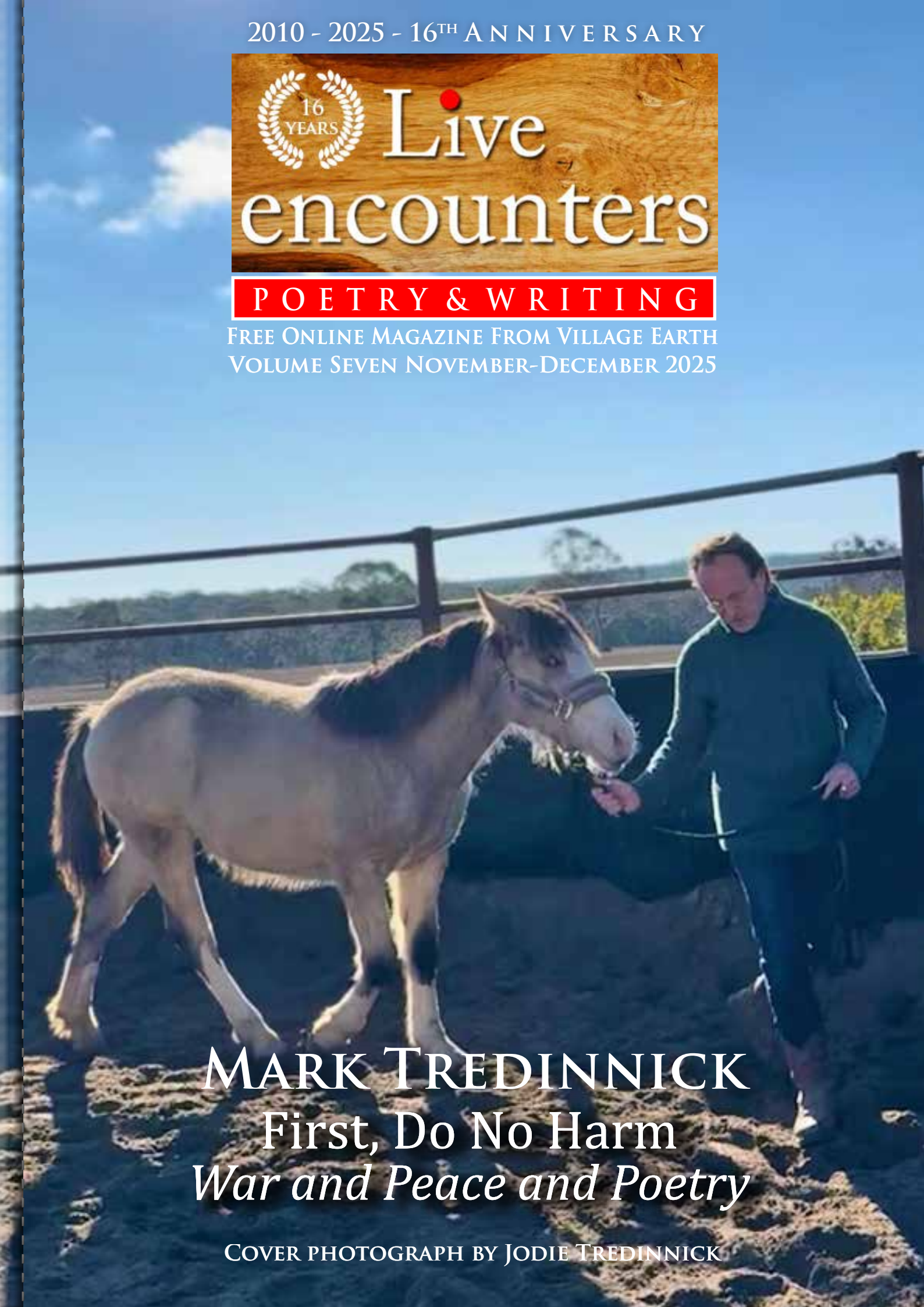


2010 - 2025 - 16TH ANNIVERSARY



POETRY & WRITING

FREE ONLINE MAGAZINE FROM VILLAGE EARTH
VOLUME SEVEN NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2025

A photograph of a man with glasses and a green sweater feeding a small grey pony in a paddock. The pony is standing on muddy ground, and the man is holding a small object in his hand, offering it to the pony. A wooden fence is in the background under a clear blue sky.

MARK TREDINNICK
First, Do No Harm
War and Peace and Poetry

COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY JODIE TREDINNICK



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VOLUME SEVEN
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Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

Mark Ulyseas
Publisher/Editor

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MARK TREDINNICK FIRST, DO NO HARM WAR AND PEACE AND POETRY

*In a time of destruction, create something.
A poem. A parade. A school.
A vow. A moral principle. One peaceful moment.*
—Maxine Hong Kingston

The Clangorous Mechanics of What's Real

Up in the northwest provinces of the great sandstone plateau we call the Blue Mountains, in southeastern Australia, a valley is cut by a small river that rises in the outlying ridges of the plateau, at Bogee, near Rylstone, and it flows, unaccountably (to me) eastward, into the bulwark of the plateau, to join the Wolgan and with that river make the Colo, which joins the Hawkesbury-Nepean, and, at last, they all find the sea. Just a bit to the north, and still in the stone country, the Cudgegong, another small river, which goes on to water Mudgee and to fill a couple of dams, rises to the east of the small river I'm sitting near, in its handsome valley, and yet the Cudgegong, though it starts further east, flows *west*—away from the plateau and the coast, and on into the hungry belly of the continent.

Mark Tredinnick. Photo credit: Isabella Brown.

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Few things in a human life or the life of the world or of a place run as simply as you'd imagine. The divide that runs a great crescent down the east coast of Australia, from Cape York to Gariwerd (the Grampians) and sorts the waters east and west of it, is made up of a thousand small and fractious ranges that find themselves tending somewhat unwillingly to cohere, and the notional divide from which the rivers flow either inland or down to the Pacific is as sketchy and erratic as all hell. As witnessed here at Glen Alice in the Capertee, where I am this late October among a profundity of birds and blowflies, wide pale pastures, and all these encompassing scarps, these handsome purple, ochre, grey assemblages. We're here for a wedding anniversary (our first), and as I put it yesterday in a poem, a gift to my beloved:

*The house sits at the head
of the valley, where the river slips into the plateau (under the gate of the garden of stone),
and the winds are chronic here, petulant as parrots, crazed as blowflies.*

*And all the long blue day the wrens run over-
due repairs on the clangorous mechanics
of what's real. The river gets on with composing the present from the past,
and the sheoaks walk all sorrow back the hard way to the east.*

The work of making poetry is hard: a poem of four stanzas took me most of a day to discover and lay out and tend yesterday. But the work it performs is like that of the lean Capertee river, whose (present) course I can make out from the house, marked by the sheoaks, carrying the sadness and loss and desire and death and birdsong and grief articulated and recollected in the valley, into the apparently impenetrable walls that confront it.

The work of poetry is soft and indefatigable. It insists on itself and on eternity and on what is real, all that it witnesses in human lives and hearts and in the greater world those lives of all beings participate in; it insists on itself and on us against an imponderable weight of indifference; it prevails, poetry, like this small river, against impossible odds. Poetry is the water that, improbably, wears away the stone.

And so, I think, it must be. The world knows enough vainglorious, strident, and violent ways of making a point. The power of poetry is to eschew those paths, and so to say and do what otherwise cannot be said and done.

And the River Goes On

As I write that last paragraph, the wrens in their workshops inside the roses out the back give over to the *chita chitas*, notorious prophets of endings and beginnings, and then, as if to laugh me out of my quiet pieties, two little friarbirds (google them) overly the house brawling their hysterical plaints. Poetry should be hilarious and outspoken and even a little histrionic, sometimes, too. But its real work begins when the outcry subsides. And the river goes on.

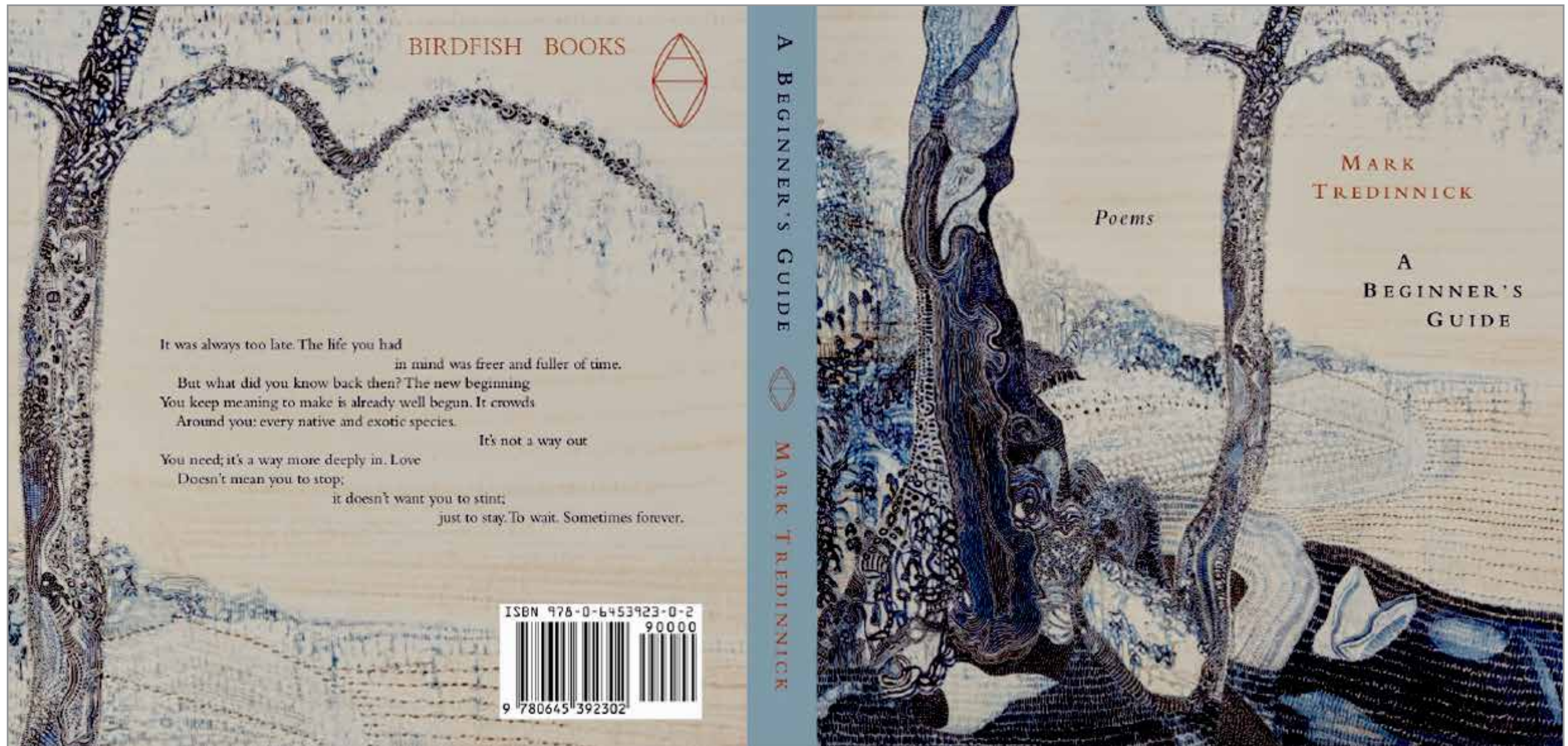
The Drunkenness of Things Being Various

Here with me to read in the valley I have a selection of the poetry of Louis MacNeice, a selection for Faber made by Auden. "I didn't think anyone was still reading MacNeice," one of my students said to me recently, as if it were a reading list—somehow compulsory and drafted by whom and on whose authority?!—from which poets are periodically eliminated. There is only poetry. When it is well made it is, again, like the river, here, going on doing its work regardless of who cares to pay it any attention or attribute to it any value. MacNeice was not, perhaps, one of the great poets T S Eliot has in mind in some remarks I'll get to in a moment. But then, who is? And who decides? But because, I think, MacNeice's work was (and is) steeped so deep in craft and care for the human condition, less persuaded by some by the arguments of fashion, some of his work endures and is capable, movingly, of speaking truths about one's own life and times, not just his.

Plus, as it happens, MacNeice's time, which might have seemed to have passed, is here again. His star is rising. It sometimes happens. It happened to Bach, after seventy years lost to us all. Never trust fashion, I'd say.

Auden apologises in his short introduction for leaving so many poems out and for his lack of all authority except his likes and dislikes for making the choices he has. He also explains that MacNeice went through a long dull patch for a decade or so.

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A Beginner's Guide - book available at <https://www.marktredinnick.com/books>

And don't we all. But the selection is still large and some fine poems made the cut: wonderful and wise "Sunlight in the Garden" and parts of the long poem sequence, "Autumn Journal," in which the poet innovated free-verse and prose-poetic forms to establish a looser kind of structure for the sustained and grounded contemplations of love and ageing and place that he writes there. It's clear what the poet stands against (cant) and for (beauty and honest and dignity and love and place. There was a lot to be anxious and angry about during MacNeice's writing years: the threat of fascism, the threat of communism, the unbreathable air of London, the threat of nuclear extinction, the moral tightness of the times. But MacNeice knows that poetry's part in the great work of resistance is the small work—the noticing how the big ideas that dominate a time play in everyday lives like of his own and in everyday moments. Like the sunlight on the garden in the poem that observes it: a poem of hope and despair, at both public and private loss, a quiet observation of the persistent beauty of things, notwithstanding ill winds.

It is only with the great poets, perhaps, that the language of the poet escapes the privacy of her idiolect and interiority and transcends the habits of mind and speech that characterised her times. More on this proposition (Eliot's) in a bit, but just to say there are, for me, a few too many occasions where I trip up in MacNeice's utterance and wish he had found the courage to be plainer or worked out how to shake a personal or temporal habit unlikely to help the poem survive its moment. (In such moments one hears but barely comprehends the speaker, and one is shut out a little from the moment of Being that had seemed, till then, one's own, all of ours.) Even in the poem "Snow," which I love, I meet a little unhelpful opacity. But then there are these lines—lines as radically clear and hilarious and serious and important now as then, as vital for us to understand as readers and voters and writers now as these lines always were: for it is true, I think, that prevailing discourse (political, intellectual, artistic and private) tends to bifurcate and enmify and oversimplify or overcomplicate and to strip lived experience of its layers and contradictions and eros and dynamism.

*World is suddener than we fancy it.
World is crazier and more of it than we think,
Incorrigibly plural. I peel and portion
A tangerine and spit the pips and feel
The drunkenness of things being various.*

Poetry's Innate Activism: Bearing Implacable and Memorable Witness

Please let us—in our languaging (as in his) and in our understandings of how humans are and how relationships play and what things mean—recall and practise the incorrigible plurality of things, the drunkenness of their and our own being various. Let's leave the platitudes and stereotypes and categories to AI. Let's leave the mantras and slogans and tribalism to commerce and politics. Poetry's activism is performed by its bearing implacable and memorable witness to the real, in language that does deep justice to what it witnesses—place, moment, person, cause. Good poetry keeps doing that justice long after the news cycle has moved on; its justice lasts, transcending as it does the particulars of the times it witnesses., Poems work in time, but also in eternity. Writing poems is for finding, through care with language, one's own unique range of variousness and for divining one's own plurality (for coming back plural, as Rumi put it once), and for making common cause—through language as awake as this head of the valley is with layers of being, past and present—with the issues and moments and instantiations of the moving world, as the world manifests in given faces and places and beings and schemes. Poetry is for joining the wide world of Being It is for perpetuating the uncanny and beautiful, and sometimes unbearable, variousness of things, catching them in the act of getting after their living, each of them refusing, notwithstanding all that is hard and wrong, not to Be.

Toward a Poetry of Peace

All is not right with the world.

It never is, but things right now, in many arenas, are unhappy and dangerous, terrifying and ugly. Mobsters broker what they like to call peace; the idea of the public good, the common good, has flown from minds both left and right; kindness and forgiveness and generosity are vanishing from heart and mind and mouth; the oceans warm and the plastics swill and the forests fail and the cities burn; loneliness is pandemic; civil disagreement, on which democracy depends, has largely descended into shrillness and name-calling, a mutually assured destruction by competing outrage; all our thoughts are thought for us and all our phrases fashioned by bots using stolen IP; ignorance informed only by internet rage gets despots elected, most of whose work, as ever with despots, is vengeance and rank ideology and the further enrichment of the rich.

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It is easy to despair, but one must not, or all that isn't right prevails.

What might be the role of poetry in times of such trouble and injustice? Not, I'm certain, to engage in the devices and postures of prevailing politics: the anger, the name-calling, the categories of blame and cancellation, the tribalism. In order to save us from the politics that prevail—and not only among politicians—poetry, I believe, must practise, in its rhetoric, its diction, its devices, and what it chooses to speak of, the values of dignity and compassion, tolerance and mercy and peace and courage and grace and civility that are so missing from the hegemonic discourses that rule our institutions of government and law-enforcement, of public policy and education. Remember Heaney, who had to fight hard for what it took to know the truth of what he said in accepting the Nobel Prize: poetry, uniquely, caters for two contradictory needs of the human spirit in times of trauma—not only a retributive, profoundly honest truth-telling, but also, a softness of seeing and saying, without which the traumatised soul, though their suffering be names, is still lost and without love.

Let us not forget to love: the world, in its woundedness; each other, and yes, even our enemy. Poetry is the way love speaks: tough love, soft love, the slim and persistent stream that defeats, in the end all resistance.

Poetry's work is to keep us from despair, to call us to turn our pain and anger into something more useful. Poetry refuses to accept or to allow us to accept what the politics of greed and envy and revenge ask us to accept as real. Poetry's politics is its refusal of the idiom of politics—its vow not to act and think and speak the way that tribal politics, sects, and ideologues do. Its work is to make us always more human than we are told we are. To love us in our frailty and magnificence and to ask us to be kinder and to be more useful to each other.

Softer Bombs

How a poet might respond to what Israel, for instance, with Western weapons, has done to Gaza: here is one of the great moral challenges of our moment. And in one sense, the response is easy. Anyone inclined to read and write poetry will condemn the murderousness, the depravity, the vengefulness, the asymmetry, the barbarism of the occupation and destruction (just as the bloodthirsty violence of Hamas, which, rising though it did from years of occupation of Palestine by Israel, triggered the monstrous and disastrous Israeli response).

But how to make one's words useful to anyone, especially anyone under the bombardment, or to anyone making decisions that might bring an end to the killing. That is the real question. Poems of shrillness and (understandable) anger have prevailed, but it's not clear how much they help anyone except as a catharsis for the speaker. It is too easy to write a poetry violent and intolerant in its attitudes and language. But no one needs more violence. Entrenched tribalism is the problem here; enmification on the page perpetuates war; it heals nothing and no one.

