THE MADRID REVIEW

VOLUME 1 ISSUE 2

SIMON ARMITAGE
The UK's poet laureate's first book of Spanish poetry, Avión de papel, translated by

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Cuidad Real's History Queen

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Brooklyn Baldwin Barcelona

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ISSUE TWO

POETRY

BIOGRAPHIES

Alexandra Corrin-Tachibana's first collection, Sing me down from the dark (SALT; 2022) is in its third issue. She is a PGCE-qualified teacher, teaching for 28 years, mainly in higher education. She has been published in numerous magazines including P.N. Review, Poetry Wales, The Moth and Artemis Poetry, and, inspired by Japanese forms, has zuihitsu, haibun and tanka in the current issues of The North and Obsessed with Pipework. In 2023, she was shortlisted for the Fish Prize and Leeds Poetry Festival Award, highly commended in the Winchester Poetry Prize, and longlisted for the National Poetry Competition.

Emma Lee's publications include "The Significance of a Dress" (Arachne, 2020) and "Ghosts in the Desert" (IDP, 2015). She co-edited "Over Land, Over Sea," (Five Leaves, 2015), reviews for magazines and blogs at https://emmalee1.wordpress.com.

Steve Denehan lives in Kildare, Ireland with his wife Eimear and daughter Robin. He is the author of two chapbooks and five poetry collections. Winner of the Anthony Cronin Poetry Award and twice winner of Irish Times' New Irish Writing, his numerous publication credits include Poetry Ireland Review and Westerly.

Rachel Harty is originally from Florida, now living in New York City. Her debut collection, Coffee: A Sip of You and Me (June 2024), blends wit with reflections on vulnerability, love, and coming-of-age. Her work has appeared in The Poetry Society of New York, Poetry Nation, and other literary journals. Influenced by postmodernism and contemporary poetic forms, Rachel's writing explores themes of introspection, identity, and existentialism. She is currently working on two major projects: one that traces her personal evolution in New York City and another that reflects on her Floridian roots. As she continues to push the boundaries of poetic form, Rachel is also applying to MFA programs in the US and abroad, eager to deepen her craft and teaching aspirations.

Andrea Villa Franco es una escritora e investigadora en ciencias políticas de Bogotá, Colombia. Escribe obras literarias, académicas y periodísticas en inglés y español; se puede consultar sus escritos previos en Americas Quarterly, Pie de Página y Periódico de Libros. Le apasiona explorar temas diversos tales como las artes visuales, los derechos humanos, la memoria histórica, el medio ambiente y la vida en colectividad. Su instagram es: @arondels

Writing from a remote farmhouse in rural Spain, James Mcconachie's poetry has been published by Iambapoet, Black Bough, Eat the Storms, along with essays/short stories for the Dark Mountain Project and Pilgrim House magazine. His poems have been nominated for the Pushcart prize and Best of the Net. His debut collection; 'Consolamentum' will be published in 2024 by Black Bough Poetry.

Brought up in rural Staffordshire, Charles Penty is a journalist by profession and has worked in Colombia, Brazil and Spain as well as the UK. He has lived with his family in Madrid since 2005. His work has appeared in The Poetry Review, PNReview, Poetry News and Spelt, among others, and he was longlisted in the 2020 National Poetry Competition.

Paul Stephenson has three pamphlets: Those People (Smith/Doorstop, 2015), The Days that Followed Paris (HappenStance, 2016), written after the November 2015 terrorist attacks; and Selfie with Waterlilies (Paper Swans Press, 2017). His debut collection Hard Drive was published by Carcanet in summer 2023 and is longlisted for the Polari First Book Prize. His website is at www.paulstep.com and he can be found on Instagram at @paulstep456 and on X at @stephenson_pj

POETRY
BIOGRAPHIES

Christian Garduno's work can be read in over 100 literary magazines. He is the recipient of the 2019 national Willie Morris Award for Southern Poetry, a Finalist in the 2020-2021 Tennessee Williams & New Orleans Writing Contest, and a Finalist in the 2021 Julia Darling Memorial Poetry Prize. He lives and writes along the South Texas coast with his wonderful wife Nahemie and young son Dylan.

Jacqueline d'Amboise is a Canadian poet and literary translator. She has worked as the Literature Officer at the Canada Council and has taught at several Canadian Universities including the University of British Columbia, where she taught poetry and translation in the Creative Writing Department and was the Director of the Literary Translation Program. She has coordinated and served as advisor to several poetry festivals and conferences across Canada. She has been published in numerous literary magazines, including Exile, The Malahat Review, Descant, and Canadian Literature. Mother Myths, a book of her poems, was published by Fiddlehead Press. She spent a year in Spain researching and translating the poems of Garcia Lorca whose works she continues to translate. She presently lives on a farm in Hastings Highlands, Ontario where she gardens, writes and goes for walks with her daughter and their Border Collie Juno.

Mark Fiddes is a UK poet writing and working in the Middle East, married to a Catalan. His latest collection is Other Saints Are Available (Live Canon). This follows his award-winning collection 'The Rainbow Factory' and pamphlet 'The Chelsea Flower Show Massacre' (both Templar Poetry). Recent work has been published in The Irish Times, Southword, Shearsman, Oxford Poetry, Poetry Review and Magma. He's a winner of the Oxford Brookes International Prize, the Ruskin Prize and a runner-up in the Bridport Prize and National Poetry Competition.

Rin Norte is a UK writer who's thankful to be living in Spain. Rin's work was shortlisted for the Wigtown Poetry Prize, 2022, and has been included in various journals, exhibitions and anthologies.

Anita Haas is an award-winning, differently-abled Canadian writer and teacher based in Spain. She has published books on film and flamenco (with her husband, Carlos Aguilar), two novelettes, a short story collection, and articles, poems and fiction in both English and Spanish. Her most recent work is the bilingual picture book, Chato, the Puppy-Cat/Chato, el Perri-Gato, the sales of which have been donated to local animal shelters. The Viaduct of Madrid was originally published online in Silver Birch Press. She is on Instagram as @aephaas.

Matthew Stewart lives in Extremadura and works in the Spanish wine trade. His second full collection, Whatever You Do, Just Don't, was a Poetry Society Book of the Year 2023.

HAIBUN FROM ARCACHON

ALEXANDRA CORRIN-TACHIBANA

‘C’est mon anniversaire’, I tell the waiter, ‘jai cinquante ans’: feeling a need to explain my solo travel. The last time you holidayed with me, you were running up Fistral Beach, me panicking until you came into view, waving from the top of a rock. And each day in Gironde, I think of how you’d love the food. Photograph flank steak for you. I think of what you’d say about the sear. Of how you like to butter-baste the thick-cut Asda steaks in the heavy iron pan. How you cook them better than Grandad! And cracking open the crème brulée, I remember lunches in Île de Ré, where you learnt to order steak haché and frites.

You rode Lily every day: the donkey in culottes – traditional, sun-protection for animals that once worked in salt marshes. On the table next to me, a Japanese-speaking family with a mixed race son, ordering steak haché! I listen to the husband translate the menu, French to Japanese. The wife puts her head on one side, using a non-committal phrase, かもしれないね, so predictable it irks me, and I avoid them on the way out. They order oysters, and for a moment, I’m buying them with you at Grainger Market. You’ve always loved strong tastes. And once, in Seahouses, got a kipper bone stuck in your throat.

And when I get home, my eyes begin to water when I do little things for you, like toast your M&S sourdough, while you scramble five, protein-rich eggs. And how grateful I am that now, unlike two years ago, when he tried to turn you against me, you no longer flinch when I ruffle your brown-black hair, don’t mind when I show concern for your dry, shaved skin. Stroke your cheek. And I cannot tell you of course, how my heart shifts, as you stand taller than me, head slightly tilted, and use an app to measure us. Of how, when I’m with you, I feel very little of him. Even though you have the same long ‘matsuge’.

Île de Ré donkey
in faded culottes
with mother and child.

IT'S NOT LOST
IF IT'S READY TO BE FOUND

EMMA LEE

There's the original key,
the imagined key
and the found key.

All fit the same lock.
The original was a perfect fit
and looks as you'd expect.

The imagined is what the seeker
thinks the original key looks like.
It acquires an ornate barrel,

distinctive fob, yet merges
with dust where it lies undisturbed.
It takes an eye to notice

a metallic spark that doesn't fit
the dull greyed surroundings
and create a keyshape

exactly right for the lock.
that the found key carries
the weight of opening.

MAJORCAN EVENING

STEVE DENEHAN

The beach is close
to empty

the sun
has almost set

a balmy evening
as my father
used to say
before
the light left him

we sit
on the beachfront wall
enjoying the warm breeze
on our bare legs

my daughter points
a family
near the water
unfolding, erecting
a long table

in no time at all
they sit
twelve of them
old to young
eating food unpacked
from Styrofoam containers

at the head of the table
is an old lady
white hair stark
against brown skin

we sit, watching
the pink cotton sky
turn to velvet
watching them
eat and talk and laugh

the old lady
says nothing
eats little
my daughter waves to her
she waves back
there are many stars
above us

MADRID'S TONGUE, NOT MI MADRE

RACHEL HARTY

I scrawled on an embossed servilleta
 the coordinates back to Kings,

mi librería, when my tongue faltered,
 high school español slipping through mis manos.

Madre, I yearned to speak
 where I first stumbled upon una revista de poesía,
 and began to review myself.
 Down and down, I ventured,
 into the laberinto of blanco estantes.

My mind, tangled in its webs of sueños,
 sought a Rioja
 to elevate this ensueño—
 to crown the moment, el libro destacado.
 But what I found was myself,
 already entera,
 páginas leídas, dobladas—
 a mapa guiding me back

to the only certainty I've ever known.

CUENTACUENTOS

ANDREA VILLA FRANCO

El aire es color de panela,
tal como esta página
sobre la cual debería de estar escribiendo.

Entre
las notas de jazz,
las paredes de cal y de ladrillo,
la percusión plástica del aguacero,
se cuelan
susurros helados
que me cuentan:

cómo nace el agua
entre el musgo y la niebla
fría
dura
como el cristal.

Pero las velas
se interponen,
incandescentes,
los bombillos
también.

Puntúan la penumbra de panela
con sus exhalaciones doradas.

¿SO WHAT?

ANDREA VILLA FRANCO

Entre estas paredes
paredes de cal y de ladrillo
se conserva un calor pardo
pardo y denso
espesado por las sombras
sombras que me quieren cobijar
cobijar porque el aguacero toca
toca contra las tejas plásticas

y ya no se escucha el jazz.

El aguacero toca duro
duro contra las tejas plásticas
y las gotas se filtran
se filtran los susurros helados
que entullecen
que enmudecen
al jazz
con sus cuentos de páramo arrebatado de las alturas
de niebla que pare lodo y lluvia
de agua fría como—

El calor pardo se conserva
se conserva entre estas paredes
paredes de cal y de ladrillo
es sordo y denso
es sombra aislante
y cobijadora.

EL MUNDO NUEVO

ANDREA VILLA FRANCO

es el estruendo de
las tejas plásticas
que caen

y, que, al caer
estallan contra
las notas de jazz
entullecidas

es el olor de humo,
el color de tempestad,
que tiñe el aire

que sopla—y sopla
hasta extraer un último
suspiro de las velas
que se esfuman

es la caricia
fría del aguacero
que me empapa

y que encharca
el papel, las palabras
de color de panela,
derramándolo
todo
es
todo lo que
no he escrito

sus susurros helados
se me colarán entre los huesos
y me contarán:

SUMMER OF '23

JAMES MCCONACHIE

¡Hostia puta, qué calor! Cut straw,
crushed into the socket of the sun,
the bottom field a blistered brass, a bed of nails.
Heat not a word anymore, but blood bound
like a blast wave, waiting for me, the
gasp at every door. Outside the
shrieks and smells of nothing
vaporised, this rabid, scouring
daynight sickness, to foul the mind
of a hound, foul the mind of a crowd.

A six-day week, the sweated shrouds
of sheets repel the waking waiter
to his swollen feet, a screaming
marrow mandrake, wrenched
out by the roots. In Malaga,
an old man, maddened to murder,
shoots his wife, the fool sun's final season.
Even the vaulted church has lost the cool of reason.

The Columbian cura kneels and prays
at misa, old ladies' zoetrope of flickering fans,
like painted bats, the men obliged, sit sodden,
crumpled, turn their hats, three days to go.
My phone says time will turn around a spine,
drop ten degrees and storm, this house,
a tragic partner to the parch of sizzling pines.
Tonight squat nightjars trilling to the treacledark,
we hope the anvil sky brings maybe rain before the spark.
This summer, last of the first of the
others, now sure to last forever and ever.
'Qué llueva qué llueva, la virgen de la cueva.'

CLARISA IN GALICIA

CHARLES PENTY

"However, Aureliano Segundo became a virtuoso
of the accordion and continued to be so after he married
and had children and was one of the most respected men
in Macondo..."
One Hundred Years of Solitude, Gabriel García Márquez.

Geese muster like parishioners
at a harvest dance,
shy at first, but curious.
The long grass

in the ruin of the ancestor's house
caresses her limbs like cats' tails.
The leaves of Pontevedra whisper
Benvida, compatriota...

But I knew where home was for her
when we drank the hot, vegetal
air of Santa Marta,
and she hummed an old Hermanos Zuleta

tune, while
asthmatic accordions
(¡como el de Aureliano Segundo!)
swelled to welcome the exiles.

STARLINGS, GRANADA

PAUL STEPHENSON

The deafening screech of birds
in the trees of the Plaza Trinidad
is not birds in trees screeching

but to stop the birds from flocking,
a sound recording that the city council
is pioneering of their screeching,

so Carlos tells me. In the midday quiet
no birds in earshot, so why at dusk
this shrill blast of screeching?

Carlos and I set about debating
if it's humans or creatures to blame
for this evening blanket of screeching,

him refusing to consider birds above
but me insistent, getting loud and
high-pitched until I'm screeching.

It's obviously not working! I screech.
The phoney screeching is being piped
at volume on top of natural screeching –

we're talking a double dose of screeching.
This is madness! I swear, a whole layer
of artificial, head-splitting screeching

is being amplified through speakers
placed in the crown of the trees to prevent
the birds from shitting and screeching.

There we are under plane trees, sparring,
startling local passers-by, not hearing
the tremendous, incessant screeching

of nine thousand birds undeterred by
the ploy of a decoy, or just quick to adapt,
them resilient on high, us below screeching.

DOGMAN AND RABBITWOMAN

CHRISTIAN GARDUNO

I don't like poetry that always rhymes
you say 3 AM like it's a bad thing
I used to daydream until I saw stars
how come you always bring up Paris?
sometimes, I really can't stand her
save me the waltz like you did for Zelda
that's when I realized
I was nose to nose with a Modigliani

DANSE MACABRE

JACQUELINE D'AMBOISE

There's a dance on a grave
and a swirling of skirts,
a Flamenco guitar, and a clapping of hands.

Nails in his coffin!
Nails in her shoes!

This love that he wielded
with knives and with whips
on her flesh with possession.

I'll own you forever!
My darling you're mine!
with fire from his tongue.

You're mine in the roots of the lilies
that grow from the soil
of the meat on your bones.

You're mine in the hyacinth
smell of your sex.
Mine are your thighs and your torso!

You're mine in the lava,
mine on the beaches,
mine in the mouth of the ocean.

So she took up her switchblade
and Aie! in the dark
cut out his shadow of dreams.

She took out his rib.
She severed his heart

Now in a soft Soleá
she opens her arms to the evening.
She drinks from the light of the moon.

Her heels on the wood of the pine box
echo out into the night,
crushing his memory.

Nails in his coffin!
Nails in her shoes!

MADRILEÑA

JACQUELINE D'AMBOISE

These hot flamenco 4 AMs
I inhale the promise of our love.
I close my eyes - your fingers
on my breasts smell of
the silver strings of your guitar.

Your soleá, your tango and your duende
besot me with the Moorish fires of your music.
My thoughts travel to you
in the cave of Sacromonte -
slim and beautiful.

Guided by the memory
of the gypsy dreams you harbour
in the darkness of the rhythm of your songs,
I flaunt my passion
to ideas of you I hold inside my mirror.

I polish my lips and my eyes.
I anchor myself to the pledge of your arrival.

NEWS FROM TERUEL

MARK FIDDES

Sometimes you will catch a whisper
like dry leaves in the hall or spirits
drifting in skins of silver dust
cast by late sun through worn shutters,
or a maiden aunt's sherry breath
clinging to blistered wallpaper,
or children's sticky fingerprints
still clasped around the brass handles,
or a shudder from the rafters
that could just be village pigeons,
or the click of a dull Luger
from the last Civil War hidden
in the roll-top desk by the cap
the Fascists made your father wear
when they turned this into barracks.
You tock the cracked Bakelite dial
on and off with a soft blue flash.
Chandeliers flicker then give up.
Across painted ceilings, bluebirds
fade between garlands and dry vines.
Lost among hangings, the voices.
Lost between the voices the hope.
Lost within the hope a roll call.
Letters from the Front in a drawer.
Some of the words have run away
in the snow that cloaks the sierra.
Muddy footsteps dry upon tiles.
All the doors are slamming as news
at last comes through from Teruel.

GLAMOUR SECRETS OF THE TRULY BELOVED

MARK FIDDES

She wrestles the clasps and straps cursing the scald from brass taps.
Too many decades dimple on cold mirrors.
Seditious hairs trick their tweezers.
Lipstick that once unlocked lovers' hearts like plush jewelry boxes
drops into her purse with razor sharp mascara.
All her Baptists' heads she keeps in frames along the dressing table.
A cab idles outside, double parked.
Tonight, it will follow her around like a jealous yellow cat
because Great Beauty has its own velocity which likes to linger.
Time has grown too small for her. Too many hopeful doors closed.
Impatient lovers went un-adored.
Any regrets she digests for breakfast with fresh juice and pata negra.
Tonight, she will make an entrance, her loaded handbag ticking
with scandal and consolations for the faithful.
The restaurant will take a breath.
The losing hours will whimper under her Prada heels as first she sips
a perma-frosted glass of Juvé y Camps.
This dimming world of chandeliers will wait if there is night enough
for all the pain and glittering.

