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SHENG KEYI
Battle of the Wombs

COVER ARTWORK BY IRISH ARTIST EMMA BARONE

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Mark Ulyseas
Publisher/Editor
markulyseas@liveencounters.net

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CONTRIBUTORS

SHENG KEYI

ELSA KORNETI + TRANSLATOR DAVID CONNOLLY

KATHLEEN MARY FALLON

KEVIN COWDALL

ANNE FITZGERALD

JOACHIM MATSCHOSS

ATTRACTA FAHY

JOHN MAXWELL O'BRIEN

PETER O'NEILL ON CAROLINA MEDINA

Sheng Keyi is a contemporary Chinese novelist, lives in New York City and Beijing. She has ten novels include *Northern Girls*, *Death Fugue*, *Wild Fruit*, *The Womb*, and several short story collections. Her works have been globally acclaimed and translated into English, German, Italian, French, Spanish, Swedish, Spanish, Russian, etc., with write-ups and reviews by *The New York Times*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books* and *The Guardian*. In addition, her novel, *Northern Girls* was longlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize 2012.



Excerpted from Sheng Keyi's new novel, *The Womb*.
Translated from Mandarin by Bruce Humes.
Sheng is looking for a publisher for the English version.

BATTLE OF THE WOMBS

With the mindset of someone preparing to put up a last-ditch fight, Snow decided to switch hospitals and submit herself to another examination. Earlier doctors had all said that the problem probably lay in that abortion years ago. *Post-operative cases of infertility were not the norm*, but neither were they rare. The doctors chided her for not having delivered then, during her first pregnancy, at the advanced age of thirty-three. You'd have thought they were scolding a wayward child for sloppy homework. They criticised her rashness. Punishment followed such rashness - sometimes quickly, sometimes later, but inevitably. Given her age and irregular menstruation, it would be much more challenging to get pregnant now than a decade earlier.

In spite of the bleak prognosis, Snow insisted on ingesting Chinese herbal concoctions until she grew disgusted with her growing resemblance to a medicine repository. She ceased medication and let Nature take its course.

A number of well-intentioned but pointed comments by the doctors left her suffering in silence. The memory of those days never receded, remaining in painfully sharp relief. They were always with her: how she had sought him out, how his attitude had pierced her, how she had secretly borne the massive hurt. After nine months had passed, she thought to herself if the foetus had survived, it would have been born by now; five years later, she imagined what it would be doing then at the age of five. She felt that the child was biding its time in an unseen space. Its life had not terminated.

This wasn't a nice feeling. Someone had told her that only when you actually give birth to a baby can it replace the unborn one and be forgotten. She was grateful to the financial editor for his tolerance and understanding. As for the question of raising a child, he wasn't particularly concerned. It had its good sides and bad. If he had been a bit keener, she might have made a greater effort to see a doctor, and perhaps her ability to conceive might have improved. But he was busy with his daily reading and writing, and when he did occasionally encounter small children, he'd elicit a smile or two and leave it at that.



Pic from Pixabay.com

The couple occasionally shared cheerless moments, especially when the boisterous clamour of children reached their ears from next door or the park. At these times they felt their childlessness more keenly. Their lives seemed like a bitterly cold winter's day in the midst of a snowstorm, as if they were inside huddled hopelessly in front of an unlit fireplace, so poor that they couldn't even afford kindling to light a fire.

Each was aware of this, but avoided touching on the matter. The financial editor would sidestep the topic by chatting about something, or suggest seeing a film, and rescue them from tumbling into the pit. Later on, Snow came to realise that this was a tell-tale sign of his own uneasiness. In reality, he yearned for a vexatious ankle-biter to spice up their life. He was actually more sensitive than she about anything to do with children. Whenever they passed a playground or a children's clothes shop, he'd quicken his pace as if trying to escape a noxious odour.

This is why she decided to go to the hospital again. Behind a rosewood desk sat an old practitioner of traditional Chinese medicine, with long whiskers on his upper lip and chin. Snow placed her arm on the soft arm rest, bringing it level with her heart. The goateed doctor took her pulse with spider-like fingers, his eyes closed the while. His eyelids and whiskers trembled slightly as if in a trance. Then he had her stick out her tongue and reveal the whites of her eyes, before summarising a slew of results indicating imbalances such as *yin* deficiency and *xue re*, or blood heat.

As he wrote the prescription, he enquired about her income and family. His practice depended entirely on payments from patients, he explained, and he was not eligible to receive payments from state-funded insurance. When he learned that she was a university professor, he erased and altered some ingredients. Seven sets of medication cost 2000 yuan. She'd undergo at least one cycle of twenty-one sets, and treatment might require six months, depending on its efficacy.

She took the prescription and left the hospital feeling low, not because of the exorbitant fee but because she had again discovered that all the doctors said more or less the same thing. This thoroughly discouraged her. She figured that her case fell into the "difficult to treat" category. For the most part, her doctors could only stumble about, feeling their way, or worse, administer treatment to a horse they knew full well was already dead.

The doctor at the abortion clinic had warned her of the potential consequences. She just had never imagined that she personally would become one of those statistics. Occasionally when she was deeply troubled and introspective, she wondered what her world would look like now if she had ignored everything and had the baby. It was undeniable that there were plenty of much poorer women who raised children on their own. If she had been forced to choose another path, she might have been able to navigate a better journey. But what could have presented more hardship than her march from a small village to self-financed studies culminating in a PhD? It was precisely for this reason that she had opted to abort; choosing to deliver a child – as an unmarried woman back then – would have meant losing her job, and all the rewards for which she had struggled.

After her marriage she covertly poured her energy into resolving her infertility. She affected not to care, and the financial editor was very accommodating. In the first few years they remained close, shouldering the burden together and standing tall; but gradually they became distracted by a sense of gloom. The editor's engagements multiplied. The traditional liquor-fuelled gatherings of older men commenced, and he revelled in delivering his witticisms there.

Present at these drinking sessions were always one or two pretty young girls. They smiled innocently at the old men with their bellyfuls of wisdom. By the time she learned that the financial editor had picked one of those blossoms, it was too late: they had already become a pair, one inside the other's belly. It wasn't important where he had encountered his flower - at a seminar, or perhaps at one of the drink fests - and Snow wasn't keen to investigate. The result was that on the other side of the river there were two flowers, a mother flower and her little flower, and on this side of the river there was just one aging willow tree.

Alone on his sampan, the financial editor drifted in the middle of the river. Should he row towards the bank where his flowers were blossoming, or should he return to the bank with the old willow, where his loyalty ought to lie? She didn't call out to the opposite bank, or withdraw from the dock; she remained welcoming. She could see Mother Flower in the space she had once occupied, in exactly the same state. Observing that flower was like observing herself. Helping her was like helping herself.



In fact, she had no intention of forcing Mother Flower to pluck Little Flower from her belly. She held no grudge against Mother Flower; it was the question of the financial editor that preoccupied her. She believed that their spirits had communed and that they trusted one another. They had often conversed, pressing intimately against one another, their souls fusing and illuminating one another day by day. She had difficulty accepting that their past had transformed into the illusory image of a moon in a rippling lake.

But given that her barren womb had not borne a single fruit, she felt that she had no right to demand anything of the financial editor.

All along, she sensed that she owed him something. Now she understood. She owed him a good harvest, a full granary. She owed him the lush soil and fecundity that a swathe of land should possess. She owed him a fleshy, substantial fruit. Her only point of discontent was that he had lied; he should not have left her in the dark. It was all those lies that had permitted Mother flower to sprout her little bud. How many times had he deceived them both, enabling Little Flower to grow in her mother's belly for four months, all the while convincing each woman that he was their man? Yes, that was her grievance — his lying and cheating. It was intolerable, and she intended to clarify matters.

When he finally confessed to the affair, he behaved like a detail-obsessed old scholar defending his failed textual critique. He was deeply remorseful concerning the flawed citations, the confusing statistics and absurd conclusions posited in the work. In the past, he had always been rigorous and meticulous, researching each aspect from multiple points of view in order to guarantee accuracy and eliminate any possibility of error. He attributed his problematic critique to momentary negligence. The figures and viewpoints that he had cited originated on the Internet and were unreliable. He had had the opportunity to correct them, but he had fooled himself into believing that the casual reader would not notice such slip-ups.

Ironically, it was actually a colleague of Snow's – just such a “casual reader” - who noted and reported the financial editor's suspicious conduct. She saw him and Mother Flower in Tanzhe Temple outside the capital, doing the sort of thing only lovers do.

So they had gone to Tanzhe Temple in Beijing's Western Hills - but why? Certainly not in order to burn incense and pray for Snow to have a baby boy. Nor would it be to entreat Buddha to bless the marriage of which Snow was still a part. When Snow had first asked him about the visit, he flatly denied it. Absolute nonsense, he scoffed. Why would he run off to a Buddhist temple to court a lover?

“Do you believe other people, or the man who sleeps in your bed?” he had fired back. This silenced her. She was inclined to believe him, especially since her informant was a female colleague she didn't know well, a gossip who enjoyed stirring up trouble.

However, the next time someone told her of a dubious outing, she became convinced that the earlier report had been accurate. If he hadn't tried to fool her then, she wouldn't have become so angry later. His lie not only insulted her intelligence, but it mocked her self-respect. She could understand that he might waver when tempted; but she could not understand why he, a highly intelligent man, would commit the classic error of plugging his ears while stealing a ringing bell — and expect others to feign deafness as well. He should realise that Snow wasn't the sort of woman one should deceive. All he needed to do was to indicate his intention, and she would have given her genuine blessing, removed all obstacles, and opened the way for him. In the past she had done so with others, and she and her ex had remained good friends.

