

THE MADRID REVIEW

ISSUE 8



MARK HADDON
CARYS SHANNON
TERESA VICENTE GIMENÉZ
HELEN SCALES
YOUTH
OLVIDO GARCÍA VALDÉS
MARK FIDDES
SINÉAD MORRISSEY
DENNIS MALONEY
TISHANI DOSHI
MATTHEW CLAPHAM
ESTHER PEÑAS DOMINGO
ANDY DONALDSON
MATTHEW STEWART ON PABLO GARCÍA CASADO



Painting the Light: Gordon Hunt

The cover of Issue 8 of *The Madrid Review* belongs to a painter who has spent a lifetime chasing something most of us only glimpse on holiday - that particular quality of light on water when the sun is high, the sea is clear and everything feels, briefly, exactly as it should.

Gordon Hunt lives and works in Fowey, on the south coast of Cornwall, in a part of England that has been attracting artists for well over a century. It is easy to see why. The approach to Readymoney Beach, the local cove he returns to again and again, looks down through clean air onto turquoise water, with families spread out below on the sand. "The subjects and style I paint evoke real feelings of sunshine, holidays, well-being and families," he says, "which seems to resonate with people everywhere. It was not a conscious decision - it's just something that happens with the images I paint."

Hunt came to painting the long way round. He studied Graphic Design at college, graduating in 1981, and spent decades running his own design business. All the while, there was a corner of the house set aside for canvases; a hobby, a passion, occasionally a sale through a local gallery. The aspiration of becoming a professional artist was always present, but so was life. It was only when his children were grown and the design work began to fluctuate that the moment felt right. He has been painting full-time for seventeen years now, and there is a quiet certainty in the way he describes that decision. "There comes a point," he says, "when you realise that painting pictures and sticking them behind the settee is not going to work."

What makes his paintings immediately recognisable is the technique. Hunt works in acrylic on box canvas, beginning not with a white ground but a black one, then building up layers of colour from the darkest tones outward, finishing with the brightest points last — those final touches of white and gold that give his seascapes their signature sparkle. His sketchbook, which goes everywhere with him, has brown paper pages; he draws with both black and white pencils, the white pencil immediately mapping where the light will fall. Photography, sketching and studio work combine into a process that is more considered than its breezy results might suggest. "I have a real sense of painting the light when creating these pieces," he says, and the phrase is not a marketing slogan; it describes something he is genuinely trying to do, and largely succeeds at.

That success has carried his work far beyond Cornwall. He has exhibited in New York and Hong Kong, shown at the Royal Society of Marine Artists at the Mall Galleries in London, and sold through galleries across Britain and internationally online. Last December brought the most unlikely adventure yet: the technology company Pitaka - whose mobile phone accessories aim to combine function with genuine aesthetic beauty - flew Hunt and his wife, the ceramic sculptor Heather Hunt, to the city of Shenzhen in China. The visit included a product launch, an exhibition of his paintings and an interview for an art magazine. "Not something you could ever envisage happening," he says, with what reads as genuine bemusement, "in the life of an artist."

The challenge, he is frank about, is not the painting. Making art, for someone with his instincts, is the easy part. The difficulty is everything else: the social media presence, the gallery relationships, the business of being visible. He is a man who prefers the solitude of the studio, and the requirement to present himself publicly sits uneasily with him. It is a tension familiar to many artists, and he does not romanticise it. "It is not all a happy-go-lucky life: it is work."

Away from the studio, he and Heather are as likely as not to be found on the beach that inspires so much of what they make, walking, swimming, sketchbooks in hand in case something catches the light just so. Their life and their art have grown together until it is difficult to say where one ends and the other begins. He cannot imagine the subject changing. Then again, he adds, with the pragmatism of a man who moved from design to fine art and ended up in Shenzhen: never say never.

Gordon Hunt's work can be found at gordon-hunt.co.uk and through galleries including the Fowey River Gallery and Webbs Fine Art, London.

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MUCH LOVE AND THANKS TO HAN, BOB BLACK, & SATYA BOSMAN: TRUE BELIEVERS

“The Mediterranean Cannot Be Saved Through Isolated Actions”

An interview with UNEP/MAP Coordinator, Tatjana Hema

THE MADRID REVIEW: What are currently the most urgent and overlooked sources of marine pollution globally?

TATJANA HEMA: Allow me first to extend my congratulations and appreciation to coastal communities across the Mediterranean. They are on the frontline of both the challenges and the solutions, and their daily efforts and resilience are essential to protecting and restoring the health of our sea.

This conversation also comes at a very timely moment, as we celebrate the World Oceans Day on 8 June, a global reminder of the vital role the ocean plays in sustaining life on Earth. This year's theme, *Reimagine: Beyond the world we know, a new relationship with our ocean*, invites us to rethink how we relate to the sea, including the Mediterranean, and how we can move towards a more sustainable and balanced future.

Coming back to your question, I would say, honestly, the pressures are significant, but we now clearly see how closely they are linked. The Mediterranean is influenced by how we produce, consume, and manage resources both on land and at sea. These pressures no longer act in isolation; pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change are closely interconnected and often reinforce one another, which is also why solutions are more effective when they are designed in an integrated way.

If we look at the Mediterranean Quality Status Report 2023, the picture is mixed. We are not yet on track to achieve Good Environmental Status - in simple terms, a clean and healthy sea - but it is important to stress that we are also seeing areas of progress. Work on the upcoming report is currently underway, which will help provide an even clearer and more up-to-date picture of both challenges and improvements across the region.

Some things are improving, while others still require continued attention. Yes, fish stocks remain under pressure, and coastal habitats are changing, and invasive species are spreading fast - for example, lionfish and blue crab are now clearly reshaping local ecosystems - but there is strong and growing effort across the region to implement the relevant policies and management measures more effectively.

We are, as scientists, concerned about biodiversity loss, which remains a major priority for attention and action. Marine protected areas currently cover about 9% of the Mediterranean, still below the global target of protecting 30% of the world's oceans and land by 2030. Building on this, we are working with stakeholders and Contracting Parties to scale up protection and bolster reinforce management. This also builds on COP24 decisions to further support implementation, monitoring, and reporting under the Barcelona Convention system, helping countries track progress more consistently and effectively. This includes ensuring that existing protected areas are effectively managed and enforced.

We are also working to help highlight pressures that are sometimes underestimated, such as nutrient pollution from agriculture and wastewater, which can lead to algal blooms, and plastic waste, which is now everywhere - from beaches to the deep sea.



That's why we say very clearly that we cannot solve issues with isolated actions - we need a real shift in how we live and manage resources.

Looking at the broader picture, climate change is also acting as a major accelerator. The Mediterranean is warming about 20% faster than the global average, which is reshaping ecosystems: species are moving, habitats are changing, and extreme events are becoming more frequent. Importantly, none of this happens in isolation — it is all connected. In response, we are actively addressing this through our strategic work under the UNEP/MAP framework, strengthening regional cooperation and integrated responses across climate, biodiversity, and pollution.

TMR: How is plastic pollution evolving, and are current international measures proving effective?

TH: Each day, an estimated 730 tons of plastic enter the Mediterranean Sea - largely from single-use items - with such materials now making up around 95-100% of floating litter and over half of the debris found on the seabed.

There has been progress. Countries in the region, under the Barcelona Convention, have strengthened action plans and are increasingly focusing on prevention, including reducing single-use plastics and improving product design. This shift reflects a broader move toward circular economy solutions, meaning designing systems where materials are reused, repaired, or recycled instead of becoming waste after a single use.

This momentum was further enhanced at COP24, held in Cairo in December 2025, where circular economy principles were placed more firmly at the centre of regional efforts to prevent plastic pollution. Contracting Parties also reinforced their commitments through more operational measures to tackle marine litter at source. A concrete example is the gradual elimination of single-use plastic bags across much of the Mediterranean, either through voluntary agreements or, more importantly, through targeted national legislation. Yet despite this progress, the key issue now is implementation, and this is where we are actively working with countries and partners to provide support and consolidate action on the ground. Following the COP24 declaration and decisions, we are working to better guide implementation and measure progress more effectively, while helping to address infrastructure gaps and uneven investment.

So yes, we are not there yet, but the region is clearly moving in the right direction.

Photo Credit: The International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD)

TMR: What role do microplastics play in marine ecosystems, and what risks do they pose for human health?

TH: Microplastics are often invisible, but their presence and significance are now well established. They are found throughout the marine environment - in water, seafood, and across the ecosystem - highlighting the scale of the issue and the importance of continued action. While we are still deepening our understanding of their full long-term impacts, the knowledge we already have is driving stronger attention and response.

At the regional level, countries are intensifying cooperation on monitoring, which is helping us better understand how microplastics move and behave across water, sediments, and marine life, and is supporting more effective responses going forward.

In addition, microplastics can carry other pollutants or microorganisms, which reinforces the need for continued research and preventive measures. As for human health, studies are ongoing. We know exposure pathways exist, including through seafood, and this is precisely why a precautionary approach is applied, meaning we act while science continues to evolve, because the issue is already widespread.

TMR: Are there any innovative solutions or policies that could significantly reduce marine pollution in the next decade?

TH: Yes, there are, but only if we scale up what already works.

One of the biggest shifts we are seeing is the move toward a circular economy (reuse, repair, and recycle). That means designing waste out of the system from the beginning, not dealing with it at the end. A very important tool here is Extended Producer Responsibility. It basically means producers take responsibility for the entire life of their products. That encourages better design, reuse, and recycling.

We are also working, under the UNEP/MAP framework, to support major improvements in wastewater treatment in coastal areas, and to scale up action on agricultural pollution and nutrient runoff at the source. The parties have committed to strict standards in this respect. Another key step is reducing single-use plastics, not only through bans, but also through incentives and smarter market systems.

Increasingly, we also try to connect the dots, because climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution are not separate issues. They must be addressed together. And technology is helping too. Satellite monitoring, AI tracking, and marine sensors are improving how we detect and respond to pollution. But of course, none of this works without sustainable financing.

That cooperation is absolutely essential.

TMR: How can individuals, cultural institutions, and media platforms contribute meaningfully to raising awareness and driving change?

TH: A very important one, honestly, essential.

Protecting the Mediterranean can't be isolated or in silos. It is deeply cultural and behavioral.

Individuals can make a difference in very practical ways, especially by reducing waste and avoiding single-use plastics. Small actions matter when they are multiplied across millions of people. Cultural institutions are also key. They help translate science into stories people can feel, not just read.

That emotional connection is what makes issues real for society. And media platforms - like *The Madrid Review* - have a very powerful role. They connect science, storytelling, and public awareness. They help bring environmental issues out of policy rooms and into everyday conversation.

At the end of the day, this is not just about information. It is about values, behavior, and responsibility. As the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development clearly shows, real progress only happens when everyone is involved: governments, civil society, media, private sector, academia, and citizens.

As we mark today the World Oceans Day, this is a moment not only to reflect, but to act with ambition and urgency. Let us *REIMAGINE* our Mediterranean Sea as a healthy, resilient, and living system and *REIMAGINE* our relationship with it. A relationship that moves away from pollution and degradation, towards balance, responsibility, and respect for nature at the heart of our economies and ways of life. The future of the Mediterranean is still ours to shape, and it is a future we must choose to transform together.

UNEP/MAP works with governments, scientists, civil society organizations, and local communities across the Mediterranean to address marine pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate pressures through regional cooperation under the Barcelona Convention framework.

More information: [UNEP/MAP Mediterranean Action Plan](#)

BIOGRAPHIES POETRY

Luis Alemañ (Alicante, 1983) es educador social forense en la Fiscalía de Menores de Alicante y doctorando en Educación en la Universitat Jaume I. Fue codirector del Festival de Poesía y Performance Poe-kráticos (2012-2016). Es autor de *Animales heridos* (Amarante, 2019), *Del cuerpo y la memoria* (Franz, 2020), *Cruzar el Rubicón* (La Isla de Siltolá, 2022) y *El número que ha marcado no existe* (La Isla de Siltolá, 2024). Su obra ha sido incluida en diversas antologías colectivas, entre ellas *146 voces para que nunca nadie* (Universidad de Murcia, 2026). Ha sido finalista del XIII Premio Internacional de Poesía Jovellanos. Sus poemas se han publicado en revistas literarias como *Anáfora*, *Mule*, *Digopalabra.txt*, *Alameda 39* e *Invernadero*.

Todd Turner is an award-winning Australian poet and master goldsmith. His work is published widely, including in *Meanjin*, *The Australian*, *Southword* and upcoming in *Poetry London*. He is the author of the collections *Woodsmoke* and *Thorn*, and his third volume, *Breathwork*, is forthcoming from *Puncher & Wattmann* in 2026.

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

Brought up in rural Staffordshire, Charles Penty is a journalist by profession and has lived and worked in Colombia, Brazil and Spain, as well as the UK. His poems have appeared in *The Poetry Review*, *Poetry News* and *PNReview*, among other publications.

Satya Bosman is co-editor at Black Cat Press. She has work in 14 Magazine, *The Lake*, *The Storms Journal*, *The Poetry Lighthouse*, *Porridge Magazine* and *Eche* amongst others. She won Third Prize in the Kent & Sussex Poetry Society folio competition 2025 and 2026 and was shortlisted for *The London Magazine Poetry Prize* 2026. Her debut collection *Dream Logic* published with Crumps Barn Studio in 2026. Her instagram handle is [@poetryandnightingales](#)

Carmella de Keyser is a prize-winning British poet, known for explorations of identity, and the liminal spaces of human experience. Founder of the Harlow Circle of Poetry Stanza, judge for the Harlow Poetry Open, she has two published chapbooks, and three books are forthcoming, from Hedgehog Press, Alien Buddha Press, Parlyaree Press and the Seventh Quarry Press.. She is on [X here](#) and [Blue Sky here](#) and her website is [here](#).

Laura Seymour's poetry has been published as a collection, *The Shark Cage* (Cinnamon Press 2015) which won the 2013 Cinnamon Press debut poetry collection prize. Individual poems have appeared in various journals including *Poetry Review*, *Poetry Wales*, *Poetry London*, *Acumen*, *Magma*, *MsLexia*, *The North*, *South*, *Glitterwolf*, and more, and most recently in the *Outskirts anthology of LGBTQ+ poetry* published for Pride 2025. She recently won the 2025 Waltham Forest Poetry Competition.

Emily Tee, originally from Northern Ireland, is a poet living in the UK Midlands. Reflections on nature and society often feature in her work, which appears in many places online and in print, most recently *Poetry Scotland* and anthologies by Yaffle Press, *The Poetry Lighthouse* and *Black Bough*. She volunteers with *The Wee Sparrow Poetry Press* and judges their ekphrastic challenges. Emily has a mini poetry pamphlet due with *Atomic Bohemian* in late 2026.

Gerard Smyth was born and lives in Dublin. He has published eleven collections of poetry, the most recent of which are *The Turn for Ithaca* and *The Sundays of Eternity* (both Dedalus Press). He is co-editor, with Pat Boran, of *If Ever You Go: A Map of Dublin in Poetry and Song* (Dedalus Press). [His website is here](#).

Lesley-Anne Evans is an Irish Canadian poet living in Kelowna, Canada. In 2024, she relocated to her birth city, Belfast, and received an MA in Poetry with distinction from the Seamus Heaney Centre, Queen's University Belfast. *Mute Swan, Poems for Maria Queen of the World* (The St. Thomas Poetry Series, 2021) is Lesley-Anne's first full-length collection. Her second collection is forthcoming from Ronsdale Press in 2027. Lesley-Anne's poems appear in *EVENT Magazine*, *The Antigonish Review*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *The Salzburg Review*, *The Honest Ulsterman*, *Banshee Lit Mag*, *Image Journal*, and elsewhere. She stewards Feeny Wood, a retreat for makers and spiritual seekers. [Her website is here](#).

Punyasloka Mohapatra is an India-based writer of poetry and short fiction whose work has appeared in *Merion West* and elsewhere. His writing draws on post-impressionist sensibilities to explore memory, displacement, war and its aftermath, and the fragile emotional landscapes of ordinary lives. Through lyrical and reflective narratives, he examines the complexities of human experience and the tensions between history, identity, and belonging. He works as a banker and is currently pursuing an MBA at the Indian Institute of Management Kozhikode.

Roger Camp is a former Marine NCO who daily walks the Seal Beach pier, muses over his orchids, spends afternoons playing blues piano and reads under an Angel's trumpet surrounded by a charm of hummingbirds. His poetry has appeared in numerous journals including *The Southern Poetry Review*, *Nimrod*, and *Scientific American Magazine*.

Thomas Saunders is a young poet from The United Kingdom. His work has appeared in places such as *Mindfork*, *Across the Margin*, and *The Gentian Journal*. [You can find him here](#).

Edward Lees lives in London. During the day he works to help the environment and in the evenings he writes poetry. His works have been accepted in various journals including *Southern Humanities Review*, *The Common Dispatches*, *Whale Road Review*, *Potomac Review*, and *Anthropocene Poetry Journal*. He has been nominated for Best of the Net. [His Substack is here](#).

Maria Taylor is a British Cypriot poet and reviewer who has been highly commended in the Forward Prizes. She has been widely published including poems and reviews in *The Guardian*, *Magma* and *The Times Literary Supplement*. Her first collection *Melanchrini* was shortlisted for the Michael Murphy Memorial Prize. Her most recent collection is *Dressing for the Afterlife* (Nine Arches Press).

Sophie Segura was born and grew up in Dublin, spent many years in Buenos Aires and currently lives with her partner and two children in the mountains outside Madrid. She has worked as an EFL teacher, clothing designer, magazine contributor and editor. Her poetry has been published in *Southword*, *Magma*, *Tears in the Fence* and elsewhere. Other writing, as Sophie Parker, has appeared in *The Irish Times* and *Time Out Buenos Aires*.

Clive Donovan has three poetry collections, *The Taste of Glass* (Cinnamon Press 2021), *Wound Up With Love* (Lapwing 2022) and *Movement of People* (Dempsey & Windle 2024) and is published in a wide variety of magazines including *Amsterdam Quarterly*, *Crannog*, *Interpreters House*, *Madrid Review*, *Salzburg Review* and *Stand*. He lives in Totnes, Devon, UK. He was a Pushcart and Forward Prize nominee for 2022's best individual poems. His [Facebook](#) is here.

Erin Wilson's poems have appeared in *Southword*, *The North*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *The Fiddlehead*, *B O D Y*, *takahē magazine*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Presence*, and elsewhere internationally. She has won a Pushcart and a Silver Medal with the National Magazine Awards in Canada. Her work appears in *Best Canadian Poetry 2026*. The Munster Literature Centre honoured her by highly commending a chapbook. She lives on Robinson-Huron Treaty Territory, in Northern Ontario, Canada, the traditional lands of the Anishnawbek. She is most at home amongst trees. She refuses to carry a cell phone.

Ursula Kelly is originally from Northern Ireland and currently lives in Benijofar on the Southern Costa Blanca. Having published when much younger, she returned to writing poetry after moving to Spain. She has had poems accepted by Acumen, Poetry Scotland, ARTEMISpoetry, Under the Radar, The Wild Umbrella and Ragaire. Her work was Commended in the 2024 Second Light Poetry Competition.

Shaun Barr is a poet, gardener and photographer based in Cumbria, UK. His most recent poems have been published in The Manchester Review, Dream Catcher, The Frogmore Papers, and Tar River Poetry (forthcoming). [He is on BlueSky here.](#)

Eleanor Davies was raised in Devon, England but now writes from her home in Edinburgh, where she also works as a doctor. Her writing is often inspired by dreams, bodies and the unconscious mind. Her writing is due to appear in the forthcoming book *This Modern Love Now*.

Joshua St. Claire is an accountant from a small town in Pennsylvania who works as a financial director for a non-profit. His haiku and related poetry have been published broadly including in Frogpond, Modern Haiku, The Heron's Nest, and Mayfly. He has received recognition in the following international contests/awards for his work in these forms: the Gerald Brady Memorial Senryu Award, the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival Haiku Invitational, the San Francisco International Award for Senryu, the Robert Speiss Memorial Award, the Touchstone Award for Individual Haiku, the British Haiku Society Award for Haiku, and the Trailblazer Award.

Sarah Lindenbaum is a Midwest writer and book historian with a bachelor's degree in creative writing and a master's in library and information science from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her essay on Bob Dylan and Shakespeare as self-conscious literary writers is forthcoming in 2026 by Cornell University Press. Most recently, she was an International Merit Award winner in the Atlanta Review 2025 International Poetry Competition and will appear in the upcoming *Winter in America* (Still volume, published by Carbonation Press).

Aidan Coyle is from northwest Ireland. He now lives near Paris with his husband. A recovering academic, he has enjoyed rediscovering his creativity through poetry. His work has appeared in Southword, Crannóg, Ragaire, The Belfast Review, The Stony Thursday Book, Pennine Platform and Prole, and in *Everyone Started Singing*, a 2026 anthology of poems about community edited by Jenny Mitchell. His translations into French of poems by the contemporary Irish poet Maureen Boyle have appeared in the Belgian literary review, Traversées.

Nayana Sivanandan is a writer based in Bangalore, India, drawn to the small, human moments that linger long after they pass. Her poetry has appeared in Wingless Dreamer, and her fiction in Columbia Journal and Modern Flash Fiction.

FLASH FICTION

Antonia Saavedra Díaz is a Spanish writer with a background in pharmacy, working between fiction, food writing, and literary experimentation. Her work often explores power, systems of care, and the quiet violence embedded in everyday rituals. She is the creator of the narrative universe Mari Estrella, where domestic spaces, kitchens, and institutions become sites of tension and transformation.

Her writing has appeared in The Madrid Review and other literary platforms. Antonia combines scientific precision, gastronomy, and professional practice with a literary voice attentive to structure, repetition, and moral ambiguity.

Geneviève Genicot is a Belgian poet and fiction writer based in Madrid, after periods of living and working in the UK, France, Italy, Portugal and Poland. Initially a lecturer in literature and sociology at university, she later worked as a playwright for a street theatre company, before becoming a published poet and fiction writer, performer, and editor of both fiction and academic texts. Her work explores journeys, cities, street poetry, and our relationship with machines and technology. She also leads creative writing workshops and literature seminars, introducing French and Belgian literature to international audiences.

Jeff Harvey lives in Madrid and edits [Gooseberry Pie Lit](#). His recent fiction is in Moon City Review, Ghost Parachute, MoonPark Review, trampset and many other litmags. His work has appeared on the Wingleaf Top 50 longlist and has been nominated for Best Microfiction. He's on [Twitter](#) and [BlueSky](#).

Marisa Mena (Navarra, España, 1963) Filóloga (UNAV), editora, especialista en tratamiento de textos. Su formación apunta a la práctica de la escritura, la edición y la fotografía. Codirectora de Editemos, firma consultora especializada en la producción de libros de arte y cultura, ha publicado narrativa, cuento y ensayo en libros, revistas y catálogos de arte. En el ámbito de la microficción, sus textos han integrado compilaciones y antologías dedicadas al género. Dicta charlas y talleres ligados a la práctica del lenguaje y la edición. Vive y trabaja entre España y Venezuela. [Instagram](#).

Enzo Farías Molina (Santiago de Chile, 1980). Escritor, poeta y cantautor. Su trabajo ha sido ampliamente reconocido en certámenes y concursos a nivel nacional. Durante 2024 participó del Taller Kenningar de la Fundación Pablo Neruda. Entre 2024 y 2025, varios de sus escritos fueron publicados en medios digitales nacionales e internacionales (Perú, México, Venezuela, España, Italia). En noviembre de 2025 funda Puerto Oscuro Ediciones Independientes, a través de la cual edita su primer libro: *Campos de Hielo* (2026). [Aquí está su blog](#).

Byron Browne was born and raised in Texas. After earning degrees from Texas Tech University and the University of Texas at Austin, he taught Latin and English for over twenty years at the Liberal Arts and Science Academy in Austin. His first book, [Driving Southwest Texas](#), was published in 2011 and the second, Spanish Missions of Texas, was published in 2017 with a translation, *Historia de las Misiones en Texas*, released in 2025. He and his wife, a Puerto Rican native, have lived in Madrid since 2019.

Kevin MacAlan is a returning contributor to the Madrid Review. He lives in rural Ireland, has an MA in creative writing, and has contributed to many journals, including The Brussels Review, The Belfast Review, An Áitiúil, Howl, The Martello, Wild Umbrella, and Drawn to the Light. He was shortlisted for The Yeovil Literary Prize in 2025. [He's on Bluesky here.](#)

Simon Firth is a writer from Morecambe Bay.

CHARLES PENTY

LATE SEPTEMBER SUNSET, ZAMBUJEIRA DO MAR

In the far reaches of the Portuguese
Atlantic off *Zambujeira*,
I watch

a blazing cave
fill with gold coins and ingots,
also the way

the glimmering road
that marks out the days
in blocks of lava

and lustrous metals,
and stretches across the whitecaps
towards me with its glowing carmine

calçada of Estremoz marble
and never-before observed
fuchsias and purples,

slides beneath the waves,
it seems, as I approach sixty,
numbering sunsets and the times left to describe

life's bathymetry,
the first terns and shearwaters from the north
arriving on the full tide,

so suddenly.

SATYA BOSMAN

ASSEMBLED PASSAGE

She rows
past the line of beach lamps
near *The House on the Strand*,
bright in the seaspray, bar one, winking its eye.

Her boat is borrowed
from *The Old Man and the Sea*,
so she knows it's sturdy.

Looks ahead,
takes an occasional bite of fish
(also borrowed)
which must last.

The tide is closing in.
Onward,
To the Lighthouse,
its white circle waiting in the sky.

