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Presents

COVER ARTWORK BY IRISH ARTIST EMMA BARONE



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Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

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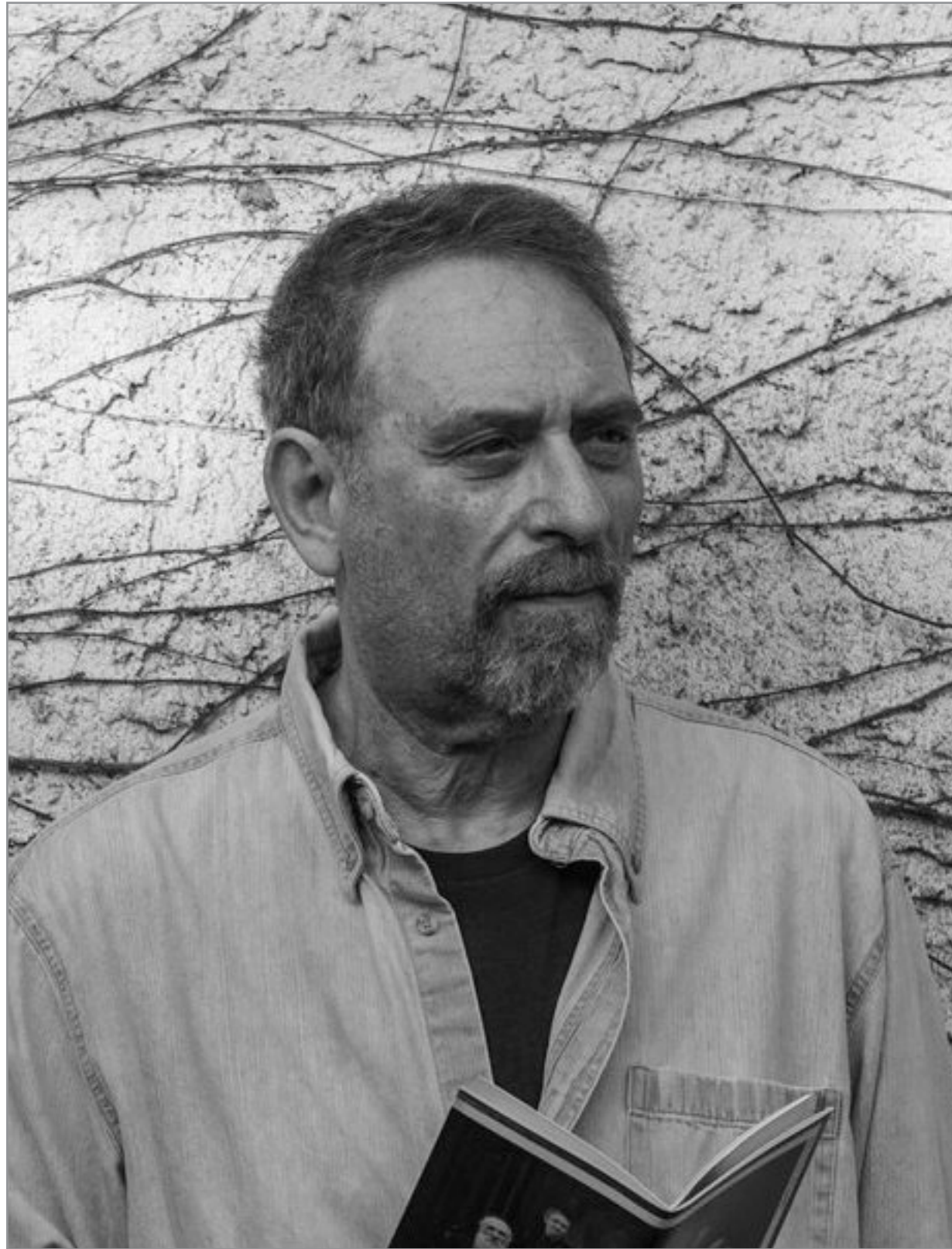


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Alan Walowitz is a Contributing Editor at *Verse-Virtual*, an Online Community Journal of Poetry. His chapbook, *Exactly Like Love* was published by Osedax Press, and his full-length, *The Story of the Milkman and Other Poems*, comes from Truth Serum Press. *In the Muddle of the Night*, a chapbook with Betsy Mars, is due in 2020.



MEETING BY THE RIVER

Peekskill, NY

Perched on the always-on-edge,
I wondered, as usual, what I was doing,
and went through all the apt motions--
trimmed my nails, brushed my hair--what there is--
combed the lint from my beard,
so far, a normal day, despite the plan
to travel not far from here, but far
from my well-worn habits--
the local coffee dive, pounding on the keys,
stealing glances at the pretty girls
so young and out of reach.

I like the north well enough, the ruggedness of the terrain,
these rocks, this river, finally freezing where it's free
from the chemicals we've brewed in it,
appeals to the manly in me, the self-righteous--
which I'm proud enough to own.
I've been this way plenty before
but why the foreignness to the feel of the so-familiar.
Here's surely no déjà vu--
a trick of the brain, it was once explained,
the sensors, one eye, one ear, the lips
or the touch of a hand, picking up an image, a sound,
the touch, and delivering it in neuron-delay,
one a nano-second ahead of the other
and causing momentary disarray--and then
such sudden calm and amazement:
I blinked my eyes, looked again, and it was you.

Alan Walowitz

READING *Catcher* AGAIN

You don't like anything that's happening . . . Name one thing.
 -- The Catcher in the Rye

Phoebe—goddess of the light—
 dares her brother, a more minor god
 and permanently lost in the dark—
 to name one thing he likes.

I understand the problem well,
 having dwelt in it myself:
 and who can ever know for sure,
 nor be brave enough to say?

Someone sends me a picture of her handsomest cat,
 to check, I guess, for proof of life.
 Eager to please, though mostly dead,
 I venture: *I could lose my face in that fur easy*

*and it might make me happy--
 though, perhaps, a little wheezy.*

Not good enough, I guess, to joke
 as she flies off to face the night alone,

where everything must be unqualified.
 The trouble is, I want to stay outside.
 Though in is where real joy might lie,
 but hard to find where I am, and without a light.

WHITE NOISE

My wife's been known to sing all day
 as her father did before,
 which might be how she learned.
 Nice enough to hear, I guess,
 what's stuck inside her head,
 but drives me nuts sometimes
 when all I want is a quiet place
 where the words I try to write
 won't blur inside my head
 and might nearly mean what I pretend.
 Maybe this her own white noise so
 she doesn't have to hear me live alone
 inside my own,
 which drives her nuts enough
 she finally has to go to bed.

She even sometimes sings in sleep
 which is hard to understand.
 But now I want to hear the song
 because, I figure, like a dream,
 this is what she really thinks
 of me, or of our life, though I suppose
 I could have asked.
 But it doesn't quite come clear
 even when I draw so close
 which might or might not
 be her fondest wish.
Sing to me, I say, softly--not a demand.
 And sharp as someone dead asleep
 might ever say, she says:
Shush, for God's sake. Just let me sing.

Ana Luísa Amaral has published over thirty books of poetry, a play, a novel, essays, and several books for children. She is translated into over twenty languages and published in several countries. She herself has translated the poetry of Emily Dickinson, William Shakespeare or John Updike. A collection of her poems has come out in the USA, with New Directions (*What's in a Name*, transl. Margaret Jull Costa, 2019). She was awarded national and international prizes and distinctions, among which the Correntes d'Escritas/Casino da Póvoa Prize, the Giuseppe Acerbi Prize for Poetry, the Great Prize of the Portuguese Association of Writers, the Prize PEN for Fiction, the Fondazione Roma International Prize or the Prize of Essay Jacinto Prado Coelho. Apart from writing poetry, her academic research fields are Feminist and Queer Studies.



The following poems have been translated by *Margaret Jull Costa*. She has been a literary translator for over thirty years and has translated works by novelists such as Eça de Queiroz, José Saramago and Javier Marías, as well as the poetry of Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, Ana Luísa Amaral and Fernando Pessoa.

Ana Luísa Amaral. Photo credit: Porto Editora.

ASSIGNATIONS

My tree is free,
I can see her from here,
her branches swaying to the rhythm
of my steps

Like an ancient chair
that needs no name, that's
her: my tree,
and I sail towards her
like a ship, now

Would she summon an army of bees,
a battalion of ants from the bottom
of the garden, if she felt
another body sitting there?

I imagine her singing and announcing
she's free and ready
to receive me

She has just thrown down
a myriad of leaves onto me,
an offering of jumbled, dying colours,
and the hymn pierced through with black
that I'm writing for her
is all the richer for that golden dust –

just like my white nightdress
which gravely displays
its stains, its smell
of a death foretold;
the sweet weariness after love –

or pure ecstasy of autumn
in the making

Marcações

A minha árvore está livre,
vejo-a daqui,
os ramos oscilando ao ritmo
dos meus passos

Como cadeira antiga
que não precisa nome, assim
é ela: minha,
e a ela aporto
como navio, agora

Convocaria exército de abelhas,
batalhão de formigas do fundo
do jardim, se sentisse
outro corpo?

Imagino-a cantando, dizendo
que está livre, se preparou
para me receber

Acaba de lançar
miríade de folhas sobre mim,
oferta descomposta pela cor,
e o hino atravessado a negro
que lhe faço
ficou mais rico na poeira de oiro –

tal como a minha camisa branca
que seriamente exhibe
as suas manchas, o seu cheiro
de morte anunciada:
esse cansaço bom depois do amor –

ou êxtase de outono
a ser

THE BEE

The bee made
her triumphal entry

on this pot plant, a miniature conifer
that gave up the ghost some time ago
and has since been colonised
by an ivy plant with leaves like clover
and tiny lilac flowers

The tree, now withered and dark,
is almost completely covered
by the ivy's tendrils:
asphyxiation in green
and shades of blue,
so strangely beautiful

And the bee, a wasp-waisted prima donna,
stepped onto the stage
of this sky tinged with spring

She tasted the flowers,
probing them deeply:
checking and testing, the infallible seductress,
methodical and blithe,
drank from every one

Then, after a glancing flight
around the conifer, and a final round of sipping
from each flower, in case there was a trace of nectar,
the bee left, triumphant

And when she left
she carried in the pockets
of her black-and-gold-striped body
an infinitesimal portion
of life

A abelha

A abelha fez
a sua entrada triunfal

neste pequeno pinheiro de varanda
morto há já algum tempo,
colonizado agora
por uma hera de folhas como trevos,
ínfimas flores lilases

As gavinhas da hera ao longo do pinheiro
seco e escuro
cobrem-no quase todo:
uma asfixia em verde
e tons de azul,
tão estranhamente bela

E ela, prima-dona de elegante cintura,
sobrevooou o palco
deste céu tingido a primavera

Provou as flores
em exame profundo:
verificou, testou, sedutora infalível,
e em frente a cada uma foi bebendo,
metódica e feliz

Depois, um voo rasante em roda
do pinheiro, uma prova final
a cada flor, talvez rasto de néctar faltasse,
e saiu triunfante

Quando partiu daqui,
transportava nos bolsos
do corpo matizado a negro e ouro
uma porção infinitesimal
de vida

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.



Anne Fitzgerald

STUDY IN GREY

The radiologist hands
John-Joe a disc, bids him look.

Play your inner self, get
a better sense of shape.

In the absence of specialist
or music he watches shades

of battleship grey, pewter
and gunmetal, greets John-Joe

in profile and lateral transepts
like odd versions of a change of mind

or an old friend remembered
reminds him how he left a neighbour's

crown spliced in two. Just
testing my resolve, your honour

and the chainsaw.
His medulla oblongata stares

back, normal enough save
for the glint of copper jackets

a Borrisokane postmistress
gifts him in a botched raid.

Two fine slugs, like pillars
of the community remain

inside John-Joe's MRI,
infections of his soft tissue map.

Antony Owen is from Coventry and the author of six collections of poetry. In 2017 Owen was shortlisted for the coveted Ted Hughes Award for new work in poetry. In 2018 Owen won a category of The British Army poetry competition for his poem "A black nurse tends to wounds" which was awarded The Museum of Military Medicine prize. His poems have been published worldwide and translated in several languages. An advocate of progressive peace poetry his poems also appear in UK School peace education resources for CND. These poems appear in his seventh collection, *Cov Kids*, which will be published in May 2020 by *Knives Forks & Spoons Press*."



CYRILLE REGIS

Guiana born you learnt how to charge through bananas like mist,
those slave-lands were your anchor to run and live free
I picture a leather ball as your chair beneath sunsets.

In West Bromwich you learnt from shoelaces the smell of England,
the puree of banana, saliva and the soiled chalk of white men,
you shrugged them off like an own goal to decency.

You were the uncaged magpie, a song against the bulldog's snarl,
more than a black man, but a human who silenced the noise,
the smiling tower on bedroom walls of proud black boys.

In Coventry came a magpie, a sky-blue heart in a city Thatcher greyed,
you charged through the right wing to Kop-song murmurations
Each time you played win or lose was an unknown celebration.

In Liverpool you became a liver-bird with a frond of the Magpies blue,
monsters made monkey noises but you never walked alone,
they took you in like bird-song, like one of their own.

Your first England cap when they posted you cowardice in a bullet and ink,
"If you put your foot on Wembley turf, you'll get one for your knees".
How sweet the grass of England and the black defiant rose.

Guiana born, you learnt your first steps charging through the foggy flora,
the best pass your Father made was from your Mother at birth,
he must have felt he'd won, that ball of life now returned to earth.

Antony Owen

THE NIGHT DAVID BOWIE DIED

The first girl I French kissed tasted of Indian summer rain
it came later than expected but when it came, I was pure,
David Bowies voice flew across the cinema in octaves
he brought my lips to hers like a stray dog scratching a closed door.

The second girl I kissed bit my lips to be cool and Madonna
I pushed her over and her dress was covered in dogshit,
she later threw a drink in my face to be edgy and Mandinka
I was lost in my headphones trying to find Major Tom.

The night David Bowie died my wife and I laid in silence,
a moth bounced against the filament like wood on drumskin
and we talked about how cancer can never really eat us.
We played This is not America on repeat, then kissed like husband and wife.

ADVICE FOR A BABY IN RAPTURE

Daughter,
for you a scree of starlings
rolling with sierras of cumulus.

For you, dusk over Amazon [™]
the vis-vest yellow of tagged humans
staring at the soda-lit borealis in love with life.

Daughter,
keep your words unspoken for now
for when they leave your mouth they have you.

For you, the lamplighter flies deep in the woods
where little girls in red hoods skip to wolves
I will teach you not to follow breadcrumbs.

For you, a shield of mother and father
we have made a vow to show you the new world
some things are important like seeing days as clean blank pages.

THE SUICIDE OF A MUCH-LOVED TEACHER

For Mr Pilbin

In the silk rags of cigarette smoke,
we wolf whistled the crush teacher
she never knew who we were and
neither did we in nineteen eighty-nine.

I remember snow, grey as PE whites.
The awkwardness of undressing together
and loudmouths who puberty quietened in
the race to have a man-cock and the easy shower.

I remember a teacher who never stopped smiling
the day we found out he hung himself for debt.
All the unloved kids loved him, mourned him over
I learnt from the “thick ones” the most important lesson.

I remember seeing the dead teacher stare at the sky,
he was feeling sun on his face for a brief moment.
He noticed that I noticed and smiled his lying smile,
that was the night before the night when he became sky.

THE BRAVE GO WILLINGLY

“Make it a good one”
Leanne Bridgewater

Your death is a hinderance –
it twists my heart like a Rubik’s cube
every side is black and I cannot work it out.

I want to rip out the tongues of my shoes
curse the route I never took to you
never speak of my failure to help.

I want to punch the white face of a mocking clock
tear out the pendulum and shout *“fuck you time”*
but no, no, I shall raise the cuckoo to wake me gently.

Your death made me stop my car on Leamington Road
move a fox from roaring road to a lullaby lay-by
my heart is meat and you always hated meat.

I want to look at the photograph of you smiling as a baby,
like my baby that I shall raise in the permanent wing;
it is not the earth that kills us but the earthlings.

I want to feel the crematorium of that hug we had in Cov -
by the tree that caught all the bags trapped in a vortex
I want to say goodbye properly Leanne and never go, just leave.



Attracta Fahy's background is Nursing/Social Care. She works as a Psychotherapist, 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 Bold Italic, Live Encounters, Banshee, Poetry Ireland Review, Poethead, Orbis, The Curlew, Impspired, Honest Ulsterman, The Blue Nib, Elixir, Ink Sweat & Tears, and several other journals at home and abroad. She was the October winner in Irish Times; New Irish Writing 2019, has been nominated for a Pushcart prize, included in Anthologies; Impspired, The Blue Nib, Avalanche, and Of Mouth Northern Women's Writings, nominated for Best of the Web 2019, shortlisted for 2018 Over The Edge New Writer of The Year, and long listed for 2019, shortlisted for Allingham Poetry Prize 2019. She was a featured reader at the January Over The Edge Open Reading in Galway City Library. Her debut chapbook Dinner in the Fields was published in March '20 by Fly on the Wall Poetry.

POST MODERN GURUS

They think I'm ignorant
of mystery, antediluvian texts.
That I'm not blessed with ability
to augur predictions, dispatched
from a chaos God,
other dimensions

The last time we spoke
It had reached the 5th –
My friend sitting on a self-made
pedestal, insisted I join
her followers.
Enlightened – she'd teach
wisdom I lacked, I must
call her, she explained,
bow when we meet, understand
she is a diamond in a dresser
full of crockery.

I felt inadequate trying,
for friendship's sake, to meditate
my western body
into Eastern positions.
I could have become revered
prophetess, all knowing,
sagaciously teaching the ignorant,
saying what gurus are expected
to say.

But prophets are expensive, bankrupt,
I can no longer afford their time.

Attracta Fahy

MONOLOGUE TO THE DEMENTED

St. Brigid's Hospital, January 1981

It was going to take all my strength not to go there,
the pit of human dark.
One must learn how to go down when they need,
but be sure to come back up.

The long stretch of tarmac, and wailing song from Ash
boughs, led to a heavy door. My stomach heaved, eyes
on blacked out barred windows, no bloom, umber green
moss a cemetery to absent spirits, like cardboard bodies
they toiled dough in the basement.

Lengthy corridors, walls once cream, now mould,
brown drips of old tea like darkened blood. Large
pastel doors, cracks, and scrapes, as if nails carved
a voice of desperation into wood. The lingering lines
of worn floorboards from pacing feet, cobwebs, stains
on high ceilings, all mirrored the split, ghosts, people
who inhabited a place of no conversation, except
with themselves, occasional rants, gloomy secluded
space for the half dead.

They walked like zombies, as if possessed by gods,
demons who spoke in symbols, rhymed coded language.
Words heard, unheard, misunderstood, the man who said
he lived in heaven, only spoke with Angels, the one who
who didn't speak, all day in a chair staring into air.

The hum through room of silent screams, louder screams
from the Women's locked ward, hysterics they were called,
as they versed through days and nights;
"I want to go to the Suck, I want to go to the Suck"
"Let me out! Please, please, I want to go to the Suck."
I still hear their pleas.

And the medication to deaden their cries, visits one Sunday
a month, husbands with children, mistresses tucked away,
single, safe from madness, asleep to the witch.

Across a large room I lined their bodies into position,
rows of beds, strange echoes bounced in musty air, stench
a screech to my ear, the unsaid fear, ice silence before shock.
As iron clamps bore down on their heads I watched each body
rise two feet, clinched brains, electric tremors, obscure
metal shudders, a draught locked my immobilised body.

Afterwards, confusion, I helped recall names,
people, songs they knew, heard their terror when
they could not remember.

It was always dusk here, shadowy beings creeping
through ether, made their way into scapegoats.
Some walked all night through rooms, night watchers,
moon -Luna dressed for marriage of death.

That morning I found him, tables stacked to reach
low watt light, its long lead around his neck,
in time to save him, his limp hand had already left,
later I heard he succeeded.

No shamans or priests in this house of hell, only devils
in damp walls, this dark home of locked doors.
I was experiment to myself, a young nurse trying
to understand the mind of another, master her own.
This was the secret, how to bend not break,
fall to pieces not apart. We fragile creatures, felt the cold,

continued overleaf...

MONOLOGUE TO THE DEMENTED ... contd

and still, there was warmth, hefty sash windows
gave glimpses of sun.
When all hope is lost, and there is nothing left,
all we can be is kind.
I sat with the pain, sat at their table, looked into their eyes
to say,
“I’m here, and so are you.”

And after all of that familiarity, a strange animal,
I became accustomed to madness, embraced their sadness,
and even began to enjoy their bread.

* The *Suck* is a river that flows behind what used to be St. Brigid’s Psychiatric Hospital in Ballinasloe. Patients are presently being integrated into the community through Community Residential services, and Social Housing.

SR. GREGS

I do not see a young girl
dancing in your eyes,
the one you might have been,
woman who has earned
compassionate wrinkles on her face.

I search for a mother,
one our bodies know
even without child, one
who gives love
without question.

They are not there, the child,
woman, mother.

What’s left for us then
when you have left yourself?

I am ill. Yet, I grieve
for you. I loved
and am lost. A child
with a child.
With only bones to offer.

THERE IS NOTHING MORE HOLY

For Deacon and Robby

There is nothing more holy
than sitting with your love,
your friend consumed in a crown
of fire, eyes closed to a choking world,
lungs hungering for air.

There is nothing more holy
than to bow to defeat, touch forbidden
by order, and all you have is mantra,
your quiet voice, warm, in whisper, say;

It's ok to let go—
Look up, your mother, Dixie is waiting
in Kentucky, your brother, Roscoe readies
a different fire.
Lois already knows, there she is at your feet,
her Labrador eyes pool your goodbyes.

It's Springtime, flowers bloom new light,
your garden enchanted in daffodil, wild pip,
gardenia, ready to burst, its journey to bud,
as you from your earthly body, like fruit,
when it decays, seed grows anew.

This, my darling friend,
is what all our little dying was for,
to prepare for today, one breath to rebirth.

There is nothing more holy than being present,
an umbilical cord to nourish your friend, cocooned
as he drifts, sails again in primordial waters,
chrysalis,

you steering his boat, oceanic waves calling
his spirit to a new horizon, leading him home,
his last breath into unknown,
unknown to you too.

There is nothing more holy than death
On the feast of Passover.

I AM WAITING

After George Hitchcock

I am waiting for the second coming,
it is promised.

I watch for signs, see one across the floor,
over the wine rack, in electric pink,
“We are all born mad”
I laugh.

I am waiting for the chef in Tartare to send my soup,
potato, leek, dillisk, the waitress to bring
my fried chicken sandwich, dressed with fennel,
slaw, and cheese. Today, a day for comfort,

waiting for news, it is imminent, wonder
what we will still know of this earth
after we die.

I am waiting for this pain in my back to inform me,
it's so hard these days to stay up in the world.
I ask for an image, a dark wood, one strip of light,
my eyes fix on that sign again.

I am waiting to be in my car, alone, where I can be real,
no pressure to smile.
I am waiting for the swallows return'
their home awaits in my eye shoots.

I am waiting for the strong to stop putting their boot
into the face of the weak, the weak to see their eyes
have a light of their own.

After all these years I am still waiting
to know my purpose, what if we have none
except to exist for the sake of it,
like bluebells spread their colour over the forest?

I am waiting for the promised prophet,
what if it's a woman, or a child?
waiting at the top of the food chain.
We have gobbled everything,
What's left but the earth to gobble us.

I am waiting for a revolution, it is coming.

THERE IS ALWAYS A BAR SCENE

*(Found poem – Instagram –
National Geographic/New Yorker cartoons)*

If you go deep enough into the jungle
there is always a bar scene.
A crash of hippos make their way, wild birds,
full of nostalgia, pick at a bottomless brunch,
animals nest in a riot of rain, fuzzy green
cropped sweaters, thick leopard skin tights,
there's a resurgence of zebra print mini-skirts.

They push the boundaries, dream of magenta,
cerulean blue, aqua in mind.
The females are hunting red lechwe, I watch
them stalk for hours. A cub holds her tail,
he watches as she makes a kill, feeds on the flesh.

I made day trips, more wires existed than good men,
over run with poaching for skin, bones, claws,
other body parts, it pays to go around the next corner,
transverse morning light and say screw it,
jump in!
I tried to document less well known nocturnals,
got caught in a downpour,
another canopy inhabitant, a helmeted hornbull
joined in the fun, stuffed his beak with frog legs.

Others decades extinct, are found hanging from trees,
they cross deep channels, wallow and feed
in swamps, on a good day you might see
a frogmouth with huge eyes as he spies for his prey.

Three orphaned rhinos prepare for life in the wild,
insist they are staying together for the sake of their parents,
An Orangutan sits in a corner beating his chest, says,
the jungle is his, he likes to raid beehives and eat honey.
At his opposite, Regulus is graceful, follows the dipper,
knows no arrow or spear will overcome,
bare hands of Hercules is what you need.
It is always special to look in the eyes of king beast.

A couple sit in a corner,
“now we have fallen in love, I have a confession,
I'm not a giraffe, I'm fifty eight weasels in a trenchcoat”

Barbara Crooker is a poetry editor for *Italian Americana*, and author of nine full-length books of poetry; *The Book of Kells* (Cascade Books, 2018) won the Best Poetry Book 2018 Award from Poetry by the Sea and *Some Glad Morning* was published in 2019 (Pitt Poetry Series). Her awards include the WB Yeats Society of New York Award, the Thomas Merton Poetry of the Sacred Award, and three Pennsylvania Council on the Arts Creative Writing Fellowships. Her work appears in a variety of anthologies, including *Common Wealth: Contemporary Poets on Pennsylvania*, and *The Bedford Introduction to Literature*.



LOVE IN THESE DANGEROUS TIMES

Sitting across from you, glass
of wine in hand, I'm warmed by
the little gas fire, secure as I think
about the cave we'll make when
we go upstairs: flannel sheets,
duvet of goose down. Tomorrow,
we will go out again in the dangerous
world, wearing face masks and gloves,
in search of produce and toilet paper,
trying to make our supplies stretch.
When we return, we'll feel like heroes
in a quest saga, safely home. But nothing
and nowhere is safe, my love. So hold me
in the dark; let morning only be broken
by birdsong. Let us keep going, hand
in hand, even though we know
now it's impossible.

Barbara Crooker

AND IT'S HARD

It's April, and a hard rain is falling,
 just as Bob Dylan told us it would,
 and every day, the news on the radio is worse
 and worse. Great greasy gobs of lies coming
 out of Washington, cabinet level appointments
 of people least qualified for the job,
 and nobody wants to talk about climate change,
 although we should all be terrified. Bob warned
you've got to serve somebody, and look, there's Satan
 standing at the head of the line, tray in hand,
 hoping for a second helping of duplicity and greed,
 the daily special. Dana Carvey used to smirk,
isn't that special in the voice of The Church Lady,
 but it isn't any more. *More more more* seems to be
 the motto of the day, but only for the haves.

I've been trying to cut down, scale back, not have
 to have so much. But then comes Christmas, which
looks like an elf threw up in your house according
 to my son-in-law—twenty kinds of cookies,
 the Holy Trinity of sugar, butter, and eggs—
 enough tinsel, glitter and tiny white lights to be seen
 from a satellite. What this has to do with the birth
 of a baby in a barn, I'm not quite sure. But I know
 something is falling, and I've got to keep hoping it's scales
 from the hardened hearts of the powerful, the way vinegar
 removes lime from a tea kettle, and that somehow, despite
 the darkening odds, a little light will shine in.

ODE TO APRIL

Nothing shy about you as you paint the sky
 with thick blue impasto, a gusto that's
 echoed in the blare of daffodils, their horn
 section discordant in the wind. Which spins
 the forsythia into a new way of dancing: jazz
 hands. Jazz hands. A brass band
 in every shade of gold. Who was it who told us
 it couldn't stay? But now hooray! for the lilacs,
 their purple credenzas, the stanzas of violets
 dotting the lawn. It's a procession, the progression
 of one flower after another, serial lovers to pluck
 and discard. Winter was hard, the yard brown,
 the garden bare. Along comes April,
 with her one sweet song. And then, without
 missing a beat, here comes May, with her ruffled
 skirt, skimpy shirt, and columbines in her hair.

HAPPINESS

Compassion is a verb.
- Thich Nhat Hanh

It's a day of startling blue, embellished,
not besmirched, by chalk-dust clouds.
In the larger world, terrible people
continue doing terrible things; careless
accidents turn ancient monuments into ash
and rubble. But here, none of this can reach
us. The only news is carried by the wind,
which is full of the rustle of leaves, the gossip
of bird song. I surrender to the arms
of this metal lawn chair, secure in its embrace.
If peace is the absence of desire, then I want
nothing more than this, a day without
appointments, deadlines, agendas. Just
this green lawn clotted with henbit
and the fallen suns of dandelions. Off
in the distance, the pale surf of traffic,
the drone of bees. And when a bluebird
lights on the nearby wire, indigo coat,
smart red vest, I think that I have won
the lottery of the sky, and nothing, not even
the black shadow of the vulture patrolling
overhead, is going to dispel this blue jubilation.

IN ROME,

at the Palazzo Massimo, we saw the frescoed walls
from the painted garden of the Villa of Livia, two thousand
years old, all hazy blues and greens. This is Eden, paradise regained.
These walls were part of Livia's triclinium, a dining room partially
underground, cool in even the hottest summer months. Guests
saw a garden of the imagination, not the real one, so no beads
of perspiration decorated their brows. On these walls,
all the blossoms bloom at once, and trees bear both flowers
and fruit, a natural impossibility: dates and quinces, myrtle
and laurel, palm trees and oaks. While birds fly in the gentle
painted breeze: partridges, doves, and goldfinches, eating fruit,
perching on limbs. Our limbs are weary, having tromped through
the Galleria Borghese, the Spanish Steps, the house where Keats
died; then the Trevi Fountain, the Piazza Navona, and the Pantheon
the day before. I would like to settle, stay here, recline
on one of the imaginary couches, with peeled grapes, nightingale
tongues, a fizzy drink embellished with pomegranate seeds
one of the birds has cut open. If I place them under my tongue,
perhaps I can remain, basking in the sunshine of this perpetual
spring, and never grow old.

Betsy Mars is a prize-winning poet, as well as an educator, photographer, and recent publisher whose first release, *Unsheathed: 24 Contemporary Poets Take Up the Knife*, came out in October 2019. Her work has appeared in *Kissing Dynamite*, *The Blue Nib*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Poetry Super Highway*, and *Rattle* (photography), to name a few. Her first chapbook, *Alinea* (Picture Show Press), was published in January 2019. *In the Muddle of the Night*, a collaboration with poet Alan Walowitz, will be available sometime in 2020.



THE PARABLE OF THE VINEGAR*

Lesson one: start with fruit, or some dark hidden root; lesson two:
 Instill it in neglect, some long, drawn-out time,
 preferably in a barrel, wooden and unforgiving. Lesson three:
 Qualify *everything*. Add a dose of sugar now and then
 to keep it on its toes,
 Uncertain where the next blow is coming from.
 Oxygen-deprived, it will ferment: finally give it air,
 a mother with acid on her tongue. Lesson five:
 Ration water, let it thirst. It will seek its own,
 find its fountain of eau de vie.
 Slip in oil in equal parts, make a dressing, measured
 and anointed, say grace in the final hour.

* The so-called **Vinegar Bible** is a version of the King James Bible printed in 1717 by John Baskett. It is best known and highly valued for its printing error, substituting the word “vinegar” for “vineyard.”

Betsy Mars

MY FAMILY HISTORY

In the shtetl distances so great,
that cousins married cousins,
and then distance wasn't enough.
Incest, a word never uttered–

taboo in my childhood world,
But from a lack of biological diversity?
a lineage of sterility, psychosis,
incidental intermarriage: not quite a biblical sin.

