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Shortlisted 2017: An extract from *The Missing Sixth* by Cathy Galvin

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(An extract from…)

THE MISSING SIXTH

Ni bas acht a fas

Irish: not dead but growing

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This work in progress is a quest to understand my mother Bridget, born in rural Irish-speaking Connemara, who died in the industrial English city of Coventry when I was eleven years old.

Elements of the story are told through the records of Anglo-Irish witnesses to the lives of my family and their neighbours, documents detailing the harsh existence of a people living on the edge of the Atlantic.

I have taken liberties with those records, some of which make uncomfortable reading, reducing the native Irish to little more than another species, using imagination and memory to embellish the documents, sometimes creating false trails, weaving a new story from fragments that draw me closer to my mother.

THE FIRST SXTH: ENTITLEMENT

I

CHARLES BROWNE MD. ETHNOLOGIST. AN ENCOUNTER WITH AN IRISH CHILD

Photographs in the archive of Trinity College, Dublin, reveal Charles Browne to be a bowler-hatted gentleman touring south Connemara in the protective company of two policemen, a dispassionate observer of the people inhabiting the remote islands and surrounding coastal hamlets in the 1890s.

He noted a landscape littered with abandoned cottages, evidence of a disastrous series of famines. Witnessed men, women and children in rags who could not speak English and would not even if they could, distrusting all his questions and his ever-present tape, with which he measured the circumference of their skulls, the length of their limbs.

The men feared he was measuring them for uniforms, that they would be forcibly conscripted to fight for King and country in some nameless war.

In the Conneely home on Mason Island, where he based himself for a time, there was a fragile prosperity from working the land and sea – from fishing (lobster, herring, mackerel, bream) and trading in kelp. The house was well kept with a dresser boasting earthenware, delft and some china.

At their table, he wrote: *The young children received a basic education in English at the small National School on the island. Families travel when they can by boat to the chapel in Carna and sometimes to the few good shops there and there is also a trade in boat-building.*

There are some signs that the population, which clings to the margins and islands of this harsh land around Southern Connemara, has grown since 1851, though a falling off is now apparent, evidently due to emigration.

The landscape and birdlife remain the same today as when he made his study: a frilled coastline of inlets and islands sinking into white sand; home to ringed plover, snipe, egret, curlew, wheatear, wren, terns, dunlin and hooded crow. All carefully listed in his notebook.

Charles made many other lists, including the surnames of families in the Carna sub-district. Among them, thirteen Cloherty, thirty-one Conneely, seventeen Folan, eleven Geary; fourteen Mulkerrin and fourteen Gorham. Close inter-marriage in a remote area cut off from the world in the far west also provided him with a list of common ailments, the population being particularly vulnerable to skin and lung disease. He noted: *imbecility appeared to be rare.*

His reports and journals reveal how my great-grandparents, grandmother and mother – not imbeciles – lived with twenty other families on an island just one mile long and a quarter of a mile wide. They fished, had a cow or two, traded with the people of the Aran islands, bringing them turf cut from their bogs on the mainland.

Browne added: *It is, perhaps, almost needless to state that spade labour is universal. The usual manure is "black weed" which is brought in from the sea- shore in "back-loads" by the women who join in all field work and seem to be the hardest worked members of the community.*

The introduction of the National School has resulted in a measure of literacy amongst the youngest children, a confidence in speaking and writing

the English language, that will inevitably reduce the population further as they leave this existence behind to improve their prospects beyond Connemara.

There is little to lament in this since the island and neighbouring districts have no civilisation and no written account of their history, such as it is.

They were to leave this existence behind, though it never left them.

Browne was a man of his times, class and country, with occasional empathy for the human species he had set out from Dublin to document:

I have spent a charming afternoon in the company of a young child called Katie, who was sent to me by her mother with tea in a cup and saucer as I rested at the crossroads. Such grace has not been commonly in evidence on my travels.

She enquired as to what I had studied in order to qualify for this exercise in observing her people. It seemed her curiosity was keen, her knowledge limited, a state of affairs her questioning suggested she also detected in my manner.

