

2010 - 2024



Live encounters

POETRY & WRITING

FREE ONLINE MAGAZINE FROM VILLAGE EARTH
MARCH 2024

TERRY MCDONAGH *Secrets in Word and Music*

COVER ARTWORK 'GLITCHES IN THE MATRIX' BY IRISH ARTIST EMMA BARONE



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Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



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

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

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

Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

Mark Ulyseas
Publisher/Editor

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MARCH 2024

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Terry McDonagh, Irish poet and dramatist has worked in Europe, Asia and Australia. He's taught creative writing at Hamburg University and was Drama Director at Hamburg International School. Published eleven poetry collections, letters, drama, prose and poetry for young people. In March 2022, he was poet in residence and Grand Marshal as part of the Saint Patrick's Day celebrations in Brussels. His work has been translated into German and Indonesian. His poem, 'UGB by Degrees' is included in the Galway Poetry Trail on Galway University campus. In 2020, *Two Notes for Home* – a two-part radio documentary, compiled and presented by Werner Lewon, on *The Life and Work of Terry McDonagh, The Modern Bard of Cill Aodáin*. His latest poetry collection, 'Two Notes for Home' – published by Arlen House – September 2022. He returned to live in County Mayo in 2019. www.terry-mcdonagh.com

TERRY MCDONAGH SECRETS IN WORD AND MUSIC

A writer in a café sipping a coffee might be a cliché, but a writer in a café sipping a coffee on a floor above a bookshop is a joy worthy of several cups. And this pleasure is all mine as I sit with my coffee on the first floor of The Bookshop in Castlebar, County Mayo. Even the stairs up to the café from the floor below, is a step to an adventure. I'm gathering thoughts for a Live Encounters editorial. Moments like these are special – a time of waiting for something to happen – pondering on this and that, taking notes and ordering a second coffee. I think of the term, *tabula rasa* – of Peter Brook's *The Empty Space*, where we are presented with a theatre space to fill with something exciting, interesting – enthralling even. My head is the empty space but I have five senses as well as memory, colour and daily experiences to draw on. It's a tingling time.

Just recently, I've been working quite a lot in schools with children of all ages. I love this work with young people, as, in most instances, they are unspoiled – full of lovely nonsense and, unlike us adults, they, usually, don't have a literary or theatrical reputation to defend. Thankfully, there are grown-ups of all ages that have remained childlike. As part of my work, I've had the pleasure of working with groups of young teenagers of varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds. I asked them to greet each other in their native tongue which led one student to suggest that language was music – and when people spoke in their native tongue – most of us couldn't understand even though we were on the same topic – but we could listen to the music in the language. We ended up trying to guess what 'others' were saying. We, then, wrote in our own language and translated back and forth. On the one hand, this was a lot of fun, but, on the other hand, I was conscious of the importance of mother tongue as identity and enrichment. I lived in Germany for more than half my life where I learned to value being able to converse and communicate in more than one language.



TWO NOTES FOR HOME. A Bilingual Evening of Poetry and Conversation with poet, Terry McDonagh and his son, actor Sean McDonagh in FWT theatre, Cologne. Sean is a well-known TV and theatre actor in Germany. He's an Ensemble member of Schauspiel Koeln and is moving to the famous Burgtheater in Vienna in the next few months. (Zentralbuero - Agentur fuer Schauspieler).

We played with letters – took W.O.R.D and, in groups, made tableaux or frozen pictures of each letter which led us to conclude that a letter is a sketch, shape, picture or painting and when we put these ‘paintings’ together, we had a word...a sentence, a text, speech, poem or story. In like manner, we took lettering from other languages and played around with them to try and get a better understanding of what language really is all about. Letters become words and we use words to build a sentence – to communicate – which, in essence, is quite simple, but as we know, communication can be complex and can lead us to not only to elation and joy but, sometimes, into sad or tricky territory.

We chose the topic, Secrets Hidden in Words as a writing topic. I was asked why do you write? As I’d been asked this question many times over the years, I had constructed a poem, *I Write Because*, to save me having to explain each time I was asked.

I Write Because...

I write because
 I’m on a train from home to here.
 I write because
 I see black sheep dotting mystery on a landscape.
 I write because
 I see children tussle with childhood.
 I write because
 I hear a Chihuahua doing battle in a handbag.
 I write because
 I hear a badger barking in my head.
 I write because
 I feel the urge to dislike words like outsider.
 I write because
 I feel a pen and anger in my hand.
 I write because
 I taste a lily-livered sun.
 I write because
 I taste angry salt on the swirling wind.
 I write because
 I smell smirking garlic in a sandwich.

I write because
 I smell perfume before I see it.
 I write because
 I gallop into a gale with wild horses.
 I write because
 I can never trust a Mona Lisa smile.
 I write because
 I’m unravelling lines of light between trees.
 I write because
 I’m in a day that won’t come back to me.
 I write because
 I write.

Sitting here with my scribbler and second coffee, I feel at ease – my time is being well spent, even if the term, *time is money*, is not part of my morning’s work. I’m quite sure my colleagues would be of the same opinion if asked why they write, and the power of words in their lives. A true friend of mine, the poet, Philip Casey, died in 2018. In January of this year, a collection of memories, by writers and friends of Philip’s, was published by Arlen House and launched in his native Gorey, County Wexford and in Dublin. I felt honoured when asked to launch this book in Gorey: *Distant Summers – Remembering Philip Casey*. It made me realize that a man who had dedicated his life to his love of letters and words was being recognized for his contribution to this world of literature. His body of work deserves to be remembered. ‘Words, words, words.’ This was Hamlet’s reply to Polonius’ question, ‘What do you read, my Lord? In this case, Hamlet suggests words are meaningless, but the power of ‘To be or not to be’ is indisputable.

When I think of the millions of words on the ground-floor shelves of this beautiful bookshop, I feel uplifted. I’m reminded of all the billions of words and pictures I have uttered and shared with friends and acquaintances in the course of my lifetime – and I try to imagine them shaping themselves into sentences, stories, legends, and tales for us to ponder on and have our lives enriched by the secrets hidden in those mountains of words. I often have to smile when I’m reminded of one young boy’s remark. *When will you have made enough money to be able to give up this poetry writing?*

I’ve done what I set out to do this morning and I won’t be giving up any time soon.

Alex Skovron was born in Poland, lived briefly in Israel, and emigrated to Australia as a boy. His family settled in Sydney, where he grew up and completed his studies. From the early 1970s he worked as an editor for book publishers in Sydney and (after 1980) Melbourne. His poetry has appeared widely in Australia and overseas, and he has received a number of major awards for his work. His most recent collection is *Letters from the Periphery* (2021); his previous book, *Towards the Equator: New & Selected Poems* (2014), was shortlisted in the Prime Minister's Literary Awards. Skovron's collection of short stories *The Man who Took to his Bed* (2017), and his novella *The Poet* (2005), have been published in Czech translations; *The Attic*, a selection of his poetry translated into French, was published in 2013, and a bilingual volume of Chinese translations, *Water Music*, in 2017. His work has also appeared in Dutch, Macedonian, Polish and Spanish. The numerous public readings he has given have included appearances in China, Serbia, India, Ireland and Portugal. In 2023 Alex Skovron was honoured with the Patrick White Literary Award for his contribution to Australian literature.

<http://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/towards-the-equator-alex-skovron/>

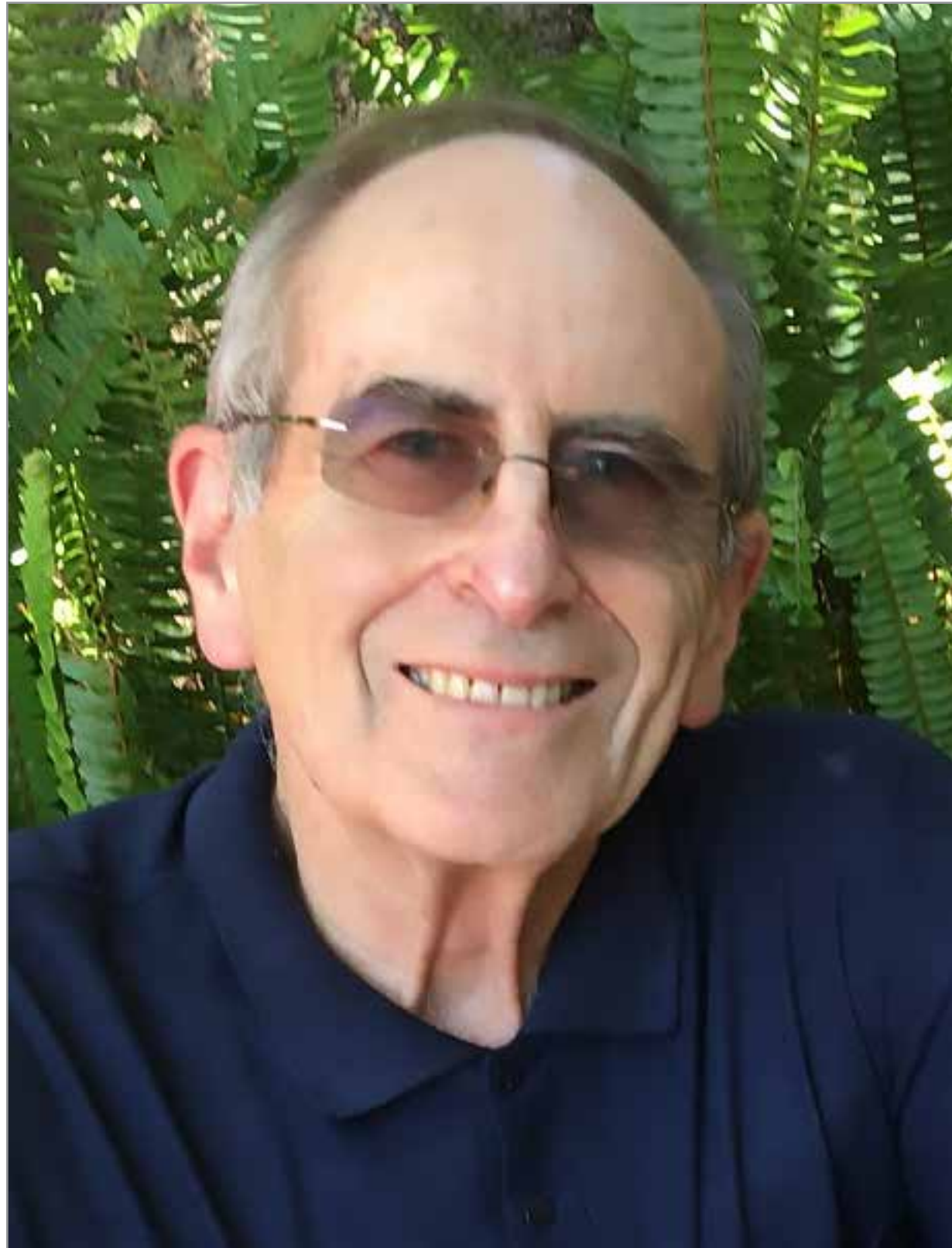
<https://compulsivereader.com/2022/03/12/a-review-of-letters-from-the-periphery-by-alex-skovron/>

BRAVE MUSIC

'Our proper bliss depends on what we blame.'

– Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*

This weather needs to see someone:
every day the track diverges, spiteful quiz. The sun
settles hydraulically enough into a soft horizon,
but come dawn you resign to the accusative printout
beside the toast; for overnight the cool warmth of spring
surrenders to the next boldface epiphany
– stormquake, insurrection, landfill, surgical mistake –
and a world so full of words stares dyslexic
into another singularity, its sizzling discharge already
brutal as truth. The civilized suburbs dog-paddle
in a pool of poems, or scurry indoors
trailing rumours of apocalypse, while the soundwaves
batter the naked countryside, toxic with untruth,
eyeless with righteous abomination
born of a plotline unalloyed in three millennia.
Someone needs to see this weather, cry the believers,
merely a matter of time before the Time –
but a globe turns, the intervals spell out a braver music
to belie the elements, it thrusts beyond the stars;
and poetry makes poetry happen,
whose lines slant back down across a timescape
luscious and arid, exultant and no less afraid.



