

A black and white photograph of a stone wall made of rounded, dark stones. To the left of the wall, a path leads towards a body of water, possibly a lake or a wide river. The water is calm and reflects the light. The overall scene is serene and natural.

FourXFour  
Poetry Journal  
Issue 1 Summer 2012

Chris McLaughlin  
Tory Campbell  
Mario Abbattiello  
Colin Dardis

## Editorial

Welcome to the inaugural issue of FourXFour.

Each quarter, we showcase the work of four poets, concentrating mostly on those from, or operating in, the North of Ireland.

Within, you will find four poems from each writer, giving you a small insight into their styles and approaches to poetry. FourXFour hopes to serve as a brief introduction to each poet's output, in the hope that you will seek out more of their work.

We hope you enjoy our first edition. Please subscribe to us on [issuu.com](http://issuu.com) as we release future instalments.

Happy reading.

Regards,

Colin Dardis, editor.

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# Chris McLaughlin

Chris McLaughlin was born in the USA (UpStairs, Altnagelvin), as per the childhood joke oft uttered on the streets of Strabane, where he grew up.

He went to Manchester to study Philosophy and Social Science at age Eighteen; it was at this stage, with his mind blown open with new ideas and a distance from home that allowed new perspectives, that he began to write.

Chris has progressed in the last few years from producing angst-ridden drivel to something more palatable. His material is influenced by personal experience and pop culture and it ranges from the tender to the absurd.

He has been a regular at the Purely Poetry nights in the Crescent Arts Centre for the past year, where he has been delighting audiences with his wicked wordplay and penchant for satire.

## The Art of Shaving

My father was most amusing when shaving:  
shirtless with taut neck and tight lips,  
cream beard rendering him ridiculous.  
Yellow Bic razor in his right hand,  
stubby brush placed down with his left.

Soon, he will emerge,  
smelling strongly of eau de Brut.  
Victorious but not unscathed,  
leather skin nicked in various places,  
toilet paper on his face  
like little fallen soldiers.

Later, I change the blade on his Mach-3,  
(this was before the heady days of Quattro or Hydro-5)  
lather up and begin  
with southerly strokes on my  
cheeks, upper lip and chin;  
careful around the Adam's apple,  
then up and in on the sides of my neck.

Skin and blade are much more amicable,  
any friction eased with a cream  
that is lawyer smooth:  
slightly greasy but effective.  
My linen skin has yet to be punctured;  
brush, brut and paper are now redundant.

## Burden

Hessian mail sacks:

The same as old coal bags,  
That would be quickly sought  
Whenever Santa brought snow;  
My mother waving gloves  
As I hurry on to the golf course hill.

It's breakneck speed at the Royal Mail.  
Temporary workmates speak in native tongues;  
I match letter on sack tag with letter on cage,  
Waddle the distance between; extend arm, then release  
Like the claw on a teddy picker.

Some create fun by shooting from distance,  
Others swing sacks between legs  
The way a man might toss a caber.  
The sores on my hands  
Are weeping for gloves  
To ease the rough rub  
Of sack cloth on tender skin.

## Requiem for a Woodlouse

*For Alice*

Whilst busy sweeping up my house

I came across a woodlouse

lying on the curve of its back

beside an armchair.

'What, asleep my love?

Dead, my dove?'

I saw that he was reaching up,

legs all akimbo; petitioning the Gods.

The absence of dignity sat at odds with me:

so I picked him up, brought him outside,

rested him on the concrete coalbunker.

From the drawer - a soup spoon,

a matchbox, some cotton wool.

The spoon laden with a serving of dirt,

emptied to my inverse image

faintly reflected in the convex curve.

The tiny coffin lowered slowly,

before the ground was patted down.

Beside the plot an inscription which read:

*"Here lies armadillo bug, cheeselog,*

*cheesy bug, doodlebug, pill bug, potato bug,*

*chuggypig, chunky pig, gramersow, butcher boy.*

*Requiem aeternam dona ei, Domine"*

I blessed myself in the manner I was taught,  
stepped inside to resume my chores.  
There by the kitchen door was an  
upturned bluebottle, making the same plea  
for ceremony; so I swept him up  
and chucked him in the bin.



## Still, we set sail

Each one of us was born to fail,  
Each is destined for defeat;  
Yet undeterred, still, we set sail.

For each son has a trusty nail  
Driven through his static feet;  
Each one of us was born to fail.

Our parents are of no avail:  
Vows long wrapped in a winding sheet.  
Yet undeterred, still, we set sail.

Breadcrumb vessels mark our trail;  
Our floating but sodden fleet.  
Each one of us was born to fail.

Up ahead, is the fabled whale,  
With its ceaseless need to eat,  
Yet undeterred, still, we set sail

So, rain down your golf ball hail;  
Come, rain down your pinching sleet.  
Each one of us was born to fail,  
yet undeterred, still, we set sail.