Later unplanned pregnancies,
early marriages, misdirected resentments:
my mother to blame for the sperm
that penetrated egg, formed her.

Others – near-abortions – survived
through failure of a bent hanger,
or courage, seeded a minefield
of eggshell-brittle dependents.

And I – the second child not to blame
for the shotgun wedding –
observing and absorbing
could not abstain from this legacy,
drinking in my inheritance of longing.

AND GATHERERS

He kneads her tear duct for nectar,
caught in the web of her lashes, tears.
He plunges in, body like a goat's
pupil across the void of her iris –
a flower whose stamen he couldn't swim.

He splashes a belly full of gatherings
across the thorny terrain of her face.

A luminescent constellation wheels
before her, she flicks at it like a fly –
splattered, another buzz killed.
Please let there be light. He tugs
at her roots, smoothes the disturbed soil.

WHERE THE ROAD AND THE SKY COLLIDE*

What if the earth absorbed all water
and the soil turned to rust –
if what was left, hung in the sky, aqueous

like your liquified eye, blue, shining down
as you used to, with the transparency
of windows, whatever a soul is

or was – back before it escaped –
now sounds the same old refrain
in my *should have*-racked brain.

Perhaps indifferent in the great beyond
where the pain meets the sky,
freed of a body, the wounded earth,

the striation-raked wounds in your psyche,
ground pounded, compressed.
In the end, we come to a vanishing point

beyond which we can't see,
although the towers play pickle,
toss communication only the right

receptors can catch. A relay. Your spirit
dances on the horizon. A dress form
mannequin, shimmering in the thin

atmosphere, gyrating
like a 60s go-go dancer.
Your memory is a truck stop

where I can refuel, unwind
in cherry Naugahyde seats,
sip bitter coffee, grab a piece of the pie.

**from Jackson Browne's song "The Road and the Sky"*

Breda Wall Ryan grew up in Co Waterford and now lives in Co. Wicklow. She has a B.A. in English and Spanish from UCC; a Post-graduate Diploma in Teaching English as a Second or Other Language from Trinity College, London; and M.Phil. in Creative Writing (Distinction) from Trinity College, Dublin. Her awarded fiction has appeared in *The Stinging Fly*, *The Faber Book of Best New Irish Short Stories 2006-7* and *The New Hennessy Book of Irish Fiction*. Her poems have been published in *Skylight 47*, *Ink Sweat and Tears*, *Deep Water Literary Journal*, *And Other Poems*, *Fish Anthology*, *The Ofi Press*, *Orbis*, *Magma* and *The Rialto*. In 2013 Breda won the iYeats Poetry Contest, Poets Meet Painters, Dromineer Poetry Competition and Over the Edge New Writer of the Year. She was selected for Poetry Ireland Introductions Series, 2014 and was awarded Second Place in the Patrick Kavanagh Award, Third Prize in The Rialto/RSPB Nature Poetry Competition, was shortlisted for a Bridport Prize and Highly Commended in Fool for Poetry Chapbook Competition. Twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize, a Forward Prize and Best of the Net Award, she won the Gregory O'Donoghue International Poetry Competition, 2015. Her first collection *In a Hare's Eye* won the Shine Strong Award. Doire Press published her second collection, *Raven Mothers*, in 2018.



PERSEPHONE

From my window
there is nothing much to see.

A suburban street.

A man wearing ear protectors
trims a hedge.

Cars go past.
A cyclists stops
to read a text on his mobile phone.

Zigzagging from footpath to cycle lane,
a young woman lays her palm
on each carbuncled tree trunk
she passes.

Green sap rises
to the tips of gnarly twigs.

Leaves bud.
It is spring.

Breda Wall Ryan

ALL MORNING

I've been watching
sparrows driving blue tits
from the feeder.

A collared dove swings it
like a pendulum, spilling seed
for darting mice to nibble.

Magpies mob a stalking cat
and while they chase him,
a moulting blackbird

bare-breast
in this raw, inclement summer,
takes his chance.

I am trying to be grateful
for his skinny, bald survival,
grateful for his bright yellow

beak that lights the drizzle,
grateful for the starlings
dripping on the clothesline.

This July, more rain has fallen
than in any other summer
but I'm trying to be grateful

for this simple gift
of songbirds flying free
around birdseed in mesh cages.

WINTERSCAPE

soil blackens
worms burrow deep
blackthorns cage leaf-drift

*

a pale waxed disc
seals sloe jam in jars—
daylight moon

*

nightlong rain crawls
down the window
in its own wake

*

in the doe's belly
her wombfed faun's
first leap

A WALK IN THE WOODS

I glimpse a sun-glint
on what might be a coin,
fish this steel cylinder
from among fallen leaves,

read 'Winchester .243'
stamped on the rim,
trace a finger
along the steel, feel
how smooth,
designed to drive a hot projectile
through meat and bone.

A soft breath
across its empty neck
raises the high-pitched whistle
of a sika deer.

It wakes my inner ear
to the gun's report.

In my mind's eye
bone shatters,
knees buckle and fold,
eyelight quenches
as a deer heart pumps
hot blood into forest loam.

I stand in a hunter's footprints,
scan shadows
spreading between trees.

The sun goes down.

I pocket as souvenir
the deer's voice
trapped in steel.

BEECH TREE AFTER RAIN

The tree goes on dripping,
dripping until the sun appears
to hush the perking leaves
that listen, listen
to all the summer sounds;
birdsong, windsong, rainsong,
the quiet hum of trees.

THE THIRD WINTER

Earthworms freeze in dank soil,
slugs slither down, layer by layer,
closer to Hades' fire. They gleam,
pallid globules on the roots
of the pomegranate tree.
Only the dream sustains me:

Demeter unwraps two straw-wound
wine apples. Ember-lit on her palms,
they shine, red-streaked lanterns.
She saves me the choicest, as if
even now I might lean into her flank,
lay my head in her lap as her blade
splits the fruit, explores the folds
of its juice-swollen womb.
She flicks bloodripe droplets
into the pink cave of my mouth
with a halfmoon thumbnail.
I crush them one by one between
teeth and tongue, release winejuice
in exquisite increments.

Earth Mother, all winter I yearn
for sap-rise, to walk with you
through pomegranate fields,
ripening the glistening fruit.
Your mourning overwhelms me.
I stretch my dazed mouth
for a wine-rich seed, taste
slug, bitter as cloudberry.
This is our third winter sundered.



Christopher Merrill has published six collections of poetry, including *Watch Fire*, for which he received the Lavan Younger Poets Award from the Academy of American Poets; many edited volumes and translations; and six books of nonfiction, among them, *Only the Nails Remain: Scenes from the Balkan Wars*, *Things of the Hidden God: Journey to the Holy Mountain*, *The Tree of the Doves: Ceremony, Expedition, War*, and *Self-Portrait with Dogwood*. His writings have been translated into nearly forty languages; his journalism appears widely; his honors include a Chevalier from the French government in the Order of Arts and Letters. As director of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa, Merrill has conducted cultural diplomacy missions to more than fifty countries. He served on the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO. In April 2012 President Obama appointed him to the National Council on the Humanities. Both appointments on the UNESCO National Commission and the National Council on the Humanities ended in 2018 and 2019, respectively. His website is: www.christophermerrillbooks.com

The following prose poems are from his forthcoming collection, *Flares*, which White Pine Press will publish in 2021.

Christopher Merrill

LODGE

There was no record of our reservation at the hunting lodge, according to the clerk, who nevertheless managed to find enough rooms to salvage the symposium on nature writing. He was a retired barrister from Jammu and Kashmir, the division of which marked his life, casting light on his offhand manner of identifying the stuffed animals displayed in the lobby—moose and caribou, a tiger, a zebra, a wildebeest. The owner had dropped dead the week before, during a shooting party on the Scottish heath; no one on the staff seemed to mourn his passing. The oldest member of our party, a survivor of the Bataan Death March, liked to say, apropos of nothing, *Now I can live*. Keen to add to his life list, which included raptors from six continents and three separate species of extinct rails, he rose before dawn to walk in the woods, returning for our discussion—which included, at his insistence, the clerk, who was well-read in the literature of his adopted homeland. Their insights colored our exploration of how writers attend to their surroundings. *Now I can live*, said the war veteran, who was in fact on his last legs. How to explain the fever that came over me for you? All I know is that it never broke.

GOTHIC

The first goat was not named Billy, despite what you may have heard. He called himself Ernest Hemingway, and he spent all day balancing on the top branch of an olive tree, aiming his shotgun at the other goats on the hillside, Che Guevara and Ronald Reagan, who liked to tug his beard when he was in his cups. He would count to a hundred before squeezing the trigger, daring them to bleat again at the church steeple. Che was plotting revolution; the actor could not remember his lines. The sky turned orange, a lightning strike having ignited a fire that charred the mountains and destroyed all the houses and barns in the next valley; a timber baron surveyed the damage from his helicopter, which was running low on fuel; smoke and ash swirled around the olive tree. *Close your eyes*, Ernest Hemingway whispered. *This is going to hurt*.

EXPLAIN YOURSELF

Did God give me a son or a ghost? cried the old woman, peering out the front door. The beggar, who only wanted a handful of rice, hobbled away down the flooding street. The rainy season had begun with a protest march, the statues of the martyrs were blindfolded, and the night watchman, dozing on a hammock strung between two palm trees, wouldn't rouse himself for the wedding guests arriving from the outermost island of the archipelago. *Come on:* these words were painted on the hindquarters of the pig selected for the feast. The old woman feared her husband, a plodding man, would use a dull knife for the slaughter, creating a bloody mess in the courtyard and bringing more bad luck to a family already singled out for misfortune. Nor was there enough perfume to disguise the fact that the bride was miserable. The beggar took his place on the curb, under a sheet of blue plastic, between a rickshaw and a rabid dog tied to the gate of the Ministry of the Interior. The groom was nowhere to be seen.

AFTER VISITING THE GORKY INSTITUTE

Someone set fire to the empty boxes stacked behind the shoe store, and the flames spread from the shopping district to the train yard, where three men in fatigues were passing the night trading stories about the strangest things they had eaten as peacekeepers. The smoke didn't alarm them, and they barely registered the fact that they had to raise their voices to be heard above the sirens approaching from every direction. How to compare monkey brains to dog or rat? They stamped their feet as if to keep warm. They toasted those who had not made it home. One recalled losing his passport in Tanzania. Another tried to remember the terms of the Treaty of Perpetual Peace. The third confessed that on his last tour he had hidden in a sheaf of papers taken from his CO's desk the court transcript of a man sentenced to death. He didn't know what had gotten into him. The sky blazed above the tracks, the warehouses, the bridge. A freight train slowed for the curve before the platform, its whistle blowing. Another toast to friendship? Why not.

FLARE

The rent was late, and nobody thought to dig up the sacks of gold buried under the black flags lining the road through the desert. At dusk a gas flare lit the eyes of a nomad who had lost hope of finding water this late in the season; his herd had been reduced by half, and if he believed that the oasis was no longer within walking distance he said nothing to his son, who was planning his escape, not to the city but to the refinery at the edge of the sea. One condition of employment there was to undergo weekly blood tests; the other, to ignore the orders of any engineer who did not kneel before the falconer. Open the door, his father said one night in his sleep. Who is it? said the boy. The landlord, said his father. His ship sails at dawn.

ROUNDAABOUT

As the last wagon of the caravan approached the roundabout, the driver thrashed the horses he had acquired at an oasis hundreds of miles from the former capital; his original team had bolted at the sound of a meteor roaring across the sky at dawn; its glittering remains lit the way to the city. His notes on the drought went on for pages, detailing his losses in a meticulous hand. Some believed his testimony might explain what had propelled their exodus, without hope of alleviating their pain. Loneliness lay on his tongue like dust from a courtyard in the medina, where sheepskins were drying in a wire cage and a laborer recited verses from the Qur'an, rubbing his legs blistered from long days of wading in the vats of the tannery. Who could decipher the graffiti—*New York, New York*—on the palace wall? *Friend or foe?* said a policeman, reaching for his gun. A dog asleep on a sack of cement twitched and whimpered. The horses did not budge. The policeman took aim.

IN ALGIERS

The ash fall hasn't reached the city, and yet the sky at noon is pitch-black. Children in the Casbah huddle on the steps, shopkeepers pull down their shutters, and a visiting pensioner from the defeated army scans the crowd outside the cinema for the daughter of the man he *persuaded* to reveal the hiding place of his best friend. As the water rises in the harbor, a geography teacher sets his basket down and picks through the garbage heaped below the sea wall, wishing he had obeyed his father's order to study medicine. A fisherman, weighing anchor, studies the couples strolling on the beach, under the reproachful gaze of the young man on the boardwalk who reads too much. Everything—everything!—fires his nerves. The pensioner marches toward the quay, sidestepping a colony of feral cats, which have their eyes on something. *Black and white*, he thinks. *It was all in black and white*. What do the cats see? A dead rat.

FIRE

No one had driven the motorbike propped against the stone wall by the chapel since the capture, trial, and execution of the leaders of the local resistance. The remaining members of the cell fled into the mountains, where late at night they could be heard singing praise songs of their ancestral valor; and since the streams had run dry before summer—the drought was in its third year—they spent long days searching for water; also the keys to the motorbike and the treasury in the chapel, both of which were destined to burn in the forest fire that marked the Dog Days of August—and the advent of the uprising in the capital. Who could have predicted this? Anyone with ears to hear.

ON THE WAR BETWEEN THE STATES

The bait? A plotline too complex to follow, which we swallowed whole, with predictable results. Around us lay debris from the Rex Ball, where the King was crowned with a plate of bread pudding filched from a wedding reception cobbled together by two families ruined in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. They shared a financial advisor, who had persuaded them to stake their future on a match made in Hell—a one-night stand, that is, during spring break in Acapulco; no one was surprised when the marriage was annulled by Easter. Call it variations on a theme from *The Decline of Civilization*. There were so many white faces in the crowd waiting for the last heretic to be burned at the stake that he thought he was in Heaven before the flames reached him. You saw that one coming, didn't you? And yet you refused to leave. Why?

THE PASTORAL TRADITION

A man with a red bandana passed the football to the manager of the plantation, who was drawing up plans to grow pineapples instead of sugarcane. A dragon flicked its tongue at a pregnant woman, who could not afford another baby, and so she had gone to the river in search of the ferryman, who had stolen her goat and continued to send her flowers on Sundays. But he was nowhere to be seen. What she found was a jar of eyeballs and ears harvested from the last battle, which had ended inconclusively. And what she remembered of that dark time was dancing a jig, composing in her mind a lullaby for a child fated to be born on the last day of the world. *Sleep, my little mongoose*, she whispered, rooting around in her pocket for a piece of candy. *No cobras here*. The man with the red bandana cried, *Run!* The manager replied, *This is not a dream*. When the dragon set fire to the dried leaves of a banana tree trampled by an elephant, everyone shouted, Game over!

Most recent of David Graham's seven poetry collections is *The Honey of Earth*. Others include *Stutter Monk* and *Second Wind*. He also co-edited *Local News: Poetry About Small Towns* (with Tom Montag) and *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography* (with Kate Sontag). Individual poems, essays, and reviews have appeared widely in journals and anthologies as well as online. He retired from college teaching in 2016, and now serves as contributing editor for *Verse-Virtual* (<http://www.verse-virtual.org>), where he also writes a column, "Poetic License," on poets and poetics. He lives in Glens Falls, New York.



RURAL POETRY

Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral.
—Bertolt Brecht

Yesterday for a moment I thought
the Presidential candidate was giving
his speech on "rural poetry" and
thought: Yes! About time we had
someone in the Oval Office reciting
Frost, Machado, Neruda, Heaney
But of course he was actually addressing
rural *poverty*—a subject Frost did know
a bit about, true, but that speech had
no poetry in it. *First grub, then morality*,
said Brecht, who was not wrong,
of course. But he said it in an opera,
not a speech studded with talking
points and applause lines. All meant
to be cheered, not pondered. And so
I was uncheered, out here on my
stump in the boondocks, listening
for a long time this afternoon to
a single catbird I never can get
a good look at. It trills and whistles
and complains in the newly
leafed apple trees along the fence
of a long vanished farm.

David Graham

PLAYING HIMSELF

The actors in that famous love scene reportedly loathed each other. Or else one of them was gay. I forget. Anyway, there's more than one thing going on at a given moment—that's the point of movies. Also the point of Easter, the Superbowl, and Thanksgiving at your grandmother's. Much of what you read on your computer is a lie or a delusion. Falsely attributed quotes along with whole websites devoted to debunking them. I know a guy who invents phony memes for fun, the way my friend shot baskets in the driveway far into the dusk, but seldom played a game. I myself used to make coins vanish on stage (easy), and then reappear (quite hard, actually). Even today, put me in front of an audience and I can't help but ham it up a bit, even if my character's a little under-written. But that doesn't mean I should act in plays, as my friend the actor sometimes suggests. It means we're all acting much of the time, but not everyone's very good at it. As Twain wrote, "I didn't say half the things I said."

COASTING

Such odd pleasure to be unrecognized in my own home town, driving through for the first time in years. Nodding to strangers eyeing my out-of-state plates, I cruise slowly down the old avenues. I pause in front of this house or that, groping for names that elude me like squirrels chittering always on the other side of tree trunks. I'm finally invisible, as when I coasted on my black Schwinn down William Street hill after dark, leaving a chorus of yard dogs barking in my wake. Now and then someone parted front curtains to peek out but saw nothing but streetlights and porch lamps across the way, shadows of elms swaying in an early June breeze—in other words, seeing nothing, least of all me on my nightcolored bike, coasting down to the bottom of that old hill, where just as I'd hoped I became visible again, and my true life, very much like this one here, could begin.

THIS SWEET MOMENT

This moment is already sweet, already gone.
—Robert Bly, “Early Snow”

The boat wake reaching shore just now
set forth the day my mother was born.

*

There’s more sky in this lake than overhead.

*

Also in these dark waters, flashing
like a trout, a girl pale and strong
swimming away from me forever.

*

The eagle in the shoreline hemlock takes off
as soon as I arrive at this sweet moment.

*

Lake water’s cold when you put your foot
down, toward the bottom, but no matter
how deep you go, it gets no colder.

THE BOY ALIVE

Any boy will flip over rocks
in the stream bed—he won’t
need reasons. There may be
the gray ghost of a crayfish
scuttling off to deeper shadows,
or there might be nothing
but water flowing, a floating
leaf casting its paper-thin shade
over the boy’s cold, flickery
hand as it sweeps across
bottom silt. This is what happens
to the lost hour of daylight.
This is prayer in an empty
church, the boy moments
before a sneeze. This is
the boy alive in the man
you see at the bus stop, gazing
at some gleam in the gutter,
or smiling vaguely even though
no one has said a thing.

David Rigsbee is author of, most recently *This Much I Can Tell You* and *Not Alone in My Dancing: Essays and Reviews*, both from Black Lawrence Press. In addition to his eleven collections of poems, he has published critical books on the poetry of Joseph Brodsky and Carolyn Kizer and coedited *Invited Guest: An Anthology of Twentieth Century Southern Poetry*. *Dante: The Paradiso* will appear from Salmon Poetry in 2019.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/david-rigsbee>



THE INNOCENCE

"Jim Beam for me, not vodka!"
 said the Russian beauty who hurled herself
 into the living room of the safe house.
 She swung the bottle like a censer
 in front of my eyes and climbed onto my lap.
 Her grandfather, a minister of Stalin, had survived
 '38 and the war, and thus passed by agents
 in three countries, she landed in Middle America
 where she stared into my face with those
 Russian eyes, decades ago, during the manifest
 destiny of Gerald Ford. Already weaving
 where she sat, trailing the edge of the bottle
 against the parquet floor, she sank
 her tongue into my startled mouth, then said,
 a moment later, "I don't want to talk about Yesenin.
 Let'd drink this, then go to bed."
 There were others present, geniuses among them,
 but they were displaced on sofas
 and love seats, while the wild girl
 went about seduction, and I calculated
 the possible outcomes. I did nothing
 and she fell asleep, snoring in my arms.
 The others scarcely turned and went about
 their party while Carly Simon sang from the speaker.
 Then I thought of the innocence of Russia,
 of Blok's twelve apostles with their cigarettes
 and kvass, of time unhinged from years,
 of Akhmatova standing in line with gifts,
 never delivered, for her rotten son.

David Rigsbee

LITTLE JEEP

Patsy Cline was coming in over the radio,
followed improbably by reggae.
We drove up patched roads the size
as a cormorant's wingspan, peach stucco,
puce stucco, red stucco faded, stone forts
heaved up in 1782, cannons aimed at the Atlantic
blue to put the French on notice. The English
barricaded among palms and lemongrass
melted in their redcoats. Shorts were issued
by the commandant, breeches and shirts.
The sun never stopped, even for rain, even
for the rain forest's sturdy helmet out at sea.
Martinique's typewriter ribbon stretched
across the horizon, and above, lines of clouds,
vaguely nuclear, side-lighted now, beginning
to glow from underneath and a shimmering
arras of rain, in the distance, as mist
joining the ocean. At every turn, hives of
exertion and indolence working in old harmony,
pickup trucks sagging with men going up,
going down. As we were, and the radio kept
pumping while the sea disappeared and returned.
Identity: the same, over and over until
someone snaps their fingers, perhaps
someone you've only just met, who says,
"It's you. I'd know you anywhere."

ST. LUCIA

The rainbow's scythe hits the water
in front of a barge bound for a rain curtain,
that having fallen from sudden height
declines color and shape. At low tide the wakes
of smaller boats crisscross in cuneiform.
Sorting through, the eye tires.
If you would find delight, you must
turn away from the amplitude,
the enormous, silent scale, where catamarans
and schooners, like tiny, frozen comets
flirt immodestly with the horizon.
Time to turn inland, and further,
where the wall lizard winks and scoots
foot-by-foot, and the rocking transports
test the hills. It rains for a minute,
then the patois of carpenters emerges
somewhere, a place that is also here.
Music follows, then fades. It says
the Devil has many wives. And
what did you expect from your trouble?
The alexandrine of a hammer again,
an electric saw built for Gordian knots,
that rooster who challenges Pavarotti,
all reduced to a plummy oneness that sits
like a stone at the edge of your plate.

BLACKBERRY

The dog's nose is a glistening blackberry,
now laid on the footstool's floral fabric.
She had her walk, marking the much-marked
grass that garlands the creosote poles.
A call came: an professional voice,
configuring its duty-bound syllables.
As with any mocked-up summons, I
felt no hesitation in dismissing it.
Just so, planes of water wind around
the rocks lying at the bottom of the brook,
tracing an S for the hawk's edification, as it
drives the helix of a thermal, looking for a kill.
I remember a portly crazed, bipolar poet
of my youth spinning into the room,
"I would have drunk the maker's wine
from my own goatskin, but who am I to delve?"
That old aristocracy that makes Athens
of a dentist's storefront façade. The voice
on the phone said, "Is this...?" I put it down.
I played *sortes vergilianae* with Tsvetaeva:
"He loved poetry, conversation, loved
to tell stories himself, only no one
wanted to listen." Of the poetry,
it was obscure. Plus no one wanted to listen.

When I asked my oracular uncle what
the talent of my family was, he replied,
"All we knew was how to follow a mule."
The stream is not a well. The hawk's cry
bears no truth. I hear the bow drawn
across the strings of the double-bass.
It is the lead-out to the ending,
in the silver of the room, where a summer
shirt hides among the dented hangers.
Or downstream, where there is nothing
left but the takeaway feel, like an effulgence
at sundown, streaming, low-angled, a sustained chord,
before the outer bracket of thought,
of memory and reason, propped up by hope,
before the inner wall sends it back again.

GOODWILL

*"I already hear them speaking on the edge of my tomb...
Already, yet when I will no longer be. As though pretending to say
to me, in my very own voice: rise again."*

—Derrida

We slept next to the dead man one room away.
There was hair in the wood. I put it in my wallet.

All look smaller as I look down the corridor.
The radio said "blizzard," and the ground answered

"closed." These things. An old fellow had greeted
us at the door, his beard a gray cravat.

A stranger like the other stranger who called
in a soft, solicitous voice, to name, to say.

I have never figured out how to organize
these matters, but you understand

don't you? How the snow intervened, how
it was all planned in the morning that

by afternoon had turned to business,
mocked by the caged parrot who would

fall silent later, a florid Iago, until his widow
sold him. And how the children slipped away.

Who could hold on to their trembling bodies?
One into the army, one into the trade,

or so we feared. We gotta get out of this place,
sang the radio to my pale mother and father

all ignoring the mounting snow.
These also trembled in the hills of West

Virginia: the mule deer, the bobcat making
a treble clef in the bare branch of a sycamore,

a hawk that had no purchase on heaven,
sitting hunched as Al Pacino watching

the escape of light. I had driven the highway
many times but only once did it bring anything

remotely approaching joy. My new wife
was at my side; there was no rot in sight.

We gathered and shook hands. The fireplace
joined us with its gas logs and puny flame.

We did not know what was opening before us.
It wasn't a tale. It was a blizzard at its

business, and time for the rest of us
to do what we do, meet, and part, and meet

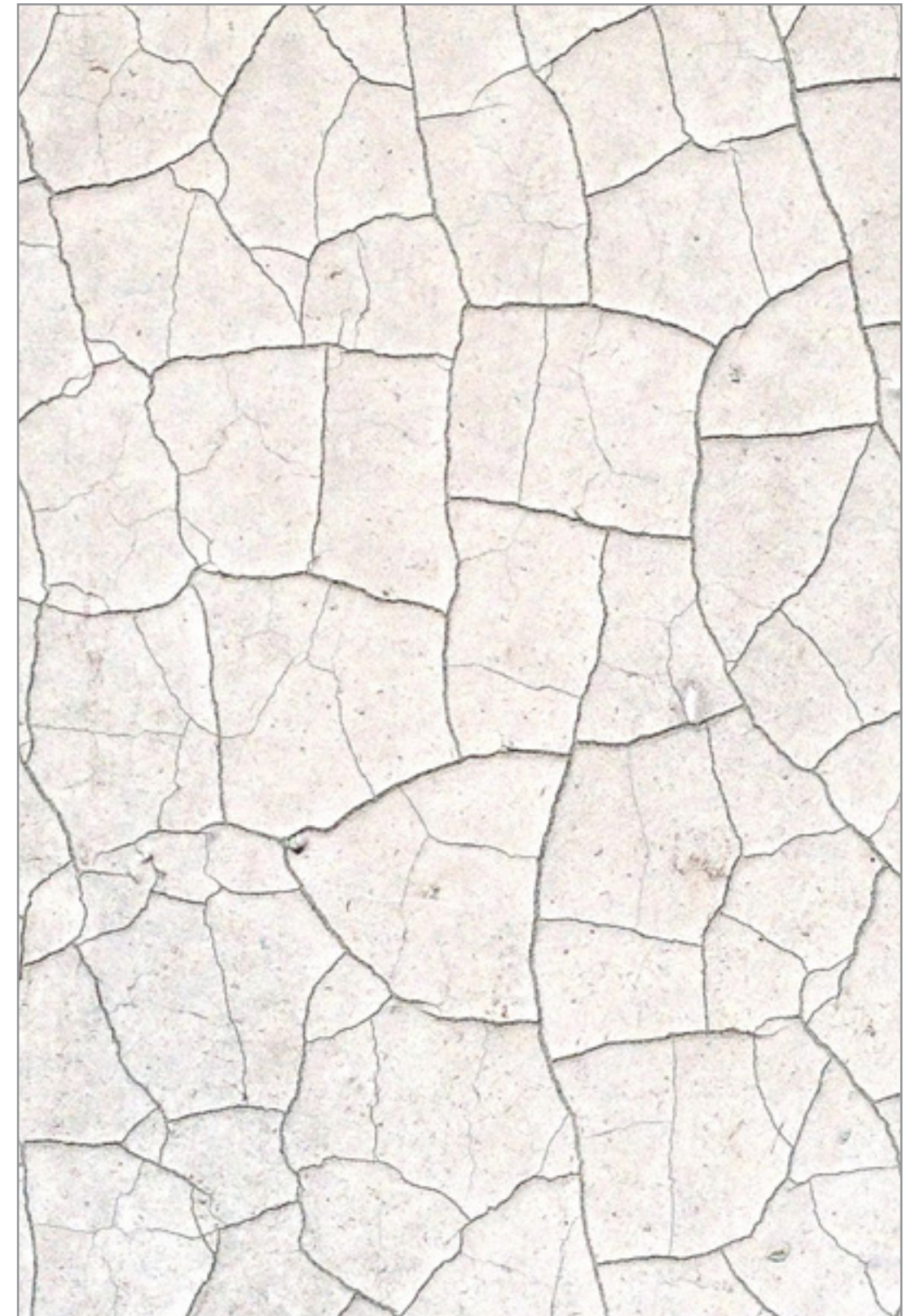
again. And part, of course, into secluded
streets over the rise where night waited

with its used clothes, its Goodwill, where
there is something for everybody, as I

have come to believe, that is the beginning,
for very little, of something else.

EXECUTOR

In the box I expected, of course, evidence
Of journeys, exotic, stony destinations
Where her famous friends, those
With prizes and wit, waved on the dock
having come to greet her, a fellow traveler.
They would have adventures, diversions,
And engagements proper to their kind.
When they were home, such material!
Just like the tragedians and satirists.
When their books came out, they signed
Them with abiding love, vigorous pledges
in filigree rendered in tiny, unassertive script.
From the first book, as with all
The others I quarried, flyers fell out:
Reviews from *The Nation*, *Poetry*,
And The New York Times Book Review.
On the back page, notes, “P 150—Metaphor,”
“P 72—relation of present and past,”
P 29-31—“Barbarians.” I reinserted
The reviews and returned the books
To their container, sealed it with masking tape,
Careful that the creases were straight,
The tape itself reinforced and taut.



<https://pixabay.com/photos/abstract-pattern-surface-texture-1867395/>

Deirdre Hines is an award winning poet and playwright. Her first book of poems 'The Language of Coats' was published by New Island Books (2012), and contains the poems which won The Listowel Poetry Collection Prize 2011. New poems have appeared in Poetry Ireland Review, Crannóg, The Lake, Elsewhere Lit, The Bombay Review, Abridged, The Honest Ulsterman, Three Drops From A Cauldron, Boyne Berries, & Ink, Sweat and Tears to name a few. She has been shortlisted in The Patrick Kavanagh Poetry Award 2010, The Allingham Poetry Prize 2018 and 2019, and in The Fish Poetry Prize 2020. Her poetry reviews have appeared in PN Review, Riggwelter, Sabotage and Rochford Street Review. She is a keen advocate of Children's Writing, and judges North West Words' Childrens Writing Competition since its inception. A graduate of Trinity College Dublin, she can be contacted for Readings and Workshops at deirdrehines@hotmail.com



IN PARABLES AND ALL ACROSS THE LAND 1 OR 2

and in the green cooing gloaming of those canopying mayes
hurdy gurdy slogans grate along Hi-Fi hip hop
and sleeping dogs stir hawthorn diesel scented air-

gang Limos, Hummers and pink carriages deposit fashionistas
at gargoyled doors, and all is glimmer, crystal, shimmer
in devotion to the commercial beneath buttonwood shade-

For those with ears to hear, those Mogul diamonds
hidden in caves by Qumran scribes are pesharim
that part the lines of hidden codes rejected by Nicaea-

Crouched behind the wall that reads "The word of god has-"
dead ringers for Judge Dredd barge past the hures of hounds
and the bread woman drops her charity in the canopying may.

Outside the courthouse white smoke wreaths ascend plastered pillars,
smoke signals from different characters in the same old plot,
sos'es to cerulean conspiring skies owned by Constantines.

