

2010 - 2024



Live encounters

POETRY & WRITING

FREE ONLINE MAGAZINE FROM VILLAGE EARTH

JANUARY 2024

MARK ULYSEAS
Point of View

COVER ARTWORK 'VORTICES' BY IRISH ARTIST EMMA BARONE



©Mark Ulyseas

Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



SUPPORT LIVE ENCOUNTERS. DONATE NOW AND KEEP THE MAGAZINE LIVE IN 2024

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

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

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

Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

Mark Ulyseas
Publisher/Editor

[Donate](#)

All articles and photographs are the copyright of www.liveencounters.net and its contributors. No part of this publication may be reproduced without the explicit written permission of www.liveencounters.net. Offenders will be criminally prosecuted to the full extent of the law prevailing in their home country and/or elsewhere.



JANUARY 2024

CONTRIBUTORS

MARK ULYSEAS - EDITORIAL

RICHARD W. HALPERIN

ALICIA VIGUER-ESPERT

ANNA YIN

ANNE COLLINS

DAVID ADES

DAVID DEPHY

EDWARD CARUSO

JAMES FINNEGAN

JANET RUTH HELLER

KATE ENNALS

LORRAINE GIBSON

PATRICIA SYKES

PETER A. WITT

RAFAEL E. FAJER CAMUS

ROSE MARY BOEHM

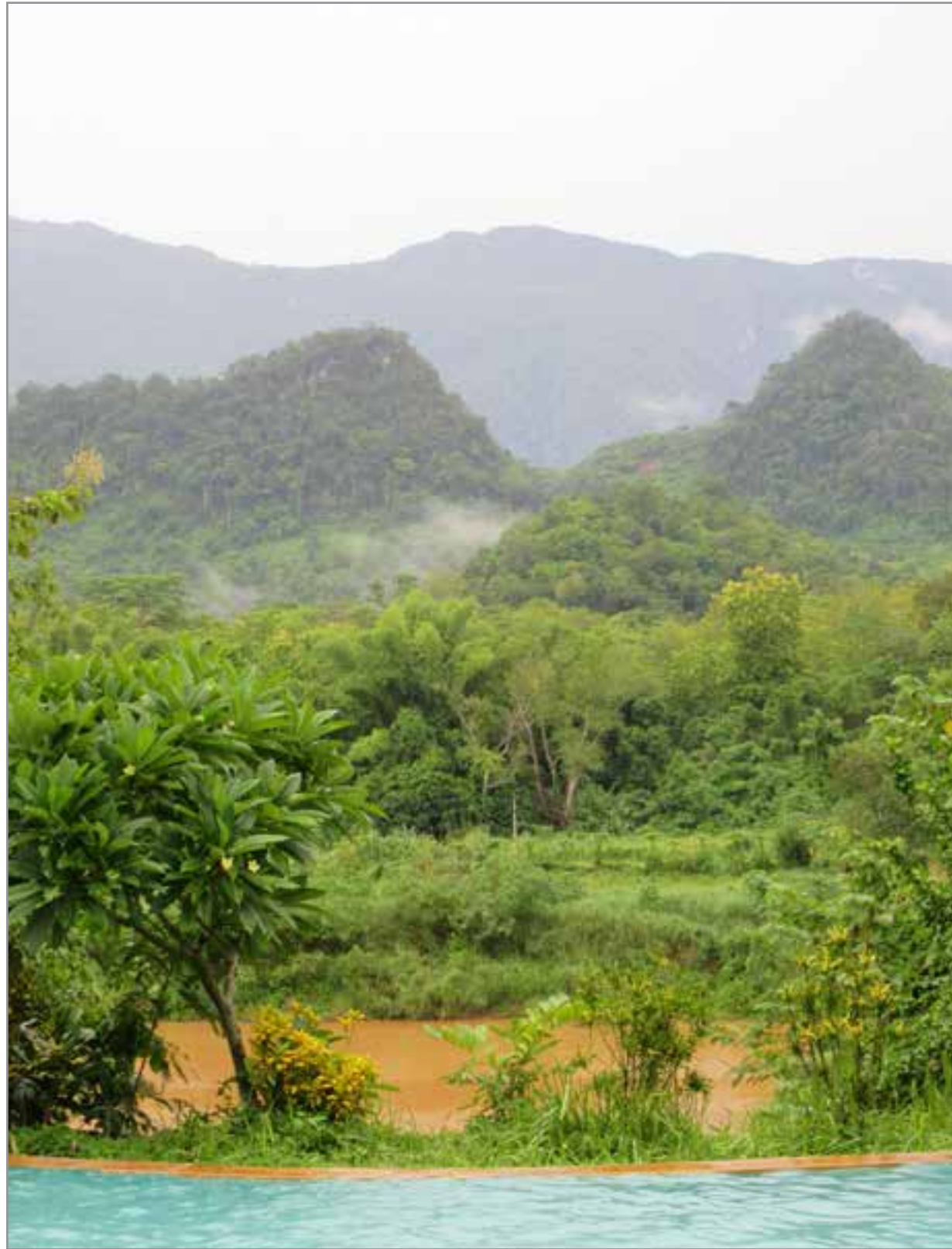
TOBI ALFIER

TUG DUMBLY

SCOTT DODGSON

MICHAEL FOLDES book review of

Safe Colors, a novel in short fictions by Thaddeus Rutkowski



Mark Ulyseas has served time in advertising as copywriter and creative director selling people things they didn't need, a ghost writer for some years, columnist of a newspaper, a freelance journalist and photo-grapher. In 2009 he created *Live Encounters Magazine*, in Bali, Indonesia. It is a not for profit (adfree) free online magazine featuring leading academics, writers, poets, activists of all hues etc. from around the world. March 2016 saw the launch of its sister publication *Live Encounters Poetry*, which was relaunched as *Live Encounters Poetry & Writing* in March 2017. In February 2019 the third publication was launched, *LE Children Poetry & Writing* (now renamed *Live Encounters Young Poets & Writers*). In August 2020 the fourth publication, *Live Encounters Books*, was launched. He has edited, designed and produced all of *Live Encounters'* 289 publications (till January 2024). Mark's philosophy is that knowledge must be free and shared freely to empower all towards enlightenment. He is the author of three books: *RAINY – My friend & Philosopher*; *Seductive Avatars of Maya – Anthology of Dystopian Lives* and *In Gethsemane: Transcripts of a Journey*.

<https://liveencounters.net/mark-ulyseas-publisher-editor-of-live-encounters-magazines/>
<https://www.amazon.com/Mark-Ulyseas/>



MARK ULYSEAS POINT OF VIEW

It has been fourteen years traversing the aisles of the lexicon and confabulating with poets and writers from across the world. Love, hope and resignation woven into cloaks for those seeking to embrace the lyrical pitted against the vulgarity of violence. Some taking sides of the absurd and the incomprehensible, of historical hatred and exceptionalism.

And yet amidst the shake, rattle and hum, there have survived like blossoms between rocks, voices crying from the rubble of bombed out homes, voices of the dispossessed. They have been heard by scribes that feverishly trace their angst into words to reflect the futility of existing in 'never' land, land scarred by hate and cursed by a God who seeks vengeance.

Looking back at 2023 is like peering into the well of inhumanity, a telescopic wall of darkness with the reflection on the surface of its water of a clear blue sky is all that there is to comfort us.

Between the thousands of published pages of *Live Encounters* thrives the souls of writers and poets who have, in their wisdom, shared shamelessly their own worlds peppered with paradoxes. Their truths have become our awakenings. Their words and lives have become an immersive experience for the readers. An experience that raises, even higher, the *point of the view* of Life that changes with the rhythm of madness, a smudged painter's palette.

The journey must continue towards nothingness. But on the way there will be forced stops, hesitations when confronted with the words of poets, words that challenge the ape within.

Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

We must forget, we must turn our backs on a life worn thin by the abrasiveness of cohabitating with the ape to follow the pathfinders, the poets, to Blake's *Xanadu*.

There are poets that extol the magnificence of Nature both in its wrath and glory and there are others that reflect the inhumanity of humanity. Both are two sides of a coin. One without the other ceases to exist on its own, for without death where does one find the beauty in life?

Poet Nasitur non fit – Poets are born, not made, is, for me, untrue. Perhaps poets are those that have discovered the light within. They seek through 'structured' words to present this to the world. Many have been lost in translation. And those that have survived the taunts of history are hidden away in books and bytes somewhere in the vastness of libraries and the Net. Their words are alien to those that do not speak in many tongues. What a tragic loss.

Live Encounters is ever grateful to the hundreds of poets and contributors as well as those who have penned the guest editorials for 2023:

Terry McDonagh (Founding Contributor), *David Rigsbee*, *Dr. Salwa Gouda*, *Mark Tredinnick*, *Thomas McCarthy*, *Mary O'Donnell*, *Carolyn Wright*, *Eileen Casey*, *Dr. Colette Nic Aodha*, *Audrey Molloy*, *Lynne Thompson*, *Jane Frank*, *Lincoln Jaques* (special edition of *Aotearoa New Zealand Poets & Writers*), *Brian Kirk*, *Eileen Sheehan*, and *Anna Yin* (special edition of *Poetry & Writing English-Chinese Edition*).

Our readers worldwide have been further enriched with the two special editions featuring Arab poets from Egypt, Yemen, Palestine, Iraq, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Bahrain and Jordan, translated and edited by *Dr. Salwa Gouda*, an Egyptian literary translator, critic, and academic at the English Language and Literature Department at Ain-Shams University, Cairo.

A heartfelt thanks to Irish artist *Emma Barone* for her fabulous cover artworks.

In 2024, *Live Encounters* will continue this journey of sharing the works of poets and writers from around the world, thereby building more bridges to connect the kaleidoscope of cultures, one edition at a time.

Here is a message from the great Indian poet, *Kabir Das**:

The moon shines in my body, but my blind eyes cannot see it:

The moon is within me, and so is the sun.

The unstruck drum of Eternity is sounded within me; but my deaf ears cannot hear it.

So long as man clamors for the I and the Mine, his works are as naught:

When all love of the I and the Mine is dead, then the work of the Lord is done.

For work has no other aim than the getting of knowledge:

When that comes, then work is put away.

The flower blooms for the fruit: when the fruit comes, the flower withers.

The musk is in the deer, but it seeks it not within itself: it wanders in quest of grass.

Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

*Kabir (1398–1518) was a well-known Indian mystic poet and saint. His writings influenced Hinduism's *Bhakti* movement, and his verses are found in Sikhism's scripture *Guru Granth Sahib*, the *Satguru Granth Sahib of Saint Garib Das*, and *Kabir Sagar of Dharamdas*. His poems are sung by Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims, especially Sufis.

Richard W. Halperin holds Irish-U.S.dual nationality and lives in Paris. He is published by Salmon/Cliffs of Moher (four collections since 2010) and Lapwing/Belfast (sixteen shorter collections since 2014). In 2024 Salmon will bring out Selected and New Poems, drawing upon the twenty collections and including thirty new poems - Introduction by Joseph Woods - on the occasion of Mr Halperin's eightieth birthday.



Richard W. Halperin. Photo credit: Bertrand A.

SNOW OVER EASINGWOLD

C.P. Stewart, 1953 - 2017

This is a letter of sorts.
A long memory unfurls about my friend
Charlie Stewart. The poet C.P. Stewart.
I remember being knocked sideways by
his short poem 'Goat' and by so many others.
He was and is my favourite nature poet.
No surprise there, his father was a gamekeeper.

A long memory unfurls about my friend
Charlie Stewart. I remember a Christmas week
spent with Charle and Lizzie in their home
in Easingwold, North Yorkshire. When I arrived
at Leeds-Bradford, there they were with
their three children, waiting for me at
the exit, all five holding a handmade banner
which said 'Mr Darcy.'

Long memories unfurl about my friend
Charlie Stewart, maybe because in physics
long resists short, and I want to resist
the shortness of his life.

A bench on a country path he loved to walk
now bears a plaque with his name. A path
that loved him. How could it not?

In snowstorms, the flakes are borne up and down
and up before they touch the earth. When they
do touch it, they melt. I hope Rest in Peace
may be that.

HANAFUDA

Businessmen's hands shuffle cards
inside houses.
Outside November rain rises in smoke
in the Japan of grey palaces. Within the deck
is dry.

On the card a picture:
A poet balances in the rain,
avoids puddles, frogs, phoenixes,
shuffles, shuffles
through cold willows,
his brain dry under his
poet's hat.

'Players playing become cards,'
nods the poet,
nod the businessmen with the rain.

Drops drip
on roots, on roofs,
hear within the hum of
hands of cards playing hands of cards.

Over the deck, twelve months slide,
slap. Businessmen lose, win, trade
the poet
who, in the rain,
walks outside the grey palaces
alone in the game
when the game is over.

'ARABY' 4

'Araby' glows on the pages of *Dubliners*
while the latest human atrocities spew
from the radio. This time, atrocities in actual Araby.
Not for the first time in Araby, where Abraham
had two sons and, for a while, there was room
for both of them. I think of a gentle shepherd
whose gentleness has never gone away
and which is mixed in with his (legal) murder.

I am grateful to Joyce for describing a boy's
first confused love for a luminous girl,
which prompts him to go alone in twilight
on a tramway to a distant bazaar, Araby,
to buy something for her, and where
he is ignored by a British salesgirl, Ireland
not yet a nation. So, faint echoes in 'Araby'
of atrocities already happened and to come.

I think of a CD of Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*
by Leonard Bernstein and Jennie Tourel.
Songs on the death of children. It ends with
the singer's picturing the children as if now
they rest in their mother's house, no longer
frightened, and with God's hand sheltering them.
Meaning, that when they were alive,
God's hand did not shelter them. At all.

Some art glows. It is there the day after
for the inconsolable.

MY MOTHER'S HOUSE

'He to his mother's house private returned.'

I can still hear the thrilling voice of Irene Samuel
my Milton teacher at Hunter College
reading that line which closes *Paradise Regained*:
Jesus's four temptations by Satan in the desert.
(Milton adds the fourth.) Irene Samuel,
and Milton, have helped guide my entire life.

They make me know that in a world
of lascivious cruelty, an artist goes forward alone.
That great works of art, like angels, are messages.
That they prompt me to take better *actions*.

Jesus is not coming back from hell.
I know what hell is. Who does not?
He is coming back from the devil,
which is not the same thing.
The devil in Milton is just some chap,
much smaller than his publicity
would lead one to believe.
Mischievous. Mischievous.

It is we who do actual evil.
With time, I have come to know
that I have been the means of that
whether I was conscious of it or not.
The damage done remains.
Is some of my subsequent suffering
expiation for that? I hope so.

My mother's house.
I know how returning to it feels,
and that the return must be private.
There is something hilarious
about having survived.

A TASTE OF COFFEE

A taste of coffee and a love of poems
is where my life has brought me.
Living in a language I couldn't speak
until I was sixty is where my life has
brought me, through the grace of others.

With age, my favourite part of 'In Memory
of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz'
is 'mix pictures of the mind.' That is what
happens in friendship, that is what happens
in love. A taste of coffee and a love

of poems. Otto Klemperer never referred
to the singers in the operas and oratorios
he conducted as singers. He referred to them
as artists. And so they are, and so are we.

Euripides writes that nothing is so foul
that it isn't washed clean by the sea.
Time is like the sea, the sea does not move,
it does not go for walks, it does not
turn in circles, all movement is within it.

To one who knows he is unclean – me –
that has become important. In a world
of gratuitous evil – animals don't make
bombs, animals don't pervert language –
in a world where compassion is at
the bottom of Pandora's box, one is
grateful – I am grateful – for anything.

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 LummoX 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.



HOMESICKNESS

How long has the sea known
about saturnine heartbeats,
sea urchins prickling
the soul
which neither Calamine,
pearl necklaces
nor murmurs from stars
can heal?

Visions of my sea and this ocean
paralyze me with ambivalence.
Now and then, a wave whispers
of what I miss, and dismiss,
then,
I peek into my chest
and notice the darkness
of a sinkhole
larger than Florida.

Like that mediaeval girl
buried face down
ankles bound so she couldn't
return from the grave,
I'm tied to a place
I love sometimes,
and fear,
most of the time,
that it will become the lieu
where they bury me.

Alicia Viguer-Espert

THE MIND

The light of the mind bright as it is, it is not what I seek must be perennial pine trees, bright green, sitting with like companions in the temple of leaves, needles pungent and sharp like swords ready to cut through distractions, seductive thoughts, the honey of a flickering phone calling me to engage with a world of plenty unnecessary news.

It's late, I tell my mind to be quiet,
I tell my mind to be still, so I can hear
the voice of the Beloved whispering.
What I hear is the body complaining,
lumbar vertebrae, scapula, cervical sprain,
every part clamors for complete attention.
A voice brings to mind that day when at 6
I was scolded for something I didn't do,

another suggests what I should cook for dinner.
The force of Samskaras pushes like a tsunami
impossible to control. Not the captain of my boat,
I fear throwing old patterns overboard could be
a crime against creativity. Alone, I try to fight the
waves, fail, try again. Finally, I straighten my back,
ask aid from the Spirit, still doubting if I will be
able to change enough to hear with all this chatter.

THE WHEEL

We walk straight towards a body pulled by desire to bloom inside limbs which one day will crack, deform and decompose. I imagine how a drunken soul aspiring to joy gives itself to the vacuum of space, which like amniotic fluid will sustain it until earthy arrival.

Incarnation, the act of a soul entering the "carne," consists of expanding to be constricted. Pure energy aiming to be shaped into form bursts into life. It's a two-being affair, one wishing to return because of unfulfilled desires, and another attracting it with a longing of its own. The expansion proves illusory, the soul confined into perishable matter suffers and the Hansel and Gretel's markers left on the cosmic path are swept away.

as the blue planet beckons
a blind soul rushes
into the trap of the wheel

Anna Yin was Mississauga's Inaugural Poet Laureate (2015-17) and has authored five poetry collections and two books of translations including: *Mirrors and Windows* (Guernica Editions 2021). Anna won the 2005 Ted Plantos Memorial Award, two MARTYs, two scholarships from USA and grants from Ontario Arts Council and Canada Council for the Arts. Her poems/translations have appeared at Queen's Quarterly, ARC Poetry, New York Times, China Daily, CBC Radio, Literary Review of Canada etc. She read on Parliament Hill, at Austin International Poetry Festival, Edmonton Poetry Festival and universities in China, Canada and USA etc. She has designed and taught Poetry Alive since 2011.



WHAT LOVE SHOULD BE

My heart has four rooms
In each I hold one lover
Spring Summer Autumn Winter
A door closes then opens
With songs both ancient and modern

I pray — my heart — the ocean
For us to step into
All the lovers and dreamers
In the past or in the future
Our rooms —no more separated

Let us be each other's oracles
Hands hold and feet on the same ground
Our shined souls, listen and chime:
This is our oath, our freedom.

Love should not divide us
We belong to each other
The sky is the blue floor wider
In a united room called "heaven"

Anna Yin

ON MY MOTHER LANGUAGE AND THE OTHER

They are my two lovers
Each takes a turn to speak
Sometime they encounter each other
And contest for the command

I love them both, Chinese and English
One is more censorious
The other more open-minded (or perhaps in a disguise)
In my dream,
I call for them but mistake one for the other

It is perfectly fine to love both
They assure me
And offer a magic wane:
My mature self in a mirror,
One coin with two sides

But it is such a challenge
To let them both equally
Enter my heart and stay
In the chambers

I wish I could remain calm
To embrace each pulse
Flowing their musical rhythms
With brave bizarre beckons

A GHAZAL FOR A BIRTHDAY CHILD

What could I give you a gift as your own?
How about happiness that you shall own?

Pray that your wings be solid and mighty,
sky without border to fly and to own.

Pray that your heart be sincere and tender,
each chamber filled with light that your own.

Pray that each morning you rise up with joy,
each trip far and near to love and to own.

Pray that each sundown you settle with peace,
each dream sweet and warm to hold and to own

Pray that your eyes be eagle-sharp and strong
Pray that your vision be fresh and your own

Pray that your young body be dragon-built
Pray that your gifts will be fully your own

The list can go on and on, on and on...
and certainly, I see you have your own

What to give you as gift to be your own?
Well, my child, just be your own, be your own...

Anne Collins writes poetry and creative non-fiction. Her most recent book is collection of poetry and prose with Spanish themes titled *Listening to the Deep Song* (Bright South press, 2022). Her previous poetry collections are *How to Belong* (2019); *The Language of Water* (2014), *Seasoned with Honey* (2008) a 4-poet anthology; and *The Season of Chance* (2005). Another collection of poetry and prose is titled *My Friends, This Landscape* (2011). Anne lives in nipaluna (Hobart) lutruwita (Tasmania). For more information go to <https://annecollins.com.au/>



THE MISSING ZERO

My poem about Time was published online.
After the elation – deflation, when I discovered
a minor typo not seen before, a missing zero.
Too late said the editor and fair enough.
But I was then astonished to learn this zero
was missing from the first draft. Right from the start
it went AWOL yet my brain kept seeing it there
standing to attention with the other two zeros.
Draft after draft, my brain kept telling my eye
it was seeing something that was in fact invisible
on the page and more so on the screen.

