



FourXFour
Poetry Journal

Issue 14 Autumn 2015

Gerard McKeown
Rachel McCrum
Marion Clarke
Jonathan Hicks

Editorial

So here it is, another issue and four more poets from the North, two still here, one now in Edinburgh, and one in London.

I've known Gerard McKeown a long time; as a previous regular on the Belfast live poetry scene, for years I had the privilege to see him read on almost a monthly basis. It's a distinct pleasure to include his work here, showing how he has progressed from spoken word to exploring form.

Rachel McCrum's first pamphlet 'The Glassblower Dances' sits happily on my bookshelf, and rightly gained much attention. With her recent amazing assignment as BBC Scotland Poet-in-residence, she is bound to wow Scottish readers even further with her verse.

Marion Clarke is chiefly known as an excellent proponent of haiku and other short form poetry. Including her here is an excellent reason to discover some of her longer pieces.

I've only known Jonathan Hicks moderately recently, but in the few times I've see him read, I've been impressed with his sense of humour and steadfastness in delivery. He was recently shortlisted in the Funeral Services Northern Ireland National Poetry Competition in October, and I'm sure his work will soon be appearing elsewhere.

Regards and happy reading,
Colin Dardis, Editor

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Gerard McKeown

Gerard McKeown's work has been published in *The Moth*, *3:AM* and *Litro*, among others. He is a graduate of Queens' University Belfast and The University of Cumbria.

In 2007 he was the runner up of the Radio 4 All-Ireland Poetry Slam. He performs his poetry regularly in London, where he is a co-organiser of the literary event Londonville Lit. This year he acted in a sold out one man show *Permafrost* by Kristiina Kriisa at The London Theatre in New Cross.

His story *Dunvale* was highly commended in The Moth's 2015 Short Story Competition.

More of his work can be viewed at www.gerardmckeown.co.uk

The People's Park

I lay and boked on the people's park pier.
Ripe chunks of rank puke slid through the beams.
A young girl cried by the rocks on the weir.
Our friends lit a fire and watched from the green.

Ripe chunks of rank puke slid through the beams.
The wire mesh dug X-s into my cheek.
Our friends lit a fire and watched from the green.
The young girl wouldn't talk. I tried to sleep.

The wire mesh dug X-s into my cheek,
half frozen in that February cold.
The young girl wouldn't talk. I tried to sleep.
The fire burned out. Our friends left us alone.

Half frozen in that February cold,
a young girl cried by the rocks on the weir.
The fire burned out. Our friends left us alone.
I lay and boked on the people's park pier.

In the Morning

Fern frost had coated the bathroom windows
while she vomited into the framed sink.

I offered her tap water to swallow
to ease dry retching, but she wouldn't drink.
I held her hair up and rubbed her shoulders.
I could feel the knots on her bent spine click.
My bare feet on the hard tiles grew colder.
My hand on her dressing gown drew static.

She asked if the snow during the night lay?
Through the frosted glass I could see white clumps
glide like paper moths towards the bright ground.
She hoped it would continue through the day.
We'd have the first long snow these winter months,
then she wiped her mouth and went to lie down.

After Our Breakfast

After our breakfast, Smoker's Lung café,
we slouch beside the window. Buses pass.
A bloody spot of ketchup stains my cuff.
I scratch it. Sunlight crawls across the dust.
Sneaking up, it strikes the face of my watch
which pokes out neglected beneath my sleeve
The beam reflects up and appears to split.
Long cartoon drops, like painted crescent moons
reflect from your glasses, below each eye.
As if questioning my overlong stare
you quickly show me a familiar smile.
The light's reflected journey, which I trace,
visible only at points of impact,
almost unlocks your complicated face.

Wetting The Bed

Almost beginning to snore
the electric yellow buzz of tasks not done
stings my mouth. I inhale fungal spores
and exhale clean air, leaving damp in my lungs.

The electric yellow buzz of tasks not done
ever present, we curdle beside each other, I sigh
and exhale clean air leaving damp in my lungs
from a now distant memory of dew on your thigh.

Ever present, we curdle beside each other, I sigh
my mouth stings. I inhale fungal spores
from a now distant memory of dew on your thigh
almost beginning to snore.

