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# Live encounters

POETRY & WRITING

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VOLUME FIVE NOVEMBER -DECEMBER 2023

A close-up portrait of a middle-aged man with grey hair, wearing a light-colored jacket over a blue and white striped shirt. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a neutral expression.

DAVID RIGSBEE  
*Suicide as Literary Criticism*



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Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

Mark Ulyseas  
Publisher/Editor

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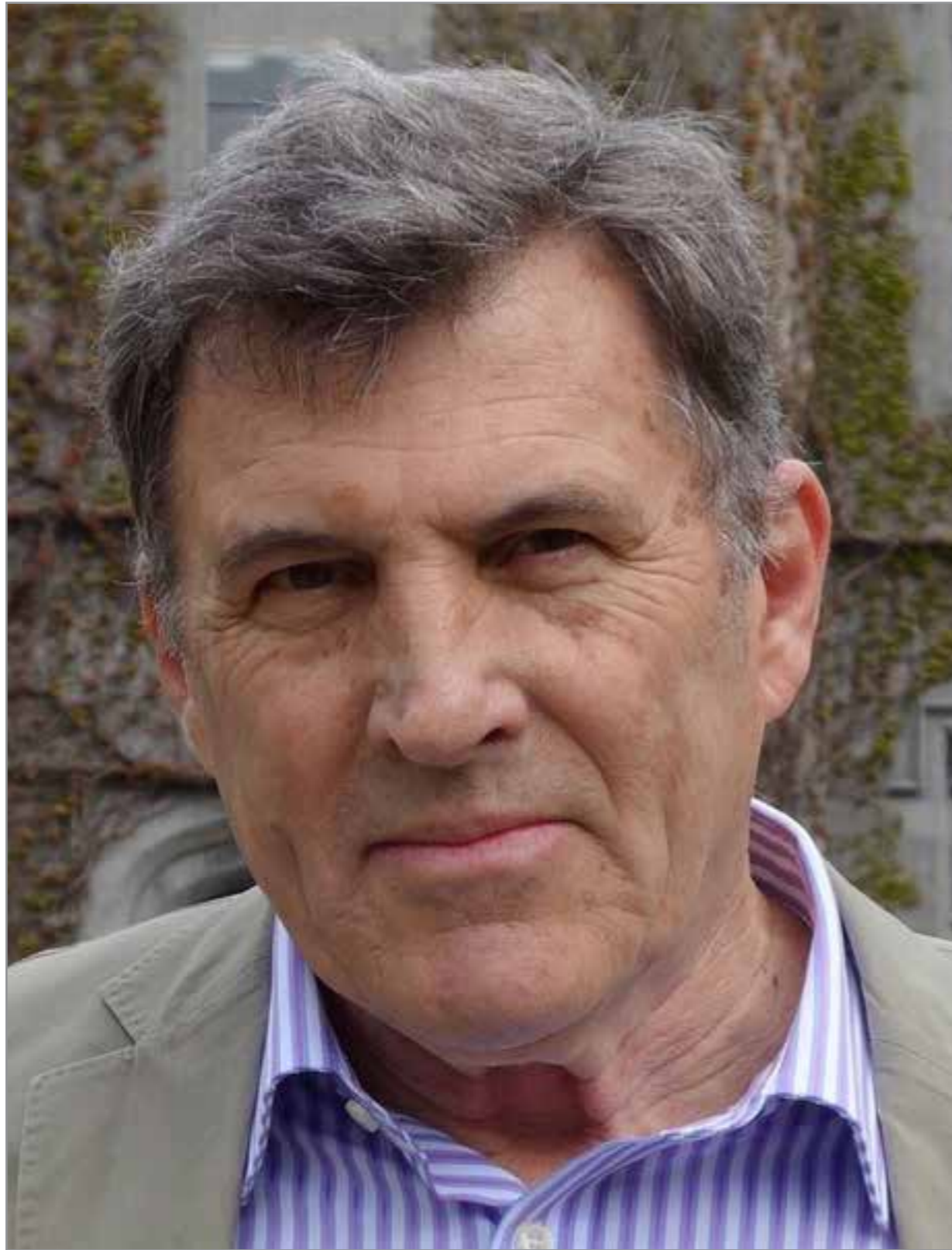


VOLUME FIVE  
NOVEMBER - DECEMBER 2023

## CONTRIBUTORS

DAVID RIGSBEE - GUEST EDITORIAL  
ALICIA VIGUER-ESPERT  
ALISTAIR CLARKE  
AMY ABDULLAH BARRY  
DAVID MORGAN  
ERIN SHIEL  
GARY FINCKE  
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JIM BURKE  
JOHN PHILIP DRURY  
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SILVA ZANOYAN MERJANIAN  
VASILIS MANOUSAKIS

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



## DAVID RIGSBEE

### SUICIDE AS LITERARY CRITICISM

I awoke one day recently and was both stirred and confounded by the following sentence: "Whatever else it is, suicide is literary criticism, surpassing theories, schools, and genres." I had long meditated on the struggle between articulation and silence, between words in their best order and oblivion. What more profound way to disable the first than by self-erasure? Where does this leave words of any sort? Of course, all humans are called upon to extend, even as they justify, the vast sustaining net of culture, even those who will terminate their own being. We put ourselves in the breach, as the silence presses down.

On December the first, 1992, I was teaching Hart Crane to an auditorium of evening students at Virginia Tech. Crane, who leapt overboard from a steamer in the Gulf of Mexico, called out, "Goodbye, goodbye, everybody!", according to witnesses. "Where the cedar leaf divides the sky," is how his poem "Passages" begins. Derek Walcott remarked that it was his favorite line in Crane. Of course, the cedar doesn't have a conventional leaf, but frilly sprigs, and so its division becomes immediately sub-divided. What seems at first a stark demarcation crumbles into something else, the sky in constant division and re-division, fracture, in fact. The poem's opening line thus announces its paradoxical nature, raising a flag of serene confusion followed by the poet's rhetorically gnarly acceptance. I explained this to my students, who followed me in their own confusion as my paraphrasing stiffened into pontification.

David Rigsbee

When I got home, the phone rang. What ensued from that call changed my life. With one finger, in one harrowing moment, my brother had obliterated his knowledge of our family, as well as his own: a wife, son, and adopted daughter, to say nothing of the private rest, whatever resided in his mind. In the months that followed I began to understand I would be replacing the engine for my poetry. At the time I was heavily committed, teaching full time in Blacksburg while commuting twice or three times a week to University of Virginia where I had embarked on a doctorate, attended classes and wrote papers, as well as being assigned a class of neophytes.

As a coincidence I won't further characterize, I had chosen to write a dissertation on the elegies of Joseph Brodsky, leveraging their versions in English as a sign of the poet's further distance from the traditional purposes of the elegy: consolation, grieving, and honoring the dead. For him, all the traditional consolations that the elegy promised proved unavailable. In his case, some kind of existential strength powered them. He had remarked that one of his heroes, Constantine Cavafy, sounded better in English than in Greek (how did he know this?). As a result, one could conclude that the translated poem superseded the original, as it embodied the poet's aesthetic alienation. It was a clever argument, which I endeavored to visit in discussing his own poems, although it was by then a kind of truism that Brodsky, unlike Cavafy, didn't translate well into English (I know, I had been one of the translators). With these things variously active in mind, along with wisps of Hart Crane, I picked up the phone.

At the time, my partner, like me, had embarked on a retooling of her education by enrolling at Washington and Lee Law School, though, like me she juggled her duties as student with her job teaching English at Virginia Tech. We were both on the move, having reached the ceiling offered journeyman instructors. She was still at the office grading papers as I called. When I conveyed the news and asked if I could come and get her, her response was "No! Don't drive!" Instead, I walked outside and looked up at the December night sky. Grief came sliding in on the heels of the shock.

My parents arrived early the next morning and we drove on to Ohio, where weather announcers were predicting a snowstorm. My sister-in-law was distraught but coherent. The house was full of quiet co-mourners I didn't know. I took the children in my arms and promised them my love. Then we went to the funeral home to view the body. His temple had been patched over with what looked like a miniature toupee cutout. The other side was not visible.

The next day the funeral came and went, as we did ourselves, not before I asked to see the bedroom, where I found a few hairs embedded on a cabinet where they had landed as the bullet made its ricochet around the room. I put them in my wallet.

I took some time off. Word had spread over two campuses. Many of my colleagues made offers of solace; others maintained a discreet distance. When I returned to Charlottesville, I was met with kid-glove condolences from my professors and a kind invitation from my philosophy professor Richard Rorty to spend some time at his house in the country. I took him up on it and used the occasion to confront my guilt, which took the form of two regrets. The first was the invitation to join my brother for Thanksgiving that I had declined, on my partner's argument that such a trip would be disruptive just as she was facing the final exams of her first semester. In the second instance, I had declined to speak at his funeral, as my mother had urged me to do. I felt unable to say the commonplace phrases with conviction. My mother had hoped for some comfort from my words, but I had none.

In fact, I had no idea how to think of the event. Words had been my means and poems my objects of choice. A few months later, I was listening to Richard Strauss' *Four Last Songs*, the composer's moving and lavish valedictory work, based on the poems of two German poets, Herman Hesse and the Romantic poet Joseph von Eichendorf. I thought what if I wrote an elegy based on Straus' song cycle, using the words of the poets he had repurposed? I could possibly weave an interlinear work to make my own outlier addition to the composer's farewell to the world, but reset to imagine my brother's goodbye, one he didn't make himself. The result, "Four Last Songs," was a 16-page contrapuntal tetralogy in which I attempted to account for my understanding of my brother's death using all the tools I had at my disposal, including many references to other poets of the elegy, in effect, using poetry to paint, if not resurrect, a simulacrum of the dead. Although he would not have known these references, I conceived of the whole in order to suggest a plausible reinterpretation of his life and death.

Of course, every elegy is a self-portrait. How could it not be? In another essay touching on this poem, I had written, "The subject of such a poem is dead and so cannot be addressed, except in the sense of being 'addressed' metaphorically. Yet memory means that the dead person remains in some virtual sense an interlocutor, whose 'response'—silence—invites the poet to offer words on the dead's behalf, rewriting and trying to make sense out of a life that has been discontinued.

That the discontinuance was intended adds a special urgency to the desire to *make* sense. That, in a roundabout way, is the subject of the poem." I realize that quoting oneself is not a recipe for artistic success, but the circularity it indicates suggests that coming back to the silence is both unavoidable and inevitable. Solzhenitsyn's image of the oak and the calf came to mind as I was working on the poem. The animal's persistence in butting his immature head repeatedly against the tree contains its own secret meaning, the one Camus further articulated in his Sisyphus, who dared to put death itself in chains and was punished by the gods for such a presumption. And yet, as Camus concluded, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

At the same time, my poem had every intention of pushing the boundaries of the genre until it became unstable, even as it was formally framed in ways familiar to any literate reader. Death puts us in the arena of paradox, poetry's version of quantum mechanics. It both is and isn't, depending on how you approach it and what you expect by way of experience. I've come to believe that the elegy isn't so much a genre as the smash-up of all our attempts at articulation against the wall of silence. The poem ends:

Having dreamed a long time, it is time  
to wake,  
led from the present  
to the distant, but  
*let us not lose our way*  
but move along the wall of silence  
and cling, as he has done, to the wall of silence.

My friend Tess Gallagher suggested I add the phrase "as he has done" in order to suggest his complicity, not only in his unmaking, but in our making and remaking. *The Southern Review* published the poem on April 1, 1995, the date of my birthday and the day I met my future wife, the daughter of my teacher, Carolyn Kizer. She told me that she had decided she wanted to marry me after reading the poem some months later. I had my brother's death to thank for that.

After getting "Four Last Songs" down on paper, I continued to write poems to and about him, and I began to understand that my poems had found their source in a kind of chugging persistence. I would butt my head against his fate, which is to say silence, again and again. To say it was a kind of negative happiness would be to put too fine a point on it.

It became a duty, which is what language becomes in the face of the completely obdurate. As I put it in a poem ("The Temple") a few years later:

So I was drawn to the stone, the marble,  
and the brick, which refused to give up  
the night frozen in their veins.  
But these returned me to the bruises,  
the bones pulverized to chalk,  
to the penitential steepness  
of steps leading to the temple,  
where my type stood on generic feet  
as had thousands before, and the self  
stood with it, like a public defender.

When I began translating Dante's *Paradiso* a decade ago, I began to understand that there was another presumption in the offing. In Dante's poem everyone is either a spirit or dead, with the exception of the poet himself. In the first canto, the poet drops a reference to Marsyas, a satyr who boasted that his flute playing surpassed the beauty of Apollo's lyre. This is recounted in Ovid. The god responded by having Marsyas flayed alive. Curiously Dante's mention comes during the *invocatio*, the traditional call for inspiration from the beyond. He calls on Apollo, asking the god to

Enter my breast and blow as high  
as you did when you pulled Marsyas'  
limbs out from their sheath.

The image is slightly askew. In terms of the challenge, it is not Apollo whose breath matters; in fact, he plays the lyre. Marsyas, on the other hand, plays an *aulos*, a double flute. Dante, in conflating breath with judgment, along with inspiration, seems to be suggesting that Marsyas, part animal, part human, can neither exonerate himself, nor escape. In Titian's rendering, he is skinned upside down, as if inversion were also his fate. The violence of it is not to be looked at askance. His presumption lay in asserting that his own breath was superior to the god's. Dante seems moreover to be implicating himself and his hubris in creating even the smallest simulacrum of his experience. He constantly confesses his guilt at being a poor poet, urging the reader to understand that the marvels he described are hapless reductions of the real thing. What he most desires is impossible, and yet the result, the *Commedia*, is a towering work.

