

Issue 1 | Winter 2025

Oscail

Home of
neurodiverse
and queer
writing in
Ireland



Oscail

Magazine

Editor

Emmet Mc Ardle

Poetry Editor

Em Egan Reeve

Designer

K. A. Jagai

Editorial

Welcome everyone to the inaugural issue of Oscale. I started this project in July and have been so moved by the immediate and growing support for an Irish literary magazine that highlights queer and neurodivergent writers.

Initially, I was under the impression that there were plenty of magazines or journals like Oscale, and this would just be another. I quickly discovered that there were very few magazines similar to Oscale. While there are countless small journals and mags in Ireland, surprisingly few focus on publishing work from queer and neurodivergent writers. Writers may see a line at the bottom of most submission pages encouraging of minority writers to submit, but it feels more like a throwaway for the sake of appearances than a genuine desire to read or publish our work.

Let's be honest: it's mostly writers that read literary magazines. Often, those writers are reading those magazines in hope of one day having their work published in them. When certain voices are excluded, it tells writers who do not fit a certain, elitist view of what a "writer" is that this work, this *art* is not for them. We have all heard certain detractors say that quality writing should be at the forefront of Irish publishing regardless of identity. To this I say that to believe the current publishing landscape is representative of the whole of the talented writers in Ireland is to accept that writers of certain privileged identities are somehow inherently better at writing. I do not accept that. I want every writer like me to know that their writing deserves to be published—not because of their identity, but because it is good. No piece of writing should ever

be rejected because of the writer's identity or previous publication record. Neither of these things are an indication of quality writing.

This issue was edited by myself and Em Egan Reeve, who is definitely more qualified than me to be doing all of this. We are both disabled ourselves and understand the intersectional experience of being queer, disabled, and a writer. It is a joy when opportunities like this emerge; this work reminds me that we are in this together, despite how isolating these identities can be in our society. And while it felt very uncomfortable having to write rejection emails, typing all too familiar trigger words like 'Unfortunately' and 'We regret to inform you', I am proud of all the writers who submitted to Oscail. I hope we receive even more superb submissions in the next issue. The writing in Issue 1 demonstrates a superb talent for creative expression. Every piece examines a certain aspect of the neuroqueer experience and fully realises feelings that are deeply personal and difficult to share. It is writing that shows the beauty of intersection within identities and how it can lead to exceptional work.

Finally, while Oscail is a small magazine, I believe that being paid for one's work is vital for any artist. The financial support Oscail received through our fundraising campaign on iDonate.ie has allowed Oscail to pay its contributors, and for that I am immensely grateful. I hope that Oscail can grow into a home for marginalised writers in Ireland, but I can't do that without continued support. If you enjoy this issue, I hope you will consider contributing at <https://www.idonate.ie/crowdfunder/supportoscaill>.

I hope that Oscail can be one small step towards marginalised writers having an equal playing field in our industry. We cannot do this alone. The culture and the industry will

only change with progressive action from our community: especially the writers on the margins. Don't wait for someone to tell you that your voice is valid. Get your writing out there and tell them yourself.

Le meas,

Emmet

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'Symphoricarpos: Ode to shrub invasion'

By Fiona Mc Shane

Common snowberry, billy buster
my mother cracked them down her brothers' backs
all seven of them, tumbling down the dirt roads
grass pushing its way through the middle of hasty tarmac
catching them when they fell,
scrambling away from the bursting of the berries
the perennial opening, springtime play
and when she dropped them in the stream
the fish were stunned, gills flapping closed
belly up in the sun. *Symphoricarpos* is resilient
soil-hardy, doesn't discriminate between loam and sand
but now is reaching for grassland, pushing out of ditches
and into fields, out of reach
of grubby schoolgirl hands.

'Testament'

By Ross Kelly

The roots spread out across the forest's floor like spiny fingers, like a hand clasping another in a silent embrace, laced together in a spell of desire. A glance here and there is rich with want. The tangled pathway makes it seem so easy to trip, but the hands of all those who have come before you are waiting in the shadows so familiar, ready at the first sign of struggle to help you back up, to show you the way, to teach you how to be. You are not the first to tread this path, there is a mountain holding you up, there is a church singing you its song, there is a child calling for its release.

As the urge calls out to you like a siren's song, a wonder crosses your mind. Do you want it more because it is dark? Because it is a sin, a secret, because it is cloaked with a comfortable shame? A truth too sick to find space on your tongue. You have worn this shame your whole life like a glove—why should it change now? Why should it be any less loved? Does it mean more in the darkness when it cannot be observed? Noticed, studied, spied? When it cannot be a thing that exists to any person except for you.

You feel the divine on your shoulders, you feel the religion beneath your feet, scratching your soles, stealing your soul, taking its toll. Like an object you can stand on, battering and bruising your tainted skin, though it appears as gentle as a kiss. What are these lips of yours if not to receive a curse and a blessing both at the same time. Who

are you to take it all if you cannot also give? The world around you has granted its cloak of invisibility; this is your moment to drape yourself in its comfort and run wild.