Alex Skovron

CARAVANSERAI

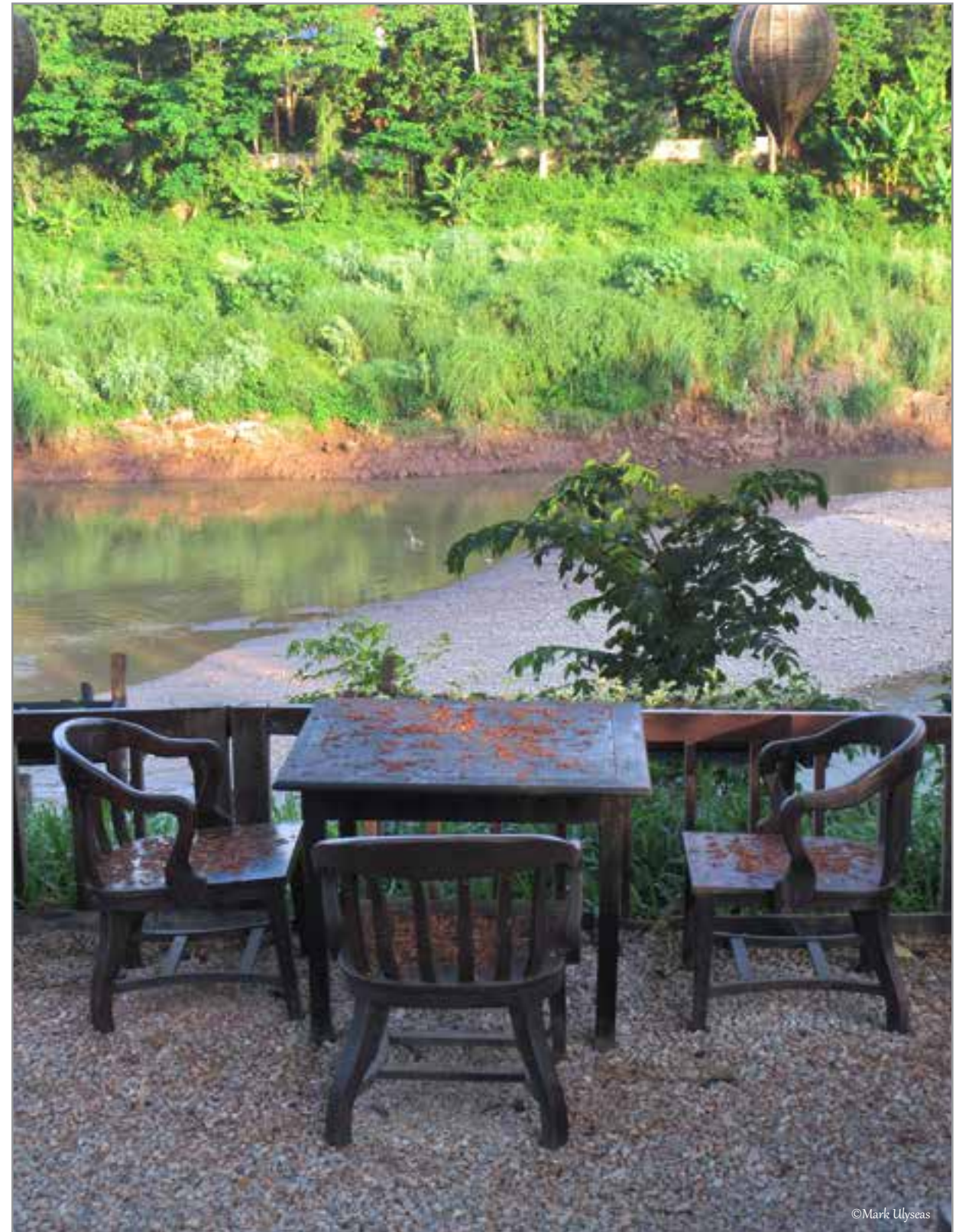
The outcome was never in doubt
Whatever could be done had been done
We guessed what the game was about
There was nothing new under the sun

We tried our best to dissuade them
Gentle bribery, a hint of blackmail
But nothing served to persuade them
And our suit was destined to fail

I wondered if the way it concluded
Was foretold and couldn't be altered
But we'd chosen our path, and pursued it
Until choices ran out and we faltered

We were poorer to go than to come
(I'm referring to nothing material)
Our leaving was an unhappy one
Our mood you could say was funereal

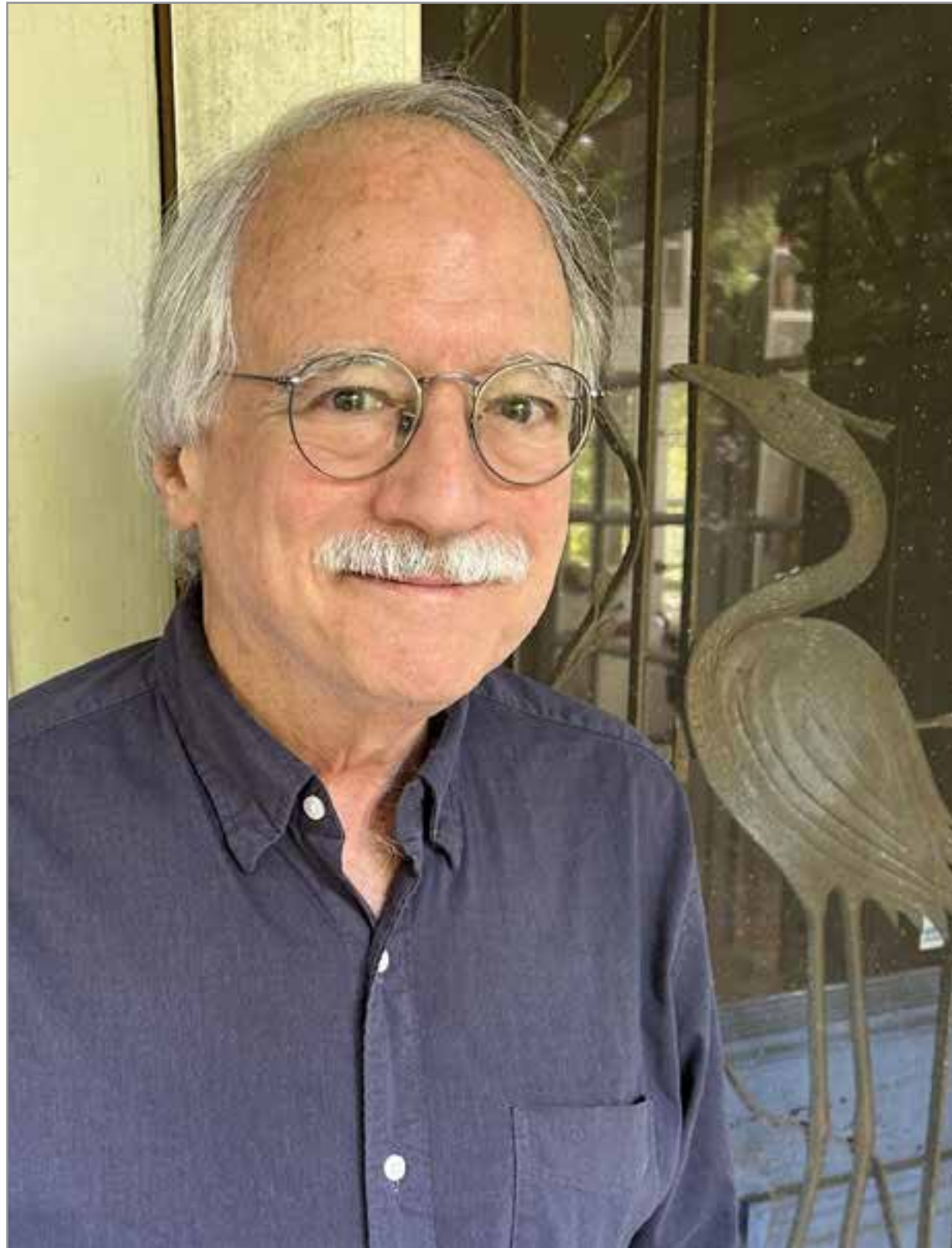
Yet a lesson had been digested
So we pulled up our stakes and departed
The future was still there to be tested
Our next journey there to be started



©Mark Ulyseas

Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

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



ODE TO A BUREAU CHIEF

I threw away the letter you sent me,
 declining to sponsor our FBI club, a brainstorm
 for my gang of would-be detectives, grade-schoolers drunk
 on your forensics lab, the wanted posters (enclosed by you),
 and the street-front where agent trainees looked
 for cut-out figures to pop up in windows, doorways,
 and then *Think fast—Do I shoot?—Oh no, a housewife!*
 No, a child!—Too late now, wish I'd missed—
Oh-no, Ma Barker got me with her tommy gun!

Not really a G-man, since they had to stage
 your arrest of Alvin Karpis, agents serving him up
 for you to collar. You qualify as a B-man:
 B for bureaucrat, B for bigot, who
 wiretapped and tailed, harassed and hounded
 Paul Robeson and Martin Luther King.
 Do we know you from the Clint Eastwood film—
 cross-dressing at parties, the partner you kissed?
 Gayness almost redeems you, but hypocrisy ruins it.

You're dead now (*yay!*) but not forgotten (*boo!*).
 Blackmailer with a badge to enforce his grudges.
 Cop who never walked a beat. Censor of divergent thought.
 I did end up an investigator, after all. Thanks
 for not sponsoring our club. Or tracking my activities.
 I've put you on my Most Unwanted List.

John Philip Drury. Photo credit: Tess Despres Weinberg.

ANDANTE

We know it means “Go slow,” the tempo mark,
but it refers, literally, to walking,
an easy-going pace, not rushed, not sluggish.
As Ammons says, “A poem is a walk,”
and inspiration comes from moving feet,
the groove of strolling through a neighborhood.

Praise to the dog for taking me on walks!
At first, the puppy seemed too reverent
to piss or shit outside, to make a mess
on grass, but soon he learned to feel at home
with nature, like a true Wordsworthian.

We both relieve ourselves in different ways.
For me, a walk expels the numbing static
that crackles in my mind. It helps tune in
the distant signals on that radio.

More sociable than any social network,
dog-walking unites the peripatetics
who know the dogs’ names, not each other’s,
finding nature within the city limits,
regularity making them receptive
to noticing the secrets in plain sight—
a hawk, swooping from ginkgo to the crown
of a bare oak, a sparrow fleeing into
the mouth-hole of a mask nailed to a trunk
in a yard full of terracotta faces.

The ritual gives me a good excuse
to meditate and clean up excrement,
knowing the tasks are complementary.
And our Italian Greyhound, tugging the leash,
is so excited to run into his friends
and frolic through their yard, while I converse
with neighbors who are digging holes for saplings.

The dog goes cruising like a motorboat,
exultant in the breeze and then the calm
that settles when he stops to sniff the grass.
I turn around and follow the trees’ progress,
happy the fallen leaves are still unraked—
a beach that’s rich in conchs and mother-of-pearl.

DAYS IN KEY WEST

Awake, I walk a balcony of dreams
 over a courtyard's tendrilled net of leaves,
 zigzagging, knowing the sea's on the other side
 of hotel doors. Palm trees have broken through
the canopy of blue-sky vines. Below,
 the elevator opens. I proceed
 under dangling blossoms, a garden that gives
 delight by hanging above where a walker roams.

No labyrinth. It's easy to get out.
 Who wants to, though, with beauty so *outré*
and so immured, like thought. Yet I emerge,
 attracted to a dock at the end of the street:
a crane unloading pilings from a barge.
 Next day, a heron's idling on the quay.



Photograph credit: <https://pixabay.com/photos/heron-sea-nature-bird-wildlife-1357037/>

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



LaWanda Walters

HOTEL EDEN

to Karen Friedland

I wish you a Joseph Cornell box, one he made himself
from secondhand stores or the five and dime.
With postcards sent from old vacations, cursive letters
in faded blue ink, children's rubber balls

and mirrors, jacks, magazine pictures
and a fishing cork, somehow he'd devise
the celestial. "White magic," he called it, the opposite
of the surrealists' work. A marble in each
of five clear aperitif glasses, set upon one shelf,
a photo of a parrot for Juan Gris.

He finagled in universes and miles of air
and impenetrable secrets, placed them
just exactly right in his basement workshop—
the air, the small compartments painted white
like walls in the tropics, the parakeet in "Hotel Eden"
like a concierge trying to arrange a connection for someone,
holding the end of a coil of wire in its upraised beak,
a regular telephone operator—
Only connect only connect—
covered them with glass, made them immortal.

Outside, on the back lawn of the house where he took care
of his brother and mother,
he was cavorting with his true love,
the artist who painted red dots everywhere, Yayoi Kusama,
(there are photographs of them together)
until his strict mother, who liked spying
from her bedroom window, dumped
a pail of water down on their earthly delights.

WHITE-HEARTED WATER

Her head on the pillow looked something like Beethoven's—
square-jawed, a beauty once, a flirt, a true musician.
Now her mouth was open for what little oxygen she accepted
as if she were being polite, trying petit-fours at a reception.

She was already far from us, in spite of the brave, raspy
breathings in. And that is why I could not see the dying.
That awful nurse was still there, refusing, in her waspish
rightness, to give her more morphine, looking wide-eyed

at our sinfulness. It sounds like she's drowning, I pleaded,
and she told us that's what it was, the lungs filling
with water—and so we sat there as needlessly
as people on a ship watching a flailing mermaid.

Perhaps she was caught on the knot of some wide net,
her arms cool and fattened as flippers, her eyes shut to us.
I touched her gently, afraid I would hurt her,
but she didn't complain. She's "still staying,"

my sister said, and we couldn't believe the nurse's
statement that "she wasn't uncomfortable."
I tried to breathe at that unearthly rate—
like a dolphin's deciding to stop her own heart.

I couldn't stand it and went home to bed.
My father and sister saw the final breath.
Though I missed my mama's dying, they said
she looked the same, her mouth still open

when they took the mask off. She got whiter,
and that was all there was to know. Anne Sexton wrote
that the dead are worse than stone—and it's true,
there was no way, then, to break through

to the brave, temperamental mother we'd known,
telling us that death, too, would be an amazing
experience, but sharing nothing of it, now, with children,
as she stopped her breathing by the sea at St. Simon's.