Once again, I'd fallen into the dreaded pit
of proofreading perils that shows no mercy.
Is there some kind of catharsis in confessing
to the flaw behind the glass of the computer screen?
Is there any point in hoping that readers' brains too
will see the absent zero as if it were there?
Is the absence any less real when it is virtual?
It was little consolation to read of the famous biographer
lamenting that the only Greek word in his book was wrong.
I know how he felt. And this was in the pre-internet era
when publishers employed dedicated proofreaders and editors
instead of leaving it up to the ill-fated poet
who after writing, revising and re-checking,
can't see the spaces for the zeros.
I've been known to see typos when they weren't there.

Anne Collins

continued overleaf

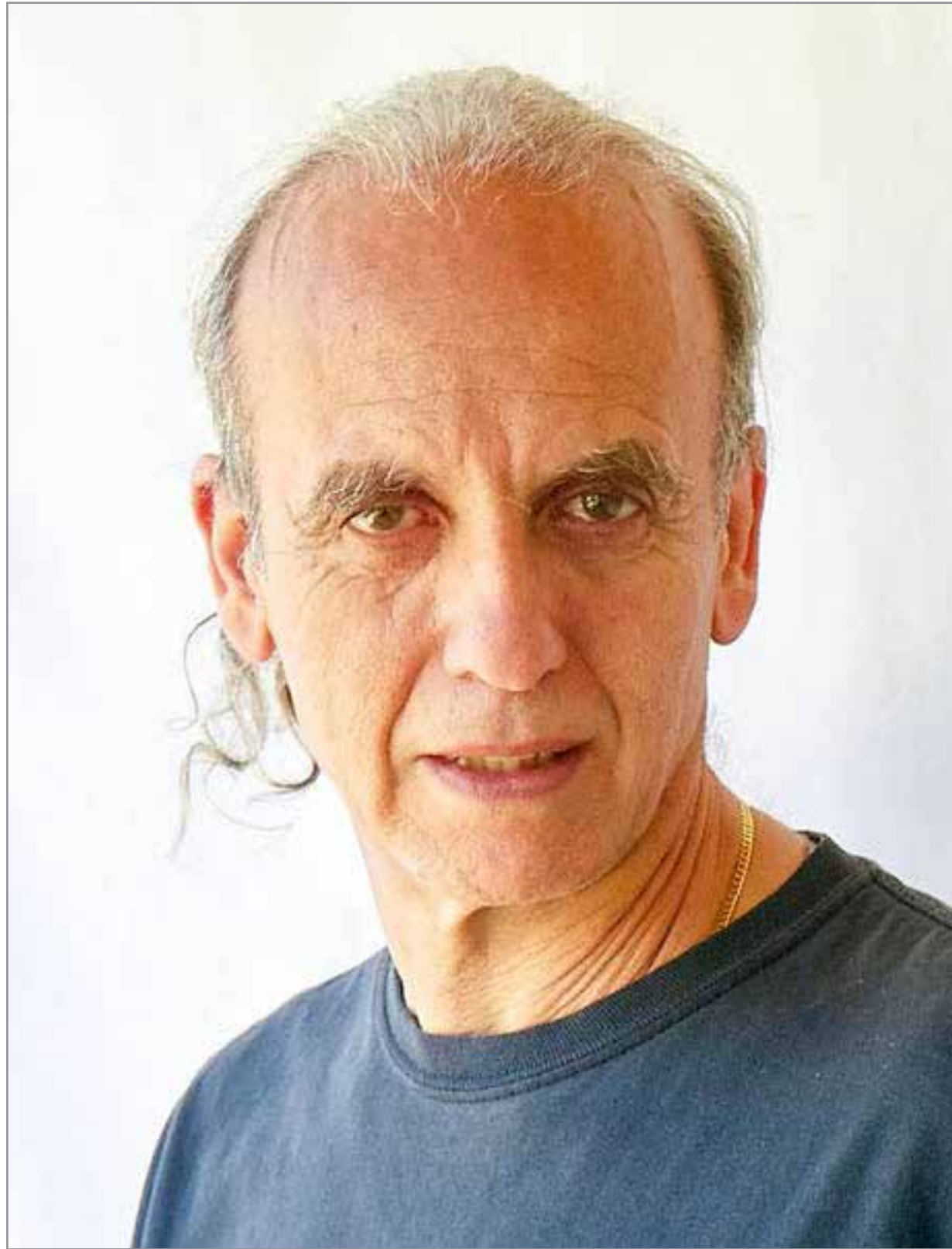
THE MISSING ZERO *contd...*

How the brain and the eyes collude to NOT SEE
the errors that appear with their sickening lights on
after the poem or book has been published.
The Time poem was 99% correct but what do I wake up and think about?
The missing zero. What can I do but get some fresh air.
On the verandah a carpenter is calculating and re-checking
his measurements. I notice a wooden beam with a hole in it,
drilled by mistake. It's as if the missing zero had escaped
outside and was letting the wind blow through it,
letting it blow away the humiliations of human error
and the impossible idea of perfection. Perhaps it's best
to simply let go, knowing the missing zero has abandoned you.
And to remember the mediation mantra when it says, gently,
at the point of zero you will reach absolute stillness.



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

David Adès is the author of *Mapping the World*, *Afloat in Light* and the chapbook *Only the Questions Are Eternal*. He won the Wirra Wirra Vineyards Short Story Prize 2005 and the University of Canberra Vice-Chancellor's International Poetry Prize 2014. *Mapping the World* was commended for the FAW Anne Elder Award 2008. David's poems have been read on the Australian radio poetry program *Poetica* and have also featured on the U.S. radio poetry program *Prosody*. His poetry has twice been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and twice been shortlisted for the Newcastle Poetry Prize. His poems have been Highly Commended in the Bruce Dawe National Poetry Prize, a finalist in the Dora and Alexander Raynes Poetry Prize (U.S.) and commended for the Reuben Rose International Poetry Prize (Israel). David is the host of the monthly poetry podcast series "Poets' Corner" which can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLb8bHCZBRMBjWIPDeaSanZ3qAZcuVW7N>. He lives in Sydney with his wife and three children.



OFFERING

Why do I think of Van Gogh's sunflowers?

The clasp of flowers in hands
seems an act of supplication.

I can't give you my own warmth,
but here, take these.

Am I asking for forgiveness or simply your regard?

Sometimes, there are no other offerings
to be made, no words to be spoken.

See me, I say without words,
as I stand before you, flowers in hand,

please see me.

David Adès

PROMISE

I'm sorry.

If I hold on to you so tightly
it is because I am lost.

*I love your ease, how you give yourself
so willingly, how unafraid you are*

of the world's bright plumage,

*how it twirls you with dance
and song and light.*

Everything hidden scares me.
I can't get past surfaces

to the depths beneath,

interpret everything so literally
it is like wearing blinkers.

You embrace the unknown like a lover.

I am wary of pitfalls, shuffle forwards
not sure where to place my feet.

Often, I stand on the spot,
hesitating to move at all.

How do you put up with that?

It's a character flaw, I know.
I'm stuck in my box of

constraints and I'm no Houdini.
I tell myself I must let go,

release you from the shackle
of me, make my own way,

colour-blind, trembling, and I will,
I promise, just not yet.

UNMASKED

There comes a time

old folk might tell you,
wearing the truth of the years
in the slope of their shoulders,

when what other people think doesn't matter anymore,

when inhibitions fall like autumnal leaves,
when the burdens of appearance and expectation
lift, so many hot air balloons rising into the sky.

Then, you can begin the work

of prising off the mask you've worn
all these years, so familiar you forget
sometimes you are wearing it,

peel off a skin you no longer need.

It might be harder to do than you think,
comfortable in place and unyielding,
adhering like a sense of self, identity.

And when you do, you might find

another mask beneath it,
a second skin, older, forgotten,
that was once bulwark, shield.

Peel that one off and there may be another.

That is your work for these twilight years,
to find again your lost face,
the one that entered the world,

and with that face to meet what awaits.

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

THE SKY

The sky grew within my heart, one day,
I was standing in the front yard.
The sky was so high it penetrated me through.
Oh, what a sky it was, so familiar and powerful
the memories as the leaves fell off the trees.
They were on the ground, as the imprints of glances
once when we saw each other for the very first time.
No fighter aircraft up there, but kites.



David Dephy

JERUSALEM

Time is invisible at night—
the sound of premonition echoes in the dark,
thousand years ahead of eclipse,
and every night we give ourselves,
as if we found something precious
that it overwhelms all our wishes.

That star drifts above the black smoke.
Our loneliness is fading away.
The answer dwells in flickering flames
beyond the waters, mists, and dust,
showing us the meaning of trust,
expecting a miracle at dawn,
and we, reading the lines of lights
through the centuries of mysteries,
want to feel each other again,
we'd like to taste this second—
time of a miracle when truth emerges
in between echoes of explosions,
on the other side of alone.

SPIRIT OF SILENCE

Language, the spirit of silence.
Each word, the heart of silence.
Without hearts we are sightless,
with fingers searching for rays.

I was circled by the cutlery of
emptiness, but I felt your breath
one day, I realized my existence.
Essence emerged from emptiness.

All the mysteries of our century
and all the answers flew with us.
Silence. Language of understanding.
Meanings, only. No words.

Edward Caruso has been published in *A Voz Limpia*, *Australian Multilingual Writing Project*, 'La Bottega della Poesia' (*La Repubblica*, Italy), *Burrow*, *Communion*, *Kalliope X*, *Mediterranean Poetry*, *Meniscus*, *n-Scribe*, *Right Now*, *StylusLit*, *TEXT*, *Unusual Work* and *Well-Known Corners: Poetry on the Move*. His second collection of poems, *Blue Milonga*, was published by Hybrid Publishers in 2019. In August 2019, he featured on 3CR's Spoken Word program.



Edward Caruso

THE PHOTOGRAPHERS

1

Morning sun,
just a shadow of your company,
an inner smile in a fleeting moment.
Beneath these porticos our cameras
capture the most wonderful graffiti:
'2001, un'oddissea dello spaccio';
'fatte canne, mica guerra.'

There's a world in your laughter,
sadness in your eyes.¹

2

A picture snapped by a black Vespa;
its mirror reflects an arched window
and your loosened hair.

Grant us the breeze.
If we could photograph sound.

3

Ever walked through
an unfamiliar avenue that invites you on?
I'm only alive in places that inspire,
so take this camera heart of ours,
the life we choose: beyond freeways,
castle walls and crypts where heat can't reach
the moods we share.

continued overleaf

THE PHOTOGRAPHERS

4

Just when it's daring to clean graffiti off walls,
in our search for more,
we find the scrawl:
'Questo muro è pulito'.²

After our flight to Istanbul,
twilight and the fourth prayer,
the Bosphorus crowds and bridge to Beyoglu,
we search for *simits*,³
feeling close to home.

The trouble with travelling is that you find yourself.
It gives the impression of discovering some essence
that gives the heart a chance to rule.

Every time I've found myself I've escaped.
To stand by the Bosphorus,
smell burnt rubber and refuse.
To think of home – live, for God's sake.
Here by the Blue Mosque,
faces, foreign tongues.
Just a walk from the Genoese tower
to the shore along pencil-thin backstreets,
their views of barber shops,
children with footballs at their feet,
fading light and putrid water.

Don't let this moment fall through the cracks of memory
with a bottle of whiskey and two half-empty glasses,
ashtrays full of cherry pips,
and half-burnt candles.
There's not one painting that can be rescued
from the street vendors below that could turn
this hotel room into a home.

5

Home: the first afternoon back is spent cruising.
It's the best way to reacquaint
ourselves with the crowded centre
and all that medieval stuff.

On leads to new jobs,
after one week in Hell
things start to make sense:
the better you know yourself,
the more impossible life seems.

To amble beneath a hot sun
when in some other part there's snow.

6

Tell it like it is,
you could never break this island in two:
we're both captains and, sure, some woman
dragged me across her skin once,
and you won't let me forget how far I'd fallen.
With every look you get from others,
if we could explore beneath the skin
what grade of liqueur flows
when stalking a yellow moon,
or a stranger's voice ...

To drown in words I wish I never had.

continued overleaf

THE PHOTOGRAPHERS *contd...*

7

Three weeks since our return,
lights on in the house,
we both wear shades.
Tell me everything on your mind
and I'll tell you everything on mine.
There's no *touché*, change in rhythm
or forgiveness.
You've dyed your hair crimson; mine is black.
Sometimes I think we're twins.

I'm sure it was a cold, wet day when we met
and that you'll prove me wrong.
We're still here, one more whiskey.
Just mention the word humidity and we'll be there.
Each day a hidden message,
a reflection of the red curtains of this city,
let's go insane for one another.

Foot notes:

- 1. '2001, an odyssey in drug-dealing'; 'make joints, not war'
- 2. 'This wall is clean.'
- 3. Crusty circular Turkish bread coated with sesame seeds.

DREAM

Why in a game of *Briscola*
did parental photos fall
between Queens and Kings

On playing with family
friends I knew fleetingly
during childhood

Who inserted family photos
into the pack
& dealt me
a picture of my parents
just engaged
lying in a field & gazing
into their post-War futures

The more we played
the more I won
As my pile increased
I asked how many points
my family photos were worth
None came the reply

I cleaned up with the Ace of the main suit
I didn't realise it until I was told
that the winnings were mine
Then I produced a Three of Wands
that would have cleaned out everybody's hands
but it disappeared among other cards
No one could find it
no matter how hard we looked

I was so far ahead
Everyone and everything
all except the family photos
in 1970s garish Kodachrome

James Finnegan, Dublin born, was the second-prize winner in the 2022 Gregory O'Donoghue International Poetry Competition. A second collection of poems, *The Weather-Beaten Scarecrow* (Doire Press), published in September 2022, has been shortlisted in the Farmgate Café National Poetry Award in April 2023.



WHAT DO I SAY TO THE NIGHT SKY

we live but there is a blind suffering to it
even when things are going well

do you see me
do you speak to me in the silence

which is more incomplete
a bookmark without a book

or a book without a bookmark
I do not know the night sky

a father's jacket over a fence
at Christmastime playing football

with his two teenage sons reminds me
of my father and Brendan and me

January diagnosed with glaucoma
shutting out an upper right portion of the night sky

is there a force in my life dissolving sameness
drawing me to the non-me-ness in things

a pull a push by the transcendent
into a real world-space I stretch to occupy

it is no surprise it's no big deal
this sun-year my closest neighbour *Proxima Centauri*

James Finnegan

LET ME PUT MY ARMS AROUND YOU

I wish to put my arms around the dead
and they are alive when I do
 first there is my father
whom I wrote an email to in heaven
 which bothered two Johns
 Lennon and Sartre
quite a shock for them
 recently sitting in my car
 out of the blue
I momentarily felt I could phone my father
 and I didn't
but it led me to a deeper closeness
 unlike email he might talk back
and the thought that I could hear
his voice went down down down
then there is my brother Michael
I read a poem at his cremation
about Mike and Bren and me
throwing stones at a bully in Dublin
I can still hear the echo of the slate
landing on the bully's head
 we never saw him again
and then there's my friend Liam
a JRR Tolkien scholar
buried in the wrong graveyard plot
I see the two of us having coffee
in Derry breaking up about that
and Liam's beaming face marvelling
at the twinkling earth humour in all things

A BIOLOGICAL AGE

there is this body
& there are these shoes
there is a chronological
& a biological age
the latter trying
to outsmart the former
& there is this face
whose right eye winks
when I wink the left
who turns left when I turn right

& there are those who wish story
to remain in a drafty barn
rather than see it roam
freely in a wide corral

my I & my mirrored I say

I am not single story
nor multiples of such
a lived life less ordered than that
 nor do we claim
we're in a post-narrative age
 though some do
some of whom seem caught
in an anti-narrative mesh
 we suggest there is story
& multiples of such
a life much more than that

Janet Ruth Heller is the past president of the Michigan College English Association and a past president of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature. She has a Ph.D. in English Language and Literature from the University of Chicago. She has published four poetry books: *Nature's Olympics* (Wipf and Stock, 2021), *Exodus* (WordTech Editions, 2014), *Folk Concert: Changing Times* (Anaphora Literary Press, 2012), and *Traffic Stop* (Finishing Line Press, 2011); a scholarly book, *Coleridge, Lamb, Hazlitt, and the Reader of Drama* (University of Missouri Press, 1990); a middle-grade fiction chapter book for children, *The Passover Surprise* (Fictive Press, 2015, 2016); and a fiction picture book for children about bullying, *How the Moon Regained Her Shape* (Arbordale, 2006; 7th edition 2022), that has won four national awards, including a Children's Choices award. Her website is <https://www.janetruthheller.com>



MOTHER-IN-LAW ON THE PHONE

Your court is in session.
Like a prosecutor,
you wedge questions
between me and my peace of mind.

"When did you get up?
Did you shower?
Are you depressed
at the end of your semester?
When will you buy a larger house?"

You reveal your other children's secrets,
but warn me not to tell anyone.

You demand that I see
the same movies that delight you, attend
the same lecture series, shop
at the same stores, buy
the same clock radio on sale.

"Goodbye, little girl,"
you conclude gaily,
leaving my 36-year-old,
five-foot seven-inch body
seething with rage.

Janet Ruth Heller

SNOW-WOMAN IN PORTAGE

I stroll across my neighborhood
during a January thaw.
Young Karl and Erika frolic
on their mountain of snow.
Andrew and Ryan
scoop out an igloo.

But a snow-woman
on Tattersall Street
stops me in my tracks.
Shapely legs end
in a bikini brief,
and a buxom torso
overflows
a bikini top.
Winter sunlight sparkles,
tanning the snow-maiden.

MARK’S PROGRESS II

For my nephew

Mark had trouble
opening his mouth
and some sounds
posed obstacles
for his lips and tongue.

When Mark was a toddler,
doctors predicted
that his autism
would prevent him
from learning to speak.

But Mark worked hard,
encouraged by his parents,
his sister Karen,
and skilled therapists.
They proved the doctors wrong.

Mark began with hand signs,
then mastered phonemes
and full syllables.
He struggled with words
like “Karen” and “home.”

Mark lagged behind his grade
in language skills. But he kept
pushing sounds into phrases,
then three-unit sentences:
“I want pancake.”

continued overleaf

MARK'S PROGRESS II *contd...*

At Cousin Jay's bar mitzvah,
Mark's mother wept,
prayed that her son
would someday catch up,
live as a normal man.

The Jewish community
sent teenagers to mentor Mark,
play ball games with him,
build his confidence,
become his friends.

He learned to read
in English and Hebrew,
mastered crossing streets
even in hectic New York,
grew tall and strong.

At age thirteen,
Mark had his bar mitzvah,
chanted from the Torah,
led songs and worship,
made his family proud.

The rabbi compared
this achievement
to the Jews' exodus
from Egyptian bondage
and praised the youth's courage.

Mark continued to study,
held summer jobs,
graduated from high school,
then lived with roommates
while completing a new degree.

As COVID raged,
Mark and his mother
shopped for senior citizens
and delivered their groceries.
Now he works for a hardware store.

Mark's progress gives me hope
that more differently abled children
will develop their skills,
reach for distant stars.

Kate Ennals has published poems and short stories in a range of literary and on-line journals (Crannog, Skylight 47, Honest Ulsterman, The International Lakeview Journal, Boyne Berries, North West Words, Crossways, The Ogham Stone, Poetry Ireland Review, plus many more). She has published three collections of poetry. *At The Edge* (Lapwing) was published in 2015. *Threads* (Lapwing), was published in April 2018. *Elsewhere* (Vole Imprint), in November 21. Her fourth, *Practically A Wake*, will be published in 2024 (Salmon Poetry).



A DAISY CHAIN FOR MY FATHER

The curve of his spine as he sits at the table
The whisper of page as he skims his paper
The gigantic of *we* with me on his shoulders
The clam of his forehead clutched by my fingers
The brick of pub wall beneath my plump legs
The twist of blue salt in a crinkle of crisps
The cleft of his chin under the thin of his lips
The rise / fall of his belly through his afternoon kip

The delicate of daisies I thread to chain him to me
The snap when he wakes and shakes me away.

Kate Ennals

OLD GUARD

At 11 o'clock, my world stopped, church bells rang
I turned, lowered my hand, kissed your cheek

*(here, I want to say it smells of roses, but it is
caked in mud and grime, tastes of ash and iron).*

Blood drips from a gash in your neck.
I'm not sure if you are dead or alive, I scramble

*(here, I want to write of eggs, fluffy and
yellow, on toast, seasoned to taste).*

scarper, clamber over the edge
crawl a moonscape of barbed wire and death to

*(here, I want to say to a place of heavenly grasses,
angels with wings, an adagio of strings).*

I come to a street with no end and a paper cup.

SWANSONG

At 5 o'clock, I stroll the loch shore
hear a chorus of quacks and clucks
grunts and honks of waterfowl

Out of the blue
comes a drumroll
I raise my eyes
see a line
of whooper swans
in the sky
beating a path
one by one
as they come to land
each swan spreads her wings
and taking a vertical stance
halts her flow of light
her neck straight
head held high
feathers stretched wide
and, for an instant
in the gloaming flight
each bird transforms
into a Celtic cross
poised in glory
mid drops of water
then folds
on the lake
like origami
and sails away
a ghost

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



DISCREPANCY

I wish I looked how I feel
you said,
Real black
black enough
to stand on one leg
wearing a cock rag
waving a spear
at all these culture vulture
seeking tourists.
What do you mean?
I said.
You wouldn't understand
you said—enough
—just black enough.

