men, for the worst of them.
War is war; on others, on ourselves by any
means possible: starvation, chemicals, cold.

We are the people left without weapons.
It's what happens every single time our time
runs out; we hide in basements or crouch
behind hedges in villages that once smelt
of peat fires, cooking pots and too many children.

We are the figure sitting dockside
with a cat in a carrier. A child sleeps;
an oblivion of birds sweeps across the lake.
We chance an unfurling across scorched land
but they are the ones on horseback, the absent

landlords who rule us, and we end up living
in their country because they have left ours
with nothing. We don't need condescension;
we have a nation and so return with our children,
our flag, our fears; to survive, to signal our identity.

Raw

Between the state of sleep and waking, I dreamt
that I killed a dog and ate it raw, and saw clearly

its lolling pink tongue with chocolate ice-cream.
I saw my father; screamed at him to never hold me again

which was crazy as he never did such a thing; not so
much as a fatherly hug or kiss, an arm around a shoulder.

I wake in fear; what else do I imagine on his dope sheet?
Then I take that can and kick it down the street.

The night my mother cut off my hair

In dream darkness,
my mother
burnt into my soul;
tried to cauterise me
against sexual proclivity.
Or any sex in fact.

Only whores have
long red hair;
Mary Magdalene,
but definitely not
the other Mary
Holy Mother of God.
C'mon, Mam, you're dead!

A menopause baby,
Mam was always warned
is different; a late
and only child might
be outspoken, outrageous;
a little outré,
they didn't say.
She was not told
that she could not hold
and forever swaddle me.

I screamed as she
flourished the scissors;
they sang around my skull
snip, snip, snip.
She made me feel
naked and hollowed
out as a tree
struck by lightning.

It was frightening,
how she saw love.

The mother place

With thanks for Antony Gormley's art-work 'Another Place'

I want only that shoreline,
with traces of oil in the sand;
its sentinel razor clams,
the mermaid's purses I used to find.

Oh, the irony of it. A place where
I could never live again, and wake up
each day to that cormorant sky
above the bloodied buildings of history.

I just want to be close to the iron men,
knee deep in water, amongst them.
One has a traffic cone placed on his head;
it's a show of affection, here. Of possession.

I want fever-dream sunsets that spread
over the sea where I flung my mother's ashes.
My red hair remains long; I know this,
because I just checked in the mirror.

All I did was feed the cats

And you were there
With your evil clown hair
Stain-spattered sweatshirt
And neglected feet
Old man's legs
Sprouting like fungus
From dirty denim shorts

All I did was feed the cats
And you appear
Spit speckling your mouth
And lousy dentures
Shrieking at me.

I'm going out
I said
Good
You said
Stay out and take
Your fucking cats with you
Their fucking mess
Their wastefulness

I'm glad we had no children
You would not have coped
With food-flinging
Bed-wetting
The terrible twos
And teenage tantrums
Would you have stood
In the doorway
Of the kitchen
Like now
Effing this and effing that?

All I did was feed the cats

Married Out: 1896

My grandmother Rebecca was beautiful.
Not that I ever met her, but the camera says
it all; sepia tinted in a rosewood frame.
Mam never spoke of why Rebecca Donnelly
married out and took an English name.

The family disowned her, I know that.
Maybe she was tired of her crazy brother Joe,
who spoke with a lilting brogue but never
went near Ireland in his life, worked on roads

with gangs from Donegal and said he was born
in Dublin. Perhaps he felt he knew himself,
or re-imagined who he was when he met
his Irish wife. Men can make decisions like that.

Rebecca married out. Out of the courts, where
a corpse might not be moved for days, and a pig
was fattened in a cellar. Where two of her sisters
died in infancy, then a brother aged only four.

Crowded court houses in their pestilent intimacy:
neighbours wanting half a cup of sugar, or tea,
or calling in for a swig of something stronger.
So much gossip. Maybe she felt she didn't belong.

There's a lot to be said for a rented house
of your own, with a cellar for coal and a family
privy down the yard, and to lose only one child.
For not having a priest squat in your parlour

asking for money you don't have, and not listen
to bishops in their presbyteries preach of a sanctuary,
the sweet bright home that Mary made for Joseph;
how a good woman is content within her four walls.

My grandmother's husband died at sixty-three,
fire-watching on the docks, lungs full of woollen fibre.
My grandmother, buried without a head-stone was provided
with a numbered brick, and five children who survived.

Interesting Times

British Summer Time

I sit in a chair at the front of my house
as sunset souses the sky. I am waiting
for you to return: later than promised,
full of golden ale and hungry.

I drink picpoule and the evening tilts
like the Earth itself; your walk home,
up the grassy bank by the cut,
will have a planetary wobble.

I'll mend your head, and remind you
of your age; I can no more change
the hour of sunrise than alter you, yet still
I'll meddle with the clocks at midnight.

Five years on

Days are cast dark under charcoal clouds;
in an unheimlich light they seethe
and ferment, a fragmenting nation
waking up to half-empty shelves,
berries unpicked, an Hogarthian lust for gin.

A south-westerly wind swarms and billows,
rain in sheets batters the red Balinese Bells;
the flag-pole cherry sheds petals, delicate
as the carved elfin ears of fashionable
Chinese girls fresh from a surgeon's knife.

Garden foxgloves offer up dark cul-de-sacs
to the foraging bees. I am waiting, patiently,
for the time of wine; watching the sun-dial,
an old-school timepiece, and counting clocks:
wisps of dandelion as I slowly exhale.

In our white, Brexit town, the new wharf
is peppered with parasols and summer dresses
waiting for Monet. After dark, a snake-park
of cycle wheels spin: manic Steampunk cogs,
crushing beer cans like babies thrown under a bus.

Hidden things
Staffordshire to Schull 2000

I had no idea of anything. My mind
in any case was mostly far away;
I had my period which was fine
except for the pain of that last kiss
and the blood on your hands and the fuss .

October, close to Halloween.
Early evening, already dark;
the last leg of the journey from
Dún Laoghaire to County Cork.
How soon the clocks will change.

My husband swings the car around
a bend, then, a sight you couldn't
make-up: an ancient graveyard
that overlooks the harbour, its Celtic
crosses and lean of stones, shadows

clean and clear in the bright light
of a full moon glowing white-hot,
ready to meltdown from a black sky
into the sea. I had no idea about
the hidden things, except my own.

The British government sent soup
to Skibbereen; there was less demand
than in Connacht because the dead
don't eat and the dying lie in ditches.
I had no clue, and the warmth of that

October sun we were told was mad, sure
we'd brought the good weather with us
from England. We wore summer clothes,
and drank cold Guinness with fresh crab rolls.
Nobody reminded us of what we had been.

The others went exploring, but I sat
in the garden peeling potatoes and veg
for Sunday dinner; we had a joint of pink
of lamb already resting. The pain, the pull
in my womb was intense. I knew nothing.

Children here disappeared quickly
like seals slipping from a rock to the sea,
all swollen and ripening for the grave.
And I kept my hidden things close to me,
listened to Eurythmics, sipped red wine.

I bought fresh fish for Friday tea
but nobody ate it. Either they were
ungrateful or I was unclean. I crossed
the bridge at Mizen Head, the sea roaring
laughing at my husband's fear of heights

and just as a dog will bury its canine delights
deep in the dirt away from predators, so then
Ireland was keeping history quiet out of some
sense of shame; I did not know of the presence
of a workhouse behind rails, the mass graves.

But now it is out of the bag, the back
of the store cupboard, and Pandora's box
is open to reveal the smell of rotten potato,
the stench of disease, old women's faces
imposed on children with dead eyes.

I did not visit museums nor memorials
I never knew of, unaware that this was
a county of famished bones found in homes
and hovels. I saw romantic, unnamed roads
with secrets even darker than my own.

The italicised words are those of Dr. Robert Traill, Rector of Schull, during his famine relief work in the parish before succumbing to fever in 1847

This Night
After 'This Moment' by Eavan Boland

A long tram-ride.
At twilight.

Musicians tuning up
in the old steelworks:
anticipation.

A man is fishing
on an artificial lake.

His supper splashes.

One window is boarded-up.
One soviet tank rusts at the roadside.

A woman sells cigarettes and sweets
in a dimly lit kiosk
this night.

Now it is twilight.
Bats colonise the sky.
The steelworks sing in the dark.

Agoraphobia

Sometimes, at night, I hear a low whistle. I huddle between
the window and the door. Outside it is all wind and trees: evil.
A bog-body, a girl tied to a chair. None were spared, I tell you.

I keep my existence small and dark, a world behind my eyes;
beyond this, emptiness expands. Muddy lanes and misogyny,
the old manor-houses festering in their own mythology.

Beasts kept in fields. At dusk, a crunch of hooves on gravel.
A fallen creation who can stride across all that is known
and have the muck-spread villages waiting on his whim.

He knew that in time the World would fall in love with him;
from the witch-finder to the hedge-funder, reformer, papist,
therapist, rapist; incels on the dark web, the hidden in the ha-ha.

I crouch beneath the table, a nulliparous with her kitlings.
My books are many. I read too much, or so I'm told. A crone
who grips her catling, waiting to dismember half the world.

catling - a long, double-bladed surgical knife commonly used from the 17th to the mid-19th century, particularly for amputations.

Searching for the Mariana Trench
Spring 2020 first lockdown

Perhaps I should turn upside down, feel
the wildcat grass tickle my head; bare feet
wading in the hot blue sky, following rippled
tide-line clouds that fade in time like an old tattoo.

But I can't drink turned upside down, and I need
an aperitivo or two in these breathtaking times.
I want to invite the devil in now and again
when I hear approaching rain, and the car floods

with music that brings you right back to me.
The moon-gazing garden gazes still; tree ornaments
glow with captured *luz solar*. Should a night daemon
appear from out of the dark wall to have sex with me,

maybe that will explain everything like how you came
to text me just I was driving home and that song played
but my phone was elsewhere, not glued to me limpet-like.
The food of famine incidentally and maybe that's all I was,

in fuck-me shoes and slippery silk dresses. Once I dreamt
of this, and found I wanted that. I swim upside down where
little fishes swarm mermaid tresses as I head for The Deep,
beyond jettisoned foghorns and the lightship scuppered.

Lost to us

Mrs. O'Connor

I guess your new title has a ring to it; lyrical, Irish,
though not as eminent as Professor X, but then,
it is as false as you: the proud, principled woman
who said she'd never change her name.

And yes, I have asked myself, because I believe
I should know my enemy, was this *jealousy?*
Of that fierce fresh lust, blind adoration, which
I sadly reserved for men I shouldn't have had?

Jeez, but that's a heady feeling. Did I too want
the beach-ready body you'd strived so hard for,
hernia surgery that was really a tummy-tuck?
Fuck, of course I did. After that you wanted rid

of all your friends and that was easier than
dropping thirty pounds. Sisterly hugs in the pub;
now I'm the butt of your secret jokes. You then,
embracing the lockdown, hiding your profile.

Your man is no-one; he has nothing, except
a reputation. You had freedom; a looking-glass
reflecting the whole of the ocean. You'll never
free-dive now, nor be a mermaid, a selkie.

He has taken your skin, and I see what's beneath,
how you watched men react: shy waiters, a lad
in Africa, a Slav market trader; the admirer who
got out of hand. A fly calculation of your worth.

You puzzle me, Mrs. O'Connor. The egalitarian, with
kids in private schools: drug problems and driving bans
bailed out by Mummy. Do they find it funny, this mid-life
love of yours with a man whose life is a mystery?

Were they at your elopement, splashed on social media?
The groom in a borrowed suit and watch-chain that made me
think of old politicos. Mermaid, you looked really beautiful;
of course you did. Be happy. Third time lucky, maybe.

Poppy

You wanted to be a nurse,
you could have been a healer;
there is that otherness about you.

His limerence was not love,
but easily mistaken until you wake,
sixteen years old to find your breasts

filled with milk to feed his child.
You looked more like a bridesmaid,
yet exchanged rings for hopes and dreams.

Ah, but didn't he do the right thing by you
with your small swollen belly and boobs,
even though he was a leg man, himself.

He had another woman then whistled for you,
his Pop-pop, mother of his children.
You left good sex; returned with the babies.

You sculpted, took up yoga,
gave your friends advice: *Be Kind*,
your smile reflecting his shining sun

whilst you became a light rarely seen.
You had friends, and gifts he scorned:
warmth, and inner steel. Compassion.

You are a grandmother, a joyous feeling
of nurture, nurse, exhaustion. I miss your healing
but you never returned from lockdown.

He has made you a spectre neither dead
nor alive, seen but unseen; nebulous.
You are an idea, a ghost, an imprint.

She
With thanks to Rudyard Kipling for the cat

The mistress of everything
she could bring home the bacon,
and had no desire for men
who wanted to provide.
Fuck their masculine pride.

Love is like a lock-down,
she had learnt that much.
Isolation she knew too well;
the places she could never go
for fearing that she'd want then, to leave.

She hated silent Covid mornings:
missed the traffic noise,
Sturm und Drang of motorways.
Missed the car-man with soft small hands,
who'd been so easy to lead astray.

She walked for miles during that hot
unnatural spring, ~~s~~at on grass with
girlfriends and drank fizz at noon,
gin and tonic at six. Wine with books
in winter. Time with another. Alone.

This was me she said:
the mistress of a life
with occult dimensions.
Who once thought of him,
and thanked the universe.

This is me she said:
the cat that walks by herself
on the wet wild roofs
and sleeps zipped up.
Time with another. Alone.

In a cemetery

A wide flat place of wet grass,
and of wind whose frictional howl
competes with the surge of mowers;
the men astride them ride
like cowboys across the prairies,
avoiding the graves with their dead
and dying flowers.

Visitors walk with heads bowed,
battling with cellophaned blooms;
bewildered children, here and there,
are hiding in the trees; whispering,
humming, unsettling.

As the rain stops a man appears.

He understands the lie
of the land, the plot numbers
which make no sense to us.
He speaks our language;
he is dressed for the weather.

Unofficial, unsanctioned,
he knows the pathways
and the coffin roads taken
by the nameless poor.
He helps us to search.

Unless we were mistaken,
my Irish cousin, you and I
have found our lost one
buried in unmarked ground.

Anonymous, she lies
between the black marble
of generations of Gerrards
and a strange white stone
with the name erased.

Her life is marked
by a numbered brick:
Three-One-Six.
In this lacuna we can
place our memoriam:
Rebecca, S. née Donnelly.

Elegy for Love
(a victim of the pandemic)

She remembers how it was to make-out
in a car hidden by trees, as passers-by
strolled and ate ice-cream.
The half-clothed recklessness
in sedgy grass; ignoring a child's bike
propped against the side of a hedge.

She remembers every apple ripe
for strong cider; dried hop-heads that whispered
in the doorway by bags of dead bees.
Almost anything seemed possible; she could
lead you on with a ball of yarn. Her thighs
still ache to grip your centaur's back and

she imagines a last mad dash to freedom
but something has died in the core of her heart.
The chambers are empty. In sleep she walks
in the garden from where summer has bolted,
talks to herself about the despair of doves,
the wren's fun-size nest in the ivy.

Your hair changed from black as her father's
eyes to the wolf of winter and she watched
your wife grow old. She stayed; respected
your deepest fear but now this year has buried
the skittering girl who needed obsession:
a bloodied bedroom, blown yellow roses.

She no longer wants the rights to you;
she has flung soil onto her empty casket,
engraved a constellation of words on a stone.
The world is on its knees, the red trees will arrive
to set the orchard on fire and burn entire cities.
Read the stars; the words. Every one of them is hers.

Plain thoughts

I know a man who solemnly states
that every right-minded man in the room
will look at his wife and experience desire.
She must not call a cab with a male driver.
He, must fetch her from lunch with the girls.

She is not allowed to walk down the towpath
alone in daylight, nor holiday with her friends.
Did he think we would get her into trouble?
For fuck's sake, it was just shopping and bubbles
not a frenzy of female lust for the pool guy.

He buys her Louboutin's, bound-feet tiny
and likes that she fights so hard to stay skinny,
despite the battle lines drawn on her sixty-year-old face.
Does he think size eight is small enough?
Her legs are slender as a filly, shaky as a foal.

He says to me 'your hair looks lovely'
when I've been to the salon. *I look and see*
you are trying he thinks, patronisingly.
His hair, grew long in lockdown; he pushes
his shades onto his head. There is a hint of curl.

He hugs ancient stones, picks litter from beaches
and visits the war graves in Ypres every year.
His wife is afraid when he's away; in a world
full of predators, she is the problem.
Men want her. And who could blame them?

I need to say to this man: hold on, your wife
is great; her friends love her to her bones
but mostly she is just as invisible as the rest
of us crones. I want to state my plain thoughts:
that women are mostly abused in the home.
Victims almost always know their rapist:
a friend, a friend of a friend, a husband.

Canal No. 5

I see him by the cut always
with his white lone wolf of a dog.
I try to stay leeward, and to avoid

the rheumy eyes that seek someone;
in a moment he's gone, his greasy coat
and mutterings the marks of an outsider.

He wears no buds in his ears;
thinks he hears the footfall of spiders
and the velvet snuffles of moles in the earth.

In fearless female times I pounded
the towpath in Nike Air Flow;
my Christ, was that fifteen years ago, when

he was living in a cellar under Alfie's butchers?
Someone said he was rich until that bitch
of a wife took him to the cleaners.

I ran in winter with sleet on my lashes;
in summer I churned up the new-laid paths
where sparrows bathed in the dust and a mute swan

clamoured its wings in warning.
In a sun-trapped beer garden shaded by lilac,
I drank cider and saw him slumped on a pine table:

part of the furniture. Rumour had it
that he had been a really hot guy, and owned
a farm high on the hill, close to the water mill,

where it had its own micro-climate.
I gave him drink money a few years ago;
that's how it was sometimes. He lives in a bed-sit,

with a landlord who one day left a note
on my campervan, asking me to call him
and discuss the myth and mystery of hares.

Now I'm no longer running but trying
to escape; not waving but drowning in gin.
I wear Jo Malone, and use my card to get out of jail

but it only takes the spin of a coin in moonlight,
a roll of dice on a warm wooden table,
for the world to change immeasurably.

Lighten our darkness

Judgement 2. On a woman of words

I don't let him
take my words;
would the Earth
sacrifice her moon?
I force his head up
to see the dusty footprints
of male astronauts.

Words are witchcraft.

I am the agnate sibling
who grew up alone
but for borrowed books,
and purloined pen and paper.

He has a plethora of words
but almost no-body listens.
They are opinions, not poetry.

Words….

are witchcraft,
and I am judged
on words that are
like a familiar to me.

He has a knotted cord,
FIRE,
a knife to rip out my heart.

I am Joan of Arc.

He loathes the colour
of blood and blushes,
of my hair. So, I laugh
and stain it cyan shades:
teal, turquoise, electric blue.

A witch may produce no child

Perhaps she is just too selfish, or vain or with
her cards and her creatures just too strange.

Rumours are that her eyes are the colour of rose gold
and barely tolerate the light; she has a familiar

who mouths a silent miaow. She will predict
the time when the swifts do not return from Africa.

That's what they say.

A witch may produce no child; she embraces
that emptiness within her, unfettered from

the pull of opinion; she finds a way to live that
needs little sorcery, and a pact with only herself.

She conjures words somewhere between truth
and imagination; sits quietly in churchyards

licking a toad or the bark of a yew tree, and
attends Mass for its dark theatre and mystery.

That's what they say.

A witch walks up a hill with purpose, collecting
bones of dead animals to carve and wrap in skin;

says upon hearing of a miscarriage *that's what
happens in war* then waits until the stars come out.

A witch may produce no child, but leap to freedom
before pushed into promises she can never keep.

A witch has the power of self; she has been put
to death a thousand times and returns like bush-fire.

That's what they say, the men.

The title is a partial line from Elizabeth Willis' poem 'The Witch' in *Address* (2011, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press)

I imagined a fire

lit deep in a cave,
the air, tight through
lack of oxygen.
I imagined how
I brought him there
to experience this
hallucinogen
to understand how

I created the end
of a day decaying
inside a stone church,
the glow of bastard amber.
He remembered
a show of shadows,
a comical cat,
the gaping vulva
of a Sheela-na-gig.

I imagined the bones
of a discarded life
hidden with the Host
behind the aumbry light.
He is a priest, a confessor,
a man who relishes
the discomfort of others
with a barely visible
curl of the lip.

I imagined the bones
of an underland cavern,
the drip of time made solid
and yet so fragile; a time
owned by the women
I could only dream of being.

He would swim towards me
down a sleek black river
and I could catch his head
between my thighs,
pulp his bright brain
and leave him
forever in the darkness.

Take me to out into the light

I drive on roads through mountains
that glow in the sun, buy an Indalo Man
for protection. I peer through chicken-net

with my camera in Bédar and an old man
shakes a fist at me; a depleted piñata hangs
from a tree beside eyeless dolls to scare the birds.

I walk into the water until the sea is soundless,
feel the brush of frond and fish. I'm sightless.
I believe, before we die we lose all vision,

claw the air to grasp at something we think we see,
or don't. But I push on up to the surface until
the waiting sun blinds me. Blinds us all, eventually.

'Take me out into the light' – reportedly the death-bed words of Lou Reed

The essential absence of light

This is a special kind of loneliness: a sentencing of sorts.
Lockdown but with no excuse for drinking every day, nor
hiding away. You had cancer: that was twenty years ago.

This illness is insidious, it is an harassment. We are isolated
in plain sight. You negotiate an entrance to the GP. He pushes
you toward a revolving door of specialists. Finally, you pay.

The year is coming to an end and the sun stands still; we suffer.
You sleep late; you sleep in the afternoon and after supper.
I wake early to empty trees, the waning moon a thin thread.

The lovely Carol says there may be sunshine later,
but for now a black smudge of cloud rests on the rooftops.
A lone bird sings a diminished chord as mid-winter seeps in.

Last night in bed your feet were like ice; you, the aggressor
in thermostat wars; that man who wears shorts into November.
What was it worth, our break in the sun and tiring flight?

In Corralejo, I realised that nothing would ever be the same.
Your pain, the choking on food; your refusal to swim, afraid
to jump in and flirt with the high-rolling surf and her salty tongue.

You will never kiss me on the mouth again; a foul saliva constantly
collects in your throat and you are coughing, coughing, coughing.
You are told how to avoid a too-early death and then dismissed.

Some things which matter to me are of little concern to you:
candle-light and dancing, *spaghetti vongole* and chilled Chablis;
now, you can barely swallow, and I hide a flicker of disgust.

As the moon's filament fades, I watch a flock of crows
with an early nesting instinct as they fly into their future. I lit
the tree but forgot to burn beeswax on St. Lucy's night for luck.

The thought of roast goose makes my stomach loosen yet I shop at 7am
for *festive fayre.* Outside the store looking in, watching the weary staff,
I am trying to fulfil futile expectations. It is still dark, and I don't know myself.

'…And there is darkness itself, the essential absence of light, that must only wait its time to expire'
Rabbi Tzvi Freeman

Existence

I am sick of warm days without sun,
too much rain, too much mid-May wine
and of the wall in the next garden with
its pink hue like a ghost of sunlight; sick
of the neighbour's big white cat perched
high upon our rockery like a Rhodes statue.

We pollarded two trees last year but they
won't take no for an answer. The clematis
above the bench has died over winter without
explanation, but a creamy thread of itself
has spread through the dark green leaves
of the butterfly bush, *Buddleia Globosa.*

Today I nagged at you to clean out the tube
you use to clear your airway; Jeez, I said
do you really want an infection on your chest?
My request was met and now the tube hangs
from the washing-line like a lone intestine.

I close my eyes to better hear the birds sing;
the breeze sets off the wind-chimes and when
I look up, an early half-moon has appeared
surreptitiously from behind the clouds of evening.
I smile at my crepuscular cats, vigilant, on watch

for prowlers but they are all fur coat and no balls,
imposters like me as I struggle to be both carer
and scholar, lover and fighter. You say I sow
weeds in this garden; I call them wild-flowers.
Sometimes lives need to be where they don't belong.

The Dublin Tetralogy

Maman

with reference to 'Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird' by Frida Kahlo

Here is Maman, lush as a mermaid,
green eyed in her sea-silk kimono;

and Daddy with the black brow bequeathed
to my sister – I call her Frida Kahlo;

she thinks it's a compliment - ugly cow.

As Maman slips away upstairs, Daddy puts his hand
on her bottom: it is firm as a just-ripe apricot.

'Will ye look what I've got.' I can hear his voice:
uncured of the city, shore fast to the Liffey, black,

so black that pool; dark stranger, I am hard with rage.

My Maman: South-Sea pearls, her costly perfume a waft of sex.
She kisses my cheek; I nuzzle her neck, and she laughs

'*Vilain garçon!*' She stoops, stares at my bare feet on the parquet,
'*Sailor boy, you are on land now chéri*' Her breasts are free inside her dress.

And here is Daddy, an eejit millionaire as he'd say himself.

Frida sits in the corner, swarthy as a mariner; a rigid
protector on the bowsprit but she is not one for the sea,

to embrace the notion of *le voyage.* For this she hates me,

says I am a flâneur of the ocean. Frida hides in an alcove,
watches me wordlessly; I imagine the hummingbird, the monkey,

the black cat at her shoulder as she plays at being the artist who painted
herself over and over again. She dreams of a necklace that brings her pain;

I loathe her naked mouth and blood-stained skin.

Maman's lips are strawberries, dark for the picking and ripe
for black pepper. Later, she kisses me goodnight and smooths

the thin sheet that covers me, until my mouth is dry. The sky
is hot with storm and suddenly I crave soft rain and thorns,

but there is a scent of strawberries, sea pinks and wild shores.

To My daughter

She paints, though never her face which sadly
so mimics mine, her Daidí: the past poverties
and black brow. She leads me into her canvas
of silent silvery birches, a footpath that ushers
the unseen towards white bone-bitten churches;
because, says she, white is the colour of death.

She's brought in a street-cat; a skinny black moggy
full to the brim with kittens. It sits on her shoulder
like a feckin' familiar, in the room she wanted
because it lets the light in. There, says she, I'll sit
and daub the dawn: a halo of grey, a scaly sky
of mineral colours; a warship wading through fog.

She creates gaudy sunsets as a disturbed child might;
her analyst worries, but that stuff is all a load of shite.
It's her mother that's as mad as a box of frogs
but a savage looking woman and so, that's us,
and it makes me laugh the way our boy dotes on her;
Who does he think he is? Feckin' Oedipus?

To my husband Ó Dubhghaill

You who spoke no French, and I who spoke no Gaelic
used the *lingua franca* to make polite chat,
but a spark, a heat was in the air we both knew that;
sex was sudden, language forgotten, love came quickly.

You and I adore champagne and hot southern nights
when you pin me to our cabin door and fuck me;
outside the fire-cracker stars bend over the sea
and I am a pale moth with wings spread like a kite.

There were those who whispered that you were ‘filthy rich,’
businessman savant with low cunning and morals;
but amongst the piranhas and toxic corals
you have learned to flatter and shine; I, to bewitch.

To my Daddy concerning your children

How Ma does love your son, with his dark-stranger eyes
and brutal, beautiful lips that are so like yours.
His fine features and fair skin are from her of course;
he lands at parties and feels the temperature rise.

Your son thinks I am ugly, that I look like you:
unfeminine, engaged in cos-play with Kahlo.
He, who sails deep oceans yet remains so shallow,
his lust for Ma, repugnant, hides in plain view.

Your son, my brother, says I am a loser, a lone wolf
who sees the world and paints it as something other.
He is *dégoûtant*, but not it seems to our mother
who pities me; between us there is a rift, a gulf.

I am not like my brother's women, pretty girls
he catches and then gobbles down, like owl and vole;
grazes on them like olives and cheese, so controlled,
so cold. Why would I want to be part of that world

where our mother believes I should be? Oh yes, she
has but one ambition for her sad, ugly daughter:
to find her a man, but I have kicked back, fought her,
I have other plans, and none are to marry.

If I decide to wear lipstick, it will be *rouge-noir*.
If I dress to kill I shall be Marie-Antoinette, despotic.
I will keep my paints; they mask me as erotic,
and in that dark pallet lies the path to power.

I'll meet a man in St Ives or the Islands of Cork;
a woman in Sozopol, beneath its clarified light.
My black Madonna will sit with me at night
and rub her soft scent against my cheek as I work.

How it was

Bert and Betty
1960's slum clearances, Liverpool

Beneath his cheap suit was a body thinner
than a racing snake; he could dislocate his jaw,
swallow a pint in one, and discard decisions:
inner-city high-rise or house in Cannibal Farm.

She said let's move. It was nearer to work,
where she travelled three mornings a week
on a fugged and febrile bus, to a windowless
world of workers in overalls and hair-nets.

After four children, the slender young girl
with auburn curls was gone. A pinny
had replaced dance shoes and diamante;
her face was a mountain of weariness.

Her husband crossed his bony legs
and lit a roll-up; from his ankles dangled
feet so large it was a wonder they held.
He sucked on tobacco like a fish drawing

oxygen from water, cheek bones honed knives.
He liked fried eggs, and fish suppers on Fridays;
she lived on chip butties and money-worries,
the disparity of her pay. Alongside the men

she packed processed slices, creamy triangles
and red-wrapped blocks of 'cheese for crackers'
they could buy cheap. He said: *You're getting fat.*
It's all that Dairylea. It was chuck steak for Bert,

who drove vans, fixed pick-ups, and biked
to work to transport crates on flat-back Fords.
New-town industries would end his freedoms:
an ale-house on every corner, blacked-out shops

where he could place a bet, long odds, each-way.
He called his wife fatty-betty, and his daughter's
fella 'Ted' although his real name was Edwin:
CEO from Hale Village who owned a gabled house.