My abilities, she told me, made me entirely unsuited to island life since I have no Irish, do not know how to handle or mend a boat, how to fish or to burn kelp, She said it was clear I did not know how to make or mend nets or shoes, build or thatch a house, make a cradle or a coffin.

Our conversation was charming and later awakened a question: where does the undeniable knowledge of record and measurement serve us well in ethnology, and where does it hinder a greater understanding?

II

Katie hooked a finger into her mouth and drew out an earring. Then another. She felt a desire to empty herself. Each time her finger went into her mouth, it found something intricate and golden: a cross and long chain, a brooch, a glistening watch. She felt the weight of all she could see and feel, pulled from somewhere deep within. Katie sat in the dunes with her shawl pulled tight against the wind, legs pressed to her chest, looking out to America across the sea, and contemplated the meaning of this strange dream.

III

In my hands I hold the deeds to five-sixths of an abandoned island cottage off the coast of Connemara, where my mother Bridget was born to my grandmother Katie on the third day of the third month, 1930.
It has no roof. The gable ends are sound but the hearth-stone is in danger of falling.
Above the empty doorframe, I have hammered in place a piece of driftwood, bearing the legend Ti Conghaile – house of the Conneelys – the letters traced first in pencil, then branded into the wood with white-hot iron.
My mother gave birth to me in England and died there when I was a child.

She left only fragments – a few letters, crockery, a wedding ring, stories and this ruined cottage, built by her grandfather, and where she and her mother Katie were born.
I claim possession: to the missing sixth of that home and to the mother I pushed away.

Between us,
there are hands that have held ours.
There is a window.
There is an island.

IV

Folio. Local Registration of Title (Ireland) Act. 1891

Parts of the lands of Mason Island containing together five acres and six perches, or thereabout, statute measure, situate in the Barony of Ballynahinch and County Galway and parts of the lands of Ardnacross Island containing 26 perches or thereabouts part of Avery Island containing 30 perches or thereabouts parts of the lands of Carna containing 5 acres of thereabouts all statute measure/ situate as expressed.

There are appurtenant to the said lands the following rights – the right of cutting and collecting one fifteenth share of all the seaweed growing or cast upon the foreshore of other part of Avery Island lettered .. one fifteenth of all the seaweed growing or cast upon the foreshore of Ardnacross Island.

The lands above described are subject: -
To the amount due on foot of £83, being the amount for which the owner has purchased the said lands from the Trustees of the Congested Districts Board for Ireland.
The purchase money is repayable with interest by an annuity of £2.13.11 for the term 68 and a half years from the 1st day of November, 1901, by half-yearly instalments on every 1st day of May, and 1st day of November.

Signed Pat Conneely (John) 31st day of March 1902. Registered 15th day of May 1902. NOTE

1. 4th August 1933 The Land Purchase Annuity is £2.2.6
2. 12th September 1974. The notice of equities is cancelled. Titles absolute.
3. 12th November 1974. Michael Connolly of Rusheenamanagh, Carna, County Galway is full owner of the property.
4. 14th April 2006. Catherine Galvin. Now owner of five-sixths of the property and searching for the missing sixth.

V

Here is a boat. Bridget dreamed this boat. She looks over the bow, being swept away to sea. There is no crew. On the land, she can see her two young daughters and husband. However much she tries, she cannot reach them. It distresses her. She sits on the corner of her bed – lilac-gold eiderdown smoothed across blankets, alarm clock ticking, a rosary lying over the white marbling of her Missal – and tells her oldest child, nine years old, about this dream of a boat on a dark sea, pulling away from an island at the edge of the Atlantic ocean.

As she speaks, light falls over her walnut dressing table, silver brushes laid out on lace. A curved bay-window opens to the blackbird nest at the top of the guttering, to the chirrups of chicks who will learn to fly over suburban streets. A breeze. Wide, wide, sky. *It was terrible my darling, so real. And nothing could be done.*

She finishes and stands, bends to the mirror, applying red lipstick. Running crème through her short brown hair to tame the curl. Adjusting a brooch.

The room smells of her perfumes and cosmetics. Sometimes the daughter watches her mother secretly, the way she twists back to adjust a stocking, puts on her heels.

