



Poetry NI: poems for

Holocaust

Memorial

Day 2016

Poetry NI:  
'Poems for Holocaust Memorial Day 2016'

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# Foreword

**Don't stand by** is the theme for Holocaust Memorial Day 2016.

Established as an international day of remembrance by the governments of 46 countries, Holocaust Memorial Day enables us all to lead the way in resolving not to be bystanders. With over 3,600 local activities taking place to mark HMD, people are able to come together and consider their responsibilities to learn from the past in order to create a better future.

The Holocaust and subsequent genocides took place because the local populations allowed insidious persecution to take root. Whilst some actively supported or facilitated state policies of persecution, the vast majority stood by silently – at best, afraid to speak out; at worst, indifferent.

The theme this year is a clear call to action focusing on the contemporary relevance of the Holocaust and subsequent genocides, and considering our individual responsibilities not to be bystanders to hate crime and prejudice, nor to international threats of genocide.

We must ensure that history is not forgotten, trivialised or denied.

Publications of creative and powerful poetry like this collection ensure that the vastness that is the Holocaust remains visible. The selection of excellent poems, demonstrates the extensive research, knowledge and

creativity of the writers. The range, from those evoking the camps, to those written in response to more recent visits to Holocaust sites and Museums shows how lives today continue to be impacted by what happened.

Moving, powerful and thought provoking poetry is an effective way to ensure messages about not standing by get to an appropriate audience.

I am sure the collection will have an impact on individuals and therefore in our communities in encouraging us to combat hatred.

I hope they encourage readers to take action today for HMD 2016: Don't stand by.

Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel, has written powerfully about the impact of bystanders:

*"I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."*

Shirley Lennon,  
Northern Ireland Regional Support Worker  
for Holocaust Memorial Day Trust

Trevor Conway: *Arbeit Macht Frei*

We've travelled by train  
To a place where meat is scarce.  
Our bodies are drums without sound,

And we are no spiders,  
Though we weave our silk to keep breathing.  
America, won't you listen to our song?

Work sets you free,  
Each morning a rush to the roll call.  
Even the dead are held up here,  
Scarecrows of the cold, dull dawn.

The gaping smile of a button hole  
Earns a brutal beating,  
But cries sink under the constant strum of the  
    lumber yard,  
The grunt and hiss of gravel.

I've watched men deteriorate,  
As though they were dead already,  
Each with haunted eyes,  
A chorus of diseased lice.

The oven heats each morning,  
To give them a private sunrise.  
See how the smoke carries their tune.

Work sets you free,  
No longer tainted with stars.  
You earn your stripes here, fenced like a beast,  
Horizons barbed across your eyes.

We are a clamour of Jews and Poles,  
Romani, Soviets, homosexuals,  
Classified by coloured cloth.  
Time now for a shower.

Karen J. McDonnell: *East*

*i.m. Ottla Kafka David, 1892-1943*

**24th August, 1943. Terezín.**

Nearly two thousand come to Terezín,  
enough to repopulate Hameln.

Ottla volunteers to care for them.

Some days she forgets and calls them  
by her children's names. Vera! Helen!

She tells them stories. She sings them to sleep.

**5th-6th October, 1943.**

They tramp to the railway station.

Klara drops her doll. Izak stumbles.

Fizel Gdanksi presses his nails into Ottla's palm.

Soldiers say they are going to Switzerland,  
but the train pulls the cattle cars East.

Inside the temperature rises. Men faint.

There isn't room enough to scratch.

Ottla says 'Stand up Izak! Stay awake!

Jakob, hold your sister's hand! Later, you can  
sleep.'



**7th October, 1943. Birkenau.**

The wooden door slides across the stench.  
Sweet air rushes in. Humans tumble out.  
Jakob still holds his sister's dead hand.  
'Juden Raus!' Ottla carries Jakob.  
Fizel Gdanski grabs her belt. A woman says  
'Sir, this man says my children are to be gassed.'  
'Madam, do you think we are barbarians?'

