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Take Two

Paul Lenehan

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Earlier this year, after a public vote and a jury selection, RTÉ and Poetry Ireland announced an impressive shortlist for the title of Ireland's best-loved poem ('A Poem for Ireland'), from which Seamus Heaney's 'When all the others were away at Mass' emerged as first among equals. The other nine poets on the shortlist were: Eavan Boland, Paul Durcan, Patrick Kavanagh, Louis MacNeice, Derek Mahon, Paula Meehan, Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh, Seán Ó Ríordáin and WB Yeats. As a testament to the riches remaining in the storehouse of Irish poetry, *Trumpet* asked a number of randomly-selected poets and civilians to nominate two poems from two poets who don't appear on the shortlist. Here are the results of this most unscientific of surveys.

PAT COTTER, poet

Thomas McCarthy, 'The Dying Synagogue at South Terrace': The poem contains McCarthy's signature cadence and original turns of phrase. But also, it demonstrates how an Ireland exists which isn't solely the Ireland of the Gaels. It's a serious poem which deals with issues of memory, origin and belonging and how people living on this island are occupied with concerns which lie beyond the confines of our own shores.

Patrick Galvin, 'Madwoman of Cork': The fact that the poem is set in Cork has little to do with its appeal. What first appears to be a surrealistically humorous poem with ballad-like refrains and music, works out on closer reading to be a treatment of loneliness and dementia in old age. It is a reminder that the real experience of many

people cannot be adequately conveyed through the medium of social realism or common sense reportage.

BELINDA MCKEON, writer

Rita Ann Higgins, 'Some People': This is a poem which every politician should have to read and in fact memorise before they are allowed to draw a salary in Ireland.

Colette Bryce, 'Derry': Because it is a staggering, powerful and personal window onto what the Troubles were like to live through, what it was like to be surrounded by sectarian menace as the ordinary weather of a day.

OLIVIA O'LEARY, broadcaster

Moya Cannon, 'Night': This poem is literally marvellous. Moya Cannon is ambushed by a starry night in Connemara. She gets out of her car to look and catches the giddiness of that experience, staring up at a glittering loft full of discarded stuff, ploughs and belts and bears. I love this shining poem.

Kerry Hardie, 'Ship of death': Children, even adult ones, don't want to face the fact that their parents will leave them. We have all known that bewilderment, or we will know it. This fine poem catches that sense of being abandoned, the anger and the desolation of watching a parent prepare for death.

IGGY MCGOVERN, poet

Paul Muldoon, 'Cuba': In Muldoon's 'Cuba' the world invades Collegelands in the guise of the 1960s missile crisis. The ultimate 'confessional' poem with a hair-trigger last line: 'He brushed against me, Father. Very gently.'

Oliver St John Gogarty, 'Ringsend': In 'Ringsend' Ireland is a red-headed whore whose wild breast must be 'redressed / From ... / Imagined, outrageous, /

Preposterous wrongs'. Peace is 'The sound ... / Of the lapsing, unsoilable, /
Whispering sea'.

ERIN FORNOFF, poet

Colm Keegan, 'Memorial': An extraordinary, nuanced portrait of the end of a young life, crafted to emphasise the regret and irrevocable momentum of its loss. It is levelling, surprising, a poem that doesn't leave you, ever.

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, 'The Second Voyage': 'The sea was still frying under the ship's side' – the poem deserves its place for that image alone. You can chew and swallow the words and phrases here, and it ends in such an elegy, with such atmosphere.

BARRY MCGOVERN, actor

Thomas Kinsella, 'Ancestor' and Mary O'Malley, 'St John's Eve': Two wonderful poems concerning loss and absence. To say more would be redundant. They are poems.

CAITLIN NIC IOMHAIR, postgraduate

Eoghan Ó Tuairisc, 'Aifreann na Marbh': Eoghan Ó Tuairisc's masterful poem on the bombing of Hiroshima splices details from a daily commute through Dublin city with the repeated realisation that, cliché though it is, life is 'changed, changed utterly' from this moment on, the innocuous specks of dandruff and dust hinting at our own impotence and vulnerability in the face of a weapon of such power.

Biddy Jenkinson, 'Mis': Perhaps a cheat in that it is a book-length poem, Biddy Jenkinson's lavish rendering of an old story of grief and healing has it all – sex, death, violence, humour, romance, loss, and incredible insight into our ability to heal and destroy ourselves and each other.

AFRIC MAC AODHA, poet

Biddy Jenkinson, ‘Gleann Maoiliúra’ (‘Glenmalure’) and Máire Mhac an tSaoi, ‘Ceathrúintí Mháire Ní Ógáin’ (‘Mary Hogan’s Quatrains’): Both these poems are tried and true winners. Both take life by the throat; both share a mutinous truth.

