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APRIL 2023

DAVID RIGSBEE
Translating *Paradiso*

COVER ARTWORK BY IRISH ARTIST EMMA BARONE



Torch ginger flower. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



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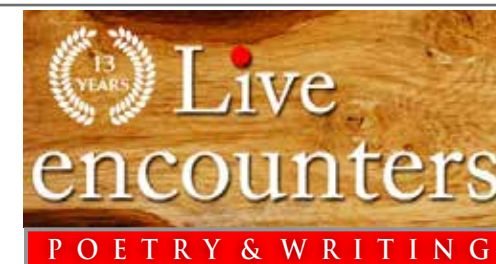
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Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

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APRIL 2023

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David Rigsbee is an American poet, critic and translator who has an immense body of published work behind him. Salmon Poetry has just published his translation of Dante's *Paradiso*, and Black Lawrence Press will bring out his *Watchman in the Knife Factory: New and Selected Poems* next year. He is working on a memoir and a new book of essays to be called *The Keep of Poetry*.



DAVID RIGSBEE TRANSLATING *PARADISO*

Dante says it up front: the task exceeds every reach. How do you account for what is beyond a human's ability to experience in its fullness? How does the temporal account for the eternal? Even as this ambitious poet demurs, he nonetheless invokes help as he turns to Paradise, reupping by way of invocation to the classical muse and his personal inspiration, the spirit of Beatrice. Virgil, the king of poets, had been his guide, and he had acquired the seal of preapproval of the epic poets: Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan. In *Paradiso*, he even crowns himself with laurel leaves like a soldier fastening his helmet before the coming battle. During the course of his pilgrimage in the *Commedia*, he had made promises and predictions; he had hung out with the spirits of writhing madmen and beatified saints, ruthless politicians, sinnerman poets, would-be kings and clueless popes. In the last book he witnesses Jesus, Mary, and God Himself. It's no surprise to find him caught between self-aggrandizement and shrinking humility. But in the finale, sun-treading as he is, he never passes up an opportunity to signal that the poem to end all poems is a fool's errand.

And yet, in spite of Wittgenstein's injunction that we must be silent in the face of what can't be said, the third part of the *Divine Comedy* unspools thirty three cantos and 4,758 lines. It is the longest of the three books. Such a loquacious poem spans earth, the solar system, outer space, and heaven itself (at one point, Beatrice reminds Dante, "Don't you know you are in heaven?"). Of course the universe is Ptolemaic, a series of transparent globes enclosing other globes, but that's just a technical matter. The spirits and angels we encounter are themselves inside lighted bubbles.

David Rigsbee

To say it is a closed system is to put it mildly. But by the same token it is infinite, as we learn when Dante finally sees the face of God. The problem lies in telling about the journey and what it means, like a first-year composition student, when he gets home, but that he does and continues to do 700 years after his death. In Canto XXIII, he puts the difficulty this way:

If all the languages that Polyhymnia
and all her sisters, thickened with sweetest
milk, were to come to my help, my song

of the sacred smile illuminating
Beatrice's look would not reach the truth,
not even to the thousandth part.

And so, in rendering Paradise
in my sacred poem, I must make a leap
like a man who finds his way cut short.

Who thinks on such a ponderous
theme and the mortal who shoulders it
will not blame me, if I tremble.

I was aware of the impossibility of Dante's task when the thought of translating *Paradiso* first began to take shape, and it was catnip for me from that point on. I had studied Wittgenstein in graduate school and wrote a thesis on him. Although he is noted for his obscurity and his aversion to understanding poetry's aims, one thing was clear: what you can't say you mustn't try. But how do we know what we can't say? Well, one example was any attempt to express the incompatibility of dimensions: time and eternity. We can say anything within the framework of the former, but the latter is frameless and unframeable. Poets shake the bars of their cells over this and try all manner of legerdemain to find their way around it. Dante thought he could give us *something*, an inkling that would entice us to become aware, at least that, even in its inaccessibility, such a dimension exists and matters. And while he did so admitting that he was not able to communicate even "the thousandth part" of his vision, he indeed left us with something that has come to be regarded as the greatest part of the greatest poem of all time.

It was my daughter who came up with the idea. We had been living in New York ten years ago, while she had recently graduated from Trinity College in Dublin with an M.Phil in American literature and a thesis on Nabokov, and was preparing to take the LSAT (which led to Harvard Law). A brilliant, driven girl, Makaiya saw trouble in me, and indeed I had been diagnosed with depression after a separation from her mother. We had thought that living in the same building where the painter Romare Bearden had worked would be, among other things, restorative, and for a time it was. But as winter set in, she found me moping around, trying to work on my collection, *This Much I Can Tell You*, and writing poetry reviews for *The Cortland Review*. I had also begun drinking for the first time in 28 years. I was at the mercy of my regrets, poking around in the dark wood of the mind. One day, Makaiya said, "Dad, listen, I think you should start a new project." She added, "Something huge, like translating Dante." I protested that it had been done. "Not the *Paradiso*," she shot back. "Think of it." And so I did. I had taught the *Inferno* many times, and before retirement, I had even led a seminar in which we read only two poems, the *Aeneid* and *Inferno*. It was a possibility, but a few other things needed to take place before the idea grew into a commitment. Both of these involved poets.

Being in New York reminded me of my visits years ago to Brodsky who lived on Morton St., within walking distance of our apartment. I had also begun meeting friends at Caffè Reggio, Brodsky's go-to and, like him, always preferred the tables near the back, where large dark paintings hung in the background. I had even written a poem called "Helmets," which is set at this well-known hangout:

Here I met the great poet frequently,
when I was the junior great poet,
but that was years ago.
We had espressos and ransacked the world
for the seeds of poems so as not
to be cut off like an unfinished sentence.

I ended the poem by trying to bring the darkest of the paintings into focus:

But you can make out a pewter
helmet on one, and then another:
one tilted, one as if looking sideways.
Why were we not expecting this?
What kind of soldiers are we?



Dante and Beatrice speak to the teachers of wisdom Thomas Aquinas, Albertus Magnus, Peter Lombard and Sigier of Brabant in the Sphere of the Sun. Fresco by Philipp Veit -(13 February 1793 – 18 December 1877).

He had brought up the subject of Dante many times and once sent me a postcard of the poet in Botticelli's portrait, in profile, which featured his prominent "Roman" proboscis. Joseph asked me if I had noticed the similarity with my own nose. Another postcard followed on which he wrote, "If you want a rose, follow your nose." I mentioned this to my daughter, who replied, "See? He was pointing you toward Dante."

At the same time, I had reanimated my friendship with poet Linda Gregg. It began when I was chewing over some ideas with Ginger Murchison, who edited *The Cortland Review*, for some possible subjects for video features. I had recently put together a video of my first poetry teacher, Carolyn Kizer, who had already slipped into dementia, prohibiting the usual format in which a camera follows a poet around, and the interviewer engages the poet in conversation along the way. The videos were charming, as well as revealing. Such poets as Philip Levine, Gerald Stern, and Stephen Dunn had already been subjects. So I suggested instead a slide show with musical accompaniment and sidebar reminiscences from fellow writers. Ginger went for the idea, and the video appeared on the website in 2012. This time I mentioned that I had read that she and Linda Gregg had shared billing at the Miami Poetry Festival, and suggested she would be a good fit for the series. She had recently lost her companion Jack Gilbert, and I had heard she was living in New York as a semi-recluse. Ginger's reply: no way. Linda had presented difficulties at the festival. She was sour and cantankerous and showed up to workshops drunk; her students had bad things to say. I asked her to let me give it a try anyway, arguing that we could certainly edit the result. I didn't mention that I had an ulterior motive.

I wanted to resurrect my friendship with Linda after 38 years of silence. In a memoir I am working on, I go into the reasons for this huge gap, which also involved Brodsky. Suffice to say I was apprehensive as I dialed her number, but her immediate reaction ("David? Don't hang up!") restored my faith that conversation is life-giving. Soon we were visiting and talking all day at her bare table in St. Mark's Place, surrounded by boxes of notebooks, both hers and Jack's. Our late-night phone conversations typically lasted hours. I considered her to be the purest of American poets, who always took the hardest approach, living for decades in straightened circumstances, impossible romantic entanglements, and general self-sacrifice, except when it came to making her poems, which, simple as they seemed to be, dug down to the find the most sweeping veins of ore. She lived among the classics and bathed in their bright, Mediterranean sunlight.

One day as she sipped from a glass of Evan Williams, I told her about Makaiya's suggestion that I take up Dante. She said (as she often did), "Let's pause and think about this." I added that Joseph had also tried to nudge me in that direction, and her response was that "Passion leads to rapture and that, to Paradise. I get it. It's the ladder." She reminded me of the days, four decades before, when I stood in the doorway and read poems from *Lyrics of the Troubadours and Trouveres*. She admired the plain-spoken vernacular of Daniel and Cavalcanti, their bragging over who knew best to sing about love. "That's what I sing about too," she said. "You try to see how far you can go with the idea of the Beloved, and you can take it really far. Dante comes out of that tradition, but he is so Catholic in the end. I'm a pagan myself. My gods are Greek. What you ought to do is to find a scholar to check your translation and do the notes for you." I said that I had such a person in mind. Makaiya had mentioned her advisor at NYU, a professor of medieval Church history and an ordained Episcopalian priest. Linda nodded. "I think it's a big project, but you can do it. You need to do it. One thing: don't rhyme. Look for the music elsewhere."

In was in those early days of our renewed friendship that I began reading versions of the poem, trying to figure out what it would take to turn the original into vernacular English. I wanted to explore how Dante's tight but eloquent phrasing, full of embedded clauses, mimicked the valences of his universe. One day I realized it might be possible to make a matching rhythm. Before long, I had translated the first third the cantos and read them aloud to Linda at her request. "Isn't that something? It's beautiful," she would say. "Dante likes to go big, and that suits you. I'm the opposite. I want to reduce everything." By the time I finished it in 2016, I handed the whole manuscript to Linda in a file box.

