

Fighting Words

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‘It isn’t easy being young. More so when you’re creatively inclined, wired to think and feel deeply, to find the means and measure by which to share these thoughts with the world’

Jan Carson, p3



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**FIGHTING
WORDS**

The write to right.

Fighting Words 2024



Back Row: (l-r) Julia Galiza from Dublin; Rachel McCloskey from Louth; Sadie Fitzpatrick from Dublin; Nicole Barry from Limerick; Oisín Twomey from Cork; Ellie Ó Mórdha from Dublin; Rufus O'Connell Cantillon from Cork; Isabelle Scott from Dublin; Sadie Forde from Wexford; Olivia Willis Lawlor from Armagh. Front row: (l-r) Chloe Doherty from Donegal; Batiste Martinaud from Galway; Anna Dunlea from Kerry, pictured in the Dublin office of Fighting Words. Photograph: Tom Honan

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Fighting Words is in: Dublin, Cork, Mayo, Galway, Wicklow, Donegal, Kerry, Wexford, Connemara, Louth, Monaghan, Kildare, Laois, Offaly, Waterford and Limerick

Fighting Words Northern Ireland is in: Belfast, Armagh, Newry, Coleraine, and Derry/Londonderry

'It's no small thing to strive for more'

The young writers in Fighting Words are not future writers – they're already contributing to the literary community, writes **Jan Carson**

Growing up I wanted to be a football commentator. Jackie Fullerton lived across the road. I saw him on TV discussing the Saturday afternoon fixtures and sometimes in Spar buying milk. I didn't know any writers. Ballymena in the 1980s wasn't a very literary place. All the writers I read were dead or living in exciting places like Paris, London or New York. Though I devoured half a dozen books per week, I never considered becoming a writer. It's hard to aspire to something you cannot see.

I was 25 before I picked up a pen and made my first clumsy foray into writing. I'd moved to Portland, Oregon, a city literally teeming with writers. I was a seasoned regular, sitting at the feet of every author who visited Powell's bookstore, from Patti Smith to Douglas Coupland and Dave Eggers. I had living, breathing – occasionally approachable – models for what I wanted to be. Furthermore, I'd found my tribe: a bunch of musicians, filmmakers and fledgling poets who shared my off-kilter way of seeing the



world. They were always up for artsy chats over coffee or hipster beer.

Most importantly, I'd identified the lack in myself. The first time I finished a short story, (though fully aware it was terrible, the kind of overly florid writing that would make Raymond Carver cry), I could tell I'd finally found the best version of myself. Julia Pimenta Galiza de Freitas, in her story, Margaret Roche: The Writer in Me, sums this feeling up when she writes, "I knew I wanted to write because I wanted more."

Northern Irish author Jan Carson.
Photograph: Jonathan Ryder

I can tell from this impressive selection of poems and stories that these Fighting Words writers are seeking a similar sense of more. It isn't easy being young. The movement from dependent child to autonomous, freethinking adult has always been a painful one. More so when you're creatively inclined, wired to think and feel deeply, to find the means and measure by which to share these thoughts

with the world. More so even in 2024, when the world feels fit to implode.

It's no small thing to strive for more. Yet, the work here is uncompromisingly brave, accomplished and, above all, urgent, raising huge questions about the climate crisis, technology, war and mental health issues – all the issues of the day – with humour, imagination and an unwavering tenacity. The future of Irish writing is safe in these young writers' hands. In fact, they're not future writers. They're already contributing to our community.

And here, I must pay tribute to the incredible work of Fighting Words, who offer so many emerging writers the essential support system teenage me would have adored. Generous and regular access to established writers through workshops, talks and mentorship, so young writers have a name and 'sort of' shape for what they are and want to become. A chance to belong to a tribe of similarly minded, word-obsessed, unique individuals so the journey towards adulthood feels a little less like a lonely road.

More than anything, Fighting Words gives our young writers a platform from which to share their experiences and opinions, their concerns, their hopes and dreams. These are words we all need to hear. They're voices we need to be listening to. Those with the experience, influence and – dare I say it – funds, need to hold the door open and do everything we can to welcome the next generation in.

Fighting Words fosters creativity in new Belfast writing hub

Late last year, Fighting Words Northern Ireland (NI) launched a new writing hub in east Belfast. Based in **Connswater Shopping Centre**, the new workshop space will allow Fighting Words NI to continue to provide creative writing opportunities for thousands of children and young people across Northern Ireland each year.

It will also allow Fighting Words NI to continue providing vital work in fostering a love of creative writing in our young people and helping to bring great art to all.

Over the next three years, Fighting Words NI aims to expand support for



children and young people who are most seldom heard, by providing more extracurricular opportunities for them and by developing new activities to support them in the classroom alongside their teachers.

Hilary Copeland, director at Fighting Words NI, says: "Our new location in the heart of the east Belfast community,



brings creative writing straight to children, young people and their adults in a way that's really accessible. There is a deep pride in this small corner of the globe, there is kindness, humour and a rich history of storytelling.

"Huge thanks to our funders for their support in fitting out the space: Clothworkers' Foundation, the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland through The RTÉ Toy Show Appeal, and Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the Department for Communities through the Health and Safety Capital Programme, as well as the many friends, volunteers and businesses who donated time, money and goods to get our creative education hub ready to welcome writers."

A wee poem, page 7; **Ulster, Botanic and ice cream**, page 11; Fighting Words NI launches **Write Up Your Street**, page 33

Connswater young writers have their say...

Timothy

What is writing? Writing is like a forest. It's so much fun to wander around in. All the things you can see, ideas you can explore. If writing is like a forest, it needs to be nurtured. Tended to, it grows, blossoms and becomes something we can all enjoy.

Ishaan

I hope that the Fighting Words organisation grows much more in the next five years from what it is now, and continues to help the minds of the future youth in several ways to write and bring out the best of their skills.

Leonie

Words will erupt here,
Towards a beautiful future,
To live in the hearts of those who pass through.
These words will not die away,
And these dreams and hopes will live on.
We get to build a few forever here.
I think that means we've won.

Kaila

Write what's wrong and write what's right, Write for your dreams and write for your fight, Write about love and about your land, Write it all simply because you can.

Laika



A poem by **Rufus O'Connell Cantillon**, age 18, Cork

Your eye is pure, a lake full of pearls
 Too deep for us to reach – a star,
 In many, in your gaze, is a dull light.
 You will see many like them, now –
 Far beyond this blue, passed heaven.
 We see you, weightless:
 You are but to orbit us.
 Your fur is cold. Long now
 It's been since last you felt, warmth,
 Of home, of heart;
 How little there was, of heart.
 A dog's trust is weightless,
 It doesn't take much to cast it away.
 You, are expendable.
 Stars' cold shoulders may try
 To shine to your pupil. Your coffin
 Has frozen, your lungs lined with your breath.
 Your name is weightless,
 You, are weightless.



I Lied



A poem by **Cian Jackson**, age 18, Dublin

Yesterday I said:
 "If I lose this battle
 I will come home
 In a casket"
 I lost
 And returned in a casket
 Alive and well
 Blazing a fat cigar



Mystery and mayhem



A story by **Ellie Ó'Mórdha**, age 11, Dublin

Annie felt a sharp pinch on her right arm, and her best friend Riley slipped her a crinkled piece of paper. It read: **MEETING AT BREAK**. Annie gave a slight nod of her head, still gazing innocently at her teacher.

When the bell rang for break, Annie jumped up quickly, grabbed a rosy red apple and hurried over to Riley. "Annie, I think we have a mystery at last!" blurted out Riley. "Rumour has it that Martha James, the school principal's daughter, has been kidnapped. Ms James found a ransom note on her desk this morning saying that if she stepped down from her role as school principal, Martha would be returned!"

Riley's eyes sparkled and her face lit up. "This is our chance, Annie," she said softly. "Let's go and discuss this in the library," Riley. It's too noisy to talk out here," said Annie.

They went indoors and settled in a cosy corner of the library by themselves. Riley opened her mouth to speak but we will never know what she was going to say. For at that very moment, the handle of the door opened and in walked Ms James! She had left the principal's office to collect some documents from the library.

The girls crouched behind a red chair in the library, as quiet as mice, barely breathing. Ms James started to pace, muttering under her breath. The girls strained their ears to try to catch what she was saying.

"What will I do? Oh, what will I do?" Ms James mumbled. Suddenly, she came to a sharp halt. The girls wished and hoped they weren't seen. "I will step down as principal tonight," and with that, Ms James turned sharply, smoothed her pleated, long silk skirt and walked briskly out.

"The rumours were true," breathed Annie. Riley said nothing. She was far away, staring into the distance. Together the two girls left the library silently to go to their next lesson with Ms Howard.

Ms Howard was the school's deputy



principal who occasionally taught lessons. Riley had noticed recently that she seemed distracted but put it to the back of her mind. When the lunch bell finally rang at the end of the lesson, Ms Howard told the class to pack up their books and head off to the canteen.

The aroma of hot soup drifted around the school. "Come on!" said Riley and weaved through the corridors with Annie alongside her. They both sniffed hungrily. Soon, dishes of steaming tomato soup were placed in front of them with homemade, crusty bread rolls straight out of the oven.

As they ate, Riley showed Annie a list of case notes she had made. Riley had covered everything and since they were both still a little hungry, they decided to have two chocolate chip cookies to round off their meal before returning to class.

Afternoon lessons were held and, in no time, it was 9pm and time for lights out. One at a time, the girls in their dormitory nodded off to sleep. When the last girl, Emily, finally fell asleep, Riley and Annie pushed their beds together to talk.

Their school, Red Towers, allowed pets and Riley's big golden retriever Sammy was lying quietly on their beds keeping their toes toasty. The girls talked about the case for hours on end when Riley eventually sat up sharply and said "I'm going to investigate!". "Shhh!" said Annie, alarmed someone would wake up. "Okay, but please quieten down" whispered Annie.

The girls both slipped on their silk dressing gowns and soft slippers. Just as they were about to leave the dormitory, Sammy whined loudly. The girls stared at each other in dismay. "We can't leave him behind. He'll wake up everyone," said Riley. So the threesome crept out into the twisting corridors, stumbling a little in the dim light.

Suddenly they saw a dark looming figure sneaking around and they pressed them-

selves against the wall, hearts beating fast. Sammy growled softly and as Riley laid her hand on his collar, she could feel his hackles rising. The figure turned and checked that nobody was around, not realising that Sammy and the girls were nearby. All of a sudden the figure bent low and disappeared!

The girls ran to the spot where the suspicious figure had gone. There they found some rolled-back carpet and a hard wooden trapdoor! They opened it cautiously and, without warning, they were pulled through!

"Well, well, well," said a familiar voice. "What have we here?"

"Ms Howard!" gasped the girls. They were both shocked but it made sense to them that Ms Howard was the criminal. For if Ms James stepped down as school principal, Ms. Howard would be the next in line for the job.

Sammy snarled and leapt at Ms Howard but, as quick as a flash, she grabbed Sammy and the girls and led them roughly past a room with a closed bolted door from where noises rang loudly. Biff! Crash! Bang! The girls shared a look of pure terror as they passed the door. Ms Howard looked anxious as she strode past it but this didn't last long as she shoved them into a different room and locked the door. The girls hammered the door with their fists yelling but Ms. Howard walked away, laughing cruelly.

"Hairpin?" asked Riley. "No" said Annie confused. "I have one" said a small voice. "Martha!!" squealed Riley with a beaming smile and reaching for the hairpin from Martha's shaking hand. Riley got to work busily picking at the lock. In no time at all, the lock clicked open and they all tiptoed out. As they made their way back to the trapdoor, Ms. Howard suddenly appeared in front of them! Sammy snarled in fury and lunged at her, knocking her down. The girls all screamed and ran for the trapdoor.

Ms. Howard's eyes flashed furiously as they clambered out and Sammy bounded towards the girls and leaped out with them, leaving Ms. Howard in a rage lying helplessly on the cold, stone floor.

The girls locked the trapdoor and sprinted to Ms. James' office. They burst in panting breathlessly. "Mum!" shrieked Martha flinging herself on Ms. James. "Martha?!!" cried Ms. James, tears of pure joy streaming down her face. She dried her eyes and said gently "Please tell me everything starting from the very beginning" and the whole story poured out.

Ms. James phoned the police and they promptly arrived and arrested the sullen Ms. Howard who looked ashamed and sorrowful.

After all the excitement was over, Annie, Riley and Martha drank mugs of steaming hot cocoa to warm up. "Off to bed now girls" said Ms. James with a warm grateful smile now that the mystery was solved and her beloved Martha was safe.

As Riley lay in bed about to drift off to sleep, one last thought crossed her mind. "What was behind the closed bolted door?"

Well, that's a mystery for another day!

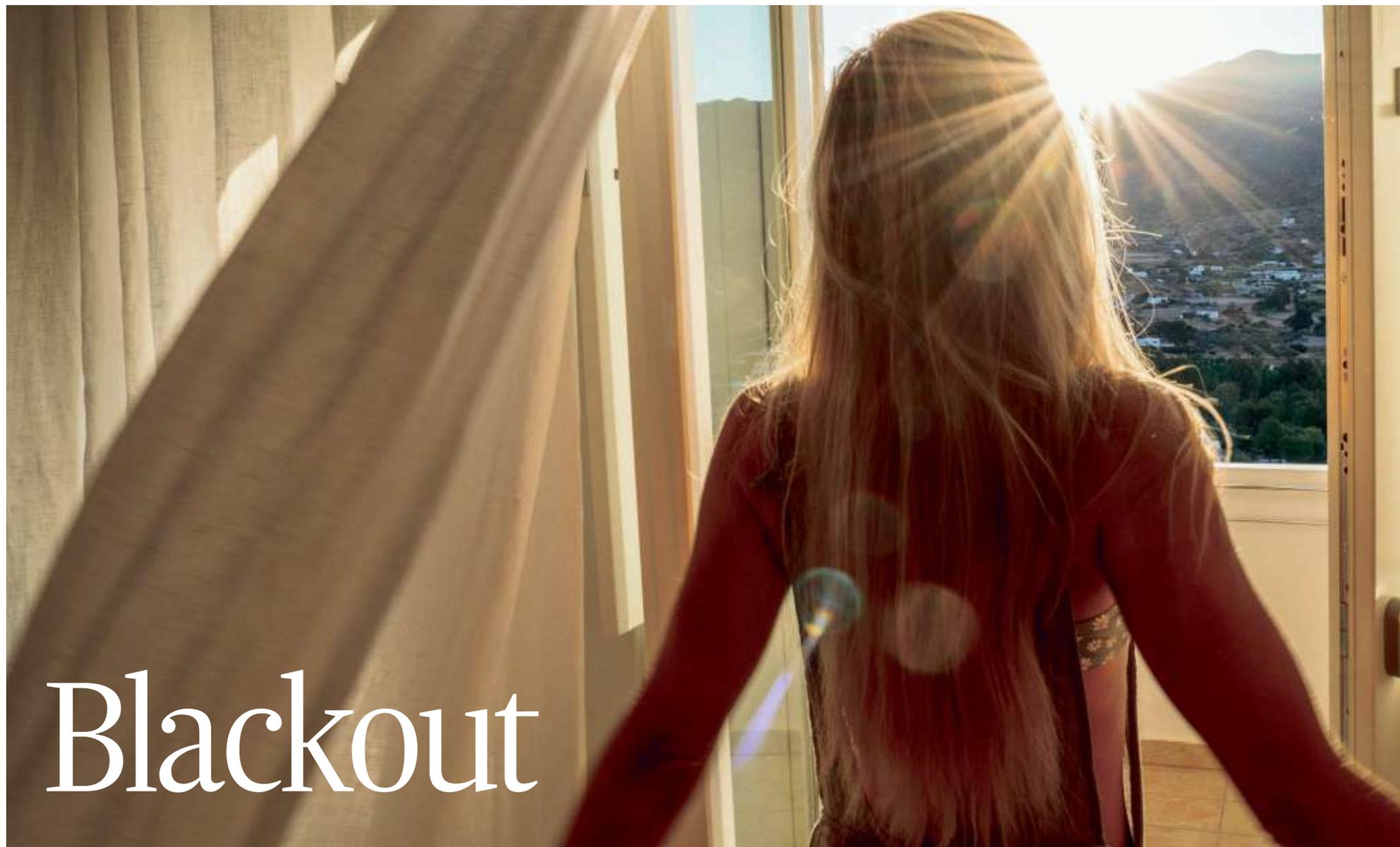


Ode to Palestine



A poem by **Odessa Yip**,
age 18, Cork

Maybe somewhere
Hidden behind the bombs
And rockets
They drop
There is a heaven,
A prolonged moment
Of a boy's life
Where there is only peace
And an armful of toys,
Where there is no need
To know bloodshed and bodies
Under thick slates of rubble,
A place where you can laugh with your brother
And hit one another in play
Without it being a reminder of the violence that surrounds you,
Where your life isn't as fragile as the bones you own
And the only worry you have
Is what mom or dad is cooking in the kitchen
The curling smoke, that your nose inhales.
I hope somewhere behind those metal bullets of bludgeoned purpose
There is an aftermath
Fit for the stolen life of a young boy
Who could barely himself understand why he must die.
Hand in hand with his sibling
Not knowing why the light must slip from his eyes
So early
Too early



Blackout



A story by **Joseph Somers**,
age 18, Cork

There are many types of people. When the city lights go dark, some panic. Some send their families down to the basement should fire erupt from the sky and chase away the stone and metal, leaving ash and charred rubble. But some others, the same ones who will wear themselves on their own sleeves, and paint rooms colours that sound like a stanza of a joyful Yeats, these people will go upwards; climb on to the roof of their buildings – the grey flats that reach for a sky which wants little to do with them – and lay out a picnic

blanket. They will lie down, and stare up at a sky usually hidden by the glare of the lights from office buildings, and office workers commuting home.

And when the lights did go off, some people did panic, some fled. But unnoticed in the dark were footprints on the stairs left by bare feet trodden in paint, with colours in the hues of early autumn, the only ones which were going upstairs.

Lying down in paint-covered denim, autumn colours matted in her hair, a paintbrush still wet in the front pocket of the overalls, a girl stared up at the stars above. It was amazing how well you could see the sky with the lights out. Reflected in her eyes were a million stars clothed in the purple clouds of the Milky Way. Did you know there are more trees on Earth than stars in the galaxy? She knew, although she couldn't remember from where. She never could. The world was an awesome place, as were her creatures. Sirens wailed below, and the windows mirrored blue lights racing down the road, a fire engine. She looked out across the city and saw orange flame illuminating the transformer station, as if taking over from the lights. Blue lights swarmed like pretty insects going about their lives, and the fire fought

against the water hoses, exploding outwards, and then running back as a child tentatively puts a toe in the pool to test the water. Eventually though, the fire gave in to the elemental control of the firefighters, and the city returned to its natural state of nature.