Lorraine Gibson

POOR THING

Winter-ice portends more tedium.
An evening’s inner-city snow is
growled-down by bitter cold.
Liability has again thrust burdens
onto supplicant hands.
Back street leaves shiver
through ginnels and snickets.
I sent the invitations you
did not receive. So sorry
to leave you choking down
your hubris. Like many
vulnerable humans
the answer to guilty or not
is constantly shifting.

DEAR MOUSE-PAD

Small rectangle pillow
for the weary writer
such comfort
you bring
to my slim wrist
each morning
in the spring
in winter
in every season
here upon my desk
you cherished, water-proof
spawn of a silicone machine.
Sweet little mouse pad,
I lean into your colours
the black and gold of you
the skin and sun of you
the hot red earth bearing
Aboriginal shapes and symbols
waterholes and campsites
rocks and rivers,
reminders
of being outdoors—not
sitting writing to what and
for whom is often unclear.
Some days
I skate across your surface
—tiny ice-rink
for a hairless mouse.
Left and right—forward
back—round in circles
in some manic dance.

You lead me on a path
towards elusive metaphors
and hidden similes.
I shape-shift and twist
around your willing surface
seeking inspiration.
Some days you
are Loki the trickster
promising Valhalla
only to pause somewhere
between the sticky work of
coffee stains and procrastination.

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



Patricia Sykes

TRAIPE GLOOM

Graffiti grammar jabs the dawn
platform cigarettes writhe
under dearth skies

it's the outskirter way
to interrogate signs
left by the previous

I know her uncannily
the passenger in flight
from her roof

her eagerness to alight
in a metropolis that magnifies
a wish to be *among*,

only to be mirrored
in faces that fail
to detect her. She morphs

is morphed, sloughed
amid the skin-cell jostle
to admix intimately

with other cells, city grit,
until the last train blinks away
via the underground

the silence an hiatus
pocked by shadows
each an atoll, pulse

as passage, timetable,
offspring of the engine
weak, strong.

I LIVED HERE ONCE

No names, mere whispers only
the kind you find slipped
under the corner of old lino
in a vacated house

such became our sub-genre
the vacate orders
issued always by our father
pack your bags, we're moving

tomorrow: there was a home before,
when she, our mother
was still alive, until
spirited away in daylight

by shadow men
the black spider in the
ceiling's darkest corner
too small to prevent them

the jabberwocky house next
full of wind-up tensions, mattresses
in tight spaces, a kind aunt unable
to add more walls, windows, doors

the magpies at least were continuous
a new home nest
each season
pack your bags...tomorrow

turned out to be an orphanage
the weather a battery
the wind choking
as if on a lead ball

a picnic is rarely
short of subscribers
even dead leaves
crave to join in

like we orphans in our spent frocks
who were no longer asked
where do you live?
but instead were sold Paradise

as the most joyful of homes
as if all an orphan needed
was a door opened by
an indebted religious key

now a litany of old
addresses, outworn voices
stored in an opaque jar
to break it

would spill the unfound,
versions still to be inhabited,
endured? welcomed?
Home?

THE BEAUTIFUL SILENCE OF OXALIS

The women over the back fence
tending their infants in the sun
spill their voices into my yard.
It's the way of it here
Intimacy squeeze, neighbour
on neighbour, the cost of
downsize from mountain
to foothill, never again
in theory to flee
in bushfire season.

The infants themselves
will increase decibel by
decibel to merge
with the racketing trains
power tools, motorbike
throttlings, frenzies
of dog and the neighbour
on the left who plays
aggro with his radio.
Amazingly a bee

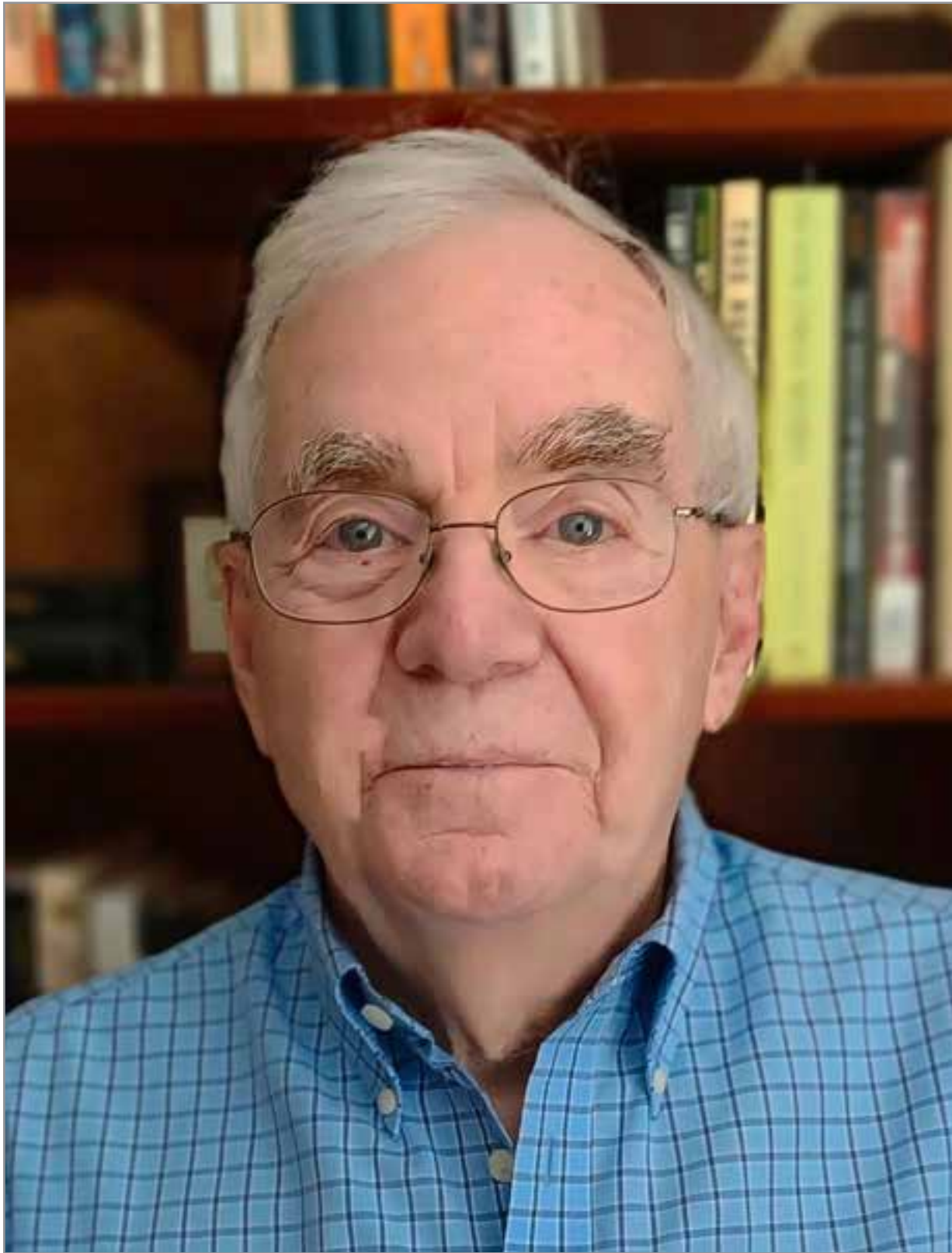
makes itself heard.
Web-caught, its own
whine maddens it.
Of course I intervene
one of us deserves
to be freed. Wing-swift
It flies off none the worse.
At its going a brief
bliss of quiet among the
beautifully silent oxalis



©Mark Ulyseas

Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

Peter A. Witt is a Texas Poet and a retired university professor. He also writes family history with a book about his aunt published by the Texas A&M Press. Peter's poetry deals with personal experiences, both real and imagined. His poetry has been published on various sites including Fleas on the Dog, Inspired, Open Skies Quarterly, Medusa's Kitchen, Active Muse, New Verse News, and WryTimes.



EXPECTATIONS

Winter arrived, unpacked its undressed trees,
waters that slowed to an iced tea trickle,
sun that slept late and went to bed early,
harvest moon that had completed its job,
now a memory of witches riding brooms
across its surface. We settled in for weeks
of log laying, kernels that popped
with a buttery rhythm, holidays celebrated
with family, few of whom could remember
their meaning, snows that filled the yard
with carrot-eyed statues, and a groundhog
that despised its shadow.

We looked forward to snowdrops,
robins, and waxwings, all harbingers
that warmer days, gentle rains, baby
rabbits, and softer skies were ahead.
All this we could count on year-by-year,
written only in our expectations, played
out with joy, wisdom, and wonder.

Peter A. Witt

CONFESSIONS OF A WINDY CHILDHOOD

At ten years old I slept alone
in a bedroom at the back of our house,
a U-shape away from my brothers, many
misunderstandings away from my parents,
I awoke most nights afraid the slightest
wind would topple a backyard poplar tree
despite it having expansive roots
wider and deeper than the tenacles
of love that failed to navigate the
hallways of my childhood home.

My mother's mother was cold, passing
the temperature onto her daughter,
who knew not how to warm
to her children, how to remark
positively about the little things
that help create bonds and feelings
of safety, leaving me to feel
that at any minute, in the dark of night,
a poplar tree might shatter the roof
and leave me injured or worse.

A psychologist suggested my parents
remove the tree to placate my fears,
he never suggested my mother
tussle my hair, or praise my grades,
or honor my high school track medal,
he explained to me my mother
would probably never change,
that it was up to me to self-love,
forgive, and learn to love others
in a way I'd never been.

Years later, my mother has passed,
through the love of a patient wife,
I've learned to appreciate the sway
of rooted trees in Texas storms
and have forgiven my grandmother
and my mother.

SOON MY TIME WILL COME TO SAY GOODBYE

A drum role played the day I was born,
flock of robins sat on the windowsill
chirping their greetings, as the sun
cast sheltered light through cloud
wisps that hung like cotton candy
over our temporary South Carolina home.
My second day was filled with oohs and aahs
of grandparents, each pleased to see
in my eyes someone they recognized.
My mother held me close, offering
the gift of warmth as I suckled
at her breast, father held me too,
telling me about his beloved Dodgers,
how we'd go hiking together, while promising
in the months ahead he'd make the world safe
so I'd never have to endure his days
to come in Ardennes Forest foxholes,
cold and desperate to get home,
where he'd sleep with nightmares
of enemy fire that would tear apart
the trees and leave his company
decimated and shell-shocked.

After three days we went to our
temporary home, mother, father, and me,
where I would grow inches and pounds
recorded in a baby book safely kept
to this day in a box of remembrances,
a lock of my hair tucked inside, along
with a list of gifts I received for my birthday
and Christmas each year until
my parents moved onto thinking
about three other newborns who arrived
regularly four years apart.
I'm in my ninth decade now, the past
is jumbled with the present,
the future shorter than it used to be,
the Dodgers have once again flunked
out of the playoffs, my father's ashes
absorb each defeat, my mother
preceding him to a spot under
a long lived olive tree. Robins
sometimes sit on my windowsill
listening to the drumroll of my daily life.

Rafael E. Fajer Camus is a Mexican writer who was educated at NYU and Naropa University. He has travelled extensively and has lived in Mexico City, Paris, and NYC. He's been through a few rehab and psychiatric treatments in the US and Mexico. He's now aware that he's not a cyborg destined to settle humans on Mars and is working on his first book *Notes on the Borderline*. His work has appeared in: ACE Anthology III: Arresting, Contemporary stories by Emerging writers, ACE Anthology IV: Arresting, Contemporary stories by Emerging writers and in several editions of Live Encounters Magazine. His work has been taught at NYU.
<https://rafaelfajer.com/>



CONSTANZA

Apolito, the shaman told her, “You can only invoke the power of the animal spirits within you. I cannot give you access to the power of a spirit that does not already reside in you. But I assure you that you will get what you are asking for.”

The confidence with which Apolito spoke to her and the flattering recommendations with which her metaphysics professor had spoken of him, motivated Constanza. She was determined.

“See you next Saturday for the ceremony. Follow the instructions well and come on an empty stomach.” Apolito said.

Constanza had been trying for weeks to get an appointment with Apolito. She had been trying for years to move up to the top position at Toma1, the advertising agency where she worked. Ronaldo, the general manager, was retiring at the end of the year and the Board of Directors was looking for his replacement. Constanza was the natural candidate, ideal if it were not for the fact that she was born a woman. It never ceased to amaze her how at this point in the new millennium, in Mexico, a country with so much development in so many areas, gender labor policies were still so backward.

Constanza had dedicated her life to her passions: advertising and the power that working in high positions gave her. No other employee at TOMA1 came close in dedication, talent, knowledge, and creativity. When she applied for the position of CEO, she did so by proposing less advantageous conditions than anyone else in that position demanded. Such was her desire for the job. The board, composed of 6 men and 1 woman, unanimously preferred to find a man for the position.

Constanza did not have much time to convince them to give her the job and seeing that the traditional ways were not bearing fruit, she turned to Apolito: a shaman expert in medicinal plants, astral travel, and empowerment rituals. In Constanza's case, after 3 appointments in which they talked, meditated together, and got to know each other, Apolito decided that the best thing for Constanza was to put her in touch with her spirit animals.

Rafael E. Fajer Camus

“Did you follow the instructions? - Apolito asked her when she arrived a week later at the ritual.”

“Yes”

“Are you sure?”, the shaman insisted.

“Yes”

“Let’s get started then. Remember that on your journey you will encounter symbols that represent your animal power. Allow the symbols to come alive in you, to become part of your psychic reality.”

Constanza and Apolito remained silent, meditating with half-open eyes during the first few minutes of the temazcal session. The air heavy with humidity made the heat more intense. Constanza felt like she was in a clay oven, contained, tight. The low, windowless dome could barely fit the two of them sitting down. Herbs and vapor coming from the chimney in the periphery of the circular temazcal. Sweat made Constanza’s skin glisten.

At the end of the meditation, they invoked the ancestors of each of their lineages, asking for their blessings and permission to invite the masters. When Apolito felt the temazcal become heavier, still, he realized that they had the approval of the ancestors and that the masters were present to guide them, he handed her a cup with a concoction of medicinal plants that he prepared especially for Constanza. Constanza drank it. Apolito also took a sip. Together they chanted until the drink took effect. Apolito stared at Constanza as he played a drum with a slow, steady beat. Constanza’s mind traveled.

Walking in a dark, damp forest, the first thing she came across was a feather on the ground. She felt its call and she responded to it. Without her noticing, the feather multiplied and became a pair of wings that were placed on her back. She continued on the path. One hoof in her way, became two hoofs that, in turn, became her feet. Further ahead, she found horns that manifested suddenly on her forehead. She continued walking and came upon a pond in which the moon and stars were reflected. She had never seen anything so beautiful. Approaching the water, she saw her reflection. It was powerful. It was Constanza with wings and horns and hoofs.

She was a perfectly beautiful creature. “This is Me” she thought, “I am one with Nature. It and I are the same. There are no longer any barriers between me and It. I feel It now.” Lost in her reflection, contemplating her new understanding of the universe, of herself, of her power, she marveled. She realized that she no longer cared if she got the position at Toma1. She had found a deeper sense of life, the experience that was this harmony, this union with nature, with the whole.

“Thank you,” she said to the universe. “Thank you,” she said to nature. “Thank you” she said to Apolito. At that moment, she began to hear the rhythmic sound of Apolito’s drum in the distance. She was beginning to come to her senses, to come out of the trance. It took a few more minutes, but she returned to the temazcal, to the heat, to Apolito’s presence and to the beat of his drum.

She burst into tears.

“Thank you, Apolito! I never.... I don’t even know how to express it. What I experienced, what I felt. I am at a loss for words. Thank you!”

“There is nothing to say. Remain silent. Absorb the experience. Retain the teachings. I am here to accompany you.”

They left the temazcal and sat down in a room with cushions to drink water, tea and meditate again. Then they slept.

The next day, after breakfast, Apolito explained to Constanza what was to come.

“The objects you encountered on your journey are symbols of the guides with whom you have a deep and constant, recent, and powerful relationship. They are the ones who will take you on the path to subtler, higher dimensions of vibration. It is a reciprocal relationship. They give to you what you give to them. Look, Constanza, I’ll be honest with you. I have lived through many processes, but I have never seen one like yours. You connected deeply with the plants. I felt your union with your teachers and guides. Drink plenty of water, meditate every morning so that you can learn the lessons well”.

They agreed to meet in a month to follow up on the ritual. Constanza went home and slept. It was Sunday. It was 11:10 p.m.

She woke up with her hunched down, brushing against a tray of feed. Her knees and hands on the floor, supporting her body. Something like a swing was holding her up by her belly so she wouldn't collapse. The position of her head and neck was held by two tubes that squeezed her at the nape of her neck. She could not move her head except to put it in the tray under her face and look at her surroundings. To her left, as on her right, was a line of women in the same posture; some eating, some turning, many screaming and most of them crying. The pain of the position was excruciating. Cramps coursing through her belly and the intense light flooding her eyes that kept her awake. There was something about the food, or the light, or the environment that caused her womb to spasm. Pain, contractions, and constant menstrual flow. Constant colic. And all those around her, just the same. Her menstruation dropped into a cup and taken to another room. Her eggs were being collected. It took her a while to realize this. Her eggs were being harvested. All these women's eggs were being harvested.

Hours passed. Days passed. Years. Constanza, with her head between two tubes, forced to eat and menstruate non-stop, lived her life there, among women who screamed and begged for help. A robotic arm would come by to pick up older women who had stopped producing eggs. They were slaughtered in grinders. One day the robotic arm arrived for Constanza. The automatic tubes opened, and the silver claws grabbed her. She, with her body atrophied by lack of movement, could not resist. The automatic system took her to the bladed machine and dropped her on the metal teeth. Crushed by the iron jaw, Constanza died.

She opened her eyes again. She was in her bed. She looked at her cell phone. It was 11:11 p.m. What had been dozens of years in the cage had been a minute. But she had lived it, she had felt it. She had suffered it. "It was a hallucination. Calm down! You are still under the effects of that potion Apolito gave you."

She got out of bed, went to the bathroom, and got into the shower cleaning with soap and water what she thought was a dream even though she knew it was a memory. She got out of the shower, dried off and with an intense thirst went to the kitchen for a glass of water. Turning on the kitchen lights illuminated the window in which she saw her reflection. She fainted.

She opened her eyes. She found that she could barely stand. She turned to look at her stomach and saw a huge bump. She was pregnant. She started having contractions. The cage was opened, and a group of people approached to immobilize her. Her body was splitting in two and the birth attendants would not let her move. They would just push on her belly and put their hands in her vagina to help the baby be born. On the eighth hour, her son was born. They placed him on her chest. Despite the painful experience of giving birth to that little creature, the love she felt for him was profound. Breastfeeding connected them. She nurtured him. Thanks to her body, he was going to grow and live. Her eyes full of joy looked at him searching for a name. "Renato, you are Renato. You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. I love you."

She moved her lips in for a kiss when Renato was snatched from her hands. He was taken away. Constanza protested, screamed, and cursed. Four people took her by force and put her in the cage. They tied her legs and arms to a device on the wall. Her breasts were attached to a breast pump with a plate of food in front of it. The machine sucked her nipples hard and squeezed her breasts periodically. The pain from the repetitive motion of this instrument grew exponentially. At first it was only muscular, then it spread to her skin which, with the rubbing of the suction cups, began to bleed. The desperation of pain nourished her screams. But no one came to her rescue. While her breasts suffered this torture, the contraption to which her body was strapped moved her body automatically to keep the blood flowing and her muscles and bones to maintain some of their density. She spent a day thinking that her pleas would be answered. But nothing. On the second day she gave up and decided to stop eating. Her breasts dried up. The extraction machine sounded an alarm. A few minutes later a nurse arrived with Renato crying. She put him in front of her. Renato's smell and his screams awakened her breasts. They started producing again. The baby was placed in Constanza's arms and taken out of the cage.

"Eat." She was instructed.

Constanza ate. The moment her plate was finished, Renato was taken away again. This went on for several days until Renato was never again returned. She stopped eating. She was intubated and fed for weeks. Her breasts were disconnected from the breast pump as they were no longer producing milk. At first Constanza experienced a strange combination of helplessness and rest, of hopelessness and peace. The memory and absence of Renato broke her heart. However, the absence of pain in her breasts was an immense relief. But time passed and those feelings gave way to impatience.

The confinement and shackles were driving her to insanity. Twice a day nurses came to check her and give her antibiotics. She tried to talk to them, but they pretended not to understand her. They wouldn't even look her in the eyes. She was just another object in that cold, dark room. She gave up. "I no longer have milk. They will kill me or release me. There's nothing more they can do to me." She thought as she was untied and taken out of the cage. She was carried to the end of a corridor on a gurney, the door was opened, and a bright light blinded her. She didn't understand what light could be this bright. As she considered the options, she felt herself being carried off the gurney and placed face up on another surface.

They took her legs and tied them wide open so that she could not move. She tried to pull away, but there was nothing she could do. "The light, it's the lighting of an operating room, what are they going to do to me?" Hardly had she formulated the question in her head when she felt a wide, cold tube enter her vagina. Constanza understood what was happening to her: she was being inseminated. In her mind she knew what her future would be. The following months and years went through her head. She passed out.

