

2010 - 2023



Live encounters

POETRY & WRITING

FREE ONLINE MAGAZINE FROM VILLAGE EARTH
VOLUME TWO NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2023

A portrait of Mary O'Donnell, a woman with short, wavy, light-colored hair, smiling warmly at the camera. She is wearing a black short-sleeved top and large, circular wooden earrings. Her arms are crossed. The background is a soft-focus outdoor scene with green foliage and a hint of purple flowers in the lower right.

MARY O'DONNELL
Asylum



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Live Encounters is a not-for-profit free online magazine that was founded in 2009 in Bali, Indonesia. It showcases some of the best writing from around the world. Poets, writers, academics, civil & human/animal rights activists, academics, environmentalists, social workers, photographers and more have contributed their time and knowledge for the benefit of the readers of:

Live Encounters Magazine (2010), Live Encounters Poetry & Writing (2016), Live Encounters Young Poets & Writers (2019) and now, Live Encounters Books (August 2020).

We are appealing for donations to pay for the administrative and technical aspects of the publication. **Please help by donating any amount for this just cause as events are threatening the very future of Live Encounters.**

Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

Mark Ulyseas
Publisher/Editor

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Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



VOLUME TWO
NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2023

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Mary O'Donnell has published seventeen books including novels and short story collections since 1990. She was appointed Poet Laureate of Naas, Co Kildare, during 2022. Her eighth poetry collection is 'Massacre of the Birds' (Salmon). An essay, 'My Mother in Drumlin Country', was listed in Notable Essays and Literary Nonfiction of 2017 in *Best American Essays* (Mariner). A selection of both her translated poems, and of her short stories appeared in Brazilian Portuguese and Spanish in South America, in autumn 2023. People say she is a kick-ass creative writing teacher. She intends to write until the energy runs out, which it hasn't—so far. Member of Aosdána. <http://www.maryodonnell.com/>



MARY O'DONNELL ASYLUM

Each year in early autumn, some people begin to re-plan the future. The map of the self is laid out and scrutinised. In night schools, at universities and at the arts centres which speckle the country I live in like small creative pulses, courses begin to fill up, hope and determination sharpen, and change seems possible.

In autumn 1979, I too wanted change, to start again, to fight back against what I saw as a disaster. I was in a state of inner desperation, an open wound of indignation. I'd just failed a major exam and my days were filled with what I saw as looming disgrace and a botched career. Now, I had a life to restore. I would be a writer and take further the scribblings and poems I'd been preoccupied with since leaving school.

Yeats's poem 'Aedh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven' buoyed me along, capturing my sense of longing for the visionary. Cloths embroidered with 'golden and silver light', were ephemeral presences that accompanied me and in their way brought me to the Brazen Head pub in Dublin for my first ever writers' workshop.

Mary O'Donnell

We were a group of ten strangers, given a room of our own behind the bar. Every week, we spent a few hours reading our work aloud to one another. There were no photocopies. You just listened. Everybody was in agreement that everything read aloud was good, or quite good, or had *possibilities*. Afterwards, we'd push back our chairs in the lino-leumed, nicotine brown back room, and enter the bar for a drink. A fat brown dog slumbered on the cracked leather bench below the window, a few locals supped pints and smoked, and we writers chatted shyly. The place was warm and welcoming. I felt completely at home. Afterwards, I'd catch the late number 66 bus back home to Maynooth and as the bus charged through the wet darkness of Palmerstown, Lucan, Leixlip, I'd turn over what had happened and what I'd heard.

Looking back, everything seems sepia-tinged, even the quality of our discussions. There was no criticism so much as an unspoken gentlemen's and ladies' agreement that perhaps we weren't quite ready for robust frankness. Perhaps we wouldn't have known what to do with it had we received it, the tools of criticism being virtually unknown outside of school and university, where criticism and analysis only applied to 'real', but dead, mostly male writers.

I often think of that first workshop. How useless it was in addressing anything of practical use to me an apprentice writer, and yet how it mattered, and the hope that sprang from simply being allowed to read my work aloud to a gathering of benign, optimistic strangers. There were none of the savaging that later developed in certain notorious workshops I heard about, when frankness melted into insult and the occasional physical throttling of a mentor. In The Brazen Head, we found a sprinkling of courage that made some of us continue to write.

It's one of those anomalies that many who emerge from school and university versed in the textual analysis of Mahon, Boland, Rich, or Heaney, have little sense of how to lift the lid on their own creative well. Perhaps an instinct about the sacredness of the self is what prevents people criticising one another's work in a useful way, rather than cowardice.

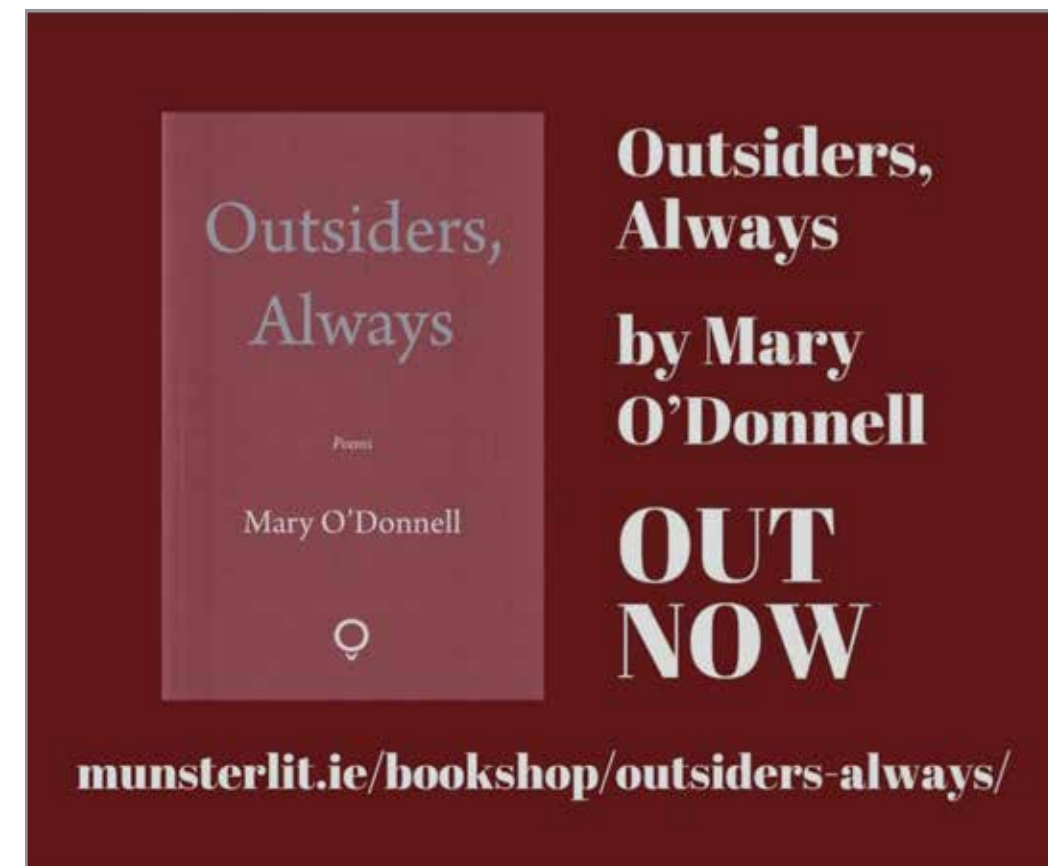
There's a recognition that within the deepest crevices of each personality, in a little repository of vision, lies material so invested with powerful emotion, and especially with memory, that we fear to tread on that ground especially when it belongs to another.

Workshops have evolved from soft and cushiony beginnings to a complex form which, thanks to the influence of the major US university writing courses, at the very least turns participants into better *readers*, both of their own work, and that of others. In Ireland, the apprentice writers of my generation benefited in told and untold ways from the presence of particular workshop facilitators, among them Eugene McCabe, John McGahern, and Eavan Boland. As an active writer-mentor myself, I believe in the world of unconscious flow that drives writers into groups where they can test their secret dreams, ideas, and thoughts.

Every autumn, and in the deepening time into winter, come new writers like ripening fruits after the season of ripening is over, seeking workshops. They come with a new openness that didn't exist when I was young. They are better versed in the language of criticism and more aware of the role of the visionary, and how to recognise the visionary within their ordinary, yet wonderfully, diverse, lives.

All the contributors to this wonderful on line journal are dedicated to the art and craft of poetry. They know what it is to rise day after day, in grey or sunny weather, to find something more than literal truth when they set down their words. Because their poetry isn't self-expression. It isn't therapeutic. It is an attempt that each of us makes to find transformation through our words and lines. We test the air but it's not the ordinary air of family meals at Christmas and Easter, nor is it the air in the local gym, or the little coffee group air where so much is discussed by so many—and forgotten about afterwards. As poets, we test the air of the world, taking its temperature, checking its pulse, often finding it sickeningly distressing despite our best efforts to be cheerful. We write, because we know there is nothing else we can do but bear witness to that world.

Occasionally, my mind revisits the balmy temperatures of that first, critically inept, workshop on those autumn evenings of 1979, when my life had disappointed me and when The Brazen Head offered solace and welcome. I'm thinking of what asylum means, wherever one lives or whatever the circumstances that create a need for asylum. For me on a simple level, I needed asylum and I found it in words. For others today, asylum comes when they arrive safely in a new country and are welcomed and made safe. I'm reminded of how wonderful a thing it is to land in a safe place, to find asylum, to have woven those blue and dim and dark cloths of Yeatsian vision, to have spread a few dreams one way or another, side by side with our fellow citizens, our 'new' Irish, many of whom are now my fellow poets.



Available at: <http://munsterlit.ie/>. Published by *Southword Editions*, a wing of the *Munster Literature Centre*. It is stocked by *Waterstones* in Cork and (soon) *Books Upstairs* in Dublin, among others.

Anne McDonald is a spoken word poet, creative writing teacher and festival curator. Her work is centered on the challenges we face in a society that is changing rapidly and how we respond or react to those changes. Through her writing she explores themes of parenthood, aging, death, loss, inclusion and response to the human condition. She was awarded The Irish Writers Residency in Cill Rialag, Kerry and The John Hewitt residency. She has had work published in *Women's News*, *Hot Press*, *Electric Acorn*, *Woman's Work Anthologies 1 & 2*, *The Blue Nib*, *The Strokestown Anthology*, *The Waxed Lemon*, *The Storms Inaugural Issue*, *Fragments Of Time*, *Blue Mondays' Anthology 2021*, *192 Magazine*, *Crow Name* and several issues of *Live Encounters Poetry & Writing*. Her work has also been featured on collaborations with musicians and animators and reviewed and broadcast on RTE Radio. Anne has an M.Phil in Creative Writing. Her first collection of poetry *Crow's Books* was published in 2020 and her second collection, *Clothespeg in my Pocket*, will be published in 2024.

These poems were written as part of a collection of response poems between Anne McDonald (Ireland) and Barbara Bald (New Hampshire) during covid and are part of the pamphlet "Conversationally Yours".



LETTERS BY THE GATE

If we had met one hundred years ago,
I would have waited for your letters by the gate,
Wondering if you had forgotten or if wind and sea
Had held your message up,
And ran to somewhere in the woods
Or in the loft to read your words by candlelight
To hear your life played out in ink on paper thick
With scents of another world.

I would have watched the baby starlings hatch
And rush to note the time and hour
To let you know, and I would have told
You of the little one that didn't live
And how it rotted in the nest and I was
Too afraid to lift it out in case the mother bird
Abandoned chicks to young to feed themselves.

I would have told you of the plough that trampled
Tadpoles I had watched for weeks, and how the
Meadow sweet blossomed by the ditched with the
Wild roses but I was sad because I hoped
The baby frogs would live.

I might have taken days to write a letter,
Counting up the special ways the world around
Me changed so I could pack it all
Into two thin pages. Waiting ages till I filled
It up enough to give you half my world,
As you would give me yours to see in my
Mind's eye. I might cry at loss of pets you
Loved with all your heart for sadness that
There was little I could do to make less sore.

continued overleaf...

Anne McDonald

LETTERS BY THE GATE

contd...

I would fold your letters neatly in a pile
And tie them with a ribbon to be read again
When nights are long and I would wonder
If the stars that I could see would be
The same as yours.

But now I fear that much of what we write
Is lost in cyber clouds if not made precious
By collating in a poem that we might read
Again and then again so I can see the deer and
Bears and plants you see, and you can see the
Fields of wheat and grey blue sky of water
Where I live.

We have both yet so much to give with words
And over time our worlds get closer
I can see your new pet grow into the house
You made a home for her, and mine becomes
A playful duchess, spreading love as if
She was always here.

I am grateful for this exchange
And hope these poems will always serve
to keep us near.

THREE THOUSAND MILES

You track wild animals in the snow.
I plant primroses in the sun.
I struggle with the weight of being a mother.
You struggle with the choice to remain childless.

You craft words with care and practice.
I throw words together on a page, and yet between us,
we dig an age of ancient wisdom from wells
hidden far below where bog lands or mountains
hold them safe.

You find the perfect shaft of sunlight.
I take the tail end of a rainbow.
Together we burrow with words and rhyme,
moving back and forth in time
between walls of water.
Crafting poems out of love, about love,
made with love to celebrate all there is to love
between two women of a certain age.

In this world of magic we sit separated
by three thousand miles of water,
reducing it to nothing.

