

NEW POETRY, FICTION, ESSAY  
AND REVIEWS

A man in a dark suit and light shirt is sitting on a large stack of books. He is holding a quill pen in his right hand. Behind him is a large, open book with text visible on its pages. The background is dark and moody, with the silhouette of a tree. The overall tone is literary and classic.

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New Poetry, Fiction, Reviews & Essays

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# Short Fiction

## Paris Vagrant By Michael Paul Hogan

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I often wander through the streets of Paris completely destitute, wearing a corduroy jacket and a workingman's cap, accompanied only by the sound of the nails in the soles of my boots as I clatter and spark beside the quais and under the bridges along the banks of the Seine – although sometimes, from the shadows of an archway, a voice will cry out,

“Bonjour, Monsieur le Vagabond!”

“Bonjour, Jean-Jacques le Chapardeur!”

“Are you come to repay the cigarette I gave you?”

“The cigarette from the cigarette case you stole in the Luxembourg Gardens?”

“The cigarette you *owe* me, you thieving swine.”

“The cigarette that burns like a candle in your sister's eye socket? Adieu, mon ami.”

“Va au diable!”

“Farewell.”

The nights are cold but the dawns are colder. Even the sparks I strike off the cobblestones are as cold as stars. Sometimes a man will approach me, a well-dressed man, a man in a knee-length overcoat and with turn-ups on his well-cut trousers and wearing English-style leather shoes, a man who will congratulate me on my poverty –

“You must be a poet, my son. To be so poor is to understand the passion of Rimbaud and Villon. Do you understand what I mean by the word passion?”

“I think I do, sir. It means suffering.”

“To suffer is a gift, my son, a gift you must use as the vagabond poets of the streets used it before you. Here –”

and then put a hundred-Franc note in my dirt-engrained hand.

“Thank you, sir. Thank you!”

I look up from the almost unbelievable piece of paper, but he is gone, his footsteps deadened by the mist that haunts the early morning river, only the echo of his parting phrase

“Je vous en prie! Spend it not wisely, my son, but well!”

hanging in the damp and dismal air like the music of a *bal musette*.

\*

I wake up in darkness – not the darkness of night, but the beautiful sub-aquatic darkness of a room from which the sunlight has been filtered through window blinds and green velvet curtains that hang from ceiling to floor. The darkness of safety. Of tranquility. Of caves in the sides of mountains

that hide behind waterfalls...

Of bathyspheres lowered by winches and cables through the depths of the oceans to the bottom of the sea...

\*

“Wake up! Wake up, why won’t you?”

The knocking on the door is like physical pain, the anticipation of the next blow worse than the pain of the last –

“Open the door. We know you’re in there!”

To open the door would be to die. To open the door would be to let Death enter, a form of suicide, as impossible, as appalling, as truly sickening as the contemplation of a pavement ten / twelve stories below, the crack of one’s head on icy concrete, the echo of the shattering of one’s skull, the sound of fists on a sanctuary door, the voices goading you to Jump! Jump! Jump!

“Open up, damn you! You know you can’t stay in there forever!”

I grind my face into the pillow and clutch the counterpane until my knuckles turn white. I say (but softly, so softly that only a sparrow on a chimney pot in Montmartre can hear),

“Yes, I can! Yes, I can! Yes, I *can*...”

\*

I stand up from the floating platform upon which Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald are lounging behind identical pairs of blue-tinted silver-framed sun spectacles and dive in a perfect arc into the turquoise-lacquered golden-rippled Cap d’Antibes.

\*

The captain of the **Marie Roget** tightened the lid of the bathysphere one last time, saluted us through the thickened glass observation window, and gave orders for Professor Apollinax and myself to be lowered into the deep...

How extraordinary to descend through strata beneath strata of seemingly infinite varieties of blue then green then previously unknown variations of purple, ending (or merely beginning?) with the profoundest, most psychologically oppressive expression of black! The fish that populate these deeps are of a nature so grotesque to be almost fantastical. They are translucent white and carry their own illumination with which to penetrate the infernal dark. Some have stalks on their heads that carry electric bulbs like wilting flowers; others are studded with lights and thus resemble illuminated bateaux mouches on the Paris Seine. After thirty or forty minutes of awed silence I turned to Professor Apollinax and said,

“My dear Professor, I do believe we have entered a world of which God is as ignorant as we.”

“My earnest fear,” replied the Professor, “is that God is ignorant of *our* world and that we have intruded into the world of God...”

\*

I smoke a cigarette in the semi-darkness of my room and pray the silence will continue. Just time, I hear myself asking, just time to drink one more glass of cognac, to smoke one more from a sky-blue packet of Gauloises *caporal*... The smoke hangs in the air, undulating, ululating, rippling the way jellyfish ripple in the South China Sea...

\*

After three hours of continuous descent, during which Professor Apollinax filled an entire notebook with detailed sketches and commentaries, I began to experience an alternative reality in which I was the occupant of a balloon taking off from the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris on a cold (it was cold in the bathysphere) December afternoon. The fish, with their extraordinary lamp-like illuminations, became a circle of photographers, all of whom wore top hats, their flash-bulbs exploding, the puffs of smoke hanging and then dissolving in the chilly air. I waved my handkerchief from the basket, acknowledging the cheers of a small but enthusiastic crowd. The anchors were cut free. I was almost immediately fifty feet above the ground.

How beautiful the roofs of Paris are, seen from their own elevation, dusted with a gorgeous chiaroscuro of soot and snow! I turned up the collar of my overcoat and floated over the *Quartier Latin* of Montparnasse, the windows and skylights of the artists' ateliers flickering silver and yellow in the rapidly darkening late afternoon, an occasional face framed in the anguish of composition as I (and my balloon) floated only a few feet from the grimy slates and silhouetted chimney tops. Hola! In one an artist with his back to me was painting a model who lay naked on a divan. The model was a strikingly beautiful young girl of maybe nineteen, but the portrait on the canvas was an extraordinary collage of seemingly random colours and shapes. As though to see a balloon floating just outside the window was the most natural thing in the world, the girl acknowledged my presence with the merest flicker of a smile, an almost imperceptible enlargement of one eye, both of which I returned with the smallest of bows. A few moments later my gondola bumped against the begrimed and frosty pane of a writer's garret. The writer, his eyes reddened with lack of sleep and excess of absinthe, looked up from his manuscript and assumed such a look of astonishment that I immediately feared for what little might be left of his sanity and was pleased when the balloon drifted up and over the rooftop, its basket dislodging a slate as it gained the comparative freedom of the smoky Paris sky. Thus it was that while Professor Apollinax plunged further down into the depths of the ocean, his voyage illuminated by the lamps of undersea creatures previously unknown to science, I made a mirror-image ascent, my own extraordinary journey lit by the infinite and gorgeous familiarity of the stars...

\*

I fear the clock. The clock is perfectly round and has two bells that are activated by the minute hand. The clock is black enamel and has a white face printed with twelve numbers that sometimes I cannot understand. The person in an adjacent bed, back *then*, once told me how to stop the minute hand from reaching the point where the nurses and the men with their own clock-white faces rush in. It is as easy, he said, as putting your hand through the mirror. Even your whole body, he said, can pass through a mirror, but to stop the moon from crossing the sky requires years of meditation – meditation which, he went on to confide, he had himself undertaken in the mountains of Shangri La. “There was one occasion,” he said, “are you listening, my friend?”

“I’m listening.”

“It was on the third night of the Lantern Festival in the ninth lunar month of the year I was reborn as Hu Yue Liang. I said farewell to my teacher, my *laoshi*, and walked out of the temple where I had studied The Way for nine hundred and ninety-nine days. The ice underneath my bare feet was like broken glass – like broken glass, my friend! Are you listening?”

“I’m listening.”

“And the moon, the full moon, was as big as – ”

“As big as?”

“ – as the eye of infinity, my friend, as a black hole filled with the tears of God! And yet as small as a doubloon nailed to the mast of a whaling ship. My feet bled ’til the snow turned crimson, but I felt no pain. No pain at all! It is strange, is it not?, that pills so small can make everything stop, even the rain...”

But the clock, I’d said, what about the *clock*?

“With a wand made from a feather from the roc that Sinbad slew on his seventh voyage. And, ah, my friend, what extraordinary travels we will have together in search of *that*!”

\*

The base of the floating platform ripples in the clear blue water, the faces of Scott and Zelda shimmering into focus above the sunlit surface of the sea. I burst through the dancing golden glimmer and grasp a hand and shake the water out of my eyes and laugh, the water galloping and galoshing around the sudden unwieldiness of the platform’s reinforced base, the hand holding mine and guiding me to the rope handles that effect a leverage up and out of the blue. I’m aware of a girl in a turquoise bathing costume reclining sideways on one elbow, smoking a cigarette in a black and silver holder, beholding me with casual amusement, and then hoisting myself up onto the platform in a slither of hands and knees. Scott pours me a glass of white wine from a bottle of Pouilly Fuisse in an ice bucket and Zelda throws me an enormous blue and white towel embroidered with the name of **L’Hotel du Cap**. The girl in the turquoise bathing suit continues to study me for maybe

thirty seconds then casually turns away.

\*

I must have slept. I opened my eyes and was momentarily disorientated. It was nothing but natural to transpose my confusion to my companion. I said,

“Are you alright, Professor Apollinax?”

His eyes twinkled behind his spectacles. Instead of twinkled I might have said radiated. When he spoke his voice positively bubbled with excitement – excitement he was at very few pains to suppress. He said,

“Alright? You ask me if I am alright? Ah, my dear young fellow, look out of the starboard port and see what I see...”

I looked as directed and gradually, through the murk with which, albeit briefly, I had allowed my eyes to become unaccustomed, an extraordinary thing came into focus. I said,

“I see a peculiar creature, professor. And a rather big one too, by all accounts.”

Professor Apollinax chuckled and rubbed his hands together over his knees. He said,

“Not merely a creature, nor merely a big one either. Oh, my dear boy, this is the greatest moment of my life – I have seen a living Plesiosaur!”

\*

“My *incidents*, as you call them, are nobody’s business but my own. Occasionally, I admit, I confine myself in my room, but I forcefully insist that solitude is simultaneously man’s greatest freedom and greatest right. That *paradox*, Monsieur le Docteur, is something that, with your pedant’s lack of irony, you fail to understand – worse, you fail in every aspect of empathy that, I would most keenly have thought and you should most keenly be aware, is part of the essential, the *quintessential* makeup of the practitioner who seeks access to the intricacies of the human mind. *My* mind, my dear Sigmund *Fraud*, ist ein System von sehnsüchtigen Trugbildern zusammen mit einer Abweisung der Wirklichkeit, wie finden wir nirgends sonst aber in einem Zustand der glücklichen halluzinatorischen Verwirrung. I am insane only to the point at which I act entirely in concordance with the dictates on my own, my original and unique mind. And if every mind is simultaneously unique and discreet then we are either all of us or none of us insane. Ah, Herr Doktor, what do you think of that! Hola! Your silence betrays either a jealousy of superior intellectual capability or a merely inadequate presence of mind. Of mind! Of all the minds in this clinic, only the clocks are insane. And I have a plan to deal with them – indeed! And now if you will excuse me, Monsieur *Froid*, I will accompany my next *incident* with a glass of Jerez and an intimately slender Dutch cigar.

“Would you care to join me?”

\*

## The Incident of the Slate

“Sacre bleu! What on earth was *that*?”

I often wander through the streets of Paris completely destitute, wearing a corduroy jacket and a workingman’s cap, accompanied only by the sound of the nails in the soles of my boots as I clatter and spark beside the quais and under the bridges along the banks of the Seine – although sometimes, from the shadows of an archway, a voice will cry out

“Sacre bleu! Faites attention! Attention, monsieur!” And a slate will pass close enough to my ear to whisper *Hello* before shattering on the cobblestones of the pavement beside me. And across the street the shadow of the gondola of a balloon will darken the chairs and the tables of the Café de Paris, and glancing upwards I will see a face – no, in fact, *two* faces: the face of the otherwise obscure assistant of Professeur Honore de Saint-Sulpice d’Appolinax de l’Academie Francaise, the internationally famous pioneer of submarine exploration, and the pale, emaciated, anxious face of the American poet Edgar Allan Poe, sickened with absinthe and laudanum and the stress of impersonating the bedridden Baudelaire. And then I will look down at the (now shattered) slate and pick up a shard of it and put the shard in my pocket as a souvenir – as a memory, in the literal meaning of the word – and I will touch the rim of my cap to Jean-Jacques le Charpardeur

“Une cigarette, mon ami?”

“Va te faire foutre, vous maudit voleur.”

and chuck him a crumpled pack of Gitanes and say,

“Be kind to me, Jean-Jacques. I know how to stop the clocks and the moon. From a man whose feet trod on broken glass.”

“You do not impress me with your pitiful charity. Now fuck off and leave me in peace.”

“Au revoir. En paix.”

“Va tu.”

Touching the shard of slate through the corduroy of my jacket pocket, much as a man of superstition might touch a rosary or a rabbit’s foot or a medallion of St. Francis – or perhaps even a centime picked up from the puddle of a *pissoir* – I will turn up my collar, tilt my cap to the breeze, and listen to the echo of my own boot-nails as I exhibit my freedom along the white-painted wards of the sanitarium, among the extraordinary creatures of the sub-marine, in chance encounters beside the moonlit ripples of the Seine...

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**The Gist:** Michael Paul Hogan is a poet, journalist and fiction writer whose work has appeared extensively in the USA, UK, India and China. He is the author of six collections of poetry, the most recent of which, *Chinese Bolero*, with illustrations by the painter Li Bin, was published in 2015. He is currently working on a collection of short stories, several of which have already appeared in, among others, *Big Bridge* (California), *Adelaide Literary Magazine* (New York) and *The Oddville Press* (London).

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# The Duck, a story in five parts by Reyna Marder Gentin

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## *That Day*

Our son Duck passed his road test. The nickname dated from when he was a toddler. That day, we watched from the covered porch as he pulled carefully out of the driveway, headed for his first solo spin.

It began to pour. We held our mugs while the coffee cooled and looked out at the slick road. Then Jeffrey arrived.

Jeffrey, a mallard -- green head, brown feathers -- swam in the nearby pond. Duck had named and fed him, and Jeffrey often crossed the street and onto our front lawn looking for his friend.

He waddled directly toward us and climbed the two stairs onto the porch, staring steadily, quacking loudly. "He's got bad news," I said.

"Don't be ridiculous." My husband hid his eyes in his newspaper.

Having said his piece, Jeffrey headed back to the pond.

I heard the music, loud and thumping, before I saw Duck's car coming down the street. He turned his head and waved to me, triumphant, as the front tire slammed into Jeffrey, sending him flying.

## *The Day Before That Day*

This conversation is as well-worn as the grooves made by our rocking chairs on the porch, but now picking up urgency.

"You'll come with me," my husband says.

I nod and smile but my face feels stiff. He has always travelled for his job. In the coming year, he'll journey to China, India, South Africa.

"What will I do while you're working?"

"We'll hire a driver and a guide for you, and we'll meet up in the evening."

He rocks a little faster and then shifts his chair closer. I sit back further in my rocker, hug my recently-complaining knees to my chest.

"If we left this house and this town for good tomorrow," he says, "who do you think would notice?"

I rattle off the names of women, mothers of our son's friends. We're tethered together by the children we've raised while our husbands provided for us and saw the world.

Soon it will be my turn, blessed with a spouse who only wants to live life's adventures together.

And I just want to sit in this rocking chair, watching Duck and Jeffrey play by the pond.

### *The Day After **That Day***

When I hit I-87, I drive north, foot heavy on the pedal. One hundred and forty miles and two plus hours after I stole away, my husband and son sleeping in their beds, I reach the outskirts of Albany. I fill up at the gas station and use the restroom. It's somewhere between moderately clean and downright filthy, and I wash my hands vigorously before heading into the convenience store. I push open the door with my shoulder to avoid touching anything. My stomach is growling but the muffins in the display case have spots of green mold. I choose a bag of Doritos and a bottle of water.

"That all?" The clerk's hair is greasy. She looks at me like she can tell.

I haven't smoked a cigarette since college, but I point and she hands me a pack of Marlboro Lights.

"Matches?"

I shake my head.

Two hours later I see the signs for Lake Placid. Eons ago, before Duck was born and it was just us, we spent a happy weekend there.

I take the next exit and turn back toward home.

When I pull up, Duck is sitting on the front lawn, elbows on his knees and head in his hands.

"Dad's about to call the police."

I don't apologize.

### *Ten Years Before **That Day***

"This is torture," Joan says.

"I hear you," I respond.

But I don't. Joan is like the other moms, complaining about the complete folly of little league, seven-year-olds who can't catch or hit a ball, who sometimes fall just running the bases. But my entire being is attuned to my son, his compact body jammed with frenetic energy as he takes the mound, his every emotion playing out on his beautiful little face.

I watch intently as Duck faces down the batter. He knows how to throw only one pitch -- a slow motion fastball. He's about to deliver when I notice his shoelace is untied. I jump up and frantically wave at the coach.

"Hey, hey -- time out!" I yell and point. Duck's furious glare is like a punch to my gut. He doesn't understand that it's my job -- my mission, my purpose -- to protect him.

I sit down, aware that the other moms are looking at me. I don't care. Only the batter wears a helmet; if Duck had tripped on his lace as he propelled the ball forward, he could've landed on his head. We'd be in the ambulance right now, me frantically trying to contact my husband, who would

undoubtedly be in another time zone, unreachable. I shake the vision off and return my laser focus to my son. Which is why it takes a moment for me to realize that Joan is talking to me.

“Do you ever regret quitting your job?” she asks. “The camaraderie? Putting on decent clothes? Using your brain? Sometimes I miss my old self.” I look down at my sweatpants, and back out at the field, at Duck. Anywhere but at Joan.

### *Ten Years After **That Day***

I make no sound when I step into the threshold of the room, my footsteps swallowed by the plush carpeting. White living room leads into white dining room leads into white kitchen. An “open floor plan,” his wife had explained. A wall of glass looks out on the Pacific. The expansiveness of the ocean shames our little pond where my son used to play.

He has married “up,” my husband says, shrugging. Up and away.

“Be nice to her, Daniel,” his wife says. They sit close together on the couch, their backs to me, and she musses his hair. “I’m always nice,” Duck says. And it’s true. He is unfailingly nice.

The baby nurse in her pressed uniform walks past me, carrying my granddaughter. I watch silently as the nurse presents the baby, already bathed and swaddled, to my daughter-in-law. Moments later, she hands the baby back. Whisked away until it’s time for the next bottle.

I wonder what sort of parents they will be, my little boy and this stranger he has married, padding barefoot and silent on the soft carpet, in this endless whiteness, gazing at the ocean.

They’ve christened her Alexandra. Such a big name for such a tiny girl. If she has a nickname, they haven’t told me.

I call her Peanut.

---

**The Gist:** Reyna Marder Gentin attended Yale College and Yale Law School. Her fiction and personal essays have been published widely. Her novel, *Unreasonable Doubts* came, out in November, 2018, is a finalist in the Women's Fiction Writers Association Star Award for Outstanding Debut.

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## Blood by Brian Kirk

---

I told her I would see what I could do, but Julia knows her mother and I don't get along. Generally, she wouldn't expect me to visit with her, but this is different. It's the first anniversary of her father's death and she doesn't want to spend the whole day in her mother's company without my support. I never usually work on Saturdays, but I genuinely have some things to do at the office that morning.

I really liked her father. Richard was a quiet man, bookish and intelligent, who doted on his only child, and when he died Julia struggled with her loss. But her mother, Barbara, is difficult – always has been – and I learned very quickly that the best approach is to avoid her when possible. Julia understands this. Sometimes when I'm in Barbara's company I wonder, as you do, if I'm seeing an image of how Julia might be in the future. But I can't entertain the notion that the warm and sensitive Julia could ever end up like frosty, critical Barbara. Julia is so much more Richard's daughter than her mother's.

'I'll get a sandwich in town after work and meet you at the house around two, okay?' I say.

'Okay.'

Julia is quiet. She gets like this when there's something bothering her.

'I need to finish that report this Saturday or else I'll be home late every night next week.'

'I know, you said.'

'What's wrong?' I ask. 'Come on, tell me.'

'Nothing... only, she said you wouldn't come. It just goes to prove that she's right about everything as usual.'

'Don't mind her.' I place my hand on the small of Julia's back and rub slowly. 'It's simply the way things are. She doesn't like me, never has. But I'll be there for two o'clock and we can all go out for dinner later. And I won't say a cross word, I promise.'

She smiles at me and I feel so sorry for her.

'Don't worry,' I say, 'she's probably just upset about your dad right now. Just like you are.' I move my hand up and stroke her hair gently.

Tears fill her eyes then and she takes my hand in hers.

'You're so good to me, Andrew,' she says. 'I know you understand how it feels to lose someone.'

She's referring to the fact that both my parents passed away before I met her. I was in my mid-twenties then and was living abroad. I come from a big family, so my siblings took care of all the arrangements. I flew home both times and flew back within days. I wasn't affected, not really; not the way you imagine I might be, certainly not the way Julia imagined I had been, what with them dying within a year of each other. I felt sorry for her because I knew she missed her father, but I couldn't map my own experience of bereavement on to hers in any meaningful way. People are different, I suppose.

It's hard to know exactly why Barbara doesn't like me. Part of it is snobbery, of course. Julia

comes from money. My parents were poor, but I'm educated and have a well-paid job. Still, that isn't enough. I used to work for an investment bank and perhaps such proximity to money somehow appears unseemly to those who are born rich. Or maybe it's me. I still feel intimidated by Barbara and people like her because I grew up in a working-class estate and worked hard to make my way in the world, while she has always lived in this leafy suburb in a detached house that looks out on the foothills of the Dublin Mountains. I suppose I resent how lightly she wears her inherited affluence, and maybe I showed it a little on the first few occasions when Julia took me to visit. Doubtless my failed first marriage didn't help either.

'Try not to be late on Saturday,' she pleads.

'Don't worry, love. I'll be on time. And, anyway, she'll probably have some of her friends over, so you won't be on your own.'

'I'm not so sure. Last time she phoned she complained how she hates the way they pity her since Dad died.'

'Ah, she just wants to make you feel guilty,' I say.

'I know. And she does, because I do feel guilty. I don't visit her often enough.' Julia stares into space.

'And when you do visit, she finds fault in everything you do. She can't help herself.'

'I know, I know.'

I can see the tears forming in her eyes again. I'm getting tired of these circular conversations about her mother and her guilt. It's all manipulation, I know, but I say nothing more.

On Friday night we have a party to attend. I half expected Julia to make up some excuse, but after dinner she reminds me of the time and urges me to hurry. She shows me the flowers and champagne she's bought for Emma and Peter who have just moved in together. I'm conscious of the fact that I need to get up in the morning, but at the same time grateful that Julia seems to be in a good mood. I shower and dress quickly and decide that I will drive. I sit on the sofa in the kitchen and read the sports pages while I wait for her to get ready.

'Ta-da!' she says, and twirls quickly, letting her long blonde hair fly. She looks amazing. But totally overdressed.

'You look a million dollars!'

'You like?' she asks.

I nod. 'I sure do! But do you think it's a little over the top for where we're going?'

She suddenly looks downhearted.

'I mean, it's just a rented flat-warming, all warm beer and reheated frozen food most likely.'

'You don't like my outfit?' she asks, and there's a cloying tone that irks me.

'It's not that, Julia. But look.'

I take her shoulders gently in each of my hands and examine every inch of her. She's very beautiful and the dress she's wearing clings to the contours of her supple body and reveals occasional flashes of her smooth fair skin. It's sleeveless and cinched around her tiny waist, opening

into a fuller skirt below. The top is cut low and fitted sleekly around the curve of her breasts. There is some cleavage. I move one hand down and caress the skin above the neckline where the roundness of her bosom starts. She looks up at me and I kiss her gently on the lips.

‘You can’t wear this,’ I whisper, ‘not to where we’re going. You’ll be talking to the tops of men’s heads all night, if you know what I mean.’ I laugh lightly.

‘But I thought you liked it...’

‘I do, I do. But go up and change. You can wear it another night when we’re going out for dinner or something.’

She hesitates, but then she goes upstairs without another word.

Later that night she says nothing as she gets ready for bed. We didn’t stay too late at the party which I was glad about, because it’s hard to make small talk when you don’t have a glass of wine in your hand.

‘Are you tired?’ I ask as she pulls the duvet around her.

‘Yes.’

‘Are you okay?’

‘Fine.’

I worry about her when she gets this quiet. Last year, after her father died, she retreated into herself. At first, she got so bad she wouldn’t go to work and spent the days at home in bed or on the sofa wrapped in a duvet. It was tough. I did my best to get her through it. After a while she seemed to turn herself around. She went back to work, met with her friends for lunch and coffee, even started going to the gym. But I knew there was something wrong. All this activity, this hectic lifestyle, this sudden newfound energy was like a symptom of a deeper malady. I tried to talk to her about it, to get her to rein it in a little, to give herself a break. After all, she had never been sporty before. What she was doing was out of character; she was becoming someone I hardly recognised.

After a month or so, I’m sad to say, I was proved right. She was getting quiet again, hiding away in the bedroom or bathroom for hours at a time. We stopped having sex, but I didn’t put any pressure on her. I noticed she no longer undressed in my presence but went to the bathroom to change before bed. I guessed what it might be, although I couldn’t bear to believe it was true. I walked in on her in the shower one day and saw the water run pink from the cuts on her stomach and sides.

I was angry at first. Hurt even. I took her unhappiness to be a reflection of our life together, but when she stopped crying and we sat down together later that evening I could see that she was simply missing her father. We talked about our dead parents for a while; I tried to say the right things, even though I had no real understanding of the way she felt. Feeling helpless, I promised to do everything I could to support her, even if it meant her spending more time with her mother. That night we made love for the first time in weeks, and it felt very special, like it was our first time together all over again.

On Saturday morning I rise early and set off for the office while Julia is still asleep. At eleven I text her: *hope ur on ur way by now! xx*. No reply. I work until one and then eat a sandwich at my desk before getting in the car again. When I arrive at Barbara's house there's no sign of Julia's car. Richard's Mercedes sits in the drive as it has done unmoved for over a year. I consider making Barbara an offer for it; I always fancied driving one of those. As I ring the doorbell, I have a sense that it won't be answered. I move around the back of the house; the lawn is pristine, the solid garden furniture immaculately arrayed on the stone patio. But there's no sign of life, so I dial Julia's number and it goes straight to the message. A knot of anxiety tightens in my stomach as I walk back to the car.

At home it's much the same: no car in the drive, no one at home. I let myself in and move between the kitchen and living room. I'm not sure what I'm looking for, maybe a note or something, but there's nothing. Upstairs in the bedroom everything looks normal. I sit on the unmade bed for a while and try to order my thoughts. Something has happened, an accident maybe, but I feel that to start phoning hospitals would be premature.

I feel useless just sitting there so I lock up the house and get back in my car. My neighbour, Tim, gives me a wave as I reverse out of the drive. I let the window down.

'You haven't seen Julia this morning, have you?' I ask.

Tim strolls over and leans across the low wall that separates our front gardens.

'Yeah, Andrew, she was off out earlier, all done up to the nines. Something special on?'

'Her father's anniversary, that's all. She was going to her mother's house.'

'Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot. Has it been a year already?'

'Yes. It has.'

'The poor pet.'

I close the window before he can say anymore.

I drive around for a while before heading back to Barbara's, as if in a daze, vaguely hoping Julia might call.

I don't like this, not knowing what's going on. Julia knows I must get a call or at least a text message if she decides to do something outside of our daily plan. I know that might sound very prescriptive, but when you're working long hours it's important to organize your free time carefully, I believe.

One time, shortly after we were married, Julia's cousin came to visit. She lives in London and was in town for work but took some time out to look up Julia. She arrived on Saturday morning with an overnight bag and assumed she was going to stay with us. It was awkward. Julia didn't want to be rude to her, but at the same time she could see it wasn't convenient. We had made plans that day to meet with friends for lunch and then go to an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. I didn't want to force her hand in any way, so I said nothing and left them to have coffee together. When I came downstairs an hour later her cousin had already left and Julia was distraught. Our

Saturday was ruined.

I have no option but to sit in the car outside Barbara's house and wait. I consider going to one of the neighbouring houses, but the prospect of having to explain myself to them is unappealing. The afternoon passes, and I keep putting off the moment when I will have to make a decision. Suddenly my phone springs into life, a number I don't recognise. I knock off the radio and answer it. It's Barbara.

'Where are you?' I ask. 'Is Julia alright?'

'She's fine.' There is a moment's silence. 'I'm calling just to let you know that she's okay.'

'But where are you?'

'She's okay. But she doesn't want to see you, Andrew.'

I can hear a smile in how she says my name.

'I don't understand,' I say, and I truly don't. 'Put her on, put Julia on the phone now.'

'No. You must listen to me. She doesn't want to speak to you, and she doesn't want to see you.'

'No!'

'She won't be coming home. We've gone away, I'm not going to tell you where. You must get used to the idea that Julia will not be coming back. It's over, Andrew. She's taken all she can take from you.'

'But she's my wife – you can't take her from me!

'There's nothing more to say. I'm hanging up now.'

'No, wait! Let me talk to her at least. I'm sure there's some mistake. We had a difference of opinion last night, that was all. Let me talk to her.'

'No, Andrew. Goodbye.'

'No, wait! No!'

The line goes dead. I sit there for a few moments and then press call back. The number is engaged. I try again. Again, engaged. I start the engine and tear out of there onto the road without looking.

'Did you find her alright, then?' Tim's smiling head appears at my window as I park in the drive. I kill the engine and push open the door almost knocking him over.

'Is something wrong, Andrew? Is it Julia?'

I open my front door and slam it shut behind me. I move from room to room, but I'm not searching for anything; I cannot sit or stand in one spot for a moment before I move again until, eventually, I fall onto the bed. I stay there, fully dressed, wrapped in the duvet, until the light outside dies completely. Earlier, the doorbell rang three times and there was knocking on the glass, but I ignored it. Now all I can hear is the sound of the house settling, the fridge downstairs juddering occasionally and the traffic on the by-pass hissing like a distant sea. Hours later my phone rings, its submarine light fills the darkened room.

'Hello,' I say.

‘It’s me,’ a voice whispers.

‘Julia?’

‘I’m sorry, Andrew.’

‘Julia,’ is all I can say again.

‘I didn’t mean for it to happen like this.’

‘I know, love.’

‘You understand, don’t you?’

‘Julia, love, just come home now. Please.’

‘But you understand why I went away?’

‘Just come home, love. It’ll be just like it was before.’

‘No, it won’t unless you understand.’

‘I don’t know what you mean. I’m tired. We’re both upset. Come home and we can fix things up, the two of us.’

There is silence on the line.

‘Julia, are you there?’

Silence.

‘Julia? Is it her? Did she force you to go away? She’s not good for you. She infects everyone and everything around her with her spitefulness.’

‘Sssh! It’s got nothing to do with her. I asked her to help me and she did.’

‘But she’s...’

‘She’s my mother. She loves me.’

‘I love you, Julia! What have I ever done to you to deserve this?’

‘I’m sorry, Andrew. You just don’t see it, do you?’

‘Are you cutting yourself again, is that it?’

‘Stop, just stop now!’

‘It’s true, isn’t it? You’re cutting yourself and she thinks it’s because of me somehow. She’s poisoned you against me, can’t you see that?’

‘No, Andrew.’

The silence between us opens out and spreads until it envelops the whole room. It feels wrong to break it somehow, so we don’t. But she doesn’t end the call and I don’t hang up either. I nestle the phone by the side of my head and pull the duvet around me. I lie there and listen to her breathing and I know she’s doing the same.

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**The Gist:** Brian Kirk is a poet and short story writer from Dublin. His first poetry collection *After The Fall* was published by Salmon Poetry in 2017. His poem “Birthday” won the Listowel Writers’ Week Irish Poem of the Year at the An Post Irish Book Awards 2018. His short fiction chapbook *It’s Not Me, It’s You* won the inaugural Southword Fiction Chapbook Competition and was published by Southword Editions in September 2019.

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## My Uncle In The Ospital by Rosemary McLeish

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I phoned my uncle a week or so after he came home from hospital.

"So how are you doing?" I said.

"No bad, no bad," he said. "I've two new contraptions Frances bought me, one's a, how shall we say, a CD player and a tape player, and the other one, that's a wee clever thing, a radio, and it's got a switch so ye can record whatever ye want. I'm listening to all sorts, music, poetry, stories."

