

A SELECTION OF POEMS FROM AND A CONVERSATION

WITH LESLEY QUAYLE  @blackboughpoems



Lesley Quayle is a widely published prize-winning poet and a folk/blues singer. Her latest pamphlet is *Black Bicycle* (4Word Poetry Press). Her previous work has been published in *The Rialto*, *The North* and *Angle*.

Q. When did you begin writing?

A. Almost as soon as I could put pen to paper, I began writing small poems and stories. It's a bit of a compulsion now.

Q. Are you mainly drawn to writing poetry or do you also write prose?

A. Mainly poetry, although I do occasionally write flash fiction and I have written a novel. I enjoy the process of writing prose, but I'm more comfortable with poetry. I did write a regular piece for the *Yorkshire Journal* about rural life, including poems, and occasional work for the *Yorkshire Post* and *Working Sheepdog News* about farming and training my young collie.

“When trouble came, it had my face –

eyes, nose and mouth.

When trouble came,

it looked a lot like me.”

It takes one to know one.

When trouble came, it wasn't wearing stocking mask or balaclava helmet as disguise. It didn't roar, or bite my face, show me its fists or shit upon the parquet floor. It wasn't drunk, it wasn't high, it didn't have a flasher's mac or knife or gun, left no graffiti, uttered no obscenities to make me cower.

When trouble came, it didn't come in bloodstained packages, a finger in a box, ear wrapped in cottonwool, it didn't come with poison on its mind, unzipping me with murderous intent. It didn't come with rusty nails or broken bottles, wild hair or maddened red-rimmed eyes.

When trouble came, it had my face - eyes, nose and mouth. When trouble came, it looked a lot like me.

(First published – The North)

“Like most poets, I excelled in getting rejections – the old cliché, I could paper my walls with them.”

Q. When and where were you first published?

A. When I was about 17, I had a poem published in a local paper and also in a rather obscure, now defunct poetry magazine, the name of which escapes me. Later, whilst at university, I discovered and was published in *Aireings* (a Leeds based poetry magazine, which I later edited) and the wonderful *Pennine Platform*.

Q. Can you describe your journey to publication?

A. Tortuous! Like most poets I excelled in getting rejections – the old cliché, *I could paper my walls with them*. Acceptances were few and far between at first but each one helped my confidence to grow a little until I was actually placing work in quality magazines, alongside poets I admired. After I became a winner of the *BBC Wildlife Magazine Poet of the Year* award, I started to believe that I could consider myself to be *a poet* and began to submit regularly to magazines, journals and competitions, with a reasonable amount of success.

Q. When and where do you write?

A. I used to have to squeeze writing into small portions of the day, in between managing the farm and looking after my four children. Now that I'm retired and my family is grown, I have more time to write, but still find my most productive periods are short bursts of energy shoehorned in between other activities. I have always written in the kitchen, with easy access to coffee and the odd snack.

Come-Bye.

Away.

He was a natural right-hander,
flanked wide and true.

I had to push him to the left,
force clockwise on him,

Come-bye.

Stay calm, don't rush him,
let commands follow like a soft wind,
his world the close thicket of sheep,
the tapering outrun, stealthy in behind them,

Steady. Steady.

There.

The lift, the fetch, balancing the flock to me,
his eyes fixed, hearing nothing but my voice.

Steady. Walk Up.

He moves like dark water.

The old flock mother tows them towards me,
tolling her brood music so they can follow,
away from the wolf at their heels.

(First published – The Rialto)

Q. Do you think your style has changed over time?

A. Definitely. I think it would be odd if it hadn't.

Q. What writers influenced you and which poets do you continually go back to if any?

A. I don't really know where to start. John Keats, John Donne, W B Yeats, Dylan Thomas, Anne Sexton (whose poems I return to again and again) Robert Burns, Tony Harrison, Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter, Jen Hadfield etc etc. I read these and many more. Current re-reading list, Helen Mort, Tomas Tranströmer, Jim Carruth, Fran Lock, Michael, Symmons Roberts, Mary Oliver, Elizabeth Bishop.



Q. Can you tell us a little about your writing process?

A. The more rushed I am, the more the poems come knocking urgently. They can begin very simply as an idea gleaned from a word, an overheard conversation, a piece of music, a view, an image, nature, pain and injustice – anything and everything, I guess. They rattle around in my head, becoming more insistent until I have to write them down. I don't use notebooks, which I know many poets prefer, so when the poem eventually appears on the page/screen it is more often than not a fully formed thing – but a first draft nevertheless, which requires more work. I can become obsessive about one word or a single image and can spend ages getting it *just right*. Very rarely, almost never, that first draft manifests as a finished poem.

Q. What are you reading now?

A. I've just finished reading *Lincoln in the Bardo* by George Saunders, *Black Car Burning* by Helen Mort and *Killochries* by Jim Carruth. About to read *Crossing* by Pajtim Statovici and currently wading through *Stalin's Last Crime (The Doctors' Plot)* by Jonathan Brent and Vladimir P Naumov.

Q. What advice, if any, would you give to an aspiring poet?

A. I guess the standard advice to read, read and read – and then read some more. Try not to get downhearted if you receive rejections, they're a fact of life for all poets so don't be put off. Don't feel you have to adopt a certain 'voice' – your own is fine, it's yours; unique and honest. So, write about the things that energise your own, personal muse, the things that captivate, rivet and trouble you and you won't go far wrong. And good luck.

Brigitte is Dancing.

Her weary feet, un-stockinged, bare.
Sea laps them, sucks toes, puckers
heels, dispenses ease like linctus.

Haar snakes her long-bones, the salt wind
tasting thigh and groin, sharp tongued,
ice-silent, teasing a glim of hair.

She lifts her arms, soft hollows
grey as underwings of moth,
raises her eyes to shoals of stars,

flings off her stillness, revolves
on the threshold of night,
naked as winter, breasts luminous,

golden gourds, her body familiar with the
sea's long calling, its grace notes
and shifting songs. Brigitte is dancing.

(First published – Angle)

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- An Interview by *Black Bough Poetry's* Editor Matthew Smith. Editing and design work by Guest Reader, Katie Stockton. Lesley's poems can be found in the upcoming issue of *Black Bough Poetry*.