LAURA SEYMOUR

MUSSELS

clacking and biting ropes
in buckets beside his van -
he left me there,
drawing the ropes
up and knotting them to the tailgate
every eight hours. Lowering the ropes
into the brine in the bucket
every eight hours.
Keeping the mussels fresh,
by mimicking the tide.

When the mussels swung,
dimming, above the water,
he would send me out
to 'pick up' drinks,
and we would all compete
trying to open the shells and lose:
our nails bent
back, our fingers dented
with their oval champ.

I boasted about hanging out there,
my life falling and lifting—beside the van
and away from the van—
I loved the underwater mussels best,
backstage curtains in a kit bag—

when they were
en su salsa
how they opened up
to wine, butter, cream.

SEA GLASS REQUIEM

CARMELLA DE KEYSER

pelagic mermaid tears thrust into an esplanade scrap yard
secrets swell to the shoreline
do you ever feel trapped between a conflict of hope and grief

prismatic cluster bomb pieces outsider syndrome
a scattering of opalescent litter
where is home when you belong everywhere and nowhere concurrently

discarded border dust as smooth as dead elephant bone
we suffuse in drunk tank pink confused disoriented
dear zeus were we ever even whole

and though heliophiles admire us our broken beauty
edgeless and blunt harlequin green and cobalt blue
etches of crescents frosted in lime
we are rolling into an undertow of suspension
a syncopation of stained-glass exiles
fracture and healing is a waiting game
stateless
the beach not sanctuary but resettlement
there is a barbarous loneliness in the boundary between the land and the sea
and what are all our broken pieces worth

and though in new gossamer lands we integrate into different arrhythmias
a popsicle squeeze and bubble-gum swell smack and drop crush and lust
will our souls ever return to their initial omnitude

we asymmetric castaways in perpetuity float
as morning jazz iridescent atonal
broken bottles
transfigured
within the drink of the opium sea

a requiem of universal glass graffiti

ROCK POOLS ON THE NORTH ATLANTIC COAST OF NORTHERN IRELAND

EMILY TEE

Today's a cool grey mid June day, not cold as such,
there's humidity waiting in the wings to bubble up.
It takes me back to childhood summer days by the sea.
Long sandy strands were my favourite, on the golden coast,
but White Park Bay's rocky shoreline held the rock pools.

Always there was fun with a small net on a bamboo pole
seeking small sea creatures that moved too quickly to catch
but that wasn't really the point, it was the pottering and puddling,
mixing the sand in those small cauldron pools into a soup,
adding small smooth egg-shaped pebbles of cream limestone,
stirring in seaweed, green strings of kelp, edible red dulse
and popping bladderwrack's warts on its slimy dark green skin,
hands stinking of the reek and the salty brine of the Atlantic
that would leave a low tide white rime on the dark basalt rocks
edging the pools. With a cloudless sky and the right kind of light
they would gleam such a deep purple from a short distance,
luminous against the black volcanic lichen-speckled basalt.

Shells were there to harvest, but rumoured fossils we never found
except we saw the markings on the sea stones and told ourselves
that they might have been a sea inhabitant millions of years ago,
back in that prehistoric time when humans hadn't yet evolved
from fish-like creatures that somehow crawled onto the dry land.
Sometimes I wonder how far we've really come since then.

A CROSSING, 1975

GERARD SMYTH

When the ferry was on the sea but still not far from land
I began to notice those around me:
Some travelling light, some carrying baggage,
a few with nothing to bring.
I was hoping to see a face, hear a voice
I might recognise but all were strangers
with blank faces, turning their backs
to the never-changing past.
Halfway or thereabouts the seabirds vanished.
We seemed to be neither here nor there,
coming or going, the sea recalcitrant, until at last
we were moving quicker than the drift of the wind,
closer to an England of rose gardens,
bridges of steel, graves kept clean in the war cemeteries.

TAHLEQUAH THE ORCA CARRIED HER DEAD
CALF TAIL ON HER HEAD FOR SEVENTEEN
DAYS AND A THOUSAND MILES

LESLEY-ANNE EVANS

In memory of Jimmy Scantland

You're three days gone and I'm going
to hop a train with a dozen white roses

wrapped in kraft paper and descend
to the crescent of Helen's Bay. I'll fold

my clothes in a neat stack, wade into the sea
with my bouquet. And I haven't thought

it through much more than that, but
I want to go in all the way, up to my neck

over my head and ears. I want to hear
whale song but I don't know if I can bear

the cold. I'll tear the petals from the roses
and float them like Japanese prayer boats.

MINUTES FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF THIRST

PUNYASLOKA MOHAPATRA

I keep hearing water.

Not outside—
inside the walls,
inside my head.

At first, I thought it was the pipes.
They've been unreliable before.

Now I'm not so sure.

I wake up certain
someone left a tap running.

I follow the sound
to a dry sink.

It doesn't stop.

The war, they say, is still going on.
I think it's just changed shape.

It moves like water—
shows up where it wants,
slips through things we thought were solid.

Yesterday, I tried to cup my hands
under nothing.
Held them there
longer than I should have.

No one mentioned it.

We don't mention a lot of things now.

The buckets are still lined up outside.
Empty, but patient.

A man swore he heard rain last night.
We almost believed him.

I laughed.
It sounded wrong,
like something cracking.

The news keeps talking—
strategy, control, progress—

I keep thinking
if they can hear what I hear.

A steady dripping.
Not loud. Just enough

to make you turn your head.
Sometimes it's close—

right behind me.
Sometimes it's far,
like it's remembering me.

I tried to sleep through it.
Dreamt of water
and woke up thirsty.

That felt unfair.

This morning, I drank slowly,
just in case it was the last time
my hands understood what to do.

The sound is back now.

I'm not following it anymore.

Let it come closer.

Let it fill the room
if it wants.

At least then
I won't have to imagine it.

FINDING MY SEALEGS

ROGER CAMP

It's my first time fishing
in forty years
the half-day boat nudging
the pier's rosary
of bald tires.

Finding my sea legs
I fish from the same spot
my father showed me
as a child.
The boat anchors

close to shore
the cliffs shrouded in fog
the tangled kelp rising rhythmically
in the flat gray light,
home

to the white sea bass we seek.
Unlike the anchovies of my youth
the bait is baby squid
its manzanita red mantle
melts into my hand

while jetting between my fingers.
Its enormous eye entrances
as black ink squirts into the sea.
The skipper's laconic voice
soothing our lack of strikes

the bait boys eager
gaffing a fish, untangling lines
tying a knot
when I am unable to find my glasses.
The trek from the bait tank

a gauntlet of tackle, a deck slippery
with entrails and silver scales.
Unsteadied by age
my hand teems with life
returning

to take my father's place.

DRESSED IN BLUE

EDWARD LEES

There is a cloudless sky, an ocean, and a boy.
The life of the mid-morning light
turns the world into a still spectator.
The boy lays on the beach, bathed in blue
from the sky and the ocean,
feeling the bright warmth on closed lids
that comes from above.

Like the boy, the light sheds its skin.
As it travels, it gets knocked around,
has to adapt to the world around it.
What we see is what is cast off.
The blue is lost light and the boy is scattered like the sky.
In this way we resemble the world:
whatever was whole is decomposed into pieces.

The ocean meanwhile has had a chance
to observe the sky and adjust.
It does not resist but absorbs what it can,
the reds and yellows, the fiery passions.
It continues to accept the light into itself,
cooler and more tranquil now,
ever darker in its depths, as if reclaiming what was lost.

Where the sky and ocean meet,
at his feet, there is a recurring conversation.
He listens but hears only an untranslated thrum.
He returns for many years to decipher it,
sensing the start of an answer in the merged horizon.
His trips shorten to make room for work.
He dresses in blue.

ON THE BEACH

THOMAS SAUNDERS

On the beach, watching the waves undulate
and the seagulls wheel high up above,
calling everything by its true name —

history seems so far away, the past
a towered castle on the other side of time:
the troubled flesh-dealer heritage

of my life is as distant
as a sea thick with white sails,
a muddy English field adorned in frost,

its cargo below contained by barbed
wire fence chains, black sheep
heading for hard work and slaughter.

The present is cloudy red with blood.
Yet here I am safe from the swirling madness
of prejudice, lost and complete.

We do not comprehend our wrongs until
they are placed before us: either gently,
warily like a shiny pirate ship

placed before a child, the parents not knowing
how they will react; or plonked
on our laps like a child's rejection.

All I want is to not be viewed
as having a head-start, to begin
in amongst the dirt like everyone else.

*

Sometimes I am an outsider in my own
body. Sometimes I am filled
with rage, a storm spitting untruths.

Most days I am sceptic, cynic.
I stand on this beach and feel
the wind point its blame.

*

The two bridges stream
away from England, arterial,
across the sea towards the hazy landmass

of Wales. Did Coleridge once
stand here, back when it looked
very different, and felt a kind of peace?

Probably not: but even so I like
this feeling of being on the edge of things,
alone and forgotten by the world.

The faeces-moulded mud, the jut and jab
of spear-headed rocks: it shows my smallness.
I don't mind. All rivers have an ocean to get lost in.

THE SEA ALWAYS COMES BACK

MARIA TAYLOR

My mother took a stone from the beach
of her childhood, unaware of trouble to come.
She kept it in a souvenir box
decorated with the silent mouths of cowrie shells.

A plain stone, its bulk sculpted
by rough salt-water. It looked smooth
though it felt jagged in the hand.

Trouble happened, a lost home and ocean.
She'd open the box, inviting a bright ghost of water
into our land-locked lives.

Years later, after showing passports at a checkpoint,
the miles of unmarked, dirt-track roads
that flared up into clouds of red dust,
we found the sea's horizon and stepped into its light.

I ran a finger over the briny hump-back rocks
at Neraides and Chelones,
coves named after sea-nymphs and turtles.
The past finger-slipped into the present.

Brightness, lustre, even from stone –
we keep the ocean in a box.

STRANGE BEAST

SOPHIE SECURA

It was always there in my childhood home, poking its nose out from behind the curtains, lurking outside when banished from the sitting-room, perking up when the radio was tuned to somewhere between Indreabhán and An Cheathrú Rua.

It had followed my mother from birth; it rode the train with her from Gaillimh to Dublin, stowed away on the ferry to Holyhead and back. She couldn't shake it.

It came with us on foreign holidays, to family restaurants with checkered tablecloths and mini-Union Jacks stabbed ceremoniously through our undercooked *steaks hachés*.

We were never to get too attached. It was on its last legs they said. It reeked of bog-holes and hedge bottoms, had become a nuisance, an embarrassment. And yet it persisted in dragging a half-dead thing—a gift—to our doorstep.

By the time I left home we still hadn't named it.

*

A decade passed. One night I thought I saw it circling the bins outside my Buenos Aires flat. Fuera! I cried. But it stayed put, returned my gaze—no cowering now—and howled.

It's been here since. It rubs its scent around the house, sprawls on the couch between me and my boyfriend, provokes admiring comments in the park. It sleeps with its paws on my throat and its rump in my childhood.

I've named it.

THE CROSSING

ERIN WISON

I had never seen anything quite like it. Sustained for ten to fifteen minutes, probably twice a minute, over and over, sheet lightning lit the dome of night. I was driving through pouring rain, the rain increasing, then (how?) increasing again in volume as though someone were tinkering with a soundboard, seeing how much of the amplified storm we could endure. I gripped my steering wheel tightly, galvanized by each charged moment. Then what was left of my headlights (whose light was being hammered to the earth by rain) passed over, dimly touching the broad bodies of deer crossing ahead. They seemed more concerned with the lightning and the force of the downpour than with traffic. I'm not sure they noticed any of us were real. They were colourless and slow, consistent in their walking, passing from one side of the road to the other, veil, through veil, to veil. I thought of you and I and how we talk with one another, how we drop our dark faces, how our words are much like night's green leaves handling water. Veil, through veil, to veil, through the deluge, I thought of our whispered words.

A WORLD OF ONLY SEA

CLIVE DONOVAN

What would it be like as a world of only sea?
A world of deep, heavy, regular swells,
Of species in communion,
Maybe whales the dominant race,
Their rôle to be corrupted – taint oceans
With religious tracts and wars.

Or perhaps the whole sea evolves
To an immense, wide, planetary brain:
Plankton neurones link the globe,
Knowledgeable corals store its memories,
Diligent dolphins plough fresh their questions
And, with the huge fin-powered stability of fish,
Serene shoals drift with conspicuous intelligence
Accepting homage from anemones
As they pass.

But how would it be without hard land?
Without some freakish rock to hurl and dash and break
Upon? Oh soul of water!
Would you not know the agonies of separation?
Hiss and thunder, milky foam?
Dazzling rainbows in showers of spray?

Yes, you know well the deep ordered swell
That covers and conquers all
But your heart has never been smashed or seduced
By a grateful rock that gladly bursts
Open to receive you, letting you grind
And scrape and rub together making children,
Sifting, sorting, ever shuffling,
Ever refining crystal children.

*And at last upon that new-born land
Would scattered furrows mark and score the sand:
Unsteady fish tails dragged in grit
Between paired prints of inquisitive feet...*

BEACHED

URSULA KELLY

It was when he hid my overcoat, then I knew
I wasn't going anywhere, anytime soon.
I'd said too much. He feared the backwash of my life,
had wanted me to cast off from the past, forget
the slap and suck of water on my skin.
And I'd been willing. His net had saved me.
Trussed in knots of gratitude, I did not give a single thought
to my coat, that he was peeling off
when he carried me onshore.

But this year when the wind came from the sea,
I breathed the bitter tang of stinging sleet and spray.
I sensed a creeping dryness in my flesh,
and howled frustrated tears to be earthbound.
I see our sons range round me like ungainly trees,
loose-limbed, but still implacably rooted
in this land that is not mine
with a language I could never speak
and barely understand.

I do not think he'll ever let me go
and sometimes doubt I could go, if he did.
Affection casts a haar around us both.
These days I bite my tongue and persevere
with a watery smile and clamminess of touch.
He knows I know. And that I'll never ask.
He hears me hunting through the house at night,
turning out the cupboards, softly searching
for the proof of who I was, before my landing.

They say I have no soul to trouble me,
so I cannot feel their mortal fears or pains.
But always now on waking I am sick
with curdled craving, buttermilk
that's long soured in my mouth.
I carry this dank longing close,
encircling a shoal of want,
poised to close my eyes
and swim into the day.

BEACHED

SHAUN BARR

It seems to happen slowly:
whales tricked by a light or sound
they're pulled towards, mapped
and mistaken for something else,

a navigational mishap maybe, or the false
sense of security a whole ocean gives you:
far-off horizons and unimaginable depths,
boundaries no more than a blurred sense

of casual belief in limitations;
an easy willingness to trust
in a world that exists
without endings.

Rapt by a sudden warmth of sunlit
shallows, the novelty of the new,
realisation comes late
and soon gives way

to floundering and the thrash and flail
of fins. Until gravity grips,
a pressure pushes in,
crushes life out.

Gone is the grace of their slow-motion
fluidity, morphed into a mass of bodies
stranded like strange boats, strewn over
the sands for what seems like miles.

Watching the aftermath on a TV screen
we puzzle over why so many end up here.
They say it can be the senility of just one,
the confusion old age can bring.

But so tight the family ties, so bonded the generations,
the rest are bound to follow headlong into harm.
We turn from the screen distraught, wondering
when (though neither of us can say it out loud)

the mass death of other families bound together —
children, mothers, and fathers — stopped hitting us
like this; how a scene of dead whales shocks us more.
Stays with us longer.

STARGAZER
ELEANOR DAVIES

My head is underwater; my eyes scan the seabed.
I lie perfectly still. My eyes and mouth are exposed
only because they have to be—I would rather be swallowed
in my fullness.

There are so many men, I think I might drown.
They watch me. When I emerge, dripping, I leave my body
to gaze at myself from inside their misshapen skulls.
I carry on as if nothing happened.

In dreams, a body of water morphs from sea to lake to bathtub
the same way the body of man morphs from lover to assailant
to fish. My face is grotesque and calcifying.
Any day now I'm expecting to grow gills.

ENDS THIS STRANGE, EVENTFUL HISTORY
SARAH LINDENBAUM

In the Miocene epoch, the first rails sprouted wings.
Herons waded in the shallows of vast basins.
You might see an owl in the daytime,
the size of an eagle, gripping a tree limb.

In the grasslands were bone-crushing dogs
and low-slung rhinocerotids.
The forest horse had supplanted the dawn horse,
and Ambulocetus wavered between land and sea.

Miocene is from the Greek, meaning less recent.
Heraclitus said everything flows, and nothing stays,
but time is not a river unless it courses backwards.
It is now understood to be a landscape, the past in one valley,
the present in another, the future high up on a nearby ridge.

Call back the rails and the owls. Call back the walking whale and Lazarus's crocodile.
Call back the rude prototypes, the dog-like horses and the horse-like dogs.
Call back the carnassial dog-bears, the cud-chewing pigs, the non-marsupials,
the feliforms and elephantimorphs, the ladder-horned ungulates and terror birds,
the first requiem sharks, the aberrant toothless things, the gravel beasts.
Call back the creatures known only from a broken mandible or single bicuspid.
Call them back to the boiled seas, the diminishing rivers, the burnt acres,
the arid lands, the dense and blinding warmth.

Call back all the extinct orders but leave out the highest. The hot earth is ready for its old
inhabitants.

OCEAN HAIKU
JOSHUA ST CLAIRE

seaspray world
three ring-billed gulls
pecking at coquina

menhaden
a lituus
of brown pelicans

storm warning
the stuttering
wings of terns

salt gales the celadon horizon

the golden hour silhouette of an ibis

whitecaps
the underbelly
of a ring-bill

storm coming
the loop loop loop
of a white tern

across the face
of the waters
three brown pelicans

the sound of distance contracting nightwaves

gracklesheen
the Atlantic slides
into night

WITNESSING SEA AND LAND FROM DÙN Ì, IONA

AIDAN COYLE

A stretching shadow in the slate-grey sea, a brooding
undertow and simmering surface, one forming wave
readying... and bursting through,

Spring sky, this single, reaching for the after-storm

slender froth-crest dashing
sideways to shoreline,
soundless in battering wind, till

frayed and stayed
by a rocky outcrop, the everyday
agitated sea scene restored.

Five electrified lambs sprung
from Easter-card quiet, seized
by an unseen impulse or
just because they can, race
along a mud-tracked vital
green field in white

formation, adding leaps
and bucks, a jiving joy
of nearly new life,

now frozen
by a common-sensed power cut.

The sea thrums with expectation, a regathering
for reprise, a re-eruption,

more confident this time,
speedier and spraying,

till the seconds-long show
halts again.

In the field, a repaired calm of lambs grazing
and keeping mothers close until the urge

to frenzied, orderly chase
grasps the troupe,
the dance detonates

for a defined time
once more.

Maybe, might be, one more time please,

and so again, on and on
till tide, wind or weariness
prevails, the patterned surges
flag and flatten to
transforming rest.

A SUNSET DIVINE
NAYANA SIVANANDAN

Standing into the mouth of the sea
Like many other along with me
Enjoying the mild breeze and calm sun
A prelude to a beautiful sunset
I walked on the manmade breakwaters
A pavement into the sea, gigantic rocks
Natural and manmade ones piled on one side of it
Courageous ones climbed over the rocks
Reckless ones ran through them wild
While I stood timidly in those paved path
Feeling the rocking of the sea
One side the sea was mild like a lake
plastics has washed up to its shore
Two fair cranes stood in one leg dishing through those floats
A lonely man, with water up to his stomach, was with his long nets
Trying luck on the placid waters
His friends standing in the shore watching him closely
There was nothing more interesting than this.
Boys were playing hide and seek
Who were long past their age for that game
Everything was right in this place.

A lonely woman and her grandson sat on a big rock
Watching the sun turn from orange to red
Her face was stoic, an untold pain
Which she shared only with the setting sun
Her grandson sat near his silent grandma
As if he too silently knows her pain
He sat there alongside her, turning his head in between

There were gangs of people, fun frolic youth
Came as a gang or a colorful family
All loud and competing to show who was more fun
Ignoring all of these, sea smashed into the rocks
As if it was a game she would never get bored of
Her admirers were awe struck
She again came running towards the rocks
From where I stood the sea looked strange
As if she was hiding someone or something
Something wanted to come out of the sea
And she was trying her best to keep it at bay
Sun laid his orange carpet over the sea to welcome it
A white and red spiral lighthouse afar
Was beaconing for its journey
A lonely boat and its passenger unknown to all these
Floated aboard looking at the crowd in the breakwaters
An arrogant eagle flew too low
Lower than the many crows in the golden sky
Nothing came up from the sea
Even though she looked brimming
I looked at the sea and at the sun
And the lighthouse and at a mystique silhouette of a tree
I knew it was time for me to leave
I gathered the pretty shells of memories
And locked in my fist tightly
I knew it was time to go
Leaving behind the remains of a divine sunset

NO PINGS

ANTONIA SAAVEDRA DÍAZ

"Calm sea," the captain said, and the word sounded like luck. It was the first thing that didn't belong. Mari Estrella had been staring at the horizon for hours. She knew that kind of stillness was never a good sign. The ocean doesn't go flat without a reason—too smooth, too watchful. Salt crusted the rails. Diesel clung to their sleeves. "Good night to cross," the captain added. "No traffic. No pings." There were six of us aboard, sitting on our bags. Two orange life vests lay under the bench. Nobody answered. The boat moved slowly, cutting a surface so smooth it looked manufactured. No waves. No wind. The engine sounded indecent, and the water took the noise without answering. "Is it always like this?" someone asked. "No," the captain said. "Only when it doesn't want company. Or witnesses." He smiled, then added, almost kindly: "It prefers balance." At midnight the sonar beeped once. The captain glanced at the screen. "Fish," he said, too fast. Then he muted it. Even muted, a low pulse travelled through the hull—machinery refusing our rhythm. That was when the water began to darken. Not at once—gradually, as though something vast slid beneath us and took the light with it. Mari leaned over the railing. "Don't stare too long," the captain said. "The sea stares back. It keeps what it measures." The engine coughed, then died. A silence with weight. "Start it," someone said. "It's fine," the captain said. "We'll drift." But the boat didn't drift. It held perfectly still—too still. "Are we anchored?" Mari asked. "There's no bottom here." The water moved. Not on the surface. From below. As if something were breathing, and the ocean were its thin skin. Someone gagged, turned away, and wiped their mouth with the back of their hand. "It's a current," the captain said, too quickly. The boat creaked—not like wood, but like something yielding. "What's under us?" Mari asked. The captain didn't answer. He looked down. Then stepped back. "Don't lean over," he said. "Whatever happens—don't interrupt it." The water rose without a splash. The boat tilted. "What if we jump?" No one answered. Because by then it was clear—the boat wasn't drifting. It was being held in place. Measured. Mari looked again.

For an instant, she saw something without shape. Not eyes, not a mouth—only a pressure, a focus, the sense of being accounted for. Not for weight, but for what they carried: fuel, heat, noise, plastic—things that never left. Then she understood. The ocean wasn't trying to sink them. It was correcting. Someone moved. Not a decision—more like a release. They climbed the rail and let go. No splash. Only a dull sound—like something sliding into a space already made for it. The engine started on its own. No one spoke. The captain adjusted the course without looking back. And Mari understood, with a clarity older than fear: there had never been six.

EPIC BLOOM

GENEVÈVE GENICOT

She still wears pieces of the night on her skin as she slips out onto the balcony, a glass of water in her hand. From the terrace where I'm drinking my coffee, there's no telling what plants she's grown in the window box. With a confident gesture, she waters the earth, then disappears into the sheer fabric of her camisole. What are these plants, these shoots that receive the kiss of clear water from an anxious lover in the morning? The seeds in the earth are a secret. Interrupting my Saturday morning meditation, a passer-by enters my field of vision, walking past the terrace on Calle de Argumosa. On her pale green T-shirt, out of impatience, large flowers have sprung up. I love their October scent, their eagerness to exist. Caring for things is a miracle; it's time, multiplied.

Excerpt from the ongoing series "Epic Madrid," where a careful look at reality reveals unexpected facts.

THE PUFFINS

JEFF HARVEY

A whirl of Puffins migrated to Nova Scotia from Greenland after foreign elements succeeded in changing fundamental rights for all species, causing the flock to lose their ancestral lands to an organization that built casinos, condos, and coffee shops. Most Puffins no longer made it to the age of four, the year they were to begin the mating process.

The Sinclair Puffins found a home in the courtyard next to Tim's apartment in suburban Halifax. Out for his morning walk, Tim met Cynthia Puffin as she was prancing about in the fountain with a minnow hanging from her lips, basking in her newfound safety, locating food for her family.

During neighbor appreciation week, Tim invited Sinclair Puffin to pose for a local photography class at the university. He awed the artists with his seventy-six centimeters wingspan and neon-orange beak and feet. A picture of him donned the cover of the local newspaper.

One night Tim heard a weeping sound and discovered the Sinclair Puffins, all covered in red plastic, gathered around the fountain. Their only Puffling, Octavia, had passed after mistaking a closed window for a new path to the harbor filled with her favorite sand eels. And adhering to Puffin culture, they honored her with three days of mourning followed by a family flight to sea to scatter her remains.