AS THE BLOOD RAN DOWN HIS PLAYBOY FACE

MARK FIDDES

Traffic gridlocks on the BR-116 into Sao Paolo
and a burger box flies out of a passenger window.

Two cabbage white butterflies cool in the shade
of a brutalist carpark.

An Italian waiter in Soho writes his phone number
on a bill, flourishing the crossbar on a continental 7.

A girl building a sandcastle on the beach near Cadiz
starts a conversation with a crab about paradise.

A boy's foot slips on of the orange clay of a cobalt pit
at an unspecified location in the DRC.

Lovers slide between sheets and the rest of their lives
in a cheap Jakarta motel with no air conditioning.

Four fingers shape a chord that floats over Derry
in memory of a lost brother.

A pale acanthus shoots pollen into the blazing sky.

As the blood ran down his playboy face,
he yells at the nearest camera: 'Fight! Fight! Fight!'

EXCELLING IN THE NATIONAL SPORT

RIN NORTE

In memoriam

A love hold of his own
first drop shot is sweetly struck
someone screams.
Goes for all-out attack, charging forward.
Steadies himself with a forehand smash
stinging and snarling
overpowering his opponent with his athleticism
pushing, pushing, pushing
with some blistering attack.
Striking to take the breath away.
Walks sadly to his chair
his feet are slow and heavy
shows he is slightly human after all.

Impossibly chases it down.
Twisting bodies and prancing feet
ends in a backwards shot.
Hits again from close range.
A devastating forehand.
This is going from bad to worse.
Pulsating, riveting, flawed, unintelligible, pure madness.
He held his nerve.
After a strong blow
tension is released.
It's out.

Fixes his stare straight ahead
completely locked in.
A face of consternation trying to work out
the next move. A sweeping forehand.
Aggressive approach.
Whoosh. Platoon of different shots.
Slice backhand finished the job.
A thudding.
A moment for composure.
He needed that.

Managed to get into a threatening position.
Lunges in for a tackle
raises his boot into the chest
free kick.
Other side takes defensive actions
isn't going to have an easy night.
Pinned back for long periods
the pressure is relentless.
He has possession
some attacking intent.
He fires wide with a stinging strike.
That pass was the killer pass.

—A collective sigh emanates.
I'm dumbfounded. Are you?—

Has been a slow burner in the opening 10 minutes or so, but
ends up sticking his boot into the body
very cagey and calculated
big blow
slams the shot low and hard
so, so dangerous
he hooks a cross
powers a header
takes aim and
SHOT ON TARGET!
They're killing us! Wake up!

On July 14th 2024, Spanish players won the Wimbledon Championships Men's Singles and the UEFA European Football Championship. In that same weekend, five women in Spain were killed by partners or ex-partners, bringing the number murdered by partners or exes to 27 women since January. (In the same period, 44 women in the UK were killed by men). All of the text for this piece comes from five sources of live commentary on the tennis and football finals on July 14th; ^^ https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/tennis/article-13628619/Wimbledon-2024-final-Live Result.html?ico=topics_pagination_desktop
^^ https://www.theguardian.com/sport/live/2024/jul/14/carlos-alcaraz-v-novak-djokovic-wimbledon-mens-singles-final-live-tennis-score-updates?page=with:block 6693d9cb8f08cb5f9ab838e0&filterKeyEvents=false#liveblog-navigation
^^ https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/football/article-13627587/England-vs-Spain-Euro-2024-final-Live-Result.html
^^ https://talksport.com/football/1889122/england-lose-euro-2024-final-spain-live-reaction-score-result-highlights-southgate/page/2/
^^ https://www.eurosport.com/football/euro/2024/live-spain-england_mtc1427047/live-commentary.shtml

IN/FLUX

RIN NORTE

Unnatural lumps on the stoney plain spotted
from the low coastal path. Refuse sack in hand, she
clambers up to find an inside-out sweatshirt twisted,
stiffened by salt mist and wind dust. Arms had been tied
around a walker's waist maybe, worked loose.

> The presence of floating microplastics and
> microplastics on beaches, for the Canary Islands,

Sweatpants lie close, among tide-hardy shrubs' yellow
microbubble leaves. Black long johns within, waistbands
hugging. Pushed to the ankles in one go. Further on, a trainer.
Somebody had stripped. Left it all behind. A suicide?
Wouldn't waterlogged shoes have helped with that?

> are among the highest in the world. There are
> more than eighty pollutants in microplastics.

A few steps away, a couple of daypacks, weathered to the clay-
grey shades of volcanic soil. Beside one a miniature toothpaste,
a deodorant with no lid. Idiots. Who dumps their shit? A third pack
hooked around a government boundary bollard: Inland, ours. Beyond,
maritime laws. Its unzipped front flapping like a thirsty tongue.

> "They are of two types: those contained in the plastics'
> manufacture; additives, dyes, flame retardants,

Brown denims nearby; colour leached to gold on the exposed folds.
Doesn't happen overnight. A summer. Strewn months ago? Next to
the checked lining of a bomber jacket. How a jacket would look
if tugged off at high speed. Or when sodden. Or both. Outer shell,
on turning over, still the solid red of the Moroccan flag.

> ultraviolet filters; and the pollutants in the ocean
> that stick to the walls of the microplastics."

Three guys wouldn't have camped out and forgotten to take their gear.
Wouldn't have come altogether to disrobe and end their bare lives.
No one's been reported missing? To save space in her beach-cleaning
bag (she's not sure if this is litter) she begins placing clothes into the
small packs with the failed zips. She'll balance the weight to the van.

> These places are located on the northeast-facing coasts and
> accumulate everything that the Canary Current, a descending

Another volunteer passes, carrying his plastic hessian sack with its shore-plucked bottles, cans, nylon rope, pellets, hard confetti, broken parts of things, packaging, pliable rocks of oil-spill tar. ‘Migrants,’ he tells her. She stops shoving in the clothes. What’s she touching? Humans’ remains. They survived. Are they okay? Lives begun again, here.

> branch of the Gulf Stream, carries with it. "Much of what it brings comes from the east coast of the USA and Canada."

Courage bordering on cavalier or fleeing crisis? They had worked and saved. Paid someone. Dressed in jeans and jogging trousers to board a crowded, unsuitable craft. They would arrive or not. While lacing their shoes they couldn’t have known. Like a gallon container or a Bic shell, drifting in with the tide under a round moon to a sharp shore.

> “They are very variable. You go to a beach in January and you find a lot. You go in April and there's nothing.”

Swimming the last few meters. Scrambling across sea boulders in plastic soles. Rapid removal of items. Pulling on stuff from the backpacks (kept dry inside bin liners) and after that, Google maps? Starting towards the nearest set of pueblo lights? Or away from them. Was she sifting litter or history? Or evidence / modern art exhibits / charity donations.

> Detecting this floating debris by satellite, to remove it, will be the subject of a future research project. Meanwhile, two ships from the Canary Islands’ government are trying to remove them.

Could she ask around, reunite the clothes with their owners? Which bag she’s filled represents more of a threat; which uncontrolled movement? Of human beings or solidified forever-chemicals, found in fish guts, salt, fresh vegetables, drinking water, beer, breast milk, placentas. Who is negotiating with the plastics’ countries of origin to stem the flow and send them back? Who’s using plastic waste to foment fear at election time?

> “When I started doing this work… the only studies… involved looking for where they are. We can stop looking now. We know wherever we look, we will find them.”

Found text source: https://www.canarias7.es/sociedad/ciencia/costa-islena-cabeza-20230205171258-nt.html Carmen Delia Aranda, 5 Feb 2023, “The Canary Islands is one of the areas of the world most affected by the presence of microplastics in the sea.”

OVER:CIVILISATION

RIN NORTE

The evening wind blows hotter than earlier;
a hairdryer turned on behind the hill.
Fine dust catches in each swallow. Nearly
every neighbour has a long-leashed dog
in an untrained yard, prancing, barking,
until you don't hear them anymore. Maybe
you know the kind of place, and not because
it feels familiar from seeing it on a screen—no,
you have been. We are all from here, quite
a few fathers back. Many mothers ago
you were swatting something away,
minding your water supply, keeping
your ration of waste far enough from
your dwelling place.

Today I tossed a bright blue bin bag
into an unlidded roadside dumpster,
the closest in the row of four and, after
closing the car door, it took three streets
with the windows down to lose the stink
of the air which had slunk in; rotting rinds,
stewing piss and shit in 32 degrees
on an island where toilet paper is not
a flushable item and refuse isn't collected
at your gate. Street reeking to a pitch that
would trigger a neighbourhood WhatsApp
group frenzy in countries which have been
able to forget. Who have we become if
we can't deal with the dirt of our existence?
If we can't abide the smell of ammonia and
skid tissues that we chuck on our way
to be bobbed about by the rising sea
that cools our skin and holds us up
as we lean back and it surges in.

THE VIADUCT OF MADRID

ANITA HAAS

The first time I saw you, illuminated
in your evening glory, I had lost my way. Running
up Toledo Street, hurrying
to meet a friend in Plaza Mayor, I rounded
the wrong corner and you commanded,
“Look at me!”

Noble eagle, servile slave, you stretch your spine, crook
your elbows, bow your head. Your shoulders carry
a load of heedless traffic, pressing on you from one
set of fingers buried in the Moorish quarter
to the other, in opulent parks and palaces,
your wingspan - your yoke - bridging two worlds, and
– your back to the city - you look down
on crumbling walls that once protected the town,
on a park dedicated to its founder, an emir of Muslim Córdoba,
on travelers passing through you like a gate,
on the Segovia Road, once a creek, the banks of which
housed the earliest settlers.

You shelter the homeless, watch helplessly
as the desperate leap from your shoulders, their ghosts
staring stunned at the spots where their bodies struck road.

Like a medieval fortress, stone steps race up
and down your slopes like beetles, resting on tree-shrouded
landings, where lovers tryst and photographers snipe
at infinite angles, each frame bathed
in milky light and cradled by arms
dressed in foliage.
War once crippled your mighty columns
Yet still you arch and gleam majestic
like a dancer, frozen in an ecstatic olé.

MATTHEW STEWART

Having moved to Spain in 1995, I've long used life in Iberia in my poetry as a counterpoint to the U.K., comparing and contrasting both societies and languages (e.g. 'after the war' has hugely different connotations from 'después de la guerra', even though it's theoretically a perfect translation). In fact, I've become a slight outsider in both countries, which lends me an additional perspective to each. In other words, I'm never going to be Spanish, but I'm no longer 100% British either! Moreover, I've come to realise that I've always been most comfortable when not quite belonging to a group: I prefer to live and write on the periphery.

However, since 2016, this tension between the two cultures has become more and more significant and explicit in my poetry. The reason, of course, is Brexit. For most Brits (or Spaniards), it hasn't really affected their daily lives. But it impinges on mine all the time, in every facet, be it work, pleasure, poetry or family. And I've witnessed a shift in the U.K. towards highlighting differences between Britian and Europe, concentrating on what separates us rather than what brings us together and what we have in common. In my poetry, I'm kicking back more and more against these misconceptions.

And an added issue that's definitely affected my poetry is the rise of so-called identity-based poetry in the U.K.. This process has led to the emergence of extremely interesting poets such as Zaffar Kunial, who embraces the English lyric tradition but fuses it with his own linguistic and cultural blend, renovating and renewing its aesthetic without eschewing it. I find his approach invigorating when considering my own relationship with the U.K. and Spain, when looking at how I might involve the reader in seemingly very specific poems that aspire to universal ramifications.

It's taken me a long time to realise that we all write through the filter of our evolving identities, whether we like it or not, whether we write la poesía de la experiencia or not. I believe our task as poets is to develop our craft and technique, fuse them with our identities, and generate art in which others might find themselves reflected. That's the challenge I set myself every time I sit down to write...

ARRAIGO

Partly ‘roots’ and partly ‘identity’,
partly ‘place’ and partly ‘belonging’ –
all four of these words and far more
come to define ‘arraigo’,
a search that reached its end
not in a country,
city or town,
but in you.

LINDE

n.f. Término o línea que separa unas heredades de otras.

The space between vineyards and olive groves
where one farm ends and another begins,

a no man’s land that’s left to grow untamed,
never quite belonging to either side.

I love to walk along this strip of weeds
and wild flowers. It’s here I feel at home.

IN COMMON

From the sixth shower today in England,
stirring up aromas of mulch and moss,
to the drought-breaking storm at dusk in Spain,
tangy steam curling above the pavement.

Two countries, two sets of smells and two rains,
but the same water heads for drains or streams.
It pours into rivers and oceans.
Comes together.

FICTION
BIOGRAPHIES

Calla Smith grew up in rural Colorado, but now lives in Buenos Aires, Argentina. When not writing, she enjoys continuing to discover all the forgotten corners of the city she has come to call home, and finding small glimpses of inspiration in the world around her. She has published a collection of flash fiction “What Doesn’t Kill You”, and her work can also be found in several literary journals.

José González Vargas is a writer and journalist from Maracay, Venezuela. Currently based in Madrid, he has worked with El País, ICON, Manera Magazine, The Boston Globe, Zócalo Public Square, Americas Quarterly, NPR's Latino USA, Into, and Caracas Chronicles. His fiction, mostly focusing on themes such as memory, time, and identity through a speculative lens, has been published by Fireside Quarterly, Letralia, and Strange Horizons. In 2017, José won the Solsticios Prize, at the time Venezuela 's top science fiction and fantasy award, for his short story "E Pluribus Unum.”

Ellen Merryweather is a British writer living in Spain. A member of Madrid Writers and London Writer's Salon, she is working on her first novel; a subversive rom-com set in Venice. In her writing, she muses about how it feels to be torn between two different places, and tries to capture the spirit of different cities on the page.

Zeina Jana is a PhD candidate. She is particularly interested in the literature of twentieth-century Spain.

Chidima Anekwe is a Nigerian-American writer and recent graduate from Yale University, whose short stories and essays have appeared in or are forthcoming from Torch Literary Arts: Friday Feature, Chapter House Journal (formerly Mud City), the Yale Literary Magazine and elsewhere. For her writing, she has received support from the SAEF Grant and the DuPuy Prize. She is currently based in CT and gaining experience in NY.

Eva Genicot is fascinated by humans on the whole and takes interest in their encounters in particular. Seeking the frontier where poetry and fiction blur into one another, she is often found wandering through cities, landscapes, and between languages. She joyfully leads creative writing workshops. While she mainly writes in French, a few other pieces of her "Epic Madrid" short fiction series have been published in English in "Madrid Open Mic La Realidad" (Café Literario Editores).

DANGEROUS GAMES

CALLA SMITH

Marisol couldn't remember exactly how she'd met Liam. She knew it had been a cold, damp night when the busy city streets were deserted and they'd wandered from one lamppost to another, nowhere to go but needing to be elsewhere.

He had waited to kiss her in the cruel light of the rising sun, when he could see her smeared makeup and fading lipstick. I want to know who you really are, he said. His hands gripped her head and his lips lingered gently over her skin before going in for the kill.

After that, they were always together, even though they never meant to be. They restlessly searched for something that always seemed just out of reach. The city wasn't big enough for both of them and they ran into each other crossing the street or waiting for the subway, surrounded by an anxious mass of bodies.

During the day, they would try to stay indoors or underground, slowly leaving behind the lives they'd led before. Once their existences had been full of the expected distractions of work, school, family, and friends; but after they met, they could feed off each other for days, sleeping on sunny afternoons and waiting impatiently for the sun to set. Only then would they head out into the faint light of soft evenings, searching abandoned buildings and old bus stops, trying to break into newspaper stands and construction sites.

One winter night, they stumbled across the old train tracks, the rails covered with weeds. Empty beer bottles were scattered around a scorched patch of ground that could only have been a firepit for some other night dwellers. It was there that Liam had thought of a new game, something that would keep them distracted from the fast-approaching monotony of their routine that yearned to be challenged.

They would have to make their way through the wasteland of glass bottles, following a path that Liam traced with a stick in the dirt. We'll hop from one foot to another like hopscotch, he said. Marisol would go first while he watched from his perch on the cold metal tracks, his eyes hungry.

Marisol started off well enough, deftly balancing as she followed the line she could barely see in the murky air. But all that it took was one wrong footfall and she tumbled to the ground, unable to stop her skin from landing on the smooth glass that soon broke under her weight. The ragged edges tore into her willing flesh and the deep red of her blood glistened in the moonlight as she pulled herself to her feet and made her way to Liam. He washed her wounds as his lips were painted red, his mouth filling with sticky sweetness.

Then it was his turn, and he made his way carefully through the maze, arriving just a little further from where she'd fallen before he too went down. She tended to his injuries before getting up to start again, racing to finish the game before the first rays of sun warmed the grass and lit the world.

The only thing that mattered were those few seconds of freefall in the dark air. Without ever speaking a word, they both knew that they wouldn't stop until the daylight showed them the ground stained a vivid, captivating red.

ALL PEOPLE BECOME BROTHERS

JOSÉ GONZÁLEZ VARGAS

I remember the train. Back home, there were no trains. I had only seen them in badly-dubbed movies on TV.

I also remember the family. I don't know where they were from, but the father sat next to me while the mother and their three kids sat in the row in front of us. Agents in windbreakers walked up and down the aisle handing out bottled water and protein bars and checking our papers over and over.

We didn't know exactly when we entered Freiland. We passed through thick forests and made stops in toy-town villages filled with wooden houses and dull-looking locals with rosy cheeks. At one of these stops, the mother pointed at a billboard by the station. Back home, there were no billboards. There were no goods to sell and no money to buy.

