



FourXFour

Poetry Journal

Issue 5 Summer 2013

Gerry McCullough

Sandra Johnston

Kenneth Bush

Natalie Smyth

Editorial

Welcome to the fifth issue of FourXFour.

You may recognise our first poet as a novelist, but I first came to know **Gerry McCullough** as a poet, having published one of her pieces in a small zine I use to run, called Speech Therapy. I'm delighted to be able to publish her work once more. **Sandra Johnston** was also published years back in Speech Therapy, and so is long overdue this showcase of her most recent work.

Kenneth Bush was introduced to me by one of FourXFour's previous poets, Mario Abbatiello. I've heard him read a couple of times, and he has an amazing voice for poetry. **Natalie Smyth** is also, to myself at least, a new poet, whose work mainly deal with mental health, an interest close to my heart.

I hope you enjoy these poets who are helping to make the Northern Ireland scene thrive, and are inspired to seek out more of their work.

Happy reading,
Colin Dardis, Editor.

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Gerry McCullough

Gerry McCullough, born and brought up in North Belfast, is an award winning short story writer with a distinguished reputation. She has had around sixty short stories published, broadcast, or collected in anthologies, and around thirty poems published in various magazines. In 2005 her story *Primroses* won the Cuirt Award (Galway Arts Festival) and she has won, been shortlisted, and been commended in a number of other literary competitions since.

Gerry lives in Conlig just outside Bangor. She is married to singer-songwriter, writer and radio presenter Raymond McCullough, and has four children.

Gerry's first novel, *Belfast Girls*, published by Precious Oil Publications, is a #1 bestseller on paid UK Kindle. *Danger Danger*, her second Irish romantic thriller, is fast catching up on *Belfast Girls*, as is her collection of 12 Irish short stories, *The Seanachie: Tales of Old Seamus*. Her last book *Angel in Flight*, featuring Angel Murphy, the new Lara Croft, described as 'a strong-minded Belfast girl', was published in June 2012. *Angel in Belfast*, the second Angel Murphy thriller, should be out by the time you read this.

Connaire Feeding

The long lashes flutter into rest
At peace on the softly rounded cheeks.
Eyes closed; the little drooping mouth
With breath like a breeze from the lush south
Falls from my breast.

Full of milk and contentment now
Her warmth against me, solid and hot;
Relaxed so completely that she must
Be sure of me in utter trust.
Her unlined brow

Reflects the peace of newborn sleep
Still at home in Paradise;
I rest, and watch her perfect face,
Escaping with her to that place
So pure and deep.

The Prodigal

Country lanes of my childhood
Provided deep ditches and banks
Against the hedges.
We climbed up, laughing,
To gather blackberries in Autumn,
Primroses in Spring.
Further afield were spreading bluebells
(Their stifling perfume stopped our senses)
For whose loveliness
We waded rivers, wandered under trees.
Occasional violets grew, rare even then.

These flowers lay in richly scented beds,
Beautiful and beckoning,
Translating us to unfamiliar joy,
Invoking lust.
We seized them greedily.

Primroses, violets and bluebells,
Growing wild – when did I see you last?
To my children's children, this inheritance,
These perfumed beauties I enjoyed with spendthrift passion,
Will be as something fading into distance,
No more than words they've read of in a book.

In the Dark

Eight of us in the dark,
The entrance closed.
No way out until the proper time.
Only he can open it, and even if
I opened it myself, where could I go?

Thunder of rain on roof,
Roaring of waves.
We've all been sick, but that was weeks ago.
Helplessness, and the feeling that we're trapped.
When will it end? Would drowning have been worse?

How long, how long?
Shut in this dreadful box.
Where is the sun? Where has He gone?
Then stillness, and the hurling motion stops.
And still he does not open the closed door.

Beyond despair, I wait
Until his hand
Comes unexpectedly, bringing our release.
The dove flies and the sun dazzles my eye.
He has drawn his coloured bow across the clouds.

The Field in Winter

Ugly, naked old bodies,
Stretching and shivering.
Mostly pines, pining for the Spring.
Ashes, too, not quite cremated
And sycamores earthbound without their aeroplanes.
Quick, cover up the ugliness,
First with the delicate see-through green of April.
By the twelfth, they'll wear thick suits,
And sashes of concealment.

