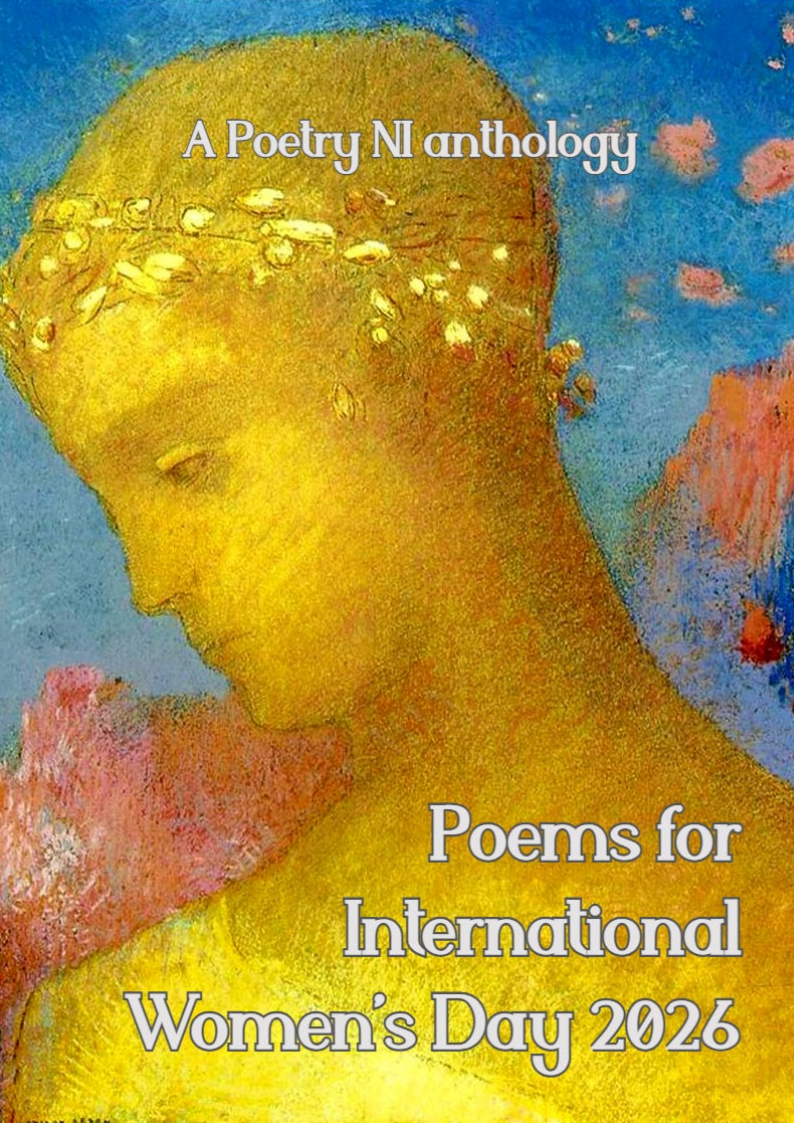
A Poetry NI anthology
Poems for International Women's Day 2026

Contents:

3. Foreword
4. Lesley-Anne Evans: What I Might Have Said Earlier
5. Marion Clarke: Capricorn Child
6. Karen Mooney: Ripping seams and stitching dreams
7. Lynda Tavakoli: Little Bones
8. Trish Bennett: If Newton Studied Poets Instead of Physics
9. Mary E. Ringland: Sherbet Fizz Sisters
11. Cat Brogan: Pairing Socks
13. Fatma Alabbasi: You Are a Star
14. Nessa O'Mahony: Petrified Forest
15. Laura O'Hare: Give to gain
16. Thérèse Kieran: Sevgili Dilan…
18. Hannah Crothers: Heated Debates with Slices of Cake
19. Debi Madden: When I Was New
21. Ruth Carr: Mother of Pearl
22. Rachel Hedley: The nest is empty, but the beds bloom.
24. Rowan Evoe Madden: Childe Rowan from the Dark Tower Fell
25. Siobhán McCafferty: Visiting Mother
27. Deirdre Cartmill: The Seeker
29. Helen Hastings: A woman drives by a chapel in the dead of night
31. Emma McKervey: Petition of Elizabeth Fry
33. Jenny Cleland: Journal
34. Geraldine O'Kane: It is in giving that we receive
35. Contributors
40. Acknowledgements