Not meant as insults, like; it was simply how Bert
saw the world. His daughter saw herself in that
gabled house and garden. Betty, too tired to care,
sat on red vinyl with half of lager, her eyes closed.

'Cannibal Farm' was a sobriquet for the Cantril Farm Housing Estate, now called Stockbridge Village

The rituals of femininity

There's nothing new under the sun
or between a woman's legs, even if
she's really a child; turned eleven
mid-summer, menstruating by Christmas.
Shit my mother might have said,
my daughter's much too young for this.

And me, who hardly knew one
end of a fella from the other,
self-conscious in a Teen-Form bra.
Mam had to tell my dad because
you know, money. Embarrassing.

Bulky towels and belts.
Torn-up sheets and safety pins.
Tampons were only for girls
who'd had it off, so Mam refused
to buy them. Rags washed, re-used,
because, you know, money.

How silent we girls were, about
the bloody rituals of femininity.
How we whispered in the pharmacy
the dark secret of our necessities.
The corner shop hid Dr. White
in the back, or amongst the baby stuff.

There's nothing new under the sun,
or the cycle of the moon, or the way
I wanted to howl at that tumefied goddess,
in fear of my own body, my own womb.

Sorry, not sorry

My friend's Aunty Lil had a Rainbow Wedding.
It was all about the flower girls, four of them:
my freckled friend in powder blue, her blonde sister,
baby pink; a pallid girl looked grim dressed in lemon;
the unfortunate teen, acne-dappled in apple green.

The bride wore shining white, of course;
her skinny groom with his huge Adam's apple
bobbing like the head of a nervous horse.

The sixties became a decade of weddings,
viz pre-nuptial sex and low-grade contraception.
I was often a bridesmaid in apricot and ribbons,
or creamy lace confections trimmed with velvet.
The women would bet on seventh-month babies.

Carol and John: a side-altar job arranged in haste.
His brother Billy blamed her, and sniggered
that *Catholic girls never wore any knickers.*

My cousin had a respectable space between
Big Day and first baby. By the time I was twenty
that cousin and his missus had half-a-dozen.
Not another! I said. Just as you were on your feet!
That's life, he replied, *And that's lovin'.*

I was told to dream of That Day yet as I watched
how confetti and hope drifted away, one child
became five, and fathers eyed-up their daughter's
teenage friends. Worn-down mothers with stained teeth
placed babies in cots, with only newspaper beneath
their near-naked bodies until the nappies dried.

Mrs. B., once so pretty with her handsome husband,
her lipstick and powder on Saturday night; a petite,
bright woman, dimmed with years of making ends meet;
the wash-house on Mondays and fish-on-Fridays.

My mother bought me a doll and I scrawled blue Biro
across its chubby baby face. She probably itched
to give me a slap but she just sighed: one day I'd meet
a man and change my mind. Sorry, Mam. Not sorry.

Ménage à Trois
A progeny's view

We all know what happens
when there are three adults
in a marriage. Oh Aunty,
how you controlled my mother,
how you hated my father
and spent your days smoking,
provoking, pouring poison
and tea. Words from thick, red
lips into a child's ears, unchecked.

I call it a marriage of three
but Aunty you soon disappeared
when Dad came home; that man
who made me promises and always
broke them and Aunty I cried
and told you everything.

Aunty, you and Mam both knew
the pain of Dad's childhood;
how his mother died young and
his father left and went back to sea.

You knew of his war in France;
Belgium: the barn where they
sheltered him. Winter in Norway,
Berlin falling, witnessing the final days.

All of you, hiding his son from me:
my half-brother. It was the past, see.
All of you living in a zone of secrets,
but words slip out, and a quiet child
hears; a quiet child listens, questions.

This is what happens when there
are three adults in a marriage.
A child will look for love wherever
it seems to live. I'll never know
if my father loved me. Seriously.
He wasn't a monster but sometimes
he got drunk and smashed things;
I get that. The self-destruct button,
the nuclear options I can't resist.

Mam, one day you told me how stupid
you had been, but your sister was dead by then.
Dad, why did you never intervene?

A spring wedding 1963

Cousin Maria chose pale flowers
for her wedding day,
conscious of the coffins
in rows of barely-heated houses
and the ground in the churchyard
almost too hard for digging.

When Maria married more snow fell,
its purity soiling the hem of her gown.
I held up her lace as she picked her way
in kitten heels across the slick paving.
In the stripped-out trees, noisy rooks
carried sticks for their nesting.

That morning, Mam's hands
numb and cold with rheumatic pain
had raked the coals in the grate,
still-hot under soft grey ashes.
At the breakfast Mam held steel
cutlery, her fingers burnt: agony.

I played with a dead animal
draped around my aunt's
crêpe neck and faux pearls,
stroking its tiny head and paws,
bored and restless to be home.
In the end my aunty said
if I didn't leave her alone
she'd floor me.

The photographer came later,
the light now a cold pink diamond.
Down from the church heights,
our river ran into the Irish Sea;
iced-up, the worst in twenty years.
I shivered in my crochet dress,
my cousin radiant with chapped cheeks;
her husband pawed the frozen ground,
horny and restless as a minotaur.

Passed

He could pass for a creature that spent
its life underground, hump-backed from
weight of a sack, his thick legs bowed.

I don't know how old he was back then;
his blackened face a mask that hid age
and prosperity, an old donkey jacket

and flat cap filthy with dust from a load
carried down our back-yard, and emptied
in the corner below a rusted iron sheet.

In a ragged notebook he'd record deliveries,
and had a bag made of hide that was heavy
with coins and the odd ten-shilling note.

At dinner-time Mam made him a mug
of tea and he'd eat his butties from a white
hanky, sitting in his wagon, crunching grit.

The coal-man gave me half a crown
when I passed the eleven plus. Mam must have
told him, but otherwise there was little fuss.

I didn't know that she and Dad sat up late
to discuss the question of money. The uniform;
a leather satchel I grew to hate and swapped

for a plastic hold-all stencilled *Everton F.C.*
A summer dress worn once; beret, discarded.
My straw boater tossed into the river for the craic.

Yet I remember how I felt, with the coal-man's money
in my pocket because I'd passed. Were my parents proud
of me? They never said and I never thought to ask.

Christmas morning Mass

I had not yet put my glasses on: haste, or vanity,
and saw the altar as a haze of gold and glamours,
the candle-light swimming in my myopic sight.

The transepts were filled with out-of-season lilies
and their heady perfume; I thought, ungraciously,
'they must have cost a fortune' and adjusted my vision

as the priest made his entrance in shining white.
We celebrate His birth, almost as beautiful as His death.
My vision was clear, a sharp and stark relief of seeing

that stripped away the power of incense and flowers,
the altar-boys tinkling bells of transubstantiation.
How do they sense when the alchemy happens?

Faith is a mystery; like a single fish to feed five thousand
and water made into wine. Wine into blood, bread into flesh.
A man is at the altar-rail, the host shining in his hands.

As I watched you Father, stitched into your riches, I recalled
how you denounced girls who had abortions; how you stood
in the pulpit, face contorted and spat out *the bitches!*

And I thought of what it meant, really, to be a woman;
to make decisions between a rock and a hard place, to be alone.

Sunday

A Satdee-night
girl could dance
until three back then,
if she had enough
pernod'n'black
down her neck.
Sticky carpets,
sticky lips, then
back stood behind
the bar for 12pm
on Sunday.
She would watch
his hands shake
as he held
his half-pint glass
for the first sip
from the pump.

Closing time,
2pm on Sundays
the streets
are emptied.
Some went
underground
to a shebeen.
She heard Mass
in an old
porn cinema.

At an altar where
hard-core movies
had played,
the host was
placed on
her tongue,
the priest's
fingers wet
from other mouths.
and confession
was well overdue.

How it is

What I am today

Today, I am an old cabin
in a winter woodland.
Stay away.

The leaves have long since
changed colour and fallen.
It is a grieving.

Today, I am a rain-swollen door
overgrown with creepers.
Stay away.

I have no idea about future years
except the wooden step
will rot some more.

My rippled bitumen is stained
with age. I am bad
for the environment.

Today, I am lonely. Abandoned.
I am an old cabin in woodland.
Stay away.

My windows are broken. I suggest
you don’t look through the glass
and point and peer.

Today I am derelict; filled with dust,
empty bottles and sharp edges.
Stay away.

Judgement 3. On Scouse shoppers

A bottle of *The Dead Arm Shiraz* in a shop
where there's seldom much to excite the critics.
I will devour it with a slow-roast neck-fillet of lamb,
which was once a cheap cut. I curse; the cost has risen
since last week. Oh, he's heard me speak: Security.

He follows me around as I balance prices against
that sinful Shiraz, seeking fiscal atonement. I look
at stuff for long time and ooh, the Gü puddings
are on offer. He's there as I grab garlic and cat food.
When I get to the door they are waiting, mob-handed:

a manager with a clipboard and two ersatz bizzies.
I've lived in the Midlands for years; in this town,
where the *ancien régime* has ruled for too long.
He checks my receipt against every item; all fine.
That expensive wine didn't pair with my accent.

Carpe Noctem

I watched. She always went out late at night.
Sneaked out; not like anyone gives a shit.
It was cold. The wind was up, straight off the river;
a moon rising, filthy red, like old, cheap brick.
Three men in a car. I bit my lip until it bled.

I've been to town, where the fellas are,
she said. They give you a good feed.
Macky D's, chips. Maybe pizza.
An' they got some boss weed.

I sometimes look at the houses at the back,
with gardens, and trees where birds feed.
I hope they get what they need in this hard
hollowed-out winter. The people who put
out the fat-balls do not like our presence here.

Yeh, right, I'd said. You don't get all that
shit for nothing. What do they want?
'Cos they want fuckin' something.
Honest-to-God, Myla. You're a cunt.

What! They're loaded, we drink vodka.
And you wanna see their friggin' cars.
Like, Mercs, they are. Yeh, I'd said.
Wait 'til they wanna fuck you up the arse.

I feed the swans in the park with stale bread.
Duck therapy. Then the sea-gulls come
like they did last spring and attacked
the nest and grabbed the baby cygnets.
That's life though; nature, isn't it.

Listen! She'd said. They're ripped, soft girl.
And I'm only with one. James he says his
name is. His dad owns that kebab shop,
'Flames'. He says he works for his family.
Tell you what, Caz, it must be good money.

When she got back, she staggered into
my room; there was a bit of light coming
through the blinds. Her eyes looked funny.
She was bruised, bleeding, her face cut.
He called me a fucking whore. A Scouse slut.

Asking for it

I ran down riverbanks
in autumn evenings;
watched in quiet wonder
the murmuration of starlings
at dusk. I climbed atop
Glastonbury Tor alone
at sunrise in summer and
saw a Little Owl perched
on a fence post: yellow-eyed,
no bigger than a song thrush.

I was no she-wolf who
required a silver bullet.
Yet then I heard the voices
of the incels, echoes
in the webbing dark.
I was no black widow spider,
bigger and shinier than her mate.
I didn't need to be crushed.

Suddenly those men
seemed to be everywhere.
Disguised as saviours,
raising their hammers,
fists, batons, because
I was just asking for it;
asking to die.

I was just a woman.
I was just walking home.

Masculine pride

When I tell you that our doorbell no longer chimes,
you shrug and bugger off to the football. I am
saddened by the sight of the old protruding wires
that no longer connect, and install a blue-tooth bell
that requires no traditional skills. It has a choice
of many ringtones, and three volumes. I set it
to a cockerel's crow: *Cock a Doodle-Do*. Loudly.
I hope for once I can make you smile.

Waiting for The Man

Yesterday we had time for a Costa;
the M6 was kind, only ninety minutes
to drive forty miles of motorway.

You tried talking with your Dr. Who box,
and I found myself laughing: asking if you
had experimented with nagging and shouting,

and complaining about the cats. It was
your turn to laugh and you spat out
brown liquid onto your clean shirt.

C'mon, you gestured, time to see The Man,
and, Madam, when he looks down my throat
don't start staring at his public-school arse.

Listen, I said, you can take the girl out of Everton
but you can't make her *middle-claaaass*.
You mouthed that I did the same with the last one,

that little guy, twenty years ago, and so stop
trying to be clever. Ah yes, I said, I remember him;
small, dark and beautifully put together.

We both smiled. *Okay*, I said, *Sorry!* by way
of an apology. *We'll avoid hospitals; you know*
I have a thing about men who practice oncology.

A Dr. Who box is the medical slang for an electro-larynx

Today I am

one of many snails silvering a log
after a night of rain; my shining shell
beautiful as a pebble under water.

Today I have a longing tangible as the taste
of your mouth, shivery as a forbidden kiss,
a memory made in the deep silence of dunes.

Today I am escaping the chrysalis;
wings wet and vulnerable, soon I will fly
to a life so brief, so brilliant in its colours.

Today I am the calico cat stretched out
in a sanctuary of sunlight; I am a hare who will
only ever gaze on the beneficent lamp of the moon.

Today I am the chauffeur who would have driven
Diana safely out of the underpass because
two young boys should not lose their mother.

Instead, I drive back from Birmingham,
and smile at my last-century memories of
striding the city on the arm of a box-fresh man.

Today I am a mirror of souls; resistant, independent.
I am a sister of the *beguinage,* welcoming heretics
and women in flight from their shackled existence.

Yesterday I found the unexpected; a green place
of peace, apple trees in blossom; but winter was stubborn.
The breeze felt stiff and cold, the frost undefeated.

Some days, I almost wish I was back in first lock-down;
a hot spring of excuses for wine and fire-pit suppers,
and other people making all the decisions.

Sex, lies and mobile phones

One hundred thousand knives
Inspired by 'The Knife Angel' contemporary sculpture by Alfie Bradley

His face is familiar to me, as if he
had once grasped my hair. Exposed
to wind and weather, salt-dirty air,
the refection of light on water

leaves his skin sun-struck
before March is out: tanned,
brown as a sweet Leccino olive,
his chin dark-smudged by evening.

He sometimes feels a weight of guilt;
his eyes shadowed as an alleyway,
and heavy brows drawn down
tight, perplexed. He is no longer

a young man, but his lips are savage
and pursed with some kind of promise
he will fulfil in the full of afternoons.
His black hair is now the silver pelt

of a long-dead animal; it is shocking
as his flightless wings, motionless
in the late light; streetlight, river-light,
an ocean of candles at his feet.

This is what he has become made:
one hundred thousand blades
each one remembering the red ripeness.

Supper

We sat in a café, and I ate mussels
cooked in wine and wild garlic
with a touch of cream.
I scooped up the sauce with a shell
and let it trickle into my mouth;
my tongue loosened the soft muscle,
sweet and salty as dreams.

I mopped up the plain blue pot
with a warm baguette, and drank
an old a Venetian white that left
the taste of slate in my throat.

You devoured rare *steak frites;*
man food, you said. I swallowed
the last of my bread, my hand on yours.
Oh yes, you enjoyed the taste of flesh.

I heard you sigh when you touched
the bare skin on my back, like you
had been given a rare gift. I loved that
you held my cold hand in your pocket

when I took you to the river to see
the early sun, hazy in the mists of January;
the hulk of container ships on the horizon,
the white feather of a sea-bird in the wind.

Last night I dreamt your wife had died.
It did not make me happy, and I text you
to make sure all was well. Perhaps it means
that I really did love you. That I still do.

Woman, spellbound

We danced. I stroked your arm,
the hard warmth of a rock
that has soaked-in the sun,
the sinews of a fisherman,
and thought of how a fresh catch
smells of nothing but the ocean.

Yes, your maned hair was grey,
but your body quick as a rip-tide,
strong from boats and ropes;
I ignored your reptile shadow,
clung to you as your iguana tongue
flicked out to taste my world.

We grilled and ate the octopus
you had speared and then smashed
against the dark jagged reefs.
The moon slid out from its hiding-place
of clouds and caught me in its jaded light.

I thought you were part of Time;
a man who had witnessed the
constellations move hemispheres,
listened as the waves shaped pebbles;
but you put stones in my pockets
and watched me walk into the sea.

Blister in the sun
*With thanks to '**Violent Femmes**'*

There is un-ripened fruit on banana trees
and warm rain, when today Santa arrives
to distribute chocolates. I throw breadcrumbs
to the birds pecking under faded screw-pines
that have made themselves at home here,
their alien seedpods washed-in from Oceania.

I am fresh from lying in the sun, a radiant world
that could kill you. I wallowed in seas you cannot
dip into, and pointlessly photograph my sunglasses
set next to a flute of prosecco, to be posted on Insta.
Late afternoon, I leave you in shade by the pool
and find a cool-breezed bar where I can sit.

I am half-sunlit, half a couple, and some people stare,
unaware of the truth hiding behind designer sunnies,
a glass of wine and a meaningful book. I don't need
to talk; I have grown used to long silences since
your voice was taken away to save your life.

I watch the quiet middle-aged coffee drinkers
with cake and no conversation. The young are in bed
and in love; I am old and my second *Vino Rosado*
is the pale, cold colour of introspection. I am alone.
It is the best time of the day.

Oh, Cuba
With love to the jineteras

In the beach-shack shade, jineteras chain-smoked,
teasing rookie policemen with their beauty, kissing
gold crosses the boys had worn from their baptism.

Ramon tended bar; sat with a smooth coconut
the size of a skull balanced on his bare legs and
slashed off the top with a machete; he fetched ice

as the clouds came in braced by thunder and electricity.
Ramon shrugged and smiled; said *No rain today lady.*
He mixed pineapple with potent rum and husky milk
and slipped me a blunt to mark my fortieth.

A young local guy rumbled over: *You alone lady?*
You want company? I flashed my wedding band;
he flapped his hand, and grinned with a glint of gold:
No good then. Us women laughed; we understood men.

Jineteras: trans. 'jockey' Cuban slang for female sex-workers

Nothing

I sat crying
on the stairs
on the train
I woke again
and before my feet
had even touched
the bedroom floor
I was already
silently weeping.

You lay sleeping
I didn't think
of you
but of him
He never lied
about the women
who tried
to keep him
fast to them
with children
he abandoned.

I felt no sorrow
for them
or you who
stood by me
and knew part of me
was broken.
Regret takes
many paths
of course,
it was years
until I felt remorse
and for when
I saw him
to feel nothing.

Days of Zeus

Night-flowers creep across a white-washed wall,
opening themselves up as the evening star appears,
bright as Bethlehem. That's where he has her.

And maybe it is too much wine, distilled in flasks
lined with the resin from pine-trees. Maybe it is
too much sun that turns her head and shutters her eyes.

She loses her shoes somewhere but has in return
a real coral choker, cream and tinged with pink.
Time melts here, and there is nothing to think about

except the music he plays every time she walks
out into the night's beginning. Sometimes she eats
elsewhere and tells him how good the fish is there

and how every dish is so fresh from the ocean,
even though year on year the stocks deplete.
A fine plate of prawns, too, grilled and juicy:

he is jealous in small matters such as these.
Time empties away here; the heat makes cold
marble floors seem almost soft beneath their bodies,

and later she sleeps in nothing but white panties
that show off her hard-won sun-tanned skin.
An engine roars outside as the sky lightens.

She laughs with her friends that they should have
taken better care of her, and they give her the side-eye.
After all, she goes back for more; leaps into the salt-pool

in ecstasy each morning, a sacrifice for the gods.
Or maybe a cleansing. In late-afternoon she plucks
a lemon from a tree in the garden, its trunk painted

to warn that the fruit is poisonous. She waves away
her friends fuss and says *It's just to stop us from*
stealing them. She makes vodka-tonic and adds a slice.

Menopause moon

Shropshire Wassail
(March 2022)

We stood outside and drank English wine,
and watched a full, dust-orange moon
rise at the end of a darkening lane.

Bats scattered from the roost, fragmenting
the last of the light. I forgot the talk of war
on everybody's lips, and I worried over you;

because after our mulled cider and dancing,
the sun falling over the Welsh hills,
I noticed your pensive mouth.

As the air chilled your husband
built a fire, where we sat on stumps
of sawn-off logs in our green gowns

and jackets made of ragged rhymes.
Your celebrant face showed the lines
of life starkly. I wondered if the curse

and cause was your father, or the anxiety
that strikes us women in middle age
but never seems to fade as we do.

Arm in arm in our verdant clothes and tatters,
we walked to fetch branches of fallen oak.
The days had been warm; daffodils swarmed

yellow as fresh-cracked yolk, edging
fields full of black Jacob lambs, bleating
with wonder at their strange new world.

Note: Wassails are traditionally held in mid-winter, but Covid variants intervened

White chocolate mice

are what the bloody kids
demand every day after supper
not milky brown or dark
they are not sweet enough

I've told the stupid sprogs
they will ruin their teeth
on those pallid mammals
with their sugar eyes

Even the cat sniffs at
souris en chocolat blanc
le chat ne veut pas
les manger

When the little wretches want
satisfying sibling revenge
white chocolate mice
are the witches in their wars

On to the fire they go
into the wood burner
melting like a memory
un camembert au four

They are white all through
no blood no heart
tout es blanc as the fire
devours them

eyes sparking like pink
popping candy there is
a sickly smell of spilt milk
no use bloody crying I say

Meet me where the owls call

she said; so he left his fire-tending
and house with orchards and barns
to meet her; down a winding lane,
under the turn and twist of the stars.

Owls gave out their tawny trembling:
call and response, call and response, and
his talk was hypnotic to her eager ears:
trauma, memories, flashbacks; the concealed

cries of the countryside gave weight to his
words. She listened, longing for unsanctioned
love. Moonlight revealed the white faces of
barn-owls with their wise, unmoving eyes.

He talked of how his mother howled to God,
his lost children, the anguish of the stars as
they arch their backs across the mute, dark sky.
He is a ragged border-man in black-face dancing

as the bastons clash, and bells jangle like
thirty pieces of silver. She looks up at him,
her saviour; she an ageing Magdalena at his feet.
He forgets the woman who is tending a fire, alone.

An owl calls thrice; night-crawling boughs shiver,
the hedgerows whisper. The black-face he wears
is a disguise; *a man like me should be home,* he says,
and fucks his Magdalena under the cover of mercy.

Woman, overwhelmed

Two lofts filled with the burden of forty years.
The weight of *The Times* in print seven days a week.
Three cat trays that reek. The smeared mirrors that
are utterly unforgiving. I'm glad they can't speak.

Everything and everyone is leaning on me;
my post-op husband, the rooms that are screaming:
I need cleaning cleaning cleaning.
No time. The house is burying me alive.

My sister-in-law, on WhatsApp for an hour.
I get her concern, but she never learns that
some questions cannot be answered; there is
only the unknown. *Mann Tracht, Un Gott Lacht.*

I have quietly disposed of some chipped crockery.
My friend comes over and clears the utility room,
deploys a scorched-earth policy. And I've never heard
the last of it. My vanquished man, bereft of his hoard,

can't see the rooms closing in on me, won't admit that
the garden has rewilded and ivy crawls up the windows;
ceilings press down on my head and cupboards threaten
to explode. My old car squats on the drive and pisses oil.

The cats need food and fuss and I am the only one
who cares. I am becoming like the Hikikomori,
sitting at a lap-top with a bowl of noodles desperate
to ignore the suffocating clamour beyond the study door.

The last bottle

of booze in the house is a litre
of *Ricard pastis;* twenty years old
at least but still tingling with the
flavours of Marseille. Or so I say.

Tomorrow, or as it is now, today,
it will be poured down the sink.
A regular order of posh tonic has
been cancelled; I'm no alcoholic.

G and T, never before six, seldom later:
by then I'm ready for that fix. And him,
off to the pub for three pints of Tragedy.
Tonight, I made a lush chicken dinner

because I can still cook and look after
him and my three cats who every day
save my life. I still write. Look at
Bukowski or Dylan Thomas. Or don't.

Hung-over at thirty, I could still look
sexy/dirty with a suntan and last night's
make-up pretty much intact. The fact is
I'm sixty-eight; so, not such a great look.

I don't want to totally give up a white
Rioja with my sea-food platter,
and do you even *know* what a drop
of Pernod can add to a prawn risotto?

How can I watch the sun go down
in Ibiza without the mint/lime/rum hit
of a mojito? A sip of pool-side pink as
I apply lipstick for a night at the beach bar?

It's gone too far.

I'm stressed, not living in a war zone.
My husband is alive if not exactly
kicking. I have friends although one
of them has lately become frickin' weird.

It's as I feared. I'm on the London Eye,
high above a city sky-line that is both
ridiculous and sublime, and I seek-out
a drink that looks like a glass full of stars.

But it’s gone too far, and now it feels like
I can’t get off as the Eye slips downwards,
almost imperceptibly, unless I fling myself
out of the capsule and into the gutter where

the bottles contain moonshine instead of
moonlight, the food makes me ill and no
bar will take my card. But I swear that won’t
happen to me; I mean how hard can it be?

Unexpected

Searching for the Mariana Trench II
Spring 2022

Once, when I knew when the coast was close
there would be warnings of unseen dangers,
but now the *basso profundo* of the diaphone is gone.

There has been a sea-change;
I am heading out to the hadal zone
and unexplored pelagic trenches,

leaving the small island that sways
and sings in a mass of ritual observance.
I am without empathy. I am empty.

Transparent as a sea-jelly, a Woman o' War
until I switch and become a crawling star
that fears the drying sandbanks and sun.

There is no silence out here; the waves
hold sound and remember. I need quiet.
From the small, lonely island comes cheering

until swiftly, the fog swarms into the land
scattering the energies of anthems;
death-in-a-mist is flowering, coast-bound,

and I tremble with cold like seaweed fronds
in a cross-current but still here I am;
alone, far-out, not quite drowning.

I admit to praying

The ambulance came in the early hours,
blue lights spinning like frantic fairground rides;
I watched my neighbour grasp her purse,
her husband's bare feet on the stretcher
fetched for the sick and injured, for the dead.
I admit to praying.
Eyes closed tight against the streetlight
that caught her stricken face:
my neighbour, not yet my friend,
but I admit to praying
that someone would save her
from losing her husband, whose life
she had made her life. His wife first,
a mother second I always thought.
I saw how she looked at him,
how the world turned in his smile;
his love of Christmas and Walsall F.C.
Her first and only man, a man
who spoke four languages
including that of music,
and whose glass was always half-full.
I admit to praying,
as I sensed that night
that the glass would empty out.

Not a believer

You don’t believe that only her children
had kept her from the bottle of pills,
from bleeding out in a warm bath,
or the siren song of an inter-city train
blaring down an open track
to take her quickly; her world ransacked,
and the day, every day, turned black.
You don’t believe she meant what she said.
No, my dear, you have never believed in love like that.

Unexpected red at night

It was later than I thought, and a hump
of harvest moon was fattening in the sky,
dithering above the trees; I heard a dog howl,
far away, so hollow, so sad and pleading.
Then a siren, keening in the distant dark.

I write until late, the copper beech in my
garden bleeding out and shocking me with
memories. I need a capsule of absolute
isolation from everything inside and out.
Radio silence; no ground control.

There is that dog again, barking at the stars,
chasing comet-tails and digging deep black holes.
My head in my hands, I think of all that has gone.
I hear your choking cough. I keep on writing,
an ice-giant with a monstrous red eye.

The time of the Strawberry Moon

The crop self-seeded, hidden away.
It became huge: aggressively abundant.

It grew, like well-watered strawberries
in a hot summer; spilling and spreading.

The wasps were not tempted. The cheeky
thrushes did not try to steal its fruit

they had heard how the nightingales
were starting to sound like a murder of crows.

The pink moon brought an intensity,
as if the days were not heavy enough.

We ask if this heat will ever end; how can we
catch a breeze when the sea seems unreachable?

Late this afternoon we both must drive into
the sweltering town; there are two wills to be signed.

Things I can't talk about at a time like this:

an old lover, suddenly in my dreams every night.
I can't control my subconscious, but it's not right
the way his eyes constantly change colour.

Food. Fried calamari with a shot of ouzo;
a leg of lamb stuffed stupid with garlic.
Alcohol as party pleasure. It's beyond that now.

Sunshine. Holidays. New beach shorts
you always say you don't need. Swimming:
they told you 'never again' whatever happens.

I can't talk about how quickly the days go,
and yet how slowly when time is of the essence.

I cannot talk about

Death. Hanging about on street corners, waiting
around the next bend, down in the abyss, shuffling
across blackened swards and swiping right to find darkness.

I cannot talk about

Hope. How we will sit in the wonderous light
of Almería, at a shaded table on a hot pavement with
a bowl of crisp green olives, and *dos cervezas frias*.

The Poetry Retreat

You came home unexpectedly,
emerging like the spirit of a hart,
your tongue loose, browsing,
speechless; you ate your shed antlers.
I realised your life was in my hands.

I walked away and through a portal
of mossed grey stone, keeping
my head low, to a pea-soup pond,
a grotto and rocky bridge shadowed
by the gunnera's green umbrellas.

Thoughts of you lay in wait for me,
surrounded me like the massed green
spread of enchanters' nightshade
slightly toxic with guilt, a glade
of green hauntings. Your dependence.