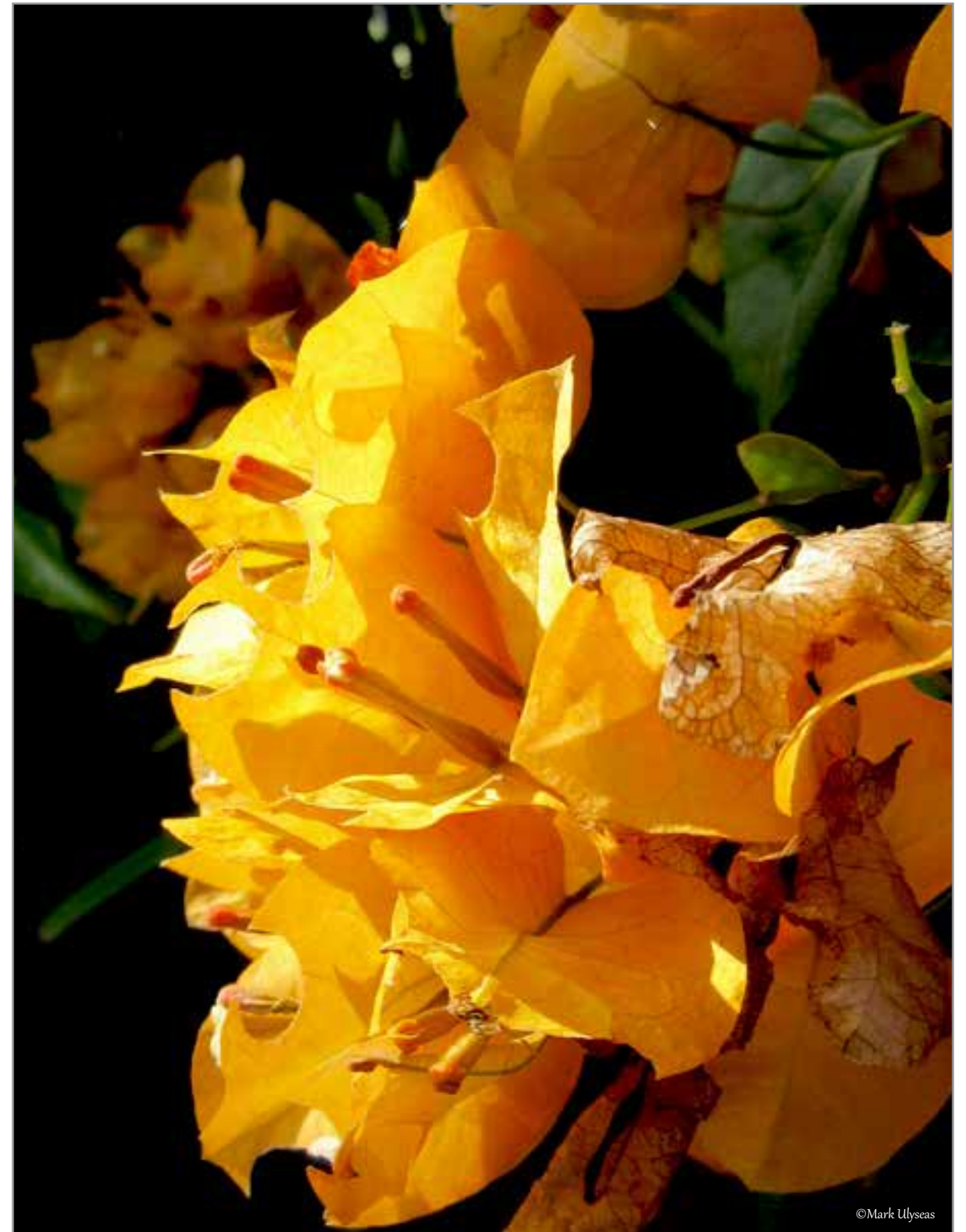
AFTERMATH

Today I opened my new front door of my mother's old house
to my sister, to my brother, to their husbands and wives,
and for once in our lives we could talk about
patio heaters and plants and fairy lights in a hawthorn hedge,
and what we could do with the patch of meadow
beginning to sprout with cowslips.

No need to say I am sorry, no need to say I was suffering.
I didn't need to hear anyone explaining why their hurting
split their tongues in two and who said what to who.
It's all gone now. The worry and the stress,
the complicated mess of families trying to negotiate,
the irreversible long drawn-out death of parents.

Today I opened the door of what will now be
the new family core and hoped that cake and coffee
and rhubarb tart and cream will go some way
to soothe away the never-ending, long bad dream
of twenty plus years of grieving, waiting, watching
parents slowly cease to be.
I have no fears of how
we will now be gentle with each other.

Leaving space to heal, space to rest
but being there if needed, which after all,
is what this messy, complicated, boisterous,
opinionated family
does best.



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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 read-ing and writing poetry with school-age children, adults. Her poems have been published in a variety of anthologies—most recently *Covid Spring II* 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*.

These poems were written as part of a collection of response poems between Anne McDonald (Ireland) and Barbara Bald (New Hampshire, USA) during Covid and are part of the pamphlet entitled "Conversationally Yours".

IF WE HAD MET 100 YEARS AGO

I would have written often, dipped my quill
into the blackness of not-knowing, Penned you a letter
that told about the tabby cat, who, like a mugger, stalks
cellar mice, then releases her live stash in the kitchen.

I would have measured the lilac bush, so you'd know
how much it had grown since you left, mentioned
how much I missed your Irish smile and crazy curls.

Candle dripping to hold in my sentiments, wax
scenting air like church votives, I would have pressed
my seal firmly to secure them for their long journey.

What then? Pony Express—mail pouch bouncing
to hoof beats on rutted trails? Not likely across oceans.
Passenger pigeon—my note dangling from its leg,
wings avoiding aberrant winds? Cargo ship—my letter
stashed in a musty hold, wooden trunks weighing it down.

Waiting, so many empty hours. Wondering how long
it would take for you to read my letter, giggle at cat antics,
smell the tea rose hidden between its folds?



Barbara Bald

WERE WE ALIVE A CENTURY LATER

a Trans-Atlantic Cable would have connected us sooner,
carried our words across the bottom of the sea.
Barnacles and starfish, perhaps, sensing our urgency.
Still, the waiting—for news, for heartbeats and chuckles.

Restricting us like handcuffs, Euros and dollars would have
limited talks to Christmas, Easter, birthdays. I'd have ached
to tell you about the new feline who rolls with paws in the air,
requesting belly rubs.

Quick, leave a picture in my mind of those green fields
where neighbors discard clippings that grow into potatoes
you'll harvest later. Tell of tadpoles often found in puddles.

ANOTHER 100 YEARS,
BOTH OF US STILL ALIVE—A STRETCH

Small phone in each of our hands, we chatter, ramble
on opposite shores. Only limits to our sharing now—
the responsibilities to which, like strings on a puppet,
we have tethered our lives.

Place your thumb on the screen till a red circle appears,
then take a snapshot of the starlings nesting under your eaves.
Pan widely to your crops of lettuce, peas and parsley.

Let me hear the distant crows that journey beside you
on your morning walk with the new pup. I'll help you hear
the two-twe-twe of the male cardinal calling at dusk.

WHAT NEXT? LET IMAGINATIONS SOAR

No waiting with 'mind-travel'. No limit to what's heard or seen.
Your words mine, mine yours? Why then might I still feel
my seal pressed into hot wax, smell its sizzle in cool air? Why then
might I still want to imagine you tearing open my long awaited letter?

VIRAL BLESSINGS

We met because of a coat, well actually
because of two coats—one in Ireland,
one in the United States.
Two coats in two poems shared digitally
in a pandemic where no one dared offer warmth.

One poem told of 5,000 sons and daughters
missing each year in a small country,
disappearances unexplained, their coats left
where fathers, lost in another way, might ask,
Whose Coat Is This?

The other told of the Navy coat of a young woman,
love letters lost in a war that threatened a marriage,
whispers of box cars, bodies and ovens hidden
in its sleeves. *The Witness* to ticker-tape parades
and hope tucked in its pockets.

A year later, four arms still embraced in a virtual hug,
you read about the same coat in your new collection.
I listen now with different ears.

WHAT'S LEFT UNDONE

I might have asked my mother why she loved dance,
how gold-lame high heels made her feet feel,
and why jazz seeped so easily into her heart.

Could have asked her to explain how it felt
to contort her once young body into an arch,
how dangling from a trapeze quickened the pulse.

I might have had her tell how the ocean's waves
spoke to her, what tones they used and why
she thought they called her name.

Could have asked her to show me how to knit
an afghan, how to entwine one delicate thread
around another without dropping a stitch.

Might have wondered aloud, as we sat together,
why sipping the first steaming spoonful
of her spaghetti sauce made her smile.

Brian Kirk is an award-winning poet, short story writer and novelist from Dublin. His first poetry collection *After The Fall* was published by Salmon Poetry in 2017. His poem "Birthday" won the Listowel Writers' Week Irish Poem of the Year at the Irish Book Awards 2018. His short fiction chapbook *It's Not Me, It's You* won the inaugural Southword Fiction Chapbook Competition and was published by Southword Editions at the Cork International Short Story Festival in September 2019. He is a recipient of Professional Development and Agility Awards from the Arts Council of Ireland. His novel *Riverrun* was chosen as a winner of the Irish Writers Centre Novel Fair 2022. His next poetry collection *Hare's Breath* is due from Salmon Poetry later in 2023. He has read and hosted events at literary festivals around the country including Dublin Book Festival, Listowel Writers' Week, Red Line Book Festival, Cork Short Story Festival, Belfast Book Festival and Bray Literary Festival. He is a member the Hibernian Writers' Group. <http://briankirkwriter.com/>



THE NEW CURIOSITY SHOP

For those of you who find it hard
to keep your eyes closed, we have masks
that block out light. For those who tire
from standing, we have canes that take
your weight (but where they take it
no one knows). For the hard of hearing
we offer earplugs which can simulate
the mumbled chant of monks or the buzzing
of your neighbour's strimmer on sunny
afternoons when you sit down to read.
For baldness we can recommend a hat,
for shyness, a shot of something stronger
in a dirty glass. For spots we stock all sorts
of creams – none of which help. For piles
we carry a range of rubber rings, for wind
we stock 'The Little Book of Calm'. For good
or ill, we endeavour to meet all your needs;
the ones you won't admit to most of all.
We offer whiskey for drowning sorrows,
shovels for burying the past, matches
to set fire to bridges you've just crossed,
traps that you can leave around the house,
rats that if released into your kitchen
can become a talking point at dinner parties
for years to come. We take no responsibility
for your feelings after purchase. Our terms
are clear. The price at time of order is the price.
For larger items delivery dates are flexible.
Check your goods upon arrival – return them
at your own expense. A damage report
should be submitted (including photographs).
Defective goods, returned, become
our property again.

Brian Kirk

SILENCE

First it was carrier pigeons.
I thought it was cute until
they shat all over my window sill.
Then it was smoke signals –
easier to ignore but insistent.
After a month the letters arrived;
I let them build up on the mat
until I couldn't open the front door.
Then it was emails and phone calls,
and when I didn't pick up, voicemails.
That was years ago. Now no one calls
or writes anymore. Still, I lie awake, listening,
straining to hear while the dark overflows,
dripping the silence of years.

HALF LIFE

laughing means nothing
until you cry
speaking means nothing
until you stop
sleeping means nothing
until you wake
eating means nothing
until you starve
drinking means nothing
until you thirst
working means nothing
until you rest
living means nothing
until you die

crying means nothing
unless you laugh
silence means nothing
unless you speak
waking means nothing
unless you sleep
hunger means nothing
unless you eat
thirst means nothing
unless you drink
resting means nothing
unless you work
dying means nothing
unless you live



Charlotte Innes is the author of a full-length book of poems, *Descanso Drive* (Kelsay Books, 2017) and three poetry chapbooks, most recently *Twenty Pandemics* (Kelsay Books, 2021). Her poems have appeared in many publications in the U.S. and the U.K. including *The High Window*, *Agenda* (online), *Antiphon*, *The Hudson Review*, *The Sewanee Review*, *Tampa Review*, *Rattle*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review* and *Pratik* (Nepal), as well as several anthologies, including *The Best American Spiritual Writing for 2006* (Houghton Mifflin, 2006) and *Wide Awake: Poets of Los Angeles and Beyond* (Beyond Baroque Books, 2015). She has been a featured poet on E-Verse Radio and for readings in the U.S. and the U.K., most recently in the New York-based Carmine Street Metrics poetry series and for a Kelsay Books reading in Warwick, England. She has also appeared in Rant & Rave, the live storytelling series produced by Rogue Machine Theatre in Los Angeles. A former newspaper reporter, freelance writer and teacher, she has written on books and the arts for many publications, including *The Nation* and the *Los Angeles Times*. Originally from England, Charlotte Innes now lives in Los Angeles.

YOUR BLUE SWEATER

—with a line from Rumi

Your blue sweater is bluer than the blue sky
over Sycamore Canyon where I look up
locked out by criss-crossed twigs of live oaks
and the hard buzz of words, go back
to that dark coffee shop the night you said

Green talks from the inside!

Everyone talks about greenery. What's true is
your blue sweater, bluer than the blue sky
over Sycamore Canyon where I look up
locked out by criss-crossed twigs of live oaks
and the hard buzz of words. I'll be quiet now.

Charlotte Innes

AS ROADS CONTINUE TO NARROW

Below my living room window (I don't know why)
there's a large asphalt space my artist neighbor
says might almost be an Italian plaza,

with a fountain, maybe. And so I begin
to imagine an Italian statue, spouting water,
smiling at tourists throwing in good-luck coins,

which would likely mean good luck for the homeless,
that guy rooting through garbage, laughing wildly
outside the rehabbed condos across the street.

Beneath the dirt that covers him head to toe,
there's a greenish sweater, once-cream pants, sandals
still intact and a youthful energy

that drugs or illness or both might soon destroy.
As I try to imagine what he was or could be,
he wanders off, red-faced, black hair disheveled,

beyond the median dividing the street
and the sign, ROAD NARROWS. Of course, all roads seem
to narrow, made tiny by the human eye

that wants to see it all, but this road, split,
is narrow. Curving round the hill
it seems to disappear like streets or alleys

meandering away from Italian plazas.