BATALLAS DE MAR Y TIERRA

MARISA MENA

La vi acercarse a la orilla aunque la resaca estaba fuerte. El sol hizo reflejo en ella y por un instante la dejó sin rostro. Entró al mar, al tiempo que una ola alta y encrespada la tambaleó para arrastrarla y hacerla desaparecer en un fluir espiral de mil vueltas. Mientras saltaba de mi puesto de vigilancia, estaría tragando agua y arena, la nariz y la garganta inundadas de sal que pica y escuece, sumergida ya en esa otra dimensión ondulante donde hay otros rumores, distintas frecuencias, entre las que seguirían las volteretas y los golpes por la lucha en la que el propio océano se bate. La succión de afuera hacia adentro, de adentro hacia afuera, en un curso que adiviné indetenible y fatal, sin poder gritar ni sacar la cabeza ni domar el laberinto de burbujas. Más agua, más arena ganándole el cuerpo a la superficie, para por fin ceder a las profundidades y dejarse ir. Empeñado en vencer la marejada, logré asir aquel volumen que era ya del abismo y robárselo a la corriente, para llevarlo a salvo y tenderlo en la playa, inconsciente pero vivo, entre el murmullo sordo de muchas voces: Había bandera roja, ¿será que la chica no la vio?

MELODRAMA

ENZO FARIAS MOLINA

Aquella tarde de miércoles, que flechaba la mitad exacta del mes de marzo en el calendario, me planté frente al mar, con la insolencia y el desapego que solo un desdichado sabe tener. El astro mayor caía inevitablemente, pero aun destellaba algo de su crudeza. El reflejo de miles de cristales rotos sobre el agua me acribillaba la mirada. Parecía como si quisiera espantarme. A mí y a esa idea miserable que cargaba dentro del puño. La respiración agitada, el rostro amargo que ya no se parecía en nada al de antes. Vomitaba suspiros densos, como un planeta antiguo en formación, que acomoda lentamente sus placas, mucho antes que su núcleo empezara siquiera a entibiarse. Una sensación postrera asolaba mi desventura. Ya no tenía un idioma para hablar, ni una tierra donde habitar. En la mente y en las ganas crecía a largas zancadas la necesidad imperiosa de destruir la ciudad, junto a todos y cada uno de sus caprichos, de lo contrario, mi corazón correría serio peligro de incendiarse. Ya había pasado por estas zozobras antes, unas cuantas veces. No es saludable repetir.

A esas alturas, deseaba en el alma, y con todas mis fuerzas que el mar se recogiera y volviera hecho una interminable cadena de olas gigantes que arrasaran al mundo por completo. Que nos fulminara de una vez y nos borrara del mapa para siempre. Que se acabara el dolor y la miseria que sentía me estaban aplastando la existencia. Esperaba ansioso, como una navidad, la llegada de un terremoto que partiera en mil partes el planeta, creando abismos de sangre y fuego, por donde caer al infinito. Quedar a la deriva, flotando en medio del cosmos, mirando a la distancia el fin de la especie humana. Estar solo y liberado, en mitad de la nada, en pleno espacio sideral, entregado a mi suerte. Solo. Completamente solo.

Comencé a adentrarme de a poco al agua, despacito, con marcha corta y lenta. Las olas llegaban una tras otra, me tomaban dulcemente, invitándome con insistencia a ser parte de su morada. El agua a las rodillas, jovial, pero fría. Mientras escalaba hacia los muslos, sentí que todo comenzaba a mejorar. Al llegar a la cadera no hubo vuelta atrás. Cuando me cubrió los hombros, estuve completamente mojado y entregado. Volteé a dar una mirada final hacia la orilla y vi mi cuerpo desparramado en la arena, rodeado por la muchedumbre. Algunos corrían de un lado para otro, había quienes gritaban en medio de aquella locura. Otros lloraban—sé bien quienes—, en tanto la estridencia ahogada de la sirena de una ambulancia se podía oír a lo lejos. Desorden y caos en el litoral.

Seguí adelante y me sumergí. Cerré los ojos y dejé que la corriente submarina arrastrara mi carne y huesos. Inmerso entre variedad de peces y la vasta flora abisal, ya era libre y pleno. Tenía paz. Al fin podía tener paz, pues ahora, ya era una criatura del mar. Del profundo mar.

JUST THE ONE

BYRON BROWNE

Then there was this time in Pensacola. Water so blue you'd think the sky fell to the ground. Sand white as a blank page. Goddamn postcard. We hadn't intended to stop there, but that view, it sorta' pulls you in.

I don't remember how old he was. Single digits. Small enough for a wave to roll like a clot of sand, young enough to feel that getting mugged by the ocean was fucking hilarious. After the sea, we ate fried chicken and strawberries at some shack up the highway. Later while we were still trying to get there, I hear this squeal from the backseat, "There's a seashell in my underwear!" He held it up so I could see it in the rearview mirror. From his smile, you'd think he'd found a doubloon. We both laughed like madmen for about 100 miles.

That's a great story. How many kids you got?

Just the one... just the one. Anyway, a couple of days later we're crossing the Chesapeake Bay Bridge and traffic is slow as Christmas. I'm thinking that's just the way it is, but no. At the middle of the bridge the cars just calcify on the asphalt. There're all these police cars cramming the space. And then we see a woman perched on the railing, feet together, legs stiff as boards, her hands wrapped around a cable. She's leaning out over the bay- a lost sail caught in the bridge's trusswork. There's a priest and about a dozen cops all huddled, staring up at her. The priest is talking but we can't hear. The traffic creeping by so slowly you can make out the colour of the woman's glasses.

So, we get past and neither of us says a thing for like five miles. Then the boy says, "She was thinking about jumping, wasn't she?" I didn't expect that. I mean, what do you say? My brain is dancing for some answer, but I got nothing. Finally, I just decide on the truth. "Yes, I suppose she was", I say. The boy doesn't answer. He just looks out the window, watching the water. Half an hour later he's playing with his toys again and never says word one about the bridge.

That's a rough lesson for a kid.

You're right. At the time that's what I thought, too.

You still talk with him much?

Nah, it's been a while since we've seen each other.

Maybe you should call him.

Yeah, maybe I should. He's out there somewhere.

HOUSEBOUND

KEVIN MACALAN

It was a day too beautiful to be cooped up at home, but this was Mr Peabody's world now. He could not come and go. He could not visit his friends. Heck, he couldn't even talk to his neighbours over the garden fence without a lot of yelling and recrimination. He felt stifled. He had a live-in carer, a kind but intrinsically lazy man called Patrick. You'd think Mr Peabody could simply ask to go out and Patrick would see to it. I mean, who worked for whom? But Patrick always thought he knew best, and these days Mr Peabody wasn't so agile. He was often short of breath, and he was plagued by arthritis, so Patrick argued that it was for his own good that they rarely left the confines of the house.

Today's conditions were exceptional. An unrelenting breeze, warm and welcoming, coming from the south, brought ozone filtered over the seaweed-strewn beach which lay just a kilometre away. It passed through the birch and alder trees that skirted the shoreline, and delivered a jamboree of intoxicating scents to the veranda at the back of Mr Peabody's house. The dark wood decking, sun-drenched and radiating, still bore traces of petrichor from yesterday's rain. Mr Peabody had turned the soil in the garden's flowerbeds while it was loosened by the damp, and the anticipation of spring brought a gladness to his spirit which eased his aging limbs. Yes, he was tired, but days like these were precious. He needed to go down to the sea.

A brief doze on the veranda did nothing to null his hankering. He ached to stretch his legs striding out on the rippled sand exposed by a receding tide. Mr Peabody didn't drive. Patrick did. And Patrick had a car, an ugly brute of a tin box on wheels that smelled of oil leaks and growled like a bear, but Mr Peabody knew this motorised shed could whisk him down to the coast in a matter of minutes. Of course, Mr Peabody also knew, that unless the idea came from Patrick himself, they'd be going nowhere. It was never wise to challenge Patrick directly, the man would dig in, and double down on whatever method of passing time required the least effort.

Accepting another day imprisoned, Mr Peabody went to the kitchen to find himself a drink. He noticed Patrick's car keys and imagined 'borrowing' the car. He knew this wasn't really feasible, but there had to be a way to manipulate Patrick into thinking about taking a daytrip. The ocean beckoned.

Mr Peabody picked up Patrick's keys and slipped into the lounge. Patrick was seated on the sofa turning the pages of a newspaper laid out on the adjacent coffee table. When Patrick left the room, briefly, Mr Peabody ambled over to where Patrick had been, and hid the car keys under the next page Patrick would turn. This was bound to work.

Mr Peabody sat panting, wagging his tail in anticipation.

RINGO'S DESCENT

SIMON FIRTH

Without realising, I fell out of my own life. It was in the Río de la Plata. I was on the ferry to Montevideo, when I had the sudden impulse to throw myself overboard. I sank through the water extremely artistically, and settled in an octopus's garden. Naturally, Ringo Starr, or possibly his double, was already there, reclining in the shade, wondering if there was any point in trying to get back out.

By nature I'm very shy. Thankfully, Ringo talked a lot. He told me he'd always wanted to go to Argentina. It seemed like such a mysterious place. He'd heard about the time four young men from Florida had grown their hair out and toured South America as the American Beatles. When they came out from behind the curtain at a gig in Buenos Aires, a little girl who'd been going completely nuts started crying her eyes out. Ringo found this very funny. I raised an eyebrow, as if to ask: why? He peered at me and said: how do you think I ended up here? I didn't understand what that had to do with anything. He laughed, a booming laugh that made my ears pop, and then talked about his childhood: years of lying in a giant greenhouse while his stomach ripped itself to shreds, teaching himself drums on biscuit tins.

He recalled other conversations in the garden. He'd talked to Isaac Newton, hunched over a rock at the end of the garden, staring at the needle of his compass on the seabed. He met with a creature who belonged to a black lagoon but had gotten lost, maybe on purpose. The creature was having relationship problems. He was in love with a woman who loved him too, but they couldn't be together due to social incompatibilities. Now the point of their relationship was for her to wait and him to be lost.

One evening I asked Ringo: where's the octopus? He's away, Ringo said. He's an odd lad. I did go into the den once. There's something like a sarcophagus in the dining room. I stood in the doorway and looked at it for a while. Then I came back outside. Also, it's not a house: it's a den.

I didn't ever go into the den, but I dreamed about it. And it was in a dream one evening that I felt the sudden sensation of choking. When I opened my eyes I was rising. Ringo was holding on to my leg. He had a firm grip. Over the edge of the coral, I could just about see a huge red creature drifting with a deathly saunter towards the den.

I can't swim, I heard myself say. Can you?

I don't know, Ringo said. What's that got to do with anything?

He laughed, that thunderous laugh of his, which propelled me to the surface and him back down to the seabed, where I presumed the octopus was waiting expectantly for his return.

SPAIN'S REAL MONEY HEIST IS STRANGER THAN NETFLIX'S

BY ANDREA ESCHEN

During the COVID pandemic, Netflix's Spanish *La Casa de Papel* (*Money Heist*) mesmerized my husband and me night after night as we remained confined in our Washington, D.C. apartment.

We witnessed a band of criminals, petty thieves, hackers and counterfeiters break into Madrid's Bank of Spain and steal tons of gold. In this Emmy Award winning drama, burglars infiltrated the bank, outwitted the security system, and broke into the *Camara de Oro* (the Gold Chamber). They melted gold bars into pellets to secret them out of the bank. Not until I later toured the only sections of the Bank of Spain open to the public did I know about a real money heist that occurred there. The actual caper took place shortly after the Spanish Civil War started in 1936. It proved that truth can be stranger than fiction even when produced by Netflix.

To steal the gold, Netflix's *Money Heist* characters mimicked the route that the Bank of Spain officials in 1936 used to enter the Gold Chamber, though, for security reasons, the actors never set foot in the building. To create the scene, set designers had studied the structure's interior from publicly available information from the regime of Francisco Franco, the general who led the military coup that started the Civil War. From that, they created a two-level stage in another building to enact the theft.

The bank's actual vault lies thirty-five meters (115 feet) underground. In 1934, carpenters, mechanics, masons, and bricklayers worked in three shifts night and day, pumping out rising groundwater to excavate and build it. They toiled under scarce natural light, poor ventilation, and extreme temperatures. Water seeped through the ground constantly. The tunnels threatened to crash on top of them. After winning a strike for higher wages and improved conditions, laborers finished the country's most secure and highly technical vault in March 1936. Today, three steel armored doors, a narrow bridge above a trench, and water from two underground rivers capable of submerging unauthorized persons prevent unlawful entry into the fourth largest gold reserve in the world.

After completing the *Camara de Oro*, workers hauled seven-hundred tons of gold from the bank's smaller vault into this new maximum security one. After the Civil War broke out in July, the Ministry of Finance needed to ensure the bullion did not get into the hands of General Franco's Nationalist soldiers. In September, the Finance Minister sent militiamen into the Bank of Spain. Fifty to sixty metallurgists and locksmiths accompanied them. These carabinieri and metal workers removed 510 tons of the precious metal, 72.6 percent of the country's reserves, and put it in ten-thousand wooden boxes. They transported 7,900 of them by truck to the railway station. It was valued at US \$ 20 million at that time. From here, the heavily guarded gold traveled to a naval station in the southern city of Cartagena. For three nights, stevedores loaded boxes of gold onto four ships headed toward Odessa, Ukraine, part of Russia. Four Spaniards guarding the keys to the security vaults of the Bank of Spain also boarded the ships. After the ships docked, laborers transported the goods to the Soviet Union's State Treasury and State Bank.



Spain's gold in the Soviet Union, "Moscow Gold," paid for the Republican Army's weapons, foreign currency, and supplies. Following the removal of the gold, bank workers sent 193 tons of silver and currency to France and the United States to buy arms and secure foreign exchange. These became the "Paris shipments."

Franco insisted that the Soviet Union return the gold. He declared it was stolen from Spain and belonged to its people. However, the Russian government had melted the gold bars and re-minted and sold them to fund the Republican government's ammunition. None of the Paris shipment returned.

The Spanish government re-built its gold reserves after World War II through international transactions, especially after the end of the Franco regime in 1975. Today, Spain's gold holdings rank nineteenth or twentieth in the world.

Despite five years of living in Spain after the pandemic ended and the hundreds of times I've strolled through Madrid's streets, I never recognized *Money Heist* filming sites. The film crew shot scenes of the bank's exterior at the enormous *Nuevos Ministerios* complex which houses five government ministries. I pass it almost daily, never suspecting the series' directors substituted it for the bank.

Another scene showed money dropping from the sky. This was shot at Plaza de Callao, also known as a "mini-Times Square." Department stores, movie theaters, and restaurants surround it. I didn't recognize that site either. Shoppers milling about the plaza don't provide clues either, as many don't look towards the heavens for cascading bills.

In *Money Heist*, the thieves, rebelling against the Bank of Spain's power and wealth, planned to give the stolen money to the people, believing they deserved it more than the institution. The gold became a symbol of autonomy and liberation for the robbers who escaped with their treasure. Television critics stated that, in addition to power struggles between rich and poor, the show symbolized resistance against systematic repression and tyranny. The show's plot circled back to the original sting in which the Republican government removed gold to keep it safe from Franco's dictatorship and in the hands of a democratic government.

This high stakes drama kept my husband, me, and millions of others glued to the couch, but it also revealed an idealistic part of Spanish history when the Republican democratic government thought it could overcome Franco's forces. A different and happier ending would have been fiction stranger than truth.

Andrea Eschen is a nonfiction writer based in Madrid whose work explores how historical events—large and small—shape the present. Her essays have appeared in literary journals including *Pembroke Magazine*, *Spillwords*, and *Months to Years*. She is currently writing a nonfiction book about the making of modern Chicago and the role of her great-grandfather, Victor Falkenau, a controversial building contractor during the city's architectural boom. A former global public health professional who spent three decades advancing reproductive health programs across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, Andrea now writes about history, culture, and place through her *Substacks Building Modern Chicago* and *Snippets from Spain*. [Connect with her here.](#)

THE UMBILICAL TIDE

BY CARYS SHANNON



Photo credit: Roger Cornfoot

It is 11pm and the temperature is 38 degrees. The drop from the bitter heat of the day, a paltry five degrees or so, offers some welcome relief. I am sitting on the balcony of the flat I share with my partner in the Andalusian city of Córdoba. My legs are slick with sweat, crossing them, they simply slide off each other. In a moment we'll go to the park, feel the hush and pulling cool of the Guadalquivir River that runs alongside it. Families will be out and about, camping tables and chairs not an excuse to forget the napkins, wine and bread needed for dinner. Children who have been sheltering inside all day will shriek and canter around in the evening reprieve from a judging sun.

The night itself tastes like relief, possibility – thoughts can form again, my body can move. We will stay here amongst these laughing, playing, chatting families until the early hours. Then we will return to the four walls to repeat this newly learned summer routine: sleep fitfully, as far away from each other as possible, wake at 6am and open all the windows, leave the house for a coffee in our local bar, complain with the other bleary-eyed neighbours about the heat, ask the barman, Carlos, when he will finally get to the beach for his holiday, attend to any activities that require effort, then back home at 11am to close the windows and lower the shutters, entering into semi-darkness and the whirr of the air conditioning until night falls again and the river becomes our friend.

And in those fitful nights of summer sleep, I dream not of this kiln of a city nor her dazzling sun; not of walking in the tiniest of shadows or the old ladies who hold their fans to their heads like cheerful shields; not of the hours spent laying a hot body in a hundred different ways to keep cool and stay sane. No, I dream of water. Of the pitter patter of Welsh rain.

I wake to the white-hot sun entering like a brazen thief through the windows.

"Is it raining?" I mumble to my partner.

"It might be somewhere." He answers.

My eyes adjust to the room and the slog of another summer's day in this frying pan of Andalusia.

I am so far from home.

So far from the cold grey tide that sloshed around my ankles as a child; my green and washed out Welsh estuary, walking with sopping shoes and trousers through silent, rising water just to see a friend.

The only escape is a pilgrimage through the sweltering streets to find a different kind of air. In the stone-cool of Córdoba's public library, I open my laptop and travel home.

Going back to the estuary tide becomes an addiction in the blaze of a Cordobese summer. My novel, *Truth Like Water*, is a life raft. I spend hours writing about the wet mud, the sloshing, slipping tidal water and the faint drizzle and fog that hangs around the landscape like a muddied sheet. The details excite me. The difference between to sop or squelch. Fat rain drops or sheets of mizzle.

Writing becomes better than a cold shower. For some hours there is a hallucinatory respite. I am cool, not dried out to my very marrow. And between the river at night, the writing, and fitful dreams of pouring rain, I call back this muddy estuary over and over again to save me from the char of truth: this is not my place.

I am a child who grew up with the prevailing, rain-tinged winds of the south Walian coast; I enjoyed a childhood swimming through seaweed or revelling as my bike wheels turned and splashed through a low tide.

How did I get so far away from myself?

The tide in my novel is both a character and a metaphor for truth. It covers and reveals the dips and ruts, secrets and wounds, of an ever-changing rural landscape. That unsentimental water takes an object and submerges it, only to be thrown up years later in another place altogether, barely resembling the original.

I write this into my novel and at the same time wonder if this is me. Am I some piece of fleshy driftwood, floated out of that estuary and across the Bay of Biscay, through the rivers and waterfalls of northern Spain, all the way down to the milky-green Guadalquivir? Do I even resemble my original self, or has this heat dried me out and shaped me into something altogether different?

I can only keep on writing.

Since moving to Córdoba, I have spent too many hours along her riverbanks, watching the often silt-laden water, leaning in for a scent of freshness, that reminder of who I am. The river saved me with her presence, and it also became too small. The end of its tail curving around an unseen bend, and me, struggling against the restraint of it.

I finish writing the novel, and, as in art so in life, my own truth cannot be avoided. Soon it is time to throw the stick of myself back into the current and this time drift north. North where the rain falls and greens the land like a technicolour Wales. North where the snowmelt thunders down the mountain in jumping and leaping cascades of water. North where you can sleep at night, even in the summer.

We migrate further still, like birds in reverse, looking for cooler climes. And here in the majesty and peaks of the Pyrenees, we build a nest in the clouds.

Here I am surrounded and held by weather, shaken by storms and enchanted by endless rivers, less dried out and more of my wild self than ever. I am invited to grow into this place. These big mountains do something to you. Now I will see what they do to my writing.

Carys Shannon is originally from north Gower, Swansea, and now lives in the Spanish Pyrenees. She has had short stories published by Honno Press, Parthian Books, and *Mslxia Magazine*, as well as broadcast on BBC Radio 4. Her award-winning debut novel, *Truth Like Water*, was published by Parthian Books in October 2025. The novel has been described as 'an absolute belter of a story', 'a sublimely written work' and 'Welsh Noir at its best'. Carys was one of 10 writers selected for the Hay Festival Writers at Work programme 2026. When not writing, Carys is happiest enjoying slow time in big nature. [Connect with her here.](#)

OLD FATHER THAMES

BY VINCENT RAISON



Photo credit: Frans Ruiters

My first memory of the River Thames is crossing it as a child on the Woolwich Free Ferry in my parents' Vauxhall 101, amazed that cars could drive onto boats, and that boats could sail across expanses of water to strange, mysterious lands. Later, a friend and I would take the ferry as pedestrians, going back and forth, imagining great adventures of piracy on the high seas, fierce giant squid and saucy mermaids. Today, North Woolwich is still a strange and mysterious land, neglected by Newham Council and mermaids alike. But the ferry gave us a simple, innocent floating playground that fired the imagination.

The journey takes five minutes, but for a kid it was a magical five minutes. There is history everywhere you look on the Thames. There has been a river connection at Woolwich since Norman times and a ferry since the 14th century, so we were playing in the footsteps of antiquity, even if all we wanted was to get out of the house. I don't suppose many of the two million passengers that cross here annually see the ferry in romantic terms, but I prefer my nostalgia-tinged view.

By 1889, the ferry had become a paddle steamer called *Gordon*. That may sound a little *Thomas the Tank Engine*, but it was named after General Gordon of Khartoum. Gordon died in Sudan but was born in Woolwich. Unlike most colonial officers, Gordon, while probably quite bonkers, was a fierce and energetic opponent of slavery, which perhaps explains why his name is still honoured by a square in the town.

The shadow of the military looms large over this part of London, where the Royal Arsenal faced the river. It provided research and munitions for hundreds of years for an Empire we don't speak of much anymore (for good reason), but also for our proud defence in World War II.

Back past the ferry lies the site of another major contributor to our expansion: "The Mother Dock of all England" – Woolwich Dockyard. Founded in 1512 by Henry VIII, initially to build his flagship, *Henri Grâce à Dieu*, the largest ship in the world at the time, it continued to be among the most important shipyards in Europe until the late 19th century. The *HMS Beagle* was also built and launched here in 1820. Her second voyage took Charles Darwin around the globe and consequently enhanced our understanding of the natural world, playing a role in the formation of his theories on evolution. This river has been the starting point of many journeys that have changed the world.

A pungent memory of Woolwich riverside is the smell of the Tate & Lyle sugar refinery wafting over the water from Silvertown, a giant symbol of our global trade. While the sugar industry was fundamentally unethical in that it was dependent on the labour of millions of enslaved Africans, neither Henry Tate nor Abram Lyle were born by the time the British slave-trade was abolished in 1807. None of this entered my head, of course, as I made my fortnightly football journey westward to Charlton. All I knew was that it stank.

In adulthood I moved gradually west, settling in East Greenwich. I was lucky enough to have the Cutty Sark pub as my local, a Grade II-listed Georgian riverside pub that was an oasis in an industrial stretch of river on a delightful, cobbled street with tables right next to the water. I began to wonder why the river, if not all rivers, are not lined with waterside pubs. I still have not adequately answered this question. Watching the life of a river with a pint is an underestimated joy, with boats sailing past for pleasure or commerce, and rowers rowing for whatever reason it is they are compelled to do so. It feels like you are witnessing the slow passing of time. In a way you are, as the Thames moves at between 0.8 and 4.4 km/h, slow enough to savour, fast enough to see.

I began an important first date at this pub, with a woman I knew was a bit different. Special, even. I suspected she was not the type of lass who would be impressed by fine dining and candlelight. Different tactics were required if I were to attract her affections. So, after a pint, we went on a walk through an industrial wasteland by the Thames. There you could board abandoned boats and rusting hulks, swing on a tyre dangling from a willow tree over the water, navigate your way through mountains of aggregates and step onto indomitable jetties jutting out into the brackish water, staring seaward, forever awaiting the return of faraway ships, like wounded lovers.

At that time, tourists would not get that much further than the Trafalgar Tavern, another magnificent riverside boozery but one that has always been more for visitors to the city. It stands next to the Old Royal Naval College, a World Heritage Site that UNESCO describes as the "finest and most dramatically sited architectural and landscape ensemble in the British Isles". On the horizon you can see the statue of James Wolfe in Greenwich Park, next to the Royal Observatory and behind the Queen's House, as Christopher Wren's colonnades in the Grand Square part for your viewing pleasure. Even as a local who's seen it a thousand times, it's impossible to pass without admiration. The prominence of the statue is a reminder of the impermanence of fame, which compares unfavourably with the permanence of the river. Wolfe had hero status in Britain in 1759 for defeating the French in Quebec in the Seven Years War. There's a sense of who, where, why? Like so many wars.

By Greenwich Pier lies the *Cutty Sark* ship in dry dock, a beautifully preserved tea clipper and popular attraction. It was around here that I welcomed in the 21st century. We could see the Millennium Dome on the peninsula where Queen Elizabeth II and Prime Minister Tony Blair were singing "Auld Lang Syne" with as much awkwardness as humans can muster. It was a time of great optimism, a national feeling that lasted another dozen years or so, until Britain decided that, rather than sail outward into the world, learning and teaching as we went, we would stay at home, cut off from Europe, looking only inward, while watching the TV in our slippers. A great, if warlike nation, that had always looked to the seas and stars from Greenwich, was now neutered, grumpy and insular.

