

VIEW FROM A KAYAK
IN AUTUMN

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VIEW FROM A KAYAK
IN AUTUMN

SHEILA GALLAGHER MURPHY

for

CIANAN DEWEER MURPHY

June 21, 1997 – May 19, 1998

and

CECILIA LEHAN MURPHY

April 26, 1999 – July 13, 2000

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Acknowledgments

“Turning Pop-Up Pages for Cecilia” and “View from a Kayak in Autumn” have appeared in *The Litchfield Review*, and “Palliative Care” in *Caduceus*.

Three poems have received awards in *Writer’s Digest* Annual Poetry Writing Competitions: “Finding Kilmacduagh, January 2001” (2001, 6th place); “Stone Echoes” (2006, 8th place); and “Weathering” (2007, 3rd place). Seven poems have received Honorable Mention from *Writer’s Digest* and The New England Poetry Club.

Two communities of writers indulge my post-retirement passion for writing memoir and poetry. After six years in a Connecticut Writing Project Writing Group, I have come to rely on a perceptive reading of my drafts, inspiration from the writing of others, and shared talk to fire our muses. After three years of weekly meetings, the eight “Generic Disclaimers” in my Portland Library Memoir Group have become a dream class and a supportive audience for our emerging memoirs, in prose and poetry.

I am grateful to the Connecticut Writing Project for a Summer Institute in 1985 that nurtured my life as teacher, editor, memoir writer, and poet. Decades earlier, at Albertus Magnus College, my Dominican and lay professors, and Maureen Sullivan, my four-year roommate, set a standard of intellectual excellence and in-depth reading that shaped my literary life. I savor the richness of literature, faith, and friendship from that time. I am ever grateful to Tish Burnham for the literary and artistic richness of her “Foreword” and to Julia Moriarty Hayes and Juju Keane who helped my dream of a chapbook become a reality. Also, Sir David Hayes, with vision, expertise, and kindness, has been of immeasurable assistance in this venture.

Closer to home, I treasure the memory of my mother reciting poetry when I was too young to know how long her voice would live. I treasure our four children, their three spouses, and eight living grandchildren for humoring my penchant for celebrating their lives with poems. And always, two infants, Cianan DeWeer and Cecilia Lehan, through their brief lives, continue to enrich my days. They, and all the other children diagnosed with Spinal Muscular Atrophy, stay close to my heart.

Most of all, I am grateful to Russ—who saw the dream in one halting line—*heart is light*—and made the light of love glow for a lifetime.

Foreword

Sheila Gallagher Murphy's poetry has a way of engaging and challenging the reader. By nature, she is a keen observer, naturalist, story-teller (even a *shanachie* at times), learned in literature and the classics, blessed with Celtic eloquence, and grounded in her faith. The meditative themes she introduces resonate far beyond the deceptive ordinariness of her subject matter (family, trips, New England weather, and the like). She seems preoccupied with the passage of time and how memory functions to explain it. Many of her poems are about journeys, whether literal or figurative, or both. In an uncanny way, she organizes the poem itself in such a way that *it* works as a journey. The formal structure of the poems, complex and varied, assists in this effort. The sonnets best achieve this narrative purpose.

"Stone Echoes" is ostensibly about a visit to two graveyards, one in Ireland and the other in Massachusetts. The first two stanzas start off informally (at least in tone) as local family gossip and direction-giving in colloquial Irish. The third turns more serious when she stumbles across a grave marker inscribed "Famine Grave." She then gives explicit (though metrically ordered) directions to the reader as to where to find the second grave marker (thus incorporating the reader into the narrative). There the two-word epitaph reads "Beloved Son," in honor of her grandson who died at the age of eleven months. Both journeys are internal as well as external, bound together by the shared pain of loss. "Finding Kilmacduagh" situates Murphy once again in Ireland (this time in haunting bardic voice), happening on a monastery ruin "on a winding, barren, windswept Irish road," where she comes upon a recent gravestone commemorating the death of an infant. The final stanza illumines a similar journey taken by the second of her grandchildren. A stranger to sentimentality, in her many poems on this subject she relies on indirect reference, symbolic language as well as plain

speech, and systematic rigor.

