

2025 Allingham Festival Flash Fiction

First Prize – Tethered – Stephen O'Reilly

Stooking bales under the backbone of night. In the dark corner of the field near the sheugh he turns his head against the sweep of light from the tractor preserving the image of a faint river of stars flowing south over Dartry into the soft glow at the galaxy's heart.

*Bealach na Bó Finne*, he has read in a book of Irish mythology.

The words feel awkward in a Yorkshire mouth.

There is the occasional rustle of small lives within the hedgerow and a suspicion of sunset on the horizon past Benbulbin's stubborn jut. Rain forecast and the machine kept busy all day. The rhythmic chug of the baler reflected from low hills and the gable end of their house.

His mother's shadow sliding over the gravel outside the kitchen window, preparing a plate of boxty for them that they will slather with butter and ketchup and wash down with tea constellated with cream from their own pale cow in the river field.

He has been left behind to get the last few bales, his father and uncle gone on to the next field with the spasmodic glow of a fag end, and he welcomes the sting of the twine as it cuts into his hands, believing that pain was useful and that skin eventually hardened up.

Looking forward to going up to the house where the adults will talk and he will sit quietly on the edge of things taking it all in. Couldn't weld or lay blocks or put a decent edge on a hedge-knife. Felt lost in talk of cattle, spuds and diesel engines, but he watched and listened to everything, never knowing what might be useful, wanting only to be the same as those around him. Tethered to the small acres and their unceasing demands. Men who scraped a living from the land, supplementing it with whatever work they could find in factories or construction. Content to have the tea and a smoke and a few hours in front of the telly with the family before bed. He thought it was a brave enough life, bounded by the knowledge that whatever you owned would evaporate away in the arid silence of a darkened room and all that was left was a narrow slot in the earth lined with moss and primrose. The pale faces of loved ones framing the sky as they eased you down into it. The constant wants to be passed on, passed down, for ever and ever. Amen. And tomorrow evening, the long walk into Mass and a seat at the back of the nave, wanting to believe and belong there too, but dreading the sweaty clasp of the neighbour paw during the sign of peace. The hollow clatter of kneelers in the front pews as the great and good of the town fall over themselves in their desperation to fondle one another in a holy show that goes on for about an eon. The soft words of an old priest leading them towards dismissal and heartfelt but ambiguous 'Thanks be to God,' while behind him the sanctuary light flickers gibberish morse.

It was always his father's home.

He was not born there and cannot settle. Turns his head against the land and finds other things to be in cities where the river of stars is obscured by the energetic outpouring of sodium and neon. Works with his back and callused hands and will use those childhood memories when he is too tired to sleep. Tractor lights swinging across a field and shadow men in its wake. The low calming drone of antiphons. Sometimes the voice of a teacher reading them Saki on a warm afternoon, chalk motes drifting in a drowsy melange of perfume, stale sweat and sour school milk. Or a hand holding his, and the murmur of heat through a thin summer dress on an evening in Bundoran.

Tethers himself to moments where he once found peace. Enough to rest. Enough to move forward. Imagines the weight of his father's arm on his shoulder as they walk up the lane to the house beneath the track of the pale cow one summer night.

'Good man,' he sometimes says.

Good man.