The night dilutes darker, a spill of black ink pooling over the sky. You pray a drop will fall onto your nose, you wish to be christened by its gloomy water, by its dread. The roots threaten to tangle your toes further, but you don't give in. Nobody before you carved this way just for you to turn around, nobody before you gave their light and their life just so you could play it safe. These roots are not trapping you, no, they are leading you the correct way.

His face is as strange to you in the shadows as it would be in the light when he appears. You wonder if it's someone you've passed before in the big Tesco. That bloke you accidentally crashed your trolley into because your weekly grocery shop had gotten too heavy. The young Scottish boy working the self-scanners who looked at you every time he thought you weren't looking back, but you always were. You had grown used to noticing when someone is staring at you without ever even needing to turn your head.

But maybe this is a stranger too. Maybe a muscle and a mouth you have never come into contact before, a muscle and mouth you never will again. There is a significance in a brief encounter, there is an intimacy in it, knowing you both share this moment that will never need to be spoken of again, a home without an address, a memory without any evidence.

There is reward in risk. Didn't anybody ever tell you that the hardest acts to perform are the ones most worth it? Didn't you ever learn that the bruises you find later on your

knees are just a mark of love? If this love means damnation then you were lost a long time ago. If this love means freedom then you know what it is to fly.

His body opens to you like a bible; you read it like a verse and sing it like a psalm. Sometimes your memories do not paint what your eyes do. Sometimes you cannot imagine all of what lurks in your panorama and its view. Of the men and boys that lurk in the greenery, staying so long at times they return with shades of emerald and sage staining their skin, their eyelashes dripping in hues of forest green. Their tongues a taste of ivy and moss.

You take as much as you can, and then some. You have walked this path before, and you will walk it again and again and again, until there is no path left to tread. You have come to recognise each curve in its track, each familiar branch that reaches out its fingers to caress you in a loving embrace. You have come to learn which gazes serve as confession, and which ones serve as sin.

A groan stumbles out of him when he finishes, and it tries to find a place in this world. It comes demanding the attention it has always been denied. His pleasure is holy, and every time you say its prayer you feel closer to God. As you leave, the roots move to the rhythm of your feet, and they bend and turn in favour of the direction you now take. No longer against you, but for you, on your side, bestowing you with a religious reassurance from those who used to know this path, who used to taste it like communion on their tongue.

'Medicament'

By Patrick Chapman

The clear blue bottle
on the bathroom shelf

is a bullshit Mercury
capsule splashed down

empty as a cloud of
cotton wool. I shake it

silent, drop it in the basket,
go downstairs.

I pour black coffee, lie
on the couch. She is there

again, the pachyderm, squat
on my beanbag,

threatening to burst it
but it holds.

She blinks slowly like a
New York librarian

expecting Nazis. The living
room smells of woodchipper

dust. I sip my mediocre
coffee and enquire,

what are you here for?
She doesn't answer

but her trunk reaches
for my cup, grabs it.

She takes one sniff,
recoils,

then snaffles cup and all,
missing a tusk by an inch.

It is medicinal, I say;
your species doesn't tend

to enjoy that sort of mud.
She shifts her weight.

The room lists to the right,
the beanbag rips a little

smile that vomits beads.
She pisses coffee into

the bag's corduroy ribbing.
Why do you only show up,

I ask, after I run out
of antidepressants?

She smarts the way
my mother would

whenever I smiled at her.
Then, in a minor voice,

worn like old piano wire,
the pachyderm explains:

I come when you run out,
asshole,

because that is when you
tell the truth.

'At 14 I candled eggs'

By Jaymz Lea

To make sure the clutch of canary eggs develop and hatch together,
remove the first four eggs she lays and replace with dummy eggs.
Hen's will happily sit.

When laying stops, remove dummies and return real eggs.

During two weeks incubation, canary eggs must be candled.

Historically, wax candles were used.

Holding the eggs up to the light lets us see shadows of life.

Holding the eggs up to light lets us see if it's 'blind' (empty of life).

I followed these instructions
to prevent withering, at all costs.

Every day, I switched
those speckled egg potentials
for pink plastic placeholders.
Wrong colour - she didn't mind.
Her yellow breast resumed waiting,
warming those innocent imposters
whilst her actual clutch sat cradled

in a humane nest of old socks,
beneath my poster of Celine Dion.
When her laying clock struck stop
so did my dutiful trick.
I'd return all eggs to the nest as one
to hatch together.
No runt to cool, to ignore, to perish

like a shrivelled shroom, lost at the back of my fridge -
no one had to die.
This was my life at 14,
fancying Jason Donovan
stealing my dad's silk cut ciggies
and candling canary eggs.
Shining torches through shells

to check for blue uncracked aches,
for that veined occupied space.
Shame that I act out my relationships
this way, impose order
to avert being left
to cool and wither
always resuscitating something half gone.

Hoard notes, cards, ticket stubs
from The Book of Mormon -
a cartography that our coupledness was alive.
I substitute the real
and dummy myself.
Project my sparkle onto hollow shaped Hims,

ignore tricks of my own light.

Crack jokes at relentless hope as she sobs

“could we start again please?”

Nests like spider webs that glue Hims to me:

60:40 Asda shopping bill split

brood fragile thin skinned Hims,

who happily hand out crumbs to an Eagle.

In private, always stomping on eggshells.

