

2010 - 2022



# Live encounters

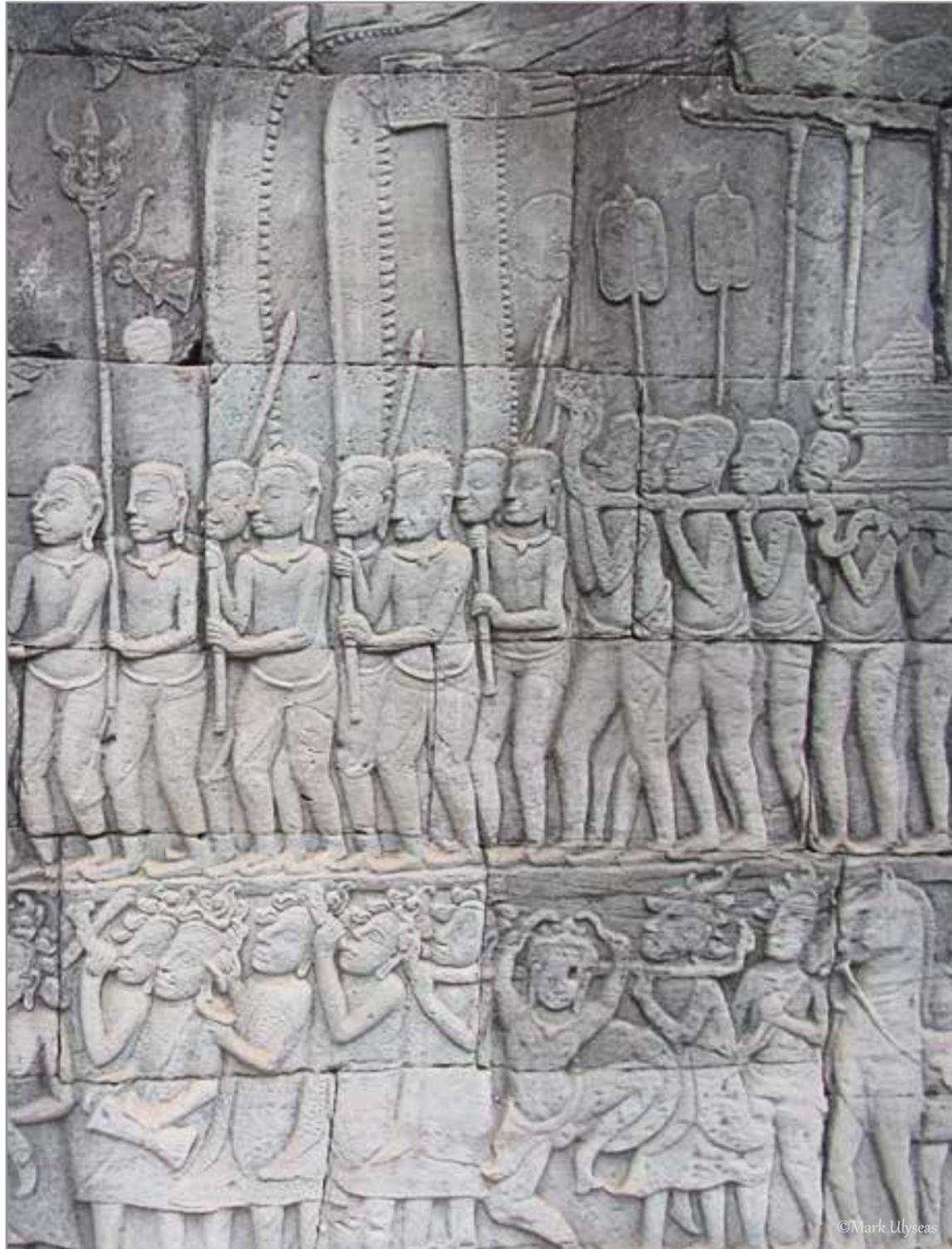
POETRY & WRITING

FREE ONLINE MAGAZINE FROM VILLAGE EARTH

JUNE 2022

MICHAEL SIMMS  
*Path to Poetry*

COVER ARTWORK BY IRISH ARTIST EMMA BARONE



Ta Bayon, Angkor, Siem Reap, Cambodia. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



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Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

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Born and raised in Texas, [Michael Simms](#) has worked as a squire and armorer to a Hungarian fencing master, a stable hand, a gardener, a forager, an estate agent, a college teacher, an editor, a publisher, a technical writer, a lexicographer, a political organizer, and a literary impresario. He identifies as being on the spectrum and as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse who didn't speak until he was five years old. He is the author of three full-length collections of poetry, most recently [American Ash](#) and [Nightjar](#), as well as four chapbooks, four novels and a textbook about poetry, and he's been the lead editor of over 100 published books. A novel *Bicycles of the Gods: A Divine Comedy* is coming out in August 2022. As the founding editor of Vox Populi and the founding editor emeritus of Autumn House Press and Coal Hill Review, he was recognized in 2011 by the Pennsylvania State Legislature for his contribution to the arts. Simms and his wife Eva live in the Pittsburgh neighborhood of Mount Washington overlooking the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers. Click here to see [Michael Simms's website](#).



## MICHAEL SIMMS

### ODD

#### *an exploration of my path to poetry*

I was an odd child. Not learning to speak until I was five years old, I simply stared at the adults with deeply set green eyes that made them nervous. I didn't like other children. They were noisy and messy and always ridiculed me. I liked building stuff, stacking blocks to make an unsteady tower, digging a hole in the backyard to find China, using a tiny wrench to assemble a carousel wheel with my Erector Set. But no sooner had I built something, then one of my little brothers would smash it with his bat or fall on it, breaking it into pieces. In the real world, nothing was mine for long. Building things in my imagination was much safer.

\*

The first time my father beat me, I was 18 months old. For years, he told the story as a funny anecdote about my stubbornness, something about my throwing magazines on the floor repeatedly. My brothers and I, as well as the other little boys we knew, were hit, whipped, screamed at, and humiliated for the smallest of infractions. Girls were never hit, but they experienced a different kind of abuse, as I discovered much later. Violence toward children was considered necessary, even obligatory, the only way we would learn to behave ourselves and respect authority. Whipping with a belt was a common way of administering these lessons. My grandmother, Red Cook, had a rosebud tree in her yard which provided perfect little wands that cut through the skin of a boy's naked butt. *That'll learn 'em, durn 'em*, she'd say breaking up the wand speckled with blood and throwing it in the garbage.

Michael Simms

Growing up in a small house with a violent father, a depressed mother, a crazy grandmother, four wild siblings, and various relatives and neighbors passing through, my childhood was chaotic. And nothing was mine, not even my name. *Michael Arlin Simms*. It seemed that almost every other boy my age was named Michael. There was Michael John Chapman, my best friend who lived down the street. There was Michael George Ashie, my cousin whom I saw every day. And in my kindergarten class, there were five other Michaels. It was so confusing to the teacher, Ms Verlaine, that she christened the Michaels with nicknames to keep us straight: there was Mike, Mikey, Mick, Micky, Michael, and... me. She never gave me a name -- she just stared at me with a puzzled look on her pretty face.

When I tried to speak, a strangely muddled sound came out. My tongue was never in the right place in my mouth, so for example the name *Roger* – what Sky King said on the radio as he flew through the clouds and what I told people my name was – came out as *Woszuh*. The other kids thought I was weird for good reason.

Miss Verlaine referred me to a speech therapist in the medical center near Hermann Park. Later, when people asked why I didn't speak with a Texas accent, I didn't know what to tell them, but now I realize that the speech therapist, a woman from Nebraska, taught me to speak in her dialect, so I usually sound like a Midwesterner. Every Tuesday, my mother, no doubt glad to get away from a house of screaming children and a bipolar mother-in-law, drove me to the therapist's office. I enjoyed the half-hour drive through west Houston with my mom; these were among the few times when I was alone with her. I loved my mom, and to this day I believe she was the kindest person I've ever known.

\*

Our small house was crowded, so I craved solitude. In our backyard a chinaberry tree stretched its branches above the flat aluminum roof of our porch. Our cat, whom we called The Cat, lived in the shade of the chinaberry, spending his days relaxing in the breeze and eyeing the sparrows that fed on the berries. One of my chores was to climb the chinaberry with a bowl of kibble in my hand and place it on the flat shady roof for The Cat who would eye me carefully, crouch low, and pretend to be invisible until I'd left. He and I understood each other perfectly. We both wanted to be invisible.

White working-class Texans, rednecks as others refer to us, are an ornery bunch. Almost everyone is armed – I received my first firearm, a .22 rifle that I loved, when I was just thirteen years old. Although I was encouraged to hunt, and I often practiced shooting tin cans at my family's farm in East Texas, I never had the heart to kill an animal; but if I pretended to go hunting, nobody would bother me, and I was free to roam wherever I wanted. I often went into the woods to sit quietly on a log, and gradually the sounds of the birds would return as if I weren't there.

\*

I was in middle school when the possibilities inherent in language touched me for the first time. I came across a poem by William Stafford in an anthology titled [Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle](#):

#### Note

Straw, feathers, dust-  
little things

but if they all go one way,  
that's the way the wind goes.

This simple metaphor spoke to me as nothing ever had. For the first time, I caught a glimpse of the profound beauty that lay within day-to-day existence. Language, as it turned out, didn't simply point to the world, it created a new one. We weren't allowed to take the textbook home, so when we were supposed to be filling out grammar workbooks, I would sneak *Watermelon Pickle* from the cubby under my desk and read poems at random. I especially loved Eve Merriam's "How to Eat a Poem":

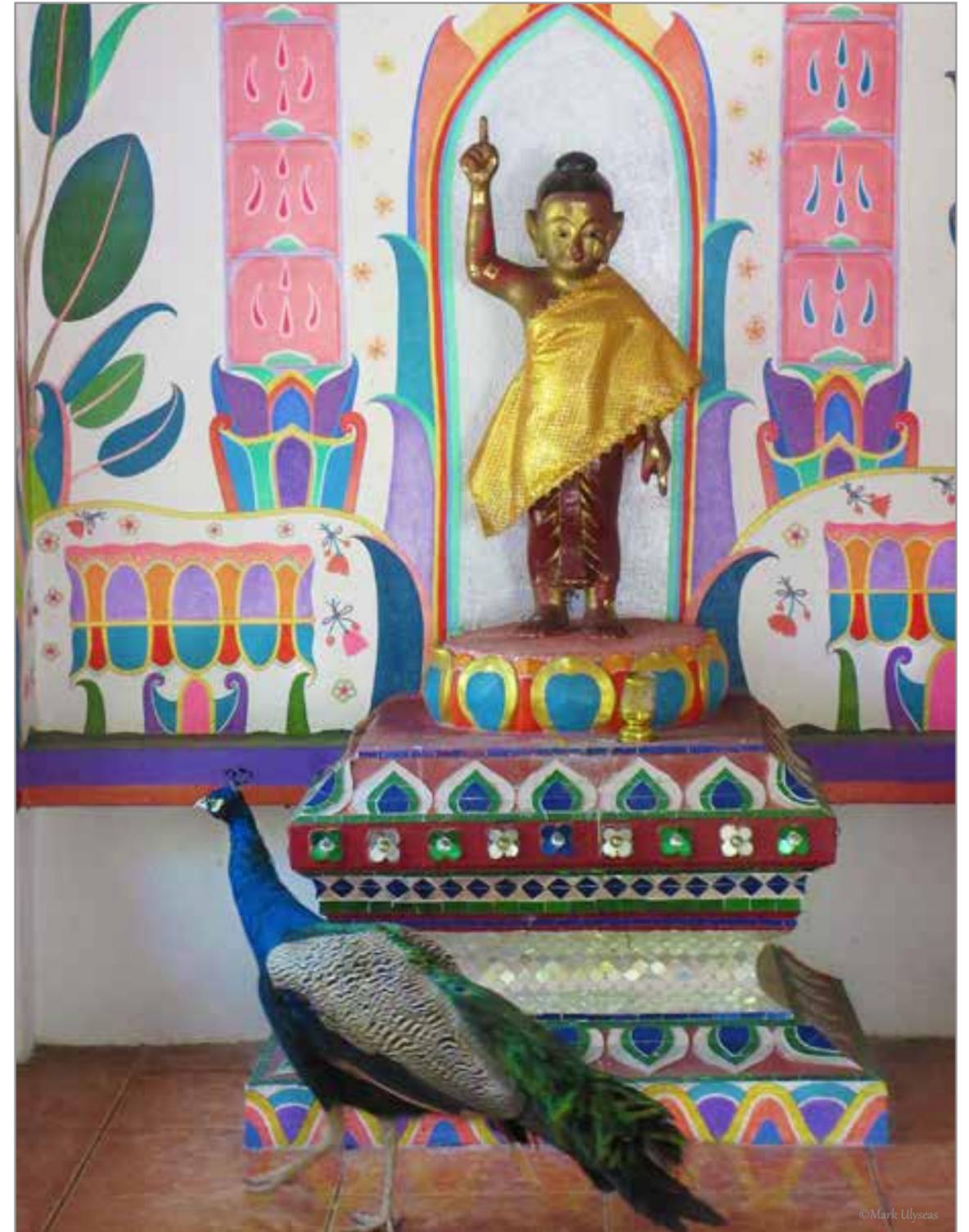
Don't be polite  
Bite in.  
Pick it up with your  
fingers and lick  
The juice that may  
run down your chin.  
It is ready and ripe now,  
whenever you are.

A poem about poetry! I was struck by the irony. And in these pages, other poems sang to me: the muscular lines of Carl Sandburg, the melodic sonnets of Edna St. Vincent Millay, the social conscience of Lawrence Ferlinghetti. The anthology contained worlds within worlds. Later, the teacher required that we write a poem. I wrote twelve. At last, I was free from the cage of silence I'd lived in all my life.

\*

People in my family didn't drink because there was a long history of alcoholism on both sides of my family tree... thank God, because they were plenty crazy without alcohol. Many years later, being married to a psychologist and reading about mental disorders, I discovered that the aberrant behavior of the people in my family had clinical names. My father's inability to see anyone except himself was called *narcissism*, and his unrestrained use of his fists pushed the diagnosis into *malignant narcissism*. My mother, living in a dream world where 1940s romantic comedies were more real to her than the actual people around her, was a *fantasist*, and her fits of weeping and inability to get out of bed indicated that she had *depression*. My grand-mother Red Cook's anger and violence indicated a degree of *criminal psychopathy*, and my grandfather Daddy Cook's obsession with recreation -- hunting, fishing, playing cards -- reflected a *Peter Pan complex*. Grandmother Rosamond, my father's mother who lived with us, was *bipolar*, as was my little sister Elizabeth who later would commit suicide.

A life-changing revelation for me was to discover that my oddness had a name, in fact, more than one name. I had *Asperger's syndrome*, aka *high-functioning autism*. I was *on the spectrum* in addition to having post-traumatic stress syndrome. I'd been an *abused child* from a *dysfunctional family*. As a young adult, I'd tried to cope with my feelings of *depression*, *isolation* and *self-loathing* by *self-medicating* with alcohol and drugs. As a result, I'd become an *alcoholic* and *drug-addict*. Learning the diagnostic terms has allowed me to understand and accept myself, and over time, my *neuro-divergent* ways of thinking have empowered me with a slightly skewed vision of the world, a rich inner life, and a bumpy style of language, giving me a unique approach to writing. Having survived my own hell, perhaps like Virgil I can show others how to move through theirs and leave it behind.