Sandra Johnston

Write a novel, live and work in a foreign country, and work as a fitness professional were three things for Sandra Johnston to do before she turned thirty. Now thirty-one, learn violin, classical Greek, and get a very boring (but useful) professional qualification are her three things to do before she is forty.

Sandra lives in Country Down, and loves being from there. That sums her up. Oh, and loves watching sport of any kind (except cricket).

Felines Are Their Own Idols

Keats, how we love to mythologise!
Twenty-five, an age to die, to be
Without blemish in your followers'
Lazy minds, seeking heroes all the time
To dream about in the office or the train.

Beside your grave
In the February sun,
We are united, you and I,
Held in wholesome and thoroughgoing
Disinterest,
To that creature who stalks these
Gravestones daily,
(To these foreign eyes
With a swagger of
Roman insouciance),
Who knows where's just right
To bake in the suntrap,
And at night is enveloped with no fear.

There is even an offertory box on leaving
"For the cemetery cat".

Footprints

(Or, To Heraclitus: The Tide *Will* Always Turn)

“Could you come closer to me, please?”

I daren't say out loud.

The closeness you used to be,

Before you edged away cautiously

To a suitably safe spot.

I have not moved an inch from you, the retreator,

But you say that my feet walked first:

That it was *I* who left imprints on our old ground

To find new terra not with you, and not this view and

So now we're "polite", asking every night

With rehearsed regularity:

“How are you?”

Answering always:

“I'm fine”, or “I'm grand”,

Something defensively bland – never, *never* the truth

Should those answers not fit.

We smile, hoping someone will enter the room

To break up the silence we sit in that makes

Digesting impossible, suggestions to do things

Too fake to imagine or say without feeling

Strange and try-hard. To shake you

And make you come back to me fruitless

Cause if you are right, I've moved away too

In which case it really is closed.

Whether one set or two sets of
Diverging footprints
Are now being
Washed by the tide,
My pride can give up on
Not wanting to lose
Distance accrued and
That's that.
Next.

Plate Tectonics

I love food
So know that when I cannot eat,
When my stomach feels
Like it's the size of a pea,
The meal in front of me
Overwhelms with its savoury smells
And heat and colour,
I am upset.

Stare at a butter bean
Like it's interesting.
Move it across the plate to nowhere.
Pierce its skin with a fork
And take it off again,
All the while the TV is a welcome
Silence breaker.

"Take it you're not going to eat that"
Is the rhetorical question
As the meal is taken from my
Disinterested side of the table.
And there we have it.

The plates have shifted
And from the fissures
Flow lavas of poetry.

How else can one cope?

The Leviathan

(or The Hobbesian Affliction: Being in Love)

You have colonised my mind in the most non-colonial way:
Thoroughly unaware of having done so.

I am colonised in the most non-colonial way:
Thoroughly willing to be so.

No longer does this metaphysical terrain have a thought
That does not relate in some manner
To the ruler of it –

The ruler who rules in a *laissez-faire* mode:
More hands off than hands on...

And for the right or the wrong voluntarily
My tongue gives up on words that are not
Dependent on you -

(Blasé to the death of indigenous language)
Speaking things that will never be true.

Autochthony: no longer sustaining or vital
To light up the black of weightlessness.

This supplicant smiles, rejecting the *autos*,
Subjecting the self to the much-sought for monarch
Who is royal in the most non-Imperialist fashion:
No blue-blood, or titles, or diamonds here, or flashing
Of world-press cameras.

My fingers tips yearn for the heels of your feet
As you walk to your territories
Afar.

Kenneth Bush

Kenneth Bush only recently came out of the closet as a poet, aided and abetted by the vibrancy of the literary spaces in Northern Ireland. He has lived and worked in war zones around the world – in particular, Sri Lanka and Mindanao.

His approach to poetry is equal measures of contemplative reflection and self-mutilation. “The best we can hope for in a poem,” he says, “is a successful failure. A fragment of truth illuminated momentarily on the musty screen of the retina before the spark burns out.”

Light Before the Symmetry of Bullet Holes

morning light
sluices red
over
a
long
serration
of
mountain peaks
nicking flaps of belly flesh
and patinating memories
of Giverny blue

light
spilling,
spilling
 softly
onto skin
-- just here
 (and there)
onto uncolonized territory

light as breath
spilling along the abdominal curve
of this needful sky

light
before

the braille of scars
the whetstoning of words
the symmetry of bullet holes

light
before we realized that shadows
tilt and beckon
from the edge of earth

but for now,
there is only now,
breath
and light

Sisyphus Drowning

Deuce.