He explained how he had marched, step by step, into a deep pit from which he could not extract himself. As with most affairs, one need undergo an initial struggle with one's conscience, together with several sleepless nights of tossing and turning. Once this phase has passed, the “problem” is overcome. Initially, he was able to strike up a conversation with Mother Flower. Then words came more easily. But later, his whole being ached if they hadn't spoken. Then it became so that he could no longer find relief by conversation alone: they had put their bodies to use. This physical act was a greater pleasure, and memories were stored within the flesh. They abandoned themselves to a rhythm that they naively believed they controlled.

He described it in this way, because he wanted to prove that he wasn't the sort to fool around aimlessly. This appeared to be a revolution of the soul and flesh, and it unnerved Snow. She had hoped that it was not serious, and was prepared to tolerate the affair.

She had assumed that - such a revolution of the soul and flesh having already occurred between man and wife - there were no munitions left for further revolutions. She had forgotten the adage that even when a man is old enough to lose his teeth he will still want to have another bite, and that even if he's toothless he'll still find a way to make revolution with his hands, mouth and tongue, his toes and his knees.

She listened to him drone on, and understood the joy that he could not conceal. Admittedly, he spoke contritely in conveying his contentedness and pleasure. But this too made her suffer. She would have preferred that he communicate his excitement directly, the emotional ecstasy plastered all over his face as he told of his intoxication, instead of adopting the implausibly tragic tone of someone who has accidentally smashed a precious vase. Eventually she realised that it was no one particular aspect that she couldn't bear. It was the entire matter that was unbearable. This sentiment overwhelmed her, as if there were an agitated beast trapped inside her, alternately hissing and snapping, and throwing its weight about while clawing wildly. She put her hand to her chest, and felt as if she were going to collapse. But she didn't want to show any sign that he had wounded her.

"Since things have already come to this, go ahead and do as you like," she said nonchalantly. "I will go along with whatever works for you."

He regarded her with a sense of alarm, as if he could not quite believe what she had just said. He had not imagined that it would be so easy. He had formed a fist and prepared to strike, but in the end his adversary was just a lightweight scarecrow. When he threw his punch, it was he who lost his balance.

The scarecrow continued to enquire about Mother Flower, urging him to cherish her. After all, she was pregnant with a married man's child and taking a great risk. Snow appeared thoroughly understanding, as if this flower had accomplished something that she herself could not, and a heavy burden had been lifted from her shoulders. After this discussion he felt emboldened to disappear for a few days, and when he returned it was to discuss the division of their assets. He had made up his mind that their apartment would be sold and the proceeds split evenly, each of them also receiving half of their cash savings. Furniture, household appliances and miscellaneous items and knick-knacks would all revert to her.

During the early days of their marriage his income had been higher, but once she began holding painting exhibitions hers exceeded his, so they were pretty much even, and this division of assets could be considered sensible and fair. However, if she wished, she could keep the apartment and he could withdraw their savings and move out. Although the savings were a little less than the value of the apartment, it would speed things up. He found all these options entirely reasonable. Other alternatives that he didn't find palatable, he wouldn't mention at all, naturally.

He didn't devote much thought to sentimentality or nostalgia. He was filled with joy about his new life, and even hummed to himself on the way to their apartment, everything already settled in his mind. Upon arrival he found that she wasn't home, and noticed that some of her clothing was missing. There was a note on the coffee table:

I've gone to Japan for a few days. Let's discuss our assets when I return. Everything will work out. Don't worry.

Snow

"Everything will work out." Did this refer to him and Mother Flower? Or just to him? Or to her alone? Or perhaps to the two of them together?

"Don't worry." About their shared property? About her emotional state? Her safety while travelling?

He wasn't sure what she meant, but he didn't intend to lose any sleep over it. And he was confident that her little jaunt would help smooth the resolution of this situation, so he prepared to await her return ten to fifteen days hence.

In fact, she hadn't gone away at all. From a hotel window opposite, she could spy the main entrance to their residential complex, and observe the timing of his comings-and-goings. She could even hear him whistling that cheerful tune. When he climbed the stairway she detected a new spring in his step, he stood taller than before, and he abandoned his former arrogance to offer greetings to others with a friendly smile. Observed from this space where she could not be seen, he revealed himself in a different light.



She had no plan to do anything specific. She had just felt like getting out, cooling down, and seeing how things progressed. But that changed, and at a given moment, she found that she wished to direct a piece of theatre. Initially, she had no idea what the plot might be, just as some authors write a novel: the characters move here and there, and then they suddenly escape the author's control. They develop their own ideas, toy with terminating someone's life, or doing something kinky. For whatever reason, they veer away from their original trajectory, new opportunities arise, and they become inspired.

This was about a battle of the wombs.

Snow had paid cash to get the low-down on Mother Flower, and within three days had sussed out where she resided and worked, that she was a northerner, still under thirty, edited an English publication, and lived in a rented flat. On the weekend Snow obtained a few photos of the financial editor and Mother Flower walking together and eating Japanese food. His habit of placing an arm around his partner's waist while strolling, and his demeanour while dining, remained unchanged. From the look of things, no one would ever sense that he had another woman.

When Snow realised that there was no place for her between them - that she might as well not exist - she was shaken. The two of them even attended the solo exhibition of that New Mexico artist — the female painter whose blossoms resemble a vulva — whom he had first learned about from Snow! To show off, he must surely have passed off her words as his own when explaining the works to Mother Flower. Snow found this galling.

Once she had absorbed this intelligence, she really did leave for Japan. Every day she bombarded social media with shots of tourist sites, appetising dishes and cultural highlights, and always made sure to include grinning emoji as if she were having a grand time. Each day featured images of a different city. She chronicled her journey happily, but just to show an appropriate degree of regret at enjoying herself without her husband she bought him clothes, ties and an electric toothbrush. She even uploaded some of their old photos evoking earlier happy times. No one could tell that, in fact, her life had been shattered.

It was her fifteenth day in Japan when she got his WeChat message. When would she return? He didn't mention their assets or anything, as if he were posing typical questions to his wife on a business trip.

She could sense that those words contained anticipation and worry too. He was nostalgic for their time together, and he needed her. She flashed a devilish smile.

She returned home one week later. He had cooked dinner and was waiting for her. And there was wine too. In the past, they had often enjoyed a drink together.

She radiated the fresh, rejuvenated look of someone just back from a trip abroad.

"Oh, is this our last dinner?" she teased, immediately gaining the upper hand.

"However you interpret it is fine with me." He uncorked the bottle and poured the wine. *Glug-glug* it sounded, splashing against the sides of the fashionably deep wine glasses. "Consider it a celebration for a traveller returned from afar."

"What a nice surprise to be treated like this," she smiled. "Of course, courtesy should be reciprocated. I brought you some presents too."

Once again, they enjoyed dining and exchanging gifts, as if Mother Flower had never appeared. Snow talked of her Japan trip, and made cultural comparisons. She even mentioned the art exhibitions, the Edo Period *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, and Yayoi Kusama's installations. It was as if she had forgotten any trouble between them. She behaved as formerly, and pretended not to notice his forced smile. As one glass of wine followed another, he found no opportunity to say anything. It seemed that she intended to use this chance to say all that she would ever say.

He surmised that she really was treating this as their last dinner. At several points he wanted to speak but held himself back, trying not to interrupt her.

The wine bottle grew dry-eyed and it was almost time to turn it upside down. He prepared to make his pronouncements. But she had been busy. The table was cleared, dishes washed, floor swept, hands washed and dried. Now it was time for him to admire the clothes she had bought him, and try them on.

The clothes she selected for him always suited him perfectly. She had a natural instinct for size, weight and length. When she bought clothes she never measured beforehand, but always knew immediately whether the clothes would fit - and she wasn't wrong this time.

He put on the charcoal-grey suit, knotted the tie with crimson blossoms against a navy-blue background, and he looked like a new man. For the life of him he couldn't work out what she was up to. He had committed such a punishable offence, yet here she was being so normal and sweet. This must be how a woman persuaded her man to come back, he thought.

Several times he was on the verge of interjecting something but held himself back, until finally deciding not to say it at all. If things continued like this, she would get the message that he had returned by her side, and the storm had subsided. They would grow old together after all.

For ten days or so after her return, he didn't go out once. They didn't discuss the distribution of their property either. One night they engaged in a round of mute but passionate carnal relations. Except for the grunting and panting appropriate to the act, not a word passed between them in the darkness. She was confident that he had had a change of heart.

He didn't realise that she knew the things he yearned to express but suppressed in his heart. But she had known even as she was leaving for Japan – before he had any inkling – that all of this was going to take place. She was the scriptwriter and director, and the plot would proceed according to her plan.

Little Flower must not be allowed to blossom. It must wither and die in its mother's belly.

It had happened on the third day after Snow had left for Japan. That afternoon Mother Flower had a sudden miscarriage and ended up in a hospital. He rushed to her bedside, only to find a sole flower, utter sorrow written across her face. He stroked her deflated belly for a long time, speechless. He couldn't think of a single word to console her. If she were his wife, he could perhaps say tenderly, "It's alright, we're sure to have another!" But he couldn't say this to her, because he hadn't imagined a next time.

His wife's face sprang suddenly to mind. With the uprooting of Little Flower, the invisible cord that had joined him to Mother Flower was severed. He realised that his feelings for her had undergone a sea-change.

Part of his heart had re-awoken and returned to his wife's side, while the part that remained here was motivated by something closer to sympathy. With the disappearance of Little Flower, her mother's attractiveness to him was mightily reduced.

He rationalised that the expectation of Little Flower had dazed him, and cast an obscuring veil of sentiment over his judgement. He must have lost his senses to have considered abandoning such a superb wife. She was capable, talented and reasonable. Except for the lack of a child, they had no other issues; he even thought she was the world's most suitable partner. If he hadn't got himself into this mess he wouldn't have realised that the person he most cherished was his wife, and now he realised that he could overlook the lack of a son or daughter. As with so many married men, he had only arrived at an understanding of family and spouse via an extra-marital affair. These bouts of stormy weather were man-made, and the little vessels called marriage were often broken in their fury.

