

THE MADRID REVIEW

VOL II ISSUE IV



SALMAN RUSHDIE

JAY MCINERNEY

HAIA MOHAMMED

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LITA CABELLUT

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JAVIER SIERRA

CARLOS BARDEN

GILES TREMLETT

LEAVING GAZA

HAIA MOHAMMED

Yesterday marked 23 years of me and today I want to share part of my journey as a Gazan who keeps trying.

My friend took that photo of me (*right*) in the very first moments outside Gaza's borders, after two years of genocide.

The bus left Deir al-Balah, passed through Khan Younis and reached the 'red zone' of Rafah, a city that looked exactly like a ghost town, yet nothing like my home, nor its people.

Then came the checkpoints.

There were buses for students, and others for wounded children and their families.

Our bus stood for hours before the tanks under the burning summer sun. As we melted from exhaustion and heat, one soldier handed a bottle of water to a child - and posed for a picture as he hugged him.

In that moment, every cell inside me screamed: *Leave him alone.*

Hours later, we were finally allowed to enter the Kerem Shalom crossing. After the endless checks and inspections - though we carried nothing, not even clothes or phones - I stood before three armed soldiers seated behind a desk.

They asked for my ID, typed my name into a laptop, and one said, "Give me your hand."

I clenched my teeth and stretched my arm.

He wrapped a plastic band around my wrist - with numbers printed on it - and he told me to keep it on throughout the journey.

I walked toward the next bus, the one for the British Embassy delegates. Just as I reached the door, I heard a voice calling my name, broken by accent. It was the soldier.

I thought, *It's over. That's it.*

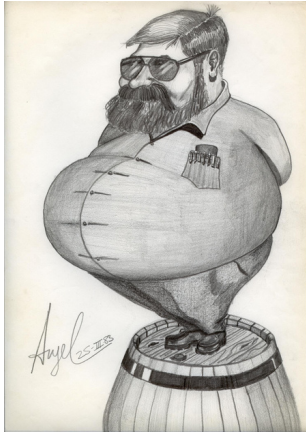
He said, "You forgot your ID."

I almost laughed. Who wouldn't forget their ID after seeing weapons pointed at unarmed students?

We boarded the embassy buses and left Gaza before sunset.

Through the Negev desert, across the lands of Palestine - all I could see were endless green fields, rich and alive. Land that could feed Gaza, feed Palestine, even feed the world. Yet Gaza starves. Starves for a grain of wheat, for a loaf of bread.

What a cruel world.
What a fierce soul you are, Gaza.



ÁNGEL ARÉVALO
CAMACHO, Madrid
1956, Arquitecto jubilado.
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. Es dibujante y
caricaturista aficionado.

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Around my wrist, that numbered bracelet.
I asked my friend what the numbers meant.
She said, "That's your number to them."

That's how they see us - as numbers.

We arrived at the hotel in Jordan at 1 a.m., after more than 12 hours of travel. We could barely stand. All we wanted was to shower, change, and sleep.

Sleep. Finally, peacefully.
Sleep without fear of death, of planes, of monsters.

We asked the British Embassy staff if they had clothes for us, since we had left Gaza with nothing, as instructed. They apologized. "No clothes were prepared. It's too late; the shops are closed."

It felt like a slap, not the first one.
I looked at myself, at my once-white shirt now turned grey, and dragged myself to my room. The door got stuck behind me - as if the night hadn't hurt enough already.

Down the hall, I saw a woman and a man pushing a trolley. I thought they worked at the hotel. I called them, asked for help with the door. The woman smiled, showed me how to close it, wished me a peaceful night and handed me two small bags: one with clothes, and one with personal care items.

I thanked her, bewildered and almost shut the door but paused.
"Are you with the British Embassy? Is this for all the students?"

She smiled and said, "No, I'm with the Italian Embassy."
Then asked, "Aren't you one of the Italian scholarship students?"
I said no.

The man beside her told her to take the clothes back. I asked softly,
"If you have extra, please let me keep them."
She nodded.

The next morning, I was the only student wearing new clothes. I told my friends the story, and we laughed. Maybe it was coincidence, or maybe it was my mother's prayers.

Later, the waiter kindly asked us to join the breakfast buffet. The table was full - Palestinian dishes, fruits, vegetables, juices, sweets.

But after 24 hours of travel, and two years of famine,
none of us could touch the food. We looked at it and felt sick.
Disgusted by the filth of this world.

So much food on this earth while my people, my children, die starving in Gaza.

What horror governs this world?

For five days in Jordan, I tried to eat. To accept the idea of putting food in my mouth while my family still starved.

One morning, a waitress approached me. She had seen me every day, sitting at the table, drinking only juice. She smiled, placed a plate of mango slices before me, and said gently,
"I made this just for you."

That was the moment that broke me.
The plate of mango.

Days before leaving Gaza, my mother had craved mangoes. We bought a single mango for £15 - an impossible price. It wasn't enough for everyone, so my mother blended it into juice. We shared it - one glass, one family.

And now, I sat before an entire plate of mango. If I asked for five more, they'd bring them without hesitation. While my family still hungers in Gaza.

I couldn't stand. I collapsed. They took me to the hospital.
Diagnosis: severe anemia.
That was my last day in Jordan.

The next morning, I stood again - ready for another journey, another battle - to London.

In London, my sister and dearest friend Aliya was waiting for me.
Alia, the girl who believed in me,
who believed we'd meet one day.
The first heroine in my story.

Beside her was Patricia, the one who had never stopped supporting me since Aliya reached out to her in 2023, asking if they could share my words at a poetry event for Gaza.

I spent a week with Aliya and Patricia. They cared for me like a three-year-old, with love, healthy food, and gentle hands - until I could stand again.

Then I met Anthony himself, returned from his travels - the real man who once promised that my family and I would be safe and free.

And here I am - free.
And my family will be free soon.

To Aliya, Anthony, Patricia, Jack, Nora, Jacqueline,
and everyone who worked day and night for all the students of Gaza -
thank you.
Thank you for being my family here. For your love, your care, and for days that still feel like a dream.

Today, tomorrow, and every day - I am free.
Safe.
Because of you.

Free Palestine!

POETRY

BIOGRAPHIES

Maryam Hassanat is a mother of two children from Gaza. She has had several of her stories and poems published in various magazines. Her writings reflect the experiences, struggles and resilience of the Palestinian people, offering a personal perspective on their shared history and culture. They are not just words on paper - they are a sincere reflection of her emotions, thoughts and daily experiences under difficult circumstances.

Yusef Azad has been living in Madrid for the last five years. He comes from Brixton, London, in the UK. He has had a number of poems published in the Brixton Review of Books.

Jose Hernandez Diaz (he, him, his) is a 2017 NEA Poetry Fellow. He is the author of *The Fire Eater* (Texas Review Press, 2020) *Bad Mexican, Bad American* (Acre Books, 2024) *The Parachutist* (Sundress Publications, 2025) *Portrait of the Artist as a Brown Man* (Red Hen Press, 2025) and the forthcoming, *The Lighthouse Tattoo* (Acre Books, 2026). He has been published in The American Poetry Review, Poetry Ireland Review, The London Magazine, Poetry Wales, The Madrid Review, The Iowa Review, The Southern Review, The Yale Review, The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2011 and The Best American Poetry 2025. He has taught creative writing at the University of California at Riverside, and at the University of Tennessee where he was the Poet in Residence.

Julie Irigaray is a French Basque writer. Her poetry pamphlet *Whalers, Witches and Gauchos* was published by Nine Pens (2021) and her poetry has been featured on BBC Radio 4. Her poems, articles and translations have appeared in over sixty publications across the world (US, UK, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Canada, Mexico, Singapore and South Korea), in Magma, Poetry Ireland Review, Poetry Wales, The Rialto, or Ambit, and her poems have won or been finalists in twenty-four poetry competitions, including The London Magazine Poetry Prize 2024 and The Bridport Poetry Prize 2025.

Francisco Jota-Pérez (Barcelona, 1979) es novelista, ensayista, poeta y traductor. Autor de, entre otras obras, las novelas *Teratoma* y *Máquinas de acción perfecta*, los poemarios *sólido_Q_Celado* y *Libro de Mientes*, los poemas largos *Luz simiente* y *Anamorfosis —una utopía—*, y los ensayos *Polybius*, *Homo Tenuis* y *Circlusión*. Traductor al castellano de filósofos como Eugene Thacker, Alberto Toscano y Troy Vettesse, ha colaborado con el artista plástico Paco Chanivet en sus obras *Interregno* y *Palimpsesto*, así como con la artista Clara Moreno Leer por ósmosis

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.

Jim Young is a old poet writing from his beach hut on the Gower Peninsula

Elizabeth Fevyer lives in Wales, UK. Her poetry has been published or is upcoming in The Broken Spine, The Alchemy Spoon, Dreich and The Storms Journal, among other places. She is currently studying for the Diploma in Creative Writing at the University of Oxford and is working on the manuscript of her first pamphlet.

Laura Camacho Frias grew up in a small industrial town in the North of Spain. Despite her initial dream of becoming a translator for the United Nations, life happened; she studied engineering instead and moved to Portugal to complete her first degree. Her partner, three kids and two dogs ensure she still can't have either a proper relaxing day or a full writing day but deep down, she wouldn't change it for the world. They all live together in Eindhoven, The Netherlands. Her first novel, *Unwritten*, will be published in May 2026 by Flare Books (Catalyst Press).

LC Gutierrez is an erstwhile academic and product of many places in the South and the Caribbean. He currently lives, writes, teaches, and plays trombone in Madrid, Spain. His poetry can be found in many wonderful journals, and forthcoming in New York Quarterly, Tampa Review, BoomerLit, Trampoline, Wildroof Journal and Slant. He is a poetry reader for West Trade Review.

Matt Gilbert is a freelance copywriter, from Bristol, England, but currently gets his fill of urban hills in South East London. His work has appeared in various publications, including: Acumen, Ink Sweat & Tears, Northern Gravy, Southword, Stand and Wild Court. His debut collection *Street Sailing* came out with Black Bough Poetry in 2023.

DS Maolalai has been described by one editor as "a cosmopolitan poet" and another as "prolific, bordering on incontinent". His work has been nominated fourteen times for BOTN, ten for the Pushcart and once for the Forward Prize, and released in three collections; *Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden* (Encircle Press, 2016), *Sad Havoc Among the Birds* (Turas Press, 2019) and *Noble Rot* (Turas Press, 2022)

Sissy Doutsiou is an acclaimed poet, actress, and spoken word artist based in Athens, Greece. She has published four critically acclaimed poetry collections and two short story compilations, and released her first LP, *Insult of Public Modesty*, on Inner Ear Records. As a founding member of the Institute for Experimental Arts, she curates the annual International Video Poetry and Experimental Film Festivals in Athens. Doutsiou has toured throughout Europe, the United States and Asia, and is a member of the feminist women's writer group Her Voice in Greece and the cultural activist group Void Network. Her work examines personal life experiences, social injustice, and structural inequality through raw, embodied poetic expression.

Gordan Struić is a Croatian lawyer, poet, writer and musician whose work has appeared or is forthcoming in 34th Parallel, Half Mystic, Stone Poetry Quarterly, Ink Sweat & Tears, Headlight Review and Lana Turner. In 2025 he received a Special Recognition Award at the international Beyond Words contest in Trieste. His poetry explores intimacy and distance, tracing the quiet border between the digital and the human with precise, restrained imagery.

Ilias Tsagas is a U.K.-based Greek poet, writing in English and in Greek. His work has appeared in journals like: Apogee, AMBIT, Streetcake, Under the Radar, Poetry Wales, SAND, FU Review Berlin, Tint, Tokyo Poetry, Plumwood Mountain and elsewhere. He works as an energy journalist and academic. He can be found on Instagram: @ilias.tsagas

Azalea Aguilar is an emerging Chicana poet from South Texas, where the scent of the gulf and memories of childhood linger in her work. Her poetry delves into the complexities of motherhood, echoes of childhood trauma and the resilience found in spaces shaped by addiction and survival. She writes to honour the past, give voice to the unspoken and carve tenderness from the raw edges of experience. Her work has appeared in numerous journals, including Angel City Review, The Skinny Poetry Journal, The Acentos Review and Somos en Escrito. She has been featured at events hosted by the American Poetry Museum in DC and is currently crafting her first manuscript, a collection exploring the intersections of love, loss, and lineage.

Joseph Hunter is a fiction writer and poet whose work has appeared (or is forthcoming) with Fairlight Books, Glut Press, Merion West, The Rumen, The Alchemy Spoon, New Feathers Anthology, the Brussels Review and others. He teaches at the University of Manchester.

Saras Moodley, born in South Africa of Indian/South Asian origin, completed her MA in Creative Writing at Teesside University in the UK in 2024. She was longlisted for the Sol Plaatje European Union Poetry Award in 2023. Two of her poems now appear in the 2023 edition of this Anthology: Vol XII. She lives in The Netherlands with her husband and their three children. Having lived through the pain and humiliation of the apartheid era in South Africa, her dream remains to strive for a world that is evermore just and equal, in both personal and wider world challenges.

Charlie Baylis is from Nottingham. His poetry has been nominated three times for the Pushcart Prize & once for the Forward Prize. His translations have been commended in the Stephen Spender Prize. His first collection of poetry is *a fondness for the colour green* (Broken Sleep Books, 2023).

Kevin MacAlan lives in rural Ireland. He has an MA in Creative Writing and has contributed to many journals, including, Howl, The Madrid Review, Dublin Poetry, The Brussels Review, Datura, and The Belfast Review. He was long-listed for The National Poetry Competition and The Fish Poetry Prize in 2024.

Robert McDonald's first book of poems, *A Streetlight That's Been Told It Used to Be the Moon*, is coming from Roadside Press in 2026. His work has appeared in 2 Rivers View, Action/Spectacle, The Tiny Journal, Le Petite Zine, Blood & Honey, Sentence, and West Trade Review, among others. He lives with his husband in Chicago.

Sam Szanto is a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net-nominated author. Her poetry pamphlet *This Was Your Mother* was published by Dreich Press in 2024 and *Splashing Pink* by Hedgehog Press in 2023. She has won the Wirral Festival Poetry Prize, the Charroux Poetry Prize, the First Writer Poetry Prize, the Shooter Flash Prize and the Mum Life Stories Prize. She is a practice-led PhD candidate at York St John University, writing about the poetry of parenthood in relation to absence and attachment.

Siobhán O'Connor is an Irish writer who has made her home in Madrid. She writes about the messy experience of living - the suffering and joy of family, the homes lost and found, the broken and hungry bodies of women, the salvation in the creative process. She is currently writing a psychological novella exploring trauma set between Ireland and Madrid and researching a memoir about her cousin Jim, who died while fighting with the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War.

Marcus Slingsby was born in Yorkshire in 1973. During his 20's and early 30's he travelled the world; working in the 1st to wander the 3rd. His work has appeared in Amsterdam Quarterly, Jasper's Folly, The Poetry Lighthouse and Flights. He lives in Friesland with his family.

Alex Padina (London, 1981) is a British writer based in Jerez de la Frontera, Spain. Bilingual since childhood, he writes fluently in both English and Spanish. He published his first poetry collection, *Yo soy Azazel* (Editorial Talón de Aquiles, 2022), followed by *Malversado* (Editorial Platero, 2024). Padina is also the vocalist and lyricist for the musical projects *Son of Sorrow* and *She Has Stigma*.

Carmella de Keyser writes poetry exploring identity, intersections, ambivalence, liminal spaces and displacement. Founder of the Harlow Circle of Poetry Stanza. Judge for the Harlow Open Poetry Competition, 2025. Published in: BBC Sounds, Macmillan, Dream Catcher Literary Magazine, The Madrid Review, The Dark Poets Club, The Hooghly Review and Wishbone Words Magazine. Honourable Mention for the Dark Poets Prize, and The Small Space Deep Impact Award. Winner of the Hedgehog Press international Poetry Pamphlet Competition 2024. Debut chapbook is out now with Hedgehog Poetry Press.

Victoria Spires lives in Northampton with her family. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in Berlin Lit, Dust, The London Magazine, iamb, The Interpreter's House & Atrium, among others. Her poems have been commended/shortlisted in various prizes including Ledbury Poetry Competition & The Plough Prize. She came Third in the Rialto Nature and Place Competition 2025 & won the Alpine Fellowship Poetry Prize 2025. Her pamphlet *Soi-même* is available from Salo Press.

John Kenny is a writer and editor from Dublin, Ireland. His short fiction has been published in Uncertainties, Revival Literary Journal, The Galway Review, Transtories and many other magazines and anthologies. His poetry has featured in StepAway Magazine, Lothlorien Poetry Journal, Smashing Times, Every Day Poets and Poem Alone, and is forthcoming in The High Window and Prole. John is also winner of the NurePoets Corner Award 2025, judged by John F. Deane.

Aden Thomas lives in the Black Hills country of the United States and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. His first book of poems, *What Those Light Years Carry*, was published in 2017.

Graham Clifford is a British author of five collections of poetry. His work has been chiselled into paving slabs, translated into Romanian and German, can be found on the Poetry Archive, and is anthologised by publishers including Faber, Against the Grain and Broken Sleep Books. Most recently, his work has been included in the Manchester Review, iamb and BerlinLit.

Ana C. Triculescu es poeta y performer rumano-panameña. Autora de los poemarios *De todo un poco (y de poco, nada): Incoherencias Emocionales* (2023) y *Trastornos compartidos* (2025), su poesía íntima y visceral explora la esencia humana mientras experimenta con las flexibilidades del lenguaje. Publicada en Santa Rabia Poetry (Perú) y destacada por Ediciones Caleidoscopio (Colombia) en el Concurso Internacional de Poesía Libre (2025), conecta con los lectores de Iberoamérica a través de recitales poético-musicales y de su proyecto @Ana_LaEscribePoemas.

Ruby Doran Meira is a graduate from the University of Oxford, where she studied Spanish philology and Linguistics. Originally from Dublin, she has spent the last five years living, studying and working between several English and Spanish cities, taking her uniquely Irish (but ever increasingly multinational) perspective wherever she went.

Lizzie Holden lives in Sant Pol de Mar, Catalonia, and spends much of her time asking questions of the sea. She won the 2004 LISP poetry competition, and her pamphlet *From the Bottom of the Wishing Well* was awarded second prize by Paper Swans Press. *Amber* was shortlisted both as a pamphlet by Poetry Wales and as a full collection by Hedgehog Press. Her work has appeared with The Emma Press, Dream Catcher, Live Canon, Smith/Doorstop Books, and elsewhere.

Brittney Walker-Zaleski is an American poet, English teacher and TEDx speaker based in Estonia. She received her MFA from Cedar Crest College's Pan-European Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program. Her poetry has appeared in The Font, The Tupelo Press 30/30 Project, Prometheus Dreaming, From Whispers to Roars and other online publications. As a member of the literary community in Estonia, Brittney has taught poetry workshops locally and has been published in Estonian literary magazines such as Tangerine and Aksolotl Literary Magazine.

Liam Boyle lives in Galway, Ireland. He has been published in various outlets, such as Skylight 47, Drawn to the Light, Confluence magazine and Causeway magazine. He has been a featured reader at the New Writing Showcase at the Cúirt International Literary Festival. He enjoys spending time with his grandchildren.

Julie Runacres is a retired teacher of English and current poet, living in the rural English Midlands with two whippets and a to-do list of ditched aspirations because of whippets. Prior to this, her work has appeared in Poetry Birmingham and 14 Magazine, among others. She is currently studying for an MA in Writing Poetry at the Poetry School, Newcastle University.

Nicola Toft Lahiff writes poems about cities, poems set in cities and poems about missing being in cities, amongst other subjects. She has just finished an MA in writing poetry at Royal Holloway University, London.

Ewen Glass is a screenwriter and poet from Northern Ireland who lives with two dogs, a tortoise and a body of self-doubt; his poetry has appeared in the likes of Okay Donkey, Maudlin House, HAD, Poetry Scotland and One Art. Bluesky/X/IG: @ewenglass

Anthony Wade, the only child of an Irish migrant mother into England, an England-trained lawyer who worked in The Netherlands, relocated to his Mother's County in Ireland following a medical disability, and published a first poem in 2018 and since in Ireland, across Britain, in Spain, India, Canada and the USA. A Forward Prize nominee, he lives by the sea in East Cork not ten miles from where he spent childhood summers, an active member of the local Writers' Group.

Brought up in rural Staffordshire, Charles Penty is a journalist by profession and has worked in Colombia and Brazil as well as the UK and also Madrid, where he has lived with his family since 2005. He was longlisted for the 2020 National Poetry Competition and shortlisted for the 2021 Bridport Prize.

Juan Manuel Martínez (Colombia, 1989) vive en Alexandria, VA, EEUU. Terminó su Doctorado en Español con énfasis en literatura en la Universidad de la Florida. Juan es profesor universitario de español e inglés. Es egresado de la Maestría en Escrituras creativas de la Universidad Nacional de Colombia y de la Maestría en Estudios Literarios de la Universidad Internacional de la Rioja, además de obtener su pregrado en la Universidad de la Florida Central. Su trabajo aparece en revistas y portales en línea, algunos de estos en: Juan Manuel Martínez | Substack .

Ciaran Buckley was born in London. He has had poetry widely published. He lives in Madrid.

Poet, translator and creative-writing tutor, Gwyneth Box is at home in Spain, in the UK, and on the Internet.. She loves the taste of words and the multi-layered aspects of language and thought revealed through translation and poetry. Her writing explores the blurred borders between writer & narrator; between translation & creation; between memoir & invention; and between poetry & prayer. Find out more about her projects on her website: gwynethbox.com.

Jude FireSong – aka Fabulous Phoenix Boy – is a Scottish-by-inclination poet, specific writer, and artist. He is a polyamorous, (gender)queer, AuDHD disabled survivor. His work explores identity, community, and storytelling. Jude's multimedia show *Made of Magic* – based on a collection longlisted for new words {press}'s Chapbook Competition 2024 – debuted at the Edinburgh Fringe 2024, reviving this year. Publications: en*gendered, Poetry Marathon Anthology 2024, Man* Made//Made Man*, S*x Gap, rainy weather days, Hush LGBTQ+ Magazine, new words. Exhibitions: *I Have Always Been Becoming Who I Am Right Now*, *Untold Stories*, Level Centre's Public Open Exhibition 2024, *Trans Joy: Moments of Trans Euphoria*.

WHEN THE WAR ENDS, MAMA..
MARYAM HASSANAT

One day, my child asked me:

"Mama, when will the war end?"

I didn't answer.

Then, with eyes still glimmering with the remnants of a dream, he added:

"When the war ends, I want to eat lots of chocolate. I want to buy a big toy plane. And I want to go to the park so I can play with my sister and laugh a lot."

I smiled, though something inside me burned.

What kind of war steals a child's right to sweets, to play, to simple outings in the sun?

What kind of world is this, where a piece of candy becomes a distant wish, and a toy is postponed until after the ceasefire?

How do I explain to him that in another country, a child doesn't have to wait for "the end of a war" to eat what they want or play as they please?

That some children sleep soundly in soft beds and don't flinch at every tremor in the wall?

That some mothers don't have to sell their clothes to buy flour... or hide breadcrumbs in plastic bags for emergencies?

My child doesn't ask for much.

He only wants to live a normal day.

To buy a toy without us calculating how much money will be left for bread.

He wants joy.

To eat without sharing his portion with his little sister out of fear there won't be enough.

To drink a cup of milk sweetened with a little sugar.

To sit beside me as we count out little homemade biscuits together.

He doesn't know when all of this will end.

But he comforts himself by saying:

"When the war ends, Mama, we'll live."

And I—

I cling to that hope.

Because it's all I have.

Waiting for the dawn of a new day,

One that smells of orange blossoms and lemon trees instead of ash and blood.

A day when my little ones eat what they crave,

And laugh without fear.

YUSEF AZAD

TONGUE

I wouldn't wish it on anyone what has overtaken me because it will soon be insupportable.

To realise one usual day that your tongue, far in fact from yours, is a foreign body squatting the mandible.

The tongue crouches most of the time at the back of the mouth, alert in its cave, and I have no idea how big it is.

It can graze on the sharp edge of my teeth.

It has two jobs. To eat and to taste and to speak. Three jobs. And to kiss sometimes. Four jobs. And lick five.

Unroll.

No don't.

JOSE HERNANDEZ DIAZ

THREE HAIKU

The Beach

Blue waves rise, descend.
Sun, moon, luminous stars: beyond.
Surfers, bodhisattvas.

The Moon's Ear

Perceives autumn breeze,
Bouncing off azure, rigid earth:
Purrs soft lullaby.

Southwestern Sunrise

At dawn, young coyote,
Prancing in local park,
Everyone else sleeps.

PATATES

JULIE IRIGARAY

I've ordered some jacket potatoes
with cheddar on top and coleslaw
at the Black Country Living Museum.

I've been living in Britain for years
but I tasted it for the first time
a few months ago with my English lover.

I explain the recipe to my French mother
by text message because she has
an Instagram cooking page.

I regularly report to her British recipes
– the weirder the better –
dissecting the composition of the dish

in the same way high school kids dissect
mice or frogs for their biology class:
with curiosity and fear.

She replies that any recipe with potatoes
as the main ingredient is proletarian,
which explains why my Granny

used to cook potatoes at every meal
in all forms: fried boiled baked
as gratin dauphinois pommes dauphine

purée Mousseline hachis parmentier
patates en carré wilfully ignoring
that she was diabetic and that slow-burning

carbs *are* sugar. How she drove my mother
crazy when after a week in hospital for
diabetes training she ate crisps and pizza

for dinner, insisting it was a *healthy meal*
because potatoes and tomatoes are vegetables.
We teased her about her obsession with potatoes:

for Christ's sake, do you have Irish ancestry?
The first French sentence I taught my Irish ex
before he met my family was *je suis Irlandais*

et j'aime les patates,^[1] which he recited in
a thick, sexy accent that charmed my Granny.
The only German word she remembered

from the war was 'kartoffel': her hometown
was perched on a hill and during a heatwave,
two German soldiers pounded on her door.

She was eight years old but took the risk
of opening. The young men made the gesture
of drinking, so she brought them two

glasses of fresh water. A few days later,
they returned with a bag full of potatoes
– kartoffel – to thank her.