A lucky person will see the sunrise 30,000 times. It will crest the hills, radiate across the sky and clouds, which welcome it with soft pinks and oranges. The birds will wake, as will the world. As will the people. They will rise, wash themselves and commute. They will work, and save money, and work again. They'll take a holiday once a year, then go back to work with their half-formed tan. They'll loosen the tie around their neck as they curse the sun for heating up the office block, now made an oven. They'll count down the days to 65, their pension, if they're lucky. And then they'll relax. Loosen the tie. They'll sit down, watch the news, cook, take up a hobby. 6000 sunrises left.

Or

They could wake, rise and smile. Open the windows and look out across the buildings to see the sun greet them, and the sky greet it in turn with its soft pinks and oranges. They could open their

wardrobe, and choose what to wear today. They could decide on some paint-splattered overalls, and a white T-shirt, also stained in colour, because stains, like scars tell stories, as a testament to existing hard enough to live. They could look at their messy hair in the mirror and laugh. They could go outside and get some fresh air, get a pastry and eat in the park, watching the beautiful dogs and their beautiful walkers stroll around under the shade-shelter palms of the oak and chestnut trees. They could meet some of their friends, plan the next beach trip, talk about everything joyful. They could go home, take out their paints and look at their walls, looking for a spot on their wall they haven't already tapestried in colour and picture, dancing to their music and paint, living. They curse under their breath when they knock over a paint tin, and then look around in panic as the lights go out, before noticing the glow through the window. They could run straight out the door and up the stairs before some people have even found their torches. And they could gaze up at the stars, far above their head but still finding them, sending their light across the galaxy to reflect in their eyes.



Faé lived. She breathed. In colour and joy. She danced in the rain in a T-shirt as people walked by her in raincoats, grappling with umbrellas. She sang in her kitchen to a playlist longer than the blood vessels that pumped the blood through her that pushed her, dragged her to do more than exist. To live in excitement and wonder. She loved, fell in love each day with a new sunrise, a new colour, a new dog. She passed people on the street and pondered. What a shame that one can never understand another person. For only part of something infinite can ever be comprehended by the human mind, infinite unto itself. A doctor can see no more than illness in a stranger, a teacher no more than a grade. But an artist, maybe they can see more. Maybe. Experience teaches empathy, the only chance for compassion.

She wrote all sorts of these thoughts down, taking lessons from them, when she can remember them. She loved those little quotes, that teach you about life and love in only a few lines, with a depth more profound than language could be capable of, but she couldn't ever remember them. That's why she started writing them on the walls.

-WHAT'S THE CRAIC?-

A wee drop of tea?

Take a wee dander

The Craic's ninety

AT'S US NAI

Wee buns

Up to high doh

A wee poem



Kaila Patterson, age 16, Belfast

Take a Dander round the city,
Our home sites look fairly pretty,
Yet we use these turn of phrases,
Our dialect goes on for ages,
What's The Craic, you'll use a lot,
It's probably Ninety if you're not,
Your Mate may ask, How's Your Ma?
You Know Yourself, How's Your Da?
Think I came up the Lagan in a bubble?
Grab your Guddies, don't start no trouble,
We say we're Foundered when we're cold,
We're Scundered after we've been bold,
The Christmas Market has a Helter Skelter,
Your Man on there's a Proper Melter!
Bloody Eejit, So He Is,
So I am and So I Did,
We'll go for a Yarn and a Wee Poke,
See that car, isn't that some Yoke?
When we're stressed we're Up To High Doh,
Is that right? Apparently So,
At's Us Nai coming off the Westlink,
Use Your Loaf to have a think,
Here Be's Me and Here Be's She,
Anybody want a Wee Drop of Tea?
People often cry, Oh Mummy!
Wee Buns aren't meant for your tummy,
Pass City Hall during your stay,
A Knuckle Sandwich means run away,
You can't be a Chancer and a survivor,
Anybody looking to Lend Me a Fiver?
Catch Yourself On, you've got to Wise Up,
Quit Melting My Head and give me a cup,
We Belfast folk do love a wee tea,
Look, there's the fella! What About Ye?
Go ahead, Big Lad, he's proper class,
Hasn't that Wee Girl a bit of sass?
I'm All Bizz for my Mate's Mate,
Awk Mummy, it's only half past eight!
The Big Fish hasn't learned to swim,
Your Man's Dead On, I know him,
He's a Geg, won a hurley shield,
But was he born In a Field?
Our words don't know what to do,
Belfast speech hasn't much of a clue,
But while our sayings don't always fit,
Our wee city Keeps Her Lit.

He's a geg

BLOODY EEJIT

AWK MUMMY

We're founded

Wise up

WHAT ABOUT YE?

Catch yourself on

I'm all bizz

Published in the collection **Write up Your Street**. For more information, see page 33

Margaret Roche: the writer in me



A story by **Julia Pimenta Galiza de Freitas**, age 17, Dublin

The following piece is a fictionalised interview with fictional author Margaret Roche

Interview with Margaret Roche, 89, author of Dear Reader; For The Last Time
By JGHiggins

Margaret Roche, 89, is a household name in the literary world. Born in 1933, Vermont, Margaret climbed her way to the top of the poetic scene, where she cemented her place as one of the most prominent writers of the 20th century.

Her latest book, *Dear Reader; For The Last Time*, takes the world on a journey through her life, from the 1950s when Margaret was an aspiring author, to today, when her name has rested upon more bookshelves than could ever be counted. The book serves as a memoir, and a goodbye to us, dear readers, since Margaret's team has informed the public of the author's retirement for reasons we can only speculate.

The author has agreed to partake in an interview, one question per day, for Mattingly High's school paper. For the next week or so, I, your faithful journalist, will be interviewing one of today's most brilliant minds and will have the privilege of hearing a first-hand account of the dazzling greatness that was the life of Margaret Roche.

Note: Some of the following quotes have been slightly edited for the sake of suitability

When did you know you wanted to be a writer?

I think, deep down, I always had that nag-

ging feeling. You know, I loved words. Everything about them – the shapes, the sounds, the pen on paper. I was quite young when I fell in love with the art of stringing together 26 letters and dancing around them to find the right progression. It amazed me how, sometimes by lucky chance or plenty of trial and error, I would be able to find just the order that could pull out a heart and leave it bleeding. As I got older, I fell in love with meanings. With being explicit, or cryptic, or blunt, and how it all came together to mean something different each time. I loved all of it from early on. That is not to say I was any good, though. You see, I've always been a reader. Plath, Austen, Dickens, the good stuff. But somewhere between the endless flipping of pages, somewhere along my late nights with nothing but a worn-out book, a lantern, and a vivid imagination, I realised that it wasn't enough for me. I knew I wanted to write because I wanted *more*, I always have. So I wrote my first mediocre poem, then another and another, then a slightly better one, then a book and so the rest of the story goes. I couldn't ever stop.

How did you know what you wanted to write about?

I don't think I did, to be completely honest. At least at the beginning. I just knew I had

something to say. I've experimented with different genres and styles, mostly mirroring what I'd been reading at the time. But after a good bit of analysis went into my pieces, I came to realise that every single one of them – from fanfiction to romance novels to angsty young adult poetry – had the same underlying stream of emotions. I had found many different ways of saying it, but at the end of the day, I had been saying the same thing. In my writing, I have made it a habit of taking my problems, insecurities, and fears, and projecting them on to some inexistent person in a way that made me the observer as opposed to the subject of said fears and insecurities. I've taken every aspect of my life and made it someone else's problem so that maybe then I could fix it. I vomited on a page, all that built-up anger, self-righteousness and mistakes, arranged them into a neat three-act structure or tidy little poem and suddenly, it was all so clear. I'm a fixer, I think all writers are. That's why there's so much of me in my characters, I think. They're flawed and imperfect because so am I, and I built them by glueing together pieces of me. I needed to understand so badly, the scar on my left hand, my avoidance, my tendency to stop calling back. There are shadows of my life that haunt all aspects of my stories, and they're so terribly clear once you know to look for



them. And so in my fictional world, there is betrayal, guilt, choice and consequences. But there's also love. So much love. Because I still believe in it. That is what I wanted to write about.

In your books, you often come back to your childhood. More specifically, how growing up the oldest child made you into who you are today. Do you think your identity as an older sister has shaped the way you write, or your choice to do so?

Absolutely. Being the oldest child has influenced many aspects of my life, and I do believe my general attraction towards writing has been one of them. As a rule, older children don't say much. Some of us may talk a lot, which I think is merely compensation, but we don't say much. Because, really, nobody's listening. For me, writing was the only way I could feel heard. Even if nobody read it, at least it was out of my system. I also think that I've always been very good at knowing exactly what everyone was feeling at all times. I could tell my mother was angry by the way she washed the dishes, I could measure the exact depth of my father's silence and I think that gave me an advantage in a way. This deep, at times disturbing, empathy enhanced my senses. I'm highly aware of every sensation around me which allows me to choose the

precise word needed to describe a certain feeling or situation. My mother's eyes were never just sad to me, they were a tormented jungle of future and past. It takes a certain perspective in life to be able to see things this way, and I think older children have that.

Do you have any advice for young women breaking into a field so heavily dominated by the male gaze?

My advice for any young female writers trying to launch themselves into the world of literature is to ignore, ignore, ignore. Focus on your art, on what you're doing and what you love, not what the people around you think of it. If someone tells you no, go someplace else, try again, but never ever stop at that. "No" has only two letters, there are 24 more that could do wonders for you.

You've lived an eventful life, with many public ups and downs. Tell me, Margaret sitting here now at the very end and looking back at it all: Is there anything you would have done differently?

[Margaret smiled so brightly I swear it reflected on me] I would do it all again.

Author's Note

Margaret passed away before we were able to complete our interview. Her daughter informs she passed in her study, doing the very thing she loved most: writing. The Roche family was kind enough to share an excerpt of Margaret's last words, the last thoughts to ever grace her wondrous mind:

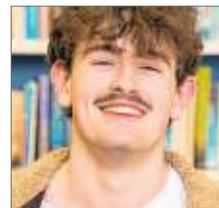
"I have been many things in the 89 years my feet have roamed this earth. I have been brave, I have been stupid, I have been greedy, I have been kind. I've done things I'll never forget, and some other things I may always regret. Though, something I will never regret is this pen. This book. This language, these letters, these words. At times, they have destroyed me, shattered me, broken me whole. But oh, God. Never have I felt as alive as the first time I saw the ink seeping on paper. I'm not too sure about heaven, if there is one or if I'll be allowed in. One thing I do know is wherever it is, there shall be music, tea, and black leather notebook waiting for me."

Margaret Roche, 2023

Margaret Roche was an icon of the literary world. A once-in-a-lifetime mind, working tirelessly, thinking and creating until her very last breath. Margaret was a hero for the wounded, a compass for the lost, and a voice for the silenced. But above all of that, Margaret Roche was a mum. She was a daughter, a wife, a neighbour, a lover, a friend. She loved, feverishly so, and she was loved most diligently by us all.

I was lucky enough to come into her orbit, even if briefly, and I will miss the passion she radiated for the rest of my days. May she rest in joy and may we always remember her not as the one who died, but as the one who, through her words, kept every single one of us alive. **JGH**

Eulogy for Sir Henry's Club, Cork



A poem by **Oisín Twomey**, age 18, Cork

My breath fogging in front of me,
Amidst the crisp bright light
Of a frigid November morning
I find myself suddenly transfixed
By an ethereal apparition
Stemming from an unremarkable beer garden

From the door, the scent of spilled Carling Beer
Mingles with the body odour
Of a thousand cavorting chimpanzees
Dehumanised by low lighting
And yet all the more joyous for it.
Those who were passed out in bathroom stalls
Are now managers of suburban supermarkets
And the two in skirmishing in the corner
Are both married and working in finance.

The pedestrians walking past, digging their necks into
Their woollen overcoats
In some mockery of an elongated tortoise,
Seem oblivious in their entirety
To the pulsating beat drilling through my chest
From an echo of a young Cobain's guitar
Or the throbbing thump of dance tracks
Spreading a soliloquy of scathing sound
Through the half empty, silent street.

What is now just another gentrified and genteel gastropub
was the home of countless companions
lost in time, and timid club goers
Making tentative eye contact with a bobbing head amidst
The raging current of riotous ravers
In the hopes of finding a kindred spirit
Within a sea of noise
How many magpies, mated for life
Stroll hand in hand
Past this derelict building in which they met?
How many more never spoke again?

Sir Henry's was demolished before my birth.
A heap of rubble from an era gone by.
Yet it fascinates me still.
Has its dance floor truly cleared?
Or has it merely emigrated into
The eternal, rose tinted realm
Of the most precious memories?



Lake Serenity



A story by **Nicole Barry**,
age 13, Co Limerick

The night had blackened everything, stealing away all but a sliver of light that stubbornly clung to the edge of the horizon, a last desperate stand against the encroaching darkness. It would be in vain.

Fog veiled the dark wood, its tendrils wrapping around the ancient trees like ghostly fingers, obscuring the path ahead and masking any trace of what lay beyond.

A soft breeze parts the fog, the tendrils parting slowly to reveal more of the wood, when a figure emerged, a young boy who had ventured out into the wood. He moved cautiously, eyes darting from shadow to shadow as he walked through the weaving

maze of trees.

The boy was young, his hair dishevelled from his hasty journey through the dense thicket. A light flush had started to spread on his cheeks from the cold, and his breath formed misty clouds in the frigid night air. He had a backpack which he held tightly to himself, clutching the small thing like a lifeline.

Sapphire eyes tracked the cloud of his own breath, watching it float up and disappear with a childlike curiosity on his face.

As the boy ventured deeper into the wood, the fog got thinner, yet the wind more vigorous, clawing at his clothes and tossing his hair this way and that.

The bitter bite of wind cut through the fabric of his clothes, making him involuntarily shiver and wrap his arms around himself in a subconscious attempt to preserve heat.

He forced his way through the trees until he got to his desired destination; a small clearing smack down in the centre of the forest, a glistening lake being one of its only characteristics.

The moonlight danced on the surface of the lake, casting a gentle glow on the scene before him. A sigh left the boy at the scene, his lips forming a soft smile as he took in the mesmerising sight.

It was then that he noticed something glinting in the moonlight at the edge of the water. It was barely there; he had to squint to see what it was, when he did however, he broke out into a grin, running over to the far side of the lake.

He skidded to a stop once he got to his destination, dropping his bag and sending stones skittering across the water's surface and disturbing its serene reflection.

The boy looked around for what he was looking for; he didn't need to look long. A voice like a soft whisper on the wind called out to him, one he recognised.

"I wouldn't have suspected you out here so late", the voice said, its velvety tone echoing through the quiet of the night.

The boy didn't look towards the direction of the voice, deciding to let the owner of said voice come to him in their own time. He took off his shoes and socks and sat down at the edge of the lake, letting his feet dip into the cold water. The end of his pants also unfortunately got wet; sticking to his ankles as he swung his legs around in the water, he spared it no mind as he answered the voice.

"I couldn't really sleep, besides I wanted to see you." He spoke softly, almost as if to himself. After a moment of silence, the figure emerged from the water, a head of brown curls popping up.

It was another boy; maybe two or three years older than the other, but that was not the part that stood out about him, far from it. What really stood out; was the fishtail that flapped gently in the water behind him. Aside from that, he had scales that looked almost like they were fading into his skin as they climbed from where the tail ended, fading completely before they even reached his mid-stomach, said scales were also circling his wrists and climbing up his arms in the same manner as the ones on his tail up to his elbows. His eyes were hooded and dark, they seemed to have a natural kohl-lined effect.

His gaze held a sense of mysterious depth, wild like a storm yet simultaneously calm like the beach waves, and with a sly smile, the merboy replied, "I couldn't sleep either". His voice was its own type of hypnotic, like the gentle ebb and flow of the tides. "But I'm glad you came." He crossed his arms over the edge of the lake and rested his head against them, looking up at the boy.

The boy smiled down at him, enjoying the company the merboy provided. "Really? You missed me?" He sounded happy, hopeful even, that the merboy would want to spend time with him.

The merboy scrunched his nose in an emotion akin to disgust at the mere



thought of missing someone, but then his expression softened a bit as he looked back at the boy's expression.

He shook his head in exasperation and laid his head back down in his arms. "Only you Theo, only you." The merboy muttered, immediately wishing he could take it back once he saw the smugness on the boy's – Theo's – face. Theo laughed, unable to contain his joy at having rattled the usually composed merboy.

"Die" the merboy said while Theo laughed, his lips twitching up against his will; betraying how he really felt. Theo laughed again, the sound echoing around the trees, his voice carrying far in the night wind. The merboy's eyes sparkled with amusement, a glimmer of affection shining through his facade.

"Wow, Adrian. I see how it is." Theo said in an amused voice, crossing his arms over his chest in an attempt to look stern. He failed miserably.

Adrian raised an unamused eyebrow at his failure, looking at his crossed arms and then back to his face as if to say "really?"

But a smile tugged at the corner of Adrian's lips, giving away his true feelings despite his air of indifference. It seemed that no matter how much Adrian tried to hide it, the merboy seemed to care for this human.

Theo then had a look of realisation wash over his features, and he nearly jumped out of the lake as he remembered something. "Oh! I have something for you!" He exclaimed, the suddenness of it almost giving Adrian whiplash.

It was soon replaced with curiosity, however, as Adrian tilted his head. "You do?" He inquired, watching as Theo nodded and removed his feet from the water to get his bag which he dumped a few feet away. What felt like an eternity for Adrian passed before Theo retrieved a small, intricately carved shell necklace from within his bag.

He ran back over, all but throwing the necklace at Adrian, who barely managed to catch it. He fumbled with it for a moment, before getting a good grip on it and sending a confused look to Theo "... what's this?" He asked after a moment.

Theo grinned, watching Adrian closely. "It's a token of our friendship", he said, his eyes shining with excitement and sincerity. There was a long silence where the only thing that could be heard was the gentle swish of water and the rustle of leaves, and then; "it's a what?" Adrian looked downright disgusted.

Theo rolled his eyes at his behaviour. "A token? For friendship? You guys don't have that?"

"No. We don't," Adrian deadpans. Theo shrugged. "You should", he said as if it was a fact of the world; the sky is blue, the grass is green and everyone should have a friendship token.