Thus, he congratulated himself on not having begun the final negotiations with his wife, and grateful that she had travelled abroad. Inadvertently, this had given him precious extra time and space to reconsider, and in which to decide to do an about-face. He was blissfully unaware that her sightseeing trip to Japan had been expressly undertaken in order to manufacture evidence on the ground. Of course, she wasn't at the scene and had no need to do anything personally. This world doesn't lack any number of people just waiting for a wad of bills to smack them in the face, provided they do someone else's bidding.

It's not that she hadn't struggled with the morality of it. An image of her proud rival — then an expectant mother — swayed before her. Snow sought and finally found a persuasive reason to justify her actions. *Since Mother Flower was at peace with herself and had no qualms about ignoring a wife's existence, why should she pity Mother Flower or take her feelings into consideration at every turn? This was just a battle of the wombs.*

Yes, a battle of the wombs — this is precisely how she characterised the family crisis that had just concluded.



Two months later, on their wedding anniversary, he takes her out to an elegant Western restaurant on the fashionable Bund overlooking the Huangpu River, in the former Shanghai International Settlement.

She suspects that he had also brought Mother Flower here because the place oozes romantic ambience. The waiters, accoutered in full black tie and dinner jacket, are the epitome of refined service. A piano can be heard, and a circle of soft, warm light shines on the centre of their table. The silverware sparkles. The other patrons, all foreign and mostly couples, speak in hushed tones. It is clearly an ideal venue for amorous socializing.

She feels a bit out of place, but gradually the joy of victory overshadows her reticence. She has not only won the uterine duel, but has reclaimed all the territory unwittingly ceded to her rival too. From the outset it hadn't been Snow's goal to win back the financial editor; it was to wreak revenge for his infidelity by crushing the Little Flower that brought him such delight. Perhaps she has also been motivated by something that she isn't prepared to admit: envy of another's more fertile womb.

No, it's not envy. I just wanted to make him lose a little something. When she is honest about her intention, the darkness in her heart surprises her. But she has persuaded herself. Back then when she was cast as Mother Flower, she had submitted to an abortion and suffered defeat. Now she is a wife, and another Mother Flower threatened her family. If she didn't take action, she'd be the loser again, and that would be tantamount to accepting her fate passively.

"Have you handled that matter?" she asks gently after he orders. She has given this real thought. If she doesn't enquire about Little Flower, that would seem odd. Now is the right time. "Does she intend to give birth and look after the child on her own? Single mothers are quite common now," she points out. "People can accept them nowadays."

"My dear, that all ended long ago. I should have told you earlier, but I thought you probably knew, and I didn't want to raise it again." He adds in a whisper, gazing at his wine glass, "I don't want to leave you." He looks up bravely, seeking her eyes. "While you were in Japan, I convinced her to get rid of it."

Her jaw drops. He assumes that she is startled by this development, and in reality she is astonished by his claim. She had assumed that the storm had passed and that their marriage would continue to sail on a steady course toward the future. But now she feels the waves crashing against their little boat again, and it makes her dizzy.

"After I read your note, Snow, I kept thinking. Yes, I did something wrong. But did that mean there would never be a way to correct it? Was I really going to rip apart our beautiful marriage? I couldn't sleep for nights. I felt very confused.

"I went to talk to her about it. I told her, 'I'm not worthy of fathering this child. I have nothing to give it. I can't leave my wife'."

He recounts all this in a low voice, calmly and with a convincing cadence. Only now does she fully appreciate his ability to tell a lie. Snow listens and observes carefully like a panel member judging a performance.

"So she asked me, 'Then what's to be done?' "

"I said: 'I'm the one responsible for this. And I'm not going to just walk away and pretend it didn't happen.'"

"Fortunately, this was a problem that could be solved with money," he says. "So I told her I'd give her 50,000 yuan in compensation. She demanded 100,000, and in the end I gave her 80,000."

He snorts scornfully, "It was like a business transaction, wasn't it?"

When he has finished he looks solemnly at his wife. "You don't know how good it feels to have you at my side again, Snow. We can survive this. I'll treasure our affection even more."

The more realistic the tale he recounts, the more ludicrous. Her respect for him is shrinking so fast that soon Snow feels that he is an insect crawling on the floor. "And then I almost made another, bigger error. It's all my fault," he says sincerely. "In the future when I see another woman, I'll keep my distance. They're all creatures hungry for money."

“And who in the world makes so many people keen to feed creatures money?” she laughs caustically. “The rich feed the rich, and the poor feed the poor. But then again, if you don’t feed people with money, what do you feed them? It seems the only free thing in this world is marital relations.”

The waiter arrives with the soup. One hand balancing the tray, the other neatly in place behind his back. A second pair of white-gloved hands positions the bowls on the table.

By this time her eyes are fuzzy with tears. An icy wave sweeps over her, caused by a more hopeless sense of sorrow than that of simply knowing of Mother Flower’s existence. From the day Snow met him until this moment, she has always felt that while he wasn’t exactly noble, he certainly wasn’t base. But the ease with which he has fabricated these falsehoods about his affair, just at the moment that they are supposed to be starting anew, and his slandering of Mother Flower and the insult to his unborn child, have brought him to an unfathomable low.

She’s unwilling to treat this as a husband’s white lie. She doesn’t count herself among those women who rationalise, “I don’t give a damn if he treats other women like scum, as long as he’s good to me.” That’s like when other people give your husband a smack or two for his dodgy behaviour outside - and in your heart you know he’s just a rat – but you continue to prize him like a pristine rabbit, just because he doesn’t shit in his own burrow. After all, a husband isn’t a coin. How can a wife only care about the side he elects to show her, and ignore the other, sleazy side? If a woman loses her appreciation for her man, then she can’t continue to love him, far less sleep next to him.

Now she begins to wonder: just how many lies has he actually fed her over the years? His retelling of the hospital scene just now has been flawless. If she didn’t know the truth about Mother Flower’s ‘abortion’, she might well fall for his spiel. *The way he speaks is so touching, his voice so sensitive. If he didn’t previously frequent such places, how does he fit so seamlessly into these surroundings?*

This is the first time she has set foot in this sort of place. When single, she hung out at cafés and libraries. She was hard at work on her studies, and never made the acquaintance of the class of people who patronise venues like this. Yes, it has plenty of atmosphere, but she feels out of her element.

She has never before set eyes on some of the dishes, and has no idea how one is supposed to eat them. The goose liver pâté served in a wine glass — is it to be mixed with wine, and drunk?

All around them are sophisticated foreigners. It makes her feel as if she has just arrived from the countryside, and as a result, she can’t really relax.

But the sad part is yet to come. For the moment she is almost relieved that his performance has distracted her from the reality of her situation.

“Try this clam chowder,” he urges.

Try this clam chowder.

No doubt he once ordered this identical soup for Mother Flower. She feels that this moment is just a facsimile of that scene, and in his mind’s eye he might even be seeing Mother Flower’s face. Snow grows more and more ill at ease. This isn’t just due to the surroundings; it is because her self-esteem is under constant attack. She is already imagining how when they climb into bed later that night, he will inevitably try the same moves that he once made with Mother Flower. Even if today weren’t their wedding anniversary, following a romantic dinner like this, that would be the next item on the agenda. She feels resentful, as if he has already made his demand.

“You really shouldn’t have brought me here,” she says. “This place is for empty sweet talk.”

He is perplexed. “But I chose it specially. You said you like western cuisine.”

“I never said any such thing.” He is confusing her with Mother Flower. And he is still infatuated.

“What’s with you?” he asks. “Do you mean to spoil the atmosphere? Since the moment we arrived, you’ve been itching for a fight. To be able to sit together and celebrate our wedding anniversary, after all that has happened, is no easy feat. Can’t you tell that I’m doing my very best to put our family back together again?”



“ ‘Spoil the atmosphere, ‘itching for a fight’, ‘sit together and celebrate’. Now that you feel you’ve got your feet back under the table, you start to criticise others. Did I ruin you and her ‘ambience’? I’ve made things easy for you, haven’t I? Do you really believe that just because I don’t argue with you, I’m just an over ripe persimmon that you can squeeze as you like? Did you really believe that since I couldn’t conceive, I’d forever be in debt to you? That because of that, I would tolerate your behaviour? How can you know so little about women?”

“Okay, okay. If you have anything else to say, we can talk about it back home. Let’s enjoy our dinner first,” he says, in an attempt to lower the temperature.

She raises her wine glass and drains it in one go as if to seal her words. She sits silently, conveying that her dinner is now over. It isn’t his words that have provoked her; she is angry about her own womb problem. She doesn’t know why she has suddenly transferred her wrath onto his affair. It isn’t as if her being unable to have a child had forced her husband to go and knock up Mother Flower. There was no cause and effect.

She is still angry about her own traumatic abortion years ago. She doesn’t hate the man involved. She can’t say exactly where the fault lies. If she blames herself, that is simply too unfair, too cruel. At any rate, that tragedy still plagues her life, like a ghost stalking her for an unpaid debt. It has even enticed her to do away with a young bud, and thereby to commit a second act of murder. Her husband may die without any knowledge of her evil, but she can’t put her own conscience at ease.

She can imagine Mother Flower’s grief at losing her Little Flower. Especially when she was preparing to become a wife, only to be abandoned. Naturally, Snow doesn’t buy that rubbish about him fobbing her off with 80,000 yuan. Snow can tell from the photos that she is no gold-digger; she is a flower blossoming under the bright sun with no such ambitions. She is well-educated, but too easily mesmerised by the older man’s knowledge and wit. Snow is more convinced than ever that the great majority of young women would probably make the same mistake with a married man — whether for a shorter or longer period — and then either step into the shoes of their rivals, or find themselves brutally eliminated from the competition. How many young women are at the hospital at this very moment, enduring inexpressible pain, as they queue for an abortion?

