

**Claire Williamson, Guest Poet reading at Ciccic, Taunton,
Thursday April 4th 8pm
Interview with Graeme Ryan from Fire River Poets**

Graeme: I find 'Visiting the Minotaur' a fantastic collection - I'm quite blown away by a poem like 'My Brother and Mother as Horses' for instance, where you deal with the shock and grief of their loss in such an immensely powerful way, nine tenths of the feeling hidden and therefore all the more powerful. It starts:

‘They sit at a green plastic table
with me after all these years,
enjoying a pot of tea in May sun.

I stand up to pour,
ignoring that they are horses.
How else would they return?’

Having experienced a little of what you write about in my own family I find myself right there with what you are saying.

'No Man's Land' delivers a very powerful charge too about trauma in childbirth. A really striking, original piece:

I'm losing blood,
every gasp of gas and air, a decision:
do I give in to the pain...?

I think you are very skilful not only in the compositions but in the way you have assembled the collection so that the themes talk to each other and we experience their force-field.

Claire: Many thanks for your email and your kind words; I'm glad you've found recognition in the poems.

Graeme: [What has been your experience of writing about family grief and trauma in terms possibly of understanding or starting to come to terms with it?](#)

Claire: The experience of writing about family grief and trauma began a long time ago, as a teenager, and even back then there were useful metaphors; I had the feeling of 'mountains in my head' that made it difficult to think straight. I suppose these mountains were a number of obstacles to 'get over' before I could get on with my life - I'm still hiking... but I do find that once I have just the right image, I can commit that to the page and it gives me a vocabulary for what is often a challenge to put into words. The poetic language to describe difficulties brings new meaning and insights, and this, in turn, helps me to come to terms.

Graeme: Your reply to my first question is really interesting, and moving too, when you talk of the 'mountains' you are 'still hiking' in your head.

In the light of what you say about 'the right image', could you say a little about the significance of the Minotaur as an image that works for you in this collection, which I think it demonstrably does:

'pulled through the labyrinth's two thousand rooms:
potteries, banquet halls, wine presses, shrines,
all stamped with the sign of the bull.'

Claire: The injustice of the Minotaur's fate has been with me for a long time now; it wasn't his fault to be born as a consequence of an affair, or that his shape was frightening to others. As described in 'The Minotaur Speaks', I have a sense of him not being monstrous at all, more silenced and perhaps a little vengeful - hence a moment of schadenfreude at the fall of Icarus in the poem. Although writing the collection may be a betrayal of the very idea of keeping secrets, there is a sense that the Minotaur never had a voice and I wanted to give this to him and to me. Having been the daughter of someone who committed suicide and the thorn in the side of my step-mother's marriage, I didn't have access to my birth family until I set out to find them in my late twenties, but instead carried the shame of difficulties that arose as a consequence of other people's choices. Logic prevails that it isn't one's fault, but experience tells a different story, one of cruelty and living with hushed tones.

Psychologist Thomas Moore in *Care of the Soul* refers to the Minotaur as both the inner difficulty, and to his other name *Asterion*, the star. Moore suggests: 'We have to care for this suffering with extreme reverence so that, in our fear and anger at the beast, we do not overlook the star.' Poetry has been the star for me, something bright that can be polished like a diamond to bring its roughness into a new wonder.

The labyrinth is significant too. I have, like many others, had a lot of untangling to do, which for some of us can only ever be a reaching after the truth. The poem *Red Herrings*, with its cryptic imagery is something to do with being misled and the stench in the poem has something to do with the aforementioned hushed living conditions.

Something happens in life when individuals choose not to, or can't, take their share of responsibility, there is a deficit and the pieces of responsibility need to be picked up by others and not always successfully. The prison that the Minotaur lives in is one of Foucault's Heterotopias (other places) to which society sends people with whom they don't know how to manage; the labyrinth resonates with both lack of integration in society and dissociation when traumatised (hence my poem *Heterotopias*), and other places people take themselves to survive, but meanwhile lose social connection and sympathy.