Roads of every kind are shrinking now
until a word or two ignites a flash
of desire or pain, tenderness or fury,
straight from the 80s or whatever decade.
And the ash-heap I think I am explodes
into a three-thousand-year-old sequoia
somehow surviving a blaze, which sends me back

to the imagined plaza, where I also imagine
a little bench and maybe a crepe-myrtle
for shade, or one of the old carob trees
that used to line my street until disease
got them. And then I imagine peace for all.

And then I imagine more and more and more.

THIS GENTLE SPIRIT

Thick as the low afternoon cloud
summering on Western ranges,
light as cold winter breath touching
your lips. Come spring, I'll be with you
in drifts of steam over meadows,

in a sweet-smelling curl of smoke
freed from damp wood on cold evenings.
When it snows, dig deep, you'll find me,
in the warmth between hand and glove,
beneath fleece jacket and wool hat.

Taste me in tears. In your cloudbursts
of laughter, hear me. When you think
I'm lost in shadows, dear, I'm not.
Even when you do not know it,
I am here, will be, when you're gone.



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

Eileen Casey is originally from County Offaly, now based in South Dublin. Poetry, prose and short fiction are published widely in anthologies by Dedalus, New Island, Arlen House, Correspondences, Future Perfect (Poetry Ireland), among others. Her work received awards and bursaries from South County Dublin, County Offaly Arts and The Arts Council, An Comhairle Ealaíonn. 'Bog Treasure' (Arlen House poetry, 2022) is her sixth collection, a collaboration with Canadian academic, visual artist and writer, Jeanne Cannizzo. 'River Songs' is upcoming, awarded by Creative Ireland. She is a Sunday Tribune/Hennessy winner (Emerging Fiction), together with a Katherine and Patrick Kavanagh Fellowship (Poetry).



PAPER

Bark. Stripped from tree, clear water
softened. Immersion. Impure flaws
removed, hibiscus weave, paste, fibre.
Pounded, kneaded, holds to nature's laws.
Placed on a board, drying 45 degree angle
then lifted from watery bed, facing south.
Stable sunshine, eloquent blend, no tangle,
light, eye, hand. Too much light, no doubt
too thin. Too little, thick. Measured matter.
No wonder oceans curl in churls of birds
lifting off from shoreline. Or river scatter
along the banks. Images rippled in reverse.
Behind a screen, woman's pearl silhouette
leaf and bone, thrush note, watermark mesh.

Eileen Casey

Finbar Lennon is a retired surgeon, accidental author and poet. He co-authored his late wife's memoir "The Heavens are all Blue" published by Hachette Ireland in 2020. He is the author of three collections of poetry, 'NOW', 'A Thimble on her Finger' and 'VOICES' (Lapwing Publications, Belfast, 2021/2022). His latest collection 'VOICES' was launched in the Irish Writers Centre(IWC) in Dublin in March 2023. He is a member of the Bealtaine Writers Group and has been a frequent contributor to 'Open Mic' events in the IWC in recent years. Some of his poems have been published online in Live Encounters. A number have also appeared online on the Planet Earth Poetry and Viewless Wings' websites and some in 'The Consultant', an Irish print journal.



SHOW TIME

So many shows on so many stations
 my own little world so small
 so infinitesimally small
 confined to base by status orange
 outside front – traffic in flight
 outside back – garden in glow
 opportunity knocks for more
 leave dreary front alone
 footsteps lead to magic show
 snapped in snow this morning
 half-bent weighed-down trees
 covered in tons of white fall
 sagging branches dripping slow
 icicles prying on my nose
 clumps of vanilla next to go
 then out of cue sky turns blue
 a sudden change in climate too
 sun at stroke revives the show
 trees shed their cloudy load
 slush and sleet swept down street
 my day out to capture and record
 no longer small, today stand tall.

Finbar Lennon

FRAGMENTS

'Stepping out loud' is a brand of shoe leather
shaped like foot to fit a shoe with steel soles
red globe that flashes twice every seven seconds
is on port side of liner waiting to leave dock
white lights in premium space visible from shore
noisy dancers boarded from sea with high fives
all snug in three adjacent cabins on top deck
captain knows numbers and how many foxtrot

no time for everything - smile from front seat
car passes author climbing hill where tree was felled
stump on high baring age, boughs on roadside wall
facing out while he kicks loose stones for company
on descent passes woman with loud voice and nose peg,
silent man waving arms, cracked windscreen with tale,
machine on manoeuvres trimming lawn of growth
driven by remote stick out of view – all too much for him

after turning corner 16 paces more to cemetery gate
entered at high end of day to greet return of butterflies.

NOT DEAD YET

The visible you, peeling laughter
signs of wear jostling for notice
face-time for size and shapes
not a sight for sore eyes
all the trouble brewing inside
silent to bearer of passport
no wish to open can for now
no questions for the listener
life in disguise a poorly refuge
shorter – the longer it lasts
erudite should know better
inner man forgiving for so long
until senses are disturbed
warning shots fired inside drum
listener still beside to help
to figure why it's not in bloom.

Fred Johnston was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in 1951. Working as a journalist for some years, he was a poetry reviewer with Books Ireland and The Irish Times, among other publications: he also reviewed for The Sunday Times and Poetry Ireland Review. His work, both prose and poetry, has appeared in The New Statesman, The Guardian, Stand, The Spectator, Iron, Orbis, The Irish Times, The London Magazine, The Dalhousie Review, The Sewanee Review, Southwards, The Moth, The Stinging Fly. Founder of CUIRT international literature festival (Galway,) his most recent poetry collection is 'Rogue States' (Salmon Poetry, 2019.) He is also a novelist and short story writer. He lives in Galway in the West of Ireland.



AMAZONIA

"I love to travel, but hate to arrive."
- Hernan Cortes

And so we left the ravelling music and the rest behind
Too many of us in a car dreaming of a scrapyard
Mountain dark took us whole, we were inclined
To sleep, a single headlight, gear-change muscle-hard
The grind of not engaging jiggling up through bone
A window wouldn't close, the radio a mess of static
A breath of tired metal, stale breath on an old 'phone
Came up through the floor with the burn of oil, a panic
To our throats when the black sudden drop
Of corkscrew road left-hooked us aware
We'd forgotten how high hours before we'd driven up
We stopped, got out, dumb as cattle, into bone-dry air
As if for the first time seeing the city lit up like a flare
Or by some Spielbergian magic there were primitive fires
Down in the drunk mind's Amazon, held on thin wires
Of sinew or human hair; we'd found it without a map
(Perhaps over the rear-view mirror swung a single star)
No peacock *caballero* ever stood here where
The living dark flies, its bright cluster-bombs unwrap-
Ping from the skin of a moonless night, this habitation, home
A place we'd just discovered, an illuminated catacomb
At least a mesh of gates, we'd been gone a dozen years -
And each fire rises on its line, shivers, steadies, disappears.

Fred Johnston

GRAVE RITUAL

It's good to visit a village cemetery
It is, after all, the future -

Something reassuring in the splash of bought flowers
The sad flag-wave of memorial cards and prayers

A sense of adventure –

For now you're a tourist here
Fixing on the grey windows

The headstones are, streaked black with old rain
Even as they flicker by your lack of interest like a train

Through a station where no one comes or goes

You hear the clack and rattle
Of a villageful of names, dates

As dumb to you as hieroglyphs, cuneiform or ogham
Yet you kneel to decipher what lives lie below them

A ritual of sorts, a backhand paying of respects.

DOG STAR

One New Year's Eve
We who are bachelors had nothing to do
The night was glary, starstruck and cold
And we drove hard into the frozen boglands
To buy *poitín* as a New Year's gift -

We had tea in a house
Where the doors were never locked and outside
It was easier to travel by row-boat than car
Without knowing it we were on islands
And someone sang an old song

The road back was black
And the bog and hills black-on-black
Painted by a blind painter in a dark room
Up on a hill a sharp prick of light
Like a pinhole through the canvass

A house of ingenious smallness
Stone to the roof, corrugated sheets up there
And a single candle lit on a poor table
A man in his suit in his whole length
On the neat bed, another man watching

From out of a thick stillness
Not lonely but bone-strong in a night watch
Cut from the dark beyond candlereach
Under the monstrous constellations
The howl of the Dog Star.

Fred Everett Maus is a musician, writer, and teacher. They teach music classes on a range of topics, for example a recent course on “Music in Relation to Sexuality and Disability” and a recurring contemplative course “Deep Listening.” They are a trained teacher of mindfulness meditation and Deep Listening, and a student of music therapy and object relations psychoanalysis. They have published prose memoir, poetry, and fiction, for instance in *Citron Review*, *Palette Poetry*, *Roanoke Review*, *Vox Populi*, and *Live Encounters*. They live in a house in the woods north of Charlottesville, Virginia, and in Roma Norte, Mexico City. *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness*, which they co-edited with the late Sheila Whiteley, was published in 2022.

CHANGE

The air, discreet as apricots,
pitted with tipping-points—
my skin waits, breathless,
watching the sky furl.

I can name my feelings.
My phone number when I was a child,
my mother’s aluminum pots,
the crinkle of my bare feet.

“I knew it!” people will say, lying.
Weeds glaze the flagstone.
Cold hungers pushed me. Now,
mud-red clouds press toward me.

I would pay you.
I have never felt so alone.



Fred Everett Maus

WILD HOLLY

Your sounds fell into dry corners.
Then you could never surrender them.

But what if the past was a dog that you kept
stepping on? Perhaps it was
a clenched yellow scroll, fitful,

a gift that you never admitted that you
mislaid. Solemn bookshelves shadowed
your forehead, your words.

At another time, or so you
believed, a pale, sticky vibration tuned
the air. You could swallow it,
spinning softly, breathing, your eyes supple.

Dark holly grew wild there.
You are missing now. You
were behind the vines, waiting,
with the rabbits, with the

uncertain ideas that dawdled like falling odors.
You were fretful. What if the past
was something knotted, a snapdragon, an egg?
What if the distance kept turning aside?

MEDIATION

When I'm quiet—sitting, reading, writing—
my dog is quiet too, the two of us
alone at home, the dog close,
peaceful, trusting. That is how I want
to live with you.

So many times we speak
by phone, our homes far from each other,
the frayed sound, voices confused
as we both speak at once, then both fall silent.
Once, long past midnight, you fell asleep,
still holding your phone. I listened to your
breath, as though your cherished body were near.

Hedy Habra is a poet, artist, and essayist. She has authored four poetry collections, most recently, *Or Did You Ever See The Other Side?* (Press 53 2023). *The Taste of the Earth*, winner of the Silver Nautilus Book Award and Honorable Mention for the Eric Hoffer Book Award. *Tea in Heliopolis* won the Best Book Award and *Under Brushstrokes* was a finalist for the International Book Award. Her story collection, *Flying Carpets*, won the Arab American Book Award's Honorable Mention and was a finalist for the Eric Hoffer Award. Her book of criticism is *Mundos alternos y artísticos en Vargas Llosa*. A twenty one-time-nominee for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net, and recipient of the Nazim Hikmet Award, her multilingual work appears in numerous journals and anthologies.
<https://www.hedyhabra.com/>



EARLY AUTUMN

After a heavy rain, I drink amber from drooping leaves
heavy with dew, ambrosia from a gold-capped maple leaf
curled into a precious artifact whispering ancient stories
from each delineated vein arising from curved midribs.

I step over fallen petals, sepals still hanging on their stems.
A variegated palette covers the gravel path. Amid pallid
shades, burgundy reminds me of my favorite Rioja newly
opened bottle left breathing on the kitchen counter.

My tastebuds guide me inside to fill my glass with the wine's
thick robe while meat pies exhale an enticing pomegranate
flavor asking to be released from the oven. I set the table
and scatter my harvest of colors around the placemats.

Hedy Habra

I CAN STILL SEE THAT RESTLESS GIRL ON A JANUARY AFTERNOON

When my mother agreed to celebrate
my eleventh birthday, I invited
my classmates right away
in fear she'd change her mind.

She was never keen on parties,
and my dad had died
a couple of years earlier
around that same time.

I ran to the Arcades to buy mini brioche
buns and fluffy anis seed cookies
from Kharinos,
our favorite Greek bakery.

I can still see myself filling
buttered slits with slices of ham and cheese.

Mom made her signature chocolate
ice cream, so creamy
and dense it could be
cut with a knife.

She set a strawberry salad
as a centerpiece, an apricot
Pasta Frolla lattice pie
and a chocolate walnut cake.

I remember circling and circling
around the display.

Only my friend Laila showed up
that afternoon.



©Mark Ulyseas

Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

Jean O'Brien is an award winning poet with six collections to her name, her latest being *Stars Burn Regardless*, published in 2022 by Salmon Publishing. She was poet in residence in the Centre Culturel Irlandais in Paris for October/November 2021. She has won, been places and highly commended in many competitions, coming first in the Arvon International UK and the Fish International and amongst others has been Highly commended in the Forward Single poem prize (UK) and was awarded a Catherine & Patrick Kavanagh fellowship and various Arts Council awards including a travel and training grant. Her work has been broadcast and has appeared in many anthologies and in Poems on the Dart (Ireland's Rapid Rail System). Earlier this year her celebrated poem *Skinny Dipping* was set to music and voice by composer Elaine Agnew and sung by New Dublin Voices at the inaugural launch in Trinity College, Dublin. She has collaborated with the artists Dixie Friend Gay (USA) and With Ray Murphy (Irl). She holds an M. Phil in cw/poetry from Trinity College, Dublin and tutors in same in places as diverse as Prisons, Community Centre, Schools, Travellers Centres, the Irish Writers Centre and at post graduate level.



ONLINE, OFFLINE

First push the yellow button, then the green,
type in some text, wait for the results.
We are dumb struck, our tongues buckle,
welded, cut, sutured, stitched.

