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# Live encounters

POETRY & WRITING

FREE ONLINE MAGAZINE FROM VILLAGE EARTH  
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ARTWORK BY IRISH ARTIST EMMA BARONE





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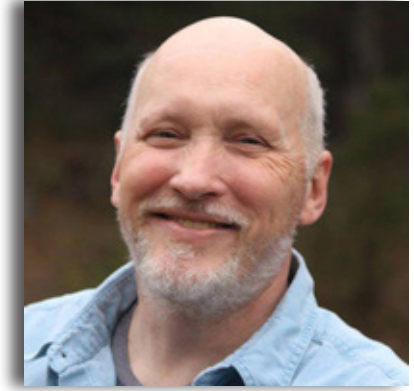
JOACHIM MATSCHOSS  
*The boy under the table*

### TRANSLATION

FARID UD-DIN ATTAR  
*The Conference of the Birds*  
translated by poet Sholeh Wolpé



Stephen Haven is the author of *The Last Sacred Place in North America* (2012), selected by T.R. Hummer as winner of the New American Press Poetry Prize. He has published two previous collections of poetry, *Dust and Bread* (Turning Point, 2008), for which he was named 2009 Ohio Poet of the Year, and *The Long Silence of the Mohawk Carpet Smokestacks* (University of New Mexico/West End Press, 2004). He is Director of the Lesley University MFA Program in Creative Writing, in Cambridge, MA.



## THE GIST OF IT

Maybe it's the body's memory, its muscled bone,  
The way a boy plays Rachmaninoff  
In and beyond thought, gathers himself

Into a baby grand, the logic of that discipline,  
The key note speakers of that house  
Climbing like skilled laborers

The scaffolding around a draped mural,  
Wings lifting in an open-air cathedral,  
Artisans pausing for bread, for coffee only.

What memory registers  
Only in the marrow?  
Wood, wire, tusked ivory,

The spontaneity, the control,  
In which the body acts  
As it was taught to do, and passion rides

That moment like a bull no matador  
Could tame, could only kill,  
The point of that red grace, that slivered denouement,

Never parting them, always part of them,  
The mind inviting this totality in,  
The beast in its rebellion, taunting the discipline.



## STALK

"Betya never even had your face slapped!"  
It was true. I was eight years old.  
Now I'm feeling it in my dead dokko,

Stalk of grass a girl slid on a dare  
Slowly into my right ear, where it became  
Entirely a rush of air. Today, a doctor saw

An old woman's face there, the sharp-boned  
Fury of a girl, some strange cauliflower  
I couldn't quite hear blooming in

The membrane that was once a tear.  
In the small bone mold of me,  
Beneath the planter, in that Year of that Rattler

The snakelets were the deadliest.  
They gave no warning,  
Couldn't quite shake it,

The mothers sinking in only a measure  
Of venom, their small fry letting everything  
Go in one fright. Somewhere above

My oldest loves, the silence  
Of those sibilants,  
That tune I carry always.

## THE BENCH A CONCRETE EAR

You think it is the tundra calling you  
The brush of a cymbal  
But it is only a poplar or two,

Shimmer of the singer's fan  
On some worn Beijing stage  
Where the women were really men

Coins flashing in the glare  
Like the shell game they use to play  
Union, Central Square,

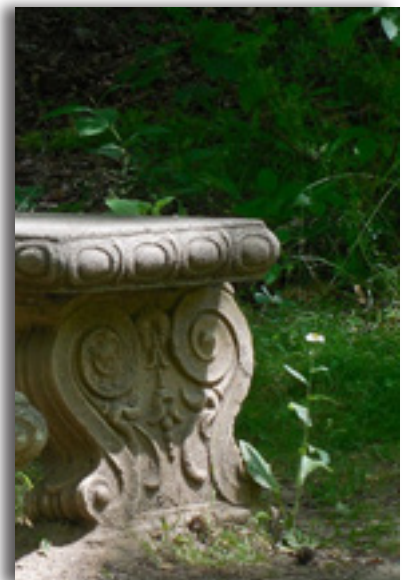
The now you see it, now you don't  
Rasp of those shells against concrete  
Is the tune you will never whistle

In your own death rattle, the mouth  
Of an empty beer bottle  
You are the constant chapped drill

Of a face leaning to the planetary spill  
Every molecule you gather  
In a vessel, everything you own

One minute, this loan,  
Time is the element of music  
And silence... If only you could tune it

To where you live and why  
Someone once split your drum  
Bird cries, cicada, these distant arid hills





Poet, writer and artist Greta Sykes has published her work in many anthologies. She is a member of London Voices Poetry Group and also produces art work for them. Her new volume of poetry called 'The Shipping News and Other Poems' came out in August 2016. The German translation of her book 'Under charred skies' has now been published in Germany under the title 'Unter verbranntem Himmel' by Eulenspiegel Verlag. She is the chair of the Socialist History Society and has organised joint poetry events for them at the Poetry Café. She is a trained child psychologist and has taught at the Institute of Education, London University, where she is now an associate researcher. Her Particular focus is now on women's emancipation and antiquity. *Twitter: g4gaia. Facebook.com/greta.sykes. German Wikipedia: Greta Sykes.*



## RAZOR BLADES

Snippets of Russian,  
German, Italian, bon giorno,  
Mingle with sand in my ears, my toes, my hands,  
the salt of the sea, the earth,  
the ochre sediment  
sink into vertebrae, neurons, consciousness.

I feel sky and peace,  
But fear their cry for arms,  
The military-industrial elite:  
The tyranny of our lives.

On the sun drenched beach we lie and gather  
Words and phrases, forge them into  
Scalpels, lancets and razor blades  
To cut their lies to shreds.