From here, the river meanders around the Isle of Dogs and Deptford, the site of another naval dockyard founded by Henry VIII and associated with the great mariners, Francis Drake and Walter Raleigh and Nelson's warships, as well as the place where the Russian Tsar, Peter the Great, learned shipbuilding.

Happily, the confluence of history and pubs reemerges upstream at Rotherhithe where The Mayflower pub, a dark, beautiful tavern with a jetty at the back, attracts many an American visitor. 65 passengers embarked here for the New World in 1620, fleeing an already deeply religious England that was not quite religious enough for them. I like to think there was a 66th who decided to stay for one more pint, missing the boat, remembering that London, unlike the Colony of Virginia, had pubs and Shakespeare to offer.

From The Mayflower you can see Wapping across the water, the site of Execution Dock, which for more than 400 years was used to dispense with pirates, smugglers and mutineers. Crowds would gather to witness the dispatching. The corpses were left for three tides as a warning to others. At The Prospect of Whitby pub, London's oldest riverside inn, dating back to 1520, there's a commemorative gibbet and noose over the water. Which is nice.



Photo credit: LxI

Past the houseboat community of Bermondsey is Tower Bridge, which looks fairly ancient but is only a sprightly 133 years old. It's one of the most recognisable sights in London and a great feat of Victorian engineering. The opening of the bridge to allow ships to pass holds an enduring fascination. Rather more grisly is the Tower of London. What was a loathed symbol of oppression is now a tourist magnet, but like many of these, it is largely ignored by locals.

We're almost at London Bridge, the site of the first crossing to span the river. It was Claudius who conquered our rainy island in AD 43, bridging the Tamesis, leading to the development of the trading and shipping settlement that became Londinium. After Roman rule ended in the 5th century, London Bridge began a loop of destruction and rebuilding as numerous Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, Danish and Norman invaders made their temporary claims. Old London Bridge, commissioned by Henry II and completed in 1209 had as many as 140 houses on it by the 14th century. The stone gate at the Southwark end came to display the heads of traitors, dipped in tar and impaled on spikes. The fifth, and current bridge, is less dramatic, and less horrific, connecting The City to The Borough, a place that felt the footsteps of Chaucer, Dickens and your boy, Shakespeare.

I rarely went west beyond the Pool of London, put off by the modern architectural mess of Vauxhall, though the river at places like Barnes, Kew and Richmond is delightful, less urban. It is thought that Julius

Caesar encountered the British tribes near what would become Brentford, nearly 100 years before Claudius. One account has it that he sent an elephant across the river to frighten the Celts – a very *Game of Thrones* move. Caesar's observations of his two invasions marked the start of Britain's written history.

But it was on the South Bank between London Bridge and the Golden Jubilee Bridges that my adult playground came to life. At 3.55pm on the last Friday of each month, I would meet three friends on the balcony of the Royal Festival Hall and, if we were lucky, watch the finest sunset in London fall behind the Palace of Westminster, as we swapped tall tales and had a pint on company time. We did this for ten years, rain or shine. Although it has become a popular spot now, we were often the only people there in the early 2000s. It was the starting point of our London adventure, ending no earlier than 3.55am and often including lookouts over the river; balconies at the National Theatre, or the Tate Modern (where my father used to work when it was Bankside Power Station). Or on the floating bars moored by the river: the HMS President, or the Tattershall, and the 'beaches' exposed by the departing tide. Steps lead down to sandy stretches that tourists tend to eschew. Perhaps they don't know that it's permissible. But down at that level, you can see the familiar from an unfamiliar angle. In the centre of London, yet away from it all.

You recall my date by the river in East Greenwich? Six years later we married at the Royal Festival Hall during the Southbank Centre's Festival of Love. The finale of the festival was a mass wedding in which 70 couples, gay and straight, married in smaller groups. After bubbles on the balcony overlooking the river, Dame Jude Kelly gave a wonderful speech about the celebration of all love, not just our own, commemorating the passing of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act. There was another special guest at the wedding; our three-year-old son, who was born about half a mile upstream at St Thomas' Hospital, opposite the neo-gothic splendour of the Houses of Parliament. He rejoiced in the neo-Lycra splendour of his Spiderman costume and joined us onstage.

The Thames has been with me for most of my life and I would hope to be scattered on it once it's all over, almost comforted by knowing the river will not end, that it will continue to be at the dawn and dusk of stories; stories that shape and reflect the world, a place where love and life can begin and end.



Photo credit: Morag Myerscough

Vincent Raison is an author based in London with a fondness for Vallecas, and is a co-founder of the alt-lifestyle project, *Deserter*. [Connect with him here.](#)

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.

While living in Madrid, I ran through Retiro Park most mornings. I always followed the same route: avoiding the tourist traffic near the lake, passing by the senior aerobics class that meets on Paseo de Venezuela and then reaching the best part of my run, the shaded path just behind the wider Paseo de Coches. Overhung by birch trees on either side, it's the spot where I almost felt like I wasn't in the city anymore. But in early May, the calm gives way to the clanging of titanium beams being unloaded, and the quick laughter of workers starts to echo through the park. [The Madrid Book Fair](#) is around the corner. Soon, that avenue of birch trees will provide shade for booksellers escaping the suffocating heat of their stalls and the same workers will move through the fair like it's a Formula 1 track, their forklifts zipping back and forth laden with boxes. For a few weeks, the park becomes the center of the Spanish literary world.

This year's book fair kicked off on May 27th, but there's still plenty of time to visit Retiro before the fair ends this Sunday. The setting of Retiro brings to mind the necessity of writing that celebrates the natural world and that examines cities like Madrid, increasingly defined by capitalist interests and scalding concrete sidewalks. With that in mind, here are some publishers at the fair this year specializing in writing about climate and the environment.

Errata Naturae (stall 287) produces some of the most beautifully designed books in the Spanish market and also publishes some of my favorite nature writing. In their catalogue you'll find reflections from naturalist Henry Thoreau, essays by poet Mary Oliver, and one of my favorite releases from earlier this year, *Los orígenes de lo sagrado*, an illustrated essay about humanity's relationship with nature throughout history. I also recommend the Italian writer Pia Pera, whose work has not yet been translated into English. Her essays and diaries on gardening, illness, and writing are equally informative and intimate. Errata Naturae is unique in their commitment to authentic sustainability, detailing the actions they take as a company as well as providing transparent data on the ecological cost of producing their books.

Another publisher to visit with a focus on climate justice is Capitán Swing (stall 136). The ethos of their catalogue is to champion works that analyze and challenge the relationship between politics and society in our current times. They often publish books perceived by other publishers as too risky, radical, or niche. In doing so, they have established themselves as a leading publisher of political essays and activist writing. Some favorites from their catalogue include the Spanish translation of *Braiding Sweetgrass* [Una trenza de hierba sagrada], a beautiful essay about humanity's reciprocal relationship with Earth and the indigenous teachings of the author's ancestors and *Huertopías* by José Luis Fernández Casadevante "Kois", which explores the social and political role of urban gardens and green spaces.

And finally Ediciones Menguantes (stall 419), a newer publisher that's part of the Archipelago Pavilion at the fair, which houses multiple smaller publishers who don't yet have their own stall. Don't overlook the publishers included in this area, as they often are some of the most innovative in the current literary landscape. Menguantes publishes books with a focus on travel, place, nature, and human curiosity.



Ejercicios de observación by Nicolas Nova is a great example of their editorial perspective, a tiny guidebook printed on highlighter yellow paper that encourages the reader to engage more closely with what often goes unnoticed through a series of simple prompts. Another book I love to recommend to anyone who loves plants or biology is *Álbum de plantas prohibidas* by María del Carmen Tostado Gutiérrez. A reimagined herbarium that details plants deemed hazardous by the Spanish government in an official bulletin in 2004. For every plant defined as dangerous, there's a fascinating socio-political context behind it.

Before you grab your favorite tote bag and head to the fair, a few tips from a bookseller for getting the most out of FLM:

1. Check the weather and social media: The Madrid Ayuntamiento has strict rules when it comes to weather conditions and safety. For that reason, the park will often close if potential weather is deemed unsafe. Last-minute schedule changes are a hallmark of the fair, so make sure to check the FLM Instagram or website before leaving, even if there are blue skies where you are.
2. Bring a snack and water: Combine hours on your feet, hundreds of book covers, and warm weather, chances are you'll get a bit peckish. However, the food stalls leave much to be desired, the lines move slower than the queue for the toilets, and a simple sandwich or smoothie can be a bit pricey. Bring a snack or buy some fruit at a local frutería on your way to keep your energy up. I highly recommend having a picnic during the midday break and getting a start on your new reads!
3. The earlier the better: If you can visit the book fair during the weekday mornings you'll be able to avoid the busy afternoon crowds and have a better chance to talk directly with editors and booksellers at their stalls. One of the best things about the book fair is the unique opportunity to talk with the people who worked directly on the books, so don't be afraid to ask for recommendations!

I hope everyone has a great time at the book fair and finds a new, exciting read. Also don't forget to stop by some of our local English booksellers' stalls! The Desperate Literature team will be at stall 77 and Librería Parent(h)esis, who are at the book fair for the first time, can be found at stall 129. Happy reading!

Kathleen Meredith is a translator and bookseller based in Madrid, Spain. She holds an MA in Literary Translation from the University of East Anglia. Her translations of Rafaela Lahore and Marta Jiménez Serrano have been published in *Latin American Literature Today* and *The Spanish Riveter*. She is a member of the translation collective *Traductoras Desesperadas*.

Nada mejor que la ficción especulativa para sofocar el calor del verano

Por Cristina Jurado

2026 está siendo un año en el que las novedades no cesan de amontonarse en los escaparates de nuestras librerías. El verano, la época en la que se concentran la mayor parte de eventos literarios, es el momento propicio para sacar la artillería pesada de los catálogos de ficción especulativa.

En lo que respecta a la ciencia ficción, Minotauro ha anunciado la publicación de *Contrapeso* de la autora surcoreana Djuna, una historia sobre intereses corporativos y tecnología que apunta al ciberpunk y al *noir* para abordar temas como la memoria, la inteligencia artificial y diversas cuestiones éticas. Este sello también nos propone un thriller de ciencia ficción con *Supradalid* de Antonio Runa, una vuelta de tuerca al género de superhéroes repleto de acción trepidante.

Hidra tiene previsto publicar *Estrategia de Salida*, la cuarta entrega de “Los Diarios de Matabot” de Martha Wells en la que nuestro androide de seguridad favorito vuelve a su “hogar” para ayudar a la única humana que parece respetarlo.

Entre los nuevos títulos no podía faltar una autora de fantasía como Robin Hobb. En esta ocasión la editorial Nocturna va a lanzar al mercado su trilogía *Las Leyes del Mar*, compuesta por *Las naves de la magia*, *Las naves de la locura* y *Las naves del destino*. En esta saga náutica en la que las embarcaciones se transforman en seres sintientes cuando tres generaciones de sus propietarios mueren a bordo de ellas, la codicia de los mercaderes choca con la ambición de los piratas, todo aderezado por la magia.

M. L. Wang desembarca en la editorial Umbriel con *La espada de Kaigen*, una fantasía épica y militarista que ofrece un mundo secundario inspirado en la cultura japonesa en el que poderes elementales y un imperio imaginario se dan la mano para abordar intrigas políticas y familiares.

La Mascarada del Carnicero, la quinta entrega de la exitosa saga “Carl el Mazmorrero” de Matt Dinniman, aterrizará en el mercado en verano dentro del catálogo de Nova. En esta ocasión el célebre superviviente y su gata siguen sorteando los peligros del Sexto Piso, un nuevo nivel infame del concurso más sucio y cruel de los medios.

Vamos a poder leer a la neozelandesa Juliet Marillier gracias al sello Duermevela. Su novela *El Estanque de los Soñadores*, el primer título de la saga “Fiero y Espina”, nos sumerge en la historia de una sanadora que busca venganza después de ser injustamente encarcelada, en un mundo que nos recuerda a una Irlanda antigua en la que la magia está presente en la vida cotidiana.

Terminamos este repaso con la literatura de terror. Uketsu, el misterioso escritor japonés que mantiene la anonimidad apareciendo en público en contadas ocasiones con una máscara de papel maché, regresa con una obra de terror tan extraña como todas las anteriores de su autoría: *Mapas Extraños*, publicada por Grijalbo. Este libro, que sigue incluyendo esquemas, diagramas y planos al igual que su predecesor *Casas Extrañas*, continúa acompañando a Kurihara, el protagonista, en otro misterio relacionado con el fallecimiento de su abuela. Los amantes de Chuck Palahniuk están de enhorabuena porque muy pronto podrán disfrutar de *Inducción por shock* con esta misma editorial. Esta novela mezcla thriller y sátira de terror en una historia sobre un internado para alumnos brillantes que esconde un oscuro y perverso secreto.

En Junio Runas ha anunciado la llegada de *Lo que no veo en el bosque* de Isabel del Río, una narración que trata sobre la vuelta a las raíces rurales en la que la naturaleza deja de ser un elemento armonioso para convertirse en una amenaza impredecible.



Zombi. Guía de supervivencia del norteamericano Max Brooks, hijo del director Mel Brooks y la actriz Ann Crawford, saldrá en nuestro país en julio con Debolsillo, el sello de Penguin Random House. Este manual de supervivencia contra la amenaza zombi expone además el comportamiento de estos seres e incluye consejos prácticos para prepararse contra cualquier desastre mundial.

Roca sigue apostando por el terror con ecos góticos de la mano de Rubén Cordón y su novela *El manuscrito de las almas*, en el que la pérdida, el duelo y la muerte se revelan en un intrincado tapiz que nos transporta a la Escocia del siglo XVII.

La indonesia-norteamericana Nadia Bulkin nos trae en esta ocasión *Problemas con la Autoridad* de la mano de La Biblioteca de Carfax, un volumen con tres novelas cortas —«Carly», «La mejor chica americana» y «Cielos rojos al amanecer»— sobre las modificaciones corporales, el poder y las creencias. Por su parte, la australiana Kaaron Warren regresa con este mismo sello y *Sky*, una novela corta muy celebrada en torno a una ciudad de provincias en la que la vida gira en torno a su fábrica de comida para gatos y dónde nada es lo que parece.

La ya mencionada Nocturna está a punto de lanzar la traducción al español de *Darker Days* de Thomas Olde Heuvelt. Esta obra inquietante, que recuerda a “Los que se alejan de Omelas” de Ursula K. Le Guin y a *Fausto* de Goethe, está ambientada en una pequeña población del estado de Washington, y trata sobre el precio que estamos dispuestos a pagar por una felicidad total para nosotros y nuestros seres queridos. Por último, la editorial Obscura tiene previsto el lanzamiento de *La Trastienda*, de Verónica Cervilla, una historia sobre la búsqueda de la felicidad y el emprendimiento en un lugar que parece atraer la mala suerte.

Cristina Jurado es escritora, editora y traductora especializada en ciencia ficción, fantasía y terror. Nacida en Madrid en 1972, estudió Publicidad y Relaciones Públicas en la Universidad de Sevilla y obtuvo un máster en Retórica en Northwestern University, en Estados Unidos. Es fundadora y editora de *Supersonic*, una revista digital dedicada a la ficción especulativa en español e inglés. Entre sus obras destacan *Bionautas* y *CloroFila*. A lo largo de su trayectoria ha recibido varios premios Ignotus y reconocimientos de la European Science Fiction Society, consolidándose como una de las voces más destacadas del fantástico contemporáneo en España. [Puedes encontrarla aquí.](#)



CORRELATIONS

JOHN LIDDY

JAMES JOYCE'S ULYSSES: A PERSONAL ODYSSEY

To Sara Cantó and the Bloomsday Society readers at the Ateneo de Madrid/A Sara Contó y a los lectores de la Sociedad de Bloomsday del Ateneo de Madrid.

Introduction

I was marked for life by Joyce. From my first readings of *Dubliners*, *Stephen Hero*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Exiles*, *Poems*, *Pennyreach* and *Chamber Music* and those two monumental works *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, his influence was profound. His use of language in all its rawness and ecstasy, its poetry; its epiphany, memory, notebooks; his uncanny command of detail in the ordinary made extraordinary and the control of structure in the labyrinths he traverses, has stayed with me.

Background

On February 2, 1922, *Ulysses* was published as a complete novel by Sylvia Beach, the owner of the Paris bookstore, Shakespeare and Company. As well as being one of the most celebrated novels, it is also one of the least read but that book, along with the novels and plays by Samuel Beckett, had a profound effect on my own life and writing. I learned much from these works, but this piece is written from a personal angle, alluding to the points already mentioned above.

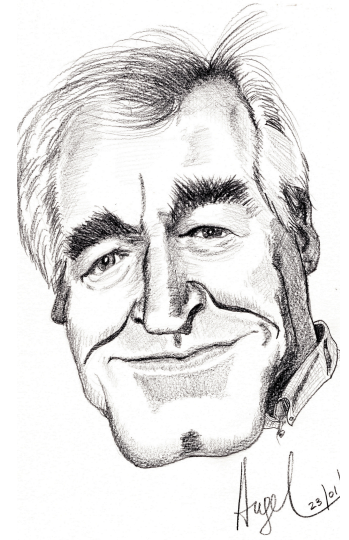
The Book

I bought my first Bodley Head edition of *Ulysses* in the early 1970s. I had saved money from a summer job and to this day I can recall the moment I held the book in my hands. My father saw me turning its pages and reading passages. I knew he was wondering what I was doing with that book, although he never said a word. The book had not been officially banned in Ireland, nevertheless, it was sold under the counter during the 30s, 40s and 50s. By the time the 60s hit, the book was on the shelves. My early reactions were full of confusion and trepidation but in my browsing I discovered passages of sheer beauty such as that from *Oxen of the Sun* (Ch 14)

"There are sins or (let us call them as the world calls them) evil memories which are hidden away by man in the darkest places of the heart but they abide there and wait. He may suffer their memory to grow dim, let them be as though they had not been, and all but persuade himself that they were not or at least were otherwise. Yet a chance word will call them forth suddenly and they will rise up to confront him in the most various circumstances, a vision or a dream, or while timbrel and harp soothe his senses or amid the cool silver tranquillity of the evening or at the feast, at midnight, when he is now filled with wine. Not to insult over him will the vision come as over one that lies under her wrath, not for vengeance to cut him off from the living but shrouded in the piteous vesture of the past, silent, remote, reproachful.

Epiphanic Influences

I began to see the book as an epic poem which led me to Homer's *Odyssey* and to recognising Odysseus as Leopold Bloom in Joyce's *Ulysses* (the Latin form of Odysseus) and the structural episodes of Homer's epic are mirrored in Joyce's 18 chapters, sprinkled with some of the Greek protagonists. Between my reading of the epic and my slow familiarisation with the Dublin one, I began to make inroads. During my 20s I had completed a first reading, with many potholes of ignorance still to fill in. But by then I was aware of the importance of epiphany in Joyce's work, particularly through my reading of his poems, which contain the seeds of his epiphanic usage.



In *Ecce Puer* (Behold the Boy) Joyce is celebrating the birth of his first grandson and mourning the passing of his father John Joyce, the poem ends with

Young life is breathed
On the glass;
The world that was not
Comes to pass.
A child is sleeping: An old man gone.
O, Father forsaken.
Forgive your son.

For Joyce, the use of epiphany serves to 'open the way', reveal a new reality, make the ordinary details of life a grand aesthetic – something I began to be interested in through my observations of the everyday around me. The celebration of the ordinary I also got from the poet Kavanagh. Epiphanic moments in Joyce's life show how those moments were caught for his grand scheme.

We know from Joyce himself that his first 'going out' with Nora Barnacle on June 16, 1904, lies at the core of the book. This is the very date for the setting of the whole story, commemorated as Bloomsday. Therefore, we have Molly's climactic phantasia representing an epiphanic repetition of this date and moment. Here, the human eros of space and time is celebrated in an epiphany of sacredness 'What else were we given all those desires for I want to know?' asks Molly.

It is also possible that a particular experience that Joyce had of being rescued after a mugging in Dublin was at the root of his motivation to invent Leopold Bloom because his rescuer was a man called Hunter, a Dublin Jew. A second mugging triggered the memory of the first and so we have Bloom in *Ulysses*. Incidentally, something similar happened to Beckett.

In *Stephen Hero*, published before *Ulysses*, Stephen refers to an object or event as 'achieving its epiphany', the 'radiance' of the 'commonest object'. Joyce developed this technique in *Ulysses* to such an extent that we have a paradoxical structure of time, which the Palestinians refer to as 'remembering the one to come', sometimes referred to as 'Messianic time'. The poet Hopkins, who studied theology and literature in the same Dublin libraries as Joyce did when young, called this time 'aftering' or 'over-and-overing'. So, Joyce's *Ulysses* is, one could say, one long epiphany with Stephen Dedalus, Leopold and Molly Bloom, the three principal characters, serving as our three Magi. Without doubt, Molly's is the ultimate epiphany for Joyce and for his readers. He has given us one epiphanic time in one epiphanic space – the culmination of a day in the life of three Dubliners, retrieved, rewritten and resurrected as literature. Not a triumphant literature of closure but of endless openness to the extant of life as serendipity, surprise, accident, grace.

Notebooks

Joyce's use of language, the detail in the retelling, the tones and nuances and his control of structures in his work derived from his notebooks, some of which are in Buffalo University. They contain thousands of references, jumbled and garbled, but important clues to our understanding of Ulysses, particularly those observations on Nora. From those notes we can reconstitute snapshots of Joyce's reactions to a variety of family situations, the tone of the couple's relationship and images of Nora which, according to many critics, is Penelope and/or Molly. It is well known that Joyce noted Nora's dreams, hazarding interpretations and using them for Molly's chapters Calypso and Penelope. In the Scribbledehobble Notebook which is dated to shortly after the publication of Ulysses and associated more with *Finnegans Wake*, there are mostly transcriptions of notes randomly accumulated earlier or loose sheets. But they and other notebooks, do contain observations such as Nora's difficulty with language and French: 'boydobelong' for 'Bois Du Boulogne' (the wood of Bologna) 'ejicated' for 'educated', 'moustache of hair' for moustache, 'gave her a hit across the face' for slap. In fairness, it must be remembered that Nora was originally from an Irish speaking area in County Galway and her English was laced with Irish syntax.

His use of notetaking stood him well as did his memory. Those notebooks and the dark recess of memory were raided for the structures and details he would apply to his novels. What he left out of one book he would use for another. It was yet another lesson I learned from the master. Never go anywhere without your notebook and keep your powers of memory well-oiled.

I will leave the last word with Himself, from Nausicaa (Ch 13):

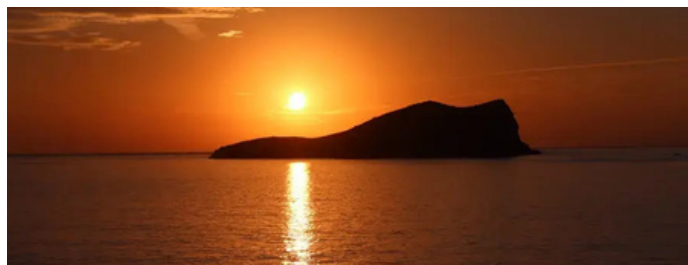
"And then a rocket sprang and bang shot blind blank and O! then the Roman candle burst and it was like a sigh of O! and everyone cried O! O! in raptures and it gushed out of a stream of rain gold hair threads and they shed and ah! They were all greeny dewy stars falling with golden, O so lovely, O, soft, sweet, soft!

Note:

Revised for The Madrid Review from a talk given to the Valencia Irish Association, 2022, which was organised by Chris Dove (RIP)

John Liddy is an Irish poet living in Madrid. He has many collections published and is a life-long supporter of the 'little magazine'.

NOTES FROM IBIZA CLAIRE CAMPBELL



I was afraid of the cliffs, and their boulders shearing into dark, choppy water. Each time I entered, I had the same vertiginous thought, that this piece of sea opened into all the oceans of the world.

At first, they were invisible to me, though I must have been a spectacle for them. Gradually they revealed themselves, in nets of light – slipping under boulders, melting into crevices or burrowing into sand, until I saw that every niche and surface was alive.

I began to think of it as an extension of my garden, ten metres above, on the cliff. I didn't sow, plant or prune, but I did my rounds, hoping to glimpse the eel's dog-like head, the starfish clinging to the rock face, or a tentacle of the octopus in its den.

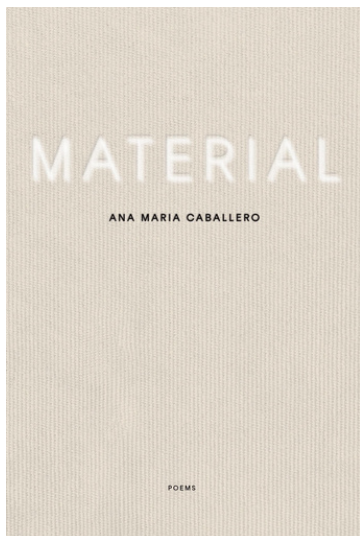
In spring, fresh green leaves pushed up from the Posidonia. By early summer the meadows were flourishing, becoming a nursery for baby fish. The water grew warmer. Too warm. One day my starfish had fallen off the rock and lay patas arriba on the sandy bottom. Large fish moved deeper, hovering close to rocks, their bodies tilted, barely moving. After the first rains, they hurried back, making the surface boil. In winter woolly balls blew along the beaches, rolled from Posidonia fibres by autumn waves.