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

## MARY JO AND ALINE

*I want to say something but shame  
prevents me*

*yet if you had a desire for good or beautiful things  
and your tongue were not concocting some evil to say,  
shame would not hold down your eyes  
but rather you would speak about what is just*

— Sappho

Mornings they loved best  
sitting over long breakfast  
light slanting over them  
Mary Jo sharing bits of news  
Aline listening adoring  
the sounds of birdsong  
they were partners selling  
real estate in southwest Houston  
during the go-go years  
Mary always said  
*sell the house to the woman  
financing to the man*  
and shy Aline in charge  
of paperwork a perfect team  
perfect partners they'd met  
at Baylor fell in love  
reading Sappho and Millay  
said goodbye at graduation  
and as they thought of it  
started their lives Mary  
became a stewardess for Pan Am  
considered a romantic profession  
for a woman in those days  
and Aline married  
Dick a seminary student at Baylor

After years of hiding  
they grew careless  
Alene's husband Dick by then  
part-time preacher full-time slumlord  
caught them eating berries in bed

Last time I talked with Aline  
we sat in Starbucks  
looking across the highway once a country road  
where Westheimer Baptist Church stood  
small wooden frame painted white  
with a simple steeple double red door  
a pulpit where Uncle Earl  
roared his sermons and  
Aline played the organ  
behind the church now gone  
I kissed my first girl whose name  
I can't remember the church  
torn down years ago  
now national boutiques  
selling lipstick and bikinis  
Aline says far away  
*Mary Jo was the great love  
of my life we would've done  
anything to stay together*

*continued overleaf..*

## MARY JO AND ALINE *contd...*

For the sin of love  
 they sacrificed everything  
 Uncle Earl shamed them  
 from the pulpit the organ  
 was taken from Aileen  
 the music of prayer  
 no longer flowed from  
 her hands and Mary Jo  
 lost her family even  
 her grandchildren were taken  
 she died asking to see them

I wonder what it's like  
 to throw everything you have  
 in the bonfire of no regrets  
 and hearing my thoughts  
 Aline says when she first saw  
 Mary Jo she couldn't speak  
*as if my tongue was broken  
 and a soft flame  
 stole beneath my flesh*

## BREATH

I remember when my sister died  
 no one could go into the bathroom  
 where she shot herself, bits of bone  
 blood and brain everywhere.  
 We closed the door and tried not to think

She felt unloved, but those of us who loved her  
 gathered at her house beside the Llano River  
 to mourn in our separate ways.  
 It was spring in the hill country  
 and bluebonnets covered the fields

Her husband locked himself in his bedroom for days,  
 kept alive by my mother handing glasses of water  
 through a cracked door.  
 My sister's sons sat around a fire pit  
 with their friends, dazed teenage boys  
 crouching by the embers, refusing tears

My brothers stunned and helpless, trying to be helpful  
 around the house, kept breaking things  
 cursing and crying. After an unbearable silence  
 Bob said *it's a hell of a thing, isn't it?*  
*A hell of a thing*

*continued overleaf..*

BREATH *contd...*

I remember walking into the Baptist church  
 standing at the back of the sanctuary  
 seeing a hundred people,  
 wondering who they all were,  
 so many Latinos with their children,  
 strangers at my sister's funeral.  
 Then I remembered my brothers had married  
 Latinas, and these generous people,  
 my extended family I didn't know,  
 loved my sister

I was amused at the irony --  
 as children we were taught to hate Mexicans  
 and now we'd become Mexicans

I started laughing, then wheezing uncontrollably,  
 panic rushing through me in waves.  
 Faces I didn't know turned to look at me  
 not unkindly, but with worry and concern  
 and my nephew Andrew Narvaez  
 a sweet kid I've always liked  
 took me gently by the arm through the red doors  
 of the sanctuary and led me outside  
 to stand in the shade at the edge of the parking lot  
 beneath the wide arms of a live oak tree

He stayed with me, saying nothing  
 letting me calm down enough  
 to weep. We waited for the others --  
 my brothers, my parents, my family,  
 white and brown people emerging quietly  
 from the church and driving off  
 into the soft blue hills my sister loved

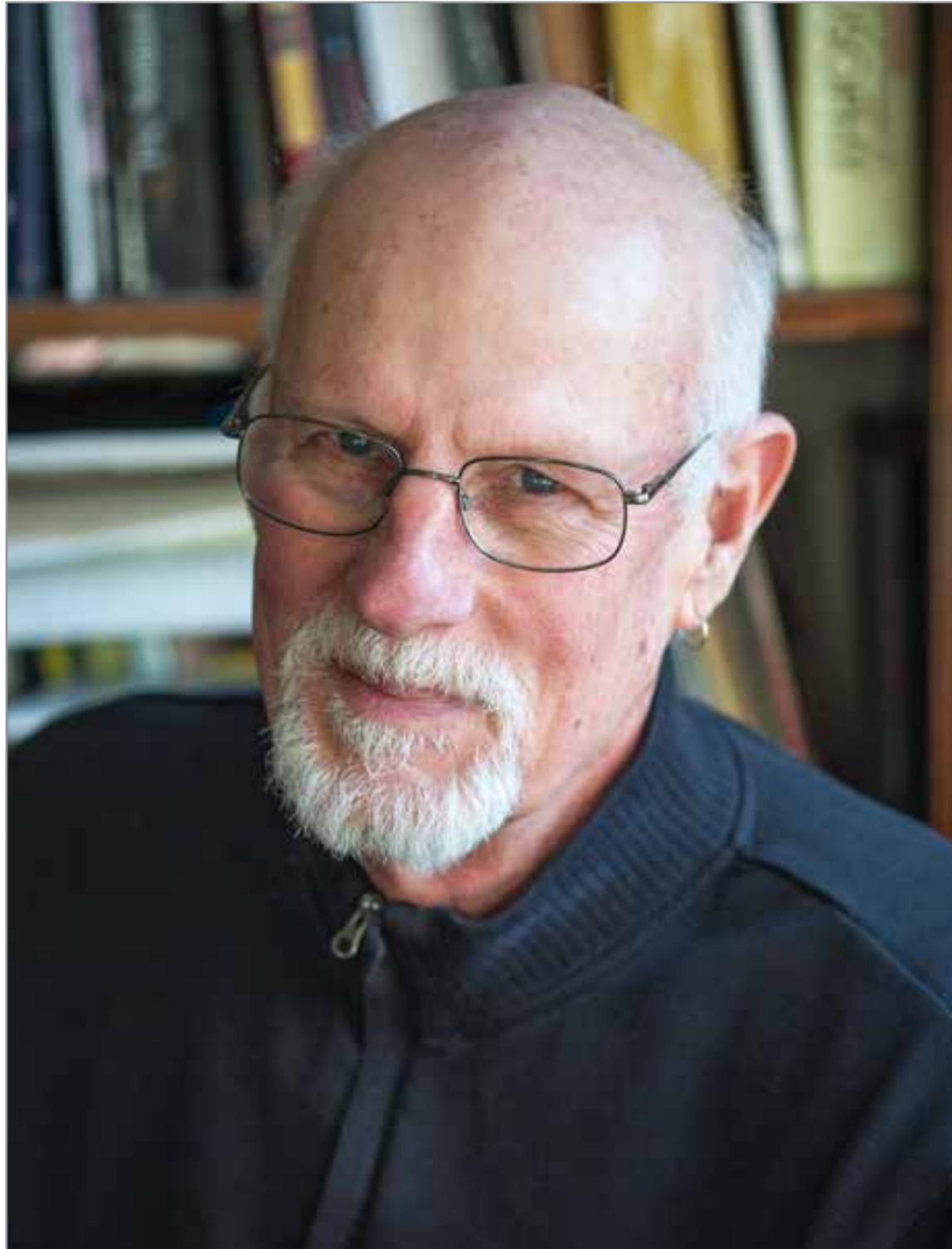
When we pulled into the driveway,  
 and this is the point of my story,  
 a woman was at the back door  
 putting a mop and bucket  
 in the trunk of her car. She came to us,  
 hugged my mother and said quietly.  
*I'm so sorry, Janie Lu. We all loved her*

In the house, the bathroom door was open.  
 The light was on. All the surfaces  
 had been immaculately scrubbed.  
 The neighbor whose name I never knew  
 had come to the house unbidden,  
 scouring tile and porcelain, picking  
 bits of bone from the floor,  
 wiping up smears of brain,  
 cleaning blood-spray from the ceiling,  
 washing every sign of suicide away

My mother sat on the edge of the bed  
 and wept. She wept for her daughter.  
 She wept for herself and her family.  
 And she wept in gratitude  
 for the compassion of a neighbor  
 who understood a mother's grief

People say the world is an ugly place and maybe it is  
 but sometimes people are so damned kind  
 I can barely breathe

*for James Crews*



Doug Anderson's first book of poetry, *The Moon Reflected Fire*, won the Kate Tufts Discovery Award in 1995; and *Blues for Unemployed Secret Police* a grant from the Eric Matthew King Fund of The Academy of American Poets. His memoir, *Keep Your Head Down: Vietnam, The Sixties, and a Journey of Self-Discovery* was published by W.W. Norton in 2009. His work has appeared in many literary journals including *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Field*, *Ploughshares*, *Nine Mile*, *Poetry*, *The Asheville Poetry Review*, *The Southern Review* and *The Massachusetts Review*. He has received fellowships and grants from The National Endowment for the Arts, The Massachusetts Cultural Council and other funding organizations. In addition to poetry and creative nonfiction he has written plays, screenplays and journalism. His most recent book of poems is *Horse Medicine*, Barrow Street Books, 2015. His forthcoming book, *Undress, She Said*, will be published by Four Way Books in 2022. He has taught in the Pacific University of Oregon and Bennington College MFA programs and is a teaching affiliate of the Joiner Institute for the Study of War and Its Social Consequences at UMASS Boston. He has written critical work for the New York Times Book Review, the Boston Globe, the London Times Literary Supplement and Counterpunch.

## OLD SONG ONE MORE TIME

The wind shifts--catch that whiff of blood  
and tank diesel. Nothing new here.  
Windup generals falling down and twitching.  
These street fighters not so easy to kill  
as they thought and now a black pearl  
of dread at the base of a soldier's skull.  
Back at the palace the big man's men  
prop him up so he can swagger one more day.  
Sliding over him, a hawk's shadow. High pitched  
shriek—is that laughter? If there were no pain  
we'd laugh, but no, it's not funny.  
They learn nothing. They rot from inside out.

Doug Andersen

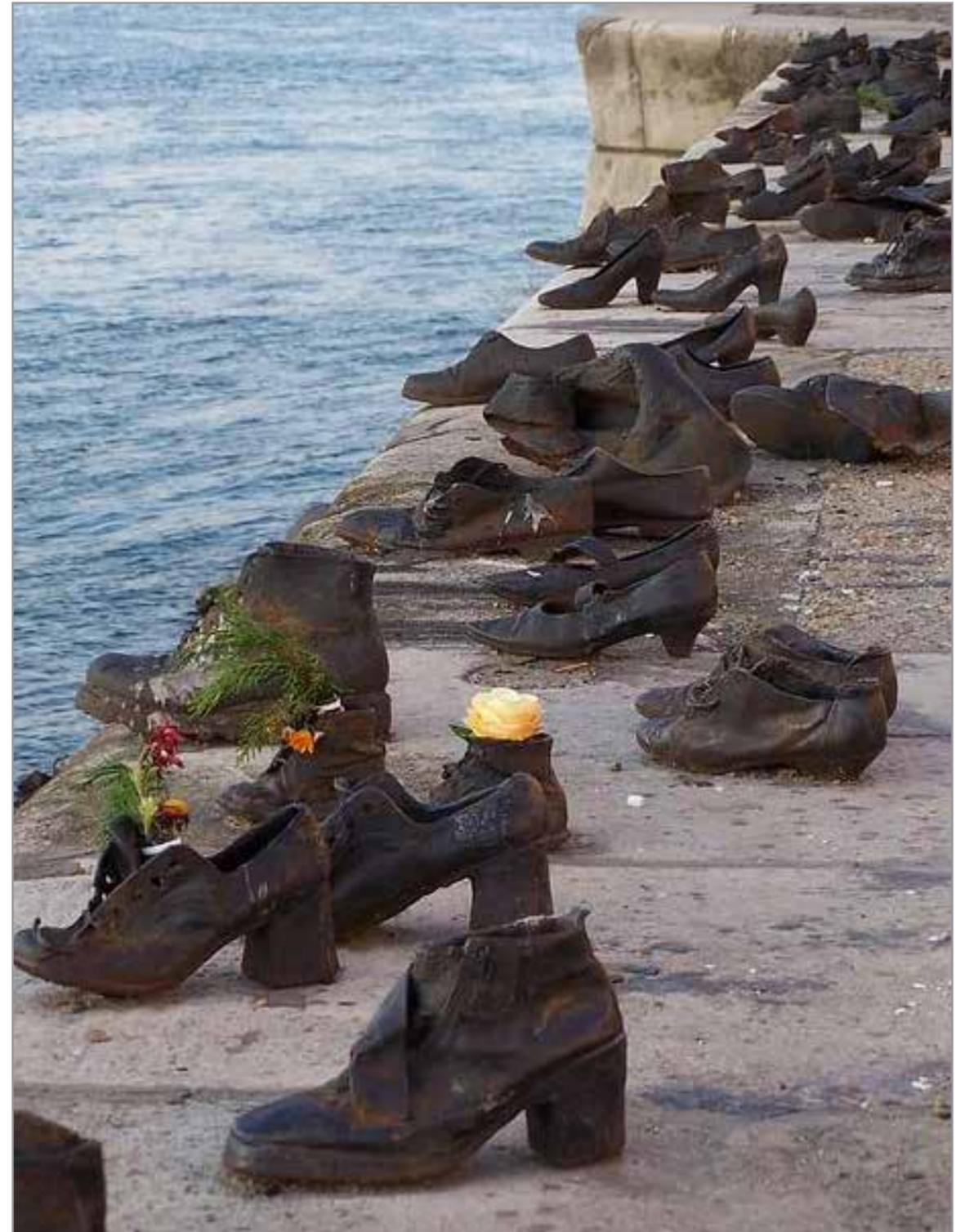
## MY SEVENTY-NINTH

Who was I then at zero?  
 I invited him back,  
     little guy I was  
         before I got cranky.  
 You could tell him anything  
     and he'd believe it,  
 even things about himself that weren't true,  
 things  
     he'd wrap his heart with like bacon;  
*you are such and such*, someone might say  
     *bad*  
     or someone else, *an angel--*  
 neither true,  
     but my little sponge-self soaked it up  
     and held it till it festered.  
 Yesterday Doc told me I had liver cysts,  
     so far benign,  
         *you get old enough you get them.*  
 I didn't expect to live this long  
     and how much of it was *living*,  
     how many daylight hours  
 dimmed by the heart's cataract?  
     Now old,  
 I feel ten feet tall it's spring and the wind is velvety--  
     there, forsythia's lightning,  
     the farmer's fields suddenly green.  
 I have this one day, I think,  
     and maybe it's worth all the ones I missed.

Hope there's something like rebirth  
     so I can come back  
         and see things as they are,  
         love better,  
 not be stupid;  
     but I think I've just got this one chance.  
 Thinking just now  
         of all the infants  
         dead in their cribs  
 because of this war or that this famine or that this disease or that,  
     what about them?  
         Priest said when my baby cousin died  
         *he has no need for absolution,*  
*he's not lived long enough to sin*  
     and I thought  
         that was me once,  
     I was *good*,  
         meaning, I think, *guileless*,  
         incapable of evil, not mean.  
         before I was poisoned  
 by the usual stuff of being human rage jealously contempt deviousness.  
     Was I good?  
 I'll be that today. I'll be kind to everyone I meet.

## ONCE UPON A TIME I DIDN'T BELIEVE IN EVIL

Especially not the theological kind  
but how else do you explain  
a politician who will say anything  
that riles his base, no matter  
how much murder it will cause,  
will destroy an entire democracy  
for a pile of cash from people  
like himself who want it all  
including yours, including the change  
in the pocket of man  
sleeping on the street, would pry  
the gold fillings from the dead,  
might even leave piles of shoes  
to cause a later generation to exclaim  
*how could this ever be*. Well, it was.



Photograph courtesy <https://pixabay.com/es/users/hos70-2319664/>

Sandy Solomon's poems have appeared in a variety of publications, including, most recently, *The New Yorker*, *Scientific American*, *Harvard Review*, and *Kenyon Review*. Her book, *Pears, Lake, Sun*, which won the Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize, was published simultaneously in the U.K. She is Writer in Residence at Vanderbilt University.



## SUBJECT

The student knows her teacher  
the way the child knows  
her parent, or a dog, the one  
who offers his daily bone.

So I knew you awhile,  
my ear tuned to catch  
your observations, morals,  
contradictions. I knew

the best and worst of you  
teaching: your lyrical, slight  
drawl, your laugh, your strict  
demand for control and distance,

your itch to exact attention  
and affection, both of which  
I gave, the price of entry  
into your good opinion,

a rolling green landscape,  
full of direction and reach,  
fields in which the subjects  
bunched beside a fence,

as the swift black and white,  
nipping, crept close,  
running around each stray  
to carry us forward over

our rough, unready ground  
and into the beautiful grass.

Sandy Solomon

## WHISTLE

For weeks I pursed my lips and pushed out air  
 but managed only a faint, breath-clouded sound,  
 not the sharp note Mom could make.

To learn took six months of trying—fiddly,  
 unsatisfying—until suddenly—  
 like learning to ride a bike—I could. Not well.

But not badly. I took to appreciating  
 others' work: trains at 3 am,  
 the man—two fingers in his mouth—who called

his son, the Country singer who gave a song  
 in time, in tune—a marvel; even the kettle  
 sharp and clear as any alarm, its screech!

