Poetry and Memory – A Reflective Journal on My Life and Work

By

Eamon Breathnach

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Supervisor: Janice Fitzpatrick Simmons

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I hereby declare that this dissertation

“Poetry and memory – A Reflective Journal on My Life and Work”

is my own work and that it has not previously been submitted for any other qualification

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Signed: Eamon Breathnach

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Dedicated to the memory of my mother and father.

To Margaret my wife for twenty five years.

To my three children, Sorcha, Treasa and Cathal;

and to my grand-children

Hayley, Joshua, Noah and Ella.

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Notes

"Poetry and memory – A reflective Journal on my Life and Work"

is formatted in the MLA style according to the guidelines in Gibaldi, Joseph. MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers. 6th Edition. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2003.

Introduction to Poems

The following poems have all been written during the course of my M.A. (Research) in Creative Writing at Waterford Institute of Technology.

Prior to commencement of the programme all my published poems had end-line rhyme as I believed strongly that poetry had to have rhyme.

My supervisor Janice Fitzpatrick-Simmons and my class colleagues encouraged me to liberate my style, and so I began to move towards free-verse. These poems are the result.

Most of the poems are autobiographical in nature, and have a particular focus on my childhood.

The Inner Bar

(Dedicated to Shane and Niall)

Twinks with weather-cock restlessness,
Eye the entrance hall.

BOOM BOOM BOOM – the disco beat-
in sequence wounds and heals.

Journeying through mid-life crisis,
I reach the inner sanctuary bar
of gender acceptance.

They render me invisible.

A head turns,
A wink – A nod.
Oh God.

There's talk of "coming out",
But I'm still going in.

Mental Institution

She sits and stares into seventy years,
Transfixed by hopelessness in an eternal now.
Electro ConvulsiveTherapy marks her brain,
Like the Woodbine- burn trophies
On her faded cardigan.

The nurse hands her the yellow pill
Bearing the number of her widowed years.
The trembling glass touches her
Speech-dried tongue.
Every visitor is her son.

Depression

Foetus-like he curls in bed
And enters the igloo of his mind.
His soul's pilot light
Dims and flickers refusing to ignite,
Dreams like lost diamonds
Buried in an avalanche of self doubt.
He *cannot* cry.
He *must* not cry.
He *does* not cry.
His wife waits with rays of love
Quietly melting a path to his ice-capped heart.
A cup of tea arrives on the bedside locker.
His children play noiselessly outside the door
And wonder if Daddy loves them anymore.

Awakenings

Springtime came in my thirteenth year,
My blood stirred in brooding heat
Like simmering porridge.
My class mate younger by a year
Succumbed to exploring fingers
Searching in the under-growth of new sensations.
Ink-stained desks hid our nervousness
As we journeyed to the adult world.

Spring turned to Summer dreams
And Autumn to a rich tapestry of feelings.
The Winter priest attired in black
Came preaching with new words
SIN LUST GUILT and SHAME
My world would never be the same.

Perichoresis[1]

I glimpsed the Trinity
In the feet of teenage dancers,
Brothers poised in perfect unison
Anticipating each other,
With steps held in motion
By a lifetime of musicians.

An old woman bent with arthritis
Shed her pain and burst into life
Re-birthing with the music of eternity.
She too had joined the Trinity
And kissed the angels
In the still centre of the dance.

For an instant I understood
Ireneus, Augustine, Aquinas -
Wrestling with the Trinity
And exhausting themselves
Counting the number of angels
Dancing on the head of a pin.

[1] Perichoresis = a Greek word used by early church theologians to describe the Divine dance of the Persons of the Trinity

Retirement

(*For Brendan, retired Council lorry driver***)**

The silent alarm clock
Greets his first day of freedom.
Conditioned, he awakes
At six thirty to nowhere.

No truck in the yard
To remind him of thirty years.
A gravel-polished shovel
Stands naked against the hedge.

Through the window he sees
The Winter Robin gulping
The last of the autumn pickings
In the rotting vegetable patch.

Stories from his life and work
Congealed inside his memory.
No thoughts yet of boredom
Or attending colleague's funerals.

For now he dozes in happiness
And thinks of Bantry, Kenmare and Rome
And planting cabbages, lettuces, Onions
In the garden of his new Springtime.

Hayley at The Towers

I stumble upon history in a wood,
Where ruins shelter us from showers.
Kiely Ussher was a Landlord not noted for charity,
But for a promise made to his newly-wed bride,
To build a mansion
Where servants walk twenty minutes
From kitchen to dining-hall,
A dream soon lost to the spectre of famine.

A child scolds a mongrel
Leg-lifting against the walls-
Old towers stone-cold in the rain.
Another visitor stops to read
Scribbles on an old bank letter and mumbles
Bloody landlords, Bloody banks.

Kodak Gold

I minded gold here once,
And raised the flags each day,
Faced questions one visitors' morning
When the green white and gold outsoared
The stars and stripes.

Texans slow to comprehend.
Youghal, Ireland - a dot on the world map,
Drawn by the States
United in prosperity.

The excitement when it came -
The promise of jobs,
Twelve-hour shifts,
Disks for the world,
Riches for the few.

Ten years later an unknown face
In a distant boardroom removed the dot,
And placed it in Poland
Or was it Lithuania.

Today, green gold moss
Sneaks through the car-park tarmac
Up the walls to the roof.
No camera in sight.

Seed House

It was a workhouse during the famine -
A fever hospital -
A grain store with offices
When I came with brief case -
A budding sales representative
For Townsend/Flahavans Seeds.

I sold wheat, oats and barley with exotic names
To farmers with ploughs and loyalty.
Sons of the soil – no longer sweating in drills between horses,
But with tractors smoking diesel
Beneath harvesters twelve feet high.

I cajoled and bargained over cups of tea,
Fed on bacon and dark green cabbage
With men rooted in the earth
Still savouring its salt.

I learned about cereal diseases,
Mildew, rust and *rhynchosporium*,
Prescribed chemicals by the barrel,
Tracked wild-oats in fields of barley,
And once tripped over a naked navy recruit
In a field of ripening wheat.

My mortality began eight years later
After my mother embraced the clay-
The dark shadow of famine re-appeared
Wrapped in the white shroud of redundancy.

Calf-rearing Advisor

I knew calves drank milk from buckets-
Lived in sheds or died from scour.
I had seen them in neighbours' fields,
Tugging at toughened udders
In fields of toughened grass.

In need of cash and confidence,
After college days expired
I found my way to Waterford co-op.

One hour later, equipped with new words,
Vitaminised – Emulsified – Homogenised,
A hired Rover car
And half a driver's licence,
I was on my way promoting *Thrive,*
A new calf-milk replacer.

I drove through pot-holes ten inches deep,
Walked through yards of redolent dung,
Stepped on cows after-birth,
Listened to stories of hurling heroes.

It all ended at a narrow gate,
After a pillar left a deep wound
On the door of my vehicle,
And an everlasting stain in my memory
Of calf-rearing advisory days.

The Goats

We kept two goats in our childhood bog,
That ran for acres towards the castle at Knockmawn.
They followed us to the well for water,
Protected us from Landers' bull
And acted as goal-posts for football games.
They munched their way to every neighbour
But especially to the sweet oats
Of bachelor Nickeen,
And carried back the hatred of love lost
Between him and my mother.

Wearied by trespass battles
Mother succumbed to depression.
After one last battle with Nickeen
We found two stiff and swollen goats
Side by side in death,
Bearing the guilt of neighbours' sins.

The Ass

My aunt Peggy had a better breed of ass
Than ours which had “Tinker’s blood”.
Peggy warned us about “Tinker’s ways”.

My mother borrowed her donkey once
To retrieve wood blown across the bog
After a night of ill wind.

The ass finished the task mid-morning,
Strolled the bog in the afternoon
And vanished in a fog of night.

Peggy’s suspicions deepened,
Sisters’ coolness hardened to winter frost
And the bog-holes froze.

A summer drought turned drains
Into passageways strewn with bones
And Peggy came to pay her respects.

Mice

The mice arrived in poverty
Under the frayed porch door,
Side-stepping our cat
Too anaemic to care.

They scraped through the boards
Dry-rotting beneath my bed,
And chewed their way
Through thin wallpaper on thick walls.

Searching the cupboard for food
One hungry morning,
I found a crust enticing them
To a trap that hanged them three in a row.

In Hospital

Sister Frances stole my milk bottle,
Said I was *a big boy now*
And gave me a bed to myself.
A nurse with a bib of buttons
Stuck something up my bum.

She fed me on sweet syrup
And kept vigil at a baby's cot
Plugged to a lamp of heat.

Once I unplugged it and waited.
When she returned
She ran screaming from the room.

I awoke in a prison of four bars,
One for every year.

The “Poison Thing”

Mother called it the “Poison thing”.
A mystery object in a disused old clock.
One school-free morning
I placed it on the open fire,
And watched the kindling explode.

The bang echoed through the house,
Sending the kettle up the chimney
And my brother and I
Running from the house.

Shell-shocked, mother found us
Hiding in the hen-house –
My brother without speech
And I without mind.

For months the scarred kettle
Remained on the hearth.
The wound in my psyche festered
Until my mother brought the kettle
To the bog hole
With the many remnants
Of a damaged childhood.

Ode to my mother

We always called you Queenie,
Your name since early childhood.
Fifties Ireland robbed you of your choices
When Ned died and I still in your womb.
Wild Woodbines stole your pennies
And a neighbour your dignity
One lonely morning.

Your face reflected the mystery of God
As you returned from Mass each Sunday,
The communion wafer dissolving
In your hungry stomach –
The whiff of sacristy rashers in your nostrils,
As you cycled the *Via Dolorosa*
On the Canty Road.

The Bog Hole

A hole big enough
To bury a bull
Appeared overnight in the heart
Of our childhood bog.