Everywhere, the swallows twittering;
the ghosts of goats skittering in the hills.
And I hold your face, full of frustrated
fury, hard as a frozen turnip in my hands.
My mind slips away; through arches

of hornbeam and moonbeams. How long
since I walked through the time-lapse
of ancient woodland, the bark of yew-trees
like an old animal hide soaked in poison?
You have come home, alive but silenced,

while I sit here and gaze across a lawn mowed
and sown with privilege and camomile, in the
company of a notebook and a comma butterfly.

The power of ~~love~~ ivy

This is tenacity; despite the men with their steel ladders,
hard hats and power-tools, the ivy still flowers. Shorn off
at the ground root I planted, new shoots pierce the walls.

In late October I start to rip it down. I find a bat box
and three decorative tiles, long-forgotten. Empty nests.
The vines are thick and hairy as an oakum rope; dug in.

What I tear away and trash drives me on, absorbs some
of the anger I should not feel. This stubborn, creeping thing
has to go – this rampant, grasping, beautiful *Hedera helix*

is eating away at the brickwork, the mortar that holds
the house together, covering the window of my room
so that my view is all variegation and spider silhouettes.

Now the pane is clear. The glass has been cleaned so that
I see the onset of winter, the stumps of the cordyline
killed off by last year's frost, the newly-pruned trees.

The ivy is holding on; I am too weak, or it is too strong,
out of my reach. It does not die and fall away as promised.
How sad this is, and glorious. How badly it wants to live.

Night in the Sleepless Citadel
14th February 2024

The hands on the clock have stopped
at seven-oh-ten. My head rattles with
the to-and-fro of trolleys, bottles of pills,
an old man's cough across the way.

I go out for air; strange, how the men
who cluster outside these fortresses,
these concrete Alcazars, are all living lives
on the edge: smoking, brawling, waving cans

of Tennant's Extra; tottering on skinny legs,
twitching like a hanged man. A marionette
holds his mobile phone aloft and shouts
fuck, fuck, fuck! Dreams of drugs-cabinets

beyond revolving doors. Mid-February,
I stand here in the darkness and expect
to freeze, but it's fifteen degrees and the world
beyond warms-up for war in a missile frenzy.

Tonight, I'd like to dine with Volodymyr Zelensky
and steal his green tee-shirt as a token.
I slip back inside. *Don't cry love, don't cry*
we'll bring you the commode. The registrar

wears a waterfall head-scarf; women working
twelve-hour shifts have long false lashes
and collagen-plump lips; black braids swing
by the wards and work through patient lists.

You, without voice, and me, we sit alone.
And now this twisted lump in your groin.
The doctor, Polynesian perhaps, asks
for the third time: *have you passed wind?*

then nods wisely. There is a lei around
his neck, I'm sure of it; kukui nuts and shells.
He holds it to your chest to hear your heart but
he looks about twelve. While I wait until he grows

I doze in the chair, dreaming of marauding
cats trying to escape from a room, my head
filled with miaowing. I long for quiet but they
will not allow me to herd them into silence.

I want my bed, my cats snuggled next to me,
a large G & T and some salt'n'vinegar crisps.

I crave Netflix. ITVX. I no longer remember
what my house looks like in daylight.

I am parked illegally; I am part of the gang.
I know my way around, the saw-bones who live
in the bowels of the building. A nurse sighs and says:
We have a lot of very sick people in here tonight.

What comes down

What comes down

A cut-glass basin and jug, age unknown
but more than one hundred years, blown-out
into history. A payment to my oldest aunt
in exchange for midwifery; passed on
to my mother as a wedding gift.

The lead-cut crystal belongs to me now,
sans the basin I stupidly broke as a child.
What was its provenance, this wash-jug and bowl
before arriving at the home of a poor woman,
and to my aunty with her crone's skills?

On my childhood birthdays it would be filled
with blue cornflowers and baby's-breath.
Now my half-an-heirloom seems to cry
for light, to ring with untold memories,
and long for more than a safe place
in a dark hallway, holding dusty silk peonies.

A photograph, an oval rosewood frame;
a portrait of my mother's mother
serene in sepia: Rebecca Donnelly.
She is ageless; dark hair gathered
into a loose bun at the nape of her neck.
Flawless skin, and pale, gentle eyes
that look away from the camera.

When Mam went into a nursing home
my father replaced their double bed,
trashed the Constable print that hung
above the gas fire and re-painted his world.
Was there anything I wanted he asked,
as the skip arrived. I rescued Rebecca.
As I look into her face I can see Mam,
see a version of me were I more content.

Those objects were my inheritance, with
a love of books, of reading, from my father;
which is a grand gift, especially when
he had no other love on offer.

Passages

They liked a drink these women some little more than girls who worked the port the docksides and had every language, every colour of skin and superstitions swarming with cash to their lodgings. Men hot from boiler-rooms sweating from galleys their pores streaming with the odour of hard labour and hard spirits.

These women who'd swill down their lobbies in the salt-air morning to wash away the detritus of their nights the bottles the blood the pipes. Oakes Street and Anson Place. Women without means in the Little Hell of Liverpool. The press blame supply not demand blame the cajoling beauty of the women in the city blame pimping. Shame the women name them:

Mary McNeill, prostitute, d. 1863. from excessive drinking.

None of them were looking at the stars.

Father Nugent said to send them away to the distant virgin territories, a pure place and pray for their souls, and soon the ship was on the wild black waves and they lay in the hot black hold these bold wild women unable live by selling baskets of fish or picking oakum, repelled by adverts looking for respectable domestic help that said:

NO IRISH NEED APPLY

Women, girls, skin rashed red in a hot violent sweat of lice and bodies and sickness that comes in waves like the Atlantic swell, their thirst worse than any that lingers after a night on the town with a steam-ship sailor. Their bodies just flesh and blood and water drain out.

Women, girls, who arrive in Bytown and shelter in wooden huts built by shantymen and priests. Mary Cunningham is first to die on foreign soil. Anastasia whose skin turned 'black as coal' dies at ten forty-five emitting a foul smell and is hurried into her box.

Anastasia Brennan d. 13 July 1847 aged 9 years

Black '47 displaced a nation halved a population people talked of genocide

On the *Ballinasloe* the last of my family to be born on Éireann's sod are danced about on an oiled watery wildness and in the darkness of steerage a pale face, a baby girl still nursing oblivious to her father cursing the currents of the Irish Sea and a treacherous sandbar to be crossed.

Irish patois shouts and curses above them no ship sails over the Mersey bar without a pilot-boat, three light-ships and a blessing for the beacons of Liscard, Woodside and Wallasey. No looking back for John-Henry and Ann, only hope of a house in a court off Blackstock Street.

Baby Julia Donnelly was dead before the age of three.

A Great Hunger
Famine (Memorial, Dublin)

If you walk past them every day on your way to work,
ME+EM dress but should have worn a coat
When the sky is cold and blue as a Mother Superior's eye,
and high heels are not suitable for cobbles
Or on a soft day of warm rain, that might explain why
they are invisible; faces gaunt, haunted.

You drive two hours every day to work in this grand city,
the past now dead as a trophy tiger
To sit in the glass cubes across from the quay and pray,
sure, no-one does that any more
To hope that the vision of a modern European nation is true.
So, who the feck are *you* to write this?

Enamelled-smile tourists are taking sun-lit selfies with them.
pretty dresses, flip-flops
Posing with images of *an Gorta Mór* but not seeing their rags as shrouds.
break an ankle if it rains
Breeze off the sea lifts manes of perfect hair silky as cirrus clouds.
but it is such a sparkling day.

You walk to your car, weary, dreading the long journey home.
dark already, check your snatchable watch
A grey mist obscures the hollow eyes, the babes already half-dead.
those heels, no good for running
They head for a ship, for anywhere other than here, for New York.
Shit. Traffic problems on the N4.

Leaving

was a matter of economics and I suppose,
love. I wondered what I'd do, when I left
that port city, for a bit of shoreline and sea.

I didn't take much, but took my slap,
the scouse-girl face, and the accent that
has never fully been replaced. I took

with me a mask and an invisible cloak of wind
and salt; the undersea colours of rainbow wrack
that braided my hair. I took skin-tight jeans,

a bright yellow Tee, and the one thing I could not
leave behind, because I was unaware of its existence:
so, the core of myself. It has taken me years to find.

Betrayal (what they said)

N - *Imagine you, living in a house like that*

The rented flat where the local pub held
collections for the IRA, and a high street
like the one where I'd shopped with Mam
although not exclusively white, you could
identify with that. But not the house I moved to,
close-by ancient oaks, spring nights filled
with bleatings and barn-owls in silent flight.

Yes, I missed the sight of a great river
to look out on and dream, and low-tide odours
in the air, but I washed the brine from my hair
and from then on, you kind of hated me.

Anon. - *Everyone knows her; she's the Scouser in the wood-pile*

The Welcome Centre people, that's what they
called us. Anglo-Asian girls with their parent's
aspirations, world-weary Irish women and young
Polish men in suits who were told I had solutions
to the difficult stuff. I hot-desked, smiled at family
photographs and pin-ups until the higher-ups decided
that no-one must now 'personalise their work-space'.

Maybe they had never been homesick, or heartsick;
never been displaced. Didn't hear as I did the cry of gulls
above tall glass buildings, a scavenger community
far from the sea. Never read the poetry of the lost,
the dispossessed, the voices within a diaspora.

L - *You're not really from here anymore*

We left, your brother and I and bought a house
ninety miles away; we knew our city's guv'ner
was a twat. Your brother and I had it sorted,
we let go each other's sins. You knew that.
I refused a wedding ring, and upset Mam
because it was 1979 and her only daughter
was living over the brush. The priest despaired
when we confessed to sleeping in the same room,
the same bed. But different rules applied.

Men would be forgiven. Men could be ambitious;
men could vote Tory and get no more than
three Hail-Marys. Leave, and not be questioned
about their loyalty. I was angry with the city I saw
crumble before me, and too young for diplomacy.

A - *You need to get back to your roots, you shite!*

My birthday, and you were drunk on my bloody wine.
Words, spat out with no rhyme nor reason, just the chip
on your shoulder. I had to keep the peace. Family.
I suppose I've forgiven you for the years spent having
to bite my tongue, yet I can no more forget than I can
disremember the hole in my bedroom ceiling, coats
piled on the bed for warmth and the cat in winter fur.

All this is inked on me. The cross-currents of my parents
marriage, the whirlpool of freedoms and fears, summers
of chemical sun-sets. Sunny weekends, a ferry to the beach;
oily sand and stranded jelly-fish, the muddied waters I swam in.

Trading

I have a house my mother could
only dream about, with no scally
neighbours, or burning mattresses
chucked over the back-yard wall.

I have lost my view of the sea.

In my garden there is an ocean
of peonies with tight double petals,
filled with pollen that the bees
can't reach. Lush and pink they
are a tease. They are useless.
The sea-thrift died for want of salt.

Near to the canal I can now spot
moor-hens and chicks; I know why
owls *twit-twoo* and foxes scream
in the night. I recognise the blackbird's
last note as I sit still, close to twilight.

I am not woken by raucous gulls nor
lulled to sleep by the rumble of taxis,
and in bed I revolve on an axis
of dark dreams and sleeplessness.
The silence keeps me awake

and so, I hug my DNA, the Irish genes
that live in every cell of my body,
the blood that dances through my veins.
I unearth a cousin, and together
we trace my grandma's grave to an
unmarked plot in a suburb of the city.

I have lost my view of the sea.

I belong neither here nor there.
I am not of the chattering classes.
In a room full of real poets, I know
I am a fake, the one still dying her hair
and wearing obvious make-up.

To fit in here I need to be slimmer;
curb my appetites. Middle-class women
are not often fat nor drink too much.
I'm often told that that I think too much,
but sometimes I hate how I see myself.

I have lost my view of the sea

Pubs here don’t have maritime names
and shadow-men sparking-up in doorways.
I don’t paint the town blue anymore.
There is no roar from two stadia.

The Iron Men of the shore are calling me
to where two birds, cormorants I think,
gaze at city and sea. But here, I sit on a bench
as a mute swan glides by in a halo of light;
summer narrow-boats pass, and walkers
seek to glimpse lapwings nesting in grass.
I am searching for sea-glass.

I am walking down an avenue
of cherry trees reaching full bloom.
I cross campus and in a room full of
poets there is a feeling of happiness.
It is many things, this happiness thing:

Standing on the seats singing,
and surging in a crowd terrified
as my feet left the ground.
My memories chant
just as we did on the terraces
Irish blood, Scouse heart

Sea-air makes me ravenous.

The men who climbed tall ladders

appeared at the crossing-point hours, moving
quietly as the sun slid into the river, steps
muffled when a fog-warning sounded and we
walked home from school in the pithy light.

They came when the winter sky wavered,
and green ribbons of light trembled above
the city. On long summer evenings they arrived
just as the pubs let out; no-one disturbed them.

Ageless-old in black coats, ladders balanced
against walls, they twisted keys and kindled
the streets, sent darkness in retreat down jiggers.
As they changed the mantles, cleaned the glass,

perhaps they peered into bedrooms where the
curtains didn't quite meet and saw the young
men they used to be; a half-tanned, muscled arm
thrown over the quilt, across a still-pretty woman.

Maybe they stared through thin, smoke-stained nets
as a baby crawled across the floor, the cat asleep
on the only rug; the day already dark as us kids
rushed in agape for jam butties and beakers of tea.

Atop tall ladders, they knew each phase of twilight;
how it was brighter for longer at sea than on land.
They were friends with the dusk, greeting the blue hour
before sunrise when they quenched the iron lamps,

and a girl in the last rags of childhood looked
down from a window and watched them leave.
Tired from work and memories of war, they carried
their tall ladders until they were no longer needed.

The Critical Component

Introduction

Inheritance is customarily defined as money and/or property but may include the bequeathment of tradition or the nebulous and ever-evolving ‘production’ of cultural identity (Hall, 2017, p.1191). Traumatic experiences may be unintentionally passed down the generations, as expressed in the poem ‘Inheriting My Grandmother's Nightmare’ (Stevenson, 2014, Loc.624). My own inheritance is asomatous but provides the catalyst for much of my poetry; it is a legacy from a city, from the island of Ireland and the context of hybrid lives. Specifically, it is a gift from working-class women.

The critical component has a focus on working-class women of the nineteenth-century Irish diaspora in Liverpool and their post-Second World War descendants. A DNA test reveals that I am two-thirds Irish, and within that context I am, as a writer, informed by my Liverpool-Irish background and so approach this topic with sensitivity to the experiences of working-class women. When I discovered my Donnelly family, living descendants of the Irish diaspora, what began as a quest for a family tree became a compulsion to write about Liverpool-Irish working-class women who were objectified through ethnic cliché, shame and poverty, and help to give them a voice. Within that process I understood that social and cultural hybridity, whether in contrived habits or unconscious evolvements, are tools for survival amongst displaced and separated people. My poetry explores those themes, and the commentary records aspects of my research which feed into that creativity. I am a creative writer, not an historian; in the critical component however, I employ an inter-disciplinary synergy to demonstrate that creativity, research and critical analysis can have a symbiotic, inspirational relationship.

For early research, I relied in particular on Part One (1800-1914) of *Irish, Catholic and Scouse: The History of the Liverpool Irish, 1800-1939* (Belchem, 2007, pp. 1-245) 'A thorough, evidence-based study that makes use of extensive archival sources and little-read newspapers […] to fulfil the vital need for "a longer-term assessment of crisis, continuity and change" among the Irish Catholics of Liverpool' (MacPherson, 2008, p.1).

Chapter 1 of the commentary provides an overview of the Irish diaspora in Liverpool during the nineteenth century, a displacement created by the effects of famine and rural poverty. The Irish faced many difficulties in Liverpool but evolved as a community with a unique hybrid identity and accent. I investigate cultural schisms within the diaspora: divisions often reflected in working-class entertainments favoured by the Liverpool-Irish, some of which were however, very much of their time.

Chapter 2 investigates the lives of the eighty percent of Irishmen in Liverpool who were poorly paid unskilled labourers, the consequences for their families and the means by which Irish women made a living. I examine the then-ubiquitous presence of the Catholic Church and its relationship with women, engaging with the research of Martha Kanya-Forstner and contemporaneous texts. I also forge a link between the nineteenth century and my childhood in 1960s working-class Liverpool.

In Chapter 3, I discuss commentaries (for example by Stuart Hall), on the topics of cultural identity, displacement and diaspora and demonstrate how such phenomena impact on individuals and communities in diverse ways. I include relevant research of *an Gorta Mór* 'The Great Hunger' in Ireland, the secondary effects of which event had a profound if inadvertent influence on the character of Liverpool people which is extant. I also analyse examples of Eavan Boland's poetry which explore nineteenth-century historical contexts.

Chapter 4 explores post-war Liverpool, a vibrant city in terms of the arts, poetry and music. I examine the lives of two successful but very different women in a changing society and consider social and industrial changes in 1960s Liverpool, specifically the re-shaping of masculinities among white, working-class Catholic men and the subsequent impacts on the women in their lives.

Chapter 5 adopts a more personal approach, exploring the expectations of working-class girls post-war following the introduction of the eleven-plus examination into all state schools, utilising research not confined to Liverpool. There is compelling evidence that this attempt by the Labour government in 1944 to engender social mobility could result in a form of cognitive dissonance, referred to as an imbalance in the psychic economy. Secondary research includes academic studies and feminist memoirs, promoting an understanding and recognition of the uneasy hybrid personalities of successful working-class women in academia. I also explore the theoretical mindset of Liverpool exceptionalism: 'Scouse not English', a form of hybrid identity, and how that may be linked to the city's Irish heritage (Belchem, 2006a, Boland, P. 2010).

Chapter 6 provides traditional literary criticism of some of the poems in the collection, including reflection on voice, speech, and sound as integral to poetic effects. I discuss the process of writing the poems, focusing on feeling, memory and observation, the inheritance of lyric mode and how that shapes my poetry. I explore the concepts of narrative poetry and the influence of autofiction and on my work and examine my use of different poetic styles. I look at the intertextual aspects of several poems in the collection. The chapter also contains my concluding thoughts on the thesis.

Chapter 1. The hyphenated hybrid: the Liverpool-Irish

This chapter is an exploration of the Liverpool-Irish and of cultural hybrids, and within that context I consider examples of theoretical positioning around identity-inheritance within diaspora. Despite Philip Boland stating that 'There is […] no academic consensus on identity' (Boland, P, 2010, p.2) it is still possible to use the wealth of material on diaspora to examine its social and cultural effects and the differences and similarities across diasporas in terms of language, religion, culture and extent of integration. In writing about the 'play of "difference" within identity' Hall draws attention to the profound effects of history and host-country culture on a displaced people, for example, highlighting the differences between Caribbean islands populated by the descendants of enslaved men and women from Africa. In a comparison of the island of Martinique, a *department* of France, with Jamaica which has been fully independent from Britain since 1962, Hall writes that 'Fort de France is a much richer, more "fashionable" place than Kingston'. One substantive measure of this inequality is that Martiniquais live on average over ten years longer than Jamaicans.[1] Exploring that play of differences within identity, Hall provides 'one trivial example' of the French-Caribbean Island: 'Martinique both *is* and *is not* French' (Hall, 2017, pp.1194-1195). Martiniquais are described by Hall as having 'a special and peculiar supplement' of black and dual-heritage skin tones adding 'to the "refinement" and sophistication of a Parisian-derived *haute couture'*. It is however, a 'sophistication which, because it is black, is always transgressive' (p.1195). Surprisingly, given its history as a maritime power, Liverpool is not obviously ethnically diverse; the black population for instance is just 3.5%. By comparison, the 2011 census for Birmingham recorded a black

[1] Between 1950 and 2024 the life expectancy of people in Martinique increased from 54.16 to 83.60 years. During the same period in Jamaica life expectancy increased from 56.80 to 72.51 years. Available at: https://database.earth/compare/life-expectancy/martinique-vs-jamaica (Accessed: 1st June 2024)

population of 11% (see Appendix 1). However, it is estimated that 75% of residents in Liverpool have Irish ancestry (Museum of Liverpool). The city may be too fiercely independent to be considered truly sophisticated, but transgressive is an adjective that can apply equally to Liverpudlian culture as to Martiniquais. The Liverpool rock-music journalist and author Paul Du Noyer described his home city as 'a sort of sunless Marseille that operates on different principles to the rest of Britain' (Du Noyer, 2007, p.6), but if Liverpool identifies with any other place, that place is Ireland. Therefore, in the context of the Liverpool-Irish diaspora, it is not implausible to say that Liverpool both *is* Irish and *is not* Irish. As John Belchem asserts, Irish migrants 'acquired a distinctive hybrid, hyphenated identity as 'Liverpool-Irish' (Belchem, 2007, p. xi). Liverpool had a similar demographic and socio-economic structure to other world port cities in the nineteenth century; Robert Lee refers to a dependency on wealth-creating, desirable overseas products and hinterland markets, changes due to inward migration, ethnic and religious diversity and exposure to infectious diseases. Port cities also tend towards residential segregation. As Lee writes 'Seamen, in particular, often had a specific spatial distribution within a port city, as in Boulogne […] separated from other parts of the town and used a distinct "*patois des marins"'* (Lee, 1998, pp.165-166). This observation invites comparison with dockland Liverpool-Irish; my own position is that the latter's patois has evolved into an accent: 'Scouse' rather than a dialect, one which has spread throughout the city and now beyond (Boland, P, 2010, p.6).

The Irish were the most significant ethnic group in Liverpool in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; Tony Birtill notes that 'the Irish language was spoken in Liverpool throughout the nineteenth century and before' (Birtill, 2020, p.139) and Irish Nationalist Alexander Martin Sullivan described Liverpool as 'a piece cut off the old sod itself' (Sullivan, 1884, cited in Belchem, 2007, p.1). Michael Crick writes that

‘Until the 1920s, the main opposition to the Liberal and Conservative Parties in Liverpool were not Labour politicians, but the Irish Nationalists, who had several Liverpool councillors and remarkably [...] an MP (Crick, 2016, Loc. 551). T.P. O’Connor, or ‘Tay Pay’, held his seat for over forty years in the Scotland Ward of Liverpool (UK Parliament). One of the contexts in exploring this Liverpool-Irish diasporic relationship is the cultural legacy of the Great Famine. My creative and critical writing about Liverpool for this project draws on a validity which derives from my selective narrative history of the Liverpool-Irish diaspora, and which I cannot write about without a backdrop of the Great Famine. The UK Parliament document ‘The Great Famine’ informs us:

> Between 1845 and 1852 Ireland suffered a period of starvation, disease and emigration that became known as the Great Famine, the main natural cause of which was a disease which affected the potato crop, upon which a third of Ireland's population was dependent for food.

Between 1845 and 1855 nearly two million people left Ireland for America and Australia, and another 750,000 to Britain (Great Hunger Museum). The stipendiary magistrate in Liverpool, Edward Rushton, in a letter to the Home Secretary recorded that between 13th January and 13th December 1847, a total of 296,331 Irish people landed at Liverpool ‘of which 116,000 were naked and starving’ (Neal, 1997, p.62). It was not always thus, as Fitzgerald and Lamkin write:

> Those whose lifetimes spanned this half-century must have noticed a stark change underway: in 1700 Ireland was a country of net immigration; in 1750 it was a country of net emigration, which would continue for nearly 300 years, until the short-term reversal of the early 1970s (Fitzgerald and Lambkin, 2008, p.113).

Many of those who left Ireland in the nineteenth century and sailed to the then globally dominant port of Liverpool became permanent residents of the city. Liverpool's prosperity continued until the 1930s, boosting the city's population to 900,000. As Misselwitz observes in his introduction to the project *Shrinking Cities,* 'the city's growth was mostly generated by the power of its docks and global trade connections, the reason for most of its wealth and status being rooted in overseas trade' (Misselwitz, 2004, p.3).[2] Liverpool also prospered from the advent of steam-ship navigation in the 1820s which caused passenger prices across the Irish Sea to fall. Ships from the New World deposited their goods in Liverpool and took on a fresh cargo: people travelling from Ireland and Europe *en route* to emigration further afield. Liverpool re-branded itself as a cosmopolitan hub through which nine million travelling Europeans passed (Richards, 2004, p.292).

However, thousands of Irish immigrants remained in Liverpool; some out of choice, others because they had been preyed upon by unscrupulous fraudsters known as 'sharpers' who left their victims penniless, or simply because they lacked the stamina and health to sail onwards to the New World. By the early twentieth century roughly one third of the population of Liverpool were Irish, mostly without skills, some of whom were described as simply feckless and lazy (Belchem, 2007, pp.1-6). On 27th January 1905 the *Liverpool Catholic Herald* reported that 'Those from Ireland were condemned as the residuum of the Irish […] who had not "wing" enough […] to carry them across the Atlantic' (cited in Belchem, 2007, p.6). Of those who stayed, disease played a significant part in precluding onward movement. Between 1831 and 1866

[2]Misselwitz writes: 'Liverpool's rise began after 1700 as a merchant city […] linked to the global slave trade. The city took immense profits as a hub within a triangular […] network, exporting (goods) […] to Africa […] for slaves that were then traded for sugar, rum, tobacco or raw cotton [….] Liverpool's global trading connections proved valuable after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 […] the 19th century was the period of most rapid growth for the city' (Misselwitz, 2002, p.114).

there were four cholera epidemics in England and Wales. Liverpool was a city with high rates of cholera, earning its reputation as 'the black spot on the Mersey'. This sobriquet does not appear to have a definitive origin; it may refer to the year 1847 known as 'Black 47' when 'migrants flooded in (to Liverpool) and typhus spread' (Belchem, 2007, p.60). Typhus, or 'spotted fever' (Neal, 1997, pp.126, 144) was also rife in 1847. In 1849 the death rate for cholera per 1,000 persons living was far higher in Liverpool when compared to Manchester and London and in 1854 and 1866 the same comparisons showed similar outcomes (Kearns, Laxton and Campbell, 1994, pp.88-89). A high percentage of people hospitalised were Irish (see Appendix 2) and the epidemics left destitution in their wake. In addition, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 2, Irish women found it difficult to obtain gainful and legal employment.

How did lone, working-class women survive and provide for their children if no employment could be found? One solution was charity. Liverpool had pioneered public welfare initiatives since before The Famine, but for the Liverpool-Irish in pauper institutions where they were a disproportionally large number, this meant the threat of proselytisation. The Catholic Church's answer to this was to found its own institutions. At the 1866 annual dinner of the Catholic Club, J. Neale-Lomax challenged the Protestants to match 'the array of institutions' upheld by the (mostly poor) Catholics themselves (cited in Belchem, 2007, p.71).[3]

If the Liverpool-Irish were disproportionally represented in terms of disease, they were also disadvantaged by another issue, which was the large and unequal number of Irish and Catholics held in prison. Father James Nugent, a prominent social reformer and Irish leader in Liverpool, was appointed as Catholic chaplain to Walton Gaol in 1863 and by 1877 declared that there were more Liverpool-born prisoners than

[3] *Liverpool Mercury* (1866) 23rd March

Irish. However, Catholics still accounted for sixty-nine percent of committals (National Archives). The inordinate Catholic prison population was notable for the number of women incarcerated. Nugent felt it was a matter of shame that Liverpool was 'the only prison in the world where females exceeded the males' (Nugent, 1877, cited in Belchem, 2007, p. 82). Many female offences were connected to drunkenness and sex-work; on 11th February 1981 the *Catholic Times* reported that such pursuits had transformed Irish women 'from a state little lower than angels […] to a condition below that of the brute' (cited in Belchem, 2007, p.85). Many of these women had slipped through the Catholic welfare net; it was felt that the only solution was to remove them from Liverpool, thus Father Nugent arranged for such women to be shipped to the virgin territories of Canada (Nugent, 1882, cited in Belchem, 2007, p. 85). Whilst the spiritual success or otherwise of this venture requires its own study, the physical outcomes of enforced exodus in 'coffin ships' were tragic for many (McGowan, *Digital Museums Canada*). Chilled by the information on the website, I imagined this sea journey in my prose-poem 'Passages' which include the lines:

> Women, girls, who arrive in Bytown and shelter in wooden huts built by shantymen and priests. Mary Cunningham is first to die on foreign soil. Anastasia whose skin turned 'black as coal' dies at ten forty-five emitting a foul smell and is hurried into her box.
>
> *Anastasia Brennan d. 13 July 1847 aged 9 years.*

The poem describes the turmoil of the women exiled to Canada, the appalling conditions they endured and the reasons why Father Nugent thought this exile necessary.

Belchem opines that during the nineteenth century 'Irish and Catholic became synonymous in Liverpool', stating that his text 'charts the contingent historical process' by which this happens and 'to show how, when and why Catholic migrants and their descendants in Liverpool made Irishness their own.' Irish Protestants who

settled in Liverpool ‘chose not to articulate an alternative non-Catholic representation of Irishness’. In short, they mostly integrated with British societal norms (Belchem, 2007, p. xii). Meanwhile, the Liverpool-Irish community did not remain static. New migrants arrived via family links and a self-perpetuating migration system aided by money sent ‘home’ and through connections with previous migrants. In addition, as Lord Henry Brougham advised the House of Lords in 1877, there was also evidence that ‘A bonus, in the shape of passage-money, was paid to them (the Irish) to quit that country which should be responsible for their maintenance’ (Brougham, 1877).