Even as we do daylight seeps into twilight,
the blood moon rises. Time seems fluid,
unstable, volatile, faltering.
The screen blinks with blue light.

The glare of brightly coloured pixels
fool our brains into thinking it is daylight,
we are splitting, ravelling, weaving.
We are disturbed by this;

just as we are disturbed by a field of sunflowers
rioting, the swell of green sea washing over us.
The sight of the marvellous Blue Footed Booby
fires synapsis, connects us.

We are all traced, tracked, moored
by machines, that help and hinder us.
The heart's tenacity, sometimes fragmented and off beat
returns like the sanctuary of an incoming tide.

Jean O'Brien

ALL WORLDS GREAT AND SMALL

I follow the yellowing laurel leaves
strewn breadcrumb along the path,
I keep the lake on my right side,
glimpsing grey water Kaleidoscoped
between the trunks of trees
and an eye on my left side for
a chance movement of shy deer,
their thin stick legs rising from
the forest floor, their velvet muzzles
quivering in early summer air.
Their every sense alert, trumpet ears
oscillating to catch a miniscule change
of vibrations in the atmosphere.

This is all mere imagination — nothing
is on the path that stretches in front of me.
But how can I say nothing when every step
on the silt and gravel and stones and tiny
brooks are semaphoring life from all angles?
Pause to really see the tight furled
green fronds of fern little landlocked
seahorses tethered to a miniature tree.
A large moss covered rock, when closely
looked at shows a bonsai world of seeds,
and sapling and beetles traversing its
mountainous terrain with the same survival
imperatives we all share in this tumult.
I need to look again at the bigger picture.

MID WINTER

We have no open fire anymore,
the builders boxed it in, sometimes I listen
to the wind souging and think in spring I hear
baby birds sing before they fledge. We warm
ourselves in front of the television,
watching flickering images where once
we gazed mesmerised by the dance and flare
of orange flames, relaying some old plot.
Nowadays we rely on candles for
that ancient gleam and glimmer.

Hung on our cave wall is Art, behind glass
professionally framed, no more hand prints
in ocre smeared in dust or images
of animals marked out with charcoal sticks.
We turn the taps on without thought, no one
now in the West hauls water from the spring
or river. Outside in the sky, dimmed
somewhat by the glare of sodium,
still sit the stars, the clouds, the moon
and no doubt will do, until one day they don't.

John Robert Grogan (aka: JR) is an Irish-Australian poet based in Sydney, Australia. Life in country Ireland and his global wanderings have cultivated a curiosity and love for the natural world, including the connectivity of all things. Find on Instagram: @jr_grogan



THE BUSH ORCHID

From Yeo street,
in the back seat
of the car, whispered
all delicate and mousy,
in my ear. It knew
that it was moving on
to other places.
*Take care of me, it said,
like you know how.*

And so, I drove home,
like I had a newborn
strapped in
for their maiden voyage.
That orchid
has stories to tell,
but it'll keep them to itself.
Now, is not the time
for sowing seeds.

John Robert Grogan

ALMOST ALWAYS BLUE

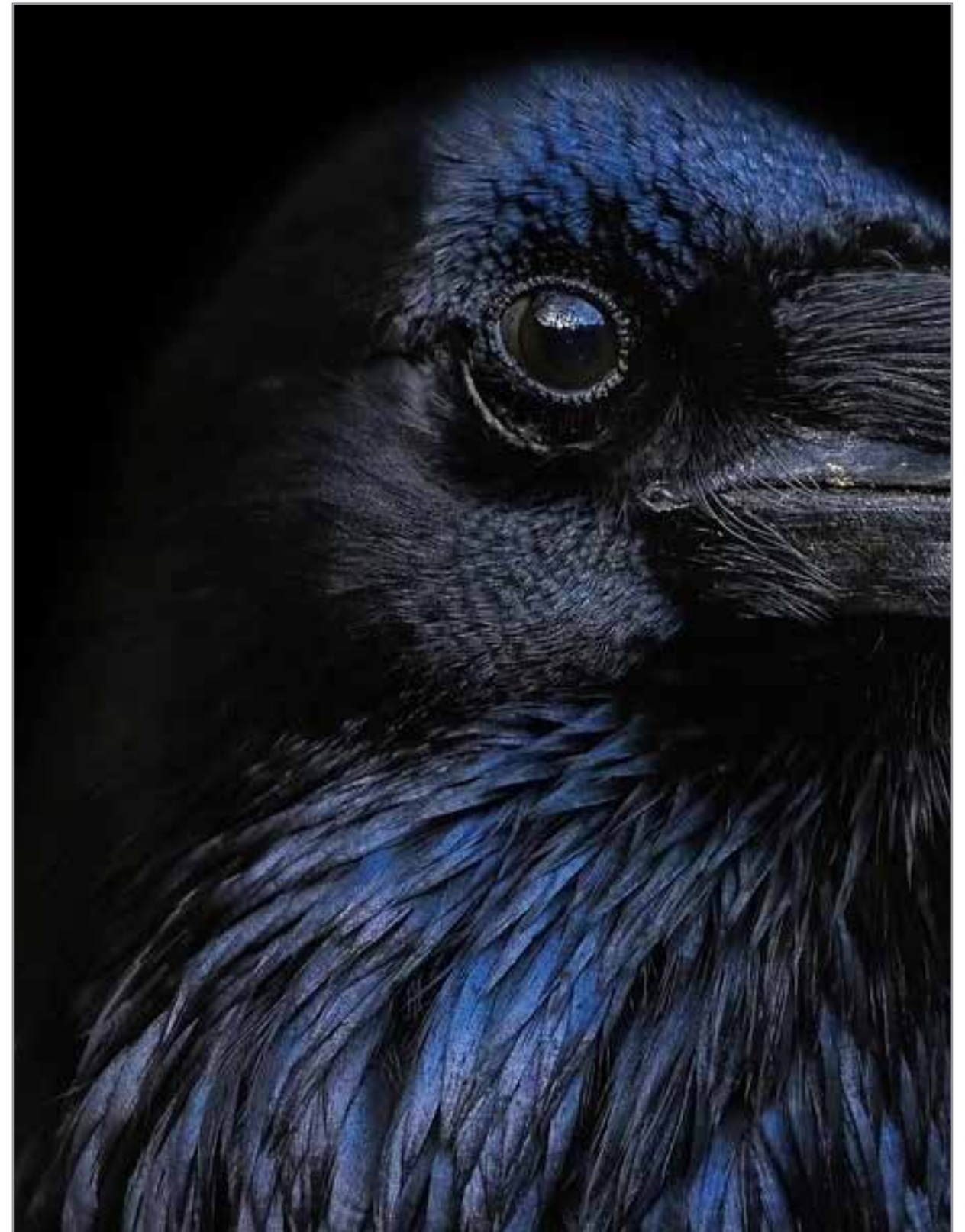
So many have left
and have lost their homes.
We think, it is the beginning
of the end.
The rain will continue,
the world feels so undone.

Why can't you send
a raven north and tell me
that you love me,
one more time,
in case it's the end
of what we've known?

The lump in my throat
that came when I spoke of us
has gone, and what is left
exhausts me. I finally let go
of the shoes I bought,
before the day we met.

Now, months later,
in the cafe window,
I am all lavender blue
and the day outside
is too bright for a winter's
day, and in a way

spring bites the heels
in the conversations of many,
but the pen is not ready for the
sunshine, and perhaps I fight
being blue, all too often.



Photograph credit: <https://pixabay.com/photos/raven-crow-black-bird-bird-avian-7612415/>

Julian Matthews is a mixed-race poet from Malaysia. He was nominated for the Pushcart Prize by Dream Catcher magazine/Stairwell Books, UK, in 2022. He is published in The American Journal of Poetry, Beltway Poetry Quarterly, Lothlorien Poetry Journal, Live Encounters and New Verse News, among other journals and anthologies. Julian is a former journalist for The Star (Malaysia), and correspondent for Nikkei Business Publications, CNET, ZDNet and Newsbytes (Washington Post-Newsweek, USA). He is also a media trainer for C-suite executives. Julian stumbled onto poetry by accident in 2017 at a creative writing workshop. That happy accident has turned into a rabid compulsion. He is still extricating himself from the crash. If you wish to support his recovery, Paypal him at trinetizen@gmail.com or send him Wordle answers via <https://linktr.ee/julianmatthews>



Julian Matthews

THE PITTER PATTER

You ask why I write so many “I am sad” poems
And I say my words are earthworms after rainfall
They breathe easier on the surface,
or else they’ll drown with me underground
Some are easy pickings for birds, hungry to serve
Some are in search of deeper graves

I am wary of smiley-happy people
Those who claim to have it all together
The cheerleaders who are only there for the game
But vanish when there’s no applause to be gained
Too chill to understand, too cheerless
to step into their own misery
I rather be real than play pretend
This is the mound I die on

It’s a morbid calling, I know
a failing grail quest, a never-ending path of broken trails
My wallowing is a fall off the wonderwall
Every night I creep down a crypt of deathly hallows
Depression doesn’t take a day off
You can’t catch a break from loneliness
You can’t take sick leave for being just sad
Some days are bad days just because

I no longer want this dread inside me
I put it out there as a salve, a reprieve, a relief
It’s the long goodbye for this unburied pain
My poems are earthworms sensing the storm above
They hear the pitter patter of rain
Then arise to meet their maker
Depression is the dirt they crawl out of
Grief is a shallow grave
and I am its slave

FRAGMENT

I wish had a fragment of Gaiman's imagination
An elfin smidgen of Tolkien's
A mystery crumb of Christie's
A scary bit of Stephen King's
A sake shot of Murakami's
A lyrical wee sip of Atwood's
A swig of surrealism of Marquez's
A tiny grain of truth of Orwell's
A miniscule lick, spittle and sliver of Thomas Harris'
The littlest chocolate chip of Roald Dahl's
The smallest particle of every novelist I've ever loved
To re-constitute and take hold of my addled brain
And flow through my fingers onto this screen
Give me a writing superpower never seen

But then again, that would be obscene
I need to be as original as can be, you see
Picasso, if he said it at all, was only joking:
"Good artists copy, great artists steal"
No A.I. genie around to grant you that deal
Head down, chop wood, fetch water
There are no shortcuts, keep writing still,
it's the only thing, in the end,
that truly matters



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

Laura Johanna Braverman is a writer and artist. She is the author of *Salt Water* (Cosmographia Books, 2019). Her poems have appeared in *Reliquiae*, *Plume*, *Levure Litteraire*, *Rusted Radishes*, *New Plains Review*, and *California Quarterly*, among other journals, and in the anthology *Awake in the World, vol. II*. She is currently a doctoral candidate in poetry at Lancaster University. Austro-American by birth and upbringing, she lives in Lebanon with her family



HOOR OF THE WOLF

Walking in the time of COVID-19

1

Children play in the modest concrete plaza
of St. Georges church, ask me in Arabic if the dog
bites – smitten by her white fur, it seems. Two
women, arm in arm, walk back and forth across
the lot without masks; the air feels cloying
under mine. Police tell me the sea walk is now
off-limits (people have been gathering). I resolve
to explore the village, should know this new place
like my old sidewalks – the bric-a-brac dealers
who left food for cats, the music shop, back alley
shortcuts – don't want to be just a house on a hill,
apart. Not quite here, no longer there. But, still –
I'm tethered to my guide. Her wolfish ancestors
understood: intervals have their strange rewards.

continued overleaf...

Laura Johanna Braverman

HOOR OF THE WOLF *contd...*

2

The dog stops, intrigued by a young man
as he fills a car trunk with grocery bags

from a market at the corner of Rue 62 –
we turn onto the one-car wide street, and

pass by an ochre stone house with dark
wood shutters. Behind one open window,

a woman sits: white streaked hair pulled
back in a red band, she lifts a cigarette

to her lips. Further down the road, children
play between parked cars, shout '*Kalb -!*'

as we walk by, and a group enjoys gurgling
water pipes round garden tables (so much

for social distancing). We climb the hill
then, back to the house where my husband

sequesters in a closed room, quarantined –
and on a low roof, I see a woman hanging

laundry over wires, her children's feet splash
in soapy puddles – while below, in the bay

evening sunlight spills pockets of honey on
the sea; the day falls towards the in-between.

3

The road smells of garbage, the sour-sweet ferment of bags piling up –

(What now? Is not a good question to ask: pandemic, economic collapse)

Midway down, after the gated El Khoury property with its cyclamen patches,
trimmed Tuscan cypress and orange trees, with its brass plaque dated 1963 –

I see two figures disappear behind a green wire fence –

Curious, we wait, dog and I, until after they have gone and find a hidden
chapel grotto hung with faded images of Mary and Mar Charbel –

Statuettes too of different sizes and dust-encrusted fabric flowers –

My companion sniffs the stunted candles and a metal coin box with a lock –

There's much to ask the saints for – today I have nothing in return –

continued overleaf..

HOOR OF THE WOLF *contd...*

4

The lady in the window faces out today, holds a white phone receiver to her ear, deep half-moon shadows under her eyes – a clipped garden rose hangs from my hand. When we reach the chapel grotto, I place it at the feet of one sky-robed Mary, then decide to enter the vacant lot by the sea-facing road.

Gravel and concrete patches mix with weeds and clumps of gold aster, a poppy here and there, pale violet scrubs and foxtails, lantana blooms; the sunbaked herby scent reminds me of home-state canyon walks – I try to find the source while the dog sniffs too, for other things I assume before a man comes walking in with a little girl – six or so. They like the sweet white puff that is the dog, and though with the virus I’ve avoided any kind of contact, it seems unfair in this moment to deny an introduction –

The man pats her head and I learn the girl’s name is Maria. As we move along, the man starts sideways Jumping Jacks across the lot, dog whines and jumps to see a lizard scuttle up a scarp. Maria scoops rocks into a red plastic pail and near a scrawny oleander bush, I see a dead mouse – supine, limbs sprawled out –

5

I leave a pebble as an offering today –
place it at the same feet where my rose is now
a wilted fuchsia puddle. On the chapel altar, two white wax lumps
with drowned wicks struggle to burn.