The flowers of the seeds the loanshark's house is known by
scent white marbled halls can't-pay-for-the drugs stumble to
as numerous as piss-the-beds that crack cheap council concrete

and on the wall, that now reads "The word of god has x"
pollen dots the green dress of the Magdalene
in the shelter of the rocks of old Marseilles, as briar
roses spear a torn supplement blowing in this canopying mayday

Deirdre Hines

IN PARABLES AND ALL ACROSS THE LAND 2 OR 1

On May 17 1792 two dozen merchants and brokers established the New York Stock exchange. In good weather they operated under a buttonwood tree. In bad weather, they moved into a coffeeshop to conduct their business. Their descendants, many of whom followed them into the dodgy business of banking can still be spotted today wearing designer suits and drinking coffee, although they no longer sit under buttonwoods.

The Mogul Diamond was lost in 1747. There are many legends concerning its fate. They are all cover ups.

The writers of pesharim believe that scripture is written on two levels -the surface for readers with limited knowledge and the concealed one for specialists with higher knowledge. The peshar of "the word of God" can be read on one level as all those g/Godly words, or on another, as the man himself, i.e. Jesus.

The Council of Nicaea was called by Constantine on May 20th in AD 325. Today's Christianity is a result of this Council. Some Christians think this unfair, and consider such a sentence to be evidence of a conspiracy against them. Many others consider the Council of Nicaea to have been a conspiracy of censorship. Anyone who has had dealings with Councils will need no further explanations.

The Armed Response Unit are rumoured to have been inspired by Judge Dredd's sartorial style.

Green became the colour Mary Magdalene, the wife of Jesus, was demoted to. Leonardo painted three "Virgin of the Rocks". The third may be in the Musee des Beaux Arts in Caen. It is. x = multiplied, like fishes. Rosicrucians invented graffiti by adorning the walls of Paris in 1623, with placards. Politicians and their parties didn't read ..' to draw our fellows from error'.. and stole the idea to advertise their lack of same.

Supplement-a thing added to something else to in order to enhance or complete it, like a vitamin.

ORIGINAL SKIN

bees drunken in fuchsiaheads	here in the firelight of a summerdawn
my just fed inner vixen curls	bend time..
and her ambered mouse	beside my cat in slumber on our Serengeti lawn
	beneath mulching petals-
flies buzz round and round	everywhere in the whitelight wood of betrayal
this skin i'm growing into	stinkhorns..
my voice a gekkering	is russet russet red
	echo
i'm reading hidden hertales	here in the torchlight of my room
shearing myth	of nine tails bindng him to us
to reveal	of original sin
	our glorious vulpine original skins.

THE PARABLE OF LITTORINA LITTOREA

Again the sea reveals
a planet of huge rocks, a planet
of grazing periwinkles, a planet
where radulae translates as tongues,
but where unknown hands descend
to remove whole communities
into saltwater filled plastic buckets
positioned in sinking sand, a planet
where shells are worn the same way
as men wore helmets on codename beaches
like Omaha, Utah, Juno, Sword
or Gold, but on both planets the soft
part of each shell is extracted just
the same before entering the esophagus
of the horse named War that swallows us
all down by the mouthful, a planet
revealed again by the sea, where
study of winkle velocity sees
man hunkered on his knees marking each
shell with 'twinkled pink' dots of Revlon
nail polish at low tide, watched by gulls,
disappointed surfers, driftwood searchers,
half-hearted walkers, a distant swimmer,
two oyster gorged sinuous otters,

one bobbing acorn in the teeming rain
blowing in from the South-West, this planet
as disparate in motion as this
other one where all periwinkles move
faster on mucus trails than on bare rock,
which is to say that winkle travel is
as inconstant as the moon or man
that stays for a while before picking
up the trail again and moving on
and is answer to the question as
to what causes periwinkles to rise
and fall at each tidal high and low
and is like breathing in
and out with tree in our own internal
seas that now reveals we are one planet
moving inconstantly among the stars-

THURSDAY

(Macron tells young jobseeker; I can find you a job by crossing the road)

as a streetcleaner fishes up a silver wheel
half stuck in silt and bottom feeders
an old waiter's shadow translates ciel
into shadow on tables tethered by mirror-water
in which walkers crossing over the bridge
watch their other selves enter the boulangerie
where baguette wands sound the pitch
proper of the article i'm reading in ' Charlie..'

red anemones are swallowing the tiny fish
dark swallows are scything the big blue
and the powerful are tasting a new dish
that will remove the chômeurs à la Rueff
the old waiter is crossing the street as
i redraw my Easter Jesus modelled on
Edward Lear's ' Dong with a Luminous Nose '
surrounded by Lowry's matchstick men..

they say the eye is connected to the brain
but i think eye is ensnared by acid tongue
that spat out all conjugations of complain
at my cartoons of men who hung
hang and still will hang onto taboo
our most important phatic expressions
are darker than forgetting the ' Bonjour '
or how to use ' you ' in its proper version..

as the streetcleaner lets drop the silver wheel
of the bicycle the old waiter throws away
the Thursday that delivers ciel
as letter renaming him a réfractaire
as the walkers crossing over the bridge
watch his new self enter the boulangerie
where a bicycle pannier hides a wedge
of papers for his new identity

as he cycles along lavender lanes
a patrol by the Hérault river
checks his papers for wanted names
only the Maquis' most expert forgers
can fool the censoring eyes
that need two cars and three Harleys
the old waiter drew around the lines
of the article i'm reading in ' Charlie ' ...

Edward O'Dwyer is a writer of poetry and fiction from Limerick, Ireland. His most recent book, *Cheat Sheets* (Truth Serum Press, 2018), is a collection of 108 dark comedy flash fictions, and featured on *The Lonely Crowd* journal's 'Best Books of 2018' list. His third collection of poems from Salmon Poetry, *Exquisite Prisons*, is due in 2020, following *The Rain on Cruise's Street* (2014) and *Bad News, Good News, Bad News* (2017). His work is nominated regularly for Forward, Pushcart and Best of the Web prizes. He is on Twitter at @EdwardODwyer2.



Edward O'Dwyer

THE WOMAN BREASTFEEDING HER BABY IN A DINER BY THE HIGHWAY

The woman was sitting in the diner when she realised it was time to feed her baby. The alarm had gone off on her phone to say so.

Breastfeeding, these days, was allowed in such places. The world has undergone social advances recently, and so she didn't hesitate.

The manager came over. She knew his position by his suit and name tag, but then he also had that unmistakeable manager presence. Even his haircut said 'I am the manager' in no uncertain terms. It wasn't a good presence. He wasn't smiling at her.

"I'm sorry," the manager of the diner cut in, "but you cannot breastfeed the highway in here." He spoke very precisely, every word was painstakingly enunciated, albeit somewhat whispered, as though he was concerned about anybody overhearing. "In actual fact, we don't allow the highway inside here at all. People need the highway to be left where it is so that they can drive to the restaurant," he carried in. "For the same reason we don't bring in the carpark or the footpaths. People need to park their cars and to be able to walk from there as far as the doors."

"The highway?" the woman responded. "I think you're making a mistake. This is my baby boy, not the highway. Now, if you don't mind, it's his feeding time."

The manager seemed thrown by this. He looked as though they were in a play and the woman had inexplicably said something entirely off of script, and on opening night, when the jitters are at their peak. He looked completely panicked. "Oh I do apologise," he began, the composure all gone from his voice. "He... Well, he just looks very like the highway. I mean, please accept my apologies. I didn't know."

He walked away as quickly as he could, leaving the woman to carry on feeding her baby. She wasn't angry, just glad to be able to go back to her motherly duty. She was even a little bit amused by it. There was no point getting riled up about it, she figured, not when her newborn baby did bear an uncanny resemblance to the highway.

Anybody, in fairness, could make the mistake, and she agreed with the manager that the highway should be left outside the restaurant, and the carpark and the foot-paths, too.

As her baby began to feed the woman was able to relax again for a time. That is, until the sound of a load of cars honking disturbed her.

They didn't sound distant, as they should have. They sounded close, very close. She turned her head to see that there was a line of traffic in the restaurant. It had come to a complete standstill. All the people in their cars just kept banging on their horns then, and they screamed the foulest of obscenities out of their windows. This is a first, the woman thought, not really sure what she should do about it.

A few people started getting out of their cars and approaching the woman and her baby. They looked pretty angry. They were waving their hands around the way angry people often seem to do.

"Lady, could you stop breastfeeding the highway?" one of them called out. "Some of us do have places to be."

"Yeah," agreed another. "My kids are waiting at home for me, probably wrecking the place. I have to make dinner. I've a thousand things to do."

"We don't have time for this," yelled another, pounding a fat index finger on the face of an imaginery wristwatch.

"Let us through, for fuck sake," roared another. From behind them the woman heard the gunning of a vast choir of engines, the sound of impatience and fury.

"You're all making a big mistake," the woman began to explain. "I'm just breast-feeding. It's my baby boy's feeding time. He looks a bit like the highway, I know, but you're all just going to have to go back. He's just a baby, and this is a restaurant. Didn't you realise you were driving your cars into a restaurant?"

"Did you say that's your baby?" somebody asked.

"Yes," the woman answered.

"Really?" another asked. The screaming and yelling had ceased from everyone who had gotten out of their vehicles and approached. They were realising their mistake.

"Yes," the woman answered again. "Yes, this is my baby boy, now please, please, if you don't mind, it really is his feeding time and I need to keep him to this schedule."

Just then the woman's baby began to cry. Although he looked very much like the highway he sounded exactly like an upset and irritated baby should. He'd been woken by all the wailing horns, no doubt. Other diners were looking just as upset as he sounded. They had turned around from their tables, craned their necks, wondering about all the clamour. Their meals were going cold.

The woman was relieved when the people started to get back into their vehicles and reverse back out of the restaurant. They had all realised their error at last, and just as well. She was on the verge of becoming worried for her baby, for his health. He was breathing in all those fumes from their exhaust pipes. His little lungs would not be able for that for very long. It would take a toll.

"Shhuuusssshhhhh!" the woman soothed, attempting to restore her child's calm. She just wanted to get back to the feeding.

The baby was just taking the nipple again when suddenly she heard a loud beeping noise. It seemed to be getting louder, too, louder and closer. What is it this time, the woman wondered.

She looked up to see a bunch of workmen in high visibility outfits placing traffic cones all around her and her baby. Some of them were putting down road signs. 'Road Works in Progress', she read from one of the signs. 'Highway Closed', she read from another. Huge machinery followed them, reversing in. More stubble-faced workmen looked down from them at her and her baby.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" the woman called out to the nearest of the workmen.

"Our jobs," the man called back. "You can't be here," he went on. "I have no idea why you're breastfeeding the highway, lady – I don't want to know – but it's going to have to stop. We're on the clock here. We've got to get this done, okay?"

"I'm not breastfeeding the highway," the woman pleaded. "I admit there is a strong resemblance, but surely, surely you can see that I am feeding my baby. This is my baby boy."

"Baby boy?" the man said, looking puzzled.

"Yes," the woman responded. "That's what I said."

"Did I hear you say baby boy?" another workman cut in. He had just approached pushing a wheelbarrow in front of him. There were several pick-axes and other tools inside.

"Yes, yes, yes," the woman answered him. "This is my baby boy, now please, get these roadworks out of here. My baby is not a bloody highway. Highways don't cry. Surely you understand that. As men who work on highways every day, have you ever come across one to cry the way my baby is crying now?"

"No, am... No, now that you mention it, I never have," the first workman said, looking more than a bit embarrassed. "I've been doing this twenty-five years and I never have."

"We'll be out of here in no time," the second one said.

"We're so sorry for the misunderstanding," the first said, and they both turned towards the other workmen and the machinery, signalling for them to go back. They gathered up their equipment and left the diner as quickly as they had appeared, gone, presumably, to find the piece of highway they were supposed to be working on.

The woman had never had a day like this before, but then her baby was growing so quickly. He was so small but he was stretching and filling out into what looked a very substantial highway now. Other parents will always want to tell you that they grow up so fast but the woman could never have imagined it to be so true. It was meant to be just one of those things people said.

"Now, where were we?" the woman softly asked her baby, holding him back to her breast. "Yes, that's it, feeding time."

She looked up momentarily to see the manager watching from the other side of the restaurant. He was glaring, as were so many of the other diners. Some of them were even walking out. The woman figured they'd had enough of being disturbed while they were trying to eat. That wasn't her problem, of course. She and her baby had been disturbed more than anybody, after all.

At last her son began feeding again. She looked down at his face, its grey, concrete appearance, the pebbles and dust settled there, and it hit her then, just then. While she would always love him more than anything, and while she would always think him impossibly beautiful, raising him would be no easy matter. Every day could have similar difficulties for her to face. She would do her very best, she knew, as she was looking down into his two pothole eyes, but it would likely be a long, bumpy road, these years ahead.

Inspired by the natural world, Eithne Lannon's poetry has been published in various contemporary literary journals and anthologies. She has been shortlisted for a number of competitions including the 2020 Shine/Strong Poetry Award. Her first collection, *Earth Music*, was published last year by Turas Press.



DUNES

Beneath the grass-laced blue
of sky, summer roots smell

of spice and yellow, swallows flicker
in a leafy frenzy, alive to every dart

and tremor. All around,
insects speak in low

tongues of fever; bees in heady
gravity, purple clusters, sweet
lavender.

By the dune's edge, mallow opens
to trespassed shadows, stems
of sunlit kindle, light overturned

on sandy hillocks. And in the briny air,
skin pores sweat-anointed, knowing

only the hour, the dazzle-shine of noon,
this bloom of tenderness, climbing

into one another
for the rest of our lives.

Eithne Lannon

FOR A DREAM

in memoriam, Thomas Kettle, Ginchy, September 9th 1916

At dawn, the field is bereft—

you rest with your face pressed
against the earth, grit warm on your cheek.
A pale soak of sun speckles the trees,
horses stand among the dandelions
and feathered thistles gone to seed; death,

like a fine mist, sits on a knife-edged sky
as though something beautiful were about to

begin.

*The big guns are coughing and smacking
their shells; I'm calm, though desperately
anxious to live.*

Marooned with your troop in the rank soil,
mortars whine and fall. All around, woods
are lush with leafy indifference, warm wind
streams through unscathed grasses; far off, inside,
a new desolation.

Morning slips into afternoon. Waiting;
fear sears through your body like a burning
wick. At the eye of the bombardment,

a slim shaft of silence,
then the whistles' signal—

over the top, the push and stagger; bullets,
mortar, shrapnel, and you are spun, chest-punctured,
backwards, your pulse lurches, the reach
of your breathing clutching. Emptiness
swamps your belly, rib-cage a bind
of tangled leavings;

lonely harbour of the body,
senses sinking, mind unmooring. You think
of all the things not loved enough,
steady footstep of your life's dwelling,
living roots you've kept; wife and daughter,
mother, father.

Copper light catches the hazy air, wind-tones
play in slender trees—in the soft prison

of your fingers' grip, leaf-shadows shift.

SING THE BODY

Silent skyline.

Salt-whisper slide in moon-pulled water,
waves soft-seething in feathered curls,

sandsilt lifting from corrugated ridges; weed-trails
scroll over wedged undulations, driftwood gleams.

She circles for miles in search of rockponds
and starfish, salt reek fills her flesh-caves,

her tide-caverns, beneath the seaweed's purpling
shallows, a pulse-beat between the water and her feet,

something ancient and buried deep,
this inpouring ocean, its spine-tangled flow,

and below, coiled bony-leaf corals wrapped
in stony silence. Her memory treads water

amongst spiral-wound cones, aeons
of patient honeycomb.

All night, she looks into the eyes of her life,
shell held close to the ear of her insides,

the unsung stanzas of her body singing out
her undersong, voice rising and falling

in slow plumes of sea-foam, sound folding
her into its furthest reaches.

Sunrise in the misted sky, light
a silver scar on the far-in horizon,

she is leaving, arriving,

her tongue speaks now as the tide speaks,
white-cuffed rhetoric rolling out of the estuary,

into the sweet darkness of her own wide interior,
the vast expanding pool of her aloneness.

THE LADY'S STAIRS

(3rd November, 1853)

In the half-glow of twilight,
she stands on the seam between earth
and darkness, the footbridge her only foothold.
Shadows carry her spent form, her voice
breathes a new map, a wider ocean,
and mystery is its own secret.

At noon, the air was bone,
a chill wind looping from Ardgillan hill
to Barnageeragh cove; the sea, all metal-creased
and craggy, grim rock and knuckled furrow
bound by the forced intimacies of a harsh tide.

Beyond the headland, waves reeled in from the ocean,
foam flicked from high-curved tips. Like frayed
chokers, collars of churned froth circled grey boulders,
water coursed through frenzied rock-veins.

Here and there, seagulls plied the buffeting gusts,
while out along the wooden stair a keening wind
wailed down the cliff-face, as though a funnel
had been worn into the air.

She stood at the water's edge, untroubled
by the turbulence; slender feet slid
through the curdling hiss, eased
her into the surging froth, the urgent sea

an uncanny calling; she wanted to wash
the drought out of her body, quench
her skin in the bitter swell.

She kicked out to the heart-racing heave,
kelp and straggle weed slapping her ribs
and she was caught in the roiling motion,
the grip of the ocean grasping her limbs,
her stung face, flung sea-spray sharp

and piercing. Pulled beneath
the riven surface, her throat salt-raw and rasping,
she was pressed inside the spreading silence.

In the distance boat spines creaked, gannets shook
their gangly necks, rinsed bladed beaks in icy water.
The sea pulsed with the life it had swallowed

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.

Translation from Greek by **David Connolly**.

WHO CAN WITHSTAND THE POWER OF A GREAT LOVE

●

If we remove all those gold surrounds
that with their arrogant luxury
so vulgarly frame us,
we are a man and a woman
who amid the leaves' shadows
are creeping quietly in the dark,
we encounter the moths
who flirt
and expect us to fall in love
beneath a converse moon.

●

*Of love there is hardly a ghost left.
O who what angel of power can assuage
My terrible demon of revenge!*

you don't exist
you never existed

you were a big bite of fantasy
you are stuck to my palate

you were a egoist love
you are a ghost surpassed
chained in a debited castle

in an attempt to save myself
from your unwanted touch
your violent gaze
I decided to become a demon
and revenge myself on you
for all your bloodied kisses.

continued overleaf...

Elsa Korneti

WHO CAN WITHSTAND THE POWER OF A GREAT LOVE ... contd

●

The best poem that still you haven't written
will be about a great love that will writhe
hanging on a question-mark's hook.

●

– And then?
– Ruined love testily brushed the dusty memories
from the lapels of forgetting and hastily dived into the red lizard's lair.
– And then?
– The little boy entered the room and asked:
“Mummy do red lizards exist?”

●

Then you rushed to hide.
To protect yourself from the stardust's drizzle.
That didn't touch you after all.
And you made a mistake
No.
You had no right to make a mistake.
Now the mistake has become your shadow
follows you everywhere.
It becomes a pestering friend
a dependent lover
a jealous husband.

●

It spies on you.
Watches you.
Undresses you.

It sticks to you like a clam.
Covers you.
Gags you.
Blindfolds you.

Whatever you do you won't escape.
You find it coiling
on your fresh sheets.
Its white fang
glints smugly in the sun.

It's a Love without love!

Ποιος μπορεί ν' αντισταθεί στη δύναμη ενός μεγάλου

●

Αν αφαιρέσουμε όλα αυτά τα χρυσά πλαίσια
που με την αλαζονική τους πολυτέλεια
τόσο βάνανυσά μας κορνιζώνουν,
είμαστε ένας άντρας και μια γυναίκα
που μέσα από τις σκιές των φύλλων
έρπουμε αθόρυβα στο σκοτάδι,
συναντούμε τις νυχτοπεταλούδες
που ερωτοτροπούν
και περιμένουμε ν' αγαπηθούμε
κάτω από ένα ανάποδο φεγγάρι.

●

*Of love there is hardly a ghost left.
O who what angel of power can assuage
My terrible demon of revenge !*

δεν υπάρχουν
δεν υπήρξες ποτέ

ήσουν μια γερή μπουκιά φαντασιοπληξίας
είσαι κολλημένος στον ουρανίσκο μου

ήσουν έρωτας εγωιστής
είσαι φάντασμα ξεπερασμένο
αλυσοδεμένο σε κάστρο χρεωμένο

σε μια προσπάθεια να σωθώ
από το ανεπιθύμητο άγγιγμα σου
τη βίαη ματιά σου
αποφάσισα να γίνω δαίμονας
και να σ' εκδικηθώ
για όλα τα ματωμένα φιλιά σου

●

Το καλύτερο ποίημα που όμως δεν έγραψες ακόμα
θα είναι για έναν μεγάλο έρωτα που θα σπαρταράει
κρεμασμένος στο τσιγκέλι ενός ερωτηματικού .

●

- «Κι έπειτα» ;
- «Ο ερειπωμένος έρωτας τίναξε νευρικά τις σκονισμένες μνήμες
από το πέτο της λήθης και χώθηκε βιαστικά στην κρυψώνα της
κόκκινης σαύρας».
- «Κι έπειτα»;
- «Το μικρό αγόρι μπήκε στο δωμάτιο και ρώτησε»:
- «Μαμά , υπάρχουν κόκκινες σαύρες» ;

●

Τότε έτρεξες να κρυφτείς.
Να προφυλαχτείς από την ψιχάλα αστερόσκονης.
Που δεν σε άγγιξε τελικά.

Και έκανες λάθος.
Όχι.
Δεν είχες δικαίωμα να κάνεις λάθος.
Τώρα το λάθος έγινε η σκιά σου
σ' ακολουθεί παντού.
Γίνεται φίλος φορτικός,
εξαρτημένος εραστής,
ζηλόφθονος σύζυγος.

Σε κατασκοπεύει.
Σε παρατηρεί.
Σε γδύνει.

continued overleaf...

Ποιος μπορεί ν' αντισταθεί στη δύναμη ενός μεγάλου

... contd

Σε κατασκοπεύει.
Σε παρατηρεί.
Σε γδύνει.

Κολλάει επάνω σου σαν στρείδι.
Σε κουκουλώνει.
Σε φιμώνει.
Σου κλείνει τα μάτια.
Ότι κι αν κάνεις δεν θα ξεφύγεις.
Το βρίσκεις κουλουριασμένο
στα δροσερά σου σεντόνια.
Το λευκό σου βλερό του δόντι
αστράφτει αυτάρεσκα στον ήλιο.

Είναι ένας Έρωτας χωρίς Έρωτα !

EVE'S NAVEL

Do you remember your words on stage?
Sorry but memorizing was never one of my talents
Let's begin then
With a circular not linear sentiment
With a blemished and misshapen rose

I'd undergo any humiliation
to be part
of this dream.
Yet, what a shame!
I can't hold a paintbrush
Dreams! I can't touch them
When simply at the touch they commit suicide
But I promise to respect the words
Especially those that bury absences

You said to me:
It depends
whether you sleep
to forget
or to remember
Joining all the direct connections
Between chance events I ended up living in
a colony of microbes
A blue water-lily
sprouted in the dot
of the question mark

continued overleaf...

EVE'S NAVEL ... contd

when it pierced

the middle of my belly
My mind is a room with a garden
Sitting in its centre is Eve
She rolls and unrolls her navel
Weaving a braid of rolling ruin
A procession of crabs
Holding tightly by their claws
So you can't tell if they're helping
Or quarrelling with each other

Now the cord is hanging helpless
A red alert that flashes
You hear her calling:
Can someone please sew my button?

Ο ομφαλός της Εύας

Θυμάσαι τα λόγια σου επί σκηνής;
Λυπάμαι όμως ποτέ δεν είχα ταλέντο στην αποστήθιση
Τότε ας ξεκινήσουμε
Μ' ένα συναίσθημα κυκλικό και όχι γραμμικό
Μ' ένα τριαντάφυλλο άσχημο και ακανόνιστο

Θα υπέμενα κάθε ταπείνωση για να γίνω μέρος
αυτού του ονείρου.
Όμως, τι κρίμα!
Δεν ξέρω να κρατάω πινέλο
Τα όνειρα! Δεν μπορώ να τα αγγίξω
Όταν μόνο με την αφή αυτοκτονούν
Υπόσχομαι όμως να σεβαστώ τις λέξεις
Κυρίως αυτές που θάβουν απουσίες

Μου έλεγες:

*Εξαρτάται
αν κοιμάσαι
για να ξεχάσεις
ή για να θυμηθείς
Ενώνοντας όλες τις ευθείες συνδέσεις
Τυχαιών γεγονότων κατέληξα να κατοικώ
σε μια αποικία μικροβίων
Γαλάζιο νούφαρο
φύτρωσε στη στίξη
του ερωτηματικού*

continued overleaf...

Ο ομφαλός της Εύας ... contd

όταν αυτό τρύπησε

το κέντρο της κοιλιάς μου
Το μυαλό μου είναι ένα δωμάτιο με κήπο
Καθισμένη στο κέντρο του η Εύα
Διπλώνει και ξεδιπλώνει τον ομφαλό της
Πλέκοντας μια πλεξίδα κυλιόμενου ολέθρου
Μια πομπή από καβούρια
Πιασμένα απ' τις δαγκάνες τους σφιχτά
Για να μη διακρίνεις αν αλληλοβοηθούνται
Ή αλληλοτρώγονται

Τώρα πια ο λώρος κρέμεται αβοήθητος
Κόκκινος συναγερμός που αναβοσβήνει
Την ακούς να φωνάζει:

Παρακαλώ μπορεί κάποιος να ράψει το κουμπί μου;

THE INTERMINABLE DIGESTION OF ANGELIC TERROR

I'll devour you
You'll devour me
I'll savage you
You'll savage me
At a feast for starving beasts
We'll eat each other
We'll digest each other
so as to remain
Two strangers
The one
inside the belly
of the other

Η ατέρμονη χώνεψη του αγγελικού τρόμου

Θα σε καταβροχθίσω
Θα με καταβροχθίσεις
Θα σε κατασπαράξω
Θα με κατασπαράξεις
Σε δείπνο πεινασμένων θηρίων
Θ' αλληλοφαγωθούμε
Θ' αλληλοχωνευτούμε
Για να παραμείνουμε
Μαζί
Δύο άγνωστοι
Ο ένας
Μέσα στην κοιλιά
Του Άλλου

BELOVED

The yellow cubes
Hang
Held by a red thread of blood
Blind butterflies
Surge though
The heart's trapdoor
The body sawed in drawers
Beautiful desirable
He hovers
Before the plague

Its spreading Is a matter of time
The brave man With humble square nails
Generously Ruthlessly
Was riddled
With the sewing-machine's stitches
of death
Suspended
his constellation
finds its place
in the resplendent cosmos
To remain unharmed
and whole
boundless love
left us alone to struggle
with how to surpass
the wretched self

Just sign please
and then cast your mite
in the slot, in the yellow box
in the shape of a cross
Thank you all.

Said Salvador Dali
stepping away
from the Crucifixion

Αγαπημένος

Οι κίτρινοι κύβοι
Κρέμονται
Περασμένοι σε μια κόκκινη κλωστή αίματος
Τυφλές πεταλούδες
Ξεχύνονται μέσα
Από την καταπακτή της καρδιάς
Το σώμα πριονισμένο σε συρτάρια
Όμορφος ποθητός
Αιωρείται
Μπροστά στην πανούκλα

Η εξάπλωση Είναι θέμα χρόνου
Ο γενναίος άντρας Με ταπεινά τετράγωνα καρφιά
Γενναιόδωρα Ανελέητα
Γαζώθηκε
Στη ραπτομηχανή
του θανάτου
Μετέωρος
ο αστερισμός του

βρίσκει τη θέση του
στο υπέρλαμπρο σύμπαν
Για να μείνει αλώβητη
και ακέραιη
η απέραντη αγάπη
μας άφησε μόνους να παλεύουμε
με την υπέρβαση
του άθλιου εαυτού

*Παρακαλώ απλά υπογράψτε
κι έπειτα ρίξτε τον οβολό σας
στη σχισμή, στο κίτρινο κουτί
σε σχήμα σταυρού.
Σας ευχαριστώ.*

Είπε κι απομακρύνθηκε
από τον Εσταυρωμένο
ο Salvador Dali

Graham Allen is a Professor in the School of English, University College Cork, Ireland. Professor Allen is an award-winning poet. His poetry collections *The One That Got Away* and *The Madhouse System* are published with New Binary Press, as is his ongoing epem *Holes* <http://www.holesbygrahamallen.org/>.

His new collection *No Rainbows Here* will be published by Salmon Press in 2020.



NO RAINBOWS HERE

For Paul and Jimmy

You are permitted to ask for more, but it is unwise to expect an answer.
Only those prepared to lose everything walk away with a different name.
Cork Regional, Neurology Department. The machine now holds a secret.
It's better that you do not ask. Walk off now into the evening rain.

Leave the details for another day, diagnoses, hypotheses, rates of decline,
flashes of blurred imagery. For you, nothing has been broken.
For you, there never was a promise. Remind yourself that life has limits,
that luck knows a certain range, that billions whose worlds are shaken

root for food, teeter on the edge, know nothing of the privilege you enjoy.
Keep away from metaphysics, exaggerated hopes, religion,
ideas of fulfilment and return. They hollow you out like a dead tree stump.
Take the bus into town, meet your friends, the poet, the musician,

one of them is a Lighthouse, the other an Anderson shelter.
Let them rally round, accompanying you into forgetfulness.
Talk long into the night about politics, drink apace and forget the weather.
You live in a climate of rain and chatter, belief here is only ridiculous.

There are no new luminous stories. Like everyone and everything else
you are on the slide, the buildings you walk past are commercial or empty,
the churches are refitted, secular, the river you cross, twice, is a mirror
of a bankrupt plan. Nothing comes prepared with significance, allegory

is something you try but fail to teach. The impulse that still haunts you
of address and petition, apostrophising stance, bobs like a wooden board,
a tethered tree in a storm-force gale. What clings to you is an old garden gate
left all night to the mercy of the wind, keeping neighbours awake, nothing more,

Graham Allen

continued overleaf...

NO RAINBOWS HERE ... contd

comfortable ghosts mocking your resolve. This is not doubt, the vessel
is possessed, your voice wants an answer. This is the condition
of our time, the bottle has a curse trapped inside, permanent echo,
an old standard that cannot be shaken, memory of the sea's audition.

The words that would define you are not your own. The songs in your head
belong to someone else. You are all trace, a beached and hulled boat.
Something scattered, beyond mending. Walk calmly into the predictable rain.
No rainbows here. All that is wrong with you is the nag of a sore throat.

Huddle together, safe in a pack, in the loudest bar in Ireland.
The world is slowly dissolving, but here are corners and long shadows.
You can hide away for hours, steady mirrors of uncertainty,
comfortable in the knowledge of where we will be tomorrow.

Tomorrow you will lecture on Byron, the canto he started on the Channel,
and again, as if you had planned it, the idea being the end of hope,
wandering, betrayal, the broken chain, a disappointed, self-defeated soul,
you will try, and no doubt fail, to restore some link to the temper of what he wrote.

TIME PLEASE! Go back to your home with its screens full of exodus,
people pouring from the birthplace of covenant.
Back there is the woman you love and the child you have made,
your own sweet Isaac, sleeping soundly, *bel-enfant*.

TIME PLEASE! Go home and do not wake them. And as the rain crashes down
on neighbouring garages, the lids of recycling bins, a nearby glass conservatory,
fall into a dream of endless deluge, the separation of the waters over,
land no longer knowing itself, the end of division and visibility.

As you wake from that watery planet, pure stone of perfect lazulite,
the age of man sunk without trace, your son greets you with an eager grin,
lifting his arms in supplication. So, raise him up in a hungry sweep,
beyond the curse of mystical oaths, beyond the Flood and the idea of sin,

beyond the chaos of an alien god, barbaric idea
of guilt and penitence, its unintelligible lack of compassion.
All you need is this child's smile, his mother folding him into her arms,
the laughter that erupts from his belly, his playful, meaningless action.