My sister and I practiced in the field out back;  
 our giggles filled the silences we made.  
 The dog cocked his head. *What? What?*

## HURRICANE

As the weather reports squawked it in,  
 the family tied down and restrained and sealed,  
 rounding the house with a new eye  
 for things uncontrolled and loose;  
 then, inside, gathered, by the radio,  
 lamps, candles, matches, and games.

The wind took up before the rain;  
 shutters rattled at their latches.  
 Objects conspired, groaning, slapping,  
 scraping. Late, she was sent outside  
 to pick the last summer flowers.  
 Already the wind bent them down

and above, the trees thrashed, shedding  
 leaves and small branches that skimmed  
 and littered the flower beds. Her hair  
 parted where she turned her head;  
 her dress gripped her body, which hummed  
 with fear and exhilaration at fear,

but she took her time -- poor mums and daisies,  
 poor ordinaries -- and bent to snip  
 and gather the imperfect, already bruised  
 and battered and held the clipped stems  
 firmly as she went. The drops began,  
 fat splashes darkening her dress,

and she ran toward the open back door  
 to artificial light and trapped air,  
 to vases opening absurdly wide.  
*Admit, admit*, the storm rattled,  
 insinuating, pounding the door.  
 Leaves flew; branches landed hard.

## THE ISLAND PRINCESS

*Sunk August 6, 1980  
in Hurricane Allen*

The Island Princess, forty-eight feet and sleek  
from unfurled sails to mahogany cabin, needed  
sprucing up, so the four of them decided to sail her  
from Key West to Captain Shark's Boatyard in Belize.  
Between Cuba and Jamaica, they heard about a storm,  
but thought the threat had passed—early August, unlikely  
for hurricanes.

When they realized their error, they tried  
to make land at Port Antonio, the waves by then  
so high—twenty-five or thirty feet—they thought  
she'd founder on the rocks, so they put out to sea again to try  
their luck.

On August 5, the storm's front edge caught them.  
10 am. For sixteen hours straight they struggled  
to stay afloat, outrun the worst. No luck. They watched  
her mainsail and foresails fray, then shred, then rip away,  
but she was moving fast—ninety miles per hour—  
without a sail to speed her. The winds so strong and waves  
so high, they tied themselves to her, everyone soaked  
and tired.

And then the storm *broke her like a straw*,  
picked her up, all sixty thousand pounds, and smashed her  
so she sank in five minutes, one of the crew tangled  
in her rigging. He cut himself loose; his friend pulled him  
on the raft. They were alive, just bruised, but the worst  
of the storm was overhead; swells loomed around.

Parts of the boat kept coming at them—

masts  
like spears, parts of the hull and cabin, the table they'd set  
a day before—one narrow miss, then another,  
the rubber raft so vulnerable as the water churned  
debris from the Princess, debris like them, close by.  
She seemed to be following them, he said, trying to take them  
with her; even when they thought she was gone, they'd turn  
to see some splintered fragment of deck high beside them  
on a wave or speeding towards them in the troughs between,  
like a boxer's punches, high then low.

Ten minutes later  
the eye passed over. Sun in a blue sky, rough seas;  
but he rested a bit. Then the hell resumed.

They felt  
the raft begin to pull apart so they used lengths  
of line to bind the ribs tight. And they survived,  
thanks to six ten-ounce cans of water in the kit.

By August 7, when lack of water threatened, with sharks  
bumping the bottom of the raft, someone spotted  
a tanker,

the Jastella, off course, off schedule,  
and Doc, who had taped flares to his life jacket, raised  
the signal. A Norwegian ship, she picked them up and fed them,  
and put them down in Cayman Brac. Doctors, first.

Then home. The Princess will be a story, survival a given.

He's going sailing again, he says, when his bruises heal.

Nothing like the whoosh when the boat bounces forward,  
blues of sky and sea; whites of the odd cloud,  
and, nearer, the sails, canvas shivering, belled with air.

Dawn Potter lives in Portland, Maine. She is the author of nine books of prose and poetry, most recently the poetry collection *Accidental Hymn*. Her poems and essays have appeared in the *Beloit Poetry Journal*, the *Threepenny Review*, and many other venues. She directs poetry and teaching programs at the Frost Place.



## ENCHANTED FOREST

We were like you once, but now we are alders and sumac,  
we are tiny pines choking in the under-light.

But even if we had the souls of snakes, of roaches,  
your hand should have shown mercy.

Still, you have learned something:  
When you tear off a little branch darkened with blood

I will cry out.  
And then you will cry out also.

Dawn Potter

## ANONYMOUS FARMWIFE, CIRCA 1930

Once I sported a wedding ring  
but my hands swelled up so, and my knuckles got thick.

Too much dishwater, too many axe handles and bent shovels,  
and long afternoons on my knees, scrubbing the black muck

from the corners of empty rooms.  
At summer dawn I stand at the clothesline

pinning up the underpants and the shirts. By the river,  
cattails quiver in a tender breeze. Blackbirds trill.

Ask me who stains the sheets.  
Who weans the calves and guts the roosters.

Who listens for wind in the chimney  
as the kettle bubbles,

as the bed holds its tongue.  
Or let me tell you my future:

To sit in a straight-backed chair, in a clean apron.  
To stare into a camera's eye. To not smile.

## WATERLOO

*We are not permitted to linger, even with what is most  
intimate.*

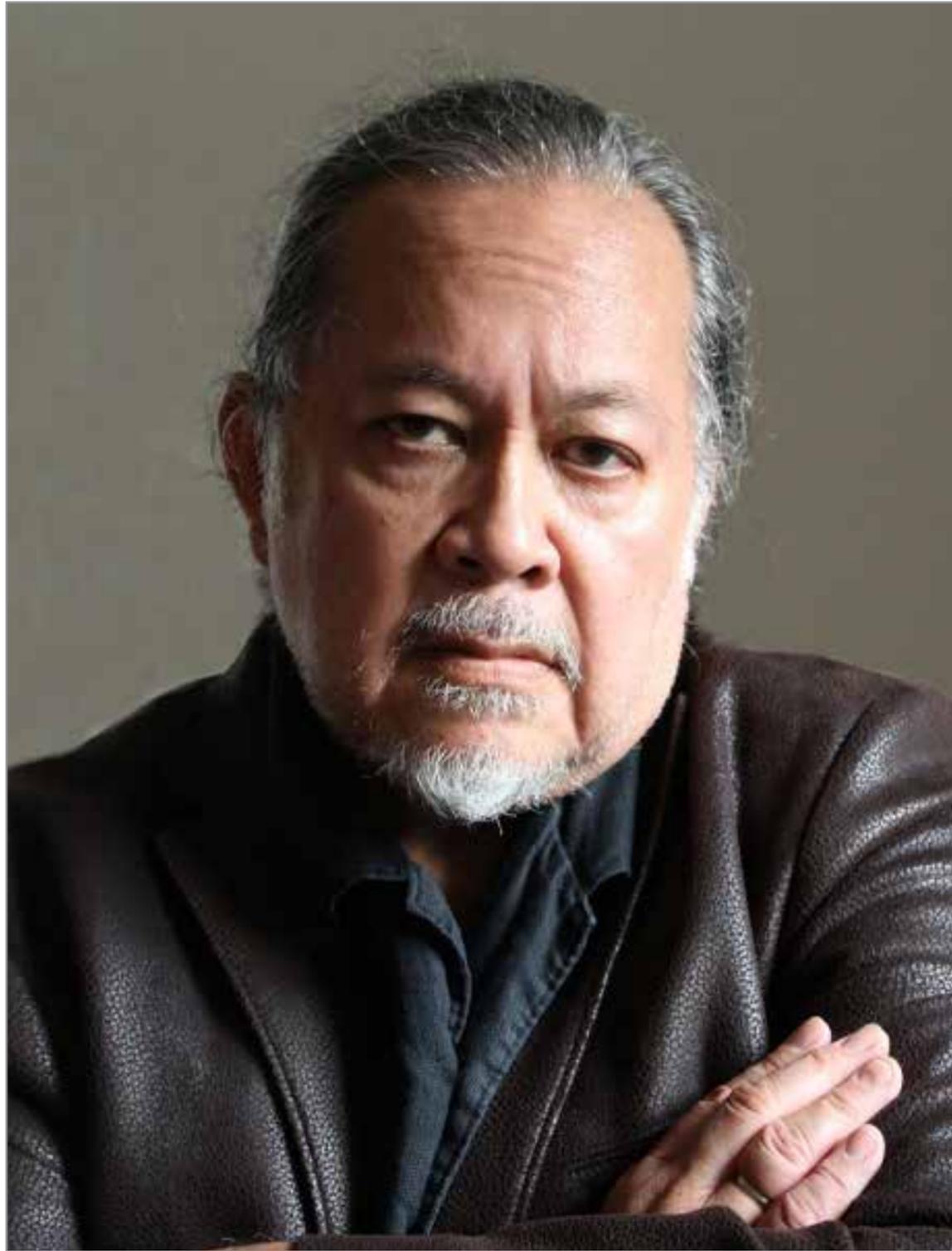
- Rainer Maria Rilke, "To Hölderlin"

The lindens in the square tremble  
in the wind like peasants kissing the feet  
of Jesus. They lift their arms and wail,  
and I have read of such kissing,  
read of how bodies drown.  
The sky grows. Agnès, who is busy and shy,

weeps to hear the peasants weeping,  
weeps for the lindens buckling into the wind.  
In the square, horses clatter and rear, their hooves  
ring on the cobblestones. Drowning and wrath,  
drowning and wrath, night and day, but Agnès  
is kissing the wind, weeping,

as the lindens sway, as the lindens tremble.  
I have read of such kissing.

Jose Padua's first book, *A Short History of Monsters*, was chosen by Billy Collins as the winner of the 2019 Miller Williams Poetry Prize and is out from the University of Arkansas Press. His poetry, fiction, and nonfiction have appeared in many publications. He has read his work at Lollapalooza, CBGBs, the Knitting Factory, the Public Theater, the Living Theater, the Nuyorican Poets' Café, the St. Mark's Poetry Project, and many other venues. He was a featured reader at the 2012 Split This Rock poetry festival and won the New Guard Review's 2014 Knightville Poetry Prize. After spending ten years with his wife (the poet Heather L. Davis) and children in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, he and his family are back in his hometown, Washington DC.



## PAINTING A TIN ROOF

It was the first time I saw Billy without his dark glasses on, knocking on our front door in the early afternoon to ask if we needed someone to paint the tin roof of our house because from what he could see from next door it was getting rusty and peeling and what with winter coming it was something we'd probably better do. And it was what Billy did for work when he wasn't drinking, working on houses and helping build buildings and it was what he did to pay for his drinking when there was no one else around to pay for his drinking which was what it meant to be a man in these parts. I knew it was his old lady who put him up to it because it wasn't like him to sell his services that early in the day and she was pregnant at forty four years of age with her first and his second or third and he never did visit any of them with there being only so many days to spend at the best biker bars just over the state line or should I say nights to spend because there are places where night spills over into day so far that there's little left to do but dive right back in to the steady comfort and motion of a dark bar long after the last traces of dusk have sunk into the dirty faded lines of Route 11 north of Winchester and points beyond. Billy never comes around now and he never comes to see his newest son just the way he never went to see his older sons, either somewhere or nowhere like a handful of dirt lost in the Shenandoah Valley wind. And the tin roof of our house is painted and ready for winter, painted by the man who took Billy's place and his woman and who cares for Billy's son as if he were his own, shoveling the short inch of snow from the sidewalks after the first fall of the season, looking up like a dog behind a fence toward the sky, no need to glance at the work he did several winters ago after Billy left because he knows the paint is still there, flat on the cold tin surface of his neighbor's house, under the snow and ready to shine.

Jose Padua

## WHERE I'M FROM

When the time is right—which means after  
the leaves have begun to sprout into dark waving hands  
and the ocean currents flow more warmly northward  
like perfect storms from southern islands  
and all my heart-beating, word-hammering work is done—  
bury me in these United States in a manner  
I see fit amongst my slightly brown, light brown,  
and dark brown brothers and sisters on solid ground  
as wide as a city and where there's so many of us  
that the powers that be start to quiver and shake  
as if the deep mud upon which they stand is collapsing  
with the quaking of their great white earth.  
Roll away the rubbish of stars and bars  
on battle flags, their sentimental dreams of  
stepping on our backs and spitting in our faces,  
and all our years of working for them rather than for ourselves,  
and all the *yessirs* and *thankyousirs* that ever passed  
our thirsty lips, and every moment  
our heads were bowed in prayer or fealty  
and allegiance beneath the smooth skin of their hands.

Then rise the way lost land rises high to blue sky,  
which bends down with the bursting of clouds  
to wet kiss crumbled brick and fallen metal.  
Rise with weeds and wild grasses as if waking  
from centuries of deep sleep, rise like voices  
when questions have been asked and the answer  
is a bird with dark feathers perched upon a statue  
commemorating the perpetrators of heinous deeds.  
And walk these streets, knowing that what's beyond  
every sharp corner, behind every wooden door,  
and under every leaky roof is another insane notion  
cultivated by the inventors of regret; so walk swiftly,  
as if dancing between bamboo poles while  
stringed instruments control the tune;  
walk, until you reach the smooth curve  
and low hills of the highway heading out of town.

PRAISE YOU (OR CREEP, PART TWO,  
THIS BEING THE POETIC NEXUS OF  
RADIOHEAD AND FATBOY SLIM  
FOR THOSE OF US LOST FOREVER IN THE 90S)

I praise you,  
all the girls I whispered  
sweet nothings to when  
I was young and knew nothing.  
I whispered them  
because only a fool shouts  
when he knows nothing,  
and they were sweet  
because anything whispered  
sounds as sweet as honeysuckle,  
as sweet as a summer breeze  
when you're eating peach ice cream,  
why even the words *menstrual cramping*  
sound sweet when you whisper them,  
which I suppose means that  
I *did* know something then,  
and if I'd whispered *menstrual cramping*  
to the right girl back in the day  
I could have been a grandfather at fifty,  
coming over for a visit then leaving  
when the baby starts to get incredibly fussy,

which is why I praise you even  
if all you said in return was *get lost ,  
be serious, get real, or I don't have cramps,*  
because at least you said something,  
at least you listened even though  
I might have been a madman or  
even just some minor league psychopath  
too scared and too dumb to make it  
to the big leagues.  
So I praise you because you live.  
I praise you from the beginning-to-gray hairs on my head  
and those dangling from the tip of my nose.  
I praise you to the tips of my toes.  
I praise you even if you hated my clothes.  
I praise you because you heard me.

Bob Herz is editor/publisher of *Nine Nile Magazine* and *Nine Mile* books, with colleague-poets Stephen Kuusisto and Andrea Scarpino. He is a graduate of the Iowa Writers Workshop and has published three books of his own poetry and three books of translations (Jules LaFogues, Georg Trakl, an anthology of various poets). He lives and works in LaFayette, NY.



## CHANGE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

The ice is breaking on the pond; it looks less weary now.  
 Early evening, light fading, birds beginning last songs.  
 It is the hour of quiet movements and rushed notes,  
 Of preparations for dinner, the bottle hidden in the cupboard,  
 The last look out the front picture window to the street.  
 The lawn tools are gathered near the garden shack,  
 Shovels and rakes arranged indiscriminately against a season's change.  
 The streetlights and porch lights come on now, hesitantly,  
 Like nurses entering the room of a child too old for such care.  
 It is nearly the blank hour, the hour of neither the one right thing  
 Nor the other, of choices made and then quickly abandoned,  
 Half-remembered dreams and angry words in the diary's secret pages.  
 Now the neighborhood's night-brides begin their circular walk,  
 Selfless, heartless, with faces blank and blameless as the sky;  
 It is not love they want, not tonight, and the rapt sons of tall houses  
 Know this, and wait for them under the streetlights,  
 Talking softly to each other, unwanted here, or anywhere.  
 They study one other, as men do, carefully, without seeming to,  
 Knowing that a word will start a fight that only blood can satisfy.  
 Childhood is ending for them tonight, and for everyone, for no reason.  
 There is no warning, only this slight change in air and light  
 Signaling night's encroachment, only the moon  
 That turns its face away as that hard other life begins.

Bob Herz

## WINTER PLAINNESS

Now the houses cast the lightest shade, gray on gray,  
Themselves a bare addition to the night;

The last leaves cling in winter plainness;  
One senses Life like that, like the disappearance into air

Of the least breath, so that the seen world becomes  
Part of the larger fantasia of lost wishes and things,

No one wanting or asking for more than that.  
In the houses, tables set for two or three, too small

For comfort against the December wind's harsh cry  
That touches everything, that worries everything.

Outside, a clapboard bangs repeatedly against an old shed.  
Who are we now, who were so brilliant last September?

The fields grow smaller. The birds find other homes.