Foreword

This year's theme for International Women's Day 2026 is Give to Gain. Here at Poetry NI, we are honoured to celebrate twenty-two women's voices in poetry from Northern Ireland and afar. Women have been giving of themselves since time began: they have given individually of their freedom, their voices, their bodies in order to move closer collectively towards equality for all women.

Poetry is a space where women give of their experiences of what it is to be human, to be mother, lover, wife, to grieve, to celebrate their otherness, their search for truth and meaning, to live with disability, always teaching through action.

Women in poetry open themselves to the world so they can connect with other women, encouraging them to be their authentic selves, and let them know that they are not alone at any point in their journey through womanhood. They use their words as a tool to raise awareness of the inequality that exists, and their unique voices as a to call to arms and to hold space for those women who lived in a time before collective changes were made. In this pamphlet, we celebrate all of those things and much more because when women come together they are limitless in what they have to say and what that can achieve.

- Geraldine O'Kane, March 2026

For further information on IWD2026, please visit www.internationalwomensday.com

Lesley-Anne Evans: What I Might Have Said Earlier

You're always so hard on yourself.
—E.M. Clements

Besides, it's not your fault, none of it. Not your fault I'm female. Not your fault I was born first. Not your fault you were odd-girl, homesick, blow-in, and all else Gabor Maté might diagnose as trauma. Not your fault you married and realized later you'd rather not be married. Not your fault you were picked, processed, kept like a canned free-stone peach in cold storage until firm became palatable. Not your fault elders, deacons, Lord's Servants, husband, uncles, sons. None of it is your fault. Not your fault I defied you and you hit me. Not your fault I was sure it was all your fault. For decades I told myself it was your fault. And it's not your fault you're three years dead and I've never told you it's not your fault and that by doing so now I can practice saying it to myself.

Marion Clarke: Capricorn Child

Milky Way ...
your appearance at the end
of the year

So tiny when you arrived, it took a month for you to get back up to your birth weight. You had problems latching on when feeding, you see. I was in such pain and was certain you could feel me wincing, although I tried my best not to. But thankfully we got there after a few weeks and enjoyed those special moments together so much that your night feeds continued for two years.

midnight movement
a vixen on the kerb
coaxes her cub to cross

And look at you now, a fine young man preparing to leave this small island to follow your dreams on a much, much larger one.

soft light
your animal alphabet book
lies open at *wallaby*

Karen Mooney: Ripping seams and stitching dreams

I found it at the back of her linen cupboard,
Granny called it flowering, delicate embroidery,
stitched to order and design on quality linens
that she could not afford, for which she was paid
pin money, the rest of her work unmeasured.

Patterns stitched by her mother and hers before her;
the count of each appraised with a judgemental eye.
A life loom, a waft of domesticity, we, the weft,
create our own fabric with what was learned
at our mother's knees. Clean, cook, sew, submit.
Rear a family, shouldering traditions
garbed in another's identity.
A tapestry of expectations.

Mum continued the tradition, the pattern replicated
but unfinished, the loose ends of which I picked up,
taking comfort in familiarity after her loss until
the design unravelled.

Pattern unpicked, threads waxed
and on a threadbare fabric,
wildflowers sewn.

Lynda Tavakoli: Little Bones

This is what he
owns of you now

your little bones

these treasures
sieved like flour
amongst the dust
of what remains

and between
his fingertips
the fragment of
a foot, a tooth,
a curvature
of clavicle

their blessings
singing to him still,
a song of love
and only little,
little bones.

Trish Bennett: If Newton Studied Poets Instead of Physics

His third law would state,
that for every acceptance,

there must be equal,
and opposite rejection,

of enough force
to counteract that joy.