At 39, I candle ruins and after parties of us,

one day I'll peel the shell from my eyes.

'The Warmth of Other Things'

By Sarah Crosby

In the days leading up to the gig, you become a new kind of animal. You grow extra senses. One for what you will wear, one for what you will say, one for the exact dimensions of the chair you will sit in, If there is a chair. If there is no chair, you will stand near the back, but standing can be adjusted. You will push yourself toward a table. You will tilt your body at an angle that suggests you are about to sit. You will create a chair where there is none.

You walk into a small boutique across the river. The clothes are hung gently, like they have been sleeping. You try not to wake them.

There is a black dress, long-sleeved, with embroidered flowers. No sequins. No velvet. This is the one. It looks like a dress that has already been worn by the right version of you, the version who knew how to pick things out of shops without looking like a child playing dress-up. You find your size and take it to the till. The woman behind the till has loose curls, some pinned back. You watch her fingers as she folds the dress, taps her screen. You store her hair in your body like a consent form. You will need to allot yourself forty minutes to replicate it. At least.

Then, foundation. You need a skin that is your own, but better. A woman in a black apron finds you. She has one thousand brushes. She has seen every kind of face and forgiven

them all. She points at the chair, does not ask. You sit. She holds up a bottle, removes the cap with the same care as someone opening an envelope containing news that will change their life, or someone else's.

What kind of coverage? She asks. Her voice low and soft, more mystic guide than makeup artist. An oracle. A life lived for every brush carried.

Medium? You try.

Good choice, she says.

You are instantly giddy. You have been a good child.

She dabs at you. The brush is warm. This surprises you. You think about the warmth of other things. The skin of an apple in your palm. The heat trapped inside a pocket.

Going somewhere nice? She asks, pressing a different brush against your cheek like she is sealing a wound. I'm going to a gig tonight.

She nods. A slow, knowing nod. As if she has always known this about you. As if the moment you walked in, she sensed: This woman will be going to a gig tonight. She adjusts her grip on a bottle with blue perfumed serum, inhaling through her nose, exhaling through her mouth.

Leaving it a little late, no?

She says it gently, the way a nurse might say, your family will be here soon.

Yeah, you say. It had not occurred to me.

She places a warm hand on your forehead. You can't think of a particular reason why she would, only perhaps, to centre you. To stabilise you. Fortify you before what comes next. She closes her eyes, exhales again. You do the same.

Well, she says. It has occurred to me.

You imagine holding her by her thin wrists then. Asking, who am I? Demanding.

You know who, she would reply, gently levitating now. You've always known.

She picks up a fresh brush.

You are five years old when you learn about electricity. You understand that it is in the walls, but it is also in the air. It enters your brain through a picture book or a tv programme, and then it refuses to leave. You lie on your bed, perfectly still. A doll arranged for display. You do not blink. You do not kick off the quilt. You are waiting for a bill to be dropped into the porch, for the lights to flicker out, for Mum to say:

That's it, that's all the electricity we can afford. We must now live in darkness.

Dad finds you in the dark. He is wearing his blue jumper, the one he wears in nearly every memory you have of him. He kneels beside you, presses a hand onto the mattress, as if testing its softness.

Why are you sitting like this?

You grip the duvet in small tight bunches. I don't know how we're going to pay for it. He nods. He does not ask what. He does not say, what do you mean? He nods, like this makes sense. It is nice to be understood.

Mum appears in the doorway. The hallway light casts her in silhouette. She could be a saint or a demon or just a regular woman who was in the middle of making tea which was the most likely possibility. Your father tells her what has happened, though in this memory his voice has a Cork accent now. He was not from Cork. He had never been from Cork.

Don't be silly, your mother says. And then, why didn't you say something?

The question is a seed, planted deep in your stomach. It will grow and branch and bear fruit over the years, sprouting from the mouths of teachers, friends, strangers, lovers.

Why didn't you just say it? Why didn't you just tell me that? Why didn't you just do this?

And the truth is, it had not occurred to you.

It had not occurred to you, it had not occurred to you, it had not occurred to you.

One day, years later, you will hear David Huddleston say this line in *The Big Lebowski* and feel it accurately explains the malady. A lack of occurrence. You will pause the movie. You will rewind and watch it again, sitting very still, rewinding, watching again, rewinding, watching again.

No, Mr. Lebowski. It had not occurred to me.

You say it. And each time, it feels less like a reason and more like a prayer.

And each time, you will see they don't believe you.

Because it must have occurred to you.

It has not occurred to them, that it had not occurred to you.

How could it not have?

They will assume you had a choice. As though you had thought of it, whatever 'it' or 'that' or 'this' might be, and actively decided against it. They will assume you peered at the choice and slowly lowered the lid on the coffin. But the truth is, there was never a choice at all. There was only the dark room, the warm press of your father's jumper, and the sound of your mother clicking her tongue in the doorway.

What kind of finish do you like? She asks.

Before you can ask what your options are, she decides.

Glowy.

She tilts your chin, sweeps colour across your face, like a Renaissance painter. No, more like a Renaissance woman, a scholar of art and science and the human form, except she is holding a damp sponge.

And this? She asks, brandishing a brush.

Peachy? You whisper.

Correct, she whispers back.

