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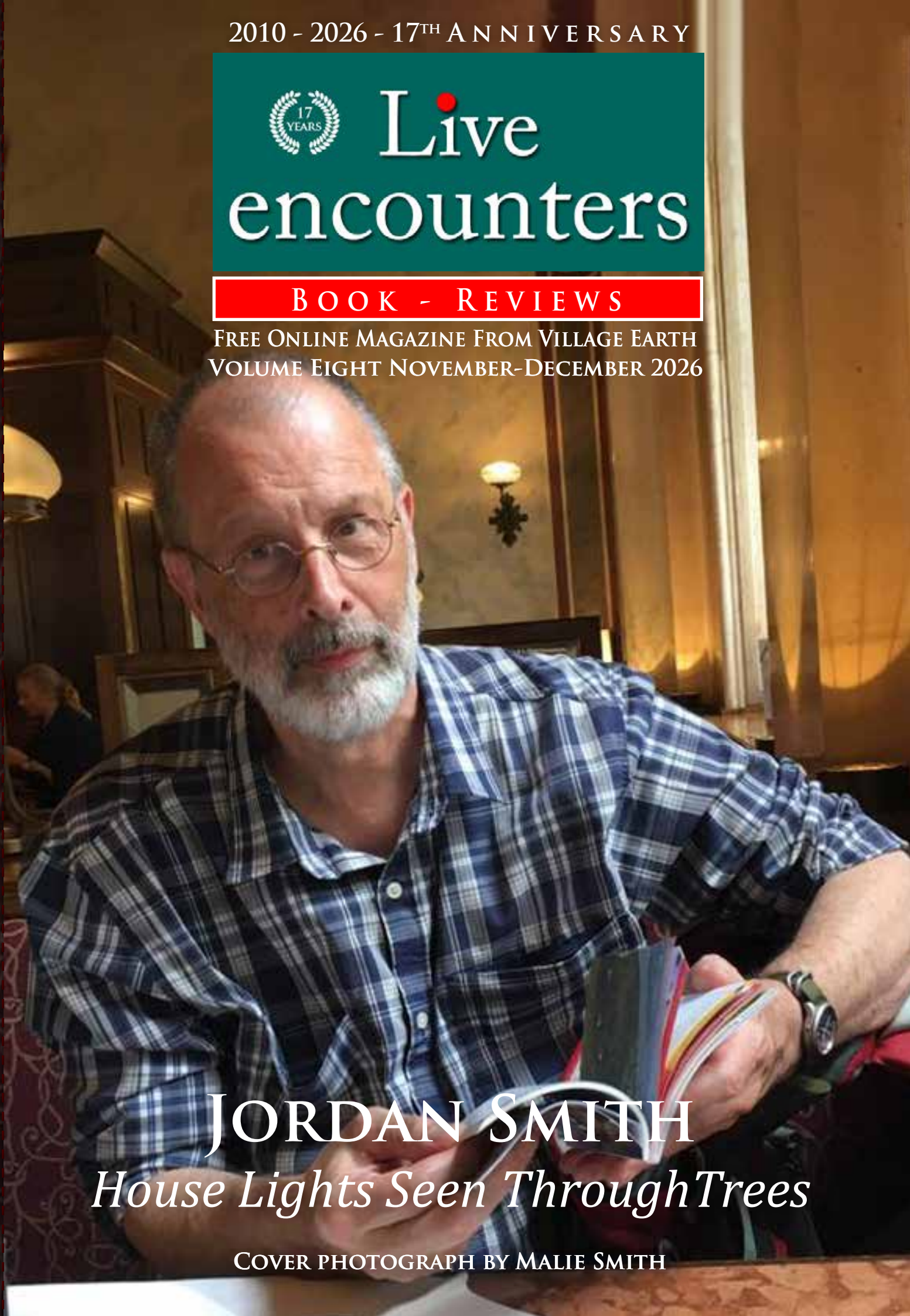

JORDAN SMITH

House Lights Seen Through Trees

COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY MALIE SMITH

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Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

Mark Ulyseas
Publisher/Editor

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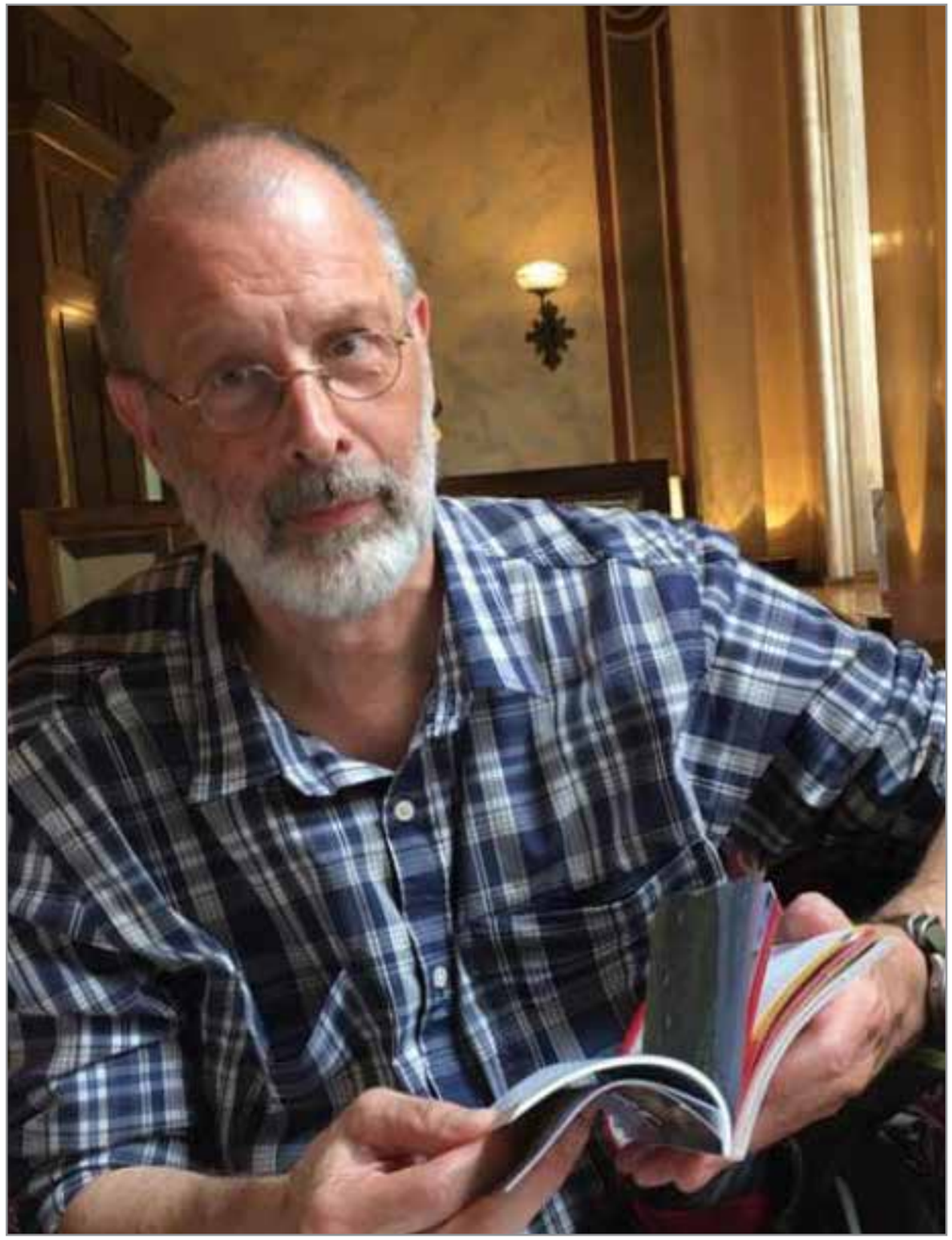

Jordan Smith. Photo credit; Malie Smith.

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

Jordan Smith

House Lights Seen Through Trees

During the pandemic winter, I spent time in my back yard at night. I was taking care of a new dog, and I was taking photo after photo on my little iPhone SE whose bottom-of-the-line-simple wide-angle lens turned out to be perfect for diffuse low-light images: clouds and trees and moon, the hound's long silhouette, silhouette, a doe's eye blazing green in my headlamp beyond the chain-link fence, the red umbrella on the deck table in the dark, the lights of houses on neighboring streets seen through the woodlot, green and red and moon-white. The lights meant something human was going on. The photos meant…well, nothing exactly. That seemed to be the point. I had no ambition for them, no interest in processing the visual information, either on my computer or in my head. I put them up on Instagram and Facebook the way a castaway long disabused of hope might hoist a flag, and then forgot about them, scenes without narrative or intent. Remember the clips of the canals of Venice that cleared to translucence during the lockdown? In the act of seeing and framing I was recognizing something lost and familiar I had no need to name and no prospect of preserving.

I was writing too, and teaching, but something was changing in the way I thought about poetry, a shift from an editorial to an inquisitive state of mind, brought into focus by Adam Nicolson's study of the young Coleridge and Wordsworth, *The Making of Poetry*. Nicolson did more than study; he moved to their haunts in the Quantock Hills and followed their paths, all to understand the state of mind (or states, or minds) behind the *Lyrical Ballads*. It's one of those projects where the effort means as much or more than the conclusions, not research or reading or walking or dwelling, but the lovely interactions of all of these in the mind's expanse. If I was envious a bit of his freedom to travel, I took a cue from Tomas Transtromer, whose poem, "Vermeer," is a reminder that it isn't circumstance that makes the difference, but openness.

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Openness is the permission place and time may offer, especially when they intersect with some third term that is both labyrinth and thread: history, or music, or myth, or memory. The act of poetry dwells in that complicating permission, more, I think, than in the confession or absolution offered by either religion or psychology, which have an end in mind. It is the permission to do something without the justifications of use. I'm sure I'm not the first person to have been introduced to Mary Oliver's poem, "Wild Geese," in a therapist's office. The doctor was my son's, and I'd taken a few minutes with him to ask if he thought I could use some help too with an anxiety that was sometimes debilitating. His office was in an old building on an old square in an old town, comfortable and nearly elegant with a fine summer light through the warped glass of the windows. In his shawl-collared cardigan and denim shirt, he seemed comfortable and nearly elegant too, with long fingernails on his right hand. In a rare moment of Sherlock Holmesian observation, I asked if he played classical guitar. It took him aback a bit. "Lute," he said, after I'd explained. And no, he didn't think I needed his help to deal with what my own primary doctor had already referred to, handing me a Xanax prescription, as "well-deserved anxiety." My problems were with the world, and my responses were within the range of the understandable, and I understood them. And then the therapist read "Wild Geese," adding that many of his patients found it helpful.

You may remember the poem or at least its first line, "You do not have to be good," a useful mantra for all of us going the usual route with good intentions. I thanked the doctor for sharing it. I didn't tell him that my problem wasn't forgiving myself for my imperfections. My problem was getting that self out of the way so something else could happen. What I needed was to do what the poems wanted done. Whether that necessity was curative didn't matter. As Philip Whalen answered, in his role as a Zen priest and in his final illness, when asked if meditative practice had tempered his unhappiness, "You didn't think it was supposed to *help*, did you?"

A few weekends ago, I joined a workshop on spoon carving. Except for cobby repair jobs around the house, I haven't worked with wood since junior high shop class, but my son, who had some experience as a turner, was interested, and we talked each other into it. The facility, an "innovation center," was a hopeful place, stocked with 3D printers, a photo studio, a half-dozen floor looms, a wood shop, a machine shop, but our class sat in a simple circle of chairs, each with a side table with a wooden blank, a coping saw, two carving tools, a strop, and a Kevlar glove, and our instructor, a sculptor from the Hudson Valley, put us to work, told stories, and offered advice, occasionally tactfully offering to make a cut or two to put us on the right road. It turned out to be four hours of not thinking of anything except the piece of basswood braced in my hand. Scooping out the bowl of the spoon took me in completely. There was the practice of learning to handle the curved blade of the hook knife. the satisfaction of the shape emerging, the frustration of tear-outs, the transformation of a solid into an absence and of wood into curls and chips. "Careful not to go to deep," our teacher warned, or you'll end up with a strainer." Imagining that eventuality, I saw not the perforated surface of a slotted spoon, but a circular opening, an echo at the bottom of the rim at the top, a portal. What came to my mind was the Zen poem of Chiyono, for whom realization occurred when the bottom dropped out of the bucket she had been at such pains to conserve: "No more water in the pail! / No more moon in the water!"

