

Title	"Places We Actually Go": three Irish poets' debuts
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Publication date	2018-08-03
Original Citation	O'Sullivan, J. (2018) "'Places We Actually Go': Three Irish Poets' Debuts', Los Angeles Review of Books, August 03, Available at: https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/places-we-actually-go-three-irish-poets-debuts
Type of publication	Article (non peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/places-we-actually-go-three-irish-poets-debuts
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Download date	2025-05-09 07:45:25
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/7122

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“Places We Actually Go”: Three Irish Poets’ Debuts - Los Angeles Review of Books

By James O’Sullivan

14-17 minutes

AUGUST 3, 2018

AS READERS OF POETRY, we consistently commit the same act of self-deprivation — we associate literary quality with longevity. This emerges from a sort of reverse ageism, wherein the pillars of national canons are often authors who have remained prolific across several decades, the assumption being that great poets return to the anvil. Coupled with longevity is visibility, the extent to which a poet is *seen* to be successful. While the canonizing influence of visibility has always been present, it has been reinforced in an age of social media-enabled posturing. To be a great writer, then, it would seem one must be both productive and visible — a trend that suggests that we have forgotten how to listen when words might vouch for themselves, how to recognize literary greatness when it creeps up on us, quiet and unassuming.

Literary greatness, whatever that might be, should have more to do with language than anything else — great writers should speak for us as readers, they should articulate what we cannot. Some

readers have the good fortune of growing up with voices that treat the very same generational contexts with which they struggle. I remember, while still in my teens, being first introduced to the work of a poet I greatly respect. I was sitting in a petrol station outside Killarney, when a magazine piece on her work caught my eye — the first thing I noted was that she too was a teenager, and so considering her success, was surely worth a read. I was not disappointed — her words were those I could never find, and I took comfort in the knowledge that she would find them for me. My assumption was that we would grow together as author and reader, that I would face the trials of adulthood in the same fashion as I faced those of my youth, with words, many of them hers, as catharsis. But this isn’t what happened, and her subsequent collections were alien to me.

It is a strange feeling when one becomes detached from one’s literary idols — while I have always possessed a critical appreciation of this particular poet’s mastery of form, I no longer feel her words in my gut. For me, a piece of poetry either punches me in the gut, or I have no use for it. I don’t know why this is, in that I will endure a drawn-out novel or film, I will listen to an entire album even though I favor specific tracks, but with poetry, I want intensity, pure and instant. When your idols fade, you fear that it will be hard to find a new source of gratification. And yet, greatness does creep, and readers who feel detached from the page can quickly find themselves back in the mire, steeped in the addictive reaction that good words can bring.

Ireland’s literary scene is thriving, but it is also changing, in that the new greats are emerging, or, better still, have already emerged. There is no point in being excited about the future greats — literary

potential is a curious thing in that it is often founded on nothing more than a fortuitous comment thrown out at the right time in the right circles — particularly when we have fresh greatness in abundance. There is no old generation, new generation, and next generation; there are only dead poets and living poets, contemporaries and legacies. I say this because I do not want to fall into the trap of constructing the work of three young Irish poets as just that, the work of “young” poets — that they are young is inconsequential, and what they might go on to accomplish should not distract us from what they are doing *right now*. Repetition should not be a necessity when determining greatness. In Elaine Cosgrove, Roisin Kelly, and Annemarie Ní Churreáin — whose debut collections were released over the past 24 months — we find Ireland’s strongest contemporary voices. Not the strongest young voices, not the strongest potential voices — *the strongest voices*.

They have not yet achieved longevity, nor have they built their reputations on Twitter and Facebook — but they *are great*. And whether or not they will go on to have *great* careers, they are, at this present moment, the authors of three of the greatest collections of poetry that the Irish canon has to offer. They are not the future of Irish poetry, they are its present — their greatness is that they have penned the anthems of a forgotten generation — and what is greatness if not that?

