

INTO THE NIGHT

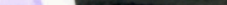
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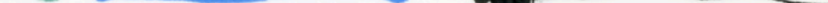
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A. C. GRAYLING - PATTI SMITH - ELAINE VILAR MADRUGA
COLIN BRAMWELL - ANNA BEER - MATTHEW STEWART
FIONA PITT-KETHLEY - MARILYN QUINTANA - CATERINA STAMOU
LAURA CECILE MOORE

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EDITOR'S LETTER

When I first moved to Madrid and heard that madrileños were nicknamed *gatos*, I thought it was because Madrid was a city populated by night owls, prowlers through the darkness like their feline counterparts. I've since been disabused of that notion but, if I'm honest, I prefer my interpretation. Not least because I'm a night owl myself - just one reason why I'm delighted to have headed up Issue 9 and its nocturnal theme: **Into the night.**

As my first issue as editor, it's also a new dawn of sorts, and I've aimed to build on the magazine's burgeoning reputation by continuing the excellent content that readers have become accustomed to, whilst also introducing a few new features.

It's been an honour to work with **Matthew Stewart** and **Anna Beer**, who have curated the poetry and prose pages respectively, reading and selecting from the flood of submissions that arrived from writers and poets addressing their words to the theme of the issue. It's soul-nourishing to know how much talent there is out there - and a privilege to provide space to share the fruits of that talent.

Our invited columnists, poet **Fiona Pitt-Kethley** and essayist **Laura Cecile Moore**, also wrote to the theme in two very different ways, taking us from the mineral mines of Cartagena to the hermitages of 12th-century Germany and the illuminations of the mind that come not from the light, but from the dark.

Visual poet **Caterina Stamou**, generously provided the gorgeous cover art for Issue 9, which seemed cosmically intended for us, as the image on the cover is from Caterina's series, *Translated from the night*. Read all about her work and how poetry can be created not only in words but through shapes and images too, in the interview on page 27.

This issue sees the first in a new regular feature, "Autobibliographies", where we ask people to tell the story of their lives through the books that have shaped them. Inaugurating the column is Spanish-Ecuadorian journalist and TV presenter, **Marilyn Quintana** - prepare to add lots of new books to your to-be-read pile!

Causing a stir on the internet - and, as luck would have it, based in Spain - **Joe Woodhouse**, the brain behind *The Word Emporium*, tells us the story of some of Spain and Latin America's strange, beautiful and, occasionally, utterly random, vocabulary.

We're also honoured by the presence of big names and big minds. **A. C. Grayling** has long been someone I turn to when in search of guidance or new ideas. I hope you find his thoughts on the creative life, and where that intersects with philosophy, as wise and enlightening as I did.

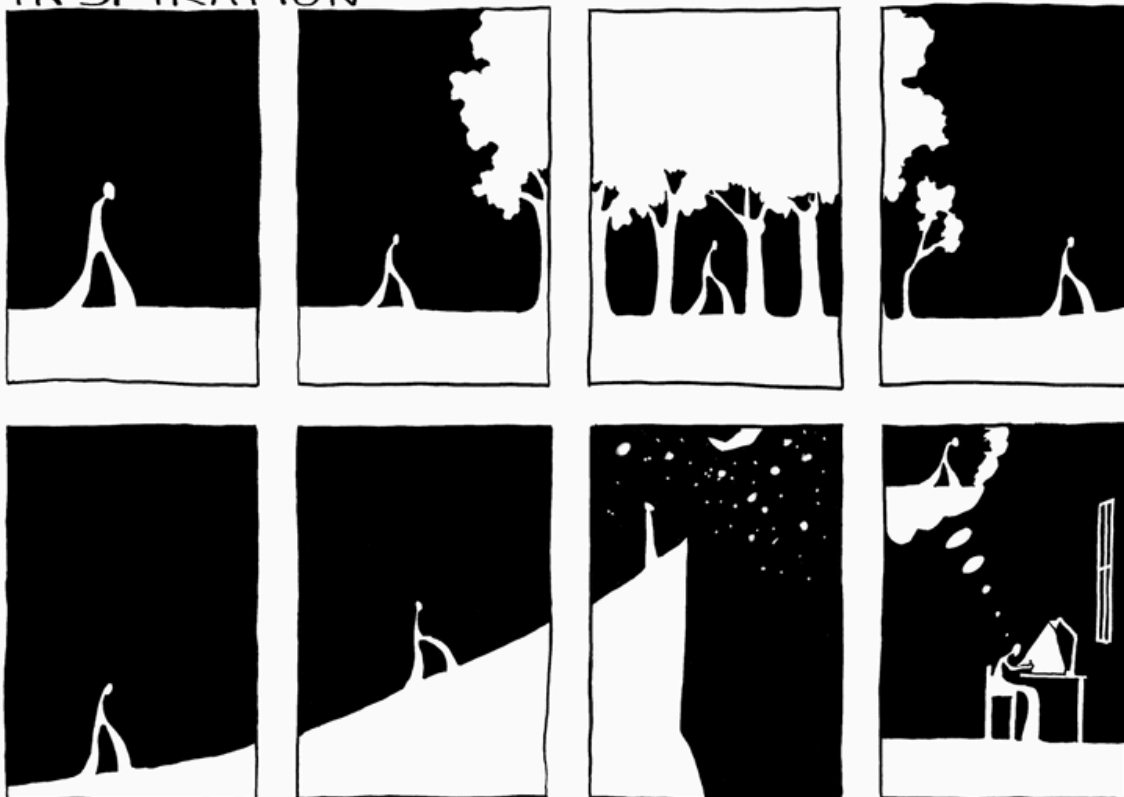
Cristina Jurado's interview with **Elaine Vilar Madruga** - poet, novelist and playwright, and one of the most important voices in Cuban literature - covers her latest novel and her wider writerly interests in desire, the body and motherhood.