Graeme: Wow, what a thought-provoking, integral and profound reply to what could potentially have been a question of poetics or 'literary/stylistic approach.' It opens up an enormous dimension to the work in this collection and saturates it with so much meaning. So much to say about this, I almost don't know where to start! When

I read '**Visiting The Minotaur**', the last poem in the collection, I felt extremely moved - it's an incredible poem and the last quatrain achieves the almost impossible in holding together the jagged, oppositional fragments and achieving a synthesis in the drum-beat rhythm and enumeration of that final list. Like a diamond retrieved from extreme heat and pressure...

'...the woman, the horse, the hooves,
The cave, the fist, and the death.'

What is so impressive is the way this works as a discrete poem with maximum impact, poetic command and economy of language.

Your reference to 'the star' within the fear and anger makes me think of the Jungian shadow too, and the alchemical process...

I have read '**Red Herrings**' several times and love the way the pungent image sets up its own disturbance and portal into an inner life through the surrealism of lines like: 'She bathed in herrings. He forced/ them in her mouth at mealtimes...'

I love poetry that does this because one's senses and attention are grabbed first - the image does its work and the meaning comes later, leaving the image to live on.

From your biography on the back of 'Visiting the Minotaur' I noticed that you are '*Programme Leader for the Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes at the Metanoia Institute*'. I looked up the meaning of Metanoia and one definition read: 'change in one's way of life resulting from penitence or spiritual conversion'. From watching the YouTube film about the Creative Writing Programme at The Metanoia Institute I could certainly pick up the redemptive and spiritual - in the broadest sense - nature of the course and its profound effect on participants. I wasn't sure about 'penitence' - what definition would you give to metanoia?

A poem like '**Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide**' is another string to your bow in the way it is written very naturalistically and yet achieves a deep level of honesty and compassion:

'After the group we chatter on the sleeted pavement,
warmed by the details
of our shared stories, coroner's courts...'

It adds another note to your writing, the same as in '**Rough**' which perfectly captures one of the 'heteretopias' you talk about:

'... the tennis court where she curled up
On a bench in her thin coat. Slept.
Woke to sun backlighting the conifers'

our collection is exemplary it seems to me in engaging with grief, fear and anger and the possibilities within us to integrate and achieve some kind of at-one-ment, to find some kind of a 'star' to steer and be illuminated by.

Many thanks by the way for engaging in such a direct, generous and thought-provoking way with this 'interview.' I have learned so much already from what you've written, and I think many others will too. Whenever you have time to reply

(and no doubt your schedule is more than busy - it's easier for me because I've just stopped teaching after thirty five years...) I will be fascinated to hear your responses.

Claire: Thank you for your generous reply. If you don't mind me turning the tables for a moment, would you indulge my curiosity?.. What did you teach for thirty-five years?

Graeme: To answer your question, I started with secondary English and a bit of Drama, then the Drama grew, and for the last twenty years it was full-time Drama at a secondary school in Taunton which had full use of a theatre (The Tacchi -Morris Arts Centre) for rehearsing and staging performances - a wonderful creative time - if very demanding. I wrote some full-length plays there which I was very fortunate to have performed by students - since I've started this new chapter I've returned to my first love, poetry, which went underground for thirty five years. My next questions:

What sort of a journey has it taken to create such authentic poetry which is both therapeutic and has great literary merit?

Have the two followed hand in hand? What sort of refinement or even alchemy has taken place over the years in you as a writer to achieve this? And is the very act of polishing language and verse a way into understanding, refining and alchemising your subjective pain with fidelity?

And on a simple level, when did you start writing poetry?

Claire: I'll answer this one backwards. I had the first sense that I was writing poetry when I was eight and a teacher (Mrs Moignard at Sandy Lane Juniors) complimented me on some writing - sadly I do still remember that it was my description of a sunset as a grapefruit squeezed over a lake. Mrs Moignard's encouragement gave me the sense that I was good at something (other than running) and this idea that I had a way with words stayed with me and quite possibly saved my life, which leads me smoothly towards your first set of questions.

What sort of a journey have it taken to create such authentic poetry which is both therapeutic and has great literary merit?

