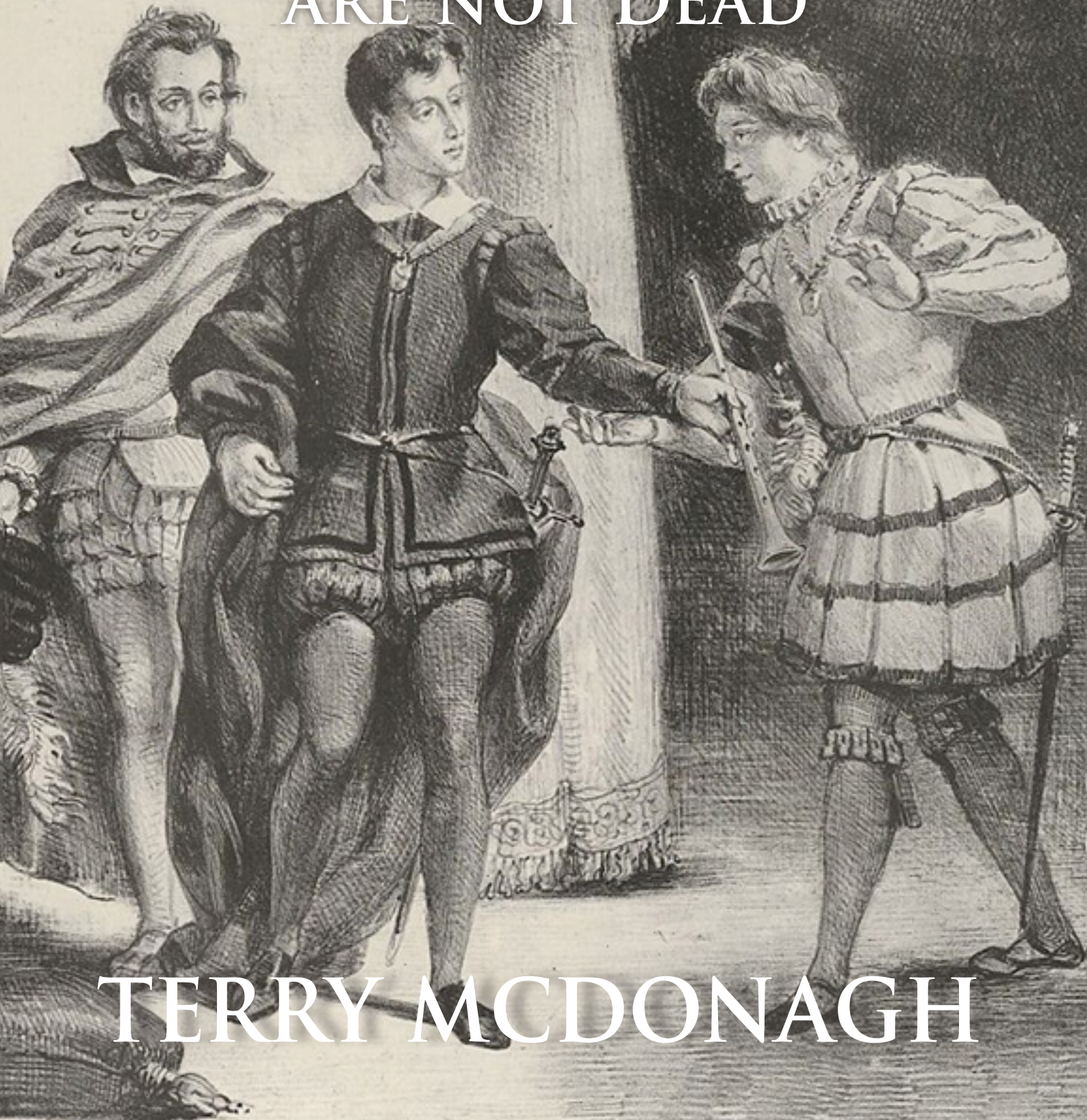