It isn't just the two of them in the room, the mother and daughter.

The boat is here, the dream.

The boat that carried Bridget far from land on a dark sea.

The boat from which, however much she tried, she could see but not touch her family, who were too far away.

I pull the boat back from the dream-shadows, bring it towards my mother, hold it in my hands. Black and blue painted wood. A terracotta sail. I lift it out of the waves, sublime in their intent. Here is the boat. Bridget is safe. She hasn't yet been swept away.

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Once, we sat together in a boat that carried us towards an island.

Black water under a heavy sky. A currach, pulling through the Atlantic from the Connemara mainland towards Mason Island. In the boat with us, her brother Michael and mother Katie.

Atoms of sea-water on faces and hair. Michael's fierce arms. Dark blond curls shoved under his cap. Katie and Michael, an oar each, pulling, pulling, pulling.

A cow swam with us o the island for grazing, on a sea that held us yet could take all in a moment. The land beyond the strand, untended for years, broken open to pitted bog in the walled fields woven with the traces of forgotten streams.

The Atlantic washing the long white beaches, pounding the boulders at the northern end of the island where clouds, wind and light kaleidoscope. The cow walked from the sea towards the meadows. Michael pulled the boat up onto the beach.

Bridget took my hand, walking along a track towards a crossroads. Where the path rises up from the harbour, we looked down over slabs of granite and fallen stones – *an old church*, she said, *Oh God, thousands of years old* – across fields to mountains, purpling the horizon. Skirting the

scattering of an ancient oratory, grasses dotted with wild flowers and the hidden eggs of seabirds; a shallow lake; a seashore of calling oyster-catchers and waders.

Are there ghosts on the island, I asked.

Bridget laughed, remembering something in Irish.

She said: *You go your way*. *And they go theirs*.

There are ghosts on the island.

But who are they, I wondered. Who are we?

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The rhododendron bush in the suburban Coventry garden reminds Bridget of the same shrubs blazing across the hills to the north in Connemara, sheltering fishing lodges, faux-castles, an abandoned Victorian railway station, relics of the forsaken dream of turning bog into a hunting ground for the rich. Bushes spreading wild inland away from the white Atlantic frill of shallow harbours, inlets, islands and bridges; away from sheets of rock searing down to the sea from the Maam Turk and Twelve Pins mountains revealing scrappy fields, cleared by hand of the stones thrown up from under the floor of the earth.

She places a music box on the top of the bureau in the front room: a white-washed, thatched cottage that plays *Danny Boy*. Over the sofa, she smooths a velvet throw sent as a gift by one of her sisters in America, with the faces of Jackie Kennedy and the dead President woven against a background of the White House. Her hands dust and arrange the white and blue

Wedgewood in the wooden shelves around the gas fire, the few books – medical dictionaries and a family Bible. Small hands, unpainted nails.

I watch.

I keep my mother in view so that she will not be taken away.

VI

She comes into my room. I am naked under the sheets, curving back and forth as the cotton flows over me like water. I hold my arms over my head so that I can see how the light catches on them. In the bath earlier, I lifted my belly, watching the water fall from my sides, the streaming sheen on my skin.

I am a seal, I tell her.

She laughs, says things I can't remember, sitting by the side of the bed, talking to me, relaxed with me, handing me my nightdress. Later I learn the Conneely legend, of our ability to transform ourselves from human to animal.

We are seals, she and I.
Beneath and above the swell of birth.

VII

Another time. Before or after. How can I be sure. She pulls the sheet across my chest, tucks the blanket around me. Sits teddy in the corner where he watches as duck and monkey are lined up under the sheet next to me.

Why has Daddy got such a big nose and ears, I ask.

I don't know, she says. *But that nose makes an awful lot of noise. Last night his snoring was so bad, I went out into the street and you could hear it ten houses away. Do you know what I did then?*

No Mummy.

Well. I came back in to the house and I still couldn't sleep because of the terrible noise. So while he was sleeping, I took his nose off. Do you know the box on the top of the wardrobe?

Yes Mummy.

