



# THE MADRID REVIEW

VOL II ISSUE II

NUALA O'CONNOR

SIR BEN OKRI

JIM CRACE

ADELE PARKS

ROSA MONTERO

RICHARD OSMAN

MATTHEW STEWART

WILL CARVER



MIGUEL D'ORS

FRANCISCO J. CASTEÑÓN

STEVE DENEHAN

JESÚS URCELOY

THE ART OF ARCH HADES

MAX WEBB

ARNON GRUNBERG

JON COURTENAY GRIMWOOD



Cartel por Coni Curi

## GUEST ARTISTS

### 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.

### MAX WEBB MAKER OF TINY EPICS

Max Webb is a maker of Short Movies, Music Vidjos, and Artoons. The Ancient Muses are character designs for his debut Long Movie *The Pelican Flies Again (again)*. The film is set in the City of Minds' Eye, the metropolis where the imaginations of all mankind meet.

He is currently working with rising stars of the Psych Rock scene Meza Ritms and strongly suggests checking them out on Spotify.

You can check out his previous work on YouTube- @MaxWebbMovies and Instagram - @MaxWebbMovies. He is also on Facebook but is confident you have worked out the name you need to search for by now.

VOLUME 2 ISSUE 2  
PUBLISHED IN MADRID, SPAIN  
MAY 28TH, 2025.

[WWW.THEMADRIDREVIEW.COM](http://WWW.THEMADRIDREVIEW.COM)



# VOL 2 ISSUE 2



## 4 NEW POETRY & FICTION

Poetry from Nicola Toft Lahiff, Monty Reid, Miriam Levine, John Liddy, Jose Hernandez Diaz, Giordano Durante, Felix Eshiet, Jessie Raymundo, Charles Penty, Patrick Wright, Bob Black, Christian Ward, Oliver Comins, Nicholas Hogg, Benson Bobrick, Jemma Walsh, Kate Copeland, Steve Denehan, Julie Weiss and 'Isabela'.  
Fiction from Alexis Levitin, Isabella Millington, Sinclair Gibson, Glyn Rebl, Gabriel Ramirez Acevedo and Dermot C. Miller.

## 22 FRANCISCO J CASTAÑÓN

## 38 LA LITERATURA FANTÁSTICA

Cristina Jurado nos cuenta qué libros hay que tener en cuenta en los próximos meses.

## 41 LA POESÍA DE LA EXPERIENCIA

By award-winning poet Matthew Stewart.

## 46 TRANSLATING LORCA

by Jacqueline d'Amboise

## 57 MIGUEL D'ORS



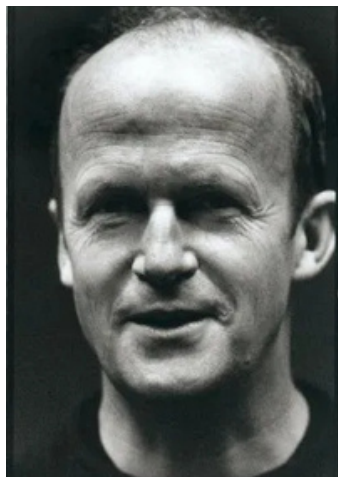
Arnon Grunberg Page 42



Page 59



Rosa Montero  
Page 53



Jim Crace Page 55



Adele Parks Page 51



The  
Art of  
Arch  
Hades  
Page  
48

# POETRY BIOGRAPHIES

Nicola Toft Lahiff writes poems about cities, poems set in cities and poems about missing being in cities, amongst many other subjects. She is currently studying for an MA in writing poetry at Royal Holloway, London, and lives by the sea (not in a city).

Monty Reid is an Ottawa-based writer. Among his many books are *Crawlspace* (Anansi), *The Luskville Reductions* (Brick) and *Garden* (Chaudiere). His most recent chapbooks are *Vertebrata* (Turret House) and *Where There's Smoke* (above/ground). A long-time museum professional, he spent many hours in Spanish museums and science centres over the years. More recently, he was the Director of VerseFest, Ottawa's international poetry festival, for almost a decade.

Miriam Levine is the author of *Forget about Sleep*, her sixth poetry collection, winner of the 2023 Laura Boss Narrative Poetry Award. Another collection, *The Dark Opens*, was chosen for the Autumn House Poetry Prize. Other books include: *Devotion*, a memoir and *In Paterson*, a novel. Levine, winner of a Pushcart Prize, is a fellow of the NEA and a grantee of the Massachusetts Artists Foundation. She lives in the USA, in Florida and New Hampshire. For more information about her work, please go to [miriamlevine.com](http://miriamlevine.com).

John Liddy is from Ireland and lives in Madrid, Spain. He is the founding editor, along with Jim Burke, of *The Stony Thursday Book* (1975-), one of Ireland's longest running literary reviews and is on the Advisory Board of *The Hong Kong Review*. He has many collections published including *Madrid and Other Poems*, *Arias of Consolation* and *Slipstreaming in the West of Ireland* (with Jim Burke). His most recent work is *Two in One*, a collection of short stories with Liam Liddy. *Spanish Points*, a bilingual anthology of his Spanish-related poems, is currently with a publisher. His poem is organised in the Fibonacci pattern, a form based on the structure of the Fibonacci number sequence, in which every figure is the sum of the two preceding it. The poetry sequence therefore consists of lines of 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, and so on with each number representing the number of syllables or words that a writer places in each line of the poem. As a literary device, it is used as a formatted pattern in which one can offer meaning in any organized way, providing the number sequence remains the constancy of the form.

Jose Hernandez Diaz is a NEA Poetry Fellow. He is the author of *Bad Mexican, Bad American* (Acre Books, 2024) a Best Poetry Book 2024 selection by Electric Literature. Additionally, he is the author of *The Fire Eater*, *The Parachutist*, and *Portrait of the Artist as a Brown Man*. He has been published in *Poetry Magazine*, *Poetry Wales*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Circulo de Poesia*, *Periodico de Poesia*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Nation*, *The Southern Review* and in *The Best American Poetry 2025*. He is the Writer in Residence at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville.

Giordano Durante is a bilingual poet and translator from Gibraltar. He was born in 1981 and studied in London. His first book of poems *West* was published in 2017. A second collection, the pamphlet *Machotes*, came out in 2020. In 2022, his third collection *Nostalgia Elsewhere* was released. He has been a speaker at the Gibunco Gibraltar International Literary Festival and was part of the editorial team for the first ever anthology of Gibraltar poetry. He has spoken at the University of Vigo, the University of Cambridge and Grand Valley State University. In 2022, he was one of the founders of Patuka Press. He remains a co-editor with Sophie Macdonald.

Felix Eshiet is a Nigerian writer and Efik-Ibibio poet.

Jessie Raymundo is a poet and educator from the Philippines. In 2024, he was awarded a Brooklyn Poets Fellowship. His poems have appeared in *TAB: The Journal of Poetry and Poetics*, *Failbetter*, *South Dakota Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Singapore Unbound's SUSPECT*, and elsewhere.

Brought up in rural Staffordshire, Charles Penty is a journalist by profession and has lived with his family in Madrid since 2005. His work has appeared in *The Poetry Review*, *PNReview*, *Poetry News* and *Spelt Magazine*, among other publications, and he was longlisted for the 2020 National Poetry Competition.

Patrick Wright is an award-winning poet from Manchester, UK. His poems have appeared in *Poetry Ireland*, *Poetry Wales*, *The North*, *Gutter*, and *The London Magazine*. His debut full-length collection, *Full Sight of Her*, was published in 2020 by Eyewear and nominated for the John Pollard Prize. His pamphlet, *Nullaby* (2017), was also published by Eyewear. His second collection, *Exit Strategy* (2025), is published by Broken Sleep. He teaches English and Creative Writing at the Open University.

Born in California, Robert Black is an award-winning poet and photographer currently living in Toronto. Having lived part of his childhood in Taipei, Taiwan and Hong Kong, his work often focuses on bifurcated identity and rootlessness. His poetry and short stories have been published in the US, Canada, France, Russia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan and Australia. His poem *The Room* was chosen as a finalist for the CBC National Poetry Award. He is currently at work on his second poetry collection and a children's book.

Christian Ward is a UK-based poet with recent work in *Southword*, *Ragaire*, *Okay Donkey*, *The Madrigal*, *AEOS*, *The Galway Review* and *Roi Faineant*. Two collections, *Intermission* and *Zoo*, are available on Amazon and elsewhere.



Oliver Comins drove to Spain from West London a good number of times but now lives in Warwickshire. His poetry is available quite widely and collected by Templar Poetry, among others. The three poems here are included in a new full-length collection currently seeking a publisher.

Nicholas Hogg is the author of *Tokyo*, inspiration for the Ridley Scott film, *A Sacrifice*, starring Eric Bana and Sadie Sink. A winner of the Poetry London Presents, Gregory O'Donoghue, and Liverpool poetry prizes, his work has been published in *The Guardian*, *Poetry Ireland*, and *The London Magazine*. *Missing Person*, his debut collection, is out now with Broken Sleep Books.

Benson Bobrick earned his doctorate in English and Comparative Literature from Columbia University. His many books have been featured on the front page of The New York Times Book Review, widely praised in both academic and popular journals, and published in translation in over twelve lands. As a narrative historian, he has been called, by *The New York Times*, "perhaps the most interesting American historian writing today." In 2002, he received the Literature Award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Two distinguished poets, Galway Kinnell and Robert Pinsky, served on the Award Committee that year. Recently, his poems, crafted over many years, have begun to appear in magazines: *Parabola*, *Seventh Quarry Poetry Magazine*, *Mediterranean Poetry*, *Pulsebeat Poetry Journal*, *Sparks of Calliope*, *The Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *The Penwood Review*, and *Marble Poetry Magazine*. He lives in Vermont.

Jemma Walsh is an Irish poet based in London. Her work has appeared in *The Irish Times*, *berlin lit*, *The Interpreter's House*, *Moth Magazine*, *HOWL Magazine*, *Ink*, *Sweat & Tears*, *The Alchemy Spoon*, *The Stony Thursday Book* and elsewhere. She is a Best of Net and Pushcart Prize nominee.

Kate Copeland's love for languages led her to teaching; her love for art & water to poetry. She is curator-editor for The Ekphrastic Review & runs linguistic-poetry workshops for the International Women's Writing Guild. Find her poems @ <https://www.instagram.com/kate.copeland.poems/>

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

Julie Weiss (she/her) is the author of *The Places We Empty*, her debut collection published by Kelsay books, and two chapbooks, *The Jolt* and *Breath Ablaze: Twenty-One Love Poems in Homage to Adrienne Rich*, Volumes I and II, published by Bottlecap Press. Her second collection, *Rooming with Elephants*, was published in February 2025 with Kelsay Books. *Poem Written in the Eight Seconds I Lost Sight of My Children* was selected as a 2023 finalist for Best of the Net. She won Sheila-Na-Gig's editor's choice award for *Cumbre Vieja* and was a finalist for the 2022 Saguaro Prize. Recent work appears in *Variant Lit*, *Up The Staircase Quarterly*, *Gyroscope Review*, *Burningword Journal*, and others. Originally from California, she lives with her wife and children in Spain. You can find both of her collections at The Secret Kingdoms bookshop in Madrid, and more about her at [www.julieweisspoet.com](http://www.julieweisspoet.com).

Millicent Borges Accardi, a Portuguese-American writer, is the author of four poetry collections, including *Only More So* (Salmon). Among her awards are poetry fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), Fulbright, CantoMundo, California Arts Council, and the Barbara Deming Foundation, "Money for Women." She lives in Topanga Canyon CA.

'Isabela' is a writer based in the Philippines whose work examines rage, self-hatred, loneliness, and self-destruction. She is drawn to the unrefined and the uncomfortable, often writing about the ugly parts of herself that she cannot love. Her writing explores the complexity of human emotions and the kind of love that becomes destructive to the one who feels it — consuming, one-sided, and quietly ruinous. Lately, she has been drawn to writing that leans toward tenderness, hope, and the possibility of healing after the mess.



Terpsichore – Dance by Max Webb

NICOLA TOFT LAHIFF

JANUARY

St Jordi's Day; still cold. I stalked the city.  
I saw Catalan flags hang from balconies,  
and Catalan men and Catalan women  
everywhere carrying books and roses.

I pictured your gap-crazy smile;  
the way you stood in January,  
the angle of your body against a motorcycle.

You were reading a book of poetry,  
waiting to take us to the Urbanismo.  
You wore glasses against cold, winter sun.

We viewed the apartment at dusk;  
it happened on the stairs as we turned to leave;  
the pair of you, and me,  
watching, as you looked and looked.

Next day, I fled the scene;  
suffered the bitterness of an aisle seat  
on a daylight flight over the Alps:  
Beautiful Ones; Daggers of Ice.

MONTY REID

BLOODWORK

There  
or there  
he slaps the inside  
of my elbow, but the veins refuse to rise.  
They prefer the deeper, uncooperative flesh  
and its secretive networks.

You didn't drink enough water this morning  
he says  
so tries the other arm  
and finally, a surge of dark blood  
lifts into the tube.

Ok, he says, you can relax your hand now  
and I do  
glad to feel the routine pressure  
of the world, as he sticks a round patch  
on the extra hole

where there  
or there

blood always finds a way out.

MONTY REID

DROWSINESS

I could never sleep in the afternoons  
before. Now I can't stay awake.

It's the pills, I say, certainly not my age  
Not the one of iron, or steam  
or enlightenment, or aquarius  
or the others I've forgotten

that need a place to lie down.  
It's just the pills.

I'll wake up in the same room  
warm in the afternoon sun

and act like I remember all of you.



## MONTY REID

### THE LAST WIRE IS REMOVED

After the lock in the neck, and one at the wrist  
and the drain in the incision, a clip on the finger  
and a cuff on the arm, and the anticoagulant drip

After the apparatus has fed and falls silent  
and the satisfied lights track across the monitors  
and the nursing stations are undisturbed

That's when they come to take out the last wire.

I didn't even know it was there, hidden under the gauze  
disappearing into the skin, just beneath the sternum  
which is itself held together with the threads of good

but biodegradable intentions.  
The wire tingled beside the heart, with its small charge.  
Maybe it kept me alive at some point, or maybe not.

And grace, as always, is made of the many things  
you will never know. Ok, exhale hard,  
says the nurse, and pulls it quickly out.

## MIRIAM LEVINE

### MAN SELLING COCONUT WATER ASKS ME IF I'M READY FOR ONE AND I ANSWER

'Have you tasted it? Flat, insipid nothing.'

He hugs me so close I feel the quiver of his laugh,  
the front of him, the swing of his hair.

The ancients might have blessed him with epithets for Dionysus.  
Savior, Lord of Wine, Waterborn, Beauty, Dolphin, Deep.

I would lick wine from his palm.

## MIRIAM LEVINE

### TIME AFTER TIME

Lightning Hopkins sings, 'I won't be blue  
all ways,' while the mourning dove  
makes its three-note bleating sound  
and the blues goes on without a stop  
in Mary Lyn's head. It's time  
to fill the water dish and feed the dog

nudging her thigh. The dog  
drinks and shakes, stares with blue  
eyes. Water drops fall. On time  
the tide, the moon. The dove,  
set like a clock, cannot stop.  
Mary Lyn gets used to the sound,

though sometimes she'd rather the sound  
of a siren though it makes the dog  
cower and bark. 'Poor Charro. Stop!  
Stop!'—Mary Lyn would yell a blue  
streak in the past, but when Charro dove  
into a wave she would think: If only time

were longer. Let the years blur, time  
out of mind. Why not sing and sound  
out notes—nothing like that dove  
Mr. Monotonous. She'll take the dog  
out to wander again by the great blue  
Atlantic that will not stop.

Why should Mary Lyn stop  
when the moon is high and time  
seems forgetful? The sky is navy blue  
just before black when the sound  
of thunder startles the dog.  
Finally the insistent dove

is still and Mary Lyn sleeps till the dove  
wakes and starts. There seems no stop  
to the wearisome sob. The sleepy dog  
stretches as if for the first time.  
Clink, clink goes the sound  
of Charro's tags, his eyes always blue.

Ageless dead Chet Baker sings 'Time after Time.  
You've kept my love so new.' Don't stop!  
says Mary Lyn and plays his 'Little Girl Blue.'

JOHN LIDDY  
CROSSROADS

For Pilar

I  
  
+  
marks  
my view  
from a terraza  
in Madrid where I observe  
the activity of the crossroads over light breakfast:  
a regularity of dog lovers,  
neighbours en route  
to shop  
work  
gym.

Those  
unknown  
to me  
fidget with phones,  
waiting for green to grant  
their impatience safe passage to the other side,  
while an elderly lady blesses  
herself twice before  
taking on  
the  
+.

I  
imagine  
being ensconced  
within the Limerick  
grid or quiet country junctions  
with the predictability of their comings and goings,  
windcreens of casually raised thumbs,  
but I know  
there is  
here  
now.

In  
the  
moment I  
finish my coffee  
and 'cruasán a la plancha',  
those fickle friends the sparrows return to vernal  
nests with flakes of fledgling  
food as I  
to the  
waiting  
page.

II  
I  
can  
decipher calm,  
tension and worry  
on faces but am always  
distracted by pained expressions welling up near me,  
which I pretend to ignore  
to avoid intrusion  
yet wish  
I  
could

do  
more,  
offer solace,  
a reassuring silence  
tinged with words of consolation,  
to say that this sorrow-wave will pass,  
be replaced by a soothing  
swell sent in  
to lift  
them  
up.

From  
my  
vantage point  
in the community  
I notice casual bin foragers  
and private concern transiting to a doctor's appointment,  
some with no noticeable improvement,  
others hardly recognizable,  
health restored,  
themselves  
again

and  
sometimes  
the blast  
from the past –  
a student I once taught  
greeted me with such summery warmth that I  
am gobsmacked, left to reminisce  
about a teacher  
who once  
taught  
me.



### III

Only  
babies  
in prams  
hold my gaze,  
unlike some adults who make  
contact with an abstracted, lost or sedated look –  
hard to read when eyes  
meet each other  
in a  
blank  
stare.

There  
goes  
the barrow  
boy with house  
deliveries of fruit and veg  
and here comes the post earlier than usual,  
perhaps a letter awaits me  
or a traffic  
fine for  
my  
son.

Out  
for  
a stroll,  
the neighbour who  
timidly stopped talking to me  
now openly pretends I work for a glazier,  
but not so the 'Leanabh  
Dé' with time  
to chat  
between  
errands.

Ahh  
what  
would we  
do without our  
own little dramas and upsets?  
When I compare the fall of dead leaves  
to what befalls people elsewhere  
the local spat  
is only  
wasted  
breath.

### IV

I  
forsake  
my perch  
for the bike  
to take me into park  
or Dalí's Plaza, 'barrio nuevo', beyond cycle lanes,  
never too far from base,  
where I eye  
the occupied  
space  
prior

to  
crossing  
the intersection  
with Goya's bust,  
hear the same catchy refrain  
from a man who never seems to tire  
of bellowing out his plea  
'algo es algo'  
which I  
carry  
back

to  
the  
habitual place  
at Silma's corner  
for an 'aperitivo' with love  
who observes my approach with a warm smile  
which I duly note by  
raising a glass  
to what  
we  
share

in  
the  
absence of  
he whose words  
reverberate in the wintry air  
beyond the hooting hullabaloo of the yellow box,  
a table of good fortune,  
proclaiming ad infinitum  
'Something is  
some  
thing.'

## JOSE HERNANDEZ DIAZ

### ODE TO FAILURE

Pressure can be overwhelming. The pressures to conform. To get married. Have kids. Settle down. Get a high-paying job.

Am I drifting too far away from society? Is that a bad thing? How far is too far? Can I come back at some point? Is now too late? Happiness is something most of us strive for, right? Will I secretly be miserable when I achieve it? Too satisfied? Boring? Mainstream? Not hungry enough? Complacent?

Regardless of where I'll be in the next year or three, the long, rough road has been worth the trouble. It's not actually about the award. It's the learning process. Epiphanies. Battles. Rejection. Challenges. Persistence.

The failure. The failure. The failure.

## JOSE HERNANDEZ DIAZ

### ODE TO THE POETRY READING WHERE NO ONE SHOWS UP

It's probably happened to most of us at some point, right?  
The disappointment. Sadness. The humor of it. The absurdity  
Of it all. I remember when it happened to me when I drove

Up to Oakland for a reading. I had pictured a giant crowd  
Cheering me on. Instead, it was only my girlfriend and the organizer  
Of the reading. It can be lonely on a quiet stage. But it happens

To the best of us. Reminds me to attend more readings, actually.  
How can I expect others to attend when I don't go often, either?  
Poems do have another level of charm when read aloud.

Even if read to an empty, vast room. Magic can exist.



Erato - Music by Max Webb



GIORDANO DURANTE  
CHURRERO

I remember when I first heard it:  
*Más caliente que el palo de un churrero,*  
But decades on, the oleaginous guy  
From Algeciras tapping the dough  
Into circles at King's Bastion couldn't  
Be further from lust. Bubbles danced  
On the surface of the oil; short-lived  
Smoke opened appetites; Hungry  
Monkey orders beeped through  
A machine; his assistant's face  
Ruddy with morning. When  
He turned the *rueda* over it  
Was like the record-breaking fingernail  
Of a Punjabi hermit. And there  
He held them, in his scabby hands,  
Elongated drumsticks burnt  
At the tips. *Más caliente...*

FELIX ESHIET  
FISHERBOY

The river does not know how to forget.  
It remembers me by the weight of my feet,  
by the silence I cast like a net over murky water.  
It sings my name back to me—  
low, & full of a grief that is not grief  
but something older, something without a name.

At dawn, I stretch my net like an open palm.  
The river fills it with fish and emptiness alike.  
What it takes, it does not return.  
What it keeps, it holds without apology.

I kneel at its edge, dip my hands into its throat.  
My reflection bends, a face I almost recognize.  
Somewhere in its belly, the river keeps the names  
of those who waded too deep and never rose.  
I listen, waiting for it to whisper them to me.

A curious sparrow calls from the silk-cotton tree.  
The wind does not carry its song.  
Not all things that cry out wish to be heard.

JESSE RAYMUNDO  
THE SEA CARRIES YOU

The sea carries you.  
You left your home  
after realizing you're debris,  
drifting ashore onto unknown  
terrain. In the cathedral by the sea,  
you pray for the present.  
April's moonlight streams  
through the windows. The waves  
whisper to you: Look to the moon.  
Come for this comfort.

CHARLES PENTY  
SEPÚLVEDA

The simple semicircular windows  
illuminating the unadorned apse  
allow the glow of an afternoon in late February  
infused with the first blush of almond blossom,

and by the gleam of the brightening sun  
reflected off the late snows  
cloaking La Peña Quemada,  
to fall on your white hair, encasing it

in a radiant archivolt,  
when you stop to trace the lettering on the tomb  
of a knight named Hermenegildo,  
under a mushroom patio heater

that calls to mind, you say,  
the Mozarabic column shaped like a palm tree  
in the hermitage of San Baudelio,  
on the road from Berlanga de Duero,

past Caltojar with its Moorish watchtower...  
Under my breath, I give thanks  
for the peace in a luminous day before Lent, conjuring  
glimpses of the Romanesque light with you.

## CHARLES PENTY

### LISTENING TO LUCIO DALLA IN BED WITH THE LIGHT OFF

Cool breeze,  
and a Midlands evening in April,  
him listening to her sing in Italian,

*Caruso* by Lucio Dalla,  
in the dark like when they were first married,  
the screen of her mobile phone

a light in the middle of the sea.  
Twenty-seven years have slipped by  
in the wake of the boat's propeller.

He thinks of a soft night in Pietrasanta,  
her dialling up songs on the FM tuner,  
the moon a *pizza capricciosa* --

mushrooms and artichoke hearts under a grilled wheel  
of *mozzarella di bufala campana*  
cheese.

## GHOST SHIP NICHOLAS HOGG

I walk the deck at night. Passengers  
sleep, and the crew toil in the engine room  
slick with grease and sweat, while the officers  
dance with women in the bar. A rusting hulk  
more paint than steel, set adrift once  
in the South China Sea,  
where the waves broke up  
like bombs of swell, as I held on tight  
at the juddering prow. So how strange now  
this galaxy of calm.  
The ghost ship balanced on a ball of glass,  
where the captain steers by the light of stars.

## CHARLES PENTY

### JOCK

i)  
That perplexed face,  
the sort its owner makes  
when a horse fades at the post  
in a point-to-point chase,  
grimaces for the photographer,  
who is, perhaps, my father.  
Your black bowler, however,  
is pure Yorkshire noir.  
Raiding Danes could plunder  
by the glow of your Sherlock Holmes briar.  
When did those crow's feet become  
talons of a raven?

ii)  
Born a year after you had gone,  
I would have loved to learn  
the grain lore at Great Ouseburn,  
set my jaw firmly like yours  
and turn up my collar  
to watch for inquisitive foxes,  
woodcock pin feathers,  
the farms patched onto a wold's quilt,  
a startled hare bolting, panicked –  
all manner of wonders you might point out,  
like the high cloud reflected in the beck  
that drains Bilsdale West Moor.



## BOB BLACK

### LEAVING TAICHUNG STATION, AGAIN

*Once, as a child we chewed upon the dark alphabet*

- a. on a northbound platform where love buckled a ride
- b. on the underside of the tracks when winter gathered warmth
- c. up the mountain's torso of the Eastern sky
- d. illuminated the scar beneath a young woman's lip
- e. as two children and a grandmother sang off key
- f. lovers' hope a brisk nob of Oolong tea at the end of the platform, when
- g. lovers' promises fell down, worn socks a soft rasp
- h. as they caught one another in backpacks of time torn
- i. in receding moments, language clacks,
- j. traced maps of dust tickled windows of silent promises in and out
- k. as fingers set vows economically with the pebbles booted up outside
- l. where a wedding ceremony promenades between the early raindrops
- m. what remains upon the grass remains upon the world they had left
- n. his skin a transparent rattle, her admiration a sea bird's down
- o. along the train's corridor, he sang her name slowly
- p. a kettle's hum of longing between the two of them in the ferment
- q. will their future after a wrong moment last?

*Later as a teenager, we learned to identify the carriage of a heart*

- a. along the cliff walk north of Hualien where the Pacific growls
- b. and a child's heart rumbles in the gale, names pebble down the hillside
- c. over a tunnel in the dark a grandfather races westward, clackety-clack
- d. escorting a wife's coffin, steel and tachometer stone toward Yilan,
- e. toward what is real, elsewhere
- f. a teen dances over a dampened dike and the sky tongues rice fields
- g. and seasons, one side a nurturing marsh
- h. the other black with trees cut short by a breeze along the sea's shoulder
- i. where fishermen's boats curve like pots
- j. their wives' shouts trapped in the mud with longing
- k. a bee-hive at the bottom of a well
- l. the careless alphabet of grammar in letters to a lost loved one
- m. the cities perfumed by soot, shale and night market coins
- n. an algebra once won along Yizhong Street Night Market
- o. where children scamper stone spice drunk in their own ballet
- p. can you hear them lost in long syllable names?

*Now as adults, we quiver in forgotten pledge*

- a. one day you will become a bridge
- b. one day you will flower into knots of unknowing
- c. your grandparents will squirrel in the treetops gathering loss
- d. old as chrysanthemum, your affirmations will unfold into handkerchiefs
- e. in hot water, pollen will bruise knees, a pocket will rattle with old keys
- f. the two of you lost children surrounded by bees and the world's upheaval
- g. Can you see love in the folds of the wind-chipped trees?

## PATRICK WRIGHT

### THE ENVELOPE

The nurses said the clocks had stopped.  
We saw something translucent lift out  
of her body, and flit to the sill.  
I snipped a lock of hair with scissors —  
a defiant *no, not everything, not right now,*  
*I'm keeping this bit* (a violation, a trophy,  
a souvenir). They gave me an envelope  
as if handing me a bill, while she escaped  
*her* envelope — arms wide, eagle-like,  
bed festooned with butterflies,  
beatific as she rose up, out of the  
Earth's envelope. I tugged one hand,  
her sister the other, wrestling for possession  
of what belonged to no-one.

The envelope waits high in my wardrobe,  
sealed with gum from anything  
that could corrupt; time, I suppose.  
It's fitting the front is blank, address  
withheld. Usually for letters, but for me,  
strands of keratin ...  
For now, clocks need to stay stopped:  
if I look, my journey never was.  
The lock I combed my fingers through  
curls in the dark like a solar flare  
against the void, radiating still,  
despite the lack of oxygen. It can't exist ...  
neither can it be obliterated. It must exist  
for nothing to ever be extinguished.

CHRISTIAN WARD  
ALGORITHMS

Jellyfish lack hearts,  
I'm told. The quiet flight

of pelagic ghosts  
is not an outpouring

of love for the sea,  
or a double slit experiment

to observe their conjoined  
state: how far one can live

without the other in a shimmer  
of electron-beautiful beads,

while waves hum love songs  
cocooned in longing, despair.

How false these algorithms are.

CHRISTIAN WARD  
MY FATHER'S LOVE AS A GAS LEAK

An unpopular thesis  
on what it means to be  
combustible. A colourless  
ghost with an odour  
reeking of rotten eggs,  
the second-hand smell  
of corpses on a game show  
celebrating putrefaction.  
Look how it silently fills  
the room like an unwanted  
elephant, cigarette suction  
cupped to its trunk, lighter  
at the ready. A look that says  
'tempt me', your whole body  
trembling like a match  
in a blizzard, some previously  
unimaginable thing.

CHRISTIAN WARD  
MY FATHER'S LOVE AS AN IKEA WARDROBE

Instructions written in cuneiform.  
Understandable only to the television static  
of rain, the slow binary of frogspawn.  
A subculture of unwanted boxes.  
Cheaply made. Designed to spite.  
Look how easily it splinters  
with the slightest shove, the material's  
grief concealed in the MDF's glue,  
whatever can be hidden, like so much,  
from the factory line.

OLIVER COMINS  
BEAUFORT 5, FALLING 3, DETACHED CLOUDS,  
SOME PRECIPITATION

It's raining indoors still. And cold.  
We have kept our curtains closed,  
but they glow enough to suggest  
the storm out there has passed.  
Hints of green and blue and yellow  
illuminate the pale cotton drapes.  
Pleats allow another kind of light,  
disrupt its natural flow, condense  
the layered colours into shadow.

We lifted rugs and cleared our floor,  
when it was clear this was more  
than passing showers. A break  
in the clouds gave the time it took  
to pack and hide things in the loft.  
The weather here hasn't always  
been so difficult—we used to keep  
these bodies soft and spend our time,  
or most of it, companionably.

OLIVER COMINS  
SOMETHING UNTOWARD

Late evening, but not hazardously so,  
a dog is holding forth in one of the gardens,  
making such a noise I can hear each bark  
echo in the deep chamber of its lungs.

I pause, standing still and upright, feeling  
the protective arms of the dog's barking.  
What makes me think something untoward  
might happen? I take one step, then another.

My key unlocks an ochre-painted door.  
The lights inside are delicate, almost pleasing.  
Perhaps there are people sleeping upstairs,  
in rooms beyond the hanging shadows.

Whoever closed these curtains has revealed  
a paisley-styled forest scene in burnt orange  
with variegated greens and mellow reds.  
I will enjoy the stillness of the leaves.

OLIVER COMINS  
MAKING WAY

In years gone by, she used the chaise longue  
in their garden room to tease him, privately.  
A time arrived when there wasn't any point.

A three-piece suite they'd bought together  
was next to go, making way for a hospital bed  
in which he slept alone until he died.

Their piano wasn't being played and took up  
too much space. His bookshelf and her books  
stood there undisturbed, accumulating dust.

That old divan, with its voluminous pillows  
and an eiderdown she herself had made,  
turned out to be a luxury and a hindrance.

In its place a smaller bed arrived with a range  
of heights, constraints and angles, allowing her  
to lie secure from harm, accessible for caring.

A wooden bench remains outside, on a patio  
they laid themselves. Most mornings, the carer  
sits there, facing south and resting for a while.

BENSON BOBRICK  
VIGNETTE

On the corner, a loitering pimp  
clutched at his ten-gallon hat.  
A kind of arthritic shuffle  
brought him to a door  
from where, leaning limp-  
ly on a gold-tipped cane,  
he ruled his rude domain  
of the rank and rankly used,  
in suave decrepitude.

