

Ten New Voices

The Open Ear | Autumn 2020

The Open Ear

The Open Ear is an annual journal dedicated to creative writing by students, staff, and alumni of Queen's University Belfast. The journal was founded in 2010 by postgraduate students. As of 2019, The Open Ear is one of the literary journals of The Seamus Heaney Centre at Queen's University Belfast. It remains a student-run enterprise.

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 The Open Ear Literary Journal

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After Carravaggio, *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge*, 1601–1605

Who was it that left all this fruit
for you, laid this abundance here
on a cracked sill?
She must have wanted the tear
of sweet flesh, found the sickly green shine of melon
maddening, that squash and its buttery yellowness
hidden under dark speckle.
Insatiable urge to slit skin
and watch the seeds spill out.
Her hands have pried a few arils
from the pomegranate,
ripped some token fig flesh
(did she pick these peaches,
in that orchard where you found her first,
sitting under a tree, perfectly content?).
She could not, did not, touch the marrows,
those tumescent, monstrous
marrows would have spelled the end.
But oh, the temptation,
all that bounty.

Sacha White

Old Ways

We sucked in our breath on seeing him
in a field when we arrived on North Uist.
We'd gone to set up our tent – and there he was
a bull the size of a house, sitting with
his flesh spread out around him like a gown,
a large plosh of contented muscle, bone
and fat and we wondered if his legs could
hold him up, or the flimsy fence hold him back.
His coat was a sleek shiny black, his lordly
look that of an emperor or a bishop.

We were woken the next morning by the
sound of cows bellowing, a petrifying
primeval sound that made sleep impossible.
We heard hooves skittering over stones,
men 'hup-hupping' and sticks whacking –
cows were being brought in for branding.
To my younger self back then, many years
ago, the sound made me think of the
women of my mother's generation,
hide-bound in their bodies, without voices.

Anne Coughlan

The Storm

It's the 1st of January 2020 and the world is at my feet. From the summit of Slieve Croob, I can see the past draining down the funnel of the old year, leaving a weak but hopeful sun hiding in the washed-out light of the winter sky. Every New Year's Day, I stand at the foot of the mountain, staring back at the old year. With gratitude, I bid it farewell and turn to move on, head bowed against the chilled wind as I begin to climb this 'mountain of the hoof', in the foothills of the high Mourne. It is the place I return to time after time, to touch the sky and reset my heart.

The path is as familiar as an old friend. It never changes as it winds upwards through bog, heather and sedge. The gurgling baby Lagan spills downwards through the marsh grass, laughing at the wind and gathering strength for the charge to the widening river bed below. It's always reassuring to stand at the source; a baptism of sorts, cleansing and renewing.

This is the land of stiles and streams, little gateways to new beginnings. It has been calling me home from the city for years and now I am back with you, living on our hill farm in Dechomet, re-rooted and content. The walk forces me to breathe more deeply, to focus on the road ahead and reach for the sky. In the distance, I see the golden cranes flash in the city estuary, where the river finishes its race. In my heart, I know it wants to turn back, rushing upwards to the little townlands of Dree and Drinn, Finnis and Begney, where the landscape is softer and the light is rainbowed.

I feel so small standing here on the path that narrows to present a crown of cairns spread out across the summit – burial chambers holding centuries of secrets, resting in peace here on this wild mountainscape. The ancient views are spectacular and humbling, and on the south face, I see the ghosts of chieftains bow in awe at the panorama of peaks gleaming in the distance. Backlit by the white-gold light of the hidden sun, Slieve Donard is every inch the leader after whom it was named – strong, dependable and always there for me and the gazing world. For this, I am so grateful, and whisper a silent prayer of thanks – thanks for the chance to come back and fulfil our dream to grow music on the mountain.