One evening, when the water was still warm, I went down before sunset. Soon I lost track of time; pottering along the shoreline, peering into the pellucid water at creatures unfurling like flowers. The only sound was the electric crackle of plants photosynthesizing. I dived down to examine a giant starfish, half-hidden in a fissure, and swam into a soft pink cave. An octopus lurked in the gloom, puffing a cloud of ink as I passed too close.

A distant, low rumble began to vibrate through my chest, rising into a frantic high-pitched scream. Clouds of sediment bloomed like smoke. Seagrass lifted, exposing its roots. A large motor boat loomed in front of me, engine roaring, bass thumping. The anchor dragged back and forth, ripping through the Posidonia. Pale limbs dragged over the sides, faces blacked out by shadow, laughing with their throats to the sun. I trod water, torn seagrass drifting around me. Abruptly, they gave up and sped off.

As the glittering cloud settled, a school of barracuda – sleek and long – moved into the shallows, hunting slow fish exhausted by the summer heat. I sank to the bottom. Flashing silver, they began to circle. I stared back and felt the water on their flanks like wind on my skin, tugging, dragging, stroking, slapping. It was a long time before I had to rise for air. They sighed and glided towards the drop where the shore sloped down into darkness.

Clare Campbell was born in Hong Kong to Scottish parents, and raised in London. She holds a master's degree with distinction in Creative Writing from the University of Hull. A writer, gardener, and mother, she now lives in Ibiza, where she is working on her first novel.



Material, Ana Maria Caballero's seventh and most recent manuscript, was awarded Trio House Press's Editors' Selection for Poetry in 2025 and was published on May 15th, 2026. It's a book that firmly situates itself within a contemporary lineage of writers who blur the boundaries between narrative and poetry to interrogate the self — echoing the work of Jenny O'fill, Maggie Nelson, Clarice Lispector and Annie Ernaux.

From its opening pages, the speaker of *Material* reveals herself quickly and without apology. This is a work with no interest in concealment, instead offering a mature and unflinching account of how lived experience both shapes and scars, how it cuts as it sculpts. It considers the many forms that strength can take, and the way recorded observation becomes at once an act of protest and of care.

Structured in five distinct sections, *Material* moves through tightly contained moments of private resistance made public. Its final section expands and disrupts conventional poetic structure, turning toward narrative urgency to tell familial stories in which bearing witness becomes an act of transformation, even redemption.

Early reader Jan Beatty describes the collection as "a stunning book of clear intention, living within the systems that shelter and fail us: Caballero's work is fearless."

[Check it out here.](#)

THE TEN BENIDORMS SOLUTION

Think you know Benidorm? Think again.

By Matthew Clapham



Photo credit: Diego Delso

Tourism has a habit of killing the goose that lays its golden eggs. That quaint little cove with its fishing boats bobbing in the bay becomes less appealing to holidaymakers once the concrete mixers have furnished them with accommodation. A sunset vista soon loses its magic if the tangerine sky is pock-marked with a thousand selfie flashes. For a destination to keep attracting visitors, it sometimes needs to find a way of keeping them out as well.

This was not seen as a concern last century when Spain first ventured into the international tourism market. Every last pound, franc or mark that could be converted into pesetas and rung through the tills of Franco's moribund economy was welcome. Aesthetic and even cultural considerations were forced to take a back seat, with archbishops' interdictions against the immorality of bikinis on the country's beaches being overruled in the service of Mammon.

In 1950, Spain received just under half a million foreign visitors, equivalent to less than 2% of the national population. By 1960 the number was over four million, the bulk of that increase accounted for by the burgeoning seaside resorts of the Islas and Costas. Things were ticking along nicely, at least in the eyes of the man from the ministry in Madrid.

Once the stats are totted up for 2026, the number is expected to brush, or even breach, the hundred million mark. Not all of them come here for the sun, sea and sand that made the country's name as a holiday destination. City breaks are the Instagrammable influencer-led boom of the past decade or so, in theory a more manageable form of tourism. After all, it should be easier to blend a million visitors into the fabric of a city the size of Barcelona or Seville, than a few miles of beach.

The reality is proving otherwise. Tourist apartments cannibalise the housing market and make homes unaffordable, commercial premises shift from selling the essentials needed by the local population to more profitable fripperies catering for weekenders. The popular backlash, in the form of protests from Barcelona to the Balearics, and Malaga to Maspalomas, has finally prompted a half-hearted and belated attempt from local and national authorities to shove the tourism genie back in the bottle.

It is the sunny coastline, though, which remains Spain's biggest draw for the citizens of Europe's drizzly north, and at the same time its greatest weakness when it comes to squaring that circle of supply, demand and desirability.

The feat is not impossible, as certain places show. You can market yourself to visitors while keeping development under control and preserving cultural and natural values. Cadaqués at the very northern end of the Costa Brava is still to a great extent the whitewashed, cobbled fishing village (admittedly now with less actual fishing and more posh seafood restaurants in its economic mix) as when Dalí, Duchamp and fellow aesthetes were hanging out there a century ago.

But that degree of preservation comes largely from geographical isolation, as anyone who has braved the hair-raising hairpins of the GI-614 will vouch. However many people might wish to visit, the physical limits of the rugged Cap de Creus headland will always limit their numbers.

The Islas Cíes off the coast of Galicia is another example: largely unspoilt despite their attractions in what had always been a low-key holidaymaking region, but is now very much in the ascendancy.

What keeps their dunes from swarming with tourists every summer, like the 'emmetts', or 'ants', locals on the English Riviera complain of in season? After all Playa de Rodas has received the title of 'Best Beach in Spain' in recent years, and even 'Most Beautiful Beach in the World' according to *The Guardian*. Normally the kind of accolade that would trigger a stampede of tourists, and an avalanche of KFC wrappers.

A maximum of 1,800 people are allowed to visit per day, while the only accommodation is a rudimentary campsite. The Islas Cíes, and the National Parks agency responsible for them, are well aware that their environmental worth can only be preserved by limiting the exploitation of their value as a destination. The same approach is applied an ocean and a half away in the Galápagos. Strict, inflexible quotas, prioritising the goose's nest over the golden egg sales, however many TikTokers and Instagrammers might tempt their squillion followers to visit.



The different faces of Benidorm

It sounds like the perfect solution to overtourism. Except for one problem. If every desirable destination kept the number of arrivals to a trickle, the world's idyllic beaches and picturesque villages might indeed remain unspoilt, but holidays would become the privilege of only the megarich. An outcome not just morally repugnant, but socially unworkable.

It is an unwritten clause of our modern social contract that in exchange for 50 weeks of hard labour confined to an office cubicle or factory floor, we are entitled to a fortnight in the sun. And in Europe, it falls above all to the countries of the Mediterranean to honour that contract, with all the economic benefits and environmental costs that transaction entails.

So if we were to go back a few decades to a more manageable era, and attempt to devise a structure which would provide capacity for sun-starved North Europeans to enjoy a cold beer in the hot sun, without sacrificing half the coastline and its hinterland in the process, what would it look like?

The unexpected answer, according to some urban planning specialists, is that it might look a lot like Benidorm. The Queen of the Costa Blanca is not everyone's idea of a dream destination, to put it mildly. But in terms of shouldering that burden of offering a beachfront bed/sunlounger/barstool to all and sundry (three million a year, or 3% of Spain's entire tourism industry, in a town that has a year-round population of just 70,000), its effectiveness cannot be denied even by its greatest detractors.

Benidorm has been getting a lot right since the early days, both socially and environmentally. The original plans for its initial development in the 1950s envisaged boulevards of the garden villas popular with the holidaying gentry of the day, until the town planners had a rethink. The post-war reality was that foreign holidays were now becoming available and affordable to families of more modest means – they were where Benidorm's future lay.

If the village and its couple of beaches were to make space for the anticipated numbers, they had to build upwards, not outwards. Density rather than sprawl. The whole municipality was turned into a single planning zone, with no limits on the height of buildings. The very model of compact, urban living advocated by contemporary proponents of the 15-minute city. More energy-efficient buildings, amenities within walking distance, lower-impact waste and water management.

According to urban planner Antonio Giraldo, if Spain had adopted the Benidorm model for all its coastal tourism, rather than the Marbella version of detached villas, private pools and golf courses, only a tenth as much of the country's coastline would need to have been occupied. Architect Elena Cabrera, meanwhile, estimates that the tourists visiting the Spanish Mediterranean could be housed in just ten Benidorms, whereas villa-style accommodation would need to occupy 70% of the whole shoreline from Barcelona to Gibraltar.

Far from being the blot on the landscape many see it as, by soaking up such an inordinate proportion of the country's tourists, at prices made affordable by economies of scale, Benidorm actually saves the coastline and countryside of Alicante from overdevelopment. So much so, that this little municipality finds space not only for nearly half a million visitors on any given weekend in high season, but a national park as well.

The way that formula is packaged might not appeal to all, although it is hard to explain why the seafront skyscrapers of Manhattan and Kowloon are seen as the embodiment of elegance, whereas people turn their noses up at the same skyline on Benidorm bay. In any event, the fine folk sipping cocktails by the pool in sophisticated Altea next door benefit indirectly from Benidorm's pile 'em high philosophy just as much as the punters swilling pints in The Red Lion down on The Strip.

Spain's beautiful and varied coastline is, after seven decades of international mass tourism, taken for granted by the whole continent's population, as an affordable, accessible option for a week of R'n'R. The planning decisions needed to balance that accessibility with the preservation of the landscape itself are matters we often prefer not to trouble ourselves with.

It turns out that sometimes, it is the fate of the spurned ugly duckling to keep the prize goose laying those golden eggs.

After studying Spanish language and literature, and teaching English on three continents, Matthew Clapham settled in Spain, where he works as a translator. Gradually sliding down the Mediterranean coast, he ended up in Alicante, unexpectedly near the cheap and cheerful resort of Benidorm. His first book, *Looking Down on Benidorm* is the result of his ongoing exploration of the unseen history and cultural implications of his neighbouring town, and the light it casts on the societies of both his original and adopted homelands. Out June 19th 2026 with Ybernia.

A Long, Strange Trip

Poetry, translation and 50 years of listening

An interview with Dennis Maloney
By Jayne Marshall

Dennis Maloney is a poet, translator and publisher. This year sees the release of his selected works, covering 50 years and 14 published volumes. His translations include collections by Pablo Neruda, Antonio Machado, the poems of Ryokan, and Juan Ramón Jiménez. He is the editor and founder of the highly respected White Pine Press, based in the USA, in Buffalo, NY.

Poet, translator, publisher - none of these vocations is easy and so, a person who has been at the coalface of this tricky literary trinity for over 50 years is a person *The Madrid Review* wants to know more about. Fresh from a conference on the Faroese language and hot on the trail of Machado in Soria, Dennis and I met for dinner in Madrid. I had questions.

TMR: I know that poetry wasn't your first choice for a career - it wasn't until you were at university and studying for a degree in Landscape Architecture that you first discovered the form. Can you tell us about that burgeoning love story?

Our college professor of freshman composition suggested we go see an anti-war poet and write a report for extra credit. The poet was Robert Bly. His reading featured his anti-Vietnam War poems 'Counting Small-boned Bodies' and 'The Teeth Mother Naked at Last' but while there I also heard the voices of Antonio Machado and Pablo Neruda. The reading inspired me to start writing my own poetry and to try my hand at translating Spanish poetry with my two years of high school Spanish.

Soon afterwards I discovered the work of the poet Gary Snyder, who was a Buddhist, and whose work drew me into the two-thousand-year tradition of Chinese and Japanese poetry. Later, in 1973, I was able to spend a semester in Kyoto, Japan which crystallized my interest in Zen Buddhism, Asian poetry and was instrumental in the development of my poetic voice. A great deal of my poetry shares the influence of the Asian poetic tradition.

TMR: You went on to not only write poetry, but to publish it as well, and in particular poetry in translation, can you take us along that route with you?

While in Japan in 1973, I met some expatriate writers who had seen all aspects of their lives impacted by a culture so different from their own. The Vietnam War was raging on in Asia, and these American writers' experiences gave them unique insights that were reflected in their writing. I was also reading a lot of poetry in translation, mainly from those few small publishers who were interested in it. Robert Bly, again, was an influence as he was translating a number of Latin American and European poets and publishing them through his Sixties Press.



Upon returning from Japan, I started White Pine Press, named for the Iroquois tree of peace and a major tree in the forests of our region, to bring the voices of those poets to readers. Over the past fifty-three years, White Pine Press expanded upon that vision and, to date, has published more than 500 titles, bringing under-represented multicultural literature and writing in translation to general readers and the academic community. We have published work from over thirty five languages. Our authors include several Nobel laureates - Neruda, Tristram, Jiménez, Mistral and Golding - as well as Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award and American Book Award winners.

TMR: White Pine Press is also dedicated to representing lesser known, 'vulnerable' languages, can you tell us more about that?

Publishing work in translation was one of the reasons I started White Pine Press. Looking back, I see that in many ways we have tried to bring voices into English that weren't present, and that were, or are, under-represented. In response to a suggestion from my friend and author, the now departed Chilean poet, Marjorie Agosin, we started the Secret Weavers Series to present Latin American women in translation. Her point was that the so-called Latin American Boom of the late 60s and early 70s introduced only the male writers of Latin America. Similarly, the Literary Translation Institute of Korea approached us about establishing a Korean Series and through our Korean Voices Series we have published over thirty volumes of classical and contemporary Korean literature.

In recent years, I have become more interested in the small language countries that are almost invisible in translation here. We have or will be publishing work from Occitan, Sami, Faroese and Catalan among others.

TMR: What is co-translation? And what it does differently to other modes of translation?

There is a long history of co-translation, some acknowledged and some not. Kenneth Rexroth, one of the first major translators of Chinese and Japanese in the 60s, didn't know either language but worked with collaborators which were only acknowledged in later decades. Many of my translations included work with either a native speaker or someone that knows the language well. I feel my part is making them good poems in English, while remaining true to the spirit and images in the original poem. As another poet has pointed out, the act of translation is the deepest reading you can do into another poet's work. I have found that my work in translation has had a substantial influence on some of my own work.

From 'Border Crossings'

for Jose Oliver & Tzveta Sofronieva

1
We gather in the Black Forest to explore
the boundaries, borders of language.
A border that is always
wandering, sometimes east, west. We never
know exactly where, always vanishing, breaking,
maybe inside ourselves.

Listening intently, I try to follow the patterns,
cadence of speech alive in the air and strange to the ear.
In conversation and poetry, we struggle to find the right words,
through the jolts and swerves of syntax, complexities of exchange,
the extravagance of lost syllables.

Sometime language borders are permeable,
where breath itself is a conscious action
that travels across languages and joins us together.

From 'White Pine'

*The rider riddle is easy to ask,
but the answer might surprise you.*

-Lew Welch

1

Five long needles
soft to the touch
when brushed against
hand or face
the resinous scent
of pitch
stuck to the fingers
lingers still

2

White pine
is
imperfect
snow
completes
it

TMR: In the last edition of *The Madrid Review*, we spoke to J.M. Coetzee. He questions the idea of an original (thus, authoritative) text, alongside arguing that global dominance of English in the publishing industry shapes what gets translated and circulated. In that context, do you see the translator as complicit in that system, or capable of pushing against it in meaningful ways?

He seems to raise two issues, one being English as the Lingua Franca of the world and that English has become a gatekeeper, determining what other literatures and languages get translated. I don't see the translator as complicit at all but, to the contrary, for the most part translators are the ones bringing voices of varied cultures into English and other major languages. The U.S. has a very poor record regarding translations, particularly literary ones, which make up less than one percent of what is published here. Other countries, such as Germany and China have a significant amount of foreign literature translated into their languages. With the exception of some Nobel Prize winners and major name foreign authors most of the translations here have been published by small literary publishers and university presses. When I started publishing in the early 70s, there were very few publishers publishing poetry and fiction in translation. Thankfully the scene has changed and there are now quite a few small literary publishers with a focus on translation. The United States as a culture is often self-absorbed so I feel it is important to bring other world voices into the conversation.

TMR: In your new collection *Clearing the Stream: New & Selected Poems*, I'm interested in how you decided what to include and in what order - does it represent a journey?

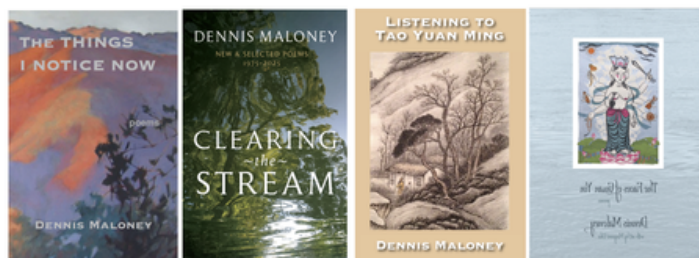
Thanks for asking about the new book. *Clearing the Stream* gathers work from more than a half century of writing so, of necessity, it needed to be selective. The book is arranged chronologically and I tried to select work that represented each previously published volume as well as a cross section of new work that points to where I am headed in the future.

TMR: Is there a particular reason you chose 'White Pine' as the first poem in the collection?

'White Pine' is one of my early poems that I thought was strong, and feel it is kind of a totem or vehicle, as the poet Lew Welch referred to it. I sought to explore various aspects of the tree and its presence in the regional landscape both historically and now. It was a major tree in the forest of our area but was extensively logged as it was utilized for many things. It was also considered the tree of peace by the Iroquois, the indigenous people of the area.

TMR: 53 years of non-profit publishing: poetry, fiction, essays, and literature in translation - can you tell us what kind of ride that has been?!

In musical analogies; the Grateful Dead's "What a Long Strange Trip It's Been"; Van Morrison's "It's Too Late To Stop Now"; and Paul Simon's "Still Crazy After All These Years"



Egrets, While War: Tishani Doshi on birds, bodies and the afterlives of crisis

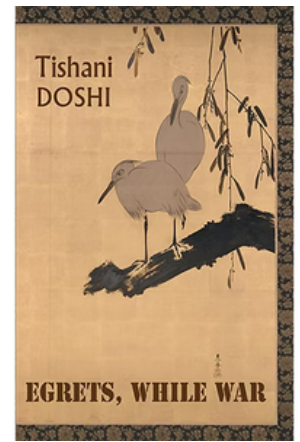
By James Hartley

Tishani Doshi's newest collection, *Egrets, While War* (Bloodaxe, 2026, just published), arrives out of what she calls a distinctly post-pandemic unease, where the promise of renewal has curdled into a more volatile sense of global disrepair. "These poems were written as we emerged from the Covid pandemic," she says, "and one of the things that I was thinking about was how we would re-enter the world. What would change after this global event that brought us together?" That initial speculative opening quickly tightens into something darker. "Arundhati Roy had written this wonderful essay about the pandemic being a portal, and there really was a hope that the pandemic might be this equalising portal, some possibility of rethinking and restructuring our societies. In fact, things did shift when we emerged, but for the worse – into wars and uncertainty and greater climate anxiety."

Out of that disillusionment, Doshi describes a turn towards deep time, as though lyric poetry might only remain viable if it can stretch itself beyond the immediate human frame. "Perhaps it was self-preserving in a way for me to spiral into the deep past and think about how egrets have descended from dinosaurs, to think about my own paltry human ancestry, almost as a way to work through the present." The birds that populate the collection – initially almost incidental – become, in retrospect, structural. "I hadn't quite realised that they were taking up so much place in the collection until much later," she admits. Living on the edge of the Bay of Bengal, she finds herself constantly negotiating a landscape where ecological precarity is not abstract but weathered and visible. "We've had cyclones, floods, a tsunami, the threat of waters rising, so the relationship to the sea is tenuous, but always framed by time."

In this shifting environment, birds emerge as what she calls "harbingers, mediators between the worlds of the past and the future", their fleeting presence offering "a flash of wing and epiphany". They are at once material and symbolic, local and mythic. The collection moves between "city pigeons and wild peacocks" and the birds of epic tradition, building what she describes as "a living archive of flight and disappearance". But the mythological dimension is never ornamental; it is bound up with questions of extinction, violence and poetic origin. "At first, the birds that entered the poems were birds that were part of my environment and daily observations," she explains, "but I've also spent a fair bit of time wafting around the aisles of Natural History Museums, looking at taxidermied species of birds that are now extinct, dodo bones, fossil of archaeopteryx. So the question of disappearance, extinction, and survival run through the poems."

One of the most striking points of convergence between myth and ecology arrives through the Ramayana, which Doshi returns to as a foundational ecological text. "This poem, which is considered Sanskrit's *adikavya*, or 'first poem,' owes its entire existence to a pair of birds." She recounts the story of Valmiki witnessing the killing of a crane mid-courtship, the grief of its mate becoming the catalyst for poetic speech. "The curse comes out in the form of a poetic metre, which he then uses to compose the entire Ramayana." What stays with her is not only the narrative but its linguistic alchemy: "in Sanskrit the word for sorrow is *shok*, and the name of this particular poetic metre is *shlok*. Transforming *shok* to *shlok*. Or from sorrow, poetry. Either way, it's a pretty stunning *ars poetica*."



If birds operate as mediators across time, they also anchor a broader inquiry into memory, both personal and collective. Doshi describes a formal shift after her previous collection, *A God at the Door*, which was shaped by the pandemic's strange collectivities. "There was a sense of togetherness, however flawed," she reflects. "But with this collection, I found myself shifting back to the 'I', somehow the weight of the 'we' began to feel oppressive." That inward turn is complicated by ageing, ancestry, and embodiment: "moving into the grand stage of perimenopause... questions of desire and love." Yet even the lyric "I" proves unstable. "The idea of the lone lyric poet standing at the edge of the fray is difficult to maintain."

Formally, too, the poems register that instability. Doshi speaks of "concrete poetry" and pictorial experiment, a continuation of a visual tradition in which poems take on sculptural or comic shapes. "Partly, because we were so confined during that time, shape began to take on greater importance on the page." Alongside this formal play runs an attention to contemporary news and technological anxieties. "There are always going to be poems that are trying to hold the horrors," she says. "Poems are interventions and confrontations... the poet as witness, however imperfect." Yet she resists any instrumental notion of poetic duty: "I don't know that I approach writing poetry with any particular goal. The whole process is happily mysterious and constantly changing." That resistance extends to questions of hope. "I don't know that it's the poet's job to maintain a sense of hope or resilience," she says bluntly. "I certainly don't hold a reserve of this and am frequently spiralling into the reverse of hope and resilience." Still, she allows for a different kind of optimism embedded in language itself: "the act of writing a poem is an optimistic act... the opposite of silence." Poetry, she suggests, cannot halt violence, but it can destabilise its linguistic frame. "Poems can't stop bombs, but they can question language and metaphor and work to reinvent meaning and power."

As a dancer, Doshi returns repeatedly to questions of breath, rhythm and spatial intelligence, insisting that poetry is inseparable from embodied knowledge. "Essentially, at the base of it, is the notion of breath and time," she says. "What is the smallest movement you can make, which still reverberates and ripples." Dance and poetry, she argues, are both "a relationship with the image", shaped by "pausing, stilling, stomping, geometry". The rehearsal space becomes a model for the page: "the daily rehearsals... allow you the possibility to return."

The new collection also extends into multimedia performance, including a film Doshi has made with performer-friends. "I was really interested in exploring the image through another medium," she explains, "to create a texture that could work alongside the poems." Using *Commedia dell'arte* masks, the work explores "visibility/invisibility and the capacity for transformation and interchangeability". In a moment she describes as "the time of the great unmasking", she reflects on institutional collapse and rupture, before returning to a quieter image of address: "I hope that readers will find in these poems little ladders – I look forward to meeting them on the rungs."

The Poetry of Pablo García Casado

By Matthew Stewart

Pablo García Casado, who's just won the poetry category of the prestigious Premio de la Crítica 2026 for his most recent collection, *Cada Uno Es Mucha Gente* (Visor, 2025), is a highly idiosyncratic and fiercely original figure on the Spanish poetry scene, often writing and publishing against trends.

In order to understand the depth of his aesthetic independence (and even courage!), it's useful to take his individual origins, alongside a snapshot of past trends in Spanish poetry, as a point of departure. García Casado was born in Córdoba in 1972, and his first full collection, *Las Afueras*, came out in 1997. *Las Afueras* is an astonishing book in many ways. First of all, there's its precociousness, the shock of a poet aged 25 being capable of employing a fully formed method whereby every individual poem works in harness to generate an overall effect. And then there's the question of his technical approach itself, especially in the context of an upbringing and literary education in Córdoba in the 1980s and 90s.

During that period, the prevailing aesthetic in Spanish poetry might be said to have been the *Novísimos*, who were supposedly more anchored in a modernist tradition of taking a step back from everyday life in order to get to grips with it, while a counterpoint was provided to them by *La Poesía de la Experiencia*, which claimed to home in on the mundane. One such example was Luis García Montero (an Andalusian poet, just like García Casado), whose famously struck pose was '*con los cuellos alzados y fumando*'. Many poetry aficionados in Spain at that time were pretty sniffy about his work, claiming that its apparent accessibility stripped it of intellectual rigour and depth. However, García Montero's poetry was in reality far from rupture, well anchored within an Iberian tradition (many of his points of reference were actually from the Generación del 27 and del 50). It would probably still have seemed pretty esoteric to an Anglo-Saxon readership, for instance, despite its nods towards accessibility.

Within this context, Pablo García Casado's writing emerged. The trailblazing quality of his early work still lies, even today, in his conscious decision not only to eschew the approach of the *Novísimos*, but to surpass the above-mentioned *Poesía de la Experiencia*, turning his attention to North American poetry as a source of inspiration.

These days, many younger Spanish poets are reading poetry from the U.S. and applying its aesthetics, techniques and concerns to their own writing, but virtually nobody was daring to do so thirty-five years ago. This means that García Casado's first book, *Las Afueras*, was slightly unfashionable when it came out, going against the established grain. However, the consequence was that it then ended up earning a slow-burning cult status among the following generations of Spanish poetry aficionados.

