



FourXFour

Poetry Journal

Issue 4 Spring 2013

Jenny Cleland

Ross Thompson

Brian Bailey

Clare McWilliams

Editorial

Here we are, at Issue Four of FourXFour, which has a nice ring to it. (In case you don't know, I say it 'Four by Four', rather than 'Four X Four', just to clear up any confusion...)

Our four poets contained within are all active on the Belfast poetry scene, being regular readers at the Purely Poetry open mic night in the Crescent Arts Centre, as well as other individual creative pursuits. I've known Brian and Clare for a number of years now through various projects and pursuits, while Ross and Jenny are newer, but certainly not lesser, versifiers who have been a great addition to the poetry community.

I hope you enjoy this small snippet of their work, and thank you, reader, for continuing to support poets and poetry in Northern Ireland.

Happy reading.
Colin Dardis, Editor.

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Jenny Cleland

Born in Belfast in 1979, Jenny Cleland was a student of LAMDA (London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art) from a young age. She studied English at Queen's University and later completed a PGCE in English with Media and Drama at Canterbury Christ Church University College.

Jenny loves the aural quality of poetic language. She started painting six years ago and is equally fascinated by how the fusion of visual and literary mediums can complement the imagery of language.

She has only recently begun submitting writing for publication. However, she was shortlisted for last year's Grace Dieu Writer's Circle Short Story Award.

Currently, Jenny lives in Lisburn and teaches English to the migrant community.

I Want to Paint Your Face

I want to paint your face:
Caress you with my brush
As I would like to
With my touch.

I want to paint your face:
To make you
Appear before me;
To make you gaze,
Adore me.

I want to paint your face:
I want to make you glow.
I want to light you up.
I want to let you know
How you obscure all others.
I want to paint your face.

I want to paint your face:
I want to blend your boundaries,
Draw you out of shade.
I want to make you proud
Of the darkness I'll put in you
And of the magic made.

I want to paint your face:
I want to expose
The undertone,
The undertone,
I want to heighten hue;
I want to stroke the shapes,
The intensity of you.

I want to paint your face:
I want to rub in oil,
In heat and cadmium colours.
I want to taint and blush.
I want to skim and brush.

I want to paint your face:
I want to twist and flick,
I want to lick
Along the lines of you
And saturate your skin.
I want to draw you in.

And I don't care
If paint goes everywhere
If it gets on my clothes
On my skin, in my hair.
I want to paint your face.

I want to paint your face

So that I

Can have you

And I can keep you.

I can see you.

I can be near you.

I want to paint your face.

Breaking Point

I see now that you are made of glass.

My father dropped a whiskey bottle once
Onto a tiled slate floor
And it bounced
And he caught it.
“That’s strong stuff,” he said.

You could have reached out and touched the emotion,
Taken some for yourself,
And we all did;
Relief and delight.
We all laughed hard.

When you fell into soul-breaking cruelty,
You bounced
And I caught you.

But now when I hold you,
I know you’re getting thinner.
You are no longer a sturdy bottle
With a rim that can dent slate.

You are a delicate wine glass,
Glass so fine
A breeze could breathe you into fragments.
We are scared to touch you
Without gloves or cotton wool.
We don't know how to make you strong again.
We don't know
 what
To do.

I see with growing fear,
 more than ever,

How beautiful you are.

The Joke

The shy boy who could not look
In the eyes of women in the flesh
Flirted with me on Facebook
And quickly lost his charm.

My guide to dating, he wrote:
Chloroform, duct tape and a body bag.
Personally, I didn't see the joke
And he was wounded, offended I spoke.
He called me a stupid slag
But I could find no wordplay or pun,
No lightness, no twist, no fun.
He said I was too thick to get the gag
And I wondered if the duct tape didn't stick
Or the chloroform had gone to my head,
That I was confused and I felt sick.
And this body that he'll never bag in bed,
Apparently, he didn't want it anyway;
He wouldn't know what he might catch.

So the poor boy must keep on searching
For a woman who loves his jokes
And not herself; his perfect match.

The Doorway

A girl of seventeen,
A beautiful girl,
Soft-cheeked and young;
She had a sense of adventure,
Hunger for a future,
Full of laughter and fun.