## AFTER SOME WORDS OF SYLVIA PLATH

Let's have no more talk of it, this city  
With no sky, no stones. Everywhere these dolls  
Fading in light, soft anvils gathered  
In a dead aunt's cupboard, in the spilled  
And hidden salt.

Nothing moves in the seven giant hills  
Surrounding us, but each gesture diminishes me.  
I am what crawls under, I am the blue cricket,  
The shoo-fly, the head stone  
Of the once-beloved. This is life's Babylon.

No one gathers here now. No one wept then.  
What do you know, really, about how  
These silences were first quarried, then lost.  
Only the stones hum. A tune  
Uncaringly bright.

The wind comes off the channel  
Blue-green, like the imaginary sea.  
Don't open your eyes, nothing here  
Satisfies. See this: How an eye opens,  
An ear. To nothing, nothing. Stones.

I dream sometimes of raiders  
Electric over the sea, a way not to think  
Of anything else. I say let the others fear.  
I say nothing will unwind you.  
I say that the loving voltage will never let up.

You are the spare part, the heart,  
The rose, the split sinew, the bad bone.  
Here is Life's lesson: You are done.  
Goodnight.  
You cannot be renewed.

## SCENES FROM THE COUNTRY OF THOSE YEARS

1.  
It's not a painting, not any more. It's a story, not even yours,  
Not even half a story, half a coin. You pass old houses in the old neighborhood,  
All seem tenuous, under intense pressure,  
As if at a touch they would burst from inside,  
Colors changing intimacies from red to ochre to blue,  
Forced by the density of heat from the TV set, the absurd laughter  
From the couch, the blue easy chair.
2.  
You know these streets, that they contain  
More brutal secrets than were ever imagined by people who lived here,  
For example, of windows rescued from abandoned motel rooms  
Then brought back as emblems of death in a new car, or the whimpering sounds  
Of lost pets, trampled gardens, or those old men who spent  
Too much time outside themselves, in a fantasy of living other lives,  
High on dystopian idealism and low-rent reality. You can still see them  
On street corners with their two buck transcendentalism  
And twenty-dollar Salvation Army knock-offs, poor know-nothings  
With the sodden shapes of swamp plants and rotted trees.
3.  
Inside each house are hundreds of little boxes  
Titled in neat script and placed alphabetically on shelves  
By people you have never met, some of them long-dead.  
Each box has an unknown content in addition to the labeled item,  
And carries the irreparable mauve scent of the ineffable  
Bedded with sand, rock, and report cards saved from other decades;  
It is beautiful, you think, a moment for which words can never show  
How it really was then, filled with the love of touching each thing  
And wishing that love and life were longer; but later on the street  
As the big thunderheads sweep angrily in from the west  
You see a rose profiled against a background of hills and train tracks,  
A house with a black and white skin exploding into gold.
4.  
That drama you heard so much about in younger days really was about Huck Finn,  
All of him, in words formed over a century before,  
By a man telling our stories, sometimes in only a sentence or two—  
And maybe we deserved no better (though best not to say so),  
And maybe the self-righteous insistence on this way of truth-telling  
Was always fake, gilt flaking in a dry wind, plastic ferns  
In real pots, cellophane burning on a cracked sidewalk.  
But you still remember it, all of it, helplessly, often sleeplessly,  
The glory as well as the loss, the hard ancient memory  
Of certain deaths tainted by later sad forgetfulness.  
You built statues for them but no one cared. Their journeys all ended in different  
places,  
Bullet-ridden diners, gas stations, abandoned ski lodges. Every day  
A new listing on Page Six of the New York Post.
5.  
Think of the story of the country as it was then,  
Of the innocence, the blushing, the wooden steps and bad whiskey  
That came with our teller to any tale of place,  
Any table of drunks or gamblers—think of him dashing  
Back and forth, leaping between tables, and the shouting—my God, the shouting—  
And him always the one in a torn leather jacket with a stopped gold watch,  
And then after, the dust, the rocks, the lame horse, the stolen raft;  
Think of the tales they still tell at the barbershop,  
Over fragrant hair and styptic-stick close shaves,  
That he was a man with a hat full of coins, a fast hand, an old friend—  
The judgments are always harsh. It's childish to expect otherwise.  
You ask: Are those fires out now? Forever?  
But he is on his island, the river around him. There is no room elsewhere for this man.
6.  
This is an old tale.  
Told right, it will lift you off your feet.

## ON THE EVE OF THE EXPLOSION

I imagined your speech as elevated by stars over a new state,  
A false Nebraska, say, or the way smoke can seem to nod delicately

In a small breeze before larger storms come and take it home.  
Even so, I called out for my own Arkansas, or Missouri, for a mud hut

At field's end where water gathered everywhere like a necklace  
Formed at no one's throat. Who else could we blame for such

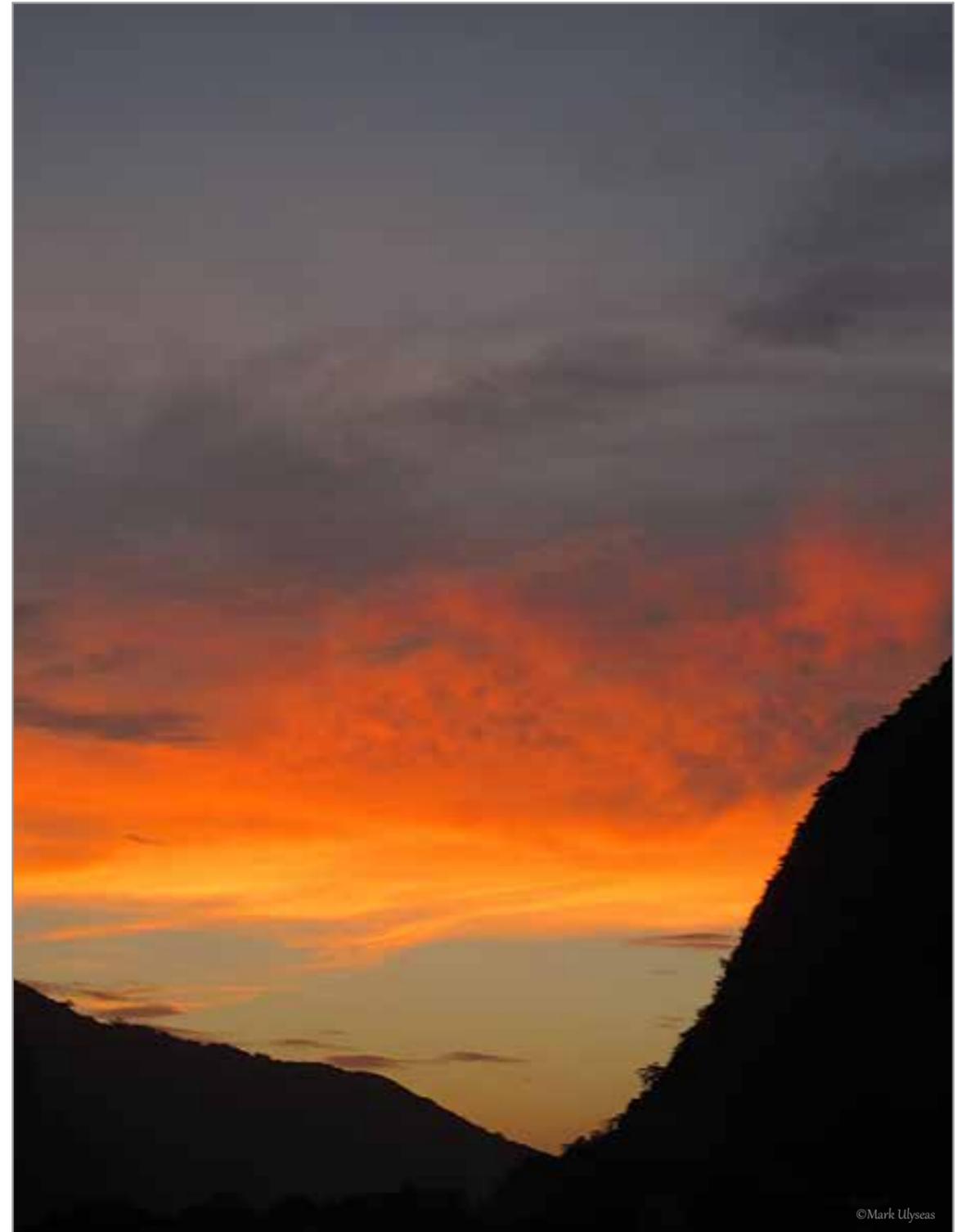
Grotesque domesticity, all so unwilled and deeply undesired:  
That question stalked every conversation now, every coupling,

Like a sad man dancing nakedly before closed shop windows,  
Amazed at his own unlit reflection. On the street, rabid youth-cadres

Of the Daughters of the Revolution invested their pledges scatologically,  
And new mutts with bad haircuts opened red switchblades, and smiled.

Everyone else averted their eyes. What could be done now?  
The waste was pouring directly into our lives, and no one could stop it.

We looked guiltily at each other, passing around a few last bottles  
Until the entire matter was, as they say, left forever up in bad orange air.



©Mark Ulyseas

Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

James Crews is the editor of the best-selling anthology, *How to Love the World*, which has been featured on NPR's Morning Edition, in the Boston Globe, and the Washington Post, and is the author of four prize-winning collections of poetry: *The Book of What Stays*, *Telling My Father*, *Bluebird*, and *Every Waking Moment*. His poems have been reprinted in the *New York Times Magazine*, *Ploughshares*, *The New Republic*, and *The Christian Century*, and in former US Poet Laureate Ted Kooser's weekly newspaper column, "American Life in Poetry," and featured on Tracy K. Smith's podcast, *The Slowdown*. Crews holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Wisconsin–Madison and a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. He lives with his husband on forty rocky acres in Shaftsbury, Vermont. To sign up for weekly poems and prompts, visit: [www.jamescrews.net](http://www.jamescrews.net).



## AWAKE AGAIN

I don't know how the heart goes cold as an unpicked apple clinging to the branch, encased in layers of ice. Yet even the slightest gesture can warm it, as if some hand were reaching out to hold the hard skin, melt off the months of bitterness. Maybe a friend hugs you longer than she needs to, just a few more seconds of pressing you closer until you want to live inside that embrace, inhaling her perfume for the rest of your life. Or your lover makes you a turkey sandwich one day for lunch with buttercrunch lettuce, pickles and extra mayo, and eating it at work later, relishing every bite, you feel that stirring in your chest, a small animal coming out of a long slumber, blinking its tender eyes awake.

James Crews

## NOT FRETTING

Let me not fret about the name of God  
or the face I pray to, but instead  
climb the hill to clip a few daisies  
and some blue-violet flax flowers  
whose delicate stems and petals  
will last for just a day or two  
when placed in a jar on the table.

Let me see God when the sun sings  
the sky above the maples, when finches  
pick at black seeds scattered  
around the feeder, each a piece of heaven,  
or when the squirrel twitches his tail,  
leaping from branch to branch,  
trusting the tree will hold him.

Let me call it prayer when the phoebe  
who nests under the eaves of our house  
flits from her perch on the hammock  
to catch a white moth in mid-flight  
and swallows it whole, shaking the dew  
from her feathers, or when a mother bear  
and her cub skitter from the sound  
of my footsteps in a flash.

Let me hear God in the silence  
after they vanish, in the thumping  
of my heart as I begin to step  
through the dappled light that breaks  
through gaps in the canopy.

## THE SWEETNESS OF DOING NOTHING

Before the appointments, in spite of fatigue,  
feel what the Italians call *Dolce far Niente*,  
the sweetness of doing nothing. It's true,  
you are still doing something as you pull on  
boots and parka and trudge through snow  
to the park for your usual two-mile loop.  
But now you can move without expectation,  
outside of the confines of productivity  
and the lines of your own endless task list.  
Hear the crunch of ice as you step into  
the ghost-shapes of your old footprints  
from yesterday. Feel your breath catch  
in your throat as a red-tail hawk lifts off  
from its perch on a bare branch choked  
with bittersweet vines, each red berry  
shriveled but gleaming, now trembling  
with the hawk's startled movements,  
its talons letting go of what they'd held  
so tightly just moments ago.

I am a native of Montgomery County, Maryland, USA. My poetry has been published in numerous journals, including Beltway Poetry Quarterly, Evening Street, Steam Ticket, Potomac Review, Little Patuxent Review, and Main Street Rag. My work has also appeared in several anthologies, including "Secrets & Dreams", Kind of a Hurricane Press; "My Cruel Invention", Meerkat Press; and "Written in Arlington", Paycock Press. I am the author of four poetry chapbooks: "Not Quite: Poems Written in Search of My Father", (Finishing Line Press, 2015), and "Our Situation", (Prolific Press, 2018), "Everyone Disappears" (Finishing Line Press, 2020), and "Little Wars" (Kelsay Books, 2021).



## POLIGNANO A MARE

Sea so broad, so blue,  
 buoy my bottled dream —  
 Let me imagine the hand  
 which scoops it up on some  
 strange shore of sighs.

My thoughts are edged  
 in black — I'll post them  
 on the window, the way  
 it's done at the edges  
 of the known world.

There, passersby take note  
 who has gone and who  
 remembers — arrangements  
 of flowers left in the sun  
 to dry — an empty glass.

Luther Jett. Photography by Serena Agosto-Cox.

## CYPHERS

Do the dead count  
 how many sleep beside them?  
 Do they jostle there,  
 under the cover of soil?  
 But, why imagine death  
 as sleep — when it is not.  
 Asleep, we wrestle, face  
 to face, with what —awake—  
 we cannot solve — Death  
 poses no more riddles, offers  
 no solutions. Surely,  
 as the dead no longer number  
 their days, they do not  
 number one another. We,  
 awake and alive to count  
 the stars, the grains of earth,  
 and all that stands between,  
 imagine what we will  
 but cannot know  
 the final sum and cypher.

WHAT MY FATHER LEARNED  
DRIVING A CONVOY DURING THE WAR

Never ride the brakes.

Steer with your foot.

Giraffes run across the Serengeti — Seen  
 from the air they seem  
 to enter a state of grace.

Don't waste soap; save  
 even the smallest slivers.

In Calcutta, children really do starve.

A mustache is a nice experiment,  
 but it isn't me.

There was a Temple in China dedicated entirely  
 to the many hands of G-d,  
 but it was bombed.

No-one knows why the Temple was destroyed.

The homeless sleep in the streets  
 and there are too many to count.

One man alone cannot replace  
 a broken camshaft.

The man shooting at you is as frightened  
 as you are, and as desperate.

There are people who look nothing like you,  
 and they are capable of kindness.

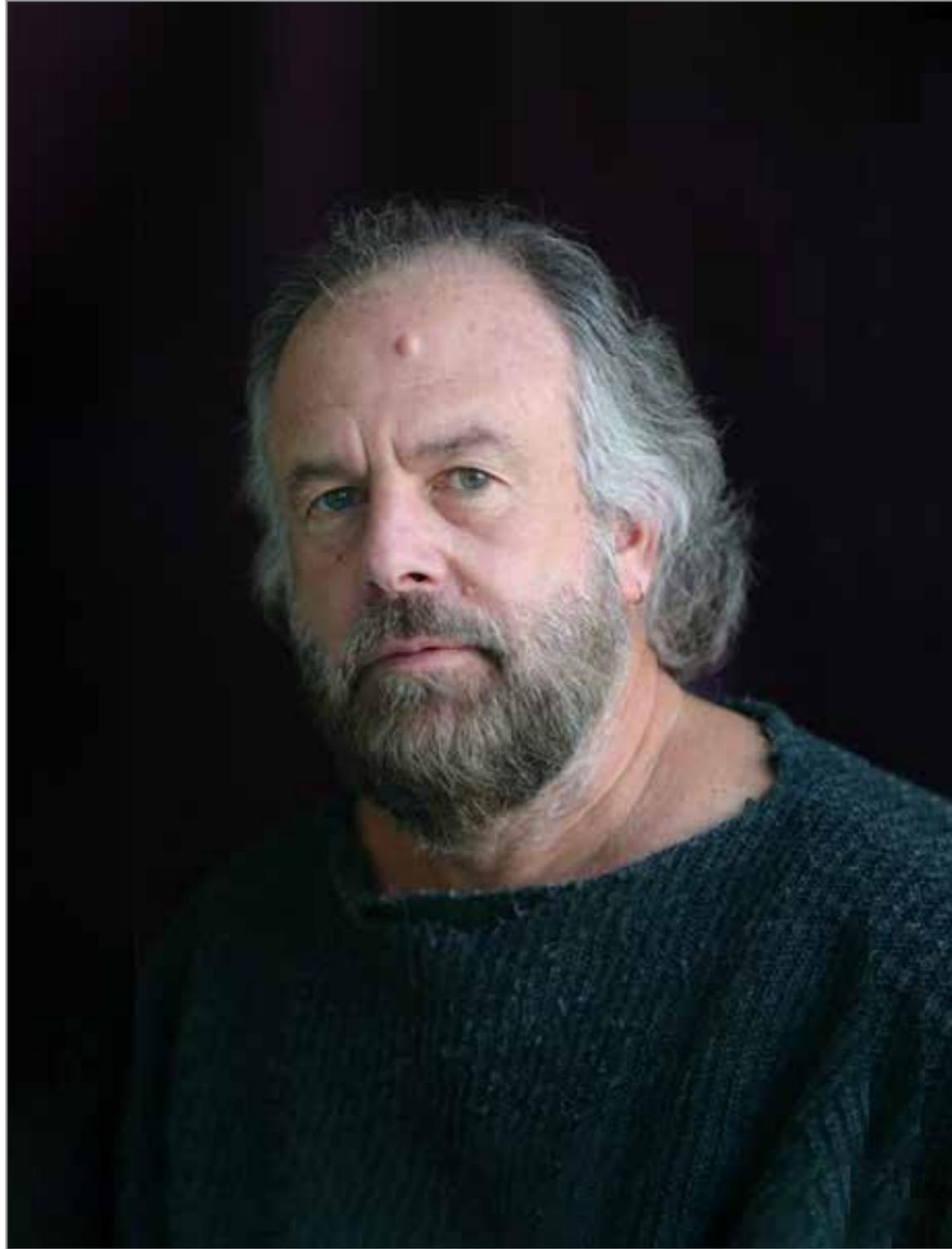
## A WARTIME LULLABYE

In the night station, great blue whales whistle down the long, worn benches. Their songs are crimson, their breath smells of oranges. Sleepy mothers wrap little babies in bunting, sigh and yearn for a place in the deep country where the moon is always full. Once the last train leaves there will be no-one left to remember the words the whales whispered, but the babes who doze in their mothers' long arms will never stop singing about those whales — the great hulk of their bodies as they float through the waiting room, the way their fins gently wave in the cool, clean air of that night.

