

FourXFour Poetry Journal

Issue 15 Winter 2016

Matt Kirkham
Deirdre Cartmill
Joseph Allen
Peter Adair



Editorial

Welcome to FourXFour Issue 15. Three of our poets in this issue will be familiar to fans of poetry within Northern Ireland, and certainly fans of Lagan Press: Matt Kirkham (*The Lost Museums*), Deirdre Cartmill (*Midnight Solo, The Return of the Buffalo*) and Joseph Allen (*Family Plot*) have all had collections published with the press, and have since been published with other presses, held prominent residencies, won awards, and/or deviated into other art forms. It is a pleasure to bring them together here and showcase a small part of their latest work.

A newer name, Peter Adair, first came to our attention through being one of the winners of the broadside competition we ran in 2015 with Translink NI. After hearing more of this work being read at our Purely Poetry open mic night, I knew I wanted to publish him. He is gaining publication credits rapidly, and is a new name to watch out for in the future.

Regards and happy reading,
Colin Dardis, Editor

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Matt Kirkham

Matt Kirkham was born in Luton and now lives in Co. Down. His collection *The Lost Museums* (Lagan Press) won the Strong Prize for the best first collection in Ireland 2006. His short pamphlet *Aged Fourteen My Grandfather Runs Away To Sea* won Templar's inaugural iShots competition, and he was a recipient of the Northern Ireland Arts Council ACES award 2013. His second full collection of poetry, *The Dumbo Octopus*, is due from Templar in March 2016. He is currently working on poems influenced by the life of the twentieth century mathematician Kurt Gödel.

Princeton Snow

Paths swell, cancerous. I'm troubled.
Snowmen grow in other front yards.
Shadowless figures bring shovels.
Paths swell, cancerous. I'm troubled.

We're a cabin-fevered couple,
pioneers, newborns, diehards.
Paths swell, cancerous. I'm troubled.
Snowmen grow in other front yards.

Recursion

The waves foliate
their westward progression,
catch on the sunrise as it breaks

the smooth horizon
and flow from a sinusoidal waltz
through a succession

of numbers – each talks
to the one before –
into a baroque jitterbug that halts

on the quiet shore.
Here is the set of elements, the order
of the far off war.

The air also rolls to the border
with the land, hushes
as it pulls under foaming water

where recursion rushes
to fill its bronchi. It sucks downwards.
The shingle crunches.

Wave and anti-wave, English words:

air, apple, a and not a.

Adele, Apfel, afterwards.

The Chinese Room Argument

I imagine a black box room – my eyes
are closed when I think of it – hurricane lamp
on plain wooden table, leather-bound volumes,
alphabetised, put together
by Mandarin-speaking Jesuits, black ink,
white paper. The room you have in mind of is lit
by candles in red lanterns. Handmaidens
bring her the scrolls, play their stringed instruments.

In the corridor beneath screened windows
sits a sage, now Confucius, now Einstein,
who passes translations between languages
neither she nor he speaks beneath the doors.
I am glad you taste my food before I eat
and that we eat in something next to silence.

The Woods Around Brünn

As I walked back from the Institute, past where the men
have been taking down the half-rotten sycamores –
this morning they were cutting notches with chainsaws
to drive wedges, or standing arms extended,
thumbs up, using similarity of triangles I guess
to gauge where the tree would fall and rest,

and then splitting sections of fallen tree into blocks
this afternoon, hefting axes –
for some reason I found myself asking
if I were to go back to Vienna, find that bar, The Moth,
get up on the stageboards if they still exist
and explain my theorems in a whisper,

what you would hear, Adele? A question
which must have sprung from my hearing the sound
of a tree as it falls to the invisible ground
in the empty woods around Brünn,
a memory I've heard ever since I was a boy,
the ghost of myself as a child.

Deirdre Cartmill

Deirdre Cartmill has published two poetry collections with Lagan Press - *The Return of the Buffalo* and *Midnight Solo*. She received an ACES Award from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland in 2011 and spent a year affiliated with the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry at Queen's University, Belfast. She is currently part of the Corners European intercultural project *Bridging the Silence* which gives a voice to survivors of abuse and political violence.

