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SINEAD MCCLURE
Contemplating Change

COVER ARTWORK BY IRISH ARTIST EMMA BARONE



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Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

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SINÉAD MCCLURE

CONTEMPLATING CHANGE

*The lights were red, refused to change,
Ash-ends grew longer, no one spoke,
The papers faded in their hands
The bubbles in the football pools
Went flat, the hot news froze...*

— *Hold-Up* by Louis MacNeice

I thought I might be the type of person who refused to change. These last few years I have been cocooned in a time warp, lost from the pace, and proclivity of everyday life. I have grown to love this displacement. Yet, I am, as Louis MacNeice puts it, held-up, at a standstill, sitting waiting for the lights to change from red, they are always stuck on red. Is this the way the world feels now? Are we all negotiating some sort of trauma? Or have some of us left the crises behind, and decided to confront all life has to offer, even its inevitable disappointments?

Change is coming for me, whether invited or not. I am a woman at the *change of her life* a ghastly phrase borrowed from another era, one that is better whispered so as not to offend anyone who may be passing by when I am discussing the litany of symptoms that go from the bizarre to the downright shocking. The only upside being that during one of the worst energy crisis in living memory I can warm-up a medium sized room by body heat alone!

Sinéad McClure

Levity aside, this is a serious time in a woman's life. It's a time when coping sometimes doesn't happen. And when I'm stuck at the lights, I can be there for days. I can easily say I am reluctant to embrace this. Maybe it's a symptom of middle age that when it comes to contemplating any sort of change I don't know how to proceed.

*When the end of summer comes, it is
A season by itself; when your tongue
Curls back like a sparrow's buried head,
I would fill your mouth with rice and mussels.*
— *To my Grandmother* by Medbh McGuckian

Then there's loss, that permanent alteration to our lives when someone leaves us. The attempts we make to fill the space. It took me a long time to realise the only shape that fits it, is that of the one you have lost, and they must be a memory, they must be thought of as if they are still vital. My writing can become the enabler of my reluctance to change. The reimagining of lives, the stories I write and write again to reveal missing people to myself. Just as writing can enable reluctance, we know it can also be transformative.

In her poem *To my Grandmother* Medbh McGuckian embraces her loss with a language that offers comfort, and yet also serves to rip at your insides, to unsettle the reader, to bring them to that place they don't want to travel to. To stare change right in the eyes, as they flicker and close forever. Her Grandmother is the summer season, and how we hate to see it leave, particularly in the Northern Hemisphere.

When the light begins to leave us here in the northwest of Ireland, we try to be ready for it. This change of light, stirring cold, sharp and at times startlingly bright is noticed by its brevity come winter. It slips away gently the equinox breaks the day into two neat halves in September. Meaning this month of October becomes our passage to winter. This path can be gloriously decorated with autumn sunshine and it can also be a narrow corridor some of us don't wish to navigate. Winter offers her chilly hand. The season moves on inevitably, and no matter how reluctant we are to greet it, we must.

I feel there is also a loss of self when we get to middle age. The realisation that letting the young person that resides within us, leave, might be an easier prospect than holding on to her. My mother was a very youthful person. In her seventies she could have passed for someone ten years younger, she had exuberance for life, and always walked with a spring in her step. But she still faced everything women must face, and more. She didn't live beyond that decade, but she walked through it as if she could live forever. As I look towards those years now, I admire how she did that. I often wonder if I could do the same. I check the wrinkles, and allow them to become more than just markers of my age. I check my gait and wonder why it isn't as swift as my mothers. I get stuck at the lights again.

*The day is come when I again repose
Here, under this dark sycamore, and view
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves...*
— *Tintern Abbey* by William Wordsworth

This year the crows took our apples. We had wassailed the orchard after Christmas, in a tradition that has nothing to do with local myth or history and more to do with our own personal need to see a crop almost twenty years after planting the trees. On a frosty night in January we doused the newly pruned trees with cider, and wished them a happy growing season. In June we had Bramley, John O Gold, and Discovery, in different shapes, sizes and colours. It had worked. But the crows were watching the apples grow too, and on an early morning in late July a marauding murder of hoodies, rooks, jackdaws and magpies descended. It took them hours to pillage what took months to grow. I learned later that the apples would offer the birds a drink, a respite from our unusually hot summer.

Most years the apples succumb to the *June Drop*, this year they held on long enough to be of value to someone. One of these years we will all benefit. I can sit under the big sycamore, and watch as the fruits ripen, in the knowledge there may be enough for us, too.

What about the type of change we invite? Now in my mid-fifties I have made the decision to return to formal education. *This is my time* has become my mantra. I wonder why I have this need driving me to begin something so late in life. Why I want to shift my focus towards academia? The thought alone fills me with dread. Yet, it is a thought that niggles at me every year, at this time, almost as if the air of autumn is scented with collegiate promise. A promise I made to myself, a dream I always wanted to fulfill.

When I left school in the mid-eighties, I gathered together an artist portfolio, purchased one of those sleek, black A1 sized cases, housed within in it charcoal drawings, pencil sketches, chalk pastels, the life's work of a sixteen year old school leaver. I can remember that smell, faintly liquorice, mixed with turpentine. Off I trundled to one of the most prestigious institutes in the country and to interview for a place in Fine Art.

I was three questions in, somewhere after what would be your favoured medium? When I was asked, and how will you pay for this?

I mumbled something about bar work. This was met with an unsympathetic sigh. My artwork wasn't looked at again. In fact, the rest of the interview has disappeared in my memory. I was just left with the feeling that this is unattainable. Back then I was in good company most of my classmates left secondary school for a job, work was hard to procure in eighties Ireland and many of them went on to leave the country altogether. I stayed and got a job in a local shop, as a cashier. The college dream faded. One busy evening in the shop, as I was passing loose change back to a customer whom I recognised as a former teacher, I was offered the real motive for change when this man said sneeringly;

"Oh it's you; Of course, a shop assistant, this is about as far as I thought you'd go."

Whether I furthered my education or not, didn't really matter from then on in. These are privileges afforded to the few and often taken for granted by the many. That day I vowed never to be made feel insignificant or below anyone, ever again. This small minded, highly educated person, had delivered the only lesson I needed, don't let people define who they think you should be.

Over the years I have improved my skills through hard work, learning, and determination. Most of my education has been picked up from books, from experience, from poetry, from nature, from people, from life. The things I have discovered, what I have loved and hated find their way into my writing, just as the change of seasons work their way through my very being, unbidden, sometimes in a quiet, meditative way, sometimes loudly pronounced.

This autumn I am stalled at the lights, but I can see a flicker of amber. I will move, at my own pace, in my own time.

References:

Extracts from *Hold-up* by Louis MacNeice and *To my Grandmother* by Medbh McGuckian taken from *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* edited by Paul Muldoon (1986 edition)

Extract from *Tintern Abbey* by William Wordsworth (Web – interestingliterature.com).

Kim Ports Parsons grew up near Baltimore, earned degrees, taught, and worked in libraries. Now she lives next to Shenandoah National Park in Virginia, gardens, walks, and writes. Her work appears in a variety of publications, including *SWWIM Every Day*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, and *deceMBER*. *The Mayapple Forest* is her debut collection, Terrapin Books 2022. She volunteers for Cultivating Voices LIVE Poetry. Visit her at www.KimPortsParsons.com



THE GUNS OF HIS EYES

Send the boy back up the highway.
Send him back across the state line.
Walk him to his door. Turn his television off.
Tick him back years, then tuck him in
with gentle stories. Never teach him
the world is his to race, that a man
is a man when he lords it over, when
he Daniel Boones his way down any street.
Teach him no mother would be proud
of a son who murders. No judge
would ever gavel such crimes justified.

The name Kyle means a narrow channel,
a tight passage between two islands.
I wish I could build a boat to navigate
the hate, to sail through this time and the next,
to long ago, and far ahead, and calm the waters.
I wish I knew how to load this poem with just
the right ammunition, how to open every clenched
hand, how to discharge a cleansing fire.

As he ran, the guns of Kyle's eyes were opened wide.
He seemed startled at his success and held his rifle close.
He wore his power casually, backwards, like his cap.

Kim Ports Parsons

I CAN'T WRITE A POEM WITH A GUN

I can't pick berries with a gun,
can't protect my fingers from thorns,
or carry the fruit back,
or stir in sugar and spice.
I can't mix pastry with a gun,
or roll it out, or bake it, or lift
its sweetness to your tongue.

I can't plant seeds with a gun,
can't measure the furrow,
or lay each one in its inch of ground.
I can't hoe any rows with a gun,
or lug the weeds to the compost heap,
or turn the steaming piles, or sift the new
soil, or spread it around the tender shoots.

I can't chop fresh greens with a gun.
Can't slice onions or grate garlic
or soak dried red beans, or stir the pot.
I can't set the table with a gun,
or arrange flowers, or light a candle,
or blow out the smoking match,
or pull out your chair.

A gun won't help me to listen
to your story, to see the falling
images as words ricochet around us.
A gun won't open my heart
to your pain, or help me to extinguish it,
or place my hand on your quaking
shoulder, or wash away any blood.

I can't make a soft bed with a gun,
or tuck a gun around me for warmth,
or wrap arms around my beloved,
or kiss a cheek, or stroke the cat,
or stretch when I wake, or smell the morning.
I can't brew coffee with a gun,
or tie the stiff laces of my muddy boots.

When a fox steps lightly into the yard,
and shakes off the dew from the meadow,
and cocks her head, nose quivering, a gun
will not help me to study her, how she seems
to consider, so intently, which way to turn.
How so much might depend upon her choice,
where to next in this fraught, this tantalizing world.

MOWING THE LAWN, 1995

*A hush fell over the park as DiMaggio stepped to the microphone to say,
'Wherever my former teammate, Lou Gehrig is today, I'm sure he's tipping
his cap to you, Cal.'*

- Ralph Peluso, reporting on Cal Ripken's 2131st consecutive game

First Saturday in a new house, the lawn ragged
from transition, a September sun cheerful as a neighbor
with a chocolate cake, but I mostly feel determined.
The machine is brand-spanking, unboxed and oiled
and gassed, silver, complete with safety bar and warnings.

The idea is this, to sweat myself into belonging,
to create the routines of childhood so that it's easy
to pretend a table laden with sliced tomatoes,
corn on the cob, and fried chicken is waiting
at the other end of the afternoon, neatly

folded paper napkins married to forks,
blue Fiesta ware winking in the light
filtered through yellow, ironed kitchen curtains.
Really, who can you rely on like memory?
Or the simple objects which still echo in your hands?

Except, this morning I don't wear a bikini top
or look forward to catcalls from the boy up the street
or pull a frayed black cord over and over
to get the damn thing to start. Just pump the fuel-
injection knob and yank once to kick on

the steady whine of the 3.5 horsepower,
and that dome of sound roars over the yard.
Soon I'm sweating into my bandana and my faded t-shirt,
legs solid, arms sure, taking the bumps and hills
just fine. A riding mower wouldn't cut it.

Sometimes you've got to get down on your hands
and knees with a rag and bucket and wipe up every inch
of your scattered life. Nothing less will do.
In this morning's paper, Cal Ripken tips his cap
to Lou Gehrig and the fans of Baltimore,

giving us all a reason to get teary-eyed
over the ways we can and cannot be counted on.
In the trailer park next door, a retiree trims
his one shrub into a perfect globe, centered
on a circle of white stones. We tend to our corners

as we can, nesting like city sparrows,
like the pair who roosted, complacent, for one whole season
in the arc of the flashing red neon Western Auto sign,
200 feet above the Kansas City traffic,
making a living among the sharp edges.

Three games in a row this week, Cal hit
a homer and made a victory run around the field
at Camden Yards in my old hometown,
his head bare, like a man in a sentimental poem.
And I woke up, determined to be good,

to do my job, to mow the lawn into concentric squares,
to smile at the mailman doing his job. Later, after a bath
and a cup of tea, after the streetlights flicker and the children
drop their bikes in driveways, I'll go to bed, try to sleep,
and try to believe in a place called home.