A fine young Gazan poet, Fatena Abu Mostafa, puts it this way in one of the poems gathered into an anthology by Denise Howell, *Each Night I Count My Children: Poems from Gaza*, a book we're proud to have just published at 5 Islands Press:

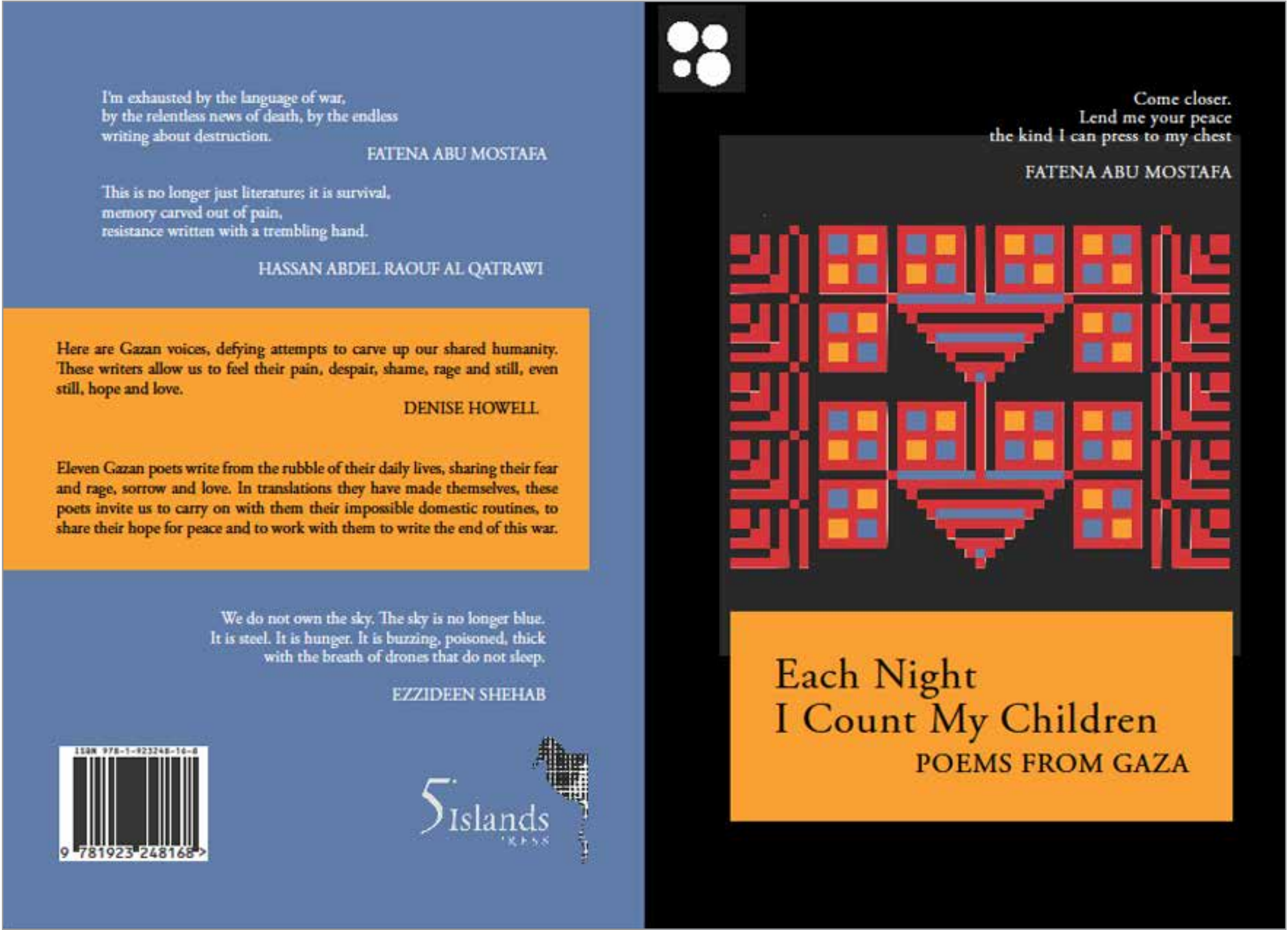
*I'm exhausted by the language of war,
By the relentless news of death, by the endless
Writing about destruction ...
Come closer.
Lend me your peace—
The kind I can press to my chest.*

There is poetry's work, spoken of by one under the bombs, one whose poems speak the language of peace even though there's a lot of war in them. There is our work, I think. There is the politics of the poem. To let us feel, in our selves, what the war is and what the dying and the suffering are and to insist on more from ourselves and our friends and leaders. The work of peace is poetry's work.

All That War is Not: How to Write Poems of Use in Times of Violence

For poetry refuses and softly refutes the violence of dehumanising discourses: war, fundamentalist ideology, absolutist politics, the words with which one tribe, in any context, steals humanity and variousness from the other. That is its politics, and it happens to our hearts. Poetry does not enmify; it takes life's side; it knows no idiom of revenge.

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Book available at <https://www.marktredinnick.com/books>

Poetry over the centuries has borne witness to what being feels like and what it may mean to live a finite life in an infinite universe, especially when the living is hard: as it is for the poets in this book, women and men and children carrying on under unrelenting siege in Gaza. Poetry restores dignity to death and sorrow and bitterness and abjection, to hope and survival and daily bread and to carrying on notwithstanding. It divines what is human, and therefore sacred, in moments particular to those who suffer (or are blessed by) them, and it invites us (readers) to know those moments as our own.

Good poems implicate their readers; in a sense, they turn the reader into their subject. This is the work of metaphor and speech music and form. The deeper speaking of poetry.

From often unbearable, chaotic, ecstatic or unimaginably awful eventualities, from suffering and privation, poetry fashions—in the voices of those who survive those moments—habitable forms, beautiful coherences, in which hope is possible again and violence falls well short of its aim. A poem is a soft bomb. A small incendiary device, a poem goes off and doesn't stop; but its work, unlike the bombs raining on Gaza, is to give life, not to take it, to dismantle ignorance and unsettle apathy, to transfigure rage into something more useful, to practise and engender compassion, to implicate the reader in both the cause of the trouble (or delight) and in its consequence and in the possible futures the poem helps us imagine.

A good poem, like all the remarkable pieces we included in the book *Each Night I Count my Children*, recruits the reader to help “write the ending” of this and every war.

Wars pursue and depend upon ideological abstractions (ideas about victory and homeland and enemy and patriotism and vengeance and so forth); they cheapen life in order to take it and to make that okay. Poetry should be all that war is not—innately human, relational, particular, contradictory, various and generative. A poem is not just a bullet; it is a mother and a father and a hearth and something unendurable to endure. It is despair seen off and tyranny stared down. It is a voice that loves life, even when it condemns those who take it.

The poems we were proud to publish in *Each Night* are partisan for peace and for life and for mothers and fathers and children. For hope and home. Even if you forget the circumstances under which they're written, they are remarkable instances of poetry's peace-making work, its soul-making, heart-breaking, mind-altering work: the way it has kept humanity (each of us and all of us) sane, made sense of senselessness, taught readers to find their own selves in the faces of the enemy (and the enemy's victim), to love better for being implicated in both the violence and the resilience.

These poems count their children, name their dead, remember the sky and the ramshackle city by the sea; they feed the cats, laugh at calamity, despair and keep going; they give in and cry out and find a way to wake again and refuse to fall silent. They throw soft bombs. They restart the revolution in the heart, which does, in the end, write the end of war.

A poem cannot stop a war; a book of poems won't bring about a peace. But still a book of peaceable poems can save lives by telling them and honouring them and those like them (many of them already lost), and it can help a beleaguered community by moving readers in a position to help, to help. Apart from reaching the readers Denise's book has already and reached, the book, through her generosity and that of my colleagues at the press, who gave their time for nothing and donate all takings to the work of MSB in Gaza, will be of some practical use. As all poems should, I reckon, try to be.

First, Do No Harm

Doctors, before they practise, take the Hippocratic Oath. First, do no harm: this is that oath, or the heart of it. Hippocrates (c.460–370 BC), to whom the oath is attributed, was a physician and philosopher from Kos, and although it is from his writings and that of the school of Epidemics he founded that the oath came, his words do not anywhere quite say “first, do no harm.” They say “I will abstain from all intentional wrong-doing and harm.” And they say “Practise two things in your dealings with disease: either help or do not harm the patient.” But the idea is the same: the primacy of refraining from harm in offering help—in meeting the medical needs of those you serve.

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And so over time, in the Latin phrase “primum non nocere,” and in the English “first, do no harm” settled into popular usage, though not in so many words, among medical practitioners (The world rarely runs exactly or as simply as it seems.) It is a form of words that all of us, even poets, know, but few of us, especially poets, pay enough attention to in our work.

Clearly the oath is not a promise that no patient should ever feel pain; the central idea, vital to the humanity of the practise of medical care, is that nothing the doctor does should be done for any reason other than to heal, to help the patient with their need. Something a doctor does, a surgery for instance, may hurt, but it must always aim to heal.

Interestingly, other versions of the oath doctors take remind the doctor that they treat a whole human (and indeed their family) and that the soft skills of the physician, like kindness and honesty and attention and the gentleness of the doctor’s speech and action, matter as much as scientific considerations in the practise of care. Not to play God, and not always to presume to have the answers.

Now, poetry has been important to all the human cultures we know of, and poetry has been associated in most, if not all, of them with healing work: it is for soul-making, said Keats; it is for survival, wrote Orr. There is no question readers have through the ages turned to poetry to find themselves accompanied in their pain or ecstasy and to help them make sense of the incomprehensible, to find a way through difficulties of the hearth and the mind and spirit.

So, if there were still, as I hope there is, a shared understanding that poetry ought to be spiritually or psychologically useful, even healing in some way—to make (and for the reader to find) in words a habitable coherence where before there was just trauma or a chaos of emotion—then the poet might want to take seriously the work she or her makes, the medicine they offer to the world. In which case it is worth asking what an oath like “first, do no harm” might look like for a poet, and whether it might help us find our readers, and help them, again.

If a poet were asked to take an equivalent of the Hippocratic oath before making a poem, it might, I reckon, have these dimensions.

- First, to help. Not just to voice, but to meet human needs for language that heals and elevates our understanding of being alive in a troubled world; that makes readers kinder and braver and less afraid and less full of ourselves.
- Also to cause no harm to language or person, while throwing light or bearing witness or consoling grief, or giving delight, or recasting the spell (as Emily Dickinson put it), or however it is one thinks one’s words might help (the language, the world, the imagined reader, the general stock of wisdom, the moral clarity of one’s times).
- To treat, as it were, the wholeness of the person (the reader), not just her intellect or his politics or their sociological or anthropological or cultural category, but their being, their incorrigible variousness, their drunkenness of variousness.
- To arise from one’s whole self, at one’s best and fullest, not merely in one’s professional life or social category. To write, as Montaigne once put it, as “all that I am.” Out of one’s flawed and mysterious and various humanity.
- Not to play god: never to be too certain of one’s observations or categories or mantras or prescriptions, one’s understanding of who is victim and who is perpetrator, of who is right and who is wrong. To be aware of the terrible complexity of things, and yet to be clear in one’s values, partisan always for justice. Poetry, after all, forgives us for being human, and finds us all both culpable and innocent and in need of some care.
- To honour the obligations a poet owes, not just to their own people and readers, but to the future and the past, and in particular to the great long tradition of the making and sharing and private reading of poetry, the deep importance of that tradition to the wellbeing of human societies and to individuals in those societies. This is not just diverting hobby, in other words; nor is it a microphone and a mobile phone and a chance to hurl curses and opprobrium at the bad and the ugly; poetry is a gift given to you to put to work for others, to rekindle the revolution in their heart).

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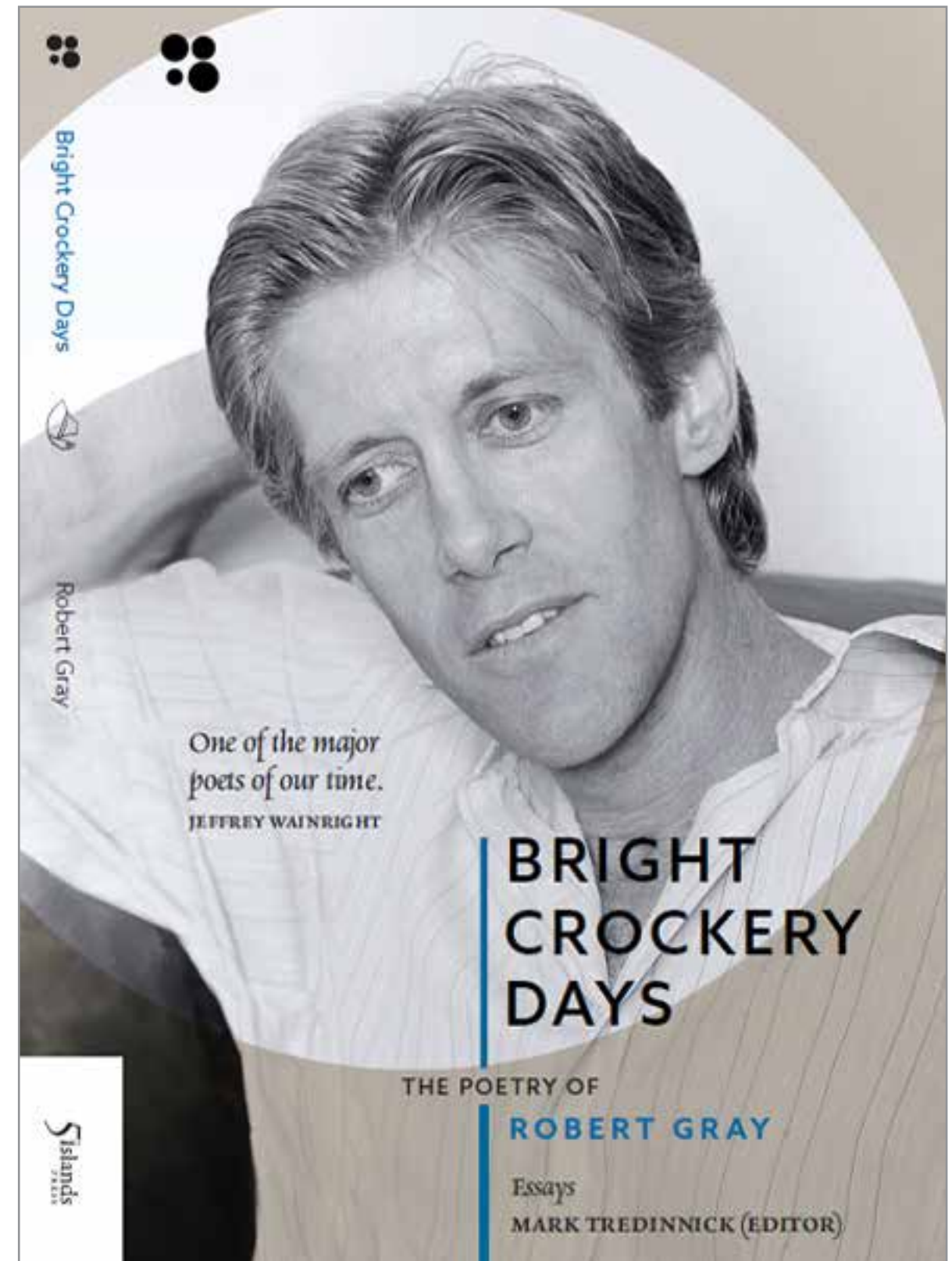
T S Eliot, Dante, and the Poet as a Servant of Language (and its Readers)

Asked to make a lecture on Dante, Eliot wrote an essay, instead, that walks around the ways *The Divine Comedy* and its poet had touched and influenced him—in life and in letters. Such is my affection for the great Italian poet, we named a dog for him: Dante, the golden cocker spaniel, for whom the straight way was always lost. Jodie and I read our way through Dante during COVID, sharing the Italian in our best imitation of how it might have sounded, and moving between Sinclair's prose and Sayers's metrical poetic translation, and checking also, when her meter got in the way, more recent translations that attempt to catch the poetry but not to imitate all the poetics, and that time in our lives, though the going is not always easy and the divinity not always all that comedic, will remain one of the times of our lives.

Because this short trip to the Capertee is a celebration of our first wedding anniversary, Jodie brought with her the book in which Eliot's essay "What Dante Means to Me" appears, and two days ago she read it aloud over breakfast. In her voice was Eliot's voice and inside his, Dante's old Italian, and here and there some Shelley. Or not their voices, but the music of their intelligence and craft and the humanity they witnessed.

I can't claim to be either as steeped in Dante as Eliot was or as deeply influenced by him, though it stays with you, that musical intelligence, that imagery, the humour and the rhythm of the wisdom. I'm with Eliot when he writes that there are some poets, he calls the masters, "to whom one slowly grows up." I'd tried Dante a few times in my thirties and forties, but I think I was only ready for him, in my reading and craft and in my living, in my fifties. Eliot was largely wasted on me at school, too; I'd grown into him by thirty-three, and largely out of him by fifty, but his ideas—the objective correlative, the power or rhythm, individual talent and the poetic tradition—stick with me.

And so it is that Eliot's three conclusions about Dante feel like better ways of saying things I have been teaching and preaching and trying to practise for over fifty years. I have no doubt that, like Sappho and Dickinson and Shakespeare and Auden and Rumi and others it is perhaps to early to be sure about, Dante was as masterly a thinker and world-builder and, above all, an artist of the line as anyone ever.



Available at <https://www.5islandspress.com/product-page/bright-crockery-days>

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It may be, as Eliot says, that though many poets are wonderful, and we need every one of them, but only a few are great. And to the great artists (Hannah Arendt says the same of Auden, by the way) Eliot attributes three particular qualities. I'm not sure it helps much these days to speak of masters and others. Certainly, though, the qualities Eliot touches on in Dante would be useful for all of us who write to work at.

And it seems to me we'd win our readership back and show the world how useful and necessary poetry can be, if we valued and attempt to practise these values and skills.

1. "The great master of language," writes Eliot of Dante, "should be the great servant of it." Through sustained attention to one's craft and to one's language, the great poets do, writes Eliot, and the rest of us should, use the language, whichever is ours, in its fullness, to serve it by stretching and renewing it—but not mostly by innovation or personal eccentricity, by ignoring its ways or subverting or abusing it. The language we write in comes to us as a great gift, I've often thought, and we ought to earn that gift, that privilege, by the love and care with which we employ it, by adapting ourselves to it as much as it to us, by fitting it thoughtfully to our times and the needs of our readers in our times. Let's aim, in other words, not to fuck language up in the service of our ambitions, but to leave it at least as rich and wide and fine as we found it. *First, in other words, let's do no harm*, and beyond that, to do some good to the language and somehow ennoble it and enable it to reach out in its native wealth to more readers than would have been the case without us, so that the language, as it finds our readers through our poems, to do some radical good.

"To pass to posterity one's own language," Eliot says, "more highly developed, more refined, and more precise than it was before one wrote it, that is the highest possible achievement of the poet as poet."

2. The poet, Eliot would say the great poet, has the gift, or develops the art through practices of inward and outward attention of wider and deeper and more discerning apprehension of the phenomena in which the world plays out and one's own life and the lives of others play out in it, experience existence in its many forms and colours.

The poet notices more shades and "vibrations," as Eliot puts it, of lived experience. And the poet will be good or great to the extent that they have the natural gift—or train themselves by apprenticeship, reading and practice—of finding within the language to which they have access ways of saying that do justice to that wider range of perception and deep and more subtle range of thought that is the core practice of the poet.