Margaret Doyle

Indian Summer

There is something anticipatory about living
through a season where it might rain at any time.
It has this incredible way
of getting through the taped-up window
despite all the care I'd taken
bandaging the ins and outs
with layers of gleaming stitches.
Still it sputters, suggests and spools gathered
in fat globules that look good enough to drink.
I can hardly take my eyes off it sinking
towards my bed and I try to remember
the last time I felt entirely content inside.
No that's not right, it's more like
the last time I felt convincingly awake,
when suddenly a wasp raps sharply on the glass
heavy with the awareness of its numbered days.

Jess Mc Kinney

Looking.

after Self-Portrait by Sir William Orpen 1905–10, Ulster Museum

The huntsman's black hat hides your eyes
leaving you in an almost featureless
self-portrait of secret interiority.

Perhaps the overpainted underlayer
covered a failed first brush,
or raised an emotion from that moment,
in the shadow of your study.

Like all reflections of self,
inner thoughts arise, form and colour
become less defined and overcast,
by questions of who we really are.

The image re-awakened in me again recently,
in a Sunday morning catch-up conversation.
My friend and I had almost forgotten each other.
We each caught sight of our reflections,
suddenly aware, of looking at captured images.

A moment of discovered self-portraiture
each opened up to our inner selves,
like Orpen's eyeless gaze,
a stilled life moment, into self.

John James Reid

Coming Back

Simon had gone through it all with his wife, Barbara, of course. I'm surprised they came out of it alive the way they normally go at each other. Old Bobby, he must have gone a bit mad in that little rundown flat by the river, but he seems to be ok. Ginny's lost a good bit of weight to be fair to her, though she won't shut up about it. Maybe I'm just bitter that I never got into doing those online workouts. She moves behind the bar with me in new fluidity, pulling pumps and cleaning glasses with grace. Jasper's sat on his usual stool being a lot chattier than usual, like he's realised he's got to make the most of the people around him. Hans is in an awful state though. More grey, hairy and smelly than anyone else. He's not really responding to anything, but I keep his drink topped up and he nods in gratitude. In contrast, the Ewans are in a constant state of shouts and songs and I keep having to remind them to stay apart from each other but it's tough. They just want to be close, and you can't blame them for that. A couple of new faces have started appearing. Normally the regulars would scowl or interrogate them until they left, but now they point at empty chairs and offer rounds. A couple of students get lectured on the history of the city, but Jasper keeps the pints coming so they don't mind. A few of the old ladies that propped up the Queen's Head across the way before it shut are initiated in. The Ewans make their moves and they tell them to behave but smile and blush all the same. Simon and Barbara start bickering until Bobby gives them a telling off that only old-fashioned teachers can. They button up and hug it out. Hans starts crying. I don't quite know what to do, but Ginny goes to him and rubs his back and says 'shhh'. The way he falls into her and how she touches him makes it look like a mother and son despite her being half his age. He apologises again and again before saying that his daughter passed away. I take over the bar and let Ginny sit with him for the rest of the night.

Everyone gets tipsy too quickly so we roll out the bar snacks and slow down the orders, there's exaggerated groans and comments made but it's all in good spirit.

The TV is on in the corner, but no-one looks at it.

It's pissing it down outside, but no-one cares.

Daniel Paton

white 4, n.d by annie veitch

my love, I never meant to make you cry.
It's not that I don't love living in our satin
berry daydreams, but there's a life beyond
the halo we've made within these sheets—

our legs flowering into each other,
lavender love passing between our lips
every time we kiss, imagining my hand
on the small of your back for the rest of time.

You remember the night we met vividly—
my nervous rambling about despising feet.
These days you rest your toes in the bend
of my knee when you get cold in the afternoon.

I wonder now if it was a lie when I told you
I detested feet because I hadn't met you yet.
You tell me to savor this moment through a broken smile.
I want to, but all we know is this violence, this killing time.

Claudia Christensen

Matchstick Poem 1

Diogenes
striking
a match

to the
millennial
pink

blush
of your
cheek,

looking
for just
one

honest
person;
Diogenes

lowers
the match,
moves on.

Jake Hawkey

Long Time, No See

I think I saw my da today. Walking, unconcerned as you like, amongst other pedestrians on Donegal Square West. Did we share a look; a double-take of disbelief? For a moment I thought he may smile. Or give a jaunty wink. He didn't.