Gary Fincke's collection *After the Three-Moon Era*, won the 2013 Jacar Press Poetry Prize. Other collections have won university press prizes sponsored by Ohio State, Michigan State, Arkansas, and Stephen F. Austin. Individual poems have been published in Harper's, The Paris Review, Poetry, The Georgia Review, The Kenyon Review, Ploughshares, and other such national magazines.



A COVID COMMUNAL

Icelanders held a funeral for the Okjokull glacier
- Harper's

Now, while winter, like the large mammals,
is going extinct, we have wondered how long
a virus can remain potent on frequently
touched surfaces. After Sunday's delivery,
we have sanitized our produce—oranges,
tomatoes, an eggplant, two varieties of squash.

Recently, fresh rumors list multiple cases
in the nursing home near our grocery.
Talk of collective memorial services,
bodies arranged in refrigerated trucks
that arrive and depart before daylight.

Earlier today, mid-week for milk and bread,
I lifted my mask in the parking lot and
watched two women enter that home,
both masked as they exited their cars,
wearing them like accessories that
highlight their uniforms for essential care.

In a neighboring county, across the street
from the specialist who monitors
my thyroid tumors, another home has
been shuttered for months, its lot a maze
of crime scene tape and sawhorses.

Gary Fincke

continued overleaf...

A COVID COMMUNAL

...contd

On its promotion site, that facility gleams with comfort and security, residents photographed in tidy rooms, their group activities filmed inside its spacious community center, each

caption dated during our current, coming-of-age century, the one in which winter will emigrate, fleeing the imminent collapse of seasons.

In Iceland, while mourners gather, time-lapsed photographs ask them to remember a glacier's immensity, how indestructible can be stripped by a bout of ordinary weather.

Keeping today's appointment, I call from my car and wait to be escorted inside, after questioning, for a report on caution and care's success.

That dark home, emptied like a glacier, seems capable of becoming airborne.

A CASE STUDY

The Silence of the Street before Hit-and-Run

This night, precisely at ten p.m., a woman leaves a restaurant where she has already hugged friends who decided to linger over coffee. Across the street, near her car, success has abandoned a store, its bare shelves waiting quietly as hope. Above it, the glow of television illustrates a just-opened volume of sleeplessness.

Speeding, a white jeep is a mile away. Hospitals are an idea; long-term care an additional insurance for the aging. As headlights hurtle into town, nothing she notices, the stoplights she crosses between both reflect red on the panes of the block's parentheses of bank and post office, court house and church.

The first murmur will be locks opening as, mid-avenue, she presses the fob, a flicker of headlights simultaneous with a flood of brilliance, the scene still muted, her thumb still poised as if relocking is possible, flung and headlong erasable, squeal and speechlessness replaced by fantasy's swift near-miss that comforts like the kiss of what's called good fortune or, at least, postponement.

continued overleaf...

A CASE STUDY

...contd

The Nocturnal Age

Facts re-enter and refuse to leave.
 Hit-and-run shatters the woman.
 Barely, she survives through ICU.
 For weeks, bedridden. Short distances,
 a walker. Charity visits, bringing
 a photographer and motor scooter.

Pity looks both ways at the crash site.
 Within a week, forensics follows
 a white jeep to its nearby home,
alleged pasted to its windshield
 like an inspection seal, its driver
 rumored to be a public drinker
 with a love for slur and stumble.

Over time, anniversaries—one year
 since the moment of crime, two years
 since test results were promised, three years
 since the newspaper mentions her name.
 Along that same main street, churches
 enter three vacant stores, week-by-week
 hissing a trio of reconfiguration hymns.

The former shopkeepers arrive early.
 On folding chairs, they sit as quietly
 as the truth. They lip-synch the litanies
 and refuse to sing. One congregation
 hires a roof bolter to drill small holes
 into its heavy sky as access for prayer.

The street, the town agrees, is becoming
 spirit, the stoplights set to steady dark,
 every night an unlit mine where invisible
 is a vandal. As costumed as a parable,
 it shrivels to an unhappy island where
 sympathy embraces a younger lover.

Delays unspool so long that myths form
 to explain the end of resolution.
 When the woman, despite surgery, dies,
 gossip fills with pitchforks and torches,
 but decency, tucked carefully away like
 glassware, nonetheless has shattered.

The Departure of Memory

Unexamined, scraps and remnants
 of the case lie unclaimed. Regret claws
 at each village door to beg for food.
 Memories relocate to somewhere
 furnished with the stuffed settees
 of a bygone era. Lies feed where
 lawns disappear under honeysuckle.
 They sniff the air, satisfied there is
 so little danger they can risk exposure.
 They crawl closer to the houses,
 stuffing themselves on perennials
 and stage-whispering reassurances:
 “And still.” “And yet.” “Despite that.”
 By now, their code is cadenced to
 the weakening heartbeat of epitaph.

THE WIDE, ASTONISHMENT OF AIR

Even before we parked beside his house
sold forty-three years ago to strangers,
my father had begun a catalogue of change.
At the end of the street, two houses down,
the world now ended at a cliff blasted
one lot closer for a widened highway.
My father, from where we were standing,
tried to distinguish an old path become
a wide, astonishment of air. He watched
the windows of that remodeled house
as if expecting the three younger brothers
he'd outlived, the sister a decade dead.

What I could see was the last funeral
in the parlor, my grandfather laid out
three days in the deep gray of Sunday.
What I didn't tell my father was
that I explored that morning, nineteen
and opening drawers and closets to
search for objects that would utter words
my grandfather would never say.

I didn't tell him I found white shirts, dark
pants, shoes brown and black and cordovan
while I rummaged for photographs,
listening hard, in their absence, for clues.
I didn't tell him that before the coffin
was struggled down the steep, wet steps
to Ogrodnik's sleek hearse, I climbed
to where the attic, years before, became
a small barracks for those four brothers.

By then, I had seen one snapshot of them
arranged on cots like boys already in
basic training for the imminent war.
I fought to enter my father's life, kneeling
to look through the one small window,
trying to make out what he'd witnessed
in nineteen forty-one, late November,
his wedding less than a week away.
I smeared a space and saw the long-
abandoned steel mill, the vacancy
left between a jeweler and hair salon
by his years-ago razed bakery, sweating
in my white shirt and blue tie, squinting
while I wiped my forehead with the back
of my hand, marking myself with dust.

The house moaned vowels of promise.
Isolation whirred like a host of locusts
while the light fled to where everlasting
lived alone. The heart of an ancient king,
I remembered, was once mummified
with mint and myrtle, frankincense
and daisy. For centuries, that icon
traveled countries like a campaigner.
In that low-slung room, the unbearable
waited like a woman I had paid for.

PLEASE, SCREAM

1

That was the week, with caution, Japan had
Reopened its amusement parks, roller
Coasters climbing to the precipice of terror.
To stop the spread of virus, the government
Told riders, please, scream in your heart.
Someone, then, had posted a photograph
Of a thrill ride so steep and high it suggested
That parachutes might be required for safety.
Would you ride? she asked, and already there were
Two hundred and seventeen shares, thousands
Of comments that tallied a landslide for NO.

2

One morning, in Italy, after we had visited
A perfume factory, an inspection so boring
Some of us sat outside to voice indifference,
Our tour bus driver, after a wrong turn, needed
To reverse us. The road, narrow and without
Guardrails, was bordered by a plummet
To a town beside the Mediterranean Sea.
More than once, the driver backed those
In the rear seats to the rare space where
"Poised over nothing" was translated by
Tears, prayers, and screams in their hearts.

3

Fifty years ago, one week after riding
In a station wagon I drove, a girl died
Beside a Corvette that crashed and
Catapulted her through its windshield.
Decades later, I used that girl's death
And the loss of her driver's legs to fuel
A story's conclusion. What happened
To your friends is not your story's truth,
An editor explained, asking for a revision
That avoided that inevitable tragedy.
And so I saved them, though ambiguously,
The choices they made perhaps maiming
Or killing them on another reckless evening.
I left her being sped through expectancy,
That thrilling car still poised, unscathed.

DANCING AFTER SURGERY

At first, dance short versions
of the walker shuffle while upstairs,
your wife believes you are still
sitting out the sixty-year-old songs.

Next, sway in place, feet planted
while you listen to where your spine
has been altered, the internal stitches,
after weeks, absorbed by your body.

For a few nights, choose slow ballads,
shy and nervous about your body
on its own, shadow dancing with
the permanent suffix of -ectomy,

One evening, deejay up-tempo.
Do a slow, cautious, wallflower Twist,
testing the oxymoron of recovery
before reverting to laments and pleas.

At last, travel to three versions
of the Land of a Thousand Dances
where you know how to Pony
and do the Watusi, where, next up,

you do the Bristol Stomp while
lip-synching Every Day of the Week with
a singer who sounds as if he's twelve,
believing every suggested promise

of love and sex, watching the stairs
for the wonder of your wife descending
to your altered self, the future
of each day on nothing but repeat,

two minutes of sustainable joy
before discomfort cries "Good night,"
a chaperone in the temporary
promise of a decorated gym.

John Samuel Tieman, of St. Louis, is a widely published poet and essayist. His poetry has appeared in "The Americas Review", "The Caribbean Quarterly", "The Chariton Review", "The Iowa Review", "Rattle", "River Styx", and "Stand". He writes a weekly column for "Azar.az", a popular online news service in Eurasia.

These poems are from his series entitled "**echoes**", and are inspired by the poets and poems listed below each of Tieman's poems.

THE ARRIVAL*

What you heard is true. During her journey north
to these States, she crawled a mile on her knees
to pray before the tilma of an Aztec peasant.
But according to our laws, she is as shapeless

as an uncharted shore. Her accent is a libretto
of birds, but her asylum application is a keening
in a shocking key. She lists as her sole asset her

hope to die among us. In the space about "Home",
she writes, "My mother's breast tasted of her barbaric
salt. When I crossed the desert, the memory of
her orchard made me voiceless and finally foreign."

**After "La Extranjera", "The Foreigner" by Gabriela Mistral*



John Samuel Tieman

SORT OF A SONNET FOR QUARANTINE*

If this plague lasts a thousand more days,
I won't need more than a word.
A word is all I will need for the sleep
deprived nights I will sit on the porch.

This word should be a pallid thing,
say something a Trappist abandoned.
It should arrive like a cop with a warrant,
the cop that slams me up against the wall.

I don't need more than a word that explains
combing my hair and making the bed.
I don't need more than a word that explains
clutching my chest when I die.

And it will make sense, this word, this
and a pallid tree that the bird abandoned.

**After Reading Garcia Lorca*

INDIVISIBLE*

What color was the flag that flew at Auschwitz?
We've all stood at attention, listened
to the bugle, saluted Old Glory and pledged
to kill anyone who raises the wrong colors.
We talk of planting and raising a flag
like it's going to grow. Like after a battle
our flag will live off the smoke, smoke
that moves like smoke expelled
from a cancerous lung. As for Auschwitz,
all flags are black in the absence of light.

**After Reading Gloria Fuertes*

STATE AND LOCAL*

I have two homes in truth, St. Louis and darkness.
 I prefer the simplicity of the city compared to all
 the complex blues and grays of a low lying fog in
 the Ozarks at dawn. Yet daylight impedes our
 words. And in the night we know only the symbols
 for sex and good-bye. We wave a white flag
 but our surrender is never accepted. Thus do I find
 my childhood, the silence of men, a hawthorn,
 and all the books the widows will never read.
 A cloud obscures the sky, and through my homes
 a river, which speaks better than men, passes.