Six weeks after Granny's death,
my mother and I can finally joke about
how she made us hate boiled potatoes,

how much of a pain in the arse
she could be, and how much
she would have loved jacket potatoes.

[1] *je suis Irlandais et j'aime les patates* = I am Irish and I love potatoes

FRANCISCO JOTA-PÉREZ

SÍNTESIS URGENTE

una reconsideración del arte como motor de creatividad racional en tanto abastecedor material de ignorancia mediante el que la razón satisfaga su necesidad de exponerse a lo peligroso

aparece
una red indiscriminada
de luz veguera sobre humedad insoportable
y en sus nudos se pudre el pelo y cuartejan las uñas
aparece
el viento enmarcado
como lo que aún no se ha perdido
un rectángulo del aroma picante del vetiver
envuelve la tela acrílica
bajo la que esconder las manos
al toque de la tarde · un chasquido de dedos

no respira
ya la brasa como caricia
alguna otra carencia de sentido
fue a suplir ese ímpetu que tanto se añora

un clamor de hiedra · la madrugada
aparece tan despacio
que podría hacer esquina
en
un clamor de hiedra · la madrugada
rompe brusco y deja una estela
cuando esa última bandera se deshilacha
con
un clamor de hiedra · la madrugada
pesa como un paisaje incendiado
donde no queda nadie
desde
un clamor de hiedra · la madrugada
quiere expresarse

y así es como, sin cabos sueltos ya, deja de cumplir las condiciones del bucle y
asienta la cronología
hasta
avanzar a la siguiente secuencia

tan no lineal
como es este tiempo
por más que se muestre
objeto recto hecho peligro

impone
el hilo musical su estrechez
de embudo sobre las posibilidades
del tiempo
contiene
las alternativas · bajo control fáctico
y por el control se sale la enredadera
que perfora la membrana interdigital
en un suspiro
de dolor, urticante
pedacito de falda de negrura

estafeta:
se envía y recoge, se frena
la inercia de la fila, pieza templada de gente
ante la decoración que se ha hecho
estándar de diseño
de base
ante el bufido poco tosco de los extractores
en el cuarto vacío
y no queda tedio
cuando se palpa fijamente
ya no repica a desgana
el reloj
porque se ha vuelto a solucionar el bucle

taraceado
yunqucito del diablo
con el bucle en el pecho, rabioso
insoluble
lo que bien acaba y que hará
a cortísima instrucción

muralla óptica · un dietario espectro
resume lo ficticio pero transparente
suplica como una caricia
a
muralla óptica · un dietario espectro
injerta en esa única palabra amable
que se malinterpreta
ante
murallas ópticas · dietarios espectro
miden retrocesos
a palmo de lo que está permitido
y es que

quien destripa un oso de peluche para esconderse dentro a recibir debe asegurarse de
que sus orificios queden justo en los puntos sueltos de la costura de asimilación

las olas no rugen
insinúan
que hay una respiración
que vale la maldita pena

un parpadeo
reubica la espuma escupida en la arena
corre una cortina

STEVE DENEHAN
SPARE CHANGE

He must be newly homeless
is my first thought
as his clothes
have not yet attained
that greasy shabbiness

he has picked a decent spot
standing just beyond
the drive-through window
out of sight
of the teller

he signals
asks if I might
have some spare change
for a hostel

I pat my thighs
shake my head
nothing on me
but

there is a fiver
in my car
I get it
bring it to him

it must be hard now
being homeless
in a cashless world
I say

he smiles
says that it is, but
that it was pretty hard before
too

I feel guilty
as I laugh with him
as I walk back to my car
as I drive home

STEVE DENEHAN
THE TREMBLING WORLD

Several buses have passed
none of them mine
it is city-cold, and I
just want
to be home

my throat is raw
from talking
over pub music
pointless conversations
with pointless people

nobody being more pointless
than myself
I look down
the world trembles
in the puddle at my feet

a guy arrives to stand beside
me
his feet shuffle
he wears socks
that could be referred to
as wacky

he balls his hands
blows into them
I know what's coming
"Cold one tonight isn't it?"
the thick smell of drink

he laughs, filling the silence
"But sure, it has to be done."
Jesus
fucking
Christ

STEVE DENEHAN

BEDSIT WINDOW

Stuck in traffic
I look out and up
to a bedsit window
above a pharmacy

the light is on, and
there is a woman
walking in the room
around the room

she wears a tightknit
v neck jumper
dark blue
her hair is black

just beyond shoulder length
it is hard to be sure
from this distance, but
I think she might be beautiful

she is on the phone
walking and walking, and
running
her free hand
through her hair

I want to get out of the car
call to her
to open her window
to tell her

that it won't always be like
this, but
I don't, because
for all I know
it will

JIM YOUNG

THE PARABLE OF THE JEHOVAH'S WITNESS MAN

he called to my mum
did mr dean
had some cake and tea
then left his magazine
never talked of christianity
so you'd never know that he had been
each month as i recall
of his beliefs we knew absolutely bugger all
never read the watchtower or awake you see
used them to line the budgie cage wall to wall
but he sure did like my mother's cake
she baked like an angel
said the jehova's witness man
sipping his tea in 1950

ELIZABETH FEVYER

BEFORE THE END

Do you remember the night we chased the music
and watched the lights dancing,
high up on the hill above the city?
How we daubed tequila in our clavicles
like expensive perfume. The ringing
in our ears, a temporary betrothal.
How we walked back down the length
of the Cemetery, the railings holding back the night
like ribs. The shadows of the villages still visible
inside the urban sweep.
How we went back to our bed above the pub,
our room no bigger than a bed, to sleep wakefully,
our ears still ringing, straining for the breath
of the cracked window and each other.
How hot our skin felt. How cold to touch.

SUEÑOS

LAURA CAMACHO FRIAS

El problema de los sueños
no es cuando no se cumplen
sino cuando se vuelven realidad
y el príncipe es verde rana,
la princesa compra en Zara
y "para siempre" dura
hasta saltar de la cama.

Oyes una música y descubres
que la persona más equivocada
es la que te hace feliz...

Te equivocas,
Te pierdes y encuentras.

Decides cambiar
porque existe un océano enorme
lleno de posibilidades
frente a tí,
más allá de la genética...
o eso dicen.

Claro que,
a estas alturas de la vida,
a quien le importa lo que digan,
si al final,
los dos sabemos que no nos entienden.

GIVE US THIS DAY OUR AUBADE

LC GUTIERREZ

*(after the entire Iberian Peninsula heard the whisper
of the apocalypse, during an 18 hour power outage)*

Again in a world where I am nothing
yet everything to me, slightly swollen

I have found morning words in my room
tossed as though by waves

and eaten them when they were good.
Awakened from a dream of cats

large enough to torture monkeys
and felt pleased to have seen them

for their extraordinary grace and power
where things otherwise collapse

around our little piles of hope.
I count the stray blessings and learn

that backwards they add up to something
from which I might drink a thin succor.

The first up: I stretch, I lunge, I pray
I try not to think of my children grown

enough to see over my shoulders
and find there only a smoldering end:

what we have left of a life for them. After all
they too will be nothing

(their little piles of hope, slightly swollen)
but everything to me.

MATT GILBERT

BONDING

At ten, it was the funniest thing
I'd ever seen. A white-bearded head,
dripping wet, neck up from the surface
of a lake. Two geese floating

either side, seeming to peck, or kiss,
an old man on his temples. A photo
in a book. Used to ambush my brother
with hysterics. Helplessly, we'd roll

in laughter. Years after, I learnt
the picture was of Konrad Lorenz,
Nobel winner, pretend goose mother,
pioneer in the study of animal behaviour

and previously, a Nazi – later regretted.
The image does not appeal now
in the way it did. But what I wouldn't give
for one more taste of that unbridled glee.

DS MAOLALAI

DEAD TEN YEARS

after the funeral. tidying teacups
and rinsing out glasses
of winerind. I didn't
much know her – I guess
with the alzheimers: dead
for ten years and then buried
just recently. flowers don't last;
they fall over each winter,
drop seeds and don't think
of what else might come.
and she was a flower
and, the last time she knew me,
I seventeen, and a flower
as well. I pick up a plate
from the piano of unpopular
biscuits. some glasses
and two empty bottles,
and a bottle which still
has a gulp in it.

MATT GILBERT

OBJECT – TATE LIVERPOOL

'THEY call it Art! That thing!'
Two young critics stand,
unimpressed by a square of canvas
painted red. I can't dismiss them,
as I would with strangers,
for their knee-jerk,

tabloid-style response.
I can't because I owe them
more than this. I am their father
and therefore, in some way,
to blame. I dragged them here,
under protest,

away from the Mersey,
just outside – whose wet, wide
interesting credentials are more
readily apparent. So, I throw
a provocation, suggest
– Anything can be Art.

They loudly disagree, but go on
to read the caption. 'Something
to do with World War II. It says.'
They scoff, with shaking heads,
before coughing up more reasons

why this shape should not be seen,
as anything other than a waste
of time. I will not prove them wrong,
but note their fascinated ire,
their inability to stop talking

about this painting. Pretend
I haven't noticed, their flicked
middle finger gestures,
causing snorts of laughter,
a few steps behind my back.

SISSY DOUTSIU

The first time I made love
The first time I got drunk, stopping every passerby in my neighborhood
asking them about my freedom

The first time I got lost in a forest all alone
The first time I was afraid of my own darkness
The first time I looked at the sky and wanted to be an astronaut

The first time I travelled in Nile and in the desert of Palestine, as a sailor

The first time I touched you
I dripped, I opened, I dissolved
Baby, what could I do?
I weighed, I won

The first time I went with my cousin to the main square of our city
to find something to smoke, just the two of us
and we found the most awful weed you could smoke
and we shared a joint
just the two of us
last puff, and then an unforgivable laugh

We could do anything
just tequila and short skirts
poetry and wet eyes
a friend vomiting from too much alcohol and herb
behind the busy street of the city with pride

I never slept with my clothes on - in bed
no matter how drunk I was

With a rapper in Brooklyn for the first time
I told him to take me home with a French accent
"Take off my clothes
my clothes are making me warm this time"
the first words were spoken at the meat market

Back then, I thought of robbing a taxi driver
threatening him with a knife and a dog.

The lights of cars blind
the shop windows melt
in front of me, in a perfect demonstration, and everyone gets stuck
we carried seven Molotov cocktails and a black spray in a bag, hidden
to write poetry on the streets of a grey city burning
my gun is the spray that catches fire

The first time I sold a few kilos of weed
I have to pay the rent, little money but it's crap, not first class
The first time I worked as an escort
Sexworkers fall in love with their clients, it's sad, I know
Masters fall in love with their slaves, I know, never felt before
My first trip to Paris,
good money – I enjoyed it incredibly

The last time I smoked heroin
The last time I smelled a bit of death like a little girl
many children are secretly in heaven

We've learned to bite others and it's getting dark outside
Everyone just wants to be able,
to be able, to work, to be able to hate, to be able to wear
a woven silk shroud
every Saturday night

The last time I wondered why
Some choose to be heroes and others followers

Nothing anymore is from my life

Make love to me now
the two of us, my love, we're not enough
with the brave ones, we'll come now.

GORDAN STRUIĆ

TRAIN WINDOW

The glass shakes
with every turn of the track,
my face returns
blurred in the reflection –
younger, almost,
as if the years
had stayed behind
at the station.

A woman across the aisle
peels an orange,
the scent carries
through the carriage,
sharper than memory.

I press my hand
against the window,
trying to hold the fields
that keep rushing past,
but the glass
does not keep anything,
not even breath.

Later,
when the train slows,
I notice the peel left
on the empty seat beside her –
curled into a spiral,
a small geography of absence.

ILIAS TSAGAS

FLAMENCO DANCER

Flamenco dancer -
a centipede sweeps the stage
legs that multiply

GORDAN STRUIĆ

SEARCH: MADRID

02:13.
I open Photos, type Madrid,
the sound of the keyboard
– like footsteps in a hallway.

Results appear:

calle_olvido_01.jpg
a doorway with peeling paint,
the colour somewhere between wine
and pain.

respira_despacio.wav
your breath, then mine,
then traffic, distant as a seashell.

manos_con_sal_2.jpg
a close-up of fingers,
salt glittering like quiet electricity.

Maps suggests a path I never took.
Blue pin, grey streets.
I pinch to zoom until the pixels lose
their names.

nota_para_luego.txt
one line only: buy apples.
I try to remember if we did.

lluvia_suave_ventana.wav
soft rain against glass,
the same tempo as our last silence.

beso_guardado.pdf
fails to load.
The spinner turns, as if rehearsing a
small planet.

I scroll to the bottom and the phone
asks
if I want to delete duplicates.
My thumb hesitates over Select All.

In the search bar, the word remains,
bright as a cursor blinking:

Madrid –
un archivo de lo que falta.
A file of what is missing.

AZALEA AGUILAR

EVERY SINGLE THING

I spent all Saturday searching
for something to satisfy this hunger
made homemade chicken soup
tried baking my first artisan loaf
served some apple pie
allowed myself one more slice
tried a piece of dark chocolate
wondered if hungry was what it was
after none of these sufficed
opened the blinds, closed the blinds
played Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks*
Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*
began a deep clean of the pantry
tossed expired masa
decided we were never going to use
that bag of organic pumpkin seeds
gave baking goods their own shelf
took all the utensils out
organized them by use
stacked measuring cups and spoons
decided to mop all the floors
on my hands and knees
a bucket and a rag
like momma used to do
slid my nails into crevices
to clean lint old as this house
washed mirrors with newspaper
like daddy taught me
rummaged through old files
tossed paystubs from 2018
flipped through old writing journals
tried salvaging stanzas
found old photos of me
one from high school prom
showed it to my girls
they were not so interested
decided not to do that again
thought about having a cold beer
salt, lime, and tajin on the rim
or a strong pour of merlot
in the glasses my mother in law
gifted us before she knew
I stopped drinking
made myself chai tea instead
read another book about trauma
The Myth of Normal by Gabor Mate
highlighted text like "we pass on

to our offspring what we
haven't resolved in ourselves" and
"the more severe the trauma,
the more total that loss."
dog eared pages where
there was too much to highlight
I was going to give up sugar
but then the cold came
and all my body craved
was every single thing

JOSEPH HUNTER

HITCHHIKING (2006)

Van full of tools and tired men
coming down Pyrenean mountain
I was young and didn't know it
felt old as the rocks, as the sleep
the tired working men slept
driver asked me about the war
I didn't know what war he meant
all wars were the same to me
all men were the same, too.

They were building a new tunnel
they'd come from Algeria
they were men who smelled of dust
their faces were mottled and grey
driver asked about the war, smiled
I think he meant the War on Terror
but the question made me afraid
I didn't know how to answer him.

They left me a mile from Lleida
mountains pink and forgiving behind
city dappled, chattering below.

JOSEPH HUNTER

YOU WERE THERE BESIDE ME AT THE WEDDING

You were there beside me at the wedding
I thought for a moment that you were her
but you were you, and saw my hand
reaching out to touch your back

but there were all those days, remember?
On wooden benches, in piled bedclothes
smiles and hands and suppressed laughter
I fell into the river after an all-nighter

my dinner suit was sodden and limp
we kissed in the hallway outside my room
the others were inside sleeping and talking
your lips were cold, I tasted of river.

JOSEPH HUNTER

THERE WHERE YOU REMAIN

Nailed-up grandfather-built garden house
Eastwood Nottingham by the organic farm
cold in winter hot in summer flat roof thin walls
there where you remain, and I can't go.

I remember when you were 11
strangle-tight black rollneck, white Nikes, smiling
we played basketball, you did silly voices
later your voice broke, got silly again
shattered clarion calling your brothers
striding the playground on puberty legs.

And was it because of your sweaty hands
like greasy greenhoused meat in summer?
Was it the red minefield your face became
oily mass of acne confessing pus?
Or was it getting dumped last day of school
when we played pool together in silence?

I went to college, you lived in that house
you never came out – couldn't come out
your PlayStation controllers were sweat-slick
us side by side, watching the milky screen.

I don't know the way to your garden house
I can't go to see you there anymore
but I remember high sounds the wind made
the squirrels and their stop-frame hands
and the bat we found under the fascia
black knot of brittle bones and blind sleep.

SARAS MOODLEY

ODE TO MY BLACKNESS

(Response to Sharon Old's, 'Ode to my Whiteness')

How could I have ignored you,
when you were always so present?
You followed me everywhere—
from birth to here.

On the park bench that said
'Whites Only', you chased me
to my side of Pietermaritzburg.

Where the roads were dotted
with potholes, mud, and dead juniper,
where the gardens were tangled
in brush and aimless lines of flaccid
marigolds,
where the streetlights were cold,
and electricity and water
sparse and broken—

~~the side of town where we, the so-called
'Indians' lived—
far from Woodlands, and Edendale,
where the so-called 'Coloureds' and
'Africans' lived.~~ [1]

Far from the northern suburbs
where the 'white' people lived,
far from their lofty villas
and princely-scaped gardens,
far from their majestic golf
and rugby country clubs.

You have planted yourself
in the marrow of my bones,
in the nameless corners
of this loose-fitting sky,
in this other land I now call home.
I lie below sea-level unable
to swim upwards to breathe again.
You've left me marked,
deformed, distempered
and even here the orange soil
speaks in your fractured
grammar of intolerance,
and glass fences,
of us and *them*—

South Africa, I bleed still
the same fearful tears
of those dark days before 1994.

Those crowded days
of heat, dust, and sweat,
when grown women and men
were called girls and boys.
Bare-footed and blistered
they'd walk for miles to
serve their *white baas*[2]—
in their homes, on their mines
and on their farms.

In the backdrop of that damp
existence, the ever-present
burning of coal, plastic and
wood fires swooned the early
morning township air, as mothers,
daughters, and wives hung over
their fires, and with their
cracked hands, prepared a thin
breakfast of *mealie-meal pap*. [3]

Come evening, the day's decay
piled up in pit latrines, heaps of
rotting garbage, and dirt-roads
lined with stagnant puddles of
urine, clogging the night's air, as
homeless dogs barked through
the cow-dung-watered streets.
They were the days and nights
of boot-stamping police raids
and *pass-controls*. [4]

But even amidst the smell
of hardship and oppression,
there was a lighting of
incense, the roasting of spices,
the stewing of meat, the performance
of life-rituals, and song & dance:
people got married, had children,
grew old, and died...

South Africa, I did not leave you,
& you did not leave me.

[1] I strike out these words, making them vaguely visible in my poem in resistance and abhorrence of the apartheid racial categories as they were used in South Africa up to 1994. In apartheid South Africa, the *Population Registration Act* of 1950, classified all South Africans as either 'White/European'; 'African/Native/Bantu'; and 'Coloured'. Indians/Asians (that is, South Asians from the former British India, and their descendants) were added later as a separate classification as they were seen as having "no historical right to the country". <https://www.source.library.utoronto.ca/southsetter.pdf>; <https://www.britannica.com/topic/apartheid>; <https://www.sehistory.org.za/article/timeline-group-areas-act-and-selected-related-races-legislation>; [accessed 17/06/25].

PS. I strongly oppose using these racial categories, especially in the light of this apartheid history. However, it must be noted that these terms continue to be used in a democratic South Africa. In the post-1994 South African context there are still those who willingly embrace such categories in defining their own identity. <https://www.source.library.utoronto.ca/southsetter.pdf>; <https://theconversation.com/coloured-south-africans-are-all-but-erased-from-history-textbooks-i-asked-learners-how-that-makes-them-feel-234832>; [accessed 17/06/25].

[2] white baas: this term was commonly used in a master-servant relationship within the apartheid system that prevailed until 1994 in South Africa. Today it is regarded as a derogatory term. (various internet sources)

[3] Mealie-meal pap: is a porridge made from fine maize meal and can be eaten as a sweet or savoury dish. It is a staple food for the majority of South Africans. (various internet sources)

[4] pass-controls: Under apartheid, the pass laws restricted the movement of all Black South Africans, keeping them confined to designated areas. If a person was found outside of these areas they were arrested. All black South Africans were compelled to identify themselves at all times with a pass document. This was regularly checked by on the spot checks by police. (various internet sources)

CHARLIE BAYLIS

I CARRY LILAC HIBBERT IN MY PINK TIGER MOUTH

she bites my neck
strawberries ripen on the vine
pink angels swooping in from the pink ocean
mourning & she sucks my skin

as if i loved her as if love
is a body of want

or if love is jane birkin
tickling the oysters in the hot french sunlight
in tiger print
in chapel white polka dots
sipping a cappuccino on the boulevards of hot paris

tortured, ludic & pure
teenagers

whose tongue searched the mouth of charlie baylis
who set charlie down on his knees
took his dreams & buried him under
chestnut trees

shuffling dawn across the lawn
pushing up daisies
gathering together his highway years
falling in love

KEVIN MACALAN

I DON'T KNOW S C FLYNN

I don't know S C Flynn,
the Australian Irish poet
who thinks pragmatically
while commentating
the coming apocalypse.

Like I don't know
a few billion others,
and time to leverage
the commonalities that unite us
is running low.

We're in the epoch
of the brindled cow,
and must learn our place
before the cold kills us
or hubris bleaches our bones.

We respect the wrong nature.
We respect politicians
whose nature is division.
What if the final dismay
at a minute to twelve

is finding amity
with the othered
(or friending an antipodean muse)
with only time enough to hear
I told you so?

HOPE

KEVIN MACALAN

I remember you there when my mother beat me,
when trust fled,
when I pleaded
with the dumb dark edge of the world
for the Earth to turn,
for the slow creep of light to rinse shadows,
and everything done under their cover.

Then later, when I tilted my head
and slid a hand across the sleek surface
of my grandmother's mahogany table,
cast away in that cheerless room,
adults, death, the scent of too many lilies,
my hand reaching your fingertips,
the touch of solace pointing beyond loss.

Later still, when I carried my child to A&E,
blood in his trusting eyes,
tears in mine,
you helped me lift him,
helped bear the weight of fear,
as you did the day I buried my father,
wanting to go with him; staying for you.

Even later, weren't you there
when I had three careers in two years?
Where did you go when I paid the manic toll?
The come down, down, down,
the narcoleptic regret,
my dismal soul
dissolving in rain on the steps beneath Eros.

I remember the chore of remaining without you,
the inertia of being,
the ache to slip away into nothing,
until the shock of bumping into you,
turning a corner, finding you again
in a new face, a body with a beating heart,
that infectious belief.

Would that all who lose you
were gathered back
before losing themselves.

ROBERT MCDONALD

MONSTERS

Sometimes I woke up when my father came home, drunk
enough that he had trouble with the lock, and this was the fault
of the keys, or the door, the goddamn lock, or my mother.
Then I'd hear the sound of furniture moving, his grunt
as he moved the couch across the room or tipped over

the kitchen table. Next to my bed I had a collection
of snap-together models, they glowed in the dark,
Godzilla, who might smash and burn down your city,
or fight another monster on your behalf.
And Frankenstein's monster, as played

by Boris Karloff, an ogre assembled from the parts
of other people, held together with bolts and stitches.
The Monster understood beauty, but he had trouble
expressing himself. That scene, for example,
when he throws the little girl into the water,

so she can be with the flowers. In those years, my father
plunged into midnight, threw himself into the deep part
of the lake, hoping green-bottled beer
would bloom the evening
into roses.

.

ON MY MUM'S EIGHTIETH BIRTHDAY

SAM SZANTO

I send a text with a balloon GIF
from the train. I check
the app to see if my son has homework.

An hour later, the text is undelivered.
She has not replied to yesterday's. At York station,
I have twenty-three minutes to get to the classroom

where I am teaching a poetry workshop
for my full-time PhD
on attachment and absence.

In an overheated room with twenty students
young enough to be my children, I think of how
my mum did a BA and got a first aged fifty,

under the table, I check my phone:
blank screen.
I see sirens, hear the hospital trolley.

At lunchtime, my text is undelivered
and the return train is cancelled.
Someone must fetch my daughter.

The rain hard on my spine, I open the door
to hear my son screaming at a video game
while my daughter yells about how loud he is.

Mum does not answer her phone.
I clutch my rectangular black box
as though it contains a soul.

I call my father. *She's fine.*
Mum says, *My phone was on silent,*
I was helping the elderly this morning.

MY FATHER'S HANDS

SAM SZANTO

were made for dancing
on typewriter keys, for gripping
steering wheels, for decanting whisky
and holding a pipe, for gesturing
in the courtroom

and the bathroom
as he made up stories. His hands
lit fireworks, grew vegetables, met mine
when we crossed a road,
my fingers tucked in

around his, thick, warm
and hairy as a bear in a fairy-tale,
bone and muscle tamed by olive skin. When
I cried, those hands shambled
in circles on my back.

They were steadier
on the pages of the ephemeris
as he looked up planetary aspects,
working out when life
might change.

Now our hands
meet like branches, rough-hewn
and worn. His arthritic, mine callused, veins
close to the surface. My children's
toffee fingers stick to his.

LOOK, FLOWERS!

SIOBHAN O'CONNOR

We collect pine cones
In a town called Miraflores
Which translated literally means
Look, Flowers

We crouch under an old tree
With branches that droop
So low they make a tent
For us to shelter in

We play hide and seek
You clamber up a slippery slope
Your fingertips grip a mossy wall
I pretend I cannot find you

We eat pizza out of a box
On a standard double bed
At the three-star hotel in
Look, Flowers

We laugh like two infants
You snort and I take selfies
And I think about how joyful
A silly night in a hotel is

And how memories are made
When we take little breaks
From our people and places and we
Look, Flowers

But then I remember
All those infants and mothers
Who when fleeing the bombs
Of PalestineSyriaUkraine
Can afford one night's rest
In a hotel along the way

Do they make memories too?
Do they order chocolate cake?
Do the mothers pretend
When they play hide and seek?

And when the children ask please
Can we just stay here?
What do the mothers say then?
Do they lie through their teeth?

Do they say
Hush now my darling and
Look, Flowers?

BULLY SLASH VICTIM

MARCUS SLINGSBY

Dear Peter,
You held my hand
onto a hot radiator
in a cold classroom
years before
the thought had entered
Zuckerberg's mind
that would tell me
forty years too late
that you'd lost
your brother and
your mam was reeling.

LAST CIGARETTE

MARCUS SLINGSBY

Smoke and black
tea the tailgate

down, sat with
an artist &

soldier; weary eyed
homesickness is harder

to draw than
homelessness.