I didn't speak Freish at the time but I knew enough English and French to guess what was on the sign. It read: "Freiland is The New Face of Europe." I took it as a good omen.

We travelled for what felt like a lifetime. The villages with tidy crop-fields slowly turned into large towns surrounded by rectangular steel and glass buildings that could have been shopping malls, factories, airport terminals or polytechnics. The children got restless and at a certain point – I don't remember exactly when – the mother made a video call to her relatives on an old smartphone. I didn't speak their language but I could sense the sadness underneath the illuminated smiles and the excited voices.

The train passed through small, clean cities throughout the night. Cobblestone roads and secular cathedrals with scaffolding like orthopaedic devices coexisted with six-lane avenues and state-of-the-art commercial towers with underground car parks and roof terraces. Back home, the buildings were neither new nor old, just rundown and unfinished.

We arrived in Croune, the capital of Freiland, at dawn.The Centraalbahnestation was a magnificent steel-and-glass behemoth showered by sunrise and surrounded by greenery.

It was so bright and clean that it made me feel dirty and unworthy. When the train entered the station we saw the Freiländers holding signs welcoming us in whatever languages they assumed we spoke.

My face was covered in tears as we paraded down a closed-off avenue, with officers on either side. I wiped them off with my mittens. I had never worn mittens before. Back home, there were no seasons. Only sun and rain.

There must have been between two hundred and two hundred and fifty of us. Some were taken to tents on the side of the road filled with photographers and official-looking people. I turned and saw the family one more time. They looked tired and confused as they stood for a picture next to a dull-looking, rosy-cheeked woman whom I recognized as the Prime Minister.

After a few blocks we found a barrier blocking the avenue and more tents where officers requested that we show our papers one more time. They divided us to board the buses that took us to the 'Centers'.

I remember my Center but wish I didn't.

Weeks became months and more people came than departed. We had heated discussions in the mess hall, with opinions ranging from indifference ("As long as it doesn't affect us, who cares?") to disappointment ("They promised us a house in six months!") to apologetic ("This is the first world, they must have a plan!"). My friend Pundit, who had an opinion on everything, argued that the government only supported immigration to get cheap workers, future taxpayers and to feel good about themselves. This didn't sit well with many of us. There were fights, but fights weren't unusual at the Center.

At that time Freiland was governed by an uneasy coalition led by the centre-left Socialist Labour Congress, the more moderate Liberal Democratic Alliance and the more radical The Right Left. Despite their differences, they agreed that 'potential citizens' – their term for us – were good and necessary. The opposition in parliament was headed by the conservative National Citizen Union and the Frei Freedom Front.

We learned about this last one, known as the 3F, early on. They would protest in front of the Centers, calling us all sorts of things. One time, one of them threw a defused hand grenade.

Eventually I was assigned a case worker and a shared public housing unit in a massive apartment block in the outskirts of Croune. Twice a week I had to go to an educational facility in the city centre where we had to prove our potential as citizens. They would train us in 'essential jobs' which ranged from taking care of the elderly to delivering meals or packages from online retailers. We also studied a simplified, stilted version of Freish and had to learn about the customs and culture of Freiland. After every session, I had to get a form signed by the class facilitator which then I had to submit to get my monthly stipend.

By then, the coalition had fallen apart in a no confidence vote. There was a general election but no government was formed. They tried again with the same results, so they tried once more. Despite their best attempts to explain all this at the facility, I couldn't grasp it at the time.

Now I understand it.

Pundit reappeared in my life around this time but I can't recall if we were classmates at the facility or if we saw each other in one of those long lines submitting paperwork. I know we talked about the general elections. He joked that Freiland was a modern and stable democracy where everyone felt disaffected with the government but not enough to do anything about it. Meanwhile, back home, a few were obscenely happy and everyone else was miserable and couldn't do anything about it.

We would sit on a bench in a concrete square adorned by a modern art sculpture, sometimes with others who I no longer remember, and spend hours comparing names for beans, flowers and root vegetables in our native tongues, or reminiscing about fad songs and trashy TV shows from our respective countries.

We also talked about our new home: the creepy girls in white tunics and candlelit crowns that offered hot wine at winter markets, the seemingly-amicable landlords and employers who threatened to call the police at the first sign of conflict, the excessive love towards cheese and pork, physicians that would refer you to other physicians that would refer you to other physicians, drunk and high teenagers yelling late at night on the metro, a dull-looking monarch with rosy cheeks whose only job apparently was to preside over football matches, parliament inaugurations and Christmas speeches. That was Freiland to us.

I will never forget the first time someone mentioned the Freiländer Naturalization. Nowadays, the term is used with the same vague understanding as' Stockholm Syndrome' or 'Manchurian Candidate'. At the time, it was just another rumour among asylum seekers, economic migrants and desperate foreign students seeking to extend their visas. Pundit not only swore it was real, but that his case worker was one of the public servants designated by the 3F-controlled Ministry of Minorities to select potential candidates.

A new government had finally been formed through a compromise between the five major parties which meant each bloc got a fifth of the seats in parliament. Pundit derided the naturalization as one of those novel policies designed to please as many voters as possible within a reasonable budget and regardless of the outcome. He wanted to be a Frei citizen, not to become a Freiländer.

I tracked down his case worker and had a long talk with her. She tried to dissuade me from applying. If I did, I would no longer be able to go back home, she said. Freiland's my new home, I responded. I would no longer be able to see my family, she argued. I hesitated. The image of my parents popped into my mind: educators who worked their entire lives for the betterment of a nation that gave them only a paltry pension and no sign of progress. I'm better off here, I answered.

After some consideration and the filling in many forms, I was accepted.

Memories of the naturalization process are buoys lost in fog. I was in a hospital bed, face down, unable to move. Doctors and nurses I could not see did all sorts of things to me. They poked a giant needle into my lower back and there were shots in the side of my head.

My skin started to blister and the staff would peel it off through a procedure that made me think of grating cheese. It reminded me of when my parents took me to the beach as a child and I got sunburned and later lay naked on the floor of my bedroom. I no longer remember the trip itself, just a memory in the memory.

Strong painkillers and sitcoms on Freiland Radio Television 2 helped my recovery. As the dosage decreased, my mind became clearer and I discovered, while watching a local remake of The Office, that I was not only following the conversations in Freish without missing a beat but also getting all the dialects, in-jokes and local references.

At the same time, the memories of my former life became distant, fragmented. One night, while watching the news, it took me a few minutes to realise that the filthy, sun-bleached streets of some poor, dusty country was the place where I had been born. I had to read the subtitles to understand what the interviewees were saying. Their dialect sounded harsh and shrill to my ears.

One day, after a long time, the head doctor, the case worker, and someone from the Ministry of Minorities came to see me. After answering a few routine questions that ranged from football championships to regional dishes and Eurovision contestants, they handed me an envelope with my new name and a citizenship card. I was discharged the very next day.

Now I'm an old man, living the old age my parents never had. I don't remember my parents' faces or what they told me when I departed for Europe and all that remains of my former language are a few awkward sounds.

My son is a successful attorney, representing some of Freiland's most important banking firms. He has a season ticket for FC Crouneer, a penthouse in the city overlooking the river and a beach house on the southern coast. Every other Sunday, he and his rosy-cheeked, dull-looking, blonde girlfriend have a meal with me and my wife filled with niceties and bland conversation. In other words, he's a Frei.

My daughter? Well, you know how university students are. They obsess about questioning everything except themselves. She says I'm a traitor to my identity, a bootlicker who sold his soul wholesale, someone who robbed her of her heritage. She doesn't know how fortunate she is to have been born here and not where I was or anywhere else.

Whether she likes it or not, she's also a Frei.

Last week, I saw Pundit again. I stopped to buy tobacco at a corner shop during a visit to the city and saw him organising a shelf filled with bags of crisps while a young man attended the cash-register. I assumed the cashier was his son but then I remembered that, like many who don't submit to naturalization, he might have accepted the alternative for rapid citizenship pushed by the Freedom Front: voluntary sterilisation.

He didn't recognize me, of course. I only knew it was him once he started to rail against the latest wave of immigrants, claiming that they were all lazy or criminal while he was honest and hard-working. His voice uncovered a trail of blinking memories amid the mental fog I'm still waiting to clear.

The cashier said that the old man might as well vote for the 3F.

Pundit fell silent, implying he might.

I guess Pundit is a Frei too.

MADRID BY THE HOUR

ELLEN MERRYWEATHER

It's six in the morning on the Madrid Metro.

Are you the one covered in glitter and sweat, hoping that your phone and wallet are still somewhere on your person? Feet sore, throat dry. Perhaps clutching the bag of McDonalds you're hoping will save you from feeling like shit tomorrow? It already is tomorrow.

Or are you sitting next to that person on your way to work, wishing you didn't have to wear such high heels or such a tight collar, or that you didn't live so far away from Plaza de Castilla? If you're lucky, you're nowhere near the Metro at this hour, and you're running around Madrid Rio in your T-shirt from the last Rock n Roll Media Maratón. Maybe you're in bed, listening to the flap of your neighbour's laundry and the bells of the neighbourhood church, trying to remember what you have to get out of bed for today. In the street below, the kiosks are opening, ready to sell you flowers, or bottled water and a fridge magnet, or a matcha latte and an architecture magazine.

Now it's midday on Gran Via. Are you freshly landed and slack-jawed, not believing that you get four whole floors of Primark to explore? Pushing slowly past the hordes of tourists and their guides, a paper bus map in your pocket? Still wrapping your tongue around the words sprinkled into your new day to day? Pueblo. Caña. Joder tia, que pesada. Or maybe you're older, standing impatiently at the traffic lights, eager to cross into Malasaña and be as far away from here as possible. Knowing that no sane person goes to Gran Via on a Saturday. Rolling your eyes at the queue for the Museo de Jamón. You savour your superiority complex, feeling more like a local.

What time of year is it, by the way? Do you feel like you're walking down the barrel of a hairdryer, or are your fingers sore with frost? It's usually one of the two and nothing between.

Four o'clock. Where are you? Walking your dog in Retiro park or trying to choose a new rug in a La Latina antiques shop? You could also be in class; CrossFit, painting, jujitsu, soap-making, salsa. Or are you in your best friend's new apartment? Eating pizza on their blow-up mattress, helping them choose a second-hand sofa on Wallapop and praying they won't ask you to help get it up the stairs.

The evening approaches, where are you heading? All you can eat sushi buffet, €15? One of the eighteen places claiming to have the best tortilla in the city - when really, the best is your mother-in-law's? An indoor market, with your back pressed against a stranger's, meerkat-ing your head above the crowd looking for that place with the good tacos? Or looking for the friend who disappeared to the bathroom half an hour ago and hasn't been seen since? You might be on a date. A first date, cocktails on a rooftop with the city sprawled under you. A fourth date, you're sprawled under them. You're in the Uber home, texting your friends 'this one is special', or wiping the tears from the corners of your eyes and hoping the driver doesn't see.

Night time in Madrid. What's your fancy? The drag establishments of Chueca, where the queens lip sync to flamenco and ABBA with equal gusto? The three storey techno clubs, or bars so small and intimate it feels like you're interrupting something when you walk inside? Stagger to the next bar with your friends, and get shushed by the security abuelas on their balconies when you sing too loudly.

Maybe you didn't do any of that today. You haven't been in the city at all. You escaped to a nearby town, somewhere with bad coffee and cheap beer, and not a single other foreigner in sight. Somewhere you can breathe the fresh air. You're driving home, the dust of Castilla La Mancha clinging to the wheels. A homecoming sigh when you see those seven stars on a crimson flag and sloping Torres on the skyline. You were only supposed to be here for a year, and now it's been seven. Overhead the aeroplanes hurtle towards Barajas.

You may go, but you must always come back again.

THE FINAL TERTULIA

ZEINA JANA

January, 1936 — one month before the General Elections.

On the night of the third of January, mist covered the peaks of the mountains on the outskirts of Madrid and from the north came a cold wind, howling ill-omens through the city's barrios. Surreptitious noises slithered along the narrow streets and the air was thick with a heavy, metallic stench. When the wind grew stronger, the stench was gruesome and repugnant. When it eased, a hint remained.

The night was old when the young poet found the unsealed letter on his doorstep. There were three sentences in the centre of the paper where it had been folded.The sentences were brief and straight to the point: a greeting with well wishes, an invitation, and a closing line that expressed hope in his attendance. There was no mention of the sender's name or any address. Typed on old, yellow paper, the letter eloquently asked him to come alone to the Café Gijon. The words were neutral. They neither alarmed nor excited the recipient.

The young poet looked at both sides of the street but there was no one. His eyes examined the paper, front and back, but even after another long examination he still could not tell who had sent it. Could it have been Don Vicente? Don Pablo? Both had no reason to send a letter anonymously. The young poets' eyes returned to his name in the first sentence; it was the only name the letter bore. There was no mistake. The invitation had been intended for him.

Though hesitant at first, the poet decided to take his chances. Two minutes later, curiosity and ambition set his pace through the foggy streets.

On the opposite side of the Paseo de Recoletos, the young poet noticed an altercation brewing. He took a deep breath and proceeded to the café door, a safe distance from the clamour. The door was bolted but after two jerks it gave way. He went inside, looking back only once at the angry shadows.

Inside was dark, warm and quiet.

Barely lit by multiple lanterns along the walls, the poet could just about make out the lines of tables and chairs hanging upside down. He took three steps closer to one of the windows. On the other side of the glass, the mist had thickened and now enveloped the street. The young poet could see nothing but whiteness. He tried to listen but no disruption came from behind the tightly-shut panes. The fighting must have ceased.The young poet waited a few minutes. Oddly, he noticed the mist was not moving. Perplexed by this strange phenomenon, he looked more closely to make sure that what he was seeing was indeed the case. Feeling a little disoriented, the young poet turned around.

The café was still sunk in semi-darkness. Still quiet. Not a single soul had joined him. It was as though he'd crossed into a different realm, detached from the world outside.The air felt foreign and lonesome, the silence sharp, almost cutting. The young poet began to wonder if he'd fallen victim to a hoax until a cough arose, chilling the marrow in his thin bones, erasing any doubts.

"Young Miguel?" asked a voice from the dark.

Miguel froze.

A moment passed and the gentle voice repeated its question.

The young poet took a step sideways in the direction of the voice, then another. A flame in a lantern flickered and the silhouette of a figure came into sight. Miguel froze again. As the flame flickered brighter, the speaker's form turned distinct. It was a lean man with a long beard sitting upright on a red velvet seat far in the corner. Over his head on the wall was Joaquín Sorolla's portrait of Benito Pérez Galdós, reigning over the room like a dearly missed, benevolent monarch.

"Don Ramón!" Miguel gasped, mouth hanging open in shock. The young poet immediately recognised the playwright and his eyes went down in search of the vacant sleeve for further confirmation. How many men in Madrid walked around with a waist-length beard and one amputated arm?

"Don't interrupt me, my son. Please sit down."

"But I didn't -." Miguel stopped and tried to remember if he'd unconsciously said something and interrupted the playwright. He sat on the opposite side of the nearest table.

"You're early of course," said Don Ramón. "Vicente did say you were punctual."

Miguel was early. He'd been back in the capital for two years and was making an effort to be accepted by his peers. Madrid was where poets thrived, and Madrid was where he wanted to establish ties with the literary world.

He was content and grateful that Don Vicente and Don Pablo had embraced him when others would not. Still it had not been easy, and every now and then he sensed himself falling into an abyss of obscurity and instability. The young poet struggled with everything, including finding work, when all he wished for was a herd of goats he could sit down by and write verses coated with the soil of Orihuela's earth.

While they waited for 'others', Miguel fidgeted in his chair. Every now and then he glanced in the direction of his host, wondering if he should say something to entertain him or remain silent. But the playwright, whose eyes were fixed on the top of the cane in his hand, seemed thoughtful and distant, so the young poet held his peace.

Five minutes had passed in total silence when the door burst open and a formally-dressed procession marched into the café like the leading choir at a carnival.

Miguel, turning in his chair, blinked twice. He could not believe the scene in front of his eyes. The faces were ones he'd only ever dreamed of seeing jumbled together on the frontpage of a newspaper's special issue, never physically present in the same place. The arcadian poet considered his own attire, his old espadrilles and large corduroy trousers and, as always, felt out of place.

Leading the procession were two couples conversing and struggling to hear each other over the loud hubbub. Miguel knew Rafael, and he knew María Teresa as well, and, to their right, he identified Ramón J. Sender and Amparo Barayón. Behind them, Arturo Barea and José Díaz Fernández were engaged in conversation. Alone at the back, distant and pondering, was Don Miguel de Unamuno, his cheekbones and forehead a little ruddy, his eyes round and wide behind a pair of ring-shaped glasses, his beard and hair the purest white.

After spotting the young poet at the table, the noise stifled until it was quiet again. Though he was intimidated by their presence, Miguel met the company's stares with equal intent, his green eyes shimmering with unconcealed awe and admiration.

"Good evening, Ramón. What is this?" Don Miguel was the first to inquire.

"Good evening, everyone. Have a seat. Before we begin, this is Vicente's friend, Señor Miguel Hernández," said the playwright, introducing the twenty-six-year-old. "He's a poet."

"And where is Vicente?" asked Don Miguel as he took his place next to Valle-Inclán. "I don't see him."

"He wasn't invited, lucky for him," answered the playwright, sadness in the last words.

The young poet's eyes were fixed on the Basque philosopher, studying his attire and demeanour. The philosopher sat upright, oozing confidence. He dusted off his sleeves, though his buttonless and tieless suit didn't have a speck of dust on them. He took off his beret and laid it on his lap, never for a moment losing his regal air.

"May I ask why you had to bring us to this eerie place?" Don Miguel's eyes met those of his friend Benito for a brief moment. "We could've done this at the Ateneo. It would've been more convenient. The streets aren't particularly safe these days."