Tom Landers and Richie Neill
Surrounded it with a wall of stakes and wire.
Fallen crockery and broken utensils
Found their way to this
Water-filled underworld.

One desert summer
From a distant inspection of forgotten treasures,
I spied decaying canvas bags
Unveiling the truth of our missing kittens.

Messenger Boy (1963)

(*With fond memories of Kit Crotty)*

I rocked and rolled with
The click-clack of the hand truck
That carried bags of meal
To farmers parked with rustic awkwardness
On the edge of Grattan Square.

I ferried half-pounds of tea and sugar
Wrapped in brown paper civility
To South Terrace and feasted
On Burke's sausages.

I ran to the bank with a five pound note
Seeking change for an ailing till
And listened to the wind announce
The arrival of supermarkets.

Dead Certain

A woman fills my ear with *Truth,*
Above the dead, long forgotten
Under high crosses at Ballygunner.

Her *Truths* – black and white
Expostulated from *Alive* newspaper
And the “fifties” penny catechism.

I nod, bemused by her certainties,
Her words disturbing
The spirits of the dead.

Summer Work at Carriglea (1964-1968)

I pass my teen summers here
Where nuns shelter ladies
Broken by life and psychiatry
To the rhythm of the cloister bell.

Wearied women peer
Through laundry windows
And watch me dig weeds
Or paint grey walls.

Stitched inside a thick-walled prison
They beckon me
To shed my fears while they
Shed their clothes in fantasy.

I dine with gardeners and labourers
Who wait by the pig trough
For Nellie's barrel of swill
Before the Angelus bell rings us home.

St.Augustine's (I964-1969)

Saddled with a case of books
I cycle to St.Augustine's
After I leave the Salesians in a week
And the Christian Brothers in a day.

I fight with Latin verbs and maths,
Wrestle with Shakespeare, Shelley and Keats,
Find solace in Wordsworth, Colum and Yeats,
And rest my bike at the college gates.

Enriched by learning and study
I stretch to manhood -
My leaving Cert. sealed
In a trunk of sexual fears.

St.John's (1969-1973)

I knocked on the seminary door
With a bag full of scruples,
A black soutane and white collar,
To walk the line to priesthood.

I trod square cloisters and circular paths
In the universe of Rome –
Read Aquinas, Augustine and Anselm-
And swelled the chorus with Marian hymns.

Good Friday came four times
With suffering, doubt and pain
Resurrection came at Easter
On board a New York plane.

Coláiste Na Rinne (1968-1988)

I join the staff
Of college giants
In the summer
Of my eighteenth year,

Musician in residence
Among linguistic greats
Who mine Gaelic gems
From fishermen and farmers.

I dine with teachers,
scholars and poets,
And play for dancers
hopping for medals.

As teens blossom
Giants grow old.
Sea-gulls swirl and turn
High above the laughter.

Giants and mines
Return to dust
I drag myself away
Before their ghosts return.

Murphy's Crows

A black army invades a field of flattened corn
Skimming the forlorn figure with arms outstretched
In tattered coat and a hat from last year's straw,
As a lone crow waltzes across drills of British Queens.

A shot snaps the silence and the crows bolt,
To circle and swoop for a dead comrade.
I wipe the droppings from my shoes with a tuft of grass
And fetch water in a bucket from the brimming well.

The canal mist lazily rises across Fennel's bog
To clear my view to the ruined castle at Knockmawn.
Pigeons call through whispering avenue trees
Above my rock seat in a mossy grove.

Blackie

They said Blackie hunted sheep
At night when the moon was quartered,
This collie that lappedTreasa from school
One spring with hunger in his bones.

His eyes filled with pleading silence
As I raised the gun to my shoulder
His transient pain transferred to me eternally
When Treasa's eyes met mine.

Armed With Music

There's music in my blood,
Piped from ancestors
Through mountains and valleys.

Col.Brunnock awaited me
At the Army School Of Music
When I was sixteen summers tall.

Anxiety touched my soul
In a late summer fog
The day before departure.

Tanks and guns
Fought battles in my mind
And I couldn't leave the bog.

Sean Phobal

With pain I roll back the years
As I step from stone to tomb
In Old Parish sacred soil.
Names ancient and new stare back at me,
O'Chleirigh –De Paor – Ó' Murchú
Ancestors of people I knew.

John and Mary nestle here,
Grandparents to my children.
Margaret comes with flowers and we find
Sean Keating's grave,
Beside the church where Conor Daly
Still shepherds his sleeping flock.

After the Hurling (2008)

A torn flag salutes the Deise,
White and blue tip-toe away
To shelter in quiet harbours
Where years of dreams must wait.

Black and Amber ribbons dance
Three in a row from Kilkenny trees
Tribal rivalry encased -
Fist-like in *a sliothar*.

The Final

(After Dana Gioia – *Saturday Night at Santa Rosa*)

It's over for another year.
The white and blue army slips away
And fold tight their flags.
Kilkenny kiss and molest
The McCarthy Cup - yet again.
The hundred Euro loser coughs up blood.
The Romanian busker counts his cash.
The breeze sweeps empty crisp bags
From the sidewalk.
Pigeons fly over Hill Sixteen.
Up in the box in the Hogan Stand
Words still flow from radio commentators.
An old *Déiseach* looks in a bathroom mirror
And dries the tears of fifty years.

The End of Childhood
(For Hayley)

I see my face in yours
as you gallop past
your thirteenth birthday.

You were only eight when you
begged me not to leave
the home that was yours but not mine.

I came to see you every day
until the pain went away
and you grew strong.

You learned to swim
in the Crystal pool and
brushed the Saturday horses.

You played the Irish tunes
on the small accordion
and sang the Christmas hymns.

You searched for Rapunzel
when we stopped at castles
on the slow road to Killarney.

You wore the witch's hat
each Halloween with masks
until I at last dropped mine.

The Singer Sewing Machine

The salesman sang his way to mother's heart,
and placed his machine on trial for a week.
It was there when we returned from school,
stitching for space with milk, bread, colcannon
and a pot of cold tea on the kitchen table.

Skilled in needlework and drudgery,
mother longed for a machine like Peggy's.
Her fingers curled her fuzzy brown hair
greying from the want of five pounds.

We promised to pick blackberries, potatoes
and stones from Moll Hearn's hill field,
as she drilled through shirts and trousers
until it stitched her finger to her prize quilt.

The salesman returned – The singing stopped.

The Books

They came by lorry to my home
in the springtime of my quest.
Half a century of condensed wisdom
from a priest in stumbling years.

Pandora-like, I released them-
Philosophy, theology, history-
Curious facts from outer Mongolia
peered from mahogany shelves.

They fought for space and time
with Margaret and her duster.
They grew in every room
and outlived my many vows.

The Quarry Pub

Chris Leahy married Wilson Begley
And owned the pub beside the quarry
That still blasts rocks to eternity.
She served porter to farmers
And lemonade to children
Who snagged turnips after school.

Mother played the farmers' cards
Under a naked electric bulb
That danced with falling stones.
I tasted television here
While Wilson sucked soft grapes
And fed toffees to his terrier.

The Hill

Moll loved the hill-
Grew potatoes and turnips
In land dividing her
From Jamsie Maher's bullocks.

She had a strange look in her eyes-
So we flinched her shaking hand
That clinched crab-like
her long bread knife.

She brewed strong tea,
Boiled pigs' heads
As we picked stones from her fields
That Scanned the Brickey Valley.

Jamsie's cattle died
When the cream left the churn,
And hen eggs rotted in his crops
The Summer I escaped childhood.

Carraig Árd

He taught me about guns -
John Joe, who rose with the sun,
pointed his rifle and
closed one eye at an empty can.

He chuckled when a pigeon
tumbled from the bough,
and a rabbit somersaulted
into Landers' blazing furze.

He joked with an accordion,
under a new moon,
when Decky's bar was full
and I learned old tunes.

He fled the Law
when a mother lay dead,
blood-cold on the floor,
her body pierced with lead.

Asylum Seekers

They followed the Tiger
From its African roots.

Long lost brothers
With darkened skin,
Without memories of heads

Nodding as pennies dropped
Through starving boxes
On the white man's table.

Some came to give birth
Or return with interest
Deposits of faith

Banked by Religious
With vows of poverty
And zeal for souls.

Others to escape hunger
And to drink the milk
Of our fattening cows.

Paud

He lived a mile away
But was seldom home,
Had red hair and came to play
And share out mashed potatoes.

His mother was “Foxy Anna”
Who had no husband.
Air went missing from a bike once
And Anna whipped Paud with a rope.

Sergeant Deasy, protector of Laws and Morality,
Carted him to the Orphanage at Cappoquin.
Mother called it the “Blue School”,
Whispered words that ended sibling rows.

Shopping Day

She takes the canvas bag
From the nail inside the door-
Pumps life into her bike
And pedals to Dungarvan.

I collect black ants from gravel
And fling them to the brown ones
Where they fight to the death
In Murphy's sandpit.

I sail the stream in an empty pram-
The steam ship of my imagination,
Until the fog horn of my stomach
Rumbles me homewards.

Like a nomad in the desert of loneliness
I run towards the mirage of her returning-
Where bags dangle from her handlebars-
And I fumble for toffees in her Woodbine pockets.

First Taste

We watched it disappear into the cupboard-
Blackcurrant jam sealed in a pot.
My brother and I took turns
To guard it from the mice.

Sunday morning seemed far away
And the clock hands reluctant to turn,
But waiting turned to sleep
Until dawn called to the bedroom window.

We were hungry puppies tugging
‘Til the pot smashed to the floor.
The feast finished when blood trickled
From my mouth on spears of sweetened glass.

Christmas Morning

I'm suffocating with flu
Under a heavy blanket.

Carols blow across the room
From airwaves through the frosty hall.

Grand-children Hayley and Ella play nearby-
Joshua and Noah miles away rip their parcels

As Santa departs and kisses the clouds
Over McGillicuddy's Reeks.