She could have
drawn the salmon

sunset but tells
me gunpowder and

sump oil are
the perfect composition

for death heavy
clouds.

PROMETHEAN COFFEE

ALEX PADINA

I never told you about those mornings.
The pink and purple hues.
A light fog and the pale moon
as a lingering testament of the night.
Today, again.
The dreamy canvas of celestial proportions.
And here and there, dead trees,
a small farm and a lonely white horse.
And the sun's flames above the mountains
painting the firmament in fiery
orange swirls and peach undertones.
Like a cosmic madman with a giant spatula,
it has whirled the colours in the sky.

Below, next to the road,
hiding in the bushes lays a bird's corpse.
It doesn't get to see much of this oneiric spectacle.
Ants feast on its insides but its black eye is still shiny,
the glossy surface reflecting only the dampest leaves.
And my dream turns to an office cubicle
so I write these lines.
I cough and, to my surprise,
I spit some ants on the napkin.
The fog has devoured the orange tones,
the sights now are pretty grey.

Deep inside me, a white blood cell has chased a
bacterium.
As the bitter taste of ants and coffee haunts my mouth
I remember Prometheus, the Three Sisters of Fate,
and other stuff from Greek legends.

Don't you just love Monday mornings?
There's so much beauty
albeit just for a few seconds.

THE JAWS OF THE SUN

CARMELLA DE KEYSER

As tender as a melting ice cube heart in my mouth,
As tender as sea foam flirting on pearl grey rock,
As tender as the dying light betwixt the pine blinds smokes,
As tender as the last yawn of the day gently closes,
As tender as the bow hits the low-voiced cello,
As tender as the weeping willow of fall, fades from green to yellow-
The sun's jaws soften me into tenderness.
A cerebral soaking.
Into the light...

THE LONG PURSUIT

VICTORIA SPIRES

Drawn back to the lake, as though my heart
Must always follow these same desire lines -

I look for your trail of dirty brushstrokes
In every sky; off-white on grey. The path is soft

Today - I feel its ache, in how it leavens
With the knead of my footsteps, and my breath

Comes pre-distilled, pluming like esters before
Your drinking eye. We are of a feather, you and

I, and here we are again, wrestling grace from
Anti-grace. A man was found here, once - did you

Know his name? I like to think he merely
Slipped, just one skipped tread in this same

Game we always play, and that you stayed
With him, in vigil, as he fringed the water's edge.

PATIENT, THE TREES

JOHN KENNY

Trees allow themselves
to be played
by the wind,
their leaves
applauding.

Trees talk silently
to each other,
branches touch,
roots seek out and
caress the earth.

Trees bend to our
burning, our slashing,
our sawing, our
hammering into
new shapes.

Trees are playing
a long game, safe
in the knowledge
they will be here
when we are gone.

HOOVES LIKE COWBOY BOOTS

ADEN THOMAS

You don't remember,
but there was that night
about a month ago,
after drinking all that sangria,
I came to you as a bison
through the mist of a dream,
singing like Chris Stapleton.

I was powerful
with my animal elegance,
with my hooves
like cowboy boots,
that I'm quite sure
had the dream continued,
I would have eaten
straight from the palm
of your ballerina hands.

UNDER STRIP LIGHT

GRAHAM CLIFFORD

You put something in your will,
a task or clause that you think is funny.

And you have pre-paid for
a novel service that provides for the legal disposal of bodies
in a way that will leave no trace.
You want to vanish.

You have emptied the loft of our childhood toys
and sent our schools books and paintings
and report cards and immunisations documents
to us. And my retelling of Cinderella
on yellow card. Typed. Illustrated
with wax crayon.

This all makes you breathe easier.
You have digitised the albums of sticky photos to throw them away —
Dad making us stand on the edge of a cliff in the rain.

You are tidying up as you leave over decades
painting yourselves out of rooms, leaving them
disastrously empty.

Once, I looked and looked for something
in your bedroom, at the back of drawers, not believing
the cursory, operational fact of you.

There had to be more.

I needed smoke and grease,
40 watt bulb-gloom clammy with nutrients

but you are fresh, plastic pipes
stacked neatly in a carpet showroom
under strip light
smelling of Leylandii.

PADRE NUESTRO
ANA TRICULESCU

Dios, ¿a dónde te has ido?
Aquí haces falta, aquí te necesitan.
¿Vienes, vuelves?

Dios, ¿estás? ¿Dónde te podemos encontrar?
No vaya a ser que has huido,
Tú también,
Junto a quienes huyen por sus vidas
Del hambre, de los truenos, del temor.
¿Has encontrado un cupo en los camiones,
Tras rejas, escondido;
O en algún contenedor,
Como producto de carnicería?

¿Será que te has ido,
Abandonando toda fe en esta
Humanidad?

¿Empezaste la semana desde cero en otro planeta,
Intentando el experimento una vez más,
Esperando que en esta nueva vuelta
La prueba salga bien?

Dios, ¿vas a volver?
Aquí haces falta, aquí te necesitan.

Dios, nos traicionaste.
Las oraciones se quiebran al desertar los labios,
Se deshacen, se descosen.
Las palabras pierden el hilo,
La aguja no las atraviesa.
El grosor de la connotación
No permite colgarlas como dijes.
No se llevan en el pecho
Como medalla de San Miguel,
No trenzan coronas de laurel.

Dios, ¿cuándo vuelves?
Aquí haces falta, aquí te necesitan.
El plomo es pluma. Vuela.
Más ligero. Más etéreo. Vuela.
Más fácil. Más rápido. Mejor.
Más. Más. Más.
Mata.

Dios, ¡vuelve!
Tu palabra no es verdad.
Se cuestiona. Se dobla. Se tuerce.
Las palabras las perfora el plomo.

¿Volverás...?

TO THE SMALL FIELD THAT SEPARATES GETAFE AND LEGANÉS

RUBY DORAN MEIRA

If I had less to do,
I would visit more often.
On a bus that barely clears corners,
I stare as your gnarled roots twist into sigils
And wilt into frail yellow knots.

If you only knew,
You would feed your leaves proudly.
Sharp shoots of mad green puncture blue,
Enraptured in homage, an instinctual rage
Of somewhere some distance from here.

The roads have forgotten
Your bygone dominion.
Wedge primly as power grid rigging,
The headstone afforded to your half-sealed grave,
A motel with a faux-Chinese roof.

You haunt my commute
With inscrutable purpose.
Split-second confessions betray you,
And in speechless wisdom you still serve the damned
Who hide from the sprawl under dust.

Whenever it rains now,
I listen for sprouting.
The groan of a sapling limb daring,
To creep past the K-rail and sop up the diesel,
And silence a death-rattle exhaust.

If ever you wanted,
I'd leap right out to you.
I'd stomp and blow air into soil,
I'd throw up a cabin and sleep there to prove it,
You're better than no grass at all.

If you have to die now,
You'll be dying twice over.

FIRST CHRISTMAS IN CATALONIA LIZZIE HOLDEN

There's no red robin
everything is blue
and tinselled with sunlight.
Flurries of white waves
and the soft crunch of sand.
Church bells tumble
through crisp nights.
Oranges hang luminous on the tree
illuminated by the perfect moon.

AFTER WORK, TEACHERS TALK ABOUT OTHER WAYS TO MAKE MONEY WITH THEIR BODIES

BRITTNEY WALKER-ZALESKI

We'll become stepmothers one colleague says
as he checks out rich daddies
discussing business at the burger place.

Maybe there's a way to be a sugar baby
without spooning out any sugar.
Maybe I can find some patron of the words
who gives me euros
to know what's on my mind
or maybe
I can teach topless online.

We talk about other ways
to make money with our bodies.

Did you hear about the girl who stopped shaving?
She sells her photos online.
Did you see the other one who sits on cakes?

Sometimes being an English teacher
isn't that much different from being a sex worker.

At one language school we called students
"customers."
Customers who could request
a specific gender or accent.

I remember hearing that lonely people
hire sex workers for conversation.

Do you know how many times
I've comforted a divorced,
recently redundant man?

I corrected all his grammar mistakes
I gave him thorough
feedback on his CV.

AUTO-FICTION

JULIE RUNACRES

First up, the yellow Passat that was
your mother's. When I backed out
hoping for the best I stove in
the nearside wing. Next, the '67

Beetle, red – minestrone
gearbox we stirred with a stick
of spaghetti. Designer Dalmatian
on the black vinyl bench

ears pinned back as we sped
to The Rosie when my waters broke
reaching for the instant coffee.
Parenthood made us reckless. Swapped

it for a Porsche, same colour. Blew
the proceeds from the house we sold
when we couldn't pay the mortgage.
On a July evening on a humpback

bridge the whole pub garden
cheered. Legged it to Oz and a tin-can
Daihatsu, unbreakable
even in deserts. We never hit

a 'roo. Back home to the family
saloons, the MPVs. I drove
the Espace too fast on the Witney
by-pass. A Toyota like Boxer

on diesel hoofed all the children,
carted grandparents. One day you
saw three generations in the rear view.
We traded it in. You cried.

AGREE TO DIFFER

LIAM BOYLE

It happens sometimes, maybe late evening over a bottle of wine
we raise one of those issues difficult to decide.
You suddenly are rigid in your attitude, I in mine.

You suggested once "we agree to differ;" in horror I replied
"That's an option for moral cowards, not us."
So we fought like cats over scraps, with honesty and pride.

But I'm tired of the way every issue we discuss
becomes one of unyielding principle. We agree on such a lot,
why not let the positive be the centre of our focus?

At this stage, I should make clear what these lines are not:
They are not meant either as betrayal or surrender.
It's just that now I want to repair and to build on what we've got.

I don't want to ignore the ugly, but to promote the tender.
Let's make a space for elements of splendour.

MUSEU NACIONAL D'ART DE CATALUNYA

NICOLA TOFT LAHIFF

Guards here follow you
like eyes in the pictures.
This one's leaning on a rail
staring at a girl; she's gazing up

at Christ in His Majesty,
who looks down on her,
His eyes all round and deadpan.
'I am the Light of the World.'

It's a job.

I WAKE TO JACOB MARLEY'S CHAINS

EWEN GLASS

I fully expect a visitation
but it's the cat's collar
and her day-bright bell,
a furious setting of the
scene and my options:
adhere or
bear the burden of her
dismay for nine lifetimes.
I inch over and let her
sleep in the warm patch,
with all her ghosts and mine.

CHARLES PENTY

SILOS MONASTERY, ROMANESQUE CLOISTER

(For John Wezelman)

My last living uncle calls
unexpectedly from Canada,
concerned I might be depressed.
In Silos, there is a cypress

like a sword blade, enhiesto!
Where Gothic meets the Romanesque,
the guide points out a painted minstrel
playing a four-stringed Amazigh oud,

his song carries across seven centuries
to the garden where a February mist
is clearing. Dear John, I am
still in my right mind, just

grasping for the lightsomeness
scattering from this sculpted scene
in its star-field where the doubting apostle probes
the wound in the side of Jesus.

Enhiesto - held aloft in Spanish

ANTHONY WADE

FOREVER

A particular pain
lies in the loss of you,
child not borne into our lives,
to no avail
the warm nourishing
of your promised life
in your mother's fertile womb,
instead the cruel snuffing out
of all future days,
and a life's every chancing die
remaining forever uncast.

You will forever play
only in the disturbed dreams
of your lonely parents,
a line of promised candles unlit
and stretching nowhere
unlighting your Mother's
darkened heart forever broken
for you who long lay unseen
in her lightless growing womb,
and now in your lightless tiny tomb
will lie forever unseen.

THE COUPLET

JUAN M. MARTÍNEZ

When I do count the clock that tells time,
empieza el Soneto XII de Shakespeare
en aquel librito de mesa de tapa azul
que en la mañana había dejado
como anzuelo para la visita de un gran amigo.
Venía de Canadá —con whiskey de maple
y el frío de invierno pegado a los huesos—
a estas tierras peninsulares de la Florida.
También llegó con un blanco
más copioso en su pelo
y, por lo demás, los rasgos intactos.

“Es una escena de *Lost Highway*”,
se había atrevido a asociar mi amigo
en nuestro viaje zen por las carreteras
campestres del norte de la Florida.
El sol había caído y aparte de las luces
(en el sentido contrario)—
y los ojos de los venados a la orilla—
todo parecía estar en total oscuridad,
a menos que miráramos a las estrellas
y que por un instante soltara el volante
como un reto de niños en la vía

Las cartas en la política nacional—
y por ende mundial—se habían jugado;
credos, mitos, “ciencias”, y hasta religiones
se habían sacudido, quizás mezclado
como una baraja de borrachos.
Pero aún escuchábamos las canciones
de siempre en el equipo del carro.
No lloramos, como de costumbre,
pero tampoco contemplamos la posibilidad

Todo terminó con una ida a una iglesia
de no-sé-qué denominación
y una pizza con cerveza.
“Lo curioso son esos dos últimos versos”,
Pensó mi amigo en voz alta, volviendo al soneto.
The couplet, recordé remotamente
que así se llamaban.
“Son como una explicación,
como una moraleja”,
traté torpemente de explicar.
Luego seguí con mi cerveza.
And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make defence,
dice el primero de esos dos versos del final.

EL NIÑO

JUAN M. MARTINEZ

Se encontró un palito en la tierra
bajo el árbol que desde entonces
o quizá desde siempre
le dio la sombra

El palito no era uno cualquiera;
tan grande como él mismo,
capaz de espantar las hormigas de su guarida
y de sacudir las abejas de los bosques

pero el niño tropezaba y tropezaba
y recogía y recogía su palito,
luego no lloraba
sino que reía

sin dientes reía y el palito se materializaba
como el de los grandes alquimistas
que le arrancan el oro al detrito
como la espada libertadora

como la que aplasta y castiga
y sin sangre desangra
como el bolígrafo para la carta de amor
para la sentencia de muerte

y la madre lo alza en sus brazos
para nunca dejarlo ir
y el palito bajo el árbol
en la sombra

PALLBEARER BLUES

CIARAN BUCKLEY

Face the coffin, the undertaker's assistant says,
Face the coffin, and the man himself,
Weeks from retirement, adds
That it is in fact the early bird that catches the worm,
He doesn't want you to be late, that's the very last thing he wants.

So, the six of us get it on our shoulders
Out of the back of the long-black car,
Struggle with directions, half-cut
In the piss-taking rain, miss the church entirely

Walk on, hope for the best
Trying not to drop it, let it crush us,
But it isn't easy,
The hills nearly kill us,
The shadow of a hungry bird circles,
Each time we see a hill our hearts sink.

We drop off, God knows where, the boozier, home,
Thirst, fatigue, dying from boredom, who knows,
You can almost see them, defeated sparrows of the gutter,
They never complain, one moment they're not there,
Left with their share of the burden, the undertaker's echo,
His bony finger poking your face.

You stumble for what must be the seventh time,
The arrogant bird, knowing the end is at hand, whistles a tune.

Shook, from the box a voice rises,
Stuttering out through broken teeth
"The early bird catches the worm
But I am the worm you cannot catch".

Mocked, the merciless bird swoops
Hoping to rip the soul from the body,
Strikes you down, the last weak man, slashes your cheek.

Starving for a second death
It tears the wood to splinters
But inside finds nothing
But snatches of laughter, an IOU, unsent letters,
A pair of odd shoes, half a bottle of vodka.

All the hopeless, hideous, heartless,
Wormless, devilish, bastard bird can do,
Outside the boarded-up church,
Is wait for night, whistle, dream of worms,
Wonder if he's past his prime, wait for dawn.

AT THE WESTERN EDGE OF EUROPE

GWYNETH BOX

Palm fronds prick at a volcanic sky
and bright hibiscus leer at pink-skinned
foreigners. I stand on a grey beach.
Black breakwaters guard my back;
beyond them lies all the heave and swell
of the Atlantic.

The boardwalk stalls
are bright with Disney towels, plastic
raffia hats and tax-free tat. Chippies,
tandooris and all-day-English-breakfast bars
are interleaved with burger grills.
Each time the scummy waves recede, I feel
America suck the sand from under my heels.

POINT OF ORIGIN

GWYNETH BOX

The house where I was born's a blank.
And yet I know my parents slept for years
in that same high bed that cushioned
my entry into the world. I remember
metal twisted tight in coils that buoyed
the mattress where my mother
twisted in her labour. Eyes shut,
my fingertips recall the bevelled edge
of head- and foot-board, smooth and warm,
and dark as coffinwood. My birthplace
travelled with us – north, then south,
then north again – the moving centre
of my infancy. Now street-view maps
reveal anonymous grey pebbledash
and slates slicked bright with English rain.

MEMORY OF YOU

JUDE FIRESONG

I've been focusing
on the cowardly way
you let us drift apart
just enough for me
to realise you'd gone

because it's so much easier
to cuss you out
for a few months of fuckery
than sit down & deal with
the loss of everything you are
and everything we were

you said you wanted to take away
some of the obstacles in my path
and so you did, more than you
ever let me give you credit for

you held me through each dissociative seizure
until one day it just dawned on me —
oh wait — I haven't had
one of those in months

you held me as I cried
over my alien body
until I got myself a chop-top
and I had no reason to cry anymore

you believed in me
being a boy, and a good one
when all the world
made my world tremble

in your eyes
on your lips
I discovered love
& true happiness

and I know I'm lucky
I got to hold you tight
in my swimmer's arms
for as long as I did

so for as long as I live
I cannot — I will not
— I refuse to let go

of the memory of you.

WATCHING THE SUN SET IN CÁDIZ AFTER THREE GLASSES OF SHERRY
CHARLES PENTY

Have you seen how the sunset spills
its bottle of *palo cortado*
onto the tablecloth of the late snows
spread over the Sierra in early April,

how a cool evening in spring
golden skinned like muscatel grapes
wraps herself in a dark cape,
adjusts her hat with the broad brim,

settles at a table in a *tabanco* in Cádiz,
tops up her glass with *Pedro Ximénez*,
watches the lanterns light one by one

on the ships anchored beyond the *Malecón*,
the sherry-hued sky clear over the bay
honey-coloured, like *Tío Pepe*?

tabanco: Andalusian tavern

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT

Writers to Watch: Six New Voices Shaping Today's Literary Landscape

Every so often, a group of writers appears whose work reminds us why stories and poems matter — that words still have the power to confront history, explore emotion, and make sense of our world. The six authors we're spotlighting this season each bring a distinct energy and sensibility to contemporary writing, from historical fiction to experimental poetry and translation.

Jerry Simcock opens the list with his debut novel *Giselle and Mr. Memphis*, a haunting, multi-layered work set in 1970s Frankfurt. Told through the journal of Ignatz Himmelsputz - a dwarf, entertainer, and survivor - the novel examines guilt, trauma, and moral responsibility in the aftermath of war. Simcock's experience as a teacher and his time living in Germany infuse the story with compassion and authenticity.

In a very different register, Julian Gorham's *Ten Poems* and *Ten Poems Too* are a masterclass in linguistic rhythm and design. A long-time copywriter and creative director, Gorham brings musicality to the printed page, celebrating the beauty of words both seen and heard. Produced in a limited letterpress edition by Paekakariki Press, both collections explore nature, transience, and connection in a way that feels both timeless and tactile - a refreshing analogue experience in a digital age.

Steve Denehan, an award-winning Irish poet, offers a collection that feels like a conversation with life itself. *A Quarter Dead and Half Alive* captures the everyday textures of existence - ageing parents, growing children, fleeting joys - with humour, insight, and tenderness. Denehan's voice is one of empathy and quiet strength, his poems companions for the ordinary and the extraordinary alike.

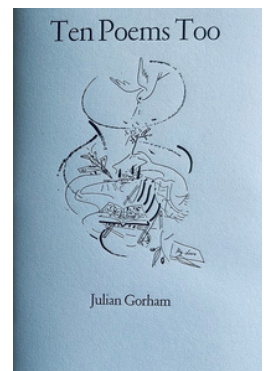
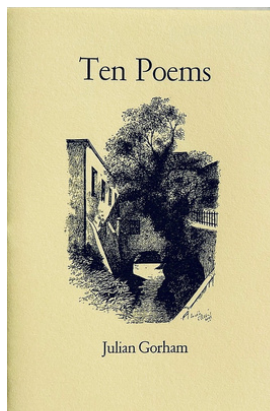
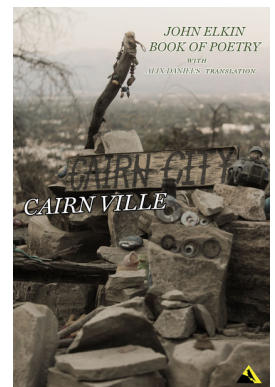
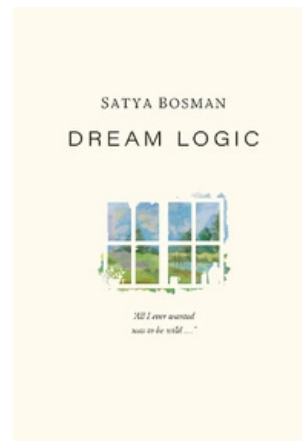
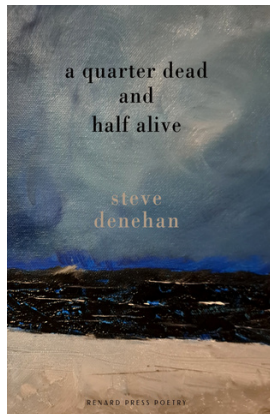
With *Dream Logic*, Satya Bosman - poet, editor, and founder of Black Cat Poetry Press - presents a debut collection that moves between myth, memory, and the mysteries of the heart. Her poems hover in that space where loss becomes renewal, where the past feels vivid but unreachable. Lyrical and intimate, *Dream Logic* asks what it means to belong and how we navigate the thresholds between reality and reverie.

Finally, John Elkin and Alix Daniel (also known as Docteur Cybirdy) collaborate on *Cairn City/Cairn Ville*, a bilingual and illustrated edition that reimagines poetry as architecture - a city built from language itself. Elkin's vision of "Anthropoetry" merges anthropology, myth, and imagination, while Daniel's French translation mirrors his rhythm and tone with musical precision. Together, they create a work that transcends linguistic and cultural borders, offering readers a truly immersive experience.

Alix Daniel is also the celebrated translator of *Ariel: Percy Bysshe Shelley*, the classic text by Andre Maurois. Amidst scandals—expulsions, financial woes, child losses—Maurois evokes Shelley's skylark-like spirit, soaring yet earthbound. Daniel's 2025 translation revives this classic for modern readers, infusing her version with idiomatic vitality and accessibility. It skips "lightly along," correcting dated phrasing from D'Arcy's while preserving Maurois' poetic cadence.

Each of these writers brings something unique to the page — a new way of seeing, feeling, and understanding. Whether through the haunting echoes of history, the music of words, or the layering of translation and image, they invite us to explore what it means to be human in all its complexity.

If you'd like to know more about our featured authors and their books, simply scan the QR code on the left.



THE WORLD PLUS THE WORK

JAYNE MARSHALL

And then he uttered the subtlest thing of all, that sly wooer: he who loves, he said, is more divine than the beloved, because god is in the former, but not in the latter.

I saw it today.

Under the searing, relentless Madrid sun. Mercifully, on the road near the apartment, there were rows of mature leafy trees every half-block or so. My steps beat out their rhythm: sun/shade, hot/cold, light/dark, clip/clop. I checked the piece of paper with the approximate address scribbled on it. On my phone, the film was ready to play at the scene outside the front door. I stopped and looked over the road at number 62. I raised my eyes to the sky, at the layers of the apartment block soaring upwards, the contents of each balcony revealing something about the inhabitants. I looked at the chairs and tables of the pavement café on the corner, and at that orangey-coloured front door. I played the film.

¡Jacquemate!

The idea to look for the apartment had circled in my head for some time. Or rather, I circled it, enjoying the courtship, losing myself in daydreams. It's free, right? Harmless. And anyway, don't artists want us to immerse ourselves in their work? Isn't that the point of creating it in the first place? Perhaps they are less keen on the idea when the work implicates their own lives, their own selves. But if someone can show me where that line is, I'll consider staying on the correct side of it.

On a bench opposite Calle de ---, number 62, I sat and watched the apartment building, vigilant behind my sunglasses. I wanted to see what kinds of people were coming and going, and how often. Maybe even catch a glimpse of him. I didn't try to disguise myself in any way. The best place to hide is in plain sight, as everyone knows. I wasn't trying to *disimular* - a verb I learnt whilst watching his 1988 film *All About My Mother* and carefully noted down for future use. The curves of the letters, the soft sound - even before I looked it up in the dictionary, I sensed it was a word I needed to know. I didn't stay long. My objective had been achieved: find the flat. I could live off this not-so-secret knowledge for a while.

Have you noticed how everything is a version now? Artists have got into the habit of using their lives as source material, then translating it into something else. That's how this began. It wasn't my decision; I'm not in charge of genres - that's the eternal ebb and flow of art itself. What's that maxim? Art is long, life is short. It's probably something to do with that. Anyway, what I mean is that interleaving layers of fact with fiction doesn't really change either one, it's just shifting the view, looking at things from a different angle. It's almost an invitation for us to do the same. I don't know if this supports what I'm planning to do or not. Here is where I should explain what I'm planning to do.

But wait, I want to keep this neat and tidy. Nicely delineated - even if these artists don't afford us the same courtesy. So, let's go in chronological order. He had a precedent. Before The Film Director, there was The Singer.

I was 10 years old when I heard The Singer's voice for the first time. I was attracted to the funny drawing on the album cover *Talking with the Taxman About Poetry*. That title isn't original, I found out later - it was taken from a poem by Vladimir Mayakovsky. The Singer borrowed it, translated it, made it his. See what I mean about artists? His voice became lodged in my brain, like a seed or something, and from that moment on his voice flourished in the ecosystem of my body, weaving itself around my heart and in and out of my life.