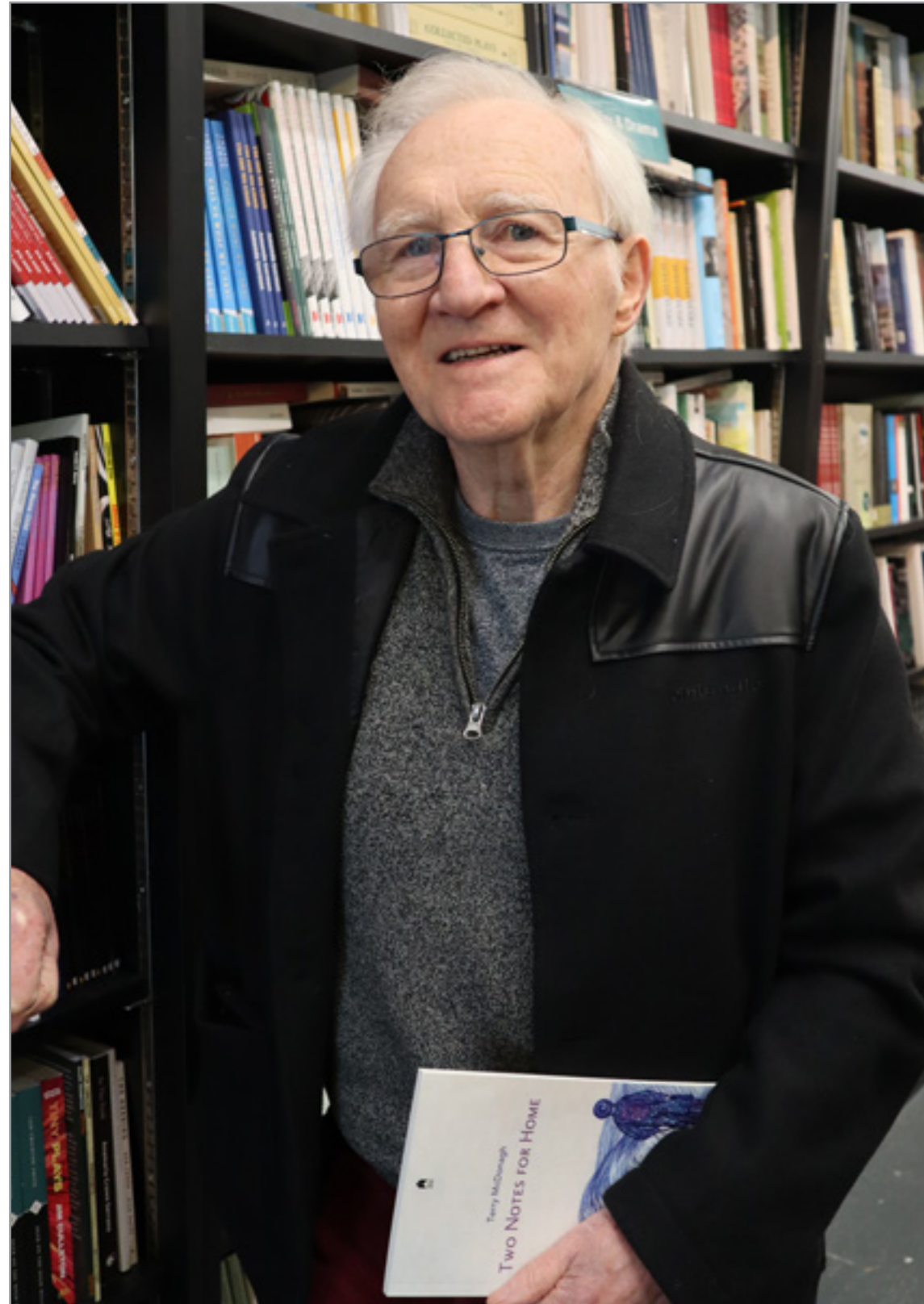