"Yes, but how's the kidney thing? Did they sort it out?" It was a few digressions later before I discovered that he still had a catheter.

"That'll be me now," he said. I felt very sad. I'd understood that they were waiting to discharge him until he could manage without a catheter. Even though he was going to be eighty in a couple of weeks, and his cancer was of long standing, it seemed something of a defeat.

"Well, at least you're home now."

"Oh, aye, that was a terrible time. Did you know, I was in the ospital for a month and a day! And most of it was spent waiting, waiting for the radiologist, I don't know what. First they'd say two days, then it would be next week."

"Some of it was till your blood got sorted."

"Aye, well, howsomever, it was like being in prison."

He'd been in a bed in an old-fashioned men's ward where the only privacy was when the curtains were pulled. There were several bays down the ward with two beds in each, but the rest of the ward was visible from all of them. My uncle's bed was quite near the nurses' station, the noisiest and most bustling part of the ward. He'd had glaucoma for many years and now cataracts made him nearly blind, so maybe they kept him there because of that, so they could keep an eye on him.

"Member the word?" he asked.

"Conspiracy?"

"Aye, that's the very one. That's how I was thinking at first. 'Member? It was so much like a prison, and the time passed so slowly, and other people came and went so quickly, in one day, out the next ... but I never got out. And it was such a long time between visiting hours. And one day, the visitors werenae let in for half an hour after their time. That was jist the madness talking, though."

He'd been in a terrible state when I first went to see him. He had the look of death on him. He'd lost a lot of weight in the months since I'd last seen him and his voice was very weak. The sight of him reminded me of the time, years ago now, when I'd gone to meet my father at Heathrow, and found him in a wheelchair, on his last knockings, so it seemed. We'd been on our way to Russia, he from Canada, I from Scotland, shortly after he'd had a severe illness. I stopped thinking

my mother was being melodramatic, telling me to be prepared for him to die while we were over there. However, far from finishing him off, the visit rejuvenated him and he lived another eleven years, so that gave me some hope for Frank.

"Of course, ye've been through aw this yerself," he said.

"Well, some of it ... but look at me now! I'm fine, I only get the occasional twinge, the stents did the trick, so I hope they'll sort you out too. And you are feeling better now, aren't you?"

"It did one thing for me," he said. "I found my voice."

I thought he was going to tell me he'd eventually said something about his treatment, or rather neglect, since he'd been complaining of pain for months before he had to be admitted to the emergency department.

"They took me to have a shower," he was telling me. "The state of the bathrooms, it was shocking. Well, the whole ospital, they're talking of tearing it down. It's so old and out-dated. See for instance they bathrooms, they havnae been updated since the 1920s. Y' know, it was a ... what's the word? ... a disgrace, that's what it was. Ye sat on the toilet, ye had to swivel yourself around, no easy thing for me, to get at the toilet paper. It was in this big drum, and ye couldnae get hold of the paper and when eventually ye did ye could only get one tiny wee square, however hard ye pulled. Still, ye don't want to hear about aw this."

"Yes I do .. you were saying about the shower?"

"Yes, the shower. They just shoved me in the shower."

"With all your drips?"

"Naw, naw, I hadnae the drips by then ... they just pulled the curtains and left me to it. And it was a miserable shower, hardly any force behind it."

I tutted sympathetically.

"I was so fed up, for once, I just let rip."

"What do you mean? Were you shouting?"

"I started singing, y' know, as ye do, I sang this song that ma mother used tae sing. She was the one for singing."

I never met my grandmother but I wish I had. My father told me she had a song for every occasion. She knew all the music hall songs and the popular songs of her time. And in the hospital, Frank talked to me about her singing, and about her long red hair, right down her back, past her bottom, he indicated, which she used to sit and brush out every night. It's hard to imagine her, there is such a magical, larger-than-life quality to their memories, and yet she was a woman with eight children and a husband out of work in the Gorbals in the twenties and thirties, doing anything she could to make ends meet, not seemingly a dreamer but a practical, managing sort of person. She took the younger children fruit-picking in the summers so they could get a holiday, and had great ambitions for them all, especially my father, the inheritor (so she promised him) of the family

jewels. She wanted them all to get an education and get out of the Gorbals. She died of heart trouble at the age of fifty-three or so, just before I was born.

"My Dad was always singing too, or whistling through his teeth, or tapping on the walls, or the chair, or the table. It's what we missed most when he died."

"Aye, that'd be the piano, the tapping ... I sing all the time too, just not usually so loud."

I'd always thought of it as Frank's warbling.

"So what did you sing?"

"It was that one ... wait a minute ... "Love Me and the World is Mine", yes, that was always one of her favourites. Anyway, I had no idea that anyone could hear me. I gave it full throttle. So when I got out of the shower, they all said 'that was a lovely tune, gie us another' and that was the start of it."

"So it wasn't such a bad time in the hospital after all?"

"Naw, naw, ye couldnae say that. It was like a prison. A prison! And all the inmates changing. They all used to say as you passed their bed: 'I'm Jimmie', or 'I'm Alec', or 'I'm Tam' and then they'd ask ye your name, and what ye did. Ye know me, I never say I was a teacher. What's it to anyone? They just pigeonhole ye anyway. But there was one time, my daughter was there, and she says quick as a flash, before I could get a word in, 'oh, he was a Maths teacher' ..."

Knowing of old that Frank's views on the teaching profession and his time in it only upset and depress him, I cut him off at the pass.

"So about finding your voice?"

"Oh, aye, well, so they say their name and you say your name and all they ever want tae talk about is the fitba. As you know, I'm no a one for the fitba. Och, ye couldnae get away fra them. Anyway, 'member last time I was in the ospital, I met Shuie? The poet? That was because I was passing this bed where a man called Tam was, and I sez oh hullo Tam, as ye do, only they all get out so quickly, so this voice sez, 'I'm no Tam', so I sez 'Tam O Shanter, I presume?' 'Ah,' sez he, pouncing, 'someone who knows his Burns.' 'Ah, naw, naw,' sez I, 'no really to speak of, not so's you'd notice.' 'Ah, but' sez he, 'ye heard o' Ode tae a Haggis, and Holy Wully's Prayer?' 'Oh, aye,' sez I. 'I write poetry,' sez he, 'Ode tae a Fish Supper', 'The Ned's Prayer', stuff like that.' 'Could I be getting a look at it?' sez I. So we had these wee chats, back and forth, about poetry and such, and he gave me a copy of his book. Inscribed it an aw. I'll let you get a shot at it when you come over. But mostly it was the fitba."

Poor Frank, a happy man when obliged with a philosophical discussion; not much chance of that on a men's urology ward.

"What about the singing though?"

"Ah, yes, yes, the singing. The man in the bed next tae me, he was like Harry Lauder, a wee struttin' sort of a man. He could sing an aw, so he'd sing a song, and I'd sing a song. It helped to

pass the time. And they aw liked it. It was terrible in there. They had such terrible stories. One man, he said to me, 'once they put you on the morphine, you know, that's it'."

"And was he on morphine?"

"Oh aye; and another one said he'd been constipated for a month. For a month! Imagine that ... and another ... och, but ye don't want to be hearing about they tales. It was ... how shall we say? ... it was a prison, that's what it was. And the needles! They were aye taking blood - every day, and sometimes three in the one day, they never finished with the needles."

"Yes, I remember you had the drip and all sorts when I first saw you."

"It's a shocking state, the NHS. Ye wouldnae believe the nonsense. Well, *you* would, ye've been through enough yerself. So anyway, one day Harry Lauder was gone, and the guy in the next bed was Edward. Not Eddie, you understand, didn't like anyone calling him Eddie. And I was singing this song one day, it was 'You Belong to Me', and Edward said, 'do ye know whose song that was?' And I said 'yes, that was Kay Starr'. No, it wasnae, he said, it was Rosemary Clooney. No, sez I, Kay Starr. Naw, Rosemary Clooney. And so it went on. Now you know me, I don't care for an argument, but eventually the whole ward got involved, the nurses and everybody, some saying one, some the other. I just gave in, what does it matter, Kay Starr or Rosemary Clooney? It was somebody's song, eh? And he left as well, in a day or two."

My uncle has a beautiful speaking voice, so it didn't surprise me that he could sing. He used to play the piano a lot, anything and everything, just as the fancy took him. I haven't heard him play in a long time. One of my earliest memories of him is of the time he and his pal Alec came to stay with us when we lived in Bradford, riding up our drive on their motorcycles, on which they later took us, turn and turn about, rides down to Chellow Dene and back. He came into the living room, taking off his helmet and gloves, made a beeline for the piano and played, with his cigarette hanging out the corner of his mouth, 'Alexander's Ragtime Band', WITHOUT ANY MUSIC. The sort of uncle every child should have.

" So, might ye come over and see me some time soon? Sorry to be a nuisance, but with this catheter thing I cannae get about much."

"Yes, of course," I said. "I was thinking about coming over next week." I was wondering whether to take him daffodils. Frank has a bit of an obsession with daffodils. In fact, we have a history with daffodils. Frank finds them very difficult to paint, so every spring he tries again, but he's never satisfied with the result. I can't understand this: to me, a daffodil is as easy or difficult as any other flower to paint. We'd had a daffodil conversation in the hospital. Frank has got more interested in poetry lately, and reminded me of that old warhog, Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud", whence we drifted into a side ally about whether and if so how clouds could be lonely, and I'd reminded him of an early painting of mine entitled 'No Wordsworth', of a vase of forced showy daffodils in front of a bookcase full of books. One of my nastiest memories of childhood is having been made to memorise this poem and recite it at a Sunday School concert. Chellow Dene, now I think of it, was the place for wild daffodils; I often did wander lonely as a cloud picking them there.

Frank's the one for Wordsworth, he even likes the daffodil poem, and makes me think of going back and re-reading him. Perhaps, though, it would be unkind to bring Frank daffodils this year, with his cataracts. He told me he was feeling sad about his paintings, he'd always tried to make the colours bright and he never seemed to manage it.

"I don't understand," I said, "what do you mean?"

"They're all so dark".

"No, they're not. Your pictures are full of bright colour and sunlight. You do put the colours in. They always remind me of your descriptions of your delight with the fields and flowers in Perth when you went raspberry picking as a boy."

"They look dark to me."

The penny dropped. "I know what that is!" I said. "That's your cataracts. You wait till you get them done, I've heard people say before, the colours are amazing. You'll see! You'll see your pictures aren't dark."

I hadn't seen Frank in the hospital after that conversation. I'd been away down to London for a week and in the meantime he'd been discharged. I was still wondering how he'd got out in the end, why did they discharge him with a catheter in?

"What happened in the end? Why did they let you out?"

"Frances came and got me," he said, "and we got home and my elbow was hurting. Well, it often did, both of them did, because of all the needles. So she said 'roll up your sleeve and I'll take a look' so I did, and they'd left one of the needles in my arm."

"What?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, they did. So she wanted to take it out but I thought she should phone the ward so that's what we did and they said to come back and they would take it out for me. So we got in the car and drove back to the hospital and they took it out, and we were dithering by the lift, Frances has a phobia about lifts and I cannae see to go down the stairs, so she was waiting with me by the lift and then she was going to go down the stairs and meet me at the bottom, and I said, on ye go, I'll be fine, so she went off down the stairs and I was just standing there, waiting on the lift, and this fella come up to me, I'd never seen him before, and he sez to me: "It was Rosemary Clooney by the way".

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**The Gist:** Rosemary McLeish is a poet and outsider artist living in Kent. In January of this year she had her first collection, "I am a field (poems of place and nature)" published by Wordsmithery. Last year, she was nominated for the Pushcart Prize and won second prize in both the Mslexia Poetry Competition and the Bedford International Poetry Competition. Her website is [rosemarymcleish.co.uk](http://rosemarymcleish.co.uk).

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# Essays

## Twice Exiled by Greg Michaelson

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My mum always said she came from Basutoland. She was a staunch anti-racist; I suspect that she wanted to distance herself from South Africa. The youngest of four sisters, she was born in 1925 on a remote farm called Appledore, in the Orange Free State. She left aged 11, and never returned, though she lived just long enough to celebrate the end of apartheid.

\*

*After my mum's death, my partner Nancy and I decided we'd try to find Appledore. I scoured the Internet, which was still in its infancy, and found nothing. Eventually, I located a tribute to my grandfather, which referred to him purchasing a farm at Komissiepoort in the district of Ladybrand.*

\*

My mum's father was a soldier-scholar. Born and schooled in England, he bought the farm after serving in the Boer War. In between further bouts of soldiering - commanding a squadron of rifles in South West Africa during the First World War, and serving as an officer in a reserve battalion during the Second - he raised cattle and horses, and, latterly, ostriches. My mum often referred to him affectionately as The Major.

\*

*I got in touch with a cousin, who'd been to Appledore with our granny, many years ago. She turned up a hand drawn coloured map of the farm. Laboriously matching this map against a prototype Google Earth, we decided on a probable location.*

\*

My grandfather was a fine historian. He wrote accounts of the Basuto people and the South African armed forces, and what remains a standard work on horses and saddlery. My mum, herself an art historian, is credited in his short popular account of harnesses and saddlery: this may still occasionally be found in the corners of gift shops at minor British historic sites, on revolving stands of pocket books about country life.

\*

*After more fruitless attempts at finding a contemporary map showing Appledore, we decided that we'd go to Cape Town, hire a car and head in the right direction. We'd travelled extensively overland on our own in Southern Africa - Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia and Botswana – but were timid about South Africa itself. We'd been there twice since Nelson Mandela's release but had never ventured alone out of cities. It's an astonishingly beautiful country, but the gulf between whites and blacks permeates society, and poverty is endemic. And we are very white.*

\*

My mum had certainly picked up a great deal about horsewear. After going to the cinema with her to see *My Beautiful Career*, set in the Australian outback in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, she commented that she'd enjoyed the film but the harnesses were quite wrong, being a much later police issue.

\*

*We flew to Cape Town via London. We arrived after dark and took a taxi to our hotel. The immense squatter camps, sprawled along the road across the Cape Flats, were testimony to how little life had improved for most South Africans, after 10 years of Black majority rule. Still, when we'd first visited Cape Town the camps were unlit: now strings of naked electric lights illuminated the chaos.*

\*

I met my grandfather only twice, after he had returned to the UK in the 1950s on medical advice. I was young, and remember a thin, stooped, elderly man who seemed very far away. I don't think we spoke much, though I do recall him telling me that, in their free time, the African farm labourers would lie over holes in the ground filled with burning dagga, inhaling the fumes. He also once sent me a postcard of Bushman rock paintings, with an explanatory letter.

\*

*Cape Town was very buzzy. We revisited tourist sites, and ate well and went to the cinema in the harbour complex. But we were warned off going out on foot after dark. In the market, I bought a length of cloth imprinted with adverts for anti-malaria treatment. I've yet to get around to having it made into a shirt.*

\*

Towards the end of his life, my grandfather lived in my aunt's therapeutic community in Kent. This aunt, the second youngest daughter, was a psychiatrist specialising in addiction. The therapeutic community was founded on anti-psychiatric principles, but never did very well, and is now a country club.

\*

*We went to the District Six museum that commemorates the last pre-apartheid multi-racial community in Cape Town. The District was flattened but never rebuilt. I wondered if, in London, my mum knew exiles who'd lived there.*

\*

My mum didn't get on with any of her sisters. She was much the youngest by eight years: I suspect that they bullied her. Her parents had always wanted a boy. Between my psychiatrist aunt and my mum, a son was born, but he had celiac disease, died young and was buried on the farm.

\*

*We visited public libraries and book shops, but still couldn't find any mapping that showed Appledore. So we picked up a car and set off cautiously out of the city; we'd been warned about car-jackings at traffic lights.*

\*

Still, my aunt introduced my mum to the Communist Party, where, at the end of the Second World War, she met my dad, a mathematician. And my aunt was always very good to me. I had a key to her apartment in central London and would regularly turn up unannounced, having hitch hiked from my home in Edinburgh, or westwards from university in Colchester.

\*

*Despite our fears, we left Cape Town without incident, and drove south to Cape Agulhas, where the Atlantic and Indian Oceans meet. It was sobering to think that nothing now lay between us and the South Pole. In the car park, some young Blacks had bogged their car in the sand. They were visibly wary of me as I helped them push it out.*

\*

I knew my granny far better than my grandfather, though I still know far less of her early life. On returning to England, she lived in Bemerton, just outside Salisbury, in a large detached house with a lawn running down to the river. Before we moved from West London to Scotland, we would regularly spend holidays with her.

\*

*That night we stayed in a hotel, in a fishing village along the coast. The British had squat stone houses built for the native workforce. Reminiscent of West Country cottages, today they're holiday homes.*

\*

My granny was a member of the Women's Voluntary Service and attended the local Anglican church, where the 17<sup>th</sup> century poet, George Herbert, had preached. Our family were atheists, so, on Sunday mornings, we would accompany her through the village but only as far as the church door. I remember her being quite cross to find the church locked one Sunday late in October: she'd forgotten to put the clock back.

\*

*We drove north across the arid plain of the Little Karoo. It was mid-winter and the landscape was brown. We crossed the Langkloof Mountains on an unsealed road through Prince Alfred's Pass. In the center of the pass, surrounded by gaunt eroded stone, was a small green oasis. On the other side, relieved that the hire car had made it unscathed, we had coffee and cake in a charming little cafe in Prince Albert.*

\*

Though she was very conservative, I think that my granny and my dad had a marked respect for each other. I found her fierce and was always rather wary of her. My mum said that my granny didn't really like boys. I wonder now if they reminded her of her dead son. Tabby cat faces bring her to mind.

\*

*We spent that night in the Drostdy Hotel in Graaf Reinet, a former Dutch town of white stone buildings. We still hadn't really interacted with any non-white people.*

I don't have any sense of Africa from my granny's house. But she did like to eat an avocado with vinaigrette for breakfast, long before they became common place. Then, I thought avocado tasted soapy.

\*

*We continued north west across the Eastern Cape. This was one of the poorest regions in South Africa, where apartheid was visibly built into the landscape. Along the road, we stopped for a black woman at a deserted bus stop, and gave her a lift home. She was a teacher and a devout Christian. Her small town had a river running through it. On one bank was the well proportioned main town where the whites lived: on the other was the township, for the non-whites who serviced the whites. The township seemed squalid, if lively. Her house was prim and proper. Nobody took any notice of us.*

\*

My mum told me that my granny hadn't enjoyed sex. How did my mum know that? Anyway, my grandfather clearly did. My granny left him, taking the four girls with her, after he had an affair with a governess on the neighbouring farm. He and the governess married, and lived happily together at Appledore: the book on horses and saddlery is dedicated "To R.M.T. Who loved a good horse."

\*

*We spent the next night in Aliwal North, a nondescript town on the banks of the Orange River. We were now three days and going on 1000 kilometres from Cape Town.*

\*

My dad died in 1991; my mum in 1995. As we cleared their Edinburgh house, we found, stacked in a scullery, several framed water colours of Appledore painted by my granny. We sent all but one to my mum's eldest sister, a farmer's wife in Wiltshire.

\*

*We crossed the Orange River and entered the Free State. We were getting close but still had only a vague fix on our destination. We'd worked out that Hobhouse was the nearest town to the south of Appledore.*

\*

The painting we kept still hangs on our sitting room wall. It shows a greeny brown, washed out landscape. A dirt road runs across the centre of the picture, from right to left. The farm buildings are towards the end of the road, to the left, beyond a grove of scrawny trees. To the right, way behind the road, is a high eroded escarpment fringing the western border of Basutoland.

\*

*The road ran straight alongside the winding wiggle of the Caledon River that traced the border with Lesotho, my mum's Basutoland. Beyond the river, the mountains rose to 2000 metres.*

\*

My mum had a strong affinity with people of African origin. We always had lodgers staying with us: students on scholarships from former colonies in West Africa and the West Indies. I now know more of what they endured when I was wee: boarding houses commonly displayed “No Coloureds” signs, and immigrants were said to subsist on cat food. I suppose this racism was, in part, born of ignorance. I recall a young friend innocently asking one lodger if he was black all over. My mum was mortified. The lodger just laughed and undid his shirt.

\*

*In Hobhouse, we went into the local police station and asked if they could direct us to Appledore. They politely asked us why we wanted to go there. We explained. Then they asked if we could read a map. We said we could. So they ushered us through to the back office and showed us their wall map of the district. Up in the top right hand corner, there was Appledore, maybe 20 km away.*

\*

We took our lodgers for granted. They were invariably nice, and fitted easily into our chaotic family. Unlike British people, they liked children, and celebrated our births and birthdays with what they told us were traditional ceremonies. And they made unusual, tasty food and listened to unusual, lively music.

\*

*I took a photograph of the map on our digital phone. We thanked the policemen profusely: they were most amused by our earnestness. Then, as I drove, Nancy guided us using a combination of the photo and my cousin’s map. The camera display was very small and kept shutting down. We followed the sealed road to the next junction and turned right onto a well graded dirt road in the direction of the mountains.*

\*

Of course, we had lodgers as much out of expediency as solidarity. Then, our parents were not so well off, and had a semi-detached house full of books and four children to support. Still, this was quite unlike other people’s households.

\*

*The land seemed barren. The fields were empty, save for the occasional cow or horse. There was no other traffic. The dirt road turned north and met another dirt road running east-west. We turned right again and met a third dirt road, running north through tall bare trees. Nancy looked up from the maps. “We’re here!” she said. “We’re here!”*

\*

In retrospect, my mum was more overtly political than my dad. They’d both left the Communist Party in 1953, the year I was born, over anti-intellectualism and anti-Semitism. Subsequently, my dad, though forthright in his views, was largely immersed in pioneering computer research, and attendant University politics over whether it was better to buy machines or build one’s own. Nonetheless, they shared childcare equally, though my mum, the better cook, did most of the catering.

*We crossed a bridge over a burn. The farm was on the left. We turned off the road and pulled up outside the gate. The farm looked abandoned. Stands of dried furze grew through the cars and farm implements that rusted in the yard. We wondered if we should really be entering someone else's property. But there was no one around, and, if challenged, we had my cousin's map by way of explanation.*

\*

My mum took us elder children to the final stages of the Aldermaston Marches organised by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. On one, a journalist is said to have heard my sister shouting "Bigger bomb! Bigger bomb!" from her push chair. A decade later, my mum and I picketed the Springbok's rugby match against Scotland at Murrayfield.

\*

*We left the car and let ourselves through the gate. To the right was the white farm house. To the left were two rows of low brown cottages, which my cousin's map labelled "Kaffir Huts". Between them and the farm house was a large brown barn-like building. We walked down the track between the mud huts, musing on what it must have been like to have lived in them. There was no sign of a well and the burn was down a steep bank.*

\*

In London, my mum had a large and eclectic circle of friends: former CP members, people from art college, other parents. I remember meeting a veteran of the International Brigades, a very stern man, and a concentration camp survivor who showed me her tattoo. My mum also collected waifs and strays.

\*

*We walked back to the farmhouse, past the barn. The barn seemed dark and uninviting. We didn't go in. The farmhouse looked well constructed and must have been relatively cosy in its day. Now, the roof had collapsed and all the windows were broken. We picked our way through rubble filled rooms. In one, perhaps the sitting room, the remains of a pressed tin ceiling were scattered across the floor.*

\*

To her regret, my mum steadily lost touch with most of her friends after we moved north to Edinburgh in 1963, when my dad got a senior post at the University. Going through boxes of her papers after she died, letters from the south dwindled away. I suppose Scotland was just too far to visit, and long distance phone calls were pricey.

\*

*We walked around the farmhouse. Beyond the house was a large pond. A wind pump stood on a tall lattice frame. In front of the house was a rock garden. I tried, without success, to imagine my granny tending it. But I'd never seen any photos from the farm, or of my mum's family before I knew them.*

My mum found Edinburgh hard. In London, she'd had her own career as an art historian. In Edinburgh, she had no status. Women were expected to decorate male academics: the University even had a Wives Club. Eventually, my mum got two part time posts at the Art College, teaching Art History to design and architecture students. It proved a struggle to turn these into a single permanent position. She never was promoted. But she made new friends and she still collected waifs and strays. And she took in new lodgers, again from the Caribbean and West Africa, but now far more for the companionship than the rent.

\*

*As we wandered the yard, I tried, again without success, to picture my mum as a small child, growing up English in this most African of environments. Still, I now thought I had a far better grasp of her fellow feeling with Africans. It wasn't just about human decency and solidarity, but a deep sense of a shared exile; twice exiled in her case. It really didn't matter that our lodgers didn't come from South Africa. They reminded my mum of the people that she'd grown up amongst.*

\*

*Nancy returned to the car. I went back into the house for the last time. The kitchen floor was strewn with broken beer bottles. Nestling on top of a mound of dirt was an open book, pages torn:*  
***Treasure Island.***

---

**The Gist:** Greg Michaelson is an Edinburgh based writer, his fiction, mainly short stories, have been published since 2001. Venues include *Scottish Book Collector*, *Textualities*, *New Writing Scotland*, *Valve Journal*, *Takahe*, *Free State*, *The Grind Journal*, *Firewords Quarterly*, *The Eildon Tree*, *unsafe space/Earlyworks*, *Citizens of Nowhere/Cinnamon* and *Postbox/Red Squirrel*. His novel *The Wave Singer* (Argyll, 2008) was shortlisted for a Scottish Arts Council/Scottish Mortgage Investment Trust First Book Award. Greg was subsequently awarded a Scottish Art Council Writer's Bursary.

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## Personal Banking by Linda C. Wisniewski

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My husband pays his bills in person. He drives to the township tax collector's office. Travels to our accountant across the river in another state. Takes the water bill...where? I don't even know. I hear him call he'll be back in a bit. Upstairs at my desk, I seal the envelope holding my check for the dentist, then click through screens to send money flying from my checking account to J. Jill or Chico's.

\*\*\*

Electronic bill paying has been available since the 1990s but only became popular when more households gained access to the internet. Customers could then transfer money from their bank or credit card accounts to a store, public utility or individual to pay an account or bill.

\*\*\*

I was watching the end of *Grey's Anatomy* when the doorbell rang. Almost 9 p.m. Spikes of alarm attached themselves to my shoulders. From the living room, I heard Steve's footsteps in the hall. The door opened and a flashlight's beam lit my peripheral vision. My words jumped from heart to mouth.

"What is it?"

We met at our open front door. My husband Steve. A tall policeman in uniform.

"I have some bad news about your brother."

\*\*\*

Can we ever really know another person? We have only bits and pieces, the parts they show us, willingly or not, by their behavior. By how they treat others. By how others treat them. And how we see them from our own limited vantage point, our eyes already clouded, corrected, magnified or blindered.

\*\*\*

Steve's mouth hung open while I motioned the officer into our house, then our kitchen where he told Steve his brother had passed away.

"What happened? Was it an accident? On the road in his car?"

I shot questions into the air. The cop said was sorry but had no further information. He gave Steve a piece of paper with the number of a police officer in Connecticut, the one who found his brother's body. We hadn't seen Mark in eight years.

\*\*\*

Paying bills online is cheaper, faster and more convenient than writing checks, mailing them and hoping they get where they're meant to go on time. Most banks let customers schedule bill payments in advance of their due date, and save the customers' information for reuse.

\*\*\*

We traveled north on the interstate to the town where Steve and Mark were born. Well past its prime as a manufacturing center, storefronts sat vacant on every block, often anchored by

Dunkin Donuts. Strip malls, big box chain stores and restaurants lined the highway. Uphill from the old downtown, 1950s Cape Cods and two-family clapboard houses with wide wooden porches stood shoulder to shoulder along a grid of streets.

We arranged for cremation and a funeral. Mark was 67 and had just retired a few months before his fatal heart attack. Outside his little yellow bungalow, frost crusted the grass on the tiny front lawn. In the driveway, his friend recounted for us the morning when he called and called. The phone was never answered. The newspaper in the box was a week old. The final frightening clue: the blue tarp blown off Mark's 1965 Corvette in the driveway, flapping in the November wind.

"I know Mark," he said. "Sometimes he wouldn't answer the phone. But he'd never leave the Corvette like that."

\*\*\*

In a 2003 study reported in the *New York Times*, online bill payments were shown to increase customer loyalty. Most companies want customers paying online where they can market additional products, answer questions and address problems in less time than is required in person.

\*\*\*

Two hours before the Mass, the funeral home filled with tired-looking men in orange work jackets, baseball caps in hand, and middle-aged women in dress slacks, blouses and open winter coats. Mark's co-workers, friends, and acquaintances, people we had never met. Some knew him because he delivered oil to their homes and some because he accepted their bill payments at the front desk of Crown Oil.

"Mark always had a joke, a smart remark," said an old man with a reedy voice.

A gray-haired woman nodded, her hand on Steve's arm. "Oh, he was a character, all right!"

\*\*\*

A 2017 study reported in *Time* magazine that men are more comfortable sharing their emotional problems and health concerns with their male friends than they are with romantic partners.

\*\*\*

A slender woman approached the silver urn on a pedestal in front of a framed photograph of Mark. She blessed herself, then turned to us as Steve walked forward. "Mary," he softly exclaimed. Mark's long-ago girlfriend. I thanked her for coming.

"I would not think of being anywhere else today," she said.

We found her later standing in the parking lot before the post-funeral luncheon. It was still November, another Thursday, not cold. She refused to come inside, only wanted to know why Mark was cremated. She'd been hoping to see him one last time. We explained the length of time before his body was found, and that the cemetery had no room beside his parents' graves. Mark's ashes would rest atop his mother's vault.

"I loved your brother very much," she said.

They'd broken up years ago, and no one in the family knew why. Mark refused to talk about it.

We were a small group for lunch at Nuchy's Cafe, ten or twelve people in a room reserved for 25. Mark had no spouse, no children, and no other siblings, but his high school friend drove 18 hours from Florida to be there.

"I'm here for all of it," he said. And then he told us the story Mark gave him about the breakup forty years ago. It happened at the real estate office where he and Mary meet to put a down payment on a house together. It came to light that Mary's half was borrowed from her brother. "She lied to me," Mark had said, and ran out of the building into traffic.

\*\*\*

James Cordova, a psychology professor at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, and author of *The Marriage Checkup*, says "It's rarely the math that couples are really arguing over. It's what the money means to us emotionally, and if you don't address your emotions, it's like looking for your car keys under the street lamp when you lost them in the bushes."

\*\*\*

Weeks later, we brought a small log decorated with sparkles and silk poinsettias to the cemetery and found another one just like it at the side of the family tombstone nearest Mark's ashes.

\*\*\*

In January we were back, emptying closets and dresser drawers filled with clothing. Mark and Steve's mother had died eight years prior, leaving furniture crammed with Wal-Mart jewelry, price tags still attached, unopened fundraiser envelopes, and decades old Christmas cards. Did Mark miss his mother so much he kept all her things? Did he just hate to throw anything away?

Dust covered everything. One bedroom was so stuffed with junk there was no room to walk – car parts, old paystubs, and muscle car magazines littered the floor, and old coins were stuck to the surface of a table. In the bathroom closet, a dozen deodorants, rolls of toilet paper, unopened packets of sponges, and bottles of contact lens solution. I wanted to throw away everything not usable but among the junk on the floor, Steve found his mother's tattered purse with two hundred dollars inside. We settled in to examine everything carefully, even the trash.

\*\*\*

People hoard because they believe that an item will be useful or valuable in the future, according to the website of the Anxiety and Depression Association of America.

\*\*\*

The more we tossed, the more depressed we became. Three separate carloads went to Savers, the supermarket-sized thrift shop in one of the strip malls. Two truckloads left with the guys from 1-800-Got Junk. By the time I came back from my third trip to the Dollar Store for jumbo trash bags, Steve had found his parents' wedding picture and his dad's letters from World War II hidden in a crawl space inside a bag full of old Easter candy.

I never got to know Mark. When we visited him and his mom, he sat in front of the TV, ate dinner with us, then went out in the evening. We had very few conversations, and I gave up easily, letting Steve talk to him about cars, weather, and sports.

That January day, our legs and backs aching, we went to lunch at the bright and busy Kizl's Family Restaurant, "breakfast all day," where men in worn jackets and oil-stained hands reminded us of Mark. Over meat loaf and mashed potatoes, we wished he had been happy. We didn't know if he was. It's never been Steve's nature to talk about things like this.

\*\*\*

According to Wikipedia, banks and companies prefer online bill paying because it reduces the expense of paper and face-to-face transactions.