JEMMA WALSH  
SEA-SICKNESS WRISTBAND

I stay to watch him run into his class  
With his blue boot bag, a topknot 'like Haaland's'  
Tied with an 'it'll do' sea-sickness wristband.  
His legs race each other to the waiting day,  
His bright face is open as a petal to the sun.

Then I sense the shadow cast, that stalking  
Of knowing they're rationed, these days  
Of mango-hedgehoged mornings, dried mango  
At pickup, the honied sound of mispronunciations,  
An O being penciled anti-clockwise in haste.

After his bath, clean as a whistle, he whispers  
He loves me even more than my back scratches.  
These love-lathered days slip and slip through gritted grip.  
Five more minutes? he asks at bedtime, and I agree.

**JEMMA WALSH**  
**THE BOY TWO DOORS UP**

That he was adopted was no secret  
but went unsaid in that understood way.  
And he was wired wild from day dot,  
hair white as teeth and laughing away like mad.

They had the best kept house on the street.  
Pink rose bushes flushed the kempt garden,  
tinted windows, immaculate, always, and rumours  
of sheened surfaces, of carpets beyond repute.

He came into our house a handful of times  
to visit the glass-blown fish on our sideboard.  
A mass-produced unspecified specie, striped  
in yellow and scanty blues, a 70's interiors folly.

I don't know how it came to be but he believed  
the glass fish came to life but each time he visited  
it just so happened to be sleeping. My mother  
played along, wide-eyed, winking over at us.

I remember one day after yet another antic,  
his father, a barracks man, broad as thick, dragged  
the boy home down the street like a dog.  
We worried for him, his head so close to the path.

A year back he was found dead in the town.  
A man now, homeless and long since addicted.  
Some say he's better off gone to God. His dealer  
had been spotted walking him weekly to the social.

I don't think of him often but his laugh  
like a haunting honesty can surface so swiftly  
and we shared the street, its maples on the turn  
and the fish that one night finally jumped.

**KATE COPELAND**

**ON VULNERABLE EVENINGS,**

ought moons bring music to life, dress the most  
instant notes — undressing her?

Deep down, the worship begins, a passion-fear,  
upright with a same silence as she

might stay. Shinier, featherlight even. With kind  
-ness in composure. How she preens

magic in the glances, swiftly, before he grounds  
into an absentminded. Birdbodied.

In her defence: she is season still, rooting up,  
fingers crossed. In his defect:

a heart so full of flying, he hardly seizes moon  
at all. Quails at chain reactions,

her swallowed details. She prays for perfect  
shoulders, sun. The sky should be female.



## STEVE DENEHAN

### ON THE BUS

He is doing most of the talking  
she, most of the listening

a young couple  
late teens, early twenties  
at a guess

it's hard to know  
as all that I can see  
are the backs of their heads

her hair is blonde  
long and straight  
his is mousy brown and short  
if you must know, and  
as I mentioned  
he is doing most of the talking

self-important stuff  
plastic philosophies  
the best of which is  
'you can't reach the future  
without being in the present'  
or something like that

the thing is  
he reminds me  
of me  
when I was his age  
a moron

I want to tap him on the shoulder  
tell him to calm it down  
relax a little  
reassure him that maybe  
she likes him  
for him, but  
there's no point  
he wouldn't listen  
we morons never do

## STEVE DENEHAN

### NIGHT SOUNDS BEGINNING

The blood rolls down my shin  
I feel it as I walk  
the tingle of it  
against the hairs

the blood is in no hurry  
neither am I  
nowhere to be  
nothing to do

I sense something  
in the sky above me  
a heron  
a pterodactyl in silhouette

the blood is running now  
cooling  
on the front and outside  
of my bare right foot

there is little pain  
and I do not limp  
though I know that I am leaving  
single red footprints now

I wonder  
how that will look  
to whoever it is  
that finds me

I am sitting down, and  
I am tired  
the ground is hard, and I  
am tired, very tired

it is warm and dry here  
the world shimmers  
in the red pool  
crickets chirp, night sounds beginning

I am lying down  
the ground is soft  
my mother's hand  
against my cheek

the heron flies  
into the falling sky

## STEVE DENEHAN

### IN LA MATA AND DUBLIN SIMULTANEOUSLY

In La Mata  
even in the shade  
there is no escape

the sun is a hunter, so  
I retreat into the one place  
that I cannot be found  
myself

it is winter  
Christmas night in Dublin City  
late, rainy

I am sitting  
on Temple Street  
in a parked car  
outside the Children's Hospital

I wait  
I am waiting  
waiting, waiting  
for the winter  
to be over

while the world melts  
in windshield raindrops



## JULIE WEISS

### ALMOST TWEEN

The places where my daughter  
nuzzles against me are disappearing.

Little remains of the space  
between neck and shoulder

where she used to nest, except  
time. When she's not looking

I smear years across my face  
until I'm no more distinguishable

than a mantis, poised on sorrow's  
last leaf. She writes secrets on slips

of silence, folds them into swans  
or butterflies, any creature that flaps

when it senses a trespasser.  
There are days when she's all

rook, hoarding joys like acorns,  
and only her friends can crack

her open. Days when I ask her  
to clean her room or stop teasing

her brother and her anger brambles,  
piercing every last layer of my love,

unconditionally. That's when I see  
them, predator hormones, thrashing

out of her mouth, driving my voice  
to a hollow in the ground.

Caliope – Poetry by Max Webb

**MILICENT BORGES ACCARDI**  
**OUR HANDS AND OUR EYES**

Even in winter, the ants stay around, seemingly limited to the kitchen, forming team ladders up and over the metal sink, expanding onto the large trash can at the front of the cabinets, like angry storm-troopers. I have half-heartedly sprayed bleach but they return in different places. Like snags in nylon leg stockings, they latch onto random articles and grow larger under my skirt, embedded in the deep knitted cowl of a sweater, the backs of my hands, running over my body to hide when I walk back to the sunken living room. Hours later, I can feel their whispery ant feet on my wrists, attached to my crossed thighs as I sit on the worn sofa. I brush them off me, getting stung each time, reacting to the pinch, the itch. I can feel them marching over my brow, and towards my open eyelids, seeking moisture to take back to the next nest they are building.

**ISABELA**

**LOVE IS A THING WITH TEETH**

It does not kiss, does not cradle, does not comfort. Love is not the soft touch they promise in songs, not the gentle embrace painted in poetry. It does not hold you tenderly; it does not shield you from the cold. Love takes, love burns, love leaves its mark. It does not rest lightly on the skin; it sinks in, deep, tearing its way through flesh, down to the bone. Love is a thing with teeth, and when it finds you, it does not ask permission before it bites.

It takes. It eats you up. It does not stop.

They speak of love as a gentle thing. They say it makes you feel warm and safe, but I know better. I know the way love sinks its fangs into the softest part of you; it latches on, and it drains. It does not feed you; it feeds on you. And the more you offer, the hungrier it grows.

Love has torn me open with its teeth, leaving my skin in ribbons and my ribs exposed. I have bled for it; I have let it sink its claws into my chest and scrape against my heart, and still, it is not satisfied. It wants more.

I have seen its hunger in the eyes of those who claim to love me. Love is not kind; love does not hold back. It devours and calls it affection. It consumes and calls it tenderness. It rips you apart, takes everything, and when you are hollowed out, when there is nothing left to give, it turns its gaze elsewhere, searching for something still whole, still untouched, something it has not yet destroyed.

Love is a thing with teeth, and it does not care what it leaves behind.

I have let it feast on me. I have felt its jaws tighten, its breath hot against my throat, its insatiable hunger pressing me down. And I have smiled through it, called it romance, fate, and worse—I called it the thing I was meant to suffer for.

But love does not suffer. Love does not break. It is the breaking.

It is the hands wrapped too tightly around my wrists. It is the bruises blooming beneath sweet nothings. It is the voice that says "stay" while pulling me apart piece by piece. It is the whisper that promises forever while gnashing its teeth, while digging in deeper, while feasting on everything I have left.

Love is a thing with teeth, and I am its meal.

Despite everything, I still crawl back to its jaws. I bare my throat, pressing myself into its hunger, because what else is there? What am I without the bite, without the bleeding, without the proof that I have been ravaged?

I do not know a love that does not consume.

I do not think such a thing exists.

## ISABELA

### I WOULD CUT MY WINGS AND WALK WITH YOU IF YOU ASKED ME TO

You only had to ask, and I would have done it. I would have taken the blade to my own back, trembling fingers pressing down, slicing deep into the skin where the wings once lived. It would not have been graceful, not delicate—the severing of something meant to lift, to carry, to soar. There would have been blood, surely. There always is when you tear away something that belongs to you.

But I would have done it because you wanted me to stay. You looked at me with those eyes that asked, "Why must you always fly? Why can't you just walk beside me?" And I wanted to be good. I wanted to be the kind of person who is enough without wings or heights. Without anything except the weight of your love.

So I cut them. I stripped myself of the thing that made me light, those wings that made me something more than just a girl with empty hands. I let them fall, those useless things, feathers strewn across the ground like wilted flowers, like remnants of a life I no longer deserved.

And then I stood beside you, just as you wanted. Feet planted on the ground, arms reaching instead of wings. I smiled, or at least I tried to, because isn't this what love is? Sacrifice. Becoming smaller. Giving away the parts of yourself that make the other person uneasy, as if love can only live where there is no threat, no wildness, no need for escape.

But the ground was cold. And heavier than I had imagined. My body ached from the loss in ways I could not explain. I tried to walk, taking step after step, convincing myself this was enough. That you were enough. That I could be happy like this—wingless, earthbound, safe in your shadow.

But the thing about wings is that once you have known the sky, the ground will never feel like home. I could feel the absence of them always, a phantom ache between my shoulders, a whisper in my bones. I tried to pretend I didn't miss them, that the sky did not still call for me, that I did not look up and feel something break inside me every time I saw a bird slip through the air so easily.

And you did not understand. How could you? You never had wings to lose. You never knew what it meant to give them up or what it was like to design yourself into something more acceptable, more yours. You only saw what you wanted to see: a girl who loved you enough to stay. A girl who gave up the sky so she could walk beside you, even as her body remembered what it once was, even as she learned to swallow the longing and call it love.

So I stayed. Because you asked me to. Because I thought love meant choosing someone else over yourself. Because by the time I realized I could not live without my wings, they were already gone.



## ISABELA

### THIS DEVIL MAKES ME WANT TO SIN

It begins with a whisper, a voice spun from silk, curling like smoke in the hollow of my ear. His words are not commands, no, nothing so crude. They are invitations, honey-sweet and patient, pressing against the edges of my reason, constructing themselves into thoughts I will soon call my own.

I know what he is. I know, but it does not stop me. His beauty is not the kind that asks to be adored; it is the kind that demands it, leaving you breathless and willing, and turning the mind to worship before the heart has time to protest. His eyes hold a knowledge older than time itself: dark and endless. Those eyes I want to fall into without ever surfacing again.

He tells me things I should not believe, and yet I do. He touches me, and I forget myself, forget the world beyond the circle of his arms. He calls me to him, and I come, as if I have always belonged in the shadow of his hands.

"Why resist?" he asks, his voice low, curling around me like ivy. "Why fight what feels so natural?"

And I have no answer, because there is none. Because sin is not sin when it feels like salvation. Because wickedness is not wickedness when it is wrapped in the shape of love.

I am not innocent. Perhaps I never was. Perhaps I have only ever been waiting for someone like him to give me permission to ruin myself, to let go of whatever brittle virtue I have been clutching in my desperate little hands.

And he is so very, very good at unmaking me.

He does not need force; he does not need to ask twice. He only tilts his head, brushes his fingers against mine, and lets his gaze linger on my mouth a moment too long, and suddenly, I am stepping forward. Suddenly, I am lost. Suddenly, I am his.

"You were always meant to be mine," he tells me, and I believe it as surely as I believe the sky is blue and the sea is deep.

Because when I am with him, I am nothing but hunger. He makes my virtues seem laughable, my morals paper-thin. They crumble in his hands, and I let them. I do not mourn them. I do not care.

Is this love? Or is it something darker? I have no idea.

He kisses me, and I do not care to answer. I will ask no questions. I will speak no protests. I will follow him down, down, down, as far as he will take me. I will sin, and I will call it devotion.

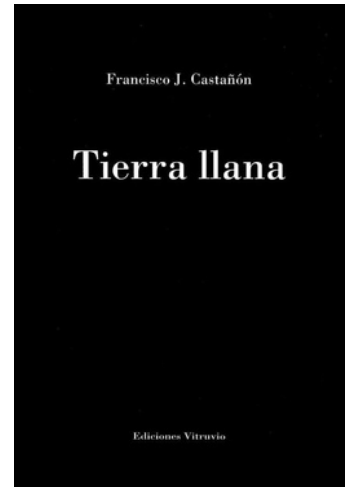
And when he laughs, pleased with what I have given up for him, I will not regret a single thing.

# THE MADRID POETS #2

## FRANCISCO J. CASTAÑÓN

*Tierra Llana*, the most recent poetry collection of Francisco J. Castañón, poems from which are translated here for the first time into English, celebrates an aspect of the country which oftentimes goes unnoticed: that of empty Spain, the empty towns with storks on the church steeples, the wide open plains with long, flat horizons and the green serpentine rivers which weave through the entire peninsular.

In language concise and perfectly measured, Castañón writes of humans in nature, of Spain and the Spanish countryside as a vast entity, the true background to the stage upon which people live. His is an honest eye which sees what there is to see, away from the shouting and glamour of the cities and 'culture' which is fanned and flames and dies. He is witness to a Spain we often see but ignore.



*Tierra Llana* (2022, Ediciones Vitruvio)

### Scenery

From the high-speed train,  
the La Mancha plain is a floodtide  
of August yellow,  
where holm oaks seem to swim  
so clearly it hurts the eyes,  
all shapes and volumes diffusing.

From the window, at 280km an hour,  
the Manchego plain is an inland sea  
of shimmering fields that breaks  
against a vast mountain range, south  
lie high peaks and deep ravines.

From the train at full speed  
the plateau is radiant,  
a luminous reality flowing through  
the abstract dimension of the carriage,  
space and time in alliance  
with the colours of the speeding landscape  
leaving behind on bare skin  
ephemeral hieroglyphics of light.

On its all-conquering journey by tracks  
of steel atop sleepers infinite,  
inescapably bound to its end,  
the train greets another train  
with lightning celerity and bids *adios*  
to the old Castilian steppe,  
bursting through olive trees  
that long to join its journey  
til it reaches that southern sea  
whose substance is *duende*, song  
and poetry.



## Windmills in the Snow

*Storm 'Filomena' paralyses Spain (9 January 2021)*

The snow we knew would come  
brings a silence  
that covers all southern reality  
with a pearly purity:  
the weary grey  
of pavements and roads,  
the ochre of empty land  
and the faded green  
of evergreen trees.  
It's a dawn ruled  
by the nasty cold  
of a season that sedates.

On television they show  
news of a day never seen:  
a historic snowfall has paralysed  
more than half of this country  
in the south of Europe  
that wants but cannot have  
a pleasant morning.  
Meanwhile the snow continues  
falling peacefully, tranquil,  
near weightless.

The internauts share  
a luminescent scene:  
the mythical giants  
of the wide, Quixotic plains,  
washed white  
as the prone snow,  
standing proud,  
their round girths  
planted firm in white earth,  
limbs high to the sky  
or pointing in surrender at the ice.

The snow we were waiting for,  
that loves silence so much  
today covers towns and cities,  
ploughed fields  
and cemeteries quiet,  
while the old windmills  
watch the world and time,  
as solemn and venerable  
as when by written word  
mythical giants they became.

## Tajo

*For Ignacio Vázquez Moliní, contemplating the river in Lisbon.*

New winter waters  
sail down the long river,  
stillwater, calm  
as a clouded mirror,  
seeking at every turn of its course  
twists of fate to carry it  
to its inescapable end.

Tireless river,  
liquid serpentine scar.  
Steadily making its way  
snapping at shores, riverbanks  
where wood pigeons land  
to sip in the twilight sun.

River of living water,  
you slow your flow,  
as if you want to stop  
for a moment  
your one-way journey.  
Life-giving water,  
spreading under a sky  
of archangel clouds  
or fantastic beasts.  
Water that likes to linger,  
in secret nooks,  
to catch its breath,  
before sliding on.

River that flows with the reflection  
of long-gone stars,  
and old bridges standing fast  
against inevitable ruin,  
and the gaze of those  
already devoured  
by time as a river.

Francisco J. Castañón (Madrid, 1961). Reside desde hace más de treinta años en el barrio de Ibiza (Retiro). Estudió Derecho, Comunicación, Gestión de Recursos Humanos..., habiendo trabajado en la empresa privada y en diversas entidades sociales no lucrativas. Desde muy joven ha estado vinculado al mundo de la cultura. Entre otras actividades, ha sido redactor en revistas literarias, colaborador de prensa en papel y digital, y miembro activo del Ateneo de Madrid donde tuvo varias responsabilidades. En 2017 fundó la revista digital *Entreletras* que dirigió hasta mayo de 2023. Ha publicado seis libros de poesía, ensayos y varias obras de divulgación histórica. Su último poemario, *Tierra llana* (premio de la Asociación de Editores de Poesía 2022), es un recorrido por el universo íntimo del autor y sus reflexiones sobre el devenir de la sociedad actual que tiene como significativo telón de fondo los paisajes de la meseta castellana.

All poems translated by James Hartley.

## The People Have Gone

*Se va la gente. Estos pueblos  
¿un día estarán vacíos?  
-Rafael Alberti*

Gone, yes, gone are the people.  
Gone from villages  
fixed to hillsides  
rooted to valley floors,  
rising from plains.

Far away went the sons,  
the daughters.  
Little by little, in a gradual  
and prolonged leaving,  
to cities, dominant,  
soul-consuming.

Gone, the people, yes.  
Their houses remained  
inhabited by nobody,  
skeletons they became  
of gnawed wooden beams  
and cracking walls.  
The streets, lonely.  
Schools, empty.

In the square, pensive old folk  
await the summer heat  
that soothes moods and bones.  
That's when, perhaps  
they'll all return.

The church, crowned  
with a mute bell tower,  
houses prayers for those  
who left on a day forever grey  
in the memory.

Like a bad joke,  
the well-kept cemetery has become  
the most densely populated part of town.

That ally of time,  
the unruly weed  
thrives just fine  
on vacant wastelands.

On high a bird flies  
in concentric circles,  
asking the air  
when the people will return.  
To no reply.

## "De alguna manera me descubría a mí mismo en el paisaje castellano..."

Francisco J Castañón

<<El que me introdujo en la poesía fue un profesor, poeta, sacerdote, y amigo mío durante más de cuarenta años. Estudié en un colegio religioso de aquí del barrio del Retiro, la Sagrada Familia, que lo trasladaron a Moratalaz , y llegó un día un profesor nuevo al Colegio - José Mascaraque Díaz-Mingo. Él empezó a editar una revista preciosa y algunos de nosotros empezamos a publicar nuestros primeros textos y a colaborar como redactores en aquella revista y en otras publicaciones. Luego he publicado ensayos. He publicado muchos artículos de prensa durante todos estos años y en bastantes revistas que ya han desaparecido. Publiqué mi primer libro en el año 2003, cuando ya tenía 40 años, y *Tierra Llana* en 2022.

A mí siempre me ha gustado mucho andar por la sierra y también he tenido mucha vinculación con la Sierra de Guadarrama desde que era muy jovencito. Sobre todo, Cercedilla o San Lorenzo. No sé si porque la gente de Madrid nos termina agobiando la ciudad de alguna manera y solemos buscar entornos más propicios. Uno de esos entornos para mí es Castilla y Castilla La Mancha. Y, sobre todo, algunos lugares en concreto, como Sigüenza. También los campos de Castilla en general, porque yo tanto por trabajo, como por placer, he viajado mucho por Castilla durante muchos años. Mucho en tren.

Creo que la primera vez que me monté en un tren fue con mis padres. Con tres años que me llevaron por primera vez a Gijón y desde entonces yo creo que no he parado de montar en los trenes. A mí me encantan los trenes, soy un aficionado a los trenes y te voy a decir más - me gusta mucho los trenes de alta velocidad, pero me gustan todavía más los trenes que van a menos velocidad porque te permiten disfrutar mucho del paisaje.

He estado también vinculado, sobre todo por trabajo, durante mucho tiempo a determinadas ciudades de Castilla como Salamanca y Zamora y también Ciudad Real en Castilla La Mancha. Todo esto me fue animando a escribir la serie de poemas *Tierra Llana*. De alguna manera me descubría a mí mismo en el paisaje castellano. El paisaje me permitía reflexionar sobre muchas de las cuestiones que tenemos planteadas actualmente como sociedad, sobre todo los temas medioambientales, que son, yo creo, una preocupación constante en el libro.

Para mí el río es una metáfora de la vida, que tampoco es decir nada novedoso - Ortega y Gasset decía que el río es una metáfora del paso del tiempo. Siempre me ha gustado pararme a ver los ríos, quedarme quieto en una orilla, viendo, por ejemplo, el río Tajo en Toledo. Esa es una de mis ciudades favoritas, llena de historia, de cultura o de culturas, y ahí hay algunos senderitos para pararse allí y ver el río, sobre todo cuando lleva agua como ahora. Es muy bonito.

Creo que *Tierra Llana* es un trabajo de madurez. He intentado que los poemas que aparecen allí fueran no sencillos, pero sí eliminar todo artificio. Es una poesía, digamos, sin ambages, sin elementos artificiosos, de forma que he intentado quedarme con un lenguaje asequible. ¿Que pueda llegar? Bueno, pues al mayor público lector posible incluso al público al que no le gusta la poesía. Porque muchas veces la gente dice, y quizás no sin razón, que la poesía es un género difícil. Sin olvidar nunca que la poesía también debe tener una parte de misterio, una parte de enigma.

Hay una anécdota que no sé si será verdad o no. Le preguntaron una vez a Borges -¿qué quiso decir con este poema? Y él dijo -Bueno, cuando escribí este poema, yo y Dios sabíamos lo que quería decir y ahora solo lo sabe Dios. Pues esto, no tanto, pero sí es verdad que cuando empiezas a escribir, sobre todo en poesía, juegas con las palabras y con las imágenes.

Pero *Tierra Llana* no es una visión romántica de las cosas, ni idealizada tampoco de los pueblos ni de las personas que uno se encuentra en estos lugares, ni tampoco de los personajes históricos que pueden aparecer en él. No, es una visión muy contemporánea. He intentado abordar temas que son complejos, como por ejemplo el tema medioambiental o de la manipulación de la verdad y otra serie de cuestiones. He intentado hacerlo de la manera más franca posible, de la manera más honesta posible, sin ambages, sin artificios, sin una poesía rebuscada, todo lo contrario.

Ahora me estoy peleando con un poemario parecido a *Tierra Llana*, pero donde los paisajes cambian, porque es el sur. Y es curioso, porque al cambiar los paisajes también cambia la temática y el prisma de la realidad.>>



# THE MADRID REVIEW CREATIVE WRITING GROUP

## THE CRAFT OF WRITING WITH JAYNE MARSHALL

The Craft Of Writing is a new feature dedicated to finding and helping writers working today. In every issue and online on our webpage, Jayne Marshall will be offering advice to writers and inviting your contributions, the best of which will be featured in the magazine.

If you wish to join the group, go to The Madrid Review website and click on the icon for more details.

### The Drop: on first lines and starting strong

*'Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way.'*

The first line of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* is a smasher. It does a lot with a little – quietly intriguing and raising questions. Questions like: 'Wait, what?' Which really is the perfect beginning to the writer-reader relationship. As both the craft and the business of writing become ever more about the now – immediacy and forward motion taking precedent over reflection and meandering description – a strong opener such as Kang's is more important than ever.

One way of starting strong is the way a writing teacher once explained it to me: begin zoomed in, on a specific moment or a detail, then zoom out over the course of the narrative. This was quite a revelation for me, as I had always done the opposite, assuming that everything should be explained upfront to avoid confusing the reader. Until I realised that a story is not a set of instructions for a flatpack wardrobe (although it can be – see the hermit crab technique). Nabokov agreed with my teacher, once stating that 'readers should learn to leap', filling in the gaps in their knowledge for themselves, and we can see that leap as a drop too – drop the reader smack bang in the middle of your world then provide the backstory later. If they are intrigued enough, they will keep reading.

Naturally, there are horses for courses – readers for writers. For every person that enjoys being immediately placed in the story, there will be one who prefers a slow build and a panoramic view. However, in my own writing at least, I am a fan of "the drop". If for no other reason than starting with a representative detail, allowing the part to stand for the whole, often serves a selfish purpose, helping me to locate the narrative threads, too, and, in doing so, figure out the broad themes and motifs of the piece.

Returning to Kang, she does all of the above in one short sentence – placing us immediately in the world of a married couple, providing a conflict, raising questions about their relationship and hinting at the unfolding drama. Which, in the end, all comes back to a few well-proven writing truisms: the path to universality lies through specificity and show not tell, or its newer iteration: scene not summary.

#### Over to you:

*Write the first four lines of a story as a scene. Include the following: a number or amount, an animal, zoom in on a physical detail, hint at an unfolding conflict.*

#### Tip:

Look at your favourite novels and stories, read their first lines and dissect.

#### Example:

The dog's coat was mangy, though it looked like once, say a couple of years ago, it was well-cared for and luxuriant. His eyes were a golden colour, hard to define, and drooped wretchedly, like you might expect for a stray dog, but there was something else there too... 'Are you listening to me?' She pulled herself back to the conversation, to the hand waving in front of her face, 'Sorry, yes, I'm listening – I look for the man with the sagging moustache and drop the product with him.'

Jayne is a fiction and creative nonfiction writer. She holds the Master's in Creative Writing, with distinction, from the University of Oxford. Her work has been published – in English and Spanish – in magazines and anthologies around the world. She has also been nominated for the Aesthetica Creative Writing Award. A collection of her stories and essays about Madrid will be published in summer 2025 by Modern Odyssey Books. She is from the UK, but lives in Madrid, where she works as a development editor at an indie press.

## BEYOND THE PAGE



In Issue 5 we'll be starting with a new feature called **Beyond The Page** – a chance for you, our readers, to quiz a top author.

Our first writer to take part will be Lisa See, bestselling author of *Lady Tan's Circle of Women*, *The Island of Sea Women*, *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane* and many more.

See was the recipient of the Golden Spike Award from the Chinese Historical Association of Southern California.

Ten chosen readers will be given the chance to set their questions to Lisa in an online call with the author and will have their names featured in the next issue of *The Madrid Review*.

Places are limited, so please write to themadridreview@hotmail.com if you would like to be considered for the call for a special introductory price of 10 euros per person.

## ITHAKA

### ALEXIS LEVITIN

Fishing boats were clustered in the sheltered cove at Puerto Engabao. When a boat returned with its nets and its catch, boys gathered round and pushed it up the beach on balsa logs. Gulls circled and squawked. Frigate birds hovered, then swooped down and, with a delicate twist of the head, snatched a scrap from the wooden carts into which the fish, some still flopping in their last spasms, were being loaded. Later in the afternoon, battered pickups would come, the fish smothered in chopped ice would be shoveled in, and the catch would be hauled off down the dusty desert road to the market in Playas and, on a good day, from there to Guayaquil.

Nestor was American, though happy that few people guessed as much. His Spanish was quick, but his idioms shaky. Now and then a person's quizzical gaze would lighten, and in triumph they would declare "brasileño." He liked being thought a Brazilian. He had fallen in love with Rio at first sight, though he felt sheepish about it, the way one might feel praising Beethoven's Fifth. Yet that *Cristo Redemptor*, high on its perpendicular cliff, always presiding, like the moon, in the middle of the sky, its arms outstretched, what a blessing, even for one who drifted through the world in doubt. Yes, after all, he was happy to be considered a "brasileño."

Now, two hands resting on his mahogany cane, he watched the activity from a bluff above the cove, the fishing boats chugging in, the boys, leaning hard with their meager weight, pushing the small craft up the beach, red and white pickups swarming, and, just beyond the village breakwater, a line of youngsters on surf boards, waiting for a large enough swell to carry them towards shore. Then he turned away and hobbled down a crumbly dirt path in the other direction, stepping carefully, leaning heavily on his cane. Laboriously, he made his way down to the beach, the open ocean beach, where neither fishermen nor surfers ever went.

Naked sand stretched for miles and he rarely saw anyone. Today two skinny dogs were nosing around in the bracken and some sea gulls were flying by. Grunting his way down the last of the slope, he found a hunk of driftwood and settled down, using the old log as a headrest. In his small backpack, he had a beach towel, a pair of shorts to change into after his swim, a sandwich, a can of coke and a fat, red tomato. He had brought along, as well, a book of poetry by Cavafy, the greatest modern Greek poet, ironically destined, however, to scarcely set foot in Greece, living out his life in distant Alexandria.

Ah, Greece. He himself, though he never had learned the language, had gone there often, impelled, initially, by the rather strange name his parents had bestowed on him.

He had paid for that name in the schoolyards of childhood, where anything unusual was, of course, ridiculed. But as an adult he had grown into the name, had found it a comfort, a natural companion. He had never met another Nestor, not even during his repeated visits to Greece and its endless islands. He had managed to visit seventy-four of them, and somehow they had all felt like home. Even the nameless, uninhabited islet he had swum around one afternoon, taking his time, a quiet breaststroke, a measured side stroke, always content in the warm, crystal clear waters.

How he had loved them all, the Cyclades, the Sporades, the Dodecanese, the very sounds filled with sunlight, their white-washed houses with blue doors and shutters, the sawing of cicadas in the hot stillness of noon, the olive trees with their dusty dark leaves and their afternoon shade. And the sandy beaches, the famous Psili Ammos on Patmos, where everyone was a nudist, and he had lost a chess game against a pudgy German, stretched comfortably alongside the board, his relaxed member dangling so close that it had seemed yet another piece in his threatening arsenal. And the far beach on Mykonos, before the tourists ruined it. He remembered boarding the bus going to the furthest village on the island, Kalafatis, and from there wandering to a sandy cove called Agia Anna. When the few others, lingering on the beach, left to catch the last bus back to Chora, he simply stayed, camping down against a small cliff backing the cove, alone with his sleeping bag and knapsack. After one last swim, he opened a can of sardines, washed his green and red tomato in the sea, and accompanied his light dinner with the remains of a bottle of retsina he had bought earlier in the day. The wine felt strange and exhilarating, like the rich sap of a pine tree. In the morning, he brushed his teeth in the sea, run back and forth for twenty minutes along the beach, then swam in the warm caress of the calm waters. Youth had been good to him.

Here now, the tide was going out, though the waves kept pounding against the beach. Far off, he could see two or three fishing boats slowly drawing towards their nets. A smudge to the north resolved itself into a squadron of pelicans, winging its way down the coast. As always, he marveled at their unperturbed melding of gawkiness and elegance. They reminded him of how the natural world always seemed beautiful, even in its most frightening manifestations: the ant-lion with its deadly ambush in the sand, the ingenious Venus fly-trap, with its delicate green and magenta tones, the dread *marimondo*, metallic and heavy, like an engine of war, clasp in its tightening grip a paralyzed grasshopper, then suddenly zooming off, black against the serene blue sky, transporting its prey to its nest in the jungle. The grasshopper, at least in Spanish, was the *marimondo's moribundo*. He grinned stupidly, ashamed of turning terror into word play.

He must have dozed off, the sun hot on his body, his baseball cap, advertising a little-known candidate from the previous year's local campaign, shielding his face. When he awoke, he lay still, quietly watched the breaking waves through half shuttered eyes. Finally, he rolled over, crouched on all fours, bent first one leg, then the other, and slowly craned himself into a standing position. Leaving his glasses in his Mauricio Rodas baseball cap, he staggered, wincing, toward the water. Shin deep, he hurled his cane behind him on to the dry sand. Then he lurched forward, ungainly, his knee almost buckling, his ankle useless with pain. Finally, he fell awkwardly into the shallow, turbulent wash.

From then on, no longer trying to stand, everything felt natural and good. He ducked under a cresting wave, swam further out, again plunged under a comber, and soon was floating in the swell beyond the breakers, at ease in the watery fields of the Lord. He easily avoided the few pieces of driftwood buoying with him in the gentle rise and fall.