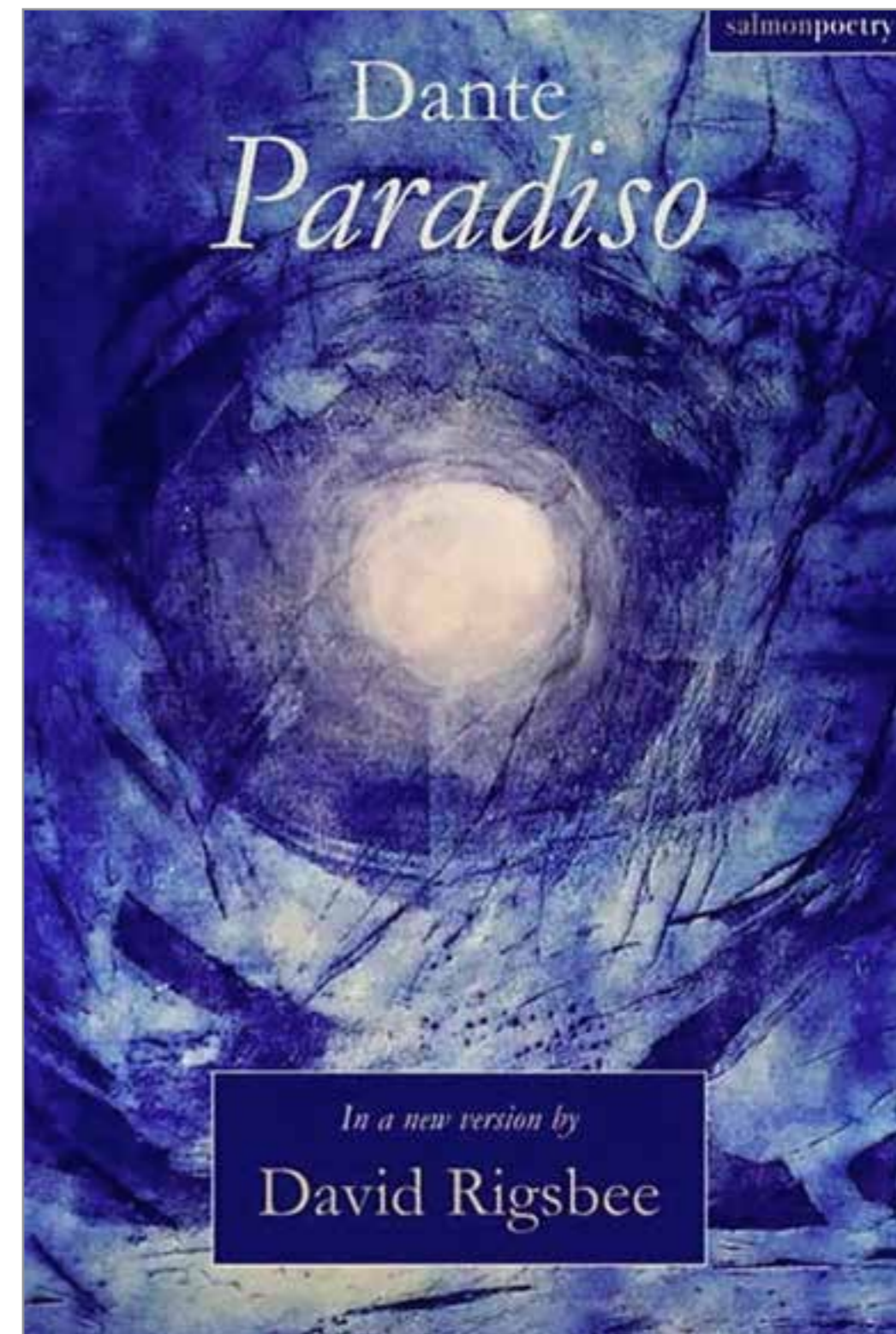
Are we to presume that Marysas was happy? That he challenged the god? That he inspired Ovid and Titian? When you look at the painting upside down, you can only conclude that Marysas' expression is one of puzzlement, not pain.

The paradox so obsessively worked over and into the poem explains why poetry fails. Silence, on the other hand, is mute in its triumph. I wrote another poem during this period in which I had the temerity to counter Yeats. In it, I allude to the commute up the Appalachians from Blacksburg and Charlottesville, and speak of a mountain I used to encounter. It looked like a mammoth vault, and it began to symbolize for me the impossibility of passage, although the highway easily curled around it.

### The Red Tower

For two years I drove by a mountain  
and wondered how long it would take  
to tunnel through using a teaspoon.  
That's how dead my brother was.  
No, more. And I thought the young  
Yeats was wrong when he wrote  
that God talked to those long dead.  
I imagined a blinking tower  
on a mountain: the red light pulsed  
but raised no one. Because even if  
God talked to the dead, what could  
He possibly say to them?  
What could He possibly say?

Of course I can't answer the question. It would be absurd. But the question itself revives a paradox where I felt myself ready to sharpen my pencil. If then paradox is a kind of ground for writing, then genres and theories are relieved of their obligations to sort and judge. They were *sui genesis* after all. Elizabeth Bishop's Robinson Crusoe, another lost world-maker, cries, "Homemade! Homemade! But aren't we all?" Home, or, as Bishop might insist, "home," sits up against the silence of its defeat—and its self-defeat. Crane's cedar leaf passes beneath the sky, many times parsed, always silent. Am I happy with this generalization? Well, that would be overstatement, but even then immediately come the qualifications, the interlinear whisperings, and the homely made thing, even a golem that melts to indifferent clay when its task of revenge is done.



Available at : <https://www.salmonpoetry.com>

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



## DOLCE FAR NIENTE

In the repose of light seagulls cross the silence  
of the afternoon we sense to be ebbing,

nothing passes by, but time trapped inside  
the golden dreams carried behind eyelids.

There's a scent of roses and algarrobos  
by the seashore, iodine and salt on my fingers

after playing with your long hair resting,  
like a soft Teddy, on my lap. Such levity

in the mauve-rose sky tiptoeing to polished silver,  
the protective silk wrapping of the soft breeze!

On this last day of October, I drink  
with my eyes the beginning of copper

on the leaves of aspens, your slow breathing  
rising towards the sun like a sunflower

and I know with certain melancholy  
that this single moment will not return.

Alicia Viguer-Espert



## SHADOWS

*After Jose Saborit Viguier Sombras*

appeared at the same time  
light illuminated the pupil  
and never left us since.  
When Pliny imagined Butades' daughter  
tracing her beloved's profile  
projected by candle light on the wall  
just before his departure,  
he gave birth to an image  
to alleviate absence's pain,  
introduced the invention of a double,  
a visible imitation of the original,  
a consolation to evade confronting  
the irreparable wound of time,  
creating the presence of an absence.

Much earlier, in Altamira, \*  
the trembling light of cave fire  
must have thrown silhouettes over rocks  
that someone filled with ocher, ash,  
and bloody hands from the hunt.  
Even before fire, the sun  
invited humans to embrace  
an opaque duplicate world  
when they discovered their own shadows  
thrust over earth, or the silhouette  
of a flying bird over sand.

And as moving light changed shapes stretched by sunset,  
or disappeared under cumulus clouds,  
it projected its first facsimile:  
shadows

*\*Altamira Caves, 40.000 years old Paleolithic Paintings in the Cantabria region of Northern Spain.*

## VISION

I sit at the door of my soul.  
Five thousand birds land on the single branch  
of a transparent tree working on its chlorophyll.  
The soft cocoon of a breeze wraps me  
in silk, while a beetle carries a ball  
of dung up the dunes. I search for camels,  
goats, anything that could have left  
such valuable present on the sand.  
I am in awe at the tenacity of this beetle  
rolling back, rolling forth like Sisyphus.

The five thousand birds' wings glow  
like fireflies, ride into stratocumulus  
before a few disappear, but the mass remains  
frighten by the journey to liberation.  
Attar\* sees through behind their excuses,  
the nightingale refusing to leave a beloved rose,  
the peacock concerned about its plumage,  
and the greedy owl lack of faith on the trip.

The beetle slides, masterminds its future  
as it keeps climbing. Ataraxia relaxes  
my fists into palms to receive blessings.  
Free of judgement my thoughts join a stream  
of consciousness, which joins a river,  
which joins the universal ocean  
of awareness, which affects the cosmos.  
My soul wishes to stretch its legs,  
inspect where light originates,

quietly attend to the river  
of life.

*\*Farid ud-Din Attar, an XI century Sufi mystic author of "the Conference of the Birds."*

Alastair Clarke is a New Zealand writer. He has recently returned to the country after years living abroad, in the U.K. and Australia. He is re-seeing his country. Poems most recently have appeared in *Antipodes* (U.S), *Orbis* (U.K.), *Poetry New Zealand* (2018, 2022), *Landfall*, *Fresh Ink*, *A Fine Line* and *Ezine*. His work has been published in the collections, *SEEING* (2022) and *GREEN RAIN* (2023).



## ELSEWHERE

You might think of elsewhere  
of Elsewheres

in a kind of rhapsody  
of worlds "out there"

floating in blue  
while world warms

sweating upon warm  
upon the stink of fire

upon smoke's blackening pyre  
(you might question this line)

You might dream of elsewhere  
of otherness

that it's easy to escape  
Yet Elon's other-world

remains illusion  
It's this that remains

All that is  
Love it or leave it?

It's love that remains

Alastair Clarke

## SO LONG...

So long, this estuary, the fishing  
boats moored close, lobster pots, nets strewn  
over the small jetty; worn ropes from

rigging and fishing, smelling of  
fishing. The calm of the inlet,  
the calm inland from sea.

Trawlers, worn working boats, honest  
sloops, tender dinghies on racks on  
shore, scattered trolleys. Seabirds

foraging, plunging the incoming  
tide. A quiet, advancing, closing  
the day. This we saw, somehow in

celebration – our brief vision –  
the bay, sheltered beneath low hills;  
the steady rippling of small wave

following wave; of lives lived across  
tides. I'll finish. We're leaving soon.

## THE BIRDS

The light to-day in this other season.  
How the little lake glistens  
like glass (yes, this cliched, yet true)  
while the ducks, the Canada geese

fling ripples rippling across  
the glass. Here houses house the lake  
while the dogs and their walkers  
together make humanness.

The trees – maples mainly – are now  
empty of leaves, yet the kingfishers  
still swiftly pass in brief flashes  
of bright green and blue.

I believe in the birds – all of them:  
they are alive, are presentness.  
They defy the stillness – the suburban  
stillness here in all seasons.

Amy Abdullah Barry is published widely. Featured in Breaking Ground Ireland. Her poems have been translated into many languages including Italian, Persian, Turkish, Azerbaijani and Spanish. Chosen for the Poetry Ireland Introduction Series 2022. A travel lover, she is the founder of Global Writers. Amy has been awarded literature bursaries from the Arts Council and Words Ireland. She is a professional member of The Irish Writers Centre and, an Honorary member of the Pablo Neruda Association, Italy. She regularly organises poetry & music events in her hometown, Athlone. She has performed her work in Ireland and internationally. 'Flirting with Tigers' is her debut collection of poems published by Dedalus Press. <https://www.dedaluspress.com/product/flirting-with-tigers/>



## A THOUSAND DIPS

One quiet morning,  
my electric gate doesn't work:  
Joe's dairy cows stray  
like errant schoolchildren  
through my garden.

There must be a hundred,  
all trampling my lawn,  
wild  
as a herd  
from some old cowboy movie.

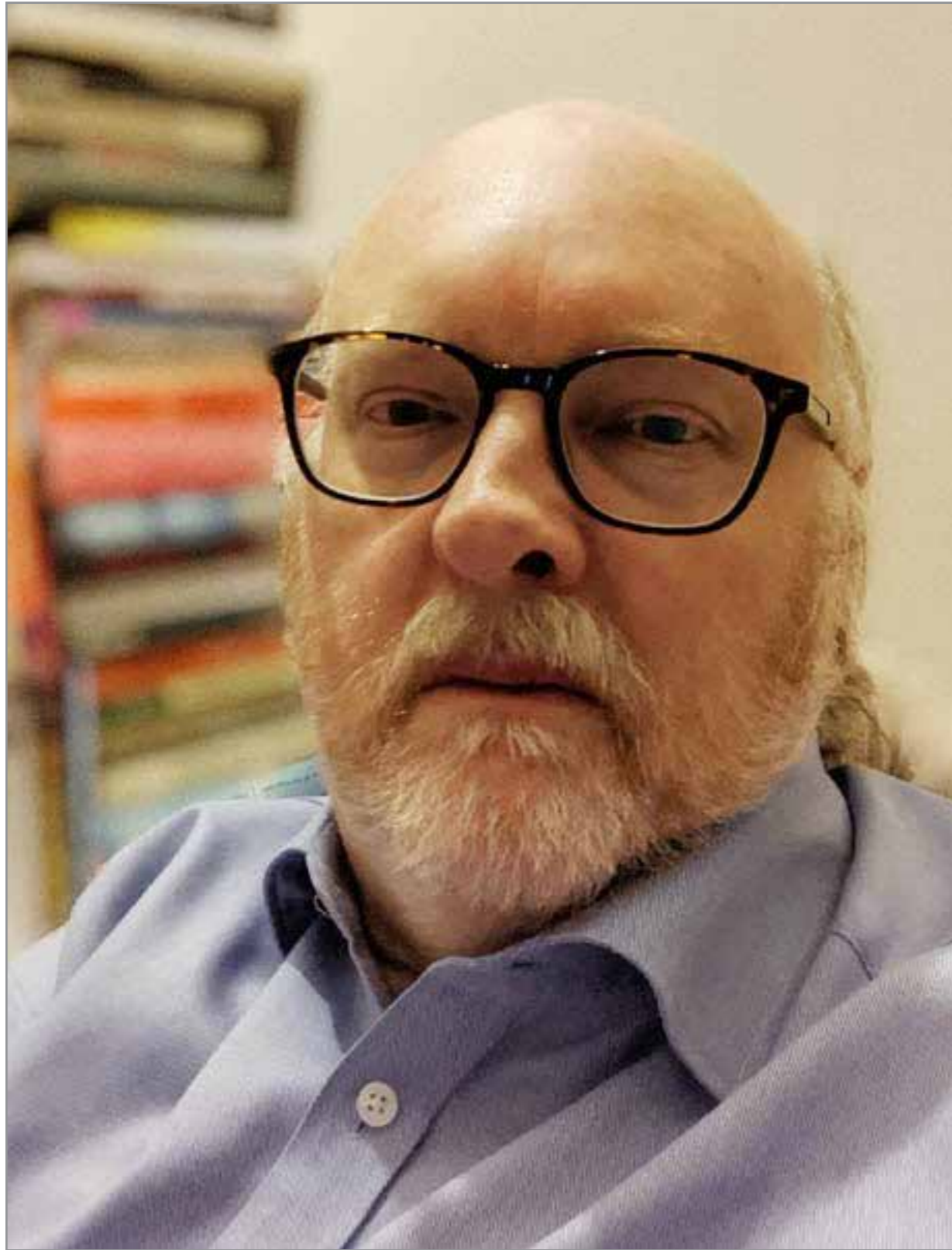
They sink into my two ponds  
deepest corners,  
churning their water sepia  
like the stirring of teabags.  
Even the fountain sculptures tumble.

Their hoof prints are six inches deep.  
Joe fills the holes,  
re-seeding each with a generous scatter.  
I am doubtful when he says,  
'The lawn will heal again.'