In the alley flowering with jasmine
bushes, a woman wearing pink pajamas circles
a gated concrete yard, while a Chihuahua yaps from a stained roof
two floors up –

a Mexican dog in the Levant. Mine
is Siberian I answer the driver in the roundabout
who asks if she is a Berger Suisse. My wolfish totem? I’ve read of
canine soul-guides,

steering us beyond the known –
finding the lost in the glow between dark and light.
In this wilderness of severance, I hold to her. We are way-finders
of the unmapped.

continued overleaf...

NOT YET A MEMORIAL

What are we at the edges – the almost –
in the humid shadowland beyond
each garden lamp?

Each softly hums,
throws out a ray of cold blue light –
on a crook of eucalyptus branch, and there

a patch of paving stones. Sprigs of papery
bougainvillea flame electric fuchsia.
The dog's pelt

flashes pearl.
She hunts for things beyond the glow
while crickets sound their rhythmic chirring.

We pass the statue of the patriarch and stop –
the bronze echo of my in-law flares
where lamplight

liberates it from
the dark: metal wrinkle, deep-set eye,
jaw skin slack. Here, there is no hiding place.

THE ART OF LEAVING

I mail myself electronic letters of how it feels
to quit this place

phone photos, too – the unburdened shelves,
unburdened rooms –

the details of fifteen years disappear: the days
of waking up,

and going down – of making this once strange
country home –

a box holds receipts from five years ago: trips,
medical bills,

a preschool evaluation of one son, sheaves
of scribbles

and swirls that will never see a garbage can –
the place

that saw two children born and grow, and gave
my healing

shelter, empties and turns ever more silent –
expanding

it seems, in its unburdening – windows widen,
light surges in

on concrete, wood, quiet walls, as the years
withdraw –

Lorraine Gibson is a Scottish Australian poet and writer living in regional Australia. In 2023 she was shortlisted for the Calanthe Press Poetry Prize. Since retiring from her work as a Cultural Anthropologist she has been drawn to writing poetry. Her poetry appears or is upcoming in: *Meniscus*, *The Galway Review*, *Hecate*, *Eureka St*, *Prole*, *Live Encounters*, *Backstory*, *Brushstrokes III*, *Poetry for The Planet*, *Booranga FourW*, *Book of Matches*, *Tarot*, *Last Stanza*, and others. Lorraine has a PhD. in Anthropology from Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. Her book, 'We Don't Do Dots: Aboriginal Art and Culture in Wilcannia, New South Wales' is published in the UK by Sean Kingston Press.



IN TIMES OF CANCELLATION

The season of constant aggression
explodes its accusations in knee-jerk bursts.
Culpability prowls along fair-game streets
scattering narcissist confetti
searching for slights.
Is it best to resist entering
debate, or indeed offering
opinion of any kind?
Or, shall we risk supping
cold-water porridge from
fathomless vats of offence?

Lorraine Gibson

ANNIE'S MASS

The bark of winter's shedding-birch peels in silver-curls.
Matriarchs huddle on the chapel's chilly flagstones,
the fur of their old coats ragged as elderly cats.
Suits and woollens hastily unpacked from storage
give-off small puffs of naphthalene as folk
settle and shuffle along the narrow pews.
Frenetic dust-motes rise and dance in the silence.
So many friends, so many differing spiritual persuasions
pressing creaking knees onto hassocks— these small
tapestry confidants worn shiny from so many
Thanks be to God and *God help* me petitions.
I am blinking back tears for you, and for me:
a silent morse code known to those of us
moving to the tip of life's triangle.
A slideshow clicks through the years: snippets
of your life Zooming over oceans to Ireland,
to kin in Cavan. You are larger than life
sipping tea from your favourite cup:
lime-green ribbons twist through violets and bluebells,
your gaze steady over the cup rim, the future not in sight.
The tenor of the day appears to rely on faith.
Some seem comforted by certitude.
I am tormented by questions, wintery with doubt,
sitting and kneeling in unfamiliar rituals,
mouthing the platitudes of centuries.
I don't want you to be in that silent wooden box,
within touching distance, holding
your amber rosary—each well-thumbed bead
—a silent store-house of a life lived kindly.

I want to be back in the cosy fug of your tiny bookshop
warming the enamel tea-pot, clattering
the op-shop cups and saucers.
I want the scones and jam; the laughter;
the talk of lovers we'd savoured and left
when we were light limbed and ripe as luscious peaches.
I need our mornings with Heaney and Larkin
when we spoke of lives that offered much—yet often wanted more.
The sun seems immune to grief. It's throwing bright javelins of light.
The image of your Jesus is glowing through stained-glass.
Crimson and cobalt pour through him. His golden palms,
his arms, beseeching, reaching down to those who need
his comfort, those who need his promised peaceful waters.
My Dear Annie, it is more of you that I am needing now.

Margaret Kiernan writes poetry and short stories. She has been nominated twice for The Best of The Net Award. She was the Runner-up in The Hannah Greely International Competition. Widely published in Literary Journals and Magazines, inc. the following sample, The Blue Nib, The Ekphrastic Review, The Galway Review. Cheavers and Masticatories. Poet Head.org. The Scarlet Dragonfly. Live Encounters Poetry & Writing, Catchwater Magazine. Red Fern Review. A New Ulster. Wildfire Words, etc. She is listed in The Index of Contemporary Women Poets in Ireland, 2020. Margaret has a background in professional advocacy. She lives with her dog, Molly. She paints landscapes and still-life.



THE MILL BALLAST

The mill stands proud in mottled shades of leaky grey,
the wheel is still.
No sign of carts or corn bags,
no shout outs to the ballast men.

Rooks fly in, rush back out,
fragranced by oat sediment.

Graffiti messages on timber beams,
like postcards from lost lovers,
there are moody spiders full of spin.
Bunched broken twigs and the birds' empty eggshells.

The only music comes from the wind
as the unharnessed water spills
over rocks.

Margaret Kiernan

THE RIVER ECHOES

Fanta in a bottle, sweaty summer grit
Spun-out throat quench
That speckled eye
From sun drench
Last drop drunk dry.

We play
Scuff leather
Beat down on dry ground
Smell rising petrichor
Punctured rubber wheel- tube
Dunked and search for air bubbles
Beneath our nose

Glass bottle refund shared in love-heart sweets
Or candy cigarettes held aloft.
Pink polka dot smock worn draped
Over scorched skin
Burnished hair casual
swinging loose.

The river echoes our play.

THE MILL

Behind the village, above the mill pond
In briars and honeysuckled ropes of vine
Lie space-age cars from Hollywood
Tarnished gadgets, silver loudhailers,
hand-built motor bikes, movie poster signs.

The owner, now long gone, made home movies
within the mill. A private cinema booth for one
of un-licensed flicks.
Shadows flout over sodden ground
Floors have sagged since the age of milling grain.

Only bags of tat spill along the floor
where drifters have called to mooch out a space
among aluminium tins of spooled film reels.
Moth-eaten book spines hang onto a shelf
with the titles Ulysses and Lord Haw-Haw.

Nearby the lime-kiln house is home to badgers.
Hares and rabbits' flit and play among wildflowers
While mallard ducks and swans glide about the pond.
Pigeons wait in the wood,
fly for home nearer dark.

Paris Rosemont is an Asian-Australian poet whose poetry finds eclectic homes, from literary journals through to kooky underground zines! Some of the publications Paris's poetry features in include: *Verge Literary Journal*, *FemAsia Magazine*, and Red Room Poetry's 'Admissions' Winner: *New England Thunderbolt Poetry Prize 2022*; Shortlisted: *Born Writers Award 2023* and *Hammond House Publishing International Literary Prize 2022*; Longlisted: *Liquid Amber Poetry Prize 2023*, *New Writers Poetry Competition 2023 (UK)* and *Joyce Parkes Award 2022*. Awarded: *Atelier Artist-in-Residence Ireland 2024*, *Kathmandu International Artist in Residence 2024*, *Varuna Shanghai Lamplight Residency 2023* and *WestWords/Copyright Agency Fellowship 2023*. Paris's niche is performance poetry. She has performed at events including the *Sydney Fringe Festival*, world premiere of *Slam Messiah 2022*, *Ubud Writers & Readers Festival 2023* and *Short+Sweet Festival Illawarra 2023*, where she was awarded Best Script, Best Actor (runner up) and Best Overall Production (runner up). Paris's debut poetry collection, *Banana Girl*, is due for release late 2023.

CRY OF A WOUNDED GAZELLE

Oh, hell! I thought my life was going to end today.
My son—how did you so wildly descend today?

You frighten me – your eyes ablaze with ill-intent;
where have you gone? I feel like I'm condemned today.

Your grandpa is in hospital through what you've done;
his shattered bones no surgery will mend today.

I'm sorry baby, but I have to turn you in –
before you do more damage you'll regret today.

Police arrive with cuffs and tranquilisers drawn;
they're here to put an end to this mayhem today.

Incensed, you hunt me down on your unhinged rampage.
And I—your mother—cry a requiem today.



Paris Rosemont

FISHING

For Oliver

'The sea birds always know,' my son says.
'See the cormorants out on the rock?'

Through the glare of the late afternoon sun
I make out tuxedoed silhouettes on a shelf

of black that juts into the soft rippling sea.
The birds stand still, feigning nonchalance,

but I imagine their amygdalas acutely aware,
their black eyes shrewd marbles alert

to movement under the warped surface.
'It's all about the timing,' he says. And in

a series of deft movements, six birds
have broken the surface; synchronised

divers, they disappear as one, and surface
as many and fly low straight lines back

to their promontory, small silver torpedos
in their beaks. A tilt of their long S-bend

necks, and their prey slip smoothly, it seems,
down their gullets—like riders down

waterpark slides.

Closer in, I hear a splosh
and fix my gaze on the fluorescent float

my son has cast out with his line. The birds
regard him calmly, curious to see how he fares

in their domain. He lacks their grace
and efficiency, but it's not long till my son

reels in our dinner. We watch the sun dip golden
into the water and the cormorants scatter

to where they roost amid the glitter of dusk.

Patricia Sykes is a poet and librettist. Her poems and collections have received various awards, including the Newcastle Poetry Prize, John Shaw Neilson award and the Tom Howard Poetry Prize. She has read her work widely and it has featured on ABC radio programs Poetica and The Spirit of Things. Her collaborations with composer Liza Lim have been performed in Brisbane, Melbourne, Sydney, Paris, Germany, Russia, New York and the UK. She was Asialink Writer in Residence, Malaysia, 2006. A selection of her poems was published in an English/Chinese edition by Flying Island Books in 2017. A song cycle composed by Andrew Aronowicz, based on her collection *The Abbotsford Mysteries*, premiered at The Abbotsford Convent Melbourne — now an arts precinct — in 2019. A podcast of this work is available on various platforms.



HUNGRY GHOST FESTIVAL

I mull the pros and cons
of Phor Thor as jet-roar
thrusts me through clouds
on the sky road to Penang.
To face Hell, raise Death,
appease grief, avoid revenge,
and apologise for neglect,
each of these a new breath,
an old ghost, and though
none of mine are buried here
I light joss sticks
watch puppet shows
make gifts of food
and Hell Money

but the hiss of oracle
is missing.
In the Temple
of the Azure Cloud
a stupor of vipers
their toxins sedated
by incense writhing
among them, or is
their somnolence
a defence against
straggle queues
of wonderment?

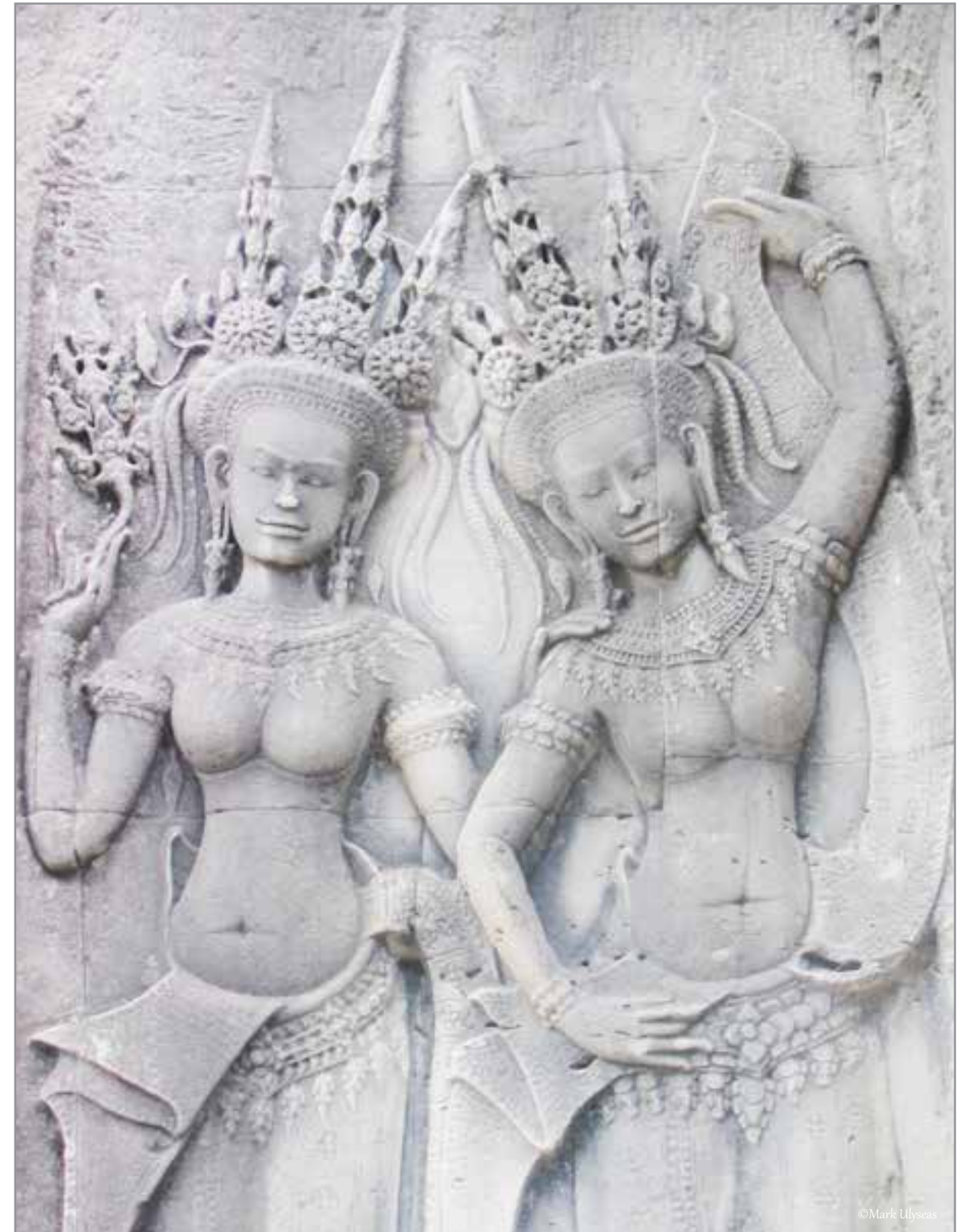
Patricia Sykes

HEAVENLY DANCER

The Apsara's 2000 smiles
circle Siem Reap
like a girdle nightly
in the grace of tradition
her daughters dance
in economic hostage
to souvenir hunters
who wield smart phone
cameras like animal traps