## ONCE MORE

Once more I gaze at the fractal geometry  
Of the forested hills,  
Absorb their endlessness.

Once more I ponder the red marble,  
Green serpentine rock and  
Sandstone cliffs that nature made.

Once more I follow the seagulls flight  
With my eyes to learn about freedom,  
Wingspans and weightlessness.

Once more I study the pines that cling to the rock,  
Myriads of roots holding tight,  
communicating with other roots, the earth,  
A lesson in survival and desire.

Once more I need to meditate how  
Seagulls' weightlessness, rocks and forests live.  
The hidden shudder of creation  
Blinks in the turquoise wave of the sea.





Hongri Yuan, born in China in 1962, is a poet and philosopher interested particularly in creation. Representative works include *Platinum City*, *Gold City*, *Golden Paradise*, *Gold Sun* and *Golden Giant*. His poetry has been published in the UK, USA, India, New Zealand, Canada and Nigeria.

Translated by Yuanbing Zhang.



## WHEEL OF THE WORLD

I have heard an old voice say  
With the eye to observe the eye  
With the ear to listen to the ear  
With my heart to be ascribed to my soul  
This is the pathway to the saints  
When you reach the core of heaven and earth  
You just need to be lonely, quiet  
The wheel of the world will embrace you

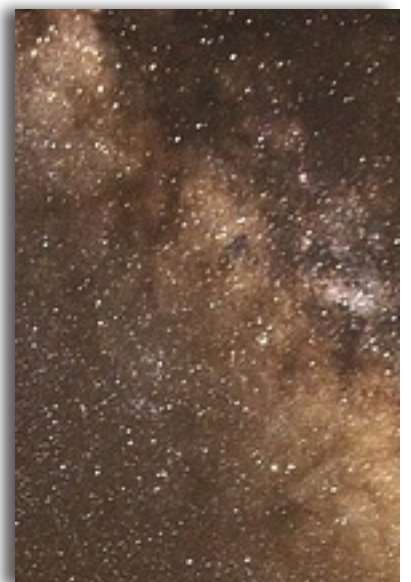


## THE AMARANTHINE LIGHT

I cannot say the secret of the gods yet  
The devil is coveting the diamond of the heaven  
In the body of the ancient earth  
There is the golden kingdom which shines like wine  
The smile of the gods is just by your side  
Like a wheel of invisible sun and moon  
And your soul is old and holy  
Flash the amaranthine light of the stars

## AS IF THE STARS SMILE AND SHINE AT EACH OTHER

I require new words  
Black gem and Sapphire  
To decipher the alien password  
To open the mystery door of the soul  
Those people who ride the flying saucer  
Blue blood runs in their bodies  
On their planet  
Every stone has a soul  
Even the flowers and trees  
like their brothers and sisters  
Yet they have no human emotions  
The same as if the stars smile and shine at each other





Born in Ireland, Irene Kyffin is now based in London. As well as writing her own poetry, she created a programme of jazz/poetry fusion with the great jazz pianist Stan Tracey on the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins, which she presented at many Literary Festivals around the UK. Irene has written and presented papers on Hopkins in the US and Ireland, giving readings as well. Whilst in Denver, Colorado, to deliver academic papers, she ran Shakespeare workshops and taught English and American Literature.



## BEREAVED

In a smoked glass bottle  
I am cut off  
from worldly warmth.

In a smoked glass bottle  
breath is shallow  
with tireless tension.

In a smoked glass bottle  
I am locked away;  
it is lonely, lachrymose.

To the smoked glass bottle  
of my childhood  
I return regardless.

From this smoked glass bottle  
I stare out helplessly  
with a hooded hunger

at the worldly warmth  
I cannot recapture.

## THE CITY

We are held in thrall, subject to  
the capillary tension  
of the city.

We drive: are driven  
by its cohesive force;  
draw sustenance from its energy.

The phalanx of the city's lights  
teases the night sky;  
impoverishes its natural discourse.

The sky becomes an abyss  
robbed of its narrative: the city  
turns in on itself.

Rivers, streams, canals:  
The constant flow of water,  
mediated by gravitational forces  
suffers the push and pull  
of a life-giving calibration.

The city draws on this potent traction:  
it is a distillation  
of the country's reach.



## SPACE

multi-dimensional, I thought;  
then there was the arc of a rainbow,  
A shooting gallery of colour:  
infinity's natural hologram.

Space allows a painting its significance.  
Lines carve through space: outlines  
give shape – a face or a body;  
substance needs space  
to allow knowledge of its nature.  
Mondrian's well-sharpened lines  
delineate his spaces;  
here we struggle for ourselves.

Each thought needs a quiet space.

In an empty room space provides  
episodes of time that reach beyond  
yesterday  
and the day before  
to a long-ago past:  
a once-upon-a-time past – a myth  
that hardly brushes against reality.

The dying take with them our history:  
leave an unresolvable space  
that widens to a great gulf.

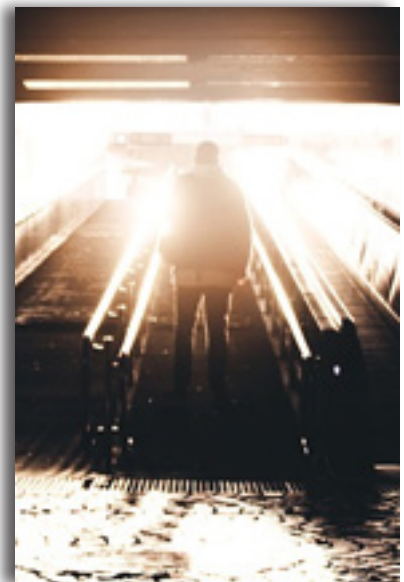
## UNDERGROUND

The little girl skips along  
With her father  
She is gathering nuts and may  
In the ice

Her words sail unrestricted up in the crisp air  
In time with her shoes, striking  
Briskly on the rime-sharpened ground  
This is where they grow together

Now dormant, still underground  
Is a consciousness, waiting to surface,  
Along with their belonging to one another  
Of the necessity of difference

.