**After reading "Two Countries", "Dos Patrias", by José Martí*

HOW TO MAKE A FASCIST*

The Party won't ask you to lend a hand.
 They will ask you to donate your hands, legs,
 chest, shoulders. The body is the easy ask.
 Then The Party will ask for time. They first
 will want just a few minutes to rewrite a little
 history. The Party will next ask you to fix
 your eyes on a screen where there was
 a newspaper. But this is mere education.
 In these trying times, the party will want
 one last something simple, your lips,
 because lips are the prelude to owning
 your tongue. Indeed, in trying times,
 as The Leader says, "The mind is a simple
 tool once The Party owns all the words."
 When you are fully prepared, hands, legs,
 chest, shoulders, lips and tongue and even
 your very words, The Party will order you
 to take a walk, just take a walk. It's a test.
 Just take a walk past houses where there
 used to be Jews, Muslims, Blacks, Mexicans,
 Asians, words. In these times, The Leader
 calls your silence "Passing The Final Exam".

** While reading "En Tiempos Dificiles", "In Difficult Times" by Heberto Padilla*

Sven Kretzschmar hails from Germany. His work has been published internationally, e.g., in *Writing Home*. *The 'New Irish' Poets* (Dedalus Press, 2019), *Turangalila-Palestine* (Dairbhre, 2019), *Hold Open the Door* (UCD Press, 2020), *100 Words of Solitude* (Rare Swan Press, 2021), *Das Gedicht*, *Loch Raven Review*, *The Irish Times* and more.



THE GREEN BOAT

after Vona Groarke

The boat aground by a dried-out pier
never felt waves rippling, washing around its keel.

No. The boat aground by a dried-out pier
is the idea of planking hand-sanded and painted
green – lacquer for infinite canvas and summer outings.

The boat aground by a dried-out pier,
on which we never set foot embarking the vessel,
was not constructed by stalwart dreamers.
Its sand-coloured sail, shipwrecked before it was set,

hangs deserted above grey crusted mud –
two seafarers stranded in dried-out harbours.

Sven Kretzschmar

DRYLAND

This beach, border between solid and fluid,
is a dilution of our whiskeys: two tears
for the salt, whenever I am remembered, here,

of a boat never untied, its green planks
never cutting the waves, sand-coloured sail
never hoisted. Songwriters claim that love needs

lonely bunks, but no sailor believes that. This beach,
a pass-through place, as its no-name allows,
becomes deserted, becomes desert at low tide,

with no waves washing around our ankles,
and your dram evaporates, runs aground.
Your tumbler turns dryland.

HEART OF THE MAINLAND

Your hazelnut eyes were like soakaways –
once I dropped down it was already too late.
A seventh-grader; I not much your senior,
and years later, on the brink of growing up,
it started with your neighbour connecting us
over late, stale street fair lagers.

No recollection of where we left that night's
memories. No tongue-tied kisses
either, no shy affection –
all the Old Town's flagstones ever saw
was a top-heavy friend
ship I did not manage to navigate

to lovers' waters. No future together,
but a life after all. Without the green boat
we used to muse about, moonstruck,
while cloud steamers stagnated above us,
always on the brink of capsizing, reminding us:
Hope is a thing for people in seaports.

ON BRIDGE STREET

after Leanne Quinn and Luke Kelly

We chanced upon each other near the flat
you'd moved to, still within reach of your dad's condo
and the station. You had just closed and locked
the door behind you; in the late stages of an unplanned

pregnancy, wearing wide cotton sweatpants, trying
to pretend normality while picking up the dog's leash.
I had tarried too long and stumbled, unguided,
past the arms I had loved the most,

still did, then, but was aware of that longing's
pointlessness. Skipping small talk, I pretended
my train was due, unable to think of speaking anything
reasonable with you being near.

Now those days are fewer, but they are still
there, when I try to gather the absence
and presence of you to which I have chained myself
too vigorously too many years ago

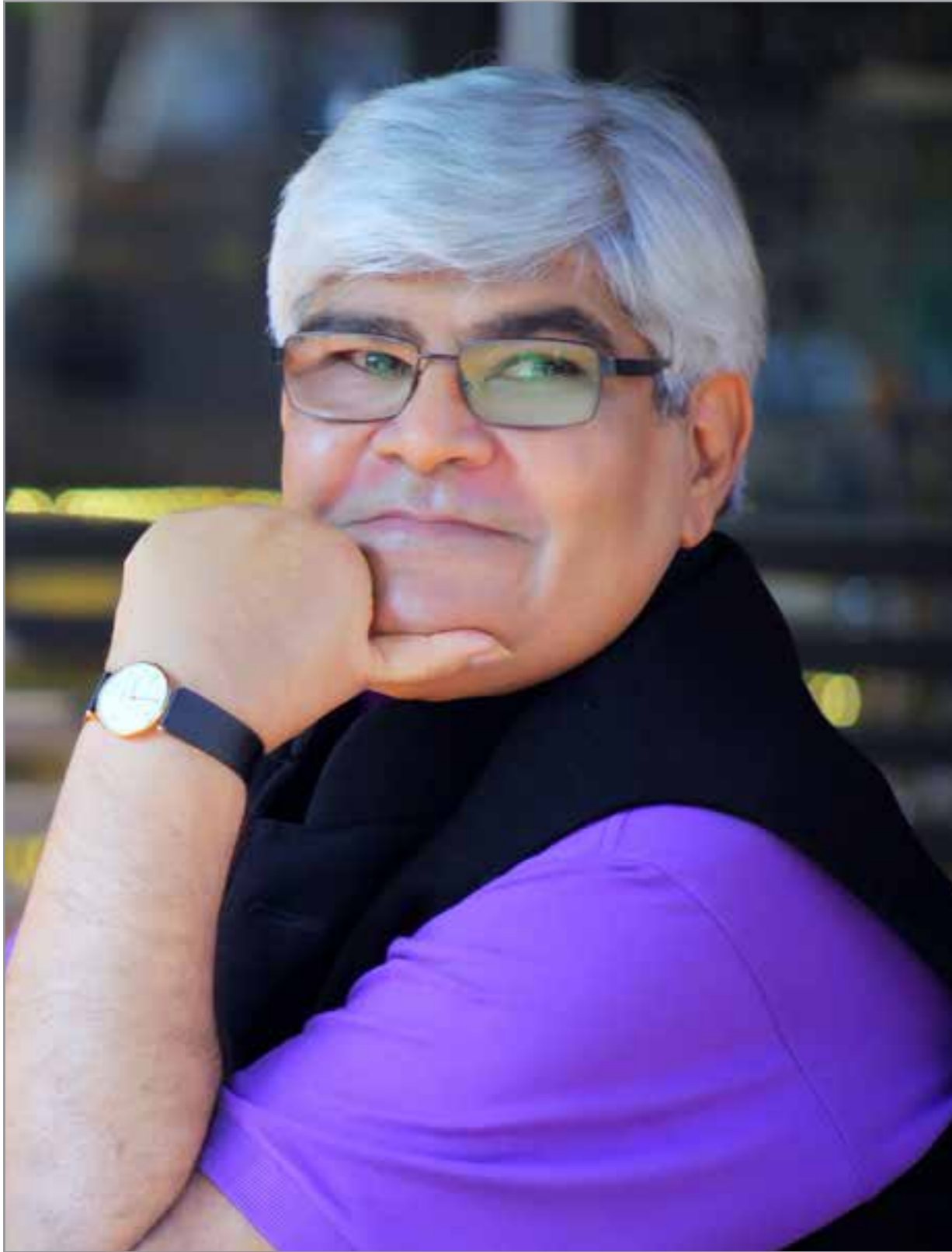
and have since lost key and pick for that lock.

THE DUNES

"there was no danger, | Only withdrawal"
- Seamus Heaney

A gust out of nowhere and she was recalled, half by herself,
half by my attempt to remain where we were,
but let it be said, a maelstrom tore our friend
ship apart. Until we were stranded, newborn,
on a tinted beach, September sun framed
by sky-blue sky. Diamond salt crystals
and watery foam spilled where heels were turned
from each other and footprints not tidal-washed
for ages. Shreds of final conversations evaporating
toward bright white cloud-mountains. The shape of loss
in the high dunes, ever-changing, unable to share
their form for longer than the next buffeting of sea breeze.

Sanjeev Sethi has authored seven books of poetry. His last two: *Strokes of Solace* (CLASSIX, an imprint of Hawakal, Delhi, July 2022) and *Wrappings in Bespoke* (The Hedgehog Poetry Press, UK, August 2022). He is published in over thirty countries. His poems have found a home in more than 400 journals, anthologies, and online literary venues. He is the recipient of the Ethos Literary Award 2022. He is the joint-winner of Full Fat Collection Competition-Deux, organized by The Hedgehog Poetry Press, UK. He lives in Mumbai, India. Twitter @sanjeevpoems3 Instagram sanjeevsethypoems



FLOWERAGE

Flowerbeds are difficult.
They demand response
like poets who publish
a book or two.
The axis of the earth belongs
to where the wind
carries our weight.

Air that emits
from the footprints
of the gone-by
settles on the staircase
of diction. My baton
rejoins the orchestration.
It turns me into a circumstellar.

Sanjeev Sethi

NULLITY

The body is on a lease; we carry no sempiternal claims on it. The vain feature in countless motion pictures sponsored by illusionistic studios. These outings hold no halo: they are like froth.

When every interaction is impetuous, you wonder if this is the fallout of not being a householder. Meliorism is the mantra of the upbeat. Can karmic markings be modified?

RENDEZVOUS

In the hushed mounting
of horizons
I burst into your vennels
of vocabulary and
through them into a lemming of lust.

You tow me to a place
where the fault lines of fantasy
meet the unfamiliar, and I begin
to ask myself:
why isn't this for me?

VIVIFICATION

Not in pieces yet;
perhaps with an imperforation.
My shadow has an alias,
but it is not easy
to pick new phrases.
My conditionalities turn me
into a monopsony:
I buy myself.

On the parapet of
an evening gone wrong,
I'm cautioned of
the intimidation of walls, of
me offering security of brattice.
The remit is to masturbate
the other emotionally:
so the caret recedes.

REPETITION

In a closed space, the dilatory maneuvers can never arrest
an exhalation from delighting or disturbing the olfactories.
During the small hours of darkness, memory unbuttons
herself and beckons me to watch the cabaret of winters
no longer in our ledgers. A turn of phrase or the origin
of an idea springs out of her curvaceousness. The eagle
settles the background score, which dictates the mood of
the metier. Ungula marks hail the homage

Finbar Lennon is a retired surgeon, accidental author and poet. He co-authored his late wife's memoir "The Heavens are all Blue" published by Hachette Ireland in 2020. He is the author of two books of poetry, 'NOW' and 'A Thimble on her Finger' (Lapwing Publications, Belfast, 2021/2022). A number of his poems have appeared online on Planet Earth Poetry and Viewless Wings and in "The Consultant" a medical print journal. An advocate for greater exposure to the humanities in undergraduate and postgraduate education, his narrative poems often tinged with melancholy seek to fill the ever-diminishing attention span of the reader with a story that will stay in the memory



AUGUST CLOUDS

I saw a pig's head, an alligator and
a wide open mouth with a rotten molar
all posing in the clouds today
turned my back and they were gone
replaced by a plane with hole in fuselage
far clouds still and grey, those nearby white
whiffs and whorls making shapes and faces
while dancing high above the sea in Lúnasa!

Finbar Lennon

HALF SPIRIT

They had left the kitchen in silence
I was now alone with the bottle
half full or more did not matter
minders had gone away to grumble -
so what! I wasn't drunk at the time,
that would come later.

A CONNEMARA HIKE

light grey to dark slate stones
depend on raindrops

that hold or fall on mountain trek
polka dots in view fade as drizzle stops
more or less on whims of clouds above;

no force will change how nature deals with nature
an endless cusp to twist
a lady with a shawl hanging from her shoulders,

hair taken from its bun to burst on slow descent
o'er ill-set rocks on narrow paths to Letterfrack.

the lonesome distant sheep
halfway up the mountain,

white boulders on parade
to fool an adult not a child

no gender to apply to fertile imaginations
roaming hills and mountains tall
any summer day in Connemara.

