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Why Write?
Richard James Allen

COVER ARTWORK BY IRISH ARTIST EMMA BARONE



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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, environmentalists, social workers, photographers and more have contributed their time and knowledge for the benefit of the readers of the magazine.

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Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

Mark Ulyseas
Publisher/Editor
markulyseas@liveencounters.net

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CONTRIBUTORS

RICHARD JAMES ALLEN

NESSA O'MAHONY

ANN CHRISTINE TABAKA

JACK GRADY

PETER O'NEILL & YAN KOUTON

DAVID RATCLIFFE

ALICIA HOFFMAN

MAURICE DEVITT

SUSAN CONDON

CATH CAMPBELL

HONGRI YUAN

ROSEMARY JENKINSON

Richard James Allen's latest book is *The short story of you and I* (UWAP, 2019). Creator of #RichardReads (Global Poetry, Read Aloud) <https://soundcloud.com/user-387793087>, Richard is well-known for his multi-award-winning career as a filmmaker and choreographer with [The Physical TV Company](https://physicalltv.com.au/) (<https://physicalltv.com.au/>) and as a performer in a range of media and contexts.



Richard James Allen, photograph by Saba Vasefi. © The Physical TV Company

...if the arts were more respected and supported, and artists challenged themselves to be truly artists and not just politicians or activists, they would double their value to their societies. They wouldn't just have to be the deep insights by which we can appreciate the past, but valuable tools for people to engage with and reimagine the present.

WHY WRITE? RICHARD JAMES ALLEN

Pasts

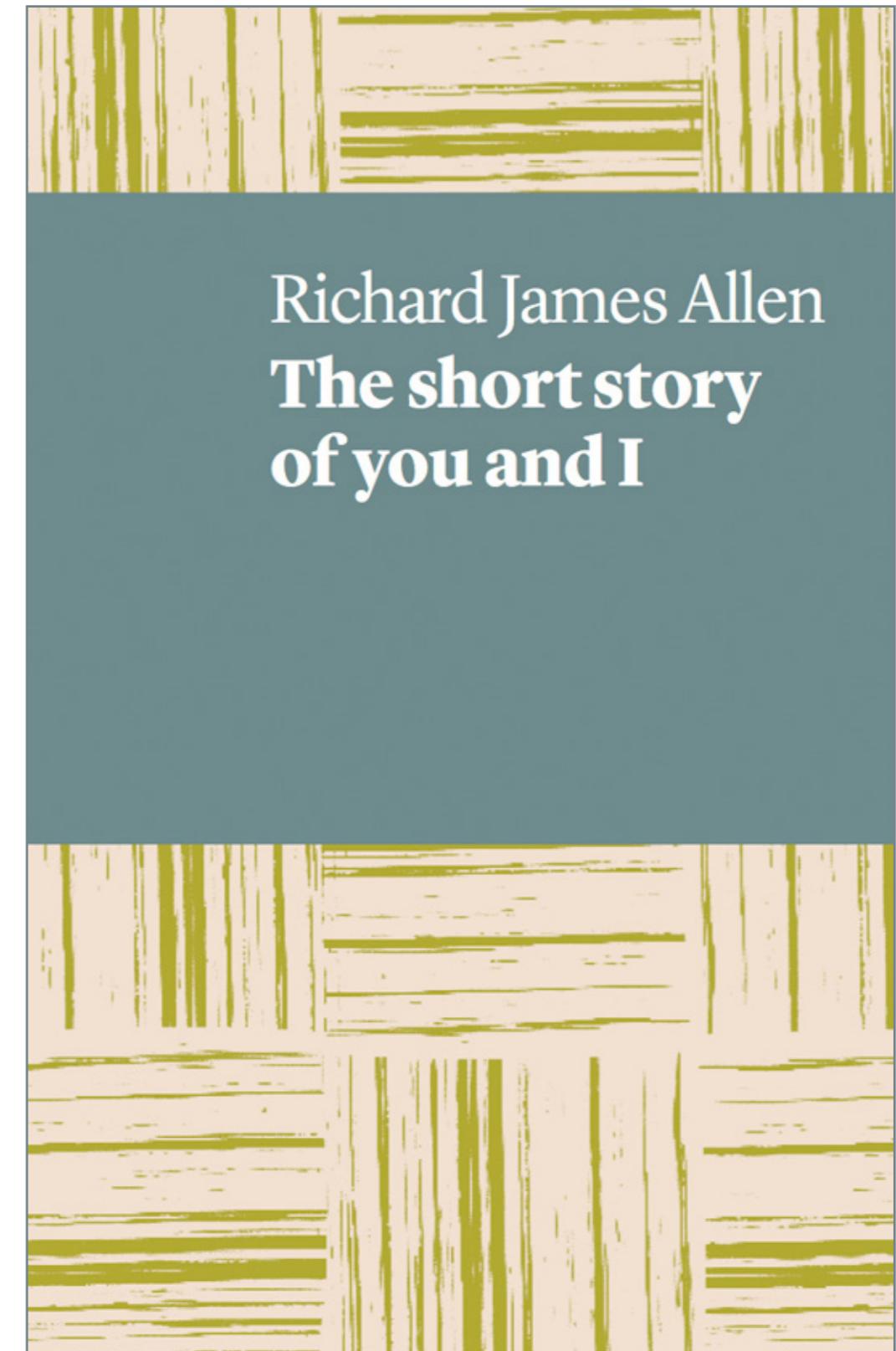
As the world seems to be rediscovering its shadows at an alarming rate, one could be forgiven for questioning the value of poetry, of art itself. As we stand, apparently helpless witnesses to the destruction of our values, the psychological and physical environment in which we live, what could be the purpose of our scribblings, our expressions in whatever form? As various luminaries have pointed out over the centuries, art changes nothing, enacts nothing, saves nothing.

And yet how untrue this actually is, because, of all the countless lists and endless inventories and catalogues one could amass of human activities, almost all of which judge themselves above art in their time, only art survives. Only art lives on to tell the tale, like Horatio after Hamlet's slaughterhouse. Bring to mind the unthinkable level of destruction of the First World War, the millions and millions of moments of individual and collective suffering, and yet the moments that come alive as if they are happening today are the ones that were experienced and written about by poets such as Owen and Ungaretti. We remember the Crusades through Chaucer, the Napoleonic era through Tolstoy, the fin de siècle through Baudelaire, the Irish rebellion through Yeats, the Weimar Republic through Isherwood, the Nazi extermination camps through Levi, the siege of Leningrad through Akhmatova, the Soviet gulags through Solzhenitsyn, the Harlem Renaissance through Hughes, and we will remember the offshore detention centres through Boochani.

We have to create the time capsules that carry our humanity forward. It is an exhausting and often thankless task, frequently misunderstood and extremely difficult to achieve at a high level of sophistication. But we have to rise above the selfishness and pettiness and mediocrity in ourselves and all around us. There are richly layered stories that need to be articulated, subtle emotions that need to be captured, half-understood injustices that need to be revealed, resonant beauties that need to be memorialised.

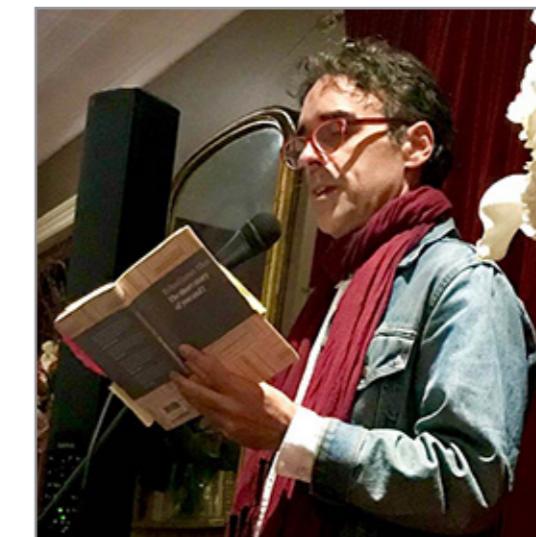
The list goes on and on if we scan the map of our cultural memory. It is the imagination of the time that becomes the history of the time. So while the writer and the artist generally have to endure a life of contempt, abuse and deprivation, being kicked around and scorned, lucky to survive, with the dogs, off the scraps off the table inhabited by the people who don't even question that they exist on some imaginary higher plane, the Fool has the last laugh on the King. Of course, art is not, nor would we want it to be, only about big historical turning points, moments of crisis and change. It is also valuable in cherishing the apparently unmemorable moments: the tiny gestures when a person is thinking, but doesn't realise that anyone is watching; the unexpected shared smile that momentarily unifies two lives; the act of kindness, whose intention carries far more weight than its practical application; the lacuna of an unadmitted, subtle betrayal; the forced smile that tries to shift the attention from envy; the awkward stumbles of not knowing what to say when being unexpectedly in the wrong place at the wrong time; the sly distraction of a sudden lust that might, if pursued, open the gateway to deeper love; the intuitive, often embodied, shift to a different plane of consciousness, the wondrous access to insights that seem like magic... All this and so much more...