Irish immigrants without connections had to assimilate quickly into the cramped community life of the court housing in the north end of Liverpool, on the basis that those who received assistance as newcomers would reciprocate that kindness when circumstances demanded. Such networks, which by now included second-generation Irish born in Liverpool, were ‘invariably run by women’ (Belchem, 2007, p.95). One Irishman reported to Hugh Shimmin that almost immediately after arriving his wife had been visited by the women in the court all wishing her good luck:

> some wanted to borrow pans and mugs [...] join them in a subscription to bury a child [...] others that had joined for a little sup of drink [...] some wanted her to subscribe to a raffle for a fat pig, which had been fed in the cellar where it now was (cited in Shimmin, 1991, p.156).

Other, more formal networks and associations whether mutually beneficial, political or religious, for example Ribbonite networks, Fenian burial societies and friendly societies of the Home Rule period were male preserves and for this reason such aspects of Liverpool-Irish life are not part of this thesis; I also exclude the issue of religious sectarianism, sometimes violent, and extant in the city until the 1970s. That is not to

say that women did not support political organisations such as Sinn Fein, but as Elaine Clark writes:

> for the better part of the nineteenth century, public opinion in the small world of England's Catholics was the opinion of laymen and priests. Their voices dominated the Catholic press and influenced the discussion of political issues in newspapers, pamphlets, and monthly journals. As this literature accumulated, it reminded readers that Catholic spokesmen were, when it came to women's rights, men of their time. (Clark, 2004, p.638).

Over time, cultural schisms developed within the Liverpool-Irish community. As Stuart Hall writes on identity within diaspora, there are associated but distinguishable views, one of which 'recognises that, as well as the many points of similarity there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute "what we really are", or rather - since history has intervened – "what we have become"' (Hall, 2017, p.1193).

Diversely opinionated groups within the Liverpool-Irish community also viewed cultural identity differently; there was 'a significant shift in focus from contestation of host stereotypes to inculcation of "Irish-Ireland" culture [...] that exposed the gulf between cultural "purists" and second-generation Liverpool-Irish' (Belchem, 2007, p.198). Put simply, middle-class nationalist brokers wished to redeem the reputation of the Liverpool-Irish working-classes whom they believed had fallen prey to Liverpool's material and moral temptations and the vices of the waterfront.[4] There was a promotion of 'respectable' national values across the span of those who advocated integration and liberalism, to the ethnic purists of Celtic separatism (p.198). One successful path to respectability was to keep people away from public houses and alcohol-fuelled celebrations. After the introduction of a new pattern of cultural

[4] 'Liverpool's Character' *Porcupine* (1877) 30th. June

celebration, the number of committals for drunkenness the day following St. Patrick's Day fell from thirty-seven in 1851 to eleven in 1864. (Nugent, 1865, cited in Belchem, 2007, p.199)

John Denvir (1834-1916) was an Irish Nationalist, journalist and author, an organiser of Irish literary clubs and concerts who was, Belchem writes, 'concerned to safeguard the ethnic and political integrity [...] of second-generation Irish in Liverpool, the young people who flock to concerts' (Belchem, 2007, p.203). Attendees at the concerts included cradle Irish, but most were of the next generation with a developed Liverpool accent. Denvir was not so much concerned with the style of such popular entertainment provided there was no element of 'low Music Hall tastes' and [...] 'so long as it will continue to be an influence for the good and the rallying point for Irish Nationality in Liverpool' (Denvir, 1885, cited in Belchem, 2007, p.204). Denvir, unlike Celtic purists, did not insist on entertainments in Gaelic; he felt that adherence to the Irish language would be isolationist and ultimately hinder the cause of Irish independence. Belchem writes that his (Denvir's) message 'was simple and accessible, inflected through the *patois* of the Liverpool-Irish' (p.204). The Gaelic League was far more exclusive. Irish Nationalism was recoiling from the scandal of the O'Shea-Parnell divorce case, political in-fighting and the Liberal Party's failure on Home Rule.[5] Cultural nationalists were either looking for a return of idealised Irish Gaelic ways and 'heroic' rural communities in Ireland, or an autonomous nation that was modern and competitive (Hutchinson and O'Day, 1999, pp. 254-276). Meanwhile, the Gaelic League severed itself from electoral politics, English popular culture and ersatz representations of Irishness. In doing so they also severed themselves from most of the Liverpool-Irish (Belchem, 2007, p.206).

[5] Little, T. https://liberalhistory.org.uk/

Ultimately, the purists faced obstacles they could not overcome: firstly, the lack of Irish speakers and Gaelic sportsmen; secondly, the younger generation's indifference to Irish songs and music and thirdly, their own dismissive attitude towards many of their fellow Irish Liverpudlians. 'Where Denvir and the Home Rulers had sought to educate and activate the second generation, Irish-Ireland appeared to disown them' (Belchem, 2007, p.209). On 18th September 1899 the *Liverpool Catholic Herald* had this to say:

> These unfortunate people [...] have been born here, they have been nurtured on English ways – on English beer and materialism – [...] without, unfortunately, shedding the Irish names of their forefathers [...] They should no more be considered Irish than the Boers on the Transvaal (cited by Belchem, 2007, p.209).

The process of 'who we really are' and 'what we have become' was evident as the nineteenth century headed towards its turn; for example, opinions amongst the Liverpool-Irish were divided between support for the Boers in the Boer wars, and 'jingo mania' including the decorating of Catholic buildings to celebrate Mafeking night in 1900. The Gaelic League aimed accusations of ethnic fade at those Irish who had come to Liverpool, prospered and proceeded to give their children English forenames, satirising them as 'arrant snobs' a 'term applied with particular force to women' (Belchem, 2007, p.208).

However, cultural purity was falling out of favour and it was undermined further by sectarian violence culminating in riots in June 1909 (BBC, 2009). By 1914 Home Rule in Ireland appeared imminent, and the two sides of the culture wars co-operated in a huge 'joyous' celebration of St. Patrick's Day (Belchem, 2007, p.214).

The strenuous life of the Liverpool-Irish nevertheless contained many forms and levels of entertainment, from the grand libraries to 'the public house on every corner' (Nugent, no date, cited in Belchem, 2007, p.223). One such entertainment was the commercial embracing of American blackface minstrelsy, a hybrid of Irish sentiment and transatlantic style. It was, says Belchem, 'an important cultural marker [...] by which they became white.' This ritual offered 'insecure Irish migrants a sense of superiority over the blacks with whom they were once identified' (p.234). Although the Irish (labelled white Negroes) felt able to distance themselves from black people by way of parody, there was a difference: 'Transposed to Liverpool, blackface minstrelsy enabled the Irish to confirm their whiteness while at the same time asserting their "ethnic" distance' (p.235). Put simply, the Irish poor, as with the white underclass in America, felt like there was someone they could look down upon.[6]

At the outbreak of the First World War, Home Rule was put in abeyance, and by the end of the war society was slowly changing, with both class and gender roles being challenged. The Suffragette movement for example, deeply divided opinion and the War accentuated differences within the labour movement. For Ireland it meant the biggest division of all: The Government of Ireland Act 1920 and the partition of the island of Ireland itself.

In researching aspects of this cultural background for my poetry, I studied multiple texts on the history of Ireland and also on aspects of modern Irish society. One text that particularly interested me was *Ship of Fools: How Stupidity and Corruption Sank the Celtic Tiger* by writer and journalist Fintan O'Toole, which chronicled life in Ireland in the 1990's and how banks and governments colluded with the fatal

[6] The reasons for this particular form of white-British racism are beyond the scope of this research. See Sherwood (2003) and Shepherd (1986) for evidence of exploitation and attitudes.

corruption of the country's economy (O'Toole, 2009). The textual imagery in *Ship of Fools* inspired 'The Dublin Tetralogy', a group of poems in my collection about a fictional *nouveau riche* family, the father a Celtic Tiger-era self-made man and his wife, a beautiful Frenchwoman. Their dysfunctional family is held together by the mutual passion and respect the couple have for each other. In 'To my husband Ó Dubhghaill' this is made explicitly clear. The final stanza of the poem explores their complex compatibility:

> There were those who whispered that you were 'filthy rich,'
> businessman savant with low cunning and morals;
> but amongst the piranhas and toxic corals
> you have learned to flatter and shine; I, to bewitch.

The poem, like several in the collection, was informed by the research I carried out into the Liverpool-Irish background and that of modern Ireland.

The next chapter of this commentary moves from the longer context of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. It examines contemporaneous texts concerning the employment of Liverpool-Irish and explores the reality of the lives of working-class women and how they survived the fray of immigrant life.

Chapter 2. Legacies of the nineteenth-century Liverpool-Irish: the eighty percent

My mother was born in Liverpool in 1915, thirteen years before The Equal Franchise Act 1928 allowed every person over the age of twenty-one the right to vote. I was born, my mother's first and only child, in the district of Everton in 1955, fifteen years prior to equal pay for women becoming law (Equal Pay Act, 1970). In other words, I grew up in a mid-twentieth-century working-class world where women's expectations were limited. My mother was third generation Irish; her maternal grandfather John Henry Donnelly was born in Dublin in 1838 and in the spring of 1840 he and his siblings left Ireland with their parents, who were no doubt looking for a better life. The family, having settled in Liverpool, found that despite patriarch John having a skilled trade as a wine cooper, they were resolutely working class and with no housing options other than the very poorest. My personal history, therefore, is related to broad social movements stretching back to the nineteenth century and this chapter explores some of those contexts.

The Liverpool-Irish Diaspora of the nineteenth century formed a ghetto of mostly casual labourers in the spatially low-lying north of the city. Skilled working-class Irish lived in the (then) more prosperous, and topographically higher district of Everton (Pooley, 1997, p.370; Belchem, 2007, pp.56-69). Despite there being no obvious phenotypic differences between the Irish and English (nor for that matter the Welsh) populations in Liverpool, the majority of Irishmen in the early 1870s were classified as 'poor Paddies' with eighty percent employed as unskilled manual labourers (Heinrick, 1990, pp. 90-91). For Irish women, finding employment was still more arduous, as Liverpool had no textile industries such as those found in the rest of Lancashire which employed women, and children as young as seven years (Gowland *et al*, p.2, 2023). There are opposing schools of thought concerning anti-Irish prejudices

within the sizeable domestic servant markets, which had a pool of Lancashire and Welsh countrywomen available for domestic labour. Belchem opines that some employment advertisements stated, 'No Irish Need Apply' (Belchem, 2007, p.27) but the infamous 'NINA' has been disputed in America, not least by Richard Jensen in his article 'No Irish Need Apply: A Myth of Victimization' in which he refers to the Irish as having been observed to 'have a chip on their shoulder' and states that:

> The NINA slogan seems to have originated in England […] By the 1820s it was a cliché in upper- and upper-class London that some fussy housewives refused to hire Irish and had posted NINA signs in their windows. It is possible that handwritten signs regarding maids did appear in a few American windows, though no-one ever reported one. (Jensen, 2002, p.405).

In contrast, Belchem states that NINA was not 'an urban myth of victimisation' but reality (Belchem, 2007, p.27). Contemporaneous local advertisements appear to confirm nineteenth-century anti-Irish prejudices, for example: 'Wanted, a thoroughly respectable servant as house and parlour maid. No Welsh or Irish need apply' (*Liverpool Albion,* 1856) and 'Wanted, immediately, a servant of all work at 144 Mount Pleasant. No Irish need apply' (*Liverpool Daily Post,* 1860). Yet, there were Irish domestic servants in the city; Martha Kanya-Forstner writes that in the borough of Liverpool, the occupations of all women included 'just over eight thousand domestics [...] more than seven thousand of whom were general servants' (Kanya-Forstner, 1997, p.102). Irish women were unable to dominate this huge market, and 'In Liverpool better paid positions were more likely to be filled by English Protestants; whereas Irish Catholic women might find work as kitchen maids, they faced some difficulty in becoming cooks' (p.104).

Irish women in Liverpool were thus often compelled to work in the lowest trades such as oakum picking, back-breaking work that was also a method of hard labour used in prisons. Another option was the equally grim-sounding road grit industry. There were also the secondary economies of the streets, such as basket selling to the poorest members of society (Belchem, 2007, p.27). Prior to increased migration following The Famine, many employers were more than happy to hire Irish men. In a parliamentary command paper investigating the Irish poor in Great Britain, Samuel Holme, a builder and major employer of the Irish in Liverpool, praised their ability to undertake the hardest and dirtiest of work 'all the low departments of industry are filled by the Irish.'[7] Holme also provided detailed analysis of Irish occupations (See Appendix 3 Table 1.1) and acknowledged that their presence kept wages low (Holme, 1836, p.28), as did merchant Francis Jordan who wrote 'if it were not for the Irish, the demand for labour could not be supplied without a much higher rate of wages; one, perhaps, even oppressively high to the capitalist' (Jordan, 1836, p.26). What employers refused to acknowledge was that it was those exceptionally low wages which were the cause of Irish impecuniousness, and many believed that poverty could be attributed to shortcomings in Irish women, incompetent in managing a family budget. As Holme writes:

> I attribute their wretched way of living […] to their improvidence […] also to a foolish hospitality; for they are very kind to each other […] The women are more improvident than the men, and bad domestic managers, and generally forestall their husband's wages' (Holme, 1836, p28).

[7] Condition of State of the Poorer Classes in Ireland. Appendix G. The State of the Irish Poor in Great Britain 1886 (Royal Commission) pp. 1- 216 HMSO Available at: https://archive.org/details/op1245313-1001 Accessed: 4th June 2024

Being ‘kind’ appears to be a concept not easily understood by a successful English businessman; Holme of course had no memory of The Famine, nor the magnanimous roles women sometimes played during that time (Lysaght, 1996, pp.84-85), but in the same parliamentary paper, a Mr. M J Whitty, himself of Irish birth, condemns women further:

> Aggravated assaults are frequent among them (the Irish), arising from some sudden provocation and drink. These are the result of the drunken rows in which women and men are indiscriminately engaged; I never knew an Irish row in which women were not concerned (Whitty, 1836, p.20).

The Irish arriving in Liverpool to escape The Famine had the effect of hardening local attitudes towards immigrants. The sheer numbers of people seeking unskilled labouring jobs pushed wages downwards, and waterfront middlemen were ready to take on unskilled and careless porters; yet much of dock work was not unskilled, albeit casual and unregulated. As Hugh Heinrick wrote ‘The large class of stevedores and master porters (who are almost to a man Irishmen), require a higher order of intelligence as well as trained adaptability to their duties’ (Heinrick, 1990, P.91). James Sexton notes in his autobiography that ‘A pattern had begun to emerge within the waterfront workers enclave; jobs were given to ‘mates’, or passed from father to son, and job experience, skill and quick-wittedness known as ‘the knack’ was valued’ (Sexton, 1936, p.67). Niche areas of expertise began to be jealously guarded; new arrivals from Ireland expecting a welcome from their fellow countrymen were given the toughest workloads if they did not know the right passwords and grips, or might be subject to physical assault (Denvir, 2009, p.131). Whilst men protected their territories, proud of their physical strength and ingenuity, and enjoyed a type of freedom and independence within this casual market despite the risks of industrial injury, women were left ‘to

balance the domestic budget against the odds' (Belchem, 2007, p.40). One must ask how this impacted on women in the Irish diaspora, who had to endlessly stretch their irregular housekeeping money.

My great-grandfather John Henry Donnelly (1838-1893) sailed to Liverpool from Dublin in 1840 on the ship *Ballinasloe* with his parents John and Ann (née Kinsley), his two older sisters Ellen (9) and Mary Ann (6), and his sister Julia who was just a few weeks old. The family assumed residence in Economy Court in Blackstock Street, just over a mile from the Pier Head in Liverpool, occupying just one room in a three-story house with cellar, which was standard accommodation in such court dwellings. Located in the heart of Liverpool, Blackstock Street would have been engulfed in the smell, noise, and pollution of nineteenth-century industry. Julia, the last of the family to be born on Irish soil, died in Liverpool aged two years, probably of consumption.[8] Of six children in total, four survived, but one can only guess how two infant mortalities affected Ann, or how she managed to keep house amid the squalid and notoriously unhealthy living conditions described by Dr. W.H. Duncan, Liverpool's first Medical Officer for Health. In his account of Duncan's work, W.M. Frazer cites evidence given to a committee of inquiry into insanitary conditions.[9] Dr. Duncan described the design and construction of a typical court:

> They consist usually of two rows of houses placed opposite to each other with an intervening space of from 9 to 15 feet and having two to six houses in each row. The court communicates with the street by a passage or archway about 5 feet wide – in the older courts built up overhead (cited in Frazer, 1997, pp. 25-26).

[8] Liverpool, England, Catholic Burials, 1813-1985 for Julia Donnelly. St Anthony's > 1840-1846 https://www.ancestry.co.uk/discoveryui-content/view/345184:2183

[9] One of the events leading to the passing of the Liverpool Sanitary Act 1846

Focusing on the insanitary conditions, Duncan described how ash pits and shared privies, often just two located at the head of the court were emptied and spread over the yard 'I do not know of a single court,' he reported, 'which communicates with the street or sewer by a covered drain' (cited in Frazer, 1997, p.26).

John and Ann Donnelly appear in the 1841 census for 8 Blackstock Street as follows:

Name	Age M	Age F	Occupation	Born
John Donnelly	37		Wine Cooper	Ireland
Ann[10]		26		Ireland
Eleanor		10		Ireland
Mary Ann		5		Ireland
John Henry	3			Ireland
Julia		1		Ireland
Martha Rollins		29	Hat Maker	

1841 Census for John Donnelly: Lancashire, Liverpool, Howard Street, District 9.

John and Ann appear again in the 1851 census, still residing in Blackstock Street. John, now aged 48 years, is employed as a wine bottler. By the 1861 census both would be dead. Elizabeth Stewart in her book 'Courts and Alleys' concludes that 'Court housing accentuated the enormous discrepancy between the lives of the wealthiest and the poorest in Liverpool. It was a manifestation of the social differences from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries' (Stewart, 2019, p.105).

Stewart gave me pause to think about how far social conditions had progressed (or not) between the time my great-grandfather grew up in Blackstock Street and when I was raised in the 1960s. Housing conditions had improved, but our family's running water source was in the form of one cold tap; there was no bath or shower, and our toilet was outside. In certain respects, working-class life was closer to the nineteenth than to the latter half of the twentieth, and I recall the men who came every evening and morning and tended to the gas street-lamps. Gas lamps did not, as is often thought,

[10] Ann was in fact 37 years old (Born, February 1804).

disappear after Victorian times; the William Sugg Website states that 'From the statistics available it was considered that as a date (for the last lamp) […] 1968 would be the 'wisest compromise' (Sugg, C). In 1968 I had just entered my teens, but the crepuscular lamplighters left an abiding impression of mystery, which I explore in my poem 'The men who climbed tall ladders' which includes the lines:

> Atop tall ladders, they knew each phase of twilight;
> how it was brighter for longer at sea than on land.
> They were friends with the dusk, greeting the blue hour
> before sunrise when they quenched the iron lamps

The memory of the lamplighters somehow connects me to that long heritage back in the nineteenth century, redolent of coal fires and fog warnings on the River Mersey.

I was aged fourteen when my parents were re-housed by what was then Liverpool Corporation, in a refurbished tenement flat with an indoor toilet, hot water and bathroom. It was 1969, but one thing had not changed from the nineteenth century: the burden of the household budgeting fell firmly on my mother, and many a domestic quarrel was about monetary resources or rather the lack thereof. A measure of my maternal grandmother Rebecca's poverty was that when she died in 1950 no money was available for a headstone. She was simply provided with a brick bearing the plot number: 316. After research via the web-site *Friends of Anfield Cemetery* I was able to locate and visit the plot with one of my Donnelly cousins.[11] My poem 'In a cemetery' is an account of a cold, windy day, and a search for an unmarked grave. We made our discovery and pledged to erect a memorial in honour of our ancestor. Thus, the last three lines of the poem read:

> In this lacuna we can
> place our memoriam:
> *Rebecca, S. née Donnelly*

[11] https://friendsofanfield.com

Eighteen months after that search, I found myself reading the Irish poet Eavan Boland's memoir, in which she too is searching for her maternal grandmother's grave in a wind-blown graveyard, but cannot locate the headstone:

> I was astonished at how much I felt the small, abstract wound. A woman I had never met and never seen. […] Yet the indignity of her aftermath at this moment in this graveyard was one of the worst parts of her story. Five children. A life of work. […] And now she had no memorial because she had no name (Boland, E, 1995, pp.20-23).

I was almost relieved to read Boland's words, which mirrored my own feelings about my grandmother and confirmed that such metaphysical emotions are not unique. When my parents died within six months of each other, I inherited little of material value, and this is explored in 'What comes down' a poem which ends on a bitter-sweet note about my inheritance from my father:

> a love of books, of reading, from my father;
> which is a grand gift, especially when
> he had no other love on offer.

Women like my mother and her ancestors lived through momentous times; they survived wars and watched families feud and fall apart. Many children died in infancy; marriages collapsed under the weight of war and poverty, women were abandoned, men cuckolded. Yet the same women have remained largely invisible in academic histories up to and beyond the twentieth century. In her book *Outsiders Inside: Whiteness, Place and Irish Women (Gender, Racism, and Ethnicity)* Bronwen Walter writes:

> the absence of migrant Irish women from public discourse has been matched by a resounding silence in academic study […] emigrant women have been left

> almost entirely off the agenda […] this absence is especially marked on work on the Irish in Britain (Walter, 2022, p.2).

Part of the purpose of my collection is to imagine and voice some of the lost or unrecorded experiences of immigrant Irish women and their descendants. In 'Married Out: 1896' for example I visualise the life of my second-generation Irish, Catholic grandmother, who married out of her religion and community and the reasons why she may have done so:

> Rebecca married out. Out of the courts, where
> a corpse might not be moved for days, and a pig
> was fattened in a cellar. Where two of her sisters
> died in infancy, then a brother aged only four.

So began the ethnic fade of my grandmother's direct lineage.

Contemporaneous texts that witness the lives of working-class women in the nineteenth century are often shocking however sympathetic the chronologist. Friedrich Engels writes:

> A class which bears all the disadvantages of the social order without enjoying its advantages [...] who can demand that such a class respect this social order? [...] H. W. has three children, goes away Monday morning at five o'clock, and comes back Saturday evening; has so much to do for the children then that she cannot get to bed before three o'clock in the morning; often wet through to the skin, and obliged to work in that state. She said: "My breasts have given me the most frightful pain, and I have been dripping wet with milk" (Engels, 1845, pp.4-5)

Such women came to the attention of newspapers, pamphlets and pulpits often only when there was controversy or a news story which aroused the excitement of the public. As for personal records, it is almost impossible to imagine such hard-pressed, impoverished women having the time, money, or inclination to keep a journal; that was

a privilege mainly of the middle and upper classes. Some exceptions are recorded (Vincent, D. 1982; Burnett, J., Vincent, D, and Mayall D. eds. 1984) but the collators comment on the paucity of written works by women, the fact that few of those were published contemporaneously and that most even now are still in manuscript (Boos, F.S., 2017). Poetry by working-class women is beyond the scope of this research but I recommend an anthology edited by Florence S. Boos, who in her introduction considers whether it was a coincidence that 'Protestant women wrote so much of the working-class poetry I have found, despite the presence of so many poor Roman Catholic and Irish immigrants in Victorian Britain' (Boos, 2008, p.16). Boos conjectures that writing may have been suppressed for political reasons or simply lost if written in local dialect.

Nineteenth-century Liverpool-Irish women in need of income often became street hawkers of fruit, fish and vegetables. A small amount of income might be spent on alcohol, but some women paid weekly sums into a savings club. Amongst the reasons for this savings enterprise was the payment of fines for 'obstruction'. According to 'Police Intelligence' the *Daily Post* reported that women 'threw salt and verbal abuse' at passers-by who were not inclined to buy their wares.[12] The *Liverpool Catholic Herald* reports that one Annie Garvey of Irish descent, known as the Pier Head Squatter, 'spent forty years living alone in a hut on the landing stage selling oranges and apples up to her death'[13] (cited in Belchem, 2007, p.41). Liverpool-Irish women in more 'respectable' occupations sometimes found a controversial route to social mobility: a marriage proposal from a prosperous protestant man, in direct

[12] *Daily Post* (1865) 9th September
[13] *Liverpool Catholic Herald* (1914) 13th June

opposition to Catholic Church laws (*Lyceum,* 1894, cited in Belchem, 2007, pp. 41-42). Was this my grandmother's intellection of which man she should marry?

As Martha Kanya-Forstner's article 'Defining womanhood: Irish women and the Catholic church in Victorian Liverpool' clearly demonstrates, not only were the clergy anxious to avoid any such proselytisation of their flock, but there was also an emphasis on a woman's duty to inhabit a central place in keeping the Catholic family in a position of moral integrity and 'ensure the religious allegiance of future generations' (Kanya-Forstner, 1999, p.168). This applied equally to Catholic charitable foundations; the Church did not want their parishioners taking money from secular organisations such as the *Central Relief and Charity Organisation Society*, established in 1863, nor from other Christian charities. It was usually wives that the Catholic clergy or lay relief workers dealt with in assessing the genuine level of need in households, and the sobriety and regular attendance at Sunday Mass of the occupants. In other words, were they poor due to their own profligacy, or were they 'deserving poor'? (p.176). However, the imagined exemplary Catholic wife and the actuality of such existence was something of a dichotomy. Catholic Priest Father Bernard O'Reilly (1820-1907) wrote that the ideal woman would be in the mould of Mary, Christ's mother 'who knew how to make the poor home of Joseph so rich, so bright, so blissful in the eyes of men and angels' (O'Reilly, 2020, p.23) but the poor relief policies of the Catholic St. Mary's conference of the St. Vincent de Paul society were, as Kanya-Forstner notes 'designed to bridge the wide gulf between idealised vision of Catholic womanhood […] and the realities of women's lives in a poor parish in Liverpool' (Kanya-Forstner, 1999, p. 181).

The work of the conference was executed by a small group of laymen, usually of Irish descent, who referred to themselves as 'brothers' (Kanya-Forstner, 1999, p.

174). The brothers of the conference had access to women's homes and were able to witness personally the often dire living conditions. They were close to the people they aided in terms of social position; unlike more remote, wealthier Catholic benefactors, they were not cushioned from the threat of destitution. Not only did the conference provide tickets for coal and bread, and monetary assistance, it was individual clergy who would propose to the conference that women be given cash (essentially a start-up payment) to buy fruit, fish, and cheap crockery to hawk on the streets (pp. 182-183). Women also sold cheap second-hand clothing in the famous 'Paddy's Market' (a sobriquet for St. Martin's Market) a legacy which remained intact throughout the 1970s and 1980s, a jumble of shoes, clothes and fabric, sold off tables or even from the pavement. Women with barrows selling fruit and flowers were a common sight in Liverpool city centre until beyond the mid-twentieth century, and street selling continues albeit from stalls.

The women hawkers of the nineteenth century were rough-speaking, insolent and sometimes hard-drinking and as Kanya-Forster notes, their street presence caused government officials, law enforcers and religious leaders to consistently draw a connection between the hawkers and prostitution (1999, p.182). An LRO report confirms how basket women were fiercely protective of their chosen pitches and would not acquiesce to being ordered into allotted spaces to trade.[14] Whilst this did not conform to Christian or polite society's ideal of womanhood, the situation of women working outside the home was felt to be a practical and expedient method of keeping Irish women close to the Church. Kanya-Forstner concludes her 1999 article (p.185) with a story from writer Frank McCourt's memoir *Angela's Ashes*, when a woman seeking poor relief displays scant respect for the Catholic clergy by threatening to go to

[14] Local Responsible Officer (LRO) Head Constable's Special Report Book, 1875-1877, 7 May 1877.

the Quakers for help if the St. Vincent de Paul Society (in Limerick) would not assist her. In this account Nora Molloy walks away with three new pairs of boots for her children, having enjoyed a much frowned-upon cigarette whilst waiting on the Society steps. The character of Nora would surely not have been out of place in nineteenth century Liverpool, and her defiance of the 'rules' is perfectly encapsulated in McCourt's text:

> 'Ah sure, Nora Molloy, the Society don't like us sittin' on the steps. They want us to be standin' respectful against the wall'.
>
> 'They can kiss my arse' says Nora, the red-haired woman (McCourt, 2005, pp.64-5).

Reflecting on the living conditions of my Irish ancestors and the spirited women of the street sellers, I am, like Kanya-Forster compelled to quote the Reverend O'Reilly's emphasis on the core role of women in the home, this being both a material and spiritual obligation, including absolute obedience to husbands and fathers:

> What every Christian country needs most are these great-souled wives, mothers, and sisters, in the dwellings of our overburdened labourers; women for whom the roof above them and the four walls which enclose them are the only world they care to know, the little paradise which they set their hearts on making pleasant, sunny and fragrant for the husband (O'Reilly, 2020, p.24).

Half a century later, nothing had changed. Pat O'Mara was born in Liverpool in 1901 to an Irish woman Mary and her abusive husband. O'Mara's autobiography conveys extreme poverty, his father's drunkenness and subsequent violence towards his mother:

> The only reason she put up with the torture was because of her pregnancy and the rigid laws of the Catholic Church in the matter of marriage. When my mother was delivered of her first child, May, my father was lying drunk on the

> floor upstairs having exhausted himself beating her prior to the arrival of the bewildered mid-wife (O'Mara, 1933, p.21).

