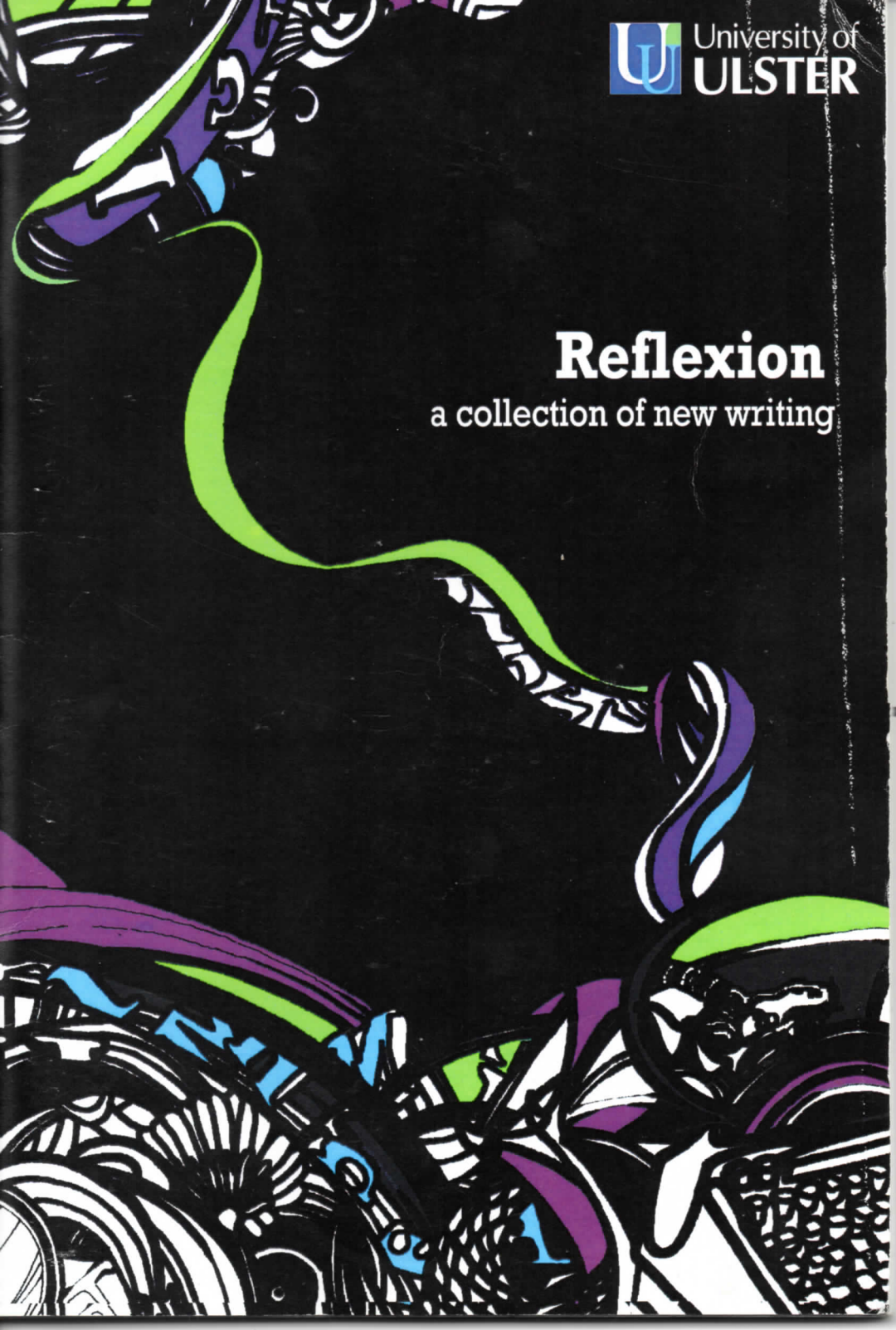


Reflexion

a collection of new writing



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CLASHED

Black mountain sits on the outer rim of Belfast city. To the mountain's silhouette of olive-grey tones, rising against an awakening sky of dusky blue, Jacky Cauldwell emerged from a back door of a house in a west Belfast council estate. A mid-terrace house, whose rear entry sat on the outer edge of the estate, this had been his only known home.

For the first time in a long time, Jacky felt calm. Not happy. Not uplifted. Not energised. No buzz on. Just calm. God knows it was a relief from the nagging, tortured mind that inhabited Jacky for months now. A significant decision had been made. Yes. He had turned a corner. It would take place tomorrow morning, This significant thing. The act he could not verbalise but had preoccupied him with indecision for some time. Now that he had taken the plunge in his mind at least, something heavy had lifted. So he was calm. Not happy. Not this long time. Just calm.