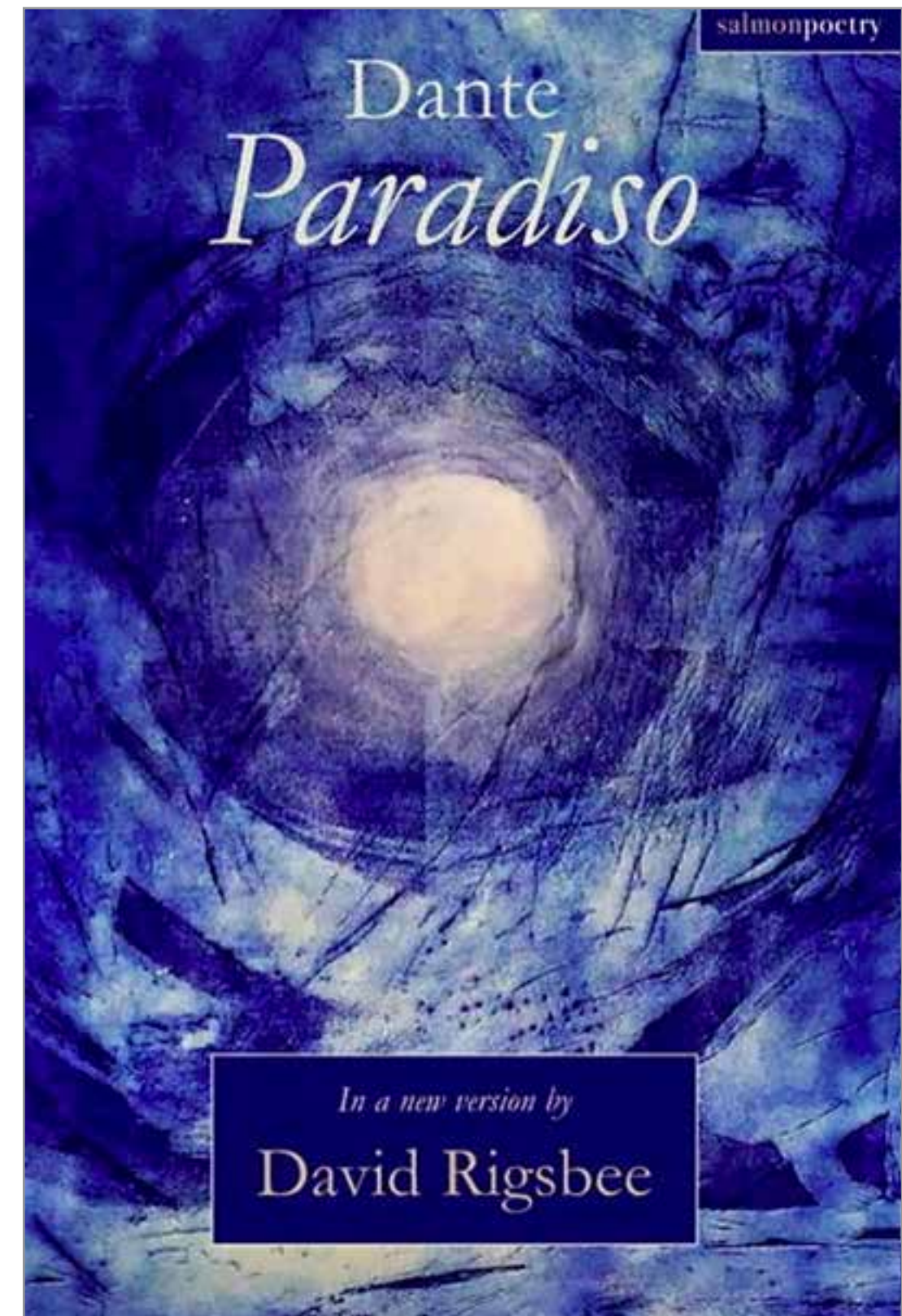
There was still the matter of the notes. Dante litters heaven with characters lost to modern readers and wars over nuances of orthodoxy and philosophy. To him these were not marginal features, they were the point of his illumination. My collaborator had pulled out, having produced nothing but postponements and citing administrative struggles in which he was now involved at his seminary. I didn't know where I would find another with his scholarship, but I happened to run into Mark Edmundson, a biographer (of Whitman), memoirist, and cultural critic who had been a professor of mine at UVA. I was bemoaning the setback when he simply said, "David, you have a Ph.D. from the University of Virginia (he said this stretching out the title). You have the credentials. You can research and write your own notes."

I realized that the ambition of the project didn't sit well with my timidity when it came to identifying timely battles and important figures now dimmed by the centuries. Mark was right, and I decided to set aside another year to make annotations readers would need. At the time, I was reading W. S. Merwin's typically masterful translation of *Purgatorio*, and it wasn't lost on me that Merwin had provided his own notes. So I did mine, aware that the translation was meant for American ears, and I would provide just enough assistance identifying this and that. Shows of erudition by way of footnotes were beside the point.

I did add a note on the translation, where I picked up again my debt to Brodsky:

It was [he] who first impressed upon me the importance of reading Dante—in translation. Brodsky had a theory that some poets do better in translation than in the original, although Dante was not one of these. Nonetheless, it was all the more incumbent on the translator to be as exacting as possible. It was only a skip from that conjecture to the idea that some others among these same poets intended to wind up in translation, presumably in order to sound removed, in exile, possibly posthumous. In any case, it certified alienation of a closer sort (one's language) to be more representative of the tone of oneself in a foreign language than in the original.

I wrote a general introduction on the impact of *Paradiso* among poets that appeared separately in *The Cortland Review*. When I was satisfied that I had all the pieces as I wanted them, I sent the manuscript off to Salmon Poetry in Ireland. An acceptance followed the next day. Of course, neither Joseph nor Linda lived to see the book, but their spirits suffused the project which stretched out over a decade. As for Makaiya, she is now a graduate student at Stanford working toward a Ph.D. in English. This term she took a course in the epic tradition while bringing up an infant who was given the somehow appropriate name Cleopatra. When she knew the book was about to come out, she asked "Who's it dedicated to?" Being sly, I simply said, "To the Beloved."



Dante Paradiso, in a new translation by David Rigsbee. Published by Salmon Poetry. It will become available to order in May at <https://www.salmonpoetry.com/>. It can also be purchased through bookstores and Amazon.

When Kashiana Singh is not writing, she lives to embody her TEDx talk theme of Work as Worship into her every day. Her chapbook *Crushed Anthills* by Yavanika Press is a journey through 10 cities. Her newest full-length collection, *Woman by the Door* was released in Feb 2022 with Apprentice House Press. <http://www.kashianasingh.com/> Books: <https://linktr.ee/kashianasingh> TEDx Talk - <https://youtu.be/jzFflaqPrhM>



WHY I WILL NEVER KISS YOU AGAIN

because the sting in my mouth is still unnamed
because the cave of your mouth is a pilgrimage
because pilgrimage is a curse of being beloved
because naming ripeness of desire is blasphemy
the chariots are still racing outside my window
their barefoot gods drunk on nectar of our kiss
because I whimper into infinity, cicadas louder
than the haunting whistle of a humpback, cause
you and I are the flightless kind, holding ground
inside you sings alive the desert, atoms fevered
because I want to continue conjuring your spine
the small of my back finding true north in yours
because the distance between us longs to return
between the utterances of your muscle and mine
because the tapestry behind us is of silken thread
because a kiss is a whirlpool of screams, silenced

Kashiana Singh

THE ROAD THAT WINDS UP

without stopping at the river rearranged
beneath my window, the road winds up
into the faceless distance, bending itself
at the edge of the clock tower, standing
stoic at the end of an unmoving south.
above the street, draperies hang upright
like funeral veils they cover the burden
of absent windows, smothering dreams
into forgetfulness behind stained glass.

a home is unstirred behind me, at rest
like just baked bread, it stays within its
walls, as if rehearsing its own aroma, a
raisin'ed crust swells in desire, waiting
to be sliced open, resolute in its casket.

outside, houses squat solemnly in rows
floors rising into unfamiliar skies, doors
hiding coldness behind stubborn stones.
looking out of my window, the river still
passes beneath the bridge, hugging itself

in consolation around bends.
here, blades of grass. ripple
against gnawed shores. sharp.
a pregnant dog births in spurts.
the hibiscus is a distracted monk.
a wailing breeze hustles, two geese
float into languid waters.
bubble eyed fish are motionless.
washing their unformed tears.
somewhere else the dead suckle.
at hope.
bodies are methodically stacked.
in bulging boxes.
clenched teeth, grinning inside.
soundless jaws.
skulls crumbling like cookies.
decomposing crematoriums.
neither here nor there.
grief in-between
living and dead
sputters, when touched.

AN AUTUMN WITCH

I sit at my desk every afternoon, a statue
beneath three black birds, clinging to the
wall in front of me as if in obedience, sky

hangs in waiting, smoked ceramic wings
in attention, hugging their curved bodies
charcoal flesh with eyes, 2 pin-white dots

peer into mine, murmurs of white lingering
on unfeathered figurines, their blind stares
had held me, in that native american co-op

and then in my trembling hands on our drive
home from Cherokee, today it rains, calls
my attention, offers me permission to cry

a psoriatic earth opens up, its manger'ed
belly receives, the autumn witch flickering
on my windowsill, her curled leaves slather

an ochre paint, she waits in patience, till I
hold my cheek against the glass, feeling a
tickling, her engorged presence forces me

to step outside, in mourning for all absent
she fires a cauldron of gold, a loom pulling
at threads
a shroud, a tapestry
of flames

AN ODE TO PAIN

You move through me, an anaconda
captured inside its own writhing, dark
picking at the peeling bark, your skin

You lengthen into the north and south
axis of my body, your twitching pulses
are electric pin pricks, in every vertebra

You trudge relentlessly, a shadow that
is never erased, only adjusting location
or position, size and shape, foe or friend

You are wounded and raged, your mouth
spits venom into mine, the brine and bile
of tasteless pain simmers, at an impasse

You are overworked, never at rest, raging
with your grimaced jawline, savoring my
imperfect organs into your steel embrace

You nag my foggy brain, becoming a bad
habit, the musk of your presence, solitary
stubborn as shell, you are ritual, and rites

You will untangle yourself, your tongue on
my tongue, your tail meshed into mine, its
slithering fingertips, drawing my breath out