Two-and-a-half ton truck
pushed up-hill
by six boy soldiers
and three conscripted villagers
in a furnace heat
that burns breathing in
and out.

In a furnace heat
that puddles road tar into scabs that
slip on black puss
against the push of army boots
and bata sandals:
ankle-tibia-femur-hip girdle-spine-scapula leaning
against gravity
in this drowning heat
like a burlap sac of kittens
pulled by a mud brick
to the bottom of the Batticaloa Lagoon.

Making Love

You start in the dark
with two pronouns :
'You' and 'I'.

Hold the 'I' between your open palms
and place the tip In the middle of the 'you'.

By rubbing open hands together,
rapidly rotate the 'I' into 'you'

(Keep the tip of the 'I' on the same spot.)

Continue in this manner until smoke appears.

(This may take weeks, months, or even years.)

At this point, redouble the vigour of the rotation.

(Ignore any blisters that may form on your hands.)

A small light will form within the smoke.

The kindling of 'you' should ignite in flame.

If this does not occur,
repeat the process with a different 'you.'

What Mattered

for Poho as he leaves Batticaloa for the last time

With each breath he became lighter,
until breath itself fell like rocks from his mouth
and his body began to rise
as if helium filled his chest.

First, his torso lifted.

Then his hips left the chair
like an astronaut unbuckling in outer space.

His long body straightened as it rose
limply,

until his toes left the planet.

He dragged along the earth for a few yards,
then lifted even higher.

People stopped, dumb-struck, and pointed.

He drifted over Batticaloa:

houses, paths, lagoon.

Mothers forgot their lost sons,

 when they looked up

Farmers forgot their hunger

 when they looked up.

Children forgot their mischief

 when they looked up.

There he was,

all grace and silence,

What mattered was not where he was,

or where he was going.

What mattered
was that he was flying.

Natalie Smyth

Natalie Smyth uses a lot of surreal situations that could happen to anyone in their everyday life: confusion, hate, the need to be loved. However, the twist comes when everyday people get caught up in the surreal and begin a downward spiral into a life where anything could happen.

She has written seven books (including two series of books) which imply how easy it is to get tied up with the wrong feelings. Much of her work comes from biographical situations, and stories that have influenced her, which she has heard from different mediums.

Smith feels that life is precious, and looks to show just how precious it is through her poetry.

The Fool

Difficult to express yourself
When you've become the fool.
Running in circles, everyone laughs,
Like you're an animal on a leash,
Unable to get away from its owner.
The only way to get free is to act foolishly
In front of those who never turn away.
They will cheer you on,
Like there's nothing wrong with what you're doing.

Instead of turning on yourself;
Pull the trigger, pointing at them.
See who's the fool now.

The Cure

Give up on everything you have ever tried to do,
As there's nothing out there for you:
No friends to call friends,
No foes to call foes.
Just yourself.

Lying down for a rest,
The sofa has a groove made just for you.
It's the closest thing you will ever feel
As the warmth of the blanket caresses you.

Sleep now that you can.
When the night falls you will be lost with the moonlight.
The stars twinkle
And your eyes are raw.
From what you have been told,
Only some can be believed
The rest is something that can't cured.

Learning the Hard Way

Is the past just a memory
Or something that's engraved in your mind?
Is there anything I can do to help you?
Maybe ease your pain a little
Or talk to you about how you feel?

Don't say 'Fuck everything'
If you don't mean it.
All I can do is help you
But you have to learn to help yourself
And to recognise what love is to you.

The Show Goes On

Shouting won't do anything,
You will have to scream.
It will make them back off a little
But they will always hurry back.
Bring them down with you
And they will infiltrate deeper.
Watch as they carry your body
To new planes unknown to you.
It's time to get out of bed
And display all you know on your show.

A

New

Ulster

A **New Ulster** is Northern Ireland's newest online and hard copy literary and arts magazine. Featuring the works of new and established poets, short fiction writers, photographers and artists. Edited by Amos Greig and Arizahn, A New Ulster is released digitally on the fourth of each month.

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Thank you for reading!

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