Irish poet Vona Groarke, on the occasion of her recent induction to the Hennessy Hall of Fame, claimed that those seeking change should stand for election — poems, she argues, are not an inherent part of the political process. And there is something to that position, particularly if one considers the extent to which many writers now “rush into rhetoric,” as Groarke so aptly puts it. But if change is to

happen, people need to be inspired. Only very recently did Ireland become a country in which women have access to safe, legal abortion, and the campaign that surrounded that referendum demonstrated that a deep conservatism persists throughout the island. This conservatism, and indeed, the rampant quietism that leads most people to shy away from growing socio-cultural disparity and marginalization, are precisely what literature must play a central role in shifting — what could be more political?

At this year’s annual Cork International Poetry Festival, organized by the Munster Literature Centre, I had the good fortune of hearing these three poets read: their words had weight, their words were political, and they all have something of that rock-star quality. The latter remark may seem reductive, but it is hugely important because there were teenagers in the audience, and teenagers listen to what rock stars have to say. These voices have made poetry that is inter-generationally appealing, and in doing so, have restored my faith in the social utility of words. Ní Churreáin, who is a particularly fierce presence when at a mic, had a young girl, no more than 15, on the edge of her seat — *there* is the politics in literature, and its significance should not be underestimated.

Readers who grew up in literary households might think all this trivial, but a poet who can draw the attention of someone half their age is a powerful instrument. Without getting detained by Heideggerian and Eliotic notions on the utility of literature, if poetry is to serve any social function and help us to better understand ourselves and the world around us, people — particularly those who might not otherwise be drawn to the form — need to be compelled to listen.

The three collections in question — *Rapture* (Kelly), *Bloodroot* (Ní

Churreáin), and *Transmissions* (Cosgrove) — suggest a revival of minimalist realism, with everyday experiences made new through literary interrogation. Examining the lived experiences of day-to-day life is one of literature’s oldest tricks, but the popular revival of avant-garde sentiments has skewed this process, privileging style over a utilitarian appeal to readers. This is not to say that these collections are artificially accessible, but that their authors demonstrate a deep understanding of the *real* value of language, balancing style and substance to craft collections that reject those templates — most notably, those rich in symbolism and fragmentation — developed by some of Ireland’s dominant literary movements. There is no mysticism in these pages. They are filled with songs sung from alleys, with poems one recites while watching the rain gather among the cobbles on Fort Street — they are like reflections in window panes, and they are beautiful because their words are known to us before we have read them.

The urban and the pastoral, the familial and nostalgic, the political and the private, complicated love and complicated sex — these all find a place, as one would expect of gritty contemporary poetry, in the work of Cosgrove, Kelly, and Ní Churreáin. But Ireland’s old literary foes — nation, language, and religion — are present, too, and treated with such fine craft that even on the most political and sensitive of topics, the critique never loses its power by descending into verbosity.

Ní Churreáin’s “Wall” is exemplary in this regard, a prose poem whose speaker details the many patriarchal barriers faced throughout her life. The speaker, joining her brothers in the building trade, is asked in the concluding line what she could possibly know about walls. The language, as replicated throughout *Bloodroot*, is

intense and localized:

There are the wall boys who want in under your bra with their cold fingers [...] There is the wall that goes up inside you the first time you’re called a *slut* [...] There is the wall of grinning wet-lipped farmers that gathers around the teenage girls at the local beauty pageant show, as you, in a borrowed dress, are herded into the ring.

That Ní Churreáin can condense the prototypical life of a young Irish woman into half a page while sustaining the poem’s impact is testament to her ability as a storyteller, the vividness of her language, and the universality of the portraits she is painting. “Wall” is a poem in which the trans-generational frustrations of Irish women are condensed into a selection of rich, powerful lines. The form of the piece thoughtfully mirrors the subject: a wall of text on the page. I say “thoughtfully” in response to the revival of concrete techniques, so often rendered without much intention.