Ottla says 'Stay close to me, children.  
We must wash, then you can sleep.'  
The children's howls assault the women  
more than cold forced nakedness.  
In the shower room a small hole opens to the sky.  
The blue pellets rattle out like sweets from a tin.  
Ottla's nails cut Fizel Gdanski's palm.  
'Come closer, children. Soon you can –

## Paul Jeffcutt: *Evacuation East*

*from a photograph at Oswiecim*

Hot July day, no breeze.  
We rest at last, in a grove of pines:  
there's a shady little pond,  
nearby a skylark sings.

Suitcases are spread around,  
a broken wall of black leather,  
our names printed on the outside:  
one change of clothes (as instructed).

Children slink and jostle,  
'watch out' screams Katerina  
but it's good for them to play a little  
after such a time we've had.

That soldier leans at the wire fence,  
rifle cupped, not seeming to care.  
Beyond, the dipping wail of a locomotive;  
I smell burning.

## Shane Vaughan: *Shoah*

here  
take me  
as I am  
a lamb  
dark meat flesh  
burnt darker

Stephanie Conn:  
*a tiny brown bird takes flight*

*Auschwitz-Birkenau 2015.*

Temporary metal frames leak a cool haze  
into the sweltering heat at two metre intervals.  
I sip lukewarm water, sweat, cannot forget  
the plumes of white mist outside the museum.

A child's single shoe placed behind glass –  
blue leather – holes pressed below the buckle,  
a pattern of punched flowers – the other,  
buried in the mound of discarded footwear.

The tracks rust, sprout veined grass, nettles,  
a lilac wildflower. Chimney stumps and wires  
stretch between the wooden posts you rest on.  
When you rise a flash of orange slices the sky.

Colin Dardis:

*Escaping Up the Chimney*

The ones who did not survive  
were used for pillows: cadaver headrests  
cushioning the cradle of laden coaltrucks,  
each handed over to the furnace.

Crematorium: a scythe cutting out  
gypsy music, played to lull away  
the peal of the death march,  
turning life to ash;  
an aftermath of bones,  
viewed like raked out relics  
from a family hearth.

Asking of relatives and friends:  
*"He escaped, up the chimney."*

When freedom came,  
they were too weak to smile.  
*"You come now, when everybody's dead?"*

Brendan McCormack: *Treblinka*

He walks to a pile of clothes,  
sees his little sister's dress,  
his older sister's dress  
side by side  
as if hugging each other,  
  
their ashes floating overhead.

## Alice Kinsella: *Museums*

Every holiday  
We'd visit two  
If not more  
As many as they could find  
Really.

Terror  
Resistance  
Imperial war,  
North and South.  
Unconnected  
All the same.

I would complain  
Resist  
Be bored  
Disinterested.

Mum read  
Dad took photos  
They didn't speak  
Other than to tell me  
To look away  
If something seemed too much.

Photographs  
And subtitles  
Dark rooms with looming projectors  
Articles in other languages  
Names that didn't look like ours  
A time I could never see  
As real.

One year we took a bus  
Out to the sunny square suburbs  
Of a German town  
With a name I can't remember  
To the dusty grounds within the high walls  
The silhouette of a chimney  
The tower of a memorial  
Flags flying low in the empty air of summer.

Then there were the shoes.  
A glass wall of shoes  
Soles separated, flaking leather  
None of them had laces  
Browned as if burned by years.

I was growing out of my pair then  
Twelve and stretching daily  
The tatty Converse coated with the dust  
Of yesterday.



I looked at all the sizes  
Wondering which was closest to my own  
Piled, packed together  
Collected and confined to serve their purpose.  
Unwittingly connected by their kind.