There was another long beat of silence before Theo spoke again, "If you don't want it –"

"I never said that", Adrian interrupted, clutching the necklace to his chest protectively, to which Theo smirked in triumph.

Adrian sent him a glare in response, putting the necklace on; it looked perfect on him, the seashell clashing with the scales made it look like it was supposed to be there anyway.

They talked for a few more hours, until the sky started to change from black to blue, and the first rays of sun started to peak through the bushes. Theo frowned at the sight. "I should probably get going", he says in a disappointed tone. "I second that", Adrian replies, sighing as he realised the night was coming to an end.

Theo smiled at him, he slung his bag over his back and slipped his shoes on before running back through the forest, throwing a look over his shoulder to wave goodbye to the merboy.

Adrian rolled his eyes and disappeared beneath the waves, gone before Theo could even take another step. Theo turned to look where he was going and continued to run off.

The sun's rays, immortal and undying, cascaded over the treetops, painting the earth in a warm light it had been deprived of for so long, it illuminated the lake, where two boys were there just moments before; yet they were long gone.



Illustration
by Sinéad
Farry

Ulster, Botanic and ice cream



A poem by **Lorcan McCusker**, age 13, Belfast

Walking through the Garden, excited but calm,
The sun rains down its rays, forcing me to put on a balm.
The building rises up before me, modern and new,
I still enjoyed going there, though everything I knew.

The entrance is bland, no friend for a cordial greeting,
But my family and I shall soon go on a greeting.
Walking into the main hall, my sister running,
My heart is like electricity, it's humming.

We walk up the ramp, the lizard awaiting.
My mum speaks of my posture, my back begins straightening.
We look up at the beast, our eyes in awe.
Outside a crow begins to caw.

Walking through the place filled with joy,
We see the creepy mummy, who is definitely not a boy.
We see old, so very old, deer, we have loved;
We have loved them through their tasty flesh, which we have killed.

Seeing the aquatic wonders, forgetting how false they are.
A couple of drunks walk by, just out from the bar.
The rocks are always boring, they just seem so afar,
Heading towards the exit, the door ajar.

Dad suggests we take a walk; the idea is met with applause.
Round the gardens we go; my sister constantly demanding a pause.
Approaching the house as warm as the rainforest, the flowers blooming outside.
Walking as long as we want, our time we bide.

I suggest ice cream; we go to my favourite place.
Nugelato; the name seemingly means grace.
Sitting down, ice cream in hand,
Our relationship is tight in love, a secure bond.

Published in the collection Write up Your Street

My name is Layla



A story by **Isabelle Scott**
age 13, Dublin

My name is Layla. I cannot speak. I am silent. No one else in Our House is silent. Except JoJo. JoJo is silent. JoJo is also what I think is called a baby. I like JoJo. JoJo understands. Maybe all babies understand. Or maybe just JoJo. JoJo won't be silent forever, though. JoJo does something called babbling. She also screams. Hopefully JoJo will still understand when she is no longer silent. I know I am not a baby even though I am silent. I am something called twelve. Another thing about JoJo and me is we can't walk very well. Man and Woman say I should be able to walk. I do not walk. I crawl on my hands and knees. Or hands and feet. I should also be able to speak and not be silent. I can do a sort of babbling like JoJo, though. I stop and start when I babble, though. Man and Woman say I am silent because of someone called Trauma. I think Trauma is one of the Bad People. I do not like the Bad People. I lived with them before I lived with Man and Woman. Man says the Bad People are revolting. Revolting is disgusting. Disgusting is like rotting because rotting is icky and that's what disgusting is. I know this because Miss Suzie told me. Miss Suzie says the Bad People are In Prison. In Prison means in a metal box because that's what prison is. I don't know if I like Miss Suzie or not. Sometimes she gives me sweets. Other times she forgets Man and Woman are called Man and Woman and tries to get me to call them Mummy and Daddy. Only JoJo can call Man and Woman Mummy and Daddy. Sometimes Man and Woman think I am JoJo and try to get me to call them Mummy and Daddy. They always remember I am Layla eventually. Something about Miss Suzie is she makes me use The Ipad. I hate The Ipad. It talks for me, but the voice is wrong. Today I threw The Ipad at the wall. Miss Suzie made a face and I screamed and pushed at her until Man and Woman came. They gave me you, Mouse Stuffed. I like you. You listened well. You understand what Man and Woman call "Layla Language". I am done talking now.



The hallway

A story by **Andrew McHugh**,
age 16, Co Galway

You stand in the hallway, two doors in front of you. On your right, girls float in and out, chatting and laughing. On your left, boys crowd in the door, smiling and joking. You're frozen.

Two doors. Left and right. Girls and boys.

If you take the left, you'll face the stares and judgment of the men and boys around you. You don't look like them, why are you here? They'll laugh and whisper, some will even shout. You think to yourself, is it really worth it?

But if you take the right, you will undo everything you have spent the last year trying to prove to yourself and everyone around you. That you are not a girl. That this is not where you belong.

So where do you go? When you feel like you don't belong anywhere. Where will you buy your clothes and what club should you join? What razors should you use and which shirt should you wear? You're alone, frozen in that hallway.

There's a girl in your class. She talks about boys and her future wedding. She tells you she loves your "girly chats". You don't say anything. You don't correct her. *Why* do you never correct her? At Christmas your aunt buys you a dress.

It's black and sparkly and much too short. She beams excitedly and tells you to try it on. So you oblige, you want her to be happy right? But as you look in the mirror the fabric hangs wrongly from your body, it hugs all the places you wish would go away. But you smile and laugh and you'll never ever tell her because you want her to be happy right? But you're alone, frozen, back in that hallway.

At school the teacher calls the roll, your name falls sour on your ears, foreign from your lips. You do not know that girl, you haven't for many years. But that girl follows you, whispers in the back of your mind. She stares at you through the mirror and turns red once a month. She appears in old photos and haunting memories. But you do not know that girl. It's just you, alone, frozen in that hallway.

But when will that hallway end? When will you reach the final door? You run and run but it just keeps going. You scratch and scream and cry but you can never escape that hallway. You're stuck, alone, frozen in that dark, dark hallway, a storm of words in your mind, a screaming in your heart. You feel trapped, outside those doors with those girly chats stuck in a dress with a name you hate. They say it will get better, but when? Please God when?

But life goes on. So you pick yourself up and dust off your dress. You walk and walk and walk because someday, you will reach the end of the hallway. And someday, it will finally all be okay.

Life; according to an old house



A story by **Ella Jones**, age 16, Co Dublin

The house sat quietly, it's windows boarded up, it's door unopened for quite some time now, the hinges beginning to rust.

The house sat in a field green with weeds and grey with the endless ennui of passing time, filled with nothing now but dusty boxes and distant memories.

As the house sat, to pass the time, it thought about old memories. It thought back to when they first moved in. The boxes, moving their things in. It remembered their first days there, their first morning, their first home-cooked dinner in the house.

It remembered the smell of her cooking on Sunday afternoons and the sound of the dog barking when he came home.

It remembered whispered words of love.

It remembered the proposal and the

planning. It remembered the wedding day, and the wedding night.

It remembered them bringing the baby home, his first words, his first steps. It

remembered his first day at school and his last day before college.

It remembered them both nearing tears as they watched their son drive off, him holding her in his arms.

It remembered ageing, they got rocking chairs on their porch side-by-side, never too far from each other.

It remembered doctors visiting, news that his heart was

giving out. It remembered their final days and it remembered him going. And every once in a while, perhaps in the wind, his rocking chair would still rock next to hers.

It remembered her mourning him and her going to join him.

It remembered a life.



Reenadinna Woods



A poem by **Anna Dunlea**, age 18, Co Kerry

Sun dappled pillars of silver and green, towering Cathedrals skywards.

Earth damp dew and warmth in the air

Choirs in every bow, feathered beat boxers,

Heads high and proud, not awaiting discovery.

Moss, twig and bramble underfoot,

Adding a low base tone as I crunch,

Fusion fundamentals of girl versus bird.

The beauty so rich, phone is pocketed,

Eyes too hungry to share.



No Accessibility



A poem by **Rosa Vallebella**, age 17, Cork

We want to be out like a normal family,
But there's no accessibility.
We're crossing paths continuously,
Because there is No Accessibility.
We are always on the lookout,
Watching for obstacles blocking the ways,
A continuous cycle of stopping... and starting,
Trying to find the accessible way.

We want to be out like a normal family,
Exploring the world from the land to the sea.
We want to be out like a normal family,
But 'normal' isn't the way the world will let us be.
We want to be out like a 'normal' family,
But 'normal' isn't the way We see.
We want to be out like a 'normal' family,
But the world isn't designed with Accessibility.

We want to be out like a 'normal' family,
But this is Normal for people like me.

Morning

My hair's not holding
My lashes not lifting
My brows not browning



and Dad's outside my room
"hurry on, will ya"

He doesn't understand
I'm a young woman
Who needs her own time
to finish her own stuff

A poem by **Amelia Iwanicka**, age 15,
Co Wexford

for herself
so she can feel pretty
for herself



Burning dragons



A story by **Aoife Lawton**, age 17, Co Galway

It is common knowledge that when dragons die they turn to stone. Islands are the most common forms, the side or back of a dragon that lived its final moments in the water, but if you look closely at most mountains then you'll see the flat sides that could have once been wings. If it's a relatively modern death, then it can be possible to see the folds of the legs, or even a head, fossilised in the side of a mountain and not yet smoothed by the elements.

Dragons that die naturally do so in a way that lets them pass as part of the world they lived on. They heighten already existing peaks, fill ravines, add another island to a cluster of dozens, until it has faded out of living memory which of the islands were naturally made, and which

appeared one day, with a stone head tucked delicately under stone wings.

Dragons that die unnaturally don't get that choice.

Scattered across the continents, rare enough to be marked on maps, are dragons, sprawled across fields, or laying, alone, in the clearing of a forest, their tail curling between the trees.

These dragons are treated like sacred sites, worshipped because of their rarity. The oldest of these tombs barely resemble dragons, so weathered by the wind and rain and time that all their features have been reduced small divots in the rock.

Even when they are unrecognisable, they are worshipped. Their stories are told and memorised and retold, passed down through generations, until the names of

any dragon that died unnaturally becomes synonymous with "legend". Any child can proudly tell you about the dragon closest to them, even if it is hundreds of kilometres away. We respect these dragons like we respect our churches, and the land surrounding them is sacred. It is the least we could do for them, after they die unnecessary deaths.

This was, of course, before the greed tore it apart. Before people forgot about our legends. Before someone realised that dead dragons can be burned.

Nothing is sacred if it can be fuel.

It was easier to excuse the earliest of these burnings, the steady taking-apart of dragons that had died within the last century or so. They weren't legends yet, nor bedtime stories. They weren't yet



sacred grounds, and so we said nothing.

They were carved into blocks and removed from the maps and burned, and we said nothing. Maybe it wasn't such a bad thing, they said, and we believed them. It even worked well, for a time. Dragon's stone burns just as hot as dragon's breath, and burns longer than coal by tenfold. One dragon could have powered an entire city for a year, so we believed that they would stop there. We have enough stone now, and we still have our legends.

We were fools, of course. No point in pretending otherwise. Before their stock of stone was even half empty, they would fill it again. They tore apart the older dragons next, our fairy tales and our legends. Broken apart and carted away, their time-softened edges were carved into harsh blocks and they too were burned.

There were protests of course, people calling for protections for these sites and these tombs, but our yells fell on deaf ears.

"It's only stone," we were told. "It's only stone and it's more useful this way. Nothing bad could come from burning dragons."

They closed their eyes to the acrid smoke that curled up from our burning

dragons and continued their carvings.

Soon, all our dragons were gone from the map, like they didn't even exist. Once again, we thought that surely they will stop here. They have enough stone to last decades. By then, we will have different power, different ways of getting fuel. Soon, this will be in the past, and we can find new legends. There is nothing more for them to take, and no need for them to take it.

We were fools, of course. Our dragons and their stories weren't enough for them. They wanted more. Sacred grounds had been destroyed, with nothing but a dragon shaped silhouette of dirt to show for it, and still they wanted more.

The mountains were next. The whole world had more dragon stone than they knew what to do with already, and yet they came for the mountains. Breaking off wings, carving open graves, they robbed the tombs of the natural deaths and left behind nothing but marble and smoke.

People stopped caring. Soon, it became something close to a fad. Dragon's teeth as long as your arm and scales the size of your hand could be found for purchase. You can own part of a legend, part of a grave, for less than the price of a new phone. You could have a piece of a creature that died thousands of years ago to display on your desk, and all it will cost is the tap of a card.

We didn't even notice when they stole the islands from the sea. The maps had been changed so much by then, and so frequently, that no one could blame us for failing to notice a few tiny islands disappear.

There are bigger events going on in the world. Wars to be won, bets to be made, who has time to care about the dragons? Who has time to care about the smoke? They weren't seen as graves at this point, just rock. Nothing left to be worshipped.

As I am writing this now, I worry. They have enough stone to last a thousand years, and enough smoke to suffocate the planet three times over, and still I do not think they're satisfied. The mountains are flat, the islands are gone, and the legends were taken from us so long ago that it's impossible to recall exactly where they once lay. Still, even now, they are not satisfied. They will not rest, they will not stop burning, until there is nothing left of the dragons at all.

They have run out of dead dragons to steal from, and I worry. I worry that they are going to start taking the ones that are still alive. If they are not stopped then they will shoot the dragons from the sky. They will be stone before they even hit the ground, and they will be torn apart and shipped away before the dust has had time to settle. They will hunt the living dragons until there are none left, unless the smoke kills the dragons first.

They will burn the skies, as they burnt our islands and our mountains and our legends, if that is what it takes to keep them warm.

Do not let them burn our dragons.



An Beagán



Dán le Éire Ní
Fhaoláin,
18 bliana d'aois,
Co Loch Garman

Níl ann ach an beagán;
Maidin fhuar i mí na Nollag.
Mo mhéara reoite go géar agam
Ag cur seaca go trom.
Bhí cuma fholamh ar na bóithre
Brataithe ag an oighear –
Is cara í an fhoighne dom
Mar fanfaidh mé lasmuigh.
Níl ann ach an dóthain;
Téad chaol ag éirí tanaí.
An leoithne fhuar do mo lorg
Deargtha ag an bhfuacht.
'S í an fhírinne í an chalóg
Glac m'fhocalsa air –
Is cara í an fhoighne dom
Agus níl ann ach an beagán.



An sceach gheal



Dán le Donnacha
Ó Tuairisc, 15
bliana d'aois,
Co na Gaillimhe

Fadó, fadó, 'is fadó bhí
Rith na síoga thart san' oí
Bhí siad glic agus gránna gan dabht ar bith
Ag sciobadh 'is ag gadaíocht na bpáistí dána
Níor stop siad a gclabhaireacht' go dtí an lá
A tháinig an fear le rud éigin a rá

Labhair sé go bog, go séimh 'is go ciúin
'Imigí anois nó cuirfidh mé sibh faoi rún'
Rith siad go sciobtha, a gcuid cosa in airde

Chuaigh siad isteach sna sceacha
Ar nós na beacha
Is seo é an fáth
Ag deireadh an lae
Nár cheart duit sceach a ghearradh.

They said



A poem by **Sadie Fitzpatrick**, age 13, Co Dublin

They said
She was a girl wrapped up in a storm
Or a storm wrapped up in a girl
Sometimes it was difficult to tell

They said
She inhaled gale force winds
And left puddles behind in her footsteps
Like the echo of a just given yell

They said
She was built from the stormy grey clouds
And her heart from the hard icy hail
Like thoughts this darkness spread

So
She was a girl wrapped up in a storm
Or a storm wrapped up in a girl
But no one ever asked
They just said.



The ghost of Deepwood forest



A story by **Olivia Willis Lawlor**, age 14, Co Armagh

Pale summer moonlight shone down on to the trees, casting a ghostly shadow across them. The trees were thick and bare, and their branches sprawled outwards, obscuring sections of the sky. I jumped down from my tree and landed soundlessly. There was someone else in this forest. But who would want to come to Deepwoods? Were they here to hurt the forest? The animals? Or worse, visit the House?

I ignored my racing thoughts and sunk into the ground. (Due to being a ghost, I could pass through objects others could not.) I waited, my eyes just above a clump of moss. I was beginning to think I was just being paranoid, but then I heard it: footsteps. I glided through the leaves to try to find them. After a few minutes of searching, I found the human.

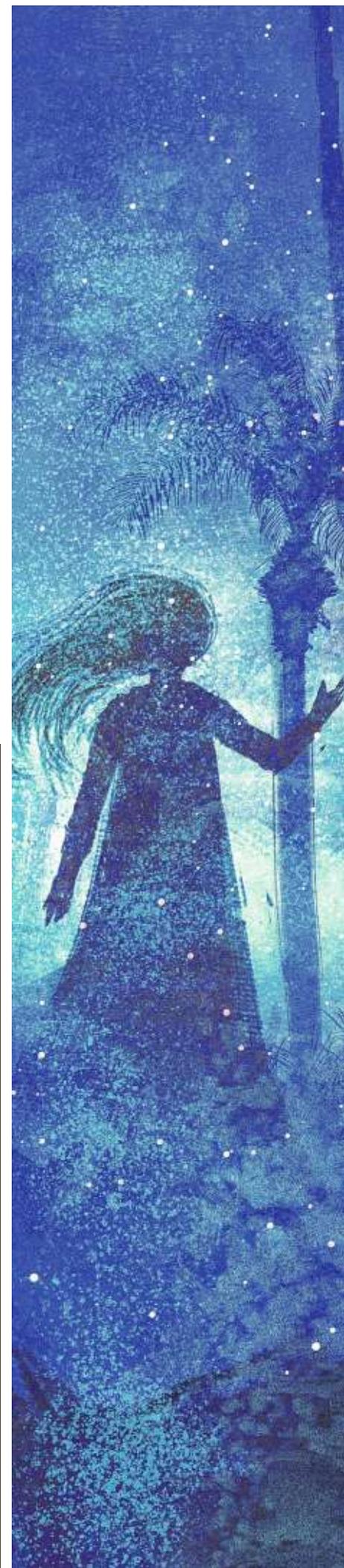
The human was tall, nearly tall enough to reach the branches, and was wearing some kind of protective suit. They didn't

seem like a threat, and they were probably a lost tourist, but I couldn't shake the feeling that they had an ominous intent ...