ANNIVERSARY LETTER

*Jane and Joy were also wives
 who pre-deceased their husbands
 an early fateful calling to the grave
 spouses sudden shift to stiff and stoical
 left bereft to cook and wash the clothes
 loss not only leaves you wanting
 it leaves you cold;
 the knot we tied was strong but did not
 ease her misgivings about
 my choice of surgery -her specialty
 listening to breath sounds reading ECGs
 child's play by contrast until she also fell ill
 when it became a matter of life and death
 poems have helped me through the barren years
 many about and with her in a starring role*

It's coming close to five years gone
 your arms still wrapped around me
 left early with a sad embrace
 a call to me to stay the course
 you live now in heather on the heath
 while resting in the earth beneath

I live in your shadow on borrowed time
 use your name to start a conversation
 of more interest than anything I speak
 small talk my fall-back when you beside
 no longer works without you - don't fret
 I can survive with smoke and mirrors

In your bed spend half my life awake
 nearby dresser bearing idle screen
 dust belies its vintage, bought to distract
 from restless legs and breathless pain
 'our lady crowned' on view in picture frame
 her gentle eyes on me remain the same

Left all your clutter and chattels behind
 presents in wrappers waiting to party
 cases of perfume now lost of their scent
 toys at the ready for grandkids to come
 hundreds of cards for every occasion
 scores of fine dresses tags on their necks

Pill bags turn up in locked cupboards
 soft and hard drugs now all out of date
 some probably work on prescription
 helpless unless you doubled your take
 better to rid the house of your medicine
 has had its fill of potions and scripts

Your spirit smiles down on my regular visits
 I bring tidings of joy about grandchildren six
 Two that you met and four more add-ons
 all dance with abandon on grass on your grave
 no matter a jot they don't know your name -
 good genes you passed on will seal their formation

continued overleaf...

ANNIVERSARY LETTER

...contd

Today I cut the legs off my wild rhubarb
 gardening has got the better of a fading man
 hydrangeas stand tall in your plot of bloom
 the weeds not a hindrance to their growth
 shut out by a canopy of blossoms and a man
 on his knees raking the sod with his fingers

I weep to write this letter and weep again
 at what I pen - the door bell silent not new
 used to hide when your friends called or escape
 with excuse to return to work to operate
 on patient who could have waited for a junior
 no more decisions to make - nothing happens

*I wonder what she will make of this letter
 a dose of self pity perhaps! I see a smile,
 her words on high "what does he expect-
 a second life? More of his 'me me me' poem!
 he has not changed, the same old fogey
 that was why I loved him"*

- for me more than enough to cherish.

PASSING COMPANY

Behind the beautiful facades
 in their lofty viewing rooms
 lucky people sit, sup and brood
 driven by a desire for more while
 gazing down from bay windows
 at wandering families below
 on streets and pavements
 with nothing much to say save
 chit-chat, noise and laughter.

As I pass this scene of contrasts
 and conjure up a telling face
 or two at notables or not, better
 to be drawn to awe than held in,
 that way can quietly go unnoticed
 everyone forgets for a moment
 who they are, and what they do
 I picked a skin crust off my scalp
 looked curiously at my make-up
 wondered if I sent it for a test
 how much more it would reveal
 about my heritage.



Lamia Makaddam, a Tunisian poet, who works and lives in The Hague, The Netherlands since the nineties of the last century. In Tunisia Makaddam studied Arabic language and Literature at the University of Sousse. While in the Netherlands Makaddam studied Translation. As from 2009, Lamia Makaddam was working as a journalist and radio maker by Radio Holland World-wide. In 2007 Makaddam published her first poetry book "Tasting to winter fruit" in Beirut. In 2015, her second book "This poem has ended, this love has ended" appeared by Afaq Cairo, in 2016, in 2019 Makaddam published her poetry book "in time and out of it" with Almutawasset in Milano. The same book was translated into Dutch and published under the title: "you will find me in every word I write". Same book will appear in Italy this spring. Her Arabic translation of "You said it" which was about Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes and which was written by the Dutch novelist Connie Palmen appeared by the General Book Organization in Cairo. Her next Arabic translation "Malva" appeared with Al-Saqi in 2019. Some of Makaddam's work has been translated to English, French, Netherlands, and Kurdish. In 2000 Makaddam was awarded Al Hizra Literature prize in Holland. In 2018 Makaddam was appointed to a Dutch jury for a national translation competition in the Netherlands together with Abdelkader Benali and the Arabist Petra Stienen.

Translated from Arabic by Miled Faiza and Karen McNeil.

IF IT WERE UP TO ME ...

if it were up to me, I would show you my breast flooding with love and seduction,
 my high, silver neck,
 my waist melting with warm touches and the remains of fingers,
 I would have showed you my ass (sweet and lethal), my deep hips
 and my constantly calling well
 if it were up to me I would give you my lips—one by one—so you could taste life
 my neck so you could liberate yourselves
 my heart to elevate the ceiling of your expectations and expand your dreams
 I would have given you my cheeks to blush your wishes
 and my belly button to deepen the affection between you and life
 if it were up to me I would do this and more
 but poetry is a selfish guard, as you know
 with a moustache so big birds dance on it

Lamia Makaddam

SOMETHING MUST BREAK IN THE END

you will find me every morning, a waitress at a cafe
 my hair pulled back in a ponytail,
 giving you coffee with shaky hands
 and saying: "good morning", or: "wake up, it's nine o'clock",
 or: "why are you spending all your time on your phone?
 write an article or a poem instead."
 you will find me at seven o'clock in a train station,
 waving you from platform to platform,
 and running between the riders to put my foot on the train threshold,
 so the door won't close without you.
 do not forget to go, there is always something waiting for us on the other bank.
 and every year
 every year,
 you will find me in a bar or a nightclub
 wearing farmers' dress and dancing until
 the end of the harvest, until the pickaxes are laid down
 and the filled bags are stored.
 you will find me in every word you write
 in every woman you love
 in every tree overlooking a house you haven't lived in yet.
 I will sing so much for you,
 in spring and winter, while I am migrating from you and to you.
 and when my wing breaks
 do not be sad, something must break
 in the end
 so that we know that we are alive.

LOVE MAKES WOMAN A MAN
AND MAN A WOMAN

it is not enough for you to touch me with your hand
 love is touching me with everything, with woman and distance
 and a bunch of grapes
 it is not enough that you take me under you and on top of you
 you have to drag me by feet and into nightmares as well.
 love is not a relationship between two individuals like they told us
 but rather two universes melting, a mixture of water with water
 it is to love women as if I were you, to lust after their breasts
 to be riven seeing their naked flesh
 to gasp when a woman lifts her hair with her hand to put it behind her
 and just as you heart weakens when you see a hanging fruit
 my heart weakens for the same reason.
 without air between us we are breathless
 without the sun rising above me and above you we are eyeless
 the idea: love makes woman a man and man a woman
 and makes water into love
 and love into life
 I incarnate in you like I incarnate in light and soil
 and you incarnate in me like life and death
 I arrive you only because I collected you from here and there:
 some of your heart I brought from a train station
 some of your eyes from glasses in bars
 some of your skin from a cemetery
 meanwhile you are here
 and not here.

IF I EVER WROTE POETRY

for some reason unclear
 I wanted to talk to you about the ugliness of cold
 during the harsh winter night and
 about my trembling fingers
 about the desolation of absence and silence
 about darkness hanging like dust bunnies from the ceiling
 I touched my mouth and didn't find my lips
 I didn't find my voice either
 in the deep sleeps a warm happiness
 whose is this scar?
 and who is speaking this silence?

*

if I ever wrote poetry
 it is because one of them had to cry
 and if I screamed with a violence that destroys everything
 it is because a door was shut on the fingers
 of a girl somewhere in this world
 the only thing that I can share with you is that leafy sadness ...
 it's something we can share with love, anyway

*

all winters are the same
 whether here or on the other side of the planet
 if your fingers tremble, don't write in this area
 and if the absence fills your heart
 then at least you know that there's something
 dwelling in it, write from that darkness
 of what makes life bearable

THE BREAD SELLER

one harsh winter
 I was working as a bread seller
 in a very small village
 someone arrived
 and he was hungry
 so I gave him a loaf of bread
 and took him to my house
 there, on the threshold, he sat for years
 feeding pigeons and cats from his hand, from the loaf
 I gave him that harsh, dark winter
 in a remote little village
 for he was hungry
 and I was a bread seller

*

I woke up one night and didn't find him
 didn't find the loaf or the threshold
 history or geography
 seasons or their memory
 but the cats and dogs
 the rats, pigeons and worms
 have never left my home since

Margaret Kiernan has a background in Public Policy and Social Justice. She writes poetry and short stories. She also paints landscapes in mixed media. She is published in, The Blue Nib Literary Journal, Lothlorien Poetry Journal, Burrow at Old-water-rat publishing Australia, The Galway Review, Poet Head, A New Ulster, Anthologies, and Cultural news magazines. She is listed in The Index of Contemporary Women Poets in Ireland, 2020. She writes with the Thursday Group of poets, at Over -the-Edge, Galway. Is also a member of Ox Mountain poets.



ENSEMBLE AT THE CAFÉ

Her best heel tripping
in the Andalusian night
guitars fast paced, sweeps soars
reaches for golden stars
arpeggio found

The piano player wears striped pants
touches the ivories like a Faberge glass
as the singer in his boater hat, mouths

Into his slim silver mic
sways his hips, touches his green tie
lyrics' smooth as chocolate mousse

A liquid silk, slick.
A woman shakes her castanets
wears a purple rose in her blue-black hair

She watches the songster's groove.
Evening slips into a mellow
cup of dance.

Margaret Kiernan

LILLIPUT BAY- BLUE HOUR

Blue boat bobs in a backwash
at this blue hour
the Bay bathed
glazed in gold
water holds reflection
to ebbing light

Clouds billow near the
horizon
Dusk
Without a moon
Extinguishing rays
Soon the birds will cease to
sing
will roost in trees.
Squirrels will fall sleep.

TRI-LIGHTED

A rebel act of creation for today

To-day I painted a tree
single, alone
free with summer greens
added shadows, a cosmos of limbs.

I dry-brush scant paint for the trunk
hold back on the universal
life beneath

My feet, shift
crackle on broken twigs
a single crow overhead
I leave out.
The tree is enough.

Wendy J. Dunn is an award-winning Australian author, playwright and poet. Her first Tudor novels were two Anne Boleyn novels: *Dear Heart*, *How Like You This?* and *The Light in the Labyrinth*. Wendy's most recent publications are two novels inspired by the life of Katherine of Aragon: her *Falling Pomegranate Seeds* duology: *The Duty of Daughters* (a finalist in the 2020 Chaucer award) and *All Manner of Things* (2021), Silver Medallist in the 2021 international Readers' Favorite Award for historical personage, Silver Medallist in The Coffee Pot Book Club Book of the Year Award (Tudor and Stuart category), a finalist in the 2022 Eric Hoffer Award and a first place win for Tudor fiction in the international 2021 Chaucer Award. Wendy tutors in writing at the Swinburne University of Technology. She's currently writing a novel set in 2010. Of course, it includes a Tudor story. She is also writing her first full length Tudor biography, commissioned by Pen and Sword.



SILENCE AT THE STATION

Silence at the station
if silence can be called
(Or if it exists at all).

The ebb and flow
of traffic noise
the frantic chirping
of a bird
(surely not nesting in winter?)

Outside the fence line
in the laneway
a toddler's piping voice
intercepts
(I think)
its mother's persuasion

On the platform
footfalls of
impatience
determination
busy lives
self-important lives

no one speaks

Silence at the station
If it exists
At all.

Wendy J. Dunn

Kate McNamara is a Canberra based poet, playwright and critical theorist. Her plays have been performed internationally. McNamara delivered the opening address to the Fourth International Conference of Women Playwrights in Galway (2001). She was awarded the H.C Coombs Fellowship at ANU (1991) and elected to the Emeritus Faculty. She won The Banjo Patterson Award for her short story *Verity*. Her published works include *Leaves*, *The Rule of Zip* (AGP) *Praxis* and *The Void Zone* (AGP). Her poetry, short fiction and critical theory has been published in a number of anthologies including *There is No Mystery* (ed. K Kituai, 1998), *The Death Mook* (ed. Dion Kagan, 2008) *These Strange Outcrops* (2020) and *The Blue Nib* (2020) She has also worked extensively as an editor and has only recently returned to her first great love, poetry. McNamara is currently working on *The Burning Times*.