I'm no more an accomplished meditator (yes, I recognize the contradiction in my phrasing, with would certainly have annoyed the sometimes testy Whalen) than I am a competent spoon carver, but I know a metaphor when I see one, and the process of bringing a poem into light has often seemed to me to be one of paring away the words that are merely self, letting the shavings fall until a kind of translucence appears. Our carving instructor passed around a spoon she had made of butternut that seemed almost to achieve that, a broad and flat bowl with the yellow-brown striated wood shimmering. Of course, a spoon carved as thin as the one of my imagination would hardly be useful to stir a pot or ladle a stew. But its fragility isn't the point; really, that's the wrong word entirely. Think of the skeleton of an oak leaf, fallen, a few shreds still hanging on to the web of tough threads that is its structure. It's present, but you look through it. You look through it, and it alters what you see.

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I've hardly looked at those pandemic photos since I took them. Even the simple editorial work of deleting some of them—which? the less successful? but there was no thought of success—strikes me as suggesting that I meant more than I did. The spoon I carved, well, it is as crude and dense as you might imagine. In poetry, I know more about the craft, but sometimes I need to forget what should work, try to scrape it too thin, imagine I might reach an emptiness that is still somehow a presence. "A place of first permission," Robert Duncan called that, as well as "a made thing." A friend told me that, in the hospital, recovering from a stroke, he understood why he'd spent his life writing. Because he was able to make something out of all this, he said, as if it mattered. The revelation was that it did.

Notes:

Chiyono's poem is quoted in *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones,* Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki, Tuttle, 2023.

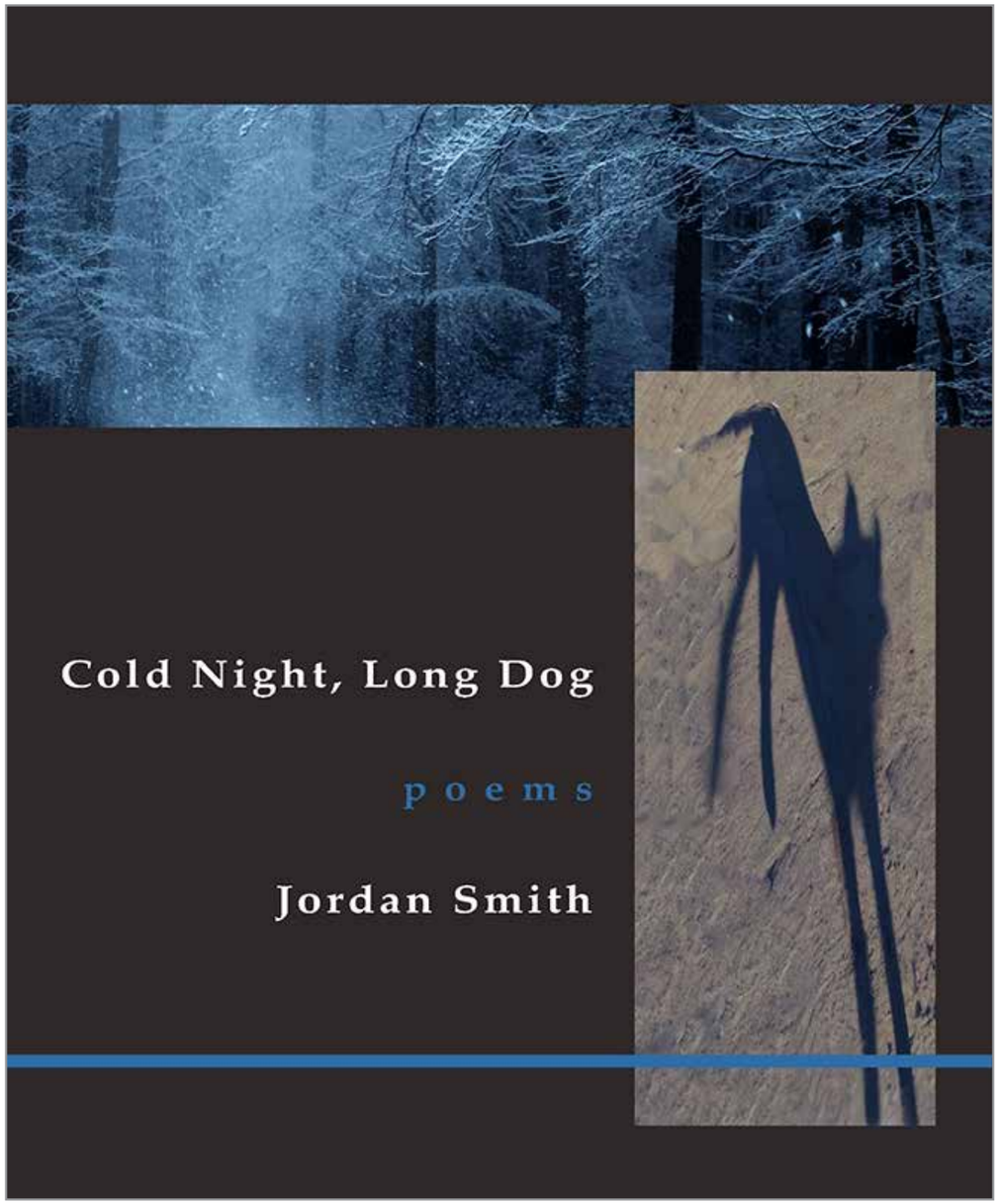
Duncan, "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow," from *The Opening of the Field*, New Directions, 1960.

Nicolson, *The Making of Poetry*, Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2019.

Oliver, "Wild Geese," from *Dreamwork*, Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986.

Transtromer, "Vermeer" from *The Half-finished Heaven*, translated by Robert Bly, Graywolf Press, 2017.

Whalen, quoted in David Schneider's *Crowded by Beauty: The Life and Zen of Philip Whalen*, University of California Press, 2015.



***Cold Night, Long Dog, poems by Jordan Smith* available here:**
https://www.ambidextrousbloodhound.com/projects/jordan-smith

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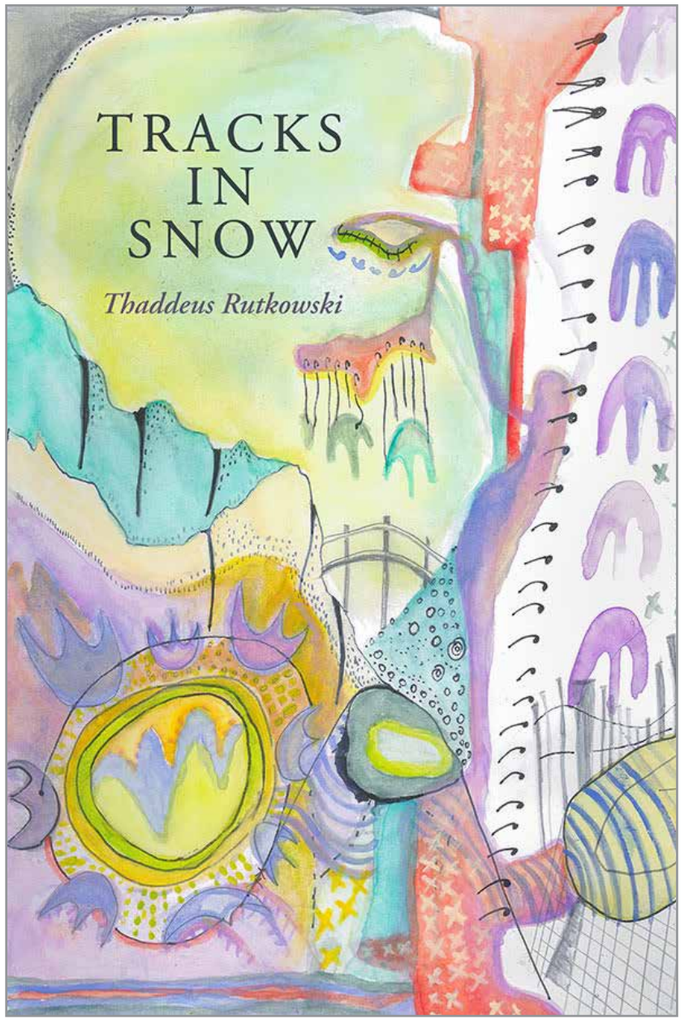
THADDEUS RUTKOWSKI

Thaddeus Rutkowski is the author of nine books, most recently *Tracks in Snow*, a poetry collection. His novel Haywire received an Asian American Writers' Workshop award. He teaches at Medgar Evers College and at a YMCA. He received a New York Foundation for the Arts fellowship and a Best Small Fictions award.

ANNA MARIA MICKIEWICZ

Anna Maria Mickiewicz is an award-winning poet, translator and publisher. She is the founder of Literary Waves Publishing. She is a member of English PEN and Union of Polish Writers Abroad. Her work has been published in the USA, the UK, Australia, Canada, Poland, Mexico, Italy, Spain, Bulgaria, Hungary, El Salvador, India,Denmark, Chile, France, Peru and China. Her poetry collection The Origin of the Planet was honoured with the K. M. Anthru International Literary Prize in India. She has presented her work at the British Parliament. She served as chair of the jury for the California State Poetry Society Literary Award, the jury of the Joseph Conrad Prize (USA). Founder and organiser of international literary festivals in the UK In the 1980s, she was associated with the democratic opposition. She was awarded the Cross of Freedom and Solidarity by the President of the Republic of Poland and Gloria Artis Medal awarded by the Ministry of Culture.



***Tracks in Snow by Thaddeus Rutkowski* available here:**
https://finishinglinepress.com/product/tracks-in-snow-by-thaddeus-rutkowski/

ANNA MARIA MICKIEWICZ
Review of
THADDEUS RUTKOWSKI'S
Tracks in Snow
Finishing Line Press (USA), 2026

This is the poetry of someone aware of his own limitations. The speaker does not present himself as someone who has understood the world and can give it a final meaning. His perspective is, rather, modest and grounded, directed towards what is close at hand. Large questions are brought back to the scale of an individual life, a single day, a single relationship. Instead of history, there is everyday life; instead of grand ideas, there are the small concerns of ordinary existence.

"Slow Day" conveys something of the pace of this poetry. It is a world in no particular hurry to arrive at an answer. Time seems to move more slowly, as though the speaker were giving his attention to things that might otherwise go unnoticed. Even New York — a city that might suggest scale, anonymity and constant movement — is seen from a different angle. The city itself is not the main concern. The metropolis is reduced to the scale of human experience. It remains in the background, while the individual is kept in view: his pain, his happiness, his home and the people he loves.

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This change of perspective is one of the more interesting features of the poems. The poetry does not try to be larger than life. It has little need for catastrophe, grand declarations or metaphysical insight. Flowers, the presence of another person, conversation, touch and memory are sufficient. His wife, daughter and mother — those closest to him — become not only figures within the poems but also points of reference in a world which, beyond them, can seem uncertain and difficult to hold on to.

Thoughts of survival return, as do questions about how to live and how to live a little better. There is no particular sense of despair in this. Rather, there is an acceptance that life will remain imperfect and that, nevertheless, it is worth paying attention to. The speaker does not expect to overcome the passing of time, nor does he try to resist it. He learns instead to live with it. This gives the poems something of a Stoic character.

His concern for human life is expressed quietly. He does not dwell on his own suffering or make it the centre of things. Pain is acknowledged as part of life, but it is not allowed to obscure everything else. There is still room for a flower, for affection, for the simple act of being with another person. These may seem like small things, but they are not without importance.

There is something of a modernist withdrawal in this restraint. The speaker seems to step back and allow reality to remain as it is. He does not attempt to control or explain it. Instead, he accepts a few simple facts: the world is difficult, human beings are limited and everything passes. Even so, there are moments when life can be accepted without resistance. Not because it has become easier, but because suffering exists alongside closeness and affection.

Dreams occur less often than memories and observations. This is perhaps significant. The speaker does not readily turn towards the future or construct an ideal world. In this respect, he is closer to the ancient Stoics, for whom wisdom involved recognising one's place in the world rather than trying to overcome it. What cannot be changed has to be accepted; what remains within one's power is worth preserving.