I floated there, halfway in the ground, staring at the human. I was surprised when they started to walk towards me. They couldn't see me, could they? After having no interaction with humans for almost 17 years now, I couldn't remember if I was visible to them or not. I felt the panic rise in my ghostly body as they came nearer. But I shouldn't have been worried. They walked past me, like every other living creature in the forest. I sighed with relief, until I noticed where they were going toward the Deepwood House, the most haunted house in the country, according to the humans. This was bad.

Humans that have entered Deepwood House have never returned alive. The human was running at an alarming speed. "No. No. No. No. NO!" I thought wildly as I zoomed after them "Not the House!" I had gained a certain fondness for the old house, I'm not sure why, but it's probably because it's where I became this ghostly state. My body might still be there, after 17 years, if the insects haven't gotten to it. I ignored this thought – I'd rather not think about my own death – and resumed my chase after the human.

The human was nearly there now. I frantically tried to put branches and logs in their way but they just jumped right over them. I tried to redirect them to a rabbit burrow (where I hoped they would fall) by using my control of the trees. But no, they kept on running. "What could they want so badly with the house?" I thought curiously.





“Perhaps they are a burglar?” My mind was acting on its own accord now. “Maybe they want to destroy the h—” Panic and anxiety swallowed my thoughts as the human approached the gates to the house. “Nooo!” my mind yelled as the human pushed them open.

I threw stick after stick and stone after stone at the human and yet they still didn’t even notice. They walked up the messy cobbled path, the unkempt plants scratching and grabbing at their legs. There was nothing I could do. They were going to get in the house. Everything I had done in my 17 years as a ghost would be undone.

Unless

I still had one more trick up my sleeve. *Fear.*

I sunk down into the ground once again, and took control of the garden. I made the dead flowers open up to reveal large, vicious teeth, the trees stretch their long, skeletal branches over to the human. I made the grass grow up like blades and shatter the hanging lanterns, causing the garden to be plunged into darkness. I then rubbed my hands together, causing a small sphere of light to form there. I shattered the sphere with a loud, deafening *crack* and threw the delicate shards at the human. They caught the knife-sharp shards as if they were simply paper.

“Impossible!” I thought in disbelief.

“Well well, little *ghost*. You’ve had your games,” said the human, a grin forming on their face. They *could* see me! *But how?!*

“This house,” the human gestured at it with a smile, “it’s worth a lot of money, isn’t it? I’d say about a couple mil—” “You can’t have it!” I shouted. I froze. I had spoken. Although my voice had scratched badly with neglect, it had power in it, and the human had sensed that. Their face crumpled with fear and I knew I had an advantage now.

“You can’t have it!” I yelled again. “You have no right to be here in Deepwood!” Rain started to pour down from the heavens. “Never show your face here again, or I’ll haunt you, your family and everyone you’ve ever known!”

Lightning crashed down, lighting the area a ghostly white and throwing ominous shadows everywhere. Without a word, the human ran for their life.

As suddenly as it had appeared, the rain stopped as I floated back to my tree to think. I didn’t know I could speak ... and the human, would they return? Would they bring others next time? When they come back, *I’ll be ready.*

The next morning, I was awoken by a loud, metallic banging. The sun was filtering through the trees and, in one of its rays, was a large sign reading: WARNING. HAUNTED AREA. ENTER AT OWN RISK. I smiled to myself, no more crazy nights for me! And with that, I glided off into the forest to talk to the animals, knowing that Deepwood Forest and its House was safe.

For now ...

Fear gan Teanga



A story by **Sarah McGuire**,
age 18, Co Down

I was falling for a language that I couldn’t understand, prying it open to examine the pieces, coaxing out its secrets, desperate to make sense of its riddle. Jumped the fox brown. Strange, inverted. Always elusive. Learnt phrases, repeated in a mind obsessive, forcing myself to take them in, to remember, for God’s sake.

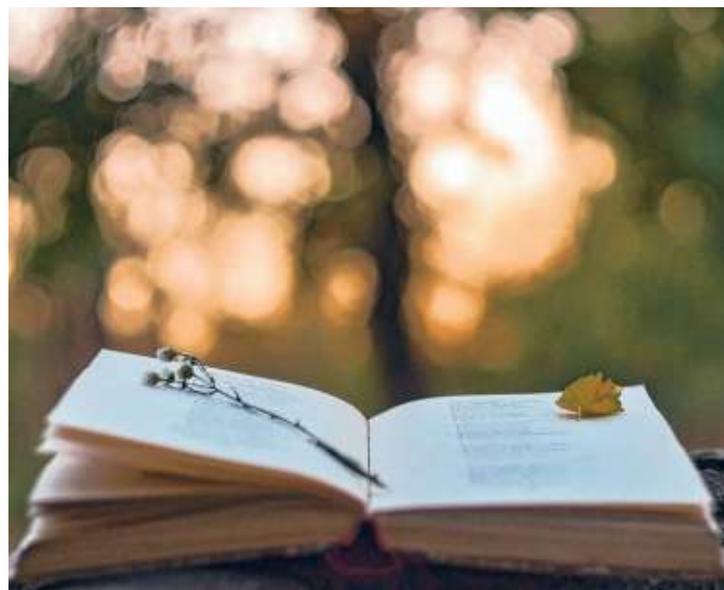
I spent my evenings in that chalk-dusted hall, beside students and young men in motley uniforms, their hurls resting at their feet, unable to afford ruffles. Not yet. Lessons began with a mumbled prayer, head bowed, knuckles clasped until white, my mouth moving, wordless. Lulled by the words spoken in unison. A chorus of disjointed voices ringing out in the makeshift classroom. Something to be feared, something to be adored.

Well into the night I stole back the hours, I stole back those unfamiliar sounds, under the dimming incandescence of the oil lamp. I stumbled over syllables, whispering them into the being alone in my room. That corner, my hedge school, the desk, a sacred altar for worshipping uncommon tongue, each new word a triumph.

I awaited that flash of recognition, that swell of pride, a familiar word nestled into a stanza of some 18th century verse I bought in a frenzy of ambition on a stall on Aston Quay. Morning, country, fox, flame. Collecting with magpie haste, scribbling down on loose paper, barely enough to form meaning, yet I held them dearly upon my tongue.

It was not a patriotic endeavour, although for many it was pure politics. I was under no illusion that it will make me more of anything. I needed this language. I was hungry for it. Beyond the material, the practical, I longed to speak of poetry and old songs, transformed with every performance. I wanted to talk to those I loved in their mother tongue, too long disused, to be part of something bigger than myself, not just declare my age.

Yet I was drowning in lists; in lenitions and tenses. Waiting for when I knew more, enough to really begin. I was falling for a language that I couldn’t understand, but someday I would.



Magpie



A story by **Rachael Anderson**, age 17, Belfast

It had been a joke, really. A half-baked, harebrained scheme. A suggestion, if you will, made with absolutely no expectation of being heeded. Dave had been talking Mary's ear off for well over a week about his *new band*, "Mary, honestly it's great – you should come to a rehearsal sometime". Mary loves Dave, honestly, but the guy can be so *incessant* sometimes that it nearly drives her mad. "I play guitar," she'd finally joked. "Why don't you see if I can join so I can experience it myself?"

She had not, of course, counted on the sheer determination and earnestness of her good friend Dave Parry.

One thing led to another – as, of course, it often does – and now Mary is dragging her feet to the school canteen with Dave bounding at her side.

"You'll love them, promise," Dave is saying, but Mary isn't sure if she believes it. All the same, she puts a brave face on as they buy their lunch and Dave leads her to the table. It feels, absurdly, like marching to a slaughterhouse. It could very well be, she supposes, if the meeting goes badly. The various members of *The Casanovas* hold an *awful* lot of sway in the school community, and Mary has no doubt her reputation could be ruined with a single word.

As she comes up to the table, though, she finds herself oddly at ease with what she finds. They just look like average boys – from here, at least. Quick glances, quicker punches, ugly – well, *decent* laughter. As awful as they may turn out to be, Mary won't begrudge them the right to enjoy themselves.

The two of them are even closer to the table now, and Mary takes one last assessing look. Chris, the only one she can place a name on, looks relaxed even in the crowded canteen – his face is calm, his posture is

open, and he's twirling a pen in his hand as easy as you like. The blond with the bowl cut has a stupid grin on his face and is shifting restlessly in his seat, and Mary imagines he's probably the jester of the group. The other one, brown-haired, truly *does* seem like an ordinary lad, though – just eating, grinning and larking about. The burst of normality is comforting.

"Hey, lads," Dave greets, and all of Mary's confidence goes flying out the window and lands right next to the table's previously easy conversation.

"Who's this, then," Chris asks into the sudden silence. Something in the curve of his mouth makes it seem like a threat, and Mary fights the urge to duck her head.

"Oh, this is my mate, Mary. She's *real* good on lead guitar, y'know, would give us a chance to do some great stuff."

Chris' tone is still bone-dry when he speaks again. "*Real good* at speakin' for herself too, isn't she."

Dave winces and looks at her apologetically. His eyes, panicked and nervous, give her the confidence she needs to speak up. If *he's* nervous, and still doing this, then she can do it too.

"Yeah, I'm alright at it. Maybe I'm just not talking 'cause I don't want to talk to you." Oh, she *really* hopes she hasn't misjudged the atmosphere.

The others jeer at Chris, laughing and barking like boys are irritatingly prone to doing. At least it lets her know she's not going to be kicked out *just* yet. Chris just laughs.

"Times change, love, times change. One day you'll be infatuated with me, just you wait."

Mary gives him a knowing look, and he looks directly back. It's a bit like a challenge, maybe, and Mary grins as she sits down. If it's a challenge this boy wants, it's a challenge he'll get.

Unfortunately, it doesn't quite turn out that way. Chris, apparently satisfied, turns back to hashing out lyrics with Keith. Charlie, the blond, scoots up to sit opposite her – they're soon engaged in a meaningless but intense discussion about their favourite records. Dave pitches in on both conversations, slipping in and out of the spotlight gracefully. It all feels far more natural than any lunchtime conversation Mary has been part of in the entire year.

Suddenly, Keith curses. "Pen's run out. Anyone got another?"

"Yeah," Dave says, reaching into his blazer pocket. "Just... oh, where is the





stupid thing...”

He begins methodically emptying his pockets out onto the table. Spare change, a pack of cigs, a lighter, keys, a hastily scribbled schedule, more spare change. The belongings of one David James Parry, laid on the table for all eyes to see.

Unnoticed by this brave pocket-explorer, the table goes slowly quiet, the other three shifting uncomfortably. With a triumphant cheer, Dave looks up with a pen in hand— and sees the reason for the silence.

The tabletop is empty.

Dave rolls his eyes, smiles. “You’re a magpie,” he chides.

Mary scrunches her nose up. “You’re a softie,” she fires back, sticking her tongue out.

“And you aren’t? Give it back, then.”

Looking disdainfully at Dave’s grabbing hands, Mary hums. The others look even more wary, if such a thing is possible. She pretends to think it over.

“I dunno... Didn’t ask me very politely, did you?”

A tongue click. A sigh. A theatrical clearing of the throat. Then, “Miss Mary Harding, would you *please* be so kind as to return any belongings of mine that you have sequestered on your person.”

Mary swoons, eyes going wide and hand flying to her chest. “*Oh*,” she gasps, “why didn’t you say so before? *Of course*, my good sir.”

Mary’s mum didn’t raise a liar; she hands everything back with an overdone flourish. The table relaxes almost imperceptibly after that, and Keith slowly takes the pen from Dave’s hand. Chris looks at Mary with suspicious amusement, like he isn’t quite sure she can be trusted but he likes her anyway.

To prove a point, Mary makes eye contact with him as she nabs one of Dave’s chips. The action also, conveniently, manages to lighten the atmosphere.

“Maybe we should write a song about that, eh,” Charlie grins. “The, the *The Klep-toe-main-ee-ac*, y’know,” he says, stumbling over the word with all the grace and surety of a lad who saw a word in a textbook once and thought it sounded rather grand.

“More like *The Eejit* though, innit? Me getting my stuff stolen, I mean.”

The table erupts into that harsh, breathless laughter from before, and Mary feels light as air when she realises she’s now a part of it. Oh, isn’t this all just *grand*.

Trá



Dán le Ciara Ní Phiotáin, 13 bliana d’aois, Co na Gaillimhe

Bhí mé ag siúl cois trá
An ghrian do mo chaochadh
An gaineamh géar ar mo chosa
Bhí an ghrian ag dul a’ luí
Agus na réalta ag teacht ar ais
Bhí an spéir imithe sórt corcra
Ghuigh mé chuig gach réalt
A bhí cailte agam



Páirc an tSonais



Dán le Clíodhna Ní Neachtain, 13 bliain d’aois, Co na Gaillimhe

Lá te grianmhar
Páirc bhreá ghlas
Toirneach ag grúsacht ar bhun na spéire
Siúlaim amach ar an bpáirc
Mothaím mórtas, bród – mo chroí ag bualadh
Teannas san aer
Airím allas ag rith síos mo dhroim
Teas? Bród? Sonas?
Ardaíonn an ghrian
Féar glas

Cath camáin
Damhsaíonn an sliotar tríd an aer

Páirc an Chrócaigh, Bealtaine ‘23





White cabbage butterfly



A story by **Valentine Jones**,
age 17, Co Limerick

Dawn drips in bright rivulets across the black sky. The sun pulls itself over the horizon and lifts the shadows of night like a mother opening the curtains of her child's bedroom. Choruses of birds strike up tweeting jigs and reels in rustling, conspiring trees. The land rolls, a bunched, wrinkled brown and green tablecloth stretching into the misty morning distance. A grey church breaks the untempered fields with stubborn realness. Time could never eat a thing like that. A city of headstones slant in the strange light of early morning. Weak yellow seeps into the worn letters. An ancient round tower tilts smugly, wedged deep into the ground.

Leaning against its base, a young man smokes. A leather coat swirls around his ankles. Under the coat, he wears an ugly, hole-riddled brown jumper and black cargo pants. His hair is black and limp, dead straight over his ears and brushing his shoulders. His eyes are tiny behind his

thick black glasses, watery blue and squinty. He's tall and thin like an awkward pale crow, and he croaks like one too when he opens his mouth to speak.

"It's dawn now, thought you said you'd be gone," he says to thin air, pointy chin jerked over his shoulder, like he's talking to someone standing alongside him.

Reality distorts beside him, as though a person-shaped mass of water has just appeared in front of the worn grey stone, warping it. It gurgles.

"What do you mean it's not here!" He drops his cigarette and grinds it into the dirt under his heel. Turning to look at the ghost (because what else could it be but a ghost?), he glares and adjusts his coat irritably.

A burbling, wet babble of incomprehensible words. A breeze elongates into a gust of wind and cackles across the dawn-drenched land. It whips his coat into a flapping leather terror, nearly flailing off his shoulders.

"I've only these two days to get you back

to your grave, Ms Fitzgerald" – an irate gurgle and he corrects himself – "Síle, sorry. Don't be calling me young Connors then, my name's Éamonn. I haven't the time to be going across the country in a mad tear, Síle, just so you can have a look at the sea. Will you just tell me where you're buried, all this guessing is wasting both of our time."

An exasperated sounding gurgle and the ghost disappears. Éamonn calls after her.

"No use telling me you were buried at sea! I know full well you never saw the sea when you were alive, you just got a longing for it when you drowned in the Shannon." Silence.

He mutters to himself, "Nothing for it, I suppose." Stalking back to his battered car, his black coat flaps in the wind like misshapen wings. He has to thump the dashboard a bit but the car eventually sputters to life. There's a bite to the air and he shivers, but rolls his windows down. He gingerly backs off the muddy grass and rejoins the unkempt boreen, phone in

hand. The howling wind through his open windows sets the whole car rustling.

“Hi, Au ... Oh. Is Auntie Órla there? Can you put me on to her, please? Thanks. Hi, Auntie! Sorry, I think I’ll be a bit longer with this job. Síle Fitzgerald’s being a bit uncooperative.” The car rocks from side to side and water splashes from nowhere on to the windscreen. “Yeah, that was her. Can I’ve another day? Sound, thanks. I’ll be seeing ye Saturday then, slán.”

The landscape narrows around the road into a series of hills, then folds out into a sprawling expanse of patchwork fields. Godfingers of sunlight break through the weak blanket of light grey clouds and caress the sparkling landscape. The car bumps along a road that winds through silver streams and rivers. A purple and green mountain looms to Éamonn’s right, native trees interspersing swathes of homogeneous spruces that sweep down the distant slopes.

“Listen,” he says reluctantly after a while. “I like the beach too. If I bring you to see the sea, will you tell me where you’re buried? I’ll even buy you a nice bouquet, leave it on your grave, yeah?”

Reality inverts in the passenger seat, before resolving into the damp apparition. The passenger seat is slowly sodden, a dark patch of water on the seat and headrest. A burble, and a fleck of water on Éamonn’s face, and they’re off happily to the beach. It’s a slow journey, with Éamonn determinedly avoiding every motorway and bypass that could shorten the trip.

The dry weather holds, midday burning into a nice, sunny sky as the car chugs across the country. Fluffy white clouds complete the picture.

“S fair nice,” Éamonn remarks to Síle’s ghost. A gurgling agreement answers him.

A while later, “We’re here now.”

The beach is deserted. Éamonn drives right on to the shore, deep tire tracks scouring the otherwise flawless white sand. It’s high tide and the waves swirl only a metre in front of the car. He tugs off his wellies and leaves them between the rocks that mark the boundary of beach and field. Marram grass scratches his bare feet until he moves back on to the warm sand.

“Síle?” he calls. Two damp footprints darken the sand in front of him as Síle warps from inside the car. He walks past her, stepping into the shallow waves. Green seaweed swirls around his feet. The sea is translucent as glass. Seashell shards and bright pebbles stretch under the waves as far as Éamonn can see before the rippling sunlight off the water blinds him. “Come on,” he says and turns back to her. The bottom of his coat drags through the water. “It’s lovely and warm.”

Hesitant footprints pad to the edge of the shore. Síle seems more there under the stark sun. Through her silhouette, the landscape is a sloshing, undulating swirl of fields and distant hills. Green blends with blue in a kaleidoscopic distortion.

“Come on,” Éamonn beckons again, gently. Síle’s feet disappear into the water of the sea as she steps forward. Another step, and she’s past Éamonn. Another, and another, and her indistinct waist has disappeared. She stands motionless, torso and head contorting the horizon.

Éamonn splashes around for a bit, picking up mostly intact sea shells and dropping them into his pockets while Síle watches the sea roil and crash into itself. The tide inhales the water further and further, the shore recedes. They move deeper out from the car as the sea takes itself away for a bit.