She is also an award winning screenwriter and playwright. Her plays toured NI as part of *Terra Nova's Arrivals 1 and 2*. Her short film *Two Little Boys* was selected for *The Belfast Film Festival 2013*. She is an experienced writing mentor and tutor and holds an MA with Distinction in Creative Writing from Queen's University.

www.deirdrecartmill.com

Signs of Life

The Test

The blue cross rises from the white,
like a photograph emerging from a negative
and slowly filling with the possibility of life.

My hand quivers like a brushed string
vibrating to its own low hum,
yearning to release its first song.

I pass you this miracle sign
and my gift becomes our secret
as we mark off the days in a daze.

We search online, try to gauge your size,
- a coffee bean, a walnut, sprouting buds
that will become limbs as the days go by.

But when we hand you to the doctor
and she scans you for the first time,
you disappear like a film exposed to light.

I try to hide my face but the tears spill out
over my fingers and taint the spotless sheets,
my failings again made concrete.

I am a funeral ship, cast adrift and floating,
carrying the dead in my belly.

Skin

I sink the blade into my fleshy forearm.
I need to mark your presence on my skin
and carry it with me always, as my memorial.

It's been four weeks but their words still make me flinch
when they coo 'you'll have another child soon' –
as if you're a faulty part than can easily be traded in.

I'm afraid to sleep because the nightmares come.
They snatch you from my grip again and again.
I scream for help, even as I let you go

and I wake alone, with nothing but a cold sweat
and a steel blade to tame my fickle flesh

First Steps

It's knowing that what I imagined will never be
- tickling your tummy, pushing you on the swings,
teaching you to build sandcastles on the beach.

You're a kite pulled free by the wind
and I find myself following you, playing catch up,
hoping that I'll rejoin you at the road's end

when I will finally cross the distance between us
and you will be waiting to coax me towards you.
You'll take my hand as I take my first steps

into your arms, one again becoming two,
and you will mother me as I would have mothered you.

The Dead in the Earth

Holub made me think
about the dead in the earth,
of how there are more of them than us,
of how we walk on their faces.

But one day we must merge
with those other earth dwellers
in a way we couldn't do in life,
as our bodies decompose

and our skin, muscles, cells
slough off and decay,
forming minerals that feed the earth
as we once fed off it;

and in that perfect symmetry
we are rats on a wheel
repeating and repeating,
still thinking we have choices.

When Do I Die?

When my last breath
stutters from my lungs
and my thready pulse
gives up its fragile dance?

Or when the doctor condemns me
with a looming end date,
and I am chained to a monitor
that beep-counts my slow decay?

Or each time my heart contracts
and blocks the flow of blood
for a sliver of a second
like another small death?

Or when my heart relaxes
and another second passes
and I still haven't moved?
And if so, when do I live?

Suburbia

The faux suede curtains block out the light,
lock me in this muted shadowland of lamplight.

My flattened face peers from each photo frame,
and I suffocate under glass and hang suspended

like a deformed sample floating in a lab jar.
I've made myself the subject of this experiment,

offered myself willingly to be stuffed and preserved,
and I don't know how to smash the glass,

but inside I'm a fractal spinning by a black moon,
with each repeating part still alive with possibility.

Joseph Allen

Joseph Allen was born in Ballymena, Co. Antrim. He has published five collections of poetry, most recently 'Looking for Robert Johnson', Lapwing Publications, 2011.

He is part of an acoustic duo, 'BIDDY EARLY' and hosts an Open Mike and Acoustic Showcase at the BT Club in Ballymena.

Baptismal

The days passed
following each other
with the same monotony
of cars coming and going
in the dull, heavy heat of the afternoon.

I can still see my uncle
forever pushing his world war bike
past the park gates,
whistling songs from the hit parade,
dreaming of girls and Saturday nights.

I have reached the age he was then
but still feel my boyhood
rushing by the hoardings,
the weight of generations
on my childish frame.

Once I was left behind
during a fire drill,
wandering the empty corridors
with the alarms echoing my steps,

and turning each corner
I eagerly expected an inferno.

With an aunt I fed stale bread
to the ducks in the dam,
felt her hand upon my back,
the sudden wetness on my face.

With wonder I listened
as my mother was told
how I fell into the water,
too engrossed with the ducks
to mind my step.

And I still love my crazy aunt,
stealing flowers from the convent,
saying Hail Marys on a found rosary,
mixing religions to fill her needs
and seeing each crucifixion as her own.

Night in Tunisia

I can picture myself
in the Forties,
brilliantined hair,
a cigarette case of Gallagher Greens.