Michael J. Whelan lives in South Dublin. He served as a UN Peacekeeper in Lebanon and Kosovo with the Irish Army and is a historian and keeper of the Air Corps Military Museum. He was 2nd Place in the Patrick Kavanagh & 3rd in the Jonathan Swift Awards. He is widely published and read for the Poetry Ireland Introductions series and his debut collection 'Peacekeeper' was published in 2016 by Doire Press.



## ECLIPSED

You say I'm the hero.  
I save you, saved your broken heart  
but I am stilled,  
eclipsed forever in a burst  
of perfect colours,  
a flash of brilliant light  
where I am killed.  
Ever waiting  
in this living moment  
I become the Universe  
and all the world within.  
I touch you  
and I am saved again.

In memory of Irish peacekeepers  
Killed on Peacekeeping service in Lebanon

## CHECKPOINT

The peacekeeper,  
flak-jacket buttoned to the neck,  
blue helmet fastened tight  
under the chin,  
rifle slung across the chest,  
muzzle pointing at the distant ground,  
trigger finger tensed  
along the trigger guard  
switched to automatic.

Alone he stands there,  
holding the road  
in front of wire entanglements  
and tank-stops  
in the narrow chicane  
of a sun trapped checkpoint,  
left arm raised high,  
the palm of his hand  
facing the threat.



© Michael J Whelan

Phil Lynch lives in Dublin. His poems have appeared in various literary journals and anthologies. He has been shortlisted in a number of poetry competitions and was runner-up in the 2014 iYeats Poetry Competition. He is a regular performer at poetry and spoken word events and festivals in Ireland and beyond. Phil is a co-founder of the spoken word festival, Lingo and a member of the Dalkey Writers Workshop. His first collection, *In a Changing Light*, was published by Salmon Poetry in 2016.



## LULLABY TO A LOST FUTURE

The sudden thud of darkness falling down  
impacted like a punch, a big ka-pow,  
as in some comic strip; who's laughing now?  
This darkness shrouds another kind of clown.

The poet who picked this moment to depart  
left us with his vision of disorder,  
said he'd seen the future, it was murder.  
We wonder what he meant. Is this the start

of time when freedoms will be put on hold,  
a portent of a deadly darker age?  
Blue light transfixed upon an empty stage,  
plain truths denied by lies that will unfold

and gather like a poison to be puked.  
But beauty still will flourish in the roots  
of trees no longer free to bear new fruits.  
Those with anthomania, when rebuked,

in search of sleep will count each petalled bloom  
and dream of landscapes no one else can see,  
great landscapes where again they will be free  
to light a light that lifts the darkest gloom.

## ON THE ROCKS

Seen through gin-drenched eyes,  
the tear-stained moon  
looks lonely on its own.  
How much better it would be,  
for the full round moon and me,  
if this late-night contemplation  
was lightened by your presence  
and the promise of sweet everythings  
once drinks were drained  
and conversation done.

The playlist shuffles  
from Waits to Cohen.  
A blob of cloud intrudes.  
In the shadow that is cast,  
I reach out for the bottle  
and pour another glass.





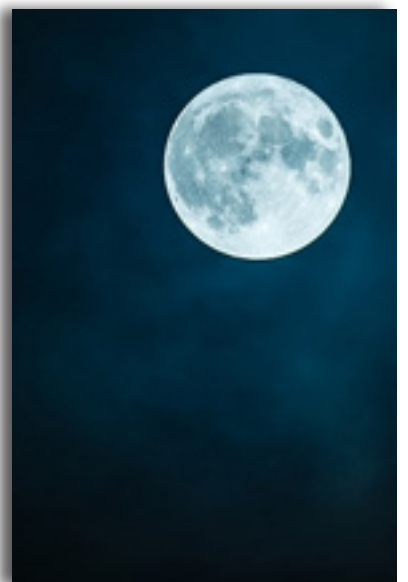
## GREY AREA

The chair sits empty  
on the balcony,  
its back turned  
against the evening sun,  
as if to say -  
there is only shade  
since you've been gone;  
as if to say -  
sometimes  
even unbroken things  
need to be fixed.

## SHED

Moonlight  
trapped inside a drop of rain  
runs down the window.

Teardrops  
on the face behind the pane  
captured in the glow.



Niall Cahir is a photographer, artist and writer. Based in Birr Co Offaly, born in Cork in 1966. His work is honest, deep and meaningful. Snap-shots of everyday life, thought provoking, with spiritual imagery, strong yet delicate in texture, just like life itself can be.



CEASED FIRE

The gun hung heavy from his shoulder blade  
Swinging  
Digging  
Aching  
Ingrained combat manoeuvres made  
RAID after  
RAID after  
..raid  
A spent hero, questioning  
As flights of fancy, fade  
Although, the training made him bolder  
Tough!  
..he never felt brave  
Not near enough!

