

THE MADRID REVIEW

VOLUME 2 ISSUE 1



BILLY COLLINS

The Outsider Gifts Us A Poem

ERICA JAMES

Queen of Hearts

JUAN GÓMEZ-JURADO

"I don't write for the critics."

KEN BURNS

The Quiet Revolutionary

DR ANITA HEISS

Wiradyuri Wonder Woman

The Art Of

ELENA GUAL



Plus all the best new poetry, fiction and reviews

JAMES HARTLEY
FOUNDER, POETRY EDITOR

CLIFF SHEPHARD
BOOKS EDITOR

BRIAN COLLINS
FICTION EDITOR

BELEN DÍAZ PÉREZ
ART EDITOR

SONIA GONZÁLEZ
EDITOR, LITERATURA EN ESPAÑOL

ELLEN MERRYWEATHER
PODCAST EDITOR

NAMITA CHAWLA
STAFF WRITER

SAMANTHA GRANT
FILMS & SCRIPTS EDITOR

JANE APPLETON
COPY EDITING & PROOF READING

ELENA GUAL
FRONT COVER DESIGN

Elena Gual is a Spanish artist based in London. You can see her work at www.elenagual.art

LUCY LEDGER
BACK COVER DESIGN

Lucy Ledger is an award-winning British graphic designer and artist based in the Cotswolds.

ÁNGEL ARÉVALO CAMACHO
CARICATURIST

Nació en Madrid en 1956, Ángel es arquitecto por la Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, y Arquitecto del Cuerpo de Arquitectos de Hacienda desde 1989. Trabajó en Jaén, Córdoba, Cádiz, Toledo y Madrid, realizando múltiples obras y proyectos, el último, la rehabilitación del antiguo edificio de Loterías, en la calle Guzmán el Bueno de Madrid. Es padre de un joven con discapacidad intelectual y para él inventó un reloj analógico de lectura fácil, el RelojAngelote, cuyo lema es "Si sabes leer sabes la hora". Es presidente de la Federación Madrileña de Deportes para personas con Discapacidad Intelectual, miembro del Consejo del Deporte de la Comunidad de Madrid y del Observatorio Regional sobre Actividad Física Adaptada e Inclusiva. Es dibujante y caricaturista aficionado.

SAI PRADHAN
INTERIOR ABSTRACT ART

Sai Pradhan is a Hong Kong based Indian-American writer and artist. Find her art at www.saipradhanart.com and [sai_pradhan_art](#) on Instagram, and her publications at www.saipradhanart.com/publications

THE MADRID REVIEW
IS AVAILABLE TO BUY IN PRINT FROM YBERNIA BOOKS (ONLINE) AND FROM
THE SECRET KINGDOMS AND PARENTHESIS BOOKSHOPS IN MADRID.

WWW.THEMADRIDREVIEW.COM

VOLUME 2 ISSUE 1
PUBLISHED IN MADRID, SPAIN
FEBRUARY 14TH, 2025.

VOL 2 ISSUE 1



4 NEW POETRY

From Julie Sheridan, Özge Lena, Royston Tester, Jerm Curtin, Louis Hunt, Robert René Galván, Oyelola Ogunrinde, Anthony Wade, Susan Richardson, Phil Vernon, Keith Bradbury, Steve Denehan, Court Ludwick, Jorge López Llorente, Mathis Lohatepanont, Treziel Mae Mayores, Kevin MacAlan and Julie Irigaray.

36 JULIO CORTÁZAR

Matthew Stewart revisits the writer's collected poems.

19 NEW FICTION

From Melanie Millington, Hiten Chojer, Zach Keali'i Murphy, Dermot C. Miller and Linden Hibbert.



Photo by Christopher Walker

POETRY BIOGRAPHIES

From Glasgow, Julie Sheridan has lived in Barcelona since 2011. Her work has been published in journals including Poetry Ireland Review, Poetry Scotland, Dream Catcher, Causeway/Cabhsair, The Ekphrastic Review and Anthropocene. Poems have also featured in the anthologies Unbridled and Coal. She won the Plaza Audio Poetry Prize in 2023, was shortlisted for the Bridport Prize, commended in the Winchester and ranked a finalist in the Mslexia Poetry Competition. In 2024 she won the Plaza Poetry Prize (40 lines) and was again shortlisted for the Bridport. She's currently working towards her first collection. Instagram: @juliesheridanpoet.

Özge Lena is an Istanbul-based poet and an EFL teacher. Her poems have appeared in The London Magazine, Abridged, Orbis, The Selkie, and elsewhere across thirteen countries. Her ecopoem "Undertaker" is forthcoming in the Convergence: Poetry on Environmental Impacts of War Anthology of Scarlet Tanager Books in the USA. She was nominated both for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. Özge's poetry was shortlisted for the Ralph Angel Poetry Prize and the Oxford Brookes International Poetry Competition in 2021, then for The Plough Poetry Prize in 2023, and for the Black Cat Poetry Press Nature Prize in 2024.

Royston Tester is the British-Canadian author of short fiction collections, Summat Else (Porcupine's Quill), Fatty Goes to China and You Turn Your Back (Tightrope Books). Recent poems have appeared in the New Statesman, Orbis, Poet of the Year Anthology (Canterbury Festival 2024), Troubadour International Poetry Competition, and shortlisted for the Bridport Prize (2022). MFA in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia (2016). Born in Wolverhampton, raised in Birmingham, he has been a judge for the Commonwealth Fiction Prize (Canada), guest editor for Cha: an online literary journal (Hong Kong), Hawthornden fellow (Scotland), and Ontario college faculty. Formerly of Toronto, now lives in Umbria de Algayat, SE Spain. His hybrid work-in-progress, welcome box – a writing project set in the English West Midlands and supported by Canada Council for the Arts – focuses on issues of adoption, mother-search, exile, sexual identity and homecoming.

Jerm Certin is from Ireland but lives in Spain. He won the Patrick Kavanagh Award in 2021. His chapbook 'Cacti & other poems' is published by Southword editions.

Louis Hunt taught political theory at James Madison College, Michigan State University. He has published original poems as well as translations from Sanskrit in a variety of print and online journals including The Rotary Dial, Snakeskin, Lighten up Online, Metamorphoses, The Brazen Head, Interpret and The High Window. He is currently working on a volume of translations from the Sanskrit of Kalidasa, Bhartrihari and Nilakantha Dikshita.

Robert René Galván, born in San Antonio of Indigenous/Mexican heritage, resides in New York City where he works as a professional musician and poet. His collections of poems are Meteors, published by Lux Nova Press and Undesirable: Race and Remembrance, Somos en Escrito Foundation Press, Standing Stones, Finishing Line Press and The Shadow of Time, Adelaide Books. His poetry has been featured in such publications as The Acentos Review, Adelaide Literary Magazine, Azahares Literary Magazine, Gyroscope, Hawaii Review, Hispanic Culture Review, Latino Book Review, Newtown Review, Panoply, Prachya Review, Sequestum, Shoreline of Infinity, Somos en Escrito, Stillwater Review, West Texas Literary Review, and UU World. He is a Shortlist Winner Nominee in the 2018 Adelaide Literary Award for Best Poem. Recently, his poems are featured in Puro ChicanX Writers of the 21st Century (2nd Edition) and in Yellow Medicine Review: A Journal of Indigenous Literature, Art and Thought. His poems have been nominated for Best of Web and the Pushcart Prize. His poem, Awakening, was featured in the author's voice on NPR as part of National Poetry Month in the Spring of 2021.

Oyelola Ogunrinde is a journalist, writer and poet from Lagos Nigeria. Her poems have appeared in Teambooktu, Scarlet Leaf Review and others. She writes poetry to distract herself from the political happenings in Nigeria.

Anthony Wade, a Forward Prize nominee, has published poetry in Ireland, Britain, India, the US, and Canada. London-born Irish, he now lives by the sea in East Cork close to where he spent childhood summers, and is an active member of the local writers' group. X.com@anthonywadepoet

Susan Richardson is the author of, *Things My Mother Left Behind*, from Baxter House Editions, *Tiger Lily* an Ekphrastic Collaboration with artist Jane Cornwell, and *Smatterings of Cerulean*, forthcoming from Dark Winter Press. She also writes the blog, *Stories from the Edge of Blindness*, and hosts the podcast, *A Thousand Shades of Green*. You can find out more on Susan's website, floweringink.com and on shadesofgreen@bluesky.

Phil Vernon's third full poetry collection *Guerrilla Country* (Flight of the Dragonfly Press) was published in 2024, drawing on his many decades of international humanitarian and peacebuilding work. He lives in Kent in the UK. www.philvernon.net @philvernon2 @philvernon.bsky.social

Keith Bradbury was born in Manchester and taught English and Drama for many years before moving to Spain in 2017. His first novel took him three years to research and write - visiting many different locations across the country from Granada to Zaragoza, Cordoba and Seville. He is fascinated by the 800 year history of the Moors in Spain, their culture, architecture and poetry. He has now written three novels and published an anthology of his poetry. Keith lives in the centre of Madrid with his wife, Jane, who translated his first novel into Spanish. His passions are reading, crosswords, writing, drinking red wine and improving his Spanish. He plays the guitar and loves all kinds of music from Mozart to The Smiths. His website is <https://www.theworksofkeithbradbury.com/>.

Steve Denehan lives in Kildare, Ireland with his wife Eimear and daughter Robin. He is the award-winning author of two chapbooks and seven poetry collections.

Court Ludwick is a writer, artist, and educator currently pursuing her PhD in Literature and Creative Writing. She is the author of *THESE STRANGE BODIES* (ELJ Editions, 2024) and the founding editor-in-chief of *Broken Antler Magazine*. Her work has appeared in *EPOCH*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Oxford Magazine*, and elsewhere. Find her on socials @courtludwick. Find more of her work at www.courtlud.com.

Jorge López Llorente is a bilingual writer from Madrid, who studied English Literature at the University of Oxford. His debut poetry collection, *Los ojos desdibujados*, is out with Cuadranta. His other poetry and fiction appeared in magazines like *Under the Radar*, *New Critique*, *Wildfire Words*, *The Citron Review* and *The Dawntreader*, as well as on Spain's National Radio (RNE).

Mathis Lohatepanont goes by the name Ken. Originally from Bangkok, Thailand, he is currently a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Political Science at the University of Michigan. He studies comparative politics and the Asia-Pacific region is his regional area of specialization. He translates poetry in his free time.

Treziel Mae Mayores is a poet who likes getting lost in her thoughts. She loves the rainy season but treats the sun as her muse. When she's not busy cuddling her cat, she writes on her blog called "Ramblication." Her works are featured in *Haunted Words Press*, *Emerge Mag*, and *Rabble Review*, to name a few.

Kevin MacAlan lives in Co Waterford, Ireland. He has an MA in Creative Writing, and has contributed to many journals, including *Howl* in Ireland, *Recesses* in the UK, *Purple Unicorn Media* in the USA, and *Datura* in France. He was longlisted for The National Poetry Competition 2023 and The Fish Poetry Prize 2024.

Julie Irigaray is a French Basque writer based in Birmingham, UK. Her poetry pamphlet *Whalers, Witches and Gauchos* was published by Nine Pens in 2021. Her poems, articles and translations have appeared in over fifty publications across the world (UK, Ireland, Italy, Spain, USA, Canada, Mexico, Singapore and South Korea), including *The Madrid Review*, *The Rialto*, *Ambit*, *Magma* and *Poetry Wales*. Her work has been featured on BBC Radio 4, and her poems have won or been finalists in nineteen poetry competitions, including The Bridport Prize 2024.

JULIE SHERIDAN

CORREFOC

Via Laietana, end of September

let there be bass drum booms
to rift the Earth's skull at its fontanelle
boom fum boom fum boom fum
let all hell let loose and rage glorious
tarasques in a shamle dance the roundel

let's rush headfirst, giddy with
permission, into the shrapnel of sparks
with sarks to the wind and hell at our heels,
hunker together under an umbel of embers
kneel in the gutter with the surdo drummers

let's tallow our toes and blaze in brazen,
sparklers strapped to our ankles
brave the maw of a dragon
let our skin ridge with witches' marks
through layers of old clothes and burned-through bras

let's skip the vestal, dangle
with the devil and his ingle instead
mingle with red-hooded demons
rattling their cascabeles,
rebrand ourselves Hell's Gazelles

let's be flagrant for the hell of it
turn into sudden dervishes unspun
brim with the elemental
let us take our place in the pantheon
cast off all equilibrium

let's be spectres on a helter-skelter
bathed in balayage flames, our limbal rings
spinning like planets, our pupils popping
like cloves in persimmon pomanders
let us spasm with laughter

let's be souls that strobe, remember our rites
and disco like our lives will hinge on this
moment, a henge swung open
the way we danced once before,
almost midnight on the millennium

let us, then, speak of the devil
not be feart of his name coughed backwards
laugh foc foc foc – in fact
let us let foc pitchfork our nostrils
scorch blasphemies onto our tongues

hell, let's slander ourselves entirely
back way past your maiden name
sack off these effigies of sadwifery
turn unpractised cartwheels
hold our hands up high in an architrave

let's revel in unravelling what was never
real, agog with the joy of the jig
our wrists whipping round like a whirlygig
to let fly Lucifer's umbellifire,
a fallopian-horned ram's head

Mother, other, nether, nun
author of the letter thorn, all these years
your name has not been your own.
Let's spell it in sparks on the September air.
Helen. Meaning: shining, torch.

Catalan words

Correfoc – firerun

Fum – smoke

Foc – fire

Spanish words

Cascabeles – jingle bells/rattles

Ingle – groin (also 'hearthfire' in Scots)

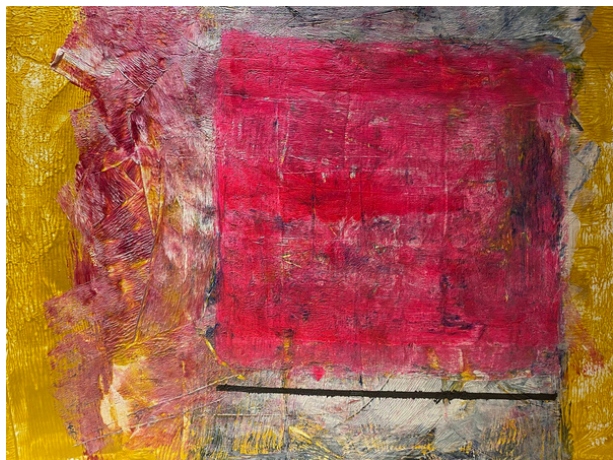
ACHING BEAUTY OF ANOMALY

ÖZGE LENA

The news spread like lava: a giant octopus washed ashore at dawn, seven tentacles like thick whips beating the amber sand, one cut, suckers dying to suck the world in, eely reddish skin glistening under the misty morning sun.

Everyone in the town went to see that impossibility out of a sheer thirst for the possibility of anything could happen to them, any anomaly might tear the dull tulle of their normality, even an aching beauty, which stayed there

in the throes until the blood of the dusk, which was dying for seven hours when it was finally dead, three hearts stopped one by one, and the townspeople turned back to their safe misery of not living a real life, of watching the world from afar.



Self (I) Sai Pradhan

OYSTER SECRET

ÖZGE LENA

If I tell you a secret, will you take me to the sea?

I ate oysters.
I ate them salaciously then licked
the milky pink and the pinky milk inside
the grainy shells that bit my lips bittersweetly.

They were dense as semen and delicious as sins.

Yes, it was too late when I swallowed the bright roundness of their slippery souls.

It was too late when I heard
siren songs.
It was too late when I dropped
my skin.
It was too late when I grew
silver scales.

It was too late when a fishnet shrouded me.

Don't cut me. Don't cook me. Don't feed your guests
who are wearing pearlings on their pale necks,
who are going to find pearls on their plates,
who are going to swallow them with me,
who are going to listen to my sinister
songs at the end of the evenings.

Let them be human. Let me be in the sea.

BUT A SCREAM

ÖZGE LENA

What I want now is not you
but a scream.

The night you left me I stood at the wide open window,
a synthetic rain all over the half-lit city.

The night you left me I made up three songs to find
my voice back to remember I, too, had a voice
to sing under the burning spotlights of stages
revealed through scarlet velvet curtains.

The rain dueted with me.

In me, everything beautiful was destroyed
by silent bullets of your love, by your soft hands
clapping crazily at first, then pulling me back from who
I used to be under the lights, a starlet singer of opera, soon waned.

What I want now is but a scream, a scream
so fiery that it will become a wildfire for the ones
who sell their dreams for the bogus beauty of normality.

What I want now is not you
but me.

GIFT

ROYSTON TESTER

what
did you keep
when you gave
me

away?
what
did you give
when you kept

me
away?
did i hold
anything

back?
what
has that given
you?

me?
what
has that given
me?

you?
did you
hold anything
back?

CONVALESCENT OUT OF DOORS

ROYSTON TESTER

with mothers
understood
and gone

stitched navel
i gather almonds
from the tree

shelled now
in soak
blue bowl

lark ascends
from radio
on my sill

time
for fathers
i don't say

unfolding
chair
this yard

why
take
so long?

cicadas
sewn
into fir

why
does it take
so long?

NAMES?

JERM CURTIN

In the days of questions at probing gates,
selves to declare, identities out,

a couple from the North lived in our block,
which overlooked the ring-road in Madrid.

Built like a honeycomb, it guaranteed
a certain anonymity to 20,000 souls.

The guy was thin and wiry, from the Falls,
the girl from the Divis Flats.

They were not the kind to make a fuss
and kept a gentle distance from the two of us.

Eager for friendship, we were the sort you'd find
lost in the back of a wardrobe or drawer.

And their nonchalance was like the trees
that lined the nearby streets,

quietly letting go of leaves;
they laid their branches bare with no commotion.

Other Irish blokes would roll their sleeves up
as a boast, but he was marked by caution.

Meanwhile, high in those beehive blocks,
Judy and I shouted and fought like marionettes;

the cause would be forgotten
before our clothes were last year's fashion.

In a dream one night, a fire engulfed
the Ladies and Gents' Emporium.

The couple from Belfast rushed from the flames –
she, like a seamstress or shop girl,

testy and sour; he, like a tailor, otherworldly,
gaunt, drawers from haberdashery

held on their hips, unmade garments
safe in the salvaged cloth.

THREE POEMS FROM BHARTRIHARI'S SHATAKATRAYA TRANS. LOUIS HUNT

I

Without desire in tranquil solitude,
no bowl but my outstretched hand,
how long, Shiva, must I wait before
I can tear up karma by its root?

II

Women are Love's victory banner,
the accomplishment of all his goals.
Only pedantic fools abandon them,
seeking the renouncer's illusory fruit.

Fleeing from Love's merciless lash,
they strip themselves and shave their heads,
or wear their hair in matted dreadlocks,
holding in their hands the ascetic's skull.

III

This slender woman's lotus face,
which once was said to harbor lips of honey
and steal the splendor from the harvest moon,
has grown too ripe, its fruit has lost its savor.
With time's passage it will turn to poison
and no longer promise pleasure.

A LOSS FOR WORDS ROBERT RENÉ GALVÁN

Words are all we have. Each word is like an unnecessary
stain in the silence and nothingness.
- Samuel Beckett

We have become so accustomed to a presence
that its absence rends the heart's strings
as if the moon has loosed its moorings
and vanished into the night,
or like a star that skirts the horizon
and migrates to a place where we cannot follow.

We are left with the remnants of a life:

an empty chair,
the last drops of wine
dried at the bottom of a glass,
shadows in a vacant room,
a faint voice in the darkness
when we are on the edge of sleep,
adumbrations that retreat
beyond silence,
a single
word
outside
of time.

THE NAME MY MOTHER CALLS ME

OYELOLA OGUNRINDE

My mother has given me an African name,
that make me different from others.
When she calls out my name,
I know it is me my mother is calling out to,
even when I am in the middle of a market square.

My mother reminds me that my name is different,
even when I meet other people who bear my name.
My mother says, when an African woman calls out her child's name,
she stresses her words in the confidence of the name.

When my mother calls out my name,
she stresses her words in the confidence of my name,
the meaning of my name,
which also gives her confidence,
in the midst of everyone, who hear me answer my name.

My mother tells me never to forget,
the way she calls out my name
Even when you bear my name,
the way my mother pronounces my name,
makes me different
and those words, the meaning of my name
have also strengthened my confidence in my name.

THIS PLACE OF LOVE

ANTHONY WADE

Love that is real is another place,
to be long sought but rarely found,
and in this fabled place
I would dwell in a warming pool
of fathomless contentment,
a translucency of happiness
with the sky washed
with balming blue,
where the singing of joy in my heart
would never cease the dance,
and after long, arduous travel,
I finally found this place,
and my sad and lonely quest
ended.

THE BITTER AND THE SWEET

SUSAN RICHARDSON

Early mornings before you are fully awake
I climb into the corner of your eye
grab for filaments of beauty
relax into the pearly gleam
burn up your retina

When you open your hands to greet the sun
I curl into your weathered palm
tattoo my heart onto your lifeline
bask in the sun of your scars
blister your fingers

In the space of a moonlit yawn
I creep under your tongue
sink into the soft bed of your pallet
delight in the bitter and the sweet of you
turn to salt in your mouth

PERHAPS

PHIL VERNON

Last time I walked this path, where jackdaws skip
and 'tchack' companionably, and search for seeds,
this stubble field was chestnut trees; that pasture,
hops in hanging garlands, dense and green.
I was with you. We stopped to explore the barn,
now gone, that smelled of nettles, absence, damp -
asbestos fragments littering the floor -
then found the floods had blocked the way we'd planned.
We climbed a fence and shuffled awkwardly
across the flooded fields, watching the swollen
river rush the debris on its way.
Did we see jackdaws on that stolen day?
We never made it to those distant hills.
Perhaps the river stopped us, after all.

AUTUMN IN CHUECA

KEITH BRADBURY

Autumn in Chueca
Azul skies
Light the square below
Where homeless gather
Amidst swathes
of raucous laughter
As if all cares
Had slipped down
The nearby metro stairwell.
Some smoke...
Some slap backs
One massages a beggar lady's neck
Like ancient lovers.
Others sell tissues
Amongst ballerina pigeons
Pecking for peace beneath tapas laden tables.
All life really is here.
Old men with leather - like baked-on skin,
Lean, as if life is forever,
On sticks.
Passing the day, the time
With cigars, memories and wine.
And I sit in the sun
Like a Caesar
Assessing a campaign-
Where to turn next
What path to forge
How next to put pen to paper
To picture for my lover
This fragrant land
Of Moorish memories,
Liberated love, candid care.
A thousand years
Distilled
into this
One square.