I doze with childhood memories,
And shoot rabbits with a cork-gun.

I crash a train through crockery
On a crowded kitchen table.

Mother boils potatoes on the open hearth
And slices a cake secured by stamps.

I open my eyes, glance at the crucifix
And plead to swap places with Jesus.

Introduction to Reflective Journal

At the launch of my first collection of poems in 2005 I was introduced to a long lost cousin and local historian David Hourigan. His knowledge of my paternal ancestors prompted me to think about writing a memoir.

Since most of my new poems are accounts of my life and my childhood in particular, I have decided to use the Reflective Journal as my MA Thesis essay and to do it as a sort of “mini memoir”.

I have also used the Reflective Journal as a means of commenting and reflecting on some of the happenings in our weekly writing workshop.

Eamon Breathnach

Janice Fitzpatrick Simmons

MA in Creative Writing

Waterford Institute of Technology

11 May 2009

Poetry and Memory – A Reflective Journal on my Life and Work.

"The most frustrating, agonising part of creative work is our encounter with the gap between what we feel and what we can express" (Whiteside 406).
In full agreement with above sentiments, I begin the lonely and sometimes painful task of outlining the events and circumstances that shaped my life and work.

A chance scanning of a local newspaper in the summer of 2007 alerted me to a program leading to an MA in Creative Writing by Research being offered at the Waterford Institute of Technology. I had been writing poetry for over twenty five years. Most of my work had been published in a local newspaper and had appeared in book form two years earlier. I thought that, by embarking on this MA program, I would have an opportunity to take a more detailed and academic interest in the words and phrases I had used to convey my thoughts to my regular readers.

I had many reservations about modern poetry with its lack of rhyme and metre. This was in sharp contrast to what I had learned in primary and secondary school so many years earlier. I was locked in my opinion that if words didn't rhyme at the end of the line then it wasn't really poetry but some form of

prose dressed up. All of my poems had end-line rhymes as a pre-requisite. The popularity and large local readership of my work encouraged me to stay with that form. I saw no reason to change.

I had witnessed the decline in readership of modern poetry and in many ways was of the opinion that modern poetry was directed more to academics and other poets than to the larger audience of perhaps less educated readers.

I was conscious that winners of competitions and poets who made it on to a larger stage were writing in the free verse style but I had no inclination to either imitate them, enter competition with them, or change my style. The pressures of living and rearing children isolated me somewhat from the world of poetic academia. Philosophy, theology and traditional music occupied much of my waking thoughts and interests. I had always hated competitions and even in the music world, which absorbed much of my energy, I never took part in competitions.

As a traditional musician, I could hold my own with the best and often in joking I would tell people that I was never beaten in competition and explain my remarks by saying it was because I never entered them. In my teaching and counselling work, I would be challenged sometimes in this thinking by others who pointed to the possibility that I was fearful of failure. With this mixed bag of thoughts, I registered on the MA Programme in Creative Writing.

Eight of us gathered in the office of Janice Simmons (programme supervisor) on 1st. October 2007. Half of the group were from the previous year and the others, including myself, were the freshmen. It was another new

beginning for me and, as always, filled with excitement and apprehension. For the third time in my life, I had crossed the floor from imparting knowledge to receiving it, and I had long since understood that the latter was much more fun and allowed much greater freedom. No longer under the pressure of having to get others through examinations, I could enjoy the freedom of debate and discussion and had only myself to answer for. I could too, enjoy campus and student life again, and mixing with young men and women gives a buzz especially when they are peers and no longer my charges. It would too, hopefully help me to feel a bit younger and mask the reality of my "mid-life crisis". The assembled group began passing around their own creative work to be dissected and commented upon. It soon became obvious that I had joined a group of skilled poets and 'dissectors' – the fact that one happened to be a medical doctor added to the mystique. His reassurance that I'd be okay and that we were the 'oldest swingers in town' helped to settle my nerves and I felt open to the new challenge.

John O Donohue, writing about the sanctuary of memory, gives a good insight into the selection process of memory:

> While experiences vanish, memory remains. Indeed, the narrative of an individual life is the secret construction of this invisible sanctuary of memory. This is where all the known and unknown substance of our days and nights is gathered and selected until it finds the form of memory. This is subtle imaginative work. Memory

> is not merely the reception of the raw imprint of experience nor its simple storage.
>
> There is a harvesting imagination that works at the heart of memory which searches the lived substance of our days until it clarifies and settles into a form that abides. Almost without our noticing it, the individual sanctuary of memory is forever finding its way further into structure and shape. This work continues until the substance of our last hours on earth is received into its deeper lived form. When at last the body falls and the visible life vanishes, the finished sanctuary of memory holds all the harvested possibility. (O'Donohue 35)

"Caw says the rook as he flies overhead,
It's time little people were going to bed"

The above rhyming couplet is the earliest memory of verse in my mind. I was three or four years old when first I heard it and have memories of drifting to sleep at night safe in my bed in the shadow of Murphy's (our neighbours) groves where crows nestled and cawed all through my childhood and to this day. Pat Murphy always maintained that the crows followed him when he moved there from Munsboro in the early fifties coinciding with my earliest memories. He regarded them almost as friends and was very protective of them. I referred to the crows in a tribute poem to Pat following his death a couple of years ago.

The Munsboro crows perched in silence
As his coffin passed between the trees,
The Xmas robin swayed to and fro,
On the fuchsia bending in the gentle breeze.

In “Return to Killishal” one of my earliest poems recalling primary school-days the crows get a mention in the last stanza:

These days are gone - to be no more,
The school was closed–it shouldn’t they say.
The crows are gone that came for lunch,
But I still hear the children play. (Breathnach 1)

In “Murphy’s Crows”, written thirty years later during this MA programme they appear again:

A black army invades a field of flattened corn
Skimming the forlorn figure with arms outstretched
In tattered coat and a hat from last year’s straw
As a lone crow waltzes across drills of British Queens.

I wipe the droppings from my shoes with a tuft of grass,
Fetch water in a bucket brimming from the well,
A shot snaps the silence and the crows bolt heavenwards
To circle and swoop for a dead comrade.

September/October 2008.

First workshop over and my nerves settled somewhat, I spent a weekend with friends Maurice and Angela Kiely in Dublin. They had tragically lost a teenage daughter some months before. We found ourselves delving into books and anthologies which we had both learned at school, and re-reading Shakespeare. “Like as the waves” reminding us of the reality of being fifty seven. We remember his daughter as we read Patrick Kavanagh’s “Lines written on a seat on the Grand Canal”. On the train home I reflected on my many tribute poems and feel gratitude for having this time to devote to the study of writing and poetry which has come to play an important part in my life, and I recalled the refrain *”So many other paths I could have trod but this one chosen by my God*”.

Another week passes and it’s time to bring my first poem to the workshop and I choose a fairly recent one; “A Trip to Carrick Courthouse” for analysis and comment. While there was general agreement that this type of poem was amusing and told a story, I quickly got the impression that most felt that the poem had too much forced rhyme and that perhaps I could express my thoughts better in a more free style. I was yet to be convinced and when a second poem - “The Foal” was cut in half by the doctor and his classmates, I reluctantly agreed I would have to change my style (against my better judgement, I thought!) and would give it a try for the next workshop.

Janice spoke of Robert Frost and introduced us to the works of American writers, many of whom had escaped my reading attention to date. I had one vital thing in common with Frost; an obsession with death. We had connected. Frost's poems "Birches" and "Death of a hired man" re-introduced me to the iambic pentameter metre which I had learned so many years earlier in studying for my Leaving Certificate and with which I had now to familiarise myself again. My study of theology hadn't interested itself in many of these matters. (My primary degree is in Theology). Frost did touch on church matters and I could identify the Protestant, Unitarian and Episcopalian Traditions in his work.

Patrick Kavanagh, about whom so much has been said and written, is on the third week's menu. I dare not mention it to the group that Maurice Kiely in a review of my book West Waterford, people and events: Celebrated in verse, had compared me with the great man and likened my themes to his – choosing the ordinary people over the extra-ordinary.

"Innishkeen Road", in the iambic pentameter of Shakespeare, is among my many favourites. "In Memory of My Father" and "A Christmas Childhood" had become almost prayers for me since my own childhood. These poems brought back memories of my own parents, both of whom played the melodeon; my mother during my childhood and, long before I was born, my father whose music I never heard. He had died before my birth. I can never visit their graves without recalling other people's memories of my father playing the melodeon and their question, "*Would he ever be as good as his father?*"

Only a few weeks into college and campus life, I was beginning to take note of the historical significance of the building that surrounded us. It was at one time home to the Good Shepherd Sisters who in turn had provided shelter for the *Magdalenes* (a rather obnoxious title for girls who gave birth outside wedlock). I thought about these girls in a new way as I sat in the canteen, which was once the laundry area where these girls worked their lives away. I had taught communications here (to a group with intellectual disabilities) only a few years earlier, when the place was under the control of the VEC. Now housing the humanities department of Waterford Institute of Technology, it was beginning to look and feel like a real university.

In another workshop, the scales of blindness towards the value of modern poetry fell from my eyes while we read Robert Lowell and - like St. Paul after his Damascus experience - I was converted. I could see how our poet laureate and Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney was influenced by him. Depression, a major theme in his work, struck a further identifying cord with me, as I had a long experience of the subject both in my personal life and in my study of counselling. In “Dolphin” Lowell wrote: ”When I was troubled in mind, you made for my body, caught in its hangman’s lines”. The hangman’s knot most certainly refers to depression. In “Epilogue”, he wrote: “These blessed structures, plot and rhyme – why are they no help to me now?” These words of Lowell were a great consolation and encouragement to me now, as I was beginning to see that it was possible to express my thoughts and feelings in free verse. My first attempt

at the new style in the poem “The Inner Bar” had brought a resounding acceptance and encouragement from the group.