As Snow sat in her Japanese hotel room, and the crucial moment in her self-directed drama drew near, Mother Flower’s image surfaced repeatedly. Snow fluctuated between resolve and doubt. She made up her mind to abandon her scheme several times, but as soon as she imagined the financial editor together with his flower unimpeded, and the pair’s intimacy that left no space at all for her, her heart hardened again. One moment she was herself, the next she was Mother Flower, then the two were one.

Just when she had made her mind and hastened to contact the agent whom she had commissioned to execute the scheme, her mobile fell into the toilet! She hadn’t realised how badly her hand was trembling.

When she got the news that Mother Flower was in the hospital, her brain exploded.

People often toss and turn in their sleep as they plan revenge, but when the day dawns sanity returns, and they reject their wild thoughts. But it seemed that Snow’s thoughts remained in the darkness, never seeing the clear light of day. Only after everything was concluded did she return from the shadows. She could hardly believe that the deed was done. Briefly she reverted to the innocent flower who had lost her own little flower all those years ago, and she wept silently for her loss.

She couldn’t believe that Little Flower’s blood was on her hands. No matter how you looked at it, she had sullied herself. “Sullied” was an understatement. She was a sinner, a murderer, a madwoman.

Just as she was presiding over her own trial, tormenting her soul, she received another piece of news. The executor of her scheme reported that before he could put the plan into action, Mother Flower had been involved in an accident. He saw an ambulance take her away, and he went to the hospital where he confirmed that she had miscarried. This didn’t make Snow feel any better. She felt as if she had willed the miscarriage, and that it was the result of her curse.

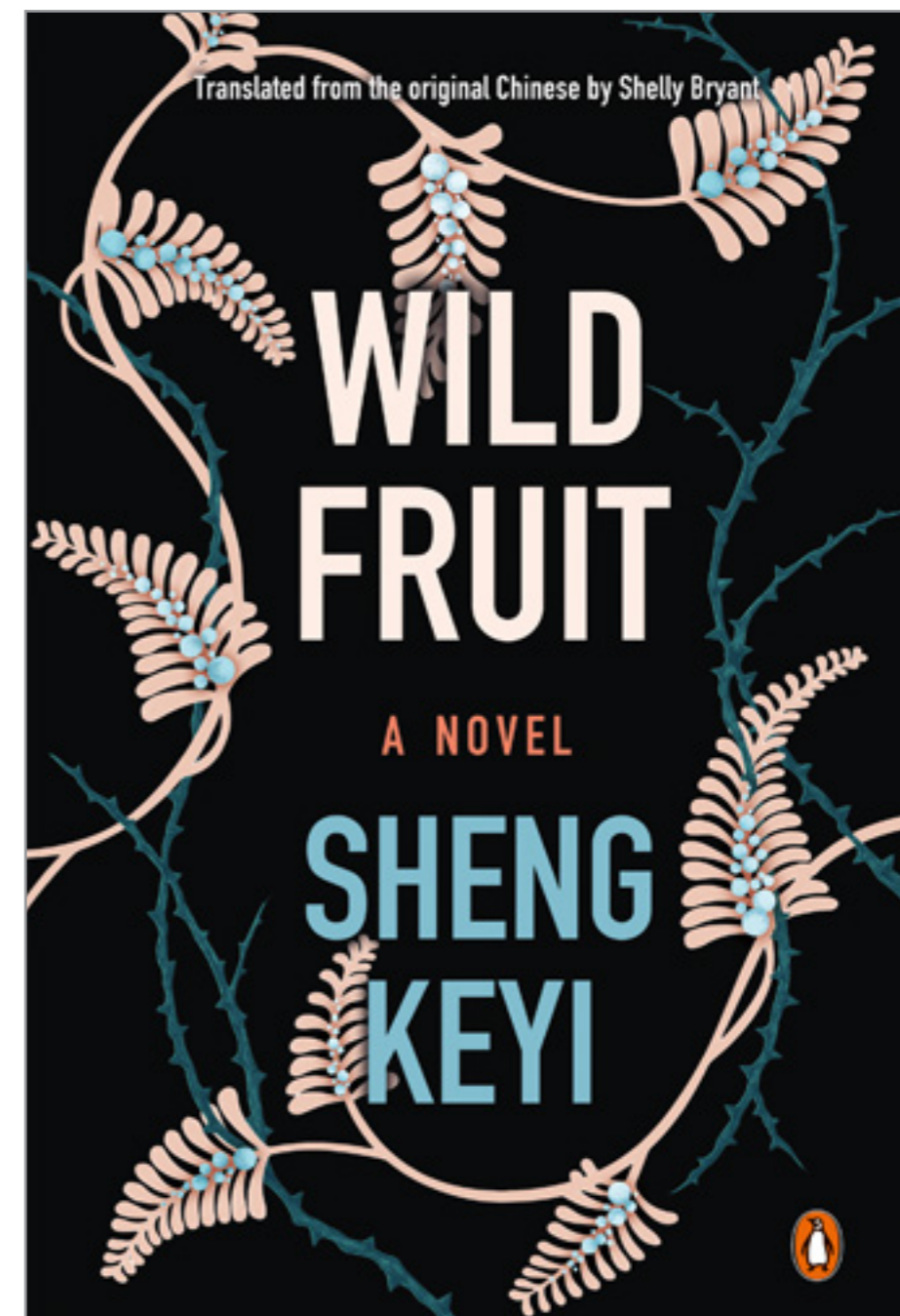
Armed with this knowledge, she endeavoured not to permit the financial editor to note any flaw in her veneer. Her performance was a key prerequisite for her husband’s return, and she wanted to obtain the highest possible score. Her main goal was, after all, not actually to win him back, so she was not influenced by other factors. But the more closely she observed herself, the more horrified she felt.

When she looked in the mirror, it wasn't to confirm her beauty; she wanted to check whether she had transmogrified into something hideous. She was afraid of waking to find her mouth dripping blood, her face covered in some monstrous beast's hair.

Thinking back on it now, it is she who is the genuine actor. How movingly she has performed! After her return from Japan and their "last dinner" at the apartment, through to this celebration of their wedding anniversary, her acting technique – graded scene-by-scene – has proven far superior to his. The longer he remains on stage the more unconvincing he seems, whereas her performance gains in flesh-and-blood authenticity. This is doubtless the real Snow. She is playing herself: one version of her observes, while the other acts. Sometimes they perform individually, and at other times they observe simultaneously.

She senses she has entered a dark passage, a part of the stage backdrop. She isn't sure whether she should continue her performance, or return to reality. She wonders, if she tells him the truth now about her scheme, how would he react? If he also possesses a latent dark side, its explosion could be extremely destructive. After all, her admission would negate all his previous perceptions of her. If he discovered that his gently assertive wife was in fact such a schemer, that his mild, forgiving, big-hearted wife was actually a cunning fox, he might throw her out the nearest window, or throw her out and follow right behind.

Standing stiffly and holding an empty tray, the waiter waits patiently for the financial editor to sign the credit card receipt. As he lowers his head toward the table, she notices a few strands of grey in his sideburns. They are both in their forties, she thinks with a twinge of sadness. What on earth has driven them both to such rash acts, to turn their backs on what was a fairly comfortable situation, and to fabricate all this friction out of nothing really? What mysterious decree had robbed her innocent uterus of the right to bear a child, and kickstarted this endless chain of events?



<https://www.amazon.com/Wild-Fruit-Penguin-Viking-Sheng/dp/0734399014>

Translation from Greek by David Connolly.

Active in organizing readings and events with other poets, Elsa Korneti was born in 1969 in Munich, Germany, but grew up in Thessaloniki, Greece and still lives there. Her career has been similarly diverse: studies in finance were followed by work as a journalist; she has published essays, book reviews, translations, short stories, and eight books of poetry. Part of her work has been translated and published in foreign anthologies and literary magazines in ten languages. She has been twice nominated for the Greek National Poetry Award.



DESTROY VAN GOGH

I'm just 33 yet breaking down
 How long does the deconstruction last?
 While I'm falling apart
 The ants are emptying my mind
 Marvel at me as a corpse then
 An ideal *nature morte*
 Skull clad in seaweed
 I'll give it a cigarette to smoke
 If I were a headless body?
 Perhaps I'd escape the asylum
 What's to blame? Absinthe? Whores?
 All the dark women in my life
 Wear black
 Come out of illusion – Get into reality
 Impossible – I married the green fairy
 Every night she becomes a demon and then a snake –
 The snake bites its tail – becomes a woman's vagina
 It drowns me in the wet channel
 I live in the beloved triangle
 Between three lines
 Does the demon command you?

It inspires me
 It kills you
 At least let's save what still exists between us
 Love should be noiseless
 But I don't know you in order to love you
 Change yourself – Get yourself together
 I adore untidiness
 You're doomed
 F a t h e r I'm sorry
 Now I know
 That's how I was born
 I live to paint perfection with madness
 Madness with perfection
 I'm tired – I want to snuggle in the roomiest
 Bird's nest in my collection – torpor is a nice word –
 I promise never to defend my disability again

WINGED POETESSES

Ladies and gentlemen
I'd like to confess my addiction
I'm a kleptomaniac
I steal the oxygen from words
I inhale their voices
Because only like this can I breathe
Your turn now:
Ladies and gentlemen
I'd like to confess my addiction
I'm suicidal
I collect my prospective deaths
Like cats do their lives
I have seven whole deaths to live
Leave her at last
To undress in peace
The bodies are expressionless
I declare myself an enemy of movement
Yet more and more often
I fall, fall...