Rachel McCrum

Rachel McCrum has worked as a poet, performer and promoter in Edinburgh since 2012, arriving via Manchester, Belfast, New Zealand, Oxford and Donaghadee, Northern Ireland. She is Broad of Rally & Broad, winner of the 2012 Callum McDonald Award and the 2015 Writer In Residence for CoastWord, Dunbar. She has performed and taught poetry in Greece, South Africa, Haiti and around the UK. Her second pamphlet *Do Not Alight Here Again* was published in March 2015 by Stewed Rhubarb Press, and in August 2015, she wrote and performed her first solo show at the Edinburgh Fringe, as part of new spoken word collective SHIFT/.

www.kickingparis.wordpress.com

'Do Not Alight Here' was a Homecoming commission.

'In Ireland We Ate Bobotie' - Commonwealth Poets United project, SPL/British Council/Connect ZA; Toni Stuart

'Bury Me at Sea' was written in 2015 as a commission for 'Territories' as part of a collaborative project between the Edinburgh International Book Festival and Maison De La Poesie in Montreal, Quebec.

'Do Not Alight Here', 'We Brought It To The Sea To Air' and 'In Ireland We Ate Bobotie' were originally published in the pamphlet *Do Not Alight Here* were published by Stewed Rhubarb Press in 2015.

Do Not Alight Here

The best time those ten minutes before the gear unlocks
the view from the air giving the lie to the land

Hold grit hot eyes wide for the curve of the hills
drink the ragged shrug of wavelets racing from the shore

A fingernail to drag foamlines from uneasy glassine water
dig deep to the palm to stop the gutlurch. And yet

craving the illicit place still. From our childhood windows
we could see, on clear days, the mainland

where we were always supposed to end up. A boot to the
backside
when we came of age. Get out. Leave while you can.

Exile yourselves. Make your accent vagrant.
Untether your compass, entertain Portuguese notions.

Wander far. Be better than us.
Do not alight here again.

“Bury me at sea.”

She said.

“I left civil twilight a while ago
to hunt for the North.
And isn't that the cosmic kicker,
that it's never a fixed point,
the one you're looking for?”

I tried kelp farming once.
No go.
When I reached the shale,
I kept going,
struck out to swallow the world.
My eyes were always bigger than my stomach.

I couldn't be shot
of the clan quick enough.
In my haste, gob agape,
I let the sea pour in.
My tongue dried out.

I'd heard that sucking pebbles
quenches a thirst
but failed to see they'd
tumble from maw to gut.

The rattle of them capsized me,
turned me turtle.

Then my country,
still shackled to my ankles,
my cannonball and my ship's wheel,
my ammunition and my steerage,
did the rest.

Never even made it past
the harbour mouth.

Remain mistress of your craft,
the vessel yours and yours alone.
This belly's only good for stones.”

We Brought It To The Sea To Air

We brought it to the sea to air
to take the salt cure

We propped it up to peer
through the smeared crust
of the ferry's perspex windows

We laid it out on harbour walls
and in questionable guesthouse bedrooms

We saunted it along the promenade
held it up to watch the gulls shoal
above the drag of waves.

We wound it up Grieveship Brae
to look down upon the island.

We tried to stroke it smooth
pat down hackles
unruffle worried feathers
unflick raised scales
till all would be silver
and rainbows

and still it lay there gasping

On the beach we performed
mouth to mouth until we could no
longer tell if those were salt crystals
or sand grains crunching
at the corners of our lips

We fed it ham sandwiches and chips

Though we couldn't say it
we'd taken it on a guilt trip

Better slipped between the fishing boat and the breakwater
Better pecked out by gulls
Better hosed into a tank of crabs
Gutted with the mackerel catch.
Better sucked under quicksand
Lacerated by barnacles
Smothered by kelp
Better the roof finally falls to smash its skull
Better crushed by a standing stone
Better rampaged by a heaviness of bullocks
Better the ribs picked clean by bone beetles

than to lie there gasping

Finally we let it go to sea
Watched it nudge aside a crisp packet
under the sign for the Eventide Club

Silently we prayed
that is buoyed by something
we could not measure

In Ireland We Ate Bobotie

Her Athlone
was sunnier
and bloodier
than mine has ever been.

She took me to the roadhouse
where 'we go when the clubs shut'
because I had to try bobotie.

A good international working relationship
we had already decided
may often be settled
by likeminded attitudes
to appetite

and we both liked to eat.

Her Athlone
was named for Cambridge
for West London
and before that
who remembers?
Who knows?

The bobotie
a Dutch sideswipe
taken on
by the Cape Malay
and
who remembers?
Who knows?

Lamb or beef or pork
minced from
leftover colonial roast.
An onion perhaps.
Raisins or apricots.
Use bay leaves
if lemon are unavailable.

Back in Belfast
we brought ourselves
and the poetry
and she cooked bobotie
with careful precision.

