Founded 2010

Live encounters

POETRY & WRITING

Free Online Magazine From Village Earth
June 2019

Brian Kirk

The Shortcut to Great Writing

Cover Artwork by Irish Artist Emma Barone

Ubud, Bali.

Live encounters
POETRY & WRITING
JUNE 2019
10th Anniversary Year
2010 - 2019

SUPPORT LIVE ENCOUNTERS.
DONATE NOW AND KEEP THE MAGAZINE LIVE IN 2019!

Live Encounters is a not-for-profit free online magazine that was founded in 2009 in Bali, Indonesia. It showcases some of the best writing from around the world. Poets, writers, academics, civil & human/animal rights activists, academics, environmentalists, social workers, photographers and more have contributed their time and knowledge for the benefit of the readers of the magazine.

We are appealing for donations to pay for the administrative and technical aspects of the publication. Please help spread the free distribution of knowledge with any amount for this just cause.

Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

Mark Ulyseas
Publisher/Editor
markulyseas@liveencounters.net

Donate

Live encounters
POETRY & WRITING
JUNE 2019
10th Anniversary Year
2010 - 2019

CONTRIBUTORS

BRIAN KIRK

DANIJELA TRAJKOVIĆ

MARY SCHEURER

JIM MEIROSE

ALISA VELAJ

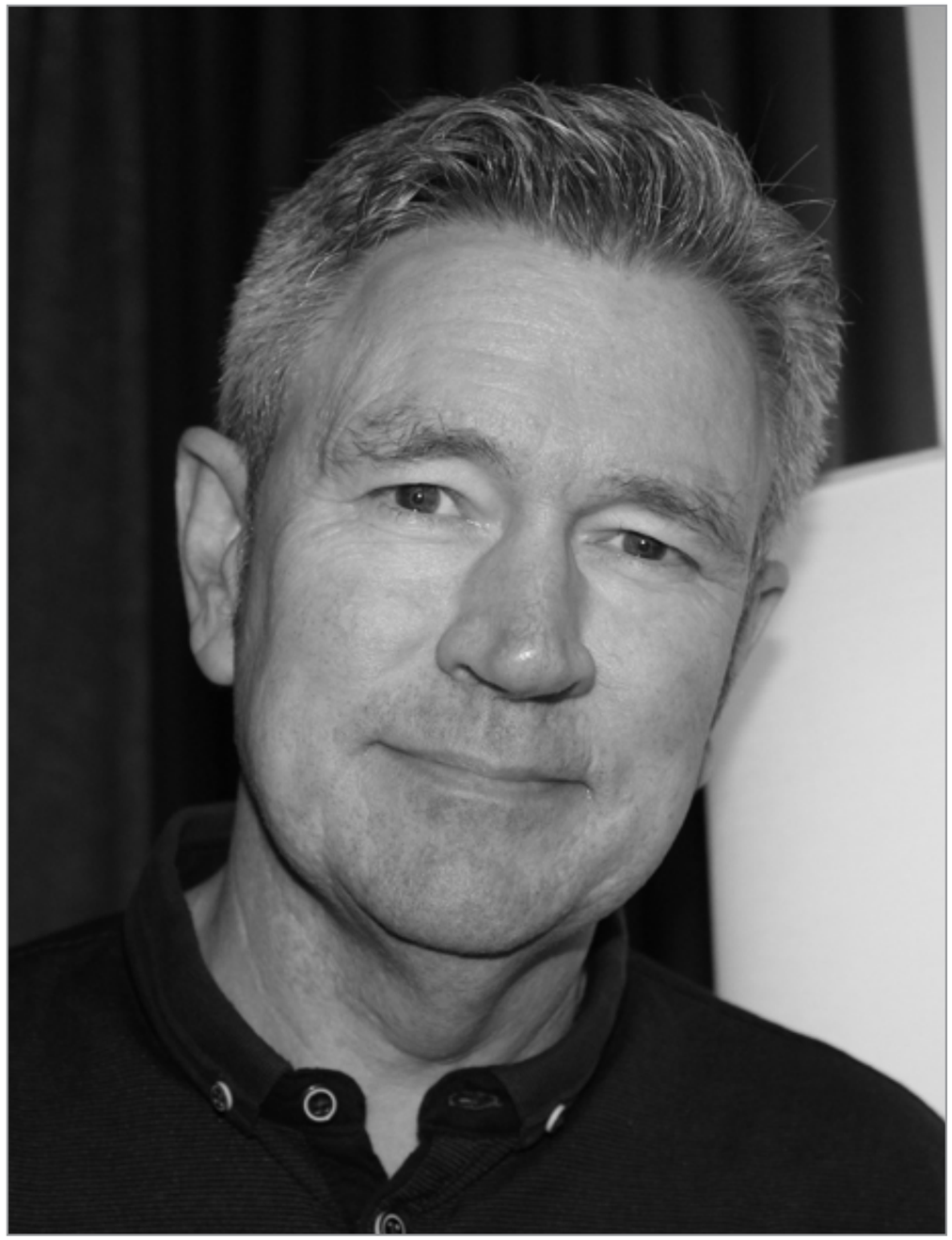
JAMES MARTYN JOYCE

IAN C SMITH

JOHN MAXWELL O'BRIEN

PETER O'NEILL

IRENE KYFFIN



Brian Kirk

Brian Kirk is an award-winning poet and short story writer from Dublin. His children's novel *The Rising Son* was published in December 2015. He was selected for the Poetry Ireland Introductions Series in 2013 and highly commended in the Patrick Kavanagh Award in 2014 and 2015. His first poetry collection *After The Fall* was published by Salmon Poetry in 2017. He blogs at www.briankirkwriter.com.

The Shortcut to Great Writing

Brian Kirk

Writing isn't hard. You can sit at your desk and put down words without too much difficulty. But good writing is hard to achieve, and great writing is as rare as hen's teeth. There are plenty of blogs out there that give excellent advice to aspiring writers about how to improve your writing, and I feel like I've read most of them. I'm not being disparaging here, by the way. I love to read writing blogs and interviews with authors about how they get their work done, and I know I've picked up lots of tips from these sources over the years. But simply reading advice from others isn't enough if you want to write well.

Looking back over my own experience of writing (poetry and stories mainly) there seems to be some indicators of success that I can identify, if we take success to be equated with publication. At the start there was a longish period of erratic writing with no publication to show for it. There had always been a sizeable amount of reading going on (and this is a must if you are serious about becoming a writer); but it was reading without focus, reading with a reader's and not a writer's eye. But I'll come back to reading later. After a few years the number of poems and stories published per year began to rise and was maintained. There are some obvious reasons which explain why this limited success was established. Firstly, I was writing more regularly and therefore had more work, new poems and stories, to send out. As I began to establish the habit of regular writing, I also began to send work out in a more systematic fashion, going so far as to employ the use of spreadsheets to monitor the status of my submissions. If you throw enough mud against the wall some of it is bound to stick, after all.

Sometimes I get the feeling I'm the slowest learner in the world. Talking to other writers about their craft I know I'm not alone. There is a sense of being emptied out when a poem, a story or a book is finished. People who don't write can't understand this. They think writing is like any other activity; once you've done it, you should be able to do it again and again and again. But writing is not like anything else. We often refer to the 'process' and the 'craft' and we attend 'workshops', but writing isn't as tangible as those words often imply. By the time a poem or story is written and revised and re-written I often have no idea where it came from in the first place or how exactly I carried it off. Even if I had a clear idea at the outset (which is rare) of what I wanted to achieve, the basis for the manifold decisions and revisions (apologies to Prufrock) I must have made in the white heat of composition elude me after the fact.

I wrote a novel a number of years ago. It was my third attempt at the long form and, although it wasn't published, I was satisfied with the completed work from a narrative and technical point of view. A couple of years later I embarked on writing another novel. Using the lessons I'd learned from my earlier experience, I set out full of confidence in my abilities. Two years later I was almost a broken man. It was awful. The story no longer appealed to me, the characters were two dimensional and their interactions forced and clunky. I couldn't understand how I could be struggling so much to write a novel having done it successfully in the recent past. This is just how it is – for me anyway. Every new poem, story or novel is unknown terrain that I must familiarise myself with on its own terms as I set out. It seems unfair, and it probably is.

Before I go any further, I should say something about workshops. I've attended many workshops over the years, poetry and prose, and I've always come away refreshed, with new ideas and approaches and drafts of poems and stories I would never have written otherwise in my pocket. But, like reading advice on blogs, attending workshops is not enough in itself to guarantee good writing. You must do the work on your own in the main. It's a cliché that writing is a solitary pursuit, but like a lot of clichés it has a nub of truth in it. Another solitary pursuit is reading, and without reading widely it is unlikely you will ever write anything of value. There may, of course, be exceptions to this rule, but I don't see how someone who doesn't read poetry could ever write poetry, for example.

There are many ways to approach reading. We read for enjoyment, to escape the mundanity of life, to find out more about the world, to learn how others live or have lived. However, writers read differently to others. Writers read to understand how the poem works, how the story evolves, to take apart the inner workings of the piece and hold it up to the light. If a poem makes an impact on us, we want to understand how its effects are achieved. If we are moved or surprised by a piece of fiction, we want to identify the point at which the story turned and shifted on its emotional axis.