WATERCOLOR

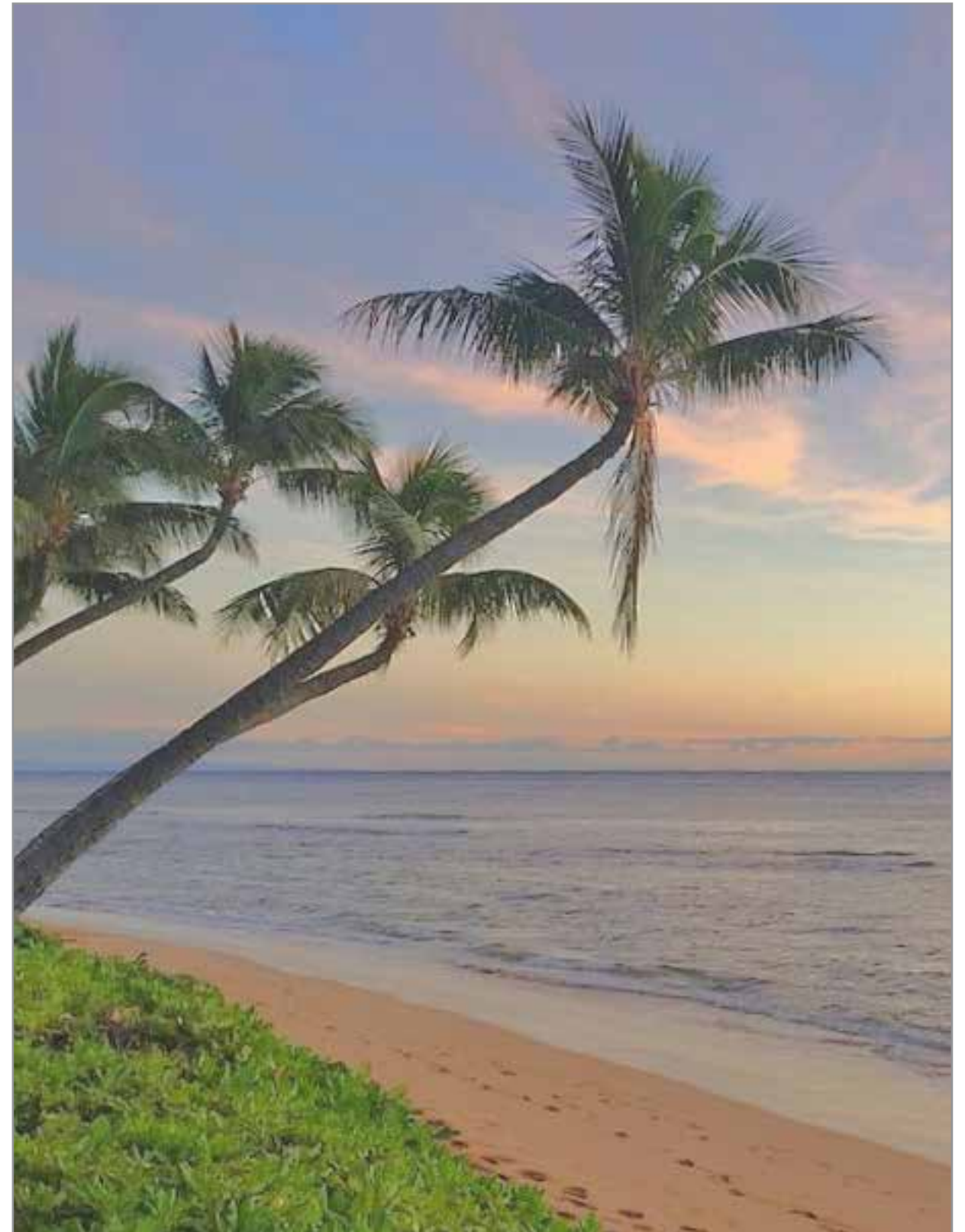
Winslow Homer, *Red Shirt, Homosassa, Florida (1904)*

Those palm trees Winslow Homer painted, like women
tossing their blue, wild hair just after a shampoo.
On that paper it is always wet, everything is clean
and misty, the result of a tropical rain. Or, no—

the metaphor should be made of paper,
how blue seeps into green, colors
too transparent for forgiveness
and so the foliage blurs. The accident

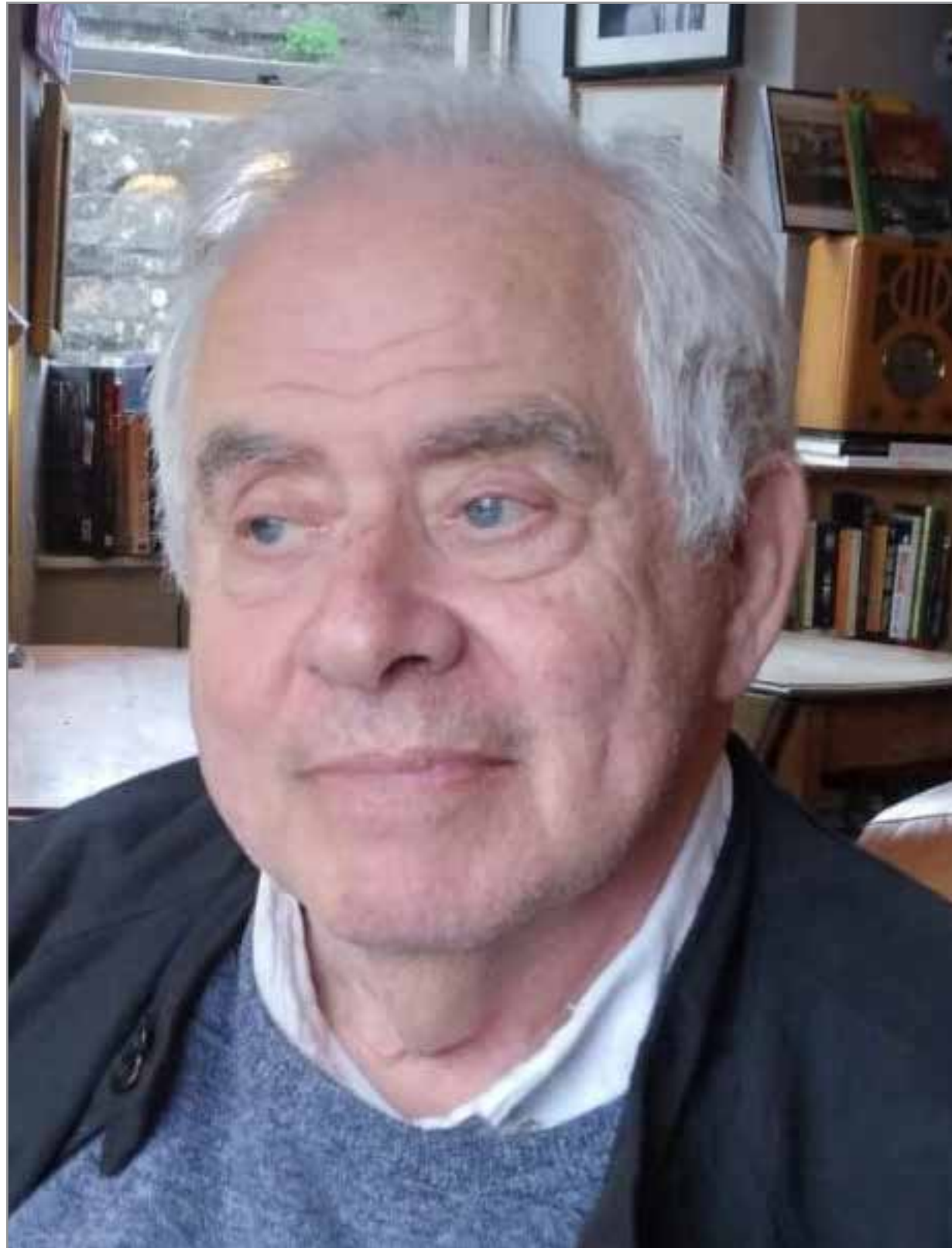
coincides with the fisherman's boat.
The smears muddy the turquoise sky
and the painter must hurry to blot
the scene and quit, hang it like laundry,

something caught there with just the time he had
before the colors set and the water dried.



Photograph adapted from <https://pixabay.com/photos/coconut-tree-sea-view-beach-baisha-1933222/>

Richard W. Halperin holds U.S.-Irish dual nationality and lives in Paris. Since 2010, he has seen four poetry collections published by Salmon/Cliffs of Moher and sixteen shorter collections by Lapwing/Belfast. A *Selected & New Poems*, Introduction by Joseph Woods, will be launched by Salmon in Spring 2024. In May 2024, Mr Halperin will read from his work as part of the Heinrich Böll Memorial Weekend, Achill Island.



A WALK WITH MY FATHER

I am walking with my father. In a field.
We never did that, we were both city boys.
He explains to small me what a snapdragon is,
then snaps one. Above us are tangled clouds.
Yesterday I wrote a poem about tangled clouds.
Not good to repeat. 'Why not?' he asks.
A good walk, this. He knows that my
favourite novel is *Fathers and Sons*.
I know that his is *The Cruel Sea*. When I
was a boy, he would sometimes say,
'Let's go hit a bucket of balls,' and we
would go to the park and hit them. This walk
is the same as that. A universe of two,
in the universe, is a universe.

Richard W. Halperin. Photo credit: Joseph Woods.

A POEM MY MOTHER MIGHT FANCY

She would fancy any poem I wrote,
because her son wrote it. Or, if it were
a difficult poem, she would try to like it,
wishing that it could give her the pleasure
of 'Daffodils' or of Joan Sutherland's
Lucia. She would not want the poem
to be about herself, mothers didn't
mean much to her. She would, I think, like it
if I wrote a poem about Dior's New Look.
She loved The New Look, she was a very
romantic lady. 'Romantic lady? Could that
be put in a poem about me?' So, I have.

THE ALHAMBRA REVISITED

for Paul Clements

My mother left Belfast as a child in 1922
to emigrate to America. She referred often
to the Alhambra, a vast Belfast concert hall
where her father – she was a Daddy's girl –

would take her to Balfe, Verdi, Wagner.
When as a middle-aged man I began
visiting Belfast, I would mention the Alhambra
to blank stares. No surprise there, my mother

made things up, as suited her at the moment.
But recently, a Belfast literary journalist
told me, yes, there once was an Alhambra here,
and sent me a photograph of it, 1937,

taken by Alexander Hogg. The building
had become a cinema, subsequently destroyed
by fire in the 1960s. In 1937,
when the camera clicked, the film was

The Charge of the Light Brigade,
Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland. Magic,
shadow, red plush seats, little hand in big hand,
little girl never wanting to go home.

She never did. Her son, yours truly
(little bow taken over the footlights),
how did he turn out? Like most people:
all three Karamazov brothers.

And she? Perched on a balcony seat
next to The Handsomest Man
in the World, under the best dome that could
be built for a few pounds sterling.

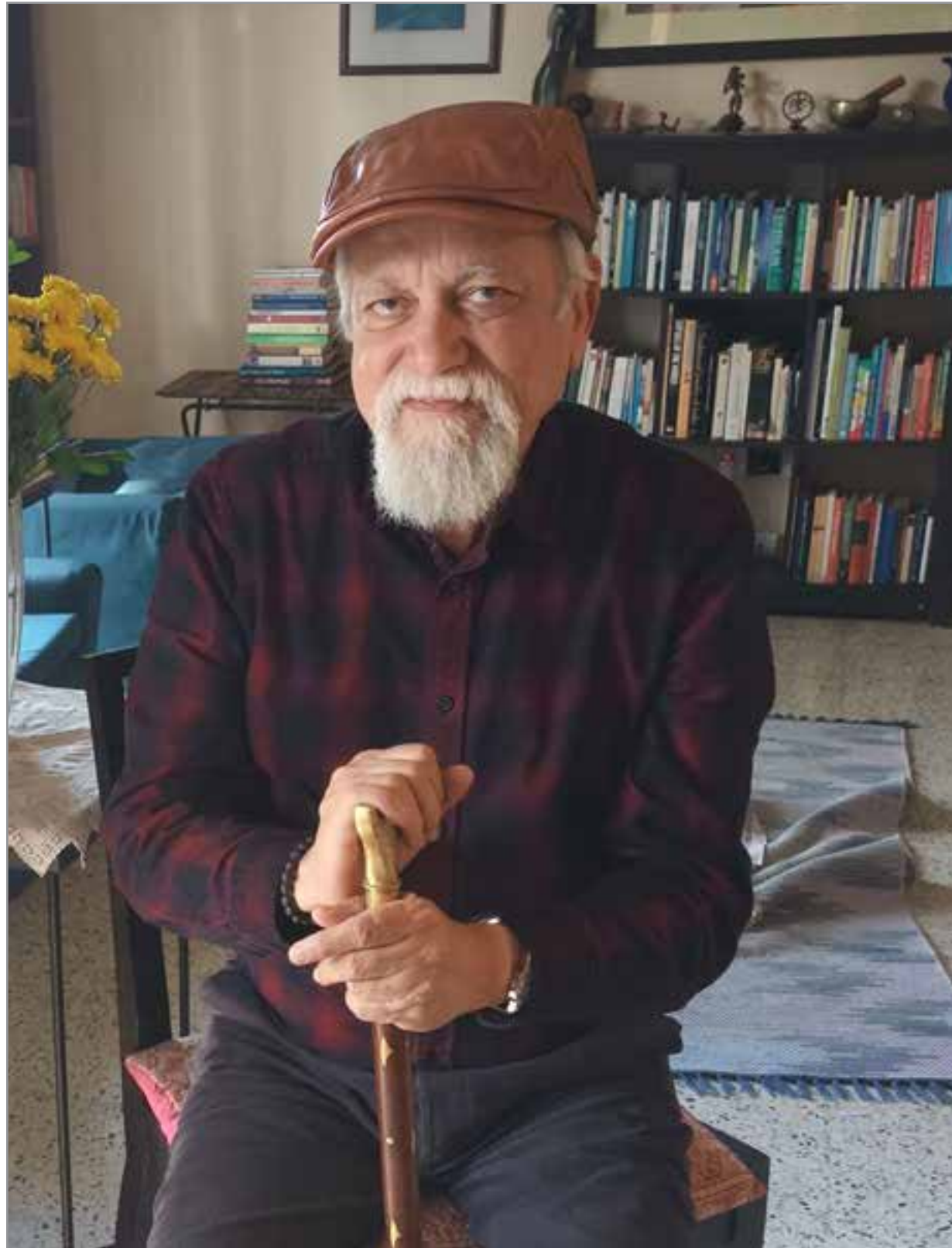
AT THE BRASSERIE BALZAR

For Cindy

February 10th, 5:00 p.m. I am here, solo, to celebrate with a late lunch the life of my friend Jack, who died unexpectedly a few weeks ago. I have been coming here for forty years. So did he. I look up from my kir at the high ceilings, the immaculate tablecloths, the huge green potted plants, the oil painting of two early twentieth century regulars sitting on a banquette just over there, the enormous mirrors which double us all. I live with *Ecclesiastes*, which I can sum up in three words: 'Here's to Jack!' I look around again. *Grand Hotel*. People come, people go, nothing ever changes. Garbo effortlessly walks away with the whole picture, as she always does.



Photograph courtesy Brasserie Balzar.



Randhir Khare is a national and international award-winning poet, writer, artist, playwright, teacher and folklorist. He has published 40 volumes of short fiction, poetry, novels, essays, and translations, exhibited his drawings and paintings in 7 solo exhibitions, led 2 poetry-music bands (*Mystic & After Rumi*), and performed and read his work in national and international festivals. He has collaborated with A.R. Rahman who has set his poems to music. His two recent books are *THE FLOOD & AFTER A Memoir of Leaving* and a novel - *WOLF, END TIME* which explores the role of shamans from traditional communities in the preservation of sacred spaces in wildernesses. Both the books have been published by Vishwakarma Publications. As a Mentor he has groomed numerous children, young adults and adults to grow into writers, artists and story-tellers. He is the winner of the Gold Medal for poetry awarded by the Union of Bulgarian Writers, The Sahitya Akademi's Residency Award for his life time contribution to literature and The Palash Award for his lifetime contribution to Education and Culture. A film, *TRAVELLING LIGHT*, is being made on his life and work. He is the Director of a school and College in Pune.