Although such efforts approach the highest levels of poetic expression, they by no means exhaust Murphy's achievement. She can be celebratory, wry, ironic, and downright funny. Bernini would have admired her "tethering" of the sacred fires of Troy to the sacred fires of our own time and place. On the other hand, I can just imagine John Singer Sargent's indignation at the nerve of her to compare the little Brahmin Julia in his painting to two Julias in her life, her mother and her immigrant grandmother. Nor would he have appreciated her arch comment on the eldest of the four girls (which I find class-savvy as well as quite humorous) that "Only a child of privilege could lean/in studied languor, at fourteen,/ against a vase..." As one who knows the painting well, I will think of that eldest daughter very differently from now on. Pursuing a different muse in "The Gardener Takes Inventory," Murphy dares the reader to find poetry in yes, an inventory—the listing thereto and the narrative thereof. The reader is mesmerized into a peace-filled trance caused by the low hum of musicality in the flow of words.

The collection ends with "View from a Kayak in Autumn," one of her nature poems, which gives the book its title. It is taut and spare, concentrated and disciplined: fourteen lines of few words. An egret, this time, carries the burden of meaning, although lightly and lyrically. Murphy offers us an epiphanic vision as her final gift.

Patricia Mullan Burnham

Marble and Fire

Aeneas, Anchises and Ascanius (c. 1620)
Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Borghese Gallery, Rome

Lit by flames from windy burning Troy,
your homeland and your wife forever lost,
carrying your father on your shoulders,
you bear the burden of a nation's dreams.

Old Anchises clings to household gods
and in your son's small hand a future pulses,
Ascanius clinging fast to sacred fire,
sheltered as he leans into your stride.

Hewn from bulk and weight and whiteness,
shaped into bone and sinew, supple skin
and curly locks, the gaze of eyes transfixed,
you walk forever, Aeneas, into light.

You three hold on—the way we also do—
old and young, around your pedestal
in Scipione Borghese's palazzo,
tethered to sacred fires of our own.

Shadows behind *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit*

John Singer Sargent, *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit*, 1882,
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

I

Only a child of privilege could lean
in studied languor, at fourteen,
against a vase, one of a pair,
that flanked a foyer's darkened air.
The sheen of glaze, a bird in flight,
mirror a gleam of four girls in white,
wearing pinafores starched, uncreased.
The youngest, Julia, sits, at ease,
with a doll between her legs, just so.
I gaze at Julia, long and slow—
her ruffled wrists and turned-in toes.
Even her doll wears frilly clothes.

II

Another Julia comes to light
who would have hovered out of sight
ironing those pretty pinafores.
My grandmother Julia, widowed
at thirty, had a brood of five to raise.
I walk on braided rugs she made.
Her Julia, my mother, in 1916,
graduated high school, the immigrants' dream.
She learned shorthand and leaned on prayer,
quoted Longfellow, Donne, and Shakespeare.
One Julia in oils, and two on my mind,
in Sargent's shadows intertwined.

Old Questions, Echoing

Four college freshmen, homeward bound:
a cab ride down the hill to board a train,
the shoreline route to Boston, next, for one
a subway ride to Harvard Square, and then
a rattling streetcar ride to Watertown.

A long slow walk remained, her suitcase full
with books and laundry, weighing down each step
on rain-slick sidewalks. The serviceable brick
of town hall, firehouse, and library
shimmered, blurring, almost disappeared,
in what her Irish mother called *soft rain*.

Head held high, she hurried up the path.
Her roommates had advised a streak, light blond,
dramatic highlight for her straight dark hair.
They had sprayed, with care, that golden dust,
a hue she hoped would hold its gold in rain.

She settled in the kitchen, eager for
the camaraderie of talk and tea,
meeting her mother's penetrating eyes,
the hint of mirth behind her questioning:
Pray tell me why your hair and face are green.

That Sunday after Mass, outside of church,
she saw a classmate from her parish school.
Twelve years together, suddenly so strange.
They smiled, paused, his question lingering:
How did you know to go away, to leave?

She would retrace her steps that afternoon,

walking briskly in a chilly wind,
traveling back to college and beyond,
seeking an answer she had yet to form:
to make a life, to always search for home.

Newlyweds: Nu'u-anu, 1959

A narrow road runs deep into a cleft
in Nu'u-anu Valley near the Pali,
their haven for a year a bungalow,
banana trees shading a lanai

until their Navy transport, homeward bound,
heard *alohas*, saw plumeria fade,
steered them into life as lexicon:
unimagined meanings in...*to have*

and hold, in sickness or in health...till death,
formulas so needfully abstract
until the dailiness of love can grow
like shoots around an old banana stalk,

seeking sun and bearing fruit until
a heavy golden ripeness is fulfilled.

Still Life

All the homes and history lived since she had left this house,
all the decades of schooling and teaching, marrying and mothering,
vanish, evaporate, as she sits in her daughter's car, becoming once again
a sullen, silent twelve-year-old, hating her family's
need to move above an uncle's funeral home.