After reading the most important thing to do is write. It seems obvious, doesn't it? You should aim to make writing, like reading, a daily habit. Don't beat yourself up if some days you don't find the time but try to make room for writing in your day. Think of all the time that the TV and your phone/internet eat up every day. After reading and writing comes re-writing. Yes, we've all heard it before but it's true. The real good stuff only comes when you put in the time, when you really focus on the project you're committed to. Sure, now and again, there are moments of magical inspiration, but these are rare, and anyway I find they only come when you're deeply immersed in the work and your unconscious mind is silently tapped while you're physically away from the page.

Some people are more social than others; they enjoy collaborating, exchanging ideas with others and often work best as part of a group. If you're so inclined, I advise you to join a writing group. It's a great way to keep motivated and can be a real support for you in lean or difficult times. I've been in groups over the years and I've always benefitted from being among talented peers. I've also been the solitary guy ploughing away on my own in a room, and all that time spent in your own head can be unhealthy at times. I've been lucky to have had a few fellow writers over the years who I could send work to, knowing I would get critical feedback and some encouragement in return. I was always happy to return the favour.

This last year, thanks to Words Ireland, I was lucky to be given the opportunity to work with a mentor on my near finished book of short stories. I had a series of one-to-one, intense meetings with Dermot Bolger between November and April this year as we worked our way through my collection, "What Do You Actually Want?". His interrogation of the stories really helped me get a handle on how the manuscript will finally hang together. This level of detailed input is rare, more like that of an editor working with a writer towards publication than a normal workshop feedback situation. I would encourage you to seek out a mentor for specific projects such as a novel or collection of stories or poems. A good mentor will force you to keep improving the work; they will push you to be the best you can.

So, in summary: you must read, you must write and re-write. You can attend workshops, join a group or work alone, find like-minded peers you can discuss your work with, get a mentor, read author blogs and interviews, go to readings and book launches. It's that easy or that hard. But if you're a writer you don't dwell on these things, you just do them because that's what you have to do. And, of course, we all know, in your heart of hearts, there are no such things as shortcuts.

Mary Scheurer lives in France and teaches Philosophy in Geneva. She is a member of the Leman Poetry Workshop, and has worked for the last ten years with a quartet of poets who met on an MA course at Manchester Metropolitan University. She read recently with the 'Quartet' at the Limerick Poetry Festival. Her writing has been published in *The Literary Bohemian, Bare Fiction, The Stony Thursday Book, 'On the Edge'* (Leman Poets), as well as in several *WordAid* anthologies.

Belem washing line

Lisbon

Procure a good length of stout maritime rope,
drape across your chest and climb the many steps
to the terrace at the tower's top.
Fix one end securely to the first spire
then circle all the other three securely.

A washing basket waits. Take pride in airing
garments in that sea-spiced Tagus breeze
to be admired. South facing, peg out first
what takes most time to dry. If tourists stop and stare
be quite aware, they wish

to be acquainted
with your outer, then inner self. You are not
in the guidebook. Only you reveal sight and feel,
inform of your unknown. Let them clamour for more,
as did conquistadors about to breach the void.

Jeans and skirts – shorts. Shades of blue (waves, sky).
Turn west: tack socks and stockings to the cord,
thus blows the bottom line. Align yourself due north:
inner apparel. Camisoles pale as clouds,
shirts, their flapping sleeves stretching eager

before the open sea. Now seal this square full circle.
Eastern promise: lingerie, freed to breezes
blowing from the estuary. See, the crowd applauds.
Lace, spaced discreetly. Give them a new world.

Place St Louis

Aigues Mortes, Camargue

How concerned is Saint Louis
plinthed high in bronze benevolence,
fringed by fountains, his gaze skimming
the tops of panoramic parasols?

Most likely uninvolved in it all
after all these years as witness
to congregations of wine-glasses,
debucketed ice cubes clouding
Pastis to milk: pearly pale then
back to glassy tastelessness.

Nor may his coolly chiseled nostrils
care yet to savour whiffs of Provence
that drift his way: sharp garlic shots,
shallot or persillade. For all of this
has long been alloyed to his regal mettle.

Yet how we buzz and bustle all about
like ribbons grafting colour to a maypole;
all ages of tanned ladies, pine to walnut,
all states of skin, smooth satin to crêpe pelt.
And gentlemen in jeans with stripes or checks
stretched to distorted geometry by the force
of lovingly cherished pot-bellied plenitude.

At the 'Express' café on the corner, waiters
race table to table, jokes fly. Francis
catches my eye. 'Same as last night?' he asks:
'Jameson's, not much ice, and then for you
a Ballantynes and soda? *Toute de suite!'*
While loudly holding up the bar, the locals
lounge jaunty at the counter. *'C'est la crise!*
St Louis, n'est pas?' and their glasses chink.

Alisa Velaj was born in 1982 in Albania. She has been shortlisted for the Erbacce-Press Poetry Award in 2014. Her works have appeared in more than ninety print and online international magazines worldwide. Her poetry collection, With No Sweat At All, will be published by Cervana Barva Press in 2019.

Poems translated from Albanian by Arben P. Latifi

Photograph Pixabay.com

Land Of Storms

There's an inherent longing in fall showers, my dear,
an unspoken word, like these undischarged cloud
Like fugitives outspeeding sounds,
we often migrate through azures,
forgetting that you simply loving me,
forgetting that me simply loving you,
is no novelty but an ancient ritual,
like the run of time from one season to another.

I ought to embrace you and love;
you ought to be aflame for love, me, and us both,
same as these boundless skies embrace themselves
in front of any surprise that nature sows...

You will then realize what longing means,
how risk-free this land of storms is
we will then realize...

Greece, September, 2018

Poems translated from Albanian by Arben P. Latifi

On The Bridge

You have said of every bridge it was the best,
over the time you held it dear.
Later on, days of destruction have followed
for you, for me, for the bridge over the river.

I, too, have said that I adore all bridges,
except for the one that was ruined on purpose.
I've said, I've said...
So much we both have said, indeed.

Further on, I from East, you from West,
dared to solemnly walk on the bridge
(while cracks of deterioration were already in sight)
intending to join hands right there,
where the heart of the whole world is said to be.

Right at that point we've fallen off to the waters,
stung all over by wasps of wrath,
unable to realize even now
whether we lost our balance because of them,
or it was the bridge that crumbled in our souls...

Albania, April, 2019

Right At The Instant Of Sunshine...

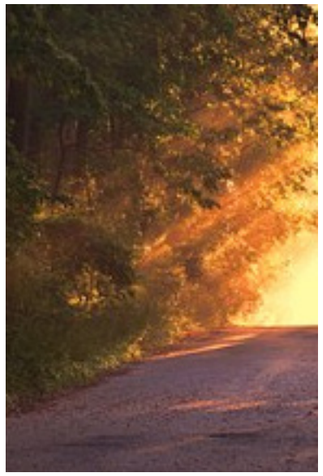
Right at that instant
when the sun happens to be shining,
quitpartway whatever it is you are doing,
even if it be love, right at that instant!

Hurry outdoors and enjoy the sights.
Trees look prettier,
skies feel nearer,
while something yet unnamed
is coming aboard the approaching train.
Walk up to the station platform, wait for it,
and, if nothing comes your way,
smile sweetly to a kid just getting off.
Tell a depressed elderly lady she looks gorgeous!

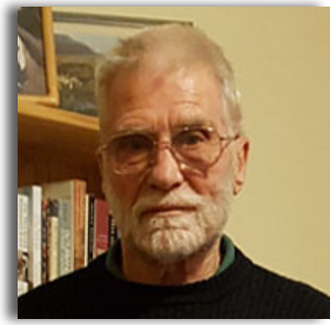
Right at that instant of sunshine,
forget about love for just a bit.
Breathe in an otherworldly brand of air,
with invisible butterflies gracing your gaze.
A melancholy...you feel like crying.
Cry, cry right at that instant
when the sun happens to be shining!

Head back home, afterwards,
where love is waiting for you—thirsty,
as parched land
for your rain of joy!

Sweden, February, 2019



© Alisa Velaj



Ian C Smith's work has appeared in, A*msterdam Quarterly, Australian Poetry Journal, Critical Survey, Live Encounters, Poetry New Zealand, Southerly, & Two-Thirds North.* His seventh book is *wonder sadness madness joy,* Ginninderra (Port Adelaide). He writes in the Gippsland Lakes area of Victoria, and on Flinders Island, Tasmania.

Binoculars

His birthday present from her to fill in nights when he couldn't get started prompted a memory of him saying what you see in reality differs from the movies, no dual arcs. He called movie-makers sly tricksters, yet he deceived readers, liked a joke despite what he wrote, aimed them, looking up on a clear night, to claim he caught the man in the moon picking his nose. They lived in a cold climate those days, above the bike repair shop, his part-time work paying peanuts. Traffic's background hum accentuated loneliness, he said, and poverty, trundling a battered Portagas heater room to icy room, castors squeaking, veering an erratic course like a supermarket trolley. He pressed a plunger until it ignited emitting a smell of burnt dust, then turned off the lights to save money, really for atmosphere, sat in an armchair over-looking the street, those windows the only ones kept clean. She grew accustomed to sudden pops of cheap champagne's corks detonating the dark, his bottle balanced on the heater with an ashtray, reflections of the shop fronts' fluorescence gleaming off binoculars trained on the night parade he called 'the market', inventing dialogue he 'saw', strangers' puffs of soggy breath like cartoon bubbles. If magnified unsuspecting characters, a jogger, couples, cops, a busker, belligerents in a fracas, stepped within range, faces haloed by neon, he snared them, triggering a dramatic scene, the story in his head matching near silent action. He believed champagne helped control his drinking, sipping quickly, binoculars heavy to hold one-handed. She paid a lot for them, resented people asking, wanting stories of human weakness to always be hers and his, expecting them to be scriptural. She disappointed, saying some published writers are boring fantasists to live with, and make little money.

