



FourXFour
Poetry Journal

Issue 11 Winter 2015

Lynda Tavakoli
Niall McGrath
Katy Waller
Heather Newcombe

Editorial

Welcome to Issue 11 of *FourXFour*, bringing you another four talented poets from within Northern Ireland that we feel make for vital reading.

All four poets featured share an ability to present the facts of their time and spaces without letting the emotion dictate the language; to allow the reader into a world that is expressive, but without telling them what to think. Within, you will find poems that speak of lost loves, lost family members, lost ideals, lost moments, and always, the worthy attempt to regain what was sacrificed or stolen through the pursuit of words.

We hope the work included here inspires you to seek out more of their writing, and to look out for their names elsewhere in the future, as with all our previously featured poets in *FourXFour*.

Regards and happy reading,
Colin Dardis, Editor

Back issues available for free download at:
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Lynda Tavakoli

Lynda grew up in Portadown but now lives near Lisburn, Co Down. She teaches special needs in a local primary school and presently facilitates a creative writing course at the Island Arts Centre.

Lynda's literary successes include short story and poetry prizes at Listowel, the Mencap short story competition and the Mail on Sunday novel competition. Her poems have been included in various publications including Templar Poets' Anthology *Skein*, Abridged *Magnolia*, *Mara*, *Silence*, *Primal* and more recently The Incubator Journal and CAP anthologies.

Lynda's poetry and prose have been broadcast on both BBC Radio Ulster and RTE Sunday Miscellany. She has written two novels *Attachment* and *Of Broken Things* and has been the recipient of both the Tyrone Guthrie and John Hewitt bursaries.

Moving Day

I moved my mother
into our dining room,
her presence boxed and waiting
for the final shift
to a shed outside.

black bags remaining empty
of the detritus
I could not throw away -

shopping lists on paper scraps,
repeated phone numbers
written in her tiny
disappearing hand
all about the house,

'just in case'.

Game On

In Syria the shooters
choose themes for target practice,
a living video game of
entertainment for the week.

On Saturday, it's chins:
anything below the nose, above the neck,
and rifle sights explore
a quivered lip
as points are deducted for errors –
cheeks and ears are left
for Sunday's sport.

On Monday, it's the old,
their leech-peeled progress
over desert skin the easier to track,
points deducted for impairment
but added for an outright kill.

On Tuesday, pregnant women.
Two for the price of one (but scarce)
with double points for primary executions,
only if you're in the zone.

On Wednesday, barrel metal
rests on gaping sills,
trigger fingers slack
for mobiles phoning home
while someone calculates the points
but lets the stretcher bearers
live upon a whim.

Thursday's dawn will drone
unblinking and unlit, sheltering
the snipers' bull's-eyed sleep
from heavenly foe. Anonymous,
the joystick thumb strokes its target
from behind a foreign screen,
one final arbitrary theme,
no worse, no better
than what's gone before.

Friday now and Holy Day.
Notch up the scores
before the credits start to roll
and silence sucks its permadeath of souls
into the black hole of a VDU.

Backward Glancing on a Tehran Street

Turquoise, my colour-of choice,
and yours, the emerald green
of half your roots;
the other half a chador-ed
shadow stretched to fit
a flat screen

back at home.

Here on this Tehran Street -
Khomeini Street -
the black crows
softly trip the light fandango
through a sea of cars
shoaling the three-lane surf
forever six lanes deep.

On pavements walk
the kohl-eyed beauty
of the young.
loose slung roosari draped
high on beehives, nose jobs
sticking-plastered for perfection
(at a Western price).

We walk rebellious in
our coloured coats,
the mother-daughter oddity
of us no longer meriting
that whispered, backward glance
for underneath our feet,
awakening slowly from its sleep,
the Persian tiger stirs.

Taken

For months
a mile or more
his legs took him,
walking the hedgerows
to seek her memory
amongst the blackthorn
and the meadowsweet.

For they had come in stealth
filching his dead wife
from where she lingered
in dressing table drawers
and trinket boxes long ago
lost of polish and key.
A handkerchief that owned her smell,
the string of pearls
she wore on holidays
or with her Sunday best.

One day he found her bible
snagged in the blackthorn,
a discarded spoil
of her stolen life,

the list of family deaths and births
on a back page
discernible still in copperplate
and faded ink,
singing her long history
in the hidden value of the words.

Now he weeps into their cold sheets,
the lost smell of her
too high a cost
as he wonders the value
of her wedding ring
on a stranger's finger
or the price of her worthless pearls
or a laced handkerchief bereft of scent
left now to languish in another's
dressing table drawer.