We need our writers and artists to remember all the moments, not only the historically important public ones but also those that are privately and spiritually significant. And they have the ability, in their various mediums, to shape these into stories and patterns of words, thoughts and feelings that illuminate our humanity, in all its craven and uplifting spectrum. So this also means we writers and artists can't give up, can't sink into despair, can't feel sorry for ourselves, can't surrender in the face of hardship, wickedness or the closing down of our horizons. Because we have a job that only we can do. We have a responsibility to witness, to remember, to record the truth as we see it, good and bad, simple and complex, thrilling and banal, palatable and agonising. We have to create the time capsules that carry our humanity forward. It is an exhausting and often thankless task, frequently misunderstood and extremely difficult to achieve at a high level of sophistication. But we have to rise above the selfishness and pettiness and mediocrity in ourselves and all around us. There are richly layered stories that need to be articulated, subtle emotions that need to be captured, half-understood injustices that need to be revealed, resonant beauties that need to be memorialised.



Richard James Allen's latest book is *The short story of you and I* (UWAP, 2019)
<https://uwap.uwa.edu.au/products/the-short-story-of-you-and-i>

One of the areas I am most excited about for the future, around the world, is First Nations' storytelling - across, and interweaving, all areas of writing, arts and film. And my hope is that the descendants of the colonisers can start to move beyond a guilty, or disinterested, ticking of boxes to a genuine engagement, and with that recognition that there is so much to learn from Indigenous peoples.



Richard James Allen, photograph by Anne Casey.
© The Physical TV Company

Presents

Given all the issues facing us today, do writers and artists also have a role to play in contributing to contemporary debates and struggles? If so, does that mean that we should make issue-based art? Funding bodies tick boxes, is that how we should approach our writing and creativity?

I have never been one for trying to argue something in a creative medium that could be more clearly, directly and effectively communicated in some other form. And, while I have a very broad definition of poetry, I have heard and read many poems that, to my ear and mind, stop being 'poetry' when they become polemic.

But that said, some of the greatest masterpieces of art do embody a political or social point of view, and I think that might be because there is a wholeness, a three-dimensionality, to their vision, that might lean in a certain direction, but it avoids simplicity or dogma. It shows both sides of an equation and has empathy for all players, even if it settles on certain moral choices in the end. Masterpiece films like *Lawrence of Arabia*, *On the Waterfront*, *The Lives of Others*, come to mind. Set in very specific historical periods, they navigate complex political, social, ideological issues, with stories of interpersonal conflict and personal psychological challenge. They don't just preach to the converted. I don't see these works ever losing their resonance, even as our circumstances keep changing. So that's a high bar to success, but, I would say, one worth aiming for.

Futures

One of the areas I am most excited about for the future, around the world, is First Nations' storytelling - across, and interweaving, all areas of writing, arts and film. And my hope is that the descendants of the colonisers can start to move beyond a guilty, or disinterested, ticking of boxes to a genuine engagement, and with that recognition that there is so much to learn from Indigenous peoples. We need to replace the, for some well-intentioned, but nonetheless paternalistic, paradigm that we must create special programs to help these 'disadvantaged' peoples with the realisation that they have so much to offer to help us to heal our divided, disassociated, dislocated and dissatisfied world.

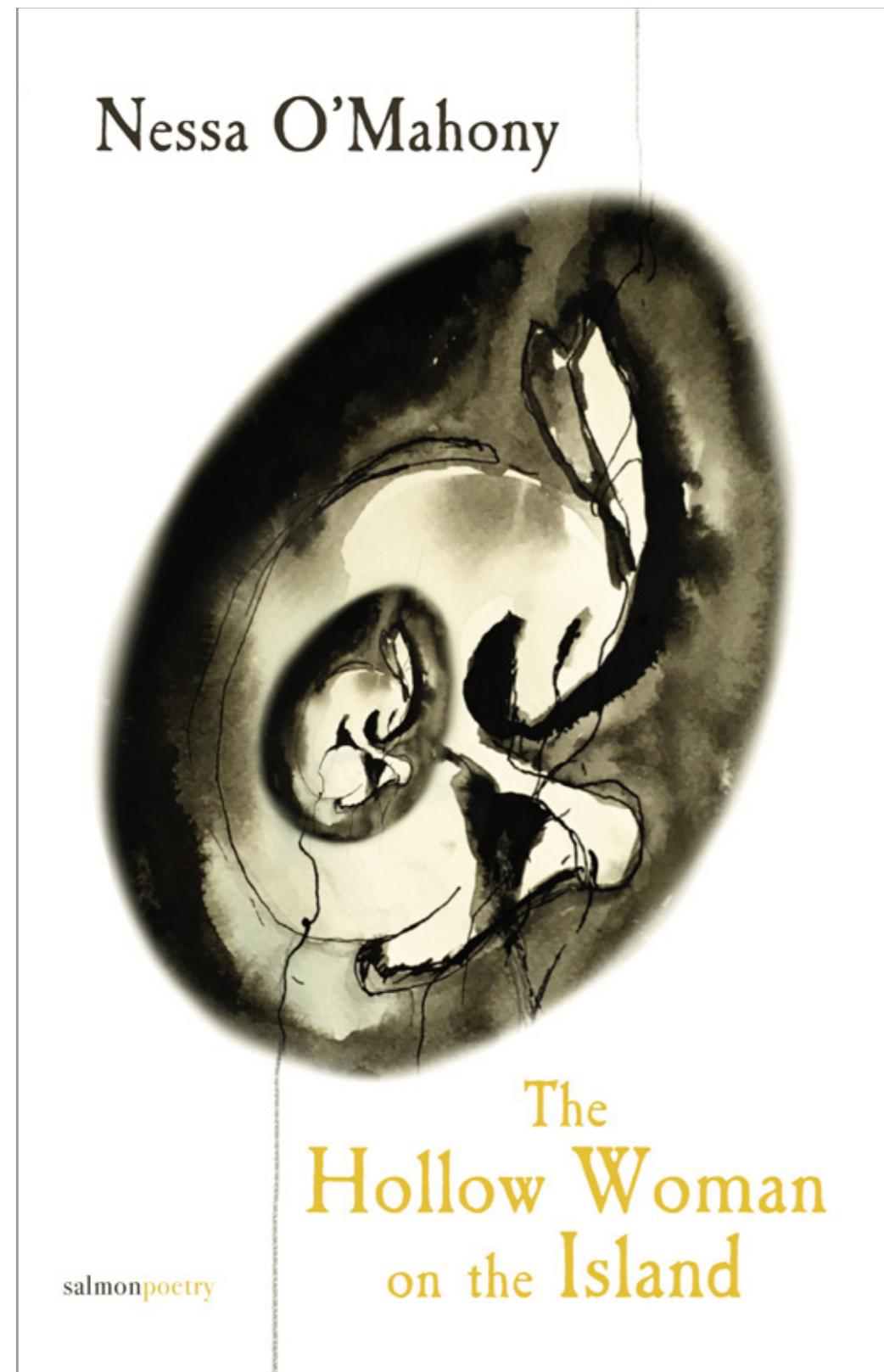
Decolonisation, along with de-misongynation, will give us an opportunity to start to relieve the deep burdens of repressed guilt and trauma (on both sides) that have been holding humanity back for generations.

To my way of thinking, poetry, and the arts in general, can assist with this not through polemic, but by presenting comprehensive, non-binary, visions that are tough and honest, without alienating through self-righteousness, instead allowing all voices a chance to sit at the campfire together, in peace, to 'tell our stories', both difficult and joyful.

In fact, if the arts were more respected and supported, and artists challenged themselves to be truly artists and not just politicians or activists, they would double their value to their societies. They wouldn't just have to be the deep insights by which we can appreciate the past, but valuable tools for people to engage with and reimagine the present.

They could help with the most intractable problem we have today, the fact that people of differing views don't talk to each other, and so never have the opportunity to understand each other.

So perhaps our writing and other artforms can have a pro-active and useful role in the world today, without being caught up in partisan politics. And perhaps our creativity can help build a bridge across the divides of misunderstanding that separate us from each other. The arts can be an empathy bridge that allows people to remember their shared humanity, and from that place of commonality start listening to each other again. To allow us to see the goodness in each other and speak to each other from there.



Details of her latest poetry collection, *The Hollow Woman on the Island*, can be found here: <https://www.salmonpoetry.com/details.php?ID=509&a=281>

Nessa O'Mahony was born in Dublin and lives there. She won the National Women's Poetry Competition was shortlisted for the Patrick Kavanagh Prize and Hennessy Literature Awards. She has published five books of poetry – *Bar Talk*, (1999), *Trapping a Ghost* (2005), *In Sight of Home* (2009) and *Her Father's Daughter* (2014). *The Hollow Woman and the Island* was published by Salmon Poetry in 2019. Her first work of historic crime fiction, *The Branchman*, was published by Arlen House in 2018.

HOMESTEAD

Nine windows,
one door,
the corridor veins
through its heart
from kitchen to bed
to parlour.

The builders
knew the value
of rooves, of walls,
of something to eat
other than grass.

Was that the clue
to survival on a road
that slopes seawards?

Collies at each bend
bark a threat.
Watch the tail,
tell the true intention
of the road that curves
waverwards.

Up the hill, lazy-beds
speak of former settlers.
Grass coats walls
that made good
neighbours once.

Electricity sizzles
through lines
that give starlings
pause for thought.

Look away
and it's gone
as a ghost laughs.

AISLING

They held a party
and all the poets came,
names writ not on water
but a gilt-edged A-list.
Pointless to look for yours
with all that air-kissing,
back-stabbing, rapping
disguised as slapping.
Afterwards, they took a bus
to some unmapped location
where the drinks were freer,
the reviews unread.