Take note
On the dividing line stands
The rival lover – The rival beloved
Stoically they wait with hooked noses
The male always the first to smell fertility
Help – I remember nothing
The stolen moments don't last long
I hate my intuition
Step this way please
Cheap sunsets sold here
I gift you
My accursed beauty
On mauve paper
And I gift you
My accursed mind
In a mauve box
Vanitas – The name of our punishment
After every heavy drinking bout
We remain ever more thirsty
Yet eventually we'll be pinned to the sky
Like two huge Attacus Atlas butterflies
Our deaths
Will be a mere detail

SLEEPING BEAUTY

It's a strange feeling
to see your body
when you're sleeping
As a spectator

My dear audience

I'm sorry but in this performance
I can't even move,
I'd like so much to play
once again the role
of my favorite Drama Queen
who for days has been painting
on a red and black background
a la maniere d' El Greco

Yet I think that the fact
that I exist as an absence
by itself provides
an exceptional staging

Please don't cry –
at the height of their beauty
blooming roses shed their petals

There remains the interminable journey
without destination
and you
faithful
to your incestuous relationship
with perfection

No,
you didn't want the cloth heart
it shrinks in the wash
nor the metallic one
it rusts
you preferred the glass one
the most reliable material
whatever happens,
whether it breaks or cracks,
it remains clear, transparent

Now stoically you wait
for an angel to fall
like an overly ripe grape
from a cloud bunch
to tie you to its wing
and save you

Do you see:
Frame by frame the sky is rotting
for you to count leaks and damp

First you had to become dead inside
to give away to the unfortunate
your dead father's designer ties
How many more times will you be asked
to confess your innocence?
Only the glass heart's bells
inhabit you
Dissonantly
so dissonantly
they resound
without sound

You'd told them:
I never asked to be awakened
and they all insist on waking me
I never asked for an antidote
and they all insist on giving me to drink
Nor did I ever ask
for the Blue Prince's kiss
and they all insist on kissing me

You've accepted it for some time
Women can't read maps
Women get lost
at least you're in no danger
you're always here
Pinned down
Pinned down
Pinned down
Horizontally

The tragic longing creeps up
its tentacles
enfold you
tightly, methodically

Your clock cries:
"Get up!
It's Gucci time!
Waiting for you is the black limousine
and a tiger in your bed."

ETERNAL BIRD DROPPINGS

In the land of pleasures
there are no
sharp corners
to injure
your hip

the days flow
in television episodes
while in the fields
sprout
bills

in the horizon's fragility
float
lace underclothes
and pigeons
of plexiglass

and
you
plunging
your sole
into dog dirt
left
your tracks
on the new carpet
in the room
of your best
friend.

*

Fall
from an unsuccessful stunt.
Are you ready
to expose yourself
like the eternal bird droppings
on the statue's head?

*

Just as
a drunken pigeon
flies
life
flaps
its wings
in the lens
of the voyeur
cinematographer.

*

Witnessing the murder
will always be
the success
of the idle observer
who shows up
uninvited
like bird droppings.

*

The pigeons
fly
only
when chased
by little kids
who wear
bullet-proof vests.

*

At the end
of a routine day
winged goddesses
fly
in the subway's carriages
while
the night shines
at the end of the tunnel.



Kathleen Mary Fallon most recent work is a three-part project exploring her experiences as the white foster mother of a Torres Strait Islander foster son with disabilities. The project consisted of a feature film, *Call Me Mum*, which was short-listed for the NSW Premier’s Prize, an AWGIE and was nominated for four AFI Awards winning Best Female Support Actress Award. The three-part project also includes a novel *Paydirt* (UWAPress, 2007) and a play, *Buyback*, which she directed at the Carlton Courthouse in 2006. Her novel, *Working Hot*, (Sybylla 1989, Vintage/Random House, 2000) won a Victoria Premier’s Prize and her opera, *Matricide – the Musical*, which she wrote with the composer Elena Kats-Chernin, was produced by Chamber Made Opera in 1998. She wrote the text for the concert piece, *Laquiem*, for the composer Andrée Greenwell. *Laquiem* was performed at The Studio at the Sydney Opera House. She holds a PhD (UniSA).

Van Diemen’s Land 1991/2
(Tasmania will always be Van Diemen’s Land to me)

POLICESTATEPOLICESSTATEPOLICESTATE
POLICESTATEPOLICESSTATEPOLICESTATE

Joe Gilovich, a post-traumatic stress-effected Vietnam vet, was shot
dead outside his home near Hobart
by an SAS crack-shot after being harassed all night
by phone calls every half hour
although rumour had it that it was a cop grudge-killing
and there was evidence to support this
the commission said the SAS must be given the benefit of the doubt

at 2:00 a.m. one frosty morning a drunk off-duty cop
wielding a revolver broke into the home of a local Laotian family
he later told the judge that he had seen a suspicious looking person
running in the back lane
the Laotian family said he talked incoherently about his mother
while he pointed the gun at them
his mother, had, in fact, lived in the house some years previously
the judge at the hearing said that whilst the officer’s story seemed far fetched
he must be given the benefit of the doubt

one Saturday afternoon last Spring I saw an accident just outside the Raceway
a cop car had chased a ‘suspicious’ car at ridiculous speeds
finally driving the car into a tree
the single, ‘of Asian appearance’, female driving the car
was the mother of three returning from her weekly shop
there seemed no reason for the chase but the judge at the hearing said
the officers must be given the benefit of the doubt
the husband said my children have lost their mother I have lost a wife but what I do
have is a repair bill from the Police Department for the damaged Police vehicle

in Hobart we eat at the Ball and Chain Restaurant, buy our bread from the Convict
Bakery, build our weekenders at Eaglehawk Neck from convict bricks with all the
olde worlde charm and authenticity of thumb-printed handmade convict bricks, stay
in Colonial Accommodation without batting an ideological eyelash, the Labour MP
who dobbed on Premier Grey et al for the bribery stunt, lost his seat last election
while Grey, despite the findings of the Royal Commission, got more votes than any
other politician in Van Diemen’s Land history

policestatepolicestatepolicestatepolicestatepolicestatepolicestate

EMCON’S ‘YES MISSUS, NO MISSUS’
DOMESTIC SLAVERY SONG *

Missus: Is the morning fire ready in the stove?

Emcon: Yes Missus

Missus: Is the milk scalded?

Emcon: Yes Missus

Missus: Are the fruit and porridge prepared?

Emcon: Yes Missus

Missus: Has the dough for the day’s bread been put aside to rise?

Emcon: Yes Missus

Missus: And the butter had its first beating?

Emcon: Yes missus.

Missus: Make the tea strong and don’t forget the hot water?

Emcon: No Missus

Missus: Don’t forget to butter the scones?

Emcon: No Missus:

Missus: Butter them hot and let it melt.

Emcon: Yes Missus.

Missus: Lay the table.

Emcon: Yes Missus.

Missus: Peel the vegetables.

Emcon: Yes Missus.

Missus: Is the meat cooking?

Emcon: Yes Missus.

Chorus takes up both the following chants.

Emcon (repeated throughout): No Missus. Yes Missus. No Missus. Yes Missus.

Missus: Don’t’ forget to dust and sweep and polish and peel and cook and stir and wash and wipe and bake and launder the linen and blue the whites and hang the washing nice and neat coloureds here and whites there
just so
and iron the skirts and iron the shirts and make the beds and fluff the pillows and empty the potties and pluck the poultry
and stuff the chicken and sizzle the mutton and baste the meat just so
and brew the tea and mix the jellies and cool the custards away from the flies
and polish the silver and place the napkins and match crockery and smooth the tablecloth and lay the table
just so
and if any of my Royal Albert China gets chipped
I’ll have you whipped

EMCON'S 'YES MISSUS, NO MISSUS' DOMESTIC SLAVERY SONG * *contd...*

The Missus' good-old-days-have-gone song

Missus: (repeated plaintively): But the good old days have gone

Emcon's Hungry song

Emcon: and wrap the left overs and hide the loaf and the crusty buns and a pad of butter
just so
in my apron pocket
just so
for the women and the children
back in their hungry, bug-infested barracks
she'll never miss a pinch of this and aspoonful of that and a handful or two of tea
and a billy can full of sweet, sweet sugar for the men
back in those hungry, bug-infested barracks

Chorus why-shouldn't-we song

Chorus: why shouldn't we
Have jam and tea
And butter and milk
And meat and mutton
Back in these hungry, bug-infested barracks

Emcon's I'm-not-a-woman-to-be-messed-with stories

Emcon: When she saw my belly swelling she threw me out to work in the green, green cane ... I slashed and slaved in the fierce sun from daylight to dark with my sharp cane knife and my baby growing in my belly and when I lay down in the shade for a spell, hot and tired with my fierce baby in my belly that overseer man kicked me up to my feet ... I wove a green cradle from the green, green cane and I laid her down in the coolest shade and I went back to work, bending my back to the fierce sun and when she cried I took her up to my breast my sweet little baby ... and when that overseer man saw me he kicked me again ... so I got straight up with my sharp cane knife and I slashed his fierce red belly and we buried him shallow and secret more blood and more bones for the green, green cane ... I'm not a woman to be messed with.