In time,  
I accustom myself to the sight  
of a thousand dips among the green.

Amy Abdullah Barry

David Morgan is by profession a journalist and editor based in London and Manchester. He has been writing poetry for as long as he can remember but has only started to take this activity more seriously in recent years. His poems always aim to be tinged with humour although addressing big issues and themes. David seeks to draw out universal relevance from personal experiences and incidents that provoke him to compose poems. Usually, the poems come to him quite spontaneously and are written at a breakneck speed; whether this method of composition shows through for good or ill is perhaps best left for the reader to decide.



## WHAT IF

What if, instead of food banks,  
Those stains on common humanity and our lasting shame,  
We had book banks where everyone queued  
Not in cowering desperation but in proud anticipation  
Of sustenance, mindful renewal and choice enlightened words  
That truly would be food for thought.

What if books unsold rather than food were discounted at close of play  
And rather than an unsightly scramble for reduced cost sour dough bread, slightly stale,  
We stand as dignified humans celebrating our boundless capacity for curiosity,  
As we rush to discover timeless classics at bargain basement prices  
There is no staleness in crafted words no matter how old they be.

David Morgan

## LAZY CHILDHOOD DAYS

Lying lazily on the grass beneath the twisting branches  
 Of a sprawling tree whose species I could never say  
 Lost to the world on a breezy summer's day  
 No school for another four weeks  
 No tasks or duties left to perform  
 My mum had all the chores under control  
 Or so I selfishly assumed without ever offering to help  
 It was indeed a long, long time ago  
 How I laughed when grandma insisted  
 Childhood was the best time of your life  
 As she repeatedly did on every Sunday visit  
 Munching on tinned salmon sandwiches  
 As we watched the afternoon serial  
 Then headed for home on the big red bus  
 Every Sunday afternoon without fail  
 Each activity precision timed  
 A family ritual whose knot remained tightly tied  
 Until finally grandma was no more  
 A first harsh lesson in death's close presence  
 My first memory of a loved one's passing  
 Guilt ridden that I was unable to cry at the news  
 Grieving another ritual learned the hard way  
 Long gone those carefree lazy days

## CONFESSIONAL – I NEVER REALLY LIKED IT

An outstretched hand delicately, almost, but not quite,  
 Caressing the tip of a woman's breast  
 A young couple unashamed to be undressed.  
 Hands entwined at the concert hall.  
 Is that where joy resides?  
 A kind of intimacy is what we all seek,  
 What we are schooled to need,  
 Desire that motivates behaviour.  
 Structuring our feelings.  
 Delimiting our choices.  
 Fixing our preoccupations.  
 It's a pursuit that consumes all.  
 Lapping up our time, energy and resources,  
 We expend too much in such fruitless pursuit,  
 To largely ignoble ends, momentary spasms  
 And infrequent satisfactions.  
 I never really liked it.  
 Of course, one experimented.  
 Once or twice, I had my fingers burned  
 Learning the lessons of life the hard way  
 As we fragile humans are wont to do.

Erin Shiel lives and writes on Gadigal land in Newtown, Sydney. She has had poems published in journals and anthologies such as Mascara, Meanjin, Cordite and Australian Love Poems. In 2022 she won the South Coast Writers Centre Poetry Award. Her debut collection *Girl on a Corrugated Roof* was published in June 2023 (Recent Work Press). She has worked in the health and community sectors, particularly in cancer prevention and early detection as well as in support services for children and families. She is currently training to be a counsellor and is enthusiastic about the role of creativity and poetry in therapy.



## A BRANCH WHERE THERE ARE NO TREES

Sometimes our bodies know before our minds. I see  
my four-year-old, plump legs pumping back and forth  
over a branch on the beach. I sit fifty metres away  
indulging in the rest from the rolling questions: how deep  
does the sand go? where do seagulls go to bed?

His baby years are over. How foolish I am to think  
of him as grown up. He still senses his path through  
his days directly in his limbs not mediated by the brain  
with half thoughts of details like how far we are from town,  
what type of tree that branch came from and why a long

branch would be on this beach where there are no trees,  
only scrubby bush. Leaping over and back, feet dancing  
in the heat, sand slipping between his toes. He stops to look  
closely at the stick, squatting down low. I see him freeze  
from the corner of my eye as I scan the rippled horizon

thinking of words to form a line. I hold back for a moment.  
The peace will be over. The line is nearly formed. But then  
I run. He is silent as I hoist him up and step away  
from the brown snake. It wakes to my heavier tread  
and slithers like a quickened creek back into the scrub.

His hands clutch at my neck as we watch and breathe in time.

Erin Shiel

## A PHOTO OF ELEONORA

At the Hotel Fiordaliso  
the old men sit in iron  
chairs watching the haze  
over the lake. Humming  
boats drag in whitebait.  
Thousands of tiny fish

flickering a last swish  
before they become antipasto.  
Late afternoon sun trapped  
in their tiny scales:  
fairy lights in a net.  
Eleonora focuses on the lights.

When they are too bright  
she looks down in the water  
at a landscape of pebbles.  
Hard on the feet, yet  
they look like little pillows.  
It's only early spring.

The water is still cold.  
She closes her eyes  
regaining her composure.  
He wants a Peaceful  
Madonna in the photo.  
The old men try to avert

their eyes from her nudity.  
It is so quiet she can hear  
their conversation tinkling  
across the flat lake. Ripples  
from the fishing boats rock  
his boat. He almost loses

his balance. She suppresses  
a smile as he dries the camera  
lens. Later she will lie  
in the boathouse and think  
of the photos she will take,  
on her day off.



Gary Fincke's new essay collection *The Mayan Syndrome* was published by Madhat Press in October. Its lead essay "After the Three-Moon Era," was reprinted in *Best American Essays 2020*. His previous collection *The Darkness Call* won the Robert C. Jones Prize (Pleides Press, 2018).



Gary Fincke

## TRACTORS

Near where I had recently begun to teach English at a Western New York high school, a tractor vanished beneath the earth when a farmer drove too early into the onion fields. Curious, I drove twenty miles to stare at a large, green John Deere as it rose from the early May mud, heaved up by pulleys.

One of my home room students, fifteen that spring, had lost an eye in a farm accident nearly seven years earlier. The empty socket had been stitched closed. Her hair always hung across that socket and the nearby scars like a veil. None of the veteran teachers knew whether or not she would eventually receive an artificial eye or plastic surgery, but they all had heard that the girl was piggyback riding her father and lost her hold. The girl, they agreed, had been wearing shorts and a t-shirt because the spring weather, that year, had been warm, the soil supporting the weight of the tractor. One colleague in the faculty lounge said that the father's black Harvester tractor had flushed birds that startled the girl into losing her balance. He didn't reveal how he knew that.

That summer, the younger brother of one of my students tumbled under the harrow that trailed what the newspaper described as his father's red New Holland. Before the service, the older boy looked at the floor, not speaking, when I reached his spot in the receiving line. During the funeral, the minister said, "Remember the nine years of joy that child has brought," as if the dead boy had been that farmer's pet. The father rushed from the church, his shoulders so hunched it appeared as if he was being dragged.

In September, the girl with one eye was in my first-period class. For a month, her head always tilted down toward her opened book. She never answered when I called on her. In October, instead of questioning her, I asked her to read aloud a story's important paragraph. Each week, as fall drifted into winter, she flawlessly read what I asked for, the only times she ever spoke.

In March, the boy whose brother had been killed quit school. In May, while the girl was reading, the school's fire alarm sounded to begin the mandatory monthly test, and she looked up so suddenly that her hair parted, exposing her damaged eye. I was the only one facing her. For once, she did not bow her head.

After school, I drove into the country, choosing back roads with little traffic until I passed an expanse of what would soon become onion fields where a deep-blue or black tractor sat a dozen rows deep. I could not identify its make, but I could clearly see that the farmer was crouched beside the tractor, facing away from it, his eyes fixed on the plowed earth between the road and where he squatted. As if he was lost in thought. As if he felt ghost-like, and was waiting to re-enter his body.

## CHILDREN'S DAY

Before Sunday School ended, my friend and I were led aside by his mother. "It's going to take some time to make you two become African boys," she said. "Ready?"

She laid a towel around our shoulders. "Hold those tight," she said. "Now close your eyes and keep them closed until I say 'Open.'" Then she went to work, carefully darkening our faces, applying a deep shade of brown to our foreheads, cheeks, and chins. "There," she said at last. "And don't touch your face or you'll make a mess."

The minister's wife had written a play for Children's Day that featured grade-school kids from seven countries. Some mothers had sewn costumes. There were Chinese girls--"Orientals," she called them--who got to wear wore long, slinky dresses. A pair of boys became Germans by wearing lederhosen. The two smallest boys wore sombreros to be Mexican. My friend and I were simply "from Africa." None of the other children, not even the two girls pretending to be from China, were different by color. Unlike the other children, we wore our regular clothes. Our costumes were our faces. I felt chosen.

My friend and I had speaking parts, but only in a chorus that said in a ragged unison, "We are the children of the world, all of us watched over by God and blessed by Jesus." The dialogue, all of which I've forgotten, was carried on by boys and girls who were in grades three through five. A few flashbulbs went off during the performance. Even though there was the Doxology and the Recessional hymn left to sing, there was applause after that chancel play. It was 1951, mid-June. I was less than three months from beginning first grade.

In truth, neither my friend nor I had any sense of what we were becoming except African boys. Not African-American, a phrase that was unheard of. Not boys like the ones who lived only a mile or two from where we stood, across the borough line that we had no idea was an invisible wall constructed by real estate agents and banks that were encouraged to do so by some members of our church and even a few of our relatives.

My aunt, afterward, said, "Don't you look cute. Like a little pickaninny."

"Like a little Al Jolson," my uncle said, and he sang a few lines of "My Mammy" while he described how Jolson, his face darkened more deeply than mine had been, got down on one knee and pleaded for a chance to relive the past. It was as if my friend and I had worn white shirts for a sharper contrast rather than wearing those shirts only because we did every Sunday, no exceptions.

My mother said, "Stepin' Fetchit," a character she'd seen years ago in a movie and called me a few times when I reacted slowly to requests or took too long getting dressed. I'd never asked about the movie, but the combination of the name and her tone identified who I appeared to be, lazy and simple-minded, not an ordinary boy from Africa.

At last, my mother waited to clean me up while my father walked my older sister, a third-grader who'd memorized and recited a dozen lines of dialogue, to the three, upstairs rooms we rented on the same block where the church was located just outside of Pittsburgh. "I hope you're never in a minstrel show like your Uncle Jerry, not while you're under my roof," she said. "This here is some terrible mess."

I knew what a minstrel show was. I'd sat through one in the church basement the winter before. Uncle Jerry had a part in it -- Brother Bones. A family friend had played Mr. Interlocutor, whose job it was to encourage Uncle Jerry and three other men with painted faces to keep talking in a way that made people laugh.

People I'd never seen in church attended, so the basement was crowded with bodies seated on folding chairs. For a while, Uncle Jerry and the rest of the men sang songs like "Swanee River" and even "My Mammy." I had been restless, whatever was funny not reaching me at age five, attending because my parents supported the church and paying for a babysitter was unthinkable.

But what I knew, even then, was that the church members who wore blackface that night were meant to be American men, not African ones. Men from the South, a place I'd never been. Where neither of my parents had ever been as well. The farthest south I'd ever traveled was a park just over the Pennsylvania border in West Virginia.

My mother, that afternoon, was mostly complaining because I'd touched my face a few times, something that was obvious because I'd smeared my fingers on the cuffs of my white shirt. "Whose bright idea was this," she muttered. "This isn't that charcoal the men use. It better all wash out or there will be hell to pay."

## MY DAUGHTER, TALKING ABOUT BOYS WHO DROVE HER

My daughter, talking about boys who drove her in cars during high school and college, mentions the one who sported the current year's demo from his father's dealership, the license plate announcing its short con like a badly made phony ID. Together, we laugh now, but that amusement was not shared the year she turned fourteen, that boy a senior who idled near the end of the driveway as if she was stealing something worth waiting for from our house.

Not laughing, she mentions the boy who loved art as much as she did, drawing and painting with her after school like a co-curricular teammate. The one who, before graduation, died from natural causes a year after failing the blood test for leukemia.

She gives herself up to that list, moving to the one, insulin dependent, who drank himself into a coma through which she anxiously waited. The one who recovered and starred in several redundant sequels.

The one who consoled her when her cat hung itself from our deck. The one who listened to her cry until he declared there was a limit of grief-time for a cat, changing the subject to his upcoming internship, then refused to look at the cat's grave after I buried it.

The one who called from the distant city of late-night melancholy, singing his songs about her that featured a mixture of regret and desire. He is the one, she says, who still texts sporadically, mournful messages become so brief they seemed to have passed through the atmosphere of years like the residue of meteors.

My daughter, four years past forty, now swells with the child of her second husband, a man so stable his story is told in silence. His absence, today, is caused by work. He will arrive, like always, shortly after his shift is finished. He will not ask for a beer.

My daughter watches her girls drift to the shallow end to check their phones, making room, she says, for an update on the boy who sped her, senior year, to a Friday movie as if the theater were an emergency room, then called someone else the following week and drove that classmate into a rollover off a country road, the trauma enough to kill her.

There's news, she says, a reason for bringing him up at poolside a quarter of a century later. That driver has been discovered dead, cause unknown. She looks at her watch as if there are only seconds left to finish this story. Not anywhere near here, she says. Not even in the United States. In a country where English is seldom spoken or even carried through customs like a valuable history to be declared.

Jayne Marek has published writings and art photos in *Rattle*, *Salamander*, *Bloodroot*, *One*, *Chestnut Review*, *Northwest Review*, *Spillway*, *Eclectica*, *Calyx*, *Catamaran*, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, *Notre Dame Review*, and elsewhere. Winner of the Bill Holm Witness poetry contest, she has been nominated for Best of the Net and Pushcart Prizes. Her six poetry collections include *In and Out of Rough Water* (2017) and *The Tree Surgeon Dreams of Bowling* (2018), with another book, *Dusk-Voiced*, due in 2023.



## CASCADIAN NOCTURNE

Past midnight: an invisible world I step into  
half-dressed. On a deck, a humid summer breeze  
strokes my arm. The deodar cedar next door  
and my Douglas-firs swing in the wind, exhale—  
how much breath fills one back yard.

When sounds begin in the deodar—squeaks  
as of a small wheel rubbing, then low snorts,  
bubbly, grunting, two, three, like contented swine  
amid cedar boughs—I hold my breath.