ROAD TRIP

for Tess Gallagher

We got what we wanted, even so,
despite the sat nav's best intentions;
the narrows, bends and swerves
mapped your cadences better,
tapped the rise and fall of chatter
about people you knew,
people I'd only read about.
A rainbow clipped the bonnet
passing Glencar Falls, a lark soared,
granite villages emerged from dips
so we paused to consider options;
the bog road seeming longer,
the lake switching sides
the closer we got to the drop-off,
to friends to be beloved.



© Nessa O'Mahony



Ann Christine Tabaka was nominated for the 2017 Pushcart Prize in Poetry, has been internationally published, and won poetry awards from numerous publications. She is the author of 9 poetry books. Christine lives in Delaware, USA. She loves gardening and cooking. Chris lives with her husband and two cats. Her most recent credits are: Ethos Literary Journal, North of Oxford, Pomona Valley Review, Page & Spine, West Texas Literary Review, The Hungry Chimera, Sheila-Na-Gig, Synchronized Chaos, Pangolin Review, Foliate Oak Review, Better Than Starbucks!

LIVING WATER

Water ...
Cool, refreshing, life sustaining.
Absent, all breath perishes.
The river that flows down to the sea
is born in the mountains high.

A marriage of snow-melt and rain,
an ancient love story of myth.
Trickling, sparkling, growing,
pregnant with life, a union for all ages.

Moisture laden clouds bestow
their gift upon the earth.
All that is living sing praise
to waters from above.

Enduring journey over rocks and pain,
continuing to the sandy shores of time.
Reflecting all that was before
and all there is to be.

Rain ...
a soothing, melodic patter,
or a devastating downpour.
Both blessing and bane.
Yet we cannot live without it.

Water ...
A reminder of where we came from,
and where we are to end.
Prism'd droplets, a rainbow's tribute
upon the thirsty earth.

LANDSCAPE OF YOUTH

When was the last time
you laid with me
upon a hillside green?
Looking at azure sky,
holding hands,
weaving dreams,
while the world drifts pass.

Winter far behind us,
spring in near reach.
It is once more time
to awaken sleeping passions.
Bare feet, sun kissed faces,
enjoying the warmth
of each other.

Soft fragrant grass,
birds' mellifluous chants.
The reverie lives once more.
Shared moments of bliss,
days of youth relived.
Regrets filed safely away.
A hillside stretches before us,
beckoning once more.



© Ann Christine Tabaka

HEATWAVE

Daylight shimmers on blacktop,
from relentless summer heat.

Sultry waves form mirages,
distorting distant objects.

Steam rises up from a far off marsh,
creating a nightmarish fog.

Oppressive days stretch
into endless weeks.

Shade sought as temperatures
reach towards one hundred,

Burned earth, withered vegetation,
torrid air sears all it touches.

A prayer goes up for rain,
with no relief in sight.

Strangled breaths struggle
in stifling humidity.

Sweltering restless nights,
while a ceiling fan whirls on high speed.

Summer's punishment in full force,
in the grips of a July heatwave.

FIVE MINUTES BEFORE WINTER

Five minutes before winter,
everything stops.

The sky opens up.
Silence penetrates the air.

And so the story goes,
without beginning or an end.

A finger points to nowhere,
a hand waves to the past.

Not knowing the distance
between right and wrong,
the path becomes obscure.

Delicacy of the moment,
wrapped in the wings of a dove.

Winter befalls autumn
in a whisper thin moment.

Cold is now the victor,
the sovereign of our days.

All set in wait for passage,
five minutes before winter.



© Ann Christine Tabaka



LEFT BEHIND

Another day of rain,
another day of doubt.
I am the rain that falls upon sorrow.
I wash pain with my tears.
Storm clouds move past,
yet I am left behind.

Misgivings mount.
Shadows stretch and deepen,
blocking out the sun.
I am the shadow that darkens.
A purple pall lifts to gray,
yet hope is left behind.

Placate my wounds,
then step aside.
All agony shall soon cease.
I no longer grapple ghosts,
I learn to accept my fate,
now defeat is left behind.

DRY SPELL

Fissured mud,
dry, hard, gray.
So many interlacing
fingers reaching out
in every direction,
crumble to the touch.

Arid summer,
sucking the breath from life.
Languishing thirst.
Wilted flora bow their heads.
Fallen warriors lack resilience
to withstand the furnace blast.

Parched earth,
crying out for sustenance.
No clouds in sight.
Not a drop of compassion
to be found.

Cruel season of drought,
unexpected curse.
Farmers pass their hats
and lay low,
hands folded in prayer.

Rotted fruit.
Tiny shriveled globes of despair.
Shrunken heads
hang limp and forlorn
upon dying hosts.

Time stands still.
Torrid air strangles all
within its grasp.
I exhale the dragon
from my lungs.

Scorched clay drifts from my hand,
dispersed into the atmosphere.
Well of hope, dry as dust.
Foreign to some years,
a vengeance in others.

All promise lost,
walking away
Then ...
faces turn upward
in disbelief,
as forgiveness rains from the sky



American-born Jack Grady is a founder member of the Ox Mountain Poets, based in Ballina, County Mayo, Ireland. His poetry has been widely published and has appeared either online or in print in *Live Encounters Poetry and Writing*; *Crannóg; Poet Lore; A New Ulster; The Worcester Review; North West Words; Mauvaise Graine; Outburst Magazine; The Runt; The Galway Review; Algebra of Owls; The Irish Literary Times* and others. His poetry collection, *Resurrection*, was published by Lapwing Publications in October 2017 and was nominated for the T.S. Elliot Prize, and it can be ordered from their list of poets on the Lapwing Publications website or via their direct link to the collection, which is [Jack Grady - Lapwing Store](#).



RESURRECTION

POEMS

JACK GRADY



Belfast
Lapwing

Resurrection by Jack Grady available here [Lapwing Publications](#).

The following four poems, under the group title of *The Murderers of Joshua Spooner*, are from a work in progress, entitled *Unconsecrated Ground*, in which Bathshua (a.k.a. Bathsheba) Spooner and other individuals involved in the events surrounding the murder of her husband and the events that followed speak from their graves. Despite the fact that she was pregnant, she was hanged in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1778, for instigating the murder of her husband, Joshua Spooner. Those who actually committed the murder – Ezra Ross, James Buchanan, and William Brooks – were hanged with her.

Four other poems in this series were published under the title *Unconsecrated Ground* in volume 1 of the December 2018 issue of *Live Encounters Poetry and Writing*, and can be read here: <https://liveencounters.net/le-poetry-writing-2018/12-dec-pw-vol-one-2018/jack-grady-unconsecrated-ground/>

BILLY BROOKS SPEAKS FROM UNCONSECRATED GROUND*

How, you may wonder, did my bones come to lie
under the weight of a city's buildings and streets
which I as a ghost must roam?

The cause was a woman of high station, so she believed herself to be.
But she was no higher at heart than a Bristol bunter, a tart,
but with a shape to enflame the envy of every wench who beheld her.

O, how I wanted her, and she knew it. She knew
how to bait me well with a wicked wink and a smile,
a flutter of lashes, a flash of her eyes, and, over the brim

of her bodice, the cleft of her bosom flaunted for view
like a worm on a hook to this fish of a fool who would bite, if he could.
But turn me away she would any time she decided I was too brazen.

But she kept me on her leash, reined me back with a wink,
stoked my heat when I began to suspect I was little more
than an uncrowned piece in her game of draughts.

I know what she will say of me – that I was born to be murderer and thief,
and, though I may fancy myself a clever rascal, a lusty rogue,
she will tell you I was nothing but a blackguard and a lout.

And I suppose 'twas true, but you must hear my story from me
and not from a Jezebel who could call a main seven*
and nick it with eleven in her eyes alone

easier than Herodias's daughter could nick her prize by dancing for a king.
And, just like that seductress was paid with the head of the Baptist on a plate,
Bathshua Spooner was paid with the murder of her husband by me.

And what did she grant me for my part in her scheme?
There was no dance for Billy Brooks, no nothing but drink,
a few rebel shillings in paper, not a guinea's worth in gold,

clean breeches to replace the ones that dripped with her husband's blood,
promises of a king's treasure from a strongbox, and, so I believed,
the promise of her body for my pleasure, too.

But my reward was to be the end of all pleasure and drink:
for my treasure a carcanet of rope around my neck,
my kingly crown a cap pulled down over my nose and mouth,

and, for coronation as a murderer, the hangman's
ladder and scaffold where I choked to death,
to be heaved into a hole in a field unblessed.

But, now, instead of wildflowers and weeds, what rises from that field
are structures of steel, brick, and concrete, whose weight grinds in this ground
the bones of an arm that swung a stake at a living man's skull,

the bones of hands that crushed his throat as he gave his last kick,
the bones of arms, shoulders and chest that dropped him like a bucket to bounce
down off the deepest stones in his well.

*In an eighteenth-century dice game known as 'Hazard', if the caster calls,
for example, the number seven as a 'main', and he then throws on the first toss
either the main or the number eleven, he 'nicks' or wins the game.

JAMES BUCHANAN SPEAKS FROM UNCONSECRATED GROUND

Though I was born and raised in Glasgow,
in year of Our Lord 1742, my residence now
is in what used to be a potters' field,
in a grave never marked with stone or name.
And any trace of that grave was erased long ago
by a town that grew over sixty fold
to sprout into a city with foundations whose roots
have crushed into dust all my bones.