Colin Bramwell is a poet whose work is informed by translation, music and performance, resulting in a debut collection which covers not only music, family, faith, sex, ageing and death, but also extractor fans, beer, *Jackass* and the absurdity of poetry itself. Read James Hartley's interview with him on page 24.

In a strange moment of string-pulling from the literary Gods, **Patti Smith's** excellent song "Because the Night" had been playing in my head when I started to put Issue 9 together, and so it was wonderful to have it coincide with her winning this year's Princesa de Asturias Prize. So, reader, take my hand and here we go, into the night...

Jayne Marshall, Madrid, October 2026

INSPIRATION



Hey! I'm Adrián Monferrer and I'm a Spanish artist who does a lot of creative stuff: project development, comics, visual development for animation and videogames, illustration for books... Anything that involves drawing, painting and storytelling. Oh, and I love raccoons. Very important information.



POETRY

Our guest poetry editor for Issue 9 is **Matthew Stewart** – award-winning poet and one of the finest literary voices writing from Spain today. 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 in the U.K..

GUEST EDITOR'S LETTER

Over 800 poems later, here I am, still in one piece after having read all of them. No sifting here! And no, the process wasn't an ordeal. Instead, it was enlightening in terms of understanding my own subjective tastes.

As a reader and editor, I'm not wanting to be surprised, a desire I've heard several other poetry editors mention over the last few months. In fact, this feels like a worrying trend, driven by their understandable saturation. The consequent problem is that understated, restrained or layered poems are often penalised in the submissions process, and they tend to be among the most interesting ones.

Enough of what I don't want though. What did make me select the poems that are included in this issue? Well, I've been drawn to a sense of line and its inherent tensions, to a concise, precise and fresh use of language (without the need for fireworks unless they play an intrinsic role in the poem's purpose), to a naturally heightened cadence, to a delving into the universal via the specific, to an emotional awareness of the reader's role. Not much to ask, I hear you say!

This means that self-expression on the part of the poet wasn't enough when I was considering submissions. Instead, I believe the poems I've chosen are reaching out to us and are always aware of our presence. They invite us into their worlds, before encouraging us to revisit our own worlds in light of theirs. These poems moved me and changed me, which was a privilege. I'm delighted and proud to share them with you today.

By Evening Light

by Paul Ings

A dark mass slipped in behind the loo brush stand
while my 3-year old boy led me in for bedtime teeth clean.
He insisted it was a butterfly, so I forced its unveiling
with a toe nudge. A chubby little mouse

wibbled its way across the floor between us
(transfixed, delighted even) and out the door
in protracted time. More than enough for me
to stamp on it. But I spared my son and his gaze

the memory my father often shared of his Dad
lifting one up quick by the tail
and slamming it down on the ground.

After a goodnight story about the life of a town mouse
and lights out, I went downstairs to the cellar
for my bag of garnet-stained and mould-flecked traps.

Another fall

by Oliver Comins

A winding cul-de-sac runs along the vale
where it separates some houses from their gardens.
Following the contour, this lane becomes a trail
disappearing into woods beyond a gate.

