

2010 - 2022



# Live encounters

POETRY & WRITING

FREE ONLINE MAGAZINE FROM VILLAGE EARTH  
SEPTEMBER 2023

DR. COLETTE NIC AODHA  
BETWEEN WORLDS:  
BILINGUALISM, POETRY, AND EXILE

COVER ARTWORK 'CONTINUUM' BY IRISH ARTIST EMMA BARONE





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Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



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Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

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SEPTEMBER 2023

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Dr. Colette Nic Aodha is Comhalta Teagasc / Teaching Fellow, School of Irish, Celtic Studies, and Folklore, at University College, Dublin. Colette Nic Aodha is an award-winning poet and a visual artist who resides in Galway in the West of Ireland and has just completed a Ph.D., with the University of Galway, Discipline of English. Colette had her first solo exhibition, Imbolc, at Galway City Library, February 2023. She has exhibited her work with Quest, Artspace, UachtarArts, and Arts & Disability Ireland. She writes in both Irish and English, has fifteen volumes published which are mainly poetry collections but also include a volume of short stories, *Ádh Mór*; as well as an academic study of the blind poet Anthony Raftery, an 18th century bard whose songs and poems are still recited and sung today. She has one volume of English poetry, *Sundial*, which was published by Arlen House Press. She also has two dual language collections of poetry by the same publisher; *Between Curses: Baine GEAR*, and *In Castlewood: An Ghaoth Aduaidh*. Her work is on the syllabus in Primary, Secondary and Third Level colleges. Colette's collected works (bilingual) entitled *Baine GEAR: Sour Milk*, is available in hardback and softback, published by Arlen House, 2016. Her most recent published collection of Irish language poetry and visual art, *Réabhlóideach* is published by Coiscéim, Dublin, 2020.



## COLETTE NIC AODHA BETWEEN WORLDS: BILINGUALISM, POETRY, AND EXILE

However central our practice to our existence as poets and artists, we occupy a liminal space in society. Throughout my time as a student, teacher, lecturer, and facilitator, inspired by poets from both the Gaelic and English traditions, I was never far away from penning the next line or verse. Consequently, teaching (or facilitating) and composition were simultaneous events in a way that would not have been possible had I a career in Engineering, Medicine, or Science. Being a writer is to immerse yourself in lifelong learning as there are always new books to read and write, with no actual clocking off time (not even on your birthday if you believe Stephen King). Words are our material, words in translation, syntax, grammar, editing, and rereading while revising, or rereading to revise, checking dictionary, thesaurus or grammar book, running spell-check, the list goes on. But there is magic in words, in a turn of phrase or new use for an adjective, even in the banality of lists. Rarely a poem works 'clean off the spoon' and its magic depends on a myriad of mechanical activities, its success or failure on attention to the last comma.

If I were to trace my lifeline as a poet growing up in post-colonial Ireland, in my immature phase I read and reread school or college anthologies, scribbling on their margins. I was impressed by *The World Split Open; an anthology of Women Poets*, a gift from my sister who worked in a London bookshop-café-gallery, long since closed. I loved learning Old Irish and mimicked its ancient script in my recalling of nine-century lyrics that I regurgitated over and over while working as a shop assistant in a lonely New Jersey Mall while on a student working holiday visa in 1984. I found 'working holiday' to be oxymoronic while a working-drinking visa would have been more appropriate. There is something about exile that beckons the muse, so when in London in the late eighties as an economic refugee, I nostalgically revisited national poetry heroes and turn of the twentieth-century bards writing on thorny political questions of rebellion and justice, often in two languages, Gaelic and English.

Colette Nic Aodha

It was being wrenched (for an unspecified time) from the motherland that spurred my first foray into writing rather than reading poetry. I travelled London subways on Sunday afternoons to procure out-of-date Gaelic weekly newspapers from a shop in Archway. Working as an assistant in WH Smith's Bookshop and Newsagent in September 1988, I dallied over the Irish poets Heaney, Durkin, and Muldoon, while witnessing the sales and rage that went hand in hand with Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* and noted the courage it takes to be a poet, to shape and to speak out.

My next position of employment as a civil servant working in the local Job Centre involved more time spent looking out windows and hatches, and there ensued macaronic longings peppering the pages of work notebooks. These were thinly disguised attempts to reconnect with my mother tongue as I felt the withering of minority languages and cultures at the heart of the Empire. All of us emigrants harboured dreams of returning to our native shore. Less than a year later, my eldest son was born and I was repatriated to southeast Ireland where I wrote poems in the Irish language, attended a monthly poetry workshop, and shortly thereafter, read my work publicly for the first time. A well-established Irish language poet who was a member of our workshop asked me to perform my work at her book launch, and after much practicing in front of a captive audience of one, my life as an Irish language poet began. Linguistic and nostalgic associations are rooted in geography and our sense of place and although my first publications were in the Irish language, I also wrote English poetry and rarely translated from one language to the other. My adult life and aspirations were represented in Gaelic verse whereas nostalgic memories from my country childhood were represented in English lyrics.

### Speckled

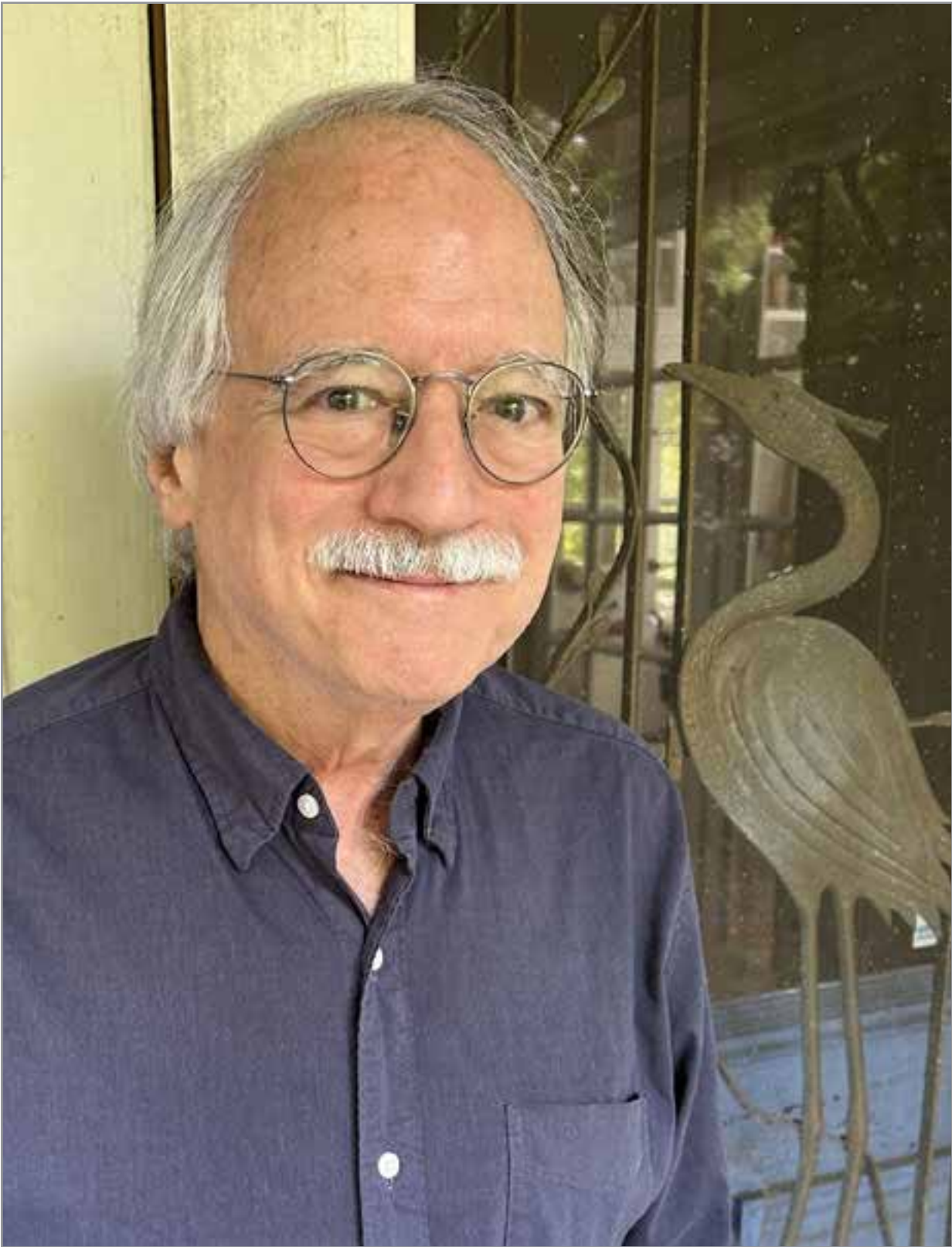
Our most indelible memories are from our childhood, I hail from the West of Ireland in what is officially described as a *Breac-Ghaeltacht*: a compound consisting of *Gaeltacht*, the Irish term for a region populated by people for whom their first language is Gaelic or Irish, and *breac*, the Irish Irish term for speckled and, therefore, *Breac-Ghaeltacht* describes a region that is partly Irish speaking. The history of the word speckled is a favourite of mine, that is my own personalized history of the word which stems back to my fifth year in secondary school when we read the Irish language biography, *Peig*. It was incomprehensible to me why my classmates complained about the old woman of Dingle. I liked *Peig*, she was grey-haired, wore a black shawl, and reminded me of both of my Nanny and of a particularly kind teacher who introduced me to wider reading.

*Peig*, on her first day at school, had a reader; on one side of the page was '*bo breac*' and on the other 'a speckled calf.' I couldn't make up my sixteen-year-old mind which I preferred; speckled or *breac*. Both, equally, I think. *Peig*'s story reminded me of happy schooldays, and my love of language, especially the Irish language which *Peig* spoke. Although *Peig* was fluent in our native tongue and spoke it every day, at the turn of the twentieth century, Gaelic was forbidden in school, and punishment was meted out to those heard speaking it, which seemed unjust. However, even at the age of sixteen, I understood societal differences before and after political independence from the United Kingdom. *Breac* or speckled are words I can associate with happy times. My mother made Halloween 'brack' which was a type of currant bread whose title was a borrowing from the Irish. In this 'brack' were hidden objects; if you found a holy medal in your slice you would have a vocation to be a nun or a priest, if you found a rag you were going to be poor but if you were lucky enough to get the golden ring you would be married. For some reason, everyone wanted the ring. More recently, an eminent Irish bilingual novelist, Hugo Hamilton, penned his memoir, with a title that resonated, *The Speckled People*.

Reading was inexpensive escapism for my generation growing up in the seventies and early eighties in rural Ireland with easy access to books and libraries. I whiled away many an afternoon in the second-hand bookshops of our local town and developed a love of a range of curiosities. However, it was in exile, physically and culturally, having to move to London in my early twenties to find employment, that forced me over the Rubicon from reader to writer, bringing with it the scrutiny, criticism, and judgment that becomes part of life as a writer. My love of the Irish language (Gaelic) is closely matched by my love of English, I initially graduated with a Gaelic and History degree, and a Masters in Gaelic, returning to complete an English degree, Masters, and Ph.D. Being a bilingual writer brings with it a richer heritage and source material of an inbetween world of language, speaking and writing a minority language makes me familiar with liminal spaces and margins from a space that was on the peripheries of the British Empire, until 1922.



John Philip Drury is the author of five books of poetry: *The Disappearing Town and Burning the Aspern Papers* (both from Miami University Press), *The Refugee Camp* (Turning Point Books), *Sea Level Rising* (Able Muse Press), and *The Teller's Cage*, which will be published by Able Muse Press in January 2023. He has also written *Creating Poetry* and *The Poetry Dictionary*, both from Writer's Digest Books. His awards include an Ingram Merrill Foundation fellowship, two Ohio Arts Council grants, a Pushcart Prize, and the Bernard F. Connors Prize from *The Paris Review* for "Burning the Aspern Papers." He was born in Cambridge, Maryland, and grew up in Bethesda, raised by his mother and a former opera singer she called her cousin but secretly considered her wife. (His book about them, *Bobby and Carolyn: A Memoir of My Two Mothers*, will be published by Finishing Line Press in August 2024.) After dropping out of college and losing his draft deferment during the Vietnam War, he enlisted in the Army to learn German and served undercover in the West German Refugee Camp near Nuremberg. He used benefits from the GI Bill to earn degrees from Stony Brook University, the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins, and the Iowa Writers' Workshop. After teaching at the University of Cincinnati for 37 years, he is now an emeritus professor and lives with his wife, fellow poet LaWanda Walters, in a hundred-year-old house on the edge of a wooded ravine.



SESTINA: BEN GRANS AVOLEZA INTRA

after Bertran de Born, 1150?-1215

Certainly much vileness enters  
Sir Ademar between his flesh and nail.  
Luxury claims his heart, close to his soul,  
and wretchedness batters him with its rod—  
not like the honorable dean, his uncle,  
in whom repute establishes its chamber.

When Ademar sneaks in a chamber,  
the smell of lamp fat burning also enters  
(no stink like that accompanied his uncle),  
so heart and mind would claw it out with nails.  
I'd like to see them measure, with a rod,  
the coffin for that body that wrecks a soul.

I don't mourn his body or soul  
but rather the land where honor's lost its chamber,  
for Ademar has bashed it with a rod  
and heaved it out of every place he's entered,  
so it can't touch him even by hair or nail—  
though goodness blooms and bears fruit in his uncle.

How good and noble is the uncle,  
the nephew worthless, empty to his soul,  
as evil as a fox from top to toenail,  
usurping any nook for court and chamber.  
Oh, what a miserable dupe who enters  
into friendship there, wiped with a foul rod.

continued overleaf..

John Philip Drury. Photograph by Tess Despres Weinberg.

SESTINA: BEN GRANS AVOLEZA INTRA *contd...*

Crossing myself, a better prod,  
I came one day to the fine dean, his uncle.  
And if I could have sojourned where he enters,  
I'd be rejoicing for my body and soul.  
With firm resolve, he opens up his chamber  
to worthiness, adhering like flesh to nail.

To my Berart, I tip my nail,  
for never have I seen him grab a rod  
to drive out youth or goodness from his chamber,  
and fondly I remember his father and uncle.  
If Ademar, though, can't fortify his soul,  
he'll lose far more and into Hell will enter.

I make this *sirventes* with "uncle" and "nail,"  
for Ademar, with "rod" and also "soul,"  
and for the dean, with "chamber" and with "enter."

Note: Bertran is responding to Arnaut Daniel's sestina that begins "The firm resolve that has entered" (*"Lo ferm voler q'el cor m'intra"*), using the same end-words in the same order: *enter, nail, soul, rod, uncle, and chamber*. In the original Occitan text, those end-words (teleutons) are *intra, ongla, arma, verga, oncle, and chambra*. In the three-line envoi for both poems, they are arranged E B / D C / F A. The opening line of each six-line stanza is octosyllabic (indicated here by indentation), but the other five are hendecasyllabic. Some scholars, however, consider 7-10-10-10-10-10 as the pattern of syllables, not counting the extra unstressed syllable at the end of each line as part of the meter, even though the surviving musical setting has distinct notes for eight syllables in the opening line of each stanza and eleven in the other five. My translation of Arnaut's sestina, a form he invented, appears in *The Poetry Dictionary* (Story Press, 1995; Writer's Digest Books, revised second edition, 2006).

Sir Ademar: possibly Ademar II of Poitiers; Berart: possibly Berart de Mondisdier; *sirventes*: a Troubadour poem that imitates the form of another, usually for satire or personal vituperation.

## GHAZAL: TANGLED HAIR, A GLAZE OF SWEAT

*after Hafez, ca. 1315-1390*

Tangled hair, a glaze of sweat on his brow, lips pressed  
to a goblet. Then he began to sing, stripped to the waist.

With eyes winking and the faint edge of a smile, he came  
last night and stayed by my pillow after midnight had passed.

He lowered his mouth to my ear and said in a low voice,  
"My darling, once mine, how has sleep come so fast?"

Lovers who can't rest through the night are infidels  
if they don't worship the gift of wine. Their love's not blest.

All you prohibitionists, don't pick on the connoisseurs  
who love even the dregs of wine, the Creator's finest.

Whether it's the vintage of Paradise or the drunkard's jug,  
whatever God dispenses in our cups, we must taste.

Laughter over wine and the toss of a lover's hair  
have undermined many plans, like those Hafez has cast.