Perhaps this is why these poems are only apparently concerned with small things. A flower, a family gesture, the presence of a daughter or a wife may seem modest when considered on their own, but they take on a different significance in the face of time and mortality. There is little a person can do about the larger processes of life. One can, however, look, remember and remain close to others. One can preserve a single day.

From this point of view, "smallness" is not a form of diminishment. It is an attempt to find an appropriate scale for human life. Perhaps the larger questions cannot be answered. One can still love, remember, notice flowers and remain beside another person. From these modest gestures comes something like a quiet philosophy of survival.

The poems draw, then, on the philosophical tradition of Stoicism. This may be the most natural way of understanding the relationship between his "poetry of small things" and Stoic thought. A Stoic might put it simply: you cannot stop the world, but you can decide how you live in it.

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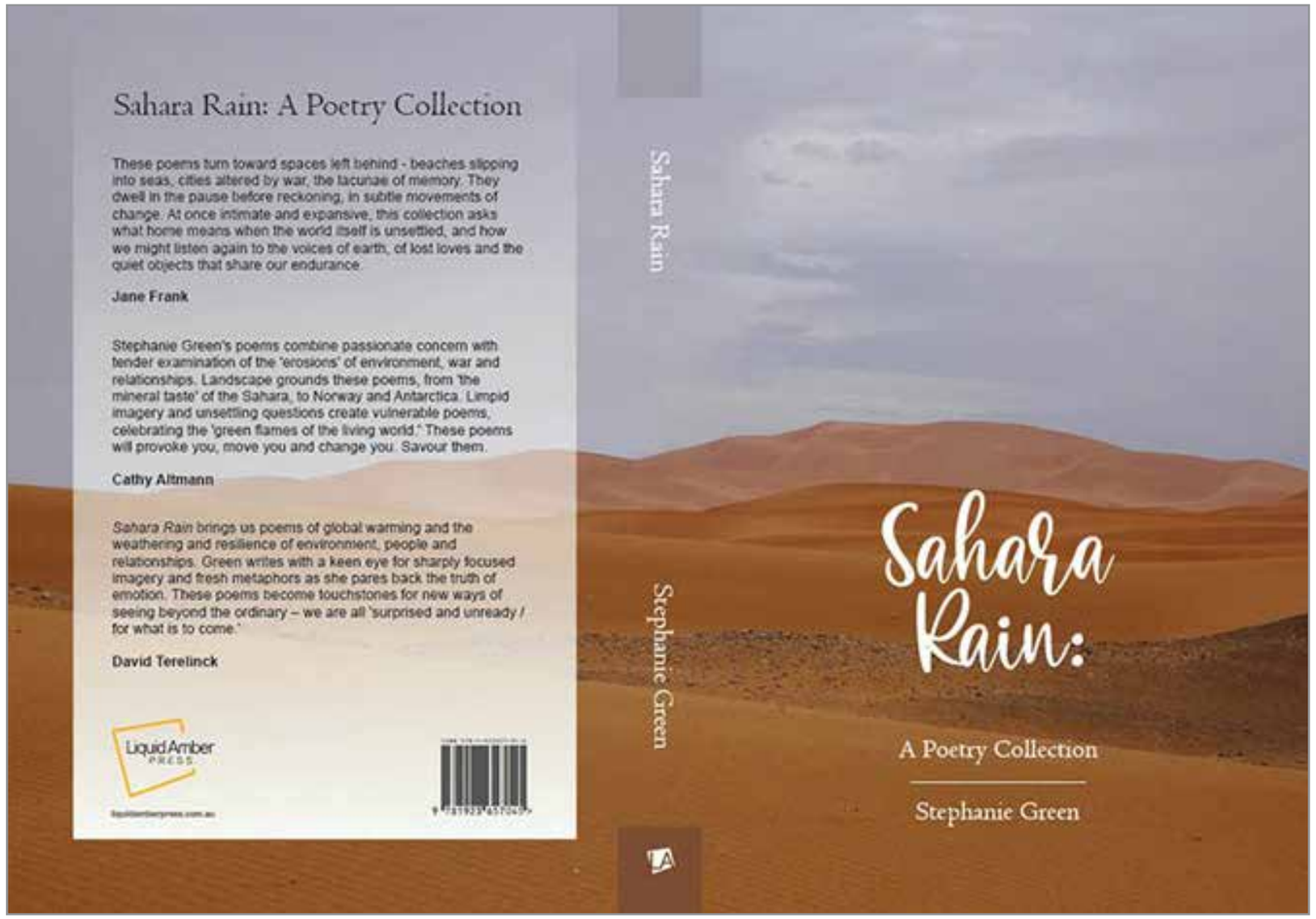
STEPHANIE GREEN

Stephanie Green is an Australian poet, essayist, biographer and short story writer, widely published in Australian and international journals, and in recent anthologies such as *Fire and Rain*, eds Yuyutsu Sharma, Sally Breen and Jennifer Mackenzie (*Pratik*/APWT 2023), *The Incompleteness Book II*, eds Julia Prendergast, Eileen Herbert-Goodall and Jen Webb (Recent Works Press 2021), and the *Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry,* eds Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington (MUP 2020). Stephanie's most recent collections are *Seams of Repair* (Calanthe, 2023) and *Sahara Rain* (Liquid Amber, 2026). Currently an Adjunct Senior Lecturer with Griffith University, she lives and works on the unceded lands of the Yugembeh/ Kombumerri Peoples in south-east Queensland.

MAGDALENA BALL

Magdalena Ball is a novelist, poet, reviewer, interviewer, Vice President of Flying Islands, and Managing Editor of Compulsive Reader. She is a popular festival moderator and has interviewed hundreds of writers for the Compulsive Reader Talks podcast. She is the author of several published novels and poetry books, most recently, Bobish, a verse-memoir published by Puncher & Wattmann in 2023, which Pip Smith in the SMH called "quietly tough and compelling". Her newest book is *Exotic Matter*, which will be published by Liquid Amber Press in February 2027.



MAGDALENA BALL
Review of
STEPHANIE GREEN'S
Sahara Rain
Liquid Amber Press, May 2026.

It's impossible to read the news or even look out the window without seeing evidence of the shift in climate patterns. This summer for example, there were wildfires all over Europe with more than 42,000 hectares burned in France alone, which experienced its hottest summer ever recorded since measurements began in 1900. Only a few months later, the same area experienced extreme rainfall and rainfall and severe flooding. Wild and often "unprecedented" weather is now the norm with every year becoming the 'hottest on record'. Of course, writing about climate isn't just writing about the weather. Stephanie Green's poetry book *Sahara Rain* engages directly with climate change and its impacts and then extends that engagement to all aspects of weathering including degradation, decay, aging, loss, but also transformation: what endures and what we must learn in order to survive.

***Sahara Rain* by Stephanie Green available at: https://liquidamberpress.com.au/product/sahara-rain/**

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As you might expect, the first of the book's four sections, "Deluges", is about flooding and water. It opens with the title poem, inspired by a storm flood experienced while camping on the edge of the Sahara Desert. This poem is the perfect opener, providing an anchor for the collection as a whole as it explores the beauty of the desert landscape, it's 'slip of its silk' and the shock and delight of the deluge:

> Yet the wet only coats the surfaces:
> beneath, everything that lives
> is still moving slowly
> amongst - between - within
> waiting in its own way
> for the familiar to return

There are other floods in this section, "rain-drenched soil", muddy tracks and bogged truck wheels, water everywhere, squelching feet, and curling surf. Water quenches and is often desperately needed but there's always a sense that once the flooding begins it cannot be stopped. Melting ice, sea level rise, and increased water vapour from a warming atmosphere all contribute to erratic and uncontrolled rainfall:

> A rift of ice calves and melts into the sea.
> A lake turns red and boils over
> strewing its dead on the shore.
> cities fall below troubled horizons
> Is this still the beginning? ("Is this still the beginning?")

The other side of a warming climate is excess salination, drought, pollution, the plastics and pesticides of our GDP obsessed world where profit is more important than saving creatures (including us) from being poisoned by pollution and pesticides:

> Wild means nothing more
> than a marketing slogan
> in a confected world. ("Melt")

Throughout the book, Green demonstrates a deep understanding of the power of making meaning with sound, blending natural acoustics with a range of poetic techniques including repetitions, which Green handles particularly well. There are multiple poems that utilise a refrain: "we will be late tonight" or "Is this still the beginning", "I'm in your city again" creating a hypnotic and oratory quality to these pieces. Many poems have a trochaic or falling meter, eg: "Don't let the warriors block the light" where a stressed syllable is followed by an unstressed syllable. This gives the poem something of a mournful quality, particularly when combined with other sonic elements like the regular assonance of the first words "How", "How", "Here" in "Weathering", sibilance, e.g. "The cosmic crocodile opens its jaws", or "slipping, one by one/into the restless sea". Green also makes careful use of silence throughout the book, with gaps between words, pauses, enjambment, and indentations:

> Lift and buckle almost gently
> as if a foot were crumpling
> the lid of a cardboard shoe box
> no match or the force applied to it ("Saw-buzz")

The "Witnessing" section explores other aspects of the meta-crisis, especially war. The poems in this section are precise, often beginning with a single image like a girl trapped under a table after her family house has been bombed, an old woman sole survivor in an "abandoned city", or the broken teeth of a brother's barroom brawl.

There is a good mix of forms throughout the book, but I was particularly taken with Green's prose poems. There's a certain wry-ness to these pieces, which tell a story, often of oppression in dream-like and surreal ways that both mirror and bypass the usual syntax of narrative:

> What really matters, you don't know, but not this. The spirit and the flame doused to make way for something else. Developers, or traders. Stolen lives. Governments thrown out. Cities raised, then cast down again. Number plates change like the face on the banner that falls and burns. What for? What for? A line drawn in soil is as nothing to the wind. ("Aim high")

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"Erosions" focuses on landscape and the earth, infused with personal grief and human weathering: aging, loss, the poems coupling the crisp imagery that Green does so well with nostalgia. There is a sadness in these poems of transformation that compare aging and change with grief for a changing world, the boundaries between the human and the more-than-human blurring:

> When I come up for air, you're still on the beach, your little blue towel full of sand and your cricket hat pushed back as. You try to measure eternal consistency. A sum I will never fathom. In time, if we stay long enough, you will turn your attention to sand. How much of it lies be neath us. How long it will last, before the sea drags it far away. ("Light waves")

The book ends on a positive note with the final section, "Recognitions" exploring the beauty of each moment even while letting go of attachments: "…hold a funeral for all the ruptures that brought them to you:" These poems focus on the consolation of being present and alive even amidst the knowledge of rupture: "Pack them away again in honour of elephants and sea creatures." Many of the poems in "Recognitions" are garden poems. There are hydrangeas and blue delphiniums, plane trees, scented geraniums, Jasmine vines, and a sundial in "some old untidy garden", taking solace in the natural world and the way that art enables us to come to terms with loss:

> Only here and now
> in your painted garden
> as the fading sun casts golden lines
> to hook our last regrets
> and as the black flocks lilt above us
> into the indigo night
> lifting sadness away with the leaves
> can peace come to us ("Cerulean Garden")

Sahara Rain ends with an evocation that is both personal and metaphoric, represented by an old and long treasured tree:

> When it came time
> to let the house go
> and put aside from us
> the memories of our parents
> we let the tree be
> just as it was
> hoping anyone else
> would do the same.

The poems in *Sahara Rain* are delicate but they pack a powerful punch, pivoting around the state of the world, and the way in which ecology, economy and global conflict are all deeply interconnected.

