



[Liverpool Poetry Café](#)

with Pauline Rowe, Clare Kirwan and Dave Jackson

Reviewed by [Denis Joe](#) January 2012

Attending a poetry event in Liverpool can sometimes seem as if you have gate-crashed some group therapy session or some private fan-club party. In the way that you always see the same old faces on trade union marches these days, so too it is the case with the poetry events. If the person on stage isn't whinging about how they lost the love of their life, or ranting bile about their hatred for those 'lowlifes' from the north of the city then you will get some decent poetry, which is, sadly, lost in the dross.

The Poetry Café is the major poetry group in the city and they have attracted some big names such as Andrew Motion, Jo Shapcott and Brian Patten. It takes someone special for me to go to a poetry event in the city and it was **Pauline Rowe**, one of the finest poets writing today. Whilst Pauline is also a friend and the founder of [North End Writers](#), a charity I am involved with, I hope that I can be trusted to be objective.



What is immediately apparent about Rowe's work is that it does not pander to any perceived needs of the audience. This is obvious from the opening two poems, *Uninvited Guest* and *Alchemist*

Whilst the poems have the appearance of autobiography (from the latter: *My Grandmother, /dead at 39, /sprayed all things gold.*

), there is none of the 'pity me' that one finds in much 'confessional' poetry.

Even *Autobiography 1968* seems as if it is composed by a watcher rather than a participant (*Each Morning Offering a pledge /of works, prayers, sufferings and joys /like letters fixed on a pyramid of milk*

). The poetry is about the poem. It does not call on the audience to empathise or identify with the poet, it drags them into another world and forces the captured to see behind the lines. This is difficult enough to achieve on the page, it is near impossible to do at a reading, but a disciplined and serious poet can accomplish this.

It was in the next poem that I felt that Pauline drew the audience in. *Driftwood* was a collective composition by writers from North End Writers group. The piece was commissioned by Radio Merseyside as part of the Heritage and the Sea event, last year. The piece deals with the History of Liverpool and the Mersey. There is no fixed point of time and we are moved from one historical period to another without a link. We have to find that link for ourselves. One section of the poem, which Pauline composed, runs:

*I have seen green moor and marshland
blazing, burning, earth charred black,
tasted stink of factories,
salt-cake, borax, soda-ash.*

*I keep a look-out on the waters,
this my testimony -
copper, iron, early death and industry.*

There is almost a natural flow from the pastoral opening line leading into the violence that illustrates the force of progress; not just historical progress, but the progress of the poem itself.

Burma

is one of those poems that I go back to again and again, like a favourite piece of music. It was a real pleasure to hear it this evening. To me it is one of those perfect poems. It is also hard to define (as are most of Pauline's works): at once it seems like an elegy, yet there is too much in it that speaks of life:

*He sometimes prays
in Latin
with his fists clenched
hard in his pocket.*

The contrast between the dead (Latin) and the determination of the clenched fists is one of the most powerful images I've encountered in poetry. And perhaps it might have been best to leave as the closing poem. There were four more poems to come including the beautiful and playful *Why Dorothy Died*

(
Dorothy was so ill/she became a virgin

). Not only did Rowe provide some of the best poetry you are likely to hear, but she also delivered them with professional élan. It is a pity that we do not get to see Pauline Rowe giving more readings, but it is a great pleasure to be there when she does.