It has been a long journey, full of words, my own and other people's. I fell in love with T.S.Eliot at Sixth Form (referenced in *Rough*) and found that there could be many layers to meaning, perfect for tucking in hidden agendas and conjuring images for smuggling through emotions for which most people don't have time to hear on the day-to-day.

Have the two followed hand in hand?

My first narrative collection, *Ride On* (POTA, 2005) allowed me to unpick my brother's untimely death, a little like a whodunit. It is authentic (and was very well received), but less crafted. *The Soulwater Pool* (Poetry Can, 2008) was a fictional drama in verse set over two tense days - it was possibly trying to be too many things, and I think lends itself to being staged or performed. My pamphlet, *Split*

Ends (Eyewear, 2016) contains a very good distillation of the therapeutic and the literary, and *Visiting the Minotaur* was a continuation of writing with trust that the feelings would find the words and images that they needed. Saying that, I can be surprised years later by the images in a poem that I didn't recognise for all they were at the time; the subconscious is a wonderful gift-giver.

What sort of refinement or even alchemy has taken place over the years in you as a writer to achieve this?

I would put in my alchemist's pot: plenty of reading of classic and contemporary poetry - not least those who shared some of my experiences and gave me the courage to write on particular topics (e.g. Jackie Kay, Pamela Gillilan, Pascale Petit, Mahendra Solanki); being unafraid to write 'badly' on my way to finding fragments that are useful to a good poem; and an excitement about the fusion of experience and language being transformational.

Regarding Metanoia...

I define Metanoia as 'the ability to grow and change'. I was lucky to work in drug and alcohol rehabilitation as a creative writer for eight years from the age of twenty-two. I witnessed individuals 'change their spots', contrary to the popular saying about leopards. So when the time (following my brother's death) came to 'do or die', I knew it was possible to 'do' and I see this occur on the MSc through students' hard work, attention to language, body and voice, and their determination to 'be the change they want to see in the world'. I'm not in the least a religious person, but I would attempt to indulge the spirit's desire to be a better person than I was yesterday. I'm working on it...

And is the very act of polishing language and verse a way into understanding, refining and alchemising your subjective pain with fidelity?

Good question. Yes - in short, bearing in mind the above. I live with a lot less emotional pain than I did twenty years ago and writing (and possibly age) has played a key part in that difference. I have a writing quartet with whom I share work, The Spoke (Paul Deaton, Bob Walton and Elizabeth Parker) and a real personal pleasure in finding the right form for the feelings.

Graeme: Thanks for your great, in-depth responses to the last questions. Loved your answer about Mrs Moignard at Sandy Lane Juniors - just proves how influential a teacher can be - I wonder if she knows what she inspired and validated in you, to the point of possibly saving your life as you say. Wow. Your grapefruit sunset made me chuckle - I once did the dawn sun as a runny fried egg melting over the roofs...

I'd love to read *Ride On* and *The SoulWater Pool* (especially as it's a fictional drama hmm...interesting) and *Split Ends*?

Going back to your most recent collection, to me the *Minotaur* is such a great

symbol because it holds all the meanings you present the reader with - a perfect container - I did a fantastic course recently on Myth and Ecology - the Mundus Imaginalis - and your Minotaur is in exactly the same territory.

Claire: It is far-reaching how influential a teacher can be; I tracked down Mrs Moignard when I found an old school report where she had written that 'creative writing is Claire's metier.' We are now Facebook friends.

It's interesting to read about your drama teaching and writing plays. It is a privilege to see your work enacted by others. I have done a lot of writing for performance (Welsh National Opera, Show of Strength, Firebird Theatre and plenty of song cycles) and it's always a thrill to hand over the work to see it transformed and returned back, sometimes by 500 singers. Teaching is a wonderful role, I just wish institutions were more congruent with the teachers...

A runny egg melting over roofs works well with dawn - a breakfast image.

I will bring books along with me, or I can post you copies of those books. They are all £5.00 as *Ride On* and *The Soulwater Pool* are old now and *Split Ends* was a pamphlet of 20 poems.