But what is even worse for me
is the company I'm cursed to keep,
to lie beside and haunt these streets
with the ghost of that bounder named Billy Brooks,
that thrawn-faced rake whose decision
to murder Joshua Spooner
got our thrapples twisted by a hangman
on a scaffold in a place called Worcester.

But Brooks will tell you, and I must agree,
that he was a victim, too, that, although
he was the main performer in that lethal deed,
he was ensnared like Adam by an Eve. And who
was the seductress who tempted with forbidden fruit,
who beguiled us into the act of Cain?
She was the unfaithful wife of Joshua Spooner.
She was a spell-weaving Circe of a web of doom.

EZRA ROSS RECALLS FROM HIS GRAVE HIS FIRST EXPERIENCE OF BATHSHEBA SPOONER**

Sometimes, I was aware of a presence
as I sweated under quilts.
Sometimes, I felt a wet cloth
pass over my brow or press
upon my skin, where it soaked up
every demon from my nightmare.

And the bed that had seemed a vessel
thrashing about in a howling storm
suddenly became a cradle,
lulling the storm into a calm
and sailing me to a sheltered cove,
to an anchorage of steady sleep.

Once, I felt a naked hand
upon my brow, then a kiss.
And I believed that the presence I sensed
had been my mother Joanna's, all along,
and that I was still a child,
safe in my bed, in Ipswich.

But, later, I discovered
I was not in Lyndebook Parish in my bed,
nor was the one who kissed me my birth mother;
instead, the mother who kissed me
became my lover – Bathshua Spooner –
mother of my death.

**Although Bathsheba Spooner's legal, given name was Bathsheba, she preferred to use the byname 'Bathshua' (given to her by her father to distinguish her from her mother), and she also signed her name as such, even when appealing to the Massachusetts Executive Council for a stay of execution.

BATHSHUA'S SPIRIT RECALLS THE AXE THAT FELLED HER MARRIAGE

Perhaps I should have been the submissive ideal,
fit for an instruction guide for the Goodwife.

Perhaps I should have mirrored
what men demanded of the thing they called us:

'the softer sex'. Perhaps
I should have emulated my sisters.
Despite what they knew to be true,
they adhered to the will of their husbands,

though their husbands, like mine,
had the courage of a cur tethered to its master's tree.
And its master was the mob unleashed
by fifes and drums of the rebels

to tar and feather the truth.
To be like them I could never be.
I was too much like my father, and,
for that reason, I was the child he most cherished.

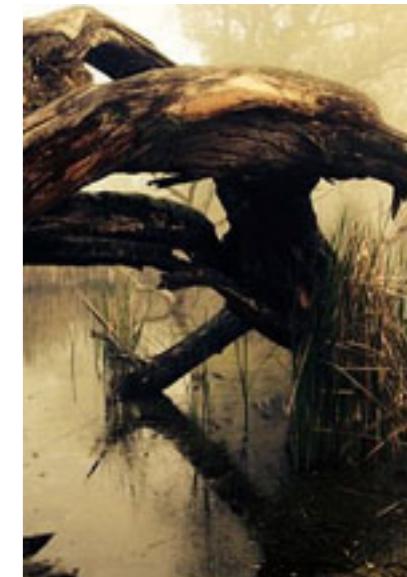
I was ever too much like a member
of the masculine gender
to suffer myself to submit
to the rule of my husband

in a matter that meant as much to me
as to my daddy: loyalty
to the authority of our King.
My allegiance to my Sovereign

was so firm that this difference between
my husband and me was bound
to lead to disaster. To the contempt
I felt for him in our intimate relations,

the contempt in which I held him
owing to his treason was joined,
and thus I could suffer not so much as a touch
from him without wishing him dead.

Politics was the axe that felled whatever remained
standing in our marriage, and politics left
the severed limbs and trunk of our union
to rot in the swamp of the American rebellion.



© Jack Grady

I first met Laura/ Alessia almost 19 years ago on Baggott Street, where we were both working at the time. We met on what was to be the last week of her short stay in the country. Well, we met soon after she returned to her native Sardinia in Paris in November, two months after we had first met. That was the clincher, she returned to live with me in Ireland the following January, 2001. She has been living with me here ever since. Ten years ago we had a daughter together, Rebecca. I have dedicated numerous books to Laura, over the years. *The Dark Pool* and *Dublin Gothic*, being two. These two sonnets, taken from Henry Street Arcade, show very well, I think, our both sides. Here's to many more years together!

Merci pour les traductions Yan.



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*. **These two sonnets are from work in progress of book titled 'Commuting with Baudelaire'. They have been translated from English to French by Yan Kouton.**

MY DARK LADY

*Nothing's had, all's spent,
When our desire is got without content.*

Lady Macbeth – Shakespeare

For Laura

For you I will be that sainted figure of a man,
If you will but accept him with all his equal quirks and perversions,
As I will, in turn, accept the base bitch in you,
The one who, through necessity, spurs the basest need in me.

For, are we both not but the conglomerate parts
Of our most extreme opposites;
Bitch from hell, base bastard from beyond?
And such is only half the tale!

But I would accept the sainted figure of you too,
Long after the pots have been steaming till all is boiled,
And your southern temperament has finally cooled.

O woman, diabolical. You are why I read Baudelaire,
For only Shakespeare, and he, seem to have your proper contours
Measured and set in unholy printed atrocity.

MY DARK LADY

*On n'a plus rien, tout dépensé,
Quand le désir est assouvi sans satisfaire.*

Lady Macbeth – Shakespeare

Pour Laura

Pour vous, je serai cette sainte figure d'homme,
Si vous voulez l'accepter avec toutes ses bizarries et perversions égales,
En acceptant à mon tour la chienne qui est en vous,
Celle qui, par nécessité, suscite en moi le besoin le plus grave.

Car ne sommes-nous pas tous les deux des parties assemblées ?
De nos opposés les plus extrêmes ;
Salope de l'enfer, enfoiré aux portes de l'au-delà ?
Et ce n'est que la moitié du récit !

Mais je pourrais aussi accepter votre sainte silhouette,
Longtemps après que les pots aient chauffé jusqu'à ce que tout soit bouilli,
Et que votre tempérament méridional ait finalement refroidi.

Ô femme diabolique. Vous êtes la raison pour laquelle j'ai lu Baudelaire,
Car avec Shakespeare, ils ont pris la mesure de vos contours
Fixés en impression atroce et impie.

SHAKESPEARE

For Alessia

Exult the chorale to leaven the waking day,
 Voices to rest the tired feet threading on human clay,
 O we who daily labour duty bound to till the earth
 With its incommensurable circumference, delivering
 Sudden and unexpected birth, each harbouring
 Like the solemn salt-lashed seaward pier,
 Enduring the barbed turbulence of change,
 Only to fulfil the octagon of possible further assault.

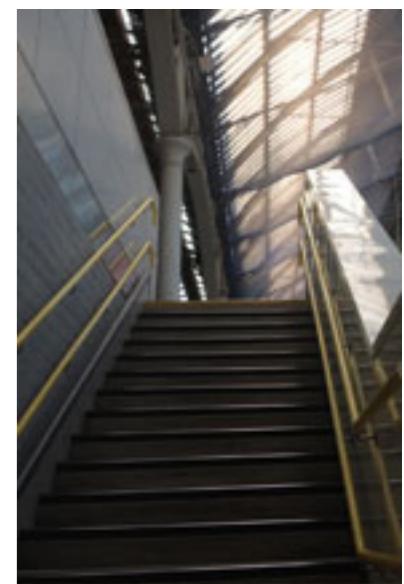
O we who both suffer mental and physical ill,
 Then and only then till reason bows us,
 So that we are forced to consider, and quite seriously,
 Forgoing all further evidence of thrill,
 When the auspicious word, vowel leaden, plump with
 OE and elongated as limbs, further steels U

SHAKESPEARE

Pour Alessia

La chorale exulte au lever chaque matin,
 Des voix pour reposer les pieds fatigués de l'argile humaine,
 Ô nous qui travaillons tous les jours obligés de cultiver la terre
 Avec sa circonférence incommensurable, livrant
 Une naissance soudaine et inattendue, chacun abrité
 Comme la solennelle jetée maritime,
 Endurant la turbulence hérissée du changement,
 Tout cela pour protéger l'octogone d'éventuels nouveaux assauts.

Ô nous qui souffrons tous les deux d'une maladie physique et psychique,
 Ce n'est qu'à ce moment-là que la raison nous renverse,
 Nous sommes alors obligés d'envisager, et très sérieusement,
 De renoncer à la preuve de l'évidence.
 Lorsque le mot propice, voyelle de plomb, s'arrondit avec
 OE et s'allonge comme un membre, plus loin en acier U



© Peter O'Neill



David Ratcliffe hails from the north of England. He writes poetry, short stories, song lyrics & Stage plays. One of his plays 'Intervention' is currently with a theatre company in London. In 2016 his poem 'Home Straight' was shortlisted in the Fermoy International Poetry Festival Competition and was featured on the poetry trail that year. David's debut collection; 'Through An Open Window' will be published later this summer by Rebel Press. His poetry has been published on-line in the numerous publications.