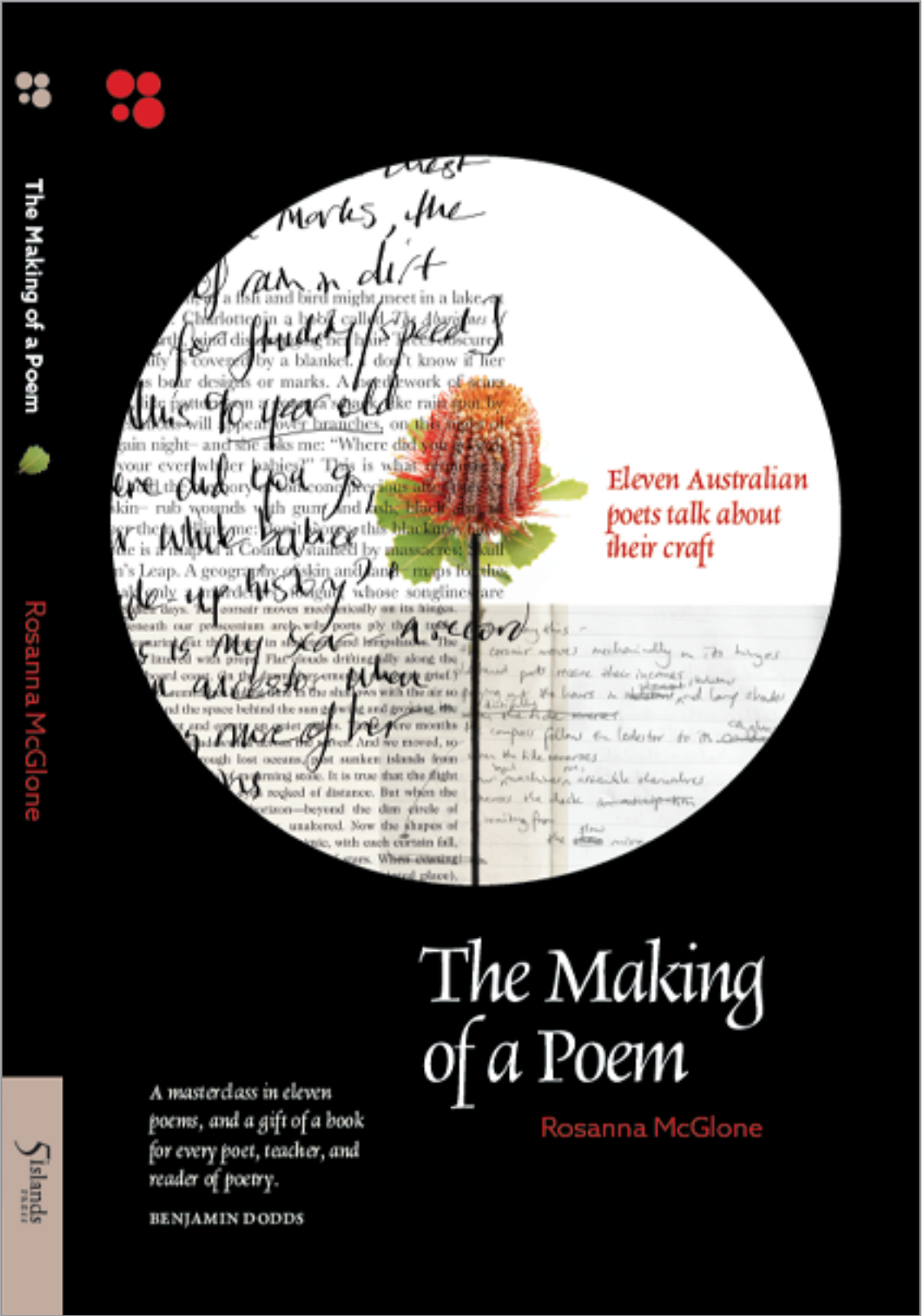
And so, as Eliot notes, the first gift or genius (linguistic accomplishment, craft, the practised mastery of the language in its semantic and lyric, figurative and musical realms) serves the second (seeing and feeling and thinking more fully). So the poet who would write some poems of use will see deeper into how life plays out, into the heart of the "incomprehensible" or mysterious or mystifying or terrifying or ecstatic, and they will offer a response to the plurality of what they apprehend, that in its sheer adequacy, in its mastery of language and poetics, serves its material more faithfully and invites a reader more fully into a comprehension of the incomprehensible, into an experience deeper than they had known they could have, or into an understanding of a phenomenon of living that a reader had known but hardly understood—and now does.

One of the ways good poetry serves us all is to expand the emotional, phenomenological range and literacy of those who read it, and of the cultures, at large, in which that poetry finds its place. This, it seems to me, has been the work—help with allowing us more fully and usefully and safely to feel and know and survive sanely the kinds of trouble and delight every life bumps into—that poetry has performed through the ages. And it is the work readers expect it to do. So, when much of the poetry readers encounter fails either to notice profoundly or speak of what it meets with well (remarkably, but clearly), to speak of it, even half to sing of it, not merely to think or rage about it—they lose their faith in poetry.

3. Dante, Eliot observes, writes from where and who he is—his times, his place, his language, his culture, his nature—but somehow, at the same time, he speaks about and speaks to all times and all places and all languages and creeds and genders and ways of being. Dante is, Eliot intones, the least provincial of poets, but "he did not become the least provincial by ceasing to be local." The Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh wrote that the parish was the proper province of the poem. "To know fully even one field or land is a lifetime's experience," he wrote. He understood the parish not as place or worldview that shut out or denied the world, but as an "aperture" through which, alone, the world might be seen and known and named. Depth, he wrote, not width, is the work of the poem.

Eliot does not spend much time on this point in his published talk; perhaps he ran out of time. But I would say that the trick here is to know your moment as an instance of all such moments, this war and suffering as instances of all such traumas, your place as one incarnation of the world, not as if it were the world, let alone the best or worst place in it.

continued overleaf...



History, the poet understands, is made of moments such as these, and she writes in that knowledge, offering up the world near at hand, the bird, the love affair, the loss, as an instance of all such phenomena everywhere and any time. Dante, for Eliot, and it felt like that to me reading the *Commedia*, has that knack. All that Dante’s poet encounters in hell and purgatory and paradise, though peculiar to times and ways now lost on us, seems spoken in one’s own voice and seems to happen to oneself— now, in whatever analogous circumstances one finds oneself in. There will always be lessons in a good poem for the times and troubles the reader lives in, far away though she is in time and place, from the time and place the poem witnesses. The good poet knows that it is not herself she writes, but all such selves, ever, and anywhere.

How the Poets Have Run Themselves Out of Town and How They Might Run Themselves Back in Again

We find ourselves in times that need poetry more than they know. And just when it is needed most, poetry, for most of the people who need it, is hard to find and harder yet to fathom or put to much use. For one thing, poetry plays much less central a role in most people’s lives than it used to—than it should. This is true especially across those parts of the world where English is the dominant language and where late-stage capitalism is in the ascendancy. By contrast, it struck me, reading the poems Denise Howell sent me to consider for the anthology—poems written by teachers and doctors and nurses and students and psychologists, by mothers and fathers, and in some cases “professional” poets—how much accomplishment in craft and perception and articulation were on display, suggestive of people more steeped in a long tradition of poetry than is true of most of us who speak our lives in contemporary English, most of the people, including book-lovers and teachers and students, that I encounter in my native land.

I don’t want, here, to rehearse the many reasons for poetry’s flight from the centre of our values and days. Some of the reasons are what the economists call exogenous, beyond readers’ and poets’ control (the radio, popular music, the internet, aesthetic theories that forgot to take readers along with them, television, the ascendancy of film ...). But we poets who mourn our falling sales, the absence or the slenderness of poetry sections in most bookshops, the lack of media attention to poetry, the lack of poetry literacy, would do well to look at ourselves and the practice of our art.

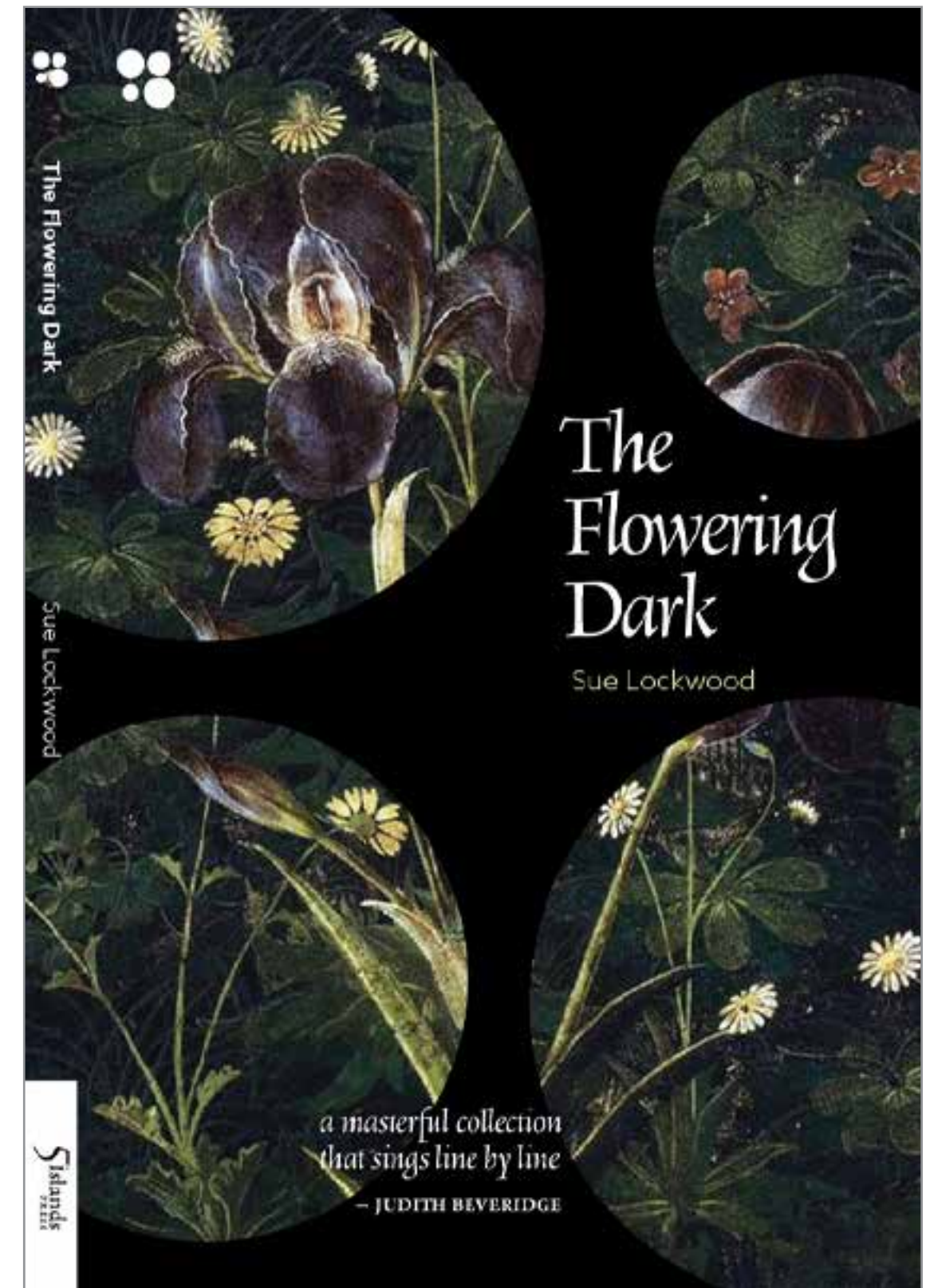
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This, too, is a big story, but since the dawn of modernism, the coming of free verse, the rejection of form (of meter and speech music and rhythm structures and often, too, the rejection of punctuation and syntax, the refusal to make sense), the story of poetry is its turning from its readers; it is the story of its refusal of the role it has played and plays still in many cultures—the making of memorable sense of mystery and tragedy and delight, of being of some use. The story of twentieth and twenty-first century poetry in the west is two divorces: from its readers and their needs (for clarity and delight, the work of lyric sense-making poems from the dawn of human languages have fulfilled), and from language and its service, at its best, of our deepest human needs, as I’ve explored them here.

Poetry has largely in our times uncoupled itself, with the support of wave after wave of theory, from the tradition of (oracular, arresting, strange, memorable) sense-making by means of form and speech music and of patterns of syntax recognisable to most readers.

There are many exceptions, of course, many poets even in recent times, like Seamus Heaney, Mary Oliver, W H Auden, Judy Beveridge, Joy Harjo, David Brooks, who have kept the poet’s oath to language and readers and the healing of spiritual harm, through devices of language used at its most economical and stirring. But poetry has lost its readership, has lost the greater part of its market; its brand awareness, as the commercial people say, is fading, readers are out of touch and out of love with poetry, suspicious of it, and that is a tragedy. A tragedy very largely of poetry’s own making. This is not really something that has happened to poetry. Forgetting whom and what they serve, persuaded by one theory after another that has elevated thought over language, the idea over the utterance, the poet over the reader, *the poets have run themselves out of town*.

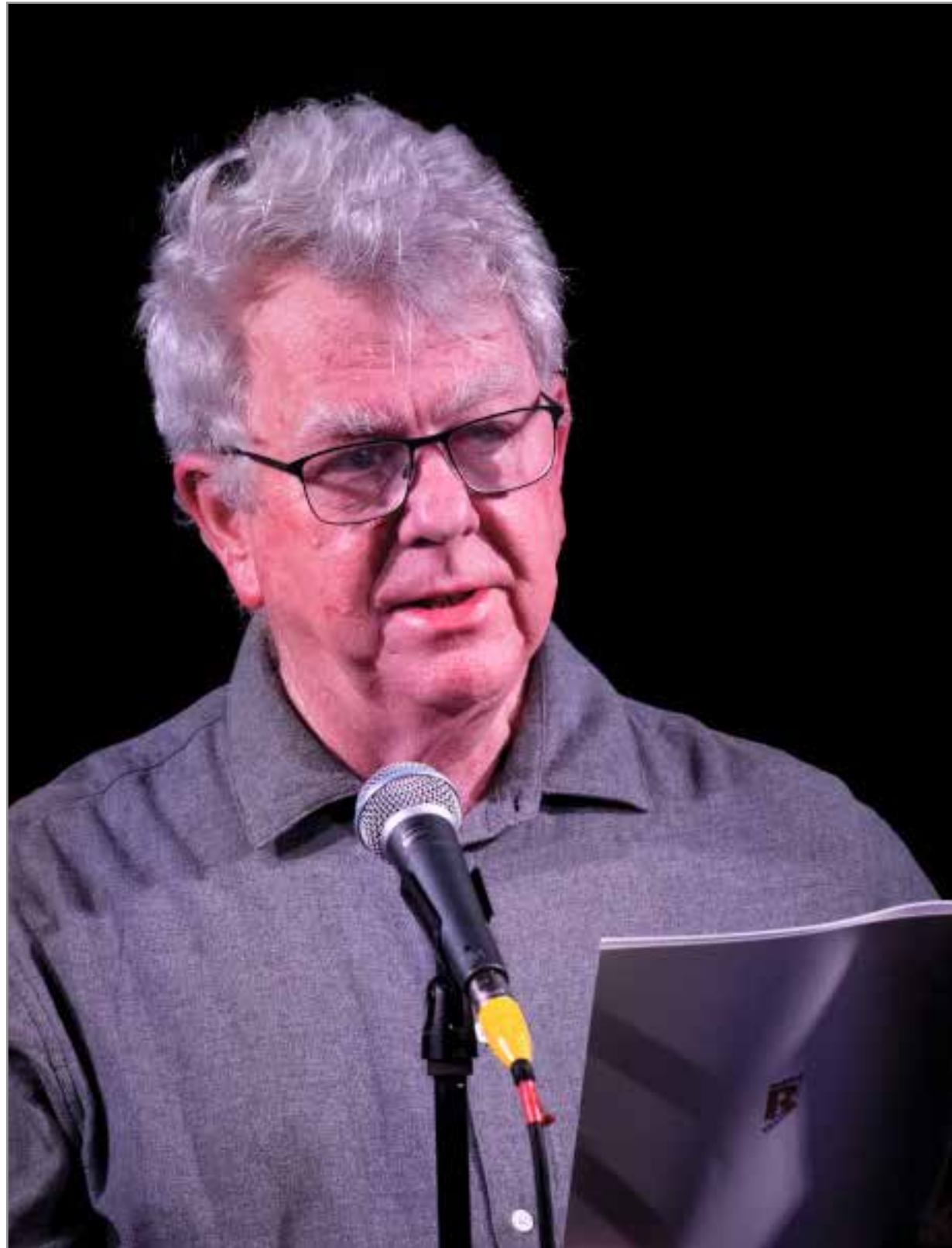
Time to find a way back in. Manifestly, no one can live long in a world from which the lyric has taken flight, where daily discourse is violent and stupid and brutal in ways that any good poem would sing right out of town.



Available at: <https://www.5islandspress.com/product-page/the-flowering-dark-by-sue-lockwood>

For much of the last four decades, Mark Roberts has been involved in writing, criticism and publishing. In 1982, he established *P76* magazine in with Adam Aitken and has been involved in small press publishing ever since. In 2011 he set up the on-line journal *Rochford Street Review*, which is currently publishing Issue 42 <https://rochfordstreetreview.com/>

The Office of Literary Endeavours (5 Islands Press 2025) is Mark's third book, after *Stepping out of Line* (Rochford Street Press 1986) and *Concrete Flamingos*, Island Press 2016.



WINDOW

It has become something of a ritual. After I eat my dinner, tonight a plate of steamed vegetables from the garden just beyond the first hill, I stand and walk across the room to the large window facing the ocean. The light is fading and I can watch darkness fall across the water. Sometimes the waves are choppy and the sky full of clouds blocking the moon and stars and you have to strain to see the line of sky and water. Other times it is clear and the ocean is flat so that there is no movement but the sparkle of moonlight on the water.

Tonight, as I reach the window, there are still streaks of red and pink within the few wispy clouds that stretch towards the horizon. The sky is a dark blue and I know that over the coming minutes the last trace of colour will disappear. The brightest stars are already out and if I look slightly to the south I will see a group of eleven stars twinkle into life. I know the old names of the constellations but, like most other things, I have renamed them. These stars I have called the 'typewriter' - there is a base of five stars, four stars form the keys and three stars form a rough line across the top. Some nights it is easier to see than others. Further south there is the 'book', to the north the 'carrot' and yet to rise is the 'coffee pot'. When you look at the night sky for hours patterns continue to emerge and evolve, once all the stars formed together in a huge image of a beast about to swallow my apartment block.

I used to be able to stand at this window and watch ships, but it has been years now since I have seen one. They used to pass by all the time, two an hour, at night you could watch their lights move slowly up and down the coast. Then, about the time people started leaving the city, they became less frequent until, about two years ago, they ceased completely. It was as if each person was connected to one of the boats and when they left their boat no longer sailed past the city.

Mark Roberts

continued overleaf...

It was after Joseph, the old man who had once fixed violins for a living and who would occasionally still play late at night, the slow mournful music sinking into my dreams, left the city. That Monday night, walking home with my bucket of water from the well, I noticed that there was no candle light coming from his room. I climbed the stairs only to find his door open. Inside his breakfast still on the table, the coffee half drunk and cold, a hard boiled egg neatly sliced on a plate. I returned the next day and nothing had changed. By the third day I knew I was the last one left in the city. Eleven days later, at 10.38pm I saw the lights of a small ship heading north east. It took over two hours to disappear over the horizon. It was the last ship I have seen from this window.

I occasionally used to think I saw a ship's light, but I they were always stars rising, emerging from the dark edge of the ocean. For a minute they hover on the edge of the horizon and, at first can be mistaken for the light on top of a ship's mast, but they always kept rising and by now I know each star off by heart, the point at which it will rise from the ocean on a particular day of the year, what time it will rise and and how it will travel across the sky.

Now that I am completely alone the night sky has become a silent link to the rest of the world. I know that light from the stars has been travelling for years to reach my window - there, the light from the star in the bottom right of the 'carrot' has taken fifteen years to reach me, the light from the middle star of the roller on 'the typewriter' has been travelling for almost sixty five thousand years. I think of someone else looking up at the same star, of viewing my typewriter from a different angle, a different position on the earth. I sense a connection not just with the moment but with a history of starlight. Eighty years ago a poet in England lay on the grass and watched the stars overhead, ancient astronomers studied my star and calculated the start and end of seasons; fifteen years ago Maree and I held hands and watched the starlight in the hills above Florence.