## Michael Farry: *When I Returned*

I taught my children  
the correct pronunciation:  
the slide from the *au*  
to that soft *sch*,  
*w* pronounced as *vh*,  
and the final *tch* –  
difficult for Irish pupils.  
Then I taught them how to spell it:  
*s-c-h* as in school,  
*w* not *v*  
and that final *z* –  
no silent letters.  
They practiced it every day  
until finally they spoke  
and wrote it  
like native speakers:  
*Auschwitz. Auschwitz.*

## Therese Kieran: *Robbed*

Behind glass  
pillaged possessions  
robbed from the brave:

spectacle of eyewear  
mouldy shoe mountain  
suitcases stacked  
in pillars of towering emptiness  
and soft mounds  
of hacked hair  
matted and trapped  
in shocking silent spaces.

On walls  
hollow expressions  
taken to the grave:

forlorn faces  
in numerical order  
follow the slow  
and solemn procession  
of bewildered pilgrims  
unsettled by head shots  
in black and white  
no sense denying it.

## Michael Conaghan: *Coffin*

The first thing is the weight,  
Then the cut into the shoulder  
The arm around your waist,  
For ballast, like a waltz.

The concentration as you move  
Distracts you from the thing  
That you are carrying.

That empty vessel , lost to you  
but elsewhere perceived;  
As you puff and breathe  
turning to face the hill before;

Broken, yet all too conscious  
Of the honour.

Ciarán O'Rourke: *The Killing March*  
(After Miklós Radnóti, 1909-1944)

Each day permits  
the old atrocities  
anew –

the necessary deaths,  
the far-off scream  
come near,

the itch of madness  
spreading  
on the hands and hair...

History is one  
disaster, feeding  
off another, or:

what poems are made  
to witness  
and withstand.

You taught us that;  
or someone did,  
whose teaching stemmed

from what he saw,  
from the hunger hushing  
through him like a mist,

his head adrift  
with grief, or sleep,  
but not dead yet

on the killing march.  
Against all murderous  
decrees, and against

the unreturning cities  
razed, the angel  
drowning in the bricks,

the roads  
where beggars roam  
and drop, it's true:

the oak trees  
still are breathing,  
and the fist,

which ice and metal  
hammered once,  
can furl

to feel the winter  
easing,  
in a luff of rain.

So it is, poet,  
in this barbaric language,  
built from pain,

I imagine echoings  
to be enough  
to raise

your sightless eyes  
and famine face,  
and faith

in breath, a force  
to conjure  
youth again:

that place  
of which, you say,  
the music speaks

in mutter-tongues  
and morse. Love-poet,  
eternal pastoralist,

in the din of one more  
ending world,  
I commemorate your corpse.



## James Meredith: *haiku sequence*

nights of broken glass  
turn to days of pillowed smoke –  
the catastrophe

into the chambers  
naked as the first of days  
on this, their last day

among 'the birches'  
calandra larks cease singing  
the sun still rises

crematoria  
thick palls of smoke pillowing  
blocking out the sun

regardless of hope  
regardless of helplessness  
the smoke keeps rising

Geraldine O’Kane:

*Whose War is it Anyway?*

*(after Martin Niemöller)*

When she was just thirteen, a book told her:  
six million people died at the hands of others,  
but those were just numbers on a page.

It began before she even entered the building:  
the eight thousand faces of Battery Park would  
    have perished  
by the time she finished the two-hour tour of the  
    Holocaust Museum  
had this been Germany 1944, not New York 2008.

As she was permitted through the sliding doors  
a hungry shroud of silence engulfed her,  
all sound seemed to shift down her body  
out through her feet, just as fear physically fell  
from those who recognised death  
disguised as a train station.

After being stamped, she was led to a grey marble  
    room  
where flickered an artificial flame furnishing the  
    words

*'when they came for me, no-one spoke out  
for there was no-one left'.*

Each room thereafter built a picture  
cradled to the grave -  
people with ancestors, customs and lives  
much, much more than just the word Jew.

On the third floor were life-size photos:  
ungendered pyramids of bodies  
charred and smouldering, a human waste ground,  
the only identifiers, gold teeth and vestiges.

Right then she had to believe the Bible was right:  
those last will be first and the billows of ash  
were the only visible souls ever to enter Heaven.