## Tory Campbell

Tory Campbell (37) is a Fine Art/Art History graduate of Goldsmiths College. She only made the shift to writing in her early thirties and is a member of Queen's Writers' Group. Tory has been published in local anthologies, *The Stinging Fly* and *The Irish Independent*, and was recently shortlisted for the 2012 Hennessy Literary Award for Emerging Poetry.

Born and raised in Belfast, Tory spent her twenties in London and Nairobi. She currently lives and works in Belfast, where she is a tutor to adults with learning disability.

## A3

Just before they locked him up  
my brother wrote poems  
in an A3 sketch pad he'd used  
at school. The poems were better  
than his art – primitive –  
scrawled on the backs of pages,  
bold as tattoos. Reading them  
I discovered a stranger  
in the boy I knew –  
puncturing him. And me.

When I went to visit him  
he told me how he'd seen  
our parents, A3 pad in tow,  
all hushed glances and lowered mouths –  
sliding into the nurses' station  
to display as evidence  
a tangible explanation –  
as though they had found  
the answer to his madness  
from rummaging through his room.

I've been writing for a while now.  
Cautious poems. Dangerous as knives.

## My father doesn't like cut flowers

The fading blooms  
protrude from vases like  
canopies of languid butterflies  
that drop apologetically  
in turn  
onto sideboards, mantels, rugs.

Breathless parachutes –  
silent as dust  
in stagnant rooms  
draped with the heavy spill  
of scent. The pollen stains  
like rouge.

He remembers  
his childhood –  
filled with weighty stems  
saluting his parents  
laid out in the dining room for days.  
Barely a year apart.

## Uhuru Highway

*For Edwinah, Jan 08*

The business district tightens  
into a boma –  
wild askari run the streets,  
marking out territory.

Kanga-wrapped bundles cling to Kikuyu mamas  
in a kibra of tiny tin nyumbani –  
senses cocked – ready to flee  
panga-toothed Luo.

Nairobi National Park flanks the city –  
its fence a gesture. Wazee speak of how  
recently a lion was seen  
strolling down Kenyatta Avenue.

### NOTES

*uhuru – freedom, independence*

*boma – a livestock enclosure, a stockade or kind of fort, or a district government office*

*askari – policemen, guards, soliders*

*kanga – printed cotton sheet used as a wrap by women*

*kibra – forest / jungle*

*nyumbani – homes*

*wazee – respectful term for old men, used for village elders*

## Mother

My mum has never learned to swim.  
Now fifty-six she claims it's far  
too late, there's nothing she can do.  
She washes in an inch-deep bath  
and likes to use a dry shampoo.

I've tried my best to understand  
what makes her mind shut mollusc tight.  
Her dry-lipped smile's not fooling me –  
I take her to a shallow pool  
to show how easy it can be.

I dress her up in floats and plugs  
and challenge all excuses as  
I try to gently splash her skin.  
Our common tongue dissolves until  
I'm tempted just to push her in.

## Mario Abbatiello

Born in 1947 on Long Island, New York, Mario Abbatiello took his BFA in visual arts, dance, creative writing and philosophy at Pratt Institute in 1971. He has had a lifelong fascination with creativity, awareness, dreams, nature, meditation and personal transformation, which is reflected in his poetry.

His journey has included: living for a year in an ashram; dancing and acting in a travelling performance troupe; owning a pottery and a natural food restaurant; 12 years' intensive training in Sufism and Zen meditation; working as an artist-in-residence in primary schools; and a career as a carpenter, taking him to 38 of the 50 States, Canada, the UK, Ireland and Italy.

In the late Eighties, Mario retrained in counselling and began practicing in Seattle while also studying creative writing, meeting his wife, Ruth, there in 1990 and emigrating to Belfast in 2005.

His poetry has appeared in *The New Times*, Seattle; and in Belfast, in *Write to Be Heard*, *The Poet's Place*, and *Speech Therapy*. He has published three chapbooks: *Mystery & Wonder*, *Maxwelton Road* and *Chicken Soup and Other Poems*.

## November Blessing

Winter has begun  
so early this year.  
The cold scene  
of snowy rooftops  
and gardens before me  
inspires quiet,  
a contemplative mood  
but no desire to speak.

A millennial eastward progress  
of icy wisps crossing blue  
opens a beneficent vastness  
in my chest where I know with  
mystic certainty the world I inhabit  
is thoroughly good.

Not the world I see on the news or  
the world viewed through eyes of  
conflict which passes for history,  
or even the world of scripture or  
sagas or epics or odysseys  
fraught with battles and heroes—

But this quiet world  
of simple living, neighbourly action;  
artless concern for life and nature  
which seems to live at the core of me.



I look out on this quiet snowy world;  
my heart opens to bless it but  
I find instead its silent benediction.

## Sangre de Cristos Mountains

She was so delicate, even precarious;  
it showed through her drawings:  
gossamer layers of coloured pencil  
stitching a transparent world at odds  
with the New Mexico desert.

Why did he take her rock climbing?  
Well, it is where he felt most alive;  
He wanted her to see him here,  
where the air seems new-made,  
like cool clear sunshine.