ROSENCRANTZ  
AND  
GUILDENSTERN  
ARE NOT DEAD



TERRY MCDONAGH



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—  
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*Live Encounters Publishing*

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ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN  
ARE NOT DEAD

TERRY MCDONAGH

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## FOREWORD

In this compelling collection, the speaker—whose voice oscillates between self-aware cynicism and existential frustration—confronts a world steeped in absurdity, one where resistance feels futile yet remains fiercely asserted in the only way it can: through sarcasm and dark humor. The poems echo the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from Shakespeare’s Hamlet, figures who navigate an uncaring, deterministic universe and whose agency, if it exists at all, comes about in ineffective, marginal ways. The originals are also put to death for even this presumption. Here the figures are not “dead” as such, but live on in the cynically inclined language of McDonagh’s speaker.

At the core of these poems lies a pervasive sense of alienation. Power, here represented as “Admin,” is an unyielding force, indifferent to the needs or desires of individuals. Like Kafka’s bureaucratic systems, it simply is, without explanation, and the question posed by these poems becomes not how to overthrow or transcend it, but how to cope in its shadow. The speaker wrestles with this, fully aware of the absurdity of the struggle but nevertheless continuing it, if only in the form of sarcastic commentary. This sarcasm is no lighthearted jest but a last form of agency, a voice that, even when trapped, cannot fully surrender to the silence of oppression.

The speaker’s rebarbative wit is not just deflection or bitterness but a pointed, cutting means of asserting a kind of identity in the face of overwhelming forces. There is humor here, yes, but it is also the dark recognition of a reality that neither demands nor receives mercy. Underneath the poet’s forays, you can detect the unmistakable sneer of one who has seen the game and refuses to play along, even as he, like his Shakespearean cousins, is swept into its unrelenting current.

In McDonagh’s rendering, the themes of existential loneliness and alienation are not merely abstract concepts but lived experiences. The poems ask us to confront the absurdity of the world not with answers but with questions, not with hope but with a grim, ironic clarity. And in this, they find their greatest strength: not in defiance, which would be too simplistic, but in the persistent, unresolved tension of the struggle itself.

Thus, what you are about to read is no surrender to despair. While it is a voice that recognizes the futility of resistance, it refuses to be silenced by it. What unfolds then is a meditation on the fractured self—caught between the recognition of powerlessness and the continued, sardonic assertion of self. You will find no answers in these pages, but you may find something even more profound: the sound of survival in the face of an indifferent world.

**David Rigsbee**  
New York  
USA



## PREFACE

I have always been fascinated by the story of Hamlet. I've seen it performed a number of times in Stratford upon Avon and in Hamburg in German language and, one thing that has always stood out is the tragedy that ensues when greed and hunger for power take over. In the words of John Dalberg-Acton: Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Claudius murders his brother, King Hamlet, to obtain the throne and the hand of Prince Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude. He manages to convince Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – Hamlet's friends since childhood – to join him in his attempts to have the young prince – who is the lawful heir to the throne – murdered and out of the way. They sense an opportunity, become spies and report back to the corrupt and power-driven King Claudius.

I see so much of our political world infiltrated by corrupt, power-hungry leaders and their cohort of hangers-on, who might have been decent people but, the moment they obtain a modicum of power, something seems to change and, then, the media will, in most cases, row in behind whoever happens to be the top dog – and this, usually, under the pretext of searching for the truth. Thankfully, there is some goodness in the world but there could be so much more. *The rest is silence* – are Hamlet's final words to his true and loyal friend, Horatio.

Terry McDonagh

*Killedan (Cill Aodáin), Kiltimagh, County Mayo.*

ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN  
ARE NOT DEAD

TERRY MCDONAGH

ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN  
ARE NOT DEAD

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not dead.  
Alive and well, they are – two for the price of one  
in the plot and ploy of media circles.  
As resident informers, they carry on as correspondents,  
hissing out wrinkled messages for Chieftain, King Admin.  
They snitch.

*Official News always.*

Goody-Two-Shoes T – alias Rosencrantz,  
out and about with chrysanthemums by heart  
while Clairvoyant B – alias Guildenstern,  
cries tragedy on telly and craves with ruptured heart.

Rosencrantz Goody-Two-Shoes T:  
*Most holy and religious fear it is  
to keep those many bodies safe  
that live and feed upon your Majesty.*

Guildenstern Clairvoyant B:  
*You do surely bar the door  
upon your own liberty, if you  
deny your griefs to your friend.*

They are not dead. They are with us  
in sob and weasel talk.  
They are the sad slugs among sweet peas.

Good God! Be grateful for small mercies  
sensible mothers used to say – and  
I say, be grateful for the switch-off button.



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

## I AM CYNIC – A FRINGE MEMBER

King Admin is the shadow-dark-vampire  
revelling in blood-sucking, sleaze and  
emergency powers – striving to instil  
submission into unlabelled Fringe slackers  
that refuse to serve a flag well.

But Admin is not confined to Europe, Asia,  
Americas, Australia, Africa or elsewhere.  
It's at home in front rooms, classrooms,  
theatres and out to the rim of reason – to  
the last scrap of colour and dream.