## LEVITATION

Morning is a crisp, blue bowl broken open. People sit in pews, or wooden bleachers, and watch migrations. The congregation rises into the air, drifts the lazy way leaves do on a mild spring breeze. Everyone has somewhere to go, even those whose tickets are blank. And I am a tree waving from the ground. I call out: "*Stay in touch!*" The wind carries my voice, but I can't be certain anyone hears.

Michael Waters' new book, *Sinnerman*, will appear next year from Etruscan Press. Recent books include *Caw* (BOA Editions, 2020; Shoestring Press, UK, 2021), *The Dean of Discipline* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018), & a co-edited anthology, *Border Lines: Poems of Migration* (Knopf, 2020). The recipient of Guggenheim, National Endowment for the Arts, & Fulbright fellowships, Waters lives in Ocean, New Jersey.



## FINE DINING

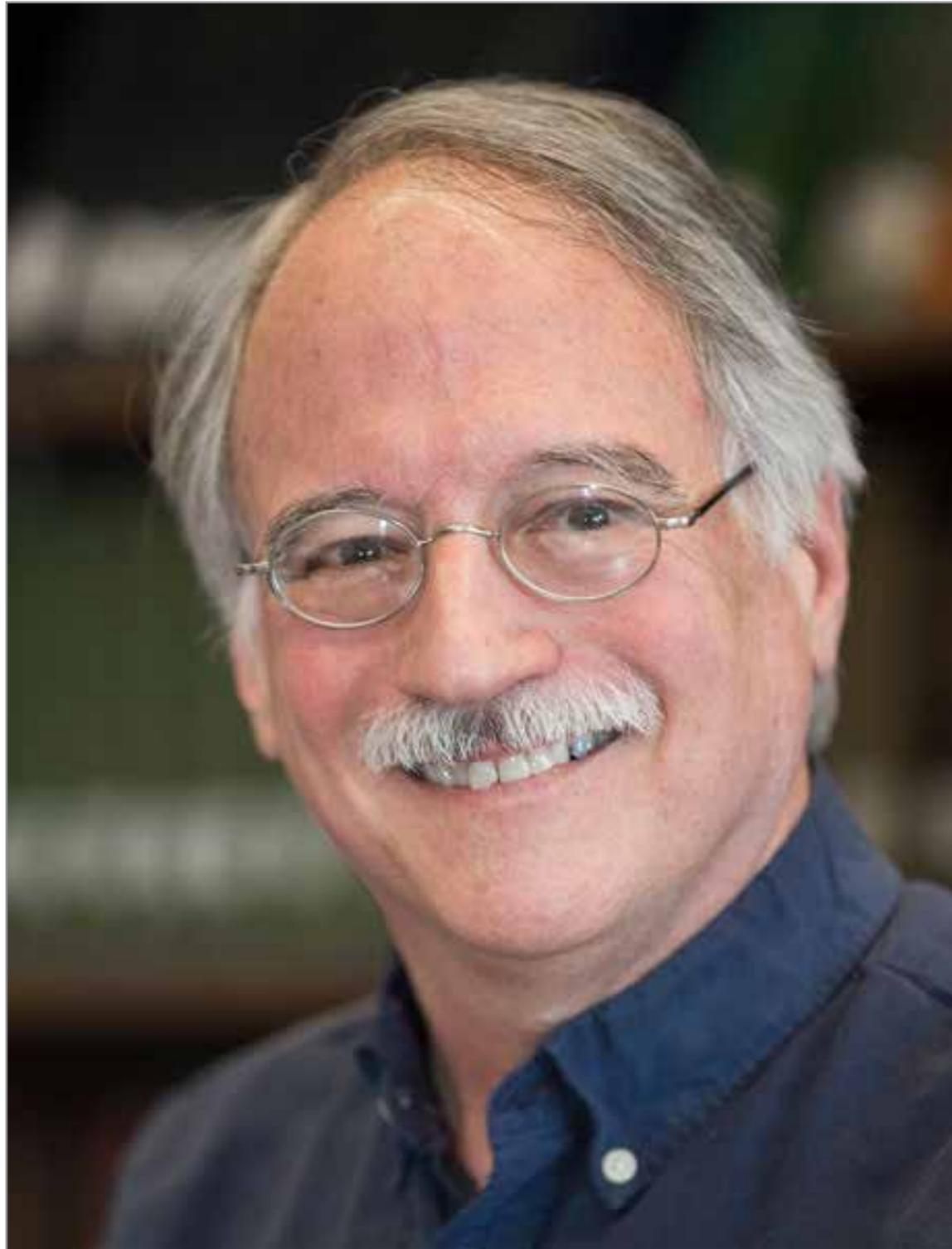
Unexpectedly, we  
Face each other near the station  
Where the hostess  
Greets couples whistling in,  
Wishes good night to couples  
Shambling out.

I startle

Like a bell  
Struck once at the wrong hour  
By its broken clapper, wanting  
Not to apologize, exactly, but  
To find a phrase  
To undo the damage.  
No one speaks.  
Behind me the dining room  
Flashes its knives  
As busboys spiral servers  
Whose flambés char air.  
A piano drops  
Icy notes into rare  
Whiskies & curious liqueurs.  
Then your husband clasps a sleeve  
Between forefinger & thumb  
To offer the gentlest tug, &  
As you ghost to your table  
Your wrist brushes my wrist  
With the sting of a lash.  
On the avenue thronging with lovers,  
My wife & I touch fingers,  
Our languorous & sensual meal  
Transformed now into ash.

Michael Waters

John Philip Drury is the author of four full-length poetry collections: *The Disappearing Town and Burning the Aspern Papers* (both from Miami University Press), *The Refugee Camp* (Turning Point Books), and most recently *Sea Level Rising* (Able Muse Press). He has also written *Creating Poetry* and *The Poetry Dictionary*, both from Writer's Digest Books. His awards include an Ingram Merrill Foundation fellowship, two Ohio Arts Council grants, and the Bernard F. Connors Prize from *The Paris Review* for "Burning the Aspern Papers." Twenty of his other published poems are also set in Venice, and he has led two Literary Venice Study Tours. After teaching at the University of Cincinnati for 37 years, he is now Professor Emeritus and lives with his wife, fellow poet LaWanda Walters, in a hundred-year-old house on the edge of a wooded ravine.



## STREETS FULL OF WATER

(Imaginary Movie)

A college dormitory, dark, but morning touches the window blinds like the gilt edges of pages in books. A woman's getting up, but all she sees are flashes from outside. Everyone else is sleeping in, but she is buttoning her shirt, grabbing her purse, and slipping down the wide, high corridor past dorm rooms and the stinky bunks of boys. Her steps resound like drops of water falling, and she unlocks a big door, opens it, and there it is, the Grand Canal of Venice.

She's standing in a gondola, the only passenger ferried to the other side. She enters the Piazza, laughing, spinning to see it in the round, and sauntering past Florian's and the Basilica, admiring pinkish diamonds, the Doge's Palace, emerging on the quay where Black men sell leather goods displayed on plain white sheets. She doesn't need a purse, and she suspects the Gucci would be counterfeit, a knock-off, but she would like to find out who they are, intrigued enough for coffee, but no more.

*continued overleaf...*

John Philip Drury. Photograph by Lisa A Ventre.

STREETS FULL OF WATER *contd...*

The tall men by the handbags look polite,  
 but one of them approaches, saying, "Miss,  
 I'm at your service, please," his accent British.  
 "I come from Senegal," he says and smiles.  
 "Is that what you would like to know of me?  
*Un peu de l'homme qui habite en Venise?*"  
 Her gasp is audible, her laugh embarrassed.  
 He's like an actor who breaks through the screen  
 to reach a woman in the audience.  
 But then the Africans begin to flurry,  
 flapping like pigeons, bunching up their goods  
 in sheets and scattering. Police are coming.  
 "I'm sorry," he apologizes. "Find me."  
 The whole embankment empties, except for her.

Later that day, she finds him, and they share  
 a bistro table next to a canal  
 that looks pale green as jade and barely moves.  
 Tomorrow she is going to St. George's.  
 Would he care to join her? Not that she  
 is so religious, really, but she likes  
 the local flavor of expatriates,  
 the plaques embedded in the church's walls  
 (there's one for Ruskin, one for Robert Browning),  
 and afterwards they'll go to a *trattoria*.  
 That's the best part. "Oh, yes," he says, "of course."

\*\*\*

And so the characters all come together  
 in the quaint church where English is the language:  
 Emily, who's studying abroad  
 in Casa Volta on the Grand Canal;  
 the merchant from Senegal who's selling handbags;  
 a painter who also plays the mandolin  
 (wearing silk breeches and a powdered wig  
 to play Vivaldi with an orchestra)  
 and lives here, runs a gallery in the Ghetto;  
 a self-professed "dumb plumber" and guitarist  
 who wants to find a job and stay in Venice;  
 his girlfriend who takes lessons from the painter  
 and sometimes models for his figure studies,  
 her hair extremely long, extremely black;  
 a would-be poet who would like to die  
 in Venice and be buried in San Michele,  
 where Ezra Pound and Joseph Brodsky rest;  
 a former rabbinical student who's lost his faith  
 and searches for what Henry James saw here,  
 his own "repository of consolations."

The plumber's studying Italian, trying  
 to get his break as an apprentice here,  
 though ancient pipes and nasty septic tanks  
 in squares where wells would be traditional  
 are hard to deal with, hardly picturesque,  
 but he's adept with wrenches, snaking pipes,  
 and plumbers are—good luck!—in short supply.

*continued overleaf..*

STREETS FULL OF WATER *contd...*

The painter's gone on tours of synagogues—  
 most of them hidden on the highest floors  
 of tenements, five windows that announce  
 where the five books of Torah are observed—  
 to memorize the lush interiors  
 so he can sketch and paint what he recalls,  
 since photos are forbidden. He even owns  
 a yarmulke whose embroidery he designed.  
 He and the plumber bring their instruments  
 to Casa Volta, where they jam. The merchant  
 sings a Jacques Brel song, his bass voice booming.  
 They've congregated in the library  
 and start to bond with Pinot Grigio.

Another day, the resident professor,  
 a randy novelist, lectures on how  
 aristocrats in silk rags begged on bridges  
 in Venice's last years as a republic,  
 decadent scene of gambling, masks, and sex.  
 Asked what he thinks, the African recites  
 a poem in French by Léopold Senghor,  
 letting them hear the "deep pulse of Africa."  
 Half conman, they suspect, and half chimera,  
 he whets their yen for anything exotic.  
 They call him their Othello, and he bows.  
 The would-be rabbi pushes up his glasses,  
 coughs for attention, shrugs, and asks them all,  
 "So what's my part? Shylock because I'm Jewish?"

\*\*\*

All of them rent a speedboat and cruise out  
 on the lagoon, Emily navigating  
 with a big nautical map the wind roughs up.  
 The merchant from Senegal, standing at the wheel,  
 pilots the boat through channels, a labyrinth  
 that's treacherous for locals to explore.  
 They run aground, but he takes off his shirt,  
 leaps in the water, making others follow,  
 easing the boat off mudbanks in the shallows.

Back in the city, reeling after grappa,  
 the would-be poet wants to kill himself,  
 climbing the parapet of an arching bridge,  
 teetering, threatening to dive head first,  
 but ends in slapstick. Everyone gets drunker,  
 moving from wine bar to wine bar, but then  
 accident intervenes—a chunk of marble  
 breaks from an ancient ledge and almost hits  
 the would-be poet walking near the wall.  
 They laugh, surrounding the crushed masonry.  
 Lights go on in windows. Heads peer out.  
 The explosion of the crash has woken up  
 the parish. Dogs are barking. Sleepers complain.

*continued overleaf..*

STREETS FULL OF WATER *contd...*

The little circle of expatriates  
 moves down the alley, next to a canal,  
 close to the building where the merchant lives.  
 But then a shadow moves, a figure bursts  
 from a doorway. The plumber pushes off  
 a sleeve that suddenly appears, pure reflex,  
 but then he notices a glint of metal  
 flashing, a blast, and then the painter crumbles.  
 Not brawlers, still they grapple with the gunman,  
 led by the merchant, pounding him and punching,  
 knocking his Magnum into the canal  
 and scrimmaging until they've pinned him down.

A member of a neo-Fascist group  
 called Casa Pound ("the rest is dross") has struck.  
 He wanted to eliminate the merchant,  
 just as he had ambushed Senegalese  
 compatriots and handbag-sellers already.  
 He slipped inside and shot two as they napped,  
 waiting for more Black immigrants to kill.  
 The next day, Africans would march and shout  
 "Racists! Racists! Shame!" in the Piazza.

The group of temporary friends is stunned  
 and gathers in the painter's studio.  
 Since he's a little famous, locally—  
 a gallery has planned a one-man show  
 of watercolors, hidden synagogues—  
 authorities allow him to be buried  
 in San Michele. Emily's crushed and shaken.  
 The plumber's girlfriend turns out to have been  
 the mistress of the painter. Now she's calmed,  
 consoled by the merchant, potent as Othello,  
 mysterious and shrewd as Klee's Black Prince.  
 Quick sketches in her open notebook show  
 a passionate rebelliousness, a seething:  
 boys who lounge on a crumbling hump-backed bridge;  
 a woman in a kitchen, scaling fish.

The plumber's on his own but gets a job here,  
 repairing leaky faucets, clogged-up toilets.  
 The would-be poet needs to try his luck  
 at anything but verse. The Jewish man  
 has realized he'll never be a rabbi  
 but thinks he's closer to enlightenment.  
 Emily smiles, a little crookedly,  
 and asks him to have dinner at the casa.  
 Later, they'll go out on the balcony  
 and clamber up the balustrade to hop  
 on the roof of the Peggy Guggenheim Museum,  
 sneaking like burglars to the sculpture garden.  
 Too dangerous? "We've done it as a prank.  
 Come on," she coaxes, "you've got to test the limits."

*continued overleaf...*

STREETS FULL OF WATER *contd...*

The merchant's busy wooing and seducing  
the widowed mistress, putting his arm around her.  
Although she doesn't look at him, she leans  
her head against his shoulder and relaxes,  
collaborating in their first embrace.  
"I want to come back sailing my own yacht,"  
he says, "and dock where I sold leather bags.  
*Mon coeur*, let's go to Paris, where it's bright  
at midnight and we'll stay up until dawn.  
And you can paint. And I can make my fortune."  
She acquiesces, gazes at his face.  
Their kiss, reflected in a dark canal,  
breaks up in flashes, flickering mosaics.

