

2025 Allingham Festival Poetry

First Prize – Tuning Fork – Gerry O'Donnell

The Brother taught me in first class,
towering above us in a long black soutane,
paunch pressing down on his belt like he'd
swallowed a globe with a sagging equator.

He orbited desks, his sandals squished
as he leaned close, to praise drawings
of tragic Celtic warriors, curating
reflections from his own Tir na nÓg.

Dark folds dusted magic chalk on his pets
as he brushed by towards the tuning fork
on his desk, pinging pitch perfect notes
to harmonise the flock, to heal himself.

He called to our house, to “borrow the car”,
was “hoping to see”, me and my brother,
a missed octave in Mum's inner ear,
her neat sidestep, his crestfallen smile.

Kept me back at the end of class,
sat me on his knee, stroked my leg,
caressed my cheek with a stubbled chin.
It reddened like an apple as he hummed.

The tuning fork lay on the desk, cold
metal line split in two at a crossroads,
strip of shadow between parallel lives,
heavy squish of sandals in the dark.