Niall McGrath

Niall McGrath was editor of "The Black Mountain Review" (1999-2006) and his most recent collections are "Clay" and "The Way It is" (Lapwing, Belfast, 2013 and 2014). In his work there is the cycle of love, death, religion and myth, and the anchorage of the land. There is also the underlying sense of revelation.

He is "a poet who bears witness to the collective anguish of his people; the thwarted intimacy and the threatened sanity of their lives. He confronts and, somehow, sings the darkness into light." (Cathal O Searcaigh).

"Here is a poet who deserves to be better known." (Gary Allen)

What Secret Demons Drove You From Me?

Restless on the sofa, I flick channels,
all-action heroes in car chases escape me;
geniuses with spatulas, sprinkling flour
and kneading dough as if caressing flesh
remind me of the warmth of your flank
my lips kissed when you lay here before leaving.
Fit dancers glide in their partners' arms,
muscular forms flexing as they cha-cha-cha;
cheerful gardeners prod earth with trowels,
display bountiful mounds, borders rampant with colour.
Dolls in lingerie cavort like those leotard-clad hoofers,
but these aim to tease. Still my finger
twitches on the remote, I get no satisfaction
anywhere; all I can do is wait for the end
of your shift, the flash of car lights at the blinds,
announcing the latest episode in this exclusive series
that fails to materialise.

Catch the Sun

"Surely the sun would not cost much?" (Lucy Irvine, 'Castaway')

In an empty living room, apart from the TV, a lamp
and framed photographs of her watching over you
as you lie, eyes closed, like a corpse on the pink beanbag.
A breeze comforts through open patio doors;
birdsong lulls.

When I arrive, you are on the lawnmower;
you raise a hand as I wave
and my heart ignites like a firefly.
You'd texted, "Do you want to come over
and catch the sun..." before getting on with the rest of your
life?

We perch on flagstones, share a can of cider,
as clouds encroach over the lough.

When I ask about the future
you shrug your shoulders.

I don't let on I've seen the ashes casket
in the empty bedroom.

Open the Blinds

"Let the light in!" you'd say.

"I hate being shrouded in darkness."

I just didn't get it.

I preferred to tilt them, so the setting glare
didn't obscure the TV screen,
or close them completely at night
when the lamp was on,
so passers-by couldn't gawp in,
or keep the kitchen roller down
so the dog wouldn't see me up
and bark incessantly for its breakfast.

Now, I can't stand a dim en-suite,
or vertical strips blocking my garden view;
too late I crave the warmth and light –
six months after you've left.

Kissing by the Pier

Neck-tight anoraks insulate their heat
like jackets on hot water cylinders,
frosty air smacks crisp as cars and buses
slough past on the street beyond empty offices.

In the eerie neon light beside the bestial slop and plok of tide
as water scums through the city,
beneath the not-yet awakened glass wall
Of the theatre bar and restaurant,
the young couple snuggle on a damp bench.

A hip raised, her face above his, hot lips squash,
tongues resolving tenderly when teeth clash;
eyes deathmask-like, hair tickling
but not enough to interrupt;
the concentrated unconscious intensity of this kiss
possesses them as I pass by unnoticed
and as, from beneath the theatre's concrete cantilever,
a dirty, globe slowly bulges
to some inevitable, ever-unseen break and fall.

Katy Waller

Katy Waller is a third year Politics, Philosophy and Economics student at Queen's University. Originally a transplant from Birmingham, she is enjoying the quieter life in Belfast. She's finally got her head around the concepts of '*craic*' and the phrase '*yer man*'.

Katy is currently competing in the Irish Times Debating competition, and trying to get involved with as many things involving pretty words as she can.

Flowers

She hates roses, tulips, lilies:
She's seen too many before,
Draped in wreaths and drowning a coffin
Too many times.

One long, dark mahogany;
Another slimmer ash
And what she hoped would be the last:
Oak and stout,
Carrying her great grandmother to her rest.

Then a tiny box,
Too small to warrant a grave;
Bright blue,
A colour she thought he'd like.

Ten reasons not to love a poet

1. They will write you. You will be caught and pinned on to paper and the results will not please.
2. They won't realise that their words could hurt. It's just poetry, they say. It wasn't about you.
3. It is never about you - they will steal your story and make it theirs. You will look for yourself between the lines and see only distortions.
4. They will not listen, sometimes. Instead they write inside their heads. You will not notice until you mention it again two weeks later and they are confused.
5. They are usually confused and looking for a pen. They will steal your pens.
6. They are not that articulate. All they can think of to say in bed is that you are pretty. So pretty. Later they will write stanzas marvelling at the nape of your neck. These you will never see.
7. Everyone will think that the poems are about you. Even when they're not. When they are not, you will be puzzled and suspicious.