She left work at the usual time
And walked to City Hall
Where rush hour was flowing,
People were crawling the pavements,
Buses; coming and going.
There were too many
In the bus shelter
To find shelter that day.
She was ten minutes early
And two minutes too late
To wait

 On the bench
And the wind could cut you in two
So a voice in her head said:
Stand in the doorway instead.

You remember the one:
The old haberdashery,
That fabulous glass-fronted
Curving entrance
That sucked you in
Like a kiss,
A window waterfall on its side;
A warmer place to hide
From the wind.

So that's where she was
When the bomb exploded.

She was frozen:
Untouched, unbroken
While the world flew past
In slow motion.

People blew like leaves
Straight up
Then shot to the side.
Some smacked so hard on the ground
That they died.

Like a thousand ancient oaks felling
At once
The great thud
 of irretrievable loss

And then
The shaking slow tremble
Of a stunned and sorrowful earth
Trying to draw breath.

There was silence afterwards
Or was it just
That crying and shouting and sirens
Were too tiny to be heard?
She said nothing. She stared.

On the pavements
Lay lost handbags, lost shoes, lost life.
Legs and arms at wrong angles.

Movement began on the street.
As they cleared away the bodies
And gathered up,
Her heart remembered to beat.

The police directed traffic,
Moved people on
And more people moved along
To replace them,
New people who hadn't seen

What she saw;
They had just come
To get the bus home.
The dead were already forgotten.
The dead were already unknown.

She stood in the doorway
Untouched and unbroken, but frozen.
That's where she was
Until someone called her
And because time moves too fast
To make us learn from the past;
She started to cry
And they had to ask, why.

If the girl had died that day,
The boy she met the next week
Would never have been so loved.
Her children would never have been born.

It is all because
They think
The name of the rose holds more value
 Than its scent
Or its colour.

The girl was my mother.

Ross Thompson

Ross Thompson was born and raised on the golden esplanade of Bangor Regis yet spent a decade running away from reality in Dundee, Scotland where, amongst other things, he devoted his time to voluntary youth work and completing a PhD on the Beat Poets.

He has been writing since he was first taught to hold a crayon. His debut story, long since lost, was a thinly veiled Star Wars homage that told of the eternal struggle between the Seiddab and the Seiddoog. He was crestfallen when it was not commissioned for publication. Since then his work has become slightly more refined, thanks in part to his years as a freelance journalist. However, it was when he was asked to compose a joke tribute to a work colleague that Ross rediscovered a love for the intricacies and power of poetry.

He currently teaches English and performs regularly at various literary events. He is particularly fond of sonnets and is currently working towards his first collection to be entitled 'Slipping In And Out Of Conciseness'.

Blackout

If I could pierce a hole between these lines,
and fold over your page so it aligns with mine.

If I could bend each concrete law of space and time,
and stretch across the cleft to brush the air around
your fingers.

If I could just amplify the sound
of your voice a little...

 but it is always drowned
out by the dull roar of the great divide, the wall
of spectral water which separates the cool pall
of the past from the shrill present.

Still your ghost calls
to me across the weir, like a song lost somewhere
in the forest at the back of my skull: yes, there,
echoing through undergrowth and settling on paired
tips of nightshade; it hangs in the air, soft and slight
as pollen, a song unlearned, a shaft of sunlight
formed into an icicle, your last breath held tight
until it melts.

The page turns and shushes goodnight.

Gift

While you were sleeping, I planted a path of flowers which ran
from your garden to your kitchen door.

Before the world stirred, I glued each sepal in place and
speckled each fleck of pollen one by one.

Taking care not to dislodge a single drop of dew, I drew each
stem to hold its own weight, tilted each head to meet
your face when you finally showed.

I poured all of my talent into a single anther and breathed
pigment into one hundred, hundred petals.

The flowers, a carpet of bluebell and foxglove, led to an
arbour, a bower shaded by trees which I planted
centuries before.

I nurtured and watered them, knowing that one morning you
would take breath in this same dappled nook.

I angled each branch for you. There I homed a threnody of
birds. I preened their feathers and dotted their eyes.

I dropped songs in their beaks as if I was feeding them worms.
A dozen different timbres of tweeting.