The Inner Bar

Twinks with weather-cock restlessness
Eye the entrance hall.

BOOM,BOOM,BOOM – the disco beat-
In sequence wounds and heals.

Journeying through mid-life crisis,
I reach the inner sanctuary bar
Of gender acceptance.

They render me invisible.

A head turns.
A wink – A Nod
Oh God

There’s talk of “coming out”
But I’m still going in.

Since sexuality is such a fundamental and complex part of human life I allowed myself to make it the theme of my first poem in the new style. My counselling training and interest in psychotherapy helped me gain greater insights into myself and others but, I believe, writing about such themes gives us even more insights. For me, with this poem, understanding reached a new level and it felt very good.

It was likewise with the next two poems written in quick succession;"Mental Institution" and "Depression". My mother suffered from depression all of her adult life and, either directly or indirectly, it was the cause of her frequent hospitalisation for the last ten years of her already sad life. I studied theology at St. John's College, situated ironically between Waterford City's Infirmary and St. Otteran's mental hospital, and we often joked about being caught between two hospitals and not being ill enough for either of them. Hospital visitation was part of our pastoral training and I was a frequent visitor to St.Otteran's where I met patients in varying states of mental illness. Memories of these haunted me for life. Reflecting on my mother's depression and on my experience of hospital visitation over a life time I wrote 'Mental Institution'.

Mental Institution

She sits and stares into seventy years,
Transfixed by hopelessness in an eternal now.

Electro Convulsive Therapy marks her brain,
Like the Woodbine-burn trophies
On her faded cardigan.
The nurse hands her the yellow pill,
Bearing the number of her widowed years.
The trembling glass touches her
Speech-dried tongue.
Every visitor is her son.

My mother's depression ‘rubbed off’ on me. Like any illness, it has consequences for the family and friends of the sufferer. It also has a genetic factor. For the most part, I coped with my level of depression and it became the catalyst for my interest in counselling and psychotherapy. Looking back from this perspective, I realise that it took its toll on my marriage and other aspects of my life. My next poem would be about the darkness and helplessness of the condition.

Depression

Foetus-like he curls in bed
And enters the igloo of his mind.
His soul’s pilot light
Dims and flickers refusing to ignite,

Dreams like lost diamonds

Buried in an avalanche of self doubts.

He *Cannot* cry.

He *Must* not cry.

He *Does* not cry.

His wife waits with rays of love

Quietly melting a path to his ice-capped heart.

A cup of tea arrives on the bedside locker.

His children play noiselessly outside the door

And wonder if Daddy loves them anymore.

November/December 2007

Equipped with two new poems written in a free-verse style, I eagerly awaited the next workshop and the comments it might bring. Approval for the new style and content came in a torrent of praise and I knew I had made the transition from rhymer to poet as Patrick Kavanagh had claimed for himself so many years earlier on his arrival to Dublin. I loved Kavanagh's poetry and could now see the influence of his work on mine.

Reading Richard Hugo's The Triggering Town, I become aware of the importance of emotional honesty in poetry and writing, and somewhat amused (but not surprised) by his claim that "most people write the same poem over and over" (Hugo 15). "Frosts statement that he tried to make every poem as different as possible from the last one is a way of saying that he knew it couldn't

be" (15). I got further inspiration from his assertion that "Your way of writing locates, even creates your inner life" (15). I found myself smiling quietly at his statement, "Emotional honesty is a rare thing in the academic world, or anywhere else for that matter, and nothing is more prized by good students" (29). As a teacher, I knew this to be true. Through my own experience of counselling and writing, I found myself also in agreement with Hugo's assertion that "Quest for a self is fundamental to poetry" (30).

I had recently come across a young graduate of the college who was beginning to take an interest in poetry and writing and had read his first poems for me. He likewise took an interest in mine and we were both attending a writers' group in the city. While I wanted to encourage him in every way possible, I was also conscious of what Dana Gioia (whose work I was only now discovering) had written in his book Can Poetry Matter: "The Greek Nobel prize laureate George Seferius recounted that, when Eliot heard about a young man who wanted to dedicate himself to poetry, he remarked with unenviable authority; *He's getting ready for a sad life!* (Gioia 144). Still in the early weeks of my research, Dana Gioia struck a major chord with my thinking as did the New Formalists. Perhaps my early opinions around structure and importance of form were not entirely out of touch with some academic writers. Gioia became my food and drink for the next few weeks. As a musician and poet, I had come more and more to the opinion that the connection that inherently lies between music and poetry had been lost in recent times and that many of the poetry readings lacked the sense of entertainment that people in other generations had come to

expect. This was particularly the case in the rich Irish Bardic traditions when musicians and poets entertained in the great houses. Gioia's words leapt from the page at me with his question,

> Why, for example, does poetry mix so seldom with music, dance, or theatre? At most readings, the program consists of verse only – and usually only verse by that night's author . . . . . Today most readings are celebrations less of poetry than the author's ego. No wonder the audience for such events usually consists entirely of poets, would-be poets, and friends of the author. (5)

While Gioia wrote, in the main, about the American situation, it is my belief that the same had happened in Ireland. "Like subsidised farming that grows food no one wants, a poetry industry has been created to serve the interests of the producers and not the consumers" (8). In his notes on New Formalism, Gioia points out that "

> Two generations now of younger writers have largely ignored rhyme and meter, and most of the older poets who worked originally in form (such as Louis Simpson and Adrienne Rich) have abandoned it entirely for more than a quarter of a century. (33)

Meanwhile my task of creating in the free style continued as I delved into my childhood memories.

Mice were a regular feature of rural life in the fifties and it was almost impossible to rid a house of them as they came in to nest from the frost and cold of the winter season. Having a cat around the house helped but was not always

successful in eliminating them. Usually, the mouse trap did the business and I had my first experience of executions.

The Mice

The mice arrived in poverty
Under the frayed porch door,
Side-stepping our cat
Too anaemic to care.
They scraped through the boards
Dry-rotting beneath my bed,
And chewed their way
Through thin wallpaper on thick walls.

Searching the cupboard for food
One hungry morning,
I found a crust enticing them
To a trap that hanged them three in a row.

I was hospitalised twice in my childhood suffering from anaemia, a condition usually brought about by poor diet and lack of iron. Going into hospital can be very traumatic for a child and, because of my attachment to my mother, I found the separation almost unbearable. It was in the District Hospital that I was weaned (abruptly!) from the milk bottle. Sister Frances, matron of the

hospital, reminded me of this fact many years later when I interviewed her for an article for a local newspaper. Perhaps she had more than one reason for remembering.

In Hospital

Sister Frances stole my milk bottle,
Said I was *A big boy now*
And gave me a bed to myself.
A nurse with a bib of buttons
Stuck something up my bum.
She fed me on sweet syrup
And kept vigil at a baby's cot,
Plugged to a lamp of heat.
Once I unplugged it and waited.

When she returned
She ran screaming from the room.
I awoke in a prison of four bars,
One for every year.

The influence of Heaney's Poem "Mid term Break" is obvious here:

> Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,
> He lay in the four-foot box as in his cot.
> No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.
> A four-foot box, a foot for every year. (Voices and Poetry of Ireland 16)

The anaemic cat in the "Mice" poem really referred to myself as I had been hospitalised twice for anaemia in my childhood. My relatively short stay in hospital was filled with nursery rhymes and children's books. I loved these rhymes and could never get enough of them. My widowed mother could never afford to buy such luxuries, but my sisters never failed to recite them to me at night, having learned them at school or in the playground. My aunt Peggy, with whom I stayed a lot, was a great reader and read stories of "Kitty the Hare", ghost stories in "Our Boys" magazine (published by the Christian Brothers) from the pen of Victor O' D Power, whose fiction writing influenced me greatly. Quoting from Wallace Stevens, Gioia puts it succinctly. "The purpose of poetry is to contribute to man's happiness" (16). Expanding on this happiness theme, Gioia says: "Children know this essential truth when they ask to hear their favourite nursery rhymes again and again" (16). The influence of early childhood nursery rhymes never left me and in my college years later I would use them and many new ones as training practice for the many public speaking exams I would undertake through The London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art.

Apart from throwing a tantrum on my first day in primary school, I soon found the experience exhilarating. No longer starved of books or stimulation, I took to school like the proverbial duck to water. Two wonderful and enthusiastic female teachers completed my childhood immersion in adult female company but left me somewhat starved for a father figure. Soon, I was learning poems in both Irish and English and enjoyed both languages. My teacher had me acting out a poem in the Irish language about a Leprechaun - a source of amusement for my classmates. This poem followed me to secondary school and I had the misfortune to act it out one day in class with the consequences of being labelled "The Leprechaun" by the entire school for the next five years. It was however a small price to play for the fun and excitement it brought to the school when I recited it at concerts.

The prose writing of John McGahern and Alice Taylor capture for me the essence of country life in the fifties and sixties. We respected and feared the policemen of both civil and moral laws; the guards enforcing the former, the priests the latter. Long before communion age, I witnessed the arrest and transportation of a young neighbour to the Orphanage at Cappoquin – an institution my mother referred to as "The Blue School". Memories of this prompted the next poem for the weekly workshop with Janice:

Paud

He lived a mile away
but was seldom home,

had red hair and came to play
and share our mashed potatoes.
His mother was “Foxy Anna”
who had no husband.
Air went missing from a bike once
and Anna whipped Paud with a rope.
Sergeant Deasy, protector of Laws and Morality
carted him to the Orphanage at Cappoquin.
Mother called it the “Blue School”,
whispered words that ended sibling rows.

We learned poems by heart, mostly a stanza at a time, as part of our homework. Wordsworth’s “Daffodils” and Padraic Colum’s “An Old Woman of the Roads” are my most memorable.