Acid ingesting the unspeakable truth  
burned up through her cheeks.  
She had to blink hard and fast  
as she pawed the glass case,  
holding headless hair and footless shoes,  
as if the emotion alone could transcend her  
to that place, that time, where one man,  
just one man, was responsible  
for the quiet, methodical slaughter

of the six million men, women and children  
he called *cargo*.

In a freeze-frame movement  
she looks for an exit, any exit;  
outside, she leans over the railings  
and lets years of unspoken words drip  
into the Atlantic ocean.  
She turns, looks around;  
this is not Germany 1944, nor is it  
her troubled Northern Ireland;  
this is New York which never sleeps.  
She is alone.

## Glen Wilson: *Elijah's Chair*

Geneva, 1947

We gathered what and who we could as lamps  
switched with the dawn in watercolour passages.  
Beams cut through windows without glass  
and through walls gashed and incomplete.

Irina was asked to be the *kvaterin*,  
a sister to your mother now, having travelled  
with us for nearly a year. People coalesce  
in groups after every kind of separation.

Uncle Lev forms a chair for you, you settle  
in his musician's lap. The Mohel says a few words,  
lips crease as the verses come back to him  
as if they have never been away.

You are uncovered, I see *zayin*, *dalet*, and *shin*  
stamped on the small ivory handled knife.  
The blade cuts quick, as if to outrun the pain,  
He sucks a line of blood away from the wound.

Your Mother wraps you up quickly; it's January  
and the ovens are only starting to warm  
for the morning bagel and blintzes, no fresh lox  
but we have become used to making do.

You cry as the drops of wine touch your tongue,  
We name you Joseph, after your grandfather  
your mother and I finish the glass, an unknown  
brand that is warm as it goes down my throat.

Peter O'Neill: *Prelude to Citadel*

Private Joachim Kleist stood up in his brown, pebbled leather jackboots, which had seen far better days. They had survived two Russian winters, but on looking at them in the summer light, he feared that neither they nor he could survive a third! It's true, the army was being re-equipped with the new Tiger tanks, more than a match for any Russian.

But, they were all too few, and too late. Hadn't they already annihilated millions, and still they still kept coming... the hordes! Uneasily, he flung the cigarette from him down the sun burnt hill. It lay smoking there were it had fallen, a sign of things to come.

## Moya Roddy: *That Morning*

That morning, she wore the tailored jacket  
the one she bought on holidays in Wien,  
the one that buttoned at the waist,  
showed her figure to perfection.  
With a hand-held mirror, she checked  
her seams were straight,  
pinned the little hat, the one with the veil,  
to the side of her head.  
It took three attempts to get it right.

When she was ready, she turned to the children,  
made sure they had changed their underwear,  
polished their shoes, cleaned their teeth.  
The youngest was impatient  
excited by the thought of a train journey.  
The eldest stood by the window  
perplexed at the growing numbers  
heading to the station,  
each carrying the one suitcase  
they'd been told they could bring.



Emma McKervey:

*Rocky Mountain National Park*

Braced on the brink of ravine, an account of a visit  
to the Holocaust Museum in New York was given  
to me

quietly, by this elderly woman whose own early life  
is preserved there. It was hot that day,  
the sun sweating sap from the spruce, the dry ache  
of wooden fence on the ridge against our thighs  
as we leant out, the car park behind fetid with  
fumes.

Any tears we did not wipe away in time  
evaporated before the ground was reached,  
as she swept her hands out across the expanse,  
embracing mountain, river, canyon, wood,  
'*there was always this,*' she said,  
'*there is always this.*'

## Raisea Dé Murchú: *Grandfathers*

Our loss falls beyond numbers.  
Would be artists, doctors, poets,  
their endless destinies all  
usurped by dust.  
We have lost generations.

Among them was salvation  
from genocide after genocide.  
Their legacies fell to teachers  
too scandalised to  
tell their stories to children.

So what of our Grandfathers  
forced to wear pink triangles  
in place of their hearts?  
Who dares to resurrect  
their names of revolution?

