

AGENDA

**A Happy Christmas and an Inspiring New Year
to all subscribers, contributors and readers!**



**A Bengal Eagle Owl caught and rescued on Fred's farm last Christmas by his sister, Carolyn.
Photograph: Marcus Frederick.**

Steven O'Brien, lecturer in Creative Writing, University of Portsmouth. His collection, *Dark Hill Dreams*, was published by **Agenda Editions**.

Zither Child

For Flossie

i

Of all things a zither!

I was astonished
By its pylon saw and jingle
When she tugged it
From the trinket-midden.

Time withers at her door jamb.
And her decree is chaos
Over cups, bangles and scarves-
Every filched bauble
Piled and trodden in.

ii

When she flung a tune
Each of her fingers was cat's paw
Plucking crazy feathers
From blond wood
And wire-

A Zingari wedding reel
Heard in a subway.
Ribbon music and mischief
Riddling up an escalator.

Beads of mountain rain,
Shoal flickers,
Strung
On her flat and cunning
Harp.

iii

Arc now
To point-forged water

Hammer stone chink
In the Doo Lough Pass-

And her poise
In the peeling wind,

Like she has leaped freshly tempered
From an under bridge smithy-

Her salmon flanked legs
Sloughing silver scales.

Each splashed glede
A zinc note

As she jumps trimly
The shutters of the sun.

Merryn McCarthy Marshall, prize-winning poet, about to go and live in France.

Trespass in the Christmas Holidays

(a former teacher speaks)

My first spin
on a new bike.
Up to school –
no one around
on all that
smooth black tarmac.

I am a ghost rider
in a ghost town.
I take in details
I never did when
walking up and down
between lessons.

My reflectors glowing,
I delight in
my abandonment
on the forsaken site.
Learner, not teacher,
I go through

all the gears
then I freewheel
as I circle, bat-like,
trespasser or thief,
stalking my own shadow
over hallowed ground.

Arlene Ang lives in Spinea, Italy. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Magma*, *Other Poetry*, *Poetry Ireland*, *Poet Lore*, *Seam*, *Stand*, and *staple*. She received the 2006 Frogmore Poetry Prize and serves as a poetry editor for *The Pedestal Magazine* and *Press 1*. More of her writing may be viewed at www.leafscape.org.

We are rarely prepared

to leave the dinner table:
wine stains like dark circles

around eyes, the foetal position
of paper napkins rolled into balls,

chicken grease on cold plates,
the soiled ends of spoons. The argyle

on the radiator has lost its pair,
and a red straw malingers in the empty

glass. This jar is full of pills
like a conch after the sea breath

has been smashed from it.
There was a time when *intravenous*

meant *darling*, *only until Christmas*
and helium balloons lasted

five days in mid-air. Here
the structure of taste is first to go.

We listen carefully to footsteps,
the respirator, seconds that drip down

a tube. Some say this fervent rattle
from the throat is the closest thing to bells

sounding the alarum. We know
it's only a vagrant breeze passing.

John Powell-Ward's poems are in the latest online supplement to the Past Histories issue.

Sacred

Nothing is fact before it got there first.
Such is epistemology. We go
Or stay; how the computer came to know
Is pensive; foxes run and salmon burst
From pools like hungry aircraft; millions thirst.

Is it? Is there. No name names the clouds
At all, and if we ponder such, some way
The curls of cirrus gather to reply
As in mythology, indeed their words
Stay to impend, like our approaching shrouds.

I call this *sacred*, sometimes, wondering
Why time no more than vegetation stuff
Floats round the people's suffering; off
Comes just a wisp of cures, a gathering
Of air like sand-grains, water levelling.

Somewhere a business slumps. Far out at sea
Huge fishermen get flung like spray or nets.
The sacred cries how each small child forgets
From those it loves even the saddest injury,
Trusting the halo which will always be.

The Problem

In fact we've rendered it so thin
It's gone invisible: an interface for where
Two surfaces encounter and no air
Fills in the gap: indeed there is no "in"

In there for that would have no meaning.
Where sea meets sky, the hugest splash
Lacks altercation, and he would be rash
Who ventured God implies no intervening

Between God's space and the first space
Beside it. *God is beneath your very nose*
Say the extreme theologies, swatting each rose
To push its aphids off; each to its grace.



View from the Agenda office at dawn, December 2007.

Photograph: Marcus Frederick

Annie Charlesworth's poem on Ted Hughes is in the '**Past Histories**' issue of *Agenda*.

Christmas Without You

O and A and A and O

I straighten the way for you
as if for a King. Winds blow
from the North into the shelter
where you lie huddled in my thoughts.

What I feel for you persists
like a faith full of carollings.
Mistletoe rings my wrists
as I lug a bale of straw to an altar
for the seating of three lesser kings.

The guiding star, hidden
from day, is my clenched heart.
Shy wordings come, unbidden,
when lanterns usher me on
and on, future summer leaves

piling up over layers of peat.
There can be no regressing:
only a crossing on bare feet
from O to A and A to O
cum cantibus in choro.

No Guiding Star

No guiding star –
Even in such clear nights when I would put you
In the centre of a ring of dancing galaxies.