Perhaps it was because of my mother’s ongoing insecurity of trying to rent a small stone house from a neighbour that the above-mentioned poem by Padraic Colum took on such importance for me. She always longed for a more permanent house from the County Council but never got it. Poor widows, it seemed, had very little clout when it came to finding shelter and accommodation. The poem in a real sense became something of a prayer for me, pleading and wishing that my mother would get her new house. (As history has a nasty habit of repeating itself, I was praying the same poem forty years later after the breakdown of my marriage).

An Old Woman of the Roads

O, to have a little house!
To own the heart and stool and all!
The heaped up sods against the fire,
The pile of turf against the wall!

To have a clock with weights and chain
And pendulum swinging up and down!
A dresser filled with shining delph,
Speckled and white and blue and brown.

I could be busy all the day
Clearing hearth and floor,
And fixing on their shelf again
My white and blue and speckled store.

I could be quiet there at night
Beside the fire and by myself,
Sure of a bed and loath to leave
The ticking clock and shining delph!

Och! But I am weary of mist and dark,

And roads where there's never a house nor bush,

And tired I am of bog and road,

And the crying wind and the lonesome hush!

And I am praying to God on high,

And I am praying him night and day,

For a little house – a house of my own –

Out of the wind's and the rain's way. (Voices and Poetry of Ireland 5)

January/February 2008

Sticking to my goal of writing at least one new poem a week in the free style, I continued to delve into my childhood for themes. Weeks passed into months and I continued to sharpen my tools among the writing craftsmen that were my colleagues and friends at the workshop. Above all, I was sharpening my perception of how the best writers went about their task. Under Janice's influence and keen eye, I was getting a greater insight into the lives and works of the American Poets, many of whom she had studied and known. Poems from such writers as Robert Lowell, Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton, William Stafford, Robinson Jeffers, all found their way onto my desk and were discussed and dissected with great enthusiasm. It was however the poetry of Sylvia Plath that got my best attention. Like so many other poets, Plath suffered from severe

depression which ultimately led to her death by suicide at an all too early age. Reading her poem “The Arrival of the bee Box” was a timely one for me on the course as it forced me to take a deeper look inside myself and ask me if I were ready to let some of the metaphorical bees of my childhood out of the hive.

> ”Many critics regard ‘The Arrival of the Bee Box’ as a symbolic representation of Plath’s role as a poet. To write poetry Plath believed, it was necessary to explore the darkest recesses of the mind, to explore the deepest reaches of the soul. Yet this, she felt was a dangerous business, for it risked disturbing all kinds of hidden traumas, inner demons and negative emotions that the mind has covered up. ‘The Bee Box’, according to many readers, represents the hidden aspect of the poet’s mind, the part where her inner demons dwell.” (This is Poetry 305)

Due to an interest in bees and honey making by my older brother I was forced to tolerate the creatures in the back garden of my childhood. My mother and I were stung several times and we had developed a dread of the damn creatures. In total contrast, my brother John could talk to them and approach them anytime of the day or evening without the slightest fear. Like Plath, the fear of the inner bees was beginning to emerge as I wrote the next poem recalling an event at which I could have lost my life and, one I believe, did cause me some emotional damage for many years.

The “Poison Thing”

Mother called it *The Poison Thing*

A mystery object in a disused old clock.

One school-free morning

I placed it on the open fire,

And watched the hot kindling

Fan to a flame.

The bang echoed through the house

Sending the kettle up the chimney

And my brother and I

Running from the house.

Shell-shocked, mother found us

Hiding in the hen-house –

My brother without speech

And I without a mind.

For months the scared kettle

Remained the only visible reminder

Of the deeper wound in my psyche,

Until both kettle and wound found

Their way to the bog hole

With the many remnants

Of a damaged childhood.

Similarly, in the next poem, I had to look deep inside my hive to take a look at my sexuality and trace its orientation roots and examine the origins of guilt:

Awakenings

Springtime came in my thirteenth year,
My blood stirred in brooding heat
Like simmering porridge.
My class mate younger by a year
Succumbed to exploring fingers
Searching in the undergrowth of new sensations.
Ink-stained desks hid our nervousness
As we journeyed to the adult world.
Spring turned to Summer dreams
And autumn to a rich tapestry of feelings.
The winter priest attired in black
Came preaching with new words
SIN LUST GUILT and SHAME
My world would never be the same.

March/April/May 2008

Themes from childhood still dominate my poems as I reflect on the small, but significant world of the bog, my childhood playground. Apart from nursery rhymes of childhood, I can recall clearly that the first real book I read was Maura

Laverty's 'The Cottage in the Bog". I have completely forgotten the theme now but I do remember reading it ever so slowly and with great relish. (Browsing the internet recently, I was very excited to find a copy still in existence). This was not a turf bog so we didn't have the luxury of cutting and saving turf so often written about by others. It was wet and marshy, holding the winter rains in abundance, but barely providing enough to eat for one donkey and two goats. Nonetheless, it provides me in adult life with rich pickings of memory and childhood games among the rushes in Summer and ice skating on frozen and dangerous ponds in Winter. Three new poems best represent this period; 'The Bog Hole', 'The Ass', and 'The Goats'.

The Bog Hole

A hole big enough
To bury a bull
Appeared overnight in the heart
Of our childhood bog.
Tom Landers and Richie Neill
Surrounded it with a wall of stakes and wire.
Fallen crockery and broken utensils
Found their way to this
Water-filled underworld.
One desert summer

From a distant inspection of forgotten treasures,

I spied decaying canvas bags

Unveiling the truth of our missing kittens.

The Ass

My aunt Peggy had a better breed of ass

Than ours which had “Tinkers” blood.

Peggy warned us about “Tinkers” ways.

My mother borrowed her donkey once

To retrieve wood blown across the bog

After a night of ill wind.

The ass finished the task mid-morning,

Strolled the bog in the afternoon

And vanished in a fog of night.

Peggy’s suspicions deepened-

Sisters’ coolness hardened to winter frost

And the bog-holes froze.

A summer drought turned drains

Into passageways strewn with bones

And Peggy came to pay her respects.

The goats were a source of constant friction between my mother and our western neighbour Nicholas Donnell. Whenever we saw him arrive at our door, we knew that the goats must have broken into his fields again, and it was always a time of great anxiety for us. The goats were an important source of milk for us during times of scarcity.

The Goats

We kept two goats in our childhood bog
That ran for acres towards the castle at Knockmawn.
They followed us to the well for water,
Protected us from Lander's bull
And acted as goal-posts for football games.
They munched their way to every neighbour
But especially to the sweet oats
Of bachelor Nickeen
And carried back the hatred of love lost
Between him and my mother.

Wearied by trespass battles
Mother succumbed to depression.
After one last battle with Nickeen
We found two stiff and swollen goats

Side by side in death

Bearing the guilt of neighbours' sins.

Back in the workshop, Ireland's greatest poet William Butler Yeats had made a metaphorical visit and needed no introduction to anyone present. We had all been introduced to his poems in both primary and secondary school so many years earlier and it was time for a revisit. Yeats, acknowledged universally as Ireland's greatest poet was the special study of one of my colleagues, Marian. She recalled how she used to listen to a special recording of his poems as she went about her daily tasks and paid special attention to the sounds of the words. She had come to see the influence of William Blake and the Theosophists on Yeats's work and how her own interest in spirituality and the metaphysical world had drawn her closer to his poetry. While much of WBY's early work is still very popular, all agreed that it was his later work that is the most impressive, and indeed, were it not for his later work, he might today be regarded as a minor poet. I recall from my seminary days a young idealist student's recitation of "The Ballad of Father Gilligan" and how he had enthralled his listeners. A friend of mine without much formal education, following a row with his wife, went off to the wood at the back of his house and quoted lines from "The Song of wandering Aengus".- "I went out to a hazel wood because a fire was in my head" (Selected Poetry 27). It confirmed for me how good poetry - like Scripture - is often shallow enough for a toddler to paddle in and deep enough for an elephant to swim in. At the mid-hour of life myself, I could identify with WBY's

obsession with ageing but being surrounded by lively young students helped me to avoid morbidity as they invited me to the college dress dance or the Law Ball where, for a few hours at least, I could recover my youthful enthusiasm and zest for life.

Reading Mary Oliver's A Poetry Handbook, I am reminded again of the influence of learning nursery rhymes and how they impacted on poets who had learned such rhymes in childhood.

> Poems written with rhyme and in fairly strict metrical pattern, which feel strange and even 'unnatural' to us, were not so strange to our grandparents. They heard such poems in their childhood – poems by Whittier, Poe, Kipling, Longfellow, Tennyson – poems by that bard of the nursery, Mother Goose. In their literary efforts, imitating what they had heard, they wrote poems in meter and rhyme. It came, you might say, naturally.(14)

During my seminary years and in my preparation for examinations in Public Speaking I became acquainted again with many of those rhymes as an aid towards good speech and enunciation. Some verses, such as the following, from Christopher Burniston and Jocelyn Bell's book Rhymes With Reasons became my 'good speech bible' for a time:

> Father's car is a jaguar,
> And Pa drives rather fast;
> Castles, farms and draughty barns

> We go charging past.
> Arthur's cart is far less smart,
> And can't go half as far,
> But I'd rather ride in Arthur's cart
> Than my Papa's fast car. (Rhymes with Reasons 7)

Many rhymes like these became my good-speech practice for four years as I edged past bronze, silver and gold medals and later taught those same rhymes to my own pupils. What I didn't realise then was the impact they would make on my own poetry as I churned out weekly verse for a local newspaper. It wasn't until the early weeks of my MA journey that I began to move a way from a too high dependence on rhyme as I watched my fellow students craft their words. My new poems were steering away from end line rhyme as I continued to present my latest poems at the workshop. I can still take on board Mary Oliver's view when she says

> Of course I don't suggest a return to metrical verse. Neither do I mean to suggest that the contemporary poem is any less difficult or complex than poems of the past. Nor am I advocating, necessarily, that students begin the remedy by writing metrical verse. (Oliver 15)

Commenting on contemporary poets, Oliver claims with accuracy (most certainly in my own case) that

> There exists a definite sense of the *person*, a perfectly *knowable* person, behind the poem. In truth, it often seems that part of the poem's *raison d'etre* is precisely to give us information about the writer – whether or not these facts are actual – even sometimes to tell the reader the most intimate details of the writer's life. (79)

I am somewhat consoled by her views; to understand that, in this respect, I am among the contemporary fold. I've believed for a long time now that writing expresses something of ourselves and that the reader learns something about the personal life of the poet from his poems. After all, since I intended these poems to be the backdrop to my memoir, how could it be otherwise? "Narrative is at the center of all literature" (Oliver 85). I read, for the first time, Oliver's poem "Wild Geese" and was inspired by its simplicity. I connected easily to the sounds from my childhood bog; the wild geese flew over our home on their migration journey.