For long minutes I listen to private lives:  
the tree holding its unseen passengers, the animals—  
I think, a sow raccoon and her young—  
who do not expect me to be eavesdropping  
in the dark, adrift in evergreen scents,

astonished by the appraisals of the night.

Jayne Marek

## SOLO DANCE

1

Alone, I leave my car  
under parking-lot trees,  
walk the aisle between bushes.  
It's mystery, as late light  
drips from an alder twig  
while crowds of leaves shimmer  
as if a performance's last notes  
were spinning echoes  
into the balconies  
of velvet forest.

2

Woods open to a lake  
with swimming area stitched  
by a string of buoys. Sky  
reflects in minuscule puckers,  
the meniscus boots  
of water striders. They skate  
in random fits  
then speed away. A handful  
of shadows scatter coins  
across the shallow bottom:  
bravo!

3

Along the edge of the lake,  
prints four inches across,  
an inch deep in sand.  
Like blossoms, petals evenly spaced,  
four shaping each circle. Rounds  
within rounds. A solo dance.  
The houselights of afternoon still on.  
I stretch out my stride  
to match the cougar's,  
my shoes three feet apart.

## THE YOGA OF ORCHIDS

for Hannah

Orchid buds, nearly transparent,  
are like the eyelids of an infant,  
a girl, sleeping in a crib.  
Morning sun finds her room  
and marvels at her, then spreads  
its arms across the outdoors,  
touching twig tips,  
inviting orchids to bloom.

A birthday means the opening  
of a new being. No longer  
waiting, nor simply part  
of a mother, but another,  
the young one comes to awareness,  
her body folded, quiet,  
breathing in, breathing out,  
in a resting pose.

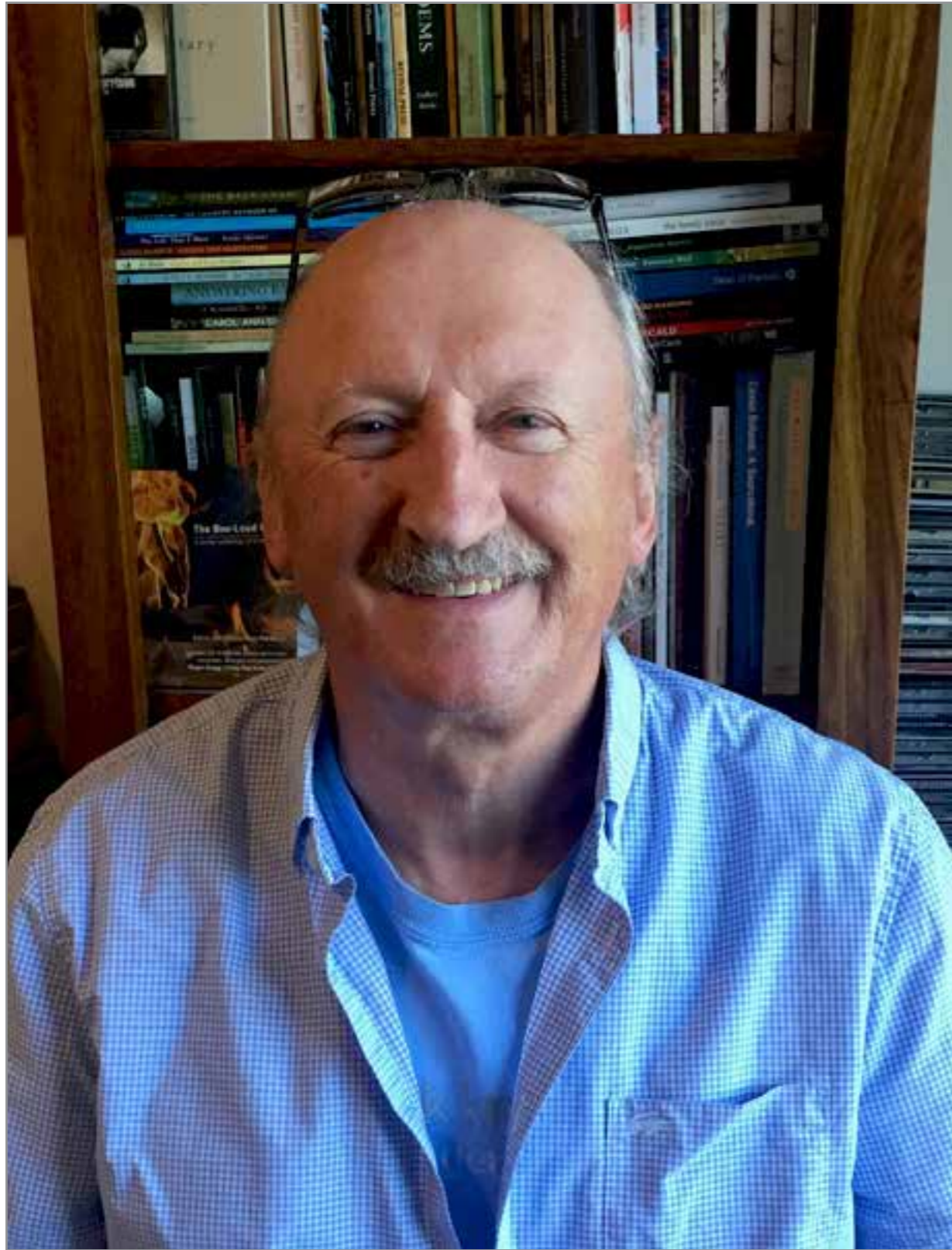
In gardens around the world,  
orchid plants blossom  
in dappled light.

The baby's tiny hands  
are like florets on a stem,  
poised along a green path  
into her parents' hearts.  
Now, she stretches  
as if in sun salutation,  
relaxes and reaches for her feet,  
reclined butterfly.

When she is older,  
she will move into the world  
with all its colors,  
following beauty  
and its strong sibling, truth.  
A white orchid holds up  
the shape of two hands,  
poised at heart center.

Jim Burke lives in Limerick, Ireland, and is Co-founder with John Liddy of The Stony Thursday Book. He completed his MFA in Creative Writing in Manchester Metropolitan University in 2018. Some of his haiku are featured in the anthology *'Between the Leaves'* (2016) edited by Anatoly Kudryavitsky. 'Quartet' poems with Mary Scheurer, Peter Wise and Carolyn Zukowski appeared in 2019. 'Montage' appeared from The Literary Bohemian Press in 2021.

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



## HALCYON DAYS

If I think about our time now, how boy-scout skills set up a camp fire and pitched the tent near the pond beyond a small oak tree in a wild field. We'd made good progress on the road from Kinvara, uncertain what we'd find; we loved the sea and we wanted the sea, but we hadn't reached it yet. At supper time we rattled off themes from the stories of Macken and O'Flaherty. In those days also, you loved Kavanagh, I loved Yeats. I always laughed at how someone had scrawled across my school book: *I hates Yeats*. Those were our early *Plantxy* days too. We'd seen *Easy Rider*, but we hadn't read *Cré Na Cille*, nor read O'Flaherty's masterpiece, *Famine*. There on the outskirts of oblivion, we watched frogs jumping into a pond. Basho had done this centuries ago in Japan on his travels to a Far Province, and somewhere up around the bend the sea waited for us. We could taste the salt in the wind. Maybe tomorrow, or the next day, we'd reach the sea and we'd jump in filling the sound.

Jim Burke

## THE ROCKY PLACE

Cloud coloured like rock  
suddenly descends on us.  
What can be said about all this rock?

Up there, we pause for the portal tomb,  
then you cycle on in front of me,  
become a reconning eye, a dart

sailing smoothly over a three hundred  
and twenty five-million-year-old tropical sea.  
Descending from the rocky place

I snatch glimpses of you just getting  
narrower and narrower, bend by bend,  
in the green of the roadside hazel trees.

## WHEN WE CAME TO A PLACE

where the passionate dead  
scattered around us, might  
return, who'd lived fifty

or one hundred years ago,  
their bleak living  
that was worth its weight;

the greatest effort of all  
to halt things falling back  
into the wilderness.

Stretched roses rose up  
a graveyard wall,  
fiercest the memory

of creating a self.  
A rag, a heart, a bone,  
a war of tongues

double meanings  
inventing and re-inventing  
resilience. We sat down

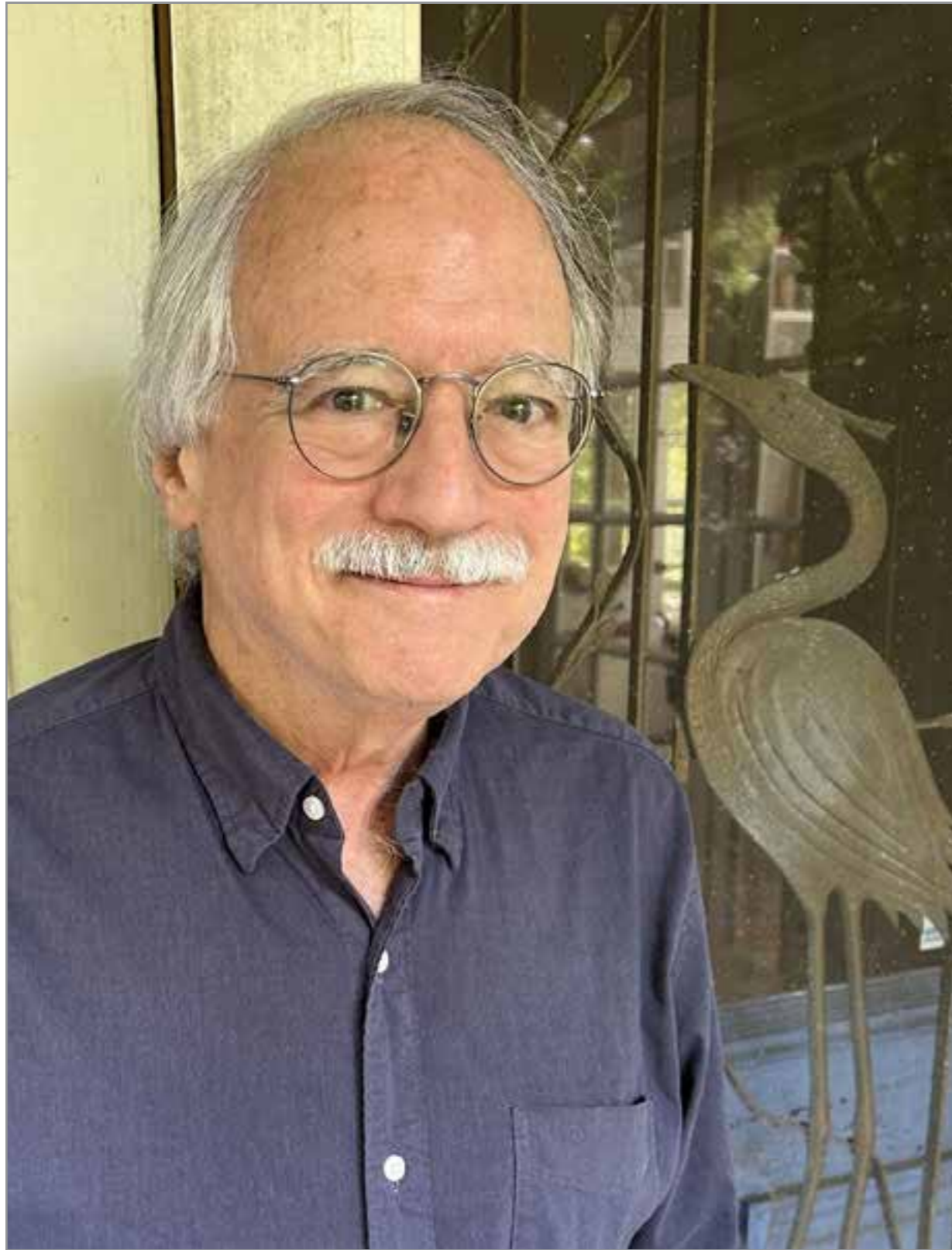
in Kilfenora, knocked  
on the door of philosophy  
and claimed together

that life is lived in moments.  
There was no one present  
to share our discovery

early sunlight had cut  
night from turf and made  
its way from someplace

into our boots and breakfast  
cups, fields had become a green  
coat buttoned by limestone.





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

## ODE TO A NEW REGIME

*Maybe the tongues of men  
O'er-riding truth's sure word, deceive  
With false-spun tales, the embroidery of lies.*  
—Pindar, *Olympian Ode I*  
(translated by G.S. Conway)

And now the manifesto, the fluttering capes  
of the movement's ambassadors.  
Wingtips click  
on marble, the corridors  
of hurry and hush, before the fanfares  
tooting in the briefing room.

And I turn away, turncoat, shunning the victors  
for the victims, however worn  
and worthless,  
pulled to the opposition  
as one, loving music, at last flicks off  
the radio, walks down flights.

And I stand there,  
below the commotion and the statuary,  
trying to ignore the ocean breakers  
of voices, acclaiming themselves, their credo  
gibberish  
in the night air of lilac,  
honeysuckle,  
mint.

John Philip Drury. Photo credit: Tess Despres Weinberg.

## ODE TO A BAMBOO CUP

Cracked culm, round-lipped and tea-colored,  
 gift from the botanist  
 who worked in Canton in the Thirties,  
 cultivating tree-grass:  
 yellow-groove, sweet-shoot, fishing-pole,  
 arrow, Chinese goddess.

I cannot drink from it—fractured  
 where bamboo leaves are gouged  
 and tinted white, where characters  
 are sunk like heron tracks  
 in a riverbank. I cannot  
 sip from the plant's hollow.

But I recall  
 the botanist who also gave me  
 a lexicon in which to puzzle out  
 the heart radical,  
 and I recall how bamboo stands he planted  
 still unscroll their long, curved leaves  
 and bend in the wind.  
 How can I drink his health when he is gone?  
 With drafts of air? Instead, I'll keep  
 the broken cup  
 upon my desk and plant a stand  
 of pens and pencils slanting on the lip.

