Snippets from the interviews, Wake Forest Series of Irish Poetry, volume iii
International Launch will be July 17 in Paris!

Editor Conor O’Callaghan’s Interview with Colette Bryce:

O’Callaghan: [Y]ou call ‘Itch’ a coming out poem, do you mean in terms of sexuality or poetry or both? And in what sense is the poem’s narrative one of coming out? It seems to be as much about your mother failing to hear…

Bryce: It’s not a coming out poem as such, more a playful take on ‘who we are’ versus who we’re supposed to be, in our parents’ eyes (ears?), and how religious ‘interference’ can deafen people to real experience. Coming out as a poet? Yes, I like that way of putting it; that can be more disappointing to parents than anything else we might throw at them.

O’Callaghan: Before we talk about ‘Footings’, ‘Line’, and ‘Break’, can I ask you describe for a US audience Derry and your childhood there in the 70s and 80s? It’s like poetry’s equivalent of being born with a silver spoon in your mouth! What was going on and how aware were you, if at all, of the great generation of poets writing through the Troubles?

Bryce: It wouldn’t be my idea of a silver spoon, more of a plastic fork! I suppose those well-documented images of ‘The Troubles’, of rioting and barricades, the hunger strikes and British army patrols, pretty much conjure up the atmosphere. I lived in the Bogside area of Derry that saw a lot of the trouble. My mother had been caught up in the civil rights shootings on Bloody Sunday, and we grew up firmly rooted in the republican tradition. Public demonstrations were a regular part of life: protest marches, memorials, and funerals. The church was the other thread: the church and political calendars would structure the year.

O’Callaghan: The brilliant poem ‘Form’ seems viewable through two competing default lenses: politics and gender. I’ve heard you assert in readings that the poem is definitely not about anorexia, but rather about self-styled hunger artists. Also, surely the poem is partly informed by the experience of living through the Hunger Strikes of 1981? Clearly not about them, but poems carry baggage forward often without our realizing it. Much as Muldoon’s great poems ‘Gathering Mushrooms’ and ‘Christo’s’ are not about the Hunger Strikes, but seem saturated by that collective experience.

Bryce: I probably did more reading around ‘Form’ than for any poem I’ve written. I was exploring the subject of hunger, or self-starvation, in many directions, from the Suffragettes to fasting ascetics, and the experience of the hunger strikers would have been part of that. I was interested in the historical phenomena of hunger artists, who would starve themselves as a kind of occupation or art, in fairgrounds for example.…

The time of the hunger strikes was a fraught period in our lives in Derry. They seemed to extend for a very long time and there was a billboard in the centre of town displaying a terrible countdown, ostensibly of the days since the strikes began, but in reality, to each man’s death. I remember attending the funeral of Patsy O’Hara, the young prisoner from Derry who died. I would have been eleven years old at the time and I don’t know how we began to process those events, as children.

O’Callaghan: Other poems in the first section of the book recall growing up in the sectarian divide. ‘1981’ returns once again to the year of the Hunger Strikes. Do poems about the Troubles by poets of our generation, do you think, differ from poems dealing with the same material by the previous generation?

Bryce: That’s a good question and I think it still remains to be seen. Poets of our generation are only now finding strategies to write about what happened, because in some ways it can almost seem to be off-limits, as if it is already written. But of course our lives are not written, and growing up in that war is something that is—looking back to your last question—inescapable. I liked the statement from Picasso that Medbh McGuckian used as epigraph to one of her collections: ‘I have not painted the war … but I have no doubt that the war is in … these paintings I have done.’ I find it can’t be approached very deliberately.
Editor Conor O'Callaghan’s Interview with Justin Quinn:

O’Callaghan: Your second collection, Privacy, is arguably your most formal book. Here we have the villanelle of ‘A Strand of Hair’, for example, or the Italian sonnet of ‘Highlights.’ Did these forms happen organically, or were they part of a formalist conviction? How absolute was/is your determination to stanza and rhyme?

