



Four Extracts from Mustangs, in Four X Four Poetry Journal

McCracken, K. (2014, Jul). Four Extracts from Mustangs, in Four X Four Poetry Journal. (Summer 2014 ed.) Four X Four Poetry Journal.

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

Publication Status:

Published (in print/issue): 01/07/2014

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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FourXFour
Poetry Journal
Issue 9 Summer 2014

Kathleen McCracken
Stephanie Conn
Gráinne Tobin
Adrian Rice

Editorial

Welcome to Issue 9 of FourXFour.

This release sees us pass our second birthday, with our first issue having come out in July 2012. We're delighted to be able to continue highlighted the wealth of poets that Northern Ireland has to showcase, and we're excited to look ahead and see who else we have to bring to you.

Before that, a note on this issue. Each of the poets within give a great example of the variety of style and voice of the Northern Irish poet. Analytical, observational, romantic, experimental; the tone and viewpoint throughout this issue shifts and flows, yet hits target every time.

One of our poets is Canadian by birth, having lived here for many years, while one was born in Belfast but now lives in North Carolina. And although open to different influences, all four display a great talent for putting humanity at the centre of their work, always considering the emotional impact of what characters have passed through their stories.

We hope you enjoy this issue, and that you'll continue to join us for more.

Regards and happy reading,
Colin Dardis, Editor
Poetry NI

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Kathleen McCracken

Kathleen McCracken is the author of seven collections of poetry including *Blue Light, Bay and College*, which was shortlisted for the Governor General's Award for Poetry in 1992, *Mooncalves* (Exile Editions, 2007) and *Tattoo Land* (Exile Editions, 2009). A bilingual English/Portuguese edition, *Double Self Portrait with Mirror: New and Selected Poems*, and a new collection, *The Gauntlet Road*, will be published in 2015.

Her poems have appeared in *The Malahat Review*, *Poetry Canada Review*, *Exile Quarterly*, *Poetry Ireland*, *The Shop*, *Revival*, *Abridged*, *New Orleans Review* and *Grain*, and she has given readings in Canada, Ireland, Portugal, Brazil, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Kathleen is currently Lecturer in Creative Writing and English Literature at the University of Ulster.

Four extracts from Mustangs

i.

Poem Telling a Story in One Word

mustang

Cajon Pass

mustang with his ear to the ground, listening out
the Santa Fe or his own heart's lamentation

Mustang Leaving Ioway

which hat to put on this day
open road stetson or rebel gray?

ii.

Mustang at the Medicine Line

a surge of nothing
stroking his half-Canadian hide

Born In A Blizzard

on the brink of March, that snowstorm story
mustang's lifeline, fate's quarry

And the Lassos Lie Where They Fell

mustang with his muzzle in the river
guzzling fords and gullies to the lees

iii.

Mustang at Melancthon

the wind farms again
a swathe of gentle crucifixions

The Lay of the Land

mustang amazed how when it came
to actual canyons, she'd be first to leap

Freeze Frame

barrel deep between oats and barley
mustang stymied by the lux of choice

iv.

Long Distance Collect

under the star-spangled canopy
mustang calling home to Canada

Acabar

mustang gone so far west
he has erased his own absence

Double Self Portrait with Mirror

who's the mustang?
is it you or is it me?

Stephanie Conn

Stephanie was born in 1976 in Newtownards, County Down. She is a primary school teacher and now lives in Ballyclare with her family. She developed and teaches the Literacy Programme, Passport to Poetry, facilitating poetry workshops for 7-11 year olds.

Stephanie returned to education at the Seamus Heaney Centre, QUB and gained her MA in Creative Writing in 2013. Her poetry has been widely published. In 2012 she was shortlisted for the Patrick Kavanagh Poetry Prize, highly commended in the Mslexia Pamphlet and Doire Press Poetry Competitions and awarded a Tyrone Guthrie bursary by Newtownabbey Borough Council.

In 2013 she was selected for Poetry Ireland's Introductions Series, shortlisted in the Red Line Poetry Competition and received a Support for the Individual Artist Award from the Arts Council of N. Ireland.

She is currently working on new poems inspired by a visit to Tasmania, Australia.

Midnight Storm

There was no warning –
unless you count the sight of a wallaby
bouncing between pavements
before sloping up the hill.

Our shack still stood on its stilts
at the top of the steep incline –
its back pressed against
the tinder dry earth.

You climbed the wooden steps,
the baby swaddled in a sling,
her warm body slung across
your sweating skin and leaking breasts.