WHEN THE NIGHT FALLS SOFT UPON US

STEVE DENEHAN

We set out
at the tail end
of the day

drive through the evening
stopping only
when the night falls soft upon us

it is strange
to share a car
with my enemy

there is tension
but
there is conversation too

I learn about his first job
his wild brother
his dead father

he learns
not so much
about me

we do not speak of her
the reason
for it all

just drive
into the night
to the deserted place

it had seemed ridiculous
when she suggested it
a duel

after all
it is 1955
not 1855

yet here we are
our backs to each other
about to step it out

he, unsure of what might happen
me, my gun
unloaded

HOTEL BELLA DELORES

STEVE DENEHAN

The hotel still stands
is still in the hands
of the same family

she stares at the screen
taking it in
trying
not to fall back
through time
trying, failing

she tells me
that she can still remember
the stairs
just inside the door
that she can still remember
the name
of the owner
Antoni Illa

how he was a nice man
kind to her, her friends
how he was the calm head
when Deirdre teetered
on the edge
of a diabetic coma

she hands me
a faded photograph
says, that she
was young once
I take it
hold the evidence in my hand
a photograph
where she stands
in front of a cliff-edge castle

a photograph
where she stands
cherub-cheeked
with more
than sixty unlived years
stretched out before her

a photograph
where she stands
somehow glowing
in black and white

THE OLD MAN AND THE JELLYFISH

STEVE DENEHAN

He must have dentures
so white, so straight
is his smile
his hair too, snow white
a whiteness perhaps heightened
by the Spanish sun

he stoops
tall as he is
to my daughter
who recoils
when she sees
what he offers

what he holds
in his palms
a jellyfish, upside down
quite large
tentacled
alien

he reassures her
with his smile
with words
that we can not
understand
but understand

she holds out her palms
takes the jellyfish, and
over the roaring sea
I hear her heart beat faster
she lights up
the old man lights up too

we make a point of finding him
to say adios, as we are leaving
my daughter says that she will never
forget him, or the jellyfish, and
I agree, while knowing
that she will

HEAT DEATH

COURT LUDWICK

Since when does the sun rise
at 5:26? Living this far from
the equator is strange. I miss
the old kind of heat that
meant I was in a particular
place at a particular time
during a particular month of a
particular year. Now,
everything is hot. My partner
nightmares beside me.
Because the time for assuming
someone is dreaming is dead.
I watch their foot try to kick
the covers away. In the end, I
am the automatic thing,
helping them escape without
realizing what I'm doing until
it is done. I try to read the lines
on my hand to help sleep
come, but my heartbeat is so
loud. Heart rate rests at 112
beats per minute. This is an
oxymoron. And the sun rises
at 5:22 this morning—too
fast. But no one questions it.
But my organs do not feel
normal. But I do not feel as I
once did.

LIFE-TIDES

JORGE LÓPEZ LLORENTE

A boy takes in the ocean.
He is a whim
for a quicksand caress,
which could hold sunrays tight and suck them in,
overflowing and draining all else.
He is sand-burnt, a statue.

A man is swept over by waves.
He is a prayer for a topaz sky,
a crevice and a hardness,
a cut with the sting of salty scars.
He is a footprint, foam-drowned.

They are the same poem,
names written in sand, unaware of
how these words
will blend
into
high
tides.



Self (III) Sai Pradhan

THREE CLASSICAL THAI POEMS

TRANSLATED BY KEN MATHIS LOHATEPANONT

TWISTED VINES

Do not trust others, he said:
be afraid of the human mind.
Even the most twisted of vines
seems benign compared to the soul.
Two people do have pure intent:
Your parents, who love with hearts whole.
But destiny's yours to control
It's your role to think on your own.
Beware of even the friendly
Cautiously think through all you've known.
Knowledge is not enough, alone:
The capstone is learning to survive.

Originally composed by: Sunthorn Phu
Poetical structure: Klon paed

This poem is from one of Sunthorn Phu's most renowned works, the epic of Phra Aphai Mani. The particular chapter from which this poem is drawn follows the story of Sudsakorn, who had been fooled and his magical items were stolen. His mentor, a hermit, magically appears and rescues him, then teaches him not to easily trust others, comparing the human mind to entangled vines. The hermit concludes by saying that self-reliance and knowing how to survive is the best of all traits. This particular selection from Phra Aphai Mani is a beloved classic and one of the most well known poems in Thailand.

PHRUEDSOPHAKASON

Elephants, cows, bulls
Lifespans full: they all die.
Their tusks and horns lie
Expired lives on display.
After our last breath
Death is death: we decay.
What of us will stay?
The good and bad we've done.

Originally composed by: Sunthorn Phu
Poetical structure: kapyani 11

This poem was written by Somdet Phra Maha Samana Chao Kromma Phra Paramanuchitchinorot, the seventh Supreme Patriarch of Thai Buddhism (and also the son of King Rama I.) This is a famous work that Thais will often quote after someone's passing. Tusks and horns are proof that animals such as elephants and cows once lived, states the poem, but our legacies — both good and ill — is what people in this world will remember after humans die.

GOSSIP

Can you stop smoke from / a flare?
Or stop the sun's glare / fully?
Or how age impairs / bodies?
Do all this, and we / can stop gossip.

Source: The Khlong Lokanit
Poetical structure: Khlong

This poem mentions three things that are impossible to do: stopping a fire from emitting smoke, stopping the sun and moon from shining, and stopping the relentless marching of age. If you can perform all these impossible feats, then you could very well be capable of performing another impossible feat: stopping people from talking and gossiping about you behind your back. The subtext is to simply accept being the subject of gossip, for it is as natural a part of life as smoke, sunlight, and aging.

SKYSCRAPERS

TREZIEL MAE MAYORES

I came from a province called Laguna.
All my life, lived in a one-bedroom,
one-bathroom house, for a family of four.
Outside the gates, no trees were around,
only red roofs and electricity lines.

When I went to Makati the first time,
I was nine, savored the polluted breeze with a smile.
Shaded pavements, people walking blur,
tinted windows reflecting the Sun's aureole.
All as I briskly walked at the buildings' base

But it felt new and surreal, I felt unwanted.
As if I'm a white dot in a sea of black triangles.
As if the skyscrapers bent themselves
to look at me below their feet,
asking themselves: 'What is she doing here?'

Recently, I went to the city again.
In its busy streets of people with tires as feet,
and its skyscrapers engulfing me with its shadows.
But this time, they need not bend
'Cause I will be aiming for their head.

REFLEX MEMORY

KEVIN MACALAN

I said, "If you go, things will never be the same."
You stayed, just to agree, and pack a canvas bag
which had a luggage tag still bearing your maiden name.

Hours later you called from a telephone box.
I couldn't refuse. I was no victim of theft,
I feared more what you'd left; silent space and ticking clocks.

Before the night turned cold you'd let yourself back in,
unpacked your bag, and cried. I remember feeling
unmoved, not concealing my homage was wearing thin.

It's hard to let the past be passed. Like a knee-jerk
I question your sincerity, and when we fight
I remember the night I discovered how you work.

Now, what disturbs me, is I may never be free.
I mean, how single-minded was your exodus?
Not enough, I notice, to have left without your key.

ASSYRTIKO

JULIE IRIGARAY

after Tracey Emin's artwork 'My bed'

The dark blue dress which makes me look like
an Olympian goddess is lying on the floor
next to the espadrille wedges that he untied
while kissing my calves. On the carpet, condom
wrappers that he didn't bother picking up
and the DVDs of 'War and Peace' and 'Anna
Karenina' swept away to make love. In the air,
the distinctive smell of semen. No twisted
stockings on the bed – I'm still wearing
them because it turns him on.

The navy sheets are stained like my Granny's
kitchen table after the snails we'd captured
the day before escaped from the shoebox
where we'd locked them for the night.

On the bedside table, a box of contraceptive pill,
sprays of Bach flowers and tablets of Sédatif PC
against insomnia, books on sexuality and the female
cycle, a pile of prayer cards – 'struggling with change',
'feeling alone', 'feeling sad and anxious', 'being accepted',
'wanting guidance' – a black Body Shop toiletry bag
with pink bunnies in which I store condoms,
church candles from Reims Cathedral and Lourdes,
a Rimbaud mug filled with tea from two days ago,
a sunstone, a rose quartz and a labradorite.

My sheets are the shade of the Atlantic Ocean
which surrounds the Virgin of the Rock in Biarritz.
I'm dying to take him there but we will never
go to my part of the world together.

On the other side of the bed, two half empty glasses
and a bottle of Greek wine because we always have
deep Symposium-style conversations after sex.
Today he brought me a piece of marble from the Temple
of Dionysos in Athens. He only gives me rocks as gifts.
He spoke with nostalgia of Crete where he loves
to go on holidays with his wife. My mattress protector
is the colour of the sea where his daughter dove
fifteen feet under their boat – his eyes sparkled
with pride as he told me the story.

The sheets are soaked with his acidic sweat, and I will
wrap myself in it tonight to drown in his smell
like a premature baby in an incubator clinging to
the blanket given by her parents to calm herself.

THE MADRID POETS #1

JUAN CARLOS RODRÍGUEZ SORIANO

Juan Carlos Rodríguez Soriano nació en Madrid en 1968, residiendo desde su nacimiento en el madrileño pueblo de Alcorcón. Realizó estudios de Electrónica e Informática con postgrado en Lean Management, dirección de operaciones logísticas y prevención de riesgos laborales. Padre de dos hijos, trabaja como técnico logístico en el Metro de Madrid. Amante de la lectura, durante la pandemia transformó sus pensamientos y sentimientos en poemas, plasmando todo su interior en escritos; de cuya recopilación surgió su primer poemario, 'Sintiéndote, poemas desnudando el alma'. Ahora, trabajando en su nuevo libro de poemas, se toma un tiempo para hablar con The Madrid Review.

The Madrid Review: ¡Hola Juan Carlos! ¿Dónde vives y trabajas?

JCRS: ¡Hola! Vivo en Alcorcón, un pueblo de la zona sur de Madrid, aquí nací y aquí me quedé. Tengo 56 años - cosecha del 68 -, divorciado de hace muchos años, y vivo con mis hijos, ya mayores, una chica de 21 y un chico de 23 años, ya que se quedaron conmigo y tuve la custodia de ellos, desde pequeños.

Estudié electrónica, los cinco años de la antigua FP e informática, la antigua diplomatura universitaria, nada que ver con mi trabajo actual en el Metro de Madrid, como técnico logístico, para lo cual me he estado formando y haciendo bastantes posgrados sobre ello. Aunque desde que acabé la diplomatura de informática y empecé trabajar en el metro hace casi ya 20 años, he sido un culo inquieto laboralmente y he pasado por muchos trabajos, como monitor de gimnasio (en mi juventud), reparando electrodomésticos al acabar la FP, conductor de ambulancia, camionero durante unos años (me saque los carnés en el ejército) y bastantes años como escota privado de un famoso banquero español. ¡¡Muchas experiencias que contar y otras que no se pueden contar!!

TMR: Háblanos de tu primer libro de poesía. ¿Cuándo y por qué lo escribió?

JCRS: Yo siempre he sido de números y nunca se me había pasado por la imaginación escribir ni nada relacionado con las letras. Pero en la pandemia, tanto tiempo libre me abrió una cuenta de Instagram y entre en contacto con concursos de poesía, microrrelatos etc., me presenté a varios y quedé en las finales y eso me picó y descubrí que me era fácil transcribir mis sentimientos en palabras. Quede finalista en bastantes concursos de microrrelatos y poesía y eso me animo a poner por escrito mis pensamientos y sentimientos. Con el paso del tiempo tenía bastantes poemas y mi actual pareja, Rosa, me animó a que intentará publicarlos y después de un vagar, por editoriales e investigar como publicar un libro, contacté con varias editoriales hasta que llegué a un acuerdo con Letrame.



Desde entonces he colaborado escribiendo relatos cortos en las ediciones de libros de temática concreta, como Halloween y del día de los enamorados.

TMR: ¿Qué tipo de poesía y libros lees y te gustan?

JCRS: Me gusta leer, sobre todo, biografías, libros técnicos de IA y física cuántica; libros ciencia ficción histórica y de poesía, todo lo que cae en mi mano de escritores jóvenes, están muy preparados y se aprende mucho de ellos; soy socio del Circulo de Bellas Artes de Madrid, y procuro acudir a todas las presentaciones de poesía de la nueva generación. Ahora, estoy leyendo todo lo que cae en mi mano sobre aforismos, aunque la pila de libros que tengo en casa pendiente de leer me llega al techo!

TMR: ¿Qué otras cosas le gusta hacer en su vida aparte de escribir y trabajar?

JCRS: Aparte de trabajar y escribir, me encanta cocinar ya que me relaja, me encanta viajar, aunque es algo que solo se puede hacer cuando el tiempo y la economía lo permite. Actualmente estoy estudiando italiano en la escuela oficial de idiomas, y todos los días intento sacar tiempo para meditar, estar en el momento presente y conectar conmigo mismo.

TMR: Háblenos de su nuevo libro, que está escribiendo ahora.

JCRS: Actualmente estoy terminado mi próximo libro de poemas, que si no cambio de opinión se titulará Rumores del silencio: Versos del alma; donde el interlocutor serán los demás (dedicados y pensados en alguien), sin rima ni métrica, verso libre.

Puede consultar algunos poemas de Juan Carlos en la página web de The Madrid Review.

FICTION

BIOGRAPHIES

Melanie Millington, former Special Needs Teaching Assistant and current wannabe potter, has been living for the past 10 years between the calm of the seaside in Brighton, England and the vibrancy of the city in Madrid, Spain.

Hiten Chojer (he/him) is an Indian-born writer and air pollution researcher. He writes poetry and prose, often exploring themes of identity, displacement, and mental health. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Magazine1, Exist Otherwise, t'ART Press, Raven's Muse Magazine, The Amazine and in his debut book 'Gods of Anxiety Be Damned'.

Zach Keali'i Murphy is a Hawaii-born writer with a background in cinema. His stories appear in The MacGuffin, Reed Magazine, The Coachella Review, Lunch Ticket, Raritan Quarterly, Another Chicago Magazine, Little Patuxent Review, Flash Frog, and more. He has published the chapbook Tiny Universes (Selcouth Station Press). He lives with his wonderful wife, Kelly, in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Dermot C. Miller was born in Northern Ireland, and is a retired teacher of French, Spanish and English. He came to Madrid in 1995 after having lived and worked in England, France and Belgium. He is also an accomplished writer, and in 2000 had published in London a collection of poetry and prose, 'Immigrant to Iberia, An Irishman's Odyssey'. In addition, he has won prizes for his short stories in various competitions in England. His first full-length novel, 'The Way', was published in Madrid in 2024 by Ybernia. He frequently reads from his works at the Madrid Poets & Writers 'Open Mic' sessions, and regularly participates in readings from James Joyce's 'Ulysses' with the Bloomsday Society at the Madrid Ateneo.

Linden Hibbert is a neurodivergent short story writer from the UK,. You can find her stories online and in print in The Baltimore Review, Litro, newwriting.net, Apricity Magazine and shortly in The Brussels Review and the Best British Short Stories 2025. She was also an honorary mention in the Cincinnati Review short story competition this year, and her work has been longlisted or highly commended by the Masters Review, the Manchester Fiction Prize and Mslexia magazine. She recently completed an MA and PhD in creative writing at UEA. When not writing, she runs an art gallery in rural England and lives with her husband, three kids, and their dog.



Self (IV) Sai Pradhan

DAWN

MELANIE MILLINGTON

She is in that halcyon half sleep where dreams play tricks with memories when the shout forces her eyes open. A loud, violent shout, full of hate. One word. Puta. Anxiety rains a thousand needles onto her skin. Noise, always so much noise.

Pushing the curtain back she sees a girl standing on the pavement opposite. In the early break of day light, the girl looks ghostly. Wild hair, dark eyes staring blankly from a pale, twisted face. She sees a man approach the girl, sneering, then, after spitting almost silent words in the girl's face, she sees the man turn and walk away. The girl sits down heavily in the middle of the pavement and stares vacantly at the man's back as he marches away, shoulders hunched, arms bent and fists clenched as if he is about to enter a ring.

What is their story?

She sees a delivery driver on a scooter going the wrong way down the road. Tinny, discordant music blares out of a small speaker swinging from his backpack. Noise, more noise, cutting through the thin air to jangle her nerves.

She sees the girl's bare feet.

What is her story? She wonders.

She sees a group of weary all-nighters, drunkenly weaving their way down the street. Laughing and jostling each other onto wheely bins and into shuttered doorways, they barely give the girl a second glance even as they move around her like river water around a rock. Cross-legged and slumped, the girl does not seem to notice the tangle of limbs as the group passes her by.

She stands at her window, watching.

She bristles as she hears the noise of a refuse truck in a nearby street. The soundtrack to her broken nights, it is an invasive, unbearable clattering mix of bangs and voices that will only get louder as it gets closer. She doesn't take her eyes off the girl.

She stands at her window, watching, waiting.

The girl raises her face to the milky sky. Her body gently rocking back and forth. It almost looks as if the girl is sleeping.

She sees a bus go by, full of bright yellow light and emptiness. When it has passed the girl is standing, her toes kissing the edge of the pavement.

She stands at her window, watching, waiting, worrying.

The girl suddenly lurches into the road. In front of an approaching taxi. The girl slams her hands down on the bonnet of the taxi as it stops, screeching, a second before contact. The green vacant light reflects onto her pale skin, her mouth open in shock, her eyes wide, staring through the dark windscreen. As the taxi manoeuvres aggressively around the girl, obscenities in Spanish snake out of the driver's window, words she doesn't understand. Is the girl nothing more than an annoyance in his rush to get home, relief that there is no need for his night to be ruined?

She watches the girl and the taxi slow dance around each other. She too, is wide-eyed and open-mouthed. Confusion over the last few seconds, the last few minutes. She is scared for the girl. The girl does not take her eyes off the taxi, turning her body slowly as it moves past her. The girl bites her lip, her forehead furrows in confusion over the last few seconds, the last few minutes. The girl looks defeated.

She watches and tension tiptoes up her spine. There is nothing she can do, so unsure in this unfamiliar city in these unfamiliar streets with their unfamiliar sounds. Inside her brick tower, her sanctuary, she is scared for herself. She can only watch.

Still in the middle of the road the girl looks up slowly, maybe aware that someone is looking at her, and two sets of eyes find each other.

She smiles a weak, hesitant smile, and slowly raises a hand to touch the window. "I see you" the hand says. The girl's hand twitches in response but the girl does not lift it. The two sets of eyes cling onto each other for a beat longer, then the girl lowers her head and walks out of sight.

THE SMOKE

HITEN CHOJER

I was off alcohol after my first year in Germany. Whenever I drank some beers, it felt like someone was stabbing my gut with countless needles. I went to a few doctors, and they did all the tests and diagnosed that I did not have cancer. And that was that.

I stopped hanging out at bars with the usual people and began waking up to the cold mornings to go to the university. I remember seeing trees like white skeletons next to dark empty streets. There were scores of cars always parked on the way, forever abandoned by their owners. For a long time there was no sunrise or sunset. The night kissed my bare hands with spiteful pain. And in my dreams, I watched myself sleeping alone in a bed of matchsticks.

Around that time, I started meeting new people at the university. I found creative ways to spend time with them. At the gym I met Tarun who was living a similar sober life. We found laughter in each other's company and misery. 'Do you want to smoke up?' he asked me one day. I said yes immediately and acknowledged him as a genius. A solution had finally presented itself.

Soon I became a regular at it with him. I saw the clouds, the stars, the moons, and the suns through the window of his attic apartment, huddled together with him and his friends. But sometimes there was no joy but tears, and once I even poured alcohol all over me to make them stop.

Then one day I asked some of my old friends to join us. Myra agreed.

In the evening, Myra and I met to have a short walk to Tarun's apartment.

'God! It feels like I haven't seen you in months. How are you?' she hugged me.

'I've been good recently. Much better in fact.'

'Are you sure? And what about your stomach now? Can we make bar plans soon?'

'Hmm, I don't know. I have good days and bad. Let's see.'

I inserted crushed cardamom seeds in the joints. First, we made three, one for each, and then two spares. We passed them around and made clouds that night. Tarun played some music on his grand TV. He danced alone aggressively staring at himself in the mirror, some song about pride and guns.

'How long have you been doing this?' Myra asked.

I didn't remember. At some point I covered my ears and listened to other music. I closed my eyes and saw a million fireflies in the dark. They danced together in unison with the music and formed a giant old man, then a missile and then the fireflies exploded. They made any shape that I wanted.

When I opened my eyes, I felt heavy. I was going for one of the spare joints when I saw Myra getting her jacket.

'Do you want to leave?' I asked.

'Yeah. I'm sleepy so I'ma head off now,' she said.

'Wait, I can go with you.'

I hugged Tarun goodbye and stole one of the joints. Out in the dark I tasted the young leaves and the bark of trees and smelled the song of sparrows. I could float if I closed my eyes.

'Dude, what the hell was that?' she interrupted our trip.

'What?'

'Do I have to say it?' she said. 'That man, your friend, he's a freak!'

'He is okay. But sometimes I miss the old gang, and the drinking, you know. Like when we all used to.'

'Why don't you?'

'It just hurts so much. Sometimes that doesn't stop me. Anyway, now I have found this. And I think it is better for me.'

'Is it better? You've gotta do something about it man. Do you remember what I suggested?'

'What can I do? There is nothing to do. And you seem to be doing fine anyway.'

'Fine? I've been getting help man.'

'Stop it please. This is not the time or the -'

'It happened two years ago, what will be the perfect time for you? We were both there. I saw the blast right there with you.'

I didn't know how far we had come and for how long we had to still go on.

'Can we just stop it? Just stop this.'

'I don't want to go on but I can't see you go on like this either.'

'You say it so easily. I wish I was also unaffected by it like you are.'

'You have some nerve to say that to me, asshole.'

'Don't call me that.'

'You abandoned us. We were there together, and I thought that we'd be in it together. I used to search how many people died in the airport that day, their names. I could see them for months. For months I could hear the deafening ringing noise of the bomb. I didn't sleep well for months. I used to think you were the only one who'd understand but you just disappeared, completely. But it's okay,' she put her hand on my shoulder.

'We survived. We are here now. It is in the past. That's what I have been learning.'

'Yeah yeah, I know all that. I remember. I just haven't been crying about it all over like you have,' I backed away.

I felt betrayed. It was our sacred secret and she had been sharing it around. The night was hurting my hands and limbs again. Tiny worms swam inside my body marinating pain in my gut. My hands shivered as I threw the joint. Time was broken, and I lost sense of its linearity. Each moment had a beginning and an end. I was suffering every one of it individually. My life became a slide show, like time itself was discrete.