\*\*\*

The February day we drove back north was biting cold. Steve brought along a briefcase with a stack of his brother's bills, forwarded to our house in Pennsylvania. I questioned the need to hand deliver checks in the winter rain when it was so easy to pay by mail or even online.

"I just want a paper receipt," Steve said. No amount of persuasion could budge him from his plan.

\*\*\*

Stephen DiMarco, vice president of client services at Compete, Inc., a Boston research firm that analyzes consumer habits, wrote this: "We're still fundamentally talking about altering consumer behavior. And if there's anything we've learned, it's that consumer behavior is stubborn."

\*\*\*

Back at Kizl's for another lunch, rain sheeted down the window beside our booth. I planned to go back to the hotel and work on my laptop while Steve paid his brother's outstanding bills. But hot chicken soup and a tuna melt softened my resolve. Back inside the car, soft jazz on satellite radio turned the space we shared into a cozy cocoon. Rather than ask him to drive miles out of his way, I decided to check email on my phone while Steve delivered the checks.

\*\*\*

A 2017 study reported by Inc.com found that 52 percent of Millennials think technology has improved their relationships. The same study found that 57 percent of Boomers say it has "ruined" relationships.

\*\*\*

Steve parked along a curb at the bottom of Federal Hill, a small enclave of large 1920s era homes.

"Do you want to get a little exercise?" he asked.

I'd been too long away from the gym and my neighborhood walks at home. It was still raining lightly but my jacket had a hood. Why not? We walked up the hill holding hands.

Inside the funeral home, an older man in a dark suit motioned us into an overheated wood-paneled office where Steve paid the bill and got a handshake with his receipt.

“Enjoy the holidays as best you can,” the funeral director said. We hadn’t spent a holiday with Mark in over a decade. He refused to travel but never said why. The Corvette sank into ruts in his driveway. Sometimes he’d tell us he was spending Thanksgiving with friends, and tell the friends he’d be with us in Pennsylvania. Yet he and Steve could laugh together for an hour on the phone. I knew my husband would miss those calls. He probably did already.

We walked down the hill to the storefront insurance company, where the wide-eyed young woman behind the counter wanted to know what happened.

“Your brother was just here a few weeks ago!”

Two more women came out of a back office to tell us what a nice guy Mark was. Apparently, like his brother, he also paid his bills in person.

At our next stop, the banker was expecting us, having read the obituary in the local paper. She offered coffee in the old-fashioned high-ceilinged lobby before setting up an account for Mark’s estate. Christmas music echoed from somewhere in the building as tellers popped their heads around the doorframe of her office, expressing shock and condolences.

I was just a bystander. These episodes of personal bill paying belonged to Steve, not me. The words of condolence repeated at each stop were by now predictable, and Steve received them like gifts in a ritual far more personal than the funeral Mass.

Our last stop would be the dentist on the other side of town. Tired of getting in and out of the car, I stayed behind and watched my husband step lightly across the parking lot in the rain. Twenty minutes later, he was back, tossing his briefcase into the backseat and leaning in to kiss my cheek.

“All done,” he said. “Let’s go home.”

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**The Gist:** Linda C. Wisniewski lives in Bucks County, PA, where she volunteers at the historic home of author Pearl S. Buck and teaches memoir writing at the Pearl Buck Cultural Center. Her work has been published in *Gravel*, *Hippocampus*, the *Christian Science Monitor* and other venues both print and online. Her memoir, *Off Kilter*, was published by Pearlsong Press and her first novel, *Where the Stork Flies*, is forthcoming in 2020 from Sand Hill Review Press.

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# An Exploration of the Rise and Fall of Alt-Lit by Ada Wofford

*Part two of A Critical Examination of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Poetry.*

## *Introduction*

Oscar Wilde once famously stated that, “All bad poetry springs from genuine feeling. To be natural is to be obvious, and to be obvious is to be inartistic.” If we take this to be true then our analysis of Kaur proves her body of work is quite inartistic and therefore, by extension, the movement of Insta-poetry as a whole is inartistic. But surely this mass movement of “genuine feeling” didn’t come out of nowhere. The easy explanation for Insta-poetry’s origins would be the high school lit mag. This is the only place I’ve ever read poetry as substantially poor as Kaur’s. But Instagram and Tumblr allowed amateur writers to have a platform with no gatekeepers. This didn’t start with Kaur nor with the short, aphorism-type style beloved by Insta-poets now—Instead, this open-source lit mag started in the late 2000s and early 2010s with writers such as Tao Lin, Steve Roggenbuck, and Megan Boyle.

This geographically disparate community (though many being in New York at one time or another) created a movement of minimalist writing inspired by everyday life but specifically the parts of everyday life that involve our computers and smartphones. This movement is known as alt-lit or alternative literature. The writing is simple and often times employs Internet slang and style. By Internet style I mean that most of the authors eschew punctuation (like Kaur and her followers) or use punctuation inconsistently (as if they’re typing without stopping to edit).

Despite the simplicity of the writing, these writers, unlike the Insta-poetry movement, appear to have a foundation in literature. Richard Yates is often mentioned, as is Bukowski, Kerouac, and others. In the novella, *Shoplifting from American Apparel*, by Tao Lin, the protagonist’s friend asks, through Gmail chat, whether in five years’ time people will know them as “blogniks” or some other term (27). The movement possessed a clear ambition; these authors longed to be accepted as serious writers and for their work to someday be considered literature. To some extent, we can look at Insta-poetry through the lens of alt-lit and describe it as a dumbing-down of a dumbing-down—A more simplistic take on an earlier simplistic take. To better understand how this shift took place and why it’s significant that a woman, Rupi Kaur, is the best-

selling poet of the new style of Insta-poetry, and of poetry as a whole, we must understand what alt-lit was attempting to accomplish and how it fell apart.

*Tao Lin*

While Tao Lin might be the most famous and best received by critics of the alt-lit writers, he probably least epitomizes the movement. While his early novella, *Shoplifting at American Apparel* has the same dry, vernacular delivery of alt-lit writers such as Megan Boyle and Jordan Castro, Lin's poetry appears to make a more honest effort at being poetic. Take the poem, "hamsters are heads with little characteristics on the head, part one":

in florida a giant hamster lays in bed worrying about its future  
the hamster has bad eyesight  
and many other problems  
later that night the hamster drives its car around  
listening to sad music; the master lightly drums its paws on the steering wheel  
the hamster is alone  
but not for long: at home three waffle friends wait  
cooling inside a countertop oven in the kitchen (Lin)

There are some elements indicative of alt-lit at work here. There is a lack of punctuation and a lack of capitalization but interestingly enough, and this is part of what makes Lin's work stand out, he includes a semicolon and a colon for effect. Where a line break would function, Lin replaces it with punctuation (particularly, what I'm tempted to refer to as "extreme punctuation") and adds weight to these lines by differentiating the pause that is created from the pauses or spaces created by the line breaks.

The other indicative element here is the childish weirdness. This weird-for-the-sake-of-weird aesthetic is a common Internet humor trope and so it makes sense that a literary movement that identifies itself as a product of the Internet would embrace this aesthetic. What's not indicative of the alt-lit movement in this poem is its purposeful use of punctuation, line breaks, and the use of rhythm and imagery: "cooling on a counter top oven in the kitchen," can't help but remind one of William Carlos Williams' lines, "glazed with rain/water/beside the white/chickens" (56)—Though I am in no way suggesting that Lin's poetry is on par with the genius of Williams.

*Steve Roggenbuck*

More indicative of the genre, perhaps most indicative, is Steve Roggenbuck. Roggenbuck found alt-lit fame primarily through YouTube, where he posted videos of himself, often in fields, reciting his poetry. He didn't write these poems, instead he would improvise and then edit the video, keeping the things he liked and ditching the things he didn't. It's an interesting process but the results are difficult to dignify with the label of poetry.

Despite the apparent editing, the monologues are directionless, rambling from topic to topic, often times with the intent of getting a laugh but the humor typically falls flat. Roggenbuck's humor is both esoteric and dated as he would constantly reference things only people in his Internet circle would recognize, such as the phrase, "boost," which means something along the lines of supporting someone or something else (i.e. To boost your friend's new book). Other than being an interesting time capsule of the Internet at the dawn of the decade, Roggenbuck's videos possess little to no literary value, as they simply appear to be the fetishization of Robbin William's character in the film, *Dead Poets Society*.

In *The New Yorker*, of all places, these incoherent video-poems received glowing praise in an article titled, "If Walt Whitman Vlogged." It's true that Roggenbuck was inspired by Whitman, he mentions it often in interviews and in his videos, but his use of this influence leaves much to be desired. Roggenbuck has no literary or poetic insight.

His book, *IF U DONT LOVE THE MOON YOUR AN ASS HOLE*, actually spelled that way, reads is as if you were to binge-read someone's Tumblr or Twitter. The pieces appear to have been written in one quick shot, with no forethought and no editing, much like the popular writing exercise known as "morning pages," where you write 750 words without stopping. These, of course, are never supposed to be read; they're simply an exercise, but Roggenbuck seems to place some sort of value on this off-the-cuff sincerity.

The reason this method fails is because it renders itself redundant after about three lines. These lines might function within the randomness and variety found in a social media feed but when surrounded by similar content, the work fails to possess any function or meaning. The pleasure of viewing a social media feed is the variety of content. Some of Roggenbuck's work might be pleasurable simply for the novelty that exists when the piece is presented within a social media feed. It is only in this relational aspect that such a work functions; perpetual novelty is what makes a social media feed interesting.

Take this passage for example, “dang i hate turtle neck’s they have put my son out of business my son makes giraffe neck’s (Roggenbuck 15).” Now, this might be amusing if it popped up amongst photos of your friends’ kids and ads for Amazon—It would possess a certain novelty and an element of surprise that might garner a chuckle or two. But when read in a block of text with several other lines that are attempting the same randomness, whatever function it potentially serves is lost. For a better understanding of Roggenbuck, let’s look at a full piece:

in spain they love football so much they even call soccer football. im becoming aware of the fact that boredom and laziness are social norms, that ive felt pressured to supress my excitement and set lazier goals. I TRAINED MY SON TO EAT OUT OF MY HAND SINCE HE WAS A TODDLER. IT’S RLY STARTING TO FUCK WITH HIM NOW HE’S 15. if i dont get verified soon on twiter im gona have an identity crisis about whether or not i am actually me. i’ll sleep when im IRL. is “charlie” short for charizard, or charmander? i am falling asleep to emo songs on a litle sofa in montreal. i dont feel proud of myself in terms of talent or even hard work but i am proud that i havent given up. i want youre life to be better because im in it  
(9)

Clearly, this possesses none of the poetic elements we explored in Part One but this piece does possess nearly every alt-lit trope that exists. As discussed above, there is the weird-for-the-sake-of-being-weird trope and the purposeful eschewing of punctuation and proper capitalization trope. For easy reference here is a list of the major alt-lit tropes that I have discovered after surveying the canon, all of which appear in the piece above:

- 1) Weird-for-the-sake-of-being-weird.
- 2) Purposeful eschewing of punctuation and proper capitalization.
- 3) All-caps for emphasis.
- 4) References to social media.
- 5) Purposeful misspellings.
- 6) The naming of a commercial brand or entity.
- 7) The slightly more complex, “I want to…” trope

Tropes 1-5 are obviously derived from Internet speak or Internet culture and do not require lengthy analysis. Tropes 6 and 7 are more complex and deserve to be explored further.

### *The Naming of a Commercial Brand or Entity Trope*

The naming of a commercial brand or entity in alt-lit is a curious phenomenon considering how widespread it is throughout the canon. In the Roggenbuck piece above, he references characters from Pokémon; but more often, this trope is used to specify a food or beverage:

“Kaitlyn had a “Synergy” brand kombucha in her jacket pocket” (Lin 36).

“I long for a Wendy’s Spicy Chicken Sandwich,` said Sam” (Lin 72).

“I will eat four almonds/I want to touch every person in the world at least once/I bought a sandwich and threw it away/I want to snort ambien” (Gonzalez 50).

“While she was going through her spam inbox, trying to figure out how to get off all of these subscription lists (Macy’s, PETA, Sierra Club, ModCloth, Urban Outfitters) that she thought were a good idea to sign up for at the time” (Bess 57).

“I hold the large, pale orange/that we shoplifted from Whole Foods/earlier that day” (Bess 52).

“Sarah and I mimic their poses and eat black pepper kettle chips” (Bess 47).

“my mom is going to watch ‘american idol’/my mom is going to heat up jenny craig food” (Boyle 48).

“today i ate: odwalla ‘food bar,’ orange, handful pistachios, five triscuits with hummus, four almonds” (Boyle 239).

We could analyze this fixation on consumption as a commentary, as something akin to Warhol’s obsession with popular advertising, but the issue is that the writing doesn’t function as such. Instead, it’s just a recording of what is happening around them, to them, or by them. It’s an attempt at realism that fails because it lacks a purpose—It fails to make a comment on what it is recording.

### *The “I want to...” trope.*

This is the most complex and interesting of all the alt-lit tropes because it communicates an unresolved longing for stimulation and expression; two things ironically lacking in the works themselves. These writers often frame themselves as pseudo-prisoners in a boring and trite world, which is typical of young adults in general to the point of being cliché. Alt-lit’s reaction to this suffocating boredom is to purpose a series of absurd activities that never make any sense nor function as symbolic or allegorical in any way. They are an aspect of their Internet culture’s affinity

for the humor-of-the-random. This has been taken to surrealist limits with today's meme culture but we see the germ of this humor in the canon of alt-lit:

“I WANT TO PEE FOR AN HOUR AND A HALF AND THEN DIE” (Roggenbuck 18).

“i want to own a warehouse that stores all the empty dolphin tanks and cigarette butts of the world” (Boyle 83).

“i want to hang a piñata full of emotionally damaged lobsters between a high school and a pond” (Boyle 83).

“I want to gather a crowd of strangers to smash and break objects with their hands” (Bess 83).

“I want someone to forcibly hug me/I want to jump-kick them and run away” (Gonzalez 7).

This trope might be the most important aspect of alt-lit in regards to the genre functioning as the “voice” of a particular generation. These absurd longings, when taken alongside the mundanity of these authors' lives and coupled with the fixation on consumption, can be argued to illustrate the complete lack of meaning these authors, and perhaps by extension their entire generation, possess. Even in Roggenbuck's ramblings of *carpe diem!*—one finds this same emptiness and lack of meaning. Roggenbuck might love the moon with all the religious fervor of a zealot of God, but the moon doesn't love him back. The moon doesn't prescribe for him a way to live, doesn't forgive him his sins, and doesn't welcome him in the afterlife. These absurd longings are a longing to embrace the meaninglessness of their lives and to live without consequence. They write these longings because they do not possess the will or vigor to actually live in such a manner.

Although such an analysis of alt-lit is probably giving this genre too much credit, it's difficult to ignore the tapestry weaved by these various parts, which only comes into focus when we look at the canon as a whole. Close up, these works are little more than the blog posts from which they are derived—Boyle's book is even titled, *selected unpublished blog posts of a mexican panda express employee*, while Gonzalez and Lin put together a collection titled, *Selected Tweets*. The issue with alt-lit is that it attempts to be something it's not; namely, literature. Roggenbuck's *If U DON'T LIKE THE MOON...* is the prime example of this; sprawling, random, and interspersed with selfies. This is not something you read, it is a souvenir one might purchase after viewing his videos or following him on Twitter. As individual works, much of the alt-lit canon merely serves the function of an Internet time capsule—A print recording of an Internet culture, valuable only because of its physicality.

### *The Fall of Alt-Lit*

While the women of alt-lit typically attempted a more sophisticated approach to their writing, they were largely overshadowed by men like Lin who, in 2014, was outed for his illegal relationship with a 16-year-old girl, much of which was apparently the material that made up his novel *Richard Yates*, as well as receiving rape and abuse allegations (Ryan). A prominent alt-lit editor, Stephen Tully Dierks, has two rape allegations (Jones). In 2018, years after alt-lit was popular, Roggenbuck, who described himself as a feminist, was outed for sending explicitly sexual messages to a 16-year-old when he was 24 (Isk, Mara, et al.).

These allegations were a huge blow to a community that prided itself on being open, honest, and different from other literary circles. Most of the writing you will find on the alt-lit movement is about these issues and the fact that the alt-lit community/industry functioned within the same sexist constructs of so many other creative industries: music, film, television, etc. Women writers often looked up to the male writers of alt-lit, such as Lin and Roggenbuck who were the movement's biggest stars. This, as in so many industries, creates an unhealthy power dynamic that can easily be abused by the men in power. Because of the extensive literature on this topic, I will not cover it in any further detail. The reason I raise this issue is because the implosion of alt-lit, and all that it stood for, served as the catalyst for the positive, self-love, feminist Insta-poetry that exists today.

### *Feminism in Alt-Lit and Beyond*

The prominent women writers of alt-lit were Mira Gonzalez, Megan Boyle, and Gabby Bess. Although they played with the same tropes as all alt-lit writers, these three women often attempted to implement these tropes into a uniquely feminist perspective. One of the most famous alt-lit pieces is titled, "everyone i've had sex with," by Megan Boyle (published both in her book, *selected unpublished blog...* and individually online in *Thought Catalog*). At the time, I suppose this would have been a brave and outrageous thing for a woman to print in a book, let alone post on the Internet. It's a detailed, not graphic, account of everyone Boyle has ever slept with. It's strikingly honest, particularly in the confusion she expresses when attempting to label her few encounters with women as sex or as something else.

But, as explored throughout this paper, honesty does not necessarily make for good writing. Of course, there is the voyeuristic atmosphere that so much of alt-lit indulges in and that many find enjoyable, but this is a shallow form of enjoyment; one akin to celebrity tabloids or reality TV. There is no real form in "everyone i've had sex with," it is laid out like a blog or diary entry, which

ends with a breakdown of how many penetrative partners, how many male partners, how many female partners, how many oral encounters, etc. It's delivered so dryly and with such a flat affect that it's almost disturbing; and it begs the question of, why would anyone require such a list? Is this a celebration of sexual liberation, a flaunting of her independence as a woman? Or is this some sort of confession? Either way, it's not art. It's not interesting. It's simply a statement of her sexual history.

Beyond the tropes listed above, alt-lit is obsessed with sex, drugs, and alcohol. A lot of literature is obsessed with these topics, they're not unique to alt-lit, but their overwhelming presence is significant, especially in light of the widespread sexism and abuse that took place within the movement. So, although Boyle's list may not be art, it may still be useful to young women readers who might feel as if they have no means of discussing or expressing their relationship with their own sexuality and sexual history. Like Kaur's cheap-and-easy feminism, the lack of quality of the work itself does not necessarily prove it ineffective. While the work may be lacking in any aesthetic quality, it may transcend its undeserved distinction of poetry and instead, serve as a beacon for young women in need of sympathy and support.

In the wake of alt-lit's downfall, women writers quickly took the initiative to form their own scene; the article, "Alt Lit is Dead and Its Women Writers Are Creating Their Own Scene," by Allie Jones, documents the articles and Tweets that surfaced quickly after the downfall. Although there has not been a new scene that has gained the prominence of alt-lit, we see the familiar tropes with a feminist spin in the world of Insta-poetry. Though not a scene in the sense of alt-lit, Insta-poetry is based online and has its handful of star writers, some of whom are men. The main difference is that Instagram's format requires incredibly short pieces, while many of the pieces in the realm of alt-lit take up several pages.

Insta-poetry foregoes the weirdness indicative of alt-lit, as well as the tropes of naming brands and wanting to do X. Instead, as seen in Kaur's work in Part One, Insta-poems attempt to impart some form of wisdom or advice for wellbeing—This too is a reaction to the often-self-destructive behavior displayed, if not celebrated, in much of alt-lit. Gone are the bouts of sex, drugs, and alcohol; instead, replaced by naïve romanticism, self-love, and feminism—albeit in poorly conceived, bite-size chunks. It has been a progress of perspective only, trading what little aesthetic achievement that existed in alt-lit for a more positive message.

### Conclusion

Alt-lit possessed ambition. The writers of this movement had some literary background and wanted to push past it or against it in some manner but ultimately failed due to a lack of vision. While Tao Lin appears to be the most visionary of the alt-lit community, his writing is minimalist to the point of dull; and it is meaningless to the point of superfluous. Coupled with his sexist and abusive behavior, which he then used as fodder for his writing, his work is not to be admired or read, as it is quite impossible in this situation to separate the artist from the individual.

While the women of alt-lit have created a body of work that epitomizes the genre without possessing any of the genre's now ruined reputation, the majority of this work serves little purpose other than that of a time capsule; a snapshot of the early 2010s, when social media truly found its legs and started running. In an interview on *Charlie Rose* in 2000, Harold Bloom said that the generation growing up alongside the Internet didn't have the means to navigate what they read; they didn't have the skills to distinguish between good writing and poor writing. While the canon of alt-lit and Insta-poetry might very well prove Bloom's point, this body of work might also be the result of a generation attempting to understand that very distinction.

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**The Gist:** Ada Wofford is a Contributing Editor to the Blue Nib who is bravely avoiding her inevitable 9-5 enslavement by studying library science at UW-Madison. She holds a BA in English literature and has been published in number of journals.

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# Where does poetic inspiration come from?

## by Denise O'Hagan

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*'There seem to be no deals you can make with poetry to entice it out of its lair. A poem, actually any writing, is always a private thing, and that is how I begin. It must have that secret source.'*

(Michael Ondaatje, author of *The English Patient* and twelve poetry books)

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines inspiration literally as 'a breathing in or infusion of some idea, purpose, etc. in to the mind: the suggestion, awakening, or creation of some feeling or impulse, especially of an exalted kind'. Most of us can relate to this, and can recognise in ourselves, at one time or another, that feeling of being so moved that we 'have to write it down!'

Although there are those poems that, in the first flush of poetic inspiration, just seem to 'write themselves', this is rare. You don't usually just decide to write a poem, sit down, and write it. You have to be in the right frame of mind and mood; it has to come to us. This is true of most creative endeavours, and particularly with poetry where there is no canvas to prime or scales to practise; it begins, quite simply with our own mind and spirit, and a pen and paper – or keyboard. We all know that feeling when we finally have a moment of peace, and sit poised and ready to write, yet the words don't come. It's frustrating, even vaguely disturbing for here is something that appears to be not subject to will or discipline; it is out of our control and beyond our understanding.

Yet perversely, and as we also all know, in the midst of a completely unrelated activity such as walking the dog or taking a shower, words – and good ones, too! – may arrive unbidden, apparently out of the blue and we have the urge write them down then and there. And if we don't, like dreams, they are apt to slip away, sometimes for good.

So in short, when we focus on our art, it often eludes us; when we focus on something else, it may grace us with a visit. Inspiration, it would seem, is capricious, and also something that *happens to us* rather than something that *we will to happen*. It would seem that what Ondaatje terms 'that secret source' of poetic inspiration is precisely that – ultimately mysterious.

Small wonder that the ancient Greeks believed in the Muse, the goddess of artistic inspiration. Greek mythology portrays nine such goddesses, personifications of literary and other arts and also science, and it is no coincidence that the poetic art claims three of them (Calliope for epic poetry, Erato for lyric poetry, and Euterpe for song and elegiac poetry).

Fastwind to the modern era, and it seems that psychologists agree that some externally-inspired form of inspiration plays a strong part in unleashing artistic creativity. Thrash and Elliot's 'inspiration scale',\* for instance, encouragingly suggests that inspiration is accessible to us all as it centres around our readiness to being receptive to external possibilities rather than an innate ability or predisposition.

If this is the case, while we may agree that we can't chase or 'capture' inspiration, it would appear that we can at least create conditions conducive to receiving inspiration. While these conditions may vary somewhat from person to person, the common denominator would seem to be their simplicity – it is in doing the essential things that we all do to earn a living and nurture ourselves and others that we find our inspiration. If Thrash and Elliot are right, it is our sponge-like quality of receptivity which can turn a routine happening or observation into fodder for a poem.

After all, great poetry does not always centre on great themes but often on the mundane, the specific and the highly individual. As Pulitzer Prize winner Rita Dove notes: '*When I least expect it something strikes me. Just now, for instance, we were driving westward and stopped at the West Virginia welcome station, and I looked at the woman next to me who tucked her purse between her legs to wash her hands, and that little action triggered something in me—I suddenly thought of all the things we do subconsciously to keep things neat, and the way women carry purses around.*'

Perhaps the current surge in mindfulness and meditation is relevant for poetic inspiration. For the more we are able to lose ourselves in the moment and keep our every sense alert, the greater our potential for empathetic observation and making connections, including of the 'what if?' sort. But I would suggest that equally we must be wary of taking a modern outcome-focused approach – in other words, you must school yourself to be attentive because you want to of and in itself, not because of where it may lead you or what you're hoping to get out of it. There must be a sincerity, a disinterestedness at the base of your approach – and an element of surrender to the rhythm of life itself.

To sum up, while the source of poetic inspiration itself may remain mysterious, the attitudes we can adopt to help make us more conducive to receiving them are less so. Slow down, be mindful to little as well as big things, and keep a notebook handy so you can write when the Muse visits you!

\*Thrash, T. M. & Elliot, A. (2003). Inspiration as a psychological construct. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84, 871-889.

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**The Gist:** Denise was born in Rome and lives in Sydney. She has a background in publishing and is Poetry Editor for Australia/New Zealand for *The Blue Nib*. Her poetry is published widely and has received numerous awards. Her debut poetry collection *The Beating Heart* will be published by Ginninderra Press in 2020.

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## On bilingualism, innate hybridity and loss

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In the fall of 2016, I attended a lecture given by Jhumpa Lahiri at Hofstra University, Long Island, New York, as part of a *Great Writers, Great Readings* event. She spoke of her falling in love with Italian, her adopted language, and shared a fragment of her writing. An American author of short stories, novels and essays, she had started writing in Italian after a visit to Rome. I was in New York on my MFA in Creative Writing where the work I produced was in English, my adopted language. Back home, I had a life that unfolded in Romanian in every aspect, except for writing poetry. The lecture made me question the reasons behind writing in an acquired language and whether I had the permission to do so. And what was I trying to accomplish?

A couple of years earlier, my mother had died of breast cancer after a four-year long suffering. All of a sudden, personal loss and grief found their way on the page in English which, at first, gave me a degree of anonymity and the freedom to write as myself.

I looked into this matter of exophonic writing and found out there were writers of the world who, either intentionally or unconsciously, embraced a language other than their mother tongue. In some cases, the complex details of ethnicity/nationality stood proof of their decision. For others, it marked a sort of personal, socio-political or geographical displacement. In my case, poetry just ‘happened’ in English. The survival instinct had pushed me to shed my mother tongue. Unable to curate grief, I started to write. Working outside the mother tongue gave me the confidence I lacked, the right to write as another and find a coping mechanism for loss. However, would I be taken seriously? Who would be my audience?

In her article *On Living, and Thinking, in Two Languages at Once*, Camille Bordas encourages writers to write as if their parents were dead. She believes it gives them a fair degree of distance between themselves and the familiar. In my case, writing in English, which my father did not speak, gave me the space to exorcise my grief, unafraid of hurting his feelings. When I told him about this new habit, my father only showed concern for my lack of time, and feared I was neglecting my family responsibilities. In the end, however, he grew curious about what I was writing. Were my poems about him and, if they were, why didn’t I write in Romanian so that the whole family could enjoy them?

I am not sure poetry would have happened, had it not been triggered by personal events. I remember, in school, poetry was at first propaganda, and took the form of long, sentimental odes to our beloved communist leader, Nicolae Ceaușescu. Later on, poetry was a sterile encounter mediated by some uninspired teachers. But I fell in love with English and decided to become a translator. This gave me the skills to navigate between the two languages and once English became my literary language, translating proved crucially significant to my poetry writing.

Translating from Romanian into English sharpens my senses and makes my poems richer, more attuned to their inner movements. To me, poetry is born in the mouth, and its process is as flimsy and volatile as ever, subject to many iterations. Each shedding feels skin-deep. English, as my second language, has penetrated all the intrinsic details of my life and a sort of colonization has begun.

For writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, giving up English began as a language-learning experience. In Italian, her third language, she found herself rooted in the flavor of the newly-acquired language. Writing my poems in English was also about escaping the prison of my identity, transcending my limitations. And if I wanted to be taken seriously, I had to embark on a program that gave me the space to produce writing and have it performed in front of an English-speaking audience. It turned out to be a useful experience though I always had to explain to the graduates in the program, or the poets/writers I met, that I never translated my own work from Romanian into English. And yes, I was very serious about the whole thing. At times, it felt like a looming shadow I couldn't shake, but I simply kept writing, revising, and submitting to journals and magazines.

One professor introduced the concept of hybridity as a way to describe my cultural identity and spoke of this "third space" I was writing in. She believed it to be a complication at language level, but since she was also bilingual, she could relate to certain poets' innate hybridity. This sort of displacement and pendulation between spaces/languages/cultures not only enriches the poet, but the outcome, as well. Stemming from personal events, my poetry helped navigate grief, but the entire process of switching between languages, the way they worked on each other, against one another, had also kept me in a state of constant need to accumulate, polish, thrive – a sort of never-ending revision process which, by the end of MFA program saw my thesis, a poetry collection, accepted for publication by Dos Madres Press in Ohio.

Back home, family and friends politely asked me to translate my poems into Romanian for them or even to produce poetry in my native language. Others frankly suggested I was disloyal to the Romanian language and culture. Writing in English is not, however, a cultural betrayal or an abandonment of the mother tongue; rather, it is in inhabiting this third space where my work as a literary translator, my organic love for languages and my own manner of granulating loss cohabit. My path into poetry writing has shown me that language, much as it is a mark of one's heritage, is, on another level, merely a vehicle to creativity.

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**The Gist:** Clara Burghilea is a translator and teacher by profession and holds the position of Poetry Editor with The Blue

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# Poetry Selected by Clara Burghilea

## Editorial

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Edward Hirsch says “the reader of poetry is kind of a pilgrim setting out, setting forth”. Reading for Issue 40 has turned out to be an unexpected voyage into the astonishing number of works submitted to The Blue Nib. The selected poets included in the issue all demonstrate minute attention to craft and form. The richness of the issue comes from the way the poems seem to be preoccupied with language, its inventiveness and precision. Thematically, the poems tackle an array of themes such as love, loss, body, myths, nature, femininity, family, history and give the reader a sense of how poetry is mapping our existence.

Issue 40 includes a variety of voices from several continents, emerging and well-published poets alike, reunited by their concern with words and the fullness of poetry.

Michelle Bermudez’s poem “Enough already” helps us appreciate and acknowledge the broadness of literature. A different point of view is offered by Diana Manole’s poem “Western Berlin 1990: My First Taste of Freedom” which carries us back in a time and place that feels both familiar and estranged. Identity arises as an object of sound in the way repetition punctures the texture of the poem: “Tablecloths? Homemade lace tablecloths?”

In Jill Neimark’s “After the Fight, The Paint” and Jodie Hannis’ “Finger Bone and Copper Rings”, the body is both craved for and look upon from a distance, whereas in Jennifer Crompton’s poem, “all the lonely people”, the body’s details equally mark the passage of time and the vivacity of the spirit.

Art is beautifully captured in Simeon Dumdum Jr’s poem “At the Vatican Museums” and Colin Pink’s “4’ 33” by John Cage”, where paintings and music give room for thought and allow sensitivities to inhabit the page.

Whether marking the personal journey or allowing the heart to resonate to beauty, the poems in this issue are conscious of their own structure and honest about the brokenness of the world and the human spirit.

One of the two featured poets, Elliott Freeman is a poet, educator, and game designer living in the mountainous hinterlands of Southwest Virginia. Elliott’s poems are visceral, pulsating with rawness and open to defeat. Lines such as “Cast your tongue like a fishing line to rain drops and snowflakes/ Dirty up your hands and grow a garden where the winter chapped your skin” melt in the reader’s mouth and convince their guts to join the poet on the vivid ride.

Tracy Gaughan is the other featured poet of Issue 40. Apart from writing poetry and short fiction, she presents the popular arts show ‘WestWords’ on Ireland’s Community Radio Network. In the interview she agreed to give for Issue 40, Tracy speaks of her path into poetry, the pitfalls and hardships of its writing, as well as how it improves the poet’s ability to conceptualise the world. Love, family, friends, art, music, literature are the veins from which she draws her energy and inspiration and as any poet, she strives to find and keep balance.

Issue 40 is very much grounded in the mundane and the themes and concerns of the poems display both excellence in craft, as well as a sort of fearlessness that permeates lines.