“Síle, should we be heading soon?” Éamonn ventures after a while. Silence answers him. Surprised, he wheels around to see Síle’s ghostly water form tighten before bursting into a shower of droplets. He sputters, pushing his dripping hair off his glasses. He casts about for Síle but can see no ghost. Where she was standing, a brooch glitters and sways under the gently rolling water. He rolls his sleeve up and plucks it from the sand.

It’s an ornate bit of jewellery, gorgeous and delicately crafted. It’s a cabbage butterfly, the thin metal painted white with black dots where a real butterfly would have them. Éamonn turns it around in his hands for a bit, head bent intently. A seagull wheels close by him, squawking loudly, and he jumps. He pins Síle’s brooch to the front of his brown jumper and walks slowly through water back to his car.

Behind the wheel, he watches the sun slip closer to the horizon, afternoon cooling into evening. He rings his aunt.

“Hi, Auntie – yeah, I’m grand. Listen, I won’t be needing another day. I think Ms Fitzgerald was another case of someone drowning in a river then the body washing out to sea and that being counted as the resting place. Yeah, it would have been nice if the parish had recorded that, rather than leaving all the work to us. Yeah. That’s good news! I’ll be seeing ye tonight, so. Thanks. Bye!”

Éamonn tucks the phone into his coat and stays in his car for a bit, watching the sea dance in the evening light. His passenger seat dried off while they were in the water. He takes the seashells out of his pockets and lines them on the dashboard in front of the passenger seat. A flock of birds too distant for their species to be discerned sweeps in front of the sun, black dots in a cawing swarm. He sticks the wrong key into the ignition, fumbles the right one in and gives it a twist. The car coughs to life, no thumps necessary this time. He wheels back on to the rocky road, engine sputtering like mad.

The car disappears towards the hills, and the beach is silent again. The waves sluice in and out. A gentle whisper. In. Out.

In. Out.

In. Out.

In.

Primary Stories

The lesson for Stacey and Stella

An extract from a story by third and fourth class, **Rosenallis National School, Co Laois**

It was a nice sunny day in the woods. A fox called Mr Pickles jumped from a tree in front of a girl called Stella with blonde hair. She was afraid and ran away.

She went home and got money to go to the shop and to meet her friend Stacey. They all lived in a place called Valley Rose, where it is always raining and there are lots of shops, different coloured houses and a big castle.

The castle is very fancy and has lots of nice things inside. Outside there is a big statue of a toad, which comes to life at night.

Outside the shop Stella and Stacey meet Jake, who is short with brown hair and black eyes and his favourite thing to do is ride his bike.

The girls are always mean to Jake.

Stacey tells Stella, “Let’s go to the park” and Jake asks to come along. But Stella says, “No, you are too small to go with us to the park.”

Jake runs to the park crying. He sits down on a bench and Mr Pickles appears. Mr Pickles doesn’t know that

Jake has been given a magical drink by his uncle, Mr Stumble. Mr Stumble is a wizard who works as a gardener in the castle.

The magical potion gives Jake the power to understand Mr Pickles and makes people invisible. Mr Pickles tells Jake, “Let’s scare them at the park by using invisible powers.”

Jake and Mr Pickles make themselves invisible and creep up on the girls, float rocks past them, make scary noises, like mouse sounds to scare Stacey and barking sounds to scare Stella and they take the girls tablets.

The girls are frightened and run towards the woods and are grabbed by a pterodactyl called Mr Cucumber, who drops them off a cliff. They land in a giant web and a giant spider with 1,000 legs and 300 heads suddenly appears.

The spider is about to eat Stacey and Stella when Jake arrives with an army of cobras.

Will he save them because Stella is his sister!



Xia's gift



A story by **Sadie Jade Forde**, age 13, Co Wexford

Xia Chen was born in 1631 in Peking, China. She was born into wealth. Her father was a merchant who had accumulated great riches. Her mother came from a family of medical practitioners who were not rich but were widely respected. It was a loving family. Xia grew up knowing nothing other than this household to which she was bound, the servants who were employed to do the family's bidding, and one other thing that was drilled into her since before she could remember much else: "Inside the house you are safe, outside you are not."

As Xia grew, she received a few of life's true gifts. First, a brother who they called Bai, of whom she was extremely fond, and then twin sisters. Liang, who was always misbehaving, was often told she was "quite the practical joker", which, although Xia was sure was not meant as a compliment, was constantly reflected in public in a showy way by Liang. The other twin was called Mei, who was a sickly child, deathly pale and with permanent dark shadows under her eyes. Xia always thought that this was the reason for Liang's misbehaviour. Xia sympathised with Liang over the fact that Mei received

almost all of their parents' attention.

They were a privileged family, and they enjoyed a very fulfilling life. That was, of course, until the peasant uprisings came. Xia was not told much, only that the peasants were fed up with the Ming rulers and had decided to revolt. Their father constantly reminded them that it was not safe, and by the time Xia was 11, her father was the only one who would leave the house.

In time, further catastrophe descended: an outbreak of the deadly plague in 1643, the effect of which was akin to that of a mass murderer. Thousands of people were dying, and Xia and her family were now not safe even within the house's walls.

One Sunday, the father called his children into the library and told them that he and their mother had decided it was in the children's best interests that they were sent away. Xia wanted to argue against this, but knew that her parents' difficult decision was the right one.

In the weeks before the children left, their mother made it her business to pass on to Xia some of the remedies she herself had learned from her own mother, in hopes of assisting Xia in looking after her younger siblings. Xia learned the practices eagerly, and her mother was proud of how much she had progressed by the time it came for them to leave.

A carriage arrived and the few possessions they were to take with them were loaded on. Father pulled Xia to the side and told her it was now her duty to look after her siblings; she was to give Mei her medication, ensure Bai applied himself to his studies, and keep Liang from getting into too much trouble. He then told her that they were going to live with a relative



in a village in the countryside where they would be safe. Lastly, he told her to stay safe, that he would be thinking about her every day, and that she was his special girl. He swung her up into a tight hug and whispered “I love you” in her ear. He lowered her, wiped a tear from his eye, ruffled Bai’s hair, and kissed the top of the twins’ heads.

Three days of travel later, the four children arrived in a remote village. Their relative (who was a lovely woman called Lei) welcomed them with open arms, and the other villagers were just as friendly. After a few weeks, Xia had made many friends and even started attending a girl’s school. Aunt Lei (which is what they had come to call her) had insisted upon this.

Several months passed, but in time the villagers began to fall ill. Although no one ever said it, it was clear the plague had spread there. Xia could tell that Aunt Lei was trying to keep the worst of the news from the children so as not to worry them. But Xia did worry, for the village was very cut off and the villagers’ knowledge of remedies was very basic. Xia wanted to help, but Aunt Lei insisted that she must keep herself safe. She obeyed.

That was until the death of Choi Ling. She was not a close friend of Xia’s, but perhaps that’s why it hit as hard as it did. For, Xia had not had the chance to get to know this girl – and she never would. Death is a strange thing, it hits *hard*.

That was the day Xia decided to take action. She would no longer stand by and watch, she had to do something. So, using the skills her mother had taught her, she nursed the grateful villagers back to health. Bit by bit, one by one – until the plague had all but vanished from the village. Almost. Everyone except one person was healed.

You see, some distance beyond the edge of the village, there lay a cottage. An old woman lived there. The villagers did not mix with her, they did not trust her. Some claimed she was a witch, others that she had been disgraced from society. She had almost never been seen. Many villagers even denied her existence.

One day, a beautiful songbird flew through the window of Xia’s bedroom and dropped a note in her lap. It told Xia that the old woman was sick and needed her help. Although Xia knew of the villagers’ fears of the woman, she knew also that she must help because otherwise the plague would never go away.

Xia brought the old woman medication and visited her every day until she recovered. She never saw her face, as it was always hidden beneath a veil. On the last day that Xia visited, the old woman told her how grateful she was and produced a beautifully patterned lantern. “A gift,” she said, handing Xia the lantern.

“Even when your vision is clouded and the darkness is overwhelming, light this

lantern and hope will prevail.” Xi thanked the old woman, took the lantern and left.

The next day, the old woman’s cottage disappeared and with it the old woman. Xia asked a few of the villagers if they knew where she had gone, but no one even remembered who the woman was. It was as if she had never been.

One day some months later, a letter arrived. It bore devastating news for Xia and her siblings. One of the servants had betrayed the family to the revolutionaries who had burned down the family home and killed their parents. They were *orphans!*

Within days, the children were sent back to the city for the funeral. Xia did not believe what she saw that day. It was as if she was in some sort of trance. She was whisked from the ash-littered ruins of their house to the funeral of her beloved parents, and then to a place she could not have imagined in her worst nightmares. You see the family’s fortune had been confiscated, and now they didn’t have money even to pay for their return to the village, so instead they were placed in a shelter for the poor. It was an awful place, unhygienic, dirty, overcrowded, and although Xia hated to admit it, the place smelled of pure poverty.

The following years were dismal for Xia and her siblings. They endured the squalor and hunger of poverty. The loss of their parents and happy family life was a constant heartwrenching pain. The siblings’ former wealth ensured that they received little sympathy. The plague passed, but now they were surrounded by the diseases of poverty. Eventually, Liang developed Tuberculosis. It brought her to what appeared to be her deathbed. This broke Xia’s heart. Liang had always been the strongest of the four. Hope seemed lost.

It was when Xia came to rummage desperately through the trunk of their few remaining possessions for some sort of cure that she came across the lantern. The words of the old woman returned to her. “Hope will prevail,” she recalled, “hope will prevail.” It was worth a shot, so, fumbling with the box that held their ration of matches, she tore one out and struck it. She lit the lantern, and it burned peacefully all night long. Xia felt hope. It was as if the flame was Liang’s soul, flickering perhaps, but still clinging on for dear life.

The sun rose on a new day and with it the children, and Xia was amazed by what she saw. As if by miracle, Liang had recovered. She smiled weakly, but her eyes were bright.

That night, Xia pondered over the lantern and the old woman’s promise. Could it be? After much thought she accepted that it might always be a mystery.

Kindness is rewarded – you never know how much people value it.

Primary Stories

Fire the Phoenix’s Fear

An extract from a story by
Second Class, **St Laurence O’Toole CBS**, Dublin

Once upon a time a spoon came over to Fire the Phoenix. He fainted on the floor for five hours. When he woke up he saw a million spoons and then he fainted again. When he woke up he saw a man holding a weird spoon and he screamed and ran away.

He went to Lil’ Timmy and Lil’ Timmy took him to Ice the Phoenix. After that, he saw Lil’ Timmy holding a spoon and he fainted again.

Then Fire the Phoenix, for the first time in 50 years, saw a fork. Fire said “Wow”.

He went to sleep and he woke up in a mental hospital and said “Why am I here?” The doctor replied, “Your friend brought you to a hospital thinking you were dead and now you’re here.”

“Another reason you’re here is you’re scared of forks and allergic to shoes,” said the doctor.

He confronts all the forks and spoons and he fights them all off but the king and queen of the spoons and forks capture Fire the Phoenix...



Lunar Fruit



A story by **Ruby Cusack**
Cave, age 15, Co Wicklow

I pick an orange from the tree drooping over my head and I begin to peel away its skin. I try to handle it gingerly, treating each piece as if it were a ticking time bomb but the segments burst in my hands, juice trickles down my fingertips as the pithed skin catches beneath my nails. The orange lays fractured in my palms, it's ruined, unfixable, but I'm cradling it fondly to my chest, scared it will wilt away. The truth is the flower bulbs are blooming and I'm missing you terribly.

I was never any good at peeling fruit, that was always your job. You would carefully take it apart, piece by piece with gentle hands, treating each segment with such tenderness it would make my heart swell. When I tried, I always ended up with a soggy mess swimming in my palms, but you didn't seem to mind. Instead, you always laughed as I licked the juice off of my fingers and our knees would knock together as the gentle echo shook your body. You would wipe my hands clean with your sleeve and pick me another one and we never grew tired of the constant routine of it.

Back then, I took these little things for granted, they'd linger in the back of my mind, going slightly dusty and though I kept them close to my heart, I never realised how much I'd treasure them. But now things are different, when I think of you, I can picture a palette of different fruits we shared. The cherry rich tint of a pomegranate bleeding down your lips, the scent of the lemons that flavoured the air as we baked my favourite cake, a kiwi reflecting in the green of your eyes. Each memory created a mosaic of colours, like a stained-glass window. I wondered if the pigments of the fruits would dilute like watercolours as they slowly lost their hue, but I soon realised that you sowed your fingers in my hair, like roots in the soil. So I let my hair grow long so I could keep every piece of you.

To you, spring was everything, it

brought on a new moon which meant new beginnings, rebirth, embracing change, I didn't really believe in all that nonsense. I didn't have any morals, no dreams or goals, but you were the complete opposite, as if the sun showed up at my front door and kissed my cheeks, you opened a part of me that I didn't know even existed.

On the night of Lunar New Year, when the clock was minutes away from striking midnight, I was sitting under an orange tree, minding my own business, perfectly happy ignoring everyone – but you came and sat beside me anyway. I remember when you tilted your head back to look up through the branches, the moonlight shone down on you as the splotches of silver danced across your features, illuminating the kisses of freckles that painted your cheeks.

Chests do this strange thing sometimes, the climax of heat behind the rib cage like bubbles in a steam pot, something you didn't know was rising until it pops. I wanted to harness this feeling forever, replay it just to feel the comforting heat of it warm me up.

You picked an orange from the tree, peeled back its skin and gave me the other half. You didn't utter a word, but through that simple gesture it felt like we

understood each other. Suddenly a cheer arose, counting down the seconds till the clock struck midnight, a new moon, a new beginning. I glanced over at you, and you smiled back at me and to my surprise, I smiled too.

From then on, that orange tree became something holy to me. We watched it change with us through the seasons, from basking in the sun's smile, to sleeping in winter's white blanket, as fireworks lit up the sky as another Lunar New Year passed and we gazed up at the new moon. When I was with you, I saw the world in shades of colour, something other than black and grey. I



cherished the sun kissed fruits we shared, the little drawings of you that I hung up on my fridge and the days when I woke up in your bed, the sunlight kissing my ankles. I would give everything to experience such happiness again, to grasp it and keep it close to my heart ...

Wait!

Oh wait ...

I remember now, I'm dreaming,

Again? yeah, it keeps happening.

I really am pathetic.

The truth is, you've left me bleeding. There's no sign of a scar or a wound, but if I was to tear my flesh off and step out of this body, you would be sure to find a rotting interior, like roadkill on the side of the motorway, ruined, damaged, too disgusting to even attempt to piece back together. I've become nothing more than your unfinished leftovers, once you were done with me, you spat me back out like a pip stuck in your tooth. I was sure to give you a cavity, maybe you would need a filling.

There was a time when my teeth were falling out, decaying, rotting, but I didn't mind, it was a sign that I was sick. I didn't get them fixed because I wanted you to look at me, realise that I wasn't okay, that I needed love, attention, anything that'll account for all the times you ignored me, glared at me like I'm dirt on the bottom of your shoe. I knew your heart was cold but mine was still warm, willing to love you, forget all the hate you showed me, I just wanted you to hold me, rock me to sleep as I cried in your arms, I knew it wouldn't be easy for you but I was willing to try, I wished you looked at me and told me you loved me.

Did I ever tell you that I assigned you a colour? You were bright blue. I saw it in fizzes, when you were laughing it would shoot out of your mouth like fireworks, they would differ in shade, I'd see spots of cobalt, teal even indigo. I was contagious around you, I hoped some of your spark would wash over me, that I could taste those electric fizzes and it would leave a sensation in my mouth like popping candy, but there were times when your colour drained slightly, times when I could trace anger in your words, and my lemonade would leave a sour taste on my tongue. Your soul began to rot, I could feel the mould growing into your skull, darkening your colour, the edges turning black.

Maybe that's when our connection seemed to perish, but now I know that it was like this from the beginning. You never told me how you felt but I could tell there was more, and you just didn't want it clinging to the air. Sometimes, I can feel my hesitancy towards spring resurfacing, maybe you simply outgrew me, looking for a change.

I feel like I gave away a piece of myself in the name of loving you, but was that still not enough for you? I should have known, I held you like water in my hands, it's no wonder you slipped through the cracks, but you were my little bit of light and I stuck to you like a moth to a flame.

You're like the way raspberries stain my fingers, I wash my hands in hope of moving on, but then I eat another and remember it all again, the fruitful memories, I want them back, my moments of happiness.

I'm pathetic really, I'm like a dog with a bone. I'm sitting under our tree, it's Lunar New Year again. I've been waiting so long now, the fruit I saved for you is covered in mould.

Primary Stories



The cat that played for Offaly

An extract from a story by fourth class,
St Mary's National School, Co Offaly

One day there was a little cat called Jeffrey who played football for Offaly. His dream was to be the world's best cat footballer. To get to be the best, he had to beat his enemy, Sir Dog the Third. So Jeffrey trained and trained and trained and he improved but he never got past the bench. One day after his training, he met his best friend, Bobby the robot who was always a step ahead in football. Bobby had been watching all Jeffrey's training and he saw that Jeffrey wasn't using his right foot properly.

"Why don't you come to my house and we can do some extra training?" said Bobby.

"OK, I'd love to practise my shooting," answered Jeffrey gratefully.

The next day, they started training in Bobby's garden but suddenly Bobby's batteries went flat because Sir Dog the Third has unplugged his charger.

"You can't train now," sneered Sir Dog the Third. "I'll put the batteries back but first we have to have a cucumber fight."

In the past, when Sir Dog the Third and Jeffrey had been best friends, they knew everything about each other. Sir Dog the Third knew that Jeffrey's greatest fear was cucumbers. Jeffrey was trying to remember what Sir Dog the Third had a fear of and, suddenly he remembered it was big dogs because he was a little chihuahua.

Since there were no big dogs around, Sir Dog the Third and Jeffrey started the cucumber fight. While they were fighting, Jeffrey lost two of his nine lives and was knocked out for twenty minutes.

Meanwhile, because the fight was over, Sir Dog the Third plugged in Bobby's batteries again. He checked his programmes and saw that he could turn into a large robot dog...



A story by
Eva Ceridwen Garayalde,
age 17, Co Mayo

I draw the flood months before it happens. Not *really* – precognition isn't one of my many talents. Here's the thing.