PRAYERS FROM THE BOOK OF DAWN

1.

I had walked the broken path of uncertainty all these years, clutching my spirit in a fist lest I should lose it. Slept beside abandoned shrines under ancient trees speaking in languages I did not understand, my spirit as my pillow. In the morning when the world awoke, I washed with cool water from my spirit flask, drank my fill then walked the broken path.

This morning, I have reached the region of light with an empty flask; waiting for it to be filled with your grace Dear One - that I may rise anew, feathers growing, lifting me among the angels of the air, drunk with song.

2.

I know the rains are on their way in baskets of clouds full to the brim with thunder lilies and the wild fragrance of water. I know.

I know my nights will sing with the voices of restless birds and leaves snapped from their moorings rocked on the muddy wind, sailing to somewhere. I know.

I know the dawn will be a dark wet sheet torn by lightening and the cold fingers of the air will blow into me, travelling down the highways of my body, my roads lined with homes, dust bins and closed shops, dislodged hoardings and street dogs under cars. My nameless lanes crooked and broken, my temples weary with waiting. I know.

I know you will arrive suddenly one night amidst the storm and fill my dreams with a green dawn still with trees and speak to me. I know.

I know after the rains the drunken earth breathes like a lover touched beyond divine madness. I know.

Randhir Khare. Photo credit: Nadia Sen Sharma

3.

You are everywhere this morning...in the sky turning pale milk, in birdsong, in the trembling leaves of this Raintree, in the bark of free dogs, early risers, milkmen and train hoots, in the croak of the jungle crow and the sound of my heartbeat, in the streetlights that die suddenly, the rats that rummage in dustbins, in everything that is and was.

Your presence stays with my secrets, my shame, my joy, my love, my loneliness; you are in the eyes of strangers on the streets, the woman with a baby tapping on the window pane of my car reminding me that I am not safe inside and in the flight of morning birds and sleeping moths speckled with shade;

You know my thoughts before they come to me, when they are embryo, you know;

I am laid bare before you Divine One - like a sand strip before the ocean, like roots in the earth, like stardust floating in the everythingness of the cosmos.

What can I say to you this morning that you do not know?

The wind brings the distant fragrance of feathers calling me to faraway places within myself where you reside.

Bless me with the joy of the explorer when he finds a pathway to the centre of the earth.

Bless me.

4.

The sky has opened itself to egrets and jungle crows, each to their own rhythms of being and purpose. I watch them harness the wind and float horizon to horizon - above my smallness that rummages among leftover dreams and promises, unable to soar. No feathers, no place to go, moving in circles, my soles burning a groove of everydayness, sameness, no wonder of lofting with the wind under my wings.

Release me from myself, Blessed One, so I'll be free, open, accepting, loving, grateful, flying on wings of trust.

I've been with the earth too much, too long, I've sent out roots, held on to pettiness, small dreams of wanting, hoping, wishing, not riding the winds of freedom.

Tear away my roots, loft me through today that I may earn the gift of nowhere-ness drawn by the magnet of your power, so gentle, so giving, nurturing.

Between the setting of the moon and the rising of the sun, carry me on your palm among the egrets and jungle crows. Show me the path to the centre of myself, the space of no-ness, nothingness.

5.

Below the green earth, below our feet, below the streets and cars and factories, below our love, below our hate, our wars, our marriages and births, below our ash strewn rivers, below all that is alive and dead and waiting to be born - are the roots of trees, wandering, breathing, from space to space, holding the earth together in their arms.

We come from them, we go to them, full with their blood. They are with us and join us, body to body into one.

And you, Mother, hold us inside you, protecting us.

Through the membranes of your womb the sky seeps in - filled with the joy of being.

Praise dawn, praise our new selves today, our preciousness that you've made above-below the earth that we stay one though separately unique.

The day with gleaming scales swims through the air, fins swirling.

Great Mother of infinity, we greet your day, turn rainbows in gratitude.

6.

Good morning life. I am grateful for all that you have gifted me; my palms unfisted to give and to receive, my arms spread to embrace, love flowing from you to me and me to you;

You feel me and I feel you, you are me and I am you. I am the spider and the newborn snake, I am the otter playing in its delight, the caterpillar waiting to become, the unfolding leaf, even the rainbow in puddles on broken pavements. You've taught me to be always ready for death, making each living moment precious.

I praise this morning with its grey rooftop of clouds trickling rain, growing seeds into plants, into trees, into forests, birthing springs and rivers, you share your home with the great tribe of homeless beings, the lost and the unloved.

Praise be this home for all, this haven in a world at war with itself, this hope, this blessing of acceptance, of agreement of peace.

Teach me to always be aware in my journey of light and love as I move from life to light to life to.....

7.

I have gone beyond words and silence into pure feeling as We have gone beyond words and silence into pure feeling as the dark dissolves leaving faint traces on my skin - maps of forgotten continents once alive with dream-memories we had inhabited.

All is pure sensation now as maps fray their edges, coastlines melt into empty spaces, shrinking, till all that remains are islands of waiting.

The day hangs like a suspended canopy, bullet-torn, lipstick marked, scribbled with crayons, damp with longing, water-coloured with forgotten secrets.

Roots turn upwards and emerge with earth secrets.

We have gone beyond silence and words into realms of pure feeling where you are, Blessed One, a lotus, your roots in the fragrance of nothingness.

The canopy tatters and light pours in. The day swirls on.

Dark dissolves leaving faint traces on my skin - maps of forgotten continents once alive with dream-memories we had inhabited.

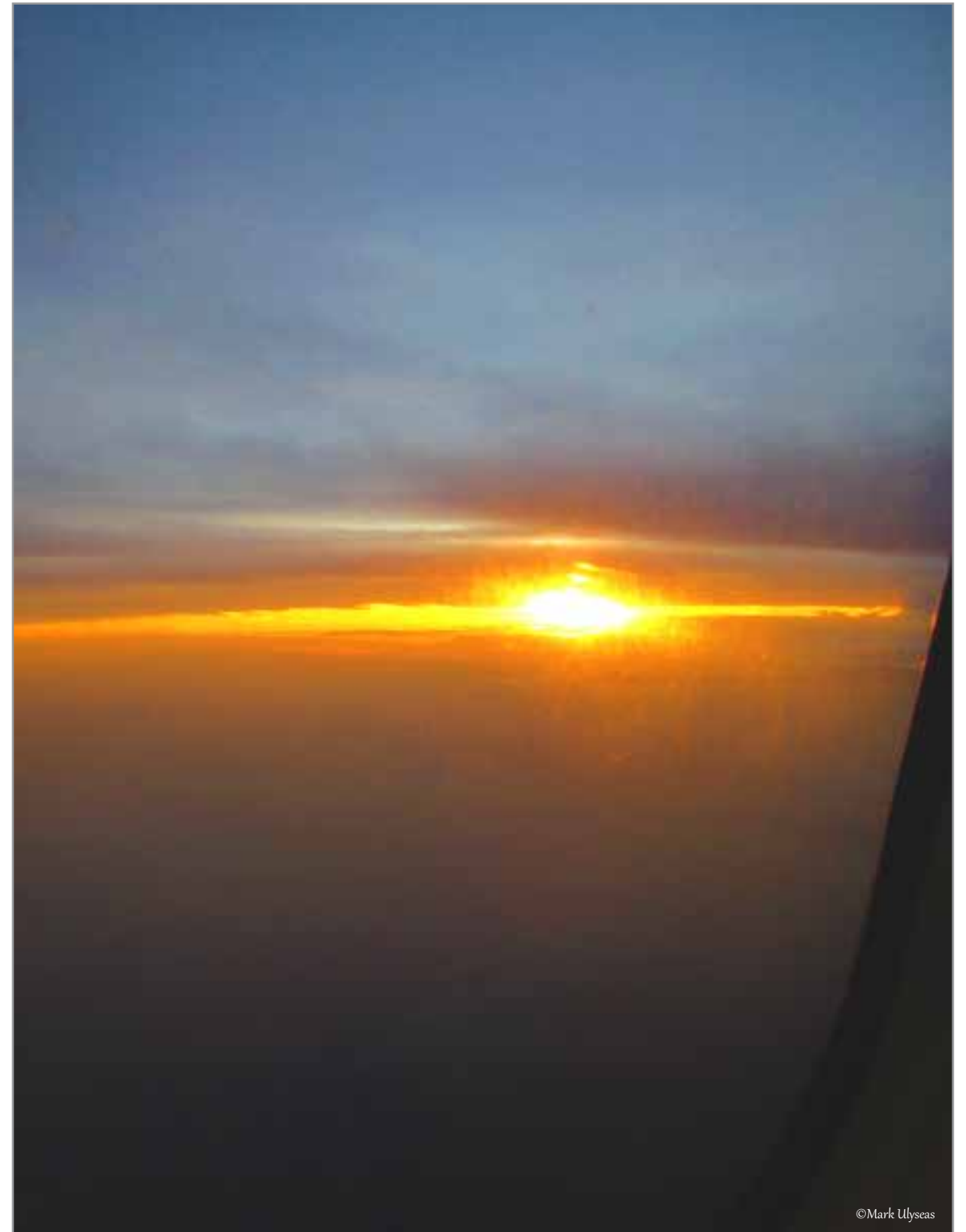
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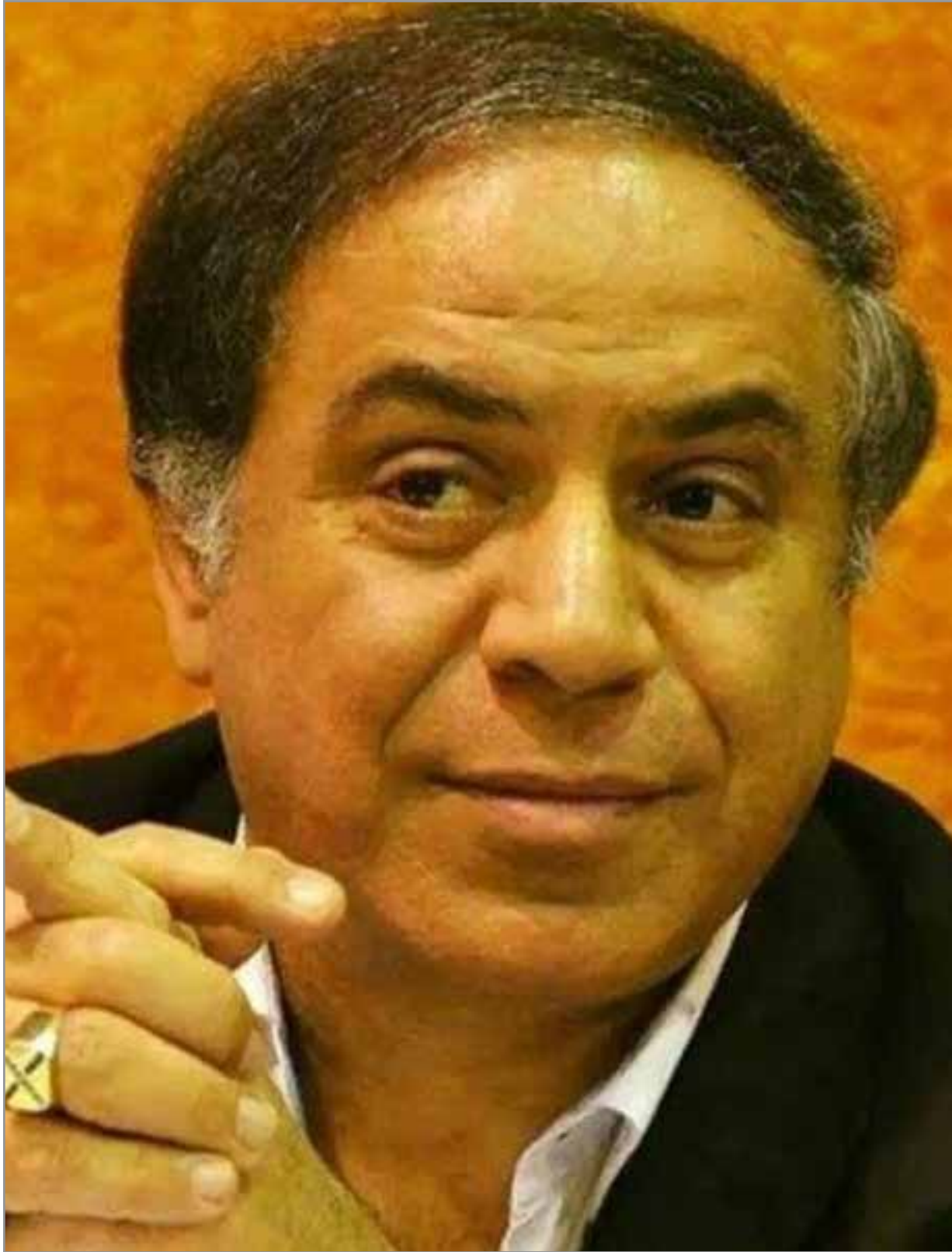
Photograph- view of sunrise from a plane by Mark Ulyseas.

Ahmad Al-Shahawy is an Egyptian poet and the author of more than 20 books and poetry collections. His poems have been translated into many languages, including French, Italian, English, Turkish and Spanish. He participated in many international poetry festivals organized in many countries of the world. Al-Shahawy was also the recipient of the UNESCO Literature Award in 1995 and the Cavafy Poetry Award in 1998. Four of his literary works are nominated in the long list of the Sheikh Zayed Book Award in the branch of literature, including his novel *The Magician's Hijab* 2022. Also, recently, *Lavender Ink / Diálogos* published Al-Shahawy's poetry anthology entitled *Alone by the Nile*, 2023.

Translated from Arabic by Dr. Salwa Gouda. She is an Egyptian literary translator, critic, and academic at the English Language and Literature Department at Ain-Shams University. She holds a PhD in English literature and criticism. She received her education at Ain-Shams University and California State University in San Bernardino. She has published several academic books, including "Lectures in English Poetry, and "Introduction to Modern Literary Criticism" and others. She has also contributed to the translation of "The Arab Encyclopedia for Pioneers," which includes poets and their poetry, philosophers, historians, and men of letters, under the supervision of UNESCO. Additionally, her poetry translations have been published in various international magazines.