She seemed to take to it,  
was rosy with excitement;  
took risks that scared him,  
made him proud.

Near the summit a Cessna 150  
droned across the valley  
at eye level. Mountain gentian  
shone blue underfoot.

He turned just in time to see her  
one misstep, momentarily balanced  
on a toe, her look not of fear but  
surprised affection

as the world stopped,  
her gaze fixing his for an instant.

Two words of farewell: I'm dying,  
before her slow-motion plunge.

## Lovesong

Pushing the drapes aside a bit  
he let in a sliver of dawn:  
sea air freshness whiffed  
through the open window;  
gulls, terns, plovers  
squawked, dipped and dove.

The teacup was hot in his hand  
stooping in the dim light  
by her bedside till she opened  
an eye, the other.

—Sleep well?

—Mmm.

—Thought you'd like this.

It's a gorgeous morning.

—Mmm. Let's take a walk  
to the sea cave.

—My thoughts.

—Give me a minute.

—Take an hour.

Bit by bit over the next half hour  
he opened the drapes wide.  
She liked a darkened room,  
he preferred the dawn.  
The hour was counted off

with sounds of clothes pulled on,  
warm brown smell of toast jumping up,  
crackle of fried eggs in the black pan,  
slurp of her tea, aroma of his coffee,  
shoes tied, jackets zipped —  
all the soft silences inhabiting their morning —  
door clicked shut, the turn of the key,  
the squelch of moist sand puckering underfoot.

— Ahh.

— Mmm.

## On the Way to the Italian Lesson

My heart is filled with  
happiness this morning.

You stunned me last night  
with your invitation:  
terrifying intimacy,  
lovely intimacy.

We are stumbling toward  
union in sweet,  
divine love,  
making our way there  
as best we can;  
two bruised souls  
healing as we go,  
healing as we learn  
to love.

Can we be still only  
learning to love?  
I think it's true.

And my heart is filled  
with sweet peace  
this early morning  
while I'm away  
to learn the original  
romance language...

## Colin Dardis

Born at the tail end of the seventies in Northern Ireland, Colin Dardis is a poet, artist, and sometimes musician. He edits *Speech Therapy*, an online zine focusing on poetry from Ireland and beyond. He is also the founder of *Purely Poetry*, an open mike poetry night in Belfast.

Colin's work has been previously in numerous anthologies, journals and zines in Ireland, the UK and the USA. His poem 'Perhaps', won the EditRed.Com 2006 Writer's Choice Award for Poetry.

Colin is a poet who displays hunger for understanding of himself and the world around him. His poetry and performances display an ever present sense of hope through times of love, sadness, death and joy, while sparkling with humour, honesty, modesty, and a touch of the absurd.

## Transponder

He accumulates electricity  
by way of study,  
storming the charges at will  
and releasing tidal waves  
of intellect and knowledge  
over a suspecting crowd,  
eager and anticipating  
this light of young genius.  
Arms raised in exclamation,  
with antennae proclaim,  
he projects the rare and right  
combination of learning and license\*,  
relating the acquired world  
onto an audience already  
opulent with appreciation.

*\*Phrase from T.M. Ragg, writing in 1938 in regards to Samuel Beckett's 'Murphy'*



## Chasm

Call to me, call again and recall,  
speak to me of distance and longing  
to shorten this great chasm between us.  
Laugh again, and I will laugh at the thought  
of our final reunion;

a formation of society  
erected from previous romantic whispers,  
stowed away from the modern fashion  
of stagnant stoicism.

In there, we breathe  
airs of temptation and desire, satisfying  
the hunger that departure has placed in our bellies,  
escaping from our overflowing canyon  
of iniquitous despair.

Curious, that in such emptiness,  
one should find sensations of immensity.

## Watermelon

Some talk of a seed of love:  
it could be determined  
from the sugar-juice  
that drips from your lips  
that one sacrificed  
love for gluttony instead.

If you could have kept that slice intact,  
then I would have loved those lips,  
like your tongue loved spooning  
that fruit syrup into your greedy mouth.

And I would have loved  
to be have been a seed  
caught within that moment of time,  
like an orchid's expanse of petal,  
unfolding into a delicatessen of desire.

## Nestling

A penny-farthing songbird  
gathers her nest:  
no mud or waddle tucked in-between  
multitudes of stick, twig and minor branch.  
She builds with eloquence,  
smooth and diligent forage  
of nature's abandonment  
constitutes a home for her young.

A poet's lot  
is to muse over faucets  
other enquiring minds may ignore:  
to stand in streams and inspect the current,  
testing each rivulet and gully;  
to question the depth of the shingle,  
height of riverbed;  
to stand on the shoreline and stop the tide,  
so that grains of thought may gather under his feet;  
to carefully pick his way through forests,  
selecting kindling for his fire of words;  
to build his shelter from the tree of life  
and nestle in its folds.

**Thank you for reading!**



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