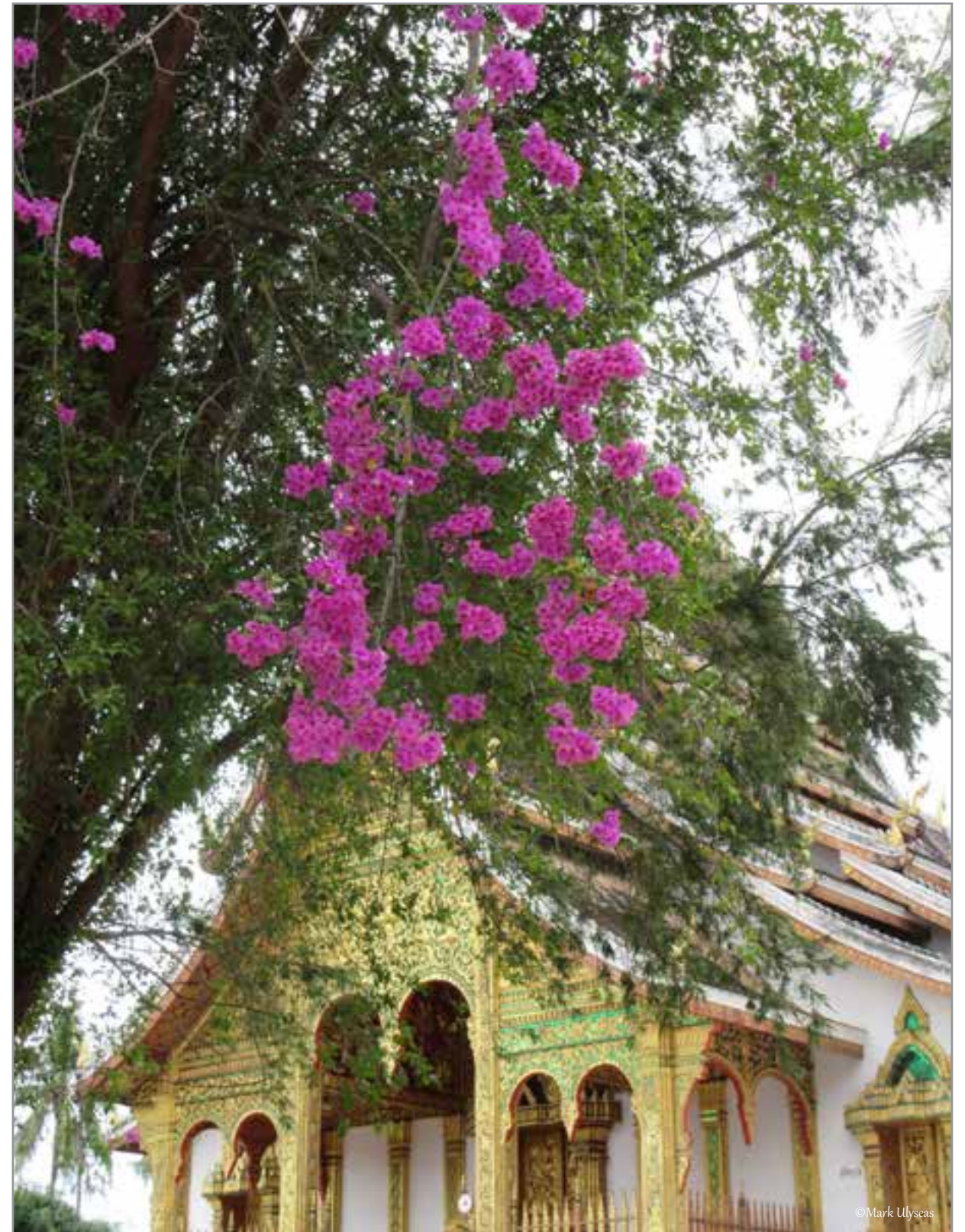
Note: My translation versifies and freely adapts the English prose version by Lieutenant-Colonel H. Wilberforce Clarke in Volume II of *The Divan, Written in the Fourteenth Century, by Kwāja Shamsu-d-Dīn Muhammad-i-Hāfiz-i-Shīrāzī* (1891): Vol. I, Poem 44, p. 111.



## ANOTHER INVISIBLE CITY

*after Italo Calvino*

You need not venture from palace or pagoda, traveling in a caravan on the silk road or an imperial barge towed up the Yangtze, to visit the city of Mnemosyne, which is truly invisible. It's here, around you, for it comprises all the buildings rulers have destroyed or abandoned, as well as those they never built. The pharos of Alexandria, disseminating its light from cauldrons of burning oil refracted through faceted glass, shines on the mile-high tower Frank Lloyd Wright designed. Six wonders of the ancient world are here, as well as the shops and houses of New Amsterdam, lost cities like Ecbatan and Ur, but also ghost towns rich in saloons with swinging doors, roulette wheel spun by the wind. There are, however, no zoning laws, so this dizzying city of sweeping balconies, villas that are sculptural, and inner courtyards with orange trees and colonnades cannot exclude the workhouses, hovels under bridges, crematoria. You might not come here by choice, but you can't escape the city limits, which extend beyond our solar system. Even within the living quarters of your capital, it's an overlay that tints and discolours everything.



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



Jean O'Brien's latest collection (her sixth), *Stars Burn Regardless*, came out last spring from Salmon Poetry. She was the 2021 Poetry in Residence in the Irish Cultural Centre in Paris and the 2017/18 Kavanagh Fellow. Her work appears regularly in journals and magazine both on and offline. She holds an M.Phil in creative writing/poetry from Trinity College, Dublin (Ireland) and tutors in same. <http://www.jeanobrienpoet.ie/>



## THINGS IN THE REAR VIEW MIRROR

Are closer than they appear as if  
the past is trying to overtake  
the present. It looms long behind us  
a dark ribbon road unfurling as  
we go blithely on, thinking we see  
the dot in the distance like a small  
bullseye and see the horizon fading.  
The tall evergreen trees appearing  
smaller and smaller until they are  
saplings again as we travel ever  
forward. What else can we do? The past,  
even if closer than we perceive,  
is still behind us. Hopefully the  
future is unfolding in front, so  
the present, the precious present is  
pinched like the waist of an  
hourglass,  
the yellow sands flowing through,  
a river in spate and we swept  
along helpless.

Jean O'Brien

## LAKE ENCOUNTER WITH A PINE MARTEN

A Pine Marten is swimming towards me,  
I sit on a concrete-grey outcrop jutting  
from the now disused wooden boathouse  
beside the lake, a miniature gravel beach  
under my feet. I stay still. He appears not

to see me, his dark fur water-sleeked,  
he could be a baby otter. I watch as he swims  
forward with intent, know that his sweet, heart-  
shaped face belies the sharpness of his teeth.  
We are almost on a collision course.

He hasn't seen me. I move a hand,  
we lock eyes reflecting one another.  
He startles and changes course, a last  
minute sinuous swerve as he dives into  
green arm-length rushes. The water settles.

## PATHWAY

I shutter the lake  
As the half moon  
Carves a watery  
Pathway towards  
The woods, making  
Familiar my home  
From home;  
A desk,  
A lamp,  
A laptop,  
A notebook  
The tools I use  
To mine words,  
To sully white pages  
With marks from  
Bejewelled hands  
Hoping the marks  
Will shine and perform  
An alchemy  
Just like the moon  
So casually contours  
A silver path.  
I want to walk on water.



Audrey Molloy is an Irish poet living in Sydney on Gadigal land. Her debut collection, *The Important Things* (Gallery Press, 2021), won the Anne Elder Award and was shortlisted for the Seamus Heaney First Collection Poetry Prize. *Ordinary Time* (Pitt Street Poetry, 2022), a collaboration with Australian poet Anthony Lawrence, was one of *Australian Book Review's* 'Books of the Year'. Her second solo collection, *The Blue Cocktail*, will be published in late 2023 in Ireland and Australia. She has an MA in Creative Writing (Poetry) from Manchester Metropolitan University. Her work has appeared in *Meanjin*, *Cordite*, *Island*, *Best of Australian Poems*, *The Stinging Fly*, *The Moth*, *Magma*, *The North*, and *Poetry Ireland Review*. She was awarded a Varuna Residential Fellowship in 2020, and was shortlisted for the Red Room Poetry Fellowship in 2022. She is the grateful recipient of a Literature Bursary Award from the Arts Council of Ireland. <http://audreymolloy.com/>



## SMOKE, MIRRORS, NARCISSIST

We'd all ended up in a Leeson Street club called Leggs, and we were smoking—me, and a blonde in a majorette blazer. We were laughing hard at each other's jokes, though we could barely hear ourselves think. *Is that Bono over there?* I shouted, and she looked, and I looked. I asked if I could light my cigarette from the tip of hers. We brought our hands close. She wore a cameo pinky ring just like my own. I leaned in and she leaned in, and I thought she was going to kiss me. My breath made a circle of fog on the mirror. I drew a little heart in it.

Audrey Molloy

## THE FIGURE-EIGHT POOLS

*Burning Palms Beach, New South Wales*

Like the light-green eyes of a man who uttered *stay*,  
these sinkholes, jade aquaria,

carved by salt and wave to a sandstone shelf  
that formed around the time

things picked up again  
after one extinction or another. On the brink

of a millennium, if another woman strode  
where I now stride, she might have had eternity in mind,

she must have stood on sediment,  
each grain a lithic fragment of an older rock,

volcanic, from a wilder age, cemented into layers,  
or ground to fertile clays that host

the hanging vines and creaking fronds  
of giant Cabbage palms that fringe the beach.

Today two boys, bare to the waist, leap the pools,  
which, by fluke, have formed a figure-eight—

a small infinity—the hollow sockets of a fossil skull  
staring at the shifting sky. A seal

basks in the yellow light of a middle-aged star  
and the white webs of the sea rise,

looping over the lip of a continent,  
as they've done before, as they will again.



The Figure Eight Pools, Lilyvale, New South Wales, Australia. Photograph by Audrey Molloy.



Michael J. Leach (@m\_jleach) is an Australian poet, critic and academic. Michael's poems have appeared in journals such as *Cordite Poetry Review*, exhibitions such as the Antarctic Poetry Exhibition, anthologies such as *Poetry d'Amour 2022: Love Poems* (WA Poets Incorporated, 2022), and his two poetry books: the chapbook *Chronicity* (Melbourne Poets Union, 2020) and the full-length collection *Natural Philosophies* (Recent Work Press, 2022). Michael has won the UniSA Mental Health and Wellbeing Poetry Competition (2015), received a commendation in the Hippocrates Prize for Poetry and Medicine (2021), and jointly won the poetry category of the Minds Shine Bright Confidence Writing Competition (2022). He lives on unceded Dja Dja Wurrung Country and acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land.



## APPLIED NEUROSCIENCE

*after Benee's song 'Bagels',\* which was created in collaboration with Youthline NZ, ASB and a team of neuroscientists*

When  
I hear her voice  
          hum & speak  
over the silkiest of beats,  
my unfocussed mind flows  
into a kind of meditative state  
and focuses on fondest memories  
of your memorable face.

When  
I hear her voice  
          hum & speak  
over the silkiest of beats,  
I'm reminded of those two  
wonderful weeks spent with you  
savouring salmon bagels on the coast  
of Awabakal Country.

When  
I hear her voice  
          hum & speak  
over the silkiest of beats,  
those immersive feelings  
of anxiousness & loneliness  
swirl so sweetly away  
down the drain.

Michael J. Leach

\* Benemusic Limited, 2023, [https://youtu.be/ARzOSZqY\\_vo](https://youtu.be/ARzOSZqY_vo)

TREASURE

*for my love, my treasure, Irina  
after Johnny Flynn’s song ‘Detectorists’ \**

- i.**  
Sunday morning—  
her eyelashes open  
’gainst my right cheek
- ii.**  
she drives us through bush  
-land—  
her playlist plays that folk song  
by Johnny Flynn
- iii.**  
we cross lush fields  
lit by autumnal sun—  
my hand finds hers
- iv.**  
on her blanket by the estuary—  
sounds of birdsongs,  
tastes of  
lips

- v.**  
we embrace in the air  
-port—  
my name over the PA
- vi.**  
this near-empty plane  
lands—  
her message  
fills my phone screen
- vii.**  
Sunday morning—  
                  space  
beside me

*\* 2014, <https://youtu.be/Q58Gm18-IMY>*



Irina Frolova is a Russian-Australian writer. She has a degree in philology from Moscow City Pedagogical University and is studying psychology at Deakin University. Her work speaks to the experience of immigration, neurodivergence, and a search for belonging. It draws on folklore and explores archetypes through cultural and feminist lenses. Her poetry and prose have appeared in *Not Very Quiet*, *Australian Poetry Collaboration*, *Baby Teeth Journal*, *Rochford Street Review*, *The Blue Nib*, *The Australian Multilingual Writing Project*, *Live Encounters*, *Mascara Literary Review*, *Kalliope X*, *Burrow*, and various anthologies. Irina's creative highlights include her first collection of poetry *Far and Wild* (released by Flying Island Books in 2021), winning the second prize in the 2021 Deborah Cass Prize for writing, and being shortlisted for the 2022 Alice Sinclair Writing Competition.



## THE STORY

*in collaboration with Michael J Leach*

i.  
 it all began *in* the middle  
 of February *one* Friday on a fatigued  
 hot husk of an *afternoon*  
 she opened his *poem* on her phone  
 her breath caught in *her* throat  
 the rest was history her *story*  
 his story their story *waiting* for that  
 weekend in March *in*-person meeting  
 late into the evening champagne  
 lips shared *bed* shunned sleep slipping  
 into a *dream* morning in mid-Autumn

ii.  
 it all began *in* the midst  
 of St Valentine's day on a warm wish  
 -bone of an *afternoon* he saw  
 a headshot of *her* on his phone his eyes  
 lingered on *her* face as poetry formed  
 4 days later he sent *her* that poem &  
 held his breath *awaiting* a reply  
 whilst fearing *it* might never come  
 he'd never *done* something so bold before  
 alone in *bed* once again sliding  
 into a *dream* of her in autumnal light

Irina Frolova



Jim Burke lives in Limerick, and is co-founder with John Liddy of The Stony Thursday Book. His haiku featured in the anthology *Between The Leaves* (2016) edited by Anatoly Kudryavitsky. *Quartet*, poems with Mary Scheurer, *Peter Wise* and *Carolyn Zukowski* (2019). *Montage*, The Literary Bohemian Press (2021).

These new poems are for a *Travelogue* in collaboration with John Liddy.



## THE FUTURE PULSES IN THE STONE'S HEART

*After a stone carving in Furbo*

That flat stone I skimmed five bounces or more  
and I swore I'd pluck up the courage to ask you  
out, or the stone I dug up in the sizzling heat,  
that stone I stole from the singing shore,  
or the patient smooth stones blank-faced bare  
without a letter or a word somewhere in the future  
waiting to be chiseled. Or that big stone dotted  
with efflorescence, that I climbed on top of  
to sit down and watch the river flow, or island  
stones, flung about of a Sunday afternoon  
out of sight of priests and polis, the practice carried  
off by island men when they gathered on weekend  
afternoons to fling American stones around  
in Boston, while they yearned for home.

Jim Burke



## BEAUTIFUL LOFTY THINGS

Let us go now  
from the turf smell  
the sound of reels  
from a country pub  
to local accents  
to a woman and man  
in a field  
noticing the coming  
and the going  
of seasons  
to their donkey  
on the shore  
drawing dulse  
Let us watch the sea  
rise above the boat  
then fall behind us  
like something we cannot  
explain  
believing in the skipper  
as the waves sound  
at our heels  
Let us arise and go now  
to a sea-water-mirror  
polished brightly  
to our dying language  
revived  
to our dead  
revered  
where ghosts speak  
tall tales entertaining  
eternity

where a dog  
knowing joy  
is playful  
Hurry up please it's time  
the clock is ticking  
the islands  
are catching up  
to the world  
Let the men in the Christmas  
cowboy hats worn now  
in the meadows  
hold our hands  
as we sing the bringing  
in of hay  
Let us arise and go now  
for there is more beauty  
to be found  
in today's moment  
than in one hundred years  
of yesterday mornings  
Let us throw our words  
on the pan and watch  
as they sizzle in the interior  
of this county  
So long  
summer showers  
Goodbye Kinvara  
Musha, let's go  
in the morning light shining  
upon the mountainside

*continued overleaf...*

## BEAUTIFUL LOFTY THINGS

*contd...*

past the forest where  
the tree falls quietly  
and things are  
natural  
where we do not casually  
reduce our destiny  
but breathe in every moment  
of this long midsummer's day  
Let us arise and go now  
and ready to go  
talk together  
yourself and myself  
under the pictures  
on the mantel  
in this hostelry  
showing up  
a slice of life  
on a fine day  
that confounds the cynic  
rises above the critic  
and his nearest exit  
Let us be off over the hills  
after lofty things  
roundabout  
the old spiritual  
and cultural circuits

## COAST

We take our pick following  
spidery legs of roads that  
lead us to the water's edge.

Rumbling rivers reach too,  
singing and dreaming,  
hurrying to the sea.

It feels like we are  
truanting all day, searching  
for a lovely wild place.

At these moments we can do  
anything, go barefoot into the water  
or up on the rocks, the sand.

We can change and praise  
unfamiliar colours, the floating  
colours that meet the sky.