Your face is done before you realise it is being done. You look in the mirror. You are taller, or something like taller. More certain. A woman who knows her own name.

I'll take the foundation, you say, because this is what it costs to be seen.

She places a fresh bottle in your palms. You create a nest with them.

Cradle it gently. Something waiting to open its eyes.

'3664 Kilometers Spread Thin'

By Kai Dranchak

I'm split in two

Iš Lietuvos į Ameriką

One is Trader Joe's and tailgates

The other farmlands and flower crowns

One is birthday cards in the mail and hopscotch drawn in sidewalk chalk

One is endless teas and conversation spoken in a language of poetry lost to my ears...

...kodėl nesuprantu lietuviškai

One is sprawling yards and tight knit communities

The other, matchbox apartments with gossip spread like wildfire

Two halves of myself

Vienas Amerikaitis, kitas Lietuvaitis

Two halves of my family

Vienas Amerikiečių, kitas Lietuvaičių

7309 kilometers spread apart

Now I'm here

3664 kilometers from a place I recognize less with every headline

3664 kilometers from ancient wounds that echo in my chest

It feels like fate that I should find myself here

At the halfway point

In the city my Grandmother chased long forgotten family

I chase long forgotten dreams

Before not just distant cousins were distant memories for her

Where maybe she too felt split in two

It feels like fate, that I should fall for a boy like you
In a place like this
At the halfway point
But I don't think I believe in fate anymore.

'SMALLEST LOVE'

By Jes Treff

When riding the bus today I saw
a woman
walking on the sidewalk,
carrying her child's tiny, light
purple scooter.
She was too tall and her arms too short
for it to touch the ground
comfortably, so
every once in a while it jerked upwards and jumped,
like a small dog on a leash.
She had a lot of patience with it,
I think. I couldn't see her face.

Queering the Creature: Guillermo del Toro's *Frankenstein* through a queer, autistic lens

By Shona Kelly

Guillermo del Toro is a filmmaker celebrated for his 'monster' movies that challenge the notion of who exactly we consider to be the 'monster'. *The Shape of Water* was born from his desire to see the titular *Creature from the Black Lagoon* be hailed as a romantic hero rather than a dangerous threat, and his latest film is no different in how it takes a story and characters that have been seen before, and studies them with his own signature compassion. His adaptation of Mary Shelley's genre-establishing and all-time classic novel *Frankenstein* pulls on the source material to elevate the Creature to status of story hero in his own right.

Something that, personally, strikes me about del Toro's films is the way in which I can take my own experiences as a queer autistic person into the cinema with me and find a kinship with his characters, themes, and narratives. It is why *The Shape of Water* is one of my favourite films, and why, in this piece, I would like to discuss his treatment of the Creature in *Frankenstein* through a lens of neurodivergence and queerness. The Creature's journey through the narrative, from his abusive relationship with his 'father' figure (Victor Frankenstein) to finding friendship and compassion in an elderly blind man, as he explores his sense of self, gains autonomy, and finds himself at odds with

the rest of the world who deem him an outsider for features and characteristics entirely out of his control, replicates a journey of discovery that will be familiar to many queer and autistic people.

Frankenstein is a film that Guillermo del Toro has spent his whole life trying to make, and you can see this clearly in the thematic underpinnings of all the work that has preceded it. Del Toro has always championed the underdog, the disenfranchised, the misunderstood, and elevated them to the spotlight. *The Shape of Water* is a story about outsiders – a mute protagonist in 1960s Baltimore whose two closest friends are a black woman and a gay man, falls in love with an imprisoned Amphibian Man who is being tortured and treated as filth. *Pinocchio* about a peculiar wooden boy and *Pan's Labyrinth* about a young girl during great personal and political upheaval. In each of them, the 'monstrous' are not that which meets the eye. Just as, with *Frankenstein*, the 'real' monster is not, well, the monster, but Frankenstein himself.

We all know the story of *Frankenstein* – a brilliant man endeavours to build a man from nothing, but gets far more than he bargained for when the man comes to life and has a mind of his own – but in del Toro's hand, this becomes not Frankenstein's film, but the Creature's. This is his story, as we quickly realise when we are shown his view of events after Victor has told his. This is a story, not of a mad scientist and his brilliance, but of the consequences of creating life and not taking care of them afterwards.

Del Toro establishes Frankenstein and the Creature's relationship as that of a father and a son, a creator and his creation, and this is thematically significant to a discussion of this film through a queer, neurodivergent lens. Victor has great expectations for his

creation, his 'son,' but when he fails to meet them, he brands him as being unintelligent and a failure on his own part. Victor bases intelligence on the Creature's ability or inability to speak, but instead of taking responsibility for his creation and putting in the effort to teach him, to help him learn, he instead belittles and chastises him, going as far as to physically abuse and attempt to kill him. In viewing the Creature as allegorically neurodivergent, Victor's correlation between speech and intelligence feels particularly poignant. It is common for autistic people to have a delay in speech development, and it is true of society at large that nonverbal autistic people are treated as if they are less intelligent for their difference in speech, which is categorically untrue. This, considering the father/son dynamic at play here, highlights the ways in which parental expectation for their diagnosed or undiagnosed autistic children creates conflict. The Creature is treated poorly by his father for displaying traits that align with neurodiversity and autism in the 'real' world, and the lack of acceptance for the Creature for being who he is from his father, leading to his leaving home to find something more for himself, reads like a familiar story for countless queer and trans people born into bigoted environments. Victor is violent and abusive towards the Creature, his son, because he does not fit the mould, because he is not as he expected him to be – a tale as old as time.