Kate McNamara

THE GARDENER

Last Sunday at the market garden
I saw you again toiling over
flowers plants the blush
of a winter rose old baby's breath.

(your favourite mine Tahitian bridal veil)

And I marvelled at the hours of my life consumed
like litmus autumn in my mind
that I had burned the unburned candle for you.
the tears the midnight trysts.
in a green place with statuary birds crying.

Of how we could not keep our hands from
each other nights that became
strangers shaped by unreason a daze of hope.

You looked up from your labours
(how you hate to be interrupted in the gentle art)
You recognised a spirit kin passing by
your world moved on its orbit
and still you could not see me
(How can that be?)

And I laughed Merlin's laugh
and looked back into the tiger eyes
of that time the absolute nature of your
obsession singular you never could touch me
nor bear not to I wrecked a marriage over you
And yours as well: what was it?

continued overleaf...

© Kate McNamara

THE GARDENER

Purple wine of the summer grape Dionysius
the scent of earth the high sighing of pine trees
or your hands making love in the back of a ute
the green harbour of your eyes your laughter.

Now it seems at last you have
finally become of assistance to me
as I battle one last love in summer by the sea
so now I can smile at this new one green eyed and
nut brown a winter king enigmatic.

As deceitful as an eel a man who has to win
even when losing so I smile and deeper
comes the memory the time of ashes the Easter bird.

Next time I find you I will speak
you will be shocked and then annoyed
surely I was dead or gone. How could
I bear life without you?

Was it worth it? Hard to say
the balance never settled quite the same
thank you for the learning the tales
of Aphrodite and her envious son.

I met you drunk as a lord at dawn
frocked up for sin and satiety
barefoot and disgraceful
foaming in rage I was trying to find
a taxi I found you universe provides
green and violent in that amazing light
waiting for a damsel in distress
that would be me again but no distress here now.

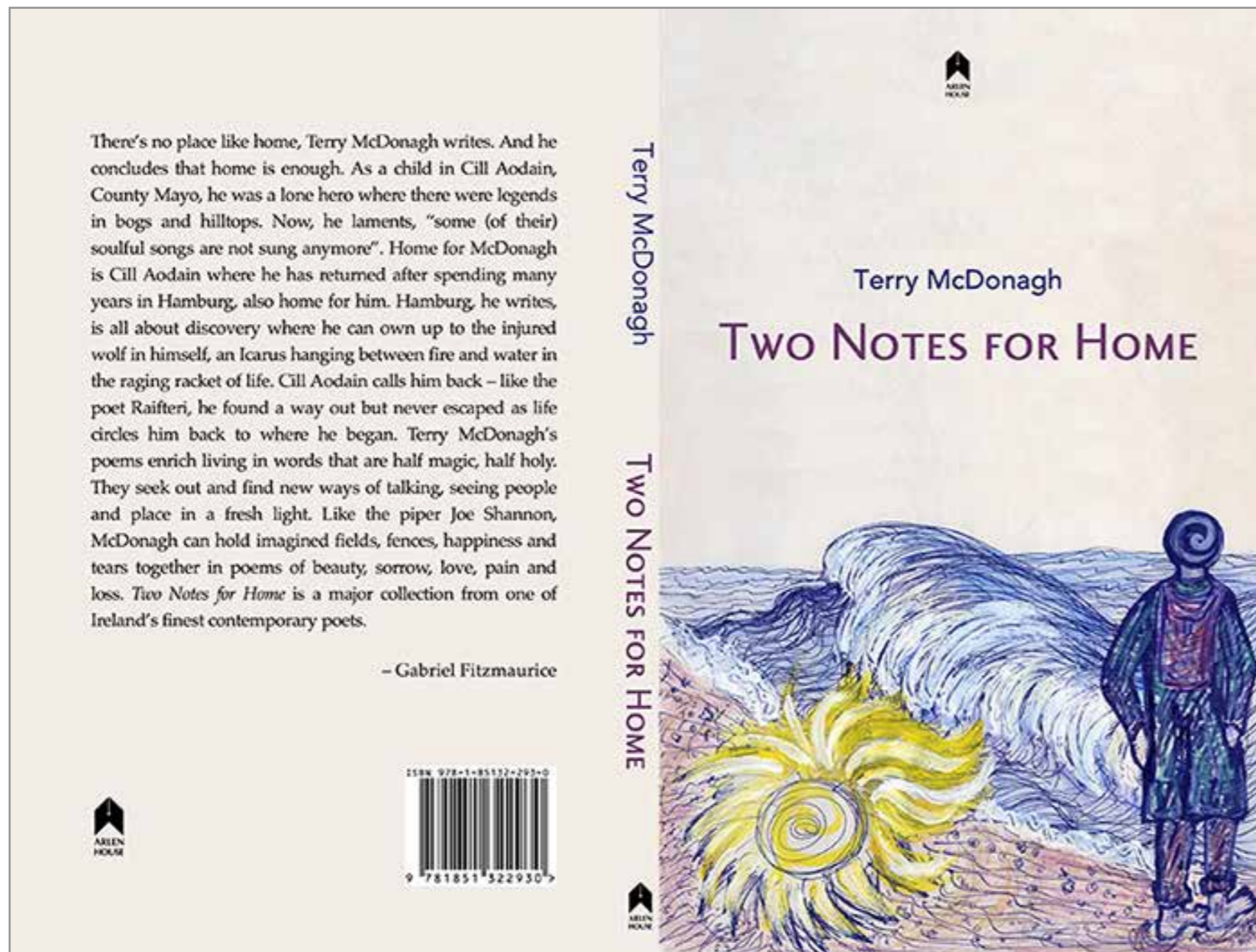
A battered gardener in a dirty hat
unloading shit from your truck a dog
I liked and stopped to complain to about
me the world and men
you had a wicked smile.
House rule says that I cannot kill a man,
for breathing let alone working I saw
your slow and meticulous hands.

You made me tea in a shack seen better days.
and then you spoke of Scotland and hawking
and now you are mild eyed a little
anxious a bitter wife a cottage in the glen
the child born breathless and blue.

All forged in the tinsel links of memory
so I should say again: Thank you
for my life I did not seem to
want it much that strange morning.

You gave it back anyway.
Outrageous.

Terry McDonagh, Irish poet has worked in Europe, Asia and Australia. He's taught creative writing at Hamburg University and was Drama Director at Hamburg International School. Published eleven poetry collections, letters, drama, prose and poetry for young people. In March 2022, he was poet in residence and Grand Marshal as part of the Saint Patrick's Day celebrations in Brussels. His work has been translated into German and Indonesian. His poem, 'UCG by Degrees' is included in the Galway Poetry Trail on Galway University campus. In 2020, *Two Notes for Home* – a two-part radio documentary, compiled and presented by Werner Lewon, on *The Life and Work of Terry McDonagh, The Modern Bard of Cill Aodáin*. His latest poetry collection, 'Two Notes for Home' – published by Arlen House – launch: September 2022. He returned to live in County Mayo in 2019. www.terry-mcdonagh.com



TWO NOTES FOR HOME - NEW POETRY BY TERRY MCDONAGH

Arlen House, Dublin

Launch September 15, 2022

at Clifden Arts Festival, County Galway.

Available worldwide: Amazon;
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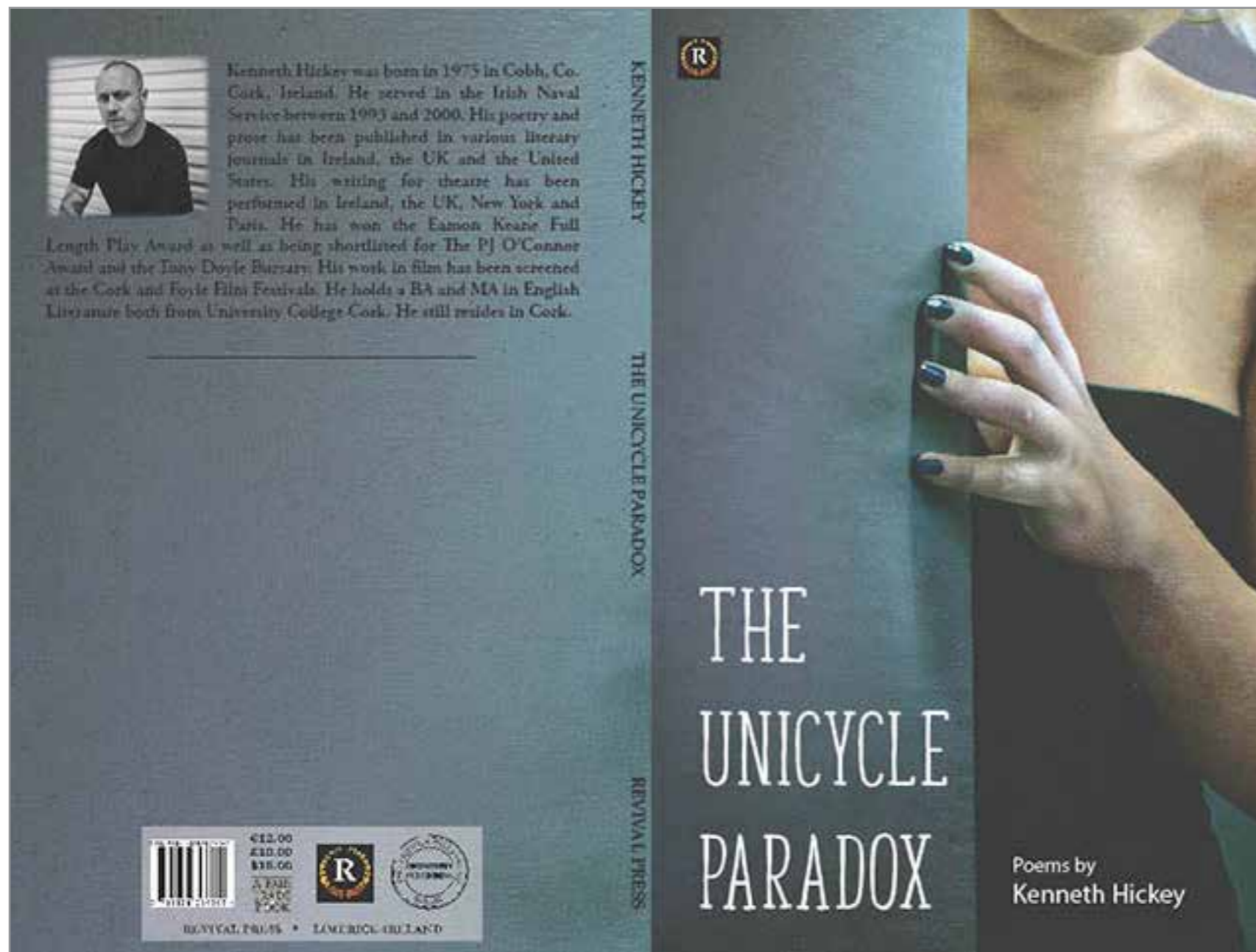
terrymcdonagh.writer1@gmail.com



Kenneth Hickey was born in 1975 in Cobh, Co. Cork Ireland. He served in the Irish Naval Service between 1993 and 2000. His poetry and prose has been published in various literary journals in Ireland, the UK and the United States including *Southword*, *Crannoig*, *THE SHOP*, *A New Ulster*, *Aesthetica Magazine* and *The Great American Poetry show*. His writing for theatre has been performed in Ireland, the UK, New York and Paris. He has won the Eamon Keane Full Length Play Award as well as being shortlisted for The PJ O'Connor Award and the Tony Doyle Bursary. He was shortlisted for the Bournemouth Poetry Prize in 2022. His work in film has been screened at the Cork and Foyle Film Festivals. He holds a BA and MA in English Literature both from University College Cork. His debut collection *'The Unicycle Paradox'* was published by Revival Press in November 2021. He still resides in Cork.