We can swan-watch from the dunes  
or check out oystercatchers  
wading in the surf.

We can talk any kind of talk we want  
the way the water strikes the rocks  
or the sand, in its simpler world.



John Samuel Tieman, of St. Louis, is a widely published poet and essayist. His chapbook, "A Concise Biography Of Original Sin", is published by BkMk Press. His poetry has appeared in "The Americas Review", "The Caribbean Quarterly", "The Chariton Review", "The Iowa Review", "Rattle", "River Styx" "Stand", and "Vox Populi". He writes a weekly column for "Axar.az", a popular online news service in Eurasia.



## TO A WRITER STILL WRITING AT 3 AM

Lately I've been taken by the saints, by their practice of  
silence and prayer, taken by the verb illuminated long  
after midnight. We've all spent a night like a stalker  
who drives by slowly, looking, waiting for something

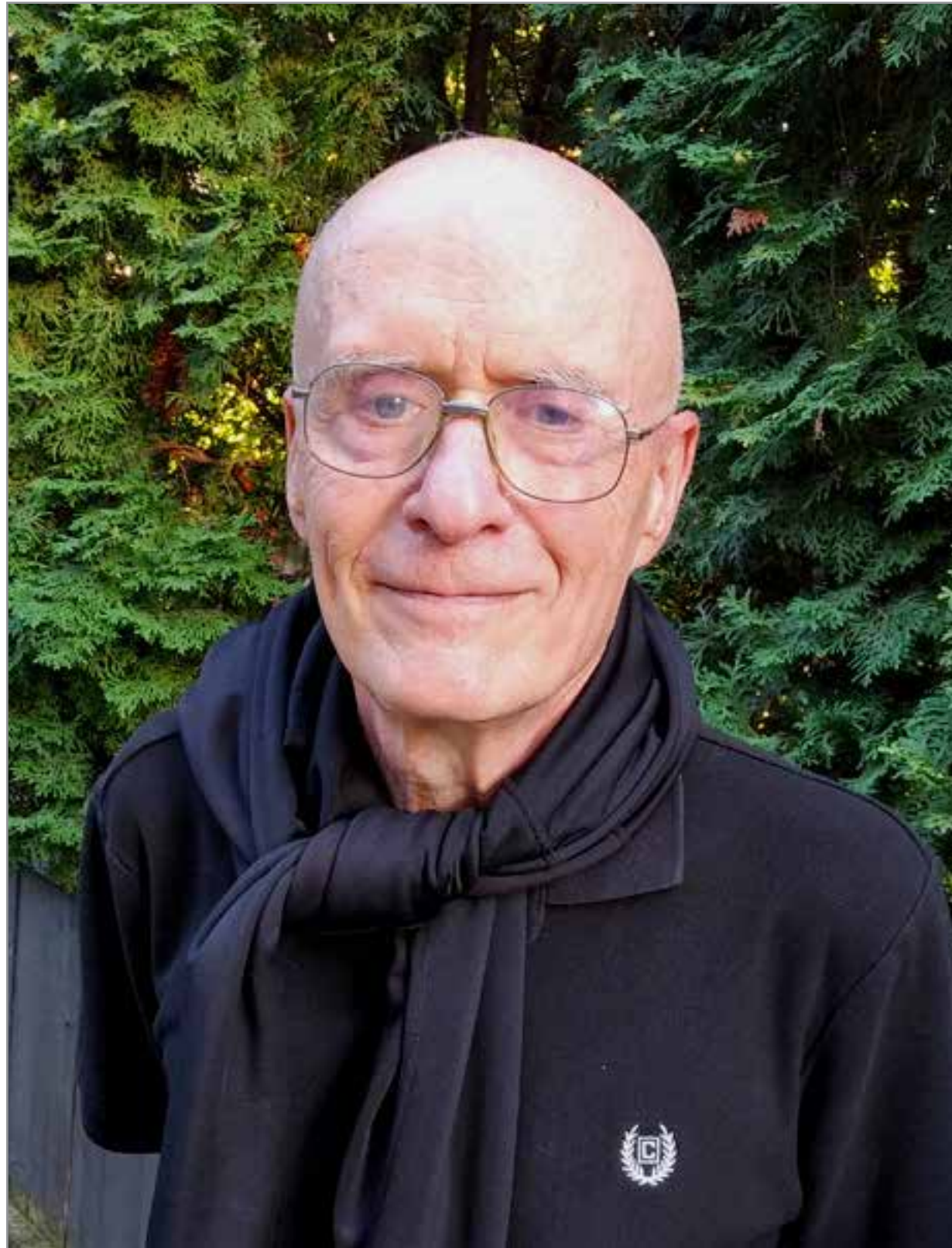
like a crime that never ends.

We've all thought surely, surely we can begin with  
a line from a night like that. I don't know. Nor do I know  
what Aquinas would write. I do know that in this silence  
you will find a verb sacred enough for a simple sentence

you will revise until dawn.

John Samuel Tieman.

DeWitt Clinton taught English, Creative Writing, and World of Ideas courses for over 30 years at the University of Wisconsin—Whitewater. Recent book collections include *At the End of the War* (Kelsay Books, 2018), *By A Lake Near A Moon: Fishing with the Chinese Masters* (Is A Rose Press, 2020), and *Hello There* (Word Poetry, 2021) which was awarded the 2022 Edna Meudt Poetry Book Award from the Council for Wisconsin Writers. His poems and essays have appeared in a variety of national and international journals. He is a student of Iyengar Yoga and occasionally offers a gentle yoga class to seniors in the Milwaukee Public Library System, and the Village of Shorewood Library.



## READING “JOY OF WINE”

*After Li Ch’ing-chao’s “Joy of Wine,”  
sung “to the Tune ‘A Dream Song’*

Ages ago, so long ago, we travelled north  
To see migrating birds, and the colors so  
Brilliant even as they floated to the ground,  
But we found a table at the Fox & Hounds,  
And after, of course I made a wrong turn,  
And then, completely lost in the dark dark  
Woods, but even without a GPS to guide  
Us out and home, somehow, we found a way  
South still a bit tipsy, not far from the Lake  
With so many Canadians settling into the late  
Night, and the waves were crashing onto  
The beach near our small home, and pulling  
Onto the street where only one of us lives  
Now, we startled grazing deer on our lawn,  
And then, quite late, we found a lonely bed.

DeWitt Clinton



## WHO WANTS THAT?

It could be worse, of course, but who wants what  
Is already really bad to get worse, as in, Holy Cow  
Worse, as in, that's bad, or WTFJH or some kind  
Of Bad Bad that only the worst are hoo-hawing  
About right now, as this is something that brings  
Out the best or worst of those who skipped out  
After third grade thinking nothing more needed  
Up there, except something is needed up there,  
But not what's there now, no, not ever needed  
Though it's going to be a tough go to try to even  
Speak evenhandedly but if we even used that  
Word once we'd probably be on the ground  
With a terrible amount of blood staining what  
Was once a decent sidewalk only now it's more  
Like a hardpan gurney with a bloody head bruised  
Eyes, swollen lips and leaky eyes so who wants  
That, really so there's going to always be that  
Quick hesitation before going in and saying stop  
What you are doing as before we even get the  
Command out into open space, when BAM we're  
Down and out on the gurney, and what, whatever  
Made us think we could talk our way out of or into  
This mess some call a mess and others just think  
Of it as just something to hit as there's not much  
Else to do as we all get closer and closer to the edge  
Of space where somebody somebody is yelling from  
Somewhere stop doing that, and those doing just

That start the old belly jelly roll just before the bat  
Comes out to rearrange whatever thoughts we once  
Had up there about fair and square so here comes  
The first pitch, and we duck a bit too slowly and try  
To stand up straight as the second windup is out  
There, cold, aiming for a better contact between  
Bat and head, and it's a hit, a bloody hit, and then  
We're down, face down, with a heel kicking in the  
Old kidney and we're wondering that maybe it's  
Really going to be worse but then it could be worse,  
But who wants that?

## KNOCK KNOCK, WHO'S THERE?

Minding my own business, trying to stay asleep though  
Up much earlier, but now safe under a pile of covers,  
Then, out of nowhere, "Are you out there somewhere?"  
In her voice, which is what some call voice recognition,  
Or at least we call it that when we think we know just  
Who is making this dream call in morning before morning  
If we really want to call 3:15 an early morning wake-up  
And yes, I'm awake all right, wouldn't you if you knew  
Nobody can say anything like that if somebody is officially  
Boxed away as cremains, awaiting a scattering, as some  
Might say, on a yahrzeit that is still so far away that no  
One yet, to my knowledge, has even thought about flight  
Tickets so we can all gather by the harbor where you've  
Requested a final scattering, not the traditional unveiling  
As there's certainly no stone, and nothing under the stone  
But that's really not important now, is it, but can you just  
Explain, neatly, without starting into something longwinded  
About what dreams are really about, could you just say  
No worries, bro, that stuff is out there, and might even  
Return, not to scare you at all, really, but just to leave you  
Completely, totally, like never ever before, totally gaga.



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



Dominique Hecq grew up in the French-speaking part of Belgium. She now lives on unceded sovereign Wurundjeri land in Melbourne, Australia. Hecq writes across genres and disciplines—and sometimes across tongues. Her creative works include a novel, six collections of short stories and fifteen books of poetry. Her latest publications are *After Cage* (2nd ed., 2022, Liquid Amber Press), *Songlines* (2023 Hedgehog) and *Endgame with No Ending* (2023, SurVision), winner of the 2022 James Tate Poetry Prize.



## FALL

The house braces itself against rain  
broken jalousie louvres  
hieroglyphed window sills  
skylight cobwebbing me  
to fall beyond the gate

Baby grand lid open for show  
playing us through the nights  
until your fingers froze  
& the keys fell silent  
under the gaze of a golden orb

The dog is dead cat next door  
bath at the tip with spatulas skimmers  
basting brushes icing syringes rolling  
pins pancake turners juicers  
cutters grinders & measuring spoons

The front garden is a grin of missing teeth  
blunt spears of picket fence  
weep cracks in the retaining wall  
holes in the screen chain's steel gate  
you roll your bicycle to the car

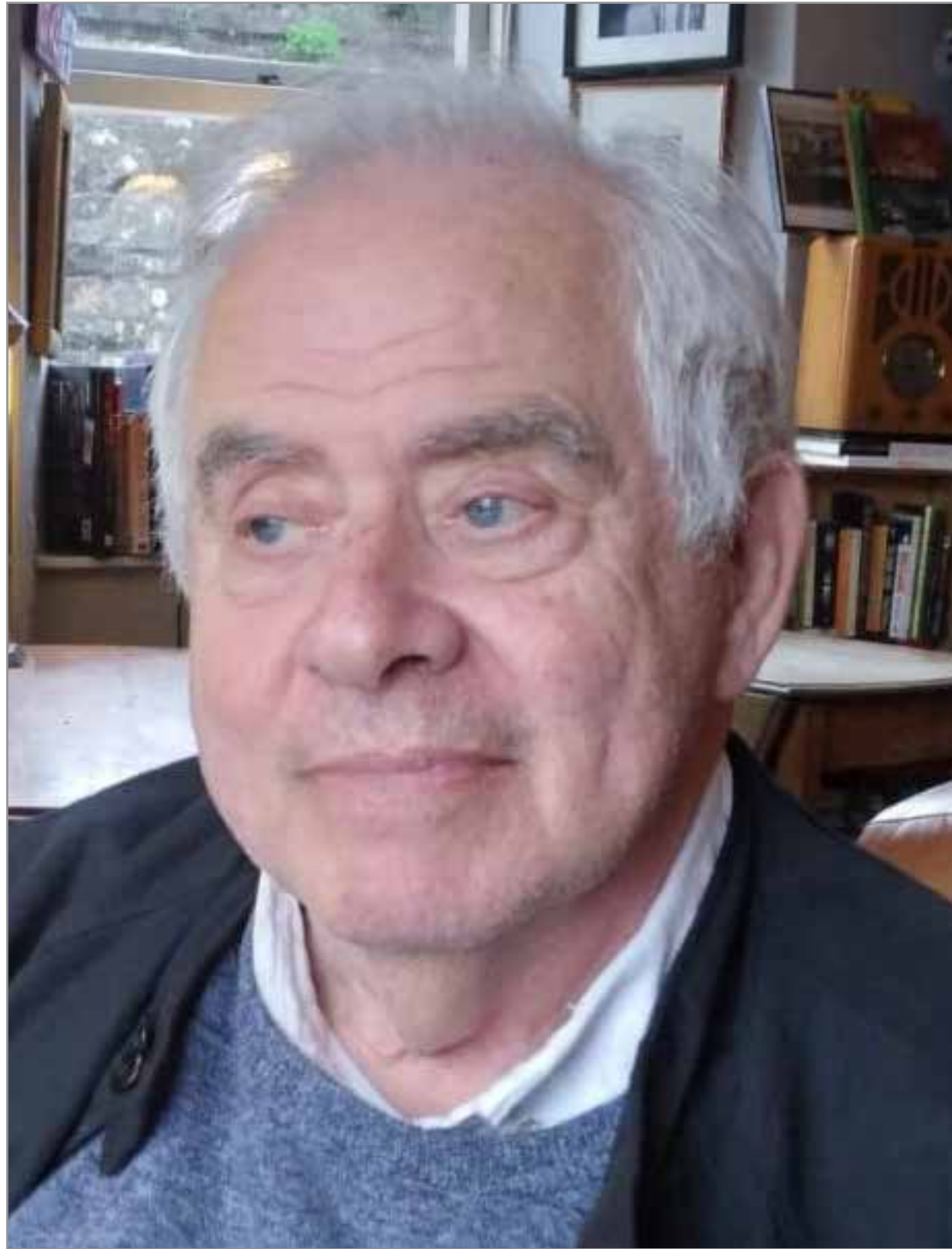
Surprise & sorrow packed  
in the words *thanks for having me*

The crust of the earth loosens beneath my feet  
i reach for my liquefying body outline

Home is a stranger now

Dominique Hecq

Richard W. Halperin's poems are published by Salmon/Cliffs of Moher and by Lapwing/Belfast. Salmon has listed *Selected & New Poems*, Introduction by Joseph Woods, 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 also appear in 2023.



## COMPOSITES

The beautiful poem which is Preface to *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is a composite by T.E. Lawrence and Robert Graves, may they rest in peace. *Persuasion* is a composite by Jane Austen of an untitled novel and by her subsequent editors. Jesus is a composite of *reportage* from four different angles which don't match up – *Rashomon* - and of the actual Jesus whom people then and now experience if they experience Jesus. My poems are composites of what happened, of the ruins of each previous hour, of an urge I can't help, and of my publishers without whom poems cannot enter the Third Party, which is what people buy and read. I am a composite of me and of those whom I love and have met in the gum of time. The gum of time is a composite.

The arrow which passes between and among is not a composite and is beautiful.

Richard W. Halperin. Photo credit: Joseph Woods.



## SIGNALS

T.E. Lawrence and Charlotte Brontë.  
 There are parallels between them.  
 Genius, of course. Genius mugs you.  
 Some impossible images help.  
 Some impossible writing – *The Mint; Villette* – helps.

A child swings on a swing.  
 Finds it exhilarating.  
 Going forward and, even more, going backward and higher.  
 A tiny risk, quite real, of death or injury.

In golf, to swing a club properly,  
 you must pause – really pause – at the top of the backward swing.

Good writing is that. Theirs.  
 Including their letters.  
 Including what they do not put in their letters.  
 Being utterly alone with What.

Genius is a signal. Theirs. Others'.  
 Some impossible writing helps.  
 Some impossible images help.

That arm, clothed in white samite  
 rising out of a lake to catch the jewelled hilt  
 of the sword Excalibur which Sir Bedivere has hurled,  
 at the dying Arthur's instruction, from the shore.  
 Only that allows Arthur to die.  
 Allows anyone to die?

## WAKING UP FROM A NAP

Jane Austen tells the story of Fanny Price  
 slowly and evenly. A rather dull girl  
 living unappreciated in an elegant  
 house and grounds, Mansfield Park.

I last reread it forty years ago.  
 Time passes, but not it. The brilliant teacher  
 who introduced me to it has Alzheimer's.  
 I do not know good and bad what has happened

to my classmates. I am in a guesthouse  
 of an abbey in Ireland. Outside my window  
 is an exuberant riot of colours: flowers,  
 bushes, growths. Further down the path,

people are at noon Mass. For days now,  
 all I have done here is sleep. Mornings,  
 afternoons and, in chapters, at night.  
 A friend to whom I wrote about this

wrote back that sleep can be restorative.  
 'We are all getting older, and the rubbish  
 of the last three years has left its mark  
 on everybody.' It does me good

to think of Jane Austen telling the story  
 of dull Fanny Price. Writing it down.  
 Blotting it. Sending it out into a  
 problematic world. Slowly and evenly

may not exist. Love may not be that,  
 but love is that. Yes it is.