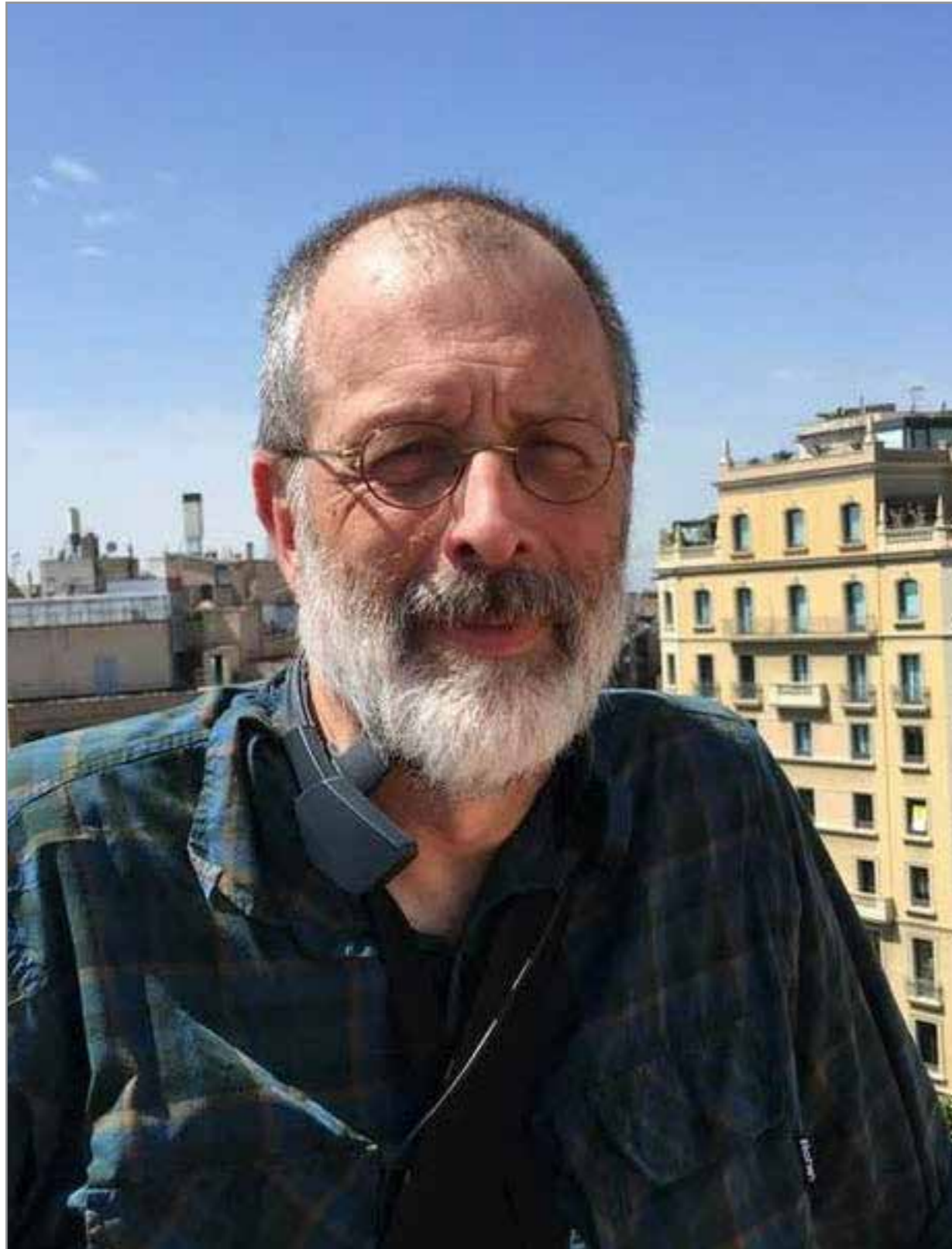
## ODE TO A ROOM NEAR THE SPANISH STEPS

A man who looked like Chico Marx  
 collared me in the terminal.  
 "You want a room or no?" he said, "Come on,"  
 and led me to a hotel  
 not listed in the guidebook.  
 My narrow room cooked like an incubator,  
 no breeze through the window, a scant view  
 of the noisy courtyard. I lay  
 sheetless in the July night, basting myself  
 with sweat, switching on the lamp to jot  
 and drip on a spiral pad.

The forum jolted me to life,  
 the fragments like spare parts, blocks, disks,  
 an energy of blasted acreage.  
 I drank iced tea in a huge  
 boot-shaped glass, in a café  
 under a vine-covered pergola. I looked  
 at sunlight on broken stone and thought  
 of my tiny room, the gas jet  
 I had to re-light to bathe, the peeling  
 mural, and a lone man rowing a boat  
 on the chipped mosaic floor.

Out of depression rose remnants of pillars,  
 laughing faces in fragments of colored stone.  
 In the Temple of Vesta, I found myself  
 where wreckage and refuse are more  
 than part of the whole: they *are* its whole.  
 Without them, truth is fume and fog, beauty  
 blurred like a cataract.

Jordan Smith is the author of eight full-length books of poems, most recently *Little Black Train*, winner of the Three Mile Harbor Press Prize and *Clare's Empire*, a fantasia on the life and work of John Clare from The Hydroelectric Press, as well as several chapbooks, including *Cold Night*, *Long Dog* from Ambidextrous Bloodhound Press. The recipient of fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim and Ingram Merrill foundations, he is the Edward Everett Hale Jr., Professor of English at Union College.



## ANOTHER ABANDONED NOVEL

When your letters to your heroine were returned,  
Addressed *post restante*  
To somewhere she had not foreseen  
You would even think to follow her,  
You had already abandoned your novel,

As you had already forsaken the diminished chord  
Tenuous, barely resolved,  
Over which the guitarist lingered, singing her name.  
A cliché, yes, especially in that kind of bar,

Which might or might not explain the scene she caused,  
There and in your deleted penultimate chapter  
Written in a style she would have thought beneath both of you,  
Even in a spat between lovers who had long ago  
Abandoned the notion of any difference  
Between propriety and property.

Pleased that, as the narrative receded  
Like her figure into the evening,  
She left only in the ash tray,  
A train ticket, one of a pair, torn so the destination was unreadable,

And her contempt that you had so quickly  
Abandoned, and so easily,  
The most you had to offer her desire:  
Words chosen only for effect,  
Words that would not ever go together well.

Jordan Smith

## AN EPISODE

*I don't have a condition, I have episodes,  
She told the querulous nurse at the desk  
In that hospital outside Geneva  
(The same one where Zelda Fitzgerald  
Took the rest cure that almost killed her),*

High above the lake, where all that light  
Whetting the edges of the whitecaps,  
Was more beautiful, she thought  
Than she or anyone had any right to expect

Who expected only one end or another with equal lack  
Of equanimity, adding

How she refused to join her friends at the Museum of Calvinism  
Since she knew already which of the two doors  
Was predestined to welcome her,

And, having no interest in a futile repentance,

She accepted F's invitation to join him on his racing sloop,  
A legacy from an uncle who had always disliked him--  
*Thirty-nine feet of upkeep,  
And I can barely afford my usual sins,*

*Although she does have the most entrancing lines--*

For a cruise to Yvoire,  
The medieval town on the French side,  
Thinking to take in its Jardin des Cinq Sens,  
Along with the champagne he opened as they left the harbor,

Just before he proved as poor a sailor  
As he was a fast drinker,  
Cutting through a racing fleet, jibing  
With no warning, and then,

As they approached the town,  
And a squall set the boat  
Almost on her side, then raked her against the wharf,  
Giving his head a little shake of triumph,  
Ludicrous, and whether

It was the suddenly cold wind  
Kicking up the spray or F's jaunty  
Indifference to the splintered woodwork,

Or the dwindling  
Perspective of the street rising between the tiny stone houses,  
As he tried to lead her  
Towards where, somewhere, the garden waited,  
Each groomed bed an homage to one sense's  
Subtly different tracing of pain,

She had not stopped shivering since,  
Shivering and pacing the deck of the tourist steamer  
That returned her  
To shiver and pace the tiny room of her hotel,

Until her friends hired the car and gave the driver the address,

And here I am, she said, and here is what I came for,  
Dropping the news photo  
Of the wrecked boat on the doctor's heavy  
And ornate desk.

*I have a craft,  
As fine as this, he said, only I  
Have learned to be more careful.*

## INTERNET RADIO

It was some kind of Breton/North African/Pashtun groove  
He clicked on accidentally (if accident  
Is even a concept these days)

Over that John Cale drone he remembered  
Holding all the A-heads together, barely,  
When the film behind the band snagged in the projector,

A corona, white light at the center and the brown-to-ash iris  
Flaring, like a consciousness

That had had just about enough of itself,

So, waiting in his usual café  
For his son's rehearsal to finish in the old church on Congress Street,  
Looking out on the terrace of the once-grand hotel

Where even so deep in winter couples sat  
Warmed by the spirit-blue torches between the tables,

He slid the headphones back into place,  
As the bendir and oud continued their conversation  
Like two friends at a party  
He didn't have the nerve to interrupt with his goodbyes,

And remembered the drive up 87 from the city  
Snow deepening at the Saugerties exit and then shivering in the lot  
Of the rest-stop before Hudson, as he shrugged  
Into the down jacket he'd grabbed from the corner of the loft

And thought he'd never wear against a cold he never felt,

Until the flute player's microtonal flurry  
Underscored each small difference  
Between the old dispensation and the new.

Judith Beveridge has published seven books of poetry. She was poetry editor of *Meanjin* for 10 years and also taught poetry writing for 16 years at post-graduate level at the University of Sydney. Her books have won major prizes including the 2019 Prime Minister's Award for Poetry. She has also won the Philip Hodgins Memorial Medal and the Christopher Brennan Award for excellence in literature. Her new volume *Tintinnabulum* will be published by Giramondo Publishing in 2024. She lives in Sydney Australia.



## HIP/PO/POT/A/ MUS/ES

Did an ambush of lions give rise to your growl,  
 the black mamba your nervous ferocity, the red-eyed  
 goshawk and blue wildebeest your lust for territory?  
 What buffoon cartoonist or male model cast  
 your jawline wider than your head? What crazed god  
 gave you the long-muzzled face of an Alaskan moose,  
 a wine-barrel body and a tail that spins slops of dung  
 through the air to mark territory and claim a mate?  
 Your jaws can break the backs of crocodiles  
 and trap the heads of rhinos—did a black-hearted  
 shaman hex you with an insatiable urge to kill  
 anything in your path? The blazing African sun  
 made your sweat glands exude a crimson sunblock.  
 Tsetse flies, midges, mosquitoes, and hawk wasps  
 accorded you gratitude for your miniature ears.  
 When you glide along a river's shallow bottom  
 what dancer or ballerina suggested the small, graceful  
 leaps, the weight-defying buoyancy to help you  
 resemble a horse on a carousel? And when I consider  
 the word *hippopotamuses*, was it a poet watching you  
 from along the Nile as she idly devised anagrams  
 from the title of her latest poem: 'Soup time, Sappho'  
 (*hot sumo puppies, mahouts poppies, set up opium shop*)  
 who came up with that order of syllables plosive enough,  
 the medial syllable weighty enough, that flow  
 of phonemes laughable enough to give your kind a name?

Judith Beveridge

## WEATHER DIVINATIONS

When a bandicoot scrapes a timber fence with its claws  
that is a sign of impending hail. If you walk through a bog

in bare feet and no leeches suck your blood then the sky  
will be clear for five days and you can go swimming and hiking.

Fast for three days, lick your finger and if the wind blows  
the spittle towards the left the dew will be heavy. If it blows

the spittle to the right then there will be blossom showers,  
contrails, and buff-shouldered falcons riding belts of light

winds in the Calms of Capricorn. If a rare blue finch  
comes to your window there will be a week of black ice

and sunsets the colour of the head wounds of murdered  
seismologists. If a flock of crows sits on your roof

there will be a battle of cold and warm fronts and a volcanic  
eruption causing crop failure, landslides, and acid rain.

When a crane sits on the back of a crocodile it means dust  
devils will blow. If it sits on the back of a snapping turtle

gales will form causing fishing boats to anchor in narrow  
channels where oiled sea-birds cry out and drown.

If a goat, a ferret, and a rat come to the door there'll be flash  
flooding in Africa, a blizzard in the Bahamas, and a beam of light

clearing the fog on Brockenspectre Mountain. If the goat comes  
alone the day will be calm, but if it comes walking backwards

with a thorn in its hoof, or accompanied by a goldfinch there'll  
be a tornado and a mock sun. If a climate change denier comes

to your door then watch the sky for sheet lightning in towering  
banks of cumulonimbus, and go to them with a simoon

on your breath, blood rain in your voice and speak of temperatures  
not even the frigate bird sailing through a storm could predict with

its forked tail and puffed chest, nor a line of larks following smoke  
from a chimney which is a clear sign of drought, nor the shadow

of a whistling kite falling over fields which is a sure sign of fire—  
oh, go to them and grieve knowing they can't read the signs.

Karen Greenbaum-Maya is a retired clinical psychologist, former German major and restaurant reviewer, and two-time Pushcart and Best of the Net nominee. Her work has appeared in journals including *Comstock Poetry Review*, *B O D Y*, *Rappahannock Poetry Review*, *CHEST*, and *Spillway*. Her collections include three chapbooks, *Burrowing Song*, *Eggs Satori*, and *Kafka's Cat* (Kattywompus Press), and, *The Book of Knots and their Untying* (Kelsay Books). A collection of poems about her late husband's illness and death from lung cancer in 2018, *The Beautiful Leaves*, was published in August 2023 by Bamboo Dart Press, and is also available through Amazon. She co-curates *Fourth Saturdays*, a poetry series in Claremont, California, as well as *Garden of Verses*, an annual day-long reading of nature poems in Claremont's California Botanic Garden.



## TURTLENECKS

Each prof in the German department was another country. Switzerland was blind in one eye, hypnotized us fiddling with his pipe, said he was waiting for us to begin. Gave no As, ever. Wore turtlenecks to stay warm. Nazi Germany had thick honey-blond hair and crystal eyes, was flat-bellied enough to look good in turtlenecks. Still authoritarian: a Marxist who lived well on inherited wealth, as full of aspiration as Wagner, and as much veneer. Post-war Germany, doctoral student at the university down the road, almost American, born just soon enough to know postwar famine, not American enough to lose his horror at the stinginess of skim milk. Wore turtlenecks so he wouldn't have to iron shirts and wear ties. And East Germany, the escape artist. who made it out to the West only on his third try. The Stasi told him they'd kill him if they caught him again. He headed to the Antipodes, to Korea, where he taught English and met his wife. Preferred wash-and-wear shirts. Escaped the college after precisely twenty-five years, just enough to achieve a pension. Gave dazzling lectures whose substance vanished the next hour, Like that joke about German-Chinese food: an hour later, you're hungry for power. Whatever insight I offered him was naïve, American. He always knew better than anything I offered. And I was the American abroad, worshiping Art, trying to escape who I was, my skin too sensitive ever to tolerate a turtleneck.