Not seen since '77, except in a dream or two, but today there he was. Small, but not as sturdy as remembered: diminished somewhat but then, so many years have passed, he is bound to have altered. His hair is thick and steely — I definitely got his grey genes — and his legs bandy as before. His gait too is the same, being slightly off kilter, his balance undone when a shipyard explosion burst his ear-drums.

Why now? Why the dropping in, to a Belfast sorely changed and alien since his death forty-three years ago? It makes me ponder; ponder the blue-collar worker who expected nothing but a horse to win and his dinner suitably on the table. Who didn't own a car, nor take holidays and the only way to see the world was through war: Malaya, India, Java, Sumatra and Burma. Such a distance for a hard wee man from Ballymacarrett.

Anne Bodel

Gantry Cranes

These giant yellow framing devices speak to us
from the shipyards, try
to tell us something has happened.

The dried hedge-leaves rattle in their aspects.
I am a broken lighthouse.
The old greenhouse

is closed to the public, but we're in luck,
two gardeners still spin
their secateurs around their fingers

as they tend to the headless rose garden.
And a solitary student
reads on a bench,

legs crossed. She wears gloves
and a pale surgical mask. The pansies nod to her and
sniffle inconspicuously.

Some of us experiment with facial hair. Others
learn Mandarin or draw themselves
for the first time.

We try on earrings we never thought we would.

Noah Swinney

Contributors

Anne Bodel was born into a working-class family in West Belfast. Whilst working and raising her family she put her writing aside to study part-time for a BA Hons degree, graduating from QUB in 2006 at the age of forty-eight. She now hopes to graduate from QUB with an MA in creative writing.

Claudia Christensen is a queer, Puerto Rican writer from Orlando, Florida, whose work focuses primarily on the body, heritage, and relationships. After graduating from Belmont University with a degree in Sociology, she moved to Belfast, Northern Ireland to pursue an MA in Poetry.

Anne Coughlan has written for many years, both personally and professionally, however, she came late to poetry. She has had poems published in Antiphon and Cyphers and was one of the 2020 recipients of the Ireland Chair of Poetry Student Awards.

Margaret Doyle is a part-time student on the MA in Creative Writing at QUB. She took an early retirement in 2019 after a 35-year career at BBC Radio Ulster and returned home to the family farm in Dechomet parish just outside Dromara, Co Down. She is also writing a collection of short stories, running a poetry club online and managing Magysfarm Music Club.

Jake Hawkey was born in London, studied Fine Art at the University of Westminster and MA Poetry at the Seamus Heaney Centre, Queen's University Belfast. He was selected for Poetry Ireland Introductions 2020. Jake was the inaugural intern at the River Mill Writers' Retreat, Co. Down and is currently a poetry PhD candidate at Queen's.

Jess Mc Kinney is a poet from Inishowen Donegal, who recently completed her MA in Poetry at Queen's University Belfast. She was awarded the Irish Chair of Poetry Student Award 2020, and her work has appeared in *The Stinging Fly*, *Banshee* and *Abridged*.

Daniel Paton was born in 1996 in Stratford upon Avon and studied Creative Writing at the University of Gloucestershire. He also writes screenplays and stage plays, one of which was performed at Stroud Theatre Festival 2018. He currently lives in Belfast, having just completed his Masters degree at Queen's University.

John James Reid is a poet and an architect who is currently attending the MA Course in Poetry At Queen's. Published pamphlets include *Mid-Atlantic*, *The Goalkeeper*, and *After Six Weeks*. Poems appear in *Clover - A Literary Rag*, *Nashville Review*, *The Ekphrastic Review*. He has been making brick sculpture and clay tablet poems over the pandemic period for an exhibition.

Noah Swinney is from Cape Town, South Africa. He studied English at the University of Cape Town, and has recently finished his final dissertation on the early poetry of John Ashbery for the Poetry MA at The Seamus Heaney Centre. He is currently living in London.

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