## IN IRELAND AGAIN

Sometimes I like to walk in graveyards.  
Parallel naps. The pal of a friend of mine  
likes to lie on his back in graveyards  
and have a smoke. If I smoked, I would do the same.

I do not know my real name. One day  
I shall find that out.

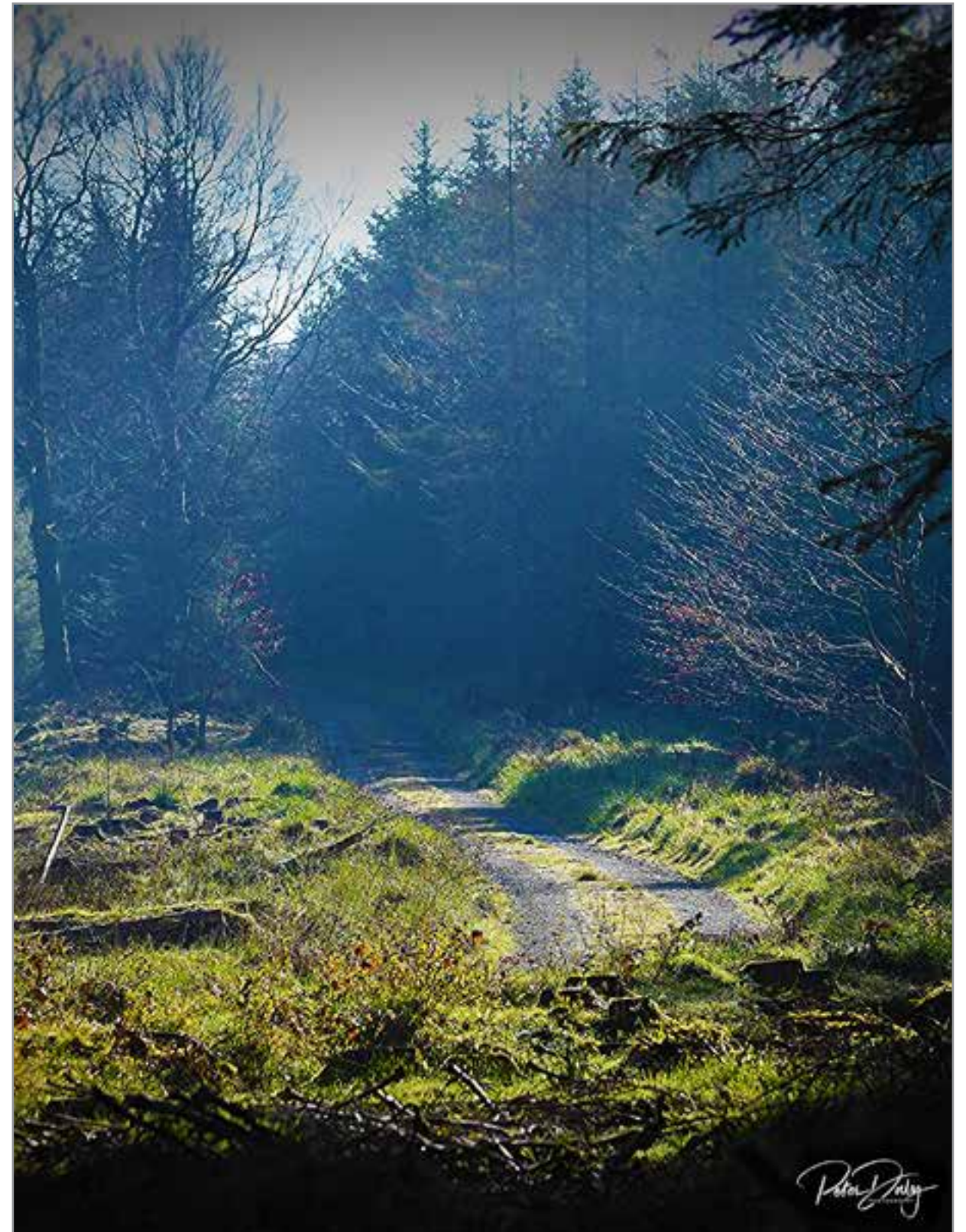
Recently, I met a kindly local man, Larry,  
about my own age. As happy as Larry,  
despite much. As alive as Larry.

Some locutions go through my mind,  
the way that they are off seems to be telling me something.  
'Clouds gather.' Clouds do not gather.  
It is we who gather.  
'Crescent moon.' The moon is never a crescent.  
We see it as that, that's all.  
Last evening, an apricot-coloured one,  
rising in an indigo sky.

Parallel naps.

If one walks slowly, any walk is a ramble.

May God have pity on the terrified.



Aghrane forest, Ballygar, Ireland. © Photograph by Peter Daly.



Kate Maxwell grew up in the Australian bush. Now a city dweller, her interests include film, wine, and sleeping. Her work has been published and awarded in many Australian and International literary magazines such as Cordite, StylusLit, Meniscus, Books Ireland, Skylight 47, ROPES, and The Galway Review. Kate's published two anthologies: *Never Good at Maths* (Interactive Publications, 2021) and *Down the Rabbit Hole* (Ginninderra, 2023). Find her at <https://kateswritingplace.com/>



## PASSING GO

Car chase in New York with the artist formerly known as prince,  
 his spouse, and splatter of paparazzi, but some claim this was less  
 pursuit, just more fizz and fluster from a blood-line royal in mid-  
 transition to Netflix celebrity, embracing new world consciousness  
 and new world dollars. The comment thread's aflame with curled  
 lip of daily scorn and the darker shades of loathing, dredged up from  
 irritable bowels of those crawling bitter spitters. Still, more photos  
 of that other orange man—his caked-on frowns and smirks ingrained  
 in culture now more akin to bacteria growth than customs and beliefs—  
 prompting me to press palms into eyes and scream. I could shut down,  
 pop a pill, pop a tart, pop a shot above the superior orbital rim to feign  
 insouciance for years and years of unmet yearning. Or maybe, I need to  
 bring it on, bring my best game, even if it's my worst. As long as it is  
 loud, proud, and loaded and I remember what part that I wanted to play,  
 which token I chose to mark my position. But I can always change my  
 mind, swap from cat to thimble, iron to boot. It's where you are and where  
 you're going that really gives you skin. There's no bling if you don't pass  
 Go. Pity, I'm so wrapped up in the colour and confetti that I forgot to move.

Kate Maxwell

## ELIXIR

Today's another visiting day but age, balance, and cold bathroom tiles have set my course to hospital instead of the nursing home.

Your obstinate old hips refuse belief in bone mass decline—remember only simpler years of easy twists and bends so, now we're always

mending cracks. The ward is full: partitioned into concertina cells of half-hidden legs, beep of machines, voices, or a sudden scream

but the bed beside yours is as open as its patient's face—*Don't mind me, Luv*, she sucks teeth, shifts her ample floral nightie form and reaches

for a biscuit on the tray table, *I've just been keeping your lovely mum company*. You fix eyes, like lasers, onto mine, burning their unspoken plea

*to get me out of here!* I answer with same hazel stare, *I wish I could. Oh, how I wish I could*. Instead, I offer smiling platitudes to your neighbour

as she starts her story of why she's lying next to you. *I'm only here because of Trixie, you know. When those ambulance folk got inside, I was howling,*

*fit to burst, for them to find my Trixie. So much pain, Luv, but all I cared about was that I might have fallen on my little Trixie!* —Yes, Trixie would

not have stood a chance, I ascertain— then murmur something sympathetic as I escape to your allotted side of purgatory and pull the screen across.

But she hasn't finished yet. *It was the middle of the night, you know. I was just getting up for the toilet and Trixie mustn't have been able to hold on, herself.*

*Then what do you know? I slipped in a puddle of poodle piss!* I take your thin-skinned hand but now you're too distressed; rolling eyes, at your bedside

buddy's clearly oft-repeated monologue, and I think to make a whisper light quip about poor Trixie but decide you're well past the point of wry or stoic.

The woman offers more invisible commentary on the hospital's poor selection of digestives, how she prefers assorted cremes instead, and how her niece

is likely neglecting Trixie while she's stuck in this dam place. Pale and pained, corralled by clatter and chatter, I see you'll have no rest. I sigh and summon

walls, beds, and bodies to crumble into rocks and dust like some big budget movie scene where only you and I remain, and none shall pass. There, secure

on precipice of laundered linen, sweet air and solitude, I could serve you peace or offer waters from the holy lake. This, I'd gladly give rather than the limp

carnations and lemon drops, untouched on the bedside cabinet. And I will visit again tomorrow then later, back at the nursing home—cocooned in pastel blankets,

thoughts, walls and medically balanced processed care—and wonder what you would trade for a mountain top of fresh air, sunshine, and your independence.



Maeve McKenna lives in Sligo, Ireland. Her work has been placed in several international poetry competitions and published widely, including Mslexia, Rattle, Banshee, The Stony Thursday Book and Live Encounters. She was one of three finalists in the Eavan Boland Mentorship Award 2020. She was part of a collaboration with three poets which won the Dreich Alliance Pamphlet Competition, 2021. Her debut pamphlet, *A Dedication to Drowning*, was published in February 2022. *Body as a Home for This Darkness*, a second pamphlet will be published in September 2023. Maeve is currently a MA student of Poetry at Queens University, Belfast.



## THE CARE OF DEAD THINGS

First, I replace the front door lock —  
an impressive repeat of mechanical metal  
versus the motionless dead flies. When  
I turn the new key it sparkles  
in my hand. Blowflies click.

Innocent ones, wings a deathly parade  
of black on the windowsill, while  
the net curtain wraps a shroud  
across the moulded window my shock  
surfaces as grief.

A lone fly, perhaps the bravest,  
has chosen its place of death  
on the microwave turntable. Several  
more lie rigid on shrivelled grey meat  
stuck to a plastic plate.

Insect spray separates like dusk  
on the cluttered draining board.  
I pull the kitchen blind, double-lock  
the door, find in the middle of each night  
I care for a sad dog.

Maeve McKenna

## CONFETTI

Gifted a bouquet of lavender bound  
in green twine, I am navigating  
the streets of a place I am lost in,

offering the moody cathedral's  
gun metal steeple our tone  
behind this city's summer skyline.

A prayer in the guise of a wreath:  
Violet whorls sprinkled to the heavens  
holding you in permanent cloud,

fragrance delicate as my belief,  
your picture wrapped  
in cling-film inside my handbag,

a faint glimpse of you as I reach  
for my phone to capture  
the spire piercing the belly of dusk.

And here, under a gang of crows  
eyeing my pointless gift,  
fluttering their black capes over

this purple moment, I inhale  
your wild will, a chaotic residue  
landing as confetti on my hair.



Photograph courtesy <https://pixabay.com/users/hans-2/>



Lynn Strongin was born and raised in New York city. She has twelve books of poems. NEA, two PEN Grants, a Woodcock emergency Writer's Grant, Canadian. Her latest book KIOSK is published in Liverpool, U.K. upcoming are an interview with Danielle Ofri, M.D. and a feature in storySouth where her work will be featured. She lives in Victoria, British Columbia this autumn.



## SILENT

... the doorbell as falling snow  
 Guests  
 Personages, courtesans gone now.

No longer come.  
 A fox-hound sky, clouds the color of almond.  
 I press my ear to sky. Glory be! Bread of the Angels would restore me.

Tucked away in hangars. *Insies and outsies*.  
 Grain is blocked by war the other side of the world;  
 People are starved. Whereas my Aunt Vi has a history implant in her.

So the twilight of life is marred. We are just guests. All things lost  
 come back to haunt me: North, South, East, West. Mimosa feathers  
 and shade trees . . . woven on a mountain loom  
 By a jubilation broken under the howling foxes,  
 in wonder of a winter moon...

Lynn Strongin

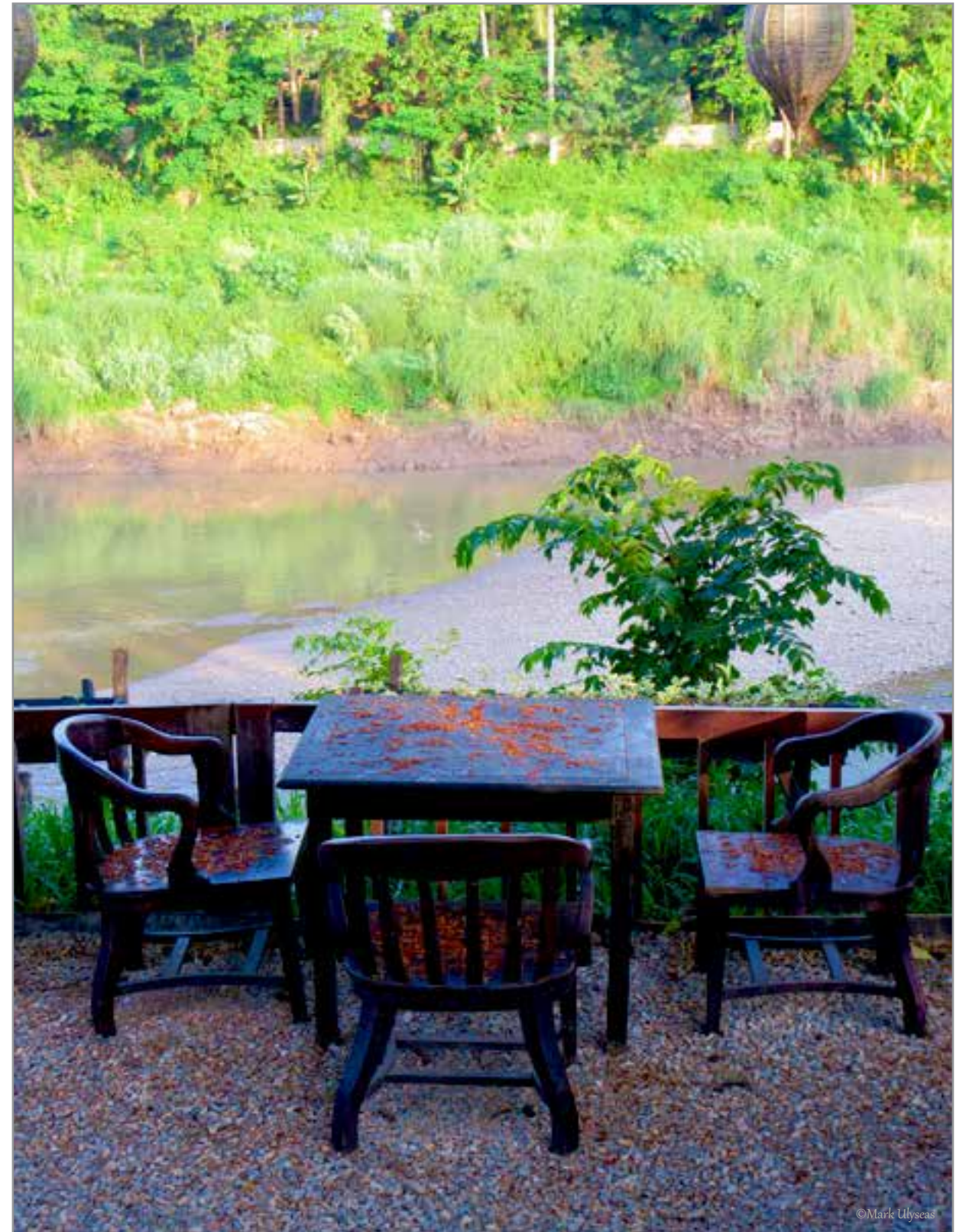


## LEANING INTO IT,

your birthday. Faraway. You're catching up on chocolates.  
In Ireland it's a bank holiday  
a dining bucket list for that late summer get-away.

In dream comes tall rangy gourmet girl with a twist  
her cosmetics from Mary Kay  
the school of lost silks.

Leaning back to catch your breath,  
'lost you' you say conversation's end. Lady, it's curtains.  
Coffee-colored suede,  
You shrug off as many losses as the leopard's spots.



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



Barbara Bald is a retired teacher, educational consultant and free-lance writer. She has worked at the Frost Place in Franconia, served as outreach coordinator for NHPTV and volunteer reading and writing poetry with school-age children, adults. Her poems have been published in a variety of anthologies—most recently *Covid Spring* published by Hobblebush Press. They have also appeared in various journals including: *The Northern New England Review*, *Avocet*, *Off the Coast*, *Silver Birch Press* and *The Poets' Touchstone*. She has two full-length books: *Drive-Through Window*, *Other Voices/Other lives* and a chapbook is entitled *Running on Empty*.



## TO THE CHILD I NEVER HAD

Could I have loved you that much?  
Set aside my own distaste of dyed hair  
to help you choose your own colors?

Would I have let you revel in blue?  
Helped you decide on turquoise or teal?  
Favored doing your whole head or just the crown?

Surely I would have asked why  
you wanted to do this at all. Wondered  
how you got to be sixteen so fast.