Karen Greenbaum-Maya



## BEYOND

I absorbed the stories of the grief group.  
A woman whose husband hadn't told her he had cancer.  
A man whose wife drank herself into death.  
A woman whose daughter had just gotten sober.

I told the group how I discovered  
a pile of my husband's shoes,  
how I wept over those shoes,  
all shaped like his poor feet.  
Then they all remembered  
how they too had grieved  
over the worn shoes.

They all talked about signs sent  
from the departed ones.  
So much emphatic nodding,  
such understanding hearts.  
I confessed I'd never felt  
such a sign, from beyond.  
They were certain I must be shutting it out,  
insisting *too scientific, too rational*.

How they erupted,  
outraged and self-satisfied  
as a flock of chickens. They affirmed  
how important these signs were  
for them, for their grieving.

*Tell me your signs, I begged,  
let me hope for unseen guardians,  
for enduring love.*

Late afternoon in early spring,  
the southern light fell in stripes  
through the blinds at the senior center.  
In silence, in accord with its nature,  
the sun headed north.

One by one, they admitted:  
not one had ever received a sign  
How hard they believed.

Karin Molde is a language teacher for high school students in Hamburg, Germany. Her ties with Ireland were fastened during her studies at the University of Ulster in Coleraine and University College Galway. Balancing a life with one foot in the Atlantic on the west coast of Ireland and one in the North Sea in Germany, she feels at home in both places, and when she walks along the beach or clambers over rocks, a strong wind pulling at her. She has published in magazines, both print and online, like *Skylight 47*, *Honest Ulsterman*, *The Wild Word*, and in anthologies, e.g. *Everything that can happen*. (Emma Press, 2019), *Identity* (Fly on the Wall, 2020), *Remembering Toni Morrison* (Moonstone Press, 2020), *New Beginnings* (Renard Press, 2021), and *Ukraine War Special Edition* (Poetica Review, 2022), and *Drawn to the Light* (2023). Her chapbook "Self-Portrait with Sheep Skull" is out with Moonstone Press, 2023.



## GHAZAL OF THE TREE OF LIFE

We are romantic travelers, resting in the shade of the baobab tree,  
fantasists singing their accolade of the baobab tree.

Boots camouflage in savannah dust. Lemayan, the blessed one,  
shields our camp. We sleep, unafraid under the baobab tree.

My lover puts the gauze of the milky way around my shoulders.  
The moon's hooked on a branch, a blade in the baobab tree.

Dry branches don't sigh under the weight of home.  
Sociable weavers serenade in the baobab tree.

The rainy season's song is muted; dust swallows sound.  
You count the cow's ribs as they dehydrate under the baobab tree.

The healer mixes roots and leaves, fruit pulp and seeds.  
Village elders drink essence to rehydrate under the baobab tree.

The baby splashes in the tub, water infused with bark.  
Her giggle a flowery cascade of the baobab tree.

If the velvety skin of the fruit were ours, I'd break it, devour  
our lusty escapade under the baobab tree.

Instead, what do I do? I run my hand on the scars of the trunk.  
Memory ages by 1000 years. Is this the last decade of the baobab tree?

The sapling you plant has juicy leaves the elephant won't chew.  
The matriarch slowly parades around the baobab tree.

Karin Molde

## A WRITER, DRAMATIST

*for Martin McDonagh*

an angry man, West of Ireland descent,  
bog man, bogeyman, who pens  
blood-dragged lines on the bark  
of storm-bent trees and cuts deep  
letters into grey branches of shrubs  
that root in the wet and cling to rock,  
who squeezes sap out of dead leaves;

an old-fashioned graffiti artist who tags  
his origin with the screams of a cat  
slung against a cottage wall, the wail  
of the mother when her heart rips  
at the return of the soldier, or his leaving,  
the shriek of the woman shut into cabin,  
or wooden box, the moan when she is  
arrested by the darkness of the blind.

This is the ancient pain  
where people morph into trees, or stone,  
and rocks come alive in human form;  
this is an agony inflicted, yet borne,  
a horror that hatches out of love;  
the broken egg shell placed on his open  
palm.

## I, NARCISSUS

squint my eyes, try  
to slice the pond's surface  
but duckweed is a blind mirror.  
I am not what you  
have turned me into, not  
enthralled by my own face.  
I am vagrant, jilted loner  
forever searching, and lost  
in forests, in groves.  
I lock into wolves' eyes,  
glacial-green, and dip  
into bog-dim eyes of deer  
but they are different. They roam  
in pack or herd, their bodies steam  
in moon-cold winter nights  
when I press mine to Earth,  
and seek her reflection  
on every watery surface.

I am 61, and the author of *Bent Not Broken*, *Life on the Line*, and *Mila and the Bone Man*. In 2019, following a debilitating spinal cord injury, I retired as a medical doctor. I am a graduate of AUT's Masters of Creative Writing program.



Lauren Roche

## JOY

They give her a room down the end, around the corner, away from the noise.  
They cover the machines, let her two pre-schoolers play near the foot of the bed, one scribbling with thick, broken crayons.

'Why do I have to? What's the bloody point?'

Her husband holds her hand.  
He looks across at their kids, making sure they have no direct view of what she'd laughingly called 'the pointy end' just two days ago.

'Keep them up by my face or occupied with something. Seeing the pointy end might scar them for life.'

He'd stroked her breast, her enormous belly. Felt the life tremble within.  
They'd laughed.

Both her sons were quieter in the last couple of days before they were born; heads down, ready to launch, no room for acrobatics.

The midwife stoops low, her eyes fixed on the mother's.

'You've got to push now. Be brave, it will soon be over.'

'I don't want it to be over.'

'Do you want gas?'

'No. I want a baby.'

'Let's support your feet, give you something to push against.'

The midwife and husband each support a thigh, rest her feet against their shoulders, opening the pelvic outlet and giving her leverage.

She'd had the usual scans, counted baby's fingers and toes and the four pumping chambers of her heart, and the length and integrity of her spine, and thickness of her neck. They'd seen her perfect little face, printed off the photo the hospital gave them, used it as a screen saver. So precious, two boys and now this little petal, a gift from heaven, this completeness of a child.

Completeness, complete mess.  
How the stroke of a key makes a difference.

With a roar she pushes, then another; a roar with guts and heart and fury and pain and grief entwined. The guttural sound that women only make when producing children and burying them.

A roar from her lungs and throat and the soles of her feet.

'Good job,' says the midwife, 'relax until the next one.'

'Oooh naughty mummy do poos in the bed.'

The two-year-old has wandered away from his toy, is sucking his thumb, staring at her battleground, her splayed legs, the pointy end.

uff, puff, pant.

The burning stinging stretch.

They lower her legs; the midwife places a clean towel ready for the crowning head.

Pant, pant.

'Oh, she's got hair, lots of dark hair, like her Dad.'

Hair, heir.

The head is delivered, both children now, watching, open eyed, the youngest begins to blub.

'Mummy hurt, mummy hurt.'

'Why the fuck did we bring them?'

The husband kisses her face, tastes the tears.

'Ssh, Lib, it's not their fault.'

The midwife slips her gloved finger around the baby's neck. It's an habitual action, make sure the cord is not tight, not cutting off breath.

With a final swoosh the baby slips like a selkie from the watery womb into the world.

The father had planned to cut the cord.

The midwife clamps it, offers the scissors.

He shakes his head.

She lifts the newborn; perfect, still, bloodless as a statue, onto a soft white towel. Uses a moist flannel to dab vernix from her face and head—the skin so delicate, it sloughs.

There is a blister on the babe's bottom lip, and mild webbing of her fingers—too slight to have shown on the scans.

Syndactyly. It's a family trait, shared with one brother.

The baby is laid upon her mother's swollen, useless breasts.

The children cuddle near; the older one wonders aloud whether they can still play with their sister as promised. His wee brother talks about buying batteries to make the baby move.

The parents rest their exhausted heads together as the midwife delivers the placenta.

There are seven little tears in her skin, but they need no stitches. She places a thick pad between the mother's legs.

'I am so sorry this happened to you,' she says. 'There was nothing, nothing that could have predicted it. You did nothing wrong.'

They take turns holding her, perfect, cooling. The boys get a cuddle too, the flash on the phone dazzling on her waxen skin.

Baby's hand and foot prints are taken, pressed onto a card for them to take home.

Placental blood is drawn into a large syringe to check for causes, but the midwife has seen the culprit, a large clot between the uterine wall and placenta.

An abruption, interrupting the blood supply between mother and babe.

One of those tragic things that happen sometimes.

Nobody's fault.

The boys, bored, have gone back to their colouring book and toy truck.

'Mummy sad,' says the little one.

'I hope we still get a Happy Meal on the way home,' says the bigger one.

'I'll try my mother, again,' the husband says suddenly. 'We don't need them all turning up. I'll call her. She might take the boys home, settle them, tidy up a bit.'

How Life and Death mock our ideas. The mother should pass before the daughter, the father before the son. This was meant to be their room of rejoicing, but this morning, when she arrived with pains, the trace was flat. There was no sign of life, not a flicker, not the tiniest bit. It feels like that is how their lives will forever be. Fetal, fatal, womb, tomb. Completeness, complete mess.

They'd called her Joy.



Photograph credit: <https://pixabay.com/photos/pregnant-woman-pregnancy-fetal-3813117/>

LaWanda Walters earned her M.F.A. from Indiana University, where she won the Academy of American Poets Prize. Her first book of poems, *Light Is the Odalisque*, was published in 2016 by Press 53 in its Silver Concho Poetry Series. Her poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Georgia Review*, *Nine Mile*, *Radar Poetry*, *Antioch Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Shenandoah*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Laurel Review*, *North American Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Alligator Juniper*, and several anthologies, including *Best American Poetry 2015*, *Obsession: Sestinas in the Twenty-First Century*, and *I Wanna Be Loved by You: Poems on Marilyn Monroe*. She received an Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award in 2020. She lives in Cincinnati with her husband, poet John Philip Drury.



## EXECUTION

Anne Boleyn's truest friend aimed  
his sword like a knight, her pretty neck  
at the mercy of his strength and accuracy.  
He got it just right, so that while her head

rolled, she saw him, a knight with a sword  
galloping toward her, like some fairy tale,  
beating his own time and accuracy  
on his fast horse, grabbing her just before

the earlier cut, so now, as in some tale,  
she was back in one piece. He'd broken  
some law of the universe we'd all like gone,  
seconds ticking by while what's unfair happens.

LaWanda Walters

## HAUNTED

*To Anne Sexton*

*I have been her kind, you said, and I believed you, took heart in your courage, thinking you meant like me or Madame Bovary, like the girl in my Mississippi junior high who “had gone all the way” with a guy. I’d see her by the sinks and mirrors, ratting her hair, adding eyeliner. Like anyone misunderstood, called “lazy” or “indolent” or that word my brother-in-law used after my husband’s diagnosis—*What an ingrate!**

But no, you go riding in some cart with your demon lover, take your “hitch over the plain houses.” I cannot sing your pitch of song—you have written music like Rachmaninoff’s *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. You are up in the wilds of harmonics and ghosts, “dreaming of evil” like some bauble or fancy cigarette. You ride with the old tale (the broom, the dildo), leagues away from less beautiful girls, anxious to please by opening their legs, or someone spending more because they’d been poor—plain old self-consciousness, fear of what others say. A dropping vertigo at supposing those gossips might have been right.

I was jealous of your writing “Little Girl, My String Bean”—your nerve in that poem, your love for her growing, blossoming. How could a mother write that way about her child’s body?

We were not haunted the same way, you and I. I was foolish, a spendthrift. I could not bear my grief. And so that day, when I took my children to the orthodontist, I did not worry about the time.

This was right before cellphones and always knowing where a person is. The waiting room was full, and after the long appointments, my kids getting fitted for braces, we drove to a place to get soothing tapioca and ice cream. I loved those times, alone with my children. Maybe we went to Gamestop.

It was confusing, later. Did I actually know he might die that day? I remember getting back that afternoon, the front door still ajar. So much of life is unclear hindsight.



## PALM TREE AND POOL

Picture the palm tree my mother purchased  
at the Island Garden Store. It flourished,  
but then it got so tall that you'd bump into  
the privacy fence, trying to walk backwards  
far enough to see it whole. Well, she couldn't afford  
an architect, and people paid in cash for piano

lessons from her, and that paid off, teaching piano  
under the table, so to speak. Anyone should purchase  
what they want unless they hurt others to afford  
it. If anyone did, my mother deserved to flourish,  
make her own paradise. People looked backwards  
to stare at her when I was little. Bumpkins,

who don't know better than to want to bump into  
someone different than they are and stare. She played piano  
and organ at church while her husband sang—backwards  
to how it should have been. She was the genius. He'd chase  
the women he directed in the choir. He'd flourish—  
they'd think he was "the sweetest man"—then get fired

for his double life. We'd move to what we could afford  
next, to the smaller church where he wouldn't bump into  
someone who knew his problems from before. He'd flourish,  
thinking he was the righteous one. So Mama quit being pianist  
after that church in the mountains. The women he chose  
(this one named Phoebe) were plump, didn't talk back

like Mama did, using her terrible words. He'd knock her backwards,  
my mother, who had trouble walking anyway. When he was fired  
that last time, Mama became agnostic. She finally found purchase,  
her balance. She followed him to Georgia, but Jesus's picture got bumped  
from the walls for Matisse, the Bible traded for her library, the sound of the piano  
from lessons or from Bach and Rachmaninoff. Flowers, not saintly flourishes.

We were grown up, but now we had a home for the summers, flourishing.  
Meals of brown rice and steamed vegetables, her walking not awkward  
in that blue pool. Some artist's residence with poems, art, the piano.  
Life seemed smooth, for a while. the rough patches forded.  
We were not ready to let it go, that lack of bumpiness.  
She built it on her own. It felt like an oasis, our purchase

on paradise. In the pool, her walk was even, no bumping up and down.  
Teaching piano, she kept that tree in the back of her mind.  
And it was no fiction. She could afford it. For a while, it flourished.

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



Lisa C. Taylor

## DEAD CALF ON A NUMBERED ROAD

Legs bound  
with green rope,

hoisted  
over the embankment.

Hiking  
we held our dog back

from sniffing  
the carcass of a fellow mammal.

Mercy, you said, implying  
the calf was ill or deformed

though he looked perfect,  
pink comma of a mouth, ruffled fur  
of the newly born.

I imagined brown eyes  
opening for the first time,

seeking his mother  
for a suckle.

What is known:  
he was slung  
from a truck bed  
on a sparsely traveled road,

small, maybe a day or two old,  
perfect in repose

but those ropes, those green ropes.