What's more, García Casado had the wit and talent to thrust North American methods through an idiosyncratic, southern Spanish lens, as in the first stanza of 'Post-Coitum'...

no podemos seguir así a escondidas pensando
que salgan las oposiciones que yo me pueda
quedar en el departamento estoy harta Joaquín...

The counterpoint of registers between the title and the tone of the poem itself, the slightly seedy, sordid nature of the contents, the clear pitching of the social class of its protagonists, etc, etc, are all reminiscent of the likes of Raymond Carver (who's explicitly invoked via an epigram elsewhere in the book), while the '*oposiciones*' – civil service entry exams – the boyfriend's name couldn't be more Spanish.



Furthermore, the above poem also possesses another key quality of García Casado's poetry, that of the dramatic monologue (or Persona Poem, as Creative Writing lecturers are wont to label it). Each poem in *Las Afueras* works as an individual piece in its own right, but they all generate a collage effect via a variety of voices and characters, building towards a cohesive and coherent vision of a specific society and a universal condition. In other words, the collection deserves to be classed as a huge achievement even before we take into account the sociocultural context in which it was written, plus the age of the poet himself at the time.

And then there's the question of García Casado's approach to versification. In the above extract, it's immediately clear that he's stripped back punctuation and aimed for a natural flow of language, very much with echoes again of Carver. Nevertheless, Carver took decades to reach that method, only fully achieving it in his later poetry. García Casado does so in his twenties.

A further evolution is thus inevitable and desirable in his later poetry. In García Casado's case, it's towards the prose poem., a process that he drives through his following collections, culminating in his latest publication, *Cada Uno Es Mucha Gente*. This observation isn't to disparage the excellent books that he brought out along the way, but the limited space available in this essay forces us to focus now on the fully achieved work that's packed into *Cada Uno Es Mucha Gente*, page after page. One such example can be found in 'Cesarini'...

Llega un momento en la vida en que firmas el empate, y
ese momento es ahora. Balones fuera, centrocampismo,
dejar que corran los minutos. Un empate. Que no colma
las expectativas, los éxitos que prometías en pretemporada.
Pero un punto vital que te aleja del descenso.

This poem is an extended metaphor (a football match as a human life), anchored in the language of sport, playing with line endings that exist but don't, with a close focus on cadence, rhythm and flow throughout. A poem that challenges our preconceptions of what a poem might be.

In other words, *Cada Uno Es Mucha Gente* is excellent. And the fact that it's received the Premio de la Crítica 2026 is also significant. Not just for the deserved recognition and vindication that it brings for Pablo García. But for the huge shift that it represents in Spanish poetry. García Casado's approach and point of reference are finally in fashion!

To finish, I'd simply like to quote García Casado's comment in the acknowledgements at the end of *Fuera de Campo* (his 1992-2007 collected poems, including *Las Afueras*, *El mapa de América* and *Dinero*, and the only way to get hold of his earlier collections these days), where he states the following...

Y gracias a mi familia, porque hacéis que toda la infelicidad se quede en los poemas.

That feels like a terrific way to go about life and poetry.

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

Entre memoria y silencio: Olvido García Valdés



Photo: Su Alonso Inés Marful

En esta entrevista, James Hartley conversa con la poeta española Olvido García Valdés, una de las voces más singulares de la poesía contemporánea en lengua española. Su obra, reconocida con el Premio Nacional de Poesía en 2007, se caracteriza por una escritura de gran precisión, atención ética al lenguaje y una profunda reflexión sobre la vida, la memoria y lo cotidiano. La conversación se centra en su reciente trabajo editorial, su relación con los cuadernos de escritura, la continuidad y la discontinuidad en su obra, y su concepción del poema como espacio de experiencia.

Su último libro reúne poemas y entradas de diario de años anteriores. ¿Cómo ha sido volver a esos textos después de tanto tiempo?

Sí; se refiere a *Entre 2001 y 2006*. En el curso de *Y todos estábamos vivos*, publicado en 2024 en la colección de poesía Pénola Blanca – una colección exquisita con carácter de bibliofilia que edita la Fundación César Manrique en Lanzarote. Este es un libro muy especial. Propiamente, forma un conjunto con *Y todos estábamos vivos*, a modo de paratexto del libro de poemas editado por Tusquets en 2006 y que había obtenido el Premio Nacional de Poesía en 2007; e imagino que esa cualidad de paratexto es lo que tiene mayor interés para los especialistas en mi trabajo. Cuando Fernando Gómez Aguilera, director de la Fundación César Manrique, me invitó a publicar un libro en esa colección que acoge algunos de los títulos de poesía que más venero, me sentí emocionada y honrada, y al mismo tiempo no podía ofrecerle en aquel momento un conjunto de poemas, porque desde la publicación en 2020 en Tusquets de *confía en la gracia*, estoy en una época silenciosa para la poesía. De modo que le propuse publicar un libro en el que un corpus de poemas que no habían hallado cabida en *Y todos estábamos vivos*, y notas seleccionadas de los cuadernos escritos en aquellos años, pudieran establecer un diálogo e iluminar el proceso creativo de un libro de poemas, siempre tan enigmático. El resultado, con el hermoso acabado artesanal de la colección, es este *Entre 2001 y 2006*. En el curso de *Y todos estábamos vivos*.

Al mirar atrás a la persona que era cuando escribió esos poemas, ¿qué le sorprende o le conmueve más de aquel yo anterior?

La experiencia fue muy interesante para mí: pensar los hilos que se tienden entre los dos libros, entrar de nuevo en aquellos cuadernos escritos veinte años antes... Extrañeza, claro. Y al mismo tiempo una voz que continuaba siendo una voz íntima.

De todas formas, mi último libro de creación es *confía en la gracia* (Tusquets, 2020), que se abrió con esta nota liminar: “Este es un libro de poemas, es decir, de mecanismos verbales complejos atravesados por la vida y depurados por su propia materia y por el tiempo; en ellos cabe todo, pero no todo queda. Surgieron entre 2012 y 2019, y en su escritura hubo diálogo y presencia de seres vivos y de quienes ya no están. Lo leído es parte sustancial –como los árboles, los animales o la luz– de ese diálogo y esas presencias. Ahí estuvo la compañía de Ernesto de Martino y el último Foucault, de Nietzsche, Lorenzo García Vega, Simone Weil, Susan Howe (con Dickinson), López Petit, el Maestro Eckhart, Christa Bürger, Liliana García Carril, Shizuteru Ueda o Jaime Saenz, entre otros libros de devoción. Los seminarios y talleres de lectura de poesía y quienes me acompañaron en ellos fueron espacio de reflexión y aprendizaje. Escribir es agradecer. Envejecer es bueno”.

Me parece que en la elaboración de un libro de poemas hay siempre discontinuidad y continuidad. Discontinuidad entre los poemas mismos que lo conforman, y continuidad en el proyecto, incluso cuando este avanza un poco a ciegas, como es mi caso. Por otra parte, como sabe, el yo es algo inaprensible, algo que cambia y fluye, y que al mismo tiempo en cada poema, incluso en los más despersonalizados, deja sus huellas.

¿Cómo sabe cuándo un poema está terminado? ¿Alguna vez le sorprende o cambia después de pensar que ya lo estaba?

Tal como ha funcionado para mí, un poema está terminado cuando no siento ya la necesidad de mover nada en él.

¿Hay algún momento de su vida cotidiana que le haya inspirado recientemente a escribir un poema?

Como le decía, hace un tiempo que no estoy escribiendo poemas. Pero en el conjunto de mi obra es muy frecuente que cualquier momento de la vida cotidiana sea el punto de partida de la necesidad de escribir un poema. Mis libros están llenos de esos momentos.

Cuando lee a otros poetas, ¿siente que influye en su propia escritura? ¿De qué manera?

La verdad es que no. Siento admiración por los poetas que admiro, pero no influencia. La noción de influencia, por otro lado, es más bien una herramienta clasificadora de uso académico, pero desde el punto de vista creativo creo que no tiene mucha consistencia.

Muchos de sus poemas han sido traducidos al inglés y a otros idiomas. ¿Cómo se siente al saber que su voz llega a lectores de todo el mundo?

“Llegar a lectores de todo el mundo” parece un marco muy amplio, sugiere una extensión comunicativa irreal. Los lectores de poesía en el conjunto de la población mundial somos muy pocos, y buscamos cosas muy específicas; nada que ver, además, con lo que buscan los lectores de narrativa o con lo que ofrece la industria editorial del entretenimiento. A mí me gusta este campo restringido que ocupamos, sabemos quiénes somos; está bien así.

Como nuestra publicación coincide con el Día Mundial de los Océanos, nos gustaría preguntarle: ¿cómo ha aparecido la naturaleza —el mar, los ríos, los animales— en su poesía y qué le atrae de estos temas?

No sé si a estas alturas podemos hablar ya de naturaleza. Pero sí, sea eso lo que sea está muy presente desde el comienzo en mis libros. Ya desde algunos títulos: ella, los pájaros; caza nocturna; Y todos estábamos vivos; Lo solo del animal; dentro del animal la voz. La naturaleza no solo como medio, sino como elemento constitutivo de un diálogo íntimo. Yo suelo decir que un poema es un lugar raro donde se guarda la vida. Y creo también que si la vida tiene sentido es por un trabajo interior que vamos haciendo sobre nosotros mismos. En ese trabajo, desde mi experiencia, los árboles, los animales, el campo son componentes y compañías esenciales. El campo, he escrito alguna vez, es lo que más consuela...

Si un lector nuevo toma sus poemas por primera vez, ¿qué esperaría que se llevase de ellos?

Ni idea. Cada lectora y cada lector trae su propio bagaje, vital y literario, y según este, según sus necesidades, así lee o escucha. Mis poemas, por lo que he comprobado en mis lecturas públicas, suelen proporcionar una entrada directa.

Mirando hacia atrás en su larga carrera, ¿qué consejo o palabras de ánimo daría a alguien que empieza a escribir poesía?

No suelo mirar atrás, mi tiempo de trabajo es el presente. Pero a alguien que empieza a escribir poemas le diría las palabras del poeta palestino Mahmud Darwish:

No creas en nuestros esquemas, olvídalos
y empieza con tus propias palabras.
Como si fueras el primero en escribir poesía
o el último poeta.

...

No le preguntes a nadie: ¿Quién soy?
Sabes quién es tu madre.

En cuanto a tu padre, sé tú mismo.
La verdad es blanca, escribe sobre ella
con tinta de cuervo.

La verdad es negra, escribe sobre ella
con luz de espejismo.

Si quieres batirte en duelo con un halcón,
vuela con el halcón.

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.



An idle winter has been followed by a busy spring for this bookselling fellow. But perhaps it is time for reflection too, as the store approaches its fourth anniversary in June. We run a packed agenda at Secret Kingdoms, with five regular book clubs, frequent author events, a writer's group, literary quizzes, and a regular philosophy session.

These events, and the more informal encounters that also take place every day, are at the heart of what we do. A bricks and mortar bookshop doesn't just give you the opportunity to stumble on a great book in a way you never could on-line, it also gives the opportunity to form part of an active literary community, in which ideas are sparked and new friendships made.

This spring has been particularly hectic though, and I must confess that am quite looking forward to the quieter summer months, when Madrid bakes under a “sun of justice” and everything has to slow down, to become a little more idle. Whilst some sessions do continue our batteries can be recharged, and more books can be read, before we come back with a bang in September..

But before then we do have a couple of great author sessions in June. On the 5th we are joined by a Southern Chameleon. Author Cartie Whitelaw will be discussing identity, performance, and survival in the American South. Then on June 19th, we will be discussing the conundrum that is Benidorm with Matthew Clapham, from fishing village to tourist resort; is Benidorm a vision of heaven, or of hell (see article on page 30)

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

YOUNG VOICES VOCES JÓVENES



Voces Jóvenes / Young Voices

We are looking for young poets in Madrid aged 7-17 to submit original poems in Spanish or English for publication in The Madrid Review and a digital anthology celebrating young voices. Buscamos jóvenes poetas en Madrid de entre 7 y 17 años para enviar poemas originales en español o inglés para su publicación en The Madrid Review y una antología digital dedicada a las voces jóvenes.

Teresa Vicente: La mujer que dio voz al mar

Por Sonia González

María Teresa Vicente Giménez, catedrática de Filosofía del Derecho y responsable de una revolución jurídica sin precedentes en Europa, ha dedicado su carrera a demostrar que el derecho puede ser un instrumento de cambio, no solo entre personas, sino entre el planeta y sus habitantes.

Teresa Vicente creció en Lorca, en una familia de abogados comprometidos con la justicia social, en un país que atravesaba la transición de la dictadura a la democracia. Ya desde sus primeros años en la Facultad de Derecho de la Universidad de Murcia, tuvo claro que las leyes del momento ignoraban el hecho de que la naturaleza era objeto de explotación. Esa inquietud, que sus propios profesores desdeñaron, se convirtió en el motor de una trayectoria académica e intelectual que décadas después culminó en un logro legislativo impensable en esos momentos.

Ejerció la abogacía durante casi una década, pero Teresa Vicente optó por la universidad como plataforma desde la que construir su justicia ecológica. Obtuvo su plaza como profesora titular en 1998 y desde entonces ha dirigido líneas de trabajo en las que ha defendido el feminismo jurídico, los derechos sociales y la protección de la infancia. Sin embargo, es en el campo de los derechos de la naturaleza donde ha logrado su mayor reconocimiento. En 2024, el Premio Ambiental Goldman - considerado el Nobel verde - reconoció su papel en la redacción de la Ley 19/2022, que convirtió al Mar Menor en el primer ecosistema de Europa dotado de personalidad jurídica propia.

En la entrevista que aquí se recoge, Teresa Vicente describe cómo la suya fue durante décadas una causa "luchada" en solitario. La suya es una franqueza poco habitual en el mundo académico, pero nos contaba la resistencia que encontró desde el principio, ya que el mundo del derecho no encontraba la manera de dar cabida a una investigación que cruzaba las fronteras entre ciencias sociales y ciencias naturales, una división que en los años ochenta se consideraba prácticamente infranqueable. Solo el apoyo de uno de sus profesores a su tesis doctoral permitió que aquel proyecto siguiera adelante.

Teresa Vicente recuerda que el origen de su vocación no estuvo en un texto jurídico, sino en las conversaciones con amigas que estudiaban biología y en la lectura de los informes del Club de Roma, que ya entonces advertían sobre la devastación medioambiental. "Yo llegué a la universidad diciendo que estaba esperando que alguien me dijera eso en alguna asignatura", recuerda. Nadie lo hizo, y esa ausencia se convirtió en una tarea.

El salto a la acción fue en octubre de 2019, cuando Teresa regresaba de una estancia de investigación en el Reino Unido, donde estudiaba los modelos de reconocimiento de derechos a la naturaleza que ya existían en otros continentes. Sus alumnos le enviaron imágenes del deterioro del Mar Menor, que durante siglos había sido el corazón de la Región de Murcia. El movimiento ciudadano había comenzado a gestarse de forma espontánea, y Teresa Vicente le dió forma jurídica.

"Cuando el Mar Menor nos dijo que se estaba muriendo, sentimos que algo también se moría con nosotros y, entonces, fuimos a luchar por su vida". Ella defendió que la laguna no era un recurso natural a gestionar o un objeto, sino una entidad viva cuyo deterioro era responsabilidad de los que vivían junto a ella.

Ese reconocimiento inicial de la ciudadanía - que Teresa Vicente subraya - fue el detonante y condicionó el trabajo de los juristas: "El primero que lo entendió fue el pueblo". Fueron los ciudadanos los que comenzaron a pedir explicaciones a políticos, a científicos, y al grupo de defensa ambiental de por qué había pasado eso. Ellos sabían que no había sido un proceso natural, ni el cambio climático, que había sido consecuencia de una agresión continua."



Se redactó una ley de apenas siete artículos, comprensible para cualquier ciudadano sin formación jurídica, y la presentaron como Iniciativa Legislativa Popular (ILP). El resultado fue una movilización sin precedentes: más de 638.000 firmas en una región que, como señala Teresa Vicente, es bastante conservadora. Una de las claves del éxito fue que la causa trascendió los intereses políticos porque no fue apropiada por ningún partido. "Nadie podía usarlo para atacar al otro bando", explica. "Y sin saberlo, fue nuestra fuerza".

La Ley 19/2022, aprobada en el Congreso y el Senado en septiembre de ese año, concedió personalidad jurídica al Mar Menor y a su cuenca, y estableció un sistema de tutela legal con cuarenta y cuatro personas organizadas en tres comités — científico, de representantes y de guardianes—. Hoy la laguna dispone de NIF propio, cuenta bancaria y firma legal. Está personada en varios procedimientos penales y algunos jueces han llegado a citarla para que declare en su propia defensa.

Teresa Vicente es consciente de que este cambio va más allá de lo normativo. "Esto no es solo un cambio jurídico, sino ontológico", afirma: "De la manera de entender quién es el ser humano y cuál es su lugar en el mundo". La justicia ecológica no es una rama más del derecho ambiental, sino una idea que cuestiona el antropocentrismo de la tradición jurídica occidental. Como la justicia social incluyó a los trabajadores y la de género a las mujeres, propone extender ese reconocimiento a la naturaleza.

El arte y la literatura, señala Teresa Vicente, comprendieron esta lógica antes que la academia. Poetas, novelistas y cineastas se sumaron al movimiento cuando los juristas aún eran escépticos. La Bienal de Venecia acogió debates sobre los derechos de la naturaleza, y museos de Madrid y otras ciudades abrieron sus puertas a esta reflexión. Esa conexión entre pensamiento jurídico y sensibilidad artística no es anecdótica: ambos comparten la capacidad de imaginar lo que aún no existe.

La proyección internacional del caso del Mar Menor ha sido enorme. Abogados de varios países han contactado con Teresa Vicente, y en Naciones Unidas ella ha defendido el reconocimiento de los derechos de la naturaleza como parte de la Agenda 2030. El ecosistema murciano se ha convertido en un modelo de referencia para iniciativas similares.

"Se trata de hacer la paz con el planeta", afirma. La frase resume su proyecto vital, respaldado por décadas de trabajo, una ley vigente y un ecosistema que, por primera vez en Europa, tiene herramientas legales para defenderse.

Lo que comenzó como el sueño de una alumna de derecho, rechazada por revistas y departamentos, y con una tesis redactada en solitario en un convento, ha terminado por transformar la forma en que el derecho concibe su razón de ser.

Youth Gone Wild: Painting, Poetry and Punk at Space Mountain

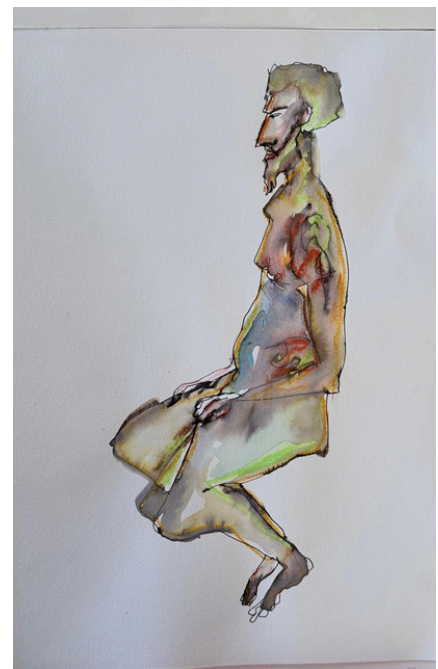


There are studios and then there's Space Mountain — a rambling, sun-blasted creative bunker perched above the valley of Lecrín in the province of Granada, Spain, where the British producer, poet and artist Martin 'Youth' Glover has spent the best part of three decades. It's the sort of place that feels part alchemical retreat, part sonic observatory.

When we get there we find a complex at the top of a hill where the windows and terrace open up onto the still snowy Sierra Nevada. Guitars are piled on grand pianos and easels and notebooks filled with half-finished portraits litter the cosy interior. There are picture frames made with the wood of the burnt down Brighton pier and a well-used library which unfurls up a tower, books accessed by step ladders, watched over by an ancient carved buddha from Youth's time in India.

Today Youth is in his element - he's been shopping and is getting set up for the day working with UK Black Country band GANS. The lads from GANS are sitting out on the terrace after breakfast, talking about how amazing the place is and how great the experience has been. Before he talks to us, Youth will bring them down as many volumes of poetry as he can carry and leave them with the group - telling them to have a look through and get inspired. It's lyrics day.

"You want to take some pictures?" he asks us, gesturing towards his art studio where landscapes and band portraits sit in charcoal and cobalt. The studio forms part of the complex - it's out in the courtyard with its own views and vibe. "Generally I paint people in the band," he says, "or the landscape." His voice and manner is low and unhurried but his eyes sparkle of mischievous energy - exactly what you'd expect of a producer who's rattled around studios with Paul McCartney, The Verve, The Cult and every other decent rock and indie act of the last thirty years while also mixing chill-out ambient with post-punk grit. Check the guy's track record, as Mark E. Smith said.



Detail from one of Youth's notebooks



Photos: Rafa Hacar

Youth didn't go to art school. He was supposed to, he laughs, but instead joined bands — three of them before he even reached the fertile chaos of Killing Joke. It was punk that gave him permission to leap into music with both feet, even though his true affinities always spanned art and literature as much as sound. These twin passions were fed early on by teachers who encouraged him to bring vinyl into art class and carve words into the margins of notebooks. That ecumenical creativity has stayed with him ever since.

"I've never stopped," he says. "I've always been creative, always pushing things that way. That's what's kept me sane over the years." For Youth, creation isn't compartmentalised but a flow. He sketches, writes poetry, makes notes on scraps of paper, then stitches those fragments into poems in his journals, occasionally typing and redrafting by hand. He's had work published - limited editions that sell out fast - and is planning a new series of books under his Painted Word label. There's also *Mü*, a magazine launched years ago with friends from the South London Arts Lab that fuses music, prose, poetry and imagery.

Poetry, to him, is everywhere. Dylan Thomas rubs shoulders with mythological archetypes; Frazer's pagan threads run alongside the stream-of-consciousness joys of Ginsberg and the Beats. And, as he points out with a grin, cut-ups aren't just a writing trick; they're a creative reset when the well runs dry: "It's like a painting - you make one mark and it suggests another." Explains the stack of books the lads from GANS are now pouring and smoking over.

Which brings us back to Space Mountain, Youth's antidote to a lifetime spent in damp London basement studios. He says he scoured Europe for a residential creative space before settling on this valley, drawn by the light, the isolation and the strange fertile silence the landscape possesses. Over the years he's welcomed flamenco singers, punk bands and local Andalusian artists into the space, offering reduced studio rates to the musicians of Granada and fostering a fusion culture where tradition and experiment merge. The big names have come too and it's not hard to see why.

Space Mountain is no ordinary recording studio: it's a creative ecosystem. Across its sun-lit rooms and corridors lined with shining discs, musicians feel free to articulate ideas that might be crushed by the sterility of a big city label environment. The studio hosts its own multidisciplinary festivals locally that draw DJs, poets, painters and writers into the mix: it's a living, breathing "arts laboratory", as Youth puts it.

In the studio he's disciplined. A typical day here might begin before dawn with a stretch of writing, brunch in the studio, then several hours folding sound into colour and colour into sound. As he put it, "When I'm here on my own, I get a really good routine. ... When I do music, painting, poetry on the same day, it all comes from the same source in my mind."

And yet, for all the philosophical weight, Youth is utterly disinclined to take himself too seriously. "Ambition is an old word, a horrible word," he says, smirking at the thought of it. "Some pieces sell, some don't. Some poems find their reader, some disappear into the ether. If they do, they do; if not, that's fine." What matters to him is the act of creation: the process, the flow, the stubborn refusal to stop at the end of a single idea.

It's that hunger - a poet's mind inside a producer's body with a punk's soul - that makes Youth one of the most compelling figures in contemporary music and art. In a world that likes labels, he's a reminder that curiosity and the courage to ramble down your own path, following the muse and going where imagination leads, can be a productive and satisfying way to pass your time on this earth. He - and the studio - are an inspiration.



Some of Youth's poetry from Brackpress

“The ocean is meditation in motion.”

Open water swimmer Andy Donaldson.

The British-Australian Andy Donaldson has swum the most punishing stretches of water on Earth: the English Channel, the North Channel between Ireland and Scotland, the Cook Strait, the Catalina Channel, the Straits of Gibraltar, as well as completing a Manhattan circumnavigation faster than anyone in history. He's also just finished a 55-kilometre swim down Australia's Ord River in Western Australia in approximately 11 hours and 51 minutes, setting a new world record through one of the more inhospitable waterways one might reasonably choose to enter voluntarily.

These are not swims in any conventional sense but prolonged negotiations with cold, fatigue, salt, wildlife and night; journeys measured less in kilometres than in attrition, where hallucination and hypothermia are not abstract risks but familiar companions. And yet Donaldson has not only completed these crossings but has done so at a pace and density unprecedented in human history.

His are, quite simply, a series of achievements that resist tidy language, though Donaldson is wary of grand framing. “The act of swimming stays the same,” he says, “but the water never does. Most of the time it's just trying to solve the next problem in front of you”.