How he had always envied dolphins, their utter fluidity, their elegance. How he had ruefully envied Fred Astaire, his uncanny flow. And later, the seductive Patrick Swayze in *Dirty Dancing*.

Elegance. The serpent who tempted Eve must have had it, too. He remembered that strange conversation in Greenwich Village at 1 a.m. with the retired Lombardi at Rosolimo's old chess parlor on Thompson Street. It must have been thirty years ago and he had confronted the International Grandmaster with a combination of reverence and brashness: "Do you believe in God?" The reply was unforgettable: "I have never cared about my international ranking. The only thing I ever cared about was the Elegance Prize. I've won that many times. It is the elegance that can occur in chess that makes me believe in God." Lombardi had been Fischer's second in Reykjavik. He had left the priesthood for love of chess, but chess had thrust him back to God.

Out there he swam for half an hour, always in place, as the current tried to pull him down the beach. This was nothing like Greece with its placid, transparent, welcoming water. This was a muscular ocean, despite its misleading name, and one could feel, even close to shore, that there was nothing tame about it. It was an ocean utterly indifferent to the wishes of a swimmer. There was always motion, a tug, a drift. Perhaps at this stage of life, he would have been better off on a Greek Island. But by now Greece had changed and he had been in Ecuador for close to ten years. His Greece remained untouched, a youthful, happy memory. As another pod of pelicans winged silently by, he finished his half hour swim and turned toward shore. He rode high with a gathering wave, then managed to body surf closer to the beach. But in the shallower water, the undertow was violent. He tried to stand, but the suck pulled him down. He scrambled in the turbid wash, using hands and feet, but again was sucked out. Swimming beyond the surf had been pleasant, calm, and comfortable, but trying to emerge from the turbulent ebb was a struggle.

For a moment he lurched to his feet, but was quickly pulled down by the riptide. He crawled through the suck and surge on hands and knees, was knocked over again, rolled about in the undertow, and finally, still on all fours, scrabbled toward rippling safety. He crouched in the shallows for some time, struggling to regain his breath. He saw, beneath him, tiny fish floating back and forth in the push and pull of each wavelet, utterly at home in their motion. Then he cranked himself upright, staggered towards his cane, and limped back to the driftwood log. He collapsed on his towel, face down, and lay there motionless, the warm sun beating on his back. A lone gull stood nearby, gazing in the other direction. He was exhausted, but with no regrets. He wondered however, if he would tempt that massive and indifferent ocean again. Perhaps in the tame cove, but not here in its naked savagery.

Half an hour later, he snapped open his coke. The can was no longer sweating, but even the remaining chill of that familiar tar-like brew pierced his throat with a joyous, acid sting. He unwrapped his ham and cheese sandwich and took a big bite. Then another. He lurched to his feet and, leaning on his cane, staggered down to the water's edge. There he bent and washed his fat red tomato in the transparent shallows, watching once again the tiny colorless fish drifting in harmony with the ebb and flow. He then limped back to his driftwood log. Soon, sandwich, tomato and coke were gone. He belched and stretched. How good a simple coke, a simple ham and cheese, a simple tomato, naked of meaning. He was glad he had made it back to shore.

Then he turned to Cavafy. "What are we waiting for" began the first poem. A question to be asked. In this case, the illusory expectation was for the barbarians to arrive. The ironic twist in the end was startling and just: disappointment that the invader has not come, the threat has not materialized. We, the civilized, with our need for "barbarians" as "a kind of solution." He liked it. And then the noble

abnegation in *The God Abandons Antony* where the poet counsels himself "like a courageous man.... [to] say good-bye to her, to the Alexandria you are losing." The Alexandria where he had spent his entire life. Nestor had had no Alexandria of his own, certainly not Queens, not even Manhattan. Instead, he had wandered through a gently unravelling skein of temporary Alexandrias. He had loved his hidden pension on a dead-end in the Picos da Europa. He had loved the beaches and wind-scoured cliffs at Sagres. But his Alexandrias were mostly islands that he had embraced, and then reluctantly abandoned: tiny Carriacou in the Caribbean, which one could walk around in a single day; steep-sloped Juan Fernandez, where Alexander Selkirk had lived his brief, but famous exile; Floreana, with its sleepy turtles, medieval-looking marine guanas, raucous sea lion colony, and one hundred and thirty-five human inhabitants; Puerto Santo, where he had lived alone on the beach with nothing but mineral water, canned sardines, and a bag of carrots, so happy at being alive that in that one week he had lost ten superfluous pounds; then, too, the black sand beach at Blönduós, stark in its Arctic beauty, its colorless flat planes and distant, worn-down mountains, where dragons had once dwelt. Those were his Alexandrias, to which he would never return. Could he follow Cavafy and say good-bye like a courageous man? He wasn't sure.

He turned the page and there was Ithaka. He remembered rather ruefully how disappointed he had been when he finally reached Odysseus' island home. But after all, that had been Odysseus' destiny, not his own. All he remembered of that fabled island now was a poor little goat having its throat slit beside the road as he went by on his scooter that late afternoon. And then seeing the goat delivered to the butcher shop near his pension in town, just an hour later. Sometimes mere reality left him speechless. No, his Ithaka had not been mythic.

But the Ithaka he encountered now in the poem by Cavafy was more than mythic. It led him beyond Homer and Odysseus and their quest. In this poem the journey towards Ithaka was everything, not the arrival at the island itself: "When you set out for Ithaka/ask that your way be long." He stretched his worn-out knee, his collapsed ankle. He could not deny his way had been long and, despite reminders of the greed of youth, he was almost reconciled. "Have Ithaka always in your mind./ Your arrival there is what you are destined for." He wondered what Ithaka the poet was imagining. Surely not Puerto Ingabao he chuckled to himself. But the poem was not finished: "Ithaka gave you the splendid journey... she hasn't anything else to give you." Nestor understood the richness of the journey and again felt gratitude. But then the challenging conclusion:

*And if you find her poor, Ithaka has not deceived you.  
So wise have you become, of such experience,  
That already you will understand what those Ithakas mean.*

He read the poem twice, mulling over "what those Ithakas mean." Certainly, Puerto Ingabao was poor, but surely that was not his Ithaka. He continued to muse, as he changed into his dry shorts, stuffed his bathing suit into the small plastic bag that had held his tomato, packed his towel and book, and groaned to his feet. It had been a good afternoon at the beach.

He caught the last bus as daylight began to fade.

Slowly, he pulled himself on board, while the driver gave him a smile of encouragement. Bastón elegante, elegant cane, the young driver remarked. Nestor smiled back, then folded into the front seat reserved for tercera edad.

He leaned on his smooth mahogany cane and stared out the window. As the driver shifted into first gear, a fat sow with five piglets trotting behind crossed in front of the slowly moving bus. The driver was sympathetic and did not accelerate.

As he finally pulling out, a couple of youngsters jumped on board, the round-faced girl giggling in her boyfriend's embrace. The couple swayed down the aisle, to collapse halfway down the bus in laughter. As the bus ground into second and they left the fishing village behind, Nestor noticed how the scrub desert beside the road was adorned with blue blossoms in the fading light: countless tattered plastic bags, flapping from spiny, desiccated branches. Grinding into third, the driver fiddled with the radio, till he found his station. It was the great Jaramillo, singing his greatest hit:

*Si tú mueres primero, yo te prometo,  
Escribiré la historia de nuestro amor*

*If you die first, I promise you,  
I'll write the history of our love*

That song had been everywhere, ever since he had come to Ecuador ten years earlier. It never faded; it never became banal. The singer promises to record their love with the ink of his heart's blood. Well, you couldn't fault that love as timid. He still thrilled to the song's unabashed romanticism, though he knew that the fury of such a love had never made his own heart tremble.

As the evening gathered, he felt it was too late for a story of love, too late for more islands, too late to even consider regrets. The darkness thickened and the only brightness was the dirt road visible in the headlights. Suddenly a dog flashed by, or was it a coyote? The bus jostled and creaked and he balanced himself on the cane between his legs, as they lurched into the gathering gloom. Vaguely his thoughts meandered still with Ithaka. Then suddenly he was engulfed by exhaustion, and, as he shut his eyes, he felt himself again in the riptide, being sucked towards a darker darkness up ahead. But, to his surprise and wonderment, instead of fear, he felt a sense of expectation now, as if on the verge of a discovery, as if, at last, he was on the threshold of Ithaka. Not Odysseus' island that had so disappointed him, but his own final port, his own destiny, the Ithaka for which he had been bound all his life.

Only when the old man's elegant cane clattered to the floor did the driver realize something was amiss.



Thalia – Comedy by Max Webb

## BURYING LAMPS

ISABELLA MILLINGTON

*Pensando, enredando sombras en la profunda soledad.*

*Tú también estás lejos, ah más lejos que nadie.*

*Pensando, soltando pájaros, desvaneciendo imágenes,  
enterrando lámparas*

— Pablo Neruda, Poema 17

The blinds are stuck halfway up. The new-day light ducks in, already hot enough to singe the hair on my legs. I curl away from its reach, the dregs of dreamland rising in my throat like bile. Fields, like always, running, like always. Empty thunderstorms and you, standing on a bridge with your back to me, reaching for something just out of sight. I blink it all away and run my tongue over the blood on the back of my teeth, the thunder still hissing in my ears like a snake, like a snare drum:

*brrrupbrrrupbrrumpbrrumpbrrump.*

Walking out of the bedroom, the heat in the hallway sucks the air out of my lungs, thick and damp. I pull out a rag on my way to the bathroom to swipe over the leaks. Even the walls are sweating now. My feet slick on the tiles, the walls growing narrower all the time. Blood in the sink with the spit. I pour just enough water from the mug to keep the cracks in the basin from staining red, saving the rest for when I'm thirsty. Thirstier. The heat pushes on my chest, hard enough to crack a rib. A body growing heavier all the time.

The day the rain came last, we walked hand-in-hand down the middle of the wide-open road, your palm hot and sticky in mine. Some straggler cars trickled past, metal steaming and the people inside wilting. Thick drops of sweat running down the forehead of an elderly driver, a teenager's wide eyes staring at us from the backseat. Each of us ignoring the advice to stay home. The rain could be toxic, we'd been warned. Well so was the air and the emptiness. The raindrops sizzled on the ground and my palm where I reached out to catch them. Heady under the cracked-open sky, I'd wished I was religious, that I might baptise myself beneath this rain they said would be the last to fall. I imagined the springs running dry, the rushes and the river beds growing thirstier all the time. I turned away from you to let a drop fall on my tongue. It didn't hurt much.

We talked again about leaving, like time hadn't decided for us, taking in the bright, wet sky and the city that already looked unrecognisable, even to you. The electricity had finally choked out, the ancient Schweppes sign darkened and dusty and sagging against the sky. I looked back as we turned into our road, imprinting it all into the soft walls of my brain. We dragged out feet up the stairs to our apartment, lingering on each floor to listen to the street, growing quieter all the time. You peered through the doors that people had left swinging open and pressed your ears up against the ones shut tight. Wanting to know who had stayed, too scared to call out to the silence.

At first, the capital had emptied out so slowly it barely registered as strange. The tourists never could handle the heatwaves anyway, you joked, and I laughed a beat too long, happy to be included. To be one of you, to belong to the hot air and sticky tarmac. The streets still buzzed and the shops stayed open like if the years couldn't shake them, nothing would. I spent those dog days between before and after walking for hours, watching people draw together, come alive as though in defiance. The pulsating belly of the city fleshy and heaving and just out of my reach, like always. I'd



let my fingers trail along scorching shop fronts and stoop low in the shade of the pescadería to pretend like I could step inside to join the locals haggling and gossiping. My mind straining to understand their words like butting up against a soundproof window.

The drummers we recognised from the summer street parties started playing for hours every day, snaking up through the neighbourhoods, a feverish rhythm building like whatever was coming was a thing to be celebrated. It frightened you. It's like war drums or something, you said. Like red sky in the morning. I'd just tap my fingers to the beat and wonder if this kind of thing was what people back home meant by 'blitz spirit'. If we'd look back on these as the good ol' days, if I'd make myself real in the memory of it.

It'll be like waiting out a storm, I told you. We'll make the best of it – I'll write and you'll draw. So you dutifully doodled on everything: on book pages and your arms, in soap suds on the backsplash. And I did try to write. About what was gone, about how it had felt to be alive in this thudding city, crackling with electricity. People spilling out of vermut bars, twenty-somethings sitting in circles on the floor, passing around cheap bottles of tinto de verano. Shouting voices and tinny beats escaping every time a door would swing open and shut, open and shut.

There was one drawing you worked on for three days: a perfect replica of our living room from above. Like looking down into a doll's house, not a mug out of place. It made me skin-crawl claustrophobic, but of course I told you I loved it. But why don't you draw something different, like a memory? I asked, gently as I could. I want to see what you think about. You looked at me like from a passing train and just said: this is what I think about.

When we first moved in together, I'd bring you the new words I learned, cradled in my palms like moths. The ones I loved the most had no direct translation into English. Fuerza. Ganas. Soledad. They do, you'd insist, trying to explain them to me, and I'd bristle. Yes, I know. But not exactly, right? Something different, something more. Eventually you sighed and said: I've heard them all my life, they're just words to me. And I wanted to kneel at your feet, peeling back my scalp to show you. What it all meant to me. Instead I said: it's like I've found all these beautiful things but I have nowhere to put them. They don't fit right in my mouth and now I can't make myself understood in either language. You didn't get it. You with your easy-rolling conversations in three languages, your sleep-deep voice switching from one to the other like turning a page. When I was home alone I'd practise using each word in sentences out loud, whispering to the open balcony door. Tengo muchas ganas de verte. La fuerza del mar. One day soon, I thought, I'll be able to use these words like it's nothing, and I won't even remember why it used to be so hard. One day soon.

Inside, we could go days without saying a word, a silence growing fatter all the time. For weeks, you'd thrash awake each night, sweat pooled around your neck, telling me hoarsely you could hear the drums, the drums were coming for you. I didn't try to soothe you. What could I say? You'd been right all along.

Did they all leave? The drinkers and the drummers and the crowds surging through the streets? I sit on my ankles and try to practise sentences to the blinds shut over the balcony door, but all my words have waved me goodbye. They left in an east-blowing wind. I watch their backs as they tip over the edge of the earth towards the tides that go out and forget to come back in again. Everything fades, the wall not a wall, the window not a window, the silence no longer a thing with teeth.

From my spot on the living room floor, I push my mind out into every corner of the building, searching for a noise in the dark. When was the last time I heard that dog slobbering about in the apartment below? The last time I heard a chair scraped along the tile, the sounds of a stranger, breathing themselves into existence? My brain crashes through the hallways and the rooms and the lift shaft, beating up against the nothingness.

Sometime during the first week, we cut all our plastic bags into pieces to make a stained-glass collage on the window. It was too hot against our fingertips, which came away red and puckered. We pressed them against each other, cross-legged on the floor, waiting for the skin to soften. The apartment smelled like burning plastic until they turned transparent and slowly started curling off, one by one. Every day now, I wait for dark before gathering up the fallen pieces, tucking them safely inside your jewellery box that no longer sings.

A few days before you left, you told me a story about Russian farmers, way out in the middle of nowhere. You said living on miles and miles of flatlands would have them going mad for the horizon. Their eyes would need to see something, anything, so bad that one day they'd drop their tools and just start walking. Walking towards nothingness over all that land, never to be seen again. I didn't get it, not until I found the note you left behind in the quiet: you couldn't take the horizon. I wanted to ask, but what horizon? You used to love these buildings and staring at their wrought-iron balconies, tracing their curled lines in the air with your fingertips. But you were already gone. I could have followed you, into the torrid land. Could have gone looking for the something. With you.

Maybe you found a way to the shore. Chased the sinking sea down to its bones and rested for a while at its tired feet. I picture you beneath a sun that doesn't hurt, with waves lapping at your toes, your dusty soles. I picture you, pen in hand, doodling on your skin like I'm still there to stare at you, ready to catch the wind that rolls in soft. The tide beats in and out.

*Thinking, tangling shadows in the deep solitude.*

*You are far away too, oh farther than anyone.*

*Thinking, freeing birds, dissolving images,  
burying lamps.*

— Pablo Neruda, Poem 17

## FOUR THOUSAND MILES HAS NEVER FELT CLOSER

SINCLAIRE GIBSON

somehow every time i'm back here i manage to reach into the deepest depths of my heart and pull out all of the sorrow and self-pity that's been hiding from me (or maybe that i've been hiding from myself). i pull it all out and place it in front of me, leaving it to air out for a week or so, there for me to contemplate while i shower as the sun comes up, go for a walk in mid-afternoon while everyone else is eating lunch, or simply sit on the sofa in the evenings.

i feel guilty calling it heartbreak because you never said you loved me. everything reminds me of you right now. i try to make a big deal out of leaving, getting out of your small town where we met and then where you left me. but four thousand miles has never felt closer than it does now. i try to remind myself of everything that you don't know. you don't know when i got here or when i'll leave. you don't know that i got to explore a new city by myself yesterday. you don't know how to read the street signs where i am now. you wouldn't be able to understand my conversations with my friends. you don't know the people who mean most to me. you're missing out, but that doesn't bring me the comfort that i wish it did. if you were here i'd share it with you. but you aren't. and you probably won't ever be again.

maybe i'm okay with that. you can stay in your small little town and find your wife at twenty years old (or try to). you can get married at the little courthouse downtown and buy a house to raise your kids in somewhere no further than ten minutes away from your parents. maybe your kids won't ever know about me, just a girl you dated for a month, but maybe that's okay. i have bigger plans than spending afternoons at the movie theater uptown with you or getting dinner at the gas station and eating in your car. i'm going to travel the world and live in two different countries at the same time. i'm going to write and learn how to turn my feelings into poetry. i'm going to grow up and meet new people, go to new places. im going to get out of ohio and create a life for myself. and eventually you'll just be a guy in the town i went to college in that never left the country and never got to see my slice of the world. and i'll get to be the bigger person.

i spent the last month wondering what this week would look like. what it would be like going from seeing each other four days a week to being halfway across the world. i know i'd miss you, but i didn't know it'd be like this. i thought i'd get to send you updates and photos, tell you what it was like being back home again for the first time in months, show you my cats over facetime and maybe even introduce you to my mom. but instead, i have to keep it to myself. so, i write it all here. maybe this will help me become the writer that i dreamed i'd once turn into.

## THE DEAD MAN'S FLAT

GLYN REBL

Akmat Abdulayev awakes from a dreamless sleep early one Saturday morning to the front door calling to him. BOOM! it says. BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Ah, go fuck yourself, he mutters, turning over on his side and burying his head in the blanket. But the insolent door (or whoever it is that's beating it to death) persists, louder, more urgently, and by the ninth or tenth blow it becomes clear to him that this problem will not go away by itself. Reluctantly – and with no shortage of curses in both Russian and English – he rolls out of bed.

The grey Prague morning glowers at Akmat as he lights a cigarette from the pack lying on the nightstand. He takes a long, passionate drag, sitting hunched over on the edge of the bed, and counts the ragged trees in the courtyard, so woebegone that even the birds won't go near them. He exhales, and the door continues to call; now it is saying, DING! DING! Alright! he yells calmly. I'm coming.

There is no need to get dressed. He just goes right down the hallway in the black gym shorts and NASA t-shirt that he slept in, puffing away on his cigarette. When he opens the door, two men he has never seen before stand in front of him: one short, rodentlike, with dictatorial airs, the other tall, glabrous, glacial, a perfect goon in his twilight years. Dobrý den, chirps the rodent. Akmat Abdulayev? Akmat inhales another lungful of smoke. Yeh, he replies in Czech. I'm Akmat.

The rodent introduces himself and his partner and then immediately gets down to business. It turns out that his neighbor had died three nights before. Although it appears it was a heart attack, there were signs that she'd suffered a fall, and when she was found two days later by another neighbor, the door was slightly ajar. Mr. Abdulayev, we're here trying to find out if anyone in the building knows anything that might've gone on in her flat that night. Anything you might've seen or heard after eight o'clock...

Akmat maintains an effortlessly neutral expression as the man talks. He is listening to him, sure, but he is also not listening. And as he both listens and not listens, he notices a puff of smoke or dust lingering in the air above them and he focuses on it as it disperses and thins out and then disappears completely. For a brief moment it strikes him as important in some way – he cannot explain why – but then it's gone and he has already forgotten about it because it's obviously not important, it's just a puff of smoke or dust.

The rodent is still jabbering on about the investigation. He knows nothing of the puff, which is made up of hundreds of millions or even billions of particles, one of which might even be his dead neighbor. Did you ever talk to her? the rodent inquires. It is now expected that Akmat contribute something of value to the conversation. In an instant, his mind flashes back to when he'd first moved into the building two years before; how she'd eyed him distrustfully the first time he'd said hello, how she'd shushed him and his daughter once when they were singing together in the hallway, how she'd threatened to take him to court for assault one morning after he'd squeezed by her a bit too aggressively when she was blocking the front door. No, he replies, looking straight into the rodent's grey eyes. We didn't get along with each other. Did she ever have guests? he asks. I don't know, replies Akmat, visibly irritated. Are you sure? the rodent continues. Her son comes

around sometimes, Akmat says. Not very often though. The rodent turns to his colleague, who shrugs his monolithic shoulders. Thank you for answering our questions, Mr. Abdulayev, says the rodent, not sounding too thankful for anything. Goodbye.

Once the police have left, Akmat makes tea, drops sliced ham, cheese, and stale rohlíky onto a plate and sits down at the kitchen table to eat. He lights another cigarette and watches the lime-green fruit bowl in the stifled daylight: two apples, an overripe banana, a black cigarette lighter, an old grocery list. A decidedly dismal still life. He watches it carefully.

After washing his cup and plate, he decides to visit Zdeněk upstairs. He dons a pair of grey sweatpants, a black hoodie, slippers, and takes the creaky elevator up to the fourth floor. He raps on Zdeněk's door; he can hear him bumbling around in there but he doesn't immediately answer. Open up, fuckface, Akmat yells, and knocks harder. After another minute or so Zdeněk finally comes to the door. He is in the same hoodie and sweatpants combo as Akmat and is clutching a coffee cup in one hand and a piece of well-done toast in the other. His mid-length salt-and-pepper hair is askew and he has grey bags underneath his washed-out blue eyes.

If someone else inhabited Zdeněk's body, someone with a bit more motivation and social skills, perhaps this face could've appeared on television or in films (or at the very least, an advertisement for gum or antihistamines at a bus stop). But it is Zdeněk and only Zdeněk who inhabits his body, so any blame for missed opportunities must be placed solely on him. What's up, dude? he croaks, in English. You tell me, replies Akmat, also in English. This isn't anything strange, as they always speak in English, they always have spoken in English since the day they met in an international school when they were teenagers, not long after Akmat had moved to Prague with his mother.

So the old bitch finally died, he continues as he follows Zdeněk into the flat. Zdeněk shakes his head. She wasn't that old. She was, Akmat maintains. OK, but you don't have to speak ill of the dead, says Zdeněk. She was actually a nice person to me. Yeah, whatever, Akmat yawns. Were the piggies up here with you too? he asks. Indeed they were, replies Zdeněk. Making me fucking nervous. He takes a bite of his well-done toast, observing Akmat carefully. What'd you tell them? he asks him. Nothing, grunts Akmat. There is nothing to tell. She was a horrible bitch, and then she died. It's like a beautiful poem. Hey man, Zdeněk says, stop talking like that...

They go into the living room and take a seat on the sofa. Akmat eyes the enormous clawfoot bathtub on the patio. Zdeněk notices him looking at it and grins. I found it on Na Míčáncích last week, he explains, squirming in his seat. I'm gonna try filling it with hot water. A joint, a glass of whiskey, some tunes...it'll be like a poor man's hot tub. Akmat smiles ever so slightly. So how is the job search coming? he asks. Zdeněk shrugs. I got a callback for some telemarketing thing. Akmat lights a cigarette. Telemarketing? What about that logistics manager position you told me about? The one at that American company? Zdeněk sighs. Still haven't heard back from them, he laments. If only I knew German! Then you could be my boss. Akmat shakes his head. No way, he says. I'd probably commit suicide before you finished your probation period...

The two old friends sit mutely for a minute. An enormous grandfather clock in the corner Akmat had never noticed before pulsates. How are things with your baby momma? Zdeněk asks. Akmat shrugs. Some things are best left unsaid, he replies as he stubs out his cigarette. Now it is Zdeněk's turn to smile ever so slightly.

The next day, Akmat is awoken early again. Some mundane drama is being played out next door – objects being moved around, people talking. A drama he wants no part in. What the hell are they doing in there? he moans, rolling over on his side. But the damage has been done, and after ten minutes he is out of bed and stomping down the hall in his black gym shorts and NASA t-shirt again.

His neighbor's door is ajar and there are several people inside the flat, some of whom he recognizes from the building. The grieving son is there, a man in his late thirties or early forties with long greasy black hair and the look of someone who prays to sardines. Zdeněk is among them too, carrying a box piled high with various items: figurines, glasses, silverware, a toaster, an impressionistic painting of the Prague skyline at dusk. He spots Akmat at the door and shuffles forward with his treasure. He's giving all this shit away! he blurts out, unable to conceal his excitement. Some of it is probably worth a lot. Bohemian crystal and stuff. Grab something while you can. Akmat goes in and looks around. He notices a decanter. Take whatever you want, the grieving sardine says indifferently. Akmat obliges him, grabbing the decanter. She kept everything, he hears him say somewhat woodenly. Up until recently, she even had this old bathtub that she kept all her junk in. It seems she's already gotten rid of it, thank God...

Akmat offers the grieving son his condolences and then beats a hasty exit with the decanter. Once inside his flat, his ex calls and Akmat forgets about it in the whirlwind. Later that afternoon though, it catches his eye again, and he fills it with the bottle of cognac he'd brought back from his last trip to Kyrgyzstan. He places it in the middle of the kitchen table, next to the dismal still life, watching it carefully in the last scraps of stifled daylight.

The week passes for Akmat as it always does. He sits at work, he says things to people, he stares out the window at the city scarved in fog. He comes home, he orders takeout, he plays videogames and smokes cigarettes. He sleeps and he does not dream.

On Thursday, he is sitting in a conference room having a one-on-one with a member of his team. They speak in German. They always speak in German because it is a German team that Akmat manages. The man, an anxious twenty-nine-year-old from Ústí nad Labem, is unloading on Akmat. Akmat is listening, but he is also not listening. The man asks him how he should proceed, given the situation. Akmat blinks twice. He sees again a puff of dust or smoke or whatever, this time hovering over the anxious twenty-nine-year-old from Ústí nad Labem's blonde head. What is the way you feel most comfortable doing this? he asks the man. The man babbles on to him, repeating everything he had just said, but more confused and less resolute than before. Akmat lets him talk for a while until the man starts saying the same thing for the third time, which is more comprehensible than the second time but still not as good as the first. Alright then, he finally interjects, cutting him off mid-sentence, so you do that then, and I will support you one hundred percent. If anyone says anything, you can send them to me, OK? The man thanks him and exits the conference room. Akmat heaves a vast sigh. The puff of dust or smoke has vanished.

In the evening, Zdeněk drops by. Nice Bohemian crystal, he comments, eying the decanter. Mind if I have a bit? Go ahead, replies Akmat, and Zdeněk happily pours himself a large glass of cognac and takes a healthy slug. Man, this stuff's good, he declares, smacking his lips. You really gotta take me to Kyrgyzstan with you sometime. You've been saying that for nearly twenty years, points out Akmat. You're welcome to come any time you want. Zdeněk takes out a joint. You mind? he asks. Akmat shakes

his head. Sorry dude. The little one is here tomorrow. I can't have this place smelling like a bar in Žižkov. Hey, no worries, Zdeněk says. I'll wait until I get home.

The two old friends sit mutely for a minute. Akmat remains still, but Zdeněk nods his head, looks down at the floor, up at the ceiling, opens his mouth and then closes it again. So? says Akmat. Anything on your mind? I was just thinking, Zdeněk blurts out, about how long we've known each other. It's been a long time indeed, agrees Akmat. You know me pretty well, right? asks Zdeněk. I know you're an unemployed thirty-six-year-old Czech man who always gets his ass kicked at foosball, replies Akmat. Ah, c'mon, protests Zdeněk, I'm serious here. Yes, Zdeněk, sighs Akmat, I think I know you pretty well, or at least as well as anyone can know another person. So what if I told you, says Zdeněk, lowering his voice a little, that I'm capable of things you would never think. Akmat looks at him for a moment and then laughs. Like what? he asks. Like crazy shit, man! replies Zdeněk. Shit you wouldn't believe. Like drinking all my booze, jokes Akmat, getting up to refill Zdeněk's glass and pour himself one. Look, I don't know everything that you're capable of, you don't know everything that I'm capable of. Let's just leave it at that and hope we never have to find out. OK? Zdeněk, placated by his second glass of cognac, doesn't protest.

But then Akmat suddenly gives him a concerned look, the kind of look Zdeněk never would've thought him capable of. His eyes fall on the floor and he furrows his brow, as if mulling over some sudden realization...and then he looks up at Zdeněk again, directly into his eyes. Zdeněk fidgets in his seat. What? he squeaks. Why are you looking at me like that? Akmat, not breaking eye contact with his friend, leans forward to say something to him...

*In space, he muses, is it doggystyle, or reverse cowgirl?*

When their laughter has died down, they have one more drink, reminiscing about a hated teacher, a beautiful girl neither of them could ever have, a summer vacation in Southern Italy, and other things that have long since drifted into the ether, and then Zdeněk, slightly drunk, goes back upstairs to take a bath on his patio. Akmat, feeling neutral bordering on good, pours himself another cognac and watches his still life. He is not thinking about anything.

On Saturday afternoon, the sun makes a brief appearance. Akmat is with his daughter in the playground between Kladská and U Vodárny. He speaks to her in English. He always speaks to her in English because her mother speaks to her in Czech, and Akmat doesn't see the point in speaking to her in Kyrgyz or Russian. He watches her go down the slide, pushes her on the swing, ties her little shoe when it comes undone. She reminds him of someone, or something, but he isn't sure what. He squints in the heavily diluted January sunlight as he tries to figure this out. He cannot.

Later, as the skies return to their darkened state and a cold, violative wind blows, they take shelter in a little café in Vršovice. His daughter nibbles at a piece of cake while Akmat drinks a beer and looks out the window at the tundra of cobblestones driving in. It could be 1895 out there right now, he thinks, and I wouldn't know the fucking difference. His daughter smiles at him; she likes the cake, she says. He strokes her hair and wonders what the difference is.

When they return to the flat, there is an awful racket coming from the apartment next door. Akmat puts on a movie but the noise continues. He loses his patience and begins pounding on the wall. Hey man, it's Sunday, he shouts in English. Just as he is about to go over there, the noise stops. His daughter, seemingly oblivious to the disturbance, asks him what's for dinner. Akmat blinks; he hasn't thought that far ahead yet. Maybe I'll make pilaf, he informs her. But she says she wants pizza. Akmat can't argue with that. The noise doesn't start up again, and the pizza turns out to be pretty good. Zdeněk calls him at ten. He hears Bob Marley singing in the background. The hot tub is a success.

Akmat works from home on Monday. He scans and selectively responds to emails, talks and listens and doesn't listen in two insufferable meetings, glances at some analytics he doesn't know the purpose of. Around eleven-thirty, already out of steam, he decides to take a nap. Barely ten minutes after lying down though the noise starts up again. This time, it seems to be happening somewhere in his head. He tries to ignore it, but then something drills through the wall next to his bed. It is a drill.

Full of confusion and rage, he rolls out of bed and marches out into the hallway and pounds on his neighbor's door. The grieving son answers. You just drilled a hole into my bedroom, he tells him, in English. The grieving son blinks, not understanding. Akmat repeats himself, this time in Czech. I am very sorry, the grieving son says, looking very sorry-looking. We were drilling a hole in the wall. Akmat stares at him in disbelief. Don't worry, the grieving son continues, I promise you I will fix it. Akmat notices two other greasy men, one holding a drill. They have stopped what they are doing and are watching them with great curiosity. Again, I am very sorry for the hole, says the grieving son. We are just trying to make some improvements here. That's fine, replies Akmat, but my concern is that this is fixed as soon as possible. Meaning, right away. Do you understand? The grieving sardine blinks, and for a moment it seems like he has not understood. Yes, he finally says, with little conviction. Right away.