He would posit,
that failure

will shift a true poet's axis
ever closer towards their opus.

Some may grow thick-skinned,
but Newton would hypothesise,

that for poets to view the world
as they do,

to feel with depth,
no matter

how hard their shell becomes;
the poet will need a soft core.

Mary E. Ringland: Sherbet Fizz Sisters

I get an inkling sometimes: a frost-bitten flashback,
longing to unfurl at the first glint of nostalgia.

Its swirling vapour tempts me down a well-worn path,
through a rusted metal gate, into a crevasse in time

– to witness two girls at the feet of a mother,
cooking up security in a tart – lemon-scented and bitter.

I remember we set out to cavort in the snow,
to play at being make-believe sisters – woven into sweaters

flecked with difference – racing headlong into a future
destined to dissipate faster than a sherbet fizz popsicle.

Buzzing like fireflies, we gathered ice-hot crystals,
too painful to hold for long, but a cinch to shape

into missiles, magnetic as fridge magnets – aiming
to make their mark for decades to come.

Now, with hearts grazed as little girls' knees, and hands red
raw from grappling with yesterday's frozen fire, we carry on.

You, look beyond me, to where, or for what reason,
from behind lashes, shaped like a question mark.

While I sift through souvenirs, smarting at the shock
of baby-soft flesh, now littered with liver spots.

Remembering threadbare sweaters, long since unravelled,
the residue of their coarse wool still provoking an itch.

Cat Brogan: Pairing Socks

Orphaned, splayed out
on the parents' flowery duvet
it was my job to pair them.

We had a bag of singles
that lived in the hot press,
some escaped, others joined.

The action of balling
together two separate articles
Must have been tricky
for mum's paralysed hand,

like the words she failed to pair,
pulling commands from a brain
of separated synapses.

Washing!
Dinner!
Uniform!
No-
Catherine!

I stopped pairing socks
when I started doing my own washing.
I no longer had my parents' bed

like a light box for the x-ray
where the nurse failed to find
a match for the pain mum felt

on the half of her that was lost.
Ten years of solo laundry later
I rediscover my conditioning
and I pair my socks.

Fatma Alabbasi: You Are a Star

You're a star with no heaven to hold
your fire kept steady, deliberate, cold
The world averts its gaze, the nights draw long
yet you persist where you were never meant to belong

You grew your wings in vacant air
that breaks what it births, then leaves it bare
The road ahead wavers, refuses to clear
still you move forward, tethered to fear

Your stories slip through impatient hands
maps of collapse no one withstands
And though no voice might summon your name
you haunt the dark, you guard the flame

Nessa O'Mahony: Petrified Forest

Reenroe, Iveragh

Sometimes I'm shadow,
one of many, I heft a looming space
for darting fish.
Fronds of bladderwrack
tease me, hide smaller fry
from cruising threats above.
I say to them *Shelter here,*
I've done this job for millennia,
kept you safe.
Any light is dull, a distant thought
like warmth when the sun
cossetted me, when breeze
swayed my branches.
Just currents now, tide turning,
memories coppiced to stumps
which feel the cold air when
the waves recede, wood damp.
Walkers pass oblivious,
eyes down for something
that glitters more than fossilised bark.
A dog approaches, sniffs,
remembers what I once was.
That is enough.

Laura O'Hare: Give to gain

Give your time
in any way
volunteering can feel
enjoyable

to help
others

gives you
a boost
I believe
nothing quite feels like it.

Thérèse Kieran: Sevgili Dilan…

Here I am at home in my light-filled kitchen,
deliciously quiet,
albeit for *Woman's Hour* burbling low on the radio.
I'm writing poems and letters,
navigating Google translate as the letters must be in Turkish
and on one A4 page
to make it into jail. Sevgili Dilan, I begin…

But what to say to the young artist incarcerated for no good reason?
I choose to write in colour:
Dear Dilan Blue, Dear Dilan Green, Dear Dilan Red and so on.
Artists lend a hand:
Picasso, Pollock and Rothko, whose styles I imitate but must admit
there's much to learn.
Sevgili Dilan, I'm making papier mâché bowls to go with poems

for an exhibition in London, inspired by you Dilan, to highlight your plight,
to ask people to write to you in prison.
It's a big ask but a fraction of the time it takes to make a bowl
never mind a poem.
I'm told you like my letters, your solicitor sends a smuggled note
on WhatsApp,
a friend translates your "blue sky wishes, {your} thirty years red of love."