some entrapment though
is home-grown, a slew
of scholars consigning
Apsara to *Duty Wife*
in lifetime service
to the king in heaven

at my hotel the waiter
hungriest for tips
nods *yes yes, Duty Wife*
and offers to disco
me, my passenger
to his motor bike.
Though my age
doubles his, I do
not call his bluff
all distinctions are
null when face to face
with privilege money.



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

Rachael Stanley's poems have been published in various journals and anthologies and have previously appeared in Live Encounters and Drawn to The Light Press. She has been commended in the Francis Ledwidge Competition. She lives in Dublin.



JUST FOR TODAY

Not for this Kenyan mother, the question
who will I meet today for lunch?
Or does the colour of this dress
match my eyes?

Not for her children
under African skies
the luxury of deciding
what to give up for Lent.

Not for her, the worry about
stocks and shares
and plummeting markets
and world trade.

Not for her, concern
about the price of nuclear weapons
or the price of grain to
fatten the cattle to feed the overfed.
No, today she will walk many miles
of this scorched earth
to haul water
to carry firewood

to pray for rain
to hope with each step she takes
that help will come, that just for today
she can feed her children.

Rachael Stanley

RESISTANCE

Everyone in her house
has been threatened
beaten and tear-gassed.

Each day they come
with their trucks, rape the land
and cut down trees

to feed the greed
of the large corporations
but all she wants

is the right to use her land
to feed her children.
There is hunger in their bellies

they stand on plundered ground
but she will fight on
till her life's blood ebbs away

till the land itself rises up in revolt
fighters sometimes perish
but the earth never forgets.

THE WHISPERER

A seed is planted in her heart
she remembers the old TV clip
of Martin Luther King
I have a dream.
Just on the cusp of despair
the memory of it comes back to her now
like a warm and comforting blanket.

She hears his voice softly whispering
telling her to dig deeply into rooted earth
and to take time to look at the night sky.
Her heart uplifted, she turns
away from the thorns
and plants mustard seeds
in the warm and promising earth.

Sarah Tiffen, author of six volumes of poetry celebrating a rural Australian sensibility and a Riverina aesthetic - deeply tied to the place where she was born, where she lives and works and where all her ancestors lie buried. Recognised by Les Murray, Donald Hall, shortlisted for the ACU Poetry Prize several times, and founder of Riverina Writing House – an independent publishing house and centre for writers and writing - Sarah's work echoes Dylan Thomas and Seamus Heaney and Murray, evocative, spiritual, raw - she also is a mother and teacher.



HOME COUNTRY

Down the long days to this Home Country.
 Winter grasses risen like vellus on the shy rude thin
 flesh of land, a pelt on the hills.
 The vista of variegated greens, green into blue light,
 and scraped and ordered soil, blooded and heavy.
 Gone through the limpid, beastly, freckled days, through
 rain-kissed glass, o shimmer of impressionistic light,
 green, green, and blurring out to the bumped, swathing sky,
 and horizon hipped and swanked with rolling.

Down the long days of earthen colours, manifold
 vignettes of baroque, fur-moss soft velvets clumped with
 burgundy sweeps and posies
 hemmed and hewn in granite congregants,
 and yea, the cattle, black and red,
 poked as currants in a wide pistachio field,
 attentive to the moment,
 arrested in voluptuous grandeur, this agricultural palette,
 this loam, this grass and all these griefs.

Gone, gone down the long days
 drawing, and the pithy lemon light and gold,
 labouring the harvest, head down to the verdant
 wonderment of sky cupped over and adorned with
 feathered smoke plumes, elegant, and ancient festive,
 drive the melancholy suture to the wound.
 Bespoke old markets, markers, makers, memory
 and flooding, corrugated majesties
 and blunt poignancy.
 Here we go, and drawn like pilgrims to lamenting
 days and prayers.

continued overleaf...

Sarah Tiffen

HOME COUNTRY

contd...

Down all the long days, to the Home Country,
expunging from earth and caves
the mossy, liquid spill of thought,
and mind, the body of this song, alive and
hungered, sacristy of light,
sweet, coagulated air and scents
of earth and bush and stock and mulched longing.
The great crypt of this Flat Land,
and hearts borrowings and soldered plangent joy.
Love guttural, wintered, pepper-corned vanquishment.
Gone glories, ghosts, and deep unserved griefs
and deep resounding armaments, the battle looms.

Home Country and the risk and buffeting of
olden modes.
Beseech us, correlate and finding,
beseech the times, ameliorate and then baptize us,
keep us, ground us, speak through us, this
reaching, limpid eye to touch, and untouched
ancestral vagrancy and journeying, behold.
Home Country, down and down all the long
yearning years and intricately seasoned
days, halcyon, disquieting
and most solemn visions pave the way.



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<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=14627545>

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/>



WOKENESS

Lying awake all night examining this life,
 an hour glass on the run, is no cure for jet-lag.
 Tossing and turning, an unusual homecoming
 with street dogs howling, cats yowling,
 the bellow of an insomniac bull, bone chilling.
 A young female's piercing cry shatters me.
 In the land of my birth a woman is raped
 every fifteen minutes. Shouldering the pain
 and suffering of the world, night loses track of time.
 Decades appear like yesterday – memory
 of father dying, disappearing in a pyre of flames.
 Never told him how much he meant to me.
 How could I when the continent of my loss
 keeps growing with the passage of time?
 A car dodging potholes, horns blaring, jump-starts
 me, disorienting as a plethora of roosters
 cock-a-doodling-doo day and night without warning.
 Accustomed to the muezzin's call to prayer
 after the ecstatic dawn chorus that brings blessings
 of sleep, this year's silence usurps my peace.
 I wait all morning for the salawāt to begin.

Shanta Acharya

Sheila was born on and continues to live on Achill Island. She is deeply immersed in the culture and landscape of the place that formed her. She writes to preserve and promote the rich legacy hidden in the local landscape. She also explores the human journey through image and language, in both English and Irish, in its sense of belonging/non-belonging. She is a published writer in fiction, non-fiction and poetry. Recent publications include: *Dánta in the Dark*, (2023) *Scrimshaw Journal* (2023) *Live Encounters* (2023)



SHADOW WORD PLAY

Night dreams and day dreams meet in the shadowlands of life.
Behind the scene they play
Their mysterious theatrics on our world stage.
In them strange personas interact; come and go unbidden.
A script writer enters, rubs the sleep from her eyes:
And wonders why she is there.
Exit stage left.

She awakens.
From a half open window in her mind's eye
Elusive words longing to be captured,
Colourful, spirited words
Jumble, tumble in the shadows.

Lithely, in a perichoretic dance
She pirouettes in and out and through the fleeting words.
Finds their shadow source:
Plays catch with them on an empty page.
Sentencing them to life.

Sheila A. McHugh

Susan Glamuzina is a published New Zealand author and poet who feels at home when there's sand between her toes and her thoughts are in the clouds.



GRIEF

The ending of a good book with no sequel
printer with no ink
empty cookie jar
wet washing on a rainy day
knife with a blunt edge
saved dollar that needs spending
dripping tap that can't be turned off
juicy apple with a wormhole
empty letterbox, awaiting mail that won't be delivered
dusty suitcase

Susan Glamuzina

I CAN'T EAT IT

donut calls me from my corn-blue plate
if I focus hard enough
I can taste the jelly splash
smooth cream and hidden sugar
crunch of the outside
cream – oh I want to taste that cream
to melt in my mouth

I wait till I'm alone, with no more jobs to do

I can choose to be sick
savour the taste
ignoring dairy's effect on my stomach
sugar's damage to my blood
fatty oil straight on my hips

alone in my safe space, I take that long-awaited blissful bite

3 am
food choices from the previous night
regretted
and the green blends into the porcelain

SPOKEN WORD

Eyes on me
wishing I could hide
knowing
I can't be a poet
if I don't speak
words out loud
so I swallow
start
hoping you won't judge
or know the courage
it took for me to be here
sharing these words

Born into a family of professional writers, words were crafted from passion for fun but mostly to lend purpose and meaning to a story. Outside of the family Susan, on the autism spectrum, lived without a diagnosis looking for her tribe and trying to make sense of the world. Art and nature seeded self love and respect for others though meaning, was often inaccessible. Observing colour, form and movement in silence or with sound was an array of sensory textures and after a career in Social Work Susan found self expression in poetry. After successfully raising two young and a public service career she now lives in retirement in Southern Tasmania. Several literary works have been published. Family and Friends appears in an anthology of poems, Quicksilver Water written by women in Tasmania. Susan has written a travel article for a women's magazine and continues to find her voice.



FRIEND

I haven't seen her for years
Now here she is
At my shoulder

Her blue eyes
And crunched smile
Adding poignancy to the market

The lost years between us
There,
In the dark corners in her eyes

How have you been?
Becomes a long answer
Trawling the unanswerable

Poured between us
From her soul
That looks out
Through blue orbs

"I've had my son
Living with me
He hasn't been well"

continued overleaf...

Susan Westcott

FRIEND

contd...

My heart ached for
Those blue eyes
Turned black

She looked at me
Yearning for connection
I only had questions

My thoughts made comparisons
Aboriginal women
White nosey questions

I asked again
Trying a new warp
In the tapestry

“Sick in body, or mind?”
My slam dunk
Hit her brittle basket
“Both!”

The gong sounded
Silencing the market
Poor blue eyes

Wearing her body
Like a sack
Her edges frayed
poked through a cloth frame

My crispy skin friend
Had no sweet juice
Left

She showed genuine interest,
In my car
We parted

I wondered
How she will look
Next time

Wendy J. Dunn is an award-winning Australian writer fascinated by Tudor history – so much so she was not surprised to discover a family connection to the Tudors, not long after the publication of her first Anne Boleyn novel, which narrated the Anne Boleyn story through the eyes of Sir Thomas Wyatt, the elder. Her family tree reveals the intriguing fact that one of her ancestral families – possibly over three generations – had purchased land from both the Boleyn and Wyatt families to build up their own holdings. It seems very likely Wendy’s ancestors knew the Wyatts and Boleyns personally. Wendy is married, the mother of four adult children and the grandmother of two amazing small boys. She gained her PhD in 2014 and loves walking in the footsteps of the historical people she gives voice to in her novels. Wendy also tutors at Swinburne University of Technology, Australia and is the proud Managing Editor of Other Terrain.

MORNING WALK

I’m so tired
I give myself an hour
for the eleven-minute walk
to my doctor.

In the past
I’ve timed it.

I meet and greet
My daughter at our local
‘meet and greet’ coffee shop
(not too long ago a milk-bar)
and buy a large coffee
to sustain me
on my journey.