I was lost. I didn't know how to reach home. Or I didn't know if I could. Then I remembered that I was in a relationship with my flatmate, and I called her. 'Please help me. Come get me please. Are you home?'

She gave me orange juice when we reached home. 'Drink it, it helps.' I wanted to throw up, but nothing came out. In the toilet I saw my body belying the physics of the world. Everything was disconnected and only my heartbeat told me the passage of time. I wept and I tried to shit.

I shivered in bed with her. 'Did you have too much this time?' I hugged her for an eternity. She rubbed my back, and I heard her speak and realized that time was continuous once again. There was no beginning and no end now. 'I feel that everything has broken down,' I told her. 'What happened?' she asked me.

In the morning, I woke up in my own bed beside her.

'How are you?' she asked.

'I'm doing much better,' I repeated those words again.

Years later when I started taking the bus number 402 to go to therapy in another country, I went through it again. I felt nerves vibrating like worms moving within my body.

'How have you been feeling?' my psychologist would ask.

'Much better now,' I'd reply with some honesty.

THE RIVER IS A MIRROR

ZACH KEALI' MURPHY

I.

I could see myself in my grandfather's eyes. We stood on the east side of the Mississippi River, gazing out as the city's skyline reflected upon the rippling waters. I'd always thought the river was a place that was full of secrets. It harbors them, and then it carries them away. Each bridge has its own stories to tell, and some bridges have foundations that don't last forever. My grandpa said he's lived a life full of regrets. It's ingrained in his face. But he's always been there for me. He speaks the world of my mother, though she doesn't speak the world of him. Sometimes I feel like I'm anchored between them. To be in the middle is to be a sailboat caught between diverging currents. I guess the war that my grandpa fought in stole his spirit. Maybe you can't be a good dad when your past eats away at your brain. If the bridges don't burn, they'll sink.

II.

If the bridges don't sink, they'll burn. My mom doesn't wash away hurt and resentment like the river does. But she's always been my lighthouse. She would paint the clouds blue for me if she could. My mom hasn't spoken a word to my grandpa for as long as I can remember. But she's always made sure to keep him in my life. Sometimes I feel like I'm anchored between them. I asked my mom why it's always been this way. She told me it's not so much what my grandpa did but what he didn't do. He wasn't there. We stood on the west side of the Mississippi River, gazing out as the city's upside-down skyline reflected upon the calm water, like glass that hasn't yet been shattered. I guess the river doesn't always harbor secrets. Maybe the secrets eventually come to the surface. Each story has its own bridge, and some stories have foundations that last forever. I could see myself in my mother's eyes.

THE HAT

DERMOT C. MILLER

I hated the hat from the moment I first set eyes on it – a preposterous aberration whose creator had fallen disastrously between the two stools of Sherlock's deerstalker and a Biggles-style flying helmet, and thus produced a millinary monstrosity that was terrible to contemplate. Its shiny, dark-brown surface failed miserably to imitate real leather, and reared up in a dome to culminate in a large round button at the summit. The thing was in no way embellished by the black patent peak protruding at the front.

'Look what I got for ye in the market!' chirped Ma, 'Isn't it great! Just what ye need for the winter! It'll keep yer wee ears warm in the cold mornin's too!'

True enough, the contraption really was equipped with two large ear-flaps sewn into the bottom rim of the head-piece, and the whole caboodle was lined with a white, fleecy kind of fur. These ear-warmers had long strips of brown ribbon attached to the lower extremities so that they could be raised like the gun-ports on a man-o'-war when not needed, with the ribbons tied in a bow across the top. Alternatively, with the flaps lowered to cover the ears, the ribbons could be left hanging loose or tied under the chin. In either configuration the effect was hideous.

'Isn't it just great, Daddy?'

My Da stared at me, and squinted at the furry mutation wedged on my head in the 'up' mode.

'Yer not gonna make the child wear that, are ye?'

'Course he's gonna wear it! It's grand! Just what he needs fer goin' te school!'

Da looks at Ma, does a double-take at me adorned with the hat, looks back at her and says nothing.

'Ach, sure what would you know about hats anyway! It's lovely, so it is!'

I appreciate Da's implied, if unspoken, empathy and I'm sure he too is mystified as to how the atrocity in question could be in any way 'lovely'.

I suppose it's natural that a pre-pubescent boy should usually see his mother as the font of all wisdom, and will accept unquestioningly that her every word is set in stone, but as you edge towards adolescence you start to notice significant incongruities which form cracks in this shield of infallibility. I'm thinking here, for instance, about the time when Ma suddenly announced – referring to a friend and schoolmate of mine – 'That boy's gonna turn out bad, I'm tellin' ye! I can see it in his eyes!'

As far as you can see, the boy referred to is a perfectly domesticated sort of a lad who you have known and played alongside all your life, and with no apparent history of any social deviance. It remains a mystery to you, and to your father,

as to what kind of telepathy steered your mother towards this drastic conclusion, especially as she didn't produce any kind of supporting evidence to corroborate her claim.

And now this hat! You wonder how it is possible that all three of you are contemplating the same object with such very different eyes, Anyone can see, and you are sure your father agrees, that it is truly grotesque, so why couldn't she see that? Maybe it was a gender thing. Perhaps the old 'Venus and Mars' theory was correct, and certain items or concepts tended to undergo a kind of perception-warp somewhere in that vast chasm that yawns between male and female thought.

In any event, you just know that the hat has to be worn, or at least seen to be worn. That first Monday morning, as soon as you had turned the corner on your way to school, you whipped it off and stuffed it into your satchel, thankful that none of your peers had spotted you. And there in the bag it lurked all day until you pulled it out again for the last fifty yards home.

Several weeks slipped by, Ma oblivious to the subterfuge, and you with your self-respect still intact.

'Weather's on the turn,' says Ma one day, 'Ye'll really feel the benefit of yer hat from now on!'

Sure enough, on the third Wednesday morning the first icy gale of autumn was already choreographing dervishes among the piled-up banks of leaves, and the intensity of the blast increased steadily throughout the day – 'a north-easterly, straight from Siberia', they announced on the telly.

On my way home in the afternoon I could hardly move forward against the wind and it had started to lash with rain, so I pulled the helmet out from its lair and strapped myself into it, ears and all. By the time I reached the bridge over the canal, I was like a walking sponge, the rain having soaked all the way through my duffel-coat and blazer, and I could feel the cold creeping slowly down my spine. Curiously, the hat proved to be remarkably impermeable, and my head and ears were indeed the only area of my anatomy not in grave danger of hypothermia.

Just then a group of older boys from the Fifth Form came careering past seeking the relative shelter of the buildings on the far corner, and in order to escape from the exposed stretch of bridge where the wind was strongest. It was then that I heard, or imagined that I heard, the beginnings of a snigger, and then maybe some more full-bodied laughter that fluctuated in volume on the buffets of air. The boys had stopped in a doorway on the corner ahead of me.

I lingered there in mid-span, pressed by the wind against the metal railings overlooking the canal. The storm was whipping the murky waters to the boil, producing small white-topped waves as if on a miniature ocean.

I slowly undid the bow tied beneath my chin and held the loose ribbons there for a moment between my fingers.

When I let go, the hat flapped its flaps and took flight.

SIRENS

LINDEN HIBBERT

She stands at the entrance waiting to be interviewed by the state's only reporter. He's got twelve minutes to extract himself from the bar before she can leave. She tries to catch his eye one last time, and he considers it before turning back to the bar, signalling for another drink. She checks the time. Eleven minutes. Just as she starts to believe it might be avoided entirely, he slides over.

Why trees?

She opens her mouth to reply, but he isn't finished.

Surely, all this money could be better spent funding things we need now?

She takes a moment to absorb the abruptness of his question, to regain her equanimity and remind herself that this expedition is all she cares about. Then she swallows down any lingering feeling before answering.

Do you know I'm named after a tree?

He looks satisfyingly bewildered.

A type of tree—she corrects herself.

She tries not to show how much she enjoys his discomfort. The natural result of her work all these years is that nobody remembers nature, not even a single plant name. Worse, they can't imagine why they would ever need to know. His cheek twitches. She starts the little speech she has memorised for this moment.

These trees—

If they exist.

She acknowledges the interruption graciously with a slight nod of her head. If they exist—

Since you have no proof—

She smiles.

Please understand the significance of that if, she says calmly. If they exist, if they have survived out there in any form—these trees must possess a resilience we need to understand; a resilience beyond anything we've been able to synthesize. Do you know of a single species which has survived unprotected ... do you? No? Precisely.

He looks back at the bar as though wishing he hadn't bothered to come over.

We need to know.

When he looks back at her, his expression is one of disgust. The look of the young at the old, or the living at the dying.

We need more cells, she tells him. The banks are depleted. We need to find—

He recoils.

If nature can be made useful again, she says soothingly. Then we must try—

But he speaks over her. Synthetics are enough.

She keeps her voice calm. Everyone is fearful of what they don't know. She explains. Everything is made from something. The clothes you are wearing. The drinks you've been knocking back—Are synthetic!

—Which had to be derived, once, from raw materials.

The twitch in his cheek returns. He's malfunctioning, she realises. She hadn't even noticed until now. He must be one of the early ones. If she hadn't seen it before, a long time ago now, she would have missed it entirely: where the new self refuses to be synced up to the old one. At least that's what she remembers. Though her memory isn't all that it once was.

He is talking about not getting her. She makes herself pay attention.

Do you need to get me?

How he dislikes this. Possibly he dislikes her. At least the subject is evidently not one he wants to write up. She wonders if he will bother, since she won't be here to check. She reminds herself of her purpose: this is about the expedition. It deserves his notice. Besides. It's his job.

The way you talk, he is saying. It's like you admire the natural world.

He is looking at her intently as though he has caught her out.

Do you denounce nature?

I do.

Say it.

I denounce nature.

He nods. Breathes out somewhat shakily. So that is it. Do they all think this—that's she's switched sides? She clears her thoughts. She's on the record. He repeats the slogan, his words, but her phrase, fashioned years ago now.

Nature works for us.

Nature does, she says, trying not to sound weary.

If she'd had any idea, when she came up with that slogan, how often she'd have to hear it, say it, think it. Politics is such a waste of energy.

Only 60 seconds left. She pulls herself together. It's so close. So close. While she is mentally readying herself to leave, he seems to be deciding whether he's done. She is looking at the door, estimating the number of steps in her head when he throws his last question at her.

Is it true you once thought, "trees were in your blood?"

She hesitates, since strictly speaking this is not a scientific question, and they have a contract, all laid out. But then she thinks she has nothing to hide. He repeats the question and then adds: Did you think it?

She answers honestly. I don't know. Maybe. I don't recall it, but equally I may well have done. You're the one with access to the archives—

But it's an odd turn of phrase, he persists. What did you mean by it?

What did she mean by it? She clears her throat and tries to explain the truth as she remembers it.

She really isn't a woman who knows how to lie. Facts are her currency. Facts and hypotheses, the hunt to fill in the blanks, the job of knowing which blanks need filling in.

All I meant was that once, a very long time ago, our ancestors named themselves for things around them, for things they knew and things that mattered: places, objects, even, yes, trees. All names have histories, but mostly we've become disconnected from them, our names are islands. That's all I would have been thinking.

Not even a twitch.

Her timer goes off and she clucks her tongue, suddenly happy. That's it, I must go, she says. I appreciate your interest in my work, as ever. She gathers her things to leave. Please coordinate with the institute to get your copy approved.

The reporter is already heading back to the bar as she takes the tunnel to the institute. Her team awaits her in the entrance lobby and they share the ride up to the lab. The back and forth of question and answer between them is a deep comfort. Their minds have been built on hers. Why can't the whole world function like our little group, she asks them, throwing up her hands. No need for social get-togethers and tedious interviews! She would surrender whatever part of her makes her human without a second thought. She has enjoyed several generations of embedded circuitry (and what a difference it makes). It's an idle thing, and otherwise unlike her, but sometimes she considers what a career spent without the threat of mortality, bodily infirmity, or mental decline would have been like. Robots never need to eat or sleep. What time, comparatively, she has squandered.

Bidding the team goodbye at the door, she enters the manufactured-marble cool of her lab to complete her few remaining tasks. Everything around her has been to her design, every experiment and instrument. Shutting down the last few machines that will not continue running during her absence, she notes the whole system's economy and neatness. She did good work here. The thought is past tense, she notes. She is not sentimental. It is a good sign that she has made herself redundant by all this efficiency.

At precisely ten past the hour, it is time to test comms. Knowing the schedule, she switches on her unit.

Hey—a voice sounds in her ear.

Good, you're there. I'm heading over now.

The designated changing room for her is on the fourteenth floor down. There, in laboratory conditions, she slips into her suit, requiring robotic assistance only in fixing her heavy visor in place. Once all the electrics are connected, her diagnostics kick in and there on the inner visor she starts to be fed her own vital statistics. From here on, she reminds herself, she must remember that everything she sees and hears will be fed directly through to control.

Twenty-eight past the hour. Time to find the convoy.

The first whisper of the possibility of a forest came after a rare purge within the ruling junta. There had always been isolated mutterings about the state of the world outside, whispers that they were being lied to. Conspiracies that suggested conditions outside the habitable zone weren't as universally bad as they were all being led to believe. She paid no heed. That was before The Realignment, before the removal of all forms of media excepting a single clone reporter. Then it seemed that the gossip was everywhere, even in the institute. Talk of the outer world carved into fiefdoms, suggestions of hidden plots of land, clean water, a forest emerging from the ash. That got her attention, since it was her research that had been used to destroy trees in the first place. She started dreaming of trees, of forests without end. Toxic, spiteful forests bent on revenge. The dreams persisted even after several rounds of cleansing. So, she set herself hypotheses, searching the archives for any hint of a location, possible size, signs of CO₂, methane, anything living out there. She spoke to etymologists, mythologists (before they too were purged), geographers, geologists, ecologists. Searched forbidden literature. No woodland site, no name in any tongue, modern or archaic, no coordinates; not even satellite imagery or drone footage of any area that could potentially host even a small woodland. It was like the trees resisted being known. She took the reverse position and time and again her experiments proved that nothing could survive out there, nothing had survived. But that was science. In her long career, there had been times when she'd got a lucky break, an unearned advance, but mostly luck did not come into it. Rather, insight was a mechanism in which every tiny detail had to align before it would unlock. She had to become accustomed to uncertainty. The sum of what was not known was vast, and growing ever vaster, and at the same time, science could prove what could not yet be fully known.

One territory above all others stood out consistently as anomalous. She applied for a grant to explore this far northernmost territory and was openly mocked, her integrity challenged, her record reimagined with every committee she sat before. The scepticism of purse-holder after purse-holder, the licence they gave themselves to humiliate her, to belittle this project as a pipe dream, a mirage, a fairy tale. At her lowest point, a senator had asked, mirthfully: do they call to you, these trees, like sirens of the forest?

They wouldn't have spoken to a man like that. She told them straight, no sirens have ever called to me. Though how she resented that she had to. When she finds nothing, she can name a sizeable chunk of ash-filled desert after that individual. She didn't think they knew it, but in the run through, as her visor was lifted on, she noticed that someone had written on the inside. What's that, she asked comms. I can see something written on my visor.

Ah, the voice had laughed. It says: Ulysses

Ulysses? What's that?

Not what, who. He's one who resisted the sirens.

She reaches and touches the front of her visor. The colour of the writing has worn away but there's still a slight scratch in the visor to remind her it was there. The convoy awaits her inspection. She keeps to the schedule down to the second though her suit is heavy and making her sweat. She's proud of the ingenuity that created her suit: it is entirely made of waste products. The fabric alone is a masterful recycling of human excretion, largely skin cells, and hair. It has required sacrifice, but then the whole project has.

No one has directly mentioned the possibility that she might not make it back, nor the graver possibility that she may not make it there. But she thinks of it all as a scientist. She has used her time to answer as many questions as she could. Answers lead on to new questions that eventually someone else will have to answer. That is the way.

The bay for the convoy is usually designated for garbage since that is the only one long enough. In all there are eighteen trucks. She will travel in the lead truck modified for her use, since travel outside the habitable zone is normally carried out by robots.

Forty-one minutes past the hour: pause for congratulations. Whooping and clapping takes over her comms as she glances down the vehicles. She smiles, but otherwise does not pause or become distracted from her schedule. Given the years of planning she understands that some members of the team feel their work is done and want to enjoy the moment. She lets the noise wash over her while continuing to check every vehicle as she passes. Everything is where it should be. The sensitive equipment which proved so exhausting to procure has been particularly carefully stowed. She is gratified. She thanks those responsible individually. At the last truck she realises how much tension she is carrying in her body as her muscles release. She gets a warning across the inside of her visor that she needs to slow down her breathing, since she is masked up and oxygen supplies on the trip are finite. The suit spills across her visor all her vital stats for control to see: blood pressure, pulse, blood chemistry, her oxygen saturation, heartrate, and temperature. In the most extreme event, they can override her. Can we just check non-verbal? the voice in her ear asks.

They are using three forms of direct communication; the visual and verbal are already up and running, only the third option, being used for the first time, has kept her up at night, worrying. Here goes—

She senses the initial vibration on the back of her hand, and then a second on the underside of her wrist.

Yes.

Both?

Check. Both.

Someone asks her to describe exactly where she felt it and she does, responding through a series of short electric pulses of her own. Vibration communication is another learning from

nature, this time from colonising insects, particularly bees. Vibrations are far more economic than speech, faster than thought and much faster than text, since it bypasses expression. Feelings, experiences, are generally underrated compared with facts and data these days. Experience has come to be unfashionable within research and academia. But in this instance, with her usual pragmatism to get the job done well, her persistence in using it is applauded.

I knew it would work, one of the control team hoots, and there is much chatter in her ear.

Looks like it's all ready for you.

Forty-six minutes past the hour: time to board.

She heads to the door of the first truck. Once inside and she is stowed, the vehicle will seal itself to avoid the orange dust which is famous in the uninhabited zone. Dust being the enemy of robotics, an immense amount of her energy and that of her team has been devoted to eliminating dust penetration of the convoy.

Ready?

This is the Director of Research speaking.

She laughs. Wow. All the big guns. I'm flattered.

The doors open. She has no sentimental last look behind; she can't wait to get inside. A ramp descends, and she walks into the dark, cramped interior. Windows would have been an unnecessary complication. Besides she will be in an induced sleep. Saving power, eliminating contamination. These are key. She steps into a harness and pulls it up around her waist, tight. The hydraulics hoist her upwards, gently turning her on her back into what they call her bunk, but which is closer to a coffin. In her training she has worked hard at combatting the very human urge to panic in small spaces. Once the final door shuts, she has just six millimetres' space all around her. This, she has known, but it helps to remind herself now she is wedged in that it's for the sake of the trip's oxygen storage. Going over these facts, lying rigid with fear, she knows she's breathing too quickly. The doors seal and all lights switch off.

Darkness.

Deep breaths.

Count! She is reminded in all three forms of communication.

She counts her breaths in and out in the hope of maintaining the optimal rhythm to control her agitation and reduce oxygen wastage so early in the trip. A small vibration at the back of her skull soothes a little, reminding her that in a matter of minutes she will be sedated through the oxygen. In the meantime, she runs through lists in her head. Lists of procedures due to be run in her lab overnight, the likely decisions in the control room; and the mechanical and electronic process by which the vehicle engines are powering up ready to move off.

Forty-nine minutes past the hour: the vehicles levitate. As the engines are firing up, there is a countdown to ignition broadcast in triplicate so that her bones hum before the engines. Vibrations run from the vehicle until her teeth ache.

At last, the sedative gets to work turning her mind fuzzy. She wills her body to relax but there is so much lateral movement inside her bunk now they are moving that adrenaline is holding off sleep. Every muscle grips, and she's started panting.

Ten to the hour: the first readout of her physical stats. Her pulse is too high, her breathing shallow and inefficient. Breathe slowly, she is told.

When she fails to control her breathing the system, in consultation with control, tops up her sedative. Now her body is liquid, but her mind is chaotic, kaleidoscopic. Finally, as they pass beyond the habitable zone and the convoy accelerates, they reach a speed that is smoother, and she surrenders to a drugged sleep.

Day one: Sleep does not preclude work. Her thoughts run over the order of what will happen when they arrive, including the atmosphere verification procedures. She will also face pressure to find her feet. In simulations, she had sea-legs for up to an hour after first standing, leading to the increased compression of her suit. She has had to take medication for her inner ear to increase its adaptability. The doors will not open unless she can walk straight.

Day 2: Sleep is a liminal state of de-experiencing the body; a state of pure mind. It occurs to her that this strange, resting sleep resembles death, or at least the sort of death she will enjoy in which her thoughts, her work, and even some form of her mind (thanks to the circuitry), will endure.

Days 3-5: At the point of having run through everything that is necessary she experiences free time. It leads her mind down new pathways some of which are strangely frightening. She may be about to glimpse her first tree. The realisation brings a sudden wave of nausea-induced-vertigo. Immediately, her mind self-soothes: no one understands more about trees than she; their cell structure, the roles of bark, phloem, the cambium layer, sapwood and heartwood; she has a great deal of knowledge about sub-molecular communication apparatus around the tree itself and the multitude of fungi allowing exterior communication. Fruits, nuts, monoecious and dioecious reproduction, tick tick tick. And of course, toxicity. Her bread and butter.

Her mind starts to mull over her namesake tree, which she has not considered in a very long time. The laurel was the first of trees, if she is to believe the distant sources, a kind of proto science in which the ancients made up stories about the how and the why of things. The laurel, known as the tree of the gods, was created for love, or lust, or the desire to command or control, the only desire of the three with which she could ever relate. The idea of her namesake tree being made by the gods amuses her, and always has. She recalls that the tree was meant to be beautiful, its beauty derived from the transformed body of a nymph.

For this reason, she imagines a laurel as her height, or thereabouts. Its width her width if she stood, rooted, with her arms spread. Although she accepts this is entirely fancy, it has left her with an expectation, not even she realises, that trees are roughly speaking the size of people, and a forest is akin to a crowd. Their colours, since her own world is grey and pale and unvaried, she imagines to be similar, and she has no notion at all of sound or smell. At this point, in a split second, her mind does something unprecedented. It blocks an emerging thought from the archive and the transcriptors. This thought: when she said trees were in her blood, she had pictured a tree and a nymph sharing one body. She knows this is ludicrous, not to mention unscientific. Historically all life shared a cellular ancestor, and though she could many times have justified the thought by mentioning this, she has not, and now cannot, in the climate she has herself in part created. But neither can she erase the thought for though it is dangerous, it has settled, and she is not prepared to root it out. She knows empirically that humans are not like trees on any level, that humans are special, not because they are made in the light of any god or sentiment like that, but because they are the most ruthless species at dispatching their enemies. She unblocks her thoughts and control makes contact.