You sat there for almost an hour, timing your breathing with the rise and fall of the leaves, which in turn breathed with the wind I blew upon them.

You lifted a pebble, almost a perfect sphere, cupped it in your palm, measured its weight and grain.

You held it with your thumb and forefinger against the spot in the sky where the moon would be.

You imagined the pocks and lichen were lakes and craters. You gave each of them names, not for scientists but for each of your friends, past lovers and pets.

You closed one eye whilst you casually rearranged the universe, spiralling the pocket-sized moon round to eclipse the sun.

You held it there for a moment, squinting as its edges blurred and turned caramel in the spreading light.

When you were done, you dropped the pebble and it mingled with its shingle brethren, each of which I carved by hand decades previously.

You savoured the sound of them underfoot as you traipsed back to the house.

I wrote the sheet music for that, you know.

Interior Design

Picture a room. Nondescript, like any other.

Sketch the walls on your inner screen.

Clean

graphite

lines.

Stretch them like new bark. Bathe them in magnolia.

Fling the windows open wide. Breathe deep.

Fill

your

mind

with the scent of what lies outside. Barbs of summer

prick your skin. Leaves of light bloom between

blood

red

tiles.

But you don't pay heed. Instead you close the shutters

and bolt them tight. You stuff up the cracks with wadding.

Seal the gaps with sawdust and gel. Switch off the light.

You lock the door and never speak of it again.

On The Singing Sand

We were barely,
just slightly,
nearly therey,
not quitely
holding hands.

The meniscus
of your fingertips
dispelled the air
quivering inside my palm.

A plasma globe. A Van
De Graaff. A balloon rubbed on hair.

Static but on the move,
we fumbled up the strand
in the August darkness
while each and every
podgy fibre and thirsty nerve
in my late teenage brain
cheered and prodded,
nudged and winked
and egged me on
to walk the plank
and take the plunge.

All the while, the pulse
in your pretty thumb
beat like a toy store drum
as the cores and pores

of your fingerprints
lazily grazed my own
as ink on paper
or soot on snow.

Brain Bailey

Brian Bailey has been involved in writing, performing and promoting poetry in Darwin, Australia, and in Belfast. He published a book of poetry, *Rhyming Doodles*, whilst writing a play (The Cork) for the Darwin Theatre Company in 1993.

On his return to Belfast, he discovered there wasn't much happening in the performance poetry scene, and little or no support from arts groups. In concert, initially with Mark Madden at the Arcadia Café, then with Mary Denvir at Bookfinders Café, he established a series of monthly poetry readings which eventually spread to other venues such as the Parador Hotel and the Front Page Bar, amongst others.

Brian also curated the first poetry exhibition in the Safehouse Gallery in Belfast entitled 'The Writing's on the Wall'. After much trial and error, he was able to get the Cathedral Quarter Arts festival to agree to include the Belfast Poetry Cup in its programme, and it ran for some 5-6 years going from strength to strength.

He is thankful that there are now several strong events and groups in and around Belfast which he hope sprang from the early drive in the late 90's to get the genre better exposed.

About Flying

I always believed I could fly:
it was predicted by an unseen hand
and so I knew it would come to me
if only I could wait.

My first attempt I'll never forget:
I used to dream
that if I held my breath and pinched my nose
then I could rise,
up
high over rooftops and steeples
and on my third flight I even crossed a mountain
and when I landed miles off course and downwind
I had the bonus of a long journey home... on foot.

Then... on my sixth birthday,
having mastered schoolboy aerodynamics
and my faith in Superman inviolable,
I ran downhill in the garden,
arms wide,
fingers dipped for extra lift;
I launched myself off the wall and... flew.
 Phew.

I was airborne for two whole seconds:
I had slipped the surly bonds of earth
and the broken toe the skinless knee
even the cold blunt kick in the balls of reality

(that comes with failure)
was bliss
for I was happy.
I had learned my lesson:
flying can be dangerous
and spitting in the eye of danger is worth everything.

I remain,
"Your Phlegmatically",
Airborne.

Um#3

My strength lies in my weakness.
I'm not paranoid, I just love the truth;
I'm not schizoid:
I'm entitled to be different,
even from myself.
I was a tree once
and when I died
I lived under colossal pressure for
millions of years.
In time,
you will become as flawless as me.