Dilan Cúdi Saruhan was arrested on spurious charges in December 2017 while a student of Marmara University Faculty of Fine Arts, Turkey. She was released from Bakırköy Women's Closed Prison, having served seven years of a nine-year sentence in May 2024. I wrote to Dilan for almost four years.

Hannah Crothers: Heated Debates with Slices of Cake

Even as a child, I learned to fold in tight,
to make sure my tummy was sat just right
Be softer,
be smaller,
be less;
be anything but fully expressed.
I've chased "almost enough" like a line I could cross but somehow, the closer l got, the more I just felt lost.
My stomach mightn't look completely right, but my heart's kept beating through the hardest of nights.
turned living itself into a thing to destroy, knocking away at my confidence and shattering my joy.
Mirrors became my unpaying boss,
noting my weight and picking at my flaws.
I had heated debates with slices of cake, as if my worth depended on the choice I'd make.
Join me in my rebellion - hear my laugh, feel my release.
I'm done making war with my right to be seen.
Not smaller.
Not lesser.
Not fading for you.
Louder.
Happier.
And taking up space too.

Debi Madden: When I Was New

when I was new
you smiled at me
you brought me to your home
you showed me all the ways
you lived
and helped me find my own

you showed me that
it doesn't matter
where the trip began
that underneath all culture
lie same truths
for everyone

there are so very many points
along the road to start
it doesn't matter
where you finish
if you choose a path with heart

everyone who leaves their home
deserves to find another
and there is wealth
and love enough
for all to be discovered

when you were new
I smiled at you
and brought you to my home
and showed you all the ways I lived
and helped you find your own

Ruth Carr: Mother of Pearl

In that time of hurt
you saw yourself as a speck of nothing particular
a nothing speck of indigestible,

caught between the teeth of a gnawing year
jammed to the sole of its boot
trapped in a crevice of other people's lives.

Then one day you notice the line of a branch,
a lone collared dove
fluffing her duvet of feathers over her toes.

You can't help hearing
a blue-green whisper
breaking through iron ground.

And sometimes first thing, you glance up
and take the sun's warmth right in
to the darkest crook

where the mother inside you wakes,
places that sting of grit in your silky arms
and slowly it begins

to take shape, the glint of a second skin
an armour within
against doubt, against creeping despair.

Rachel Hedley: The nest is empty, but the beds bloom.

Soil,
nestled in
nailbeds.
Her fingers
curl
between
roots in
the flowerbeds.

(Theirs no longer need tending.)

She kneels,
through
seasons.

An unringing phone,
sits.

Too much tea,
in the kettle,
cools. And the
ironing pile –
slightly lighter.

Dawn cracks open.
Yellow coats the
garden, but she
is filling vases.
(They are carefully selected bouquets.)

Her arms, laced
with the wee
girls whose roots
mean more,
than the
overgrowing foxgloves.

Rowan Evoe Madden: Childe Rowan from the Dark Tower Fell

"You need to feel it, baby"
But what am I meant to feel?
Stripped away and exposed
And it shouldn't even matter
(It's all that ever mattered)
(I took your hand in that tower)
(*Struck*. I promised you forever)

"You need to sit with it, baby"
And do what with it?
Make art with phoenix ashes
Mixed to such a pretty grey
But if anyone ever stayed with me
What would I do with all this silver?
(*Struck*. I promised you forever)
(Sorry I failed to deliver)

"You need to grieve it, baby"
And what will we build with the rubble?
Where's my shelf? Where's my decimal?
Where do these paper cuts lead?
Get drunk and buy another lamp
(*Struck*. I promised you forever)
(Look at all you gave me)
(Look at what I torched)

Siobhán McCafferty: Visiting Mother

i.m. Bertha Benz

The questions are coming from the back seat.
See Nanny soon? When see Nanny?
As I glance in the mirror, the calls become urgent.
I indicate left to pull in at a service station.