Comms went down, and we lost you briefly; are you ok?

All ok.

She sends a small electric pulse of confirmation.

Underneath her, the convoy covers mile after mile of dust, landscape that was once peatland and tundra, forest and field. There are no markers to point the way, only co-ordinates, because even the magnetic field is damaged and cannot be trusted for navigation and the atmosphere too polluted to glimpse stars.

Day 6: She senses a minor adjustment in trajectory, a lowering of altitude and some turbulence. She is aware that she is both dry-mouthed and thirsty and needing to urinate. The vehicle dips downwards tentatively, which she mistakenly believes is all the descent they need. At the second more dramatic plunge, she vomits into the visor of her travel helmet.

You ok Doc?

Did you just puke? –

Aha.

They are down, stationary, though the motion is still felt in her muscles. Once the engines have switched off, she is lifted from her slot and held, standing shakily in the harness. The effort of holding up her head is making her dizzy. She desperately wants to lie back down again. She is given a shot for her ears and immediately her balance improves.

That's better.

As she sends out scopes into the atmosphere, she starts to feel excitement mounting. She's made it. She's here. She spends a few precious seconds registering that thought before her innate

schedule kicks in.

Landing plus forty minutes: When her vitals have steadied, the harness automatically loosens so that her muscles are forced to take over. Briefly she feels at sea again, but this time the sensation passes quickly. Some of the initial tests of the atmosphere have come back and between her and the lab they determine the exact coating for her outside suit to keep her protected—twenty minutes—and her temperature even. As the outer membrane is tweaked—another twenty-two minutes—she cleans vomit from the inner visor of her helmet and steps into the heavy boots. They are weighted along the shank and toe and extremely heavy to walk in. She checks her blood sugar, and gives herself a shot of dextrose. Within moments she feels energized.

Come on, come on.

Two hours and three minutes from landing: her suit is ready. It appears out of a side compartment and a robotic arm steadies her and does up the fastening. She feels swaddled, too cocooned to move freely. The twice coated fabric is unyielding, it digs into her ribs and weighs her breath down.

You ok?

Ok and ready to go.

Securing her helmet, she catches sight of her face in its visor. The pores of her skin are orange as dust. She looks down at her hands, her nails. They too are faintly rimed with it but that is nothing compared with the whites of her eyes which have turned orange.

You can disembark.

Roger that.

A sense of unease creeps into her subconscious. Despite all her planning, her great confidence that she had ensured a sealed vehicle, nature has found a way in.

Two hours thirteen minutes since landing: the outer doors open. She makes her way clumsily in the heavy boots towards the ramp. The ramp slowly lowers, and she walks through the opening in the vehicle's side onto dry earth. Earth, she notes, shocked. Though it is dry, littered with organic dust, it is brown not orange. Her pulse quickens and she kneels clumsily to touch the ground, sifting the matter and letting it slip through her splayed, gloved fingers. Still looking down, she describes what she is seeing for the lab in case the visuals aren't clear: bits of broken nutshell, leaf matter—occasionally the veiny spine of an actual leaf. Look up, look up. But she is too caught up by the simple presence of soil. When at last her legs get so tight, she is forced to stand up, she sees them.

She has landed in a clearing around which there is a dense deciduous forest. It leaves her speechless. All her preconceptions, everything she thought she knew is challenged by the sight of a row of vast beech trees before her. How big, then, is this forest? And how could she not have seen it on any of the maps? She thinks again of that man asking her, do trees call to you. Is that what she's experiencing now? She approaches the nearest tree, a vast, silver barked beech. *Fagus*

sylvatica. The trunk is both smooth and wrinkled in places. She presses her hands against the bark. Does it know her as an enemy? she wonders. It feels solid under her gloves. It does nothing back to her. Nothing at all.

She moves approximately south by southwest, though her direction has no purpose, she is wandering, gazing around her. She walks under the beech which is so vast that she can't reach a single branch and the leaves above her are seen in silhouette, their beautiful, practical, elongated ovals, with clearly defined veins and midrib, with a wavy edge. She realises that the canopy above is not solid, nor one block of colour. She can glimpse the sky in places. Light filters through and catches the colours, so much green. A leaf floats downwards and she hurries to catch it as it passes her visor and slips through her gloved hands. Bending, she tries and fails to pick it up. She fights with the gloves. They are too thick to be dexterous.

Use the robots to take samples.

The word sounds alien in her current situation. Like she has forgotten why she is even here.

Use the robots. Hang on. We can do it from here —

She ignores the voices, the vibrations and messages, willed on by a strange compulsion to pick up the leaf herself. After a frustrating number of failures, she manages to scoop the whole leaf into her palm and cradle it.

Command has overridden her and released the robots which gather at the top of various vehicle ramps. The long train itself, and the robots, appear out of scale, smaller, than she expected them to be.

Wait, she says to them, and then turns her attention to moss in a dip between the soil and the roots of a tree. Such a delicate organism, she thinks, peering at it under magnification. How did she not realise how complex even mosses could be? Above her head, on one side of the tree's trunk, grows lichen straight on the silvery beech trunk. *Chrysothrix candelaris*.

Are you seeing this?

The words are spoken out of habit, though she doesn't heed the response. It's for the concreteness of describing all she is seeing, since her experience has taken on the sensation of a dream.

The chatter in her ears is building. She's stopped being able to pick out what she needs to know. Too many commentators asking too many questions. It's overwhelming. She wants to press her hands over her ears but with her gloves on, the movement is too awkward. She is fighting the desire to know how it would all sound without the constant babble from comms. What does a single falling leaf sound like? How does it feel?

The robots are ready for you.

Just stop. I need silence.

The robots can do anything you need doing.

And so the messages go on.

Stop fussing with your gloves. You'll damage them.

Just use the robots.

The robots contact her. She tells them to wait. Gets into a battle with comms when they try to override her decision.

It's for your own good. You need help.

Doc?

Doctor?

Please acknowledge you're hearing us.

She just cannot do this. How is she so unprepared for what she's found here? She who is always so meticulous in her preparations. She stops thinking to watch a single birch leaf spinning as it falls to the forest floor. The singularity of the experience is mesmerising. She shuts herself down and just watches leaf after leaf, each one falling differently, and is yet the same, and to the same end. She follows the light in the canopy, moving deeper into the wood, past beech and oak, birch and sweet chestnut. Such verdure and then sudden patches of light. The way the light of various openings in the canopy penetrates the leaves, is held by them; the changes in colour and texture brought about by this small but exquisite harmony. Having lived her life in grey, the sheer range of colours within the single shade of green is spellbinding. Nothing is still and yet there is silence, beyond the clamour of the artificial noise in her helmet. How has she never realised that silence is a sound?

The deeper she walks into the wood, the greater the amplification of a new kind of noise. She reaches the point when she cannot bear not to hear them unpolluted by talk, by electronics.

Err, what is she doing?

What are you doing?

Is she alright? What are her stats?

Is it the pressure?

DO NOT adjust your helmet.

The robots repeat the same warnings.

No, she tells them. Do not repeat what they are telling you. Listen to me.

When comms blocks her, she repeats in vibration: this is not what we are here for. Stay where you are.

Control sends a first wave of robots down onto the ground.

Go back to the convoy and stay here, she orders them. I want to be here alone.

Most of the robots obey. After all, they are her progeny. One tips off balance and overturns and has to be rescued by an engineer robot. One heads behind the convoy's end towards a small sapling, its circular cutter extended.

No—

This time she walks back towards it, but even before she nears the robot it stops.

What the fuck is going on?

This is the Director of Research speaking.

She is clawing at her glove. The effort sends her stats skyrocketing but she no longer sees or feels their warnings, her focus is all on the one task of freeing her hand. She discovers that by clamping her hand under her armpit she can heave it

more effectively and something small tears. Stitch by stitch it loosens and then rips. The glove is sent flying. Winded, she leans over, panting, but smiling, inspecting her hand. It looks well-used, lined and wrinkled with visible veins. She removes the second glove, and staggers on. Reaching the trunk of an enormous horse chestnut she presses her hands flat into the bark, feeling its texture, the pads of her fingers all making contact. Then she tips backwards, pushing off from the tree, reaching outwards towards light which she is trying to cup in her hands. Arms out, she spirals her wrists a hundred and eighty degrees, stretching and dancing her fingers.

She overrides the security on her helmet and removes it, awkwardly, bruising her chin in the process. She lets the helmet drop and hears at last the silence that has called to her. Within that silence she starts to identify distinct sounds, the sound of boughs moving in the breeze, of leaves rubbing against each other in their millions. Of sun-warmed bark expanding slightly. She turns slowly on the spot, listening.

Her suit and boots try to turn her back. One last effort from control. But she resists, with effort that leaves her hardly able to stand. She is beyond sight of the convoy now and is glad to be, swallowed by the forest. The feeling of being enclosed like this in green air. Nothing in life has prepared her for it. She kicks off her suit with what strength she can find. Then the boots, without which she feels weightless. She crawls towards a drift of leaves and then sinks back, spreading her body wide on the ground, gazing at the canopy. Having lived in compression clothing her entire life, she feels vulnerable without it, her head light and dizzy. She could be spinning but she is lying still. She draws in deep breaths. Unfiltered, unpolluted air. How is that possible? How have all her experiments been so wrong? She should have been dead the moment she took off one glove; shrivelled by radiation. But instead of railing against science, against the lies she herself has perpetuated, she feels instead only wonder. She tastes the chlorophyll in the air, green, nourishing. She bites it as if it were food.

From her position, watching the leaves fall, spinning, floating, drifting on an unseen breeze, she starts to distinguish a soundscape of the very trees themselves — the whisper of millions of leaves in symphony. She feels it in her ear, direct to her, felt through her body as well as along the nerves in her skin. Like being caught up in sound, stroked and lifted by it. Intimate as a kiss on the lips, a hand through her hair. She bathes in sound, that lifts and drops with the wind. She luxuriates in the canopy, in the light falling through, in the explosion of shades of colour. In the motes held by the light. She lies in a drift of leaves. Basting herself in them. She is old, certainly, but alive too. Sound and light and the resinous scent, part sweet, part fungal nourishes her. Sated, now, she sleeps.

Idle thoughts of a Bookselling Fellow

David Price, of Secret Kingdoms English Bookstore on Calle Moratín, opens an occasional series on the bookselling life...

It was a cold wet evening in February 2022 when we first saw the place that would become Secret Kingdoms. A tattered A4 sheet whispered “to rent” to the darkling street... A Sunday morning visit followed and we fell in love with the abandoned yoga studio that raised its bleary eyes to ours. It was the end of a long journey that started over 40 years earlier when the child who was me first fell in love with books. My first books, Thomas the Tank Engine, The Famous Five, Biggles, The Lord of the Rings.... My later books, Humankind, Memoirs of Hadrian, Children of Time, the pleasure of discovering all human thought, forever echoing within the warm and welcoming walls of bookshops. Secret Kingdoms is the fulfilment of a lifelong dream.

There followed a mad dash to spruce the place up, get the shelves up, (thank you Joseph!), and be ready for opening in June 2022, and we haven't stopped dashing about since.. And now, in this brief idle moment of reflection between Christmas and New Year 2024-2025; what have we learned? and what have we got to look forward too?

When we started, as a 100% English Language Bookshop, we thought that 60% of the business would be tourists, and 40% expatriate/immigrant anglophones. As things have turned out, perhaps 30% of our business are tourists, 30% expatriate/immigrant anglophones, and, delightfully, 40% are local Spaniards. We anticipated that thrillers and historical novels would be the biggest selling genres, in fact, young adults and self help take the crown and classic literature runs them close. Books about Spain, its history, culture and society, are a key genre, and it's been a huge pleasure developing the range and inviting key writers about Spain in to discuss their work. Works of contemporary literature, sci-fi, philosophy, feminism, fantasy, poetry, essays and ideas round off what people seem to be looking for in Madrid.

Revisiting my childhood through the various children's sections and our Saturday morning storytelling has also been also great fun. Dipping our toe into publishing with a bi-lingual “guide to Barrio de las Letras” by “Making of Madrid” guru Felicity Hughes proved almost too much for us, but after an 18 month delay (which was entirely our fault) we are very proud of the final result and its been our 3rd best-selling book this year.

Community was a top priority from the start, and we are delighted at how our relationships with the Madrid Writers Group, with the Madrid Players, the local Royal British Legion,



and with local publishers, such as Ybernia, and indeed with the Madrid Review, have flourished. We have 6 of our own book clubs running and play host to more, the philosophy group dives deep every month, and the English conversation group and story-telling develops our older and younger future readers. New friendships have been forged, and random and amusing moments have come thick and fast. I well recall the loud crack that woke me from summer siesta (our 2-hour lunchtime closing is one Spanish tradition we are determined to maintain) to announce a 33% lean in the main books display table and the end of its service. The treasure hunt sparked by a featured author announcing that the 2nd hand book he bought the previous day had contained 200 US Dollars is another cherished memory! No one has ever found money again, though old boarding passes and the occasional postcard continue to crop up! Finally, our Quarterly Literary Quizzes with wine tasting by Madrid & Darracott bring out a cheerful competitive spirit with a veritable league table of local teams developing!

The community within the community is the team, Filipa running the show in week and Pierre and Angela looking after things at weekends whilst Beatriz and I try to stay on top of everything, and that's not to mention our Social Media guru Carla (who also runs a book club!). Social Media has been a vital part of the story, after our 1st 6 months things were tailing

off at level that might not have been sustainable when suddenly a lot more people started coming through the door – 3 local social media influencers had posted viral videos about us! Beatriz immediately suggested seeing if one of them would work on our socials, and we have not really looked back since!

Looking ahead to events, we have a great early 2025 season of wonderful authors coming to talk with us in our regular 8.00pm interviews with drink and tapas.

On Saturday 1st of February Helen Crisp and Jules Stewart will be returning to Secret Kingdoms to present their “Cadiz, the story of Europe’s oldest city”. Then on February 15th Troy Nahumko will join us for “Stories Left in Stone”, an exploration of roads less travelled through Caceres and Extremadura.

We then swap Spain for Alabama (or do we?) to explore “Don Bigote” by Roy Lotz on February 21st. Moving into March we have “Hikikomori: Journey into Darkness” by local author Luke Darracott on the 15th. With Easter out of the way, April 23rd sees our historical novel festival with Katherine Mezzacappa & Lisa Medved discussing the genre and their latest books “The Maiden of Florence” and “The Engraver’s Secret” and we then go “From Madrid to Heaven” with Leslie Croxford on May 10th, followed by local writer and poet Parisa Salahshourian with “A Thousand Lives” on May 17th.

We are much looking forward to each and every one of these author events and do look out for more.

Finally, a book recommendation, I have recently been re-reading “The First Man In Rome” by Colleen McCullough and once again found myself totally drawn in to the beginning of the end of the Roman Republic with well realised characters inhabiting an authentic ancient Rome. And the great news is, if you love this 700-page epic monster, there are 6 more of them in the series!

It’s been a pleasure rambling across our story with you, here’s hoping to see you at the Secret Kingdoms, Calle Moratin 7, near the Anton Martin Metro in Madrid. Do check out our events calendar, and much more, at www.theseckretkingdoms.net, or drop me a line at davidprice@secretkingdoms.es.

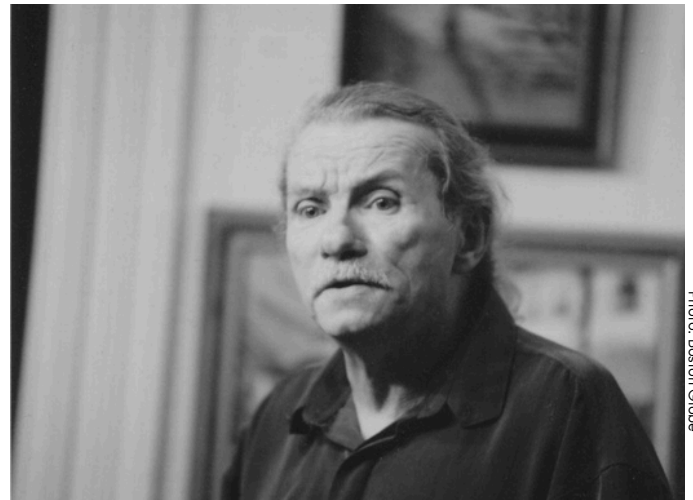
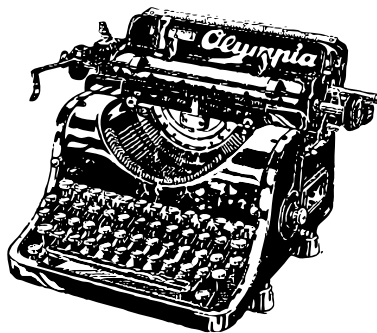


Photo: Boston Globe

A Note on Jack McCarthy

By Steve Denehan

Jack McCarthy is dead. He died a while back, in 2013. I wish he wasn't. I wish he hadn't. From an online trawl this morning I have learned that he was a charismatic, engaging, thoughtful, good man and much missed by his hometown of Boston. But, having never had the pleasure of meeting Jack, I selfishly, simply hate that there will be no more poems.

There are good writers on every street corner. They are everywhere. There are great writers too, though they are harder to come by. Then, there are writers that go beyond judgement. Writers that simply have to write. When you read their words it is clear that they were written not for acclaim, or to dazzle, but out of necessity.

Jack McCarthy did not write poetic poems. By attempting to write his pain away the resulting poems are hard, unclean, and sometimes heart breaking, mired as McCarthy was in his alcoholism. Yet, they are never without hope, rendering them all the more poignant.

I don't love poetry though there are poems that I love. These poems tend to be on the shorter side because to me, poetry is the art of compression. A lot of the poems in ‘Drunks and Other Poems of Recovery’ are quite long. Some are very long. As I read them my interest never waned. In fact, my emotional connection to them grew to the point that often, as the poem neared its end, I slowed up my reading so as to savour the last few lines.

I discovered Jack McCarthy yesterday. I wish I had found him years ago, before his death, so that I might look him up and thank him for getting the poems down, and out. Instead, I will cherish this collection and look forward to reading the other couple of collections that I have tracked down and ordered.

Jack McCarthy wrote his pain away. Or tried to. He wrote not to fill pages but to empty himself. He wrote to show people that no matter how far the fall, there is always a way back. Jack McCarthy wrote because he had to write and there is nothing purer than that.

La sombra de la literatura fantástica es alargada en primavera

Por Cristina Jurado

La ficción especulativa, ese frondoso árbol que acoge bajo su sombra a los géneros fantásticos, sigue gozando de una salud a prueba de bombas en un país como el nuestro, que no es precisamente amable con quienes se arriesgan a publicar para un público aún minoritario. Por lo general sólo un puñado de títulos consiguen el favor del público y son los fans apasionados, esos que coleccionan ediciones especiales y que no dudan en hacer cola durante horas para conseguir la firma de su autor favorito, quienes mantienen esta literatura a flote. Bueno, los lectores y un intrépido grupo de editores, muchos pertenecientes a sellos pequeños, que suplen su falta de recursos con ilusión.

Esta primavera se presenta repleta de novedades para todos los paladares, aunque la fantasía sigue superando al terror y a la ciencia ficción. A pesar de todo es a este último género al que pertenecen algunos de los títulos más esperados, como 'Amanecer en la cosecha', el quinto volumen de la exitosa serie juvenil distópica 'Los Juegos del Hambre' de Suzanne Collins. Traducida por Pilar Ramírez Tello para Molino, esta historia transcurre en el mundo de Panem veinticuatro años antes de los eventos descritos en la primera entrega. Por su parte Anagrama publicará 'El volumen del tiempo II' de Solvej Balle, la segunda entrega de la ambiciosa saga de seis volúmenes dedicados a Tara Selter, la librera anticuaria atrapada en un bucle temporal. 'Fiskadoro' es la elegida por Random House para inaugurar su primavera fantástica. Esta novela de Denis Johnson cuenta las peripecias de un adolescente que vive en una comunidad de supervivientes de un desastre nuclear planetario y que se empeña en aprender a tocar el clarinete.

En un artículo sobre novedades hay que incluir al prolífico Adrian Tchaikovsky que en esta ocasión verá en Plan B – Freder su novela corta 'Ogros', donde despliega un universo fantástico en el que las criaturas mitológicas del título dominan el mundo con mano de hierro. Minotauro sigue apoyando el romance fantástico y tiene previsto publicar Rey entre sombras de Melissa Landers, un cruce entre La Bella y La Bestia y The Sandman, mientras que en su línea de fantasía épica va a lanzar 'El Foso de los Olvidados', que combina intriga política y magia en el universo creado por Antonio Runa.



En el ámbito de las editoriales independientes, Literup propone 'Horroturismo có(s)mico' de Ibán Sánchez, una historia de humor absurdo acompañada por una incisiva crítica social. El Transbordador sacará a la venta dos títulos: 'Kazuki 2' de Marta G. Andilla, que continúa las aventuras de la anticuaria Kei Kazuki y su peculiar tienda en Kioto; y 'La corona del oráculo' de Carlos di Urarte, una fantasía épica situada en un mundo inspirado en el norte ibérico. De la mano de Crononauta llegará 'Otra vida' de Sarena Ulibarri, una de las máximas exponentes del movimiento solarpunk, y que narra una historia sobre crisis identitarias y resolución de conflictos en un escenario utópico. Nocturna lanzará en abril 'Vespertina', la nueva obra juvenil de Margaret Rogerson sobre una adolescente con poderes que debe defender su mundo contra los espíritus de la muerte. La editorial también sacará al mercado 'La maldición del Holandés Herrante' de la zaragozana África Vázquez, una historia de amor imposible que se desarrolla en la costa asturiana entre un capitán inmortal y una valiente pescadora. Los extremeños Aristas Martínez apuestan por la aclamada narradora china Can Xue con 'Bajos Fondos', una insólita fábula del subsuelo narrada por un roedor.

En cuanto al thriller y al terror, el madrileño Rubén Sánchez Trigos regresa gracias a Grijalbo con 'Vuelve a mí', un thriller sobrenatural que es, a la vez, una siniestra metáfora de nuestra realidad laboral. El sello La Biblioteca de Carfax, consagrado al terror, prepara en marzo el lanzamiento de 'Como aceite en sus huesos' de Karon Warren, novela corta traducida por M^a Pilar San Román para la colección Deméter sobre fantasmas y naufragios, culpa y redención.