All her dread at having to enter the same doorway
as an ever-changing stream of mourners,
never able to avert her eyes as she passed the viewing parlors,
slinking on tiptoe up the long curved stairway

is offset, suddenly, by the balm of remembering
her mother's resolute good cheer, how she had
carpeted those stairs in a deep red-gold design
and even let children slide down the long banister
when *wakes* (even to a child the irony of that word not lost)
were not being held downstairs.

All the wood and glass and white Victorian sprawl
face her after almost forty years, as if those soaring windows
far above the porch still reflect her mother's image:

looking through a sheer curtain at the same old barn and tree
where the fermented ripeness of fallen cherries swells the air.

or checking on the backyard grape arbor, bitter green until
the heavy clusters sag, ready for stirring with a sticky spoon

before a wine-dark syrup fills the jewel-like jars with conserve
she loved to make and give.

or, standing near the child who stares at snow,

reciting, in rhythms as gentle as the falling flakes:

Every pine and fir and hemlock

Wore ermine too dear for an earl....

old memorized verses, always apt, always soft

as though to soothe those scars she sees today:

a warren of dentist offices in the low long wing,

apartment walls that chop the curve of sweeping stairs,

the ragged carpet, dulled to a gritty pink,

even the burned and boarded-up barn

—all can fade, recede—

even the small stuffed Santa-on-skis tucked under the eaves.

His softness surfaces as they drive away.

Old Lovers Visit Newgrange

Imagine moving those gigantic stones
to build a crypt that rises high along
the valley of the Boyne: a place for bone
and chiseled symmetry, for circles drawn

outside a narrow hallway low and long.
Inside their dark and vaulted cave, what rites
did men conduct within those walls? What songs
were sung, to echo far, by acolytes

with trembling hands and hearts? On high, a slit,
near swirls on deep-etched lintel stone, was cut
to send a glow from rising sun that lit,
at time of winter solstice, men and hut.

This passage grave insists we keep in mind
that one must lead, the other walk behind.

Frail Flower

Shopping for birthday balloons, I saw a blooming
hibiscus, lugged that heavy pot home for a family
feast, weaving once-upon-a-time tales of a son's
Hawaiian birth, linking faraway decades
with unfolding days.

Celebrating newborn Cianan, and his grandfather's birthday,
we heralded those trumpeting summer blossoms,
tinted echoes of Pearl Harbor sunsets,
the lilt of waves on Kaneohe Bay,
soft trade winds off Paumalu.

Counting each red splash on a canvas of fading green,
we measured autumn's gathering dusk. Trimming
withered blooms and rust-brown leaves, we knew
our decades and depths of love could not hold off
long winter's dark.

Stone Echoes

I

County Kerry, Ireland, 1993

To find the old graveyard in Kenmare,
turn left at the Carnegie Library.
Think of Nanny's brother Mick,
first as custodian, then librarian.

Follow the rutted road to Killówen
where cousin Sonny will offer a nip.
He'll drive, too fast, past the farm at Cahír,
where the O'Sullivan clan lived and left.

Scan a hillside of toppled stones. Hear:
Our others are all in here somewhere.
Notice, etched on that leaning slab,
two faint words: FAMINE GRAVE.

II

Plymouth County, Massachusetts, 1998

To find Evergreen Cemetery in Kingston,
drive down a winding road of pines,
beyond gnarled trees and lichen-crusting graves
to a sunlit valley, new-seeded grass, as yet no saplings,
one granite marker, upright. Beneath his name and dates,
two words, so deeply etched: BELOVED SON.

Three Sonnets for Cianan

I

When *life* becomes a synonym for *year*,
what words can hold an infant for all time?
Will our next generations ever hear
of how he loved to laugh at silly rhymes,

at books like *Jamberry*, *Pooh*, and *Brown Bear*?
The way balloons above his bed beguiled
him, or how bubbles, translucent spheres
ephemeral as hope, would win his smile?

And when his cousins, older now than he
will ever be, ask why he had to die,
what answer but that faith and memory
surround a loss, though neither satisfies.

In just a year, swift as a falling star,
his life would pass, a radiant meteor.

II

His life has passed, a shining meteor
so bright in memory, so dark in loss
rising like tidal swells that lap a pier
where shades of wintered boats seem near, and frost

covers splintered slats. These sturdy boots
imprint ice crust with tracks that hold a shape
like ghost boats moored on snow. The sea retreats
while barren floats rest high and mudflats wait

to disappear at river rise again.
Salt sea will spread through reeds and rushes
to fill the river, drain it dry, and then
leave debris of shells and crabs, a salt marsh hush.