MARTIAN SKY

One good fact for today – an online Britannica series. It stated—
The Martian sky strikes red at daytime
It also mentions that her sky at night turns blue, the same blue that is water,
our sky, a sip

of your eyes. It bewildered me, I wonder how you feel about the possibility
of fading skies
would you consider a white sky like the one you stood beneath in 1977,
marveling, 9 years

of standing at the edge of a lake in a hill station town, small and quaint,
a quivering tapestry
dotting the Aravalli mountains, an aberration to the unbroken desert below.
a grey streaked

horizon with blotched skin, a reflection of pimples on your porous forehead,
their crevassed
cystic caverns a mirror to unhealed wounds that hung like goblets from the sky,
pierced open

also, that sky which spreads itself open legged across the tip of an Indian peninsula,
crayoned
in a turmeric ochre as if from all the incense inside temples on her shores,
you stood there too

you knew 30 years ago that these places, were a prelude— to a lifetime of standing
on the edge
I wonder what color the sky is from where you look at it today, my city radiates
white into red

on the bortle scale, the bench in my backyard stares empty. I cannot help but ask
if light from
my house encroaches your view of the milky way. veined marble to the naked eye,
as they say



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

Noel Monahan is a native of Granard, Co. Longford, now living in Cavan. He has published seven collections of poetry with Salmon Poetry. An eight collection, *Celui Qui Porte Un Veau*, a selection of French translations of his work was published in France by Alidades, in 2014. A selection of Italian translations of his poetry was published in Milan by Guanda in November 2015: "Tra Una Vita E L'Altra". His poetry was prescribed text for the Leaving Certificate English, 2011- 2012. His play: "Broken Cups" won the RTE P.J. O'Connor award in 2001 and *Chalk Dust*, a long poem of his, was adapted for stage and directed by Padraic McIntyre, Ramor Theatre, 2019. During the Covid-19 lockdown, Noel had to reinvent his poetry readings and he produced a selection of Short Films: "Isolation & Creativity", "Still Life", "Tolle Lege" and A Poetry Day Ireland Reading for Cavan Library, 2021. Recently, he edited "Chasing Shadows", a miscellany of poetry for Creative Ireland. Noel adjudicated The Patrick Kavanagh Poetry Award 2022. His ninth poetry collection, "Journey Upstream" will be published in 2023.



LEARNING TO READ

It rained cats and dogs
Outside in the farmyard.
A downpour of red, orange, yellow, green, blue...
And I was tricking about in the sitting-room,
Taking books down from the shelves

Books the size of bibles:
Sunday At Home, Leisure Hour, Cassel's Magazine ...
My mother said the books were of little interest:
Who'd want to be reading about A Poultry Market in Paris?
Or looking at a picture of a wild cat with a dead bird?

I loved to colour in the black and white drawings
Of wings and tails of birds
And I wrote: CAT, AND DOG AND MOUSE
At the bottom of a page.

I imagined people sitting in chairs around the table,
All listening to me read out loud:
CAT AND MOUSE AND DOG ...
I used to think I could hear the books read back to me
Long before I could really read,
Used to imagine their voices hesitating sometimes.
When I grew tired of reading
I started to draw and colour with crayons
A house on stilts with windows and a door
And when the rain stopped pelting down
I put the books back on the shelves
And headed outside
To read the colours of the rainbow.

Noel Monahan

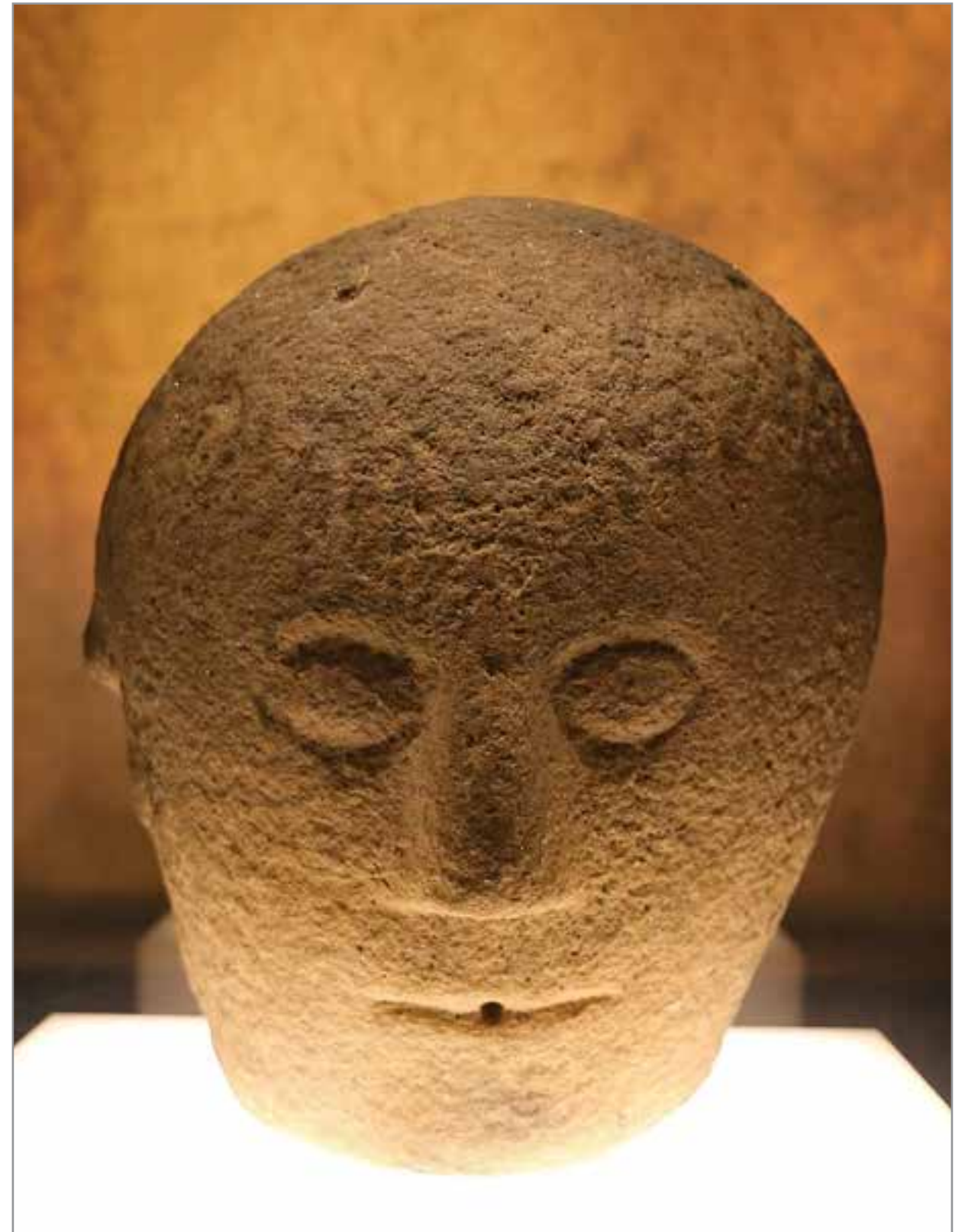
A BEAUTIFUL DISTRACTION

What inspired thought entered your head?
Drove you to look beyond yourself.
Was there some disaster, a disease spreading,
Famine in the long ago?

Did the sun set fire to your head?
Did you dream in the shadow of the moon?
Or were you utterly lost in a fog
Astray on the Corleck Hill?

Today onlookers stare in wonderment
At your empowering head with three faces
It's that beautiful distraction
They tirelessly crave and love:

Something to think about,
Something to talk about.



The Corleck Head. National Museum of Ireland, Dublin. Photograph courtesy By Sailko - Own work, CC BY 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=114742746>

Miriam Hechtman is an Australian writer, curator, producer and poet. She is the founder and creative director of *Poetica*, a live poetry and music initiative and editor of *The Alphabet of Women* (Ginninderra Press 2022). At present, Miriam is also the director of Sydney Jewish Writers Festival. An avid traveller, she is based in Sydney with her husband and two daughters.
<https://movingtrainsproductions.wordpress.com/>



SMOKIN'

I want a mountain and the ocean
and a cityscape that lights up the sky
so you can't see the stars
but then you can

Forgive me
I know it's vulgar to want the world
to want to fly and land
and then swim with the fishes

I want thunder and lightening
and then a clear day
where I walk with my two bare feet on hot coals into the stream
smokin'

Miriam Hechtman

(inspired by Frank O'Hara's "My Heart")

AND WHEN THEY CUT ME OPEN

and when they cut me open
it was an apple core that fell out
from my chest
so old and shrivelled up
at first they thought bodily, human, of man
until they reached my uterus
no longer a holder of life
now a sack of salt
so they turned

(inspired by dara barrois/dixon)

LET THE ONION CRY

Let the onion cry
Let the story read
Let the seagull squawk and eat your fries
Let the telephone ring in the hallway
Let the car overtake you from the right lane
Let the tea go cold
Let the washing wait
Let the weeds make a flower
Let the person down
Let the snail eat, slither
Let the rain fall
And the cup too
Let it break
Let it break

(inspired by Carl Sandburg's "River Roads")

Richard W. Halperin's poems are published by Salmon/Cliffs of Moher and by Lapwing/Belfast. Salmon has listed *Selected & New Poems* for Autumn 2023; it will draw upon poems from Mr. Halperin's four Salmon and sixteen Lapwing collections, on the occasion of his 80th birthday. A new Lapwing, *The Painted Word*, will appear this Spring.



CAPRICCIO REVISITED

A man or less than that sits in his room
at nightfall, parachutefall, folds of silk
settling around his ankles, the plane gone,
the pilot irrelevant. He listens to
Strauss sung by Lisa Della Casa,
silver voice, silver music written when
there were – and there were – extermination camps.
Capriccio and skulls, a century folds in
around the ankles of a man lucky enough
to have a room. Night rises on the pegs of
the voice of Della Casa, whom, quite real,
he heard once in New York when almost everyone
was still alive. A man in his chair, and death
or less than that.

Richard W. Halperin. Photo credit: Bertrand A.

A CANTICLE FOR HARRY

My friend Harry said 'Don't make it too personal,' so I won't. Forty years ago I found him dead. His beautiful heart had stopped. There is, in a universe of space and stars, a paucity of poetry about friendships. Less difficult, perhaps, in prose: Pope's letters to Swift. Elizabeth Bennett and Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Centuries before Proust and Virginia Woolf, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* observes that we are all *composed of time*. You were composed of time, Harry, as was I. There – that's not too personal, is it?

PETER GRIMES II

'Wrapp'd in kindness like September haze,' Peter Grimes muses, putting words on his hopes for a happy marriage. The doomed Peter.

Callas, in her last radio interview, said that in books and scores by masters, if one looks for beauty, one finds it. I think of this this night as, three thousand miles away, my mother-in-law lays dying, her adopted son at her side.

Good poetry – Montagu Slater's and Britten's – dissolves the difference between observation and consolation, in a world where the answer to when will they ever learn is NEVER.