"I wanted somewhere casual. I thought the Gijon or the Montaña would be nice, but I have bad memories of the latter so here we are," said Don Ramón, shrugging.

"Well, just keep in mind that I retire at eight-thirty," said Don Miguel to Don Ramón while the others were placing their chairs around the table.

"Have no worries, this won't take long," said the playwright. "Where are Manuel and Antonio?"

"Who?" asked José Díaz Fernández a little absent-mindedly as he finally settled in his chair.

"Chaves Nogales? Machado? Amparo! Look at you!" said the playwright, changing his tone from serious to warm in a second.

Amparo touched her pregnant belly and smiled. "Almost there," she announced.

"And still working?" asked María Teresa.

Amparo said she was involved in more than one activity at present. Her husband flashed a proud smile.

"How committed!" said María Teresa, genuinely impressed.

The door of the café opened and Manuel came in with Antonio, the former waving a piece of paper up in the air.

"There they are," said Don Miguel. Tapping his watch, he said, "Shall we begin?"

"Make tonight an exception, Don Miguel," said Ramón in an exasperated manner, rolling his eyes.

"Eight-thirty, Señor Sender," he insisted. "Please ."

“Good evening, friends and colleagues,” said Manuel, settling himself in a chair he’d grabbed from a nearby table. “Sorry I’m late but I come with great tidings.”

Antonio, calm and serene as always, waved his hand over the crowd and greeted them before he grabbed a chair. Barea, Sender, and Díaz Fernández, who’d been evoking common bad memories, stopped to listen to what the Sevillan journalist had to say.

“Señor Sender, allow me to congratulate you,” said Manuel, passing the note to the novelist.

Sender took the note and scanned it with his eyes.

“Quick, share the news with the rest of us!” said Arturo. “You can’t keep us hanging here.”

“Míster Witt en el canton has won the National Award,” said Manuel in a broadcasting voice.

Applause and cheers erupted.

“Glory be to your pen, señor Sender,” said Arturo. “Pray I don’t pick up mine or else it is over for all of you.”

“You would be a most excellent rival, Señor Barea. Thank you, everyone. Yes, yes, thank you. I was only told of the news moments before coming here.” A grateful smile showing on his face, Ramón looked in the direction of his wife and added, “By the end of the year we’ll have had plenty to celebrate.”

Amparo smiled back and took her husband’s hand. They were expecting their second child.

“Congratulations, Señor Sender,” said Don Miguel. “I agree that this announcement is worthy of a celebration, but may we please proceed?”

“Yes please, let us commence,” said Sender, agreeing with the Basque philosopher for once.

Valle-Inclán supported himself on his cane and struggled to stand up. Young Miguel wanted to help but the playwright ushered him away with the hand that held the cane. His sleeve hung loose in the air. Now that the lantern was closer to his face, his features looked noticeably withered. “Fellow writers,” he started.

Everyone stopped talking at once.

Don Miguel took a piece of paper out of his breast pocket and laid it in front of him on the table. The playwright stopped for a brief moment to watch him. “Fellow writers,” he went on, “poets, playwrights, journalists, revolutionaries, republicans, trade unionists…”

“Hold on, Ramón,” interrupted Don Miguel, raising his right hand in protest. The philosopher analysed the faces around the table. He waited to see if anyone else was going to say anything. “What is the nature of this meeting exactly?”

“Well, Miguel, I have gathered you here tonight so we could mourn,” announced the playwright.

Silence.

Don Miguel was the first to cut through it. “Yes, mourn. Life, death, suffering and the uncertainty in between. The tragic sense of life,” he said, thinking of something beyond the physical setting he was in.

“Mourn who, Don Ramón?” asked María Teresa, bringing them all back.

“Care to explain?” added Rafael.

The playwright took a deep breath. How could he put lightly that which weighed so heavily? Antonio said the playwright’s name in an inquisitive tone. “There will be a time, very near, when you will all be either gone or in faraway lands.”

Amparo released her husband’s hand and placed hers on her belly.

“This is very unfit for a jest,” said Ramón.

“But this isn’t a jest. My life has come to an end and it is my duty to warn you of what awaits us.” The playwright swayed his cane, keeping the end pinned to the ground. “Another friend was supposed to be here but he decided not to attend. I wasn’t sure if he could do that but, as you can see, he isn’t here, so, obviously, he could and he did. Though I am not sure that will help him dodge anything.”

The air in the café changed and young Miguel’s face darkened. He’d been watching the attendees’ faces closely and individually. It appeared that, just like him, they did not know what was going on. He wanted to say something but quickly stopped himself. The others had said all that needed to be said. But what if this were some sick trick to alienate him further? Were they all that good at playing their parts in Don Ramón’s little play?

“Yes, we will all perish sooner or later,” Don Ramón proceeded. “Some of us sooner than the others, but, alas, it will eventually happen. I have gathered you here so you could have one last look at what was, and what will never again be. What we’ve had was something special, something the world will never have again. Every word you’ve written, every stanza, every story that was in the service of us all, will be cherished forever. Some of your words might disappear for a while, but words can travel far and they can survive the trial of passing time. Long

after you are gone, there will be a time when you will find a way back into this world. You'll exist in other languages and the world will know of you and your work. It will know, and it will mourn."

Don Miguel's fingers stopped over the shape of a bird he'd just finished folding. He wouldn't look up. For some reason they all knew the meeting was over.

Valle-Inclán has lost it, the others thought. Agitated, Sender helped his wife up and helped her to the door. María Teresa and Rafael didn't wait a minute longer and Arturo, Manuel, and José followed suit. A shiver went down the young poet's spine. Seeing that only Don Miguel and Don Antonio had stayed behind, Don Antonio most probably to have a word with the playwright after everyone else had left, he decided it was time for him to leave as well.

When Miguel opened the café door and stepped outside, he saw the mist had evaporated into pinching cold air and the street was loud with the cries of fighting men. The trouble had now spread to both sides of the street, with men running back and forth across the middle of the moonlit road. María Teresa and Rafael were standing in front of the café, watching the scuffles from a distance.

"Señor Alberti?" asked Miguel anxiously.

The couple turned at the same time.

"Miguel," said Rafael, acknowledging him.

"How do you intend to avoid the fighting?" asked Miguel.

"We'll find a way," said Rafael.

It was true that the young poet had learned enough about Madrid by then, but he was yet to learn its secret ways and alleys.

"Why don't you go that way and we'll go this way... see what we can find," said Rafael, pointing at two narrow alleys engulfed by darkness. María Teresa was growing tense.

Miguel looked in the direction of the alleys Rafael had pointed at and hesitated. The battle had turned violent and blood was running down the lines separating the wet cobblestones under their feet. Seeing that they didn't offer him to come along with them, Miguel had no choice but to acquiesce to their suggestion. Slowly, he entered the mouth of the other suggested alleyway.

After walking quickly for a few minutes with only his noisy breath for company, Miguel arrived at a dead end. He swore and turned on his heel, running back to the café's door. With each step the shouting and angry violence grew noisier and closer.

Rafael and María Teresa were nowhere to be seen. He waited in front of the closed door, pressed into the cold wall, until he realised he was on his own and the scuffle, bloody and inescapable, was closing in on him from both sides.

The young poet pressed his face to the café's window and looked inside. The lanterns had gone off. Valle-Inclán, Unamuno, and Machado were in their chairs, their bodies still, a dark shadow cast upon their stern features.

They looked closer to a painting than animate humans.

The young poet looked around and far beyond what lay around.

Seeing a battlefield he could not cross alone, Miguel caught himself whispering, "Aquí hay mucha **** y mucho hijo de ****"

MMA MADU IS A PATIENT WOMAN

CHIDIMA ANEKWE

A small throng of hopeful passengers waited patiently at the station. Mma Madu waited patiently at the station. Patiently, meaning irritably. But in a certain comported manner - for Mma Madu had tact. She understood how she was meant to behave. She was 65 years of age, a fact that she still had trouble believing. But she didn't mind evoking its power in times of trouble, like when one might doubt whether or not she knew how to behave. She'd been on this earth long enough. She had every right to scold the petulant children of strangers when their foolish parents were too timid, or perhaps apathetic, to do so for themselves. She'd always wait of course and give them the chance to prove their ability. Patiently, meaning irritably.

The train was running over twenty minutes late.

Mma Madu had a child of her own. A daughter, now 35 years of age. She worked abroad in the sales industry and rarely came home to visit. On account of the distance, the expensive airfare, general busyness, it was quite common for one not to see their child for years on end, you understand. Mma Madu understood. She would be seeing her daughter that very day, at the very least. She had no reason to complain.

And her daughter had picked a fair place to relocate. She wasn't impartial to London. There were lots of other Nigerians in the city, though most of them were Yoruba rather than Igbo like herself, it appeared. She appreciated this fact nevertheless, though she tried not to think too long and hard about the reason why. And the people were straightforward. Mma Madu rarely had to worry about whether or not a waitress or cashier was being insincere when they spoke to her. There was rarely small talk to interrogate. She had little doubt this was the general experience.

An announcement over an intercom stated there'd be another fifteen minutes delay. Until this point, Mma Madu had remained standing with her suitcase, out of principle. She was not some frail, ageing woman who couldn't handle waiting on two feet. But upon hearing the announcement, Mma Madu relented. She found a spot on the bench and settled herself into it. There was a pimply teenage girl one metre away, and she reminded her of her daughter. She had never been a terribly good-looking sort of girl. She hadn't been fortunate enough to inherit her mother's features. Mma Madu recognized this, though not with any degree of self-aggrandisement. It disheartened her.

The girl caught the sense of Mma Madu's staring at her, and met her eye. Mma Madu offered her a kind smile. The girl swiftly went back to reading something on her phone. Mma Madu sighed.

She remembered when she was young, and her smile used to elicit ones like it in return. Sometimes she laid in bed at night and thought of all the men she could have slept with and never did, and now never would, if she hadn't been too cowardly or too proud or too satisfied too soon, of the time she might have saved if she hadn't been forced to spend hours sitting in a chair each month to get her hair plaited, and then how she might have never slept with anyone at all if she hadn't, of how a dark part of her had always known her husband would grow tired of her the year her forehead began to wrinkle and she would be forced to make regular trips to the drugstore in search of black hair dye, of how she wished she hadn't married the first man to knock on her parents' door, of the guilt in that this would mean her daughter had never been born, of how her daughter maybe resented her for having allowed it all to happen anyway, despite the outcome of her birth. Of how her daughter still wasn't married at thirty-five and maybe it was because she never had had her mother's looks, and for this she did pity her, but sometimes it felt like her daughter wasn't married because she pitied her, instead. And this made her sick.

Mma Madu prayed that the train would arrive at last. She wasn't getting any younger.

FROM 'EPIC MADRID'

EVA GENICOT

Epic wake-up in Madrid (a plot)

Awakened by a series of nervous knocks at the door, I gather what little Spanish consciousness I can muster to call out [¿Quién es?] from the mezzanine but instead of clearly announcing himself the morning intruder launches into an enthusiastic tirade of which I don't understand a single word. After Herculean, sleepy efforts to get down and reach the door, I open it warily [Who could it be? No one knows I live here, in this holiday rental] but open it nonetheless [in case it's a neighbour, or the landlord delivering important news] on a man in his thirties, all smiles, wearing a grey suit and a very specific shade of green tie [I immediately think it's some kind of uniform] and as he strings together sentences at an impressive speed [Where does one sentence end? Where does another begin?] I realise that he's neither a neighbour nor the landlord. [So, who is he? What world does this uniform hail from? Is the man a Jehovah's Witness? A member of a Fraternity dressed up for Holy Week?] I ask him once more who he is and manage, amid the flow of seamlessly blending words, to make out his name: Daniel – followed by another incomprehensible monologue. This is when he waves brochures in front of my heavy-lidded eyes, making it clear that he wants to come in and talk with me, despite the obvious state of darkness from which I've just emerged, dishevelled in my flowery pyjamas. Wait a minute. I'm starting to get it. This man is a true salesman. The unstoppable kind. Yes, I can feel it, he's got something to sell me. I can't really put my finger on what that is, but my intuition tells me: religion. Struck, not by grace but by an overly peppy wake-up after a short night's sleep [Madrid me mata, etc.], my heart cries out an irrefutable answer in three steps: "No. Gracias. Buenos días." All day long, I keep thinking about Daniel, about his green tie, about his grey suit. Damn it, Daniel! I couldn't get back to sleep after you left. What did you want from me?

The following week, as I finish a chicken empanada while strolling past the storefronts on Corredera Alta de San Pablo – designer windows, a pleasantly named bar called Pharmacy on Duty, and a real estate agency renting tiny central studios at exhorbitant prices - there he is!

Yes, it's Daniel, in his grey suit and green tie. With the same energy and enthusiasm he had when he knocked on my door, he asks me in Spanish if he can help me with anything, pointing to the real estate ads. I reply "No thanks" as if I knew him (and indeed, I do). I suddenly realise, as my eyes move from the ads to his tie and from his tie back to the ads, that green and grey are the agency's colours. He nods at me, cheerfully pushes open the glass door and bounces in with a spring in his step. My intuition is confirmed: his enthusiasm is indeed that of a true believer. The good news he's delivering door-to-door is the gentrification of Malasaña, which begins every morning, bright and early.

Street level philosophy in Madrid

At the bottom of Calle de Carretas, which ascends from Sol towards Plaza Benavente, two elderly men struggle up the slight incline, dragging their tired bodies with extreme slowness. It seems as though they are moving imperceptibly, one foot just about placed in front of the other. As I pass them, I hear that the situation is dire, that The city has changed, that Tourists are everywhere, that Pigeons are proliferating, and that No one is doing anything. Only one of the two companions is speaking, while the other simply nods. Passing them, I enter a clothing store a bit further up the street. When, ten minutes later, I emerge empty-handed, they have just reached the store's vicinity. The situation has worsened. Everything is falling apart. Entrepreneurs have to do everything themselves. And the bureaucracy! No one is doing anything. Then: Did you see all those pigeons? The other one agrees silently. Passing them again, I arrive at a supply store at the top of the street, where I buy a notebook and linger a bit before continuing on my way. I find again the two men, now stopped, at Plaza Benavente, not far from a group of pigeons engaged in an urban brunch. The situation is now desperate: I distinctly hear the words total decline. I open my notebook to write down the stages of the apocalypse and a third occurrence of No one is doing anything. A poem also comes to my mind.

City complaint
Tourists, tourists everywhere,
Like pigeons flying in the air
BnB, filled with latte clouds
Sunday vendors have no licence
Expats dream of new roots
Madrid, Melanchaos City

Gazing absentmindedly towards Madrid's Museum of Illusions, the silent old man, relentlessly exposed to the verbal collapse of his city, suddenly splits his companion flow of words with a smile from which a few words emerge: If they did everything right, what would we complain about, huh? The other is left stunned. As I head down towards Lavapiés, I see pigeons everywhere.

Mystery chase through the streets of Madrid!
Calle de los Coloreros, two black guys carrying large, white potato sacks (full of what?) over their shoulders, run through the crowd, losing two police motorcycles without sirens – observed by an entire terrace of San Ginés Chocolate Factory customers, witnesses caught in the act with chocolate on their fingers, frozen mid-bite with churros lightly held in the air and which begin, as they resume their delicacies, making delicious guesses about what just happened.
A week later, Plaza Tirso de Molina, on a dozen white sheets spread out on the ground, African vendors offer sunglasses, souvenirs, glowing gadgets; Louis Vuitton bags, football t-shirts, cheap luxury. The collection of stalls forms a genuine little market. But a feeling of uneasiness and volatility hangs over the place, as if something were about to happen. As if it were a launch pad for parachutists. Or the starting line of a jockey competition. Or perhaps the countdown to the start of a dog-walkers' urban race. Each vendor holds in hand the four gathered threads which, attached to the four corners of the sheets, enable their sudden folding – and suddenly they fold them, the sheets, the stalls, the parachutes, the market itself, and start running, chased by silent motorcycle police, running just with their feet, no dog, no horse, a disorganised race of men carrying over the shoulder their swiftly bundled up counter (now looking like a large white potato sack) – they run, scattering the market across the many streets of the neighbourhood, while simultaneously dispersing the speculations made, in their respective languages, by the customers of the San Ginés chocolate factory, in the earlier paragraph.

The Void

Travels along the Spain-Portugal border in the Arribes del Duero Natural Park by award-winning writer **Emma Willsteed**

The edge of the gorge was eluding me, all 100 kilometres of it. Some time ago I was seduced by tales of hypnotic changes of light in the depths of the canyon and a craggy, expansive beauty that quietens the mind. I was told about smugglers tying ropes around their waist to swim across its river, evading guard posts stationed on high, about children hurling balls across the water from the Spanish to the Portuguese side, and the richness of its flora and fauna. Yet after hours of walking, this formidable natural border between the two countries still hadn't revealed itself.

I had set off early from my guesthouse in Fermoselle, a town in the Arribes del Duero Natural Park on the western edge of Castile and León. An elegant woman in a produce store urged me to carry enough water. The spring temperature was abnormally high, she warned, and very high at that.

I walked west racing the sun as it arced over the Meseta Central, through old fruit, olive and vine terraces cut into the steep hills. Some were still tended, the soil clear and ploughed, neat lines curving round the thick trunks of stately trees. But many were unkempt, long grasses dotted with poppies, daisies and vetches, unintended rewilding from ongoing depopulation and subsidies to rip out vines decades before.

Stormy skies blocked the sun and held the heat close to the ground. I headed down increasingly isolated tracks, past collapsing old walls and abandoned stone shelters, trying to make sense of the map scrawled by my enthusiastic, but impatient, host at breakfast. With flourishes from an ostrich-feather pen she had drawn an obvious route, she said, but it translated into confusion on the ground. Her landmarks were not obvious to me, still unfamiliar with this environment, and after too many wrong turns I retraced my steps back to Fermoselle. Later, when I tried to explain myself, she snorted with incredulity.