Growing up round here, kids will race their bicycles,
chasing down the paths they've made, looping over hills.
Some bends, taken fast, can leave a rider rolling
in the bracken, handlebars and bike turned skew.

He does this once and large, while riding out alone,
travelling fast and high, above a misjudged bank.
Dusted then and bloodied, chain completely broken,
he's limping out at dusk, slowly going home.

He hopes there won't be friends or others from his school,
but three of them are there, gathered on a doorstep.
They watch him pass along the street—the girl he knows,
who does not ask, and two who quietly laugh.

POETRY

The Poachers

by Róisín Tierney

Five men, naked from the waist down, wade into the river. Two girls sit in the car eyes clenched shut, on their honour not to look, though they know full well the headlights are trained full beam ahead through the black night onto the water.

The net tightens and the fish rise softly, unafraid, bedazzled by the light.

By midnight they are being fried in butter on the range. Fresh river trout—such a feast! And all the better for having been snaffled out on the cut, the Suir steady as ever in her progress towards the sea, steady and silent.

Never a fear that she'd let slip the goings-on that led to this pile of *cnámha éisc*, this bristle of fish bones heaped on a plate.

Belles Arts

by William Thompson

Sweat-soaked and panting, I sit with you in the palatial cool of the museum's entrance hall. The alcoves echo like a swimming pool as tourists open heavy doors, stoop through and swing a shaft of light across the shadows. We swig lukewarm water, make our phone calls then stash our bags in the cloakroom and walk into a gallery that's hung with the glow

of the Gothic's religious, brocaded sameness. Next, Romans in Medieval plate, Boschian flames, Valencian canvas after Flemish canvas. Baroque, Rococo, Romantic. All make their claim until we meet Sorolla and as we pass what life is like starts staring from the frames.

Embajadores

by Martha Sprackland

It doesn't come. The sheet will not shake out. The first half ruminates low down in the spine, the bar down in the plaza thuds and shouts – pressure in the bladder, all the usual fears of time

and maiming, missed flights, fights, esprit d'escalier. The escalator is broken. The portero has hung a sign: 'in progress'. But there is no progress. Some things, yea, do change, do go on changing. The blind's bruised line

blues and blackens till the interval, then shrinks to nought, then pinks and bleeds. You observe it all, cold as a bell – bleaching light sprung by a skinny cat; night-thought on the latch, open to the upward spill of the citadel.

The fire alarm is sounding now under your hand, the broken crockery is piling up onto the sand.

Island

by D.A.Prince

Last trip, the ferryman just visible roping his boat, giving a final tug before he steps into the dusk. Between us now there's so much current slapping, water rising. He'll be back tomorrow but tonight's *Agatha-Christie-retro* murmurs one, and half an hour ago we'd all have laughed. *5G looks good* — another voice, screen-lit, searching for certainty. So much depends on the unseen, beyond darkness, where air is teasing the willows louder. Trapped in this river, secure as prisoners, we fumble up the steps to grasp the handle as if sanctuary. Inside — behind the key, both bolts — we could be anywhere.

POETRY

Echoes, Córdoba, 7 April 2026

by Rory Waterman

'A whole civilization will die tonight, never to be brought back again.' US
President Donald Trump
7 April 2026

'The people of Iran are people of an ancient civilization, an ancient culture.'
US Secretary of State Marco Rubio
15 January 2025

The Mezquita-Catedral,
a square plantation
of regimental trunks
softly echoing, as it has
for a millennium
of studied quiet
and purges, opens –

maybe ten ranks deep –
in a cruciform yawn,
an exaltation
from what has become
its launchpad.
And this is where
it has taken us.

My phone hums.
'You seen THIS?'
Where to look
but up? A man
made of gold holds
a sword. The dome
perfects what scuds

above it, by blocking
that out. Domination
in stone on stone.
How easy it would be
to reply: 'How easy
to say this when
civilisation, culture,

to that lot is a soft drink
and a burger chain.'
But from Karaj
to Kansas, babies
are comprehending
the faces of those
they'll depend on,

are clutching a gentle
finger like it is a handle
to open a door on all
they'll yet do wrong.
I must strive against
what is inexorable.
Stone answers: 'No.'

One or Two Streets Away

by James Lilliefors

The chill of early evening
still sharpens the eye, awakens
the sleeping lawns.

Trees let go of daylight slowly.
Beyond what I can see, what I fear
is softened by the rustle
of oak and maple leaves.