I am Cynic – a paid up Fringe member  
of the graffiti corner branch – a bastard  
on battered bicycle taking up valuable street space.

One day a big wig bawled at me  
from Bishop Bill's balcony: *you  
are looking at your exterminator  
Mr good-for-nothing-Fringe-floater.*  
*If this be a private scrap, let's dual, Brother Evangelist,*  
I retorted, flexing my wings.  
*Scumbag*, roared big wig swearing that even if  
benign Bishop Bill should wake in a shaft of fright,  
pothead-lefty-trippers like me would be rounded up  
to keep the streets tidy and he'd see to it  
that pipe-dreaming poets clutched prison bars.

And King Admin court decrees: it is right and proper  
to hurt the unenlightened brigade when they  
come knocking – for they are the uncorked enemy  
meddling in none-of-their-business,  
preying on children and waiting to do us in.

In fairy tales, good wins over evil and  
it is said in official circles that  
some non-conformist-outsiders produce knives,  
instead of being grateful for shoes they are given,  
to walk tall, comply and be famous – to fit in.

And herds of upstanding citizens will ask:  
why do foolish freaks feel elated by versions  
of baby clouds finding their feet  
in a sky full of milky ways and untrained images  
when they could easily sell a mother's house  
for enough cash to buy a big car and  
get started on a decent rifle collection?

\*

But if a person goes on trial for being a Fringe,  
it's assumed they live in a hole in the ground  
with withering worms and are only kept alive  
for laboratory experiment and off-camera treatment  
that includes beatings with discarded barge poles,  
compulsory jabs and remarks deemed appropriate for airheads,  
anarchists, bumpkins, basket cases, beatniks, bohemians  
and crackpots – not to mention the whim available

to legal teams panting up front steps, figuring out ways  
of stripping wasters of their last flesh and bone – while  
never leaving a blemish on a passing breeze or a blob of blood  
on a wife-ironed white shirt.

\*

The silence in solitude and sand hints at truths now and then but it's said, in better circles, that those oozy, alien tribes spend so much time on trial, they should remain locked up and wake up to lists of labels such as: dimwit, dingbat, dipstick, ding-a-ling, freak, fruitcake or hippy-head-bangers that possess the gall to show up in Pre-Raphaelite regalia, towing a shower of offspring in canine costume – fashioned like flower-power monkeys demanding pre-satnav greenery all the way to their fantasy homelands.

\*

Watching King Admin at work  
in his caricature of caring  
is like trapping slime in a cesspool.

\*

A Fringe footballer would be familiar with terms such as: idiot, imbecile, jackass, looney, lump, madman, moron, mug, neurotic numskull, oaf, odd bod, oddity, pervert, poet, prick, rare bird, screwball, smartass, square peg, scallywag, wackadoodle and that all before half time when playing well enough.

## PARASITE IN PINSTRIPE

King Admin is a parasite in pinstripe  
snipping at singularity.  
His elephant in the room  
fades in and out of head office  
next to the kitchen where  
it drinks lashings and only guffaws  
when King Admin and lackeys  
share giggles, gala and tinderboxes  
with pharma and high-tech hybrids.

You'd wonder at what stage  
do systems detect their own  
foul-smelling decomposition.

## LEAVE IT AT THE DOOR

*Leave it at the door*, I say. Then I shout,  
*leave it at the door*.  
I often say it just to hear the echo of my own voice.  
*Leave it at the door*.  
Out of sight and sound, I sing silly songs of exile,  
plucking airs out of syllables:  
*I'll have a blue melon wrapped in butterfly wings,  
for breakfast, please, but leave it at the door...and  
thank you for doing my laundry, oh yeh!*

Muffled sobs on both sides of the door.  
We keep our eyes shut and nobody sings handing over  
the laundry bag – its contents half smooth and folded.

The same routine. The same tears.  
*Leave them at the door*.

\*

I'd have to say yes to get speech permits.  
But I wouldn't. Admin was everywhere  
droving herds of volunteer-citizen-stock  
all being whipped along by media conduits  
like Goody-Two-Shoes T and Clairvoyant B,

our home-grown Rosencrantz and Guildenstern,  
and they puking from high moral ground.