Quinn: Organic or conviction. That’s a tough one. For the previous fifteen years I had practiced conventional forms so that they were an organic conviction. For me this question doesn’t really apply to any art. Take a dancer for instance: one doesn’t ask a dancer if he’s able to do what he does organically, spontaneously. Or a painter. Artists and writers can reach a point where they wield the hard-won techniques naturally, like a dancer. The form becomes a mode of thought, not a mould for it. A way of measuring breath and cadence. Which is a way of life, and a trajectory of emotion and sensibility.

I think rhyme should be a way of thinking, a way of constructing an argument, of setting up contrasts that can’t be got at through normal statements. It’s one of the fundamental advantages poetry has over other discourses.

O’Callaghan: Light is very important in your poems. ‘January First’, ‘Even Song’ and ‘Affair’ seem bathed in various lights and shades. What does light represent in your work? That’s a daft way of coming at it! Let me rephrase it: what is it about evening and its light that makes for poems?

Quinn: I’m tempted to answer facetiously and say it represents light. I think that such basic physical aspects of existence such as light, the weather, the seasons, vegetation don’t really represent things in poetry or literature; rather all the complications and machinery of literature are merely there to intensify our awareness of these fundamental phenomena. Most poems begin out of simple impulses like: ‘isn’t that light fantastic?’ ‘isn’t that man/woman beautiful?’ ‘isn’t it awful that person is dead?’ The three poems you mention are about, respectively, being burdened with a child, nostalgia for one’s home country, and imagining having an affair with one’s wife; but really you could argue that those “themes” are just decorations on the fundamentals such as changing light, seasons, vegetations--the poems live for those things and not vice versa. Stevens has a beautiful epigraph to one poem, from Mario Rossi: “the great interests of man: air and light, the joy of having a body, the voluptuousness of looking.” Everything else is secondary.

Evening’s good because it’s an in-between stage, when you can question the solidity of things. Daylight objects are still perceptible, but they’re kind of floating off from their moorings ever so slightly. Maybe poetry, and art in general, needs to be reminded that things are malleable. But this isn’t metaphorical, this doesn’t represent anything else. The actual things are there and they actually seem less substantial.

Editor Conor O’Callaghan’s Interview with John McAuliffe

O’Callaghan: ‘A Vision of Rahoon’ seems to take its cue from Joyce’s ‘She weeps over Rahoon’. How conscious, again, are such remakes? Dillon Johnston has even argued that much of 20C Irish poetry has taken its cue from Joyce’s invention and pastiche rather than Yeats’s grand style.

McAuliffe: We end up in the same corners as Yeats and Joyce whether we like it or not...

On Joyce, though I loved reading Portrait and Ulysses, it’s Dubliners I return to and re-read still. It’s so clinical and sure, and raging too, with its use of gritty detail, its undercutting of romantic images, and its careful use of symbol and repetition, its attention to local detail balanced by attention to the stories’ larger shape or form. But to read his poems was equally revealing, because there he seems so stuck in outdated modes. In terms of ‘invention and pastiche,’ Yeats’s inventiveness was, and is, more of a practical inspiration than Joyce’s to me, especially in terms of how his poems remoulded poetic forms and rhythms.

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O’Callaghan: Can you say something about the impulse to catalogue, and the use of proper nouns? I am thinking especially about poems like ‘The Middle Kingdom’ and ‘The Ice Carrier’. The poems seem to savour the strangeness of names. It seems to me, in these poems, to do with the newness of settling down and becoming a family: the poems are hoarding...

McAuliffe: The great joy of having children is in the poems I hope. But there is also a completely new and vulnerable sense of mortality. Or so it appears to me, now: I wasn’t conscious of that at the time but yes they are very caught up with gripping the here-and-now. Maybe that’s also related to ‘hoarding’ and the way they mark out and itemise the world around them. Formally the catalogue or litany is something I love, though it’s often associated with elegy and I’d become a little impatient with that elegiac note in my own poems, wanting instead a bit more tension and resistance: ‘The Middle Kingdom’ in particular puts some daylight between the more traditional subjects of a catalogue—flowers, birds, other artists, ships—and its looping list of different kinds of public and commercial premises in the industrial north. I meant it too as a kind of indirect companion to the Horace version.