Today would be his last day at a tedious job. He would greet the taunts of workmates with the usual veneer of nonchalance, edging it with a bit of cheek. They would never guess his plans. Not one would suspect his secret departure from the low-waged, mini-market chaos of trolleys, baskets, cardboard boxes and supervisors whose whining habits seemed to constitute their 'raison d'être' He would eat with curiosity and not quite relish, the routine bacon and egg soda bread sandwich at lunchtime, knowing it would be his last. On the homeward bound bus-ride, he would bemuse over the familiar shop fronts along the main road, all the road signs, every set of traffic lights, each familiar street-name. No more bus journeys like this for him. The last journey home.

Rarely was family dinner a social occasion. Tonight, like many other nights, Jacky would scavenge amongst cupboards and larder to procure a makeshift meal from whatever was available. Still, his sister Karen would be home, engaged in fastidious study towards some future goal. He would be kind with her tonight. Ask her about school, friends, boyfriend. Then to bed to lie calm and still, savouring these final tranquil hours, until sleep overcame him.

But the dreams came, every night: torturous and devastating in their content and intensity; lurking in chilled shadows of destruction and remorse; swelling in conflict, panic and confusion; symbolic for Jacky of his crappy life, his no-hoper personhood, his distraught and life-worn self. Here it comes.

Sinking. A sensation of muddy swamp underfoot. Silent terror. He tried to get his voice to work but the scream would not vocalise itself – it remained a strangled gasp, stretching itself out through the eternity of dreamtime.

Awakened with a start, he braced himself for the usual gnaw of anguish. Then Jacky remembered his plan. It would all be over soon. What's the point of dragging yourself through dull days like you were a dead weight with no joy or even basic contentment? Never had he known what it felt like to be at home in the world. Or wait, was that entirely true? Karen was nice to him, tried to shield him and look after him when no-one else seemed to give a damn, even though she was younger. But she herself was worn down by the relentless humiliation of continual knock-backs, criticisms, deprivations, snide remarks and being made to feel like you should never have been born.

What time is it? Not six yet. Good timing. Jacky got out of bed with a feeling of being afloat. Some kind of heaviness had disappeared from his limbs and this lightness was a new experience. Maybe he didn't need to go through with it? But as soon as that thought took hold, the anguish jabbed again. **YOU'LL NEVER BE RID OF ME! YOU'D BETTER GET ON WITH IT OR YOUR PATHETIC LITTLE LIFE WILL GET WORSE THAN YOU'VE EVER IMAGINED.**

Better leave the note for Karen. His heart weighed down like the final thud of an iron hammer.

*

Jacky dressed quickly and lifted his brown, canvas duffle bag with cords greased in grime from countless school days and football practices. Out of it he pulled a grubby envelope with Karen's name and three x's, and a note inside that read,

Karen, I can't do this anymore. Please don't be sad I'm gone. Listen, I go to my peace knowing you will make it for the both of us, won't you? I know that you will understand why I have to do this, don't you? There's no other way out for me. Take care of yourself Karen, have a good life, really a good life, love Jacky.

He had not quite convinced himself and now imagined Karen's face contorted in tears, her thin form shrouded in screams. The vision haunted him. Ambivalence again.

-Where is all this coming from now? Just when I thought I'd made the right decision and I knew it was right because it brought the instant calm. Now I'm confused again. Sure what use am I to Karen or anyone else? But what will it do to her if I go through with it? I thought before she'd get over it but now something's at me - now I'm not so sure....To hell with it, and to hell with her, I can't live this stifling life-

Quietly down the stairs, cautious not to forget the duffle bag, couldn't manage without that. He placed the note for Karen behind the clock and a pity filled him, not for himself but for her. Then he began to feel numb. That would do the trick. Numbness lets you get through things, lets you do things without feeling their effects. Out the back door.

Another misty summer morning. Another surprise. Here, on this attempt at finality, Jacky Cauldwell felt a sudden sense of connectedness with the earth. As he breathed in the vapourous morning air, an awareness dawned on him of life in all its teeming rawness. He felt bloodywell alive!

-Shit, why now?

He began to run, off the pathway and through the dew-wet, overgrown meadow into the nearby woods. But the feelings compounded. The woods felt inhabited, mystical, magical, calling to him in some kind of uncanny way. The trees looked like they were moving for him, beckoning him into their primordial organic-ness.

-What's going on here?