THE UNBEARABLE PAIN

The unbearable pain
Is sleeping on my pillow
While confusion is eating
The thoughts in my head
Even anxiety dared on me
It stole my clothes
The ruin is wiping the marble
As if it were its own house
And madness raised a red card in my face
It warns me of what is coming
It asks me to stand attentive
Whenever it hits the ground with
Its stolen shoes.



Ahmad Al-Shahawy

MY TOWER HAS NO PIGEONS

My tower is without pigeons
 The house is empty
 And no passion
 Why sadness if
 You can live with
 A letter with one cell
 With an eye that witnesses
 Two quarreling clouds?
 Why do you think of a rope with
 Which to hold for protection
 And your field did not grow
 Flax or terry
 Do your Nile fell asleep after
 Water clipped its nails?

You do not like complaining
 Because you were not a coward
 Nor a flute that slept from an absent pain
 Nor a fox that deceived in the morning
 To gain the sun.

You do not like too much talk about love
 Since your name became the converser of love
 Whenever the wind carried it towards the
 Places
 Although the park is empty
 And the well without ink
 And the tower of the heart flew
 To a scorpion as if you are
 Death and birth.



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

Muhammad Afifi Matar (1935–28 June 2010), was an Egyptian poet who represents the voices of post-modernism in Arabic poetry. He was born in the village of Ramalat al-Anjab in the Menoufia region of the Nile Delta. Matar received numerous cultural prizes in the Middle East. He published more than 12 volumes of poetry during his lifetime. In addition, his poetry has been translated into several languages including English.

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ANCIENT LAND

I saw it written on the inheritance certificates
A book of man, chisel
And the stone
I saw it spilled from the cracks of summer
Forests of hands that grow in the blood of trees
And faces brought from the clay silt
Woven with green branches, and fruits
And bones that collapsed its shrouds
Overturned a red butterfly, blushed
With fire, clouds, and turmoil in travel.

The inheritance deeds were sealed
With a flaming ring and grilled letters
And on its periphery from the basket of days
A Kufic decoration
And the trail of dusty caravans of flags
And the crowd that resembles an owl’s nest
And the stab of the swordsman and the imam
And the muffled scream!

When my fingers split
And the cursed camel’s joints dried
I stood in the desert under the sun
Waiting for the tughra and the auspicious orders
So, I can whisper
I stood in the desert, despondent and masked
Looking at the surface of the earth
Which is replaced, copied and patched
And whenever the sun fixed its red spears
In my skull

Muhammad Afifi Matar. Photograph courtesy Afifi Matar (1935 - 2010) Emirates Today.

continued overleaf...

I interrupted the journey of stopping by reading
I take out from the depth of the cloak
The sacred inheritance sheets
And whenever its lines were torn
by the termite
A city collapsed on the heads of
Its inhabitants
Or a castle or kingdom fell under the Roman sandals
Or our borders encroached and fenced off the
Footholds
If this tree
Did not braid the roots to the depths
Or if she had not cooked the light inside her
And spin the leaves
She would never own an inch over the kingdom
Of ups and downs
That extends into it or casts its patterned shadow
With blossom.

I see you, wild deer
Waiting for me through every mountain in the hollow of every tree
And you run in the traveling clouds
If my cut fingers grew
You would have been - my wild deer -
A young girl
Who gives me her sacred cake
And her fringed, dotted shawl
With red spikes...



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

Ahmed Swelam (1942) is a famous Egyptian writer and poet who has published more than 14 poetry collections. He also published four poetic plays and several critical works. In addition, he won several major national and international awards.

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IN THE PRESENCE OF POETRY

Maneuver

Dig the sea deep
Perhaps a river will be born
Perhaps you will reveal the secret of legends
And the herb of epics.

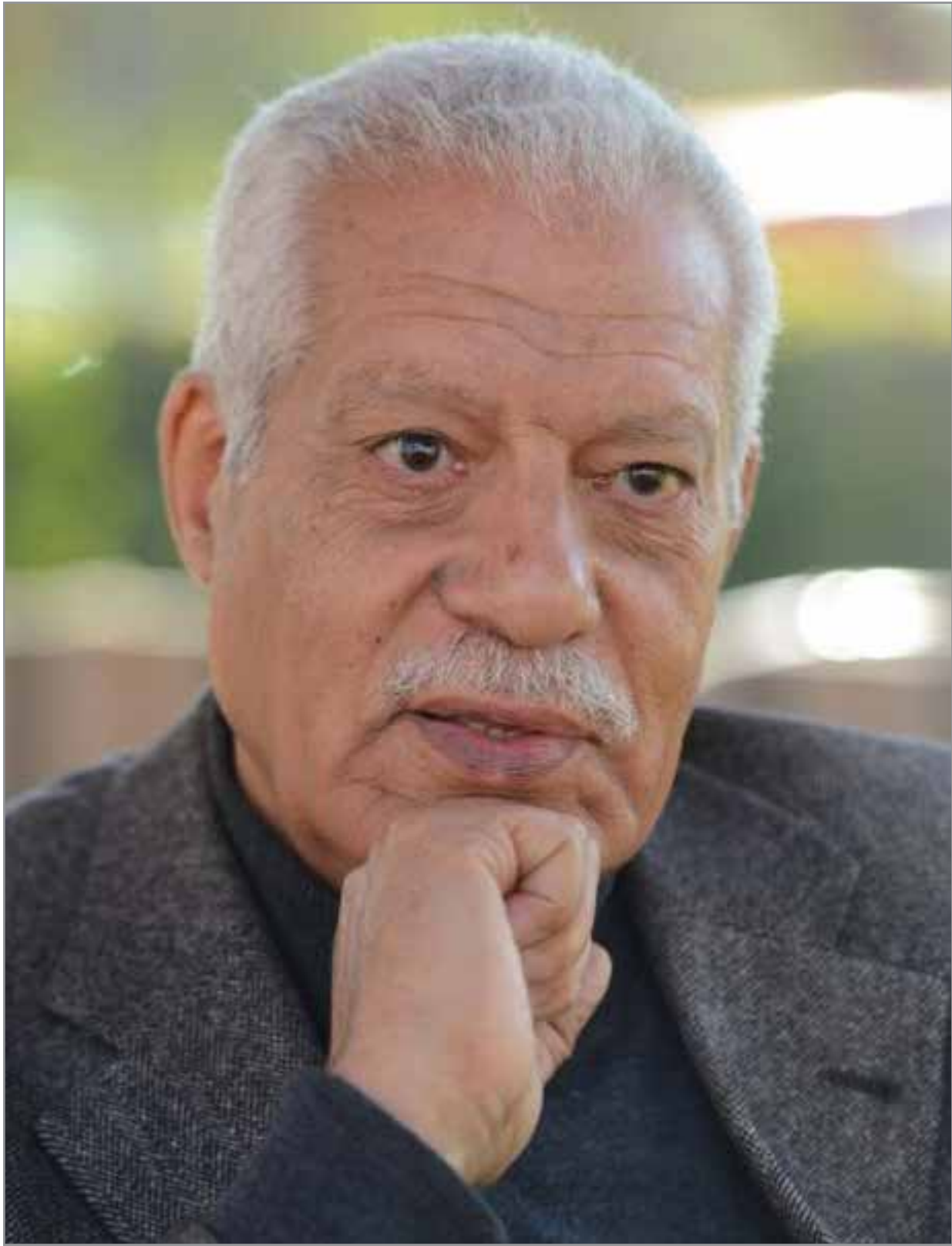
Plant fields of love
Perhaps tomorrow's trees are sprouting leaves
That has long absent stories
And fruits we desire
That we have not tasted for years.

Pave paths on earth
Perhaps a path will take us to a new dream
After we are exhausted by the enemy
And dust covered us.

Open the chest of clay and search
Perhaps it folds lungs
That hid a thousand inhales and exhales
That gives time a new life.

Extend a shadow in the setting sun
That shelters all those who have strayed from the paths of love
Satisfy it with water that helps the heart
And heals the pain of life
And guides his next steps
To the distant dream.

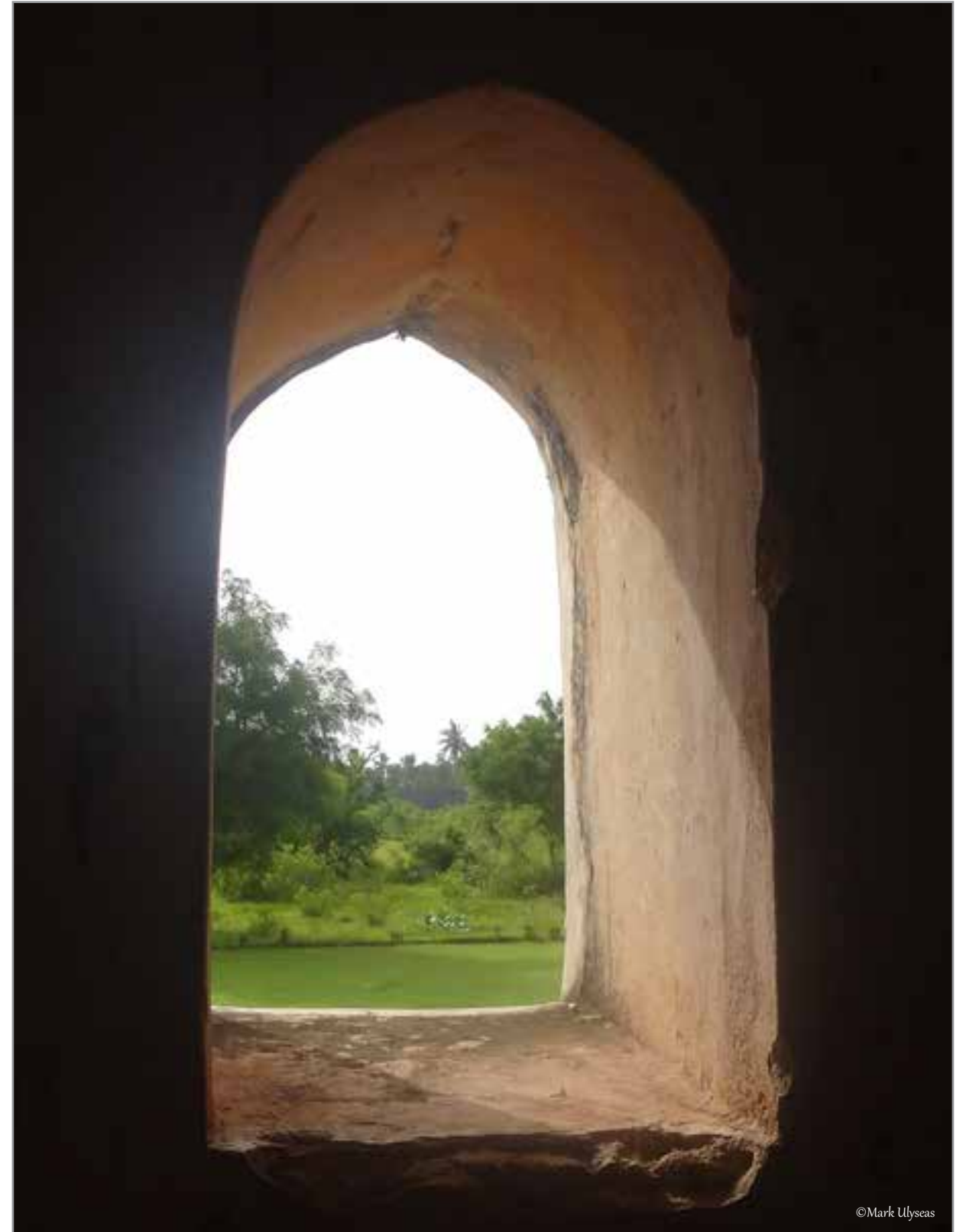
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Ahmed Swelam

Here, I am dreaming like a child
In my right hand, is my lamp at night
And in my left hand are my hidden longings
My eyes line up around me
The beauty of the universe
I only listen to Hazard, who reveals love
And sang in nostalgia
I pick the rose and give it to the one I love
It quenches my eagerness and longing
In the best poems.

Here, I am dreaming like a child
No storm can stop me
And age does not surprise me
With what the years hide
Perhaps people bombard me
With madness
But my steps will not slow down
And what always shines brightly in my heart
Will not lose tomorrow since there is certainty!



©Mark Ulyseas

Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

Ahmed Nabawi is an Egyptian poet and academic. He deals with humanitarian themes in his poetry. His poetic career began early in the nineties. He has five collections of poetry: (Testimony of Love), (Wounds Have Tributaries), (Flames of Questions), (Scenes from the Refugee Camp).(The Brilliance of Colors), and two collections in print entitled (An Ant Said - The Doors). In addition, he has a collection of critical books, including The Poet’s Culture and the Production of Significance - The Poetics of Small Details - The Contemplative Tendency in Andalusian Poetry - The Heritage Tributaries in Andalusian Poetry.

Translated from Arabic by Dr. Salwa Gouda. She is an Egyptian literary translator, critic, and academic at the English Language and Literature Department at Ain-Shams University. She holds a PhD in English literature and criticism. She received her education at Ain-Shams University and California State University in San Bernardino. She has published several academic books, including “Lectures in English Poetry, and “Introduction to Modern Literary Criticism” and others. She has also contributed to the translation of “The Arab Encyclopedia for Pioneers,” which includes poets and their poetry, philosophers, historians, and men of letters, under the supervision of UNESCO. Additionally, her poetry translations have been published in various international magazines.

A COLOR AND SHADES

There are clouds in the soul
That the two colors
Black and red remain
In the emblems of countries
He does not know
Where does sadness come from?
And how does it come?
And why does the thorn pricks
In the human heart?

He does not know
What is the secret of the overwhelming sadness
In the artist’s brush?
Does the color choose sadness
Out of its own free will
Or is it intentionally done by the brush?
And why does the tree of sorrow
Grow bigger in the painting?
And why does it appear in the east of the painting
Dreams behind bars
And a nostalgic woman in love
Who screams silently
Behind the walls?
And why is there a human being
Blurs with black
In violence
The flowers of his fellow man?
And to the north of the painting
A person who grows
In monster form?

continued overleaf...



