

# Paying it forward and back – the kinship of poets and their mentors

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On a December evening in Stockholm, Seamus Heaney delivered his acceptance speech for the 1995 Nobel Prize for Literature. “I credit poetry,” Heaney said, “both for being itself and for being a help.”

Over the course of a remarkably dark and difficult year – the Irish poetic community still mourning the losses of literary luminaries including Ciaran Carson, Eavan Boland and Derek Mahon – *Hold Open the Door* prizes connection within a year that deprived us of it, and reflects on the persisting glow of our mentors, even now.

“Please come flying,” Elizabeth Bishop writes in *Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore* – the mentor here is invoked to witness what the poet sees, perhaps to see what it is they now write. The younger poet writing to a mentor figure forms as long a tradition as the printed word itself, and this anthology proves that this instinct is strong and sure in Irish writing and beyond.

Opening the anthology, James Stafford’s poem *And I Tell Her* echoes with the same cadence as Bishop’s, but Stafford forges a playful imaginative mentorship with Elizabeth Bishop where the poem’s speaker tells of his observations at the bus stop. “There are houses there now,” Stafford writes. Here is where the work of this anthology begins. The poems and essays in these pages are not simply humble devotions to important mentors – they spin off in their own surprising ways, now they have the strength in their legs.

For some writers, there is a clear, tangible form of apprenticeship. Paul McMahon tenderly describes how Matthew Sweeney would stab a word on the page when he disagreed with it, only to then beam with “an endearing smile” when it was suitably resolved. Others note the profound influence that poet-professors have had on their practice, such as Emma Must describing how she travelled by boat from the Isle of Wight to take classes with Mimi Khalvati, or later to Belfast to study under Sinéad Morrissey; or John James Reid recalling that Ciaran Carson, in his weekly Wednesday writers’ class, “broke the surface of my poetic thinking and my resistance to the subject by helping me to see”.

Despite the proliferation of creative writing programmes in the past decades, it is a balm that many writers in this anthology do not necessarily have to be formally taught by a mentor, do not necessarily even have to know them. Perhaps, by deciding to be a writer, you confer your poems to your readers in the knowledge that they may find them instructive. Who are we to tell them otherwise?

Rory Duffy, for instance, explains that he has always “carried an anger” at his early experiences of school, and that Annemarie Ní Churreáin’s sustained attention and insight helped him to process those emotions through different angles in his poetry. Sophie Segura notes that, while working as a journalist in Buenos Aires, she was able to “push back against self-doubt regarding my non-academic path to writing” with the help of Claire Rigby’s support. Mentors such as these are breaking down the perception that poetry can only be written by those who are “qualified” to do so. They are saying, instead: you are human, and you are a poet.

While the events of this past year may have served as a stark reminder, it is no secret that poetry is often tasked with saying the unsayable; we turn to it to see us through the harsh winters of our lives. Sometimes, it can even give us the will to live.

Evgeny Shtorn speaks of his friendship with Russian poet Galina Gamper, attributing her “almost-magical capacity to help people stay strong” to helping him endure the darker days.

Molly Twomey’s unflinching, clear-eyed account of her struggle with an eating disorder outlines the power of the personal connection to a mentor’s words and work, and how she comes back – continually – to Leanne O’Sullivan’s compassion and wisdom “when the pain returns, too difficult to numb”.

Mentors can also give us permission to fully inhabit ourselves, as when Nithy Kasa credits Jean O’Brien’s oeuvre with encouraging her to embrace her femininity, or when Chandrika Narayanan-Mohan describes how Fíona Bolger’s celebration of both her Irish and Indian identity prompted this poet to reclaim aspects of her origin and heritage that she had previously chosen to erase. For Stephen de Búrca, Paul Muldoon’s “formal ingenuity” and “etymological puns” inspired and “helped [him] more than most other things to fathom the long, complex tradition of [Ireland’s] emigration” as de Búrca himself emigrates from Ireland to the United States.

Elsewhere, two broad columns of the anthology are prose reflections on Eavan Boland and Seamus Heaney, bowing to mentors who were unaware of the seismic importance their presence had on the contributors. In the essay *Her Knowing*, Aoife Lyall reflects on the news of Boland’s death in April 2020, and the gift of being seen as a “mother-poet” by Boland during a brief editorial relationship. “[T]here she was,” Lyall writes, “holding out a hand, helping me up, letting me get on with it.” In *The Good Turf*, Connie Roberts, having never met Seamus Heaney, cherishes a hand-written note he left for her during a visit to a nondescript Irish bar in Manhattan. “It is a far, far better thing you do now than you have ever done,” he assures the fledgling poet.

As we celebrate the 25th anniversary year of Heaney’s Nobel award and its legacy, we think back to his own reflections on the value of this mysterious and transformative tradition. Evident in many of his lectures and much of his work over the years – perhaps most unequivocally in his poem *Fosterage* dedicated to his former headmaster, Michael McLaverty, where the young protégé finds himself “newly cubbed in language” – the one that still tugs hardest at the heart is the kinship that he describes feeling for Sweeney, in his introduction to *Sweeney Astray*.

While Heaney remained fascinated – like many who appeal to the literary imagination in Ireland – by the legend of the exiled poet-king, he spoke of his fundamental relationship to Sweeney as being one of place. When he began working on this version of the *Buile Suibhne* poem, he had recently moved to Wicklow, quite close to Sweeney’s final resting place at St Mullins. In that “country of woods and hills, [he] remembered that the green spirit of the hedges embodied in Sweeney” had first been personified for him in one of the members of a local Traveller family, also called Sweeney, whom he would frequently pass camped out in the ditchbacks along the road on the way to his first school. “One way or another,” Heaney reflects, “he seemed to have been with me from the start.”

Perhaps this, simply put, is the mentoring relationship: a shared affinity that stays with us from the outset, secret shoulders we are invited to stand upon, the ability to walk farther because those who went before us carved a path. Perhaps, at its heart, it consists of a profound, time-defying friendship – unshakeable, irreplaceable, and “like most friendships: a little imagined, a little real”.

In these ways, *Hold Open the Door* is, in parts, praise-songs to enduring relationships between mentor and mentee; in others, a created space where a poet pays tribute to a mentor they never knew, but did – somehow – through their work. May the poems and reflections in this anthology be a reminder of this vital practice of connecting with one another and engaging in the generous vulnerability that is writing, reading, and appreciating the poetic impulse.

*Hold Open the Door* is a varied and diverse selection of writing that reflects on the always revelatory, sometimes inexplicable nature of being mentored, and marks an important coordinate on the rich cloth-bound map of Irish poetry to come.

*Mícheál McCann, Summer Meline, Marcella LA Prince and Nidhi Zak/Aria Eipe are the editors of Hold Open the Door: The Ireland Chair of Poetry Special Commemorative Anthology published by UCD Press this month*

*Offering an intimate look at the vast influence of Ireland’s extraordinary literary heritage, Hold Open the Door highlights how a new Irish poetry is coming to stand alongside the tradition from which it has grown - leaving that tradition enriched and transformed. The Ireland Chair of Poetry Commemorative Anthology celebrates the 25th anniversary of Seamus Heaney’s Nobel Prize Award, and the subsequent legacy created by the Ireland Chair of Poetry. This contemporary anthology features original poems and essays from some of the most exciting new and emerging Irish poets as they reflect on the formative value of mentorship and creative exchange, drawing inspiration from renowned poets and artists across the island of Ireland and beyond.*

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