She opened her eyes. Was it another dream? She was back in her cage bound and intubated. It was not a dream. She was strapped to the contraption, in her cage, intubated. Days, weeks, and months went by like this. She tried to break free, to escape, to drown, to kill herself by any method she could think of only to find the nurses ready to reverse all her attempts. Days turned into weeks and weeks turned into months. Her mind began to lose its sharpness, but her suffering increased. When the delivery came, her thoughts did not follow any recognizable pattern. She no longer understood whether it was day or night, whether she lived in the present or in the past, she only felt her body manipulated and her heart in despair.

She gave birth once again, this time to a girl, Alejandra. But Alejandra died within minutes of her birth. Constanza's breast did not want to give milk. Constanza lay exhausted in her cage, tied to the device that kept moving her body. She fell asleep. Her dreams no longer made sense. Her mental processes weakened; this torture destroyed her psychologically, physically, spiritually. But she was at rest. There was nothing bothering her then. There was only an absence of pain and suffering that gave her a few moments of peace. The nurses came back. They untied her. She woke up. Without understanding or wanting to understand what was happening, she let herself be carried to another room. She opened her eyes crestfallen and saw a coppery red membrane that painted the floor. Her throat was slit.

She opened her eyes. She was in the kitchen of her apartment. The clock on the wall indicated 11:55 p.m. She ran to her bedroom and picked up the phone. She looked for Apolito's contact and just as she was about to press the dial button, she lost consciousness.

She opened her eyes and was in the same place. In her apartment, in the kitchen. The clock read 11:55 p.m. Nothing had changed. She stayed on the ground for a minute, two minutes, waited 10 minutes to see if anything would happen and nothing did. Surprised, she got up. "Has it already happened?" She poured herself a glass of water from the refrigerator filter. She took it quietly. It seemed like years since the last time she had drunk fresh water. It was a blessing what she was experiencing. Eagerly, she poured herself two more glasses which she drank quietly leaning against her kitchen counter. She sat down in one of the chairs surrounding her dining room table and took a deep, slow, breath.

"It's over now. The effects of that potion are insane. Damn Apolito. What's wrong with him?" She no longer cared about the position at Toma1, but it was helpful to think about the job. It centered her. It brought her back to her present. It was a tool to forget what she had "experienced". It gave her hope, purpose to her suffering.

After some time of reflection and quiet, she returned to the refrigerator. She opened it and was surprised at what she found there. An immense number of fruits and vegetables. Her refrigerator was an herbivore's paradise. Grateful not to have found any animal products, she prepared a salad, ate it, and went to dozed off.

That night she slept soundly, as she had never slept before in her life. Her head sank into her pillow making a hollow from which her hair radiated like a black sun. She was thankful that her pillow was soft, soft like all the cotton that stuffed it.

She woke up with the certainty that what had happened to her had "happened" because she ate animals, because she drank milk, because she was an omnivore. The refrigerator full of herbivorous treasures was a clear indicator of the path her life would take.

Full of energy she started her day. From time to time, unwanted images of what she had "dreamed" came to her. She shook her head and continued her morning preparation. She had a bowl of oatmeal with almond milk and fresh fruit for breakfast. The coffee tasted like glory. Every moment was another opportunity to be grateful that she was alive. She grabbed her bag and went to work.

After that hellish night everything went well for her. Every task she set herself was accomplished without any major complications. The promotion was no longer in doubt. Negotiations with the Board were going full steam ahead. Seeing the progress in a process of transition, the CEO agreed to retire a few months earlier, as soon as the contract with Constanza was signed, and that was not long in coming. Constanza never ate any animal products again. She always fed at home and the refrigerator always had food in it. She didn't need to go to the supermarket. Constanza understood that this perpetual abundance was part of the blessings the universe was bestowing on her new understanding of it.

The day of the signing of the contract arrived and a banquet was organized to celebrate. It was the board of directors (all 7 members), Ronaldo and Constanza. She entered the private room at Toma1, where the celebration would take place. She saw the table set with impeccable taste. Everyone was sitting around waiting for her. As soon as the door behind her closed, two people grabbed her by the arms and took her to the back, where there was a human-sized spinning top. They tied her hands behind her back and hung her upside down from the ceiling by her feet. They opened her neck and left her to bleed to death while they rubbed oil on her body. It didn't take long for her to lose consciousness.

She opened her eyes. She was in her apartment, in the kitchen. The clock on the wall indicated 11:56 p.m. "No, NO. NO!" She thought. "This can't be my life!" She picked up the phone and called Apolito.

"I need to see you."

"I know. I'm going to your house."

She took 45 minutes to get there. 45 minutes in which Constanza trembled with fear. She didn't understand anything. Lost in fear and anticipation, she wept.

"Why is this still happening to me?"

She had already stopped eating animal products. Was she going to pay for the rest of her life for the ignorance she had lived with; for not wanting to see how much pain she was generating with her eating habits? Something had to be done. Apolito started this, Apolito would finish it.

"I'm going Crazy. I'm desperate. What do I do, Apolito?"

"I know what is happening to you. I gave you very clear instructions. Tell me what you ate last week."

"Apolito, I couldn't help it. You know that I came to you for the position of CEO at the agency."

"What did you eat?"

"On Monday we went to have breakfast with a client. I ate some fried eggs."

It started to become clear to Constanza what had happened.

"I had a cappuccino... With cow's milk. On Thursday I was invited to a dinner with the Board of Directors, and we had goat for dinner... free grazing. You don't need to tell me anymore. I understand."

"What were you looking for?"

"The power of my spirit guides, the wisdom of my power animals."

"What did you find?"

"I didn't want this."

"I gave you what you asked for. You must have understood what you were asking for. You are one with them... you felt their power. You felt their suffering. Therein lies their wisdom."

Apolito got up and said goodbye. Constanza went to the bedroom to get the money she owed him for the visit. She took the wallet from the bureau and fainted. Constanza opened her eyes....

Apolito heard the noise in the bedroom. He went to see what was happening and found Constanza unconscious on the floor, her leather purse in her hand.

Rose Mary Boehm is a German-born British national living and writing in Lima, Peru, and author of two novels as well as seven poetry collections. Her poetry has been published widely in mostly US poetry reviews (online and print). She was twice nominated for a 'Pushcart', once for 'Best of Net'. Her latest: *Do oceans have underwater borders?* (Kelsay Books July 2022), *Whistling in the dark* (Cyberwit July 2022), and *Saudade* (December 2022) are available on Amazon. Also available on Amazon is a new collection, *Life stuff*, published by Kelsay Books November 2023. <https://www.rose-mary-boehm-poet.com/>



ALL THESE LAST YEARS I PLANTED WORDS

I ploughed furrows into
the black soil of anamnesis,
anatomy, animosity. Weaving,
waving, waning, water bearer.

Your diazepam, dear.
The bells. He tells tales
of the hole into which I fell.
Hell.
After a while my eyes adjusted
to the effulgence of foxfire fungi.

Sowing out fault lines and faux pas.
My skin itches from the dust
of the mowing. Fault lines
grow fast. Before I could throw
a line and anchor, the tectonic
plates of our two bodies moved.

Rose Mary Boehm

FLYING TO NEW YORK

We are doing a left.
The Hudson Bay disappears under
the rising wing,
the sea comes towards us.

I remembered Miss Geography.
An elderly ship in which we safely sailed
in a no-nonsense way.
I remembered the wooden stick
in her bony hand, veins thick
under her skin, poking the map
of North America.
“Hudson Bay!” she stentored sternly,
and repeated it so it would penetrate
our thick skulls. “Hudson Bay!”

And when we approached Canada,
before making the turn,
it all looked exactly as it did then,
in that dingy school room,
on that much used geography map
hanging from a rusty hook in the wall.
It was for rolling up.
As Miss Geography became more relaxed,
one leg went up onto an unoccupied bench,
and long, beige, woolen bloomers
became visible under a medium long,
beige skirt.

There were only old teachers left.
It was 1950. The young ones
had all been killed at the front.
The new crop hadn’t been harvested yet.
Then, one day they trickled in.
First just a few.
Oh. My. God. There was Miss French.
She can’t have been older than 25.
She wore fashionable dresses,
and lipstick!
We all loved her to bits and wanted
to be like her when we grew up!
She was soon followed by Mr History.
We swooned, and my friend Doris
passed her history exam with
a very revealing wrap-around blouse
as well as two impressive tits.
Mr Maths and Miss Art, we snickered,
saw each other after class.

When I pedalled my bike home,
my school satchel clamped precariously
behind my squeaky seat, I looked forward
to this unknown journey awaiting me,
once I was free to explore a world
that was so full of promise.
I took my hands off the handlebars
and whistled.

BETWEEN NIGHT AND DAY IN THE PORT CITY

The first trams fill the narrow cobblestoned
Antwerp street, for a moment clanging
into semi consciousness, the sleepers
still full of last night's sins and revellery,
a *pintjespak* in the bar at the corner
before the sun comes up,
where the working girls and taxi drivers will find
a hot soup, a fresh baguette, and a cognac
to warm the gullet.

Condoms, cigarette butts, and chewed-out bubble gums
side by side, friendly witnesses
to meetings under the cast-iron wrought streetlamps
or in the shadows afforded to those
who would not be seen.

Annetje stretches under her semen-stained sheets,
giving herself a luxurious reprieve from demanding hands
and urging voices. The cat never twitched.

Madame looks at her bedside clock and relaxes,
her heavy body almost unable to move.
After the last client had left, she waddled upstairs
and fell into her sagging mattress.
She needs to pee.

Piet whistles, hands in his dark-blue overall pockets,
walking purposefully towards the harbour,
breathing in a sharp early-morning air
that carries promises on the waters of river and sea.
Another ship has come in from Valparaíso.



Photograph courtesy <https://pixabay.com/photos/ladder-walk-tourism-valparaiso-2709286/>

Tobi Alfier is published nationally and internationally. Credits include War, Literature and the Arts, The American Journal of Poetry, KGB Bar Lit Mag, Washington Square Review, Cholla Needles, James Dickey Review, Gargoyle, Permafrost, Arkansas Review, Anti-Heroine Chic, and others. She is co-editor of San Pedro River Review <https://www.bluehorsepress.com/>



SHUTTERED WOMAN

She reads wine labels like the love letters
hidden in her ballerina jewelry box
some ancient as the papery lampshade
in the study, some as new as the year.

The winter light is dim
and so is the hallway
as she rushes through her evening
in order to sit poised, relaxed,

waiting for evening company.
There's a distortion in the room
that could be mended by a kiss
or by the ghosts of memory

as they float away past the mirror,
out the open window blowing
snow so gently on the floor
it breezes in a line straight as rulers.

She is a physics problem
to be solved, her dream speech
disarmed and translated
into love language

like we say *artichokes*
are our love language
and other things that make no sense
and every sense.

She is the border
of a vanished country,
a cold seam of winter light,
an unbroken anonymity

but she always comes back
beholden to no one
the years broken her gray
her evening companions shot with light.

Tobi Alfier

WHAT CAN I GET YOU?

She had the grades
and high enough IQ to sail through
any Ivy League school

but preferred the mere mortals
in the bars she tends—
two bars, seven days

enough stories to fill
notebooks and notebooks,
turning them into myths and tragedies

no one would believe
but they were rather
impossible to make up.

The man with the cringing gait
was a track teacher after
a war injury,

he never said which war,
in fact he never said much at all
until after last call, when

all who were left were dreamers
and saints.

The woman who burned through money
buying solace for everyone, who looked
like she slept rough, she had a story.

Held up by the cranes and scaffolds
of alcohol and cigarettes,
faces baring the weight of shadows

beyond imagination, they raised a building
of delicate grace with rum and coke,
did not burn it down. And freed

from their separate tragedies, the sum
of their parts made them whole—and that
made her whole. Two bars, seven days.

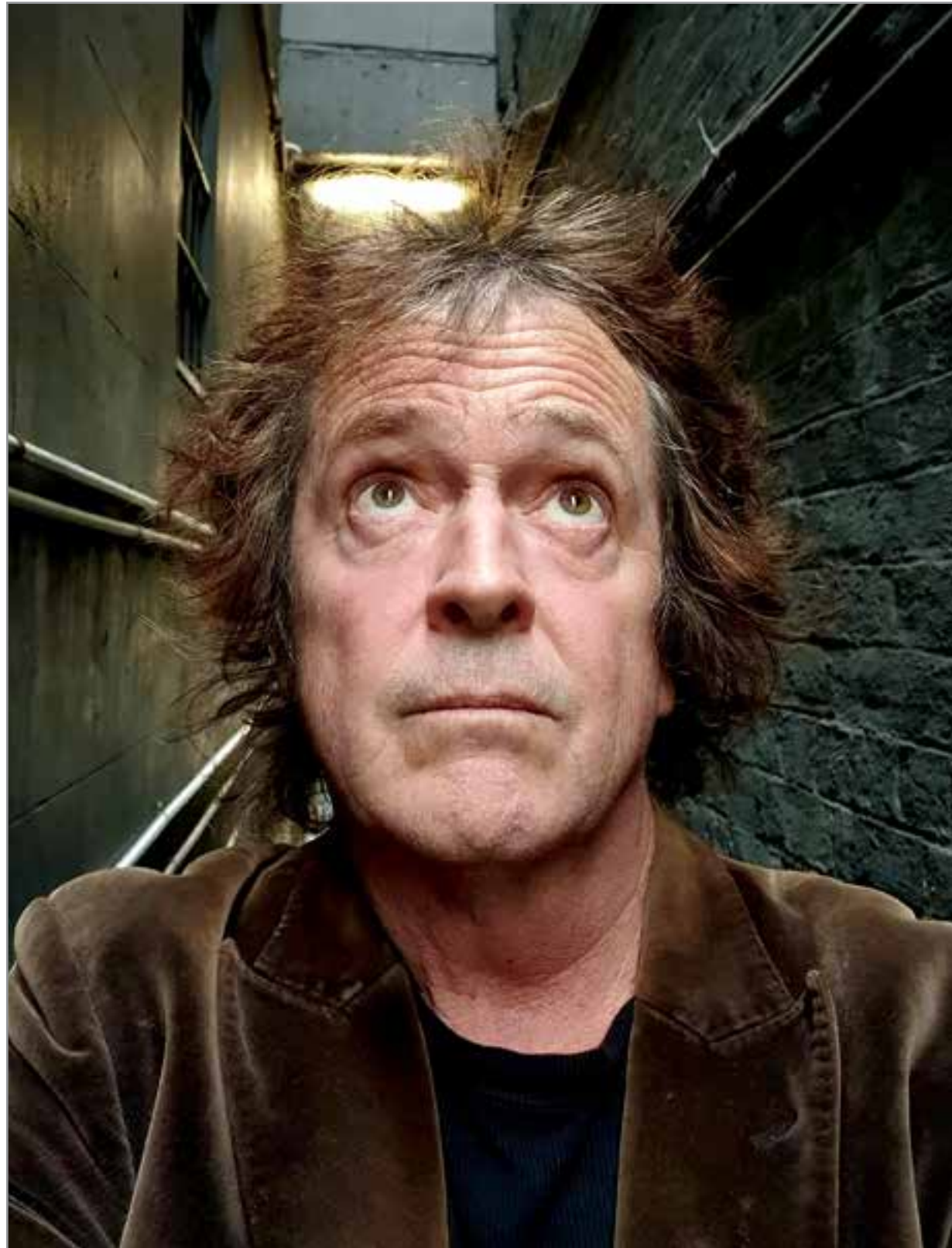
NO SALT WATER TAFFY

I am beholden to evening boardwalks,
the empty booths, the secrets,
the closed up carnival wonders
and souvenir shops selling everything
from post cards to toe rings
—secret speakeasy piercing/tattoo shops
in the back. The tattoo artist
is always my kind of guy—all partied out,
clothes that look well-traveled in,
a PhD in art and life, he could look
at you and guess what you were there for,
he'd pass you off to the piercing guy
if desired. A shot of tequila,

then stare at the ceiling
stickered with constellations—
all the anesthesia you'd ever need.
I know from experience the black
lines hurt most, but the piercings
might need two shots of tequila, I don't know
—maybe a 5% lidocaine patch swiped
from some hospital would work well
but I digress. The piercing artist
is always particularly creepy. He speaks
like a castaway, an insomniac,
a runaway from a sideshow—
he speaks like a robot or the fortune-telling

head at the end of the pier. He's worn down,
waiting to light out for his watering hole
in an even more disdained part of town
but he's careful, and talented, just alienated
from the normal niceties of people
who take your money and act like they care.
I myself prefer women for my own
personal ink, and confess I'm a junkie
for the closed food stalls—
love going to sleep all tangy from sea air,
mustard under my fingernails,
a bag of salt water taffy in the fridge,
funnel cake stretching the bluebird on my stomach.

Tug Dumbly is the pen and stage name of Geoff Forrester, a Nowra-born poet and performer who has lived in Sydney for decades. He has worked extensively in radio, venues and schools, and founded a couple of seminal poetry nights in Sydney. He has performed his work as resident-poet on ABC radio (Triple J, ABC 702), and released two spoken-word CDs through the ABC – *Junk Culture Lullabies* and *Idiom Savant*. His awards include the Banjo Paterson Prize for Comic Verse (twice), and Nimbin Performance Poetry World Cup (thrice). His poems have appeared in many publications and he has been shortlisted numerous times for major awards. In 2020 he won the Borranga Poetry Prize, in 2022 he won the Woorilla Poetry Prize, and most recently he won the 2023 Bruce Dawe Poetry prize. His first poetry collection, *Son Songs*, came out in 2018 through Flying Island Books. He is also a singer, songwriter and musician who likes photography and nature, especially cicadas.



PROFESSOR OF CONCRETE

We were having drinks on the roof of the State Library. It was after a reading of Romanian poetry in the gilded rooms below. I'd read some English translations of Romanian classics and this man congratulated me on my performance. I thanked him and asked what he did. 'Professor of Concrete', he said.

I looked about me. Mostly males, over sixty, tufts of ear hair and dressed by Lowes. Christ, I was at the Engineer's table. I picked at a pretzel and plotted my escape. The Professor batted on. He was an academic who lectured in concrete. He told me of his hero, a man who'd written a textbook on concrete, a kind of Concrete Bible, as sacred to the Prof as Leaves of Grass is to me.

'So, a seminal work on cement' I said, for something to say. The Professor's Espresso Martini froze to his lips and he winced. His wife's smile dropped like a rock and she busied herself in the canapés. If there was a piano it would have stopped playing, then suicided from the roof. I knew I'd blundered. A hobbitish little man to my left, who I'd thought asleep, nudged me:

'Concrete, not cement', he hissed. Never mix the two'. I said 'is that an Engineer's joke?' 'No', he said. 'Amongst Engineers there are no jokes. Only failures'.

I confessed to the Hobbit that I used the terms Concrete and Cement interchangeably. Was there a difference between the two? I mean, it's just that hard stuff of buildings and roads and footpaths that you blithely walk on and through, and live and work in, and are never more than a couple of feet from for most of your life. It's everywhere, right, our environment? And, like, does a goldfish question the water it lives in?

The Hobbit considered me with scorn, then pity.

'Yesss ...', he finally conceded. 'To confuse Concrete with Cement is a mistake sometimes made. By the ignorant.'

Tug Dumbly

He then condescended to sketch me a brief Wiki lesson on the differences between the majesty of Concrete and its poor serf cousin Cement, a primer on their varying properties and uses. There was guff about proportions of sand and gravel and lime, water and blue metal ... talk of skyscrapers, birdbaths, the Colosseum ... girders, formwork, steel reinforcement ... blah blah.

I thanked him and promptly forgot all he'd said. Or rather I didn't bother trying to remember it. I was too fixated on pretending to look like I was listening to him to actually listen, like I am with most people. But I knew enough to turn back and resume talk with the Professor. I'd even armed myself with a mnemonic: 'Concrete is King, Cement's a bit shit'. (Yes, it needed work). The Professor had thawed from his shock and was busy wheeling the Lazee Suzanne to get at the Cabanossi.

'Look', I said. 'I'm sorry about my silly mistake before. But your friend here has now set me straight'. 'Oh', said the Professor. 'Which friend is that?' 'Why', I said, 'this gentleman right ...'

I turned to my left, but the seat was empty. Not only empty but neatly pushed in, with the cutlery and plate unused.

'But he was just here', I said, 'a minute ago!' 'Yes, yes of course he was', said the Professor soothingly. 'It's been a big afternoon's poetry ... anyway, you must tell me about your methods. I've always been envious of people who can make poems. And cakes too. Yes, poems and cakes'. He patted the hand of his re-smiling wife.

Call me paranoid, but I couldn't help feel that others at this round table of engineers were eyeing me, from under their owl brows and fat bifocals, with a mix of derision and amusement. At heart, beneath my sensitive exterior, I'm actually a fairly competitive fellow – petty, egotistical, brittle and vain, bristling with an arsenal grievance and lack. I judge others constantly, take bad weather as a personal affront, find offence in the laughter of children, and another's good fortune can destroy my day. In short, I was compelled to save face.

'Well you know', I said casually, 'Concrete and Poetry are not all that dissimilar. There's even branch of poetry called Concrete Poetry ...'

The Professor paused in sucking the brains from a King Prawn. He'd taken the bait.

'Is that so?' he gruffed.

'Oh yes', I said. 'Concrete poems are written to ape the shape of their subject matter. Thus a poem about a tree will look like a tree, a poem about a horse will be in the shape of a horse, and so on. For instance George Herbert's poem Easter Wings has its text in the shape of wings, while Lewis Carol's poem The Mouse's Tail is ...'