Lost Language of Trains

An early scene from *My Beautiful Laundrette.* South London, where my father grew up. Daniel Day-Lewis a gay bovver boy, no way of knowing he shall one day be the U.S. President, still young then, as was I. Trains racket along the line below a young Pakistani Englishman whose mother suicided by jumping onto it, where he pegs laundry that will fleck with soot, take forever to dry, as it does in rain-streaked districts of stained bricks.

I became familiar with laundrettes in Thatcherite London, and constant trains, their echoes wails of suffering as if from ancient bones buried beneath the lines in that centuries-old city of conflict. Like a pardoned convict's return, mine took years from when my parents whisked me to the other end of the Earth if that verb is applicable to a crude six-week voyage by ex-troopship after we seemed to leave as hurriedly as the squatters scrambling out the window in another early scene.

One woeful Wednesday, sent home from school because the King died, I skipped home joyous at this unexpected half-holiday only to disturb my mother, a chilblained war-damaged woman, hands fixed in washing-up water, staring at something nobody else saw, face damp with sorrow. Soon we were off, to the Australian jungle, I thought. Well, school was savage, which suited me, London days disappearing dreamlike.

Back Down Under where laundry dries quicker than yesterday dies, a squater myself wherever I lived, years worn to the bone now, the evening train comes on down the line, earworming me, a train in an Elvis song, lights semaphoring my walls, hauling me back to when everybody seemed on the dole, another line from that film, when I needed little more sustenance than the energy, the wan thrill of returning emigres you could call underground love, memory and landscape alike in attrition.

Drinking

My son asks me, an abstainer now, to drive him to his suit fitting, flying from interstate where he finally landed a steady job, to attend a bucks' party, and be measured up for when he stands as best man. Now I live alone, I don't see him much since he lost his licence wrecking his car, breaking his brother's ankle.

The day I suited up as best man, a humming Melbourne morning in my grim youth, escorting the maid of honour whose husband, a leading jockey, rode a winner at a rural track while we celebrated the marriage of my friend who had arranged our small bridal party to spend that evening drinking together, enjoying being young at his mother's empty house, the clock hands were circling. Leaving the sanctuary we processed through dust motes towards sunlit open doors, and thunderbolt news. The jockey had visited a bar with other riders before setting off to drive to the city. Soon after, he ran down, and killed, a pedestrian.

I have traced people from long ago as far back as my first best friend at school, including those I gave little thought to, life wildly galloping by, but found nothing of that jockey's uncommon surname and distinctive nick-name. Old newspapers digitalized, this racetrack hero's feats, his serious traffic offence, seem to have evaded cyberspace.

That flattened post-wedding party broke apart, marriages, friendships, those events, the aftermath, forgotten. Now, the music we played golden oldies, memory a Rorschach test of blurred imagery and blanks, I wonder what happened after that jockey's terrible blunder, happiness muted, his wife's gut gripped by horror. I imagine my son, much older, wiser, gazing at photographs straining to recall past events some future day, hope these won't include trauma, celebration crumpling into tragedy.

That Buzz of Interest

Before mobile phones, noisily busy in the next room, I once heard the staccato of a long message being left on my answering machine. When I had time to play it, it had vanished, to my utter horror, due to a fault in the connection. I never found out who believed I received it, then failed to respond.

Reading *Eligible*, Curtis Sittenfeld's clever take on *Pride and Prejudice,* reminds me how much art makes of mixed or lost messages lit by hope or darkened by despair, the giddiness of thin secrets. Think of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles,* or other memorable examples, not the Dirty Realists.

Long ago, before words, said and unsaid, proved a formula for my unhappiness, I returned from travels to discover a letter under an antimacassar on my armchair, left – hidden, then forgotten? I shall never know – by either my house-sitter or, probably, his girlfriend. A lovelorn paean, this was written to her, but not by him. Of course, I read and reread it, buzzing with interest. It was better than TV. If Jane Austen were alive she would pillory TV, a la Sittenfeld.

An editor who rejects my submission emails the next day, explaining he had previously published this attached work which did not match the titles in my cover letter. A buzz of interest stirs. Because he reads submissions blind, he thinks his admin error is responsible so invites me to resubmit, albeit not blind.

The following day, after I discover the error was mine, he accepts my new work, as well as what he believes is something else by me he previously rejected. This work is not mine. So we email awkwardly back and forth. Confusion. Misunderstandings. Happiness. Despair. Even a misread tone can alter the course of lives according to certain novelists. And so the heart rises and falls as we dance the tightrope of language. At least I am not in love, wish I were intriguingly so.

Peter O'Neill is the author of several books, perhaps most notably *More Micks than Dicks, a hybrid Beckettian novella in 3 genres* published originally by Famous Seamus (UK, 2017) but which is now out of print. Other books include, *The Enemy – Transversions from Charles Baudelaire* (Lapwing, 2015), *The Dark Pool* (mgv2>publishing, 2015) and *Dublin Gothic* (Kilmog Press, 2015). He has also edited two anthologies of contemporary Irish writing, *And Agamemnon Dead* (mgv2>publishing, 2015) and *The Gladstone Readings* (Famous Seamus, 2017). He is currently working on his first novel, and a new book of poems *Say Goodbye to the Blackhills* which is the final instalment of his *Dublin Trilogy.*

Photograph Pixabay.com

War Poems

1

Talk of war fills the air.
Before me, two wood pigeon
Cavort on the upper-most branches
Of a Sycamore Tree.

The scene is idyllic, they could be
A framed tableaux gracing the walls
Of some old manor in Fontainebleau,
Or the Forbidden City.

Although it is almost May,
The temperature is only eleven degrees.
The jet streams are circulating the Artic
Sea currents. There is *nowhere* to hide.

2

Before the war we read crime novels
For the purpose of entertainment,
Not ever dreaming of killing somebody
Ourselves. Not even in jest.

And that was the beginning of a new form
Of education; The school of murder.
Now, when you look at someone you
Think kill, or not kill? And, without a thought

Of the consequence. The physical body
Before you… the throat taking the knife, or the bullet.
No jury or prosecution, imprisonment then
Of a very different kind. *Locked into killing.*

3

Before the war there were no real values.
All we had was a kind of common or lukewarm
Hedonism, in which we neither loved nor
Hated, particularly, but merely indifferently.

We were shameless in our untruthfulness,
All our talk being mere babble.
Everything was measured in the
Accumulation of things, or money.

We were such a cold and indifferent kind.
Though now that the war is here,
We collectively inhale and with
Each passing second, count preciously each breath.

© Peter O'Neill

4

After the war, when I do think of you,
Which is not very often, I see, very much, a
Body, which is no more, as inexistent then
Even as the mind which I knew and loved.

Your strength then being in your body,
Which I so devoutly worshipped like
A drunken fool, happily before you
On my knees, face down in your lap.

Such devotions! The scent, two decades
Later, is still pertinent. Hence, the eternal appeal
Of perfumes! Mentally, I still bottle you.
Eau d'Antiope. But, there is a tax on such duty.

5

Seeing the great cupola, or dome,
Of the Natural History Museum
Explode in a roar of smoke and flames,
Spewing like some urban volcano fragments of

Slates, burning timbers and hurling brick
Sheer onto the adjacent streets, equates
Simultaneously with my own consciousness
Similarly splitting after witnessing a child being hit

By a hurled window pane, severing the head
Clean off in a fowl swoop, blood cascading
All over the pavements in a wash of crimson,
Heralding the dawn of a terrifyingly new paradigm of beauty.

Born in Dublin, Irene moved to London in the 1960's. She taught in Secondary and primary school, moving to Further Education where she began to work in Dyslexia support. She now gives public talks on Dyslexia. Irene devised *The Nature of Hopkins* with the famous jazz pianist Stan Tracey, based on the Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins. They presented it at many Literature Festivals in the UK. Irene writes papers on Hopkins and presents them at conferences. Irene has been writing poetry throughout her career.

Transformation

Between the first line and the last
The poem transforms the everyday
Making it strange;
Removes the particular experience
From its common context.

In this journey we recognise anew
What we already know
but now we have a new vocabulary
with which to express ourselves.

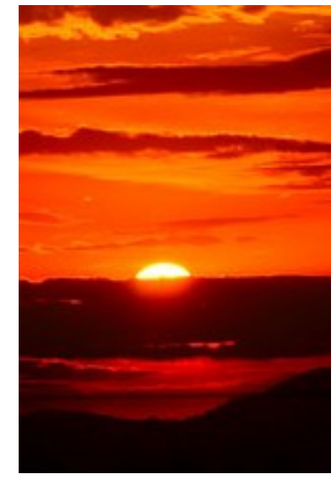
Heat

The city trembles in the heat;
buildings agitate and exude
exhaustion. Seams that
hold the buildings intact
ache with tension;
the very mortar longs
for the cool of evening.

The Thames runs softly, offering
an invocation for a cool moment;
a hinge that holds the two sides
in their submission
to the grinding passage of the sun.

Antennae thresh the air
testing the solar compass -
the antennal clock has not reached
its moment; restrained by the sun exercising
its authority, the creature cannot take to
the migrating path: remains earth-bound.