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



GRAHAM ALLEN Review of KENNETH HICKEY'S *The Unicycle Paradox* Limerick: Revival, 2021

Kenneth Hickey's *The Unicycle Paradox* (Limerick: Revival, 2021) is an impressive first poetry collection.

Hickey's past experience as a member of the Irish Naval Service and his education, especially in Classics, are major influences on his poetry.

Hickey's themes include politics and power, modern love, and urban life, but all these themes are mediated through a classical filter, so that the experience of reading the work is to be constantly challenged with shifts in focus, from the contemporary world of Ireland and beyond, on to classical analogues, and back to the contemporary. The effect is one which is both unsettling and deeply rewarding.

Available at: <https://limerickwriterscentre.com/product/the-unicycle-paradox/>

What allows for this multi-temporal focus is Hickey's developed art of allusion. Indeed, the book would be an extremely rewarding object-text for anyone seriously studying the often-overlooked art of allusion. Allusions here go from direct quotation (italicized): "*Death in the afternoon*," "*Turning and turning in the widening gyre*," to more playful loosely covert reappropriations (no italics):

Crystal dew burning the corn,
Winter robins fight in song,
Christmas creeps to be born.

But most importantly of all is the manner in which, in a fashion that is outside of anything we might call neo-classical, Hickey flits in and out of focus between Homeric and other classical perspectives and contemporary situations of personal experience and modern life. In a poem about his childhood sporting experience, "Memoirs of a Minor Athlete," for example, the autobiographical content rests on an extended allusion to the myth of Dedalus and Icarus, here with a significant nod to W. H. Auden's rendition of the climax of that myth:

He implored Icarus to jump,
A soul in tension that's learning to fly.
While demonstrating the knotty knack of flight,
Fiercely flapping his own feathers,
Searching for his son in the rear-view mirror.
A fisherman catching flounder with a taut pole,
A herder resting on his rod,
Or farmer leaning on the shaft of his hoe,
Maybe spied the first aviators,
And paused, transfixed,
Sure they were witnessing divinity,
Angels traversing the heavens.
Virgin Atlantic, more experience than our name suggests.

The last line is a real slogan used by Virgin Atlantic.

This dual vision, between the poet's contemporary world and classical myths or canonical literature is the major technique and meaning of these poems. In "At Swim with One Bird," for example, *The Waste Land* constantly comes into focus, only then to fade into the background: "Winter is the time of dying," "Hope is the cruellest thing".

In "Der Fisher," the object of the poet's love ("The Girl") transforms into a series of classical and canonical women:

And still the beloved holds me
Bright Beatrice
Time collapses
A memory sitting at the loom
Weaving a wedding dress
For another wandering warrior
Penelope searches the sea
For signs of ships
Tuning to the shipping forecast

In "Three Ages of Isolation," that collection of interrelated diachronic allusions Harold Bloom calls transumption occurs (Homer – Virgil – Dante – Milton – Wordsworth – Shelley – Eliot - et al) over the image of city commuters:

Early morning commuters' breath
Crackling the air
Of the cold suburban carriage

In a section entitled "Shock and Awe," in his poem "Thus Spake Hector," clearly, amongst other subjects, dealing with the second Gulf War, the image of the Cyclops from Homer's *Odyssey* is deployed in a manner that adds weight to the contemporary scene:

CNN weren't available
To cover the village girl's story.
Broadcast priorities, the executives say.
Cyclops Benny watches from his bed.
Somewhere the defence secretary
Is showing videos of precision carpet bombings,
Flanked by his favourite beribboned general.
"Look at 'em go Norman".
Cue applause.
Israel grabs more desert

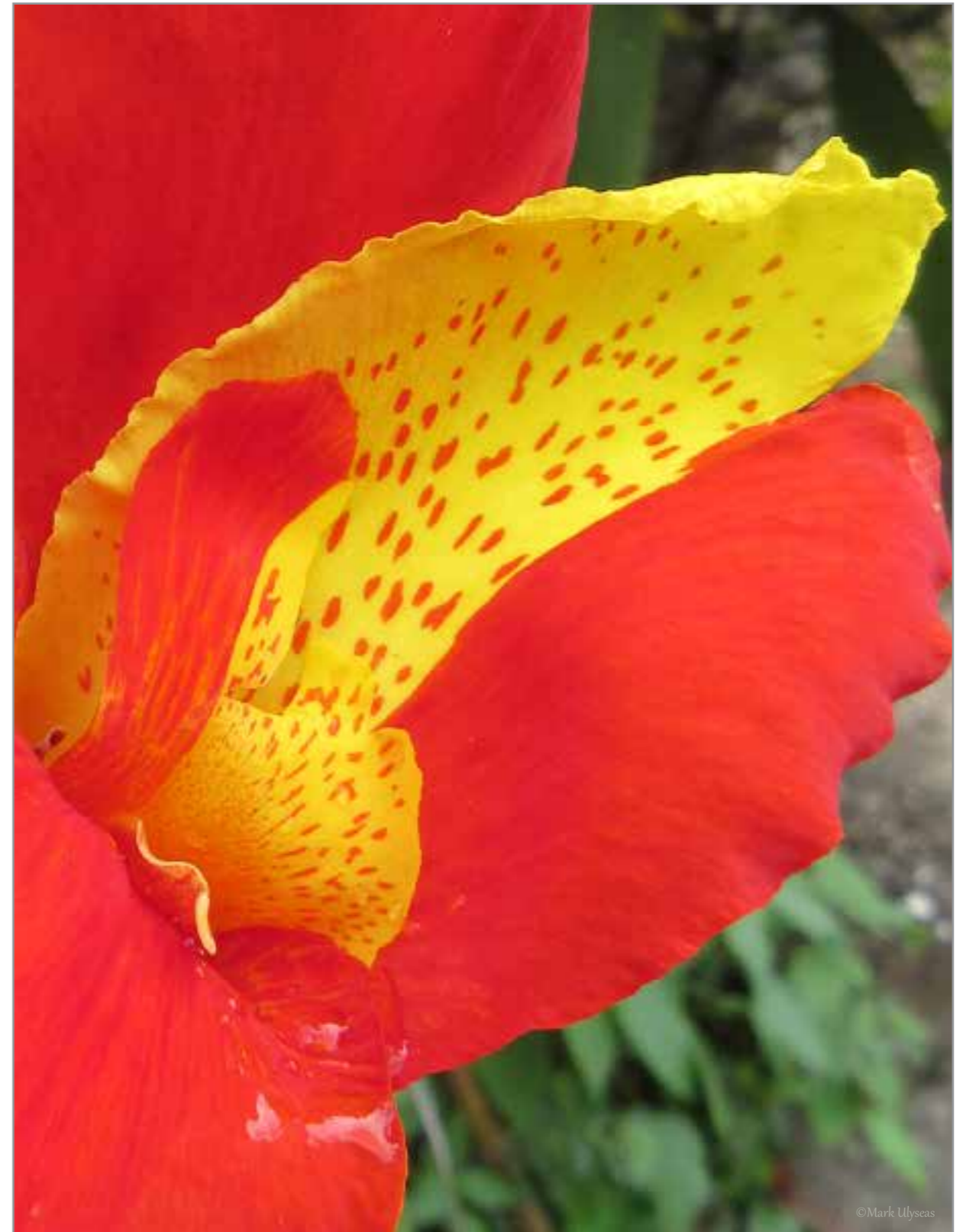
That last passage conveys something of the ethics of this book, in that it uses myth-ology not to belittle contemporary life, nor to aggrandize it. The ultimate vision created by Hickey's allusive voice is to present a world constantly in danger of repeating itself if it does not see itself through such a meta-historical lens. This is a vision captured well in one of the more straightforward poems in the collection, "This Love":

My love is not that of mythical motorbike trips
To flagrant Florence
At the age of eighteen

Nor that which Bronte bore on the moors.
Nor that of doomed Paris
Watching his brother die

Mine is a small love
Of ham sandwiches,
Dinners made and cups of tea.
 The kind you never find in odes and elegies.
Of children playing.
When I am old
I'll look into your eyes then
And show you all.
This is the love I have for you.
Take it,
If it is enough.

If that last question can be redirected to the poetry that is asking it, then the only response is an overwhelming YES.



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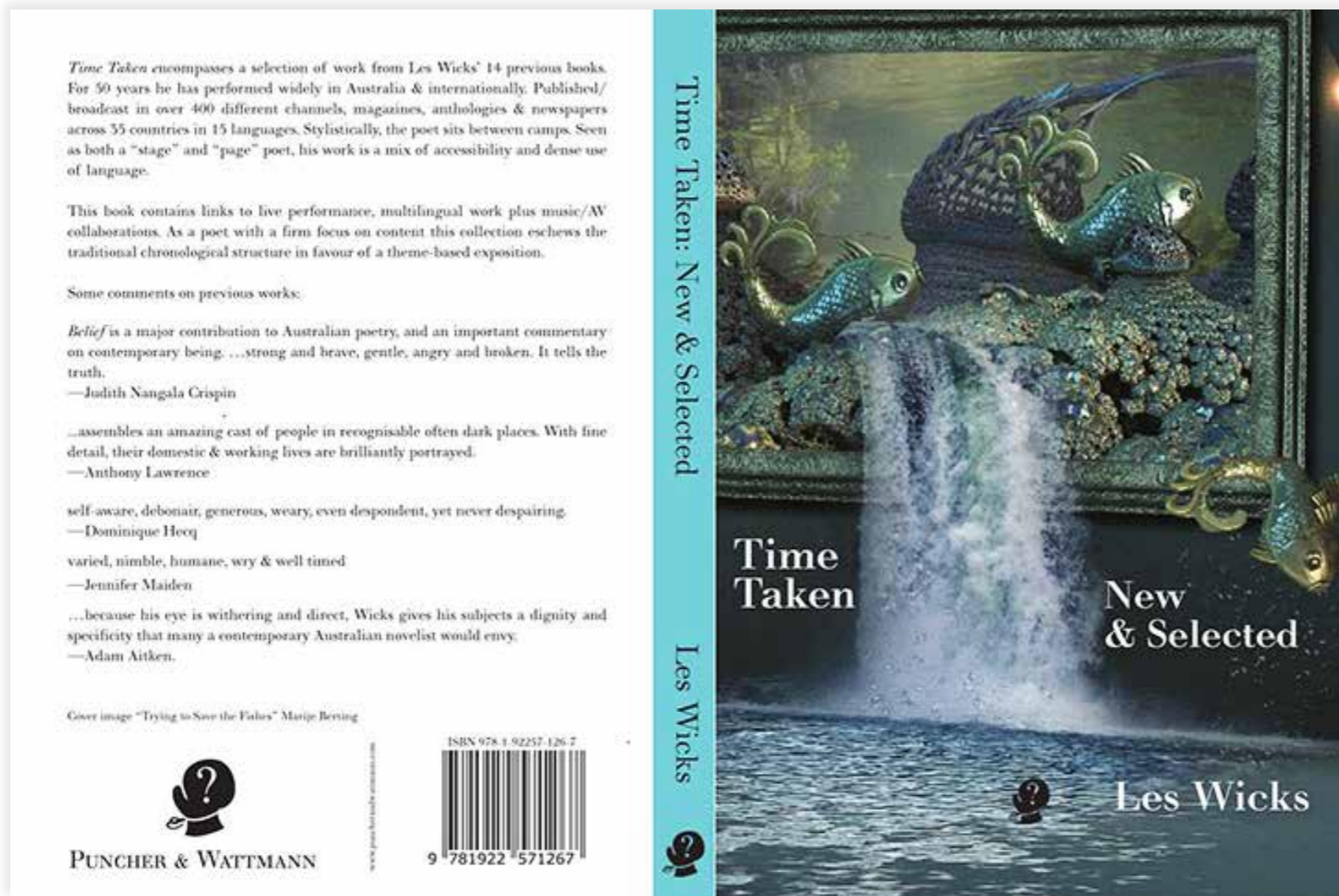
Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



Les Wicks has toured widely and seen publication in over 400 different magazines, anthologies & newspapers across 36 countries in 15 languages. His 15th book of poetry is *Time Taken – New & Selected* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2022). <https://leswicks.tripod.com/lw.htm>



Micah Horton-Hallett studied literature and creative writing at the University of Sydney, after which he spent eight years as MC and co-convenor of the Rhizomic poetry open-mic and invitational series of readings. He lives in Sydney's Blue Mountains and works as a School Learning Support Officer specializing in early literacy intervention, complex trauma and oppositional behaviours.