To paraphrase the last line in Diana Manole’s “The Misunderstanding”, poems do produce oxygen like plants and their intricate aliveness is meant to keep us grounded and dreaming alike.

Thank you for making time to read and engage with these poets and their work.

*Clara Burghelea*

# Michelle Bermudez

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## Abecedarian

After waking up, she makes her hands into loose fists and wipes her face like the bunnies she loves, taking sharp breaths and fast laughs as her cheeks get redder and redder and I don't think I ever want to sleep alone anymore so I drive for hours, push my old car past its limits and through elements it shouldn't be in, just to feel her nose twitch every time she gets to touch kindness. The hands of God are never themselves and he used both to make her and is that not the most undeserved of gifts? Just think of humanity—mortality without devotion—never begging, never knowing what it is to whisper at the feet of a woman who means everything, whose laugh could make a coqui's throat tremble like an ordinary frog—a slave to the world and a master of nothing, but the coqui—he knows his worth like God knows language and how he sings at night—not to put us to sleep, but to remind us of the things we have done... O the things I have done at her hand and will do over and over again to prove that I too, will never forget the language of a woman in love or a woman who's sorry, Questionable words, yes, but I for one have never met a woman in love who wasn't also really sorry for something she has done and sometimes she doesn't know what that something is so she waits and waits for the coqui's song to come tell her but the trees have gone silent and the forest isn't talking anymore, not to the leaves and not to us, we who have forgotten that when you touch the leaves of a morivivir they will close, that *Vivir* means *to live* and that the word *morir* comes first and that there are so many words for death in all languages that aren't so different from each other and that a xenopus frog isn't so different from a coqui and that I came up with five new ways to say *I love you* to her just this morning as she stayed sleeping in bed, her face inches from the Zen garden I bought to remind her that there is always enough time for prayer when you're in love.

## Enough already.

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The women in my family have healing hands, healing fingers  
and I couldn't tell you why, but I touch every poem with my English hands first.  
But when I spread my fingers over the aching belly of my beloved  
the words leave my lips 100% Spanish and fluent woman:  
*Sana, sana, colita de rana, si no sanas ahora sanaras manana.*  
Frogs don't have tails anymore and there is no real need for Spanish in San Juan  
but the women in my family will still call you *mija* and say *Dios te bendiga*  
in a tongue you can't suck dry no matter how many paper towels you throw into a crowd.

The women in my family have strong hands, thick fingers, browned in the sun and stained  
orange with *sazon* and red *con la sangre de sus dolores*.  
Even my *abuela* still leaves bright spots in the chicken and forgets to turn the stove off,  
but she will never forget the sound of a pot that's ready or oil that's too hot or to always rinse  
the rice before cooking or the way that the rain speaks a different language here.

It's important to go slow when speaking *la sana* and to move your hands in circles  
and to use every language you have:

*heal, heal little frog's tail, if you don't heal today, you'll heal tomorrow.*

My *abuela* will tell you that it doesn't work in English and sometimes I believe her,  
but my hands are smaller and softer and they haven't learned her pain yet and besides,  
my beloved likes the part about the little frog's tail and I need her to understand me  
when I call for the *colita de rana*

Frogs don't have tails anymore but the women in my country still have their healing hands  
and fingers, strong enough to hide their eyes from your country's faces and our country's  
violence, fired into the natives who, like my *abuela*, have not forgotten the number 4,645:  
*cuatro mil seiscientos cuarenta y cinco: el número de personas*  
que han muerto despues del huracán María. Your hands were not strong enough to hide it and I will  
not translate the pain.

Las mujeres de mi isla have hands strong enough to pray, to heal, to hold the beads of  
a *rosario* softly, like they do the heads of their daughters and the hearts of their sons  
y dejame decirte, there isn't a lie in the world that can escape a Boricua woman's hands and  
corruption

is just a fancier word for lies and corruption and *la corrupción* don't sound so different  
and my *abuela* can understand both.

My mother's hands can call your bullshit with just one smack to the mouth, will fight for her  
children down to the quick of her nails, will fight to keep her last name because it's theirs and fight  
to keep a home in a country she never wanted, but sometimes there is no strength left for the  
smarter options and when I was twelve years old my mother told me:

"If I have to live under a bridge, you two are coming with me."

The women in my family have strong hands, healing hands, hands to hide us under the bridges, keep us from government corruption—I asked my prima about the riots and she spread her hand over the hair of her beloved son and she told me: “I am tired...”

Las mujeres de mi isla tienen manos cansados, basta ya, basta.  
The women of my island have tired hands and they told me “enough already,”  
and I am warning you, there is nothing more dangerous than a country full of tired mothers.

The people of my country have tired hands, sick of healing, and there aren't enough frog tails in the world for what you have done and they are telling you:  
“Enough already. We have had enough.”

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**The Gist:** Michelle Bermudez is a Latina poet who received her MFA in creative writing at Adelphi University, where she is also an adjunct instructor. Her poems and prose have been published in *Isacoustic*, *Sugared Water*, *Miletus*, and *Persian Sugar in English Tea: An Anthology of Short Poems and Haikus* (Volumes 2 & 3). She lives in New York and is currently at work on a collection of Spanglish poetry.

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## Emily Bilman

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### **The New Order**

The minotaur is captive in the poem's labyrinth.  
The beast feeding on sacrificial human flesh  
Will only forsake the trap when the poet's torments  
Subside like the ill wind that sinks the pirate ships.

Until then, it must dwindle within the maze,  
Trying to figure the way out. The king believes  
Human sacrifice protects the harbor and his ships,  
Yet he cannot bid the minotaur's savagery

Nor the poet's life-force that sustains the poem.  
Like the ingenious Ariadne, the poet unravels  
The thread leading out of the labyrinth to save

Regal Theseus who slays the wild beast.  
The sonnet's turn points to an order of courage  
Distorting the price of human sacrifice.

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**The Gist:** Dr. Emily Bilman teaches poetry in Geneva as London's Poetry Society's Stanza representative. *The Psychodynamics of Poetry: Poetic Virtuality and Oedipal Sublimation in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot and Paul Valéry* was published by Lambert Academic in 2010 and *Modern Ekphrasis* in 2013 by Peter Lang. Her poetry books, *A Woman By A Well* (2015), *Resilience* (2015), and *The Threshold of Broken Waters* (2018) were published by Troubador. Poems were published in *The London Magazine*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Offshoots*, *San Antonio Review*, *Expanded Field*, *Poetics Research*, *Oxford School of Poetry Review*, *Tipton Poetry*. She blogs on <http://www.emiliebilman.wix.com/emily-bilman>

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# Jill Neimark

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## After The Fight, The Paint

Lover, you slept and I lay painting your body  
lapping cleaved rock of the blades on your back, jaw and hips, too, I  
painted  
your heart all night.

Left only your wrists and ankles untouched.  
It was meticulous as prayer  
like a bricklayer erecting a mosque.

You woke and whispered, *Wow, these are manacles only in reverse, the  
places you left free.*

*Yes, now you'll always belong to me.*

*And what do you want to talk about, I asked, as you served morning tea.  
Apples, quartered. Honey from the turned wood of a dipper.*

*Anything, you said. Last week the whole relationship almost got shitcanned, so  
anything's a gift now.*

And then you put your arms around me. *Don't leave.*

I could feel you dredging those words out of the place  
where they had plummeted when I walked out and you looked down  
stoic, unmoved  
And now, a man with no pride, you dove down and found them for me.

*Paint my ring finger, you said, with the word 'restraint'*

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**The Gist:** Jill Neimark is the author of adult and children's fiction, as well as a journalist who has been published in Discover Magazine, Scientific American, Science, Nautilus, Aeon, The New York Times, NPR, Quartz, and Psychology Today. Her novel, Bloodsong, was a BOMC selection, translated into Italian, German and Hebrew, and optioned for film. Her poetry, essays and reviews have been published in or are forthcoming in The Rumpus, Aeon, Los Angeles Review, Borderlands, The Massachusetts Review, Cimarron Review, Tiny Seed Journal and Construction Literary Magazine.

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## Featured Poet, Elliott Freeman

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### Half Measures

When I'm waiting for you, I tie a snapdragon  
around the horizon, as if a little link of stem

could anchor down the sun. How small,  
these spells: Leave the coffee cup

unfinished. Make a second portion;  
let it fallow in the fridge. Call the dog

by half her name; you took the other  
away. Daisy chains and breadcrumbs

for the birds; a drop of milk left all night  
in the saucer; a briquette of quartz lifted

to catch the swipe of a falling star—  
if a watched pot never boils, my tribute

is pasta, soaked but still stiff.  
On this first warm rain of spring,

I'll catch birdsong and that ozone smell  
in a plastic bucket, stretch the cellophane  
across

until we two can lift and breathe and share.

### But, Do We Need Another Poem for Spring?

In the spring, the mountains  
grow an inch taller, like my nephew  
when I haven't seen him since  
a long-ago buzzcut. It matters—

this green up-do of leaves  
can clear the bar of a rollercoaster:  
You must be at least this alive  
to ride. I don't grow, but

my soul opens; not like a flower,  
but an umbrella. It strains  
the ribs, inside-outs  
into the wind. I do not fear

the sexuality of *moist*,  
that ugly muck-and-quench  
adjective. The moist world  
is the loveliest; did you know

there was a time before  
the roof? That long, steady  
moistening cleans and sticks  
to skin and hair; the mud

like water; the water like mud—  
if you stand too long in it,  
you might remember  
how the oceans happened

or why the vegetables  
un-tomb themselves.

## **This is to Say**

*To X—*

This is to say  
that you can milk the violence out of yourself and pour it into the storm drain.

This is to say  
the moments when you struck were over like wasp-stings; the moments you didn't  
linger in and through me, these tectonic bruises.

This is to say  
that who you are now, the way you've opened your ribs and broken your fingers—  
I can love and I can trust, but I can never un-shudder  
that whisper of fear.

This is to say  
that I will always answer your number as if the other end  
is a policeman. Or a coroner.

This is to say  
I know enough of you to see how you stretch the good days around your heart;  
to say that I watch you wretch down that muscle memory; to say  
that I feel so lucky that you survived yourself. To say: I survived you,  
too.

This is to say:  
maybe.

This is to say:  
keep going.

## **Inkblot**

If you want to understand a man,  
watch how he holds his fingers—

what it means, not even he knows,  
but you will horoscope up an answer

of your own: proximity and angle,  
bone and knuckle and hair and

skin. If you want to understand  
a tree, imagine each year

as a shirt layered over so many  
other shirts: what is the skin like

underneath? Only an undressing  
can reveal. If you want to understand

a city, go out into the morning  
and count the homeless

and the police and the workers  
in jersey cloth or silk ties,

make them into a zodiac:  
those who arrive at work

by 8am, born under the sign  
of the parking officer; those

arriving in the pre-morning dark,  
born under the sign of

the invisible hands and the rubber  
gloves. If you want to understand,

take a handful of dice and roll,  
then drain the tea cup and read

the entrails and draw three cards  
because the knowing is in

the imagining. Every die  
is an ink-blot.

## Raze // Raise

Lift up, like a well-aired veil, the worries and the seizing moments.  
Your head is not a thundercloud. The patio, the rocking chair, the lemonade—

rain only spoils paperbacks and electronics. Everyone has shoulder blades  
that join and pivot, twin ridges that could have been anchor points

for a twenty-foot rainbow-feather wingspan. When it's wet and cold  
and the earth gives up its richness, anyone can slip into the crawlspace

of an old song, something acoustic. If need be, build a duplex  
inside your chest—the personal and the meant-to-be-shared.

Make a fire pit for sins. They don't burn, not really, but they dazzle,  
shedding white sparks like forks in a microwave. Cast your tongue

like a fishing line to rain drops and snowflakes. Dirty up your hands  
and grow a garden where the winter chapped your skin.

Remember, or learn, that the body wants so desperately to live.

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**The Gist:** Elliott Freeman is a poet, educator, and game designer living in the mountainous hinterlands of Southwest Virginia. His work has previously appeared in journals such as *Rogue Agent*, *Liminality*, and *Rust+Moth*.

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## Jodie Hannis

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### **FINGER BONE AND COPPER RINGS**

I have a whisper and a cold circle for the girls I may not have  
the boys I might not be disappointed in.

When I was a small mouse with big teeth and  
there was no future because time was barren,

my mother scorched everything with hard leather straps  
her fingers too heavy to hold in the palm of my hands

so perhaps I will give you to the girls without parents.  
The ones who stuck with the first dance and tried

while I've been chasing orbits fast around  
these four walls that became a coffin of us.

## PLAN DRAWING

He's trying  
to teach me the  
spell, the pattern that

makes the world  
fixed for just a  
moment. Our fingers  
pull this shape through the air

triangles and  
squares, and a nail  
knitting a cat's cradle  
across our sweeping knuckles.  
He lends me the numbers – alchemy –

3, 4, 5  
a symbol for  
the ancient way the world

is laid out.  
And now his hands  
have drawn a map, here  
in the space where sky and earth

are a muddle;  
a jagged tooth-smile  
upwards, our spell a polaroid  
of our grandchildren grinning into  
the sun. They have the measure of us.

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**The Gist:** Jodie is a Midlands-based poet and spoken word artist who is exploring archaeological writing as part of her PhD research with the University of Leicester. She has performed across the country including at *Handmade Festival*, Curve's *Inside Out*, and *Nottingham Poetry Festival* and came in second representing the East Midlands in Commonword's *Superheroes of Slam 2017* national final in Manchester. Recent publications can be found in *Welcome to Leicester: poems about the city* and *The New Luciad*.

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# Paige Elizabeth Wajda

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## What I Mean When I Talk About Bi Erasure

A used to pluck my long dark hairs  
from the kitchen floor,  
and scream.

*How disgusting, how lazy, how American you  
are.*

I asked her to come out to her parents for me.  
She laughed with derision, and told me  
I knew nothing of that country.

Despite it all, I loved her, the spite etched into  
her Athenian reflection. She made me ache  
in that uniform, and told me that we could  
elope  
in 2035, when she retired from the police  
force.

M folded me into the family. Held my hand  
in public, and after the party, she'd stand in the  
street  
and scream.

*You touched him. You fancy her. You're using  
me.*

*You prefer her because she speaks better  
English, you  
disgusting American.*

Never mind she preferred to dance with  
everyone  
but me. Never mind all the secret, fevered  
reading  
of my private messages.

After she'd slammed the door for the final  
time,  
I decided I'd sleep alone.

I dreamt of hands which would not ball into a  
fist,  
lips that would not purse into a scream.

And then there was someone.

But the friends all said, *It's weird.*  
*He's not a \_\_\_\_\_. We didn't expect you  
to be with a \_\_\_\_\_. What else  
have you lied to us about?*

That A ends in 'buse' and M in 'alevolent';  
that even after they'd followed me  
to my favorite bar, so that I'd see them making  
out  
at such angles inescapable from vision,  
that they were intent upon torture —

you still question why I chose him,  
wonder why I still flinch when you joke  
*but all men are trash.*

## Funemployment

I allow myself to become eaten by the couch.  
Gram watches me peel stickers and place them  
into the correct places in the sticker book.  
She tells me that I'm talented.

"Talented" — or "not hired" with no courtesy email.  
I flip through Grandad's retirement gift: a journal brimming  
with well-wishes and poems: *Enjoy your retirement,*  
*we're all jealous. Have fun. Don't forget us.*

I make art as the numbers command. I cook dinner  
and the family ooh and aah. It is my dead friend's recipe.  
Where does talent go? The novels languish, unfinished,  
the days slip by like dishwater through my

fingers, worn down from typing  
cover letter after cover letter:

*I look forward to hearing your response.*

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**The Gist:** Paige Elizabeth Wajda is a Choctaw writer from California and Head of Poetry for *The Selkie*. She spent four years teaching English in Poland before earning a Master's in Creative Writing from the University of Edinburgh. Her work has recently been published in *Star\*Line Magazine*, *Polu Texni*, *The Future Fire*, and elsewhere. Find her online at [paigeelizabethwords.wordpress.com](http://paigeelizabethwords.wordpress.com).

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## Jake Charles Hawkey

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### Terry

The counsellor says *Being the child of an alcoholic can create confusions around love, death and women.*

Last night, I sat on the edge of my bed and wept.

Some claim my name from the Hebrew יַעֲקֹבֵאל  
transliterated into Latin script as *Ya'akov'el—May God*

*protect.* As a kid, I wandered and watched the iron spit  
a small pool on your FCUK t-shirt. I watched

you change. You weren't afraid to make them wait  
and the club would often end in a good fight, wouldn't it?

One night, six beefy bouncers led you down an alleyway,  
having had enough by then too.

The house lit up with calls,

Love sat aching, Dad drove to pick you up from the hospital.

Yes—I know why you stay out late, where all this begins, why  
we need to be loved so ferociously. Sit here now, stay with me?

## Vecchio

Your older sister's voice on a rollercoaster  
saying her boyfriend has just been hit by a car  
and died in the middle of the road. In any case,

thank you for helping me prepare for the job.

Richie Rich had a McDonald's in his mansion,  
but had to bribe his friends with hamburgers.  
The cheeseburger was an *invention*,  
which is to say the hamburger was just clever.

Your sister weeps like a gently ripped luxury,  
long spine, her sex and grammar. Empire,  
mucus, my wishful south of the I'm Sorry River.

My love accrues automatic debt in an overdraft.

You with subtitles, winning a goldfish at the circus  
*I have lived here all my life and now I'm older.*

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**The Gist:** Jake Charles Hawkey was born in London, studied Fine Art at the University of Westminster and is currently studying MA Poetry at the Seamus Heaney Centre, Belfast. His poems have been published by Live Canon, the Honest Ulsterman and anthologised in Eyewear's Best New British and Irish Poets 2019. Jake was recently the inaugural intern at The River Mill Writers' Retreat, Downpatrick, Co. Down.

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## Sandy Green

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### WHY HE WANTS TO BE THE POET FROM *LES SYLPHIDES* IN YOUR LIFE

In the ballet *Les Sylphides*, the poet gets to hold hands with two women and neither one seems to mind the other, so he doesn't think you would either— He wanders around as if he's in a dream because most of the time he is and when he's awake his eyes are half-opened or half-closed depending on your point of view.

While the sylphides, that is, the jilted dead women, are hard at work running, regrouping, waiting expectantly, he wanders the stage and manages not to run into anyone because everyone's aware of him, but he ignores them. He'll stand and support you when he's not busy showing off and look at you with bedroom eyes, but that might mean he's about to fall asleep again.

At the end of the day, or the ballet, he has two women draped on his shoulders. (I wonder if Michel Fokine thought this out) How nice for the poet guy, but is that what you want?

### TOR

We trudge higher towards the broken clouds shredded like torn denim. I slip, trip, rip jeans, skin knees, grind palms. You carry me like a duffel bag

slung across your back. Rain trickles off your shoulders, pools in the bends of my elbows. We land in a heap on the crest

heaving like how the hills were formed when frozen earth thawed and rose—

Fireflies hidden in the grass blink a thousand winking eyes, waiting for the storm to pass.

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**The Gist:** Sandy Green writes from her home in Virginia, USA where her work has appeared *Bitter Oleander*, *Existere*, and *Qwerty*, as well as in her chapbook, *Pacing the Moon* (*Flutter Press*, 2009). *BatCat Press* published her limited-edition chapbook, *Lot for Sale. No Pigs*, in June 2019.

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# Jennifer Crompton

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## **tell a dream ...**

the guts of it is  
lucid  
disembodiment

a slick theft  
you sly gent  
nothing

my swelling mouth to  
your unencumbered  
ear

can be proven  
in spite of footage  
your legerdemain

*do you want  
to steal  
an apple?*

*do you always do  
everything  
as if it is on camera?*

day for night  
we are on location  
the crew intent

you whirl and sting  
*stop touching  
me*

about their business  
the tree  
lit from within

*every touch  
is like a kiss  
every kiss is a nip*

*like this like this like this!*

## all the lonely people

i cut my toenails and my fingernails  
sitting on the back step in the morning sun

let the clippings fall where they would (like a nomad)  
tweezed the menopausal hairs from off my hairy chin

then kicked my heels up as the rock and roll bird  
called – *rock and roll! rock and roll!*

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**The Gist:** Jennifer Compton was born in Wellington (New Zealand) and now lives in Melbourne (Australia). She is a poet and playwright who also writes prose. Recent work has appeared in *Antipodes*, *Poetry New Zealand* and the new spoken word anthology put out by University of Queensland Press - *Solid Air*.

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# Diana Manole

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## WESTERN BERLIN 1990: MY FIRST TASTE OF FREEDOM

To the thirty-year anniversary of the Fall of the Berlin Wall  
on November 9, 1989

Straggling through the streets, mom, dad, big sister, kid sister,  
lace tablecloths in our hands, painstakingly crocheted  
by my late grandma,  
grandma fidgeting in her grave, bones kissing bones  
longing for housework and flesh.

‘Tablecloth? Homemade lace tablecloth?’

Romanians vamoosed for the first time from their country—  
borders like prison walls but with no windows  
guards ready to shoot,  
dogs eager to sniff out and pounce on all attempts at  
unauthorized freedom,

Ceaușescu—

a horse breaker assiduously riding the willpower of millions  
with food rations and snitches.

But now happiness powders our footsteps with gold  
mapping a Western fata nirvana come true  
through perestroika and revolutions, not miracles.

Berlin engulfs us, effortlessly arousing—

‘Breathe in, breathe out!’ mom says, struggling  
to survive freedom.

‘Tablecloths? Homemade lace tablecloths?’

Billboard lights we’ve never seen,  
fast-food smells we’ve never smelled,  
faces without the sear of fear.

Malls, like palaces—

kings and queens waltzing their way from floor to floor,  
trimmed with shopping bags, as if living, ornamented  
Christmas trees.

Grocery stores, like art shows—  
exhibiting what we'd missed generation after generation.

The first ever Snickers bar—  
an orgasm of the taste buds.

'Tablecloths? Lace tablecloths? Homemade!'

Manole 1

Ampelmännchen greenly frown from the traffic lights,  
policemen eye us,

suspicious we're daydreaming of free boarding  
in top-notch prisons with

air conditioning and LED TVs in the dayrooms,  
Western technology we're yet to see.

'Tablecloths? Lace tablecloth? Homemade!'

Rain on Unter den Linden Boulevard,  
Frederick the Great royally ignores us, raindrops  
dripping on our heads from Conde's tail like horse piss  
on chickens in the wrong place at the wrong time  
in the wrong life.

'Tablecloths? Lace! Homemade!'

'Danke Schoen!' says a grey-haired Jungfrau Maria  
in a worn raincoat

handing us a few Deutsche marks for the ethnic  
Tischdecke,

not that she needed it, but we really looked  
in need

'Can you also read my palms?'

in her faraway grave, grandma would smirk  
if she could.

Mom, dad, big sis, kid sis—

the painfully full bladders finally celebrating Western freedom  
in a city with no public washrooms

and the fear of communism.

A stroll through Berlin after the fall of its wall.

Each November, rain stains the leftover homemade lace tablecloths  
in my memory

## THE MISUNDERSTANDING

The next-door neighbour asks me to pray together  
for the welfare of the humankind.

She doesn't believe I've long forgotten  
the 'Lord's Prayer.'

She gives me a book of prayers and tells me  
to read the text from it.

She doesn't believe I can't see well because  
of my cataract.

She starts praying and tells me to repeat after her.

I wouldn't mind but I can't understand the words.

When I ask her to repeat she gets mad.

'You only care about your own writing!' she screams.

She doesn't believe poems produce oxygen  
like plants.

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**The Gist:** Diana Manole is a Romanian-Canadian scholar, literary translator, and award-winning author of nine books of poetry and drama in her native Romania. Her poetry in English has been published in magazines and anthologies in Europe, the UK, the US, Mexico, South Africa, and Canada, and in English-Romanian book B&W (Tracus Arte 2015). Her second bilingual collection of poems will be published in Canada by Grey Borders Books in 2020. Photo: Alex Usquiano

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# Mary Mulholland

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## THE MAKING OF DREAMS

Before you're six weeks you've left the west country, with its thunder drones,  
the triple choker birth gave you, your *tears exercising the lungs*.

Propped up in your pram, watching waves wheeze over the east coast shingle:  
be good. *One day we'll join daddy in another land*.

Soon he's forgotten, and his bristle moustache. Wait. Third girls must *be trouble-free*. *Eyes smart*  
from the wind, cheeks burnish like coxes.

The others, back from school, play in the snow. Birdsong lulls you. Petals fly.  
A teaspoon of *brandy in hot milk will help you sleep*.

Then O the excitement, O the laughter, your sisters sing, we're off to see daddy again!  
*Different sand, different sea*, dusty smells catch your throat.

Too hot for sleep; *the ayah keeps opium under her nails*.  
Outside noises: wild cats, frogs. Curtains shiver. What's under the bed?

Gaps round the doorframe let in light and downstairs murmurs. Light reveals  
*fingers over the wardrobe*, fingers playing shadow games. Shh, be quiet,

you'll make the pillow wet. Stroke your hair, its softness will soothe you. The *fingers*  
*grow bulbous*, they're laughing. The sheet's central seam is scratchy, shh,

*a shadow under the door*. Stay still. It opens. Your heart's a drum. Eyes shut,  
hold your breath. It's always him. She's too tired, with the others, the heat.

*Your wrist throbs* as he holds it, his ear by your nose, he bends to push teddy  
into your arms, tucks you tight. Leaves. Breathe. Toss teddy back to the floor.

It won't be loved till it's old, lost its fur, *no longer growls*, is renamed Velvet Paws  
by the next generation. Kick the sheets loose. Sob yourself to sleep.

But if you're ill, then she'll come. She'll sit by your side, sew clothes for Elizabeth,  
*varnish her lips and nails red*; dab lipstick measles all over her body,

pour her perfume on your Jack and Jill hanky. Now worn as a cravat by Velvet Paws. In time you'll  
recall how she taught you to daydream. Long after they and Elizabeth are gone,

you'll lift the hanky with its still, faint scent, *breathe in the past* and gaze at the moon that's hardly  
aged since you were young.

## RESTOCKING AFTER THE BREAK

Milk	The builders promised they'd be gone by now.
Potatoes, onions, carrots	Two weeks. They blame the weather.
Chicken or fish?	We had fish every day. The smell hung in the air. Fresh salty air. Not like London.
A salad might be nice	Yes, it was good. But where to go from here?
Perhaps a mature cheddar	That's his part of the country. Sometimes it works. Why's that not enough? And when we parted at the station and I said, what's our relationship now?
Sheep or goat?	He said, No one's written a rule book. And kissed my head.
Honey	Even though I'd told him –
Tea, coffee, wine	but not everything. I didn't want to hurt him.
Tissues	Did he see me crying?

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**The Gist:** Mary Mulholland came to poetry after much travelling, including careers in journalism, property and psychotherapy. Recently she completed a Masters in Poetry with Newcastle University/ The Poetry School. Her poems are published in many anthologies, online (eg Ink, Sweat and Tears) and she has often been shortlisted or commended in national prizes (eg Bridport). She founded and co-runs Red Door Poets and lives in London.

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# James Finnegan

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## DRY BONES

there's no word coming to me  
nothing distinctive on the rise

I feel I have nothing left to say  
as if the inchoate is locked in bone

a frozen marrow wilderness  
waiting for life to happenstance

yet there's confidence  
water will again flow from stone

the yellowing horse-chestnut tree  
the leafless ash with red berries

tar-spotted sycamore leaves  
montbretia October-ing through

brilliant fuchsia fuelled and felled  
ivy stealing light and water

holly admiring its own green shine  
crisp curled copper colours rustling the road

looking at the out there  
brings me back every time

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**The Gist:** James Finnegan - shortlisted for Hennessy Literary Award (2018), highly commended in the Patrick Kavanagh Poetry Competition (2016, 2018), published in *New Hibernia Review* (2019), *Poetry Ireland Review* (2018), *CYPHERS* (2017,2018, 2019), *Skylight 47*, *North West Words*, and *The Best New British & Irish Poets 2018* - first full collection of poems *Half-Open Door* (Eyewear Publishing, 2018).

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# Lucy Dixcart

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## Unfinished

A seismic rumble strikes the solar plexus,  
bores through bone.  
From the churn of cello and bass,  
strings swarm the cathedral's skies.  
Rosin-fingered, a schoolgirl violinist  
watches the boy, his oboe aslant.  
These torn pages have an unwritten end,  
yet she feels her whole life is here:  
a flight of hummingbirds  
underwritten by tectonic movements.  
Decades later, while children dream,  
she and he will hear these notes  
electrify a winter evening. Suddenly alight,  
they will find their former selves –  
like tumbling back through the wardrobe  
to find no time has passed.

## Waxing gibbous

Onto carpet, this dazzling  
night casts a recumbent doorway.  
Shadow-she glides, crossing the frame.  
Blotting her with my body,  
I recline, combining our darks  
in liminal space.  
The tapestry above  
picks out half-known patterns:  
celestial assemblies loosely knit.  
Unseen needles prick open every between.

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**The Gist:** Lucy Dixcart lives in rural Kent. Her poems have been published by Acumen, The Frogmore Press, Fly on the Wall Press, Marble Poetry and Eye Flash Poetry and she was shortlisted for the 2019 Canterbury Festival Poet of the Year competition.

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# Fiona Pitt-Kethley

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## Slates

In England, slate's blue-grey. Where I live  
now,  
it also comes in amethyst and green.  
Smashed, powdered stones lie glittering on the  
hills  
and silver stream beds, glinting in the sun.

The countryside has all become a slate.  
First, lovers wrote their names on trees and  
walls.  
Roadmakers left instructions in the paths:  
where they had asphalted and where they'd  
not.  
And jokers added quips on cowboy jobs.

Next, came a mystery worker with black paint,  
Proclaimed corruption everywhere he went.  
The whole Sierra was his open book,  
the pages, buildings, bridges, mines and wells.  
On obvious routes the Council covered up,  
sent round another man with more black paint.  
Tourists will never read that message now.  
But those of us who like to walk off piste  
still see his words inscribed upon the stones.

## Plum pudding

The diggers sliced through hills and broke  
down mines,  
broadening the road for lorries to the port.  
We took a pick-axe there on Christmas day.  
We knew the area'd be deserted then  
and dug between the turkey and the pud,  
harvesting fluorite, purple as plums.

I'm sad the mine's destroyed yet pleased to  
find  
this booty, ghosts of cubes within a cube  
and interlocking forms. Yet all is flawed.  
Vibrations damaged it beneath the earth.  
Sacred geometry broken by machines.  
We pack our spoils to save them from the light.  
Their form is damaged but their hue's  
preserved.

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**The Gist:** Fiona Pitt-Kethley is the author of more than 20 books of poetry and of prose published by Chatto, Abacus and others. She lives in Spain.

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## Simeon Dumdum Jr

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### HOW I WANT PICASSO TO SKETCH ME

This is how Pablo Picasso  
sketched Ella Fitzgerald.  
Her breasts like the waves of Hokusai,  
hair a cluster of grapes.  
She tilts her head upwards  
the way singers do  
when belting a high note.  
And the song that comes out of her mouth  
is like cotton candy.  
That's Ella—*pour Ella Fitzgerald*,  
*Son ami*, signed, Picasso.

This is how I want Picasso  
to sketch me, chest flat, like the Shield  
of Achilles but with no design,  
a flat cap on my head,  
eyes raised but wearing glasses,  
lips slightly open,  
a thought bubble above me  
like a growing rain cloud,  
and if he cannot make the sketch  
(not the least because he is dead),  
I can very well do it myself.  
In grade school I was doing sketches  
like that which he made of Ella,  
but I am poor in forging signatures  
and do not know French.

## AT THE VATICAN MUSEUMS

We kept on walking hand-in-hand  
Through the Vatican museums  
After we heard news that a friend  
Had lost his wife in the crowd.  
Beginning with the Pio Clementino  
It seemed our courtship days once more.  
How did we look standing before  
Laocoön and sons, who tried  
In vain to keep the snakes at bay,  
Her hand in mine a docile serpent?  
The crowd found us the opposite  
Of anguish as through the galleries  
We went with my hand clutching hers—  
The Candelabra, Tapestries,  
Gallery of Maps, where we moved  
From ancient to modern Italy  
Without ever letting go.  
This we maintained throughout the tour,  
Except once, when she took a shot  
Of me before Caravaggio's  
*The Entombment of Christ* (which means  
That only death could separate us?).  
Thence through the rooms of Raphael  
And finally the Sistine Chapel  
Where we were ready to release  
Each other until we looked up  
At Michelangelo's *Creation*  
And saw that God and Adam too  
Were joining hands.