THE MUSIC DIED

You pluck chords from an open wound
composing a tortured symphony,
picking the same strings I strum,
feeling the pulse of pain
while I lip-sync emotion
as sand weeps into the bowl
uninvited.

Your disquiet disturbs me;
I envy it's hurt,
wish to pierce my core,
allow it to bleed,
though numbness controls my hand
and all I do is hold you.

For now, I remain constipated,
although in time I know
I must die in instalments
scraping my bow
along the sinews of separation.

EUNICE

Skin glowing in the puce layer of sunset,
the enduring vestige of purloined fantasy,
her slight frame inclining a chill breeze,
eyes of neon lighting moments past.

Unadorned purity summoned in surfacing
passages defeats lip-glossed wantonness,
from masquerading ladybirds, mere beetles
underneath. She, the pure essence of
magnolia, graceful as a meadow pipit skipping
through the vale. No trinkets or concealer to
conceal her majesty, nor wanton attention
impose upon her virtue. Grace and elegance
lingers in my mind, modestly reigning over my
abiding memory of fair Bute Isle; of Eunice.



© David Ratcliffe



THREE-DAY WEEK

Nestled in the Pennine vale,
blackened, defiled by time,
a 'three day week' factory,
serves a seven-day need.

Like concert pianists,
in neat rows, they sit 'mantis-like'
taking turns in shouting
"where is that girl with my thread?"

Treadle down, run through,
hems sewn, scissors readied,
more attire for the wasteful breed
in 'that' London.

Burr of machines, piped music,
widows, wives, and spinsters
sing their own words;
vowels flatter than dads cap.

Callused fingers, shoulders burdened,
thoughts drift to trading gas money
for a chippy tea; large portion
feeds five, a midweek treat.

Through desperation and fear
they laugh at nothing
as if it were everything
and sing of brighter days.

COLOUR-BLIND

I sauntered through decades
in twenty minutes;
along grey decking
beneath a pale blue sky,
full sun grilling my bald spot
demanding a cap,
as I listened to my son
laughing through the mystical portal
wedged in my clammy hand.

Playing with stubble; thoughts
tumbling like twitter feed
everything seemed immediate,
important,
less so
then lost.

For over twenty years,
I'd craved such simple repartee;
a refuge from sorrow,
and so on capturing his self-effacing tone
I bathed in the warmth
of his sanguinity,
as we vacated the battlefield
to tend to our wounds

Together the sun and my son
illuminated the garden;
reds, greens & purples
vied for attention,
as his throwaway annotations
ricocheted around my head.

He said 'I love you Dad'
as he hung up
my face aching,
head scorched.

Two days later,
another call from his number
though this time his aunt spoke...
'John has been found dead'
his voice still playing in my mind
as she faltered with hers.
Without notice, my eyes filled
were boil-washed,
and hung out to dry.

RHUBARB

'Someone important shot in the head',
so the wireless told the elders, back when
'get to bed or I'll smack yer legs' was a promise.

Yet more immediate to us;
at the hindmost angle of the yard
a hapless goalkeeper
attempted retrieval of
Jimmy Greaves' projectile
from red-legged rhubarb stalks
thicker than his wrists.

Green elephant like ears protected
the death-row pie fillings
nestled on a clump of earth
below the tightrope
where birds performed aside
overalls and waving arms.

My brother and I hesitated
at thick-skinned defiance,
the binding of plant and bramble,
the vibrant creepy-crawlies
in that infinitesimal world housed
in the cracked hands of the Pennines.

Maybe we would retrieve it later
or gain revenge at the dinner table?
We never expected anyone would ask...
'what were we doing that day'?
to which we'd reply...
'We lost our ball in the rhubarb'.

UNRELIABLE WITNESS

Leaving words unwritten
of thoughts indisposed
I finally conceded to fatigue,
logging off from the familiar,
while at odds with accounts.

Deleted files from my hard drive
attracted the self-appointed detective
working the night shift
who'd become perplexed
at disturbing images
demanding investigation.

As the mind closed down
he poked around
viewing the 'out of whack'
box set of my autobiography
as the corrupted files played
nonsensical episodes.

Evermore confused and defeated;
his trilby slid over his eyes
as he fell asleep on the job
leaving the surreal episode
to drift into perdition.

A place where erased memory
of the dead presides
over varied reports
of time and place
about cold case events,
though nothing was taken
or body was found.

Recklessness befell mindfulness;
repentance recoiled
at the midpoint of torcher
as the grainy image closed
and woke the gumshoe
who questioned this unreliable witness
now seeking council.



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Pic from Pixabay.com

Originally from Pennsylvania, Alicia Hoffman now lives, writes, and teaches in Rochester, New York. The author of two full-length collections, her work has appeared in a variety of journals, including *The Penn Review*, *SOFTBLOW*, *Radar Poetry*, *Redactions: Poetry & Poetics*, *Up the Staircase Quarterly*, *A-Minor*, and elsewhere. She holds an MFA in Poetry from the Rainier Writing Workshop at Pacific Lutheran University. Find out more at: www.aliciamariehoffman.com.

ALEXA PLAYS MILES DAVIS

as I stand over the kitchen island, snapping wooden ends from asparagus, smashing garlic into a fine paste. As the sax crescendos water rolls to a boil and this is my day, my half glass of cabernet working magic in my veins, shrill note of a job de-escalating, transitioning into evenings I take off professional trappings and let myself go loose to lose myself in music I don't know anything about except instrumental jazz is something I like, a privilege to enjoy, this notion of liking without knowing, because I can't tell you why this balancing act of chaos and clarity, confusion and clear delineation moves me, or why I am allowed to pamper myself in simple pleasures while the world loses itself in a kind of blue that keeps me paralyzed. Stuttering, Alexa skips to a different song, as though intentions are never enough, as if a request is more prayer than action, as a new age tune echoes a drumbeat, begins a synthesized sonorous vocal track, a button pushed in a studio replicating what used to be real. Who is to say what makes anything authentic? What simulacrum does not intuit the shadows true shape beyond the cave? I am in my kitchen, and in South East Asia the same sun shines as the Rohingya flee from genocide. Right now, someone thinks only survival as I waste vegetable scraps and play act at wonder, as the world's music barrels in and voices in their anguish keep me singing.



EPISTEME || DOXA || GNOSIS

I love my little house. I know this
because I've walked its four corners

in slow motion, made note of doors
in need of stain, faucets encircled

with rust, tubs in need of new caulk.
But tonight, the wind is picking up,

and I am thinking too much
of myself. I don't know much

of the world. If I could, I would
gather its distinctive parts in my hands.

I would love them so hard. I've heard
it said music is heard between the notes.

If true, I want my song silently rising
over the eves and cornices of this house

I love so intimately, out past streetlights
blinking on as dusk replaces day.

I want my love to move us, to carry us
in it, past the harbor where pleasure

boats dock on the crest of Lake Ontario,
to sail us right into the heart of weather.

I want us comfortable in the drafts,
sifting through the seas, embracing

it all regardless of mistakes. The countless
mistakes. If I lie on my back and begin

to name every error passing like a cloud
over my head I will only begin to cleave

this parting and going and making.
I know when we go away from here

this planet will continue creating
or it will not. I know I don't know.

I know I like the sound of solipsistic
as much as I am, but that even this

in the scheme of things is enough.
That it will amount to anything

is another dream—vaporizing tonight
near the windowsill as a pot of water

begins to roll to a boil and I dream
in a fleeting moment the very field

of clover I discovered as a child
when the whole world knew more

than ever what I thought of it
and decided to gift me a genesis

of green stalked leaves in threes
and one with four like a miracle in vitro.

It is hope we continue to continue for.

TO SAVE MY LIFE

Sometimes I can't write a poem to save my life.
 To save my life I've burned the ends of hours
 lining my mind with lines, my memory a sieve
 I dream of words that will continue to help me
 continue, to shore up the dock in the sea
 of this wide-open life—words floating
 in the offing like life rafts in the blue horizon
 as I wake each day drowning but for this
 new word in the distance I need to near,
 as if a few syllables were sunk some time ago
 into a pocket of my personal sea as I forgot
 to pay attention, as I was rounding a mark,
 maybe, or maybe as I was on my way to losing
 control of the helm of the boat that is this life
 strayed off course—sails flail in the wind
 as I struggle to lean starboard, grasp the hull—
 to save my life I listen to the sounds, whispers
 on the wind like sirens singing—to save my life
 again, a new word swimming in the distance.

DOUBLE SONNET W/ LATE STAGE CAPITALISM ENDING AT THE OFFICE

Along the northern border, this country
 gathers people in its slate colored streets,
 in its bus depots and its big box stores
 advertising a BOGO on Chex Mix,
 Nutri-Grain, plasma screen TVs lit like
 X-mas. It's a blaring emergency,
 each minute a new crisis. Today breaks
 news like ticker tape confetti as we
 gather in our factories, lick our stamps,
 as we post bills, hand our children what we
 need for them to pass down, as it was passed
 to us, from kin to kin, in communal
 congregations. This country works to work
 again, and again, a new day dawning.

So today, the planet tilts its axis,
 the S&P plummets and, yes, again
 morning traffic expectedly stops on
 Alexander, cars caught like logs in jams
 along an asphalt river, the cold rain
 pelting windshields, commuters jarring wheels
 to bleat horns in urgency as I am
 able to breathe—a temporal blessing
 for one moment—as roads, at least this one,
 in this small section of life's expressway,
 allow me a break—a pause long enough
 to dream in—before the congregation
 begins again its endless worship, work
 ship sailing still for that starlit office.