Eventually Mary sought an official police separation from Pat's father, unable to turn to the parish priest for help when compelled to leave her marriage. Whatever the circumstances, the Catholic Church's teachings on marriage were non-negotiable and Martha would have been advised to 'bear her cross'.

In my poem 'Married Out: 1896' I explore a young woman's desire to separate herself from her Liverpool-Irish heritage and leave the squalor of court housing; she dislikes the interference of the Church in working-class enclaves, particularly the priests who would visit homes, whatever the family income, with a view to ensuring attendance at Mass and if possible, provide a copper or two for the Church. I remember priestly visits to Catholic homes in the 1960s, usually unannounced, for just such purposes of fund-raising. In 'Married Out: 1896' the young woman knows she will not miss such intrusions:

> There's a lot to be said [...]
> For not having a priest squat in your parlour
>
> asking for money you don't have.

Following research into Liverpool-Irish lives I must conclude that some of the stories of womanly perfection which appear in O'Reilly's original 1883 text are apocryphal; they do not bear examination under the harsh light of nineteenth-century working-class reality (O'Reilly, 2020) .

At that time in Ireland, as the potato crop began to flourish again, the inhabitants of a decimated populace who had somehow avoided starvation, disease or emigration were attempting to restore communities and consider how they might gain independence from Great Britain, whose government had mostly failed to assist The Famine victims in any meaningful way until too late.

Chapter 3. *An Gorta Mór* (The Great Hunger) and the consequences of diaspora

As shown in previous chapters, there were multiple reasons over time why so many people left Ireland, and there is a clearly identifiable global Irish diaspora. William Safran writes:

> For many generations, the phenomenon of diaspora was dealt with only in connection with […] the exile of the Jews from the Holy Land and their dispersal […] diaspora (Galut) connoted deracination, legal disabilities, oppression, […] this community adjusted […] and became itself a centre of cultural creation. All the while, however, it continued to cultivate the idea of return to the homeland (Safran, 2005, pp. 36-60).

Safran refers to the definition of diaspora given in the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, published in 1937 prior to Germany's invasion of Poland and the subsequent events that scattered Jewish people once again (Safran, 2005, p.36). Since then, the word diaspora has been extended to include a range of peoples and situations, although the most prominent diasporas at least have two things in common: profound social upheaval and a longing for a homeland. Both the Jewish and the Armenian people, for example, experienced genocide in the twentieth century: for European Jews under Nazi Germany (United States Holocaust Museum) and other victims of the Nazis (Centre for Holocaust Information) and in the Turkish suppression of the Armenian minority in 1915-16 resulting in a loss of three quarters of their population of two million people (Kenny, 2013, Loc.261). Stuart Hall explores a third notable diaspora resulting from the Atlantic slave trade, opening a dialogue on cultural identity and displaced people and the concept of homeland. Enslaved African people were transported to the Caribbean and America where their children were born and remained, but Hall dismisses the idea of The Black Triangle visualised by Armet Francis and writes that

'His text is an act of imaginary unification' and that 'This Triangle is [...] "centred" in Africa. Africa is the name of the missing term [...] which lies at the centre of our cultural identity' (Hall, 2017, pp.1192-1193). Hall has reservations about this '*origin* of our identities' after four hundred years of 'displacement, dismemberment, transportation' therefore any sense of returning to Africa, writes Hall, is 'more open to doubt':

> The original Africa is no longer there. It too has been transformed. History is [...] irreversible. We must not collude with the West which [...] appropriates Africa by freezing it into some timeless zone of the primitive unchanging past. Africa must be [...] reckoned with by Caribbean people, but it cannot be [...] merely recovered. (Hall, 2017, p.1197).

The original Ireland also, is no longer there. The Famine exodus, particularly from the Irish-speaking southwest, has left a dwindling population of people who speak Irish on a daily basis (Ó Caollaí, 2023). Irish society has experienced an abrupt shift since the 1990s, and is notably divergent from The Constitution of Ireland, adopted in 1937, which was almost totally influenced by the social teaching of the Catholic Church and also conformed to the values of the majority of citizens at the time. The Church was considered to be the guardian of faith and morality; homosexuality and abortion were criminal offences. The Irish constitution can only be changed by referendum, and Irish voters legalised divorce in 1995, backed same-sex marriage in 2015 and repealed a ban on abortions in 2018. Ireland now clearly wishes to be, and be seen as a modern, liberal state rather than an agrarian economy with strict Catholic mores.

In a review in the New York Times of Sean Connelly's book *On Every Tide*, Fintan O'Toole says that 'in June 1963, President John F. Kennedy told a rapturous crowd in the county of Cork, "Most countries send out oil or iron, steel or gold, or

some other crop, but Ireland has had only one export and that is its people"' (O'Toole, 2020). The journalist reflects on how those who were part of that exodus might feel about President Kennedy's comment, writing that the remark was no doubt well-meant, but might have triggered objectionable memories. Between 1821 and 1901, six million men and women left Ireland for good. Between 1846 and 1926 Ireland's population halved to just over four million (Connolly, 2022, p.8). The reasons were three-fold: firstly, with the exception of Belfast in the North and Dublin in the South, much of rural Ireland was poor and underdeveloped; secondly, from the mid-eighteenth century a new western, industrialised economic world was developing: it needed labour, and the Irish could provide it; thirdly, between 1845 and 1852 the potato famine devastated Ireland (Connolly, 2022, p.9). In the nineteenth century Ireland was part of Great Britain, but not only did Britain do too little, too late, to help relieve the Irish people, the majority of British politicians and establishment figures placed the blame for the Irish population's dependence on the potato and subsequent starvation firmly on the rural poor. Starvation itself, however, was not the cause of most of the deaths. As Joel Mokyr writes 'Now, as in the past most famine victims die not of literal starvation, but of infectious diseases' (Mokyr and Ó Gráda, 2002, p.339).

. Whatever the debates, and they are many, (Connell 1965; Guinnane and Miller, 1997) about landlords, tenure and Irish land reform, the potato was an easy and nutritious crop to grow; it had a shorter than average growing season, thriving in poor soil and on smaller patches of land. This was not a strategy understood by the British. Patrick Brantlinger writes that '*The London Times* often compared the slothful, "potatophagous" Irish with the energetic, bread and meat-eating English. It claimed that "the potato blight (is) a blessing" which will teach the Irish the virtues of sexual

restraint, hard work, and being carnivorous' (Brantlinger, 2004, p.198). In response to this, the Irish Nationalist and journalist John Mitchel famously writes:

> But potatoes failed in like manner all over Europe, yet there was no famine save in Ireland. The British account of the matter, then, is, first, a fraud; second a blasphemy. The Almighty, indeed, 'sent the blight', but the English created the famine (Mitchel, 1869, p.596).

President Kennedy was in fact wrong in saying that Ireland had no material exports; during the famine years, Ireland under British rule continued to export grain, cattle and grain-based spirits whilst most of Ireland starved.[15]

The Great Hunger has not been forgotten; there is now a plethora of museums and exhibitions in Ireland dedicated to The Famine and the consequent Irish emigration, and there are many Famine memorials around the world. Historian Emily Mark-Fitzgerald explains:

> What's clear is that no singular 'memory' of The Famine exists: it has held different meanings for diverse groups, at various points in time. The history of The Famine's representation and presence in public space is in fact complex and highly variable (Mark-Fitzgerald, 2021).

Such memorials, built across the world from the nineteenth-century onwards (except, anomalously, in Ireland) reflect the changes in public perception of The Famine, the meanings and memories across the long reach of time. Why did Ireland delay erecting memorials? The oldest memorial in Ireland was erected in Ennistymon but not until August 20, 1995, the 150th anniversary of the tragedy. Camilla Orjuela is right to argue that there are reasons why making famine memorialisation tends to be difficult: 'narrative challenges, shame and competing traumas' (Orjuela, 2024, p.260).

[15] *The Irish Memorial* (https://irishmemorial.org/)

The seasonal 'Irish Famine Exhibition' in Dublin includes an audio format to enhance the fifteen-minute film of contemporaneous photographic images and poster rooms depicting The Famine. The words spoken by the ruling English establishment are voiced by actors, which when translated by the twenty-first century psyche are unwitting statements of self-condemnation. British civil servant and colonial administrator Sir Charles Trevelyan's attempts in *The Irish Crisis* (Trevelyan, 2018) to justify the economic arguments for the way in which he managed Irish Famine relief must certainly generate opprobrium. The following excerpt from a letter written by Trevelyan to a Colonel Jones on 2nd December 1846 confirms his lack of sympathy for the Irish 'The great evil with which we have to contend is not the physical evil of famine, but the moral evil of the selfish, perverse and turbulent character of the people' (Trevelyan, 1846, cited by Woodham-Smith, C. 1970, pp. 150-151). Compounding this attitude, the British government meted out harsh impositions on men, women and children who, already half-starved and diseased, were forced to build what came to be known as the 'famine roads' in order to receive relief. A passage in Thomas Gallagher's *Paddy's lament* explains how this worked:

> money appropriated by the English government […] was spent on labour that the law decreed had to be unproductive - that is, on the construction of bridges and piers having no purpose or necessity and on roads that began where there was no need for them and led to nowhere in particular (Gallagher, 1987, p.42).[16]

The famine roads and the Great Famine are topics that the Irish poet and literary critic Eavan Boland (1944-2020) has explored, for example in 'Famine Road' and 'Quarantine' (Boland, 2005, p.42 and p.282).

[16] An exception to this is the Healy Pass on the Beara Peninsula, now the R457 on modern maps.

Boland lived life as a semi-exile, educated in Dublin, London and New York; her father was an itinerant diplomat and her mother an expressionist painter. She divided her adult life between Palo Alto and Dublin, where she died.[17] Boland, whom *The Irish Times* refers to as 'a leading feminist light' (Hayes, 2023) writes about many aspects of womanhood, the scattering of the Irish nation across the world and laments the Irish people's lack of knowledge of their own history, obliterated by British colonialists. 'Writing in a Time of Violence' is a seven-poem sequence in Boland's poetry collection *In a Time of Violence* (1994) a volume of which was shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize, in which the Irish poet explores cultural artefacts over a period of time, which objects reveal something of the broader power relationships between England and Ireland. Boland maps the past and repeatedly returns to conversations about gender and nationality, class, and gender oppression. Each poem in the collection is concerned with an act of inscription, the sequence intertwining across locations and historical periods. As McMullen notes, this 'chronological expanse of the sequence suggests that to write at any time over the last three hundred years of Irish history is to write "in a time of violence" (McMullen 2000 p.498).

J.B. Krygier writes on cartography 'Within this process, "art" and "science" serve a functionally similar role, informing the different ways in which we come to know and re-know our human and physical worlds' (Krygier, 1995, Abstract). Maps and place play key roles in 'Writing in a Time of Violence' and Boland employs both in her exploration of the landscape and connections in Ireland's colonial and post-colonial history, specifically in the opening poem of the sequence: 'That the Science of Cartography is Limited'. A copy of the poem appears as the first page of print in *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine,* (Crowley, Smyth, and Murphy, eds. 2012) but what is

[17] Poetry Foundation https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/eavan-boland

curious is that an article by Smyth in *The Irish Examiner* has misprinted the poem's title as 'That the *Silence* of Cartography is Limited' (my italics). This typographical error becomes an inadvertent truth about cartographic maps, specifically that so much of Irish history contains silences. For example, the National School system was introduced into Ireland in 1831 by its colonial rulers, who as Robert Scally writes 'meticulously avoided the Irish language and history – except [...] to correct mis-guided myths and notions [...] It was expressly decreed that the lessons (in Geography) were to be given from the assigned text "*and no other source"'.* Maps were almost 'non-existent' among the townlands of 'Hidden Ireland' in the early nineteenth century and those of Ireland were 'the first such pictorialisation of the world around them the townland children had seen' (Scally, 1995, p.151). International political realities, for example America's independence from Britain in 1776, were misrepresented and maps were geographically inaccurate, primarily because of the use of Mercator projection which *inter alia* placed Great Britain at the centre of the world (Fletcher, 2023). On the cusp of The Famine that would re-order Irish society and landscape, Irish knowledge of what the rest of the world looked like, or routes of entry and exit, had been determined by their oppressors: the British government and their cartographers (McMullen, 2000). The opening of Boland's poem, with its run-on title, emphasises the continuation of this absence of knowledge:

> That the Science of Cartography is Limited
>
> \- and not simply by the fact that this shading of
> forest cannot show the fragrance of balsam,
> the gloom of cypresses,
> is what I wish to prove.

Boland's female speaker discovers a famine road and despite the physical presence of this and other roads built for the same purpose, she realises that contemporary maps of

Ireland bear no trace of them. The speaker's lover identifies this officially invisible road. Boland writes:

> When you and I were first in love we drove
> To the borders of Connacht
> And entered a wood there
>
> Look down you said: this was once a famine road.

In this stanza, the lovers' pastoral tryst is interrupted by a moment of cognition, yet what lies below is not only what McMullen refers to as 'the physical remnants of the lives of silent people' (McMullen, 2000, p.497) but also a crucial turn in the development of a lyric poet who nevertheless identified with hidden women: seamstresses, rural women, inmates of workhouses. As Christy Burns writes, 'The commonality that binds Boland to her female subjects is not a common literature, language or religion; it is what is radically available to all: sensation, seasonal shifts, and desire' (Burns, 2001, p.228).

'The Science of Cartography' is a form of admonition to the powerful men who create maps which purportedly reveal the world, but only as they wish people to see it. Boland is seeking to subvert the discourse of power revealed in authorised maps; the road exists, but its history is silenced by its absence from the map, and the speaker must look down 'at ivy and the scutch grass' to find it in the woodland. The speaker of the poem wishes to 'prove' that the official maps are inadequate by way of a written attack on the science. Yet what she writes is more than an objective, factual take-down of existing maps; as McMullen argues: 'The maps, histories, and the other public discourses through which Ireland has been imagined [are] inadequate to the task of proving what Boland has called elsewhere "the complicated human suffering"[18] that marks this cultural landscape' (McMullen, 2000, p. 497). To put it another way, the

[18]Boland, 1995, p.137

shading on a map denotes a forest, but maps do not, cannot, reveal everything: the memories, the hauntings, and the voices of those who suffered during The Famine. McMullen argues that 'Boland's deconstructive task is complicated by the rich sensory detail, shifting syntax and a deep subjective responsiveness in the lines that follow the announcement of her epistemological examination' (p.497). In other words, Boland's approach to the relationship between text and meaning is complex; there is something within the detail that appeals to the physical senses, the arrangement of words and unconventional line-breaks portray a deeply personal receptiveness which follows her decision to examine and understand the limits of what human knowledge is able, or is prepared to, reveal to us and what exists beneath. The poem continues:

> Relief Committees gave
> the starving Irish such roads to build.
>
> Where they died, there the road ended

The single line stanza, here, provides dramatic emphases to the connection between the building of the road by people who were already so weakened that they expired where they stood. The majority of such roads had no purpose except to satisfy the British government's capitalist principles of small state individualism, but 'became the material signposts to understanding the historiographic absence of townland tenants' (McMullen, 2000, p.496). The famine roads led to no village nor vantage point; their cartographical existence is obliterated, and Boland aims to fill that lacuna. The roads, the 'physical remnants of silent lives' remain unfinished 'like the decolonising process itself.' (p.498)

The final stanza tells us that:

> the line which says woodland and cries hunger
> and gives out among sweet pine and cypress
> and finds no horizon
>
> will not be there.

There is a tension, here, between the emotional intent of 'cries hunger' and the poem's lyric imagery; as Burns says in his comparison of Boland to W.B. Yeats, Boland 'attempts in her own writing to retain the lyricism of Yeats while resisting the romanticism and she achieves this by grounding her poems in everyday specifics' (Burns, 2001, p.218). In other words, a lovers' day trip to dappled, scented woodland creates a political yet personally expressive poem that is devoid of sentimentality.

'That the Science of Cartography is Limited' speaks of lost histories but with an intensely personal connection. I have used the word 'speaker' in the analysis, rather than suggest that the poem is based on Boland's bona-fide memory, but there is autobiographical content. Boland writes in her critical essay 'A Question' that the line that begins *When you and I were first in love* 'had an exact source for me' (Boland, 2000, p.23). Whilst the poem is ostensibly about the power of maps and the chasm between their revelations and occlusions, it expresses the vulnerability of humanity. Boland and her lover (in fact they were newly married) enter a hidden world of cruelty where no amount of love can save a family. 'The Question' Boland asks is multi-faceted 'who makes the destination, who marks the way, where is authority, and who will contest it? If there are no exact answers, at least there are questions. I hoped this poem would be one of them' (p.23). To paraphrase Boland, this is a dilemma which at some juncture all poets will speculate upon: should I be the person to write about this subject?

'The Death of Reason', the second poem in the sequence, opens by using longer lines to first create a sense of uncontrolled imperativeness, followed by an immediate shortening and tension:

> When the Peep-O-Day Boys were laying fires down in
> the hayricks and seed-barns of a darkening Ireland,
> the art of portrait-painting reached its height

across the water.
The fire caught.

The poem conveys a point in time where violence exists under the fragile bubble of the English enlightenment which ruptures to reveal the repressive regime in Ireland, a regime that supports the masquerade of the era and the subsequent genteel expressions of what is known as the 'age of reason' in the long eighteenth century (McMullen, 2000). 'The Death of Reason' begins with a description of guerrilla tactics and arson by Protestant vigilantes known as the Peep-O-Day Boys against their rural Catholic neighbours in Ireland, but in a surprising turn moves to an image of fashionable art 'across the water'. In the 1780s the 'Peep-O-Days Boys' were all-powerful, claiming that 'they were simply enforcing the Penal Laws reneged upon by the gentry' (Foster, 1989, p.272). As this violence was being perpetrated, the art of portraiture in England became renowned across the world. Portraiture has long been about power, once the preserve of royalty and tyrants, but in the eighteenth century, the merchant classes also gained access to money and influence (RP Website). As McMullen argues, Boland 'contrasts the violence in the provinces with culture in the capital' (McMullen, 2000, p.506). The activities of the Protestant rural marauders are an encompassment of 'a darkening Ireland' which includes the preceding and subsequent decades of repressive colonial rule and the defeat of Irish nationalists. As fires burn in Ireland and threaten to spread to the distant metropolis, the poem turns to focus upon 'the incongruously serene and apparently apolitical interior scene' (p.506)

And she climbed the stairs. Nameless composite.
Anonymous beauty-bait for the painter.
Rustling gun-coloured silks.
To set a seal on Augustan London.
And sat down.
The easel waits for her
and the age is ready to resemble her
and the small breeze cannot touch that powdered hair.
That elegance.

But I smell fire.

Boland's style here produces a sense of anger never far below the surface; the end-stopped lines, the attempt to control the poem: 'And sat down'. The writer and reader pause, before words spill out again, and the poet herself enters the scene to, as McMullen suggests, fan the 'self-destructive flames of political violence'. This seemingly untouchable woman with powdered hair appears to stand in the centre of a metaphorical see-saw with the violent uproar of religion and colonialism at one end and the epoch of scientific reasoning and serenity at the other; if the age (of reason) "is ready to resemble her", then surely chaos will not prevail. The 'unknown beauty', as McMullen writes, seemingly the 'antithesis of political violence', rustles "gun-coloured silks"' and 'is exhibited by Boland as the woman as both a justification and assurance of political unrest'. She is, like the art which places her on a pedestal, both the justification and the redaction of Britain's chaotic and barbaric dominance of Ireland. The violence is 'vindicated' in both public and private, and in the genteel spaces of the home (McMullen, 2000, pp.506-507). From my own perspective, the image of this rarefied woman suggests both femininity and disguise in the form of 'silks' which are the colour of guns, of weapons. The word 'rustles' becomes the muffled, crackling sound of distant gun-fire or a menacing footstep in dry leaves but might also play on the meaning of the word as to 'round up and steal', as in the 'Peep O'Day Boys' who allegedly broke into Catholic homes at day-break to steal weapons (Powell, 2005, p.249).

Anne McClintock observes that while women are not part of the public face of (Irish) nationalist struggle, they are absorbed into the 'national body politic' as its symbolic (feminine) limit, a construction of passivity for nation as woman in contrast to the role of men who are in fact oppressive systems of authority 'contiguous with

each other and with the national whole' (McClintock, 1997, p.90). McClintock asserts that 'military violence and the authority of a centralized state borrow on and enlarge the domestication of gender power within the family' (p.93) and from this, the 'nameless composite' in Boland's poem can then be recognised as the embodiment of the home narrative on which depends British imperialism. The sitter, McMullen writes, becomes 'the metaphorical equivalent for Anglo-Irish and British colonial culture of the Irish nationalist's Rosaleen' (p.507).[19] Both cultures have objectified women into an expression of a national ideal; whatever her privilege, the British 'anonymous beauty-bait' has also been violated and de-humanised. She is anonymised, occluded and controlled by a domesticity which is underpinned and endorsed by imperial domination and feminine subordination to the patriarchy, just as 'Dark Rosaleen' was a 'young rose whose bloom could only be restored by the blood of her defenders […] a silent, suffering object of patriotic desire' who became submissive to male authority and Church by way of legislation (McMullen, 2000, p.500).

Boland deconstructs the symbiotic relationship between state power and domestic patriarchy and as McMullen notes, the dialogue between 'the domestic and artistic' conversations and debates of the time 'supply "kindling for the flames"'. The political fire she (Boland) can smell is licking not just at 'the lintel/the door/the canvas/and at her mouth/[…] but also at curve and pout/of supple dancing and the couplet rhyming […] the cabinet-maker setting his veneers in honest wood/'.

My reading is that the fire of rebellion has spread from agrarian Ireland to destroy British complacency at the level of government, through to the artisan worker and the art and beauty at the idealised domestic heart of the nation. At the poem's conclusion are familiar themes 'borrowed from two separate revolutionary

[19] Mangan, J. C. (1847) 'Dark Rosaleen' https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50353/dark-rosaleen

vocabularies': the symbolic burning of the British 'big house' by Irish Nationalists, and the destruction of 'the angel in the house' (Patmore, 1858) to bring about the enfranchisement of women. 'The Death of Reason' presents us with a beautiful wealthy Englishwoman who is herself an object, in this case of portraiture that manifests as peculiarly non-sexual. The fire of public outrage in Ireland which encroaches on her, 'licks at her mouth/…curve and pout' as if she were no more than a wax sculpture to be consumed.

> as her hem scorches and the satin
> decoration catches fire. She is burning down.
> As a house might. As a candle will.
> She is ash and tallow. It is over.

The death of the age is announced with finality, in blunt sentences. It is unarguable. The eighteenth century, its pretentious mythologising of 'the age' is dead. Its grip on the popular imagination has collapsed. History will be read in a different way.

In the third poem of the sequence 'March 1, 1847. By the First Post', a young, rich English woman from an Ascendancy estate is writing to an absent 'Etty' who is concerned with the delivery of a fine dress. The scribe recalls picnics and teas which she laments are over 'for now', as all everyone talks about is famine, which makes life in Meath 'dull'. As she confides in her letter:

> *London may be dull in this season.*
> *Meath is no better I assure you.*
> *I go nowhere–*
> *–but a cloth*
> *sprinkled with bay rum & rose attar*
> *is pressed against my mouth.*

She also recalls a scene when out driving with 'Mama' when they see a (dead)

> '*woman lying across the Kells Road with her baby -*
> *..in full view.*
> *[...]*
> *and poor Mama was not herself all day.*

In this poem, Boland ventriloquises as an upper-class woman in order to accuse her. The woman shields her mouth, her face and eyes, all her sensory faculties, from the horror of famine, surely an analogy of the British wishing to ignore the devastating deaths many believe they had helped to perpetrate. Yet the political realities were complicated; Colm Tóibín has underlined the fact that in the aftermath of The Famine, divisions within the 'Irish nation' – especially class divisions – were passed over in silence, while blame was focused on the English and the Ascendancy (Tóibín, 2001, p.9). Such a reaction is probably natural, as is an inclination toward cultural amnesia.

One must assume that Boland chose the date of the letter, 1847, to denote the worst of The Famine years known as Black '47. Economic historian Joel Mokyr, although providing a scientific rather than a political reason as to 'Why Ireland Starved', nevertheless asserts that 'Most serious of all, when the chips were down in the frightful summer of 1847, the British simply abandoned the Irish and let them perish […] Ireland was not considered part of the British community' (Mokyr, 1985, pp. 291-2). McMullen writes that Boland's decolonising poetry 'constructs an Irish past that is not definitive, a national identity that is multiply inflected by class, sexuality, and gender, a border between public and private that is insistently traversed' (McMullen, 2000, p.515). Put simply, the past is not 'black and white'. Boland the feminist is also Boland the Irish poet. She has motives other than infiltrating the 'patriotic nationalist discourse' (p.515). Boland will write the decolonising political poem by opening up the silences within the historic Irish poem and filling the historiological spaces sustained for so long (Boland, 1995, pp. 200-201).

'By the First Post' feels utterly detached from the writer yet reads like a vivid memory: women of the Ascendancy in their carriage on a public road, crossing paths, quite literally, with what should be the most private, intimate moment of all: death. The

young woman in the poem who is writing to 'Etty' has a learnt, girlish sexuality, her mother exuding a supposedly feminine sensitivity which is ultimately uncaring, whilst the Irish mother and her baby become mere objects of repulsion. Within the first and third poems of the sequence, Boland presents us with the accounts of two contrasting women who reveal a diverse processing of events: one who understands the ghosts of place and suffuses the lacunas in Irish history with meaning, another ensconced in her privilege and so terrifyingly careless of the life of another woman and her child. Behind them both the 'age of enlightenment' with its emphasis on rationality is seen to be hollow and uncaring in its practical application to everyday lives.

In the west of Ireland, some people 'claim to be haunted still by the silences, and absences and emptiness that the Famine left' (Tóibín, 2001, p.9). If, as Tóibín implies, it is difficult for most people to have a clear and complete understanding of the emotional claims of people whose ancestors were part of highly distressing events, he refers readers to a quotation by the then-Taoiseach Enda Kenny who identified the 'power of Famine atavisms' today:

> As their descendants, we carry the generational memory of *An Gorta Mór*, deep within us. It's in how we stop momentarily when we hear summer blight warnings on the radio; it's in the coldness in the back of the neck at the particular smell of a bag of potatoes that has spent too long in the cupboard (Hand, 2014).

I have tried to capture some of that shared trauma in 'Hidden things' – a trip to County Cork over 20 years ago, the speaker unaware of its Famine history, concerned only with her own secrets:

> But now it is out of the bag, the back
> of the store cupboard, and Pandora's box
> is open to reveal the smell of rotten potato,

The poems of Eavan Boland explore the private aspects of womanhood contained in political history; in my collection, ‘Oceans of goodbyes’ is an example of how wider historical events can inform personal connections in that it was conceived as Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022.

The poem seeks to imagine war, displacement and colonisation, but is specifically an examination of women at war, sometimes with themselves. In this poem I endeavour to encapsulate the idea of proprietorial men with power and money who enjoy having a beautiful woman in the background whilst stripping her of independence, as being akin to the absent landlords of Ireland:

> landlords who rule us, and we end up living
> in their country because they have left ours
> with nothing.

Boland was a feminist of whom Burns says ‘has learned the importance of lost histories, both personal and social. Irish history, as it has often been written, rarely addresses women's experiences, and in its poetry women's daily, domestic lives are kept from view’ (Burns, 2001, p.217). I bring real-life observations of women’s lives to the page, for example in ‘Sorry, not sorry’:

> Worn-down mothers with stained teeth
> placed babies in cots, with only newspaper beneath
> their near-naked bodies until the nappies dried.

I remember that working-class domestic scene I witnessed with absolute clarity. Does such a tableau of poverty force its way into the subconscious mind to lodge there forever? Beneath the 1960s seedy glamour of the Liverpool poets, the fresh young pop-stars and two very successful football teams lay strata of grim realities: too many children, not enough money. The poem is a rather disingenuous apology to my mother for not giving her grandchildren.

Liverpool, like many diaspora cities, is influenced by migrant or outside cultures; for example, John Lennon is unapologetic about the Beatles having been influenced by black music from America (Taysom, 2020). Liverpool also had the first Chinatown quarter in Europe which developed from 1860 onwards. However, as John Belchem writes, Liverpudlians have a strong sense of belonging to a city with a distinct identity, or to put it another way 'exceptionalism and apartness' (Belchem, 2006a p. xxviii). This a complex topic. For instance, whilst fourth and fifth generations of Irish may or may not identify themselves as such, the city voted 58.2% in favour of remaining in the EU and an article by Andy Bounds in *The Financial Times* (2020) writes that Liverpudlians have Irish roots and wish to retain cultural and economic links with Ireland. That said, the Facebook Group 'Scouse Irish' and the banners at football stadia are more specific. I write about this phenomenon in 'Trading'

> My memories chant just as
> they did on the terraces
> *Irish blood, Scouse heart*

'Trading' evolved as a comparison of middle-class life to the experiences of 1960s and 1970s Liverpool. The speaker fears she will never have cultural capital and will always be that hyphenated hybrid, longing for a view of the sea.

Chapter 4. The 1960s 'Liverpool is the Centre of the Conscious Centre of the Universe.'