Traced her mother's recipe
while mine snuck back to the kitchen
questing a third helping.

Marion Clarke

A graduate of the universities of Ulster and Bristol, Marion Clarke returned to Northern Ireland after living in England for over a decade, writing feature articles for the trade press. She also returned to creative writing, particularly Japanese-style short form poetry, often inspired by her location on the shores of Carlingford Lough.

Her work has appeared in a variety of mainstream and short-form journals, including *Burning Bush II*, *Abridged*, *The Linnet's Wings*, *Heron's Nest*, *Modern Haiku*, *Haibun Today*, *Frogpond* and the Japanese newspaper *Mainichi Shimbun*. Her haiku is published in the first anthology of haiku from Ireland, *Bamboo Dreams*.

In 2012, she received a Sakura award in the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Haiku Contest and was long listed for the Desmond O'Grady Prize, 2013, and a Seamus Heaney Award for New Writing, 2015. In May, she was winner of the *Financial Times* Poet in the City Haiku Competition.

<http://livinghaikuanthology.com/haiku-readings/marion-clarke.html>

<http://seaviewwarrenpoint.wordpress.com>

haiku/senryu sequence

shadows on the lough . . .
we await the results
of his scan

that metallic taste –
he tells us more surgery
is required

finally understanding
his refusal
of further treatment

huge realisation –
how little time
left

Development

We stand apart,
mysterious as two spies,
a girl, a boy, a bridge
in Amsterdam.

Beneath sepia trees
and a negative sky,
we squint in winter sunlight,
cocooned in coats,
scarved to the chin.

Like the Keizersgracht canal,
we are frozen,
hands plunged into pockets
to avoid touching
wrought-iron railings
that encase us.

Just a moment ago,
a dark rash of crows
sloughed from bare branches.
My eyes followed them
out of the frame.

But he just stares at you,
his brother, his friend,
perhaps aware of a manifestation,
some sort of development.
And you, of course,
are not in the picture.

The Swansong of Leatherhead, KT22

As if by magic,
next door's ginger cat appears,
muzzles its way along
the newly-washed panes.

"Bye, bye, puthy tat!"
my toddler exclaims,
flattening his palms against glass.
A faint trace remains . . .
then evaporates.

A few minutes later,
ever-so-slowly,
I close the front door
of our family home.

My husband, all business,
checks passports and tickets.
I attempt to quell
the hot threat of tears,
to oppose the swell
of a hundred indecisions.

Outside, by a garden bonfire,
a sad-eyed neighbour smiles.
I watch the yellow smoke
spiral upwards . . .
then disappear.

The Lament Configuration

A haibun inspired by the fiction of Clive Barker

*rabbit's foot
in the souk, a voice from behind
the curtain*

Only, this is no ordinary box. It is The Lament Configuration – an antique, lacquered lock-puzzle of unparalleled workmanship made by Lemarchand, the French toymaker. A clever person, accustomed to such a task, might release the first piece of the device after several days. If successful, he will be startled by a strange tune, triggered by an internal mechanism. These notes of sublime banality will taunt and intrigue the player, who will examine the fragments of his perplexed face, reflected on the polished interior of the black box. The tune will evolve as additional pieces are manoeuvred through a complicated sequence. Each segment opened will present a fresh challenge to fingers and intellect, and the participant will be rewarded with a further musical intricacy.

*shards of light –
a ballerina turns
on glass*

Drawn onwards, the player will descend deeper and deeper into the layers of the box. Finally, a loud bell will toll to indicate that the puzzle is almost solved. This mournful sound originates from the hell-like realm of the Cenobites, harvesters of human souls. It announces their imminent arrival. These beings have come to collect the person who has willingly summoned them through the

device. The participant will now be escorted back to their dimension via the gateway he has unlocked.

Its task completed, the mechanical puzzle box begins to reassemble itself. It is now too late for the player to turn back.

*windswept landscape . . .
the thud of peat
on his coffin*

Jonathan Hicks

Rupert The Bear was Jonathan's first poetry teacher. Those annuals displayed stories with pictures, rhyming couplets, and prose paragraphs. He would look at the pictures and read the couplets. *Commando* came after *Rupert The Bear*. Girls came after Old English cider and cigarettes. What came after the sharp end of Life's funny-bone was his name spray-painted on railway bridge walls. Not so much an act of vandalism but a literary act which said *I exist*. Writing, it seems, is a form of existence that tends to move between the margins of adversity and comedy, so far.