**Production Notes**

The title comes from a telegram sent by Robert Benchley after he arrived in Venice: "STREETS FULL OF WATER. PLEASE ADVISE." I developed this blank-verse treatment because I wished Woody Allen would set a film entirely in the city, where part of *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996) takes place. The passage about "an actor who breaks through the screen / to reach a woman in the audience" alludes to a scene in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985). Like Ezra Pound, another controversial artist, Allen has strong connections to Venice, where he once considered buying Ca' Dario and where he and his jazz band performed a concert reopening La Fenice after a fire had gutted the opera house.

Emily is the only character named in the poem, but here's the full cast of expatriates (all outsiders, standing apart even in their own communities):

Emily Harrington: "studying abroad / in Casa Volta on the Grand Canal." (In a Woody Allen film, the female lead would almost certainly be white, but it might make more sense for this scenario if she were African American.)

Paul Durée: "the merchant from Senegal who's selling handbags." (His father Catholic, his mother Muslim, he's accepted by his fellow street vendors, all Muslim, but represents an outlier.)

Walt Spiegel: "a former rabbinical student who's lost his faith."

Roger Woods (also known as Ruggero Sylva): "a painter who also plays the mandolin / ... and lives here, runs a gallery in the Ghetto."

Joe Messick: "a self-professed 'dumb plumber' and guitarist / who wants to find a job and stay in Venice."

Miranda Locke: "his girlfriend who takes lessons from the painter / and sometimes models for his figure studies."

Galway Cooper (whose real first name is George): "a would-be poet who would like to die / in Venice and be buried in San Michele."

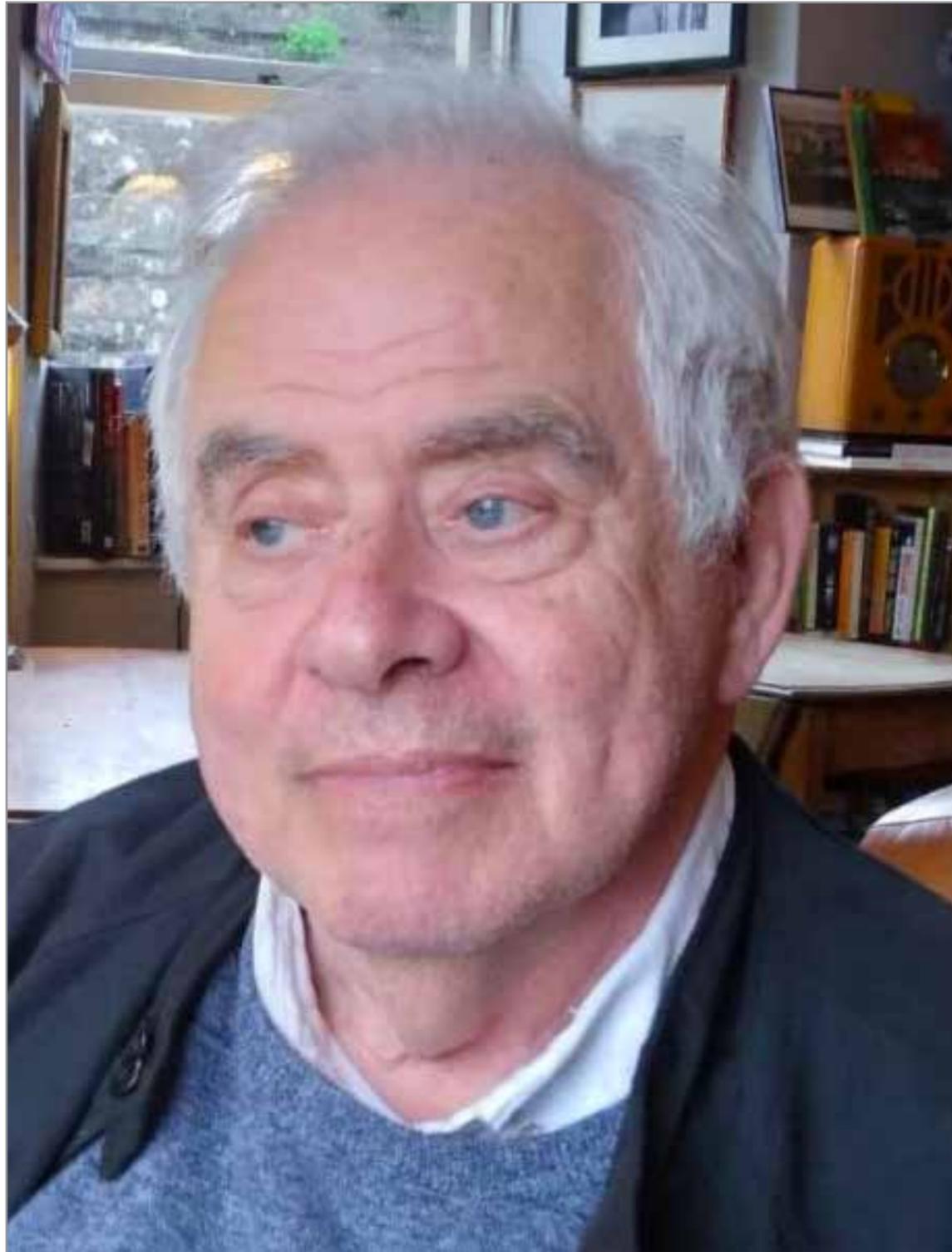
Prof. Leonard (or Lenore) Brinkley: "the resident professor, / a randy novelist."

Casa Volta is the alias I chose for Casa Artom, a house which serves as the Venetian campus for Wake Forest University. It's located on the Grand Canal between Ca' Dario and the Peggy Guggenheim Museum. I visited the building during a research trip in September 1997, after meeting two students at a restaurant where the congregation of Saint George's, the Anglican church in Campo San Vio, dined after the service. I learned that the Chaplain lived next door to Ezra Pound's house on Calle Querini and had a key; later that week his wife gave me a tour of its three floors, each with a single room. (An additional scene could show Emily, Walt, and Galway going on a tour of Pound's house.)

Donna Leon's *Blood from a Stone* begins with the murder of a Senegalese street vendor, referring to him by the derogatory term "*vu cumprà*." At the end of the mystery, these "*ambulanti*" remain alien to Commissario Guido Brunetti and other Venetians. There's no realistic way to bridge the divide. In a movie, however, the impossible can happen, and people can make surprising connections.

The massacre of Senegalese street vendors actually took place in Florence on December 13, 2011, but I took the liberty of transferring the atrocity to Venice.

Richard W. Halperin holds Irish-U.S. nationality and lives in Paris. Since 2010, he has published four collections via Salmon Poetry, *Cliffs of Moher*. The most recent is *Catch Me While You Have the Light*, 2018. In complement, he has published sixteen shorter collections via Lapwing, Belfast. The most recent is *A Ballet for Martha*. In Spring 2023, Salmon will bring out a *Selected & New Poems*, which will include poems from both publishers.



Richard W. Halperin. Photo credit: Joseph Woods.

## ART

In a few hours  
a friend will be giving a reading in Strokestown.  
He is sometimes nervous before a reading.  
He shouldn't be.

I think of an Auden love poem  
'It is time for the destruction of terror'  
the first two-thirds of which describe the sorry state of the world,  
then comes the marvel, untainted.

I am recuperating from brilliant dental surgery.  
The Evil One at the moment is trying to destroy Ukraine.  
He has plenty of help.

The pieces don't come together, in this hotel.

Why do some people draw? Do they themselves know?  
As a small child, I drew. I did not know why.

A picture of a rose is not a rose. It is other.  
Ballet dancing is not walking. It is other.

When Eavan Boland died suddenly,  
a friend who is also a poet wrote me  
'Her light bulb went out.'

Virginia Woolf hearts John Donne. I don't.  
Virginia Woolf hearts Christina Rossetti. I do.

There is your drawing,  
On the table in front of you.  
No one else could have drawn it.  
Not even you.

## THE ETERNAL RETURN

In a short story by Henry James,  
an earnest passionate dull young man  
waits on a dock of a Swiss lake in late evening  
for a girl who is coming back to a hotel,  
but not, as it turns out, back to him.

A modern version of the myth of  
the longed-for return of a wonderful being.  
When the wonder does return, nothing  
in daily living is one whit easier.

Tennyson depicts the same thing  
in 'Ulysses' Henry James. Tennyson.  
I like living with artists who cannot  
be fooled.

## FIGURE IN THE CARPET

Sunlight sometimes makes figures: ovals,  
filigrees, patches. If one watches, they move.  
They are never still. Transfigure is the wrong  
word. They dance. I often have reason not

to be jolly. They make me jolly. I often have  
the impulse – not the compulsion; the impulse –  
to believe. They lighten that. Dance is the closest.  
Thus, the Marthas and Margots and Genes

in my poems. Sunlight on my carpet. The relief  
of having no idea what the patterns mean.  
Merles come and go. We come and go.  
But what are these?

## MY FATHER LIKED PLAYING CARDS

My father liked playing cards. My mother didn't. She liked plunging into things. He liked arranging things, then playing them out slap slap on a table. Why do poets write of parents? Why do I, often? Because a child sifts. A child is not the same age as they. Then the child is older than they, and there they are – gone – and more understandable, so, not gone. I know what it is to try to hold a marriage together. I know what it is to try to hold a friendship together – the two are different and not different. I am conscious of some of the ways I am a mess. Acutely, more each day. I am left in the ruins and in the blessings of how things turn out. I am conscious this morning in Paris at near eighty of my parents playing cards. He liked playing them. She didn't.

## A FRIEND IN BETTY'S BAY

I have a friend in Betty's Bay.  
He goes there sometimes to be alone and not to be alone.  
He doesn't care if the lines are of different lengths,  
so why should I?  
He has a place to stay.  
Many don't. He is always conscious of that.  
He is near the ocean.  
In fact, he is near two oceans.  
Who isn't? He has, he always has had,  
a good effect on me, my friend  
in Betty's Bay. What to talk about  
and what not to talk about. How to  
be together and not to be together. How to  
remember tough times and integrate them.  
How to care and not to care about whoever Betty was.

Yahia Lababidi, an Egyptian-Palestinian author of ten collections of poetry and prose, has been called “our greatest living aphorist”. His aphorisms and poems have gone viral, are used in classrooms, religious services, and feature at international film festivals. Lababidi has also contributed to news, literary and cultural institutions throughout the USA, Europe and the Middle East, such as: Oxford University, Pearson, PBS NewsHour, NPR, HBO as well as beIN Sports. His latest work includes *Desert Songs* (Rowayat, 2022), a bilingual, photographic account of mystical encounters in the deserts of Egypt, as well as *Learning to Pray* (Kelsay Books, 2021) a collection of his spiritual reflections.



## PRAYER WITHOUT HANDS

When younger and mastering their craft  
 — balancing bicycle against self —  
 one might, miraculously, lift their hands  
 from the handlebars and propel themselves  
 using only their weight and will.

It's the same with prayer in older age...  
 on cold nights when we are swaddled,  
 like a helpless child, in bed  
 both arms pinned to our side  
 and prayer beads out of reach.

We might worship, motionlessly—  
 addressing the Unknowable One  
 (whatever you can imagine, He is not)  
 and find our burdens, mysteriously lifted  
 without ever raising a finger.

Yahia Lababidi

## CONFESSIONS

A mystic is a tormented soul who surrenders  
the turmoil of violent passions to the Lord  
—entrusts Him, alone, with their burning body

The spiritual journey is one of great risk  
in perpetual danger of spilling over...  
a long night of wild terror precedes safety

Proceed with caution, pilgrim,  
you have been, gravely warned:  
*Here, moral harm is immortal.*

## PRAYER BEADS

The mystery of the worlds  
held in your hands  
oscillating between Here  
and the Hereafter

With rhythmic movement,  
an undulating thumb  
and steadfast forefinger,  
prostrate and stand at attention

Losing self and time, in trance,  
navigating immeasurable spaces  
at once, grounded and at sea—  
nameless as the summoned One

Worlds at your fingertips  
each bead an orbiting planet  
or a patient Muslim pilgrim  
circumambulating Mecca's Kaaba.

## WHAT IS THE DESERT?

It's forgetfulness  
of trivia  
and noise:

the city  
or ego

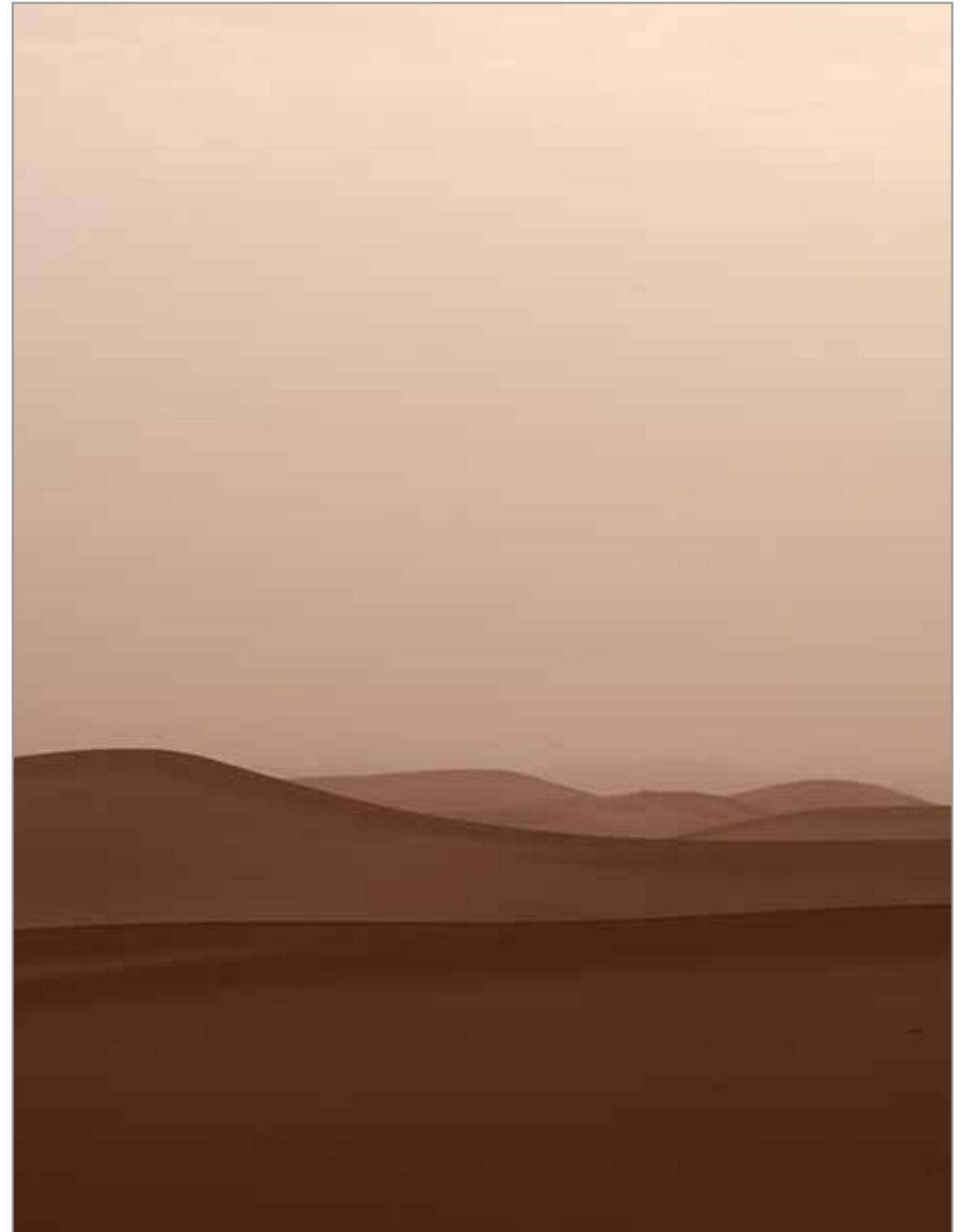
Remembrance  
of essences:

silence  
stillness  
and G\_d.

It's the stormy story of the sea  
recollected in tranquility

death and birth and death  
and transformation—

a gift granted only  
to the patient  
who surrender.