In her article 'Work, Culture and Gender: The Making of Masculinities in Post-War Liverpool' (2004), Pat Ayers documents the rebuilding of the post-war city and economic changes, and how from that process there evolved a restructuring of masculinities, albeit one which did little to change the patriarchal domination which existed in the home and workplace. Whilst my focus is on the experiences and lives of women, the context of masculinity is crucial. In an earlier text, Ayers observes that many working-class men in Liverpool, from the nineteenth-century up until the outbreak of the Second World War, had a culture of masculinity where work was centred on port employment and seafaring, which resulted in a persistent culture of casualism; masculinity 'concentrated on employment, family and religion as prominent sites in its construction' (Ayers, 1999, p.66). In the immediate post-war period however, changes in employment possibilities, housing, and the advance of consumerism influenced the dynamics of masculinity. (Ayers, 2004, p.154). Ayers focuses on those Liverpudlians living in the North End of the city, and who were mostly working-class, white and Roman Catholic and although Ayers does not say this, were almost certainly descendants of the Liverpool-Irish diaspora.

The privileges attached to being male were entrenched and as masters of adaptation, the men of those communities were able to shape their personalities to the new post-war welfare state promised by the Labour government (Timmins, 2018, Loc.767), whilst remaining the gender that retained the power of choice. While referring to secondary research centred on such traditional masculinities, I will demonstrate the effect of these power structures on women's lives and discuss the changes working-class women experienced in the new industries of Liverpool and in

the home, which often operated in parallel with the changes in masculinity. In the course of this research, I developed the idea of exploring my own lived experiences of that time creatively. Wider reading resurfaced childhood memories which I explored in my poems 'Spring wedding, 1963' and 'Sorry, not sorry'. They evoke a phenomenon I refer to as 'the decade of weddings' during the baby boom of the 1960s, and the limited aspirations of many working-class women. In this culture the apogee of a woman's life was to find a 'good' man, followed by marriage and children. Observation persuaded me, however, that marriage was not always happy-ever-after, as I express in the poem 'Sorry, not sorry':

> I was told to dream of That Day, yet as I watched
> confetti and hope drifted away, one child became five
> and fathers eyed their daughters' teenage friends.

But as the pre-war casualised working practices in Liverpool diminished, so did the accepted sense of male autonomy and control.

In the post-war economic boom, there was a move to full employment, rise of the trades unions and men who felt empowered to take collective action in terms of wages, conditions and status in the work-place, and who self-identified as *working-class* (Ayers, 2004). During this short-lived prosperity, which included the port economy of the city, casual workers were in fact working regularly, although work bottlenecks meant there were lean periods. Younger men had the option of seafaring; favourable trading conditions meant a choice of ships, and how long to stay ashore. The labour market was strictly divided along gender lines and men developed a new sense of empowerment: strong, working-class men who had emerged from the experience of war. Already dominant in the home, men now engaging in skilful but heavy, hazardous work developed an ego which was 'essentially male' (p.156).

Alan Johnson in an unpublished essay argues that 'Liverpudlians felt themselves and their city to be important on the world stage […] footloose, free-spoken, respecting only those who earned it […] consuming riches when ashore' (Johnson, p.40 cited in Ayers, 2004, p.156).[20] Tony Lane qualifies this in *Liverpool: City of the Sea* in that the colourful stories of seamen, the drinking and womanising, promotes 'a freewheeling life of adventure and independence' (Lane, 2015, Loc.1413). However, to paraphrase Lane, what was important was the essence of how men self-identified through such stories, rather than their literal truth (Loc. 1404). Lane also declares that despite such attitudes being formed from male experiences and conceptions, its translation into everyday life was identical to behaviour and attitudes in (Liverpudlian) men and women 'both being equally assertive and defiant in their refusal to bend the knee to anyone' (Loc.1418). As Lane argues, however, women's lives did not mirror those of men. Whereas men could largely choose where to work and when and how they disposed of their money, women were generally in charge of the household and more skilled than men in the art of every-day monetary survival.

Jon Murden, writing about change and challenges in Liverpool, considers the new factories which had been opening in Liverpool since the 1940s and 1950s, followed by the expanding car industry in the 1960s which gave both men and women the opportunity for reasonably well-paid, full-time work in the conventional economy (Murden, 2006b, pp.407-409). Change was not painless; Liverpool men were politically aware, astute and unmalleable despite the lack of organised labour movements in industries new to the city. Men believed that 'walking out' was the correct response to grievances, although in theory this behaviour was more aligned to

[20] 'I remain in debt to Alan Johnson for long conversations when we worked together and for his generosity in sharing with me his analysis of post-war Liverpool'. (Ayers, 2004, p.164)

those working (on Merseyside) in an atmosphere of job insecurity and irregular pay (Meegan, 1989, pp. 217-219). One woman recalled of her husband: 'He'd walk off the job at the drop of a hat […] his mate, not him, mind you, had been picked on for something […] and he stepped in' (Ayers, 2004, p.157). [21]

This type of unofficial action might result in wage-loss or dismissal, rebounding on the man's wife and family. As Ayers notes, managers at Ford Motor Company sent out a warning in 1965 to 2,600 employees after absenteeism doubled. The same week, mediators were sent into AC Delco, a components manufacturer, 'to mediate between the company and its employees for the same issue'. Employees appeared to regard the working week as Tuesday to Thursday. (*Liverpool Daily Post,* 1965, cited by Ayers, 2004, p.157) Despite the changes in employment, masculinity remade itself without damaging the male ego. Men strutted at strike meetings, fluffed-out their feathers in the 1960s Liverpool scene, and planned industrial action in dockers' clubs, pubs and works canteens. Huw Beynon recalls how trades unions activists, most aged under thirty, had little respect for authority:

> They wore sharp clothes; suits with box jackets [...] They walked with a slight swagger [...] They were born and brought up in the city that produced The Beatles and had always known near-full employment [...] They [...] respected tradition but seemed no less bound by it (Beynon, 1973, p.70).

Despite Liverpool's projected reputation for social justice, there were divisions within the brotherhood; religious schisms, homophobia and racism were the norm and 'perhaps most significantly, local black men were excluded' (Ayers, 2004, pp. 158-9). The working-class men who felt in control of their own destiny and of the parameters

[21] Ayers interview with PW born 1940

of male identity had no intention of surrendering the privileges which accompanied white, heterosexual masculinity.

The domestic role of men in terms of their masculinity was complex. Marriage and fatherhood implied an acceptance of responsibility for maintaining their wives and children, the man being 'the breadwinner' and typically the sole or main source of income for the family. In the initial stages of the post-war world, 'the title of "breadwinner" had a literal meaning' (Ayers, 2004, p.159). Post-war, unlike the time of the inter-war Great Depression, there was full employment, regular and predictable wages and improvements in real wage levels which 'made breadwinning a realistic aspiration for local men' (p.160). However, those improvements to earnings did not always filter down to their families; whilst most men understood that their responsibility as wage-earner was to support their family, they did not always feel that they must do so (p.160). This control of income was an essential part in the composite make-up of male identity and impacted greatly on women. J.B. Mays writes on married but socially immature young men:

> So many still retain the mental outlook of adolescence and have little idea of the degree of adjustment demanded by the marital relationship or of the sacrifices entailed in parenthood. The amount of personal spending money a young man requires is often staggeringly high, many of them demand half their earnings, the equivalent of the whole expenditure of the family housekeeping' (Mays, 1956, p.92-93).

In other words, it was the man's decision as to how his income was divided; 'The way in which the housekeeping money is spent is largely the woman's field, but he will expect her to give him adequate meals and the standard of comfort he requires' (Mays, 1956, p.86). Ayers provides an example of this in her collective interview with the

Murphy family (GR and siblings) who grew up in the north end of Liverpool in the 1950s. To summarise, Mrs. M's 'essential problem was that her (seaman) husband's […] "needs" did not coincide with hers. Each time he paid off after a trip […] partying and general profligacy […] took precedence over the longer-term needs of his family' (Ayers, 2004, pp. 160-161).

To some extent the construction of new towns and factory-based industries changed the male/female dynamic of the family. The dockland and all-male Labour Clubs were not present in these hinterlands; married women were now, by law, entitled to work, albeit often part-time to allow household duties to be completed. Although some men assisted with household matters it was not an equal division of labour. Whilst this inequality was not confined to Liverpool, Ayers notes that Liverpool men 'had a sense of self that had a particularly local slant' (2004, p.164). Arthur Brittan writes:

> Gender inequality […] like all historical constructs [...] is an expression of human interests and rationalities. Why should most men start from the 'incorrigible proposition' that their biology gives them greater power than women? A very simple answer is that it is in men's interests to do so (Brittan, 1989, p.43).

Ayers concludes that 'economic restructuring did nothing to challenge the status, privileges, rights and priorities of men relative to women in either the workplace or the home' (2004, p.164). I explore this inequality which existed irrespective of whether a wife had her own wage in 'Bert and Betty: 1960s slum clearances, Liverpool'. Betty has a part-time job, and is badly nourished yet overweight:

> He liked fried eggs, and fish suppers on Fridays;
> she lived on chip butties and money-worries,
> the disparity of her pay.

My status as spectator to adult lives at that time would not lead me to contest either Ayers' or Brittan's conclusions and my poetry also addresses the micro-aggressions, body-shaming and in some cases violence that some men routinely subjected their wives to, for example, 'Plain thoughts' and 'All I did was feed the cats'.

Despite male hegemony, some women managed to pursue truly successful careers. Two such Liverpool women from separate genres of art and culture were Cilla Black and Beryl Bainbridge. The two were very different in terms of background, if not income, but both were products of a social and cultural catalyst. Away from the north-end docklands and satellite towns of Liverpool, a new artistic era was emerging during the 1960s, centred around the southern part of the city. The now-defunct newspaper the *Liverpool Daily Post* reported in 1967 'The society which is evolving up there behind Hope Street is unique, no other city in Britain has an area with such a high density of artistic and intellectual talent' (Neilson, 1967). In an article for *The Big Issue,* Claire Bucknell explains how in the 1960s, poetry became 'cool' (Bucknell, 2013). In Liverpool, the same adjective also applied to local pop music, in particular The Beatles, and to art and jazz. Bucknell reports on the poet Adrian Henri talking about folk club evenings 'where the girls on the front row […] were the same girls you could glimpse at the Cavern Club, the heart of the city's rock scene' (Bucknell, 2013). 'Girls' - that is teenagers and young women - were seldom centre stage; Christine Feldman-Barrett's article on the overlooked existence of girl-bands in the 1960s 'From Beatles Fans to Beat Group' confirms that 'The genre's (rock and pop music) masculinisation accounts for why scholarship on mid-1960s all-girl rock bands remains scant. Clearly, such bands do not fit into this established narrative of rock music' (Fieldman-Barrett, 2013). The idea of all-female bands such as The Liverbirds was something of a novelty; the band were sarcastically told by John Lennon that 'Girls don't play guitars' (McGlory,

Saunders, 2024, p.53). For the most part, girls were in the audience, not on the stage. An exception to this was a cluster of British female singers, including Liverpool-born Beryl Marsden, real name Hogg, and Liverpool-Irish Priscilla White aka Cilla Black. Many female artists at that time were given stage names; Cilla Black's was the closest to her real name. Black went on to become a household name, but in the early 1960s it might have been Marsden, one of ten children, who went on to greater success. She and Black are often mentioned on Merseyside in the same context, and with rumours of rivalry. *The Beatles Story* (Blog, 2020) describes how Marsden had worked with Rod Stewart and Mick Fleetwood, and all-girls band The She-Trinity; in the 1980s she toured with Martha Reeves and the Vandellas. Unlike Cilla Black, Marsden is not a household name, but when asked about this by Black's biographer, Marsden says 'Cilla is a family entertainer – always has been – while I'm more of a singer. Making it isn't about making a million pounds but being happy with what you do (Thompson, 1988, p.54).

In reality, their difference in fortunes may have been the result of Black's ambition and self-confidence, and the ministrations of her first manager Brian Epstein. Cilla claimed that Epstein gave her the name Black because it was 'strong and sexy' but it was probably an error in her recording contract that stuck (Thompson, 1988, p.50). The daughter of a dockworker, all of Black's great-grandparents were from Ireland, and she lived in the working-class Liverpool-Irish enclave around Scotland Road. Her protective family felt they could trust middle-class Epstein and despite the impresario's secret life of alcohol, drugs and 'rough trade', they made the right decision (p.49). Black was adored by her manager; as Du Noyer writes 'attached as he (Epstein) was to The Beatles, he was equally devoted to his only female signing, Cilla Black' (Du Noyer, 2017, p.41). Epstein promised her success and delivered it. Black

was not forced to change her accent, her image, or who she was for the stage; according to Douglas Thompson, however, Black's Liverpudlian accent did not make her popular in London or Manchester 'From early days, she learnt to speak differently' (Thompson, 1998, p.4). This account varies with Black's contention that 'I've never lost my Liverpool accent, and I never want to' (Black, 2015, p.144). It was Black who appeared to have control during her professional relationship with Epstein; when he appeared to be ignoring her as his lifestyle encroached on his work, Black said she would find another manager. Epstein begged her not to leave him and she stayed until his premature death in 1967, just as he had negotiated a contract with the BBC for a Television series, *Cilla* (Thompson, 1998, p.77).

After Epstein's death, Black's husband, Bobby Willis, took over her career and micro-managed her professional life. After Willis's death from cancer in 1999, Black's friend and fellow-Liverpudlian, broadcaster Paul O'Grady, was quoted in a documentary:

> She'd never done anything for herself, to tell you the truth. She'd never used a hole in the wall to get cash out of, she didn't have a clue. She'd never been on a bus, she didn't know how to order a taxi for herself, Bobby had done everything for her. (Sulway, 2020).

Cilla Black was an enigma: a fiercely hard-working woman who adored the limelight and never doubted her talent, but she 'wanted to have children. Desperately' (Thompson, 1998, p.111). Yet six weeks after the birth of her first child, Robert, she was back at work, 'driven by something that was calling me back to performing' (Black, 2009, p. 203). Following a career hiatus, in the early 1980s Black emerged phoenix-like from the ashes, most famously with her show 'Blind Date'. Again, the enigma: audiences thought of 'Cilla' as their friend, as a Liverpool girl still, but the

reality was vastly different. Black's family stayed firmly in Liverpool, while she created a 'castle' elsewhere for her, Bobby and their children. Ian Inglis writes on Black:

> Her stated admiration for Margaret Thatcher, her support for the Conservative Party during the 1992 General Election, and allegations that she had deserted her working-class Liverpool roots made her, for a time, a mildly controversial figure, and in 1994 Liverpool's John Moores University's proposal to award her an honorary degree was dropped after student protests (Inglis, 2016, p.261).

Despite her ambition and success in a world still dominated by men, on the subject of feminism in a BBC interview Black answered the question 'Do you think it's a myth that women can have it all?' by saying:

> Well, I did it, didn't I? I have it all. I'm living proof. You know, when people ask me do I believe in feminism - well, I didn't even know I was a feminist. I was the top of the bill; I've always been the top of the bill. So, I don't know what equality is (Jamieson, 2014).

This statement can be translated in several diverse ways, and I would argue that that ambiguity could also be applied to Mrs. Bobby Willis. 'Our Cilla' worked ferociously to stay at the top of show-business for forty years, and like Madonna needs only one name for recognition; and yet as her researcher I find that she remains unknowable. Her autobiography (Black, 2009) and later memoir (Black, 2015) are written in an almost-illusory, exclamation-strewn style that shrieks 'look at me!' but Black at least is always honest about being an attention seeker (Black, 2009). Despite being unmoved by Black as an entertainer, she is an interesting subject for my thesis as a working-class woman of Irish descent in Liverpool, whose career, although uncommonly stellar, was

indicative of the transitions in gender politics taking place more generally in the post-war period.

In the 1960s the same patriarchal and social criteria were applied to female poets and writers as to musicians, despite the emergence of prominent British women writers, for example Iris Murdoch, Angela Carter and Margaret Forster, whilst across the Irish Sea, Edna O'Brien was making waves. One such important writer, who was as suspicious of feminism as Cilla Black, was Liverpool-born Beryl Bainbridge. Bainbridge said in an interview:

> I've never been drawn to the feminist movement. I was brought up to believe that men had little to do with the home or children – except to bring in the money. I've never been put down by a man, unless I deserved it, and have never felt inferior. It seems to me that a mutually beneficial relationship between a man and woman requires the man to be dominant. *A sensible woman will allow the man to think he is the most important partner* (my italics) (Guppy, 2000).

In Guppy's interview, Bainbridge describes how her once-wealthy father had married an upper-class woman, but that by the time she was born her father was bankrupt, the big house and maid gone, and her mother had taken over the family finances. Her mother was as disappointed as one might expect; nevertheless, Bainbridge was able to attend Merchant Taylors' public school (from which she was expelled) and to take elocution lessons to rid her of any Liverpool accent.

Many of Bainbridge's novels are notably dark: comic but horrifying. Set in suburban Liverpool, her first manuscript in 1967, entitled *Summer of the Tsar,* was rejected by several publishers despite her obvious talent. Frustrated by the equivocation

of John MacDougall at Chapman and Hall she pressed him for an explanation. He replied:

> I quite understand that the newspaper case only served to set your imagination on its way […] your picture of two girls looking in an existentialist sort of way for experience is a logical development of the theme.[22] But what repulsive little creatures you have made them, repulsive almost beyond belief! (King, 2016, pp.203-204)[23].

The manuscript was finally published in 1972 as *Harriet Said*, her third published book.

Like Cilla Black, Bainbridge was an enigma. Her image was typically bohemian; the perennial cigarette in her fingers, she was thin and hard-drinking and appeared formidable. Yet, she allowed her relationships with men to dominate her life with often disastrous results, impacting on her health, work, finances, and her children. In a letter to Judith Shackleton in October 1963 she wrote 'I go on making messy relationships, fail, and fling myself into the next one. I seem to have an intense craving for narcissistic gratification. I have to get love by all sorts of means' (King, 2016, Loc. 4). In my poem 'Nothing' the speaker displays a similar form of narcissism, an almost moral nihilism when faced with her illicit lover's abandonment:

> I woke again....
>
> I was already
> silently weeping.
>
> You lay sleeping
> I didn't think
> of you
> but of him

[22] A murder in New Zealand
[23] Letter from Chapman and Hall, 1st January 1958

As the Booker Prize web-site attests, Bainbridge achieved great professional acclaim and yet Dame Beryl DBE died of cancer, a poor tolerance of alcohol and possibly loneliness.[24] Although nominated five times for the Booker Prize, she was never the winner and in the modern parlance her private life might be described as 'a car crash'. This is a stark contrast to the highly focused Black, a fierce defender of her family who used the men in her life as a support-group (Black, 2005, pp.355-356). Yet like Black, Bainbridge was a self-confessed attention-seeker from an early age, although the writer used lies, false anecdotes, and told only the part of her story she wanted to tell about herself, rather than entertaining the room. (King, 2016, p.7). King cites Bainbridge as saying it was 'because people listened. You got some attention that way' (p.8).[25] She was also quite capable of creating a furore, which often showed her in a bad light, including pillorying the Liverpool accent which should be 'wiped out' (Bainbridge, cited in Doig, 2009). Most damaging were her remarks about such subjects as rape and child abuse which she claimed were commonplace and nothing to make a fuss about (King, 2016, p.37). Bainbridge had herself been raped in the 1950s but never spoke about it. As King writes: 'Beryl was [...] 'in denial' and in denying that rape or abuse had a damaging psychological effect on others, she persuaded herself that she was unaffected by it too' (p.38). The idea of buried trauma crystallised into the idea of a poem exploring the dilemma of denial. In 'Days of Zeus' a holiday fling starts when a young (inebriated) woman is raped and deals with it by telling herself it was consensual:

> She laughs with her friends that they should have
> taken better care of her, and they give her the side-eye.
> After all, she goes back for more.

[24] https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-prize
[25] Quote from *Authors Lives'* British Library sound recording (Track 2, December 2008)

This self-delusion is a way of feigning control of a situation. In a 2014 magazine interview, actress Joan Collins alleges that she was date-raped aged seventeen by the actor Maxwell Reed, then aged thirty-one. Too guilty to tell her parents, she married Maxwell two years later despite 'hating' him (*Marie Claire*, 2014).

I could never imagine Black and Bainbridge in the same room, and yet, both women represent the possibilities for women in the sixties to succeed professionally, despite the gender gap, and for that reason it is fascinating to make comparisons. In the underground but very much burgeoning Arts scene in 1960s Liverpool, most women were still trying hard to be 'seen' and taken seriously in the machismo world of performance, but these two women represent the sense of a cultural revolution taking place which still resonates in the twenty-first century.

The title of this chapter, 'Liverpool is the Centre of the Conscious Centre of the Universe' is a quotation from May 1965 by US beat poet and counter-cultural icon Allen Ginsberg (MacDonald, 2014, p.5). Alfred Hickling writes that it should be taken in context. Ginsberg was in Liverpool as part of a global tour; he had made similar claims for other cities. Liverpool poet Brian Patten, who provided Ginsberg with floor-space to sleep, said 'I think Allen believed the centre of human consciousness to be wherever he was at the time' (Hickling, 2007). Yet Ginsberg's words were not erroneous. Liverpool was a catalyst for more than youth culture. In her chapter 'To Create an Environment of One's Own: The Liverpool Poets' Cornelia Gräbner examines the 'scene' which 'brought together art, poetry and music on an equal footing' (Gräbner, 2015, p.71). However, in her exploration of 1960s and 1970s poetry performances and publications, few female poets emerge. One exception was Libby Houston, about whose essay 'On Being A Woman Poet' Gräbner writes that 'her words are permeated by the sense that even though she spoke and wrote, her poetic voice got

lost in the black hole of non-response or negative response'. Gräbner in part attributes that to hostility towards Houston's gender and middle-class upbringing; contrarily, Houston's poetic style, no doubt influenced by her *adult* lifestyle as a mother living on a multi-ethnic council estate, was dismissed as 'chatty' (Gräbner, 2015, pp.77-78). It appears that whatever their circumstances, women poets were belittled.

In *The Liverpool Scene,* an illustrated book of poetry and recorded conversations (Lucie-Smith (ed.) 1967) the only female represented is Heather Holden, who contributes three texts to a total of sixty-five poems. In a corner of page 69 is this fragment:

> Still Life
>
> it might
> be nature Morte
> but it's still
> life

In *Gladsongs and Gatherings* (Wade, 2001) a prose paean to Liverpool poets and their social context, Holden is referred to on just three occasions, (pp. 77, 90 and 91) all in connection with her lover, poet Adrian Henri. Yet British women in the 1960s were undergoing a style and fashion revolution which displayed modernity and a care-free attitude distinct from their mothers. An excerpt from a 2012 poem by Liz Lochhead captures this moment:

> Photograph, Art Student, Female, Working Class
>
> Her hair is cut into that perfect slant
> – An innovation circa '64 by Vidal Sassoon.
> She's wearing C&A's best effort at Quant
> Ending just below the knicker-line, daisy-strewn […]
> She's a girl, eighteen – just wants to have fun.

Society was changing in terms of how sexual relations, class and the establishment were viewed. Firstly, working-class talent was not only recognised in the arts, but working-class lives were now a subject for drama and comedy. Secondly, moral purists

such as Mary Whitehouse, a member of the Christian Moral Re-Armament cult and campaigner against what she saw as ‘filth’ were being ridiculed by the main-stream media. When Whitehouse targeted the BBC1 working-class comedy series ‘Till Death Us Do Part’ for excessive use of the word ‘bloody’, series writer Johnny Speight in return had the cockney bigot Alf Garnett praising ‘Mary White-arse’ (Stubbs, 2008).

The 1960s was an extraordinary decade for many reasons; according to the Met Office, the winter of 1962-63 was one of the coldest on record in Britain. In the introduction to *Frostquake: How The Frozen Winter Of 1962 Changed Britain Forever* (Nicolson, 2021) the author says:

> The winter of 1962-3 was one of the coldest ever known. After a week of catastrophic, lung-clogging smog in early December in which many people lost their lives, snow began to fall on Boxing Day 1962 […] and did not stop for the next ten weeks. […] There are moments when society, however embedded, shifts on its axis. The long and lingering hardships of the paralysing winter of 1962-3 encouraged, even enabled, change; […] As the country froze it melted.

Nicolson suggests that 1960s events and phenomena, for example the contraceptive pill, the musical revolution and the rise of satire, along with the Profumo Affair (1963) were somehow signalling the emergence of a different world that was hidden beneath the ice and snow. A review of Nicolson’s book appears to dismiss this concept, not least because many of those seminal cultural and political changes did not take place during that winter (Hughes, 2021). However, Hughes goes on to say ‘Where *Frostquake* triumphs is as metaphor – a network of images that describes how Britain was beginning to unfreeze from the 50s.’

For children, winter 1962-63 was a white Christmas. For most working-class women it was fetching water from a standpipe in the street as lead pipes in the houses

froze and burst. I would argue that the severe weather was harder on women than men: daily shopping whilst negotiating snow-covered pavements, cold houses and very little in the way of domestic facilities. On the steep streets of Everton women would slide down the icy slabs, sitting on flattened cardboard boxes to access Great Homer Street market, while children shod only in canvas plimsolls squelched through slush to school. If there was a Golden Age in 1950s Britain it had never quite reached working-class Liverpool, despite a government intervention in 1944 which introduced the eleven plus examination, an educational innovation designed to increase social mobility. It created a tripartite system of secondary schools in an attempt to give bright working-class children an opportunity to acquire more than a basic level of education and possibly a university place. Chapter five will examine accounts of schoolchildren and academics in Liverpool and elsewhere, with a focus on working-class girls, and will explore some of the practical and psychological results of this attempt at educational 'levelling-up'.

Chapter 5 – Working-class women, social mobility and the psychic economy

I cannot remember the date on which I sat for a particular test at primary school in 1966. I had been absent from school for a few days due to illness, as had another girl, Jean, and we were ushered into a separate room to complete this 'test'. Sometime later, I realised that this might be the eleven-plus examination. I knew on one level that the exam was important, but I had no realisation of how admission to grammar school might change a person's life. I scarcely thought about my 'future' and my parents never discussed such matters with me; universities belonged to another world, one that people like 'us' would never be privy to.

My primary school's muted approach to the eleven plus may have been a response to the fact that it was entirely made up of working-class children, and not much was expected of us. Passing the eleven-plus, for the average twenty-five percent of post-war children who succeeded, meant free education up to the age of eighteen, taking 'O' (Ordinary) and 'A' (Advanced) level examinations in a range of subjects, and in theory a route to higher education.[26] Technical schools provided some of their most promising graduates with an admission to university, but such schools somehow never flourished; of those children who failed the exam, most attended secondary modern schools, where they could complete a course of higher-level elementary studies, leaving school aged fifteen or sixteen to enter the world of full-time work. The reality was that by 1960 only 21, 680 secondary modern pupils had stayed on after fifteen to take GCSE exams (Kynaston, 2015, p. 233). An unflinching report in *The Spectator* by Colm Brogan in 1957 on an East End secondary modern praised the teachers but concluded that from the pupils' point of view:

[26] Success or failure in the eleven-plus was also influenced by where the candidates lived. In south-west England the chances of success were 35%, in the midlands 24.1% and in the city of Nottingham 10.4%. In some areas there were simply not enough grammar school places. (Kynaston, 2015, p.228)

> The final and overwhelming impression was one of total lack of interest. The school had nothing to offer them that they believed had any value whatsoever. With the exception of the minority who have agreed to stay on, the sole aim and object of the children is to get out the instant the law releases them. The world outside is Eldorado, to which their eyes and thoughts are forever straining. (Brogan, 1957, p.8)

It is unsurprising that anxiety about grammar school places was a feature of middle-class and aspiring working-class parents. Wealthier families could afford private tuition, and some working-class parents sacrificed much to ensure that their children continued their education beyond age fifteen (Sandbrook, 2015, p.614). This put huge pressure on young students. Schoolgirl Laura was interviewed by Cécile Landau about life in the 1960s and recalled that 'For years it had been impressed upon us at school how important the whole thing was […] if I didn't get through this exam […] I would never do anything with my life' (Landau, 1991, p.1). Linda S. remembered 'My parents were frightfully middle-class […] I was terrified of failing' (cited in Akhtar and Humphries, 2002, p.26). For most working-class girls, the parental commitment to their daughters' education was radically different. Grammar school was viewed as a way into white-collar employment rather than entrance to university or a clear career trajectory. Natalie Thomlinson records Jean, a working-class schoolgirl in the 1960s, speaking of her grammar school experience:

> I wanted to do something arty […] but […] this is the other thing with my parents, neither of them ever said to me "Come on! You can do this!", you know. Once I reached fifteen, […] they didn't really mind whether I went to school or not. I was doing my O Levels, there was never any "are you going to revise? What exam have you got?" They didn't care […] as long as I didn't go

> into a factory, that's all they were bothered about. Once I got an office job, in their eyes, I'd arrived (cited in Thomlinson, 2019)

Similarly, Thomlinson writes about Linda X:

> who enjoyed her experiences at the grammar school in Slough (but) reported feeling a sense of not belonging, surrounded by girls whose parents did professional jobs and lived in 'posh' commuter belt villages. She (too) left at sixteen and worked in a bank. Looking back […] she (felt) she could have done better, expressing regret that no-one encouraged her to stay on into the sixth form (cited by Thomlinson, 2019).

On the day in 1966 when I 'passed', I was totally unaware that my father had persuaded my mother to surrender an 'Industrial Benefits' life insurance policy to pay for the grammar school's uniform, which could only be purchased in one department store in Liverpool.