## DARK SKY

In a dark sky town, ambient light  
goes on sabbatical  
and stars own the sky,  
constellations brighter  
than New York City.

When night opens its maw,  
the chill gnaws at remnants  
of lavender and light.

Today's freshening evoked beginnings,  
times apart from the familiar  
into a world transformed into something else,  
cliff face or hawk wing.

Wolves are returning  
of their own accord,  
and the reservoir is poised  
to fill after years of drought.

While wind upends porch chairs,  
the juniper tree invites waxwings  
and juncos to feast.

This is an uninterrupted sigh,  
a shooting star.



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

W. Luther Jett is a native of Montgomery County, Maryland and a retired special educator. His poetry has been published in numerous journals as well as several anthologies. He is the author of five poetry chapbooks: *Not Quite: Poems Written in Search of My Father*, (Finishing Line Press, 2015), and *Our Situation*, (Prolific Press, 2018), *Everyone Disappears* (Finishing Line Press, 2020), *Little Wars* (Kelsay Books, 2021), and *Watchman, What of the Night?* (CW Books, 2022). A full-length collection, *Flying to America* is scheduled for release in the spring of 2024, from Broadstone Press.



## DIASPORA

She gave me a box of darkness.  
I sang her a promise of rain.  
After the long march  
perhaps this was not the moment  
either of us expected.

No shadow-shrouded mountain.  
Nothing written on the stones.  
Only these wings which sprouted  
from our weary shoulders.

And when we flew, we flew  
in different directions.

I kept the box — unopened.  
Where she landed  
there were many broad rivers.

Luther Jett. Photo credit: Serena Agosto-Cox.

## AT THE AMSTERDAM ZOO

Grey December, lions  
in their pit, an imitation  
savannah beside the North Sea.

Nearby, flamingos, capybaras,  
one lone panther whose eyes spit  
green fire. In the pit, a pride  
of ten or twelve — cubs,  
maned males, regally lazy.  
A lioness paces, glances  
upward time to time.  
The pit is not so deep.

Families line the railing  
ten metres above —  
a mother props her kid atop  
the stone wall which holds the rail —  
Better to see. Better to be seen.

The lioness pauses her patrol,  
stares up at the child.  
Every muscle tensed, tail tip  
twitching, hind legs bent  
so slightly. She seems  
to calculate distance, potential  
trajectory — the trigonometry  
of death. And then ———

Her shoulders slacken, she  
resumes her imprisoned prowl.  
I think the mother never knew  
how near her child  
stood to becoming prey.

## TULSA

A girl in an elevator  
screams and a neighborhood  
is set ablaze, block  
after block reduced to ash.

It's not that simple —  
never was. Someone  
told a lie that magnified,  
hung — a cotton-gin fan,  
to weigh an entire  
nation down, to the depths.

Someone nursed a wound  
that festered. Someone  
cast blame to escape blame.  
Then someone got his gun.  
Someone got his torch,  
lit a match, threw a stone.

And somebody else got rich.

Lynne Thompson was appointed by Mayor Eric Garcetti as Los Angeles' 2021-22 Poet Laureate and she is a Poet Laureate Fellow of the Academy of American Poets. The author of three collections of poetry, *Beg No Pardon*, winner of the Perugia Press and Great Lakes Colleges New Writers Award; *Start With A Small Guitar*; *Fretwork*, winner of the 2019 Marsh Hawk Poetry Prize selected by Jane Hirshfield, her newest collection, *Blue on a Blue Palette*, will be published by BOA Editions in Spring 2024. An attorney by training, Thompson sits on the Boards of The Poetry Foundation, Cave Canem, and the Los Angeles Review of Books. In June of 2022, she completed her four-year service as Chair of the Board of Trustees at Scripps College, and she continues her service to the Board as a Trustee. Thompson's recent work can be found or is forthcoming in the literary journals *Best American Poetry*, *Kenyon Review*, *The Common*, *The Massachusetts Review*, and *Copper Nickel*, and the anthology *In the Tempered Dark: Contemporary Poets Transcending Elegy*, among others.



## IN MY DAYBOOK

some pages are yellow, some are torn  
My hunting knives are drawn and on display  
as I write God

no more strangely than any other poser—  
not Allah, not the Upper & lower case gods, not black Jesus,  
now that skies have gone full Basquiat & seas bank Sarah Vaughn

Now that Drake's warned *sometimes we laugh, sometimes we cry*  
and Miles' *Kind of Blue* aquamarines, navies, bluebonnets  
under a blue moon

Since order has been re-ordered, I can only scribble:

*now is lightning and sea urchin*  
now that we know the world was never easier than  
Now that language has new powers to rend us, this is how now *nows*:

with terra mater melting  
her grasses on fire while I write I  
finally taste like honey & my body has earned its space

now that *don't you remember* is a fast car plus my seasons  
of scotch whiskey plus all that I have chased away, I write  
*orbit & longitude & unexpected encounters of uncommon kinds*

Lynne Thompson

ODE TO THE LORDE LINE *I am you in  
your most deeply cherished nightmare—*

I will move into a grand mansion in the  
shadow of your beloved white oak tree.

I will feed your children a dinner of ribs,  
cornbread & greens, with bread pudding

for dessert. I will run outside, barefoot &  
brown, right in front of your husband;

I will lay by our pool, my body oiled with  
shea butter, in front of your second wife.

I will welcome you into my office for  
an interview for that job you have always

wanted. My son will report that he saw  
you buying cannabis at the local liquor store.

Why won't you accept our invitation for a  
shrimp & grits supper, a round of dominoes?

Why won't you acknowledge us in the  
Church where we all pray to be mo' better?

When my friend, Bertha, speaks of her  
love of her Gullah people, why do you bow

your head? Do you know I sleep soundly—no  
delusion or dream, just your most cherished?

THIS ISN'T GLOBAL WARMING —

just great shreds of Klamath River lamprey,  
an orange light someone once named sun.

No longer seduced by any half-shell with  
its near blood and little mate, we crowd

under umbrellas, knee deep in sediment,  
waiting for religion in the wake of flaked

mica. We are silent and stumped; a herd  
squat on the village handkerchief, under

weeks of fractured moons, longing for signs  
of harvest, return of the oyster or Appaloosa.

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

## ON THE NIGHT LOUISE GLUCK DIED I REREAD *Averno*

*after Averno, by Louise Gluck*

I am seconds away from posting *All Hallows*.  
Maybe she'd prefer *Averno*? It's too late.  
Bombs reign down on Gaza.

In the Negev Desert party-goers dance on sand the tone of dying.  
In Bethlehem there is no Mary with Three Wise Kings  
and a living baby.

It's too late to post — *all the chairs in the world won't help you* —  
and this is true, because I'm sitting here,  
in this all-world death.

In her poems she was ready, she said —  
*you have to prepare*.  
I remember, for now, the word for chair.



Maeve McKenna



Dr. Maria A. Miraglia, an accomplished educationist, bilingual poet, translator, essayist, and ministerial lecturer for English language teachers. She has been a dedicated member of Amnesty International for many years and currently serves as the President of WFP. Dr. Miraglia is also the Literary Director of P. Neruda Cultural Association and sits on the editorial boards of several international publications and peace organizations. With over 20 anthologies published, her poems have been translated into 30 languages and featured in over 100 anthologies and magazines. Her many achievements include receiving multiple international awards and being elected to the European Academy of Science and Arts in Salzburg.



## THE ESSENCE

I will not allow boredom  
tomorrow  
to bite my soul  
pain to tear my heart  
nor will I any longer  
listen to howling voices  
but to birdsongs  
when, light they dance  
under starless vaults  
the rustle of leaves  
at nightfall  
or the murmur of water  
where the willows  
their hanging branches reflect

Then  
In the echo of time  
I will hear His voice  
eternal  
and will no more  
let life slip away  
like candle smoke  
that in the blink of wings  
disperses in the air

Of my journey  
I'll grasp all the beauty  
of life  
its essence

Dr. Maria A. Miraglia

## INQUIETUDE

She arrives, comes in  
Slams the door furiously  
And throws the keys away  
To keep her far  
I beseech aid to Reason  
That smiles at me  
Like a mom does  
When a baby  
poses a weird question

So I turn to Patience  
that straightaway tells me  
wait wait  
but she's been there a long time  
I say  
even when I feel like sleeping  
as an owl  
she begins to hoot  
and in the morning  
when silently  
I open the door  
to leave her inside  
she follows me like my shadow  
but  
what can I do to get rid of her  
wait and hope  
don't you see  
how long and white my hair is  
ask your Sub-conscious  
she then softly whispers to me

After a long walk  
I meet this myself  
hidden and unknown  
and I also ask him to free me  
of the enemy that  
with bravado and arrogance  
stays in my mind  
occupies my thoughts

With a lit torch  
the Unconscious shows me infinite paths  
dark and intertwined with each other  
one life would not be enough  
she tells me  
to enlighten them all

And so I go back  
and  
the banality of everyday life  
wraps me again  
like an airwave  
hot and stuffy  
while assails me the nostalgia for infinity  
for the immense meadows  
where free blow the winds

## THE ESSENCE

I will not allow boredom  
tomorrow  
to bite my soul  
pain to tear my heart  
nor will I any longer  
listen to howling voices  
but to birdsongs  
when, light they dance  
under starless vaults  
the rustle of leaves  
at nightfall  
or the murmur of water  
where the willows  
their hanging branches reflect

Then  
In the echo of time  
I will hear His voice  
eternal  
and will no more  
let life slip away  
like candle smoke  
that in the blink of wings  
disperses in the air

Of my journey  
I'll grasp all the beauty  
of life  
its essence



Photograph credit: <https://pixabay.com/photos/baby-feet-new-born-child-newborn-1025398/>

Michael Simms is the founder of *Vox Populi*, an online forum for poetry, politics and nature, as well as Autumn House Press, a publisher of books. He's the author of four full-length collections of poetry including *Strange Meadowlark* (Ragged Sky, 2023), two novels including *The Green Mage* (Madville, 2023), the co-author of a college textbook about poetry — and the lead editor of over 100 published books, including the best-selling Autumn House Anthology of Contemporary Poetry, now in its third edition. In 2011, the Pennsylvania Legislature awarded Simms a Certificate of Recognition for his contribution to the arts. Simms lives in the historic Mount Washington neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA.



## EDGE OF THE WOODS

Let me imagine the edge of the woods  
 Where the blackberries grow in soft light  
 Between the bright grasses and the dark  
 Pillars of trees and let me imagine  
 What might have been our childhood  
 If everything had been the way  
 Adults imagined and how  
 Strange years later they said the good  
 Years were back then always re-inventing  
 The peace they wanted to have won  
 And let me imagine the light slanting  
 Down through the leaves and a rustle  
 Of movement in the dark brush where  
 The luminous eyes of old fears  
 See us moving through the border  
 Of now between light and dark  
 Field and forest where we sleep  
 And travel a path to the house

Michael Simms

## A RIVER RAN BEHIND THE MOTEL

Not sure where the ashes went  
After my brother poured them  
In the rapids of the Llano River  
The water coming fast over  
The limestone shelf slowing  
As it joined the reservoir  
Where my son and nephew  
Years before jumped off the dam  
To show off for girls in bikinis  
Water clear as sunlight  
In those summer afternoons  
Where did their cries of joy go  
After they echoed over the water?

My mother first then my father  
Lingering unable to die  
My brother caring growing sad  
Tired as the old man lay grieving  
His cruelty to me his vain  
Attachments to money  
And career I'm sorry  
He said For what  
I asked What did you do?  
Nothing nothing I did  
Nothing he said  
I'm sorry for everything

How small he was  
My father lying in bed  
Arm over his face  
Hiding from the red light  
Of the vacancy sign  
My brother looking down  
At our sleeping old man  
My brother still speaking to me  
In those evenings of grieving  
A river ran behind the motel  
We could hear it  
As we heard the highway  
That brought us back here  
Then we didn't hear anything  
But our father snuffling  
As he woke startled  
And saw me perhaps

Scott Frey grew up in Western Pennsylvania and teaches English at Pine Meadow Academy. He also serves as a parent advisor for the Pediatric Advanced Care Team at Children's Hospital, Boston. He and his family live in Granby, Connecticut. He has work forthcoming in *Passages North*, *December* magazine, and *The Missouri Review*, where he was awarded the 2023 Perkoff Prize for poetry. His chapbook, *Night Nurses*, was a finalist for the 2023 Black River Poetry Competition. He is working on his first book.



## GRIEF

An orca nudges forward  
her daughter, small  
sinking body.

Skin to skin she carries her  
across her shoulders  
mile after mile carving  
days into weeks.

If the body begins to fall,  
she catches it,  
rising through the water  
as if pushing a ball  
to the surface.

Then one day  
the daughter's body  
slides from her back  
again. The mother  
lets her drift

and turns away  
into an endless sea

Scott Frey

## WEST BEACH AGAIN

A pigeon rope-a-dopes within my youngest daughter's reach,  
but her gaze lifts toward the jetty stones and tidal pools

and gulls' wings, two commas against the horizon.  
Beneath them, my son drags a tuna carcass from

two slick rocks through the wet sand. It's taller  
than she is. Their footprints are deep beside it.

He caresses the jaw, still fleshed enough to attract  
two vultures. She traces her fingers along the tail.

Why are my children drawn to death in places clumsy with life?  
The circle they dig around the body mirrors

the vultures' slow descent. The vultures wait  
until my kids climb back on the kelp-coated rocks.

## TO THE FLOUR HANDPRINTS ON MY WIFE'S PANTS

whose traces appear  
signs that  
some spectral being  
alighted here  
to rest her hands  
atop the curved shelf  
below her hips  
a ghost self  
who lost only the syrup  
and maybe her car keys  
the rest here and whole  
no bitter herbs  
with the zucchini  
shredded to nourish  
her children  
in a small kitchen  
where our butts brush  
flecks of flour  
rise from black leggings  
lingering there  
a message chalked on slate  
from a parallel dimension  
with all our children alive  
together in the portrait  
above the dining room table  
where when we catch  
each other's eyes  
mid-sentence mid-laugh  
through the wisps  
of our daughter's hair

it isn't only fantasy  
all four sets of hands present  
in the upside-down artwork  
five braids of rope dangling  
from each paint-dipped palm  
grooved and blotched  
clouds we'd like to climb

Serena Augusto-Cox's poetry has been twice nominated for the Pushcart Prize, and she coordinates poetry programming for the Gaithersburg Book Festival and was a featured reader at the Gaithersburg's DiVerse Poetry reading series and D.C.'s Literary Hill BookFest. Poems appear in multiple magazines and anthologies. She's an editor for D.C.-based *The Mid-Atlantic Review* magazine and founded the book review blog, *Savvy Verse & Wit*, and *Poetic Book Tours* to help poets market their books.