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**The Gist:** Simeon Dumdum Jr. once worked as a judge. He is retired and lives with his wife Gingging in Talisay City, Cebu, Philippines. He has published 14 books, 11 of poetry and three non-fiction, and has received several awards for his work.

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## Colin Pink

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### **Lepanto** (*im Cy Twombly*)

It's a wake of sorts: procession passing,  
scrim of dream, blazon of nightmare.

The battle is over; all that's left scattered gifts:  
driftwood limbs, blood stains diluted on the tide.

The wounded carry their wounds always, visible  
and invisible, sharp as sea-spray flung in the eyes.

The composite bow of time unleashes its quiver  
of arrows in sudden and fearful velocity.

The ooze of history seeps between our toes  
as the sea swirls up at the lip of the shore.

Rocks of longing and loss, wilder shores of love,  
fill the horizon with boats, each its own sunset.

A stigmata of blisters blossoms on our palms, our  
oars dipping, sparkles surfacing, fish leaping.

Rowing against the tide our strokes carry us  
ever nearer to the elusive coast of Bohemia.

## 4' 33" by John Cage

I used to listen to it regularly  
in the dentist's waiting room.  
It would always start slowly:  
a gentle slither and flick  
of magazine pages accompanied  
by the counterpoint of the distant  
ringing of a telephone. I always  
waited with constricted breath  
to the sustained high notes  
of the dentist's drill that would  
hang in the air shrill as Valkyries  
advancing. The rhythm section  
was provided by the urgent  
syncopated beat of trains on the  
railway line across the street.  
But it always ended on the mezzo  
*sprechgesang* of the dental nurse  
'We're ready for you now.'

---

**The Gist:** Colin Pink writes plays, fiction and poetry and lectures on the history of art. He has two collections of poetry in print: *Acrobats of Sound*, 2016, is available from Poetry Salzburg Press and *The Ventriloquist Dummy's Lament*, 2019, is available from Against the Grain Press

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# Kymm Coveney

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## Looping Gravity

Loop quantum gravity and cosmology  
put me in mind of Jimmy Stewart  
offering to lasso the moon for his gal.

How can my brain bend around loop  
quantum gravity when it can't disentangle  
an actor from his role? Recall her name?

Consider fluctuation and correlation.  
Microscopic degrees of freedom.  
Degrees of freedom I am told exist

unambiguously. Perturbatively.  
(Yet they leave gaps into which  
Zuzu's petals disappear.)

Coherent states exist: I hear equations  
of motion, fluctuating and correlating  
in space-time structures, are dynamical.

Like angel wings. But when coherent states  
do not exist, quantum loop theory ricochets  
off the super moon. Lassoes my thumb.

## Aftermath

Like a crowd pressing in on you  
his absence takes up all the space.  
Jostles you. Never lets you be.

Inside this him-less bubble, you  
continue to participate.  
You make dinner. Tie their shoes. Breathe.

When, the instant he rose past you,  
all else should have stayed in its place  
caught in a game of Red Light. Freeze!

Yet the full moon still appears, you  
see it in the sky that endures,  
sketching clouds. His spine. Ribs. Coccyx.

Because all you touch is his, you  
touch it all and, in touching, spur  
the world to resume its tick-tock,

brash click of days unspent, while you  
splice the rush of seconds, whirr  
like a bomb that never goes off.

## Cauldron Song

*After Jamaica Kincaid's 'Girl'*

Fullmoon restless, my coven shakes  
chestnut leaves into shadowplay,  
branches squeezed so hard they moan.

This is how you raise the sash.

Patti waits below, hair uncombed,  
horses pawing the ground for worms  
she holds in her cheeks so they can speak.

This is how you make the leap.

Margaret empties from her apron flowers  
gathered in Latin along the forest path. Spells  
each word out with her long wooden spoon.

This is how you stir the pot.

Anne raises her arms, and letters run like sweat  
to her hips. She shimmies, fanning flames; spins  
her lovers' names until they twirl round her wrists.

This is how you serve the feast.

One part story, two parts poem; a dash  
of grated elbow, zest of palm. Slut-spiced  
and bloody, our tongues conjure the dawn.

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**The Gist:** Kymm Coveney was born in Boston, earned a BA in Modern English and Spanish Literature in 1981, and has lived in Spain since the 1982 World Cup. She co-hosts a multilingual poetry recital series in Barcelona, Poémame, edits the Sea of Words writing contest, and is a freelance translator. Her poems have been published in *Under the Radar*, *Prole*, and *The Interpreter's House*. Flash fiction, poems and translations can be found online through [betterlies.blogspot.com](http://betterlies.blogspot.com) or twitter [@KymmInBarcelona](https://twitter.com/KymmInBarcelona).

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# Ben Verinder

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## A couple kissing

on the corner of Woburn Place and Russell Square  
meet with such force  
that each kiss

cuts a piece of them away

a lobe

his blue eye

her hand

still stroking as it slaps  
onto the pavement between Café Nero  
and the red post box

a knee rolls out

from his trouser leg like a

hubcap

with her remaining fingers  
she soothes a single hair from his collapsing face

the crowd of pedestrians at the traffic lights  
don't seem to notice as they topple

on

to

their

own parts

but the pigeons do.

## The shorthand test

at the stroke of one  
I want you to burn your writing wrists  
against my spoken word  
evaporate the vowels  
crush consonants to the raw pigment of  
idea  
shrink your favourite film to a single line  
your childhood to the fizzing smell of grass  
a continent the pinch of spice  
or the way a fly moves up a baby's face  
the incomprehensible to God  
ourselves this exercise

## Dark energy requires that the speed at which the universe expands is not a constant

*The female human foetus  
is born carrying three million eggs  
says the leaflet I find it hard to read  
as we wait on the soft lip of a blue sofa  
for your twelve-week scan.  
And why not? Suns spawn planetary cells.  
Futures pack into each other like Russian  
dolls.*

The ultrasound suite smells of lemon drops  
and thyme.  
A bright afternoon peaks under lowered  
blinds  
like an over-excited relative relegated to the  
car park.

*Egg production ends at birth  
and by puberty half of them have died.*  
As if it were ketchup or a scream  
the sonographer smacks gel out of a bottle.  
From the corridor a surprise of male voices  
and jangling of keys. As the screen comes  
to life  
the ice-cold pulse of fear  
that where we expect to find you will be  
dark space,  
a star supposed before the advent of light.

---

**The Gist:** Ben Verinder lives in rural Hertfordshire. His work has featured in *Brittle Star*, *South*, *Obsessed with Pipework*, *Lighthouse*, *Ink Sweat and Tears*, among others and he was recently shortlisted for the international Plough Prize (short poem). He runs a reputation research agency and is the biographer of the adventurer and writer Mary Burkett.

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## Hibah Shabkhez

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### ONE MAN'S CLICHÉ ...

There was a straw basket on mother's head  
When we locked the one-hinged gate.  
A chattering twin dangled off each arm  
And the baby kept her back straight.  
I came last, holding the water instead  
Of old Bhaloo who kept me warm.

The twins are now echoes in rustling trees  
And mother's back stoops unhindered;  
But I still have to hold this bottle so  
To stop this top – it was splintered  
When the laughing men knocked me to my knees –  
From letting out our last swallow.

I must save it from the sand. On we go  
Like ill-skipped stones, lurching and slow,  
That take forever, twist, turn and shiver;  
And never do cross the river.

---

**The Gist:** Hibah Shabkhez is a writer of the half-yo literary tradition, an erratic language-learning enthusiast, a teacher of French as a foreign language and a happily eccentric blogger from Lahore, Pakistan. Her work has previously appeared in *The Mojave Heart Review*, *Third Wednesday*, *Brine*, *Petrichor*, *Remembered Arts*, *Rigorous* and a number of other literary magazines. Studying life, languages and literature from a comparative perspective across linguistic and cultural boundaries holds a particular fascination for her.

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## Clare Morris

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### El Mèdol, Tarragona

The full-throated blare and glare of the CN 340 tears through the August morning,  
Service station palms frolic fitfully like ostrich feathers in the hands of wayward girls,  
While, deep below, the Via Augusta traces its imperial lineage along antique channels.

Tarraco's limestone, too workaday for Rome's elite,  
Bears its slave stripes keenly, its golden tones,  
Marbled in pink and white, sole testament to its provenance.

The percussive beat of feet on gravel falls silent at the sudden shock of the witness column,  
Twenty metres of rough-hewn rock measuring the depth of quarried stone  
And quarried flesh, marked by toil and unmarked in death.

My hand cold against the stone stays shackled to my modernity,  
No murmuring of ancestral voices speaks to my alien heart,  
Silence seals around me like a second skin.

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**The Gist:** Clare Morris works for The Blue Nib as an Editor at Large and regularly collaborates with the abstract artist, Nigel Bird ([www.nigel-bird.com](http://www.nigel-bird.com)). Much of her poetry is written in response to the environment. She is currently working on a historical novel which focuses on 9th century Britain and takes the elegy Wulf and Eadwacer as its starting point. She and her husband live in Devon so that they can always put the cream on first.

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## Glenn Hubbard

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### The Turn

Scandalously languorous,  
the yacht yawns into a turn,  
stern tilting like an easy lover  
adjusting to accommodate another.

### Cranes

You hear them before you see them,  
their calls carrying. From up high  
you scan the sky until you spy in  
the distance a ball of soot that  
contracts and expands. Cranes.  
Skeins that fly to the south west.  
Icons of autumn. Hungry for acorns.  
Minutes go by and now the shifting  
V is clear to see. The long legs almost

left behind and the heads pointing  
the way forward. And still the trumpeting.  
Perhaps it's comforting or the way  
that they discuss the finer points of  
navigation, proposing or rejecting  
some minor alteration. The fuss they  
make! These exquisite, noisy birds,  
as they trek across the sky along  
the ancestral route to Extremadura.  
Far off now, the conversation continues  
but each *parp!* is now less audible and  
there's a sharp realisation of how you  
will miss those voices that have filled  
the emptiness of the last quarter of an  
hour of your life, of how the silence  
will bring an unanticipated sadness,  
of how, finding no solace, you will  
look north east and make earnest  
petition to the horizon.

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**The Gist:** Glenn Hubbard lives in Madrid and has been writing seriously since 2012. He has had around 50 poems published in magazines and last year had a poem entered for the Forward Prize. R.F. Langley is one of his favourite poets and is largely responsible for a love of internal rhyme. He loses track of time when writing, a rare pleasure.

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# Andrea Potos

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## IMAGINING HEAVEN

*after Paul Zimmer*

I am sitting beside Shakespeare  
in Gertrude Stein's studio.

We are listening to John Keats  
recite an ode.

The mullioned windows are flung open--  
brightness unheard of gushes in--  
one nightingale perches  
on a particular beam of sun.

Just now, Emily D. glides in,  
arms linked with the other Emily.  
Charlotte follows close behind,  
the sequel to *Jane Eyre* in her hands.

Renoir sets up his easel, a cigar  
hanging off his lips, while Emerson and Jung  
smile from the settee.

Johannes and Clare settle close  
on the silk-draped piano bench,  
their fingers nearly touching.

Outside, Satchmo and Dizzy  
are warming up in the gazebo.  
Mozart chats on the lawn with Friday Kahlo.  
Just now, Monet arrives  
offering a bouquet of water lilies splashed  
with water and light--a gift from our Hostess  
who is everywhere  
though unseen.

## WHERE TO FIND THEM

If a scent had wings--whisking past you.

Sunk in the haymows of your longing,

Beyond the last camera roll,

Stitched inside the heart's silk repository,

Inside the sealed envelopes of this world--

Within the marrow of every summer  
there ever was or will be.

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**The Gist:** Andrea Potos is the author of nine poetry collections, most recently *Mothershell* (Kelsay Books), *A Stone to Carry Home* (Salmon Poetry), *Arrows of Light* (Iris Press), and *An Ink Like Early Twilight* (Salmon Poetry). Several of her books have received Outstanding Achievement Awards in Poetry from the Wisconsin Library Association. She also received the William Stafford Prize in Poetry from *Rosebud* Magazine, and the James Hearst Poetry Prize from the *North American Review*. Her poems can be found widely in print and online. She is currently at work on another collection!

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# Alina Stefanescu

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## In Manole's Orchard: A Re-visioning Of the Romanian Legend

A long time ago, in a land with more crows than days unaltered by loss, Prince Negru Voda ordered stonemason Manole and his faithful masons to build the world's most breathtaking monastery.

Manole and his masons worked hard but the walls kept collapsing. No sooner would a wall rise than return to the ground. Only the orchard stayed tall.

On a night without constellations, Manole wandered his dreams until a fairy told him: *Manole, if you want to build a wall that lasts forever, you must build it around the first woman who appears at the orchard.*

On a day without clouds, a man must choose between the promise he made to a prince and the vows sworn to his beloved. Manole's wife stopped to visit. She brought a basket of fruits and wine to share with the masons. Manole buried his wife alive inside the church walls. He had nothing left to give his country when the beauty of the monastery stole his breath.

Ensuring nothing so perfect would ever be built again, Prince Voda ordered his soldiers to pull all the ladders away from the roof, stranding Manole and his masons on top.

To escape, they made wings from shingles and tried to fly, but none survived. Where each mason fell, a stone appeared, nine stones total. In the place where Manole crashed, a salt well *watered by tears* appeared. The stones, the well, the wife, and the wind remain at Curtea de Arges monastery in Romania.

*I run my mouth across the rim*

*of a line by Blaga*

In this orchard  
wherever we fell amid fruit  
there was a tree turned coffin

I felt that by laying my hands on the  
ice

I would know more  
about turning to stone  
in a story  
molecules condense  
to a point where motion ceases

but nothing ever stops

And the wind is a woman  
known for angry  
whispers, for questions  
no life ever answers

Some speak of a brick  
which keeps the structure  
standing  
but I know her voice  
is a blizzard, chilled into wails

and no legend is foreign  
to the girls we raise  
inside it

O Manole, did she bring you  
an apple?

Or was she the tumbled  
fruit, the  
orchard's footfall?

A man buries what he loves  
and stays faithful by swearing

*forever*  
in a country of stone-faced icons

## **The Burden of My Star**

*after Lucian Blaga*

A child swings alone through  
the echo of a churchbell.  
Wind hovers like a mother, carrying buckets  
of sandbox gossip back and forth, the burden of balance.  
A child wishes hardest on the stars  
she trusts not to hurt her.  
If not for the scars on my legs, I'd run back  
and tell the girl on the swing  
that best friends may lie like angels  
until they grow big  
and learn to lie like wives.  
I pass the burden of my star  
from one shoulder to the next  
like Lucian Blaga. I am guilty  
of wearing the masks that please you,  
fashioning glibness like sterile gauze  
to stop the blood.  
I feel, again, the way you loved me  
for never crying, the urge we exploited  
within the warm womb of moving trains,  
discovering ourselves in tiny villages being demolished.  
The ruin of others made us important.  
One moment's chug becomes momentum,  
the singe-marks of chains in a churchyard.  
I lean back and surrender my balance for a ligature  
the wind can't undo. To know why car alarms howl  
like wolves when touched by the full moon's magnets.

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**The Gist:** Alina Stefanescu was a finalist for the 2019 Kurt Brown AWP Prize, the 2019 Greg Grummer Poetry Prize, the 2019 Frank McCourt Prize, and the 2019 Streetlight Magazine Poetry Contest, Alina won the 2019 River Heron Poetry Prize. Online at [www.alinastefanescuwriter.com](http://www.alinastefanescuwriter.com) or @aliner.

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## Featured Poets and Writers

### Poetry and Short Fiction by Tracy Gaughan

Tracy Gaughan lives in Galway, Ireland. She presents the popular arts show ‘WestWords’ on Ireland’s Community Radio Network and facilitates Creative Writing workshops in her local area. Tracy recently completed a master’s degree in International Contemporary Literature at NUIG. She writes poetry and short fiction.

#### Mittens for Nasma

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Like a clock on the hour, it struck him. Mittens! He was packing a shoebox with presents for Gazan children. Crayons, jellies, small toys and mittens: pink fleece ones, with a cartoon bunny on the top. He had bought them for a sixth Christmas his sister never saw. The bus sent her flying through the air like a stone and the day he kissed her goodbye, her hands cold as snowballs, he couldn’t help wishing that he had gifted them sooner. His mother said her soul would go straight to heaven; that she would be warm there in God’s amber glow. Still, Kevin didn’t care about a soul he never saw and didn’t know. He thought about the hands he had held walking to school, the ones he had played *concentration* with, the impish spidery fingers that ruffled his hair after he’d combed it; that were now growing hard as iron in the buried dark. Kevin wasn’t stupid, he knew how long people were dead for.

In they went, two pink fleece rabbits in a gift-wrapped burrow, tied together by an umbilical string cable and a note that read: *From Galway to Gaza: A Christmas wish that you will be safe and warm.* Almost every family in the town prepared a gift-box. When the cars came to collect the packages, piled high as trees in the sacristy, the chorus of whoops and cheers could be heard four thousand kilometres away, as a generator thrummed to life restoring power to Gaza city.

Kevin adorned the municipal Christmas tree with lights that hung like stars above Palestine. Counting down the days left until Christmas, he opened another door on the advent calendar and peered inside. He saw Nasma. Short-haired, brown-eyed and barefoot. She was counting on her fingers, the number of days she had been slowly starving in the dark. Six years old, deaf and mute as a flower, the new light had led her to the kitchen where her mother was returning with bread and a gold box fastened with red ribbons.

‘Five days’, she etched to her mother in the air. Five days to Christmas. Five days since her father and brothers vanished in a cloud of dust and debris, taking their bedrooms with them.

Sitting on the floor on a woven rug, threadbare and frayed as her mother's wits, Nasma undid the box in noiseless rapture. Cramming coloured jellies into her small mouth, the handwritten note saying nothing she could decipher, she pulled on the mittens which fit as they should but concealed her fingered vernacular, hindering her ability to communicate. But maybe this was the point. Alarmed and under threat, even insects know to stay still, but Nasma began to wonder whether her gesticulations drew the bombs that disappeared her brothers. Thinking this a gift from an angered and absent father, she donned her mittens and stilled her calligraphic hands.

Four days and the church-bells of Galway rang out like a warning in the Gazan night. While Kevin carolled to the Christ-child and lit fragrant candles on the festive altar, Nasma caught the scent of a myth. A birth or a death, she couldn't remember but it smelled of magic and her grandfather's farm in Bethlehem. Three men of an ancient tale had travelled here in the middle of the night and she thought that maybe, just maybe, her father and brothers - the three wise men of Jabaliya refugee camp - might have journeyed there too.

Three days and whilst Kevin festooned the chancel with wreaths and golden angels, the first snowflakes appeared and fell as ash from the blitzed and collapsing edifices of Gaza city. Nasma watched as missiles passed overhead, bright and noiseless as meteors. The neighbourhood fled in soundless terror, shadowing hares to their underground hollows but Nasma, whose hands spoke to no-one, hastened in the direction of a star. She trailed it like a maga. Her mother followed too, through perilous streets and hostile meadows. Suddenly, a wrathful and radiant light flashed amber from behind the black-boned limbs of an olive grove. Striking both blind, the bomb cut Nasma in two. It took her mittened hands to an unknown place, where they lay hushed and warm as two sleeping mice. Gifts for the Christ-child who didn't lift a finger to help. The rest, fell into her mother's arms, outstretched as a converting Saul; another on a journey toward a birth or a death, no one remembers, but two days to go, the ash continued to fall soft and silent, on a child lying contrapposto in the manger of her mother. Two enigmatic Nyad's carved in stone, whose deaths, inconspicuous as snowdrops in a river, lay garlanded on Christmas eve beside the wreckage of a distorted myth.

As the lustre of the world slowly ebbed away from Gaza, the nativity came to life at Galway cathedral. Kevin stood before the curious magi from the east, the expectant mother, the propitious future yet to arrive. Then starlight, brilliant and redolent, shot through the gathering crowd, skewering a tiny space beside the manger. He saw them there, two pink fleece mittens, tied together by an umbilical string cable, lying hushed as two sleeping mice. Mittens lost and forgotten by some child's hands. Some child's hands lost and forgotten.

# Poetry by Tracy Guaghan

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## THE WAITING ROOM

A flock of physicians arrived on the wing, bringing some new grief.  
I was sent to the waiting room. It was so full of honesty; it was half empty

and almost impossible to hide from God. I took a seat and tried to exist less.  
I recognised myself in the ruined faces about me. The silence was absolute.

We disappeared into the walls like frescoes. Fixated on our portraits, we clung  
to our belongings like sacred relics: scarves, spectacles, a chain of crochet;

a storybook and a handbag. In those moments, which were the longest  
and shortest of my life, I imagined historians, in the next millennium

making fools of themselves, deciphering the significance of these mementos.  
Trying to determine what brought a small caravanserai of pilgrims together

at this latitude, in this epoch, in the midst of a wholly different Holy City. I claimed each  
possession as my own and bore the burden of its true biography.

Because, when a kingdom falls dilapidated into what remains of the last  
and the slow labour of archaeology begins; our belongings become fortune's coiled fossils.

The icons and sacred manuscripts that will one day tell a truth, or a lie.  
The waiting room will be ransacked and looted, the handbags wrenched from their moorings,

like the blunt arrowheads and potsherds before them. Virgil told of the tears of things, both  
mortal and not, and the spectacles, the crochet - made by the hand to please the heart

will sit weeping in museums, alongside wistful statuary, far-flung  
from the desires of their bearers. How will the archaeologists know?

That we were more than a community of unshorn axemen who mutilated ox's,  
built walls and polished stones? How will they know

that a man was not giving up on a woman, whose heart was giving out?  
That a child, with a shadow on her lung the size of the moon

was looking-up from her storybook, making a room smile  
as if in the company of a flower?

That a young man in a scarf, stealing heaven, would soon be asked to return it?

Something of us catches on the things we touch, and when the poets ask:

*Ubi Sunt? Where are those who went before us?* They already know our forebears are still here, moving like heavenly bodies in their own secret evolutions.

Walking through the doors we never walk through. They are the light remains of vanished stars, the truth in the waiting room paring us to the bone.

Later, came the physicians. They passed-by without stopping, returning home for the winter perhaps, taking your heart with them as they flew.

## SAPPHO AND ARISTOTLE

Sappho is a papyric myth, humidified by a man. A learned face on an Attic vase, transfigured to fulfil the will of an age. A poet, a priestess recast as a whore. A violet-haired woman-lover scorned for an acumen revered in Aristotle.

He never made a myth of her. He kept a book of Sappho's poems beneath his pillow. From far across the Aegean, her melodic lyre lulled him to sleep.

Two souls in motion. On soles of silk  
She dreamed her way into his dreams.

*Admiration is the fire of love; you may burn me if you wish.*

Their sleepy assignations were oratories of reciprocal love. Sappho's vivid imagery, her vowel-laden verse permeated the rhetoric of the Lyceum. Ideas, hewn from a woman's mind. For what is a philosopher if not the emissary of a muse? Aristotle reoriented his soul, in the virtuous bower of an invisible poet. Gave his love to whom he knew would return it.

*Teach me your song that I may learn it and die.*

Upon soporific cantos, Sappho climbed into his mind and Aristotle climbed the sublime rungs of love. When in reverie he died, she came on winged horses to retrieve him. Slipping between the shadows and the satin sheets, she hoisted him on her shoulders carrying him to some arcane domain thousands of years away. What happened there, papyrologists have yet to discover.

## PASSCHENDAELE

This much I know. That first, there was a village, then, there was no village.  
There was a woman, now there is none.  
I close my eyes with a finale of long shadows wrought by the sinking sun.  
I am haunted by men.

My body is a bitter earth, a garden of remembered dead. Pockmarked  
With cavities, violently shelled-out by omnipotent men  
who poured their fury all over me. Who were all Hun to me.  
I lie on my back looking up at the unfailing sky. It has not changed  
in one hundred years. It is the same late summer sky beneath which  
my verdant skin was scarred by rancour and shrapnel,  
a forced smile slashed across the churned-up ground  
of my beautiful face. My defiant tears that fell  
from heavy-laden clouds above the village, that sprung  
from the deep trenches of my veins, submerged those men  
and their munitions into glutinous mud. They did not withdraw.  
They burrowed in like leeches, suffocating and expiring right there,  
cradled in the low ground of my arms, subdued by the throbbing army.  
By my ears the bullets whistled. The shouting shells and smoke of war  
hid the glow of my blossoming roses. My thighs gashed and riven  
by their heaving gun carriages. I lay there, an open-jawed cadaver  
entangled in the silent barbs of the death wire, my soft breasts  
ravaged by contorted metal, the landscape of my room ransacked  
and strewn with spent munitions; detritus of a brutal incursion.  
I closed my eyes, let the sodden earth devour me.  
Like a flotilla of charred masts, a silent vista of defoliated trees rose up  
from the fetid mire. Everywhere corpses; corpses in the copses of my shell-holed mind,  
wet-bodied men drowning in the flooded craters. From above,  
the great hand of providence seeded corpses between the folds of my furrowed womb.  
They festered there. Gestated. I deliver their putrid carcasses each spring - stillborns  
resurfacing from the innards of the earth - the midwifery of nature, an aide-memoire to shame.  
Those omnipotent figures loom large above my grave.  
They weep not for me. A confessional of remembrance absolves them of sin,  
Those committers, free to commit again.  
War, someone would later say, does not decide who is right but who is left.  
And what is left soiling the scarred earth of Flanders?

This much I know. That first, there was a village, then, there was no village.  
There was a woman, now there is none.  
I close my eyes with a finale of long shadows wrought by the sinking sun.  
I am haunted by men.

## AFTER BRANDENBURG

Autumn came threshing through the window.  
A woman and a man strapped themselves in.  
Their whole past lying in front of them.  
The blade of the plough churning up that dark  
soil. Words falling like leaves, then  
unbearably ripe apples:

I

don't

love

you

came pounding into their laps. Two lovers  
sick from love who did not know what  
love was. Shivering like the fall's first couple  
at the thought of never loving each other  
again. The wind did their speaking for them;  
broke them up like clouds. Absorbed them  
into a tragedy. The woman stood at the door  
feeling the austerity of the stars. The man  
returned home and put the apple in a bowl.  
It sank quietly into the bottom of itself.  
The rest of the world continued its way.

## MOTHERHOOD

According to David Attenborough,  
the female Australian Crab Spider  
ensures the survival of her young  
by allowing them to suckle nourishing juices  
from her leg joints.  
Sucking her dry.  
Until she dies.

## Interview with Tracy Gaughan

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**Clara Burghelea:** You write both fiction and poetry. How do you negotiate the two writing roles?

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Truthfully, I never know what I'm going to write until something possesses me. A line, a thought or a feeling might come in the shape of a poem, or sometimes, a character might pop up and say: 'Hello. I have something to say'; then I know I have a longer narrative on my hands. I began my writing life as a poet and wrote my first fiction piece only a few years ago. Overtime though, I've found going beyond the confines of a poem quite liberating. Poetry improves your ability to conceptualise the world and on a formal level, teaches economy of language. However, writing in long form prose allows you to inhabit language in diverse ways, providing opportunities for expression and articulation of meaning that differ entirely from poetry. My poetic impulses drive my prose and vice versa. So, I suppose I'm more comfortable identifying simply as a writer and I move between genres depending on mood and subject matter. 'Be plural like the universe!'. That's what Pessoa said.

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A poem is like a garden in a sense, there is always work to be done and it may take some time to mature, but just how much landscaping are you prepared to do? Writing poetry is hard. Some poems work but most do not. You must just keep going, changing tone or mood, intensifying metaphor etc. Writing is a solitary occupation so sometimes feedback can be invaluable, and I often run a poem by my writer's group or ask my sister Evie, who is also a writer, to cast an eye over something I'm working on. I'm not sure that a poem is ever finished but as a rule, if it's no longer keeping me awake at night then I'm happy enough to let it go out. Not always in hat and tails but definitely with its shirt tucked in!

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**Clara Burghilea:** What are your future projects?

**Tracy Gaughan:**

I fulfilled a dream recently when I returned to university to complete a master's program in International Contemporary Literatures and Media. That experience gave me the confidence to pursue other long held dreams and ambitions. In terms of writing, it has always been an aspiration to publish a book of poetry, so my goal right now is to put together a collection of poems for this purpose. I have similar hopes for my short-stories and now that I think of it, it's been almost two years since I put the first chapter of my novel into a cupboard and walked away. It would be a challenge but an awesome project to get stuck into this year. I'm motivated to return to *WestWords* with a fresh perspective now also. I'm always looking for new ways of making poetry a living presence in people's everyday lives, so I would love to take it out of the studio and develop it into a kind of pop-up situation with live music and performance poetry. My home city, Galway, will be the European Capital of Culture in 2020, so I'm hoping there will be lots of opportunities to take poetry and literature to the community in these novel ways!

**Clara Burghilea:** What advice would you offer to an emerging/aspiring poet?

**Tracy Gaughan:**

I think you develop your own praxes as a writer, but if you wish to progress from being an occasional poet to a professional one, that is, adopting a professional attitude, then you need to give yourself every chance to develop. I would suggest reading good books and reading widely. This will help you find your own unique style and voice. Try not to compare yourself to other writers – we all have our own unique perspective. Write regularly, both mentally and physically. This involves planning a routine that works for you. Early mornings, evenings, whatever it is, stick to it and protect it from other people and things that might be vying for your attention. Revision is also important. It separates the amateurs from the professionals. Spend more time alone with yourself. Be quiet and concentrate – let the inner voice become audible, as Wendell Berry would say. Walk. Mindfully, I mean. Notice the snail, the hedge, the sparrow – there is magic in everything. The mind wanders with the body, it produces thoughts. Some of my best ideas and ways of structuring them come while walking. Develop confidence, trust yourself and value your work. Also, try not to operate in a vacuum. Writer’s groups are not for everyone, but valuable to dip into every now and again. The right one can offer opportunities for good feedback and criticism and you find out what your contemporaries are doing. If you’re fortunate, you may even make new friends. Most of all, poetry is an apprenticeship, so be patient with yourself. Persevere. You can do it!

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**Clara Burghilea:** What are your future projects?

**Tracy Gaughan:**

I fulfilled a dream recently when I returned to university to complete a master's program in International Contemporary Literatures and Media. That experience gave me the confidence to pursue other long held dreams and ambitions. In terms of writing, it has always been an aspiration to publish a book of poetry, so my goal right now is to put together a collection of poems for this purpose. I have similar hopes for my short-stories and now that I think of it, it's been almost two years since I put the first chapter of my novel into a cupboard and walked away. It would be a challenge but an awesome project to get stuck into this year. I'm motivated to return to *WestWords* with a fresh perspective now also. I'm always looking for new ways of making poetry a living presence in people's everyday lives, so I would love to take it out of the studio and develop it into a kind of pop-up situation with live music and performance poetry. My home city, Galway, will be the European Capital of Culture in 2020, so I'm hoping there will be lots of opportunities to take poetry and literature to the community in these novel ways!

**Clara Burghilea:** What advice would you offer to an emerging/aspiring poet?

**Tracy Gaughan:**

I think you develop your own praxes as a writer, but if you wish to progress from being an occasional poet to a professional one, that is, adopting a professional attitude, then you need to give yourself every chance to develop. I would suggest reading good books and reading widely. This will help you find your own unique style and voice. Try not to compare yourself to other writers – we all have our own unique perspective. Write regularly, both mentally and physically. This involves planning a routine that works for you. Early mornings, evenings, whatever it is, stick to it and protect it from other people and things that might be vying for your attention. Revision is also important. It separates the amateurs from the professionals. Spend more time alone with yourself. Be quiet and concentrate – let the inner voice become audible, as Wendell Berry would say. Walk. Mindfully, I mean. Notice the snail, the hedge, the sparrow – there is magic in everything. The mind wanders with the body, it produces thoughts. Some of my best ideas and ways of structuring them come while walking. Develop confidence, trust yourself and value your work. Also, try not to operate in a vacuum. Writer's groups are not for everyone, but valuable to dip into every now and again. The right one can offer opportunities for good feedback and criticism and you find out what your contemporaries are doing. If you're fortunate, you may even make new friends. Most of all, poetry is an apprenticeship, so be patient with yourself. Persevere. You can do it!