In 2014 he was awarded an Arts Council grant and has been published in various C.A.P. titles, Shalom Writers Group books, Creative Writers Network, Black Mountain Review, Revival, THE SHOp, The Honest Ulsterman, and The Rialto. He's also worked with the Poetry In Schools project, and plays drums.

I Cannot Forget

In my mother's house

I am allowed to dream, play, and write.

In my father's house

toy cities in the basement are decimated.

In my mother's house

washing the dishes is the only chore.

In my father's house

I brush up dust round his derelict feet.

In my mother's house

pigeons feed on what the blue tits drop.

In my father's house

cats crouch under the empty oil tank.

In my mother's house

bills are paid. There's hot running water.

In my father's house

he rewires the meter, locks the doors.

In my mother's house

there are tears, hugs, kisses, naivety.

In my father's house

there is the belt, blame, neglect, and a boat.

In my mother's house

she works three jobs to bring home bacon.

In my father's house

he is upstairs having his cake and eating it.

In my mother's house:

an open window leads to a railway station.

In my father's house:

cracked panes reveal a row of bars.

In my mother's house
I cannot forget
my father's
house.

In This State

we will live on
Navagio Bay in the (refurbished) MV Panagiotis
smoking the odd Turkish cigarette, occasionally.

In this state we believe in restoration.

In this state bigger windows in schools will be installed for
daydreaming.

In this state
at St Abel of Reims, the orphaned child and the down-and-out
will care for each other.

In this state the grass is always green.

In this state Gross National Happiness
over Gross National Product will be precedent.

In this state no news will psychologically be good news.

In this state I will see you from the Porta d'acqua
pouring over a menu wearing
a pair of Cutler and Gross sunglasses,
sitting in a pleated chiffon dress
about to order Squid-ink risotto, gingery monkfish nuggets
with spring greens.

In this state Compassionate Protection Laws will be passed.
No cuddling and no affection will be serious offences.

In this state
we will slide down 30 foot wooden chutes, while whooping, into
wine cellars.

In this state laughing at yourself will aid promotion.

In this state the Textile Industry is optional.

In this state Religion will not be finger pointing but a finger
pointing.

In this state we have an army: The 1st Non-Division Refusaleers.
Their chosen weapon: the water pistol.

Bob The Bodybuilder

i.

I lost myself.

In bits

like a wingless Daddy Long

barely alive

disassembled and scattered across the school locker room floor

by

a knife, a wall, sulphuric acid,
a pillow...

(I can't breathe...

'now you're a space cadet!')

ii.

- 1) Slot humerus into clavicle.
- 2) Flush and pump the biceps up.
- 3) Click in backbone.
- 4) Glue fibula, pelvis, tibia, patella.
- 5) Snap on cranium.
- 6) Pop in glutes, wheels, boulders, lats.
- 7) Dip. Press. Grind. Jerk. Rep. Snatch.
- 8) Repeat, until you dial it in.
- 9) Oil.

iii.

Now I squat to sit, pump my bottled water, even curl
the coal bucket, bulk up and lateral raise the roller blind.
I face the day. Sun is out, 'guns' are out. I face the mirror
and say it. *No more sand in this face.* I say it. *You're not
a space cadet, you're Mr Universe. You have found your
self.* I say it, repeat it until I dial it in. *Now breathe.*

My Better Half

wants the dishes washed, the drainer cleared
 the floors, brushed and mopped, the bathroom smelling of forest
 the bills all paid on time, the sludge scooped
 out of the sinkhole, congealed fat in the grill pan, the coffee mugs
 Miltonised, the front door chained last thing
 at night, the house alarmed, to get my shit together, speed limits
 kept to (approximately 33 miles per hour,
 or 77mph), the renewal form completed before the passport date
 runs out. My better half wants me to stop

calling it cunty-ballocks Bangor, to apologise,
 to get on, to get off my trunk, to go to bed early, quit smoking, quit
 cursing, gambling, watching Gentlemen's
 Special Interest movies, less cream buns, more exercise, lose weight,
 support more charities, give blood,
 not drink milk from the carton, weed the garden, wash the car,
 send
 birthday cards, tins in that bin, weeds in that.

My better half says stop putting up selfies
 on the Internet, stop wearing my mother's skirts, save up for a
 rainy
 day, go to confession more, take a leaf out
 of Esther Rantzen's autobiography, not Richard Hell and the
 Voidoid's,
 stop pilfering from the National Handbag!
 floss teeth, nails: fingers and toes, hair: trimmed and neat.
 My better half says
 impressions are important.

Thank you for reading!



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