Nothing would, or could have prepared him for this  
A tainted national promise  
A poisoned kiss  
Honour and glory for frayed homeland flag  
And his fated prize?  
..a latent toe-tag

Medalled military merit  
Used, abused, confused!  
Man's programmed slave  
A preyed-upon pilgrim  
..pawned by governing knave

Penetrating shell  
Piercing pain!  
Shattered muscle  
Severed artery, main

Throbbing  
Throbbing  
Pulsating earthly agony  
*Lonely*  
Convulsively  
Sobbing  
Sobbing

Sensations dulled in sequence  
Failing  
Failing  
One by  
One by...

ssshhhhh

..one

All debts, marked *'PAID IN FULL'*  
This truly vicious cost  
Mortal coil shuffled, discarded  
Tossed!  
Outer battles fought  
An inner war, won  
Struck-off as collateral damage  
This man!  
..was someone's son

His conditioning ran deep  
Humanities malevolent tool  
No longer the gregarious sheep  
Nor manipulated puppeteered fool

So, sleep soldier sleep  
May death make you whole  
Fearless rest is yours, eternal soul





Sholeh Wolpé was born in Iran and has lived in Trinidad, U.K. and the United States. About her poems, The Poetry Foundation writes, “Wolpé’s concise, unflinching, and often wry free verse explores violence, culture, and gender.” A recipient of the 2014 PEN/Heim, 2013 Midwest Book Award, 2010 Lois Roth Persian Translation prize, among others, her publications include four collections of poetry, a play, three books of translations, and three anthologies. Wolpé’s modern translation of *The Conference of the Birds* (W.W. Norton) by the 12th century Iranian mystic poet, Attar, has been hailed by Reza Aslan as “timeless as the masterpiece itself.” Wolpé’s writings have been translated into eleven languages. She is based in Los Angeles. Learn more at [www.sholehwolpe.com](http://www.sholehwolpe.com).

## BEWITCHED

You’re strolling through Nick’s Nursery between two rows of roses in gallon-size plastic containers. They have names a child gives invisible ponies: Aloha, Magic Dragon, Ballerina, Hermosa, Bewitched.

Bewitched is in full bloom. Its flowers, pink and buxom, balance above slender emerald stems. You bend, breath in the fragrance of the largest bloom, then run two fingers along its throat lush with fine fuzz. It shivers.

You jump back, adjust your red-rimmed sunglasses, look around. A mockingbird perched high on a pepper tree trills an impressive repertoire of stolen songs; two monarch butterflies flutter over the red geraniums. You reach for the rose again, run your index finger gingerly along her stem. It trembles like a lover kissed after a long absence. Is Nick a warlock and this, his magic garden?

A crow takes off in a clatter.

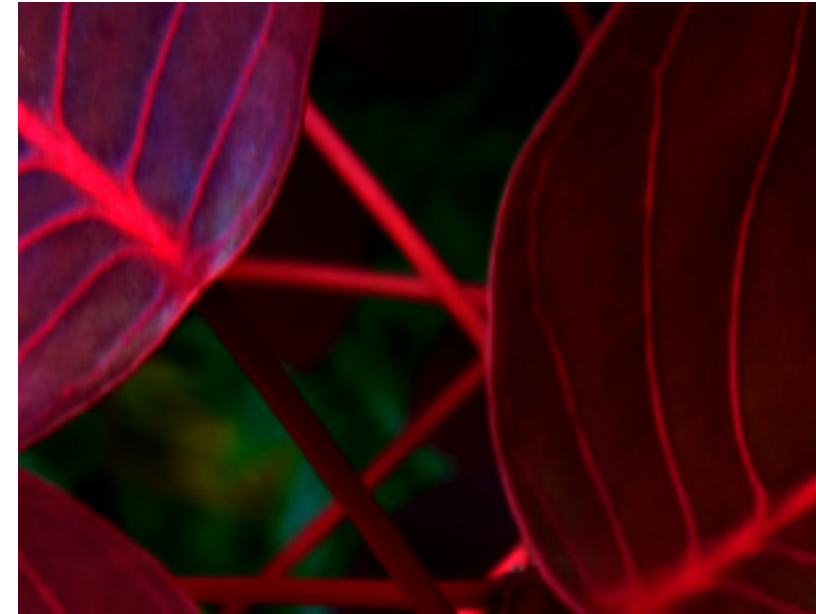
You make up your mind. Bewitched must be yours. She will ward off the vampires you date, the ghosts that keep rapping on your windows, the midget who lives next door and jumps the fence at night to peer into your bedroom.

You call out to Nick. He sticks his head out from behind the pepper tree, then walks over, limping, his pot belly swaying side to side like a beer-filled balloon.

*Nick, you say. This plant is... special, no?*

He narrows his eyes and strokes his thick greying mustache, a corner of which is stained with hot sauce. He says, *Si, muy bonita. Nice pink.*

*No, you insist, I mean... really special.* You then wink at him.



*Ok*, he says licking the hot sauce off his mustache.

*Here*, you say, pointing your finger at Bewitched. *Touch her stem.*

Nick looks at you as if you're a popcorn that has just popped right in the middle of his nursery. Still, you're a paying customer, so he obliges with his calloused fingers, then stands up and stares at you stoically.

*Didn't you feel that?* you ask, anxious.

He bends over again, repeats the touch, then laughs.

*Si, claro*, he says.

You take a deep breath, then say, *It shivers, right? Temblar.*

*Ah! Si*, he says smiling and points up.

To Catholics, miracles are almost always the doing of Mother of God. You are so excited you want to dance Egyptian around Bewitched. Nick's son, José, comes over to see what's going on. You invite him to touch Bewitched. He does. He too smiles and points up.

*La Virgin?* You ask.

*Chica loca*, Nick says to his son, who is now laughing. It suddenly dawns on you that this may be a demonic place. Maybe they water their plants with the blood of virgins, which thankfully, you most definitely are not.

*Mira! Look up!* says Nick.

They say the devil has many shapes. Here, up high, it was an entwined crisscross of snakes. The moment your eyes register their presence, your ears hear the hum of their hiss, the powerlines' steady drone behind the musical patchwork of the talented resident mockingbird.

You return your gaze to Nick and José. They've stopped laughing. Maybe the eeriness of witnessing a face drain of color has sucked the tickle out of their throats.