Para abril está prevista la continuación de la exitosa 'Orígenes secretos' de David Galán Galindo en el sello Runas, que sigue los pasos del inspector David Valentín como Vértice en su lucha contra las bandas callejeras de Madrid. Con Obscura Editorial llegará en marzo 'Wollstonecraft: el principio siempre es hoy', una aventura fantástica e histórica de Ricard Ruíz Garzón que profundiza en la británica Mary Wollstonecraft, autora, filósofa y referente del feminismo. En abril el sello catalán propone 'Antología Obscura 4: diez relatos', la obra que prepara anualmente con cuentos de algunos de los mejores autores del panorama nacional.

Los valencianos Dilatando Mentes publicarán 'Nuestro amor nos devorará' de R.L. Meza, una novela sobre las relaciones familiares y la oscura cara del amor, y 'La veta' de Steph Nelson, que tiene como escenario una vieja mina de plata de un pueblo de Idaho en el que los sucesos extraños se multiplican. Para abrir boca en primavera Apache Libros ha decidido confiar en Ángela Pinaud y su 'Ritual', la historia de una abogada que se enfrenta a fuerzas desconocidas conectadas a la traumática muerte de su padre. La editorial madrileña también quiere homenajear a las autoras francesas de finales del s. XVII que nutrieron con sus ideas el género de los cuentos de hadas con el lanzamiento de 'Las otras hadas (Descubriendo a Les Conteuses)', coordinado por Gemma Solsona e ilustrado por Marta Ponce.

No pueden faltar las reediciones, muestra de que hay obras que desafían el paso del tiempo. Así Duermevela reeditará la ya clásica 'Entre extraños' de Jo Walton, premio Hugo, Nebula y British Fantasy 2012 con nueva traducción y portada, y Nova ha anunciado la reedición en tapa dura ilustrada de 'Sombras de Identidad/Mistborn' de Brandon Sanderson.

Todos estos títulos y muchos más son el aperitivo primaveral a la próxima gran cita de la literatura (y no solo la fantástica) en España, la Feria del Libro de Madrid, que se celebrará entre el 30 de mayo y el 15 de junio. ¡Nos vemos en el Retiro!



Una de las ilustraciones de Las otras Hadas, el libro 'Homenaje a Les Conteuses', que surge bajo el lema "Somos las tataranietas de las hadas que no pudisteis silenciar". [emartaponceilustracion](#)



Cristina Jurado Marcos es una escritora y editora española de fantasía, ciencia ficción y terror, ganadora de ocho premios Ignotus. Ha escrito cuatro novelas y numerosos relatos cortos, y editado varias antologías, además de artículos y entrevistas en la revista SuperSonic, que dirigió durante siete años.

MÁS ALLÁ DE MADRID

By Romy Hüggle



From the street names, the food, or the music leaking out of nightclubs or jerking morning commuters awake on Línea 6, Madrid would not be the city it is without the creativity of Latin America. To the unknowing tourist, the capital can appear inhabited largely by locals – where it's not overrun by digital nomads – but canner ears are rewarded in bars, shops and terrazas with a vast array of dialects from all over Latin America, essential to the city's DNA. Madrid's literary scene follows the same story. Countless writers – Mario Vargas Llosa, Rubén Darío, Pablo Neruda, Gabriela Mistral and Borges, amongst others – made the capital their home and, consequently, a centre of Hispanic literature. Literature has been a constant means of dialogue in the Spanish-speaking world and, especially as Latin American fiction experiences a “second boom”, ‘Más Allá de Madrid’ hopes to be a space for exploring literature and culture from Latin America, and how it engages with Madrid.

LATIN AMERICAN FICTION IN 2024

Once again, 2024 saw another sweep of Latin American novels nominated for the International Booker Prize. Previous nominee Mariana Enriquez returned readers to her Gothic version of Buenos Aires with short story collection ‘A Sunny Place for Shady People’. As the title suggests, urban Argentina appears rife with secrecy; middle-class neighbourhoods are forced to confront the country's disclaimed youth in the form of “black-eyed” adolescent ghosts who, whether representatives of the “disappeared” or its child poverty, are where Enriquez's horror reaches its chilling best.

Chile's Alejandro Zambra also explores youth in ‘Childish Literature’, a collection of short stories and essays that explore fatherhood and inter-generational connections in a country that for years associated the word “father” with “dictator”. Zambra describes the collection as practice for future conversations he wants to have with his son in which, among reflections on masculinity, creativity and language, he stresses that “literature is always childish”.

Anyone with even a vague interest in contemporary Latin music will know that 2024 ended with a spectacularly triumphant call to action by Bad Bunny, whose album ‘Debí Tirar Más Fotos’ has the world collectively damning the gentrification of his native Puerto Rico and singing, “Quieren quitarme la playa... quieren que tus hijos se vayan”. Jamie Figueroa's memoir ‘Mother Island: A Daughter Claims Puerto Rico’ narrates exactly that: the experience of generations who left Puerto Rico for the US and her struggle to claim her mother's culture growing up in the white Midwest.

MADURO'S VENEZUELA

What happens when a country is left to the dogs?

In the last decade, over 7 million Venezuelans have left their country. Extreme poverty and mass exodus of the middle-classes have left Caracas dark and sleepy, abandoned by “lucky” families boarding planes and countless desperate others fleeing on foot. They leave behind streets almost empty of traffic and a population of skulking shadows who couldn't understand when or why they were being left: Venezuela's stray dogs, of which there are now over 3 million.

“Bicycles are to Amsterdam what dogs are to Caracas: the objects of its cruelty.” In Rodrigo Blanco Calderón's ‘Simpatía’, while human suffering is occasionally referenced at the periphery – a student, killed by paramilitary groups, or a security guard, too hungry to stand up – dogs are paid most attention. Sick and starving, victims to senseless acts of violence, and repeatedly referred to as embodiments of Christ, it's Caracas's canine population that the protagonist Ulises strives to save.

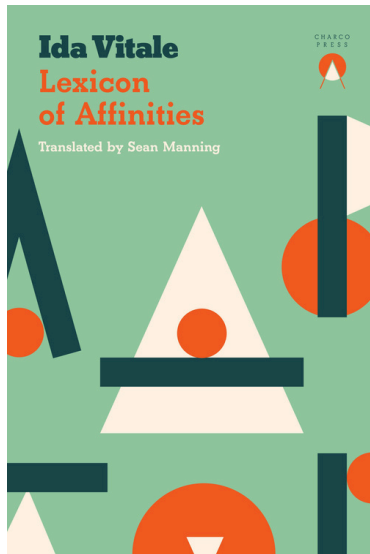
In Calderón's Caracas, the thousands of unaccompanied dogs actually provide a sense of normalcy among the sinister happenings in the background. Bizarre or supernatural theories compete to explain the strangeness of the novel: is it the haunted Hotel Humboldt where this darkness originates? In the labyrinthine family mansion where Ulises is instructed to set up the ‘Simpatía Por El Perro’ foundation, accusations of murder and inter-species love affairs seem to promise answers: or perhaps the Caracas's disquiet dwells in the city itself, waiting to erupt in the Ávila volcanoes concealing themselves as mountains, in the water hiding Nazi submarines or the soil where those murdered by the state or by jealous lovers are buried. In the madness, Ulises and his motley crew of volunteers focus on their mission to save Caracas's strays with mystifying urgency – mystifying, that is, until we hear: “We'll have a house, and a dog to give to everyone who comes back. Because if things get better, people will.”

What happens when a country is left to the dogs? Well, the country is left. It remains, if only for dogs. To keep the dogs alive is to keep the country alive – to keep something to come back to. Calderón writes, “the world is a postapocalyptic antenna that goes on transmitting signals even if no one receives them. Or human beings are postapocalyptic animals who keep on trying to receive signals even if nobody is transmitting them anymore.” While Caracas morphs constantly into new, terrifying iterations, orphans are the novel's constant: the orphaned protagonist, Ulises, the orphaned Simón Bolívar, watching Venezuela from his stony perch, and the orphaned

'Simpatía' tells the story of these orphans as they eagerly await, misinterpret or attempt to send signals - as they try to send or receive waves of life force across empty, quiet miles.

VENEZUELAN LITERATURE IN MADRID

On February 18th, Casa de América is hosting an event for 'El adiós de Telémaco. Una rapsodia llamada Venezuela', by Juan Carlos Méndez Guédez. Free recordings of the event will also be accessible online at Casa America's YouTube page.



TO LOOK FORWARD TO IN 2025

'Lexicon of Affinities', Ida Vitale. Uruguay's esteemed Vitale redacts her incredible lifetime in dictionary form. A blend of essay, memoir and criticism, 'Lexicon of Affinities' asks us what literature can be and do. (January 2025, Charco Press)

'The World We Saw Burning', Renato Cisneros. From the writer of 'You Shall Leave Your Land' comes another novel that sets out to interrogate migration, homecoming and identity, following two Peruvians born decades apart: one a journalist living in Madrid, the other an immigrant to the US who then finds himself drawn into WW2. (June 2025, Charco Press)

'The Accidentals', Guadalupe Nettel. Collected short stories of characters who, due to unexpected events, are pushed into outstanding circumstances, in writing that blends the real and fantastical. (April 2025, Fitzcarraldo Editions)



My name is Romy Hügler and I was born in the Black Forest in Germany but have grown up in London. I'm currently an undergraduate student of Spanish, German and English Literature at Newcastle University but, after living for several months in Madrid, I've been travelling back and forth and have had the opportunity to discover the city's literary scene. I have always been passionate about literature, particularly from Latin America, and have published articles in the Latin American Review of Books and Sounds and Colours. I plan on moving to Buenos Aires next year and hope to do more research and reviews!

LETTER FROM NEW YORK

BY RACHEL HARTY

"The grand Metropolitan Museum of Art rises above the Upper East Side like an eternal sentinel, its shadow draped languidly into Central Park. It is, as the world knows, "The Met." A crown jewel for tourists, yes, but for local transplants like me, it's more of a familiar, scintillating backdrop.

It was a December Saturday, one of those mornings when the city feels as quiet as a held breath. The holiday frenzy had thinned out like the last thread of a frayed scarf, and a friend's spontaneous invitation to visit The Met led us to—well—meet at The Met. A pun so neat it felt accidental. But I digress.

The thing about The Met, I've learned, is that it's impossibly vast. To absorb its entirety is to attempt the impossible: it's not meant to be conquered in one go, only wandered. So, wander I did, following no plan but a whim, letting the halls choose me as much as I chose them.

Somewhere along the way, the usual late 19th century Western European icons of Gallery 827—Monet, Renoir, Degas—blurred into the background of art history. And then, standing apart, was the Russian-Ukrainian painter Illia Repin, his portrait of Vsevolod Garshin hanging before me like a sentimental ornament.

Garshin, for those who know him, sits slouched among books, yet it's his eyes that hold you. Dark, tired, and deeply knowing. He was a writer—a man who carried too much: the Russo-Turkish War tragedies, back-to-back familial loss, and incomprehensible grief. Repin captured all of it. In the portrait, Garshin isn't reading nor writing (for once), and he's certainly not pretending to. He's just staring, as if daring you to recognize something somberly shifting in him. I did.

No matter how I moved, his gaze didn't let go. It made me wonder if we ever truly shed our pain or simply pass it along—into art, into stories, into others. Maybe that's why we come to places like this. Not to learn something new, but to remember what we've always known...

As 2025 unfurls, many will chase novelty—new goals, new skins to wear. But there's comfort in returning to what's already here. The same museums. The same galleries. The same nestled paintings. The ones waiting in corners, unchanged, until you're ready to really look.



Rachel Harty is a Florida-born poet, now a New York City transplant. Her debut collection, 'Coffee: A Sip of You and Me' (2024), blends sharp wit with tender reflections on love, vulnerability, and becoming. Her work appears in The Poetry Society of New York, Poetry Nation, and beyond. Rachel's poetry bends postmodern edges and contemporary forms to probe identity, intimacy, and existential drift. She's currently teaching poetry and working on two new projects while remaining open to opportunities that further her academic pursuits. Visit her via www.Rachelharty.com.

tantas bocas

Pilar Asuero

El hombre entra casi sin hacer ruido. Cierra la puerta a sus espaldas como si en lugar de una calle estrepitosa y transitada en pleno Lavapiés del otro lado hubiera un niño recién dormido. Recorre las mesas y las estanterías como un perro callejero que reconoce su casa de acogida por primera vez, olisquea e investiga los diferentes rincones. Le lanzo algunas miradas atentas, pero como no solicita mi ayuda, lo dejo curiosear tranquilo y sigo colocando los libros que llegaron hoy.

Estoy introduciendo 'El cielo de la selva' de Elaine Vilar Madrugá entre 'París no se acaba nunca' de Vila-Matas y 'Huevo retrato' de Gabriela Wiener (queda el espacio perfecto y el libro encaja como una moneda en una alcancía), cuando escucho un carraspeo, breve y bajito, pero nítido e indiscutible. Miro hacia atrás y el hombre capta mi mirada. El libro se queda colocado a la mitad, como la hélice de un molino desprovista de un viento que la haga girar. Entonces, sin vacilar y sin ningún espacio a la duda, dice: gracias, y asiente una vez con la cabeza.

Pestaño dos veces. Uno, dos. Los ojos dicen: perdona, ¿qué? No he hecho nada por este hombre más allá que darle los buenos días y una sonrisa gastada de cara al público. Pero él mantiene mi mirada, impasible, y repite: gracias. Es como si las letras se alargaran en su boca, como si fueran personas diminutas que bostezan a la vez y estiran los brazos y las piernas. Las personitas se espabilan, aprovechan la puerta que se ha abierto entre los labios y escapan. Revolotean, son partículas gaseosas y las paredes azules de la librería el recipiente que las contiene. Son letras juguetonas, excitadas, pero a la vez tan serias como el oxígeno o el nitrógeno.

El hombre no dice nada más. Vuelve a salir con el mismo silencio y cuidado con el que entró. Y yo, mientras termino de encajar 'El cielo de la selva', me pregunto si realmente ha estado aquí. Las letras que siguen dando vueltas me lo confirman. Todavía vibran con su mensaje.

Pensé que sería un caso aislado, pero, como en una peregrinación, esa palabra continúa llegando en diferentes bocas. Bocas grandes, bocas pequeñas, bocas de labios rosas, pálidos, rojos, secos, finos, gruesos, oscuros, jóvenes, gastados. Bocas que se abren amplias y dejan salir la palabra completa y sonora. Bocas que la escupen como la cáscara de una pipa. La librería se cubre de millones de copias de esas siete letras, pero no son inoportunas como el polvo en los libros. No, las apartamos como a las flores o a las ramas de los árboles cuando paseamos por un jardín frondoso: con cuidado y sin hacerles daño.

Estoy segura de que Giedre Pavalkyte y Eitan Felner no se imaginaban que la palabra que más escucharían al abrir la librería de sus sueños sería 'gracias' (no vamos a mentir, la segunda que más se repite es 'valientes'). El barrio ha recibido a Parent(h)esis con los brazos abiertos, cansados de tanto ruido, satisfechos de tantas terrazas para brindar, se deleitan con la idea de un espacio dedicado a la literatura. A la pausa. Al silencio, pero también a la comunidad.

Después de años buscando tiempo en sus vidas para dedicar a los libros – Giedre con la asociación literaria The Write Salon de la que es cofundadora y su club de lectura en inglés; Eitan con su emprendimiento de catas de libros, BookTasting, y de



Librería Parent(h)esis, c/ Valencia 30, Lavapiés, Madrid

regalos literarios, TindLeer–, por fin decidieron zambullirse en este ambicioso proyecto. Una librería generalista y bilingüe, que ofrece libros de diferentes géneros de ficción y no ficción. Buscan, además, que este espacio pueda potenciar estos proyectos anteriores y sumar muchos otros.

Durante la entrevista que me hicieron para trabajar con ellos, fue inevitable que su ilusión se contagiara. Me contaron que estuvieron un año completo buscando el local ideal, que fuera lo suficientemente grande para tener un fondo cuidado y competente tanto en español como en inglés y que permitiera hacer todo tipo de reuniones sociales en torno a los libros.

Además, dijeron, cada dos meses queremos tener un país y un autor o autora destacado y diferentes mesas temáticas. Durante los primeros meses el país fue Portugal y la autora, la poeta argentina Alejandra Pizarnik. Como temas tuvimos Árboles, Insomnio, Precariedad laboral e Hijas y madres. De hecho, a principios de enero organizamos nuestro primer evento relacionado a las mesas. Congregamos a autores de diferentes géneros – Sergio Fanjul con su ensayo 'La España invisible', Rosario Villajos con su novela 'La muela' y José Daniel Espejo con su poemario 'Perro fantasma' – para charlar sobre precariedad laboral.

Durante los primeros meses del año el país destacado es Senegal, y en febrero tendrá lugar el primer club de lectura de la iniciativa, #leyendoelmundo. Comentaremos 'La más recóndita memoria de los hombres' de Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, y la sesión la coordinará el mediador social y cultural senegalés Youssoupha Sock. La autora destacada en esta ocasión es Simone de Beauvoir, de la que hemos escogido ensayos, novelas, cartas y conversaciones. Y, por último, las mesas actuales son Invierno, Secretos familiares, Gatos y Violencia sexual, de las cuales también organizaremos un evento.



Cuando empecé a trabajar en Parent(h)esis todavía no había libros. Las estanterías estaban vacías, aún no llegaba el escaparate y había muebles por montar. No había ninguna G colándose por el mostrador, ni ninguna S serpenteando por el suelo. Los ventanales estaban cubiertos y, a pesar de que algunos curiosos lograron echar un vistazo, ni se imaginaban que en menos de dos semanas este antiguo bazar se convertiría en una librería. Si yo misma miro a mi alrededor y suspiro satisfecha, ni me imagino el orgullo que sentirán Giedre y Eitan.

Días después, vuelve a entrar el mismo hombre. Ahora ya reconoce el lugar, sabe exactamente dónde dirigirse, casi pareciera que podría recorrerlo a oscuras. Le toma cinco minutos escoger un libro. Se acerca al mostrador y me lo extiende. Es 'The Invisible Women', de Caroline Criado Pérez, que estaba colocado en nuestros favoritos. ¿Efectivo o tarjeta?, ¿quieres una bolsa? Paga con tarjeta y no quiere bolsa. Le coloco un marcapáginas y se lo entrego. Abre la boca, amplia y llena de esas siete letras listas para salir corriendo, pero me adelanto y le digo: 'gracias a ti'.



Pilar Asuero (Santiago de Chile, 1997) es escritora y cofundadora del proyecto de difusión literaria La Elocuente. Fue residente de la promoción XXII de la Fundación Antonio Gala para jóvenes creadores. En 2024 recibió la Medición Honrosa en los Premios Literarios Roberto Bolaño por su relato "Fermentación", publicado en la revista Casapais. Próximamente publicará su primera novela con la editorial Altamarea.

Redes (Instagram): @pilarasuero / @la.elocuente

'La verdad inventada'

The poetry of Julio Cortázar

By Matthew Stewart

Julio Cortázar (1914-1984) was an Argentinian writer whose narrative fiction has long been renowned and revered by many critics. His work is often packed with allusion, its syntax dense, its potential meanings demanding to be unpicked.

As a consequence, Cortázar's poetry comes as a huge surprise in many respects. First off, there's the mere fact of its existence. But perhaps a bigger shock lies in his approach to verse. Without eschewing erudition, Cortázar pores over experience throughout his poetry, rather than adopting a more esoteric method and aesthetic that might have been expected of him. Here's a short statement from the man himself...

Cuanta más distancia hay entre la sustancia verbal del poema y la sustancia de la vida, más tiempo ha pasado. No es que ahora busque especialmente lo concreto, digamos como los poetas de la escuela de Nueva York, pero creo que lo concreto me busca a mí, y casi siempre me encuentra.

The above shows us a Cortázar who embraced the *Poesía de la Experiencia* long before it was widely contemplated as a critical term by the Hispanic literary establishment. As so often in his literary career, he was well ahead of the game.

The quote is taken from 'Salvo el Crepúsculo', Cortázar's *Collected Poems*, brought together by the poet himself, the last book he published before his death. As such, it can legitimately be considered his definitive contribution to the genre.

Throughout 'Salvo el Crepúsculo', he intertwines his own poems with quotes in different languages, from other poems, from other poets writing about poetry – and combines them with his own prose reflections on poetry, on the act of reading and writing it, on its relationship with his physical surroundings. The selection of quotes is worth the admission fee on its own, before we even start considering the poems themselves.

The result is not just a set of stunning poems but also an implicit 'Ars Poetica' that also reads as a manual for any budding poet. In fact, it certainly served that purpose for me when I first encountered it over twenty years ago. The following is another quote that I used as an epigraph and title for my first pamphlet. It still resonates for me today...

Supe que no llegaría a la verdad inventada...si me convencía de que país nuevo era vida nueva y que el amor se cambia como una camisa.

Cortázar took the concept of invented truth (i.e. a truth far beyond mere facts), as previously invoked by Clarice Lispector, and turned it into a driving force behind his poetry. It became a goal for Cortázar, both in life and in poetry, and had to be achieved by delving into the self rather than seeking it via extraneous influences and surroundings.

And what about the poems themselves? Well, they're rooted in both extensive reading and concrete experience, while also drenched in his particular interpretation of deeply felt romanticism. In technical terms, for instance, decades before list poems became fashionable as exercises in Creative Writing classes, Cortázar was an absolute king of the real thing. Here are two such snippets...

Y sé muy bien que no estarás.

No estarás en la calle, en el murmullo que brota de noche
de los postes de alumbrado, ni en el gesto
de elegir el menú, ni en la sonrisa
que alivia los completos en los subtes,
ni en los libros prestados ni en el hasta mañana...

(from 'El Futuro')

...Para algunos todo es igual, mas yo

no quiero a Rácing, no me gusta

la aspirina, resiento

la vuelta de los días, me deshago en esperas,

puteo algunas veces, y me dicen

qué le pasa, amigo, viento norte, carajo.

(From 'Fauna y Flora del Río')

These extracts are clearly based in everyday existence, but they also coexist with Cortázar's romantic and erudite vision of life and literature, juxtaposing vulgar terms and high register syntax. This vision is reflected by his outstanding ability as a phrasemaker. Page after page, original images and expressions are layered with concrete details. I could easily pull out a few dozen by way of example, but these can serve as a taster....

Tengo esta noche...el corazón sudado.

(From 'Nocturno')

...Y la sonrisa, ese animalito furtivo

que ya no vive entre mis labios.