I dampened my disappointment with a beer in the small, irregular Plaza Mayor, watching young children race around brightly coloured cones for sports day. None were older than 12, the birthrate so diminished that they now had to travel to bigger towns for secondary school. Fermoselle, balanced on a rocky outcrop just a few kilometres from the gorge, was once the region's capital, a thriving and successful society for centuries.

The castle that stood guard imperiously over the plains and the gorge is long gone, along with all records of its size. Only part of the foundations remain after it was destroyed in the 1520s, a punishment following the Castilian uprising against the rule of King Charles I.

Now the town's population swells in the summer months, mostly with tourists who explore the gorge and natural park and visit this town of a thousand cellars.

I'm told that in medieval times you could disappear underground into a network of chambers hacked out of the granite, travelling from one side of town to the other in secret. These cellars were used as wineries, with a side hustle of smuggling: contraband being passed through small windows that linked the underground chambers.

The clues to this extraordinary world are still visible, the 'respiradores' at street level, metal grates in the pavements that funnel fresh air to those working below.

A local winemaker, Charlotte Allen, who is English but known here as Carlotta la Francesa, led me into the belly of a hillside at the western end of town, where one cavern led into another and yet another. The air was cool and still, the sound muffled. At the back of the final chamber she showed me seven steps that led into a small pool of cold water, chest deep. Stone benches had been carved into the walls. This, she said, is believed to be evidence of Jewish rituals held in secret. I put my hand on the smooth stone: a link to Jews fleeing the Inquisition, hiding their faith in Fermoselle, trying to stay alive.

Back at street level the light was falling in disjointed shafts between the tall, narrow buildings. I was unsettled by this world of secrets, chambers of heartbreak and persecution and resilience. The urge to escape the streets that twisted back on themselves, hiding the sun and playing with my head, became all-consuming. I crossed the square back to the guesthouse, postponing my search for the edge of the gorge until morning.

With another hot day forecast I set off at dawn – this time with a map from the natural park office. I drove north along a winding road lined with wildflowers, a riotous mashup of purples, yellows and whites: lavender, broom and cistus. Here the landscape was softer, opening out into small wheat and barley fields framed with old chestnut and oak trees. Dotted at irregular intervals were enormous granite boulders resting at improbable angles. I clambered up one and listened to nightingales before my heart skipped. In the distance was a glimpse of a void, an edge that disappeared into the gorge.

Each kilometre deeper into this landscape and I slipped further into the liminal space between the old Spain and the new. Somewhere on the vast plateau just a few hours from vibrant, wealthy Madrid I had crossed into an older way of being; quieter, more conservative and austere.

Just outside one village, I watched a cowherd leading her cows between pastures. Her footsteps were surprisingly quick and light, her face deeply tanned and lined and, apart from her hands, no other part of her body was exposed. Even in the unseasonal heat she was wearing black tights, a thick jacket and a headscarf. She urged the herd onwards, but they were in no rush, the grass was still lush and humming with insects.

Here in one of Spain's poorest regions the effects of 'la España vaciada', the emptying rural landscape and lack of investment, is tangible. Graffitied bus shelters with broken windows, too-quiet villages with many houses left empty or used only at weekends or in the holidays. Farms limping on or completely abandoned, the old granite walls demarcating fields crumbling into heaps. But there is still belief in what is special here. The endangered black Sayaguesa cattle, once bred for work but now reared for meat. The winemakers reviving vineyards and unique varieties, finally recognised with their own Arribes denomination. The award-winning cheeses. I rounded a corner into a herd of several hundred black goats, bells ringing, jostling their way down the middle of the road. At the back was a teenage girl in dark jeans and a vest top, earphones in as she walked behind them. I wondered if she would stay, with her vigour and vitality, or whether the exuberant energy of urban life would lure her away.

I left the car in the shade of an old cork tree and headed down ancient tracks that led me through ancient lifetimes.

Across bridges built from immense blocks of granite, grooves chiselled down their sides where they had been crafted into a useable form. Past water channels, now dry, that would once have funnelled streams to turn the mill-wheels. Now the mill-houses sit silently, doors closed and dusty. Everywhere were wizened holm oaks covered in lichen, their main boughs still regularly shaped and trimmed. On one, I found rusted wolf traps hanging from a branch. The wolves are still here, but the shepherds are dying out.

I could sense the gorge now. The light was clean and strong and the air moved differently, a powerful flow across the open landscape. Clambering over rocks I stopped suddenly as the ground fell away. I was on the edge of a ravine, a breath-catching plunge of 400 metres down jagged sides to the jade River Duero.

Vultures and eagles rode the thermals, dropping to skim the tops of the low bushes and small trees that clung to the unforgiving granite.

I stood looking across to Portugal, hypnotised by the winding river heading to Porto and out into the Atlantic. It was as awe-inspiring as promised. The scale and solidity soothed my disquieting sense of old ways of being folded into history, of a region finding new ways to bridge the void between what was and what will be.

Emma Willsteed grew up in Hong Kong and now lives in Sussex, England. She won Bradt's New Travel Writer of the Year in 2023 while finishing an MA in Nature and Travel Writing at Bath Spa University. She has written for Traveller Magazine, Echtrai Journal and Seaside Gothic.

vagabond life

Mark Eveleigh – whose new book, Vagabond: A Hiker's Homage to Rural Spain, about walking Spain from top to bottom has been named one of '6 top travel reads for 2024 by National Geographic magazine – once lived in Madrid.

"Yes, I moved to Madrid in 1996 when a Spanish girlfriend invited me to use her flat as a writing base," he explains. "Although I knew Spain well, the capital was something of a mystery."

"I was writing my first travel book - about a Borneo expedition I'd led the previous year - sponsored, bizarrely, by Heineken - and a third-floor studio on Calle de Lope de Vega in the Barrio de las Letras sounded like it ought to offer sufficient inspiration for a struggling writer. I finished the book, switching my allegiance from Heineken to Mahou in the process, and then lived in Madrid for a further six years."

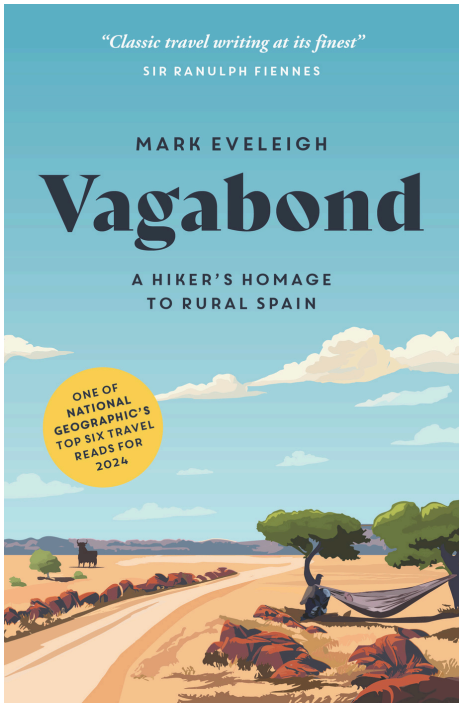
In Vagabond (Summerscale), Mark makes a 1,225 km solo walk across the Iberian Peninsula, from Gibraltar to Estaca de Bares, Spain's most northerly tip, with only a backpack and a hammock. The highly readable travelogue peppers history and salty anecdotes over the tale of Mark's walk. Who, I wonder, are his travel writer heroes?

"Well, anyone with a love for both Spain and for words in general is likely to consider Laurie Lee a literary god. He was the greatest influence for me to set out on the hike. In hindsight the trek might well have had its conception in something of a midlife crisis: after decades working on magazine and newspaper-assignments all over the world, I wanted to get back to basics, roughing it with just a hammock for a bed in the style of my early rambles as a young hobo-backpacker. Anyone who's read the book might agree that perhaps I made an error of judgement at the ripe old age of 55 in trying to match strides with the 19-year-old Laurie Lee.

"I also read a lot of Spanish and Latin American writers but international literary heroes who set me on the path as an author were Kerouac, Theroux, Twain, London, Steinbeck and - driven by my fascination for Spain - Orwell, Michener and, of course, Hemingway. He once famously said that 'the most essential gift for a good writer is a built-in, shockproof, shit detector.' In recent years I've struggled to re-read Hemingway - after all, he was not averse to a little B.S. himself.

As for meeting living legends, a recent unexpected literary highlight for me came during an assignment when I met the 80-year-old writer and ex-boxer Mohamed Mrabet in Tangier.

"He told me stories of his early life and friendships with Kerouac, Capote, Hemingway, William Burroughs and Tennessee Williams...and his eventual fall-out with Paul Bowles. Tangier might not have been everyone's cup of tea during that playboy era but Mrabet's tales of everyone from Woolworths heiress Barbara Hutton to Rolling Stones Keith Richards kept me entertained through several hours of mint teas. I was on assignment for National Geographic Holland so, sadly the story was only published in Dutch."



history queen

All bow to María Dueñas. By James Hartley.

Maria Dueñas is working on a new, top-secret novel which is due to be published in November 2025. This will be the latest in a line of best-sellers from the 61-year-old Puertollano-born writer which started with 2009's global best-seller The Seamstress.

Dueñas and her team are remaining tight-lipped on the subject of the new book, but chances are it will be a tightly-researched historical novel in the line of The Heart Has Its Reasons and Las hijas del Capitán. "To gather information, I use all kinds of resources," she says, when asked about her research methods.

"Academic and popular works, literature, maps and photographs, contemporary newspapers and also personal testimonies of people linked to the time and space I intend to write about. Because of my personality, which needs structure, and also because of my academic background, I plan a lot before I start writing. I set the scenes and block out each moment, build the characters, decide on the tone and outline the skeleton of the novel. Only when all this is clear to me do I start writing."

The academic background she talks about was a PhD in Philology and a stint at an American University. "I always liked language and linguistics," Dueñas says, "both Spanish and English; I chose philology over literature because of that. I studied English Philology at the Complutense University of Madrid, then I did a Masters in Spanish at Michigan State University, and then a PhD again in English Philology at the University of Murcia. The interest was always maintained, divided between the two languages."

I ask her to tell me about Michigan. How was her experience in the States?

"Oh, it was magnificent!" she enthuses. "Two years of a Master's that I combined with a scholarship as a Teaching Assistant - teaching Spanish to American students. I made friends from different countries, really enjoyed the campus life and had a great time. It all generated in me an enormous affection for the United States, which is still intact."

As she'd alluded to earlier, with her research, in many ways Dueñas´ academic experience has informed her work as a historical novelist. "Yes, although the academic world is very foreign to creative writing, I transferred many of the skills from then to my procedures for writing fiction," she agrees.

Before she leaves – rushing off to oversee more adaptations of her novels and original ideas for the screen, and to prepare for the Guadalajara Book Fair in Mexico at the end of November - I have to ask her which books she read as a child – and did she write?

"Well, I was always a curious child and a good reader," she replies, "and this was also encouraged by my parents, who often gave us books as presents and told us stories and tales every night. Depending on the stage of my childhood, I read different authors; I remember Enid Blyton's books - all her

collections: The Famous Five, The Secret Seven, Malory Towers. But no, I didn't write, despite being quite an imaginative child."
Making up for lost time, Maria Dueñas heads off into her busy future with more dreams of the past to entice us with.

¿Qué importancia tenía la literatura para usted de niña, María? ¿Qué leía? ¿Escribía?
Siempre fui una niña curiosa y buena lectora, y eso además lo estimulaban mis padres, que nos regalaban libros a menudo y nos contaban cuentos e historias todas las noches. Según las distintas etapas de mi niñez leí autores diferentes; recuerdo por ejemplo los libros de Enid Blyton en todas sus colecciones: Los Cinco, Los Siete Secretos, Torres de Malory, Santa Clara... Pero no, no escribía, a pesar de ser una niña bastante imaginativa.

¿Por qué decidió estudiar filología inglesa? Alcanzó el nivel de doctorado, ¿qué mantuvo su interés?
Me gustaba mucho desde siempre la lengua, la lingüística, tanto la española como la inglesa; elegí filología por eso, más que por la literatura. Estudié Filología Inglesa en la Universidad Complutense de Madrid, hice luego un Master of Arts en Español en Michigan State University, y después un doctorado de nuevo en Filología Inglesa en la Universidad de Murcia. El interés se mantuvo siempre, repartiéndose entre las dos lenguas.

¿Puede hablarnos de su experiencia estudiando en EE.UU.? ¿Alguna reflexión?
Fue una experiencia magnífica, dos años de master que combine a la vez con una beca como Teaching Assistant en mi universidad, enseñando español a estudiantes

norteamericanos. En principio pensé seguir allí con el doctorado, pero finalmente opté por regresar a España. Pero fue una decisión difícil, porque fue un tiempo estupendo: tuve profesores y compañeros excelentes, conocí un tipo de enseñanza muy distinto al español de entonces, hice amigos de países distintos, disfruté mucho la vida de campus... Todo ello generó en mí un enorme afecto por los Estados Unidos, que se mantiene intacto.

¿Qué le espera en el futuro, a finales de este año y el siguiente?
Estoy terminando una nueva novela que confío en que se publique el año que viene. Ando implicada además en varios proyectos audiovisuales, tanto de adaptaciones de mis obras como de desarrollo de ideas originales. Tengo previstos además varios viajes vinculados, como la Feria del Libro de Guadalajara (México) a finales de noviembre. Así que me espera mucha actividad por delante...

avión de papel flies in

The poet laureate's in town. By James Hartley

Britain's poet laureate Simon Armitage is visiting Spain to publicise his first collection of poems in Spanish, Avión de papel (Impedimenta). Translated by Jordi Doce, who has translated Blake, Eliot, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes into English, among many others, the collection takes in poems from Zoom!, which made Armitage's name in 1989, through Kid (1992), Book of Matches (1993) and excerpts from his versions of Homer's Odyssey (2006) – he also adapted the Iliad into a play which ran at Shakespeare's Globe – and the Arthurian adventure Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (2007). It ends with three poems from 2016's The Unaccompanied.

"I've been to Madrid twice before," Armitage says, "and to Spain many times, mainly as a tourist to Pollensa in Mallorca, but also to Salamanca and Seville a number of times to poetry events with the British Council and in conjunction with Sibila magazine and Juan Carlos Marset. I love Spain. To me it's a very romantic country and there's a connection with the laureateship going back to the 17th century - the UK Poet Laureate receives a barrel of sherry from the sherry producers in Jerez, and I had a great time there, visiting the bodegas. Of course, Spain are better at football than we are, which is very annoying."

I ask him about the laureateship. How does he explain it to people, and to himself?

“Well, it isn't really a job, more of a position,” he replies. “I have some ceremonial and bureaucratic duties but no poetic obligations, so I can interpret the role however I please.” He thinks about it. “It's certainly a great opportunity to achieve things. I've established the Laurel Prize, an international prize for eco/nature poetry. I've embarked on a decade-long tour of UK libraries and I'm developing a National Poetry Centre in Leeds.

“I've also chosen to write about public events and news stories - something I've been doing all my poetic life. I guess you might say the post is mainly ambassadorial but it's one I take very seriously and practice with great pride, speaking up for my chosen art form.”

And why now, the decision to publish his collected poetry in Spanish? After all, Paper Aeroplanes was first published in English way back in 2014. Armitage shrugs. “Most translation opportunities are coincidental - the right publisher and the right translator at the right time - and that's the case here. To someone who doesn't speak the language translation seems to be a question of trust. Trust in the publisher, the editor, and their choice of translator. That was the case in this instance - it's odd to think that a kind of intimacy has been shared without ever meeting or even corresponding. And exciting for the same reason. A kind of arranged marriage maybe.”

The translator in question is Jordi Doce, coordinator of Galaxia Gutenberg’s poetry collection and poetry critic at El Mundo. A former lecturer at Sheffield and Oxford Universities, Doce has published widely and is a respected poet himself. “The translation was a personal commission from the publisher Enrique Redel,” Doce says. “We’d wanted to work together for years and I’d let him down - let's say - on a couple of occasions due to personal circumstances. Armitage's book was a natural meeting point. He’s an author I’ve known and read since I arrived in Sheffield in 1992. In fact, I attended a poetry reading he gave at Sheffield University in the spring of 1993.

November

We walk to the ward from the badly parked car
with your grandma taking four short steps to our two.
We have brought her here to die and we know it.

You check her towel, soap and family trinkets,
pare her nails, parcel her in the rough blankets
and she sinks down into her incontinence.

It’s time, John. In their pasty, bloodless smiles,
in their slack breasts, their stunned brains and their baldness,
and in us, John: we are almost these monsters.

You’re shattered. You give me the keys and I drive
through the twilight zone, past the famous station
to your house, to numb ourselves with alcohol.

Inside, we feel the terror of dusk begin.
Outside we watch the evening falling again,
and we let it happen. We can say nothing.

Sometimes the sun spangles and we feel alive.
One thing we have to get, John, out of this life.

Noviembre

Vamos al pabellón desde el coche mal aparcado
y cuatro pasitos de tu abuela son dos nuestros.
La hemos traído aqui para morir y lo sabemos.

Revisas su toalla, el jabón y los recuerdos familiares,
le cortas las uñas, la empacas en sus sábanas rugosas
y ella naufraga en su incontinencia.

Es la hora, John. En sus sonrisas pálidas y exangües,
en sus flácidos pechos, sus cerebros pasmados, su calvicie,
y en nosotros, John: somos casi estos monstruos.

Estás deshecho. Me das las llaves y conduzco
por la zona gris de la cuidad, dejando atrás la célebre estación
para llegar a tu casa y anestesiarnos con alcohol.

Dentro, sentimos despuntar el terror de la tarde.
Fuera vemos anochecer, otro fracaso,
y dejamos que ocurra. No hay nada que decir.

A veces el sol brilla como una lentejuela y nos sentimos vivos.
Algo hay que sacar de esta vida, John, o a otra cosa.