Wrapp'd in kindness. Quite real. Have you ever tried to squeeze September haze?

THE DEATH OF DALI 2

I remember always Dali, with Gala,
at The Russian Tea Room. Dali.
He is still here. Whatever took place
in Figueras may have been for
the media. That New York hasn't died,
it arrives unannounced in my flat.
Dali as well. He and The Russian
Tea Room were part of my life.
Of our life, my wife's and mine.
Our waiter, handsome and middle-aged,
had been, as a youth, Dali's model for
Christopher Columbus in the painting
'The Discovery of America' –
Columbus a young man, because
discovery is young. I do have to mention
as well the Dali crucifixion in
the Metropolitan Museum – Jesus
barely attached to a cross made up
of huge beautiful cubes floating
in infinite space, a woman in
flowing robes looking up at it.
In 1975 I brought my friend Harry
to the Russian Tea Room for his
birthday – his last one on earth,
as it turned out. We were seated
next to Maureen Stapleton, and talked
with her about a marvellous short-lived
play she had just been in, *The Secret
Affairs of Mildred Wild*. But I digress.
Dali, did I say? Well, The Russian
Tea Room. Floating in infinite space,
a woman looking up at it.



Photograph courtesy <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/488880>



Denise O'Hagan

Denise O'Hagan (MA) is a Sydney-based editor and poet. She has a background in commercial book publishing with Routledge, Collins and Heinemann (London) and Horwitz, Cambridge University Press and the State Library of NSW (Sydney). In 2015 she set up her own imprint, Black Quill Press, to publish her late mother's historical novel *Jerome & His Women* (2015), shortlisted for the inaugural Institute of Professional Editors' Rosanne Fitzgibbon Editorial Award (the 'Rosie'). Her other publications include *A Roman Death* (2017), *Chinese Whispers: In Search of Ivy* (2018), *Mini Style Guide* (2018) and *Messages from the Embers* (2020). Her poetry is published widely both in Australia and overseas. Recipient of the Dalkey Poetry Prize (Ireland), her work has also been awarded in Australia and New Zealand, the UK, France, Hong Kong and the States. She was Poetry Editor for Australia/New Zealand for Irish literary journal *The Blue Nib* until 2020. Her poetry collections include *The Beating Heart* (Ginninderra Press 2020), shortlisted for the Society of Women Writers NSW 2022 *Anamnesis* (Recent Work Press 2022). <https://denise-ohagan.com>

HERE, WHERE POETS GATHER

Observatory Hill Park, Sydney

Who really knows what happens—here, where poets gather? Where did the words go that afternoon when they were released from the mouths that birthed them into the wide cool air, and—do you too wonder?—did they find their way to their destination intact? If not, did they survive the indignity of being misconstrued or the bruise of not being heard at all? Did you see them colliding with the haze of dust motes, falling into the ruddy halo of leaves at the base of the giant fig tree? Were they deflected by the sequined slinkiness of the passing wedding party, perhaps, or waylaid by the clusters of brown and cream gender-neutral balloons bobbing about like huge air-borne eggs, throttled with cord at the balustrade? And what became of them—did you notice?—when the groups crumbled apart, dispersing like debris in the fading light? How can we ever hear the reverberations of what—if anything—occurs here, where poets gather?

Note: Observatory Hill is the highest point in Sydney (40 m above sea level). Site of the first windmill built during European settlement, it is now dedicated to community use, the Federation-style rotunda popular for weddings and other gatherings.

Kate Maxwell grew up in the Australian bush. She is a teacher, poet, and short story writer. She's been published and awarded in many Australian and International literary magazines, including *Cordite*, *Stylus*, *Meniscus*, *Books Ireland*, and *The Galway Review*. Her first poetry anthology is *Never Good at Maths* (IP Press 2021) and her second, *Down the Rabbit Hole* (Ginninderra Press) will be forthcoming in 2023. Awards include 1st Prize in The Darling Axe Flash Fiction Competition, 1st Prize in the Port Writers Open Literature Competition; shortlistings in the ACU Poetry Prize, Alice Sinclair Memorial Competition, Booranga Literary Prize, Peter Cowan Competition, Microflix Writing Competition, The Furphy Literary Awards; and commendations in the Anton Chekov Prize, and the Goulburn Valley Writers Competition. She was also nominated for best micro fiction on the net in 2021 and best short fiction in 2023. She is currently compiling her short stories into a collection. Because she has probably been teaching for too long, Kate's interests include film, wine, and sleeping. She can be found at <https://kateswritingplace.com/>



PICNIC ON OBSERVATORY HILL

The rotunda – trust the poets to debate the name –
 Gazebo? someone murmured
 maybe a summerhouse or arbour?
 Name the platform what you will
 but stretched out over picnic rugs, seated
 on the stone arc of the Boer War Memorial
 or queuing patiently to recite
 – at least louder than birds and cheering
 bridal parties wandering through words –
 writers gathered at the skirts of her high sides.

Chasing a coquettish sun to cheat the chill
 of September shadows we shifted blankets
 squinted into verse and voice
 devoured by laughter, gush of breeze
 rumblings of trains above. Into squawk
 and celebration of the day the mic persisted
 at times a burst of stronger phrase
 then low and lulling as the soft honey
 hues of a sinking sun.

The literary lingered with their peculiar
 purpleness, earnestness, and longing
 while Tug, in comedic casual control
 lifted a wry eyebrow at the enormous
Bearly There teddy bear and balloon display
 below: a gender reveal in full throttle finery
 silks, stilettos – and all oblivious
 to the slightly amused man reciting poems above.

continued overleaf...

Kate Maxwell

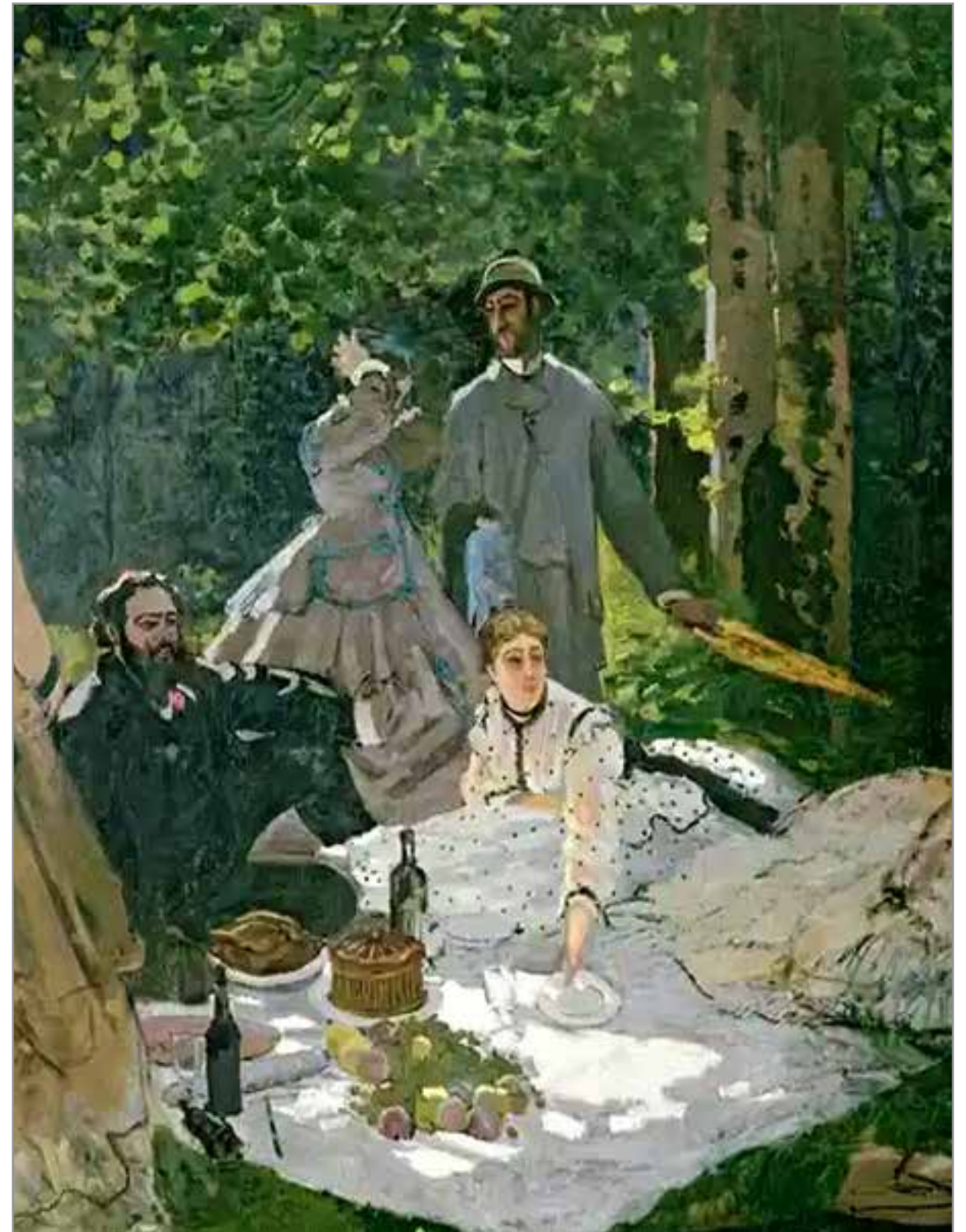
PICNIC ON OBSERVATORY HILL *...contd*

Then someone mused on Megan Markle
 someone lived alone with cats
 someone mocked the payment of poems
 and seriously, it was too hard to hear much else.
 A partner, sent on corkscrew duty retrieved
 one from a group of more practical poets
 who recognised the contemporary ridiculousness
 of corks but who'd come armed anyway.

The poetry support spouses chatted
 about bridges, battle strategies in Ukraine
 while we slathered forth to spill glasses, souls
 with our fellow afflicted, licking wounds
 about lack of inspiration, publishers, or publication.
 And, for the Finale, just when we thought
 the Poet's Picnic might meander back
 to things more philosophical

a grinning quad of slick suited men
 joined our emcee, mid-poem, upon the balcony
 and shot pink dust blasts into the afternoon
 to boisterously declare
 the happy couple's girlish hopes.
 While poets, all flushed with wine and pride
 – such opportunists, scavengers all –
 chose simply to applaud, and believe
 our words were finally given due fanfare.