I believe the uniform cost £40.00. To put this in context, in accordance with the Office for National Statistics, the average weekly wage for a male manual/factory worker in 1966 was £20.00 (see Appendix 4) but from gross pay was deducted income tax at 41.25% (Morris, 2016) and National Insurance contributions. What remained had to meet all the essentials of life, and any small leisure pursuits. My parents had no savings, no assets, and clothing and household furnishings were paid for in instalments which were not an option for a school uniform, even if my parents could have taken on the debt. It was some years before I understood the sacrifice they had made for my education. I write about that lack of understanding and ingratitude in 'Passed'

> A summer dress worn once; beret, discarded.
> My straw boater tossed into the river for the craic.

School rules stated that all first-year pupils must wear a beret in winter and a boater hat during summer, after which hats were optional. Many pupils discarded headwear as soon as possible, telling parents they had been lost, or stolen.

I experienced occasional episodes of imposter syndrome during my first year at grammar school, particularly when it was clear that my parents had so little money. Yet, I fared better than other working-class children who were offered grammar school places. I would never describe my parents as 'ambitious' or 'aspirant', but at least I was allowed to take my place. John Lanchester recalls his mother Julia Gunnigan, a teacher in an English 1959 secondary modern, questioning one boy's parents: why they would not allow him to take his grammar school place? Embarrassed, they admitted to their fellow Irishwoman that 'We didn't want him to think he was better than us' (Lanchester, 2012, Loc.2973)

I left school due to economic pressures aged sixteen, but my 'O' Level qualifications were enough to secure a job in local government on equal pay, rather than on a production line where I might earn half of the wage that men received (see Appendix 5). I also had opportunities for promotion and professional qualifications, and my time at grammar school meant that I glimpsed another world. I mixed with girls of all social classes and saw the opportunity for a better life than my parents had, wherein money was a constant source of tension. I wanted more and I wanted to achieve that independently.

Roy McKibbin writes that some working-class girls faced a stark choice: accept the middle-class ethos of the grammar school and abandon the values of their family and friends or as happened to many who were unable to assimilate, leave grammar school prior to 'A' level examinations. Another problematic issue was 'accent'. A colloquial accent was not sanctioned in grammars, whilst received pronunciation

alienated friends and family; some children spoke one accent at home and another at school (McKibbin, 1998, p.264-5). Dominic Sandbrook however, writes that that 'for all its problems grammar school […] opened up opportunities to a minority of working-class pupils about which their contemporaries could only dream' (Sandbrook, 2015, p.618). In 1958 the headmaster of Manchester Grammar School, in an interview with the BBC, stated that grammar schools were spawning a 'new middle-class of technologists' and claimed that 'in a way the grammar schools are really the spearhead of the movement of social mobility' (cited in Gunn and Bell, 2003, Loc. 2825). Nevertheless, whilst only a tiny minority of children were educated privately, this minority held (and still does) enormous power and influence in all aspects of public life.

Annette Kuhn lived her early life in similar circumstances to my own, albeit she is eight years my senior. Kuhn devotes a chapter of her memoir (Kuhn, 2002, pp.100-123) to her memories of passing the eleven plus and grammar-school education, finding that good behaviour and hard work still left something that was 'extra' to be obtained which she did not quite grasp. In retrospect, the memoirist writes:

> I see today what I could not see then: that, as part of its predominately bourgeois system of values, the school took for granted a certain 'cultural capital' in its pupils. The cornerstone of the school's value system was its insistence on […] us and them: 'us' being the elect […] as against 'them', the *hoi polloi* […] brainless masses beyond the school walls (p. 104).

The customs and behaviours of the middle-classes were those which Kuhn's school aspired to, reinforcing class division rather than promoting the idea that grammar schools would level-up society by way of success through meritocracy. Such middle-

class mores included the expectation of diligence and lady-like good behaviour: As Kuhn notes ‘Brains were not enough’ (p.113).

In ‘Betrayal’ the poem’s speaker is a young working-class woman who leaves inner-city Liverpool for the shires. In the 1980s Liverpool was on the verge of economic breakdown and mass unemployment yet the speaker discovers that whilst economic migrancy is outwardly acceptable for men, in women it might be considered a betrayal. One of the poem’s sections ‘*You’re not really from here anymore’* is clearly directed at the speaker; yet this same sentiment is not aimed at her husband. In this excerpt the speaker tries to explain her anger towards her home city and gender inequality, and the penalties of being outspoken.

> But different rules applied: men would be forgiven. Men could
> be ambitious; vote Tory and get no more than three Hail-Marys.
> Leave, and not be questioned about their loyalty. I was angry with
> the city I saw crumble before me, and too young for diplomacy.

This poem explores how I was perceived as a betrayer of working-class values, while my (male) partner was not. Liverpool is a very Catholic city, hence some specific word choices: men were ‘forgiven’ for leaving, voting for Margaret Thatcher (the equivalent of sleeping with the devil for many in Liverpool) and for putting ambition above their home-city. The ‘punishment’ of three Hail-Marys is equivalent to a very small sin, the level of penance given to a child for being naughty. My moving away from my parents and with no ambition to have children engendered a negative reaction from family and some of my peers. Did my male partner encounter the same response? The short answer is ‘No’. Unlike Kuhn, whose mother told her whilst still at school ‘You can’t rise out of your social class (Kuhn, 2002, p.114), I had the advantage of being an adult when I left a not particularly joyous home. However, my hopes were met with scepticism, despite gendered changes in the workplace. As Worth and Paterson write:

> By the 1960s, women expected, and were expected, to return to work part time after having children [...] The welfare state infrastructure in Britain was embedded and expanded contemporaneously with this growth in female employment. However, based on a male breadwinner model, the state support infrastructure was constructed for an economy in which women remained at home (Worth and Patterson, 2020, p.319).

Specifically, in the 1980s, the male opinion still counted for more, and within the social structure working-class women were seldom expected to achieve socially or financially, unless by marriage.

There was another aspect at play however, which might partly explain this negativity: the city of Liverpool itself and its self-perception, which John Belchem examines in *Merseypride: Essays in Liverpool Exceptionalism* (Belchem, 2006a). First published in 2000, the second edition contains an introduction 'The new Liverpool' (pp. xi-xxix) that documents evidence of a city 'reborn' and an explanation as to why in the earlier edition of the book he (Belchem) 'grappled with the stigma, doom and gloom which kept the late twentieth-century Liverpool apart, an internal "other" within enterprise Britain'. Belchem goes on to say that the essays in the 2000 collection 'sought to re-evaluate Liverpool's history of apartness – and to offer some limited optimism for the future. How circumspect and unambitious this now seems' (Belchem, 2006a, p. xi). In the preface to the 2000 edition, included for clarity in the second edition, Belchem writes:

> Liverpool's apartness is, indeed, crucial to its identity. Although repudiated by some as an external imposition […] Liverpool 'otherness' has been upheld (and inflated) in self-referential myth, a 'Merseypride' that has shown considerable ingenuity in adjusting to the city's changing fortunes (2006a, p. xxx)

To paraphrase Belchem, most studies of the Celts in Liverpool focus on the Liverpool-Irish, and often not in a positive fashion, that is not so much working-class as underclass, and disinclined to advance from where they had disembarked in Liverpool to other parts of Britain and elsewhere to seek better opportunities; thus, the idea of Irish inaction and irresponsibility has engendered a negative reputation which has been calamitous for the city:

> With characteristic inverted pride, Liverpudlians have chosen to adopt not to contest this crude stereotype […] adopted as the foundation character […] in popular history and working-class autobiography […] the distinctive local accent – the register of the true Scouser – has been traced back to […] its Irish originators (Belchem, 2006a, p. xxxiii).

In addition, the Irish, Franz Spiegel asserts, 'gave the Liverpudlian not only his accent but also his Celtic belligerence' (Spiegel, 1989 cited by Belchem, 2006a, p. xxxiii). To summarise, I would contend that my fairly moderate ambitions and a dawning realisation that I wanted a different life to that of my parents, were seen not only as a rebellion against what was expected of a woman, but also as a betrayal of class and my Liverpool origins.

Kuhn and other women like her achieved academic and career success, but historian and author Selina Todd argues that social mobility and equality by way of selective education is a 'myth' (Todd, 2015, pp.389-392). Whilst acknowledging that the post-war boom of full employment, the creation of the National Health Service and provision of such benefits as free milk and orange juice for children almost certainly made for a healthier population, with more energy and resources to benefit from Britain's free education system (National Archives), Todd declares that 'the eleven-plus examination and the grammar schools failed to produce a meritocracy' and rather

'cemented the social divisions already present in pre-war Britain'. Secondary modern schools, overcrowded, underfunded and poorly equipped, educated eighty per cent of Britain's children (p.389). Nevertheless, between 1945 and 1958 university student numbers almost doubled (Timmins, 2018, Loc. 3455). My position is that it was the post-war revival of public schools which cemented class divisions. As Sandbrook writes 'Public schools recovered from the crisis of the thirties [...] the real boost came from middle-class families whose children had failed the eleven plus [...] determined not to condemn their offspring to a secondary modern' (Sandbrook, 2015, p.618).

Diane Reay (2021) reports on data from a research study (Crozier *et al,* 2008) which includes interviews of nine working-class students at an elite university (Reay, 2021, p. 55) and explores the experiences of young working-class people who struggle to flourish socially in elite universities; whilst 'deeply committed to academic learning' and capital, they were 'ambivalent' to the social aspects of the university. There are tensions, 'a very strong discrepancy between high academic consecration and low social origin' described as a 'cleft habitus' (Bourdieu, 2008, p.100) which Crozier *et al* (2008) also discovered in their research findings (Reay, 2021, p.56). All nine students 'expressed a sense of habitus dislocation […] inferiority, lack of belonging, deficit and discomfort' (p.57). Perhaps there was no outright rejection, but rather the subtle workings of societies, social groups, and the sometimes-indifferent attitudes within the world of elite universities. Reay here refers to *young* working-class people, and of course most students are young. My reading is that this group may have little experience of class subtleties or networks, and disadvantages from a lack of social capital when dealing with such fine-drawn distinctions, but they will understand when they don't quite 'fit'. This 'fit' with one's peers is pivotal to almost all young people's wellbeing and becomes as crucial to their lives as their studies. Furthermore, a young

working-class person may not wish to burden or disappoint their parents with their own feelings of failure, and it would be easy to crumble under such social pressure.

In his review essay, David James examines three academic studies concerning *inter-alia* identity and social mobility, class, curriculum, pedagogy and public purpose within the higher educational process: (Boni and Walker, eds. 2013; Stich, 2012; Matthys, 2012). Commenting on Boni and Walker, James believes that some of such studies should be 'less benign' when characterising higher education:

> In the United Kingdom […] higher education is at the apex of an education system that – despite the best efforts of some within it – appears to be a major engine of social inequality. […] higher education excludes well over one-half of the population by virtue of their […] qualifications, (and) it continues to show persistent social class bias even across those qualified to enter, (it) (James, 2014, p.320).

James argues that more attention should be paid to well-meaning higher educators' work which in fact may promote unfairness (James, 2004, p.323) and the belief that expansion of higher education would engender further inequalities. I agree with this statement, at least in part. As journalist Chris Parr observes, Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair's implementation of just such a policy saw the introduction of tuition fees at £1000 per annum in 1998. By 2012 fees were £9,000 p.a., capped at £9,250 in 2023. It might appear self-evident that students and prospective students who have a cushion of family wealth or assets will be far less affected by such increases, but those from poorer families also find themselves with more student debt (Parr, 2024). Reviewing Stich and student equality theories, James clarifies that expanding higher education is different to affirmation policies, or 'positive discrimination' (which James appears to favour) and writes that:

> More promising […] is the attention paid (to) Stich's explicit support for the view that further expansion of higher education would bring even greater inequality – a point often conflated with the entirely separate process of improving access to higher education for under-represented groups. The latter idea gets barely a mention, but I would argue that 'Access to Inequality' already provides powerful justification for more radical action in terms of admissions, perhaps drawing lessons from affirmative action policies (James, p. 323).

Reay concurs, but with a caveat:

> Perhaps now is the time to consider practices such as those David James argues for. But it is also vital to ensure working-class students as well as ethnic and racial minority (BAME) students are adequately supported once they are at university. Widening access and participation, and the underlying meritocratic sentiments that underpin it, will never amount to more than empty rhetoric [...] until students from all class backgrounds feel at home in all higher education institutions (Reay, 2021, pp.61-62).

Put simply, it is one thing to allow working-class students into the world of dreaming spires and quite another to ensure they have the opportunity to adjust to elite environments and gain true social and cultural capital.

In 2023, the US Supreme Court banned the use of *race-based* (my italics) affirmative action in American universities. This controversial policy has never been used in UK universities (Martin, 2023). My own position on 'positive discrimination' in favour of gender fast-tracking is that women overwhelmingly do not want this. We wish to be treated as equals, to be included and not have to suffer sexist comments or sexual innuendo. This of course is far more difficult to achieve than implementing a

fast-tracking or affirmative policy; it requires a change of mind-set for all employees and employers, and a willingness to expose perpetrators of sexism whatever their reputation or status. This should apply equally to class as to gender, whether discrimination is conscious or unconscious. This is a topic I address in one of a trilogy of poems in my collection, 'Judgement'. In 'Judgement 1: On a working-class woman' the speaker describes her humiliation after a verbal encounter with a middle-class male academic in the lines:

> Weeping away my painted imposter face I fled him;
> dropped his derogation into a sinkhole, and slunk home
> to bright blue, saffron and sunflowers - no shades here
> of Farrow and Ball - and a squall of cats on the bed.

The speaker tries to discard her unhappy memory, and 'flees' to her home that is decorated in bold colours and with gaudy flowers on display, rather than the expensive, subtle interiors favoured by the middle-classes. She allows pets on the bed, a 'squall' of them, indicating commotion, all of which suggest a mind-set incompatible with understated 'Elephant Breath' interiors and the quiet accumulation of cultural capital and which Bourdieu might have considered she was 'pre-disposed (in her habitus) to feel' (Bourdieu, p.51).

A deeper excavation of the realities of social mobility and 'levelling-up', still on-point in 2024, is beyond the scope of my research. Rather, I focus on working-class women who 'passed' into a different social milieu and subsequently began the transition to the other side of the class division, and an examination of changes in the psychic economy resulting from such a move between social classes. (Lucey, Melody and Walkerdine, 2003; Reay, 2005; Birkin, 1999). In an article entitled 'Uneasy Hybrids' Lucey *et al*. examine successful working-class young women who attended university and were determined to access employment in academia or management/executive careers. The authors observe that it is no easy task for women

to ‘have it all’. This consistently alluring concept, conceived in the 1960s and arriving fully developed in the 1980s, continued throughout the 1990s with for example, the Spice Girls’ concept of girl-power, despite the ‘overwhelming evidence that shows the persistence of gendered inequalities’ and ‘strong feminist critique’ (Lucey *et al,* 2003, p.285). Currently, in 2024, one cannot avoid the global phenomenon that is singer/songwriter/pop-icon Taylor Swift (Cooban, 2024). Clichés such as ‘follow your dreams’ and ‘never give up’ suggest infinite opportunities: ‘Every single person you admire has failed at some point. They never gave up, and neither should you.’ (Swift in *DK*, 2022, p.63). This promise of success, which seems to rest on the tenacity and work-ethic of the individual woman, is ‘tempered and regulated by the kind of meritocratic principles that can explain any failure […] as a personal one’ (Lucey *et al.* 2003, p.285). ‘Uneasy Hybrids’ is a study of two working-class young women and their success stories in the 1990s, unveiling a complex dynamic of social mobility, breaking the boundaries of social class, ethnicity and gender, and entering new spaces where the conscious and unconscious mind must negotiate the influence of personal feelings and opinions with newly found possibilities. In an approach not unlike Belchem’s exploration of Liverpool-Irish hybrid ethnicity, Lucey *et al* write:

> We examine the notion of hybridity, as put forward by cultural theorists in relation to new forms of ethnic subjectivities […] and while it is a useful concept in exploring […] the multiple layers of experience of subjects in a context of shifting economic and social relations and adds (to) […] theories of fragmentation (Bradley, 1996), there are, however, no easy hybrids (Lucey *et al*. 2003, p.286).

Such hybridity may be distressing; social mobility, educational achievement and the stumbling aspirations of a young working-class woman, are followed by the realisation

that past peer groups and family are culturally and possibly economically disparate, to her newly forged lifestyle. Although one might wish to, it is almost impossible to discard the past and live fully in a nascent existence, as memoirs of working-class women's lives often testify. Carol Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* (Steedman, 2005) for example, recalls her mother holding Steedman's baby sister during a call by a health visitor who told her mother that their house wasn't a fit place for a baby, leaving her mother crying and saying, 'I'll manage'. Steedman vows:

> And I? I will do everything and anything until the end of my days to stop anyone ever talking to me like that woman talked to my mother. It is in this place, this bare curtainless bedroom that lies my secret shame and defiance' (p.2).

The implication here is that the remembered incident leaves a deep emotional scar on Steedman as a young girl, or she uses this memory, which like all memories may be slightly subjective, to 'justify' her escape from working-class life and her mother, and from motherhood itself. Those are her acts of defiance: Steedman cannot and will not let her mother's hard, unfulfilled life, 'ruined' as her mother said by having children, be projected onto her.

A humiliating episode not unlike Steadman's is portrayed in the poem 'Betrayal' wherein the speaker recalls sleeping in a bedroom which had been condemned by the local authorities as 'unfit for human habitation':

> the hole in my bedroom ceiling, and coats
> piled on the bed for warmth; the cat in winter fur.
> All of this is inked on me.

The lack of sufficient bedding and heating, the cold and hardship of living in slum-housing, is a memory the speaker may never escape. It is as permanent as a tattoo, an inking; removal or disguise of such an enduring image is possible, but painful.

Social landscapes have shifting borders of class, gender and ethnicity; social hybridity is a constant skirmish between new possibilities and old emotions, arousing tensions and the sense of guilt which are irrational personal idiosyncrasies that have evolved from the absorption of familiar culture, and influence how a person perceives and reacts to the world. Lucey *et al.* (2003) examine cultural and social hybridity in relation to the difficulties that successful working-class women face in terms of family dynamics, in other words the psychic economy of possible emotional privation versus the procurement of a profession and the acquisition of cultural capital. What then are the psychological effects for an educated working-class young woman of moving into the professional world, when 'requiring an internal and external "makeover"'? As the authors note: 'It is […] essential to explore the complexities of the losses as well as the gains invoked in […] social mobility for working-class young women' (Lucey *et al.* 2003, Abstract). This sense of loss and gain resonates with Freud's concept of the 'psychic economy'. In an article on Sigmund Freud, Lawrence Birkin writes:

> In his paper on the 'Unconscious' Freud explicitly delineated the three meta-psychological hypotheses underpinning psychoanalysis; the topographic […] the dynamic […] and the economic. […] the third (principle) has been […] neglected. The idea of a 'psychic economy' may appear too much a remnant of Freud's earlier neurological work. Even after Freud [...] devoted the rest of his life to psychology, he continued to speak in terms of the 'economic' or 'quantitative' forces underpinning psychoanalytic thought. Freud's work was thus full of the language of political economy [...] Psychic processes, he proclaimed, should be evaluated in terms of 'gain' and 'loss' (Birkin, 1999, p.311).

Freud no longer has the slavish following he once enjoyed; there are many critics of Freud and 'de-bunking' of his theories. Anna Kornbluh writes: 'Far from the founding of the "psychic economy", Freud's economic thought amounts rather to a translation and re-working' (Kornbluh, 2014, p.138). Nevertheless, the 'psychic economy' has clearly gained traction and is a useful model to apply in the context of the psychological effects of moving between classes.

Freud dealt with the unconscious mind, but the psychic economy of social class in my experience is both subconscious (over which we have no control) and conscious thinking. It is perhaps a form of over-thinking from some points of view, but just as a cat would instinctively know when it is alone in a yard full of dogs, so a working-class person will be aware of when they are in a room of people whose accents, cultural capital and confidence are elevated and may seem threatening. Some people successfully make the transition: their accent and expressions change; they are keen to 'fit in' and develop a new ethos. Naturally, individual tastes may evolve; art or certain types of music cannot be appreciated if one has no exposure to it. New interests are often kindled by new social groups, in the same way that many middle-class people have come to enjoy and enthuse about football, once almost exclusively the sport of the working-class male. Truly, however, there are 'no easy hybrids'. Like a cat in a yard full of dogs, however friendly they may be, my own position is a longing to escape to 'safety' when suffering from impostor syndrome. The uneasiness I experience is not just because I am the product of a working-class family, but also in hailing from one of the most extreme and unusual cities in the world: Liverpool. As Higginson and Walley write, 'Liverpool is […] beloved both by tourists and the heritage industry but also a cosmopolitan, edgy city' (Higginson and Walley, 2014, Loc. 39). Famous and infamous in equal proportions, the city has an almost tribal culture that considers itself

'Not English but Scouse' and whose football fans boo or sing over the English National Anthem (Duggan, 2022; Kennedy, 2022). The reputation of this legacy can follow a person around – literally. Part of my 'Judgement Trilogy' is 'On Scouse shoppers' a text inspired by the experience of a (black, female) friend shopping in a supermarket and a social media comment that said the same thing had happened to a (white) couple with strong Liverpudlian accents. I imagine this in the lines:

> when I get to the door they are waiting, mob-handed:
> a manager with a clipboard and two ersatz bizzies.
> He checks my receipt against every item; all fine.
> That expensive wine didn't pair with my accent.

There is broad agreement that upwardly mobile social transition may result in the gain of economic, social and cultural capital being offset by psychological losses; my aim in the poem is to explore the conscious or unconscious bias toward people who are 'outside' or whose accent is not only working-class but is linked to a reputation for rebelliousness and even notoriety.[27]

The texts of Lucey *et al*. (2003) and Birkin (1999) both record an element of neglect in psychic economy research. Diane Reay writes that her article 'Beyond Consciousness' 'draws on educational case studies to demonstrate some of the ways in which affective aspects of class – feelings of ambivalence, inferiority and superiority, visceral aversions, recognition, abjection and the markings of taste constitute a psychic economy of social class and goes on to say that 'This psychic economy, despite being largely ignored […] contributes powerfully to the ways we are, feel and act' (Reay, 2005, p.911). Reay also says of her article that 'in many ways this is a speculative work [...] The contemporary orthodoxy is that class consciousness and class awareness no longer exists' (p.912). I would suggest that in 2005 Reay is sceptical about such

[27] Media representations e.g. by Harry Enfield display stealing and the 'calm down' catchphrase as typical Scouse behaviours (Boland, P. 2008, pp.360-361)

idealism and continues to be so. As Reay concludes in a more recent article: ‘Working-class self-exclusion follows exclusion by more powerful others’ (Reay, 2021, p.61).

My own position is that more attention needs to be given to ‘classism’ in the same way a democratic, enlightened society deals with racism or sexism. It is simply not acceptable. During a recent keynote address I attended, the speaker stated that ‘there is no such thing as imposter syndrome’ which was a surprise to her post-graduate audience. To paraphrase, the speaker announced that we feel like imposters because we are ‘made to feel that way’ by others in the room, often white men of a certain age. It is a method of holding back the working-classes, in particular women and girls, who feel like they are invisible within the sphere of those who have a sense of entitlement in terms of education, life-style and the attainment of cultural capital.

Chapter 6. Lyric inheritance and concluding thoughts

My poetry collection is divided into ten sections. These sections are not in any way chronological, but the penultimate section is personal and rooted in the recent past. The collection is informed by the lyric mode and I make stylistic choices as appropriate for each poem.

The progression of lyric from song in Ancient Greece to written form in poetry across the world has not been linear and the definition of lyric has been hotly debated, the most consistent characterisations being brevity, the deployment of a first-person speaker, and as an outlet for personal emotions (Brewster, 2009, p.1). Lyric has been identified as 'the very essence of poetry' (Brewster, 2009, p.4) in that it is passionate, intense and authentic, and therefore not easily imitated; all of which interpretations accord with how I see lyric poetry. In Tudor times poets would write for a small group of friends, often to gain favour at court; Garry Waller writes that that use of 'the lyric 'I' during this period invites the reader or hearer to become part of the poem's experience' (Waller, 1993, p.105). John S. Mill however argues that lyric poetry is inward-turning, distinguishing eloquence which is 'heard' from poetry, which is 'overheard' (Mill, 1973, pp. 80-81). During the Romantic movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, lyric poetry turned toward nature and the interior world of feeling, however a commercial aspect also came into play. In a review of William G. Rowland Jr.'s *Literature and the Marketplace,* John Kand considers 'the ways in which awareness of audience helped to shape Romantic writing, particularly in relation to the Romantic author's growing awareness of a mass-audience' (Kand, 1997, p.244). By 1839 there was a niche market in expensive illustrated annuals of poetry designed to be given to women as Christmas presents; Wordsworth was one of the contributors (Kand, 1997, p.245).

But who am *I* writing for? And why? In my collection, I try to persuade the reader to better understand the experiences of working-class women who may not have the education, style of speech or appearance to achieve social mobility in a stratified, patriarchal society. Such 'eloquence' remains part of my lyric poetry. I also write for myself, but like most writers I hope to attract an appreciative audience. Whilst I claim a lyric style, there is sometimes a narrative, or story running through a particular poem. For example, in 'Carpe Noctem' (p.49) we see a series of snapshots in the lives of two girls: Caz, older and more circumspect, tries to dissuade Myla from allowing herself to be groomed by a group of men. Like all good stories the poem contains conflict, but unlike classic narratives for example Poe's *The Raven*, there is no resolution; the girls' origin story is untold and their future unknown. But is it lyric or narrative? The two are not mutually exclusive; in both 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and 'Kubla Khan' (Coleridge, 2018, pp. 32 and 54) 'the narrative impetus stalls, frozen by moments of vision or intense perceptual experience' (Brewster, p.82). 'Carpe Noctem' is a short poem with a first-person persona, Caz, who while neither romantic nor confessional, has contemplative moments when she fears for Myla and also when reflecting on the harshness of nature and the distaste of the middle classes who do not want girls like her in their community. The text is a fictional narrative spoken by a wholly-imagined voice which also contains dialogue, but it remains a formally structured lyric poem.

When a poet examines their own life, what emerges may have a greater or smaller smattering of speciousness; this dichotomy is blurred because memory is so unreliable. At this point I might enter into a debate about Confessional Poetry.[28] However, I prefer to categorise some my own texts as autofiction: a work of creativity

[28] The phrase "confessional poetry" arrived into common usage in September of 1959, when the critic M.L. Rosenthal coined it in his review of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* in the *Nation.* *https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/151109/an-introduction-to-confessional-poetry*

heavily influenced by the life experience of the author. This genre, although widely associated with prose, occasionally feels pertinent as to how I engage with my own past or the lived experiences of women represented in my collection. It allows me to wear an 'invisibility cloak' which, unlike J. K. Rowling's creation, I imagine as a matador's cape I use to entice the reader in whilst simultaneously hiding behind it; for example, in the use of an unidentified protagonist and a speaker who is an onlooker. The poem 'She' (p.20) is an example of this approach. 'She' is an intertextual poem inspired by the idea of a wild creature; it concerns a woman who likes men but will always be a free spirit:

> Isolation she knew too well;
> the places she could never go
> for fearing that she'd want then, to leave.

'She' hated the silences of Covid lockdowns; she missed the noise of traffic, 'the Sturm und Drang of motorways'. But there is reference here also to the late-eighteenth-century German proto-romantic literary movement known as *Sturm und Drang* (storm and stress) that exalted nature, feeling and human individualism all of which are tenets of 'She'. The voice or tone of the poem, that of an independent women, is clear from the first stanza: 'Fuck their masculine pride'. A reader might be drawn in by this defiant statement, and the third stanza's suggestion that 'she' values individualism above the conventional social mores may arouse their curiosity:

> [She] Missed the car-man with soft small hands,
> who'd been so easy to lead astray.

A reader might ask whether 'she' is in truth the poet admitting to a seduction? Or perhaps 'she' is the woman the poet would like to be. Autofiction is an important writing tool; the darker side of the writer can be both revealed and hidden; the humiliations and victories of marginalised people may be owned by them without embarrassment and stories are told that might otherwise disappear. I am influenced by

author Jeanette Winterson, as an example of autofiction and whose first novel *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* (Winterson, 1991) 'has regularly been reviewed as a realistic and heavily autobiographical comedy of "coming out" with basic traits drawn from the early feminist novels' (Onega, 1995, p.135). I am particularly attracted to Winterson's idea that 'Oranges' is a comforting novel, 'not because it offers any easy answers but because it tackles difficult questions' (Winterson, 1991, p.xiv). In other words, problems cannot be solved until they are faced; one cannot be heard until one has a voice. I believe that the newly found voice may first best express itself by remaining 'hidden' in plain sight. Winterson writes 'Is Oranges an autobiographical novel? No not at all and yes of course' (1991, p.xiv). Just as Winterson has fairy tale parallels within the narrative of her restricted religious upbringing, so *Ghost in the Throat* by Irish poet Doireann Ní Ghríofa is a work of prose autofiction in which the author entwines a story from eighteenth-century Ireland with her own chaotic life as a pregnant, breastfeeding mother of two, beginning with the words 'This is a female text' (Ní Ghríofa, 2021, p.3). That statement influenced how I came to see my thesis: it too, is a 'female text' which encompasses past and present and is birthed in the history of Ireland.