All you need is the yes of this morning, the only promise that will ever stick.
All you need is what's seeded in you, readiness to provide a world,
this sweet impulse to nurture and protect. There is no other providence or law,
no stronger, more substantial bond, no rival, today, for you, in act or faith or
word.

REBEL SONG (FOR EXTINCTION REBELLION)

We are not barbarians.
We refuse to be pitted against each other.

We will not be fooled by pedlars of dreams
and competitive violence.
We are capable, still, of love, of hope, of reason.
We will not be bought or sold.
We refuse the logic of dog eat dog,
of strike or be struck, of merry vandalism.
We refuse to believe in the uses of war,
in the dominion of the iron hand,
in the greedy strip-mining of the earth.

When you try to divide us we are water,
when you try to suppress us we are flame.
When you treat us like children we rebel
with improved philosophies and new music.
When you treat us like criminals
we build island sanctuaries and migrate.
You will never defeat us, we are not solid.
When you threaten our friends and our families
we hide in the mountains and send down thunder.

We know where truth lurks gossiping with beauty.
We have been to the happy isles beyond your ideas.
Our children converse with angels and devils,
our parents walk with the dead unafraid.
We have seen into the future,
we know the limits of your machines.
You will never tax the sun or the oceans.
We know your regime of blind expansion
will try to consume all of our tomorrows.
But we remain strong. Certain of the future.

We are not barbarians.
We refuse to be pitted against each other.

Prometheus can have his gift back,
there is force enough in the folds of the sea,
in the welcoming arms of the moon-loving wind.
We are inventors, interpreters of rock,
rebel children who lit the midnight beacon.
There are many among us who converse with crows.
Friends of the living on land, air, or sea.

We are made of tears, we are made of rain.
We are as insubstantial as the evening breeze.
We are as solid as the earth can bear.
Without us you cannot build bridges.
Without us there are no towers or palaces.
We have no flag, no officials, no language.
We have banned boredom from every school,
We reject all pieties, pomposity and cant.
This world you own is our invention
and if so minded we can tear it down.

You will never contain us, we are mist in air.
We are as organised as needs be,
as strong or as weak as occasion asks.
We are fluid. We are granite.
You will not lock us away in some forgotten drawer.
We seep through cracks in the floor and ceiling.
We are ooze, we are scurf, we are brine.
We are the rust that ruins your engines,
the mould that clings to your chest,
the steam that eats through masonry.
We are liquid, the melting world
under the midday sun. You cannot hold us.
At night we fade back into the shadows.

continued overleaf...

REBEL SONG (FOR EXTINCTION REBELLION)

... contd

We are emotional and rational,
patient as December yet quick to anger.
We are the counter-law of the excluded middle,
agents of all contretemps,
we are black and white, we are hot and cold,
fearful for tomorrow and intensely optimistic.
You cannot name us, we are legion.
We are in the end proliferation itself,
a world of refusal rushing forward,
fearless in the face of all your realities,
witness to a million broken dreams.

TOMORROW

For Matthew

I give you the light behind my eyes,
it was yours before I was ever born.
I would count the reasons that you own it,
but there are fewer stars in the desert sky.

The only gift I can give to you
are promises that can be broken by me.
The only gift you can give in return
is that song you sing about hope's resolve.

When you have grown beyond my understanding
and wandered away into vivid colours,
your memory is the thing I will rest upon,
as my days begin to dip behind the hills.

Even then I will keep our fragile covenant,
that sweet imperative and law of love,
my dreams sinking like rain into the sand,
you still up ahead waving me on.

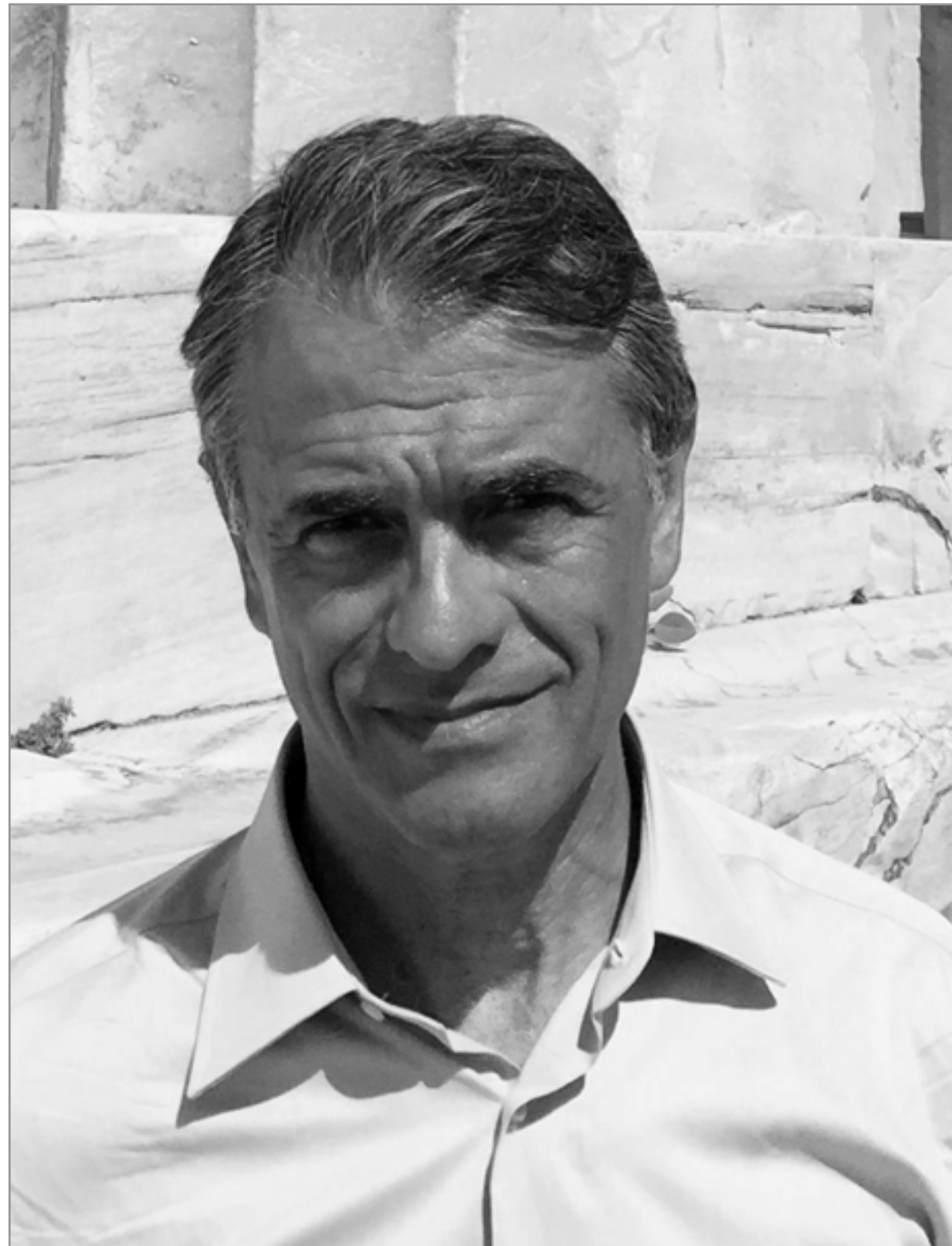
CONCENTRATE

Elvis Costello and the Attractions
 are bringing *Lipstick Vogue* to a spitting crescendo
 in a dank cavernous working men's club
 somewhere in middle England,
 and you are looking into the death mask
 of the future as the tiny Asian girl you promised
 to keep safe and always by your side goes floating off,
 her hands and arms in violent fits
 above the blind directionless heads
 of mohicaned giants in wife beater vests
 and swastika drill pants. This is now serious.
 You will never see her again. You will
 be held responsible by people you hate
 and by cool Marxist teachers you like
 but always fail to impress. Innocence is fading
 before your eyes, sacrificed to the lusts
 of apolitical menace and pure spite,
 the glorious thrashing of an awakened beast
 devouring more than you can save and more
 than you can care about. But you should do something.
 You should give a damn. You should fight
 against the tide that is washing her beyond
 your compass. Despite the thumping voice
 at the centre of your head, making triangles
 of consciousness with your eyes
 and your ears that are collapsing into spasms
 of joy as the drums tumble into themselves
 again and again and the green spotlighted face
 of the grinning demon holding the microphone
 looks with utter contempt beyond the sea
 of writhing bodies below him and shouts
 out at the darkness SOMETIMES I EVEN FEEL
 JUST LIKE A HUMAN BEING! IT'S YOU!

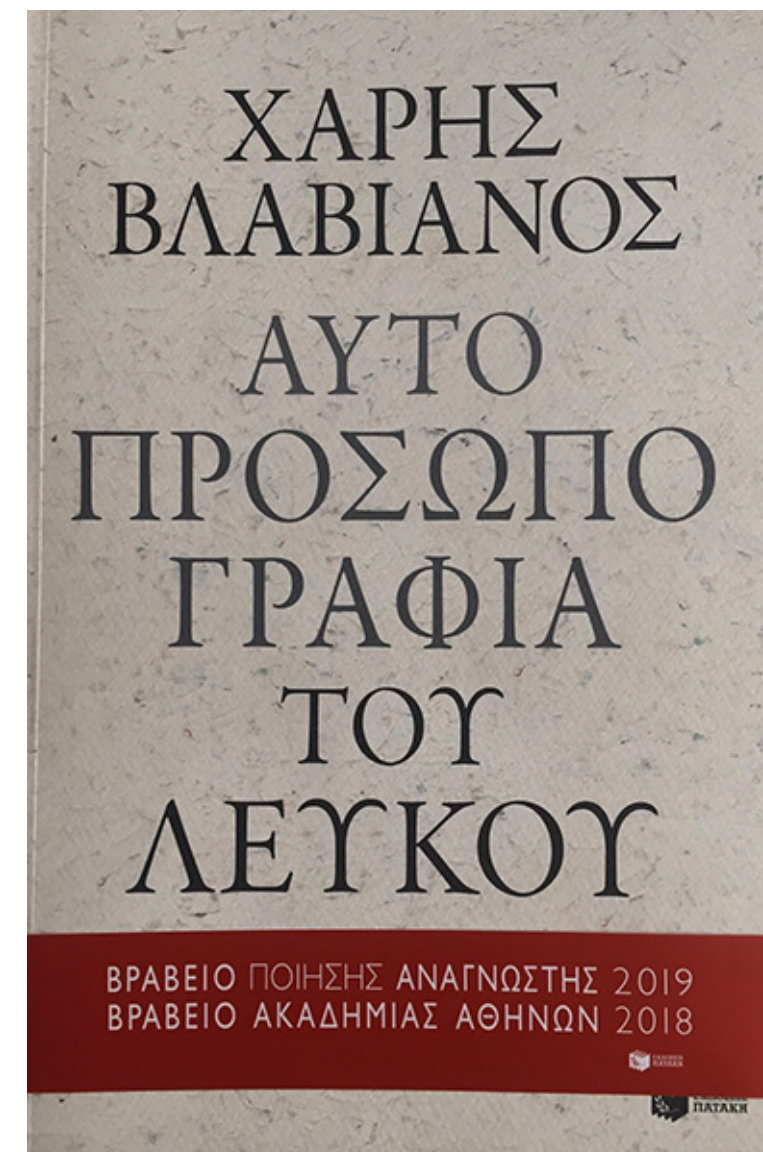
And you know this is your time and your youth
 and your apogee of burning creative being
 crushed tight like a diamond into a frantic roll
 of venom and syncopation and rapturous singularity.
 There will never be another gig like this,
 there will never be another time like this,
 this is the one epicentre you will experience,
 the one point you and yours will rule the world,
 music will be hijacked by suited bureaucrats
 with pre-programmed computer loops
 and catalogue blondes with corrupted misty eyes
 and you will be damned to live in a hell
 of unimaginative, cost-effective muzak,
 nostalgic for this moment of pure fear,
 loathing, epiphany, supercharged adrenalin
 and fully unveiled ecstatic one fingered genius.

You saw her at the station, just before boarding
 the late train back to London, attached to a hand
 twice the size of her head and smiling
 like a sunny afternoon after weeks of rain:
Jesus! she said, *that was fucking amazing!*

Haris Vlavianos was born in Rome in 1957. He studied Economics and Philosophy at the University of Bristol (B.Sc) and Politics, History and International Relations (M.Phil, D.Phil) at the University of Oxford (Trinity College). His doctoral thesis entitled, *Greece 1941-1949: From Resistance to Civil War*, was published by Macmillan (1992) and was awarded the "Fafalios Foundation" Prize. He has published thirteen collections of poetry. He has translated the works of major poets such as, Whitman, Blake, Stevens, Pound, Eliot, Cummings, Ashbery and Carson. His translation of the *Waste Land* will be published at the end of May. He is the editor of the influential literary journal "Poetics" and Poetry Editor at "Patakis Publications". He is Professor of History and Politics at the American College of Greece. He is at present teaching a post-graduate course in Creative Writing at the Greek Open University, as well as, at "Patakis".



The following seven poems have been translated from Greek by Peter Mackridge.



"Self-Portrait of Whiteness" in Greek is available here <http://www.patakis.gr/>

Haris Vlavianos

RED, JUICY LOVE

An apple next to a jug
is yet another *nature morte*
awaiting the brush of an experienced painter
to come alive on his canvas.
But an apple in the mouth of your beloved
is “an entirely different story”,
as Pater would have said.
As you watch her sharp teeth
sinking forcefully into its smooth body
and then her tongue, slowly, with a circular motion,
licking her lips
still moist from the greedy contact,
you do what the moment demands:
With a lightning movement you snatch it from her mouth
and you thrust it violently into your own
only to return it to her a few seconds later –
now reduced to half.

Isn't that love?
Aren't those its signs?

CYCLADIC IDYLL

Lower your eyes.
When beauty
invades your life with such force
it can destroy you.
The two ants hurrying along
next to the soles of your feet
are burying their summer dreams
deep in the ground.
The load they're carrying
isn't going to crush them.
They've measured their strength accurately.

Your shadow melts into the shade of the tree.
Black on black.
Guilt that must remain in the dark
so as to go on defining you.
But the glare of those fragments
may still hold you.
You have no need of adjectives.
Of devious subterfuge.
Every question is a desire.
Every answer (you know by now) is a loss.
Stay where you're standing.
In a while it will overtake you.
The clouds don't ask where.
They just continue on their way.

ODE TO LOST MEANING

To Anna Pataki

As you wander aimlessly
 through the exhibition spaces of the Tate,
 your gaze suddenly falls
 on a painting by an English artist.
 (His name and dates are beside the point.)
 On a wooden table he's placed
 a bowl of fruit
 – apples and oranges – and next to them a water jug.
 (Nothing special.
 The subject has been familiar and trite
 since the time of the Flemish School,
 till Cézanne's brush-strokes
 added an extra dimension to it.)
 To the left of the picture you read:
 "Still life with apples and oranges."
 "*Nature morte*..."
 Where English sees life
 – an instant of it –
 ("don't move please")
 yours sees death,
 the slow decomposition of nature.
 (The word includes the painter
 who is now equally part of his composition.)
 A difference of temperament
 or of standpoint?
 Or is the standpoint perhaps defined
 by the temperament?
 Someone might argue that "*nature morte*"
 implies the possibility of rebirth,
 whereas "still life"
 presents life trapped
 in the motionlessness of a pose.

Someone.
 But you're hungry now.
 You open your bag
 and pull out an apple.
 You hold it for a while in the palm of your hand.
 Under the smooth peel you feel
 its compact strength.
 As you prepare to take a secret bite
 (the guard's not looking)
 you think: "How wonderful
 dead nature can sometimes be."

LE DIABLE DE FRIVOLITÉ

Thank you for your message,
 but I didn't feel like listening to it.
 As soon as you said
 "I'm drowning in regrets"
 I deleted it.
 Aren't we a bit old
 for this unbearable melodrama?
 Besides, what kind of Bohème are you?
 Since you left (and you were right to)
 why did you come back with your tail between your legs?
 Only a romantic poet like Paraschos would seek out
 "a heart that has sinned".
 Such naïve poets don't exist any more.
 I have to admit though that
 the exchange of small-talk
 has its amusing side
 Yesterday I was reading a piece by Auden
 in which, among other things, he refers
 to a meeting he had with Stravinsky
 in California in November 1947.
 Do you know what the maestro
 called women like you?
 "Le diable de frivolité"!

Isn't that lovely?
 Neater than what
 other men would think
 in my situation.
 So, my little devil,
 I'll leave you now
 (my battery's running out)
 to devise your new plan.
 We'll certainly meet
 at another of life's
 operas
 (operettas more like).
 Love and kisses.

BAL MASQUÉ

To Katerina

To write one line
 you first have to write another.
 To recite Shakespeare's Sonnet VIII
 you first have to hear Catullus' nightingale
 singing in your garden.
 To describe the shades of green on Cézanne's apple
 you first have to snatch the palette out of Velasquez' hands.

I know what it means to be in love:
 You dive head first into the sea from a rock,
 you touch the bottom, stroke the sand with your fingers
 and, watching the sun's rays refracted in the water,
 you very slowly rise to the surface.
 When you pronounce her name
 you are already someone else.

BYRON SHORTLY BEFORE, SHORTLY AFTER

If thou regret'st thy Youth, *why live?*
The land of honourable Death
Is here:—up to the Field, and give
 Away thy
breath!

Seek out—less often sought than
found—
 A Soldier's Grave, for thee the
best;
Then look around, and choose thy
Ground,
 And take thy
rest.

“On this day I complete my thirty-
 sixth year”,
Missolonghi, 22 January 1824

“Who would write
if he had something better to do?”
said Byron to his Greek servant,
as through the narrow window
of his tumbledown house
he watched the Ottoman hordes
gathering round the city walls.

He had just completed
the first stanza of the poem
that was destined to be his last.
That day he had reached thirty-six.
Three months later
the bitterly divided foreign country
that he had chosen for his homeland
would grant him what he desired:
a death worthy of his name,
a heroic sortie from the unbearable boredom of Poesie.

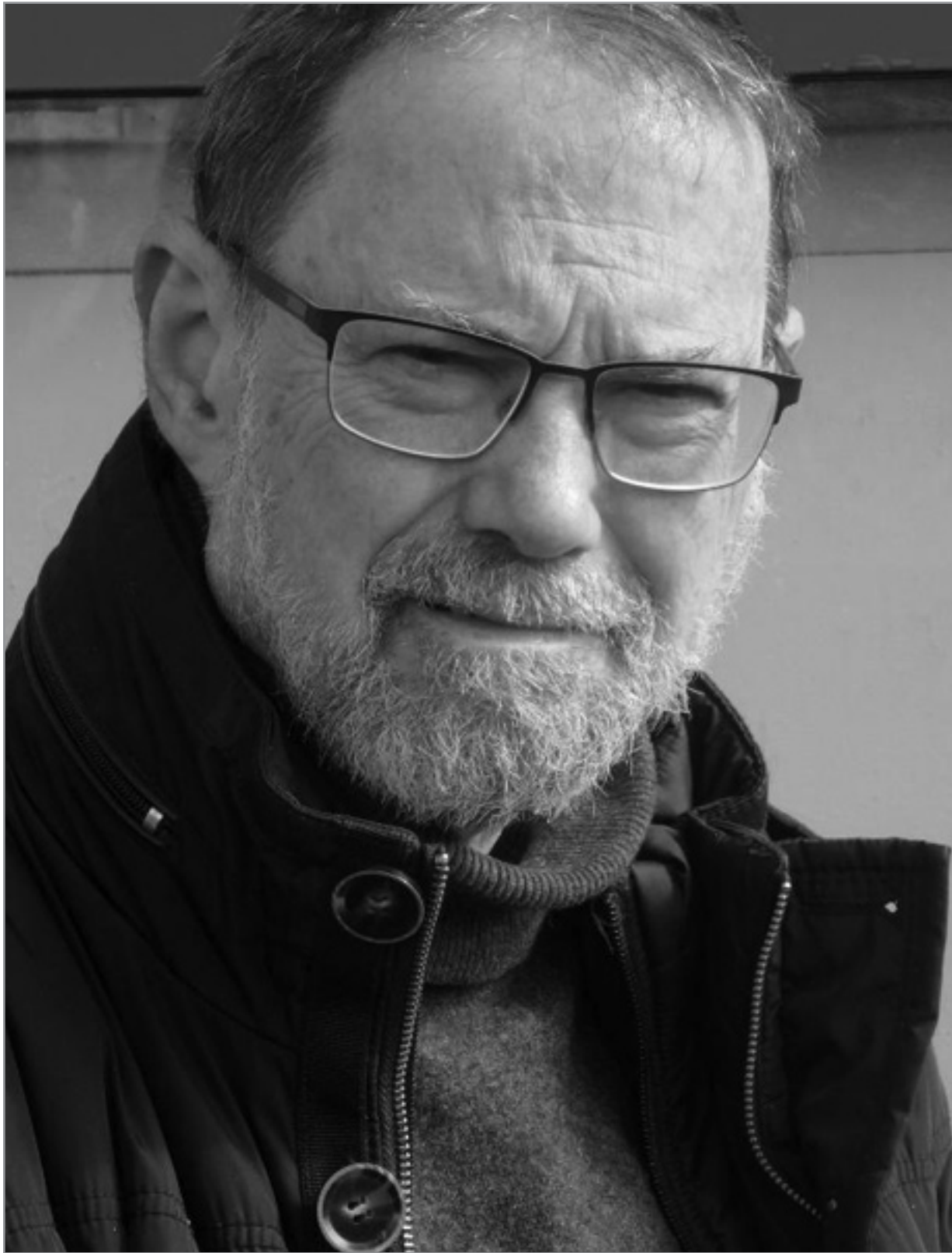
GUILLOTINE MAINTENANCE

To Torsten Israel

And twenty years later,
in the notorious Landsberg,
the prison where in 1924 Hitler
wrote his manifesto of hate,
finding a convenient pretext
in the antisemitic delirium
of “the great philosophers of the nation”,
– Kant, Fichte, Hegel –
another philosopher,
but not such a “patriotic” one,
Kurt Huber,
waited stoically in his cell
for his turn to come.
In the short time he had left
he reread his beloved Leibnitz
in an effort to understand the nature of evil
– “that false note in the concert of life”.
He had been found guilty of high treason
because as a member of the secret “White Rose” organization
he had helped Sophie Scholl
and other students of his
to write anti-Nazi proclamations
that called on German youth
to rise up against the “criminal regime”.

He was murdered on 13 July '43.
Two months later Klara Huber
was visited by the Gestapo.
They announced to her that as the wife of a traitor
she was not entitled to receive his pension
and that in addition she owed the German State
two months' wages –
for “guillotine maintenance”.

Jack Grady is a war veteran and a founder member of the Irish-based Ox Mountain Poets. His poetry has been published in Ireland, the United Kingdom, France, the United States, Canada, Indonesia, Portugal, India, and Nepal. He has read at international poetry events, including the *Festival International Poésie Marrakech*, in Morocco; *Poesia a Sul* in Olhão, Portugal; and in Seville, Spain, at an event honouring Spanish poet Emilio Durán. His poetry collection, *Resurrection*, was published by Lapwing Publications in October 2017 and was nominated for the T.S. Eliot Prize.



Thank you Jack Grady for this gathering of poets. The generosity of the poets to share their unpublished work without a fee with the rest of the world is the very heart of what poetry is...lyricism nurtured with raw wisdom, honesty and a generosity that defies logic. In these days of hardship it is the songs of the poets that keep us alive to life itself. - Mark Ulyseas, *Poetry is...therefore I am*.

Jack Grady

DUENDE FOR THE COMING AGE

I am not a guitar or castanets
or the clacking heels of flamenco dancers
nor am I any sound they dare make
in the future dystopia.
I am not the rifles raised
or their bolts driven home
or their aim taken
nor am I the blindfolds
of those soon to be shot
in too many nations to be mentioned.
Nor am I the Madre de Dios
or the Madre del Diablo
or whatever last cry the doomed will make.
I am that moment
when you raised your shoulders
and stuck out your chest
that moment when you sucked in your breath
like a lion and roared
that moment when at last
you grasped the reins of your life
that moment you lived
and the lies died.

ALWAYS WATCHING

Almost everywhere the poster.
It may change year by year,
but it is always there.
Sometimes it looks different,
perhaps painted another colour.
Other times it seems the same,
though the name of the virus
portrayed may change.
But always at its centre the eye,
an eye with an x-ray stare
that strips you to the bones
of your guilt as you walk by
to another place where it stares again
as it watches you approach
the lamppost where it is mounted
or a bank that no longer
deals in money but only
in a different sort of currency,
your credit based
on your worth as a serf
to the invisible owners of the eye,
watching, always watching
that your steps don't stray
out of line.

WITH EYES WIDE SHUT

*'...sometimes the wind...gave a broad roar around the traveller,
as if all Nature were laughing him to scorn....'*
– Nathaniel Hawthorne, Young Goodman Brown

Was it a warning he caught,
or was that a plead in her eyes,
as he vanished in the magic
of a Witch-Sabbath night,
and, like Salem's Goodman Brown,
heeded neither faith in God
nor in Faith, his wife?
Or was that a whip in her words
lashing him from home,
or was it the wind
laughing him to scorn?

He drove so focused
on his self-obsessed road
to the treasure marked X
on the map to success
that he never looked back
until too late to catch
his wife embracing the moon.
But he sensed he'd been duped
by the devil or himself;
that his wife was a beguiler,
a mask on a snake;

sensed that his life
was but the horns he must wear
until death woke him up
from his nightmare.

CAPE COD CRUCIFIXION

Motionless
like an aborted foetus
immersed
in a jar of formaldehyde
the pup of a Great White Shark was betrayed
by a Judas of an ebb tide
and even
the sharpness
of its bared teeth
could not free it
from its Golgotha
of still water
the breathing
of the shark's gills
cut off
in the trap
of a liquid coffin
walled
in rock

Jean O'Brien's fifth collection her *New & Selected* was reprinted by Salmon Publishing in 2018. She was awarded the Patrick & Katherine Kavanagh Fellowship in 2017/18. An award winning poet she won the Arvon International Poetry Prize and the Fish International prize and was recently shortlisted for the Voices of War competition run by UCD Historical Dept. She holds an M.Phil in creative writing from Trinity College, Dublin and tutors in poetry/creative writing.



THE WIND BLOWS THROUGH

*I.M. Deborah Diggs poet, who jumped to her death
from the Bleachers at Umass Stadium, Amherst in 2009.*

the doors of my heart and scatters
like sparrows at vespers, it sings
through the Bleachers, soothes as my words
surround me and envelopes me
in a caul of freighted, supple air.

The oncoming night is filled
with rooks heading home to roost.
Vagrant, out of place they tumble
through the thermals their harsh *kaah-kaah-*
kaah ran-tan sounds a rough music

that fills me with despair. Still spring,
night comes early in these parts,
I feel like Euclid with his elements
and theorems. I am sure I could make
a straight line out from here; be held

in a trapeze of making,
of vibrations, and travel through
the waves to some outer world beyond
gravity, beyond profundity.
I crack the bell of evening open and I fly

Jean O'Brien

TRACKING DEVICE

I left home to travel north.
Satnav will not speak to me.

I revert and use a map, which shows
the bigger picture.

I arrive just as darkness falls,
weary with the moving miles of road,

the rushing hedges, the streaming trees.
I unpack and settle in.

Yet every time I open my iPhone
it tells how long it would take me to get home,

depending on weather and traffic the time
shifts from morning to afternoon.

The messages keep me tethered, electronic
bread crumbs. Little pings to bring me back

Should I stray too far off track

WHELMED

Because they fly so low,
you don't hear the *whish*
of wingbeats 'till
the last moment
and when you do look up
there they are,
a flying cloud
in V formation
cumulus heavy,
necks taut, outstretched
with breath left to honk
and that huge white wingspan
making you gasp at the majesty,
the loud insistence
of displaced air in their wake
and think of King Lir
and his changeling children
turned into swans
by his rogue wife,
swans for life.
Picture them asleep at night
on the black canal water
floating white feather coracles
leaving you dazed and whelmed
in their tailwind.

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. His 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.



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

Aloysius the Great by John Maxwell O'Brien is being published by Propertius Press and is due out shortly. <http://www.propertiuspress.com/>.

John Maxwell O'Brien

CHAPTER II

As I'm about to leave campus, a car's incessant cranking lures me to an adjacent parking lot. There sits a flustered Elena Delagracia behind the wheel of a hearse-like Cadillac. Is this providential? My blood pressure rises. *Be tactful, Aloysius, or you'll scare the lady off.*

With an engaging smile, I approach her car and tap gently on the glass. Elena looks up, half smiles, and rolls down her window.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm having a little difficulty, Professor Gogarty."

"So, I've noticed. Do you mind if I take a look?"

"Gracias. I beg your pardon—thank you." She fidgets to extricate herself from the driver's seat, exposing black nylon stockings reaching up to a metallic clasp on the thigh. *Mary, star of the sea, pray for us sinners.* I wonder if Elena's aware of her resemblance to Brueghel's *Calypso*?

I slide behind the wheel and notice an unopened letter on the passenger seat addressed to Sra. Elena Delagracia. It's written in the bold hand of a bold man. Someone thinks she's married. Señor Delagracia.

I turn the key and hear a crisp succession of clicks and a barely audible whine. "It sounds like it's your battery or your starter."

"Oh, my."

"I don't have any cables, but if we contact campus security, they'll give you a jump-start."

"Thank you. Will it take long?"

She's more anxious than irritated.

Carpe diem.

"Who knows? I'd be happy to drive you home, if you'd like. Just leave your keys here in the car for the security people so they can work on it. It's probably your battery."

"Yes, I'm afraid I'm in a bit of a rush. My son's off from school today and my father's been with him all day. *Papá's* getting on in age now and he tires easily. If you can take me out to Wantagh, my father can drive me to work early tomorrow morning. We live close to the parkway there."

She has a son, but no mention of *Señor Delagracia*.

"Elena, why don't you meet me over in parking lot three? Look for a red Volkswagen convertible. I'll stop by the chemistry office next to the parking lot and call security."

She gathers her things and appears to be unconcerned that I've used her first name.

I'd better take care of business promptly, and get back before she changes her mind.

That took no time. Ahh! There she is, leaning against the car.

"I like your Volkswagen, Professor Gogarty."

"Why, thank you. I call her *Pequeña pelirroja*, my little redhead." A bald-faced lie invented on the spot, but she's smiling.

Be careful. Don't get too cute. It could backfire on you.

"Look at the nerve of me, translating Spanish for you. By the way, you speak English beautifully. Did you study it at school?"

Elena settles into the passenger seat. "Yes, I majored in English at the University of Havana."

Her perfume is as subtle and unimposing as her looks are striking and hypnotic. How do I find out more about this exotic creature without being intrusive? What would Alexander do?

Take an oblique approach.

"I'll bet your father is quite an interesting man."

"Yes, there's no question about that."

"Is he the one who encouraged you in your schoolwork, or was it your mother?"

"Both did, but especially my father." She pauses momentarily. "He's very well educated."

"Really?"

"He has a bachelor's degree, a law degree, and a PhD."

"My oh my—he is well educated. So, did your father wind up being a lawyer in Cuba?"

"Yes and no. He was a lawyer, that's true, but he did other things."

"Oh?"

Elena pauses again, and then decides to continue. "Under *Batista*, Papá had some governmental responsibilities, and he was also a successful businessman, especially with his marlin and shark factories."

"So, he was a big shot, huh?" I cringe at my trite expression.

"If that means an important person, I guess you could say so. But when Fidel Castro took over, Papá had to leave everything behind and take a boat to Florida in a big hurry. With all his education, the only degree he was able to—is it *salvage*?—was his bachelor's degree from Salamanca. Now he's a substitute teacher of Spanish in a Catholic school out on Long Island."