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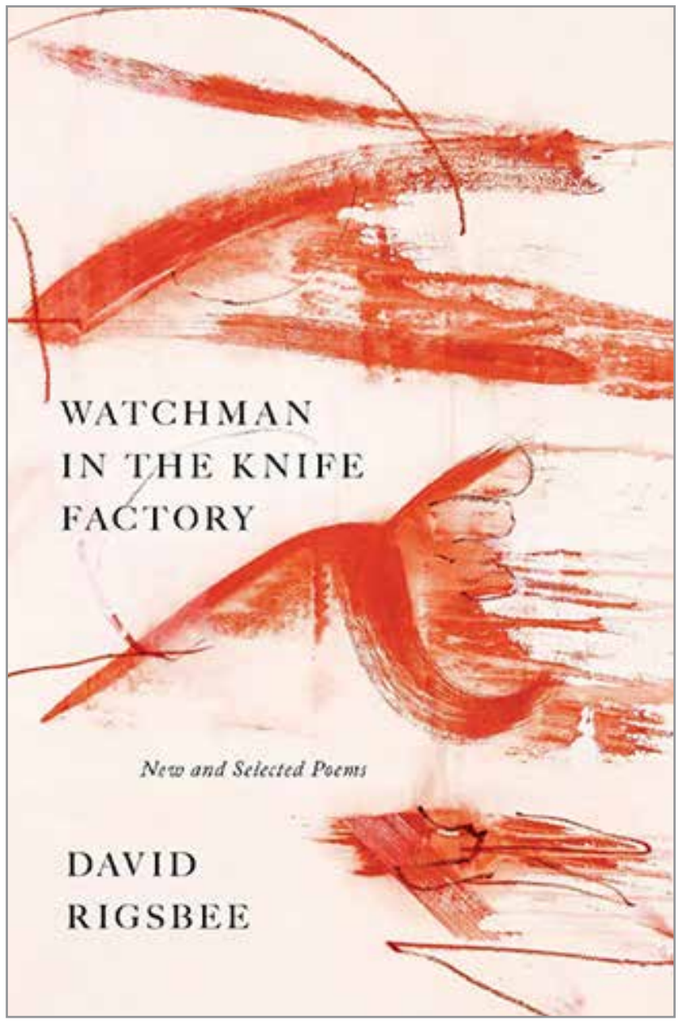
DAVID RIGSBEE

David Rigsbee is the recipient of many fellowships and awards, including two Fellowships in Literature from The National Endowment for the Arts, The National Endowment for the Humanities (for The American Academy in Rome), The Djerassi Foundation, The Jentel Foundation, and The Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, as well as a Pushcart Prize, an Award from the Academy of American Poets, and others. In addition to his twelve collections of poems, he has published critical books on the poetry of Joseph Brodsky and Carolyn Kizer and coedited *Invited Guest: An Anthology of Twentieth Century Southern Poetry.* His work has appeared in *Agni, The American Poetry Review, The Georgia Review, The Iowa Review, The New Yorker, The Southern Review,* and many others. Main Street Rag published his collection of found poems, *MAGA Sonnets of Donald Trump* in 2021. His translation of Dante's *Paradiso* was published by Salmon Poetry in 2023, and *Watchman in the Knife Factory: New & Selected Poems* was published by Black Lawrence Press in 2024.

SCOTT DODGSON

Scott Dodgson is an American novelist, memoirist, essayist, filmmaker, and longtime sailor whose work explores memory, place, desire, violence, history, and the strange persistence of beauty. His books include *The Madness of Beauty's Light, Swipe, The History of Water, A Sailor's Bearing,* and *L'Auteur.* His fiction and nonfiction draw on a life spent moving between continents, ports, film sets, villages, and open water. He now lives in Magalas, in the Languedoc region of southern France, where vineyards, medieval roads, village life, and the Mediterranean continue to shape his work. His current projects include *The Vigneron's Wife, The Cat's Paw,* and *They Carry Their Songs*, a novel set in thirteenth-century Occitania. Across genres, Dodgson's work is concerned less with linear time than with memory, recurrence, and the ways language carries a life forward long after the people themselves have disappeared.



Watchman in the Knife Factory: New & Selected Poems
by David Rigsbee **available here - https://blacklawrencepress.com**

Scott Dodgson
Review of
David Rigsbee's
Watchman in the Knife Factory: New & Selected Poems
Black Lawrence Press, 2024

The Sword and Shield

David Rigsbee's Watchman in the *Knife Factory: New & Selected Poems* is not merely a book of poems. It is a long act of witness. The title gives us the governing image: the poet as watchman among blades, the solitary figure moving through a place built for cutting. The knives are history, memory, family, suicide, illness, politics, race, art, eros, and God. The watchman does not prevent the wound. He sees it. He remembers it. He names the gleam on the edge.

The book gathers new poems beside work from *This Much I Can Tell You, School of the Americas, The Red Tower, The Pilot House, Two Estates, Cloud Journal, The Dissolving Island, A Skeptic's Notebook, Your Heart Will Fly Away,* and *The Hopper Light*, making the volume not simply a selection but a retrospective architecture, a map of a lifetime's moral and imaginative weather.

The case for Rigsbee does not depend on admiration alone. A body of criticism has already begun to describe the scale and pressure of his work, though the larger literary culture has not yet fully caught up with the achievement. Writing on *Watchman in the Knife Factory*, Shawn Pavey calls the book "a comprehensive collection of David Rigsbee's work over the last three decades," one that allows the reader "to see a poet at the zenith of his powers and the path that brought him there." Pavey's phrase is useful because it understands the book not as a late-career assemblage but as a revelation of development, mastery, and earned exposure

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Tim Hunt, in *World Literature Today*, identifies one of Rigsbee's central powers when he writes that the new poems combine "the 'jolt' of things deeply experienced with a deepened awareness that opens the jolt for reflection without lessening the visceral, jarring impact." That sentence understands Rigsbee's method. The poems do not move away from impact into thought. They think through impact. The shock remains in the body even as the mind begins its work.

This is why a poem such as "The Slug" can be at once forensic, familial, metaphysical, and terrible. The brother's suicide becomes a scene of evidence: pistol, note, blood, ricochet, police uncertainty, body, bullet. But the poem's true subject is not the mechanics of death. It is the obscene transformation of grief into evidence. The bullet becomes a conspicuous, untradeable treasure. Around it the living gather, amazed, horrified, uselessly enriched. That is Rigsbee at his best: the image is exact, morally hideous, and unforgettable.

The same pressure appears in the political and historical poems. A review in *The Iowa Review*, discussing *School of the Americas*, describes Rigsbee's work as marked by "deep psychic engagement with perception, memory, culture, and the politics of human interaction." That phrase refuses to separate the private from the public. In Rigsbee, the family table, the classroom, the highway, the war, the rally, the graveyard, the museum, and the weather all belong to the same moral atmosphere. History is not outside us. It sits in the room. It eats with us. It appears in our jokes, our evasions, our inherited cruelties, our failed acts of courage.

Peter Makuck's remark that few poets so powerfully capture "both the ignorant cruelty and profound love we bear one another" might serve as a key to the whole enterprise. The greatness of Rigsbee's poetry lies partly in this doubleness. He does not write from purity. He writes from implication. He knows that love and damage often share the same house, sometimes the same sentence.

That doubleness is everywhere. In "Joan," a classroom prank becomes a permanent moral indictment. A Black student, "first heir of integration," enters the room and sits on thumbtacks placed there by children. The adult speaker will not let childhood become an alibi. The poem's last sentence, "For she was a child and we were children," does not absolve the speaker. It deepens the wound. It recognizes that the cruel are often children too, which makes the act not less terrible but more terrible. Innocence itself becomes implicated.

In "Storm," a hurricane-damaged island opens into the larger wreckage of Southern labor, tobacco, machinery, fatherhood, and disease. The father calibrates cigarette machines, those instruments of uniform appetite, and the machines manufacture not only cigarettes but the conditions of his end. Rigsbee does not write, "Industry killed my father." He gives us German machinery, tobacco fields, IV clinics, bald lungers, ruined houses, flooded stalks, and the strange calm after devastation. The poem makes an ecology of harm.

This is one of Rigsbee's deepest gifts: he does not isolate grief. He finds its system. The private wound almost always belongs to a larger arrangement of weather, class, history, labor, politics, and language.

I have known David Rigsbee for more than fifty years, and only recently have I begun to understand the true nature of his intellect. I once thought of it chiefly as brilliance, range, cultivation, wit, command. But that is not quite right. In David, intellect has always been both sword and shield.

In the beginning, perhaps, the shield mattered most. The intellect protected the tender, exposed places, the emotional vulnerabilities too private, too raw, or too dangerous to leave undefended. Learning became armor. Literary reference became a form of shelter. Wit could deflect what pain might otherwise reveal too plainly. The mind stood guard at the threshold of the wound.

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But over time something changed. The shield did not disappear, but it became less defensive. The intellect no longer merely protected the vulnerable self. It began to reveal it. The sword grew finer, more exacting, more capable of cutting through evasion, sentiment, piety, and self-protection. Yet the more skilled the sword became, the more vulnerable the poems became. This is one of the paradoxes of Rigsbee's mature work: the sharper the intelligence, the more exposed the heart.

In the late poems especially, intellect is no longer armor against feeling. It is the instrument by which feeling becomes bearable, visible, and morally precise. The mind does not cover the wound. It enters it.

Bill Mohr has written of Rigsbee's "unflinching imagination" and his "technical control of cadence and rhythm," and that combination is crucial. Rigsbee's poems are not loose recollections dressed up as feeling. They are built things. Their associative movement is disciplined. Their wit cuts through sentiment. Their references, whether to Blake, Donne, Dante, Cavafy, Piero, Derrida, Roy Orbison, or Neil Diamond, are not ornaments but working instruments. He uses culture the way a surgeon uses tools, not to impress the wound but to enter it more precisely.

This is why the poems are full of art, music, philosophy, and literary ghosts without feeling merely literary. Donne appears because Good Friday summons him. Blake appears because resurrection and the body are at stake. Piero appears because looking itself is under judgment. Roy Orbison appears because popular music becomes a theology of posthumous longing. Neil Diamond appears because even bad grammar and pop desire can open the trapdoor under a life.

Rigsbee's intelligence is not academic display. It is survival equipment.

Perhaps the most generous and accurate summary comes again from Pavey, who says the poems are written with "a musician's ear, an editor's eye, a philosopher's mind, and a poet's heart." This is not blurbed exaggeration. It names the composite force of the work. Rigsbee hears cadence, sees image, thinks beyond anecdote, and yet remains faithful to wound, tenderness, absurdity, and the human comedy. The poems are learned without being dry, wounded without being self-pitying, comic without being trivial, and metaphysical without floating free of the earth.

A poet of grief who cannot laugh becomes pious. Rigsbee refuses piety. His humor is not decorative. It is acid, necessary and cleansing. In "Shum," the formalist scholar performs Russian sound poetry while the glamorous teacher calmly opens her compact and brushes her hair in the front row. The scene is comic, theatrical, and savage. It is also an ars poetica. Poetry exists somewhere between nonsense and vanity, between the ridiculous performance and the grave hunger beneath it.

In "The Hook," Neil Diamond's tortured grammar becomes a revelation about education, desire, marriage, failure, and the strange afterlife of pop culture. In "Falsetto," Lou Christie becomes a metaphysical figure, rising into an unnatural register because one face is not enough to be true. Rigsbee's comic poems are never merely comic. They are jokes with trapdoors. Under the laugh is the abyss.

The elegiac poems are the center of the book, but Rigsbee's elegy is not ceremonial consolation. He distrusts consolation. He is too intelligent, too wounded, and too honest to let language pretend that the dead are repaired by being remembered. The dead in this book are not at peace in any easy sense. They remain active, volatile, half-summoned, half-resistant.

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"The Red Dot" may be one of the major poems of contemporary American elegy. It begins after a separation at a crosswalk, with the speaker returning home to look for the small red digital sign of a message. But instead of the message, the dead arrive. His mother, father, and brother rise through the sky, airborne, spectral, familial. They come like aircraft, like clouds, like memory given weather. Yet the poem refuses to settle for supernatural comfort. "Because I was vexed, I pretended / it was them." That admission is devastating. It keeps both truths alive: the hunger for visitation and the knowledge that visitation may be invention.

That refusal of false consolation is one of Rigsbee's moral strengths. He does not use poetry to make death bearable by lying about it. He makes death bearable, if bearable is even the word, by looking longer than most people can look. A comment attributed to Bill Tremblay in *Rain Taxi* says that the cumulative effect of *Watchman in the Knife Factory* is "a lived sense of why one might care so much about this world, as flawed and wonderful as it is." That is exactly the point. The poems care without prettifying. They love the world without acquitting it.

Rigsbee is also a Southern poet in the deepest sense, not because he traffics in magnolia nostalgia or gothic decoration, but because he understands that the past is never past, never clean, never abstract. Race, class, religion, tobacco, military power, family shame, and regional speech all move through the poems as active forces.