The lightning ripped open the sky,
the rumble drowned out the cry of our charge;
you held your breath knowing there was nothing
between us and the clouds. I photographed the strike.

Flashback

She dreams of lightning over Bicheno bay –
a wide-angle shot of ocean, inky black and waiting,
shivering beyond the arc of rock and sand.

A fluorescent strike finds a shell below the surface.
Close-up and just a hint of pearlescent lining,
the magnified view of nacre, concentric layer

upon layer, the accelerated motion forming a bead.
Cross-cut to the perfect drop resting in the small dip
of tanned skin beneath her throat. She is wearing white.

A wide-shouldered man in a dark suit stands in soft-focus.
Freeze-frame. She is choking, waking, staring at a stranger
on a sea-blue pillow, open-mouthed, centimetres from her face.

Enjoy your Stay

Port Arthur, 1870

Welcome. You have progressed
from the penitentiary
to the separate jail.

Here, we keep the peace –
note the felt slippers covering our boots,
the sea-grass laid out on the concrete floor.

To the right is your cell –
feel free to spend your twenty-three
isolated hours behind this door.

Walking will be done alone –
your remaining time in the high-walled yard.
We will be out of sight, moving like ghosts.

Fair Trade

after Lyn Reeves's 'Maireener Shells'

Forgive me. It is less my story to tell than yours, and yet having come to hear it spoken from your lips, I know it can travel great distances. I long to tell my children

how the Palawa women sat by the kerosene lamps stringing shells on the sinew of kangaroo tail, kept wet for the stretch, the natural grease letting them slip easily into place.

How they left the miniature cones swept up on the beach alone, knowing they'd be brittle. Waded out, instead, in the low spring tides until they were waist deep in water,

pulled the living shells from the seaweed fronds, watched the drops of iridescent green and violet gleam in their dripping hands. Back on sand, they smoked their haul and rubbed them

gently in the long grass to reveal the lustre of their pearly base.

The young girls of the tribe soaked up every move the elders
made

in moonlight, how they bore holes with the eye-tooth of a
wallaby,

putting just enough pressure on the point, never shattering the shell.

They carried their loot home to the lull of tales retold and the delicate click of their catch against thighs. They counted their blessings into intricate patterns, watched them fall in long shining loops, feeling a familiar ache in their fingers. Soon they would trace red ochre onto their skin in spirals, whispering thanks to the sea.

Their story isn't mine to tell and yet I know it by heart. My daughters carry it with them, and when they gather periwinkles at low tide on this island beach, they open their hands to the waves.

Gráinne Tobin

Gráinne Tobin grew up in Armagh and now lives in Newcastle, Co Down. She taught in further and adult education, and then at Shimna Integrated College in Newcastle, before retiring from the day job.

She is a member of the Word of Mouth Poetry Collective, and was a contributor to the *Word of Mouth* anthology (Blackstaff, 1992) which was translated into Russian and published in St Petersburg. She has produced English versions of poems by the St Petersburg poet Galina Gamper for Word of Mouth's parallel text anthology, *When the Neva Rushes Backwards*, (Lagan Press, 2014).

Gráinne is the author of two poetry collections from Summer Palace Press: *Banjaxed* (2001) and *The Nervous Flyer's Companion* (2010).

In the Armoury of the Knights of Malta, Valletta

Chain mail ganseys worn with pikes,
breastplates embellished with the lives of saints.

Bucklers, greaves, blunt-toed iron shoes
in bear-paw form, etched with acanthus leaves.

Helmets to make a face into a death's-head,
pelmated brows, a stare of solid force.

Round-bellied iron weskits, peplum-skirted,
and here, reticulated open-crotch leggings

bespoke to fit the warm, well-muscled thigh,
tapering to a neat knee, of one long dead.

Who was he, unfastened, in his bed,
this swaggerer, whose shape is left behind?

An exoskeleton emptied of flesh,
an absence forged from shadows.

Museum of the Revolution, Vizille

Perhaps a castle is burnt out by an angry crowd
as the drums bangbang *The People!*
United! Will never be defeated!

unless the castle is taken instead for the assembly
to rule by acclaim before interlocking betrayals
choke its pipework and rot its floors

until it falls out of use and into disrepair
and is refurbished by a later government
as an official summer residence

complete with parkland swans geese gleaming mallards
an artificial waterfall and lake
a smooth parterre with trimmed hedges

and then the castle can be passed to the survivors
for a museum of revolution to visit on fine evenings
with lightshows and a guillotine in the garden

Small Print on a Box of Chocolates

He gave her a pink miniature hatbox
inscribed with art nouveau gold letters,
containing six handmade chocolates
in fluted ruffs of gilded paper.
An Ulsterman who knows what women want.