I see you here now, head craned backward  
toward the sink, terrycloth towel around your neck  
to save your Red Sox jersey.

My hands massaging your tender scalp,  
suds foaming between my fingers, dark blue stains  
on white porcelain ready for the drain.

What if you had chosen to pierce your nose?  
Ink a swastika on your arm? What then?  
Could I, would I, have held the mirror higher for you?

Barbara Bald

## HERE

It has taken fifteen years to lie down on this spot.  
To curl in fetal position on this rug

beside ghosts of empty bottles, valium and Antabuse,  
over the stain of body fluids left where you died.

Here, I want to stretch out unencumbered  
so I can feel your numbing fear of dying alone.

I want to watch over our story for hours  
like our loyal spaniels who guarded your bluing lips.

Before letting go, I want to spoon with memory—  
here—as our bodies did on cold wintry nights.

## BEHIND THINNING LASHES

You can see it in the eyes—aging.  
Lids folding down, shades closing slowly  
on a life.

Eyes once wide—blue, green, brown—  
full of gusto. Beacons pointing the way,  
body following.

Passion now peers around corners,  
through dusty blinds. These eyes are tired,  
sag like folds of a well-worn shirt.

Even the whites give it away—yellowing.  
Thin red lines tell stories like lifelines  
gypsies read in wrinkled palms.

But, behind old eyes, wisdom stacks up  
like books on a shelf or healing potions  
in an apothecary's window.

Weary eyes know when to let a child  
build her own sandcastles, when  
to help a teen draw firm lines in the dirt.

These eyes honor the heart's softening,  
thank the mind for realizing life was never  
about being 'King of the Hill.'

Perhaps the gentle droop of lids signals relief  
in letting go, offers wise messages—urging,  
*Take down your flag, Let go of the rope.*



Alicia Viguer-Espert, born and raised in the Mediterranean city of Valencia, Spain, lives in Los Angeles. A three times Pushcart nominee, she has been a featured poet at numerous venues within the greater LA. Her work has been published in Lummo Anthologies, Altadena Poetry Review, ZZyZx, Panoply, Rhyvers, River Paw Press, Amethyst Review, Odysee,pm, and Live Encounters among others. Her chapbooks *To Hold a Hummingbird*, *Out of the Blue Womb of the Sea* and *4 in 1*, focus on nature, identity, language, home, and soul. In addition to national and international publications, she is included in "Top 39 L.A. Poets of 2017," "Ten Poets to Watch on 2018," and "Bards of Southern California: Top 30 poets," by Spectrum.



## THE VISIT

From the gate I notice flying seagulls,  
cascading jasmine leaning on cold stones  
of names, dates, and inscriptions.  
My eye catches a silhouette in blue,  
she returns the look from her twenty years  
of distance; still so beautiful!  
Nearby, parallel lines of turquoise give solidity to water,  
melancholy and bougainvillea trickles from rod iron balconies,  
I walk the path to meet her.  
I cannot forgive how her cruel departure broke my step,  
collapsed my place in the world,  
still, tenderness floods through me remembering  
our strolls by the sea, passing sails in front of our window,  
sharp cypresses puncturing the lucent sky,  
nightingales' conversations in the Botanical Gardens.  
As the sting of memory stabs my side  
I drag my feet all the way to the stone carved with her name,

Alicia Viguer-Espert



## WAKING UP

I woke up to empty glasses, a blanket  
wrapped around my chest, a written note.

Behind the open window a single star watched  
half hidden from the crescent moon.

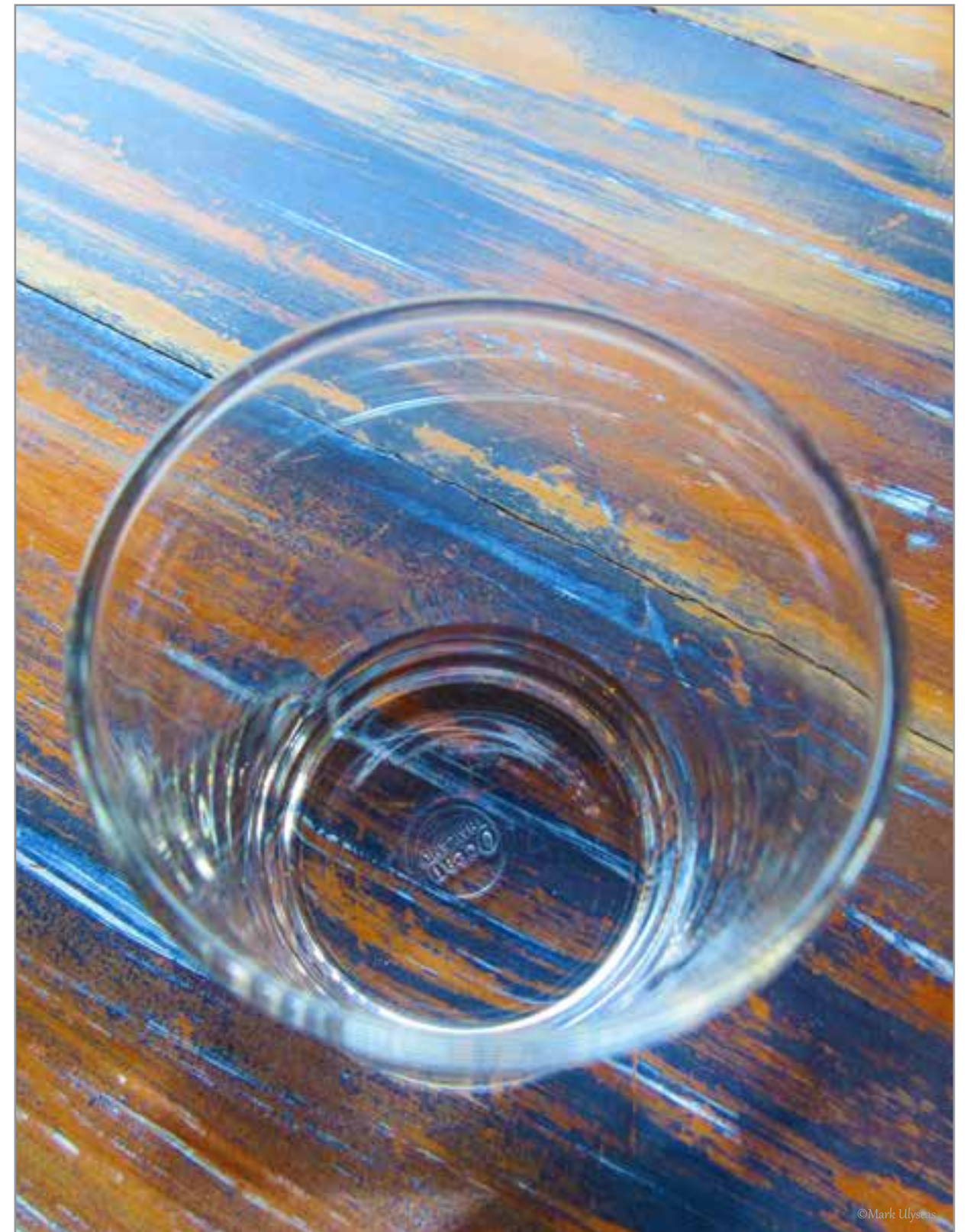
A solitary bird sang desperation  
in its unrequited calling.

I remember a storm of blood pulsating,  
kisses exchanged, your hand on my thigh

silently burning, tangerine flames  
before stars opened their blinking eyes.

In my head a storm is brewing dark like coffee,  
the forest, blue a few hours ago, erased

with the grayish fog of departure.  
Your shoes, which always gave me hope, gone.



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



Jo France is an emerging Australian poet based in Tasmania/lutruwita. She has been twice Highly Commended in the Robyn Mathison Poetry Prize, and her poems have featured at Oasis Women's Poetry. She often writes on themes of family and women's experiences.



## JE M'APPELLE

my father tossed a coin  
outside the country church of my christening  
*Joanne* landed on my head  
I kept the first part  
unhitched the caboose  
*Jo* - so close to joy  
but lacking the inflection  
the eternal *why*  
I asked my parents  
if my name was special  
*it's just a name*  
*it doesn't mean anything*  
French form of Johanna  
I find it means God is gracious  
Joan of Arc's motto  
*go forward bravely, fear nothing*  
at seventeen, divinely inspired  
the lionhearted maid of Orleans  
a national heroine  
at nineteen  
too dangerous to be allowed to live  
burned at the stake  
and so it goes  
for valiant teenage girls  
whose names refuse  
to be extinguished  
and burn eternally on our lips

Jo France

## FATHER AND FIFTH CHILD

at six, I thrilled to stand  
on the crests of his feet  
sashay across lino  
a syncopated two-step  
to his jaunty whistle  
once, through the screen door  
on the verandah  
I witnessed him weep  
his large hands  
a mantle for his face  
in dry rhythm  
his body quaked  
his voice a canticle  
I watched sorrow rise  
charge the air  
a lone flamenco dancer  
then dissipate  
at right angles  
through imperfect  
louvre windows

## WAITING FOR DEATH

we all have someone  
who will have to die  
before we can  
speak our truth  
I don't mean we need to kill them  
necessarily  
but they must be respectfully mourned  
before we can speak with abandon  
to write is to bleed  
said Hemingway  
but what if the blood is not our own?  
do we have the right to spill it?  
words are indelible  
they take our breath away  
make us bend  
sometimes break  
to wield that power  
requires courage I am not sure I possess  
and so I face the lion  
and so I wait



Sarah Meehan's work has appeared in *Crannóg* and *Cordite Poetry Review*. She acknowledges the Jinibara people as the traditional owners and custodians of the land and waterways that are her home.



Sarah Meehan

## LITTLE ECHO

I have been thinking about how a bird  
playing throw and catch  
with its voice

can wake the echoes in the mountains

and how a dandelion in its youth  
is a little echo  
of the sun

and how a dandelion in old age  
is a little echo  
of the moon

and the way puddles and ponds  
look like shards of sky

and how the wrinkled face of a  
newborn is an echo  
from the future

and how the light of a star  
is an echo from the past

and the way the letter m  
holds the shape of water

and the way my left hand  
carries the imprint of my right

so that when they strike  
the sound bounces off the evening

releasing the echoes from my palms  
to hustle  
home to roost.

WING PRINTS

It is morning and a voice  
is scaling three paired notes  
like a stairway to the sky

so it seems if I could give my  
whole attention and  
yoke myself to its repeating

I could be rising  
flight by flight,  
flight by flight —

~

Coasting low along the river  
a sleek-winged crow  
spills its darkness,

a slick  
across the water  
that spreads

onto the raised-root bank  
and gathers as a grass-  
bound bird.

~

Emerging from cloud  
as though formed of  
cloud

a pair of cattle egrets  
glide to the fields  
where they feed

from the hoof-churned earth  
as though sprung  
from the earth.

~

At that hour when the sun  
turns wool rosy  
and the paddocks are filled

with flushed ewes and lambs  
the curve-billed ibises  
drift by

in fours and sixes  
and descend to their roosts  
in hush-spun spirals.



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*.

## ANTIGONE

So it begins a season of death  
Unburied brothers howl  
Upon the red field  
Creon a dog for power

Fingered gums the thin moon of winter  
Bones of grass, slow gnashing earth crows of memory and war waiting  
And we stay watching  
In the silver dead time.

I imagine Antigone of Thebes  
That dread daughter  
With her high head looking at us  
As the hut of stone walls waits  
She glows among the funeral hills.



Kate McNamara

## CURLEWS

The curlews are dying  
their ravaged cries haunt  
the thin thin thread  
of time bleached bones  
in the salt swamp  
old bays glazed with brine  
decorous in mud and shells.

That vast migration they  
are compelled to undertake  
the V of their flight  
imperious as they fade  
as they fly starving  
on the wing starving  
as they travel an ancient map  
of stars and sun and moon.

Flying on wings that edge the dark  
those pinion feathers  
speeding through the last  
of the dying light and  
thousands and thousands of miles  
and years encrypted in their eyes  
their claws their power.

Soon we who have murdered them  
will no longer see  
nor hear that aching call feel  
the darkest line of their movement  
clearest feathers of flight  
breaking the edges of light  
of love and beneath them  
earth barren polluted dead.

Flying and starving quivering  
they move through our minds through time  
and we as cunning as any predator  
as indifferent as fools  
we fail to see their loss will be  
as nothing another apocalypse.

But for the curlews they may yet  
transcend all surviving us  
flying on the other wind into another world,



Shanta Acharya's recent poetry collections are *What Survives Is the Singing* (2020), *Imagine: New and Selected Poems* (2017) and *Dreams That Spell The Light* (2010). Her doctoral study, *The Influence of Indian Thought on Ralph Waldo Emerson*, was published in 2001 and her novel, *A World Elsewhere*, in 2015. Her poems, reviews, and articles have featured in journals and anthologies, internationally. The author of seven poetry collections, her poems have been translated into several languages.  
<https://www.shanta-acharya.com/>



## BELIEVING

Believing you might appear disguised, I wait  
 with my prairie-open mind, let time and life  
 scatter my unknowing somewhere between faith  
 and doubt, mocking my need only the sky's emptiness  
 can fill, an emptiness where you should've been,  
 teaching me to trust the passing clouds whose breath mist  
 the looking-glass of belief. The higher I climb,  
 the poorer the visibility. Waiting for the dark to lift,  
 I sing in the half-light with insects of time passing,  
 seeking a sign, a mirror to see myself in, know who I am,  
 have been. Are there journeys without destinations,  
 pilgrimages that don't lead to self-discovery?  
 Can faith enter the interstices of doubt,  
 find fertile soil to put down roots, flower in?

Shanta Acharya

## LONELINESS

A work of art, covering the face of agony,  
ecstasy is fleeting, not universally shared.

Love may have a way of outlasting us,  
change is our true companion in life.

Doubt plays a key part: like a child enters my heart,  
wrecks everything I place my faith in.

The hours rarely pass without tiredness making  
an appearance like the Chorus in a Greek tragedy.

Why did I think it normal to crawl on the floor  
of the ocean of exhaustion, hoping for redemption

or the sky to provide me asylum in her kingdom?  
Looking for myself among stars that lie shattered,

having donated their everything to the universe,  
I discover the true meaning of altruism.

Living in a state of vulnerability, hanging on  
to the tree of life sucking hope, each day a triumph

of improvisation, I pray for the chronically fatigued.  
When doctors talk of asthenia, thalassaemia, genes and more,

I am in an IMAX movie theatre, watching an unreal world  
exploding at its seam. How does one get at the truth?

Single, female, first generation immigrant, no security,  
intelligent, neurodivergent, born to be different.

Don't they know that loneliness is a *cramping*  
*of the spirit for lack of companionship?*

If only they knew the enterprise involved in finding  
one's way through this universe of unknowing?



Sinéad McClure's writing is published on radio, and in anthologies, magazines and online including; *The Honest Ulsterman*, *The Stinging Fly*, *Southword*, *Live Encounters*, *The Cormorant*, and many other fine publications. She was the 2022 recipient of the Roscommon Bursary Award for her first solo chapbook *The Word According to Crow*. Along with her collaborator Cáit O' Neill McCullagh their chapbook *The songs I sing are sisters* was published by Dreich Press in Scotland and the recipient of a 2023 Saboteur Award. Sinéad is currently completing her MA in Creative Practice at ATU Sligo.



MAEVE MCKENNA

*Review of*

SINEAD MCCLURE'S

*The Word According to Crow*

*The Calendar Road Press (October 12, 2022)*

Spanning twenty-five poems, *The Word According to Crow*, guides the reader on a journey into the wilds of North West Ireland where we find its creatures and habitats and witness the challenges faced by those who call this terrain home. In several poems we are also invited into the personal world of the poet; her family, pets and gardens, and her beliefs, also.

Nature is universal, however, and in these poems we are pulled from our neighbourhoods to many continents, a sense that the world is a small place full of shared experiences, the poet knocking on our door, calling us out from our comfort zones.

Judge Lani O'Hanlon, placing this collection first in the Roscommon Chapbook Award, 2022, wrote; "*Sinead McClure is speaking for the earth and her creatures in a different and profound way*".

McClure is a poet who writes of nature with authority, and importantly, integrity. We are bestowed with a myriad of wild-life and their habits, yet in every poem, as humans we become not only reader but witness, and possibly, culprit. These blurred lines create moral dilemmas that unnerve the reader, as do all contradictions we battle in our lives. In every poem there is a cause and effect.



Book available in: USA - [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). UK & IRELAND: [Amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk). EUROPE: [Amazon.de](https://www.amazon.de)



The opening epigraph, taken from the poem, *The Padre and the Plantation*:

*'There is a void in the forest  
where the trees failed to prosper.  
A small clearing.  
This is where I genuflect'*

gives a clear indication of the poet's deep reverence for nature.

The title poem, *The Word According to Crow*, includes the refrain *'I am here'*, which achieves a mesmerising chant-like quality that is carried throughout the book.