Photograph courtesy [https://pixabay.com/es/users/wolfgang\\_hasselmann-12114733/](https://pixabay.com/es/users/wolfgang_hasselmann-12114733/)

Julian Matthews is a former journalist from Malaysia who is published in *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Beltway Poetry Quarterly* and *Borderless Journal*, among others. He stumbled onto poetry by accident five years ago. That happy accident has turned into a rabid compulsion. He is still extricating himself from the crash. Welcome to his recovery. If you wish to support his continued vocation, please send him *Wordle* answers at [linktr.ee/julianmatthews](http://linktr.ee/julianmatthews) or contribute to [paypal.me/poetjulian](http://paypal.me/poetjulian)



Julian Matthews

## THE SEARCH

I know I shouldn't have signed that consent form  
without reading the fine print at the bottom  
When we friended each other, it was only because we had 37 mutual friends  
All of them were poets, artists, creative types  
She said she liked my words, and was curious about my right-brain  
I didn't think she meant that literally  
When she asked whether she could "probe my lobes",  
I thought she meant ear lobes, not brain lobes  
It sounded like a nerdy come-on, or perhaps she was just rhyming  
I made a note to myself to look up "probe my lobes" in Urban Dictionary

When she said it would be "minimally invasive" and didn't require anaesthesia,  
she sounded professional like a surgeon  
When she used the term "remote brain mapping", I knew she was serious  
Hell, I welcomed any kind of intimacy in this lockdown isolation  
All I had to do was just leave my airpods on in bed at night,  
and all she needed was my phone number  
She'd call unobtrusively when the app I downloaded sensed I was asleep  
I obliged, thinking this was a sciency, millennial way to hit on me

The first time it happened, I thought it was just a dream,  
or tender head massage  
The second time I felt it deeply, like when you stick a finger  
too far in your ear and it itches and hurts  
I heard her rummaging through my brain  
She opened dendrite drawers she shouldn't have  
I sensed her reaching behind my cerebral cupboards  
where I hid my stash of new ideas for poems,  
my fragments of dreams  
She squeezed my hippocampus so hard like it was the last bit of a toothpaste tube  
and I felt some my saddest memories pop out  
She had struck a nerve, cupping my inner trauma in her hands,  
whispering over and over: "It's not your fault, it's not your fault, it's not your fault."

*continued overleaf...*

## THE SEARCH *contd...*

Once, as a teenager, I fell off my bike and had a concussion and they did an MRI. It was so scary like entering a high-tech coffin head-first.

But I felt none of those sensations from last night's probe  
 This time, she was all in  
 She prodded my amygdala, my emotional centre  
 I felt her swinging on nerve endings, sliding down my synapses,  
 I could almost hear her breathing, hard, sometimes gasping inside of me  
 I have to admit it was a little exciting, my axons were titillated  
 But then came the chiselling and scraping,  
 like she was a fossil-hunter chipping away at my neurons  
 like a prospector extracting precious stones  
 or a palaeontologist on her final dig  
 I could sense some part of me was being suctioned away  
 I thought I felt her dragging bits across my prefrontal cortex

Today, when I woke up, I messaged her immediately to tell her to stop.  
 She replied flatly, almost too quickly: OK.  
 Had she taken what she came for and no longer cared?  
 Was my brain permanently damaged in some way?  
 I felt nothing.

Then I got up, pulled the curtain, and the sun streamed in  
 and my head felt lighter, and my heart filled up  
 like a thousand rainbows

## RESURRECTION

I wish I could bring you back to life  
 I wish I could ask again for your advice  
 And really listen this time  
 And record you  
 And put it on volume 10  
 And on endless repeat  
 So I can hear you again and again  
 Until it seeps into every pore  
 It burns into my very core  
 So internalised that it manifests itself and busts down doors  
 Like a muscle memory reflex  
 The experience of constancy  
 That bounces into action  
 And saves the day

Cause the nights are all I have now  
 And I am so alone in making these furtive calls  
 And the ghosts of our past conversations wander in and out empty, mazy halls  
 I only hear your whispers in huddled corners  
 Ear pressed hard against the wall  
 The echoes diminishing with every call

When does the adult stop childishly yearning for a mum's cuddle?  
 When does a child start adulting and know the adult thing to do?

I wish I could resurrect you today  
 There is no bible to reference your signs  
 No psalms to sing for which all the lyrics would tumble out in rhymes  
 No prayer you taught me comes answered with the clarity of a chime  
 I want you here and now to save the day  
 The way you saved mine  
 I am no hero  
 Only human  
 And this saviour thing  
 is beyond me...

## DO THE MATH

The first box I played in was probably cardboard  
 A crate of a dozen milk tins from the neighbourhood sundry shop  
 My mum would empty it and let me sit in it  
 In my imagination it was a boat floating down the  
 Ganges or the Amazon  
 I might have been light enough for my brothers  
 to have lifted me in it  
 Circling the round table in the hall like a Wright brother  
 on a maiden flight, whooping with hands outstretched  
 My sister may have tied a string and dragged me around in it  
 like a train, choo-chooing as we rode along,  
 around mum's kitchen or dangerously down the staircase  
 We may have fallen, cried, laughed it off  
 No one would have died

When they suit me up and lay me in that last box  
 I won't get to choose its make or let my imagination run  
 The pallbearers will disperse the weight by six  
 But the new lightness will be heavy for some

Do the math  
 In a marriage 1 plus 1 never adds to 2  
 And 1 times 1 is never 1  
 Human value multiplies with age  
 When you divide you make things smaller  
 When you add you overthink it  
 When you subtract you negate me

We were never meant to tick each other off  
 within boxes  
 We colour our lives outside of them  
 We are equal only when our imagination  
 soars on the shoulders of others, before us,  
 and after us  
 Both sides are never a balanced equation  
 when falling/rising is a rite of passage

Do the math  
 Six feet under  
 12 feet above  
 The dirt between us is soil for the planting  
 Or a bucket of it to cart away and claim your own  
 The graverobbers dream of treasures beneath  
 The cemetery dogs hope for pickings above  
 We only light the candles or place the flowers  
 after the grave has been weeded and cleaned  
 Human folly is calculating the losses on either side  
 The sky smiles knowing clouds come and go  
 by catching drifts  
 And blue is only one of its many colours

You are limited only by the box you pine for, child  
 All else is imagination  
 Do the math

## UNLIKE OUR MOTHERS

I'm at Kinokuniya, after a long while, since the lockdown  
The welcomed scent of fresh, new softcovers permeating through my double mask,  
triggering memories of homes past, No 18, Freeman Road,  
the bookshelf with the Encyclopaedia Britannica with gold lettering,  
and the set of Children's Classics: Black Beauty, Tom Sawyer, Robin Hood, King Arthur,  
a young mind seeded with knowledge, heroes and adventure

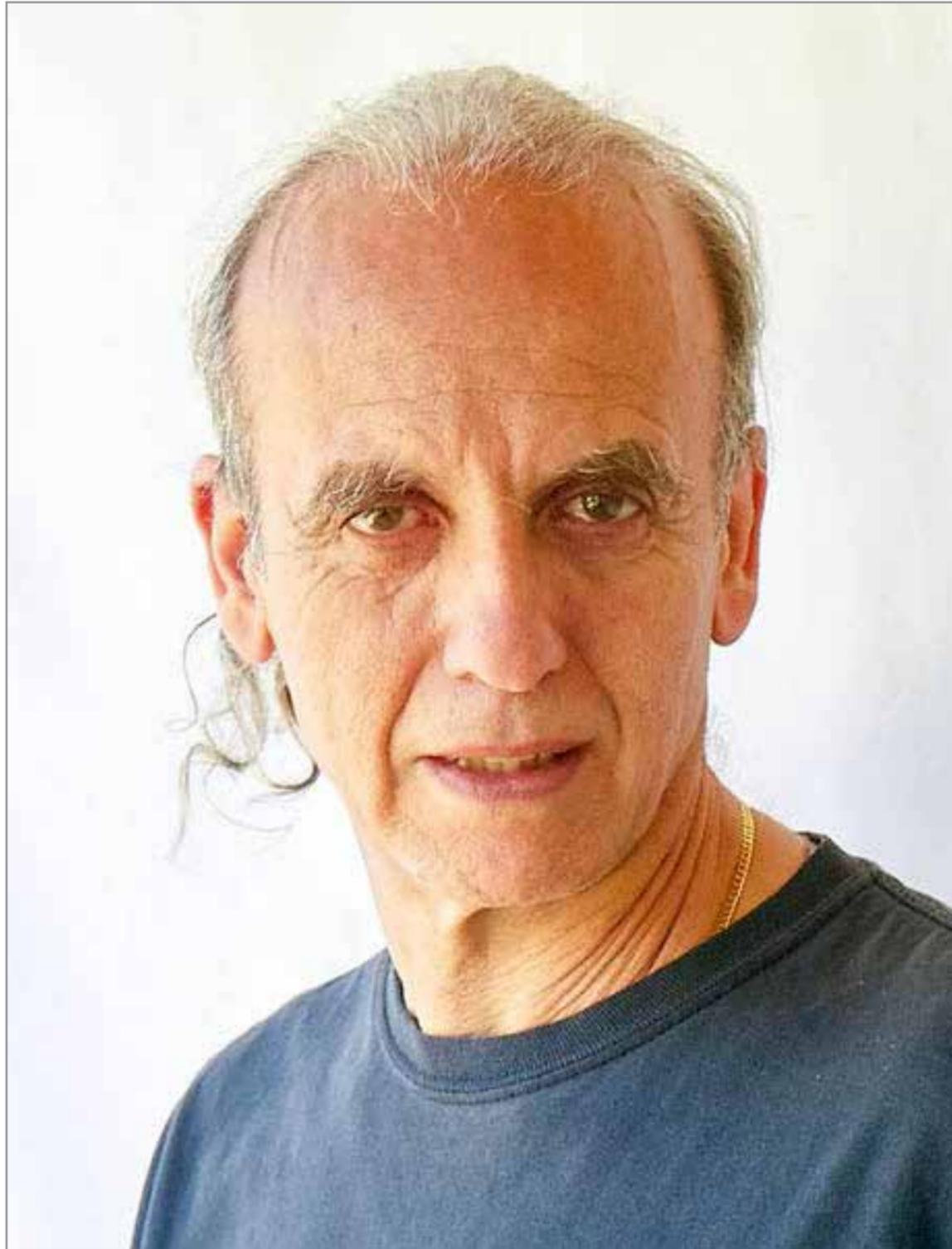
And of you cooking curry on the stove,  
how you handled the pot and served it without flinching,  
your calloused hands unscathed from the heat,  
like it was some kind of superpower

Unlike me this morning, pulling the coffee from the microwave  
and yelping, like a stepped-on puppy,  
almost flipping the mug over  
and blowing my fingers  
as if it would help

How soft I've become in adulthood,  
so unrepresentative of your DNA, your tenacity, your resilience,  
the innate ability to get through tough times.  
Your generation was made of sterner stuff.  
My generation applauds from apartment balconies for those in ICU  
then waddles back to get our eternal fix from the MCU  
For what is a pandemic compared to surviving World War 2  
— or motherhood for 65 years?  
The heroics of the many in place of the few

I scan the spines of books—  
hoping to grow a backbone from all this reading  
A wannabe writer, cooking up stories, lacking the same spice  
My clumsy hands often hidden, stewing in pockets,  
fingers emerging only to type me-me-me poetry  
on padded keys,  
documenting your hands, thumbprints singed off,  
palms toughened from cradling the world  
holding on to hearts long after  
the scathing

David Adès is the author of *Mapping the World*, *Afloat in Light* and the chapbook *Only the Questions Are Eternal*. He won the Wirra Wirra Vineyards Short Story Prize 2005 and the University of Canberra Vice-Chancellor's International Poetry Prize 2014. *Mapping the World* was commended for the FAW Anne Elder Award 2008. David's poems have been read on the Australian radio poetry program Poetica and have also featured on the U.S. radio poetry program Prosody. His poetry has twice been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and twice been shortlisted for the Newcastle Poetry Prize. His poems have been Highly Commended in the Bruce Dawe National Poetry Prize, a finalist in the Dora and Alexander Raynes Poetry Prize (U.S.) and commended for the Reuben Rose International Poetry Prize (Israel). David is the host of the monthly poetry podcast series "Poets' Corner" which can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLb8bHCZBRMBjWIPDeaSanZ3qAZcuVW7N>. He lives in Sydney with his wife and three children.



## FROM WHICH I MUST ALWAYS AWAKE

Before skin : eyes partake :

shy eyes : brown : dreaming timid under lashes :  
thieving eyes : stealing sideways glances :

so many little thefts :  
at face : at hair : at freckles : at neck :

at hands : at fingers :  
at curve and swell beneath dress :

beneath white blouse : beneath : beneath.

\*

Skin : what is your testimony?

Whose fugitive hands : long gone :  
stroked you : coaxed :

a wanted : unwanted : wanted : unwanted  
erection from you :

shiver : tremble : quiver : quicksilver :  
while you were dreaming : fledgling dreams :

dreaming other : dreaming girl hands?  
What is your memory?

*continued overleaf...*

David Adès. Photo credit: David Mane

FROM WHICH I MUST ALWAYS AWAKE *contd...*

Who touched you here : and here?  
Who raised his hairy knee :

between your bare legs :  
in an empty change room :

whilst others danced *The Wedding Dance*?  
Who arranged to meet you :

during a school lunch break :  
furtive amidst the trees and thickets :

the rocks and sculptured ponds :  
of the Veale Gardens?

Who lay beside you in the long grass : whispering?  
What secrets : have you kept all these years :

what imprints : what scars?

\*

Later : I threw away his letters :  
the childish rounded script :

something given : something taken away :

Whether from anger : or shame :  
I cannot say: the only letters discarded.

\*

She lay beneath me : still as a fallen bird :

I was skinbone : stripling : sapling :  
lowering my mouth to : her mouth :

my lips to : her lips :  
to the soundtrack of Carole King's *Tapestry* :

and she : white bloused : golden-haired :  
beneath me : still as a fallen bird :

When our lips touched : she didn't resist :  
didn't respond : and my kiss :

faltered : foundered :  
fell between us : still as a fallen bird :

that did not breathe again.

\*

We danced : my hands :

(do I imagine this?) : on her white-bloused waist :  
round and round : circling : never arriving :

the moments distanced : silent :  
the recovered footage of a lost movie :

*continued overleaf..*

FROM WHICH I MUST ALWAYS AWAKE *contd...*

girl from another land : girl from another world :  
 girl temple : temple of my longing :

girl never found : long lost : girl never known :  
 How could she know of my longing :

when it was a bone not yet unearthed?

\*

If I dream of her now :

I enter the dream I had of her then :  
 insulence gleaming in her eyes :

at the corners of her fourteen-year-old mouth :  
 I enter the dream of my heart :

its adolescent pounding :  
 the dream of my novice lips :

in their timid uncertainty.

\*

To fully apprehend a moment :

a singular moment in a vast plurality :  
 pluck the moment from obscurity :

and hold it : for a lifetime : with tenderness :  
 with the concentrated gaze : of the senses :

until its petals open : delicate : flush with colour :  
 as with : the thirty seven years :

since : the still life : of my fallen kiss.

\*

With or without skin :

on skin: against skin : inside skin :  
 touching : pressing : filling : squeezing : caressing :

imagination partakes : helps itself :  
 to the fruits of *eros* : the imagined touch :

the imagined lovemaking : thrust and moan of it :  
 feel and sound of it : body to body :

spooned : astride : entwined :  
 sweat and breath : hunger : compulsion :

weight of cupped breasts : tongue's soft questing :  
 on nipple : on furrowed skin :

between : between :  
 moistness on moistness :

her raised bud : my dripping chin :  
 hunting sighs : hunting shudders :

*continued overleaf...*

FROM WHICH I MUST ALWAYS AWAKE *contd...*

abdomen's involuntary contraction :  
pungent smell of it : tongued bitterness :

tongued nectar of it :  
fingers on glans : on shaft : on testicles :

entering and : entering :  
blurred thought of it :

want and want of it : tensed muscles :  
arched back : thrust and moan of it :

fullness of it : hope in it :  
promise of it : release from it :

transitory release from it.

\*

At my very heart :

(in its rhythmic beat :  
axiom : gravity well : lightning rod : *leitmotif* :

the chamber music of love :  
call it ventricular love : call it aortic love) :

is the dream of a woman :  
a woman with many faces : many bodies :

known : and unknown :  
a woman never displaced : by circumstance :

Always there : in the years of solitude :  
the years of living alone :

the years between lovers :  
and whilst there were lovers :

and in the midst of a marriage :  
the dream of a woman :

same dream : different dream :  
dream of being accepted :

dream of being received :  
with open arms : with open heart :

with love : with ferocity :  
uncompromised dream : that no woman can match :

from which I must : always awake.

\*

Meet me here :

where the wilderness of the unspoken :  
meets the wilderness of the spoken :

where mirages shimmer in the distance :  
in the fierce heat :

*continued overleaf...*

FROM WHICH I MUST ALWAYS AWAKE *contd...*

I am tired of sifting : my heart's rumpled pornography :  
I am tired of trying : to articulate :

Meet me here : and fill my ears :  
with sweet nothings : show me :

the ripe body of your lust :  
Bring to me : your willingness :

your questing hands : your needing lips :  
Bring to me : the sly curve of your mouth :

dancing devils in your eyes :  
your unappeased heart :

Bring to me : your naked loveliness :  
your unasked questions : your hot wet urgency :

Take from me : the fire from my furnace :  
my quiet incantations : my un-beached poems :

Come to me : unguarded : vulnerable :  
heart and body open :

Meet me here now :  
before night's sharp cold arrives :

and let us fuse : in the heat of this wilderness.