Beagbheann ar amhras daoine, Beagbheann ar chros na sagart, Ar gach ní ach bheith sínte Idir tú agus falla ... – from ‘Ceathrúintí Mháire Ní Ógáin’

I care little for people’s suspicions, I care little for priests’ prohibitions, For anything save to lie stretched Between you and the wall ...

MYLES DUNGAN, broadcaster

Tom Kettle, ‘To my daughter Betty, a gift from God’: Written to his infant daughter just days before his death in September 1916, Kettle offers a *raison d’être* for his participation in the Great War as – in his own words – ‘a bloody British soldier’. His tangible motivational sincerity in offering this apologia to the child who, as it transpired, would never know her father, adds to the poignancy of this exquisitely painful and beautiful sonnet. His assertion that he died, ‘not for flag, nor King, nor Emperor / But for a dream, born in a herdsman’s shed, / And for the secret scripture of the poor’, can be taken at face value. Kettle was fighting, not for Home Rule or the British Crown, but for, as he saw it, European civilisation.

Brendan Kennelly, ‘The Man Made of Rain’: I sat entranced while Brendan read an extract from his ‘out of body’ long poem in the Edmund Burke Hall in Trinity a few years ago. Perhaps all poetry is created in the space between life and death but this poem was, apparently, written after serious heart surgery when the poet must have been at his most vulnerable and honest. The central image of the visitation from the ‘man made of rain’ was simultaneously bold and ordinary. The memories of the reading still recur.

LEONTIA FLYNN, poet

Paul Muldoon, 'Incantata': At the risk of suggesting a Northern Irish bias, I'll nominate the elegy 'Incantata' by Paul Muldoon from *The Annals of Chile*. It's as formally tricky and allusive as you'd expect from Muldoon, but all the erudition and digression is powered by a real heartfelt loss at its core. It makes me cry.

Medbh McGuckian, 'Visiting Rainer Maria': I've studied this poem (from Marconi's Cottage) over the years, and the fact that most of its lines are borrowed from a book about Osip Mandelstam is just part of its brilliant madness. It manages to say something about erotic desire and feminine inspiration, and also be a kind of smart-arsed experiment.

MÁIRIN NIC EOIN, academic

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, 'An Mhaighdean Mhara': A powerful study of loneliness and displacement, drawing on the rich imagery of Irish mermaid legends.

Colm Breathnach, 'Trén bhFearann Breac': One of the best poems I know about how Irish speakers can feel like strangers in their own land. It also communicates the sense of loss felt by those who feel cut off linguistically from their own cultural history.

DAVID WHEATLEY, poet

Samuel Beckett, 'what is the word': You'd think that after six decades of writing Samuel Beckett might have picked up a few insights into how to make his poems flow. As 'what is the word' testifies, apparently not. This is Beckett's last piece of writing, and a wonderful meditation on the art and act of poetry-writing and the never-ending quest for the next word.

Trevor Joyce, 'Cry Help' (from *Courts of Earth and Air*): This is a version of Aodhagán Ó Rathaille's 'Cabhair Ní Ghairfead', and is a wonderfully headlong torrent of bafflement, anger and pain at the death of a culture. If Ó Rathaille had been an English-speaking bluesman, I imagine his poem might have sounded a little like this.

LELIA DOOLAN, producer

Denis Devlin, ‘The Tomb of Michael Collins’: a glorious mourning elegy for our shattered Ireland.

Rita Ann Higgins, ‘The Power of Prayer’: With irreverent sensual gusto, Rita Ann Higgins always shows another side of us. Many poems come to mind; ‘The Power Of Prayer’ has to be the one for now:

We did the Creed,

a blast of the Beatitudes

the black fast was mentioned,

the Confiteor was said

like it was never said before, Marie Goretti was called

so was Martha,

we climaxed on the Magnificat. After that it was all personal stuff. – from ‘The Power of Prayer’

NESSA O’MAHONY, poet

Paul Muldoon, ‘Incantata’: Muldoon’s poem in memory of artist Mary Farl Powers has to be one of the great elegies of twentieth-century Irish poetry; it is sincere, restrained and unbelievably moving.

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, ‘Ceist na Teangan’: I can’t think of a poem that better captures the cultural dilemma of the Irish language, and those who write in it. Her use of the fable of the Pharaoh’s daughter sending her infant out in a reed boat beautifully encapsulates a sense of fragile yet indomitable faith in our native language.

PAUL LENEHAN, editor

Michael Longley, 'Ceasefire': In praise of compromise, in hope of reconciliation, this is a poem about the Trojan War and about the Troubles, a poem for troubled times and places everywhere.

John Montague, 'Like Dolmens Round My Childhood': Now a dolmen himself, majestic and monumental, this is Montague's awed homage to the *dramatis personae* of a rural childhood and of their passing into 'that dark permanence of ancient forms'.