(From 'Ganancias y Pérdidas')



Cortázar's poems provide the reader with surprise after surprise, just as he surprises himself, knowing that the essence of poetry lies in the ability of the poet to experience those surprises and then transform them into art. In this context, the following prose quote from 'Salvo el Crepúsculo' is pivotal:

...Busco una ecología poética, atisbarme y a veces reconocermé desde mundos diferentes, desde cosas que sólo los poemas no habían olvidado y me guardaban como viejas fotografías fieles. No aceptar otro orden que el de las afinidades, otra cronología que la del corazón, otro horario que el de los encuentros a deshora, los verdaderos.

While capable of using traditional metre, Cortázar relishes the process of exploring aesthetic innovation, engaging with fresh means of transmitting emotional authenticity. His poetry experiments in ways that lie well beyond the reach of many contemporary poets who unconsciously attempt to imitate him while believing that they themselves are the innovators.

And to finish (I could go on for ages, but there's a word limit!), a brief note about the availability of Cortázar's verse. For me, the definitive volume is 'Salvo el Crepúsculo', as it's Cortázar's own choice, made shortly before his death. However, it's barely available these days, out of print, and costs a fortune.

The good news (brought to me by my old tutor at Oxford, Eric Southworth), is that Alfaguara are bringing out his 'Poesía Completa' in March this year. The worrying news is that it's 832 pages long, whereas 'Salvo el Crepúsculo', including its quotes and prose snippets, comes in at 346.

What extra stuff has been included? Will the exquisite sequencing of 'Salvo el Crepúsculo' be maintained? Either way, at least it will make his astounding and outstanding poetry more widely available once again, enabling us to discover or rediscover Cortázar's invented truth.



Matthew Stewart lives in Extremadura. His second full collection, 'Whatever You Do, Just Don't' (HappenStance Press, 2023), was a Poetry Society Book of the Year.

TRAVEL: THE DUBAI CONNECT EXPERIENCE

BY NAMITA CHAWLA



As I wheeled my suitcases out to the front, a long, exhausted sigh escaped my lips, the kind that carries the weight of knowing a grueling journey lies ahead. The almost 20-hour trip to Madrid loomed over me like a storm cloud. Typically, the flight from New Delhi to Madrid takes about 10-11 hours with a layover in between. But this time? A punishing 7.5-hour overnight layover awaited me. Needless to say, my wrecked sleep schedule and I were not looking forward to the journey back to Madrid.

Thankfully, my family, saints that they are, booked me for a business class trip via Emirates. If you've flown with Emirates before, you know that this airline has practically redefined long-haul travels. Based in Dubai, Emirates is an "award-winning airline covering 152 destinations". As noted by the World Airline Awards, Emirates is known for its "culturally diverse workforce" and offers a premium flying experience that actually makes long trips enjoyable.

Amongst their many standout perks, Emirates offers their passengers the utmost comfort during long layovers. If your itinerary has a long connection time between flights, make sure to check if you are entitled to the Dubai Connect program. According to Emirates, the Dubai Connect program offers passengers with long layovers "complimentary hotel accommodation, transfers, applicable meals, and a transit visa to enter the United Arab Emirates".

A free stay at a luxury hotel during a long layover, I mean, who's going to say no to that? So the multimillion-dollar question on everyone's mind is... Do you qualify for Dubai Connect? Let's see, shall we?

It all sounds great, but of course, there's a catch. To book the complimentary program, your connecting flight must be the shortest available connection. If a better itinerary is presented with a shorter layover, you will not be eligible. Additionally, minors are only eligible if traveling with a passenger over 18 years of age.

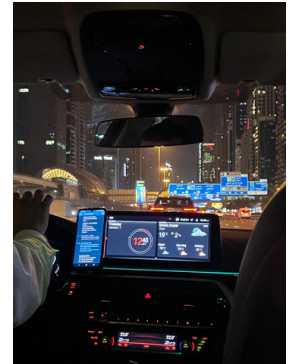
What about layover length? For first and business-class passengers, any booking made after July 2023 with a duration of 6 to twenty-six hours is eligible. For economy and premium economy, any booking made after October 2022 with a duration of 8 to twenty-six hours is eligible. If your flight qualifies for these conditions, make sure to select the Dubai Connect program at least 24 hours before your trip. The Emirates website provides additional information on the program and its eligibility.

This was the first flight of mine with Emirates that qualified for the program and like any curious traveler-aspiring journalist, I decided to chronicle my experience for future passengers. A few days before my trip, I had submitted my documents to Emirates for the transit visa and the following day, I received a letter of confirmation. I was officially good to go!

As I entered Indira Gandhi International Airport in New Delhi, I traversed onwards through the usual thick crowds, making my way to the Emirates check-in counter. Along with my boarding pass, I was given two additional tickets; one containing visa and transport information, and the other - a hotel voucher.

I dropped my ticket in disbelief, as my eyes carefully scanned the name of the hotel. Emirates had booked me a complimentary overnight stay at none other than the JW Marriot Marquis Dubai. For a moment, I stood frozen, caught between confusion and delight. Only the impatient shuffling of another passenger behind me snapped me back to reality. With a grin of approval directed at the check-in agent, I moved along.

I settled into my first flight, distracting myself with a couple of feel-good rom-coms on Emirates ICE Entertainment program. Four hours later, my flight landed at Dubai International Airport, 23:55 local time. What followed was a brisk 15-minute walk through the vast airport to the Arrivals gate. A large sign emboldened with crimson in the immigration hall marked the entry point to the Dubai Connect route.



Tired but determined, I followed the signs through Passport Control and Customs, my cranky expression betraying how badly I needed to collapse into a bed. I rushed through the picturesque passport control hall, almost lost in a trance of silver and blue.

After breezing through passport control and customs, I headed toward the chauffeur drive service. I was handed a chauffeur-drive slip and made my way outside, my jaw dropping. Rows upon rows of luxury cars stood gleaming under the Dubai night sky, awaiting passengers. Handing over my slip, I slid into a sleek vehicle that whisked me away on a smooth 15-minute drive into the city.

Despite my exhaustion, sleep was impossible during the ride. My eyes remained glued to Dubai's glittering skyline, a breathtaking panorama of skyscrapers that felt like something out of a dream.

As I made my way to the Emirates desk at the front of the hotel, I was greeted and quickly checked-in, being handed a room key.

No words can describe the amount of relief and awe I experienced when seeing my hotel room for the night.

Regret tinged my excitement as I realized I only had three precious hours to enjoy this sanctuary, but even three hours of sleep in a bed this comfortable felt like a blessing. Brushing off my makeup and regret alike, I dove into my skincare routine before snuggling under the plush duvet. I set my alarm for 5 a.m. and drifted off into the most blissful sleep I'd had in weeks.

Ring-Ring-Ring! Ugh, my phone's alarm clock worked. I was secretly hoping for it to fail to stay in this hotel room longer, but to no avail. I got up, quickly doing my skincare, and headed down to the lobby for check-out and a chauffeur-ride back to the airport. I bid farewell to Dubai, looking back and acting all dramatic as if it was my last night in this city forever.

I made my way to the Emirates Business class lounge, grabbing some breakfast before another 8 hour flight. As I munched down some chow, I reflected on the whirlwind experience I had just had.

While my time in the Dubai Connect program was dreadfully short, I have to give my props to Emirates. This is an airline that truly cares about the comfort of their passengers. I definitely recommend this

program to any traveller with an extended layover. Never have I ever experienced such luxury than those three hours of blissful sleep in my hotel room. From the seamless transit process to the luxurious accommodations, they went above and beyond to ensure passenger comfort. The staff was gracious and attentive, answering my every query with patience and professionalism.

Now, if you're itinerary looks similar to mine, opting for Dubai Connect seems more optional. Realistically, with all the hassle of leaving and returning to the airport, my layover was quite short and the whole experience, while majestically luxurious did feel a bit unnecessary. For those with tighter schedules, the Business Class lounge—with its comfortable sleeping pods and ample amenities—might be a more practical option. Additionally, since I arrived after midnight, the complimentary meal included in the program wasn't available, which was a slight letdown.

However, if your layover exceeds mine, this is the program for you. With extra time, you could explore not just the hotel but perhaps even venture out to see Dubai itself—a mini-vacation within your trip. For long-haul travelers seeking a comfortable experience, this program is an absolute game-changer.

Would I do it again? In a heartbeat. For a few hours of unparalleled luxury and the opportunity to recharge in style, Dubai Connect earns my highest recommendation. Emirates truly knows how to make every minute of your Dubai experience a luxury.

EATING OUT RANGOLI, GRAN VIA

When I arrived in Madrid as a wide-eyed university freshman, my parents came to drop me off. As soon as we unpacked our bags, we decided to venture out for lunch. I immediately searched for nearby restaurants after my parents announced, in unison, that they wanted Indian food. I couldn't help but chuckle, rolling my eyes at the all-too-familiar refrain I'd heard on every family trip we'd ever taken.

How predictable. My Indian parents had just landed in Madrid, surrounded by tapas bars and local flavors, yet their only craving was Indian food. It was peak "brown family" behavior and I couldn't help but poke fun.

"Why don't we try a Spanish restaurant?" I asked, cautiously testing the waters.

To my utter dismay, my suggestion was met with horror-stricken stares. It was as if I'd suggested something truly outrageous, like I wanted to be a unicorn when I grew up or something.

"We can't eat anything here," my mom said dramatically. "It's all red meat, and we won't even understand the menu!"

And so began the great hunt. That week, we scoured the city, eating Indian food for nearly every meal. I soon began growing weary of the repetitive flavours, but their stereotypical eating habits surprisingly had a silver lining. After testing 8 different Indian restaurants in Madrid, they crowned one the best and most authentic. Their winner? Rangoli, a charming, intimate restaurant tucked away in the bustling streets of Gran Via.

Situated on Calle Valverde 8, Centro, Madrid, Rangoli stands as a beacon for Indian food enthusiasts in Madrid. Owned by three Spanish couples, the restaurant skillfully bridges the gap between haute cuisine and authentic Indian tradition. Known for its creativity, Rangoli offers customers a perfect balance of service, quality, and, most importantly, flavor. Many of the head chefs and servers - originating from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Spain, and Latin America - highlight their multicultural heritage through the food and the warm, welcoming atmosphere.

The restaurant greets you with an understated yet elegant decor. Rich golden hues dominate the space, complemented by lush greenery that peeks out from corners. Adorned at the corner of the restaurant sits a majestic gold statue of Lord Ganesha, the elephant God, tying together the ambiance with a touch of cultural authenticity. The soft ambient lighting, polished wooden bar, and downstairs dining area exude a tranquil vibe, perfect for both intimate gatherings and casual family dinners.

Now let's discuss what you really came here to read about: the food. When testing Indian restaurants abroad, I like to order the most universally-recognized dishes to gauge their execution. For this visit, my friend and I ordered the aloo (potato) samosas, butter chicken with rice, and a mango lassi to share - a classic, foolproof choice often dubbed the "white people Indian food order".

The menu hosts a wide variety of North Indian classics, tandoori specialties, fragrant curries (chicken, lamb, fish, and vegetable), and delectable desserts. The prices, ranging from 20 to 35 euros, are reasonable given the generous portion sizes. Before our meal arrived, the waiters graciously brought out a complimentary platter of crispy papadoms accompanied by three flavourful chutneys: mind, tamarind and a tangy onion relish.

Nazrul, who is in charge of service at Rangoli, is quick to recommend dishes based on spice tolerance. For milder palates, the butter chicken and chicken tikka masala are crowd-favorites, whereas spice lovers will enjoy the fiery chicken Rogan Josh or the Madras chicken.

Our order, perfect for two, came to a total of 34.8 euros. The service was incredible - our dishes arrived in minutes, and the tantalizing aroma of spices wafted through the air, only increasing our anticipation.

The food? Incredible and authentic as always. The golden-brown aloo samosas had a crispy, flaky exterior, giving way to a soft potato filling that paired beautifully with the mint chutney's refreshing zing. The basmati rice was light, fragrant, and cooked to perfection, serving as an ideal base.

However, the true stars of the evening were the butter chicken and the mango lassi. The butter chicken was an absolute delight - succulent pieces of chicken bathed in a velvety, aromatic tomato-based gravy, with just the right balance of creaminess and spice. Each bite was indulgent, transporting me straight back to the flavors of home. And the mango lassi? Thick, rich, and bursting with the sweetness of ripe mangoes, it was nostalgia in a glass, reminiscent of the Punjabi lassis I grew up with.

Yet, beyond that, what brings me back to Rangoli every time is their unparalleled hospitality. The entire waitstaff is friendly, professional and welcoming. They always remember my order and converse with me at length.

A special mention has to go to Nazrul, as he is deeply patient, kind-hearted and makes me feel at home. In fact, one of my favourite parts of going to Rangoli is conversing with Nazrul in Hindi - my native language - a rare opportunity for me to connect with my roots while living in Madrid. Every time I visit the restaurant, I facetime with my family, and funnily enough, Nazrul and my father always greet one another lovingly.

Overall, whether you're an adventurous foodie or someone like me seeking the comforts of home, Rangoli offers an authentic slice of India in the heart of Madrid. For me, it's not just about the food—it's about the memories, and the connections. A true home away from home. If you're ever wandering the streets of Gran Vía, don't miss out on this hidden gem. It's worth every bite.

Namita Chawla visited
Rangoli, Calle de Valverde, 8.
910 571 186

the art of elena gual



'LA TANA', 2024
ÓLEO Y ACRÍLICO SOBRE LIENZO

120 X 80 CM

Paintings, of course, have to be seen in the flesh. This is very true of the art of London-based Mallorcan painter Elena Gual, whose artwork adorns this issue's cover. Her paintings 'are' flesh: they are three-dimensional, breathing, tangible things, wrought with ridges, contours and bold, living colour. They speak to viewers in the silent, deep, international, invisible language of art. They stop people in their tracks. They stopped me in my tracks.

If you can't get to one of her shows – she's been in Mexico this month and exhibits regularly in Europe – follow her on Instagram for a chance to take in the scale of her creations.

For me the paintings have a quality which few really have – the ability to seize and hold your attention at first sight and to maintain interest and reveal new depths over repeated viewings. There is a simplicity to her work, but it's the deep simplicity of a Beatles song or a wildflower; elemental, brusque and life-affirming. You can't really witness the paintings without reacting to them. They attack your nervous system, as Bacon always hoped his paintings would do, and they steal your heart.

Elena is represented by another powerful woman, Arena Martinez. Daughter of the artist Papartus, Martinez is the founder and owner of Arma Gallery and is building her own fashion house. Together they make a formidable team, taking art and fashion around the world and making the world love it. "Each piece of mine is a portal to the exploration of femininity, diversity, and empowerment," Elena says. "I hope people feel inspired and moved."

Like they'd have any choice in the matter.

James Hartley



'VIRGINIA', 2024
ÓLEO SOBRE PAPEL

30 X 40 CM

An interview with Arena Martinez

Founder and Director of Arma Gallery

TMR: Did you go to boarding school in England when you were young? Can you tell us about it?

AM: Yes, when I was twelve, I was sent to boarding school in Yorkshire. The truth is it was quite a tough experience but it certainly strengthened me a lot. To be sent at the age of twelve to another country where another language is spoken when I didn't even know how to speak English well was an experience. I missed my family and my friends a lot, but over the years I think it was a great decision my parents made, I would probably not be the same person if I hadn't had those experiences. I ended up living twelve years outside Spain until I came back to create my projects, my brand and my gallery.

TMR: When you were young, you travelled all over the world. Do you feel the effect of that on your life now? How?

AM: Yes, I think that travelling opened my eyes and my mind a lot. Apart from all the wonderful things I experienced, I think travelling makes you more tolerant, to different cultures, races, habits, traditions. I consider myself a person with a great desire to move, to do things, to discover new things, to innovate and I think that in some way this is closely related to everything I've seen around the world and the mentality I've grown up with.

TMR: Your clothing brand and your ideology are very unique, what are your plans for 2025?

AM: My brand has started much stronger than I ever imagined. It has been a wonderful few years, but also hard. I started two years ago and when just when the brand was working, suddenly we were closed for Covid. That was complicated for the business but I managed to overcome it and it made us stronger. During Covid I started to think about the gallery project and I decided that I wanted to keep the brand as a more exclusive project for my clients who are super loyal

and make the gallery successful. For 2025 I have a very nice project because I'm getting married and I'm going to make the first collection for 2025 inspired by the women I admire the most in my life so that they can all wear my brand at my wedding.

TMR: Are the worlds of fashion and art very different?

AM: Totally different. They have one thing in common, which is art, fashion is art, but it's true that they are two worlds that function totally differently. I would say that something peculiar about the art world is that it is a totally unknown world to anyone who is not involved, whereas fashion is much more well known. The art world has a lot of 'rules' or 'praxis' that are super interesting but are totally unknown, when people get into it and start to understand how things work, they are very surprised and at first, it's really hard for them to understand.

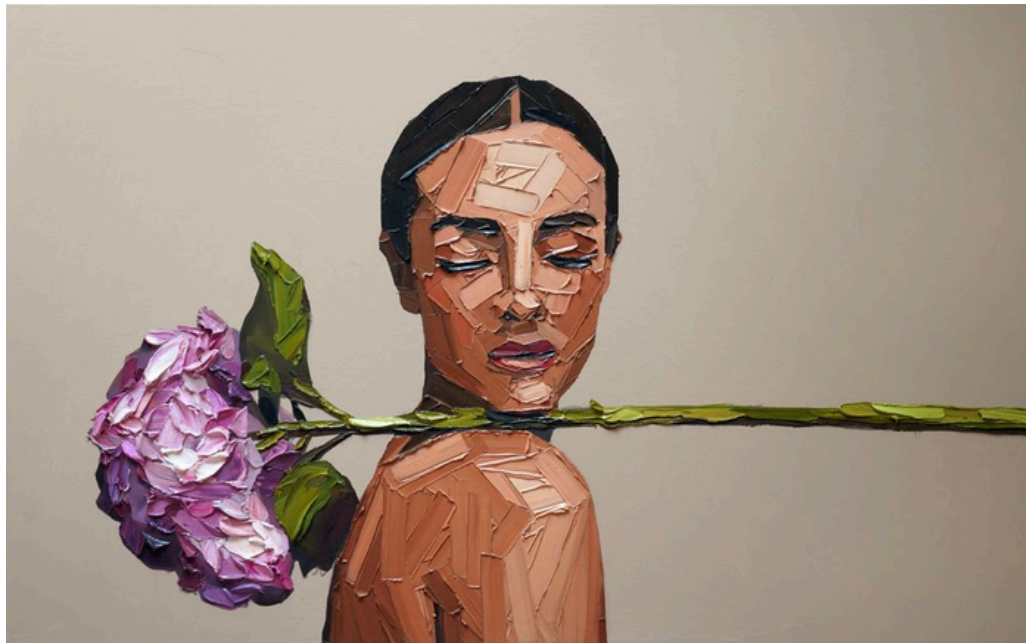
TMR: How did you meet Elena and why did you decide you wanted to work with her?

AM: I met Elena through my father 'Papartus', who is also an artist at the gallery. Elena, her mother and my father met at a dinner party. Being both artists, they started talking and my father thought that we would make a good match and that we should meet. The next day I met her and she was just moving to Madrid for the first time. Since then, we have been inseparable and my father was right. I was just starting with the gallery and she had just landed in Spain after living abroad. A few months later, I suggested taking her to a fair in Spain and we started working together.

TMR: What do you like to do outside work?

AM: I like to spend time with my loved ones more than anything else, my boyfriend, my parents and my friends. I like to travel a lot. I also like to read - lately I've been lucky enough that several of my friends have written books and I'm experiencing reading from a much more personal angle, which I love. I like going to the cinema with my boyfriend, I love to eat - we're crazy about trying restaurants. I also like music, I play the violin and I usually listen to jazz or bossa nova music.

Arma Gallery c/Valverde 30, Madrid info@armagallery.com



'RAICES', 2024

ÓLEO SOBRE LIENZO

100 X 160 CM



queen of hearts

Jane Appleton chats to Erica James

Erica James is the author of twenty-six best-selling novels which have sold over five million copies, yet she never wanted to be an author. "It was something that sneaked up on me when I was in my late twenties," she says. "I certainly didn't think of ever being a bona fide author, I just thought of it as an enjoyable hobby, something to do while my sons were at school and nursery. Having always loved to lose myself in a good book, I was curious to know if writing one myself would give me the same pleasure and sense of escapism and guess what? It did!"

And how. Erica's first novel, *A Breath of Fresh Air*, published in 1996, reached the Sunday Times bestseller list. "Ever since then, I've worked according to a deadline as agreed in the contract I sign," she says. "More often than not, the contracts have been for two books but more recently my contracts have been for three. It takes me approximately a year to write a book and I start work on a new one within a few weeks of finishing the previous one. I really applaud those amazing authors who can turn in a book in much less time - I must be one of life's plodders. But plodding has worked for me as I've now written twenty-six books and am forging ahead with book number twenty-seven which will be published some time in 2025."

I tell Erica that I very much enjoyed *An Ideal Husband*, her most recent novel, and that, as usual, I found her characters easy to react to. It never seems to take long to feel you know them. I can't help asking if she bases them on people she knows.

"Well, my characters might have one or two traits which I've 'borrowed' from a real person," she replies with a smile, "but generally they come from my imagination. Of course, it's always possible that my subconscious is hard at work in the background and stealing real people for my books!"

"The way I go about creating a novel is to begin with a cast of characters, a setting and a couple of ideas and then I launch myself off the cliff-face into chapter one. I never start with a plan or a synopsis, I like to make the story up as I go along as I find that makes the process more spontaneous. If I can surprise myself with the way a character suddenly behaves, or how something unexpected happens, then hopefully the reader will also be surprised."

I tell Erica that I've noticed that she's clearly very keen on Formula One. Has she ever thought of incorporating that world into any of her books, I wonder? Top F1 driver meets quiet country girl and changes her life (or she changes his!)?

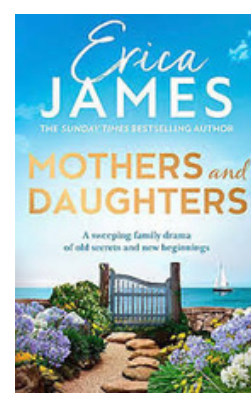
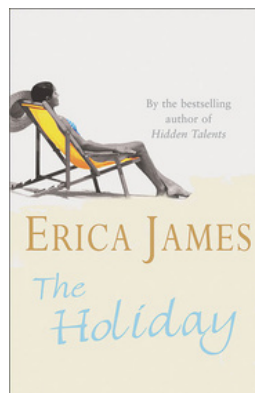
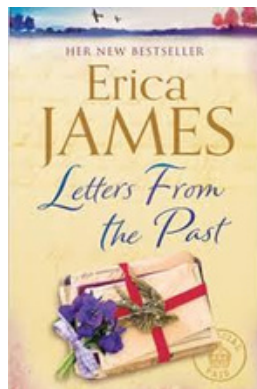
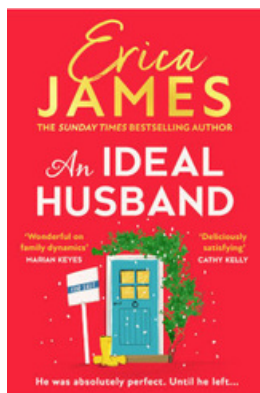
"You're right, I love Formula One," she laughs, "but as much as I enjoy it, I have no plans to feature it in a novel. I'll leave that to an author who has more insider knowledge than I'm ever likely to have. The Spanish Grand Prix is held on the outskirts of Barcelona and maybe one day I'll return to Spain for that!"