"Joan," "'68," "School of the Americas," "At the Grave of Jesse Helms," and "Sodomites" show a poet who understands the South as a moral theater where public violence and private cowardice are braided. He is not writing slogans. He is writing implication. He knows the speaker is not outside the damage. This gives the political poems their force. They are not merely condemnations of others. They are examinations of complicity, memory, belated courage, and the embarrassing delay between knowing and acting.

This may be one reason Rigsbee has not been placed as centrally as he deserves. He does not fit neatly into the simplified categories by which contemporary poetry is often marketed. He is too intellectual to be merely confessional, too personal to be merely philosophical, too funny to be solemnly official, too morally serious to be fashionable, too Southern to be easily absorbed into coastal taste, too cosmopolitan to be reduced to regional identity.

A review of *The Red Tower* in *The Journal* observed that the book seemed likely to bring Rigsbee "something more like the recognition he deserves," and described his work as offering "an attractive combination of precision and mystery." That was written years before *Watchman in the Knife Factory*, but the point still holds. Recognition has lagged behind accomplishment.

His poems often move by long sentence, anecdote, meditation, pivot, and metaphysical aftershock. He is not primarily a poet of the isolated lyric fragment, though he can produce unforgettable images. He is a poet of consciousness in motion. The poem often begins in the ordinary world, a highway, a porch, a classroom, a restaurant, a hospital room, a song on the radio, and then proceeds by association until the ordinary is no longer merely ordinary. It has become charged, dangerous, historical.

The danger in such poetry is that the mind may sometimes crowd the wound. Rigsbee's intelligence is so active, so associative, so culturally furnished, that a few poems risk becoming over-inhabited. One can feel, here and there, the pressure of reference threatening to overgrow the emotional clearing. But this is not a workshop flaw to be sanded away. It is the cost of his ambition. Rigsbee is not writing minimalist lyric. He is writing poems in which consciousness itself is the drama. The abundance is part of the wager. When it succeeds, as it often does, the poem feels not overstuffed but orchestral.

The best poems in this book, "The Red Dot," "The Slug," "Joan," "Storm," "Max and the Promise," "School of the Americas," "The Red Tower," "Immortal Soul," "Goodwill," "The Thousand Acres," and the *Cloud Journal* sequence, belong in the serious conversation about American poetry. They have gravity, wound, wit, intellect, cadence, and moral weather.

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Rigsbee's closest affinities may be with poets and writers who understood that memory is not recollection but burden. There is something of Lowell's historical self-scrutiny, Jarrell's moral inwardness, James Wright's wounded tenderness, Charles Wright's metaphysical landscape, C. K. Williams's long-lined ethical pressure, and even Sebald's associative melancholy. But Rigsbee is not derivative of any of them. His particular gift is the fusion of anecdotal American life with European intellectual weather.

He writes as a man who has read deeply, suffered intimately, watched closely, and distrusted easy redemption. The result is a poetry of aftermath. After the suicide. After the storm. After the failed marriage. After the political disgrace. After the father dies. After the old gods fail. After the song ends. After the red dot does not appear.

And still, the poem begins.

That is why *Watchman in the Knife Factory* matters. It gives us not a career arranged into pages, but a long act of witness. The watchman walks among blades. He cannot stop what cuts. But he can keep the record. He can say where the knife entered, how the light struck it, who was present, who looked away, and what remained afterward in the room.

David Rigsbee's achievement is not simply that he has written many excellent poems. It is that he has made an art of moral attention. His intellect, once shield, now sword, has become one of the instruments by which tenderness survives its own exposure. The poems do not console us by turning away from damage. They console, if they console at all, by proving that attention itself can be a form of love.

And love, in Rigsbee, is never clean. It is implicated, belated, comic, ashamed, wounded, and persistent.

It keeps watch

National Endowment for the Arts. "David Rigsbee."

Use for awards and credentials. The NEA page notes that The Pilot House won the Black River Poetry Prize and that *The Red Tower* was named best book for 2010 by the North Carolina Poetry Council.

Black Lawrence Press. "Poetry Consultations with David Rigsbee."

Useful for biographical details: 23 books and chapbooks, two NEA creative writing fellowships, publication in major magazines including A*GNI, The American Poetry Review, The Georgia Review, The New Yorker, Poetry, Prairie Schooner, The Sewanee Review,* and *The Southern Review.*

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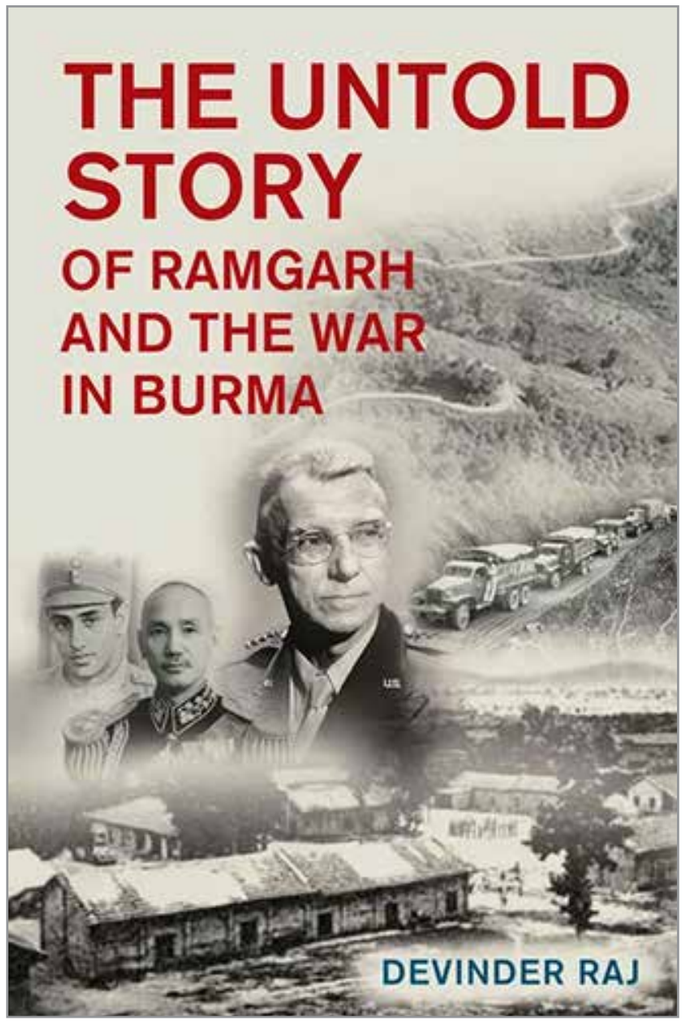
DEVINDER RAJ

Devinder Raj is a Malaysian author and amateur historian with a longstanding interest in the history of Malaysia and Southeast Asia. A graduate of the University of Malaya, he began his career as a teacher specialising in English language education. During his career, he worked with Malaysia's Ministry of Education and the British Council in Kuala Lumpur before moving to Beijing, where he taught at an international college. He later volunteered at the National University of Laos in Vientiane, working in the Faculty of Education with students pursuing a diploma in the teaching of English. His latest work, *The Untold Story of Ramgarh and the War in Burma*, explores the little-known role of Ramgarh in eastern India as a training centre for Chinese forces during the Second World War. Drawing on extensive historical research and his own family's connection with Ramgarh during the war, the book places the story within the wider China–Burma–India theatre. It also highlights the contributions of the Chinese, American, British, Indian and other Allied personnel whose roles in this important chapter of the war have often received limited attention.

PERCY AARON

Percy Aaron is an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teacher at Vientiane College, Lao PDR. In addition to this, he has also taught or edited for several international organisations including the World Bank, the UN, Australian Aid, Asean, and a number of Lao ministries. As lead writer for the Lao Business Forum, he was also on the World Bank's panel of editors. As teacher and editor with the Pasteur Institute, he helped a number of French epidemiologists get their scientific papers published in leading British and American scholarly magazines. He has had published a number of short stories, edited three books and was the editor of *Champa Holidays,* the Lao Airlines in-flight magazine and later of *Oh!* – a Southeast Asia-centric travel and culture publication. Prior to becoming a teacher, he was an entrepreneur, a director with Omega and Swatch in their India operations and an architectural draughtsman. He has answers to most of the world's problems and is the epitome of the 'Argumentative Indian'. He can be contacted at percy.aaron@gmail.com`



The Untold Story of Ramgarh and the War in Burma by Devinder Raj
available here: https://www.gerakbudaya.com

PERCY AARON
Review of
DEVINDER RAJ'S
The Untold Story of Ramgarh and the War in Burma
Gerakbudaya (Malaysia), 2026

Historians, novelists and others have produced countless books on the Second World War. Almost all have been about the great battles, or the major characters, such as the generals and politicians, most of whom stayed far from the actual battlefields. Lesser importance has been given to the ordinary fighting men and women, on both sides, who often paid the ultimate price in unknown numbers. Largely ignored have been the little players: the medical staff, the workers in the armaments and other factories, and all the support services, too numerous to mention here, that kept the machinery of war oiled and functioning.

The Untold Story of Ramgarh and the War in Burma by Devinder Raj attempts to shine a light on the little-known China-Burma-India theatre that played such a huge part in draining Japan of men and material, ensuring its final defeat.

While thumbing through family photographs, Devinder Raj, an amateur historian, came across a photograph of his father among some American soldiers. Interest piqued, he decided to go through his father's diaries. His father, Dev Raj Sud's habit of recording important events in his life, revealed a wealth of information, not just about the man but also about the times he had lived through. What Devinder learned was that his father had served as a malaria control officer in a war time training camp in Ramgarh, India. His discovery forms the basis of his eighth mini-history.

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The Allies took a severe mauling as Japanese forces rampaged through Southeast Asia and Burma winning battle after battle as they headed towards their ultimate prize, the crown jewel of the British Empire - India. British and Indian forces together with tens of thousands of troops from the Chinese Expeditionary Force that had been sent to defend northern Burma, withdrew to the relative safety of the Indian subcontinent, far from the advancing Japanese forces.

Mainly Italian prisoners were interned in the prisoner-of-war camp in Ramgarh, in the Indian state of Bihar. Following the large-scale influx of retreating Allied forces, the camp was then reconditioned, in the greatest of secrecy, into the Ramgarh Training Centre to accommodate, at different times, the approximately sixty thousand Chinese soldiers that that had retreated into India. Here, the mainly American advisers, trained the bedraggled and demoralized Chinese soldiers into an energized fighting force. After regrouping and replenishing, they were airlifted over the Hump in the eastern Himalayas or overland via the Ledo Road back into China.

The Ledo Road's (later renamed the Stilwell Road) construction was begun in late 1942. Its purpose was to replace the Burma Road which had been severed by the Japanese in order to cut off the transportation of supplies from Lashio in eastern Burma to Kunming in China's Yunnan province. Completed over two years, it was a monumental feat of human determination. Traversing dense jungles and mountainous terrain, it took Allied soldiers, engineers and local labourers almost two years to complete

Earlier, the transport of war materials over the same Lashio-Kunming route, but starting from Singapore, was achieved via the Burma Road. This road, which was completed in 1939 was constructed to replace the earlier routes along China's eastern seaboard which had been lost to the Japanese years earlier. About 3,200 truck drivers, mainly Chinese but including some Indians and Malays were recruited in Malaya. Known officially as the Nanyang Volunteers, they transported the supplies along the Indochina route to Lashio.

The Japanese invasion of India was finally repulsed by a combination of various factors: unsustainably long supply lines; revengeful local populations that had been brutalized during the years of occupation; hostile terrain and weather and the need to withdraw its forces to defend territories closer to home.

From March to July 1944, Indian and British armies inflicted heavy defeats on the Japanese in the bloody battles of Kohima and Imphal in Northeast India. India and British dignity had been saved.

Despite its title, *The Untold Story of Ramgarh and the War in Burma* is light on details about the town of Ramgarh itself or about life within the camps. This was possibly due to war time censorship. In fact, the existence of the camp was known only after the end of hostilities.

Virtually nothing is known, about Dev Raj Sud and his team's malaria-control efforts to protect the tens of thousands of Chinese troops who passed through the camp. It would have been interesting to have had some anecdotes of daily life in the camp, especially of how the Chinese communicated with the Indian medical staff and American instructors. The book is extensively researched but it would have benefitted considerably with more maps of the route taken by Stilwell and his companions in their 'Walk out of Burma'. Also, the number of people on that walk differs in three different places. The editing could also have been a little tighter.