This river thread lies siphoned by that thief,
the moon. All tides, relentless, rise, like grief.

III

The moon, the tides, relentless, rise, like grief
that follows pilgrims genuflecting, numb,
longing for peace in rituals of belief.
In Saint-Sulpice at noon a priest intones

Au nom du Père... His soaring echoed hum
receives response in softly murmured prayer.
On Rue St. Jacques, inside Saint-Severin,
flickering votive candles glow through tears.

Saint-Germain-des-Prés, the ancient home
of Benedictine monks, looms dark and still.
At dusk in Notre Dame, a setting sun
finds angled glass to hold, near stone and chill,

those shards of light that linger, almost blur
when *life* becomes a synonym for *year*.

Turning Pop-Up Pages for Cecilia

On each lettered page
from alligator to zebra
a flap uncovers

behind green grass, or bush, or tree
a jungle creature that sometimes
wins her twinkle of recognition,
her ghost of a grin.

Prone on that high hospital bed
she lies and listens and stares and
waits for revelation
on each propped page.

None but the giraffe
whose arching neck and nibbling mouth
can reach the tallest leaves
will earn her wide and crooked smile.

Palliative Care

After that doctor, eyes lowered, scrawled
failure to thrive,
would he even ponder how three curt words
could mock the limits of his spare clinical truth?

He never heard her father read
The Owl and the Pussycat, or watched
him win her smile at the page where
they ate with a runcible spoon.

He never listened to her mother sing
The Wheels on the Bus, cradling
the ragdoll softness of her small prone limbs
to move *up and down, up and down*.

He never saw her eyes, wiser than mine,
spark the current of her stillness
into a conduit for eight more months
of light, pure shining light.

After Candle's Light

Her tiny fingers, curled and bent,
appear to hold a candle plucked
from a cupcake held for her
to see. She feels an ash-tipped wick,
hears a wavering birthday song,
and wonders why a flickering glow
flares bright, then leaves so soon, so soon.

Finding Kilmacduagh*, January 2001

On a winding, barren, windswept Irish road
just south of Gort, and near Thoor Ballylee
we came to Kilmacduagh, around a bend:

a field of ruins, arches, cloister ends,
a tower fort for all the world to see.
On a winding, barren, windswept Irish road

stood crumbled churches, walls man-built for God,
and graves, some new—too much mortality
as we came to Kilmacduagh, around a bend.

Drawn by a patch of flower buds, we found
in chiseled stone a muted litany
on a winding, barren, windswept Irish road.

An infant died twelve years before, we read,
and: *Those You Love, You Never Leave*. Slowly
we walked at Kilmacduagh, around a bend.

Cecilia had but fourteen months to spend
till she went home to God and memory.
On a winding, barren, windswept Irish road
we came to Kilmacduagh, around that bend.

*kil-mac-DOO-ah

Journey toward Adoption

A landscape unreels in plains of dust,
and hills deforested centuries before

this ancient bus creaks away from Madrid
on a stripe of road unfurling toward

a sun-baked horizon. Sad crumbling houses,
scattered like sand castles, lean into

parched soil, where chickens scratch near
mottled dogs and a donkey switching his tail.

After miles as empty as grief, a mirage of
rippled walls crowns a hill of the Sierra de

Guadarrama. Soon, arches and gates curving like
furrowed scallop shells increase and multiply to

frame an ancient and sacred refuge. Like a jewel in
the sun, Avila waits, holding its mysteries—

like your face, another distant wonder,
smiling for a camera, waiting in Korea.

Angels' Voices

And when you arch your back and turn
your strong and supple neck to see
a wall of books, so much to learn,
or hear clocks chiming, just off key,

just what do you expect to find?
Memories, mine, behind you, unfold:
a halo's glow, soft chords combined
with chanted prayer, a steeple's toll.

Yes, Declan Park Murphy, you're third,
with Cianan and Cecilia before you.
Not ghosts' but angels' voices are heard.
Not loss but love will ever enfold you.

Weathering

Our town's all blanketed with snow, and slick
with sleet, beset by ice that coats the trees,
a beauty marred by danger, ripe for falls,
and accidents on roads when sand's too late,
or drivers careless, young, or, worse, too old
to manage spinouts, steer out of a skid.

My brief attempt to walk the dog unhinged
my vow to stay relaxed, to choose each step
with easy confidence. He pulled, I tugged,
then clung to any standing firmness, tree
or fence, whatever offered steadiness
that these old bones have lost. The dog and I,
he reluctant, I relieved, returned
to foot-sure floors and carpeting, to warmth.