Before our time is up, I ask Erica what she's got planned for this year.

"As I mentioned before, I'll have a new book out in 2025, but I can't tell you the title of it as my editor and I haven't decided on one yet. It's set in and around Cambridge and I'm really enjoying spending time with my characters and putting them through all sorts of terrible problems!"

"Writing aside, I hope to go and see my sons and grandchildren during the year. I have one son who lives in Los Angeles and another who lives in Tokyo, which means I have two amazing places to visit every year."

You can read more about Erica and hear first about that new book title at ericajames.com



Erica's Other Loves

These texts are taken From Erica's Website, which is her own name and easy to find.

GARDENING

My novel 'Gardens of Delight' revolves around a group of people who are members of a garden club, and I wrote it at a time when I was just acquiring the gardening bug. Since then, I've moved house several times and with each new house I've thrown myself into creating a new garden. At the beginning of my gardening voyage, I enlisted the help of professional designers, but where I live now, and having learnt a thing or two over the years, I took on the challenge myself. I deliberately chose a house with a medium sized garden which I would be able to keep on top of on my own as I know from experience, the more of the garden I hand over to a gardener, the less I love it. There's a real sense of joyful satisfaction for me in looking at what I've created and thinking, 'I did that!' In common with most gardeners, I find it almost impossible to sit still for very long in the garden. In common with most gardeners, I find it almost impossible to sit still for very long in the garden. Even if I'm thoroughly absorbed in a book I'm reading, I'll glance up and spot a weed that needs pulling out, or a plant that should be deadheaded there and then in the pursuit of perfection.

DOLL'S HOUSES

There is something universally appealing about doll's houses, it really is hard to ignore the allure of them. As you start to read this, you might be inclined to dismiss the concept of a doll's house as being nothing more than a child's plaything, but trust me, it's so much more. Think Queen Mary's Doll's House which is part of the Royal Collection in Windsor and is the biggest and most famous doll's house in the world. It was built by the architect Sir Edwin Lutyens and has the addition of a garden created by the famous garden designer of the age, Gertrude Jekyll. Think also Titania's Palace which was built by James Hicks & Sons, Irish Cabinet Makers who were commissioned by Sir Neville Wilkinson from 1907 to 1922 to make it. The magnificent 12th scale house has eighteen rooms in total, and all are exquisitely decorated. It was auctioned at Christie's in 1978 and consequently its new home became Egeskov Castle in Denmark. I had a brief fling with doll's houses many years ago but resumed my interest during the pandemic when we were in lockdown. A word of warning though, this is a hobby that is highly addictive. Not satisfied with one doll's house, I then bought another and decided it would be an antique cum knick-knack shop with accommodation above decorated in a modern shabby chic style, so quite different to the ye olde house.

KNITTING, CROCHET & NEEDLEPOINT

Ever since I was a young child and when my father taught me to knit (I have no idea how or why he could knit!) my hands have itched to be busy making things. But it wasn't until I was eighteen and I was living in digs in Oxford and my landlady taught me how to follow a knitting pattern that my knitting obsession really took off. During the mid to late 80s, and when my sons were quite small, I progressed from handknitting to machine knitting. I started designing my own jumpers and then selling them at craft fairs, which was great fun. But life changes and while living in Brussels, I decided to abandon my knitting hobby in favour of writing a novel – I think it's fair to say that was a smart move on my part! Never one to be idle though, I then took up needlepoint which was something I could do in the evening while watching the television. Having decided I'd then had my fill of needlepoint, (there are only so many cushions a house can accommodate), I tried my hand at crochet. To be honest, I can only crochet granny squares which I sew together to make throws. I have yet to learn how to read a crochet pattern, it just doesn't make any sense to me. I need somebody to teach me how to unlock the code of what all those abbreviations mean.

Yes, that's me – an outsider!

Meeting Billy Collins.

By James Hartley

Caricature by Ángel Arévalo Camacho

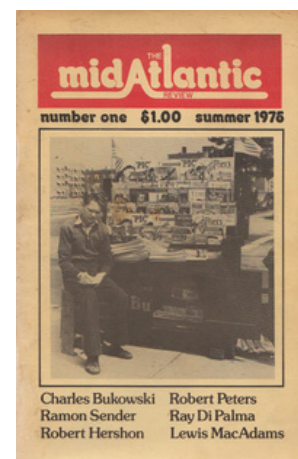
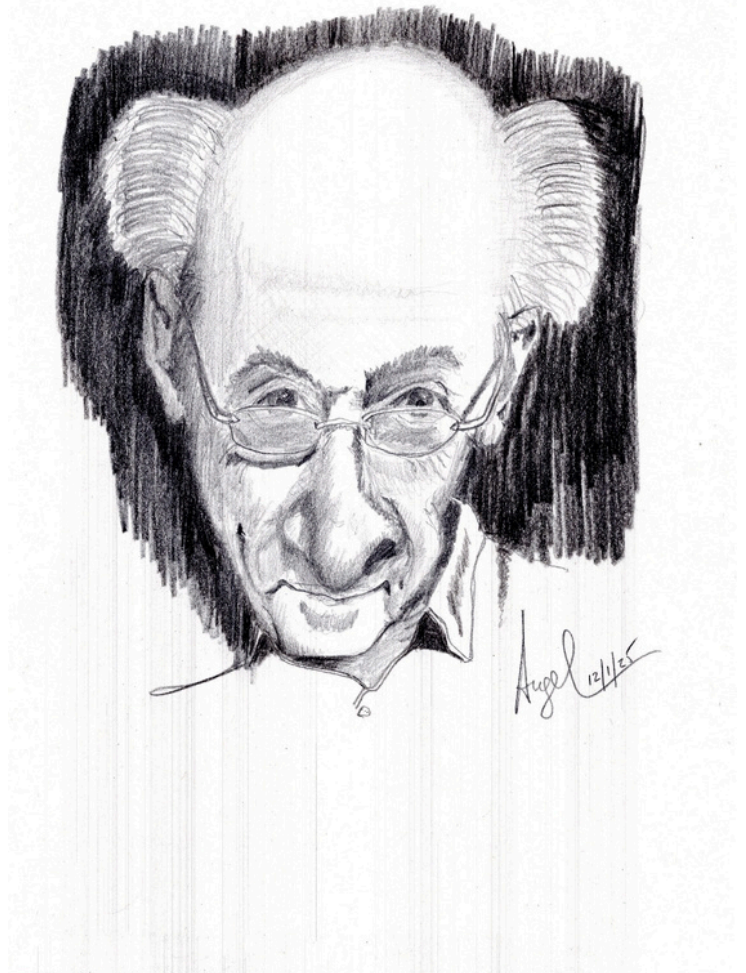
If there are such things as superstars in poetry, New Yorker Billy Collins is up there in the firmament. The 84-year-old is a trailblazer, a template, even, for today's Instapoets and social media-savvy literati; he's been there, done that and all on the back of his distinctive, pithy poems, which cleverly, often concisely, play off their titles to create mini works of very American word art. They've been drip-dripping down upon the public for years now and show no sign of drying up.

Last November a book of sixty new poems, 'Water, Water', was published by Random House, following best-sellers like 'Questions About Angels' and 'Musical Chairs'. What can we expect in 2025? "Oh, more of the same, I suppose, except more autobiographical poems, where the speaker, previously a strictly indoorsman, actually goes places, like Rome, New Zealand, a racetrack, a drawing class. Another book, titled 'Dog Show', is coming out in 2025. Twenty-six of my dog poems, with dogs in watercolours by a terrific painter friend, Pamela Szybel."

His readings regularly sell out. He's taught for almost his whole life, been the Poet Laureate of New York and the Poet Laureate of the United States itself; he's broadcasted and been broadcast, been lauded, feted and rubbed gills with the biggest fish but as my brief dealings with him taught me, Mr Collins remains a humble, polite, quirky gentleman despite it all – perhaps a case of life imitating art?

"You know I once founded a small literary magazine so I tend to support them," he tells me early on, as if I didn't know. "We called ours 'The Mid-Atlantic Review' in the hope that people would assume they were already subscribers!" The first issue, which Collins founded with Walter Blanco and Steve Bailey, featured Charles Bukowski's name on the cover (see pic, right). After reminding me to send him questions and saying he'll give me an unpublished poem to print (see right), he thanks me in an email for inviting him onboard. A true gent.

"I was born and raised in New York," he says, remembering back. Billy's mother was a Canadian- Irish nurse who loved



poetry, his father worked on Wall Street and kept the world in check with shining sense of humour. Billy was an only child – “still am,” he quips – who was given a Catholic education. I wonder what he thinks about all that stuff now? “Like the Copernican Upheaval, the Hubble and now the James Webb telescopes, which are reaching into deeper and deeper space, are bringing the idea of a personal God into question,” is his answer. “Yes, there seems to be a creative force but can you really petition that force for favours like a successful operation or a win for your team? Such a force would seem wildly distant and seriously unapproachable. One lapsed Catholic said, ‘I don’t believe in God, but I believe that Mary was his mother.’ I concur.”

Billy has described how, when he was about nine years old, he and his parents were driving on the East Side Highway and he noticed a sailboat sailing up the East River and he asked his mother for a pencil because he wanted to write something down – his first ‘literary reaction’ to an observation from life – though he doesn’t recall what he wrote.

“We moved to the nearby suburbs of Westchester when I was twelve,” he says, talking about how the first poem that first fired him up – that made him jealous – “if you’re going to be a writer, the most important emotion you can have is jealousy” – was ‘The Flea’ by John Donne.

“About ten years ago I moved to a college town in Florida but until then I never lived more than an hour away from Grand Central’s ‘Oyster Bar’, which was for me the hub of New York City.

“There are few neighbourhoods left in Manhattan where working class people can comfortably raise a family – more banks, fewer saloons. But my poems tend to take place in a nameless, vaguely suburban scene, sort of suspended between the city and the woods. A piece of Buddhist advice few can follow is, ‘live either in the forest or in a castle: everything in between is hell.’”

In the past Collins has spoken lucidly on his method. In 2014, in conversation at the JFK Presidential Library and Museum, he said, “I’m not an autobiographical poet. I write from personal experience; by autobiography I mean my past. I’m not burdening you with traumas or anguish or sadnesses or loss or memories, not in a literal way. I mean, I hope there’s sadness in my poems, and I hope there’s the right amount of melancholy, because that’s part of the human experience. But my persona is someone who’s there.

“I try to write in a very plainspoken way. And I try to start very straightforwardly and then get a little more complicated as I go along.

“One of my favourite analogies for the poem is it’s like an eye chart. There’s this big E in the beginning that everybody pretty much can see, we hope. And then the letters get smaller as you go along and you reach in the doctor’s office a point of illegibility. And I don’t want the poem to be incomprehensible but I think I want to make more demands on the reader later than earlier.

Storks

(PREVIOUSLY UNPUBLISHED)

A single stork
can carry
a newborn into the world

but four
are required
to take out the dead,

lifting us one by one
into the air
by our shirt cuffs and socks.



COPYRIGHT PAMELA SZTYBEL



COPYRIGHT PAMELA SZTYBEL

"I think a lot of reasons I stopped reading poems is that I don't finish reading very many poems. I conduct some workshops and I sometimes tell students, 'You think your poem ends with the last lines that you so carefully and overly carefully crafted, perhaps, but your poem actually ends where the reader stops reading. And that's usually somewhat before the last lines.'"

When I ask him how he sees the world these days – was Dylan right when he sang, 'You'll find out when you reach the top, you're on the bottom' – his answer is: "Is there a top and a bottom? Like most of us, I wake up somewhere in the middle, then the day gets better or worse, depending on lots of effects – the weather, my wife, my pulse, bird life, a well-timed whiskey, a sudden laceration. As Frank Sinatra sings, 'that's life'. He also sings, 'But, if, baby, I'm the bottom, you're the top!'"

Before he leaves, I ask which poets had left an impression on him in his long life.

"Anyone my age has lost friends, in my case poets; some notable like William Matthews, Paul Violi, Evean Boland, Tom Lux – but also a few whose work never saw the light. To the world they were mute; to me, they were certainly not inglorious Miltons.

"As for early reading, some who shaped my sensibility were prose writers: James Purdy, Ronald Furbank, and Colin Wilson for 'The Outsider'. Big teenage revelation: yes, that's me, an outsider!"

The Monet Conundrum

FROM: WATER, WATER (RANDOM HOUSE, 2024)

Is every one of these poems
different from the others
he asked himself,
as the rain quieted down,

or are they all the same poem,
haystack after haystack
at different times of day,
different shadows and shades of hay?

Juan Gómez-Jurado:

“I write for the reader, not for the critics.”

By James Hartley



“Reading is fundamental to be able to write. For every hour of writing, there are a hundred hours of reading. The child who hid under the sheets with a torch when his mother ordered him to stop reading at night and go to sleep, was right. That was the way.”

Juan Gómez-Jurado is reflecting on his childhood, which he says was spent reading whatever books crossed his path. An adopted child living in Madrid, he read voraciously – Agatha Christie, Tolkien, Stephen King – emerging as a driven young man who forged a career in Spanish journalism before crashing noisily into the world of literature. “If I had to sum it up in one sentence, I’d say it’s like being on a roller coaster,” he says. “Dizzying, thrilling and, at times, a little scary.”

This rollercoaster has taken him up to the heights of being an internationally best-selling author and has crashed him down through a divorce and a sea of criticism from literary snobs and those offended by his choice of subject matter. But up again he’s risen, his Red Queen series currently being streamed into millions of homes via Netflix, his latest book *Todo Muere*, still on the bestseller lists, and adoring crowds cheering wherever he appears.

“Haha, yes, the pros are many, of course,” Juan agrees. “First and foremost is knowing that your stories are reaching so many people. That’s a huge privilege. When I started writing, I never imagined that I’d reach so many corners of the world, nor that I would have such a large and passionate community of readers. Every time someone tells me that a book of mine has made them feel something, or that they’ve spent sleepless nights because they couldn’t put it down, it’s an indescribable feeling. There is also the possibility of continuing to write, to dedicate myself completely to what I love. To make a living doing something you are passionate about is, without a doubt, one of the greatest achievements one can have – but not everything is so simple. There are downsides too. Sometimes it’s difficult to manage personal and professional time. In a world where trends change so fast, the challenge is to stay true to what you do well, but also to evolve.”

He sighs. “Then there’s the perception of being a ‘best-selling author’, as if that detracts from your literary value. It’s a label that can generate certain prejudices. But, frankly, I’m not too worried about it. I write for the reader, not for the critics. My aim is

that they enjoy it, to make sure that they feel caught up in the story, and if that means selling millions of books, then great. And if it doesn't, well, I'll keep writing the same way."

For someone so prolific, I wonder what his writing method is. "Before I start writing, I like to have a solid structure," he answers. "I work on an outline that details character arcs, plot twists and key moments. For me, knowing where I'm going is essential - and I've known for years - it's like having a map to guide me along the way."

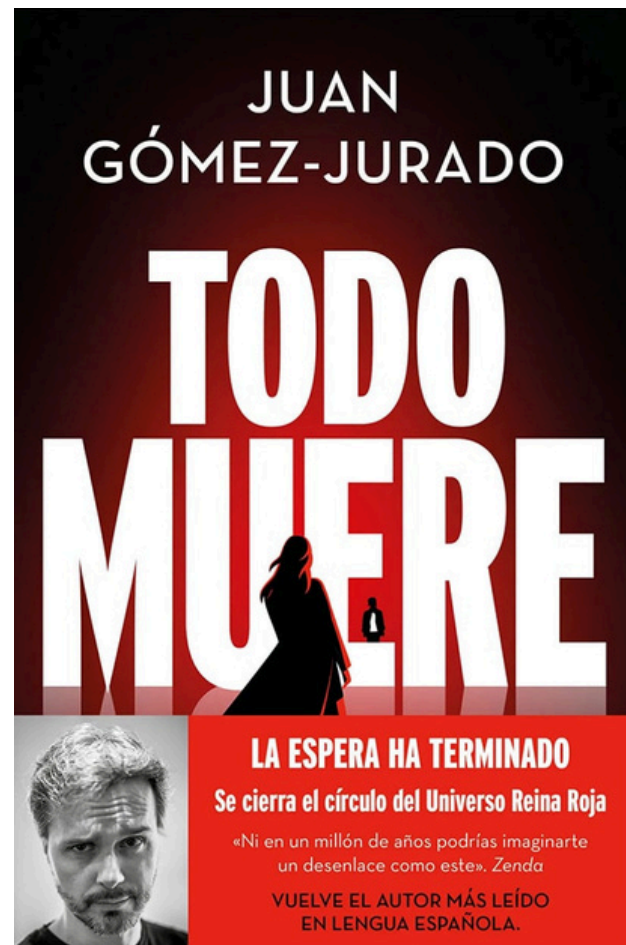
"Visualising the scenes is a fundamental part of my process. I like to imagine every detail: the characters, the atmosphere, the emotions. I try to immerse myself in the story as if I were watching a film in my head. This helps me to describe the scenes more vividly and to connect with the emotions of the characters. I want the reader to be able to feel what the characters are feeling and be present at every key moment of the story."

"I find a quiet place, without distractions, and immerse myself in the writing. Sometimes I find myself writing for hours, losing track of time because I am so immersed in the story. Writing is both an act of creation and discovery; every day, as I sit down to write, I continue to explore the story and discover new layers of characters and plot."

"So, in short, my process is a mixture of planning, visualisation and flexibility. Each book has its own path, but I always start with an idea that I'm passionate about, and from there, I let the story unfold as authentically as possible."

I tell him I see a man who seems content with himself.

"To be able to make a living from something you are passionate about is what we all aspire to. Thanks to all the people who read me, I have been able to achieve it."



“I won't work on a more important film than this.”

Ken Burns chats with James Hartley



Photo Credit Evan Barlow

It's a long time since celebrated American documentary maker Ken Burns was working in a record shop in Ann Arbor, Michigan, but he still remembers, with a chuckle, the serial numbers on the sleeves of the albums in the shop. "They say that all art forms, when they die and go to heaven, want to be music – it's the only invisible art form, too, which is incredible. I'm a filmmaker and arguably the single most important aspect of a film, even though it's a visual media, is the musical soundtrack."

In amongst Burns' many awards are a Grammy for Best Traditional Folk Album for his series *The Civil War* (1990). His new film, *The American Revolution*, which will premiere in November, uses a wide variety of music, both from the period and newly composed pieces for the series, with recordings by Johnny Gandelsman, Rhiannon Giddens, Jennifer Kreisberg, David Cieri, Yo-Yo Ma, and many more.

"After more than almost 50 years of doing this, I won't work on a more important film," he says, "and I can't wait to share it because it's as complicated and as challenging as any we've ever done." The series, which has been in production for eight years, was directed and produced by Burns, Sarah Botstein and David Schmidt and written by long-time collaborator Geoffrey C. Ward. 2025 marks the 250th anniversary of the start of the war, which began in the spring of 1775, more than a year before the Declaration of Independence.

"The subject is the birth of the United States, so it's fraught with its own peculiar set of misunderstandings and mythology. You know, Americans accept the violence of the Old West. They accept the violence of our civil war. They accept the violence of the 20th century wars but we've protected and shielded the American Revolution in a kind of pleasant, bloodless, gallant myth that suggests that it's just about great men thinking great ideas, and though that, of course, is a large part of the story, it's also really a bloody civil war – one part of the country against the other. Yes, our revolution was a civil war but it was also a world war that engaged more than two

dozen nations, European as well as Native American and, of course, it was the first time ever there was a revolution promoting human rights, even though there were glaring hypocrisies and inconsistencies involved.” The film, narrated by Peter Coyote, includes the first-person voices of nearly two hundred individual historic figures – rank-and-file Continental soldiers and American militiamen, Patriot political and military leaders, British Army officers, American Loyalists, Native soldiers and civilians, enslaved and free African Americans, German soldiers in the British service, French allies, and various civilians living in North America, Loyalist as well as Patriot – all read by a cast of actors, including Meryl Streep, Kenneth Branagh, Josh Brolin, Hugh Dancy, Claire Danes, Jeff Daniels, Paul Giamatti, Tom Hanks, Ethan Hawke, Samuel L. Jackson, Michael Keaton, Edward Norton and many others.

“We’re super-excited about how we brought it to life,” Burns enthuses. “Some films – like Leonardo Da Vinci,” he says, mentioning the 2024 film he made with Sarah Burns and Dave McMahon, “are aided by kind of almost giddy ability to sort of throw everything in there. You can’t do that in the with the Revolution because it’s not about one person. It’s about dozens – hundreds. This posed new questions, which is why there’s an emphasis on paintings and drawings, maps and lithographs.”

It’s a technique which has served Burns well throughout his career, marking him out as a pensive, unhurried, contemplative film maker in a world of slam-bang documentaries which go for hooks and end up dangling from them. Ironically for a man who describes himself as a ‘luddite’ when it comes to technology, the Ken Burns Effect has been incorporated into Apple software and has become a byword

for a slow panning and zooming effect used in film editing. “I just treat old photographs as if they’re alive and moving, as if they’re paintings,” Burns shrugs. “It’s an impressionistic thing, where you’re not looking at the faces, you’re just there with the music, with the soundtrack.”

In the run up to the November debut of the film, PBS and Florentine Films, Burns’s production company, will be working with a wide range of national and local organisations including the National Constitution Center, The Smithsonian, The National Parks Service, The National Archives, The Museum of the American Revolution and others. They’ll also undertake a tour of the United States, holding screenings and having conversations with the general public, teachers, students and community stakeholders. And all the while Burns will be working.

“I’m 71 and I have projects already underway on LBJ, on the history of Crime and Punishment, on a period called Reconstruction after the Civil War and a biography of Barack Obama – and, we hope, Martin Luther King, too – all of which should take me into the 2030’s.” Might there be any space in there for another European subject, like Da Vinci?