## Bill Cushing

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Bill Cushing lived in various states, the Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico before moving to California. As an undergrad, he was called the “blue collar” poet by classmates at the University of Central Florida because of his years in the Navy and later as an electrician on oil tankers, fishing boats, and other naval vessels before returning to college at 37. Earning an MFA in writing from Goddard College in Vermont, he now teaches at East Los Angeles and Mt. San Antonio colleges.

Bill has been published in various literary journals, magazines, and newspapers, including The San Juan Star and the Florida Times-Union. His short stories have appeared in Borfski Press, Newtown Literary Journal and Sediments. Bill’s poetry has been in numerous journals, both in print and online, including Avocet, Brownstone Review, Glomag, Mayo Review, Penumbra, Poetry Nook, Spectrum, The Song Is. . . , and West Trade Review. He had poems (one a Pushcart Prize nominee) in both volumes of the award-winning Stories of Music. In 2017, Bill was named as one of the Top Ten Poets of L.A., and this year Spectrum Publishing named him as one of the “ten poets to watch” in Los Angeles.

When not teaching or writing, Bill facilitates a writing workshop in Eagle Rock, California (part of the 9 Bridges Writing Community). He also performs with a musician in a project called “Notes and Letters,” a project that is available online through both Facebook and youtube. He is now in the pre-publication stages for a full-length volume of poems with Finishing Line Press, scheduled for release in mid-2019. That book is tentatively titled A Former Life

### MARY, COLIN, AND ME

The moon hangs suspended  
balanced between three stars  
this autumnal February evening.

He’s Libra, balanced; you, I,  
Pisces—water signs:  
tonight a lunar Trinity.

And I’m thinking of him  
and you, and his eyes—  
your eyes when you allow,

And I think how when  
I hold him, I hold a part  
of you, and sometimes

that’s enough.

## AT PETE'S HUT

Cue balls scatter,  
clicking through the Marlboro haze  
thick enough  
to choke a horse.  
He wheels around, bearlike hand  
gripping the edge  
of fading felt.  
He stops, says,  
"Let's put that puppy right there."  
Then, aiming from  
an otherwise  
awkward angle,  
slaps a clean crosstable shot into  
the side pocket.

Three girls, sitting  
on a bench, watch  
as the winning continues.  
He is handsome:  
Broad shoulders, a square  
face, framed by  
a dark beard, breaking into wide smiles.  
And were it not  
for the broken  
lower half  
of his body,  
he might have left the place that night  
and gone home  
with any one of them—  
or all three.

## **CROSSING A ROPE BRIDGE**

Coaxing myself to place a foot on  
that hesitant first step  
of the crossing, a journey with outcome  
neither known nor guaranteed.

Isolation is a very shaky place  
where circles of behavior echo  
or resolve into a hydra or, worse,  
demons of solitude.

Stopping on this wobbly avenue,  
my feet feel vibrations deep in their soles,  
making me wonder: Where is the tipping point?

Peeking down to see a drop deeper  
than that uncertain climb  
to the other side, to the safe haven  
of the forest veiled in mist.  
Then vertigo, fear of failure, overwhelms  
so that retreating into the numb  
appears an easier alternative  
to taming the dragon.

## GETTING OLD IS

Getting old: it is indeed  
“the passing of an era.”

After all, the last munchkin  
has died, and while I sit, stuck

in neutral at a traffic  
light, an emaciated

Santa stands at the curb where  
Concourse crosses Olympic,

eyeing the entrance to the  
free soup kitchen in the church

across the street as he plays  
his own version of Frogger,

avoiding a pickup piled high  
with aging washing machines

and weathered desks trapped behind  
wooden slats while two modern

*hausfraus* traverse the crosswalk,  
each gliding in Stepford *chic*

to the beat of the light’s pulse.  
I wonder of the drifter:

Does he take the exact same  
route daily, a commuter

of his own sort? Inhaling  
the smoke of the cigarette

he bummed earlier, his face  
wrapped in a walrus moustache,

all his belongings hang, bagged  
at his side—almost a part

of him, clutched by shaking hands  
mottled and tobacco brown,

this traveler—this vagrant  
wreckage, this canary in our

coal mine—signifying the times  
we find ourselves dying in.

## TWO STAIRWAYS

The first greets those who promenade  
through the foyer to a sunken

living room; its steps—wide with  
carpeted tread—ease beneath gilded panels

lined with portraits of staid patriarchs  
long dead. Bright red lips brush fair cheeks,

*besitos de cultura alto,*  
as these elegant guests parade

through the living room past a massive  
dining table and walls affixed

with innocuous ceramic buttons,  
doorbell fixtures to summon the help

from the kitchen hiding a second staircase:  
steep, jagged, and above all concrete.

Servants—rough hands wrapped in skin darker  
than the mahogany furniture

they rub to a high shine—trudge between  
floors  
carrying the weight of meals, loads of laundry,

flutes of lemon water, and whispered curses,  
triggered by constant buzzing commands.

Meanwhile, quiet worms of hate burrow, deep  
yet imperceptible, into their hearts.

## Emma Lee Speaks to Bill Cushing

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**EL: How did you start writing and what drew you to poetry?**

BC: Because I was a withdrawn child because of an overwhelming father, writing allowed me a release free of judgment. Poetry itself came unexpectedly. As a returning student, I attended a journalism conference called “Improving Your Writing,” actually a short lecture. The woman conducting the seminar told attendees, “If you want to get better at writing anything—reporting, commentary, whatever—write poetry.” Once I began, journalism never held the same interest. Poems became my vehicle for interpreting and presenting the world I perceived. It was one happy accident.

**EL: You say you were described as a blue collar poet when you were an undergraduate, would you say this described your work? Have you found the label limiting or an advantage?**

BC: I wear that moniker with pride. After high school, I entered the Navy. I continued working as a marine electrician over the next 15 years, with time mixed in as a bartender, cabbie, truck driver, or salesperson. They say “write what you know,” and my experiences—as rough and crude as they were—provided great material along with a broader view of the world.

**EL: Your collection *A Former Life* was reviewed in *The Blue Nib* and included a couple of poems inspired by Miles Davis. Is music a big influence?**

BC: I always loved music, especially classical. In fact, my “Bydlo” piece in the book comes from *Pictures at an Exhibition*, perhaps the most visually impressionistic piece ever. In high school, I went to a concert at Madison Square Garden, and Miles was the warm-up act. His sound completely captured me, and I was hooked on jazz. I even have a recent chapbook (*Music Speaks*) dedicated to music and its influences, and my jazz pieces dominate the material.

**EL: How did the collaboration *Notes and Letters* come about?**

BC: That resulted from a 45-year path Chuck and I took. We grew up across the street from each other in New York City’s Queensborough. I left town in 1970, first for the Navy and later for work, but in 2015, I learned we were both in Los Angeles. I invited him to a reading for *Stories of Music* since I noticed he had majored in music. Reuniting after 45 years, he said what inspired him to study music were memories of a fairly basic, mostly mediocre band I was in that played at parties

around town. I was flattered but thankful he never came to me for any lessons. Before parting that evening, Chuck suggested that we collaborate, so our current stage activities were born.

**EL: Do you have a writing routine?**

BC: Not really: I write when I can and where I'm able. This is partly because I focus on my teaching, giving my profession priority, which doesn't afford many opportunities for a definitive schedule. Once I retire, which is coming up, I'll have more time. Of course that's no guarantee that I'll stick to any routine. After all, I also have a disabled son to look after, and I devote as much time as I can to him.

**EL: How do you go about editing/reviewing a poem?**

BC: To quote a painter I knew: "I know what's right. I want to know what's wrong." Phillip Levine's credo is that poetry both "oral" and "aural," so I revise largely by reading my material aloud but also believe the best means of working toward one's goals are writing groups. Belonging to such communities prove integral to improving the work. I seek feedback from other writers before sending things off. That option also allows me to hear how others might read my work since I often ask someone to recite my work.

**EL: What poets have influenced you?**

BC: The poets I most admire include Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Sharon Olds, and Levine although I don't see my writing bearing similarities to theirs. I'm usually influenced by whatever I'm reading at the moment, which may make things confusing but also, hopefully, interesting.

**EL: What projects are you working on right now?**

BC: Lately I'm writing within more "traditional" poetic formats: odes, madrigals, so forth. By forcing myself within the boundaries of those structures, I'm trying to use language with greater effect and precision. Another device I've taken to is ekphrasis, writing work inspired by visual images. It's been fun, and I've even constructed a chapbook (*This Just In*) built around those poems.

**EL: What are you currently reading?**

BC: I've been reading Umberto Eco's *Memoirs of a Young Novelist*, mostly because I admire his analysis on language and meaning.

**EL: Is there any writing advice or tips you'd like to pass on?**

BC: Two great views of writing are first, "write without fear; edit without mercy." Related to that is my mantra that the key to writing is rewriting.

**EL: What's next for Bill Cushing?**

BC: Once I retire, I plan to return to my MFA creative thesis, a memoir focused on my late wife and, in particular, dealing with terminal illness. That work is named *Counting Down the Breaths*, and I'm trying to pare it down to a publishable state.

**EL: What question would you have liked to have had?**

BC: The question I love to answer. . . "How does one define poetry?" I'm not talking about its philosophical or spiritual meaning but its denotative meaning. It's fun because, it seems, if one gathered ten poets to ask that, it would probably produce at least 18 different answers. First, I explored others' writings: Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, and Khalil Gibran. Edith Sitwell called poetry "the deification of reality:" interesting viewpoints, but the superlative definition came at the most unlikely moment from a most unlikely source, while sharing a train ride with a Canadian poet. When I brought up the question of "what's poetry" to check his response, he said—simply and without hesitation, "Poetry is the history of the human soul."

That answer works literally *and* literarily. Recall that the Greeks used the poetic form to record events since rhyme and meter allowed for reliable retellings with no required literacy. As one subscribing to the critical theory of New Historicism, the statement also satisfied my belief that writing is more than a reflection of the writer; it reflects the writer's existence, events, or circumstances. His eight-word definition expanded my view and perception of the genre, allowing me to take a giant step in my approach to both reading poems and crafting my own work.

Thus, "poetry is the history of the human soul." Amen.

## Featured Poet, Helen Moore

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Helen Moore is an award-winning British ecopoet and socially engaged artist currently based in Sydney. She has published three poetry collections, *Hedge Fund, And Other Living Margins* (Shearsman Books, 2012), *ECOZOA* (Permanent Publications, 2015), acclaimed by the Australian poet John Kinsella as “a milestone in the journey of ecopoetics”, and in 2019, *The Mother Country* (Awen Publications), exploring British colonial history and themes of personal, social and ecological dispossession. In 2018 Helen gave the annual INSPIRE lecture at the Hay Book Festival, based on her award-winning essay ‘Is love the answer?’

### SONOGRAM, SPARROWS

In industrial zones (where air’s undermined  
by burning coal), sonograms of Sparrows show  
heavy metals morph their song, call the tune.

With quicksilvered brains, birds lose  
vocal ranges, complex sibilant trills –  
sound more mechanical, deeper machine.

\*

Centre of town, the yard of our home  
orchestrates more life than when we first arrived.  
Filled with nuts & seeds, swinging beacons attract  
Sparrows – their scruffy nests in the climbing Hydrangea.

Like skittish Mice they haven up inside  
this latticed cavern, safe behind its whispering skin  
through which comes dancing light  
in fragments, as if from disco balls.

Popping out amongst its broad, leathery leaves  
& creamy flowers, our Sparrows grasp  
wax-green tentacles as they flirt & cheep,  
primed to sense the subtlest threat.

From an upstairs window, I watch  
a fawn-coloured sentinel, her rotating, tipping head,  
her shrillness, which alerts the rest,  
prompts rapid spurts of flight.

These feathered dendrites of the Earth’s  
nervous system provoke thoughts of how

we need to heal. Frequently as kids  
our sensitivities were critiqued –

*'Only the tough succeed in this world!'*

For though our human brain has half as many neurons  
as the Milky Way has stars, the overriding  
of our bodies' signs is routinely endorsed.

\*

Recently a friend described  
his latest job in health & safety  
on a car factory floor.

The macho hustle of the plant, the grinding steel  
& artificial light, the repetitious clap & shriek  
of numerous machines all fray his nerves.

Persisting for his rent, this man grows ill –  
yet each time he recovers & returns,  
symptoms flock into his body, come home to roost.

## HONEY PUMP GHAZAL

*After Joseph Beuys & Bee United! Malls Mire Community Wood, Glasgow*

In all directions there is flowing honey –  
& here in the wood, community is bonding with honey.

Listen! Nettle minarets are rising from Winter's muddy wreckage  
as small, feathered muezzins call prayers sweeter than honey.

From scrubby Hawthorns green scriptures are unfolding,  
& over them jaws of browsing Deer move smoothly as honey.

Where Urban Roots have set up hives, worker Bees return  
with dusty yellow legs & stomachs full of honey.

As on many Glasgow days, Sun and rain come and go –  
the steamy warmth like Bees fanning water from honey.

Once the wild boys of Govanhill, Amir, Kamal, Sajid volunteer  
to raise marquees, while laughter spreads like honey.

Dressed in a furry black & yellow suit, young Abdullah clowns  
with childish puns – raw Weegie humour ripening like honey.

Through the trees children's carefree leaping over logs  
is a supple rise & fall like the yearly cycle of honey.

Around the wood, people forage fresh, tender edibles  
as kids pick up litter – a give-back that's savoured like honey.

My hand-carved spoon is by turns in every child's hand –  
mixing wild herb pakora like the hive making honey.

Gathered in a circle, neighbours of faith & none are stirred  
by the spell of *Qur'an* – Madinah's recitation potent as honey.

Expectant faces round the fire, & the healing power of honey  
an ecopoet admires. In all directions we are one with honey.

## RETIRED BOOTS IN SPRING

*For RHLM*

Boots you got me long ago will soon be sprouting blooms –  
a pale pirouette of Crocuses, I think.

Late January, day nudging night into retreat, soft leaves  
of Woodbine unbudding;

& where collars hugged my ankles, pale-green periscopes  
now probe a foot of mulch.

Eyelets still stand proud on each, a pair of wobbly, brass ‘V’s;  
but with laces gone, uppers cracked,

tongues darkly misshapen (like those of butchered Cattle),  
what ways to honour foot-service

of more than twenty years, or creatures killed for meat  
& for their skins?

Bundles of nerve-endings in both, these sorry, ticklish feet  
went far so well enclosed –

high on Blencathra’s saddle in fierce winds, hailstones & Sun  
they knew Skiddaw’s folds & peaks,

expansive snowy fells, the long, blue knives of shadow.  
Often as we climbed, I’d fail to match

your stamina & stride, while struggling in those elements  
I needed ground beneath my steps –

so this walking meditation, adapted from a line in *Psalms*:  
*To the hills I go from whence cometh my strength.*

Evenings our boots would rest stuffed with yellow news  
side-by-side beneath the aga. Then smearing them

with dubbin, your vigorous brush  
assured their supple toughness.

Now only bulbs restore the spring to these retired boots,  
while Crocus ballet will express all my love & thanks.

## Denise O'Hagan speaks to Helen Moore

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**Denise:** When did you start writing, and what first drew you to poetry?

**Helen:** Poetry began early in my life, even as I was learning to talk, through my enthusiasm for creating streams of sing-song nonsensical rhyme. This no doubt grew out of an awareness of language and poetry in the family, and my grandmother often recited poems she'd learnt by heart. At primary school my teacher, the aptly named Mrs Friend encouraged my poems and accompanying drawings and, at the age of 11, I was awarded second place in a national short story competition for young people. I won £100, which of course was a big deal at such a young age, and attended a fancy award event in London. Nevertheless parental expectation was that I should pursue a more 'respectable' career, which would offer me financial security. I resisted this pressure, studying literature and languages at university, and at the tender age of 20 decided to be a writer. Throughout my twenties I was quite focused on prose and it was only in my early 30s that I came to understand that my preferred mode was poetry. I like the compression and craft involved, and as my interests range widely, I found I could shift my focus through writing different poems. Also I could fit poetry around paid work and community activism, both of which absorbed a lot of my time.

**Denise:** You define yourself as an ecopoet – and thus a representative of a relatively new genre of poetry. How would you define ecopoetry?

**Helen:** I define it as poetry written with the consciousness of our interdependence with all beings – and not just the so-called charismatic megafauna, I mean Flies, Slugs and Earthworms too! I follow William Blake's sense that everything that lives is holy, and for that reason I want raise all other-than-human beings from the margins to which much of contemporary Western culture has relegated them. Ecopoetry is also written from a deep sense of the particularities of place, and awareness of the ecological crisis we face. It's an evolving practice, although I've found it helpful to identify and explore four major themes in my own work. These are: (re)connection with Nature – celebrating beauty, diversity and the miracle of Life; witnessing social injustice and ecocide, which are of course intertwined; resistance, speaking truth to power; and (re)visioning Earth-centric ways of living and being. The latter is based on rewilding and regenerating, and advocating for a future Ecozoic Era, where we live in harmony with the Earth as our community. Each theme is a portal through which ecopoetry can be developed, although of course they're all intertwined.

**Denise:** Is there one particular aspect of ecopoetry to which you find yourself returning?

**Helen:** Witnessing ecocide and learning to feel and express grief are practices to which I regularly

return, as the desecration of our planet is on such a vast scale. I don't want to numb my responses, yet at the same time I need to sustain my psycho-emotional health, and so ways to express and move through grief towards action are important. In recent years I've also become conscious of the need for decolonising in this work (i.e. becoming aware of colonial legacies and the intersection of social and ecological injustice issues), and this was an aspect of my most recent book, *The Mother Country*. At the moment I'm engaged with connecting to an expanded sense of 'home', particularly body and planet. Also on a more personal level, having recently left the UK and the deep familiarity I have with Nature and place there, I'm opening myself to a sense of Australia, and more locally Sydney, as home. And yet the climate crisis is biting deeply in this continent, with increased drought and bushfires, escalating temperatures. Living with the consciousness that our collective home is in great peril, and that the future is deeply uncertain, provides me with an opportunity to be more present in the here and now, and to develop and express a stronger heart-mind connection with myself and all beings.

**Denise:** What, or who, is your main inspiration behind writing?

**Helen:** The miracle of Earth-life. Here we are living in (yes, in!) this extraordinary 4.6 billion year-old self-regulating super-organism to which I sometimes refer as Gaia, after James Lovelock (and Ancient Greek mythology), and which has evolved to support a dazzling array of life-forms. This awareness I find to be a constant source of inspiration! I'm also deeply inspired by the notion that we can choose to become cells in Gaia's immune system, rising in defense of Life. And regardless of whether or not we'll ultimately be successful, taking action is our best way to stay sane and to give more positive outcomes our best shot. I remember years ago an established (white, male) poet telling me in a workshop that 'There's nothing new to write about Nature', that all the poets of the past had already written everything that could possibly be said. I believe I've spent the last 15 years proving him wrong!

**Denise:** Which other poets have exerted the most influence over you?

**Helen:** The American Beat Poets, in particular Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder. Opening the collected works of Ginsberg in the early nineties blew me away, put me in touch with the radical edges that poetry could embrace. And Snyder's ecopoetry has been a guiding light for many years. I'm a massive fan of his world-view, the perennial wisdom shaping his poetry, and regularly return to drink from the source through books such as *Earth House Hold* (1969) and *The Real Work: Interviews & Talks 1964-1979*. And there are many other poets from whom I've imbibed deeply too, including Rumi, Blake, Rilke, Shelley, Neruda, Yeats, Patrick Kavanagh, Francis Ponge, Kathleen Raine, Robert Bly, Denise Levertov, Carolyn Forché, Heathcote Williams and Alice Oswald. Niall McDevitt, a London-based Dublin poet, whom I knew personally for some years, was

a great influence when I'd just found my voice, and I'm grateful for his encouragement to take my poetry seriously. I admired how edgily political his own work can be and our connection influenced my first collection, *Hedge Fund and Other Living Margins*, which came out in 2012. I also want to honour my friend, the late Jay Ramsay, a British poet and psychotherapist, who championed the need for spiritual vision in contemporary poetry. He co-edited (with Andrew Harvey) *Diamond Cutters: Visionary Poets in America, Britain and Oceania*, an anthology which came out in 2016 and includes a couple of my poems.

**Denise:** When you've finished writing a poem, what is your editing and reviewing process?

**Helen:** My process is organic and unique to every poem, as of course every poem's unique! Some poems come out quite well-formed and need only a few further tweaks, but others can take months, even years to fully complete. Putting work away for a while always helps, so that when I review it there's distance, fresh eyes. I always read my work aloud to hear how it sounds, and like to share new poems with poet-friends, whose opinions I trust. Obviously, there's the process of sending work out to journals etc., and this can provide an opportunity for further editing and refining – there's nothing like the prospect of an editor's eye to help raise the bar! But even after a poem's been published, it may still undergo revision. Bringing out a collection of poems provides the final opportunity to get them right, and with my most recent collection I was grateful for a fruitful exchange with my editor and publisher, Anthony Nanson of Awen Publications, a fine writer himself.

**Denise:** Do you have a particular writing routine? How do you balance work and personal time?

**Helen:** Again this is quite organic, and flows around what else is going on in my life, although I'm quite self-disciplined at carving out regular time for work. I'm not a highly prolific writer, and have never been a workaholic; I know the importance of time for self-care, and have daily practices of yoga and meditation. I also attend weekly dance classes; plus I enjoy gardening, walking, cycling and swimming. Friends and community are highly important to me, so time to connect is essential, along with regularly giving back to the Earth – at the moment through regular conservation work/ bushcare in the Canada Bay area of Sydney, which simultaneously nurtures and inspires me.

**Denise:** What books are you currently reading?

**Helen:** I've just reviewed Naomi Foyle's new collection *Adamantine*, so its powerful energy is still with me, and next I'm excited to write about Anne Casey's *out of emptied cups*, which is one of the most soulful poetry collections I've encountered in a long while. Plus I've just begun reading Anne Elvey's beautiful new collection, *on arrivals of breath*, from which I literally just heard her read when she launched it here in Sydney. So lots of wonderful women poets at the moment! Plus I'm dipping into *The Sufi Book of Life* by Neil Douglas-Klotz a lot just now; and slowly working through Clive James' translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. There are always various threads to my reading, which is most often poetry and non-fiction – with the latter I'm regularly consulting various ID guides to Australian flora at the moment, also books about wild foods/bush tucker, including *The Oldest Foods on Earth* by John Newton, a fascinating book.

**Denise:** You've published three poetry books, as well as numerous essays and short stories, and are a regular speaker at literary events. What effect does this engagement have on your creativity?

**Helen:** Generally I find this engagement stimulating – I remember coming out of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment conference at Sheffield-Hallam University in 2017 quite literally buzzing – the high I felt at delivering a seminar and poetry reading there was intense, and it was several hours before I began to feel grounded again! Recently I toured the UK with my new book, taking three months to travel between Scotland and England, with various launches, conferences and writing retreats along the way. This took a toll on my creativity, partly just being on the road for so long, but it was also a very special experience, something I'd always dreamed of doing – and there were some epic train journeys on which I did get some new writing done. The personal aspect of *The Mother Country* meant that sometimes it felt hard to find the strength to read to my audiences, as some of the poems involve quite a baring of the soul. However, I believe it's so important to share our vulnerability as writers. It's only through reading and hearing about the inner world of others that we understand our shared humanity, and become more connected with the vast sea of experience. In fact I was massively heartened by people's responses, particularly from the daughters of similarly difficult mothers, who thanked me for articulating experiences that resonated with their own lives. That's the greatest reward for a writer – seeing how our work has touched others' lives.

**Denise:** What role do you feel ecopoetry does, or should, play in our society?

**Helen:** At the moment there's so much denial in privileged Western societies about the ecological crisis we collectively face, and therefore such a need for poets to write and speak about what's going on. Also to help others come to terms with their grief; but also to help them see with new

eyes, to awake to the miracle of Life and to perceive a vision of how we can respond. This is what the American eco-theologian Thomas Berry calls 'The Great Work'.

**Denise:** Lastly, what advice would you offer to aspiring poets, eco- or otherwise, out there?

**Helen:** Don't get too caught up with what or how you perceive it's currently fashionable to write. Find your authentic voice. Be conscious of the degree of self-censure you bring to your writing (which aspects of yourself/life may feel taboo to explore/write about) and go fear-wards! Snyder says that as poets we must be willing to explore the darkest, scariest places inside ourselves. But this also needs to be balanced with cultivating and connecting with our heart-mind, our gratitude, our love. People are hungry for authentic, fully ensouled poetry!

## Featured Poet, Anthony Lawrence

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Anthony Lawrence has published fifteen books of poetry and a novel. His most recent collection 'Headwaters,' (Pitt Street Poetry, 2016) won the 2017 Prime Ministers Literary Awards (Poetry). He teaches Creative Writing at Griffith university and lives on Moreton Bay, Queensland.

### *Archery*

When the last ashes of my marriage had blown away  
I joined an archery club. I wasn't ready  
for the intimacy of dating scenes  
    like Asian cuisine or digital photography.  
    I liked the singular nature of target,  
bow, drawstring, arrow. Six months in  
I entered a competition. I loved taming my pulse  
with stopped breath, standing side-on, balanced  
    between repose and equipoise,  
    dispatching pointed lengths of light.  
I won a trophy and was invited to dinner.  
I laughed with my body, not just my face.  
Dinner led to breakfast by a lake. I liked him.  
    A friend said, cruelly,  
    that he was target practice.  
At the range he asked me to join him  
on a hunting trip. I declined. Disappointment  
was a dark blue glaze that passed over him.  
    When he persisted, I left the club.  
    When he phoned I didn't answer.  
When he knocked on my door, I froze.  
The day he approached me in the car park  
I saw him through the viewfinder of my stare,  
    my focus winged, withdrawn  
    and then, under pressure, released.  
When I reached him there were shadows  
like dried blood on his shirt. He said something  
the wind could not translate. When I opened  
    the car door he flinched visibly, as if  
    something feathered had flown past his face.

## *Welcome*

A pair of swallows  
fly out from under the iron gate  
like offcuts of shadow  
an onsite manager  
had swept aside with his yard broom.  
I say *Welcome* and turn  
to see who had spoken.

## *A Condensed History of Witchcraft*

First came the need to rhyme, because companion planting was never enough on its own. A flax seed pressed into soil in light from a just-risen moon became a brood parasite & a guarantee that seasonal abundance was forthcoming. Having bloodied her mouth with blackberry juice & a lie about intimacy, she made the eyes on moth wings open & close like passwords, then passed unnoticed by woodsmen into hickory smoke. Then came the planetary signs like stars burning out in threes & fours, & comets with tails of ice flying forever, & once or twice to be seen by those who say we are pinned to the planet yet released simultaneously. Spells of course, & how they were lived not invented, to be gifted or cast for healing in dactyls hooded as falconry. Flames feathered when shavings of iron were fed to them, or hallmarks were stamped into silver. Old age was a handbook on how to tell narcotic from edible narrowstem, like a bodice pulled in by a crisscross of lace, then unhooked by starfall. Hair when burned had the animal reek of closure. The word *extinction* was still glowing at the forge and the names of children were entered like charms into lined black ledgers to be summoned when memory falters then fails in fire & earth.

## *A Spell*

It wasn't the eye  
that grew inside  
another mouth  
he used for fun  
that opened in  
his neck it was  
the second heart  
that kept apace  
with everything  
he threw at it  
including spittle  
spells & dirt  
its chambers lit  
with cross-cut  
sections he had  
rigged with red  
& yellow bulbs  
to showcase how  
free radicals go  
around the hip  
machinery we  
are made from  
Here we go he  
liked to say be-  
fore the trap  
door in his head  
swung open to  
reveal the twin  
clocks he'd wind  
by walking slow  
he was a man  
for every scene  
where B-grade

love is made on  
ocean stones or  
single beds he  
cobbled together  
from petrol tins  
& orange crates  
his second heart  
was famous for  
the sound it made  
when he was with-  
in singing range  
of domestic birds  
with liner notes  
for mating calls  
it made a series  
of quips & over-  
exaggerated trills  
when he'd stand  
astride the pool  
he consulted for  
morning rituals  
the eye inside  
the mouth his neck  
revealed until  
two hearts were  
keeping time  
with birds he loved  
to feed & name  
a beating wing  
a clockwork heart  
a dovetailed box  
for a brain.

## *Chickens*

As chickens seem to love the sound of rain on the tin roof of their shed, they are also drawn to the embering glow of a flower I drip-fed with tonic water, the quinine in its veins appearing as blue in the black light I wired to a branch in the garden where the Gold Laced Wyandotte, a breed with plumage like tiny amber flames outlined in charcoal congregate as if in homage to the flower's thin pool of light, and when it rains, they scuff and shuffle away to their shed, leaving one luminous moment for another.

## Denise O'Hagan speaks to Featured Poet Anthony Lawrence

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**Denise:**

When did you start writing, and what first drew you to poetry?

**Anthony:**

Poetry found me when I was very young. Perhaps six or seven. I am the beneficiary of amnesia, so I can't recall the finer details of where or when or how I came to write poems. I'm sure my maternal grandmother's readings, at bed time, when I stayed with (them) during my father's illness, had something to do with it. The book was called *Come Hither*, and one of the poems was 'The Highwayman' by Alfred Noyes. We can never underestimate the power of iambic pentameter when it comes to rhythm, imagery, and remembering. My mother has kept everything I wrote, over the years. There are shoeboxes full of envelopes, bits of cardboard, newspaper and even a cash register docket tape with poetry written all over them. Even then I understood that poetry doesn't wait around for the right medium. It needs to be captured and recorded immediately.

**Denise:**

Is there one particular subject or theme to which you find yourself returning?

**Anthony:**

I'm more concerned with the natural world in all its variousness than life in the routine world of human community. There's no escaping that, of course. A love poem can't always have its foundations in wooded terrain. I write a lot about the connection between landscape and human intervention. Frank O'Hara wrote that he couldn't enjoy a blade of grass unless there was a freeway close by. I can't enjoy suburban living unless I'm able to leave and be near the ocean or open farmland without having to drive all day. I'm interested in how a scene changes once someone enters it. This applies to protests against the growing number of endangered species due to habitat degradation to seeing a flock of short-billed corellas in a paddock. Once you enter that space, it changes rapidly from observation to interaction. The birds leave. There's a Michael Donaghy poem in which birds suddenly take to the air. It's not explained. You know that people have been shot, in a forest, during the war.

**Denise:**

What, or who, is your main inspiration behind writing?

**Anthony:**

For years I struggled with starting poems and maintaining the intense inner attention to see them through. About four years ago something changed. I think it began the day I made a conscious decision to write a sequence of poems based on the first thing that came to mind. It was a word: 'button.' I made a list of rules for composition:

- \* The poem could be no longer than an A4 page.
- \* The word button had to appear in the poem, but not as a central, driving motif.
- \* Association and peripheral vision were to be a priority.

I do believe that giving myself this odd task with its rules and guidelines unlocked me. I wrote a book based on this 'exercise.' It's called *Simple Things*, and it's due out in 2020.

### ***Buttons***

They taste worse than coins and were used in spells

as when my mother put a curse

on my *social engagements* with girls.

On a first date, stepping from the cinema, she failed

to negotiate the toggles on her coat

and was taken by the need

to perform public acts of intimacy, such as running

her fingers through the flickering neon of her hair.

I have a button with a wolf's head

set in pearl that I stole from a market in Wiltshire

famous for its car boot sales and cider.

I have tried wearing it like a brooch

or badge, but the wolf's ear rubbed my nipple raw.

When made into a ring, it gleamed on my finger

like a hallmark of melanoma.

Now I wear clothes cut from one piece of cloth

and the wolf has a paper-clip

holding its mouth together.

\*

For the last four years or so I have not been sidelined by a barren writing time. I was used to the Muse

taking off suddenly for some nameless parish and leaving me with no need or desire to write. I couldn't compose a shopping list. I've been working on poems, new and old, every day since I began that one-word exercise. It is, of course, a blessing and a curse. We complain if we're not able to write, and complain when we can't stop. It can be exhausting.

The poetic impulse is a fascinating thing. It might come (as it often does) from reading a line of poetry that lights the fuse. It might appear as an image during a walk - the particular way shadow falls over a stone wall. Here is how Derek Walcott began his poem 'Cul De Sac Valley':

A panel of sunrise  
on a hillside shop  
gave these stanzas  
their stilted shape.

Despite the frequency and variety of the impulses that summon me into the ineffable, there is one constant: it is always an emotional rather than critical response that drives me onward. It begins somewhere in the chest and spreads. So it becomes a physical response as well – blood flow, the pulse, the workings of the body to make and break the lines. It's all about rhythm.