\*

I can be assertive: *Leave it at the door*.  
That woman on the outside with a cohort  
of kids in the Pacific or elsewhere and me – a  
grey silhouette inside – not allowed out  
and she not allowed in.  
We're about as wanted as each other.  
I feel a kind of pride in my voice  
when I say, *leave it at the door*.  
I do.  
I'd be very assertive sometimes.  
People used to say I had the voice of authority  
at gatherings – even when  
pious racketeers chanted, booed  
and guffawed in unbearable perfume.

\*

I've never been a fool. I'll say that in my defence  
and I'll say it again. I've never been a fool  
but some of that perfume takes the biscuit.

## INTO SOLITARY

The dissident unregulated lot  
peruse subversive literature in public.  
They are me and I am one of them.  
I hope.

I had a life in front of me and still do  
but when I saw those sneering faces at my gate,  
I burned what I could, hid smoke signals,  
said goodbye to my fingerprints and scarpered.

For a time, I'd been trying to avoid political fashion,  
rank odours and dark roots, but the reptile is patient  
under briars and brambles. My garden was carefree,  
wild and incomplete with tricky little passageways  
to escape the rule of reverence, but I was soon sniffed out  
by a bugger of a digger and bruisers with torches,  
studded sticks and wads of warrants in night-time raids.

They nabbed me incognito on my dreamtime break.  
It was claimed I'd been googled and was not a pretty sight  
walking an undocumented dog in unapproved bedroom slippers  
and, to make matters worse, the elephant in the room  
noticed I'd not swallowed my tablet dosage.

I should know that the best citizens  
don't like the purr of non-compliance.

The full shame of my crime would go rampant and public  
and my hair would be chopped by a pair of cranky clippers.  
The elephant, in consultation with admin-dumb, suggested  
an extended term of detention. So here I am – out of reach.  
I've got an iron bed, a bog, a basin, a skylight. My medication  
arrives in pharma crates. That brings out the long-lost monk  
in me. I offer sacrifice and feed on dream potions. I am  
a major concern spied on through keyholes and up downpipes.

Even if my senses, thoughts and dreams have gone awry,  
I can always return to myself with a peace offering.

## AN ASIDE

On the run from Amsterdam tulips  
and official lawn-mowers  
I stumbled on a boot in a forest clearing.  
It was an odd boot and  
I was searching for foothold.  
If there'd been another foot,  
it might have been attached  
to Robin Hood – my hero – on  
the run from his King-dumb.

Or, perhaps, the shoe belonged  
to a misguided fitness freak  
getting fit for white sands  
and erotica in a hotel room  
given over to afternoon shenanigans.

But a boot is only a clump – revered  
by big people kicking in the dark,  
jumping out of jeeps or dropping off  
outrageous pleasure tools  
for hard-core public servants.

There I go again. I think I heard a knock.  
Where was I? Oh yes,  
following my forest path  
to escape the terror of  
the keeper of peace while  
working on stronger legs  
to support me in my flight  
from official rhetoric  
and global index fingers.

ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN  
ARE NOT DEAD

TERRY MCDONAGH

I've wandered. Dropped off  
like a rainbow on a sunflower.  
I have. But I do like oddities  
and sing out, *Admin is bo-toxed*,  
when nodding off – which  
puts my shoe on the other foot,  
out of step and happy as a clog.

I'd like to write a big book,  
a sprawl of odds and ends  
but what if my exhausted pen  
runs out of steam and ignores me  
on my cloudscape of cuckoo and verse?

On the other hand I could listen  
to a river to be sure of calm and content.

MEN AT WORK

Sometimes when standing on a hilltop  
looking out to islands, I used to  
kick-start technology to zone in  
on activities on a faraway beach  
where I once saw a group  
of playful gallivanting girls  
being spied on by auld fellas  
in pinstripe party colours  
hanging out of top windows.

Some girls looked like Ophelia  
before Hamlet – others  
like versions of Desdemona.

Then cometh big boss, Admin  
in the company of R & G  
with a retinue of fleshy members  
insisting young people tasted potions  
with a promise of opera tickets.  
They tasted, singing and dancing,  
unaware they were becoming herd.

## CAVE

I get carried away, but so what!  
And, anyway, I've never been  
more than a man upgrading himself  
in the image of his star sign.

I do have my philosophy but seldom  
the courage to ask for a cherry blossom  
on my piece of cake. I'd stand  
at the café door hoping that  
my turn for a soft seat and some kisses  
would be mine one day.  
The outsider takes the hard road home.