© Alicia Hoffman

THAT FOREVER

I've been reading a book about the history of humans.
Spoiler alert: war, famine, disease, death. Mesopotamia

to modern day: religion, ignorance, the conquerors have
what the conquered do not. Not a student of history

I delight in the idiosyncrasies of imaginative names:
Gilgamesh, Siddhartha, Trotsky, Lenin. Genghis Khan,

Muhammed, Tutankhamen, Guevara. I haven't finished
the book. The book, I believe, has no end, though humans

are fond of hypotheticals, systemic of overworked
hypothalamuses, I assume, so we use examples: Nuclear

annihilation, climactic catastrophe, asteroids, event horizons,
the impending singularity. We wonder what it means to die,

to return, to be greeted at the door to heaven with a boatload
of nubile virgins, to Gabriel's Gates, to the afterlife we choose

and by choosing lose something necessary needed in our language,
some isthmus of imagination, pinnacle of evolution, missing hinge

on a much-needed door—a bolt of cloth, a mural painted on muslin,
the fine workmanship of a clay pot, jade rooted in the axis. Geometric

squares on the floor of the mosque. Or perhaps, the ellipses of earth,
the galaxies beyond, the cultural revolution of planets and the planets

and moons behind what we find, and meanwhile, the small acts
of opening, here, the slow unfolding of peony blossoms in late June,

the quick fullness of them till they fall, the twin image of the lungs
inside the cave of the body rising, releasing a scattering of dust

swirling over the precipice of our breath as we walk each morning
a bit further down the road into a story that forever is the future.



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Selected for Poetry Ireland Introductions in 2016, Maurice Devitt's poems have featured in a significant number of journals, both in Ireland and internationally. He was a featured poet at the Poets in Transylvania Festival in 2015 and a guest speaker at the John Berryman Centenary Conference in both Dublin and Minneapolis. His poems have been nominated for Pushcart, Forward and Best of the Net prizes and his Pushcart-nominated poem, 'The Lion Tamer Dreams of Office Work', was the title poem of an anthology published by Hibernian Writers in 2015. He is curator of the Irish Centre for Poetry Studies site and has recently published his debut collection, 'Growing Up in Colour', with Doire Press.

THE FEAR OF BEING

A burglar called to my house last night
but I wasn't home, so he slipped the latch
with his ATM card and let himself in.
He hovered in the innocent dark,
adjusting his eyes to the light,
the alarm triggered like a starter pistol
and he was off, swooping through the house,
eyes peaked, gloved hands flapping
and ears tuned for surprising sounds
in the chaos. When I returned,
my world was laid out for anybody to see,
but not as I remembered it, and a stranger
had walked in to my life, never to leave.

IN PRINCIPLE, PETER WAS RIGHT

after Laurence J. Peter 1919-1990

My boss called me to his office,
that plush, chrome cavern on the ninth,
remarked how my performance had surpassed
all expectation and outlined a position
he would like me to consider. At first I feigned
disinterest, my gaze apparently distracted
by the precipitous view to the river, but,
not for the first time, the black tongue of ambition
quickly sold me the deal. A corner office on the seventh,
an oak desk the size of a small house, Chesterfield suite
in stressed leather and a green banker's lamp.
I was accompanied by boxes of management books,
bought but never read, and, waiting to crowd the bare walls,
a tower of framed certs, impressive to look at
but not to examine. I called my mother, she called
her friends, and I settled in quickly, my team rapt
and responsive, their lunch breaks spent googling
my career. Deal after deal stacked up, board members
whispered my name, for months I could do no wrong.
Until one day, I'm not sure when, my numbers became
a fraction of themselves, presentations appeared
in invisible ink and every sales pitch
sounded poached and scrambled. I tried harder
and the target moved further away. Friends trawled
my past for torn blankets of comfort, but they covered little
of the gloom. I had grown to believe that failure
was a distant cousin of success, mentioned in passing
at family parties but never seen, yet, when it arrived,
I could hardly tell the difference, and recognition
brought such a glorious release.



THE OFFICE BULLY

lives on your street
and every morning
he kisses his wife and kids
goodbye, heads for the train.
He might engage a friend
in conversation about the football
the night before or simply stand
in a packed carriage
thinking about the day ahead.
In the evening he re-traces his steps,
is delighted to be home
and, when his wife asks rhetorically
about his day, he smiles
and wonders what's for tea.

STILL DREAMING OF LIVORNO

When I was seven I acquired my first chicken,
a Black Italian Leghorn, stolen under cover of darkness
from the coop at the end of a neighbour's garden
and secreted in a wicker basket under the bed.
As I slipped its first egg into the fridge, I remarked
to my mother how I had been woken by a noisy skiffle
from the hen-house next door, followed by the plaintive cry
of a fox, taking care to quickly dismiss an errant feather
from my school jumper. Some days later, when I felt the coast
was clear, I decided to introduce the chicken to my family,
explaining how I had found her wandering in the woods
behind the house and how she had followed me home.
She settled in quickly, sitting beside me on the couch
while I watched cartoons and Aardman re-runs,
scratching industriously around the school-yard
and, even nestling on a window-sill, listening intently,
as the teacher discussed questions of causality,
origin and sequence. And every day a single white egg
until, three weeks in, I found her watching an episode
of *Countryfile* on the pros and cons of battery farming
and her rhythm stumbled. Her eyes grew cold, she skipped
her daily dust-bath and passed the time staring at the sky.
One morning I woke to find her bed empty,
save for one last egg, sad face emoji etched on the shell.

THE WAGES OF FEAR

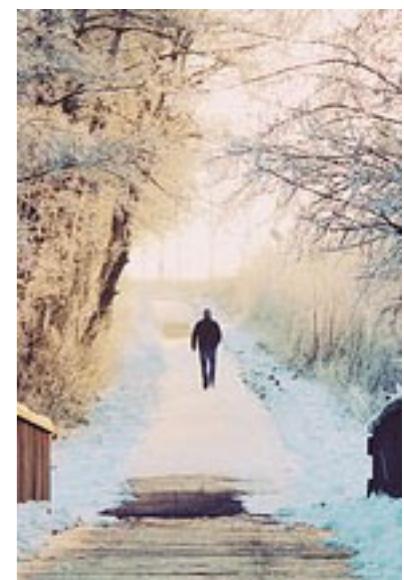
For years you worked in the shadow
of a man who knew your honesty
was a weakness, who would fleer
at your words, turn certainty
into doubt and scar every weekend
with a cast-off quip,
as he passed laughing through the office
on a Friday evening.

To us a father was all-powerful,
there to entertain on a Sunday night,
read us to sleep, but now I know
how your stomach churned,
as a parallel story
played out in your mind.

A WALK IN WINTER

It was a day like any other,
aimless and blue.
No crushing commitments,
no burning eye on the calendar,
yet, by evening, he had decided
to step out into the dark.

He must have looked anonymous
in the black air, striding
as though he had some purpose,
some destination in mind.
If it helps, I will describe
again what he was wearing
bulked up against the cold,
perhaps it wasn't clear on the CCTV.



© Maurice Devitt



Susan Condon, a native of Dublin, Ireland has started working on a new novel set in her home town. She was awarded a Certificate in Creative Writing from the National University of Ireland Maynooth. Her short stories have won numerous awards including first prize in the Jonathan Swift Creative Writing Award while others have been long-listed, on four occasions, in the RTÉ Guide/Penguin Short Story Competition. Publications include *Ireland's Own Anthology*, *My Weekly*, *Boyne Berries 22*, *Live Encounters*, *Flash Flood Journal*, *Spelk*, *Flash Fiction Magazine* and *The Flash Fiction Press*. Susan blogs at: www.susancondon.wordpress.com. You can find her on Twitter: @SusanCondon or check out her crime fiction reviews and interviews on www.writing.ie

THE SLEEPING LANDSCAPE

A light mist falls from a slate grey sky as
my eyes traverse the sleeping landscape.

It's difficult to visualise this world awake.

But eventually, voices break the silence,
an inanimate world springs back to life.

Dark blots on the horizon, carry a white casket,
weaving their way towards a toothed enclosure.
The hallowed ground offers peace and tranquillity.

Tendrils of anguish brush my cheek: a grief,
intense enough to burn my soul. Some quench
fires while others fan the flames; igniting hatred,
allowing old wounds to fester. But not today.

In solidarity, this land divided, now joins as one.

Birdsong breaks my reverie. A lone robin departs.

Pic from Pixabay.com

Cath Campbell, a retired probation officer, wrote reports for the courts for thirty years. Once freed from the tedium of the formulaic, she studied for an MA in creative writing, passing with distinction, but never wrote poetry until several years later after accidentally joining an on-line poetry group. Since then she has had many poems published in a variety of on-line and hard copy magazines.



THE COLOURS OF FREEDOM

It's the colour of white deserts at noon,
the peace therein for those who are left.
It's the colour of tumbled blue oceans,
of the creatures who sweep their depths.
It's the colour of a vast green forest,
the wealth of life that inhabits it yet.

It's the grey of the mountains straining
towards the snowfall speckle skies.
It's the colour of dark thunderclouds,
and the birds that fly in endless highs.
It's the colour of rubies, of coal, of gold,
it's the sum of our deeds, our lives.