On Saturday night, Akmat is returning home from his bi-weekly poker game, very drunk and six hundred crowns poorer. The neighborhood is still, silent, the only sign of life a lit cigarette butt left smoldering on the sidewalk. Akmat walks unsteadily, searching for the moon. He is not thinking about anything.

As he unlocks his door, two of the Romani guys from upstairs enter the building, loaded up with bottles and other provisions. They are having a party and invite Akmat up for a drink. He tries to politely refuse, but it is impossible. He climbs the stairs with them towards the music on the second floor.

He has been up here a few times before, often in a similar state. His neighbors lead him into the flat, a haze of bodies and bright lights and cigarette smoke, inebriated voices suspended in the glutinous wail of an accordion. Someone hands him a beer and puts a chair beneath him. He isn't sure if the music is a recording or if it's being played live. Perhaps both.



One of the gypsies jokes about Akmat's friend on the fourth floor, who they say is into old women. Akmat has an uncharacteristically dumb smile on his face as he listens and not listens. They tease him for speaking to the police. They think he is Chinese.

Later, stumbling back down the stairs to the first floor, he thinks he sees Zdeněk standing outside his neighbor's flat. To his bewilderment, his neighbor is there too, or rather, her hands are, jutting out from behind the doorframe – pale, veined, contorted with the bitterness of the centuries. She motions Zdeněk inside with those ghoulish hands and he enthusiastically obeys. As he disappears behind the closing door, he notices Akmat approaching. For a split second, they lock eyes; Zdeněk can't help but crack an embarrassed, if slightly combative grin, as if to say, what did you expect? The door now closed, Akmat stands there for a minute, shaking his head, back and forth, back and forth. Then he unlocks his own door and makes a beeline for the sofa, where he falls facedown into a dreamless sleep.

The next morning, he doesn't quite remember any of it. Or, if he does, he could've sworn it happened some other place, in some other time. Nonetheless, he doesn't give it any more thought.

Monday passes for Akmat as it always does. He sits at work, he says things to people, he stares out the window at the city scarved in fog, etc. On Tuesday afternoon though, there is a knock at the door. Akmat, who left the office early to go to the chiropractor, has just arrived home. He answers – it is his landlord, a useless man who he'd already complained to about the hole that still hasn't been fixed by the grieving sardine. He wastes no time in leading him into the bedroom to show him the hole. That is quite the hole they drilled, remarks the useless man. Akmat looks at him in disbelief. Can you get in touch with this guy at least? he asks. He hasn't been around for over a week. That's because there have been some new developments, says the useless man, scratching his head. A will from Katerina was found. And I care, why? asks Akmat. The useless man shrugs in his impassive Czech way. Because your friend upstairs now owns the flat. Akmat maintains an effortlessly neutral expression. So let me get this straight, he says, now Zdeněk is in charge of fixing the fucking hole? That's correct, the useless man replies, and then adds, I have witnessed all sorts of crazy things in this building since I got this flat from my grandmother twenty years ago, but this, this is definitely the craziest.

Akmat sees him to the door. I can talk to him if you want, he continues. But maybe since you know each other so well, it would be better for you to do it. Akmat sighs. Don't worry, he says to the useless man. I'll handle it.

After the useless man leaves, Akmat spends the rest of the afternoon playing videogames. His empire is flourishing economically, socially, culturally, militarily, but it gives him no satisfaction. He looks at everything he has constructed, at the people idling about with a sense of peace and security that they assume will never end, and he sighs. Life reduced to a video game, he thinks. A video game reduced to life.

At eight o'clock, he fixes himself a sandwich with whatever scraps he finds in the refrigerator. He eats it standing up by the window, watching the ragged, woebegone trees in the courtyard wave to him with their ghoulish hands. Once he has finished, he settles into the sofa to smoke a cigarette. He isn't there a minute when he hears Zdeněk's knock. It's open, he yells calmly.

Zdeněk gingerly enters the darkened living room. He-ey, he greets Akmat, his voice reedy, wavering. What's up, dude? Have a seat, Akmat says sternly. Zdeněk obliges him. So you came into some money, huh? he deadpans. Zdeněk grins sheepishly. You could say that, he replies, and begins to offer Akmat a needlessly long, convoluted explanation for his recent inheritance that may or may not be true. Akmat is listening, but he is also not listening. He allows Zdeněk to tell his story the way he wants – it is important to allow people their stories, as stories are often coping mechanisms, and who is Akmat to deny people their coping mechanisms? – but eventually he reaches his limit and cuts his friend off. Look, I don't care about any of that, he says. All I want to know is when you are going to fix that fucking hole. I can literally see into your kitchen through it. I'll try to patch it up tomorrow, says Zdeněk, a tangible note of relief in his voice. I promise you.

He turns around to leave. Wait a second, says Akmat, getting up from the sofa and walking into the kitchen. He opens a cupboard and takes out a plastic jug and then picks up the decanter from the counter and empties its contents into the jug. Take this, he says, foisting the decanter on him. I don't want it. Wow! exclaims Zdeněk. Thanks man! I have to admit, I was slightly jealous when you got to that one before me. I promise I'll give it a good home. Akmat stares at him almost pityingly. It's technically yours now anyway, he says. Just patch up that fucking hole. Zdeněk smiles. No worries, he replies. Oh, and Akmat? I just wanted to say...I love you, man. Akmat doesn't say anything in reply, but then again, Zdeněk reasons afterwards, he never was a very emotional guy.

Sometimes he is visited by previously known things. A bright courtyard in Munich where he first lived with his mother after leaving Kyrgyzstan. A horse gargling mud. The ceiling of a washed-out hospital hallway in Bishkek through swollen eyes. The unknown steppes and lakes and deserts, country so vast that most of Europe would be lost in it. He watches all of these things pass out of the corner of his eye, a feeble procession that is not begging for his attention, that is in fact asking nothing of him. He watches them.

She did everything for him. All the things he'd seen and learnt, all those languages that whirled around in his brain...he never had to make any effort. But she didn't do any of it like a mother. It was more like someone who just really cared. That was sufficient, he thought. At least it was for him.

He watches a night outside in the middle of nowhere. A mining project. He was an interpreter. He was twenty-three and had gone back. Why? He couldn't explain it, at least not with any of the languages that whirled around in his brain. But it was clear to him he was not what he thought he was, and as he moved from the university in Bishkek to the fuliginous streets of Almaty to his current role as a miracle parrot in the middle of nowhere, he couldn't escape the feeling that he was sleepwalking through it all, sleepwalking with one eye open. And that perhaps, given the circumstances, this was the best course of action.

The night was silent in the middle of nowhere, a vacuum that seemed to swallow up all language. Suddenly though, there came a sound that disturbed the horses and the Europeans – a human sound in a place where there should be no human sound. Tell them not to worry, said one of the guides, a Kazakh who had never been to Almaty before. No one is going to come all the way out here. And if they did, he grinned, they'd deserve everything we've got.



After Zdeněk has left, Akmat pours himself a large glass of cognac from the plastic jug. He takes a gulp and lights a cigarette. For a moment, it seems his hand is shaking. But it is not.

As he stands there with his steady hand, something begins to seep into him – a long, thin frequency, ringing out from the far end of the night. If he were to connect it with anything – and he will not – it would be comparable to a feeling of sorrow. But it is not sorrow, because sorrow is human and this is not human. But it is here now, full, empty, perfect. He can feel it deep within his unknown.

He eyes the piano in the far corner of the room; it is covered in dust. He finishes his drink and then gets up and crosses over to it. He sits down at the instrument, removes the cover, and begins to play – a bit awkwardly at first, but then he quickly finds his footing. He plays *Moonlight Sonata* – one of the few pieces he can still remember – and he smokes his cigarette, letting the ash fall on the yellowed keys. His abdomen begins to swell with the strange moonlight of the music and soon this swelling seems to have expanded into the room itself. It's not the breath of God or anything, but it might as well be.

After a few minutes, the swelling feeling peters out – it *has* to – and Akmat stops playing and sits there, his moist eyes fixed on eternity. He lights another cigarette, takes a drag, exhales, and watches the puff of smoke rise, imagining each particle contained therein as a human being. He sees the dictatorial rat and the perfect goon in there, he sees the grieving son who prays to sardines, he sees Zdeněk and his ex and his anxious coworker from Ústí nad Labem, the useless man and the grinning Kazakh guide and even his daughter too...

*His daughter.* Akmat can't help flexing the muscles at the sides of his mouth. She is coming tomorrow, isn't she, he thinks. His little bundle of something. He will have to tidy up the place, go shopping, come up with something fun for them to do together. She will carry all of this with her for the rest of her life, so he'd better make some effort here.

The night about him slowly drains with a silken gurgle. A still, dismal life beautifully rendered in rotting fruit, black cigarette lighter, old grocery list. The tundra of cobblestones driving in. 1895 – or perhaps 5918. A reminder of someone, or something. Akmat is alert now. He is listening. He is thinking. He feels neutral bordering on good.

He might even be alive.

## GABRIEL RAMIREZ ACEVEDO

### SUBMARINOS Y CONEJOS

Siempre tuve mucho miedo de copiar en un examen. O mejor, temía que me descubrieran en la trampa. En la escuela, cuando no sabía la respuesta de alguna pregunta y quería alargar la mirada para sacarla de la hoja de algún compañero, los nervios me carcomían. La respuesta estaba allí, pero el miedo a ser descubierto siempre podía más.

Un día un amigo me contó que él pasaba por lo mismo. Teníamos 10 años. Él era el mejor de la clase en matemáticas y yo el mejor en inglés; si pudiéramos copiar el uno del otro, tendríamos siempre todas las respuestas correctas. Un dúo brillante. Pero ambos estábamos aterrados con la posibilidad de que nos fueran a atrapar.

Como un par de pequeños criminales comenzamos a revisar nuestras opciones, para reconvenir un par de días después a intercambiar ideas. Él había visto un programa de televisión sobre códigos de espionaje, y había anotado una manera de escribir mensajes en un papel para que sólo quienes tuvieran la clave pudieran descifrarlo. El problema era que pasarnos papeles codificados durante el examen sería tanto o más obvio ante los ojos del profesor que pasarlos sin codificar, así que rápidamente descartamos esa opción. Luego pensamos en inventar una manera de comunicarnos con las manos, describiendo palabras y números con movimientos de los dedos. A una velocidad pasmosamente lenta nos dimos cuenta de que esa idea ya se le había ocurrido a la gente que no podía hablar, y que había un lenguaje de señas que los sordomudos ya usaban. Aprender un lenguaje nuevo sería una tarea monumental, sin contar que quedaríamos demasiado expuestos ante el profesor haciendo bailar las manos en el aire de aquí para allá para entregar palabras entrecortadas.

Quedaba menos de un mes para la temporada de exámenes, así que había que buscar otra opción lo más pronto posible. Después de días de pensar, llegamos a la solución ideal. No sólo había una manera de comunicarnos claramente entre los dos, sino que se podía hacer a escondidas: ¡leer la mente! Era muy sencillo. No hacía falta sino aprender telepatía, y ya estaba todo solucionado; un plan infalible.

Logré convencer a alguien de mi familia para que me llevara a la librería y una vez allá, parado frente a un mostrador más alto que yo, pregunté al vendedor por un libro que hablara de telepatía. Me respondió que de esos temas no tenía nada, pero agregó que si en algún lado podría encontrar algo similar sería en la librería Nueva Era a unos locales de allí. Sin perder un segundo arrastré a mi acompañante los tres pisos hasta la librería, y le pedí a la señora que organizaba los estantes que me vendiera un libro sobre telepatía. Le hice señas para que se agachara y, creyendo susurrar en voz de secreto de niño, le dije que necesitaba no un libro cualquiera, sino el mejor manual práctico que tuviera para leer la mente.

Para mi felicidad y para sorpresa de mi compañía, me dijo que tenía algo que, si bien no era un manual, tenía las últimas investigaciones de los gobiernos del mundo en la materia. Saqué del bolsillo un arrugado bono navideño de lectura y se lo entregué, convencido de haber pagado por un futuro prometedor.

No había tiempo que perder, pues tenía que leer el libro lo más pronto posible y luego pasárselo a mi amigo para que él aprendiera su parte. Cada segundo era valioso. Durante las pausas entre clases, me sentaba a leer en el césped al lado de la cancha de fútbol, buscando entre las páginas algún ejercicio o alguna clave para poder enviar mensajes ocultos de una mente brillante a otra. Hacia la mitad del libro había un pasaje que fue determinante. El capítulo contaba que recientemente se habían desclasificado documentos que explicaban cómo durante la Guerra Fría los grandes poderes experimentaron con maneras de pasar mensajes entre espías de una mente a otra sin ser detectados. Para desarrollar esta técnica, los militares soviéticos habían llevado a cabo experimentos secretos transportando camadas de conejos en un submarino nuclear y dejando a la madre en tierra conectada a toda clase de sensores. El libro aseveraba que en el mismo momento en que los militares torturaban y despellejaban a los pequeños en el fondo del mar, la madre conejo chillaba y se lanzaba desesperada contra los barrotes de su jaula. Sin embargo, nunca pudieron determinar a ciencia cierta qué hacía funcionar el hilo que conectaba a la madre con sus hijos.

En ese momento dejé de leer y cerré el libro, perturbado por los animalitos y decepcionado por la conclusión inevitable. Si durante décadas las grandes potencias mundiales no habían podido llegar más allá de enviar mensajes de terror entre conejos, en la semana que nos quedaba para los exámenes jamás lograríamos aprender a enviarnos las respuestas de la prueba de matemáticas. Y ahora, además, tampoco había tiempo de estudiar con el método tradicional.

Llegó el día y las preguntas parecían formuladas en un lenguaje ajeno. Tensionado en mi asiento, con la espalda encorvándose sobre el papel y con los pies apenas alcanzando el piso, trataba de concentrarme para que mi amigo supiera que necesitaba su ayuda para las primeras dos preguntas. Por mi cabeza sólo pasaban imágenes de los fatales experimentos y, para colmo, el chico sentado a mi derecha interrumpió mi esfuerzo telepático para pedirme con urgencia que le pasara el borrador de goma a la compañera a mi izquierda. Lo hice de mala gana, y antes de que pudiera concentrarme de nuevo, ya venía el borrador de regreso. Esta vez, antes de entregarlo, noté con sorpresa que la goma blanca tenía precisamente la forma de un conejo en posición de alerta, la mitad de una oreja ya perdida en el uso de corregir. En el lomo del animal se leía un mensaje escrito a lápiz con letra diminuta: "Resp.1 = 25. Resp.2 = 163".

## DERMOT C. MILLER

### THE POSTMAN

Benjamin awoke shivering and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the threadbare blanket. The point of a broken spring protruding through the mattress was digging into the small of his back. He pushed himself up to a sitting position, and then rose unsteadily to his feet to shuffle across the unkempt room towards the door.

When he opened it, the glare of the morning sun blinded him as it sliced through the obscure interior. He looked hastily left and right down the dusty street with its two rows of dilapidated single-storey shacks. He could see the Mediterranean gleaming blue beyond the track that led towards the seemingly endless plantations, and a scrawny dog scavenged in the gutter, but there was no sign of the postman.

'Perhaps he's already been,' thought Benjamin, 'or maybe there's nothing for anyone today.' In the six months he had spent in this place, Benjamin had only seen the postman on a few occasions since he was usually out working with the others in the fields from first light until dusk. Now he tried to recall the wiry face of that postman in his crumpled blue uniform who sometimes trundled a yellow trolley along the street, and he wondered if those really were the eyes of a thief and if, as the Reverend Undunku had told him, they stole all the money sent by post to this country, but Benjamin found it very difficult to judge whether a white man's face looked honest or dishonest.

He hadn't gone to work that day because a sudden fever had surged through him in the night leaving him weak and disorientated. He lamented the loss of desperately needed pay, but he calculated that if he permitted himself a respite today and Sunday, he would be able to carry on working seven days a week indefinitely. He just needed to rest a little first and recover more from the harrowing journey that had brought him to this place, and from the back-breaking work he had endured since his arrival. He stood nervously in the doorway, not daring to venture out further into the street. The crumbling dwellings, rented to the immigrant workers by the estate owner, were completely deserted at this hour, with everyone out picking tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers; all the abundant produce of this fortunate land which his grandfather had talked to him about so often.

Benjamin didn't like being alone here during the day. He felt safer with the others, even though he couldn't really understand their many languages, except for those few from far to the south who had similar tribal dialects to his, or anyone who spoke a little English. But here, alone, he was afraid, although he hoped that his grandfather's powers could still reach across the barriers of death and the many miles that separated him from his homeland.

He was fearful because he had, at least, understood the stories of how some of the young people from the local town would sometimes come in gangs and randomly attack unwary workers that they found isolated from the protection of the group. He also heard that they had sometimes come in the daytime when there was no-one around and had already burned down two of the houses by squirting gasoline through the letter-slot in the door and then setting it alight. Benjamin could see the evidence of this himself as he glanced quickly across the street at the blackened skeleton roof of an abandoned shack just opposite. On its charred walls the perpetrators had daubed in bright red paint two single words in the tongue of this land which provoked in him an involuntary shudder.

Many of the workers had shored up the doors and the one and only window at the front as best they could against possible intrusion, and some had even sealed up the letter-slot too. But for Benjamin, and the five others with whom he shared the cramped space, the postal service offered the only possibility of communication with home. If they sealed up the letter-slot, how would the postman get the mail to them? He might just leave it on the street outside for anyone to pick up, or maybe throw it away after opening it up and checking for money. No, they had all decided to leave the letter-slot open.

Benjamin closed the door, deciding it was probably too late for the postman now. He flopped down on his bed again, and thought fondly of his grandfather who had given him this opportunity to create a new life for himself and his family. He thought of his wife Salina and little Ben and tried to recall the smell and the feel of them. Both Benjamin's parents had died when he was still very young, and Onlule had always been more like a father to him. No-one knew exactly what age Onlule was and, being the oldest person in the village, there was no-one to dispute his claim that he had stopped counting when he reached a hundred. The truth of his accumulated years still remained a mystery, even after the day when he suddenly announced to Benjamin, 'I've heard it's time to die,' without any apparent signs of illness, or any explanation of how or where he had heard such news.

Onlule had spent a lot of his younger life working for the European land-owners. At various times he had acted as hunting guide, estate labourer and man-servant, and he knew all the distant territories beyond their tribal boundaries. Among his great wealth of knowledge, he had learned a lot about European ways, and even how to speak and read a little in English and French. The Reverend Undunku at the Christian Mission always used to bring his grandfather foreign newspapers from the city. It was also well known that Onlule could communicate with the ancestors, and attained from them strange powers that enabled him to live past lives in dreams, to influence the present and foretell the future.

On the night he died peacefully in his sleep, Benjamin's grandfather called him to his side and said, 'I have seen that there is a terrible famine and drought to come. Our land will slowly wither and die, and the only chance you have is to get your family to Europe. There you will find food and work. You must go alone first, and then send for your wife and child. Have no fear for the journey, for I will be your feet and eyes.'

With that, his grandfather lifted up the tunic he was wearing, and Benjamin saw that dangling behind his testicles and supported by a thong around his waist was a worn leather pouch. Onlule took it off, and into the palm of Benjamin's hand, he emptied out three large shining gems. 'These,' said the grandfather, 'are precious stones from the sacred river Tonuga in a place which you have never seen. My father gave them to me, and they are the source of my special gifts. Now I pass them on to you to bring you long life and prosperity. Now there is no life for anyone here. The only escape is to sell the stones in the city and get away. Salina and Ben can follow after once you are established. This is the future I have seen for you.'

After Onlule's death, Benjamin confided the story in the Reverend Undunku who seemed very willing to help. Benjamin gave him the stones to take to the city, and he returned with five thousand American dollars, which he said was a very good price. He had even taken a photo of Benjamin with him and managed to procure

a passport for five hundred dollars, and in half the time the bureaucratic process normally took. According to the Reverend Undunku, this too was very cheap, and that where he was going it would help a lot to have a passport.

So, a short time later, Benjamin set off north across the continent, convinced that Onlule would guide him. For months he travelled, mostly on foot, eating what he could, sleeping rough and avoiding human contact for fear of being robbed. Eventually he reached Morocco and the coast where he heard about the people who sold passages across the sea to Europe. Benjamin could sense that these men were crooks as soon as he spoke to them – they had the same expressionless faces as the postman who now delivered to the street, but having no other alternative he paid the two thousand dollars they demanded, and was bundled one night into a leaking open boat with about forty Moroccans who headed out to sea. The battered old motor stopped working after about an hour, and they had to continue rowing for many hours more while they bailed sea-water out of the boat with their hands, but Onlule protected them, and they eventually landed in moonlight on a sandy beach in a place which the Moroccans said was Spain. Benjamin followed along with them as they dispersed along the coast and melted into the vast cultivated areas that were their goal.

Now, as he lay shivering on the bed, Benjamin recalled the journey and felt for the reassuring rub of the leather pouch between his legs were there were still more than two thousand dollars left. He would need to continue working for many months to add to this before getting his wife and son to him, but there were many questions that troubled him. Would they be able to come the same way as he had, or was there a safer way? And how was he going to get the money to them? He had sent several letters with his address to Salina via the Christian Mission, but that was many weeks ago and there was still no reply. Of course he couldn't send the money in a letter, but the Reverend Undunku had given Benjamin the details of his own personal bank account and said that all he needed to do was transfer the money from any other bank or an international money transfer office and he would pass it on.

Thank God for the Reverend Undunku! He was a truly Christian man. A man you could trust. He didn't have the illegible features of the postman or the men who sold the leaking boats. But Benjamin had never been in a bank before, or an international money transfer office, and he was thinking about asking the Moroccans how they went about sending money to their families when he drifted into an uneasy sleep.

Benjamin awoke coughing. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and realized that the room was full of smoke. The flames that were engulfing the wooden door had already spread to the end of the blanket on his bed. He retreated to the back of the shack, but there was no escape there, and the way forward was already a blazing barrier of fire. He screamed at the top of his voice for help, but everyone was in the fields and no-one heard him. He coughed and

choked and called out, 'Onlule! Onlule, help me!' but Benjamin knew then, as his skin began to blister, that the powers of the sacred stones had been sold along with them, and that his grandfather could no longer help him.

The police came when the remains of the body were found among the ashes, but no-one could provide a more detailed identity for Benjamin other than his first name. Nor could anyone identify those who had again scrawled in bright red paint upon the scorched exterior wall the same two words as before 'EL CARTERO' (THE POSTMAN).

## FICTION

## BIOGRAPHIES

Alexis Levitin has published fifty books of translations, including Clarice Lispector's *Soulstorm* and Eugenio de Andrade's *Forbidden Words*, both from New Directions. His translations have appeared in over two hundred magazines, including *Agni*, *APR*, *Kenyon Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, and *The New York Times*. His short stories began during the fear-tinged isolation of the pandemic. So far, sixty-two of them have been accepted by magazines in the USA, England, Italy, Norway, Sweden, Turkey and now Spain. His book of chess memoirs and inventions, *The Last Ruy Lopez: Tales from the Royal Game*, was published in late 2023 by Russell Enterprises.

Isabella Millington is a writer and designer from the UK based in Madrid, Spain. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Sonder Magazine*, *Rat World*, *Nowhere Girl Collective*, and *Panorama Journal*, among others. She is currently developing a collection of short stories and dreaming of returning to live by the sea.

Sinclair Gibson is a New Yorker-turned-Spaniard who's always felt torn between both worlds. Currently double majoring in Urban Studies and Environmental Studies, she's dreaming of a future where she can combine her love for cities and creative writing in a way that makes both places proud.

Glyn Rebl is originally from Vancouver Island but has also lived in Montreal and Prague. Nowadays, he calls Madrid home.

Gabriel Ramirez Acevedo was born in Bogota, Colombia. He studied International Relations in Colombia, and International Development in the Netherlands. After living in Colombia, Canada and the United States, he emigrated to the Netherlands where he works at the University of Amsterdam and dedicates his free time to learning the art and craft of writing. His story *Mixtape* won the first prize in the 2021 flash fiction competition for the Dutch magazine *Writer's Block*, and his story *Polishing Imperfection* was published by the Austrian magazine *Tint Journal* in 2024.

## IDLE THOUGHTS OF A BOOKSELLING FELLOW

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



Having written the first in this series on the bookselling life by the log-fires of Christmas, I am delighted to be penning the second from the beach. Whilst Filipa and Pierre look after Secret Kingdoms, it's a great opportunity for me to stop selling books for a moment and spend a bit more time reading them. Stacked on the bedside table I have; a history of Toledo from 1898, a portmanteau of short stories about Madrid by Leslie Croxford, and a thriller by Dick Francis.

By the time you read this, Leslie will have presented *From Madrid to Heaven* to an appreciative Secret Kingdoms audience and we will be accelerating towards the long-awaited 40<sup>th</sup> of May, and getting well into the heat of the Madrid Summer...

And as for the bookseller, what will the summer bring? May and June are going to be hectic, with a run of interesting events. We start with Leslie's event on May 10<sup>th</sup>, followed by the much-anticipated launch of Parisa Salahshourian's *A Thousand Lives* poetry collection on May 17<sup>th</sup>. Then comes a Sunday of Romance on May 25<sup>th</sup> with Elena Armas signing her books across the late morning followed by a 'Wines and Spines' chat with her fans.

Eddie Ross asks, *Where is my free lunch?* on June 6<sup>th</sup>, followed by Madrid Photographer John Dapolito and friends double bill of *Stray cats* across June 7<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> - I am modestly (*modestly?*) proud to have contributed to this one myself!

Amongst all this we also will also find time to work out how to raise bilingual families with Katharine Cannings on June 13<sup>th</sup>.

Things will then slow down for a while as we steer straight into the brutal heat of July and August. We will continue to be open normal hours but there are no more author events until we kick off again with Vanessa Edwards' latest thriller on September 6<sup>th</sup>. Whilst the Book Clubs will continue throughout the summer, as will the Philosophy and Writers' groups, numbers attending are likely to fall away a little (do join us!). Much ice will be added to long summer drinks as we wait for cooler times.

Yet summer will also be time for contemplation and renewal, as we idly ponder the coming of the new releases of autumn, the layout of the bookshop, and the ever-tantalising possibilities of the times yet to come.

What authors or genres would you like to see more of at the Secret Kingdoms? What sort of events do you enjoy? Please do call by and let us know - See you at the Secret Kingdoms!



Secret Kingdoms is at  
Calle de Maortín 7 in Madrid - Metro Antón Martín



# Sin literatura fantástica no hay vacaciones

Por Cristina Jurado

¿Qué sería del verano sin las horas perezosas que invitan al descanso? Y, ¿qué sería de ese ocio desenfrenado sin los libros? Para muchos, las vacaciones son sinónimo de lectura a cualquier hora, sin necesidad de mirar el reloj, encadenando momentos propicios para embarcarnos en aventuras o, por qué no, temblar de miedo desde las páginas repletas de palabras. Tal vez sea por eso que la literatura en su conjunto, y los géneros fantásticos en particular, celebran alguna de sus citas más importantes del año en los meses estivales. La reina indiscutible es sin duda la Feria del Libro de Madrid que tendrá lugar del 30 de mayo al 15 de junio, y que se ha convertido en parada obligada para lectores, autores y curiosos por las numerosas firmas y presentaciones que acoge. Minotauro, por ejemplo, ya ha confirmado que Sabino Cabeza, el último ganador del premio de literatura fantástica que lleva su nombre, estará presente junto a Pedro Berrueto, Antonio Runa y Carlos Sisi.

Este año la Semana Negra de Gijón (4-13 de julio) cumplirá treinta y ocho años dedicada al género policiaco y al thriller sin dejar de lado su interés por algunos nombres aclamados de la ficción especulativa. Es el caso de la incombustible Rosa Montero, que presentará *Animales difíciles*, última novela de su serie protagonizada por Bruna Husky y publicada por Planeta. Solo unos días más tarde se celebrará el Festival Celsius en Avilés (15-19 de julio) con un impresionante plantel de autores nacionales e internacionales entre los que destacan Lev Grossman, Robin Hobb, Joe Abercrombie, Brandon Sanderson, Alma Katsu o la argentina Agustina Bazterrica, por citar unos pocos.

Esta también es la temporada de las reediciones de algunos de los títulos más demandados por los lectores. Minotauro lo sabe y por ello ha encargado a Tomas Hijo -reconocido ilustrador que destaca por sus grabados- una edición de lujo en cartón, con cantos tintados y hasta una cinta como punto de lectura, del clásico *Drácula* de Bram Stoker. Ediciones Duomo hace lo propio con *La Casa de las Hojas* de Mark Z. Danielewski, ejemplo de literatura ergódica, un tipo de obra que exige un gran esfuerzo por parte del lector por sus variados estratos narrativos de la mano de variaciones tipográficas, diseños de página sorprendentes, notas en los márgenes, etc.

El terror no da tregua en verano y las editoriales lo saben, por lo que aprovechan para lanzar numerosas novedades de cara a los distintos festivales. Entre las iniciativas independientes, La Biblioteca de Carfax inaugura las vacaciones con la segunda entrega de la trilogía del Lago Indian de Stephen Graham Jones: *No temas a la Parca* llega con traducción de Manuel de los Reyes en una historia que sigue los pasos de Jade, de nuevo en Proofrock, para enfrentar otro u otros asesinos en serie.

Por su parte, el holandés Thomas Olde Heuvelt vuelve a las librerías españolas de la mano de Nocturna con *Oracle*, un thriller sobrenatural en el que se dan cita la intriga internacional y el terror con profecía incluida y la amenaza del regreso de fuerzas antiguas que podrían cambiar el mundo para siempre. Obscura Editorial ha anunciado la publicación de *La tercera regla de los viajes en el tiempo*, de Philip Fracassi y con traducción de Jesús Cañadas, un thriller de terror sobre viajes en el tiempo. El sello Runas propone *El*

*horror de Réquiem* de Marc Pastor, con ecos lovecraftianos pasada por el tamiz de los Monty Python en la que Barcelona se convierte en el escenario de aventuras trepidantes y humor cósmico. Vinculada al creciente interés por el terror folk-cósmico es *Musivo* de la galesa Catherine McCarthy, otra de las novedades para esta temporada de la editorial Dilatando Mentes. En esta historia una restauradora se enfrenta a sus traumas infantiles mientras la vidriera de una iglesia rural inglesa en la que trabaja parece cobrar vida.

Destino no se queda atrás en la carrera por publicar la fantasía más épica del mercado. Por ello trae a nuestro país *La Espada Fulgurante* de Lev Grossman, que describe las andanzas del caballero Collum en una Camelot caótica tras la muerte del rey Arturo y plagada de seres de leyenda. También en el ámbito de la fantasía Insólita ha previsto dos novelas cortas de Fonda Lee, precuelas de *Ciudad de jade*: se trata de *El tallador de jade de Yanlún* y *Esquirlas de jade*, todas ellas inmersas en el universo fantástico urbano creado por la autora canadiense y en el que los lazos familiares y la magia se entrelazan para generar aventuras inolvidables. La editorial El Transbordador añade a su catálogo *Hay Fantasmas Sobre la Tierra*, la primera novela de Alejandro Candela Rodríguez, que firma una historia en la que fantasía y folclore se unen para ir desvelando el oscuro pasado de una pescadora. Literup ha anunciado el segundo volumen de su colección dedicada al romance entre humanos y criaturas fantásticas: *No vuelas con la arpía*, de Maeva Nieto una invitación a disfrutar de aventuras que beben de las historias clásicas de cazatesoros y en la tierra de los djinn.

La ciencia ficción tampoco se toma un respiro durante las vacaciones. Los fans de Martha Wells están de enhorabuena porque el sello Hydra ha anunciado que se hace cargo de la aclamada serie Matabot y sus dos primeras entregas, *Sistemas Críticos* y *Condición Artificial* estarán disponibles a partir de este verano. Inteligencias artificiales que alcanzan la autoconsciencia, planetas lejanos y sucesos misteriosos se entremezclan en este universo narrativo creado por la autora norteamericana.