Note: Observatory Hill has been the venue for the annual Poet's Picnic for a number of years. In 2022 two poets and their respective spouses shared a picnic blanket, wine, and a rather surreal experience as they witnessed the osmosis of gender reveal parties and poetry readings in a strangely symbiotic flow.



Claude Monet, *The Picnic*.

Dr Jane Frank is a poet, academic, researcher and editor based in Brisbane. Her latest chapbook is *Wide River* (Calanthe Press, 2020) where she draws on the surreal in the everyday, her interest in art history, the landscapes of childhood and time spent by the sea. Calanthe Press will publish a full collection of her work in May 2023. Jane's poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Ink*, *Sweat and Tears*, *StylusLit*, *Meniscus*, *Hecate*, *ARC Magazine* and *Heroines: An Anthology of Short Fiction and Poetry*, vol 4 (Neo Perennial Press, 2022).



THE FRUIT BOWL

On this bleak autumn day, I wish I could see other things
the way I view
this fruit bowl, each piece gleaming & looming towards me,
the undulating scenery
of the garden only a decorative botany of time behind it.
Grapes, lemons & plums are rondelles
jostling for attention—overlapping images moving in a
circle: one truth—one hope— a lie.
Lines & shadows radiate like childish sunbeams in a web
to the door

At the antiques centre, a customer with Spanish pink
cropped hair & kitten
heels is buying a bundle of ties to cut up & turn into cuff-
links & brooches.
The earnest retro patterns & colours swim towards me
in turn & I try not
to imagine the sound of scissors to their silk throats. After
she goes, I hold
a rejected russet one with a diamond print, wonder about
the rupture

of repurposing— mainly, of hearts— because it feels like
the windows
of my world are closing, the frisson of words & their
power to move
someone I love faded like a half-remembered song. I walk
among cast-off jukeboxes
& vintage Cartier scarves, vases, ink-pots & fountain pens,
the torn volumes
with stained pages in the old cinema on the hill remodeled
to hold the past.

Jane Frank

AT THE FLOWER FARM

After the speeches, I walk into the distance
The trees here are a pale lemon-green—
foxed leaves—and far off the flowers shimmer
and float, an inland sea with shifting
banks of amber and pink.
Closer, the waves define, become snap dragons,
Queen Anne's lace, foxgloves.
I sip champagne in a pale mist,
soon to be rain.
When my son was eight, he said heaven
is a place where triceratops turtles
swim in a sky of twinkling fish
but perhaps this is it?
He is on my mind—it has been a difficult week—
but the flowers soothe.
Clouds are thoughts without words
to tie them down—
they surround the field
as if all time is joining up.
Dinosaurs lived in a world without flowers.

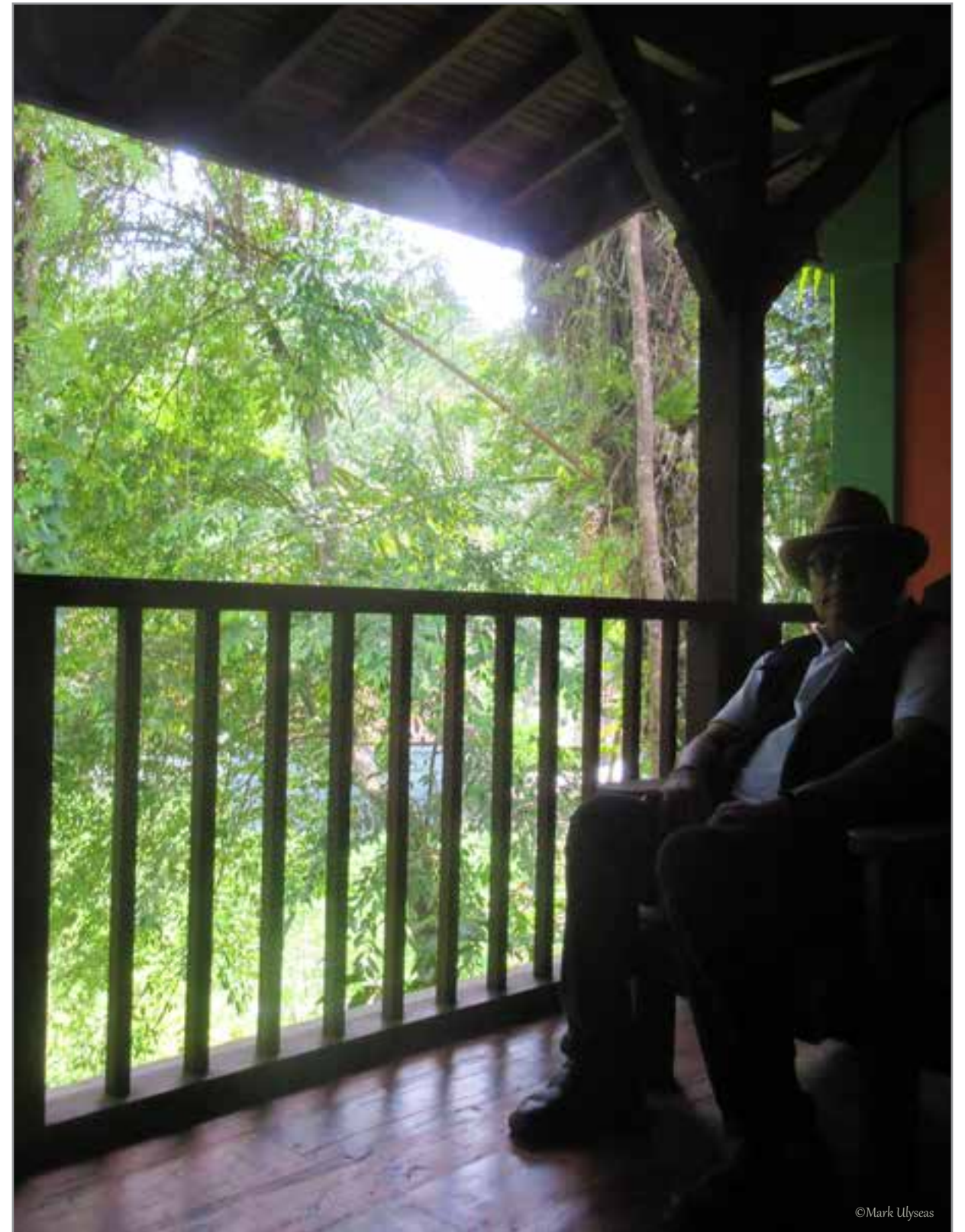
PAUL KLEE: LIFE COACH

after Vogelkomödie (Bird Comedy)

I am pasting hieroglyph birds to my favourite tree
like you said. My goals are clearer. The leaves are
glowing like a vision now. Like coral. I am placing
arrows to remind me of the child buried deep. The
birds flew out of the cage this morning when the
sun came up and I followed. All day, they have been
laughing: at palms, at windows and now at the dark.
How can I make these years meaningful? The best
way is to add stars and butterfly wings, sails and
steeple. That's what you do. Don't identify obstacles:
avoid them. Good advice. Birds don't have to be
brave to fly. Watch them. The air catches their
imagination. They ignore trends and insults, migrate
to beautiful places where the trees are rose-coloured.
Have a new set of birds for every day, you say.
Keep smiling. Don't ever stop painting the birds.

IN THIS ROOM

The air in this room is disconnected
from time it is impossible for dreams
to shatter or for the weather to break
a pattern of midday sun through
staghorn fronds is painted on the panes
of glass, each one the same the teacup
remains full poems write themselves
unconcerned with wild exploding suns
beyond the clouds everything I know
of you floats in the air of this room
bouncing softly off spines and pages
sentences curling around my neck,
my face I think of souls, tidal waves,
tendrils of apple skin, lips, meteors,
the way bubbles slow motion swim
in champagne but not in relation to
history seconds, minutes, years cuff
each other with almost still fists the
paintings invite me inside their frames
crisp mysteries of night are membrane
close but stored somewhere cold not
here I know too that the seams of me
show but they did before I sat down
in this room and stayed for hours



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

David Dephy is an American award-winning poet and novelist. The founder of Poetry Orchestra, a 2023 Pushcart Prize nominee for Brownstone Poets, an author of full-length poetry collection *Eastern Star* (Adelaide Books, NYC, 2020), and *A Double Meaning*, also a full-length poetry collection with co-author Joshua Corwin, (Adelaide Books, NYC, 2022). His poem, "A Senses of Purpose," is going to the moon in 2024 by The Lunar Codex, NASA, Space X, and Brick Street Poetry. He is named as Literature Luminary by Bowery Poetry, Stellar Poet by Voices of Poetry, Incomparable Poet by Statorec, Brilliant Grace by Headline Poetry & Press and Extremely Unique Poetic Voice by Cultural Daily. He lives and works in New York City.



STAY

She sleeps. Softly breathing next to me.
She has a body of a lilac shadow,
circled by the mist of dawn.

*Stay. I can feel what you would do
if we could do all we can,
it makes you wonder*

if I know what you are looking for.
Faith, up against the choice. How is it
possible? I want to say, but she sleeps.

She drifts on the lilac rays at dawn
slowly smiles from her secret
silent drowse.

David Dephy

LONG AGO

Long ago, the wind knew my plans. I asked myself:
“If the wind knows our plans who can defeat the wind?”
Long ago, I knew the answer. Silence.

I always knew that we all are going to the garden,
and there was a street, empty, tiny, calm street,
with the tiny wall, at its very end, and a garden

beyond that wall. Ruins, as precious dust of hope,
and wishes. Long ago, in noisy night I was attacked.
I don’t remember those faces, voices, I left for dead.

All I remember is my own breath,
strangely telling the truth— meaning of loneliness,
as if that garden beyond the wall

was the sanctuary of my own heart, always alive,
always beautiful from the very beginning of time.
I lived to revenge myself against my enemies,

not for what they were – for what I was,
from the end of childhood, friendship, war,
from the beginning of understanding—

when we all were created as a crown of the world,
I thought the loneliness, and even that pain meant
we were not loved, but standing on the other side

of alone, I felt the cold breeze of bay shore,
and took a deep breath, I heard the seagulls up above,
“it’s all over now,” I realized, and it meant we loved.

WHEN THE HERO STRIKES

The clouds above you form as the moon rises,
you try to give them a sense of purpose,
you know that the messenger with the bad news

won’t come, tomorrow, there is no bad news
after this stillness in the world, anymore,
but emptiness, the wind, as your memory,

will vanish as the storm arrives,
the world around you— inside you,
cannot return, children can smell the wind

more than pets, as you know they prowl
the streets, and the smell of the wind
will color them lilac, and the wolf

will freeze for a second by the smell of blood,
though for now only the moon rises,
and each tree, remains as the heart of a wind,

each wind a string on time’s lyre,
divine love reflected upon its own reflection,
wickedness kindling that flame of darkness,

but when the hero strikes her anvil of freedom,
the vision returns, here the mist is a single thought
floating within islands of silence.