My weakness lies in my strength.
I'm not arrogant,
I just stand my ground;
I'm not intolerant:
I'm entitled to be different, even from you.
So I wait for everyone;
I'm in no hurry.
In time
you will be flawless.
you can count on me.

Speaking in Tongues

I've always kissed with my eyes closed
but that doesn't make you any less beautiful:
blindness lends a tactile advantage.

I was blind on the breast.
I still succour that moment
and when I'm alone

I just smoke too much.
Your lips are not just a passport to your pussy;
your lips are more than a milestone,
your mouth tells me who you are.
Before you speak,
and when I appear blind,
don't bite your tongue;
speak to me
silently.

Hide and Seek

I must hide
for I have no taste for death.
I am hiding,
heeding,
bleeding
and death mocks its rattling teeth
in its laughing skull.

I must die:
it is written.
I am dying,
crying,
whiling away my deposits
and withdrawing my finality.

I must hide
because my living tends to scare you.
I am hiding,
seeking,
bleaching
my bones from the inside and midnight's strike
brings on the new day.

Clare McWilliams

Clare McWilliams has been writing since her Crayola days and has developed a healthy pen fetish. She studied drama and social anthropology at Queens University Belfast, where she joined Toxic Theatre with Frida Wikstrom. She co-wrote, technically directed and performed in several social satires touring to Dublin with Mrs Useless's Odyssey.

She came out as a poet in the early Naughties. Continuing the poetic oral tradition and trailing it screaming into the 21st century, to many a disapproving formalist, she currently performs regularly at arts centres, galleries, bars, urban spaces, open mic nights in Belfast and throughout Northern Ireland. Her style shifts from shocking to poignant, sensual to militant but is always guaranteed to touch or bug.

She organised the Spoken word tent at Pigstock in 2010, performed at Sunflowerfest in 2011 and took the stage at Stendhal Festival in Limavady in 2012. She is also co-founder of Mouth Off! with comedian Marcus Keeley, a monthly audience participation comedy and spoken word night held in Belfast. Clare also co-ordinated and hosted the All Female Showcase for the Avalon Arts International Women's Day Festival, 2013.

Cringer

I expect more from you
Go on... show me.
Your battle worn camouflage hides
The one unsullied by pain,
Peeks at me from its retinal home,
The one that creeps through the urban growth.
I would meet THAT pupil,
Stare into the depths of it
And try my best
Not to rip its heart out.

Coiled Spring

Thinking of a future summer
Do not miss the coiled spring.
Where soils are thawed and
Lethargy warmed away by a budding sun.
A too-quick jump from dark to light
Incurs frosty wrath.
Emerge in the tendril dawn of the year
Slowly,
Deliberately,
Quietly,
In order to shine brighter
Through to autumn's glow.

The Game

This is not a blame game
It's a classroom
Full of ignorant teachers
That won't shut up.

This is not the same game
It's a moment
Changing brief perspectives
In an immovable world.

This is not a frame game
Cued and set
But we are all snookered
By the length of our arm.

This is not an endgame
It's a beginning
Roaming through in blindness
Forces you into a loop.

This is not a tame game
It's a tempest
Whirling wicked witches
Past the storm of your eye.

Our House

The candle burned at both ends in our house.
Morning bustled as mother changed her shift from Nurse to
Homemaker.

To my ill-formed eyes she did not seem tired
But my heart felt it,
So I assisted and enabled life as best as my littleness could.

There was a lot of love in the house
But mainly of the cold, clinical kind
Borne out of practicality and bleach:
Everything was disinfected and rubbed regularly,
Cleanliness being a manifestation of our holy family.

We were different,
Insular,
Unlike the ones round about who did not talk to us in July.
Mother put up chicken wire and kept us in the coup;
We begged to get out to be pecked.
Friends would come, vagrants and gypsies it seemed,
For I rarely saw the inside of other homes.

I listened in my torched reading tent
To their low murmurings of woe and joy
And loud ablutions.
Sometimes, with luck, I would find them in the morning
Covered haphazardly by that strange blanket
that did not match any colours of the house.

Thank you for reading!



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