Donaldson grew up on the west coast of Scotland, near Glasgow, in a landscape that seems almost designed to produce a certain kind of stoicism. He remembers the weather as “rough and cold, especially in winter”. He was raised in a sporting family where activity was not so much a pursuit as a condition of life. He grew up overlooking the Firth of Clyde towards Arran, a view that might be described as picturesque if you don't have to live inside its weather system. He swam competitively as a child but swimming in the sea, he recalls, was informal, almost incidental — “a dip or a splash”. Open-water swimmers, he admits, seemed “a bit mad”. “It was far too fresh,” he says. At that point, open-water swimming was not yet the codified endurance discipline it would become; it existed more as eccentricity than sport. That shift — from eccentricity to discipline — is, in some ways, the arc of his life.

Andy eventually left competitive swimming altogether, trained as a Chartered Accountant, and for a time appeared to have settled into a more conventional trajectory. Then, in 2019, he stepped away from work, picked up a backpack and began travelling: Israel and the Middle East, the Baltics, Spain, Slovenia, then South and Central America. Spain in particular recurs in his biography like a refrain — partly familial, partly linguistic, partly emotional. “Spain has always felt like a second home,” he says, a line offered without sentimentality, but with weight nonetheless. His aunt and uncle have lived there for more than two decades, and his grandparents once kept an apartment in Mallorca, where he first learned to swim.

It was during this period of travel, and the enforced pause of the pandemic that followed, that swimming returned — not as ambition, but as repair. A friend suggested he return to the pool for mental health reasons. He did so, and found, somewhat to his own surprise, that something in him had not diminished but simply been dormant. “It had just been waiting,” he says. From there came a series of increasingly serious challenges, including the Rottneest Channel Swim in Western Australia, which he won, and used as an opportunity to raise funds for charity. This, he says, suggested: “that there was still, within me, a desire for sustained physical difficulty”. This desire manifested itself in the Ocean's Seven swim - the toughest swims possible, all in a year, and he's never looked back



What distinguishes Donaldson from the familiar archetype of the extreme athlete is the absence of narrative inflation. He does not speak of conquest. The ocean, in his description, is not an adversary but a “teacher”, and at times a “safe haven”. He is unusually candid about mental health, both his own and within his family, and about the role swimming has played in stabilising periods of difficulty. His grandfather suffered from depression, he notes, and this shaped his understanding of vulnerability long before endurance became his profession. “The ocean,” he says, “is like meditation in motion.”

Not all swims resolve neatly into achievement. The Molokai Channel in Japan, for instance, is described without triumphalism. It was slower than expected, physically and mentally punishing, and yet more meaningful than faster crossings. “The achievement lay in overcoming adversity rather than the time,” he says.

His more recent swim down the Ord River continues this pattern of purpose embedded within extremity. It was undertaken not solely as a record attempt but in connection with the opening of a new 50-metre pool in the Kimberley region, and with broader aims around water safety, youth engagement and community participation. There is something almost deliberately unheroic about the framing — an effort, perhaps, to ensure that the act remains anchored to something other than spectacle.

He speaks of having a “mental health toolbox”: reading, travel, music, time with family, particularly his young niece and nephew, whose presence he describes as grounding. Recently he has been reading *The Lord of the Rings*, which he mentions without overinterpretation. “It keeps things in perspective,” he says.

The question that remains is what, exactly, Donaldson is doing in the water. The simplest answer is that he swims long distances. The more accurate answer is that he has built a life around sustained exposure to conditions that resist control. This is not recklessness; it is attentiveness. The ocean, he suggests, is indifferent, but not meaningless. It teaches, if one is willing to remain in it long enough to notice patterns.

It would be easy to overstate the philosophical dimension of all this, to turn an athlete into an allegory. Donaldson himself resists that. He is, instead, methodical, curious, and disarmingly modest about his capacity for discomfort. Yet it is precisely this modesty that makes his career difficult to categorise. He is not chasing transcendence; he is practising endurance as a form of attention.

In an era that often confuses intensity with significance, there is something quietly radical about that.

Mark Haddon: Fragments of a Life in Prose

By James Hartley

There is a moment, early in my conversation with Mark Haddon, when one becomes aware that the context of how he wrote the subject under discussion - his memoir *Leaving Home: A Memoir in Full Colour* (Jonathan Cape, 2026) - explains its style. "I had brain fog as a result of Long Covid, and a very small working memory," he explains of the book's construction. "So I was forced to write in fragments and not think too hard about overall structure."

The fragmentation is not presented as aesthetic strategy but as necessity. And yet it is precisely this constraint that gives *Leaving Home* its particular texture; a memoir assembled not as a continuous narrative but as a series of sharply observed instants, held together by rhythm rather than argument.

Haddon, of course, is best known for *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, the novel that in 2003 moved almost improbably between literary fiction, young adult readership and global bestseller status. It is a book often discussed in terms of voice and structure, of its unusual clarity of perception. But to reduce his work to that novel is to miss the broader and more elusive continuity of his writing life: an ongoing preoccupation with perception itself, how it fails, how it distorts, and how it nevertheless persists.

In *Leaving Home*, he turns that attention inward, though not in the confessional mode one might expect. "Insofar as I remember clearly," he says, "every book I've ever written has been a different experience." Memory, here, is not a repository but a variable condition, unreliable, partial, and sometimes explicitly absent. The memoir acknowledges this instability rather than resolving it.

Asked whether revisiting his past brought moments of surprise or disquiet, he is characteristically unsentimental: "Not in the writing as such. I was more concerned with how the prose would be read by a hypothetical stranger than by the personal experiences I was drawing upon."

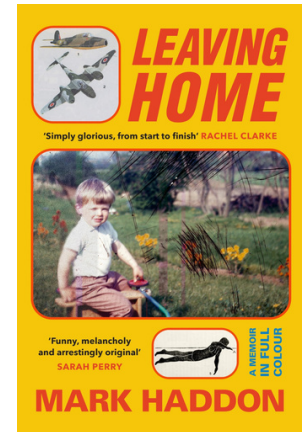
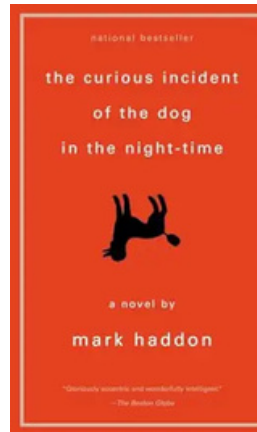
It is a revealing formulation. Even in autobiography, Haddon's attention remains outward-facing - oriented towards reception, towards the imagined reader. And yet he concedes that something did shift in the aftermath of publication: "Messages from readers after publication surprised me... I felt... much as I hate the word... 'validated'."

The hesitation around the word is telling. Validation, for Haddon, is not a triumphant category but a slightly awkward one — acceptable only with quotation marks implied.

There is, too, a quiet reorganisation of his earlier artistic life in *Leaving Home*. Haddon once wrote poetry, though he is now blunt about its place in his practice: "I don't write poetry anymore. I think I learnt how to write more poetical prose and as a result no longer needed that other outlet."

It is a pragmatic rather than mystical account of artistic development. Forms are not elevated or abandoned; they are absorbed, metabolised, rendered redundant by evolution elsewhere in the work. "Readers may disagree of course," he adds, with a characteristic dryness.

Across his fiction and non-fiction alike, there is a persistent interest in characters who perceive the world obliquely. When asked how much of himself inhabits these figures, he resists the idea of pure invention. "I think it's impossible - at least it would be impossible for me - to write any believable characters that aren't informed by some part of my own experience."



Yet he is equally resistant to autobiographical reduction. What emerges instead is a layered account of perspective shaped by class, education, and temperament. He recalls a boarding school education chosen by his father - "because that was the education he would like to have had" - and the lasting effect it had on his sensibility. "One of the many things I learnt there was a deep and abiding hatred of uniforms, of rules, of party lines, of groupthink."

There is also, he suggests, a neurological dimension to this sense of distance. "Having a mood disorder helps too," he says matter-of-factly. "There are long periods in my life when I'm simply unable to work. The experience is not unlike being trapped on the bank while life flows past."

It is an image that might easily be over-interpreted, but Haddon offers it without invitation to metaphor. It sits, instead, alongside more concrete reflections on work itself. "I'd be a terrible teacher if I thought there was a single most important lesson to be conveyed," he says of his time teaching creative writing. "Practice is so much more valuable than principles."

The same scepticism towards abstraction informs his account of writer's block, which he describes with disarming frankness: "Half my life is writer's block. Largely caused by periodic and deep sloughs of despond." The remedy, he says, is not revelation but routine: reading, walking, exercise, persistence. The language is deliberately unromantic, almost procedural. Writing, in this account, is not an inspired state but a managed condition.

If there is a unifying landscape to Haddon's work, it is not urban or domestic but something more liminal. "I am not good in cities," he says. "A day in London and I feel cramped and claustrophobic and I long desperately to be in a forest with no people." Woods, hills, rivers, unpaved tracks recur across his writing, spaces that resist enclosure, where attention can move without obstruction.

You can trace a line, too, back to an early intellectual awakening: the discovery of the poetry of R. S. Thomas while preparing for O-levels at the age of twelve or thirteen. Before that, he had been "obsessed with science (maths, cosmology and palaeoanthropology in particular)". Poetry, he says, offered "some of the same deep pleasures", a phrase that quietly links disciplines often treated as opposites.

Asked about ambitions yet unrealised, his answer is almost offhand: "I have long nursed a desire to write a graphic novel. It's a desire I may take to my grave."



La poesía como astrolabio: conversación con Esther Peñas

En su libro *Historia de la lluvia*, la autora se detiene en un elemento natural convertido en símbolo recurrente. La lluvia no es solo paisaje, sino experiencia corporal y memoria afectiva: “La lluvia nos repercute en el cuerpo. Nos recuerda su hechura”. Y añade una reflexión sobre el modo en que los símbolos operan más allá de lo evidente: “La lluvia nos sucede y nos permite soportar el encuentro en la ausencia de lo que buscamos... dejarnos encontrar en la renuncia a lo esperado”. Su imaginario, reconoce, está poblado de elementos naturales —“vencejos, corzos, luciérnagas, aurora, trigo, cosecha”— que funcionan como mediaciones entre lo íntimo y lo cultural.

Sobre su proceso creativo, reivindica una escritura sin programa previo, más cercana a la irrupción que al diseño: “Sé que algo está escribiéndose en la trastienda... no lo incordio, dejo que se geste, y cuando está listo hay una necesidad delirante de recibirlo, escucharlo, escribirlo”. Esa ausencia de planificación se traduce en una obra “torrencial”, donde la escritura aparece como una forma de recepción más que de construcción. En ese límite entre lo que puede decirse y lo que se resiste al lenguaje sitúa una de sus preocupaciones centrales: “Ese es un gran límite, el umbral en el que el decir no dice, ni canta, ni hace posible trazo alguno”.

La dimensión fronteriza también atraviesa su biografía intelectual y espiritual. Entre la terapia psicoanalítica y la meditación de raíz católica, señala una forma de estar en el mundo que oscila entre polos: “La fe que practico me coloca constantemente entre lo humano y lo divino, entre la providencia y lo volitivo, entre el prójimo y uno mismo”. Esa tensión, lejos de resolverse, amplía la mirada: “Colocarse en lo fronterizo nos amplía la perspectiva, nos recuerda que las cosas pueden ser de otra manera a como las pensamos o las sentimos”.

Desde su experiencia en la comunidad literaria madrileña, observa cambios en la recepción de la poesía con una mirada crítica hacia la profesionalización del campo: “Ya no preside lo lúdico, el placer, lo gratuito... hay un interés draconiano por figurar, destacar, publicar”. Recuerda épocas en las que predominaban los fanzines y la experimentación informal: “Se improvisaba mucho más, la camaradería acampaba, dispuesta. Hoy prevalece el rédito. Y allí donde hay rédito la poesía huye”.

Su práctica de la entrevista aparece, sin embargo, como una forma de aprendizaje continuo: “Me permite ejercer un discipulado sostenido... siempre me llevo una monedita de cobre en la faltriquera”. La conversación con otros, dice, funciona como un archivo vivo de posibilidades de pensamiento y escritura, un modo de leer el mundo en plural.

En cuanto a sus influencias, su mapa es deliberadamente amplio y heterogéneo, abarcando desde la tradición literaria hasta la filosofía y la música: “No me entendería sin Gómez de la Serna, Cortázar, Huidobro... Simone Weil... Nabokov... pero tampoco sin Julio Monteverde... Emilia Conejo... Y, desde luego, yo no sería yo sin la música de Luis Felipe Barrio”. Esa enumeración sugiere una identidad literaria construida en diálogo constante con múltiples voces.

De cara al futuro, su respuesta no apunta a un programa sino a una disposición: “Tengo la certeza de que el poema se cumple a expensas del poeta, prendo el deseo que siempre quede abierto el sueño del sentido”. Una idea que, más que cierre, funciona como declaración de principio.

Esther Peñas Domingo (Madrid, 1975) ha construido una trayectoria literaria que se mueve con naturalidad entre la poesía, el periodismo cultural, el ensayo y la entrevista, una zona híbrida en la que la escucha y la palabra escrita parecen retroalimentarse. Formada en Periodismo en la Universidad Complutense de Madrid, su trabajo ha estado ligado de manera constante al ámbito de la cultura, donde ha ejercido como entrevistadora, cronista y poeta, y donde ha ido afinando una voz que combina reflexión, sensibilidad simbólica y una fuerte conciencia del lenguaje como materia viva.

En esta conversación, la autora define la poesía desde un lugar que desborda cualquier función instrumental o decorativa. “La poesía es un astrolabio vital, una brújula que orienta y calienta el ánimo, un murmullo incansante que recuerda que estamos vivos”, afirma, antes de desplegar una constelación de imágenes que la sitúan más cerca de lo ontológico que de lo estrictamente literario. “Es una invitación continua a habitar el misterio, y el prodigio, y el estupor, y la maravilla. Es lo que nos hace abiertos. Aquello que nos permite salir de lo previsible cotidiano”. En su visión, la poesía no es un añadido sino una condición: “Más que urgente, es constitutiva. Como la alegría”.

Su obra, que transita entre géneros con naturalidad, está atravesada por una reflexión constante sobre la escucha y el desdibujamiento del yo. La experiencia del periodismo cultural, especialmente el formato de la entrevista, aparece como una escuela de atención: “El hecho de desempeñar mi oficio, cuyo eje son las entrevistas, me predispone por un lado al discipulado; por otro, a la escucha, cualidad sin la que no entiendo el quehacer poético”. En esa línea, insiste en una concepción del lenguaje como algo que precede a la intención del autor: “La poesía acalla el yo y alumbrá la palabra. Hay que dejar que el lenguaje se cante. Basta escucharlo”.

Esa misma idea de la palabra como entidad autónoma recorre su forma de entender la escritura: “El hecho poético se produce porque dejamos que la palabra se sostenga a sí misma, para más tarde sostenerla nosotros”. La comunicación, tanto en el periodismo como en la poesía, comparte para ella una misma base de apertura: “Tanto la comunicación como el alumbramiento nos invitan a la acción. La palabra, cualquiera, es también cuerpo”.

Between Wonder and Warning: Helen Scales on the Living Ocean



A composite of Helen and all her photos of fish she's taken made by Ria Mishaal

Marine biologist, writer, and broadcaster [Helen Scales](#) has spent her career exploring the hidden worlds beneath the surface—from coral reefs to the deep sea's most mysterious ecosystems. With a gift for weaving scientific insight into vivid storytelling, she has become one of the most distinctive voices in contemporary ocean writing. In this conversation with *The Madrid Review*, Scales reflects on the wonder that first drew her underwater, the growing pressures facing marine life, and why hope and fear must coexist if we are to imagine a future for the world's oceans.

Do you remember the first moment you fell in love with the ocean?

I vividly remember the first moment I fell in love with the aquatic realm, and specifically with the sensation of breathing underwater and seeing a fish for the first time in their wild home. This wasn't in the sea, but a freshwater lake. It was my first scuba dive outside the sterile swimming pool where I'd been training for the previous few months. When I first jumped into the frigid, murky water I wanted to get straight back out again – it was a truly horrible experience – but then a little fish caught my eye and everything changed. It felt like the aquarium glass had fallen away and I was immersed in their three-dimensional world. At that moment, I knew I wanted to spend as much time as possible underwater, watching fish, learning about their lives and exploring their world.

You've spent your life studying and writing about the sea—what still surprises you about it?

On a regular basis, I get surprised that there are still so many things in the ocean that I've never heard about or seen before, species and habitats that are completely new to me. I'm sure the ocean will never run out of surprises to show me, and that includes things that scientists are constantly discovering – especially in the deep sea – but also things I'm seeing myself, often much closer to home, just by spending time looking and noticing.

How do you balance wonder and warning in your writing, especially in an age of ecological anxiety?

This is something I've struggled with for some time. I've felt torn between wanting to share my passion for the ocean's immense living wonders, and telling people about the terrible troubles the ocean faces. And I've found myself getting asked more and more, in radio interviews and by audience members after talks, a question along the lines of: are you hopeful for the future of the ocean? And I found it difficult to answer. I've been very lucky to see so many glorious animals and healthy ecosystems in the ocean, and I've experienced first-hand many of the worst threats. For a long time I've found it really tough reconciling the two. It's why I wrote my book *What the Wild Sea Can Be*. I decided to spend time thinking deeply about this question of hope. The book is essentially my long answer to that question.

Writing the book, I took a deep dive into the latest research on how the ocean is changing and adapting to modern threats, finding the places and species that are in most urgent peril, and those that are coping better with all that humanity is throwing at them.

After finishing the book, I came away with a strong new sense that I can be both hopeful and fearful for the future of the ocean – that it's possible to be both. In fact, it's important to be both. We can't turn away from the troubles, but we also mustn't let waves of ecoanxiety overwhelm the joys the ocean has to offer. Hopes and fears can exist side by side.

Now that I've found a personal balance, I'm doing my best to channel it into my writing. I've come to see my collective output as a whole; some of my writing focuses on the beauty, the exciting science and discoveries happening in the ocean; other things I write are more hard-hitting reports on the troubled ocean.

World Ocean Day can sometimes feel symbolic. What does meaningful ocean action look like to you?

To me, any actions are meaningful if they add to the knowledge we have about the ocean, or recognition of how and why it matters, and protects in it some way from human harm. This can happen at many scales. It can start with the smallest idea or a subtle shift in mindset, when someone pays attention to the ocean that little bit more and cares more about what's there. And it can be far bigger, systemic changes that will help the ocean to continue to be an incredible, life-giving ecosystem.

If you could correct one major misconception the public holds about the ocean, what would it be?

We need to move on from the misconception that the ocean is essentially there for our benefit; it's there to feed us, cure us, make us rich, solve all our problems. It's true, that the ocean can do those things, and it holds incredible resources that people should be treasuring and only using with utmost caution and care. But especially in recent years, it feels to me like the race has kicked up a gear to grab as much as possible from the ocean, as quickly as possible, before someone else gets there first. The ocean should not be forced to pay its way economically, because what humanity most needs does not come with a price tag. I want corporations and governments to step away from using the ocean to try and drive economic growth, and instead find ways to value the benefits we all gain from it for free.

Are you optimistic about the ocean's future? What gives you hope, and what keeps you up at night?

Aha! There's the question! So, continuing from what I was saying about finding a balance of hopes and fears, I get a lot of hope from knowing that more people than ever are identifying as ocean people, by which I mean they are interested and care about the ocean, and finding their own personal connections whatever they might be. Whether it's campaigners in the UK demanding water companies stop dumping raw sewage into rivers and seas, or citizen scientists helping with all sorts of ecological projects, there is a growing global movement which means the ocean will no longer be ignored, overlooked and uncared for.

And what keeps me up at night? The climate crisis, sometimes quite literally on those hot, airless nights.

You've written beautifully about the deep sea. What do you think the next great ocean discovery might be?

It will be something nobody was expecting.

What questions about the ocean still feel unanswered to you?

Oh, there are so many, but one of my favourites is: *Where are baby blue whales born?* They are the biggest babies on the planet, and still nobody knows where they are born.

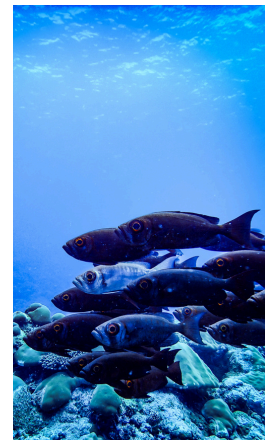
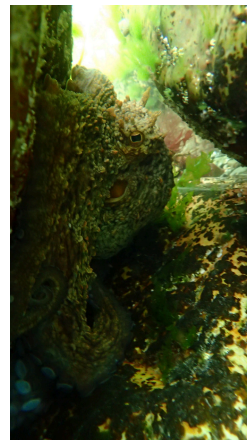
What are you working on at the moment? Is there a new book, expedition, or collaboration on the horizon?

I'm writing this on my way to Corsica, where I'm researching for an article about fish that build thousands of nests on the seabed. I'll be at sea with a team of researchers who discovered this phenomenon a few years ago, and it could be the remnants of a lost ecosystem that used to be much more widespread across the Mediterranean.

I've also started work on my next narrative non-fiction book. This one will explore the extraordinary migrations that all sorts of marine animals make across the ocean. I recently returned from Galápagos, where I was following the story of scalloped hammerhead sharks that swim thousands of miles across the Tropical Eastern Pacific.

If the ocean could speak, what do you think it would say to us right now?

Let me tell you a three-billion-year story of life on earth.



Photos by Helen Scales of a mandarin fish (top), a common octopus (left, above) and a moontail bullseye in Palau.

When you imagine the world in 50 years, what role do you hope oceans will play in our collective future?

If I'm allowed to dream big for a moment, my hope is that the ocean in the decades ahead will become increasingly just and fair, sustainably feeding people and providing livelihoods for those who most depend on the ocean. For everyone else, the ocean will increasingly stoke awe and wonder, and shift from a utilitarian to a more inspirational role as the wildest, most life-filled and exciting parts of the planet, a place to know about and treasure, and mostly to leave alone.

Finally, what would you say to a young person who wants to devote their life to the sea?

If you're passionate about the ocean, in whatever way it might be, then you will find a way to make it a part of your life. Don't worry if you achieve your dreams right away, but whenever you can, choose to do things that excite you or let you learn something new. You never know where connections to the ocean will emerge. Don't wait for people to tell you what to do – but don't be afraid to ask for help. And don't worry if you change your mind or shift your path as you go. I have done all sorts of different things linked to the ocean. When I left school, I never imagined I would become a writer; that didn't happen until much later.

Mark Fiddes: Inner Cities, Outer Worlds

"Although most of my poetry is about cities, I'm always looking for their inner landscapes and the ideas that hold them together," says [Mark Fiddes](#), a British poet whose work moves fluidly between lyric observation, political urgency and a globalised sense of place. Born in Northamptonshire, England, Fiddes went on to study Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Oxford. He's worked in journalism and as a creative director in a career that has taken him between London, Washington D.C., and, more recently, cities such as Dubai and Barcelona. His poetry has appeared widely in major journals and won numerous international prizes, including the Ledbury Poetry Prize and recognition in the UK National Poetry Competition and the Moth Poetry Prize. What follows is a conversation with Mark about his new collection, *Hotel Petroleum* (Broken Sleep Books), and his life.

Where did you grow up? How do you think it has shaped the way you see the world and the way you write?

I grew up in the Nene Valley in Northamptonshire, England. It's where peasant poet John Clare lived in the early 19th Century. Unlike the Dales or Lakes or Moors, its landscape is far from spectacular. Perhaps this is what gives Clare's work such intimacy with the details and rhythms of Nature. I would spend days walking along the river with a pocket size collection of Clare's poems published by the novelist J.L. Carr (*A Month in the Country*). He was a family friend and asked my father – painter Chris Fiddes – to illustrate the cover. Dad did a whole series for him – Keats, Wordsworth, Blake.

My school was right next to the asylum in which Clare passed his final years. At lunchtimes I would climb the fence and wander the hospital grounds with its fine oaks and odd celebs like Spike Milligan and Les from the Bay City Rollers. School also inspired me with an extraordinary English teacher Danny Hickling who brought all the voices of literature alive in the classroom, from his lecherous Chaucer to a world-worn Dryden.

Were there particular books, writers, or even non-literary influences like music, film, or environments that first shaped your sense of language or imagination?

As a child member of The Puffin Club, I would get a regular book, magazine and sky blue enamel badge. Earliest book memories are coloured by the illustrations of Edward Ardizzone, from *Tim All Alone* and James Reeves's poems in *Blackbird in the Lilac* to *Stig of the Dump* and *The Little Grey Men*. It was a short step from there to Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Balzac's *Père Goriot* and any other Penguin Classics my mother, a teacher, had in the bookcase.

Music was vital. I've never lost the love for the Beethoven and Bach that I would hear at full blast from my Dad's studio. Then I got into punk early on and played in a few bands around Northampton, birthplace of uber-goth Bauhaus. At College we put together a Velvet Underground tribute outfit called 109 Days in Tehran (how prophetic) which morphed into indie band The Jazz Butcher (Creation Records). All I contributed was the name and a couple of songs like *Zombie Love* which appeared on the first album *Bath of Bacon*. My credit was as 'Antichrist' - don't ask. The real genius was Pat Huntruds RIP, a true English songwriter in the tradition of Ray Davies and Robyn Hitchcock. The first films to influence me were haunting imports from Eastern Europe on kids TV like *The Singing, Ringing Tree* moving on to early David Lynch and anything by Fellini or Tarkovsky. On TV, Dennis Potter was God – from *Blue Remembered Hills* to *The Singing Detective*.

Do you remember your first real encounter with poetry, when it stopped being something you studied and became something you felt drawn to write?

Keats, like so many other poets. 'Ode to a Nightingale'. Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Both transported me to other worlds while telling me something profound about this one. Among the moderns, Dylan Thomas on radio (*Under Milk Wood*) and a scratchy T.S. Eliot reading *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* on my grandparents' old gramophone.