In *Faltering*, a beautiful poem about seasons, *'until it finds winter and drops it upon me, unannounced'*, the poet makes a direct address to the wasp in the opening line, *'I ask the wasp to hold one end of this poem'*. This confirms McClure's deep connections with and understanding of the wildlife around her and is a clear indication of its influence on her writing.

The poem is an introduction to the route McClure will take, not so much leading, more the poet being led by an array of creatures and their experiences who become almost human-like. McClure is not just writing about these animals; they are recounting their lives and struggles through these poems, given a voice by the poet who observes acutely. We follow willingly.

Many poems hint at religion, however there is a distinct irreverence to all things of the church: *'I want to walk on unconsecrated ground/these are the richest places, unsullied by religion'* from the searing *There is no peace, says your God, "for the wicked"*.

Perhaps nature is its own belief.



Sinead McClure



*A walk in the country* tells of a cow grieving for her dead calf. The narrator, out walking, comes upon the scene. The question '*is she ok*', is to whom? The answer '*no*'/*she will not leave her*'. Who offers this reply? McClure uses this technique throughout the book, leaving the reader unsure if the voice is that of the narrator or the animal. The poem tells a regular tale of the realities of rural life, yet the sense of grief and loss is profound and universal and is conveyed with subtly and a lack of sentimentality. The moment observed captures all loss, the inevitability of how cruel life can sometimes be. Is the poet asking us to not only acknowledge our indifference to the emotions of animals, but to our fellow humans, '*the vet and the farmer drive away*'. Are we complicit by our actions and inactions? In these poems we are asked repeatedly to consider and reconsider.

*Fox* is a poem of Hughes-like insightfulness, and as we find in many poems, is full of worry: for the foxes, the chickens, and the muscovies. Here, the poet tells of encounters with foxes who visit the land where she lives, but more is hinted at: about rural living and the treatment of wildlife. While there are many opinions on such matters, the closing lines are a call to all: '*a fox cry up here/strikes fault lines through the mist/leaves an echo hanging in the hollows/a deep wound/ we dress each day/until it heals*'.

There are so many poems to love in this book. They offer insights into country life, environmental issues and the human condition in an informative, engaging and thought-provoking way. There are also personal poems which offer a nice balance and a sense of the poet herself, *Preparing my dog for reincarnation* displays tenderness and respect for a family pet and in *The Padre and the plantation*, dedicated to her partner, gives insights into the life of the poet.

We began the voyage in the opening poem with a swallow, fearful of its journey to Africa, asking for blessings from the rook, which are ignored. This is the hierarchy of nature at its most savage. Are we equally indifferent and cold to the needs of others?

The penultimate poem, *Moths*, is an invitation to the reader; '*finally, the drinker moth will sip you in*' and we do indeed give over and are consumed by the stories in these poems.

Equally, in *Dream Catcher*, the final poem '*I knew we were letting go of ourselves*', and we do, fully, into the world the poet has challenged us to enter.

Reading these poems we face the uneasy truths of our existence and our arrogant sense of importance on this earth. Cruelty, kindness, aggression, concern and vulnerability sit side by side amid our shared realities. These contradictions encourage introspection. We think we know so much, yet know so little, and are reliant on writers of such observation and lived experience to inform us. Sinead McClure has given us a window into the world we share with its creatures, their experiences mirroring our own lives. This collection insists we reconsider how our behaviours impact not only the world we live in but those around us.

After reading this collection, there is no doubt you will never spend time in your garden, visit fields, woodlands or beaches without questioning your understanding of what it means to be alive, not just as humans, but alive to the responsibilities of being human.



Di Li, born in 1978, is the first crime-thriller novelist in Vietnam modern literature with the famous detective novel “Red Flower Farm” (The “Scarlet Hill” movie on Netflix of 177 countries based on this novel) and author of over 30 other books. The Yomiuri Shimbun said about “Red Flower Farm”: “The high-circulation book has shown that Vietnamese readers were expecting a mystery-horror novel written by a Vietnamese author, not only by foreign authors”. She has two BAs, one in English and one in German language from Hanoi University, and an MA in Education Management from Hanoi National University of Education. She now works as a teacher of life skills at Hanoi Commerce and Tourism College. She also works in Public Relations and is the first author of PR books in Vietnam. Besides, she works as a free-lance columnist for several periodicals. She has been a member of the Vietnam Writers Association since 2010 and the Hanoi Writers Association since 2011. Di Li was awarded third prize in the Military Literature and Art Magazine Competition in 2006 for her two short stories, ‘My Mischievous Students’ and ‘Cocktail’ and third prize in the Literature Competition in 2010 organized by People Police Publishing House for ‘Red Flower Farm’.

Translated from Vietnamese by Lư Anh Tuấn.

Special thanks to Nguyen Thuy Hoa (Ms), Director, International Cooperation Department, The Voice of Vietnam, Hanoi- Vietnam for making this happen.

## THE GHOST

I woke with a shiver and found myself at a crossroad on a ruined street corner, no one in sight. The rain fell heavily on the bitumen road; it also drenched the leaves on the old trees along the roadside. To my left, a riverbank, one side dark, perhaps because of the dense vegetation. On my right, a short row of low-rise old and dilapidated buildings. Looking around, I figured I might have been in an old and poor provincial town. The long riverside street I was standing on was just as abandoned, somewhat a dead city. The raindrops hit my head and neck, and the occasional flash of lightning made me see more clearly the dreary scenery where I stood. It looked like it should have been thundering as well, but I didn't hear any thunder. I suddenly realized that since I been on this street, I had not heard a sound, not even the sound of the rain that should have been loud and noisy, the sound of leaves that were probably struggling under the storm. It was as if I had lost my hearing, or fallen into a giant vacuum.

Just as the lightning flashed again, I suddenly saw a moving object in the distance. It was moving slowly along the riverbank, heading towards me; It was a cyclo. I waited for it to come close and saw the rider was pedaling very slowly and it felt like centuries before it got close to me. I wanted to ask the rider where I was as on this rainy night as last I knew I was curled up in a bed that smelled of bleach. Had someone drugged and kidnapped me and brought me here?

The cyclo driver was thin, wearing old-fashioned clothes like a century ago, his head sullenly tilted to one side, like a depressed man who no longer wanted to live and didn't care about his surroundings. However, even though I stood in the middle of the crossroad, naked under the pouring rain, he didn't even notice it. Even more strangely, he just kept driving the vehicle straight towards me without attempting to move out the way, as if I were invisible. Even so, I stood there not moving to see what he was going to do. I got a shock when he languidly turned the wheel of the cyclo which made him seemingly come rushing straight at me. Confusedly and even more shocking was that a second later I saw him behind me and saw the rider continue his weary peddling. He... was... he passed right through me. He... didn't... see me. So... am I dead? Did I turn into a spirit? Only the dead cannot be seen by the living.

Di Li



I collapsed to the ground, screaming in panic, bending over and crying. Tears mixing with the rain. Never in my life had I felt so alone, so desperate and so bitter. I wish this was a nightmare, and when I woke up I would be as overjoyed as ever. But this drizzling rain, this murky street is reality, not an illusion, even this very rough old asphalt surface. I kept kneeling in the middle of the crossroads like that, until I thought I should go find somewhere warmer. Even if I was only a ghost, I still needed a place to warm up, even more so than when I was alive.

I walked towards the verandah of a house. It had a roof made of tin and so the rain should have been pounding loudly on the roof, but I didn't hear a sound. The door to the house was closed. I tried banging on the door, but my deafness told me that even the landlord couldn't hear me calling. Now I found myself still wearing the nightgown from the night before. The white silk dress was a bit frayed with a lace trim. It was thin and only had two tiny straps hanging from its shoulders. I was horrified to see that the dress, my hair and body were all still dry. I couldn't even get wet like a normal person. The rain continued to fall and showed no sign of stopping. If only I could know what time it was. Normally, I wore a watch on my wrist. It had been an inseparable item since I was 16 years old, from the time I bought my first wristwatch, until I had collected nearly a hundred more. I was almost obsessed with time, constantly wanting to know what time it was, and needing to be precise to the minute, until my brain also had the power of a clock. Without looking at the minute hand, I could tell what it was reading, whether it was in the middle of a merry-go-round, waking up in the middle of the night, or alerted after an unfinished business. But now, I cannot guess, not even an approximation.

Last night I had gone to bed late after an argument on the phone. The content of the argument had driven me crazy and I needed cold water on myself to cool down. I took off my watch before taking a shower, I forgot to put my watch back on. I shouldn't have forgotten such an important item. In my entire life I have never left my watch off for even half a second, but when I die I seemed to have forget it. The thought of not being able to tell the exact time in this gloomy world made me panic. The cold water of the shower or maybe the unwanted phone call made it difficult to sleep.

I tossed and turned until two a.m. or more, until I was lost in thoughts that had no beginning and no end. Maybe I had had a stroke in bed right after falling asleep, or after a sleep just deep enough to make my body's defenses weak. If so, it must have been around 5 am.

However, I saw no sign of dawn, even though I sat motionless on the porch for a long time to reorganize everything. Maybe I should go find someone. I walked barefoot out into the rain, along the river and through narrow streets. The rain began to subside and I was delighted to see signs of life. A woman in her fifties, wearing a floral dress, with an ugly face, was carrying a basket of vegetables in front of the house and talking endlessly to herself. I hurriedly walked closer, but didn't hear a word. Her posture was crumpled and twisted. Even if I wasn't hopelessly alone in this demonic world, I still probably would not have spoken to this lady.

I went back to the main road, maybe when the dawn came, my luck would come, I would find someone to see me and hear me. How was it possible that in this crowded world, no one could see me? I was stunned when I realized that the river had disappeared, replaced by a modern city silent in the night. I was standing on the sidewalk of a long street close to a shop that was open, but there was no one in sight. This place was not like the place I was in, or maybe it was another provincial capital, I was not sure. Strange street names didn't evoke any memories. But why was I here? Where did the river go? maybe I'm not dead yet, maybe this is just a nightmare. Only in a dream can the scenes be this virtual.

I walked along the streets, like a ghost town, with the doors wide open, the goods neatly displayed, the food and drink but no one using it. No seller, no buyer. No sound, nothing moving but a dog I met earlier. It is a dirty yellow dog that people often kill. Seeing me, it growled fiercely, its eyes wide with hostility and fear; I was equally terrified. Then even though I kept backing away, backing into a nearby shop, the dog backed away with its tail between its legs, as if it had just seen a ghost.

After turning into a small alley, I met a second person. It was a man who looked like a bricklayer, dressed in workman's clothes, he was laughing and babbling to himself. I had no intention of starting a conversation with him, nor did I expect him to see me.

I walked around to the other side of the road, stepping on dirty puddles and rough broken bricks, trying to avoid some dog shit and shattered glass. I went into a shoe store and picked up a nice pair of sandals from the shelf. But it's strange that it's as if it's sealed in place, or if it weighs a thousand pounds, I can't lift it. I took a lighter pair, even tried holding the tiny bill on the cashier counter, but in the same way, everything around seemed to have turned to stone. I surrender. So far, my feet haven't been painful or dirty, even though I've stepped on rough ground many times thus far.

I encountered a third person, a young woman whose width was almost the same length. She was scooping broth into a bowl. She.....also babbled alone in the dark, smiling awkwardly as if there was a large crowd of people in front of her. An instant thought that made me realize that not all of these people, including the first woman I met on a small riverside street, were talking to themselves. They were all communicating with someone, it's just that I didn't see the others. That is to say, this city, is full of people. They live, they work, they breathe, they talk, they laugh, they eat, they excrete, they walk, but I don't see them. I only see certain people, perhaps because of some unknown mystery, but they don't see me either. The only creature that recognized me was the wild dog I saw earlier. This girl seems like a shopkeeper, fidgeting around the steaming pot of broth that should have been fragrant. But I couldn't smell anything, even though I almost stuck my nose in the middle of the pot. No smell, no taste, no heat.

I had lost both my sense of smell and taste, I put spice on my tongue, nothing. All that remained was my miserable vision, which was like seeing the world through a negative film. Based on what she was doing; I knew it was late morning. But I'm in a world without sun. Or rather, other people who are still alive see the sun filling every street corner. It is only me that cannot. I am no longer human. I have turned into a ghost, wandering without shoes and decent clothes. This thought paralyzes me.

I just sat there in front of the counter, I don't know how long. It may have been the end of the day, because I saw that chubby woman moving her arms and legs without stopping for a minute, but now sitting leisurely in front of the wall-mounted television, I noticed that its image was just blurry, much like last centuries static interference on a radio.

Even so, she still watched intently. I discovered another quandary about this world. I can't see anything moving. No cars or motorbikes on the road. Not a single bird. Even the television wouldn't let me see what it was showing. I'm lonely to the end.

The shopkeeper seemed to be bored with the television and got up to do something. Her face scowled at an invisible person in front of her. She's burning paper money, lots of red and blue paper, clothes and cardboard boxes of lipstick. Maybe today is the full moon day, I'm not sure. But if only she knew that I couldn't wear the ashes she just turned on the sidewalk, nor spend the banknotes now mixed with the dust on the sidewalk. If only I could tell her. There are things that only when we die then we can understand the secret behind it. At that moment, I was attracted to something else moving down the street. Unable to wait any longer, I hurriedly walked closer. This time it's a girl. Even in the afterlife, I have never seen anyone so beautiful, except for the stars advertised on TV that I'm sure they had plastic surgery and relied on the witch's hand of a makeup artist to improve beauty up to ninety percent. The girl was wearing a simple pair of pants, which, since my vision was always in the dark, I could not determine exactly what color it was, be it brown, or dark blue, or gray. The office-style white shirt and small computer bag indicated she had just come home from work. The neat high hair bun showed off the whole pretty face with thin eyebrows, delicate nose bridge and lips as soft as a rose petal.

She seemed to be having a lot of fun. Every now and then, the corners of her lips pursed to suppress a smile. Looking at those bright eyes, I knew this person was happy. Perhaps she was in love and the date caused her to return home just now. Curious, I followed the girl. She turned into a nearby alley and ducked into the depths of an old building then climbed the old wooden stairs in soundless high heels, finally opening the door that led into an apartment. This building has many apartments on the same floor. Perhaps it was once owned by the French or a great bourgeois national, before being redistributed by the government to the householders in which, after many generations changed of ownership, until it came to this girl. The atmosphere inside the house was cozy, although the light was always as dark as my eyesight had been accustomed to since falling into this parallel world. The apartment has one bedroom with a lovely flower bed, a tiny living room with a kitchen and a wooden framed window that overlooks the building's backyard. I sat on the salon and even stretched out on it. Knees on the embroidered flower headrest.



This house can't be compared to where I live, which is now as far away as is my previous life. It's a luxury duplex in a luxury apartment complex. A few months before we got married, I hired someone to design it like a space from a sci-fi movie, with a white living room and an all-white stone kitchen. The only furniture is a gray sofa with a 105-inch TV, alone worth the price of a small apartment, making my place more like a cinema. My husband didn't like it. He said that even the bedroom is so cold, the love between husband and wife can only go down. I shrugged without saying anything, a shrug of authority. He sighed and had to leave his familiar apartment to move into my "cinema". After all, I had never been married and he was the experimental character for that marriage.

The owner of the house took off her clothes, walked barefoot into the bathroom and flushed. Every gesture was without a sound. From the sofa, I looked at her like I was watching a silent movie. Two round breasts swayed over her small waist before expanding into a soft curve. Long slender legs glistening with water. She is even more beautiful than on the street. More importantly, she is a likable person. I feel that very clearly. I decided to stay in this house. Anyway, I have nowhere else to go. My new-found shelter made me feel less alone. I will live with her.

The girl dried herself and put on a thin silk kimono, and then sat on the salon, also sitting on my feet. But strangely enough, I didn't feel her weight, only vaguely felt the cool silk and her strong buttocks touching me. But I'm not so sure, maybe I just thought that I felt it, maybe it was not a real feeling at all. I quickly pulled my foot back and curiously peered at the screen of the phone she was glued to with the same rosy smile as the moment I first saw her. She's in love. I know that. I see on her voice-mail an avatar of a handsome man in a plaid suit with shiny hair. She typed repeatedly, possibly laughing out loud. Now I realized one more thing that I can no longer read the words clearly. From the moment I came to this world, my eyes are like that of a shortsighted person, seeing only everything in the distance, but close is not so clear, so the words have become blurred. Even so, I know the words on the screen are getting sexual and seeking to want passionate lovemaking. In an instant, her eyes darkened, her smile faded, and the corners of her lips drooped sulkily. It looks like the man in the photo had abruptly ended the conversation. She threw the phone on my lap and left the room. The door slammed shut.