<u>September/October 2008</u>

After some speculation about our course, we were relieved to find Janice back at her new desk in the main college campus, and last year's students getting ready for graduation. I was beginning to refer to Janice as the "Rubic-cube lady" because of her skill at juggling stanzas and lines in our work – to great effect. She has a gift for it and invariably improves the poem with her skills. Back in the workshop I continued to write and present poems with stories from my childhood. "Messenger Boy" represents my early teenage years and

“Summer Work At Carriglea” the latter part of my teenage years. My sister worked for Kathleen Crotty, a widow who had an old style grocery shop and meal store in O'Connell Street, Dungarvan. I helped out there on Saturdays, from the age of twelve to fourteen, as a messenger boy filling paper bags of meal and carrying them to farmers’ cars. The tasks, while menial, helped my confidence greatly as I had to engage in conversation with the customers. It was also my only source of pocket money.

Messenger Boy (1963)

I rocked and rolled with
The click-clack of the hand truck
That carried bags of meal
To farmers parked with rustic awkwardness
On the edge of Grattan Square.

I ferried half-pounds of tea and sugar
Wrapped in brown paper civility
To South Terrace and feasted
On Burke's sausages.

I ran to the bank with a five pound note,
Seeking change for an ailing till,

And listened to the wind announce
The arrival of supermarkets.

In the pre-supermarket days of my childhood, we lacked the choice and variety of so many goods that my children and grand-children take for granted. It is hard to believe that a simple thing like a pot of jam could represent such luxury.

First Taste

We watched it disappear into the cupboard
Blackcurrant jam sealed in a pot.
My brother and I took turns
To guard it from the mice.

Sunday morning seemed far away
And the clock hands reluctant to turn,
But waiting turned to sleep
Until dawn called to the bedroom window.

We were hungry puppies tugging
'Til the pot smashed to the floor.
The feast finished when blood trickled
From my mouth on spears of sweetened glass.

I lived my childhood in a square mile radius from the bog which was the centre to Moll Hearne's (south on the hill) where mother helped with seasonal agricultural chores. Aunt Peggy and Uncle Sean lived a mile north, beside Killishal National School. To the west was Chris Leahy's pub and shop beside the lime quarry and the old protestant church. Dungarvan town was a few miles east. Gerald Barron served his Sunday customers in his small shop across the road from St. James Catholic church in Ballinameela. We cycled to Barron's for bread or to Leahy's for the odd bottle of porter that mother might buy when Nick Power, an old friend, happened to arrive.

The Hill

Moll loved the hill-
Grew potatoes and turnips
In land dividing her
From Jamsie Maher's bullocks.

She had a strange look in her eyes-
So we flinched her shaking hand
That clinched crab-like
her long bread knife.

She brewed strong tea -
Boiled pigs' heads

As we picked stones from her fields

That scanned the Brickey Valley.

Jamsie's cattle died

When the cream left the churn,

And hen eggs rotted in his crops

The summer I escaped childhood.

Mother sometimes brought me to the pub with her as she played cards there, and it was here that I got my first experience of television. I still wonder how it is that I never drank alcohol despite the time spent as musician in pubs, but I haven't broken my 'confirmation pledge' – yet!

The Quarry Pub

Chris Leahy married Wilson Begley

And owned the pub beside the quarry

That still blasts rocks to eternity.

She served porter to farmers

And lemonade to children

Who snagged turnips after school.

Mother played the farmers' cards

Under a naked electric bulb

That danced with falling stones.

I tasted television here
While Wilson sucked soft grapes
And fed toffees to his terrier.

November/December 2008

"Summer Work At Carriglea" gives an account of the bulk of my teenage years. I worked as gardener and painter in Carriglea - then a private psychiatric hospital. My oldest sister was a member of a French order of nuns and was based in France. Gardening gave plenty of time for reflection and while I wasn't writing poetry then, my memory had stored the material for the poem. The seed germs for my future interest in Counselling and Psychotherapy were perhaps sown at this time as I brushed shoulders with psychiatric patients.

Summer Work at Carriglea (1964-1968)

I pass my teen summers here.
Where nuns shelter ladies
Broken by life and psychiatry
To the rhythm of the cloister bell.

Wearied women peer
Through laundry windows

And watch me dig weeds
Or paint grey walls.

Stitched inside a thick-walled prison
They beckon me
To shed my fears while they
Shed their clothes in fantasy.

I dine with gardeners and labourers
Who wait by the pig trough
For Nellie’s barrel of swill
Before the Angelus bell rings us home.

These were also the years of my secondary education and the germination of my thoughts on becoming a priest. The end of my teenage years saw me take that road and my study of philosophy and theology. “St Augustine's” and “St John's College” poems give insight into those years and were well received in the workshop.

I went to boarding school for a week to the Salesian College in Ballinakill, Co. Laois with the notion of becoming a brother or priest. It was my first time away from home and I was overcome with home-sickness. My second attempt at secondary education ended after one day at the Christian Brothers' School in Dungarvan, from which I fled after witnessing corporal punishment. This was

totally foreign to me after such a wonderful primary education. My third and final attempt was St. Augustine's College, Dungarvan, where Fr. Butler, the rector, made me welcome and where I undertook all my second level exams.

Reflecting on this period nowadays, I think of the great freedom I had from my mother to make such decisions about my schooling. I'm still not sure if it was a strength or weakness on her part that she always allowed us to make our own decisions. It certainly seems to have benefitted all six of our family and I adopted the same policy with my own three children.

St. Augustines (1964-1969)

Saddled with a case of books
I cycled to St. Augustine's
After I left the Salesians in a week
And the Chrisitan brothers in a day.

I fight with Latin verbs and maths,
Wrestle with Shakespeare, Shelley and Keats,
Find solace in Wordsworth, Column and Yeats,
And rest my bike at the college gates.

Enriched by learning and study
I stretch to manhood -

My Leaving Cert sealed
In a trunk of sexual fears.

Music remained my main source of recreation; I played the accordion on a daily basis and began to play in the pubs from my mid teens. There was no interruption to my secondary education, but my Aunt Peggy felt that, since I hadn't stayed in the Salesians' College, I may not have a vocation to the priesthood. She secured for me, instead, an entrance to the Army School of Music. It did have some appeal at age sixteen but I didn't like the idea of having to fight with an army should the need arise. This forms the theme for this next poem:

Armed with Music

There's music in my blood,
Piped from ancestors
Through mountains and valleys.

Col. Brunnock awaited me
At the Army School Of Music
When I was sixteen summers tall.

Anxiety touched my soul

In a late Summer fog

The day before departure.

Tanks and guns

Fought battles in my mind

And I couldn't leave the bog.

The wish to be a priest strengthened in my mind and, after Leaving Certificate, I entered St. John's College in Waterford - but left after four years.

St. John's (1969-1973)

I knocked on the seminary door

With a bag full of scruples,

A black soutane and white collar.

I trod square cloisters and circular paths

In the universe of Rome -

Read Aquinas, Augustine and Anselm-

And swelled the chorus with Marian hymns.

Good Friday came four times

With suffering, doubt and pain.

Resurrection came at Easter

On board a New York plane.

January/February 2009

In Terry Eagleton's book How to Read a Poem, I was pleasantly surprised to discover the link between poetry and rhetoric. “What we know today as criticism was in effect known as rhetoric” (10). I had developed a love for rhetoric and public speaking in the seminary and it was nice to read about its connection with poetry. “Rhetoric was the science of them all, and poetry, like history, was just a sub-branch of it . . . . . Speaking gracefully and thinking wisely were thought to be closely allied” (10). Eagleton makes an interesting point when he says, “Literary criticism is in danger of breaking faith with its origins in classical rhetoric” (16) and, on what a poem does, notes:

> A poem is a statement released into the public world for us to make of it what we may. It is a piece of writing which could by definition never have just one meaning. Instead, it can mean anything we can plausibly interpret it to mean – though a great deal hangs on that 'plausibly'”. (32)

And, “Aristotle remarks that the poet, unlike the historian, does not have to stick to the way things are” (35). I can agree fully with Eagleton when he quotes Lotman, “Good poems are those rich in information” (58) and his own view; “Poets, like infants, relish sounds for their own sake. Poetry is a superior form of babbling” (58). He warns against too close an analysis of literary form;

> Talk of tone, mood, pace, dramatic gesture and the like is purely subjective . . . . . There is no exact science of these matters, and there is indeed a good deal of room for disagreement in discussing poems." (102)

The subjective nature of criticism was brought home to me in the workshop when young Cathal attended with a new poem he had asked me to read and comment on. On my suggestion, he had omitted the last stanza of his poem in an effort to improve it. Others in the group thought the stanza was vital to the poem for balance. I understood what Eagleton meant, and now I am more wary of offering any suggestions!