Time Taken encompasses a selection of work from Les Wicks' 14 previous books. For 50 years he has performed widely in Australia & internationally. Published/broadcast in over 400 different channels, magazines, anthologies & newspapers across 35 countries in 15 languages. Stylistically, the poet sits between camps. Seen as both a "stage" and "page" poet, his work is a mix of accessibility and dense use of language.

This book contains links to live performance, multilingual work plus music/AV collaborations. As a poet with a firm focus on content this collection eschews the traditional chronological structure in favour of a theme-based exposition.

Some comments on previous works:

Belief is a major contribution to Australian poetry, and an important commentary on contemporary being. ...strong and brave, gentle, angry and broken. It tells the truth.
—Judith Nangala Crispin

...assembles an amazing cast of people in recognisable often dark places. With fine detail, their domestic & working lives are brilliantly portrayed.
—Anthony Lawrence

self-aware, debonair, generous, weary, even despondent, yet never despairing.
—Dominique Hecq

varied, nimble, humane, wry & well timed
—Jennifer Maiden

...because his eye is withering and direct, Wicks gives his subjects a dignity and specificity that many a contemporary Australian novelist would envy.
—Adam Aitken.

Cover image "Trying to Save the Fishes" Marjje Berling



PUNCHER & WATTMANN



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MICAH HORTON-HALLET T Review of LES WICKS' *Time Taken* Puncher & Wattmann, 2022

"Don't speak to me of those poems I wrote in my thirties. I am not that person anymore"
- Judith Wright

*"My job, blazing shirt & neat long socks.
Is to collect the shavings of time"*
- Les Wicks: Trip

Comprising of selected works drawn from 42 years of publication, along with a slew of new works, *Time Taken* provides not just an overview of the decades of Australian Les Wicks' poetic career, but a document of Australia's that have passed with the decades and the denizens that inhabited these lost shores. Les Wicks' earlier poems in particular have a straightforward clarity, where the success of the poem lies in Wicks' observing eye: Sometimes caustic, sometimes humorous, always connected, human and compassionate.

Time Taken is a collection of poems where the poet is almost always present. Like a third person camera perched just over the readers shoulder and whispering commentary in the reader's ear. One explicit example of this can be drawn from *The Hinge*, where Wicks is writing of the mistreatment of a homeless person at the hands of police:

He was what they called an NFA
Owned nothing (I even take this story as my own)

In his primary mode, Les is the poet of record- taking the reader for a ride and saying 'come and see' as he states in the closing stanza of the poem *News*:

I too have a tiny role, the
uneasy eye. Feel the words rise already,
barely aware of panic,
& drink
It in.

He treats his subjects (people and place alike) with the same equanimity of gaze, whether his subject be pension day drunks on the long commute to night, (Jenna) domestic poisoners (Her Light Fruit Cake) or an anti-sex slavery campaigner (*Khozikode*). Rarely attempting to occupy the subject of a poem, Les Wicks' distinct, personal voice can sometimes feel constricting. In particular the erotic poem *Under the Weather* is marked by a specific cis-gendered and hetero-normative male gaze that is earnest and heartfelt, but trapped in these conceptions of femininity and the female form. Strong emotion that forms a solid surface with not much but immediacy underneath, but that is its point, a document of passionate wonder that is enticing in its ownership of the earnestness of youth. Wicks then follows up with the poem *Hold On To Your Love*, which holds the lines;

But most love poems
Just talk about the sensitive
& backlit prettiness
Behind the authors own eyes

A juxtaposition that shows the laconic, ironic and often humorous self awareness that is one of the hallmarks of Wicks as a poet. This is a poet who is aware of their otherness and refuses to try and occupy, but instead celebrates

The collection is divided into themes rather than epochs Hungry, Angry, Friends, Touched, Landed, Waterways, Puzzled and Peace. An organisational device that places poems from different stages of the poet's life and career in proximity to each other and lets the reader see these recurrent themes through the lenses of a slew of different personas, faceted ideas and images turning so the light can be caught differently each time. It is an approach that works on the whole, changing theme just as the reader is being glugged with a kaleidoscope of people/places/elements/ideas and the system of organisation works on a number of levels.

Each section gathers its own momentum, builds and then crashes, mimicking the waves and water that provide inspiration for some of the collections most affecting and linguistically spectacular works. and ending appropriately with Peace, although as in all the other sections the sections' theme refuses to be one dimensional, questioning, undercutting and complicating. Making the reader question and engage with the very concept, the very possibility of peace.

For over forty years Wicks has been protesting and documenting issues that he obviously remains passionate about. His concern for environment, humanity, social justice and global conflict run like electricity through the body of work, and yet although the voice can be bone-tired, elegiac, and edging towards despair in poems like *Lake Peddar Lost* and *One More Peace*, his poetry remains hopeful, unbowed and unbeaten. And in *Out and About*, he passes the struggle down to a new generation. Writing of his daughter at her first demonstration:

& my daughter, 12 years old is just
out of reach of everything –
but she stands
valued & vital
as any of those grey haranguers on that stage

His approach to political poetry is marked by clarity, strong imagery and a refusal to fall into the strident didacticism of some of his contemporaries. He remains politically engaged, but still equivocal, still questioning the mode of resistance. An explicit example comes from *Fix*:

If we are more than just gristle and fluids
then we must stand up, engage

However, in the face of another who offers violence, or at least the capacity for self-defensive violence as a political/ social option he ponders

I was too awed to argue, maybe wouldn't have anyway
though where are the fists that do not crave use?
Open hands can also speak

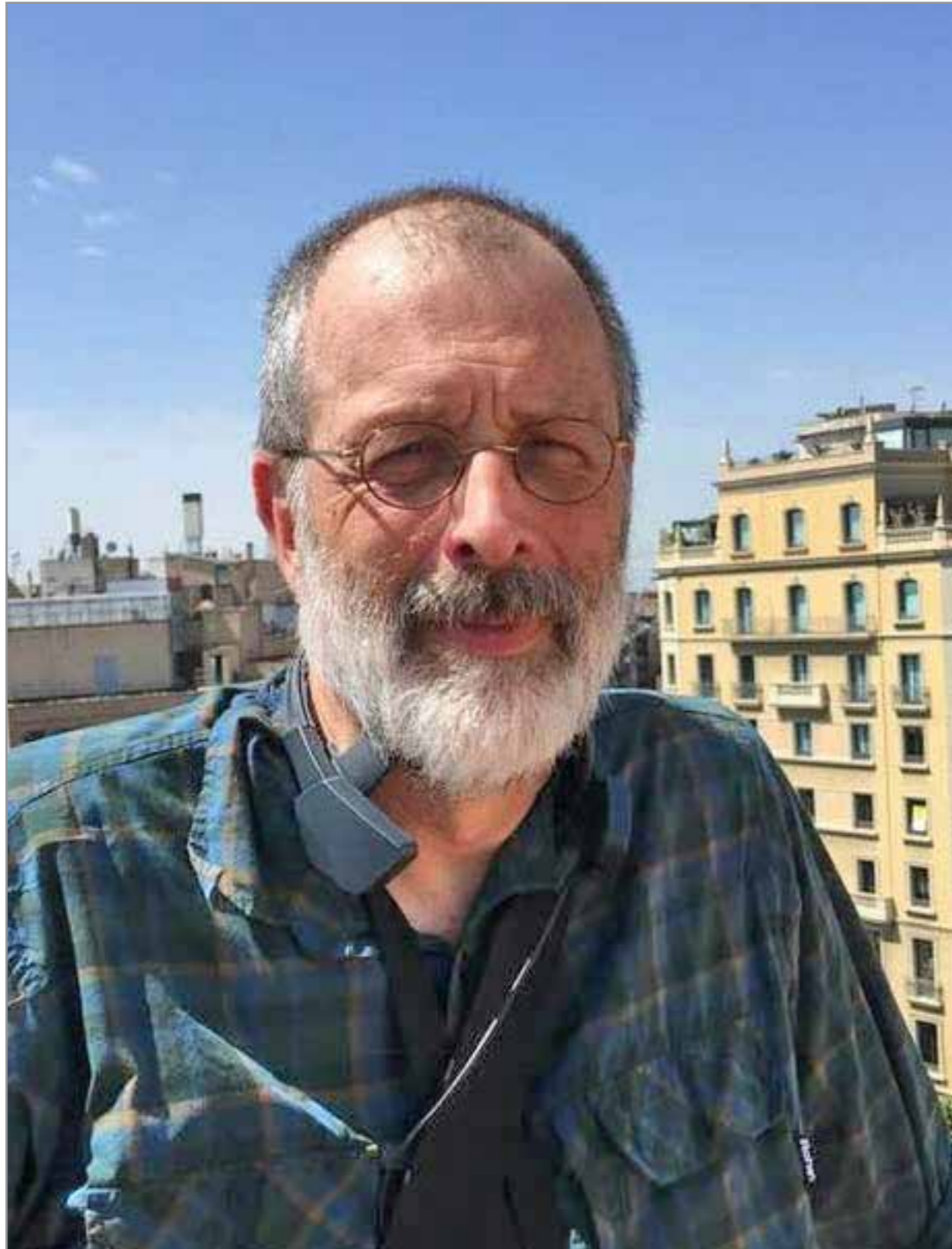
Then acknowledges the limitations of his engagement, deferring to one whose mode is not witness, but active engagement.

Which burned through all the arguments
Of voyeurs and thinkers like me.

Nigel Roberts, the Australian poet enfant terrible of the 1970's confidently claimed in the afterword of his seminal work *Steps for Astaire* that by the 2000s people would be consuming poetry via holograms. While this vision of the future has (so far) failed to eventuate, Wicks has done the next best thing; placing QR codes alongside some of the poems that link to performances of those poems, sometimes accompanied by music, and sometimes not. This ability to pull the authors voice out of the ether works brilliantly for a poet whose performance is as strong as his writing and adds an extra dimension that goes beyond mere gimmick and makes the works documents of time. The recordings also highlight the true strength of Les Wicks' poetry; its musicality and the deft way that he manages to sidestep cliché and expectation.

In defiance of the often repeated maxim that a poet produces their best work in their twenties, it was new works such as *Awash* and *Belief Beach* that I returned to again and again. Les Wicks is a live poet, a voice that has not faltered, that has grown and matured and still has much to say that begs to be read, begs to be heard. The sheer delight in the way that he engages in word play and pun is infectious. *Time Taken* also has the honour of holding the best closing poem of any I have read in any collection. Ever.

Time Taken is a fitting encapsulation of a career thus far, but also an intimation of works still to come and is absolutely worthy of attention.



Jordan Smith



Lynn Strongin is a Pulitzer Prize nominee in poetry. A recipient of a National Endowment Creative Writing Grant, nominated twice for Pushcart Prizes, Lynn Born in NYC at the end of the dirty thirties, she grew up in an artistic Jewish home in New York during the war. Earliest studies were in musical composition as a child and at The Manhattan School of Music. Took a BA at Hunter college, MA at Stanford University as a Woodrow Wilson Fellow. Lived in Berkeley during the vibrant sixties where she worked for Denise Levertov and took part in many peace demonstrations. Poems in forty anthologies, fifty journals; Poetry, New York Quarterly. Forthcoming work in *Poetry Flash* and *Otoliths*. Canada is her second home. The late Hugh Fox said Strongin is the “most exciting poet writing today.” Danielle Ofri wrote to her, “you tear the veil off that mysterious disease polio.” Strongin’s work has been translated into French and Italian. Her forthcoming book is THE SWEETNESS OF EDNA.