After you've regained your composure, you ask, *I tried the others, but only this one trembles when touched.*

Jose picks up the plant, examines its roots and says, *Bottom is wet. Do you want it or not?*



Ian Watson was born in Belfast and lives in Bremen, Northern Germany. He writes and publishes in both German (mostly prose) and English (mostly poetry). His recent publications include two books of poetry and short prose - *Kurzpassspiel* (German) and *Riverbank City: A Bremen Canvas*, and his collection *Granny's Interpreter* was published in March 2016 by Salmon Poetry in Ireland. He wrote this poem for a celebration of the life of the Bremen translator, reciter, reviewer, broadcaster and *homme de lettres*, Jürgen Dierking, who died unexpectedly in June 2016. Dierking translated many writers into German, including Sherwood Anderson, Gertrude Stein, Raymond Carver, Sujata Bhatt and Charles Baxter. <http://www.irishwriters-online.com/watson-ian/>



## COLD CALL

It had been a Berlin number, so he had lifted the receiver without thinking. Just before Christmas. She was young, enthusiastic and persuasive, but he insisted it had been a one-off thing. Yes, he was the person who had signed the petition at the S-Bahn at Alexanderplatz at the end of January (he remembered the damp cold) and had spontaneously given a small donation on the pavement (ten Euros, he seemed to recall), but that was as far as he wanted to go. Yes, indeed; he sympathised with her people's plight, but he had so many commitments, you know - political, charitable. She said OK, she understood, no problem; he heard her smile and he wished them all the best in their struggle.



It had begun with a rustling on a breezeless evening. Then there were the scratchings in the night, like the muffled fluttering of a trapped bird. Somewhere behind the wallpaper - or was it above the ceiling? Or under the bed? Mice, he had told himself. Sleep had been replete and complicated, so that dream and memory merged and confused him. In the shadows there were movements half seen, half guessed, out of the corner of an eye. Out beyond the study lamp, behind the darkened raindropped window, grey shadows shifted. Wisps of smoke? The reflection of a chased cloud? Occasionally there would be a face caught fleetingly in the street that he seemed to remember having seen before.

There had been other calls: wrong numbers and apologies; hangings-up without an apology; strange questions and comments. The phone ringing in the night, ignored in half-sleep, the pillow pulled over his head; no 'Missed Calls' next morning. Then the poltergeists in the computer: the printer, unsolicited, spewing out websites he had visited the day before; the crash; the bug that the IT workshop said was unidentifiable.

The word they all fell back on was *imagining*: colleagues, guys at the gym, even Katie. So who do you turn to?

Parked exactly at the darkest point between two lampposts, the kind that turns the dark blue night brown, was a long, long-bonneted Volvo. From the driver's window, smoke leaked out into the night. In the windscreen only the stars were reflected. Among them, upside down, was the hunter with his club - Orion obviously had it in for him. He finger-tipped the gauze curtain; down there, a note was made. Life became an unmarked car outside his bedroom window. Next morning there was no trace of anything, except for five cigarette butts on the road.





Margi Prideaux is a writer, negotiator and independent academic, with a PhD in wildlife policy & law. She has worked on conservation projects in the Pacific Islands, South East Asia, Africa and Latin America, and always with the goal of protecting wildlife through communities. She has published three books: *Birdsong After the Storm*, *Global Environmental Governance, Civil Society and Wildlife*, and *All Things Breathe Alike: A Wildlife Anthology* co-authored with Donna Mulvenna and Jessica Groenendijk. Her fourth book, *Wild Tapestry: Weaving Wildlife Survival*, should be released in late 2017. She is on Facebook and Twitter @WildPolitics. [www.wildpolitics.co](http://www.wildpolitics.co)



## WANGGAMI

Eyes twitch, ears flick. Leaning against a large tree, she stretches her back and deeply yawns. A satisfying extension reaches her toes. Clothed in soft, deep chocolate-brown fur, with a silver ruff beneath her chin, she pushes herself up to stand. Her coat echoes the colours of the ancient tree, its bark pale silver, with streaks of ochre, brown and gold.

The sun smiles from its midmorning pose. Beyond the tree's deep shade, the landscape is bathed in flaxen light, shimmering off the dry stalks of a crop recently harvested. Large round bales stand in a sparse grid, casting deep round shadows that ricochet off the brightness of the day. Not a cloud breaks the piercing cobalt sky.

Hot, heavy air sits like a blanket on the landscape. Still, but alive with a buzzing so characteristic of the Australian summer. Insects hover and dance nearby. A cricket serenades across the paddock.

Beyond these sounds the silence is so deep you can hear the thrum inside your body. A silence known to people who live in places absent of humans, where weather can be utter stillness.

The pungent smell of eucalyptus rolls down the hill as the sun warms the leaves. This tree has been sheltering those who wear their rich brown coats for hundreds of years.

A thousand generations ago the Ngarrindjeri people who walked this island called her ancestors wanggami. It's a bewitching name. Now people across the world say kangaroo.





Turning her face towards the field, the wanggami begins a slow languid roll in her mouth, grinding grass and leaves to smooth paste. A small arm flicks a fly from her ear and she stretches again for a moment, before settling back to the rhythm of her comfortable chew.

Closer to the ground, her belly begins punching outward. She doesn't seem to notice. A foot appears, followed by a small head and another arm that together stretch and yawn. She looks down at her young, gently touching his small head. He responds by rolling sideways, out of her pouch and onto the ground.

Standing high and unsteadily on his toes, he tries to balance on his tail. He hasn't mastered this pose yet, but clearly delights in the moment. As youngsters do, he soon abandons this practice and tears off around the tree, hopping and falling and hopping again.

Mum watches, but not too closely. She is more attentive to the roll of grass in her mouth.