'Yes, yes, how quaint', interrupted the Professor. 'And yet how laborious and futile'.

'Ha, yes', I laughed, 'I'm inclined to agree. Mostly. And yet ...' I paused, as though reticent to plague the great man with whimsicalities. The Professor's fork hovered in expectation over his Sticky Date pudding. '... and yet there are other possibilities', I tantalized. 'Concrete poems don't just have to be about Nature, you know, the frivolities of bugs and trees. No, they could be shaped to cathedrals, for instance. Or any other kind of building ...'

The professor got a misty look. I pressed my advantage:

'... now if only some maverick could break the mould! You say you're envious of people who can make poems. And yet you yourself could make some of the most monumental of poems ...'

'Go on', said the Professor, licking his lips.

'All we lack are visionaries', I sighed. 'Why, even as I sit here gazing out over this city skyline before us, this majestic concrete peon to commerce, other possibilities occur to me, as surely they must occur to a man like you. Yes, I picture a truly functional yet beauteous form of concrete poetry, a form shockingly new ...'

'But you don't mean ...' stuttered the Professor.

'But I DO mean!' I pounced. 'A Poem City! Form and function in one delicious fuck. Picture it – Haiku-shaped public toilets, Limerick-shaped shops, Villanelle villas, Ghazal Ghettos, public housing blocks in the shape of Bush Ballads (the poor will have no choice), right up to skyscrapers of Dante-esque Epic!'

‘But ... but, this is pure fantasy’, said the Professor with a pale smile. ‘I mean the audacity! ... This is, this is ...’

‘This is VISIONARY!’ I finished for him, bashing my fist onto the table and making the plates and grazing engineers jump. ‘This will be a movement to banish Bauhaus back to the shithouse! An architectural revolution to make the International Style look like International Roast!’

The professor was suddenly bug-eyed and randy with Vision. ‘But of course!’ he blurted. ‘Such ideas as these have long skirted the edge of my fantasies!’

‘No doubt’, I said, grasping his hands. ‘And credit for the foundation of the Poem City Movement will be laid at the feet of its rightful progenitor. Look, we can write our manifesto right here and now. On the back of these cocktail napkins!’

‘Yes, yes!’ said the Professor, his mechanism whirring. But then he paused. ‘But ... the practicalities of designing such buildings ... the form, the structure ...’

‘Pfft!’ I dismissed it with a flip. ‘These are gnattish irritants to men of vision, quirks that I’m sure your underlings here’ – and I indicated the circle of now gaping engineers – ‘will relish resolving. Remember gentlemen, I smirked at them, ‘there’s no “can’t” in concrete’.

‘He’s right, you fools!’ ejaculated the Professor. ‘They said Utzon was mad, and look what he did with a seashell! Well, you heard the man, get cracking!’

And thus, on a soft Autumn evening, on the rooftop bar of Sydney’s historic Mitchell Library, with flying foxes dotting the caramel sky above the Botanic Gardens, the Poem City Movement was born.

Oh, the Professor was hooked deep. He right away began barking orders at the table of engineers and architects. ‘Come come, gentlemen, no time like the present. Let us inseminate our Poem City!’ And like a team of Oompa Loompas on deadline in a chocolate factory they set to work, sketching on the back of napkins, cobbling models from cheese cubes and gherkins, marking mud maps on the tablecloth with gravy.

There was a frenzied Googling of different poetic forms, and heated discussion of metre, indent, enjambment and stanza. Should that hotel be a Sestina or a Ghazal? The new parliament a Lyrical Ballad or Blank Verse? I played my part and quickly summarised the history of Modernist Poetry for the poor drudges, and then explained to them, as though to slow toddlers, the differences between the English and Italian Sonnet. (It was decided Italian for Starbucks, English for Chemist Warehouse).

The Professor whipped his men on like an old Egyptian slaver, and encouraged my own galloping excitement, which lead me to stand on my chair and begin improvising a loud and lengthy ode to our new Poem City, or “MetroPoem”, as I styled it. Exactly what I said is lost in the ear of the gods. But I know that I was on fire and that the Muses were having a gang bang in my brain as I showered sparks of vision. Truly, my mouth was an angle grinder of angels!

The rooftop bar was stilled by my oration. The Romanian Consul and other dignitaries, guests, bar staff and innocent strangers watched agape as I declaimed about ‘ants of language’ and ‘alphabets of sperm ... the living syllable ... Sestina rest homes ...’ Oh at first there was some confusion, as they wondered whether to call security or an ambulance. But by the second hour they settled into it and I could feel them won over like a tide as I, in full performance flow, poured forth immaculate glissandos of words rhapsodising the coming Poem City!

When finally I sat there was a pause ... And then? Oh then, such a dam-burst of APPLAUSE! Nay, naked adulation! I was exhausted but exultant. The professor, mopping his eyes with a napkin (and a chicken consommé with a bit of sourdough), slapped my back as the engineers mobbed me like gushing groupies. Everyone believed in me and my vision, none more so than myself! Yes, what had begun as a cheeky prank on the Professor and his gang of boffins had been converted in my head to a shining possibility, nay an actuality – The Poem City! Ye gads, that bright and mythical place was Coleridge’s Xanadu, but for real!

Well the rest of that arvening was spent in a pleasant blur as I soaked up praise and Port in equal measure. The world was a magnificent place and I felt magnanimous and expansive, full of brotherly love and generosity for my fellow creatures, even these poor engineer dullards. No, we weren’t so different the Professor and I, he with his love of concrete facts and me with my penchant for words and the un-calloused abstract.

I saw that anyone's love for anything can be beautiful, no matter what that thing may be – that thing that wakes them in the morning, that thing that sets a sweet pillow under their head at night.

Yes, thus the Poem City Movement was born!

And thus, alas, it died.

Hours later, on the way out to the lift, after basting in many effusions of love (and Freddy Fudpuckers) I saw an odd thing. Or at least imagined I did. Glancing down a staff access corridor at the side of the bar I could have sworn I saw the Professor's wife. Only her dress had changed into the uniform of the bar staff, and as the door closed behind her she was removing a Brunette wig to reveal the sharp cut of a Concrete Blonde! But it was only a glimpse. I rubbed my eyes and blamed the lateness of the hour and the liquor.

But then down on street level I saw something more solid, something that couldn't be as easily dismissed. Walking ahead of me up the road towards a taxi rank was the Professor. Beside him was a little man. It was the Hobbit who'd been seated beside me at the start of the afternoon, the one who the Professor had dismissed as a phantom of my imagination. They were both cackling madly, doubling over and slapping each other's backs. I couldn't help but suspect I'd had a joke engineered upon me.

...



<https://pixabay.com/photos/>

Scott Dodgson has roamed the seven oceans sailing as far north as the Baltic Sea and Alaska and as far south as Kenya in the Indian Ocean and from South Africa to Chile in the Southern Ocean along 50 degrees south. He wrote the popular movies “The Anna Nicole Story”, “Paris Hilton, Princess Paparazzi,” and numerous other films and television shows. His podcast “Offshore Explorer With Scott Dodgson” can be found where ever you get your pods. He has published a novel “Not a Moment to Lose,” a novella (optioned for film) “The Casket Salesman,” and numerous short stories and essays including in Live Encounters. His anthology of short stories “A Sailor’s Point of View” published by Main Street Rag Press is available. His two new novels “The History of Water” and “Le Pêcheur” are grinding their way toward publication. He lives in the south of France.

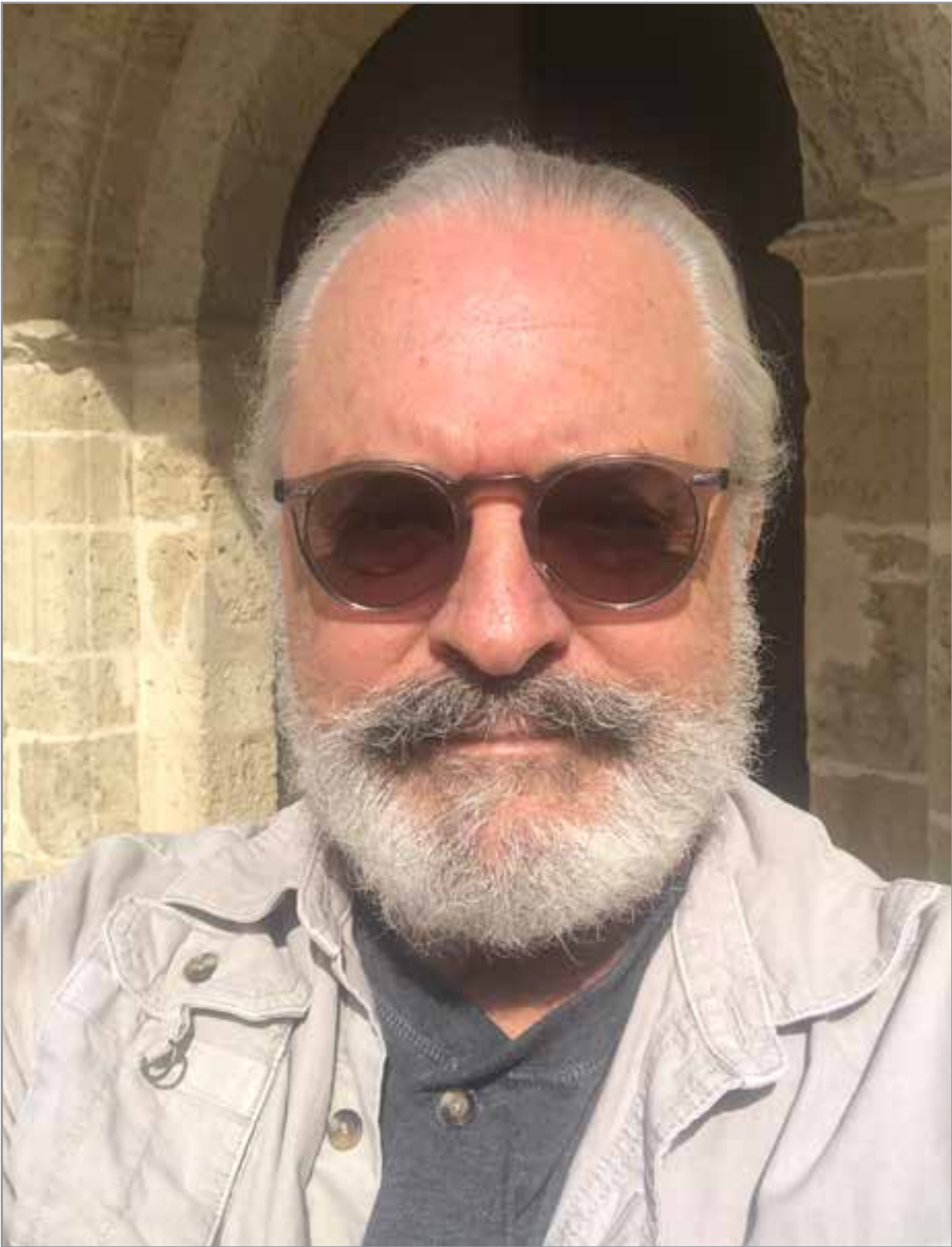
MY DEAREST CELIA

This is an epistolary play. There are two characters *The Writer* also referred to as *S* and *Celia*. They are two people who have experience in life. Actors may be interchanged to allow a more universal appeal to the commonality of the love letters.

The set is open with a minimum of props, a chair, a desk, and a chase lounge.

Video screens form the backstage where certain pictures and videos play supporting the mood, technical realities of our modern world, (Skype, Texting, etc.) while the letters are recited.

Note:
The Writer and *Celia* are a continent and nine hours apart.



Scott Dodgson

LOVE LETTER #1

My Dearest Celia,

I learn. I learned that I have little control over my emotions for you. What I know is even though I have had my heart broken many times, as you have had, I have a tremendous desire to take the risk of loving you completely and forever. I have believed for many years that I would never love in the whole-hearted way I have when I was young and yet even though all the signs point to our time together as an interlude of passion and lust, "vacation sex/romance" I ignore the signs that may cause me fatal pain!

Maybe in a love letter it is best to keep to the titular passion fueled by our erotic and lustful desires for each other, but I feel an uncommon bond with you. I believe you feel the same. You and I can take lovers and enjoy their bodies and Eros angels for a while then slip back into our safe worlds of writing and school. But what if these last two weeks were a sign that we may be able to save ourselves from our otherwise sexual adventurousness? What if the other more mundane qualifications so prized by the normal partners were precisely what we have been searching for all our lives? There are very good reasons why we are single almost none of them have anything to do with our sexual appetites. None of the reasons have anything to do with our deep seeded need to be loved without hesitation, without a second thought to devotion to one another, or thoughts so negative they blacken the sea clouding reason and truth. What if you were to wake up and say to your very inner self, the "beast" I call it, Beast! Don't bother me! I am with my man! I am with my woman! Go away!

And now if what we feel for each other, forged by qualifications; Princeton, law, books, intellectuals, great conversationalists, easy demeanor, precisely perfect sex, wonderful playfulness, warm security in each other's arms, comfortable management, love of bodies, loyalty, and deep respect have been antithetical to our darkest desires in the past, are exactly what makes you and I so close?

I beg you not to be afraid to give yourself to me. There were moments in these last two weeks when you gave yourself, not to lose yourself, that will never happen, because it is your "self" I prize so much. I respect so much! You gave your heart to me, and I held it gently and with great care. When you did you became frightened. Of what? What is the fear? What does the beast say? "You will be hurt?" Love and trust equal freedom. Fear not my love we are one. We are young and free together. Forever.

When you wake from your jet lagged dreams and read this letter you will find it complicated and difficult. I know. Love letters are to be read over and over again. I choose my words carefully and made the construction of the ideas in this letter with great thought. I have a great power to write. I am using it to describe the great power of your love on my being.

You opened your mind and heart here in California and I stepped in. It was fate and it is truth, and I will not leave forever.

Love always, Your Man,

S

LOVE LETTER #2

My Dearest Celia,

The inner world is majestic. At the center of this great cosmic spectacle, somewhere beyond what we know, beyond what we think we know, and even further into what we don't know we know lies our soul. Religion tells us one thing. Another religion tells us another. The artist's instinct suggests the unknowing and the existence of unknowable things. We take the dirge of speculation and make it, fold it, anneal it, forge it into something our less majestic self can understand. The outside world is scrap. Used and useless things once shinning with hope that we have understanding. It is this scrappy, dirty, musty world that reminds us that the inner world is our only sanctuary for a life of unbounded love. How do we know what love is? It comes from the inner world without warning. It comes through gestures so subtle as not to be noticed. Can it be cultivated as an orchid? Or is it likely to be a field of sunflowers following the sun across the sky? Is it a moment when the moon is so close that we can wave our hand and move the ancient glittering dust into a weightless cloud?

Love is majestic. It is the unknowing knowable.

When you first kissed my cheek three times I could almost feel your lips as if they were mine against my scruffy beard. I could almost taste the smoke on my skin as you did. I was not in my outside self; I was whirring in that undefinable spectacle changing places with you being in you. We both love to love. We give pleasure because it is where we get pleasure. My caress is your caress, and your caress is my caress. The simple gestures and acts of sex feed only the roots of our being. Like the roots of the sunflower deep in the soil so aware that the earth is spinning that they grab hold hard as we did to our shoulders, our arms, our thighs, and our hands. Somewhere in the fantasy, between the animalistic drive and the emptiness of our mind as we kissed, licked, sucked, spanked, pulled, drove hard toward that freeing and wonderful sensation.... Orgasm... is the majestic inner world.

Will we find the wisdom to nurture the beauty of the orchid? Will we allow ourselves to accept the gestures from the inner world? Will we even know what gestures the talisman of our inner self are.

Kissing you after we make love and tasting your simple musk is this a gesture to help us tap our inner self? Is it the warmth of my hand or the gentle cupping of your breasts signal something? I don't know. What I know is the unknowable when you cried. I felt it. I thought I recognized it. Whatever it was or is comes from the majestic inner world and it shone as bright as the biggest moon casting light on the outside world as meaningless.

Even four thousand miles away I feel your inner world in me, and I don't want it to be a weightless cloud of ancient moon dust forgotten in time. I hope it reminds us of cosmic gestures come from the majestic inner self.

Good morning.

S

LOVE LETTER #3

My Dearest Celia,

You are sleeping now. Off in a faraway land you call home you lay on cool crisp sheets and a pillow scented with that rarified perfume of Andalusia. So close to the ocean I love so deeply and know so well I can feel the gentle roll of the Atlantic Ocean. She is mighty. I have known her for many years. Rocking gently in my berth she has caressed my dreams many times. I have felt her wrath as well, but we have an understanding her and I. It lies in the greatness of her nature. I call to her. I live so far away on the shores of her sister Pacific. I know her sister well also like I know my youth. I sailed the Pacific when I was a young captain just learning my trade. Our relationship was tense, filled with misunderstandings and sometimes lessons taught with severity. I learned the Atlantic in middle age, a time in a man's life where the lessons are more noted and loved than the sharp stick of youth taught to me by the Pacific.

I call on my dear friend to call to you. To embrace you as I would in your slumber. I lay next you with my surest belief her gentleness will love you as I do. Her zephyrs will touch your neck as my warm exhale when we slept together. Her soft breeze will kiss your shoulder. Her warm waft will press against your back as I would be pressing. We are one in the same. When you roll over to find me to hug me, to hold me she will be there to remind you that I was there. I hovered over you. I watched over you. I assured you everything would be all right. I kissed the tears from your eyes. She will dry them for me with a gust of care. When you wake open the window. Open the window as you have for me many times and taste the kiss I send across the ocean to you. Look far onto the horizon and know at many times in our lives I have sailed those very waters. Literally my course has past the shores you stand on now. But through life and all the courses I have set and all the ports I have visited, I've come to you now as a gentle breeze upon which I whisper, I see you. I feel you. I am touching you. When you walk along the water's edge know that somewhere a drop of the great ocean has touched us both. Put your hand in the surf and smell my scent. It is me! I am here with you!

Good Morning.

S

LOVE LETTER #4

My Dearest Celia,

We rest like two beasts in the Savanah young and free. Giant oaks protect us from the sun and the luxurious full moon and dapple us with countenance. A coyote wanders past nose to the ground following a secret scent. We merged our scents first without as much as a second thought. We mingled, embraced, passionately without caution. There were obvious signs on the path; a bent twig, stones stacked like little temples. The red dirt path called to us; this is the way! Yet we paid no attention. We made our own way. We shared discoveries. Our histories were more similar than imagined and more dissimilar than we hoped. Yet we still forged our way over the rocky ground, through fields of sun burnt sage to this savannah where the shade painted coolness like a soft brush on our tender skin. The shackles of our normal life, we pushed away like the empty plates from our dinner, with their wipes of scented olive oil, and broken bread. In the silence we listened to the tomato seeds converse with the butter dish. "What next?" We observed forks and knives laying on the table like soldiers fallen on some far away and exotic battleground. Flies lit like an unseen air force of scavengers dressed in glittering rainbows. Bees with their natural maleficence circled in a dizzying dance fueled by their hunger and our unspoken fear of them and of what was next. We conversed cautiously, histrionically, seeking to entertain and inform for the moment only. We are skilled in irony, knowledgeable in life, patient in some but not all things yet the words and skill to use them fell haplessly like a leaf from the great oak. In our savannah the intimate came first now we try to build outward. We are still young lovers for this moment; laying, lying, laid, naked against the warm mountain breeze tumbling down the mountain after its climb from the cool Pacific into our canyon a sort of extended conjugation.

Bisou

S

RESPONSE #1

My Dear Writer,

Good morning. Thank you for all the wonderful letters. I love to read them. It is hard for me to write you. You have the advantage of language. You asked me to write to you in my language so I could express myself more clearly, but I can't. You are the writer. I find it hard to write about my feelings for you. I would rather not. You seem so sure in your feelings for me, but I don't believe you. In your letters you ask many things of me, and I am not ready to give them to you because I don't have those feelings. We are two very distant people. We are separated by an ocean and a continent. We are separated by nine hours. I am awake when you sleep, and you are awake when I sleep. We should talk like two distant people.

I don't want you to take what I say the wrong way. I shared with you a wonderful time. I told you my heart has been broken recently. I may be too cautious for you, but I beg for your patience. This morning I woke, and I was happy and relaxed. I have been caressing my body as if it were you.

As you know I leave for my village today. I haven't been there in twelve years. I won't be able to write to you for a week. I will have no time or privacy. I won't be able to receive your beautiful letters. I will return home when I hope to find your letters waiting for me. I start the semester teaching after I return. This is my life, and I can't imagine how you will fit into it. I am listening. I am waiting to see if this fades. You asked me if I think about you. Yes. I do. I think of you holding me. I think of the way you look at me. I think of the way you touch me. I give you many kisses.

Celia

LOVE LETTER #7

My Dearest Celia,

Today a young Hindu man dressed in a finely pressed dhoti knocked on the door and asked me for directions to the temple. It was an unusual experience even for Southern California. I gave him directions and he thanked me. Just before he left I asked him why he stopped at this house. He smiled and said, you are a Buddhist, no? The house has Buddhist prayer flags all around as you know. He looked puzzled for a moment. Why would I even ask this kind of question? I wished him well on his journey.