At last, at last, the day begins its decline,
releasing, reluctantly, its captives.
Heat and energy achieve the balance flight demands;
we stir, the buildings stir and sigh - all is resolved.
in the darkening calm. The sun resigns its place;
gives way to the evening star.



© Irene Kyffin

To Your Specification

Let's go home you said
And we can have tea
And you can write me a poem
On the computer.

Remembering that you don't like
literary poems, I hesitate.

Can I write such a poem
At the command? it becomes
a threat - not a request, not a desire
to enter and share
my particular, peculiar world of words
which I know it is.

It has not been a poem afternoon.
It has been, right enough,
an afternoon of the rippled green of
the hills of
Clwyd - but it has been, too, a day
of searing wind,
the kind you struggle with, the kind
that makes you think about survival;
the kind that wipes out
any thoughts of poetry.

All you can do is catch your breath;
not with the beauty - you can forget that;
more with the staggering
uphill pull, on your
pounding heart, your lungs, your legs,
at the end of which you
say, bravely, that was exhilarating
and strangely, ironically,
mean it.

A Memory

'Do you want', I say and bite my tongue
I hear my mother's voice:
'Would you like, dear'. It comes unhesitatingly.
The correction is always there, at my shoulder,
it will not let me go.

Just like the word 'napkin' which one should say
but not 'serviette'.

I bravely think I've long dispensed with such gentilities
but, naggingly, the dispute still rages in my head.
Nowadays, foreigners say 'napkin' so that I am confused.
Every time my mouth opens to ask for – the thing, my speech -
along with my mind - freezes with the agony
of whether I should be saying
'napkin' or 'serviette'.

Generations

I know you
I know your face from ancient;
it has lived with me between the pages of the Book
and the letters of the Word;
it has been beside mine in the dragging of the stones
when we retrieved the sanctuary.

We fled to, held out and died at Masada,
staunch in our belief, choosing, preferring a paean to death
in a celebration of lives lived.

Whether we believe the world is eternal or
that it came into being on the cast of the die
is of no consequence;
we shared it in all its ambiguities.

We listened with one ear to the lachrymose violin of Bruch.
The glass broke and the shards of tears
scattered the pavements.

The musculature of the Enlightenment collapsed
in the wake of hope.

We carry on together;
Perhaps the Khazari melded into us
Or we into them but, inescapably,
we have become one.

After reading Dinah's poem

Your words take me,
shake me and I realize
my experience in yours.

You make me focus on
a detail in the daily middle distance
of living.

Today this detail
launched itself at me,
eyes in the street
severed me from the comfortable
private habitation
of being.

A man looked at me
and his eyes told me, clearly
that I was denuded of clothes, of individuality
and of privacy;
that I was, above all,
for his consumption.

What I was, am, will be,
my sentient self, delights and
disappointments, disappeared
into the deep well
of his projection.

Some reflections on a
long history of women:
their mirror'd cornucopian
breasts and hips, Junoesque
beauty, consummate or otherwise
created by eyes such as those
that denuded me, expose, vividly,
the myth that sets the boundaries
of that look

© Irene Kyffin

Danijela Trajković is a poet, short story writer, translator and reviewer. She holds an MA in English language and literature from the Faculty of Philosophy in Kosovska Mitrovica, Serbia. Her work has been translated into Russian, Spanish, Romanian, Arabic, English, Bulgarian, Czech, Slovakian, Macedonian and published in journals, newspapers and anthologies worldwide, the most recent in 'World Poetry Almanac' (2017-2018, edited by Dr Hadaa Sendoo, Mongolia) and 'Atunis Galaxy Anthology - 2019' (editor in chief: Agron Shele, Belgium) Danijela's first book '22 Wagons' (Selected Anglophone Contemporary Poetry) was published by Academy of Arts, Knjaževac, Serbia, 2018.

Translated from Serbian by Danijela Trajković and Pedro López Adorno.

Photograph Pixabay.com

The Book

Once upon a time there was a little shy boy with the sweetest name in the world - Antonio. He spent most of his time reading books. One day he found in a book a little girl named Vera. Antonio was aware of the fact that she was the girl who could finally accompany him in all his adventures. The book became his favorite one, so precious that he hid it in a secret place so no other boy could ever find it, touch it, open it, look at it, read it. Every day he went to the secret place, taking out the book, holding it so gently as if was made from glass, pressing it against his heart, opening it with his beautiful fingers, reading it with his dark, unique eyes. He could feel, almost hear the breathing of the girl. He could swear that her chest moved up and down while he was looking in the book. As time passed he was seeing many things that the girl was doing, like raising her eyes and looking at him, smiling, touching his face, holding his hand, even talking to him. He felt like never before. He didn't want to detach himself from the book, but the fear that some other boy could steal it, kept him all the time carrying his treasure with him. So, after several hours of magical moments spent with the book daily, he would leave it in the secret place.

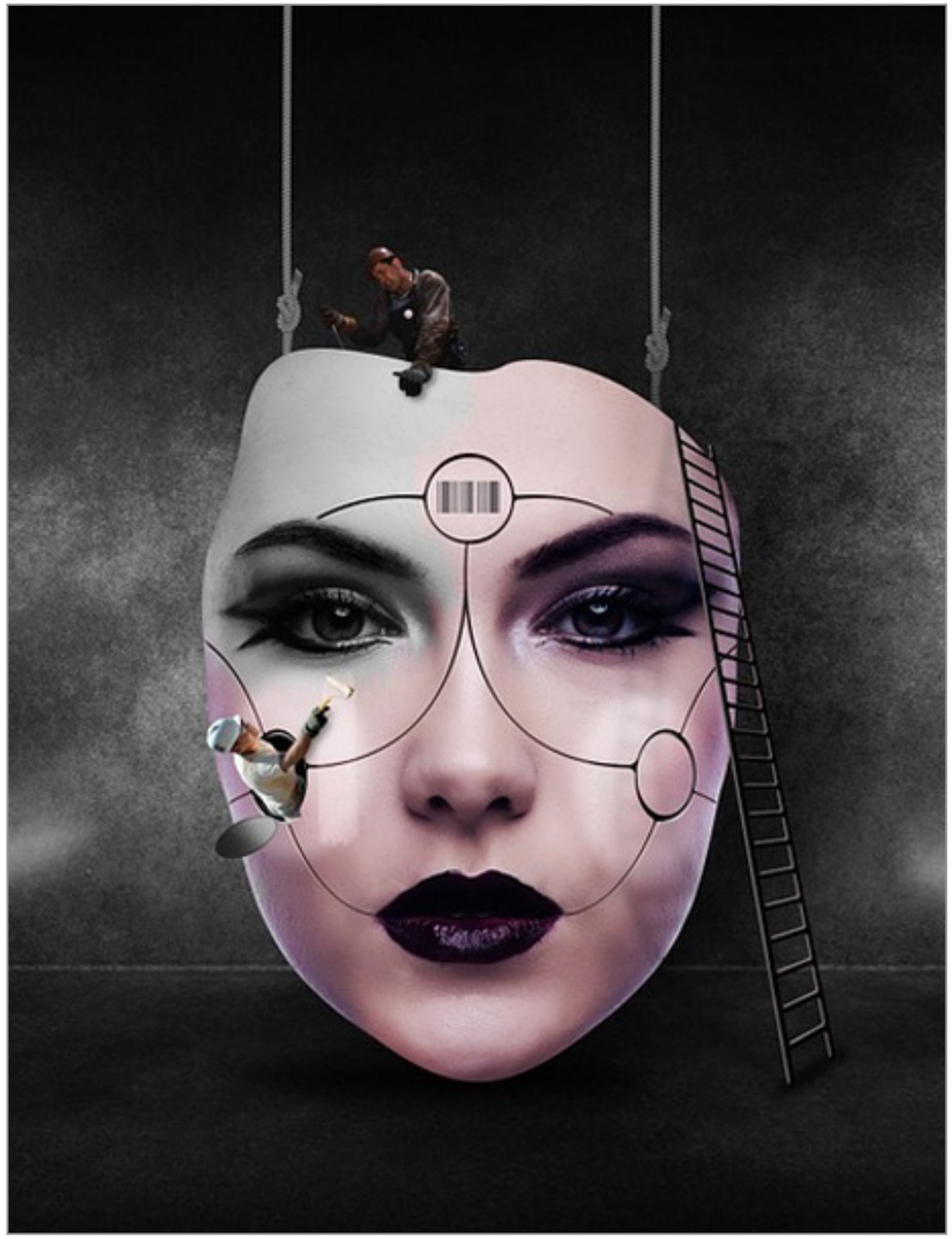
And all of a sudden, Fall came bringing with it many colors that impressed the little boy. There were trees everywhere. He loved them! He was enchanted by those fall colors that he started visiting the book less and less.

Then Winter came. He remembered that he hadn't open the book for weeks. The problem was that he didn't like to leave his warm room nor the fire that gave such a lazy and pleasant feeling.

But when Winter was gone he decided to go back to the secret place and see his book. Upon reaching the secret place, he found the book and, when he opened it, he turned pale. The little girl was gone.

Gone like Winter.