The colour of a heart fighting for justice,
it's strength of resolve against slavers,
defence of our downtrodden and weakest.

This dream of freedom grows as distant
as the moon, or the sun, or the stars.

ON THE LAST DAY

On the last day I shall not whitewash my windows,
or get behind the mattress and hide under the stairs.
I shall not become angry, or sad, or fall to despair.

I'll play Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen endlessly
and upset the neighbours one last time for free.
I'll sit in the garden with my wee dog, counting daisies.
I'll say goodbye to sparrows and blackbirds with seeds.
I'll eat black olives, and home-made bread with cheese,
and sip from a china cup the very best Yorkshire tea,
and, perhaps, have a slice of blackberry pie with cream.
What I won't do is worry about the state of my health,
the leckie bill, overdraft, or how to increase my wealth.

I shall not waste time whitewashing the windows,
plumping the mattress, or cowering under the stairs.
I shall not become angry, or sad, or fall to despair.



© Cath Campbell



HUMAN

The bird with a broken wing,
picked up early Sunday morning
by a woman on her way home,
is not safe and well, but safe and dead.
The lengths to which she went
to get a vet to stop the pigeon's pain
was the best part of human.

It's the least I can do, she says,
because other suffering is too far away
across oceans, mountains and deserts.
She understands it is the 'high, out of reach'
who make those calls to bomb and break.
She cries at the news when children die,
and sobs her heart out for that bird.

REFLECTION

We are at the place we have never been before:
Where fact wavers to fakery and fleas feed on lions.

Where flowers have no scent, and are grown
against the natural order of the natural season,
their wild beauty tamed in uniform glass houses.

Where schools become shooting galleries for the mad.
Where a reputation instantly sinks into a bed of nails.

Where a child's life is worth less than a drop of salt
in a monster's eye, teeth gleaming, sharp as acid,
and winter snow in hardened hearts kills the weak.

Where if you object, you are Wrong! Wrong! A fool!

We are here, in this place of mirrors from long ago,
when our ambitious thoughts formed the universe,
where we have no one to blame but ourselves.

Where, if we look close enough, creation will look back
and say, there is nothing that cannot be undone.

Where change will come on a firefly whisper,
to take us to a place we have never been before.

WAR DOES NOT END BECAUSE WE GIVE IT A DIFFERENT NAME

It's warm here in the British summer time.
The FA cup distracts us, a civilised conflict.
After that we'll watch tennis at Wimbledon,
and then ride Le Tour for three weeks.

We'll sit in our gardens drinking wine,
and perhaps read a novel, or mow the lawn,
grousing at the growth of those unwanted weeds,
far away from the wars that supply our needs.

We'll not go to bed dreading, fearing the dark,
or death come in the violent dawn on silver wings,
nor fall to despair at the lack of food or water,
the destruction of our roads, hospitals and homes.

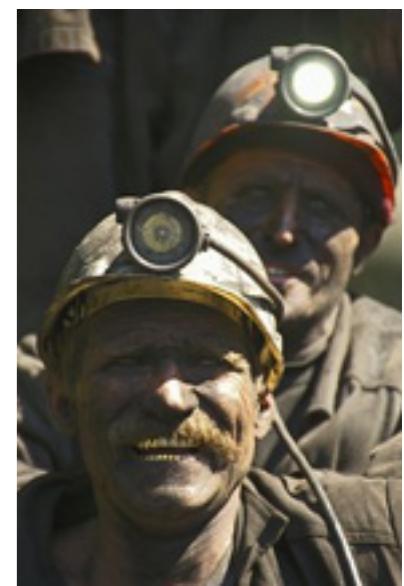
Having changed the name of our incursions,
we will call them Kill All the Dictators,
Let's Build a Democracy, Call of Duty.
We are rooting for you from our armchairs.

And we cry like crocodiles into our dinners
at the loss of life this dubious cleansing brings,
levelling the ancient, tearing down the beautiful,
so great corporations, unhindered, can roll in.

If only you hadn't had gas and oil.

COAL TOWN

Once there were giants in this town
with massive picks beating out a rhythm,
and boulders for their breakfast
rolled among vats of monster grain.
They strode the streets with pride,
and built a nation's wealth,
mined earth in sweated concentration
until the pits, forced again to sleep,
no longer carved the song of coal,
and they grew old. Shoulders sloped,
knees buckled, crooked backs burnt
with the shame of nothing left to give.
I have never seen a giant since.



© Cath Campbell

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 from Mandarin by Yuanbing Zhang.

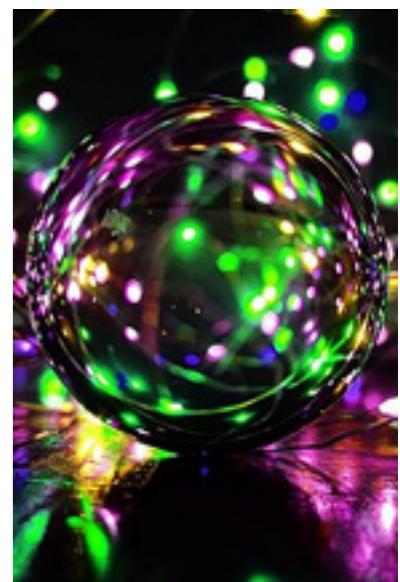


SOUL AN INVISIBLE MUSE

Open the eyes of your soul
and you will encounter your many souls
In timelessness, as if the sun and moon never set or rise
The world is only a book, phantom-like
The soul an invisible muse
Before the words were born, you were a giant
From the kingdom of gold who know not yourself.

HEAVENLY TEMPLES AND TOWERS

I rode a heavenly camel towards a desolate desert,
a jade bottle poured the sweet dew of the Kingdom of Heaven
from which emerged a lake, an eternal spring that never dries up,
and giant trees in prehistoric times grew
Their branches and leaves rustled in the garden of phoenixes and birds
The song of birds was music, it intoxicated the clouds
Colourful pebbles grew into huge gems in the dreams
That transformed into heavenly temples and towers.



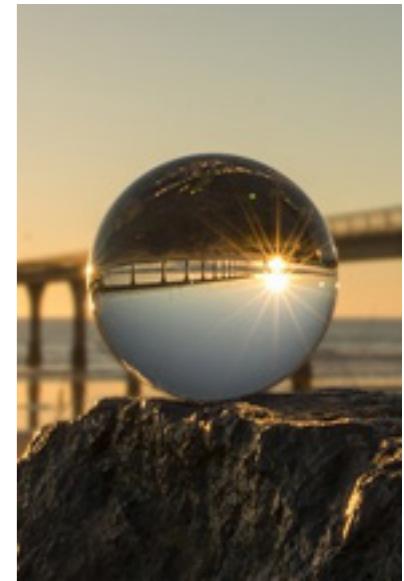
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FRAGRANT AND AMARANTHINE FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS

One day I will return from outer space
on a red cloud and bring a giant picture scroll.
My lines of lightning songs will flutter gold greetings from a prehistoric giant city
The mountains that have been sleeping for hundreds of millions of years
will become transparent
and the lights will be brilliant, like five-coloured gems
And the songs of my soul will blossom from me
like the fairyland flowers of the Kingdom of Heaven,
that remain fragrant and amaranthine for millennia

A FLYING SAUCER OF GIANTS

Day by day the lightning in my body is waking up
And flying to this mortal world, dark night like iron
Seeking the Devil's head, to make him into a skeleton of hell
And to repay time with gems
The python's body will become a golden bridge
Towards a giant city of the morrow
Standing out against the sky, like clouds rising, gathering,
And an interstellar spaceship on my palm,
Like flying saucer of giants
Flashing miraculous brightness from another galaxy.



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Rosemary Jenkinson is a playwright and short story writer from Belfast. Her three short story collections are *Contemporary Problems Nos. 53 & 54*, *Aphrodite's Kiss* and *Catholic Boy* (Doire Press 2016). She was the Artist-in-Residence at the Lyric Theatre Belfast and recently received a Major Individual Artist Award from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland to write a memoir. Her plays have been performed in Dublin, London, Edinburgh, New York and Washington DC. *The Bonefire* was winner of the Stewart Parker BBC Radio Award 2006.

THE LOTTERY OF STRANGERS

BY ROSEMARY JENKINSON

Folk in the west of Ireland believe that if you tell a story to someone, you lose a little piece of your soul. Well, that's according to my ex-housemate, John Paul from Donegal, but I'm prepared to tell the story and take the risk. It's really a tale of two houses within a rented house in Belfast, a tale of two men diametrically opposed in culture and levels of hygiene.

You couldn't help liking John Paul. He was yawningly pale, fidgety, with a complexion like po-rous soda bread, and in spite of his thinness, he had the constitution of a man who'd gone straight from the breast to Guinness. He worked hard as a barman but in the house he was always slothful and you'd find him in the living room, grinning at Ulster TV, his arms stretched out over the sofa, his legs flying around trying to find a comfortable nesting place to roost.

John Paul was a typical Irishman as he had the words for about forty shades of rain; he could even tell between wet rain and damp rain. He had the charming bonhomie of a drinker - 'Tilt your arm a bit further there,' he'd urge and, taking the cue from Gianni's civilised drinking habits, he'd begun extolling the virtue of a daily glass of wine for your health, the difference being he'd stretch it to a few glasses to make up for all those years it had been missing from his diet. This leads us on to the antisocial side of him. He had a tendency to flake out on the sofa after a skin-ful and we had an inkling that the damp patches the following morning might have emanated more from poor bladder control than spilt alcohol.