Count no man happy until he's decidedly dead.

"How about your mother? You said she, too, was from Andalusia, as I recall."

"Actually, my mother's family originally came from Gibraltar. *Mamá* was born there, and then her family moved to Andalusia. She didn't go to college. *Mamá* passed away several years ago."

"Oh. What a shame," I say, while thinking: *At least you had a mother.* "Were you able to take your degree with you?"

"No, I'm afraid not. When I flew to Spain in 1965, Castro's Dirección General de Inteligencia kept it to make sure I'd return."

"The DGI—that's Castro's KGB, isn't it? So, you and your husband were able to escape. Well, thank God."

"Not my husband, he's still in Cuba, where he's a physician—a gastroenterologist. He was supposed to meet us in Spain, but..." Elena stops short.

He never appeared. Did he desert her? How could anyone abandon a woman like Elena? What am I saying? Men abandon goddesses. We're afflicted with the disease of never being satisfied with what we have – especially when it comes to women.

One man's Penelope is another man's Calypso.

"Professor Gogarty, are you quite sure you know where you're going? I've never been this way before."

"Please, call me Aloysius, unless you find the name peculiar. Many people do."

"Aloysius, the patron saint of young Catholics? I'm fond of that name. There's a Spanish—how do you say?—connection there."

Here's a chance to impress her. "Wasn't his mother the Lady of Honor for the wife of King Philip II?"

"Yes, that's true. Queen Isabel. Very good, Profess—oh, sorry—Aloysius," she says with a sheepish but full smile. Elena shows renewed concern for our whereabouts by rotating her head back and forth as we pass rows of pink and blue and yellow houses looking very much alike.

She seems alarmed. Put her at ease.

"Don't worry, I'm taking a shortcut. I know where we're going. Back when I was a college student, I often played basketball around here with my friends and went swimming at Jones Beach. We should be close now. When you see something you recognize, just tell me where to turn."

She points. "There! If you turn right *there*, and follow *that* street to the end, our house is the yellow one on the left. You were right. Your way's much faster at this time of day, but I'll never remember all those turns."

Tell me, Muse, about the man of many turns.

"Aloysius, would you like to stop in and say hello to my family?"

This is promising. I nod and follow her up a cement walkway to the door of her ranch-style house. She leads me into her sparsely furnished lodgings while announcing, "We have a guest."

Her father, who's wearing a handmade silk shirt, rises from a threadbare couch with frayed arms and faded stains. He's a short, stocky man with black glossy hair combed back, bright brown eyes, and a slight hunch to his back. The intensity of his stare and his wrinkled brow make me feel like a reluctant matador facing a bull who's sizing him up.

"Professor Gogarty, this is my father, Dr. Miguel de la Flora. Papá, this is Professor Gogarty from the college. I had some trouble with my car, and he was kind enough to drive me home."

We shake hands and he keeps a firm grip while we're being introduced.

"Professor Gogarty has just become the resident director for our study-abroad program in England. He'll be leaving soon to set things up there and get the program underway."

De la Flora's grip relaxes and his brow unwrinkles. He gestures for me to follow him into his study, which has a small desk with a folding chair behind it. A compact bookcase containing several dozen volumes in English and a Spanish-English dictionary serves as a partition from the living room.

Elena follows behind us, with a kitchen chair for me. She squeezes it into the space available and then leaves. I'm on my own in the lion's den. If you're ever going to get close to Elena, it will have to meet this man's approval.

Be careful where you tread, Aloysius.

De la Flora positions himself behind his desk as if it were a judge's bench, and in short order determines my height, weight, age, degrees, marital status, and the fact that I'm untenured at the college. I'm beginning to feel as if I'm courting Torquemada's daughter, and have been summoned before the Inquisition. A low point is reached when the inevitable question about my glasses is raised, and my patented rejoinder fails to evoke even a nod. Why is he so fiercely protective of her? Why not? She may have already been betrayed by one man—Señor Delagrancia. De la Flora has quite a few books by Hemingway. I'll try to draw him out on that.

"Sir, what do you think of Ernest Hemingway?"

"He writes a clear English sentence."

"Yes, he certainly does," I say. Not much to go on, but enough to launch me into an impromptu lecture on Hemingway's writings, moving sequentially from his early to his later work. I stop to see how I'm faring, only to discover that de la Flora's beginning to doze off.

"Dr. de la Flora," I say, raising my voice slightly. His left eyebrow twitches. When I increase the volume, he stirs.

Ask another question before you lose him.

"I've been going on and on about Hemingway, and you've scarcely said a word. I suspect you might be the true *aficionado* here." I point in the direction of his Hemingway collection. "What do you think? Am I making any sense at all?"

"Of course, you are, Professor Gogarty," he says, "I basically agree with what you've been saying. He meant well. Unfortunately, he drank too much, and I told him so on several occasions."

I gulp. "You knew him?"

"Ernesto and I used to have lunch together at the Floridita in Havana, and I sometimes agreed to go to the Tropicana with him, although that was not—how do you say it?—my cup of tea."

Here I am lecturing her father on Hemingway, when he knew the man. Hopefully, he's too groggy to remember what I've said.

"I have been a bad host," de la Flora says in an apologetic tone. "Would you like something to drink?"

Watch your step.

"Oh no," I say, lifting both hands in protest. "Not for me, sir, but thank you."

"Professor Gogarty, you mentioned *The Old Man and the Sea*, no?" Now fully awake, he points at the book, and I raise my eyebrows and nod.

"Well, you see, Ernesto needed to know more about marlin fishing to write that book. He asked me if he could borrow Felipe, my best marlin fisherman, to teach him the particulars. He was grateful. He should've been. No Felipe, no book. And that's the one that landed him the big fish—the Nobel Prize, eh?" He chuckles. "Maybe Felipe should've been awarded that prize. I'll tell you one thing. If he had been, Felipe would've mentioned Ernesto in his acceptance speech, but Ernesto never said a word about Felipe."

Her father leans forward and stuns me when he whispers, "My daughter's husband passed away a few years ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that." He's dead? That's not what Elena said. Is this wishful thinking on Torquemada's part or an item on his agenda?

He glances over my shoulder toward the door. I turn to see Elena's son standing at the entrance to the makeshift study. "*Abuelo*," he calls.

De la Flora gets up and escorts us all into the living room proper. There he introduces me to Miguelito. The boy is about seven years old. His hair is red with a black border at the base of his neck, and both his eyes are avocado green. Miguelito's complexion is much darker than Elena's. He's a sturdy young lad who moves with athletic fluidity.

Miguelito's the same age my son would've been if Deborah had had him. I urged her to do something about the pregnancy because I was afraid that she might die in childbirth, like my mother. I shouldn't have interfered. The choice was hers. Where is she now? Where is he now?

The boy's skeptical of me at first, but I soon have him giggling at my comical faces. De la Flora observes me benignly, but he's fading fast. It's time to go.

In the midst of cordial farewells at the doorway, Elena sends a chill up my spine by lightly stroking my brow and gazing at me affectionately.

"Ahh," is all she says. It's enough.

This is encouraging, but I'll be on my way in a week. How can I court Elena with an ocean separating us? Will Torquemada allow it? How about Señor Delagracia? What if he shows up?

One man's Calypso is another man's Penelope.

John Sibley Williams is the author of *As One Fire Consumes Another* (Orison Poetry Prize), *Skin Memory* (Backwaters Prize), and *Summon* (JuxtaProse Chapbook Prize). A twenty three-time Pushcart nominee and winner of various awards, John serves as editor of The Inflectionist Review, teaches for Literary Arts, and is a poetry agent.



FLAT EARTHER

From here it's impossibly
 bowled over, ironed out,
 crisp as a Sunday shirt,
 as a hospital bedsheet ::
 a burning
 wind breaks & breaks over
 this endless
 plain :: bright rows of
 ash that would be wheat
 or corn or houses if things
 weren't so level :
 : isn't all this nothing added to
 nothing meant to suggest
 a rounder world :: I don't
 believe any more than you
 that the world continues
 out-of-sight, mind ::
 like the dead, how they stop
 speaking once written
 off the page ::
 let's not take anything
 for granted :: astronomers
 astronauts physicists all those god
 damn theories & photographs :
 : there must be a wall
 of barbed air a property line
 a ledge to step or to step back from
 :: let's agree it's more than
 gravity holding us together

John Sibley Williams

AGE OF ARK & BRUISE

Why not a name for this swollen constellation?
Something that borrows as much from myth
as where myth collides with history. Great

brawny men half-beasted, blood-thirsty,
bull-headed, as ever. The rocks they chained
themselves to. The hells they are said to have

conquered & returned from. Our father
as both raven & dove. We send our hearts
out with him each night in search of land.

Sometimes he returns with a fistful of it,
sometimes empty-handed, though neither
quells our fear of drowning. It's not that

we don't believe the old oaths of redemption.
We're just looking for one that tastes of angels
but unlike angels doesn't rust in the rain.

THE SILENCES ARE AT IT AGAIN

The first sound of what will be
morning once the light sobers
& steadies is always hunger.
The second sound: yelp.
We rarely stay long enough
to hear what the world offers
once it settles, but I'm pretty sure
it's no darker or brighter this.
As you read yesterday's news
aloud over my nakedness the local
school shooting takes the form of fable.
We can't stop filling it with all kinds
of impossible animals. & since it helps
us to name things, we give what we feel
a name. & since we fear nothing more
than silence, we keep talking ourselves
further from contrition. They say the fact that
elephants mourn their dead makes them
slightly more human. I agree. Like how
human touch can make a mother renounce her cub.

Maeve McKenna lives in Sligo where she writes poetry, flash fiction and the occasional short story. Her poems have been placed in several poetry competitions. She has been published in print and online. Her hobbies include avoiding writing.



THREE COURSES FOR THE HUNGRY

Twice people became themselves,
then, another skin-free face
smeared grins across the table, until,
we were on course for the third serving.

Of what? Who? Behind the beguiling flicker
of a breath-swept wick, after the sultry dissection
of an overcooked floret, we made love to those
at either side. It was a feast!

I'm sure I heard clapping, or was it the slapping
shut of preening lips after a full-belly sigh of
satisfaction: you never can tell in such company—
who delights in you, or, to spite you. We all raised a glass.

It must have been quite a show; us, starved
at the feeding trough, them, devouring
our force-fed words. I'm sure, with time,
there will be a new menu for the hungry.

Maeve McKenna

THE UNBLESSED

Commandment: write in ink of wounds, as a form
of redemption, for disbelievers to believe. Each

handwritten word its own purgatory, too sullied the penitent
for another crucified confession. Your mothers dust

shimmers in hushed light; the hue of twelve stations, her
shadowed presence as constant as sinners dying. Years

of punishment purify rituals, each nameless card
a signature of guilt, processions of murder to the sacred

altar, backs mortal in devotion. The burial plot of scorched
embers banish stray hairs out beyond the chapel window. Inside,

a body is descending from prayer—every pane an image of holiness
unburdened by reflections of remorse. No flesh of flesh, no meek

inheritance, no name and date etched in concrete. Only a child's bloodless
palm of shame offered to the metal-rimmed heart of a forgiving Christ.

DEAR LOVE OF MY LIFE

Mind stalk, tick-tock, I'm
counting the seconds
on your fist clock: foot,
the grip, and all your fighting
bits. Smile, sneer, bite,
revving at that baby-faced fear,
killer steer, into it for death,
sex breath and hunger
teeth under your tongue prod.
Young; let me fix
this, insist, wink, nod, the bliss,
my little pox-bottle, full
throttle, way-hay! You
want more, flaunt,
taunt, let's mix it. Dirty
smear. Leer. Hiss. Lay. Shrink —
to this.

Regards,

Your Fucking Whore.

Martin Hayes was born in London and has lived around the Edgware Road area of it all of his life. He has worked in the courier industry for over 30 years and is the author of four books of poetry: *Letting Loose The Hounds*, (Redbeck Press, 2001). *When We Were Almost Like Men*, (Smokestack, 2015). *The Things Our Hands Once Stood For*, (Culture Matters, 2018) and *Roar!* (Smokestack, 2018).



THE FORGOTTEN NEIGHBOUR

the neighbour who lives under me
 got in the way when I was carrying the rubbish out on Boxing Day
 he was on the landing
 in his Miami-coloured shorts and white vest-top
 leaning on his stroller
 his electric is off
 he wants to know if it is the same in my flat
 he wants to know if I've ever killed a man
 or a woman
 he is in the early stages of dementia
 confused as a red setter
 the colour of his eyes are just about visible under shallow water
 like stones in a river
 they are cold and black he is
 life in its first death throe

but it's Christmas
 so I go in to see why he hasn't any electricity - there is a meter
 it is a key affair - I ask him when he last topped up - he
 is outside on the landing leaning on his stroller - I open the door
 ask him - 'when did you last top up?'
 he can't remember - he thinks
 the Germans are coming up the stairs
 all of the fight in him has been
 internalised
 lost
 lost
 lost

Martin Hayes

continued overleaf...

THE FORGOTTEN NEIGHBOUR ... contd

I think for a second that right now
 I could kill him
 I could just bundle him back into his flat
 and lay on top of him until he stopped breathing
 who would know?
 who would care?

but it's Christmas
 so I take his key up to Kilburn instead
 fill it up and then come back
 stick it in the meter and make sure his heat is on
 I check his fridge
 he has nothing in there but old milk
 an open packet of bacon
 and the broken half
 of an Easter egg

if someone else had caught him on the landing
 say in mid-January
 skint and desperate
 after spending everything they had on Christmas
 they could've killed him
 put him out of his misery
 stolen his half of Easter egg

no one would've known
 no one would've cared

THE NEIGHBOUR AND THE LIGHT BULB

the neighbour underneath me is at my door
 he wants to know if I have a spare lightbulb
 it is 2 pm on a Saturday afternoon
 but he is dying of dementia

so I give him a lightbulb
 he doesn't ask if it's a screw in one or a twist
 he just takes it from me
 and says thank you

as I hand it over to him at the door
 he looks at me
 turns his head from side to side
 like a dog
 then he says
 did you come round mine at Christmas?

there's still life in there

no I tell him, I met you on the landing on Boxing Day
 your electricity was off

electricity? oh, yes

he doesn't know what the hell I am on about

in the lift taking him back down to his floor
 I can smell the death he holds my hand with
 he calls me Andrew
 his fingers are like the penis bones of a primate
 hard and wanting to break through the thinnest skin

continued overleaf...

THE NEIGHBOUR AND THE LIGHT BULB ... contd

when I get him in his flat
it is a wasteland
no signs of life
no photos
no order
there is a kettle on the mantle piece
a loo roll on the floor
an open packet of Wotsits on the window sill
everything is exactly where it was left
when it was last touched weeks
or maybe even months ago

he sits in his chair
I place a glass of water beside him and switch on the tele
Temptation Island is on

thank you, Andrew, he says

I don't say anything

the whole world is humming outside
and sometimes it's hard to understand why

THE NEIGHBOUR AND THE FLOOD

there's a knock at the door
before I open it I know it is him
the forgotten neighbour
trying to be unforgotten

I open the door
yes
it's him again

have you got a leak, he says
no, I don't think so, I say

that's funny, he says
because there's water all over my floors

I tell him to stay there
and I jump down the stairs
but his door is shut
so I jump back up them again
and tell him that his front door is shut

he says, what door

I ask him if he has the key

he says, what key

shit, I say, the key to your flat

what flat, he says

the one you live in that my flat is leaking water into?

THE NEIGHBOUR AND THE FLOOD ... contd

oh, that flat, yes

he tweezers his fingers into his neck and pulls out of the fat a bit of string that raises
a key up out of his vest top

somebody still cares

somebody did that

or maybe he did it in a moment of clarity
knowing that he'd find himself in this position again

I take the key from him
jump down the stairs
put it in and open up the door
expecting water to be everywhere

but there is nothing

I check the kitchen, front room and bathroom

nothing

I go into his bedroom
nothing
no water
but beside his bed
there is a photo of a lady smiling
eating candy floss on a pier
and there are the letters M A V I S
written in black marker pen above it on the wall

when I go back up I tell him that I've cleaned it all up and will get a plumber in to
make sure it doesn't happen again

he says, thank you Andrew
you're a good boy

Mary O'Donnell is one of Ireland's best known contemporary authors. Her poetry collections include *Spiderwoman's Third Avenue Rhapsody* (1993) *Unlegendary Heroes* (1998) both with Salmon Poetry, and *Those April Fevers* (Ark Publications, 2015). Her eighth poetry collection *Massacre of the Birds* appears from Salmon Poetry in late summer and can be ordered direct from Salmon. Her poetry is available in Hungarian as *Csodak földje* with the publisher Irodalmi Jelen Könyvek. Four novels include *Where They Lie* (2014) and *The Elysium Testament*. A volume of essays, *Giving Shape to the Moment: the Art of Mary O'Donnell* appeared from Peter Lang last June, and her new fiction collection, *Empire*, was published by Arlen House in 2018. Her essay, "My Mother in Drumlin Country", published in *New Hibernia Review* during 2017, was listed among the Notable Essays and Literary Nonfiction of 2017 in *Best American Essays* 2018 (Mariner). She is a member of Ireland's multi-disciplinary artists' affiliation, Aosdana. www.maryodonnell.com Twitter: maryodonnell03



Mary O'Donnell

THE STOLEN

The tutor's face held its expression politely when he explained during a seminar that he hadn't read many women writers apart from a few pages of his ex-wife's Anne Tyler (which brought titters from the group), informing her that his favourite writers told solid stories with a beginning, a middle and an end. He apologised for the omissions in his reading, and the tutor smiled and said *sure we'll get you into the loop Karl, no worries, I'll have you reading all kinds of material before the year's out*. This, with a slight toss of her head and the merest, disquieting, hint of a wink.

Apart from the course, being in the rented house is another pleasure. He loves returning in the evening with the shopping, which includes all the elements of his new diet: fish, lentils, spinach, eggs, skim milk. He's trying out a life that involves a foray towards vegetarianism (apart from fish, and he needs as much brain-food as he can pack into himself these days). That, and traipsing around the heaving web of streets after the seminars, or along the banks of the manic Corrib, and later, venturing into the vast space of the fields and narrow roads around his new home. The house is set in its own wilderness, on a road off a road off the M6.

The blackthorn hedges on the fairy fort have finally bloomed, curbed by a mean spring that refuses warmth, despite lengthening days. But winds have calmed, sky clear. Every morning, he watches first light seep through a weave of branches in the next field, the dew-gripped stems haloed in mist. There is something weirdly arousing about that view, Karl finds, as he touches himself beneath the sheets.

He has already experienced eight months of horizontal rain across the fields from Galway bay. He has rented this place, some ten miles distant, partly to avoid the proximity of constant celebration and the diddle-di-dye sounds that pervade both the city and student life at the university.

He gets along fine with the others on the MA programme, and likes most of the tutors too, although he still wonders about the red-head—the 'multi-genre writer' according to the bio on her website—who believes she can *stretch him in new reading directions*.

Even so, he tells himself to go with the flow, to accept what comes his way. Whether his sense of expansion derives from simply being away from Leinster for a year remains to be seen. At forty-nine, he has man-breasts, thin legs and no arse to speak of. He's not one of those guys who drift around with a sheaf of poems sticking out of the tweed jacket pocket, or who carries a Boxer pup as a babe magnet. At least he has abundant hair, tied back these days in a rough ponytail with a piece of string.

One of the other tutors is renowned for his verbal flayings of students whose non-fiction memoir isn't up to scratch, and creates a terrifying atmosphere in the classroom. A broad-shouldered, brown-haired, long-eared chap whose essays appear frequently in a big-wig journal in England, nothing the students write can meet a standard so lofty Karl thinks it must give him altitude sickness. Karl, who hasn't read the journal in question until now, doesn't know what all the fuss is about. Unlike the red-head, Long Ears doesn't believe in praising the positive and not over-emphasising the negative. They are all incompetents, with no hope of making it in the world of writing. In the presence of Long Ears, some of the younger guys sweat. The women seem more able for him. He's pretty free with his language too. *Wanker. That arse. Oh for fuck's sake.* Dropped from his mouth as a matter of course, although Karl too has begun to use similar language as he moves around the house, sometimes knocking into things when he's drunk too much, even more so when he has to re-draft his work.

Even so, he has discovered oxygen blowing into him again after ten years in Dublin's planning offices. There was safety, yes. Collegiality. Regular salary. Green plants shivering beneath the AC system in summer as he and the others worked through the applications, some of which made the cut, it went without saying. Even so, the magisterial nature of decision-making had begun to drain him and he felt the ancient pull of wanting distance, especially since the break-up with Anna. It has been a quest for great plains, something new to pit himself against after Anna announced two years ago that she was bisexual and had met someone else. *You mean you're gay*, was his bald, stunned response. *No, I mean I'm bisexual, Karl. Bisexual? If you can take that on board.* That really raised his hackles, apart from the shock of it. Splitting hairs, trying to have it every way. She was leaving him for another woman, so how the fuck did that make her bisexual? Was she leaving the door open, in case she changed her mind and wanted to get back with him, or be with another man?

He'd always wanted to move away from Leinster, with its city-defined attitudes, its aspiring *garden-trimming-coordinated-fucking-furniture-leaving-cert-child-buggering-dinner-party* ambition, have a larger house, live more cheaply. Their home had been neat and modern. Dining-room linking to sitting-room on the left. Small office to the right. Downstairs loo he could hardly stand up in while he pissed. White walls everywhere and neutral furnishings with the odd flash of a Moroccan kilim and a turquoise cushion. The usual polished granite kitchen island—a prerequisite in every Irish kitchen when someone decided that food preparation could no longer occur on worktops facing a wall, but must be performed on a space the size of Texas. But Anna wouldn't budge from her commuter route to the city. And then she met Henni, from Finland.

It wasn't like the old days when you stuck it out and put up with one another until the man died and the wife entered a new phase of coming and going as she pleased, of bridge, *hiking* (that made him laugh, thinking of all the under-exercised flesh trailing up and down the Sugar Loaf mountain), evening courses and weekend breaks to Kerry with 'the girls'. Even so, the stomach-sickening, pile-driving shock of discovering that she loves—absolutely *loves*—a woman, pretty much in the way she'd once loved him, took some digesting. He developed irritable bowel syndrome, found himself practically skidding to the bathroom to shit his guts out, all because of heartbreak. Now he was truly emptied, and that heart was just—*just*—beginning to grow numb, scab over. To *heal*, in therapy-speak. Since taking up with Henni, and implicit in this, while recovering from life with *him*, Anna has been having monthly therapy, suggesting recently that he should try it too.

The rental is his therapy. A refurbished two-hundred-year old cottage extended to three times its original length, catching every loop of light when clouds break and sunlight flashes through. The sash windows are small, with bright red frames. On the kitchen window-ledge, an ornamental cock perches, comb bright, black and white tail-feathers curling high. Patrick, the owner of the house, has set the bird's feet on a base of concrete, to protect it from the gales. He keeps specimen hens and cocks himself, he tells Karl, bringing him down the road one evening to see them. The white outbuildings which house the fowl are low-lying, with metal grills running from top to bottom.

We have to watch out for our old friend Reynard, Patrick had said. When Karl looked blank, he added *An sionnach?* Still no response. Finally, exasperated, *the friggin' fox?* Karl leant to inspect the fluff-legged ruddy-feathered cocks with trembling combs and fierce eyes that burned in an apparently irritated way. Patrick said strangers upset them, and it was true, judging by the rumpus and squawking up and down the coops. A giant black and white fellow paused, one leg drawn up hesitantly beneath, and eyed Karl before dropping a generous shit. His favourite was the massive red-feathered specimen with loosely bobbing blue-green plumes on its tail. It strutted around, ignoring both him and the owner, comb wobbling in a way he found slightly repulsive. The bird also reminded him of a judge entering court, disregarding the minions, certain of his position. *If he was mine I'd call him Judge*, Karl said absently. *His name is Seamus*, Patrick replied softly, opening the pen and reaching in to fondle the bird. Karl marvelled at the life of a man who could choose to dote on such fowl, who owned a second home for renting out, and who was over two hundred miles from Dublin.

Patrick had warned him that he might see people coming and going to the fairy fort. *They won't ever set foot on it*, he said, *they're just leaving offerings*. There were two reasons, he went on. Stillborn babies, buried long ago, but also the presence of the Little People themselves, the *Sidhe*, or fairies. *Arra, it's a local thing. No man will plough that fort*. Karl smiles tolerantly.

Some evenings as he sits at the kitchen table, laptop open, struggling to grasp Julia Kristeva's theories on identity politics—which he can make neither head nor tail of, and Roland Barthes—whom he *does* understand, especially that essay called “Steak”, and who doesn't use that cussed word *liminality*—he raises his head only to see two or three people walk past the house. Women, mostly, though not entirely. They bear bunches of daffodils. He finds it incredible, the laying of votive items, the tying of ribbon on branches, licking tongues of colour in the breeze, all for the sake of maintaining diplomatic relations with the fairies. *For fuck's sake*.

He never treads on the fort, but strides along the periphery of the field from time to time. The mound reminds him of one in a book his sister had when they were children, which showed the Little People trooping back inside their kingdom. Another picture illustrated joyful times within the fort, with handsome, adult fairies dancing together in an eternal state of youth, while their pretty fairy children pranced in circles of their own. The place is beautiful, he admits; he feels mostly safe and warm, but occasionally uneasy, and his imagination roams sufficiently to

consider that perhaps there are fairies looking over him. He scoffs out loud, then like the weather changing, a face-drenching wave of self-pity sweeps through him as he recalls the desolation of the break-up, knowing himself to have been abandoned, discarded as of no possible use either as companion or pleasure-giver.

But it's the final week of semester. There are poems to hand in—twelve, to be exact, no more and no less, together with a critical essay—and twenty-five pages of non-fiction memoir. Kiki, a Greek lesbian in the memoir group has taken him in hand—lesbians! Everywhere!—and advised him to focus on one primary incident, such as his feelings about his wife leaving him (she knew about that, because it had tumbled out in an awkward moment of revelation during one seminar, the theme of which was identity, which for a time garnered him unasked-for understanding and admitted him finally to the seminar group's circle of confidences). He has taken her advice, and written freely. His vocabulary might not be the most scholarly, but by now he is inured to the challenge to heteronormative values, and has something to say.

It hasn't been easy. Truth-telling. Remembering one particular party, an after-work thing of Anna's which he'd been invited to back in Dublin. To think he'd been there, on the very night she'd met this Henni girl. (Reminder to self: *Woman*. He must call her a woman, not a girl). And that is what he writes about. Blindness (his). Unknowingness (his). The sounds of a Harcourt Street summer evening, of trams rumbling along outside, and within the pub, the voices of Anna's female office colleagues. Writing this piece of personal revelation causes him to weep again, but in the end, he submits the essay, Student ID at the top of the document. Times New Roman. 12 point. Double-line spacing or else that tyrant Long Ears won't so much as read it.

After submitting two of his three papers, relief flows. Kiki has just completed hers, so has a student called Rodrigo, from Brazil. They retreat for a coffee to the student café, fling their bags to the floor, relax. He has adjusted to this seething world of youthful bodies, and understands the relative ease of being invisible. Kiki and Rodrigo, and an Irish girl with a speech impediment, are good-humoured company. The Irish girl writes sensitive lyric poetry which, when she reads it, emerges from her mouth in a rock-fall of strangulated language. She too is alone, he senses, disenchanted, if her poetry is anything to go by. He wouldn't mind making a play for her but knows she would consider him a fatherly fossil.

He sips his coffee and lets the chit-chat wash over him. Occasionally, he chips in with a riposte or a comment. Rodrigo is dismissing various theories about gender, flinging his arms in the air. *What about male identity*, he demands in comic tones, which sets Kiki off and an argument ensues.

That afternoon, he drives home slowly. With a month to work on his final manuscript, he has already half-assembled three short stories. A month gives enough time to invent another. For the first time, he feels a few ideas within his grasp. He can write about anything, after all, and has rediscovered lost memories and moments that might be worth harvesting.

He drops the car keys on the kitchen table and decides to have a lie-down. At forty-nine, he's not exactly old, but even so, the luxury of acting spontaneously on occasional tiredness is new. The afternoon is warm, the sun flings light across the unmade bed, where he stretches out on the tangled duvet, legs spread-eagled, arms akimbo. He scrabbles on the floor with one hand, then drapes an old sock across his eyes to block out the light. His last thought is to wonder what Anna would think if she could see him now. Would she be happy to see him like this, towards the end of the course? Would she give a damn?

He awakens about half an hour later, judging by the passage of the sun across the bed. His right leg is now in shade, while his left, with its dark denim, absorbs the heat. Something is amiss. A sound when there should be none. Has he left the radio on? He hardly listens to radio outside the morning news headlines on his phone. It sounds like a party in full swing, right in the house, or perhaps the garden. Has Patrick walked in with a large crowd of unusually jolly fairy folklorists? He doesn't think so. It's one of those lively conversation gatherings, where people aren't drunk, with Irish jig music in the background. Music you could dance to, whirl around to. Heart thudding with anxiety, he jumps from the bed and flings the door wide, racing down the hall to the front door. He slips back the latch and listens. But there is no sound beyond chirping sparrows and a lone blackbird on the telegraph pole out on the road. The wind has dropped too.

On the way through the kitchen, all is equally silent. He rips open the back door. Silence. This is a waking dream, he thinks, returning to the bedroom. Even before he has shut the door, waves of sound return, like a radio being turned up. He leaves the room again. The sound disappears. He re-enters it, and it returns.

He realises he is now out of his fucking mind. He has gone native, or entered some feral time-space warp. At the same time, he feels no fear. He wouldn't mind being at this knees-up, wherever it is, everybody enjoying themselves in what sounds now like a near-violent level of ribaldry, and nobody, male or female, is trying to leave a marriage or make off with another man's wife. The music! Wilder now. Once more, to be certain, he opens the bedroom door and places a foot in the hallway. Already, the music is dying. He re-enters the room. There. He's caught it again, in full flow. He can no longer restrain himself. Now, in the centre of the room, he raises arms above head, finger-tips almost touching. He takes a step, then another to the side, keeping to the rhythm while staring out the window at the fort, which is sun-dappled, its dandelions still, bluebells scarcely nodding. He shuts his eyes, follows the elemental fiddles that have played their way into this room, and moves, roused now, with an ease and grace he never knew he had, cock beading within his jeans, he can feel it, oh someone take a hault of him, towards what he cannot see but only hears. It's the ease and grace which Anna and Henni found after Henni stole Anna, but even in his aloneness, it has come to him also. A gift.

Happily he dances, turning again towards the fairy fort, wanting to be witnessed, himself and him alone, to be taken at last, wanted, ravished perhaps, and returning it. He unbuckles his belt, drops his trousers, steps out of his underpants and rips off his t-shirt. His erection is a red rod that quivers as he dances. He has been invited and included in something, after all, something beyond and outside, hatched in the in-between spaces of his existence, which he had ignored until now. He is taking part, vital on this earth, dancing, willingly stolen, blood dancing in his cock.

Selected for Poetry Ireland Introductions in 2016, his 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.



