

2025 Allingham Festival Poetry

Third Prize – Anseo -- Peggy McCarthy

Corridors rang with mid-morning rollcalls:
the rapid fire *Anseo*, the jolt of an absence.
I led the chant of number patterns, poems, prayers,
set them beyond the reach of unlearning;
shepherded my troop to the church on the hill
herded them on when they lingered by the river;
placed chocolate buttons on their tongues -
primed for the mystery of dry wafer.
Amid cardboard crowns and straw, we donned
tea towels and gowns for the Nativity
where the donkey often shone brightest
and Jesus was never the leading light.
We traced handprints to create lion heads,
Christmas trees, glorious suns. I learnt
how *famine* might be misconstrued as *salmon*
and the effort required to swim upstream.
We fleshed out hearts, plaited love
through wristbands for Mothers and Valentines
which were usually one and the same.
Intrigued by variations of the human skull
I fitted helmets to heads, armed my squad
with hurleys and sliotars for the clatter of battle.
We shot basketballs like small planets at hoops
smashing off the backboard to ricochet into space.
Through the din of a hundred playground voices
I stemmed the flow of the wounded: the dizzying round
of squabbles, scuffed knees and bloodied nose.
I embraced the mayhem of free play,
group work gone awry, sat in the rapture
of story time, the stillness after three.

We practised joined up writing: our pencils
flowing from letter to word to sentence,
hoped it might lead to joined up thinking,
maybe even joined up lives.