



FourXFour
Poetry Journal
Issue 22 Summer 2017

Maura Johnston
Mary Montague
Therese Kieran
Anita Gracey

Editorial

Welcome to Issue 22 of FourXFour Poetry Journal.

Our four poets in this new issue were all featured in the recent anthology from Arlen House, *Washing Windows? Irish Women Write Poetry*. The collection describes itself as a “snapshot of the contemporary writing scene” among Irish / Northern Irish women poets.

Being incredibly impressed by the depth and range of poets that editor Alan Hayes had compiled, FourXFour thought it would be opportune to invite four NI poets from *Washing Windows?* that we hadn't yet published, but were certainly on our radar.

We're delighted to showcase the work of Maura, Mary, Therese and Anita, and to add to the fine work already undertaken by Arlen House. We've published a number of the poets in the anthology already in back issues, which we encourage you to check out, and as ever, will continue to promote women's writing from Northern Ireland.

Regards and happy reading,
Colin Dardis, Editor

Contents

p.4 Maura Johnston
Dreams in the Dry Season
The Swing
Found poem
Footsteps

p.11 Mary Montague
The Reckoning
The White Dove
Action
Healing

p.17 Therese Kieran
Exodus Terminus
Whisht...
Curse of the A-line Skirt
Blue

p.22 Anita Gracey
Riding Pillion
The Good Room
Emy Lough
Nursing Home Visit

Maura Johnston

Maura Johnston lives in Moneymore, in the Writer in Residence at Palace Stables and The Navan Centre, Armagh.

She has been shortlisted for the Brian Moore short story competition, and recorded three of her stories for BBC Radio Ulster. Recently she was commissioned by the World Wildlife Fund to write a poem about the Ballinderry River, as part of the RIPPLE Project. Her work with children has included cross community projects; writing projects in schools; extended literacy tutor at various Primary Schools; reminiscence work with a variety of groups; working at Bellaghy Bawn with pupils from nine schools to produce a poetry booklet for Seamus Heaney on his 70th birthday; and with six schools to produce a book of poetry for the opening of Heaney HomePlace.

Maura has been published in a variety of magazines, newspapers and anthologies, including *The Female Line*, *Poetry Ireland*, *Sunday Tribune*, *Orbis*, *Fortnight*, *Belfast Review*, *Honest Ulsterman*, *Fingerpost*, *Ulster Tatler*, *BBC My Story* and *Pen to Page*. Her first collection is *Just Suppose*. Her most recent work has been published in the anthologies *The Bees' Breakfast* and Arlen Press's *Washing Windows? Irish Women Write Poetry*.

Dreams in the Dry Season

The rain is a dancer
tapping, tapping on the dirt road
that lilts to the town.

The town is a nosy hyena
sniffing out secrets in dark alleys
that pincer the canal.

The canal is a calm hostess
offering a sprinkle of sparkles
to the factory walls.

The walls are dawdling raconteurs
entertaining the fawn grasses
that fret for the rain.

The rain is a dancer
tap-tapping on the dirt road
that lilts to the town.

The Swing

It was a rough rope
that made our swing.
It needed a folded
cushion for padding.
That hairy rope grazed
hands that gripped
tight knuckled as
we bucked and tipped
and swung out over
nettles and stones,
knowing one fall was
enough to break our bones.
Still we swung, entering
and leaving air
that sluiced our limbs,
buoyant in an element not ours.

Found Poem

I found a poem
in the waiting emptiness of a room
where the tassel of the blind beat blindly
in erratic rhythm against a pane

I found a poem
trembling under a rainbowed puddle's shine
trembling in a graciousness of green leaves
and in shadows stalking city street lights.

I found a poem
clouding the kettle's pushy, pulsing seethe
crackling from the bedsheets' creases and folds
singing, swinging the windchimes in the trees.

And so I took it, emerging, moon cold,
marble, to help it find a handhold.

Footsteps

followed me down the street
where dead leaves lapped the concrete
in a soft smirr of rain.

I watched my feet,
watched my step
found myself walking in time
to the beat of those feet
slapping on pavements
slipping on dead leaves.

I turned my wet face
searched for stars among the rooftops
while my feet kept on
on the darkening leaves
and footsteps
tapped echoes back
to catch in the lamplight
like broken words,
danced into my yesterday
with the beat of certainty
and nothing of my frailty.