As the street lamps start to hum
I can hear nearly everything
I ever wanted to be,

just one or two streets away.

A Life

by Kathleen Bell

The man who's fast asleep on the night bus
set his alarm. Before the terminus
he'll wake, pick up his briefcase, and go in
the gents for a quick wash. A good day means
combed hair, clean teeth, a slightly fresher shirt.
His shift – eight hours on the phones – provides
cups of free coffee, Rich Tea biscuits, pay,
no questions about where he lives, or how.

Christmas approaches when no buses run
and libraries are closed, so he stacks up
the newspapers he'll pack against his chest,
and there's a dark brick corner where he stores
cardboard for warmth, hoping he'll also find
a quiet doorway, safe and out of sight.

POETRY

The Threshold

by Rory Waterman

She told him she had loved him once, and that would have to do,
then paused, mouth ajar, eyes in his,
as though she hadn't meant to say what they both knew was true.
What now? He reached for her. She pulled away

gently, plucked her coat, and said what people seem to say:
Sorry. Unpicking why would take too long,
each clause a knotted rope, leading back to the same place,
so she left. He heard the door. Her feet. Her car.

In autumn I dream the recipe for a summer bath

by Rebecca Farmer

Choose a night that keeps the heat of day.
Set bath amongst a copse of lime trees.
Fold whisked breeze from a willow tree.
Line with crushed verbena leaves
then drape honeysuckle around taps.
Dust rim of bath with frost of starlight
and fill slowly with infusion of jasmine
before scattering petals of white peonies.
Pause to hear the murmur of doves then
persuade peacocks to open jewelled screen.
Next consume fig and elderflower salad.
Check all is secret, silent and serpent free
before peeling clothes from pale skin.
Place parsley in ears, submerge body, be still.

Dusk Falls on the Prime Minister

by Merryn Williams

Dusk fell, he was alone. His aides had left him,
the water jug had grown a film of dust,
the vulgar outdoor noises couldn't reach him.
He'd lost the party's, and the people's trust.

His mind was like a rat in a metallic
maze, trying to find ways out, as light turned dim.
The men and women he'd betrayed stood smiling
far off, and now the knife awaited him.

After Before Sunset

by Sharon Black

After rain, birdsong. The olive
perky in its new pot. Hawke
and Delpy fade to black, her swaying

to Nina Simone's Just In Time,
him watching from the sofa
(leaning back, smile playing on his lips)

in her shabby chic apartment
in la Cour de l'Étoile d'Or.
He's going to miss his flight.

Unsure if I've already seen it.
Rewind, Play. Another day
nine years earlier, they first met,

rounder-faced and ripe with dreams,
like when I met you. All the stuff
that happens in between:

in cupboards, shelved or filling up
spare rooms. The tree you gave me
shivers in its ball of grey-green leaves.

In the courtyard they're preparing
for a feast with trestle tables,
wrapped meats for the barbecue,

tabbouleh, pâtes aux pois chiches.
Hawke and Delpy won't be down
for some time yet, they're opening

their hearts. Once the credits roll
the rain will come, and then the dark,
the olive holding out its arms –

POETRY

A Last Rite

by Mary Howlett

This poem is dedicated to my mother, Josephine Mc Namara who passed peacefully from this life in her 99th year.

We rush through slow moving traffic
in slanting rain to be at your bedside.

The nurse swabs your parched lips
with antiseptic sponges that look like

rainbow lollipops.
You refuse the cool gel: it burns your mouth.

I hold a damp cloth to your forehead,
your breath shallow, the rise and fall

of your chest like gentle waves. Your eyes
flutter and fade, unfold for the last time.

On the locker, mother of pearl rosary beads,
a candle flickering. We sit through the night,

watching your every move as you try to settle.
When early morning sun rises you open your eyes

as if seeing for the first time. We hold our breath.
In your West Cork accent you whisper,

I'd love a cup of tea.
You drink the entire blue tumbler-

a last rite before you leave us.

In the Dark

by Neil Elder

It was just a spider doing spidery things, the way spiders do.
I watched it pause, then scuttle, pause, then disappear
beneath the bookcase. And that was the last I saw of it.

All day I've been thinking of Matthew:
how he would swing by, full of stories and chatter,
before disappearing into the dark.