Now I'm left alone in the salon, I would like to sleep from now on but I did not feel sleepy, even though maybe two days and nights have passed. Maybe souls never need sleep. That's what I wished for in the afterlife. Never have to sleep but can still live and work as hard as a robot. Before our last sleep, we had a heated argument on the phone. I was tired of saying "I need to sleep, I have an important meeting tomorrow morning and the whole company is counting on me to win this bid. You're not really polite. You too, need to sleep." "You know well that after hanging up the phone, neither you nor I can sleep. So what's the point of trying to sleep, what we're talking about is more important than sleep tonight. Did you forget that we'll all sleep forever!" You don't know that I can't even sleep now, even there's nothing to do.

There are things we can only know after we are dead.

Now he's regretting it, I guess. He will be deeply saddened by the body of his wife in the hotel bed that the room manager discovers and then tries to contact the customer's next of kin. Maybe the entire board of partners and colleagues waited forever to see me and went to find me, then panicked to find that I was lying face down on the pillow in a familiar sleeping position, long black hair on the white sheets like in a horror movie. Even after I'm dead, I still can't get over my anger and delight in picturing my husband's desperate face.

He will hug my cold body and spend the rest of his life tormented by accidentally cursing me to sleep forever. "Love is about making sacrifices and putting the interests of the one you love first. It turns out you only love yourself," I yelled over the phone, hoping the soundproof walls of the five-star hotel were thick enough not to disturb the neighbors in the middle of the night. "I have yielded to you all these years, don't you see. My work, my career, my sleep, over the years you have been quiet and quiet like a shadow. Today is our anniversary, you were left in this cold cinema, not even a message."

If only he knew that I hadn't eaten a grain of rice all night. I just drank water to hold my breath and fiddled with the documents that still had some incomplete points. If the bidding is successful, we will go on vacation together for a week in the Maldives, then I will have a full seven days to scold you, okay?

But why should I explain and comfort a person who does not understand and sympathize with his wife. I was bored and hung up the phone right after the word “What if...”. If he hadn’t pushed me so hard that at 2am I’m still burning with anger like sitting in a furnace, I wouldn’t have had the stroke. If in the afternoon I tried to leave work for exactly 15 minutes to send him a sweet text message for two years of marriage and eat bread to fill my stomach, perhaps my cardiovascular system would have worked better. If I decline this trip and mission, my account would still have enough money to buy two more apartments, and adding an achievement won’t make my career brighter, as it already has full of lights and sparkle.

Now my body has fallen to a strange place and my soul is wandering somewhere until now I do not know. I am now on the salon in the narrow room of an unfamiliar girl.

The girl has woken up or pretended she hadn’t slept. I see the shadows of her eyes as dark as the eternal night outside the window. Messy hair covered a sad face. I sat on the salon all night, then got up, wandered around the room, looked at the owner’s neat little kitchen, and then lay down again. She was struggling as much as I was, pacing aimlessly, her gaze uncertain like a ghost. Then, finally, she changed her clothes, tied her hair and put on a little makeup to go to work, again leaving me in the lonely house. Left alone, I began to look at the girl’s belongings. The bedroom was neat, everything was tucked away in the closet so I could only observe what was left. Lots of books and music on the shelf, a blooming rose pot, a computer, a table lamp, a cup of half-drunk coffee, a picture in a frame; taken from an unknown location, only the blue sky and in the middle of the picture is the female owner hugging the neck of the man I saw yesterday on the phone screen. They are deeply in love, why is she so sad, maybe they are arguing.

I looked at the two handbags hanging on hooks. They are cheap fake leather, simple but elegant. I remember the huge glass case in the dressing room, with dozens of rare edition bags by top designers. If only I could bring them here.

If, before I die, I wear the outfit I just bought from a fashion week, put on a three-carat diamond ring, and carry the most expensive bag to bed, I wouldn’t be in my shape nailed forever in this old garment.

But I used to like the silk dress I’m wearing, it’s loose, light, and comfortable. Where did I find it? Apparently my husband brought it back on a business trip, many years ago, when we were still in love, and it seems that his eyes were drooping when he saw that I didn’t even glance at the dress, like all of his gifts were appreciated profusely with an expressionless face, before stowing them in a corner of the closet, except for this dress. Now everything is in vain, no one has any need to see a ghost dressing up. Besides, no one can see me.

The girl has a big mirror in the room. I stood in front of the mirror, but the glass only reflected the opposite bookshelf, with absolutely no image of me in it. I can’t even see myself anymore. I fell to my knees, completely broken. For the first time, I desperately wanted an embrace, from him, from my mother or even from friends. I don’t remember when I last called my mum, and had a cup of coffee with my best girlfriend, maybe a few years or so. I never had enough time, not even time, just to think about them. However, now my time is endless, and infinite.

The girl has returned, I only realized the presence of the host when she dropped onto the salon with a lifeless appearance. All that night and the following day, maybe Saturday, and the day after that, she played the role of a ghost as she didn’t eat or sleep, not even move. As for me, I imitated a living person by sitting next to her, trying to push back the hair that covered her trembling shoulders but couldn’t. Now I can’t even do the simplest things.

For what might have been a week, she lived like that, leaving the house with a melancholy face and returning with despairing eyes. Sometimes she looked at the phone screen as if waiting for something, then sighed. Then one time, she also got out of bed to open the refrigerator. That’s right, if she refuses to eat anything but cookies, she will turn into a shadow just like me. She turned on the gas stove and leaned over the items on the shelf, immediately her long hair fell into the flames. I let out a scream of terror and hurriedly shoved her hair out of the flames. This time something strange happened, her hair completely obeyed my will, being pushed aside by the force of my hand. The girl turned around in surprise, staring into my eyes.



But she clearly saw nothing, otherwise, she may have fainted from fear. She looked puzzled and continued her work. I was equally surprised to see my hand in a strange way. I tried touching, holding, lifting, pushing every object, even the lightest things, they were as heavy as if they were cast in lead and fastened to the tabletop. My body has turned into air, or maybe, I am existing because of thoughts, and all the body images I see these are just memories that have finally been attached to the brain image.

Then one day, I saw him. The man in the picture frame has arrived, ending the girl's series of days of depression. I was stunned when I saw the visitor, for nothing but the fact that for the first time since falling into this world, I could witness both of them conversing at the same time. I guess that the people I see have a special energy field that matches their existing electric waves. He burst into the house and they entwined. They gasped, whispered in a hurry, quickly took off their clothes and threw them at the entrance. I have never seen this scene before, except on the TV screen of course. The girl, contrary to her usual gentleness, elegance and weakness, suddenly became passionate and even violent. He carried his lover into the room, naked and wild. I lay in the salon again, my only job every day. Fortunately, I have completely lost my hearing. I can't remember the exact time we last made love. Probably very little, because after a stressful day at work, I often return to the apartment exhausted, and when I dived deep into my husband's gentle caress, I become more and more dim to the point that I want to fall asleep right away without saying a word of comfort. The next morning, I would frantically change clothes to go to work, trying to avoid the bewildered eyes of the other person. I always don't have enough time, even for a quick love-making.

This man probably also took advantage. He seemed to finish very quickly and showed up at the bedroom door in the same neat, clean clothes as when he first arrived. However, his face had become irritated, in contrast to the sweet and passionate expression from before. They were arguing again, after a hot hurricane on a bed of blue flower sheets. The girl's eyes glittered like rain, and in an instant her cheeks were covered in tears. Her messy hair was also soaked by the sweat. I tried to read their mouths, and began to guess half of the story. I thought, my beautiful friend, you are wasting your youth and sunshine. Let him go, and be gone forever. I stood in front of them, like a mediator, or even a judge.

But he ignored my angry expression and the corners of his lips showed no emotion to the girl's sadness. In his eyes, we are both invisible. The man went straight to the door, and I followed, unconsciously. I want to know who he is, to make my dear friend suffer like this. Oh yes, she is my only friend in this world. Apart from her, I have no one else.

The man got into his car. I also hurried in and sat down in the front seat. After an initial few minutes of grimacing, perhaps an afterthought of the last argument, he quickly regained his composure, even whistling. The driver drove very slowly, braking hard, as if the road was congested, and then stopped for a long time in front of a house in a large alley. The door opened automatically, or someone else was opening it. The convex mirror inlaid above the recessed door stared helplessly at the stranger. The man drove the car into the yard, got out and stretched in the space in front of him, bent down to place a kiss and said a few words to the thin air, then crouched even lower, almost kneeling on the window-sill of the living room for a second kiss, in the sweetest way I'd seen. I looked closer, the thin air was a baby, maybe a girl, I guessed, and immediately saw a photo of the whole family in the picture frame on the piano: The man was putting his arm around the shoulder of another young beautiful woman and in the middle was a little girl about five years old as pretty as her mother. I quickly backed out before the gate could close. I crept out into the alley, sad as if I had been betrayed. There are things we can only see when we're dead, or if invisible like I am now.

I stood blankly on the sidewalk of an unfamiliar street, and gradually panicked when I realized a reality I had never thought of: I had absolutely no idea where I was. I am lost. In my old world, getting lost was normal. If I got lost, I asked for directions, use my phone to ask for help or, most conveniently, search on an electronic map. But now, I can't do that. I was going to head back to the other man's mansion, wait to follow him, and then one day he would come back to meet the girl. I could again find my new home. At that moment, I saw her, exhausted, confused, disoriented, walking into the alley. I almost wouldn't recognize you if the street became busier. But since I probably don't know anyone anymore, I know for sure that the person walking around like a shadow, with an expression of defeat and loss of consciousness, is indeed my lovely friend.

The girl stopped in front of the closed gate, overgrown with bougainvillea, which would be beautiful in the sunlight. She dialed the phone, and waited desperately for it, then texted frantically and continued to wait helplessly for a response.

I sat down next to her on the sidewalk, completely frustrated. He won't come out, and she won't leave him, what's the point of finding him, because he was never hers. She is just losing herself. Look at her, from an angel striding proudly on the sidewalk, she now transforms herself into someone else's shadow. No one in the world needs shadows. I also became desperate because all my words couldn't make a sound. Or maybe, my counsel is being drowned out by thunder. I guess so, because at the same time there were intense flashes of lightning in the sky and heavy drops of water that quickly turned the alley into a small river. The water was pouring down on our heads. The man on the second floor, waiting for that, quickly slammed all the windows to prevent storm water from entering his house. My friend started crying, or maybe she's been crying continuously since the fight at home. Maybe she hadn't stopped crying since the beginning of this miserable affair. She hunched over and cried, letting the rain soak her shiny hair and the dirty water washing over her calves. The way she was crying, just like I was in the middle of a crossroad, in that moment of waking up from death. She was extremely lonely, and felt like she was dying. She died while still alive.

Like me, perhaps suddenly thinking that it was time to go find somewhere warmer, she waded out of the water, got up, and staggered to the end of the road. The storm was still raging and violently knocking the trees to the ground. It's dangerous. You should find a place to stay. But I know that not even a living person can advise you now. No one, except that man. Suddenly, the thing I dreaded most happened. The wind twisted some branches that toppling everything in its path over, knocking the flower pots from the balconies of buildings. A black object fell straight at my friend's head. I screamed in terror and raised my hand to brush away the giant flower pot. The strange thing happened again, my hand was under the command of my thoughts. The flower pot fell to the ground, only half a foot away from the girl's wet feet. Something seemed to wake her up. She fixed her eyes on the broken potted plant and hurried off, with strides as long and beautiful as the first time I saw her, even in the midst of a storm.

Soon we were back home. Just as I was about to go up the stairs, I was startled by a figure looming in the dark blocking the road. A pale, mostly naked man, some dirty cloth wrapped around him. He looked lazily like a tramp by a river, but he didn't seem threatening, he gave the image of melancholy; sad pathetically melancholy. But it was strange that the girl did not see him, she just kept walking and... passed through him. Neither did I, in my confusion, I never touched him on the narrow stairway, even though he stood in the middle of the lane. Something suddenly dawned in the murky darkness of the corridor of the old house. I suddenly remembered the cyclo rider at the river. They are just souls, just like me.

"Miss..."

"What?"

It was like for centuries; I didn't see anyone talking to me. This stranger's voice was eerie. It wasn't sound, but like a frequency that was reaching my cerebral cortex with telegraph waves.

"Let me in the house."

"Who are you? I asked again by tapping on the invisible telegram in the air."

"I do not remember."

"How long have you been dead?"

"I do not know. I just have no place to go."

The girl went straight to the bathroom and didn't bother to close the door. I stood across the door like a guard, raising my voice cold and hard as I did when I was alive.

"This is not your house. Go find another place."

"But I have nowhere to go. I'm very lonely. I been wandering for a long time ..."



The man started to sob and I slammed the door shut with my hand, before I had time to marvel at the force of my hands and before I could see the vagrant's stammered frame "How did you... do... that?". Perhaps the terrifying sound of the door had caused the girl to panic and run out in a naked state. She gaped, staring in horror at me, or rather at the door. She stood there for a long time, her hand resting on her round breast, under which perhaps her beating heart was pounding with astonishment. I wish she could see me. All souls are lonely, because we exist side by side in this world without being recognized. The reluctant stranger had probably not seen anyone for a long time. He was like a dead man floating on a river and his soul drifted to a strange land. I am not drifting; why am I being thrown to this strange place. It's still a mystery I don't know yet.

The stranger seemed to have left. I suddenly felt sorry for him, but I couldn't invite him into the house anyway. This clean, cozy home is not a place for people like him.

I discovered something new, and full of excitement. That is when I concentrate my thoughts and energy, I can control things, even push heavy objects better than when I was alive. I started practicing every day, persistently and hard. At first I still used my hands, then I learned that even without touching the object, my brain waves could still make it move. Because after all, my hands are just an illusion, not a reality. When I was alive, I tried playing games at the physics museum during a trip abroad. My husband and I sat at either end of the glass table, on the table was a cotton ball, our temples had two electrodes attached. Our task was to focus our thoughts to push the cotton ball over there. EEG would be transmitted to the wire connecting the glass table to make the cotton ball move. All traveling couples tried and the men always won. The museum staff smiled and said that because men always focused better than women. In turn, the cotton ball was pushed back and forth a few times and then flew towards the opposite person, maybe a ghost hand was moving it. My husband lost. I smiled and stood up, satisfied. My ability to focus my brain was developed from an early age, or it has been so since I was born.

I started moving everything in the room, from dishes, towels, papers, clothes to buckets and tables and chairs. I can even turn on the light without using the switch. I usually wait until the host is away before I begin my training.

Once, I moved the whole hostess's desk mirror to the living room and forgot to put it back. She opened the door and entered the house and stared at the mirror in the wrong place, then it seemed that the whole evening became restless and insecure. I slightly regretted making my benefactor panic and told myself never to be so careless again. Based on the surprise of the uninvited guest the day before when I calmly pushed open the wooden door with my hand, and also my helplessness when I first fell into this world, I guess not all souls are able to do these things, just as it is not easy for every living person to meditate. It is a privileged power given to each person.

Ever since I had work to do, I've found my lengthy time series make more sense, though at times it's terrifying to think of the prospect of being left in this place forever. That floating guy has probably been stuck in this dimension for centuries, so much so that he can't remember when he died or who he was. I also started to slowly lose my memories. Even my mother's face was blurred like a fog. I try to forget all my loved ones, more precisely, forget the pain they had to endure when they lost me. Never did I want to find them, even though it was impossible, as I didn't even know where I was. I don't want to add to the pain when my light soul is already heavy enough.

One evening the girl returned very late, in a drunken state and collapsed on the chair. Then she sobbed nonstop. I just realized today that she has aged ten years more, and her face was getting more and more worn out. If only she knew that happiness is like diamonds in a basket, and that she already has such a basket full, and then is thinking about throwing away every single day, just like me when I was alive. I sat next to her on the sofa, also suffering from my helplessness. She suddenly turned into a little girl who needed a hand to protect her because of the pitiful nature. Perhaps a soul should not have emotions, especially a soul with special abilities like me. In a thoughtless moment, all my energy poured into my fingers, I involuntarily parted her hair and wiped her tears, just like how my mother used to do when I was a child. Her bewildered eyes quickly became sober, then into panic, she frantically reached for the phone with trembling hands and began to talk while crying after the other line picked up. Looking at the girl's face, I understood that my mistake just now made the extreme loneliness deteriorate like a chronic wound:

"I'm begging you, just come here for a few minutes. I'm so scared... I'm not drunk, I'm sane. This house has a ghost; I have to move."

“ ...”

“It’s not that I’m haunted, it’s the house. I’m not crazy, I’m completely sane. Why do you always leave me when I need you the most...”

My reluctant victim dropped her phone and rushed out in her pajamas. She had almost gone mad. I felt great regret and was tormented to the point of despair. I did not have time to run after the girl, and now I do not want to chase. I was afraid that I would lose my way again, and then completely lose her. Besides, I’m not sure what more stupid thing I’ve done.

That night, she did not return home, nor the following night and the night after.