I found *The Untold Story of Ramgarh and the War in Burma* very interesting and despite being a history buff, there were so many things about the CBI (China-Burma-India) theatre that I was ignorant about until I read this book.

It is a reminder, that World War II, like all wars before and after, was not just about the Joseph Stillwells, Chiang Kai Sheks and other lesser-known warriors. It's also about the unsung men and women who played lesser-known but equally important roles. Men like the Dev Raj Suds.

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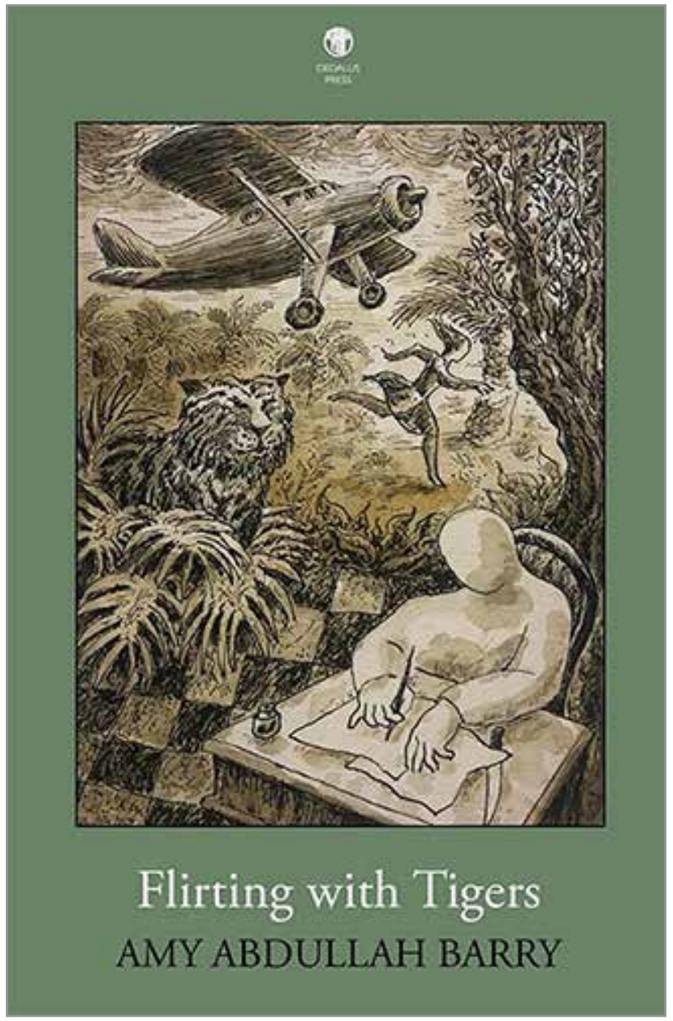
AMY ABDULLAH BARRY

Amy Abdullah Barry Award-winning writer, poet. Amy's multicultural identity plays a crucial role in her writing, bringing together elements from her Asian roots and Irish life. She is published widely. Her poems have been translated into many languages. Chosen for the Poetry Ireland Introduction Series 2022. She regularly organises poetry & music events in Athlone, Dublin & Roscommon. She has performed her work in Ireland and internationally. Amy was honoured to perform as the opening half for headliner, Lemn Sissay's 'Let the Light In' at Morecambe Poetry Festival, UK, 2024. 'Flirting with Tigers' is her collection of poems published by Dedalus Press.

COLIN CARBERRY

Colin Carberry was born in Toronto, spent his childhood in Lanesboro, Co. Longford, and now lives in Linares, Mexico, with his wife and two daughters. He is the author of three poetry books, including *Ghost Homeland: Selected Poems* (Dublin, 2020), and is the translator of three collections by Jaime Sabines. His poems have appeared in anthologies, journals and newspapers worldwide, and have been translated into many languages. He was Writer in Residence at the Heinrich Böll Cottage on Achill Island, and is the recipient of numerous Writers' Bursaries. Colin has read from his work on radio and television, and at book fairs, embassies, festivals, prisons, and universities in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Canada, Ireland, Mexico, Serbia, Slovenia, and the United States.



Fliritng with Tigers by Amy Abdullah Barry
available here: https://www.dedaluspress.com

Colin Carberry
Review of
Amy Abdullah Barry's
Flirting with Tigers
Dedalus Press, April 2023.

When it was published in Ireland, her adopted country, Amy Abdullah Barry's debut collection met with immediate interest and acclaim. Her verse is vivid, richly detailed, rooted in everyday life and sprinkled with a light measure of gentle sardonic humour. She has an instinct for the 'poetic moment', and knows where to begin and end – a gift even some veteran scribes struggle with. She writes with ease about nature and some of the ostensibly 'ordinary' people – family figures and friends, mainly – she grew up among, close to the lush, dangerous rain forests of Penang, Malaysia.

The book opens with 'The Breath of the Rainforest', in which the future poet, a feisty tomboy, lays sulphur around her tent's perimeter to 'halt the slithering of snakes' while taking in the distinctive sounds of 'tarsiers, toucans, tigers, / wild elephants trumpeting troubles / from miles across the forest floor', as she tries to sleep. It ends with 'A growl from the woody beams of bamboo' (how is 'woody' somehow precisely the right word here?) and finds herself 'squatting eye to eye with a boar'. But her apparent lack of fear unnerves the startled animal and it flees.

Magical tigers, ancient family guardians in 'moments of distress', feature in 'I unfold my own Myth'. Three Japanese Imperial Army soldiers stand over the poet's uncle, a resistance fighter, poised to shoot him, when 'through his tears, / two huge tigers appear, / to send them running for cover.' In the second verse, the poet's heavily pregnant eldest sister prays for protection and 'Two tigers with lustrous fur appear like long tooth angels, / guard either side of the doors.' And close to the end of the poem, the speaker recalls 'When I was three, two tigers emerged / on Grandpa's headstone, / just sitting there as if it were natural, / like rocks by the side of a stream.'

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Indeed, magic is latent in the earth, plants, trees, animals and humans in Barry's childhood Penang – even in her daily food: 'The constant pounding / of chillies, lemongrass and shallots, / where Mama assembles ingredients / in the kitchen, making / the kind of magic / I read in books of fairy tales.' In fact, food is one of the book's central themes, and in chronicling and describing recipes she once took for granted, perhaps, Barry achieves two aims: she fulfills a promise to her deceased mother ('Take these recipes with you, / and share them with others – / you are writing / a piece of our history, you know.'), while creating verbal magic of her own: 'Eagerly I look on – / Bubbling pots of spicy beef curry, / an oven pregnant with crisp chicken, / fluffy rice white as a bride's dress, / pretty in patterned bowls.' (All of the quotes in this paragraph are from 'Farewell Mama'). One of the book's most fully achieved poems, 'Taste of Penang', with its description of delicious food being cooked by her mother, makes one's mouth water – but one detail reveals the secret ingredient in these bewitching recipes: love: 'She cooks by estimation, / not measurement, / feeling her way through a recipe, / cumin, coriander and cardamon / simmering in the wok, / Asian spices drift in the air. / 'Remember...Cook for love,' she says, / 'or there will be no flavour at all.' This made me think of my own grandmother, Nana Harold, whose mysterious recipes, baked with great love over many decades, are now lost.

This theme continues in two poems written about living in Ireland. When Irish living abroad are asked what they miss most about home, many state family, music and the craic, but when one talks to migrants from many other cultures, they often reference food. In 'The Mango', the poet laments being forced to buy wizened fruit from impersonal supermarket chains, like Tescos, that she once picked off the ground – Ireland's soil and climate being unsuited to the cultivation of tropical fruits: 'All I have is an apple tree now, / whose fruits are so sour / I must smother them in sugar / to taste.' Likewise in 'Ripe': when her daughter buys frozen durians from a local shop, Barry writes, 'I imagine the silky custard taste of the fruit even in my sleep.'

There are no no airs or graces, no distance between the poet and what she observes, smells, and tastes, which originates in advice found in 'Don't': 'Don't write of things others can't picture.' She fits into the settings and cast of characters she so deftly describes as naturally as the street singers that feature in a number of poems. Like them, she sings when she's happy, sad, or nostalgic, nor is she immune to loss (of family members, including a brother – to suicide). Some pieces also touch on the theme of luck, first cousin to magic. At the end of the previously mentioned, poignant 'Farewell Mama', for instance, we find this hauntingly beautiful scene: 'Lucky, the stray dog, mama used to feed, / somehow made it here / across miles of road to a cemetery, / to bark his whimpering farewell.'

From pages 25 to 47 the poet chronicles her travels in places like China, India, Italy and Turkey. This is followed by a sequence of political poetry, because – as the poet writes in 'Separation Wall', dedicated to Ahed Tamimi, a Palestinian girl who was incarcerated for eight months for slapping an Israeli soldier – 'the ultimate evil / is knowing wrong, / and looking away.' The remainer of the book explores abuse, her domestic life in her adopted country, her beloved cat, Pablo Neruda's verse, and—a kind of prefigurement—lines about an Irish nun who once taught her: 'I felt the painful lash of Sister Agnes's ruler, / many times…' (At Father Barre Convent').

The best poems in this book are those dedicated to the poet's first home; they possess an earthiness, vivid beauty and ring of truth that truly convinces. The matter of Ireland is dealt with peripherally – *Flirting with Tigers* is a debut, after all – but how about the following lines, from 'A Mini Forest of Hazel Triskele', for close observation: 'Here at Lough Ree – / a spring breeze whistles off the lake / tossing the hawthorn's shiny green leaves. / Swans arch their wings, / windsurfing across the water.' Hopefully, in her next collection, Barry will explore more of the rugged beauty of the fields, bogs and waterways around Athlone, where she has made her home and become a vibrant cultural and literary force in the local community.

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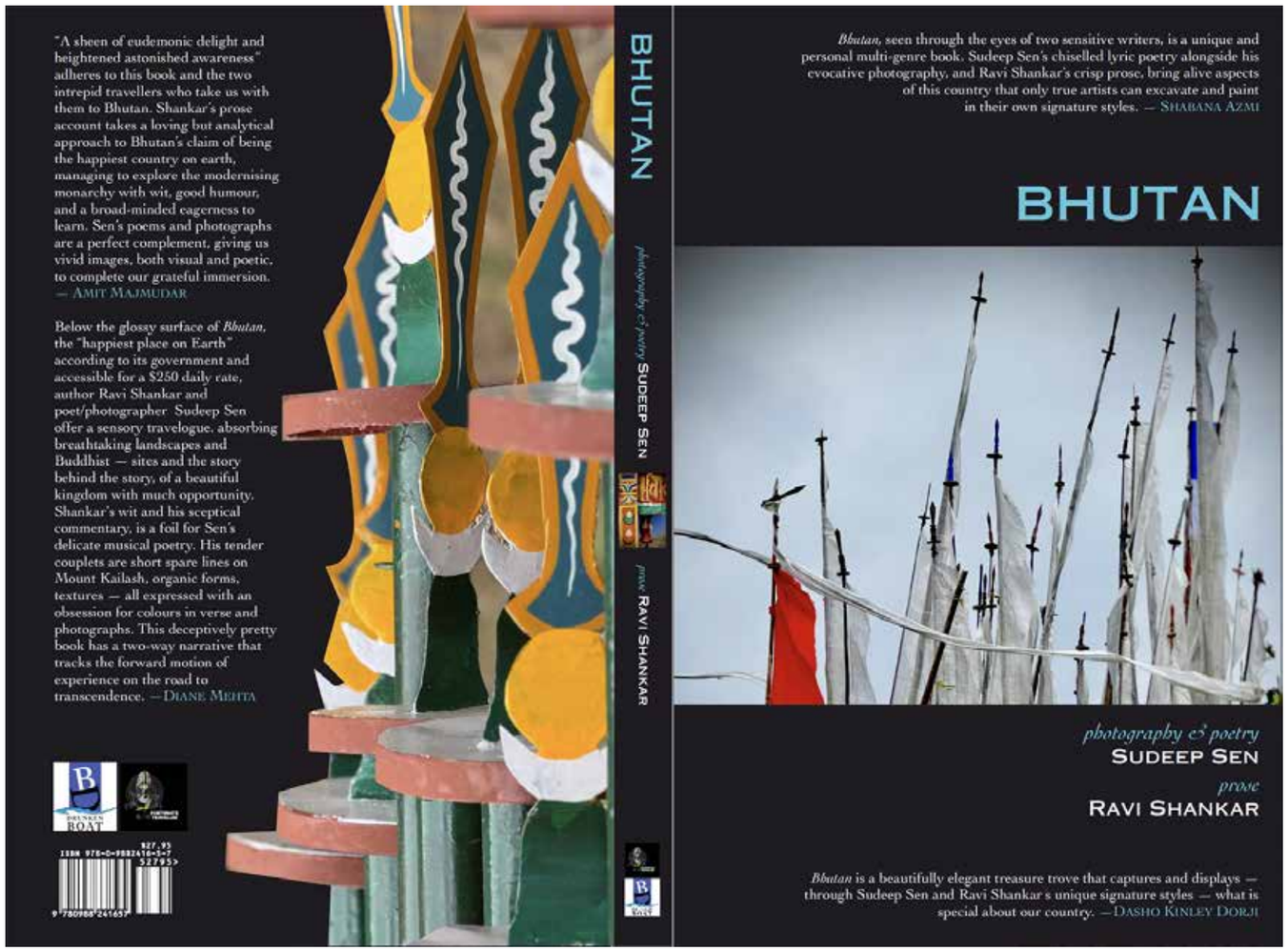
RAVI SHANKAR