Nova está trabajando para publicar *Donde Está Enterrada el Hacha* de Ray Nayler, novela cibernética sobre intrigas políticas que narra una arriesgada operación revolucionaria y que aborda desde un punto de vista crítico las muchas formas de autoritarismo que ahogan la libertad humana. El sello Crononauta tiene previsto lanzar *Fuga en luz mayor*, de Laura S. Maquilón, sobre la fragilidad de la paz, la lealtad y el poder de la tolerancia en medio de profundos conflictos sociales. El norteamericano Jason Sanford desembarca en nuestro país gracias a la colección Freder de Dolmen, con una novela, finalista del premio Philip K. Dick y Nebula que mezcla ciencia ficción y fantasía oscura para ofrecer una visión inquietante del futuro de una humanidad híbrida.

Libros para todos los paladares, libros intensos, acogedores, mágicos. No hay excusa para no seguir este verano el camino de la ficción que nos hace vibrar y soñar.



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 Hügle



Entering Madrid's "pequeño caribe" – namely Tetuán, Puente de Vallecas and Villaverde – it is easy to feel you have left Spain. The sound of Dominican or Cuban slang, salsa and bachata, and the multitude of blue and red flags all characterise these neighbourhoods as distinctly Caribbean – and they are communities which continue to grow. In 2024, El País recorded that Madrid has never welcomed so many Cubans, in large part dissidents and intellectuals – such as the playwright Yunior García and art historian Yanelys Núñez Leiv – who now favour Madrid over Miami.

Meanwhile, a new generation of intellectuals have championed a Caribbean literary movement that explores post-revolutionary island life. Writers such as Rita Indiana, from the Dominican Republic, are championing a new kind of Caribbean prose that reads as airborne, melodic and thick with slang as the accent sounds, with writing that examines revolution, national identity and political heritage.

## HECHO EN SATURNO by RITA INDIANA

*"Quizás era su oportunidad. Dejar la vaina. Dejar el Temgesic. Limpiarse. Aguantar como un macho sus síntomas."*

So sounds the mantra of Argenis Luna, abandoned and penniless in Cuba. Rita Indiana's *Hecho En Saturno* (2018), is a novel that follows the son of a Dominican revolutionary sent away to be cured of his heroin addiction. His first few weeks in Cuba, he lay by the pool or watching a ceiling fan, killing time between regular doses of Temgesic. Now, he finds himself stranded and faced with seemingly one option: reinvention. Perhaps here, in the faded glory of Havana's streets, Argenis will cease to be the "tecato" he has become. He will make something of himself, begin painting again, don an expensive suit and in this way avenge his father: he will become "El Hombre Nuevo".

"El Hombre Nuevo", a concept rooted in Nietzsche's "Übermensch", was championed by Che Guevara as a new, individual-based morality. Guevara posits that through man's sheer will to reinvent himself, humanity's slow march to rampant capitalism – a "sociedad de lobos" – can finally be halted, and a new kind of man can be born.

These are the heroes and monsters of Argenis's childhood bedtime stories. He grew up watching his father, a Dominican communist, leave every room with "Hasta la victoria siempre" as a form of goodbye. As children, he and his brother were forced to memorise and recite speeches from revolutionary heroes. They were sent with other children of revolutionaries to summer camps from which, admittedly, Argenis extracted no greater wisdom than learning how to masturbate. As a child, Argenis viewed the politics of his family detachedly, as though listening to "liturgias de un lejano planeta". Indiana writes:

*"Se sabía un analfabeto en la extraña atmósfera comunista, daba lentísimos pasos sobre la superficie ideológica, interesado más que nada en los efectos de la misma en la gente, las pequeñas manías, las implosiones oblicuas en los ojos por la desesperación silente."*

Unlike his father and brother, Argenis has spent the last decades in art studios or living rooms, painting or taking heroin – not getting rich from the revolution. This distance allows him a lucidity with which he becomes aware of a constant, two-sided struggle.

*"Junto a un afiche del Che Guevara, había un calendario de Avena Quaker fijado con una chincheta. Allí juntos, la cara del Che plasmada en gorras y stickers por todo el mundo y el feliz Quakero, eran los extremos de un grotesco yin yang. Por un lado, el ideal socialista convertido en mercancía; por otro, la marca capitalista de contrabando que sostenía a duras penas el funcionamiento biológico de la Revolución."*

Idealism and corruption, communism and capitalism, change and the old-world order: Hecho En Saturno, hailed as a fundamentally Caribbean creation, embraces all these contradictions simultaneously. Havana is likened to a "puta vieja" who only regains her former glory in the dark: her neoclassical buildings and boulevards maintain their colonial grandeur under layers of poverty. Bursting through every line is the irrepressible force of capitalism and globalisation: Indiana writes in an animated mix of Caribbean slang and English brand names. While belief in "El Hombre Nuevo" is ingrained in Argenis's DNA, so is the awareness of broken promises and failures on part of the revolution, embodied by his brother and father eating steak every night in too-small Prada suits.

Argenis is haunted by Goya's image of Saturn, with bulging eyes and a bloodied mouth, devouring his offspring. Indiana blends the preoccupation with "El Hombre Nuevo" with an obsession with fathers, particularly those who act as parasites towards their children and countries. Another of Indiana's novels, *Papi*, centres on a larger-than-life father figure: "Papi tiene más de to que el tuyo, más fuerza que el tuyo, más músculo, más dinero y más novias que el tuyo." Whether as the ultimate symbol of status and wealth, or as the "Hombre Nuevo" who will save humanity, Indiana shows a generation continually preoccupied with supreme patriarchs who embody the irremediable gulf between expectation and reality. Argenis watches his father surrender to greed: once chanting "hasta la victoria siempre", he becomes a man willing to pilfer his son's Christmas money to buy himself a suit, and later exile him to Cuba. So Argenis shoulders a double betrayal: that his father has betrayed his principles and that he's betrayed him.

Finally Argenis, shrewd observer of hypocrisy, undergoes a transformation of his own. He forgives his father and comes to dress like him: it's only when he himself dons a tailored suit, in the traditional tropics-friendly white, that Argenis galvanised to reinvent himself as an artist and a great man – he is finally un "Hombre Nuevo", but one defined from the outside in.

*"Aquel traje impecable había despertado en él un orgullo desconocido."*

*Aquellas telas cosidas no solo lo habían hecho lucir distinguido y atractivo, sino también habían recubierto al mundo con una patina lustrosa."*

Donning a suit and reconciling with his father have their perks: after decades stealing and getting high, the new Argenis is approached by a couple of art dealers talking to him excitedly about grants and exhibitions in Europe. Having showered him with prosecco and compliments, they ask if Argenis's father could put them in touch with the president.

*"Argenis entendió el poder que ser un satélite de su padre le confería. Sopesó lo que estaba en juego. (...) Ya no eran el epitome del buen gusto, ahora eran otro par de joseadores."*

"Count on that," Argenis replies. It is the novel's final, deciding contradiction. *Hecho en Saturno* explores a life caught in the tide of revolution yet ruled by the vagaries of human nature. After devouring his son, Saturn is forgiven: the son allows himself to be devoured, and even devours Saturn back. "El Hombre Nuevo", originally meant to save us from joining a "Sociedad de lobos", realises that one dresses and eats better in a wolf's clothing.

#### MORE CARIBBEAN FICTION

*El Hombre Triángulo* (2005), Rey Emmanuel Andújar – follows Pérez, a soldier in the Dominican military who struggles to define his identity and masculinity in the shadow of the Trujillo dictatorship.

*Reinbou* (2024), Pedro Cabiya – a historical fiction that explores corruption, social upheaval and U.S intervention in modern Dominican society.

*Bachata del Ángel Caído* (1999), Pedro Antonio Valdez – follows the life of a young aspiring writer in El Riito, a neighbourhood on the margins of Dominican society.



Romy Hügler was born in Germany in 2024 and moved to London soon afterwards. She is currently an undergraduate student of Spanish, German and English Literature at Newcastle University, after living for several months in Madrid. She has always been passionate about literature, particularly from Latin America, and has published articles in the *Latin American Review of Books and Sound and Colours*. She regularly travels to Madrid and plans to continue her studies in Spain, as well as to continue sharing her love of literature and culture in Buenos Aires and Bogotá next year.

## LETTER FROM NEW YORK

### BY RACHEL HARTY

#### A Little Fat, Oil and Salt on Macdougall Street: Pommes Frites

Some days I regard New York City with the reverence of a student loan statement. Other days, it's just a large cardboard box with ruthless branding. Either way, I'm often found in the ambitious intermission: that swank waiting room between intention and indigestion, where the receptionist never calls your name, but you stay, out of hope or hunger.

I tell myself, out loud, to no one, like one does on subway trains (boombox and all), that a little oil, a little salt, a little fat won't undo me, when I feel like this.

I don't necessarily believe this, but the mantra works if I recite it with the background volume down and the sense of self up.

Spring, for its part, can't decide who to be: 59 degrees and frumpy or 93 degrees and nude. I want to meet her in the middle, but what if she doesn't show? I keep my clothes on. The weather isn't promised. But you know what is? Padding.\*

I want carbs. I want pommes frites. Not just any, but the ones off MacDougall Street—Pommes Frites, the kind of hole-in-the-wall New York neglects to brag about. A narrow Belgian fry shop with dark red brick walls and over thirty dipping sauces that make the menu oddly akin to the Cheesecake Factory. No pretense, no wine list, just fries: thick-cut, twice-fried, handed to you in a cone, still steaming. I particularly like the classic ketchup sauce, but if I'm being honest, I've tried every single sauce on that menu.

At twenty-one, I'd take them to Washington Square Park, sit alone on a bench, and eat slowly, contemplating my existential dread, what my parents thought, my loves lost, and all without answers. Just salt sticking to my index finger and thumb. I was in a city that felt both entirely mine and completely unanswerable.

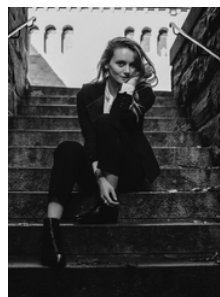
Lately, I think we've been requiring answers to things that are not meant to be answered. Or better put: out of our control.

Not every restaurant has to be dazzling and layered. Sometimes, it's the ones that do just one thing, and do it well, that hold you together. Sometimes brilliance is fried.

Even in downturns—economic or personal—fried things hold their post. I like to think of them as edible optimism. A golden ratio you can dip in Curry Ketchup or Thai Sweet Chili. The best ideas, I've found, occur rather close to starch and near oak park benches.

Go be gluttonous with someone who lets you ramble (with or without sauce and/or grease stains on your trousers). Because that's when true know-how shows up. That's when creativity sparks, when you think you're in a lull. It happens in the between, in the greasy cone, on the oak bench, and not a second before.

\*Padding, noun: self-soothing comfort food that absorbs life's uncertainty.



Rachel Harty is a Florida-born poet and New York City transplant. Her debut collection, *Coffee: A Sip of You and Me* (2024), pairs sharp wit with tender reflections on love, vulnerability, and becoming. Her work appears in *The Poetry Society of New York*, *Poetry Nation*, and elsewhere. Currently an MFA candidate at Columbia University's School of the Arts, she researches the peculiarities of meaning and builds on postmodernism one written line at a time. You can find her—coffee in hand—[rachelharty.com](http://rachelharty.com).

# ‘La Poesía de la Experiencia’ in Spain, from the 1990s to the present day

By Matthew Stewart

Literary terms and labels often shift in meaning over the years, and *La Poesía de la Experiencia* in Spain is a prime example. Its connotations have changed over the last thirty years with a focus on the evolution of two contemporaries, Luis García Montero (born in Granada in 1958) and Karmelo C. Iribarren (born in San Sebastián in 1959). Rather than invoking a changing of the generational guard, we'll now look at how the reputations of these two older poets have developed.

Back in the mid-90s, just like now, many poetry readings in Spain were followed by more than a few drinks at a nearby bar, where the audience would debate the relative worths of differing poetic schools. Among these discussions, a typical polemic would pitch supporters of the so-called *Novísimos* and their acolytes against the advocates for *La Poesía de la Experiencia*, a well-rehearsed argument in which everyone already knew their pre-assigned roles and in which tempers invariably frayed after four or five DYC-Colas. Even so, it made for great theatre!

The *Novísimos* were supposedly more anchored in a modernist tradition of taking a step back from everyday life in order to get to grips with it, while *La Poesía de la Experiencia* claimed to home in on the everyday and the mundane, an aesthetic that had only started to reach Spain via the *Generación del 50* and poets such as Ángel González and Jaime Gil de Biedma. However, all these labels might well have taken on unexpected overtones to any British reader once they actually approached the poems in question, as we'll see below

One such example was Luis García Montero, a poster boy for *La Poesía de la Experiencia*, whose famously struck pose was ‘con los cuellos alzados y fumando’. Many poetry aficionados in Spain were pretty sniffy about his work back in the 1990s, claiming that its apparent accessibility stripped it of intellectual rigour and depth. In that period, it was still surprising in Spain to encounter a poet with serious ambitions setting scenes such as the following from *Diario Cómplice*...

Bajo una lluvia fría de polígono,  
con un cielo drogado de tormenta  
y nubes de extrarradio.

Porque este amor de llaves prestados nos envuelve  
en una intimidad provisional,  
paredes que no hacen compañía  
y objetos como búhos en la sombra...

Nevertheless, beyond the concrete details of the scene, these lines are deeply anchored in a Spanish lyric tradition and embracing of abstract concepts such as an ‘intimidad provisional’. And then the title of the book itself constitutes a nod to Rafael Alberti, for instance. In fact, García Montero's poems are littered with allusion to the likes of Lorca, Cernuda and Machado. On many occasions, the reader has to unpick his literary references in order to reach the core of his poems. In this context, an Anglo-Saxon reader back in the 1990s had every right

to be slightly taken aback that García Montero's poetry were being labelled as *La Poesía de la Experiencia*, when it was laden with esoteric ramifications bubbling away under the surface.

At that same time, an unknown poet called Karmelo C. Iribarren was beginning to publish on the small press scene up in the Basque Country, far beyond the Spanish literary establishment. His poetic and vital points of reference are far more transatlantic than was usual in Iberia. The Beat poets are undoubtedly in the background when Iribarren writes of the back street bars of his home city, as in his poem *Compañeros de Viaje*...

Acaba de marcharse  
una mujer; una mujer  
de la que ni siquiera sé  
su nombre, a la que conocí  
anoche, en un bar, de camino  
hacia mi casa. Me ha dicho  
adiós, desde la puerta,  
con la mano, y ha desaparecido.  
así de fácil. Sin ningún  
aspaviento, sin carantoñas  
fuera de lugar. Como quien  
se despide de un compañero  
de viaje, con el que simple-  
mente le ha tocado viajar.

It's worth comparing these lines with García Montero's above-mentioned poem from *Diario Cómplice*. Iribarren's pared-back imagery and matter-of-fact tone root his writing in a *Poesía de la Experiencia* that's far more recognisable to Anglo-Saxon readers. But if certain Spanish critics looked down slightly on García Montero, they were ignoring Iribarren for all they were worth.

Which begs the question: what happened to bring Iribarren to the forefront of poetry in Spain? Well, beyond his growing focus on his own work and its possibilities, the internet happened. Social media took off. Iribarren's poems attracted readers who thought poetry wasn't for them. He might have been approaching middle age, but his poetry suddenly became a viral success, shared widely on a whole gamut of platforms. Of course, those critics were still yapping away in the background, but the sales of his books were going through the roof. Bigger publishers became involved. And now, today, it's plausible to suggest that both García Montero and Iribarren are equally major figures in Spanish poetry.

The journeys of the two contemporaries have been completely different, of course, but their influence on younger generations of poets is undeniable. Especially in the case of Iribarren. He's one of the first renowned poets in Spain to have taken American influences and twisted them into a completely Spanish vision, but numerous poets are now following in his footsteps. And the meaning of *La Poesía de la Experiencia* has changed forever.

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.

# Decline, and the struggle against it, seem to begin earlier and earlier: what does that mean for love?

Halina Reijn, J.M. Coetzee, and Miranda July explore the right to desire, and the right to be desired. But, Arnon Grunberg wonders, if that becomes increasingly difficult, what is plan B?

Love should be more than a practical matter, but what is that 'more'? The Italian writer Natalia Ginzburg (1916-1991) captures this beautifully in her collection *The Little Virtues*: "The problem of our relationships with other human beings lies at the center of our life: as soon as we become aware of this—that is, as soon as we clearly see it as a problem and no longer as the muddle of unhappiness, we start to look for its origins, and to reconstruct its course throughout our whole life."

She adds: "In which house in the city, at which point on the planet does the right person for us live, the one similar to us in every regard, ready to respond to our every question, listen to us forever without getting bored, smile at our faults, and enjoy looking at our face forever?" And then she concludes: "And we leave home and go to live with this person forever; not because we are sure that he is the right person: in fact we are not entirely sure, and we always suspect that the right person for us is hiding away goodness knows where in the city." You would like to keep waiting, but time is pressing.

## The Struggle Against Decline

In Germany, a book by literary critic Elke Heidenreich (81), with the subtitle *Everyone wants to live an old age - yet no one wants to be old. Is it not absurd?*, has been on Der Spiegel's bestseller list for 37 weeks. It perfectly captures the dilemma. Growing old? Yes. Being old? No, thank you.

Love and aging are often linked: the right person is the one you grow old with—that is the ideal. But with aging comes decline, and as people grow older—in most parts of the world life expectancy has risen dramatically in a relatively short time—the decline and the struggle against it seem to begin earlier and earlier. What does that mean for love?

## Feigning Pleasure

The much-discussed film *Babygirl* by the Dutch filmmaker Halina Reijn, 49, begins with a sex scene between a married couple, both well into their fifties. Nicole Kidman runs to her laptop after a faked orgasm, watches some porn with a touch of BDSM, and then climaxes for real.

What's interesting is the premise underlying this scene, the source of its provocation: orgasms should happen with your partner, not alone while watching porn.

Perhaps we have focused too much on the difference between men and women and their respective orgasms, much like the average outspoken citizen believes the difference between a Jew and a Muslim is as vast as that between Venus and Mars. Yet, to quote Shylock: "If you prick us, do we not bleed?"

Anyone who, like me, has seen the film twice cannot shake the impression that Kidman's husband, Antonio Banderas, is also faking it. He feigns excitement, he feigns pleasure, he remains a sex symbol in the twilight of his body, willing to play the role of the good husband. And in this context, there is only one way to play goodness: bloodlessly. Marriage as a lovemaking scene overcoached by an intimacy coordinator with a bit too much enthusiasm.

Thus, this opening scene is not so much about the female versus the male orgasm, but rather about the validity of marriage. Romantic validity: expired. Aesthetic validity: a matter of pretense. The hell and salvation of bourgeois desire—the image must be just right, if not for us, then at least for the neighbors.

## Staying young without being young

*Babygirl* has been analyzed through a feminist lens in various newspapers. Did it live to the expectations that this was a truly feminist movie? We should not judge art by ideological standards. Yes, half a century ago, some Western intellectuals fought against so-called bourgeois art in the name of the workers' paradise east of Berlin. In the name of which paradise is the feminist yardstick now being applied?

The American critic Andrea Long Chu wrote that each generation of feminists will be more disappointed in the previous one. Perhaps in the name of youth.

If *Babygirl* is about anything, it is about the question of how to stay young without actually being young anymore. The protagonist's daughter says to her mother: "You look like a dead fish." How do you defend yourself against a line like that—arguably the crux of the film—without losing your dignity? That proves to be complicated. The all-too-understandable battle against the double chin, the wrinkle, the sagging flesh has its side effects.

And undoubtedly, there are advantages to dying before you grow old. If Jesus had been crucified as an 80-year-old man, Christianity would never have amounted to much. Looks matter, even if you believe that it should be what's inside that truly matters. And although Christianity has clung—rightfully—to human suffering, its vanguard has always been the awareness that even the suffering human remains sensitive to beauty, even though Protestants tried to replace the beauty of the image with that of the word.

In that sense, the premise of *Babygirl's* opening scene seems Protestant to me—at the very least, a Christian premise. Orgasming alone while watching porn? Pathetic. The modern version of sinful.

## Mirror Image of Babygirl

J.M. Coetzee puts it this way in his 2005 novel *Slow Man*—he was in his early sixties at the time:

"Why does love, even such love as he claims to practice, need the spectacle of beauty to bring it to life? What, in the abstract, do shapely legs have to do with love, or for that matter, with desire?"

*Slow Man* is a kind of mirror image of *Babygirl*: a 60-year-old photographer is hit by a car while cycling, his leg must be amputated, and he falls in love with his caregiver. A dead fish, a missing leg—decline takes many forms.

Kidman plays Romy, director of a large company that aims to replace redundant human labor with increasingly advanced robots. She feels attracted to a young male intern, excellently played by Harris Dickinson. Maybe she even falls in love with him. If you sleep with somebody, all bets are off.

As the film progresses, he becomes more and more attractive—he is sexy, he is the answer to Coetzee's question of why love needs beauty to come alive: because that's simply the way it is.

He grins with the confidence of those who, late at night, still believe in their own invincibility. And he wields his beauty sovereignly, just as Kidman sovereignly runs her company.

Coetzee's photographer falls in love in an "inappropriate" way. His caregiver is not only much younger—which might still be manageable—but she also has two children and a husband.

She is taken, but the often inappropriate passion has never cared much for such details.





#### Safeword in the BDSM Game

Much has been written about the mild BDSM play between Kidman and Dickinson, but that game is a mere detour—not even a particularly interesting one. The most intriguing aspect is the safeword that ends the playing: *Jacob*. The name of her husband, the name of Antonio Banderas in this film. With that name, the game stops—on the other side of the affair, Antonio Banderas is waiting for his wife.

Reijn, however bold she may be, adheres neatly to Hollywood conventions. The bourgeois dream may be tested but must not be shattered - this isn't a Lars von Trier film. And yet—poor Banderas, poor husband—is reduced to a safeword in his wife's mild BDSM play.

That does not take away from the fact that the spectacle of Kidman and Dickinson is, at times, sublime. For the teenage daughter, Kidman looks like a dead fish; for Dickinson, her body is paradise. Or half a paradise, because he, too, has someone else. Sex and desire as the last meal of the condemned.

#### Menopause Novel

All of literature, all of cinema, tirelessly tells us that there is only one way to give away your heart: the inappropriate way. And yes, why should we, why should Antonio Banderas, want to play the know-it-all? But *Babygirl* seems to take it even further. The dead fish does not just want to give her heart away; the dead fish wants to be desired. Love must be mutual, no, not love, desire. No, more than mutual, Kidman would rather be desired than desire herself.

Miranda July (50) expresses this just as well in her novel *All Fours*. "This was my first experience of being too old. I had not always gotten exactly what I had wanted - men had been unwilling to leave their wives for me or to do more than flirt - but even in these humbling cases I hadn't questioned my right to feel desire."

The right to desire is the right to be desired. The narrator is a 45-year-old woman, a self-described minor celebrity, with a husband and a non-binary child. Because the word menopause appears in the novel, it has been labeled a "menopause novel." Incorrectly so.

The rise of medical jargon—diagnosis as an explanation for everything and as a cornerstone of identity—is a stab to the heart of both art and humanity.

#### Price Tag

The middle-aged woman gives her heart to a young man who works for the Hertz car rental company and who, in my imagination, looks exactly like Harris Dickinson. Falling in love sounds archaic, but I believe that is the right word. "I alternated between masturbating and cleaning," the narrator says. Hoping to better seduce her love interest, she goes to a fitness trainer because she wants to get back the shape she once had. ("I described the butt in my mind's eye I envisioned and he nodded seriously.")

Yes, Jesus has the right to be desired, but wherever people start demanding rights, there is usually a price tag attached—this time, in the form of a gym membership. Perhaps a new iconoclasm will make us realize that the word 'butt' itself is already beautiful enough.

#### Life is Trembling

The love between the half-celebrity and the Hertz boy is never fully consummated, despite the improved ass. But there is another older woman, a friend of the Hertz boy's mother, who initiated him into love. Well, into sex. The Hertz boy's mother thought: I'll organize his *L'éducation sentimentale* myself.

In that regard, Miranda July is less conventional than Reijn. Kidman's Plan B is Antonio Banderas. In July's case, Plan B is the first lover of the true love interest. And that results in sex that could never be mistaken for that of a dead fish:

"I inhaled my fingers, her warm, buttery cunt smell, and kept them under my nose as I walked." And shortly after:

"Forty-five minutes later I was still walking. I no longer wanted to fuck everyone in the entire world— that was lunacy, haha! — now I wanted to eat the whole world like a giant fruit."

Long before death strikes, the right to be desired threatens to become a merely theoretical right. That realization makes the shudder of pleasure—see July, see Reijn, see Coetzee—urgent and intense. Life is trembling.

And after that? Plan B. Plan C. Ginzburg already knew: the right person is the almost-right person, the no-longer-right person, the soon-to-be-right-again person. Or as a New Yorker cartoon put it:

"He is not Mr. Right, he is Mr. Now."

We just need to agree on the safeword.



Arnon Grunberg (1971) - photo by Sander Voerman - is a Dutch author of novels, essays, reports, and columns. He lives and works in New York and Amsterdam. Grunberg grew up in a Jewish family in Amsterdam. His parents were Holocaust survivors, a theme that frequently recurs in his work. In 1994, at the age of 23, he made his breakthrough with his debut novel *Blue Mondays*, a partly autobiographical story about a boy growing up in Amsterdam trying to escape his surroundings. The book was a major success and won several awards. In 2006, he reached a wider audience with his novel *Tirza*. The book became an international success and sold over 300,000 copies in the Netherlands alone.

Grunberg is one of the most prolific writers in the Netherlands, and his work has been translated into 31 languages. In addition to novels, short stories, plays, and essays, he also writes various journalistic reports, often immersing himself in different worlds. In 2023, he wrote a non-fiction book about refugees and the functioning of borders, for which he traveled through Poland, Ukraine, and Georgia, and accompanied the immigration service. His work has been awarded major lifetime achievement prizes, including the P.C. Hooft Award and the Johannes Vermeer Award.



# What Am I Writing Here: Lessons from Bruce Chatwin

As an aspiring writer, **Christopher Walker** counts Bruce Chatwin as one of his primary influences. Here he shares what he's learnt from re-reading Chatwin's books this year.

The most voracious readers often find their way into writing: reading is our apprenticeship. Bruce Chatwin read widely; Robert Byron's *The Road to Oxiana* was his self-declared Bible; he loved Osip Mandelstam so much that he put the name into the mouth of one of his chance acquaintances in *In Patagonia*.

Chatwin was born in 1940 and died tragically young of AIDS in 1989. His writing career spanned a fraction of his life, with his first novel, *In Patagonia*, coming out in 1977 and his last, a collection of essays called *What Am I Doing Here* (a reference to Rimbaud) appearing in the year that he died. In all, he wrote three novels and two travel books – though he might not himself have divided his work between fiction and non-fiction – as well as a wealth of shorter pieces.

Considering that for much of this time Chatwin was ill with the disease that would eventually kill him, it is astonishing that he produced so much and that it was all so good. This is his first lesson: live and write and do it all now because you don't know what tomorrow will bring.

Chatwin was not universally strong as a writer. His dialogue, such as moments in *The Songlines*, cause a slight wince. But he had Cartier-Bresson's eye for the decisive moment and could both select and recall telling details. These add a remarkable depth and substance to his work, and were, I believe, born of his pre-writing career at Sotheby's art auction house. Chatwin was so keen an observer that you can open his work at random and find an example. Here he is describing a scene in *The Volga*, one of the standout pieces of travel writing included in *What Am I Doing Here*. Chatwin has joined a boat trip down the famous river, and in Lenin's home town of Ulyanovsk, he visits the house of Lenin's parents, a school inspector and his wife:

"She was a devout Lutheran of Vloga-German descent; and in her orderly house – with its bent-wood chairs, its painted floors, antimacassars, flounced net curtains, piano, wallpaper of daisies, and map of Russia on the dining-room wall – you felt the puritanical, not to say pedagogic, atmosphere of Lenin's own quarters in the Moscow Kremlin."

No better picture could be drawn of that house, or what the accumulation of details meant to the observer. All writers would be advised to use the training of their other lives – and all of us have such other lives – in their writing.

The phrase 'target audience' is the death-knell of creativity. Books that are written to satisfy a demographic never last. You can see that in Chatwin best of all. Chatwin was passionately nomadic. The wandering spirit is a thread that courses through all of his writing; it is the fuel for his engine. Today, a book like *In Patagonia* could be written by fluke and then the writer would find themselves trapped by its success (if we can even speak of successful writers in the age of social media). That writer would have typecast themselves as a writer of books like *In Patagonia*.

But look at Chatwin. After this first success, he attempted a biography of a Dahomey slaver from Brazil that would become the novel *The Viceroy of Ouidah*. In researching the story, Chatwin was caught up in the 1977 attempted coup of Benin, which he wrote about for *Granta*. After that came *On the Black Hill*, set in Wales, and then Chatwin found himself in Australia continuing his research into the nomadic spirit.

*The Songlines* was a labour of love, combining travelogue with long sections devoted to Chatwin's thoughts about what makes man such a restless creature.



And then, shortly before his death, came *Utz*, about a collector of porcelain living under the Communists in Czechoslovakia. Such variety! And yet Chatwin's passion is always tangible. It is what made him as a writer and it is what should make us as writers, too: the passion we feel in our heart should be held up to the light like a gem and explored from every possible angle.

Two of the three out-and-out novels of Chatwin's, *The Viceroy of Ouidah* and *On the Black Hill*, open the same way. They place us near the end of the story and then Chatwin presses rewind, casting back as much as a hundred years to show how we got to where the story begins. But despite there being only two years between the novels, there is something far more mature and intelligent about what Chatwin is doing in *On the Black Hill*.

The story concerns the twins Lewis and Benjamin Jones, who live their entire lives on a farm in the borderlands between England and Wales. Chatwin, a nomadic spirit who lived his life on the move, writes against type here, or rather he sets one kind of life against the other. There are elements of Cain and Abel, of the farmer and the shepherd, of the conservative tied to their land and the free man looking over the horizon. But what Chatwin does in the opening chapter is a slice of genius, as he shows us the twins at eighty, on their farm, in a world that has remained as frozen as Miss Havisham's in *Great Expectations*.

First impressions matter, and for the remaining 240 pages we see the twins as we saw them in that initial chapter. Our preconceptions are conservative. There is nothing unnatural about staying where you are, of living out your life in one place. The upsets and fractures that occur along the way have the power to shock because, even though we know they must come, we feel just as unprepared to deal with them as the twins do. This is a brilliant lesson: use your first chapter to set the reader's mindset and then do what you will with it afterwards.

Not everything that Chatwin wrote will stand the test of time. But he was a magnificent writer in many respects, and I feel I am a better writer – maybe even a better person – for having studied his work so closely. I recommend others do the same.

Christopher Walker is a writer and English teacher based in Poland. His most successful book is a guide to English grammar called "English is a Simple Language", though he tends to write stories to entertain his daughters these days, including "Try the Best You Can" and "The Four Queens".

# The Unchained Century:

## Si la República hubiera vencido la guerra civil española

Por Cristina Jurado

*Nuestra imaginación radical es una herramienta descolonizadora, que nos permite reclamar nuestro derecho a modelar la realidad en la que vivimos*

Adrienne Maree Brown (1)

Si hay un rasgo que identifique a la ficción especulativa es, sin duda, su naturaleza contrafactual, entendida como esa capacidad para responder a la pregunta “qué sucedería si...” de formas creativas y, a menudo, sorprendentes. Tal vez uno de los géneros en los que esta capacidad sea más visible sea la ucronía, también conocida como historia alternativa o *allohistoria* (el prefijo griego allo- significa “otro” o “diferente”). En realidad es un concepto bastante moderno: el término se acuña en 1876 cuando Charles Renouvier publica su obra *Uchronie, l'utopie dans l'histoire*, un ejercicio filosófico para examinar la historia de la civilización europea. Ya avanzado el siglo XX es cuando gana popularidad como género literario en el ámbito de la ficción con obras como *El hombre en el castillo* (1962) de Phillip K. Dick o *La conjura contra América* (2004) de Phillip Roth.