Well I took that box down and I put his nose in it. I have to use a little screwdriver and undo the screws around his nose. Now every time he goes to sleep, I take his nose off and put it in the box and lock it with a big key. In the morning before he wakes up, I put it on him again.

We say our prayers.

God Bless Mummy and Daddy. Grandad, Grandma, Uncle Michael, Sally and Shelia and Mary and Eileen and Tom and Jean and Terry and all our friends and relatives and the dear departed. Amen

And don't forget Daddy's nose, I say.

No. It would be impossible to forget your Daddy's nose, she says.

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My mother is standing outside, looking in through the long windows of the hall at St Thomas More primary school during morning assembly. She is pointing at me. Mouthing something I can't hear.

I stand inside, not listening to what is being said on either side of the window, noticing the maroon weight of the velvet curtains pulled across a stage, the climbing frames lining the walls; the distinctive gym-smell of polished wood and sweat. It's when I lift my head from pulling up my socks, as the light from the windows dances with speckles of dust, that I see her clearly.

She has one hand on the handlebars of her bike.

Standing in the grass, right outside, where she's not supposed to be. The short curls, the hard glare. It takes a while for me to see she is gesticulating with the other hand, pointing at me, then at my shoulders.

She's mouthing: *Put your shoulders back*. Put your shoulders back.

At least, I think that's what she is trying to say.

Three years later, she will be dead. The world will lose a vibration. She will be silent and my response will be to silence myself and push her even further away.

When she stumbles into my bedroom, dazed by heavy medication saying *I'm sorry. It's the tablets. Go back to sleep*, I will know that soon, she will be gone. I will hear her sisters shouting at her, angry and inconsolable, somewhere deep in our house.

She will die alone in London, a hundred miles from our home, and be buried without saying goodbye to her two daughters. Without the rituals of her Catholic upbringing for the sacred passing of a mother. Without the Wake, the step between one world and another. Without the keening, the caoine, the song of lament and mourning from her children.

I will not visit her grave, mention her name nor ask questions about her while I am growing up. My sister will not tell her schoolfriends that she doesn't have a mother. What is the right way to talk about her after she has gone: can I speak of Mum or Mummy? She? *What was she like?* I will not ask, for fear of the effect on myself and others.

I will be told she is dead by my father in a pub garden.

I will walk away, shut myself in a toilet cubicle.

Tell myself, there are worse things than death.

Walk back. Not let anyone see me cry.

Days later, I will lay out my new school uniform in the house of a friend.

I will get on board a bus, start secondary school.

For a while, my sister and father will also disappear from memory.

She will leave me her wedding ring, the distant landscape of Connemara and a ruined cottage, a structure standing incomplete, listening for the end of its story.

And her words, *Put your shoulders back*.

And what we share beyond words.

I see her standing outside the window and hope no-one else has spotted her.

I straighten. Stand tall. When I glance again, she has cycled away.

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Was it night-time? Hard to say but it was September and an adult was speaking to me, while my throat tightened, saying I had a choice about whether my little sister and I went to our mother's funeral. I felt the tiniest stab of something like anger inside the numbness. I thought, *you don't want us there.*

I decided we should stay away.

Having told the adults this, for a while I stopped talking altogether.

I began to work hard at school and to read.

I put my mother and our story far from my heart.

I began to collect the stories of other people.

People much more interesting than us.

For we had been forgotten.

About the Author

Cathy Galvin has roots in Connemara and England. A journalist, she has worked on staff for *Newsweek* and the *Sunday Times,* where she founded the Sunday Times EFG Short Story Award. She is founder and director of the UK's leading promoter of short fiction, the Word Factory. Her poetry has appeared in journals and anthologies including *New Walk, Visual Verse*, the *Morning Star, London Magazine* and *Letter To An Unknown Soldier* (Collins). In 2016, she published her second collection of poetry, *Rough Translation* (Melos Press), was artist in residence at the Heinrich Boll Cottage, Achill Island, and was awarded a Hawthornden Fellowship. The Missing Sixth is part of a larger work set in England and Ireland, exploring her mother's short life.

Cathy Galvin Writer