When the Creature does venture out on his own and meets David Bradley's elderly blind character, he is shown a different type of love, finds a sort of community, and learns how to speak. As in *The Shape of Water*, the Creature grows and learns through the assistance of another disenfranchised person. He finds somebody who understands him in some way, who meets him on the same level, with dignity and

respect. The blind man's lack of sight and the Creature's lack of speech allow them to connect and the Creature can only learn to speak when he is met with kindness. He learns to express himself, his thoughts, and his feelings, and comes to resemble a 'normal' man. This replicates the process of masking as an autistic person, and similarly for the Creature, no matter how much he strives to fit in, it does not matter to anyone other than the blind man. When the blind man's kin return, they see the Creature only as a monster and try to kill him, and he must leave 'home' once more. The search for found family, kinship and acceptance can be never ending for queer and neurodivergent people, and the Creature's story makes that ever more real.

One of the deeply heart wrenching moments in this film is the Creature's expression of a desire for companionship from another who is like him - someone else who cannot die. This cements the Creature as an outsider, of being a man in a world that seems to speak the same language but neither seems to understand the other. Despite the fact that he has become 'intelligent' in Victor's eyes now that he can speak, and despite the fact that he has done everything in his power to resemble a 'real man,' he is inherently different and is perceived as a threat because of this. He is monstrous, dangerous, and scary in the eyes of others and they refuse to see him as their equal. He is doomed to never fit in, to be a lone soul wandering the earth forever. It is quite an evocative parallel for being autistic in a neurotypical world, desperate for someone else who might understand you.

But there is someone who seems to understand him. Elizabeth. Notably the only woman in a major role in the film (with the exception of Victor's mother, who is also played by Mia Goth, and dies very early on), Elizabeth meets him immediately with

compassion, tenderness and care, not with the aggression, fear and violence that the men approach him with. This also, like in *The Shape of Water*, places the 'monster' in a romantic role, in conflict with the true monster of the film. Victor is in love with Elizabeth, but to her, Victor is a monster, and instead, the Creature holds her heart. Despite this, their love ends in tragedy and can never be. Doomed star-crossed lovers whose 'different' relationship causes consternation and disapproval – thematically, that is a queer story.

The Creature is the unlikely hero of this story, an outsider who, following rejection from his father, goes on a journey to find himself and community, only to be met with rejection from all over. He finds kinship here and there – with a blind man and with Elizabeth – but no one can ever really understand him. He is the only man like him, and that is a feeling we can all relate to across the board. Del Toro knows that better than anyone and it is why his work resonates with so many, particularly with those disenfranchised by the real world. He takes his time to let the world see the othered as if they are not, as if the normal are the abnormal and as if peculiar is the best thing to be.

'erinville I'

By Jessica Anne Rose

I am much too old for this body of mine.
This gangly frame of a thirteen year old,
Etched like a whisper, a charcoal smearing. My face is muddied
When I attempt to picture it, all that I can assemble in the blankness
Are sharp Rorschach limbs jutting out from underneath a tinfoil blanket.

Each thought is barbed and rips ravines into an already overcrowded cortex.
Every waxy sheet of skin is coated in coarse hair. I am like some forgotten
Animal, just hatched, blotched eyes stretched too wide.
I have been left to survive in an arena of brick and gravel.

Somebody has forgotten to tell me the rules, I say.
Someone has misplaced me, I am no girl, no human,
I am a twitching beast about to be sliced open
By hyenas in school uniforms, by the owls in lab coats.

The owls surrounding me smooth a quilt over my head,
Hushing my faint cries that I am not quite right,
But that would mean that they are not quite right.
I watch their eyes dilate as they grow clinical and distant,
Robotically adding to piles of pills, eyes clicking back
And forth at each other, never quite noticing me beneath them.

I spell out the word LOST in every way I can conjure,
But no oddity comes to steal me to my true home. I never wake
Without the dread that is skinning away what consists of this
Milky blue body. It pulses and hiccups, stubbornly alive.
I am much too old for this body of mine.
I have been here far too long.

'Where Does All the Love Go When You Leave Someone?'

By Matthew Fegan

My first real love left me at 3am on a Friday night in May over the phone. I was drunk and cried so hard that I asked for my mother, and when he found that out, he said he felt bad because "people only call for their mother when they feel like they're going to die." And I think in that moment I did, or at least something inside me collapsed, something young and soft that believed love alone could hold the world together just because it was love.

Six months later he came back and said he loved me, said he was ready, and without even thinking I said "yes". It was instant, like the pause in between us had never really been an ending, just a waiting room, and some part of me had always been sitting there, still dressed in hope, still convinced we would find our way back, because it didn't make sense to me that something that had felt that intense could just vanish without returning to collect itself.