In my head, my house is a castle. Emphasis on *in my head*. In the land of unfortunately bland reality, it's a beige-walled bungalow squished on top of a small hill. I want it to be a moated fortress overlooking a fantastical landscape of forests and lakes and maybe a few dragons. The dragons symbolise my *exams*. They can't get me here.

So I draw it into reality. Maths – Higher, lucky me – is a particularly fierce beast but it's never come close to my castle. I've not been to school without my sketchbook in months now, even if it means leaving textbooks at home.

About two weeks before exams start, I open a new page and start to draw. I don't use colour much but this time I get through a whole blue pen filling in the risen sea, from which the castle is among hilltops poking above the waves. I don't really think through a backstory for the scene, aside from vague ideas about angry witches cursing the land. All I know is that it's keeping the dragons away.

Worldbuilding isn't my forté, okay? Turns out, neither is getting good grades. But the precognition thing is looking more likely by the day.

The rain starts at the end of June, comes down with the great howling wind just after I finish my Leaving Cert, dark clouds rolling in the second I put down my pen. I assess my chances with more focus than I could ever give a maths question and decide there's a solid 60 per cent chance I've failed an unreasonable number of subjects. All I want to do is get home.

I trundle up the hill with all the enthusiasm of a distractible slug, certainly not trying very hard to beat the looming downpour, knees aching. The King – our spectacularly stupid great dane – rushes down to greet me. At speed, the King bears an alarming resemblance to a huge, slobbering cannonball. I screech to a halt, bracing myself for the impending doom barrelling towards me. He's about to break the speed of sound, looks like.

There's a sharp whistle from the back door just as my life begins to flash before my eyes. It's Cora, the prodigal daughter



Prophecy, maybe

returned to us, summoning the beast back to his lair.

"So, how did it go, Kit?" she asks, as I lean my bike against the wall.

"Like, 50-50. Probably passed enough."

"Your confidence is truly inspiring. Tea?"

"Jesus, no. It's roasting. Get me some fridge-water, ASAP."

Cora blinks, slow and comical. "Fridge-water?"

"Y'know, water that's been in the fridge. Couldn't be any more obvious."

"You made it sound like scummy pond-water or something gross."

See, this is why me and Cora get along surprisingly well, despite her overachieving tendencies. She's just not that preoccupied with me following in her gold-paved law-studying footsteps. More interested in my name for cold water than my exam results. But, if I'd come home crying, she

would've given me the motivational speech of the ages. Out of all the things Cora's good at, being unexpectedly sound is probably the best. That or writing essays at breakneck speed.

I gulp down a nice cold glass of fridge-water, sitting on the kitchen counter. Somewhere in the distance thunder rumbles ominously, and right on cue Dad walks in, muddy trowel in hand, grinning like a maniac from behind the pair of hideous novelty sunglasses he bought in Mallorca two summers ago. He looks suspiciously pleased with himself.

"You unclogged the drains?" I guess.

"I unclogged the drains." Yay, one point for that precognitive-me conspiracy theory. The drains have been a problem for ages and he knows it.

"Good thinking," I tell him. "Getting that sorted before it starts raining."

"Wouldn't have been too bad. Sure,

we're on top of a hill. Even if it really poured, it'd just make the house damp and a turn the drive into a moat." I try very hard not to choke on my fridge-water. Just this morning, I finished colouring my masterpiece, depicting pretty much exactly that.

Dad drifts away into the sittingroom, and I count the seconds it takes him to figure out that he's still holding a muddy trowel. He U-turns after exactly nine and I watch as he disappears outside to the shed again.

It's getting dark outside, which isn't exactly *normal* for half four in the afternoon in June. Neither is the colour – ripe bruise. Another roar of thunder and Dad returns trowel-less, followed by Cora and the King. "Unplug everything! Get the torches out!" he yells.

"Bit dramatic, huh?" I say under my breath. Cora gives me an unimpressed look. "Don't you ever read the news? This is



a..." she gestures vaguely, searching for the right word. "A once-in-a-millenia thing. I think. That's what the weather guy said."

I close the door behind them just as the rain starts bucketing down. It hits like a train, the wind too, roaring and thudding against the flat roof of the extension. The power goes out with a heavy air of finality as Cora swears loudly, tripping over my bag where I'd left it by the door. "Kit, for God's sake..."

Cora's outburst notwithstanding, the first evening of the storm is surprisingly peaceful. We play chess – I lose every time, as expected – and thank our lucky stars that we have a gas cooker. Makes all the difference, having warm tomato soup. I get out my old Nintendo 3DS, and play Animal Crossing until the battery dies. Most importantly, I resolutely ignore the howling storm outside. I even go to sleep before 11 at night for the first time in years, probably. Sure, won't the weather have cleared up when I wake up?

The weather has not cleared up by the time I wake up. In fact, all it's done is somehow get worse, going from above-average thunderstorm to Cthulhu's Wrath unleashed upon the unsuspecting land. It's

10 in the morning, or close enough to it, and it sounds like there's an army of hairdryers outside my window – and they don't seem to be going away any time soon. I squint at the glass, trying to look more than 12 feet out from the house and failing. People talk about rain being "practically horizontal", but they lie. This stuff is pretty much flat as a table and it's really something else. I feel like I should start praying to Zeus or something. Or Poseidon, I guess, because if that rain gets any heavier the air will be 100 per cent liquid.

Somewhere in the middle of my half-asleep musings on the technicalities of Greek mythology, Cora summons me for breakfast by knocking on my door like she's about to arrest me. "Toast and jam, whether you like it or not!"

"That sounds like a threat," I mumble.

"It is. I toasted the bread in a pan 'cause the power's still out. It's a bit charred."

I consider my options. "What jam?"

"Raspberry," says Cora. I pull on my dressing gown and open the door.

"I accept."

It rains, and it keeps on raining. The sky settles into a dark concrete-grey, and Dad starts muttering anxiously about how we're going to manage if this goes on for much longer.

"It's only been a day," I point out over halfhearted pasta. "It's not the end of the world."

"Debatable," says Cora.

"No, don't be like that, please. Stop catastrophising." I wave my fork at her.

"We're so screwed."

"You're just trying to piss me off now, aren't you?"

It takes three days for the sun to emerge, cowed and a little wobbly, like me when I've got the flu. It wakes me up early, shining through the slits in my blinds. Somewhere, there's birdsong. All very poetic. Right up until I peer out, blinking and confused. Sure, the rain's stopped – but what I'm looking at isn't all that different to my drawing. Despite the drain-un-clogging, there's pretty much a moat at the bottom of the hill, where some of the lower fields have been submerged. And now the air's clear, I can see far enough out to know that it's not just here. The news says we're lucky that the power even came back on in the end, even though the water hasn't gone down. I'm almost glad for the storm, if only for the quiet afterwards. It means I forget about my exams for a solid week or so, until the day we get our wifi again.

My school email inbox, which I check maybe twice a year, contains one single interesting message hiding among the spam and Duolingo reminders.

To all sixth years, it says.

Unfortunately, due to recent severe flooding, there has been an incident involving your exam papers. We believe they may have been inadvertently destroyed. Re-sits will be organised in due course. Our sincerest apologies.

I scream. Loudly.

Primary Stories



Princess Alissa and the evil mother

An extract of a story by first class, **Scoil Aoife Community National School, Co Dublin**

The main character is Alissa the princess. Her greatest wish is to have a sibling called Amelia. Her greatest fear is dragons. Alissa's best friend is Snowy, a person who wants to be rich.

Once upon a time, there was a princess called Alissa. She lived in a castle with her mother, and she was evil. Her mother broke her favourite vase. Alissa was feeling sad.

Alissa was afraid of dragons. One day, Alissa met a dragon and she was scared. The dragon roared, "RAW-RAWRAWR".

Alissa screamed, "Go away!!" She ran home. She told her mam and then her mam scared the dragon away.

"Im sorry," Alissa's mam said. From that day on, she was a nicer person.

The next day, Princess Alissa sees the dragon again...

Timmy, Billy Billy Bob agus an Teach Nua

Sliocht as scéal le Rang a 3 & 4 at **Scoil Mhuire, Co na Gaillimhe**

Lá amháin bhí Timmy ag siúl síos an bóthar nuair a chas sé le Billy Billy Bob. Bhí sé fuar agus bhí sé ag cur sneachta go trom. Thosaigh Timmy agus Billy Billy Bob ag caint lena chéile.

"An bhfuil tú ag iarraidh teacht go dtí mo theachsa?" arsa Billy Billy Bob.

"Níl cead agam dul ag teach dhuine ar bith mar beidh mo Mhama crosta," a d'fhreagair Timmy.

"Who cares?" a dúirt Billy Billy Bob.

"Mise agus mo Mhama!" a dúirt Timmy.

"Ná bac le do Mhama agus tar ag mo theach"





Stone princess



A story by **Batiste Martinaud**, age 17, Co Galway

The Alean Palace has never seen this much activity. The courtyard is filled with coaches belonging to a variety of noble houses, and even foreign kingdoms, their passengers climbing marble steps to the palace as servants trail behind them.

Outside, the people gather at the gates, trying to get a view of the rarity that is this many important figures in one place. What could possibly be the occasion? A wedding? A funeral?

As the dignitaries and nobles enter the main hall, they are greeted by the palace staff, offering food and rest after their long journeys, but the offers are refused, for that is not why they have come.

The staff nod and bid the visitors follow them. Servants are dismissed, and the guests are led down corridors lined with portraits of past Alean rulers, austere faces looking down at them through the ages.

They arrive outside the doors of the throne room; their ultimate destination. A line trails from it, down the corridor, and important as they are, the newest arrivals are forced to wait, joining the line of

people, some of whom have been there for days.

Within, the king and queen of Alea sit upon their resplendent twin thrones, on a raised dais overlooking the hall, watching as the parade of nobles and princes continue to pass by, occasionally stopping to allow some of them to step upon the dais, where a peculiar statue stands.

It is stone, carved in the likeness of a young woman, hair cascading down her back, her face frozen in an expression of shock. Her hands are slightly outstretched, as if trying to ward something off, and had any of the castle's staff, or indeed the citizens of Alea, been allowed to glance inside, they would have many questions.

Why is this statue on the dais, space reserved solely for the royal family? Who had carved it? And why does it look so strikingly like Princess Miranda, current heir to the throne?

"Your highnesses." Lord Faren steps forward. He has arrived at the palace several days prior, and it is at last his turn. "We thank you for your audience."

"We thank you for your journey." The king replies. "I trust it was not too diffi-

cult?"

"No, my lord. It was mercifully untroubled."

"Let us thank small mercies." The queen stands and walks towards the baron. "You seek our daughter's hand in marriage?"

"My son does, my lady." The baron bows his head, and his companion, a younger, stern-faced man, quickly follows. "Damien is my eldest, the brightest our house has seen in some time."

The queen eyes the young man, who raises his head, but does not meet her stare. "You think him worthy?"

The reply is tactful. "Only if you do."

"And what of the boy?" The king asks from his throne. "Is he prepared for the responsibilities and duties his union with our daughter would entail? Does he ... love her?"

"Yes, my lord." Damien's expression remains neutral, but his eyes glitter with anticipation.

The queen turns to her husband, and a wordless exchange passes between them. "Very well. He may step forward."

A grin splits the young man's face, but it disappears as quickly as it comes as he composes himself and mounts the dais,

walking towards the statue set between the thrones.

“Princess Miranda.” He speaks under his breath. “You will be mine.”

He stops in front of the statue. Her engraved expression of shock is so lifelike, it surprises him. Nevertheless he leans forward and kisses the statue on the lips, then retreats a half step.

He, the king, the queen, his father, and everyone standing in the throne room, wait with bated breath, but as the seconds stretch into minutes, nothing changes, and Damien’s head sags in disappointment.

The queen gives an imperceptible sigh, then declares, “That is enough for today. Let all those who wait be provided with rooms. We shall resume tomorrow.”

As everyone leaves, attended to once more by the palace staff, the king stands. “Still nothing.”

“We must hold out hope. All of our advisers say the same thing. Love will lift the curse.” The queen turns to address the guards by the entrance. “We are retiring to our rooms.”

The lights go out as the two exit the hall, and the doors slam shut behind them.

Time passes. Evening turns to night, which eventually gives way to a new dawn. The hall remains empty and the statue stands alone by the vacant thrones, unmoving.

In the early hours of the morning, just before the rooster is set to crow, a shimmer disturbs the air in the centre of the room, and from it steps an armoured figure. It looks around, getting its bearings as light streams through the windows above.

It lays eyes on the statue and begins to walk across the hall, stepping up on to the dais. It reaches out a hand, as if to touch the statue’s face, then stops and grabs its helmet instead, pulling it off and tucking it under her arm. Long black hair streams down the knight’s back, and she smiles sadly at the frozen figure. “Hi.” Her voice echoes around the empty hall. “It’s been a while. Can you see me? Are you aware of what’s going on?” She pauses. “I hope not. For your sake. All those people ...” She interrupts herself. “Apparently it’s the only way though. True love’s kiss. I hope you don’t mind if ...”

At that moment the doors open and the king and queen of Alea enter the hall, having spent another sleepless night worrying about what the next day will hold.

They see the figure standing on the royal dais and, after a moment’s shock, the king raises a finger. “An intruder! Guards! Stop her at once!”

The guards rush to separate the two, but they are too slow, and the knight leans forward, kissing the princess on the lips.

“Sacrilege!” The queen shrieks, and the guards reach the dais as the intruder remains fixated on the statue. One of them grabs her arm and another her shoulder. She does not resist.

They are pulling her from the dais when a voice rings out. “No.”

Everyone freezes. The statue has spoken.

“No.” Princess Miranda repeats as her skin returns to normal, the stone crumbling and sinking back into her features, her dress falling around her legs, no longer partially suspended in movement. “Release her.”

Immediately, the guards step away from the armoured intruder.

“Alanna ...” The princess steps forward, wrapping her arms around the woman’s neck. “Thank you.”

She returns Miranda’s embrace, wrapping her arms around her tightly. They remain like that until eventually, the queen finds the words to speak. “What is the meaning of this?”

Miranda pulls herself out of the embrace, facing the monarch. “The meaning, mother, is that true love broke the curse.”

“No ... but ...” The queen splutters.

“What? Did you think true love meant ‘the wealthiest man’? Or perhaps ‘most powerful prince’?”

She steps down from the dais, supported by the knight.

“I don’t know what was worse. The parade of suitors or having to hear you act like you cared about me.”

“Miranda!” The king exclaims. “Don’t talk about your mother ...”

“And you.” She jabs a finger at him.

“You’re no better. Standing idly by while your daughter is put on display. And you *knew*. But I suppose the kingdom comes first, doesn’t it?”

“Miranda, cease this foolishness at once.” The queen says sternly, attempting to regain some control. “You need rest. This intruder ... The spell has addled your wits.”

The princess laughs hollowly.

“On the contrary, your majesty. I think my wits are clearer than they have been in a long time. I don’t have to listen to you. Either of you. Not any more. Goodbye.”

As if on cue, there is a shimmer and the two are gone, leaving the king, queen and guards standing, staring at the empty dais.

“How did you know I had an exit?” Alanna asks as the pair sit on a hill overlooking a field, far away from the palace and its procession of carriages.

“I figured if you had a way in, you had a way out.” Miranda pulls a flower from the ground and begins to pluck its petals, one by one. “How did you do that?”

“Someone owed me a favour.” Alanna looks over at her. “Will you be all right?”

The former princess shrugs. “I don’t know. I don’t even know what we do now.” She meets the other woman’s gaze. “But I have you.” She leans in and the two of them kiss again, this time both able to enjoy it fully.

“That feels good.” Alanna mutters.

“I’m glad.” Miranda responds. “There’s plenty more where that came from.”

They embrace, and the two vanish once more.



Labrador



A poem by **Rachel McCloskey**, age 17, Co Louth

Somewhere
At the end of the world,
A dog lies by a mahogany door
Waiting
for the sound of copper keys.
For footsteps.
While her tail is now too heavy to thump,
Her bones, like the wood,
hard like sore teeth,
beg to escape her skin.
The fur on her snout greys,
her ears drop,
Forgotten.

But of course, she waits.

I’ll fly you to the moon



A poem by **Chloe Doherty**, age 14, Co Donegal



I’d make a rocket for your dreams unfulfilled,
I’d cherish the troubles it took me to build.
We’ll soar beyond blues and bash our goodbyes,
Then land on the moon and seek the sunrise.
Hypothetical guns shooting stars our way,
The sun coruscates and chimes his rays.
Propel to all planets; gain all aspects of light,
A silent universe, our soothing night.
Whimsical visions stand victorious views,
Don’t be surprised when I still stare at you.
For every meteorite in space –
I’d still prefer to see your face.

Primary Stories

When blue turned green

An extract from a story by P6, Knockbreda Primary School, Co Antrim



It was summertime in the forest and the sun shone through the trees. The trees and the grass were blue except for a special blade of grass, blazing green, called Paul. The sky was pink and the sun was falling out of the sky.

There was a dog called Geoffrey who was on his way to the Spar to get lightbulbs. He was feeling down because he had dropped his favourite lightbulb and it had shattered.

As he was walking along, he saw a blade of grass wearing a cowboy hat. He was completely befuddled.

“Hey there, old pal,” said Paul. “I’m looking for a buddy to have a routin’ tootin’ good time and you look like the perfect pardner.”

“Who are you?!” Geoffrey cried out.

“Well, I’m Paul,” Paul said, swinging his arms and tipping his hat.

“How can you talk?” asked Geoffrey.

“How can YOU talk?” replied Paul.

Geoffrey ignored the question. “I’m on my way to the shop to buy a lightbulb.”

“No way!” said Paul “I also need to buy lightbu’bs, pardner. I want to make the biggest lightbu’b in the world because the sun is falling out of the sky. That’s why the grass has turned blue. I want to save my family...”

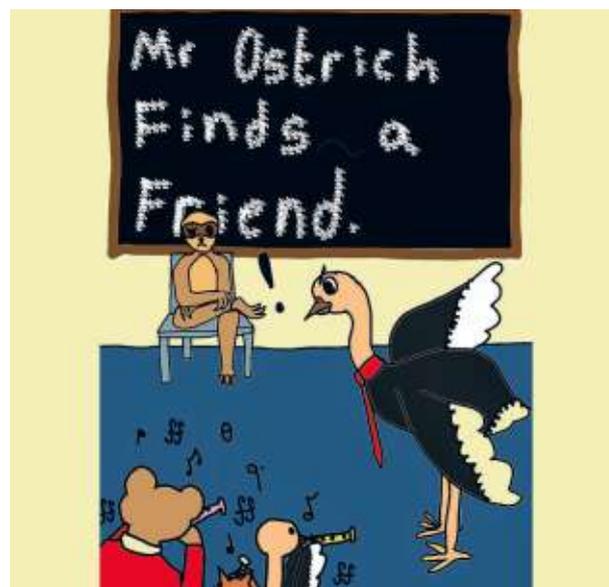
Mr Ostrich finds a friend

An extract from a story by P5, Carrick Primary School, Co Armagh

It was after school, and Mr Ostrich couldn’t fly but he was going to try again. Mr Ostrich felt very sad that he couldn’t fly, but he was keeping his hopes up! He went home after school, and the next day he decided to try again.