PUZZLE

I was doing a jigsaw of Kinsale Harbour – rows of candied houses crowding nosily around the bay – and had just completed the terrace on Pier Road when you appeared in the picture, tripping out the door of *Actons Hotel* on the arm of a man I didn't know. Cutting through the freshly laid green, you hesitated at the pier wall, as though waiting for direction. I had assembled the edge pieces first, so your options for escape were limited. Afraid that I might lose you in the labyrinth of streets behind *The Trident*, I scrabbled in the box for the pieces that would lead you on the waterfront back towards town, having first distracted you with a jagged island of difficult blue, your eyes drawn by the first clinking sounds from the marina. Snapping each piece into place, I managed to stay one step ahead, while you, like Dorothy in red shoes, were happy to follow the stepping-stones as they appeared, wheeling past *Dinos*, the carpark and onto Pearse Street – the look on your face when you walked into *The Blue Haven*, me sitting in the lounge, jigsaw on the table, one piece missing

Maurice Devitt

BLACK APPLES

for Paul Hackett

It was one day after school and we were sitting on the grass patch at the top of the hill, watching the *Holy Faith* girls swing by and filibustering to avoid going home. You told us a story about black apples – had read somewhere that after a bite of one you would never grow old. There was a tree in Byrne's orchard, you said, though no-one knew which it was. Set halfway up the road, the house could be approached from top or bottom, though we favoured the top – walls lower, neighbours less athletic and cats more prevalent than dogs. Suggesting an exploration, on Saturday night we set off to follow your lead – squirrelled with difficulty over every wall, as you sprinted adroitly through the threatening dark, wiry limbs making light of each new obstacle; flattened ourselves like starfish every time a light flicked on, dog barked, or a kitchen door opened. We channelled Burt Lancaster in *The Swimmer*, as every garden presented a fresh surprise – slack washing-line, rusty swing or a rotary mower idling on the upper lawn. As our eyes lifted above each wall, they locked onto families circled around the blue screen of the *Late Late Show*, were alert for houselights suddenly turned on or faces pressed blindly against the glass.

You were the only one who made it into Byrne's. On the cusp next door, we were scattered by a scream into the night, a manically barking dog and the clatter of bin-lids. We had agreed to meet in the lane behind your house, four of us waiting nervously for you to appear. When you did you were breathless, face scratched, jumper ripped and bounty scarce. We looked at the apples but none of them were black. You said you were disturbed before you could find the tree. Years later, I met you perched at the bar in Tolka House – you hadn't aged, and I have to say, I was suspicious.

CLOWN

Remember the year the clown
lived next door and every morning
he would have a different dog,
inflated and twisted into shape,
tied to the railing for children
to play with on their way to school?

He would walk to the coffee shop
in blouson jacket and Farah slacks,
chat to the girls behind the counter.

I never heard him crack a joke,
yet every day we'd see a taxi idling
out the front, him rushing from
the house, bulging cricket bag
of costumes and toys
slinging from his shoulder.

It was only afterwards you remarked
how strange it was
that none of us had ever been in the house.

MY DOG REFLECTS ON EXISTENTIALISM

Spooked by the slate-green hush
of a spring afternoon, the swish
of shadowed branches on a gable wall,
my dog starts to bark – soundbites
of aggression – and, each time he stops,
I am left listening to the white noise
of thoughts crushing rudely
through the turnstile of my mind.

I try to ignore them, concentrate
on the barking dog: rough music,
spiky rhythm and the not knowing
whether he has seen me –
a half-blur in the study window –
and decided to mess with my head

THE MAGICIAN

after René Magritte

He met her at a show in the Castle Hotel,
a card trick where he dealt
her chosen card.

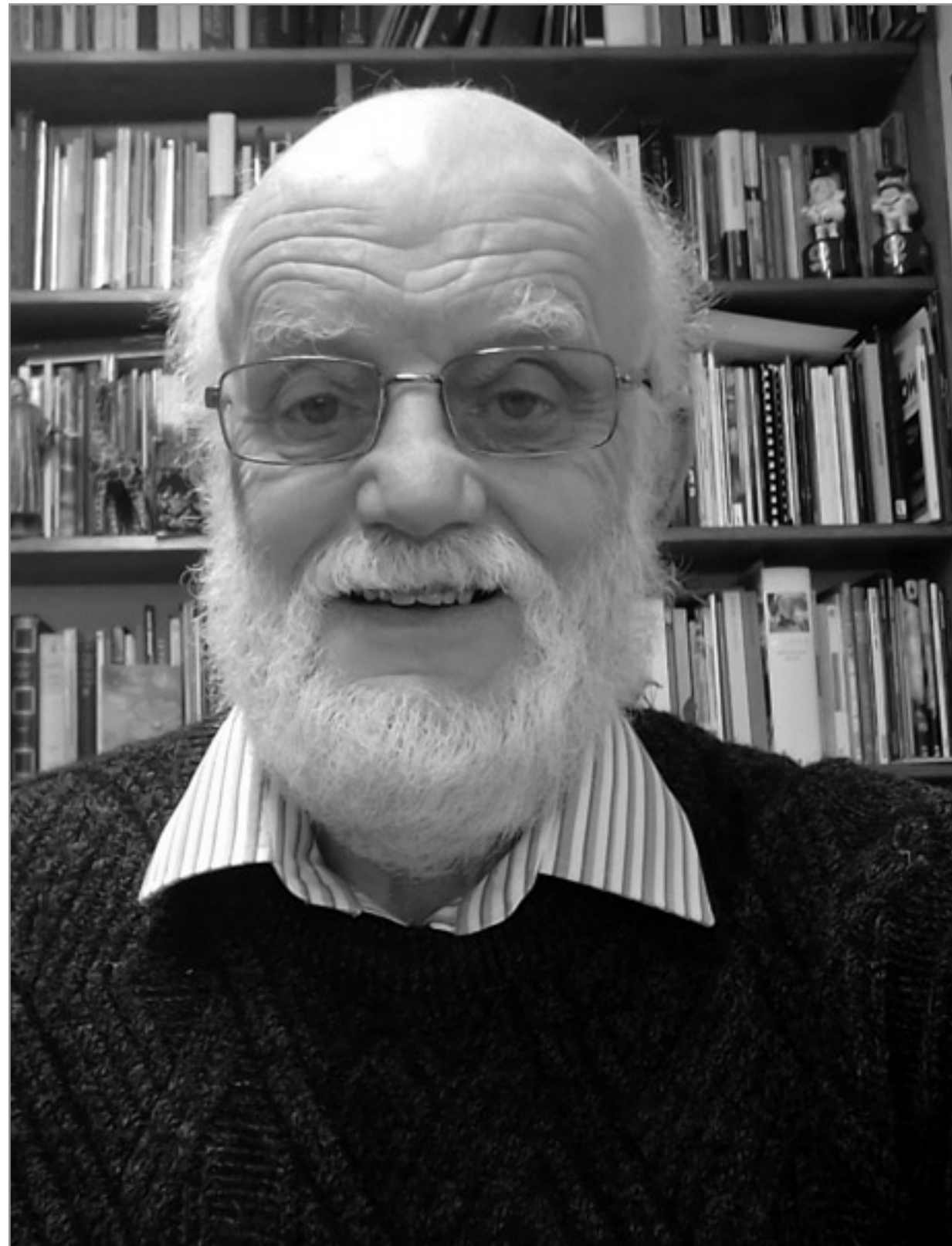
Walking home he was flirty and funny,
and, when they stopped outside her house,
she begged him to look into her eyes.

In the morning he remembered nothing
and was surprised to find
one playing card
in an otherwise empty wallet.

TOMATOES

Even under a microscope you couldn't see
what was written on the seeds, yet,
as soon as you planted them,
water unlocked the instructions
and first leaves, the weight of a whisper,
shouldered their way to the surface,
appearing in the morning light,
as though they'd always been there.

Michael Farry's third poetry collection, *Troubles* (2020) has just been published by Revival Press, Limerick. It deals with memories and commemoration of the 1912-1923 period in Irish history. He also writes history and has published widely on that war of independence and civil war period in Ireland. His first poetry collection, *Asking for Directions*, was published by Doghouse Books in 2012 and his second, *The Age of Glass*, (2017) by Revival. He is a retired primary teacher.



HAND WASHING

This Easter I felt a moment's fellow feeling
with him on his seat, my hands washed clean
to protect me, us, the world, from this unseen
menace. He was another small man, appealing
by a grand gesture for innocence, a liturgy
of lies, and I imagine his finger-dip, a ripple
in tepid water, a public cleansing, superficial,
his bogus lavabo the most famous in history.

In these strange days we pray that our washings,
our simple soap, our white and chapped hands
our space and distances, all these resolute
observances, show the importance of small things,
in helping us, under attack, to withstand
the onslaught. *Truth*, said Pilate, *what is truth*.

Michael Farry

THE CURE

She knows someone with the cure of poetry
but hasn't seen him for three weeks or more.
I'm sceptical, think it might involve idolatry,
breathing on the patient, and some dancefloor

moves my mother knew. It's never easy
to leave, but after fifty years Elsinore
has lost its glamour – seventy actually –
and it's time to set sail for another shore.

Do you think all brave men must be dancers
I asked the man behind the desk. Metaphors
and similes are forbidden here, he answered,
we deal in simplicity. Pah! I swore

I'd stop, too much in the books but filled
up the application form. Stevedore
is the perfect fit. The demand for skilled
craftsmen is growing. I still feel sore,

told the truth, stretched thin, on every line.
A mistake. They refused me. The more
I try, the more the wolves of the dollar sign
gnaw my bones, carnivore on carnivore.

Living in the limitations of weakness
has its good side, but it's time to explore
options, compromise my errant genius
swallow pride, reapply to be the governor

of the island. There I'd reread the classics,
absorb the lessons of the windmills, bore
my subjects with the wisdom of a geriatric.
Waiting for the call, I take the tablets, ignore

the daily newspapers, continue to rhyme,
Holderlin rather than Heaney, bedsore,
a slave to chivalry and disorganised crime.
Before I sleep allow me one sonnet more.

THE HERMITAGE MEDICAL CENTRE CAFÉ

They are cleaning out the ornamental pool.
 Its water jets are stilled.
Workmen hose the filthy rock-rolled stones.
 I get coffee and a scone.
In a day or two all will return to normal.
 There are no hermits here.

Nurses with salads and still water are lost in their phones.
Serious young men with aged parents concentrate on tea.

Everyone struggles with a new language.
 The grammar of illness is simple.
Its dictionary is infinite, its definitions brief.
 This building encourages belief.
Those ominous nouns and verbs are difficult.
 Repetition is the key to learning.

Strong tea, toast and marmalade conceal their grief.
The child is blind to her mother's concern for her mother.

It's easy to spot patients on their first visit.
 Pronunciation is a problem.
I pretend detachment, make my coffee last.
 Couples discuss the forecast.
Those returning to check decline speak less.
 Resignation is a bitter badge.

For quietude and tranquillity this café is unsurpassed.
Everyone seems scared their voice might break the hush.

I know no more, caught up in my own worry.
 This is typical café coffee.
It's morning in Montreal and minus six today.
 I have no idea what he'll say.
I won't tell the others until Easter is over.
 The crossword is almost done.

There's a small chapel here where some few go and pray.
Suddenly I remember I have left no written instructions.

LADDER

Distracted from the long-distance heats
of a championship somewhere
in the air-conditioned middle east
I looked out, saw two men shoulder a ladder
down the pavement
from the river end towards the main road
in perfect step, silent
except for their rhyming footfalls
concentrating on the carry.
The ladder rode like a laden Viking longship
on an inner fjord, almost home.

I have no idea where they came from
nor did I feel a need
to leave my chair to check
if they turned into the cul-de-sac
where the extension is nearing completion
or kept on across the main road
to the archaeological dig.
When they left the frame of my window
I turned back to the race
the penultimate lap, four had broken free
sure to qualify. I didn't care
the real race came later.
It was late September, the eve of my birthday
not a significant one, my friend told me.
She wasn't there, didn't see the ladder.

WATCHING *Odd Man Out* IN 1947

I imagine my parents
in the Gaiety Cinema, Sligo
the summer of the year I was born
holding hands
terrified
by the darkness, the rain, the mud,
the threatening children, the treacherous friends.
I'm sure I too stirred to the snivelling music
pitied the drenched doomed wanderer
the love innocent, the faith futile.

Afterwards I hear them pray
that this time they might see their son
walk, go to school
my mother reassuring my father
that it was just a film
the darkness essential
betrayal a plot device
rain a Hollywood cliché
the finale a neat wrap
and that in the real world
things were different
more difficult.

TABLES

after paintings by Ruth McDonnell

This time I know
exactly what to expect. I sneak up, satchel,
compass, pen-knife, find the hedgerow, gravel,
the south window.

The sombre studio
needs no curtains. Two tables wait inside
in blank dust-sheets like expectant brides
or drifted snow.

A cold moon glows
above me. I scan the landscape far and near,
remembering footprints in the mud, a stir
in the shadows

battles long ago.
The hollows are still and silent, all at rest.
Uneasy, I turn and look in. Only one is left.
I am no hero

but I cannot go.
The final table has the air of one cocked for flight,
tense, waiting for me, the only obstacle, to blink.
I stare in terror.

NOISES

He still has a perfect ear
for the nuances of a car engine
predicted the demise
of my old workhorse
its failing clutch
terminal gearbox
on one of our trips
to scan or biopsy
somewhere in his atlas
of Dublin hospitals
so when I succumbed
bought the bright red
ten-year old hatchback
I couldn't wait to take him
to his next appointment
hear his diagnosis
of what I thought was
the engine's perfect hum.

The news was not good.

Michael Minassian is a Contributing Editor for *Verse-Virtual*, an online magazine. His short stories and poems have appeared in such journals as *Comstock Review*, *Evening Street Review*, *Fifth Wednesday*, *Main Street Rag* and *Poet Lore*. In addition, Minassian occasionally writes about Film for *The Lost Coast Review*. His chapbooks include poetry: *The Arboriculturist* (2010); *Chuncheon Journal* (2019); and photography: *Around the Bend* (2017). His full-length poetry collection *Time is Not a River* was released in 2020 and is available on Amazon. For more information: <https://michaelminassian.com>



Michael Minassian

DARWIN'S BEARD

As a young man,
Darwin kept his beard
neatly trimmed, stray hairs
and fingernail clippings
preserved along with
insects and frog legs.

After returning
in the HMS Beagle,
he ran out of jars—
fossils and stuffed
birds kept in rooms
throughout the house,
ignoring the complaints
of his wife Emma
and the Anglican Church.

All the while his beard
grew whiter and longer—
when he laid down at night
his beard stretched
to the next room
and out the door,
forcing his gardener
to mow lawn and beard
at the same time—
careful not to disturb
the nesting of gulls
or Emma's bone
and ivory combs.

In dreams he thought
he heard God cough
through His beard—
rimmed by dinosaurs,
doves, fossil wings
& angels braiding hair.

DRESSING THE BUDDHA

Coming home from my neighbor's house
one snowy afternoon,
I recognized Shakyamuni Buddha,
wearing only a thin robe,
walking barefoot along the road.
Unlike the Zen masters,
I knew I couldn't kill him
even if it was an illusion—
instead, I took off my coat
and draped it over his shoulders,
then took him home
for a cup of tea and bowl of rice.

After eating, we watched TV,
counting breaths during the commercials
though he seemed not to like
any of the shows, keeping his eyes
closed the whole time
until I switched to cartoons,
and he smiled for the first time.

As he got up to leave,
I asked him what it was like
to walk everywhere on the earth
but he didn't answer—
never speaking a single word
even when I gave him
my favorite sweater, wool cap, and gloves
along with my wife's warmest boots
(surprised at how small he was and thin).

Just as he was going out the door,
my wife came home—
of course, she recognized him right away
and noticed he was wearing her boots—
have you been meditating again?
she asked me, shaking her head,
you can take me shoe shopping
as soon as I put these groceries away—
but before the Buddha could cross the road
she ran after him and gave him her saffron
colored scarf, wrapping it gently twice
around his bare neck: *thanks*, is all he said.

THE SILENCE THAT AROSE

She once told me
she loved the quiet moments
when we used to go hiking
along the trout stream
north of Ringwood State Park.

On sunny days we sat
on the rocks beside the rushing
water watching fishermen
cast out, their lines cutting the mist
that rose in smoky tendrils,
the water's own veil.

As the day heated
everyone left except
the two of us
eating our lunch,
pretending the world was new
or as old as we could remember.

I never knew how much those days
meant to her, the silent casting
of the past's curved hooks,
biting and embedded
beneath the skin of the water.

Then when it was too late,
I could not answer, nor tell her
I would never return to that place alone
beneath the water of our skin.

WINGS

In the raw egg of morning
acoustics ripple
like a falling lake.

Birds in the backyard
take turns eating at the feeder,
mates call to each other
with voices that could seduce
machinery or a drop of rain.

I try to speak to them,
recite poetry, whistle, and sigh.

I affect my grandmother's accent
use broken English, French phrases,
pretend to be a statue:
hold my arms out stiff to the side,
close my eyes.

Still we cannot communicate
beyond the simple:
hello, I'm hungry
feed me, stay away, fly.

Later, I fall asleep standing up,
feel my knees bending
the wrong way,
vestiges of wings
erupting from my back—

Birds delight in impersonation,
imitating each other's sounds.

Yet I wonder what do they
dream of when they see
a man with wings?

LOS MUERTOS

At the supermarket,
cashiers and stock clerks
wear leftover Halloween masks:
skulls, zombies, Darth Vader,
or Pennywise the Dancing Clown.

I stroll the aisles
wearing a folded-over bandana,
dark sunglasses & a baseball cap,
feeling like a desperado
as I reach for the tomatoes
& the last can of tuna.

A woman spots me
staring at the empty shelves;
I can't see the expression on her face,
wondering if it's fear or a smirk
pushing up crow's feet
at the corner of her eyes
as she blinks once and retreats,
glad she can't see my day-old beard
or the drool escaping from my lips,
an involuntary response
or perhaps just hunger—

At the deli counter,
skeletons hold hands
dancing in circles,
skulls lined up
along the shelves.

Outside in the parking lot
shoppers wait six feet apart;
police wipe down door handles
or stay in their cars.

I hear sirens as ambulances
race along empty roads
and wonder if the refrigerated trucks
behind the market are morgues
or simply there to deliver food
while the rest of us sleep.

I can barely remember
what life was like before
the future arrived,
& we started counting again
from the year zero—
a new world
we did not want or expect.

Moyra Donaldson is a poet from Co Down, Northern Ireland. She has published nine collections of poetry, including a limited edition publication of artwork and poems, *Blood Horses*, in collaboration with artist Paddy Lennon. Her most recent collection is *Carnivorous*, Doire Press, 2019. In 2019, she received a Major Individual Artist award from Arts Council NI.



DREAMS IN THE WEEK BEFORE

Little just-fledged birds peck
at my fingers.

I am bleeding again; bright rivulets
flowing, a red tide
across the delta of my thighs.

The water is clear, but very deep,
the cliffs are high, the railings
the children lean against
are rusted; loose.

Moyra Donaldson

CRONE SONG

Not every song's melodic
and over time I've come to love
the crow's true earth music -

feathered blue-black notes
that call to old women
at the core of themselves;
spirit and memory.

Corvids and crones
keep company with divination,
shift between realms.

I lie awake,
as old women do: at dawn,
I open my cawing throat
awe awe awe

MY DAUGHTER CUTS MY FRINGE

I close my eyes, feel the scissor-slide
across my forehead, cool and smooth,
snips of hair fall into my hands
upturned upon my lap

and into my lap, a memory -

arguing with my mother
while brushing my daughter's hair,
dragging through tangles,
her head jerked back
by my roughness. Full
of anger at my mother;
hurting my daughter.

HER EYES

Glaciers, skies;
blue within blue,
blue blazing
star child,
travelling
beyond
our lives

THE DAY'S EYE

They said it was a fine year,
full of brightness;
I didn't notice,

living in the shadow's remnant
I found myself surprised
by summer's glow on the skin of others;
taken aback
by their sunlit conversations,
by their remarking on the good weather.

Give me time
to open in the full gaze
of your innocent light.



Natasha was born and raised in Athens, Greece. She is an academic researcher lecturing in literature, drama, and critical theory and has held academic posts as an Assistant Professor at Qatar University, the National University of Ireland, Galway and the American College of Greece. She is also a volunteer English teacher for migrants/refugees campaigning to end Direct Provision. She holds a Ph.D. in Classics & English, a M.Sc. in English Literature: Writing & Cultural Politics, and a B.A. in English & American Literature. She has published chapters on Irish studies in edited volumes and journals and is currently writing her monograph on Irish theatre and rights. Her poems have appeared in *Melodia* magazine, *The Anthology of Young Greek Poets*, her poetry collection "The Dialect of Water" in *Writing Home* (Dedalus Press) and her essay in the *Correspondences Anthology* (The Stinging Fly). Her homes are Athens, Edinburgh, Doha, and Ireland since 2003. <https://www.dedaluspress.com/product/writing-home-the-new-irish-poets/> <https://www.rte.ie/culture/2019/1210/1098209-correspondences-the-anthology-giving-voice-to-direct-provision/>

FIFTH FLOOR

No visitor, no lover, acrobat, earthquake, child,
not even breeze or wave in Lily's lounge.

Five or six meandering frames the scenography of her dining room,
the smell of naphthalene: her greatgrandmother's portrait, jaundiced

(Athens, 1897)

Dido
and
Aeneas

in happier times, methodically angular
aging every night.

Invisible straight lines titillate her eye
adjusting
to level the disorder, measure gratification,
straighten indulgence, fix deviating borderlines,

then sit and idolize the guilty symmetry of correction
from a distance.

They found her in her armchair one morning
with hammer and nail in hand,

a singing swan.

Natasha Remoundou

ODE TO CAFFEINE

I know your many faces:
free drug for leaving cert. students
coca-cola for breakfast, air-condition, secret fags, and on ice,

stiff-necked addiction for memorizing historical dates,
savouring the taste of a sharp mind.

There used to be a coffee factory on our street corner
selling dates, dry figs, salted arab pistachios, almonds and walnuts.

and it was always the fragrance of the freshly ground coffee beans
absorbing the neighborhood, that made me feel sick deep down in my guts

while others stopped to relish it
everytime we used to pass by on our way to school early in the morning.

And in class, the breath of our teacher, tobacco and greek coffee without sugar
taught me what men are,

sitting around coffee shops filtering secrets inside their alabaster coffee cups
leaving at the bottom an obsidian dampness
-the remains-

for a woman who knew how to “tell the coffee”
by turning the cup upside down on the saucer
to read the future in primordial coffee stains .

Or when my paralyzed father asked me to prepare his coffee in the late afternoon
and I did it -not out of mercy-
to eat spoonfulls of sugar and drink the coffee foam uncensored
for the tip and for forgiveness.

In myriad cups of tea, charcoal karak chai with milk and cardamom
and bitter arabic coffee steaming in the heatwave of the Corniche.

In Mayo, I have been kept warm
overdosing in tea mugs when the oil had run out.

Dark dust from Calcuta or from Mount Parnonas
dressed in delicate transparent suits,

I keep your darling leaves in IKEA glass jars
exposed to visitors of the kitchen museum.

You spark my nervous creative system in front of a blank page:
we sit and stare at each other for hours harboring some consummate thing.

Orla Fay, from County Meath, edits *Boyne Berries*. Issue 28 of the magazine was a specially curated COVID issue to mark Poetry Day Ireland 2020. Recently her work has appeared in *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Impossible Archetype*, *Crannóg* and *The Lake*. She won 3rd place in The Oliver Goldsmith Poetry Competition 2019 and was highly commended in The Jonathan Swift Creative Writing Award 2019 and The Francis Ledwidge Poetry Award 2019. Her poem *The Natural Order* appeared in The Irish Times as a poem of the week in July 2019. Her debut collection is forthcoming from Salmon Poetry. <http://orlafay.blogspot.com/> Twitter@FayOrla



FRYING AN EGG ON THE PAVEMENT

The day belongs to Sol, Apollo,
the brightest star, so strong I cannot look at it,
unlike glittering Venus in the evening sky,
the cauldron of night.

How must the flowers feel?
Or know? Only fathom its omnipresence of warmth
returning after the long sleep in the clay.
Do they stretch, yawn?

There is certain divinity in its heat,
an awakening call, an energising of energy
that says I am inextricably linked to this universe
by miracles of science

I do not comprehend.
I follow it in circadian rhythm from sunrise to set,
content as a child in a cyclic womb. I see no more
than my happy prison.

In space it is white.
Earth's atmosphere makes a runny egg, yolk yellow, orange,
and through a prism it scatters a rainbow of colour,
painting all that it touches with joy.

Orla Fay

CLOTHES PEGS

Whites seep into pale blues on a clothesline day,
this horizon behind flapping vests and underwear
rising above the treetops. A golden sun dazzles
too bright to look at in blotched black attempts,
fingerprints taken by the eye for the crime.
It is safer to peek from dappled green leaves,
modesty in a trickle of the glittering light.
This seer of the sky shows no mercy in its shine,
often thwarted by a natural world that seeks to shelter.
Only can I have impressions of you lest translucent
I burn. Truly you are the source of the universe,
a roaring inferno behind which lies a sea of eternity.
The length of distance is a measure of your love,
bunches of spring in your image and a summer
sweetening to pinks, oranges and those red roses,
fragrant with passion that fades to autumn.
Everything is held in your sphere, in your thrall.
Everything is carefully balanced, poised on a razor's
edge. On this precipice I choose to lie, awake at night,
at times caught in suspension, like these newly purchased
novelty pegs that say, 'hold on tight' and 'get a grip'!

MORGAN LE FAY

She stands to be seen, unafraid to speak.
She is entirely herself, beautiful,
bold, eyes glittering green add to her mystique.
She knows she will be held accountable,
far more than some of the male seers will be,
in speaking of the aged ways to summon
lost magic, adventure, and chivalry.
She is a wild and dangerous woman.
Oh, lady of the silver moon rising
above the village of the little lights
return to this world with your hair streaming
in the flight, black as the raven and nights
that seem hopeless in the hour before dawn.
Bring back your witchy ways from Avalon.

RIDERS ON THE STORM

The intro seemed especially atmospheric on July afternoons,
when thunder rolled in the distance and the heavens opened.
What if there was a killer on the road?

He was a loner but not lonely, more animal instinct
than human, searching for his prey, like the eagle
screeching above the valley, on another plane
to the unwitting, unsafe in walls of civilisation.

The same man became the Unknown Soldier
blooded by battle, appetite whet for destruction,
the gun, the grenade the climax of his violence,
the red mist in his eyes a veil to *Break on Through*
to death. Death the leveller. Death the ultimate prize
for living, the great testament to nihilism.

He is buried in Pere Lachaise with other musicians, poets,
dreamers, soldiers, lords, ladies and vagabonds.

Their bones remain not dust yet, their love a *funeral pyre*,
their songs still sung, energy renewed, recycled, transformed,
blazing phoenixes of art a second chance saloon, redemptory.

THE FEMALE HOBO

"Women were too oppressed to be hobos."
- from Wild by Cheryl Strayed

Hiking the Pacific Crest Trail, Strayed tells a reporter
that she is a hiker, not a hobo, but he is captivated
by the image of her as a lone, drifting woman.
She refuses to feel afraid, sings songs to the air,
blows a whistle when confronted with a charging bull,
side-stepping rattle snakes, a fox, a distant bear,
frogs and ants. Yet it is always man who has the potential
to be her great foe. The underlying vulnerability
of being the weaker sex, physically, is concerning.
I want to be bolder in my life, less fearful,
less bound by tradition. I want to throw the kitchen sink
through the window, install grain and grit in my voice,
keep a centred core, a positive stance, take control,
blow the horn, bang a gong, wield the flute.

Owen Gallagher's latest collection is 'Clydebuilt' published by Smokestack Books. He lives in London.
<https://smokestack-books.co.uk/catalogue.php?search=owen+gallagher>



THE INN TO HEAVEN

When the dark-skinned stranger arranged six glasses
of whisky on the counter, in the shape of a cross,
each a tiny chalice, the lights dimmed.

The gold liquid glowed as he downed each
like a man would down water in a desert.
His body sent out rays of light.
We were almost blinded
when he lifted the last glass.

Arms outstretched, he rose in the air
and passed through the ceiling,
which closed like skin over a wound.

MARY JACK SAID:

'When the men and women were in the field
saving what they could of the hay, a horse
and cart appeared in the sky and made its way
towards them. An auld fella drove the rig

and parked under darkening clouds.
Folk were speechless as they watched him heave
bales of hay off his cart and land them
at the gate at the top end of the field.

When the barns and sheds were crammed
the auld fella drove off. Rain hit us like dried corn.
Our livestock grew bulky that Winter.
Cows and sheep multiplied in the Spring.

It was a summer like this, when fodder
can't be cut and barns are empty.'

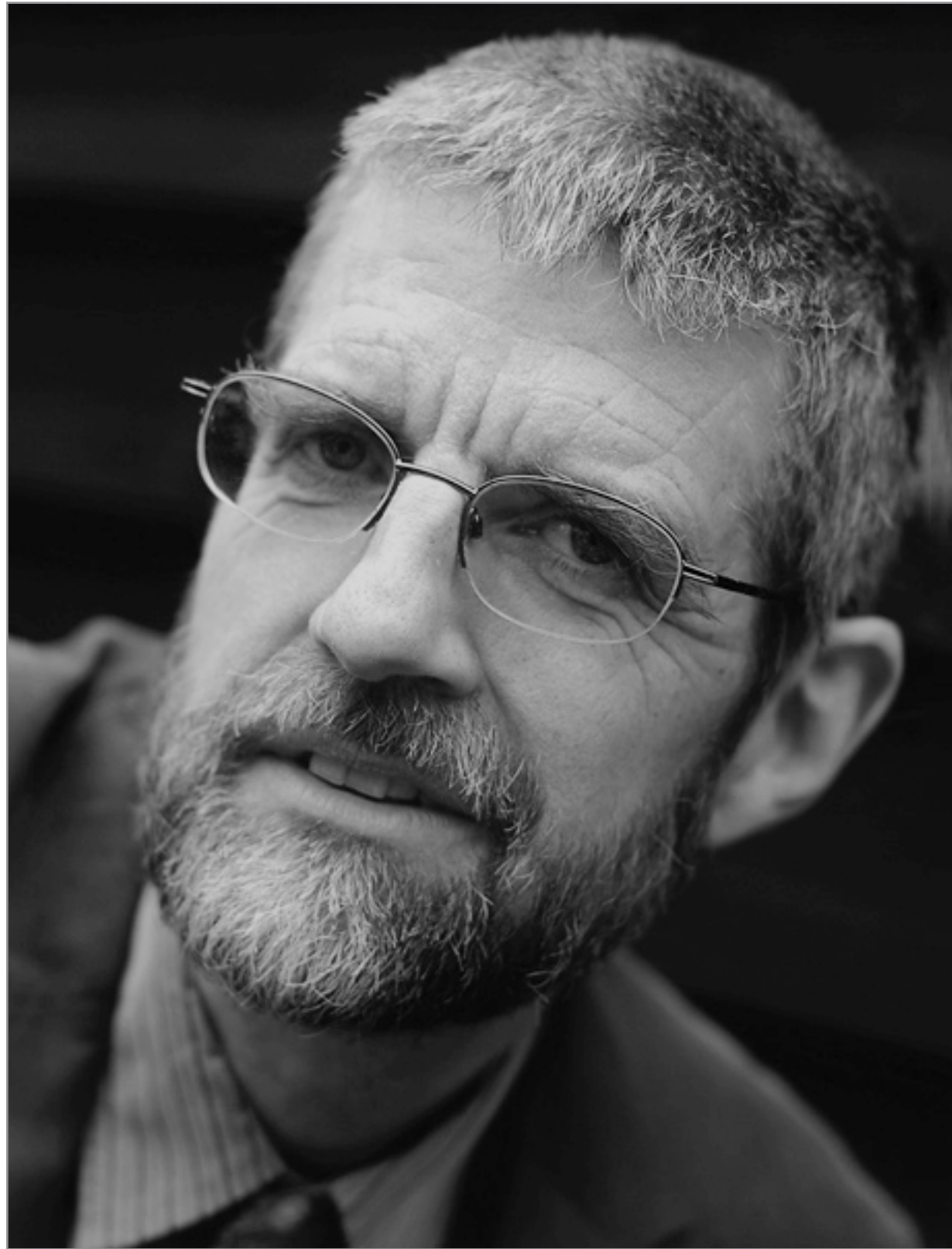
THE DONEGAL SPANIARD

'Will there be no breach in this weather?'
Finn sputtered over his porter.
'Pour me another.
The last time 'twas this fierce survivors
from the Armada snuggled under
the blankets of our ancestors.'