Mary Montague

Mary Montague is from Ederney, Co. Fermanagh and lives in Belfast. She is a biologist by background. Her poetry collections are *Black Wolf on a White Plain* (Summer Palace 2001) and *Tribe* (Dedalus 2008). She completed a PhD in birdsong in 2014 and now works as an Open Learning tutor of science courses at Queen's University, and as a facilitator of creative writing and poetry.

Her work has appeared in *Poetry Ireland Review*; *Cyphers*; *TickleAce*; *Exile*; *New Hibernia Review*; *THE SHOP*; *Crannog*; *West 47*; *The Stony Thursday Book*; *The Interpreter's House*; *The Spark*. Her work has also featured in a number of anthologies. She has been translated into French, Italian and Russian.

More details can be found on her website:
marymontaguewritersite.wordpress.com

The Reckoning

I have gathered all I need:
a summer of haw; the sap
of yarrow; flocks of wild birds,
their urgent persistent song.

Sprigs array my rucksack.
Blossom lines my pockets.
Garlands of sunrise. Falls of dusk.
A tinkle of goldfinch applauds.

A milk-white swan flies black
against a bone-white moon.
I pack all these carefully.
Triceratops slumbers on.

I forget the accounts. I rely
on the dead. There is no-one
to shame me. The warm metal
of a key solidifies in my hand.

The White Dove

With giddy eyes, pale pink cere
and a fantail that bestowed
its Victorian air, a white dove
came to my window.

I thought of Darwin
mingling with the fanciers,
struggling to articulate
his terrifying vision –

fit it
for the domestic,
the familiar.

I thought of Emma
despairing for his soul,
their litany of dead children.

I thought of olive branches,
temple sacrifices,
holy ghosts.

And here was the dove
flitting from sill to sill,
flapping from one side of our street
of red-bricked semis to the other,

like a foolish belief
or a dazzling truth.

Action

speaks movement

 betrays

 flashes

on the retinas

 of predators

you must

be still

 take

the slightest

of breaths

 make yourself

small

 stop blinking

don't close your eyes

 watch

 yourself

 follow

their heedless performance from behind your receding

mid-distance gaze

as if you

don't

see

don't

take up

space

breathe

Healing

Slowly
over many months,
even years,

the tissue stitches itself
back to a single piece.
The scars are raised, bumpy.

Then there is the learning
to live with pain,
to feel it in your flesh,

gristly, interruptive,
a burn creeping
through your whole body.

Gentleness. Tenderness.
These are not part
of your vocabulary

but pain cannot be bullied away.
Your approach is timid.
Yet something responds:

knots, adhesions, soften;
muscle yields and stretches;
a damaged thing works.

Therese Kieran

Therese Kieran lives in Belfast. She enjoys writing poetry. In 2016, and with ACNI support, she conceived and curated *Death Box*, an exhibition of poetry and prose including contributions from 25 writers. As part of this project, she and project partner, Lucy Beevor, hosted Northern Ireland's first Death Café.

In October 2016, she collaborated London based designer, Sam Griffiths, to develop her piece, 'Try Me', which was exhibited in The Free Word Centre, London. In 2015, she was a runner up in the Poetry Ireland/Trocaire poetry competition and longlisted for the Seamus Heaney Award for New Writing.

Her work has featured in a variety of anthologies including those published by *Arlen House*, *Shalom*, *Community Arts Partnership*, *Queen's University*, *Panning for Poems*, *Poetry NI*, *26 Writer's group*, *The Incubator* and *Tales from the Forest*. In 2017, she was again long-listed for the Seamus Heaney Award for New Writing, had two poems shortlisted in *Poems for Patience*, University Hospital Galway and was highly commended in the Imagine Belfast Poetry & Politics Competition.

Exodus Terminus

a boy, a beach
no bucket, no spade
no mama, no papa
a cold wet cradle
for treasured wreckage

a boy, a beach
no summer, no spring
no cabin, no berth
flushed out, washed up,
no buoyancy aid

a boy, a beach
no sunshine, no shade
no ice-cream, no fries
flotsam and jetsam,
tossed ashore

a boy, a beach
no mercy, no luck
a broadcast, a headline;
press pause, press pause
press pause. Pausa.