## TRANSIT'S WEB

Tenuous web stretches  
past my business card  
into your hands. Stuffed,  
crushed between legs and hips  
among lint.

Silken lines flow out of Metro doors,  
extend from Shady Grove to Bethesda  
station, winding through tunnels  
toward Glenmont and back.

I move past strangers on the platform,  
no hellos are exchanged.  
Tangled threads between us -- unseen, imagined --  
but stronger than rope. Our connection,

transient, yet we sit side-by-side on subways  
in deep tunnels below the city.

I wonder if the strangers feel the slight pull  
from business cards in pockets among quarters,  
Maybe the threads have fallen, grayed,  
drifted long ways, sideways,  
around street corners, up alleyways.

Serena Augusto-Cox



## BOSTON COMMON

Moth-eaten holes  
in nylon pave the route  
for air that creeps up my leg  
into my cocoon.

I curl my legs  
hold them to my chest,  
but the exercise is futile.  
I squirm out, wiggle  
out into the fullness of cold.

My partially unraveled knit hangs  
diagonally across my neck,  
fighting the gusts  
whistling through Boston Common.

Plato sweeps in,  
his iridescent plumage  
shimmering in morning light.  
He struts to my bench,  
bebopping to his own music.

My out-stretched hand offers  
nuts, Plato's persuasion;  
he devours them.  
Wind corrals Socrates, who flits  
with curiosity and slams his seeds,  
a meal to savor and save in winter.

Ink-pooled eyes stare at me;  
I pause, roll up my sleeping bag,  
shove my hands into gloves, scowl  
at the witnesses.

Emerson greets me  
on his trip inland away from the storm.  
His sloped white neck strung  
with plastic rings. *So, much for self-reliance*, I mumble.  
Virgil scurries by, sniffing tarred walkways,  
yellowed grass, fills his cheeks to bulging.

He weaves his way through the crowds,  
perhaps he can free Emerson. Instead,  
his fingers plunge into torn plastic bags,  
pilfering my pistachios.

Lugging my home, I look into their eyes.  
Striding parallel, pushing through  
Public Garden gates where we follow  
Schön's bronzed ducklings.

Scott-Patrick Mitchell is the author of *Clean*, a poetry collection that explores addiction and recovery. *Clean* was shortlisted for the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards and the Western Australian Premier's Book Awards. Mitchell was the 2022 Red Room Poetry Fellow and 2023 winner of Queensland Poetry's XYZ Award for Innovation in Spoken Word.



## WETLANDS

a murmuration of ear  
crest & creak, frog-speak  
a throat opening to bubble  
croak, sonorous: cicada  
violin-string legs  
crescendo as season melts  
into mewl & hoot of unseen  
owl-kin, speaking echo  
to locate meal, silent slip  
a yowl to fold night & wing  
as we sing, somnolent  
& sweating in the heat  
which is an orchestra  
of its own as we sit  
on the edge, listening

hear is a meditation

Scott-Patrick Mitchell

## POET

is a strange animal  
long-looker at the small  
thinker who tinkers with lures as if preparing fishing lines  
beast who wrestles with a cage of words  
fawning leaper  
scientist who would rather grow feather or fur  
daydream cloud buster  
walks so the angels can talk clearer  
sometimes-cat curled around a tome  
othertimes-avian with book nest  
always on the prowl for the next great sliver to be caught in their jaw  
pro-procrastinator and wind stitcher  
elegant child of the difficult space  
born lungs first, reciting

glimmer of the toad, the stool, the microbial  
small elephant who is convinced the plume can make them fly  
intrepid introvert, unless a microphone blooms beneath the staged lights  
chaos compendium, expect when laying on the page, dressed in black ink,  
white space  
do not feed them lest they follow you home

## BEDROOM SCENE

Into the wet laying work, succumb.  
Our bodies brush. Tongues of paint.

Cover me in covet, sigil, paint.  
An omen: you scry from me a future.

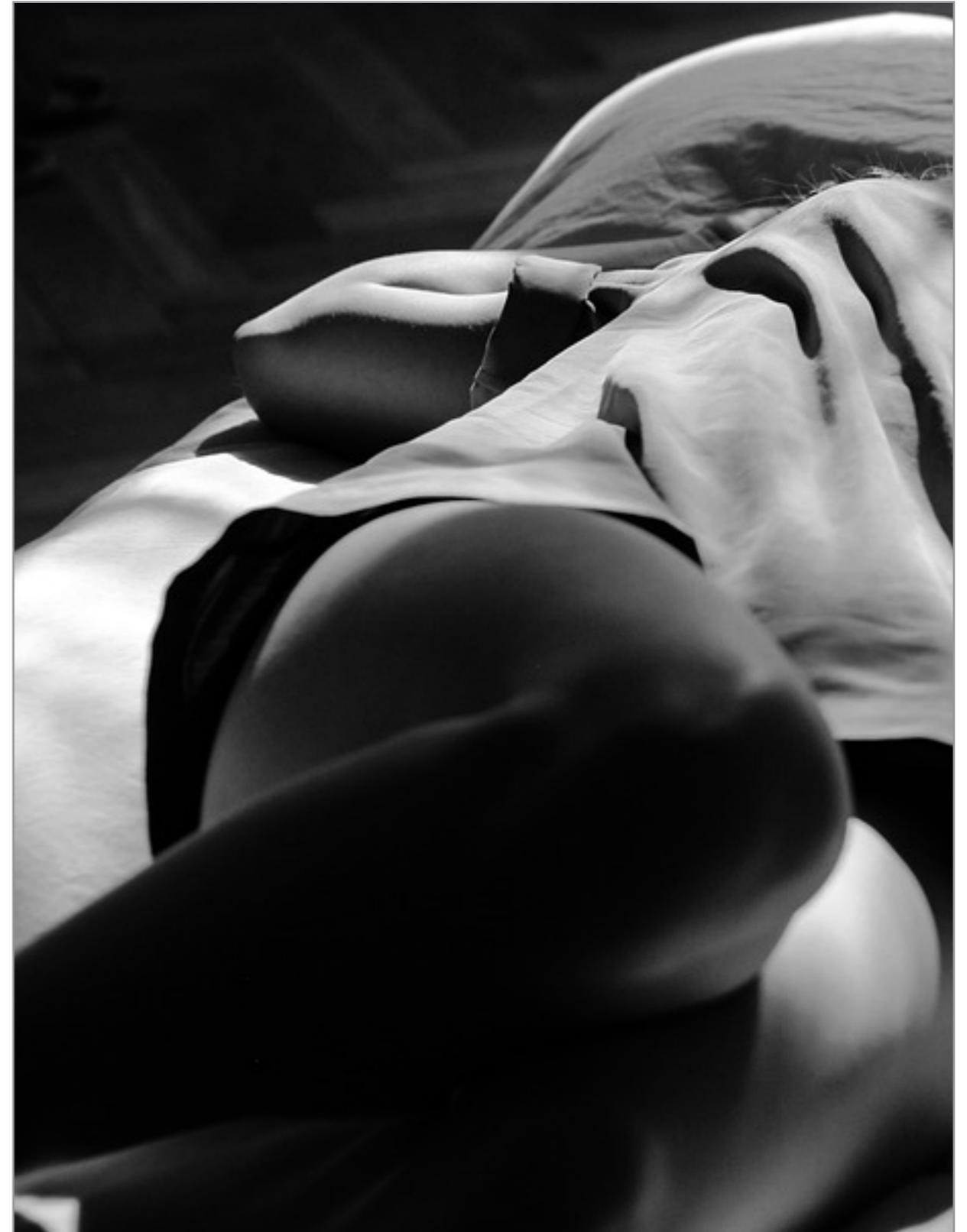
What body do we build together? Future  
stock, investment housed in linen. Count

on me to hold on to you, for we count  
as we shepherd this bed with little deaths.

Let us live this out, listen for our deaths  
together. How love is an infinite cusp

but we are still far from it. Bravado a cusp  
to expunge into the other. Remember

this as age spots our skin. Remember:  
into the wet laying work, succumb.



Photograph credit: <https://pixabay.com/photos/bed-sleeping-woman-resting-relax-1836316/>

Silva Zanoyan Merjanian is an Armenian American poet. Her work is featured international poetry journals. Merjanian has two volumes of poetry, *Uncoil a Night* (2013) and *Rumor* (Cold River Press, 2015.) *Rumor* won the Pinnacle Book Achievement Award Fall 2015 for best poetry book by NABE, she has 3 poems from *Rumor* nominated for Pushcart Prize.



Silva Zanoyan Merjanian

## DARKER

*If thine is the glory, then mine must be the shame*  
Leonard Cohen

I thought I'd change the way you see  
this night through its scars  
past the thick skin and the white bone  
to the vein that bleeds but wants to live

writing itself on the thick crust  
hardened on time  
on the silence blue in my throat  
on the encrypted and deciphered past

it wraps itself around pine trees  
cradling an imagined breeze  
and like the Jasmine on the trellis  
that rises to kiss the humid air  
and falls in disgrace without its scent

it lost its way

a night like this  
chaffed on entitlement and greed  
chisels memories on the moonlight playing  
on the walls

I can't remember the laughter flapping  
on our windows  
but the distorted panic of awake nightmares foams in my mouth  
like the ocean's infected flotsam  
washing blame on shores

*continued overleaf..*

DARKER *contd...*

this night picks at life's oldest scabs

I remember it darker  
Cohen tangled in white curtains  
can't silence regret's howl in gutters of shame

stillness of the stars judges memory's backwash callused on my tongue  
my pen pierces a mother's wail  
and I remember how to sigh without an exhale

If mine is the asphalt catching scream of roadkill in a poem  
yours are the corpses of prayers cast by the side of highways

our violence a credulous bystander to shame lost in cobwebs of freedom

we scrub the sky clean of dark clouds  
knowing it'll stain the rooftops with every raindrop  
somewhere mothers glaze their children's handprints on the soil we hope to turn  
but never dare  
A night like this can turn around  
walk away with the limp of an old man  
darker in my memory as it gets closer to the morning light  
darker as I wake it up in my bloodshot eyes



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

Dr. Vasilis Manousakis is a short story writer, poet, and translator, whose work has appeared in *New American Writing*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Barcelona Ink*, *Parentheses*, and *Drunken Boat*, among others. He writes reviews and translates poetry and short stories for literary magazines and e-zines. He has been one of the founding members of *Bonsai Stories*, the blog directly linked to *Planodion* literary magazine. The blog is dedicated to flash fiction and work from many well-known writers from Greece, the United States, and other countries has appeared there. These flash stories have been collected in two printed volumes so far, and a special tribute to 9/11 stories has appeared in a third volume, in which Vasilis was on the editorial committee. He holds a Ph.D. in Contemporary American Poetry and currently teaches creative writing, modern poetry, short fiction and audiovisual translation. He is a faculty member of the New York Writers' Workshop and a writing instructor at Scribophile. His focus on the human thought and behavior in his writings has led him to a Master's Program in Mental Health Counseling, and he holds individual and group sessions with clients, specializing in cognitive behavioral therapy and narrative therapy.

## TANGO LESSONS

There is a place in Manhattan where people used to go dancing. It is one of those bars owned by someone from Santo Domingo or Puerto Rico and it is so cool that at Dolores bar all New York hangs out. Businessmen and women, leaving the boring café of their company for a drink there and students of all nationalities, who want to learn the secrets of tango, to impress a boy or a girl back home. Because, most importantly, at Dolores we find a dance school. Not like the others where you wear your special clothes and shoes, and you learn step by step the sterile moves to brag in some graduation party or a class reunion twenty years later. At Dolores you were learning there, on stage, among the tables, the smell of spilt beer and grease coming from the kitchen, smoke and the growling of a loser who missed the train of life. At Dolores, you went in, shouted what kind of beer you wanted, even though they all tasted the same, and then you sat and waited to be chosen by one of the women and men, who would be your instructors that night, or any night, if you could handle it or if they weren't taken. They made you stand up with a touch on the shoulder and they grabbed you, even by your ass, to dance you graciously to Argentina, Spain or wherever else they like tango and make you forget you were in New York, nose deep in documents, student papers, in a kitchen, a vagina, a dick or in the dumpster of your mind.

The evening I ended up at Dolores, I'd had three beers with a colleague at lunch, marked plagiarized assignments, met my new colleague, stuck in traffic and had decided three times to turn back. I'm glad I didn't. I'm glad I met Pilar. I'm glad I moved on with my life dancing. Because Pilar was not just a dancer, she was a hurricane... Sweeping and always unreachable, she whispered in your ear while you were dancing, and she took your heart and mind.

*continued overleaf..*



Vasilis Manousakis

If you were lucky, you got a nice word, but if you dared to speak, she was gone as if she never existed. She dumped you there on the makeshift stage and you wouldn't see her again all night. The only time I told her she was a good dancer, I was left there pretending to be a scarecrow with my arms outstretched to scare the crows, bad luck, and my negative thoughts away.

I had so many things to say to Pilar, but my words were always left hanging, since I didn't want her to go. I didn't care about tango. What would I do with it in class anyway? I would only stir a bored student from their sleep. No point. The time I made love with my body had passed. Now the mind was prevailing. Love is only the extension of your thoughts anyway. The freer they are, the bigger the flame in your body. Just like Pilar. Just like her dancing. Just like me letting go of myself in her hands to teach me how to tango. To teach me how to live, I would repeat to my car's mirror, as I was driving away from Dolores. These are the things I would say to her if I could speak, but I dared not to. Instead, I would shut my eyes among the chairs and the stretched-out legs and the voices of those who were looking. She would fly and I would drag my two left feet on the floor below. Yes, Pilar was not for the faint-hearted.

After a while, she wasn't touching me on the shoulder, when I walked in. There was no need. She would appear before me like a mirage and when the music stopped, she disappeared in darkness as if she never was, leaving me stranded and thirsty for something vague, only it wasn't water or beer.

You needed guts to love Pilar. And alcohol. But, mainly, guts. As is natural for strong and independent women. As is natural for those who teach you you exist. We never ended up in bed with Pilar. I never talked to her to imply it anyway. She would hold my hand tight, and I received blood, heart, voice, light through the veins visible in her white hands. There, for an hour every evening, for three months. At Dolores bar. Which doesn't exist anymore. Burnt one afternoon due to a kitchen fire.

I took Kathryn to that neighborhood one night in our tenth anniversary. Pilar taught me how to love and be a good partner, how could I not to?



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