## Yvonne Boyle: *Untitled*

It was only after I stood  
in Krakow's Jewish Quarter,  
pre-war home of 65,000 Jews,  
used in Schlinder's List  
as 'the ghetto' at Podgorse  
had become too modern,  
that I bought Helen Lewis' book  
'A Time to Speak'.

I did not know she was  
a holocaust survivor when  
she taught me to dance  
in a church hall  
off the Lisburn Road in Belfast  
in 1976, as Troubles raged.

*'I did ballet as a child,'* I said.  
She said, *'You haven't lost it'.*

## Notes on Contributors

**Trevor Conway** writes mainly poetry, fiction and songs. He has recorded an album of his songs, released in 2013. His work has appeared in magazines and anthologies across Ireland, Austria, India, the UK, the US and Mexico, where his poems have been translated into Spanish. He is a contributing editor for *The Galway Review*, and his first collection of poems was published by Salmon Poetry. [trevorconway.weebly.com](http://trevorconway.weebly.com)

**Karen J McDonnell** lives in Ballyvaughan, Co Clare. Her writing and photography have appeared in the *Irish Times*, *Clare Champion*, *SIN*, *Freehand 5*, *Crannóg*, *Brain of Forgetting*, *The Stony Thursday Book* and in the *Words on the Waves* and *Wild Atlantic Words* anthologies. She has won prizes in the 2015 *Wild Atlantic Words* and *Baffle* festivals. A poem from her historical song cycle *Notes from the Margins* won the 2014 *Words on the Waves Poetry Prize*. [www.karenjmcdonnell.wordpress.com](http://www.karenjmcdonnell.wordpress.com)

**Paul Jeffcutt's** debut collection of poetry, *Latch*, was published by Lagan Press in 2010 and was chosen by *The Ulster Tatler* as their *Book of the Month*. Paul has been widely published and has won a series of prizes for his poetry in the UK, Ireland and the USA.

**Shane Vaughan** is a writer of poetry, prose and plays. His work has been published or is forthcoming in *The Pickled Body*, *Unbroken Journal*, *Roadside Fiction*, *Silver Apples* and elsewhere. In August 2015 his play, *Jacqueline*, ran in the Cork School of Music to popular acclaim. He works for Ó Bhéal: Cork's Weekly Poetry Event, as an administrator, and also runs *Stanzas*, an *Evening of Words*, where he publishes a chapbook of new writing every month. [shanevaughan.wordpress.com](http://shanevaughan.wordpress.com)

**Stephanie Conn** is a former teacher and graduate of the MA programme at the Seamus Heaney Centre. She recently won the Yeovil Poetry Prize, Funeral Service NI prize and the inaugural Seamus Heaney Award for New Writing. She is a recipient of an Arts Council Career Enhancement Award. Her first collection, 'The Woman on the Other Side' is forthcoming with Doire Press. She is currently working on her second collection.

**Colin Dardis** is a poet, editor and arts facilitator. He is a recipient of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's ACES award 2015/16, and founder of Poetry NI. He is a recent winner of the BBC Get Creative / Fun Palaces #WriteScience competition and of the Glebe House 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Poetry Competition. [www.colindardispoet.co.uk](http://www.colindardispoet.co.uk)

**Brendan McCormack** is an Irish poet and writer based in Rosscarberry, West Cork. He helps run a monthly open mic night in DeBarra's in Clonakilty on the first Tuesday of each month. His poetry has been featured in Outburst, Poetry Bus and others in Ireland, the UK and the USA.

**Alice Kinsella** is a writer living in Dublin. She writes both poetry and fiction and has been published in a variety of publications, including *Headspace magazine*, *Poethead* and *The Sunday Independent*. In 2015 she was included in *Poethead's* indices 'Women Poets' and 'Contemporary Irish Women Poets'.

**Michael Farry** is a retired primary teacher living in Meath, Ireland. He was selected for Poetry Ireland Introductions 2011. His first poetry collection, *Asking for Directions* (in which 'Which I Returned' originally appears), was published by Doghouse Books, Tralee, in 2012. His history book, *Sligo, The Irish Revolution 1912-1923*, was published in 2013 by Four Courts Press, Dublin.