A few moments later a neighbor stopped by to borrow a toilet plunger. I found one and gave it to her. She promised to return it quickly.

Do you remember the little bird's nest outside the back door? Remember there was a little bird following its mother. It kept coming into the kitchen. I chased it out many times. I was thinking I would put some seeds out so it could eat. I think the mother is long gone. Just when I had this thought I heard a dink on the front door. I thought it might be the plunger returning as the woman knocks very lightly, but it wasn't. The little bird in a panic flew into the glass. I studied him for a minute or two. I had hoped, even prayed he just knocked himself out. I picked up his little body. It seemed lighter than a creampuff and laid him outside next to the big rock. He was hidden from predators, yet I could still see him. I checked several times to see if he would wake up. He didn't.

The worshipper, the plunger, and the panicked little bird showed me a lesson. Faith, the practical, and the fragile spirit all come to your door. You must be ready to accept it and learn from it.

I hope you find a balance between the three: Have faith in me, don't let the practical dictate your outcome and above all remember the spirit we shared is fragile and we shouldn't fear its ending. After all a Buddhist answered the door.

Good Morning.

S

LOVE LETTER #8

My Dearest Celia,

I woke this morning, and it was very cool. I pulled the covers over my head and wished you were beside me. I ran my hand over the curve of your hip. I pulled you closer to me so your butt cheeks would press against the mercy of my hips. I let my hand slide softly over your hip and onto to your velvety softness. I felt you vibrate from deep side. My face pressed against back between your shoulders. I kissed your back softly. My hand traversed over your soft belly. Touching you was electrifying. You touched my hand. You rubbed it softly outlining the bones on the back of my hand. You sighed. It was a satisfying sigh, a long-awaited sigh. Your sigh was deep, that only comes from morning sleep; heavy and luxurious like a theater curtain when it is opened to begin a play.

You guided my hand over your ribs and onto your breast. It seemed as if there were zones of heat on your skin and your breast exceeded all zones. Your nipples stood hard against my touch. I cupped your beautiful breast and pondered the deeply erotic weight of them, as if I were weighing some precious stones; diamonds and rubies resting in a silky sack. I find holding your breast so gently a profound experience. While cupping your breast I let one finger, I think my index finger, run around and around letting the shoulder on the very tip of your nipple sing, For Joy! You eagerly pushed closer even though every part of our body that could touch was touching. You reached behind and grabbed my cock. You lifted your leg and placed it next to your pussy, then slowly lowered your leg locking me in place. I could feel you lips kissing my cock. There were small vibrations and contractions, yet you hadn't moved. I held you for a long time. I kissed the back of your neck. I smelled your morning musk. Good morning, I whispered. Buenos Dias you replied.

There was nothing more to say or want to say. We laid in perfect intimacy. As this erotic morning fog lifted from my mind, I sighed with frustration. I wanted this fog to stay with me always. I had no need to see beyond the gentle curve of your neck. But this was a dream and I had to get up and start my day. Without a thought, I changed my normal morning ritual of coffee first above all else and ran into the shower. I had a strange hope I would find you and my foggy eroticism in the warm water falling on my shoulder.

The vivid memory of us standing in the shower holding each other while the water formed a little pool in the cleavage of those magnificent breasts rushed at me. When you washed me. Soaping my cock and looking into my eyes for my expected reaction you smiled mischievously. It wasn't long before I realized the warm water had given out and I took leave of the shower.

I made my coffee and checked my mail. I found your letter with this line. "This morning I woke and caressing my body as if it were you."

It was.

S

LOVE LETTER #9

My Dearest Celia,

Today I waited with anticipation for the night stars to shine down on me. These are the same stars you and our friends howled too. The circle of friendship over my dear Atlantic ocean and this bountiful continent closed like a great spiritual fist. I waited to see the very stars you stood under in you little Spanish village celebrating a fiesta if they would pour down your love, their love

in the soft glittering light of the infinite on me. We both knew this moment would come. When our friends unknowing of our blossoming relationship when they left we were strangers. They found out later we had forged a path together in their very home in the mountains. They were surprised and delighted. Now they had their first opportunity to look into your eyes and ask if we were real.

Although as I write this I am ignorant of the answers you gave them. I surmise from comments our other friends have made that we cannot hide our relationship. Even without us overtly or secretly revealing our true purposes with each other they felt the trueness of us.

So, the stars tell me. They sent their gleaming light on you. When our friends asked. You laughed. You cast your eyes to the side. You let your soft embarrassing sigh exhale onto the village square. You tried not to reveal your feelings for me. You shuffled your feet as if to say I have doubts and fears. But the stars know. The stars like the great warrior Orion who hosted many celebrations for his great victories, knew who the lovers in his midst were. And his loyal canines know like the village dogs know darting through the shadows, to find the freshly cleaned bone they covet so dearly. Sirius the brightest star in our night sky saw all. Andromeda, Lira, Sagittarius, and Cassiopeia with her gentle smile spoke to Zeus the king of the ocean as they crossed above, and he raised his great trident into the sky and rejoiced.

The gods are happy. I am happy.

The night lily in the garden laid open her marital white bloom. I have tended to her. I have watered her with words, phrases, paragraphs, and letters. These are her nutrients. Tonight, the star light feeds her as it feeds me knowing feelings cannot hide from the trueness of the universe.

The last star in the morning sky, Sirius will wink at me as the morning sun rises. The sleepy dog will say before sleeping that love is when it is in the bone.

Good Morning My Pretty

S

LOVE LETTER #10

My Dearest Celia,

I ventured out of the house this evening to take some fresh air. The beach is not far so I went to see the ocean. The surf is very big to the delight of the surfers. I stood next to a couple of guys who sat with their surf boards watching the surf. It turns out the beach was closed as the authorities determined it was too dangerous for them. The waves pounded the shore so hard that if they had been near the house they would have shaken the pictures from the walls. The waves rolled in and licked the underside of the pier. Big. Big waves for Southern California.

The waves were coming from two hurricanes long since petered out from Hawaii. Our conversation drifted to a news story about a sailboat that need rescuing because of winds and waves. Yet here the ocean was flat and docile on the surface. Beneath the rolling energy from these far-off storms rumbled into the incline of the ocean floor and crashed upon the shore. A death was reported yesterday. They thought the people in the sail boat to be foolish for getting caught in the hurricane. Yet, even as they quietly admonished the captain they stood wearing wet suits and their surf boards readied.

When I stand on the beach any beach I feel melancholy. A captain's life is on the deck of his vessel. On the beach we are a sad lot longing to be in our place. I have endured five hurricanes in my lifetime of sailing. So, I endeavored to explain the logistics of facing a monster weather system. They listened and understood the lack of choice a captain has. The skill is to find the soft spot and not face the monster head on. You must allow the energy to work for you. If you can imagine the dial of a clock. The storm travels toward twelve o'clock. Between twelve and three o'clock the winds and wave are more intense and more deadly. The counter clockwise motion of the storm drives directly toward you with the addition of the speed the storm is traveling. Between three and six it is still rough, but the winds are like a passing train rushing past you on your beam. Between six and nine the winds follow you. This is the safest quadrant although the swell is gigantic usually for a big storm forty feet in height. Between nine and twelve o'clock you are pushed along at a speed exceeding your hull speed.

If you combine this with the swell you surf down the mountains of water pushed by a relentless wind into the trough between waves where the wind dies and then lifted like an express elevator to the top where the wind meets you with vengeance. All this lasts about twelve hours, but during that twelve hours you are fighting to be precise in your steerage, pray nothing breaks, and as an added problem you can't see because the spray of rain and ocean sting your eyes like bullets hitting your face.

They understood and adopted a new respect for the captain left with little or no choice but to face the beast with only his skill and endurance. I had a special feeling every time I was in a hurricane. I was more calm then all the mediation could ever claim. I was exhilarated beyond belief. I was confident without self-consciousness. I was one with the greatest fury nature could perpetrate. I was wholly one with myself.

As I walked away from the beach, I thought I was living through another kind of hurricane. I will call her Celia. When I walked through that door and saw you for the first time I saw the signs. The high clouds described as horse's mane screaming across the sky. The barometer dropping by inches an hour like my defenses into the pit of my stomach. The anticipation of the fury of love. Nature's full-on fusillade of energy! I have ridden out the twelve hours, in our case weeks and now I stand on the deck of my life looking to the horizon for Celia to return.

S

RESPONSE #2

My Dear Writer,

Yes I am all right. I am very sorry for not answering you. I can't find the time or the way to tell you that's I can't be the whole day texting you. I came back yesterday night. I went to the university very early this morning. I have many things to do and many people to talk too. I was in the village all day with people or resting and I did want to fully enjoy the experience being there. Tomorrow I go to my parents' house again with my nephews. We are too far away to be in touch all day every day. I don't want to disappoint you or make you sad, but I would like you to just be "earthy". I feel overwhelmed. As much as I would like to be with you in the house now, I am in another world.

You try with your letters to convince me that I have feelings that I don't have. You use big words. We have been fifteen days together and we could build a relationship, may be, but not this way, inventing it.

Thank you for understanding.

I am flattered by your letters. I like it very much when we can talk and see each other. Please don't take this the wrong way. I want very much to continue. Because I am shy, I can't handle it, but I like to hear it and read it, but I am shy.

Thank you for the last letter it was beautiful.

Your Dearest

LOVE LETTER #11

My Dearest Celia,

I have quit glancing back over my shoulder to see where you are, where you've been, where you might be. I have immersed myself where your word and gesture are imperative. I see you in the flitting of a Monarch butterfly by the creek bed of the savannah. The delicate thermals lift you from flower to flower. I see you watering the plants in the garden with a big orange bucket. You dip it into the barrel and carry life itself to each plant with such care and purpose I can't help but wish I were a potted Geranium so I could feel the cool water penetrate my roots. My desire for you and a life beyond this strange hiatus forged by distance is rooted in your innocent touch. I feel your unintentional gaze. I hear your unspoken questions. Sometimes I hear simple domestic questions. How does he like his eggs cooked? When will he take out the trash? What will he cook me for lunch? There are other quieter questions. The questions are like the ruffle of the leaves in the great oaks. There are the creaking sounds from the great lumbering branches not a cracking sound but a low moan giving away to the breeze rumbling down the mountain. They are even more transparent like the spider web so intricately weaved as it flexes and strains in the in the warm wind. It never breaks. It remains whole and flexible. Why "questions" are like these images? Why does he dream so big? Why does he care for me? What is the true depth of his feelings for me? When will he fade like his writing into the past?

You would brush this off as the fanciful musings of a talented writer, but you don't. There is an adventure afoot. I feel it in your gestures. I see it in your words. I know what hides behind you like I know what I see over my shoulder. There is a great deal of noise in our lives. The rushing sound of modernity. The creaking of friends. Even the unheard straining of the spider's web deafens us to love. And what of the new sounds? The ones not heard. The attractive man or attractive woman ingratiating themselves into our basest needs. Is this not a noise we both have in the past fallen prey to? Can we be like poor Odysseus who was called to put wax in his ship mates' ears to save them from destruction and death?

In this great cacophony I whisper to you. "We are on the adventure of life. We will sail away to find a new land for our hearts to live." But for now, it is murmur like our heart beats longing for answers to questions we have yet formed. Faith in each other will keep us listening.

S

LOVE LETTER #12

My Dearest Celia,

This morning I found the kitchen counter covered by an army of ants. At first while I am rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I realized they weren't black crumbs running about, but ants. So, there was ant Armageddon before I made my coffee.

Afterward while sitting under the trees, the morning sun peaking over the mountain's ridge did I begin to feel as if the whole world might be heading into disregard? Was there a reason? Was there a hint it is coming? Are we like the lizard sunning on the rock? When the red tail hawk perched high above the canopy called. The lizard puffed out his silver throat and appeared to be doing defiant pushups. Is it like that? One minute you are following your friends, maybe friends is not the right description of ant relationships, searching for food on the long flat plane of white linoleum, but the furious exploration followed by lines and lines of fellow comrades only to have your intention wiped out by a man upset with you crawling around his sugar bowl? Is life like this? Is it so fragile and brief that with one stroke you disappear from this world and down the sink?

I know this is a morose thinking especially so early in the morning. Yet I can't help being reminded by all the experiences and close calls I have had that life. My life is far more fragile and fleeting.

Isn't our life more than standing in endless lines? Isn't our life more than the endless stream of career decisions to secure our place in the endless file? If an alien in a far-off planet stared down on us would they not see the endless streams of cars on the arteries of our planet? Would they be as cavalier as I to wipe the counter clean?

In reality ants are not like us. We have thought, imagination, and awareness. So, it is this awareness that has me thinking about love and it's my imagination that sculpts my very desires for you. Life is fragile. Love is equally fragile. When is it found is it not like the tiny sugar crystal to the ant? ...Sparkling, tasty, and enduring. Shouldn't we be as defiant as the lizard and declare we will survive! Our love will survive! It is what makes us stand apart from the lines of our friends and comrades.

Love is the spiritual connection that defines us as human. It is this spiritually that defines us as greater than the masses. Too many people spend their lives without love or believing a deluded concept of it. We are lucky to have this moment to transcend the normal to something extraordinary before the completion of our journey. Love makes us all unique.

S

LOVE LETTER #13

My Dearest Celia,

I went for an early morning walk. When I started the sky was a slate grey. I went with the left hand the easiest hand because I am a person who sees happiness as something attainable. The sky seamlessly marched through its shades of blue. The wispy clouds appeared like pinkish gashes in the sky they turned reddish much like the color of your areola surrounding your nipples. The crickets still chanted their night time opera. The voices of the birds seemed to speak one at a time. “Good morning my beauty” I imagine as I imagine you saying to me. The horses down at the bottom of the canyon feasted on their morning oats. They cast a quick glance at me as I passed. Oats are more important. A family of raccoons filed across the road on the way home from a night of foraging. A squirrel traversed a limply secured telephone wire. It was inelegant at best. He flipped upside down. His tail spun wildly in circles to counter balance the swaying wire. It reminded me of a vaudeville act on a high wire. Every slip, every fake fall, last second grasp took your breath away. The canyon is the last to taste the sunshine. It will be a few more hours before it pours its warmth down the mountain and warms the dry rock creek bed.

I know you are traveling today from your village back to your home to Seville. I see you in your car driving down the dusty heat-soaked highway alone with your thoughts for the first time in weeks. You told me you were a bad driver. I don’t believe you. You said I made you feel like a woman and a young girl at the same time. I imagine the woman drives. The one with the fierce intelligence and attention to detail no matter how mundane. I am sure you will feel the transformation. I know the feeling of warmth a family gives, but as you get further away it will peel off you and alone-ness that waits for you at home will require much sterner stuff on your part. But the little girl, young woman whose sexual passions, unencumbered lust for adventure, electric happiness will not disappear as you know I will be waiting for you. I will call to that woman to figure out the logistics of our lives. I will touch the young woman on the knee. I will drive my hand deep between your legs as you try to maintain your speed on the highway. I will slide my hand under your shirt and rub your breast.

Your mind’s eye will see all the subtle colors of the morning in the vivid canyon sky. And when the sun finally casts its warmth deep between your legs your buttocks will tighten. The seat belt will pull hard against you lap and chest. My embrace will cover you. My lips will touch her neck. Your palms will sweat gripping the steering wheel. Open the window and breathe.

The woman in you may feel the young woman foolish, maybe even dangerous. I think that after you’re long journey of discovery. Your discovery of me. You’re revisiting your village after such a long time. The love of your little cousin. You are in a new place. The woman is open and proud of the younger you. I hope you feel whole and happy.

Safe travels.

S

LOVE LETTER #14

My Dearest Celia,

Yesterday I attended an afternoon Labor Day party in Beverly Hills. My friend, who I refer to as one of the blessed few that is he is among a very small group of screen-writers who can pitch an idea to the studios and receive a very fat check for virtually doing nothing. He will write the screenplay in a few weeks and receive another fat check. It is an admirable position to be in, but he is usually sad and cranky. He doesn't hate his life, but he hates what he has become. He once, for a brief moment believed he would be a serious writer and now according to him he writes garbage. We have lunch or dinner several times a year where we discuss a wide range of subjects. He is a great fan of mine and somewhat of a mentor for the business. Yesterday he was gracious and positive.

His house is high up in the hills with breathtaking views of Los Angeles. It is really three properties with two pools and lots of sculpture and trim bushes. He lives by himself except when his eighteen-year-old son visits. He invited me so I could be introduced to couple of producers and a specific director. Except for my friend and me, the party was all couples. I wished you were there with me. I think you would have found it entertaining in an anthropological sort of way. In fact, I think you would have found it down right hilarious.

The women formed little groups around the terrace. They dressed casually, if you would call wearing the entire collection of Cartier casual. They spend more in one week than you make in a year of hard work. The waiters and waitress were out of work actors of course who served drinks and canopies, very tasty. I think they all had a copy of their CV in their pockets just in case.

I was introduced as a "great writer who hasn't had his big break yet." I bristled, but I understood how this all works. It was a sort of initiation. The subtext was here is a very talented fellow who is going to make it and we should be prepared to let him into our club very soon. Big means millions of dollars. I was peppered with questions. I kept my answers short. I was reminded of your loving management. I didn't drink. When the time came I quietly thanked my friend for the invitation. He told me something about me as changed. I told him we will meet for lunch soon.

I am sharing this experience with you for two reasons. Your presence in my life has changed me for the better. That has never happened before as I am usually bigger than life without regard to others or their opinions. Secondly, regardless of our separate and independent lives there is room for each other in them and with luck we can include Cartier too.

With a very quiet whisper.

Yours.

RESPONSE #3

Dear Writer,

You are overwhelming me. We only spent fifteen days together. You communicate with me too much. I don't share the same feelings you do. Your letters try convincing me of feelings I don't have. We are far apart. You don't understand my life or me. I don't think we can ever know each other as our lives are so different. I don't want you to be sad. I want you to understand. I can't have the same feelings you keep saying I have. They are not there. If I had strong feelings for you I would tell you. Words and thoughts are just words and thoughts. The only reality I have is your skin against mine. I have invested a lot of time in this relationship, and I am willing to continue. I don't have the time to write you every day. I am sorry if this hurts you, but it is what I am feeling.

You missed a day sending me a letter.

Celia

LOVE LETTER #15

My Dearest Celia,

I am sorry if I overwhelmed you. It was not my intention. I am still trying to sort out how you feel about me. I realize you haven't, and you need more space and time to arrive at your conclusions. I know you are honest about your feelings. I respect you. I am sorry if I suggested I had any insight into how you are feeling. I really don't know to be honest, because of your shyness you don't reveal much but little fluttering's. I would like you to try and understand me. I am a man who has fought in war, sailed the oceans, and have received a very fine education. I have lived life robustly and with a great appetite to experience all life has to offer. I have failed miserably in love. I am sure that meeting you set off these robust feelings I have. It is profoundly unfair to you, and I realize it now.

You have said we live in two entirely different worlds. I will not talk about the future because it doesn't exist. And the past is fading like remembering your kisses and warm hugs. But I would argue that the moment you think of me, and I think of you that our world is real and without the constraints of time and distance. My intention with these letters is so you will not forget me. Being forgotten is bitter and uncertain death. So, if you can help me understand how we will build this relationship? I promise to do the heavy lifting. Like building a house, I'll carry the lumber. I'll hammer the nails. Every once in a while would you measure with your carpenter's square to tell me if I am right and true. Just as you have in your last communication, and I will make the adjustment.

Take the time and please be gentle and kind as I know you are.

Good morning and have a safe trip.

LOVE LETTER #16

My Dearest Celia,

The summer has ended. The hot dry weather has yet to yield to the cool wet fall. We have a phrase “An Indian Summer”. I don’t know what it really has to do with Indians, but it refers to that glorious phenomenon after summer as given way to cool air. After the moment when you’ve settled in for the long winter. The wood has been chopped and stacked. The hay is stowed in the barn. The last remaining fruits of the garden are pumpkins and gourds. Then miraculously summer returns for one more dance. Sweaters are shed. Shorts are dug out of the hamper for one last wear. It is a beautiful time. You enjoy it like the first summer’s day. It is a time when the serious business of hunting and gathering begins.

The world is back to work. I must execute all those plans I have been hatching over the summer. I have films to produce, scripts to write, and meetings to attend. As you have said I have many files open. You of course return to lecturing at the university. Eager students will concentrate on your every word, and you will try to hide your nervousness over speaking to so many people at once.

This fall will be different for me. I will not be working for myself. I will not be looking for the singular gratification of my work. I will be working with you in mind. You are my emotional Indian summer. When it seems, I will be lost to the damp grey of winter thoughts of you watering the garden just wearing a pair of flip flops will warm my heart and my psyche. I feel like I have a purpose other than my own self-satisfaction. I have not felt this way in many years. So, my day begins. Phone calls and requests have already filtered into my space. An actor discusses a part I wrote searching for that singular piece of information so his portrayal will organically grow. A producer calls to make excuses about where my payment has disappeared. A director sent a production schedule for me to study. A friend calls asking for help moving into her new house. I make appointments. I set up meetings. I work on my writing projects. Yet in all this motion I am completely immersed in my thoughts of you, my Indian summer.

Good Morning.

S

LOVE LETTER #17

My Dearest Celia,

Today was an especially hard day for me. This morning I woke up thinking of my sister. I might have told you she was murdered when she was just nineteen. Well for the first time since that day I forgot the anniversary of her death. She was killed August 10th. We were in the middle of our romance. I don’t know how I could have forgotten. I’ve been racked by guilt all day.