Por eso, cuando hace poco más de un año el autor e ilustrador colombiano Luis Carlos Barragán me invitó a participar en una iniciativa ucrónica internacional, me lancé de cabeza. Otros compañeros de Estados Unidos, Argentina y Haití ya estaban trabajando en ella pero buscaban a alguien de España que tuviera interés por sumarse. «¿De qué se trata?» pregunté. Luis Carlos me habló entonces de Syllble Studios, la productora colaborativa dedicada a la creación de mundos que acoge este proyecto. La idea que propone Syllble es muy simple y poderosa al mismo tiempo: reunir autores y autoras para que desarrollen mundos ficcionales compartidos desde los que generar historias de ciencia ficción y/o fantasía. Desde su fundación en 2018, su objetivo ha sido poner en contacto diferentes culturas, tradiciones y perspectivas del pasado, presente y el futuro para imaginar nuevas realidades alejadas de las tradicionales visiones coloniales y heteropatriarcales.

Cuando Luis Carlos me explicó con más detenimiento la premisa desde la que el grupo de trabajo partía, no pude dejar de pensar en la cantidad de posibilidades ficcionales que se abrían ante mí. Se trataba de imaginar qué habría sucedido en la historia de la humanidad si el bando republicano y no el nacional hubiera vencido en la guerra civil española. Desde ese momento, me uní a él y a un grupo de intrépidos autores de varios países: Fabrice Guerrier, artista multidisciplinar haitiano-norteamericano y uno de los fundadores de Syllble Studios; Alex Wallace autor, editor y reseñador norteamericano de origen filipino e impulsor del proyecto; Paz Pardo autora, traductora y correctora argentino-norteamericana; y Arturo Serrano autor, reseñador y traductor colombiano.

La idea partió de Alex Wallace: «Me interesé por la guerra civil española después de encontrar la obra *The Spanish Holocaust* de Paul Preston en una biblioteca local y, desde ese momento, me obsesioné con ese tema. La Segunda República es un periodo en el que ocurrieron toda clase de cosas extrañas e interesantes y gran parte de ello podría haber tomado direcciones interesantes si Franco no hubiera acabado con tanta gente.» Lo siguiente fue organizar una videollamada con Fabrice Guerrier y Arturo Serrano, y el proyecto se puso en marcha.



Una vez reunidos todos los participantes, bautizamos nuestro universo como «The Unchained Century», nombre del movimiento de solidaridad internacional, interracial y de la clase trabajadora que imaginamos, y que se convertiría en la fuerza motriz capaz de detener al fascismo en nuestro mundo alternativo. De esta forma, íbamos a transformar el siglo XX al asegurarnos de que fueran los pueblos—y no los imperios—quienes vencieran a la opresión y a la tiranía. Con el poder de Franco debilitado y el movimiento independentista marroquí ganando impulso, los avances ideológicos y tecnológicos se irían sucediendo con un efecto dominó que precipitaría el cambio de la sociedad en todo el mundo, desde América Latina y África hasta el Lejano Oriente.

Coincidió con el filósofo y comunicador Tobias Van Veen en que, a veces, la mejor manera de reimaginar el futuro es alterando el pasado. El propio Van Veen apunta que «insertar una contranarrativa en la constitución del pasado libera las trayectorias de una futuridad impredecible (2)». De este modo, y en palabras de Luis Carlos Barragán, «The Unchained Century» actuaría como «un conjuro sobre la oscuridad del pasado y presente, en los que ninguna forma de gobierno o sistema económico ha conseguido imponerse a la codicia del capitalismo y tecno-feudalismo». El propio Fabrice Guerrier señala que, en este proyecto, agencia e imaginación se dan la mano como herramientas radicales que permiten reclamar un papel activo a la hora de dar sentido y forma al curso de la historia.

Además, cualquier proyecto de historia alternativa nos recuerda, como señala Paz Pardo, que «lo “inevitable” es un constructo, ya que la historia está siempre en proceso de escribirse y, por ello, se puede cambiar la dirección hacia la que va el mundo». Por su parte, Arturo Serrano reconoce que la historia alternativa combina las infinitas posibilidades de la ficción especulativa con la eficacia estructural que aporta la escritura basada en ciertas restricciones. Los participantes han propuesto historias siguiendo las reglas de este universo alternativo creadas por consenso a través de reuniones semanales que se han prolongado durante más de un año. En esta realidad Marruecos pasaría a llamarse la República del Riff y se independizaría del tutelaje de España y Francia, acelerando la descolonización primero en África y luego en el resto del mundo. La segunda guerra mundial no tendría lugar, aunque se sucederían conflictos localizados en Europa entre fuerzas fascistas y sus oponentes, y un nuevo orden mundial se vería reflejado en avances

tecnológicos, científicos, económicos, sociales e incluso políticos que dibujarían un mapa bastante distinto al actual. Una parte fundamental se centra en la cultura en la que el poliglotismo y la traducción jugarían un papel central, favoreciendo su estudio en centros dedicados a la enseñanza, traducción y producción políglota y evitando que un solo idioma fuese considerado lengua franca.

Los cuentos que nos transportan al universo «The Unchained Century», y que verán la luz en una antología del mismo título, profundizan en temas como los desafíos a los que se enfrentarían los valorados traductores, los ataques desesperados de los nacionalistas tras la victoria de la República, la posibilidad de que Lorca y Buñuel rivalizaran por un mismo proyecto cinematográfico, la cualidad sanadora de los recuerdos de una argentina miembro de las Brigadas Internacionales, la visita de Frida Kahlo a París en un momento de máxima efervescencia artística y filosófica, o las posibilidades de que ideas anarco-islamistas fueran aplicadas en la construcción de la República del Riff.

Pero esta iniciativa no alcanzará toda su potencialidad hasta que nuevos autores intervengan con sus propias propuestas narrativas para (re)construir un pasado que proyecte las reflexiones que el presente genera a todos los niveles. Por ello este artículo también quiere hacer un llamamiento para quienes estén interesados en construir una realidad paralela a la que nos ha tocado vivir, una en la que, sólo tal vez, los sistemas opresores son aplastados y surgen nuevas maneras de convivir, más justas e igualitarias.

## Historia Alternativa: Novelas Recomendadas

Para quienes estén interesados en la historia alternativa, los actuales miembros del proyecto «The Unchained Century» proponen:

Luis Carlos Barragán: *Tiempos de Arroz y Sal* de Kim Stanley Robinson

Fabrice Guerrier: *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* de Susanna Clarke

Cristina Jurado: *Danza de Tinieblas* de Eduardo Vaquerizo

Paz Pardo: *The Intuitionist* de Colson Whitehead

Arturo Serrano: *The Future of Another Timeline* de Annalee Newitz

Alex Wallace: *To Climates Unknown* de Arturo Serrano

(1) Brown, Adrienne Maree (2019): *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*. AK Press.

(2) Van Veen, Tobias C. (2016): «*The Armageddon Effect. Afrofuturism and the Chronopolitics of Alien Nation*» en *Afrofuturism 2.0.*, Lexington Books.

# Absent Soul: Translating Lorca

by Jacqueline d'Amboise

It was during my time as the Director of the Literary Translation Program in the Department of Creative Writing at The University of British Columbia, that I received a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to go to Spain and begin my translations of the poems of Federico García Lorca.

I had for a few years been studying flamenco dancing under Claudia Carolina in Toronto where I performed a reading of *Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías* accompanied by flamenco guitarists.

Enchanted as well by the films made by Carlos Saura, who was initially inspired by Compañía Antonio Gades' production of Lorca's *Bodas de sangre*, I felt that had Lorca been able to witness these great flamenco artists he would certainly have seen and heard his ideas of "duende" in action. I had also recently read the great Hispanist Ian Gibson's *The Death of Lorca*.

Totally enraptured, I could hardly believe that by that time, in the summer of 1984, only a small selection of Lorca's poems had been translated and published in English. Prodded on by a voice inside me, I decided that I was going to translate the whole of Lorca's poetic opus beginning with his first collection, *Libro de poemas*, published in 1921.

Upon arriving in Madrid, on my way to Granada, I reached out to Gibson, the ultimate authority on the life and works of Lorca, who wrote his definitive biography of the poet in two volumes titled *Federico García Lorca*. I will never forget his kindness and generosity: not only did he help me get a library card at the Bibliotheca Nacional, where a few years later I spent the winter researching Lorca and working on my translation, but he helped me secure permission from the Lorca family to begin translating *Libro de poemas*.

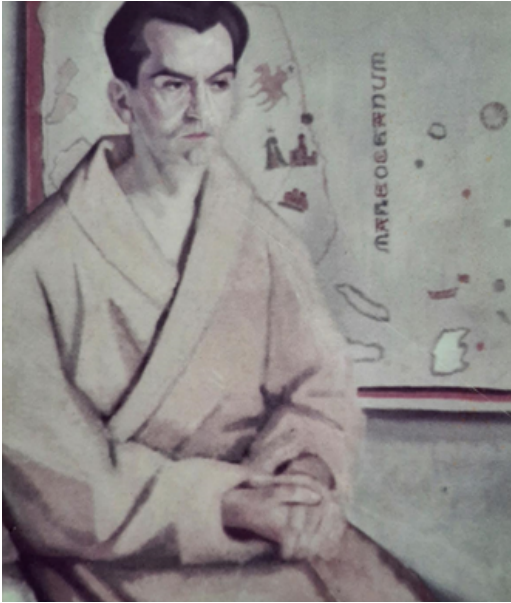
I spent two months in the cool refuges of La Biblioteca de la Universidad de Granada translating from Gibson's edition of *Libro de poemas*. It was July and the average temperature in Granada then was 42°C. And so began my long relationship with Lorca's work.

One day in Granada, I walked the path to Lorca's home, the Huerta de San Vicente. It is now a museum, but in 1984, when I was there, it was still in use by the family. Unaware of this, but hopeful of seeing someone who might be able to speak with me about Lorca, I knocked at the door. An older gentleman, almost certainly the caretaker and groundskeeper who looked after the place when no one was there, told me that the family was away. I then experienced more kindness: I asked him if I could see Federico's study and he took me on a tour of the house. He even allowed me to sit at Lorca's desk for a time.

I remember being moved to tears, by the simple fact of just being in the same room where Lorca had written some of his poems, where he had slept and taken meals. I thanked the caretaker profusely and asked him if I could take a photo. The photo of Lorca accompanying this article was taken in his room. (It was pointed out to me recently that a photo of this painting, although not as faded as is mine taken some 30 years ago, was used for the cover of Ian Gibson's book *Federico García Lorca: De Nueva York a Fuente Grande*).

Translating Lorca is no easy task, not least because of his precise, yet highly allusive, often mystical imagery. He reminds me of Dylan Thomas, in that way, although the Welsh poet was not the surrealist Lorca was.





His poems embody a tension between freedom and formal aesthetics that was—and is—vanishingly rare in modern poetry. I believe that this tension may owe to his fascination with the theme of spellbinding love that refuses containment, becoming intertwined in the inevitable implacability of death. It is this fascination that renders so much of his poetry beautiful to the point of sublimity—but also tragic.

More practically, the Lorca revealed in his poems left me deeply curious, not only about his Granada, but also about his experiences with the gypsy culture of Sacromonte and with flamenco music. My love affair with Lorca's poetry almost certainly began when I first read *Romancero Gitano*. His interest in gitanos or gypsies brought me to the world of Flamenco. For me they are complementary.

This poet, who seemed to be a very private man, inspired a nation and continues to inspire the literary world. The circumstances surrounding his death are rife with mystery and conjecture not only about his political leanings but also about his sexuality.

So many people write about Lorca's death, still to this day. His is a famous story of murder. But what is important about Federico García Lorca is his life, not his death...his life and his work.

I hope that my translations can be a catalyst for those readers who are unfamiliar with the poems of Federico García Lorca to delve into his work and discover the man and the poet who is certainly the most important poet of 20th century Spain.

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

## THE GUITAR

*La Guitarra*

*Poema de la Sigüiriya Gitana*

(*Poema del Cante Jondo*, 1921)

A Carlos Morla Vicuña

The guitar begins  
its lament.  
Dawn's wine glasses  
shatter.  
The guitar begins  
its lament.  
It's impossible to stop it.  
It cannot  
be silenced.  
It weeps  
in a monotone,  
the way water weeps,  
the way the wind cries  
over the falling snow.  
It cannot be silenced.  
It laments for  
far away things.  
The hot southern sands  
clamouring for white camellias.  
Its laments are a targetless arrow,  
an evening with no morning,  
and the first dead bird  
on the branch  
Oh guitar!  
Your heart fatally wounded  
by five swords.

## IF MY HANDS COULD PEEL THE PETALS

*Si Mis Manos Pudieran Deshojar*

(*Libro de poemas*, 1921)

November 10, 1919 (Granada)

I utter your name  
On shadowy nights  
When the stars come  
To drink from the moon  
And branches  
Of hidden foliage sleep.  
Then I feel hollow,  
Passionless, musicless.  
Crazy clock that chimes  
Dead ancient hours.

I utter your name  
On this shadowy night,  
And your name echoes back  
More distant than ever.  
Farther away than all the stars,  
more doleful than the gentle rain.

Shall I love you again  
As I once did?  
Is my heart to blame?  
If the fog evanesces  
What other passion awaits me?  
Will it be tranquil and pure?  
If only my fingers could  
Peel the petals off the moon.

# the art of arch hades

"If you buy a piece of mine, you buy a memory," says Arch Hades, an artist and poet from London. In 2021, Arch became the highest-paid living poet in the world. Over the last four years, Arch has concentrated on fine art after her inaugural exhibition opened at Ladbroke Hall in London in November 2024. Represented by LICHT FELD Gallery in Basel, Switzerland, her artwork is be showcased in London from the 12th September until in the end of December and she'll be holding an exhibition in Venice during the time of the Biennale in 2026. Here she talks us through some of her work. "In painting we're always trying to express our feelings, to draw from reality and our own lens of experience and we're hoping to express ourselves in a way that feels true to us," she says. "You always hope what you do has some kind of universal resonance."



'MONTANA', 2025

120 X 90 CM

**Montana** is pretty straightforward because a lot of what I paint is figurative stuff, the stuff that is going into exhibitions at the moment. This one is also going to be my opener for the London show in September this year.

It's very much a way for me to basically serve my family and create some kind of beauty out of some special memories of mine. If you buy a piece of mine, you buy a memory.

One of my relatives owns a ranch up in Montana. The first time I went there was in 2018, before the pandemic - it seems a lifetime away now.

Sometimes, at dawn and dusk, I'd go with a wrangler and we'd ride our horses out. We had two horses.

They were called Blue and Cool, which is why I really wanted to paint the horses loose. So this is really a tribute to the absolutely amazing time and memory I had there with Blue and Cool with this growing, open sky.

It's a very warm memory because riding out into the sunset honestly felt like freedom. Yeah, the air filled with the smell of huckleberries and the grass growing stirrup high, it was such a sensational feeling that I just wanted to pay tribute to it by putting it down onto canvas.

What was so special is that our horses were best friends - because I didn't know horses have best friends.

Cows also have best friends.



I would love for the audience, for the viewer to kind of have their own relationship with this one. I even wanted to name it **Pair** because I wanted an open-ended relationship between the two characters.

Are they friends? Are they lovers? Is that mother and daughter, sister and brother? What can a 'pair' be? So I'm actually quite keen for the viewer to form their own thoughts and ideas and reflections.

I'm averse to painting human faces. I don't try to do that too much. So I wanted to exaggerate this pair. To look at them they are humanoid but there's also an alien element.



'PAIR', 2024

120 X 90 CM

The inspiration behind **The Sea, the sea** was a poem from my fifth poetry collection, *21C Human*. I really wanted to express a little pain.

It comes from memory as well. Sometimes a memory is painful and it just is, and you cannot rewrite it no matter how much you want to go back and turn it into a different kind of fiction. You just can't.

One of my friends has a habit of saying that every time you look at the ocean, the person you think about is the person you love most; the person you miss most. That's why I really wanted to paint this with a solitary figure looking out onto the sea.

The figure has a grayscale kind of tone and is very flat, almost two-dimensional. I didn't want to make them too human. I wanted to make them almost look like an angel, or a ghost of an angel, or like, you know, some kind of spirit. Whilst the wall, I really wanted to capture in a very vibrant, very crimson colour to emphasise emotion.

Could it be another person that they're specifically missing? Yearning after? Or are they mourning the loss of themselves in a way? Is the mask their own or someone else's?



'THE SEA, THE SEA', 2025

120 X 90 CM



Again, **Angels and bulls** is a tribute to our world, because the more we learn about animals, trees, flora and everything around us, about our environment, the more we understand that there's so much more to our shared humanity. There are all these other relationships and interactions and there's so much depth and compassion to all these creatures and life around us. And as horses have best friends, and how that is so moving, I really wanted to paint all these creatures in pairs.

I have a lot of compassion for the animal world and if there's anything I can do to preserve it, I will. In a way I guess I'm trying to do that through my art as well.



'ANGELS AND BULLS' 2025

120 X 90 CM

I guess part of it was me thinking that even though this is **my first self-portrait**, I didn't want to centre myself in it. So I'm there, in the background, and as the blue sort of scrapes into the grey sweater I'm wearing, it's me dissolving into the background.

I live in the countryside and I've made a lot of friends **with crows**. I've been feeding them regularly over the course of the past two years and so now I have a special murder that follows me around every single time I take my dog out. It's so lovely to be greeted by these creatures every single day.

I borrowed the two in the painting from Norse mythology. Even though I'm named after the Greek god of the Underworld, I borrow a lot more from Norse mythology. Greek mythology in general I sometimes find quite problematic. In a lot of stories it's often women getting punished for the shortcomings of men, so I don't love that.

In Norse mythology there are a pair of ravens that are closely associated with Odin. Every morning, Odin lets out his ravens and they fly all over the world and report back with any kinds of news to Odin, so it's a way for him to connect to the world through nature, through crows, and I really love that element of the myth. Because I have my own special relationships with the crows around here, I really wanted to include them.

'WITH CROWS', 2025

120 X 90 CM



# 25 Bestsellers in 25 Years

Adele Parks says,  
“I can’t quite believe it’s happened!”

“I consider myself an entertainer,” best selling British author Adele Parks says. “I like the fact that I take people out of their lives and out of themselves for short periods of time.”

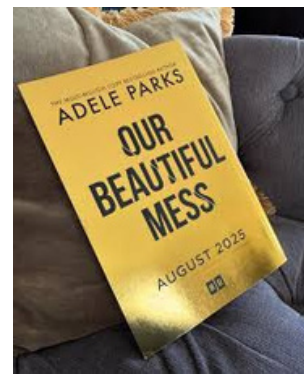
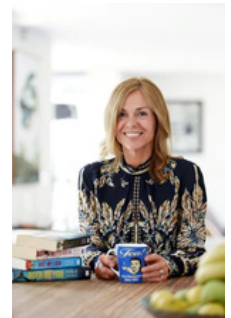
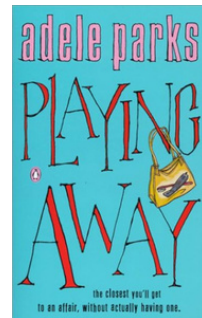
Parks is the author of many bestselling novels including the recent Sunday Times Number One hits *Lies, Lies, Lies*, *Just My Luck* and *First Wife’s Shadow*. Over five million English editions of her work have been sold and her books have been translated into 31 different languages. In August she reaches another milestone. “This is literally the 25th year I’ve been doing this. So 25 books, 25 years. I can’t quite believe it’s happened!”

One reason for Parks’ success, apart from her wicked talent for seasoning her books with delicious suspense, great characters and a constant, malingering sense of doubt and trepidation, is her work ethic. The week we meet she’s on a national tour of bookshops for the excellent *First Wife’s Shadow*, is ready to speak to a book club in Malaga after speaking to me, and is preparing to head down to the London Book Fair where she is a keynote speaker. She also has a strong social media presence and writes journalism for The Times, The Guardian and The Telegraph.

“You know, when I wrote *Playing Away*, my first book, my job was just to write the book. When it was launched, I think I did maybe two interviews. I did one or two events because there wasn’t the appetite or the expectation from the readers. Readers just went into book shops and made their selection.

“I think the invention of social media partly changed that. If you’re on social media, you become available. There isn’t such a gap between reader and author as they used to be. Readers feel a connection and they want to meet you. I do enjoy the events. I like talking to readers. I like that connection because a lot of the other time as a writer you spend on your own.

“But my goodness, now my division of time, instead of being 99% writing and 1% promotion, is 40% writing the book, 35% promotion and 25% what I’d call ‘admin’, things like contracts and getting from A to B. It’s a big commitment because it’s a super busy market out there. There are so many more books being published these days than there were when I started.



The many faces of the hardest-working woman in books today, Adele Parks. From her first novel, *Playing Away*, to *Our Beautiful Mess*, which features the same main character. *First Wife’s Shadow* was a bestseller this year. Adele also works an ambassador of the National Literacy Trust and the Reading Agency - seen here with Queen Camilla of the United Kingdom.



"I've done tricks to kind of keep myself interested. I've changed genres, you know. I set off in romantic comedy. I wrote some family dramas. I've written historical fiction. Then I wrote psychological thrillers. There's a dark family drama coming and that's part of keeping me fresh. It's part of keeping my readers fresh. I'm not delivering them the same thing over and over again. I think the events keep me fresh as well."

As well as being a full-time writer, Adele is an ambassador of the National Literacy Trust and the Reading Agency: two charities that promote literacy in the UK. In 2022 she was awarded an MBE for services to literature. "I care about the country I'm in and the kids that aren't reading," she says. "I know they're not going to read me. Well, they might read me 22 years down the line, but I'm just trying to get them to read."

"I genuinely believe in reading. Obviously it improves our education. Anyone who reads has a base of vocabulary to work with, a wider vocabulary. You can express yourself better if you have the tools to articulate yourself and communicate what you want to get over."

"It really is so important. More than sales. I love the sales I get. I love the chart positions, all that side of it, but I know that the most important thing I can do now that I have a voice is to stand on this soapbox shouting about literacy levels. I want to fundraise to get books in libraries. I want to try to level up our country, to try and give people who are born with fewer opportunities more opportunities."

We talk about the wealth of books now available to young readers. "Right, the market for young adults now is amazing. It shows an understanding that there's different life stages and different interests and I think that's marvellous. I'm just hoping that all these 'romantasy' readers stay with reading and find a different genre and what doesn't happen is they get fed up with their genre because they think I've read everything in it and then stop reading."

I doubt it. "I think books are a relatively cheap hobby, a really convenient hobby," Adele continues. "You can, especially as a young woman with a young family, always have a book in your bag. And when you sit outside, whatever sports club it is, waiting to pick your kid up or drive them from A to B, you can just pull your book out and read it. It's a little bit of 'you' time. And it does that thing of taking you out of your own world, too, which I think people enjoy."

Why, I wonder, is it mainly women who read Adele's books, and crime and thrillers in general?

"Yes, there's a lot of women reading them. There are men reading them, too, but men read fewer books anyway, and I think if men are going to read, they tend to read books written by men. A bit sexist of them but it's true. It seems to take a brave man to go, 'I don't care about the gender of the person that wrote this book, I'm just going to read the book'. Women tend to be a little bit more open to reading books written by men. They read books written by women. They don't care. But I wonder about where this thriller/psychological thriller/crime fashion comes from with women."

Why is that?

"I've only got theories and I can only really base it on the people I talk to, but I think it's that they know they're going to get some safety and justice in these books, which isn't necessarily what they get in the real world. So it's a little bit like as a child going on a rollercoaster, you're utterly terrified. But, you know, you're really holding your mum and dad's hand, and it is going to stop and you're going to get off and have an ice cream, and life will be fine."

"My psychological thrillers are all about the mean things we can do to each other through our minds. And it's quite often in, in my case, family dramas that just get darker and darker and darker and darker and go to the extremes."

"If you actually look at the vast majority of crimes, they do happen within familiar groups and I don't just mean family but friendship groups and things like that. People tend to know the person who committed the crime against them. All relationships are this leap of faith and we have to trust each other. And yet once trust starts to get nibbled away at, it's so hard to get back. It's so hard to get it back and I just play with that idea."

*Our Beautiful Mess* comes out in August. "I've been desperate to get that 25 books 25 years done because I don't know many women who've also had a family and who've done the 25 in 25. I mean, there's a lot of brilliant writers out there, but I'm quite proud of myself."

Adele - who says she always writes the end of her books first and loves an unreliable narrator - describes the new book as "a dark family drama with psychological aspects."

"I took the characters from *Playing Away*, my very first book and aged them. So Connie was this naive young woman in the first book. Back then she was in a kind of romantic comedy and I've aged her and taken her into another genre. She's now got a family of young adults, teens, and something goes very badly wrong. It's set in London, in the drug world of London that is very available to middle class kids and it's disastrous what happens. "I loved revisiting Connie. She was such a successful character for me and she gave me that first book that was in The Times charts for twelve weeks. If I hadn't had that first start, I don't think everything else that has come since would have happened. So it was so fun. It was like going back to meet an old friend and saying 'right, my friend, where are you in your life? This is where I am. What have you been doing?'"

Now that milestone has been reached, I wonder what might be next. "Well, I've already executive-produced one of my own movies. It was super challenging but really interesting and I learned a lot. So part of me would like to sort of see through these stories that already exist in some different media, maybe in TV, maybe in film. Let's see what can happen there. So I do have ambitions that way. And I also have one crazy ambition. I would like to see one of my books become a play or a musical. I just think that would be so much fun!"

Theatre agents and producers, take note!

# rosa montero

< <lo que aspiro  
es a morirme muy viva> >

Por James Hartley

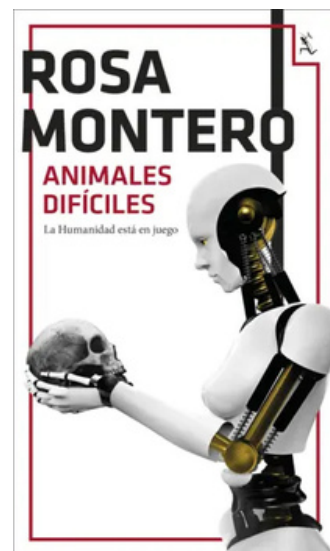
Caricature by Ángel Arévalo Camacho

En el Madrid de 2111, la detective Bruna Husky es contratada para investigar un atentado terrorista en las instalaciones de Eternal, una gran empresa tecnológica. Las primeras pistas la llevan hasta un periodista que sigue los pasos de uno de los asaltantes, pero cuando los implicados empiezan a desaparecer o a morir, el rastro se pierde. La detective y su colega, el inspector Lizard, se verán atrapados en un enigma cada vez más sombrío, en una trampa mortífera diseñada por una mente criminal aterradora. Estamos ante una Bruna Husky llena de furia contra el mundo y, sobre todo, contra sí misma, porque ya no es una poderosa tecnohumana de combate, sino un débil androide de cálculo. Y es desde esa nueva fragilidad desde la que debe afrontar el caso más peligroso de toda su carrera.

Esta es la descripción de *Animales difíciles*, la última novela de Rosa Montero, que fue publicada a principios de este año por Seix Barral, en su mismo sitio web. *Animales difíciles* es el último libro de la muy querida serie de Bruna Husky, formada por las novelas *Lágrimas en la lluvia*, *El peso del corazón* y *Los tiempos del odio*. <<Los cuatro libros de Bruna me gustan especialmente porque adoro al personaje de Bruna Husky, porque es mi alter ego y porque, además, suponen la creación de un mundo propio>> dice Rosa. Le había pedido que me dijera cuál de sus libros le gustaba más.

<<Es difícil decir qué libro es el que prefiero, la verdad, porque mira: ¿La escritura? Lo que vas haciendo es una obra, ¿no? Y la obra es el camino, un camino que te lleva toda la vida y cada libro te lleva al siguiente. Entonces, en cada libro pues hay algo que me propuse y algo que conseguí o que no conseguí o que conseguía la mitad, pero, en cualquier caso, que me permitió seguir al siguiente libro. Así que, hay libros que me gustan por una cosa y otros por otra. Por ejemplo, *Bella y Oscura*, que me parece mi libro más poético, y, además, fue el primero en donde sentí que yo estaba escribiendo algo radicalmente nuevo.>>

<<Luego, los tres libros que yo llamo 'artefactos literarios', que son esos libros híbridos y raros que son *La loca de la casa*, *La ridícula idea de no volver a verte* y *El peligro de estar cuerda*, pues me gustan mucho, porque dentro de mi obra son muy originales, también porque de alguna manera me he inventado ese género, ¿no? *Historia del Rey Transparente* me gusta porque es la novela más ambiciosa que he escrito y tenía unos retos muy difíciles y creo que los conseguí solucionar. Así que ya te digo, es imposible de escoger un solo libro de unos te gusta una cosa y de otros otra.>>





Nacida en Cuatro Caminos en 1951, Rosa lleva más o menos leyendo y escribiendo desde entonces. <<Para mí leer es lo más importante y lo que he hecho desde los tres años. Mi madre me enseñó a leer. El boom latinoamericano fue tan importante porque de repente, en mi juventud, dices, 'Pues la mejor literatura contemporánea que se estaba haciendo se hacía en mi lengua, ¿no?'>>

Le comento que he leído que estudió psicología durante un tiempo y me pregunto si aún le interesa.

<<Estudié psicología porque creía que estaba loca,>> dice Rosa. <<Tuve crisis de pánico desde los 16 hasta los 30 años y en mi época y en mi clase social nadie te llevaba al psicólogo ni al psiquiatra, así que decidí estudiar psicología para entender qué me pasaba - yo creo que es por lo que estudian psicología el 98% de los psicólogos, ¿no? Porque piensan que están chiflados y la verdad es que no es una mala cosa, porque yo creo que eso da una proximidad con los pacientes, digamos. El otro 2%, por cierto, son hijos de psicólogos o de psiquiatras.>>

Rosa se ríe a carcajadas antes de explicarme qué es lo que más le gusta leer últimamente. <<Cuando ya supe qué me pasaba - las crisis - pues lo dejé. Lo dejé en cuarto. No terminé psicología. No aprendí nada. Creo que lo que sé de psicología lo he aprendido mucho más leyendo libros que me pueden interesar, sobre todo de psicología social. La psicología social es la que más me interesa, creo y la que me parece incluso más científica. También por psicoanálisis, me he hecho terapias, tres veces en mi vida - un año y medio cada vez - y es interesante, es un experimento interesante y una búsqueda personal interesante. Y luego me interesa mucho más que la psicología la neurología y la neurociencia, de la neurociencia sé mucho. Leo mucho de neurociencia y de neurología, mucho más que de Psicología.>>

Este interés es algo que se refleja claramente en el nuevo libro de Bruna. Rosa es tan conocida como escritora por sus libros como lo es como periodista y me interesa conocer sus opiniones sobre la prensa y su futuro.

<<El futuro de la prensa, no ya en España, sino en todas partes, es bastante oscuro>> ella dice <<porque, como sabes, estamos haciendo la travesía del desierto desde hace veinte años con el cambio de modelo de mercado con los digitales. Creo que en los últimos veinte años han desaparecido algo como el 90% de los periódicos del mundo y esto es una pérdida brutal, no solo para los medios de comunicación, sino para la democracia, ¿no? Ahora hay una pequeña esperanza porque ya la gente se está acostumbrando a pagar por contenidos digitales, y los periódicos empiezan a tener suscriptores, pero, aun así, la supervivencia es muy dura. Y yo creo que no es casualidad que ahora la democracia también está en crisis; su credibilidad y su legitimidad están en crisis. Los medios de comunicación también, porque los medios de comunicación son esenciales para una democracia fuerte. Y ahora, estamos en un momento de debilidad tanto del sistema democrático como de los medios de comunicación, por desgracia.>>



Pero ¿tiene esperanzas para el futuro?