My favourite video of The Singer is him performing live at the Dominion Theatre in 1988, the year *Workers Playtime* was released. Let's watch it together. Look. Look at his posture as he strikes the guitar... The way his clothes fit him, his hair, which always seems to be a little bit on its way to being in his eyes. The way his lips move in that particular, pouty way when he sings the words to the songs that move me so much, and how, when those words are very tender, he squints at the camera, as if it physically hurts him to expel them. I really should switch it off and get on with things; I'm sure you're wondering whose apartment I'm casing. But just wait. The setlist is about to move to "The Short Answer". Watch with me, with the same intensity as I do. It's an intensity not regularly applied to the more standard areas of life, and I bet if you stopped to think about that for a moment, you'd find you have your own Director or Singer. At least, I hope you would. We all need to escape relentless reality from time to time. Here it comes. Listen out for the lyric: "... I'm left standing here/With my hands down the front of my trousers". You know, that isn't his only reference to onanism. Though it makes sense - to me anyway - that an artist who sings about obsession, about monumental desire, would get around to it eventually. In "The Warmest Room" his tone is more playful, more plainly sensual, like when he sings:

And here she comes again
And I'm sitting on my hands
And she sings to me that siren song
Here she comes again and I'm biting my lip
But it won't be long

His hands... His hands on his guitar, his hands being restrained beneath him, his hands down the front of his trousers... Raymond Carver claimed that his own poems about sex and love turned him on. He wrote poems about those poems. Many artists say that if they can't make themselves feel their work, they can't expect their audiences to either. So, it has precedence, right? It's an invitation, too. I'm watching my own hand now, as it starts to move...

It was only after I followed The Director to Madrid, his adopted and beloved city, that I discovered The Singer's album *Workers Playtime* for the first time. Imagine - on Radio Nacional de España of all places! Hearing the beauty of his voice, the familiar lilt of his accent, was a welcome salve. Warm sun on my face on an autumn afternoon. It located me, in this strange city, gave purpose and meaning to my being here.

It was the first time I had heard him sing about love, and its counterpart: heartbreak. And about sex and infatuation. He made me think about the decisions we make, and that which spills forth from them and into the lives we create. I walked this foreign city, listening to his songs as ancient seams of feeling ripped themselves open, blending with his lyrics, creating my own version of his story, each one layered over the other, fact folded through fiction. And the lyric: "The temptation to take the precious things / We have apart to see how they work / Must be resisted for they never fit together again" running through my head. The longing *Workers Playtime* described spoke to me in a profound way that transcended actual heartbreak, though it seemed to encompass that too; the entire heartbreak of life itself, as if all of it were just one big breakup song. It sounds like I'm defending myself, doesn't it? Poeticising and so diminishing responsibility. Well, that didn't last long. It soon gave way to something less... passive.

At some point, I began to notice who the album was about. Or perhaps more accurately, for - written as it was, to target someone obliquely, at a remove. And so I began to wonder, who was this Mary? The tall girl, the barefoot girl, the little black cloud in a dress. The more I listened, the more the songs about Mary became the point where The Singer and I met. In those moments, I merged with something bigger than me. They came to stand for the whole thing, smushed together and speaking for the entirety, a pointillist mess with its own crazed, internal logic. I urgently wanted to know who Mary was and what she had that held The Singer so in thrall to her. The lyrics to "The Short Answer" provided a lead:

If anyone could help me with my obsession with
The young Susannah York
It was Mary

She was a British actress, active in the 60s and 70s. She played Superman's biological mother. We looked nothing alike. I listened to all the different versions of "The Short Answer" on YouTube that I could find. The demo version was particularly raw and heart-rending. Under it @studonaldson1497 had added the comment:

Ahem. I knew Mary a little. [The Singer] nicked her off a
mate of mine during a tour and then gave him a 'new man
proletarian socialist hug' to compensate which never really did.

A year later @aqhat3702 had asked:

is this true?

@studonaldson1497 replied:

Aqhat, sorry to say yes it is. It's not for me to judge but it
caused some hurt as those things always do. I really hope
everyone's now over it, Stu X

To which Aqhat, on the side of fairness and balance, closed the conversation with:

theres more than one perspective i guess

This was a link to the flesh and blood Singer. The real Singer doing real things, like stealing someone's girlfriend, breaking hearts and then having his own broken in turn. Someone on the other side of my screen had breathed and touched someone who had breathed and touched him. I found it extremely exciting to have him manifest in this way. And I wanted to maintain that excitement.

That said, with The Director it's different. Rather than the arguably more straightforward obsession with The Singer (which, let's face it, has the lingering taste of possession), it's more that I want to become The Director. Or somehow melt myself through his world. Which is the same thing as *becoming* him really because isn't he also infatuated with his own work, thus his own self? In *Pain and Glory*, his most autobiographical film, he says that all the money he made throughout his career, he used to buy art - huge canvases by Guillermo Pérez Villalta, gigantic on the walls of his central-Madrid apartment, on Calle de ---, number 62. Making, from his body of work (itself made from the stuff of his own life), a work of art within which to live.

On a class trip, when I was 14 and studying Spanish at school, our teacher took us to see a film by The Director. His work introduced me to a world that was so hugely different to the one I was living in - a grey, industrial city with its attitude of proud hopelessness. After that trip, I immersed myself in his work, taught myself how to live in these two very different worlds at once. Which was necessary because, the life I saw around me, I realised, was not for me. It seemed so pointless. Narrow and constrained. No one else saw it that way and. I suppose that made me strange, but I prefer to point to the counter argument.

The first time I visited Madrid, I came to understand how the city herself was a character in The Director's films. It represented the thrill, the creativity, the abandon of his world. And so, like The Director before me, I left everything behind and moved to Madrid. I still live in the same barely furnished apartment I looked at after arriving in the city. To walk down to buy bread in the morning, I pass the fountain where, in *The Flower of My Secret*, Marisa Paredes sat and paid a homeless man to help remove her boots, which were too small for her feet. And the apartment building that went up in flames in the final scene of *The Law of Desire*. The serpentine backstreet where Rossy de Palma beat up Antonio Banderas for stealing her drugs in *Tie Me Up Tie Me Down!*

It's almost like living in one of his films and it satisfies me for now: an inverted reflection of when I was at school and from that distance dreamed about the world I am now living in. I know it sounds like I'm justifying myself again. Using distance, an authorial gaze through which to view and theorise my actions. But all I can say is for me there is no remove. This is my life as I live it. In my world, all this fiction is very real.

Once I had established a base in Madrid, I went back through The Director's entire filmography. I borrowed as many of his DVDs as I could from the local library, impressing the librarians with my commitment to their culture, their language, their most famous creative export. I watched them in order, carefully taking notes, tracing the themes of his life and work, following them through and back and out and back in again. I drew diagrams, maps of his stories, which I tacked to my bare apartment walls. Though I may sound impulsive, I do like to be organised.

There is a clear thread; a strong taut thread, through from the seed that was planted by The Singer and his voice when I was 10 years old, to discovering The Director as a teenager, to where I find myself now. What *Workers Playtime* did, once I was installed in Madrid, was to photosynthesise the seed and allow this life to unfurl itself. The one I'm on the brink of living. But, before I roll the dice, allow me to share this last piece of data.

I had grown up with the idea – been indoctrinated into it – that obsession was a good and beautiful thing. A powerful thing. (Mary was one proof of that.) And so, my own initiations into the world of relationships had been more like experiments than lived experiences. There was one boyfriend who almost pulled me back into a more ordinary life. He normalised my heart by understanding and accepting its abnormalities. This boyfriend was an artist, so that likely had something to do with it. I was with him on an idle daytrip when I found the battered old copy of *Lolita* at an outdoor book sale. It was missing the dust jacket and appeared half-abandoned, some way apart from the other books, on a weather-beaten shelf. I tore through it. This was the first time I had come face-to-face with real, serious obsession and its most murky, shadow-side.

I lent my copy of *Lolita* to that boyfriend. We happened to be in bed together when he finished it. When he closed the book, he left his hand on the cover for a moment, as if in prayer, then turned to me and said: 'Why would anyone bother to write another book ever again?' For a moment, I thought I could love him. Really love him, like other people love. He showed me Martin Creed's *Work No. 232: the whole world + the work = the whole world*. He interpreted this as saying that art is ultimately meaningless, as it all comes out the same in the end: the world is still the world without the work. I took it to mean the opposite, that the world is not the world without the work. The work is the world. We broke up not long after that.

So, this is the thing: in *Pain and Glory*, The Director uses his own life as source material. He appears to film outside his own home and possibly inside too. I respect his commitment to his medium. I really don't think he will mind what I'm planning to do. Once it's all over – when he has had time to view it all from a different angle – I think he will see my actions as a work of art in themselves. And I could really do with the money if I'm honest. In the script – or is it dialogue taken from real life? – The Director says: 'I spent all my money on these paintings by Guillermo. They are all I have.' I'm going to take his art from him, the art he purchased with the money he made from the art he created. The art that helped create me. It's all quite logical really.

I saw him today.

I could and couldn't believe my eyes. He strolled, or rather somewhat limped out of Calle de ---, number 62 (he's getting old now, something which will be of use to me). Unmistakable with his dark glasses and crop of white curls. *He really does live there*. He put his *own house* in one of his *own films*. Now I just need to know what's inside. If it's true that original paintings by Guillermo Pérez Villalta reside there amongst his artfully arranged books and stylish kitchenware.

I'm so close now I'm almost tired of it. I remember a time when the sight of a thick black hair curling out of a lover's nostril entirely demolished what had been, only moments before, a powerful and significant desire; such a degree of passion apparently impossible without the hovering threat of its disappearance. Let's try *Workers Playtime*. Tell me you can't hear that? Feel that... such intensity must only exist within this matrix. It has to be ridiculous. It has to be beyond the everyday, beyond any knowable definition, for it to feel this way. I think: It's not just his words. It's his voice. And it's the tone and the potency of his voice. And with that voice he speaks the words. And that's the whole thing really.

I conclude it would be prudent to follow The Director around for a few days and get an idea of his routine before I strip him of all his assets. For someone so well-known, he spends a lot of time alone, without company or anyone keeping watch over him. I decide obsessive, sycophantic fan is the best way to get his attention. And that's a role I barely even need to assume. He goes to the same café for a coffee (a *café solo* that he sips at interminably) around 11:30 am every day. I plant myself there, I wear brightly coloured, well-cut clothes and sunglasses so we can eye each other up behind a shield of plastic. I buy a big ostentatious copy of *The Human Voice* to read. I also place a copy of *A Manual for Cleaning Women* on the table. I know his weak spots. It takes one obsessive to spot another.

It's hard to tell, with so much sunglasses wearing, but I'm pretty sure I've caught his eye. After calmly finishing my coffee, I raise my arm to signal for the bill and flash The Director a big smile. As I'm leaving, I stop at his table and graciously, politely tell him how much I love his work. How much it has meant to me over the years. The Director removes his dark sunglasses and smiles at me. Warmly. Genuine warmth. Then he stands and kisses me on both cheeks. His hand on my arm. It almost wrong foots me, this sweetness. A human kindness. But I carry on, using the script I wrote and rehearsed. I tell him it was because of his films that I moved to Madrid and he laughs, saying he hopes I wasn't disappointed. I laugh too, like tinkling glass. I casually drop into conversation that I've recently moved to a new apartment nearby. I say that perhaps I'll see him again, I have coffee here most days.



NOTES FROM IBIZA BY CLARE CAMPBELL

It was easy to pull off in the end. He is very trusting for a famous person. All I had to do was have coffee with him enough times for him to allow me to walk him home and then later, up to his apartment, where I saw 'Artist Looking At an Art Book' and all the other canvases, in all their magnificence. Glorious with pain. I made sure as many people as possible saw us together: the doorman in his building, the waiters at the cafe. I smiled at them all, my broadest smile. I touched The Director's arm when we spoke, my face close to his. Laughed at his jokes. Small details to illustrate trust and intimacy to anyone who might be watching.

On the chosen day, I got to the café early and told Isma, our waiter, to tell The Director I would arrive late because I was going to collect the latest Sigrid Nunez novel from our favourite bookshop. I wore an oversized, double-breasted, gold lamé trench coat and a touch of his favoured tomato-red in the form of some big hooped-earrings and matching lipstick. As I said, the best place to hide is in plain sight. It also served to distract from the old jeans and heavy work boots I was wearing underneath. Then I took up my old position on the bench opposite Calle de---, number 62. I waited until The Director had left his apartment building, then knocked the door to get the *portero*, Antonio's, attention. I explained that The Director had left his preferred sunglasses at home and had asked me to run up to his apartment and get them. I let myself in with Antonio's master key and threw off the coat, ripped the earrings from my ears. Then I dismantled the panels of triptychs, threw soft blankets over the rest of the Pérez Villaltas and took them out the back door in the kitchen (Just like the apartment in *The Flower of My Secret!*) and into the service lift which I kept wedged open with one of The Director's hefty coffee table books. From there I put the artworks in the back of the van I had parked on the road behind the apartment building. Like I said, easy. Easy for someone like me, anyway.

Here I am then. Standing with one foot crossed in front of the other, a hand on my hip, looking at my favourite of his bold paintings 'Artist Looking At an Art Book' which is propped against the wall in my new, undisclosed location. About my location, all I'll say is that this time I have furniture. I've arranged everything as closely as possible to how it was in The Director's Madrid apartment. It's a replica, an homage. And I had to sell one of the paintings on the black market in order to afford it.

I'm still hopeful that once all the details are out, The Director will see this as an artful act, not a criminal one. I swiped a few of his books that day too. He had so many handsome books. I was just reading one about the artist Amelia Mendelson. She says that most of us only ever glimpse 'a small portion of the vast landscape that is the soul'. What we consider to be ourselves is really just a magnified detail of an enormous painting whose entire composition and narrative we don't yet know exists, let alone have seen. Just zoomed in details without ever fathoming the whole. But once we do, if even for just a moment, we are forever changed. I find that touching. Significant. I want to know more about her life and work. Once it's safe to go online again I'm going to start researching.

It's a good job for her she's dead already.

My desk faces the window, where everything happens. The sun burns across the sky. A cormorant dives and disappears. The fisherman motors out and in and out once more. Sometimes the sea brings dolphins, or a twister, and once, a rare, deep-sea shark, lying still on the sand.

I was watching over the lip of my laptop, slow greens turning into blues, dark continents of *Posidonia* spread out like a map of the world, when a small boat chugged around the headland.

It sat low in the water, overloaded with men shouting and singing, a party boat on the verge of sinking. As they tumbled into the shallows, I caught their chant, 'Ibiza! Ibiza!' That's when it hit me. They weren't drunk. They were refugees.

The engine was still running as they wandered off in all directions. Their joy was radiant. I thought of the myth that Nostradamus called Ibiza 'Earth's final refuge'.

Ten years earlier, I also came by sea, belongings strapped to my bike. London had been a blur of work and parties. Something had to change or I would end up mad or dead.

I wheeled my bike off the ferry into the grey dawn. Gulls screamed overhead. A woman in a kaftan sat on a bollard smoking.

'The island either welcomes you,' she said, 'or spits you out.'

I laughed nervously.

As I rode away the sun struck blue water and white walls, low houses and tall apartment blocks, windmills, watchtowers, and, in the distance, pine-fringed hills.

I cycled the coast to the sound of waves, my wheels brushing coppery grasses speckled with blue butterflies, down dusty roads past white-washed houses and red-earth fields. I camped on remote clifftops. Emerald lizards fought over my breakfast crumbs.

The air was sticky with pine and rosemary. I swam naked, dressed in sunscreen and basked on hot rocks; skin prickling with salt, sun glowing red behind my lids, and slept as if recovering from a long illness.

No clocks, no plans, only shadows shifting slowly across my tent. July arrived, or maybe August. I didn't care. My heart was a slippery fish caught in the island's net.

Then came the hard years. Drop by drop, I filled my bucket of tears until it brimmed. Still, beneath it all, I could feel the island's hum. The sun left no shadows to hide in; the sea reminded me to breathe; the dry earth wouldn't let me forget that life is brief, fierce, and precious. The bad things would have happened anywhere, but the island was teaching me not to despair.

The writer Albert Camus believed the Mediterranean landscape nurtures a spirit of joyful defiance, not just enduring life, but loving it anyway. I still see the refugees walking stiffly up the beach, eyes skywards, shaking their heads in wonder. I hope the island welcomed them. I'm still waiting to be spat out.

From my desk, I watch the sea. Sometimes it brings dolphins, sometimes wind. Once, it brought a boat full of men, shouting the island's name like a prayer.

Contact Clare at clarecampbell@yahoo.co.uk

THE CRAFT OF WRITING WITH JAYNE MARSHALL

‘Say it wrong to say it right’

Say it wrong to say it right is also known as the ‘burnt tongue’ technique. A phrase – it is believed – first coined by Tom Spaunbauer and later used and discussed by his pupils and followers, most notably Chuck Palahniuk in his part-memoir, part-craft book *Consider This*, where he defines it thusly:

A way of saying something, but saying it wrong, in an awkward and interesting way, twisting it to slow down the reader. Forcing the reader to read close, maybe read twice, not just skim along a surface.

It is used, as Palahniuk says, to slow the reader’s roll and make them think, just a little, about the words they have absorbed. But the other reason to ‘say it wrong to say it right’ is the one that I love best and so we’ll focus on that because what are you going to do about it? That reason is: to say it unusually and intriguingly. I’ve mentioned in a previous column that I really admire multilingual writers, amongst many other things, because this – I feel – is something writers with more than one language do naturally, and do brilliantly.

Before Spaunbauer and Palahniuk, Nabokov was a prime example of ‘say it wrong to say it right’. His multilingual upbringing, along with the expulsion from his homeland which necessitated his integration into other countries and languages, informed his unique use of English, so that, as Maria Kager has written: “... one can see the manner in which Nabokov develops characters in a way that mines linguistic complexities, and that would have been unthinkable had Nabokov not experienced a language switch himself.”

Nabokov also had a precursor, describing his jumping ship from writing in Russian to English as his ‘Conrad switch’. Conrad – appropriately described by Salman Rushdie as the ‘trans-lingual creator of wanderers’ – was fluent in Polish, French and English, and was, like Nabokov, a consummate stylist, acting as a figurehead for multilingual writers and predating a range of current trends in literary criticism.

By way of a more modern example, I recently finished reading André Aciman’s ‘Call Me by Your Name’. Aciman was born in Egypt to parents of Turkish and Italian origin, raised in a French-speaking home, where family members also spoke Italian, Greek, Ladino and Arabic, and attended British schools in Alexandria. Thus, ‘Call Me by Your Name’ is full of delicious examples of ‘say it wrong to say it right’. For instance:

After weeks of wanting and waiting and – let’s face it – begging and being made to hope and fight every access of hope, I’d be devastated.

Did you read ‘every access of hope’ and change it in your mind to ‘every aspect of hope’? And then go back and realise, no – ‘every access of hope’ is beautiful and perfect. A touch weird-sounding, perhaps. Beautiful and perfect, definitely. Because this description isn’t only about hope as a thing; about the elements that comprise it, but also how you arrive there: how you infiltrate hope. Or in this case, resist that infiltration of it into one’s heart.

And, do you know that feeling when someone speaks a series of words that make sense grammatically – all the words are in the right order and tense and what have you – but somehow they don’t fully land? And yet, on second read or listen, you find they actually do, that you intuit their meaning at some deeper, less conscious but more emotional level? Aciman has that covered too:

“Whatever happens between us, Elio, I just want you to know. Don’t ever say you didn’t know.” [...] His words made no sense. But I knew exactly what they meant.

Perhaps writing on the subject of monumental, ferocious desire, as is the case with ‘Call Me by Your Name’, is always going to veer naturally towards riddles of this sort. In the same way that lovers invent their own language – that native language of the few. But either way it is a rich hunting ground for ways to say it wrong to say it right. And, even when we don’t know what to say, what to write, how to wrestle a moment or a feeling to the ground, Aciman shows us that we can always fall back on saying nothing at all and still get it right:

I tried to whisper “Get lost” to myself as a way of jump-starting my memory. The words had seemed so real last night. Now they were just two words struggling to make sense. And then I realized it. What I was experiencing tonight was unlike anything I’d experienced in my life. This was much worse: I didn’t even know what to call this.

Over to you:

Palahniuk uses ‘The Harvest’ by Amy Hempel (also a student of Spanbauer) to showcase the burnt tongue technique. This is the opening line:

The year I began to say vahz instead of vase, a man I barely knew nearly accidentally killed me.

I asked ChatGPT to “correct” it, and this was the result:

In the year I adopted the pronunciation 'vahz' in place of 'vase,' an acquaintance of mine came close to accidentally causing my death.

Which do you prefer? Need I ask?

Prompt:

Take the opening line of a short story or a novel and rewrite in a way that retains the sense but also interrupts the expected pattern of language. For example, remove any feeling or thinking verbs, or any passive language, read it aloud then adjust so that it sounds more natural to the way that people tell emotional stories.

IDLE THOUGHTS OF A BOOKSELLING FELLOW

David Price takes us behind the scenes of Secret Kingdoms English Bookstore on Calle Moratin. All their author events are free, start at 8.00pm and are based on a welcome drink and 45-55 minutes of interview/readings/Q&A with the author. Reserve your places on the agenda page of their website.



What makes a bookshop, or indeed a Bookstore, work? Secret Kingdoms passed its third anniversary this summer, and whilst we celebrated by wallpapering the ceiling, it's put me in a contemplative frame of mind... We have survived three years, but how are we going to survive three more, or indeed thirty more? (which should just about see me out, someone else can worry about it then).

There are 101 questions always running through the idle booksellers' mind. Is our display space organised as well as it could be? Do we have the right range of genres? Should we finally give in and create a specific sport or business section (insert your "missing" genre here)? Do we need more depth in the genres we have? Just what is a "young adult/new adult" and should their books be displayed together? Are we running the right number of events and activities? Do we have the right balance between author events, book clubs, writers' groups, philosophy sessions? Do we have the right balance between new/second hand books? Should we start selling audio books? How do we deal with books that cause controversy, either because of their content, or the authors' activities or stance? Can we be remotely consistent in our approach? Why do some social media channels seem to work better than others? And that's just a random selection from the eternal buzz...

There probably isn't any right answer to any of the above, the best we can do is to keep trying different things (not too often, I know how annoying it can be when your favourite genre changes shape or location) and see how and if they work. We are blessed with an active and engaged "bookish community?" and the constant flow of suggestions and feedback is vital to keeping us going and keeping it fun!

But enough existential meandering. What you really need to know is what events we have coming up this winter.

We kick off at 8.00pm on December 6th by examining *The Swap* with Drew Hinshaw, this top Wall Street Journal Reporter has dug deep into the story of the "new cold war", unspooling the history of the biggest US-Russian prisoner swap ever on August 1st 2024. Our last event of 2025 follows on December 12th, and it's a big one! Giles Tremlett will be joining us to discuss his much-anticipated new biography *El Generalísimo Franco*. Things then hot up in the second half of January, with no less than 4 Author events. On January 15th we have Luke Stegemann discussing his acclaimed *Madrid – The New Biography* followed by renowned children's educator Carol Read, and a shark lamenting *Something is stuck in my tummy* on January 17th. Hot on their heels comes a conversation with Kayla King on January 23rd, and we round the month off with The Madrid Review's very own Jayne Marshall on January 31st. She will be discussing her Madrid book *A Line Drawn or Printed* and will be joined by debt novelist Carys Shannon talking about *Truth like Water*. Together they will discuss how writers draw from real life without being bound by it, and wrestle with what responsibility they have to the truth and to their readers...

Until next time...

Secret Kingdoms is at
Calle de Moratin 7 in Madrid – Metro Antón Martín

LETTER FROM NEW YORK

RACHEL HARTY

Reading Underground

'Poetry in Motion', started in collaboration with the Poetry Society of America and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), may be one of the city's rarest successes in public feeling. Fads have arrived and receded but this has remained, even as poetry is told it has become esoteric. We stream music constantly, we memorize lyrics and yet we rarely read the language placed directly in front of us. On the subway, we're more likely to stumble upon the likes of a Hinge ad or a 1-800 lawyer promising relief.

What I admire - and admiration is not a casual offering here - is that the poem is almost never the one you would have chosen. Think about it: you're often riding tired, lugging questionable purchases, replaying a conversation with your boss, a lover, or even a colleague. Sometimes you're overhearing a stranger's podcast bleeding into your skull. Then the car shifts and suddenly you're reading about a pond at night, or a film rewind, or some poet recounting oranges from 1978. Poems are not what you think of when you think of "my MTA," and yet it works. The subway does not require context; it requires passengers willing to be momentarily unguarded.

There's a tiny Ashbery pleasure in reading poetry while the world refuses to match it. Remember, you are in a stainless-steel cylinder full of commuters attempting hard not to look at each other, and above you there's some alluring line about "gas as an elegy." It's a mismatch I oddly trust, as life is rarely on-theme.

And boredom - the condition we resist - becomes an artist's patron, underground. With no cellular service, everyone reads what's in front of them, more carefully. Like the poem. Someone will photograph it and keep it - perhaps forever.

What the program is really proposing (perhaps without quite saying so) is that interiority is permitted in transit, when you're wedged between a Juilliard student's bulky violin case and a civilian's gooey slice of pizza. You are allowed to have a private thought. Your commute can be an anteroom to a secret chapel. All it takes is one line to slip you into contemplation - a subtle pause.

So, New York, please keep poetry inside trains, at all times. Let the commute be that oddly available interval, the time in which we are allegedly occupied but secretly able to wonder. You know we will read the poems, misread them, judge them and read them again. We are, in fact, New Yorkers, and commentary is ambient. The poets, many no longer here (to object), will not answer back, and that, too, is a kind of civic arrangement.

If you live here, pass through, or are simply visiting, don't skip out on a superb MTA read. Sometimes the artistic movements are right beside you, speaking to you, like poetry. You might even look up from your ordinary life and think, briefly: Ah. \$2.90 was well spent.

Happy commuting!



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. You can find her—coffee in hand—rachelharty.com.

MY WINTER IN MADRID

JACQUELINE D'AMBOISE

Jacqueline d'Amboise is a Canadian poet and literary translator. She has worked as the Literature Officer at the Canada Council and at several Canadian Universities, teaching poetry and translation. *Mother Myths*, a book of her poems, was published by Fiddlehead Press. She spent a year in Spain researching and translating the poems of Garcia Lorca whose works she continues to translate. She presently lives on a farm in Hastings Highlands, Ontario where she gardens, writes and goes for walks with her daughter and their Border Collie Juno.

It was good fortune that found me browsing through the movie credits of Carlos Saura's wonderful film *Carmen*, (the second film of his Flamenco Trilogy) in search of the name of the studios where the dance was filmed. I was so impressed with Antonio Gades' dance choreography combined with the musical genius of Paco de Lucia and this wonderful interpretation of Bizet's *Carmen* that I decided I had to study at that academy. I was going to Madrid for the winter to translate more of Federico Garcia Lorca's poetry at any rate. What better way to enter into his world than to frequent the world of Flamenco!