Whisht...

bird whistle, long notes then cheep,
then crow crow,
then magpie castanet and pigeon coo
and all with the February sun massaging my back,
I pause:
sheltered in a dip of the field above the woods,
rooted to a spot; the stream below stripping silt from stone,
cleansing thought, washing worry,
until...
in some far-off tree the crows intent on torture
are causing ructions and the birdsong responds
like the unrepentant honk of a child's bicycle horn;
the ones they love and adults bemoan
and I want to tell them,
whisht, let me hear the sun,
let me sip snowdrops through these sprouting rushes.

Curse of the A-line Skirt

Third year domestic science - skirt:

Buy a pattern, lose it,
but it again, size 14 - I'm a 6.

Sister Molly - "You are a goose!"

"What are you? Say it,"

"I am a goose, I am a goose, I am a goose."

Fabric is cotton sateen - good for curtains;
white, pink, grey, large-scale painterly florals
but the pattern defies matching on the seam.

The waistband tapers to the width of the buttonhole
that travels half way round again to find the button.

The invisible zip holds its own protest
by being visible and very, very yellow;
the central inverted pleat sits defiantly to the left
and the hem buckles like an accordion
that will never be played.

Blue

Waiting room. Washed out
wipe-clean chairs. Blue,
one for me, one for you

on your phone, while I
check the time, hug my bag,
watch the door as more

slope in, also blue -
to mumble names, to wait in queues,
to text, tap, fidget.

The doctor calls your name,
she nods, I smile,
but not the blue you, who

leaves me flicking grubby magazines,
skimming salacious revelations,
pondering blue interior decoration.

Anita Gracey

Anita Gracey was born in 1971 and bred in Belfast. She has a degree in Social Policy and has worked in supported housing and is a freelance trainer in independent living. Anita is a wheelchair user and her biggest fan is her teenage son, who hasn't read a line of anything she has written!

A relative newcomer to poetry of five years, she finds it challenging and therapeutic. Anita has written poetry, short stories and articles in newsletters (*Ataxia Ireland, Centre for Independent Living*), newspapers (*Death Box*), booklets (*BMC*), book (*Washing Windows?*) and even on someone's tattoo! Anita scavenges her themes from personal experiences, family, friends and social issues.

Riding Pillion

Hedge-lined lanes flying by
I'm behind on a cushioned seat.

You'd swing my dimpled legs over gates
flopping in tall grasses
we held one breath, watching white tails bob
and thrilled at the swallows swooping low
in search of evening insects.

At home you never hugged me
but with my arms hugging your waist
you didn't have to.

The Good Room

I craved a room to have nothing to do but
be still and good.

Luxurious theatrical velvet curtains
swept down to a swirling carpet
which begs for shoes to be thrown off
and toes wiggled.

Matching red suite with gold braid trim
waiting for tailored bums.
Cushions sitting just so
plumped and squeezed.

Waiting in the wings, faux mahogany table
having stage fright.
An anonymous backdrop
blandly painted.

China ballerina poised
imprisoned mid pirouette.
Solemn spotlight
dust particles forever dancing.

Emy Lough

The clocks are set on snooze
inhale attentive ebbing
eavesdrop on distant dreams.

Forgive the biting nettles
the sinful lassoing brambles
ducks pedal by while
fish throw champagne kisses.

We are both reliable loners
within our teasing depths
I lie back on your surface

the stillness whispers possibilities.

Nursing Home Visit

Within nursing home walls
lurk Rembrandt shadows,

shrouded with his touch.
Bowed flowers, uprooted and lost

chairs silhouette like tombstones
paying respect

in a would-be Milltown.
Question marks in blankets

swaying to their own tune
tarnished faces, home to ethereal eyes

time goes by slowly, so slowly
in limbo, waiting, just waiting.

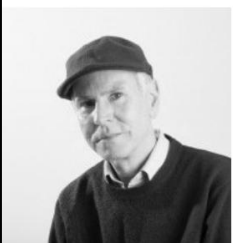
Dutiful monologues mouthed
one last Judas kiss before I leave.

LAGAN ONLINE

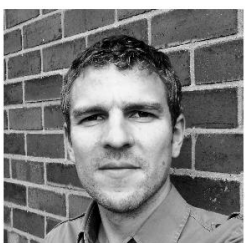
A  verbal PROJECT

... a place where every story matters ...

laganonline.co



*Supporting the literary scene
in Northern Ireland and
beyond through new writing
and reading development,
and featuring our '12NOW'
New Original Writers*



Thank you for reading!



Copyright original authors © 2017

All rights reserved

Produced in Northern Ireland

A **Poetry NI** production

Back issues available for free download at:

www.poetryni.com/fourxfour