That was the start of the whole thing –
courtship, wedding, babies, house,
his business taking him away so often,
silences between toast and marmalade,
hot operatic scenes, his declaration
of passionate love for a young man
he'd met in London in his other life,
the breaking of Wedgwood, biblical denunciation,
her father in his pulpit, rending of garments
in the temples of the law courts,
the judgement.

A Deconsecrated Furniture Showroom

The glass hall is empty except for a sellotaped notice
to show the pilgrim to the upstairs cafe
where a waitress tells me
the place was shut down months ago
and we say the words to each other
receivership jobs recession
antiphon call and response

*The restaurant will continue to trade
in spite of the recklessness of their banking partners
and their agents*

The Private Dining Room a locked Capilla Real
and the nave a funnel of celestial light
within the shadowy void
as the escalator carries you upwards
a ladder of souls

Vacant room-sets side chapels
frescoes marble and parquet altars
sealed off with swags of tape

Shaded lanterns burn on their chains
as in Toledo of the captives

and the faithful still meet for conversation
broccoli bake and apple tart
in their breaks from the industrial estate
retail park car dealership warehouses
hospital wards across the roundabout

Adrian Rice

Rathcoole-bred, Rice was Writer-in-Residence at Lenoir-Rhyne College, Hickory, NC, in 2005. Since then, he and his family have lived in Hickory, where he teaches at Catawba Valley Community College, and Appalachian State University. Rice is also half of The Belfast Boys, alongside singer-songwriter Alyn Mearns. *Songs For Crying Out Loud* regularly airs across the Carolinas.

Rice's poems first appeared in *Muck Island* (1990), a collaboration with Ulster artist, Ross Wilson. *The Mason's Tongue* (Abbey Press, 1999), was shortlisted for the Christopher Ewart-Biggs Memorial Literary Prize, nominated for the Irish Times Prize for Poetry, and translated into Hungarian by Thomas Kabdebo. *Hickory Haiku* was published in 2010 by Finishing Line Press, Kentucky.

His latest book, *The Clock Flower*, was launched in Belfast in November, 2012. A reissue of *The Clock Flower*, with additional poems, was published in 2013 by Press 53 (Winston-Salem). A new collection, *Hickory Station*, is scheduled for 2016, also from Press 53.

Little Things

Sometimes things seem a little less lonely;
Turning my eyes to the starry prairie,

Seeing the old familiar Plough still there,
Part of my America. Only here,

Folk have always known it as the Big Dipper.
And that makes things even lonelier.

Recognition

The buds are beginning to open,
the young leaves are on their way.
Soon they'll be giving me
their green full-handed waves.
I would love to just stand here
at this upstairs window

and watch them as they grow.
But I know, even if I stood here
for a full day, without blinking,
I would still miss everything,
I would still not be a party
to their supernatural way.

Which makes me remember,
that's how life always is.
We don't notice people growing
when we're traveling with them.
It's only separation which lends
recognition, the shock of decay.

The deal-with-the-devil of the émigré.

Roman

The oldies are dancing
In Whitehouse Working Men's Club,
Circling the floor in twos

Like characters on a carousel.
A lady stalwart announces
The deaths of two more (ex)

Members since last week.
The bar theme is Roman.
There's a guy – medals on – singing.

Sometimes I Think

Sometimes I think that my happiest days
Have been spent in bookshops;
Especially when everything's in bloom,

When the trees have hung out
Their flags on every street,
And the clouds have gone AWOL

Or been safely penned
By that orange collie of the skies:
It's then that I'm in my element

Because, because there's magic in the book.
Even Hewitt, custodian of reason,
Was moved to heresy as he took me

By the elbow in his house
To tour his library, his working collection,
And pointed to a buckramed book

On the jam-packed shelves. *See this one?*
Believe it or not, and I sense you will,
Roberta and I were in Edinburgh,

*And as we hurried past a second-hand
Bookshop, I suddenly stopped and said
That I needed, quickly, to go in.*

*I knew, somehow I just knew,
That there was a book on the shelf
That was somehow meant for me.*

*So we entered, and I went straight
To it, reached for it, and took it.
Now, that's all that I can tell you.*

It was there. And it was for me.
My friend always says that we should
Choose our addictions well.

I think I have. Only time will tell.

Thank you for reading!

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Produced in Northern Ireland

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