The tick and chime of clocks reverberate
until, at last, the sound of tires, a door.
Tonight, the icebound world surrounding us
has loosed its grip, its omens forecasting
peril, instability, and woe.

Once, we'd glide on frozen lakes and ponds,
oblivious to the slow, sure fall of time.
Relieved, I see your frame, as brittle-boned
as mine, negotiate the slippery step—
safe, home.

Dusk on Covell Hill

Blessed be bare, stripped branches
scratched on steely February skies,
though yesterday
at twilight
outside my western window
the top of Lathams' maple
caught fading sunglow
against a graying sky,
flowering
pink and arched,
a curve of lace,
a blush fleeing
faster than words.

The Year of Cecilia, Five Years After

In Virginia, that April, everywhere
The splash of redbud trees, more rose than red,
appeared, as if some giant hand would dare
to finger-paint in circles overhead.

Her Boston birth reverberated far,
as births so often do. Does one blame God
that red buds fall or wither in midair
when cold or blight or wind invade

their atmosphere? And so, betrayed by genes,
a defect in chromosome five, to be precise,
her limbs were stilled, but not her mind, her smile.

Strawberries, rain-soaked, die, unripe, still green.
Acres of apple blossoms drop, the price
of frost ill-timed. And yet, to lose one child....

On This Day: May 19, 2008

On this day
outside Cavaliere's Bakery,
two small tables appear,
an oasis after weeks of rain and chill and wind,
too cold for May though not in Connecticut
where nature begrudges her release of green
but showers pink blossom dust on hillside roads.

On this day
my Main Street chair warmed by morning sun,
the dog's head resting on my shoe,
my coffee black and steaming,
memories of an infant's smile
soften a droning hum of cars and loss.

Outside my kitchen window
lured by the sweetness of nectar,
a hummingbird alights in a blur,
so welcome a whirring,
like Cianan, after ten years,

on this same day.

The Gardener Takes Inventory

In early morning quiet, he'll begin
his garden walk by breaking off a pinch
of mint, oregano, or lemon thyme,
or rub a leaf of basil, and then snip
the heads that want to go to seed too soon.

He'll weed before the height and heat of sun,
deadhead the roses, water where there's need,
nod to chorus lines of day lilies,
attend with butterflies and bees to domes
of echinacea, pungent marigolds,
clusters of Shasta daisies, black-eyed Susans,
a pink and stately Mr. Lincoln rose.

He'll spy on birds, unwelcome grackles, jays,
the bright small splendor of the yellow finch,
the cardinal's sturdy red. Birdsong and flutter
crowd the hilltop feeders: time to fill
again. A chipmunk scrambles at his feet,
then sits atop the split-rail fence to watch
him set the solar panels for the fountains
out, to store the sun so water-rippling
sound will soften summer noonday glare.

Some days, more frequent now, the yard will need

mowing, clipping, pruning, pulling down
a tangle of wisteria vines that choke
the branches of an ancient oak unless
he intervenes. Viburnum and mock orange,
long past their bloom, redeemed no more by white
frosting or sweet perfume, seem rangy,
green and scraggly, like that lone quince bush
whose branches mask a window's view and light.

Morning shades my hilltop glider now,
but the old bench next to the fountain pond
and that spindly chair beside the marsh
will claim their shade this afternoon. He'll find
a place for the new hammock and we both
will harvest time and shade to sit and sway,
with books and dog and saltmarsh breeze,
counting the blooms and blessings of July.

View from a Kayak in Autumn

Just now, like that snow
egret, its hazy
whiteness balancing
between saltmarsh green
and a rising tide
of rippled river,
so still, then soaring,
smaller and smaller,
over marsh and reeds
and river and bay,
the shimmer of your
small swift life hovers,
touches down, and then
flies away again.

About the Author



SHEILA GALLAGHER MURPHY taught English and Latin in Massachusetts, Hawaii, and Connecticut, grades seven through college, for thirty-four years. She edited two collections of teacher essays for the Connecticut Writing Project, a booklet of memoirs from her Portland Library workshops, and a still-unpublished collection of essays about the poetry of Leo Connellan, Connecticut's second Poet Laureate. She has four children, eight living grandchildren, and a Welsh corgi. She and her husband of forty-nine years live in Connecticut and Massachusetts. Her poetry celebrates the memory of her Irish ancestors and her two grandchildren who died of Spinal Muscular Atrophy. Part of the proceeds from this book will be donated to FSMA, the Families of Spinal Muscular Atrophy, www.curesma.org