When I arrived in Madrid by train from Paris I asked the taxista to take me to the Hostal Matute on c/Matute 11, a hostel recommended to me by Claudia, my Flamenco dancing teacher in Toronto. The taxi driver warned me that this place was not safe and that the barrio was one of the worst in Madrid - a barrio of prostitutes and Gypsies, he said. I have often found that places get bad raps due to hearsay. The taxi driver did not live in that area and had probably never stayed at the Matute. Now when I research the Matute I see nothing of what it once was. It seems that it has been restored and receives tourists in its guest apartments. I stayed there during its period of neglect. My room was small and noisy, owing to the fact that there were a number of bullfighters in residence, and the younger ones were out in the hallways with "capote" practicing.

From there I walked along Atocha over to Amor de Dios dance studios on c/Amor de Dios at which I had naively planned to study flamenco dance. I stepped inside the building to witness a rush of mostly women chatting in the hallway, dressed in a variety of coloured skirts, dance leotards, leather shoes of many shades but mostly black, all mulling about in conversation or practicing "arms". The woman seated in the small reception area introduced herself in Spanish as Maria. She was obviously one of the mainstays of Amor de Dios. Maria knew no English. There were students from all over the world there. If they couldn't speak Spanish she asked around the school for someone who spoke both their language and Spanish. I was blessed to be able to converse easily in Spanish. Once Maria knew that I wanted to study flamenco dancing, she said: "Vete en la clase de Josele"! She then gave me the room number and I was on my way. Josele was a short man with a commanding presence. The room was filled with students all practicing Sevillanas, accompanied by six guitars. He told me to stand at the back of the class and follow. I was truly a beginner and so I meekly said "Baby Flamenco". He laughed and told me to take a seat. When the class was over he came over, grabbed me by the waist, sat me on his lap and told me I should take private lessons with him, that we could start right away. He charged \$25 US per hour.

My first lesson was just punta tacón, heel toe, with alternating feet. This went on for 20 minutes while he read a newspaper. This seemed like a waste of my money and time since I already knew the basics, so I told him I wanted to take a beginners' class. He said "Vete con La Magdalena".

Around four in the afternoon, when I found Magdalena's classroom, I joined the class. As she did not show up, one of the more advanced students led the class. I wore a flared practice skirt, a Danskin leotard and had a pair of character shoes which I had brought with me from Toronto, not real flamenco shoes. I had a lot to learn.

When I went back to Magdalena's class the following day there was a sign on the door with a cross on it and a note saying that Magdalena had been killed in a car crash the previous day. One of the other students said the accident occurred while we were waiting for her. I went back to Josele and said: "Magdalena está muerta!". He then said: "Vete con La Cintia".

No one knew who La Cintia was, so I stood at the top of the stairs and yelled out in English and Spanish: "Does anyone know who La Cintia is and where her class is?" That's when I met Nana Ikariyama, a dancer from Tokyo. Unfamiliar with English she spoke to me in broken Spanish, telling me how to get to La Cintia's class. Over my time there I found out that La Nana was a famous Japanese Flamenco dancer from Tokyo, who gave classes at Amor de Dios and attended some master classes as well..

La Cintia was an interesting person - self possessed, bossy, rambunctious and beautiful. She had no qualms whatsoever in doing things that sometimes shocked the students, especially some of the Japanese students who were pretty strait-laced. One day she lifted her skirt and unveiled her taut midriff as well as a bit of her pelvis. One of the Japanese girls exclaimed that there were men present, pointing to the guitarists accompanying the class. Cintia nonchalantly retorted that they had all seen it. She was a knowledgeable, effective and imaginative teacher. I got to know her a bit while I was in Madrid. She was married to David Serva, the brilliant Flamenco guitarist, but they were separated and lived separate lives.

Most of the students, teachers and Gypsies associated with flamenco frequented Candela's bar. It was just up the street on Calle del Olmo. It was fascinating to sit and watch the students come from the world over to study dance there, drinking, frequenting other flamencos and gitanos. One often witnessed tall blond Scandinavian or Dutch girls flirting with the short brown Gypsy men. The only time one saw a Gypsy woman there was because she was a dance teacher taking a break.

Candela's bar was home to many of the flamenco greats. I myself mostly went there after dance class with other students. The winter I was there it was chilly and I found myself more often than not in the early evening or late afternoon after dance class, or after spending my daily hours translating Lorca at the Biblioteca Nacional, at Candela's drinking tea and cognac. David Serva was often there before a show at Corral de la Morería, possibly the oldest and certainly most famous Flamenco Tablao in Spain, where he had a regular gig, so we would often chat over cognac. We became good friends. Not only was he an amazing guitarist but he also knew a lot about poetry.

Sometimes I sat with La Nana and we shared tapas and a beer. One night very late around 2 a.m. Nana called me and asked me to join her at Candela's.

Much of the real culture of Madrid occurred between 10:30 PM and 4:00 AM. Almost all authentic flamenco shows began after 1 a.m., so I didn't go out to them very often, but Nana said that Paco de Lucia was coming for a *juerga* flamenca. A group of us went together. We were only allowed in because of Nana. Manolete Maya, a Gypsy dancer from Granada, vouched for us as well.

Nana pointed out that quite a number of the flamenco heavies were there. It was a world that fascinated me. One could only scratch the surface of that world as a *turista*, which I most definitely was. That *juerga* ended at 10 a.m. behind closed doors.

It became known amongst the flamencos that I was translating Lorca, which earned me some credibility. The first week I was there Ian Gibson, the leading Lorca specialist, invited me to lunch at the Cafe Gijon, the famous literary cafe where the Generación del 27, a group of preeminent poets and artists, which included Salvador Dalí, Luis Buñuel and Federico García Lorca, gathered regularly for their literary discussions.

I stood in a lineup at the National Library (BN) to have the book I was translating at the time, *Suites*, photocopied. The Library only lent out books for three hours and I needed it, as well as a place to work on a regular basis. One had to stand in a long lineup of people. I was unaware that the person who did the photocopying took a lunch break as we waited, so we stood in line for hours. I fell into conversation with the person in front of me who happened to be Alfonso Muñoz Cosme, the architect involved in the restoration of the Alhambra Palace. He invited me to join him and his friends for a *paella* Valenciana that evening.

At the BN I was given a study room to work on my translations. The BN closed the Sala de Lectores at some point during my visit, but the people who worked there all knew I was working on Lorca and treated me well. They always gave me the seat I wanted - seats were assigned. They moved all the dictionaries I needed down to the basement when the Sala was under renovation and they put us researchers there temporarily.

At first sight Madrid can appear to be like any big European city. In 1986 the population was some 4.5 million souls. Nowadays Madrid can boast a population of close to 7 million. Unless one is a city person the hustle and bustle can be daunting. My time there was spent mostly in Lavapies or at the BN to which I would walk most days from Calle Buenavista along Recoletos.

Excitement took over when I made that first walk. Although the first time I did wonder if I was lost, but this Madrid, the Madrid of streets and shadows, of early morning pianos wafting through the car horn laden alleyways, of Madrid's rising sun, as my eyes searched for sparrows and starlings along the treed avenues, welcomed me with open arms.

My early morning walks along Recoletos offered a scenery which became familiar over the months: cars, the smell of petrol, the comfortable sight of old historic buildings. My eyes saw cobblestone streets lit up by crowds, and the blues and whites of clouds above them. They also saw blood and spit, beggars, gypsy women wrapped in shawls so tight one could only see a hole instead of a face. They were seated for what seemed to be days on end on the sidewalks with four pesetas beside them. I also saw prostitutes, vagrants, homeless people, businessmen and women, mothers, children, old people, all of them strangers. Along Calle del Prado just past the Banco Nacional there was a man on the corner giving on to Paseo de Recoletos who was like a fixed stone or a sculpture.

He kneeled with his head bowed and a bowl in his hand. He was there for endless hours, ever immobile. I always felt some strong emotion when I saw him. Everyone was out early here - the butchers, the morning bar people, the churro makers and even some poor creature who left a trail of blood for three streets. I watched the blood pass me by along my walk to a café where Joey the barman had a brother who was a carpenter, in whom I was interested for his skill at fixing windows, for my kitchen window would neither open nor close; the glass was broken and let in the cold air.

I wondered what anger and violence had come out of the night to wound the creature and I felt more and more nauseated, only to be relieved when the trail of blood took to a newly watered-down side street and I could fix my attention on the usual morning street happenings.

Madrid stretches out before me in my mind in the not so far away distance. I can still hear the chattering voices. I can still smell the pollution in the air. Here was the air I breathed, here was a ray of my daylight, and there in the dark corners of my words were the shadows of my nights.

In those days there was no central heating in most places, including in the flat I rented after I left the Matute, from Ilisa Rosal, a dancer who had a school in Miami. It was situated on c/Buenavista in a six story walk-up with no elevators, on Piso 1B, so, on the first floor, not on street level, but one up. I was usually asleep at dawn only to arise a few hours later and go to the BN. My flat gave onto an inner courtyard, thus I could hear the neighbours who had their televisions on loud enough so that I too could listen to Alicia de Larrocha. Somewhere in that interior space I could also hear the soft *rasqueo* of a flamenco guitar.

My living room gave onto the street. Through the shutters petrol fumes from cars and motorcycles wafted in on a wave of beeping horns and city brouhaha. I heated my flat with an *estufa de gaz butano*. It required a bombona which I would get by yelling down into the street when the gasman or butanero did his rounds. He would carry it up for me. Heating with this kind of gas stove often gave me a dramatic headache.

It was cold in Madrid that winter. The days were sunny and cool. The nights were frigid. I spent time in my flat listening to Cante Jondo, my ankles and knees killing me. During my first week in Madrid I pulled a muscle in my neck and could hardly move my back at all. Flamenco dancing can introduce a risk of injury due to its athletic nature. Correct technique of the elements involved in Flamenco dance is necessary to increase safety for amateurs such as myself. A dancer's whole body has to manage ever-changing footwork steps regarding stability.

Moreover one must have the correct shoes. I ended up purchasing professional shoes from Gallardo Flamenco Shoes which was situated in Lavapies on c/Oso. Nowadays I believe it can be found on c/ de los Cabastreros.

Madrid in winter is by far a more pleasant place to be than Granada is in summer when the sun is an amorphous ball of fire that suffocates you with an oppressive heat that drives you indoors in search of cool spaces. This leaning towards the sun and the intolerable swelter almost certainly takes over Madrid as well. I have never been one for siestas but even in cold weather it seems that the whole of Spain becomes the Sleeping Beauty and nods off for a few hours in the afternoon.

When I first got to Spain it took more than three weeks before I had letters from home. It can be lonely without a sign that one existed elsewhere.

One morning David showed up with his guitar in one hand and a bag of oranges in the other. He poured them onto the marble floor so that the entire entrance hallway was rolling in oranges. There was warmth in the gesture that brought summer to my veins and the colour orange moved around in circles in my mind.

I was invited to the Lorca exhibition which showed Lorca's drawings. There I met Manuel Montesinos who was the Director of the Lorca archives at the time. He gave me permission to actually work in the archives at the Fundación Federico García Lorca (c/Serrano 142). I went there as often as I could and sorted through Lorca papers which were in boxes. It was fascinating to be able to look at actual manuscripts. I spent my time organizing Lorca's papers, which included letters from his family, poems written by his mother and the manuscripts of many of his own poems. It was inspirational.

Manolete Maya was an accomplished and great Flamenco dancer whom I met because of Cintia and Nana. They had both danced with Manolete and so he was present in their lives. In November Manolete was rehearsing with the Ballet Nacional de España. They were putting on *Los Tarantos* a flamenco version of *Romeo and Juliet* set in Franco's Spain. Felipe Sánchez was the choreographer and Paco de Lucía was the musical director and composer.

I asked Felipe to invite me to the dress rehearsal as I wanted to write an article covering it for a Canadian Magazine. More to the point I wanted to meet Paco de Lucía in person. Felipe told me to bring a camera. In truth I had no camera and so I asked among the dancers if anyone had a camera I could borrow for the occasion. A Japanese airline stewardess named Yumiko, who was in my class, said that she had a Japanese friend who had been a photographer and who might lend me his camera. He kindly invited us over for a meal and gave me a camera that baffled me. I looked in La guía telefónica de Madrid for a camera company that might help me. I chose the biggest ad as I figured someone would surely know how to use this camera. I called and spoke to a woman whose name I cannot recall. She told me to come over to her studio. When I arrived there an armed guard answered the door. This took me aback. He told me that I could not come in, that I must have the wrong address. The woman with whom I had the appointment yelled down to let me up. I was amazed to find floor to ceiling photographs of Franco as I went up the stairs and of Juan Carlos waving to a crowd at the top of the stairs. I seem to remember that she was one of the photographers who photographed the King, Juan Carlos. She looked at my camera and told me that it was a very old camera and needed special film, which she provided. She suggested that I bring the film back to her to be developed as it was unlikely I'd find anyone who could do so in Madrid. She said that the rehearsal room would have to be well lit.

I went to the dress rehearsal which was remarkable and inspiring. The light in the theatre was filtered and looked as though the lighting designer had illuminated the sets to appear old and sepia toned. I remember the shots that I took, as though it were yesterday. The whole rehearsal took about 7 hours. I convinced myself over the years that I had just filed away these marvellous photographs. I recently spent 3 weeks looking for them so that I might use one or two for this article. I did not however find them. I vaguely remember that the photos did not turn out because of the lack of light in the theatre.

I was introduced to Paco de Lucía as well as Manolete once again. Manolete danced with a force that delivered magic to his solo "baile por soleá y bulerías".

Paco de Lucía's musical score was ingenious. Felipe Sánchez' dance choreography and their work together, along with the entire performance which took place at Teatro de la Zarzuela early in 1987, was mesmerizing.

One evening Nana brought Manolete over to my flat where we all drank Jerez and Fino and I recorded an interview with Manolete. I still have that interview among my cassettes.

I spent Christmas Eve with Yumiko, my airline stewardess friend. We drank Champagne and I made chicken cacciatore with spaghetti. She left early as she had an early flight to Bombay the next day. She wasn't gone long when the door-bell rang again. It was Yumiko, frightened. She said that the subways were closed, that there were drunks in the street. We called a taxi but none would come. I decided to go out into the street with her to get her a cab. It was midnight by then. We were out walking for an hour and saw no cabs, or none that would stop. So we decided to come back to my place and call again. There were no cellphones in those days. As we were approaching the flat there were footsteps behind us that moved more and more quickly. The street was empty. Yumiko kept looking back and a look of fear which was already dim in her eyes grew stronger. I put my arm around her and she hurried her pace, still looking back and moving ever more urgently. Then I felt someone bump against me. He threw his arms around me from behind and gripped me tightly. I screamed. So did Yumiko and she continued to scream. I elbowed him to get out of his grip. I screamed at him as we ran towards my building door. He moved towards us again but we managed to get the door open and jump inside. The weirdest thing was that a day or so later I discovered that the morning "cartero" or postman was the man who had jumped me. Nothing really happened but he did give us a fright. I recognized him when he turned to look at me.

My New Year's Eve was spent with Yumiko, at her favourite Sushi bar. The Sushi master was a great gambler at casinos. He gave us a bottle of Champagne and kept bringing on different types of sushi. We had to have brown noodles for a pre-midnight celebration. One is supposed to make as much noise as possible while eating them so as to have good luck in the new year. Then we joined Nana at another bar where we each had to eat 12 grapes at the tolling of the midnight bells.

On my last evening in Madrid my new friends from the dance school, the BN and some gypsies all came to my flat to wish me farewell with a mini-juerga. David played guitar, Maki and Nana danced. Alfonso and Paqui and Maria Joaquina and her friend Maite all attempted palmas.

I promised to keep in touch and to return to Madrid.

I haven't been back since.

"Lightning feet and flashing hair I fly :
a comet's tail against the night,
pause, preparation, pirouette :
I spin, and dazzled mortals stare
to count the facets of the gem."

"...when I dance in truth I strip
down to the essence that I am :
a form on which is pinned a heart.
I'm the scene you've paid to see,
both the actor and the play;
I am the sculptor and the stone,
a statue, I, of flesh and bone.
Not just the artist, I'm the art."

excerpt from *The Dancer* by George Faludy
Trans. Eric Johnson

Franco and the Two Spains

On the 50th anniversary of Franco's death, Siobhán O'Connor meets prize-winning biographer, narrative historian and journalist GILES TREMLETT to discuss his new book *El Generalísimo Franco: Power, Violence and the Quest for Greatness*, now on sale. Tremlett writes opinion and long-form reportage for The Guardian, and is a former Madrid correspondent for The Economist.

"If you want to understand the country you live in, you need to understand Franco."

These were author Giles Tremlett's parting words to me as we left the coffee shop in the Retiro neighbourhood of Madrid, where we had met to talk about his latest book - an enlightening biography of the dictator Francisco Franco.

I felt Tremlett had thrown down a gauntlet at my feet. Did I dare come to terms with what Spain really is? With the fact that Spain was ruled for thirty-six years by a brutal authoritarian dictator? With the fact that Franco's control over Spaniards was so ingrained that his regime continued until he died of old age, in a comfortable bed at Hospital La Paz, Madrid, in 1975?

Truth be told, when it comes to Spain's bloodied past, I'm no fool. Some years ago, I discovered that a cousin of mine joined the International Brigades and died in the Battle of Belchite in 1937. As a result, I have, reluctantly, already done my fair share of research into the Civil War period. I, more than many other foreigners, should not struggle with the knowledge that Spain is a complex and wounded country.

I think this is knowledge I possess but have not really accepted. Mostly, my Spain has been a vibrant and artistic place, a personal locus of discovery and connection with like-minded, bohemian types. And far from gloomy or threatening, Spain has been a safe harbour in the unanchored life I chose for myself when I left Ireland seventeen years ago.

Whether I was ready for my reckoning with Franco remained to be seen. But I was very ready for my conversation with Giles Tremlett. His books - where history meets compassionate prose - have taught me more about this country than any others.

When I moved to Madrid in 2008, a dog-eared copy of *Ghosts of Spain* was being passed around my friend group. Reading it was a rite of passage for recent arrivals. It answered the questions we knew intuitively not to ask our new Spanish friends: Where did ETA come from? Who is buried in the mass graves? What happened during the war? Who started the war? Why doesn't anyone want to talk about the war?

When I began researching the story of my cousin, I sought out Tremlett's *The International Brigades: Fascism, Freedom and the Spanish Civil War*. This book - a roving record of the Civil War across Spanish terrain - transformed my understanding of this country. Now, when I drive across Spain, I do not see rivers and hilltops. I see trenches and frontlines. I see shifting territories and allegiances. I see columns of frightened boy soldiers up to their waists in cold water. I do not see a country, but a great swathe of skin, stretched across a taut back, and cut all over with deep scars.



I suppose that, when I scratch beneath the surface of my emigrée romanticism, I have always known that Spain is two things at once - scarred and beautiful, violent and passive, conservative and liberal. But it is only in reading this latest Tremlett book, *El Generalísimo Franco*, that I become aware of 'Las Dos Españas', a culture-defining maxim dating back centuries and popularised in 1912 in the poem *Españolito*, by Antonio Machado.

There is a Spain of life
desiring, who upon a life embarks
between a Spain now dying
and another Spain who yawns.

Wee Spaniard coming
into the world, Godspeed.
One of these two Spains
will freeze the heart off you.

Translation by Robin Munby

The riveting opening chapter of *El Generalísimo*, ominously titled *El Desastre*, describes how Franco's troubled childhood in Galicia, set against the backdrop of Spanish colonial decay, was defined by this notion of The Two Spains. "The Two Spains of conservatism and liberalism... were at loggerheads in Franco's childhood home. They were represented by a pious mother and domineering but politically liberal father who refused to ever be impressed by his own son, however remarkable his feats".

Young Francisco was the wee Spaniard of Machado's imagining and the freezing of his heart was compounded when his father abandoned the family to live in sin with his mistress. "He was acutely aware that it publicly shamed his mother - a social, personal and moral cross that she bore with dignity". Tremlett asserts that it was in this formative paternal betrayal that "the battle lines were drawn".



From that point onwards, he believed fervently that all of Spain's troubles were the fault of the Spain of his father - liberal Spain. That early shame, those premature scars - they made Franco who he was.

We humans are ashamed of our scars. We prefer to conceal them. Spain has been hiding its scars for over fifty years now. Time has faded the scars. But not the shame. Shame is a different animal altogether. Shame remains. And it festers.

I ask Tremlett whether, with this book on Franco, he hopes not only to "understand Spain" but also, perhaps, to heal it of its shame? Perhaps this book is his way of taking the hand of his Spanish neighbour and saying '*Venga, ¿hablemos de nuestro pasado?*'

In conversation, I cannot tempt the historian with my sentimental worldview. He assures me that he had no specific objective when he decided to write the book but concedes that "if healing were to occur as a result of reading it, it wouldn't be a bad outcome". Tremlett's writing, however, does bely a wish that Spaniards forgive themselves for the dictatorship.

In *El Generalísimo*, Tremlett suggests that it was not the case that Spaniards were controlled for thirty-six years by a bumbling and unimpressive figure. Instead, the historian concludes that Franco was a very effective, cunning and unforgiving leader. "It is false to reduce Francisco Franco to a cartoon villain and historical mediocrity. Relentless personal ambition and considerable luck combined to allow him to occupy a commanding position in the history of Spain. An ability to grasp the moment, and then hold on to it for so long, are proof of ability, willpower and abundant self-belief".

"Abundant self-belief. Limitless self-regard. Cold-blooded self-confidence" - the self, the self, the self. It would be all too easy for me to slap the label 'fascist' on Franco and walk away, but after reading *El Generalísimo*, I cannot. I am inclined to agree with Tremlett - Francisco Franco is not to be understood solely in terms of an ideology. He was, rather, a man who spent his entire life obsessed with himself, in pursuit of the recognition he never received from his father, and who saw himself as chosen by God to rid Spain of the disease of liberalism.

Talking with Tremlett, I am struck by his restraint. The even-handedness with which he treats such emotional and divisive material is remarkable. This, I think, is the work of the biographer - in withholding personal feelings, he can turn up the exposure on the photograph of his subject and create a truly three-dimensional portrait. I ask Tremlett if by three-dimensional he means true? No, he says, not true but rather "many people's truths, people we do and must live amongst".

I am not a biographer, and it is not *my* job to withhold personal feelings. When it comes to Franco and the despots of today who so frighteningly resemble him, I can and must retain my deeply critical standpoint. Afterall, if Franco were around today, I have absolutely no doubt that he would hate me and seek to have me silenced. I commit the double sins of being a woman and a foreigner. To make matters worse, I am making a terrible fuss about my cousin's remains. I am a dog with a bone, and I just won't drop it until I know which unceremonious hole in the Aragonese dirt his body was thrown into.

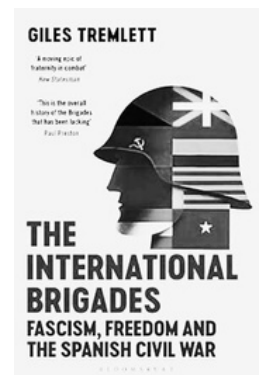
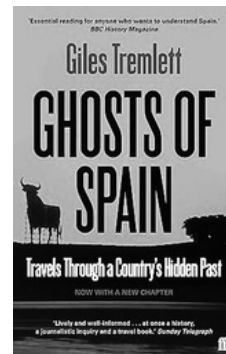
Yes, I can and must retain my critical standpoint. But I would also like to adopt Tremlett's equanimity and empathy. We do, indeed, live amongst many different people's truths. And if I want those people who disagree with me to see things from my point of view, I must do the same for them.

After I say goodbye to Giles Tremlett, I stroll the two short blocks to Parque El Retiro and allow an internal compass to guide me to the lake. I sit on the steps of the imposing granite monument that overlooks the water.

High above sits a statue of the 19th century monarch Alfonso XII, known to some as The Peacemaker, and to others as the man who ended the dream of the First Spanish Republic.

Alfonso has overseen many of the lake's periodic refurbishments, the next of which is due to take place in 2026. For the first time in twenty-five years, the lake will be drained of its murky water, and all manner of secrets will be revealed. In the sludge at the bottom of the lake, the discarded artefacts of a generation lie hidden. But not for much longer.

I envy the birds who today skim the surface of the water and know nothing of kings and dictators, nor even of Spain or the notion of country. Their only country is the clouded Velázquezian sky and the benevolent shade of the Madroño trees.



Siobhán O'Connor is an Irish writer who has made her home in Madrid. She writes about the suffering and joy of family, the homes lost and found, the broken and hungry bodies of women, the salvation in the creative process. She is currently writing a psychological novella exploring trauma set between Ireland and Madrid and researching a memoir about her cousin Jim, who died while fighting with the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War.

Robin Munby is a freelance translator from Liverpool, based in Madrid. His translations have appeared in the Glasgow Review of Books, Wasafiri, Subtropics, and the Cambridge Literary Review, and he has written for Reading in Translation and Asymptote. He is currently learning Asturian.

LETTERS FROM THE RASTRO

KATHLEEN MEREDITH

Kathleen Meredith is a bookseller at *Librería Los pequeños seres* located in the heart of El Rastro. You can find the bookshop at Ribera de Curtidores 19 - Metro La Latina.

As I reflect on the books that have excited me as a bookseller over the past few months, I've realised that what they share has nothing to do with bestseller lists or social media buzz, but instead with the relationships and conversations that come with bookselling. How the right question can lead you to an incredible recommendation from a client, or attending an event at another bookshop, leads to a Google search upon walking out the door of said bookshop to discover a book mentioned during the event has just been rereleased with a gorgeous new cover. Many of the books on our recommendations table are those that have been a part of building those relationships and opening conversations between our bookshop and the larger book community in Madrid, whether that is with other booksellers, clients, or authors. Please enjoy these recommendations of a few of my favorites from this past autumn.