Every day, he hoped that his class would be a little bit quieter. Mr Ostrich was a teacher at the Ostrich Academy, and his class was always noisy – talking when he was talking, and it gave him a sore head every day.

On Mondays, the class played the recorder, and it was EVEN MORE NOISIER! And when he came home, he had an unhappy head but his friend, Billy the Sloth didn’t really care, and made a lot of noise.



Mr Ostrich went out to find a better friend, and he found one called Bob Froggy at Lurgan Park. They BUMPED into each other, when they weren’t looking where they were going. Mr Ostrich was jogging, and he ran into Mr Froggy, who was on his phone.

Mr Froggy said, “Sorry!” in a kind voice. “I was busy on my phone,” he said, “and I should have watched my step”. Mr Ostrich felt happy because he had found a friend who cared.

When Mr Ostrich got home, Mrs Ostrich wasn’t there so he called her phone as many times as he could.

“Please, please pick up!” said Mr Ostrich sadly and anxiously. “PLEASE PICK UP!”

But she had disappeared...

The old cap

An extract from a story by rang a 3 at **Bunscoil an tSléibhe Dhuibh, Co Antrim**

Smack and snap went the mouth of the crocodile.

The swamp was dirty, covered in plastic and green. A man named Patrick lived near the swamp and he was fishing and he saw the cap floating in the swamp and he called his friend Michael over.

“Do you think I could fish this cap out?”

Patrick fished it out but something was tugging on the other end of the cap, something green and heavy. He saw two small eyes poking out of the water.

Patrick was frightened. His heart was in his mouth.

“Ah,” he shrieked, when he saw the two intimidating eyes.

The crocodile came at him with speed and Michael ran away.

When Michael sprinted away he saw Lily from the corner of his eye, playing dress-up with her friends.

Lily’s daddy had been eaten by the crocodile and when Lily saw Michael sprinting she wondered what was happening.

Michael ran into a forest and Lily tried to follow him but she tripped over a tree root . . .



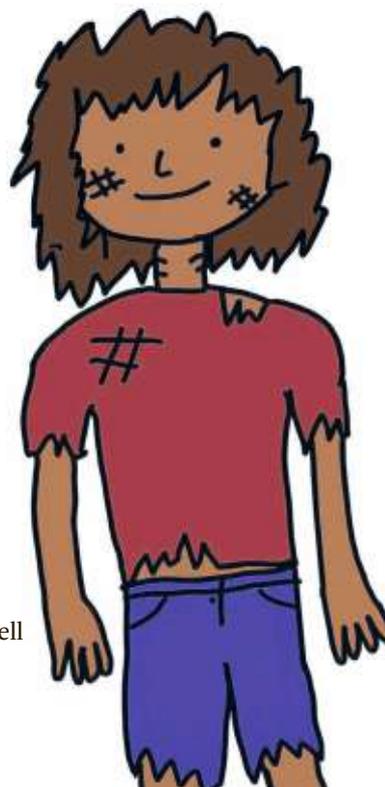
Poachy and the gorilla

An extract from a story by P4, **St Paul’s Primary School, Co Fermanagh**

A long, long time ago there was a boy called Poachy who lived in the jungle. He was a special person and he was always kind. He could breathe underwater and he liked to swing in the trees. He had magic powers so that animals could talk to him.

One day whenever Poachy was walking about he found a mean boy called Slither who was half snake, half person.

Slither the snake had been climbing up the tree but Luca jumped out from the bushes. He scared him and Slither nearly fell on top of Poachy! But he grabbed on to a branch.



Poachy and Slither didn’t like each other and they were about to fight.

However, his friend Luca the gorilla strolled over.

He saw what was happening and said in a kind way, “Sit down and talk about it and don’t fight.”

Poachy wanted to make friends with Slither so they could team up and help people and the animals in the forest.

“Sorry,” said Slither and Poachy, and Luca said, “Let’s all be friends now.”

Suddenly, right in front of them, selfish people began to burn the jungle, setting it on fire . . .

Primary Stories

An Muc Eitilte: Fealladh Taylor



Sliocht as scéal le rang a 6, **St Louis Senior Primary**, Baile Átha Cliath

Bhí Joe an Muc Eitilte ag ithe sa bhialann lena chailín, Taylor. Nuair a chríochnaigh siad, chuaigh Joe síos ar a ghlúin. Tharraing sé bosca beag óna phóca. D’oscail Joe an bosca agus bhí fainne sróin istigh ann.

Dúirt Taylor, “Níl mé cinnte gur maith liom thú mar sin.”

Rith Taylor amach as an mbialann ag caoineadh. Rith sí síos lána dorcha agus bhí an Mac Tíre ag fanacht uirthi le mála mór.

D’fhuadaigh sé í. Theastaigh uaidh go mbeadh sí mar a bhean chéile féin...

The snapped pencil

An extract from a story by fourth class, **St Mary’s Senior National School**, Co Wicklow

One day, someone bought me in an office shop and I don’t know who yet, but I’m going to find out. They brought me to the pencil case and there’s so many markers and rubbers there. They were using me and they dropped me on the floor, it’s scary down here.

The teacher came and picked me up and put me on the desk. The markers were mean, but then I realised I could read the rubbers’ minds!

‘I’m the best rubber in the pencil case!’ Said Jim the rubber. He thought this because he looked the coolest. Someone had drawn a little dress on it.

Jimmy agreed.

Then the big red marker started a fight with me.

‘You’re really small!’ said the marker.

Then Siri the pencil sharpener comes in and fights off the marker.

The pencil case came to life.

‘Stop it, you two!’ they said.

Then all of a sudden, they hear a snap! It came from Jimmy the pencil.

And the teacher put him in the bin...

The hungry whales

An extract from a story by sixth class, **Scoil Eoin Phóil**, Co Kildare

Dixie the pink whale was floating around in the big blue sea. She was sad because she wanted to go to the big red sea. The big red sea had the best fish hunting spots, but she had to be blue in order to go hunting.

She decided to call her friend Doxie the purple whale who lived in the green sea. She echoed her location and they FishTimed.

“Why can you never trust an atom?” Doxie wanted to cheer her friend up. “Because they literally make up everything.”

“Ha. Ha,” Dixie replied before she let out a sad sart (sea fart).

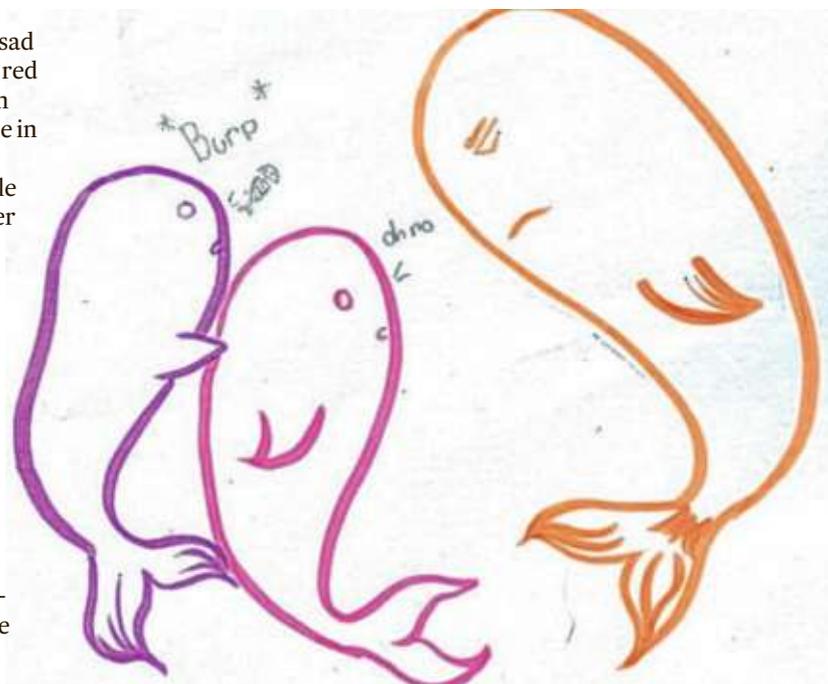
She was tired of living in the big blue sea where she almost drowned when she was a young bubble whale – aka a bale.

“Let’s meet up in the red sea and make a plan to make me blue,” suggested Dixie.

“Why don’t you use blue coral?” Doxie said.

They met up in the red sea and covered themselves in blue coral. As they swam further in, the coral began to fall off.

Suddenly, Dixie was stopped by a pool of piranhas who called the Balooa Whale Police...



Fighting Words Northern Ireland launches new magazine for young writers

Write Up Your Street, a free publication available in Belfast, looks at the everyday through a new lens

Dear reader,

The first Fighting Words NI magazine for young writers, Write Up Your Street, is about finding inspiration in Belfast; seeing the everyday places around us through a new lens. These stories and poems take the stuff of our everyday lives – shopping, eating, landmarks that usually barely get a glance – and turn them into new writing.

These young writers know a different Belfast. Peace Walls are now places for inspiration and art, though they still divide the city. The violent nights are over. The Troubles are a history they have not lived. Their portrayals of Belfast city help us share understanding of places we can all be proud of.

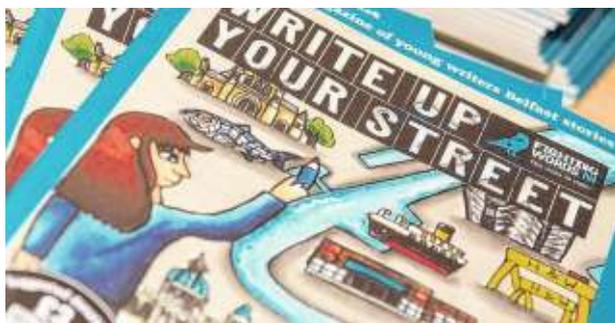
Sometimes the quietest people in the room carry power in their pen instead of their voice. This magazine shows that the young thinkers, visionaries and creative leaders are here, brought together in print. The young writers are putting up their hands and showing their presence through all the streets and quarters of the city. It is inspiring to see so many contributing and helping creativity to grow and spread further in Belfast.

Write Up Your Street magazine is free and available across Belfast and from Libraries NI branches. The second edition of the zine, Happiness, will be launched in June 2024.

Maybe you have a friend or sibling or child whose writing is in here. We hope you enjoy it and come to understand better the power of words. Maybe next time you'll be the one nervously awaiting other eyes on your own work.

From the Fighting Words Guthanna Óga – Young Voices panel: Patrick, Kaila, Rachel, Tara, Eden, Éire, Darragh, Michael, Eabha, Wiktorina and Emily.

The zine Write Up Your Street is a collection of poetry, stories, essays, and comics all based on places around Belfast – from Cavehill to Victoria Square, Titanic Quarter to Botanic Gardens. Supported by Belfast Harbour, young writers were invited to submit pieces with one condition – the work be inspired by Belfast landmarks and areas. Go to fightingwords.co.uk to find out more about the second edition and where you can pick up a copy over the summer.



Scaling Education is an initiative dedicated to promoting creativity in Deis (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) primary and secondary schools across Ireland. Through Fighting Word's workshops and school projects, young -people are given the opportunity to explore their own ideas and find their own voices. Stories produced in workshops are often published on the Fighting Words website under Tales to Scale which are free to read – and a lot of fun. The team works with teachers to organise workshops in centres, local libraries or visiting the school. Fighting Words is allocating increased numbers of workshops and activities for Deis schools.

Teachers in Deis schools can contact info@fightingwords.ie for information. There are also after-school programmes for young people who wish to further delve into their creativity: Word Warriors ensures a safe space for children aged between 10-12 attending Deis schools to explore their own creativity. Young people aged between 13-18 are encouraged to join our free in-person Write Club in Dublin or Online Write Club. There are many ways for young people to share their work in these programmes, including publishing opportunities.

Tá ocras ar Timmy agus Jimmy

Sliocht as scéal le rang a 2, 3, 4, **Bunscoil Sancta Maria**, Baile Átha Cliath

Maidin amháin, bhí Timmy an Turtar amuigh ag spraoi le Jimmy an Iasc. Ansin, tháinig daoine agus rinne siad iarracht bulaíocht a dhéanamh orthu. Bhí na daoine ag caitheamh sú oráiste orthu.

Bhí na daoine ag iarraidh greim a fháil ar Jimmy agus Timmy. D'úsáid siad sleá mhór chun rugadh orthu.

Rith Jimmy agus Timmy go dtí an trá. Ansin, bhí liathróid ollmhór ag teacht ina dtreo.

Dúirt Jimmy le Timmy, "Tá daoine ag teacht."

Dúirt Timmy, "uh-oh."

Dúirt Jimmy, "Tá ocras orm."

Bhí na daoine fós ann agus d'úsáid Timmy a shliogán a mar sciath.

Dúirt Timmy le Jimmy, "Tá ocras orm freisin."

Agus d'ith siad na daoine . . .



The otter, the fish and the big wish

An extract from a story by sixth class, **Scoil Bhríde Primary School**, Edenderry, Co Offaly

David the otter and Kelly the fish were walking and rolling along the seafront. Kelly doesn't like being in the sea, so he has a hamster type bowl with water in it to roll around in. They were having a chat about their dreams.

"I want to be famous," said David in an excited tone.

"You say that every day," said Kelly the fish in a sarcastic tone while rolling his eyes.

They stumbled upon a crab talent

show that was happening that day on the beach.

After David saw a crab singing on-stage he exclaimed: "That's it, singing is my ticket to fame!" in an excited voice.

Kelly was annoyed because David was wasting his time and Kelly said to David: "You are going to embarrass yourself, you sound like a cat trying to get out of a bag when you sing."

Kelly added, "But if you really want to get into the singing business, I know a guy."

"What do you mean?" David said in a confused voice.

Kelly explained that his cousin Gary the goldfish worked in the local underwater theatre and he could try to get you an audition.

"I don't know if I'm ready for that yet," said David in a worried voice.

Kelly said: "How about we do a duet, maybe that could help to boost your confidence?"

They return to their cave where Kelly has a collection of bowls to swim in.

They start to write their own lyrics and make up fun beats.

After days of writing the song, they finally came up with a good one. In the coming days, they keep rehearsing to make it perfect.

David asked Kelly to contact his cousin Gary about the audition.

Gary set up the audition with a big music producer who was coming to town to look at acts in the underwater theatre.

Kelly realised that the audition was going to be underwater, but it can't be on land because David was afraid of people

The aim of the Cross Border Story Seeds Project is to promote a positive sense of self and the community, bringing young people together across the Border and across traditions through creative expression. Over the course of this project the facilitators, artists and volunteers visited more than 120 schools and community groups, working with approximately 10,000 children and young people in Counties Antrim, Louth, Down, Monaghan, Armagh, Donegal and Derry. Working with primary schools, chapters were exchanged back and forth across the Border, with each school adding a chapter in response to what was written by the previous school, culminating in finished stories and the publication of the zine *Story Seeds Across the Border*, weaving together a refreshing and insightful description of community life along the Border counties and beyond.

Working with post-primary schools, students created stories within the Gothic genre and wrote fantastical stories that were full of creativity and imagination that celebrated important local landmarks and investigated the folklore in their communities. The stories are also published today in the zine *Gothic Tales: Stories of the Mysterious and Macabre*.

Working with community groups, groups of those with additional needs and youth clubs, some of the participants contributed stories to the *Gothic Tales* zine. However, they mostly created stories, plays, screenplays and radio plays that will make up the next two episodes of the *Story Seeds* podcast that can be heard on the *Fighting Words* podcast. The project was funded by Creative Ireland and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sports and Media. The project ran from April 2023 to March 2024

Dr Dejection's Ghost Detections

An extract from a story
by Creative Writing Club,
**Bloomfield Collegiate
School, Belfast**

Dr Dejection was on his way to investigate a ghost sighting in the graveyard of Crumlin Road Gaol.

When he entered the graveyard, he saw a figure that was different from the description he had been given by the warden. It was a translucent, white figure wrapped in cloth, with chains binding it to a tombstone. It had long hair that was waving around in the wind.

"I have to make this quick," he thought to himself, "there's a storm coming."

He decided to head back into the safety of the jail, unaware that he was being followed. He opened the door that led away from the graveyard. It was stiff and rusted.

He walked into the hanging room. The door slammed shut behind him. He heard glass shattering in front of



him, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw two figures walking around the room. The same silhouette from the graveyard was somehow in front of him now. It was dragging the tombstone as it walked. The other figure was a little girl sitting next to the ghost, playing with a rock from the crumbling wall.

"Help us" whispered the figure with long hair. "I've been trapped here for I don't know how long."

Dr Dejection's knees went weak; he felt like he was going to collapse. He tried to leave but the door was locked. He fell back a few steps, startled.

The girl cocked her head to the side. She looked up from the stone she was playing with. She opened her mouth; the voice that came out was faint from years of silence.

"I've been so lonely for so long; won't you please come and play with us?"

Extracts from stories by three primary schools in Ulster

Chapter 1

Time Travel in Jonesborough

P6/7 Jonesborough Primary School, CoDown

It was a sunny Tuesday afternoon and Cahir was playing football in Jonesboro Park. He saw Pearse and Lily hanging out in one of the trees. He kicked the ball towards them to get them to come and play. Pearse and Lily jumped down to the ground. Pearse bicycle-kicked the ball back to Cahir. "This is why they call me the best keeper in Jonesboro," said Cahir, catching the ball with ease.

"Do you want a challenge?" said Lily.

"Why not?" said Cahir. "I'll go first." He placed the ball onto the white spot of the grass and ran up to take a shot, but the power of the kick pushed him back. He fell right back to the river.

At that very moment, Lily ran and saved the goal. She turned around and saw that Pearse was eating popcorn.

"Where did you get that?" she said.

"I got it at the Sunday market," replied Pearse.

"How did you get it at the Sunday market when it's a Tuesday?" asked Lily, confused. She looked at her smartwatch and realised they had travelled in time...