Editor Conor O’Callaghan’s Interview with Maurice Riordan:

O’Callaghan: Much of the landscape of your childhood must have been very similar to Heaney’s and Muldoon’s? That must have been very difficult starting off, to find some free space there. One image in ‘Rural Electrification’ seems to play knowingly with at least two competing allusions: Heaney’s ‘Digging’ with its “milk in a bottle / corked sloppily with paper,’ and Muldoon’s ‘Quoof’ s “red hot half-brick in an old sock…”

Riordan: It’s ‘a Wellington sock’, isn’t it? Which is a thick wool sock, so it’s handy for keeping the tea warm. The detail would have been important to me, just as a way of claiming the validity of my own experiences. The way of life I knew as a child was similar to what Heaney and Muldoon knew and had already written poems about. At the primary level of the senses, we’d seen and heard many of the same things. We’d used the same soap, said the same prayers, went to the same schools, had the same ‘mother’. It was a homogenous culture—that rural Catholic nationalist world. But for Heaney and Muldoon there was the electric tension of division, of sectarianism, and being under the whip. Down my way, in the immediate vicinity round where I grew up, a Protestant was as rare, and notable, as a Bugatti.

I realized part of the job for me was to find my own space. It wasn’t easy. But then I think difficulty is no bad thing. I might have written more freely, and more poems, if Seamus Heaney had never been born—or if he’d gone on the African missions. But I suspect the poems I have written, or some of them, are more interesting because of a degree of resourcefulness and reinvention they required. Even so, not least in the 1980s, the last thing anyone in England wanted was another male Irish poet writing about his childhood.

Editor Conor O’Callaghan’s Interview with Gerard Fanning:

O’Callaghan: ...you seem to get some kind of imaginative buzz out of that persona of nameless faceless civil servant. Is this fair? Your second book is Working for the Government. A lot of poets never write about their real jobs. There is a definite tradition of Irish poets who worked on behalf of the state: Denis Devlin, Dennis O’Driscoll… Are your colleagues aware of your other life?! Or is poetry a version of secrecy, of being under cover, for you? In purely practical terms, how does the poetry fit into the life of a civil servant? And how does that work translate poetry?

Fanning: The faceless civil servant might be a little too Kafkaesque—but there is a permanent government or class who wield power and say nothing. Having a job gives me the prosaic cash to just get on with things. And so, for now, it’s the “n tray” as “the lights come on at four, at the end of another year.” The “Working for the Government” title was a nod to Talking Heads (“don’t worry about the government”). I have never worked 9-5. The job is outdoors, which involves visiting businesses, interviewing and field work. It’s a bit like a benign Glengarry Glen Ross, sharing anecdotes with colleagues; when I’m back, writing up in the office. This freedom has a Maverick quality,
with all the foolishness that entails. Eccentricities such as poetry are easily accommodated. If there is a covert, subversive quality to the other life of poetry, you do it in your head, on the bus, observing all the time.

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O’Callaghan: *What is the draw to light and water in your work?*

I think we are a wee bit obsessed with both in these parts. The Boyne is a famous salmon run. What returns with each tide however is complicated by some 60 year old leakage from Second World War munitions dumps in the Irish Sea. In ‘Tate Water’ the focus is more that water has no color in itself, but depends on various forms of light, though the putative narrator ties himself up in his own hubris and leaves the conclusion hanging. It could be more for a painter’s eye, but that doesn’t stop you trying to catch some of that rich transience. And it’s where I live, the sea nearly always in view, the memory of foghorns, a cruel history of ship wreck and drowning and the harbor at Dun Laoghaire with its relics of empire and emigration. The changing light now seems less a feature of what we live in and more of a miracle, to be celebrated out of the everyday.