Panic set in. He waited for the anguish....No sign, but it will come at some stage, no doubt about that. Better get on with it, right now. A rope has a strange feel when you know it's the last thing you'll touch in this world. Snake-like and almost alive itself. He wrapped it around his hand, wondering in his daze what kind of knot would be the best one for a successful outcome.

-Why did I not work this out beforehand? Maybe I don't really want to do it?

How long he stood under that tree branch was impossible to tell for he was paralysed with fear and regret, yet also dread of not completing his task. Chilliness crept up his legs like an upside-down icicle encasing itself around him. It reached the pit of his stomach and felt like dry ice crunching his guts into shards. It was only when the music drifted into earshot that the intensity of his feelings was interrupted. The spell was broken. Or rather, a new

spell was invoked. What was that? Raw and electric, penetrating and uplifting, Jacky felt something ignite. He heard voices.

-No harm investigating, I can always come back later on and do what I have to do-

Jacky allowed the music to draw him to its source, and as the volume intensified and he got closer, Jacky developed a sensation of being warmed up from the outside in, or was it from the inside out? No matter, he continued his thaw and followed the music and the heat, eventually coming upon a group of young men. They were all sat around a campfire in a clearing, with one of those new portable cassette players, the big, stereo kind. He recognised one of the guys, used to be a hippy down the street.

-Haven't seen him in ages. Johnny I think?

Jacky stood quietly for a few minutes, elevated by the riffs and edges of this new sound like nothing he'd heard before. Punky but smart, you know, not Sex Pistols. More profound, got you in the guts with something surreal yet infused with the mysteries of the universe.

- What harm if I just ask about this band, whoever they are?

"Hey man, sit down. You look like you just seen a f***ing ghost man."

"Maybe I did, mate. My own!"

"Gimme some of that, whatever it is you're on, man. Must be good shit when you get an 'oobe'."

"Pass no remarks on our Johnny here, he's carried away with all that e.s.p. stuff" another guy said. "Picked it all up over in the big smoke. He's just back from London for the week, you know? Anyway, skin, what are you doing out here at this time of the morning? I thought we were the only all-nighters 'round here?"

"Ah, you don't want to know what I'm doing out here. It's not my usual scene, that's all I can say at the minute. What I really wanna know is who is that band, mate? The one you're playing on the cassette there?"

Johnny, eager to expound on his claim to fame amongst the gathering, said

"That's The Clash, man, you never seen anything like them. How can anybody describe that sound, man, I mean it's in the stratosphere, isn't it?"

Johnny closed his eyes and jerked his head in tune with the beat.

"Guess what? I saw them live in Camden. Belter. Honest to God, I never felt more alive, man. I tell you, they're gonna be a legend. Especially the lead guy, he has some kinda f***ing energy, man. And the guitars, and the drums, shit, the whole band. They're like alchemical man, you know?"

Jacky knew alright because the decision, the one that had taken up most of his waking life in recent weeks, was now fading rapidly into the mists of a past life.

"You going back to London then Johnny?"

"Sure am, man. Too much fighting here and no bloody decent work. Gotta see that Clash again. Get back in the scene, you know?" Johnny walked up to Jacky's side and slung an arm over his shoulder.

"It's all happening over there, man. Punk, Carnival, Reggae, it's like a living party man. But I have a job anyway like, but I'm learning the guitar too, you know? Aiming for the music business you see. There's nothing like it, I tell you, bands springing up everywhere" Johnny was on a roll and Jacky was spellbound.

"And like, you don't have to be a maestro. Just lift the instrument and open your mouth and belt it out, man. In fact, now that I'm talking about it all, it's that exciting I'd nearly head back this morning. Right now". Then, to Jacky, Johnny came out with,

"Why don't you think about joining me?"

"What? You mean you would take me with you?"

"Why not, man? You look like you could do with a bit of a life injection!"

Everyone laughed and swigged in turn from a bottle of Black Bush, passing it finally to Jacky. He had some money due, now that he thought about it from this sudden, new worldview. He had told Karen to lift his wages at the shop and tell them he wouldn't be back anyway.

-No! Karen, the note! "Hey guys, there's something I have to do, but I'll be back, definitely. Johnny, will you wait for me?"

"Sure will, man. Sounds like you been Clashed!"

"Yeah....Actually...I have....I've been Clashed. And I never felt so glad to be anything-ed in my life!"

His name was being called from a distance. Karen. Running towards her voice, he heard it shift from panicked desperation to guttural howl, "Jackyyyyy".

"Karen! Karen!" he called, "It's alright, it's me, I'm here!" as she ran into his arms, "I didn't do it, kiddo, couldn't do it. It's

alright, I'm sorry, I'm sorry to scare you like this kid, I'm sorry" and tears bled down his cheeks.