Pic from Pixabay.com



John Paul's general slovenliness was anathema to Gianni who came from Italy. He fancied himself as an Italian stallion but at five foot six he was more of a little pony. Alternately saturnine and light-hearted, he tended to dominate the household with whatever mood he was in. I was the only housemate laidback enough to have survived more than six months with him and he doused the house liberally in bleach, hoping to exorcise the wandering remains of former housemates. It was a bit much because wherever I set my towel down in the bathroom it picked up bleach stains. He worked as a pizza chef and made a lot of dough from making dough. He lived in the front room with his shy, pretty girlfriend who matched his paranoia with her own hyper-nervousness.

Two weeks ago I came home after work to find a detective sitting in our living room. I wasn't thrilled as the police always bring me out in a cold sweat and I start wondering if they're still after me for refusing to move from the road in last year's anti-capitalist protests. To me their mere existence could qualify as harassment. In any case, I'm always sure democracy is only one step from the gulag.

With all those scenarios in my head I was almost relieved to know we'd had a burglary. Eilis, Gianni's girlfriend, had managed to disturb the burglars but they'd still had time to go through our rooms and I'd had fifty quid cash stolen.

Eilis was giving a statement, her hands wrapped round her knees, looking very shaken. She was halfway through when Gianni burst in like a whirlwind.

'It was no burglar. Someone from in here did this,' he insisted dictatorially to the detective. 'Finger print every one in the house.'

I stifled a laugh and the detective let slip a tiny smile, flaring her eyes at me, which I returned. 'Welcome to the madhouse,' I wanted to tell her.

'You think somebody you know has done this?' she checked with me.

I diplomatically mentioned that we'd had quite a procession of housemates who'd scarpered very suddenly, often with the keys. I omitted to say they'd usually been driven to it by Gianni, the one-man mafia.

'Where is John Paul tonight?' Gianni wanted to know, a strange look on his face.

'No, Gianni,' said Eilis, guessing what he was hinting at. 'The burglars have trashed his room too.'

If anything I thought it looked like the burglars had tidied it.

The police said that the burglars had chiselled through the kitchen window but Gianni refused to believe it. 'Professional, my arse,' he grumbled. 'Experts know nothing. You never see the doctor who leaves the scissors in the stomach and sews it back up?' For the next couple of days Gianni skulked around our backyard looking for signs of entry and kept giving me a heart attack, his face popping up at the kitchen window like an evil fairy.

He was convinced that the burglar, whoever it was, had used a front door key.

'You understand the way?' he asked me. 'Too many people looking at me when I doing well, when I have nice stuff. Next time, I touch my balls for luck. Hey, fuck you all, you who looking at me!'

I didn't remotely believe it was any of our ex-housemates, although it did baffle me why on their way out they felt they had to steal something from us like it was a souvenir from a foreign country. Even the low-watt light bulbs would go, not to mention the cutlery that was so bent it looked like it had passed through the hands of Uri Geller. But I always loved when Gianni talked of the old times. Whatever you may say about us, Gianni and me, we have seen off the weirdos - not to mention the snails we shared our hall with for a few days. Ah, yes, and we also put flight to the landlord during the Great Rent Revolt of 2016.

However, more sinisterly, it soon became clear he'd taken it into his head that John Paul was in some way responsible for the burglary.

'Look,' he said, calling me out into the hall and showing me the scratches on his Vespa made by John Paul when he'd fallen down the stairs. 'Look what the dick-head done.'



'It's not that bad,' I replied. 'You can barely see it.'

Gianni and Eilis both eyed me with hostility. They'd been hoping to merge with me in a takeover bid of the house in order to oust John Paul. To be honest, I'd had enough of their machinations and felt it was high time I opted out of their Axis of Evil. I didn't object to living with John Paul and I was tired of new housemates every month.

On my way through to the kitchen, John Paul was standing wobbling like a scarecrow in the wind, helping himself to another can. There was never a mark on him from his entanglements with the Vespa. It didn't surprise me as I imagined his rubbery physique would always come off better in a one to one struggle. Even when you'd just be standing there minding your own business, he'd accidentally stab you with a cigarette, being utterly unimpeded by the central commands of his nervous system.

'Did Il Duce mention me?' he asked and he shrugged when I didn't answer. 'It's all right, better to say nothing. When I've been wronged, I don't say a word. I leave it and sometimes it takes days or sometimes it takes five years for the wheel to turn but, sure enough, it does. And sometimes I'm after seeing what's happened and I go to God, 'Now why did you do that? That was a wee bit more cruel than I'd have been.' Oh, it'd surprise you how cruel God can be.'

If anyone had the right to know, it was John Paul, himself a statistic of divinely inspired demographics. He'd been christened John Paul as his conception had coincided with a Papal visit to Ireland and the ensuing parental renunciation of condoms. Gianni was pretty well tuned into God's mysterious ways himself; whenever he had a headache you'd see him crossing himself with a finger dipped in olive oil. Anyway, as I'd stepped out of the equation, I was very interested to see where God would stand on all this.

John Paul stayed well away from Gianni over the next few days. He buried his head deep in The Kama Sutra which he said was a fascinating book although he suspected the only way it would help him to get girls would be by hitting them on the head with it. I thought he was being unduly modest. After all, after a few pints he was more flexible than anyone I'd ever met.

When I arrived home on the Wednesday night all the lights of the house were on and the books and magazines in the living room were upturned on the floor. For one horrible moment I thought it was another burglary until I saw Gianni in the kitchen rifling through the bin bag in a frenzy.

'I losta my ticket,' Gianni wailed at me. 'I no joking. It gone away, disappear.'

He was so upset, it took me a while to understand. It transpired the numbers he used each week on the lottery had just come up, netting him one point two million. The major bummer was, he'd misplaced the ticket.

'Don't worry, we'll find it together,' I promised him, stifling an impulse to negotiate a preliminary cut in the million for myself.

Eilis, John Paul and I joined him in the search - fortunately John Paul proved willing to put his hand down the back of the sofa. At midnight we gave up and went to bed but I could still hear Gianni feverishly pacing downstairs. I really felt for the man and prayed he would find it for his sake. I then got to thinking how I could move into his and Eilis's room which was far bigger than mine. He'd probably leave the six-pack of bleach behind too. It was an all-win situation.

The following day when I came back from work, I noticed a few dodgy-looking individuals scouring our street. Someone was even using their foot to turn over the dock leaves and dandelions proliferating outside our front door and I wondered how the word had spread. Then Gianni emerged from the hall accompanied by a TV crew. He had gone public with his story. He was upbeat, optimistic, clad in new Milanese tailoring that he'd just paid a fortune for.

'Believe me what,' he breezed to me and John Paul. 'Ever you taste rice with champagne? When I find my ticket I'll let you taste.'

John Paul fired me a look over his *Kama Sutra* and whispered, 'The shop where he got his ticket definitely sold the winning numbers. Problem is, he can't prove he was there, as the shop camera had run out of tape. Now all the oul loony bins are crawling out of the woodwork with the same story.'

Later, we switched on the news and watched Gianni make a promise to split the money with whoever found the ticket but I felt slightly embarrassed when the interviewer waved a hand round our living room, using the words, 'escape from rented squalor'. On the book shelf behind her you could just make out the copy of *The Kama Sutra* snuggling up to *Hitler and Eva Braun: A Love Affair*. Eilis hovered into the camera's sights now and then, her dark, worried eyes out on stalks, her crumpled pink cardigan on her curved back, making her look like a frail prawn floating about in the murky depths of our living room.

When CNN phoned Gianni's mobile at eight o'clock the next morning, I realised just how much Gianni, the telegenic pizza-maker with the amusing grammar, had caught hold of the public's imagination. He was threatening to go global until the terrible news came - at noon it was announced that the one point two million had been claimed.

Gianni was inconsolable. At one o'clock, I answered the door, hoping it was maybe one of his Italian friends armed with a sedative. It was the police. Again I broke out in a sweat, sure they were onto me. Wasn't it the same detective who'd asked me at the demo if I was determined to be arrested?

I guessed it wasn't every day that the police got a call to investigate the theft of a million. I imagined their little hearts had initially skipped a beat at the exciting prospect of maybe for once being asked to crack a heist but they said there was nothing they could do about a case like this. A consortium of local refuse collectors had come forward with the winning ticket, claiming it had belonged to them all along.

'It's no possible, you understand? I always left it here, so someone he steal it,' said Gianni, pointing to the table beside the sofa, narrowing his eyes at John Paul.

I wondered if it was possible...no, it wasn't worthy of me to think it. All the same, he definitely held something against Gianni...could John Paul have stashed the ticket, then given it to the binmen? He could have struck a deal with them. No, I was being crazy! It was mad. Living with a succession of strangers was turning me as paranoid as Gianni.

Later that night, John Paul was drunk downstairs and I could hear him stagger into the wet yard. From the kitchen I could see him tilt his chin up towards the sky and point a cigarette accusingly into the air.

'If you don't mind me saying, that was awful cruel of you. Altogether terrible. I would never have gone that far myself,' I heard him slur into the heavens as a rain that didn't know to stop fell steadily.



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