



FourXFour  
Poetry Journal  
Issue 23 Autumn 2017

Linda McKenna  
Amy Wyatt  
Brendan Cleary  
Rosie Johnston

## Contents:

p.3 Linda McKenna

Salt

East

Boxed Up

Resting Place

p.9 Amy Wyatt

China Bones

Digging Potatoes in Crawfordsburn

Baptism at Stricklands

The beach under the Slieves

p.14 Brendan Cleary

For God & Ulster

August without Esme

Miss Brannagh

Ghost Drinker

p.19 Rosie Johnston

Four '17s'

## Linda McKenna

Linda McKenna lives in Downpatrick. Originally from County Dublin she has lived in County Down for over 20 years. Having dabbled in 'bits of writing' as a teenager, she started writing poetry about two years ago.

She has had poems published in *A New Ulster*, *Skylight 47*, *Panning for Poems*, *Lagan Online* and *The Blue Nib*.

## Salt

*'Great dearth of salt this year...so much so that the jesting folk were composing its elegy.'* *The Annals of Ulster.*

The acrobats are balancing on the barrels  
where we used to store winter, brimming  
with salty treasure; pork, beef, venison, cod.  
Even the children don't clamour to stop,  
dragging on their mothers' hands, perching  
on the ground to stare. We are busy being  
crammed with the spoils of the hunt, the cuts  
of the animals too tired to stay alive. As fat  
bellied as ships sent to relieve a siege, our flesh  
so rich, so dense, famine's teeth will break  
before they reach our bones. The dishes scowl  
unscoured on careless tables where strangers'  
elbows jostle and poke. The whipped boys  
are wearing ribbons of rotting flesh.

## East

I walk two circles here and there. Venn diagram  
of my now and then homes, intersections of church

and cricket ground, gate houses; useful hedgerows  
allowed run to seed. Nettles don't grow here

without dock leaves, thorns are packed with blackberries,  
and rose hips. For this is East. Pale and paler still,

planned, squared off, knowing its place. Congregating  
around a ruined abbey, a restored castle, a sharp diamond.

Straightening haphazard paths and hills, damming  
water, taming lush Australian plants with cold and fog.

I cherish this. Not for me the wrecked and wild west,  
houses backing into the sea, inviting flood and pirate;

the gaps in talk you fall foolishly into, the children's walls  
fencing off nothing, everything, especially a grievance.

But this securely pinned and sewn tight Norman world.  
Its shrewd saints and maiden ghosts that rise unsurprised

out of weathered tombs, only when required.

## Boxed Up

I take the black pencil skirt, a ruffle running almost the whole length of it, from the box. Folded into tissue paper so we might dream ourselves in a line of women who regularly waited for boxes from fashionable dress shops; unwrapping bright silks, delicate lace. The word 'trousseau' comes to mind.

What I think of is my great-grandmother, one of the those girls living in box rooms. Boiling under the eaves of a Chicago townhouse, the summer heat rising and rising until it finds her sunk in an old mattress. Her wardrobe a cardboard suitcase; one good dress, boots stuffed with yesterday's newspaper.

The best cast offs parcelled up for home. A black astrakhan coat with jet buttons, shoes with buckles, dresses made from crepe de chine, poplin, lawn. And tucked away, maybe in a pocket, the envelope

of dollars to feed the cattle her sisters-in-law  
would milk, their feet easing into the dew  
soaked grass she seeded.

I imagine her at the attic window, trying  
to match the colour of her childhood  
sky as expertly as she matched thread,  
her fingers running over the tray of greys  
in some emporium of plenty; or stopping  
in front of a display of winter fashion, seeing  
in the wool of a coat, the exact swirling purple  
mauve of the Reek in summer evening.

## Resting Place

*'May your Excellency....mitigate this Sentence so that their Bones may be laid in a homely grave..' The Convict Petition of Mary and Ann Atcheson, 1827.*

This thin soil hoards its goodness  
a pinch here and there, enough  
for foraging sheep, enough to nudge  
the whins to dance yellow, enough  
to warm the half asleep hills.

This narrow water lies silver and cold,  
the mist rising and staying all day  
in your hair, on your clothes; wool  
never drying, feet always gripping  
over seaweed strewn rocks.

This land grudges its harvests, hides  
away riches, rewards patient hands;  
the skin opening and bleeding,  
cutting and cleaving the closed tight  
shells. Inside, life plumping and pulsing.



## Amy Wyatt

Amy Wyatt is a teacher, poet and artist from Bangor. She teaches A Levels at SERC Bangor and works creatively from The Blackberry Path Art Studios in Bangor.

She studied English and Social Anthropology at Queen's University, Belfast in 2003 before completing her PGCE in English, Drama and Media at the University of Ulster. She recently completed a Foundation Diploma in Ceramics.

Amy is currently working on her first collection of poems, *Sonnets to a Seamstress*, which are based on her Great Aunt Delia, a spinster seamstress; and her first illustrated children's book, based on a scribe monk and his cat whose remains were discovered at Bangor Abbey.

Amy founded the Bangor Poetry Competition which is in its fifth year. She facilitates poetry and art workshops and exhibitions on a regular basis.