No guiding star
Only something snapping: the satin ribbon
Cut off the parcel of our love, contents gone.

No guiding star.
You have sharpened its points but not acted
Upon them, shocked, now, at my lack of festivity.

No guiding star.
No paper chains apart from the folded poems
Written to you in a belief bordering on a faith.

No guiding star.
No front door wreath – just a hand-carved crib
Of our wasted nativity. No tinsel, no angel

No guiding star –
Your skin hardened into a morticed wall,
Excluding me forever in holy family time.

No guiding star,
No considering moon. No sky, even, to ink in
The night differently, forgetting you are

No guiding star –
Only the innkeeper who let me into your heart,
Then said there was no room, the star fallen.

Erin Bidlake's work features in **Broadsheet 9**.

Screw Santa Claus

for my father

his arrival

the mud room on Albert
after a day at the farm
off green coveralls
sticky with pitch
off chainsaw boots
wet with snow-soaked wool

his smell

maple syrup boiling hard
fir boughs freshly cut
sweat under layers of flannel
conifers and gasoline having it out
in the back of the truck

his greeting

icicles drip from eyelashes
weekend beard scratches my cheeks
his hands chapped red from the cold
against my bare neck

eeeeeee!

his size

screw Santa Claus
my father is Jack Frost and
Paul Bunyan wrapped up
in one arctic sleeping bag
wintry giant of my childhood
wielding shovel and ax

kisses rough as bark
sweet as sap

Edward O'Dwyer, 23, gained a first class Honours degree from the University of Limerick. He is currently studying at University College, Cork for Postgrad in Education. He has had a chapbook published and his poems have appeared in *The Shop*.

Christmas Time

What is Christmas, really,
when you've made
that very sudden transition
from child to cynic?

Or when that drink too many
is the highlight,
and tell me, what is Christmas
when Santa's just a jaded old secret
not worth keeping anymore?

When you've made
the startling realisation
it might as well
be last year's TV guide reprinted,

or when with each year
you notice the self-coaxing
to get down the decorations
from the attic
is wearing its thinnest,

what is it more than a time
wrapped in colourful paper,
bound in glossy ribbon,
when opened,
one we'd all surely return?

Caroline Clark, 30, has poems in **Broadsheet 9**.

Snowfall

It lays the length of branches
the backs and arms of benches,
tram cables settle neatly in peaks
to spray newly
every few minutes
then recover in freshfall.

Silently it slips from statues' laps and shoulders
softening the blow;
we trace our tracks
lightest footfall ever known.



Suzanne Clark: Ploughed Fields – charcoal on paper

Owen Flatley, 24, lives in west London. He works part-time as both an EFL teacher and a tutor in English, French, and German. He writes in the afternoons and is currently working on his first novel.

Finchley Road

It's Christmas on the Metropolitan line.
At Finchley Road
The crowded smiles of buttery lights strung out
Across the platforms
Have mulled the spicy warmth of German markets
Into the dark
Sincerity of early evening's sky.
A mellow blush
Of conversation settles on my ears
As voices rub
Together in the stiff, expectant cold.
We stand and wait.
Coincidence, that holds us in this night
With calm assurance,
Ruffles the station's murmuring mirage with
Unbuttoned laughter
That spills from winter coats like claret scarves;
It sends the trains;
The squinting semi-fasts to Amersham
That waddle from
The endless depths of London's chugging mines
And wait agape
For them to board. The Watford train is late.

Across the aisle
A man attempts to solve the puzzled seats:
He stares intently
At the isosceles of red and mauve
Assembled on
The felt-tip blue material. I turn
To look outside.
We slide past smears of ersatz light
From drooping lampposts,
Slow down to watch some football dragged to languor
By spongy shadow,
Disturb the water slobbered on trampolines
Received last Christmas –
Riffling through lives which will forever be
Semi-detached
From our circumferences. Coincidence,
That gives then snatches
Back these, the flash biographies of men,
Is overworked.
It staidly drops her book
Upon my foot:
'Contemporary Analyses of Freud':
We smile half-smiles
Of swift apology and swift acceptance,
Returning straight to
Our own connections, more exotic than
Coincidence.

I do not turn to watch the train lights sink
Into the darkness.
And nor do I conjecture what the man
Was working out
Or where the girl was travelling to. I'm full
Of Finchley Road -
Its Christmas lights, its vintage voice, its cold.

Cava Hurrahs

'I'm sorry I can't be there'.
 'It's been a pleasure working with you!'
'Please save me an éclair.'
 'I hope you like the pressies too'.

'And to you Judas.'
 'Remember, give your badge-pass in'.
'A merry Christmas.'
 'And cheers from me and everything'.

'Yeah mate, nice one'.
 'I'll send your reference in the post.'
'With kisses, John.'
 'Another day or two at most.'

'Goodbye.'

'You need to leave us your log-on.'

'From Di.'

'We'll miss you when you're finally gone.'

I left the office with a creambun grin
And stuffed the card directly in the bin.
An indigestible thought had broken free.
I shuddered: Who was boring: them or me?'



Cock Pheasant on Fred's farm, Christmas 2007.

Photograph: **Carolyn Frederick**