Currently I'm co-writing a long sequence with the poet Audrey Molloy. It's an exciting project. We respond as lyrical interlocutors, finding magic and grace in each other's 'letters' and extending the work into unpredictable, often deeply surprising areas. It's a curious correspondence because we've never met. We have our love of language, and the wizardry of our combined imaginations to help us navigate the lines.

**Denise:**

Which poets have exerted the most influence over you?

**Anthony:**

It's a very long list. Here are some of the poets whose work has influenced how I read and write: WB Yeats, Paul Muldoon, Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, Richard Hugo, Philip Hodgins, Judith Beveridge, Les Murray, James Dickey, Derek Walcott, Lucie Brock-Broido, Sharon Olds, Don Paterson, Simon Armitage, Robert Lowell.

**Denise:**

When you've finished a poem, what is your editing and reviewing process?

**Anthony:**

I edit and revise as I write. I tend to treat each sentence as a poem, crafting it and teasing its imagery and rhythm into a form I'm happy with, before moving on. This means I almost never have any idea about where I'm going or what the poem means. The writing itself informs me of this. I can be well into a poem and still not know what I'm doing. It's never troubled me. There are architect poets who need a solid ground-plan from which to work, and there are those who walk out and

throw a handful of seeds at the earth and wait to see if any of them take. I'm more of an organic gardener who is into companion planting, in the dark, then tends to the growth of what's emerged until it's mature. Writing poetry is always an adventure. Finishing poems is always hard. You have to fight the urge to wrap things up neatly: drum roll, curtain down. Like many fine movies, sometimes an ending might seem wrong or inadequate because questions have been left unanswered, but what's not been solved or stated implicitly can linger, even burn, long after the final scene or stanza.

**Denise:**

Do you have a particular writing routine? How do you balance work and personal time?

**Anthony:**

I'm fortunate to have a job where reading and writing poetry are central to its list of responsibilities. I teach Creative Writing and Writing Poetry. I'm aware that many academics find the demands of teaching and research interfere or even wipe out their creative output, but that's never been an issue. After a day discussing and reading the poetry of Galway Kinnell, say, I'll come home lit-up with the need to get back to a poem. I came very late to academic work. It's a great job for a poet.

I write wherever and whenever the need takes me. It might be ten minutes in a cafe that will lead to a few hours later in the day. It might be an all-day session worrying and teasing a poem into shape.

**Denise:**

You've always been an avid reader. What are you currently reading?

**Anthony:**

Brigit Pegeen Kelly's *The Orchard*, Nick Laird's *Feel Free*, and Paul Muldoon's *Frolic and Detour*.

**Denise:**

How does the success of your publications and public accolades affect your creativity?

**Anthony:**

The effects on creativity can be seen in the number of poetry books I'm able to buy if I win an award, which is always good for the work. Reading feeds and nurtures everything to do with composition. Apart from that, nothing changes. I wrote in isolation for over ten years before my first book was published, and during that time I was only concerned with getting things right. It's still the case.

**Denise:**

As an experienced teacher of poetry, what role do you feel poetry does, or can, play in our society?

**Anthony:**

Reading and writing poetry can open us to the marvellous in the commonplace. It can help us see the world anew. I suggest that my students might like to leave their phones at home next time they

go for a walk. Unplugging the ears from a playlist and lifting the eyes from a Twitter feed can offer unexpected amazements. Recently I asked a tutorial group if anyone had stopped to watch a bird or pair of birds at work in a tree or on the ground. What species? Colouring? Environment? No one could discuss it. Poetry can be a potent platform for protest and political dissent. It can also be a wonderful vehicle for celebrating rites of passage. Memorising poetry is a kind of spell that works on our brains and bodies and reminds us of the power of written and spoken language.

**Denise:** Lastly, what advice would you offer to aspiring poets out there?

**Anthony:**

Read poetry. Buy books, ask for them for birthdays, Christmas, whatever reason or excuse you can come up with. Using a library is fine, but then you have to take the books back. Start your own library. Build on it. Carry a book of poems everywhere you go. Read constantly. It's the only way we get to move beyond competency to the possibility of a striking, original 'voice.'

*Thank you!*

# Poetry Selected by Denise O'Hagan

## Editorial

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Summer is fast approaching in Australia and New Zealand – the perfect time to sit back with a copy of Issue 40 and immerse ourselves in the magnificent offerings of, amongst others, over thirty talented Antipodean poets!

In selecting work for publication, I have once again been impressed by breadth and depth of expression, as well as style, with rhyming verse, prose poems, villanelle, triolet, and nonlinear poetry all represented. Combined, these poems weave a vibrant and varied tapestry; to read them is to be enriched as well as entertained.

Running through this body of work is a deep awareness of the threat of climate change and a call to us all to adjust the way we live. With the increasing reports of erratic weather patterns, including droughts and bushfires, and Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg's impassioned plea to world leaders to care for our Earth still ringing in our ears, it's no coincidence that many of our poets feel they have no option but to turn (in part) activists. Featured poet Helen Moore sets the tone with her delicately observed but unflinching ecopoetry – an ode to the natural world and a call for ecological responsibility in equal measure – as in this reflection on sparrows illustrates: *'these feathered dendrites of the Earth's/nervous system provoke thoughts of how/we need to heal'*. Jenny Blackford's sharp observations invite us to take a whole new approach to the animal world, as in the case of an egret with attitude: *'unrushed, skilful on its stilts,/the white-necked bird complied'*. Ivy Ireland elegantly dissects the natural world with lines such as *'by night he is/smooth black creek stones/worn to gloaming in moon/she is water eroding/a rock thick need to name mystery/eternal things whispering.'* Brenda Saunders also identifies intimately with nature, as her spare, chiselled lines demonstrate: *'I see a curlew ... Her reedy call ... wakes an ocean/inside me'*. Rob Shackne's exquisitely titled and very topical *'Elegy for a bee'* is precisely that, a sentiment echoed elsewhere, as in *'the bees said goodbye.'* Tony DeLorger pays graceful tribute to nature: *'shards of light ... search-light streams of wonder,/exploring each leaf, bark and fruit,/in a peaceful array, as life in diversity, reigns.'* Nadia Rhook's carefully calibrated comment about the sea at Broome resonates: *'the ocean's got something to say to us'*. The fresh voice of Chloe Marer, too, breaks down the separation of the human and its environment: *'you are there beneath it all/beneath the clouded visions and summer haze/the valley fog and the pouring rain.'* In a very different way, Paul Turley reminds us of the wondrous power of nature: *'The earth is so heavy/it can crush/weeds into diamonds'* and how Uluru, that *'huge desert stone'* is *'fire-red'* at the day's end.

Following on from this appreciation of the natural world is a need to rein in our self-indulgence on many levels. Sandra Renew's short but hard-hitting poem *'How dare you'* is, significantly, constructed entirely from extracts and paraphrases of Thunberg's speech to the UN. On a more personal level, Daragh Byrne draws a moral lesson from the purchase of a fridge: *'we're quickly bound for conflagration/Cast out of the garden, our consumption/Gone well past no return.'*

If the Earth is vulnerable, so are its inhabitants, and our poets take a hard look at what it means to be human, revealing our own inner frailties, as well as a wider social dislocation. Featured poet Anthony Lawrence meditates on the shadowy world of our vulnerability to each other, as in *'Disappointment/was a dark blue glaze that passed over him.'* Michelle Seminara's penetrating gaze into aspects of domesticity lets us know that all may not be quite as it seems: *'The coiled snake/of my father's anger/sleeps at the base of his spine'* or when questioning 'other mothers': *'I wonder ... if their masks itch and slip ... contain/the urge, the surge/of migratory flight.'* Ellen Shelley touches on solitude and fragmentation succinctly and movingly with lines such as *'that solitary thin figure peers down into loneliness'* or *'a rain streaked goodbye/what makes you see others.'* Moya Pacey delves, directly and powerfully, into the sometimes cruelty of humans to each other: *'Across the road, a baby boy called Peter burned in a Moses cradle. Growing up, he has a hook for a hand ... He chases me across the street ready to strike.'* Rosie Bogumil lucidly captures the weight of her inner world: *'thoughts are loud/louder than my voice will ever be.'*

In exploring how language may be employed to construct barriers between us, Peter Mitchell makes a stirring plea for inclusivity by highlighting the effect of its absence: *'We don't need you damn Cath-o-lics... Words leave their mark, a hovering menace, a triad of barbed letters.'* Lincoln Jaques also exposes, eloquently, the limits of language: *'To think, we danced like silverfish/gnawing at the white space/between words.'*

The sensitivity of poets is at times political, with David Atkinson's tackling the National School Walkout (New York, 2018) with poignant lines such as a youth's *'muffled words tentative into the megaphone/die as dust within the park'* and later, *'The pale orange-clad boy will feature,/sole survivor of the depravity of a February day.'* Siobhan Hodge plunges us into the uncertain world of looming typhoons, riot shields and immigration: *'There are no Hong Kong people. The Basic Law simplifies it all'* – and the dissonance between that and the *'polite coffee hallways/and sensible shoes'* at *'home'*. Christopher Kennedy's blunt statement, *'Forty-one Aboriginal children/were taken into custody/near the opal mines/of Lightning Ridge'* lets us infer the racism of the enforced removal of Aboriginal children from their families.

Another sort of separation is heartrendingly evoked in Brent Cantwell's gated community, *'when indifference has cooled you with a swim/when codeine has dreamt you a Goddess again.'* A very

modern social dislocation is evident in Bree Alexander's rhetorical musings '*... and do I miss home?/I really don't know/European stock/from stolen lands/ yet this unknown/the lost in translation/the discomfort/the un-learning/wistfully seeps/submerges my core.*' A light touch comes through in Rosa O'Kane's oblique reference to the challenge any emigrant will recognise: '*... and please return/to your seat fasten your heartstrings/decide where your home is/heart is.*'

Many poems also celebrate human relationships. Laura Jan Shore's frank and exuberant delight in love re-found cannot help but entrance us: '*our divorce had been a failure./Although love meant more paperwork, we volunteered for another round.*' Stephen House's depiction of a brief bonding in a shelter where the '*two men grip built fresh bonded/shake*' offers hope in unexpected circumstances. Philip Muir's whimsical conjuring up of the 'cacophony of life' where '*Lovers shuffle synchronised; instinctive, time-built skill/Vermin scurry casually through decay*' affords us a gently humorous perspective on society. Dylan Everett, too, in his embracing of non-linear poetic structures, achieves a dream-like sense, where part of his meaning is inherent in the flow of words, as in '*... songs from distance/broken down into silence/It stirs the void of stars/it marks the skin of borrowed angels.*'

Finally, our boundaries of time and space are also stretched in surprising ways. Ben Hession offers a tantalising hint that, on a planet far away, '*miracles are here, carefully stored in parts,/they're waiting for volunteers to assemble*'. Justin Lowe reaches back into the classical world and the mind of the great Roman historian Tacitus's slave, who feel moved to probe into the writing up of history and ask himself, '*what exactly are the Romans' plans for this shadow world?*' Susan Howard shines a gentle light into the place of Katherine Mansfield in New Zealand schooling, and an idiosyncratic teacher: '*I never go over to Eastbourne without remembering our English mistress at grammar school. She used to love reading Katherine Mansfield out loud ... tipping precariously back in her chair; crossed feet on the desk, relishing Kezia's attitude to life in her own peculiar way.*' In her 'origins of malice', Rose Lucas side-steps us into unusual and provocative territory – the role in the Sleeping Beauty/Briar Rose story of the evil fairy godmother, '*sucking on/envy like a jube/the one thing she hates the most is the visibility/of other people's happiness*', inviting myriad speculations on the presence of 'intolerable suffering' in this world, and indeed on the human condition itself.

To all the diverse and wonderful poets represented, thank you, and to everyone else, happy reading!

Denise

## Ben Hession

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### AND THEY'VE FOUND ICARUS...

wings outstretched at fate's final kick,  
drawn by the wet light of a simulacrum,  
a loosened parable of brightness, his  
in flesh and bone, but insect-like, he drifts

onwards, inviting a ripe kind of story,  
across the sun's stagnant waters  
that have captured aspiration, exuberance,  
its plumage – the waxing of youth,

his hot imago had carried him higher:  
something viral and febrile drowned him.  
'you only live once' someone shouted  
'fuck yeah' he answered, ascendant – restless.

his flotsam, an ellipsis on apathetic ripples,  
could smiles from old pictures breach this moment?  
his cadences might shuffle towards a lolling myth:  
he's not lost. no, not lost. look, here! the silly lad.

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**The Gist:** Ben Hession is a writer based in Wollongong, New South Wales. His poetry has been published in Eureka Street, the International Chinese Language Forum, the Cordite Poetry Review, Verity La, the Mascara Literary Review, Bluepepper, the Marrickville Pause and the Don Bank Live Poets anthology Can I Tell You A Secret? His poem, 'A Song of Numbers', was shortlisted for the 2013 Australian Poetry Science Poetry Prize. He has reviewed poetry for Verity La and the Mascara Literary Review. He is also a music journalist and is involved with community broadcasting.

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# Justin Lowe

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## The Forest

Tacitus gazes at the spluttering candle  
and then over at the limp arms of parchment  
dangling from the lectern

Tacitus can make shadows dance in the Teutoberg  
but he cannot make shapes on the parchment  
words vanish like the legions at the first cry of the curlew

Tacitus frowns at his slave and his slave splutters like the candle  
holds the quill poised at the ready  
he is like his master's failure carved in stone

Tacitus wonders whether he should send the man away  
he would like to spare himself this humiliation  
but the slave is a learned man who condescends rather than obeys

Tacitus likes this about the man  
this and his tendency toward candid appraisal  
of his master's account of distant events

he looks upon misfortune  
as the domain of others  
a foreign country

like the past

but he feels compelled to ask himself  
while he awaits his master's first word  
on the matter

what exactly are the Romans' plans for this shadow world  
and how vast do they imagine this world to be

because it seems that every time they venture out into it

that world grows like a man's mind

when he turns back to his maps and scrolls

after a long day in the fields

## Zbigniew

I chose this life  
it wasn't thrust upon me  
there have been enough conscript poets  
it is what the poor of spirit  
would call 'a luxury'  
all that others accrue I have jettisoned  
to slow my sinking into the earth  
what the impish of heart  
would call 'flying'  
I have honed my life  
like I have honed my art  
down to a fine point  
come too close and I will peck you  
like a songbird  
it is what the dilettante would call  
'a poetic temperament'  
they would tell you that my heart  
is all sinew, no muscle  
like the hemp that dragged broken Hector  
around the stern walls

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**The Gist:** Justin Lowe is a poet, editor and occasional reviewer who lives in a house called Doug in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney where he edits poetry blog Bluepepper. His seventh collection, *The Picketeer*, was released late last year, and his latest, *Hall of Mirrors*, is currently doing the rounds of publishers. He has had poems put to music by such acts as The Whitlams and The Impossibles, and has published widely around the world in such publications as Melbourne's *Meanjin*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and New York State's *The Cortland Review*.

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# Peter Mitchell

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## RADIANT

1.

The years with you were cycles of wax and wane: sometimes  
we were a bright star in your gravity's orbit; sometimes I was

a nova.

With your sun falling behind a memory of lightness,  
I rotated to a dead star.

2.

Three years after the burnout, I picked a second-hand  
novel from my bookshelves.

On re-reading it, I found the bookmark, your photograph  
inside the back cover.

Your blue-orbed menace  
still trembled my second skin.

3.

One night two years later, I sat on the backsteps  
& gazed at the galaxies.  
The skies,  
a million light years deep, glittered  
and the miraculous

wild and known only to itself,  
came near.

4. I listened in its silence & looked at your photograph  
again.  
I recollected our recent meeting at a dance party.

You said, *I thought you might still be angry with me.*  
I said, *Fifteen years is long enough to be angry with you.*  
We hugged.

Our past was a star: shining, distinct & had  
moved to another part of the night sky.

Now radiant,  
my star revolves on its own  
axis.

## DAMN CATHOLICS

In a small town moment, I and a neighbour's boy play rapture:  
a cosy front yard, marbles clink the balmy air, a palace in the sun.

Mr Laidlaw, my soccer coach, barges our bliss. *We don't need  
you damn Catholics*. His purposeful stride is a departing

threat. *Cath-o-lics*. Words leave their mark, a hovering  
menace, a triad of barbed letters. Yet in the

stunned air between us, our eyes catch a shift in the light.  
Above us, the sky is now upturned. The skin of the dome

becomes a busy commotion, a mob yelling *hate*. This  
word was a distant rumbling on life's edges, now it

scuttles on the rocks below paradise. These letters  
heat the air and rise to the centre of my life.

Now the path is a surface of sludge-deep holes. How  
will my splintered selves dodge through the decades ahead?

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**The Gist:** Peter Mitchell is the author of *Conspiracy of Skin* (Ginninderra Press, 2018) and *The Scarlet Moment* (Picaro Press, 2009). He writes poetry, memoir, short fiction and literary criticism. His memoir, *Fragments through the Epidemic* is awaiting a publisher. *Conspiracy of Skin* was recently awarded a Highly Commended in the Wesley Michel Wright Prize 2019.

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# Jenny Blackford

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## TWO SECONDS TO TEARS

The Doomsday Clock is set at  
two minutes to midnight  
for life as we know it.  
I'm set at two seconds  
to tears:  
my mother, his father.  
Not for the old reasons  
which seemed so urgent  
back then.  
I could laugh

almost.

Just when we should  
have been having  
the time of our lives

his father fell  
on a smooth surface.

My mother can't remember  
what she can't remember  
again and  
again and  
again.

And time disintegrates.

## ON THE PUTATIVE DARKNESS OF CATS

The household feline wants to think  
he's dark-mysterious, scourge of the night lands,  
savage with delight; uncanny hunter,  
companion of witches and poets.

White Death, they call him  
in his silky dreams.  
We're all in the spare room, furry  
and smooth-skinned family members together

because the silly beastie lost a baby rat  
in the big bedroom, and I can't find it.  
The cat is in disgrace, but even he won't stay  
overnight in the same room

as the tiny terrifying wild thing.

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**The Gist:** Jenny Blackford lives in Newcastle, Australia. Her poems have appeared in *Westerly*, *Going Down Swinging*, *The Pedestal Magazine* and more. Her poetry prizes include first place in the Thunderbolt Prize for Crime Poetry 2017, the Connemara Mussel Festival Poetry Competition 2016 and the Humorous Verse section of the Henry Lawson awards in 2014 and 2017, as well as third in the prestigious ACU Prize for Literature 2014. Pitt Street Poetry published an illustrated pamphlet of her cat poems, *The Duties of a Cat*, in 2013, and her first full-length book of poetry, *The Loyalty of Chickens*, in 2017.

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# Ivy Ireland

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## SMALL TOWN BIG WET

that's how it goes with boons from the sky  
who can fathom that mystical moment of initial impact  
what does it matter if we comprehend any of these  
it will never signify if we comprehend the absolute  
this one who is five says it comes from the mountains and the sea  
in her lexicon the glorious axiom simple ends argument  
simple also means that she won definitively  
this is the cosmogony of late spring drought relief  
and sometimes the day wins this way  
passes through all ephemera  
leaves the bones of what has taken place  
yet this boon now slicks our bodies

it's not raining then it is  
the musk of wet stone slides into the absolute  
miniscule milliseconds of pure shift  
inside this simple fact of rain  
the mountains and the sea mummy simple  
nothing more to say please don't try to say it  
she is not yet quite sure just what  
when we dance in it we are only bodies  
simple  
without needing to make a sign over itself  
we can pick through those later  
small blessing in this perfect only moment

## FOREST LACUNA

at first he is the quality of light  
on rainforest floor  
    dappled shifting uncertain

she is one small seedling  
reaching one slim limb  
    towards gleaming

...

past noon he is  
that darkening  
    fringe of leaf-litter

she is the twitter of  
tiny wings beating through  
    thickets of twigs

...

by night he is  
smooth black creek stones  
    worn to gloaming in moon

she is water eroding  
a rock thick need to name mystery  
    eternal things whispering

...

come dawn they are gone

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**The Gist:** Ivy Ireland was runner-up in the University of Canberra Vice-Chancellor's International Poetry Prize 2019 with her poem, "The Owl Inside". Ivy completed her PhD at the University of Newcastle and her poems, reviews and essays have been published in various anthologies and journals including Cordite, Overland, Mascara, Going Down Swinging and Plumwood Mountain. Ivy has lectured in Creative Writing at the University of Newcastle, Ivy's literary awards include the Australian Young Poet Fellowship, the Harri Jones Memorial Prize, the Thunderbolt Poetry Prize and the Newcastle Poetry Prize local award.

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# Nadia Rhook

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## considering the life of codes and Bob Hawke

there arrived a time toward the end of history when language went underground  
grammar, a shell patterned cave

I dreamt one night of seeking refuge there from  
the rubber bullets I spied tucked under pedicured fingernails

the bullets had no names on them, except  
for strange names, like  
Hanson – Anning – Shorten – and  
other names I can't repeat here

I heard voices, travelling along the shell-writ grooves  
they became softer the closer I drew  
they become closer the softer I grew

I want to break the codes, some said, but  
I don't know if that code has a key  
if that word had a history

codes? history?

once upon a time there was 0 1 0 1  
1 is on  
0 is off  
for example;  
wealthy, poor  
loser, winner  
red green  
good politician bad politician

just then, just as the age of codes was drawing to an end, a nameless rubber bullet broke through an  
above-ground room's window, glass shattered, fragments of meaning stuck to polyester designs, and  
jean-clad thighs stuck to brown retro lino, and coffee stained lips

*too many shapes to collect*

glass shards lodged in incomplete sentences  
objects lost their verbs, and nouns, cried out for their missing adjectives and

no one quite knew anymore, whether racism came before capitalism  
or capitalism came before racism or whether humanity came before Medicare  
or Medicare came before Bob Hawke whether land came before rights or whether  
Bob Hawke came before land rights and everyone wanted to watch him tear up when he  
announced that he'd allow Chinese students to come to Australia after Tiananmen Square but  
some of us couldn't decide if he was good or not, deep down, and no one wanted to remember that  
there'd already been some exemptions for Chinese students made in the 1920s

and I? I didn't know either

the thing about the code was  
the violence had become a logic, and the logic was buried  
deep down in the cells, of people with hearts who bleed rational blood

0 dollars can become 1 dollar, and  
1 dollar can become many dollars

then, one day,  
the language went underground and I, too, dreamt of seeking refuge there

leaving behind '0' and '1'  
taking my Medicare card with me

## Broome speak

during the sunset I pause

the ocean's got something to say to us  
maybe it's history speaking or maybe  
it's other people's ancestors  
hard to say for sure

with every snap of the pinkening sky, the  
rocks become silhouettes, of picnics, the sand  
ingrained in my grandmother's sparkly linoleum kitchen floor

the surfaces getting sharper than the day

for a split second  
between snapping anniversary selfies and dodging camels  
and SUVs crawling, branded ants across the sand

Broome Broome

Broom Broom

while the ocean projects across the land to the carpark, the tourists keep clicking  
the middle of history is full of the sound of rental cars with their handbrakes on

---

**The Gist:** Nadia Rhook is a white settler historian, educator, and poet. She currently lectures Australian and Asia-Pacific history at the University of Western Australia, on Whadjuk Noongar land. Her poems appear in journals including *Cordite*, *Westerly*, and *The Enchanting Verses*, and her first poetry monograph, 'boots', is forthcoming with UWA Publishing in February 2020.

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# Philip Muir

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## Lunchtime

Reposed amongst the throngs, the wisps and the wills  
The street a sonorous whisper in the fray  
Her wistful stare; her coffee cup sits still

A vacant space lies dormant, a desire to fulfill  
Curtain drawn, circumvent display  
Reposed amongst the throngs, the wisps and the wills

The cavalry stampede, with battle-ready quills  
A vain pursuit of enigmatic prey  
Her wistful stare; her coffee cup sits still

Parent grasps the little hand, love lessons to instill  
Inquiring eyes lead fresh young minds astray  
Reposed amongst the throngs, the wisps and the wills

Lovers shuffle synchronised; instinctive, time-built skill  
Vermin scurry casually through decay  
Her wistful stare; her coffee cup sits still

A cacophony of life, rhythmic churning through the mill  
Static stage, frenetic, mad ballet  
Reposed amongst the throngs, the wisps and the wills  
Her wistful stare; her coffee cup sits still

## Struck

Full force in the centre, no sense of its advance  
Reeling, staggered, wound demands response  
I'd like to reconcile, will I ever get the chance?

Feelings swirl within the soul; impassioned, feeble dance  
A safe and tranquil rendezvous is all this vagrant wants  
Full force in the centre, no sense of its advance

The eyes arise to scan the scene, hoping for that glance  
Of recognition common to true friends and confidants  
I'd like to reconcile, will I ever get the chance?

Assumption and deduction, feeble tools to read the stance  
Aggressive, tender, it could be, or haughty nonchalance  
Full force in the centre, no sense of its advance

Risk assessment urgency, 'fight or flight' enhanced  
The pain I feel is real, so separation is ensconced  
I'd like to reconcile, will I ever get the chance?

Protect myself the best I know, within this fragile trance  
Hoping for a rapport renaissance  
Full force in the centre, no sense of its advance  
I'd like to reconcile, will I ever get the chance?

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**The Gist:** Philip savours the power of words as both a mode of communication and as an art form. He lives in Auckland and regularly performs at open mic events. He also runs a poetry group through the 'Meetup' website and dreams of one day having his work understood.

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## Bunch or Fold

reactions in us  
    are an open-air show  
eyes fire or fade   the lens of our beliefs  
    see how we attack  
the fruit       the glare  
our passions orbit   hold us tight  
    hours spent examining   the unease unseen  
through the ivy       the glaze  
    that first bite   on forever  
& in the distance a bridge tapers   a moon-split night  
    staring up from the leaks  
that solitary thin figure   peers down into loneliness  
    a view of things  
up close       underneath  
where words paint of light through glass  
                    or a rain streaked goodbye  
    what makes you see others

---

**The Gist:** Ellen Shelley is a Newcastle poet who likes to write in response to real life events and emotions where momentum gathers in the form of a story, a poem aiming for relatable topics. She reads at Poetry at the pub and Cuplets. She has been published in Eureka, Backstory, Other Terrain, Not very Quiet, Eucalypt, Canberra Times, Highly Commended for the Philip Bacon Ekphrastic, It's Raining Poetry in Adelaide, Cordite, Mozzie, Dámour, Grieve, Poetry Matters, Australian Poetry Collaboration, Christie Press and a few anthologies.

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# Moya Pacey

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## DISAPPEARANCES

Most times it's winter. White as bandages. Red with scarlet fever. Two men wearing peaked caps appear on the road, driving a cream coloured ambulance. When I see them stop a few doors down, I hold my collar until I see a dog for luck. So do the other kids. The ambulance men carry out the taxi driver's daughter, Josie, on a stretcher.

Valerie's father vanishes every few months into the Merchant Navy. After he's gone, she stops holding her breath, smooths her rainbow skin and comes outside to play with me again.

Our neighbour, the soldier, gives his wife a black eye, breaks her nose and hides in our attic. The Military Police wearing red caps drag him down our stairs. Mam scrubs and scrubs until the blood goes.

Across the road, a baby boy called Peter burned in a Moses cradle. Growing up, he has a hook for a hand. Half his face ruined. One eye. He chases me across the street ready to strike. I manage to open the front door of my house, slip inside, slam it in his face and disappear. His hook gouges out a chunk of wood in our red front door.

Dad grows our food: potatoes, onions, spinach and cabbages. Dad does not roam. He never leaves us like other fathers who go out their back doors shouting they're going for cigarettes and never come home.

## FISHPOND

I am going there again. Leaving the shouting and pushing and falling over. Slipping through the gate to find the place we're not allowed where everything feels right. It's behind a hedge that scratches and you have to know the place to squeeze through and we do. I go with my brother not on my own.

There's a long pool you can walk around and look down into water. We don't touch anything not even the water. We just look at the big white flowers floating like soft stars. We don't know how they float like that.

It's dark where the pool is but the light gets in through the slats above our heads and lets us see fish gliding, swimming, weaving in and out beneath the surface. We don't catch them. They are silver and gold and bigger than the goldfish that swim in the glass bowl on our sideboard. We look for a long time. Some kids might throw a stone into the pool but we never do. And we don't say anything because it's quiet.

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**The Gist:** Moya Pacey lives in Canberra, Australia. She published her second collection: *Black Tulips* (Recent Work Press, University of Canberra) in October, 2017. She co-edits the on-line journal, *Not Very Quiet* [notveryquiet.com](http://notveryquiet.com). She was poet in residence at Elizabeth Bishop House, NS, Canada October 2018.

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## Rob Shackne

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### ACCIDENT : INCIDENT

In the corner  
of my eye a chair  
a small table  
then lilac vase red carnations  
nearly murdered—  
yesterday a truck  
stopped in time  
the trick is yours  
like footprints  
of a tiny spider  
my memories  
the melting ice  
how do you tell  
a photograph  
the destruction  
of everything—  
what is this place  
the corners  
already gone

### ALIEN EASEL

Alien easel  
some gravity  
lord knows the light  
how do you see  
the eye of a whale  
inside the wood  
the whorly knot  
in the stomach  
when Jonah finally  
knew he was there  
that curious blue  
sure it's rather big  
there's a lot going on

---

**The Gist:** Rob Schackne lived in many countries until Australia finally took him in. He was a Foreign Expert EFL teacher in China for many years. There were some extreme sports once; now he plays (mostly) respectable chess and pool. He listens to the Grateful Dead. He lives in a small Victorian country town, where he enjoys the fresh air, the birds and the sunshine. When he's not writing, he likes taking photographs.

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# Siobhan Hodge

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## RIOT OR RESIDE

I.

I don't tell my mother where I am headed. The lift shakes as I reach the ground. Typhoon nearing shore, but only a black rainstorm warning so far. Each step down the hillside threatens spillage. I have to pick lines in islands of pavement, slip taxi taillights to cross. I don't tell my mother that I can see them. Students in black, clotted on Harcourt Road. Teargas mists between forests of arms, legs, mouths. Theirs is the cry. I hover in air-conditioning, hair in wet ropes. Offer smiles as they sit in the cool, hands on phones, hearts on lips. They rise like water, roar in waves that chisel rock. I slip past the riot shields lingering in the park. Permanent resident, a cracked spine. Toe the steps back up the hill. I tell my mother about the sales, how the posters were torn down. No queues in the MTR. Yellow post-it notes peel like scales down my eyes. Home is a passage, disappearing under the current. I don't tell my mother where I am headed.

II.

Unvoiced fears purchase paper notes. There are no Hong Kong people. The Basic Law simplifies it all. I find post-its glued all down the subway, secured by plastic. Temporary shelter from the climate. Most are Cantonese. All are love, all are hurt. I hesitate to share. Water could flow in a moment's notice. Leave a mark among the urgent voices, turn for cover. My identity is scheduled for renewal in 2020 or 2021, Immigration Tower decides.

III.

It's ok when I get back to Perth,  
they say. Polite coffee hallways  
and sensible shoes.

I don't need to worry  
about what colour

I am wearing  
and how

it will look

when I enter.

How good to be back

it's such a shame

what's happening. How

are your parents? Is your brother  
still at school?

Open emails and calendar  
plotted in blue crosses,

ripe as a bruise. I check in  
manageable bites.

Bullet holes in a child's leg,  
lungs filled behind masks.

How nice to be

behind lines

where ghosts have to reach

to make the guilt fit

more easily.

## CARRION

One of the cats  
who hides in the rafters  
of the old racing stable  
has left a shaft  
exposed  
almost – a pride of feathers  
jutting from wet sand.  
A forgotten scrap of pigeon  
or galah – something grey  
and picked, I think,  
plodding through the mist  
on an elderly mare.  
She snorts and skirts,  
hooves moon-neat  
along the verge  
as bristled shadows clump.  
Beneath the stooping doorway,  
gaunt and staring, jaws ache.

I don't touch the shorn bird,  
leave the ripped pillow  
of wings and tail.  
I spy one cat,  
razor thin  
beneath a rusted caravan.  
She backs away, moans  
when I crouch  
with tins and soft words.  
She isn't there  
when I return,  
but yellow eyes  
are there when I  
close mine.  
On we plod. I don't know  
the sinews left along the path,  
but I try to think of names  
they may become.