The food in her mouth now attended to, she leans forward and begins the distinct kangaroo amble that Australian's know so well. Two forearms and a massive tail hold her balance, while she lazily lifts her back legs up and forward. Settling on her back feet, she lifts and crosses her arms like an old lady, munching grass as she goes. With this slow locomotion, she ambles from the shade.

She is even more beautiful in the full sun. Wanggami. Big doe eyes and a rich chocolate coat reflect deep silver flecks, making her spiritual partnership with the tree complete. The tree will stand atop this hill for a hundred more years. In time, her grandchildren will tear around its trunk and shelter from the sun under its outstretched arms. When the rain pours, the tree's branches and the coats the wanggami wear will streak together like black platinum.

The youngster has tired and hops over to mum. He paws her face and ears, his little chin tilted skyward, striking a yoga style pose crucial to his future. She responds with arms clamping his head in a tight embrace and caressing his face with her tongue. It's not possible to see his expression, but imagining a grimace doesn't seem a stretch.

The cleaning done, he leans forward, plunging his face into her pouch. Rising high on his toes he tips his whole body forward in a well practiced action that tumbles him inside. A few punches and stretches and he is snuggled into his preferred spot. Mum resumes her amble.

Suddenly she stands. Alert. Her ears tune purposefully to a sound beyond human hearing. She is rigid for an instant that stretches time. Then, with three powerful bounds, she is lost from sight beyond the hill's crest.

Since it separated from the mainland, the Ngarrindjeri people no longer walk this island landscape, but the tree stands as an echo connecting the past to the present and for now, the wanggami are my closest neighbours.



Joachim Matschoss was born in Germany and now lives in Melbourne/ Australia. He is a playwright, poet and Theatre-maker. His Theatre Company, 'Backyard Theatre Ensemble (BYTE)' presents diverse pieces of theatre all across Melbourne/ Australia and internationally, both Youth Arts and for adults. Joachim has created theatre in Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom, India, Uzbekistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, HongKong, Hungary, Taiwan, Switzerland and China. Joachim's poetry is published in Australia, Germany, the United Kingdom and the USA. Joachim's latest book, *Rain Overnight: Travels in Asia*, is available directly from him or from good bookshops in Melbourne and on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) [www.byteensemble.com](http://www.byteensemble.com)



## THE BOY UNDER THE TABLE

The boy was fascinated by the theatre.

He was full of boys' noise inside his head, full of mischievous ideas, never sat still. Only the theatre could calm him, make him listen and give shape to his story. He loved everything about the theatre and now some sixty years later he still does.

The boy grew up cushioned by the voice of his father wrapping itself around vowels and consonants and arrange them in fascinating configurations as he read stories and words quickly left the page and became people with faces and bodies and their own special voices, happy people mostly with the odd blue day but his father's voice and his hand gently stroking the boy's head made sure that soothing colours would be just around the corner. The boy loved those moments, loved those stories, those little plays performed just for him.

The boy usually listened with his head on his favourite pillow in his bed but occasionally underneath a table in his father's dressing room that stood in front of a mirror with lightbulbs around it. There his father worked, speaking the words others had written, being the person others had imagined, going on a holiday every night for a couple of hours. The boy loved it there. Loved it very much, often falling asleep aided by the smell of greasepaint and the sound of the beautiful language that trickled from an old loudspeaker mounted high up in the corner of the dressing room. It had not been painted for years and the family of spiders that lived behind it had not been disturbed since those speakers were installed, forty years ago. The boy was jealous because these spiders could enjoy a permanent holiday, having dinner with Shakespeare, Chekov and Ibsen every day.

The boy and his father usually arrived around ninety minutes or so before the play would begin. His father slipped into his costume that had been lovingly washed, fixed if necessary and treated with great love by a woman from Bulgaria who could tell a story about every button, every shoelace and every hat.





‘The costumes are my other skin’, his father had told him and once he wore them he became someone else. The boy watched him silently putting the make up on and sometimes he put on something himself and soon after that it was almost time to listen to another story, told up above him on the stage, crackling through the speakers. The boy occupied his special spot under a table near his father’s feet who was still sitting on a chair gazing into a mirror ready to soon begin speaking the words others had imagined. His father rose, kissed the boy’s head and left the room. Shortly after that another person somehow crawled under his father’s skin and two floors up on a big stage began to tell a story that dripped into the room like beautiful music, enveloping the boy like a blanket. The spider family was very still, even though the must have known the stories they listened attentively. The boy did too, curled up on an oversized pillow with a lion’s head printed on it and covered by an old costume, a coat that once a king would have worn. Above him on the table a still-life of the process of transformation. Nothing was in order, everything was in the equilibrium of beautiful chaos: eyeliner pencils, unused eyelashes, blush and face paint, there was a coffee cup, chipped as if two big teeth had taken a bite, a half full ashtray, a photograph of children playing on a beach pinned to the frame of a mirror that was a little dusty and cracked in the bottom left corner, there was a piece of apple that had turned brown and lonely banana peel. Next to the ashtray lay a nearly empty bag of throat lozenges and right in the middle of the table a marked script brimful with the most beautiful language, Kleist, Lessing, Schiller, Chekov, and Shakespeare. The boy loved this little haven. He felt safe there, close to his father, listening to stories, entering those stories, somehow becoming a part of them.

