



FourXFour  
Poetry Journal

Issue 19 Winter 2017

Mel McMahon  
Leilanie Stewart  
Clodagh Brennan Harvey  
Nathan Thanki

## Editorial

Welcome to Issue 19 of FourXFour Poetry Journal, our second issue of 2017 already, as we continue to unearth and showcase new poetry from within Northern Ireland.

Once again, we bring you a mixture of poets at different stages of their careers. Mel McMahon last year released his debut full-length collection, while Leilanie Stewart already has two excellent pamphlets to her name. Clodagh Brennan Harvey has steadily been building her profile through anthologies in recent years alongside local readings, whereas Nathan Thanki is a promising young voice on the live poetry scene in Belfast with a reputation for poems rich in social activism.

We hope you enjoy this issue, and look out for more of the same very soon from us.

Regards and happy reading,  
Colin Dardis, Editor

# Contents

p.4 Mel McMahon

Deliveries

Run

Wake House

Fire

p.12 Leilanie Stewart

It's a Metaphor for Something Else

Live wire, Earth wire

Tribulations

Devolution

p.19 Clodagh Brennan Harvey

Along the Lagan

Sea Glass

You appear from nowhere

Partings

p.25 Nathan Thanki

Beijing

Masjid Jamek

Between the Devil and the Irish Sea

No Place Like Home

## Mel McMahan

Mel McMahan was born in Lurgan, Co. Armagh, in 1968. He has had his work published in many literary journals and magazines and has been a prizewinner in several writing competitions. He co-founded Abbey Press with Belfast poet, Adrian Rice, in 1997.

In 2016 he published his first full collection of poems, *Out of Breath*, with Summer Palace Press. He is currently working on a sequence of poems on events and poets from World War One entitled *Beneath Our Feet*. He lives near Slieve Gullion with his wife and two children and is Head of English at the Abbey Grammar School, Newry.

## Deliveries

*for Rory McMahon*

### *Milk*

Afraid to offend the two milkmen  
on our estate, my mother doubled  
her daily order. We listened  
for the streamline purr,  
the unworldly gear changes  
of the *Creamline* float,  
its ridiculous slowness  
that we felt we could outrun

or McAlinden's rattled crates  
and Basil's sunny whistle  
no matter how early, how dark.

### *Coal*

Not always there during the day  
to see him heft the bag  
over his shoulder,  
unbouldering his burden  
into the darkness of our shed,

the sleep of the hamsters razored  
by the scrunch of sliding coal,  
the chunkle of tumbling nuggets  
or the silky slippage of slack  
gliding on its black drift,

I would hear the gate unbolted  
on winter evenings and rush  
to get the pile of change  
assigned on the fireplace,  
open the door to someone  
who seemed to be carved  
out of the very night,  
his colliery greasepaint  
the skin's livery of hard knocks,  
his shoulders leathered for work,  
his cap at a friendly, unkempt tilt.

## Run

Running down through Stanley Headley's field  
into grass that tangled around our knees

and sent ladybirds to rub the air,  
we belted out our stories and hopped and laughed

hardly hearing a syllable, our tiny feet  
pecking at the dried-out earth

touching its giant piano key  
that sent its sound through us

to play our tiny torsos,  
like hollow reeds,

the ebb and flow of blood  
swishing through us from head to foot.

## Wake House

I wasn't expecting this-  
the phone call shredding  
the late evening quiet in the hall,  
the sudden flurry of footsteps,  
strangers leaning against my walls,  
their voices tangling the air with questions.  
Had they no homes of their own?

And the tears coming from every room!  
And more tears. The relay of grief  
thrown around like an unwanted baton;  
the sighs of new arrivals  
as they came through the door,  
their hearts hauled from the world  
they had left outside.

There was much to be done.

Day and night people queued.  
Could they not see  
that I had walls to be painted,  
was not looking my best,  
had not expected this?



I would miss his palm on the handrail  
in the morning, the soft fall of his step  
on my threadbare stairs,  
the way he would pull the door over,  
gently, not wanting to disturb anyone as he left.

## Fire

*for Aine Quinn*

With parents gone for the day  
I was left in charge of it,  
uncertain of how to handle  
the mysterious life  
dancing between (and under)  
stacked-up, chunky coals.

I fed it, nursed it,  
kept an alert eye on it  
as if, like an errant pup  
it might get up  
and run away or  
do something stupid.

Slacked up at night  
to steady its fevered pulse,  
we hunted with the poker  
for clinkers, those large  
fused tumours of coal.

Removing them gave the fire  
a second wind, an afterlife.  
Emptying the ash pan

was like the removal of moments  
cremated from the day just spent.

Day done, lights off, door closed,  
It glowed, ready to go again.