During the Madrid book fair this summer, fellow bookseller Alina Zarekaite of La Fabulosa insisted that I read *La segunda venida de Hilda Bustamante* by Argentine writer Salomé Esper. It delighted me with its unique premise, loveable characters, and its echoes of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Now Esper is back with a collection of short stories, also published with Sigilo Editorial, *Querer es perder*. Unsurprisingly, each story reverberates with the same joy and tenderness as Esper's first novel. Almost all of them enjoy a touch of "magical minimalism" as my friend coined it when I described one of the stories, just enough of the absurd or surreal for the reader to loosen their grip on the everyday and instead follow the characters into their inner worlds. The third story in the collection, *Primerizos*, was a highlight, in which a young couple struggles to cope with their new reality as parents. However, wishes uttered amidst exhaustion and exasperation result in surprising consequences and discoveries for the couple. Esper reminds us of the fragile nature of time, suggesting that each moment that passes, whether we wish for it or not, carries with it its own quiet loss.

I've noticed a recent trend in Spanish publishing where many new releases explore the complexity of friendship and in particular, the loss of one. Among them is the short essay, *La amiga que me dejó* by Nuria Labari. This is a topic I often discuss with my own friends, considering what it would mean to give these relationships the same weight in our lives as we do our romantic ones, and the emotional and societal echoes that might follow such a shift. I loved this essay—it was enlightening, fresh, and readable. Labari scatters quotes from Barthes, Socrates, and Sappho throughout the essay as she reflects on a friendship that ended spontaneously and how that separation reshaped her perspective on friendship and community. The concepts of intimacy, rejection, and empathy are reconfigured through the lens of friendship, revealing truths with razor-sharp resonance. It's easy to name one of the many novels about heartbreak and the loss of a lover, we rarely question why this theme appears again and again in literature. By contrast, Labari asks what happens when it's a friend who leaves us, where that grief goes, and how it's perceived in a culture that too often values romantic relationships over platonic ones.

The editors at Editorial Periférica were kind enough to send a copy of Constantino Molina's prose debut, *Niño parabólico* to the bookshop before it hit the shelves on October 27th. In this hybrid novel, Madrid is examined almost like a still life, each moment observed until every element, every brush stroke is revealed. Molina reflects on nature, philosophy, art, solitude, and above all what it means to exist in modern society.

I resonated with Molina's fragmentary musings about the ways in which we chart the map of a city and our own existence in it as someone who is a transplant to Madrid myself. A city is not its street names or metro stops, but the late-night kiss shared on the steps of that metro stop or the local spot on the corner where you always buy your preferred brand of vermouth. That is how we make space for ourselves in a sprawling city like Madrid—our existence is what we observe and remember. This is one of those books where not much happens, but its clever, funny, often profound observations kept me reading one chapter after another.

For my final recommendation, please allow me to cheat a bit by mentioning a book that is neither a new release nor originally written in Spanish. A few months back, author Lucia Ljitmaer praised *Espejo roto* (*Mirall trencat*) during an event at Desperate Literature, and I quickly picked it up for myself. Coincidentally, Seix Barral has just published a new edition with a lovely prologue by Rosa Montero. This modern classic by the acclaimed Catalan writer Mercè Rodoreda offers a prismatic portrait of an aristocratic family in Barcelona, tracing their fortunes from the turn of the century to the years following the Spanish Civil War, when the family ultimately falls into ruin. Rodoreda is in the same echelon as perhaps more familiar female Spanish writers of the 20th century, such as Carmen Laforet and Carmen Martín Gaité; however, this book is unique in that she wrote it while in exile due to her political and linguistic stances. It is a deeply introspective and layered narrative, portraying the passing of time as both a character and a consequence within the Valldaura family. The English translation of *Espejo Roto* (trans. Josep Miquel Sobrer) was published by Daunt Books in 2017.

I'm looking forward to sharing more Spanish book recommendations in future issues. Until then, feel free to stop by to pick up a new book or share what you've been reading!



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China Miéville y el triunfo de lo insólito

Por Cristina Jurado

Si no estás familiarizado con la literatura fantástica, el nombre “China Miéville” probablemente no te diga nada. Casi con seguridad pensarás que se trata de una autora, como me ocurrió a mí misma la primera vez que oí ese nombre en la cola de una firma de libros de otro autor. Es lo que tienen ese tipo de colas: cuando son lo suficientemente largas, es inevitable entablar conversación con quienes las comparten contigo. Corría el año 2012 y recuerdo que la persona que me precedía en la fila me recomendó varias lecturas, mencionando entusiasmado a Miéville y escribiéndome el título de una obra en concreto: *La Estación de la Calle Perdido*. Nada hacía presagiar lo que estaba por venir ya que, a partir de ese momento, cambió mi percepción de la ficción fantástica para siempre. Y es que, hasta entonces, mi relación con este género había sido la de cualquier fan: buscaba obras que me entretuvieran y empezaba a dar mis primeros pasos en el ámbito de la escritura, pasos titubeantes, irregulares y llenos de dudas.

Días más tarde me interesé por la novela que me habían recomendado y, cuando estaba segura de que la imagen de quien la había escrito correspondería a la de una mujer joven, me di de bruces con la foto de un hombre de mi edad, con el cuerpo moldeado por el gimnasio y tatuajes que mostraban criaturas lovecraftianas. Tuve que comprobar varias veces que no me había equivocado en mis investigaciones: el tal China se llamaba así porque sus padres, en un alarde de creatividad hippy, buscaron un nombre sonoro y diferente. En el argot de Cockney, del este de Londres, se denomina “China” a un colega[1].

El efecto “Miéville”

Si bien es cierto que su primera novela, *Rey Rata*, irrumpió con fuerza en 1998 en el ámbito del terror anglosajón, fue *La Estación de la Calle Perdido*, dos años después, la que situó a Miéville en el mapa literario internacional con numerosas nominaciones a premios, reconocimientos variados, y un gran apoyo de la crítica y el público. Esta sería la primera entrega de la trilogía Bas-Lag, el universo fantástico con ecos de steampunk que recuerda claramente a las islas británicas, y que constituye el escenario de la trama. En esta trilogía, completada con las novelas *La Cicatriz* y *El Consejo de Hierro*, se dan cita algunas de las criaturas más icónicas del imaginario mievillense, como los Rehechos, proscritos mitad humanos y mitad máquinas y/o animales, además de especies insólitas como los Garuda, Cactae, Khepri, o Vodyanoi.

Cuando dije que entrar en contacto con sus obras cambió mi relación con la literatura, no estaba hablándole al viento. Siempre que me sumerjo en ellas, me siento como en casa. Lo extraño, lo insólito, lo anticonvencional de sus historias me resultan un territorio familiar que yo pensaba que nadie más compartía conmigo.

Porque, si por algo es conocido este autor es por incorporar en sus obras elementos de terror, de fantasía y de ciencia ficción y por mezclarlos con referencias de la tradición gótica, al Weird, al realismo mágico y al surrealismo. Sus novelas son tapices tejidos con ideas deslumbrantes donde la prosa adquiere un enorme protagonismo y en la que abundan los neologismos, intercalados sin miedo ni explicación. Es esa abundancia de referencias y prosa expresiva lo que lo convierten en uno de los autores más originales y admirados de lo que va del S.XXI. Desde 1998 y en el espacio de siete años, Miéville no solo publicó su primera novela y la saga de Bas-Lag, sino que completó su tesis doctoral en política internacional[2], escribió su laureada novela corta *El azogue*, varios números del cómic *Hellblazer*, y sacó al mercado *Buscando a Jake*, su primera antología de cuentos.



Su carrera, tan prolífica al principio, se fue ralentizando con el paso de los años. Habría que esperar hasta 2007 para disfrutar de su siguiente novela, *Un Lun Dun*, una aventura dirigida a adolescentes con ecos del *Momo* de Michael Ende y el *Neverwhere* de Neil Gaiman. *La Ciudad y La Ciudad*, su thriller distópico y psicográfico, abriría en 2009 otra etapa bastante fructífera en su trayectoria, ya que en 2010 publicaría *Kraken* —novela de fantasía urbana psicodélica y lovecraftiana—, *Embassytown* en 2011—su proyecto más “cienciaficcioneiro” en el que explora el lenguaje y las creencias religiosas—, y *El camino de hierro* en 2012, —un crossover entre *Dune* y *Moby Dick* dirigido a un público de jóvenes adultos. Todavía le quedó tiempo para coeditar en 2009, junto a Mark Bould, el libro de ensayo *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction*. En 2010 incursiona en los juegos de rol con *Pathfinder Chronicles: Guide to the River Kingdoms* creado con Elaine Cunningham, Chris Pramas y Steve Kenson, y publica nuevos cómics de las series *Justice League* y *Dial H* en 2011 y 2012, respectivamente.

No es hasta 2015 que ven la luz más de sus historias, en este caso *Three Moments of An Explosion*, su segundo libro de cuentos, y dos novelas cortas el año siguiente: *This Census Taker*, una narración que recuerda a *Viajes por el Scriptorium* de Paul Auster y que muchos afirman que reúne numerosos de los motivos recurrentes del universo mievilliano; y *Los últimos días de Nuevo París*, una historia alternativa y surrealista situada en la Ciudad de la Luz después de la invasión nazi. Ese mismo año se atreve con un libro infantil titulado *The Worst Breakfast*, ilustrado por Zak Smith y, desde entonces, deja de publicar ficción para sumergirse en proyectos de ensayo. Miéville sorprendió en 2017 novelizando un importante acontecimiento histórico del siglo XX en *Octubre: Historia de la Revolución Rusa* y tardó cinco años en publicar su siguiente trabajo, en este caso *Un espectro recorre el mundo. Sobre el Manifiesto comunista*, una guía para entender el famoso texto de Mark y Engels.

Su última obra de ficción data de finales de 2024: se trata de *El Libro de Otro Lugar* en colaboración con el actor Keanu Reeves, y que propone una aventura pulpera y existencialista donde se abordan temas como los efectos de la violencia, la memoria, la inmortalidad y la relación entre lo sobrenatural y lo mítico. En cuanto a sus trabajos futuros, hace poco se anunció que el británico publicará en 2026 *The Rouse*, una ficción en la que lleva trabajando veinte años y de la que se desconocen más detalles.

[1] En esta jerga basada en palabras que se sustituyen por frases que riman con ellas, “China plate” (plato de porcelana fina) rima con “mate” (colega).

[2] *Between Equal Rights: A Marxist Theory of International Law* (2005).

¿Qué demonios es el New Weird?

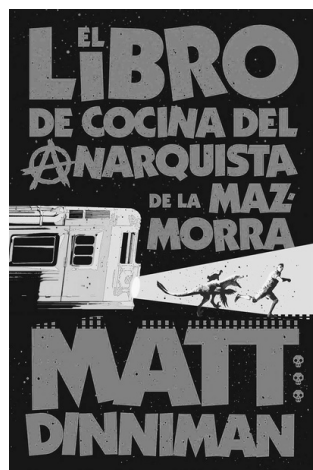
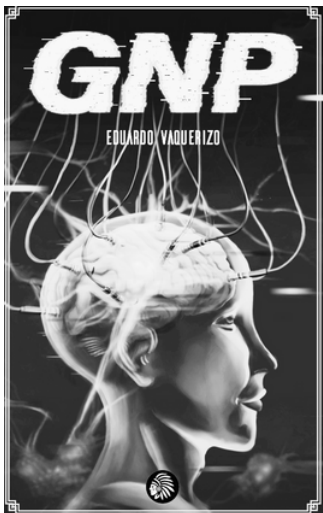
Es precisamente en el prólogo de su primer recopilatorio de cuentos, *Buscando a Jake*, en el que el también escritor M. John Harrison acuñaría el término New Weird para referirse a la ola de ficción fantástica que había empezado a aflorar desde los años '80 —de Clive Barker a Thomas Ligotti— y que tendría en Miéville la primera concretización de un éxito comercial. En 2008 Damien G. Walter en un artículo del periódico *The Guardian* apuntaba a este subgénero como un claro punto de inflexión en lo fantástico porque congregaba a la primera generación de escritores que habían crecido completamente inmersos en la cultura de la ciencia ficción.

El New Weird actualiza el estatus liminal de la ficción Weird cuestionando las divisiones demasiado cómodas entre ciencia ficción, fantasía y terror. En definitiva, encarna una nueva sensibilidad que acoge lo ajeno y lo monstruoso como espacios de afirmación y transformación. En contradicción con el horror de Lovecraft ante lo extraño —influido por su racismo—, el New Weird adopta una política más radical que concibe lo alienígena, lo híbrido y lo caótico como formas de subversión frente a las diversas normalizaciones del poder y de la subjetividad.

Celebraciones y legado

Este año se cumple el veinticinco aniversario de la publicación de *La Estación de la Calle Perdido* y, para celebrarlo, el 5º Festival de Géneros Fantásticos de Barcelona organizó hace unos días una serie de eventos alrededor de la obra del británico. Esta “MievilleCon”, como fue bautizada por el festival, ha incluido una serie de mesas redondas en las que se ha analizado la relación del escritor con el New Weird así como su portentoso uso del lenguaje y su predilección por lo monstruoso. El evento concluyó con una entrevista grabada que se emitió en exclusiva en el festival y en la que Miéville habló de sus comienzos, de sus proyectos futuros y de sus lazos con la literatura en español.

Haber podido conocer en persona, aunque fuera a través de la pantalla, a Miéville me ha servido no solo para conocerlo mejor sino para darme cuenta de que, al final, el New Weird es no solo un subgénero: es una actitud ante el oficio de escribir y, en último término, ante la vida. Además del año de nacimiento y de la primera y última letra del nombre, eso es lo que Miéville y yo tenemos en común.



COMIENZO LITERARIO DE 2026 ENTRE SUEÑOS, MONSTRUOS Y FUTUROS IMPOSIBLES POR CRISTINA JURADO

Ni la cuesta de enero es capaz de desanimar a las editoriales de nuestro país a la hora de programar sus novedades. Ciertamente es que la campaña navideña es, junto a las distintas ferias del libro que se organizan a lo largo y ancho de nuestro territorio, una fecha clave para impulsar el catálogo de títulos, y que los primeros meses del año se perciben como menos propicios a la hora de lanzar nuevas obras. Pero el mercado nunca duerme: hay que aprovechar todas las oportunidades para poner al alcance de los aficionados lo mejor de la ficción especulativa nacional e internacional.

Los amantes del cómic podrán disfrutar de *Los Hijos del Topo*, el acid western de Alejandro Jodorowsky y José Ladrönn, surrealista y delirante, que aparece más de medio siglo después del estreno de la película de culto *El Topo*. La historia narra el viaje espiritual y violento de Caín, el hijo del legendario pistolero místico “El Topo”, que busca redimir su culpa y liberar a su hermano en un mundo desértico dominado por el fanatismo y la fe.

En lo que respecta a la ciencia ficción, Minotauro ha anunciado para enero la traducción al español de la novela *Agency* de William Gibson. El canadiense, creador en los ochenta del término “ciberespacio”, invoca en una misma obra una secuela y precuela de su novela *The Peripheral*, en la que trata de realidades paralelas y del avance de la inteligencia artificial. Apache continúa afianzando su oferta de ciencia ficción con *GNP* de Eduardo Vaquerizo, en la que el biopunk le da la mano al futurismo más distópico en una historia sobre las consecuencias sociales de los avances médicos.

El sello Crononauta tiene previsto reeditar *La rosa de las nieblas* de Lola Robles en la que la madrileña explora el tema del contacto entre sociedades distintas que tanto le interesa y sobre el que ha trabajado en otras novelas. El estadounidense Ken Liu irrumpirá en nuestro país en marzo de la mano de Runas con *All that we See or Seem*, un techno-thriller que abre la puerta a una saga protagonizada por la hacker Julia Z y que explora el mundo de la realidad virtual.

La fantasía sigue siendo uno de los géneros más populares de la ficción especulativa en nuestro país y entrará con muy buen pie en 2026 de la mano de *El Transbordador* que publicará Hábito y Mortaja, la segunda parte de la saga La corona del oráculo de Carlos di Urarte, que tan buena acogida está teniendo entre el público y que continúa invocando a la épica en un mundo inspirado en el norte ibérico. Oscura editorial ya tiene lista la cuarta parte de la saga “El despertar de Osharan” de Eva Amuedo: se trata de *Las cenizas del mundo*, en la que la autora sigue explorando los conflictos de las criaturas humanas y fantásticas que habitan los mundos paralelos Asthaluss y Muriath.

La editorial La Magnífica acude de nuevo a Evangeline Walton, una de las grandes voces olvidadas de la fantasía del siglo XX, y presenta en castellano *Los hijos de Llyr*, parte del célebre “Ciclo del Mabinogion”, en el que la autora reinterpreta y actualiza los antiguos mitos galeses. Lo nuevo de Matt Dinniman, *El Libro de Cocina del Anarquista de la Mazmorra*, llegará a España de la mano de Nova. En esta entrega Carl y su gato Donut se enfrentan a un nuevo desafío enterrado en un complejo sistema de vías subterráneas y en las que un libro de recetas parece ser la clave para sobrevivir. El mismo sello tiene casi a punto *El Regreso de la Guardia Carmesí* de Ian C. Esslemont, la segunda entrega de la serie “Malaz: El Imperio”, que transcurre en el mismo universo de las obras de Steven Erikson y que recoge hechos sucedidos tras los eventos de La Noche de los Cuchillos y en paralelo a algunos acontecimientos de *El Libro de los Caídos*.

En febrero Minotauro quiere impulsar el romantasy con *North is the night* de Emily Rath, una fantasía épica inspirada en el folclore finlandés en la que mitos antiguos dan la mano a la magia para poner a prueba la lealtad entre sus protagonistas. Los y las aficionadas a la narrativa de Sarah J. Maas están de enhorabuena porque Minotauro les va a ofrecer muy pronto *Un festín de rosas y espinas: Guía ilustrada de "Una corte de rosas y espinas"*, la saga seductora y sobrecogedora que combina romance, aventura y leyendas feéricas. Alfaguara también se prepara para dar batalla en este territorio con *Fallen Gods* de Rachel Van Dyken en la que el poder, el destino y el amor prohibido se entrecruzan en un mundo de mitología nórdica re-imaginada.

La australiana Angela Slatter desembarca en nuestro país con la traducción que Dilatando Mentes ha realizado de *The Tallow-Wife and Other Tales*, una antología de relatos oscuros desarrollados en el universo de "Masa Madre". Samantha Shannon llegará a las librerías españolas gracias a editorial Roca. Su novela *Las Flores en Llamas, El Priorato del Naranjo*. Precuela 2, aborda la resiliencia humana ante circunstancias extremas y nos guía a través de los acontecimientos desgarradores y trágicos que preparan el terreno para el inicio del éxito de ventas *El Priorato del Naranjo*.

Las editoriales que dedican parte o todo su catálogo al terror también han puesto en marcha la maquinaria. Así, la editorial La Biblioteca de Carfax propone *La Atadura de la Muerte y Otras Historias* de la escritora y poeta irlandesa asociada al Renacimiento literario irlandés Katharine Tynan. Traducido por Shaila Correa, esta obra recoge una colección de relatos con elementos de novela gótica, folclore irlandés y romance sobrenatural. Las de Carfax también han anunciado *El Ángel del Lago Indian* de Stephen Graham Jones, traducido por Manuel de los Reyes, y que concluye esta saga de terror contemporáneo con tintes de slasher, misterio y drama psicológico.

Obscura ha anunciado *Y entonces desperté* del australiano Malcolm Devlin, con traducción de M^a Pilar San Román y prólogo de Antonio Torrubia, novela que mezcla elementos postapocalípticos con un terror original y que explora las consecuencias de la culpa y la gestión de las tragedias.

La norteamericana GennaRose Nethercott es la elegida por la editorial Horror Vacui para inaugurar el año con *Fifty Beasts to Break Your Heart: And Other Stories*, una antología oscura de cuentos de hadas y folclore fragmentado que profundiza en las maneras en las que el amor puede salvarnos o transformarse en algo monstruoso. Crononauta está trabajando en *Lo que nos devora de noche*, la novela corta de T. Kingsfisher que continúa la historia contada en *Lo que mueve a los muertos*. En ella continuamos acompañando al soldado veterano Alex Easton en su vuelta a casa, que encuentra vacía y con la muerte rondando.

Otra novela de Runas para este comienzo de año es *Llamas en Nuncanada* de Catriona Ward, una historia inquietante, poética y emocional que se desarrolla en las Montañas Rocosas con jóvenes enfrentados a horrores que surgen de los lugares más insospechados. En parte homenaje a *Cujo* de Stephen King y a películas como *It Follows*, *Mean Spirited* de Nick Roberts es una de las apuestas de Dilatando Mentes para 2026, siguiendo la espiral de descontrol de un profesor alcoholizado que recibe el perro de un estudiante asesinado. La Magnífica también ha anunciado *La estrella cae, la tierra llora*, otra antología de cuentos de Alfredo Álamo que mezclan la fantasía oscura y con el horror social y que tienen como escenario el barrio del Cabañal en Valencia.

En definitiva, los primeros meses del 2026 auguran un año en el que el romantasy se consolida en nuestro país y en el que el terror gana terreno con opciones para todos los paladares.

MÁS ALLÁ DE MADRID

By Romy Hügle

Montonera gaucha, 'pibes chorros' and protecting a paradise: the world of Argentina's villas in literature.

As long as Argentina has had cities, it has had villas: sprawling settlements of brick and corrugated iron, plastic, and telephone wires, the Argentinian equivalent of Brazil's favelas. Whether it's the newer, more politically correct terms "viviendas precarias" or favour the older "villas miserias", the topic dances around conversation and the term "villero" is readily used to describe a certain type of man, often a die-hard Boca fan with short hair and tattoos. Of course, Argentina's villas and their estimated 5 million inhabitants go far beyond this description.

Villas have grown alongside Argentina's population, beginning with the arrival of European immigrants in the mid 20th century as well as internal migration from other provinces. The earliest villas originated in the 30s and many others, such as the famous Villa 31, in the 1950s. One of the earliest examples of literature written about villas is the novella *Villa miseria también es América*, published in 1957 and written by journalist Bernardo Verbitsky. Verbitsky's opening description offers a good idea of how villas were perceived in the mid-20th century, years when Argentina's main apparatus for self-classification were the concepts of "civilización" (the urban and educated) and "barbarie", the rural and illiterate. Verbitsky paints a picture of "los barrios de las latas, que forman costras en la piel del Gran Buenos Aires", adding "para mucha gente era la barbarie, la monotonía gaucha que había llegado a las puertas de la Capital."

The novel is the earliest example of "literatura villera" being widely published in Argentina, and although the novel suffers from its slightly magnanimous tone, it's remarkable to observe how little seems to have changed regarding villas since the 1950s until now. Their marginality and notoriety are perhaps less surprising in their consistency than the day-to-day anxieties of residents, like difficulty accessing water and fear of forceful removal. Equally revealing is the fact that, almost seventy years after Verbitsky published *Villa miseria* también es América, "literatura villera" is still considered an "emerging" literary genre.

More recent titles within "literatura villera" have come a long way since Verbitsky's 1950s snapshot. Gabriela Leighton, in the article "Villera literature: writing from the margins and new authorships", cites works such as *Cuando me muera quiero que me toquen cumbia*, by Cristian Alarcón, and *La Virgen Cabeza*, by Gabriela Cabezón Cámara, as those which have brought to the literary world the hardships, characters and values of Argentina's villas today. With that being said, the genre is still in its infancy. Villas are characteristically closed off and insular, and works of fiction can only offer a fantastical or limited idea of what they contain – despite the fact that they home fact almost 12% of the general population.

Cámara's *La Virgen Cabeza* (2009) tells the story of journalist Qüity and a trans sex worker, Cleopatra, who after being violently assaulted claims to be able to communicate with the Virgin Mary. Qüity, seduced by what promises to be an award-winning story, leaves her loft in Palermo and moves into the villa, only to observe Cleopatra organise the neighbourhood into a kind of utopia.

She ends up falling in love with Cleo, and the villa, until police descend on the residents and turn their paradise to dust.

The novel offers a new and wider insight into who resides in Argentina's villas. No longer consisting in internal migrants from the countryside (or "la montonera gaucha") that Verbitsky describes, Cámara paints a more complex picture of 20th century villas:

"Agregamos una comisión más a todas que ya teníamos, travesties, paraguayos, pibes chorros, peruanos, evangelistas, bolivianos, ucranianos, porteños, católicos, putas, correntinos, umbandas, cartoneros, santiagueños y todas sus nuevas combinaciones posibles."

Perhaps the most recognisable symbol of the villa here is the "pibe chorro" which, in the Argentinian imagination, as vividly tied to the villas as the sound of cumbia. Both occupy central roles in "literatura villera"; "pibe chorro" refers to a young man (somewhere in that grey zone between child and adulthood) raised in poverty and involved in crime. They are the protagonists of cumbia, the faces of las villas and it is their concepts of brotherhood, loyalty and defensiveness that characterise the villas' moral codes. Even in *La Virgen Cabeza*, technicolour with magical realism, the "pibes chorros" and their value systems lend the novel a grey realism.

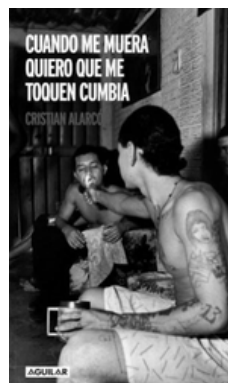
At the heart of this moral philosophy, built on sticking together and protecting one's own, is the self-positioning of the villa not only as "other" from mainstream society, but as good and virtuous in comparison to corrupt and unjust. The sociologist Roberto Bosca, writing for La Nación, explains:

"(Es) una síntesis letal de consumismo y pobreza estructural, en la que el desempleo de varias generaciones (...) va fabricando el nicho perverso y letal de la exclusión, donde la condición de víctima y victimario se confunden. (...) Existe una convención por la cual los pobres son buenos y los ricos son malos, y aunque la simplificación es irreal, siempre ha encontrado confirmaciones en la realidad."

The 'villeros' are victims, the authorities violent perpetrators. As Bosca observes, this goes beyond a self-flattering delusion and is regularly demonstrated by police conduct; in *La Virgen Cabeza*, the battle scene with riot police over the villeros' handmade paradise has the brutality and pathos of any David vs Goliath showdown. Consequently, the "outside world" is regarded with suspicion and defensiveness. Part of this defence, Cámara explains, means keeping the world of the villa hidden from outsiders' eyes.

"Él que tenga un paraíso, que lo cuide y que lo esconda: tanta vista, tanta foto, tanta nota y tanto documental nos pusieron en todas las pantallas y cambió el modo de estar en el mundo de la villa, que siempre había optado por una prudente discreción." (La Virgen Cabeza).