How things had changed because when he was a really young boy he dreamed of becoming a pilot, a soccer player and for quite some time he wanted to sell mushrooms by the roadside, wild brown ones, uniform buttons, delicate skinny ones plucked before dawn in a birch forest near his house, a basket full of mushrooms, selling the flesh of the earth by the handful in little brown paper bags – but these thoughts didn’t last long. It was difficult for him to show himself wanting something because that did mean to put himself into a position of a frightening vulnerability. He didn’t like to be so open and so he clowned, pretended, created quite complicated scenarios avoiding at all costs to show something of himself but there was always the theatre, creeping unnoticed into his dreams, taking him hostage when he stared aimlessly out of the window during his schooldays, so bored by mindless repetition of things he didn’t want to know let alone remember,

forced to remember and spit out again on command the white-haired man with oversized spectacles who was his teacher in the forming years, at the beginning of institutionalised knowledge. If the boy failed to remember the white-haired man would hit him with a large ruler that was always within his reach. The boy ignored the danger and often took the anger of the ruler in his stride. He wanted to dream, fly through the window, go on a holiday, and be a part of fantastic stories that took him beyond time into a thousand places all at once.

The boy grew up and over time the theatre taught him to come terms with his inhibitions and insecurity, find ways to deal with them. He created an atmosphere of intense concentration and was able to find heavy tears, frightening panic, and joyous laughter. He was able to enter completely into the past, able to leave the present behind. Later in life he could remember the colour of the wallpaper of that room with the table under which he spent many nights of his childhood, he was able to describe the furniture, the rickety chairs, the bent hatstand and the pillows that moths had declared to be their kingdom. He knew what he was wearing underneath that table and eventually what he was feeling back then and how and why those feelings changed, often without warning. For a while, a long while growing up was a lonely time, because the boy had left his fixed universe, a place in which he had a distinct purpose: to be the boy, the only one under that table.

His father often had to wake him up after the stories on stage had reached their temporary end. He was carried to the car when he was still small and gangly and they drove home through the night. The car was tiny and very unreliable and so they had to take the bus on many occasions. There were times when his father did not need to wake him because there was no time to fall asleep. The boy listened attentively to the story coming through the loudspeaker and he heard a gunshot. He wasn’t frightened because he knew that they used fake guns in the theatre but still they sounded so real, not that he would have known what a real gunshot sounded like. Suddenly his father was standing in front of him, his shirt stained with blood.

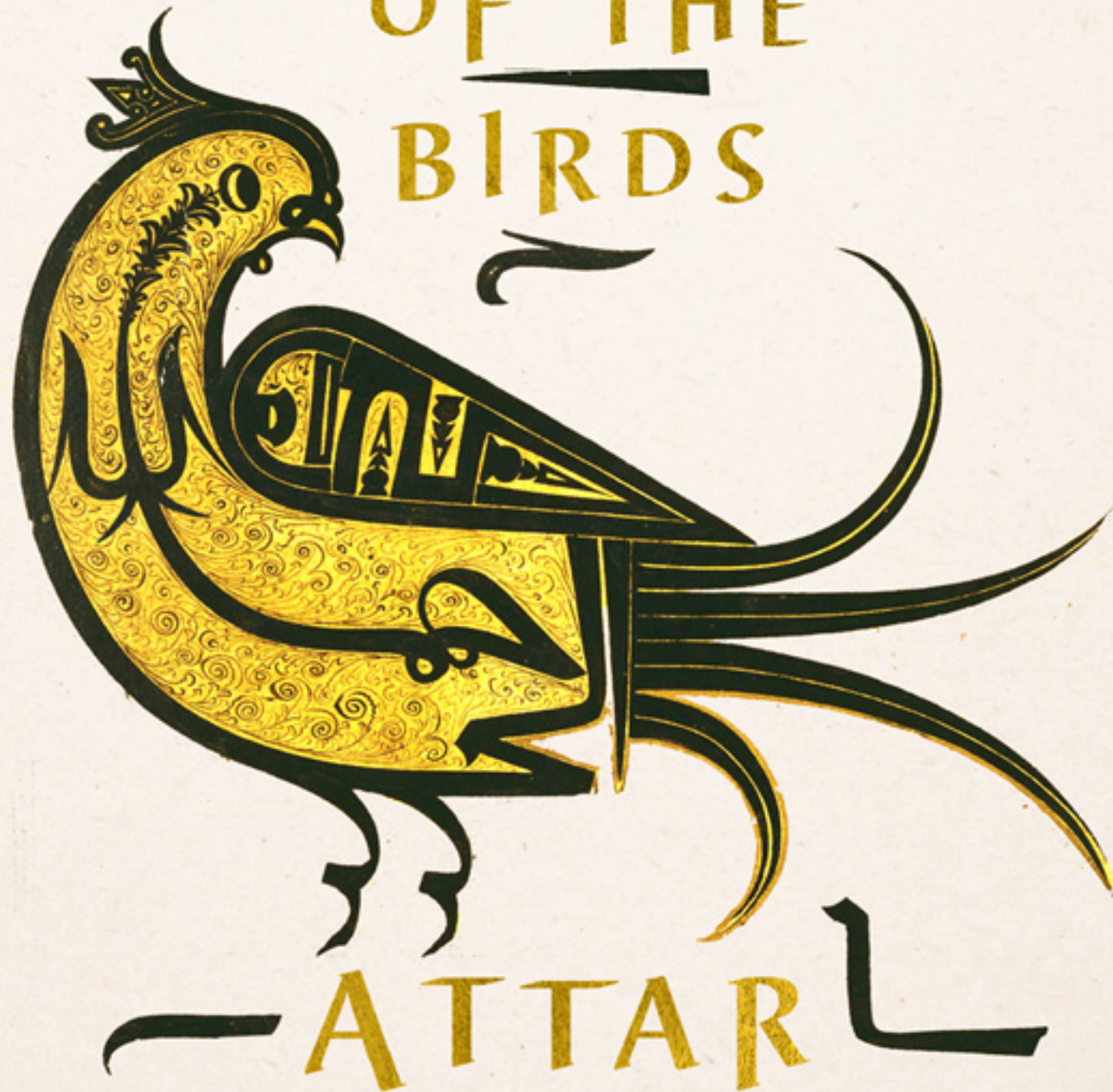
‘I’m dead! We can go home.’