As a player of traditional music, I sometimes get irritated by fellow musicians who are 'first off the mark' in telling which key they are playing, be it F or G or B flat. I may not immediately know the key but can play in whatever key they play by way of instinct. Perhaps, writing poetry is a bit like that. Many writers may not always know the sub-terminology but manage to produce good work. We have all learned however, that we may or may not take on board any suggestions offered. Perhaps much of this has to do with one's own confidence. My fellow West Waterford poet, Thomas McCarthy, in a recent interview with Catherine Phil MacCarty in Poetry Ireland Review says, "One of the joys of my lifetime has been the moral collapse of literary criticism" (Poetry Ireland Review 57).

The mundane Summer work of gardening and painting of my teenage years came to a sudden and rather unexpected end as I reached my eighteenth

birthday. At a chance hearing of my music at a pub session, a close associate of Ring College persuaded me to make contact with the manager, Micheal Ó Domhnaill, with a view to applying for the position as resident musician at the college for the Summer period. More in hope than in expectation, I had a quick audition at the college and was delighted to be accepted. In the long history of the college, I was the youngest to occupy the post which I subsequently held for twenty happy summers. It was there that I met Margaret who was to be my wife for the next twenty five years. The Ring College years were among the happiest of my life.

Coláiste Na Rinne (1968-1988)

I join the staff
Of college giants
In the summer
Of my eighteenth year.

Musician in residence
Among linguistic greats
Who mine Gaelic gems
From fishermen and farmers.

I dine with teachers

Scholars and poets,
And play for dancers
Hopping for medals.

As teens blossom
Giants grow old.
Sea -gulls swirl and turn
High above the laughter.

Giants and mines
Return to dust.
I drag myself away
before their ghosts return.

Depression and anxiety took a firm hold of my life one year into the study for the priesthood and it was with feelings of relief and some sadness that I left after four years with the thought perhaps of returning again after a break. Surprising even myself, I was married within two years. My first temporary job after leaving the seminary was with Waterford Co-Operative - now Glanbia. They had developed a new calf milk replacer and I was to promote it for a few weeks. They gave me the fancy title of “Calf-rearing Advisor” - the title of my next poem.

Calf-rearing Advisor

I knew calves drank milk from buckets,
Lived in sheds or died from scour.
I had seen them in neighbours' fields
Tugging at toughened udders
In fields of toughened grass.

In need of cash and confidence,
After college days expired
I found my way to Waterford Co-op.

One hour later, equipped with new words,
Vitaminised – Emulsified – Homogenised,
A hired Rover car
And half a driver's licence,
I was on my way promoting *Thrive,*
A new calf-milk replacer.

I drove through pot-holes ten inches deep -
Walked through yards of redolent dung,
Stepped on cows after-birth,
Listened to stories of hurling heroes.

It all ended at a narrow gate,
After a pillar left a deep wound
On the door of my vehicle,
And an everlasting stain in my memory
Of calf-rearing advisory days.

While my excursion into the calf-rearing advisory world was very brief, it did open a door for me into selling and, on the basis of my brief experience in promotion and sales, I soon found myself working as a Sales representative with Townsend/Flahavan's Seeds, a post I filled for the next eight years.

Seed House

It was a workhouse during the famine-
A fever hospital-
A grain store with offices
When I came with briefcase-
A budding Sales representative
For Townsend/Flahavan's Seeds.

I sold wheat, oats and barley with exotic names
To farmers with ploughs and loyalty.
Sons of the soil – no longer sweating

In drills between horses,
But with tractors smoking diesel
Beneath harvesters twelve feet high.

I cajoled and bargained over cups of tea,
Fed on bacon and dark green cabbage
With men rooted in the earth
Still savouring its salt.

I learned about cereal diseases,
mildew, Rust and Rhynchosporium,
Prescribed chemicals by the barrel-
Tracked wild oats in fields of barley,
And once tripped over a naked navy recruit
In a field of ripening wheat.

My mortality began eight years later
After my mother embraced the clay-
The dark shadow of famine re-appeared
Wrapped in the white shroud of redundancy.

A tragic incident took place in the heart of my homeland during my early days as sales representative. A man, well known and liked in the neighbourhood, who had worked as a farm helper ‘flipped’ one day and shot his employer’s wife, leaving him a widower to look after his young children. Because I had known him since my own childhood, I was asked to give him a character reference in court. My simple involvement brought with it a controversy that I didn’t expect or require.

Carraig Árd

He taught me about guns -
John Joe, who rose with the sun,
pointed his rifle and
closed one eye at an empty can.

He chuckled when a pigeon
tumbled from the bough,
and a rabbit somersaulted
into Landers' blazing furze.
He joked with an accordion,
under a new moon,
when Decky's bar was full
and I learned old tunes.
He fled the Law

when a mother lay dead,

blood-cold on the floor,

her body pierced with lead.

In addition to the full time day job, I was also teaching some traditional music classes at night and towards the end of my time on the road was a regular contributor to the "Dungarvan Observer," in which I had a poem each week and an interview/article. Michael Harty was a long-standing Fine Gael councillor for Ring/Old Parish Gaeltacht where I had lived since my marriage in 1975. My first published poem "The Councillor" was a posthumous tribute to him and also appeared in the local newspaper. Because of local popularity of the poem, my poems were regularly accepted by the "Dungarvan Observer". I had struck a chord with the – then - seasoned editor-cum-businessman Paddy Lynch. This was the beginning of a long relationship with the popular paper still run by the Lynch family.

Interested in history and folklore, I discussed the possibility of organising a competition for school children to write about some aspect of their local area or stories they heard from their parents or grand-parents. The editor agreed, and I contacted every school in County Waterford, set a deadline for entries and secured sponsorship from local Councillors. The stories and legends poured in and we began the task of adjudicating. A full page was devoted to the results every week for a year and it was a phenomenal success. Six years later it was published in book form by The Friendly Press entitled History Lore and Legend –

Through the Eyes of the Young. It is long out of print now, but still available in schools and public libraries. I was delighted to hear recently from a student of folklore at UCC, that it was on the recommended reading list. Perhaps, it's time for a re-print and update.

The first workshop of the new year 2009, took place against the backdrop of the election of the first black president of the United States, Barack Obama and there is an air of real excitement and hope. While the world wide recession deepened there was still no trace of it in any of the latest poems presented at our workshop. We were all too busy with childhood memories. There can be little doubt but that childhood lasts a lifetime. In my poem "Christmas Morning", I tried to bridge the gap between Christmas past and Christmas present, but returned to childhood memories again with the poem "Shopping Day".

Christmas Morning

I'm suffocating with flu
Under a heavy blanket.
Carols blow across the room
From airwaves through the hall.
Grand-children Hayley and Ella play nearby-
Joshua and Noah miles away rip their parcels
As Santa departs and kisses the clouds.
Over McGillicuddy's Reeks.

I doze with childhood memories
and shoot rabbits with a cork-gun.

I crash a train through crockery
on a crowded kitchen table.

Mother boils potatoes on the open hearth
and slices a cake secured by stamps.

I open my eyes, glance at the crucifix,
plead to swap places with Jesus.

Shopping Day
She takes the canvas bag
from the nail inside the door,
pumps life into her bike
and pedals to Dungarvan.
I collect black ants from gravel
and fling them to the brown ones
where they fight to the death
in Murphy's sandpit.
I sail the stream in an empty pram-
the steamship of my imagination,

until the foghorn of my stomach
rumbles me homewards.

Like a nomad in the desert of loneliness
I run towards the mirage of her returning -
where bags dangle from her handlebars
And I fumble for toffees in her Woodbine pockets.

Janice talked to us about the American poet, essayist and interviewer Sherod Santos and his book The City of Women. Browsing through the book - a mixture of poetry and prose - gave me a certain sense of comfort since I too was toying with the idea of producing my memoir in somewhat similar style but had some reservations about the format. This was to give me a new momentum and encouragement.

The death of my mother in June 1983 and redundancy from my sales job a month later in July, brought my relatively secure world to a shattering fall. With a wife who hadn't worked outside the home since our marriage, three children under seven years of age, and a mortgage that was a struggle to pay even while employed, these were the worst of times. For three years, to preserve my sanity, I dug the garden and cut wood for the open fire in our new but cold home lashed by Atlantic gales in Winter. I wrote very little apart from the odd tribute poem. Looking back now I know that it was my faith in God that things would eventually come right which kept me sane.

The end of that three-year period brought hope in the securing of a job by my wife in Kromberg and Schubert in Waterford city. This was the beginning of the long goodbye to the country-side and the Gaeltacht I loved. Adapting to life in a much more socially deprived community of Ballybeg was mind-blowing, to say the least, but it was a community that I came to love and respect as the years rolled by. Fortunately, the children were still young, so they adapted very quickly to city life. Life improved somewhat financially after the sale of our country home but not without the trauma of knowing that we were probably saying a permanent goodbye to rural living which we both loved.

I never lost interest in furthering my education and received a counselling diploma from Maynooth. Because of my interest in counselling and psychotherapy I was elected first chairman of the Waterford Branch of the Irish Association for Counselling. I saw counselling and psychotherapy as another way for people to find meaning in their lives and in their search for the ultimate meaning. Theology and Spirituality beckoned once more and I returned to college to do a full time four-year study of Theology, graduating in 1994 with a Bachelor of Theology degree from Maynooth. In many ways, this was a return or an attempted return to my earlier interest in Theology and Spirituality.

As I looked out the north-facing window of my home I watched the first fall of snow for many years gather on the bare branches of the silver birch trees which illuminate the spring twilight. I recalled Dana Gioia's poem “The Gods of Winter” and ponder his opening lines.

Storm on storm, snow on drifting snowfall,

shifting its shape, flurrying in moonlight,

bright and ubiquitous.(The Gods of Winter 9)

The beginning of February and the beginning of Spring is also the feast of St. Brigid of Kildare, often referred to affectionately as “Muire Na nGael”. There was little sign of Spring this year, nevertheless I felt a familiar aching need to potter in my sister's garden. But, first things first! - a poem needed to be finished for a workshop.