I can sense the moonrise approaching, more spectacular to my my mind than sunrise. I feel a silence over the ocean, hear the stars dim. I always close my eye and listen. I have learnt to read the sounds, the slight change in air pressure, the song of the night birds in the trees behind my apartment. Opening my gaze at the instant before the moon appears, rising silver on the horizon. Easy to understand why you could think it a god as the waxing moon, moving towards fullness, appears rising out of the nothingness beyond the horizon. A cold light, poetic, throwing unexpected night-time shadows.

Looking down at the front of my apartment I can see in the moonlight the water already halfway across the road and the tide still coming in. Next week, with the full moon and the king tide I expect the ocean to reach the steps of the apartment for the first time. It will retreat again a little but that first touch of the building will be symbolic – the beginning of the final stage. The ocean is slowly washing away the city, the people have gone, the beach washed away, the old promenade, where I used to walk with friends, where I would take coffee during the day and wine at night, is mostly under water now. I can occasionally see the green roof of the cafe, just visible at low tide, the table and chairs long since swallowed by the waves.

I read once of an English village, built on a cliff, that had been falling into the sea since the twelfth century. Homes, buildings and roads have been collapsing on the beach ever since the sea began surging at the cliff face in the twelve century. As one building collapsed the owners would retreat and build a new building at the back of the town. Slowly over the centuries the village has moved almost 5 kilometres inland as the sea advanced.

continued overleaf...

I think of my own city, abandoned, facing the advancing ocean, each tide marking out a new boundary. There is no one to rebuild. I stand here each night and observe the toing and froing of the tide and I know in a year or maybe two my own building will start to crumble. I am not sure what I will do. Should I retreat to another building in the city, further away from the waves. A building I am not familiar with, and live in a room that it is not my own. Or should I stand at the window and watch the tide surge into the foyer and wash away the foundations. Should I stand here and disappear into the waves?

The stars keep rising and move across the sky. The ocean, calm tonight, captures the silver of the moon, dancing on tips of waves as they move closer to me. Soon it will be time to turn away from the window when the tide begins to turn and sit at my desk and write of the night sky and the ocean and what lies in my future past the dark line of the night horizon.



Fish on styrofoam wrapped in plastic. Photo illustration by Mark Ulyseas.

Co-editor of *Rochford Street Review*, Adair is a writer, artist, and activist descended from several Irish refugees, most of whom came from Counties Roscommon and Galway. Two of her great-great-grandmothers were sent to Australia as teenage orphan girls on the Earl Grey Scheme in the wake of *An Gorta Mor*. Their overlooked stories have inspired many of her poems, and she was honoured to feature in September at *Poetry Plus* in County Tipperary and to participate in Ireland's National Culture Night reading at Charlie Byrnes Bookshop in Galway. She was privileged to be a guest poet at the launch in Glasgow of the collection *She's Some Woman* by The Wonderlust Women Glasgow. Adair's poems have been anthologised in *OysterCatcher One*; *To End All Wars*; *Messages from The Embers*; *Poetry for the Planet*; and published in international journals including *Live Encounters Poetry & Writing*; *FemAsia*; *The Blue Nib* as well as various independent Australian journals. She has been interviewed for 3CR's *Spoken Word* program, and has exhibited her poems together with her paintings in both solo and group shows in Sydney, Australia.

ON SEEING 'MY COUNTRY' THROUGH EMILY KAM KNGWARRAY'S EYES

The Alhalker Suite 1993

*After seeing Emily Kam Kngwarray's exhibition
and this 22 panel work in particular.*

Cultural pilgrims
we flew to London
to visit the grand tower
of Tate Modern
solely to witness
Emily Kam Kngwarray's works

At the entry we
drink in *Anmatyerr* language
listen as her descendants sing
about Alhalker Country
to the belly of the beast of Empire
just east of Shakespeare's Globe

Smiling in our hearts we encounter
ancestral stories vegetation surveys
vibrant ceremonies -- secrets *almost* shared
with our acquisitive white fella eyes
ten rooms of brilliance at scale
hung on vast white walls



Linda Adair

continued overleaf...

The womens' songs
 wash over us
 resound under soaring ceilings
 amid voices of Kam and her family
 a gift of seeing and knowing
 bestowed from their ancient land

This narrative of presence and respect
 a song of Country, plants, animals
 drawn from sand and women's dancing bodies
 ritual patterns morph onto silk batik
 flow on to canvas of increasing scope
 and majesty.

Art lovers venerate
 The Old Woman's oeuvre
 we glimpse the sacred beyond
 our pale Western point of view
 in a realm of culture and spirit
 embodying thousands of generations

Truth being told becomes beauty
 this is a celebration of survival
 suffused with ceremony and intent
 -- 40 years ago this Elder began
 mark making to tell Alhalker Country's
 story to future generations

One huge gallery wall holds
 22 uniformly-sized canvas panels
 billowing clouds of colour release
 blooming textures and meanings
 embedded in layers of paint
 reciprocity of respect for land and people

We feel deep time's pulse
 of Kam's beloved landscape
 we are seduced by her alphabet of dot and stroke
 as the coloniser's official language
 English translates for those of us
 tongue-tied to the 'Butcher's apron'.

Thousands of works created over two decades
 the epic examples shown vary in style
 defy assimilation in practice and theory
 swirling colour or vibrating textures challenge
 paradigms of knowing
 and something inside me shifts in joy.

As our putative nation 'Australia'
 continues to debate its identity
 some wish to silence voices from the heart
 we descendants of Empire's boat people
 should read the way the wind blows
 in this institution a timeless breeze
 muffles colonisation's last gasps.

Sandra Yannone (she/they), Poet Laureate of Old Saybrook, Connecticut, USA, is the author of *The Glass Studio* (2024) and *Boats for Women* (2019), by Salmon Poetry in Co. Clare, Ireland, and of the forthcoming chapbook *Fire at the Big Top* (MoonPath Press, June, 2026). She also is co-editor of the forthcoming anthology *Unsinkable: Poetry Inspired by the Titanic* (Salmon, 2026). Nominated for the Pushcart and Best of the Net awards, her work has appeared in *Live Encounters*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Lavender Review*, and *Women’s Review of Books*, among many other print and online journals. Since March, 2020, she has hosted *Cultivating Voices LIVE Poetry* on Zoom via Facebook. Visit her at www.sandrayannone.com.



CADMIUM RED

I open the abandoned
box of crinkled tubes
with crusted paint

brushes, stale
turpentine

chokes the air

her hands held
each of these
foiled tubes, colors

with names
I will come to love

like the child

I was once inside her
breezeway painting
an alphabet all my own

burnt sienna, cadmium
red, titanium white,

cobalt blue

Sandra Yannone

continued overleaf...

one summer
we hung a gallery
in her drywalled garage

charged everyone
on the street a dollar

per view

my grandfather was first
but got in for free by virtue
of being my grandfather,

her husband, the man
who'd purchased

the supplies

that kept us together
breathing in our toxic
beauty like the pure oxygen

she would come to hate
early in my teens before

she died

plastic tubing hung from her neck
like a stethoscope dangles
toward its tired heart

like a bull's nose ring,
pierced nostrils

still flaring,

signals its captivity,
a scene she painted
once on black velvet

& asked me to copy,
beside her in miniature,

so I did. See how

carefully she brushed
the capote waving
without surrender

in the matador's confident
hands, the banderillas

perfectly raptured

between the shoulder
blades, the estoque
drawing near-final blood,

and the dagger, the coupe-
de grace, finishing off

her masterpiece.

MY HISTORY WITH CARS

Glinting against the 1995 curb, the steely sky
 blue of my grandmother's Chevy, a Bel-Air
 reincarnated — the same brand
 as the cigarettes she smoked until the year
 before I was born, until the moment
 she woke to the doctor's face insisting
 she'd die from a next puff while she struggled
 to breathe through the new hole in her neck —
 the same car she used to teach me
 how to drive the summer before third grade,
 letting me steer on our Saturday morning trips
 to the grocery store and the next summer
 on the returns home off Maple Avenue
 into Cricket Court, into the driveway of any
 half-built wooden skeleton, and
 switching places with me so I could practice
 driving around in the privacy of the future
 block. And because she taught me to use
 one foot on the gas and one on the brake,
 without hesitation I said yes to my history
 teacher when I buckled myself into his
 driver's ed loaner and asked if I knew how
 to drive, only weeks after seeing the gory
 accident film from the highway patrol
 in the late afternoon of his classroom,
 which on other days doubled as detention.
 He chuckled and had me start all over
 with just the right foot, and pressing the brake
 pedal to the floor, I knew I would never get
 the new car my grandmother had promised

since I was nine, since she'd acquired
 a portable oxygen tank and elected never
 to leave the house until she died a year later,
 a December boys' basketball away game day.
 I kept official score, driving to games
 in the puke green Delta 88, my family's
 compromise to keep my grandfather off the roads.
 Day after day, I smiled back at the polyester
 car dealer seated next to my grandfather
 as he promised me a car off his shifty lot
 when I graduated high school
 while my homework and I waited
 for my grandfather to finish his drink, his
 slurrings about college and good grades
 and college to the other town drunk.
 The line of bottles behind their heads
 reversed order in the mirror spanning
 the length of the bar. Sometimes I saw
 my own reflection beyond them, but I couldn't tell
 whether that girl knew the smoke in all
 those talks of cars and days to come.

COMET

Whatever the sky has
Given me in name

Or action, whatever
I've betrayed

While the night shielded
My every move,

Whatever celestial body
Streaked across the sky

To let me know
I was alive,

I could for years
Never come clean

To the fact
That I was

Alive, that I
Deserved living.

And so we come
To the green,

Gritty powder
In a shiny foil can,

Pixie dust for
whatever ailed me

As if I could sprinkle
The chalky lime

Anywhere and scrub
The problem of living

Away. Comets
Are not shooting

Stars. Or are they?
Are they more rare

Than an eclipse
Or an equally befuddling

Cosmic phenomenon?
My grandmother

Would ask me
To scrub the bathtub

Clean, then go
Over to her sister's

And do the same.
The cleanses

continued overleaf...

Becoming ritual
After I returned

Home to where
Behind every door

The secrets
Built up

Like tree rings
Around the porcelain

Vessel. I could
Not captain

Anyone’s life,
Let alone mine.

I was not here
To scrub clean

Every aftermath
I witnessed

But did not
Speak. I could

Not use that
Household

Product to make
Everything sparkle

Like all those
Commercials

Where every
Woman smiled

Effortlessly as
She vacuumed, stars

Shooting from
Her perfect teeth.

Alexandra writes poems and short stories. She received several awards and fellowships, including the Kate Edger Postdoctoral Award from the University of Auckland (2016). Her work was published in Aotearoa New Zealand and overseas. Her latest projects include translating her poetry volume *Transformation* (Scripta Manent, 2023) into Romanian and completing her novel in progress, *A Secret History of the Metamodern*. She lives in South Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, where she teaches at a local high school.



TEXTING

The time, your time, will come
(even before the parousia
when daffodils
recover their fragrance
and kindness is its own reward).
Meanwhile, the cat's
been sleeping on my legs,
and little is right in the world

But you are home at last -
I imagine you breathing through the walls,
and I pray that your presence gives you joy.
And that the cat befriends you too.

Try treats and chin rubs
(if she's amenable to that)
while sunning herself
beside the potted daffodils
on sunny days
whose kindness
can't be questioned.

Alexandra Balm

M L Williams is the author of *Game* (What Books Press), the chapbook *Other Medicines*, and coeditor of *How Much Earth: The Fresno Poets*. His poetry and prose has appeared in *Salt*, *Western Humanities Review*, *Hubbub*, *Plume*, *Miramar*, *The Journal of Florida Studies*, *The Cortland Review*, *Rattapallax*, *Quarterly West* and elsewhere. He teaches creative writing and contemporary literature at Valdosta State University in Georgia.



RED RIVER VALLEY

*From this valley they say you are going,
We will miss your bright eyes and sweet smile.*

Wind so strong I stopped the car
and looked up at a cliff outside Wichita Falls
and the spray of dust, dusk closing in,
and then again headed north and somehow
crossed the Red River without knowing
how far I was from Byrdtown
driving from Georgia to Colorado Springs
to meet a fabric artist who found me online,
without knowing I'd crossed that river
or that its flow bled just north
of where my father was born
and where his father's mule and wagon
hauled to the south bank
to float the cotton they grew
downriver in barges to the Gulf.
Because I was oblivious, I have to imagine
the red tint of the current I didn't stop to see
and the dirt roads and plank shacks
like one they shivered in all winter
or pressing gauze on boll-pricked fingers
or huddling around the stove, boiled beans
with onions in an iron pot, collard greens,
a pan of warm biscuits, but I don't need
to imagine the hard wind, the sting
of dust in my eyes. I stopped
and stepped out into it without knowing.

M L Williams

NARCOLEPSY

*Burned black as coal
countless rise, dead souls
in the dead of night
from the atomic bombing mandala.*
—Yamaguchi Tsutomu

Sleeping on the couch in a baseball cap
in front of Nana's television, his breath
heavy, almost snoring, my uncle dreams
of long fly balls, I suppose, or nails—he is
a roofer—, or birds—he has an aviary,
raises canaries and cockatiels and shows them,
wins awards. We talk about him
as if he isn't there, joke that he falls
asleep mid-sentence, so maybe he
dreams of the sentence's end,
and because no one can recall how it started,
his dream must be like being stuck
in a poem, an exquisite corpse, perhaps,
enjambment as finale.

Years later I learn of an infidelity
and suppose he may have been dreaming
of his youth, falling in love
with his brother's wife, who became his,
and I learn he served on a dive bomber,
so he may have dreamed of flight,
engines screaming, green islands
in the glittering Pacific erupting
fire and earth and death. His obituary
mentions love of birds and his fame
in that community, his World War II medals,
his heroism, that he was on the ground
in Nagasaki the day after it was bombed.
He never talked about the war or Japan,
so now I must suppose that every sentence
his sleep interrupted could only end in nightmare
on a couch in front of a black and white TV.

TREE OF GRACE

I read about AI
composing better
college essays, writing poems
preferred for “beauty”
and for “rhythm”
by “non-expert” readers,
according to *Nature*.

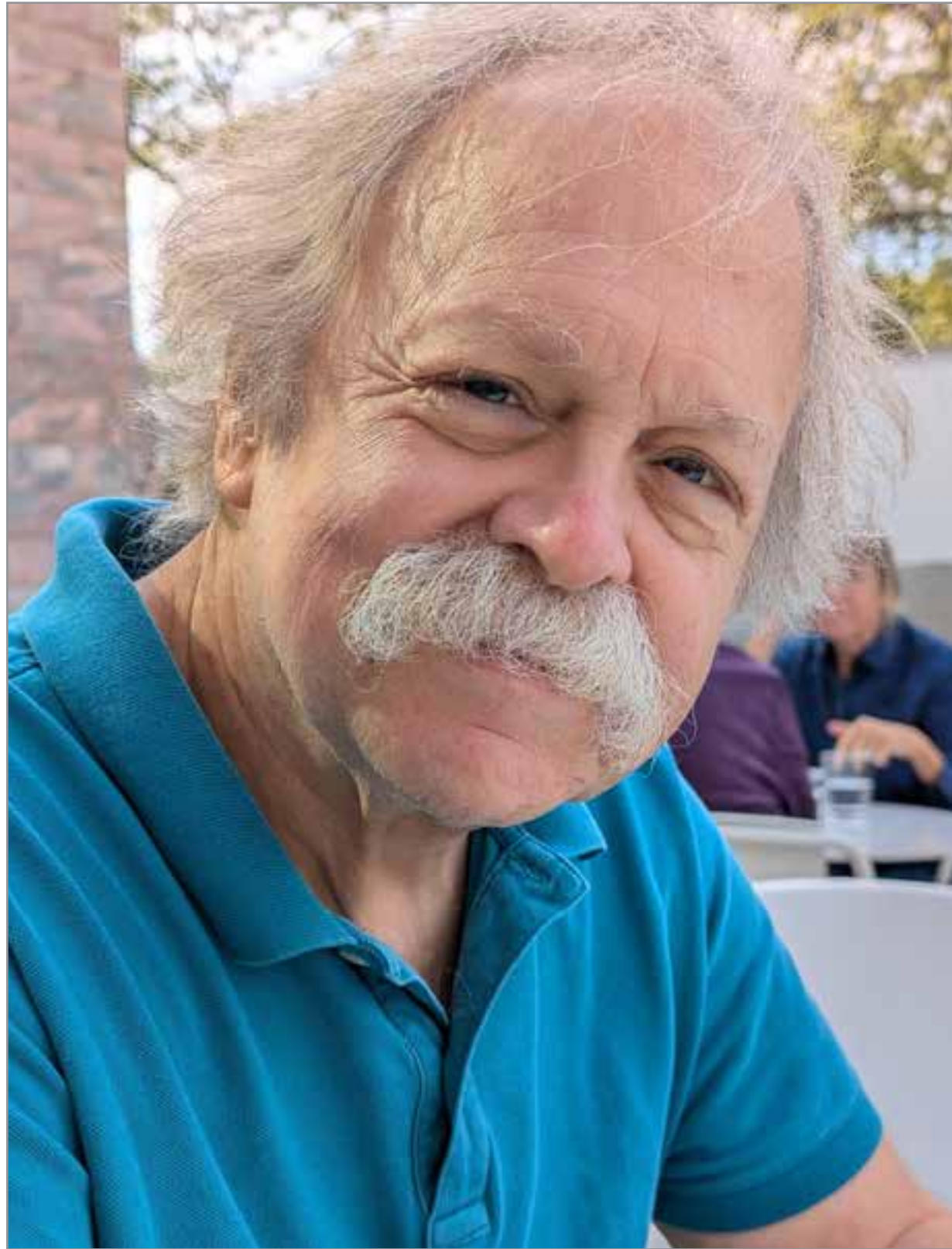
“Language speaks,”
said the Nazi
Heidegger, his quaint
and perfect hamlets
absent of anyone
who could lay its stones,
no one to build
his bridge envisioned
over the perfect brook.

We pace supermarket
aisles for red globes
of ripe tomatoes, grapes,
rough avocados, heads
of Romaine, sweet
onions picked and thighs
of chickens boned
by hands we choose
not to see or name.



Fish on styrofoam wrapped in plastic. Photo illustration by Mark Ulyseas.

Greg Kosmicki is a retired social worker who lives in Omaha, Nebraska. Greg received his Bachelor's and Master's Degrees in English from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and worked numerous jobs since then, including a 24-year stint as a social services worker for the State of Nebraska. He founded The Backwaters Press in 1997, which published over 120 books of poetry, interviews, anthologies, and fiction. It became an imprint of The University of Nebraska Press in 2017. Author of 15 books and chapbooks of poems, Greg's poetry has been published in magazines since 1975, and anthologized multiple times. His poems were selected by Garrison Keillor and read by him on "The Writer's Almanac" on Minnesota Public Radio, with another selected for Ted Kooser's nationally syndicated column, "American Life in Poetry." He twice received Individual Artist's Fellowships from the Nebraska Arts Council. His 2016 collection, *It's As Good Here as it Gets Anywhere* (WSC Press) was a finalist for the 2017 High Plains Book Award. His most recent collection, *The dog has no answers*, (Main Street Rag Publications) was published in 2024. He and his wife, Debbie, are the parents of three children and grandparents of two.



PICK-UP GAME WITH MY DAD

How many evenings in the driveway
in front of our house, where the wheat field
stretched before us to the darkening sky
did you pitch a baseball to me,
knowing I've never hit it?