“Sure, but to me he is the man of the last Millennium,” Burns replies. “If I were British, I’d submit Mr. Shakespeare’s name for that list and it would be valid. And if I was German, I’d have a whole host of people from Mozart to Bach to Goethe who might qualify.

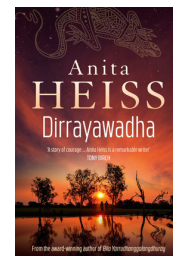
“It’s so fascinating that Leonardo is not only the greatest artist of his age and, perhaps, of all time, but I think he’s also the greatest scientist of the age, too, without a doubt. And all of that being completely untrained, born out of wedlock and not permitted to go to university. Nature became this great a teacher to him and I think that’s wonderful.”



Emanuel Leutze, *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851). Metropolitan Museum of Art

“There can be nothing more disempowering than having someone else decide how you live your life.”

James Hartley talks to Dr Anita Heiss



“I was born in Gadigal country and spent most of my life on Bidjigal and Dharawal land at Matraville,” Dr Anita Heiss says, speaking about her Sydney-area childhood home. “The land was strategically placed between the Malabar sewage works, Long Bay jail and the Orica industrial estate,” she adds with a distinctive, sunny grin.

“I grew up playing cricket in the street and walked safely to and from school each day. My home suburb of Matto was, in my early career as a writer, the perfect setting for creative inspiration.”

It really must have been, for Dr Heiss has gone on to write prolifically: books for children and adults, fiction, non-fiction and poetry and plays. “This year I’m releasing ‘Red Dust Running’,” she says, showing no signs of slowing down, “a romcom that was first commissioned as an Audible Original and will now be published as a paperback by Simon & Schuster Australia.”

When she’s not writing, Dr Heiss works as a Lifetime Ambassador for the Indigenous Literacy Association. “The groundswell of support for ensuring that Indigenous kids have the same opportunities as other Australian kids inspires me, not only as an ambassador and an Australian author, but also as a Wiradyuri woman.

“The development of English literacy skills is important for the life opportunities of Indigenous children and youth. Being literate means they can participate in social activities, in the education system and the employment market. It means they have more chance of enjoying equity and improvements in health and lifestyle. The reality remains, though, that there exists an enormous gap in the English literacy rates of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia. That gap is even wider for Indigenous people living in remote and isolated communities.”

The 2019 National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) showed that only 36% of Indigenous Year 5 students in very remote areas of Australia were at or above national minimum reading standards, compared to 96% for non-Indigenous students in major cities.

The ILF says the situation is improving but there is still a long way to go, and the challenges are immense.

“Without drastic improvement in the literacy rates of our young people, we’ll have another generation of Indigenous Australians still reliant on non-Indigenous people to make decisions for them in some key areas of their lives. There can be nothing more disempowering than having someone else decide how you live your life.”

The harsh realities facing some Indigenous communities are the reason that the Indigenous Literacy Foundation was established by Suzy Wilson of Riverbend Books. It was originally founded as the Riverbend Readers’ Challenge in 2004, raising AUS\$25,000, when Wilson realised that Indigenous illiteracy was a national crisis. “I have no doubt whatsoever that if the statistics above were attached to non-Indigenous Australian children, this would be front-page news and ministers’ jobs would be on the line until real change had been made,” Dr Weiss notes.

Heiss was educated at St Clare’s College, Waverley, then at the University of New South Wales, where she earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1989. Going back to UNSW to complete an honours degree in History in 1991, Heiss gained her PhD in Communication and Media at the University of Western Sydney in 2000, becoming the first Aboriginal student at the university to achieve this, which she considers her proudest achievement. But it was in letters, not academia, where she felt her future lay.

“One disturbing moment I experienced while working in a school environment as part of my writing journey was related to a schoolteacher. I was visiting a remote school with a group of other people from different fields for specific week-long activities. The students were very excited and a little restless at the prospect of some fun activities after lunch. When they took longer than they should have to settle down, the teacher in charge threatened, ‘Those who don’t behave will have to go back into the classroom and write.’ Writing was therefore their punishment – something that was not seen to be fun, like sport – when in fact literacy, while a core to life’s journey, can also

be entertaining. I was mortified, not only as an author, but as someone who has worked for many years to encourage young Aboriginal kids to read and indeed write their own stories.”

Even before she was an official ambassador for the ILF, Dr Heiss had always been an advocate for Aboriginal writers and writing through her role as the chair, deputy chair and management committee member of the Australian Society of Authors (1998–2008) and as national coordinator of the AustLit research community of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers and storytellers known as BlackWords (2007–10, and since then, as an adviser and Champion).

“Since time immemorial we have been telling stories. Throughout the history of Aboriginal Australia, most aspects of Aboriginal society, culture, religion and history were passed on to family and community via an oral tradition that included approximately two hundred distinct Aboriginal languages spoken by six hundred Aboriginal nations. This involved storytelling to pass on information over generations, and this practice endures today.

“Storytelling was oral literature, the art form likened to dance, performance and visual arts, which also pass on information.”

It is this storytelling, or ‘oral’ technique, that contributes to a distinct Aboriginal style of writing. Wiradyuri academic and Cowra community member Dr Lawrence Bamblett published ‘Our Stories Are Our Survival’ – a work that shares history through stories related to sport. Lawrie also focuses on stories of Aboriginal advantage, shifting the conversation from one of victimhood to one of self-determination.

“In the 1960s, one of my greatest writing role models, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, then Kath Walker, hit the literary limelight as Australia’s first published ‘Aboriginal poet’, with her collection of poetry, ‘We Are Going’ (Jacaranda Press). Today we have many award-winning poets to look out for, read and share, including my favourites: Samuel Wagan Watson, Charmaine Papertalk Green, Ellen van Neerven, Evelyn Araluen, Ali Cobby Eckermann, Natalie Harkin, Alison Whitakker to name a few.

“Now, in early 2025, we have over seven thousand published Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors across genres in Australia and a number of Indigenous and mainstream publishing houses releasing works on a regular basis by First Nations authors. The largest publishers of First Nations titles are Magabala Books (Western Australia), Aboriginal Studies Press (Australian Capital Territory), University of Queensland Press and the Indigenous Literacy Foundation, through their community publishing program.

“As the Publisher at Large of Bundy – the First Nations imprint of Simon & Schuster Australia – I suggest your readers seek out Stan Grant’s ‘Murriyang: Song of Time’ and keep an eye out for Tasma Walton’s ‘I Am Nannertgarook’ which will be out in April 2025.”



Photo Credit: Morgan Roberts

Dr Heiss’s children’s literature includes ‘Who Am I? The diary of Mary Talence’, ‘Our Race for Reconciliation’, ‘Harry’s Secret’ and ‘Matty’s Comeback’. Her adult fiction includes ‘Not Meeting Mr Right’ and ‘Tiddas’. Her novel ‘Barbed Wire and Cherry Blossoms’ was shortlisted for the QLD Literary Awards, longlisted for the Dublin International Literary Prize and was the University of Canberra 2020 Book of the Year. ‘Bila Yarrudhanggalangdhuray’ won the 2022 NSW Premier’s Literary Prize for Indigenous Writing, and was shortlisted for the 2021 HNSA ARA Historical Novel (Adult Category) and the 2022 ABIA Awards, and longlisted for the 2022 Stella Prize. Her non-fiction works include ‘Am I Black Enough for You?’, ‘Dhuuluu-Yala (To Talk Straight)’, ‘Publishing Aboriginal Literature’, and, as editor, ‘Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia’ and ‘The Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature’ which she co-edited with Peter Minter.

“Growing up I had a wonderful childhood,” she says, smiling. “Mum made lots of chocolate cakes and she worked at the local drive-in theatre, so we went to see films a lot. Dad was always working as a carpenter in the garage and making things around the house. He used to get on his bike, put one kid on the front, one on the back on his shoulders and we’d squeal as he rode up and down the street. We always ate dinner together, and there wasn’t a TV in the kitchen then, and no Playstation or Wii. My parents were very family oriented. There was a lot of love in my house. Of course, we fought too, but that’s what all kids do, don’t they?”

THE BOOK WAS BETTER...

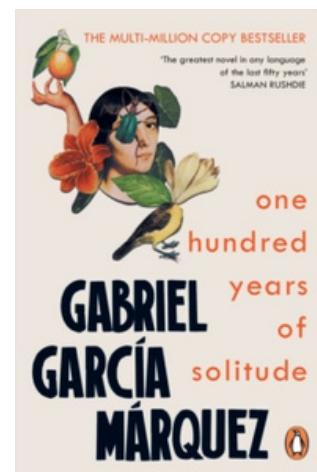
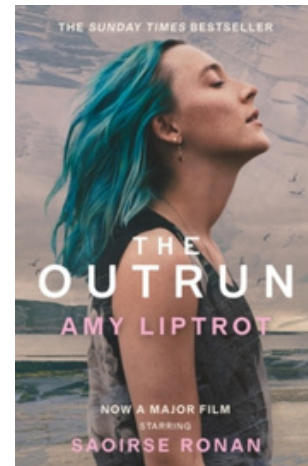
A REGULAR COLUMN ROUNDING UP RECENT BOOK TO SCREEN ADAPTATIONS

By Cliff Shephard

Midway through watching the film adaptation of Amy Liptrot's award-winning memoir 'The Outrun', as the main character hits rock bottom through alcoholism and bad choices, you look at lead actress Saoirse Ronan and think, "Damn, she's stunning!" Then you realise that the casting has probably spoiled the main thrust of the film - even at her lowest moment, she appears beautiful and every bit the star that she clearly is. Unfortunately, it's this that jars against an otherwise impressive direction, tight script and stunning location. Through no fault or lack of effort on the part of the filmmakers, it feels as if this version could have benefitted from unknown actors and less budget. Where Liptrot's book was bleak, stark and gritty, this film seems altogether too... shiny somehow.

THE OUTRUN is available to stream on Amazon Prime and Apple TV

Despite being one of the best novels ever written in the 20th Century, 'One Hundred Years Of Solitude' by Gabriel Garcia Marquez has long been considered 'unfilmable'. Even the author himself thought it unlikely that anything could be made which would capture the essence of his most famous work. Filmed in Columbia and spanning eight episodes (only half of the projected story), somehow directors Alex Garcia López and Laura Mora have managed to encapsulate both the mysticism of the novel, and create a dynamic narrative which allows the family saga and the politics of the time to be explored. A frequent criticism of the book - "all the characters seem to have the same name and it's confusing" - is of course



not a problem on screen, and there's not a poor performance amongst the large international cast.

ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE (PART 1) is available streaming on Netflix now

Italian Director Luca Guadagnino made his reputation with the gay love story 'Call Me By My Name', which won awards and plaudits around the world. For his latest feature, the themes are similar, if much bleaker. Set initially in 1950s Mexico, 'Queer' is based on the thinly veiled autobiographical novella of the same name by beat writer William S. Burroughs. With an innovative soundtrack by Trent Reznor and a star turn by Daniel Craig (behaving nothing like James Bond), there's much to admire in the unhurried and mesmerising story. What this beautifully shot, well-acted film lacks though, is sympathy for its subject and gives us no suggestions as to the talent that Burroughs possessed, and that has made him such a compelling subject to this day. Novel-wise, 'Queer' stands up as one of its author's more accessible works, it's just a shame that more of his voice doesn't translate here on the big screen.

QUEER is in selected cinemas now



INCOMING!

NEW BOOKS BY CLIFF SHEPHARD

SEASON OF THE SWAMP

by Yuri Herrera

Season of the Swamp

Yuri Herrera



¶ The badges dragged the man from the ship, hurled him down the gangplank, and he fell in front of them and then attempted to stand, but the badges conquered him with clubs and he didn't defend himself from their blows because his hands were clasping a treasured object to his chest. One of the badges torturing him said Drop it. They didn't speak the language, but that's what the badge was saying: Drop it! Translated by Lisa Dillman

Set in New Orleans 1853, 'Season Of The Swamp' tells of the missing years of Mexico's first indigenous President Benito Juárez, who was exiled by a rival and is at that point still years away from returning and becoming one of the most important figures in the country's history.

Yuri Herrera has long been considered the jewel in publisher And Other Stories' crown, and it's still a crying shame that more people have yet to discover him. It's to the credit of this independent publisher that we can now read the Odyssey-like 'Signs Preceding The End Of The World', the hardboiled mystery of 'The Transmigration Of Bodies', and the Lear-like fable of 'Kingdom Cons'. Each story is exceptionally crafted, satisfying both the head and heart of the reader.

His latest offering is a fictionalised imagining of a brief moment in the life of Juárez, and is full of the sounds, the smells, the language in the air...it builds us a visceral picture of a New Orleans where music, food and people are bigger and louder than life. As our protagonist eases into the rhythm of the place, what is on the page is more of an atmosphere, an impression, almost a meditative poem and love letter to this vibrant multicultural city. 'Season Of The Swamp' resonates with themes that are still in the news today, as Herrera follows migrants as they navigate their way through life, finding love and kinship on the way.

Finally, a special mention must also go to translator Lisa Dillman - although Herrera is fluent in English, the collaboration that clearly arises from the synergy between them is clearly part of the book's tone and success.

Paperback £14.99 published in the UK by And Other Stories

LOST AND FOUND: CELINE & MARQUEZ

Recent discoveries of ‘unpublished manuscripts’ by two iconic authors have polarised the literary world. **Cliff Shephard** looks at these books and ponders their value.

In spite of the author’s “majorly problematic” views and affiliations, Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s ‘Journey To The End Of The Night’ is still regarded by many as one of the best novels of the twentieth century, from one of France’s most important writers.

In 2021, boxes originally hidden during the Second World War by the French resistance were unveiled that contained numerous unpublished manuscripts by Céline. As well as two “finished” novels was a novella called ‘War’, which featured Ferdinand - best known as the protagonist in his most celebrated novel. The English language version was published last year to some curiosity but perhaps not the acclaim that you would think it should deserve.

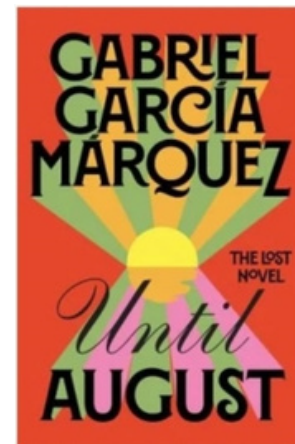
The staccato, piecemeal nature of what was discovered proves to make any reading of ‘War’ a somewhat jarring experience, and probably explains why it was not received well. Where ‘Journey To The End Of The Night’ flows with a pleasing pace and feeling, ‘War’ is all over the place. At well under 200 pages, it also barely gets going before the experience is over. Characters’ names change, the timeline jumps back and forth, and the overall fragmented nature of the text counteracts and warmth that the actual prose may contain. It’s clear that translator Charlotte Mandel is trying to construct something workable, but it really isn’t effective enough to be readable.

It’s clear that somewhere amongst ‘War’, ‘Journey To The End Of The Night’ and whatever else has been found lies a vitally important, possibly revelatory work which looks at the human condition, war, and history under the lens of a masterful author. As long as all the pieces of the jigsaw remain scattered and unsolved though...we will never know.

WAR by Louis-Ferdinand Celine is a £14.99 Hardback published in the UK by Alma Books

In some ways, the treatment of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s “last work” is worse. Nothing more than a novella, it’s clear that what we are reading is a diminished genius. The author explicitly did not want this published - in a foreword to the book, the family who control his estate hopes that he would have ‘forgiven them’.

In ‘Until August’ a happily married woman travels annually to a remote island to take a new lover for ‘just one night’, and when she makes an unexpected connection, things become more complicated than she could have dreamed. There’s the familiar prose style of a once great author at work, and if you’re a fan of his novels then there’s plenty of familiar themes. We are in the territory of betrayal and regret, in a land where sometimes people need something outside their regular life to keep what is precious on a pedestal. And, of course, there is the overhanging risk of losing everything as a result.



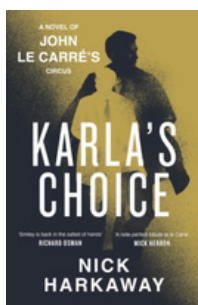
Unfortunately though, it feels as slight and unpolished as you’d expect, with repetition and unresolved elements that are so noticeable that they make the whole experience profoundly disappointing. Marquez had apparently worked on the manuscript, yet battled with dementia and finally abandoned the project altogether.

Would this have been better off left in a box in his loft? It’s a difficult argument to have - if Max Brod had listened to Kafka and burnt all his works, we wouldn’t have been able to read all his fantastic stories. Yet after reading ‘Until August’ I had a similar feeling to when reading Albert Camus’ disappointing ‘recovered’ novel ‘The First Man’ - that perhaps some things should just...stay lost.

UNTIL AUGUST by Gabriel Garcia Marquez is a £16.99 Hardback published in the UK by Penguin Random House

LISTENING IN ON GEORGE SMILEY

With the recent publication of 'Karla's Choice' - the first novel featuring masterspy George Smiley since his creator John Le Carré's death - Cliff Shephard inspects the audiobook treatment of this iconic character's progress.



There's a warm, satisfying feeling that washes over you as you listen to Simon Russell Beale's dulcet, measured tones reading the audiobook of 'Karla's Choice' by Nick Harkaway. Being the son of John Le Carré is probably daunting enough, but taking over their stories of his most famous character George Smiley seems (on paper) to be a monumental task. How could anyone else possibly do justice to the character? Are there even more stories to tell? Former genre fiction writer Harkaway has always been well-regarded, yet branching into such heavily trodden territory with the spectre of one of the most loved authors (and your Dad) is a brave move.

Cleverly set in the missing period between 'The Spy Who Came In From The Cold' and 'Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy', Harkaway seems entirely at home with the tone and pacing of his father's work. The writing is comfortable, unhurried, and expertly fleshes out some of the backstory involving Karla, Smiley, the lovely and wayward Ann...all adding to the mythology without ruining what went before. By the conclusion of the story, the reader is left feeling reassured, and looking forward to possible further adventures.

Being in somewhat of a 'golden age' of audiobooks, choosing Simon Russell Beale (who previously voiced Smiley in eight previous BBC audio adaptations) as the narrator for 'Karla's Choice' is truly inspired and gives us the familiar voice and tempo to ease us into this new chapter in the life of the most weatherbeaten, downbeat yet surprisingly hopeful British agent. An absolute pleasure from start to finish.

The unabridged Audiobook of **KARLA'S CHOICE** by Nick Harkaway is available as a download at £14 or free with a subscription

COMICS, STRIPS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

Kieron Gillen's Powerful Fantasies

The irresistible rise of comic writer Kieron Gillen has been a joy to watch. Although a central creative figure at Marvel until recently (where he guided Young Avengers, Thor and - to great acclaim - The X-Men), Gillen's more interesting work lies outside of the mainstream.

From the effortless pop culture sensibilities of Phonogram and The Wicked + The Divine to the RPG horror-fantasy Die through to Arthurian mystical adventure series Once And Future, his indie comics work seems to still always have at least one eye on the concept of "superheroes", or "extra-normal" people.

His latest project is 'The Power Fantasy', which imagines a world in turmoil and six powerful beings on Earth who are navigating a reality where the general population fear and sometimes even hate them. These godlike figures intervene in wars, or don't...they influence world leaders, or sometimes kill them. The more interesting twist to this narrative is the view we get, rather than seeing this all from a "normal" persons perspective, we get an insider's angle on the thoughts and motivations of these beings as plots and grudges amongst the "Nuclear Family" emerge.

Re-imagining a more realistic world where superheroes exist is definitely not a new concept, we've seen it from Alan Moore, we've seen it from Frank Miller. Despite very much wearing its "Watchmen Fanboy" badge on its lapel, 'The Power Fantasy' manages to be different though, to feel like new, and most importantly of all be compelling. This is a series to follow, to look forward to, and to get excited about.

THE POWER FANTASY vol 1: THE SUPERPOWERS is out in paperback in the UK 11th February at £8.99



THEATRE: HAMLET, MADRID

BY HILARY PLASS



“To be or not to be?” This production of Hamlet opens with the famous question as a prelude to the action, inviting the audience to reflect on what is perhaps the very essence of the drama. Should we live and take action despite our doubts and uncertainties or choose the equally uncertain course of dying without knowing what we will meet in the afterlife?

The renowned Shakespearian director Declan Donellan brings the Teatrul National Martin Sorescu de Craiova to Madrid in an adaptation of Hamlet in which the role of Hamlet's faithful friend Horatio is replaced by the audience, who are thus transformed into an essential element of the play.

This sense of involvement is reinforced by the minimalist staging, designed, as is customary in Donellan's productions, by Nick Ormerod, which seats the audience on either side of a cat-walk where all the action takes place. The actors for the most part wear monochrome suits - apart from Hamlet, dressed in black - thus ensuring that any use of colour produces an immediate effect, such as Gertrude's transition from grey suit to flamboyant red dress and finally to a brooding black outfit. Indeed, a sense of sobriety and foreboding dominates the play, underlined by the constant presence of the ghost of Hamlet's father at one end of the cat-walk. Only the humour of the scene with the gravediggers provides a brief and welcome respite.

As for the cast, they interpret their roles with mastery and fluidity. Hamlet (Vlad Udrescu), dominates the stage and convincingly conveys the madness, initially a guise to try and discover the truth behind his father's murder, as he dons red high heels in which he swaggers and staggers along the cat-walk. Throughout the play we are drawn into each character's own personal drama. We see the suave and seemingly unfeeling usurper, Claudius (Claudiu Mihail), regretting his evil deeds, his new wife, Hamlet's mother (Ramona Drăgulescu), caught between the trappings of power and her feelings for her only son, and Ophelia (Theodora Bălan), unable to understand Hamlet's cruelty, determining to obey her father's somewhat manipulative advice to distance herself from her lover.

The final scene, ending as it does with the deaths of all the main characters, is enacted without speech, which comes as relief from having to switch between reading the considerable amount of text in the subtitles at the same time as trying to follow the action unfolding on the stage.

Credit: Europa Press



Although the rhythm of the action never lags, its continuity and some of its intensity are lost as a result.

But that is my only criticism of an excellent adaptation of Hamlet presented with verve and dedication by the entire cast thanks to the astute direction by Declan Donellan.



Hilary Plass, now happily retired, worked as an English language teacher, teacher trainer and materials writer in Madrid for nearly 30 years and is a past president of TESOL-Spain, the national association for English language professionals. Her initial degree from the University of Exeter was in Drama and French and she is a keen theatre-goer, enjoying productions in English, Spanish - or any other language, for that matter!

SUBMISSIONS OPEN MARCH 1ST 2025

Check the website for details
www.themadridreview.com