**Therese Kieran** likes to write poetry and has been published in anthologies by Community Arts Partnership and Shalom, Panning for Poems and The Incubator. She lives and writes in Belfast.

**Michael Conaghan's** work has been published widely both in Ireland and in Britain. He was the regular 'poet in exile' on Your Place and Mine on BBC Radio Ulster, and was the regional winner for Belfast on the Funeral Services Northern Ireland National Poetry Competition in 2013.

**Ciarán O'Rourke** was born in 1991 and is based in Dublin. He was winner of the Lena Maguire/Cuirt New Irish Writing Award 2009 and the Westport Poetry Prize 2015 (In Memory of Dermot Healy). His work has been published widely, and his pocket-pamphlet *Some Poems* was issued as a Moth Edition in 2011.

**James Meredith** lives and works in Belfast. He writes stories, poems and plays. A past winner of the Brian Moore Short Story Award, his work has been published in Ireland, the UK, Europe and the USA. He has also had poetry published in translation in Romania.

**Geraldine O'Kane** is a poet, creative writing facilitator, arts administrator and mental health advocate. Her work has been published in numerous anthologies, journals and zines in Ireland, the UK and the US. She currently works for the John Hewitt Society, a literary charity organisation.

**Glen Wilson** lives in Co Armagh with his wife Rhonda and children Sian and Cain. He has been widely published including work in *The Honest Ulsterman*, *Iota* and *Boyne Berries*. He won the 2014 Poetry Space competition and was shortlisted for the Wasafiri New Writing Prize.

**Peter O'Neill** was born in Cork in 1967. He is the author of four collections of poetry, most notably The Dublin Trilogy comprising of: The Dark Pool, Dublin Gothic and The Enemy, Transversions from Charles Baudelaire. He edited An Agamemnon Dead with Walter Ruhlmann, and organised and hosted Donkey Shots: Skerries First International Avant Garde Poetry Fest in 2015.

**Moya Roddy's** novel The Long Way Home was described as "simply brilliant" in the Irish Times. Her collection of short stories Other People was long-listed for the Frank O'Connor Award in 2011. She has written for stage and TV. Her poetry has appeared in Stoney Thursday, Poeming Pigeons (USA), Crannog and Aids West Magazine.

**Emma McKervey** studied at Dartington College of Arts and has been involved in community arts, education and poetry for a number of years. Her work has been published in Abridged, The Honest Ulsterman, The Linnet's Wings among others, and she was recently longlisted for the Nine Arches Press/Poetry School Primers competition, as well as winning the 2015 Translink Poetry/Poetry NI competition.

**Raisea Dé Murchú** is a writer and poet, currently residing in the Republic of Ireland. Her work has found publication in the USA, the UK, and the Republic of Ireland. With the release of the upcoming feature film, 'One Night In Dublin', she will make her debut as a screenwriter.

**Yvonne Boyle** has been writing for a number of years and has had poems included in a variety of publications. These include 'I Will Dance Again', Corrymeela Knocklyd Writers Group, 2001; 'You Can't Eat Flags for Breakfast', NBCAI, 2002; 'Literary Miscellany, Ulster Tatler', 2010/2011 and 'Cobalt Blue', Dunfanaghy Writers Circle, April 2016, forthcoming. She is a recently retired Social Worker and was Alliance Deputy Mayor of Coleraine 2014/5.

**The Holocaust Memorial Day Trust** is the charity that promotes and supports **Holocaust Memorial Day** (HMD).

27 January is the day for everyone to remember the six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust, and the millions of people killed by Nazi Persecution and in subsequent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur. 27 January marks the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest Nazi death camp.

On HMD we can honour the survivors of these regimes of hatred and challenge ourselves to use the lessons of their experience to inform our lives today.

For further information on Holocaust Memorial Day, please visit <http://hmd.org.uk/>