Listening to Miles,
feeling superior to
the pop loving teens.

I should have been a man in 61,
living in the post war boom
an abundance of factory girls on my arm.

In 79 I made my break,
bumming around France
until the Consulate paid my fare home.

A father envious of my mistakes
drove me from the family home,
six months too late to make a point.

Hard times around Lyons
had hardened me
to a vagrants life.

I could feel his shame
as he drove by,
my indifference camped on a street corner,
oblivious to him.

Place me in Minton's,
listening to Bird, Dizzy and Monk
cutting the changes,
I belong here,
In the cigarette smoke around the horns.

Tar babies

Each Sunday morning was a chaos of activity,
tripping over one another in a house too small.

The bedlam of breakfast,
washing of school uniforms,
housework, homework, a father's hangover,
I found a space to read.

Brer Rabbit was my hero,
escaping every ingenious trap,
my favourite was the Tar Baby,
unable to let go.

And as I grew older we had our own tar babies,
a warning to the local girls.

I wondered how they met the morning,
the shame of exposure,
thrown into the briars.

Ham

As Gregarin and Titov circled the earth
and Kennedy floundered in the Bay of Pigs
my mother lay in hospital,
Wooden Heart and Take Five
sounding from the radio.

Berlin waited for its bisection
and in Ketchum, Hemmingway
followed his father's example,
ending his Hemochromatosis with a shotgun,
as my mother watched the nurses
screen her bed from the ward.

And on that Sunday morning,
as Algeria waited for freedom,
Yvor Williams took his Bollingen,
on my brother's second birthday,
I was delivered against the odds,
born laughing like Ham.

Peter Adair

Peter Adair was born in... After an abrupt departure from school, he later studied English at the University of Ulster. Thereafter he managed to avoid a career, being in and out of various jobs.

He won the 2015 Translink poetry competition; his poem was published as a broadside. Poems have appeared in *Panning for Poems*, *The Honest Ulsterman*, *The Stare's Nest*, *Snakeskin*, *Haiku Universe* and *Failed Haiku*.

A latecomer to Twitter, he is fascinated by micropoetry and expressing as much as possible in the fewest words (make it short!). From time to time his poems emerge at #micropoetry. He lives in Bangor.

Pipe Man

This morning at three.
The ghost of a cough,
hard, hacking –
a pipe smoker's.

A dream, I suppose,
unless there are ghosts
in these enlightened days
of empty ashtrays.

The wind was wailing.
Fatal for his buggered lungs,
fatal for his old body
slumped on the sofa.

A whiff of Condor,
or was it Saint Bruno?
Days when men
strode through Alpine passes,

legendary names
in the dying art
of keeping a pipe lit
in all weathers.

Bicycle

When she hears 'bicycle' the wheels spin
on carless roads and sunstroked lanes,

although she lags behind
him as he jets along on his Hobbs

forgetful of her, until he glances back
and goes slow while she pedals like mad

to catch him up, to cycle side by side
around the corner through the dark

forest where she skids on muck,
brakes hard and screeches to a halt.

Then, flinging away her bicycle,
forgetful of him, she strays through trees

lost once more, although I can almost hear
the brakes cranking down in her brain.

Kingdom

They give no warning of their return.
I can't repair their beds, vacuum the dust-
buried floor or tinker with the broken cooker.

They just appear, make themselves felt,
contrive of absence a more-than-presence
in the house that fell down years ago.

In his room the wall paper peels off, collapsed
like his lung. He wheezes on a hospital bed.
A nurse smooths our fears like sheets.

And my hand touches her warm pillow, her sheets.
Dressing table. Hairbrush. That net
she wore in bed, before her hair fell out.

She's put on her dressing gown and slipped down
to the kitchen. I can hear the kettle
hissing, smell the toast, see her at the table.

As my eyes blink open, as my mind yawns
awake, they stay on, until I count the years and know
theirs is the kingdom, the kingdom within me.

Abercorn

The Abercorn restaurant, early sixties,
morris-minored to our Christmas treat,
an interlude of apparent peace:

no bombs, no screams, no body parts,
just a whoosh of chatter, body heat,
a waitress parking a trolley at our table.

Mother burns through my bones.
My tongue shall melt the snow,
my hand shall reach for cake:

lost chocolate, cherry, marzipan,
lost shoppers of the Abercorn.

Thank you for reading!



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