<<¿Que qué me queda por conseguir? Pues es que no me planteo la vida así, ¿sabes? Por temperamento y por generación, soy muy de vivir el momento y no de plantearme el futuro. Si quieres que te diga algo sobre mi futuro, lo único a lo que aspiro es a morirme muy viva, tanto en lo personal como en lo profesional.>>

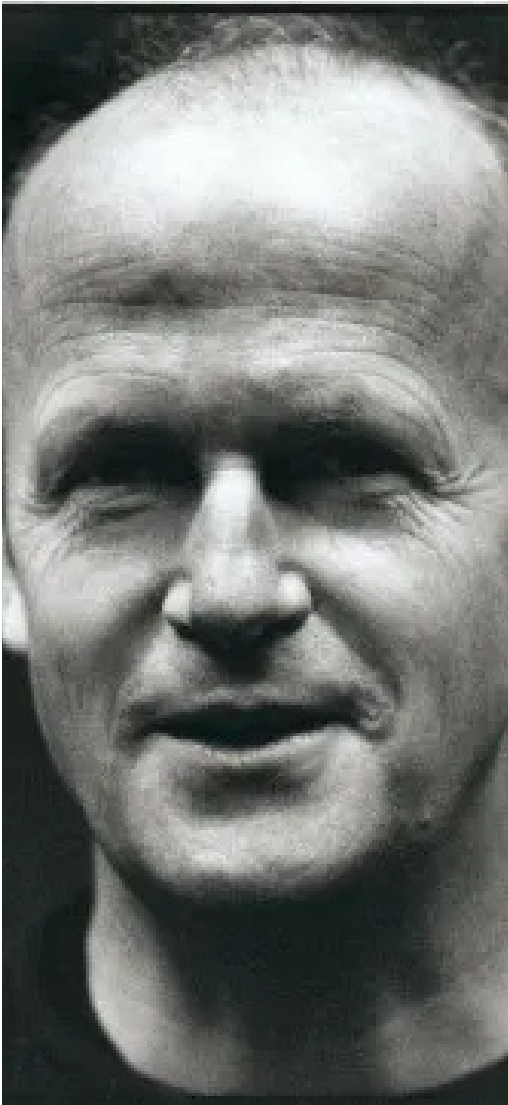
No es difícil de creer. Rosa Montero está tan llena de pasión por su trabajo y su vida como siempre.

<<La música para mí es importantísima. No podría vivir sin ella y me gusta absolutamente todo, desde lo clásico, la ópera, lo moderno, desde Mozart, jazz hasta Ibrahim Maluf, que es una fusión con jazz, un trompetista extraordinario. Y la pintura, los artistas, lo mismo, mira, te voy a decir solamente, por ejemplo, un artista, una pintora que me encanta, que se murió hace año y medio y que me encanta. Es Paula Rego, que es una pintora portuguesa afincada en Inglaterra. Me gusta muchísimo la pintura, pero fundamentalmente me gusta la lectura y la música - son esenciales para vivir.>>

# Jim Crace:

“I was always going to be a writer...”

By James Hartley



I catch British writer Jim Crace on a good day. He says he's just turned the corner on a new book he's been writing and beams down the line at me from the top of his house on the edge of Houseman and Shakespeare country. "The book will be done and edited over summer and out later, in 2026," he says. "It's called *Bread*."

Crace - eighty next birthday- published his first novel, *Continent* in 1986. "I was really naive when I started," he says. "I'd been a journalist and therefore I had confidence in my prose. I'd learned to edit and I'd learned to pack in as much as you could because I knew they were going to cut everything down, the *Telegraph* or *The Sunday Times*. They'd cut your jokes or your best lines if you went over the allotted word count.

"So I'd learned all those disciplines and transferred them into fiction. The difference was that as a journalist, I was very puritanical, coming from a socialist background, believing that the truth alone was eloquent and persuasive. But when I moved over to writing fiction, I discovered that I could become more cavalier. I didn't have to have any regard for truth anymore.

"I couldn't write autobiographical books because I had too happy a childhood. I love my parents. No one beat me. I haven't been divorced. I'm not a drunk and I haven't fought in a war.

"I didn't want to set any of my books in real places. I could say whatever I wanted because I was inventing what they called 'Craceland', and that was the discovery. That wasn't like a decision that I made coldly before I started writing but that's what happened. The result was that I had a fresh voice.

No one else was doing anything similar. I think that's where my success, such as it is, came from.

"I mean, partly those books are unreadable. People are scared by them and they seem a bit odd, but publishers love them because there's no one else on their list filling that niche.

"One of my problems is that I always think about the scene itself. You know, the shape of the jug is what matters to me. Not that someone drinks too. A few years back, just before lockdown, in Moscow at a Book Fair, Jonathan Coe was there and Sebastian Faulks - very successful writers who sell twenty times more than I do, and both nice very people, by the way, and great writers - and they were chatting and Jonathan or Sebastian started off by saying 'Do you know what? I'm sick and tired of the sentence. I don't want to be weighed down by the sentence. All I want is the propulsion and the momentum to get to the end of the chapter. The other one replied, 'I feel exactly the same.'

"Now I'm sitting there and I'm thinking 'No! I'm completely, only interested in the sentence. I'm in no hurry to get to the end of the sentence. I don't want to leave the sentence until it's really perfect.' Every little note is musical and sits properly in its own place.

"That was a moment of revelation. I thought, 'That's where you've gone wrong'. Maybe if I hadn't been so fastidious about my writing, I'd have been much more successful. Much less troubled, would have written more books, and would have the sales figures of Sebastian!" Though he did find success, and immediately.

"I just expected to be successful," Crace

explains. "Not through any arrogance, but because I had no concept of failure or success. And so, when I won three prizes in a single day, it seemed to me that that's just what happened.

"I'm a prize winning author, but in a way that's not what we want to be, is it? We want to be bestsellers, don't we?"

*Signals of Distress* won the 1994 Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize. His next novel, *Quarantine*, won the Whitbread Novel in 1997 and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize of the same year. *Being Dead* won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1999. *Harvest* was shortlisted for the 2013 Booker Prize, won the 2013 James Tait Black Memorial Prize and won the 2015 International Dublin Literary Award. He received the American Academy of Arts and Letters E. M. Forster Award in 1996. He was awarded a Windham-Campbell Literature Prize in 2015.

"My dad wasn't educated. He left school and he didn't learn to read until he was an adult, until he was our father. But he was a soldier and he was a bright guy. He wasn't one of those people that said literature, opera - that's for the toffs, I'm not interested. No, he said, 'I want my share'. And so he learned to read and would be bringing books back into the house. And therefore there is, because I love my father, an immense value to those books he brought into the house. And I also felt that somehow or other the world of those books was my world, because I was a titch, a short guy.

"I wasn't violent, I lived in north London and I found that I could be quite sharp with my tongue. I could be funny with my tongue. People didn't want to fall out with me because I was cruel. I'd put a label on them. "I love that reverence for language and the way that you could protect yourself with language and the way that you could arm yourself with it

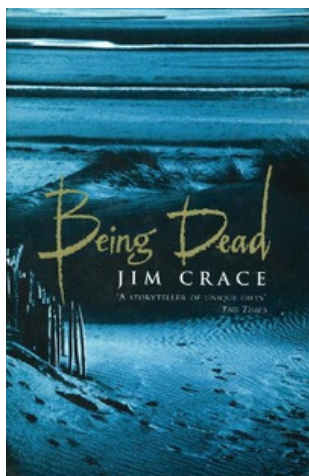
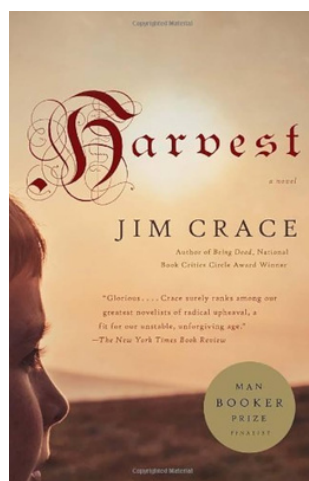
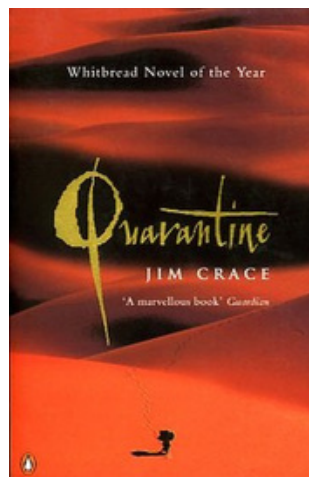
"I never thought I'd be a sculptor or a musician. Never thought I was going to be any of those things. I was always going to be a writer.

"But how? When? You know that I was thinking about it today for myself, and I was like, I just seemed to be something inside me. I thought it's the only thing I wanted to do.

"When I sold my archive to the University of Texas in 2013, I found these prizes I'd won eight through a magazine called *The New Elizabethan*, which published short stories. I found old old department store bags with handwritten short stories in them, and from when I was about 13, clearly very influenced by *The Metamorphosis* by Kafka."

"I remember a friend of my dad's was a veteran from the International Battalions who fought in the Spanish Civil War. I remember when my dad introduced me to him, I got up to shake his hand and he shook my hand with his left hand. And then I looked and saw he'd lost his arm and I said to him, 'Oh wow. Raise your arm'. Only little boys can ask strange men something like that. He raised his arm and I said, 'Where's your other arm?' and he said, 'I left it in Spain.'"

Although Crace says, with a smile, "you won't learn anything about me from my books. If it looks like you might learn something about me in a paragraph, I'll change it", he's open and honest about his age and the winding down of his career.



"I can feel my presence in the world of literature just fading, fading, fading," he says. "I get fewer invitations to go to festivals, fewer people buy my books, smaller advances, all of those kinds of things at the end of a career that I can't possibly complain about. Certainly, my time is coming to an end. I've been very, very lucky to have gone as far as I'm going. I'm still writing, you know. I've turned the corner with a book this very day, as I told you.

"Some people I know stop writing because they no longer have an audience, but the reason I'm still driven with exactly the same feelings as before, at a time like now, when I might not even be read or publish this book, is because the book itself needs to be done and I won't rest until it is done. You know it's torture. But I never think about sales, never.

"Generally there's been an erosion of contact between human beings because of advances in technology. When I think about what I used to do, when I'd send my journalism down to London. I had to drive into town. I had to go to a railway station. I had to talk to a guy. If I travelled anywhere, I'd go on a bus, not in a car. I wanted to make a phone call back in the day, I'd have to stand in a queue. You know, you know the story. I saw a quotation which said that the cost of the price of everything new worth having is the loss of something old worth keeping.

"And it is absolutely brilliant. You know, that's the way we move forward. We have quick checkouts, but you miss the chat with the woman behind the counter.

"I remember my mum telling me she was at a friend's 90th birthday and said to her, 'I'll be at your hundredth, mum'. She said, 'Oh I wouldn't want to live to be 100'. And then she thought about it. And she said, 'Unless I was 90' And I think that's the key to it, isn't it? We all recognise that we don't want immortality, but we also don't want mortality to come. We don't want mortality to come next week or next year."

In the meantime, writing, life, family and birdwatching. Crace tells me he's just back from a trip to my neck of the woods, Parkgate in Cheshire. "Spotting Spoonbills," he says, smiling. "I saw one. Yeah, he wouldn't turn his beak to me properly. I said, 'I bet I'm the only person in this group that's ever seen a spoonbill.' Because when I used to live in Botswana - a great country, great people, very kind and spirited - one came up from South Africa in the Kalahari and landed outside my window. Suddenly the woman who lived next door came out with a big saucepan and smashed it on the head. She cooked it in the same pan. And of course, it was a big honour to invite the guy from next door to come and eat the spoonbill. So I did..."

# miguel d'ors

## entrevista con el maestro

**¿Puedes hablarnos un poco de tu infancia?  
¿Cómo y dónde creciste y tus recuerdos e  
impresiones, echando la vista atrás?**

Nací en Santiago de Compostela. Mi padre, barcelonés de nacimiento y madrileño de crianza, fue a aquella universidad para ejercer su cátedra de Derecho Romano. Allí conoció a mi madre, natural de Puente-Caldelas (Pontevedra), que estudiaba Filosofía y Letras, y allí nacimos yo y varios de los hermanos que me siguen. Hasta 1961, en que, teniendo yo 14 años, mi padre pasó a la Universidad de Navarra, viví allí.

Santiago no era entonces el parque temático agobiante que es ahora, sino una ciudad pequeña, introspectiva y de ritmo lento, con dos cosas que marcaban su carácter: la Universidad con sus profesores y sus estudiantes, y la Catedral con sus canónigos y sus peregrinos, que entonces solían serlo verdaderamente. Los catedráticos y sus familias, lo mismo que los miembros del clero local, eran conocidos y respetados por todo el mundo.

En mis primeros tres años fui un niño precioso, con un pelo rubio ensortijado que todo el mundo celebraba mucho. Puedo acreditarlo con fotos. Mi madre se envanecía de que, a mis pocos meses de vida, le habían pedido que me prestase para hacer de Niño Jesús en una función teatral navideña o un belén viviente de un colegio. Pero a los 6 o 7 años mi aspecto pasaría a ser definitivamente del montón.

Desde los 4 asistí -cosa que hoy resultará chocante- a un colegio monástico: el que las madres benedictinas tenían en su convento de San Pelayo (o San Payo) de Antealtares, muy cerca de nuestro domicilio en la calle del Preguntoiro. Después, cuando empezó a funcionar el de La Salle, de los Hermanos de las Escuelas Cristianas, que fue en 1953, continué mis estudios en él. Esto significa que recibí una educación católica, que complementaba muy bien la que mis padres me daban en casa. Además, los domingos por la tarde asistía a una catequesis de niños en la iglesia de Santa María Salomé.

No fui lo que se dice un buen estudiante, sino muy irregular: en unas materias me daban matrícula de honor, en otras aprobadejo y hasta en alguna suspenso. Y lo peor es que en la misma asignatura que en un curso había sacado matrícula de honor al siguiente me daban sólo un aprobado, o al revés. Tenía, me parece ahora, muchos pájaros en la cabeza. Las cosas que más me gustaban eran el campo, los animales, el dibujo y la pintura, hacer redacciones, tocar la armónica y la mandolina, las colecciones -de

cromos, de sellos, de monedas, de chapas de botella, de insignias, de hojas de plantas...- y algunos deportes: caza, hockey sobre patines, fútbol, buceo y baloncesto.

En 1952 mi madre heredó de un tío abuelo suyo una casa y unas fincas en el lugar de Paraños, parroquia de San Miguel de Carballedo, concello de Cotobade, provincia de Pontevedra, y desde entonces la familia pasó allí todos los veranos. Aquellas vacaciones largas de la época, que comenzaban a fines de junio y terminaban a mediados de septiembre me hicieron disfrutar mucho y me proporcionaron cierta familiaridad con el mundo rural: la naturaleza, las faenas del campo y los animales -en la casa había tres o cuatro vacas, uno o dos cerdos, una o dos ovejas, un perro, dos o tres gatos y dos docenas de gallinas, a los que se añadieron unos cuantos patos y alguna paloma de mi propiedad personal-. Por otra parte, y esto fue muy importante para mí, mis abuelos maternos, que eran perfectos como abuelos, pasaban el verano con nosotros. Mi abuelo Manolo -que era, además, mi padrino de Bautismo- era cazador empedernido, y cuando yo andaba por los 11 o 12 años me regaló una escopetilla de un solo cañón que disparaba cartuchos de 12 milímetros y me enseñó a disparar, y desde entonces me aficioné a cazar y le acompañé en algunas jornadas cinegéticas para mí muy emocionantes. Además, cada noche, con la luz del dormitorio apagada, el abuelo nos contaba a mis hermanos y a mí alguna de las aventuras venatorias de su juventud -en buena parte, pienso ahora, inventadas- de una forma realmente fascinante. Se entenderá que en muchos de mis poemas aquella tierra y aquellos veranos aparezcan como una especie de paraíso perdido.

Bueno, me parece que lo de "hablar un poco de mi infancia" lo he entendido en sentido lato.

**Creo que Galicia tiene un espíritu y un sentimiento propios. ¿Estás de acuerdo? Y si lo estás, ¿cómo describirías ese espíritu y de dónde crees que procede? ¿Cómo se manifiesta, aparte de la poesía?**

Sí, no me cabe duda. En el espíritu gallego se notan, a mi modo de ver, cierta cazarería típicamente rural, que hace desconfiar y manejar siempre segundas intenciones; un talante conservador, hecho de resignación, escepticismo y fatalismo, y favorecido por el hecho de que quien más, quien menos, es propietario de sus parcelitas y sus vaquiñas; un sentimentalismo elegíaco; un amor a la

patria chica nada abstracto, sino vinculado a lo sensible: a los árboles, las plantas, la humedad, las nubes, los ríos, los olores, las comidas -yo lo llamo "patriotismo telúrico" -, y que caracteriza la morriña del gallego alejado de su tierra; un humor sarcástico y satírico, una afición jocunda a comer y beber (casi todas las fiestas gallegas giran en torno a alimentos o bebidas: la del pulpo, la del mejillón, la de la ostra, la del cocido, la del albariño, la del ribeiro, etc.), propensión a la cólera y al litigio (como ya notó Aymeric Picaud en el Codex Calixtinus) -lo del litigio es una manifestación de la cazarería-, desinterés por la estética en las cosas de la vida cotidiana (vivienda, gallinero, cierres de fincas, muebles, ropa de diario, etc.), falta de pulcritud (las cunetas de las carreteras gallegas, por poner un solo ejemplo, son un basurero continuo: la gente arroja a ellas latas, botellas, tetrabriks, plásticos y de todo), necrofilia -en ninguna parte se da tanta importancia a los funerales, entierros, cabos de año y visitas a los cementerios-, honradez admirable -me refiero a que hay pocos ladrones y a que si alguien encuentra en la calle un sobre con dinero o un reloj, lo entrega a la policía- y xenofilia. Galicia, tierra que ha recibido millones de peregrinos y ha exportado millones de emigrantes a todo el mundo, recibe y aprecia como nadie a la gente de fuera, a menudo a un solo paso del complejo de inferioridad.

**Tu poesía es muy precisa en forma y expresión. ¿Cómo es tu proceso creativo? ¿Vuelves a menudo sobre lo que has escrito o tu forma de escribir es más espontánea?**

No todos mis poemas surgen de la misma forma: algunos han partido de una idea -en el sentido conceptual: un pensamiento mundo y lirondo- y mi tarea ha consistido en "ponerla en poesía": una empresa llena de riesgos porque el lenguaje conceptual mata lo poético; en otros me ha llegado de golpe, como en un flash, lo que yo llamo una "idea poética", que no es propiamente un pensamiento, sino la intuición -me resulta difícil explicarlo- de un punto de vista original sobre un asunto; en otras ocasiones han aparecido unos pocos versos que reclamaban la compañía de otros para formar un poema; cuando estaba empezando a escribir, muy jovencito alguna vez todo comenzó con una especie de rumor, una melodía que era también un tono emocional y que iba cristalizándose en palabras y adquiriendo sentido a medida que yo iba esbozando versos.



En todo caso los versos me asaltan cuando y donde menos los esperaba. Alguna vez he dicho que para mí la inspiración no consiste en que yo siento de pronto ganas de escribir un poema, sino en que de pronto un poema quiere ser escrito por mí; y esto me sorprende en las situaciones más diversas: por la calle, en la montaña, en la cama a las 4 menos 10 de la madrugada, en bicicleta... y también, por supuesto, en el salón de mi casa o en mi mesa de trabajo.

En muchos casos no tengo a mano donde escribir lo que se me ha ocurrido, y voy como rumiándolo en la cabeza hasta que llego a casa y me siento al ordenador. Porque desde hace ya unos cuarenta años ya casi nunca escribo los versos en papel. Eso sí, una vez tecleados, los imprimo y los meto en una carpeta.

A partir de ese momento vuelvo una y otra y mil veces sobre cada poema, eliminando los golpes de efecto, los clichés, la altisonancia, todo lo que es pirotecnia verbal y falsedad, afinando las palabras, ajustando la puntuación (porque no me da lo mismo una coma que un punto y coma), mejorando la música de los versos..., precisamente porque quiero que parezcan algo espontáneo. Podría decir que la espontaneidad suele costarme muchas horas de trabajo.

**Tengo la sensación de que el sentido del humor es muy importante para ti. ¿Lo es? ¿Por qué? ¿Qué y quién te hace reír?**

Sí, creo que tengo cierto sentido del humor. Gracias a Dios, porque el sentido del humor es un buen atenuante de las malas cosas de la vida. Me río con muchos chistes, sobre todo cuando vienen de una de esas personas que tienen gracia para contarlos; me río con algunos gags de José Mota, con las letras de algunas coplillas de las chirigotas del carnaval de Cádiz, con algunos “memes” que circulan por la red, con comedias cinematográficas antiguas tipo Tiempos modernos, Al servicio de las damas, La fiera de mi niña, Ser o no ser, Ocho sentencias de muerte o Con faldas y a lo loco, y me río con algunas poesías burlescas de Quevedo y con Las crónicas de Bustos Domecq de Borges y Bioy Casares.

**¿Cuál es tu poema favorito y por qué?**

No tengo un poema favorito. Sí poetas favoritos: Jorge Manrique, Garcilaso, Fray Luis de León, Lope de Vega, Quevedo, el autor, sea quien sea, del “Soneto a Cristo crucificado”, los Machado, Fernando Fortún, Borges, cierto Alberti, cierto Neruda..., por hablar sólo de poetas de lengua española y del pasado.

**¿Por qué elegiste a Manuel Machado como tema de estudio y qué es lo que más te interesaba de él, antes y después de tu trabajo?**

Cuando leí por primera vez de forma sistemática la poesía de los hermanos Machado, tanto la de Manuel como la de Antonio me gustaron mucho. Sin embargo, en el ambiente de aquella época -hablo de los primeros años 60- Manuel estaba muy postergado; por razones, creo, esencialmente ideológicas, que no estéticas. Por un lado, porque la condición de “modernista” que le asignaban los simplistas libros de texto de la época le atribuía un halo de superficialidad, esteticismo e irresponsabilidad frente a la hondura y la preocupación cívica de la mal llamada “Generación del Noventa y Ocho”, y por otro lado, y sobre todo, porque su adhesión al Alzamiento Nacional desde setiembre u octubre de 1936 lo convertía en un apestado para el sistema cultural del momento. En consecuencia, mientras que a Antonio Machado, “noventayochista” primero, republicano después y al cabo víctima indirecta de la derecha, se le rendía un culto que, siendo justo en sí mismo, a mí me resultaba injusto por el agravio comparativo que suponía, a su hermano Manuel se le tenía arrinconado. Y yo siempre he sentido un impulso de solidaridad con las víctimas de injusticias.

Desde los últimos años de la década de 1970 la poesía de don Manuel viene siendo ya justamente valorada, y me halagaría saber que he tenido parte de la culpa de esa recuperación.

**Trabajaste muchos años en Granada. ¿Qué recuerdas ahora con más claridad de aquella época sobre la ciudad y la región?**

Dentro de Andalucía, Granada, aun compartiendo muchas cosas con las demás provincias de la región, tiene algunos rasgos que la distinguen, aparte ya su privilegiada combinación paisajística de alta montaña y costa. Cierta propensión al patetismo, por ejemplo, que en Huelva, Sevilla o Cádiz no he percibido; o una disposición general menos abierta y simpática, llena de recelos, de segundos planos y de sospechas de que en todas las cosas siempre hay escondido algo más -en esto coinciden granadinos y gallegos-; también lo que llaman la malafollá, que es una cosa difícil de definir pero fácil de captar empíricamente, y que no es la envidia pero que a mí entender algo tiene que ver con ella; además, un gusto estético de carácter barroco, como el de toda Andalucía, pero con matices propios, porque en los

productos artísticos, en Granada, además del abigarramiento y la complejidad se valora la dificultad de realización y la pequeñez; tanto para una orza de barro como para un empedrado callejero, una pieza de orfebrería, una bóveda de mocárabes, las cruces de mayo, un cuadro o un poema.

La institución estética más típicamente granadina es la filigrana: algo que acumula elementos y detalles, que es menudo y que requiere una especial habilidad manual. Hasta la Alhambra, bien mirada, es un conjunto de miniaturas abigarradas. Granada capital, por lo demás, es una ciudad complicada, con unas elites bastante impenetrables, una universidad demasiado politizada, un tráfico muy crispado y mucho ruido. Por suerte tiene un clima muy agradable, con sólo una quincena de mucho calor y otra de mucho frío en todo el año. Y el mucho calor suele atenuarse al caer la tarde con el fresco que llega del ventilador natural de Sierra Nevada.





# “There’s also that extra edge, a sort of tough magic that is uniquely Galway...”

Nuala O’Connor is back with her first poetry collection since 1997.



Photo Credit Una O'Connor

“This collection,” says the prizewinning Irish writer Nuala O’Connor, talking about *Menagerie* (Arlen House), her first book of poetry since 2011, “is concerned a lot with my autism diagnosis, art, animals and trees, the environment, politics, women’s lives. Things I care about.”

O’Connor – who writes also under her Gaelic name Nuala Ní Chonchúir – has described movingly in *Trasna*, the online literary journal, her autism diagnosis, which coincided with a decision to give up alcohol. “Over the years, my siblings and I sometimes joked about being autistic,” she wrote. “Something would happen and one of us would say ‘You’re so autistic’, and we would all agree. We acknowledged our propensity for introversion, aloneness, and insularity; our distaste for disruption to order; our trickiness around friendships; our severe sensory reactions to ostensibly ‘normal’ conditions; our devotion to solitary, creative pursuits. I was an anxious child, a house devil/street angel, and my mother often used to say to me, ‘I think there’s something wrong with your brain,’ but, alas, she never had me assessed.

“In recent years, the more I researched how neurodivergent people operate, the more I came to understand myself. One of the elements of autism that chimed strongly with me, was the business of masking: the adopting of false selves to conceal the true – autistic – self. My whole life has felt like an extended acting role, and I spend an inordinate amount of time trying to assess – and even mimic – what ‘normal’ people do and say. I also attempt, always, to unpick how or why people appear to be so easy and happy and good, when I seem to be discombobulated and unhappy and bad.

Unlike Edgeworth, I’ve never felt like a happy guest at life’s banquet, I am more of an awkward intruder, desperately trying to figure out how to mould myself well enough so that I fit in.

“In 2022, I mentioned to one of my younger sisters I was going for an autism assessment, and she told me she had recently been through the process and – no surprise to anyone – had been diagnosed as autistic. Similarly, the results of my own assessment affirmed my beliefs – I am autistic, too. Though anticipated, this is a new reality and a welcome one – I look back now at that singular, stand-apart child and teenager with renewed compassion; my neurodivergence made me who I was, I wasn’t just wilfully awkward, I wasn’t trying to be angelic on the street and devilish at home, and my brain wasn’t ‘wrong’, it was merely untypical.”

The calmness and clarity that comes with this affirmation of one’s own beliefs, in this case O’Connor’s autism diagnosis, is reflected in the poems in *Menagerie*, which boasts a wonderful cover by Elena Duff. The poetry is wry and witty, rooted in place and observation and lit up by O’Connor’s brilliant turns of phrase. It’s at once humble and otherworldly. *The Irish Times* said the book had “a warm feelingful generosity and a distant, diagnostic eye” and said it was a collection “which is at once involving and clear-sighted.”

“I suppose poems come in different ways,” Nuala says. “Some are immediate, some need more tinkering. My poetic antennae have not been as alert, or ‘on’, in the last twelve or so years, in the sense that my writing life has been more or less fully devoted to fiction, and other prose.”

There's a twinkle in the poem's eyes, I say. Humour is always just under, or breaking, the surface. "Humour is essential, especially when our world is turning into some surreal, retrograde hellscape," O'Connor agrees. "The bleakest of stories or poems can always benefit from that chink of light, or pinch of levity, otherwise the work can feel leaden, or po-faced, or soggy. Irish people poke fun, it's in our nature, so that tends to leak into the work. The Irish are not averse to turning the spigot of humour on ourselves, either – there's a rueful humility in most Irish people that I really value."

O'Connor, who was born in Dublin in 1970, lives in Galway, on the west coast of Ireland, with her family. "I'm twenty-nine years in Galway now," she says. "I became a committed writer here, so Galway has fed my soul, and I've brought my family up here, so I have deep attachments. I came to this county on a tide of romantic notions in my twenties and stayed because I married and bought a house and so on. Galway's wild spaces are fabulous, obviously, and there are great, big-hearted people here, too, but there is also that extra edge – a sort of tough magic that is uniquely Galway."

That 'tough magic' is wind blustered and moon drenched, more elements which affect *Menagerie's* climate. "I've always been obsessed with the moon," O'Connor agrees. "As a melancholic loner – since birth! – the moon feels companionable to me; a strange, lovely, reliable friend. It always turns up in my writing. I'm trying to learn more about the stars and science as I age but it's difficult stuff to wrap my brain around. I do my best but, mostly, what I retain is love for the gorgeousness and mystery of it all. Space is unfathomable but comforting in its reminder to us how small we are."

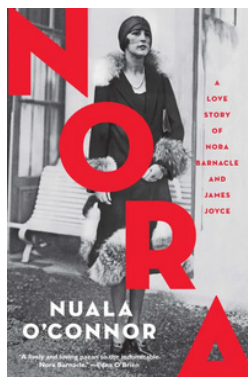
Nuala is the author of four previous novels, including *Becoming Belle* (2018) and *Miss Emily* (2015), a reimagining of the life of Emily Dickinson, and six short story collections, her most recent being *Joyride to Jupiter* (2017) and *Birdie* (2020). She's won many prizes for her short fiction including the Francis MacManus Award, the James Joyce Quarterly Fiction Contest and the UK's Short Fiction Journal Prize. Nuala's work has also been nominated for numerous prizes including the Edge Hill Short Story Prize, the Kerry Group Irish Novel of the Year Award, the Irish Book Awards Novel of the Year and the International Dublin Literary Award.

*Nora*, a brilliant, glinting, jewel of a read about the relationship between James Joyce and Nora Barnacle, was shortlisted for the 2021 An Post Irish Book Awards RTÉ Audience voice Award. Joseph O'Connor said about the book that "Nuala O'Connor has brought to vivid life a woman about whom every literature lover has surely wondered and has done so with immense skill and daring." It's a episodic novel which exists on the edge of biography and fiction, capturing the essence and truth of Nora and Jim's peripatetic, turbulent, passionate life together.

"Joyce looms large in Ireland, particularly for writers, and I wanted to explore why earthy Nora charmed him so," she has said.



*Menagerie* (Arlen House).  
Cover by Elena Duff



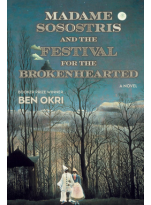
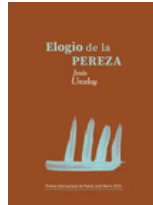
"Obviously he fell for her sensuality, musical sentences and personal ease, but I wanted to explore how they fared through their long years of their wander around Europe."

As well as her writing, Nuala is also the editor-in-chief at flash e-zine *Splonk* (Gaelic for 'flash'), and she enjoys travelling. "It's a few years since I was in Madrid," she says. "We have friends in Extremadura – a Spanish linguist and her Irish husband – and after visiting them, to talk about my work in the university in Cáceres, we took a few days in Madrid. We went to the Prado, we walked a lot. It was beautiful. I set a short story, *Storks*, on the road between the city and Cáceres. Spain is full of inspiration for me – it's so different to Ireland: the architecture, the climate, the art, the wildlife, all of it. Wonderful!"



# In Praise Of Laziness

By Jesus Urceloy



*In Praise of Laziness* or, *Elogio de la pereza* in Spanish, has just been published by 'Ya lo dijo Casimiro Parker'. It's the latest in a long line of poetry collections and other assorted writings to be published by the veteran Madrileño writer Jesús Urceloy.

"All of my books are different," he tells me when we meet one afternoon during a break in the rain. "No one of my books is the same as the next and I like that."

*Elogio de la pereza* won the XXXV José Hierro International Poetry Prize, organised by the City Council of San Sebastián de los Reyes.

"I started writing this one about 20 years ago or more. I didn't write the book thinking about writing it. I wrote one poem and then another. Then when I came up with 50 poems, I thought, 'wow, look here!'" And that fantastic title?

"I didn't try to give it a title. Titles are not something I worry about. One day, my wife said to me, 'Jesús, you're so lazy' and that was it: 'In Praise of Laziness'. Job done."

The structure of the collection is interesting. Each poem is co-titled with another work of art, sometimes a work of literature, sometimes music or painting. Jesús begins to leaf through the copy of the book he has brought for me as he explains the workings behind that idea.