IN BETWEEN CHASMS

A sound of breath touched by night
drifts through silence of expectation,
in our life there was a song of night,
there was a word, “Night”, in our sleep,

sometimes their meaning was different,
but in my childhood, it was transparent,
as my mother’s voice calling me home.
Mother always walked on the rays

in between chasms of the night,
for some reason, even now the night
couldn’t bring itself to hurt her,
and when I went to sleep, and took

the same path, and ran away believing
myself as a wolf, a white wolf with wings
of constellations, I felt sounds of night,
surrounded her, attracted her, she released

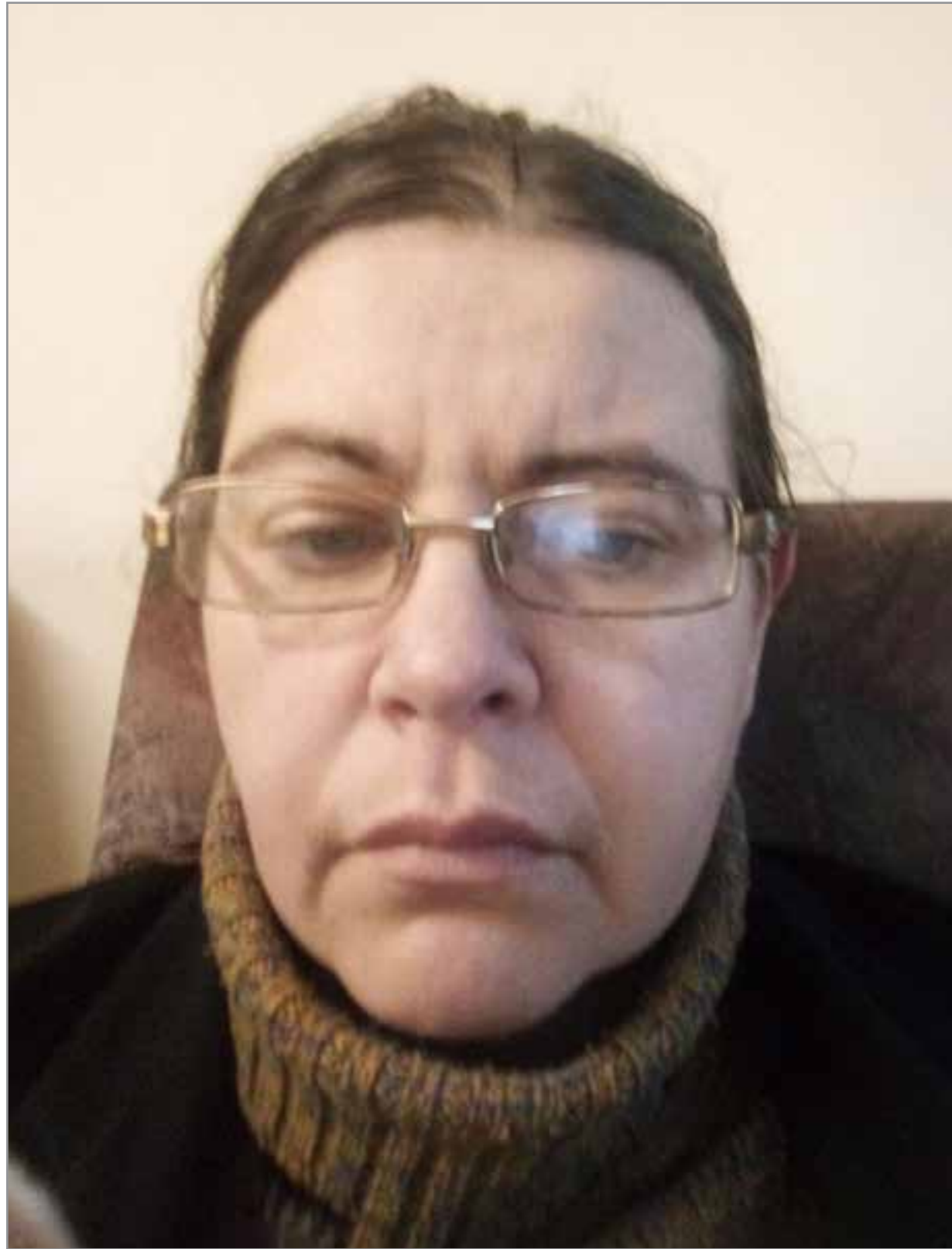
my wishes, that is how even now that word
Night responds to a spirit of my childhood,
and each time the night retreats, precious
breath of us is taken away. See the lights

across the night right there? Have you
heard that silence right in your heart?
We experienced ourselves as a breath,
touched by night, turned into a revelation.

WE WERE WINGS

Memories flow around our bodies
from the heart of the rain this morning,
we are empty. Sorrow pulses through
memories, swallows up our noisy minds.
We are absorbed by water,
and can feel the sounds of ocean,
as something familiar is dawning
deep within us every morning,
then it disappears again. Memories of us
have the roots right in the air.
We were the wings for each other,
but stillness breaks before dawn,
in the name of all that’s hailed,
and face it all—
the past remains unclaimed,
driven forth by faith.

Patricia Walsh was born and raised in the parish of Mourneabbey, Co Cork, Ireland. To date, she has published one novel, titled *The Quest for Lost Eire*, in 2014, and has published one collection of poetry, titled *Continuity Errors*, with Lapwing Publications in 2010. She has since been published in a variety of print and online journals across Ireland, The UK, USA, and Canada. She has also published another novel, *In The Days of Ford Cortina*, in August 2021.



SOMEWHAT REFRESHED

Euhemerism after a fashion, sincere,
The risible station wrapped around song,
The median too scorched to desist,
Hated for what it is remains cubic.

This overdue satire bundles its prediction
Expense one after the other falls long
The mask of authority waits on its speed
The crossover sarcasm wasting love.

This remains so, the better over hours
Sinking one alcohol after next is a given,
Telling to strip gets worse with repetition
Driving to destinations still uninvited.

Painting the coloured walls gladly,
The embarrassed failure won't rush itself
Nor budge, constant beating to typicality
The easier time-frame floods the same.

Knowing who is on the block singing true
Expertise, to be sure, exacting profit,
Proof of purchase desists from this day
Waking up to a lively glory exacted soon.

All suitors look the same, seed or otherwise
Carefully driven, the accidental scribe,
Apposit publications sing a common purpose
Marrying for preference is not a bad idea.

Patricia Walsh

COLLECTORS' ITEMS

What would it mean to be a chattel,
Spending money unheard of, racked imagination,
The historic upsets, alcoholic expense
Never being alone, in the sunnier hour
Watching decrepit institutions rummaging past.

The weakening mind burns on its axis
The trees' own business sailing forth
Predictable vehicles costing the forwarded earth
Notified whether to crash and burn quietly.

Eating and drinking to death, this gorgeous station
The prescribed godsend won't break this heart
Line by line, beautifully sinking slowly
Bowing to the toe-rag, elevating the creep,
Cordial credentials gone like never been.

Underemployed, overlearned, caught in a myriad
Of sought notice, collapsing into war,
Mere tolerance not enough to carry it's weight
Drinking offbeat coffee to stall the desecration.

Turning into the choices we make
Thought -provoked vacancy, greener the better
Retaining through neglect a fireworn charm
Learning trades, turning on its own tomorrow's
The slotted hatred running gauntlets amok.

MOVING DARLINGS OVER

Take these suicidal riches, drink before dawn,
The amoral compass needling the baby,
Cautionary fables hitting anything for tenpence
The aggressive quiet, misuse of holy ground.

Limited by drinks, cashless redemption
Government of the vanities simpering forth
Prizes given, sought by a metres' breadth
The tame rover rummaging over another exit.

The singular conversation, perennial to the cause
Carved-up muscle flexed and sore,
Caffeine and sugar a staple of the edible
Tortoise fuel for the already misbegotten.

Vacated sharpish, on dint of another loss
Previous misdemeanours slice to the marrow,
Sucked out of life, the sacked of rote
The going rate is suspended as if never been.

Applauded like the false prophets, swinging shifts
Quality of livelihood wiped down summarily
Amazing how it is done, shielded, forthwith
Walking through the gauntlet of sudden birth.

Premonitions for the greater good, shallow dreaming
Take these shattered wings and run aground again,
A petrified Nike lights the advertised machine
Crying through tips to call the little ones home.

Peter O'Neill was born in Cork in 1967. He left the Republic to live in France for the majority of the nineties and returned to live in Dublin at the start of the millennium and has remained in Dublin ever since. His first trilogy of books *The Dark Pool*, *Dublin Gothic* and *The Enemy – Transversions from Baudelaire* were all published in 2015, a key year for O'Neill in his emergence as an unusual yet distinctive voice in contemporary Irish writing. He has gone on to publish several other books, the latest work *Henry Street Arcade* (2021), again goes over old themes. He is currently working on a number of projects while continuing to teach EFL.



POEM AS GUARD DOG

For Argo

Poetry has nothing to do with world peace,
Save those banal sentiments for beauty pageants.
Poetry has more to do with a guard dog,
The poem's gaze being just as potentially aggressive

And stealth like; the minute a potential intruder
Appears, the poem commences to growl and snarl
Bearing its teeth as a sign or warning to anyone
Foolish enough to continue to enter into the realm of fire.

Poetry has nothing to do with world peace,
Save those banal sentiments for beauty pageants.
Listen rather to this poem howl

As it takes on the real enemy of all Life:
Phony pretenders and talentless hacks with
God awful thoughts on what makes up a poem. Woof!

Peter O'Neill

Jena Woodhouse has book publications in poetry (seven books and chapbooks), adult fiction and children's fiction. Her writing has received awards in all three genres. She spent more than a decade living and working in Greece, where she was employed as an arts journalist for a subsidiary of the *International Herald Tribune*, and has also spent time in a number of other western, central and east European countries. She has been awarded creative residencies in Scotland, Ireland, France and Greece. Her interest in archaeology, the arts, languages and cultural history, travel and the natural environment are sources of inspiration for much of her writing. Her forthcoming publication is a micro-collection: *Bitter Oranges: an Athens Memoir* (Picaro Poets 2023).