Five months after that I ended it over the phone again because I realised I was holding

him to a version of the life I had imagined, and he had never promised me that version. He had never even asked to be in it, but I'd placed him there without question, like he belonged in the future by default, and it wasn't fair because he was trying to love me inside a story he didn't write.

I've always thought that to be loved is to be known, and I knew everything. I watched him closely and gently and constantly, and the moment I met him I felt something shift, like my whole life started leaning towards him in this subtle way, and suddenly he was the direction everything pointed in. Even when I told myself I was making choices for me, they always had his name somewhere in the corner, written in tiny print like a secret reason I never wanted to admit to.

I liked believing in fate because it gave me permission to not choose, and I've always been scared of choosing the wrong thing, scared of picking a path that ruins not just my life but my idea of love and his too. And if something is fate then at least the pain belongs to the stars and not to me.

But I'm learning that real love isn't about fate, it's about choosing. It's about waking up and seeing every flaw and every fear and still saying "I pick you again", not because the world said so but because I did.

I've never known how to end things cleanly. The first breakup I ever had was one I initiated, it was with a girl, and I cried for days because hurting someone made me feel like I was doing something unforgivable, like I was the villain. And in moments like that I think I'd rather be left than leave.

This one was different. When he ended it the first time, my friends celebrated and my family clapped because they saw how tired I was, how much the way I loved him emptied me out. And that's not his fault, that's just who I was, someone who believed love meant pouring everything out until I had nothing left, and even then, I'd have given more if it meant I could love him again. But after I broke up with him, I felt guilt, not because I regretted it but because I think deep down, I believed that once someone comes back to you, you're supposed to hold on forever. Like the fact that they returned meant you owed them your whole heart until they decided to go, and the idea that I could let go first felt wrong. It felt selfish and cruel, like I was abandoning someone who had already chosen me twice.

I was about to graduate and move to the city he lived in, and I told myself it was for me, but I think we both know he was always the quiet reason, the gorgeous little caveat at the end of the sentence. And I think I was okay with that. I liked the romance of it. I liked that he was stitched into the future without ever having to say he should be.

But then I was in France, and I had this moment where I imagined spilling my guts on the floor, everything that was inside me just laid out, I knew that at least sixty percent of it would be him. And that scared the fuck out of me, not because I didn't want it but because I knew that if he did the same, I wouldn't be there. Not really. Maybe a few scattered pieces, a nice memory, a kind touch, but not the core, not the centre. And that broke my heart more than anything because I knew he loved me. I know he did. We just loved different languages. I didn't know what to do with that thought. I carried it around like a quiet ache, and before I could do anything with it, he came to me and said he wanted more "independence", and I said "okay, have it".

A few days later I left, not because I didn't love him but because I couldn't let us both stay in something that was slowly turning into something we never meant it to be. He used to say I moved too maturely, and that used to bother me because I don't think that's true. I love being 23 and still figuring out who I am. I love being out late with my friends. I love the chaos of not knowing what's next. I love being alone when I want to be alone, and I love how full my life is even when I'm not in love.

I think what he meant was that I moved with clarity, that I felt things deeply and didn't run from them, and maybe that was scary for him because I think he confused stability with dullness. But the life he described wanting was the life I already had, and I still had room in that life for love, but he didn't know how to hold both.

I think I will always carry love for him, not the loud kind, but the kind that sits quietly under everything, the kind that colours the way I look at the world. And I like to think that somewhere in his body there's still love for me too, running through him like blood, even if he doesn't talk about it, even if he wouldn't admit it. And maybe that's enough. Maybe not all love is meant to be lived out. Some of it just stays inside you and teaches you something about who you are.

Some relationships don't end because someone did something wrong. They end because the rhythm changes, because the timing is off, because the love doesn't know where to go anymore. And that's the hardest part, that love can still be there, still alive and burning, and it still ends.

Unless you don't cut contact.

There's a particular kind of performance we rehearse in private, the one where we tell ourselves we're in control. We write the script where we are calm, detached, unbothered, the kind of person who can handle sex without intimacy, attention without expectation, desire without consequence. Sometimes it works. Sometimes we convince even ourselves. But sometimes, quietly, disarmingly, the line between reclaiming power and tolerating disrespect gets blurry. We start calling it "casual" when it's really unspoken hope dressed in indifference.

We let ourselves be touched by people who don't see us and then wonder why we feel a little less real each time we leave. It's not that we want love from the wrong person. It's that we want recognition from someone who once knew us, or claimed to, and now only speaks the language of detachment. And it's disorienting, isn't it? To share something so intimate with someone who can't even meet your eyes when the moment passes. To hear the language of closeness in a context of complete emotional vacancy. To be reduced to a body in the hands of someone who once asked about your dreams.

There's no easy villain in this story. Just two people looking for different things in the same silence. There's a comfort in pretending you've reached a higher plane of detachment. That your body can be in one place, doing something intimate, and your mind can stay two steps removed. You start saying things like "it's just sex" and "I know what this is," as if those words alone are enough to shield you from the side effects. Inside this strange little container of shared history and unspoken boundaries where

the only rule seems to be: don't make it real. Stay vague. Stay at surface level. Keep it moving.