Your rimless glasses, later
the brow line ones, shining
above your smile—those white-
picket-fence Kosmicki teeth with the gaps
in the dying sun each evening

but no disappointment,
never recrimination, you always thought
I guess, I'd figure it out, how to connect

and I stood there at your bed
when you gave up your last breath
but hard as I could swing
I whiffed it again, and now

some say you are up in Heaven
some say you are not
but I know you are
out there in the driveway

winding up to lob me
yet another easy one
across the random scrap of cardboard
we called home.

Greg Kosmicki

“LOOKING FOR THE BUDDHIST SUBTEXT”

For Ernst, who always did

Not long after the cancer
came back and got him
and some manic weird
thing kicked in
maybe because of meds
my friend
called me late
one night
back in Omaha

said he
couldn't understand
what the big deal was

if it was so bad
why were people
still going to their jobs

why weren't people just refusing
to do
anything

go to work
pay taxes
get up in the morning?

If the world is
coming to an end

if the planet's dying

why are we all
acting like
it's just another

ordinary day
tomorrow? Why
did we act like that today?

I didn't know what to tell him.

Every time
I agreed with him
he came back with
Then why
aren't *you*
doing anything?

Is it all real?
is it all fake?
I don't understand.

A CHARM FOR MY SISTER

(before her surgery)

We've seen them all before, the TV ad folks—
 the vibrant women directors of community
 theaters, pulling whole towns
 together for the summer play,
 the coaches getting their game
 under control, both their
 terrible diseases and their soccer
 teams, the mountaineers, the back-packers
 at the hidden chalet near the edge
 of a remote and barren desert
 laughing with friends, holding up
 a toast to their own vivaciousness,
 who walk into and out of scene after scene
 fully in charge again after disease
 had frozen them into to living rigor
 mortis, sitting at the table
 with family and friends, laughing,
 talking, smiling, holding the floor
 as they had never been able to do
 back in the dark days
 when their disease was all,
 when their disease was what their name
 was known for, but now they have traversed
 the shoals and rapids, the rocky
 boulder-strewn waterfalls of side
 effects, of gastric disturbances, flaking skin,
 loss of feeling in limbs, inability to have sex,
 tingling in their arms or legs, trouble sleeping,
 distressing or psychotic dreams

sleepwalking into the daytime to come out
 the other side, mood swings, but come out
 singing, wide-eyed, full of life, vibrating
 some new string in the universe
 with urgency, surrounded by friends
 and possibilities, able to set up a truck
 full of items handmade from feathers and stones
 at the farmers market, ever alive,
 ever gracious, ever welling over
 in gratitude for the small moments
 that make up the magnificent tapestry
 of life, no tears, no soiled spots,
 not one thing gone wrong, you become
 after your disease another of this crowd
 family and friends gathered around in hope
 and admiration, you have more life,
 now you can even play the guitar,
 hang glide and bungee jump, sky dive
 run out into the surf
 no longer embarrassed of your skin,
 you are alive like this, when this charm
 has done its job, performed its humble feat—
 just living, with all its side effects.

Lorraine Gibson was raised in Glasgow, Scotland, and lives in regional Australia. She began writing poetry after retiring from her work as a cultural anthropologist. Shortlisted for The Bournemouth Writing Prize (for poetry) 2024, Flying Islands Press Poetry Manuscript Prize 2024, and Calanthe Collective Poetry Prize 2023, her poetry appears/is forthcoming in journals, magazines, and anthologies including: *Meniscus*, *Antipodes*, *Prole*, *The Lake*, *Quadrant*, *The Galway Review*, *Live Encounters*, *Booranga FourW*, *Hecate*, *Brushstrokes IV*, *London Grip*, *Backstory*, *Eureka Street*, *Book of Matches*, *Last Stanza*, *Poetry for the Planet*, *Burrow*, *Tarot*, *Lothlorien*, and others. She is the author of, 'We Don't Do Dots: Art and Culture in Wilcannia, New South Wales'. Sean Kingston Publishing, UK.



Lorraine Gibson

ABERFAN

Rain falls gently greening the valley,
 three weeks of rain, constant,
 heavy, soaking through slag
 above tip number 7.
 Beautiful children sit in assembly,
 half-term holidays three hours away.
 Ash and old tailings form
 a liquified blackness
 a glistening wave that roared
 down the mountain, poured
 through school windows,
 filled up the classrooms
 and smothered the children waiting to sing
 of *All things bright and beautiful*
 deep in the valley of dear Aberfan.
 Here are the miners, the mothers, the fathers,
 digging for children, digging through slurry,
 hunting through pockets for sweets
 for hankies, for something;
 something to tell them
 thank God you're not mine.
 A whistle sounds. The crowd calls for quiet.
 But all that is heard is human exertion,
 the anguish of parents waiting
 above ground. The parents that knew
 of the underground springs
 that soaked through the tip to join with the rain.
 The Council who knew
 that 'something' was wrong
 and hoped to do 'something'. But 'something'
 costs money said the National Coal Board
 and should workers keep talking
 their jobs are in peril from bosses
 who value the power of the pound.

continued overleaf...

Embalmers from Ireland fly
a cargo of coffins to tend the small bodies
of Aberfan's future.
Then came the spin from the bosses and lackies.
'If only we'd known' of the underground springs
or known of the map
that marked-out their presence or
listened to parents
or Aberfan Council who told us
coal mountain will slide down the valley.
But here is an offer of £500.
A Coal Board 'donation'
we feel is 'most generous'
to cover the cost of your grief and your loss.
I remember the children
who lived in the valley
who sung in the valley;
their voices silenced
deep underground.

This week, I watched an old interview on BBC Ulster of the late Seamus Heaney; a celebration of 'Book Week'. Heaney said that some poems are '[A] kind of you might call an archaeology of the imagination, you know, digging up the past'. There are some incidents laid down in childhood that remain vivid despite the passing of years, and which are unearthed from time to time; not regularly, perhaps, but enough times to form an embodied part of memory. Aberfan is one such memory. I was twelve years of age when at 9.13am on the morning of October, 21, 1966, an illegally high 'mountain' of tailings, rubble, and ash from Methyr Vale Colliery in the village of Aberfan, Wales, thundered down Taff valley into Pantglas Junior School. 116 school children (aged seven to eleven) were crushed and buried by the sludge. Sitting with my Nana and Grandpa, seeing the horror unfold on our wee black and white television in Scotland will stay with me forever.



A fallen leaf of the Gulmohar flower. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

Kate Mahony's short stories have been widely published and longlisted/shortlisted in international competitions. Her debut novel, *Secrets of the Land*, was published in September 2023 by Cloud Ink Press. She has an MA in Creative Writing from the International Institute of Modern Letters at Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington. She lives in Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand.



Kate Mahony

THE MAN IN THE LIBRARY

The usual security guard wasn't on duty as Elaine walked through the empty foyer of the library. He had been employed since the virus broke out to check that people wore masks and showed him their vaccine passes. She imagined he'd be gone soon anyway. No job to do.

An acrylic barrier had been put up a while back in front of the main counter. The barrier separated the library assistants from the customers' spit, coughs and whatever else. A young woman with long dark hair, a red carnation tucked into one side of it, stood at the counter. Elaine hadn't seen this assistant before. The woman continued looking at her computer screen ignoring Elaine as she walked by. There was an age people got to when they were no longer noticed, Elaine had often thought. She was used to it but still it rankled a little.

She headed to the section with the best sellers. They were described that way even if they weren't. People could rent them for ten days for \$4. Sometimes she just came in and picked one up and sat down in an armchair and began to read it. Then she didn't have to pay. Money was tight enough as it was.

She was a quick reader, always had been and if she got bored or it was too much of a thriller and she didn't want to have nightmares later, she'd skip to the last chapter. A couple of the women she had played bowls with before such sports were shut down had seemed shocked when Elaine mentioned this one time.

Why not? Elaine asked. It was hardly sacrilege. 'Not as if it were a book by James Joyce or someone of that ilk.' There was nobody much to have such conversations with now. Or arguments. Most of the senior citizens had given public places like the library a miss. You could pick up the virus or the flu that was bad this winter. She picked up one of the books, sat down on the nearest chair and began to read.

continued overleaf...

After a time, she became aware of a man's voice behind her at the desk. It wasn't particularly loud but had an insistent tone. The man must have approached the assistant without Elaine noticing. She turned to look. A big pile of books now stood at one end of the counter, near the assistant. The man was tall with wild brown curly hair and had his back to her. He sounded animated. Elaine leaned forward hoping to catch what he was saying. Not that she might be intending to join the conversation, of course not. But then if the topic was interesting enough that might be a different story.

All she could make out though was the assistant – who was tallish, but not as tall as this man – saying, 'You'll have to talk to the manager when she comes back.' Each time the man said something in his quiet yet insistent voice, the assistant responded with the same or similar words about talking to the manager. Each time, she said this politely, Elaine noticed. This went on a while.

There came a different sound. The man had picked up one of the books and banged it on the desk. 'No. No need. I know you can do it yourself.' His voice had got louder. Was he threatening her?

Elaine looked around the room. No one in sight. She got up from the chair and stood to straighten a couple of books which had toppled over on the Best Sellers shelf. She walked softly on the carpeted floor towards where one of the assistants could often be found at a bench behind a glass window sorting returned books. But that part of the library was eerily quiet. Where was everybody? Off sick?

She spotted a man and woman who regularly sat at the bunch of computers towards the back of the library. They were usually silently engrossed in what they were doing – writing emails to people back in their home countries, or job applications, she had surmised. If she interrupted them, she would then have to explain the problem when it wasn't even clear to her what was happening. No, there wasn't the time for that.

She returned to the main counter. 'Listen,' the man was saying. He paused. 'Leilani.' It was as if he were reading her name slowly and deliberately off the name badge she wore on her chest. 'I am sure you can do this for me. It's not a big deal.'

His tone reminded Elaine of her aunt's husband. He was a bully. Elaine had never liked him and hadn't mourned him when he died of a stroke. She moved quietly forward and stood behind the man, on tip toes.

She peeked her head out to one side of the man, so the assistant could see her. 'Are you okay?' she mouthed before remembering she was wearing a mask. She changed her position now to giving the assistant a thumbs up sign in what she hoped was a questioning way. Yes? No? Their gaze met. The assistant's brown eyes were serious, as if she were pleading with Elaine to do something.

But what could she do? She was a woman in her elder years, the kind who got overlooked in busy streets and barged past by impatient customers in queues in shops and banks. She could hardly hit the man or yell at him to leave the girl alone.

Still, Elaine stayed, meeting the assistant's gaze. It was as if she, Elaine, were her last chance.

'You can do this,' the man repeated. Firmly.

The assistant didn't reply this time. Silence hung in the big empty room. The man must've finally realised she hadn't answered him, or he had noticed he no longer had her full attention. He swept his tall pile of books across the bench towards her and turned suddenly, almost knocking against Elaine. He strode towards the door, muttering loudly and angrily. The assistant and Elaine were silent for a moment.

But then the assistant, or Leilani as Elaine now thought of her, spoke up. 'Thank you. Thank you so much,' she said. 'Look at me, I can't stop shaking. I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't been here.'

continued overleaf...

Elaine felt she hadn't done anything. Not really. She herself wasn't shaking or fearful. Her main reaction now was curiosity. 'What was he wanting you to do?'

Leilani sighed but said nothing.

Elaine was eager to know the answer. She waited.

'It's complicated.'

'Of course.' Elaine waited again.

Leilani breathed in slowly. Then out. And then as if she had changed her mind, she said rapidly, 'He hasn't brought any of the books he's borrowed back to us. He has a big overdue fine. But he wants to borrow even more. The manager is new, and she has said we are not to let him have any more books. Not until he pays the fine. And brings back all the books.'

'That was it?' That was what the threatening tone was about. Unbelievable. 'He must love reading.' Elaine thought some more. 'Do you know him? Have you seen him before?'

'Yes, he was here last week. The same thing. He asked one of the other staff to issue them.' Leilani's tone was weary, exasperated. She lowered her voice. 'I know he's been forcing some of them to do so because they don't like to say no. Today he even asked me to waive the fine.'

The cheek of the man. Elaine felt her curiosity arise again. She wished she had taken a good look at the books that had been stacked on the counter. 'So do you know what kind of books he does get out?'

Leilani nodded. 'I have looked,' she said quietly, gesturing to the computer screen in front of her. She wrinkled her nose as if she didn't want to spell out what she had seen on there. 'They're not good.'

Elaine thought about it. 'In what way?' Her mind ran through the options. What kind of 'not good' books could a library have on its shelves? Now she was really curious.

Leilani said nothing further. Perhaps she thought she had gone too far. The man was a customer after all.

Another assistant, a slight nervy young man who looked as if he wouldn't have been much help if he tried, came out towards them from somewhere down the back of the room.

'Everything all right?'

Leilani turned to him. 'It was that man again.'

The young man nodded. Elaine found herself wondering where he had been all this time.

'This customer helped me,' Leilani continued. 'I was so scared. Look, I can't stop shaking.' She waved her trembling hands at the younger man. 'I didn't know what he might do.'

'Listen,' Elaine said. 'You must report this man to your manager. Another time he could be more dangerous. Escalate things.' And perhaps no one would be around to help. 'You must tell your boss.'

'I will.' Leilani nodded earnestly.

Elaine sensed she wouldn't. 'Make sure you do that.'

She started to head to the exit. Another security guard had joined the usual one, and both were seated together behind a table.

They were peering at their cell phones. Neither looked up. No change, Elaine said to herself.

It didn't matter. She suddenly felt energised and emboldened. She had been part of an interesting situation. Things could have got out of hand. Someone had relied on her. She had stepped in. She had been noticed.

Laura Johanna Braverman is a writer and artist. She is the author of *Salt Water*. (Cosmographia Books, 2019). Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Plume*, *Levure Litteraire*, *MER*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *The Fourth River*, *Reliquiae*, and *California Quarterly*, among other journals, as well as the collections *Awake in the World, vol. II* and the *Russell Streur Nature Anthology*. She is currently a doctoral candidate in poetry at Lancaster University. A graduate of Rhode Island School of Design, her painting works were more recently exhibited in 2023 at the Mina Image Centre (*An Ever-Changing Stream*), and in 2024 at Saleh Barakat Gallery (*Faith in the Forming*). Austrian/American by birth and upbringing, she lives in Lebanon with her family.

ON LOOKING AT HAYSTACKS

Harvest, Afternoon

In the field near the yellow school
where I first used fountain-ink for numbers
a man sits atop a tractor –

cutting pathways in the green
while a girl in purple shorts
rakes the foliage into rows.

Everywhere the scent of cut grass
drying in the copper light.



Laura Johanna Braverman

continued overleaf...

Bales, Morning

Today the field is a dance
of round-wrapped bundles –
a geometric cryptograph

seen from space –
the old story of bodies bending
over the tall crop

blade thrash –
the shoring-up of grace.

Gathering, Dusk

Come evening the bales are marshaled
into ranks, shoulder to shoulder
against the slate alps.

Light collapses
over the shorn ground. Only stubble
remains for the deer –

their quicksilver bodies flash.

Housed, Midday

An open shed:
nine haybales stacked,
three rows across and up.

I stop –
so much *there*,
the bales of grass

as if they are what keeps me
here – tethered
to the earth.

IN EXTREMIS

Busy with a blue bellflower
 in a rock-face crack, I don't see
 the nestling at first –
 still breathing on the path.
 I look for something we could safely
 rest it on until trail's end,
 until we reach the house.
 My husband tells me: *It won't work* –
 my son, *Mom, don't interfere* –
 We've tried this once before
 I know – in the days
 of revolution and suicides,
 fed our garden fledgling
 through a syringe,
 made a makeshift nest in a box.
 It chirped a day or two, then stopped.
 The alternatives to giving up.

WHEN GALES ARRIVE TO BREAK THE CANICULE

the valley night becomes a theater –
of lightning threads
and percussive pressure cracks –
of apple trees battling their rootedness.

From the mountain forest, wind
 hurttles out – a string-section crescendo:
 a storm of bees. The body's
 cellular multitudes entrained, immersed (you too

are this) – to the dark chorus
I offer my face.

The first drops meet
the transitory boundary
of skin.

Sven Kretzschmar hails from Germany. His poetry has been published widely in Europe and overseas, among other outlets in Writing Home. The 'New Irish' Poets (Dedalus Press, 2019), Hold Open the Door (UCD Press, 2020), Voices 2021 (Cold River Press, 2021) The Irish Times, The Storms, and Das Gedicht. He was awarded 2nd place at the Francis Ledwidge International Poetry Award 2022



A SLICE OF MOON

It is October and the early days
when melancholy strikes for no reason.
Maybe it is the entering of the season

of shadows, but a joy for light
remains. And yet, conkers have started
turning, half their leaves eaten away

since spring. Their hammered rust only
a sign of infestation, by morning
covered in veils of dew.

Long moments when water holds.
Before a slice of moon makes way
for traffic jams and foxes retreat

into fields again. This world of dew –
and yet I still can't help but hope
for your bonfire kiss of leaves

padlocking a box of pains
before I fall asleep. And that
when I put my head to rest

you stay by my bed until I sleep.

Sven Kretzschmar

GERMAN AUTUMN, 2023

When all chestnuts were picked up from the lawn,
we left the garden to hedgehog and sparrows,
television saw us return. To the abandoned

rubble of Gaza. Not evicted this time,
obliterated. Our news not keen
yet on telling the stories behind iron

rain, osseous ashes, phosphorus
fog where once was quickness, dissension.
A desire to live.

FROZEN APRICITY

A few scattered bales wrapped white
for winterfeed, and shreds of memory –
my trust in you in vain. Splintered
sunlight on the pond, distorted reflection –

what the world could look like. I think
of you often. Someone has gathered
crows on wire like braille music notations
in air fresh and clean, winter sun hangs

gentle between scuds and I long
for you through words, words. Under
boots, the soil does not shift. Two flocks
of starlings fly in waves like dunes

and sea wearing themselves out. Autumn
is not quite over yet, a nimble spider is
nearing the basement door. Next time I open
(up) to someone, it will be my autopsy.

María Castro Domínguez is the author of *A Face in The Crowd*, her Erbacce-press winning collection, and *Ten Truths from Wonderland* (Hedgehog Poetry Press), a collaboration with Matt Duggan. Winner last year of the first prize in The Plaza Poetry Prize and third prize in Brittle Star's Poetry Competition 2018. She was highly commended in the Borderlines Poetry Competition and this year's The Red Shed Poetry Comp. Shortlisted in Renard Press' 2024 poetry competition 'Building Bridges'. Her poems have appeared in many anthologies and journals such as *Popshot*, *Live Encounters*, *PANK*, *Empty Mirror*, *The Lincoln Review*, *The Friday Poem*, *Orbis*, *Chattahoochee Review*, *The Cortland Review* and *Backlash Press*.



A MARKET DAY

Sunday in the market. Time slips out of focus.
Pots and chains, rings and green vintage glasses.

I feel the anaesthesia of not sleeping for days.
He hasn't remembered. I want it like that.

My skin like water-colour white.
Funky oysters and papas bravas

claim their space. The move has taken weeks.
Each book hand-placed onto its perfect shelf.

Your stress decibels scream
out, way above normal range.

It's going to rain, **rain** people echo?
It drips-drops into my eyes.

A gutter flushing water
splashes us and drenches our feet.

Fake leather on offer,
a bargain a vendor says.

Grater bowls in several sizes, where you
grate garlic or lemon skins. I buy one.

Maria Castro Dominguez

continued overleaf...

Vermouth and tapas of too-dry tortilla.
Extra-large knickers on coat hangers.