"The work process was not very different from what I have followed in other cases: a first draft by hand, in a notebook, and then a fairly laborious exercise of composition and correction on the computer screen. There was a third stage, as important as the others, which was the revision work with the publisher's proofreader, Isabel Márquez. Her reading of the book was a lesson in humility for me and forced me to rethink many things and go back over the text almost verse by verse, stanza by stanza. I don't think I had ever come across such an attentive and meticulous reading of one's own work and it was, as I say, a lesson for me. I am very grateful to her, because in the end we all - starting with the readers - come out winners."

I wonder about trying to capture the voice of a poet in another language. "For me the important thing in a translation is the tone, the timbre of the voice, having a clear idea of how you want that poet to sound in Spanish," is his reply. "The semantic aspect is not the least important, of course, but I take it for granted: one has to try to say in a different way what the original says. But beyond that, the important thing is the 'how': if X were to write in Spanish, what would he sound like, what tone or timbre of voice would he have? And in that sense, the translator's job is like that of the actor - remember that both words share a synonym, 'interpreter': one has to unfold oneself into another, create a character and interpret it. For me that's the key. All the formal issues are important and must be addressed, but if there is no tonal coherence, if the reader does not perceive the same voice behind the translation, and a plausible, credible voice, the reading experience suffers fatally."

Armitage says he reads poetry in translation. "It's poetry underwater, a refracted experience, rather than a direct one I guess, so I just try to enjoy the ripples and the currents and the shadows rather than attempting to identify fish or spot treasure on the sea bed."

A DANGEROUS FOLLOWING

Kate Rhodes talks about her new, suspenseful thriller

Bestselling UK Novelist Kate Rhodes is best known for her thriller series featuring DI Ben Kitto, known collectively as the Isles Of Scilly Mysteries. Her new novel 'The Stalker' centres around a behavioural expert who herself becomes a victim of threats and violence from an unknown assailant - but as it becomes clear that they know her intimately...who could it be and why are they targeting her?

By Cliff Shephard

'The Stalker' is a standalone novel with unsettling overtones - what was the inspiration for the novel? With such a sensitive subject which many people experience in their own lives, was there a challenge to create a dramatic and entertaining story without trivialising the whole topic?

I had to think long and hard before writing 'The Stalker'. I experienced stalking myself, which I'll be writing about soon in The Times, a long time ago. It has taken me two decades to feel safe and confident enough to write about the subject with any objectivity. The experience left me feeling like I had nowhere to hide, as though my personal history as well as present-day experiences were on public display. I hope very much that I've managed to represent the devastating impact of stalking on the victim, as well as their family and friends. It remains a little understood syndrome, even though it affects a huge number of people world-wide each year.

With the huge success of your brilliant 'Isles Of Scilly Mysteries' series, did you feel you needed to write this new novel to take a vacation away from there and break new ground? Or was it more of an idea which had been around for a while which you needed to get out into the world?

standalone novel, but have ended up I've always been intrigued by the idea of writing a high-impact writing two series instead. There's a joy in getting to know characters and their environment intimately over a period of years, because they become like family members, but I was ready to try something different. It was an adrenalin rush, knowing that I had just one shot at creating a believable, immersive ride for my readers! I loved the whole experience.

There's a rich sense of place and community about the Ben Kitto Scilly Isles books, but do you ever feel a 'writerly' pitfall in concentrating on one limited setting? Have you found yourself studying the Ordnance Survey map thinking "Right, which island can I use next?" or thinking that with such a small population you may end up running out of murderers and/or victims?!

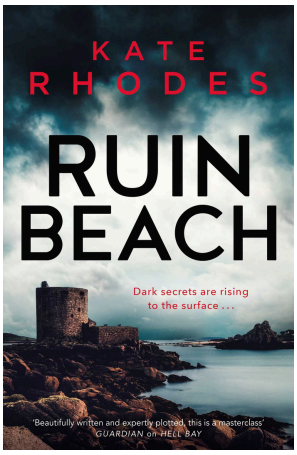
I've been lucky so far that the Isles of Scilly have some very scary sounding place names, like Hell Bay and Ruin Beach! They lend themselves perfectly to dark tales of crimes at sea, and in the tiny coves where smugglers traded contraband for hundreds of years. I love looking at maps of the area, and sometimes they do provide inspiration, you're right! It was a nautical map of shipwreck sites all over the islands' waters that prompted me to write 'Ruin Beach'. The Atlantic is so dangerous, I thought it deserved its own story!

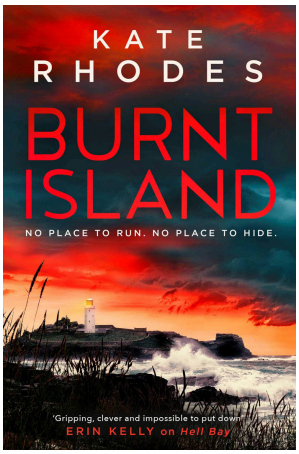
You do fantastic work supporting libraries around the UK with events and talks - how do you feel about connecting with your readers directly? Do you feel that publishers and the industry in general should be doing more to support libraries and literacy charities?

I love libraries, because they were instrumental in turning me into a reader, as a child. I think many authors like me are keen to support libraries, because we know they have had their budgets slashed in an alarming way in recent years. But while publishers do offer some help to libraries. I wish they would do even more. The percentage of the UK reading population is falling each year, partly due to the cost of books, so we lose libraries at our peril.

I recently asked Scarlett Thomas this same question, but would love to know your experience - You teach creative writing at Cambridge University, how much of your 'process' do you share with your students when working on a new novel? Or are they kept completely in the dark?

Such an interesting question! I'm a hundred percent honest with my students about the way I write, because it demystifies the process for them. I wish that I sat in a Keats-type garret to write, but I sit here, at my desk hoping for stories to arrive. I have good days and bad, just like my talented students, but writing remains an incredibly exciting and privileged job.





The late, great Westcountry author Marcia Willett was always on a schedule from novel to novel, turning in a new one each year like clockwork. You seem similarly disciplined - is there a knack to it? Do you ever suffer from writer's block?

I've been lucky, so far, never to have suffered from writer's block. I'm still passionate about writing, and I've learned a few tricks over the years, to keep the ideas flowing. I've discovered that the main thing is just to keep writing, and to try and silence your critical inner voice, while completing the first draft. It's easy at that early stage to feel discouraged, but musicians become skilled through constant practice and writing is just the same. The art of writing well comes from doing it every day. It's lucky for me that I still love it, after all these years!

The Stalker is out in the UK on 26th September, a paperback from Simon & Schuster at £9.99

Joanne Harris – whose book, The Midnight Market, was published this summer – loves Bellver's sculpture of Lucifer which sits above a crossroads in the Retiro park, 666 metres above sea level here in Madrid. "The Fallen Angel is unusual in being a subversion of the triumphal genre," she says, "showing Lucifer in all his hatred and defiance against the Almighty. I love its uniqueness and its humanity - and I can relate. The God of the Old Testament has a lot to rebel against!

Harris, 59 – 60 in two days – is a natural born rebel and trailblazer. The Chocolat author says The Midnight Market grew from a seed originally planted in her Honeycomb world of books and stories, mixed with a flash of inspiration she had while on the Tube in London.

"Magic can reveal itself in unexpected places. This story came to me on a train to King's Cross, where my son and I chanced to see a moth against the window. Butterflies and moths adapt to suit their surroundings: in cities, they develop a camouflage that reflects

What if magical beings did the same? What if the beings we call 'fairies' were governed by the same principle?"

And so The Midnight Market was born. "I wanted my fairies to be more Peaky Blinders than A Midsummer Night's Dream," she says, which will come as no surprise to anyone who's read any of Harris' books. "Yes, this one's dark in places, and violent," Harris admits, "but it's a book for anyone who wants to read it. I don't believe we ever outgrow the things we really care about and if you liked fairytales as a child, you might enjoy this one. But it wasn't written with children in mind and it might be worth checking it out before letting them loose on it."

I ask her what research she needed to do about the fae for the book, but she says she didn't have to do any. "I've been studying folklore and fairytale since I was a child. And this particular folklore is at least in part my own invention, born of a number of intersections between different cultures and traditions."

Harris's own childhood was spent in Barnsley in the north of England. She's the daughter of a French mother and an English father and, being the father of two half and halfies myself, I asked her how this was for her. Did she feel more French or English? Did she feel she was, or is, two people? "It's hard to have a basis for comparison," Harris replies. "And of course, there's no way I can really separate the two halves of me. But I do think I have slightly different personalities depending

"I WANTED MY FAIRIES TO BE MORE PEAKY BLINDERS THAN A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM"

JOANNE HARRIS

on which country I'm in, or which language I'm speaking. I feel that my French side is more sociable, my English side more introverted. And of course the French side of me cooks, while the English side does the writing..."

And what about the books she reads? It must be amazing to have access to all the best in contemporary (and historical) English and French literature?

"Yes, I read in both languages, though most of the books that come my way for review are in English. This month is an exception: I'm Chair of the Entente Prize for YA fiction, which means I'm also reading a lot of different YA books in French as well as in English. It's fun: I'd rather lost the habit of reading contemporary French fiction, and I'm really enjoying discovering these new authors."

The Midnight Market was published by Pegasus Books on July 2nd, 2024.

Brooklyn Baldwin Barcelona

A chat with **Colm Tóibín**. By James Hartley

‘It might be hard, for readers now, to imagine a moment when gay life in cities was both deeply secretive and oddly on display. It might seem that Giovanni’s Room is set in the dark, distant past. But when I went to live in Barcelona in 1975, just twenty years after Baldwin’s novel had been published, there were no gay bars in the city. Instead, there were a few bars that were rumoured to be gay-friendly. People hung out there, often men alone. Sometimes, it was hard to know what they were looking for. At other times, in a bar like Café de la Opera or El Drugstore beside the opera house, everyone was just watching. But there was nothing to watch.’

Ihis text comes from Colm Tóibín’s On James Baldwin (Brandeis University Press, August 2024), specifically the chapter Paris, Harlem, which is one of the Mandel lectures Tóibín gave at Brandeis University, in Waltham, Massachusetts, which are collected in the book. The chapters detail Tóibín’s relationship with Baldwin from afar, as reader and writer, and, as the dust begins to settle on the twentieth century, meditate on the place of Baldwin’s work in the canon.

“I think he could be immensely charming and witty and funny and wise,” Tóibín answers, when I ask what he thinks James Baldwin might have been like to meet in person. “But he also became sad in his later years. It would depend on the day.”

The passing of time is a theme Tóibín often explores in his novels, journalism and essays but he insists ageing is something he doesn't think of unless it thinks of him. "I am still playing tennis. My game hasn't changed - I have never been any good. But I feel the aftereffects of all that exertion much more. One of the good things is that I am less interested in company or social life. There is almost never a moment when I don't want to be at home."

At home, yes - to write and read.

Long Island, his latest bestseller, the sequel to 2009's crossover hit Brooklyn, continued the story of the enigmatic Eilis Lacey, who always, to me at least, speaks very formally, without contractions. I wonder why that is. "I probably will go back to using contractions, but this time I wanted Eilis's idiom to be formal. I wanted her to be articulate, as though her speech was a sort of power where other forms of power had eluded her."

Does 'go back to' and 'this time' mean there will be another time? That's a question many readers who finished Long Island may have considered. But much will depend on how long it takes Tóibín to get around to writing it. In between he has his journalism – The Guardian, The New York Review of Books and other top notch publications carry his work – and a little sideline in literary novels which deal with the interior lives of writers like Thomas Mann – in 2021's The Magician – and that of his writing hero, Henry James, in 2004's The Master. In everything, his writing has a unique rhythm, a music, and I ask him about it.

"You can't really listen to music when you are working," he says. "You need to concentrate. But I do listen to music a great deal and find that I most interested when a work has a preordained form – a sonata form, for example.

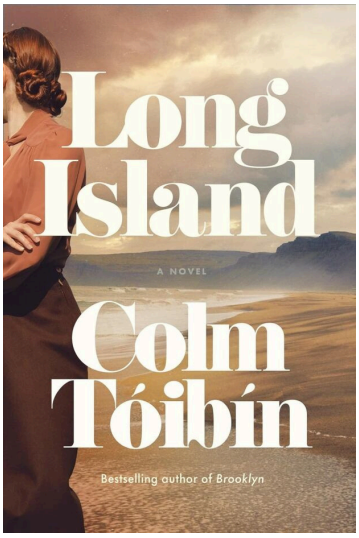
Thus I favour string quartets over rhapsodies or nocturnes. And, yes, the idea of a tone, something you start with, a sound in prose, that is important. I work with rhythm all the time, but it is silent rhythm, like undercurrent."

Each publication – be it piece, symphony or aside – tends to end up twinkling with silver and when not writing, Tóibín too lights up academia. He's worked at Manchester and Liverpool Universities in England and is currently Irene and Sidney B. Silverman Professor of the Humanities at Columbia University, though he lives in Los Angeles. It's a wonder he has time for tennis, let alone Eilis.

"Part of the pleasure of being at the University of Liverpool, and at the University of Manchester before that," he says, "was watching England in a state of transformation. While all the attention was on Brexit, a real change was taking place in Northern England and this was being fuelled, to a large extent, by the universities which were large and dynamic institutions. I saw this at its most glorious at graduation time in Liverpool.

"It was part of my job as Chancellor to hand out the certificates on some of the days. I watched a new generation of confident people emerging from the university, many of whose parents had not had the same chances. But I also noted that there was no great surprise among the parents. They believed it was natural that their children would go to university. This new confidence was, I still believe, what was really happening in England. It was a privilege to witness it."

But to finish we go back to the start, back to Spain, to Barcelona, to Tóibín as a young man, the young artist. It's a formative time, a time Tóibín has often written about. A 2005 story published in The Dublin Review called Barcelona, 1975



detailed an “entirely true” story about the first orgy he’d ever attended, at the home of a painter.His 1990 novel The South had Barcelona as a main character. Barcelona is inexorably connected with his memories in On Baldwin. There is something in the ‘him’ of those years which he can’t help going back to, to understand himself and the world now.

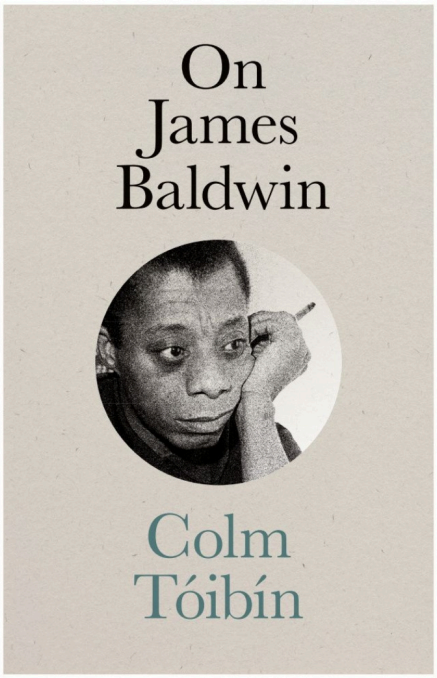
“I arrived in September 1975. It was two months before the death of Franco. So many things were submerged or emerging strangely, or about to emerge. They included Catalan nationalism and left-wing politics and they also included gay life or gay freedom.

“Within a year, and even more within two years, the city of Barcelona was transformed. There were demonstrations almost every day. And as an undercurrent there were people in power who were determined that everything should change so that everything might remain the same.

“At times, it might have seemed like a revolution, but in the end it was a system of elaborate and necessary reform.

“As an Irish person, I think I understood the emotions around Catalan nationalism. I lived first in a pension and then in the old city in an apartment.

“My first impression was beauty, and that stayed.”



IT'S THE END OF THE WORLD (AS THEY KNOW IT)

Cliff Shephard talks to Kerry Andrew

Photo by Andrew Furlow

Photo Credit: Andrew Furlow

Composer, performer and author Kerry Andrew's fourth novel 'We Are Together Because' was released earlier this year by Atlantic Books. In it, four siblings are holidaying together in the south of France, relaxing in their father's holiday home as they await his arrival. Tensions and emotions in the house are already heightened before it becomes clear that an Apocalyptic event has occurred in the outside world. Adjusting to this new reality, as well as confronting their complex feelings for each other results in a suspenseful, sometimes melancholic, yet utterly compelling and addictive novel.

Hi Kerry, from the outset I was struck that the whole book is very grounded in place and nature - I love the view we get of nature reacting and adapting to the new changed circumstances, but subtly and without it taking over the main plotline involving the siblings. How much research did you have to put in to make these parts as authentic as they feel? What relationship do you have with the area of France the novel is set in?

Actually, unlike my first two novels that felt very rooted in nature and landscape from the start, this novel was initially focused very much on the siblings and their French holiday villa. My four protagonists – Luke, Connor, Thea and Violet – are focused on their inner lives and aren't very connected to nature. In planning the novel, I'd planned to include little still-life cutaways of the villa, but during the work (it was written on and off between 2016-22), the climate crisis grew so pressing in my brain that it turned into a climate crisis novel! I personally find it impossible to write in a contemporary setting and not be in its shadow. So instead, the cutaways became snapshots of the natural world around the villa in the South of France that the four are unaware of, and how it is subtly changing – in my novel, in a not-at-all-natural way. I often think cinematically, and picture the shifting flora and fauna, slo-mo and with the sound turned up, in these sections.

Genuinely, this novel first came about because my first two ('Swansong' and 'SKIN') were largely set in the cold and rainy Scottish Highlands and the Republic of Ireland, and I'd take myself on trips there to keep up the inspiration. My husband Andy asked if my next novel could be somewhere hot and sunny so he could come too. Ha. We'd already been to the Lac de Sainte-Croix in the Var region of South-eastern France a couple of times – it's this amazing, jade-blue reservoir that is the (unnamed, to not pin myself to exact geography) setting for this novel.