Graeme: I've been circling round the Minotaur again and I thought I'd ask two questions this time:

[How did the Minotaur constellate as a holder and revealer of meanings in you at this stage of your life?](#)

[Was it something that came as a revelation or did the labyrinth come first and you smelt it and, as it were, heard the bull's pawing and breathing somewhere in the distance?](#)

Claire: The minotaur came into my life a number of years ago, particularly 2007 when I made the solo venture to see the Picasso painting in the poem *Visiting the Minotaur*. I'm a huge fan of all Picasso's work, but his iterations of etchings remind me of my own scrabbling after with words (much more fallible than his etchings - my scrabblings aren't worth exhibiting, although I'd stand by the fail again, fail better process).

I also had a wonderful mentor, an art-therapist Paul Curtis, for twenty years until his death in 2016. Paul was working on a screenplay set in Franco's Spain. We talked a lot about bulls, bullfighting and the bull ring. He also gave me enough understanding and courage to write ekphrastic poems. The poems *If I have Time* and *Beyond the Abstract Face* are for him.

I hate bullfighting, but went to see the Barcelona museum last year. The brightness of the sand in the Iberian sun is blinding. A remarkable theatre for an unpleasant sport.

Knossos is somewhere I've visited and have always been interested in mythology.

I'm noticing my own language above: blinding, scrabbling - there's a sense of being 'in the dark' around my own identity and the maze of false trails (*Red Herrings* again, and *Fruit Machine*).

So the imagery has been constellating for some time, but it only became legible, narratable and readable when I sat down and wrote the poems.

Poetry is a long road, as you and your colleagues will know. I remember in my twenties looking at a festival brochure and wondering why all the poets were old. Now I know why because I've lived the learning journey. The landscape has changed too since then and there are younger, more diverse voices being supported and encouraged to tell a broader set of stories. I'm now middle aged, but I'm telling the stories that shaped me and have been shaping me for years. Perhaps I'm getting nearer your question now...

The childhood poems were waiting in the wings twenty years ago and my brother's death in 2003 was the catalyst to write them down. A kind of 'private investigation' into his (and my mother's) suicide in *Ride On*.

I was also inspired by poet Rose Flint who told me about the mice in her house nibbling away at her poems and they would be gone if she didn't send them out. They were literal mice, but I had metaphorical mice and so my poems started to leave home. Sadly, we don't get discovered in our bedrooms as poets. We have to play the game with journal credits etc. When I went to the Bridport dinner I felt I was finally accepted by the academy after many, many years. I digress...

...

You can choose to ignore all of the above because I think have the distilled answer now for why now? :

When I sit down to write I fail, fail again, fail better each time until the images and the feeling come together in the best jigsaw I can manage, something literally 'clicks' with a feeling of 'that's it'. I believe that we all have the right images for feelings and with practice they can be excavated (and back to diamonds) polished, but it takes time (sometimes years) and sitting to write (wherever that may be) is essential work. To this end I advocate writing with abandon, fragmented, unfinished pieces. I've recently written about five pieces (false starts) to get to one piece that brings together in a sonnet a lover/friend who died young and a soulless railway station cafe at Bristol Temple Meads.

Graeme: Thanks for your recent thoughts and responses - fascinating!

Must have been great to hear your work sung by a 500 strong choir for example - something wonderful and collaborative in all this - 'transformed and returned back' as you say. That's why so many poets want to work in drama too, because it can be a solitary road. I remember Simon Armitage saying how pleased he was to have finished his novel 'The White Stuff' because he'd been locked away in it for what seemed like an age. Also, Ted Hughes made a remark, to Richard Eyre I think it was, saying he wished he's done far more work in the theatre even it meant less poetry... Having one's work read and performed by others doesn't half sharpen up the writing

- you can almost hear straightaway whether something works or not - it's a lot of fun too.

I imagine you have a great balance between collaboration and working on your own writing as Creative Writing Director, each reinforcing the other.

Have sat in exactly the same cafe in NZ you refer to in 'After the Coming of Darkness'. Opposite that point on the Otago peninsula is a beautiful place called Aromoina (I think it's spelt) where we camped in our van for a night - then found out what had happened there a few years before...

So...back to 'Visiting the Minotaur'.