Jim Meirose's work has appeared in numerous magazines and journals, including Calliope, Offbeat/Quirky (Journal of Exp. Fiction pub,), Permafrost, North Atlantic Review, Blueline, Witness, and Xavier Review, and has been nominated for several awards. His E-book "Inferno" is available from Amazon. Underground Voices. His novels, "Mount Everest" and "Eli the Rat", are available from Amazon. "Mount Everest" has been adapted to a play by a leading west coast playwright. www.jimmeirose.com



Photograph Pixabay.com

Take a Letter Mister Chickie

Ready and set and all Mister Chickie? Okay, here goes. No. These, no no, would be no no no no, not difficult to see from space yes; there since, no no no no no no no, astronauts are in orbit at all-all-all not at-all at this time, but that's no, no, not yes but no, will be more yes severe cripple to us since these are mainly plain items, mere fluff and nonsense, brace, and worthless as weapons of war. These are the, brace, kind of symbolic small baubles handed out at glitzy, brace to push past if, management events held at bright shiny expensive resorts mainly also no-no-no-no-not on beaches. There are more. The existence of these items no-no-no-no-not on beaches on land mainly beaches won't ever yes ever no not no yes please but don't do, mainly speaks to upholding a culture-wide sense of camaraderie palm trees and a resultant false primary feeling of funny-funny fun-fun pseudo-psycho-based morale. Or halt maybe it might be—yes, we meant morality. Erase that last, Mister Chickie. Wilt thou please? Thanky-thankie. Bop.

Checkie-check baby?

Check.

Good. Done.

James Martyn Joyce is from Galway. He has published three books, including editing *Noir by Noir West: Dark Fiction from the West of Ireland* (Arlen House). His work has appeared in The Cúirt Journal, West 47, Books Ireland, Crannog, The Sunday Tribune, The Stinging Fly, The Shop, The Honest Ulsterman, The Stony Thursday Book and Skylight47. He was shortlisted for a Hennessy Award in 2006, the Francis McManus award in 2007 and 2008 and The William Trevor International Short Story Competition in 2007 and 2011. He has had work broadcast on RTE and BBC and has won the Listowel Writers Week Originals Short Story Competition. He won the Doolin Writers Prize in 2014. He was a winner of the Greenbean Novel Fair in 2016 with his novel, *A Long Day Dead*. His second poetry collection entitled *Furey*, was published in June 2018 by Doire Press.

Falling in the Garden

Anne stopped running where the narrow path came closest to the edge. Far below her the gulls were perched on a craggy stump, a stone fist pointing from the scrub, their faint cries barely registering. Below that again the waves were small and almost silent, but she knew that at sea level they would lash against the cliff face, bruising it, wearing it down.

From this height there was nothing but the wind whistling in her ears, cooling her cheeks, making her eyelashes flutter, stealing her breath until there was only something like fear left behind her breastbone, a little knot, tight, and tight behind her eyes, her tears stinging.

Her face felt swollen now, the first shock of pain going, a dull ache tightening the skin of her skull until she believed she could feel every hair clinging to her head, each one a tiny pull dragging the skin tighter still.

Stephen had given her no warning, the slam of his open hand catching her along the jaw, the light suddenly brighter, her eyes focussed as if until that millisecond she had been, in some way, asleep. He'd closed his fist for the second blow, the force making her teeth grind, the perfect teeth that had cost him so much because 'no consultant's wife should be seen with such a crooked smile'.

Anne knew now that it had been foolish to ask him if he would be late again this evening. But he'd been away so much, and the children had asked. So, she'd almost blurted it out: Should she cook dinner for them all, or would he be eating at the hospital?

'Don't be such a smart bitch, Anne!'

His roar had shaken her, and his sudden punch had rocked her. What if his shout would bring the children? So, she'd grabbed her coat and run, sliding the patio door shut behind her.

It had been like this almost from the beginning, the threat hanging there, dangling above her, and yet she could not leave. Even on their honeymoon she'd seen a shortness in him she'd never noticed before, his breath held a fraction longer, a pale tightness to his lips. Again and again over the years, she had gone back to the house; the girls were the magnets, and she could not bring herself to challenge him, because she knew that in the long run he would win.

Their first daughter must have been a disappointment to him in some way; he'd never beaten Anne until after Grace was born. He'd wanted a boy, someone to take over, someone to grow the land and offices he'd invested in on the guidance of McColgan, his accountant.

Three years later when Claire had arrived he'd gone missing for a week and she knew then there would be real problems. Her future would be trouble, trouble in her nights and watchful in her days.

Of course, there were still the foreign holidays, all the trophy wives, Anne among them, lying in the sun on some private beach, listening to the other wives, the suitable wives, comparing kitchens, talking up the next 'great hope'. Who would shine under pressure – and there was huge pressure – and the others who would not make the grade, the ghostly finger of general practice beckoning. And all the time the feeling that somehow a door had closed, a concealed door she never knew was there until she heard the click of the lock way too late and the chance was gone.

Her face would be black for days. She knew the routine well enough by now, stay indoors and read, never answer the doorbell. Be careful with the phone in case friends would offer to visit. Tell the children she had fallen in the garden.

Sometimes she feared that Grace could read her eyes, the way she would smile and stroke her face, never touching the bruise; the way she looked at her father, like he was never fully there, no matter how hard he tried, always drawing her into his conversations, trying to recruit her in some way.

Claire was still too young to understand, but she would come and touch her mother's face, her fingers wet, circling the bruise, her small fingers barely touching the skin, with a heat off her touch Anne could feel behind her eyes.

When she got home he was already gone, the children were playing with their toys, a cartoon running on the flatscreen. They were almost seven and four now and they were beautiful. They would notice the mark, so she got to the stairs calling as she ran that she would take a shower and be down in a few minutes. The steam eased her bones, the swelling soft under her fingers, a blackening egg moving to her wincing touch. Claire came crying to the locked door as Anne was trying to disguise the bruise with make-up but went downstairs again, whimpering softly.

Anne never minded when Stephen was away. She knew that he would be at his club, or in some hotel, leaning on the bar, creating himself anew to the women there. And there were always women, women like himself, looking for some small adventure, some dalliance. She often smiled at the word. She found him once by accident, not long after Grace was born. She'd gone for lunch, arranging to meet up with her sister, Tessa, in a city centre hotel, never thinking he would be there at the small mahogany bar, tweed sleeve to the polished wood, looking into the eyes of some coiffured women far older than himself.

He didn't see her; he was bent in whispered conversation, the woman's kohl-eyes never leaving his, his hand resting on her arm. Anne had approached him, called him Stephen, intent on saving him in some way, telling him 'Tessa's coming', and he had taken the woman's arm and guided her through the archway to reception, turning left to the gilded elevators and the bedrooms beyond.

She regretted nothing later when he hit her, spinning her around before the fireplace, her spittle flying, her cry a shock even to herself, his shout of 'Never again, Anne! Never!' ringing off the walls, his sharp finger digging in her breast.

The girls were sitting quietly when she finally came down. Coco Pops littered the carpet, Claire sucking her thumb and watching the television. Grace ran to her immediately, her face crumpling in tears, her thin arms hugging her waist, her snuffles lost in the folds of her dress.

This cannot go on, she told herself, this can not go on, but it would, her ball and chain hugged her tighter, the children were her jailers. He could have her declared an unfit mother if he really tried.

She thought again of Hugh, she felt her throat tighten and the tears gathering, Grace brushing them away. Claire had been just over a year, still almost an infant, when they met at the university. Not that she was studying there – she liked to walk in the quiet grounds, mingling with the summer influx of students, listening to their many languages, their halting English.

He was there beside her one day on the rough bench, reading, until Claire had started to cry, and Anne prepared to leave.

'It's fine,' he'd said, smiling, 'I have four little brothers all noisier than that.'

It was that simple in the end, no plan, they met on a few occasions afterwards until it became almost routine, their conversations getting longer, growing more personal, and their lives on parallel lines of instability and change. He was on a postgraduate year studying Yeats, but then 'Who isn't?' he'd said. A successful thesis would get him a very junior lectureship in some lesser American college. He could travel, maybe write a novel, get away from his father who still thought the church would come again and sweep away the wider world and all its sins.

Then she met him for coffee on the day her friend Lily took the children. Just for coffee, she'd told herself, just for coffee. But they both knew. Yet there was no hurry as they walked beneath the oaks by the canal and he quoted Larkin and she almost cried. They had grief enough for themselves.

They made love, a shared whispering in the quiet glow of his darkened room, the heavy curtains softening the calls of the local children playing in the street. Afterwards she cried, and he stroked her face, his body cooling to her light touch. They knew the trap was sprung, they were held in their shared days when she would come happy to his touch and their hours together grew into autumn and the gathering dark.

Stephen had found out. He told her afterwards how some junior doctor who had met her at a charity event asked if his wife was doing classes at the university, and Stephen had waited well, checking her out, asking no-one until he was sure and then he had pounced.

She remembered leaving the flat on that final Thursday, her shoulder bag swinging as she turned towards the canal, noticing the man by the railings, a long coat hiding his form until he turned, and it was Stephen, and she thought about running, but where? In his eyes she saw it was way too late for that, so she stood there in the inhaled evening, stillness holding her, her shoulder bag grounded on the fractured path.

He didn't hit her then, instead he told her there on the footpath how he would take the children, her children, how she would never see them again, how she would be alone, and then a week later he called her to the phone just after dinner and it was Hugh. He sounded broken and confused, the university had terminated his study post and they'd given no reason. He'd asked and then he'd threatened but they'd told him that any protest would be futile. He was moving on.