A snack, a fill up of petrol,
we're back on the road,
changing down gears to climb the Glenshane Pass.

I think of you,
when you woke your sons,
perhaps with a shake of adolescent shoulders
then shushed three wheels down a track.

You were a lawbreaker,
driving from Mannheim to Pforzheim
to visit your mother; to market a car.

I think of you
going into that first service station -a pharmacy;
asking for ligroin to fuel the car.

You were Athena taming your chariot;
lining brake pads with leather; designing more gears,
using your garter to insulate a wire.

Were you afraid?

I change down gears,
and snores soft as a baby's cheek sneak in.
Tiny red painted nails mirror the car she clutches
as I turn down a gravel track and touch the brakes.

I unbuckle her seat belt and carry her in.

The toy falls as Mother tucks her in.
I reach for another – my one eared bear-
its paw mended with the sloping red thread
of my mother.

Deirdre Cartmill: The Seeker

I search for you
in the wind that sends the fallen leaves circling
and shakes everything from its rest
to land afresh.

I search for you
in the waves that sling rocks in my path
and still I stumble over their slick backs
to reach the sea's edge.

I search for you
in the eyes of another,
and wonder if your eyes see
beyond the mask, to who I am becoming.

I long to bare all I am,
to scream, *Here I am beloved.*
See me, feel me, hear me, know me,
let me know you.

I have travelled far and found nothing
and then I look inside
and there you are dancing,
singing out to me,

longing for me to sing back,
to sing out my love,
for love is what you sing to me,
and here, now

I find everything.

Helen Hastings: A woman drives by a chapel in the dead of night

In my Godless silence
headlights break the darkness
buttering stone, illuminating the steadfast,
the believers and the holy

And then I imagine the dead
suddenly alive in there
Beyond the locked doors
they bend one knee
bring hands to heads

and then their torsos
navigating their bodies
while drawing the points
of their faith

Will I ever comprehend
the depths of belief?
Calculate the infinite loyalty
Of the dead?

I don't believe in empty buildings
stone is the blueprint of human nature
and here, even the dust
is consecrated and rising
rising

To form shapes
of the people who never left
a communion of ghosts
surrendering forever to the body of Christ
while gently they skirt the living

Emma McKervey: Petition of Elizabeth Fry

The study was made ready for her each morning.
After breakfast instructions were given to the housekeeper,
her husband sent on his way, social engagements confirmed.
The fire was clean, set, lit with a scuttle of coal waiting
and her desk as she had left it, orderly, neat, prepared.
Quality paper, medium weight cartridge, fine grained,
embossed only with her initials.
Her pen was selected for its balance, its glide,
though sometimes it left an ink stain
on the side of her middle finger, just below the nail,
in the groove made by the frequency of its resting there.
a fault she recognised as her own, for her tendency to lean in
rather close to the edge of things, the join between ink shaft and nib
being the case in point; a little seepage, some stainage
is inevitable on the line between two things
but her paper was always free of taint,
the lines true, her message clear, as she wrote each day:
Dear Sir, Dearest Madam, Your Royal Highness,
I have heard the bell tolling at midnight in the chapel without,
when in vigil for those about to die,
I have seen the destitute made more wretched.
An Act, perhaps, of Parliament?
To Newgate some blankets, a sewing kit, food, linen.
From Newgate a covered wagon for the road to Resurrection Gate.
My Lord, my Lady, I petition you, reform is needed, rehabilitation,

they are women, they are children.
With deepest respect, Most sincerely, Yours faithfully, Yours,

Elizabeth Fry

Jenny Cleland: Journal

I bought a journal, picked it out, set it aside.
At first, it was overwhelming, so many words
hammering to escape my skull but I was tired,
sore. I fed you instead with touch and milk,
gazed at you through months of silence.
Then I dated a page and told you how perfect
you are; how small, how replete, how my heart
overspills, my hand enfolds completely the new
weightless softness of your tiny feet.