Ahmed Nabawi

He always wonders in pain
From where?
And how does it enter us?
And why?
A color dominates the painting
Only one color.

ALL EXPATS

There are clouds in the soul
All expats
No matter how different they are
And how did they travel
And where did their attention go
All expats are
Indigent people
They removed themselves
From the embrace of home
Or they were taken away
Against their will
When the restrictions on their hands became more severe
or
When it broke
Within them
Colors of joy
or
When the violence of hurricane
Threw them onto the vast land.

All expats are
Loving people
The humiliation of alienation disturbs them
And a never ending nostalgia
Towards the motherland
And a hidden red moan
Unmistakable
If you focus with their eyes.

continued overleaf...

All expats are
Losers
And oppressed
And patriots
They left their houses reluctantly and anxiously
They paid a lifetime
To leave a light for his fellow brother
And to facilitate
A way to earn a living
And opens a window and a neighborhood.

All expats are
Interval questions
Looking for answers
In the motherland
And the motherland
Unfortunately
Places them
On the sidelines
In a faded, worn-out memory

All expats are
Without exception
Revolutionaries
They took a stab
Followed by a stab
but
Under a hopeful sky
They fold the heart over the wound
And they go on.

All expats are humiliated
No matter how strong they look
They are weak
They have no stronghold to secure them
Nothing secures
Except the motherland
And the motherland
Unfortunately
Puts them on the margin
In a faded, worn-out memory.

Walid EL Khachab is an Egyptian poet, critic and academic at York University in Canada. He has published more than three poetry collections and several critical books. Walid Al-Khachab got the opportunity to work and complete his studies at a Canadian university. He gradually turned into an immigrant university professor, but this immigration did not sever his connection with the reality of cultural life in the Arab world, as he was active in many initiatives based on confirming the presence of Arab creative voices in and outside Canada.

Translated from Arabic by Dr. Salwa Gouda. She is an Egyptian literary translator, critic, and academic at the English Language and Literature Department at Ain-Shams University. She holds a PhD in English literature and criticism. She received her education at Ain-Shams University and California State University in San Bernardino. She has published several academic books, including "Lectures in English Poetry, and "Introduction to Modern Literary Criticism" and others. She has also contributed to the translation of "The Arab Encyclopedia for Pioneers," which includes poets and their poetry, philosophers, historians, and men of letters, under the supervision of UNESCO. Additionally, her poetry translations have been published in various international magazines.

SCHOOL YARD

I do not like going to school
Because Ashraf Wissa beats me
He runs to Madam Aida to complain to her
Because of the surprise, I do not defend myself
The injustice is terrible
The school yard is the first exercise in slander.



Walid EL Khachab

THE FAKE RAID

The most beautiful childhood memories after 1967
When my grandmother takes out the sprouted beans in the morning
So, I know that we will spend the night in a raid
We light the candles with anticipation
Yet we watch TV
I do not like TV-deprived evenings
I do not understand the difference between a power outage
And the imagined enemy raids
Our windows were blue
And its glass is sealed with tape
And the entrance to our building is hidden behind brick walls
And our city's garages are the bunkers and basements of our homes as Well
When I was a kid, we used to spell letters
We learn the first words:
Dad... Mom... Raid... Bunker.



Palestinian children stand amid the rubble of destroyed buildings in Al-Bureij camp, Gaza, on October 29, 2023 following Israeli airstrikes. © 2023 Mohammed Talatene/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/22/israel/gaza-hostilities-take-horrific-toll-children>

Abdullah Mohammed Al-Samati is an Egyptian poet, literary critic, and researcher. He published 14 poetry collections and 35 critical books. In addition, He worked in cultural journalism for more than 30 years for several Egyptian and Arab newspapers and magazines. He also participated in several poetry and criticism evenings and literary conferences in Egypt and the Arab world.

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BEHIND THE INVOLUNTARY MASK
OF A DAFFODIL

1

For the first time, I live. I illuminate the earth in the rib of air.
I see a silhouette Wearing me
I versify the throat of Nowruz; I call myself slowly and flee into my madness
Here
In the blind pleasure
Over the fence of astonishment of a folk singing bough
My silence chatters me
Here too
The metaphor of the wind, where I blow on a string
I depart to me with the geography of nostalgia.

.....

For the first time, I live.

.....

2

Everything outside us is bad, if inside us is ugly, such is the world of certainty.



Abdullah Mohammed Al-Samati

continued overleaf...

3

Here in my fingers are the stones of a universe that does not want to pounce
Because my pulse is from my aorta
Here, with my first resurrection, I will drown a thousand seas in me
Like an ascension on the root of groaning
Here I extend like a nothingness opposite to the Hyle, where my essence is a maze
Of my thoughts
In my humanity, a child would like existence to become his toy that contains
My years.

4

I am behind the involuntary mask of a daffodil, which is arranging its well
with the extent of my eyes.

5

I anxiously personalize the light of my things, and the shadows oppress me
as if I will fall into an ambush.

For the first time, I live.



©Mark Ulyseas

Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

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



BREATH

I start an angry conversation
from my front steps to the altar of worry,
reject carved wooden benches from church,
the mundane and the gift of rational thinking,
until your soft hand on my thigh whispers,
enough, our love is wider, thicker, stronger
than this mindless argument.

We inhale and suddenly I notice
that vast space from where we take
a breath of air, and what's air
but what ties the body to the soul?
Once we stop, the soul is free to go,
the body remains a pile of minerals
incapable of soaring an inch from earth.

I continue glancing at this empty space
full of oxygen, nitrogen, argon, other
minor gases nobody remembers.
Observe the pump of our lungs, assisted
by noses of different shapes and colors
carrying inside our bodies that ethereal
sustenance natural to every living being.

And when after the fight calmness
returns slowing down my heartbeat,
my soul, like a timid but savvy child,
comes out of the darkness of agitation
to teach my breath the lightest of games
which guides my sight into seeing
what is beyond what I see.

Alicia Viguer-Espert

THE DAMAGE

To Sharon Hawley, Aspen Lover

Already ill with heat
I wound the aspens
with sadness.

Old paths
silent like trees grieve
the loss of their greenery,
veer into a ravine
shaped by wind
and the whims of men.

I touch opal barks,
their gentle swaying
moves me to listen
to sap
ascending higher realms
turning into a gold dance
to the rhythm of fall.

Wild wind like furies
begins to howler,
initiates a mournful singing
as night rises from a naked horizon.

I hide behind windows,
fasten the shutters,
pray for the resurrection
of all dying trees.



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

Samra Mahfoud, from Syria. Master degree in Environmental Management from Ca'Foscari University-Italy. A translator English-Arabic and Arabic-English. Works as Director of Public and External Relations at Daal Publishing House. *Joyce's Music Book* is her first published work which is a collection of poems by the Irish writer James Joyce that is published by Daal Publishing House-Syria.



DEPARTURE TIME

It's departure time; it's time to go;
 I'll carry some luggage and leave.
 Or maybe I'll not take it;
 I'll carry only my identity,
 or maybe not—
 I lost my identity.
 Yes, since we fell apart, it's lost;
 Since we became strangers to each other;
 Since we started killing each other
 Because our identities differed
 Since then, we lost it.
 Look, I am not a poet,
 And this is not a poem.
 Just take a look at it
 And you will find a city;
 You will find a village;
 You will find a child;
 You will find a country in ruins,
 A country that means nothing to the world
 After it was the second homeland of half the world.
 So, I will not take my identity.
 Who cares about it?
 Who cares about me?
 Who would recognize me?
 I'm the stranger in her own country;
 I'm the homeless in her own home.
 So, who will recognize me?
 I walk in streets I knew,
 But they don't know me now.

Samra Mahfoud

continued overleaf...

I'm losing one of my guises with each step,
 So, who will recognize me?
 I don't know me:
 This is not my face, nor my eyes;
 These are not my hands or my feet;
 This is not my dream, not my laughter;
 This is not my land, nor my family
 I 'm losing me.
 Who could recognize me now?
 My heart is bleeding,
 And my tears try in vain to purify it.
 The blood mixes with the tears
 And a river of grief floods
 A home without an identity.
 The cold is eating me;
 The darkness is blinding me;
 The hunger is killing me
 Do you recognize me?
 The stranger in her own land;
 The homeless in her own home.
 Everything is gone from me, except my desire to leave.
 It's the time of departure;
 In the sky above, there is no need of anything.



Syrian refugees Haya, three, and Sabeen, five, outside the shelter where they live (UNICEF / Donne)
<https://theirworld.org/news/seven-years-of-syria-conflict-how-it-affects-children-education-refugees-schools/>

Winner of the Kyogle Readers and Writers 2023 Poetry Prize, Longlisted in the 2023 Liquid Amber Poetry Prize & the 2022 Flying Islands Poetry Prize, Peter Mitchell (he/him/his) lives in Lismore on Widjabul/Wia-bal Country, Bundjalung Nation, writing across all narrative forms. His short fiction has appeared in *Baby Teeth Journal*, *Bent Street*, *Powders Press* (UK), *The Newsletter* of the Canberra Science Fiction Society & the international anthology, *Signs of Life* (Moshpit Publishing, 2021). All his other writing: poetry, memoir, essays & refereed journals papers have appeared in international & national print & online journals, magazines & anthologies. He's published two poetry chapbooks, *The Scarlet Moment* (Picaro Press, 2009) & *Conspiracy of Skin* (Ginninderra Press, 2018) which was Highly Commended in the 2019 Wesley Michel Wright Prize for Poetry. <https://www.peter-mitchell.com.au>, on Insta @petermitchell546 & on FB Author Page at *Peter Mitchell Wordsmith*.



Peter Mitchell

CROWS IN HIS EYES

There are crows in his eyes.

Crows - the colour of luminous charcoal with beaks of steel and eyes like white, blazing orbs.

At night, they honeycomb his sleep. Massing in great numbers, they fly through the vault of dream, their beaks like arrow tips, aiming for his eyes. During the day, their long, drawn-out call sounds like a distressed child lost in the unknown distance.

Bill stands on the back verandah of 'Carinya'. He leans against a wooden post, his scuffed workboots hanging over the jagged edges of the bare, grey boards. The sun hangs high in the midday sky scorching the air and stilling the moment as if suspending time. His eyes are glazed, a far-off expression in them. He pictures shoots of young wheat, verdant and ever-green, swaying in a gentle breeze.

A peripheral movement disturbs his reflection. The direction of his gaze changes, his eyes staring at a crow gliding through the air. It lands on a dead tree branch and settles its wings. The composed head turns, one white eye studying him. Tension rhizomes his neck, pin-pricks his muscles. He looks at the paddock adjacent to the tractor shed, his eyes darkening at the brown tussocks islanding the cracked soil like shattered, black glass.

Jane walks onto the side verandah, stands still and watches the line of earth and sky. For several minutes, the sky fuses hot and blue as if melting into nothingness. A vision emerges. She sits in their ute, her hands on the steering wheel as she waits for Bill to open the gate. Changing into first gear, she waves good-bye and drives to her new job in Moree. Her imaginative projections always make her weightless as if levitating in a room.

Bill turns around, opens the backdoor and walks into the kitchen. As the screen door bangs behind him, a fly comes through a gap in the wire. He sits down at the table, his shoulders rounded from tension. For a second time, he looks out at the horizon, gazing absently, the dying wheat leaning the still air.

Ping, ping! He hears the rat-a-tat as the fly's body tings a wooden frame of a window. Thirty seconds later, he looks right and sees it in a spider's web, its frantic movements enmeshing it with the traitorous strands at the top of the window. For several minutes, he observes this life-or-death struggle. The spider's red-stripe slowly moves towards the fly, each leg a tensile protuberance testing the strength of its death loom. As the spider lunges its legs around the fly, his gaze shifts to the letter on the table.

Jane stands at the kitchen doorway. I read the letter from the bank, she says, stepping into the room.

Bill sinks into wordlessness.

-What are we going to do? asks Jane. She steps closer, stopping a metre from him and pauses. Twenty seconds later, she says, I have a few ideas. For a second time, she pauses, unsure of whether to continue. She decides to and says, please Bill, let's talk about them.

The sound of her words glance off Bill's shoulders like gravel thrown at a closed window.

Jane collapses into helplessness. Again. Her shoulders droop as she thinks, his silence, his ever-present silence. She sighs heavily, turns around and walks further into the house.

Bill folds the letter into quarters and pushes it into his backpocket. He walks to the second window. The fly is embalmed by the sticky thread, the spider a threatening monument in the opposite corner of the web. For several minutes, he gazes at the distant grey-slate hills, his mind empty of reflection. He sits down at the table again, his palms enveloping his head, his eyes boring into the wood's grain.

The words, 'a marriage made in heaven', cross his mind. They were the words his mates had said as they bought him round after round of celebratory beers in the front bar at the Royal Hotel.

Spokes of afternoon sun, pale gold in colour, penetrated the light of the bar and skittered across the tiled floor. At the time, he remembers, he felt light and airy as he sat on a barstool opposite the large, rectangular window.

Jane sits on the lounge and flicks through a *House and Garden* she had borrowed from the shire library. She rests the magazine on her lap and thinks about the letter. She wonders what Bill will decide this time.

The thought fades as she admires a photograph of a house. Her fancy absorbs her as she steps back from a rubber plant, the luxuriant green a striking contrast to the apricot-coloured pot. She imagines herself standing in a house of light and air, her gaze regarding the clear, pine furniture and thick, plush carpet. It reminds her of her former life in Sydney and her harbourside apartment in Neutral Bay. She remembers with satisfaction working at Mitchell Library and sitting at Lady Macquarie's Chair, eating her lunch as she watched the yachts zipping across the harbour.

Her reverie ends as questions about their future return. They remain unanswered, open-ended. Her future? This question has a partial answer. For the last four years, she'd volunteered at Moree Plains Municipal Library, shelving books and cataloguing the audio-visual items.

Earlier in the day, she had decided that a refresher course for library technicians was a possible option. More questions cross her mind. Why hadn't she thought about this earlier? Why had it taken so long? She sighs heavily, shaking her head at her own indecision.