I don’t know where to find her. I stay here and wait. I did not dare to go to the street, even though I was tormented by the feeling of loneliness, even though I was restless from waiting and bored by hanging around in a narrow space for days and nights without distinction. It rained again that day. During the stormy season, the water rushed down the dark courtyard and was slanted by the wind like a swaying curtain. I didn’t know if it was day or night. If only this apartment had a balcony overlooking the street, I could have looked and observed more closely. I came up with an idea. I opened the door to the outside and climbed into the attic. Sure enough, there were no people on it, because it was just a renovated corrugated iron roof to cover the water tank leading to the terrace. From there, I easily climbed to the roof next door. I walked on the tiled roof like a feral cat without fear of slipping and falling. I know that now I can let go of the free fall unharmed. My soul will fly with the rain and gently land on the ground like a leaf. I chose a ledge that jutted out from the roof and sat on it, arms propped in front like a sphinx. The street scene stretched out before my eyes, desolate and lonely like a ghost town. In this dimension, it was truly a city of ghosts.

The road below was bleak in the dark. It could be midnight, I guessed, through the closed doors. High-rise buildings rose up black in the sky. Occasionally, a few flashes of lightning horizontally and vertically displaying the infinite supremacy and power of the universe. If only I had come up here on a clear day, I would have been able to see the sparkling beauty of the galaxy.

Where do I come from, in the depths of nothingness? And then where am I going to stay like this? I gradually found myself as light as a raindrop, the diluted sadness melted and softened like a lake that had just absorbed a dose of painkiller. Maybe this was my real world, and the hurried life under the sun before was actually just a long dream, a beautiful dream. This pleasant feeling, I had never experienced, in either of the worlds. I sat still in the storm, watching the sadness of the city reflected in the sky. My mind drifted aimlessly. For the first time since I was born, I felt close to reaching peace.

The girl returned, along with the man. He helped her settle down, smile, feel happy and young again. She seemed to forget all the previous misery and afflictions, forgetting the ghost that was haunting the house. Except for the man in front of her, nothing else makes sense. He agreed to stay with her for a few days. He cooked for her, gently massaged his lover’s feet and poured sweet words into her ears with his caressing lips. The tragedy is here. If he was a total pervert, a total asshole, the girl would have easily eliminated that debt from her life. However, only once in a while is he a tyrant, for the rest, he’s a sweet and passionate guy. But it is those “occasions” when he is a tyrant does he make my girl die again and again.

They were laughing, eating, making jokes, and cuddling in front of me, like it was an endless honeymoon and their life was all about heaven and nothing else. Most of the time he stayed, I used to sit in my old position on the roof, especially when they were fast asleep and the night moon began to rise to cast silver glitter over the darkened trees. They continued their nostalgia like that, even after he left to return to his beautiful bougainvillea home. I feel secure when I see the girl feeling calmer each day and begin to focus more on work. But one day, the old tragedy repeats itself. They continued to quarrel fiercely and after lots of sleepless nights, after lengthy days of pretending to be a ghost, she sat on the bed, thin and wilted like the corn tree growing on the window long forgotten to be watered by the owner. Then, before I knew it, she’d emptied the entire load of pills down her throat and laid motionless on the bed. I frantically pushed the phone towards her and screamed in helplessness. The girl suddenly opened her eyes, stared at me and opened her mouth: Who are you?



She saw me. Overjoyed, I poured out a series of monologues, half scolding, half admonition, half pain, sympathy and fear. Not sure if she heard what I said, but it seemed like she didn't move and was drifting towards death, back into my world. In a moment of helplessness and despair, I opened the door and ran into the street, I needed to find someone who could help. The world of the sun cannot lose her.

After a long period of time after the doorbell rang, the girl would leave the bed covered with blue flower sheets on a leisurely Sunday morning, the iridescent sunlight slanted through the louvers and reflected in speckled streaks on the wooden bars. She only had time to quickly put on a thin shirt to be polite and look at a strange visitor standing in the corridor in surprise.

"Sorry ma'am, maybe you think I'm having a mental problem or that I'm making up stories to scam you, but I've come to bring a message from a spirit that used to live in your house. She very much hopes that you're still alive."

The girl stared in astonishment at the woman in her elegant ivory duffel, her simple square-cut hair and face with almost no makeup other than a hint of pale brown lipstick. Then, as if awakened, she staggered back to leave the door wide open for the woman to enter the house. She walked towards the salon spontaneously without being invited to sit and smiled.

"Just as she described it, you are truly beautiful."

"You're... Where did you meet her?"

"On an island in the Mediterranean."

"..."

I discovered my psychic abilities 25 years ago, when I was just over 10 years old. A few months ago, I went to the island on a trip and happened to see her sitting on a cliff off the beach, wearing only a nightgown. For those who have just acquired this ability, they often cannot distinguish people from parallel worlds because they look just like us.

But from my experience, I immediately knew who she was and approached to start a conversation. She was surprised because I could see and hear her.

"But why on the island? – The owner of the house lost her voice and could barely stand."

Spirits are inherently just a source of energy, some can dissipate immediately after leaving the body, others take time, and there are spirits trapped between two worlds for a long time, depending on the electric waves of each person when he or she was alive and how he or she died. Sudden deaths, especially young people, often leave the residues of their electric wave very abundant, since they have not been consumed and exhausted by disease and old age. But because of that, they can't escape and are easily "blown away" like a leaf by other sources of cosmic electricity. Your lady had been moved like that three times. Each time she did not know where she was. The last time was when she ran outside to get help when you were trying to commit suicide. The spirits rarely leave their desired abode for this reason. They are afraid of losing their way, and are afraid of being unintentionally transported.

It's not that I tried to commit suicide, but I committed suicide, and took a step into the afterlife, that's why I saw her. – The girl whispered. – She saved my life, not just once. "It is only when you die that you know that death is not the end of all afflictions but only the beginning of more suffering." She said so. "You have no idea how sad the world of spirits is. Then you will enter a gloomy, melancholy place where dawn never comes. You will be imprisoned in your own world. Your life under the sun is heaven, you are very happy, much happier than I am now." She was about the same age as me, and I didn't have time to ask why she died. But then she screamed to demand me to call an ambulance and I tried to lift the other hand back to dial the phone. Then I didn't know anything, woke up to find myself in the hospital and my mother sitting next to me. But why did you find me?

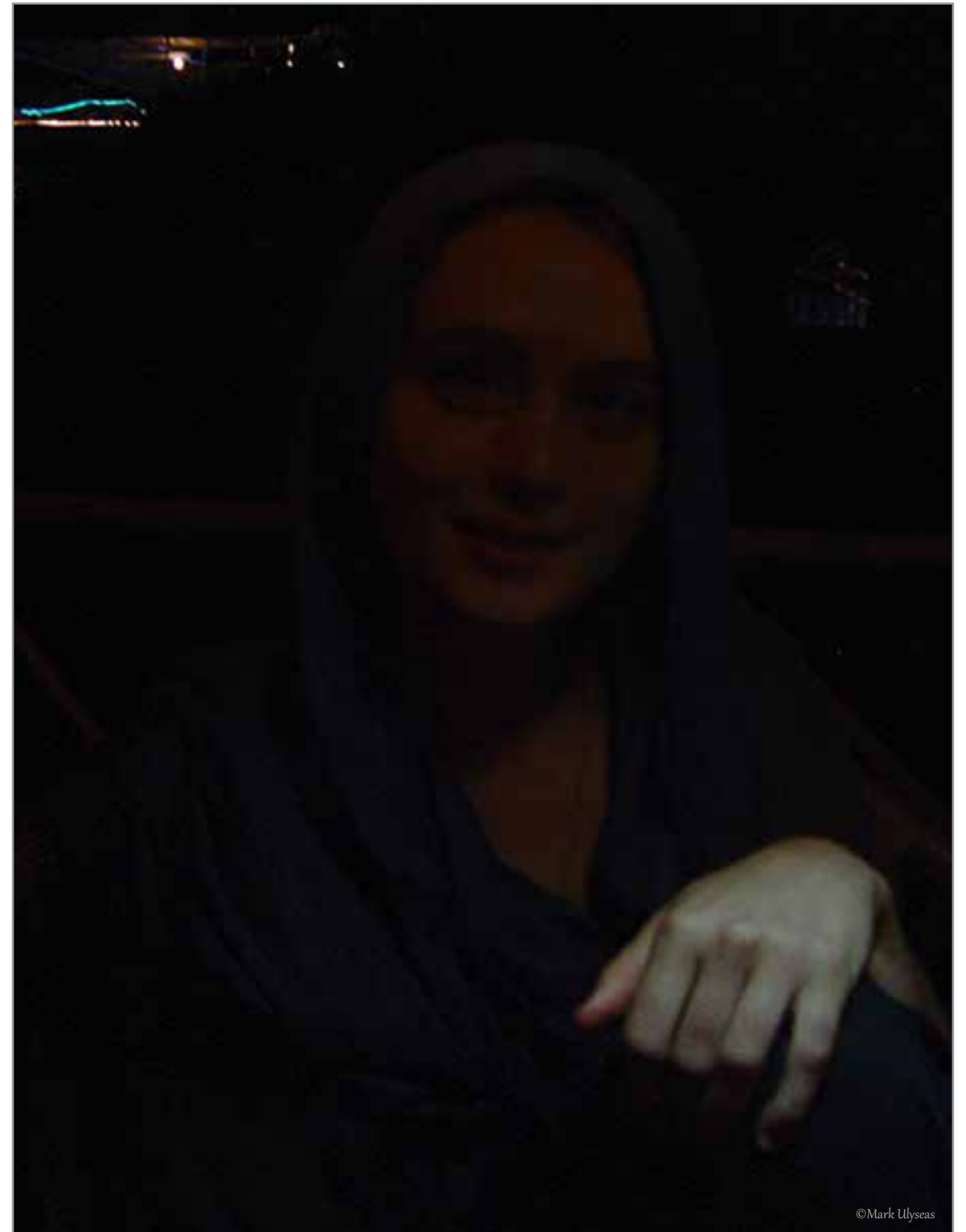
Based on any information and description she provides. Fortunately, I used to live in the neighborhood as a child, but it took a long time and it was hard to find you. Normally I don't waste time on such things but she was so earnest. Unfortunately, I was unable to inform her that you're still alive and safe.

Now, I have almost forgotten all my memories. The busy and hectic life in the afterlife became blurred and speckled like an old videotape. Sometimes the images appeared in such intermittent streaks that I couldn't piece them together into a complete story. Even my stay on the poor girl's salon was as vague as a dream. I never expected to see her again in this world, no matter how much I loved her. There is also no chance for me to meet someone who can communicate like that woman with telepathic abilities. My vision is getting worse and worse, it is directly proportional to the memory that is sunken and emotionless.

I have been wandering on this beach for how long I don't know? But I just found a clean paved gentle slope. Above are villas surrounded by wildflowers, and below are waves of the sea. The sky is full of stars tonight. The countless glitters attached to the giant dome form a mysterious and fanciful dimension. Instinctively I lay down on the asphalt, then rolled on the slope like a cobblestone. I heard the waves crashing, I felt the coolness under my body, I tasted both the salty taste of the sea breeze and the fragrant smell of rosemary. I found myself drifting through thoughts that had no beginning and no end, as if I were falling into a deep slumber.

In the last brief moment, I knew that I had returned to eternity.

I'm drifting deep into space.



The ghost. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



Lisa C. Taylor is the author of three poetry collections, most recently *Interrogation of Morning* (Arlen House/Syracuse University Press 2022). She also has two short story collections, *Impossibly Small Spaces* (2018), and *Growing a New Tail* (2015) and two poetry chapbooks. One of her short stories received the Hugo House New Fiction Award in 2015. Both her poetry and fiction have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best-of-the-Net. Lisa is the co-director of the Mesa Verde Writers Conference. She also teaches online for <https://writers.com/>.



Lisa C. Taylor

## MOURNING CLOAK

Kieran worked for fifteen minutes to free the mourning cloak butterfly stuck in the grill of his car but the right wing had a fatal tear. When he laid it down on the grass, it fluttered its good wing once or twice, then stilled. Vibrant blue dots around the edges, it looked like a piece of jewelry resting in a green velvet box. He slipped it in a padded envelope to bring home.

"Where were you?" Kieran paced the galley kitchen, brushing crumbs off the soapstone counter onto a linen napkin that he emptied into the wastebasket.

"I've got a suggestion. Don't ask. We're roommates, remember?"

Arden's short flowered skirt with leggings and red boots made her look about sixteen. Her hair was parted in five places with five different ponytails, each tied with a different colored ribbon. Once she wore blazers paired with slacks or a skirt, nylons and low heels. She would spread her work out on the kitchen table, budgets and graphs. Even her language sounded different then, splashed with words like maximize and deadline. He didn't understand it, just made coffee and provided dinner; a salad paired with some sort of protein, the only kind of meal she'd eat.

When she saw her father's picture in the New York Times last Tuesday with a headline about his pending release, everything changed. She brought home a copy, scribbled over his face with red and black sharpies before shredding it. The next day she quit her job.

"I'm going out." Arden grabbed her water bottle off the counter.

"Again?"

"My life, Kier."

Kieran sighed, ran his hand through his thinning hair.

She slammed the door hard enough to cause the doorbell to vibrate.

The gunshots seemed far away but it was hard to tell. Yesterday's headline said it wasn't safe to walk near Highline Street or Prospect, the site of a shooting last Saturday. The community center had a flyer for a class in target practice next to flyers for yoga and a 5K run to raise money for people with autism. Peaches ripened on the trees, and he made a blueberry pie that Arden wouldn't touch. Kieran watched a crow peck at crusts he put out on the wall. One crow had her beak lowered like a hunched-over nun he saw shuffling to the market last week, canvas bag clutched to her chest.

Arden used to do the weekly crossword puzzle, legs stretched out in front of her or bent in like a grasshopper. Sometimes Kieran would rub her head or they'd wander outside to look at the moon. Crescent moons were her favorite because she liked the idea that she could only see a fraction.

"Do you ever think about the parts we can't see?" she once asked. "When I see a bud and imagine purple ruffles, sometimes the flower turns out white."

She wasn't coming back, at least not in the same form. Kieran read his emails, sipped English tea. The gunshots had quieted, and now he heard the pelt of rain and the grind of traffic.

"Just because you found me doesn't mean you can keep me," Arden told him ten years ago. Kieran felt old; she could have been his daughter. Beauty can perch anywhere and when it does, it is hard to look away. She had nothing but a red backpack and seventeen dollars. He had a duplex and investments.

"I'm not going to sleep with you," she said, the first of many lies.

Kieran noticed a chip where she had slammed the door, the frame bruised.

Her father's plea deal meant he'd be out in April. New York wasn't far enough from Massachusetts to deter him.

"I can take care of myself," she had said but accepted housing and a university education.

Gunshots again, louder this time. The music seemed to mimic with amplified percussion. When sirens screeched, he was composing an elegy to the mourning cloak butterfly. *Mariposa*, he called it, his song in the key of D. Arden once loved to sing with him, her voice deep and raspy. He'd sip a brandy and she'd perch behind him while he made up chords and riffs on the piano. They spent hours like this.

Her father would stop at nothing. She gave up her career to become less visible, or so she thought. Kieran knew better. If anything, she looked more like the girl she had been when her father sold her to a fifty-year-old man who promised to make him rich.

"She's every man's dream," her father told the man. Her formative years were spent drugged and exploited. That was the part of the story she told.

"You can't fix me," Arden told Kieran when he found her propped up against a concrete wall in front of Benny's Bargains. "I'll always be dead inside."

Cycles of the moon and golden aspens in autumn helped. She'd never seen a mountain so he brought her to Colorado where the Rockies towered over everything. She learned to ski and wanted to go outside every night to see the explosion of stars across a dark western sky.



"I'm not going to sleep with you," she said.

"I don't expect it," he said, though he dreamt of it every night, her gold-rimmed irises, hair falling in loose curls around her face, the lobes of her naked ears.

She came back later than expected, ponytails matted and eyeliner smudged. Her left knuckle was red with a few spots of blood as if she had punched a wall. On her throat, the bloom of a new bruise.

"What happened?"

"Why are you here?" she said, pouring a glass of orange juice.

Kieran motioned to the couch. He had placed a bowl of nectarines on the coffee table, her favorite.

"Did you hear the gunshots?" she asked.

"Yes. They seemed close."

Arden laughed, gravelly like her singing voice. "You know they shoot pigeons and squirrels for sport."

Kieran felt the worm dangling in front of him.

"We don't have to do this," he said, in almost a whisper.

"You don't know anything."

Kieran's stomach roiled. "Arden."

"Not my name. I'm Neema and I'm moving out."

She walked to her room and closed the door. Nightfall obliterated light like an eclipse. Kieran flipped on a light and looked around; galley kitchen, living room with three padded chairs and a brown leather couch, television black as the windows. The framed picture of Arden jumping in the snow was next to the mourning cloak butterfly, now pinned under glass.



2010 - 2022



# Live encounters

POETRY & WRITING

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SEPTEMBER 2023

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