## AN ODE TO AN INVISIBLE HAND

I remember landing hard  
in a deep hole  
deeper than I'd imagined.  
I came a cropper,  
looked around, put  
my sunglasses to one side,  
whispered a prayer and took hold  
of an invisible hand that  
opened a daunting door.

I felt like a therapist taking  
first steps in survival theory.  
I let go of the hand  
or it let go of me and  
I entered taking a seat  
at a variety show that  
included a sloth and  
some other political animals.

I just knew I'd be called up  
as I was in the front row  
smelling of nonconformity  
with only a horsey laugh  
as protection. The sloth  
was sleepy and the animals  
rambled off for a lump of steak.

I was ordered to tidy up  
by a big bruiser of an ape  
who claimed I'd snuck in  
without any visible rights.  
I blamed the invisible hand  
but the ape - in no mood  
for nonsense, showed me  
a yellow card and the tip of  
a red one with traces of blood on it.

## ARIEL

I keep a diary of the flight  
of the sun and wily moon  
through my small skylight.

I talk to myself about Ariel,  
an imprisoned spirit of the air  
until rescued by Prospero.

But, I ask, who will rescue me  
or that corridor-long list  
of non-aligning Fringe families  
waltzing with magpies in dense fog.

## NO TELEVISION

I asked a chaperone in dark colours  
for a television. He looked puzzled  
but when I said I liked football  
and wanted to be up to date  
in case I ever got out, he said  
*forget it* as I was not a herd member  
and, furthermore, having consulted,  
he quoted Admin via the elephant:  
*the law of the Simpsons does not apply.*  
I sent greetings via smiley to the elephant  
and to Admin, but – knowing it to be futile  
I encouraged them to read *Before the Law*  
and *Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka.

## THE MONK IN ME

I don't have my monk's habit in my cell  
but when I look at the moon,  
I feel a habit coming to life in me.

When quizzed in court, I'd suggested  
I was being treated like  
a Shakespeare Caliban in The Tempest.  
As confused and lost as jungle escapees,  
team Admin huddled, shuffled chairs  
and concluded I was a Taliban in a storm  
of my own making. How simple you are, one said

King Admin didn't show up in person, but his herd,  
had gathered me in daylight and paraded me in public  
while my neighbour, Barrabas, a criminal and tax evader,  
went free. Most of the faithful carried clubs and  
R & G kept me in the light as if I were a crab apple.

If I'd taken the tablets, my dog could have been reprieved  
as it was a useless animal, and I might have got proper shoes.  
One gentle-looking person with cloven feet and a long mane  
waved a white handkerchief and another shouted he'd  
mention me at the next party meeting.

In court, I could have promised to do the right thing  
when out walking my dog but, as my name was on record,  
I'd be the alligator of the streets  
under the watchful camera of every nameless dog-matist.

## DESTINY

Sometimes, I don't know if  
I'm too loud – out of turn  
but speaking up can be tricky.  
I could be lining up  
for the first lemming bus  
to the cliff edge. Right lads!  
All aboard. Young Admin,  
the king's lad, runs the bus company.