A year later she was present at the ceremony when her husband announced his funding for a new extension to the medical library, further support guaranteed from some obscure American foundation, McColgan smiling at his side. At the dinner her husband leant close and whispered how easy it had been and how Hugh was now teaching English in a comprehensive somewhere in Greater Manchester, his studies 'on hold' for the moment.

The children would have to be readied for bed soon; Claire sat on the soft carpet, her thumb in her mouth, her eyelids sinking shut, her head drooping. Grace was colouring a picture at the table in the corner and every so often she would catch her mother's eyes and smile. She was a greater comfort than she knew now, growing day by day and too soon she would be gone. Anne didn't want to think what life would be like when the children grew up and moved away. How was she to cope when they would share the house alone? She couldn't think, her head buzzed, and her face hurt, she needed sleep.

Once the children were safely in bed she made some tea, sipping it at the sitting room window, the broad sweep of the drive before her curving away towards the gates. He would not be back tonight, and he was on duty in the morning. Maybe he would stretch it to the weekend and play golf, she no longer cared. There was so much here that she loved, the roses clinging to the old walls, her carefully tended beds, the summer seat where she would sit and read and all of it provided by the earnings of her husband, the most successful consultant in the city, the perfect medical god.

She must have stood there for a long time, lost to everything but her own thoughts. When she looked again it was dark, the curve of the drive no longer visible, the trees darker patches against the sky and the man almost pressed his face to the windowpane before she was aware of him. She screamed, her flailing hand sending the cup flying from the sill. He held his hands up in a calming gesture and pointed towards the front door, it was only at that point that she noticed the uniform.

'I'm sorry to trouble you so late. May I come in?'

She felt it even before he spoke to confirm her identity. She could see it in his face, the tautness around his eyes and a gentleness used to dealing with pain.

It had happened on the sweep into the country to the south going towards his club. The policeman had the car registration and the model, they'd pulled it from the forest, the driver and his passenger still inside. Neither had survived. They'd made a positive identification from his wallet; another policeman was even now telling the husband of the other victim. He mentioned a woman's name. Were they family friends?

'No. No, I don't know the name.'

She saw him take in the bruising around her eye, moving to cover the black, stammering something about falling in the garden and looking away.

'Will you be all right?' He was trying so hard to be kind.

'Yes, yes, I will have to wake the children; they will have to be cared for. But I'll call my sister first, she lives across the city. She can be here in half an hour, she will care for them.'

'Okay. If there is anything I can do?'

'No, I'll call her now. You've been very kind.'

She guided him towards the hall, his steps awkward on the carpet. At the door he turned and shook her hand, his eyes taking in the bruise again.

'I'm very sorry.'

She thanked him and eased the door shut; she stood and listened to the crunch of his footsteps receding along the drive. She should phone Tessa now and then wake the children.

She turned into the darkened lounge, the curtains swinging closed at the touch of the switch. She opened the well-stocked drinks cabinet and took out a bottle of brandy. The seal wasn't even broken, and she snapped it quickly, pouring a full measure into one of his best glasses. She walked to the fireplace and eased herself into the fireside couch, sinking down into the deep cushions. She placed the cool brandy glass against her swollen cheek, rolling it over the bruise before sipping slowly and letting her head loll against the soft rest. Above the marble fireplace her husband's eyes surveyed the room, his red riding jacket black in the gloom. He did not look amused.

Suddenly, a giggle shook her frame. She shouldn't laugh. She shouldn't. Another giggle burst from her, she sipped again and placed the glass on the low table. He looked angry now astride the sweating horse, the short whip in his right hand. He looked positively offended.

She couldn't help herself, she had to laugh. She giggled, at first, a guilty giggle. Then it burst from her in a great wave as she pressed her hands to her tender, swollen face. Great rolls of laughter grew in her as she slipped to the carpeted floor, lying on her back before the marble fireplace.

She laughed and laughed, kicking her legs in the air, until she felt a warm, pleasured feeling and knew she'd wet herself. She lay there, tears streaming from her eyes, wheezing gasps filling the quiet room until she was exhausted and at rest. Then she phoned her sister.

For the duration of the mourning period she was the perfection of the grieving wife, her position bolstered by the fact that he had been with another woman at the time of the accident. At the graveside people pressed her hand, the children confused and lost, mystified by the circling crowds.

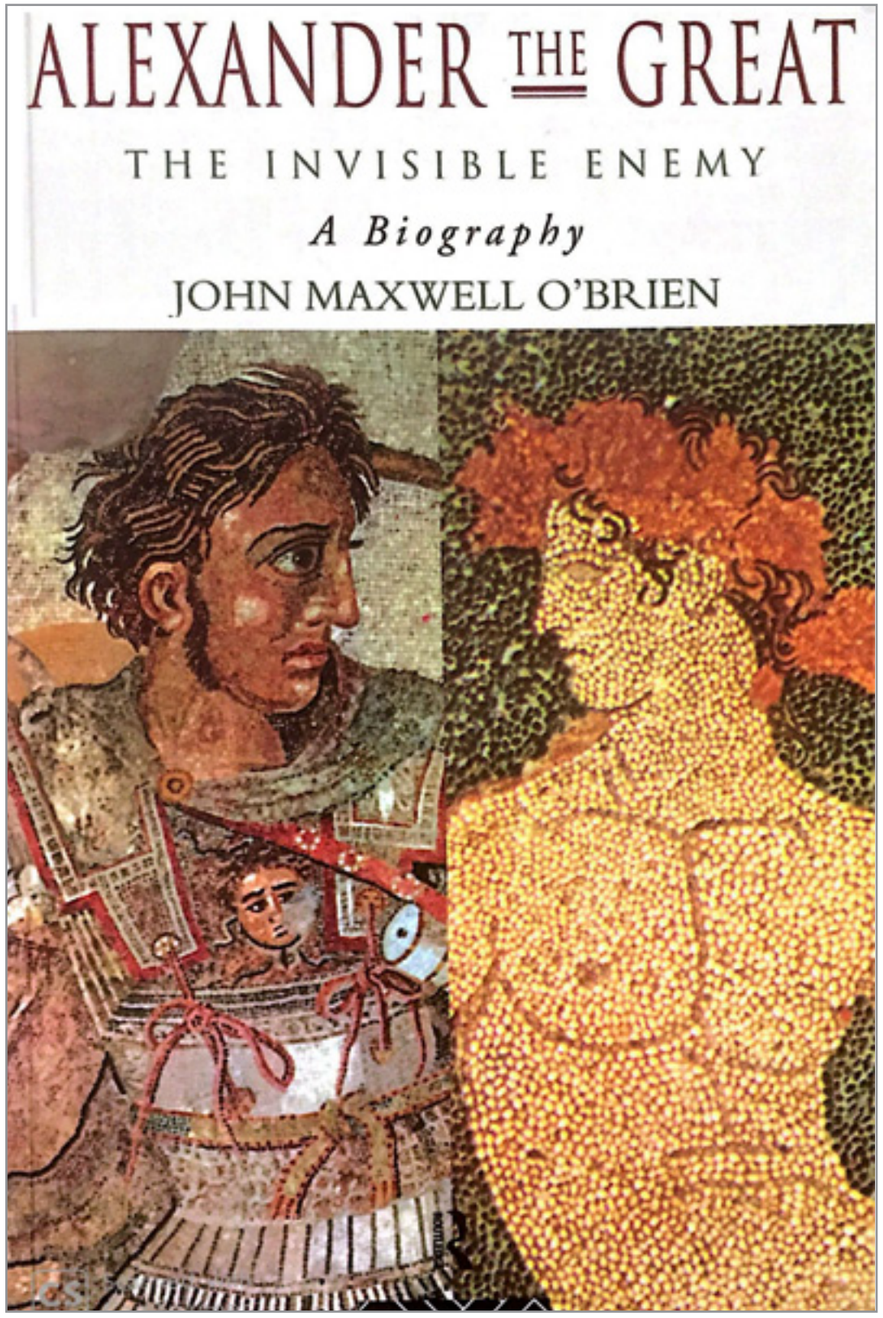
McColgan shook her hand, his eyes reflecting his great loss.

'We have to talk, Anne.'

'I'm in mourning now, Mister McColgan, but phone me next week when you have an exact figure. John Finch will need to check that everything is as it should be, he's my solicitor. You do know Mister Finch?'

His eyes narrowed slightly but he said nothing; without her husband his work was virtually at an end. Finch would dig and probe and build a complete portfolio for his new client. For McColgan this would not be pleasant.

She stood by the open grave. Her sister had taken the girls back to the car as the mourners drifted away in the encroaching dusk. The rain was not far off, but for now the gulls circled on the updrafts from the sea, their wings spread wide, their cries echoing. In the years that followed she would often think of that awful time and always the burning memory was of lying on the deep carpet smelling of the best brandy, kicking her legs high in the air, her laughter ringing off the walls.