And I did the same
With another overseer man
I killed him dead in a tricky, secret way
I'm not a woman to be messed with

We had carefully planted taro and sweet, sweet potato
In a little garden by the hungry barracks
They were nice and green growing and almost ready
Our mouths were ready and watering
And nasty man that he was
For no good reason
He kicked them dead
Ground them into the dirt
With his boot while we watched
With a nasty smile
On his nasty face
I'm not a woman to be messed with

EMCON'S 'YES MISSUS, NO MISSUS' DOMESTIC SLAVERY SONG *

So I waited my time
Till I saw my black anger
Coiled like a snake
In the dark of my heart
A nasty big black one
Nasty as he was
Nasty as the anger
Coiled in his heart

So I found a stick and a sugar bag
And I coaxed it inside
And I waited till midnight
And snuck into his room
Like a slithering snake
Silent as midnight
Slipped it under his blanket
And I let that nasty snake
Do its nasty work
Under his bedclothes
He was dead in the morning
No, I'm not a woman to be messed with

And when he sent for me
That boss man from Sydney
I ran to Welo and Wacvie
And we knew it was time
For freedom

Wacvie harnessed the horse
To the bosses new sulky
And we drove straight through
To Cudgen
To freedom

* This is based on a book by Faith Bandler, *Wacvie*. It is the fictionalized biography of her father who was 'brought' from the island of Ambrym in what is now Vanuatu. Once called 'Kanakas' (now referred to as Australian South Sea Islanders), approximately 62,000 men and women were 'brought', by fair means or foul, to work primarily on the sugarcane fields of Queensland between 1863 and the end of the 19th century. With Australia's Federation in 1901 two of the first Acts passed were the *Immigration Restriction Act* (the basis of the notorious White Australia Policy) and the *Pacific Island Labourer's Act* which attempted to 'repatriate' i.e. ethnically cleanse all Islanders back to home islands, even though many had been in Australia for generations. Approximately seven thousand were 'repatriated', some forcibly, but, through Islander activism, a Royal Commission was established and approximately 2,000 were allowed to remain. *Wacvie* tells the story of Islanders escaping the harsh, slave-like conditions on Queensland's sugar plantations and fleeing south to New South Wales, 'to Cudgen', where conditions were better.

Kevin Cowdall was born in Liverpool, England. He has had over 200 poems published in magazines, journals and anthologies in the UK, Ireland, across Europe, and in Australia, Hong Kong, India, Canada, and the USA, and broadcast on BBC Radio. He has previously released three collections; 'The Reflective Image', 'Monochrome Leaves' and 'A Walk in the Park'. His 2016 retrospective collection, 'Assorted Bric-a-brac' (bringing together the best from these collections with a selection of more recent poems), has had excellent reviews and is available in paperback and as an e-book on Amazon. Kevin's novella, 'Paper Gods and Iron Men', is also available in paperback and as an e-book on Amazon.



THE SORROWFUL MAGPIE

A single magpie stands
alone on a secluded
stretch of common
seldom frequented
by strolling humans
or other foraging creatures.
It moves in fretful hops
across the parched grass,
long tail bobbing,
stopping time and again
to utter a raucous chatter,
tilting its head expectantly,
awaiting a response –
but none answer the call,
no others deign to come . . .

THE TENTATIVE FAWN

Standing on legs which seem
barely able to support its weight;
a fragile thing, exposed, defenceless.
It trembles with an intrinsic gait
and takes a first, tentative, step,
with a determination quite innate.

Moving as if testing its ground,
on in to an undetermined world
and untold dangers all around.
Senses growing ever more aware,
twitching now at the slightest sound,
it wavers on the verge of discovery.

THE CONTEMPLATIVE CRAB

It stands in
contemplative stillness,
barely discernible
amongst the shadows
of a shallow pool amid
the scattering of rocks.

Soon the incoming tide
will disturb the tranquillity,
overwhelming its sanctuary,
forcing it to stand its ground
against the onslaught
or retreat to a safer haven.

I too, must seek refuge;
the waves are already
rolling across the sand
to lap at the nearest rocks.
But I am unwilling to leave,
and linger for a while longer.

I drag myself away as
the waves sweep in,
engulfing the place where I
had stood only moments ago.
I am content and stand
in contemplative stillness.

Anne Fitzgerald's Poetry collections include, *Vacant Possession* (Salmon Poetry, 2017), *Beyond the Sea* (Salmon Poetry, 2012), *The Map of Everything* (Forty Foot Press, 2006) and *Swimming Lessons* (Stonebridge, 2001). She teaches Creative Writing in Ireland and North America. Anne is a recipient of the Ireland Fund of Monaco residential bursary at the Princess Grace Irish library in Monaco and lives in Dún Laoghaire, Co. Dublin, Ireland.



WHERE WERE YOU

The first time I saw curry
was in the back of my
brother Cain's Fiat 127, sat

snug beside Noel V. Ginnity
fresh from Jury's Cabaret,
as he shovels rice off a Willow

pattern plate his wife flung
on his lap, a parting gift as we hit
Kildare to open the Railway

Hotel Dad buys his eldest, before
his heir brings it to its knees
Cain will file Chapter 11 three times.

Meanwhile news breaks airwaves
driving through the Curragh.
Elvis is dead. Found on his thrown.



Pic from Pixabay.com

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



MAN EATING CHICKEN

he stares ahead
 illuminated by changing traffic lights
 a face scarred by the day's events
 the sound of his teeth against bone
 pulling and pulling
 in search for lukewarm flesh
 he's eating alone in this strange city
 the footpath still wet from a recent downpour
 he throws lightly browned skin away
 pigeons in a flurry descend
 as he now sucks the bone
 flights over cartilage and knuckle
 he'll eat until he's done
 with the piece of chicken
 with the day
 with life

WOMAN GAMBLES IN MUNICH

the smokers' haze around her
 wafting in thinly from outside
 exhaled by tired lungs
 the pub's door kept ajar by a cold draft
 fierce and uncompromising
 winter doesn't much round here
 she's forty but it's hard to tell
 hasn't washed her hair for days
 drinking beer quietly and throwing coins
 in endless succession into the wet slits of horny machines
 sexed up, swallowing euro after euro
 three fat red hearts make her straighten up
 in anticipation of a downpour of money
 but all she'll get is a free game
 a quick smoke only to return to chase new luck
 soon, very soon, bills, coins, dreams will vanish -

some blocks away, someone looks after a newborn
 that longs for the skin of her mother

STEFAN

we've been in the same film, you and I
set in suburban streets all over germany
we've heard the same doorbells
touched the same towels
smelled and tasted the same food
we've heard the same voices in the room next to us –
but somehow, we had two childhoods
mine was a dream
was yours a nightmare?
life went on, unedited
you lived yours in the coldness of a room I don't remember
the wall in your head had my name on it
sprayed with the echoes of tears
with age I think about you more than ever
your shock of blonde hair
and a head full of gifts and generosity
and a smile that would light a city

THE ACTOR

her hair has a deliberate messiness
lipstick colour bohemian
she talks, likes talking -
the difference between actions and habits
is often measured by – she stops
strikes me being scattered
like electricity in rural ukraine
chemicals make me sick, she says
one bump, one line, half a gram
jesus was addicted for sure
the part, the role
right now, it's a stretch, but hey
push the limits, go past the past
her eyes quiver
as if they'd be swerving lanes on the autobahn
I wanna melt with my characters
like let our souls collide
dissolve the boundaries –
at some point I ask a question
about life
her life
real life

she smiles
look at life, wink and start laughing



Attracta Fahy's background is Nursing/Social Care. She works as a Psycho-therapist, lives in Co.Galway, and has three children. She completed her MA in Writing NUIG in 2017, and participates in Over The Edge poetry workshops. Her poems have been published in Banshee, Poetry Ireland Review, Poethead, Orbis, Impspired, Honest Ulsterman, The Cormorant, and several other magazines. She has been included in The Blue Nib Anthology, short-listed for 2018 Over The Edge New Writer of The Year, and a Blue Nib nominee for Pushcart. She is presently working towards her first collection.

HOW COULD I HAVE UNDERSTOOD

Abstract mysteries, coded Latin manuscripts,
sitting in my kitchen, the sun streaming through
skylight, spreading itself over the table
of books,
lost dreams recorded in journals.
How am I responsible for the worlds pain?

Guilt creeps into thoughts, through my body.
The serpent escaped from the rout of Dionsysus,
crawled up my spine, now I have degenerative
disease, my neck creaks when I move.
I carry the weight of ancestral oppression,
my auto immune system reacts to our animal
nature, wild beast which lurks in depths,
instinct of original savage,
as we rape, plunder the earth.

I plea for release from this nonsense,
escape to beliefs, magical thoughts,
ecstasy, hope has become enemy.

Over the road cattle are moved,
calling familiarly into a new field,
their lowing prophetic.
In my garden I sow red, childlike tulips,
tear dropping fuchsia, white annabelle
hydrangia, this is how I live now Prophet,
in your late arrival.

LOVE POEM

I dreamt you were a poem, a numinous sonnet;
held my breath in hope you would conquer
immurement, loss, love, reveal a truth, quell
the unbearable paradox of who I am.

A raw belly of words tried to articulate
allegories. I, lost in want, could not touch.
Where are your hands, feet, lips?
Already, you'd penetrated.

Even in retreat, love always wins.
Your verse an epiphany, needed nothing
more than to be. I envied your self love,
your sureness. My heart gave up its ghost,

found in the embrace, what love you offered.
I took your syllables, your lines, made them mine.

ANDROMEDA SPEAKS

Perseus, I have been circling ocean cycles,
orbiting our galaxy of sky too long
to trust ideas.
My Grandmothers deformed their bodies
with corsets for ideals,
no longer a girl
the eye you can't see from holds a different view.

The new I behind these eyes,
not driven with desire to please, walled woman
with her hands tied to rock will not be consumed,
I already befriended my sea monster.
Medusa,
willed you to find her in you.
She knows I paid with my blood.
Her stone face rides on the helm, our ship.

Don't assume I am happy to serve a vacant
eyed role, or untie these hands until all deals
are off with my father. This handless maiden will
not be seduced into smouldering fire,
from her lone boat voice waiting to speak.

I will love on my own terms,
you already had mother, and I need a man,
not a boy.
Jupiter and Venus swing in gravitational pull,
mess earth's stability,
togetherness held in polarity.

I look out from chrysalis, ripe with birth,
in search of a face, Jesus, the grail
groom of slippery fish, his constellation stale.
I'm ready to lead, your hand on my heart, a new
milky way,

and here I am with my cross,
walking to Calvary, my freedom,
falling down, and up again ready to love.
Now tell me again what you are offering, Perseus?