\*



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

Catherine Gonick's poetry has appeared in journals including *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Forge*, *Poets Artists*, and *New Verse News*, and in anthologies including *in plein air*, *Grabbed*, and *Dead of Winter 2021*. She has poems forthcoming in *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*, *Mediterranean Poetry*, *Soul-Lit* and *Amethyst Review*, and the anthology *Support Ukraine*. Raised in California, she lives in New York, and is part of a company that seeks to slow the rate of global warming through projects that repair and restore the climate.



## NAMING NAMES

for the sake of the story  
 the story of the name  
 name everyone already knows  
 knows is to blame for the story  
 the story with no need to name  
 name any others by name  
 name but the one named by the news outlet  
 outlet independent in a nondemocratic state  
 state that need not be named  
 named in an unnamed undemocratic region  
 region with but one stated enemy  
 enemy state named  
 named interfering with freedom  
 freedom to speak against without fear  
 fear of another quick death  
 death in the extended family  
 family in the extensive region  
 region with denominations the outlet does not name  
 name in their countries  
 their countries supported  
 supported by other countries outside  
 outside countries not to be named  
 named could interfere with blame  
 blame apparent so transparent  
 transparent reporting not needed  
 needed not truth through investigation  
 investigation into a crime so heinous  
 so heinous a crime said to speak for itself  
 itself heard to shout  
 shout for the narrative

Catherine Gonick

*continued overleaf...*

## NAMING NAMES

*contd...*

narrative naming the enemy  
 enemy with no need for a name  
 a name that is always anyway stated  
 stated for merely its name  
 its name is enough for the story  
 the story told by the news  
 the news called independent  
 independent in an undemocratic state  
 state in a hot region  
 region without an enemy in the family  
 the family enemy only that one named  
 named as a must prevent  
 prevent another quick death in the family  
 the family that knows without fear  
 fear in its mind unconfused by facts  
 facts made up in its made up mind.  
 What if they said the enemy might not have  
 not have committed the crime? What might  
 might happen to them and their families?

## THE UNEXAMINED BULLET

I am but a tiny penis in form but far mightier than a sword.  
 I spend my existence waiting, dependent on outsiders

to achieve my goal. I am humble, seem like all the others  
 of my kind, yet can be proved by science to be an individual

with my own strange striations, not just one of the crowd.  
 I am existentially attached to another individual, one of yours,

a person endowed with name and skill. I come from somewhere,  
 which is important, though only after the fact. I come indisputably

from one of you, someone I've never met and never will.  
 I usually but don't always meet my target. Do or don't,

I am sometimes said to have gone astray, like a wanton girl.

## THE DEVIL'S CATECHISM: CONCERNING BIRTH

*Every sperm is sacred.*—Monty Python

Man's connection to a woman ends at the tip  
of his penis. His sole responsibility is to his sperm,

a duty she must share, once they're in her. Thus  
begins her sacred trust, to be enforced

by Man as temple priest. His offered seed must grow  
behind her veil of flesh, hidden and holy until born.

Then something else abides, profane, of no account,  
which can be dropped off at a manger.

O suffer the little children to come unto them  
with God on their side, and good luck

to the kids. Their birth rings the bells  
at Man's black mass. As the woman pushes,

he's the uninvited guest. He stands unnoticed  
at the foot of her bed, imagines it as altar,

hospital room as church. In the sanctuary  
of his fancy, Man raises blood and body

still unborn, to be blessed by Heaven  
one last time before a head appears.

Stolen pyx and chalice get recycled. Man  
has seen the transubstantiation of his sperm.

Epiphany is enough. Exhausted by the long  
labor, Man returns to more important work.

## BRIEF FOR THE DAUGHTER

*In his draft abortion opinion, Justice Alito cited Sir Edward Cooke,  
17th century English jurist who held abortion to be murder, and  
witches, who worked with the devil, deserving of judicial murder.*

As the court may if it pleases rule  
the law can act in loco parentis  
loco father to the daughter.

*Anthropology holds that marriage is an exchange  
of a woman, between two groups of men.  
Except for the father's daughter, the rule forbidding  
the sexual use of female relatives  
is reinforced by the claims of other kin.*

By long tradition, the law holds  
'tis better the daughter bear fruit than burn  
as a witch for offending the rights of the father.

*The father is most offended by sex between mother and son.  
Aunt and cousin belong to the uncle, sister-in law  
and niece to the brother, daughter-in-law and  
granddaughter to the son.*

The daughter belongs to the father alone.  
The witch belongs to the devil.

*If the father disregards the rule about the daughter,  
no one else's rights are offended, as long  
as he finally gives the daughter in marriage.*

*continued overleaf..*

## BRIEF FOR THE DAUGHTER *end...*

Here, the daughter shall not marry the devil  
only date him.

*The daughter shall not steal the father's children  
to offer to Satan, nor kill them by needling  
their heads, as they emerge from the womb.*

The daughter shall not attempt to return  
to her crumbling cottage in England,  
uproot historic plantings.

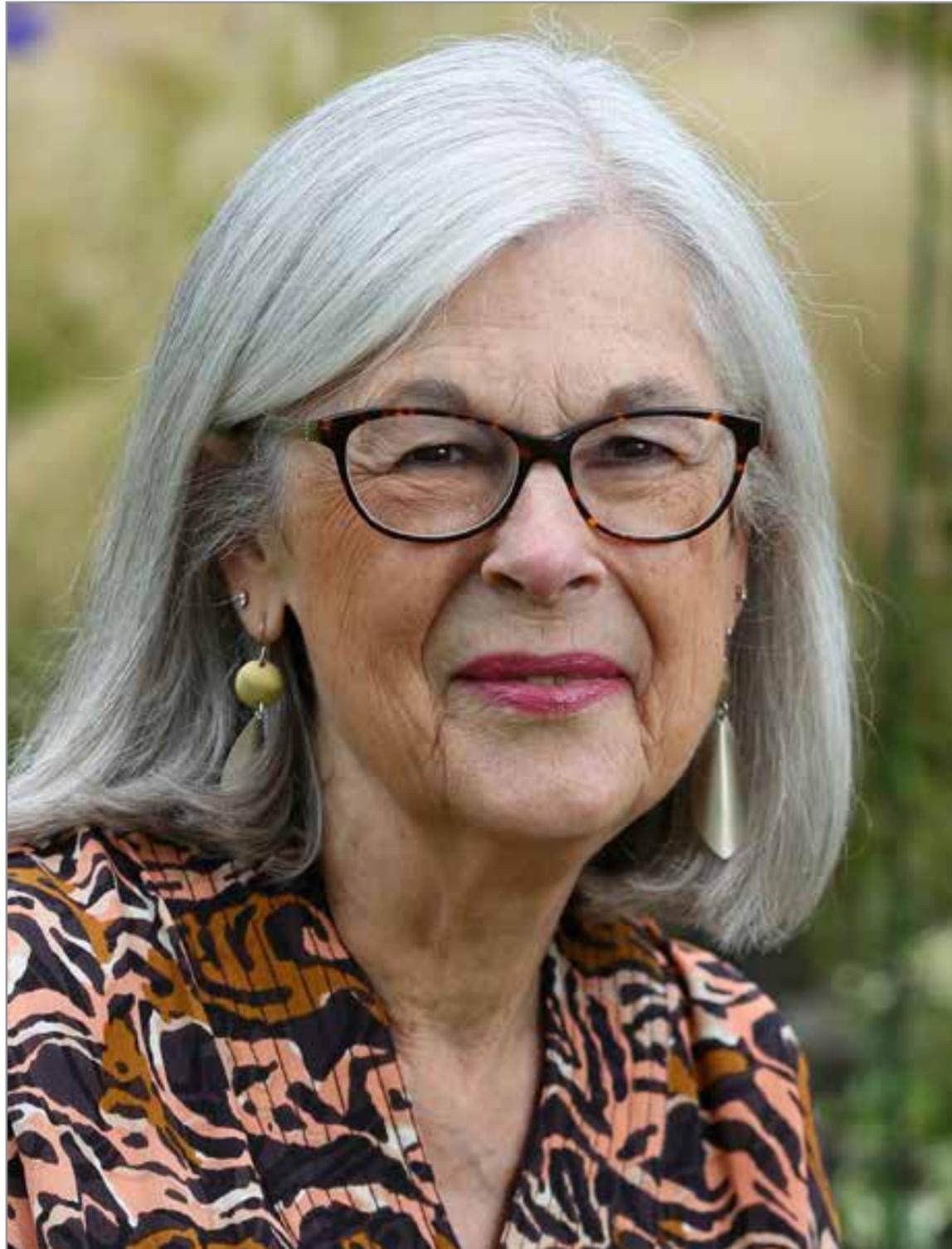
Here, the devil shall be given no standing by the court.  
The daughter shall be kept safe from him.  
The daughter shall be ruled only by the law.



Sources: <https://www.msnbc.com/transcripts/the-last-word/transcript-last-word-lawrence-o-donnell-5-4-22>; <https://historycollection.com/12-shocking-beliefs-from-the-malleus-maleficarum-the-witchfinders-guidebook>, *Father-Daughter Incest*, Judith Lewis Herman

Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

Clair Chilvers was a cancer scientist, and latterly worked for the UK National Health Service. She divides her time between writing and volunteering for the charity Mental Health Research UK that she co-founded. She lives in Gloucestershire, UK. She has had poems published in online and print magazines including Acumen, Agenda, Allegro, Amaryllis, Artemis, Atrium, the Ekphrastic Review, Impsired, Ink Sweat and Tears, Live Encounters, Poetry Atlas, Sarasvati and Snakeskin. She won second prize in the Poetry Kit Ekphrastic Competition 2020 and her poems have been longlisted or commended in the Cinnamon Press Pamphlet Prize 2020, and Poetry Kit Competition 2020. Her first collection *When We Come Out of the Darkness* (Frosted Fire) was published in 2021. Her second collection *Island* (Impsired Press) was published in 2022. [www.clairchilverspoetry.co.uk](http://www.clairchilverspoetry.co.uk)



## SUMMER IN PARIS

### I The Concierge

A tall Haussmann building  
on the Rive Gauche  
impenetrable privacy  
guarded by the concierge  
in rusty black dress, wrinkled stockings.

At night she double-locks the heavy door  
to shield us from whoever might seek entry  
or to prevent the exit of he who should not be there.

At 6am she opens it  
for delivery of patisserie  
to the couple on the first floor  
who have a live-in nursemaid  
who takes the baby every day to the park  
where she gossips with the other nannies.

At 7am green-clad *éboueurs* flush the gutters  
the concierge takes her broom,  
sweeps the front step until it shines  
and she can face the day with equanimity.  
How she must speak to *Mademoiselle*  
in the garret, about her lover  
who crept down the stairs at five past six.

*continued overleaf...*

Clair Chilvers

SUMMER IN PARIS *contd...***II The Concierge accosts *Mademoiselle***

*Mademoiselle*, she says,  
a young man was in your room, *non*?  
What would your English *maman* say?

Perhaps, *en Angleterre*, such things are permissible,  
but *Mademoiselle*, *en France*  
we are more proper.

I give you one chance, *Mademoiselle*,  
before I tell *Monsieur*.  
I think he would not find it *amusant*.

**III The nursemaid**

She minces down the stairs in her short grey dress  
tiny white apron that *Monsieur* approves  
puts on her uniform, long dark coat, sensible felt hat  
puts *bébé* in his *poussette* and off she goes

into her own world  
where *Monsieur* touches her breasts  
as he passes her in the passageway  
and perhaps one night  
when *Madame* is indisposed  
he will come to her room.

And she will giggle behind her hand  
when she meets the other nursemaids  
at their usual bench in the *Jardin des Plantes*  
convey by looks her secret longings.

Originally from Switzerland, Verena Durrer has been living in Ireland for more than three decades and has been entangled in writing for the latter half of this time. Initially she wrote short stories and flash fictions but shifted her focus to poetry. Playing with brevity she has been focusing on Haiku for the last year. She is a member of the Argillan Creative Writers and has performed in various public readings, including the recent Fingal poetry Festival.



Verena Durrer

## HAIKU

Mimicking sunbeams  
I squeeze thoughts into a room  
filled with tense silence.

\*

Pearls, white as day, spun  
in dark, salty lodgings, not  
yet found: our hope?

\*

Echoing sharp knives  
their sound shifts through blue mirrors,  
twists to dreary dreams.

\*

You're not lost. Just gone.  
Somewhere else. Still, your bouncing  
echo guides my life.

\*

Motionless you sit  
in jagged silence; wrestle  
to hear the birds.

\*

A weather-front flirts  
with a fiery sun that beams  
beyond blurry skies.

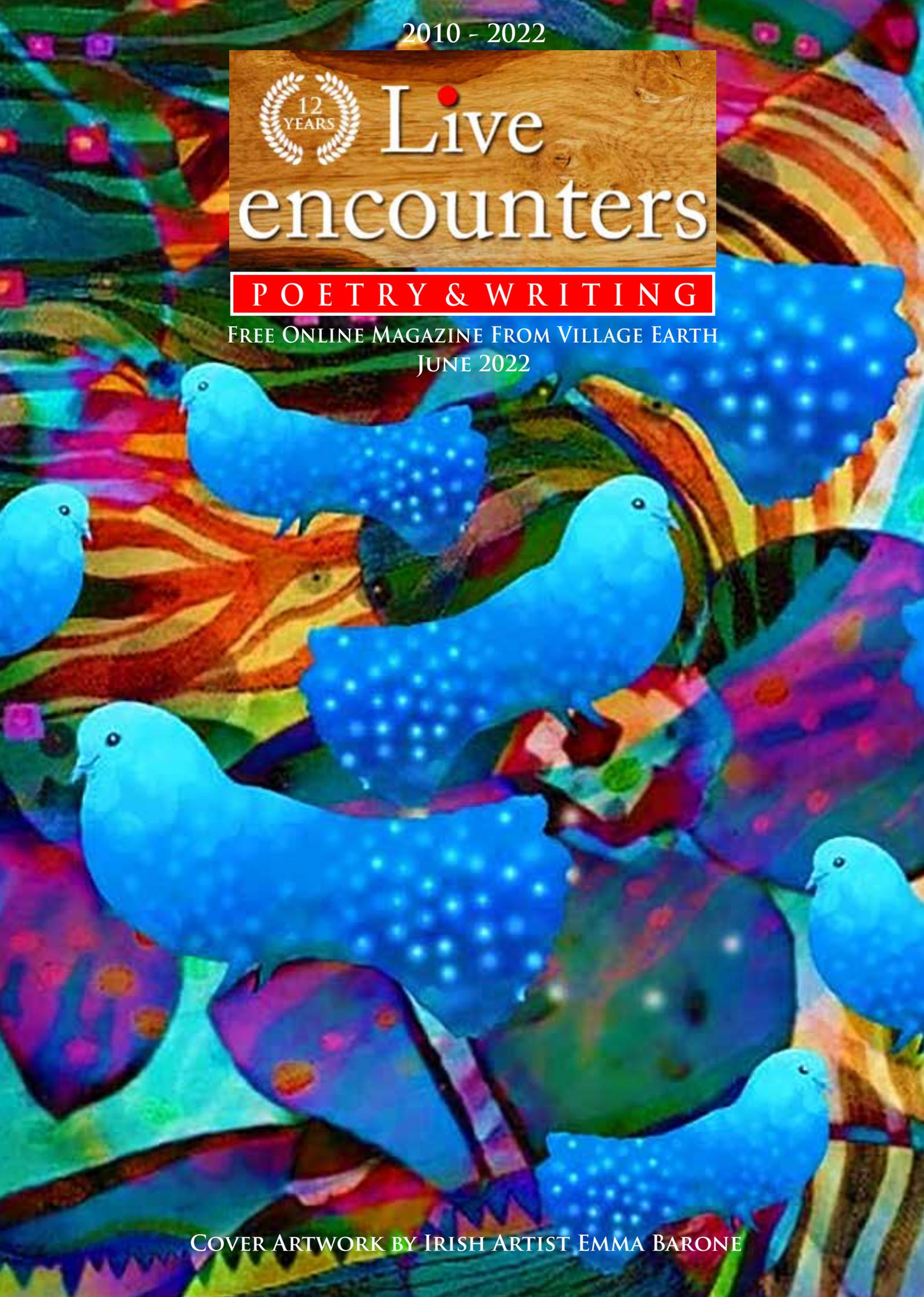
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