I tried again, repeated myself and stopped.
All the things I want to say, you don't need,
not yet anyway, and you might not listen,
not understand. My thoughts, philosophies,
my pain should not muddy your clean slate.
Who needs to know the truth about their father?

I turned pages, stroked fine clear canvas,
whispered words that melted white like snow
because, no, they were not for you, you,
unspoiled, untainted, unmarked and pure.
For you: butterflies and dinosaurs, yellow sand
and blue skies, open eyes and hopeful hearts.
For you: crisp peeled apples and mother's milk,
being held until you fall asleep and waking up
with kisses. I am the mother: the hand to guide;
the blanket and the safety net; the heart.

Geraldine O'Kane: It is in giving that we receive

1985, my maternal grandmother throws holy water at the TV,
a prayer so God will help Dennis Taylor become World
Snooker Champion.
Her twelve children must have been leading a novena so the
television didn't blow up.

I prayed daily for my family –
that they'd be gifted a good day,
that they'd live through the night.
I prayed to God for things I wanted,
things I shouldn't have; answered prayers
have consequences like accidental fires
and having to live temporarily with your father.

1996: I'm fifteen, being introduced to my first boyfriend's
parents.
By way of greeting, I'm handed a pair of rosary beads,
told I will be giving out a decade; first sorrowful mystery:
'The Agony in the Garden', as familiar to me
as "nobody puts Baby in the corner".

2012: I ask people are they okay regularly,
get an ache when they say events have floored them.
I tell people they look good in red, yellow, blue,
their eyes look lovely when the light shines from them.

Telling someone they are amazing
is the best kind of prayer:
'it is in giving that we receive'.

Contributors

Fatma Alabbasi is a third-culture poet. Her poetry reflects her lived experience as a woman navigating displacement, belonging, and the ongoing process of self-formation.

Trish Bennett is an award-winning writer and performer from Leitrim who lives in Fermanagh. Her writing spans poetry, memoir, and short stories. Arlen House published her debut poetry collection, Stench, in 2024. trishbennettwriter.com

Cat Brogan is a poet from Northern Ireland. Her work has appeared in Dedalus Press, Skylight 47, The Martello Journal and Anthropocene. She is the 2024 Ulster Poetry Slam Champion and holds an MA Writer/Teacher from Goldsmiths, University of London. She works across poetry, performance and community arts.

Ruth Carr is from Belfast. She is a poet, editor and facilitator. Her four collections are: There is a House, The Airing Cupboard (Summer Palace Press), Feather and Bone and Catching the Missing Beat (Arlen House). Available from www.whiterow.net

Deirdre Cartmill has published four poetry collections – Under the Blue Seraphim (Arlen House 2025), The Wind Stills to Listen (Arlen House 2023), The Return of the Buffalo (Lagan Press) and Midnight Solo (Lagan Press). Her writing explores redemption, grief and spirituality, and uncovers moments of grace in the everyday. www.deirdrecartmill.com

Marion Clarke, from Warrenpoint, County Down, was grand prize winner in the 11th Setouchi-Matsuyama Photo-Haiku Competition, winner of the Financial Times 'Haiku Poet in the City' and runner-up in the Seamus Heaney Award for New Writing, 2023. Her work features regularly in international short form poetry journals and anthologies.

Jenny Cleland's chapbook Belonging to Myself was published by Pen Points Press in 2016, the same year that she won the Belfast Book Festival Poetry Slam. She has performed in numerous festivals, been published in various magazines and released the collection In and Out of Love Poems in 2024.

Hannah Crothers is a 26-year-old creative from the East Coast of Northern Ireland. Aside from poetry, she enjoys painting, public speaking and making jokes that she herself laughs at. Passionate about mental health, many of Hannah's poems encompass this theme through tasteful humour and sharp punchlines.