Pushcart prize winner Ravi Shankar is a poet / translator / editor / memorist who has published 18 books including W.W. Norton's "Language for a New Century," called "a beautiful achievement for world literature" by Nobel laureate Nadine Gordimer and the finalist for the Memoir Magazine and Connecticut Book Awards "Correctional". Translated into a dozen languages, he has published in The New York Times, Paris Review, Caravan, appeared on BBC, NPR and PBS, done a TEDx talk, and won fellowships from the Corporation of Yaddo, the MacDowell Colony and the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts. He teaches creative writing at Tufts University and for the New York Writers Workshop.

SUDEEP SEN

Sudeep Sen's [www.sudeepsen.org] prize-winning books include: *Postmarked India: New & Selected Poems* (HarperCollins), *Aria* (A K Ramanujan Translation Award), *Fractals: New & Selected Poems | Translations* 1980-2015 (London Magazine Editions), *EroText* (Penguin), *Kaifi Azmi: Poems | Nazms* (Bloomsbury), *Anthropocene* (Rabindranath Tagore Literary Prize), *Red* and *Rock*. Edited landmark anthologies: *The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry, Modern English Poetry by Younger Indians* (Sahitya Akademi), *Converse: Contemporary English Poetry by Indians* (UK), and *Himalayas* (UK). The Government of India awarded him the senior fellowship for "outstanding persons in the field of culture/literature." Sen is the first Asian honoured to deliver the Derek Walcott Lecture and read at the Nobel Laureate Festival.



***Bhutan* by Sudeep Sen & Ravi Shankar available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/Bhutan-Ravi-Shankar/dp/098824165X**

TIM TOMLINSON
Review of
RAVI SHANKAR & SUDEEP SEN'S *Bhutan*

Drunken Boat, May 2026.

Sinking and Flying in Shankar & Sen's BHUTAN

In the late spring of 2024, poets/writers/editors Ravi Shankar and Sudeep Sen spent a week on a government curated visit to Bhutan, accompanied—not always, but often—by government certified guides. *Bhutan* is their account of that trip, its splendors and its peculiarities. It's a hybrid text. While both authors are widely published poets and writers, the workload here is divided. Shankar provides the introduction and the essay, Sen provides the poetry and the photography.

In the volume's preface, Bhutanese journalist Dasho Kinley Dorji commends the co-authors for looking "beyond the romanticism of external and social traits" and finding "a small country that dares to be different." Shankar's introduction extends "an invitation to intellectual humility disguised as a travel narrative." He reminds the reader of a potential disconnect between a writer trained in western skepticism and a "civilization organized around fundamentally different assumptions about reality, happiness, and the proper relationship between the sacred and secular worlds."

continued overleaf...

© Tim Tomlinson

Tim Tomlinson is the author of *Listening to Fish: Meditations from the Wet World*, a hybrid collection of poetry, prose, and photo-graphy concerned with the splendors of, and the perils facing, the world's coral reefs. His other books include *This Is Not Happening to You* (fiction), *Requiem for the Tree Fort I Set on Fire* (poetry), and the chapbook *Yolanda: An Oral History in Verse*. He is the founder and director of New York Writers Workshop, and editor/co-author of its popular text, *The Portable MFA in Creative Writing*. He teaches in NYU's Global Liberal Studies, and at the Deledda Master in Creative Writing, Sardinia

Several things puzzle Shankar most: the monarch and his ubiquity in domestic and public spaces; the ubiquity of the phallus, plastered onto home and commercial wall spaces and offered as souvenirs in various sizes and shapes in handicraft shops; and the concept of Gross National Happiness, which tours through Bhutan are designed to highlight, and which Shankar doesn't buy, despite enjoying its performance. There are facts, Shankar tells us, observable and research-able, that challenge official understandings. Such as: the youth unemployment rate at 29%; 1.5% of the 2023 population migrating to Australia for work and study; a 2023 ranking of 90th by the World Press Freedom index.

Sen's contributions are less skeptical, more celebratory, more plugged into aesthetic beauty and spiritual aspirations. Whatever wonders Shankar identifies, Sen's photographs capture. They are stunning. Prayer bowls, prayer flags, monks in prayer, himself in prayer. Buddhas large and small, Buddhas commercial and domestic. And of course the ever-present phalluses (his own, delicately not included). Where Shankar speaks of traditional garb (the *kira* for the female, the *gho* for the male), Sen follows with a photo. When Shankar describes painstaking ascents, Sen shows the Taktsang Monastery, better known as the Tiger's Nest, perched on a mountain ledge nearly 1000 meters above sea level, a dizzying, enrapturing sight.

So while the essay sketches out the fundamentals of the nation, its culture, and its conundrums, the photographs anchor the facts, often underscoring their nuanced nature, and bringing to mind something observed by Talking Heads back in 1980: *Facts all come with points of view ... / Facts just twist the truth around.* The poems suggest the truth, or a truth, or many truths, the ultimate truth being, perhaps, that truth here in Bhutan, just like anywhere else, will be hard to pin down. The difficulty is paralleled by the book's layout featuring a trilinear interpolation of prose, poems, and photographs.

When their tour arrives in the nation's capital, the guide named Ram provides an etymology in Dzongkha, Bhutan's official language, of the capital's name, Thimpu, which is something like a portmanteau word. "Thim" means to sink, and "phu" means to fly. This conflation functions somewhat as an *ars poetica* for the volume. To instruct, Shankar sinks; to delight, Sen flies.

Sen's poems might be read as a collective ekphrastic: Bhutan is the artefact, the Grecian urn, if you will, and the poems are Sen's ode. To this ode, Sen brings decades of practice, numerous strains of tradition, yielding in verse the sense of stillness, the flux, the flight much more than the sinking.

In "Prayer Flag 2": *Prayer flags / flutter — // I try to catch / their flight.*

In "Timelessness": ...*I imagine I am sitting on a river bank, // letting my thoughts flow out to the water-sky / horizon. Measuring distance is tricky here. // measuring time even more difficult.*

And, in the seven linked haiku "Meditation": *Thinking of people / one loves and hates — we forgive.*

There's a sense of that forgiveness in Dasho Kinley Dorji's preface. He points out that Shankar and Sen's visit was short and, from the evidence of the text, obviously enjoyed. But of course they had entered "a spiritual environment that lies beyond the reason and rationale of what we call modern education." Shankar alludes to as much, citing a possible cultural myopia. And Sen contributes a poem entitled "Eyes Wide Shut." But despite those perhaps over-emphasized limitations, each contributor alone and both together provide a visually, historically, and literarily vital account of a nation on the cusp of modernity, a nation that's both welcoming and wary and containing multitudes.

I, too, visited Bhutan in 2024. On the descent from the Tiger's Nest I met a Bhutanese guide who had tattooed a statement of Emerson to his forearm. Talk about multitudes, talk about incongruities. A Buddhist temple in Bhutan, an American transcendentalist quoted on a forearm. The tattoo read, in part, *if we do not use the gifts they bring, they carry them silently away.*

Shankar and Sen's *Bhutan* is a gift, to its host country, and to future visitors. Bhutan will, as Shankar has it, defeat cynicism "not through argument but through sheer presence." That presence shines forth in these pages, in Shankar's prose, its humility and its erudition, and in Sen's photographs and poetry, which capture both gravity and light.

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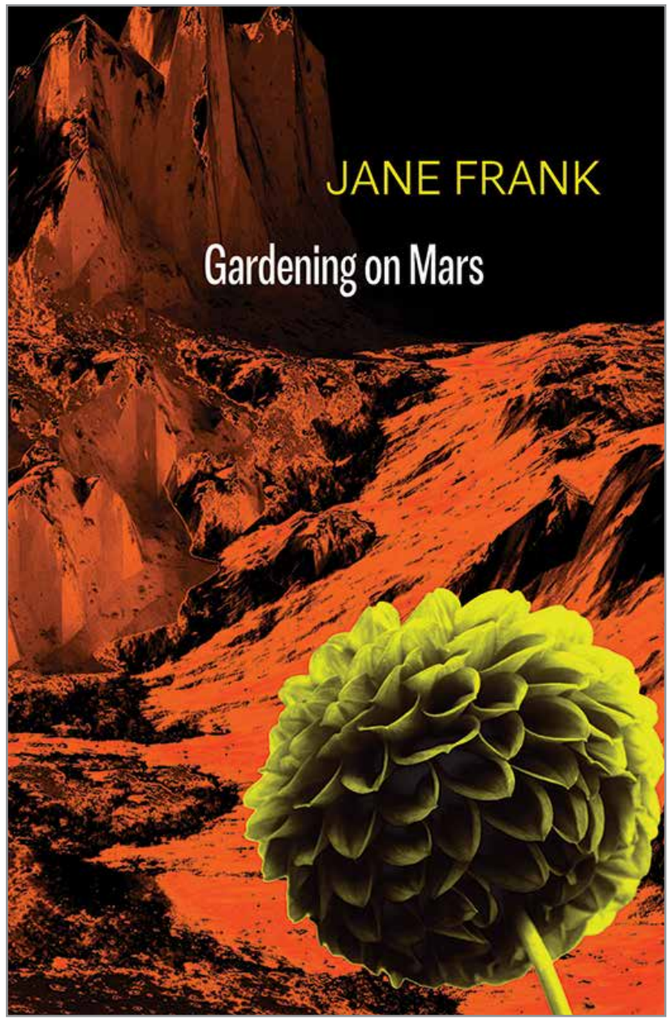
Jane Frank is a prize-winning Australian poet, editor and academic. Her most recent collection is *Gardening on Mars* (Shearsman Books, 2025) and her previous poetry collections *Ghosts Struggle to Swim* (2023) and *Wide River* (2020) were published by Calanthe Press. Her work is widely published in journals and anthologies in Australia and internationally, most recently with *Ink, Sweat and Tears*; *The Ekphrastic Review*; *Noon*; *Wigtown Writers Festival 'Writers' Walks* project; the *Liquid Amber Prize Anthology*: *Poetry on Fire* and *Other Terrain Journal*. Her poems were shortlisted in the Rose Spencer Poetry Prize 2026 and Poetry d'Amour 2026. In 2026, she has read poetry at the Sunshine Coast Hinterland Writers Festival, Brisbane Writers Festival, at Small Room (Griffith University, Gold Coast) and as part of the Poets@Stones Boutique Poetry Series. She is Reviews Editor at *StylusLit* literary journal and lectures in the School of Business and Creative Industries at the University of the Sunshine Coast in south-east Queensland, Australia.



Gardening on Mars by Jane Frank
available here: https://www.shearsman.com

JANE FRANK
Gardening on Mars
Shearsman Books, 2025.