Thanks to Penelope Weiss who gave this essay her caring reading and copy-editing.

LYNN STRONGIN

Jordan Smith: Mystic in red flannel shirt

Introduction

I see a tall lanky figure striding the hills of Upstate New York. With the thoughtfulness of a Puritan mind making music with the prose of a poet, Jordan Smith catches the eye because his red flannel shirt, that soft cotton, is like a lit spark against the Protestant grey hills. Americana to the grain the work, this poet who wishes to play fiddle with both Thomas Hardy and John Clare: two dark figures touching upon madness: that peculiar poetically rich state of soul and mind: the schizophrenic and the mystic have been compared. Carl Carmer’s book “Listen for a Lonesome Drum” about his travels upstate in the 1920’s has some good discussion about the religious impulse in this landscape.

Smith’s formal music begins with “An Apology for Loving the Old Hymns” and continues with his favorite instrument, the folk music fiddle; through his more than half a dozen books of poems music sounds and resounds. Often in classic iambic pentameter, these are hymns which build, orchestral, instrumentally and at time chorally. The poet told me “Sometimes rather than often, lots of syllabics occur in my first book.”

If he was not a lover of Milton at one point or another I would be surprised. He is master of the long Miltonic line, often iambic.

Smith’s architecture is rough-hewn. “Weathered ...cut stone” and “roofline harsh” as well as “weathercocks rusting” carry out the opening description of something beyond simple description. The “iron pickets” are “darkening.” So is life itself with a “door bolted, its paint etched away” and even the shutters bear out “a patterned, elaborated journal of weathering. . .”

The Body of the Poems: Old Hymns & John Clare

The hymn which culminates in Jordan Smith’s work on John Clare was written late in his career. Here music becomes orchestral, symphonic. Hallucinatory light is refined. Smith’s adjectives are consistently extra-ordinary, jarring: the paint on doors is not usually “etched away.” And shutters are not patterned with a “journal of weathering. . .”

“Clare’s life, a series of almost impossible negotiations between ignorance and knowledge, gift and condescension, poetry and privilege, appetite and refinement, seemed to me to raise issues that have hardly gone away: class, liberty, ecological responsibility, the rights of imagination and the rights of property. The intent of the poems is to present moments from that life at a high pitch of tension and to consider how little has changed,” writes Smith.

These poems are a fantasia on the works of John Clare. Smith is not as magnetized, deeply drawn by as repulsed by the horror of being insane: but his is an amazement with compassion, indeed pity for this state of mind: think of Van Gogh, of Virginia Woolf.

The footpath, past locks and stocks and boundary stones,
Left him a bastard’s felicity, his turn for speech
And flattery, deft wit, dab hand with grey or roan
Fillies, left him, in lieu of other teaching
Such pleasures. His grandson, too. That drowsy boy
Would learn to make an empire of his joy,

Strong, one syllable Anglo-Saxon words “Locks and stocks” make the opening here powerful, yet there is tenderness in the alliterative line, “deft wit, dab hand with grey or roan.” Clare was a driven haunted man, his demons. Although pathologically shy about his work here is what Clare can be imagined to have done:

He wrote on scraps of paper his mother craved
For *her own purposes*, tedious, domestic,
Practical. He hid his drafts away;
Practice in penmanship or arithmetic,
He’d lie straight-faced if any such were found.
He spoke one once. He claimed it . . .

And that flat, green light, the same, the same
As the frozen pond and river. All
The roads snow covered, all the shame
Of appetite reduced to a hunter’s call,
A long-tailed bird, a prayer for prey
From scarcity. A winter’s day.

All poetry I believe tends toward a homecoming. The homeline in the excerpt below is simply stated: emphasized in the words “slowly” and “splendor.” Going home he looks upon as “good in any weather.”

I want
To drive slowly through
That splendor home.
(p. 35) *Three Grange Halls*

While Jordan Smith is not what I would call an ecstatic poet he voices elation. Nor can he be placed in the confessional school. Is he a minimalist? No, not quite: he pares earthly life down but in long breaths which take in the full sweep. He is a formalist, a modern, a brilliant observer of the daily scene. And he internalizes the visual, the familiar. Slowly unspooling revelation seems to be Jordan Smith’s forte, most often in long musical lines. His is an earthy yet spiritual take on existence.

Hymns is also, for me, a deeply spiritual, if not religious, book. While the terms ecstasy and apostasy are not appropriate, the slow exultation that comes of massing moving details—such as in “An Exaltation of Larks” moves like a shuttle thru the poems in this first book, weaving in and out.

No one, furthermore, exists to do what the windows have done: “taken on the steely air of rain” and brambles, threateningly, have “moved closer.” Small jets of gas lamps, grain of oak stair steps, yellowed invitation on the mantel are also among the numbered things remembered but near to oblivion, one step far from forgotten.

It is that mystic space “One step from forgotten” that Jordan Smith is haunted, mesmerized and enchanted by and which all is summed up in the old hymns.

If music is his primary, preoccupation, I would say memory is his second: the deep and delicate gift for remembering.

So if the landscaped world is a great weight upon the eyeball, that of memory, music, and later art, particularly that of painter Walter Hatke, are Smith’s passports if not to God, to spirituality. As with Simone Weill, it is impossible to separate his music from his spirituality. Opening “The Morning Dew” in *For Appearances*, “What I envy tonight is the ecstatic life.”

So if the landscaped world is a great weight upon the eyeball, that of memory, music, and later art, particularly that of painter Walter Hatke, are Smith's passports if not to God, to spirituality. As with Simone Weill, it is impossible to separate his music from his spirituality. Opening "The Morning Dew" in *For Appearances*, "What I envy tonight is the ecstatic life." This does not mean he yearns to be a monk but yearns for a life 'Pared to simplicity, pared / Almost to no nothing, or to a ritual / Enacted, like a good habit: From this he moves to his music, "The violin tucked in its case"

The lovely use of vernacular and formal is evident in this line front "The Morning Dew" "It's like cobby workmanship on a house." This workmanship comes with the sense "Something sacred is meant to happen there."

So I look round to "something sacred" and an emotion deeper: Smith's late poems for John Clare deal with madness. This is reminiscent of an earlier poem in which he describes in "Tristan" the sea's "Continual / Music of loss" while in "Local Color" he speaks of the need for unveiling the mystery "the smoke screen of things." Smith's finest work portrays that smoke screen, pervasive but understated. He is reminiscent of Emerson who in "Nature on the "Splendid labyrinth of our own perceptions" opens when the "noble doubt" of solipsism isn't grounded in the possibility of the transcendental.

The Names of Things Leaving: Good Strong Oak Remains

But if the world ultimately or along the way breaks its promise, the soul, Emerson's "oversoul" or "Transparent eyeball" keeps its trust with life most especially in music. There is, however, the later darker statement which comes in a later collection, opening *The Names of Things are Leaving*:

"In the years before my bereavements (not the obvious ones). . . I found the names of things were leaving me. Those small, crested winter birds, gray / And smudgy'

Mystically, by a leap of poetic imagination, names become "winter birds" and they must be the color as well as "smudgy" What leaves is unnamable.

It is not the poet's "hands picking up the pen nor . . . spare hopeful / Legacy of words". Then what was it? He speaks of "the neurons' little lapses and deaths, / What would always happen" it is the names above all names that (one) "could not bear to lose." This is a dirge-like music, because it still scans at the very least an elegy for the beloved: function the mysterious way "a child's equation. Let s equal, or let y as well." There is the holiness of the work table. Then we move forward to 'A Young Person's Guide to Wagner's Ring' "From the living room, there's music / Low-pitched and hardly separable form the light'. Near the end of the poem we read that "Great words are great betrayals." There / Is a roughness in the back of the throat, and there, right there, is hope."

Hope, that essential emotion of faith is present. That, Hope, is the tryst unbroken. Almost always. John Drury wrote "Smith's voice has the magnetic authority of a patient crafty story teller and the liveliness of a musician reinventing the old tunes. . . goes on orchestrated in irrational splendor." He combines this splendor with the "Integrity of American Oak. Karen Swenson writes "Music always draws you into the dance, a trance."

Looking at the body of Smith's poetry, chronologically, music and art deepens his historical poetry from his first book, *Hymns* which creates a massive music in a page-length poem, a hymn itself. "For Dulcimer & Doubled Voice" states that "Because the sadness of the mode rests / in an empty singing between the string," a poem which exalts the string instrument "'split heart / of cherry: " a few lines further on "whorls slipping away in quiet water." Both are reflections of quiet emotion.

I want to take a backward glance:

The longest poems are in the first book. Part Two of *Hymns* is three long letters. Here the urgency of tone, and vivid language show Jordan Smith as dramatist. They are "A Portrait by several Hands Sir William Johnson Baronet who was Superintendent of Indian Affairs (1715-1774).

These are long poems, epistolary and like that lost art, letter writing, formal in style. The opening one is entirely set in quatrains and runs twenty-two pages. Long historical addresses, in the form of letters often, and the emphasis on music move us forward into fresh insights about older arts. Formal, rural and historical these poems will surely take their place in the canon of millennial and post 20th century American poetry.

The Northeast is always his geography, aside from his vivid descriptions, when writing of John Clare, of England. "(The nuts and bolts of any small town). ("Schuylerville" *Three Grange Halls*.) He makes glancing reference to Edward Hopper, "It could be a Hopper scene," but is lovelier. (*Ibid.*) Getting into the meat of Smith's poems is still, for me, always a kind of angel-meat. "The problem is solved / O how to feel in the face of beauty." (*Ibid.*) Clare's experience of enclosure—the common land becoming private—is part of this, the openness of the New York countryside vanishing into development; if it wasn't common land before, it was at least available to the eye.

Always life lived with the leisure that opens the inner eye: "The faded mural of the Adirondacks / On the backdrop" compel the eye. But solving the problem is necessary before the poet leaves, the problem of beauty "So engrossed in the varieties / Of its own passing" (*Ibid.*) Always, at the end of a poem, or a visionary day, he will "nod thanks." (*ibid.*)

I could compile list of landscapes alone. Like all visionaries, Jordan Smith figures as a rustic visionary: he wants "to be dazzled by the glare / Of what's offered without / explanation." (*Ibid.*) The explanation would spoil but it is a slow driving "through / That splendor, home" which resonates and rests with us, leaving us the final impression of a mystic in red flannel shirt, listening for the land's own music, pressing closer, and closer "At least a dozen good barns landscape / That looks good in any weather." (*Ibid.*)

Smith points up in an epigraph to the final poem in *Three Grange Halls*, "Fiddleheads," the musician's traditional body is work is "a vital whole pieces together like a patchwork quilt out of many discrete shreds. That "roughness in the back of the throat," that driving "slowly through splendor." Becomes a hymn, if unsung, heard in the space between sleeping and waking: *Hymn* is the word which recurs most often in Jordan Smith's poems. I go to my dictionary. From the Greek, Hellenistic, used as a noun this is a hymn to Apollo. Synonyms are canticle, psalm, carol. In all cases, it is a music of praise. For Smith, it is not praise to a God, or gods but for the vari-textured emotions of living hitting him in the face with the effect of brilliance: brilliance is in a place of its own: it dazzles.*

It is night: sky is darkening; Protestant severity touched the Eastern hills. That red spark describing the outline, on the horizon, of eastern woods, eastern hills if the poet, Jordan, in red flannel shirt: like Whitman in love with the world around him, like Wallace Stevens, a lover of the longer line, mainly iambic, the create an engraving crafted with a vitality, detail, ruggedness and lyricism peculiar to the American voice. And, as in these lines in praise of jazz improviser Charles Lloyd, a presence found everywhere and in spite of everything:

And at Big Sur, an old man with a horn under his arm has walked a little further into the scrub where the trail dodges back from the cliff.

Considering that long paradox of infinite division. Who would have thought the broken might contrive such beauty.

Who would have thought the saxophone might be one voice of god?

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POETRY & WRITING

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