So when I realised I needed my nature inserts, we went back and I studied the area's wildlife in a very amateur way, including falling in love with a neon yellow/orange butterfly species that cameos in the novel. I was lounging in the lake when I saw a golden eagle catch a fish in front of me. Awesome! Back home, I watched a lot of YouTube videos of snakes mating, cannibal lizards, that kind of thing... these tiny sections took a ton of work, guided by my editor at Atlantic, James Roxburgh, in order to give them dramatic weight and not just still-lives. Nature is not still, after all.

Looking back, do you recall what the starting point for the novel was? Having come to it with no preconceptions beforehand, as a reader I was drawn in by the characters early on, and when the Apocalypse hit I was slightly disappointed that the stifling hothouse tensions had been interrupted! I then realised how it had been building cleverly in the background and was eager then to see it play out. Were there specific story beats you wanted to get in from the beginning, or was it constructed more organically?

Yes, I knew the story shape from the outset. The core inspiration for the novel was being in the South of France for the first time in 2011, our friend's parents having generously offered us their holiday home, avec pool, near Antibes. While we were there, the civil unrest in London and elsewhere in the UK took place.

We didn't have easy access to the internet, and so our experience of the first day was getting alarmed texts from family and friends asking if we were OK, reports from fellow London friends of shops being looted and cars turned over, and turning on French news to see images of what appeared to be London on fire. In retrospect of course, it was a series of complex events, but the initial feeling was a strange, distant sense of alarm – there we guiltily were, in idyllic, sunny France, while chaos seemed to be happening in the city and indeed the streets where we lived.

This gave me the initial spark for a narrative about a family staying in a French villa while disaster strikes. It being fiction, I thought I'd, you know, bring the Apocalypse... All I was really interested in was what would happen to the family as the world shut down, caught in this beautiful place with a tightening, end-of-days atmosphere. How their interior worlds and outward dynamics shift in the second part.

I'm interested in story structures that surprise (and possibly frustrate) – I always had the idea that this novel would seem like a sultry literary beach read and then halfway through, the reader would sit up and go 'whaaaaaat?!' Initially, the end of the world was going to be completely out of nowhere, but my agent and editor encouraged me to feed it in subtly in the first section!

I originally ordered this book in on instinct, thinking it struck me as interesting and 'a bit Deborah Levy'-like. Looking back at the Publisher marketing though, it seemed to me not quite sure where to put it (I was particularly struck by the phrase 'emo-apocalypse') - was there any pressure from them to provide a more traditional 'teens-at-the-end-of-the-world' story or even 'zombie' the whole thing up? Did you consider that it could be pushed to a YA audience rather than adults?

I love that you say this, because my inspirations included Deborah Levy's 'Swimming Home' (read on the very rock where Thea reads Angela Carter

in the novel), as well as others including 'Bonjour Tristesse', Meg Rosoff's 'The Great Godden', and Ian McEwan's 'The Cement Garden'.
In the editing process, I was definitely supported to go more literary, not more genre, by ensuring that the reason for the Apocalypse remains slightly intangible. The genre vibes come only from me!
I have a definite very commercial streak – I just want each of my books to be an utter page-turner and make the reader cry, ha. I'm also very drawn to writing young adult characters – they're on the cusp, caught between child-and-adult-hood – but so far their worlds have always felt on the literary end. Though to be honest, this is all just marketing-speak, because art has to be put in a box to sell it. I leave that up to the marketers and just try and make the work that I want.
That said, there is a strain of dystopian fiction that my publishers wanted to tap into, marketing-wise – publishers need to look for all angles these days and that's cool by me.
I also really love genre and like to find ways to straddle both literary and genre worlds – like Kazuo Ishiguro's 'The Buried Giant', or Claire Kohda's 'Woman, Eating'. Again, a TV and film influence! I don't see why an artwork can't do both. I like highly arthouse westerns, alien or dystopian movies, etc, but don't usually enjoy the straight-up genre versions. I guess I was trying to find that balance for myself here. 'A story of siblings, sex and the end of the world' was something I wrote as a tagline for myself...

Another big part of the novel is to do with 'Sound' - listening and hearing, particularly in the case of Connor. I really loved the spectre of resonant sound that he identifies and begins to hear constantly. As a musician, could you feel a soundtrack running through the book as you wrote? I haven't heard the audiobook you narrated, but did you have input into audio elements within that?

I wanted to explore my own hearing, both lifelong and more recent, in this book, through Connor. His deafness (deaf in one ear since birth) is exactly the same as mine, and the drone that he hears was inspired by my recent, quietly horrific experience of tinnitus (as a working musician having to perform in loud contexts, this was nightmarish). I just went big again, reinventing the tinnitus into an aural signalling of the end of the world! I then had a lot of fun imagining the drone shifting and changing, and trying to describe sound in other-worldly terms.
I listened to a few drone-based and noise tracks for inspiration, but mostly used my imagination. I can't seem to help getting music/sound into my novels but always at a bit of an angle from my own professional experience. My next novel, 'The Ballad of Eleanor Rykener', will feature late 14th-century English ballads, so I'm enjoying immersing myself in those right now.
No audio elements apart from my dulcet tones and attempts at soft Mancunian accents are on the audiobook! I'm a firm believer in the delicate balance of words and music in an artwork, and there are words a-plenty in the book. No sound, outside them, were necessary.

Perhaps the strongest rhythm running through the novel for me is to do with how people emotionally unravel, cope, and receive support in difficult circumstances. The way you describe each character's journeys and connections is uniquely strong and compelling - how important was the familial connection between them?

Thank you for seeing this. It wasn't how I planned it, but during the writing I underwent my own personal Apocalypse – going down extremely severely with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, having never had it before, a part of the long process of healing, I've been through a shitstorm of mental health issues and resulting, essential self-care.

I wrote most of the first half before illness, and most of the second half since (I still have CFS, though am improved). I ended up going much more deeply into exploring trauma and trauma responses, refracting elements of my own experience of anxiety, depression, PTSD and intrusive thoughts through each of the four siblings. They all are a bit of me, as well as very much their own people.

All I was ever interested in was having an awkward, fractured family dynamic become a close one (really quite close, in some cases), and I thought really carefully about how each sibling would interact with the other in both the first and second halves.

I come from a fractured family – it was important to me that these siblings find their ways to support each other (wouldn't recommend all of them, though) and communicate in ways that my own family members were unable to.

One final question, the finale is really deftly handled - did you go through different endings, or was it always going to play out the way it did?

The Apocalypse had a slightly different flavour in earlier drafts, but I tend to know my endings as soon as I know my beginnings. I always knew what would happen to all the siblings, and the fun and the challenge was wending my way there. I continue to hate myself though, for what I did to one character! I'm still rewriting it in my head...

We Are Together Because by Kerry Andrew is out now in the UK in Hardback, priced £16.99

MARGARET JULL COSTA

BY JAMES HARTLEY

All my literary heroes are dead. They live on the shelves, in their covers, in my Kindle, walking around in the cities and worlds of my mind, but they are not here to speak for themselves, not here to write anymore. But there is one lady living today who straddles the literary under and overworlds, a translator, poet and writer who has brought to life the great figures of Portuguese, Spanish and Latin American literature with such dedication and gusto that they spring alive on the page and in the mind just as they must have lived. This is Margaret Jull Costa, 75, from Kingston Upon Thames.

I first encountered her in Cordoba, in an old bookshop that doesn't exist anymore, downstairs, browsing the Dedalus Editions of Eça de Queiroz's books. The following day I was going to drive to Portugal with my wife, to Coimbra, and I fancied reading something Portuguese. Pessoa looked daunting and I liked the look of The Crime of Father Amaro, a priest causing a scandal in a small village, and so bought the book. It was the start of a lifelong passion, with Eça, with Portuguese fiction and it was all thanks to Margaret Jull Costa. But who is she?

"I grew up in Richmond, on the outskirts of London," she tells me. "Near the wonderful Richmond Park, so more suburban than urban. My father was a clerk of works for a big construction company and my mother an accounts clerk. I have a brother and a sister, and we had a pretty nice childhood really. Neither of my parents was particularly into reading - possibly because they didn't have time, both of them working full-time and bringing up three children, but they made .

sure that every Saturday, from the moment we could read, we went to the children's public library and, later, to the 'grownup' library.

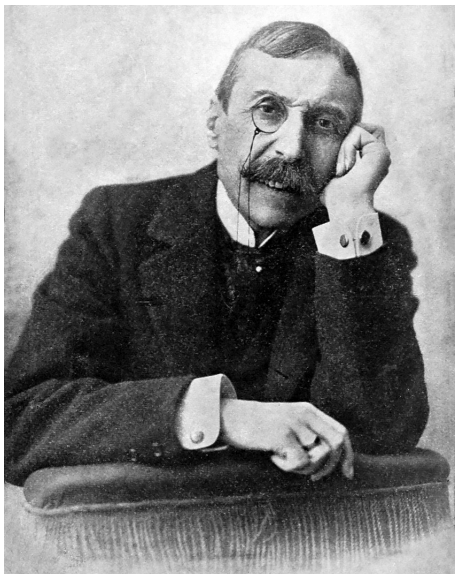
"I think it was there that I first became hooked on literature and language, as well as art history - the library had a whole section on that. I read my way, completely randomly, through Russian literature, Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby is still one of my all-time favourites, D.H. Lawrence, James Thurber, Sartre, you name it."

Jull Costa says that if there was an "epiphanic moment" regarding her future career, it was when she started studying A-level Spanish, feeling immense pleasure translating Carmen Laforet's words into her own. I think this is an important observation for if there's one thing that Jull Costa manages in her translations, it's to transmit the pleasure she feels in her work into the text you read. She brings the works alive in English and reading authors through her is always an intensely enjoyable experience.

She herself says the miracle of a good translation is not to be invisible but "to be as seductively fresh and original as the original." This she achieves – something that has been recognised by everyone from the British government, she's an OBE, to the Instituto de Cervantes and being a member of the Order of Prince Henry.

Jull Costa has been working professionally since 1984, when Granta asked her to translate a short piece by Gabriel García Márquez and she's never looked back. In August she will publish a co-translation, with Robin Paterson, of Quincas Borba by Machado de Assis. What stands out for me, though, in all her work, are the translations of Fernando Pessoa and Eça de Queiroz. Reading The Mandarin – a mad favourite of mine – or The Relic or The Tragedy of the Street of Flowers, all available in Dedalus, I can't help almost feeling Eça is with me as I read. In a strange impossible way, he dictates the books across the ages. You can hear him chuckle, hear him sneer. How does Jull Costa picture him, I wonder?

"Oh, I think he would be tall and gangly - his health was never good - and very funny. He was very gregarious and had lots of friends. He had been Portuguese consul in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Bristol before being posted to Paris. He was, he said, happiest in Bristol, which is my alma mater. Although he lived most of his adult life abroad, he was profoundly Portuguese, scathing about narrow-minded Portuguese society, but in love with the country itself and the language. His books have been an absolute joy to translate, and he is probably the writer I feel closest to."



"Once, when I was in Lisbon," she says, "I saw someone who looked incredibly like Pessoa, in a long overcoat, black hat, glasses, eyes fixed on the ground - quite sensible really, given the uneven paving stones and cobbles! Needless to say, I didn't approach him, and I'm not sure I would have wanted to know the real Pessoa. In photos, he never looks at the camera, and I imagine that, although he did have close friends, his gaze was always focussed on his complicated inner life, teeming with heteronyms."

Jull Costa first came to Spain in when she was eighteen. It was, she says, "very, very exciting". She drove down from Bristol Uni with her brother, who had a girlfriend living in Madrid. Once bitten, she was soon back – in 1975.

“I spent my year abroad from university in Madrid in what proved to be a very interesting year, with the long-awaited death of Franco foremost, and the extraordinary Carnation revolution having taken place in neighbouring Portugal just the year before. I shared an apartment near Tirso de Molina metro, in a top floor apartment up many stairs in Calle Mesón de Paredes. All very Galdósian. When you came back home late then, you had to summon the sereno to open the street door.

“I haven’t been back to Madrid for a long time now, but I imagine it must have changed a lot from those dying days of Franco’s regime.

“I walked everywhere and really got to know my way around. I loved all the parks, the Retiro and the Casa de Campo and the Parque del Oeste. I remember going for a walk there on the day Franco’s death was announced, and I had the day off from teaching. And I often visited the Prado, of course, having long been a devotee of Velázquez and Goya. Another major discovery was chocolate con churros – like drinking a melted bar of chocolate!”

These days she lives in England with her husband, her first reader. “He doesn’t know Spanish or Portuguese,” she says, “so he reads my final draft for any oddities in the English or things that non-Hispanists might stumble over. He was a university lecturer - now retired - teaching English and American literature, so we share that passion for books and language.”

It's our luck that she – they – choose to share this passion with the world.

literary outsider

Cliff Shephard talks to Lawrence Osborne

Author and travel journalist Lawrence Osborne has been flying under the radar for far too long. Despite establishing himself with spellbinding novels such as 'Hunters In The Dark' and more recently 'On Java Road', he's remained an outsider - perhaps the best-kept secret in modern fiction. His sense of place, mood and characterisation stand out among the rest of the pack, and he is one of those authors who is so addictive that you will have to seek out everything he has written.

Your recent collection of short fiction 'Burning Angel And Other Stories' was a superb book, which I felt worked as a perfect introduction to your writing and style. Do you set out with a "this is definitely a short story/definitely a novel" mindset when writing, or do the stories evolve organically as you develop the initial idea? Does a short story ever work itself into a longer narrative?

That is a very interesting question and I think it works both ways. Sometimes a story might well suggest something longer but you try to do it it doesn't really work. And some things begin as novels and end up as much better short stories. Curiously, this happens to me quite often and leads to a lot of wasted time! But then it's not always possible to know until you actually do it. There's a story called "Camino Real" in my collection that I am writing now as a novel – because I think it was really an embryo to begin with.

A preoccupation with many reviewers of your work is that you are 'a succesor to Graham Greene'. It's not bad company to

be keeping, but do you think it's a helpful comparison? Or is it just a lazy shortcut for publishing people (i.e.. "He's the next <insert classic author here>)?

I was always a bit surprised by that but perhaps it's because British and American fiction these days is very anglosphere-centric when it comes to places, settings, whatever you'd like to call it. Whereas I no longer live in the US or the UK. I guess PR does work that way of course – it's a sort of shorthand to signal to the reader. Obviously, there's a little bit of truth to the idea of literary ancestry. But no-one ever brings up Raymond Chandler, for some reason.

With the critically acclaimed film version of 'The Forgiven' out in the world, and one of 'The Ballad Of A Small Player' lurking in the wings, how much involvement did you have with adaptations of your work? Is it a case of being present on set to help craft the vision or oversee the story, or just a case of a visit to set to give it your blessing? I remember one author telling me that anything outside their novel should be 'nothing to do with them'...

Well, I usually end up being somewhat involved if I have an Executive Producer credit. I mean, an EP credit is not that serious but they do pay you for that so I feel obliged to chip in if I can. I just came back from the shoot for Edward Berger's adaptation of "The Ballad of a Small Player" in Macau and Hong Kong and I must admit it was fascinating to see these characters moving in real time, speaking as I imagined them speaking – and to see people like Colin Farrell and Tilda Swinton put their heart into it. It's very moving, actually. And it absolutely does have everything to do with the writing itself – in my opinion. Aside from that, I prefer movie people to book world people: they aren't as depressing.

I was very struck by your Philip Marlowe novel 'Only To Sleep' which managed to be faithful in tone but with added levels of depth. I also appreciated a suitably tangled plot which was entirely in keeping with the original author's style - what freedom did you have when using that character to colour outside the lines and how difficult was it not to fall into the stereotypical portrayal of Chandler's iconic gumshoe?

When the Marlowe estate approached me – through Graham Greene's family ! – I turned it down at first precisely because I didn't want to do a pastiche. So I asked them if I could make him an old man and set it in 1989, a time when I was living on the Mexican border as a reporter. I wanted to use all my old notebooks from that time, when I was travelling all over Mexico on buses, broke and alone and surprisingly happy. Eventually, they agreed. And that's how I made it my book and not a pastiche.

In an age where authors are frequently coerced by publicity people into full-on engagement with social media, your modest presence is quite a breath of fresh air (I'd never have discovered the brilliant Pitigrilli without your Instagram recommendation). What sort of relationship do you have with social media and the unfiltered dialogue it creates with fans?

You're right - I stay off it most of the time. I'm not sure writers have much to gain by being twitter bugs unless they have elected to do intelligent punditry in that media – like Water Kirn for example. That doesn't mean I don't consume it. I do. I think you have to keep abreast of that in one way or another. And then we get to recommend books that have been forgotten – like the Pitigrilli, an author strongly disliked by the literary establishment because of his unsavoury political connections. I like to do this with Japanese writers because I feel strong affinity with them.

One particular bookseller favourite I've found whenever your name is mentioned is 'The Wet And The Dry: A Drinker's Journey'. Along with books like 'Bangkok Days' and 'Paris Dreambook', it's clear there's still an appetite for your travel writing. Have you thought of returning to non-fiction in the future at all?

It's a good question, to which the answer really is "yes." But I'm really not sure what or where. I mean, I could write an interesting meditation on Hokkaido but I doubt anyone would pay me for my labours!

'Burning Angel And Other Stories' is out now in the UK, a paperback from Vintage at £10.99

THE BOOK WAS BETTER...

A REGULAR COLUMN ROUNDING UP RECENT BOOK TO SCREEN ADAPTATIONS

By Cliff Shephard

The notoriously 'unfilmable' classic novel 'The Master And The Margarita' was announced to be adapted into a film with much fanfare in 2022 and subsequently an exciting looking trailer was shown to the world. Try to watch the film after its limited release in Russia (where it was a box office hit) though...and you'll probably be out of luck. Though not strictly speaking suppressed, the lack of foreign distribution of such a big budget adaptation of one of the most beloved books in Russian literature feels like no coincidence given its anti-authoritarian message, and subversive stance that its American-born director has given it. The film itself goes a bit all over the place, and its approach is not dissimilar to that of the scattergun satire of auteur filmmaker Terry Gilliam.