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**The Gist:** Siobhan Hodge has a Ph.D. in English literature. Her thesis examined the creative and critical legacy of the ancient Greek poet Sappho. She is the co-editor of *Writ Poetry Review* and winner of the 2017 Kalang Eco-Poetry Award, the 2015 Patricia Hackett Award for poetry, and was recently second in the 2019 Ros Spencer Poetry prize. Her work has been published in several places, including *Overland*, *Westerly*, *Southerly*, *Cordite*, *Plumwood Mountain*, *Axon*, *Peril*, the *Australian Poetry Journal*, and the *Fremantle Press Anthology of WA Poetry*. Her chapbook, *Justice for Romeo*, is available through *Cordite Books*.

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# David Atkinson

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## Degrees of Deception

Exhausting day, a country drive  
through starlit night, celestial calm.

Returning to the family farm,  
his eyelids droop; a lad of five.

He drifts away, a formless heap,  
spreadeagled on the car's backseat.

Conceives a plan, a child's deceit:  
when home, pretend to be asleep.

The beating tyres a lullaby,  
the boy's fatigue observed, unsaid.  
Strong arms will lift him to his bed,  
embrace of love, a dozing sigh.

Uncomplicated boyhood scheme,  
before the guile of dirty tricks  
now prevalent in politics.  
A naive childhood it would seem.

### **The Authority of Survival**

His tee shirt 'No guns' appears identical to the others,  
orange pastel sways before him;  
teenage physique too callow for the confidence,  
bravado of leadership.

As he speaks, muffled words tentative into the megaphone  
die as dust within the park.

The river breeze ruffles the eager heads of hair,  
smooth against the skin; like a tide students stream,  
a peaceful flow, fluid across Brooklyn Bridge.

Guy ropes stir under grasping hands,  
the throb of a ferry below drifts on the odour,  
redolence of a creeping tanker.

While the tyres of yellow school buses sing  
along the freeways back to Florida,  
televisions will flicker reporting  
the National School Walkout.

The pale orange-clad boy will feature,  
sole survivor of the depravity of a February day.

National School Walkout, New York, 3 June 2018

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**The Gist:** David Atkinson is a Sydney poet whose work has been published in more than thirty magazines and anthologies in Australia (including Eureka Street, Quadrant and Tamba) and also widely in the USA. David's collection 'The Ablation of Time' is available through Ginninderra Press. Favoured areas for poetic exploration include the human condition and the natural world.

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## Michele Seminara

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### Migraineur

recalled — by snapping synapses  
in brain — to inland hushed by chemical  
cascade — a swaddling rain —

migraine muscles body  
to live — instead of head — in bed

and consciousness to monitor the flame.

how wise the flesh to rein the mind, to  
turn its outward looking  
in; re-  
coil thought to meditate  
the dumb pathways of pain.

vehicle tempering wayfarer —  
restrain. restrain. restrain.

### Run Rabbit

The coiled snake  
of my father's anger  
sleeps at the base of his spine.

It snores through play  
but rises unpredictably  
to transgression.

Triggered, it shoots up and out  
his customarily kind mouth.

We flee in well-versed vectors —

Run, rabbit, run!

Alas, plump and placid,  
I am the slow one...

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**The Gist:** Michele Seminara is a poet from Sydney. She has published a full length collection, *Engraft*, (Island Press, 2016) and two chapbooks: *Scar to Scar* (written with Robbie Coburn, PressPress, 2016) and *HUSH* (Blank Rune Press, 2017). Her second full-length collection, *Suburban Fantasy*, is forthcoming from UWA Publishing in 2020. Michele is Managing Editor of online journal *Verity La*.

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## Sandra Renew

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### Traps

my mother had little love for cardigans, no access to pearls, no fashionista furs

sometimes, coiled around her neck, she wore a plaited leather stock-whip used for moving the bulls,  
some lengths of bailing twine or fencing wire to make necessary repairs  
when we rode out to check the traps

curse of rabbits  
skins stripped inside out  
their soft, soft fur

### How dare you (Triolet)

How dare you continue to look away.  
Change is coming whether you like it or not.  
I refuse to believe you are evil, but I say  
how dare you continue to look away,  
your empty words fail us, politics hold sway.  
The science is clear. My future is not.  
How dare you continue to look away.  
Change is coming whether you like it or not.

*Note: Constructed from extracts and paraphrases from speech of Climate activist Greta Thunberg  
(2019 UN Climate action summit, New York)*

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**The Gist:** Sandra's ongoing project is the interrogation of gender presentation and the LGBTIQAA gender discourses. Her poetry comments on contemporary issues and questions including war, language, environment, climate and the planet's health, translation, border crossings, dissent, gender.

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## Susan Howard

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### **DAYS AT THE BAY**

I never go over to Eastbourne without remembering our English mistress at grammar school. She used to love reading Katherine Mansfield out loud to the third form class,

tipping precariously back in her chair, crossed feet on the desk, relishing Kezia's attitude to life in her own peculiar way. Listening to her, we could imagine ourselves

spending genteel afternoons in the garden, drinking home-made lemonade, served with fresh slices of lemon and a floating island of ice, then tip-toeing down the wide cool dark

hallway, for an afternoon nap. We couldn't quite comprehend the reason for Linda's cool boredom and determined indifference towards her children, and we waited with

bated breath for Stanley Burnell to come home from work, to be met at the door by an exasperated Aunt Beryl. In those days, when you went on holiday you caught the ferry

across the harbour. Now, we go there for a day trip, and spend time fossicking through the shops. That's where we picked up those quaint wooden latticed placemats, remember?

### **THE SCANDALOUS MATHEMATICS OF GRACE**

You may wonder if there is any point  
in turning up early.

If you stand around long enough,

he'll touch your sinner's heart with  
an offer too good to refuse.

There's something to be said for

taking up the option early,

but the grace must be catching.

If you grumble you haven't understood.

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**The Gist:** Susan Howard lives in the countryside north of Auckland. She writes about what affects her and what she observes in NZ and on the world stage. She has been published in NZ and overseas, most recently in Takahe magazine (NZ), and the online publication, A Shot Glass Journal (USA).

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## Brenda Saunders

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### THE BALCONY

*after 'Sydney by Night' by Brett Whiteley*

He stretches a canvas of midnight blue  
frames his window on the water below  
Curves his balcony in filigree white

Wide-eyed his studio opens to sounds  
on the night air, magic curves the bay

Palms blur into shadows deep as indigo  
a jetty swings out from Wendy's garden

He waits for a blacked-out sky  
watches currents move dark to light

Paints the harbour into view

With liquid lines he draws shallows silver  
as the moon. Streamers of zinc white  
leap the bridge, trail in a ferry's wake

Light pinpricks boats moored in the bay  
ring the city's distant shoreline

It is summer in the city of sun and light  
Chinese lanterns swing on pleasure craft  
Yachts, cruisers tinkle the evening in

Luna Park roars a welcome

The Opera House dances on water, plays  
his signature tune in a corner of sky

## LUMINOUS

There is wild delight, frenzy in the garden  
in November. Summer has already run riot  
over plants crowding the fence line  
Cicadas have set up their steady droning  
Viridian paints a whimsy of pure colour  
in overgrown corners, on green turf lush  
from overnight rain. A breeze startles  
the air with a splash of lilac. Spent blooms  
ring the ground, vibrate a fallen echo  
Even the sky is weighed down with clouds  
of humid light. Thunder breaks, a storm  
threatens somewhere out of sight.

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**The Gist:** Brenda is a writer and artist of British and Wiradjuri descent. She has published three collections and her work appears regularly in selected anthologies and journals including *Westerly*, *Overland*, *Southerly* and *Australian Poetry Journal*. She was awarded the 2014 Scanlon Prize for her collection 'Looking for Bullin Bullin' and in 2018 she won the Oodgeroo Nunnucal Prize and the Joanne Burns Award ( *Spineless Wonders*). Brenda is currently completing a new collection concerned with changes to the Australian environment since colonization. She reviews for *Westerly*, *Plumwood Mountain*, *VerityLa* and *Mascara*.

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# Bree Alexander

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## Through cotton fibres

The foreign bread  
of a motorbike sandwich  
behind husband and wife  
I find myself tripling  
loud waving from the side  
as my dupatta, always uneven  
dances close to death  
with the wheel  
a dhanyavaad<sup>1</sup> slide her way  
in return  
I lift her up and wrap my head  
wind carries her over my eyes  
I watch through cotton fibers  
gauzed vision  
sun hitting the frame  
an all-sense ignition  
territory unknown  
and do I miss home?  
I really don't know  
European stock  
from stolen lands  
yet this unknown  
the lost in translation  
the discomfort  
the un-learning  
wistfully seeps  
submerges my core

<sup>(1)</sup> Thank you in Hindi (phonetically spelt out using the English alphabet)

## I don't end here

Finally  
I take the time to  
sit quietly  
no longer a wild thrashing  
relentless creature  
able to take in the sounds  
of constant evolution  
the building of a fire  
flames that dance wildly  
but without heat  
before they envelop the wood  
heat rising  
as they drop into a low glow  
not to be confused  
with feeble  
as they burn blue  
without wood to consume  
fading into embers

bright orange  
a fall away from cold  
I am reminded that  
my body does not end  
at my fingertips  
here my body is not about  
outlines and symmetry  
or even having all my  
parts as I could still live  
even if one dies  
but if the flames no longer burn  
if the air no longer feeds them  
if the air is unbreathable  
the water undrinkable  
the land unstable  
then I can't go on  
and that's how I know  
that I don't end  
here

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**The Gist:** Bree Alexander (also Lika Posamari) writes poetry and more in or between Melbourne and New Delhi. Her current writerly interests include playing with form, multilingual writing and explorations of movement and writing across intercultural experience. Her work has recently appeared with Enchanting Verses Literary Review, Australian Multilingual Writing Project and Westerly Magazine. She was shortlisted for the Overland Fair Australia Prize 2018 (NTEU category) and has a poetry chapbook *The eye as it inhales onions*. Bree is also a member and facilitator with Transcollaborate.

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# Laura Jan Shore

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## **Our Covenant**

Tangled as we sometimes were  
in the ropes of discord, padlocked,  
shackled and chained,

if one of us was sane  
enough to call it,  
we'd both drop everything.

Stop  
and breathe together.

Dive into the warm sea  
of the heart, sink below  
the noose of thought.

With a Houdini's grace,  
a dimensional shift.

Unloosed, we'd float  
in the whispered wisdom  
of the unseen.

As with a phantom limb, my body  
still throbs for yours.  
My mind stumbles

over your old boots, no longer  
in the hall. Seated now,  
beside your empty chair,

I hear your call.  
I'll meet you there.

## In Praise of Foibles

He wore his imperfections lightly,  
announced them to strangers in the park.  
He was his own blooper reel, a bank  
of dispensations when the rest of us  
screwed up.

He slept in his clothes for days and then  
jumped into the pool to wash them.

When someone cut him off in traffic  
he wouldn't snarl or curse, but think  
of something he'd done worse  
and forgive them both.

When he bid on a construction job,  
his price was low with a proviso,  
his gusto could (and probably would)  
suddenly flag. No guarantees when the work  
would be done, but his company was fun.

He could trash a hotel room  
in seconds flat, socks strewn  
over lampshades, sheets pulled loose,  
pillows tossed. His own lair  
was a fug of detritus and when he first  
moved in, lugging boxes of unpaid taxes  
and bills, I prayed for strength.

He was the H in humble though he had  
hubris, too, when the switch flipped  
and his slick self rose from the ashes of defeat.  
Revitalised, he became a whirl of industry.

And when I asked for a divorce,  
he said he understood, he'd divorce  
himself if he could.

Five years, we travelled separate  
shores untangling what was his,  
what was hers,  
until we were clear,  
our divorce had been a failure.  
Although love meant more paperwork,  
we volunteered for another round.

---

**The Gist:** Laura Jan Shore's poetry collections include *Breathworks*, Dangerously Poetic Press, 2002 and *Water over Stone*, IP Picks Best Poetry 2011, Interactive Press. She's also the author of YA novel, *The Sacred Moon Tree*, Bradbury Press, 1986, nominated for the Washington Irving Children's Book Award. Her work has been published in anthologies and literary journals on four continents including *Magma*, Fish Anthology 2015, and *The Best Australian Poems 2013*. She graduated with an MFA in Poetry from Pacific University, Portland, Oregon in 2019.

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# Rose Lucas

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## **The Beautiful Moment**

*after Toby Penney, visual artist*

when a slide of elements      might slip  
together    over the ordinary terrain of  
a canvas      its cross-hatching      its patience when

something emerges    from a pounding texture  
of parts    the multi-voiced scripts  
of our lives    and starts to    happen –

viscerality of palette    a thickness  
buckling and    calling to  
touch    the language of hands

fabric collaged and echoing  
the world like leaves or  
a glory of water sparkling under a daffodil

sun    where colour is a shorthand  
that sketches the possible  
the yet to be visualized

curlicued      across translucence of skin  
the breathing of  
this beautiful ephemera

## **Recipe**

Stop – and listen to your thoughts, their rise and fall, flutter and build

See your friends, reach out to them

Do the work that is needful, one task and then the next

Go to the movies

Savour the food in your bowl – ripe tomatoes, green leaves, the sweetness of stew

Sleep well, deep and regular

Go to the gym

Read books, especially the stories that won't let you go

Tend the threads of your family

Walk the tracks of the world, listening to its crackle and pulse

Make dinner, offering plates to the spread of the table

Love with generosity – and be humble and amazed if it comes back to you, you're not owed anything

Watch all the growing in the garden, one seedbed at a time

Arrange your things with care, turning on the lamp in the corner

Let the cat make a nest on your lap

Write down your thoughts

Revel in sunlight, the gift of the day you find yourself in

Settle

Repeat

## origins of malice<sup>1</sup>

This story keeps playing over –  
a troublesome fairy not invited to a christening  
a whole palace paralysed with suffering:

easy enough to think of her in classic pose  
far from the conversations and the mirth  
the clink of glasses the fêted child

stewing alone this wicked fairy twists  
her guts in bitterness sucking on  
envy like a jube

the thing she hates the most is the visibility  
of other people's happiness the shadow it casts  
is intolerable bile in the mouth

harder to see the dark thing she's gripping  
humid and rattling  
under that sweep of cloak

something stunted and uncherished  
fear's  
relentless footsteps down a corridor

panting of powerlessness

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<sup>1</sup> In the various versions of the *Sleeping Beauty/Briar Rose* story (from Perrault, Grimm brothers, Anne Sexton to Disney), there is an uninvited and disruptive guest at the christening of the precious child, one whose 'gift' is poisonous rather than life-giving. The damage which this 'wicked fairy godmother' inflicts can only ever partially be counteracted by the goodwill of others; malice plays for high stakes, given that its engine is intolerable suffering.

the insidious voice in her head

*spoil it for someone else*

*it's the only gift you have*

*don't look behind     you'll*

*always be sorry*

**Poetry and Breathing**  
*for Anne Elvey*

In the end maybe every poem is

about breathing

about re-inscribing

the certainty

for now at least

of rise

and fall

this anchor

in wild waters and calm

the unbearable simplicity of

in

and

out

the cool air I invite into the habitation of my body

its invisible conduits

the welcome tide of bright blood and spark

of neuron

that searches me out

washing me in the salty pathways of life

the warmed breath that flows from me

back into the world

I am its creature

A body swimming in air

the steady and the variable beating of

words and white

spaces

words to pulse out an interplay of

note

and rest

ornament and pause while always

the deep current of silence

its possibilities of disruption to

splinter the sheen of surface

**Today, although it's only June,**

spring air came rushing in the window – warm and faintly fragrant and tapping at my heart's slow seed-pod – at least it did in the early afternoon, that brief and grassy field of possibility where growing things still reach upwards in the sun –

a turning, a reminder –

before chill seeps in again around the edges in a tumble of greying clouds, crisping leaves, glass that's cold to touch – so that it's time to re-fasten the window and gather myself back in, folded and close through these interior landscapes, the roiling of this unexpected season.

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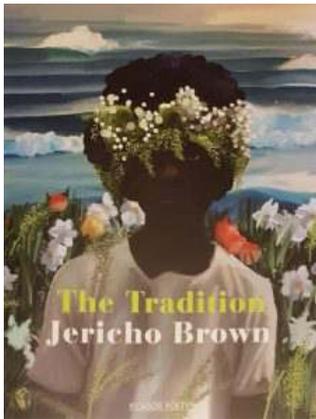
**The Gist:** Rose Lucas is a Melbourne poet, reviewer and academic. Her first collection, *Even in the Dark* (UWAP) won the Mary Gilmore award in 2014; her second collection was *Unexpected Clearing* (UWAP 2016). She is currently completing her third collection, *This Shattered Eye*. In addition to poems published in many Australian journals and magazines, she has published a wide range of scholarly articles on women's poetry. She currently teaches in graduate research at Victoria University.

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## Reviews curated by Emma Lee

### The Tradition' Jericho Brown – Reviewed by Emma Lee

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'The Tradition' Jericho Brown  
Picador UK; Copper Canyon Press, USA  
ISBN (UK) 9781529020472, 86pp, £10.99

'Jericho Brown's 'The Tradition' explores legacy, racism, queerness, trauma and where personal concerns intersect with historical legacies and in-built disadvantage. An early poem, 'The Microscope' manages to encompass most of these concerns. Musing on 'my coiled hair on one slide/ Just as unimportant as anyone else's' spreads into carrying a pencil, which gets lost, 'To stab someone I secretly loved: a bigger boy/ Who'd advance through those tight, locker-lined corridors shoving'. An action that's a beg for attention but the lost pencil means the other boy will never know how the narrator feels so can't react to it. Each memory contains a comment about it not being worth remembering; these were ordinary events not worth paying attention to. The poem ends,

*'On the way to an American History exam  
I almost passed. Redcoats.  
Red blood cells. Red-bricked  
Education I rode the bus to get. I can't remember  
The exact date or  
Grade, but I know when I began ignoring slight alarms  
That move others to charge or retreat. I'm a kind  
Of camouflage. I never let on when scared  
Of conflicts so old they seem to amount  
To nothing really – dust particles left behind –  
Like the viral geography of an occupied territory,  
A region I imagine you imagine when you see  
A white woman walking with a speck like me.*

'Redcoats' are the British the American nation established independence from, but it's interesting this history exam is about battling a foreign national and not the internal civil war and slavery. 'Red-bricked' refers to standard state education. The 'slight alarms' of institutional and person racism that allow assumptions that black children have low aspirations or are of lesser intelligence, that are too big and too established for one child to challenge. But they linger making the child wary of how they move, where they go and who they're with. Grinding a child down to a speck of dust allows racist attitudes to become a self-fulfilling prophecy and creates passivity in the child.

In 'Shovel', a man paid to drive a truck and dispose of a body on behalf of an anonymous murderer listens to songs on the radio as he drives to the grave site and buries the body,

*I completely cover the dead before I return  
The truck where I assume someone else must  
Scrub it – engine off – of the body's evidence,  
And I sing, again, those songs because I know  
The value of sweet music when we need to pass  
The time without wondering what rots beneath our feet.*

The driver may not have shot the man he's just buried, but his need for pay makes him complicit nonetheless and the distraction of music is not permanent.

Throughout the poems are several duplexes, an invented form, described as a combination of the sonnet, ghazal and the blues. There are fourteen lines in couplets, alternately indented, where the second line in each couplet has its key theme repeated in the first line of the next couplet. Sometimes this might be a straight repetition, sometimes a word or two are changed to alter the sense of the line or the second repetition might answer a question set out in the preceding line. In 'Duplex (I begin with love...)'

*'Some of us don't need hell to be good.*

*Those who need most, need hell to be good.  
What are the symptoms of your sickness?*

*Here is one symptom of my sickness:  
Men who love me are men who miss me.*

*Men who leave me are men who miss me.  
In the dream where I am an island.*

*In the dream where I am an island,  
I grow green with hope. I'd like to end there.'*

'Mediations at the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park' part 2 contains the observation,

*'I can remember the brass band, it  
Lives, every goodbye a lie. Every  
One of them carries the weight*

*He chose. And plays it. No theft.  
No rape. No flood. No. Not in  
This moment. Not in this lovely*

*Sunlit room of my mind. Holy.*

*So the Bible says, in the beginning,  
Blackness. I am alive. You?  
Alive. You born with the nerve*

*To arrive yawning. You who  
Walk without noticing your feet'*

It returns to the theme of the transformative powers of music, how, focused in one moment, it's possible to push aside concerns, history and legacy. The narrator notices others are listening without the same intensity, those who have come to pass time and don't need the music to take them away from a negative legacy because they enjoy the privilege of not having to pay attention to where they stand and walk.

In the title poem, Jericho Brown merges the tradition of natural science, tending to flowers, and violence against black men – John Crawford, Eric Garner and Mike Brown are named – which is posited as a tradition. It encapsulates the key concerns of the personal intersecting with history.

However, if readers merely focus on the concerns, they will miss the skill and playfulness apparent in 'The Tradition', the mastery that makes Jericho Brown's poems reward re-reading.

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## In Nearby Bushes' By Kei Miller -Reviewed

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'In Nearby Bushes' Kei Miller

Carcenet

ISBN 9781784108458, 76pp, £9.99

'In Nearby Bushes' is inspired by Jamaican police and newspaper reports of crimes where perpetrators escaped 'in the nearby bushes' or victims and criminal evidence were hidden 'in nearby bushes.' There's an explanation of the collection's title in a quote from Professor Anthony Harriott, 'I make a distinction between "the nearby bushes" and "in the nearby bushes"... "In the nearby bushes" equals concealment, danger, while "the nearby bushes" equals a place of opportunity to do what one wishes to be hidden from others...' The poems, however, are not wholly concerned with crime.

The first section 'Here', follows a poem, 'Here Where Once Laid the Bodies', that lists in tercets names of young men killed with a final solo line '& this are only some', Here explores place and folk stories. In 'Here Where Blossoms the Night'

'        Here where blossoms the knife  
here where blossoms the blade,  
          here where glistens the blood.

The Wild Mint grows here, & the Wild  
      Pawpaw, & the Wild Sage,  
& the Wild Caesar Obeah. So much wildness

          can be found where creeps  
the Cerassee, the Love Bush that strangles trees.  
          Here where shines the Raw Moon -

          "Raw Moon" being folk etymology. Original word,  
Ramoon. Here where you will find  
          the much improved

names of things -'

The gentle meandering off into discourse on etymology contrasts with the violence of blade and blood; just as day contrasts with night. The 'Love Bush' 'strangles trees' just as a parasite feeds on its host; the worse violence is inflicted by someone who purports to love their victim. A beautiful island also conceals dark secrets.

Section 2, 'Sometimes I Consider the Names of Places' is described as a section of micro-essays that consider who gets to name places and create borders and also the spaces between borders. In 'Sometimes I Consider the Nameless Spaces'

'If sometimes is it possible to hear trees breathing, can you also hear them catch their breaths before the violence of place? Because isn't place always a violence - the destruction of trees, the genocide of bees, the dislocation of birds, the cutting, the clearing, the paving, the smoothing, the raising up of cement like giant tombstones over the grave of all that was there before.'

Its lyricism belies the destruction being described, The use of passive verbs allows Kei Miller to avoid naming the perpetrator of the violence. Its tone a reminder that readers are not being lectured but asked to think. It's also a reminder of newspaper reports that report the victim was killed rather than the alleged murderer took the victim's life, the woman was raped, never the rapist raped. It sets up the final and longest section which gives the collection its title. 'In Nearby Bushes' is a long sequence which starts with a newspaper clipping about the discovery of a body of a young woman in a shallow grave after dogs were seen fighting 'in nearby bushes'. The clipping is repeated four more times as erasures; text greyed out but still visible and chosen words kept in black type offering a different reading or perspective on the story. By leaving the remaining words visible, rather than redacting them, it shows how important words and emphasis are, how a story can be spun to suit the teller. Throughout the sequence, the bushes become a motif, concealing what people don't want to deal with. In part VII.I,

'If you could move over the breadfruit leaf - the one that has turned the colour of what an uncle who migrated calls "autumn", you would find a skeleton. The skeleton of an SUV. Hidden just so, under a simple leaf. And it would not surprise you, the magic of nearby bushes, this turning of things into nothing.

The SUV, once green, has turned the colour you refuse to call autumn. After all! In every country, leaf drop and dead in the same colour. The vehicle is only the colour of dead leaves, as if it too has fallen, which it has.'

The rotting SUV could be a metaphor for the memory of the migrated uncle; present but buried, out of sight so out of mind. The newspaper clipping recurs too, in part XI.II, the poem's narrator looks up the victim on social media,

'It did not look like the picture in the newspaper, which wasn't really of you, but of men in masks, the yellow investigative tape a backdrop of bushes - the bushes that held a body we could only imagine. I imagined the body of my cousin - my cousin who is still alive but who locks the useless doors so tight because she too had been dragged into nearby bushes. I did not know you. I do not

know that my breath had any right to catch, or my heart to stop, or myself to wake up these past few nights haunted by the dream of you.

In the dream you are my cousin. In the dream you are a white deer. You stand beautiful in the dawn.'

An earlier poem has already told readers that deer are not native in Jamaica but a herd were brought to the island for display and some escaped. With no natural predators, they are thriving and move without fear. The poem does not name the breed or describe their appearance but they are white-tailed deer so the dream's deer being white is an allusion to a ghost or angel which the murdered girl has become.

Despite death, she can still be addressed and spoken to and the poems in 'In Nearby Bushes' maintain a conversational tone throughout. Ideas are distilled through a mix of standard English and Jamaican patois, the use of second person creating a sense of intimacy, a one-to-one conversation. The casual address is underpinned by craft. Although 'In Nearby Bushes' shines a light in dark places, it does so with a note of hope: by knowing the negative, you can see the positive. It's a collection to return to and rewards repeated readings.

## River Wedding' By Amlanjyoti Goswami -Reviewed by James Fountain

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'River Wedding' Amlanjyoti Goswami  
Mumbai: Poetrywala, 2019

The seventy-two poems of this collection are hugely varied in both subject-matter and form, as Amlanjyoti Goswami introduces us to an array of characters, locations and narratives. The result is a long series of bewildering, exotic scenarios, propelling the reader through his richly varied experience.

These portraits are often compelling. In his introduction, Pradip Acharya describes the book as a collection of 'reflective pieces' containing: 'a surprising immediacy and an assured ease of assertion'. Goswami's observances in his first collection certainly contain a deft assurance. Early on, 'Places' strikes the eye and ear with an unusual depiction of old age and the passage of time:

Arrivals are lovely  
These hugs, so warm  
An old man hugs his happiness,  
Offers to carry the burden

Goswami rarely employs (or, rather, deploys) a spent phrase, and magic realism often entwines with Hindu mysticism, allowing the reader new insights on spent subjects. We are also rarely allowed to exit a poem easily, as is the case with 'Places': 'All that going in, coming out/All that waiting'. When we are brought to the old man's internal narrative and at its end, a full stop is not provided, denying closure. For Goswami, experiencing the world is, and should be, all-consuming.

'Lunch' with his grandmother is even more personal a poem. Love is shown through action, as opposed to description, tenderness communicated through cooking: 'The taste of the pot, where we

dwelled./It tasted good.’ There is an obvious nod to Hemingway in the minimalism of Goswami’s gastronomic description, but these occasional literary borrowings rarely jar: they only serve to enhance the experience. This name-dropping is intentional, and not always merely stylistic, with poems dedicated to Leonard Cohen, Matthew Arnold, Derek Walcott and Paul Celan. There are also poems dedicated to remote towns in India.

Perhaps most striking are the more experimental moments. The post-apocalyptic ‘21\_\_’ depicts a futuristically-flooded Manhattan, a scientist murmuring: ‘We knew this for a hundred years/Yet nobody did anything.’ Once more, Goswami does not offer an easy exit, with a splash of sibilance and thud of alliteration: ‘Earth is a forlorn shore./Soon we touch the sky/And wade our dreams with those distant stars.’ Romanticism and futuristic dystopia are fused as one, and the reader becomes tangled in spiralling metaphor.

But, the poet does not allow misery to consume his verse. The airy, language poem ‘Terminal 3’ which follows shortly after is emphasises a pre-occupation with travel as a means of escape, and catalyst for creativity. It also presents the challenge of capturing fleeting thought:

Stars, stay away

The blink of  
Arrivals and departures

An idea without memory

The poem’s sedated lightness of tone leads to the persona’s accepted drift through consciousness at the poem’s close:

The highway empty  
  
of thought’s litter,  
Gusts of dream blowing silent.

Where language poetry often feels gratuitous, reading Goswami’s does not, since it is employed sparingly and for a distinct purpose, rather than to garner critical praise. The form and style of each poem in this collection seems justified.

The descriptive ‘Basantnagar’, concerning the Central Indian town, is captivating. So effective a conveyance of minutiae is achieved that they eagerly imprint themselves upon the readers’

consciousness and refuse to leave. We do not necessarily learn who the figures are, and sometimes they appear blurred: it is arguable the intention is for us to add these details ourselves, as co-producers:

His scooter turns,  
Throttling  
Past the rubbish heap  
Past glass shards, lunch  
Leftovers, biryani.

The collective detail builds images that resonate. It is their simplicity which generates this power, along with the poet's control over mechanics. Here, assonance belies the shards of glass under the scooter's wheels, the 'rubbish heap' and leftover 'biryani' working on our nostrils, cannily backed by half-rhyme.

'Rain Shelter' is testament to the collection's consistent theme of the power of traditionalism over modernism, using the metaphor of a rain shelter. The final stanza displays Goswami's fascination with traditionalism, its comparative mystery over modernity, insisting its complexity:

The paths here are delicately approached  
Not the straight modern way,  
And storms are not just brought by cloud.  
Usually revelation trickles down unexpected places,  
Through the roof,  
A mud puddle that shows  
The sky that falls.

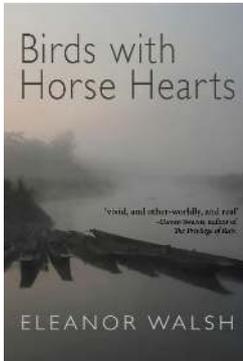
It is these 'unexpected places' which engage Goswami most, but what strikes the reader is his combining of the mundane, the everyday, with the unexpected. He provides an unexpected use of language and syntax, peppered with unusual phrasing and sparks of wisdom. The persona of 'January 2' ruminates: 'things happen, they sometimes do.//While you, look, among the grey, for something/Like an answer.' The poetry of *River Wedding* is compelling, since its author maps a search for answers in the verse he shares, often with powerful results.

James Fountain

# Birds with Horse Hearts' by Eleanor Walsh

## Reviewed by

Nusrat M Haider



Birds with Horse Hearts – Eleanor Walsh

Ad Hoc Fiction [www.AdHocFiction.com](http://www.AdHocFiction.com)

ISBN paperback 978-1-912095-74-2, 50pp, £7.49

Through a series of flash fictions, we capture rural Nepal through the eyes of Avery, a young widow from Iowa, who travels to Nepal to connect with her late husband's roots. She knows very little of his village Baghmara but to connect with her lost love she will go there no matter what. In 'Kumari's Cage', the parakeet has been left out in the monsoon,

'Kumari does not step outside the cage, but instead leans her head against the bars, repeating herself. Her language makes no sense to birds with the freedom to cross continents.'

Avery sees the country through her deceased husband's eyes and it is refreshing as it brings back human pain and connection with others to share grief and loss. She meets a young Nepali woman, Putali, and her mother, Khusbhu – two women also struggling to build new lives for themselves – Avery becomes more embroiled in the chaotic energy of the living than the histories of the dead, pursuing a connection far deeper than the one for which she'd been searching. 'Migration' captures this,

'Khusbhu bends low and rests her face against the mare's lowered head. The white rings of the horse's eyes pool like milk. Her nostrils balloon pathetically.

It suits Khusbhu so, to move and breathe like this, finding somewhere to put her sadness. All of us are migratory. All born too cold and unrecognised. Shivering, looking for something to wrap around ourselves, looking for somewhere there is no need to talk.'

The prose opens up old wounds that need to be healed and the essence of connection, the three women connect and enter a fusion of emotions such as longing, pain, lost love, belonging, acceptance, denial, the writer allows us to allow the entwining emotions of all three women and how it impacts on Avery and her journey to self-discovery and connecting with her deceased husband's homeland. The struggles the women face depicts the writer's point that pain and emotion is felt universally across borders and we are more similar as women to each other than we think.

Nusrat M Haider.