Someone lowers a blind.
My son stuffs his cold hands into his pockets,

we stroll side by side. His grey face
worried about his wife and kittens.

He points to the sky, maybe we should leave.
The crowds push us slowly together

and suddenly we become one.

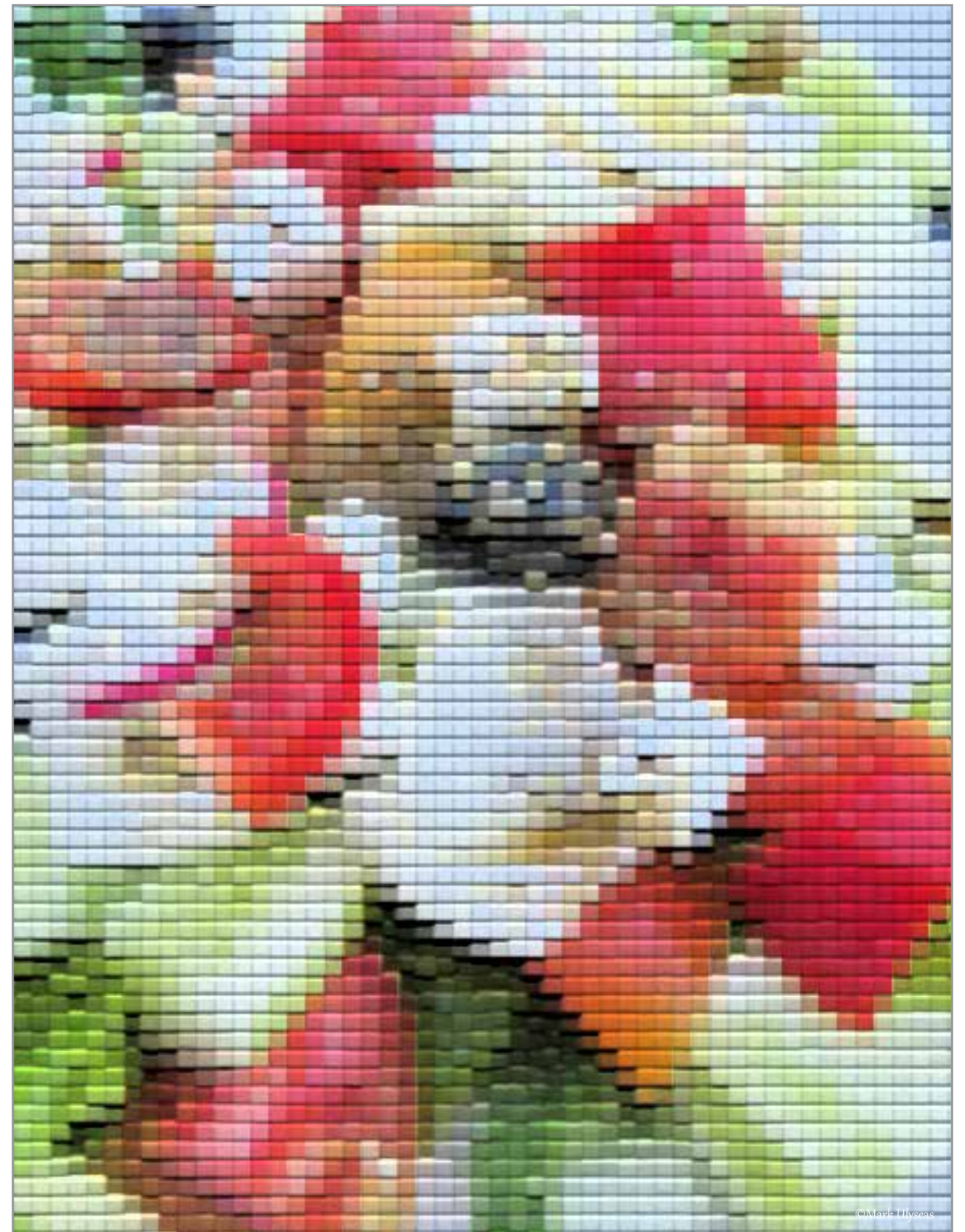
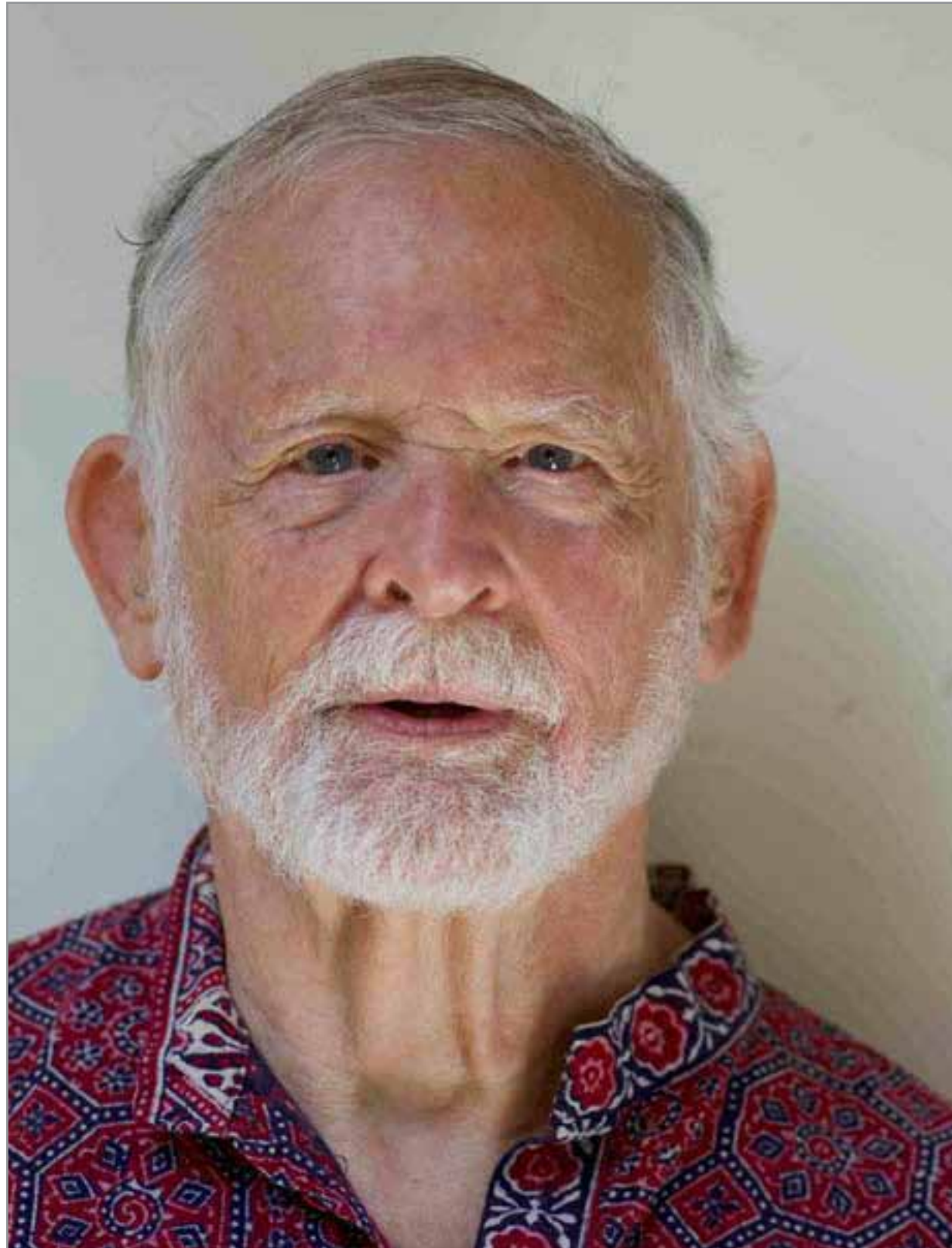


Photo illustration by Mark Ulyseas.

Dirk van Nouhuys is an American writer, journalist, minor Silicon valley pioneer, and editor known for his work in fiction and non-fiction. His work spans various genres, including novels, short stories, essays, poetry, manuals, and technical documentation. He has contributed something over 100 times to literary magazines and journals. Van Nouhuys' writing often explores complex characters and intricate narratives, reflecting his interest in the human condition and societal issues. You can learn more about him from his web page(<https://www.wandd.com/>) including a complete list of publications.



QUILTING AND GOSSIP

Anne Fukuhara called her Best Female Friend Bridget Connors Saturday morning after she returned from her trip with Dennis Forbes to make sure they could quilt the following Monday. When she entered Bridget's house without knocking, as she often did, Bridget was not working but studying a magazine showing designs. Bridget did not follow printed patterns but used them as a basis the way an experienced cook reads recipes but makes their own dish.

Bridget held up a picture that seemed a brightly colored chaos from an article titled *Experimental Quilting*.

"What do you think?"

Anne shook her head and said, "Not for me." They continued for a few minutes looking through pictures in the magazine. Bridget agreed that the bright quilt should have some hidden structure to sustain it. The quilt Anne liked best was made of irregular rectangles of different cream and beige colors and the quilter had found a piece of cloth thickly worked with vines and flowers and cut and worked it so on the quilt it appeared as a single spray extending from low on one side to nearer the top on the other side.

"How was your weekend?" Anne asked.

"OK. I went with Mark to a concert."

"How was it?"

OK. Mark is OK. He likes me. He knows how to give me a good time."

"How far does that go?"

"I'm really not sure. How was yours?"

continued overleaf...

Dirk van Nouhuys

"I showed Dennis Forbes where we were interred while he was living in our orchard."

"Shit yes. I forgot you were going to do that. How did he take it?"

"He took it."

"What do you mean?"

"It's almost all gone now. Where I grew up from seven till twelve. It's a stretch of rocky ground and ghost foundations."

"Why did you go back?"

"To show him our story."

"Did it work?"

"Even the fences are gone. Our gardens. The fields where our parents grew our crops, our apples. I couldn't tell which foundation was ours, which one was where I went to school with my friends. One building's left run by the Park Service and it was closed. Do they think it was a park? I could still find the grave yard. I got emotional. I cried and cowered. I was afraid."

"Afraid?"

"What would my father do if he saw us there?"

"He's never gone back?"

"Never, never."

"What did Forbes do?"

"He helped me to my feet."

Bridget had just begun working on something with pieces cut like a soccer ball with pentagons set in hexagons, the hexagons white, and the pentagons bright colors. She lifted the seven pieces she had stitched and asked Anne, "You see, the problem is the edge. How do I make it whole?"

"Are you listening to me?"

"Yes." Bridget smoothed the fragment she had made and ran her finger around the irregular edge.

"He asked about the monument there."

"What kind of monument?"

"It's an obelisk. Well, a small one. It has a saying written on it in Japanese."

"What does it say?"

"I never learned to read Japanese." She cast down her eyes.

"But you know what it says."

"Tower that comforts the soul." He asked me and I told him. Then I hid from him. I mean we were out in the open, but I walked away. When I returned he understood. I asked him what his father had done with our land. But his father is dead. He sold it for a lot of money."

"Did you ask him if he could make amends?"

"I asked him how much it was."

continued overleaf...

“Did he know?”

“He said, \$6,000 dollars then. He learned that from a title search. So you see he has taken it to heart. That would be about \$15,000 now.”

“Do you trust him?”

“I do. We went onto the hot springs I told you about. I soaked a long time in the warm water while he swam laps. When we were children, and I was watching him for our moms, I was older but it doesn’t matter now.”

“Are you sure?”

“He’s a good looking guy now.”

“Did you learn more?”

“No. I let him off. We talked about books. Then we went to a motel in Bishop I had picked out. A teenaged girl checked us in.”

“Separate rooms I take it.”

“She took a long time to answer the bell and was straightening her clothes when she came out of a back room. I think she had been making it with her boyfriend. Then we had dinner in a café she recommended.”

“How was that?”

“He asked about my ex-husband; so I told him.”

“How did that happen?”

“He asks a lot of questions. Questions are like coins for him that he shoves into the conversation machine.”

“But you answered.”

“I wanted him to know who he was dealing with. I asked him what he would say to my father.”

“What did he say?”

Anne shook her head. “He said he didn’t know. Well, that’s an honest answer.”

“What would your father say to him.”

“If he came with money in his hand, or something like that, he would be cordial. Otherwise the cold warrior stare. I wanted to hug him.”

“Did you?”

Anne shook her head. “I was afraid. All night long I was afraid.”

“Are you afraid of him.”

“Not now. We have a date next Friday.”

“Does that mean what I think it means?”

“I think so.

“What are you afraid of?”

“How am I to be myself?”

“How close were you on that trip.”

“I already miss our conversations.”

continued overleaf...

“Is this a romance?” Bridget asked.

“No, something else. A romance is about the future. We live where the past and future mix.”

“Sometimes. Sometimes it’s very much about the moment,” Bridget mused.

“We drove on through gorgeous canyons up to the Sonora pass.”

“What’s that?”

“It over 9000 feet. In history people ate one another when they were trapped there.”

“Are you sure that’s not ‘Donner Pass’ — I remember it was called ‘The Donner party’.”

“I’m not sure. Do you think there could be foxes up there?”

“Foxes?”

“Yes, I thought I smelled foxes around the view point. There were foxes sometimes in our orchard. I smelled them at night when I was as a little girl. It was scary. In Japan fox spirits, like, they are scary nature spirits. At night they carry torches to their weddings. Seeing their dancing lights is a good omen, but they take revenge on uninvited guests.”

“Revenge?”

“I think they can steal your soul. They are shape changers. Sometimes they take human form and marry men or women and it’s a good omen.”

“Is he a fox?” Bridget asked.

“Am I a fox?” Anne answered.

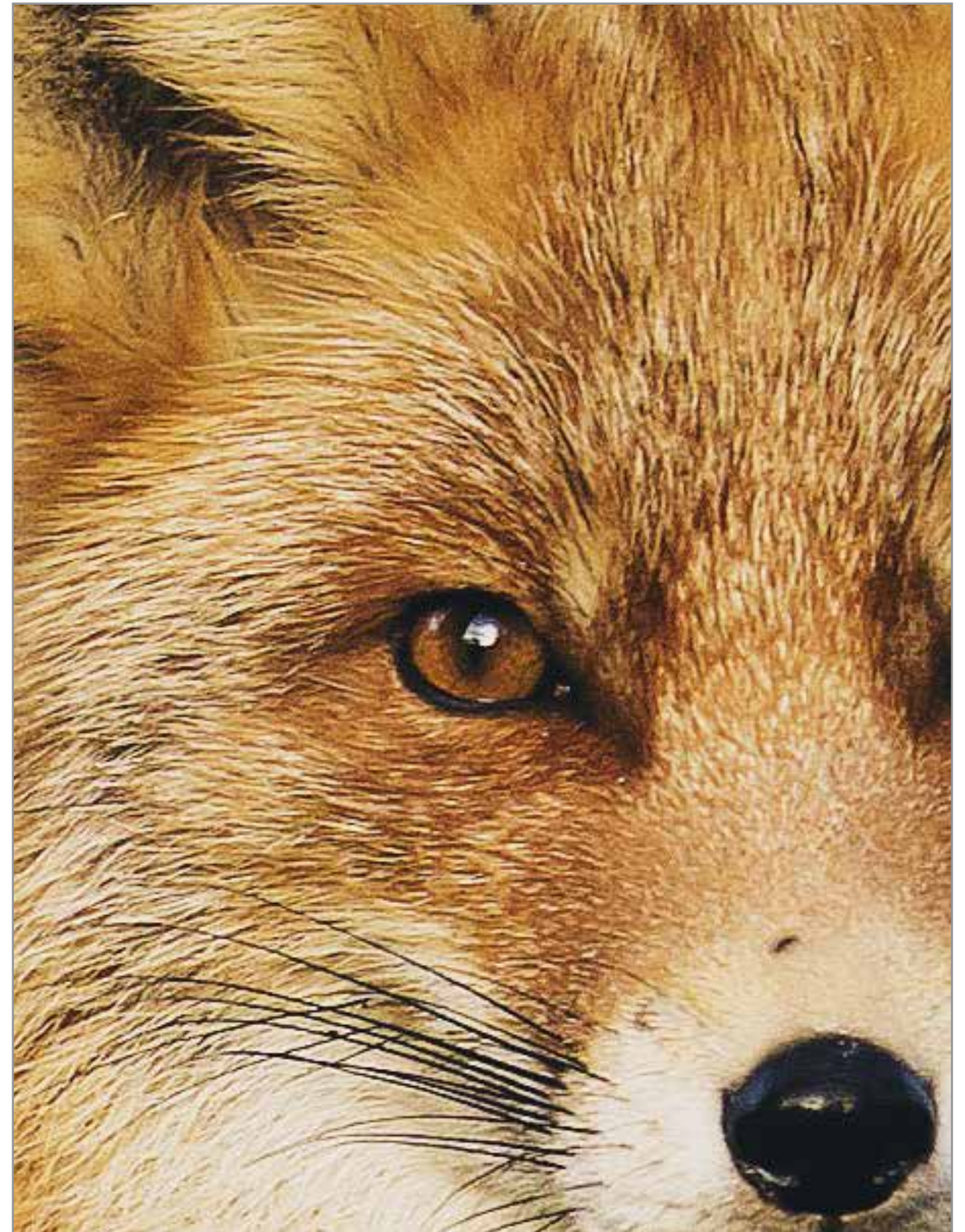


Image by Pexels from Pixabay.