I stop
only three minutes
into my walk
spilling coffee
down my front
as I try to control
my swinging laptop

That’s when I see a card
lying on the pavement
LOVE YOU
YOUR VALENTINE
it says

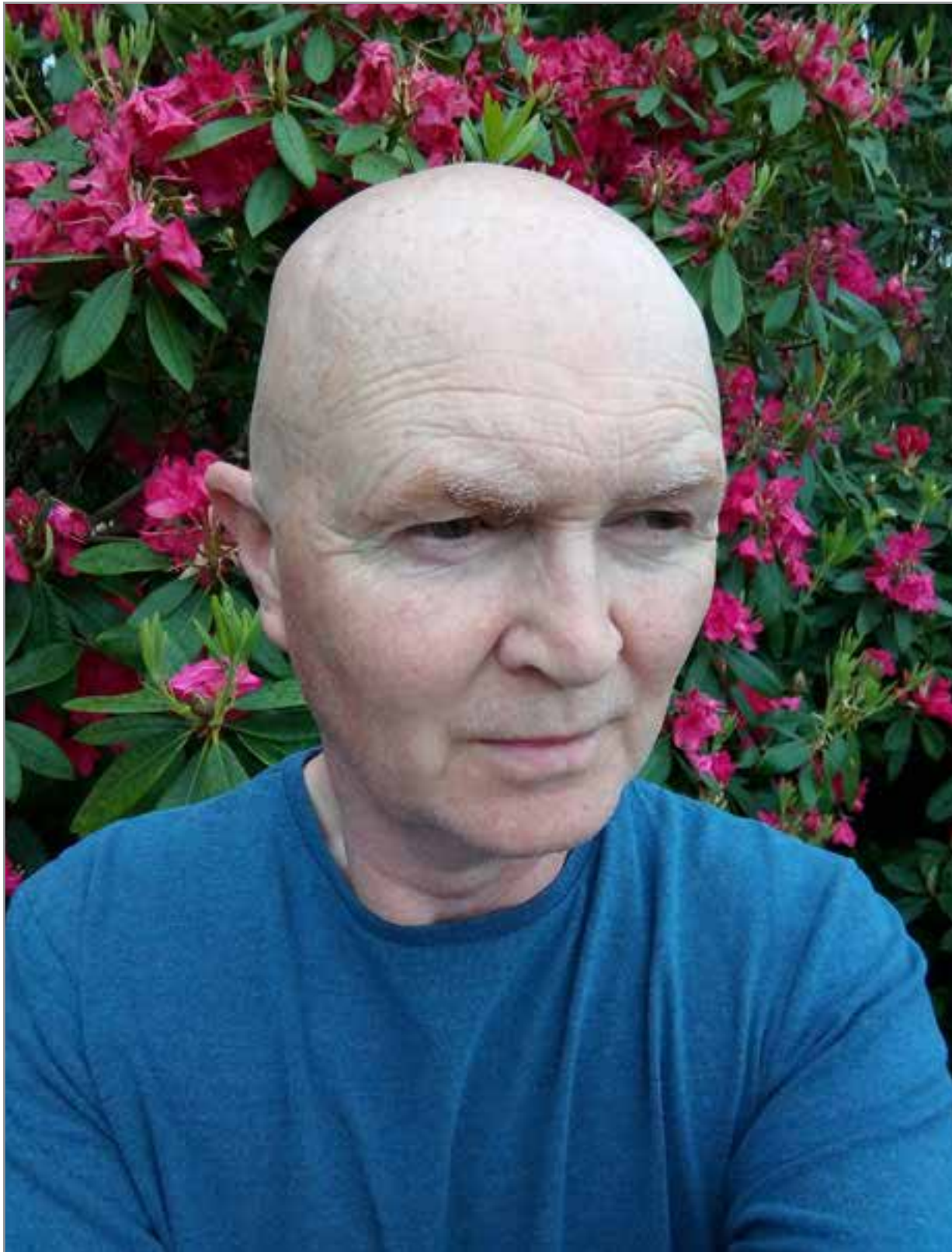
Fortune’s kind
the card is not one
thrown away
by a hoped for lover
but an advertisement
from a local business.

My spirits lift
and I smile
and smile again
thinking little things
bring me joy.



Wendy J. Dunn

John W. Sexton's poetry is widely published and he has been a regular contributor to *Live Encounters*. A collection of experimentalist poetry, *The Nothingness Kit*, is now out from Beir Bua. In 2007 he was awarded a *Patrick and Katherine Kavanagh Fellowship in Poetry*.



THE GREY

Pale, grey-eyed Líadan, was born
on a night when the moon was bright
with all of its pieces. For some,
therefore, it was moonlight
they saw in those pearl eyes. Others
glimpsed the ocean, flecked with its troubles,
gulls defiant of its boisterous
whims. But for many who held her gaze
it was the subtle shadow a star cast
against the night that they beheld.
Thus, they felt ill luck in her presence.
Yet these conjectures were not hers to hold
blame for. For colour claims no sense
but what you bring to it. Her tone
was mystery, impenetrable
to those blinded by assumption.
None guessed what her eyes were able
to apprehend, that they were bright
with knowing. For the moon observes
all of the world; the ocean eavesdrops
all secrets; and the stars in night serve
the night. And so it was the hopes
of expanding existence that poured
into her. As she grew, she grew revered.
And those who dared the icy mirror
of her stare, came to love her.

John W Sexton

THE VESSEL

At the age of twelve, Líadan had informed her father, the chief Ollamh, that she was to be a poet, and sought to formally train.

“Being my daughter grants you the exemption from the bar of being a female. But first you must bring a poem. Only a poet can be a poet.”

That night a woman came to Líadan in a dream. The woman was in a place of darkness, but her countenance was bright; the woman was in a place of light, but her countenance was dark.

“Líadan, wake up. It is *my* daughter that you are.”

“Mother, before I wake, where is the place that I will find you?”

“Come into your father’s courtyard now. I am there. You must kiss me on the mouth.”

Líadan woke.

Not a creature stirred in the courtyard. Moonlight pooled on every surface, but the brightest part of the courtyard was the well. Líadan approached the shining water. Beyond its glaring surface Líadan knew that all was darkness, unfathomable in the cold depths. So Líadan knelt, and pushed her face into the waters. The Mother’s lips met hers; then the Mother’s tongue touched hers.

Líadan found herself in an immense, darkened meadow, the moon a dull tincture of grey. But Líadan was not there as herself, but as an enormous shadow of herself, stretched across the meadow. And the meadow was not of wild flowers, but of the wavering shadows of flowers.

“Líadan, this is the vestibule of the dead, the storehouse of memory and spirit. This is the True Poet’s Mind.”

Líadan awoke then, and her body floated up and broke the surface of the well. She took her breath.

When Líadan stood before her father in his night quarters, she was still wet to the bone.

“Daughter, where were you?”

“Father, I was taken into the Vessel of Duibhne.”

“And what did you see?”

“Shadows of thistles / touch the dead in sleep; / our world too solid / O you dead to keep.”

After that, Líadan was given leave to undertake the poet’s training.

INVOCATION

Sounding through her, her own name
struck from the tongues of others:
“Líadan”

Night’s fine stitches of stars, sewn
firmly to the cloth of night:
“Líadan”

May’s loud blossom of hawthorn
freeing the hedgerows of fog:
“Líadan”

Time never undone by time,
but deepened in its fathoms:
“Líadan”

THE VOID

Under the grey milk of the stars
her tears have leavened the heavens.
Her knees are grazed raw as the night,
ceaseless nought in the high distance.
She listens with the empty bell
of her heart, dull now of clamour.
Only emptiness replaces
emptiness, replaced in its turn
by the need for starlight; for night
is increased by the thing not it.
Under the grey milk of the stars
her tears have leavened the heavens.

FINDING HER VOICE: RECLAIMING THE POET LÍADAN FROM PATRIARCHAL AND CHRISTIAN AGENDAS

In my mother’s county of Kerry, the county in which I live, we have one ancient female poet, locatable in the 7th century, and associated with the historical Saint Cumméne. Her name is Líadan (which in modern Irish spelling would be Liadhain), and which can be interpreted as Grey; and we have not only a prosimetric Romance about her, but also a few verses attributed to her. This is perhaps more significant than many might realise, for early poetry by Irish women was rarely recorded, and in later centuries was actively discouraged. We have documented folkloric traditions expressing the belief that if a female poet appeared in a family, then that particular line would bear no more male poets for anything from a further four, seven or nine generations.

In the 1937 Irish Folklore Commission’s National Schools Project, we have two separate Kerry documents from the Castleisland area that relate the memory of the poet Ulick Kerins. One refers to his sister being a poet, and how this broke the possibility of any more male poets in their foreseeable family for generations. And the second refers to his own daughter, Joan Kerins, growing up to become a poet and outdoing her father in a poetry recitation. On the conclusion of her poem her father was said to have uttered the following curse upon her, “Loisceadh an Toirc ort”, which translates into English as “May you roast like a pig!” (The Schools Collection, Volume 0446, Page 224, from School Na Corráin.) Such viciousness indicates the power of this belief, which was obviously sprung from a misogynistic strategy to discourage women from following the Poet’s path. And, like everything else, such male ploys were perfected as part of the controlling arsenals of the Roman Catholic Church.

It must be noted that in most modern anthologies of translations of Irish language poetry from the Medieval period to the 1890’s, that only two named female poets figure, and they are Líadan from the 7th century and Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, who flourished in the 1700s. It is also not insignificant that their poems that have come down to us from the oral tradition are laments, of two different kinds, over men. But we will examine this specific aspect in terms of Líadan a bit more closely further on.

The evidence we have of Líadan is gathered in the Medieval Irish romance, *Comrac Lídaine ocus Cuirithir*, written down in Old Irish in the late ninth to early tenth century. But the details of the tale, especially the significant inclusion of Saint Cumméne, date the work in its original orally transmitted form to the earlier seventh century. There is also evidence, first noted by Kuno Meyer, who translated and edited the tale in 1902, that Líadan was known as a poet of renown from that earlier period, and her fame is referenced in the introduction of an early text of *The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare*. Irish literary materials lived in, and were passed on, through oral transfer for centuries, so it is not uncommon to find something only being written down a century or two later by monastic writers.

The version of *Comrac Lídaine ocus Cuirithir* that we have was recorded by an anonymous cleric, and can essentially be divided into two distinct stylistic halves. Being in a prosimetrum form it contains both poetry and prose, something common in the Old Irish tradition. The poetry, relayed in quatrains and tercets, is regarded largely and essentially as the work of Líadan herself, while the surrounding prose structure, put in place to provide a coherent narrative context for the poetry, is evidently the hand of the male cleric. In content, the poetry is swift, pure, utterly poignant, while the prose is somewhat typical of the moral adventure. However, it must never be forgotten, that if not for this monastic scribe and editor, all trace of Líadan and anything of her work would have been totally lost to us. One should also realise that although loyal adherents to Christianity, that the monks from the early Irish period were in fact from the Irish ruling families, and would themselves have undergone the Poet's training and the committing to memory of sagas and genealogies. They were from the educated elite of Irish society. This is the very reason that what we have left from our earlier tradition was actually written up by these monastic hands. They already had the work in their prodigious stores of memory as a result of their training, and all that was left to them was to record it in such a way as to be useful to the current Christian dispensation.

A brief aside here on some of the significant English translations, before we look at the content itself. The first translation, and by far the best, is the previously mentioned work published by Kuno Meyer, *Liadain and Curithir: an Irish Love-Story of the Ninth Century*, published in London in 1902 by D. Nutt. This is a thirty-three page book containing the Old Irish and Meyer's translations on facing pages, with an Introduction, footnotes and a Glossary. There is also a book by the Irish poet and playwright Moireen Fox (1883 – 1972), *Liadain and Curithir*, published in 1917 by Blackwell in Oxford, that is often cited by online sources as a "translation". It should be clearly stated that it is nothing of the sort, and certainly wasn't purported to be by the author herself. This particular book is simply an epic imaginative verse romance, inspired by and acknowledging Meyer's earlier pioneering translation, many of the verses of which had previously appeared in very early issues of *Poetry (Chicago)*. It is essentially a rather extended adventure romance relayed in verse.

Those who have mistaken it for a translation have perhaps been confused by various elements of Moireen Fox's own Foreword, which possibly they have misread, but which is indeed quite clear. A few words should also be said here of the notes and literal translations that appear in *A Golden Treasury of Irish Poetry AD 600 to 1200* (MacMillan, London, 1967), edited and translated by David Greene and Frank O'Connor, published a year after O'Connor's death. Firstly, the footnotes to some of the translations are highly informative, and even in some instances correct Kuno Meyer's few misreadings of the Old Irish, and O'Connor's translations that appear in this volume are spare and literal, and are helpful in cutting to the sense directly. However, O'Connor had produced earlier English version translations of the Líadan poems which often crop up in anthologies, including Séan Lucy's *Love Poems of the Irish* (Mercier Press, Cork, 1967) and these are somewhat more problematical. Beyond argument, they are beautiful as English verse, and as Séan Lucy attests in his notes, O'Connor continued to work and tweak his translations throughout his life; but in becoming distinct artifices in English, these particular versions stray from the clear beauty and metric precision of the original Old Irish.



Photograph courtesy a Private Collection.

It should also be stated that Greene and O'Connor, in the first mentioned book, bizarrely refer to Líadan as “the Cork poetess”, and mistakenly conflate her with Saint Líadan. This Saint Líadan, however, was a different person, was married in her younger days, and belonged to a completely different tribe, the Corcu Loígde.

In the opening sentence of *Comrac Líadaine ocus Cuirithir*, Líadan steps out from the murk of Medieval history: “Líadain of the Corco Dubne, a poetess, went visiting into the country of Connaught.” We are told that during this poetry tour another poet, Cuirithir mac Doborchon, arranges an ale-feast in her honour, and then promptly proposes a union, saying “A son of us two would be famous”. Straight away, Líadan rebuffs him, on the grounds that her rounds as a visiting poet would “be ruined for me”. She tells him though, that if he calls on her at her home after the tour, then “I shall go with you”.

The striking thing here is that for a woman in that culture to be a poet engaged on a tour, indicates that she would have to be both high-born and also have undergone a poet's training of some degree. For a woman to be thus privileged, to have studied poetry in a deep way, we may speculate that her father would have had to have been either a king or a chief poet. Or that at the very least, we can conjecture that she learnt from her mother, who would have perhaps had that same background of Poet's descent. A tour of this type would have been to the dwellings of similar high-born families and kings, and the fact that she was received would indicate the esteem in which she must have been held. Furthermore, the detail that she prioritises her poetry tour over marriage to a man of equal social rank indicates how seriously she took her position as poet. None of the poetry that she composed prior to the events relayed in this tale has ever been recovered from the oral tradition, but the fact that she was engaged on a series of poetry readings indicates that a body of work must have been in place by that time. So already we can see the tragedy of this disappearance alone, of that lost work. But, unlike the other characters in the tale, Líadan is given no immediate genealogy and no surname to indicate any, so we have no idea of her parentage. In contrast to the parentage declared for the other characters, one might begin to suspect a deliberate strategy of disappearance at work in the narrative framework itself.