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.



Pic from Pixabay.com

CHAPTER XX

"So, it's Ensign Ewart, not Hughes, huh? Who was this Ewart?"

My chubby, flush-faced taxi driver responds with a spirited soliloquy. "He was a lad from Kilmarnock who enlisted in the Scots Greys around the time of Napoleon and became a sergeant. At Waterloo, the Greys and the Gordon Highlanders faced the French Forty-Fifth, the 'Invincibles,' as the frogs called them. The Scottish lads were champing at the bit to get at them, and when the officers finally let them loose, they rode at the French line screaming, 'Scotland Fore ere,' scaring the French out of their *fookin* lace skivvies. Ewart went straight for the French standard bearer, cut his way through a half dozen of the bastards, snatched their eagle and carried it up on high back to the regiment. They gave him the Waterloo medal, and after that it wasn't just the *fookin* officers who got medals, but men from the ranks—the ones who did all the dirty work."

"You should teach history. You're better than the ones who get paid to do it. Is Ewart's grave around here? I enjoy rummaging through old cemeteries and looking at epitaphs."

"Well, it used to be at the castle, which is only a stone's throw from the pub. But it's in Midlothian now until they fix it up and bring him back. His spirit's in the pub, though, and they've got mementos of what I've been telling you about. In fact, here we are now. Hoist one in his honor while you're there."

"I shall. And I'll hoist one in your honor, as well." I tip him with a couple of pound notes for his recital, and he shouts at my back, "You're *fookin* officer material, you are, laddie."

Mountjoy said this pub is on one of the highest hills in Edinburgh. Get a load on and roll all the way home. Not this time, old boy. Controlled drinking is the order of the day.

Ensign Ewart's pub is brimming with memorabilia. It looks like a cross between a museum and a ritzy pub. The barkeep seems affable enough. I'll ask for advice.

"What would you recommend, to wet the whistle, my good man?"

"Well, if you're one for ales, have a lick at our Deuchars IPA."

"Why not?"

I drain the schooner. "Yes sir. That does the trick all right, and it's not as stale as some of the lagers down south."

"Our beer is hand-pumped up from the cellar. There's a difference, you know."

"Now I do. It looks like you've got three more kinds there. Let's have a taste of each in turn if you don't mind."

"Here's some wee glasses, if you want a sampling."

I drink them in rapid succession. "Well, they're good except for the last one. It doesn't have much life in it."

He agrees. "It tastes like dishwater. That's the one you Americans usually rave about. But I can see you're a man who knows his way around a tap."

"I've drained a jar or two in my time, but I'm trying to keep an eye on myself. I've been known to get carried away on occasion."

"It's many a good man's fault. Who hasn't had a night or two he'd rather forget?"

"Nobody I'm comfortable with. I'm only passing through Scotland, though, so I should get a sip of your malt whiskey. You do have it, don't you?"

"Aye. Speyside, Lowland, forty varieties. Is that enough for ya?"

"I should think so. I only want to partake of a few, though, and I'd like to remember which ones they are."

"I tell you what, laddie. I'll write them down on this here coaster. You can tuck it away and keep it as a souvenir. Now, let me tell you something about whiskey. It's like a woman: it's all a matter of taste. I can give you something smooth with a long, round finish; something spicy with a peaty aftertaste; or something soft with a heathery, honey flavor. What suits your mood today?"

"Do you have any with red hair and one green and one brown eye?"

He laughs. "That won't be in until next week. What would you settle for now?"

"Surprise me. Let me have a couple of fingers of something you'd drink yourself and a refill on the Deuchars to wash it down."

The bartender places an empty larger-than-conventional shot glass on the bar alongside a schooner of ale.

"What's this?" I ask.

He points to each in turn. "This is the Deuchars, and this is what I drink."

"But that's empty."

"I know. You asked me to give you what I drink. When it comes to booze, this is it for me. Even Bucky Barabas hasn't made it past these lips for the last seven years."

"Nothing *at all*?"

"Me dear departed father once told me, he said, 'Billy boy, every man has his own God-given quota when it comes to drink, and you'll know when yours has been reached. That'll be the crossroads. Either you'll keep sucking it up like a sponge or you'll step back and watch the other laddies blow themselves up with it.' I reached my limit seven years and thirteen days ago."

"How did you know your time was up?"

"When it dawned on me I was allergic to the stuff."

"Allergic? How did you know you were allergic to alcohol?"

"Because when I overdid it, I kept breaking out in handcuffs!"

I choke on a mouthful of Deuchars, spitting some of it on the bar. He wipes up the mess cheerfully, pleased with my reaction.

"Did you just stop? It must be difficult. The good juice is everywhere, and you, with your job, are surrounded by it."

"I got, and still get, help. Other lads who're in the same boat meet twice a week, and we remind ourselves it's not for us anymore."

"Is that Alcoholics Unanimous?"

He laughs. "Anonymous. It's Alcoholics Anonymous."

"I know. I was pulling your leg. My brother Tommy back in New York is a member of your club, and he hasn't had a drink in three years."

"Well then, good for him. If the thought ever passes your own mind, have a chat with him. He'll tell ya what it's all about. Better yet, get to a meeting with him and see if it's for you."

"I'll remember that. Well, where were we? Oh, yeah. If you were back in your prime and decided you wanted nothing but the best, what would you ask for?"

"This." He lifts a bottle from behind the bar, pours it in a shot glass, and says, "Macallan, ten-year old."

I down the shot. "Oh my, that's smooth. I tell you what. I'd like one more, a large one, and I was wondering if you could point me toward a more local type of pub. This has been great, and you're a fountain of information, but"—I lean over to him and whisper—"your joint is a little too touristy for me. It's crawling with Americans."

He chuckles. "I know what you mean. You're looking for a pub with some local color, a knockabout type of a place that sells cheap beer and rotten whiskey. Edinburgh's bursting at the seams with them. There's one over on Little Britain Street where the university students and some locals hang out. But I have to warn you, you're just as likely to see a brawl between those two groups as not. Is that more in line with what you're thinking?"

"Exactly." I slip him a five-pound note under my palm and ask him to call a cab. He looks around, pockets the fiver, and pours a shot of whiskey from a bottle previously hidden from view in a cabinet behind the bar.

It burns as it goes down. "Whoa! This stuff is volcanic. What is it?"

"Cask-strength Macallan. On the house." He starts pouring another shot. I put up my right hand to stop him, but it's too late. Well, can't waste it. "What's the name of that pub?"

"Barney Kiernan's."

"That's an Irish name."

"It sure is. We've got quite a few Irishmen around here. Nothing to brag about, mind you, but we've got them. Keep to yourself and curb your tongue there, though, laddie. If the students and the Irish ruffians aren't beating the piss out of one another, they're just as likely to pick on a stranger. I'll have a taxi take you right to the front door. You'll be there in two shakes of a stick. Oh, here's something you can enjoy even if you're not crazy about the crowd there."

He takes a small box from underneath the counter and opens it.

"A cigar? You're talking to the right man. I enjoy a good cigar every once in a while."

"This isn't a good cigar; it's a great cigar. This, my friend, is a genuine Cuban cigar. It was given to me by one of my sailor friends. Cubans are the best."

"I know. I know."

He leans over so no one else can hear what he has to say. "Did you know laddie, that those chiquitas in Havana roll the tobacco slowly back and forth over their inner thighs, dangerously close to their private parts, just to give each and every authentic cigar the faint scent of Spanish pussy?"

He has a way with words.

"No, I can't say I knew that. But I'm sure it'll enhance my appreciation of it."

"Here's your taxi. It's right there at the curb."

"Thanks. The best of luck to you."

"You too. Don't forget to talk to your brother about the club."

I raise and wave my right hand as I walk toward the taxi.

"Barney Kiernan's please." The cabdriver hears my accent, turns around, and gives me a strange look.

"Are you sure about that?"

"Yup."

"Okay. Kiernan's it is."

Jesus. It smells like stale beer in here, and there's a hint of urine coming from somewhere. Who cares, as long as it's not mine? The bartender fits right in. He's got a scar on his left cheek and a black patch over his right eye. Sure enough, students on one side, Irishmen on the other. I'll station myself in neutral territory in between the warring parties.

"Hello, may I have a beer please?"

"I'm not a mind reader," the bartender snaps. "What kind do you want?"

Charming. "Half a pint of ale, please."

"So, you're on the wagon, huh?" He roars at his own comment, momentarily drawing attention from both factions. I'd better establish my credentials.

"You're right. I've been on the wagon long enough. I'll have a pint of bitter, and a double shot of Macallan."

"Now you're talking. We're not a high tea operation around here, if you know what I mean, but we do have Macallan."

He turns his head, so he can see me with his good eye and barks, "What's your name?"

Throw him a curve ball. "Cashel Boyle O'Connor Fitzmaurice Tisdale Farrell, but my friends call me Nemo."

He glowers. "All right, Mr. Nemo. My name is Mickey Cusack. I'm just an ordinary citizen, but you can call me Mr. Cusack." He smiles mockingly and walks toward one of the students whose calling out, "Mickey."

Everyone's smoking here. It's time to light up my prized possession. God, that's smooth. No whiff of female genitalia yet, but you probably have to be well into it to get all the benefits. The Irish have the dartboard. I'm surprised they're not competing against the students. That would guarantee a donnybrook.

"Mr. Cusack."

He turns his head in my direction. "What do you want?"

Cusack's barely my height but has massive shoulders and arms. He must've been a boxer or a shot-putter. He's also got the hound of the Baskervilles stationed close by. This dog is enormous, and his ears and muzzle look like they belong to a wolf.

"I'll have another double and another bitter please. Great-looking dog you've got there."

He gets my drinks.

"I'm glad you like him. Owen, come over here and say hello to the gentleman."