## Leilanie Stewart

Leilanie Stewart grew up in Belfast and lived in Japan, Cambridge and London before moving back home to Northern Ireland last year. Her poetry has appeared in *Neon Highway*, *Erbacce*, *The Journal*, *Weyfarers*, *Sarasvati*, *Inclement*, *Decanto*, *Tips for Writers*, *The Robin Hood Book: Verse versus Austerity*, *The Sound of Poetry Review*, *Nostrovia*, *Boyslut*, *The Blue Hour*, *Mudjob*, *Jellyfish Whispers*, *Dead Snakes*, *The Open Mouse*, *Black Mirror*, *The Commonline Journal*, *Morphrog*, *Ashvamegh*, *Message in a Bottle*, *Mad Swirl*, and *the Fat Damsel*.

Leilanie was longlisted for the Melita Hume Poetry Prize in 2014 and a selection of her poetry appeared in the 'Best of the Web' Storm Cycle Anthology 2015, published by Kind of a Hurricane Press. Following this her debut poetry pamphlet, *A Model Archaeologist*, was launched by Eyewear Publishing in June 2015 and her second poetry collection, *Chemotherapy for the Soul*, has been published by Fowlpox Press in January 2017.

In addition to writing and promoting her own poetry, Leilanie runs *Bindweed Magazine* with her husband, writer and poet, Joseph Robert. More about her work can be found at:

[www.leilaniestewart.wordpress.com](http://www.leilaniestewart.wordpress.com)

## It's a Metaphor for Something Else

In order to wash your hands  
first you must acknowledge  
that the tap must be turned on  
as nothing other than running water  
will wash material objects clean.

Then you must wet your hands  
and apply soap, rubbing vigorously  
until your fingers are covered  
in a rich, bubbly lather;  
you must get into every crevice  
or the germs will breed and multiply.

Do not let the germs take hold!  
This is a warning - they're dangerous!  
Attack them all with malediction.  
You have no time to worry about others;  
the bacteria they carry is their own problem.

## Live wire, Earth wire

It's shaped like a cylinder  
with a triangular spout at one side  
and a curving handle at the other:  
you call it a kettle.

Attached to the kettle  
is a long plastic cord  
that conceals wires inside  
attached to a plug.

Pick up the plug,  
it's plastic too. Now see the three prongs?  
Stick those into the wall  
where you'll see three holes.

The holes are square  
one on top, two below;  
put your plug in those holes  
and push the button.

The button is in the socket,  
it's a switch, if you like,  
and if you follow all these steps  
you'll never receive an electric shock.

Conform.

## Tribulations

She reached down  
and pulled off his stamen  
carelessly,  
like any idle child  
tearing the legs  
off a fly.

He needed his stamen,  
unlike a lizard,  
able to shed its tail  
since he can't grow  
another stamen  
so readily.

Nothing  
can be done about her.  
People gossip  
about her 'condition',  
whispering in sheltered corners  
talking of trepanning.

No amount  
of hole drilling in her skull  
would alleviate this rose

of the thorns  
hand reared by  
mother nature.

In an age of technology  
she's plain and simply  
not user-friendly.



## Devolution

If there is an imbalance  
that must be corrected;  
for one to be centred  
one has to devalue  
the corrosive feelings.

Those are the feelings  
that eat at the core of being,  
erode a person from inside out,  
starting in childhood.

See this poem?  
See how it is detached?  
The impersonal nature  
is for the best.

For to go out, guns blazing  
is counterintuitive.  
Remember that the body and mind  
are both physical;  
  
the snakes won't go away easily-  
they have to be driven out.

# LAGAN ONLINE

A  verbal PROJECT

*... a place where every story matters ...*

*Supporting the literary scene in  
Northern Ireland and beyond through  
new writing and reading development.*

[laganonline.co](http://laganonline.co)



## Clodagh Brennan Harvey

Clodagh Brennan Harvey now resides in Belfast though she was born in London and spent most of her life in California. She received her PhD in Folklore and Mythology from the University of California, Los Angeles, with a specialism in Irish oral narrative. She has taught courses on Irish storytelling for over thirty years and is the author of *Contemporary Irish Traditional Narrative: The English Language Tradition* (University of California Press, 1992).

Poetry is now the focus of her writing, which often incorporates themes and motifs from Irish folklore. Her poems “Terminal Moraine” and “Bedrock” appeared in *The Honest Ulsterman* (2016). Other poems have appeared in the anthologies *Between the Light and the Half Light* (2015), *On the Grass When I Arrive* (2016), and *Washing Windows: Irish Women Write Poetry* (2017). Her poem “Queue” was short-listed for the 2015 Bridport Prize.

## Along the Lagan

We parted on the Albert Bridge  
after a slow, companionable walk—  
you, to head into town for a nightcap,  
me, to head home,  
cradling a new-found comfort  
I still couldn't quite name.