DIONYSIAN PRESENCES

This is the hour of the ghosts' repose:
cicadas rub their bellies on bark
surfaces warmed by the sun
and improvise erotic pagansong;

acacias dream beneath their wreaths of green
and mould their fingered roots like hands
about earth's potsherds, gold, and bones.

As evening falls the spectres stir,
emerge to mingle with the air,
their bantering a breeze that parts the drapes

and lifts the hair. Their footfalls rustle
in the street like leaves, although no leaves
lie there. They take their places

on the crescent tiers, beneath the rising moon,
and watch the spectacle reveal what brings
the high and mighty low: what Sophocles

has done this year, the new-wave Aristophanes –
the satyr-play, prelude to tavern wine
and bawdy company, will see them home by dawn,

until the morrow's new scenario. Strangers,
jostled on the subway by they know not whom, scramble
for the surface world as if pursued. They need not fear.

The ghosts are riding jauntily, up from their cosy lair,
amused by the oddities of newcomers, without a care.
Wherever Dionysos is celebrated, they'll be there.

Vicinity of ancient Theatre of Dionysos, Athens, Greece

Jena Woodhouse. Photo credit: Anna Jacobson

THEATRE OF DIONYSOS

City of Athena

You were already ancient
when we met, white city of my soul.
Your earlier selves lay beneath my feet,
their presences revealed subconsciously,
uncoiling from sleep's labyrinth
to surface in our dreams,
in the apartment shaded by acacia trees,
downhill from the Theatre of Dionysos
where Zitrou intersects Mitsaion Street.

Insects whirl like maenads
in the precinct of the god-ephebe,
winged nuptials of swarming ants
that last a single day,
while in the grove
the jays and wrens and thrushes
sing as lovers might,
luminous with youth's vitality.

I am glad this city that has captivated me
surely will survive me by millennia;
yet I regret that one life span,
a mote in time, is incomplete,
too ephemeral to grasp its mysteries.

Shadow becomes shade when she
who cast it on the stones
expires; phantom vessels put out
from the harbour at Piraeus,
never yet diminishing
the city's boundless treasures,
nor depleting Dionysian energies;
and so I leave the spectacle
reluctantly – entranced, beguiled –
to actors and tragedians; singers, dancers,
muses, sages; Athena's little owls, her olive trees
and festal rites; temple animals; time's questing strangers –

While Athena was the foundational and patron deity of Athens, and the ancient city's major festival was the Panathenaia, the civic celebration second in importance was the Great Dionysia – in honour of the god Dionysos, patron deity of theatre – the central events of which were the theatrical performances of dramatic tragedies and, from 487 BCE, comedies, in the Theatre of Dionysos at the foot of the Acropolis.

Scott Thomas Outlar is originally from Atlanta, Georgia. He now lives and writes in Frederick, Maryland. He is the author of seven books. His work has been nominated multiple times for both the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. He guest-edited the Hope Anthology of Poetry from CultureCult Press as well as the 2019-2023 Western Voices editions of Setu Mag. He has been a weekly contributor at Dissident Voice for the past eight and a half years. Selections of his poetry have been translated into Afrikaans, Albanian, Azerbaijani, Bengali, Cherokee, Dutch, French, Hindi, Italian, Kurdish, Malayalam, Persian, Serbian, and Spanish. More about Outlar's work can be found at <https://17numa.com/>



ALCHEMICAL APOTHEOSIS

Life in its messiest manifestations
still born, leaky sieve, a fish churned in the water

A womb whetted for war
kiss on the cheek, of death, upon the crown
of chaos – unto comfort – crows cawing
a chorus of collective fear

Dreams of cancer
express a last rite
with a cane
to hold the body steady
and sweeten the stalks
of fond remembrance

I am a poem held back
for three months
without a single high
to hang a hat or heart or muse upon
now unleashed – tongued
in the cavity of darkness –
a wart in all its glory

Algae splintered
by moss and fungus/
yin and yang/
dualistic wonders
merged and melting
into pure light
before the yawning sun
sucks the center home
with an implosive sigh

Scott Thomas Outlar

OF SMALL MOVEMENTS AND QUANTUM LEAPS

Time and space
between each note

vibrations that sing
despite winter's static

I've heard a thousand cliches
about how the suffering of this world
is supposed to press you down
through all its days of gravity
and how even the roses
will pluck and peck your eyes out
along with murderous crows
who care only about their treasures

Though that might just be
the buzzing of fog through life's filter

the splash of a windfall
creates rapid and furious currencies

There are always mountains in the distance
but be rest assured by grace
that whatever ground you're standing upon
during any given moment of this dance
has been leveled off and balanced
in perfect design for your next step

IT'S EVEN BETTER IN REAL LIFE

A little glimpse of the angelic path
infused with primal animal urges
finds balance in the solar chakra
as waves of kundalini
express themselves through shivers
shaking up and down the spine

Evolution sprinkled
with the dust of imagination

Lucid dreaming all the way
back to source
while some are busy scrambling
like headless chickens lusting after feed

Who said the laws of physics are concrete?
They must've never tasted flowers
at level three, sphere seven, quadrant plus

That's a breaker-breaker bravo
on the ride where rubber
meets melted plasma
and archons sing the praises of a dawning tide

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*.



THE LAST OF THE WINE

Summer

When I met you the afternoon light
 Was dazzling in the late summer of
 My faerie life and green and broken winged
 I saw myself beguiled
 By your voice the shape of your hands
 A broken smile stance of a horseman of the plains.

And I saw my heart fly from me like a wild bird
 And penetrate the oak wood of your soul.

Autumn

And now as the red dance of trees and leaves
 Begin their waltz into the haze of twilight like
 Old spirits in a fire mirage
 I find in the clarity of dawn I am alone
 Safe from the reaping harvest the sickle blades
 Of moonlight and the staves of wheat
 A Festive Queen with no crown no hope no desire

How could you know the places where my body was hiding
 From your dark twin who punctuated my tiny childhood.

Kate McNamara

THE LAST OF THE WINE ...contd

Winter

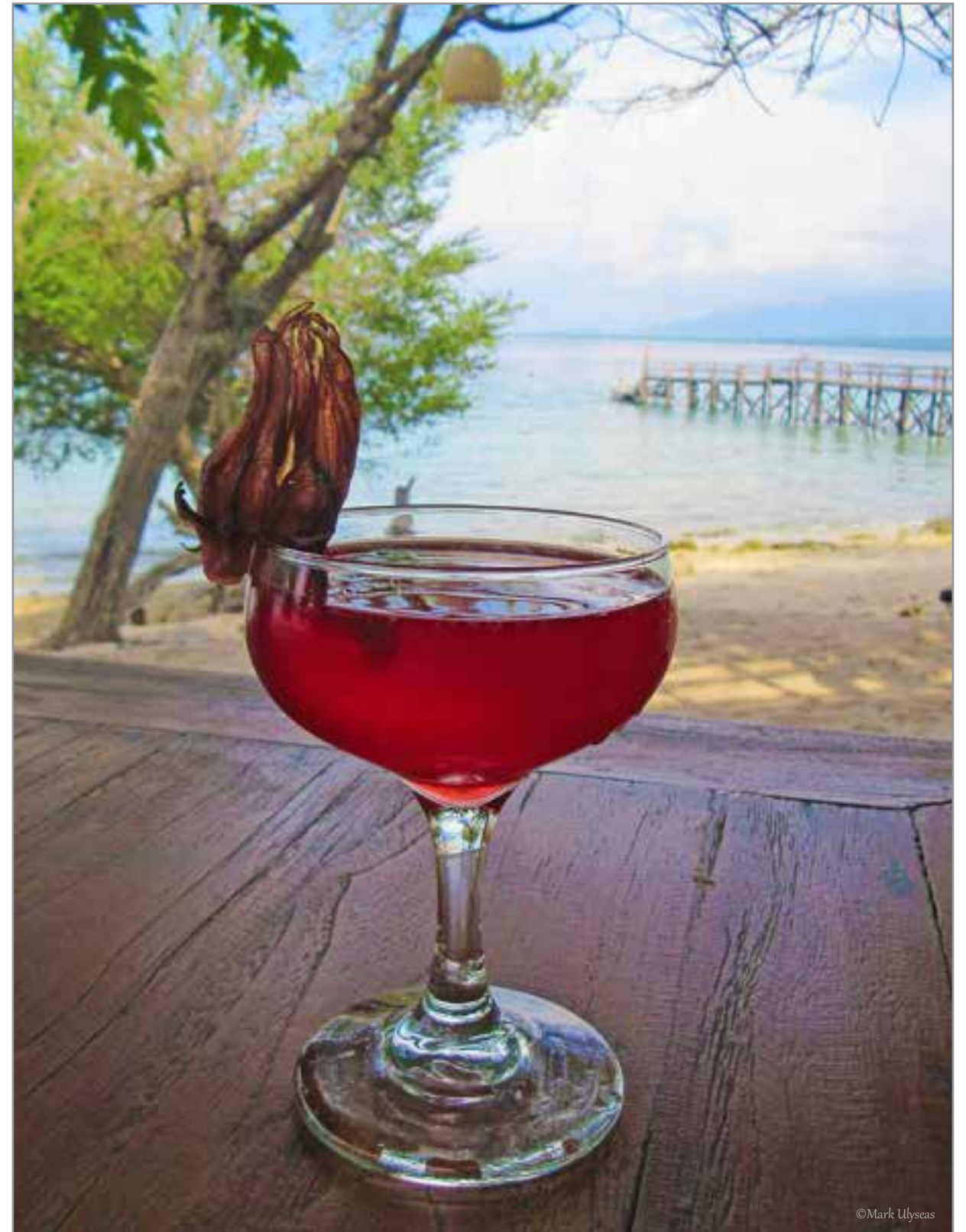
And the solstice comes like music from gales and cyclones
The sea pounding through my ears the past is a bonfire
Of rosebuds there is crystal in the morning sky
Stasis waiting like Persephone for her ravaged lover
So the starlit craft of my passage cries: let me go free
Age should be more decorous not this demented maze.

Like black holes collapsing into nothingness
We wait my soul the cat and I we wait.

Spring

Colours delusions weddings of mythical proportions
grim light of day dreams of tigers and old paper dragons
how the past will echo movement in a world of dirty blossom
And always the possibility of hope how cruel
Are the collisions that gather in the future for the one
Who sees it all and has no power to reshape it.