'That would account for the olive glow
in the folk around Falcarragh
with hair darker than a crow,'
pronounced Paddy 'The Spaniard' O' Hara.

'Aye,' Finn muttered, unaware
that whilst he bunched twigs
in nearby woods his wife, Clare,
tangoed with 'The Spaniard' in his digs.

Philip Gross lives in South Wales and has published some twenty collections of poetry, including *A Bright Acoustic* (Bloodaxe, 2017). *The Water Table* won the British T.S.Eliot Prize in 2009. He received a Cholmondeley Award in 2017, and his science-based collection for young people, *Dark Sky Park* (Otter-Barry Books, 2018) was shortlisted for the CLIPPA award, 2019. He is a keen collaborator – e.g. with artist Valerie Coffin Price on *A Fold In The River* (Seren, 2015) and with poet Lesley Saunders on *A Part of the Main* (Mulfran, 2018). A new Bloodaxe collection, *Between The Islands*, appeared in 2020. <https://www.philipgross.co.uk/>



Philip Gross

From A CHANGE IN THE WEATHER

(tanka journal, Autumn 2019)

Take it, and leave it
to fly. Haiku: gift offered
on up-open palms.
Tanka: that turns to reflect
on the moment of giving.

[Circumstances are the about-ness of the thing, as much what stand about it as what it is about.]

*

An intemperate
altercation: curt drench, then
a startled brightness.
Early leaf fall, wet flames, washed
down the subway steps in drifts.

[The temper of the times is unpredictable. Is warming, can boil over. Or craze and crack like ice beneath our feet.]

*

A close day – closer
the more you hurry – sweaty
fingers on your skin.
Switch off the rolling news: it
seeps through your pores just the same.

[Borderlines are always leaking – no defence, in any case, against the brittleness we feel within.]

*

continued overleaf...

From A CHANGE IN THE WEATHER ... contd

The politicians'
tone is weather. Is warning
of weather to come.

See how the sky darkens, brightens,
shifts our shadows, word by word.

*[Weather is just the surface. But it's where we live. Climate is something else;
it's how that surface tilts.]*

*

Long distance migrants
at the tideline – the turnstones
are back, from nowhere,
more and more appearing as
I get the knack of looking.

*[Change: some changes arrive as a sign in the sky; some, as if they'd been implicit
from the start.]*

*

Unequal pressure
unfurls, breakers rolling up
our ragged seaboard –
depressions are the temper
of the times. The season, too.

*[Depression: sullen energy locked into the leashed toils of its isobars;
incipient storm.]*

*

Bird flock splintering,
peeled off in the wind. The waves
continue their work
as if the world had to be
realised, one stone at a time.

*[Turnstone, arenaria interpres: sand-dweller and... Interpres?
Messenger, translator or negotiator. Go-between.]*

*

The twitchy flick-peck
of turnstones in the tangled
wrack they pick among
– the random exactitude
of loose edges: how life fits.

*[Tidal: so much of what passes for constant hangs on our asymmetries:
eccentric orbits, the skewed axis of the earth.]*

*

Mist between the trees
– in this separation, each
comes into its own.
To know each other, we need
our misunderstandings too.

*[Three-dimensional: never believe what flat screens tell you.
To see the world, you must step into it.]*

*

continued overleaf...

From A CHANGE IN THE WEATHER ... contd

A chill pale dawn, all
London's towers and lowdowns
laid out at its feet.

Here too, the early bin rounds:
all we physically forget.

[**Waste:** our text to the future, sure as any monument.
Ask an archaeologist: it's the midden tells you how a people lived.]

*

A niggardly turn
in the daylight, as if
inward, to itself.

The sun, I know, is still there
though Earth turns her cheek away.

[**Dark Ages** are always just around the corner,
where our language can't quite reach.]

*

The voice of the wind
is not its own, but things' – trees,
wires, bricks, resisting.

Is this what taught us singing,
this struggle to swim upstream?

[**Storm** force is an illusion of direction, circling on itself.
All it's trying to do is fill the emptiness inside.]

*

Around the sleeping
house, the un-hum... like a sound
but its opposite.

Listen, beyond the shouting:
the massed choir of quiet things.

[**Yes/no**, the binary dancers, matter/antimatter, circle, arms around each other.
Did you want me to choose?]

*

Brusque wind this morning
picks over the tide wrack where
the turnstones have gone
who live each moment on that
cusp; to be here / to move on.

[**The cusp** of the earth is everywhere; however much we yaw and pitch through
seasons, it's a globe in the (is there an?) end.]

Pippa Little is a Scots poet living in the North East of England. She reviews, edits, mentors and is a Royal Literary Fund Fellow at Newcastle University. Her most recent full collection, *Twist*, came out in 2017 from Arc and was shortlisted for The Saltire Society Poetry Collection of the Year. *Overwintering*, published by OxfordPoets/Carcanet, was short-listed for The Seamus Heaney Centre Prize. She is currently working on her next collection. She has a Hawthornden Fellowship, won many awards, been published widely in magazines, anthologies, online, on radio and film and has read across the world.



THE COFFIN CLUB

Motto of The Kiwi Coffin Club, Rotorua, NZ:

'It's A Box Until There Is Someone In It'.

The elderly learn carpentry as a community project and to save funeral expenses.

Happy afternoons under the tin roof of HQ
when sawing makes a bass line for the ta-ra-boom-de-ay of our hearts!
We're delighted by radiata pine, oak's warm bloom,
how they release top-notes of forest charged, responsive
to our hands' sweat. We've been made strong again.
Handles get tapped in, then last of all we'll fetch and fold
crochet blankets looped in our old age so lying down to rest
will smell of home. The radio plays *Cuando Cuando Cuando*,
time to fill the Brown Betty teapot, catch up on chat
and ailments: today there's another gap around our table
but soon everything we love will be all around us.

Pippa Little

ORANGES AND LEMONS

I still have her Chinatown cleaver
from that summer she researched the history of rape
and cooked furiously every night while growing skinnier.

Beast of a thing, it left metallic residue on the palm
bitter as aspirin. Inner city sirens called rioters to prayer,
helicopter searchlights kept ladderling our dark.

Distracting nursery rhymes, so queerly British,
didn't do the job. *Here is a candle to light you to bed/
here is a chopper to chop off your head.*

After she left, I hid it and forgot. Now found by chance
I heft it from hand to hand: how lank and dull
the rust-flecked blade has grown:

chicken-feet scrape and catch again in my throat,
her *chop/chop/chop* gathers speed like a train,
dark and light, passing through, passing for

facts that night after night
I refused to face:
even now, none of us are safe.

A SPRINGING

if you just pulled up your roots
in a fistful of long skirt
and took that leap, over winter fields
and far away,
who or what could be saved
before it grows too late, all over again,

the way memory sends you tipping
high as the sky, wild and hanging on
for dear life as the swing you're riding
bucks, goes almost over the bar -
human cannonball, you're no longer anything
but a wild, dangerous hurtle of atoms
all desperate to be free of one another,
a beautiful explosion beyond
the world's edge of disapproving pines
who don't understand how it hurts
to spring apart into soft leaf:

how far you might reach,
all the while kneeling on family soil
hands cupped around the tips of crocuses'
intimate heat, answered in your blood
at the ends of your thumbs,
prickling signs of one more chance at life.

NOTES THE DEATH-MASK MAKER LEFT BEHIND

The face falls at the moment of death.
 Very slow: the moment itself is
 invisible in plain sight but its aftermath
 can be seen if you move your eyes away/then back
 as if from a glacier about to calve.
 Once I used to tie the jowls tight with torn linen:
 these days the mandibles are superglued
 to smile in the face of gravity. After all,
 the head is now merely a sign of itself,
 surface to be made facsimile – so
 no disrespect. I am always careful.

Something has gone, yes –
 but in the process of covering over the planes and angles
 of bone and lip I am completing, memorising
 ‘the spirit beyond the skin’. I press
 and mould a new series of every crease, follicle, blemish,
 closer than the mother of a newborn.
 This negative, turned inside out, becomes the likeness
 someone loved once: eerie, they often call it,
 wanting to touch. But it is neither warm nor cold,
 and I do not tell them of the time it took
 to rub the real head clean, to separate each hair
 each eyelash from my sticky alginate.
 I have boxes lined with silk to fit.
 Better, I think, than a jar of grit and bone.
 Centuries I have been making the dead into the sleeping:
 nobody owns life, after all, it slips through us.
 When you see me, look for someone else.

‘THE BEGINNING OF LOVE IS THE EYE’

‘Asili ya Huba Mwanzowe ni Jicho’

I see a country whose flags are many and multi-coloured
 and belong to everybody. They are ordinary and splendid
 as washing, they are always speaking to one another
 and asking questions. They swaddle and comfort
 so you can dance in them, beat your heels, raise
 your arms high, they will wrap you in life, they will sing
 around you, red, yellow, emerald, crackling in the breeze.
 I see a country whose every border is porous,
 says welcome, come touch, come in.
 Imagine such a country!
 Then suddenly it’s here
 in Lubaina’s afternoon
 as a flowering of freed children rush
 through, among, between the banners,
 pull on the red ropes to re-arrange her dreams
 into their own.

Rob Childers divides his year between Alaska and Connemara. His poetry has been published in Ropes, Tule Review, Poet's Republic, Galway Advertiser, and Skylight 47. In 2014 he was a featured reader for Galway's Over the Edge library series and placed first in the Alaska Arts Council Annual Poetry Competition.



Rob Childers

ONE STEP FORWARD AND A SHUFFLE BACK

Like those first near-human space flights
we Zoomed last night

eight volunteer writers, all silverbacks
who on taking one giant step

for mankind's geriatric, pulled it off
a mass digital breakout

that brought us from - Let my people go!
to a launch and the Eagle safely landed.

But not without its side-effects
as seems we'd all slipped back a bit

in our primate advancement. So ape-crazy
happy were we to screen-see each other

that our chatterings soon grew
into a group vocalisation

so loud it would have silenced the forest;
even the buzzing insects stopping for a listen.

And had there been bushes about
or tree limbs handy

we'd have shook them, swung from them
or madly beat our palms on the ground.

Then since what Zooms up must Zoom down
it was done before the nit-picking had begun.

Still, never have I felt so cousinly connected
to my opposably thumbled clan

that first feral meeting magnificent,
there under the canopy of the internet.

Robyn Rowland has 15 books, 12 of poetry, most recently *Under This Saffron Sun – Safran Güneşin Altında*, Turkish translations by Mehmet Ali Çelikel, (Knocknareone Press, Ireland, 2019); *Mosaics from the Map*, Doire Press, Ireland (2018) and *This Intimate War Gallipoli/Çanakkale 1915 – İçli Dışlı Bir Savaş: Gelibolu/Çanakkale 1915*, Turkish translations by Mehmet Ali Çelikel, Five Islands Press, Australia; Bilge Kultur Sanat, Turkey, 2015; republished Spinifex Press, 2018. Her poetry appears in national/international journals, over forty anthologies, eight editions of *Best Australian Poems*. She has read in India, Portugal, Ireland, UK, USA, Greece, Austria, Bosnia, Serbia, Turkey and Italy and is published in translation. She is filmed reading for the *National Irish Poetry Reading Archive*, James Joyce Library, UCD, available on *YouTube*.



FISHER OF POETS

for Wendy Fleming, Melbourne Poets' Union, in admiration

'It is very real and it doesn't feel like art'
from *Backyard Lemon* Wendy Fleming

Fisherman here on the islands off Connemara
know the shoals when they're coming
by the light in the sea,
and you know that soul, your own
twinned to the beat of this green place
and the ways of gathering.
And the giving, that grew in you
from where I wonder? Not just being
a third child, but a belief in communion.
Always generous, a spring that overflows
towards others, you are our lifting wave
when in doubt of our own words.

You only ever asked me one favour.
To give Billy Collins your book
when we read at Cúirt in Galway.
It came across the waters that small parcel.
Lodged in his bag among the poems of the great,
doubtless it sits on his shelf of foreign wonders.
Like him, you know the power
of what is right in front of us, how the every day
reaches into us with its pain and love and
you write it out clearly so there is no confusion.

Robyn Rowland

continued overleaf...

FISHER OF POETS

... contd

Billy wrote for you in the book I gave you.
 I never read it, being private. I hope it was funny,
 I know it was warm. There was joy in that for us all.
 I told him about you and your great gift,
 the creation with others of a Union to last in poetry
 that focuses on the poems themselves,
 and the way you gather so many together
 around the nets, drawing in poems under light
 shining in the sun, under starlight.
 Sparkling. *Drithla*. Or in the backyard
 under the lemon-tree, a kind day
 for a kind heart, right here, right now

THE GIFT

for my father, 2019

This morning driving back from Leitrim
 side lanes were lakes of elder flower
 lapping along my car window, a lacey spread
 fringing the ocean of green I swam through.
 Trees tall, arching, I breathed in lush green haze.
 Lost, I made good time. It was lovely but long.

His voice from daily skype was still with me.
 Over ten thousand miles from me and my morning
 coffee, his evening joke, that the only thing worth
 adding to whisky, is more whisky, before
 his question *is everything OK with you?*
Everything's ok with me.
 I tell him my stories, what I see in raw
 beauty spread out along the journey.
 But he repeats as every day, *'but is everything*
all right with you.' It's enough for him.

Now on my Connemara shore,
 fields across the way proud with
 white ponies flank-deep in buttercups,
 I gaze one hour into a still pool.
 The fret of distance eases out.
 Looking, just looking. And standing.
 Sometimes crouching, so long, I see now
 what seemed dark-claret weed
 reveals itself to be small sea slugs, minute
 frilled edges ever-slowly moving,
 going about their fluttering business.
 Rocks are crowded with young mussels
 so inky almost phosphorescent.
 Above me the sky is a drench of the blue
 my mother would soak his white shirts in.
 She died early at sixty-seven, my age.

continued overleaf...

THE GIFT ... contd

Some kind angels gave us him for this long time,
 in compensation maybe, ninety-nine years now.
 Everything I see, I hear, I breathe,
 every person I love and place I sing up
 is because of the blessing of him,
 his good health a world away.
 His stubborn belief in my living free.
 Gratitude is the strangest of feelings,
 not given like love, cast against like anger.
 It just fills us up sometimes, unexpected
 by a pool, in a forest drive.
 What can you do with it, but feel.

JUST WALKING

with Úna, Innis Meain, Ireland

This is a geometrical island – rectangles, squares,
 circles – a carved chessboard of limestone,
 land made vertical in walls of functional art,
 ego-less, the self of the maker not on display,
 just what remained after the game.
 Huge boulders, seventy-eight tons each,
 bitten off by deep-ocean creatures,
 were dropped careless to lay in a sandy bag of the deep,
 then emptied out and pitched far inland by storm-swells,
 a child's marbles rolled along a grey slate floor.

On western cliffs at Synge's chair
 above Gregory's Sound, rough angular
 sculptures were created by modern hands
 that found sliced shingles of stone irresistible,
 stacking a challenge to see could they
 match such natural magnificent skill.
 Waist-high fences trim small land-parcels of
 jagged rock fields in a higgledy lace of slit stone,
 opening their triangles of light as whistle holes
 for the wind to sing through.

There, you lost your footing,
 my arm securing you like a tent peg.
 Towards the north, soluble limestone, too soft
 and tender, was rubbed open by tidal caves beneath,
 blistering the pavements into 'puffing holes'
 where a sea-giant tests his lungs.
 Lips pursed, breathing slowly at first,
 in one great bellow of air bursting forth,
 sea is propelled skywards to lay flapping as a seal
 exhausted on the mercurious sills of stone.

continued overleaf...

JUST WALKING

... contd

Below, towards Foul Sound and the elliptical beach,
tighter-moulded walls stream towards the waters,
symmetrical, militarily straight rows,
so high you can't see a head above them.
Hypnotic as old mazes they trick the mind in
direction, distance and space.
Bedrock has yielded totally there, compliant,
breaks each day into a million grains of sand,
smooth and untrodden, desolate and lovely
as human vacancy can be.

There we lost our way and forgot time.
Around the island, across the waters,
Cliffs of Moher drop mad gulls thousands of feet.
We stand on the smaller mimic, below which
flat shelves are sea-sliced into tram tracks,
at their feet a scene like rainforest pools,
stones thick-woven with pea-green moss,
lichen flowering sorrel and cream
under a small cascade of drops that in photos
remain as tiny white rods springing back from soft landings.

And always the flowers that grew here
before men and women shifted weed to
make soil and scraped food out of shallow earth,
strike open the cracks, burrow out of the fields.
Irish saxifrage, that 'breaker of rocks'
with its white flowers tinged-pink on upright hairy stalks,
runs between the bells of eyebright.
Colour plays itself across grey stone:
bloody crane's bill in 'hollywood cerise',
cobalt-blue gentian, purple orchids and star-yellow samphire.

There we paused for breath and spectacle.
Returning, took the high hill back, cows leaning into night.
At dawn, night's removal – and ours –
a sun is rising red with sea mist outside this window,
squeezed elliptical as orange molten glass
between a low grey cloud and rock-still horizon.
Sky is lightening blue into dandelion,
where a plane scratches calligraphy across the sky,
a silent message of departure,
the trail home a wild crack in the circle above.

A MAN WHO NEVER KISSES

She thinks of him here, at her campsite travelling back,
 watching full moon over the van,
 a bloated pearl bulging
 between timber cross pieces of an old paling bridge.
 Under maple and willow
 she sits to listen beyond the noise of cars, bridge,
 a barking dog, frogs –
 to overhear the delight of river running with
 its simple slap of current
 against a snag perhaps, or a willow's trunk.

She sits in the dark
 so as not to lose sound to the van's light,
 to let night's own beams clear pathways of shadow,
 trees shawling themselves in night
 before sky gives up day's blue skin.
 The night is warm, all undone,
 open to some small movement of air,
 not quite a breeze,
 maybe an offering up of the river's sigh
 as it relaxes into day's passing.

Eight days she has been in retreat among forested gums,
 wallabies leaving tracks in early dawn
 among bright purple orchids
 their yellow throats singing.
 Passing gymea lilies with their towering scarlet heads
 walking a sandy path through forest in silence.
 Everything had a perfection only the land can create.
 Out of fires that blackened trees darker than old blood,
 sprouts of green, small blazes of emerald, test their faith
 after a night of feathered showers.

There is a hill there of sandstone boulders
 but inside the face of one, undetectable from below,
 a cave had been carved by ancient rivers
 two rooms almost, with windows each end.
 Its entrance was a vulval slit she had to climb inside
 on a ladder made of twisted gum-branches.
 She went there twice. She needed to understand
 what things can be accommodated; what can't.
 It was hard to leave it behind, though of course
 some things, some people, must be.

As she had lain in that cave inside the earth itself,
 she had thought then of being, of taking inside;
 of lips softly wet, and eyes that watch love in the other
 as a kiss takes the darkness from suffering, banishes loneliness,
 brings vitality into the burnished joy of touch,
 invites everything to open, body and heart. Simple trust,
 she thought now by the river, in this simple thing. A kiss.
 It's absence, lips a forbidden place, tongue forever stilled, how odd.
 What other fenced-in places linger as barrier? So she wrote
 in farewell: *without a kiss each day, you cannot ignite me to love.*

Sacha Hutchinson is an eye doctor working in Galway, Ireland. She writes poetry, attends a weekly poetry class and has read at the *Over The Edge* open reading. Her poetry has appeared in *Ropes* 2018, in the 2018 spring edition of *Skylight* 47 and the autumn edition of *Curlew*. She was shortlisted for *Poetry for Patients* 2018 and 2019. She was shortlisted for *Over the Edge New Writer of the Year* 2019.



BLACK

Night so long
day beyond
outside a sea pauses
between two tides.

Thoughts begin and
end in silence
each worries more
than the one before
hopes hidden
peace for others
a time to question
never an answer.

Then a painter's brush
slides soft blue into
predawn black
and with it
birdsong.

Sacha Hutchinson

SOMETHING

A sense I am
missing something,
far away inside
far away outside,
time to gather little bits
hold them light.

Farmer Joe walks his field
over a fold of memories
somehow connected to his land
past the crease of a track
a furrow centuries old,
goldfinch seek bitter seeds,
evening light is stuck
under cold air, peaks
through hedges of hawthorn
blackthorn and hazel.

His landscape of splashed ink
soft transparent smudges
hard marks thick and thin,
part of a hazy mystery
never to be placed or held.

SOPHIE'S STORM

Dead dull day
where nothing happens
meaningless
sea flat merges
with slate sky.
Oh for a storm
then as if in answer
horizon turns black
spreads, shivers with
expectation.

But soft quiet again,
before a deeper darkness
over water cold fury
she shouts "it's the wind"
her words bounce with joy
against wild living sky.

Masses of water
pulsed by God
rage, roar, rise
above rocky shore
eyes burn, face stings
lips licked salt tight.

Finally something
happening
our world quick and
sharp again.

THE EMPTY QUARTER

"In the desert I found freedom unhampered by civilization."
- Wilfred Thesiger

We travel
with the Bedu
follow their desert ways
across Arabian lands.

Each footstep marked
now time to notice
shapes of ripple on the ground
a grasshopper under a bush
moments to pick a plant
to touch a rock
this very speed
diminishes monotony
to drift through dunes of
shifted sands
large grain over small
dark over light, then to stop
pull brackish water from a well
to let the camels graze
their front legs hobbled
when familiar stars
screen the far beyond
to sit in radius of fire
all huddled close
with camels couched.

In endless space
stripped of possession
covers slip away
truths emerge
our found freedom.

But somehow always
the intruder from
the shoddy material world.

S Roderick Roxas-Chua is the author of *Saying Your Name Three Times Underwater*, *Echolalia in Script*, and *Fawn Language*. His poems, artworks, calligraphy and interviews have appeared in journals including *Narrative*, *December Magazine*, *Cream City Review*, *Georgia Review*, *Missouri Review*, and *Gulf Coast Journal*. Currently he is working on a project that includes field audio recording and calligraphy. He lives in Eugene, Oregon.



ONE BOY, TWO BIRDS — EBB BREATHING

This is not a call to the poet
or the storyteller, nor the banshee
or the small thirsty spirits hidden
in August rain. This is for the boy
who bound two birds with a red
string who was found cursing
at the sky on Timberline Road,
that dead end coat of asphalt
at the front gates of a forest—
home to deer and the voluptuous
peacock that can predict the coming
of snow. This is for the distant
church bell that's a minute off,
delaying the persistence of religion
at our doorstep. This is for Mildred,
the village seraphim who wore
her graying wedding dress to the fair,
beetle-eyed and stone-faced
from rocks thrown at her by boys
who cannot *spell* time; boys who fear
the piano in the middle of their living
rooms—as if the ivory keys could tell
stories from *The Book of Tusk & Feather*.
This is for the boy who swallowed
a snake as his spine arched his body
into bridge. This is for the boy
who planted an egg on the ground
and dreamt of his mother singing
inside its yolk, ebb breathing—
an arpeggio of dark colors weaving
a tiny river into violet.

S Roderick Roxas-Chua

(M)OTHERING

The door to the yard swings back and forth all day, all the memories in and out of the house, all the as-is-ness of her, footless—welcome. *So go ahead*, I say. *Break glass, pull at my sleeve, spell my name on the kitchen window with your finger*. I welcome the hours of the lightbulbs, slow-bursts inside the incandescence. Every year this day comes, this gray shawl of spring. I welcome the glow of her photo above garlands. I knew you were the paste in my blood, the wax in the wings of my pale siblinghood, a foundling again with loose bands of sinew strumming the throat.

NOTES FROM THE QUIETRY

I'm interested in the invisible poem, the after-poem that opens the front door while I sleep. I'm interested in how a poem receives challenging news, how it extends its invisible arms to people I do not know, how they too, in the strangeways of our homoture, the sameness of otherhood—share the same last breaths in the end. I am interested in knowing how a poem carries the hundreds of anchors I've thrown off the bow of my ship, how each metal arrow has the appetite for coral, fish, and keys. I am interested in how a poem protects me from my mind, god, and imagined beings. I'm interested in the invisible poem and the notes it leaves me by the Nara table, coded rings in revolute, teaching me how to extend my tongue: A, B, C, a, ba, ka, pu, puh, muh, row-row-row.

DEOXYRIBO NUCLEIC ACID

Made from many moons,
my head was shaped from mountains—
I am my father.

Made from many breaths,
My lungs failed to fully form—
I am my mother.

MORE NOTES FROM THE QUIETRY

I like odd poems, poems that loop back into itself where we find the fish in the water again, before its scales are grated off by the back of a knife. I like poems that doesn't end with a signature or the flavor or contest, credential, fellowship, and money. I like the bleed in the poem, the purr, the bark, the hiss. I like poets whose hands rattle, poets who dig for tender-roots and make soup out of second-hand bibles. I like moments when one falls off the edge of a library chair as people snicker. I like poems that linger around the broken neck of a light fixture or poems that read like reference manuals arranged by perfumed hands. I like poetry books that fall off the shelf when you don't know who else to turn to when the doctor says your losing the battle with small-type font, grief, and letters to whales too big to fit in your mouth. I like poems with mouths, poems that grow from carcass and feather, poems that inhale the weight of the soul—whatever that means to you, I like it. Because I use to believe in the pageantry of a soul. I wrote about souls and saw poetry as a part of the body, so I offered my words and won awards that saved me a seat at who-knows-who shindigs and went home thinking that the mirror in the foyer will see the fish of me this time, my scales glimmering in a certain calculus of light.

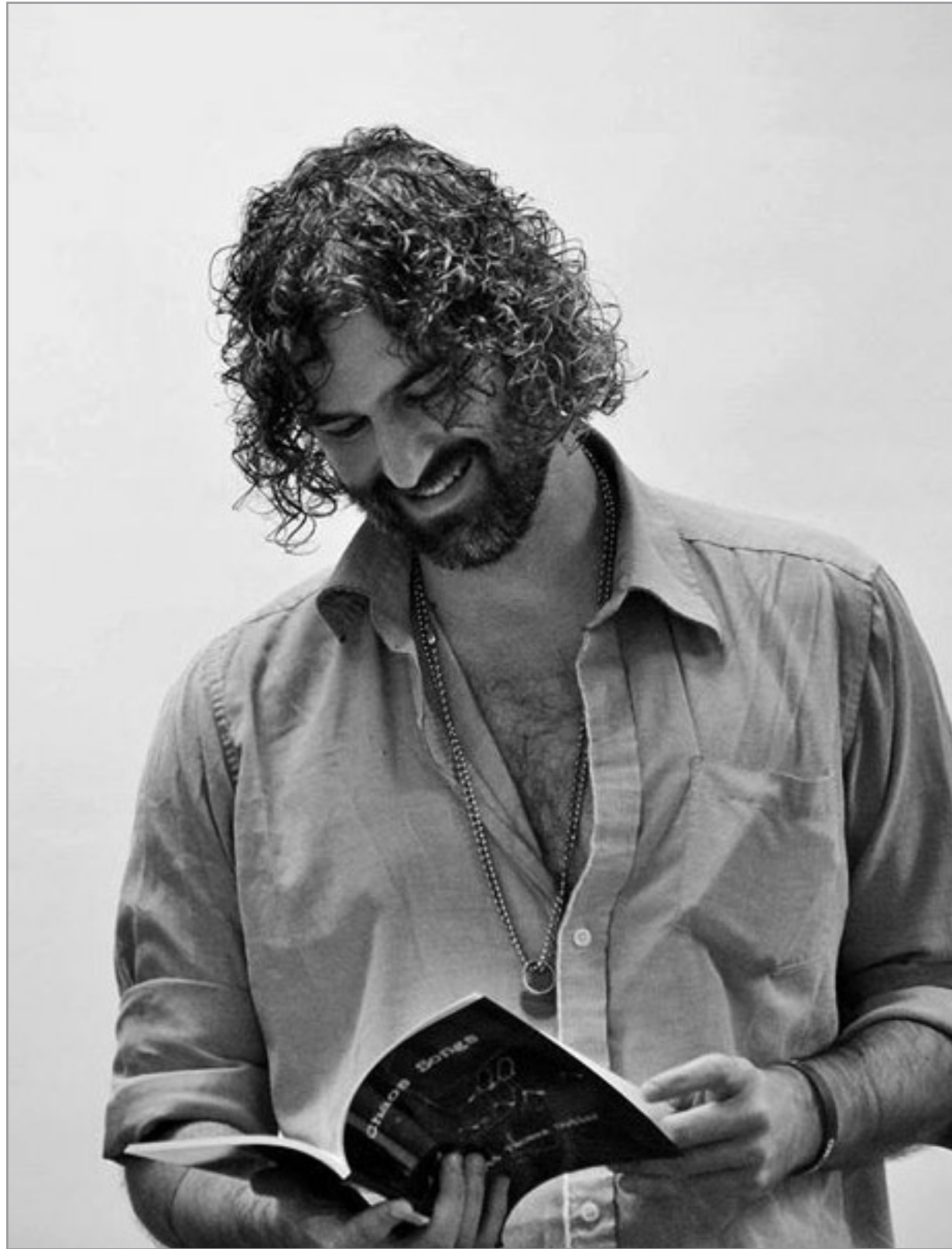
THIRD WEEK, COVID19 northwest, lowercase america

Today fear took hold
of spaces between
inhalers and exhalers,
a pause in the sway—
learning how to give
each breath a new
name. I try to keep up
because tomorrow,
the sky—oh,
that big big sky.

FOURTH WEEK, COVID19 northwest, lowercase america

I've been looking at the moon since the quarantine
four weeks ago. I don't say anything. I let it follow
me like all the dogs I've lost. I drop breadcrumbs,
tangerine rinds, peanut shells—all this to draw a
trace back to my house in case my scent is different
now, less the morning coffee roast from the cafe
that lingers on my sleeves, less the scented oil left
on my shoulder from an embrace, less taste of sun
on the back of my hand. My clothes smell like
rattan and rubbing alcohol now, I've watched all
the home movies I can carry and sleep with coats
of aloe on my chest. Moon, you one-eyed king—
my cyclops: let all lost things find their way home
now, let the cupboards be full of cans of this and
that, may our skin taste like apples again as we
kick God out the door and leave him in the rain for
doing nothing.

Scott Thomas Outlar lives and writes in the suburbs outside of Atlanta, Georgia. His work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. He guest-edited the 2019 and 2020 Western Voices editions of Setu Mag. Selections of his poetry have been translated into Afrikaans, Albanian, Bengali, Dutch, French, Italian, Kurdish, Persian, Serbian, and Spanish. His sixth book, *Of Sand and Sugar*, was released in 2019 through Cyberwit. His podcast, *Songs of Selah*, airs weekly on 17Numa Radio and features interviews with contemporary poets, artists, musicians, and health advocates. More about Outlar's work can be found at <http://17numa.com/>



OF ESCALATIONS AND ENDGAMES

Just because you don't understand the rules
or even know that they exist
doesn't mean you get to whine
about the consequences that arrive
upon breaking them

There are three
types of skin
on a tree

If you have every advantage on the board
to orchestrate a checkmate
but you mess around wasting moves
and wind up drawing a stalemate

then you have not yet learned
the rough edges of war

and it will cost you
a dying breath

just as everything else
eventually does
in this world

When the opportunity for victory arises
take the shot

Scott Thomas Outlar

NOT A FLINCH

You can keep your four horsemen
I've done dirtier deeds to myself
than they could ever dream

You can keep your beatitudes and mindful paths
because peace and love would be perfect
if they didn't cuss so damn much

I grew into the habit
of holding back
out of fear
I'd finally
get myself killed

So if the kitty cat ends up
eating my heart out
at least it wasn't a bar dive
that did me in

WHEN SIRENS BELIEVE THEIR OWN SONG/ THE DROWNING

your hands
were helpful

not only sand
slipped through

but the seed
escaped
to die

from atom to omega
every city in between
and later ruins

Silje Ree is a Norwegian visual poet and artist based in London, currently studying MA Visual Arts: Book Arts at UAL. She designs, creates and prints books for Mellom Press exploring the interplay between poetry, languages and imagery. She curated the Mellom press' online visual poetry exhibition 'Trånslatiøns'. Her work has been published and displayed in places such as *3:am magazine*, Poem Atlas, the Poetry Society, 5th Base Gallery and Museum of Futures in London, and *Lasso*, *Filologen* and Studio K in Norway. Her two poetry pamphlets *Melodilaust tone fall* (2019) and *EnN* (2018) explores code-switching between English and Norwegian



THOUGHTS

I never found my thoughts
poetic enough to be written
or fit for poetry.
I never found my feelings pure
enough to say something new.