Owen gallops over to me, plants his front paws up on the bar, flashes his incisors, and snarls ferociously. I jump back, drawing belly laughs from both contingents.

Cusack grunts. "Down, Owen. Back over there." The beast's paws drop to the floor, and he mopes back to his spot and collapses.

Reclaim your post at the bar.

Cusack's mouth curls back in a vulpine snarl. "You still like him?"

"Sure. He's an exquisite animal. You're a lucky man." I get it. Owen's the bouncer and Cusack's in charge of public relations here.

He puts the drinks down, points to his patch, and says, "Lucky, huh?" He lifts his patch up so I can see his vacant socket. I turn to get a better look, and the tip of my cigar narrowly misses his good eye.

"What the fuh—are you looking to finish the job?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Cusack. It's my damn reflexes." I need to change the subject. "What's that the students are drinking?"

"Buckfast." He brings the bottle over and lets me examine the label.

"My, oh my. Thirty proof and loaded with caffeine. You can get drunk and stay wide awake at the same time. Tailor made for students. I wonder what it tastes like."

He pours me a touch.

My God is that sweet! Look at the students. They're going to town on this stuff. I glance left at the Irish, and sure enough, most of them are drinking Guinness. Cusack awaits my verdict on Buckfast.

"Okay, I guess, but not for me. Too cough-syrupy. Another double of Macallan please."

"Now there's a man after me own heart. I'm with you," he says, leaning over to speak confidentially. "These students get polluted fast and cheap on this panther piss and wind up looking for trouble."

"That's what they're like," I say agreeably.

One student in a drinking circle close to me shouts over in my direction, "So we have an American here, huh?" He announces in a loud voice, "There's a stranger in our house causing trouble, like they do everywhere they go."

That's all I need—a brawl. I look over at him. "Yes. I'm visiting from New York. What are you studying at the university?"

He puts a scowl on his face and belches. "Syphilisation. But what would you know about that?" he asks, looking to bait me.

"Civilization? Western European? Asiatic? African?"

"American. You know why? It's the easiest way to get a degree because there's so little to study. Instead, we hang around here waiting for people like you to enlighten us about your contributions to the world, like slavery and imperialism. Since you're here, why don't you explain to us what the fook you're doing in Vietnam, and when you plan to get the fook out of there?" The other students grumble in agreement.

"I'm sorry, my dear boy, but I'm not privy to information of that sort. But, from what I do know, we're trying to help the South Vietnamese stay independent by stopping Ho Chi Minh and his thugs from steamrolling over them."

I gesture for another drink and offer my adversary one, but he waves me off scornfully. He's enjoying his tirade too much. The Irishmen to the left of me are becoming interested in our exchange. If it comes to it, maybe I can get some support from them. This student is smaller than I am and not particularly husky, but he's going at it like a bulldog.

"When are you Americans going to get the fook out of Vietnam?"

I roll the cigar back and forth across my mouth several times, drawing deeply from it, and sending a string of circular smoke rings in the boy's direction.

"I'll tell you what, laddie. When I get back to the States, I'll give Lyndon a call and let him know how you feel. In the meantime, don't you think you're being a bit too modest about your own role in slavery and imperialism?"

"I and we"—he sweeps his right hand across his group—"have nothing to do with any of that. And we certainly have nothing to do with war. We're pacifists."

How do you like that—truculent pacifists. "Really? What about the British Empire, or has that slipped your mind? Okay. Let's pretend you're the prime minister of Great Britain and I'm the president of the United States. I've just received your ultimatum to evacuate Vietnam, and I agree, with one proviso."

"What's that?" he growls.

"That you withdraw all your troops from Ireland. Just a little quid pro quo between imperialists."

"Ireland has nothing to do with this. That's an entirely different question. You're making false comparisons. The Irish needed us then, and they need us now. They're like Americans. They don't have what it takes to govern themselves."

Shouts come from my left. "Like fookin hell we don't. You little shit."

My God. Cusack's urging the Irishmen to ratchet it up. I turn back to the students. "Aren't any of you reading history at the university? If you were, you'd know that Henry II's lads invaded Ireland in 1171, and the British have been exploiting the Irish ever since. Eight hundred years of oppression is long enough, wouldn't you say?"

The Irish begin stomping their feet, clapping their hands, and shouting, "Out of Ireland. Out of Ireland." Cusack starts chanting along with them, and now he's waving a bat in the direction of the students. He slams it down so hard on the bar we all stop dead in our tracks and turn to him.

Cusack hollers, "Let's hear once more from each of the parties concerned, and that's that. If anyone disagrees, they can continue discussing it with my partner here." He taps the top of his head. In one leaping bound Owen lands on the bar, scattering drinks in all directions and sending a bone-chilling howl across the room.

I retrieve my drink in time. Cusack snaps his finger, and the hound retreats. Then he turns to the student and orders him to make his final statement.

I signal for another double.

"We want you," the student thunders, pointing both of his index fingers at me, "to get the fook out of Vietnam, and we want it now!"

"My dear boy, I hereby solemnly swear that the very moment the last British soldier departs from Irish soil, our evacuation from Vietnam begins."

Glasses are breaking, and punches are flying in every direction. Oh Jesus, I'm right in the middle of it. I've been hit in the face. I'm down. My God, they're kicking me. Christ, I'm bleeding. I feel the wind get knocked out of me and begin gasping for breath.

The hound—he's getting the students off me. Whistles. What are those whistles? It's the police. They're picking me up.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm Okay," I tell a constable. "I just have to get washed up. . . . No. I don't need to go to the hospital. No. No doctor. I'll be all right. I need a taxi. . . . No. I don't want to file any charges. I'll be fine. Don't worry. . . . Yeah, thanks. I'm going to my hotel."

They steer me toward a taxi, and I collapse into the back seat. "The Royal Scot Hotel on Glasgow Road. . . . Sure, I'm Okay. No problem."

I finally get a glimpse of myself in the hotel bathroom mirror. Jesus Christ! I look like Rocky Graziano after a Tony Zale fight. I'd better get home and go into hiding. I can't let anyone I know see me like this. There's still a couple of a weeks to go before we're due back at the university. Hopefully, I'll look more human by then. What's next? Breaking out in handcuffs?

Peter O'Neill is the author of several books, most recently *More Micks Than Dicks*, a hybrid Beckettian novella in 3 genres currently out of print, and *The Dublin Trilogy: Poems & Transversions 1992-2017*, a singular engagement with a 19th century French Master; launched in Paris in November last year to commemorate the 150th anniversary of Baudelaire's death. He recently presented *je la dis comme elle vient* - The Appearance of the Homeric Muse in Beckett's *Comment c'est/How It Is* at the *How It Is Symposium* organised by Gare Saint Lazare Players Ireland at the Centre Culturel Irlandais in Paris. He teaches EFL and resides in Dublin.



CAROLINA MEDINA

EXHIBITION

CHILEAN EMBASSY DUBLIN

27TH SEPTEMBER 2019

The only writers or artists who have ever interested me have been the ones who speak about death, in other words, whose work, or art, is primarily concerned with mortality, or to put it another way, whose art attempts to explore what it means to be mortal.

Carolina Medina is such an artist.

Her current exhibition, images taken from her latest book, concern the relationship which she had with her father while she was growing up as a girl in her native Chile. In it she treats his subsequent death, and how she has been trying to come to terms with this traumatic life altering event.

Like Marcel Proust, who believed in working only with the assorted phenomenon of involuntary memory, Medina creates key images from her past which become emblematic, metaphorical images, and when they are exhibited together, or printed page to page in a book, they form the edifice, or monument, that is her art.

For example, take the image of the overloaded ashtray smoking away like Vesuvius, full of half-spent or smouldering cigarette butts, which become a totemic image of her father who was a habitual smoker, and who eventually died of cancer. So, just as the Madelene infused in the tea became the involuntary aroma which, when noticed by the narrator in *Du côté de chez Swann*, suddenly evokes all of the mysteries of Combray, in Normandy where he spent his time during his childhood with his family, so too for Medina can the pungent odour of a certain tobacco, or cigarette smoke, trigger in her times spent in her family home with her father and family back in Chile.



© Carolina Medina



© Carolina Medina

Samuel Beckett identifies eleven 'fetishes' or 'Proustian revelations' in the epic 8 volumes of *La recherche de temps perdu* which are key moments in the mammoth project which act as catalysts for the work as a whole. Looking around the walls of the Chilean embassy in Dublin today, as spectators, we too are privy to a rich kaleidoscope of images from Medina's now mythological past. We can see the avatars which have surfaced, through her art she has managed to salvage them; the orange Mercedes which her father drove, it appears upon the wall as evocative as the deer once painted on the cave walls of Lascaux. As does the frying pan, another scared object; her father used to cook for the family when he came home from work...

Presence in absence, or absence in presence? Which would you prefer to suffer, given a choice? The former would indicate such a presence in a former life that it remains like an indelible stain upon the mind of the host, so that their waking lives are assailed continuously by the ghost-like phantoms of the absent – in the case of Medina her father. We all have these phantoms, if we are 'lucky'!

Such is LIVING. An exercise in ontology. Be-ING! As opposed to appearing to be. The latter being a particularly Irish feature, evoking Berkeley. We 'are' only because we witness one another, act as references to one other. A hall of mirrors. All then being surface. Superficial. A world of mere appearances. Nietzsche, Wilde and Yeats acknowledge this world of masks which the young Rimbaud, so brilliantly evoked here by Medina, attempted to burst through by colouring the vowels through the systematic *dérèglement de tous les sens*.

*Oisive jeunesse
A tout asservie,
Par délicatesse
J'ai perdue ma vie.*

FOUNDED 2010

Live encounters

POETRY & WRITING

FREE ONLINE MAGAZINE FROM VILLAGE EARTH
OCTOBER 2019

COVER ARTWORK BY IRISH ARTIST EMMA BARONE