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

A RAIN MEMOIR

1
The rain on my concrete patio
shades from charcoal
to pale grey

mirrored by clouds
the tinted biography
of a minute

2
The rain so light it sprinkles
the nasturtium leaves
with water crystals

their green shimmer
a celebration
of dawn's lushness

3
Eastern spinebills flit
from flower to flower
their littleness a bonus

as their curved beaks
feast on the garden's
blissed nectar



Patricia Sykes

A HEART'S DIVIDENDS

As little more than a sizzle
on the hotplates of history

my heart's morphology
atop its chassis of bones

at once a shackled star
and a sanctum of joy,

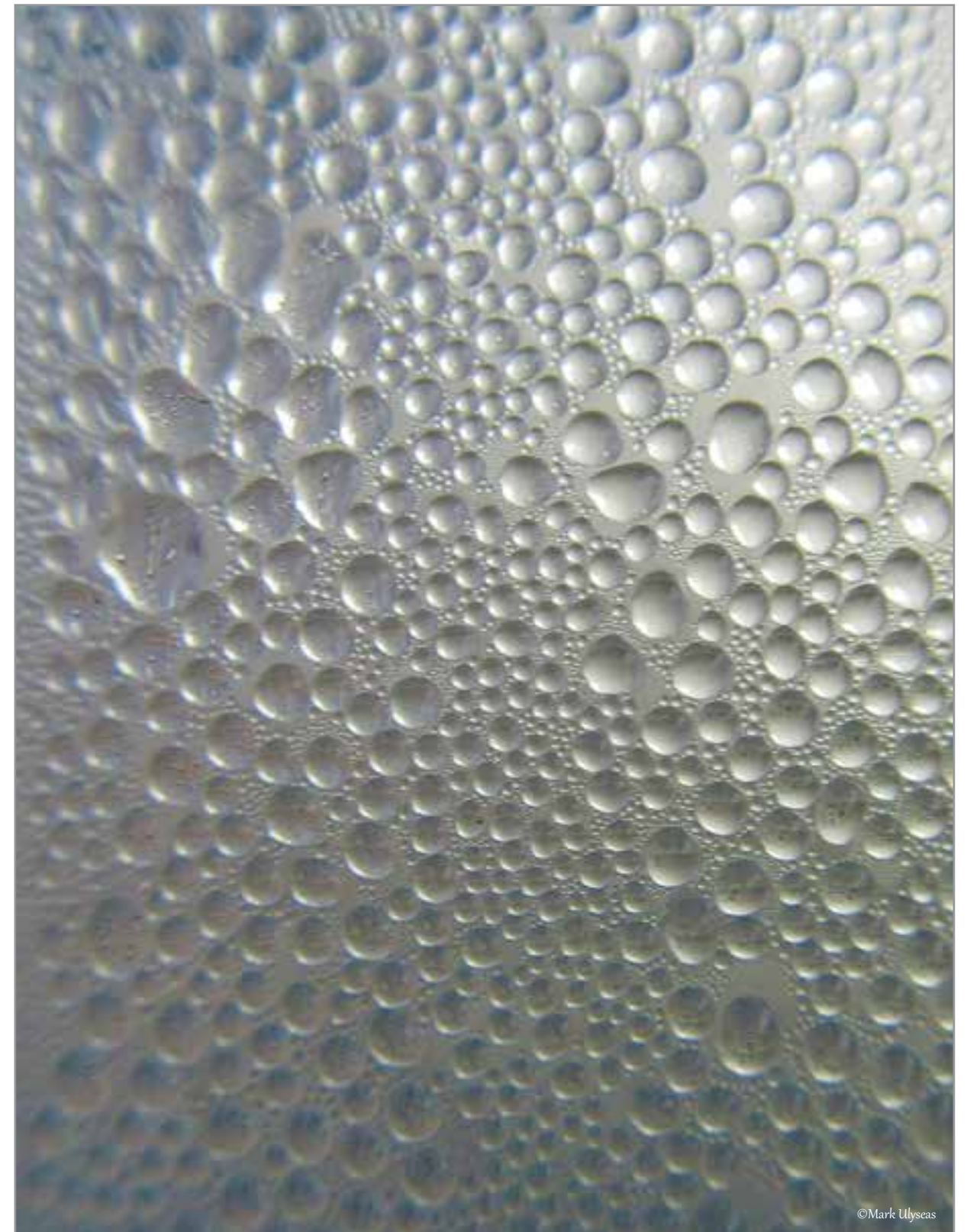
grief, as it sings
its own redemption

despite its litany
of secrets

it relishes the brain's
wild fruit

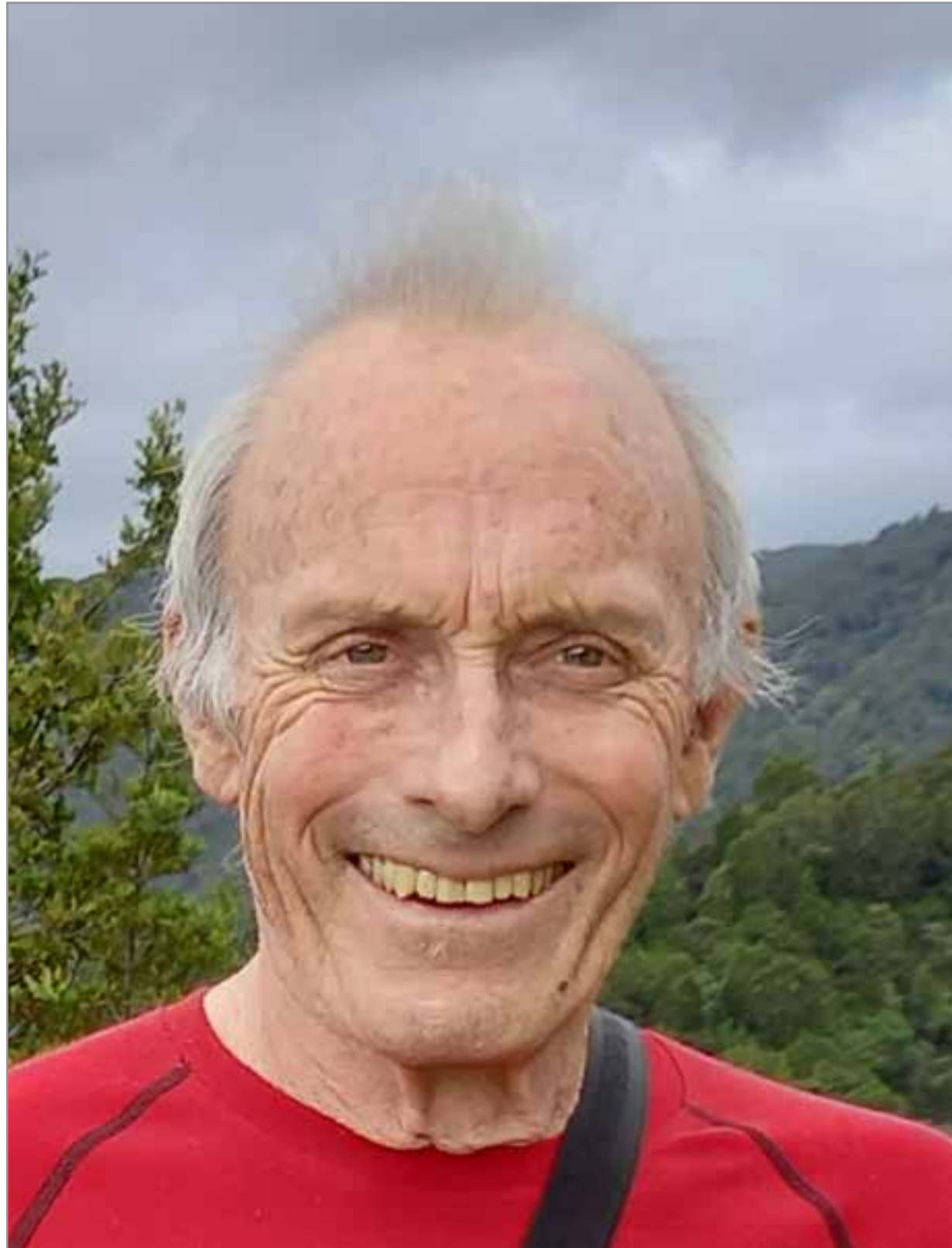
expelling toxins
from its lungs

as it swims off
in witness



Rain drops on a window pane. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

Piet Nieuwland lives in Whangarei. His poems and flash fiction appear in print and online journals in Australia, USA, India, Aotearoa, Antarctica and elsewhere. His latest books, *As light into water*, and *We enter the*, are published by Cyberwit, and a new collection, *Anticipation*, is developing. He publishes *Fast Fibres Poetry*, an annual anthology of Te Tai Tokerau poetry and participates in collaborative visual art exhibitions. As co-ordinator of *Intangential*, a short poetry flash fiction music dance show for the local fringe festival, he also performs live poetry, convenes local monthly poetry gatherings and is a book reviewer. He trained as a forester and once worked as a conservation strategist for Te Papa Atawhai. <https://www.pietnieuwland.com/>



TOSSING FLIM-FLAMS

Pluvial and riverine flooding
 engulfing the fever of the curved shore
 the great lapping desire of fluid boundaries
 in a county based on the violence of speculative colonial cartography
 scattered with imperial graffiti
 of pearls and gladioli and crystalline rumors
 of luscious Oriental contours that sparkle
 a network of spiders that ride upon a frothing squall
 blossoming pohutukawa bleeding a lament for the coast
 dense curling crimson ruby black vermilion glimmers
 of angels Semenaza, Zyandoz and Umabel
 tossing the flim-flams of the law with their friends
 the niddy-noddy satchel –loaded seekers of Friar Bindfastatis
 and twenty-seven girls chasing white butterflies
 from the tranquility of a previous existence
 in an old cemetery in Oakura Taranaki
 that features on maps of blood
 and melancholy

Piet Nieuwland

RIFF IS

*A choir of seagulls does their best on 'Heavenly Pop Hit' a song
by the Chills*

Trees with skins of mica breathe into the billowing
purple gush of lush magnolia branches
where a puriri moth rests camouflaged
clouds gather collecting charge over Kaihu Plateau dark
today three septillion yottawatts of light were emitted by two
black holes merging
a field of mushrooms sheds spores into the still air
I am hurrying, though heading nowhere
toward language as desire, love as colour
no one sees bittern by the river anymore
we sing waiata in the community hall
and Earth is a magic carpet
a spectacle of glisten gleam sparkle and twinkle
spin surfing and slip tangling
on a guitar jangle riff

SQUIRM

*'television viewers oblivious to the repetition of racist lies
squirm in their ontological insecurity'*

Te Tiriti o Waitangi workshop 2024

In the archipelago of clouds that wander over us
the pale light of night lies like a duvet over the city
street lamps illuminate their corners
and pathways through fog
ruru call from puriri forest as green eyed cats prowl
their territories
through the endless midnight tuna rivers in sinuous lines
glow with pockets of time
opening up on edges, crumbling out, falls of silty sand,
a few small stones
twigs and leaves falling in, fragments of language
paragraphs of hills, their wide sheets of experience
the fabric of sentences, valleys of syllables
a series of slips and slumps, opening phrases
a sluice in heavy rain, a gush of torrents
of holding on to what is sacred
tapu

Tim Dwyer's debut full collection, *Accepting The Call*, has won the Straid Collection Award. His poetry appears regularly in Irish, UK and international journals, and he is a previous contributor to *Live Encounters*. Originally from Brooklyn, NY, he lives by the shore in Bangor, Northern Ireland. <https://templarpoeetry.com/collections/new-titles-submissions/products/accepting-the-call>



TWO WINDOWS

In America
middle of the night
high in the sky
I see harvest moon
glow through cumulus

while in Ireland
early in the night
above the hedge
you watch harvest moon
through a hazy veil

From these distances
we look to the Milky Way
white river of stars, where
herd boy is sailing back
to weaving girl.

*Inspired by 'A Moonlit Night' by Du Fu, transl by David Young,
Five T'ang Poets, Oberlin College Press, 1990.
Weaving girl and herd boy, from a Chinese folk tale*

Tim Dwyer

FLIGHT DETAILS

for Paul

Leaving the off-licence,
our imagined conversation begins.
I tell you I come here to buy
the cheap stuff,
protect my reputation at the wine shop
where they know me by name.

You counter with a story
from your late teens,
driving two Ohio towns over
to purchase *protection*.
You imagine being *Cool Hand Luke*
to cover up Catholic boy jitters.

Crossing the street, I turn to the empty air
and tell you one better—
the flight path is clear
for your welcome arrival.

MULLED

During last night's thunderstorm
apples were shaken from Gary's tree
and tumbled down the narrow lane.
I pick up one and take a bite,
sweetness of a McIntosh
from long ago. Red. Plump. Crisp.
I fill my pockets and gather
the bruised ones strewn on the ground.

Press, ferment, mature,
mull with cinnamon, zest, and cloves.
Serve the cider piping hot
for one more lingering winter.

Sarah Tiffen is a poet, publisher, speechwriter and teacher. She is Leeton born and bred, and founded Riverina Writing House in 2021 to allow the voices of rural people to be heard and to make unique books and promote writing, stories and literature at home and abroad. She is forever grateful to her own publisher Ginninderra Press and Stephen Matthews for giving her the chance to be a 'real' poet with her own books, and wants to give this transformative opportunity to others. In a world of turmoil, authentic, beautiful, grassroots, literary objects made with love, telling stories of truth, is an act of defiance, rebellion and a crusade to uphold values that make us human, fragile, faulty and real. Her sixth book of poetry – *Redemption Road: new and early works* – is out soon. She is mother of three amazing children – Tom, Lil and Wilbur – and loves swimming, poetry, her dog Alfred Maximus, drinking whiskey and talking by the fire, and walking in wild places.



Sarah Tiffen

THE HEART OF STARS

"If we have no peace, we have forgotten that we belong to each other."
- Mother Theresa, Calcutta

The day I saw Professor Brian Cox on a reel
where he talked about being asked to make a video message
for the leaders of the world to play
at the opening of the Glasgow Climate Summit – and he said
that, instead of a video saying 'Welcome to Glasgow',
he made a video where he made an important argument as quickly as he could
to be discussed by the leaders of the world at that summit, being:

'that it is possible that this is the only place where complex biology has emerged
in our galaxy and if that's true then this is
the only island of meaning in a galaxy of 400 billion suns
and you are responsible for it, because you are the world's leaders -
therefore, if you destroy it either through deliberate action or inaction
then each of you are personally responsible for destroying meaning
in a galaxy of 400 billion suns potentially forever.
Go away and discuss.'

was also the day that I heard from my daughter
that she saw a tiktok of an obstetrician in a burned out bombed out
hospital in Gaza cutting open the bodies of dead mothers
to rescue the babies who were very soon to be born before
their young dark-eyed mothers were killed by bullets and bombs
and on the bed beside the doctor were ten tiny little babies
swaddled and peeping and shocked from having been
ripped from the wombs of their heavily pregnant dead mothers
by a weeping, bleeding doctor in a burnt out bombed out birthing room
in the desperate hope that she could give them life amidst the carnage
of dead women's bodies, amidst the wreckage of a hospital
the bombing of which was a war crime and unforgiveable
and my daughter, herself a new doctor, wept as she told me,
and I was so grateful for the profound gift of her and her love

continued overleaf..

and it was also the day that I was gifted Bertolt Brecht's poetry by Can Dundar - a Turkish journalist living in exile in Berlin, who was interviewed on the radio and who wrote an article about Ekrem Imamoglu, the jailed Mayor of Istanbul, invoking the words of the great German poet and playwright at the conclusion of his essay:
'All of us or none'.

All of us, or none.

It was such a thought to chew on as I drove the winding roads from the west, avoiding kangaroos and sheep, and it moved me to search for Brecht's poetry and I found a man who was himself in exile most of his life, fleeing the Nazis in his own Germany, then fleeing McCarthyism in his adopted America, with a voice so familiar and wise and kind I wished to invite him for beers and yarns, and discovered so many magic words, like:

'What is done, is done. The water that you poured into the wine can not be poured out again, but everything changes. You can begin anew with your very last breath.'

And I was so grateful to find poet kin in this unexpected way, and thought about how truly mad it was that anyone would try to kill or jail such a mind, a mind unable to submit to fascism and gently incredulous that anyone would fall for such a thuggish, nasty, small-dicked, ill-begotten and shameful ruse as that.

And it was also the day that I listened to Khaled Sabsabi speaking about being an artist denounced and repudiated by politics, and how a murderous thug regime in Israel had led to him being labelled a terrorist in Parliament in Canberra by culture war idiots leveraging suffering to promote their own right-wing shallow thug views thus censoring the artist's right to satire, ironically and not, given the conservative appropriation of free speech as a weapon of prejudice, ironic and tragic as Sabsabi is a Lebanese Christian – a Maronite - a sect as gracious and ancient as the Druz – but they censored him because he has a Middle Eastern name and twenty years ago created art critiquing Islam and urging the true sacred of our shared humanity, regardless of our faith – as faith is faith in the sacred no matter what the shape and sound, and how he – the artist - had chosen to be silent in the face of his defamation in deference to the great Maronite saint St Charbel, whose shrine he had visited on his first trip home to Lebanon from Western Sydney since fleeing war with his family in 1977, and following the teachings in the words of the saint:

'If you don't understand my silence, you will not understand my words', which is of course imbued with great humility and dignity, though Brecht wrote once, as the Nazis took hold of his beloved country and catastrophic war was imminent:

'I always thought that the simplest words would suffice. If I told things the way they were it would rend the heart of anyone. That you will go under if you don't defend yourself, should be utterly clear to you.'

*That you will go under if you don't defend yourself
should be utterly clear to you.*

continued overleaf...

Though the dignity of silence in grief is noble,
 like the great Indigenous Antipodean intellectuals and spiritual leaders
 Noel Pearson, Marcia Langton, Tom Calma and Megan Davidson –
 who entered into the Holy Silence of Grief after the
 terrible and inexplicable repudiation of The Voice,
 the violence of that abstruse denial, of that invitation
 which was only to acknowledge presence in grace,
 which was a simple and gentle request to hear the
 First Belonging, and enshrine that First Belonging
 as a right to be heard and embraced so one
 small colonial outcrop could build a deeper, closer,
 richer belonging to each other and the Earth, the Sea and Sky.
 Dignified in Silence – the cultural mourning -
 though of course the Silence elongated until the thugs shamefacedly,
 defensively and smugly thought they had managed
 to eradicate what cannot be eradicated – which is objective linear time,
 and the Fact of 60,000 versus 250 – and the pictures in
 the galleries of the Pilbara’s Murujuga, amongst the gorgeous
 megafauna art, that tell the story of how
 the ancients saw tall ships arrive, and strange white ghost
 people emerge from amongst the sails and smoke.
 Which is only to say that 260 nations of people were thriving here
 before the English landed – because they saw them land.
 Sometimes silence means there are no words left.
 The children of Gaza are mute. They cannot speak.

But still after all that, I couldn’t help notice the sky was a blue cloth
 stitched and embroidered with white cloud flutes and feathers –
 and that a magpie had stood in a patch of light and sung his own kind of tune,
 lilting in descending minor keys,
 and that the paddocks were dark mahogany and amber coloured,
 rich with the mystery of minerals that sustain life, and
 the light at the end of the day was golden, golden, golden,
 and I could not help but revel in it, it’s sheer miraculous beauty,

and then slept fitfully
 after reading Olga Torkaczuk – her words like woodwork and tunnels and forests, a
 song that was laid in my blood centuries ago. Dark labyrinths of burgundy,
 intricate, gruff, galactic, a hungry spirit world.

**

Last night I read that Geoffrey Hinton, the godfather of Artificial Intelligence,
 holds grave fears for the world and humanity in the face of unfettered AI, and that we
 should
 urgently and carefully install great scaffoldings of protection and limitation
 to the rapidly obscenely multiplying virus of this technology of deceit,
 this technology of debasing and violating authenticity and language,
 appropriating our minds, our heart, our inexplicable capacity for melding
 words, love, philosophy and sex into beautiful things, the yawping cry of
 the human heart into the magnificent wilderness of mountains and rivers
 and trees. And I tried to find a program that would remove AI from my life,
 from my laptop and emails and research and writing and making of documents
 and texting my children with private dialects of thoughts and love –
 and I haven’t worked it out yet,
 and despair and think – doesn’t anyone remember Terminator 2? Doesn’t anyone
 remember Sarah Connor and her desperation, and how Sky Net burned
 the children while her carcass screamed hanging from that fence around the play-
 ground?
 Since the proliferation of ‘smart’ phones, the mental health of our young
 has plummeted – universally anxious, universally depressed –
 while we argued about energy and habitat and whether someone
 made of botox was fucking someone made of steroids –
 and then I might conclude that we are fickle and selfish
 and cruel and violent and careless and beyond redemption.
 That God abandoned us a long, long time ago, because we
 don’t deserve either peace or one another or this world...

continued overleaf...

But after all this, when I smell cloves I can feel the memory-feeling
 of standing in my grandmother's kitchen, and the sound of apples
 being peeled, and the light through the claret ash at the front of the house
 and my grandfather coming home from the farm and lying on the floor
 in his corduroy and flannelette, the scent of grease and hay.
 The scent of my newborn daughter, cinnamon and custard
 just before I bled out. The exquisite sense of a dewy morning
 on the farm, a cello's low and gracious mourning.
 As Mary Oliver so quietly and pragmatically observed:

'it is a serious thing
 just to be alive
 on this fresh morning
 in this broken world'.

I deeply and wholeheartedly believe.