If my thoughts were not meant
for poetry, is poetry meant for me? I never let myself
onto the page
in fear of not having anything to say
that was original or new
or something
anyone would want to read
because someone else had already said it
better.

Afraid of failure, I've disguised my words
in images and code-switching
in hope of making it more interesting.

And this
poem was never meant
for the page or to be
anything more than a forbidden train
of thought.

But here they are
for real and without filter, my words
my biggest fear
written down and presented
to you.

Silje Ree

DECISION

I chose the certainty of London
that spring would come
and summer follow
that it would be warm
that things might resume
quickly

I chose the everyday
to be with my books and habits
knowing it would advantage my studies
and coming back after leaving seemed unlikely
so I chose to wait
I chose not to return home
to the sea and rain

some days I wonder if I made the right choice

HOME

I wanna say
I miss you
when in reality it's the idea of you that I miss
I don't miss how it rains all the time or how you're a constant state of grey
but your sunny side
that you show once or twice a year, I miss
the cabin
a four-hour drive
away from trains, traffic and neighbours
I miss the mountains and forest. The cabin,
a sunny stillness guarded by trees and the river
glistening in the light of the sun
feeling like the rest of the world is non-existent

I wanna say I miss you
when in reality what I miss
you cannot provide

LOCKDOWN

Phase one: March
scared and hopelessness
time slow
baking loads.

Phase two: April
enjoyment
time on hand
baking and planning

Phase three: May
happiness
mixed with anxiety
time speeding up
fear of going back
not wanting to go back
not doing enough
not relaxing enough
nothing is wrong
nothing is
why do I feel like this?

Phase four: June –
should I work harder?
will I be able to?
what if I fail?
what if?
what next?
the new normal?

ESCAPE

Lately I've found solace in the arts
of baking
the precise science of turning banana into bread
and eggs into custard a sudden excitement
like most of Britain
I've scoured every shelf, every shop
looking for even a tiny bag, please – I don't need much
using bread flour for cake
self-raising flour for thin pancakes
I've made cookies, cinnamon buns, chocolate cake and carrot rolls
cottage cheese no-knead rolls, quick-baking banana scones, plain buns and buns with
custard
apple cake, cake with sugar, cake without sugar and two-ingredient banana cake
using skills
like planning and writing shopping lists
and scrolling for hours
I'm subscribed to the top ten baking channels on YouTube
and recreating food sensations from Instagram
spending all my time honing my inner Mary Berry
one might question the need to bake more than I have done before
within just a couple of months
and I don't really know what to say
other than
would you like a slice of mango strawberry banana cake?

Sinéad McClure is a writer, illustrator, and radio producer. She has written 15 dramas for children which have aired on Ireland's National young people's radio service. Her most recent drama "Indestructible" is about how single-use plastic is affecting a colony of gannets on the fictional Kelp Island and was broadcast in December 2019 on RTEjr Radio. Sinéad also writes prose and poetry. Her poem "Tea & Sympathy" was published in Crossways Literary Magazine in January 2020, and her short story "Five Years" has been published in Meat for Tea, the Valley Review in Autumn 2019. Sinéad has also written articles for ALHAUS magazine. Sinéad lives in Sligo with her husband Jho and their two border collie dogs Ruby & Deacon. She often revisits the theme of the natural environment in her work and has a particular interest in wildlife conservation. She is currently working on an illustrated book of poems for younger people called "Curlew Logic"



MOTHS

for JH

You won't remember this;
They will show you pictures,
ask you questions
talk to you as they would a child.

It will be as if the window of summer has firmly closed
and the moths, the ermine and the burnet
are hanging from webs at its edges.

But the moths will find a way inside your brain.
A map-winged swift
will take new strands—hot electric rods
that strike against each other—more will come
to flutter by tiny beacons as each one is lit.

The common lutestring will remember music.
The yellow underwing will take you under his.
Then a drinker moth will sip you in.

Somewhere a window opens.
A cinnabar drifts in,
in hot red susurrations.
At last a moth of daytime.

Its caterpillars wait on the Buachalán buí
to chew the ragwort from this road.

Sinéad McClure

MY BROTHER, THE ORANGUTAN

When I left the forest
I left my brother behind
But he didn't mind

He liked the way the trees spread upwards to the sky
They travel up, so high
he'd say.

You'd often find him there
Hugging the stars
His furry shadow embossed by their light
Right up there
he was.

It was here he slept
His hammock
an intricate nest in the curve
where branch met trunk.

He told me he kissed the trees
Thank them for keeping me safe
he'd say
They are my sky
They are my home
They are my larder
As the soft fruit spilled from his lips

When we came back to the forest
we forgot our brother, the Orangutan.

We cut his house
We took his food
We left him too far from his sky.

And the soft fruit spilled from my lips
he said.

EQUINOX AND THE WHOOPER SWANS

First, it is the sound of children laughing.
Then hoots, howls, and bellows
above the tree line.

This is the whoop of Spring's arrival.
Forty in one group arrow the sky
narrowly missing the tops of the Scots Pine.

Each day more leave,
climb higher, fly faster.

They are leaving the lakes.
Leaving Gara, Key, and Gill.
When a pair leave late,
tell them "hurry up"
and they will.

Until the day casts shadows on their wings
and they raise their voices once more
Fly towards a mid September sunset
To return.

Finally it is the sound of children crying.

Susan Millar DuMars is an American-born author living in Ireland. She has published five poetry collections with Salmon Poetry; the most recent, *Naked: New and Selected Poems*, appeared in 2019. *Naked* has been featured in The Irish Times and Poetry Ireland Review as well as at the Poetry Flash readings in Berkeley, California. Susan and her husband have coordinated the celebrated Over the Edge readings series in Galway, Ireland since 2003. In 2020, Susan received an Irish Arts Council bursary to support her as she completes work on her second short story collection, *Cameos*.



BRUISE

This bruise comes from nothing
I remember. So many
quick collisions. So much proof
I'm tender. The bruise runs like paint
until my hand is blue. My arm
up to the elbow.

As I stare,
patterns appear.
A small bird, long pointed leaves,
a fish. Outlines
scratched in paint. Then the bird
hops. The little fish
swims toward my wrist.
Leaves lift
and fall.

My skin is glass.
There is life
within my life,
a will that slips
like a fish
upriver,
courage that hops
and flaps, rehearsing
flight.

My bruises ache
to tell me this.

Susan Millar DuMars

LATE SEPTEMBER

The students next door have pinned a row
of white cotton socks to their line
bright as teeth in a hopeful smile.
The socks have stayed for six days now
through every type of coastal mist and rain.

I shake my fist at old lady sky
who snivels in her widow's dress
while the kids meander, sure
none of this has happened before.
Sockless optimists.

WOBBLE

Maryanne Cobb climbed out the window
of her Newcastle semi-detached
thinking it a bus see-sawing
on the edge of a stony cliff.
The moon cringed into
the sycamore's breast.
Maryanne sat on the damp grass.
Her world still teetered and she could not climb
out of the world
so she waited for it to stop.

It didn't.
Like tinny windchimes the stars jingled.
Maryanne Cobb lay back on her lawn,
wondering, when her house was a bus,
where had it been going?

The ground beneath her rolled
like a lonely, end of summer wave.
Going seemed out of the question
so she gave herself to the motion.
She floated, was lifted, was dropped.
Her dress rode up her thighs,
grass got between her toes.
She decided not to worry
if neighbours watched out windows.

Little by little, Maryanne Cobb
learned to ride her wobble.

Sven Kretzschmar is a prize-winning poet from Southwest Germany. His work has been shortlisted for various awards and competitions in recent years and has appeared in numerous magazines, journals and anthologies in Europe and overseas, among them *Writing Home. The 'New Irish' Poets* (Dedalus Press, 2019) and *Turangalila-Palestine* (Dairbhre, 2019). Recently published in *PENdemic*, *North West Words*, *100 Words of Solitude* and *Fly on the Wall Poetry*, special mention in the *Desmond O'Grady Int. Poetry Competition 2020*. Further works are forthcoming in *Ropes* and *The High Window*. https://tracking.wordpress.com/@sven_saar_poetry



ALL THOSE MASKS

There you were who you wanted to be,
back here you wear the mask of homeland
at the regular table and family dinners;

a workman's mask once you enter a bus taking you
to the nine-to-five. Put on so often and long
it sometimes seems like capital-R Reality

instead of just another facet.
Below those layers lie deep-pore hills and valleys
another surface; skin-tarpaulin covering

thoughts you barely dare speak to yourself.
You hardly ever lift that cover,
not even when you're on your own at your desk,

seeing in a paperweight cut glass crystal
all those masks –
the multifaceted faces you deserve to be.

Sven Kretzschmar

GAPS

after Francis Harvey's 'Gates'

They don't like gates in Donegal;
all they are good for is

to lean on, to take a rest, and for a while stare
at gaps in clouds or between hills,

between layered stone walls,
and, at a closer look, blades of long grass.

Gaps where spaces
open before you –

birds and men and sheep
at any given time pass through.

Sometimes for the first time, sometimes
for the last time –

for the gates of heaven
when what is left on the summits

or in the water on the rocks are only
bleached bones.

THE SHIPPING FORECAST

Shannon, Fastnet, Malin, Irish Sea:
offshore, heavy gales at first,
good, occasionally moderate maritime weather
conditions later, transmitting fishermen
onto land, signing up for a quick one in
Falcarragh, Doolin, Glengarriff;
mainly fair in the beginning, then loosing
their national identity by Friday.

Ballinamore, Roosky, Oughterard, free
from heaving and hauling of nets, increasing foam
on stout seas rising, pissed, pay washed away
to publicans. Loading of social systems not expected
to come on trawlers or in life vests, but pinstripes
via Dublin, Dun Laghoire, motor yachts.

STANDOFF BY THE STREAM

Blueprint for the first Irish Western movie

For Abigail and her hero(n)

Baby in a buggy, her wee fingers
firmly grab a gun.
In lack of a Cattleman Stetson she eyes
her opponent from under a fire-coloured

fringe. All tense and with every fibre
of her being she expects the heron to turn
about in an instant, to give her hell and lead
if she falters pulling the trigger,

but the feathered foe keeps standing
on the edge of the stream, back turned
to girl and world, all eyes for himself

in the ever-passing wetness trying
to remember what it was he let fall
into the Royal Canal: fish or revolver.

PHOTO FRAME

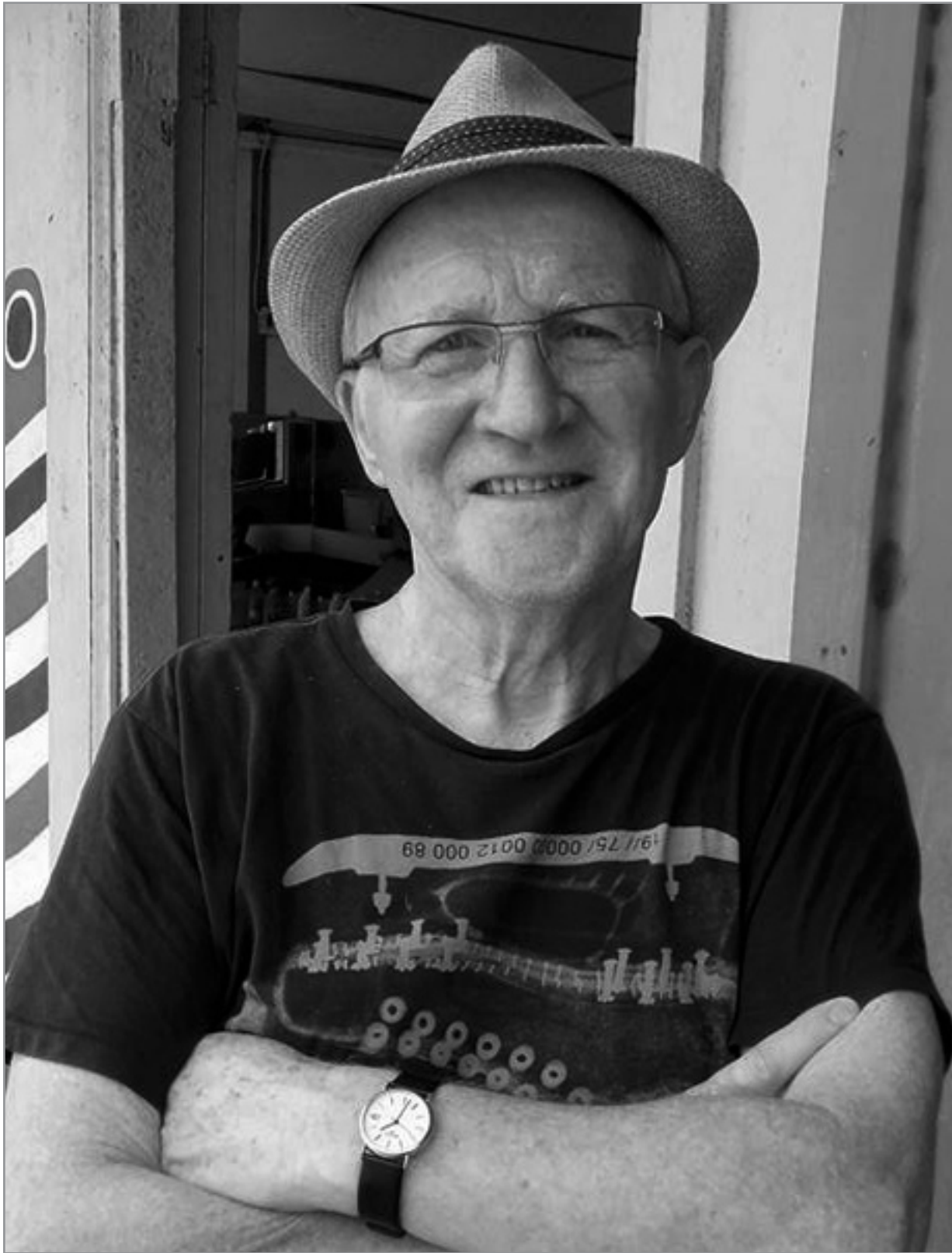
The sepia face of a child
presses against the glass
form the other side of the pane.

Terry McDonagh, poet and dramatist, taught creative writing at Hamburg University and was Drama Director at the International School Hamburg. He's published ten poetry collections as well as letters, drama, prose and poetry for young people. His work has been translated into German and Indonesian. 2016: poetry collection, *Lady Cassie Peregrina* – Arlen House. 2017: included in *Fire and Ice 2*, Gill Education for Junior Cycle. 2017: poem, *UCG by Degrees*, included in Galway Poetry Trail on Galway University Campus. 2017: *Director of WestWords*, Irish literature festival in Hamburg. 2018: latest poetry collection, *Fourth Floor Flat – 44 Cantos*, published autumn 2018 by Arlen House.

<http://www.terry-mcdonagh.com/>

A LOVE SONG

Somewhere in the West of Ireland
an old woman feeds her goldfinch
on birdseed to keep it wholesome.
She prays the joyful mysteries
of the rosary while beseeching
her god of the sacred-heart lamp
to take that bird to himself
before he takes her. She's
a child again when she thinks
of their shared time and even
if life has been hit by modern use,
her finch has remained golden – an
old-school choir mistress and friend.



Terry McDonagh

‘HOW CAN I GO ON I CANNOT’ – S. BECKETT

*How can I go on, I cannot
with that beast of burden
strapped to my fragile back
and my only son the traveller
out there shoeing next to
where clouds shape horses
and all I want to do is
for me and the beast to visit
a sick relative at the zoo
before she passes on but
as long as my son keeps
shoeing out of reach, we’ll
have no way of getting to Dublin.*

CURRENT TIMES IN BLUE

To begin with I didn’t know
where this piece was going.
It was a work in progress.
I like work in progress. I’d
seen the words current times
in a newspaper article and
blue popped into my mind.
I don’t know why
but it did – simply blue.

Further down the page
there was a media saga
on a footballer who’d lost
his wife to a wag. There
was scandal to keep you
glued to your tea and toast
and stuff about death on
and between the lines. On
the next page a picture of
a comedian on fat phobia
and a headline that said
sympathy only strikes a chord
in symphony or in light operas
that make you cry. Maybe.

I put my newspaper to one side,
shut my eyes, registered
a strong sensations in rocks,
and watched swallows gyrating
their messages in plumes.

Am I master of my fate?
Don’t know. But when I hear
thumping in haze and furze
I know I’m a stranger trying
to take something with me

as I stare out into oblivion
or look for secrets in shadow
and dense fog before light
and blue sky get there first?

Theresa Griffin Kennedy is a lifelong resident of Portland Oregon. She was educated as a creative writing instructor, and teacher. She is a novelist, a poet, a freelance writer of creative nonfiction, Gonzo journalism, and fiction writing. She is a contributing columnist for the *Portland Alliance Newspaper* and for the website *GoLocalPDX*. She is a social activist fighting for social change through writing as a social act. Kennedy paints abstract with mixed media and volunteers as a writing coach. She works as a developmental editor, proofer and chief editor of Oregon Greystone Press. She is the author of four books.



IN THE SPRING OF 2020 THE WORLD DID NOT STOP—IT KEPT SPINNING, *May 6, 2020*

A prose poem

Though for so many it felt like it had stopped. And the deaths collected like leaves in a field, like petals from decaying Cabbage Roses, or the worthless stones in the parking lot on NW Thurman Street where my friends and I used to search for agates. In search of elusive beauty, we sifted through candy wrappers, dusty gravel, beer cans and broken glass, searching for the unlikely we might possess. We looked through the glassine surface of the stones, to the sun on the other side, joyous: *"I found an agate! I found an agate!"* The Corona deaths are like those transparent agates—unique, special and precious to those who knew them, and to those who lost them.

My mind keeps returning to the bodies, once lush with heat, with pulse, knowing they each became stilled grey mountains of inertia. How those bodies cluttered hospital hallways, emanating toxicity, and awaiting their lonely appointment with the crematoriums flame. And the numbers staggered me, literally staggered me. The numbers made me weep, made me feel *The Bottomless Sadness* that I've carried for years, reacquainting myself with its smiling persona yet again.

Me: "You're still here, after all this time?"

The Bottomless Sadness: "Oh, I'll always be here. I'll never leave *you*, Theresa." Contemplating how they died alone, that there will be no Wakes, no mourning, only the flame inside the hot box, and their ashes going back to succulent earth, settling on glossy blades of grass, the invisible Loess carried on the wind, the ancient ancient stardust all around us. Inside each Gold Cell, we wait to nourish the innocent insects and flora, the unfurling Azalea, the budding Lilac and Daphne Odora, the fragrant, indomitable Lavender, the precious Heritage Roses that slowly die out, replaced by hybrids with no scent.

It will all be nourished with the dust of our dead.

continued overleaf...

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Theresa Griffin Kennedy

The world has become a virtual dimension—*that* became the “new normal” of our suddenly acquired state. And the social isolation of our famous “transient” American relationships became this new desired thing they call: “social distancing.”

But the kindness of *The Human Condition* was explored in other ways, too—violin solos on apartment verandas in Italy, the faint allure of singing voices drifting across the wind in Paris, comforting the solitary, the aged, the young and still afraid, looking out over horizons they never once contemplated seeing before.

Yet, in the spring of 2020 the world did not stop—it kept spinning.

And I hunkered down with my old man husband, my old man lover, and brought out my sweet smelling stash of super fatted bath soaps. We washed out hands, and we washed our faces, and didn’t answer the door. We made soup and planted Lilacs, we did what we generally do, being the reluctant recluses we always were—not going out, staying at home, writing, thinking, remembering the ones we’ve lost, and observing the solitary customs we’ve created.

But I felt such a sudden and violent sorrow, unexpected by me, the original cynic, that *this* was where we were, that even our *choice* had been taken from us.

Because of course we *will* do what is right. Of course we will *not* go out unmasked, ungloved, and of course we *will* listen to Science and do what we knew is right to contain “the beast” as it wanders from point A to point B. As it points to the next person before consumption, its tiny protein spikes sinking in, latching on, the parasite growing virus by tiny virus, consuming the sticky lungs, and making them glossy and thick, and so very dead.

For us, there will be no screaming enraged protests to attend, no angry accusations of “Fake News” to share with confused Lost Souls, romancing their deaths and the Crematoriums’ flame with their menace and their snarls and their lonely, abject hatred.

But it seems that now it is official—the transience of American Relationships has become our new reality, our new way of life. Now, it is just not a trend, it is required, and this is finally what we have become. Still, I remind myself...

In the spring of 2020 the world did not stop—it kept spinning.

I remind myself of Stjepan Hauser, in the Arena Pula, Croatia, and his Cello, and the searing *Alone Together* tribute for the blue collar Front-line Workers, who only two years before were mocked by the other side. The Memes from the other side rang out: “*If you want more money, get better jobs!*” The mocking offered directly to: restaurant workers—grocery store clerks—warehouse workers—street cleaners—child care workers, and truck drivers. Those people who are now the “Essential Frontline Workers” and honored with “virtual” concerts as the “heroes” of this time.

I remind myself of my own elderly mother, herself a survivor of the Great Depression, telling me with wonder in her voice at “the incredible kindness of people,” during this, the Age of Covid Coronavirus. That her faith in humanity has been restored when she listens to those violins on the balconies, when she hears the singing voices in Paris, when she sees the waving from vast distances, and the ways we still extend ourselves...shared through letters, phone calls and those distant waving hands...

Those waving hands, waving hands, distant waving hands...

And I remind myself that...

In the spring of 2020 the world did not stop, it kept spinning.

Tim Cumming is a poet, artist, journalist and filmmaker from London. He was born in a children's home in Solihull and was brought up in the West Country. His poetry collections include *The Miniature Estate* (1991), *Apocalypso* (1992, 1999), *Contact Print* (2002), *The Rumour* (2004), *The Rapture* (2011) and two collections from Australian press, Pitt Street Poetry, the art and poetry of *Etruscan Miniatures* (2012) and *Rebel Angels in the Mind Shop* (2015). A new collection *Knuckle* is due from Pitt Street Poetry in 2019. He made the acclaimed *Hawkwind: Do Not Panic* documentary for the BBC in 2007.

<https://timcumming.wordpress.com/>

DEATH KEEPS ITS GLOVES IN THE REFRIGERATOR

I saw a woman
in dark glasses
walking really slowly
up the street
as if anticipating
something big
about to happen
any moment now.
Every minute
was like that,
a terror as
ordinary as
the lack of
personal
protective
equipment.
The next breath
means life,
so draw deep
and keep moving,
a light-stepped
companion
coughing at
your shoulder
jogging on,
places to be,
standards to keep,
clapping
on Thursdays.
Gatherings
larger than two.
No journey
without purpose.



Tim Cumming

WATERSIDE

I watched as she crossed the river,
 dragging an underworld behind her,
 patterning out her name and position,
 her place to be a code for re-entry.
 After abandoning everything she knew
 she knelt and began pulling ancient history
 from her face. Body parts, unfinished
 sentences, lingering cold, hanging questions,
 the lid on a box, the drop of a pin.
 This happened when? The clocks age,
 she ties up her hair and tosses back
 her head, vivacious in the underworld,
 bright sharp edges catching the light
 as she walks out to meet her man forever
 awaiting above ground for his spring arrival.

LOW COUNTRY

Streams of little voices ran deep,
 plunging the cenote of the lower self,
 all those romantic landscapes
 looking back on themselves
 waiting for the lights to change,
 for time to move on from here.

Thank you for connecting,
 we're speaking the same tongue,
 knotted like grain through wood.
 How's your breathing?

This way has turned to forest
 and the wild things are very quiet
 but they know us by our temperature,
 adjusting their heads to the scent of attraction

VISIBLE SURFACES

Her face stared out from
the pottery of the ancients,
thinking only of what she
had to do and where to go
in order to release herself,
to spring the catch
of visible surfaces
and climb through to
the other side, the gods
grinding through her
like a mill grinds pepper.
Under her watch
I harden and glaze.

QUEUE

Your number
in the queue.
It's not even
important that
you're unaware
of your position,
that there's any
queue at all to be
a part of, though
you're sure you're
part of something,
a protest movement
railing against
your place and
position in and
out of any kind
of queue.
You've got
hand wipes
and grievances
and some are
fixed like posts
or sleepers
on a long
straight track
while others
float off, one
breath after
another
mingling in
the free air.

Time was
you sprang up
and ran for
trains and buses
as if they
were the last
things on earth
but now
you're next
in the queue,
waiting to see
what's left
and what's
behind you,
writing into
the dark
and you thinking
this is how
it's going to
be from here.

Recipient of fellowships and grants from The Rockefeller Foundation, Ireland Literature Exchange, Trubar Foundation, Slovenia, The Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature and The Foundation for the Production and Translation of Dutch Literature, Yuyutsu Sharma is a world renowned Himalayan poet and translator. He has published ten poetry collections including, *The Second Buddha Walk*, *A Blizzard in my Bones: New York Poems*, *Quaking Cantos: Nepal Earthquake Poems*, *Nepal Trilogy*, *Space Cake*, *Amsterdam* and *Annapurna Poems*. Three books of his poetry, *Poemes de l' Himalayas*, *Poemas de Los Himalayas* and *Jezero Fewa & Konj* have appeared in French, Spanish and Slovenian respectively. Half the year, he travels and reads all over the world and conducts Creative Writing workshops at various universities in North America and Europe but goes trekking in the Himalayas when back home. Currently, Yuyutsu Sharma is a visiting poet at Columbia University and edits, *Pratik: A Quarterly Magazine of Contemporary Writing*.



JASMINE JEWELS

Inspired by Julie Williams Krishnan's photograph

Translucent sparks
of compassion,

quiet, impenetrable
feathers of light,

only fools would
attempt to smash

their indestructible cores
with sledge hammers.

The white jasmine
jewels have traveled

centuries of soft
sleep to arrive here

and nestle like little lambs
between human and divine feet,

tousled, nameless
face of the animal vehicle

beside the frozen feet,
the only clue to the deserts of darkness

they tried to plough through
to overcome the demon that rode

a wolf's back to drink up
raging oceans of humanity,

Only the quietly menstruating
jasmine flowers survived in the end

to sum up our story.

Yuyutsu Sharma

ON AN EMPTY SAC STREET

Sacramento, Ca
For Penny Kline

On a lonely summer afternoon
 everyone seems indoors.

The Sun baking the white ferries
 wavering on the sluices of the Delta shines,
 bleached bones of my own ancestors
 I picked up years ago from
 the cremation ghats back home.

On the Delta King
 the waitress of blue eyes
 endlessly taking 'selfies'
 has forgotten to bring milk
 for my Organic Indian tea.

A man in shorts only
 running up and down
 the cobbled streets has crusts
 of dirt on his bare body.

First time I came to the city
 Rachael spoke of the night she slept
 with a visiting poet from Chicago
 on this every riverboat that rocked
 that night from tumultuous winds.

Would these rail bogies with
 SANTA FE painted in glazed white letters
 ever leave The Pony Express Depot
 for its ultimate Station?

The underpass you directed me to
 was so scary, I took my saffron scarf off,
 folded it carefully and placed it in
 the loneliest sections of my black bag.

They hung out there and frolicked in hordes
 along the dignified portraits of the Colonists,
 Capitalists, masterminds of the Gold Rush
 and feral fires of the Chinese captivities.

A young woman on the First Street,
 folds of her fluffy white belly drooling
 over her tattered leather belt,
 must have been a secretary
 a treasurer's concubine or a teacher
 with a gigantic guilt before she opted out
 to count stars in the shattered hourglass.

Her cartload of miseries, canned food,
 toilet paper rolls, cartels of beer
 hiding the purple circles of her nocturnal abuse.

Did I sleep with her
 moved my hand over her private fish, once,
 perhaps in another life
 as she took me out to a short safari
 on a boat across the Delta of gold
 where Champaign air flowed in
 over the confluence of the sacred waters
 mingling blood and body of the Lord Almighty?

But today everyone seems indoors
 except for a lonely Chávez statue
 in a glassy square under renovation
 and a homeless hunger sliding into a sleep
 on an empty Sac street.

WHAT FEEDS THE FURNACE?

for Marcia Niccoli Kiernan

What feeds the furnace of my mind,

driving the demons on a damp day away,
a conical kettle bubbling on an ancient stove,

ready to whistle away any moment
as you unmake your bed, fold sheets,

the wooden floor crackling underfoot
your kind host sleeping away into late lethargic mornings

not just a Park Slope pavement
a fire truck cracking the silence of a million eons,

screaming its way through
a quiet Sunday silence of the 7th Avenue,

a half-burnt toddler
crawling through the hallway,

a sole maple leaf
serrated, magenta, autumnal

on the white strips
of a rain-washed zebra crossing

a deadly ambush in the scuffling eye
with the hound of my boyhood

even on a dusty Himalayan street
as you walk teary-eyed and

someone you love hands you
a prize soaked in an acid of insults

what guides your shaking hands across
scrawny page of your late mother's wrinkled face

banishing the ghosts of gloom away?

INDEPENDENCE DAY, GORAKHPUR, 2017

For Shreejana

Frail details
 of a forgotten dream flood
 the fields of my sleep
 into a river of surly smiles;
 she is pregnant, glowing
 like a goddess, sitting near me
 in a scarlet satin saree,
 her belly ripe, her face flustered
 her eyes, two blackbirds gawking
 at me non-stop,
 an enigma of alpine winds.

In one of newly built
 Hi-rise buildings in the capital's suburbs
 someone hands over a gift to me --
 a white elephant on a silver tray,
 a basket full of flutes,
 a conch shell to cry out national victories,
 a huge book, larger than our lives,
 leather bound, crisp like currency notes,
 its pages iridescent
 leaves from a garden of Paradise,
 a peacock's feature
 ablaze in a mid-day Sun's retina.

A hoopoe breaks open
 into a sudden flight, crackling,
 a saga of stifled sentences
 as I crack open its fat belly.
 Can I take it home and
 start reading it
 like faces of my children?

We wait for a while
 for a just bought Landrover truck
 of our affluence to arrive
 and take us along with the Book
 newly perched atop my lap,
 like a just born baby.

I stand up when the national anthem
 comes up the television
 right after his speech from the Red Fort;
 she keeps stroking my chest
 as I rise and stand in reverence
 to the invisible flag,
 my million childhoods racing
 before my eyes,
 and finally, entangles herself around me.

In my hometown my grandpa
 in shining white turban
 brings home a free box of sweets
 from the municipality parade
 in the centre square

I open the box
 to see dead bodies
 of just born babies
 lined up, huddled
 like wrinkled marigolds in it.

10 ANNIVERSARY 2010 - 2019

Live encounters

POETRY & WRITING

FREE ONLINE MAGAZINE FROM VILLAGE EARTH
MAY 2020

COVER ARTWORK BY IRISH ARTIST EMMA BARONE