You've won poetry prizes and received recognition over the years, how important do you think awards are in a poet's career today, and what impact, if any, have they had on your own trajectory?

I only started getting back into poetry in my early fifties, after a 20 year break. So awards gave me a way to have my poetry read and taken seriously by judges without anybody knowing my age, sex, ethnicity or sexual orientation. When I won third in the National Poetry Competition in 2018 with a poem about toxic masculinity, one of the judges told me they thought it had been written by a woman. Hooray.

Winning awards gives you some recognition, I guess, when you're submitting to mags and journals, but not that much. Good editors go their own way without playing to the gallery. The Ledbury Prize was lovely to win because it involved a trip and a stay in the company of other English-speaking poets. This was new to me as I live in the Middle East and don't get to mix with the British poetry 'in crowd' such as it is. That said, we have a great community here in Dubai of poets in Arabic, Urdu, Hindi, Tagalog and even Uzbek, all learning from each other and performing together.

How would you describe your own 'style'? Do you have one?

No idea. Lyrical urbanism? New Metaphysical? Punk Betjeman?

What does life outside poetry look like for you now in practical terms, and how does that everyday life feed into or sit alongside your writing?

Every day, I rise and write poetry for two hours wherever I am, usually accompanied by fierce black coffee. The rest of the day I write to earn a living. That could be scriptwriting for a brand 'mood' film or coming up with names for an island somewhere or a city street plan. Recently I've been writing the vision for Dubai's Museum of the Future. Last year, I worked with Fosters architects designing and creating the visitor experience for an award-winning Expo Pavilion.

Beyond that, I have a wonderful Catalan wife and two grown sons. One is a former pro-footballer turned management consultant living in Barcelona. The other is an assistant film director. Maribel is the life and soul of any room she walks into and a true ambassador for the human race. When we're all together, it's a wild mix of Castillian, English and Catalan - which has the best swear words.

You've described poetry as a way of putting together fragments of experience, what kinds of fragments do you find yourself working with most often, and how do they begin to form a poem?

Mostly, I think of poems in film scenes. An image will lodge on my dodgy retinas and I'll keep a note. Or a feeling will arrive that I will find hard to describe so I'll cover a page with contradictions in my notebook. Gradually connections will draw together. My Oxford Brookes University prizewinner 'Kodachrome Book of the Dead' was just such a composition of images from childhood along with their tastes and smells. It ends with the disposability of digital image making which was grafted from another poem entirely



Poet Mark Fiddes by Julian Hansford

What do you think poetry can realistically achieve in the world today?

Personally, poetry is a way to make sense of the world. To understand its awesome beauty, to stand up to its evils and bring people together. This autumn I will do a two month residency in Prague where I have been invited by the UNICEF City of Literature Programme to celebrate Vaclav Havel's 90th. It came from a paper I delivered to Versopolis on 'Poetry as the antidote to Populism', spearing ogres like Orban and Trump. Whereas Populism divides us by creating enemies, Poetry unites us in our common humanity. As John Burnside said ""Poetry is the art of belonging." We need that more now than ever.

Tell us about *Hotel Petroleum*. How was it born? How did it grow?

The title is from the Moth Poetry Prize/Forward Prize Highly Commended poem called 'Hotel Petroleum'. On one level, this poem appears to be about ultra-luxury consumption but it is also a gaze into a *Brave New World/1984* mash-up which then signals a number of big themes in the book. As Tom Stoppard said: "Hotels inhabit a separate moral universe." So this collection gave me a chance to explore that. With the help of my brilliant editor at Broken Sleep – Kit Ingram – I was able to move the 60 or so poems into three separate sections called Arrival, Occupancy and Departure. Much of the inspiration comes from my experiences in the Middle East where I have spent the past ten years living and working in Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi and the UAE. The region is deeply misunderstood thanks to Islamophobia, Orientalism and Post-Colonialism, all of which have grown worse as The West loses its grip on the world order. From tolerance of the Gaza atrocities to the intolerance of the far right in the political mainstream, we all have to speak out. There's also a fair bit written about Catalonia and Brexit Britain, to which your readers hardly need any introduction.

If someone asked you about *Hotel Petroleum*, how would you describe it?

Think of it as journalism with better pictures. I say 'better' because it is the reader who will create the images. I'm just the prompt, the dialogue coach. As for the style, it is unapologetically lyrical in places because sometimes words go their own way and you must let them. Critics have picked up on the 'dark' humour. Personally, I would highlight the many moments that celebrate joyously what it means to be human. As AI advances, this is another responsibility for the 'unacknowledged legislator' in every poet.

What modern poets do you enjoy reading and working with?

We lost him a couple of years ago, but I massively admire Adam Zagajewski. He has that ability to hold the gaze to beauty and absurdity at the same time. I also love the 'punk' in Dianne Suess and the enchantments cast by Alice Oswald. Her reading at Ledbury last year was captivating. Being a fellow Midlander, Zaffar Kunial's perspective on English society is heartbreaking, without ever losing its poise. And I have to mention Scottish poet John Glenday for his ability to take your breath away with the quietest observation. My mother's family is Scottish and I feel a very close affinity to his work and his land.

You've been publishing '*Spring Journal*' in *The Madrid Review*. Can you tell us about why you decided to write it?

Firstly, thank you for supporting the poem and describing so insightfully its echo of Louis MacNeice's 'Autumn Journal' which was written during the descent into WW2. The work is a clear inspiration and I've always admired MacNeice – not just because he's a fellow alumnus of Merton College!

I'd already written quite a lot about the invasion of Gaza which is a kind of prequel to the Iran War. The poem 'Year of the Crayfish' is about MAGA and ICE and DOGE and GAZA.

The day before hostilities broke out, I'd gone for a very early morning sea swim, knowing I was breast-stroking towards the USS Abraham Lincoln. So I made light of it in the first canto you'll read in the sequence. The next day, I heard my first cruise missile. Then everything happened at once. The community in which I live in Dubai is full of folk from other conflict zones – Lebanon, Ukraine, Sudan - who all offered their advice on the WhatsApp groups, from how to stop your windows shattering to how to calm a nervous teenager. The government was amazingly frank and open with information. Life just carried on. First, I wanted to capture this. The power of ordinary people doing ordinary things.

Yet this was clearly such an unnecessary disaster, fuelled by a monstrous vanity, hubris and need for a national distraction in the run up to the mid-term Congressional elections. In the light of Gaza, it also felt like a continuation of the 'non-white lives don't matter' position that was going unquestioned. So I had to contrast the dignity of my fellow residents and the courage of those serving in the air defences with the cupidity and cowardice of the instigators. A poetic diary, like MacNeice's, looked like the only answer. Moreover, it was therapy. A way to cherish life while being moments away from the next missile alert. I also wanted to disarm the view of cities like Dubai as honeypots for trivial influencers and tax exiles. That's not the reality for 95% of people here.



Poet with painter father Chris Fiddes in his studio.



Hotel Petroleum

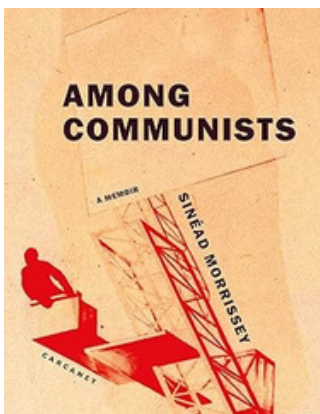
Mark Fiddes

Broken Sleep Books

“I am preoccupied by the climate crisis and the future my children will inherit.”

Inside Sinéad Morrissey's new book 'Among Communists' and why she's worried for her children's world.

By James Hartley.



Sinéad Morrissey's forthcoming memoir *Among Communists* (Carcanet Press) is rooted in a childhood she describes as both intellectually charged and quietly estranging — a life lived, as she puts it, “at right-angles to the mainstream culture surrounding it.”

From the outset, Morrissey frames that upbringing as formative not only in content but in perspective. “My childhood instilled a deep interest in history and politics – especially history,” she says, adding that this sensibility “is reflected in my work.”

But it was not only history as subject matter; it was history as atmosphere. Growing up in Belfast within a politically conscious household meant early exposure to systems of thought far beyond childhood expectation. “There was also something about belonging to a marginal community which gifted me an outsider perspective – so valuable to any writer,” she reflects.

Within that environment, she recalls, ideas were not abstract or distant but almost domestic in their presence. “The Communist valorisation of culture, reading and education more broadly meant I was exposed to big ideas,” she says — naming them directly: “class struggle, surplus value, even the Platonic conception of Pure Form.”

Yet she is careful not to present this as ideological inheritance in any simple sense. “Even though I didn’t go on to own these ideas as an adult,” she says, “they still gifted me a powerful sense of personal agency.”

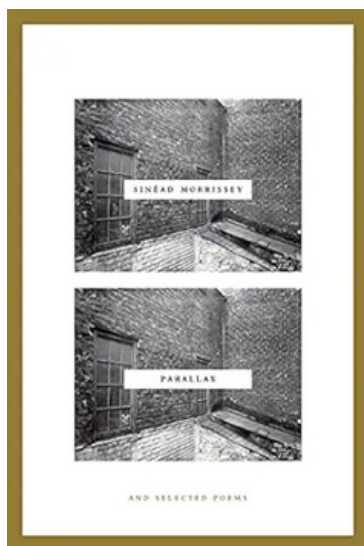
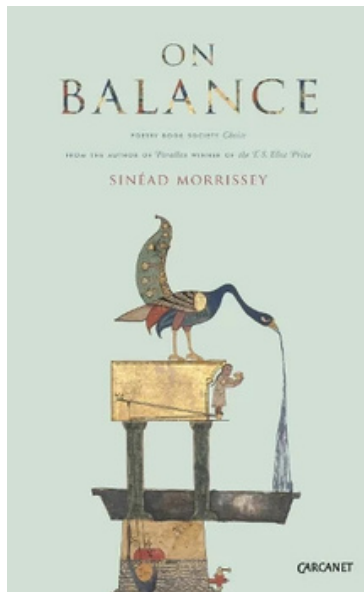
One phrase, however, remains lodged in memory with unusual force. “We’re the vanguard of the vanguard,” her father told her when she was eight. “We light and lead the way.” The poignancy of that declaration lies in what came after it. “All of which was completely ironised, of course, by the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in 1989 but which was still energising at the time.”

The emotional residue of that collapse, she suggests, continues to shape her imagination. “Perhaps the most significant legacy of my politicised childhood is a fascination with sudden endings,” she says, “and the ways in which they enable the aestheticization of lived experience.” That attention to rupture and threshold extends across her poetry and into *Among Communists*, where personal memory and historical systems are constantly refracted through each other. It is less memoir as chronology than memoir as structure — how endings reorganise meaning.

A similar dynamic of disappearance and return appears in her reflections on water, a recurring motif in her work. She describes a long-standing dream: “I’m trying to get into the sea to swim and I can’t.” The dream shifts in form but not in feeling. “Either it recedes further and further from view as I walk towards it,” she says, “or when I do get into it, the water suddenly drains away.”

Her interpretation of this image is strikingly direct. “It occurred to me... that the sea was language itself,” she says. And the dream becomes something more specific: “an act of grief for language – for that sense of being connected to/plugged into language – so grievously missing when one cannot write.”

From this perspective, her shoreline poems are not simply descriptive but restorative. “A lot of my shore poems... are me literally working my way back to the sea,” she explains, “back to language and writing again, after a gap.” If language is a tide that recedes and returns, so too is history in Morrissey’s thinking — never fixed, always re-entered from the present. Reflecting on how poems inhabit time, she recalls a remark by Les Murray: “no matter the pronoun or perspective employed, a poem was really always about the poet.”



She finds something revealingly contradictory in this. "I thought this was such a surprising thing to say," she notes, especially from "the writer who invented a series of bespoke languages to try and capture animal consciousness."

Her own conclusion is more circular than definitive: "No matter what historical moment we choose to inhabit in a poem, it's really always about the present."

That sense of presentness also informs her environmental concerns, which she speaks about with urgency and frustration. "I am preoccupied by the climate crisis," she says plainly, "and the future my children will inherit." She does not separate this from the everyday. "The cataclysmic extinction of species and the utterly stupid selfish miscalculation that is plastic," she adds, are part of the same continuum. Even domestic waste becomes emblematic: "I take a lot of my plastic to the local supermarket but I don't have faith that it's being recycled properly." The scale of accumulation is what unsettles her most. "It's always astonishing how much of it there is... And it will never break down."

Yet even here, she is attentive to historical irony. Reflecting on earlier infrastructures, she cites sewer gas destructor lamps: "These were invented towards the end of the nineteenth century... in order to ventilate underground tunnels and prevent explosions." At the same time, she notes, "sewage was still pumped directly into the sea - consciousness hadn't advanced to the point where people realised that was also going to be a problem!"

Still, she finds in them a paradoxical lesson. "To me," she says, "the sewer gas destructor lamp still exemplifies the kind of out-of-the box, can-do thinking we need now more than ever."

As editor of the upcoming *Poetry Ireland Review* issue on "Home," Morrissey is equally alert to how concepts become unstable through overuse. "Home is such a contested and overloaded concept," she says, "it's difficult to be prescriptive about what might work or have an impact on a reader."

What draws her, instead, is clarity of perception. She names poems that "paint a very clear picture in my mind," including Larkin's 'Home Is So Sad' and Hayden's 'Those Winter Sundays', which she finds "particularly powerful as a single parent because it's also about the labour and love of parenting."

But she is also interested in how "home" might be displaced altogether. "Perhaps the bigger challenge," she suggests, "is to move out of rooms altogether... into what is alien, unreadable or even hostile through the quality of our attention."

She invokes writers who attempt this outward movement: "Basho did this. Elizabeth Bishop did this all the time. And of course Amy Clampitt... who knew so much, and looped together what she knew with what she saw."

As for what comes next after *Among Communists*, Morrissey resists the idea of forward momentum as constant production. "I wrote a new poetry collection last spring," she says, "which means I probably won't write poetry again for another while."

Her writing rhythm is cyclical rather than continuous. "I tend to not write more than I write," she explains, "partly just to do with the pressures of working full-time at a university."

When she does write, however, it arrives in concentrated bursts: "My last three collections were all written in about sixteen weeks."

The same applies to prose. "I couldn't have written the memoir without the Fellowship... which bought me out of teaching for two years."

For now, she is turning toward smaller, more fluid forms. "In the meantime, smaller projects beckon," she says. "I've written a few different song cycles," and is interested in continuing that collaboration with composers.

She also mentions "some more - shorter! - creative non-fiction." And then, characteristically open-ended: "We'll see."

L'ÉTRANGER THINGS

WITH TWO RECENT ADAPTATIONS OF ALBERT CAMUS' MOST FAMOUS AND INFLUENTIAL NOVEL BEING RELEASED WITHIN THE LAST YEAR, CLIFF SHEPARD TAKES A LOOK AT THIS CLASSIC FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF TWO VERY DIFFERENT MEDIUMS.

Published in 1942 to much fanfare and more than a little scandal, *'L'Étranger'* (The Stranger, published in the UK as *'The Outsider'*) follows the fortunes of Meursault, a Frenchman living in Algeria who, following the death of his mother, kills an Arab man 'without reason' and is arrested. Exploring philosophical themes of absurdism and existentialism, the novel is widely considered a pillar of twentieth century literature. There have been few adaptations (including a notable stab by Visconti) which have somewhat unsuccessfully conveyed the true nature of Camus' finest hour, but in the last year two new approved-by-the-estate versions have tried to tackle this seminal work.

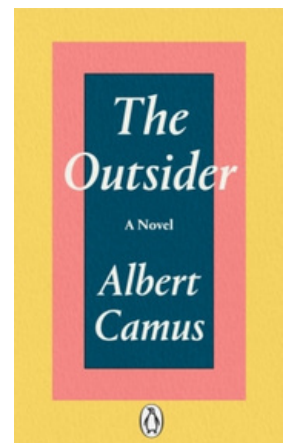
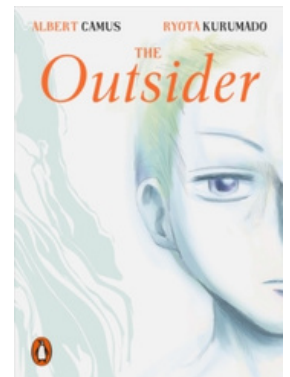
Adapted by Ryota Kurumado and translated from the Japanese by Ros Schwartz, *The Outsider: The Manga* is the first ever manga version of the novel, and tries to catch the spirit of the source material, without being bogged down too much with the text. The result is disproportionately dynamic - where the slow burn of the narrative, and the lack of action permeates the original, the manga version feels the need for movement and dynamism throughout. This means that when anything happens, it is spun across many pages in fast, sharp cuts which have the effect of being quite at odds with the pace.

The illustration is strong and clear, but the pitfall of the genre means that the characters either look like young children or very old people. Recent manga versions of HP Lovecraft have shown that you don't necessarily have to go down this road to produce stylistically different retelling. Ultimately though, with plot simplified and thoughtfulness sacrificed, the result is a distilled and superficial 'primer' that conveys action without meaning.

Famed screenwriter and director François Ozon takes a much slower and thoughtful approach with his recently released film *L'Étranger*. Shot in black and white and starring Benjamin Voisin, the director has an eye on what the novel can say about our modern world, with greater emphasis placed on the Arabian characters and their place in French occupied Algeria.

An expanded role for these originally peripheral figures cleverly switches the focus from the indifferent, apathetic Meursault with all his musings and sees the impact of his actions from a very different viewpoint. In addition, the long wide shots, and unhurried editing are entirely suited to the subject matter - the laconic cinematography and sparse dialogue capturing perfectly the essence of what the author intended. To create a film that is both a faithful period piece, but also manages to resonate with modern themes is quite an achievement.

'The Outsider' is available in comic book stores and bookshops, 'L'Étranger' is available in selected cinemas.



From Quiet Reflection to Cosmic Carnage

This issue's reviews range from Ben Lerner's cerebral literary fiction to the cult sci-fi sensation *Dungeon Crawler Carl*. Our man CLIFF SHEPHARD reviews them both.

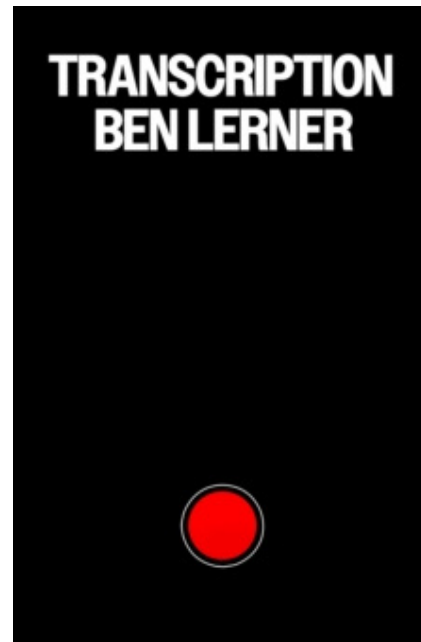
Ben Lerner's new novel *Transcription* is really three linked stories: A writer travels to Providence, Rhode Island to record an interview with his aging mentor, but a mishap with his phone means that unable to use it. Instead of confessing to his subject, he just pretends he is recording, intending to write it up from memory.

Flash forward to a conference where he has let the audience know of his misdemeanour, and is shocked at the negative reaction he gets for having passed off the interview as genuine, when it was remembered. In the final section of the book the protagonist talks to the mentor's son, who talks of his struggles with his daughter's eating disorder. With the help of her tablet computer, she has managed to break the cycle and return to a more healthy lifestyle.

Ben Lerner's short novella is partly an investigation into our relationship with technology. Whether the macguffin is a water damaged phone, or a child's tablet...the way in which these devices can rule our lives without us realising is a rich subject to unpick.

There are also detailed discussions on morality, fatherhood and anxiety, but the author deftly manages to tread a fine line between humour and pathos. Many critics have already called this 'The Book of the Year', and with an interesting structure and lots to say for such a slim page count...they may well be right.

Transcription is in Hardback at £14.99 and published in the UK now



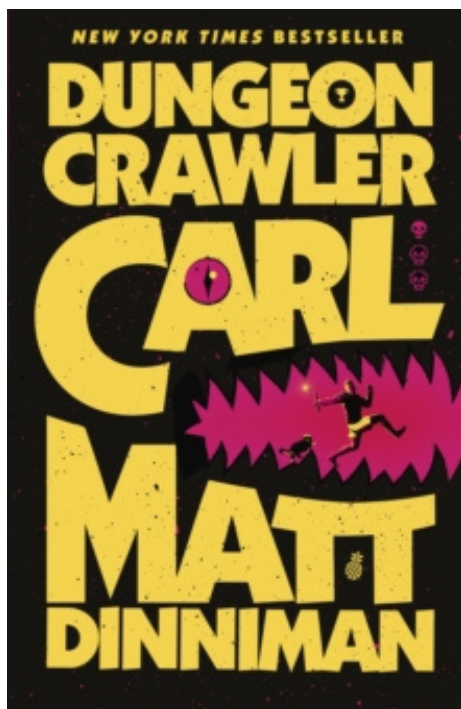
A man and his ex-girlfriend's cat find themselves plunged into a game for the survival of the planet, where they have to navigate many dangerous levels of a dungeon whilst being watched by billions of aliens for their entertainment.

Originally self published in 2020 during the covid pandemic, *Dungeon Crawler Carl* borrows and borrows shamelessly - with strong flavours of *The Hitch-hiker's Guide To The Galaxy* and *Red Dwarf*, mashed up with *The Hunger Games* and *The Running Man* - but it at least lets us know from the beginning that this is entirely intentional.

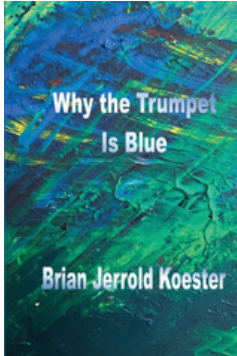
Becoming huge on social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, it is clear that the author and his creation are having 'a moment' which is rarely seen in publishing. With fan fiction, cosplayers, and even a TV series about to be foisted upon the general public...does it live up to the hype?

There is a fresh feeling to the 'dive in and don't worry about it too much' approach to storytelling that Matt Dinniman uses, and not too much time spent on setup or 'lore'. Storywise, much fun and humour abounds, especially with the now-talking cat Princess Donut, yet what becomes increasingly clear is that the repetitive nature of grinding a dungeon and solving puzzles may appeal to role-players and gamers everywhere but the lack of variation in story makes this first volume in a projected ten book series become tiring pretty quickly to most readers. Unless the author throws a decent amount of curveballs in following volumes, the concept will be stale long before the final boss fight.

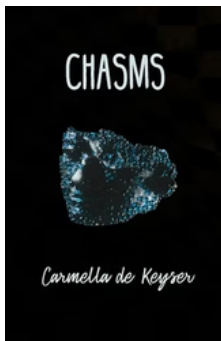
Dungeon Crawler Carl is in Hardback at £22 and published in the UK now



RECOMMENDED READS



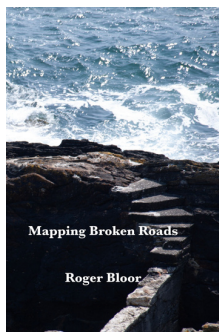
Why the Trumpet is Blue is a searing, unflinching collection that transforms personal trauma into luminous, hard-won beauty. With emotional intensity reminiscent of Plath yet wholly its own, Koester's poetry navigates childhood neglect, grief, and maternal absence with courage and precision. Nature becomes both witness and healer—moonlight, birdsong, and shifting seas offering moments of fragile transcendence. Musicality pulses through the work, echoing the poet's voice as both cellist and storyteller. These poems do not look away from pain; they name it, shape it, and ultimately release it, revealing poetry's power to carry us, bruised but breathing, toward truth and the possibility of healing. [Have a look here.](#)



Chasms by Carmella de Keyser is a quietly powerful collection that lingers in the spaces between: past and present, self and memory, belonging and displacement. With striking clarity and emotional precision, de Keyser captures fleeting moments of identity, grief, and transformation, weaving 1990s subculture and personal history into something intimate yet expansive. Her language is accessible but resonant, charged with subtle music and vivid imagery. These poems don't demand attention, they earn it, unfolding with understated intensity. *Chasms* confirms de Keyser as a distinctive, rising voice, offering readers a deeply felt exploration of what it means to exist in-between. [See it here.](#)



#Moth by Eleanor Holmes is a mesmerising, genre-defying collection that fuses medicine with myth, lyricism with lived experience. Moving between clinical dialogue and luminous poetry, it unsettles the boundaries between doctor and patient, body and self, knowledge and mystery. Holmes writes with precision and wonder, capturing the fragility and strangeness of being human through the recurring image of the moth, drawn to light, transformation, and risk. Both intimate and unsettling, this hybrid work challenges conventional narratives of care and identity, offering something rare: a poetic space where the clinical becomes magical, and where complexity is not reduced, but fiercely illuminated. [Find out more here.](#)



Mapping Broken Roads by Roger Bloor is a deeply affecting collection that traces the fault lines of memory, love, and survival with quiet intensity. Moving between the innocence of youth and the weight of adult experience, these poems chart an inner landscape shaped by loss and longing, yet lit by resilience. With vivid, evocative imagery, the work guides us through fractured emotional terrain toward something resembling home. Each piece feels both intimate and universal, inviting reflection without sentimentality. In naming what is broken, the collection reveals unexpected beauty, offering not easy answers, but a sense of movement, meaning, and the possibility of healing. [See it here.](#)