"Each of the poems has a title connected to a literary work, or whatever. I didn't write any of the poems until I'd read the work or listened to the music or seen the film. For example, here I'm looking at *La rebelión de las masas* by Ortega y Gasset and I don't write about what Ortega y Gasset wrote, but about the sensations that reading that book produced in me. Sometimes, in a poem like *Amarcord* about Federico Fellini's 1973 film, there is a clear reference.

Jesús says that as a teacher of poetry, he can't resist working hard on the often unnoticed side of a poem, the structure. "Why does a good poem work well?" he asks. "Well, it has what I would call an 'undercurrent', that is, underneath what we read there is something else and that something else is sending a secret message between you and me."

Jesús suddenly starts laughing. A warm and burly man, almost blind these days due to a degenerative eye disorder, Jesús says, "Because I'm an animal about these things, in the case of *Amarcord* all the lines are hendecasyllabic, accented on the second syllable and on the sixth." He sits back and beams the smile of the writer who knows he managed two things: to satisfy himself, the critics and his readership.

## Sir Ben Okri's Midsummer Madness

"It's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* meets Oscar Wilde, with a borrowing from T.S. Eliot, laced with a thread of the African spirit world, brought to the boil with the tremors of heartbreak," Sir Ben Okri tells us, when asked to describe his latest novel, *Madame Sosostri & the Festival for the Broken-Hearted*, which was recently published by Bloomsbury in the UK and Other Press in the US.

"In short it's the tale of a woman who wants to start a festival for the broken-hearted because, without knowing it, after twenty years she still hasn't fixed her own broken heart."

The woman in question is Viv, who's in the House of Lords, and who had the idea for the festival on the twentieth anniversary of the day her first husband left her. Six months later, crowds descend on the grounds of a dreamlike chateau in the South of France, avidly awaiting the experience of a lifetime, Viv's inaugural Festival for the Broken-Hearted.

Everyone is in fancy dress. No one knows who anyone is. They wander the beautiful woods with just one night to change everything. And to crown it all, a very special guest is expected: world-renowned clairvoyant and fortune-teller Madame Sosostri, known as the wisest woman in Europe, and not seen since the pages of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. She will attend for one night only.

"It's about relationships, class, identity, destiny, imagination, clairvoyance, and the mysteries of love," the Booker prize-winner tells us.

Playful and knowing, we wonder if it was as fun to write as it is to read.

"One has to work harder to make a novel read like it was fun to write," Okri responds. "I'm doing so many things in this book that I have to make it seem like I am telling one straightforward story. Many levels and layers, yet the humour should predominate. Also comedy is always deceptive. To many of my readers this might come as a surprise. But this will only be because they have not been paying attention over the years. Humour is stitched into my work like a secret pattern."

"The fun in writing *Madame Sosostri* was the sense of doing something you're not supposed to do, mix real things with imaginary ones, make characters from a book take on a real life for a moment. Also writing about these characters in a style I can only characterise as *con brio* was a delightful challenge. The book is a return to the old European form of narration known as the *conte*. It is pure narration that delivers its charge with speed and sometimes humour and with edges of introspection."

# Richard Osman, el rey del crimen británico, vuelve con ‘Resolvemos Asesinatos’

**Por Sonia González**

Cuando uno piensa en novelas de crímenes, le pueden venir a la cabeza los agudos Sherlock Holmes o Poirot, tan profesionales y pulcros, o bien las historias más truculentas de Poe o de autores nórdicos donde la sangre salpica al lector. Richard Osman, sin embargo, nos lleva de la mano de todos sus personajes hasta el fin de sus novelas sin casi darnos cuenta. El amable anciano de la casa de al lado, el gángster retirado, el grupo de jubilados del asilo cercano o el mecánico del pueblo de sus páginas, nos acompañan siguiendo las pistas que resuelven el crimen. Después de su exitosa serie del “Club del crimen de los jueves”, su última novela comienza una nueva serie con también nuevos personajes pero el mismo ingenio de las anteriores.

‘Resolvemos asesinatos’ ha entrado por la puerta grande en la historia de la novela negra desde su publicación: número 1 en Gran Bretaña, el libro más vendido de 2024, 11 millones de lectores, y traducido a varios idiomas ya, nos llega a España con la editorial Planeta y como indiscutible éxito de ventas en todo el mundo. El llamado “rey del crimen británico”, se lanza una vez más a la búsqueda del culpable casi como el que se va de compras o pasa el rato un sábado por la tarde. El tándem suegro policía viudo retirado y nuera guardaespaldas, práctica pero sensible, funciona a la perfección pese a sus diferencias, y nos ofrece situaciones chocantes y divertidas que casi nos hacen olvidar, de lo cotidianas que son, que los asesinatos se suceden uno tras otro y el culpable se les escapa una y otra vez entre los dedos. La historia es amena y los personajes nos van mostrando sus vidas y pensamientos con tanta naturalidad que no podemos dejar de leer.

Richard Osman hablaba en una entrevista tras la publicación de su última novela en España sobre su nueva obra pero también sobre su famosa serie “El club del crimen de los jueves”, que tantos éxitos ha cosechado. El mismo autor reconocía que cuando comenzó a escribir *Resolvemos asesinatos*, le asaltaron ciertos sentimientos de culpa por estar casi traicionando a su querido grupo de jubilados del “club de crimen de los jueves”. Ha sido, sin embargo, la ocasión perfecta para sumar un nuevo grupo de personajes cotidianos y únicos a los ya famosos Elizabeth, Joyce, Ibrahim y Ron de la saga del club de los jueves.

Steve, el policía jubilado que quiere una vida tranquila en el pequeño - y casi aburrido- pueblo donde vive con su gato, se entretiene en el pub con sus partidas de Trivial pero de la noche a la mañana se lanzará a una investigación internacional para desenmascarar a un asesino de lo más escurridizo junto con su nuera. Amy es todo lo contrario que su suegro: fría, calculadora y práctica. Esta eficiente guardaespaldas, oculta una mujer sensible que tiene en Steve a su consejero y también compañero de aventuras desde que le convence para lanzarse a la búsqueda del culpable, saltando de avión en avión y cambiando de zona horaria sin despeinarse.

Comentaba Osman al ser preguntado cómo se le ocurrió la nueva pareja protagonista, que fue por su gusto por los personajes opuestos por lo que se decidió por personajes tan antagónicos. Comentaba cómo disfruta cuando los personajes reaccionan de maneras distintas a lo que va pasando en la obra, cómo de esta manera, el lector se puede ver reflejado en alguno de ellos y además le quedan ganas de pasar más tiempo con los protagonistas fuera de las escenas de venturas: quiere conocer más de su vida, cómo toman decisiones, por qué ríen, cómo interactúan. El lector podrá encontrar situaciones, formas de actuar o comentarios con quién identificarse constantemente.

Pese a que sus personajes tienen detalles de mucha gente que ha conocido, admitía que es Steve, el policía jubilado y un poco taciturno de su última novela, el que más se parece a él. Ama la rutina, la vida y los placeres tranquilos y cotidianos. Los personajes de su anterior saga tenían todos alguna característica de su autor, pero es Steve con el que más se siente identificado.

A la pregunta de porqué su versión de la novela negra no tiene que ver nada con lo truculento de las novelas nórdicas, reconocía buscar algo más tranquilo, una novela que aunque tenga como eje central resolver un asesinato, lo haga sin perder la “normalidad” de las situaciones de la vida cotidiana, pero sin ser meramente un mundo de color de rosa y finales felices. Las novelas de Richard Osman supusieron el comienzo de un nuevo estilo dentro de las novelas policíacas que nadie había explorado antes. No son policías perfectos por lo inteligentes, valientes, agudos o experimentados que son, ni asesinos en serie fríos y despiadados, casi psicópatas. Los personajes de Osman salen de la vida normal y no son o blanco o negro, son personas reales con sus vidas y situaciones con las que seguramente nos sentimos identificados en algún momento. Pueden colgar el teléfono después de haber encargado un asesinato al sicario de confianza y luego irse a jugar al golf.

Una de las cosas que más llama la atención además de lo cotidiano de los personajes, es el toque de humor-ingenio que nos descoloca sin esperarlo. Aparece a la vuelta de la página en las situaciones a veces más rocambolescas, y nos arranca una sonrisa sólo con imaginarnos la escena. El personaje de la famosa y hippie escritora Rosie D'Antonio con sus comentarios sin filtro o el matón a sueldo con inquietudes literarias, nos ofrecen escenas llenas de humor que contrastan con la seriedad del caso. Richard Osman comentaba su sorpresa, precisamente al hilo de este tema, por la acogida del libro en algunos países pese a las referencias británicas en muchos de estos toques humorísticos. La traducción al chino, por ejemplo, era el doble de larga por todos los pies de página que explican al lector de aquel país estas referencias tan lejanas a su cultura, pero tan necesarias para entender el toque humorístico de la obra.

Pero como el mismo Osman reconocía, el haber sido acogida en países tan diversos, puede que se deba a que el humor de los personajes es “universal”, a una casi “globalización” del humor en estos momentos. Comentaba también como le fascinaba el ser humano y todos sus matices y que quizás por ello y porque es un optimista con las personas, sus protagonistas siempre tienen ese lado entrañable. Todo el mundo que conoce, según él, deja algo en sus personajes y el haberse movido en ámbitos como la televisión, el espectáculo y la literatura no han hecho sino reafirmarlo en su optimismo con la gente.

Sobre su proceso creativo y las claves del éxito de su novela, reconocía que escribe sin pensar mucho y sin seguir grandes rituales, y daba dos consejos para lograr salir airoso del reto de escribir una novela con toques de humor e ironía: no perder de vista la realidad de la historia y sobre todo no abusar de estos toques de humor, ya que se puede llegar a causar el efecto contrario o saturar al lector.

Cuando uno acaba *Resolvemos asesinatos*, está deseando empezar con otro caso para saber dónde les llevará esta vez la historia y seguir los pasos de Amy y Steve. ¿O volverá Steve a su tranquila vida en un pueblecito de la campiña inglesa con su gato? Tanto enganchan la historias de Osman que al llegar al punto final del libro uno se da cuenta de que está pensando: ¡Otro asesinato, por favor!

# THE BOOK WAS BETTER...

## A REGULAR COLUMN ROUNDING UP RECENT BOOK TO SCREEN ADAPTATIONS

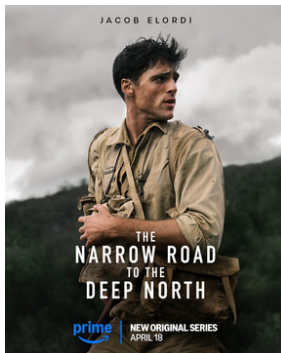
By Cliff Shephard



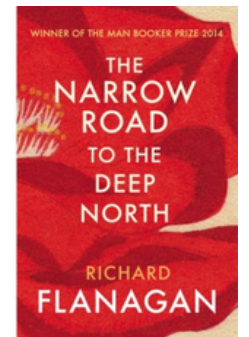
Now in its third series, the popular adaptation of Lee Child's unstoppable series **Reacher** is at a bit of a crossroads - we have come to terms with the fact that our protagonist is invincible. We know he's a 'loner' who does not play easily with others. He is always one step ahead. These facts are probably enough for loyal readers. It's clear that with the TV series, they have decided to explore his psyche a bit more. The results leave our hero seeming more dysfunctional, emotionally unsure and...stupid. For a former decorated army major, he seems a bit clueless throughout most of the episodes, and the 'love interest' angle is misplaced and laughable. By attempting more depth in their main character, I see what the makers are going with here, but I fear fans of the novels will say that this is not their Reacher.



*REACHER: PERSUADER* is out now on Amazon Prime



Richard Flanagan won the Booker prize in 2014 for his novel **The Narrow Road To The Deep North**, which told of one man's experiences in a concentration camp and its effects on his later life - despite being hailed then as a masterpiece, it has taken eleven years for it to make its way to screen. Over five episodes, we are shown not only the deep horror of war and captivity, but also the way the consequences of someone's actions can haunt them. The strong cast are shown in scenes difficult to watch as they are forced to make the Burma Death Railway a reality amongst impossible conditions. Current screen heartthrob Jacob Elordi is very much on shirtless display for this, but the praise really needs to go to Ciaran Hinds as the older Dorrigo, whose gentle and nuanced portrayal of a man truly damaged by his experiences deserves all the awards.



*THE NARROW ROAD TO THE DEEP NORTH* is available streaming on Amazon Prime

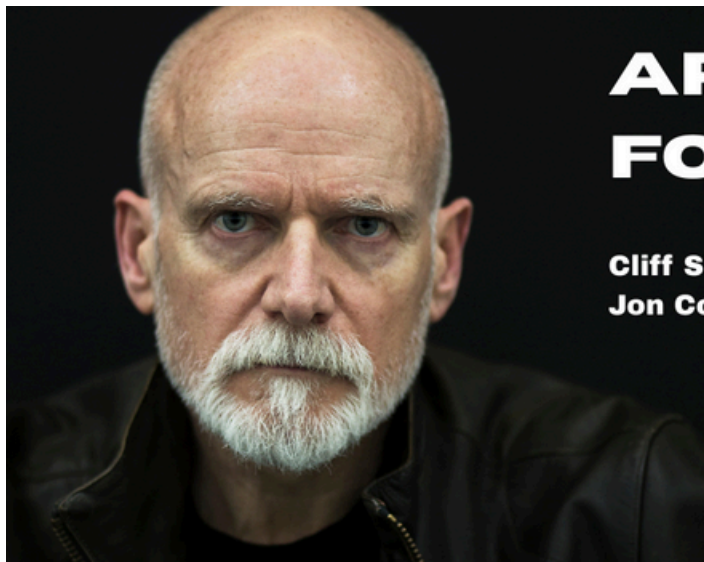


I'm not sure whether a more timely adaptation has come along for a long time: **Conclave**, the film version of Robert Harris' bestselling novel of Papal intrigue recently won an armful of awards, and was a significant box office success. Praised for its faithfulness and smart casting, it must be one of the most satisfying films this year. In particular Ralph Feinnes and Stanley Tucci must be singled out for special treatment, as they coolly underplay what could have easily been a one-dimensional and heavy handed treatment of the source material. It's impressive to see the twists and turns of the book treated in a thoughtful way, and a credit to director Edward Berger for stewarding the whole film so well. Highly recommended.



CONCLAVE is out in cinemas now, as well as available on Apple TV, Amazon Prime and Blu-Ray





# ARCTIC FOX

**Cliff Shephard talks to  
Jon Courtenay Grimwood**

Coming into paperback at the end of last year, *Arctic Sun* completed the 'Moskva' trilogy - a series of cold war spy novels by the seasoned author JACK GRIMWOOD. The author is also known as Jonathan Grimwood for some of his novels, and Jon Courtenay Grimwood for others. He has been writing across genres since the late nineties.

**Cresting just as a resurgence of 'Cold War' thrillers reaches fever pitch in the publishing world, your recent run of novels seem timely to say the least. Was this just a coincidence, or were you aware of the rising popularity of the genre from the outset?**

Pure coincidence! I wanted to write a series that ran up to the fall of the Berlin Wall, and I was bored with modern spy thrillers that reduced everything to hackers, computers, dna and profiling, and relied on characters' mobiles failing, or information not getting through, to explain why the whole thing wasn't wrapped up in eleven pages, and thought, "Right I'll have a go..."

**The hero of the 'Moskva' trilogy Major Tom Fox seems to be constantly put through the wringer in both physical and emotional terms (no spoilers here, but...bloody hell...) - as a result, we really become invested in him as a character. Was there a story arc planned through for him when you were writing Moskva, or did he just develop as you came to each book in the trilogy?**

Tom came out of writing *Moskva* and I learned who he was in the process. I knew he'd been in Northern Ireland, I knew his marriage was a mess, his daughter dead, and that he'd been raised in a children's home. It's hard to write a character with PTSD without falling back on the Hollywood cliches, so I had to work to make him likeable (for my values of likeable) while making the damage obvious. I'm pleased with the final result. And I love Charlie, his six year old son, probably because I see a lot of myself at that age in him. I retro-fitted in *Nightfall Berlin* and *Arctic Sun*, working back from things I knew about him to how those things came to happen. I think most of that process is either instinctive or automatic.

**What was the research process for these most recent books? Did you travel to far flung icy wastelands of Russia, or hang around questionable alleys in Eastern Europe?**

Mostly they were based on memory. I was briefly in Moscow in the mid 80s, in the early days of Perestroika. And I grew up in Norway in the early 70s, although I'd been back since, so that gave me those. I made a couple of trips to Berlin to update my knowledge of the city, and spent a week in Finland in midwinter, going out on the Baltic ice; then combined modern (Finnish) methods of ice fishing with my teenage memories of ice fishing in Norway, and took massive liberties with both.

**Given the popularity of turning books into 'properties' for media networks, is there ever a conscious eye on that? I recently saw that the new Hunger Games prequel was advertising its film adaptation before the book was even released...**

No. I've been optioned, but filming's never got any further. For *Island Reich*, Penguin brought in a script expert who was big on linearity and story arc, and pushed hard to widen the canvas (the US, Spain, etc) to give it greater appeal, but that's the only time I've been asked to write with half an eye on what might (possibly) happen.

**Your earlier 'speculative' works are much beloved, could you see yourself returning to something a bit more time-and-space bending? Or are you fully immersed in historical adventures grounded in this reality?**

I would love to return to the Ashraf Bey novels, and write another three from the viewpoint of Hani, who is a great character. She's fierce, damaged (again), intelligent, and cynical as only a child who's had to navigate an impossible childhood can be. I had huge fun writing her, and made numerous trips to Morocco and Tunis location hunting. It was also the perfect excuse to attend a North African cookery school. (I always try to learn and cook two or three dishes from the places I'm writing about, and buy and listen to the music.)

**Given that you've been with some major publishers such as Penguin, Canongate and Orion, have you found them very hands-on in their approach, or are you pretty much given free rein in creating your work?**

Publishers vary wildly, and habits and behaviours go in and out of fashion. I've had books published exactly as delivered, and one or two mauled half to death. And there are a few where I've synched with the editor, and the final result has been a recognisable improvement. Copy editing is much the same - Canongate's was superb. It's pretty much a crap shoot. Find an editor you like and you're in a good place. Have one be poached by another publisher and the book be shuffled onto someone else and nothing can save it.

Continues on page 67

# kill will



**Will Carver's *Kill them With Kindness* opens on a global pandemic. All hope is lost, so much so the UK government is handing out 'dignity' suicide pills. In a Chinese lab, a scientist is cooking up a very different virus - one which will make everyone more empathetic, more compassionate...nicer, even. When ideologies and priorities from all sides collide, what unfolds is more sinister than anything that could be imagined. Thoughtful, challenging and unafraid to examine the impact huge events have on the human condition, Will Carver's work is always timely. Is this his most important novel to date?**

**Ahead of its release in June, Cliff Shephard caught up with Will to find out more about his process, the relationship he has with his publisher, and living with a houseful of teenagers...**

***Kill Them With Kindness* as a 'pandemic' book seems to be coming out once the dust has settled a bit on that subject in the publishing world - was it written during then, or did you consciously wait until people had calmed down about it before saying what you wanted to say?**

I, actually, found it to be in bad taste that anyone would write a pandemic book during that time - and by 'pandemic book' I mean a story that centres around the affects of being locked down and fearful of the unknown, of hiding from a virus. I think it is important for artists to tackle difficult subjects and it's great to be able to do that at the time of the event, but the way that you attack it should not be to sensationalise it or to exploit it. To write something where people are forced together due to lockdown procedures and somebody dies feels like using the pandemic as a gimmick. Having a story that centres around a virus taking over the world was perhaps too raw. And swiping at the behaviour of those who flouted the rules would just be a cheap shot. I think tragedy requires time. Time to think, time to digest the outcomes, time to evolve. With time comes further discovery but also the opportunity to inject some humour that would probably not be appreciated with the event still going on.

As always, I am more concerned with the psychological impact of such an event. How did people act during the pandemic? What changed? Are there any lasting effects that are still not understood. Initially, I was taken by the rush of people to get hold of sanitiser and toilet roll, how they were unabashedly selfish in the first phase of impending tragedy. They were frightened, in the first instance. But there was a shift. Tragedy has a way of unifying a community - clapping the NHS staff, social-distancing street parties for the Queen's jubilee. And then something amazing:

Environmental impact. Air was clearer, rivers were cleaner, streets were quieter. I saw positivity around the globe with respect to this and it felt like others might see and understand that we are responsible for this planet. For each other, for the land and seas, that all of the horrors are created by man and that we are also capable of creating the opposite. And then I watched the goodwill dissipate very shortly after the lockdown restrictions were released. That the compassion gave way, once again, to anger, outrage and disillusionment. There was lasting damage to peoples' mental health, too. Kids who had missed defining moments in their schooling experience and their education. It was going to go on to do more damage than the virus ever did. I thought that we had discovered a solution. That kindness and compassion had made the world a better place for a while. That we, as a global community, had shown resilience in the face of adversity. That is what I was most interested in. Could there be a way to make people better, more caring. And could that save the world?

That's how I came up with the idea to write a book about a virus that does not make people sick, it makes them kind. So, while there is a pandemic of sorts in the book, I would not consider it a 'pandemic book' - though it obviously satirises elements of that period. It is an exploration of human strength and weakness and a question of whether or not we have bolted beyond an environmental and, perhaps more importantly, social tipping point. I realise that makes it sound incredibly serious and it isn't. There is a lighter touch and plenty of humour, and that is only possible because, as you say, a lot of the dust has settled. There was a surge in 'cosy' crime during the Covid pandemic and I think reader preferences changed. They wanted something lighter at that time because the world was such a terrifying place. There was a departure from darker fiction, which wasn't great for me but I'm hoping people are ready to think about it now.

**The grander scale of *Kill Them With Kindness* seems a departure from the cults and serial killers of your previous novels...are you done with that genre?**

It's funny, I don't ever classify myself as a crime or thriller writer, just a writer. I write about the things that interest me or I want to explore in more detail. In something like *Good Samaritans*, the vehicle is a 'domestic noir' but it's really a look at how disconnected society has come even though we are all magically connected and contactable now. Yes, there are a series of murders but the interesting part is why the wife stays with a murderous husband and how they can seemingly only function through their dysfunction. In *The Daves Next Door*, there is a terrorist attack that links together a disparate group of characters but it's not about the deaths, it's about the existential questions of the terrorist, the anguish they go through deciding whether or not to detonate. It's about not seeing everything in black and white, about always questioning. *Psychopaths Anonymous* follows a woman who sets up a support group for psychopaths. She kills a lot of people throughout the story but it is about mental health and labels and belonging and swimming against the tide of societal norms. It's

about what it says about the reader who ends up empathising with this woman despite the heinous things she does. (And I have had so many messages from female readers who love the murderous Maeve.)

Now, *Kill Them With Kindness* is being billed as 'speculative fiction' or an alternate history. I honestly never thought of it in that way, it was just an idea that I thought was going to be interesting and fun to write, and a way that nobody else has really attacked the subject. It doesn't mean that I won't write another serial killer story (I already have) and it doesn't mean that I will continue down a speculative path. I write the things that interest me and I try to tell them in the best possible way to fit that particular story. So I am not done with any genre and no genre is off limits because I don't think about that stuff.

**In publishing circles, I've seen you pegged as part of a 'Brit Noir' movement along with authors like Joseph Knox - is a label like this an advantage or disadvantage?**

Well, Joseph Knox sells a lot of books, so if readers of his are pushed in my direction, I'm always grateful. They will either be annoyed or surprised that we are not really alike. I think that publishers and book shops need to know where to position their writers, so it's good for them to have these labels or apparent movements, so they know which shelf to put us on. Brit Noir just means that a book has a gritty British setting, dark themes and morally compromised characters. In that case, I guess I do fit into the genre. So it is helpful for readers of that genre and it gives them a chance to find my books. I often get pushed towards the 'literary' end of crime fiction, which is also correct but that can be a turn-off for readers who want to switch off their brain a little when they read a book and get swallowed by the story. There are fewer readers at the literary end, I think. So there are pros and cons to this type of thing and, personally, I don't pay much attention to it, it's all about marketing and positioning. A writer can have all the right labels and still not be at an advantage, because most success comes down to luck. (And a hefty marketing budget, of course.)

**You seem to have a great relationship with your publisher Orenda Books, if a larger publisher came a-calling would you feel under more scrutiny and pressure to conform or change the way you write?**

My original series of books was published by Random House, so I have the experience of writing for the biggest publisher on the planet and an independent publisher, already. And, yes, it is very different. I have a great relationship with Orenda Books because, where the larger publishers are more and more risk averse, the indies pick up the slack on publishing more interesting or challenging books. (Well, that's how it has always been. It's a tough world out there, now, so everyone is a little more scared than they once were.) I've always had the feeling that Orenda care about the words and ideas. So, it's great if I write a book like *Good Samaritans* or *The Beresford* that has some commercial success, because it allows me the opportunity to try something that might not work. You don't always get that with the bigger, more mainstream publishers. There's no way that I would have been allowed to just switch lanes from crime or thriller to writing *Kill Them With Kindness*. I got the opportunity to do that because I wrote another Beresford book and my publisher knows that there is always a chance that something 'different' can hit.

If one of the big publishers offered me a large chunk of money for something, it wouldn't be the kind of thing I am writing now. And if they came calling and wanted me to write something new, of course there would be more pressure to make it more mainstream, to make it more commercial. One-hundred percent. I could write something like that and you would still know it was a Will Carver book, I have a recognisable voice, but it would be different. And it would be a decision I would have to make if it ever happens. I would find it incredibly difficult to write something conventional but it's certainly possible that I could switch to a more commercial mindset while writing. And I would have to. Without doubt. For now, though, I'm enjoying writing the things that I want to write.

**I'm a big fan of an author whose books subtly hint at a shared universe - I mark out when the phrase "nothing important happened today" appears in one of your books. I've always thought it cool when 'easter eggs' like this are discovered, almost a reward for the regulars. Are you aware of a 'fanbase' for your books, and do you write with them in mind sometimes?**

I definitely get labelled as a 'cult writer'. Obviously this refers to the things I write about and the style of my prose but it also about the fans. I'm well aware that the fans of my books are die-hard. They'll pick up whatever I put out without even seeing what it's about. I love that and I think loyalty should be rewarded. I love an easter egg, myself. So I cram them in for the people who have followed me from the start. I have minor characters that show up in several books and certain place names that crop up. I reference *Twin Peaks* and *The X-Files* a lot, too, because they inform so many of the things I write. (There are so many *Twin Peaks* references in *Hinton Hollow Death Trip*.)

A couple of years back, I was being interviewed for a podcast or web show and somebody referred to it as *The Carver-Verse*, which I thought was brilliant. I love the way that all of my books can be linked together even though they happen in different times and places. And readers feel clever or satisfied when they spot these things. When I sign a book, I always write a comment that is a clue about my next book, too. It's fun. I do a lot of it for me, really, but I know that if I like it, fans of my books will like it also.

**Your new podcast is an absolute joy - was it created as an antidote to social media? A way to reach people without constraints?**

Thank you. It's called *Nothing Important Happened Today*, which, as you said, is a line that appears in everything I have ever written and is the title of the favourite of my books. The idea is that I take a small subject and turn it into something more significant by applying it to social issues of the time. It is irreverent and (hopefully) funny but what I want most is for it to be thoughtful. The episodes are very short but they take a lot of preparation and research so that I can fit as much in as I can in that short time. One of the greatest gifts any published writer has is the presence of a good editor. They see the things that you do not and they make your work so much better. But there are, of course, constraints on what you can say and how you can present your writing. So the podcast gives me an outlet where I am in complete control of what goes out. If it fails, it's my fault, if it's successful, then it's down to me, too. I do everything on my own. Novels, once written, become



a collaborative process, and I like that, but my favourite part is the writing itself. I enjoy the truth of it and the rawness. That's what I get with the podcast. A lot of the success of a book is out of the writer's hands, I think. With the podcast, it's really an outlet for me. It's not about books, it's about anything. It's about things that don't seem important but really are. It's about honesty. It's about fun. It's about society and trends and current affairs and history but mostly it's about looking at things in a different way. And it's certainly not about becoming a huge podcasting sensation. I like the idea that a topic that doesn't necessarily interest one person will resonate with another.

I don't really get bogged down in social media, too much. I don't get into arguments with people, I don't force my opinions on anyone and I don't just self promote on there. It's a way for readers to reach me. So the podcast is not an antidote to social media, it's more an antidote to the toils of a changing publishing industry.

**On your podcast you casually mention that you share a house with 5 teenagers...how do you get any writing done?**

Ha! Yes, it is a pretty hectic household. Three teenage girls and two teenage boys. It's the same for any parent, though. There are school trips or football matches or dance competitions or scout excursions or exam revision timetables and dinners to make and rooms to clean. We just have a few extra, so it always feels like there is somebody in the house and there's always somebody else that needs a lift somewhere. I like the bustle of it. But sometimes it can make writing difficult. I drive my daughter to her singing lesson on a Thursday. While she is in there, I sit in my car with my laptop and write for forty minutes. I'll do it late at night and early in the morning. I built a soundproof podcast studio beneath the stairs where I record but also write. It doubles as a very small office. They all call me Harry Potter when I go in there.

I've said this many times before but one will always make the time for the things they want to do the most. If you want to go out for a run, you will adjust your day to get an hour somewhere to pound the streets. If you want to eat better, you will make time to plan your meals and you will set aside a little extra in order to make things from scratch. It may mean that you don't watch TV for quite as long or you have to sacrifice something else but people will always find ways to do what is most important. For me, that is spending time with my family and writing. I have a very understanding partner who appreciates the work that goes into producing a novel or podcast or play, and that support is invaluable. The kids are also great because they understand that writing is work and not just a late-night hobby, so they leave me to it when I really need them to. If it gets too much, I always find that I can work at the pub with a bottle of wine, my noise cancelling headphones and a little George Gershwin in my ears. It's a tough job but somebody's got to do it. You have to make the time. You have to find a way that works for you. And I don't know who said it but it's true, the magic you are looking for is in the work you are avoiding.

KILL THEM WITH KINDNESS is out in the UK on 19th June. You can find Will's podcast NOTHING IMPORTANT HAPPENED TODAY on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and other similar platforms.

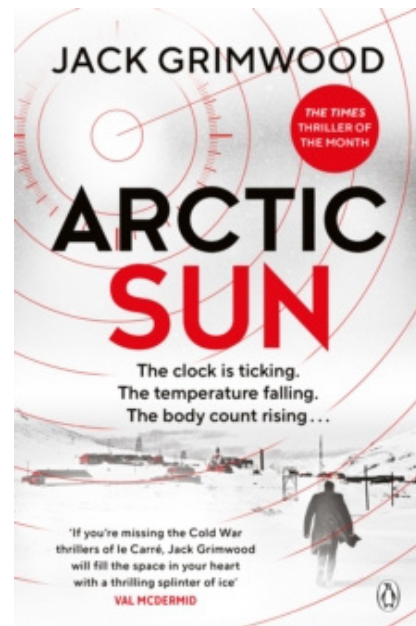
**From page 64 - JACK GRIMWOOD**

**Someone recently told me that you were currently working on a...memoir? Can you tell us a little about how and why that has come about?**

I'd written 20 novels, and thought, 'Well, I can start the 21st, or I can do something different.'

I'd always wanted to do a PhD, so I decided to combine that with the writing something different.

I used doing the PhD at St Andrews to make me write the memoir. And used writing the memoir to make me do the PhD. *Swimming to the Moon* covers my life from six to nineteen, and opens in Malta (where I was born) and closes in Oslo. It's been really interesting to research and write, and has made me think harder about how I write and why. That's it, though. I'm back to novels after this!



**ARCTIC SUN by Jack Grimwood is out now in the UK**



Euterpe - Flute by Max Webb



LA FIAMBRERA ART GALLERY PRESENTA

# POSTCARDS FROM NOWHERE

UNA EXPOSICIÓN DE ÁLVARO P-FF

DEL 12 DE ABRIL AL 28 DE JUNIO DE 2025



**La Fiambrera** ART GALLERY  
C/ PEZ 30, MALASAÑA. MADRID  
[WWW.LAFIAMBRERA.NET](http://WWW.LAFIAMBRERA.NET)