It's so easy to call it freedom. To tell yourself that having access without obligation is somehow evolved. That you're empowered for continuing to say yes without demanding more. That being wanted in one dimension is enough, as long as you're the one in control of when and how. But over time, the illusion wears thin. Something shifts. Not dramatically, not enough to call it a crisis. Just enough to make you feel slightly emptier when you leave. Slightly less whole.

There's a difference between choosing not to care and learning to function despite being disappointed. One is agency. The other is adaptation. And I think for a long time I've been confusing the two. I'm not trying to make this a morality play. I don't believe there's one correct way to handle sex, or exes, or the blurry spaces between. But I do think we should be honest with ourselves about what our bodies and minds are actually experiencing, especially when it's not what we hoped it would be. And if it starts to feel like you're shrinking inside a situation you once felt powerful in, that matters. If your detachment starts to feel more like self-protection than confidence, that matters too. At some point, I want power to look like something else. Not just endurance. Not just silence. Not just withholding vulnerability because it's safer that way. I want it to look like choosing not to stay in places where I have to pretend I'm okay with being reduced to fragments of myself, pieces that are palatable, convenient, and disposable.

If you're reading this and wondering if it applies to you, maybe it doesn't. Or maybe you've felt the ache of being almost wanted. Maybe you've been told "this is

just how I am," like emotional unavailability is a personality trait and not a choice. Maybe you've mistaken endurance for strength.

Matty x

Nuala O'Connor

Oscail interview, Winter 2025

Your novels often centre on historical women who were marginalised or misunderstood in their time, Emily Dickinson, Nora Barnacle, and Anne Bonny. What draws you to these women, and what are your thoughts on the balance between historical accuracy and imaginative freedom in writing?

I admire women who are in possession of themselves, maverick, courageous people who kick against societal norms, to live in ways that are nurturing to them. For me it's important to remain true to facts and to the personalities of the players, rather than invent ultra-palatable versions of them. It's not the novelist's business to write genial characters, we confront human foibles and frailties, even if it makes the players 'unlikeable'. Interestingly, Anne Enright observed, '...fictional men are allowed to be bad, their badness often *is* the story, female characters are not allowed to be bad, because it makes a story slightly unpleasant.'

As for invention, that's the real work in fiction and it's my job to embroider, empathise, and embody. I do that by giving the characters internal worlds that are as close to their true selves as I can glean from research.

You've written across multiple genres, including novels, short stories, poetry, and flash fiction. Talk me through how your creative process differs between these forms, and do you find that one form influences or takes on from the others?

I think the genre-jumping is to do with being AuDHD – my autistic side is diligent and hardworking, my ADHD side is novelty seeking, so hopping about is necessary to me. My monotropism means I like to stay in one place for a bit, though, so if I'm working on a novel, I tend to stick with it exclusively. Ditto each of the other genres.

I'm naturally a 'small' writer, meaning I value concision, precision, and tight, elliptical work. My editors always have to encourage me to expand – say more. I started as a poet but I think my natural element is shorter prose forms like flash and stories, and their tendency towards gappiness, twinned with precise language.

Your most recent poetry collection, *Menagerie* (Arlen House, 2025), has been called "a collection which is at once involving and clear-sighted" How does your approach to poetry differ from your approach to prose, and what themes or fixations run through this collection?

I think all my writing is drawn from the same source – my personal obsessions and any eye-catching wisps that hove into view. I love language, I love the neatness of poems, the way they pin things in place that might otherwise escape. They're a diary of sorts, of happenings and travels and so on. My fixations in *Menagerie* include the natural world, neurodivergence, writing, marriage and familial love, and art and politics.

How have your late diagnoses affected your understanding of yourself as a writer and as a person? Has it changed how you view your earlier work?

Everything makes sense now – the very fact that I had set up a life where I get to be alone, mostly, and conversing with myself says a lot. I knew I wanted to work solely with my passion – words – and to be my own boss. I'd set up a good autistic life, in a quiet place, without having the dx, just by knowing my own needs and obeying them (mostly). I'm way, way more self-compassionate now, I don't beat myself up (as much) for my quirks, or my need to self-care.

My dx has made my previous work come into sharp focus – practically every story and book has had an awkward, self-seeking loner at its heart. I was hiding in plain sight, but it took until I was 52 to be affirmed. That's too long.

In interviews, you've mentioned that all your heroines are autistic, like you. Can you talk about how neurodivergence shows up in your characters and narratives, even when it isn't explicitly labelled?

Their constant out-of-placeness, their feelings of 'why can I not fit in?' Their singularity and impulsiveness. A certain naivety. I'm not saying these are exclusively autistic traits but they're some of mine, and I'd inadvertently (or, sometimes, knowingly) given my own awkwardnesses to my characters.

Looking back on your career, how has the Irish literary landscape changed in terms of representation, accessibility, and support for neurodivergent and queer writers?

I think supports have improved for writers across the board, there are more opportunities, and more investment since I began in the mid-nineties. But, there is still rampant othering and misunderstanding about what it means to be disabled and/or queer. Ditto about what we may want to write about. Not every disabled person wants to write disabled characters. Also, accommodations at literary festivals and within lit orgs need overhauls. Investment, crucially, needs to be ramped up. There's a belated, slow move towards consultation and inclusion, but it's going to take time.