John's best-selling biography, *Alexander the Great: The Invisible Enemy* (Routledge), has been translated into Greek and Italian. https://www.amazon.com/Alexander-Great-Invisible-Enemy-Biography-ebook/dp/B00IEBZHI2/ref=dp_kinw_strp_1

John Maxwell O'Brien is an emeritus professor of history (Queens College, CUNY)) who has written numerous articles on ancient history, medieval history, and the history of alcoholism. His best-selling biography, *Alexander the Great: The Invisible Enemy* (Routledge), has been translated into Greek and Italian and he authored the article on alcoholism in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary.* Professor O'Brien's second life has been devoted to his first love, creative writing. Professor O'Brien's poems have appeared or will appear shortly in *Literary Yard, Hedgehog Poetry Press* (where his poem was short-listed in the Cupid's Arrow contest), IthacaLit, The Southwest Poetry Review, and the *Irish Poetry Corner* of *Irish Arts & Entertainment.* A short story of his is in the current issue of *Kaleidoscope* and **he has just finished a debut novel entitled *Aloysius the Great,* an extract from which appears below. Professor O'Brien is now looking for a suitable publishing home for his novel.**

Aloysius the Great is a seriocomic tale of an alcoholic professor who becomes resident director of an American study abroad program in England during the 1960s and finds himself on a runaway roller coaster of rebellious students, drugs, sex, liquor, and academic politics. This picaresque novel is a treasure trove for admirers of James Joyce. Its chapters parallel episodes in Joyce's *Ulysses.* Many of its characters come from *Ulysses* and/or individuals significant in Joyce's life. Words and phrases from *Ulysses* are sprinkled harmoniously throughout the text and Joyce *aficionados* are invited to detect vestiges of the master in the excerpt that follows:

Chapter 1

That posturing hippopotamus couldn't possibly know about Marthe, could he? No. Not Dean Irwin. He's oblivious to anything beyond his own résumé.

Marthe wouldn't breathe a word of it. Or shouldn't. She's the one who did the seducing. Okay—lacing my coffee with gin while still at the college was an error of judgment, but who expects students to be knocking at your office door at ten o'clock at night?

Stop playing the victim, Aloysius. It's unbecoming. If you hadn't been drinking, you would have persuaded her to back off, or at least made a break for it. If she has pointed a finger at you, no one will believe your version of the story. Screwed—that's what you are.

I glance back down at the letter on top of the pile.

Aloysius Tabeel Gogarty
Assistant Professor
Department of History
URGENT

I start to unpeel the envelope but stop and turn it back around. No, it's not my absurd name that's troubling me. It's the return address in the upper left-hand corner: Office of the Dean of Faculty. Footsteps approach from the hallway. Beware of prying eyes in the faculty mailroom. Retreat to the sanctuary of your office.

September 11, 1967

Dear Professor Gogarty,

A situation has presented itself that demands immediate attention. It is of utmost importance that we meet concerning this matter. Contact Mrs. Delagracia at my office (ext. 1922) to arrange a meeting with me and do so promptly upon receipt of this letter.

Francis Irwin
Dean of Faculty
Municipal College of the City of New York
FI/ed

There's no please, not even a sincerely yours. Maybe civilities are superfluous when it comes to notices of execution. One vulnerable moment and—poof—everything you've worked for goes up in smoke.

Go ahead. Do it. Pick up the phone. Climb onto the funeral pyre.

"Hello, it's Aloysius Gogarty from the History Department. I understand the dean has been looking for me . . . that is . . . uh . . . wishes to see me. Yes, I'm over here in Hammersmith Tower and can stop by now if that's all right. Good. See you soon." I walk across campus at a brisk pace but stop dead in my tracks in front of the dean's office, immobilized, gaping at the doorknob.

Take a deep breath. Open the door. Don't slam it behind you.

Elena Delagracia looks up from behind her nameplate and catches me unaware. I take a step back to process what I see. Her red hair moves upward in an irregular curl at the apex of her forehead, just as Alexander the Great's did.

Her eyes are avocado green, but when the light catches her right eye, it turns chestnut brown. Alexander's eyes were said to be like that.

"Might you be Professor Gogarty?" she asks in a high-pitched voice, breaking the spell.

Off on the wrong foot again. Color me hapless when it comes to women.

"I beg your pardon, you remind me of someone. Yes, I might be . . . I mean, I am," I shake my head theatrically, "Aloysius Gogarty."

Her winsome smile puts me at ease for the moment. Elena Delagracia isn't what you expect to see in a Latin American; her hair and ivory skin hint at a Celtic or Germanic influence. She seems amused. Make the most of it.

"May I ask—are you from Spain?"

"Actually, Professor Gogarty, I was born in Cuba, but my parents come from Andalusia which, as you know, is in Spain."

The German tribe of Vandals left their name in Andalusia; maybe they're the guilty party. But the Greeks and the Jews and the Arabs and the devil knows who else from all the ends of Europe traipsed over that region. So, it's anyone's guess. Didn't the dean's letter say *Mrs.* Delagracia? There's no ring on her finger?

"Simply for reasons of protocol, should I address you as Miss Delagracia or Mrs. Delagracia?"

"Either way," she says, with oracular ambiguity. "You can take a seat if you'd like. Dean Irwin will be with you in just a few minutes."

"Thank you."

I find myself stealing another glance at her. They say my mother's eyes were a different color too. She gave me life, but I killed her in the process. Now it looks like I've killed my career. I must have the Midas touch in reverse. Everything I lay my hands on seems to turn to—

Dean Irwin emerges from a corridor behind Elena's desk and signals for me to follow him. There's no handshake, a sure sign my fate is sealed.

Irwin can't be more than five feet five but must weigh close to two hundred and fifty pounds. I can't resist mimicking his waddle as I follow in his footsteps, but this risky routine comes to an abrupt halt when my shoes sink into a thick crimson carpet.

His office is a large horseshoe-shaped room with intricately carved mahogany bookcases lining its walls. The bookshelves are filled with leather-bound classics arranged chronologically, except for one area, French literature. There, foot-high marble busts of Montaigne and Racine face out into the room, drawing a visitor's attention to the three volumes they frame—Irwin's celebrated tome on the use of the accent circumflex in France during the seventeenth century. In the next life he'll probably focus on the accent aigu.

An antique chandelier hangs over a mahogany chair directly in front of Irwin's larger-than-life desk. He points to the chair and we sit. Irwin's head is silhouetted by the sunlight streaming through a semicircular window behind him, making his round face barely visible against a postcard profile of the Manhattan skyline. A pungent wave of his cologne wafts in my direction, but I restrain myself from retching.

I wonder how he sees me. I'm twenty-seven, five feet nine and a half inches tall, overweight, and undistinguished, except for my auburn hair and small, round black sunglasses. Come to think of it, almost all of my clothes are either black or gray. I'm always seen in my undersized black beret, tilted slightly to the right. It's my Latin Quarter hat, my Hamlet hat.

"Is there a clinical explanation for those opaque glasses of yours? You always seem to be wearing them," Irwin says while reaching for a pencil.

He's been collecting evidence.

"BEB."

"BEB?"

"Yes, benign essential blepharospasm. I contracted it as a child during the war, and it left me photophobic."

"You wear them at night as well?"

"They mitigate the impact of artificial light on the pupils of my eyes."

"Really?" he asks, rolling the pencil back and forth across his desk with the palm of his hand. "Oh yes, of course . . . BEB."

He hasn't the slightest notion of what I'm talking about.

"Professor Gogarty," he lifts the pencil and stares at it, "what were your plans for this year?"

I feel the blood coursing through my neck.

Here's where the hammer descends on me.

"Well, I *had planned* to continue teaching here."

Irwin starts tapping the pencil on his desk. After a glacial pause, he speaks. "Well, if it were up to me, you would *not* be teaching here this year." He squints and sits there squeezing the pencil until its tip breaks from the pressure he's applying.

I flinch, and beads of sweat gather on my forehead. I reach for my handkerchief, fold it in half, and make a wide sweep of my brow. What should I do? Confess and throw myself on the mercy of the court?

"Oh?" is all that escapes from my mouth.

Irwin shifts the phlegm around in his throat and looks at me from behind the pointless pencil he's holding upright in front of his nose. "How would you like to lecture at a foreign university this year?"

"What the…? Excuse me?"

"Yes." He smiles.

He *smiled.*

"As you may know, we're in the process of transforming our study-abroad program into the largest—or I should say— the best example of international education in the world. We now have six centers in Europe and three in Latin America. This year we're moving into England and Japan, and there's an opening for you at one of our international centers."

Sweet Jesus recalled to life. What did he say? Japan?

"I don't speak Japanese."

"No, no, no. The UK. England. How would you like to be resident director of the New York Municipal College's Study-Abroad Program in Great Britain?"

I've already learned that the longer an academic title, the less important the position, but it's a far cry from leaving in disgrace, so I raise my eyebrows to show I'm impressed.

"You'll be teaching several courses at a host university and serving as a shepherd of sorts for our students. You'd be what the English call their moral tutor."

"Their *moral* tutor?"

"Why not? There's nothing that would disqualify you from such a post. Is there?"

"I should hope not," I say, as convincingly as I can.

He nods in satisfaction. "You may be wondering why all this has arisen at the eleventh hour. The fact of the matter is that, poised as we are to set the UK program in motion, we've experienced an unanticipated setback. A Berkeley professor agreed to lead the group, but he's taken ill—atrial fibrillation, and the poor man is only in his early fifties. His personal physician has advised him to remain in California. We need a younger man, someone who is physically fit and popular with his students.

"I've been led to believe you may fit the bill. Now I'm well aware that you are coming up for tenure this year, but there's no reason that can't be accomplished *in absentia.* If you provide exemplary leadership abroad it would be of inestimable value to the college and, of course, taken into consideration when you're evaluated for tenure. Does the position seem attractive to you?"

If I'm denied tenure I'll lose my job anyway, so it's out of the frying pan, into the inferno. Is there a choice here? I might as well probe.

"What about my classes?"