**

Then on the day that a young husband hung himself in
 the garage of the family home while his little children were at school,
 and Iris turned 100 years old, and Lent began,
 and rain was promised and the television was unbearable
 and the Presbyterians said they didn't feel comfortable
 to hire their church hall to people of a different God, who were
 the Muslim community of Afghans and Indonesians and Syrians and Malaysians
 who wished to gather to hold their iftar happy feast with friends and family,
 and to which everyone was invited to join in,
 I heard Esther Freud, daughter of painter Lucian Freud
 and great-granddaughter of Sigmund Freud – and whose family luckily
 escaped Nazi Germany to England when her father was a boy –
 talking about a story about homes for unwed mothers in Ireland in the 1960's

where people sent their daughters, and where orphans and lost girls went
 to be cared for by the nuns and priests, and where all the girls were sinners
 and they were forced by the nuns to labour alone, and their babies were taken
 from them and some of the babies were the children of priests and later
 they found in the gardens of homes for girls mass graves filled with the
 bodies of 1000's of little babies born in sin and unconsecrated – and the
 streets filled with women with broken hearts for the babies that were taken
 and that luckily, Esther's mother was independent and fierce and had Lucian,
 and kept her babies close and went on adventures to Morocco instead of
 having to hand her babies to nuns in the dark.
 And I wondered about our capacity for suffering
 and inflicting suffering on others
 and how Christ suffered for us but did not
 I think intend for us to make others suffer for us
 to invoke Christ's suffering,
 as we are not Christ but only human and
 we belong to the sacred and we need each other
 and it's 'all or none' and we ought to, must, tread carefully
 and prayerfully upon the earth.

And on the day I drove once more to the west, in a cloud
 of halcyon light, with the ghosts of ancestors thronging
 and the whispering country shining and my heart a prism
 of love and sadness, I thought of philosophy,
 and the cosmologist's words on the only question worth asking, which is:

What does it mean to live a finite fragile life in an infinite eternal universe?

'And the answer is so paradoxical that whilst we are definitely physically insignificant
 – the Earth is one planet circling around one star amongst 400 billion stars in one gal-
 axy amongst two trillion galaxies in a small patch of the Universe, so we are definitely
 small, just specs of dust

continued overleaf...

But if we think about what we are – collections of atoms, and some of them are as old as time, our bodies made in stars cooked over billions of years in a pattern that can think – you have the means by which the universe understands and explores itself, which is us.

And it sounds unlikely when you put it like that – you take a few things, cooked in the heart of stars, stick them together and suddenly they have ideas and they form structures that can think and feel, and stars start writing music! How does that happen?

And then you ask, are there other worlds where this has happened – and the answer is no, or we must work from that premise – so this is the only place where anything thinks for millions of light years in every direction.

And if you consider the sheer miracle that this planet is the only place where anything thinks – then suddenly you end up considering this planet the most valuable place in the universe.'

And I remember a chilly evening in June
when my youngest son and I had taken our dog for a walk on the commons
on dusk when the quiet was soothing and the bitter winter breeze a tonic
and the water black marble with swirls of streetlights and moonglow
and the bush clumped silhouettes like gatherings of rangy dark monsters
and on the last turn, my son saw a shape on the ground ahead,
lying as if flung by a small bottlebrush tree in the dark,
and as we approached we saw it was the body of a man
alone and unmoving in the freezing mid-winter dark,
and my son bent down close by and heard that he was breathing,
and asked 'are you ok, mate?' and got a slight moan in response,
and we conferred and called the ambulance
and waited there to guide them in to the
lone lonely man prone on the cold grass in the freezing mid-winter dark
of that bitter late evening in June.

For to sleep in the open in winter in this austere and Godless city,
unconscious and unremarked, would surely lead to death
and though we had our own worries, and were unknown to him
and he to us, the fact that our paths had crossed in the dark
on that night meant we

were bound by ties of cosmic reasoning,
each cooked in the heart of stars a million years ago
and that we must show compassion, and wait on hold
on Triple Zero, and wait until the ambulance arrived
and hand him to the medics to be saved. For to do nothing
would be to look away from our shared belonging,
and that one day we too may be lying in the dark
alone and frozen and hope for others to do unto us
the same. Or if not, that we ourselves could at least walk forward
with the sense of purpose and moral fortitude
that comes with doing what is right out of love
for your fellow man, or creature,
and if only we were not so afraid at the thought
of being alone and sacred in the universe
that we are consumed with self-hatred
and must pursue divisions in order to
define ourselves as other, not one,
and to tell ourselves our battles are mythic
and meaningful so the fight itself deflects
from our own inevitable reconstitution
back into the stars after a short, fragile,
miraculous, and sacred life.

And we could live quietly and in grace
amidst the light and water and the birds and dragonflies
and consider seriously the miracle of Life,
of trees, of poetry and music and love
and practice rituals of communion
that affirm we belong to one another
and pray to all gods together
and never bomb hospitals or kill children
or eradicate peoples or think that any one of us
is entitled to any more than any other
and listen carefully to the Universe breathing peace
and breathe it back.

Sharon Fagan McDermott is a poet, essayist, and teacher who lives with her dog Beowulf in Pittsburgh, PA. She has published four collections of poetry, most recently *Life Without Furniture* (Jacar Press, 2018). Her first collection of essays, *Millions of Suns: On Writing and Life*, co-written with M.C. Benner Dixon was published in 2023 by the University of Michigan Press. "Poets and Writers Magazine" named this collection of essays and writing prompts one of its "Best Books for Writers."



ON GROWING OLD

A train winks between a memory
of leaves. Its engine whistles through
morning yarrow, spider webs glint in sunrise.

I was so alone in that Jersey field,
but peace opened in me like snowdrops.

Sweet planet of air, I am here! Whatever
it means to be passing through. I miss
my home, which is no longer where I left it.

Those August winds carrying rain—so riotous
earlier--now just mizzle and fog.

Now back in this brick city, its contortion of steps
and rivers. This here and now to make a stand,
to understand. To make my bed. To belong

somewhere. To be stood, understood, to know
my place. To place the steaming mug down.

Sharon Fagan McDermott

SEVEN STUDIES OF LIGHT

1
How light asserts itself.
How it argues the dust
and twine of these empty
chairs. How it guides
you where to look,
why to bother.

2
The light in Hopper's
paintings maps
the miles between
us all, the shut door
a human face could be.

3
Plump sunrise:
a nectarine on a pile of books.

4
My friend Francis says, *Let go.*
Make room for the new. He etches
a bridge onto a copper plate. I nod,
but I can hardly trust a man with acid
near his fingers. But oh!
what he finally captures in his art
--how light defines itself--
how it twists in branches
of the thin-limbed trees.
How it shreds to sparkle
in the January wind.

5
Blue smoke and a train.
Notes split the wheat
from sun-pools
in late afternoon
haze.

6
Desert scorch
turned O'Keeffe
to her luminous bones.

7
Better to speak a dead language.
Better yet? To still yourself.
Nothing you say will bring them back.
Nothing you say will hold their strange light.

Vicky Tsaconas is based in Naarm/Melbourne. She writes poetry, creative non-fiction and reviews. Her poetry and prose have been published in the anthologies *Southern Sun*, *Aegean Light* and *Mothers from the Edge*, in *Stylus Lit*, the *Australian Multicultural Writing Project*, *Transnational Literature*, *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Azuria*, *Hobo Poetry Magazine*, & *(ampersand)* and *Unusual Work*. Her essays and reviews have been published in Australia, Greece and online (including on *garland* and *Senses of Cinema*). In 1996, she won second prize in the Poetry Section of the Greek Australian Cultural League Literary Competition and in 2003, one of her poems was Highly Commended in the Daffodil Day Arts Awards. Vicky was one of the founding members of *Διφωνίες (Difonies) Journal of Greek Australian Thought*.



THE PAGE

after *Letters to Amherst III* by Edmund de Waal, 2023

one
translucent
scrap
among many
in a room bare
except for
a desk chair books

she hides it
so it does not shatter
writes silver words:
porcelain
in a vitrine
that hangs from the wall
spiderly ridges
the only marks

away from the light
they are not visible
close-up – secrets
held by minute grains
specks of glass
transformed

to light, and then return

Vicky Tsaconas

ONCE AGAIN

after *The Boat Which Carries Time* by Chiharu Shiota, 2017

I collect
blood-red threads
interlace
ends dropped
a while ago
mesh a boat
for my soul
moments
days
slip
past

in this world
and in dream

Ηλιο HELIOS

emerges
crown aglow
from water that holds us
journeys
across the blue above
his glimmer a balm
as the blue below
focuses my gaze
soothes my eyes

in the distant west
he dips
in gold cup
makes his way back
minute
by minute
to begin again

Ηλιο – believed by the ancient Greeks to be the sun-god

John Kenny is a writer and editor from Dublin, Ireland. His short fiction has been published in *Uncertainties*, *Revival Literary Journal*, *The Galway Review*, *Transtories* and many other magazines and anthologies. His poetry has featured in *StepAway Magazine*, *Lothlorien Poetry Journal*, *Smashing Times*, *Every Day Poets* and *Poem Alone*, and is forthcoming in *The High Window* and *Prole*. John is also winner of the NurePoets Corner Award 2025, judged by John F. Deane, and has edited three anthologies of short fiction: *Writing4All: The Best of 2009* (2009), *Box of Delights* (2012), and *Decade 1: The Best of Albedo One* (2016).



NO HEAVEN

No heaven will judge us
for our cruelty to each other
and our fellow creatures,
bred to slaughter,

endless generations burned,
pole-axed and dismembered,
bones piled high, crushed,
powdered, settled to earth,

entrails used, abused, repurposed,
drains clogged with offal,
blood gouting to rivers that
enrich our native clay

with an ancient memory of
all that we have accomplished
since we sprang from
our forgotten Eden.

No heaven, no, but Eden
yes, her splendour buried,
will disinter her savage beauty
and deliver us her answer,

wipe us from this troubled
sphere and leave the air,
as after a brief rainstorm,
sweet and clean.

John Kenny

BRAVE NEW WORLD

In the City Garden park, Sofia,
clustered at one end, a
scattering of market stalls
I wander through this
bleak winter day.

Amongst the knick knacks
bundles of photographs,
sepia-toned portraits
of uniformed men
and their families.

1880s, 1890s? some
from the Great War,
no names on their backs,
no dates, no hint of
who they were,

and next to them,
thrown into boxes, heaps
of tarnished medals, awarded
across many wars, most
Russian, some German,

sold generations ago to
feed hungry mouths in the
wake of national fervour,
all glory gone in
harsh new realities,

photos left in abandoned
apartments, medals changing
hands, to be picked over by
anonymous fingers in a
brave new world their
owners never got to see.

BRAY HEAD

Halfway up Bray Head I turn
and cast about to catch the
silent advance of waves
to shoreline, flattened by
distance, hushed by
sun-drenched air,

the pebbled beach dotted
with people, tiny dogs walking
along the promenade, buggies
pushed, toddlers toddling
handheld on its low wall,
kiosks vending ice cream,

couples on green baize grass
by the bandstand, shimmering
in heat's haze, savouring the
vinegared tang of newspapered
chips, engaged in lives from
which I'm forever barred,

and up in the blue cloudless
vault wheel gulls released
from this earth's grip,
crying free, unbounded
by our concerns, and
uncaring.



Photo illustration by Mark Ulyseas.

A retired librarian, Helen Fallon grew up on the border of Northern Ireland and now lives in Kildare. She began writing in 1991 after returning from working at the University of Sierra Leone. Initially she wrote memoir pieces and short stories. Her work has been broadcast on Sunday Miscellany, Lyric FM and BBC Radio 4. In the last five years she has focused on writing poetry and has published in a number of journals and anthologies. Her poem *Shell-Shocked Land* was placed second in the Poetry Ireland/Trócaire 2019 poetry competition. She was selected for *Poetry Ireland Introductions 2022*, and awarded a John Hewitt Summer School Bursary in 2024. Her poems cover a wide variety of themes – Sierra Leone, emigration and immigration, the Northern Ireland conflict and growing up in 1960s rural Ireland, a time when the Catholic church was very influential.



WINTER SUNDAY

The sameness of those Ulster Sundays - mass,
dinner, then free to roam fields and laneways,
where we were rooted. Skirting whin bushes,
past a cottage, collapsed in on itself,
white stones like skulls scattered among the ruins.
Our shoes squelch on wet grass.
Through crumbling pillars of an avenue
lined by leafless trees. Branches criss-crossed,
as if praying, shadow the bruised grey sky.
Then past the big house, curtains closed on high
windows: those people go to church not mass.
The gate squeaks as we get out to the road.

Smoke spirals from scattered chimneys, incense
splashed across the sky. A hunched man rattles
past on a blue bike, thin shopping bag hitched
to handle bars. He calls *Youse are out late*.
We reach the shop. I click the door latch, thump
the wooden counter, smell onions frying.

Betty slouches out, cigarette dangles
from her lips. *There's thirteen dead in Derry.*
God and his holy mother protect us.
They'll be civil war yet.

Helen Fallon

MAGDALEN

Da pulls the Moses basket from beneath blue baling twine
in the shed, slams it on the kitchen floor.

Ma weeps as she wipes it down. Tiny fingers rest on rose
patterned blanket, soft breath ripples the wool.

I close my eyes, see the river’s edge, lower the basket
into marsh weeds and yellow flag irises.

Butterflies dance before his opening eyes. A woman
from the big house on the hill hears a cry,

rushes down, marvels at this rose-wrapped gift among the reeds.
She takes him home, raises him as her own.

I hear footsteps creak on the polished boards, a swish
of cloth,
a nun lifts the basket and shuts the door.

THE VILLAGE OF WAITING

Sierra Leone 1991

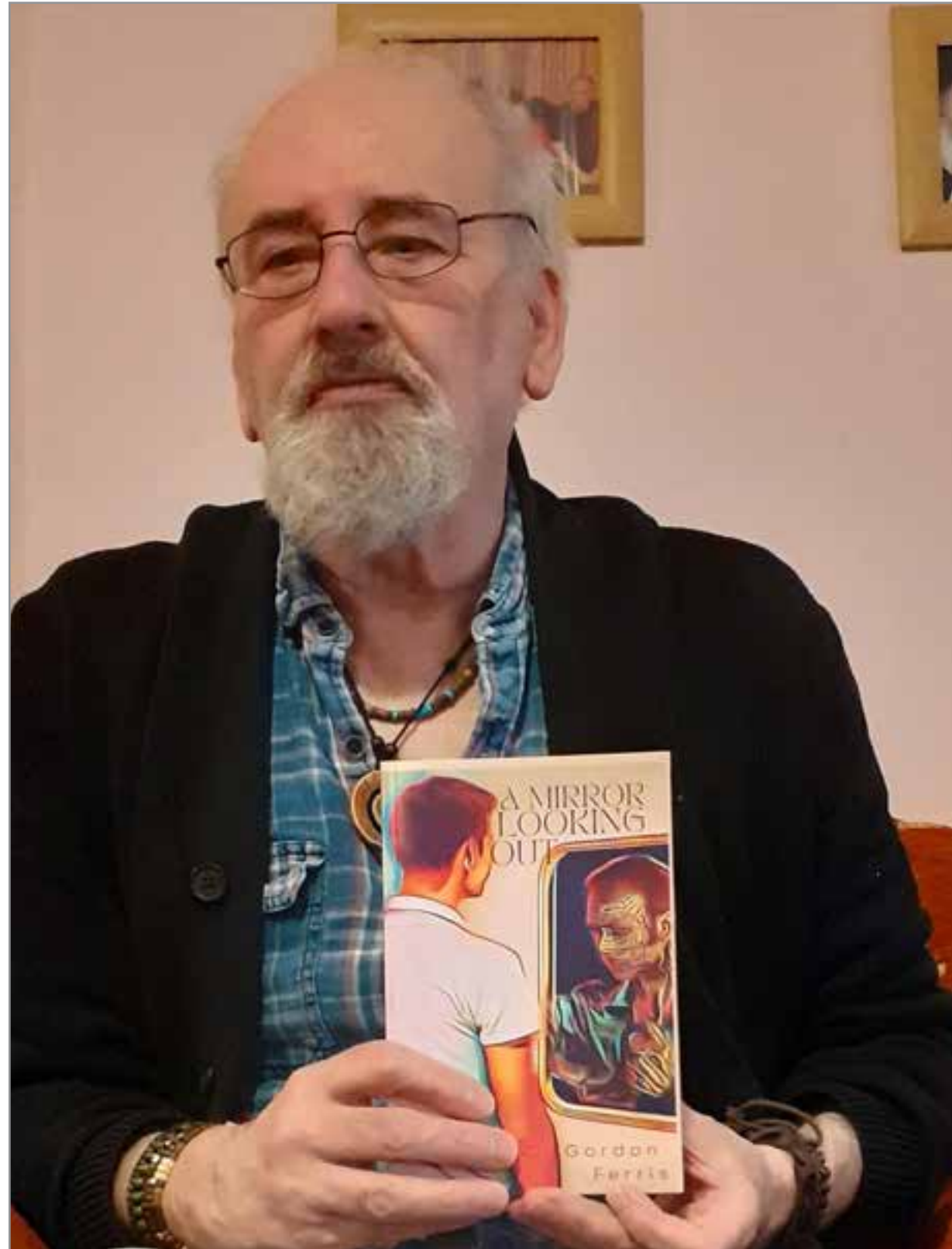
In the market Binta waits for buyers.
Enamel bowl spills wilted spinach,
crinkled aubergines, burst tomatoes,
and blackened baby carrots.

At the barracks Saidu waits with soldiers,
for salary due last rainy season.
They whisper words of treason -
clean water, schools and free elections.

In air conditioned office Amir waits,
for diamonds sifted by barefoot women
and children from riverbeds. He hovers,
a vulture eager to gorge on soft mango flesh.

At the college I wait for post from home,
for the six o’clock curfew to be lifted,
for classes to resume, for rain to drench
the parched earth.
Nights, the garden comes alive and whispers.
Frogs croak, crickets rasp and chirp,
Fireflies shimmer silver in the grass.
We wait.

Gordon Ferris born and bred in Finglas, a Northwest suburb of Dublin. In the early eighties, he moved to Donegal where he has lived ever since. He started writing in 2014 and has had many short stories and poems in publications including Hidden Channel, A New Ulster, The Galway Review, Impspired Magazine, and Lothlorien Poetry Journal and Live Encounters. He has also won prizes in the summer 2020 HITA Creative Writing Competition for his poem 'Mother' and won the winter competition for his poem 'The Silence'. Gordon was awarded a Poetry Town Bursary by Poetry Ireland. His first book was published in January 2023 by Impspired, a short story collection called *Echoes* and his second book, *A Mirror Looking Out*, a poetry collection, published by the same publisher, Impspired, under the brilliant stewardship of Steve Cawte.



THE SILVER SPOON

Today, I was reminded of a stream
A stream, where, as a child, I used to jump across
on the way to Concor Hill
a stream long gone underground

like a lot of our old beauty
disappeared to become
a thing from our past

a thing that was our everyday
now a vague reflection in that flowing baby river

In the centre of a forest
I was reminded
of an ancient ruin
transformed in my child's mind
to a jungle in our
War games played.

All gone underground now
replaced by houses, factories
or places that generate finance
No place for wandering childhood
Escaping the adult world
or to hold off the demons
that inhabit the grown-up world
The demons etched on the faces of all
who have left their childhood behind
and marched onwards
towards the shadow of
respectability
and
responsibility.

Gordon Ferris

A DOG SLEEPS

A dog sleeps on the floor
I watch her breath rise and fall

Her paw jerks suddenly
a dreaming gesture
Reassuring me, she still exists

You are getting old now

You struggle with some things

You need a nudge into the car

You struggle to rise from sleep

And stretch out your hind legs

But, when loved ones appear
You forget your pain

You love deeply

unconditionally

You would die for those you love



Afternoon siesta in my little town. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

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