The language is equally as vivid in Kelly’s “October, Cork City,” where the author’s skill presses the mood so that it delivers the aforementioned punch to the gut — this is a poem about lingering, about wondering, maybe regret. Kelly’s language is suitably multi-sensory, drawing readers toward the familiar “smell of coffee” as it “mingles with rain.” Set in the city where *Rapture* is published, the poem drags grandeur down to the streets of Cork, juxtaposing Mars, Venus, and Orion with a local cafe containing stars of its own: “[A] candle burns on every little table.” Of the three collections, Kelly’s is undoubtedly the most thematically consistent, operating as something of a coming-of-age montage defined by a central relationship — it is, in many respects, a book of love poems. But that is a terribly superficial account of its deeply poignant execution

— *Rapture* is hard to read, because we’ve been where this painful collection insists on taking us. Kelly, as great writers do, compels her readers to engage, and for readers of *Rapture*, that engagement is with the past. What is striking about Kelly’s writing is that she intentionally situates herself within Ireland’s literary tradition, frequently drawing on Yeatsian images like the rose. She is unswerving, however, in her desire to draw romance and realism together, and Kelly revives the symbols of old so that they might be re-spoken in a brazen, drunken voice: “I carried a single rose to your home. / When I arrived you were still at the pub / so your friends and I smoked in the kitchen [...] We kept drinking. The rose fell out / of my hair. A girl tore at it with her teeth.” Kelly’s poetry is at once tender and savage, steeped in tradition yet brave in expression — she takes readers where they don’t want to go, a feat that most writers attempt, but few achieve.

Borrowing the words of Elaine Feeney, Cosgrove is also a “true apprentice of the vast tradition that has gone before.” As with Kelly, her respect for that tradition — and command of all that it offers — does not distract the voices she creates in *Transmissions*.

Cosgrove’s collection is all about *tone* — this is a book you want set to some steel string guitar, phrases like “brush-drum rattle,” “frost-spiked grass, giggling,” and “shoes sole-slicking tanned bags” just a sample of the text’s rhythmic undercurrent. Cosgrove’s literary world is as gritty as those of her contemporaries, full of smoke and spirits. *Transmissions* resides at the juncture between *Bloodroot* and *Rapture*, containing everything from unrequited drunken text messages, as in “Cupid’s Text Arrow,” to “Motorway’s” complex examination of the self. Again, the author’s skill is in her ability to do so much with so little: “Using both eyes and thumbs to guide me, / ‘I

think I like you,” she writes, opening the floor beneath her readers’ feet. But Cosgrove’s true talent lies in her ability to encapsulate the urban space, which she does with a skill rivaled by few in Ireland at present. We find evidence of this in “Hush and Fall Asleep to Fantasy,” where the speaker braves Galway city on a race night: “I’m annoyed at our West for / mashing chips into the cobbled streets, / picking up littered hearts that shout somatic / *are ya single, ya fookin’ ride?*” Again, there is nothing verbose, only “chip shop vomit” and “Girls who wear assholes’ ties around their necks” — scenes we all know, set from experience. Readers typically encounter two Irelands in poetry: the idealized Eden, or the corrupted state. Cosgrove writes of places we actually go, of less lofty, but consequently more important, everyday things. Our canon needs more of that.

We often hear of authors who are “making Ireland new,” but new is nothing if it stands alone, beyond the utility of any real readership. Ireland is changing, at last, but we need writers who can represent that change in a way that goes beyond the superficiality demanded if one is to make their name within the literary community at present. Returning to the notion of greatness, if I were to compile a list of contemporary Irish poetry’s essential readings, these three collections would form a part of that list, not because they are doing what others are not, but because they are doing what everyone else is doing, but better. These are poems you want to read at a house party, poems you want to hear bellowed from a lectern — Irish literature has long needed some new pillars, so we are fortunate that Cosgrove, Kelly, and Ní Churreáin have emerged. Whatever the future paths and significance of these authors, their words as they exist right now have articulated contemporary

concerns that have either been neglected or less skillfully expressed — they are, and I do not say this lightly, great poets who are speaking for a generation.

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