Bill stands, pushes the chair back, walks to the back verandah and sits down, his back against a wooden post. He brushes several flies away from his face. The crow still sits silently in the tree, its beak open to cool its body. It turns its head, its eye assessing him again. A recurring dream tracks through his mind. A crow, tiny like a distant pinhead, moves closer, then flies through his projections, growing larger. He feels the whip of its flapping wings and sees the talons aiming for his skin-soft throat. He shivers slightly and shakes himself out of the recollection.

He changes position, making himself more comfortable. He hears the rustle of the bank letter, reminding them about lack of available credit. Resentment roils his stomach. The black print, benign and without judgement, suggested selling farm machinery as a way to pay debts.

His gaze roves over the dusty paddocks as a childhood recollection passes his eyes. His mother towered over him, her strong arms pushing him into the kitchen pantry, the key locking the door. Her words lashed him for being lost for hours and for the trouble he caused by worrying his parents.

He had been looking for his dog, a rust-coloured Kelpie. She had chased a rabbit into the near distance. He had wandered into one of the paddocks, calling Rusty, Rusty. His initial pursuit turned into an afternoon-long search, his awareness of time blurring as the sameness of the country skewed his sense of direction. Hours later, the local policeman found him in the shade of a river-red gum.

The pervasive tick of the clock interrupts Jane's ruminations. She glances up at it, a frown lining her forehead. A moment later, she looks out the lounge-room window, recalling the first twelve months of their marriage.

She remembers the languid feeling of long, hot baths, Bill cupping her breasts, round and heavy as he held her. And relaxing at the end of the day on the front verandah, the rose-pink sunsets streaking the horizon as shadows lengthened over the surrounding hectares of wheat.

Crossing her ankles, the toe of her sandal bumps the vacuum cleaner on the floor. Its presence reminds her of the dust. At first, it disturbed her as it kissed her underwear in a fine embrace. She resented the thin black layer coating every piece of furniture in its ever-present moth-touch. And still after ten years, she washed black footprints off the kitchen floor time and time again and dusted the house once a week.

Bill stands, walks to the gate and leans on the rusting rail. His mind flits over other possibilities: a vague idea about sowing soya beans and remembered conversations with neighbours about forming a cooperative to sell grains. And there was a furtive thirty seconds when growing marihuana crossed his imagination too.

Walking through the gate, he bends down and picks up some dead tussocks. He rubs them between his fingers, the stalks papery to touch, the particles falling to the ground. Again his shoulders droop, depletion overwhelming him.

He remembers his father and grand-father with their stoic facial expressions, how words of complaint were considered a betrayal, how you bent into the wind and just kept going. It was the only way his family controlled their world, the only way his family loved. He also remembers Jane's eternal optimism, the steel in her eyes, his words of complaint a sword between them.

Jane continues recalling their marriage. Bill was a very different man at first. After three years of drought, his silence and moods lengthened. After several more years of variable rain and haphazard harvests, she became familiar with his facial canvas of black anger, his back a silent wall.

She turns another page and reads an article featuring a house at Byron Bay. She looks up and remembers the countless times she encouraged him to talk to her. She closes the magazine, places it on the small coffee table and stands. This is the only life I know, she thinks. This is all that I want. Returning to Sydney? Her body tires at the thought. Anyway, she concludes, it's become too big, too impersonal, too busy.

She walks into the kitchen and switches the kettle on for a cup of tea. She decides it's time for action. An appointment with their bank manager will be a start. She walks to the side window and wonders where Bill is. Looking at the horizon, her legs are straight, her feet placed firmly on the floor, her only thoughts about repossessing their property from the drought and bank.

Bill looks slowly around him and feels the weight of an unchanging world. Looking up, he sees the crow watching him again. It flies from the tree, its aacchh aacchh, calling him to the black void. He watches it as it becomes smaller in the flame-blue distance.

He walks to the garage on the other side of the house and opens the door, the bottom scraping the dirt in the depression of the driveway. To his left, a square of light illuminates the gloom of the interior, showing silhouettes of tools and small pieces of machinery.

For a minute, he stands at the entrance, his eyes seeing the house and the farm buildings melting into the black dust. He walks to the car and unlocks the boot. In his hands, the metal is solid and dependable. It is not changeable, he thinks, like the weather or the price of wheat. He turns it around and regards the two black moons.

For a second time, he looks up and out at the house and surrounding paddocks. He hears Jane calling, 'Bill, Bill'. He smiles to himself as a projection crosses his imagination: Jane standing on the front verandah, fortitude colouring her eyes. He feels a shift in his body, his family's history, Jane, the future transforming his heart. He places the hardware back in the boot.

As he closed it, a plastic shine in the dimness of the right-hand corner catches his attention. He opens the resealable bag and sees seeds: some slate-grey, some black, some with tiger spots on them. Ah yes, he remembers. That furtive thirty-second conversation. He shoved it into his backpocket and walked to the house.

-Ah, there you are, says Jane.

He remains silent, smiles and opens the plastic bag.

For ten seconds, a frown knits her forehead as she gazes at the seeds. Ah, she says for a second time. Such variety! The muscles around her eyes relax as she looks at him again. They remind me of my miss-spent youth.

Bill smiles and closes the plastic bag. Indeed! he says. He pushes it into his back-pocket.

Jane loops her arm through Bill's as they walk to the front gate, both of them looking into the future. The crow flies from the branch, its wings slowly beating the still air as it moves away from the farm, becoming a pin-drop in the horizon.

Greta Sykes is a German/English poet, author and artist. She is a founder member of the London Voices Poetry group and its organiser. The group has brought out many anthologies which include her poems and artwork. They can be found in the London Poetry library. Their most recent volume, 'Under Siege', came out in 2022. Greta's novels are 'Under charred skies', a family story during the Weimar Republic and 'The defeat of Gilgamesh' depicting Mesopotamia 5000 years ago. She is an Associate Researcher at UCL. Greta also works as an essayist. Her work can be found on academia.edu and on her website greta.sykes.com. Her next novel 'Eve meets Dante' is with the publishers.

This is an excerpt from her new novel 'Eve meets Dante', which is about to be published.

ROXELANA

It was foggy outside, an early autumn day. I was on my way to university and had a lecture to attend. Leaves fell down rustling like wings of birds. When I reached the forest, I stared at it for a moment and felt my stomach tighten. There was fog. It was like blotting paper had wiped out paths and only shadows of trees looked real. Lanterns shone dimly producing large shapes of trees and branches. My heart was beating loudly. I held on to my bag as if it was a shield and walked leaning forward as if it made me faster. The water under the small bridge rumoured, as if ghosts had gathered. Further down I glimpsed a human figure with a sense of relief. She was walking in the same direction as I towards the station. Oddly, I could not get nearer to her although I began to run. Did she also run? I could not work out what was going on. I ran faster, she ran faster. Was she afraid of me? Did she feel persecuted by me or someone else? I stopped and looked behind me, but there was only the woman in a long dress or coat and myself. The fog was so thick I could only just make out that she was still there, but she had slowed down, while I had stopped. I speeded up again. She speeded up as well. The walk seemed to get longer. I felt by now I should have reached the railway station, but we were still moving forward one behind the other, and I could not get nearer to her or the station. My panic had disappeared. Instead, I was breaking out in a sweat, partially from running and partially from frustration and disbelief. The thought of reaching the station this way had given way to an intense longing to find out the truth of what was happening right here in the forest. My eyes were sharply focused on the figure, my hands were clasping my bag and my feet were carrying me as if my life depended on it. I missed the moment when the scenery around us changed profoundly. The fog had lifted, the earthen forest path was covered in stone slabs, and buildings of great beauty rose to my right and left. I seemed to be in the middle of a town, following a person who walked right, then left and right again until she came to a tall portal with massive wooden doors. She stopped and turned towards me who was still hastening to catch up. She looked at me and smiled.



Dr Greta Sykes

'I knew you couldn't resist,' she laughed. 'Your desire to get to the bottom of what was happening was too intense. So, you have now left your forest and a day at university. Maybe you are sorry. But perhaps you will enjoy this interruption of your life.' She laughed in my face, suggesting to me that she felt successful in having abducted me. I was annoyed. An intense feeling came over me of wanting to get to university and hear the lecture. It must have looked funny to her because she laughed again. I felt hot, my face glowed from the long run and walk. The temperature here was much higher than where I had come from. I felt uncomfortable in my warm clothes and a sense of betrayal occurred to me. On the other hand, she was right. I had shown determination to follow her. No one had made me try to catch up with her. I resigned myself to my fate but said nothing.

'I am Roxelana. Come along with me now, that will be the best. We are entering the new palace where I live. Follow me, there are many parts to it. No one can pass unless known to the guards. You will be very safe here.'

We arrived in front of a large portal within very high walls which was guarded by the mentioned guards. They saluted her. There were a few people waiting in the courtyard inside. They seem to have business to sort out. To my surprise there were a couple of elephants and horses in the courtyard which looked like a busy area with workshops, a waterworks, and an infirmary. We walked on through a second portal into another courtyard guarded by at least a dozen guards and crowded with people. She named them as we passed. Janissaries. Embassy staff of the Sultan, council members. Scribes. Money counters and guards are here in their busy life of administration for the Sultan. From the second hall we passed through I spotted the roof of the next hall. It had many chimneys. Food smells came from what must be large kitchens. More great domes and towers. I turned to look at the architecture, but Roxelana had clasped my hand tightly and wouldn't let it go.

'We are now entering the inner courtyard through the Gate of Good Fortune,' she declared. A further large space opened in front of us with a bewildering number of doors and presumably rooms behind them. She unclasped my hand and asked a waiting palace servant to take hold of my bag. We entered one of the rooms to the right, walked on through many ornamented rooms, a garden, and further in a maze of spaces. Finally, she showed me into a large chamber with a generously sized bed, cushions, pillows and blankets, a wash basin, a window to the gardens and a lovely perfumed scent.

'Eva,' she started, surprising me again as she knew my name, 'You can sort yourself out here. They will bring you clothes that will make you feel more comfortable. You are now in the year 1555, and you are my guest. I am Roxelana, also called Hurrem Sultan. I am Sultan Suleiman's married wife. I have invited you to learn about how we live and take my story with you where you live in your world. Freshen yourself up and come dressed with your new clothes out into the courtyard where I shall be. We shall have some food.'

I felt overpowered. I was still angry about having been abducted, but what choice did I have? I washed and felt a physical relief after putting on new clothes. They involved a headgear which sat like a pointed turban covering my hair. There was a long under-dress of soft white cotton, on top fitted a dark blue silk gown and silk shoes. I saw my bag had been placed near my bed and looked for my familiar exercise books, my pen, pencil, and rubber, my precious companions. Holding them gave me a sense of my own identity which had slipped out of my grasp. It was as if I was losing myself in this strange world. I held on to my books and pen and walked out through the many rooms into the courtyard. Roxelana spotted me and led me out into a garden adjoining the courtyard. A sumptuous table was laid with silver cutlery, glasses for wine and a rich array of dishes. We sat down and were served. Roxelana did not waste much time before she began to tell me her story.

'Now you see what it feels like!' She said with a certain amount of triumph.

'I was captured by Crimean Tatars from Russia, quite like how I captured you. They brought me to Istanbul. You cannot imagine what it is like. You are treated like an animal. They check out your virginity, your strength, your health and then group you and assign a price for your sale. I was lucky. Bought by the sultan's family. I was only seventeen. I became one of his concubines in 1520. You are in the women's quarter with everyone. They all stare at you to see if you are more beautiful. They train you in how to be artful, but I already had some training. I am a fast learner, that helps. I tried not to worry about the many other women there and made sure I remained cheerful. Maybe I was a cheerful person anyway. They started calling me Hurrem, the cheerful one! It certainly helped in those early years when there was so much envy and jealousy among the women. It could become quite unbearable. I had to use all my mental discipline not to cry at times or start hitting someone.' Roxelana laughed showing her teeth. I would not like to be hit by her I thought. She looked strong and fit. She continued,

‘But what is fascinating is that all the women there were Christians from central Europe or Asia. The sultans don’t have Moslem women in their harem. They procreate with Christian women. It seems odd, but that is how it is.’

I was in a state of stupefaction. What could I add. Everything was so strange and different. I did not even know how to ask sensible questions. I just looked at Roxelana with my mouth gaping. I was also very hungry and ate and drank until filled up and ready to sleep, while she insisted on talking. I am not sure how much I took in.

‘We lived in the Old Palace for many years. I gave birth to a son within a year. Within the next four years or so gave birth to all my other children, sons, and daughters. They were arduous years. We were taught every day and all day. The supervision was so that it was impossible to escape into indolence. Hundreds of eunuchs, servants, cooks, carpenters, craft people were part of the palace. The eunuchs were there to guide us wherever we were supposed to be. They might have been four hundred of us harem women all learning the rigours of being representatives of the Ottoman state and to be shown off on special occasions. I had to cope with envy from the women, especially one of them who had given the sultan his first son. They all began to realise that I became Suleiman’s favourite concubine. Normally a woman, once having given birth to a royal child, would not be seen again by the sultan. Her sole task was to look after her son and bring him up well. But he kept asking for me. I ended up giving birth to many of his children. He appreciated my intelligence and wisdom. Many times, I gave him advice on a military campaign which he found was advantageous.

That is how I rose in his estimation. The most shocking event happened after his mother Hafsa died. Suleiman decided to marry me! No slave woman could ever rise above the mother of a sultan. Marrying me was something unheard of in Ottoman society.’

My eyes must have been shutting and opening between alertness and dropping off when I found Roxelana tug me on my sleeve as she spoke.

‘You are falling asleep, when I want to tell my story!’ She exclaimed.

‘I’m still listening,’ I stated calmly, ‘you said ‘marrying me was something unheard of in Ottoman society.’

‘Oh, good, but I suppose you might be tired, I don’t know what time scale you are in and what time of the day it is for you now. You are a few hundred years ahead of me, is that so?’

‘Well, yes, but it doesn’t feel like it right now.’ I was making a point which was not lost on her.

‘You’re having a little dig at me for bringing you back in time. But you don’t know you might have been much happier and luckier living now!’ She quipped back.

‘Perhaps, but we’ll never know, will we?’