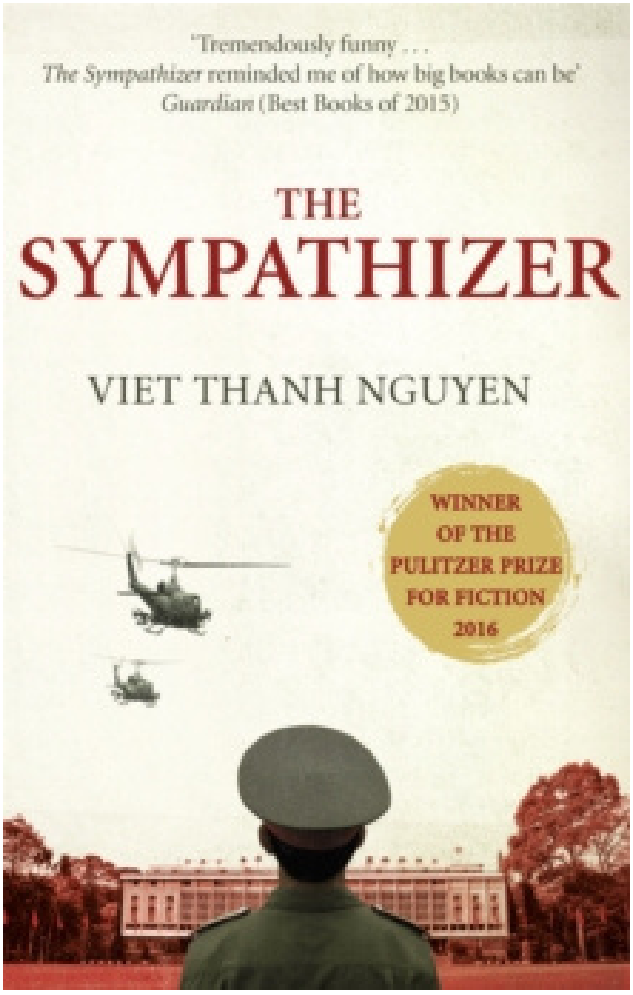
Essentially though, it does have at its heart the original, powerful themes of the novel - a writer fighting evil state oppression, and the absurdity of those in power.

THE MASTER AND THE MARGARITA is available...if you know where to look

The seven-part TV adaptation of Viet Thanh Nguyen's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel 'The Sympathizer' transforms it into a broader black comedy, but without diminishing its power. Brilliantly executed, the series doesn't shy away from the full experience of the Vietnamese nearing the end of one of the worst periods in their history, paying particular attention to the influence that the intelligence services from all sides

had. What unfortunately does grate a little is the 'Doctor Strangelove-like' device of having the actor (and executive producer) Robert Downey Jr play multiple roles within the show, essentially jerking you back out of story as you say "Oh look, it's him again!". I'm sure it looked good on paper, but on screen it looks more than a little self indulgent to see him mugging away whilst the rest of the cast fully commit to this otherwise excellent adaptation.

THE SYMPATHIZER is streaming on HBO



With the wealth of crime novels getting new long-form leases of life thanks to the popularity of streaming and TV services ('Bosch', 'Rebus', and 'Slow Horses' for example), it's good to see one of the most underrated US authors get a shot at the spotlight. Carl Hiaasen is one of the finest crime writers working in the last fifty years, with most of his books centred on the sleazy underbelly of his beloved Florida. 'Bad Monkey' (published originally as a novel in 2013) stars a pitch-perfect Vince Vaughn as a former police detective investigating murder and corruption with an equal blend of suspense and humour. With a cast of hustlers, backstabbers, questionable women and even a monkey who 'worked on the last Johnny Depp Pirates movie'...this ten-part TV series is as light and entertaining as Hiaasen's books always are. Highly recommended.

BAD MONKEY is currently streaming on Apple+

INCOMING!
NEW BOOKS BY CLIFF SHEPHARD

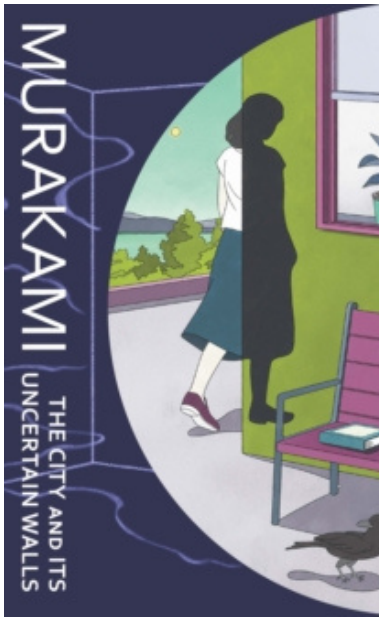
THE CITY AND ITS UNCERTAIN WALLS by Haruki Murakami

Following the disappearance of his girlfriend, an unnamed young man sets about finding the realm which he believes she has vanished to. This journey will take him to a walled city, past mythical beasts and into the dream library where a version of her seems to exist. Amongst all this, can he unravel which reality holds their true selves...and which hold merely their shadows?

Anyone who may have read Murakami's fourth novel 'Hard-Boiled Wonderland And The End Of The World' will currently be scratching their head and thinking "This premise sounds very familiar...". And they'd be absolutely right in the comparison, because it's essentially the same book. In his afterword, the author confesses that he had unfinished business with the story he wrote back in 1985 and wanted to re-visit it for a do-over. What we have as a result then is essentially a companion piece, fleshing out the parallel world that the characters visit and reside in, and skirting some quite interesting developments and relationships which sadly never quite come to anything. Additionally, common with that trope of the 'elderly male author looks back lecherously' (see Marquez's 'Memories Of My Melancholy Whores' for another example), there's also some uncomfortable observations about young budding female bodies which jar when set against the speculative, neutral tone of the rest of the book.

Coming alongside a similarly jacketed reissue of the original novel it mirrors, 'The City And Its Uncertain Walls' is a re-heated snack, but not quite the meal that Murakami fans have been waiting six years for.

HARDBACK £25 Published in the UK on 19th November



THE EMPUSIUM by Olga Tokarczuk

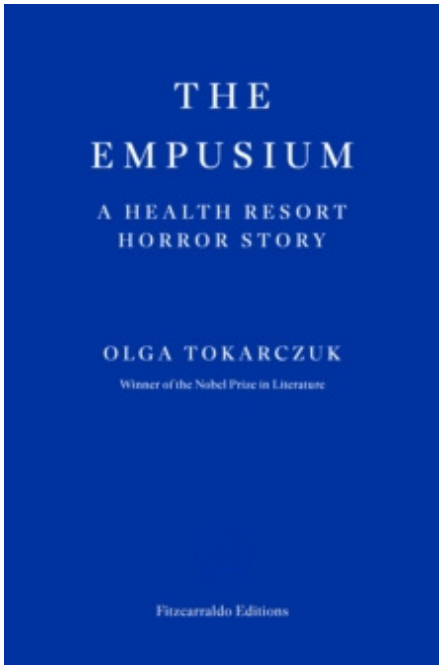
Set in a Polish health resort in 1913, young student Mieczysław Wojnicz arrives to recover from tuberculosis. Here life is slow, dull and full of idle gossip among the patients, but rumblings of sinister goings on in the nearby woods turn from speculation into a shocking reality.

Any new Olga Tokarczuk novel comes with great expectation, especially on the heels of her great successes with 'Flights', 'Drive Your Plow Over The Bones Of The Dead' and the weighty but fascinating 'The Books Of Jacob'. 'The Empusium' was written in 2022 and has only now got its English language version, robust and engaging thanks to translator Antonia Lloyd-Jones.

In many ways a homage to Thomas Mann's 1924 novel 'The Magic Mountain', Tokarczuk revisits many of the themes and topics of the classic, but with a knowing smile. As we follow the slow realisation from Wojnicz - that no-one at the resort seems to be recovering, and that the local villagers appear to hold terrible secrets - provides an

inventive counterpoint to Mann's stuffy philosophical inspirations. Also to be applauded is the subtle feminism within the text revealed through the subtext of most of the male characters' misogyny and out-dated attitudes. Through their assumptions and speculations towards women, a mirror is cleverly held up to our own modern world, which includes a neat twist concerning the main character.

This novel feels like the Nobel prize-winning author at her most playful, and it displays a real skill to be able to blend the dark humour of the sanatorium's larger-than-life characters, with a kind of absurdist folk horror, blending them into one enjoyable and thought-provoking story.



PAPERBACK £12.99 published in the UK on 26th September

COMICS, STRIPS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

The downbeat, pulp world of Brubaker & Phillips

In an impressive partnership spanning two decades and multiple awards, Ed Brubaker and Sean Phillips have cornered the market in intelligent and thought-provoking comics which challenge and entertain.

Ed Brubaker's writing is very spare and cinematic, and it's unsurprising to note that he has collaborated on various successful hit TV projects such as 'Westworld' and 'Batman: Caped Crusader', as well as more indie-focused Nicholas Winding Refn sleeper 'Too Old To Die Young'. An adaptation of Brubaker/Phillips' hit 'Criminal' graphic novels is filming now.

Sean Phillips became beloved for his distinctive gritty style on the DC Vertigo title 'Hellblazer' and his subsequent pairing with Brubaker over at Image comics has cemented his reputation as one of the UK's most talented artists. It is undoubtedly his approach to visual storytelling that makes each collaboration exciting and eagerly anticipated.

As a creative duo who can handle subjects as diverse as crime, western, and even the murky world of comic books themselves, Brubaker and Phillips are making some of the best graphic novels around today, and show no signs of slowing down.

HOUSES OF THE UNHOLY - Ed Brubaker & Sean Phillips

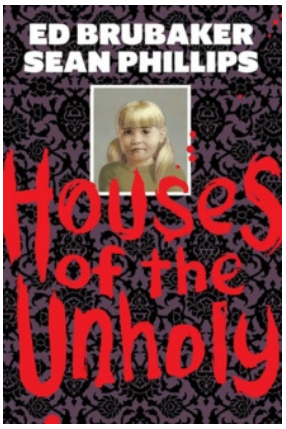
The recent graphic novel 'Houses Of The Unholy' takes this premise to the extreme when an FBI Agent West and Natalie, a private investigator who frees cult victims, become tangled up in a supposed plot in a local community by devil worshippers who have a direct connection with Natalie's past.

Flashing between past and present, clues to the slow burning horror are laced within the backstory of Natalie, and hints at how things will play out are hiding amongst the mundane and ordinary.

Touching on modern themes of conspiracy theory and mysticism, and building on the concept of 'sins of the past', its nearest televisual comparison would probably be the first season of 'True Detective', where unreliable narrators and hidden symbolism are rife.

The one-shot original graphic novel is a perfectly suited format for both Brubaker's superlative writing and the affecting imagery by Phillips. Thought-provoking and suspenseful, the power of 'Houses Of The Unholy' will stay with the reader long after they have closed the covers.

HARDBACK £22.99 published in the UK 27th August by Image Comics



SHERLOCK MUÑOZ AND THE CASE OF THE NARCISSIST'S PARTY BY JAIME OBSCURO

Depending on who you ask in Madrid, Casilda Muñoz was either a genius or a fool. The only thing everyone seems to agree upon is that she was a divisive, prickly character. Running a small, private psychology consulting service out of dingy offices in a basement on the Calle O'Donnell, near the Retiro Park, Casilda – thin, with short, cropped brown hair and bird-like emerald eyes – employed me about a year ago to help with her spoken English. Before she died, we became something like friends and these thinly-disguised stories are my meagre tribute to this fascinating woman's genius. They're almost all true; only some names have been changed to protect the guilty.

I knew Casilda's favourite books were the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius and Memoirs of Hadrian by Marguerite Yourcenar but we'd never talked about film or theatre. One afternoon, in class, sitting in that weird, velvety darkness of her drapes-and-throws consulting room, she told me she'd been invited to dinner that night at the Circulo de Bellas Artes.

She asked me to come, saying there'd be a famous English poet there and she wanted to make sure she was understood. When she told me his name, I said I didn't know him and she said she didn't care, she wanted me there anyway. I agreed to go.

This isn't the time or place to go into my life at the time in detail except to say that I was a struggling writer and a flourishing English teacher. I'd been in Madrid about three years and had fallen in love with the city at first sight and the city in turn had been good to me. I had a good job and a nice place to live on the Calle Calatrava in La Latina. I indulged my passions to my heart's content but longed for love: it seemed the only thing missing in my life.

I met Casilda that night at the Banco de España Metro station at nine, in front of the glittering, tinkling Cibeles fountain.

The old Post Office - now the town hall, of course - was spiked, white and turreted behind the falling water. There were still tourists about, some late office workers heading home and the night was balmy and warm. Casilda looked annoyed, as usual, and hurried with me up to the Círculo de Bellas Artes, finally explaining why she'd been asked to come.

Some of the artistic people we were going to meet, she said, were worried about a friend of theirs, a Señora María Valls, who they thought was showing the first signs of dementia or Alzheimer's. She'd been a fairly well-known actress in her time, especially in zarzuelas, and had married twice. Her first marriage had ended badly, in an acrimonious divorce and no little scandal after she'd been betrayed publicly by a fellow actress. Her second husband - Nacho Reina, a retired, respected theatre critic, had raised the alarm bells and her other friends, who would be dining that evening under cover of celebrating the launch of one of their children's productions, had called on Casilda to come and observe Valls and tell them what was happening with her.

It was my first time at the Círculo - I usually ate at the shabby bars around my house - and I was impressed with the leaning blinds and liveried waiters. We were shown to a large, circular table where a selection of good-looking, well-groomed artistic types, young and old, rose to greet us. I sat with Casilda and an easy, cultured conversation flowed as we drank our beers and wine and picked at olives.

My soul's reaction to this crowd was mixed: to the younger ones - very beautiful, with short dark hair and red lips (the director), and her husband and hangers on (tattoos, strange, 'wild' haircuts), I felt a kind of revulsion. They were self-appointed artists and I'd seen their like in London too many times. But the older set - grey bearded, distinguished, wrinkles ironed with make-up - drew from me only fear and respect.

Casilda, meanwhile, sat playing with her glass of water, turning it in unpainted fingers.
"...wouldn't you say, María?" asked one of the men.
I looked across the table at Señora Valls for the first time. She was blonde and attractive, but did have that strange, slightly faraway, confused look in her greyish eyes as she spoke. "Oh, I think you have to respect the conventions..."
"Respect the conventions!" her husband interrupted, laughing. Ignacio - Nacho - Reina was tall, thin and handsome, bare-chinned, with expensive-looking glasses. "María, hija,..."
I gathered from the conversation they were talking about a new zarzuela which had caused controversy among the press and public for defying conventions. It sounded like a meta-piece, about a group of actors putting on a production of Doña Francisquita, but never being a straight-ahead performance. The public and critics didn't like it. The arguments seemed to be more about convention and modernity than the production itself.
"In my day - say, when we did Doña Francisquita," continued María, mentioning a director and her lead actor, "we wouldn't have got away with not performing exactly what was written on..."
"You didn't do Francisquita," replied her husband, taking out his mobile phone. Nacho took off his glasses and frowned as he scrolled.
The conversation went on. One of the younger ones - a very thin young man with a curly mullet who'd just come back from smoking outside - said that he thought it was wonderful what they'd done. People needed to be challenged. What was the point of saying the same thing again and again? He said the last time he'd been to the theatre to see a zarzuela, he'd been sitting in front of a sea of grey heads and that if something didn't change, the zarzuelas would die with their patrons. And just as soon.
A blonde lady, once a television actress, who now appeared in Hola when Ana Obregón was unavailable, said: "The worst thing for me with these new-fangled productions is that you have to learn new lines. With the classics, the one thing you always knew you had for sure was the text!"
This drew a few laughs. Orders were taken.
Someone quoted a speech from Doña Francisquita and they all began to interject lines around the table. Some of the younger ones played a beatbox and delivered their lines in satirical ways, but they knew the words. All eyes fell on María Valls and I realised why: they wanted to know if she could remember her lines.
Valls sat very still and stared into the middle distance, across the plates of ham and stuffed mushrooms and bottles of wine, conjuring up an uncomfortable, dramatic silence. We all became very aware of the other diners, even of the traffic passing beyond the windows in the dark Calle de Alcalá.
I looked for Casilda: surely this was proof? The poor woman's memory was going. I knew it from my grandfather who'd gone the same way; he'd had the same look in his eye.
But Casilda was gone.

I found her in the street, tying a dark raincoat tight around her skinny frame. The dark figure of winged victory was above us, looking down from the lit-up Metropolis building at the end of Gran Via. The stars were out. "Casilda! Wait!
She turned and seemed surprised to see me. She looked ill - which I later found out, she was. She'd be dead in three months. "Didn't you want to stay?"
"God, no!" I shook my head and she laughed. "You left without saying anything!"
"What is there to say?"
"María Valls couldn't remember the script!" I told her what had happened. "Didn't you see it?"
"Oh, she's fine," Casilda replied, and we began walking downhill alongside the stocky old stones of the national bank. "Her spirit has been broken like a beaten dog, that's all. She's terrified of saying anything at all because her husband will contradict or correct her. She has two options, silence or divorce, and she's chosen silence. It's less lonely. She'll do anything but be lonely. No, Doña María Valls is perfectly well. The problem is that she lives with a narcissist, a cerebral narcissist, if I had to specify. Who? Her husband. Why is he like that? Who knows?

My guess would be that he's very insecure, some sort of family dynamic at play, or that he has a very small penis, or all three. Either way, she's chosen to live with him and that's the end of it. Buenas noches."

And that was it, she was gone, swallowed by the mouth of the Metro as I watched buses curl around Cibeles and trundle up the Castellana into brake lights and the night.

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