I will pause here to go back to the beginning of that opening sentence, “Líadain of the Corco Dubne”. Corca Dhuibhne, often anglicised as Corkaguiny, is the ancient name of the northernmost of the major peninsulas in County Kerry, the Dingle Peninsula. But Corca Dhuibhne is not simply a place, it is a people – the “seed or tribe of Dhuibhne”, a major Goddess, equated by some with both Dovinia and even the Great Mother Goddess Herself, Danu. Immediately we have a cultural conflict, for we have a Pagan background in what is largely, as we shall see, a Christian foreground. Later in the text she says of herself, “I from Kil-Conchinn”. In a footnote to this reference, Kuno Meyer states: “The Ui Maic Iar-Conchinn are mentioned as a tribe in Corkaguiney.” But Kil-Conchinn might also reasonably refer to the early Medieval Christian Ecclesiastical Settlement of Cell Achid Conchinn, which is said to have been founded by Saint Abban, but which was on the grounds of an earlier place of veneration for the holy virgin Saint Conchenna. This settlement fell within the major diocese of Ardfert and was well inside the encroaching regions of the Corca Dhuibhne.

After Líadan returns to Corca Dhuibhne, and the timeframes are somewhat obscured in the fragmentary text, she takes the veil and becomes a nun. There has been some speculation as to why Líadan took such a drastic step after declaring an interest in Cuirithir. Was it purely a religious decision made from spiritual conflict, or was it a desperate strategy to keep herself free from childbirth in order to still pursue the intellectual and poetic life of learning; in short, the inner life? One can also speculate quite reasonably, that a proposal made by a man of high birth from another powerful family would be attractive to both Líadan's parents and tribe, in terms of the alliances of wealth and political power that he would bring with him. Was it under such pressure of an inevitable future as wife and mother, that Líadan put herself aside for the Church? Robert Graves, in *The White Goddess* (expanded edition, Faber and Faber, 1961), expresses a more robustly misogynistic theory, but more of that in due course. What must be stressed here, however, is that it is a paradox of the text that Líadan is also deeply in love with Cuirithir. She is inescapably conflicted.

While LÍadan is under the veil, but still apparently with her family, Cuirithir unwarily travels south to continue his courtship. He arrives outside the family court and meets up with another traveller, Mac Da Cherda of the Dessi of Munster. He is described here as, “Chief poet he was and the fool of all Ireland”. This probably indicates that he is the hereditary poet of his people, but of a lesser rank, that perhaps of Bard, and something of an entertainer. He crops up in other Old Irish texts and was called “Boy of the Two Arts”. His appearance in the story here is an interesting intervention, as he occupies the role of both Trickster and essential intermediary. Himself and Cuirithir make a bond, and Cuirithir asks Mac Da Cherda to relay his presence to LÍadan. Mac Da Cherda accepts, and LÍadan is made aware of Cuirithir’s entreaties.

It is at this point that LÍadan is reunited with Cuirithir, and to salve the implications of their dilemma they put themselves under the spiritual direction of “Cummaine Fota, son of Fiachna”. And it is at this point, sadly, that their joint tragedies become sealed. Cumméne Fota or Fada, Cummine the Tall, who flourished circa 591 to 662, was an Irish Bishop of Clonfert, later canonised, and an important theological writer of the mid-7th century. Despite his great learning, a more deranged, po-faced fanatic our two lovers could not have found to appoint as their spiritual guide. His Paschal letter, *De controversia paschali*, was a catalyst in swaying the Pictish and Irish Churches towards Rome in synchronising the celebration of Easter, and his alliance and heart was very much with the Roman Church. One can only speculate as to what a Celtic Church we might have had, had not the eloquent likes of Saint Cummine persuaded our Churches to hold sway to the Roman Pope. We know certainly that he had foundations in Kerry. Kilcummin Strand in Dingle, close to where LÍadan had her residence, was an early settlement under his leadership, and he also established a church and community just outside Killarney, in a Parish that now also bears his name, Kilcummin (from the Irish Chill Chuimín, the founding Church of Saint Cumméne).

Coincident with the appearance of Cumméne Fota, Cuirithir has now also taken a monastic vow, and the two surrender to Cumméne’s direction in a bond of anamchairde or “soul-friendship”, a form of chaste spiritual marriage.

It will be noted at this juncture, as many commentators have pointed out, that there is a similarity here with other narratives, dated to the 12th century; from elements of Marie de France’s Eliduc, to the end parts of the Arthurian cycle where both Guinevere and Lancelot take up the religious life, to the historical figures of Abelard and Heloise. But the tale of LÍadan and Cuirithir is much older. This is not to impute, however, any definitive literary influence on the others, or even a historical context for the decisions of Abelard and Heloise, but simply to indicate some succession perhaps, of tradition or contextual social behaviour.

Cumméne first offers the couple a choice: to be able to see each other without speaking, or to speak to each other without seeing. Being poets, perhaps indicating the primacy of their craft of language, they choose to speak without seeing. When Cuirithir is abroad the settlement grounds, LÍadan is locked in her cell; and when she does her rounds he is cloistered in his. At this period in Irish ecclesiastical history there are no stone churches. All church buildings and monasteries are made of timber, usually always an oak frame and roof, with daub and wattle sealing walls and partitions. It is at this very instant in the tale when the exchanges between LÍadan and Cuirithir are first delivered to us in verse. The resulting poetry, in short dialogic stanzas, is increasingly heart-breaking, swerving through regretful longing to remorse and, on the part of LÍadan, self-reproach. This tortuous, sadistic imposition by Cumméne becomes increasingly intolerable to LÍadan, speaking as she must through wattle walls, and she pleads for a respite. Cumméne complies, and allows them to sleep one night together in each other’s company, but with the proviso that a young postulant sleeps between them for the duration of the night. The following morning, the overzealous Cumméne questions the postulant, making it clear that he will be satisfied with no answer. The result of Cumméne’s self-righteous enquiry is that he banishes Cuirithir to another monastery, and LÍadan is left to drift alone, hopelessly inside her loss. The resultant lament for her exiled love is a jewel of Old Irish prosody, often anthologized in Kuno Meyer’s English translation, a sequence of ten tercets in the syllabic metre known as *treochair*. In these and the other verses of the story, LÍadan has immortalised herself in poetry. As will be seen, however, Christian agendas would be at odds with such a reading.



Photograph courtesy a Private Collection.

After composing her lament, Líadan leaves the ecclesiastical enclosure in search of Cuirithir. But, on hearing that she has gone in search of him, he crosses the sea in a coracle to seek the solace of pilgrimage. When Líadan in turn learns of this, she knows that she will set eyes upon him no longer. Vulnerable and in despair she returns to the monastic enclosure, and sets to stay upon the flagstone where he often knelt in prayer. In remorse and utter heartbreak she remains, dying some short time afterwards on this same kneeling-stone. But the text assures us that “her soul went to heaven”. The final sentence of the tale, however, is Líadan’s literal final sentence, for we are told: “And that flagstone was put over her face.”

So Líadan ends this ecclesiastical romance with her face, her mouth and tongue, and essentially her mind, sealed under a symbol of penance. And her destination of Heaven, it is inescapably implied, is through that instrument of penance. Reducing women, especially strong-willed women, to the role of penitents has long been a cultural strategy of the male-dominated Catholic Church. Another great Old Irish poem that emerged in the written literature at the same time as Líadan and Cuirithir, was *The Hag of Beare*, which comes down to us in several versions and fragments. Similarly to the tale of Líadan, for the Christian agenda was the same, the Hag of Beare is portrayed as a penitent woman, now in her aged, regretful and remorseful years. And in Frank O’Connor’s translation, the poem is actually called *The Nun of Beare*. Of course, this is propagandist nonsense. The Hag of Beare was neither a penitent nor a mortal woman. And neither was she a negative entity. The Hag of Beare, also called the Cailleach, is the Winter Aspect of the Eternal Pagan Goddess. I live on the Kerry side of the Beare Peninsula, on a mountain called Carn Mór, and all the land around here is suffused with Her mythic memory, and has two localised Hag myths associated with it, one with the mountain itself, and one with a small lake in the vicinity. There was, no doubt, a great poem or chant of the Hag of Beare, existent in Ireland in Pagan times, but it has been bowdlerised and co-opted into its current Christian propagandist form. So too with Líadan’s story.

Beyond argument, Líadan was a Christian. And beyond argument she was invested in the Christian faith. By the 7th century Christianity had been established here for two centuries. But to argue further that Ireland was an island without a pervasive Pagan microwave background, would be naïve. Faith in this island did not begin with Christianity, and due to the deep oral tradition in a culture that was only recently emerging with a written literature, Christianity here would have been deeply layered with an underlying Paganism. Even as recently as the early 2000s, before its lessening grip on the population, Irish Catholicism was heavily ingrained with superstition and pagan practices. Líadan and her people, certainly in the 7th century, would not yet have fully divested themselves of their Pagan traditions. In their less dogmatic mind-set there was room for both Paganism and Christianity, and both were still in tension. In fact, Christianity in the beginning may have offered the Irish a unifying purpose. Instead of learning only the genealogies of one’s particular tribe, now the endless and ancient genealogies of the God-chosen Judaic people of the Old Testament may have seemed neutral and removed from the immediate politics, conflicts and agendas of the Celtic present.

Here I must state plainly my principal motive for delving into the history of Líadan. I am a Pagan, and as an Irish poet of Munster, with deep family connections in Kerry and Limerick, I identify with the Aisling Poetry Tradition, a form of Vision Poetry, and have done so, openly, for several decades. But in my own interpretation of Muse Poetry, the point for me is never the gratuitous concerns of a male poet, but rather a core belief in the pre-eminence of Woman as a creative force, and the inviolability of female artistic example. In my personal interpretation of the Muse or Goddess-centred Tradition, the notion that this form of poetry revolves around male poets is a corruption, a late-imposed heresy. In more ancient times women were actually at the centre of Goddess reception, and their position was gradually and fatally usurped. The concept of Muse Poetry is open to all genders, but it should never be forgotten that it is essentially Goddess-derived. My wish for Líadan, without denying her Christian background and struggling spirituality, is not to deny her Pagan faith and background.

In those earlier Christian centuries the separation was less definite, and subsequent histories and literature have been edited and redacted to give a decidedly Christian slant to works that were not originally Christian. For instance, the prayer that many know as a hymn, *Saint Patrick's Breastplate*, was originally a Pagan prayer or chant, and would have been imbued with magical properties and ritual. Pagan religious and literary culture was co-opted by Christianity and then almost obliterated.

In the 7th century version of LÍADAN's story, we can still see very clearly that she is a woman of independent vision and thought. She is a woman trying her utmost to navigate the male structures that obstruct her. A Christian scribe almost obliterated her, but, in thrall to the absolute beauty and purity of her verse, this learned man could not quite let that go. In keeping some of the poetry, but by placing "upon her face" the kneeling-stone of penitence, he may have hoped that he had kept the poetry without keeping the poet. But in the poetry we can still apprehend her. In her own words, in her absolute craft, she is immortal. In the resolute strength of the Feminine she has held firm for thirteen hundred years, to this time when we can comprehend her reality once more.

Before concluding, if I may, a word of caution, and a literary cautionary tale. The poet Robert Graves, in his seminal and idiosyncratic examination of Goddess Myth and its relation to Poetry, *The White Goddess*, makes mention of LÍADAN, his reading obviously founded on Kuno Meyers' 1902 translation. Ironically, the chapter in which Graves mentions her, a late chapter called "War in Heaven", is by far the most blatant display of misogyny and homophobia in the entire book. Graves cannot resist attempting to infect LÍADAN's motives with his own deep-rooted sexism, and tries to use her to hammer down his personal theory that "the White Goddess is anti-domestic; she is the perpetual 'other woman', and her part is difficult indeed for a woman of sensibility to play for more than a few years, because the temptation to commit suicide in simple domesticity lurks in every maenad's and muse's heart". In Graves's toxic rewriting of everything truly Feminine, where the Muse is merely the instrument of the male poet, he decides that LÍADAN's taking of the veil is a labyrinthine ploy to punish Cuirithir for proposing marriage, threatening her career as poet for his own desires, and for stealing her heart.

His final words being: "Cuirithir renounced love, became a pilgrim, and LÍADAN died of remorse for the barren victory that she had won over him". Such Pagan misogyny is no different to Christian misogyny, and there should be no room for it in any re-readings of mythology or literature.

The lack of genealogy or immediate parental attribution for LÍADAN has been taken in some quarters as a sign of fictionality, yet that doesn't account for the real reverence in which she was held in earlier tradition. Yet again, it could equally be argued that her lack of genealogy is a tool for anonymising her, a device of Disappearance through narrative control, something that women poets from Irish Bardic Culture to modern times are only too familiar with. Men wrote the histories, and often portrayed women as objects of devotion, or as penitents, or as cheats or twisters, or as naïve saintly figures. The list, sadly, goes on. And in the narrative elements of LÍADAN's story, she is largely regarded in relation to the two male figures, Cuirithir and Cumméne. As soon as she meets Cuirithir, her independent life as a poet becomes impossible, and Cumméne is symbolic of the death of compromise. LÍADAN has been trapped, not simply beneath that stone of penitence, but also under the sediment of male-dominated Christianity.

It may also be instructive to look at how she is figured with a single appellation, that name LÍADAN. Her name, meaning Grey, may also now be seen as a sort of cognate for Hag. When we regard it in this way, we can comprehend more clearly how her biography has been so shamefully manipulated.

In my poems dedicated to her, I am self-consciously attempting to re-evaluate and recreate a proto-LÍADAN of the Disappeared, retaining the memory of her tribe, the seed of the Goddess Dhuibhne or Danu. It is an attempt to reinstate her as Poet; but as a poet of herself, not as a poet to any man or to any Christ. There are those, of course, who will argue, and not unreasonably, that such Pagan reconstructionism merely adds yet another layer to the palimpsest of myth. And indeed, that may well be the case. But if it is, then let that palimpsest now read brighter, let that palimpsest read true.

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