I like your description of the 'best jigsaw you can manage' and 'something literally clicks with a feeling of - that's it.'

I want to say here how your poetry is verbally arresting and fresh - innumerable examples of detail, imagery and particular lines eg the wonderful description of the peacock in '**In Our City Lives**' with its 'teal ballgown', its smell - yes! - and 'his chicken-like flap... 'unable to unzip/his rustling dress before bed' - spot on!

Similarly 'the troposphere of spruces' and 'licks of rain' in '**My Daughters Blueberrying**', or the way you liken the legs of roe deer to 'sturdy cherry branches' in '**Mricna, Czech Republic**' - I'll never look at roe deer the same way again - so many other examples!

The layout of poems like '**Blame**', '**Atonement**' and '**Temple Church, Temple Street, Bristol**' (really interesting subject matter in the latter) adds another dimension to your work which I find very rewarding.

Also, there's a poem I haven't commented on yet, which I think is incredibly profound and well-written - it's '**Labour**'. For me you capture something at the core of us - our cellular need to connect (however difficult) with our family roots and to belong - 'the herd of my bones' and 'my skeleton ached to speak/like those abducted cattle' and the incredible last couplet:

'My spine bent to the spelling
of my matronymic line, as if in labour.'

Something about the forces which work in us and seek to be born, expressed in a powerful and completely congruent way within the body of the collection.

Claire: Yes - you are so right about having your work read aloud sharpening the language. I read my writing out loud and if I cringe the line gets cut! I had a read through of The Soulwater Pool, by a group of willing actor/poets, who also gave feedback - it was so helpful.

I enjoyed your quotes/anecdotes - I didn't know that Hughes had said what he did about drama. And how strange that we both sat in the Albatross Café. I think I was there at Easter 2003, the year before the massacre.

You are generous in your comments about my imagery and you pick up on poems that I read less often, so that is gratifying - thank you. **Labour** particularly was deeply felt; I did feel literally disabled by the not-knowing.

G: Is there a particular poem (or poems) in 'Visiting the Minotaur' that you remember being particularly pleased with when it 'clicked' - and why?

Claire: It is probably *My Mother and Brother as Horses*. It clicked for me, but has also been the most noticed poem in the collection. It was 2nd in the Neil Gunn Poetry Competition, judged by Michel Faber and receives mentions in a number of reviews.

I was sitting in a Texaco forecourt when I wrote the first draft. I was mid-excavation, digging deep; I asked myself if I could ask for one thing, what would it be. I thought having my mother and brother back, but like all good myths, there's a catch. They come back as horses and the simple tea party reveals the impossibility of us being together. The overriding feeling was that I was the only one with hands. Only I can heal the hurt. This is perhaps the steeplechase passing as a realisation. Feeling the responsibility and disappointment of losing the fantasy.

So the images that clicked were the horses, the hands, the spilt milk, with the feelings of impossibility, responsibility and disappointment respectively.

Graeme: I find this whole description you give incredibly moving. As I said at the beginning, it is a poem which blows me away, one of the highlights of a wonderful collection which I'm very much looking forward to hearing you read in person.

Claire: It has been a pleasure to have this dialogue. I appreciate you sharing some of your life and work too and I feel the overlaps in our interests, subjects, and style.

I've been woken up in the past couple of years by how rare it is to receive feedback. Your questions have helped me with my own reflections on process and probably my deep psychology too...

Graeme: Thank you so much Claire, it has indeed been a fascinating conversation. You have given us a wonderful insight into the sources and processes of your creativity, the depth and integrity of your poetic sensibility and your generosity as a writer. Your students and colleagues at The Metanoia Institute are lucky indeed!

Visiting the Minotaur is a fantastic collection and achieves the rare feat of exploring the landscape of grief with the deftest and most clear-sighted poetic approach – and then finding what it is that abides and has strength.

I wanted to mention one final poem whose concluding lines I find extremely profound and would, I imagine, be a real source of consolation, and even redemption, to many. They certainly are for me.

The poem is '**Imagined Mother II**' and it ends:

'One unexpected gift
is my confidence that mothers,
even absent mothers,

are forever mothers,
however distant, however dead.'