## China Bones

I have broken all my plates upon your  
heavy head. Look. See. Just eat with your hands!  
Just stick them straight into the pot; or pour  
the stew straight into your throat. I had plans  
in which the neighbours called to have a cup  
of tea each afternoon; and a full set  
of china bones were laid right out, set up  
for knitted tight windy women to whet  
their appetite. Yet, on the table laid  
a skeleton of mundane afternoons  
and tea stained lips burnt with things never said.  
We base life and days upon suns and moons:  
upon the thought of waking up alone,  
of being nothing more than china bones.

## Digging Potatoes in Crawfordsburn

You earnt it well, for hard you had worked; oft  
sprung back by the heave of unrooted spud  
finding foot in the fertile field of dirt,  
you pocketed your time; covered in mud  
you'd return to Cootehall Road, wash away  
the sixpence of labour you had endured.

The bath already run by Gran, to say  
she knew you toiled the farmer's field for her-  
her appreciation: a boiling tub  
and hearty stew made from the duggen stones.  
Yet Henry - he earnt twice amount in mud  
and you sliced half; but every stew has bones

and every day begins beneath the ground  
and we shall dig, 'til every stone is found.

## Baptism at Stricklands

Knee deep in the river is a place  
that she had not yet been-  
a shock to feel her fur heavy wet.

Six baptisms later, fur now scales,  
the initiated emerged, barking ten to  
the dozen.

I don't speak it, but I knew  
what it meant. Canine glee. *Woof,*  
*splash, woof* - the glen, a totem.

Sacred space; ceremony ends.

## The beach under the Slieves

A dashing pebble pathway to the sea  
grouted in impure gold; open mussel  
shells – butterfly wings un-fluttering free.  
Drift from rock pools: ephemeral crabs' shells

like hollow porcelain knuckles: punch lost,  
fight gone, meatless and empty. All debris.  
Sea debris. Cuttlefish swim still amongst  
the great divinity of grainy sea.

Oh, we could hardly stand the ground so rough,  
so we walked tentatively, without wrath  
as not to break the skin or stub the toe  
as our feet trod the devil's pebbled path.

He led us to the wealth of liquid salt,  
unsure where land would meet or sea would halt.

## Brendan Cleary

Brendan Cleary is originally from Whitehead. He has published many full-length collections from presses such as Bloodaxe, Wrecking Ball, Tall-Lighthouse & Pighog as well as over 25 pamphlets. He currently lives & writes in Brighton.

## For God & Ulster

outside in the dark & wind  
waiting for your taxi  
near the bucket for butts  
you told me about a girl  
when you were young  
raking about the place  
& she had red hair  
but was a Catholic  
so your family stopped it  
& I could see tears welling  
in your dodgy eye  
as you stood & smoked  
clutching your Zimmer frame

## August without Esme

sad for Sam Shepard  
sad for Professor Fred Snow

sad for the dead leaves  
sad for the troubling sea

sad for The November Blues  
sad for my door key

& no matter how much I pretend  
I'm sad for lines around my eyes

the half-drunk pints  
the ripped-up bookie slips

the sicknotes & Red Bulls  
& all the many likes & dislikes



## Miss Brannagh

every night about 9  
you went next door  
to check her place  
see if there were ghosts  
or any intruders  
under her curtains or beds  
or behind her cupboards  
& I remember going with you  
in late summer twilight  
smelling her old corners  
watching new dusts gather

## Ghost Drinker

sheltering in the tunnel  
of the low bridge  
near the dump  
& the Yacht club  
in the greyness  
under the lighthouse beams  
I can just about make you out  
in the promenade spray  
stumbling off to Blackhead  
with a blue bag of Harp

## Rosie Johnston

Rosie Johnston was born in Belfast, grew up in Portstewart, and has been a Londoner for forty years.

Her three poetry pamphlets, published by Lapwing Publications, have been reviewed and featured in *Culture NI* and *The Honest Ulsterman* and her other poetry has appeared in *London Grip*, *Hedgerow* and *Ink Sweat & Tears*. Last year *Live Canon* (an actors' ensemble group and publisher in Greenwich) commissioned her to join their '154 Project' celebrating Shakespeare's 154 sonnets on the 400th anniversary of his death. She has been the Cambridgeshire Wildlife Trust's poet in residence since 2014 and reviews poetry for online cultural magazine *London Grip*.

Her poetry always takes a 17-syllable form without being haiku. Lately, Rosie has been writing sequences of several 17-syllables in a bid to make her poems look a bit more like other people's. Each stanza can be taken individually or as part of the sequence, or both.

Her two novels are *The Most Intimate Place* (Arcadia Books, London, 2009) and *What You See Is What You Get* (Wolfhound Press, Dublin, 2005).

[rosiejohnstonwrites.com](http://rosiejohnstonwrites.com)

What can she know about safety? She's an  
empty can  
rolling the street.

That week-old bruise. Its slanting  
rainbows  
seem to offer distant rescue.

Buds sway in sleet, notes without a  
stave  
in this diminished interval.

Forget-me-nots shiver in her  
fingers. A posy.  
Words blow away.

**Thank you for reading!**



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Editor: Colin Dardis

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A **Poetry NI** production

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