If the villa is a paradise, and one run on strict moral codes, it's only natural that it gives rise to its own deities or authority figures. In *La Virgen Cabeza*, this figure is unmistakably Cleopatra, the villa's middleman to the heavens. She is credited for miracles and depended on for protection. While fantastical, her figure is familiar, mirrored by the iconography of real-life villas – for example, Víctor Manuel Vital, or "El Santito de los Pibes Chorros".



El pibe chorro Frente remembered on a T-shirt

Vital or "Frente", as he was known, has one of the most visited graves in the San Fernando cemetery. "Frente", murdered aged 20 by police, is far from being the only "pibe chorro" to be killed by law enforcement, but it's not just the circumstances of his death that move people to adorn his grave in beer bottles, plastic flowers and football shirts. Vital embodied the values of a virtuous "pibes chorro" – a Robin Hood type, he was heralded for stealing from the rich and distributing money and food among his fellow villeros. These acts have never been forgotten; according to Diaro Móvil, "El que va a robar pasa por allí"; his headstone is frequented by "pibes chorros" pleading protection from the law.

As a martyr, he encapsulates "moraleja villera": generosity, brotherhood and resisting the police. Cámara's Cleopatra is just one example of his representation in literature; in Alarcón's *Cuando me muera quiero que me toquen cumbia*, we see a novel dedicated entirely to Vital's life and the shadow he left behind.

In this sense, literature from Argentina's villas has closely reflected their evolution, not only regarding demographic changes and their perception in wider society, but the iconography and value systems shaping their collective identity. From "montonera gaucha" to 21st century saints, villas have seen dramatic changes in the last century yet remain largely invisible. One can only speculate where "literatura villera", a genre in its infancy, has yet to go.

lita cabellut:

El arte es algo divino...

una entrevista con Lis Iglesias

Lita Cabellut (Sariñena, 1961) reside en La Haya desde hace más de cuarenta años y es ampliamente reconocida por sus obras de gran formato que combinan técnicas tradicionales con aplicaciones modernas. Los personajes elegidos son el canal de comunicación del concepto. Lita transforma el lienzo en un espejo de nuestra psique colectiva, dotando a sus piezas de una textura y una transformación distintivas que invitan a la contemplación. Ha sido galardonada con varias distinciones, entre ellas, Doctora Honoris Causa de la Universidad de Barcelona (2024), Artista del Año en los Países Bajos y, más recientemente, Comendadora de la Real Orden de Isabel la Católica (2024), otorgada por el Gobierno de España.

Lita, ¿Qué papel juega tu arte en tu vida? y ubicándonos en el pragmático mundo contemporáneo, ¿Para qué sirve el arte?

El arte en mi vida es mi manera de ser. Está entrelazado y tejido en todo, en lo que siento, en lo que pienso, en el calor, el frío... no soy una artista de 8.00 a 17.00. Las 24 horas los sensores del arte están en mi vida: en mis derrotas, en mis deseos y triunfos, lágrimas y sonrisas... En todo lo que veo y percibo.

El "Arte" es Urgente y muy necesario porque es la conciencia de nuestra ética, de nuestros valores en la sociedad, es el parámetro que lo mide. Ayuda a identificar de dónde venimos, dónde estamos y dónde queremos o no queremos ir. Es el altavoz que nos indica los peligros y también el altavoz que nos da nuevas posibilidades para rehacernos, reconstruirnos de una manera donde la inteligencia, que es lo que nos hace humanos, no se duerma ni se destruya.

Has comentado en varias ocasiones que la poesía tiene un papel fundamental en tu vida, se dice que los poetas escriben mejor con el corazón roto, no sé si compartes la opinión... ¿Crees que el arte debe partir del dolor para ser bello?

No, no estoy nada de acuerdo con esa teoría. El arte no tiene preferencias hacia el dolor o la felicidad, la amistad o la miseria...en general, los artistas tienden a percibir los sentimientos de una manera más impactante, sin filtros. Esto choca con nuestra sociedad obsesionada por la eterna felicidad y entonces, muy rápidamente, se categoriza como trágico o dramático algún tema o relato cuando sólo es una perspectiva desde un sentimiento mucho más estremecido, pero siempre conjugado a la hiperrealidad de la vida. Por eso no creo que haya que partir de la dificultad, el dolor o lo tortuoso para aproximarse a la belleza de la creación.

Dentro de tu proceso creativo, que implica tantos factores y que se acerca tanto al mundo del teatro y la performance, ¿cómo te enfrentas a un nuevo proyecto?

Con una gran dosis de dudas y una forzada valentía para traspasar esa frontera entre el delirio y la realidad.



Como mujer artista, ¿qué espacios has tenido que inventar o conquistar, para que tu voz artística exista plenamente? ¿Qué territorios del arte o de la vida aún sueñas habitar?

Nunca he querido darle sexo al arte porque creo que es algo divino, que es comparable a los ángeles: ni femenino ni masculino. La divinidad no tiene sexo, pero sí tiene una superioridad en la que une al ser humano sin género ni distinción.

Mis territorios por conquistar se encuentran en el "hoy", el pasado es algo que ya no podemos retener, se va transformando en la memoria y en la historia de una manera muy personal o de un punto histórico muy conveniente. El futuro no me interesa, porque eso significa para mí ir a un lugar donde no tengo un papel activo e implicado como me requiere el presente. Continuo en mi territorio plena de convicción y dudas.



Regina (abajo) **Disparate** (arriba)



¿Cómo te imaginas un mundo sin artistas? ¿Crees que sería posible?

No me lo puedo imaginar y no creo que pueda existir. El ser humano evoluciona, en todos los sentidos, el arte es el músculo de la inteligencia, la arteria de la conciencia, seríamos animales sin ninguna herencia, el caos de la brutalidad aplastaría a su propia especie.

Como artista, ¿qué temas son los que más te interesan? ¿Encuentras difícil el equilibrio entre ambas facetas?

Creo que es una búsqueda a quién somos, sin adornos, sin sentimentalismos, sin prejuicios. Esta fealdad y esa crueldad que algunos lectores pueden leer en mi obra no es nada más que un simple respeto profundo a la vida tal como es. Y la belleza y la fealdad son de un mismo cuerpo, son diferentes extremidades que hacen que un cuerpo pueda agarrarse, coger, dar, romperse y reconstruirse. La belleza está presente siempre.

Has trabajado con múltiples variantes artísticas para plasmar tu trabajo, incluyendo incursiones en el mundo de la escenografía y el vestuario. Dentro de esta diversidad, ¿Destacarías algún proyecto como tu favorito? ¿Hay alguno del que te arrepientas?

Jamás me arrepiento de algo que tiene que ver en el proceso de mi trabajo. En mi vocabulario no existe el éxito ni el fracaso, mi desarrollo lo veo como un paisaje con diferentes superficies y texturas...un día me hundo en el fango y ese mismo fango me protege del desierto que me espera a la mañana siguiente, para no quemarme, para protegerme de algo que no entendía pero que tiene todo su sentido en el proceso. Y no podría decir que es lo que más me gusta, porque con los años y al crecer, he entendido que el lienzo es solo una ilusión, un material, que el arte no tiene espacio ni límites, y que el material es solo algo para dar forma a ese sentimiento, a ese concepto. Por eso creo que la descripción 'artista de campo amplio' es perfecta en mi caso.

Has señalado en numerosas ocasiones la importancia que la obra de grandes artistas como Velázquez, Goya o El Greco han tenido en tu trabajo. ¿Encuentras en artistas del circuito contemporáneo esa misma inspiración?

Si. Hay buenísimos artistas en todas las facetas del arte, a mí me encanta buscar inspiración y maestros en la cinematografía, en los dramaturgos, literatos, músicos, coreógrafos...en todos aquellos que no se conforman en repetir una escuela sino en cambiar las cosas de su sitio y dar un nuevo enfoque con diferentes perspectivas, pero siempre respetando la gran labor colectiva de la herencia en el mundo del arte.

Tu última gran propuesta en España se clausuró en Valencia con "Vida Desgarrando Arte" en la Fundación Bancaja y, a finales del año pasado, en la Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, "Miseria humanidad la culpa es tuya" de la mano de los Disparates de Goya. ¿Qué proyectos tienes por delante? ¿Cuentas con alguna parada por Madrid en el futuro próximo?

Madrid es mi casa. En Madrid estoy siempre presente con mi galería, Opera Gallery, que es portavoz de mis trabajos y últimos proyectos. Ellos siempre son mi ventana, aquella que necesita el coleccionista o el amante del arte y al mismo tiempo son los que tienen la información más actualizada sobre mis proyectos en el estudio y a nivel internacional.

carlos bardem

Entrevista con Lis Iglesias

Carlos Bardem, actor, guionista y escritor español, habla con nosotros sobre su trayectoria, sus sueños y sus futuros proyectos. El escritor de *Mongo Blanco* y el ganador del Premio Hammett de la Semana Negra de Gijón, ha visto recientemente estrenado su último proyecto televisivo de la mano de Telecinco, *La agencia*, manteniéndose así en el eje del panorama cultural español.

Ha desarrollado una prolífica trayectoria como actor, como guionista y como escritor, que ha sido reconocida a través de incontables nominaciones y reconocimientos. Pero usted es un historiador también. ¿Esto impacta en la forma en la que se enfrenta a su trabajo artístico?

No, necesariamente, y no en todos los papeles. Pero sí hay historias y personajes que exigen una comprensión y conocimientos de otras épocas. Ahí es fundamental porque el trabajo de la creación de personajes, como actor o escritor, requiere de informaciones muy variadas.

Precisamente su primera incursión en el mundo editorial surge como resultado de una interdisciplinariedad artística absoluta. El diario de rodaje de la película *Perdita Durango* es un acceso directo a los procesos involucrados en la creación cinematográfica. ¿Qué es lo que recuerda con más cariño de aquella experiencia?

El ambiente absolutamente alocado que rodeo toda la filmación entre los USA y México. Lo que pasa en pantalla es divertido y salvaje, pero lo que pasó off camera los fue aún más. Una verdadera aventura que, creo, nos cambió a muchos para siempre.

Desde esa película, ha seguido trabajando en una filmografía amplia, como actor y guionista, a un lado y al otro de la pantalla. Si tuviera que destacar uno de tantos proyectos cinematográficos en los que ha participado, ¿cuál sería? ¿Por qué?

Me resulta difícil elegir. Hay varias películas que significaron cambios muy importantes en mi carrera como actor: *Celda 211* por el éxito que tuvo; *Alacrán Enamorado* por estar basada en una novela mía, coescribir el guion y coprotagonizarla; *La Zona*, premiada en Venecia, o *Días de Gracia*, que nos llevó a Cannes, mis primeras incursiones en el cine mexicano, en un país que amo y que se ha convertido en mi segunda casa.

Su trabajo le acerca a un mundo fascinante, repleto de personalidades y espacios alejados de gran parte de la sociedad. Ha trabajado con grandes directores de cine, con destacados guionistas y con actores de primer nivel. ¿Qué compañeros de profesión han impactado de forma notable su trayectoria? ¿Con quién volvería a colaborar si tuviera la oportunidad?

Sería injusto elegir. En efecto he tenido la suerte de trabajar con gente magnífica y de todos, y eso para mí es lo más importante, he aprendido, sigo aprendiendo. Pero bueno, una respuesta obvia es que me encantaría volver a compartir escena con mi hermano Javier.

¿Cómo se desarrolla su proceso creativo? Por ejemplo, para la escritura de los guiones o de sus libros, ¿se deja llevar por periodos intermitentes de inspiración o sigue un camino más determinado por la constancia?

Carezco de horarios como escritor por un tema material. A mí el que me paga la comida y la casa es el actor, así que mi escritor se adapta siempre al tiempo libre que le deja mi actor. Escribo cuando y donde puedo, a veces mucho, otras poco.



El cine y, en general, aquellas disciplinas vinculadas con la cultura, han estado siempre en una posición muy maltratada en cuanto a la estabilidad económica que ofrecen, especialmente para aquellos que están empezando. Desde su experiencia, ¿qué consejos le daría a alguien que quiera trabajar en la industria cinematográfica?

Que se prepare para cuando llegue la oportunidad de mostrar su talento, algo que a veces tarda mucho en ocurrir o pasa solamente una vez. Y, sobre todo en el caso del actor, que acepte que es una vocación y que por cada sí que reciba, le dirán cinco o diez noes. Y eso, que pasa en cualquier escalón de la profesión; es frustrante y duro. Que se pregunte si está dispuesta o dispuesto a lidiar con eso.

¿Tiene algún sueño por cumplir?

Yo soy mis sueños por cumplir, como actor, como escritor, como hombre, como ciudadano, como ser humano. Tantos que no cabrían aquí. El motor que nos empuja a caminar hacia un horizonte que, aun sabiendo que nunca lo alcanzaremos porque se mueve con nosotros, nos sirve para seguir avanzando, seguir curiosos, seguir comprometidos con las causas que importan.

Siempre ha utilizado su espacio mediático para denunciar todo tipo de injusticias, como es el caso del atroz genocidio en Gaza. ¿Tiene la cultura y aquellos que la construyen una responsabilidad social frente a este tipo de conflictos?

Si no lo hace, no es cultura. Si no lo hace es eso que llaman "sano entretenimiento", o sea, una distracción inocua y colaboracionista con las causas de las injusticias. La cultura, la de verdad, es crítica, incómoda para las verdades oficiales, o no es.

Un libro, una canción y una película que todo el mundo debería disfrutar en algún momento de su vida.

Soy pésimos haciendo este tipo de listas, hay miles. Lo que animo es a que se vea cine y se lean libros. En un mundo de nadería viralizada, darse tiempo y silencio para uno mismo, para abrir un libro y viajar en el tiempo y en el espacio con la imaginación es un acto de rebeldía.

Recientemente se ha estrenado su último trabajo televisivo, *La agencia*, en Telecinco, donde, junto a compañeros como Javier Gutiérrez o Manuela Velasco, aborda las contradicciones y vivencias inusuales del mundo de la representación. ¿Qué proyectos tiene ahora por delante?

Como escritor, rematar mi próxima novela. Como actor viene una época de estrenos importantes - *In The Grey*, de Guy Ritchie, *Papeles*, Arturo Montenegro, *DRAGN*, de Peter Webber, el corto *Una Conversación Pendiente*, de Cecilia Gessa- y de lo que filmaré no puedo nada hasta que lo anuncien las productoras.

Javier Sierra: “La historia es el filtro que nos permite entender el presente”

por James Hartley

A Javier Sierra le gusta pensar que el misterio no es un género, sino una manera de mirar el mundo. Nacido en Teruel en 1971 y formado en Periodismo por la Universidad Complutense de Madrid, ha construido una obra que combina investigación histórica, arte, espiritualidad y aventura intelectual. Su nombre está asociado a éxitos internacionales como *La dama azul*, *La cena secreta* o *El maestro del Prado*, y en 2017 recibió el Premio Planeta por *El fuego invisible*. Este año ha regresado con *El plan maestro*, una novela que recupera al misterioso personaje que enseñaba a “leer” los cuadros del Prado.

Sierra llegó a Madrid “con 17 años recién cumplidos”, recuerda. La capital le pareció “enorme y algo hostil”, pero pronto descubrió su energía contagiosa. “Viví los últimos compases de la movida y descubrí, poco a poco, lo vibrante que podía llegar a ser una ciudad que era cien veces mayor que la mía.” En su proceso de adaptación, el Museo del Prado fue decisivo. En aquellos años, bastaba mostrar el carné de identidad para entrar gratis, y él lo aprovechaba a diario: “Siempre que podía - y era muy a menudo - pasaba mis fines de semana entre la Cuesta de Moyano, el Retiro, el Rastro y El Prado... y aquello terminó colándose años más tarde en novelas como *El maestro del Prado* o *El fuego invisible*.”

El arte, la historia y la intuición son los tres pilares de su literatura. En *La cena secreta* (2004), traducida a más de cuarenta idiomas, Sierra explora los secretos de *La Última Cena de Leonardo da Vinci*. Lo que comenzó como una investigación sobre el filósofo renacentista Marsilio Ficino acabó convirtiéndose en un hallazgo inesperado. “Descubrí que Ficino fue amigo de Leonardo, que se frecuentaron en la corte de los Sforza, y me pregunté si le habría invitado a leer a Platón. De repente me di cuenta de que *La Última Cena* tenía una lectura platónica increíblemente clara”, cuenta. Ningún estudio académico lo había señalado, así que decidió sumergirse en esa hipótesis. “La cena secreta es, en el fondo, un manual para decodificar enseñanzas de Platón en una pintura de tema cristiano.”

El mismo impulso de rescatar lo oculto le llevó a escribir *La dama azul* (1998), donde aborda el caso de Sor María de Jesús de Ágreda, la mística del siglo XVII que, según los cronistas, podía bilocarse. “Nunca puso un pie en la capital, pero en la Corte todo el mundo hablaba de esa monja capaz de estar en dos lugares a la vez”, explica. Felipe IV la convirtió en su asesora espiritual tras saber que la habían visto en Nuevo México, Arizona y Texas, sin haber abandonado jamás su convento en Soria. “Su capacidad para bilocarse nunca se explicó, y eso me inspiró una trama en la que convertí la investigación de ese ‘superpoder’ en la obsesión de mis protagonistas.”

De todos sus libros, *El maestro del Prado* (2013) es quizá el más personal. “El personaje central es una especie de fantasma que se aparece en las salas del museo para revelar los secretos de ciertas pinturas”, dice.



El origen del relato proviene de una experiencia real: “Un día, cuando tenía 19 años, un señor de edad avanzada se me acercó mientras contemplaba un cuadro de Rafael Sanzio. Me lo explicó como si me estuviera enseñando a leer y desapareció para nunca más dejarse ver.” Aquella charla lo marcó. “Sus explicaciones me acercaron a una forma de entender la pintura totalmente diferente. Como me quedé con la necesidad de volver a verlo, lo convertí en personaje de esa novela.”

En *El fuego invisible* (2017), el escritor quiso mirar el presente a través de la lente del pasado. “Para mí la historia es una especie de filtro que, aplicado a la actualidad, te permite ver con mayor definición lo que nos sucede”, afirma. Por eso mezcla sucesos contemporáneos con referencias medievales y místicas. La novela comienza en un club de lectura madrileño que estudia textos franceses sobre el Grial y termina revelando que esa reliquia fue “inventada y pintada por primera vez en la península ibérica en el siglo XII”. Es, dice Sierra, “un viaje por el pasado pero también por la modernidad y su obsesión por las reliquias sagradas.”

Sus influencias literarias son amplias y eclécticas: “Desde Umberto Eco a Juan Eslava Galán, pasando por Julio Verne, Emilio Salgari, Hergé, Michael Crichton, Katherine Neville o Stephen King. Cada uno, a su estilo, usó el misterio como fuerza motriz de sus historias. Yo aprendí leyéndolos.” Como periodista, mantiene un respeto absoluto por el dato verificable. “Arranco siempre con un hecho que pueda documentar, que ancle sus raíces en la realidad. Me gusta hacerlo porque el lector del siglo XXI tiene herramientas que le permiten seguir investigando, y lo que suelo proponerle en mis textos invita a ese ejercicio.”

Hoy, con la publicación de *El plan maestro*, Sierra cierra un círculo iniciado hace más de una década. “Cuando escribí *El maestro del Prado*, dejé en el aire cuál fue el paradero de ese misterioso instructor que me enseñó a ‘leer’ en los cuadros del museo. He retomado ese personaje para dar esa explicación a mis lectores... una explicación, claro, llena de sorpresas.”

A lo largo de su carrera, Javier Sierra ha demostrado que el misterio no consiste en ocultar, sino en invitar a mirar de otro modo. En sus libros, la historia no es pasado inerte, sino una fuente inagotable de revelaciones. “Si aplicas la historia al presente - dice -, todo cobra sentido.”

El último libro de Javier Sierra es *El plan maestro*, publicado por la editorial Editorial Planeta en febrero de 2025.

Elevenes with Salman Rushdie

Salman Rushdie, seventy-eight this year, is as famous as he is infamous; a global figure whose name has echoed around the world in adoration and hatred; perhaps the most public writer of our age but who has also, through circumstance, been the most private.

Rushdie was born in Bombay, now Mumbai, into a well-to-do Kashmiri Muslim family: his father, Anis Ahmed Rushdie, was a Cambridge-educated lawyer turned businessman, and his mother, Negin Bhatt, a teacher. He grew up alongside three sisters, attending the Cathedral & John Connon School, before being sent to England in 1961 to continue his education at Rugby.

After completing a Cambridge degree, Rushdie moved to London in 1968 and worked in fringe theatre. He moved into advertising not long after. Taking a copy-test at J. Walter Thompson, he was asked to "explain to a Martian how to make toast in 100 words". Though he didn't get the job, he joined Ogilvy & Mather and worked there through much of the 1970s, crafting slogans such as 'Irresistibubble' for the Aero chocolate bar, 'Naughty but Nice' for cream cakes and a campaign line for the *Daily Mirror*: 'Look into the Mirror... you'll like what you see'.

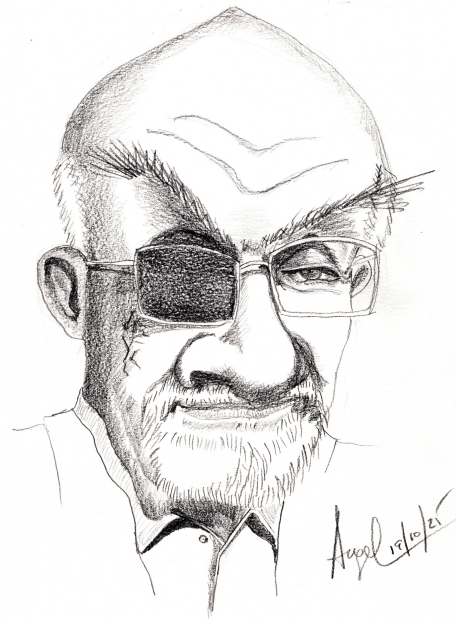
Rushdie has credited his advertising experience with instilling in him the discipline of writing as "a job" - showing up, putting in the hours, meeting deadlines - a mindset he later brought to his fiction. His first novel, *Grimus* (1975), emerged from this period. It's a strange, allegorical work blending science fiction, myth and philosophy. He'd later call it "a novel written by a very young man", and it laid the groundwork for his breakthrough, *Midnight's Children* (1981), which transformed him into one of the most celebrated novelists of his generation, winning the Booker Prize and, later, the Booker of Bookers.

Shame followed in 1983 and, in 1988, *The Satanic Verses*, which made him world-famous and world-notorious. A sprawling novel that explores questions of faith, identity and transformation, the book describes the intertwined fates of two Indian men, Gibreel Farishta, a Bollywood star who loses his faith, and Saladin Chamcha, a voice actor who clings to his Englishness. Dream sequences provoked a 1989 fatwa from Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini calling for Rushdie's death.

Rushdie went into hiding under the protection of the British government, living for nearly a decade under police guard and moving frequently between safe houses. Despite the isolation and danger, he continued to write, producing essays, children's stories and novels.

Over time, the immediate threat lessened and by the late 1990s he began to reappear in public, eventually settling more openly in London. In the 2000s he moved to the United States, teaching and writing in New York, where he has since lived a relatively public life.

Those years brought *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999) and *Shalimar the Clown* (2005). More recently he's published *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008), *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* (2015), and *Quichotte* (2019).



In August 2022, while preparing to speak at the Chautauqua Institution in New York, the writer was attacked on stage by a knife-wielding assailant. Rushdie later recalled that the man came at him "like a missile." He sustained grave injuries: wounds to his neck and abdomen, nerve damage to his hand and the loss of sight in his right eye. For a time, he believed he was dying, lying in what he described as "a substantial lake of blood."

He spent weeks in hospital and rehabilitation, emerging permanently blind in one eye and with lasting damage to his hand. In his 2024 memoir *Knife: Meditations After an Attempted Murder*, he confronted the attack with a blend of dark humour, philosophical reflection and a fierce refusal to be silenced. "Losing an eye upsets me every day," he has said, but he's also spoken of gratitude, even wonder, at his survival.

This month came his first work of fiction since the assault. "The new work's concern with mortality is in part a response to the attack, but it's also a response to getting older," he told us. "As far as style, form, content, character, story, I don't think the attack has any bearing on those."

The Eleventh Hour, which Rushdie believes "offers a pretty good introduction to the themes and styles of my work", is a collection of five interlinked stories - two short tales and three novellas - in which the landscapes of India, England and America are revisited to explore the approach of life's final chapter. "These are the three settings in which almost all my work has taken place," he notes. "I'm happy that this book offers, in shorter form, a sort of panorama of my imagination."

The pieces range from 'In the South', where two elderly neighbours in Chennai confront time and loss amid national upheaval, to 'The Musician of Kahani', a magical revenge tale set in a reimagined Bombay. 'Late' is a ghost story about a dead Cambridge academic seeking posthumous justice and 'Oklahoma', a metafictional meditation on mentorship and disappearance. Finally, 'The Old Man in the Piazza' is a parable about language, power and freedom.

"I see all the stories as realistic," Rushdie insists, "realistic about character, motivation and human need. The rest, what you call fantastical elements, are just part of the tool-bag of the artist, to be used as required, based on instinct."

Mortality and legacy, he acknowledges, have also become central motifs: "Death must be a fascinating subject to everyone living," he observes, "since it comes to everyone and yet we can't know how it will be for us. Perfect subject for imaginative writing."

María Oruña: el misterio, la palabra y el milagro en equilibrio

Por James Hartley

En la voz de María Oruña hay una claridad tranquila, esa firmeza que solo se adquiere cuando uno ha cruzado más de una frontera: la del derecho al arte, la del trabajo al sueño, la del silencio a la historia. Nacida en Vigo en 1976, Oruña pasó una década entre códigos y litigios antes de que su imaginación - o quizá su destino literario - la reclamara por completo. Su nombre, inseparable ya de los libros del *Puerto Escondido*, ha convertido los acantilados cántabros en escenario de intriga, memoria y belleza. Pero su historia, como sus novelas, no se resuelve con una sola pista.