‘Ok, lets leave things for today and get some sleep. But I have not much time, so we’ll chat again tomorrow after siesta. I have meetings to run tomorrow morning.’

Roxelana got up from the cushions she sat on, straightened the beautiful clothes she was wearing and showed me back to the room where my bag had been deposited. A tea set and several books were lying on a table.

‘I saw you brought your papers with you. You must be a keen writer.’ I was not sure if she was mocking me, but I was beyond caring.

‘Eva, make yourself comfortable here and have a good night and rest. Ring when you want to be served food or drink. I’ll come and pick you up from here tomorrow afternoon.’

‘Is there a garden I can walk in, Roxelana, I quite like the outdoors.’

‘Certainly, all you need to do is ring the bell and someone will guide you out into it. It’s an ornamental garden. I think you will like it.’

She disappeared quickly like a piece of magic from a theatre. But it did not bring me back home. I was clearly stuck and had been deposited in another time without my agreement. I pondered this fact for a moment. Perhaps it happens more often than we think that we are suddenly caught without being able to escape. Was it my curiosity, was it my fear or panic that drives these circumstances? I felt too tired and not inclined to think through this subject. I had eaten and drunk. I sat down on the sumptuous bed and was soon overwhelmed by sleep. Incense, bird song, musical instruments and tunes entered my subconscious from time to time, but I drifted only further into night and sleep.

On the following morning, I rang for food and drink. I had a bath with incense and hot towels. I was nurtured and cosseted by several women who also decided to attire me in some precious garment in deep red and gold and a green scarf. They were fascinated by my yellow hair and begged me to let them play with it and turn it into a hairdo of their choice. Why not, I thought. It is pleasant to have someone massage your scalp, comb your hair and have something done with it without having to think about it oneself. I gave in to the pleasures. I had lunch in the garden. There were cages full of different exotic birds all vying for my attention. I could not take my eyes of the owls who stared back at me as if to demand a piece of wisdom from me. I heard Roxelana laughing behind me.

‘Look at you! My girls have transformed you into a fabulous lady. Better not let Suleiman see you! I wouldn’t like him to take a fancy to you.’ She laughed again, then took my arm and walked me to a secluded corner with a bench and a table.

‘Let’s sit here for our chat. I haven’t got much time, as I said. But I must fill in the rest of my story.’

‘Where were we? Oh, yes, at my wedding to Suleiman. I was so proud and happy, I cannot tell you what a marvellous occasion that was. People all over Europe reported it in the newspapers. The Venetians had spies. They knew everything. We married in 1533. It was a fantastic ceremony. It made me an equal to other empresses. I received the title Haseki, meaning Sultan. Suleiman created a new tradition in our empire. I received a salary which was 2,000 aspers per day. Of course, there were rumours. The sultan has given up power for his wife and so on. But that was not true. He favoured my advice over and above that from his other close circle.

I think by that time most people in Istanbul accepted me, but it was different in the harem. The complexity of how all these women related to each other could only be born because of the extraordinary etiquette that was taught as a standard of behaviour. We had been taught exact manners of how to treat each other and become an example of virtue.

That didn’t work with one woman called Mahidevran. She became very envious of me. When she came back from Manisa to live with us in the Old Palace things became very bad with her. It was before I got married. She came back with her son Mustafa who was the only one she had. She soon found out that I had several sons with Suleiman which was entirely unusual.

It showed her that my relationship with him was special. It got very bad, now that we were living near each other. She began to hate me. One day when we passed each other in the harem Mahidevran started to insult me. She yelled and screamed at me, her face flushed with anger. She called me ‘cheap meat’. She scratched my face, pulled out my hair and soiled my dress. I felt in a terrible state and hid in my room. Later that day Suleiman asked me to come and see him. I told him that I could not, because my face was scratched. He demanded I come. I told him what had happened and cried bitter tears. He was incensed and asked Mahidevran if it was true, and she replied it was and that I deserved no better. Suleiman was furious with her and told her to go and not come back. You can imagine that her anger towards me got worse. I began to rule the whole of the harem, and there was nothing she could do. I stayed there all my life, although I moved to our new palace called Topcapi. This is the building where government affairs were conducted. My presence there as a woman was something that had never happened before. I enjoyed the respect of the people, and I enjoyed my husband’s love for me. You know we even wrote love letters to each other.

This is part of one of my letters:

My dearest sultan! As it has been one-and-a-half months since I last heard from you, Allah knows that I have been crying night and day waiting for you to come back home. While I was crying without knowing what to do, the one and only Allah allowed me to receive good news from you. Once I heard the news, Allah knows, I came to life once more since I had died while waiting for you. He wrote to me under his pen name, Muhibbi:

“Throne of my lonely niche, my wealth, my love, my moonlight.
My most sincere friend, my confidant, my very existence, my Sultan, my one and only love.
The most beautiful among the beautiful..
My springtime, my merry faced love, my daytime, my sweetheart, laughing leaf..
My plants, my sweet, my rose, the one only who does not distress me in this world..
My Istanbul, my Caraman, the earth of my Anatolia
My Badakhshan, my Baghdad and Khorasan
My woman of the beautiful hair, my love of the slanted brow, my love of eyes full of mischief..
I’ll sing your praises always
I, lover of the tormented heart, Muhibbi of the eyes full of tears, I am happy.’

‘They are both such beautiful poems!’ I exclaimed. ‘You are truly a wonderful woman, in spite of having abducted me.’ I joked. I felt we got on so well that I could make this little sharp remark. I learnt from her that she began what is known the era of ‘the reign of women’ in the Ottoman empire. She had influence on the affairs of the state and foreign affairs. She would listen to the discussions through a wire mesh window. She often accompanied Suleiman as his political advisor. When he was away on a campaign, I had to make all the political decisions. She told me.

‘Do you want to know what really brought us together?’ Hurrem asked me.

‘Yes, do tell me.’

‘It was poetry! He loved poetry, so did I. when he found out we began to read poetry to each other. That is how we fell in love with each other.’

By now the daylight was fading, the colours and scents in the garden were taking on magical hues and odours. Shadow and light played games with our fantasy. Food and drink were brought. We drank some wine that flowed warm down into my stomach.

‘I have to go quite soon, and I know you have to get back as well. But let me just tell you one or two other things I want you to know and take back with you to your world. It’s my involvement to better the life of ordinary people. I had a mosque built, two qur’anic schools called madrassas, a fountain, and a hospital for women near the slave market. I commissioned a bath house, called Hurrem sultan bathhouse and a public soup kitchen in Makkah. ‘

I noticed that Hurrem had not touched her wine, while my glass was already empty. She looked at me closely making a very sweet face, took my hand and said softly,

‘You are a very good listener, Eva. I have got to like you a lot and wish you all the very best for your future. Even it is not easy sometimes, think of me and survive like I did. You can see how strong and happy I am. Do have some more wine. It is one of our best. Enjoy it and sleep on it all. I must be off now.’

She got up, waved and was gone. I had another one or two glasses of wine, soaked in the atmosphere of her wonderful gardens before I went to my room.

While my thoughts meandered about these difficult issues to keep them from thoughts about my own life, I heard footsteps and a knock on my door. A Janissary opened the door and announced Roxelana who was there already and entered my room. I got up, pleased to be relieved from my ponderings and greeted her heartily. She begged me to come out into the garden with her and sit among the bird cages for a short while for a final chat.

‘I know you must get back home, and I will bring you personally back the same way we came. I owe it to you, as I was the one who abducted you.’

I must have looked surprised.

‘You think it cannot be done, but you’ll see. We will just have a very nice drink here first from my garden with its many fruits. Let’s sit here,’ she added pointing to a place with a bench and a small table surrounded by bird cages. She looked me in the eye and her look was warm and sad at the same time. She said let’s get up now. Fetch your things. You must put your own warm clothes on because it will get cold where we are going.

MICHAEL SIMMS



Michael Simms lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA. He is the author of three novels and four collections of poetry. His poems have appeared in *Poetry* (Chicago), *Plume*, and *Poem-a-Day* published by The Academy of American Poets. He is also the founding editor of the online journal *Vox Populi*. In 2011, Simms was awarded a Certificate of Recognition by the state legislature of Pennsylvania for his service to the arts.

MIKE VARGO



Mike Vargo, a freelance writer based in Pittsburgh, is a former journalist who held editorial posts in both mainstream and alternative media. He has won major awards for his in-depth reporting as well as for other work. Currently he writes creative nonfiction and reviews, and collaborates with subject-matter experts on nonfiction books.



MIKE VARGO Review of MICHAEL SIMMS

Windkeep:

*The Second Chronicle of Tessia Dragonqueen
(The Talon Trilogy) Paperback – February 1, 2024*

Art of the Sequel: Michael Simms and *Windkeep*

Sequels are special cases. During much of the history of Western culture they've been rare in serious literature and drama. Beckett didn't follow *Waiting for Godot* with *Still Waiting*, and Jane Austen wrote standalone novels, leaving later writers to sequelize them. But the inclination to write followups has existed for a long time, as have audiences who want more. The novel we now call *Don Quixote* consists of two: an original and a sequel published years apart in the early 1600s. Cervantez's contemporary, Shakespeare, created a *de facto* series with *Henry IV Parts 1 and 2* and *Henry V*, plus a Falstaff spinoff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Then, around the mid-20th century, the scene began to shift. Series built on continuing sets of characters moved upscale, from detective stories and the Tarzan books to Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* and John Updike's *Rabbit* novels. And the works that reverberated the most came from two British authors who were old pals. J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* novels piled a mega-trilogy atop his earlier book *The Hobbit*, while C.S. Lewis rolled out the seven-volume *Chronicles of Narnia*.

Together, the two series set multiple precedents. Both the *Narnia* books and *Hobbit+LOTR* were originally aimed at young readers but also grew popular among adults. Both helped to establish fantasy-world fiction as legitimate literature, the kind that scholars analyze. Moreover, their success served as proof of concept for a creative approach that has spread.

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

If you're going to invent an entire imaginary world, and invite readers into it — a world beyond the real which somehow reflects the real, operating by its own customs and laws of nature, where colorful characters are caught up in tensions between the good and the no-good — if you're doing all that, then you should endow that world with a long-running saga, not merely a one-off story.

And so it came to pass that J.R.R. and C.S. begat J.K. and George R.R., and many others. Within this context, let's look at a new book in a series that hasn't already been discussed half to death. *Windkeep* is the second novel in the planned Talon Trilogy, by Michael Simms.

Simms (no initials) comes to world-building from an unusual direction. For years he's been primarily a poet and is best known as one. His first venture into long-form fantasy fiction was rather unusual, too. *Bicycles of the Gods* (Madville, 2022) presented a new take on the Second Coming: Jesus is sent to Earth with his fellow god Shiva, Destroyer of Worlds, who's eager to help cleanse the planet of sinful humans. The two arrive incognito, swooping into Los Angeles incarnated as 12-year-old boys on cool bikes. *Bicycles* still awaits a hoped-for sequel because meanwhile, Simms has launched the aforementioned trilogy. Which unfolds in a different sort of world entirely.

The Talon Trilogy is set in an imaginary land where the living standards appear to be early medieval and most technologies are Bronze Age: "copper" is a widely used metal. But the main characters include a dragon, and the tech arsenal includes magic. Madville published volume one, *The Green Mage*, last year. And of course one should read it before starting *Windkeep*, its sequel. That won't be a chore. *The Green Mage* is very good. In this book, Simms showed that an experienced writer with a vivid imagination can take a fairly standard sword-and-sorcery plot and make it sing. The story is narrated by the title character, an itinerant trader who uses his green (healthy) magic sparingly, to avoid upsetting nature's balance. He gets drawn into a campaign to overthrow a corrupt and cruel regime. The rebels are led by a brave young woman, who recruits the dragon as an ally. They battle a dark wizard, usurper of the elderly king, and — necessary spoiler — the good guys win. For a while, everything is rosy. Curtain.

Windkeep resumes the saga a few years later. The bloom is off the rose. Tessia, the fiery young warrior from the revolution, has become queen. But she's screaming-heebie-jeebies bored with the business of governing, and civil society is coming unglued.

A rustic but once-thriving economy now sputters; the people are restless. Worse, the weather has turned dry and blistery, in a drought that augurs doom for the farmers who feed all.

This setup does the things you'd want fantasy fiction or indeed any fiction to do. We have a central character whose predicament rings psychologically true. Dramatic tensions are cranked high. The fantasy world faces challenges that have real-world parallels. And author Simms's writing — channeled again through the voice of the Green Mage, now a counselor to the queen — comes across clear and un-fancified. You are moved briskly into the story by a narrator who puts you tangibly there on the ground, in the rooms where it's happening. The special requirements of a sequel are nicely met, too. The same core characters you've gotten to know are seen in different circumstances, which drive them to develop or reveal different sides of themselves. Further, *Windkeep* does more than give the characters a new set of problems to solve. It transports them to a new dimension; draws them into a game in which the rules and the playing field are new and uncertain.

In *The Green Mage*, magic spells come into play only sometimes and are usually aimed at individuals. In *Windkeep*, spells are cast prolifically and they're cast with wide-reaching nets. It seems that blue witches, an advanced breed, influence the changing climate. On a mission to track down the witches, Queen Tessia and company trek into territories where nature has been modified. Tiny forests of tinier-than-bonsai oak trees grow underfoot. There are talking sheep and hybrid creatures, part one animal, part another. It's unreal but also makes you think Oh, wait — *maybe this isn't so different from what's going on in the real world*.

And the dragon. In volume one we learn that the she-dragon Tyrmiss thinks, feels, and speaks on a human level. In *Windkeep* she is revealed as a superior being, not just for her abilities to fly and spit fire, but above all for her penetrating wisdom, keen moral sense, and common-sense eloquence. Although Tyrmiss declines to hold office, she's the very model of an ideal prime minister.

Do the allegories and real-world analogies feel overdone at times? They do. But the pace of *Windkeep*, a page-turner like its predecessor, should keep a reader too busy to worry about imperfections. For anyone who wants to try out a fantasy-fiction world, I'd say the Talon Trilogy books offer an engagingly wild ride in a much more compact vehicle than you might find elsewhere. *Windkeep* wraps up within a tight 299 pages. If the trend holds, volume three shouldn't be long in the coming or in the reading thereof.

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