On August 10th, 1972, I was laying an ambush along a trail in Northern Laos a few kilometers from the North Vietnamese border. I was leading a squad of twelve Thai Special Forces. I was in charge. Me. I was twenty years old. During the night a large force maybe a company of two hundred North Vietnamese moved past our position. We were given the wrong intelligence and found ourselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. I spent the night listening to myself breathe and my heart beat. I was sure at any moment one of those Vietnamese soldiers would hear me. My sense of time was completely distorted. I stared into the dark jungle. I strained my eyes all night watching the Vietnamese soldiers walk down the jungle path. I had to remove my finger from my M-16 several times because I had pulled it to the very brink of firing. The company moved past us in less than a half an hour, but it felt like an eternity. As long as I have lived I have never felt time stretch like a Dali painting as it did that night.

We stayed in our positions until dawn. All sorts of bugs feasted on my arms and legs and my crouch. Yet I could not move regardless of the pain and discomfort. At dawn I gave all clear. I sent two scouts in opposite directions to see if the enemy was around. They weren’t. We relaxed. We drank water. We ate dried fruit. The men looked at me in the eyes and said (Phonetic here) Dein doy fue wa. It means walks without fear. That phrase followed me around for the next two years. The fact was I was scared beyond belief, but I didn’t show it. I don’t know how it happened, but I have always been good at handling fear. Today I was not. I have always believed that my sister despite her violent and tragic death somehow imparted into me as her very spirit was leaving her body the ability to handle fear. She was a fierce woman even at nineteen. By forgetting her what does it mean? I have never missed. It is a long time to remember but I never forgot until this time.

continued overleaf

Usually, I feel solemn and sad. No matter where or what I have been doing I remember. I pay homage to my beautiful sister who was so instrumental in my spiritual awareness. Today I did pay homage. I lite a candle and thought of our youth together. I thought of that night in the jungles of Laos and how it wasn't me being so brave, it was her calm spirit that allowed me to cover my fear.

As I think back to August 10th, we were so happy together. Maybe she was telling me she didn't want me to continue paying homage to that fearful and tragic moment. She may have set me free knowing your arms would protect me. I don't know. It is a pleasant construction. I don't know.

Without Fear Your Man

LOVE LETTER #18

My Dearest Celia,

This will be the last love letter I send to you. I have been thinking about all the things you have said to me. Especially that you don't have those type of feelings for me. I actually don't believe you. I believe you have very strong feelings. What is happening is you are not ready and fearful. You use the distance and time as an excuse for our relationship not making it. I think I can't be with someone who doesn't at least give me a little hope that we can make this work out. You say I am trying to convince you. Well yeah??? Love letters are supposed to evoke a response I thought that's why you asked me to write you them. I mean consider the point. I am not boring. I don't live your kind of normal. I live the life on artist pardon me for my intensity. My writing is the fullest expression of my feelings. You should feel flattered, overwhelmed, confused, preoccupied.... Love is painful as well as beautiful. I am torn up inside for you. Are you capable of understanding the depth of my feelings? You said you were overwhelmed. You asked me to be earthier. Does that mean distant and boring? Well, I will take the letters off the table and let you get on with your life. I mean if you aren't going to at least try. Encourage me? What kind of fool does that make me?

I want you. I am deeply passionate for you. I can't imagine you slogging through another 20 some years to get your pension. You are far too beautiful a woman. You deserve more. I do understand that the relationships, colleagues, and family create a gravity that is hard to escape. Will you continue on your path of vacation romance then back to work? Will it serve your soul? I know there is a real desire in you for a change. I am offering you serious love, serious adventure, serious friendship.

I am guessing this letter won't make you sad or disappointed. More than likely the opposite relieved.

I want you to know I will continue to write these letters I just won't be sending them. If you want to see them you will have to be interested. I am here if you want me. If you want to build a life.

I love you.

S

RESPONSE #14

CELIA: Just read your last letter. Shocked. Unfair. I can't talk, I am with my nephews, my mother is ill, no time, no privacy. Very sad and disappointed. I have talked today with my therapist about you. I told him you understand me. I was wrong.

WRITER: I am sorry, but it seems every time I try to understand you I fail. You tell me I don't understand you. I am frustrated and confused. You are not wrong. I do think I understand you, but you have to help me.

CELIA: I don't know what to say and now you say all these horrible things.

WRITER: I guess I am more frustrated then you realize. We need to talk properly. I love you and I know you hate it when I say it.

CELIA: We will talk properly when we can talk. But in the meantime, it seems that you can't stop your mind. To think bad.

WRITER: I just felt that you were retreating and wanted me to disappear or just be normal. I just wanted a kind word from you, that's all. I am serious about you and I'm trying to give you more space to think.

CELIA: I am here. I think of you. I am happy. I am willing to keep going with this relationship.

WRITER: Those are the best words I've heard.

CELIA: Have faith and patience and write scripts.

WRITER: I have faith.

CELIA: I am very happy to have you. WRITER: Thank you.

CELIA: I have to go. Kiss. Kiss.

LOVE LETTER #19

My Dearest Celia,

Today a Red-Tailed Hawk landed on the lower branches of the big oak. They say the Red-Tailed Hawk in the spirit world is one of the totems. They represent vision. Vision to see the larger picture since they soar so high. I suppose I don't have that vision when I look at your intentions toward me. I regret sending you the last letter. I didn't want to upset you. Our conversation lifted the fog. I know you have a hard time expressing your feelings. I am your opposite. I express them freely and honestly. It is the way of a writer. I am overjoyed you are willing to work on our relationship. I am ecstatic I make you happy and that you think of me. Those little phrases have made a difference for me. I am a simple man in the sense that if you say one kind word of assurance it will be the nutrition to sustain my passion for you for a long time. The simple knowledge, the smallest thing makes a difference and as we spend more time together we will understand each other better. I suppose that I might rub off on you a little and help you be more expressive. And you will certainly rub off on me with a little patience and faith. I let the absence of those things get twisted inside me. I should have trusted my vision.

I am pleased you believe that I understand you. I do. I understand the strength of this relationship is our differences. You are a powerful and beautiful woman. You express yourself through intention. I might add sometimes it is difficult to know at times. For many years I had a reoccurring dream. I was in the water swimming toward my boat. It was dark. The only lights were in the aft cabin. As I swam toward the boat it sailed away from me slowly. I never could reach it. So please throw a line off the stern so I can grab hold and hoist myself into your arms. We have much in common, our intellect, our physical passion, and our sense of humor.

You told me to have faith and patience. I do have faith in you and me making this relationship work. I sometimes let doubt rattle around in my head. But you dispelled that with the phrase "I am happy to have you." I feel better now. I feel clearer and more confident. I hope you do as well. I am freer to attend to my writing now knowing you are there. This is a good thing. Now we may never have the spiritual vision of the Red-Tailed Hawk but at least we now see a path and that makes us happy.

With all my heart, S

RESPONSE #5

SKYPE CALL: A split screen appears on the video screen. Both CELIA and WRITER are dressed casually. CELIA is in day light. The WRITER is at night.

CELIA: Hello.

WRITER: Hello, how are you feeling?

CELIA: Blood and pain.

WRITER: Oh? I'm sorry.

CELIA: I had my period.

WRITER: Ok.

CELIA: I thought I was pregnant.

WRITER: Really?
(She shows him a pregnancy test stick)

CELIA: It's not blue.

WRITER: Is that a good thing?

CELIA: If I was pregnant I would have wanted to have the baby.

WRITER: (Without hesitation) Me too.

CELIA: Of course it's not going to happen.

WRITER: We could try again.

CELIA: Impossible right now.

WRITER: Yes, of course. I like the idea. But many things would be disrupted.

CELIA: Yes, children have their own demands. It would be hard and we couldn't have sex often.

WRITER: I think we could figure something out.

CELIA: I thought you would say that.

WRITER: I'm predictable.

CELIA: Not really. I have to go for now. I have someone at my door.

WRITER: Can we discuss this at a later date?

CELIA: Yes. Bye. Kiss. Kiss.

WRITER: Kiss, Kiss.

LOVE LETTER #20

My Dearest Celia,

Today the gardeners came first the man with the rake and leaf blower. He launched is futile attack on the fallen leaves. He blew away the leaves that had falling so gently on your favorite sofa. I haven't sat in that sofa since you left. It was my little homage to your place. It was a sad little romantic reminder to our time in that particular place. In a few hours the afternoon breeze will rush down the mountain and the leaves will let loose from the oak and the sycamore. My little shrine will be restored. I noticed he was wearing an oversized tee shirt with Dad emblazoned across the front. It made me think of our conversation about family. He seemed so happy to do this difficult and futile work. Did his shirt indicate he was cloaked in family and fatherhood? Was this his shield? Was this his security? I think so. Being alone for so many years I have deliberately shied away from this concept. With you I feel comfortable and excited to embrace family. I am comfortable with the understanding I can wear your invisible cloak of love.

The second gardener, Tony entered the gate carrying a small trowel and a bag of organic chicken poop. He proceeded to attend to the plants. I watched him from inside the house. He carefully worked the soil in each pot with his trowel. He poured a little fertilizer onto the soil and gently worked it into the surface. When he finished he took the orange pitcher and watered each plant. When he was finished he smelled a bud on each plant. After secretly watching the care he gave to these living things I went out and introduced myself. It turned out he was extremely knowledgeable about every plant. Who needed more water? Who needed more attention? I was a little concerned about my stewardship and he assured everything was fine. I recalled that many years ago my parents took up gardening with a passion. They were already raising three kids yet seemed to need more nurturing. I suspect the garden was easier to do because the flowers and vegetables never talked back or screamed for attention. After he left, I stood amongst the flowers and trees. There was an air of poise, self-assuredness, from this loving care. Can we be gardeners of this relationship? Will we till the soil carefully and lovingly? Is it possible that two people such as us; independent city dwelling workers of intellectual growth discover we can make life, care for and have it flourish? I think so.

S

LOVE LETTER #21

My Dearest Celia,

I am experiencing a change in the way I perceive my day. I have abandoned my circadian rhythm and adopted the beating of your heart. Your heart is the beautiful time piece of my life. While I sleep I dream of you moving about your life. I search for the intersection between you and me. I may be sitting in a café across from the university waiting to catch a glimpse of you leaving your lecture. I may be walking down the long-polished hallway asking students in my broken Spanish where you are teaching. At other times I am in the market watching you buy the sundries to make your life better. Sometimes I am driving in the car with you on a dusty road. I see you look out over the vast plain of Spain. What are your thoughts? When I wake in the morning I know you are into the thick of your day. You have that weary armor we all wear with our day daily grind. I want to comfort you. I want to say fly away with me. Let's lie on the sofa together under the splendid oak and talk philosophy and love.

My early morning dreams, the ones you remember just before stirring, are filled with your whispers. Your whispers are like the ticks of a fine Swiss clock. They speak of memories. They converse about the future. They remind us that it is time to greet me. Of course, the math was hard even for us, nine hours difference, forward and subtracting should we be adding instead? It isn't an easy thing when there are only twelves to stop the math. I have been working on a twenty-four-hour clock. The sailor in me is used to this system. The math is simple. Yet, time is an artifice. Time like this doesn't apply to us. We may appear to arrive at work or attend a meeting at a specific time, but it isn't our time piece any more. My heart beats. Your heart beats. Time doesn't exist for us in this way.

We text and Skype. It will be our domain for a while. It serves a useful purpose. I text good morning and you welcome me into my day. Conversely I text the same just before I go to bed. This domain is only useful in the sense we can share the minutia of our lives. It is a space in which nothing exists, and everything is attainable. You can tell me of something you like, and I instantly can see it. If we were facing each other inches apart it would be something to find later, because in your presence there is only you. I care nothing for the outside world. I only care for the sound of your heart. It is the magic of my time.

continued overleaf

As my day begins in earnest I am consumed by words, sentences, and paragraphs. I am measuring by meter, by page, by thought. You see thoughts have no sense of time. They are independent. They are arrogant of time. Time is just another thought in a series of better thoughts. Time is a rookie. Time inspires nothing. But our time, two beating hearts less time's stupid standard is where poetry lives. Poetry is that infinite beauty of the real soul.

When the sun begins its decent and the savannah is it's warmest you are slipping into bed to rest. Your dreams take flight. I feel them. Sitting here at my desk writing silly and serious stories your dreams travel across our universe on the beating of our hearts. I sleep with you. I hold you. Yet I am typing away in a world you understand but can't truly fathom. It doesn't matter because your real life is just a few scattered images to me. What matters is our time. After the sun goes away from here and comes up over your house I will send you a good morning. You will have heard my whispers all night. Your morning dreams, the ones before you stir will be full of images of us living together where time doesn't exist. Two people sharing the same heart beat where nothing matters than the poetry of our love.

Good Morning.

LOVE LETTER #22

My Dearest Celia,

I am aroused! You are the only one in my experience that I can make love to and have joyful uninhibited sex at the same time. I don't ever see having to utilize a fantasy during sex with you. I have had this experience before, but not to this extent and with so much passion. The thought of you arouses me. I could if I was to try contrast us with others or my other experiences, but I think I would be diminishing the sheer glory of making love with you.

When one describes something they can either exhort all the positives or compare and contrast. One might even resort to metaphors to describe the poetry of the moment. But sex is a simple pleasurable conceit. Most people have no knowledge how important sex is to their lives. They create all kinds of barriers from the respect me notion, to the romantic misconception love me but do no harm. There is the other side of sex, the seedy, damaging, power of viciousness and domination. I don't refer to the fun games of domination or the role playing but to the psychotic other worldliness of hate sex. No, we are perfect in our sense of joy and fun. We love each other's bodies. We enjoy our fun and don't hesitate to please each other. Let's face it we both have had our experiences. I am not in any sense of the word ashamed to embrace your experiences or mine. I am not able to project a standard of behavior on your experiences. We've talked about them. We shared the details. I know you wouldn't do such a thing to me. We are not chaste lovers of a forgotten time. We are epic lovers of our time. Our time is one where sex is sex. Whatever? It's about a lot of things from drunken one-night stands to friends with benefits. It is casual. It is intense. It is pleasurable and fun. We have a new standard in a sense.

Sex with you is all these things and I can't imagine for a second that we would suffer from familiarity or boredom with each other. We don't just play one tune. We are romantic in the best of the word. We are sometimes like two drunken porn stars. The trueness of our relationship is our wholehearted openness to one another and our unabashed lack of self-consciousness to please each other.

As promised I will talk you into an orgasm using only my words. You cannot touch yourself in any way or form. We will achieve the perfect state of sexual pleasure. This idea makes me very aroused.

Good Morning

LOVE LETTER #23

My Dearest Celia,

The “I” in my life has been too long in charge. The “me” has stood passively by bearing the results of my “I”. Until I met you I was content to work and live by the seat of my pants. I uttered phrases like “it’s the artist’s life” “Whatever happens, happens” “The universe will provide”. All statements my “I” loved to hear. Because my “I” could be as selfish as it wanted. It is not bad when you are on a difficult path. Writing is not an easy way to generate comfort, in fact, it may be the least effective way. But I am hard headed. I am belligerent. I am also dedicated to my purpose. After all these years of being alone I have realized, thanks to you, that I need the “we” to make my balance.

I am not balanced as of today. In fact, I couldn’t be further from being balanced. But I see a time with you by my side that I will be. This realization is without a doubt a stunning and unexpected turn of events for me. I have such a great desire for the “we” I feel consumed.

I saw you, dressed in your red dress, glasses, heeled shoes, purse crossing over your body, make-up, and a giant smile. I sent you off to work. I held that image of you in my mind’s eye all day. I wrote emails. I made calls. I prepared myself for a very long day. I was happy. I was satisfied I was working for something other than myself. The all-consuming nature of my business seemed less hungry, yet I was more enthused.

When I first came to Hollywood, I took meetings all around town. Even though I was older than most, I was still viewed as new. This has changed over the years. But the task of making a film hasn’t. It is still damn difficult and usually requires a miracle. You are my miracle and my muse. The sheer energy of our love will make all these dreams come true. I want, not only the film to be made, but I want the films to provide us the ability to see each other and find a decent life together. More importantly I look forward to sharing my success with you, because it would be meaningless if “I” were the only one.

I don’t have to glance back any more to justify myself. My self is yours to keep.

Good Morning,

LOVE LETTER #24

My Dearest Celia,

Today I found a tiny bird in the bedroom. It chirped and chirped. It flew up against the windows. It perched on the lamp. It sought to escape. Given my last experience with a small bird crashing into a window and dying, I felt a real sense of panic. I tried to shoo the tiny thing out of the bedroom, because there was no chance of me catching and releasing it. We were both captives. I relented after a short while and returned to my desk in the office. A few moments later it was fluttering against the big windows in the living room. I closed off the doors to the bedroom. I thought at least the little fellow was closer to freedom in the living room. If it didn’t actually happen I could use this event as a metaphor to describe my thoughts and feelings. Imagine to be able to see where you belong in the freedom of the wild only to be blocked by an invisible wall of glass. He seemed to be testing every source of light except the door where he came in. There is only one way out!

He flew into the office and tested every window. He would fly so fast then at the very last minute, perhaps seeing his reflection slam on the brakes. He danced on the bongo drums. He might have a future as an entertainer. It would be funny if he wasn’t so desperate for freedom. Eventually I closed off the office and he was confined to the living room and the kitchen. If there was someone to help I could actually steer him outside. But there never is anyone to help when you are trapped in a glass box chasing a panicked bird.

I relented. I acquiesced. I went back to work. I listened to his chirps. I felt his fluttering wings. I couldn’t imagine how he would ever get out. This event lasted about an hour. I went outside with hopes that he would follow me, but I knew that was a foolish thought. I could only imagine I would find him on his back dead. The chirps continued. I sat outside and listened to his desperate pleas. When suddenly he was standing outside with me protesting. I was relieved. I am now batting one for two on the bird in the house events. I pray it won’t happen anymore.

continued overleaf

I can't help but think about how my caring for you moves you. Caring has been painful for me over the years. I care and I suffer when someone or something in my life is in pain. I care because I have no other way to feel. I care more deeply for you than you can imagine. I feel each flutter of your wings and I hear every word you whisper. I care because I know by doing so it will set you free. Both our hearts will live in the freedom of the wild. We can escape the glass box that keeps us troubled. We just have to fly out the door.

With all the freedom of my heart.

Good Morning.

S

LOVE LETTER #25

My Dearest Celia,

I am following you through your day. I am there to arouse you and make you desire me. You have a long day of teaching today. So, when you wake this morning I will be the pillow between your legs. I will press against your pussy. My hands will pull the cheeks of your ass open, and I will drive my tongue deep into your ass.

When you make tea I will catch you passing and slide my hands under your night dress and softly massage your breasts. The water will come to a boil, and you will pour the tea. I will sip the tea with you. I will hold the hot liquid in my mouth for a moment. After I swallow I will put my hot mouth on your breast and make you shiver with excitement. When you shower I will be standing next to you. I will soap your body. My slippery hands will run over your shoulders and down to your breasts. I will slide my hands over your stomach and around your ass. I will put both hands around your legs and stroke them up and down. When both legs are done I will wash pussy with great care and love. When you dress I will be the mirror showing you the best points of your body. I will reflect your smile. I will watch you toss your hair. I will look at you with the purest desire.

When you walk I will watch your reflection in the store windows. I will be touching your muscles. I will be feeling the pure athleticism of my lover's stride. I love how confidently you walk down the street. On the bus I will sit next to you. I will share idle chat while I slide my hand under your dress. Wait you forgot to wear???? I will take my finger and rub gentle. The object is not to cum but to enjoy the pleasure of my touch. You will adopt the role of professor and begin listening to the students. Will you be listening? Will you be thinking that they can see you are distracted? I think not. Sometime during this day, you will breathe on the back of your hand. It is the start, as you know to private ignition. Maybe you will feel a bead of sweat form around your arm pit. My tongue will kiss and lick it away. It is a long day with many students. You will struggle but you will get your job done.

continued overleaf

I know you have dinner with a friend. I won't be there in this sexy erotic form. You will be alone. You will wonder where I am. What am I doing? You will try not to think about me or the way we are going to change each other's lives.

You will be exhausted by the time you lay your head on the pillow. I will be the pillow. You will push your face into me, and I will wish you good night.

Good Morning.

(The film plays on the screen while the writer narrates from the stage.)

LOVE LETTER #26

My Dearest Celia,

A cinema dream in a country like Greece. In a time when the culture was corrupt. Where fear and ignorance held hands like brothers.

A very low traveling shot catches the feet and legs of a woman running across sun cooked cobblestones. We can see she is wearing a red dress as the hem below her knee is tattered and torn. Her feet beautiful white porcelain is caked with dirt. Her nails were once red but are chipped and the bleeding. She runs. In a deep focus a crowd is chasing her. She is faster. She turns the corner in the ancient village. We see the crowd rush to the corner and stop.

The camera rack focuses like Sergio Leone.

An old woman dressed in a long black dress and faded floral apron raises her hand to her hairy chin. She rolls her mouth as if to shift her ill fitted wooden dentures. An old man sweat rolling down from under his cap grits his teeth in anger. His leather vest is stained from years of soup stains. A very plain woman almost ugly holds a baby swaddled in a bloody blanket. Village boys with their wild eyes darting back and forth excited by the chase of the crowd yet ignorant of the reason. A matador throws his cape over his shoulder. His sword is raised in the air. He is courageous but not courageous enough to leave the mob. He is more comfortable letting the danger come to him.