8. Sometimes words make them cry. This is usually, unfortunately, in public. They will not be embarrassed.
9. They spend hours choosing between one plain black notebook and another, and yet still never have paper.
10. When you break up (inevitably - they smile condescendingly at your metaphors and drink all of your tea) they will continue to write you. You will never escape, not really.

Madeleines

The last time I had a madeleine was naked in your bed.
As I lay gasping, sweat cooling,
You rolled out and up,
Threw on a dressing gown,
Half-insubstantial lace.
You went to make tea,
Came back with two steaming mugs
and four sponge shells
on a willow patterned plate.
They were tiny, light, sophisticated,
Sweet but with a bitter aftertaste.

They were always my favourite.
Now they make me think of you.

On Being an Ex-Size Zero Girl

I was never pretty
but I used to be skinny.
Like, model skinny.
My hip bones were sharp enough to cut.
My face, not so much, but
I was thin enough to wear a pair of size zero jeans
and I didn't even have to try .
And when you're fifteen that's all that matters.
And when you're eighteen and
your mother makes you a custom dress
because you can't buy for a figure as statuesque
as yours -
your lack of boobs and arse
no big deal because
you are skinny and your friends call you a twig
and the girls in magazines and on billboards they look
 like you,
even after three MacDonald's they look like you;
and that feeling -
if only you could bottle it .
And then you're nineteen and on medication
and you're suddenly normal sized;
you read the label
(*side effects may include weight gain*),
well - shit.
And you burst into tears in the middle of New Look
because you have to buy size ten

and you're not skinny anymore
and you can't wear the clothes you used to
and that magic slender power is gone
and you go from expending a rush of laughter and giggles
to always sucking in.

You are soft now where you were sharp.
And you know how many calories are in a slice of bread.
And you will never be carelessly skinny again.

Heather Newcombe

Heather Newcombe was educated in Coleraine and now lives in Ballycastle, County Antrim. A literary activist, she founded and co-directed the 'Let Me Take You To The Island' literary festival held on Rathlin Island from 1999 – 2010.

She has read her work at venues throughout Ireland, including: Poetry Ireland, Cuirt, Between the Lines, the Wild Geese Festival, the John Hewitt Spring School, and elsewhere. Her work has been published in magazines and anthologies in America and Ireland.

Heather was runner-up in the 'Breathing Places Poet-Tree' Competition run by the Western Education and Library Board and the BBC in 2007, and in the Winchester University Poetry Prize 2009.

A former columnist with the Creative Writers' Network magazine, she tutors creative writing. Her first collection of poetry, *Almost Dancing*, was published by Summer Palace Press in 2004.

Midsummer

On the longest day we cut the Pampas;
its thick thatch a flaxen wig of buried
summers. The saw whirrs like a wasp-
shards stick in its teeth, the strange
whoop of sound as it breaks free.
Bleached leaves slice our bare skin.
We find a ball, its weight has left
a shallow moon.

I will miss it, forget its size,
the massive girth; how it broke
the blue of the ocean.
Remember only dragonflies skimming
the pond, the plant's green leaves
swaying in the breeze.
Its small fronds like furry ears,
the smell of rain in the air
the night we planted it.

At the Truth Museum

In Memory of Ho Minh Chanh

Five days after
they capture him,
he is twenty.

May 8 they chop off
his left foot.

May 12 his right foot.

May 15 his right tibia.

I try to fill the spaces.

June 2 his left tibia.

June 27 his right thigh.

July 15 his left thigh.

I write on paper
that is damp,
cannot comprehend.

My fingers, a painful cluster
around my pen.

At the Cu Chi Tunnels

The descent below ground
a freefall of five feet.

We touched the baked walls
dark and grey as elephant hide.
Shuffled low, cumbersome ,
our eyes heavy lidded
half-blind as badgers.

A stretch of narrow tunnel,
a minute chamber that
might have been a hospital,
a school.

Ten thousand miles of
clay below their nails.
Ten thousand miles of
crawling on their bellies
like Saigon rats.

We emerged after one
hundred and forty feet,
our senses altered.

A guide in green fatigues
offered moonshine in tin cups.

All around us - rusting tanks,
helicopters and fighter jets
lay grounded in defeat.

Their stars and stripes
fading slowly.

There are no words for loss

It has no substance to speak off.
nothing that will protect;
its gossamer thinness startled her.

It cannot hold against the lightest
of footsteps, or the heel of her left hand
pressed against it.

All frothing brown around
her bloodied ankles, her broken toes
a runaway river in winter flood.

Thank you for reading!



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