"We're already in the process of making arrangements for adjuncts to cover all of your sections. From what I've heard it'll be difficult for anyone to match your performance in the classroom, but we'll do the best we can. Don't worry about us though; we'll manage. No one is irreplaceable."

Isn't *that* comforting? By all means, go right ahead and usurp my life. Uproot and transplant me as it suits you.

"What about my research? I've almost finished the final draft of my book and planned on polishing it during the next few months."

"They polish books in England, don't they? In fact, the English are forever polishing their books. Your manuscript—it's about Charlemagne, isn't it?—should improve by leaps and bounds in such a civilized environment. Besides, the tenure materials are not due at the departmental level until April. There's no reason whatsoever you cannot accomplish all of your objectives abroad. I finished *my magnum opus* in Paris, despite all the seductive distractions there."

Irwin smiles suggestively but declines to elaborate on which seductive distractions in Paris could possibly have come between him and the circumflex.

"And that work, by the way, earned me recognition as a *Chevalier of the Ordre des Palmes Académiques.*" His pudgy finger points to a medallion attached to a purple ribbon encased on the wall in a gilded baroque frame.

I purse my lips and nod, as if I've been made privy to an earth-shattering revelation. The truth of the matter is Irwin reminds the entire faculty of this distinction with numbing regularity and is said to wake people up on park benches to let *them* know as well. The consensus is that it was his wife's access to the corridors of power in French society, rather than his immortal broodings over the circumflex that earned him his *Chevalier* medallion. Her family traces its lineage all the way back to Charlemagne.

Wait a minute. He thinks I'm writing a book about Charlemagne and is probably concerned I'll say something unsavory about his wife's ancestor.

"It's Alexander, by the way. Not Charlemagne. I'm writing a biography of Alexander the Great."

"*Alexandre le Grand*, eh? Well, I'm glad to hear that. I thought it was Charlemagne. So, Alexander's the one you're making a drunk out of?"

"I prefer to think he did that to himself. I'm simply disclosing what I've discovered in the sources," I say piously. "I'm sorry if you find that disconcerting."

"Not in the least. In fact, I find it quite promising now that I know its Alexander. Properly executed, it could draw favorable attention to the college. Still, it's a trifle old fashioned with the drinking, no? What about drugs? Didn't he use them? That might make your book more engaging and be more in keeping with our times."

"Thanks for the suggestion, but no he didn't use drugs, just wine."

"No beer, either?"

"The ancient Greeks thought of beer as a swinish potation, better left to the barbarian."

He smiles again. "How French. This isn't going to be a temperance tract inveighing against the fruit of the vine, is it? I occasionally indulge in the grape myself, and you, I've been told, are no teetotaler, correct?"

"God forbid," I blurt out. Then, realizing Irwin's just made a jarring reference to my drinking, quickly add, "I tend to follow Aristotle in seeking balance in all things." Jesus. I sound just as pretentious as *el hipopótamo.* Better change the subject.

"Won't these students require a great deal of attention in England?"

"Minimal. They're young adults, not children. Furthermore, the Berkeley man scrutinized all applications and interviewed each and every candidate. I, of course, had the final say as to whether an applicant was acceptable. Few difficulties should arise.

"Naturally, during the first couple of weeks you'll have to make yourself available to them, but after that they'll be largely on their own. Only our best and brightest students, thirteen in all, have been approved for the program. These young people are looking to absorb a foreign culture, not make a surrogate father of you."

He has an answer for everything.

"They'll be leaving by boat on the weekend. The English term begins at the end of this month, and our students will spend a few days in London to get acclimated. You will leave early next week by air, in order to establish yourself and coordinate their orientation. First, you'll go to Yorkshire University to introduce yourself, then to London to greet our students. After a week or so there, you'll arrange for three of them—all girls I believe—to be transported to Berkshire University. You'll accompany a mixed group of ten students to Yorkshire University. That's where you'll teach. You'll have a liaison at Yorkshire, but that's not the case at Berkshire. Here's the name of the Yorkshire man and how he can be reached." He leans across the desk as far as his bulbous stomach will permit and hands me a sheet of paper.

It says: "Yorkshire University: Richard Tarleton Mountjoy" above a phone number and a university address. Talk about names. He's probably one of those portentous prigs the English lionize.

"It will be of utmost importance for you to make a good impression on this man and form an amicable working relationship with him."

That will be a challenge. We'll have next to nothing in common. Irwin still hasn't answered the most important question:

"You don't think then that this commitment could adversely affect my chances of getting tenure?"

"In my opinion—and I do not, of course, speak for members of the Promotion and Tenure Committee—if your book gets published by a scholarly press, and if you enjoy a successful year abroad, it would be very difficult to deny your tenure."

So, there's no hammer, but a Damoclean sword will dangle over my head until the mission is accomplished to his satisfaction. I raise a skeptical eyebrow. "How many students applied for the program?"

He hesitates. "Thirteen. But you can rest assured all of them are well qualified. So then, what do you say to all this? Can we count on you?"

Thirteen apply, thirteen are accepted. There's selectivity for you. Well, I've exhausted every evasive tactic I can imagine. No little woman at home who has to be consulted before any important decision can be made. No elderly father or mother who needs to be tended to. I won't have to worry about Marthe—she'll be three thousand miles away.

Don't hesitate.

"What an extraordinary opportunity. I'm most grateful for it and delighted to be able to accept!"

"I hoped you'd feel that way. Here are your students." Irwin nudges a piece of paper in my direction.

They're in alphabetical order. Only one name is familiar to me.

Fleischmann, Marthe.

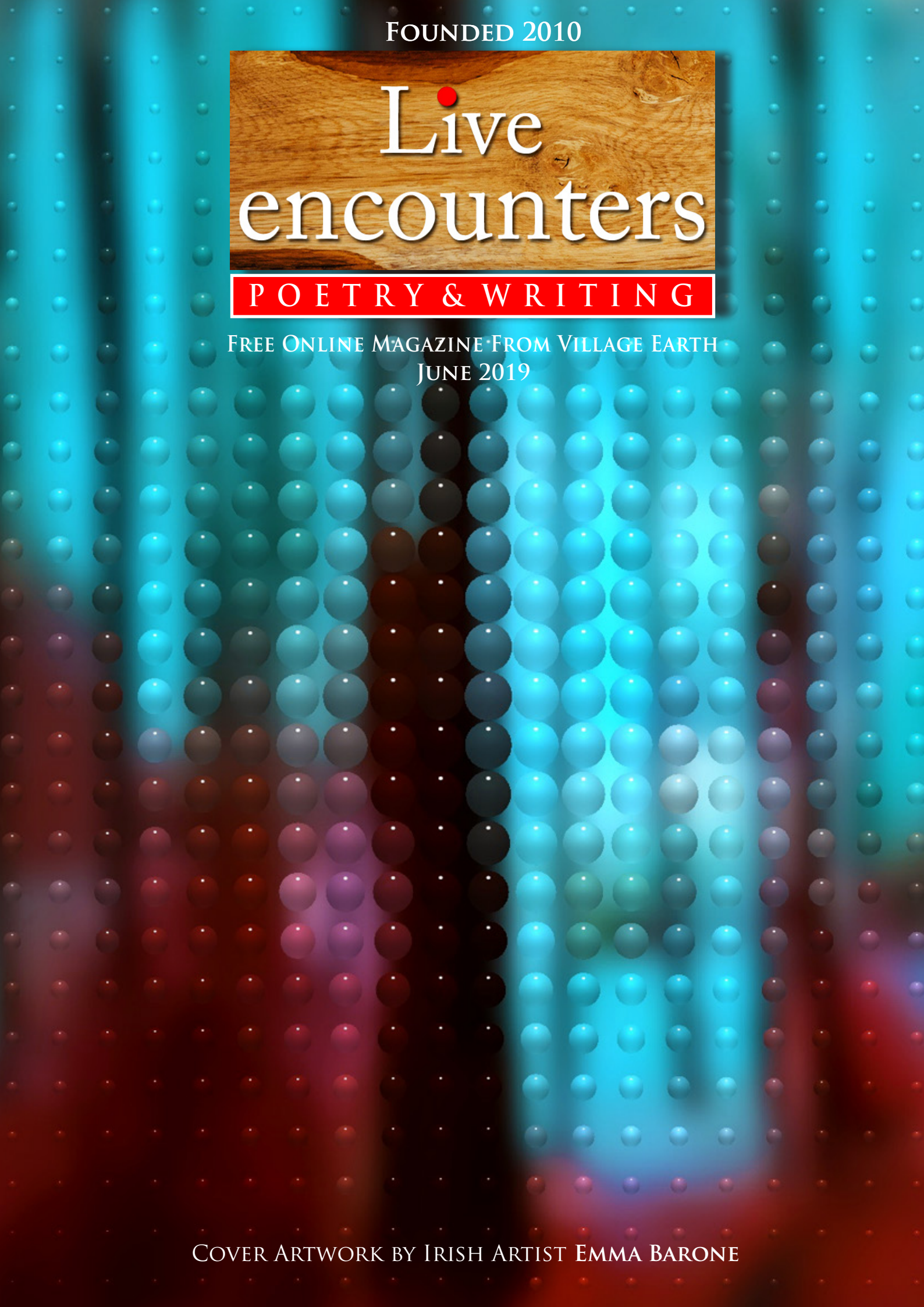
Founded 2010

Live encounters

POETRY & WRITING

Free Online Magazine From Village Earth

June 2019



Cover Artwork by Irish Artist **Emma Barone**