"El cambio profesional no fue tajante ni radical," me explicó cuando le pregunté por su salto de abogada a escritora. "Compatibilicé ambas profesiones durante dos años, casi tres, hasta que mi mundo literario creció tanto que decidí dedicarme en exclusiva a la literatura." En ese tránsito, entre expedientes y manuscritos, se fue fraguando una voz que uniría la precisión jurídica con la sensibilidad narrativa. "Los que hemos sido abogados estamos muy acostumbrados a utilizar la palabra con precisión", me dijo. Pero también hay ternura en su escritura, y una mirada íntima que se asoma, por ejemplo, en *El tren fantasma*. "Si no hubiese sido madre nunca lo habría escrito. Solo lo pasé a papel para tener de recuerdo cuando mi hijo fuese mayor."

Cantabria, el territorio que respira en cada página de su saga, no fue una elección decorativa. "No es que necesitase un enclave para contar una trama", contó, "sino que la propia historia real que tenía entre manos (y en la que se inspira *Puerto escondido*) había sucedido allí mismo, en los pueblos de Cantabria. Toda mi familia paterna es cántabra... conocía muy bien la zona y su idiosincrasia, sobre todo por mi abuela, que desde niña me contaba anécdotas de la guerra y posguerra." Así, sus novelas son tanto retrato de un paisaje como homenaje a una herencia.

Cada título de Oruña parece dialogar con un género distinto: lo gótico, el cuarto cerrado, el domestic noir. Pero detrás del juego literario hay siempre disciplina. "Es la propia historia la que decide el género", afirmó. "Por ejemplo, el misterio de habitación cerrada de *Lo que la marea esconde*: si quieres homenajear ese estilo, debes ir a los clásicos. Jugar con el ingenio del lector fue divertido, pero difícil. La astucia del que escribe está en que no se note el enorme trabajo que le ha llevado llegar a presentar la trama."

De ese esfuerzo consciente surge su ritmo de publicación: medido, reflexivo, contrario a la prisa editorial. "Nunca he pedido bajar el ritmo", aclaró, "porque cuando escribo sé qué márgenes temporales tengo. Pero no quiero publicar un libro al año: es una barbaridad. Implicaría un desgaste creativo, físico y personal."



La escritura es solo la primera parte; después vienen las correcciones, la promoción, los viajes, la exposición pública... lo ideal es publicar cada año y medio o dos años como mínimo."

La literatura de Oruña no solo ha transformado su vida, sino también el mapa. "La ruta literaria del *Puerto Escondido* se creó apenas unos meses después de publicarse el primer libro", recordó. "Pensé que no duraría, y diez años después sigue viva, con guías gratuitos dos veces al mes. Me consta que muchas personas han ido a Cantabria movidas por mis libros. Me resulta sorprendente, emocionante y bonito. Los libros están vivos en las manos adecuadas."

Su rigor investigador alcanzó otro nivel con *El bosque de los cuatro vientos*, donde una leyenda gallega se volvió realidad: "El hallazgo de cuatro de los nueve anillos de la leyenda fue realmente emocionante. Supuso un impacto mediático considerable y, en mi caso, afianzó una imagen más seria de mi perfil profesional." Pero lo cuenta sin alarde, consciente de que la literatura, más que buscar tesoros, los revela.

Ahora, con *El albatros negro*, Oruña vuelve a Vigo y cambia la Guardia Civil por la Policía Nacional. "El motivo es sencillo: la Policía Nacional trabaja en el ámbito urbano, que es donde se ancla la novela. Para escribirla me presenté en la Comisaría de Vigo y comencé desde cero." Su universo se expande también hacia lo audiovisual: "Finalmente Henneo no hará la adaptación de *Puerto escondido*, pero seguimos trabajando en ello. Soy consciente de que el lenguaje audiovisual no es el literario, aunque me he formado en guiones y, si me dejan, tal vez salpimiente por ahí."

Cuando le pregunto por su mayor logro, no duda. "A nivel personal, mi logro más notorio es mi familia. A nivel profesional, lo más extraordinario es que los libros perduren, que las historias sean atemporales y que, dentro de unos años, te sientas menos solo al leerlas. Mi primer libro se publicó hace diez años y se sigue reimprimiendo: que yo pueda vivir de ello me parece un milagro en equilibrio."

Y así habla María Oruña: con la serenidad de quien sabe que el misterio no está solo en lo oculto, sino también en lo que perdura. Sus historias, como el mar que las inspira, no se agotan: cambian de luz, pero nunca de profundidad.

Con *El albatros negro* (Plaza & Janés, 2025), María Oruña regresa a Vigo con una historia de 616 páginas donde el mar y la intriga vuelven a cruzarse. Es su novela más reciente, una obra sólida y ambiciosa que confirma su lugar entre las grandes voces del suspense literario español.

Richard Holmes

The Biographer and the Boundless Deep

By James Hartley. Photo by Stuart Clarke.



"I still believe that biography is absolutely an adventure," Richard Holmes tells us, "but it must also involve chasing up, and attempting to narrate, certain insoluble human mysteries."

That line might serve as a motto for Holmes's entire career. For more than half a century he has redefined what literary biography can be, pursuing his subjects across landscapes, libraries and time until they become, as he once wrote, "companions in the imagination."

Holmes's new book, *The Boundless Deep: Young Tennyson, Science and the Crisis of Belief*, just published by HarperCollins, continues the adventure. It is both a group portrait and a meditation: Tennyson among the young Victorians, facing the intellectual tremors of geology, astronomy and natural history in the decades before *On the Origin of Species*. For Holmes, this period represents "a great unravelling of certainty", the moment when the modern crisis of faith began.

"After finishing the second volume of my *Coleridge* in 1998," he recalls, "I gave a lecture at the Royal Institution entitled *Coleridge among the Scientists*. It centred on Coleridge's unlikely friendship with the young Humphry Davy, who became the greatest chemist of the age and eventually President of the Royal Society. This opened up the whole question of the intimate exchange between science and poetry, and vice versa, before the Two Cultures split. I realised I had found a big subject of wide general interest. The theme of Romantic Science and biography pre-occupied me for the next 25 years and produced four books - *The Age of Wonder*, *Falling Upwards*, *This Long Pursuit*, and now *The Boundless Deep*."

Those earlier titles established Holmes as one of Britain's great interpreters of the Romantic imagination, an inheritor of Johnson, Boswell and Woolf, yet with the zest of a field naturalist.

Born in London in 1945 and educated at Downside and Churchill College, Cambridge, he began his career with *Shelley: The Pursuit* (1974), which portrayed the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley not just as an icon of Romanticism but as a complex, conflicted human being. It won the Somerset Maugham Award and established Holmes as a major new voice in literary biography.

His two-volume *Coleridge* (1989, 1998) confirmed that reputation, while *The Age of Wonder* (2008) made him a bestseller, bringing the "Romantic scientists" - Davy, Herschel, Banks - to life at the same time. His prose has always been at once scholarly and exhilarating, written with what one critic called "the biographer's pulse still racing."

In *The Boundless Deep*, Holmes returns to familiar terrain: that turbulent intersection where poetry meets science - the cliff edge where belief begins to crumble. "Tennyson's great early friendships at Cambridge," Holmes says, "were with Arthur Hallam, Edward Fitzgerald and the very literary Apostles group. But his most influential tutor at Cambridge was the scientist William Whewell, who wrote *A History of the Inductive Sciences*, discussed the notion of life beyond the solar system and even invented the term 'scientist' itself."

From there, Holmes traces Tennyson's deep reading of the age's new science: Mary Somerville's *On the Connexion of the Physical Sciences*, Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, John Herschel's vast catalogues of 'Island Universes'. The discoveries of 'Deep Time' and 'Deep Space', Holmes says, profoundly shook the poet's imagination. Holmes argues that "images from all these scientific subjects filled his poetry from *The Kraken* (1830) and *The Two Voices* (1842) to *In Memoriam* (1850) and *Maud* (1855). They can even be found in *The Lady of Shalott* if you look carefully enough."

It is characteristic of Holmes that the biography becomes, at moments, a map of the cosmos itself. For him, *In Memoriam* is not only an elegy for Arthur Hallam but a scientific epic, a poem haunted by extinction, evolution and the search for meaning in a mechanistic universe. "The terror of Evolution theory, the collapse of Natural Theology," he notes, "is essentially Victorian. Yet the feeling of a continuing crisis in mankind's relations with Nature finds its echo in our current concern with climate change and the way we are exhausting natural resources and destroying 'wild' species." He quotes from *In Memoriam* No. 123, one of Tennyson's most visionary stanzas:

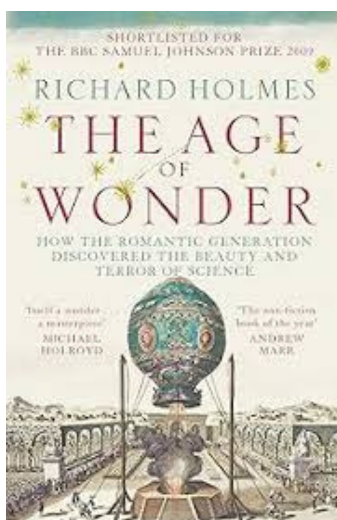
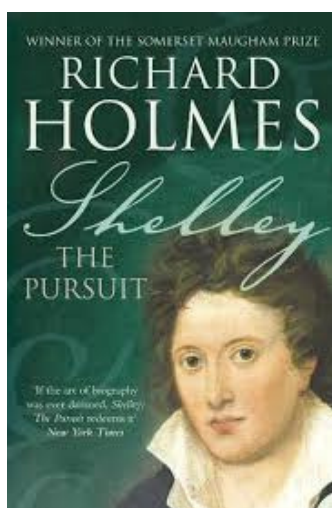
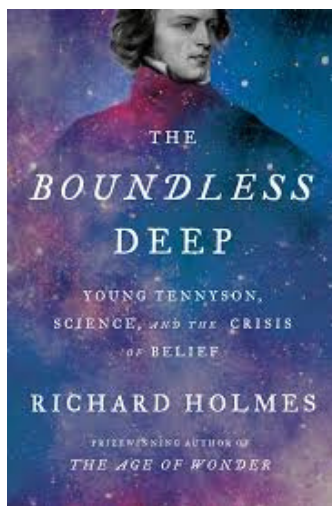
*There rolls the deep where grew the tree
O Earth, what changes hast thou seen!
There where the long street roars, hath been
The stillness of the central sea.*

Holmes smiles as he adds, "And now there is the paradoxical idea that it is Man himself whose 'teeth and claws' are red."

One of the book's most inspired devices is Holmes's use of Edward Fitzgerald - Tennyson's lifelong friend, and, later, the translator of *The Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyám - as a kind of Greek Chorus. "Old Fitz," Holmes says, "is affectionate and supportive, but also provides a deeply critical voice, expressing reservations about Tennyson's poetry and whole career, being distorted by Victorian values including imperialism, sentimentality and finally love of celebrity. Fitz's reservations may express those of many modern readers and are intended to keep the tension of judgement - admiration and dislike - alive throughout my story."

Now in his eightieth year, Holmes has always written biography as a form of psychological suspense. "The enduring contradictions in Tennyson's own character and beliefs," he says, "and the mystery of his closest relationships, provided me with a kind of psychological suspense-story throughout this book. For instance: How badly were he - and his brothers - damaged by their drunken father? Did he really mourn Arthur Hallam's death for twenty years, or was he mourning a quite other kind of death (of faith)? Was *In Memoriam* more a scientific epic than an elegy? Did his friend Fitzgerald finally grow disillusioned with him?"

Such questions animate *The Boundless Deep* and remind us that for Holmes, biography is not simply the art of explanation. It is the art of pursuit, of staying close to the mystery without ever pretending to solve it. "The sheer intensity of an individual life, a vivid emotional and intellectual journey; plus rich sources either in the archive or in the field - the 'footsteps' principle - are what draw me in. And finally, I think, my subjects must indeed be lovable, in one way or another.



In recent years Holmes has also turned the lens upon himself. "I now realise that there is a clear line of 'secret' autobiography which began in *Footsteps* and continues in *Sidetracks* and then *This Long Pursuit*," he admits. "Partly I am exploring the persona of the 'Romantic biographer' and the lonely imagination seeking companionship; and partly questioning the nature and meaning of the whole biographical genre itself."

And with that he's off, lost in thought, following the footsteps through time and space again.

Ulysses

It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson.
Written after the death of Arthur Hallam, when
Tennyson was in his early twenties.



Alfred, Lord Tennyson
by Samuel Laurence and Sir Edward Burne-Jones
circa 1840. National Portrait Gallery, London.

THE BOOK WAS BETTER...

A REGULAR COLUMN ROUNDING UP RECENT BOOK TO SCREEN ADAPTATIONS

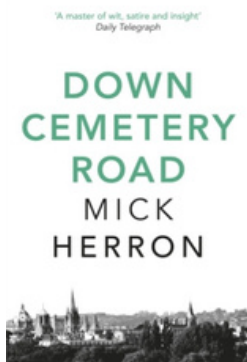
By Cliff Shephard



Ruth Ware's excellent 'locked-yacht' thriller *The Woman In Cabin 10* was always ripe for a TV or Film version, so understandably it was hoovered up by Netflix just as her sequel novel (this time in Suite 11!) hit the bookshop shelves. Troubled journalist Lo Blacklock is invited onto a seemingly benevolent millionaire's boat with a group of suspicious characters, before stumbling on a missing girl and a possible murder. Keira Knightley, Guy Pearce and the rest of the cast chew scenery as if in a pantomime and take very seriously what is, in fact, very silly...before accelerating far too quickly to an action-packed climax where all these 'normal' people suddenly behave like action stars. The end result is much weaker than the entertaining book it was based on, and consigns what could have potentially been a surefire hit into a 'skip it' hand gesture on the remote.



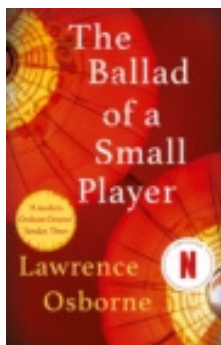
THE WOMAN IN CABIN 10 is streaming now on Netflix



Off the back of the amazing success of the *Slow Horses* TV series, Mick Herron (and Apple) have delved into his back catalogue to the series of detective thrillers he wrote early in his career set in Oxford and featuring the detective Zoë Boehm, played here with gusto by approaching-national-treasure-status Emma Thompson. Stellar actress Ruth Wilson and the hugely underrated Adeel Akhtar round out a solid cast for a tale involving a missing child, evil government shenanigans, and unsettling hitmen. Although *Down Cemetery Road* is a very different show to *Slow Horses* and perhaps lacks some of the humour which people love, it nevertheless has the tension, pace and style that Mick Herron has become famous for, and for that reason makes it required viewing.



DOWN CEMETERY ROAD is available streaming on Apple TV+



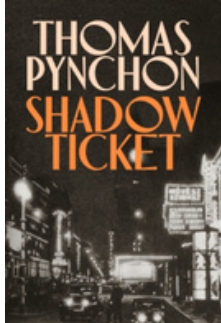
After 2021's excellent film adaptation of *Forgiven*, *Ballad Of A Small Player* is the second novel of Lawrence Osborne's to be adapted for the screen. Very much the director's particular vision this time round though - the unsettling, surreal shooting style unfortunately alienating the viewer instead of drawing them in. Confidence trickster 'Lord Doyle' is stuck in Macau trying to gamble his way out of trouble. There he meets the beautiful Dao Ming and a spark of redemption may be on the cards, but Tilda Swinton's debt collector is closing in, ensuring a messy third act that is hard to watch at times. All credit to Colin Farrell, who is incredible in the role, and to the gorgeous setting of Macau...but both are let down by the jazzy, over-the-top cartoon of a film.



BALLAD OF A SMALL PLAYER is out in cinemas and streaming on Netflix

The Return Of The King(s)

Thomas Pynchon and John Irving return with new works. Cliff Shephard has a read.



Twelve years after Thomas Pynchon's last novel *The Bleeding Edge* was published, out of the blue comes a new offering which is his most accessible and enjoyable book in many years.

Touching on themes of Fascism and anti-semitism, *The Shadow Ticket* is a romp that begins as a hard-boiled detective story, then a chase, maybe a romance, and finally a satire on modern American political attitudes. Far from the oblique and confusing wet cement of his larger 'difficult' novels, the story is told with a sparse wit that never slows down. Let's be clear, mind you - it does still manage to confound about two-thirds in, which requires the reader to 'push through'...but after all, you go into a Pynchon novel and expect to be challenged, eh?

Above all though, *The Shadow Ticket* is fun - the 1930s setting with its tough guys and hot dames provides a perfect backdrop for this homage to Chandler and Hammett, but with a surreal dash of Vonnegut on the side. Cannily, it's published just as Paul Thomas Anderson's film *One Battle After Another* (very loosely inspired by Pynchon's novel *Vineland*) releases in cinemas. For a somewhat reclusive figure...the author is all over modern media for once. Let's hope it inspires more readers to discover his work

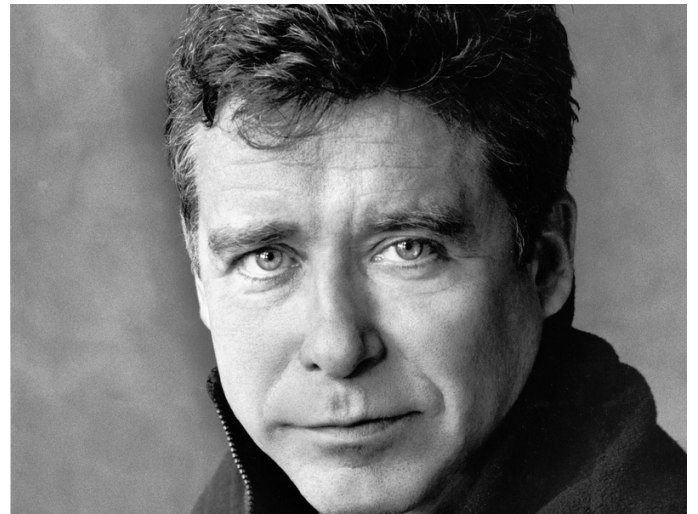
Coming in the same month as Pynchon is *Queen Esther*, the new novel by another 'big beast' author: John Irving. Beloved by most for works such as *The World According To Garp*, *The Prayer For Owen Meany* and *The Hotel New Hampshire*, Irving has returned to the setting of *The Cider House Rules* to tell the story of Jimmy - the child of the new novel's title character. We follow mother and son as their lives separate, before inevitably coming together again amidst the backdrop of the anti-semitism of the mid-to-late twentieth century. Esther's activism counterbalances her son's struggles through life, from America all the way to Vienna.

Where *The Last Chairlift* - his previous novel, which weighed in at a hefty but compelling 912 pages - was clever, profound, witty and slightly mystical, *Queen Esther* somehow (even with the nostalgia value of Wilbur Larch and his amazing orphanage) misses the mark on all counts. All the promising ingredients of an Irving novel are there, but there's a coldness and lack of heart which makes the reader wonder whether the author's trademark tropes being cycled through could have possibly been Irving fan-fiction instead, or worse - AI. The disappointment of *Queen Esther* is one that fades, but leaves you feeling that you hope this isn't his last work.

Shadow Ticket and *Queen Esther* are both out now

STILL BRIGHT, STILL BIG

Author Jay McInerney will always be best known for his first novel *Bright lights, Big City*, which was published in the mid-eighties to universal acclaim. His subsequent novels and short stories, as well as collections of his journalistic wine writing are published and admired the world over. Before the release next year of his seventh novel *See You On The Other Side*, unashamed fan Cliff Shephard was able to ask a few questions.



When you exploded onto the literary scene in 1984 with *Bright Lights Big City*, a lot of emphasis was placed on you being part of a 'Lit Pack' with other talented young authors such as Bret Easton Ellis, Tama Janowicz and Donna Tartt - how much of this was inflated or misrepresented? Did it help or hinder you in becoming successful?

First off, I should point out that in 1984, when I published *Bright Lights*, the other writers you mention were unpublished. *Bright Lights* became a phenomenon before the appearance of an alleged cohort of writers. I certainly think I helped pave the way for some of them. None of us liked the term The Brat Pack - it's inherently derogatory, really. And as I said, I published my first without knowing that other young writers would be coming along. I met Bret at a seminar about the novel at NYU, where he, myself and Richard Price spoke, and I thought he was smart and interesting. He hadn't yet published *Less than Zero* but I knew about it and after I read it I felt that, different as we were, he would be subjected to a lot of the same tides and currents and media hype and distortion that I had been. And I knew we would be compared. So I wanted to help him deal with that. We eventually became very good friends and he was an early reader of my third and fourth novels. I met Donna through Brett and greatly admired her first book and she became an early reader of some of my manuscripts. Tama was not part of our social circle although I reviewed *Slaves of New York*, favorably, for the NY Times Book Review.

One really fun pastime as a reader was spotting where characters and authors from this group appeared in each other's books - I'm thinking particularly of Alison Poole in Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* & *Glamorama*, Patrick Bateman in *Story Of My Life* and even later yourself appearing in the hugely entertaining *Lunar Park* by Ellis. Do you remember if you asked each other's permission for these 'easter eggs' or was it something that wasn't discovered until after publication?

Bret warned me that Alison Poole was going to appear in *American Psycho* and all I can say about that is that luckily she wasn't murdered. Apparently Bret wanted to make much more extensive use of her in *Glamorama*. Obviously he liked the character. I think also he figured, if critics were going to compare and confuse us, as if we were interchangeable, that he would use one of my characters as a kind of intertextual joke. He did not warn me about my appearance by name in *Lunar Park*. My biggest complaint about that is that he made himself the Frank Sinatra of the Rat Pack whereas I was merely Peter Lawford.

Although you'll forever be primarily associated with *Bright Lights, Big City*, I've always considered your 'Calloway' novels (*Brightness Falls*, *The Good Life* & *Bright Precious Days*) as your strongest work - do you have favourites amongst your books?

I think my favorite of my novels is *Brightness Falls*. It still strikes me as very accomplished and very readable. My latest novel, *See You On the Other Side*, is the final installment in what is now a tetralogy featuring the Calloways.

Since the late Nineties you've become known as a smart and influential wine journalist - where did this passion come from? Were you approached to write about wine, or was it something you pitched?

I got interested in wine partly through the influence of literature - Evelyn Waugh, Ian Fleming and Ernest Hemingway in particular. I decided I wanted to be the kind of guy who could pick up a wine list and order authoritatively. Of course, that desire was partly a desire to impress women. During the writing of *Bright Lights, Big City* I worked at a wine and liquor store in Syracuse and I would read from the owner's extensive wine library. In 1985 I met Julian Banes, who, I discovered, was a wine buff. I had dinner at his house in Tuffnel Park, and had two wonderful bottles of Châteauneuf-du-Papes, the 1962 and 1967 Jaboulet Les Cedres. We began a correspondence which included commentary on wine and Literature which continues to this day. And in 1995, my friend Dominique Browning was named editor in chief of House and Garden. She wanted to have a wine column and asked me if I would write it. With some trepidation I said I would give it a shot for six months and I've been writing about wine ever since.

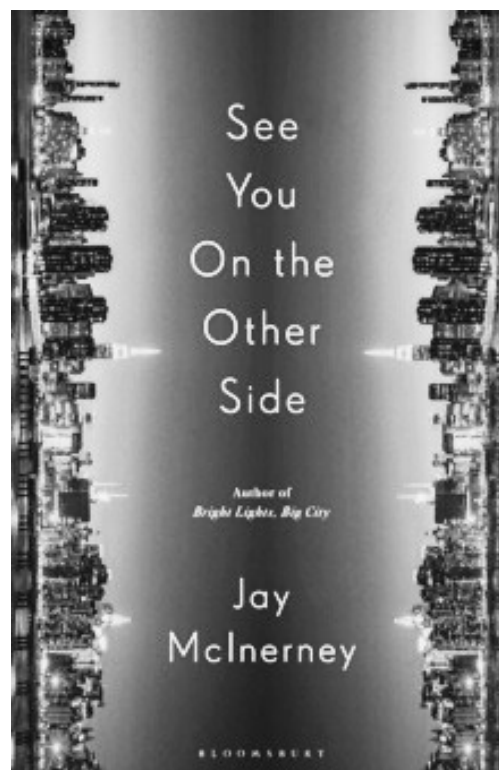
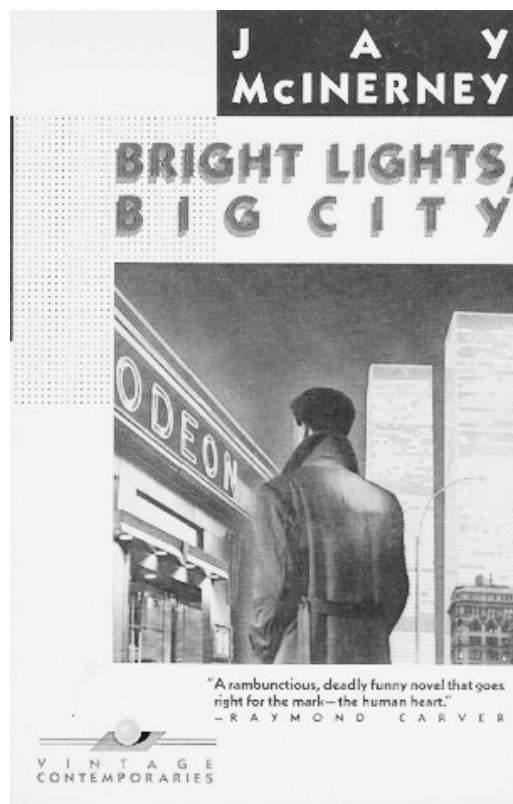
Back in the days of the big Conde Nast budgets I travelled to most of the world's great wine regions and greatly enhanced my knowledge and enthusiasm.

In the timeless discussion of the existence of The Great American novel, which do you think comes closest to earning that title?

Like many others I am inclined to see *The Great Gatsby* as the great American novel.

I'm currently reading *Happiness And Love* by Zoe Dubno which is very much a 'Bowery, NY' novel and reads as if it could slot effortlessly in the shelf next to *Bright Lights, Big City* or *Story Of My Life*. Who should we be reading?

I haven't read *Happiness and Love* but I am always on the lookout for the great first novel that tells us something new. I think there is a kind of music of the spheres which is only audible to people in their twenties and I am always eager to hear about it. I don't think I have felt that in a while, but I am ever hopeful.



See You On The Other Side will be published by Bloomsbury next spring

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