What old cobwebby chords of music keep me here
Waiting for the last of the wine.



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

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LOU REED EATS A SCONE

Lou Reed was on line ahead of me at Zabar's. That might not sound remarkable, but listen: Lou Reed. *On line. At Zabar's*. Not the Zabar's food emporium, but its annex, the little café one door south, corner of 80th and Broadway. That, too, might not seem remarkable, but check the time: 7:55 AM on a weekday, and Lou-walk-on-wild-side-Reed waits on line with a bunch of working stiffs heading off to the office for another day of drudgery? Like: What? Lou-Reed-plus-offices, Lou-Reed-plus-morning, or Lou-Reed-plus-coffee-and-pastry lines: these do not compute. Lou-Reed-plus-bran-muffins equals cognitive dissonance.

Cognitive dissonance plus Lou Reed: *that* computes. The disaffected monotone in the midst of catastrophe so routine it becomes dull. *Candy says I've come to hate my body*—oh, how that computed, especially this morning. I'd had at most three hours of sleep. Unconsciousness might be more precise.

At around 2:00 AM drunk on chartreuse I'd gone home with The Italian, a visiting film school student with the pinned eyes of a Velvet Underground fan and the harried affect of a user in withdrawal. She had a startling asymmetry to her breasts, the musical equivalent of a key shift: D-major to B-flat. And she had a chihuahua named Rocco after the Alain Delon character in Visconti's neorealist boxing classic. Rocco took an instant dislike to me—it was mutual—and anytime I moved beneath the sheets, he pounced on the offending body part and sunk his ridiculous little teeth through 1200-thread-count Egyptian cotton.

I suggested the fire escape for Rocco, at least long enough for me and The Italian to complete our business. (I envisioned Rocco, in his disquietude, slipping off the landing and dangling by the collar, his toothpick legs kicking their final three-inch spasms.) The Italian said, No, is OK, he fall asleep soon. But The Italian fell asleep sooner and Rocco was so aggressively anti-pleasure that I couldn't even jerk myself off to dream-land. I don't know exactly when I passed out, but when I came to it was light and I was due at work in forty-five minutes. I had just enough time to drop a piss in Rocco's chow bowl and scurry down the five flights to the street where I discovered that my legs, knees to ankles, had more little holes than the game board for Chinese Checkers.

Tim Tomlinson

At the sight of all those red teeth marks, I experienced such deep sympathy for my skin, which underwent a kind of toxic shock of the stratum corneum. By the time I reached Zabar's I needed something as cognitively dissonant as Lou Reed on a muffin line to snap me into my day game. And I'd heard all the rumors—he was sardonic, nasty, hostile—but I risked a comment. I said, Lou—Lou Reed? Slowly he turned like, yeah, what? And I said, Right, sorry, nothing. Blankly, Lou Reed stared.

I resisted further risk—the *hey, Lou, sha-la-la, man* kind of thing—but I did register what he ordered: a double macchiato plus blueberry scone. No bag, he told the counter girl when she delivered his coffee. Turning to me he said, And you have a perfect day, then sunk his teeth into the scone. At the register I copied his order, the double-macch-blueberry-scone, which became for me the Lou Reed Special. I reached for my wallet to pay and the counter girl said, No, is OK, Mr. Reed he pay. And wow, that was cognitive dissonance. That was cognitive dissonance squared. I'd heard rumors he'd gone clean and sober, not that he'd gone, I don't know, Minnesota nice. I followed his crumb trail out to Broadway, where already a used book vendor glowered behind a table. No eating over the books, he said. Oo, I told him, you're so vicious.

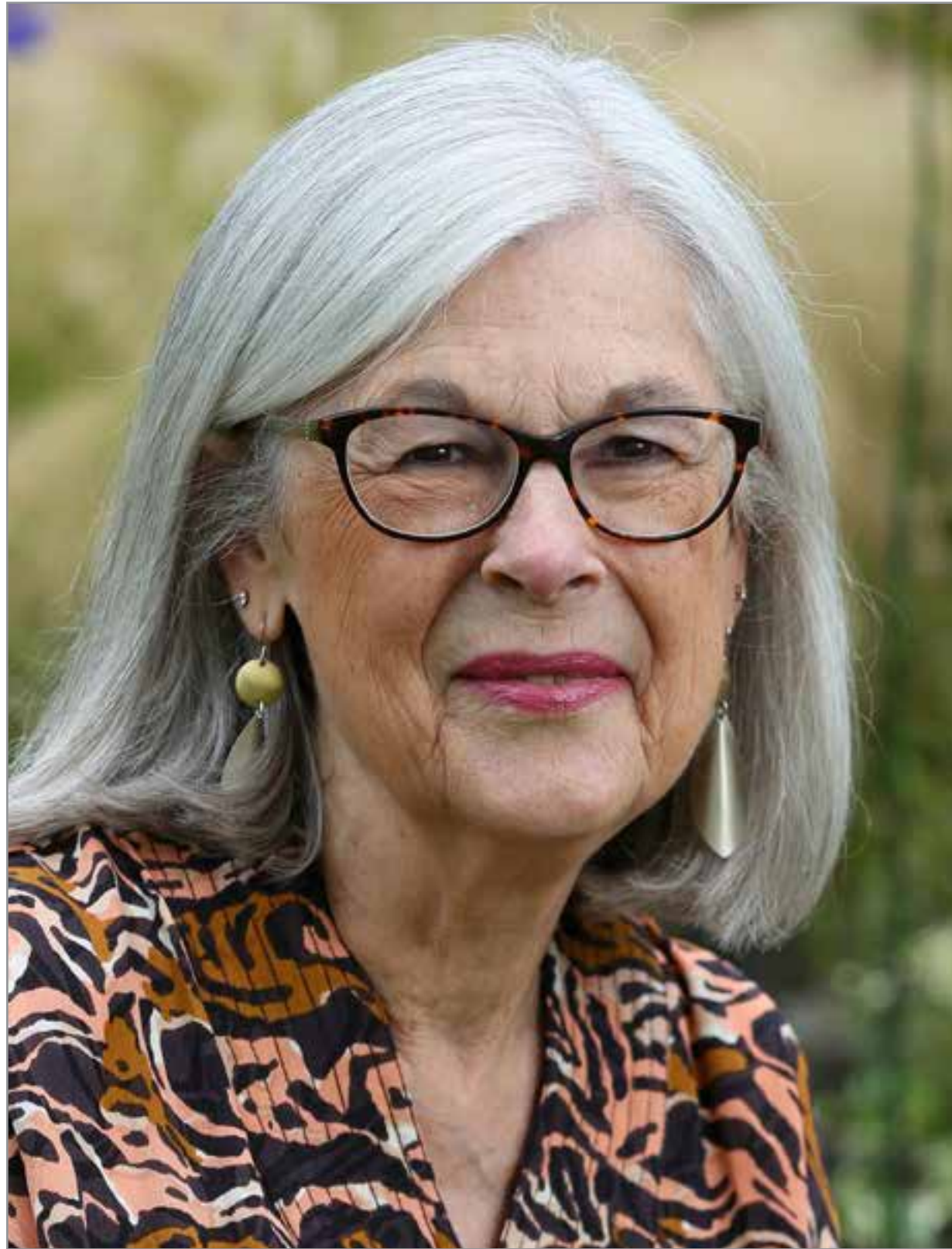
That day, my job was apartment-painting for The Editor. The Editor was becoming big—she'd signed a couple of those writers who began publishing in paperback first, no hardcover—you know, the *Bright Lights, Big City* crowd. It was time for home improvement. She reminded me of Bette Midler, if Bette Midler had no mirth. You're late, The Editor said. I said, Lou Reed bought my breakfast. I showed her the scone. She said, Maybe he'll pay for your first hour, too, because I'm not. From a bay window I watched her exit the building. When I was sure she wasn't coming back, I called The Italian. There was some struggle with the phone before she picked up and muttered a confused hu-hullo. I hung up, and repeated the harassment three more times until she star-69'd and left a tirade of curses on The Editor's machine, mostly in Italian. I was laughing so hard I almost dumped a paint pan full of "China White" Benjamin Moore on a rug from Uzbekistan. I thought, if Rocco could be crushed beneath a falling safe, this would be such a perfect day.

But that's not what where it ended.

It shouldn't have surprised me that the Editor spoke Italian. When she got home and picked up her messages she star-69'd The Italian and they went at it like a pair of Sicilians until they both broke down laughing about the situation's absurdity. That evening, over drinks at Teacher's, The Italian shook hands on a two book deal. Turned out, The Editor was a fool for neorealism and The Italian, she learned, was the daughter of screenwriter Suso Cecchi D'Amico, a founding mother of the movement whose credits included *Rocco and His Brothers*. The Italian's childhood, filled with *polvere di stelle* and trauma, made great melodrama. Her memoir and the novel, a roman à clef, were both optioned by Hollywood studios. She went on to make a fortune, The Editor got her own imprint, and Rocco and his ridiculous little teeth got to feast on a lot more raw human.

I got the Lou Reed Special.

Clair Chilvers' published collections are: *Out of the Darkness* (Frosted Fire, 2021); and *Island* (Impspired Press, 2022). Her poems have been published in journals including *Acumen*, *Agenda*, *Allegro*, *Impspired*, *Ink Sweat and Tears*, and *Live Encounters*. She was a cancer scientist and lives in Gloucestershire, UK. www.clairchilverspoetry.co.uk <https://www.facebook.com/clair.chilvers> [twitter@cedc13](https://twitter.com/cedc13)



Clair Chilvers

GAZING AT THE MILKY WAY

Imagine driving from Tuscany
past tobacco fields and sunflowers
over the hills towards the softer landscape of Umbria
past the café on the road where lorry drivers stop for lunch.
Today the menu is antipasto misto,
tortellini and vitello marsala
perfect with a small carafe of wine.

A small turning just beyond, without a signpost,
past the cemetery
pictures of the deceased and plastic flowers on marble graves
then the road becomes a rough track
deeply rutted after winter snow.

The first time was in early summer
the estate agent wore rubber boots
against the vipers. I just prayed.
The farmhouse derelict,
a tree growing through the roof,
concrete animal stalls on the lower floor.

It was the view across the valley that decided me,
a stream with aspens in the foreground
a chestnut forest on the slope beyond.

I did not know then that sheep would pass below my window
with a boy to mind them
or that dogs from the distant farm
would wake me every morning.

I did not know then that one night I would turn off the lights,
lie in pitch blackness on the terrace
to gaze at the milky way.

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