The move to the city in 1987 brought some new opportunities, one of which was the invitation to teach a night class in Conversational Irish at the Central Technical Institute. With some reluctance, I accepted the invitation and enjoyed it over the next ten years. Meanwhile, I had adapted more to the role of ‘house husband’, collecting children from school and preparing dinners. Returning to the full time study of theology was, in a sense, a returning to my never-extinguished interest in theology and spirituality and an attempt to offer my full time services to the church. Spiritual reading was a daily happening for me right through my adult life and the Redemptorist Book Club kept me up to date with the best writers in the field. Sadly and much to my surprise, I found that the church to which I had devoted a total of eight years of full-time study, hadn't yet found a role for lay expertise, despite the promises and excitement of Vatican II thirty years earlier. It was still dominated by priests and a shortage had not yet begun to take its toll. I found myself, complete with my degree in theology, still on the margins - only finding part-time teaching hours for other subjects. Now fifteen years later, all is changed in the Church and, with a serious

shortage of priests, it is forced to depend on the laity for its survival. For me perhaps, it is too late to find a role as I stumble towards retirement age.

As I reflect and write about the last fifteen years, Waterford Crystal workers are staging a sit in at the factory forced to close because of the recession. For eight years in the nineties, the" Waterford Show" sponsored by the Crystal played an important role in my life. The Waterford Show was an entertainment show-piece for the many visitors who came to the city, and I was happy to have contributed to that with my music skills.

The radio has just announced the death of Hugh Leonard, Irish playwright and journalist, just as I come to reflect on the more recent years of my life. He was my favourite newspaper columnist and I enjoyed his humour and satire in the Sunday Independent during all of my adult life. Even his struggle with bad health during the past number of years didn't prevent him from producing some great columns.

Before the turn of the millennium, a health warning in my own life, caused by high blood pressure and the stress of a marriage in break-down mode, forced me to make some major life-style changes by way of exercise and diet. My brother was in charge of the security arrangements for Kodak Multinational Corporation which had a manufacturing plant in Youghal. By the turn of the millennium I was helping him with some of his duties until the company, like so many others since, moved its production elsewhere. "Kodak Gold", well-received at workshop, comes from this experience.

Kodak Gold

I minded gold here once,
And raised the flags each day,
Faced questions one visitors morning
When the green white and gold outsoared
The stars and stripes.

Texans slow to comprehend.
Youghal -Ireland a dot on the world map,
Drawn by the States
United in prosperity.

The excitement when it came-
The promise of jobs,
Twelve hour shifts,
Disks for the world,
Riches for the few.

Ten years later an unknown face
In a distant boardroom removed the dot,
And placed it in Poland
Or was it Lithuania.

Today, green gold moss
Sneaks through the car-park tarmac
Up the walls to the roof,
No camera in sight.

The breakdown of my marriage after twenty five years brought major changes and is very comparable to a death. While it was inevitable and expected, just as in the case of a death, it is a shock when it actually happens. After the initial separation, I lived for a while with my daughter and grand-daughter until I found a place of my own. Leaving them was a great trauma for me. This is reflected in the poem I wrote for my grand-daughter on her thirteenth birthday this Spring: my colleagues in the workshop gave me a very strongly positive feedback on my effort; at times I feel that I haven't been making any progress. Hopefully, this is a reflection on my depressive trait!

The End of Childhood for Hayley
I see my face in yours
as you gallop past
your thirteenth birthday.
You were only eight when you
begged me not to leave
the home that was yours but not mine.

I came to see you every day
until the pain went away
and you grew strong.

You learned to swim
in the Crystal pool and
brushed the Saturday horses.

You played the Irish tunes
on the small accordion
and sang the Christmas hymns.

You searched for Rapunzel
when we stopped at castles
on the slow road to Killarney.
You wore the witch's hat
each Halloween with masks
until I at last dropped mine.

March/April/May 2009

The highlight of my writing life had been the publication of my poems and verses which appeared in “The Dungarvan Observer” over the past twenty five

years. Ninety-two of my poems published in book form "West Waterford – People and Events Celebrated in Verse" went into print in 2005 and represents the end of a style of end line rhymes which characterised my poetry for so long. At the launch of this book, I met David Hourigan. He introduced himself as a long-lost cousin on my father's side. He has a keen interest in history. It was David who started me thinking about tracing my relatives and writing a memoir. He maintained that when my grandfather left his farm home in Lackendarra, Ballinamult to marry Mag Browne, the man lost touch with his family. He and Mag came to live happily in Knockaun where my father was born and lived. My grandfather never returned home because his family frowned on him for marrying beneath his class; the Brownes were not farmers! It is an interesting story but one that I cannot confirm nor deny. It did however mean that no land followed him which indirectly led to the impoverishment of my childhood after the death of my father.

Just prior to my commencement of this M.A. Programme, I had the very enjoyable experience of being a participant on a course in storytelling, organised by the University of Glamorgan. A group of interested persons attended regular seminars and workshops on practical story telling skills. I found it most entertaining and up-lifting as many of the participants were already well versed in the art of storytelling. It re-connected me to my earlier interest in folklore and legends and helped me see clearly once again the value of my one-time project through the schools in collecting stories and legends.

Ash Wednesday came - the first day of Lent - the start of forty days of preparation for the Christian feast of Easter. The Church with all its failings and inadequacies does effectively mark the seasons of the year well and has added colour and imagination to the lives of ordinary people through its rich liturgy. It is a time of preparation and waiting. A time to look back and reflect and prepare and to make adjustments to one's life and compass. It was especially timely for me as I approached the final few months, if not weeks, of the workshops. Already, new prospective students for next year's course were beginning to appear and participate in the workshops. We all hoped that the course would continue and offer the same opportunities to others that it has given to us. There are a number of books that I refer to each year at this time and have found many pages marked for special attention. These include Thomas Merton's No Man is an Island, Van Kaam and Susan Muto's Tell me who I am, Charles Cumming's Spirituality and the Desert Experience, and Thomas H Green's When the Well Runs Dry. Theology and Spirituality for me is like the air that I breathe. It is part and parcel of my sleeping and waking and in the main what gives meaning to my life. I have come to see the intertwining of Theology and Psychotherapy and see them both as a search for meaning. Cummings talks about the "The Desert of Daily Routine" (27) from the perspective of life in his monastery; "Everyday life is full of little, commonplace things that have to be done but do not yield a great degree of satisfaction and fulfilment in the doing. The humdrum of daily life may be our desert" (27). Writing about the desert of loneliness surrounding separation or divorce, he says, "The other partner will

have to face the desert moment of admitting to himself or herself that he no longer means anything to the one person who means everything to him" (48). Those of us in that category understand exactly what he meant and are all too familiar with the desert of loneliness.

In the silence, which most poets and writers are familiar, we get insights into life and into ourselves. Van Kaam and Susan Muto put it well; "A dialogue goes on at all times between what I am and what I am becoming" (34), and "One practical means of fostering an interior life is the keeping of a daily journal" (121).

The biblical image of God as the potter and we the clay in his hands has always fascinated and inspired me. Thomas H Green puts it well;

> The clay cannot shape itself, cannot even have an idea of what it would mean to become a vase or a candlestick . . . . Only the potter can envision what the clay might be, and only his skilled hands can realise his vision." (105)

Thomas Merton, Monk, Writer and Poet has been one of my favourite sources for inspiration and spiritual reflection and I keep his books close-by on my shelves beside St. Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. Following one of the workshops, I reflected on Merton's words; "The man who fears to be alone will never be anything but lonely, no matter how much he may surround himself with people" (201), and again; "Solitude is as necessary for society as silence is for language and air for the lungs and food for the body" (217). Books have played a major part in my life and browsing in bookshops one of my leisure activities.

Fr. Philip Donnelly, a friend who ministered in Australia and Scotland, donated his entire library to me on his retirement to his beloved Youghal. Many of those books followed me everywhere I lived. Pondering on this, I wrote the poem 'Books':

Books

They came by lorry to my home
In the springtime of my quest.
Half a century of condensed wisdom
From a priest in stumbling years.

Pandora-like I released them -
Philosophy, Theology, History -
Curious facts from Outer Mongolia
Peered from mahogany shelves.

They fought for space and time
With Margaret and her duster.
They grew in every room
And outlived my many vows.

The weeks have been rushing past and, following an entire weekend meeting the requirements of the course administrators, I was exhausted. Creative writing energises me but filling forms leaves me breathless! Since this season of Lent is one of penance, I offered it up for my sins as I looked forward to the joy of completion and graduation. I was exhausted again following a very full day in college with a marathon workshop and the launch of the latest poetry anthology from Canada entitled How the Light Gets in - edited by Humanities Department heavyweight, Dr.John Ennis. The anthology, a large tome of work representing Canadian poets, has a cover picture by photographer Aidan Dunne, brother of the late poet Sean Dunne, whose annual festival was being celebrated at this time. I was delighted to see that my friend and mentor Garrett FitzGerald - now an MA graduate of the Creative Writing Department - was given the honour of being Master of Ceremonies for the event.

Mothers' Day came and went almost without my notice. Once a Church celebration called "Mothering Sunday", it has, like all great days, succumbed to secularisation and the peddling of commercial goods. I think of course of my own mother once more as I round off this Reflective Journal. As in the case of John McGahern, my mother's presence is in all my life and work and I can never escape her influence be it positive or negative. I would like to think that my recent poem "Ode to My Mother" will be a fitting tribute to her memory and to my (hopefully, improving) skill as a poet.

Ode To My Mother

We always called you Queenie,

Your name since early childhood.

Fifties Ireland robbed you of your choices

When Ned died and I still in your womb.

Wild Woodbines stole your pennies

And a neighbour your dignity

One lonely morning.

Your face reflected the mystery of God

As you returned from Mass each Sunday.

The communion wafer dissolving

In your hungry stomach-

The whiff of sacristy rashers in your nostrils,

As you cycled the “Via Dolorosa”

On the Canty Road.

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