Your novels often explore queer desire and non-normative relationships, particularly in *Seaborne*, which centres on Anne Bonny's relationships with women. Bringing these stories into historical fiction, what did you find challenging or rewarding?

Love stories are always both those things for a writer - they challenge and reward in equal measure, because people are basically bonkers. But you figure it out as you go. For *Seaborne*, it was challenging to be told I needed to shy away from explicitly showing the violence on the plantation, and to stick to writing white characters, which is ludicrous because it warps history. The power imbalance between Anne and her maid, Bedelia, made some eds feel uncomfortable but, literally, this is what was happening. Sanitising in publishing seems to me the weirdest of all things - if writers

can't point out injustices, who can? New Island (the publisher who took on *Seaborne*) were great – they could see the importance of historical accuracy.

What do you think literary magazines and publishers can do to make the submission, editing, and publication process more accessible for neurodivergent writers?

Recorded subs would work for some writers – any tech that would make the process easier would be useful.

The availability of a buddy-editor, to help with the subs process could work; someone in-house or freelance.

A quota of available slots for disabled writers in lit mags/on publisher schedules.

What's next for you as a writer, and are there any new projects or creative directions you're excited to explore?

My next novel – a contemporary one set between Corfu and Ireland – will be out spring 2027. I'm working on a memoir about late dx autism. I want to have a quieter year in 2026 in terms of appearances etc. I've been overdoing it and I'm exhausted.

What advice would you give to emerging Irish writers, particularly those who are

neurodivergent, queer, or working outside traditional publishing pathways, who are trying to find their voice and their audience?

- Follow your passions, write the things that excite you.
- Read like a maniac; write, write, write.
- Tenacity is often more valuable than talent – stick with it.
- Rejections are inevitable – I still get them, thirty years in, all writers do; have a cry, move on.
- Connect with your peers. Find a writing group that feels ‘right’. If it’s uncomfortable, move on. Set up your own group.
- Ask for clarity, and state your needs clearly, in publishing relationships.
- Be kind – support your fellow creatives.
- Be kindest to yourself – don’t overdo the workload, burnout is tough.

Contributors

Jaymz Lea (he/they) is a queer human, playing with words for the annoyingly joyful jostle. They are a mental health professional, published academic and poet. They are chewing on this experience to write about human interiors – at the edges – those othered outed and ousted. He is an excitable nature geek and has shared much of his adult life with a queen, his cat, Effie. Jaymz is ridiculously happy to have had some of their pieces published in the Passionfruit Journal, Wildfire Words, Feral Journal, Rough Diamond 100 poems for the 21st Century and Poetry Wales Spring issue 2025 as one of the top 60 Welsh poets to keep an eye on.

Patrick Chapman has published sixteen books since 1991. He has also written television, film and radio drama. His monograph on Robert Forster's album *Danger in the Past* is published in Bloomsbury's 33 1/3 series. His tenth poetry collection *The Following Year* was shortlisted in the 2025 Farmgate National Poetry Award.

Kai Dranchak is a Cork-based visual artist and poet originally from the U.S. His work often explores cultural and queer identity. He recently completed his MA in Arts Management and Creative Producing at UCC. When not creating art, he enjoys discussing movies with friends, cooking, and playing with his cat.

Fiona McShane is a queer poet from Kildare. Her work often focuses on the intersections of history, folklore and modern Irish life. Find her online @agscriobh.

Jessica Anne Rose was awarded the Miriam Cotter Award, a full scholarship for an exciting and emerging writer accepted into University College Cork's MA in Creative Writing. A National Student Media Award winner in 2022, Jessica is now a contributing journalist for Hot Press Magazine. Jessica's recently published poetry is included in Abridged, A New Ulster, ROPES, Cork Pride Magazine, and Hide and Seek Anthology.

Ross Kelly is an Irish writer living in London, working as a bookseller. He reviews books on Instagram at @readsbyross and is currently working on his debut novel. He is a firm Rachel Berry apologist and a lover of all things pop music.

Sarah Crosby is a queer, autistic writer and psychotherapist from Dundalk. She is the author of the best-selling book *Five Minute Therapy* (Penguin Random House, 2020). Her fiction has been supported by the Arts Council and the Irish Writers

Centre's National Mentoring Programme. She is currently based in Listowel, working on her debut novel.

Matthew Fegan is a 23-year-old Northern Irish writer and award-winning academic living in Dublin. He turns the raw material of experience into intimate essays that reflect queerness and intimacy, in turn, uncovering the way relationships can both illuminate and distort who we believe ourselves to be.

Shona Kelly is a film enthusiast and screenwriter based in Louth. They have just completed an MA in Screenwriting at the University of the Arts London (UAL) and love to talk about all things film and television.

Nuala O'Connor is an AuDHD writer, living in Co. Galway. Her writing has been widely published, and won many literary awards. Her sixth novel *Seaborne*, about Irish-born pirate Anne Bonny, was nominated for the 2025 Dublin Literary Award and shortlisted for Novel of the Year at the 2024 An Post Irish Book Awards. She won Irish Short Story of the Year at the 2022 Irish Book Awards. Her fifth poetry collection, *Menagerie*, was published by Arlen House in 2025. www.nualaoconnor.com