This is Australian poet Jane Frank's third collection of poems. It transcends terrestrial boundaries, exploring profound connections between the natural world and human experience. Ranging from confessional and ekphrastic poems to surreal evocations of Australian place that express strong emotional connection, these poems maintain a rich dialogue with visual artists and writers of the past and present. Whether she is writing about hang gliding with Leonardo da Vinci, being lost inside a rainforest snow globe or witnessing a pinball game between galaxies, this is tactile and visual writing that bristles with striking language. Moving through her poems is like walking through a forest of imagery, layered and verdant, and is also an expedition through the fabled landscape of imagination and memory where love, longing and loss are familiar compass points. Her poems are often meditations on the joineries of life, the spaces where is meets was and might have been. The introspective is illuminating but there is also an understanding of the ways in which the poet seeks to garden her own life in the face of personal and planetary challenges. The poet is accessible, empathetic and yet displays masterful form and craft. She makes us want to go with her, share the journey, wherever it ends.

continued overleaf...

© Jane Frank

Endorsements:

Martin Duwall in *Australian Poetry Review:*

In the first poem of *Gardening on Mars* – her second full length volume after *Ghosts Struggle to Swim* – we meet an additional factor which adds to the structural strength of the poems because the detailed description is followed by the gnomic assertion that "knowing so little can be a comfort". This is taken up in the title of the second poem, "What We Don't Know". It's an exciting and invigorating tension. On the one hand there is the detailed and precise description born of observation of the visual environment – it's undoubtedly relevant that the poet's father was an accomplished painter – and on the other, a recognition of how little in all this plenitude we actually understand. And this lack of knowledge includes things like the complex biological motivations of animals and insects but also what happened in our relationships and what happens inside our own personalities. And, added to this list of things we don't understand, is the complex world of creativity itself: the writing of poems often turns up as a subject in the poems of this book.

Melissa Ashley in *StylusLit:*

Brisbane-based poet and academic Jane Frank's latest collection of poems, *Gardening on Mars*, explores themes of imagination, being and creativity. It's a sort of lyrical manual of the curious, adventurous, and deeply conscious vision of a poet's life. The discovery of poetry, the pleasure of writing it, the power it affords the poet to think clearly, to invent and remake, is such a deeply arresting experience that she returns again and again to joyfully examine its many facets. But poetry is a slippery creature, and although one might strive to grip it like the wings of a rainbow lorikeet, it is ever elusive and cannot be held onto. Nor commanded or tamed. Rather, the poet must wait for a visitation, must cultivate a presence of mind so she can recognise the sound of its knuckles on her door.

Angela Costi in *Compulsive Reader:*

Frank's accomplished poems carefully and skillfully guide us across poetry's terrain. Throughout this gathering of over sixty poems, there are surprise plantings of mellifluous lyric alongside absorbing syntax. *Gardening on Mars* orbits Frank's poetry into national and international spheres with its exemplary associations about what is strange with our familiar.

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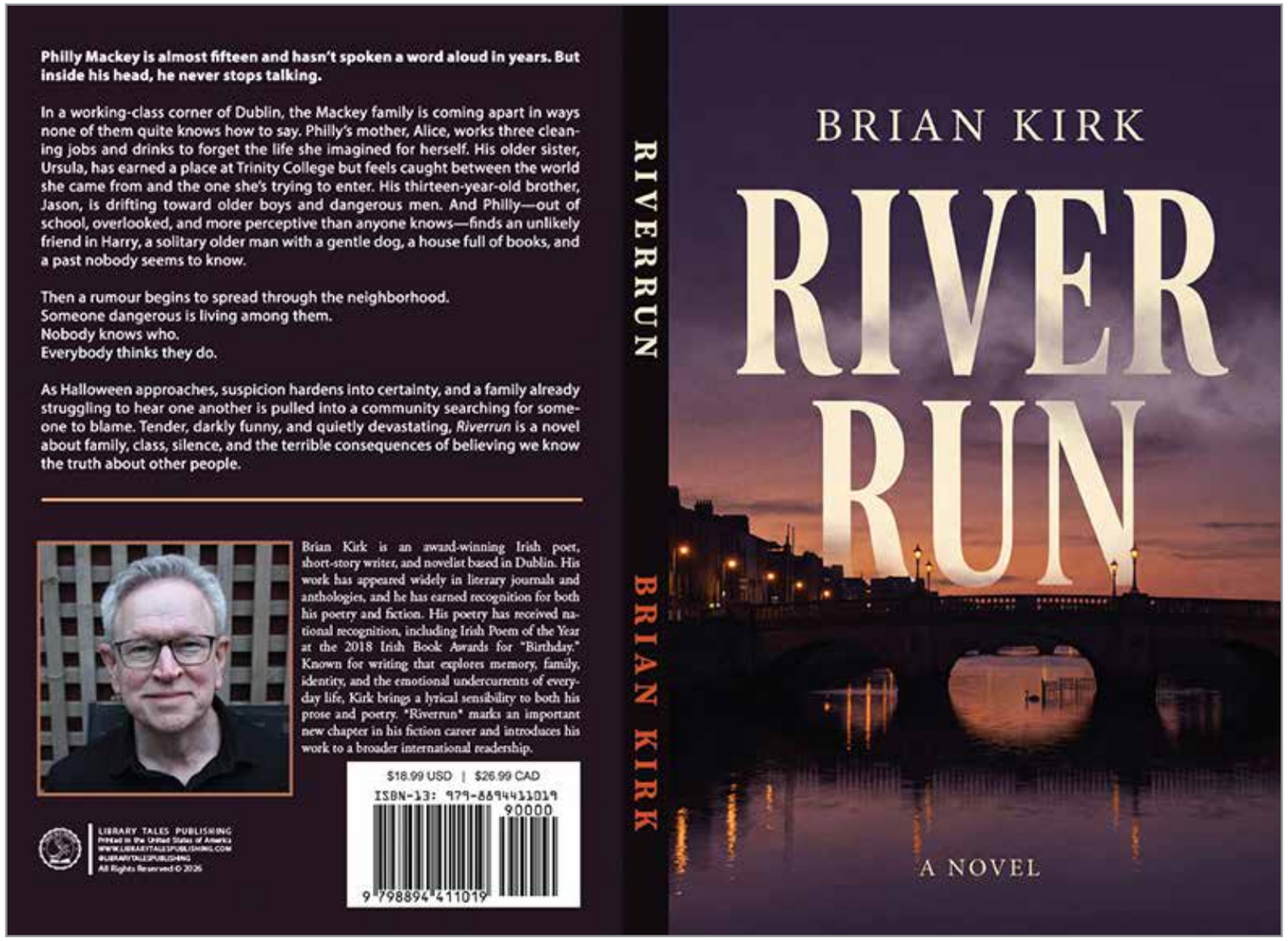
2026 November-December LE BOOK REVIEWS © liveencounters.net

Brian Kirk has published two poetry collections with Salmon Poetry, *After The Fall* (2017) and *Hare's Breath* (2023) and a short fiction chapbook *It's Not Me It's You* (Southword Editions, 2019). *Riverrun* was chosen as a winner of the Irish Writers Centre Novel Fair 2022 and short-listed for the Spotlight First Novel Prize 2023, now forthcoming from Library Tales Publishing.



Brian Kirk

Riverrun

Library Tales Publishing, November 2026.

Philly Mackey is almost fifteen and hasn't spoken a word aloud in years.

But inside his head, he never stops talking.

In a working-class corner of Dublin, the Mackey family is coming apart in ways none of them quite knows how to say. Philly's mother, Alice, works three cleaning jobs and drinks to forget the life she imagined for herself. His older sister, Ursula, has earned a place at Trinity College but feels caught between the world she came from and the one she's trying to enter. His thirteen-year-old brother, Jason, is drifting toward older boys and dangerous men. And Philly—out of school, overlooked, and more perceptive than anyone knows—finds an unlikely friend in Harry, a solitary older man with a gentle dog, a house full of books, and a past nobody seems to know.

Then a rumour begins to spread through the neighbourhood.

Someone dangerous is living among them.

Nobody knows who.

Everybody thinks they do.

As Halloween approaches, suspicion hardens into certainty, and a family already struggling to hear one another is pulled into a community searching for someone to blame.

Tender, darkly funny, and quietly devastating, *Riverrun* is a novel about family, class, silence, and the terrible consequences of believing we know the truth about other people.

***Riverrun* by Brian Kirk pre-order at:**
Library Tales Publishing - https://librarytalespublishing.com/books/riverrun
Simon and Schuster Distribution - https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Riverrun/
Available in all good bookshops after 24th November 2026.

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2010 - 2026 - 17TH ANNIVERSARY

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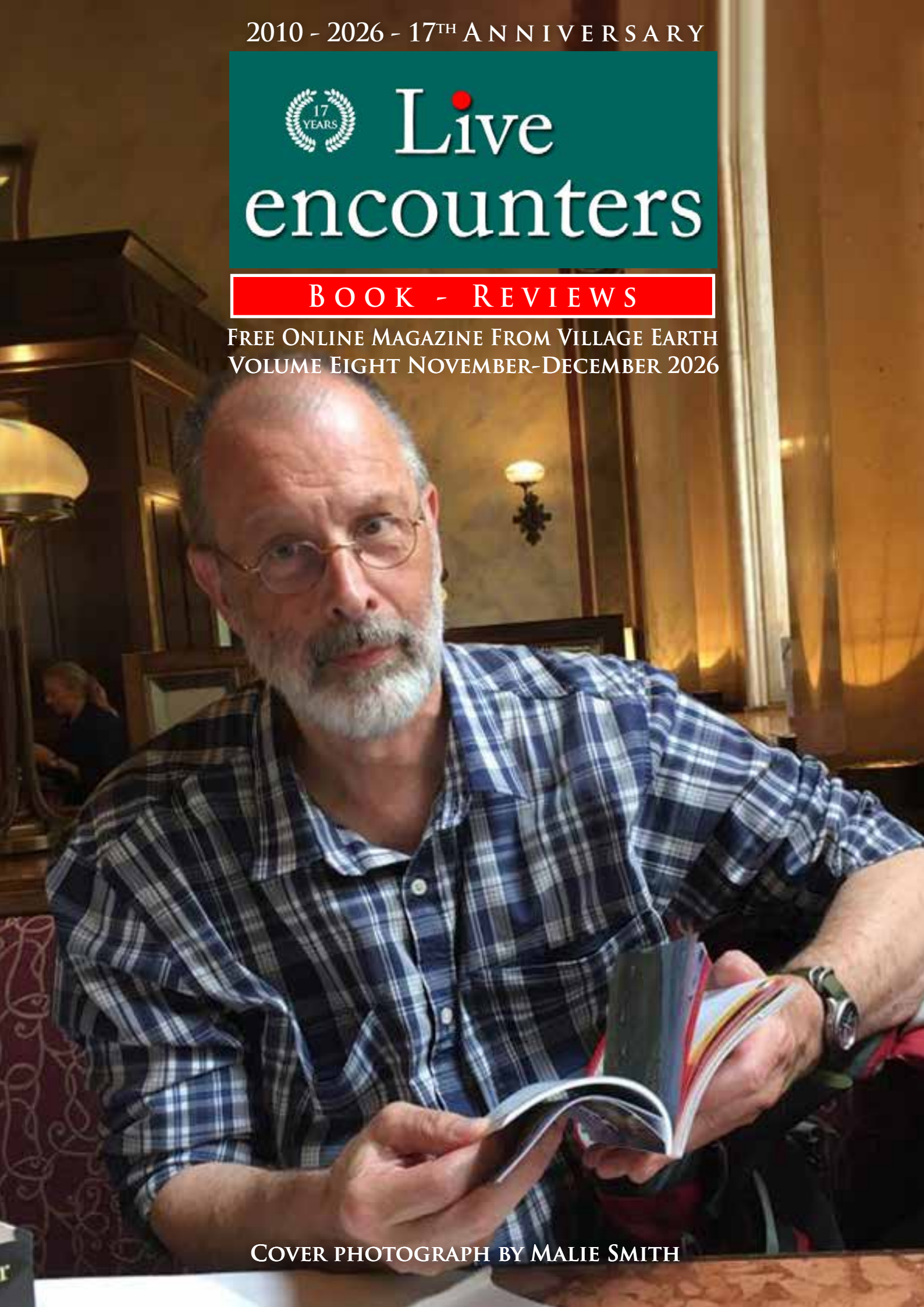

COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY MALIE SMITH