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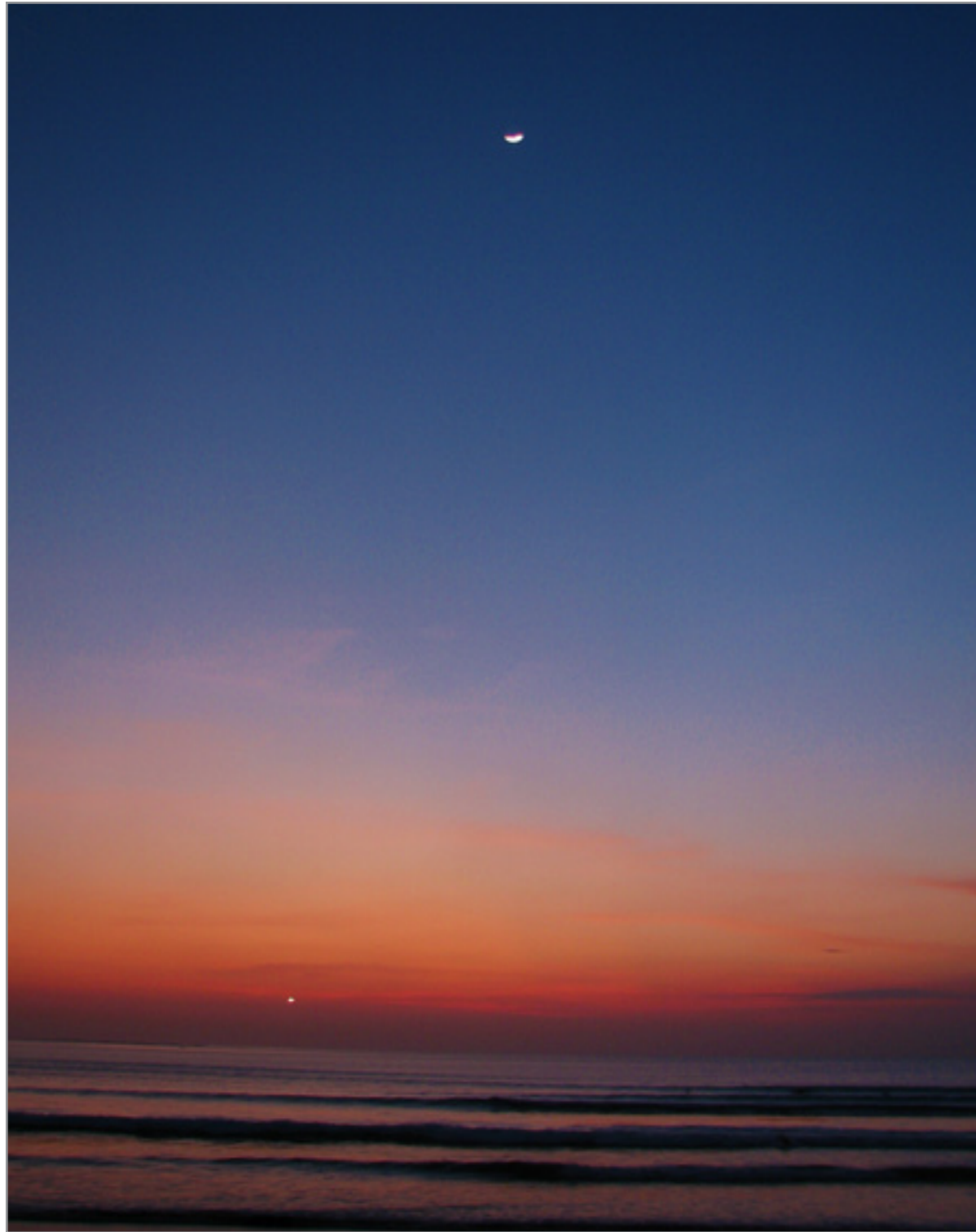
They creep up on our tenterhooks  
like a rash in a plague  
and call their carry-on a search for truth.

But I'm here now – content in solitude  
and in the poetry of four walls with  
a skylight to the sun and moon phases.

I sleep soundly and what  
I'm labelled as or called  
is of little consequence.

In truth, I'm in isolation but,  
with no official future, I'm  
happily at home in my shoes.

I remain,  
Your Cynic.



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

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Terry McDonagh has returned to live in his native Cill Aodáin, Kiltimagh after more than thirty years in Hamburg. His poetry collections include: *The Road Out; A World Without Stone; Boxes; A Song for Joanna; Cill Aodáin and Nowhere Else; In the Light of Bridges – Hamburg Fragments; Echolocation; The Truth in Mustard; Ripple Effect; Lady Cassie peregrine; Elbe Letters go West; One Summer in Ireland (Children's story); Fourth Floor Flat.*

Terry taught literature at The University of Hamburg and was Drama Director at Hamburg International School; In 2017 he was Artistic Director of WestWords, Hamburg; In Twelve Strange Songs, twelve of his poems have been put to music for voice and string quartet by composer, Eberhard Reichel; He's been a regular contributor to media outlets in Hamburg and has featured on Radio and TV on several occasions; He's an acting voice in a number of Sinead McClure's RTE radio dramas for children; Director of Raftery Returns Arts Festival, Kiltimagh; In March 2022 he was Poet in Residence and Grand Marshal at the Saint Patrick's Day celebrations in Brussels; He's a member of the Aurorenvereinigung Hamburg.

Cover image: Lithograph of *Hamlet and Guildenstern*  
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