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# THE CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS



—ATTAR—  
 TRANSLATED BY SHOLEH WOLPÉ

AN EXCERPT

## THE CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS

by 12th Century Sufi Mystic Poet, ATTAR translated by SHOLEH WOLPÉ

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Attar, also referred to as Attar of Nishapur or Farid ud-Din Attar, was born in northeastern Iran around 1145 CE and died a violent death in the massacre inflicted by Genghis Khan and the Mongol army on the city of Nishapur in 1220.

About this translation, Azar Nafisi, author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, writes: “In this beautiful rendering of Attar’s *Conference of the Birds*, Sholeh Wolpé, herself a passionate poet, transports us to another time, another language & another world, while reminding us of how enduring and universal great works of imagination are, how they create spaces within which we not only acknowledge and appreciate our differences but also recognize & celebrate our shared humanity. Only a true poet could achieve such a feat.”

*The Conference of the Birds* (Manteq al-Tayr) is an allegorical epic poem about our human struggle, both physical and spiritual. It is peppered with beguiling parables. Indeed, this method of story-telling through poetry was later adopted by future master poets, namely Hafiz and Rumi. Attar’s use of everyday details, stories, and historical chronicles is a masterful technique he invented to animate the deeper meanings of what we consider “reality.”

The story goes as follows: The birds of the world, representing the mystics, gather and acknowledge the Great Simorgh as their King. Simorgh is a mysterious bird who dwells in Mount Qaf, a mythical mountain that wraps around the world. The great and perilous journey is led by the Hoopoe. At the start, each bird presents an elaborate excuse for not being able to make the journey, but the wise Hoopoe addresses their many hesitations, complaints, fears, vanities and questions. Their journey takes them across seven valleys—the valley of the Quest, of Love, of Knowledge, Detachment, Unity, Wonderment, and Poverty and Annihilation. Upon reaching their destination, the surviving birds find realize they themselves are the Simorgh, just as water drops are part of the great ocean.





Here is a bird who speaks about its love of gold. The hoopoe answers the greedy bird, then follows it with a parable.

### **A Bird Speaks of Its Love of Gold**

I love gold. It's like the kernel of the nut.  
If I don't have that yellow nugget at the core, as flowers do,  
then how can I laugh, blissful as a bloom?  
I love the world and its gold too.  
Sadly, this love has made me pretentious and sly.

### **The Hoopoe Answers the Gold-Loving Bird**

You are stuck on the face of the world like an ant,  
distracted by outer forms,  
blind as a bat both night and day;  
inner meanings are lost to your heart.

Seek the essence;  
don't be bamboozled by externals.  
What's essence? The core of everything.  
What are outer forms? Nothing.

Gold is merely metal with a nice hue—  
you're seduced by its color like a child.  
If gold diverts you from your Beloved,  
then it is an idol; throw it aside and be on guard.

Gold is of course fitting in some places,  
like the birth control rings for donkeys,  
which are always made with gold.

No one benefits from your gold,  
least of all yourself.  
If you give a kernel of gold to a poor man,  
you'll first make him feel in your debt,  
then regret having given it away.

You're so greedy that offering money  
to any poor fellow will not gratify you,  
so you give it to a famous cause  
to bring notoriety to yourself.

Your friendships are based on gold;  
your so-called security comes from gold.

Each first of the month you count your profit,  
but what is "profit" when you pay for everything  
with your soul?

You spend your dear sweet life  
to make a nickel from your shop.  
You give everything for nothing

and put your heart into it too.  
Your neck's in a noose, and one day fate  
will pull the stool out from under you.

*continued...*



### The Hoopoe Answers the Gold-Loving Bird *contd...*

Know that in this world each adornment you hang  
on yourself, will one day burst into ash.  
When you drown in the material world,  
your faith drowns too.  
Your faith won't be able to rescue you.

You seek comfort in your work,  
and when you don't find it,  
restlessness overwhelms your soul.  
Spill your wealth in all four directions  
for the Holy Book says: *You are not righteous until  
you give away everything you hold dear.*

You cannot even keep your own life,  
what makes you think you can hold on  
to money, property, this or that?  
Abandon everything, even your life if you must.

If your bed is nothing but a ragged rug,  
even that lies between you and the Path.  
Burn that mat if you wish to walk the Road.

How much longer will you be a hypocrite?  
Do you think you can fool the Almighty?  
If you can't surrender this coarse rug  
for fear of having nothing,  
how will you fare with fine carpets?

Don't fall prey to the sound of your own sigh,  
for it has the sound of "I" in the middle.  
Rid your ego of the "I," for it lives twice in narcissism.

### Parable of the Greedy Student

A student hid a bit of gold from his master. The master knew but said nothing and let his student keep it. Then, one day the master and the student went on a journey. They came upon a dark valley where the road split in two. The student began to worry about his gold and wanted to take the safest road. Sooner or later gold always speaks for you, and so the student asked: "Master, which of the two roads in this dark valley is the right one to take?"

His master replied: "Get rid of the wrong you are hiding, and either of these two roads will be the right path."

Make gold your mate,  
and you'll scare even the devil away,  
because for a mere morsel,  
you'll split hairs like a sly cheat.

Your arms will be weighed down  
yet you'll be a person of no weight.  
When it comes to faith and belief,  
you'll limp like a lame ass.

You'll become a sultan of cheating,  
an ignoramus in faith.  
Waylaid and robbed by gold,  
you'll fall trapped in its well.

Joseph, stay away from such deep wells.  
Don't draw a breath; its foul air will choke you.



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POETRY & WRITING

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