"Jacky, Jacky, what were you thinking? I know Ma and Da are a bit all over the place, but it'd kill them if anything happened you! Come back to the house with me willya, please?"

"Lead the way, kiddo. Listen, something's happened to me, just there now. I heard a band – sounds a bit ridiculous when I say it but I swear to you, the music changed me some way, right away, and this wood, these trees....I can't explain it – all I know is I feel like living and that's something I haven't felt in ages, but....I'm going away, Karen. To London, with Johnny, remember hippy Johnny?"

"Kinda. You sure you'll be ok?" She hesitated, thought, then resolved

"At least we'll know you're alive, I suppose." Hesitated again,

"But what if you get down again Jacky, what then?"

"I'll never be there again kid, never. I tell ya, some sort of spark went off and it's brought me to life like nothing else. Don't worry about me Karen, I'll come back and see you, I will, honest."

Already they were almost home, panting and out of breath as they took the last few half-walked, half-run steps back across the long grass. Da was standing in the rear garden, shaking in his shapeless jeans, bare from the waist up. Ma could be heard from the open kitchen window, sobbing. Immediately he spotted Jacky and Karen emerge from the overgrown meadow, Da yelled and broke into a run towards them. He grabbed Jacky in a desperate grip and gasped "Thank God son, thank God."

Ma, still sobbing in her dressing gown and slippers now wet from the grassy verge, held onto Jacky for a long time, unable to speak. Nothing else was said until Jacky breached the silence.

"I'm going to London – don't worry, I'm gonna get a job and join a band. I know it sounds mad but I have to go. Karen'll explain it all – I need to go and get the wages owed to me, I'll see you before I leave."

"Wait a minute." Da cast a pregnant glance at Ma, then motioned them all into the house. "Look son, if it's what you need, then so long as we know you're alive and kicking, if that's what'll keep you alive and kicking, then, well, you go for it. And while we're on the subject, your Ma and me, well we had something stashed for your birthday but seems like now's a good time to give it

to you anyway. Sure you might as well have it now," and he reached into the under-stair cupboard to produce a black, leatherette case.

"A guitar!" Jacky was astounded, yet it seemed the proper culmination to this somewhat synchronous day. "Ma, Da, I don't believe it! I never even guessed! Ah thanks, thanks so much. Can I take it with me?"

"Well it's not much use to any of us here! It's for you, your happiness. Go on and take it with you son, and live your life. Enjoy your life. Stay alive, son, that's all we ask, stay alive and live it to the max."

"Will do, Da, will do."

Roberta McDonnell

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This year, 2009, saw some massive developments and exciting changes for Reflexion. For three years this student and staff publication has remained the best kept secret of the University of Ulster's creative writing classes in Coleraine. Now, for the first time Reflexion has been pitched to all university students across every subject area and all four campuses. And the response has been overwhelming. It was particularly exciting to consider the huge number of submissions from students and staff members outside of Literature Studies. Within this slim volume we have contributors from educational backgrounds as far ranging as Fire Safety Engineering, Computer Science, Public Relations, Psychology, and Social Anthropology – proving that poetry, composition, and indeed all forms of creative writing really are for everyone.

This fourth edition of Reflexion weaves together a variety of pieces from talented writers across Northern Ireland and beyond, joined together through a shared experience of life at the University of Ulster. Regrettably, not all submissions could be published, but I feel the following selected pieces aptly represent the immensely talented and multi-cultural future of Northern Ireland.

Many thanks to all those who generously donated their time and their resources to assist in this year's publication of Reflexion – it is very much appreciated. And finally, special thanks must go to the authors of this volume; I sincerely hope this collection brings you some of the recognition you all so clearly deserve.

Charlene O'Kane
Editor

Reflections on Reflexion:

Now in its fourth volume, reflexion remains as it has always been – multifaceted, dynamic, refreshing in the diversity of its themes, moods, and voices. Lyrical, satirical, or meditative, recalling memories of a visit to Finland, of a train ride across rural Antrim, or of a military conflict in Sri Lanka, analysing the intimacy of love or reflecting on social conventions, whether in today's Ireland or in some dystopian computer-controlled future, these poems and stories take us on a journey through a diversity of human experience – sometimes serious, sometimes playful, but always impressive in its energy and sincerity."

– Dr. Jan Jedrzejewski

"From the slimmest haiku to the most inventive of short stories, this issue of Reflexion is rich in the originality and diversity that have become the hallmarks of this premiere UU student publication. Start reading now!"

– Dr. Kathleen McCracken