How long it's taken  
ease to come,  
miles of silence  
now behind us.

I stood for a long time  
watching the starlings above me  
rising and falling in countless formations,  
knowing just when to come together,  
when to break free,  
like you, like me,  
along the Lagan.

## Sea Glass

Walking on sea glass  
is a novelty;  
underfoot  
its sculpted contours  
seduce the eye away from the horizon  
with its formless fears  
to a satisfying new task—  
the *ah ha* of pretty things.

Concentrating,  
I train the eye  
to see differently  
as I poke among sea grasses  
and the detritus of shells  
for that lustre or spark.

In Belize a woman once told me  
pieces of sea glass  
were the souls of lost children,  
though she had long lost count.

## You appear from nowhere

shambling down familiar,  
narrow switchbacks  
of a steep, rocky path  
as though both you and  
the haggard old donkey  
under you  
were frequent travellers here,  
secure in every dozy step.

Nothing has changed:  
your short black skirt  
your khaki army jacket  
your wild blond hair  
stacked even higher now,  
an aura of defiance  
clinging to you still.  
Even the ancient Egyptians would pale  
before the fierce black kohl  
tracing your eyes  
to your hair's very root.

Unseen, I listen.  
I'm close enough to hear you  
uttering words  
in clipped, precise diction  
in a language nobody knows.

I watch you  
making your way nimbly on a donkey  
between cavalcades of drunken horses  
in the perilous mountain passes  
of some distant desert?

You, ashram girl,  
kundalini girl,  
maker of banana bread  
and beautiful children!

Why did you never come home?

.

## Partings

The phone rings.

*Hi. I'm here.*

No need for names,  
as if being *here* were my job.

I do not understand yet  
the *frisson* of urgency  
tugging with the delicacy  
of a tiny fist.

Parting,  
we are formal,  
we use our names,  
but gently—

fragile as  
spidery filaments  
of a fallen leaf.



## Nathan Thanki

Nathan Thanki grew up in Belfast but has lived in Sudan, Canada, Peru, the USA and elsewhere over the past ten years. He still travels widely as part of his work organising in the global climate justice movements, but he always ends up back in Belfast, a town so small he hasn't seen half of it.

When he's not trying to build bridges between progressive causes, Nathan dabbles in poetry. In spite of his surroundings, Nathan is a closet optimist and believes in better worlds. He thinks we should be realistic and demand the impossible. He likes whisky and R&B, sometimes together.

## Beijing

We descend under darkness,  
the city's under covers  
and seven thousand miles away  
so are you.

This is going to be interesting,  
I think,  
as the heat encroaches.  
*Welcome to Beijing.*

I lie to customs and take a breath.  
Having spent sixty hours  
coughing up recycled air,  
when I finally step outside  
it's into smog.

Can't see ten feet in front of me.  
I might as well smoke.

\*\*\*

I remember buying you croissants  
thinking this is the life,  
this is heaven:  
this is it.

I remember making blood oaths  
and drunken toasts  
to be friends forever  
in this cold, dark universe.

I remember a 3 a.m. call  
and seeing your floor drop out,  
seeing you broken down in the bed,  
everyone else in the room quiet.  
My hands were holding your head.

## Masjid Jamek

They had to cut this city  
out of the flora  
and raise it up  
into Kuala Lumpur

–

a muddy estuary,  
as is, necessarily,  
true of all  
confluences of people.

## Between the Devil and the Irish Sea

The boat sits in Belfast Harbour  
for half an hour before we leave.  
(You say the only reason it  
docks down here is Drumcree.)

As we cross  
with all the unfaithful departed,  
we slosh our bitter beer  
and agree with ourselves:  
Home is a savage little shithole,  
but we love it.

Later, in London, I hear myself lying,  
"I will return,  
I will return,  
I will return."

## No Place Like Home

*(dedicated to everyone)*

I'm the product  
of a broken home  
and several broken countries,  
my blood's  
a rip current hidden  
in a very muddy confluence.  
As if what you don't know  
can't hurt you.

I'm more afraid of belonging  
than of always longing  
for somewhere else.  
So I slither  
and I crawl  
and I run  
into, then away from  
whatever arms I think can hold me.

Other people have been  
teaching me how to talk  
since I was born;  
there's not a smile or a skin I have worn  
that was mine,  
mine alone,

no box on the census to show  
who I am,  
where I'm from,  
where I'm going.

People like us,  
we write for ourselves  
because no one else has

a  
n  
d

n  
o

o  
n  
e

e  
l  
s  
e

w  
i  
l  
l.



**Thank you for reading!**



Copyright original authors © 2017  
All rights reserved  
Produced in Northern Ireland  
A **Poetry NI** production

Back issues available for free download at:  
[www.poetryni.com/fourxfour](http://www.poetryni.com/fourxfour)