Chapter 2

The Mysterious Dumpster

P7, Windsor Hill Primary School, CoDown

Lily snapped out of her shock.

"Help, help!" shouted Cahir.

"What's going on?" asked Pierce, waving his hands in the air.

"Let's check if the Sunday market is open," suggested Lily.

They all walked to the Sunday market. On their way they saw something quite surprising. A green dumpster. Poking out of the dumpster was the face of a cat. It had light-brown fur and green eyes, and was miaowing loudly at them. Cahir spotted it first.

"What's wrong?" Pierce asked.

"What's that?" asked Cahir, pointing at the cat.

Lily and pierce turned around, but the cat was gone. Miaow!

"I swear I just saw a cat... I think it looked like a pancake... with butter on top?" said Cahir.

"You're going crazy, Cahir," said Lily, laughing.

"Let's go and see if the cat's still there," said Cahir.

They walked towards the dumpster and stopped. The lid magically opened and they peered inside. While they were distracted, the cat hopped out of the dumpster and tied all their shoelaces together.

"See, there's nothing there," said Lily.

They looked down and fell head over heels straight into the dumpster.

Just then, the bin lorry pulled up. It tipped the contents of the dumpster into the truck and drove off.

At the traffic lights, it took a left and went through a portal. Little did they know the cat was driving the truck...

Chapter 3

Welcome to Ballybay

6th class, Scoil Éanna, Ballybay, Co Monaghan

Cahir, Pierce and Lily woke up suddenly in the back of the green truck. They stopped at a traffic light and jumped out. They

realised they were at Pearse Park GAA in Ballybay, Co Monaghan.

They decided to go in and kick a ball from the 45 line over the bar. Ellie was playing basketball at the astro pitch and suggested she take them to the old market.

Before they left, Cahir kicked the ball one last time, but it blasted them from Wednesday all the way back to Sunday 13th in 1989.

Lily checked her smartwatch and the time read 12.40.

At the Ballybay Sunday market, they were selling fresh fruit and veg for a low price, and the spuds were cheap. At this point, they realised they were not in their hometown any more.

They wanted popcorn but the market closed at 1pm, so they had to hurry. They only have 20 minutes left.

When they were leaving the market, they walked along the Main Street and saw a wee short lad with brown hair coming out of Gerry's chipper. In his hand was a bag of chips.

"Well, how's she goin? My name is Vincie," said the boy. "Would you like a wee chip?"

Cahir, Lily and Pierce were scared so

they replied, "No thanks."

"Ach, go on."

"No thanks, we don't want any but where are we?" asked Cahir.

"We're in a wee town called Ballybay, Co Monaghan!" said Vincie. "Where are you guys from that you don't know this place?"

"We're from Jonesboro," they all replied.

"Where's that?"

Just then, a load of bulls came running down the street. Behind the bulls there was a man in very mucky clothes.

"Ay, wee gason, stop them bulls there would ya!" the man shouted.

"Here, hould me chips would ya," said Vincie. "And don't take any!"

Vincie ran out the road and started shouting. He swung his arms up and down.

"Suc, suc, suc! Come on!"

Most of the bulls ran off but one of them tried to charge at Vincie.

Meanwhile, a cat walked up to Cahir, Lily and Pierce and spoke to them in an Oxford English accent.

"Well, that didn't go as planned," the cat said.

The cat touched them all with a paw and they all teleported...



Teleportation

Lost and found

A radio play by students of the VT and RT classes at National Learning Network, Community Development Project, Co Donegal



Scene 1

Jim gets the news of a secondary school teacher who passed away. O'Malley (also known as Tayto O'Malley) died of old age. The scene is the living room of the wake of O'Malley. The room is full of smoke. Among the mourners are two former pupils of O'Malley who have come to pay their respects. Jimbob (45) is an alcoholic, and Siobhan (45) is a high-earning professional who hasn't returned to Letterkenny since leaving for America as a teenager. She has developed an American accent. They don't recognise each other.

Siobhan: God, he looks like himself.
Jimbob: Sure, who else would you expect him to look like?!

Someone walks in with sandwiches.

Voice: Would you both like a sandwich?
Siobhan: I didn't realise he was so well-known.
Jimbob: Jeez aye there's some crowd here altogether hi!

Siobhan and Jim eat sandwiches in silence for a bit.

Siobhan: I missed them.
Jimbob: You missed what?
Siobhan: Tayto sandwiches! It's been years.
Jimbob: Do you know the story about the Tayto?
Siobhan: Sure of course I do, wasn't he known as Tayto O'Malley.
Jimbob: (surprised) I didn't know he taught in Texas!

Jimbob and Siobhan turn and look at each other.

Siobhan: I might have lived in the States, but I started out as a wee sham.
Jimbob: I've been in some states myself, sham.

Jimbob recognises Siobhan as his first love.

Siobhan: Aw . . . really?
Jimbob: I was in some state when you left . . .

Scene 2

Jimbob and Siobhan are both 17. They are sitting in a booth in the Dolphin Café on the Main Street in Letterkenny.

Siobhan: G'on, pass me the salt Jimmy.
Jimbob: Your arms aren't that short darling!

They continue eating.

Siobhan: Sooo, the reason that we're here
Jimbob: Don't tell me you're pregnant!

Pause.

Siobhan: I am. And I'm being taken away.
Jimbob: What do ya mean away?!
Siobhan (starting to cry): I have no choice. They're making me go to the States. We're all moving!
Jimbob: Wait? What? Houll' on now. They can't do that. You're my woman and that's my wain. Maybe we can make a plan? I'll go get a job.
Siobhan: Jimmy, it's all decided. We fly on Saturday. I'm sorry.

Scene 3

Jimbob and Siobhan are sitting on a bench at the top of the Market Square in Letterkenny. They have just left O'Malley's wake together.

Siobhan: Soo . . . it's been a while.

Pause.

Jimbob: My child would be 27 & a half by now?
Siobhan: He is. His name is Seamus. He's a fine-looking man . . . He looks like you did back in the day.
Jimbob: I hope he handled things better than me.
Siobhan: Decisions were made for us Jimmy. I went through a lot of emotional stuff myself.
Jimbob: I lost myself when I lost you. I searched for you in bottom of a bottle. The more I looked, the more I lost . . . job, family, house . . . hope. I always wondered about the child over there belonging to me.
Siobhan: I lost myself as well. Even when I got married, I still only wanted you. I tried to find myself in a career in psychology but sure I was more lost than my clients. Then my marriage fell apart. When I heard of Tayto's death, we had the excuse to come back that I always wanted.
Jimbob: Who's we?
Siobhan: Your son, Seamus. And his family.
Jimbob: I really missed THAT much? I'd love to meet them but look at me . . . just a washed up mixed up alkie.
Siobhan: Would you like to see a picture of them?

Siobhan takes a picture out of her wallet. There is a long pause.

Jimbob: Everything in this picture is everything I have ever wanted. I always knew you'd be a good mother
Siobhan.
Siobhan: It's never too late for you to be a father.
Jimbob: So, the door's still open?

They both look at the picture.

Jimbob: Jeez, our son looks like the both of us!
Siobhan: Sure, who else would you expect him to look like?!

I dream of becoming a surgeon

A story by **Saamiya Cali**, age 12, Grade 4, Baragah-qol School, Baragah-qol town, Sanaag region, Somalia

My name is Saamiya Ali, and I am a 12-year-old student attending school in Baragah-qol. I live with my parents and siblings, and I have a deep passion for learning and striving for higher achievements. Currently I am in the fourth grade and my aspiration is to continue my educational journey all the way to university, driven by the desire to reach new heights.

At school I have the pleasure of being surrounded by classmates who share my enthusiasm for learning. The school has become my favourite place to be, as it offers a diverse range of subjects that captivate my interest. Every day I ensure to arrive early, eager not to miss any classes or risk being late. Being punctual is crucial, as missing classes could hinder my academic progress.

School holds a special place in my heart, as it provides me with opportunities to engage in various activities. I actively participate in school cleaning, competitions, club activities and even sports, such as skipping rope. During our free time, we enjoy playing skipping rope, fostering a sense of joy and camaraderie among my peers.

My parents consistently encourage and inspire me to pursue my studies. During weekends and when I am not at school, I assist my mother with household activities, further instilling a sense of responsibility and teamwork within our family.

My dream is to become a neurosurgeon doctor in the future.



Fighting Words is working with World Vision Ireland to support creative writing activities with children in Somalia, South Sudan, Syria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This long-term partnership is one part of a broader five-year World Vision programme to empower and protect children and women. These creative education opportunities can strengthen children's resilience, build their confidence, and contribute to the bigger objective of protecting children from violence. In collaboration with local World Vision staff, and together with the communities themselves, Fighting Words is providing the training, supports and materials to set up sustainable creative writing programmes for children that fit the needs and reality locally. The project is funded by Irish Aid.

Classmates laughed on my first day but now I tutor younger pupils

A story by **Umayma Yasin**, age 11, Grade 4, Yibaayil School, Yibaayil village, Nugal region, Somalia

We used to reside in the countryside, where our family led a pastoralist lifestyle. However, when the devastating drought struck, I was brought to the village to live with my aunt. It was during this period that I experienced my very first day at school.

As I stepped foot into the school, I was amazed by the school's size and the bustling crowd of children. When my name was called for attendance, I remained silent, unsure of how to respond with a simple "present". My classmates erupted in laughter, leaving me bewildered. But now I have grown to understand the workings of the school and have become an active participant in its vibrant community.

In the beginning, I struggled with

reading and writing, completely unfamiliar with these skills. However, with time and dedication, I have gained proficiency to the extent that I can now assist and tutor younger students. I take pleasure in sharing my knowledge, often revisiting lessons with them. My aspirations have transformed and I aspire to become a teacher myself when I grow up.

I hold deep affection for my school and teachers, appreciative of their exceptional guidance and instruction.

Initially, I harboured fears about school, believing that children were subjected to physical punishment, as rumours suggested. But my experiences at school have shattered those misconceptions.

I have come to realise that it is strictly forbidden to harm children,

creating a safe and nurturing environment for learning.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to all those who have contributed to the success of my school, with a special mention to parents who have played a significant role in supporting our education. Their love, encouragement and dedication have been invaluable.

I would also like to express my deep appreciation to World Vision and Irish Aid, whose unwavering support has been instrumental in transforming our school. They have not only provided us with a well-equipped infrastructure, including classrooms and chairs, but have also supplied essential teaching and learning materials. These materials have empowered us to engage in effective education, enabling us to learn and grow.





Finding equality: My journey as a disabled student

A story by **Sakariye Ahmed**,
age 11, Grade 3, Taageer School,
Dangoroyo town, Nugal region, Somalia

My name is Sakariye Ahmed and I live with my grandmother. At the age of 12 I face the challenges of being a disabled student, particularly with walking. However, thanks to the support I received from World Vision in the form of a wheelchair, which was specifically provided to assist our school, and the unwavering encouragement from my teachers, I have become more active and optimistic.



In the beginning, I had doubts about my ability to attend school and engage in activities alongside my non-disabled peers, such as playing football. But now I firmly believe that I am just as capable as my classmates without disabilities.

I actively participate in various school activities, including cleaning and sports. Additionally, I am proud to be a member of the school's reading club, where I eagerly contribute and participate.

I deeply appreciate the invaluable assistance and resources provided by the school administration, teachers and World Vision. Their support has been instrumental in my educational journey. I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to them.

To all children facing disabilities like mine, I want to convey the message that they, too, possess remarkable potential and are equal to their non-disabled peers.

Would you like to get involved with Fighting Words?



Youth Advisory Panel and Write Club offers any young writer the chance to develop their unique voice

The **Youth Advisory Panel** is an island-wide initiative made up of 16-18-year-olds from both Fighting Words and Fighting Words Northern Ireland, who come together to discuss and review our organisations' activities. Founded in 2022 to platform young people's voices at every level in our charities, it is now on its second generation of members.

The panel meets monthly to discuss current and upcoming projects. The panel also present at our board meetings on a rotation, transforming the dynamic of our decision making and aiming to empower and centre youth voice in the organisation. Young people on the panel take an annual trip to one of our locations, and get various social and creative opportunities. The next event on our calendar is a trip to Belfast, including a showcase performance opportunity for Belfast Book Festival 2024.

In the words of one of our members, Éire Ní Fhaoláin: "The Youth Advisory Panel at Fighting Words is a space where ideas grow and flourish. We call ourselves Guthanna Óga, which is Irish for Young Voices – and that is exactly what this panel celebrates.

"Young people from all over Ireland work together to inspire and to promote writing in all shapes and forms and we come together to craft new ideas for a brighter writing future. This panel focuses on a variety of aspects of literature, emphasising the importance of the Irish language

in our writing, the concept of spoken word and even the use of art in our compositions.

"In addition to this, young people and their voices are amplified as part of this wonderful panel and our ideas are respected, valued and put into practice. At the very core of Guthanna Óga is the importance of meeting like-minded people and friends. The panel is one big family, united by the shared passion to write, encourage and nourish creativity."

Write Club is for anyone aged 13-18 who wants to be part of a community of writers. Always free, sessions happen weekly and take place in person and online, meaning young people from all over the Republic and Northern Ireland can share and celebrate their creative writing with each other.

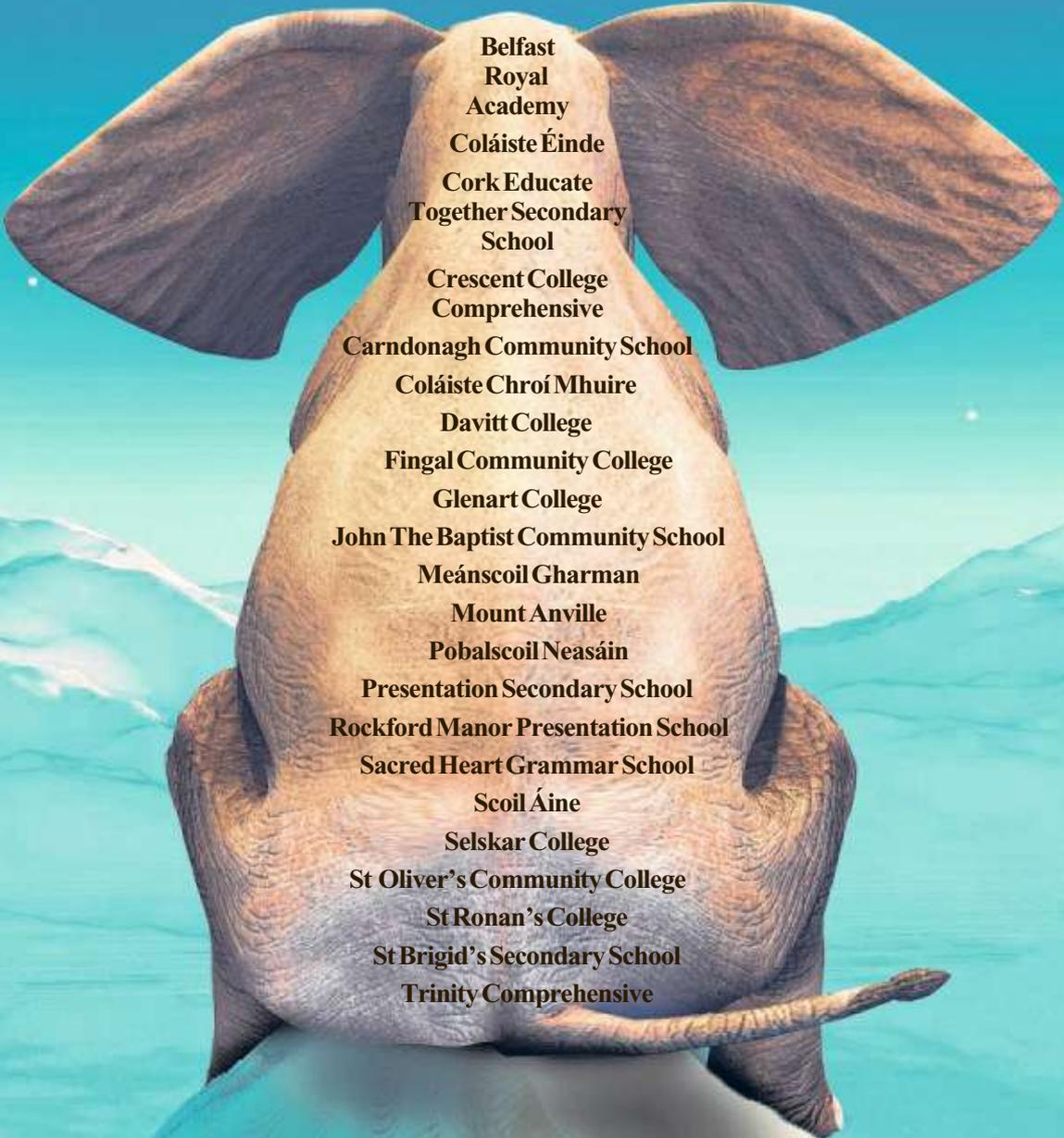
Our members write short stories, long stories and very long stories; poems and spoken word performances; graphic and flash fiction; scripts for plays, theatre and radio . . . the list goes on. In short: any form of writing that captures your imagination. If you have the words, we have the expertise to help you hone your craft.

Additionally, with publishing opportunities, showcases, and monthly Q&As with industry professionals, Write Club can help any young writer develop their talents and their unique voice. Whether you are brand new to writing or have a project you're working on, visit fightingwords.ie or fightingwords.co.uk to join the club.

Fighting Words

would like to pass a big note of thanks to all the children and young adults who we met this past year. The imaginations and creative energy we encountered, and the wonderful pieces we have read, have been inspiring and invigorating. To the teachers at primary and post-primary level who support and encourage their young people to create, imagine and dream, THANK YOU.

Huge thanks also to the editorial committee for reading all of the pieces entered for consideration and special congratulations to all the post-primary schools, listed below, whose students were selected for publication in this year's supplement.



Belfast
Royal
Academy
Coláiste Éinde
Cork Educate
Together Secondary
School
Crescent College
Comprehensive
Carndonagh Community School
Coláiste Chroí Mhuire
Davitt College
Fingal Community College
Glenart College
John The Baptist Community School
Meánscoil Gharman
Mount Anville
Pobalscoil Neasáin
Presentation Secondary School
Rockford Manor Presentation School
Sacred Heart Grammar School
Scoil Áine
Selskar College
St Oliver's Community College
St Ronan's College
St Brigid's Secondary School
Trinity Comprehensive

the arts
council
comhairle
ealaíon

funding
literature



**FIGHTING
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The write to right.