New poetry: Annemarie Ní Churreáin, Audrey Molloy, Cian Ferriter and Sarah Howe

Martina Evans on Hymn to All the Restless Girls, Fallen, Brink and Foretokens



In writing of a modern 'fallen' woman, Audrey Molloy's weapons are humour and a fine precision

“History is a trick;/ the light can pass right through it./ Hard to believe that anything happened here,” Annemarie Ní Churreáin says in Even Now This House is a Cold Consolation. Yet this poem is one of several in Ní Churreáin’s **Hymn to All the Restless Girls** (Gallery,

€12.95) which raises the dead of the Stranorlar Mother & Baby Home to pulsating life.

Using spells, folklore, incantations and her native Irish language, Ní Churreáin pushes back against article 41.2 of the Constitution which imprisoned Irish women within the home and punished those without.

The opening poem, Candle for a Girl Passing through the Forest, acts is both prayer and a call to arms: “Oh, she does be bold! She does be old as Eve and older still,” and it exudes the restless spirit of Ní Churreáin’s earliest mentor, Leland Bardwell.

Ní Churreáin counters the prescriptions of the Constitution with her own dazzling prescriptions: How to Enter a Home for Unmarried Mothers in 15 Easy Dance Steps echoes the traditional set dance caller’s instructions, “Take your place in line and face the boy with the silty eyes./ Ready your slim, hard waist./ Ready his slim, hard chest.”

The inevitability is palpable, the word “repeat” a reminder of countless incarcerations. “And lead off up the centre in marching time/ into the night, starless and fox-scented…”. Form is crucial here, the best poems always tethering their ecstatic rhythmic anger to the poignancy of concrete detail: “No one to snip your nails./ No one to kiss your sore knee… you make yourself good with strangers,/ to sleep in the outhouse, to swallow the slops.”

In Woodie's Homeware Store on Bonfire Night "a wild burn runs through everything", reflecting the heat rising from these incendiary pages, its presiding spirit, Goddess Áine, "who closed her mouth, like a figwort bud, around the ear of the man who hurt her. And bit. And tore".

Audrey Molloy in **Fallen** (Gallery, €12.50) writes of a modern "fallen" woman, in the sun-drenched landscape of Australia, matching Ní Churreáin's defiance with her own inimitable ruefulness. Molloy's weapons are humour and a fine precision.

Her light touch could belie her hard-won freedom, but, although she's far removed from early 20th-century Ireland, society still judges: "Wives are afraid of me now... almost accidental it sounds! Fallen –/ as though I'd lost my footing... men stride forth/ with purpose... A wife neither falls nor leaps – she ditches into the dark hands of the sea..."

Marriage is likened to the death by a thousand cuts in The Tale of Lingchi: "A happy housewife is all I wanted to be... To pack glass baubles in straw at Michaelmas... cut ham-and-cheese sandwiches into teddy-bear shapes. I never signed up for knife-thrower's assistant... No one noticed... the blood that seeped..."

[Annemarie Ní Churreáin: 'There's a deep respect embedded in Gaeltacht culture for troublemakers']

Haunted by the unforgettable faithless wives of fiction –

“Oh, I read the Russian novels/ (and you are not sure now if I mean read or read” – there is something of the novel in Fallen as it recounts the tortuous twists and turns of its racy survivor: “Once was a woman who cut her foot/ clean off, just to be free… She gets about these days on stilts… They look up to her/ through the field glasses of curled-up hands. It may be painful up there,/ but it’s so quiet.”

Molloy’s most pitiless gaze is reserved for herself and this is what gives her quiet wickedness its power, “You stand, one foot on hardpacked sand… three-quarter profile, like a starlet, tummy pulled in… Two small boys tether your hands,/ beaming at their father as he takes the shot… you double-check the photo does the swimsuit justice,//… thank your husband very much/ and ping the photo off to someone else.”

If Cian Ferriter’s **Brink** (Dedalus, €12.50) had a theme tune it would surely be the haunting slow air Port Na bPúcai. In The Little People, a neat sonnet commemorating Tony McMahon, one of Port Na bPúcai’s most famous interpreters, McMahon “fixes” Ferriter “with a look”, claiming to have seen fairies “emerge from a crack in the ground just there/ – pointing to a ditch…”. As McMahon closes his eyes on the “back squeeze/ of a box handed down from Joe Cooley”, Ferriter understands McMahon “was where that ditch began/ and not where the rest of us thought it ended”.

It is from this liminal space between life and death that

Ferriter's strongest poems emerge. Ferriter's mother, orphaned at 13, is central, her survival celebrated in the powerful sequence Republic.

Coal – with a nod to Michael Hartnett – is a terrifying elegy for the survivor. "A teacher who picked flowers/ with the students who hated books.// In the end, an insomniac falling asleep on the couch to Tom and Jerry. The slow clap of a punctured wheel.// Her eyes, when she turned,/ were two coal-bags of grief/ pouring into a basement cellar."

The title poem defies such loss of connection when Ferriter's own life is on the "brink" and his partner climbs into his hospital bed when the nurses are "off-guard" Its bookend, the final poem Morning Run, is even more affecting as the couple run together: "I fall in with your stride", their threatened yet steadfast connection expressed in movement and breath and "the steady power of knowing... that when we stop, your hand will touch my back".

Time itself is the driver at the puzzling heart of Sarah Howe's **Foretokens** (Chatto, £12.99). Using many forms to explore memory, inheritance and colonialism, Howe's personal labyrinth is especially preoccupied with the slipperiness of perception. How do we read the past? Or the faces in an old photo of her mother and grandmother? – "She's in a patterned cheongsam/ out of Wong Kar-Wei, lipstick, wavy hair restrained... the child's gaze blurs...

Their noses, surely they were the same?"

But wasn't Howe's mother an adopted abandoned child? The specular Fore/mother plays the tantalising story forwards and backwards, its short touching lines fragmented, "What I know begins outside/ within/ the limits of Shanghai./ A girl is born… is/ sold to strangers."

Songs of Us borrows from science with short sequences of DNA forming the backbone of each song, "As if seeing faces in the moon, secrets in a Rorschach blot, / Trick patterns could derail the inheritors of Mendel…".

Formidably intelligent and scientifically curious, Howe's poems are rich in feeling too. World Service unfolds an indelible image of her mother in terza rima, "the washing up my mum/ liked to do in the small hours. The fridge's drone… beat-up Sony portable her sole companions –// her sunflower gloves circling in the gloom".

Elsewhere anthropomorphic poems speak movingly on behalf of 18th-century Chinese porcelain. "It's not just wares/ like me trussed as cargo. Human beings are// were always things… Ask the sugar/ bowl here what it is it sweetens. One day/ the English will forget who invented tea." (Porcelain Tea Caddy Painted in Underglaze Blue).

The tremendous final long poem An Error, A Ghost mines Jorge Luis Borges' story The Garden of Forking Paths to tell its own forking, shifting tales of an ever-compelling unknowable past: "Reality split: one way,/ a girl is sold to

strangers. [years blank] Then// 1948, a cry in the rubbish heap, flight, babe in arms,/ across the water. The other way: a story about the/ closed door, the carefulness with which she made/ and remade, after visitors, the room's single bed."