Lesley-Anne Evans is an Irish-Canadian poet with an MA in Poetry from the Seamus Heaney Centre, Queen's University Belfast. Her work appears in Poetry Ireland Review, Banshee Magazine, The Belfast Review, The Honest Ulsterman, Poem Alone, and elsewhere. Mute Swan is her first collection. www.laevans.ca

Helen Hastings is a poet based in South Down. Her favourite topics include nature, existentialism and the end of the world. She has performed at many spoken word events including festivals. Helen facilitates the Words for Castle Ward writers' group and writes a mental health column for Down News.

Rachel Hedley is an Irish writer. She was the 2025 Poet in Residence at the Green Room Bar where she co-hosted with Jessie Fletcher. A recent project was her video poem *'im*, reflecting on the male mental health crisis in the country. She looks forward to more projects and performances**.**

Thérèse Kieran is a Belfast based creative practitioner. Her work has been published in anthologies including Washing Windows?, The Trumpet, Poetry Jukebox and Dark Angels: Three Contemporary Poets 2023. She is currently a student on the MA poetry programme at QUB and is Vice-Chair of Irish PEN/PEN na hÉireann.

Widely misspelled, **Debi Madden** spent a long time in the Pacific Ocean wishing she wasn't a poet. When that didn't work, she helped establish performance poetry in Belfast with her poet partner Mark, starting live readings in the city in the now burnt Arcadia Coffee House in 1997.

Rowan Evoe Madden was born in a café and now lives in a river. They were reared in Belfast by poets, which explains a lot. She is the author of several unpublished novels, and credits her poetry to the patience, support, and driving licence of her friend Pearl.

Siobhán McCafferty works in education and lives in Whiteabbey. She is a regular at the Purely Poetry Open Mic nights in The Crescent Arts Centre, Belfast.

Emma McKervey is an award-winning poet. She currently lives in Bangor, Co. Down. Her third collection, God-Head-Contraption was recently published by Dublin based Turas

Press. She is a founding member of poetry collective Femina Culpa.

Since retirement, **Karen Mooney** retrained as a Community Facilitator with the Women's Resource & Development Agency, going on to Chair the RCGPNI Patient's Group. She is now a lay representative for NI in health data research projects. Karen's poetry has been published online, in journals, and by The Hedgehog Poetry Press.

Laura O'Hare has had some poems published in the late 1990's and also in 2025. She has performed her own and other people's poems in the Crescent Arts Centre Open Mic nights and at the end of term show for the Crescent Writers Read.

Geraldine O'Kane is a neurodivergent poet residing in Belfast. She is co-host of Purely Poetry open mic and her first collection Unsafe was published by Salmon Poetry.

Nessa O'Mahony was born in Dublin. She has published six books of poetry – Bar Talk, (1999), Trapping a Ghost (2005), In Sight of Home (2009), Her Father's Daughter (2014), The Hollow Woman on the Island (2019) and Dodder Daughter (2026).

Mary E. Ringland is a poet and therapeutic counsellor from Larne, County Antrim. Her poems have appeared in various publications, including The Storms Journal, The Morecambe Poetry Festival Anthology, and The Bangor Literary Journal. Mary recently completed an MA in Creative Writing and is currently working towards her first collection.

Lynda Tavakoli is a professional member of The Irish Writers Centre and winner of several international awards for her poetry and prose. For the past two years she has been working on a series of poems about Gaza that are presently being translated into Arabic and soon to be published.

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Live Encounters Poetry & Writing, Dec '21

Trish Bennett: If Newton Studied Poets Instead of Physics
Find, Poetry In Motion, Community Arts Partnership, March 2019

Mary E. Ringland: Sherbet Fizz Sisters
An earlier version of the poem, under a different title, was first published in *Measure,* Poetry In Motion, Community Arts Partnership, 2025

Cat Brogan: Pairing Socks
Measure, Poetry In Motion, Community Arts Partnership, 2025

Ruth Carr: Mother of Pearl
from the collection *Catching the Missing Beat*, Arlen House, 2025

Emma McKervey: Petition of Elizabeth Fry
from the collection *God-Head-Contraption*, Turas Press, 2026

Poems for International Women's Day 2026

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