A challenge to any poet is to write about events and lives we had no part in, or cultures we have never experienced, irrespective of whether that writing is imagined or based on authenticity. Eavan Boland was aware of the risks in writing about Irish rural working women, in, for example, 'The Achill Woman' (Boland, E. 2005, pp.176-177) but as Burns writes: 'Boland's insistent use of unromanticised, nondramatic detail arguably enables her to represent this woman without collapsing her into the clichés Boland despises' (Burns, 2001, p.233). In 'Passages' (p.82), the only prose poem in my collection, I use deliberately dramatic language and repetition of certain adjectives 'the

ship was on the wild black waves and they lay in the/hot black hold these bold wild women' to give the poem its voice and place myself as the writer, at a respectful distance from the protagonists. I also intersperse the creative text with authentic death notifications to provide a sense of realism:

> Women without means in the Little Hell of Liverpool. The press blame supply not demand blame the cajoling beauty of the women in the city blame pimping. Shame the women name them:
>
> *Mary McNeill, prostitute, d. 1863. from excessive drinking.*

The device of repetition in this stanza plays on mis-directed 'blame', but as a reflection of 2024 the most poignant word is shame: almost two centuries have passed but for some attitudes remain the same; one cannot help but think of multiple-rape victim Gisèle Pelicot and her words 'Shame must change sides' (cited by Lamb, 2024, *The Times and The Sunday Times*).

'Maman' was originally to be a stand-alone poem, until I decided that her fictional family deserved further exploration. The poems contain disturbing themes, not least of which are the obscene amounts of money made and spent during the Irish economic 'boom'. To reassure the reader that this 'family' was a figment of my febrile imagination, I adopt a slightly whimsical tone of writing throughout 'The Dublin Tetralogy' which includes 'Maman'. The son waspishly calls his sister an 'ugly cow'; his father lasciviously squeezes his wife's bottom. Maman lapses into French conversing with her son, while her husband fancifully compares him to 'feckin' Oedipus'. There is a cat seemingly about to explode with kittens and chaos, a daughter sarcastically announcing that 'I shall be Marie-Antoinette, despotic' and the playful rhyming of 'morals' with 'corals' and 'despotic' with 'erotic'. The family are dysfunctional, and totally fictional. As for the Celtic Tiger era, well, you really couldn't make that up.

Almost all the poems in my collection were written between 2021-2024, a period when the world became increasingly volatile, and when my husband was diagnosed with advanced cancer. Was writing poetry germane to what was happening around me? I only knew that I had embarked on a creative and academic journey that I wanted to continue, whilst fearing that I might never write a satisfactory poem again. My breakthrough came with 'Oceans of goodbyes'(p.3). In February 2022, as I watched footage of Russian tanks roll into Ukraine and women and children fleeing their homes, I remembered my father's sickening recollection of fighting in World War II: that after the fall of Berlin 'you could buy a woman for a bar of chocolate'. I feared for Ukraine, and yet it was a memory of a holiday in Greece that became the first step in the process of writing 'Oceans'. Sitting in a port-side taverna I had watched a feral cat drinking from a water pipe, which engendered a sadness for this solitary creature. I had also observed, with some astonishment, illegally parked cars being unceremoniously winched away by the port authorities. Those images became:

> the feral drinking at a dripping pipe.
> People brutally winched away […]

The cat disappeared as a direct reference but the line still evoked pathos; I imagined people being 'winched away' from their homeland. That first stanza, never edited, was the foundation stone of 'Oceans', a poem about war, something I had never before attempted. I decided to experiment with new styles of poetry, adopting different styles of speaker to build a bridge between my collection and my research.

'Oceans' is women-centric; I observed the exodus from Ukraine, the basic belongings women took with them, children dragging suitcases, babies sleeping and household pets in tow. I almost felt their desolation and abandonment, waiting for transport to take them on a journey they didn't want to make. I imagined the 'bland face of a psychopath' looking down on events, evoked by the observation of Putin's

frozen features, pale and expressionless as a tambourine and lifeless as the moon. The imagery in the fourth and fifth stanzas reflects my memory of the Irish Famine Exhibition in Dublin (p.124) where the inclusion of rare nineteenth-century photographs of police destroying the turf-built homes of evicted tenants and images of babies starving to death at their mother's breasts, caused me to contemplate women's survival in war-time and under the yoke of colonialism (p.136). I built the last three stanzas on those memories and the shock I felt when truly comprehending that I was observing not ancient history but an event that happened in the modern era. I almost instinctively made the 'speaker' of the poem a collective of women, still hopeful of being heard but exhausted: expansionism is terrible, and yet men repeatedly pursue it.

As a family, in the early 1970s, we sat down to watch the television series 'The World at War', a news-based documentary with film footage of World War II, episodes of which I remember vividly. My parents related stories about being part of the war effort that left my family impecunious and emotionally scarred; they were not alone. In 1960s Liverpool, the war felt like a recent event; much of urban housing was slums, large families were typical and children played in bomb-craters. I needed to write honestly about such things, as testimony to a collective experience. As a curious and bookish only child, I spent a lot of time around adult women and was well-placed to observe their lives. Although I have very few photographs of that period I retain memories and at times the shame of the working-class woman's lack of cultural capital; poetry is the vehicle by which I re-engage with those women's lost stories.

In the poem 'Ménage à Trois' (p.41) I examine the post-war period through the lens of a child who is living within a 'zone of secrets'. Like so many people, the poem's speaker wishes they had asked more questions when they had the opportunity to fill the silences in family history. Instead, truths remain obfuscated and issues are

left unresolved. The silences in my own family taught me something about memory; after putting the same loaded question to both parents at different times they presented opposing versions of the same events, both equally painful to hear. As Eavan Boland writes, 'Memory is treacherous' (Boland, 1989, p.5). Memories of fractured family relationships flow into 'Ménage' just as 'Aunty' was 'pouring poison […] into a child's ears' about her father. I clearly recollect my mother's most frequent visitor: her sister was dark, striking, vivacious and controlling, her bright red lipstick imprinting itself on the many cups of tea and cigarettes consumed during these hours of gossip. She and my father openly loathed each other.

People may say or do things which are upsetting and/or induce anger but they are tolerated through choice or commitment; writing about such encounters feels difficult and guilt-inducing but also cathartic, for example in the poem 'Betrayal' (p.85) wherein the speaker confronts her critics in a sequence of remembered events. It looks neat on the page, has a narrative of sorts and is the exorcism of several 'ghosts'. The final stanza recalls a 'big' birthday celebration, and a drunken insult which triggers memories of childhood poverty and insecurity. I have discovered that whilst the completion of such a poem (having found the right words and voice) is satisfying, it is the writing of the poem itself which is purgative: a disgorging of supressed emotions.

I had similar feelings when writing about my husband's life-changing cancer. I was brutally honest: I sometimes did not have the sensitivities expected of a caring wife. 'Blister in the sun' (p.58) was written when the world felt as dissonant and discordant as the song which gives the poem its title.[29] I was in a familiar holiday destination but everything seemed changed; I felt that, like the seed-pods from

[29] 'Blister in the sun' is the title of a hit song by The Violent Femmes and is used in the 2008 Norwegian film *The Man Who Loved Yngve.* Song-writer Gordon Gano says it is about 'coming down' from drug abuse.

Oceania, I had been washed up on an alien shore. I became conscious of time passing, of ageing and a weight of responsibility I must carry but at times resented:

> The young are in bed and in love; I am old […] my second
> *Vino Rosado* has the pale, cold colour of introspection.
> I am alone. It is the best time of the day.

The cold tone of the speaker's voice is captured in the matter-of-fact way she describes her surroundings and feelings as she sits drinking, alone, as a momentary escape.
I needed to write this poem, to obliterate myself and cede my emotional exhaustion to the speaker; it was an attempt to address a certain level of guilt and briefly assuage it.

The poem 'Ménage à Trois' is written in what T. S. Eliot called the 'first voice' although the pronoun 'I' appears only once in the text. As Eliot writes, 'The first voice of the poet is talking to himself – or to no-body' (Eliot, 1957, p.89). 'Ménage' is an apostrophic poem, the speaker appealing directly to three dead people for answers, of which there are none. The speaker, now an adult, blames her parents and (repetitively) her 'aunty', in an anaphoric mode of speech, for the toxic and secretive atmosphere in her home:

> Oh Aunty,
> how you controlled my mother,
> how you hated my father

This produces a peevish adolescent voice that pervades the poem; the last line 'Dad why did you never intervene?' retains the anger of a child struggling to make sense of adult behaviour. The poetic effect of this tone of speech is to unsettle, to evoke a sense of the speaker's continuing unhealthy preoccupation with aspects of their childhood.

Speech and voice are important characterisation tools I also use in 'The Dublin Tetralogy' (pp.32-36). Here, the multiple voices are distinct from each other but overlap, creating a Venn diagram of family love, lust, rivalry and difference. My original idea was to experiment with a fictional depiction of some of the personality

types in Fintan O'Toole's book 'Ship of Fools' (p.104). 'Maman', with its undertones of jealousy and incestuous desire was the bedrock of the tetralogy. The use of similes is a prominent feature in this poem used to envisage a beautiful French matriarch as seen by her son, his idolisation of whom does not stretch to his 'rags to riches' Irish father who is described as being something of an antithesis:

> Here is Maman, lush as a mermaid […]
> her bottom: it is firm as a just-ripe apricot.
>
> And here is Daddy, an eejit millionaire as he'd say himself.

The speaker is different in each of the four poems, as is the voice and structure of the poetry itself. 'Maman' is lyric free-verse, with use of dialogue to reflect a multi-lingual, multi-faceted family but with the focus of the speaker firmly on his mother. The repetition of the word 'Maman' and the deconstructed *blason* to her sensual beauty is both a cry for help and blatant attention-seeking, and the closing stanzas are unsettling: just Maman and her son, alone, with no words spoken. By contrast, 'My daughter' is a sestet that uses alliteration to accentuate the dark atmosphere of the daughter's art. The speaker muses on his daughter with admiration, love and bewilderment; he sees himself as a salt-of-the-earth Irishman, his internal voice somewhat cynical: 'says she' and 'her analyst worries, but that stuff is all a load of shite'. The speaker uses colloquialisms but I felt that such poetic signposts should be rationed to avoid parody.[30] In 'To my husband Ó Dubhghaill', Maman speaks to her husband as lover and confidant. The poem is brief, sexy, and fun like their liaisons at sea in a private yacht; the short lines allow the ABBA rhyme to dance across the page, underplaying their relationship as a genuine 'power couple' in the nefarious financial world of the 'Celtic Tiger' era:

[30] The word 'savage' when applied to his wife is a compliment in parts of Ireland as in 'Sure, you're lookin' savage' meaning 'fantastic' or 'great'.

> but amongst the piranhas and toxic corals
> you have learned to flatter and shine; I, to bewitch.

The poem ‘To my Daddy concerning your children’ is also in enclosed rhyme, but with an almost identical number of syllables, typically eleven, to each line making the sound of the poem calming. The daughter knows herself: an artist who will live her life her own way. Her talent is her super-power, her art a mask when required; she is unconventional, but with a moral compass and dislike of materialism:

> Why would I want to be part of that world
> where our mother believes I should be?

The poem, which concludes the tetralogy, ends with an alliteration of soft and sensuous ‘s’ sounds: St. Ives, islands, Sozipol, sit, soft scent. I use this device, in contrast to the other three poems, to give the speaker’s voice an air of contentment.

Unlike The Dublin Tetralogy which is a work, of imagination, the poem ‘Sorry, not sorry’ (p.40) is rooted in my memories and observations. It takes its title from a popular twenty-first century idiom meaning ‘sorry, but not really’. It is appropriate for a poem which, as discussed earlier, is a disingenuous apology to my mother (p.137). The memories are from my distant childhood, but I do my best to render the truth. As late as the 1960s in Britain, over 70% of weddings took place in religious institutions where they were centred on a standard marriage format (Carter, J, and Duncan, S. 2017). The poem begins in 1965, with a bride arriving with a gaggle of bridesmaids dressed in differing pastel shades; I recall the party leaving in a flurry of church-bells, flowers and confetti which invariably attracted an audience; it was a glimpse of brightness amid the post-war gloom that was finally starting to lift. I was ten years old then, but the memory was ignited when one of the original bridesmaids contacted me on social media. She, like me, had married, left Liverpool and enjoyed a career and life-style which embraced childlessness.

Any state of childlessness is a sensitive topic to engage with; in my own practice I found that dark humour worked as a poetic style, an antidote to the underlying serious issues examined in 'Sorry'. I began recording my thoughts and feelings of marriage and weddings, discovering that Aunty Lil had aspired to a middle-class 'look' for her wedding day, unwittingly aping a trend for 'rainbow' bridesmaids dresses that were originally designed to flatter the flower-girls' individual complexions.[31] As the following lines make clear, the bride did not quite succeed:

> a pallid girl looked grim dressed in lemon;
> the unfortunate teen, acne-dappled in apple green.

Brides inevitably wore purity-signalling white, often standing beside a groom who looked little more than a boy in an ill-fitting suit. I capture some of this as the lines:

> her skinny groom with his huge Adam's apple
> bobbing like the head of a nervous horse.

A young working-class man might have cause to be nervous; he now had the financial responsibility for a wife and any children, the first of which might already be on its way. The alternative to bridal pregnancy in 1965 was illegal abortion or the shame and fear of the community's and authorities' disapproval.[32] Overhearing 'women's talk' taught me what was sometimes meant by 'premature' first babies.[33] This is the context for the lines:

> The sixties became a decade of weddings,
> *viz* pre-nuptial sex and low-grade contraception.
> […] The women would bet on seventh-month babies.

[31] https://www.facebook.com/groups/1464780633773932/posts/3118273011758011/ 'Fashion of Bygone Days 1950s –1960s' explored

[32] Between 1949 and 1976, in England and Wales an estimated 185,000 children were taken from unmarried mothers and adopted. Women and girls who became pregnant outside of marriage during these decades were seen as having shamed themselves and their families. Babies were taken from their mothers who did not want to let them go. *Source UK Parliament >Committees* 15th July 2022

[33] The pill was introduced in the UK on the NHS in 1961 for married women only – single women gained access in 1967, the year the Abortion Act was enacted. From 1974 the pill was free of charge.

By the fourth stanza the mood is darker; as a teenager I had a close friend whose father, Billy, was an Orangeman and who was fond of me despite my Catholic religion.[34] He was less tolerant of his brother, an apparently foolish man 'tricked' into marriage by a Catholic girl; this was discussed openly and often in earshot of my friend and me. This short stanza summarises a furtive marriage ceremony and a verbatim account of Billy's sectarianism and sexism:

> Carol and John: a side-altar job arranged in haste.
> His brother Billy blamed her, and sniggered
> that *Catholic girls never wore any knickers.*

When I suggest that the couple are equally responsible, I was told that if passion escalated it was because 'a man could only take so much'. Foolish as he was, 'John' was a helpless victim of seduction.

The prosody of 'Sorry, not sorry' took shape as the past pulled me in. The stanza sizes are irregular; I mix end rhyme for example, *horse* and *of course,* with oblique rhyme such as or *half-a-dozen* and *lovin'* which I deem appropriately contradictory poetic devices: working-class women and girls in Liverpool were embracing 1960s modernism yet religious teachings were steeped in quasi-medieval beliefs. [35] As an older child I understood that the larger the family, the greater the degree of exponential poverty which existed, and the more women became physically and mentally worn-down. Stanza six focuses on a mother of five and was discussed earlier (p.137). Despite my own family's financial struggle, the sight of a baby in her cot with newspaper in lieu of a blanket shocked me. The same mother, Mrs. B., is then portrayed in flashback in stanza seven. The two stanzas are linked by end line rhyming

[34] Orangeman: a member of a society founded in Ireland (1795) to uphold the Protestant religion, the Protestant dynasty, and the Protestant constitution. *Collins Dictionary*

[35] Oblique rhyme: two words that have only their final consonant sounds and no preceding vowel or consonant sounds in common. The device was common in Welsh, Irish, and Icelandic verse years before it first appeared in English and was not commonly used until the nineteenth century for example, by for example Gerard Manley Hopkins. https://www.britannica.com/art/half-rhyme

in stanza six that also half-rhymes with that in stanza seven to create a euphonious effect despite the uncomfortable topic of deprivation:

> Worn-down mothers with stained teeth
> placed babies in cots, with only newspaper beneath
>
> her lipstick and powder on Saturday night; a petite,
> bright woman, dimmed with years of making ends meet;

The reference to 'her lipstick and powder' is a memory of my friend and I playing in the street on a warm summer evening, watching local couples walking to the pub for their weekly night out. We exchange glances and whisper 'Look at Mrs. B!' Following the birth of her first child she was smiling happily at her tall, handsome husband; dressed in a dainty skirt-suit and Jackie Kennedy-style pillbox hat, her face was fully made-up. We couldn't remember seeing any other mother in the street looking so pretty and so incredibly young; it seemed to us almost sinful. It is that memory which is dramatised in the poem.

The wrong-doing perpetrated by the speaker then aged about eleven, in the final stanza, was a deliberate act of rebellion: I considered myself too old for 'baby' dolls.

> My mother bought me a doll and I scrawled blue Biro
> across its chubby baby face.

With hindsight I believe my mother was trying to interest me in babies, expecting me to dutifully care for the life-size doll like my own 'pretend' baby. The blue Biro incident (which might be viewed as a psychological rejection of my mother's values) angered and I suspect confused her greatly. I simply thought that babies were uninteresting; hardly surprising when I was living in a street with a pram in almost every hallway.

I knew from quite an early age that I did not have enough of what the Irish call 'the Grá'[36] for motherhood. In 2022, looking at becoming a septuagenarian in a few years hence, I was wondering whether I had enough caring abilities to support my husband. 'The essential absence of light' (p.30) is an intertextual poem, written just prior to my husband's second cancer diagnoses. The context that inspired the poem was that it was mid-December, and I was close to despair; we had recently returned from a holiday which was different from any other we had experienced. Lap-top in front of me, I looked out over the garden just after sunrise:

> but for now a black smudge of cloud rests on the rooftops.
> A lone bird sings a diminished chord as mid-winter seeps in.

I knew of diminished chords from my piano-playing days; it is an odd sound, eerie, dissonant and tense. This, I decided, is what the 'lone bird' would sing. I needed a controlled emotional release, and chose to write in non-rhyming tercets, each self-contained, creating a poem that is slower-paced than using terza rima; it places a focus on the subject matter. Tercets are flexible: they allow lines of differing lengths within each stanza; I could say what needed to be said in the moment and move on. The title of the poem is important but when I chose the title, I had no real knowledge of the quotation origin. I only knew that it reflected my sense of helplessness in the face of an as yet undiagnosed illness: life was about going through the motions, slipping between light and darkness, trying to cope with life-changing undiagnosed symptoms. This is captured in the lines:

> In Corralejo, I realised that nothing would ever be the same.
> Your pain, the choking on food; your refusal to swim, afraid
> to jump in and flirt with the high-rolling surf and her salty tongue.
>
> You will never kiss me on the mouth again

[36] Grá in its simplest terms means 'love'

The most basic things in life, such as eating, sleeping ‘You sleep late; you sleep in the afternoon and after supper’ and sex become synonymous with symptoms of illness and sources of fear. The poem also captures the ways in which the ‘well’ person may selfishly and irrationally react to the situation:

> Some things which matter to me are of little concern to you:
> candle-light and dancing, *spaghetti vongole* and chilled Chablis;
> now, you can barely swallow, and I hide a flicker of disgust.

Behind such feelings may be fear of what the future holds but nevertheless it does not reflect well on the speaker; the light she remembers fondly is dimmed candlelight; her reflex reaction of disgust is a ‘flicker’ she must hide. At that moment, light is essentially absenting itself, and yet the speaker in a different frame of mind seeks light and clarity. In the first two stanzas she guides her husband through the NHS maze without success until ‘paying’ both figuratively and literally (sourcing a private specialist for a diagnosis). In the penultimate and final stanzas the speaker is attempting to create a ‘normal’ Christmas for them both:

> I shop […] for *festive fayre*. Outside the store looking in, watching the weary staff,
> I am trying to fulfil futile expectations. It is still dark, and I don’t know myself.

The speaker tries to create brightness with Christmas tree lights but berates herself for forgetting her usual celebration of Saint Lucy whose name means ‘Light’ or ‘Lucid’. It feels like a bad omen. The speaker shops early, in darkness; she feels shut out from the world, looking in, like she doesn’t exist. Her quest for food is pointless, but she doesn’t know what else to do. This was very real, and as I wrote the words I remember the feeling of loneliness I experienced that dark winter morning. The source of the poem’s title, however, believes that light will overcome darkness ‘When the darkness itself is transformed into light, it is a light that no darkness can oppose’.[37]

[37] Freeman, Tzvi, ‘Returning Light’ Chabad.ORG. Blog. https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/45659/jewish/Returning-Light.htm

‘The essential absence of light’ is in lyric style; it does not have a true narrative nor tell a story, so much as drop the reader into a situation. I’m not sure I felt any cathartic effects from writing the poem, but I did feel that I had communicated something to the world about the visceral nature of illness and the darkness and light of human nature. ‘Absence of light’ has what Sianne Ngai calls ‘ugly feelings’: ‘disgust is the ugliest of ugly feelings […] disgust is never ambivalent about its object’ (Ngai, 2005, p.335). In the poem, disgust is not directed at a person or an inanimate object, it is a spontaneous, human reflex but still an ‘ugly’ one. But the poem is also about the instinct to seek-out the light; or to put it another way, not giving up hope. I did not give up hope on my husband, nor on plans to finish my thesis.

The aim of this thesis was two-fold. In the critical essay I sought to provide a narrative of working-class women in a specific community; however, an examination of contemporaneous texts concerning the Irish in Liverpool proved to be a study of specifically male authorship, writing almost exclusively about men, for a male readership. In this context religious texts which targeted women mostly provided an unrealistic set of demands for an idealised Catholic womanhood as in O’Reilly, 2020. At least those were my findings. Secondary sources confirmed that which I already knew: the social positioning as an underclass of Liverpool-Irish women and their descendants continued until the second world war, and that working-class male hegemony comfortably survived the social and economic changes of the post-war years in Liverpool. I chose the poetry of Eaven Boland as a lens through which to examine aspects of the fallout from British imperialism in Ireland, the Great Famine and the manipulation of passive feminine ideals to legitimize the underlying political aims and violent instincts of men. Finally, in promoting a concept which I view as an alternative diaspora, that of working-class women trapped in the socially hybrid lives of the

psychic economy, I came to understand that such women have not one, but two glass ceilings to break.

The poetry collection is mostly informed by the stories and struggles of working-class women, but I remained aware of the basic emotional needs and fears that *all* women share: the commonality that Burns highlights in Eavan Boland's work. Commonality and imperfect humanity are concepts I sought to capture in the poetry collection.

The poem 'Married Out 1896' (p.8) is based on fact, familial memories and contemporaneous and historical accounts of court housing in Liverpool: Shimmin, (1991) Stewart, (2019) Frazer (1997). Underneath the heading 'Sex, Lies and Mobile Phones' lies a group of women-centric poems lavish with imagery and intimacy but also searing honesty. 'Menopause Moon' explores mid-life concerns, changes in lifestyle and chaotic middle-class lives. The section entitled 'How it was' encompasses memories of Liverpool working-class life the 1960s and 1970s; interspersed in the collection are three contemporary poems which make up 'The Judgement Trilogy'.

Only with hindsight are aspects of post-war working-class women's lives, such as socially enforced weddings, menstruation shame and the judgement of men on women, fully understood to be still functioning today in wider society. Similarly, debates and discussions on class remain centre-ground in the media and in literature: Smith, White and Haughton (2024), Jones (2020), McGarvey (2018).

I believe that I have achieved my goal of helping to illuminate working-class women's lives, introducing Liverpool as a place of hybrid 'otherness', of Irish Catholicism and guilt and of women's fear of men and our desire for them. Within the lyric content are stark reminders of women's reality, of poverty, illness, but also the joy of holidays and food which post-war working-class children had no concept of. The

social tragedy of the twenty-first century in Britain is the working-class family who have, due to de-industrialisation been without employment, without hope, for possibly three generations, suffering material and emotional poverty the violent brunt of which is so often borne by women (Hill, 2020, p.69). I hold out hope that one day there may be a government intent on finding the will and the way to change this, but fear that as 2025 unfolds, solutions will prove elusive.

Appendix 1

Liverpool City Council

Available at: https://liverpool.gov.uk/

Demographics headline indicators
All data points are the latest available data, as at September 2023.

Source: ONS Census 2021

Population by ethnicity

Indicator	Liverpool	England
White	84.0%	81.7%
White: English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	77.3%	74.4%
White: Irish	1.4%	0.9%
White: Gypsy or Irish Traveller	0.1%	0.1%
White: Roma	0.2%	0.2%
White: Other	5.0%	6.2%
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	3.5%	2.9%
Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh	5.7%	9.3%
Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African	3.5%	4.0%
Other ethnicities	3.3%	2.1%

Birmingham Census 2021 available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/

Source: ONS 2011 and 2021Census

Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh	26.6% **31.0%**
Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African	9.0% **11.0%**
Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups	4.4% **4.8%**
White	57.9% **48.6%**
Other ethnic groups	2.0% **4.5%**

Appendix 2

Origin and occupation of patients in the Liverpool Northern Hospital 1849 and 1850		
Occupation	***1849***	***1850***
Labourers	1086	1204
Sailors	719	830
Mechanics	292	270
Women	415	475
Children	297	359
Total	**2809**	**3138**
Origin	***1849***	***1850***
Liverpool	564	591
Other in England	457	561
Ireland	916	1149
Scotland	124	114
Wales	112	89
Foreigners	636	634
Total	**2809**	**3138**

Source: Report, List of Subscribers, and Statement of Account of the Liverpool Northern Hospital, for 1849 and for 1850, Liverpool, n.d. (Belchem, 2007, p3)

Appendix 3

Table 1.1 Occupational analysis of the Irish in Liverpool in the early 1830's

Occupation	*Number*	*As percentage*
Merchants of various sorts	780	10.4
Brickmakers	270	3.6
Sugar-boilers	200	2.7
Masons' labourers	350	4.7
Bricklayers' labourers	850	11.3
Chemical works and soaperies etc.	600	8
Sawyers	80	1.1
Labourer employed in smithies, limekilns, plasterers' yards and by paviors	340	4.5
Lumpers around the docks who discharge vessels and re-load them	1700	22.7
Porters employed in warehousing goods etc.	1900	25.3
Coal heavers and sundry other employments	430	5.7
Total	**7500**	

Source: Evidence of Samuel Holme: Parliamentary Paper 1836 (40) XXXIV: Royal Commission on the Condition of State of the Irish Poor in Great Britain, p.29

Appendix 4

Hourly Earnings 1960s Men

Regions of England	**Year**		**Year**		**Year**	
	1964		1965		1966	
	s	d	s	d	s	d
South East	*No Information*		10	0.3	10	8.5
London and SE	8	3.4	9	0.2	9	6.7
Eastern and Southern	8	3.4	9	0.6	9	6.2
East Anglia	*No Information*		8	8.3	9	3.7
South West	7	7.7	8	4.8	8	9.9
Midlands	8	3.9	9	1.8	9	7.2
West Midlands	*No Information*		10	5.4	11	1.7
East Midlands	*No Information*		9	4.5	8	11.6
Yorkshire and Humberside	7	4.8	8	1.5	8	5.7
North West	7	7.0	8	3.2	8	9.8
Northern	7	8.8	8	7.2	9	0.9

The statistics shown are pre-decimalisation. For example, in 1966 a male factory worker in the North West (Liverpool) would be earning the decimal equivalent of 45p per hour. A ten-hour shift would pay £4.05. Five ten-hour shifts (i.e. a week's wages) would be a gross figure £20.25, or £1,053.00 per year.

Appendix 5

Adult Male					Adult Female				
Full Time Manual		Full Time Non-Manual		Full Time "All"	Full Time Manual		Full Time Non-Manual		Full Time "All"
£		£		£	£		£		£

DEPT OF EMPLOYMENT LABOUR STATISTICS (Pre-NES)

YEAR	F.T. Manual		… ..		… ..	F.T. Manual
1956	11.8		… ..		… ..	6.0
1957	12.1		… ..		… ..	6.3
1958	12.7		… ..		… ..	6.6
1959	13.2		… ..		… ..	6.9
1960	14.1		… ..		… ..	7.3
1961	15.1		… ..		… ..	7.6
1962	15.6		… ..		… ..	7.9
1963	16.2		… ..		… ..	8.2
1964	17.6		… ..		… ..	8.8
1965	18.9		… ..		… ..	9.2
1966	20.3		… ..		… ..	10.0
1967	20.6		… ..		… ..	10.2
1968	22.3		… ..		… ..	10.9

1938 - 1968 compiled on basis of men aged 21 + and women aged 18+

Source: 1938 - 1968 : British Labour Statistics Historical Abstract 1886 - 1968; Tables 40, 41, 42, 49 and 53

Figures from 1938 - 1968 taken from the British Labour Statistics Historical Abstract 1886 - 1968, converted into decimal currency

For this table the ASHE figures are GB only to allow comparison with the NES.

https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/written-answers/1969/apr/21/manual-workers-wages

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