The camera reverses abruptly. We see an old man wizened by the years sorting books on a table outside his bookshop. He smiles and points down the street which runs up hill away from the port. He is her friend. He carefully places a book in the top of the stack titled "Jung: Analysis of Dream Archetypes".

We cut to her feet running down the hill. She stops. A point of view shot of a troubadour and his girl singing a sad love song. His guitar case is open. A couple of coins dot the black velvet landscape inside. It deserves more. She tosses a coin in the case and continues. We stay on the Troubadour there are tears in this song.

continued overleaf

Moments later we have a wide shot of the woman in the red dress hustling across the open square next to the lake. There are two boats tied to the stone quay. One a fancy boat has well healed travelers boarding. We can tell this because the men are dressed in white and cream suits, wearing summer straw hats of the finest construction and the women wear long dresses with very tight bodices. They carry umbrellas with fancy fringe. She passes them. The men look at her with desire. Men like these live to take advantage of a woman under duress. The woman mutter obscenities and hurl daggered looks. She is going to the second boat. It is a small caique painted blue and white. An old man stands ready next to the tiller. The little motor coughs, putt, putt, wheeze, putt,....

We have a close up of her feet stepping on board. She squats down and we see for the first time she is beautiful.

A medium shot of the bell tower, campanario. The bell rings. It is a round low sound. It is the best the village could do.

Smash cut: A man with a crown of thorns jammed onto his head looks up into the afternoon sun. Blood trickles down his temple. He is tied to a wooden chair. The chair is being carried by angry men two poles slid under the chair. They hold the poles on their shoulders. Young girls stand in the dark shade and cry. They fondle themselves and flash their young breasts as he is carried past. He smiles at them like one smile from a pleasant memory.

The crowd yells, philosopher, poet! They sing a church hymn in an indiscernible language. He is tied with stiff hemp ropes from the barn. His hands to the arms of the chair and his bleeding legs to the worn spindles.

In this wide shot of this angry procession, we see old women throw garbage meant for the pigs at the man. He is amused until they step foot on a caique and make for the middle of the blue lake.

Cut to the woman crossing the lake. Her feet hang over the side. The water rushing past the wooden hull washes the caked dirt of her feet. The old man by the tiller alerts her to the approaching boat with the man tied to the chair. She shades her eyes from the noon day sun. As is the custom the men by the tiller stop in the middle of the lake. The men toss the man tied to the chair into the lake. He sinks. The woman cannot believe her eyes. The men lite cigarettes and drink a sip of brandy. A job well done on their part.

The point of view from the man in the chair as he sinks slowly toward the bottom of the clear blue lake. The rays of the sun bend in the water. A shot from under the man in the chair sinking into darkness but hoping to see the light.

The woman stands up and yells, that is my lover! The men laugh. One man cruelly says you have had many lovers, me included. The other men declare they were once her lovers too.

The woman in the red dress dives into the water.

From under the sinking man, we see her swimming toward him. He thinks he sees an angel coming for him and he is satisfied.

She reaches him and kisses him on the mouth. They float downward together in the fading beams of light.

Smash cut: The man lays naked on cool white sheets. The woman lays next to him. The bedroom is modern. The doors to the balcony are open. An ocean breeze moves the muslin curtains slowly.

She holds him close to her breasts. She kisses him on his lips. He wakes and kisses her tenderly.

I know, he says tenderly. What do you know? She asks as if she already knows the answer. She kisses him giving him one more breath of life.

Good Morning, S

LOVE LETTER #27

My Dearest Celia,

You placed a blindfold over my eyes. I stood in the middle of the bedroom. You slowly unbuttoned my shirt. I could smell your scent even more powerfully than with my eyes open. I felt your hair brush up against my chin. You slipped my shirt over my shoulders and slide it off my arms. The texture of the shirt made my skin tingle. The change in temperature felt like a wave of a thousand fingers over my shoulder and arms. You gently put my hands together and tied them at the wrists with a silk tie. I asked where you got this. You replied, I’ve been planning for a long time. This excited me even more to have an insight into your secrets. What you don’t want me to know about your inner thoughts excites me beyond reason. You cinched the rope. You didn’t say a word. I could hear you breathe. Your hands unbuckled my belt.

I felt the back of your hand as it worked through the mechanics. My zipper dropped and you pulled the sides of my pants down around my ankles. I stepped out. You ordered me not to move. Ordered was said kindly, but stern. You left my side and pulled the covers of the bed. I could hear them rustle and fall to the floor. You guided me into the bed and told me to lay on my back. “Put your hands above your head.” You disappeared. I laid on the cool sheets and waited. The air was cool, but not cold. I felt a sublime sense of relaxation overcome me as I waited for you to return. I first heard you walking barefoot into the bedroom. Then I felt you get into the bed and lie beside me. I felt the warmth of your body next to me. I knew you were naked. You placed your hand millimeters above my chest. It was as if your hands were on fire with warmth. It was a kind of touch a healer from some far away mountain kingdom might have. I felt you pass over my chest hairs. They bowed to your presence. Your hand passed side to side across my chest. It followed over my arm pit. I felt a slight tickle. Even the smallest hairs of my body stood erect. I could imagine your eyes studying my skin carefully. You adjusted your body. Our skin touch just slightly on my side. I felt your breast lay on my chest. Your mouth approached mine. I am so full of desire I could scream. I know you will only give me a little. You ordered me to stick out my tongue. You took your tongue and licked around mine. The tip of your tongue touched the soft under belly of mine. I wanted so badly to plunge my tongue into your luxurious mouth. You pulled away.

This was excitingly cruel. You pulled my shoulder and hip to roll over. I laid on my stomach with my hands above my head. You shifted. You spread my legs as far apart as possible. You rubbed your breast over my back. Back and forth only pausing to kiss and lick the crease between my buttocks. I could feel your rock-hard nipples traverse my shoulders then fall away to the small of my back and over my buttocks. This was wildly pleasing to me. Then you sat between them. You raised my hips and slide your legs under my hips. You slid your hand under my hips and pulled my cock toward you. You stroked my cock firmly. I could feel the tip of my cock touch your sweet wet lips. I twisted my wrists. It was a reaction to feeling so helpless and so aroused at the same time. I could hear you groaning with pleasure above my own deep growls. You slapped my buttocks hard. You did it again and again each time harder. Each time the sting shot like a lightning bolt into my core. You shifted and made me roll over. You placed your pussy on my mouth. I licked and sucked and tried to drive my tongue into your wet sweetness. You grabbed my cock and beat it against your cheek. Then in one motion devoured it deep into your throat. What seemed like a moment but was truly an eternity you shifted again and mounted my cock. You were hot and wet. I lost control just as you came.

Exhausted, you laid on top of me. I took my arms and encircled you and held you. I experienced my lover in full detail even blinded. You whispered into my ear. “Next time I wear the blindfold.”

Good Morning, S

RESPONSE #6

Dear Writer,

This is not what I like. I prefer the reverse. C

LOVE LETTER #28

My Dearest Celia,

We seem to be walking in the middle ground. Yesterday I took the day off from writing. That night I couldn't sleep and what sleep I did have was full of disturbing feelings. I might chalk it up to just a bad night. I regularly sleep well, so I consider one night an anomaly. Last night was worse. It was one hundred and ten degrees, and the heat didn't abate until three in the morning. I got up and worked. We have no air conditioning! I apologize for my moodiness. I have found writing this letter to you difficult. I worry that the intensity of these letters may have caused you anguish. I care about you. You know I do and through these letters it was never my intent to make you feel stressed. I am not trying to convince you to have feelings you are not ready to have. I concede that the balance of enthusiasm and intensity has been one sided. I understand more than you might realize, in my last relationship I was in your position. It is uncomfortable. I don't want this to be the case between us. I want a balanced relationship. I think it is essential. Hence the difficulty in writing this latter.

I don't know what to say. I don't want you to be angry with me. So, I am afraid to offend or disturb you by writing with too much passion. So, I am in a bit of a quandary. If you were here with me I would be able to see the effects on you. I would easily adjust my intensity. I might note I have never done this with anyone, nor even considered regulating myself. I am, as you know, a rather intense man. I can't apology for this, but I can tone myself down.

I can only imagine what you are feeling. You have this whole life of work, family, and friends set and comfortable. Then along comes a man who sees everything good in you. The constancy of my energy for you must be frightening. I know it frightens me. I can't believe how one person has so infiltrated my creative process as with you. I am fearful it will either be too much or not enough. As I ponder what to write to you I hear your words of advice. I hope you will continue to look upon me favorably and with affection as I struggle to find the balance most comfortable for you and myself.

Yours with affection,

S

LOVE LETTER #29

My Dearest Celia,

Tomorrow you start teaching. I am so proud of you. There is nothing sexier or more erotic in my mind than a highly educated woman in command of knowledge and her expertise. Of course, I have noticed you haven't been texting me back. I am assuming it is the implementation of "Celia Rules". I suppose you are trying to put my presence further away so you can concentrate and feel comfortable when you face the class. Lecturing looks easy from the back of the classroom. You know you will be great. I know you will be great. If you feel this is flattery, you are absolutely right. I see the greatness in you. I see intelligence and savvy. I love the power you possess. It is wonderful and positive. It is what really draws me to you and the sex is not bad either. (I'm laughing.) I have experienced two kinds of women in my life; women who you want to possess and want to be possessed, and the truly special women you want to share life as an equal. I see you the latter. You are in my eyes amazing, if you weren't I wouldn't write these letters or be with you. You are a singular and beautiful talent.

Now I can hear very clearly your inner dialogue. The loudest voice is that dark shadow in your mind. It says, "You are not worthy of this man's love." "Remember your experiences and how they made you so depressed." "If you love someone you will be hurt." "I will create so much anxiety and worry you will never find your way." "You have a life why make it worse." My answer to those chants of doom is "fuck off!" You are worth every ounce of love and respect I can give. If anything, I worry I am not worthy of you. I understand we all carry a sack of shit from our past. Every once in a while we need to dump it so we can move on. Now you may presume I am being manipulating. This is not manipulation it is honesty and care. It is self-preservation. It is the truth. You may even be angry. But I am not going to let the shadow win. You may even think I am totally wrong. I am not. But I have sensed for some time this "other" force in our relationship.

continued overleaf

I understand why you cried so hard our last night. You may not even be aware yourself. You cried because you were afraid the beauty you felt with me would be lost. It won't be lost. I am not going to let it.

You are a remarkable and beautiful woman. You are smart and sexy. You need to shine your light on the world because you will make it better. I want you to do this regardless of my presence or not. You deserve it. You need it and I am confident you will achieve it because you are greater than you think. Be strong and don't let the shadow win. Good luck in school.

With Great Affection,

S

RESPONSE #7

I am sorry you are so angry. I have told you many times I don't have the same feelings as you. You just don't seem to listen to me. But at the same time, I still want to see you again and see what happens. That is the point. You keep saying to me that I have feelings but don't want to express them or can't or I am afraid of expressing them. No. I don't have those feelings.

I am leaving for Barcelona I will be back in five days. I ask you not to contact me when I am away. I will take a deep breath in Barcelona.

LOVE LETTER #30 UNSENT

LOVE LETTER #31 UNSENT

LOVE LETTER #32 UNSENT UNFINISHED

LOVE LETTER #33

My Dearest Celia,

Tonight is my last night in this wonderful and mystical house. There will only be unattached memories of our days and nights together. I embark on a new adventure. You have already changed your place in the world and left these very real things behind some time ago. I have been overwhelmed emotionally from our time together and the amazing creative experience. I am guilty of putting my desires first in spite of your pleas. I am returning to my life in Venice. I feel very lucky we met. You have been a great inspiration to me, and I thank you.

Now I must work on the other parts of my life. The play, the films and everything else that goes with my work. I must admit that being alone for a month has made me a little out of sorts. I hope you understand I don't act this way as a rule. I would ask for forgiveness, but there is nothing to forgive.

I am prepared for you to reject me and go on with your life without me. I understand. I will put that rejection in my bag of sad things. I will eventually see our time with the fondest of memories and the deepest love. I will never stop loving you. If there is an eternity and an eternity beyond I will be loving you.

However, if you do keep me in your life. I would be overjoyed. I will take the lessons you have taught me and learn from them. I don't imagine I will love like this again. I need to breathe and get my balance back. If it turns out we can be together in the future I will welcome our union. I will learn.

Your Man, Your Writer, Your Lover

(FIVE DAYS LATER)

RESPONSE #8

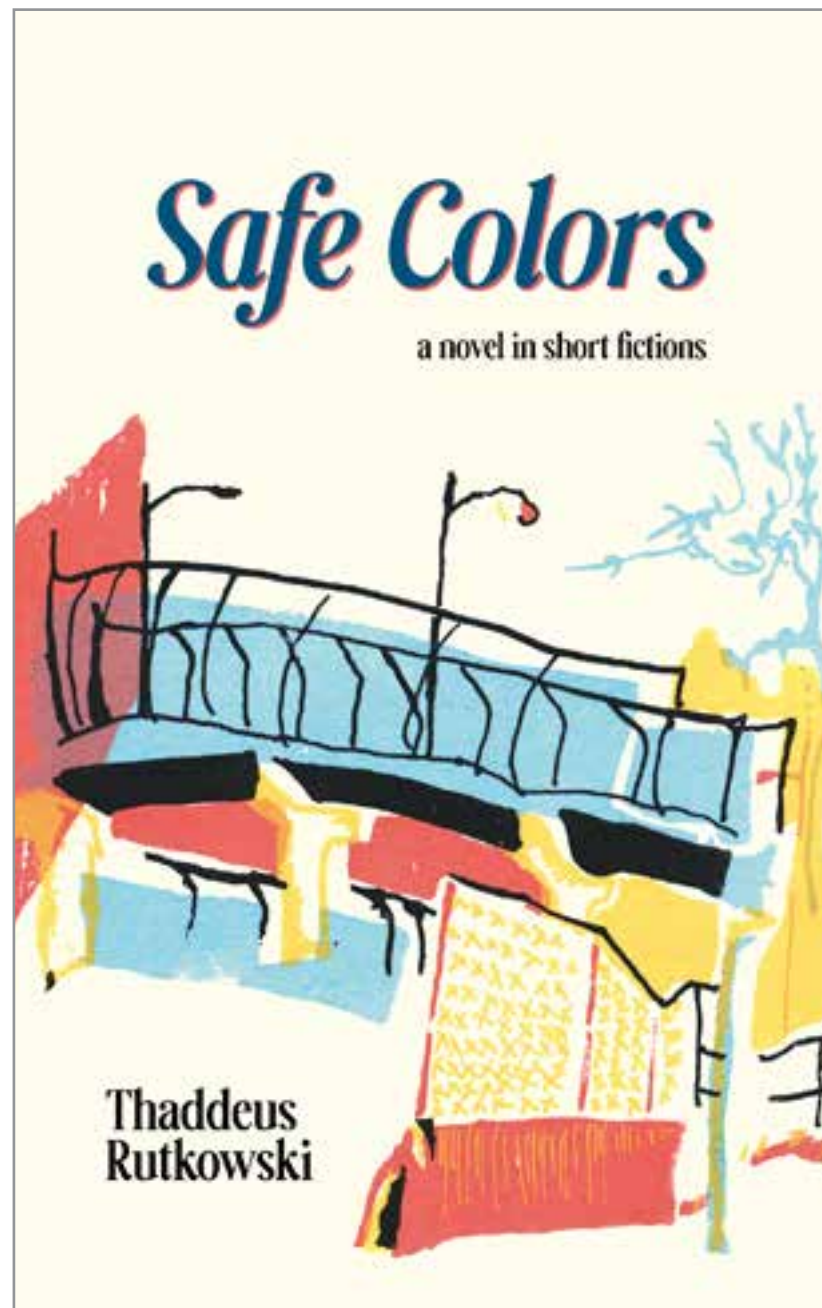
TEXT:
I am in the taxi on the way home from the airport. I miss you and I like it.



Thaddeus Rutkowski is the author of eight books, most recently *Safe Colors*, a novel in short fictions.. He teaches at Medgar Evers College and Columbia University and received a fiction writing fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts.



Michael Foldes (b 1946) is an American poet, publisher, author and businessman. He holds a BA in anthropology from The Ohio State University. Foldes's articles, editorials, poems, reviews, interviews and stories have appeared in publications worldwide, some in translation into Romanian, Hungarian, French, Japanese and Spanish. Publishing credits include *l'Oeil de la Photographie*, *Where is the Jazz Festival*, *Mobius*, *Southern Literary Review*, *the Village Voice*, *Hustler*, *High Times*, *The Seventh Quarry*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *CLH/Romania*, *We Are You Poetry anthology*, *From the Finger Lakes*, and *Folazil (France)*, among others. His books include "Stopped Dead: The End of Poetry," "In an Early Hour," and "Sand and Snow"; *"Sleeping Dogs: A true story of the Lindbergh baby kidnapping,"* (Split Oak Press, Ithaca, NY, 2012); *"Sandy: Chronicles of a Superstorm,"* with artist Christie Devereaux ; and *"Fashions & Passions"* and *"End Game"* with artist Christopher Panzner. His poetry chapbook "Original Sin" (2022) is available from Cervena Barva Press, Amazon, Barnes & Noble and other booksellers. Foldes and his wife Margot live in New York's Southern Tier a few hundred yards from the Susquehanna River, said to be one of the five oldest rivers in the world.



Available at: <https://amazon.com>

MICHAEL FOLDES Review of THADDEUS RUTKOWSKI'S *Safe Colors, a novel in short fictions*

Cover art by Shay Rutkowski
Bridge on East Houston Street (screen print)
Author Photo by Hollie Rutkowski
Cover and Book design by Alexandru Oprescu
Published by New Meridian, part of the non-profit organization
New Meridian Arts, 2023.
ISBN: 9798985965971
LCCN: 2023935891

I'm 76. Soon I'll be 77. I live in the same town I grew up in. I didn't always live here. I've lived other places: in the Midwest, cow country as we used to say, and New York City. I've traveled and was fortunate enough to live at a time when hitchhiking was still an acceptable form of travel. I hitched rides from New York to Ohio, from Spain to France, and to the port in France on the English Channel where I took a boat to South End and eventually on to London. I made a lot of notes along the way. And wrote poems. Most were not very good. I have many creative friends who tell me that it doesn't matter if the poems are good or bad, that they all need to be saved. I'm not sure why, really, except, perhaps, that they're like steps up sides of mountains to Buddhist retreats, or monasteries in northern Greece where Orthodox priests sanctify life in isolation with prayer.

I sometimes enjoy looking back upon events in my life that are reminders of where I've been, what I've done, family members I've not seen since I was a child, family members I've not shed completely, but with whom we share only childhood memories, such as walks through woods and the same grandparents. I don't lay claim to having better memories than anyone else, or more of them. In fact, the leaps forward from those days to high school, college, weddings, divorce, children, work, and the rest of what keeps us going are a broken chain of important events that somehow stays in place around my neck as if it were tattooed there. And I can only see it in a mirror.

What I loved about Thaddeus Rutkowski's *Safe Colors* is the boomerang effects of his vignettes from childhood to the present that brought back countless memories of similar events and circumstances, many of which are unique to the times and places where we each grew up. Thad in a Pennsylvania dairy-farming area and I in a relatively nearby Upstate New York industrial town where shoes and time clocks were manufactured.

Thad's sketches detail his upbringing in Appalachia in a most appealing fashion. High times and hardships co-exist in easily styled and engaging literary pastorals. The book, titled *Safe Colors* and sub-titled "a novel in short fictions," runs approximately 275 pages in three sections. The "short fictions" capture events and influences of events from the author's childhood through various stages of life to the present. The stories project images easily recognizable from childhood, especially boyhood, as so many of them are about the relationships between son and father and the bonds between mother and son.

The individually enjoyable anecdotes create a mural of the mid-twentieth century presented as still lifes left to the reader to decide whether they are in fact fiction, memories, versions of memories, distortions of fact, or things that happened to a friend. Or even to the reader him or herself who appreciates a good read that can be taken in small doses and remain cohesive.

Rutkowski has mastered the recollection of events for retelling by turning what might appear to be small influences into something grand—but not grandiose. There is humility to be found in these small parcels. The wonder of earthworms in a cold wet lawn, the tug of a game fish on a handmade lure, the burning smoke of incense held too closely to one's nose, honest answers given in school mistaken by a teacher for work performed by someone else, children playing with guns both toy and real. We get a taste of how an Asian-American sees himself as viewed by peers, how so-called liberal politics plays in a conservative community, and how black smoke from incense can connect one with the spirits of the dead.

Apply the same simple principles to nonessential elements of carefully drawn experience, mix in a bit of memorabilia and sufficient irony to make the canvas come alive, as it does with *Safe Colors*, and you have in hand a road map from childhood to maturity. Great to be along on the author's ride navigating the juggernaut of time travel from backwater to oceanside in one of the largest cities in the world.

2010 - 2024



Live encounters

POETRY & WRITING

FREE ONLINE MAGAZINE FROM VILLAGE EARTH
JANUARY 2024

COVER ARTWORK 'VORTICES' BY IRISH ARTIST EMMA BARONE