Old Times

by Hélène Demetriades

Stop climbing in
under my duvet

stop clinging to my backbone.
Old flame, you're like

my father, disturbing
my sleep. He shuffles in

to snuff out my light –
pecks at me

twice on the cheek;
my room a saucepan

on the boil, my anger
a cast iron radiator

turned on full, the curtains
off their rails,

midnight's throat
at the unlatched window.

Night Nurse

by Stephen Claughton

'Flash' on her bike, bat-cape flapping behind her,
Pedals up the drive to begin her shift.
This is paradise compared with the life she left:
No ghettos or pogroms, only our madness here.

After all these years, her accent's just as strong.
Tired staff or inmates in a drugged-up state
Aren't going to help, if you want to integrate.
The dim-lit wards are where she now belongs.

She doesn't mind her life's turned upside down,
Swapping her day for night and night for day.
The graveyard shift is less of an ordeal.

She won't be in if they call for her at dawn,
And when patients wake up shouting she can say,
'Don't worry; it was a nightmare; they aren't real.'

POETRY

Late

by Charles Hensler

The dogs in the night
are quiet at last. They heard nothing
back from the dark. Tired, they've fallen
into the splintered sleep of the small
and the unanswered. Now that tapping
from the kitchen—a drip, maybe the clock.
Beyond the door the porch swing
that sways through the night, empty
in a wind, saying it all,
saying it all.

Woven Labels for Trinity Term

by Jane Thomas

I put the order in; your name
& half of mine, Cloister Black
gothic font, stitch forty point

One wet Tuesday evening I iron
them on to every hankie, jumper
vest, checkered shirt and Y front

Glue them onto sheep slippers
Roberts radio, a 400 day clock
gallery of velvet-backed frames

A few days later, I do your socks
hand stitch, slow, with red thread
unpick them again each evening.

Not Yet Night

by David Lumsden

I look at my hands, the skin more dry
with every year it seems.
There is acrylic paint on my nails
and knuckles. Downstairs, the books
have started returning to the shelves,
revived by finding new neighbours;
such a profusion of riches,
I am overwhelmed with things to read.

The house makes an anagram of itself.
But my joints are sore and a heavy fatigue
occludes my thoughts.
A new pain nudges me.
It's muscular, I tell myself.

I lie upstairs with three pillows.
You run the vacuum
over the new flooring,
and the washing machine
plays through its familiar cycle,
the stop and start of running water,
the final rumbling uninterrupted whirr.

Through the sheer curtains
the sky is an unbroken blue
and on the birches some leaves
have already turned to yellow.
There is no halting some things.

Door on an old stone house

by Matt Gilbert

The old boards are scratched,
and stiff and closed against the night,
but underneath and through
the gaps, a trail of light leaks out,
alongside pot clangs and laughter.
Awake now, in the dark, after
sun-shunning shuttered silence
throughout another searing day.

POETRY

On Friendship

after Stephen Dunn

by Paul Stephenson

'Our friendship means a lot to me' you message me from your bed
once I've got home, safe indoors, after you've told me you want to
sleep alone tonight because you really value your morning routine.
Here we go again with friendship. That old chestnut. This me and you.
'I've never had a friend like you', you tell me, to which I smirk, say,
'I'm not your friend, don't you see?' then say, 'Of course I am', hoping
you'll recognise that our friendship is the basis for something solid.

Do you sleep with your friends? I guess you do these days because
it's all the rage. Friends with Benefits. Even yesterday on Instagram
there was this guy saying he sees no distinction between friends
and lovers – everything's so fluid, like there's no more boundaries.
Yet all I keep receiving are reels of random people insisting on
the need for boundaries, convinced that we must protect ourselves,
our heads, our hearts, as if suddenly friends were fucking enemies.

For the love of a lake

(Drawing up a village's Neighbourhood Plan)

by Emma Lee

You marvel at the lake. You're here to see a village in three dimensions,
walk the streets, to sketch out a Design Code, to keep safe green spaces
between homes and roads, to include play areas in the inevitable new housing.
You look at the lake. Even when told it's artificial, created by an MP's wife,
dug out, as myth has it, by Napoleonic prisoners of war, the excess earth
dumped to create the Mount and its grotto, as brick was laid to form a bowl.
There are rumours of fish, occasional swans and consistent moorhens,
raising chicks in the reeds. We move on, the park, the pub, the rugby club,
the woods, which were once part of the same estate as the lake,
which you return to. Scaptoft Hall a background shadow, darkening
the water which spreads its calm, like small breeze-triggered ripples,
like your enthusiasm makes us fall in love with our village again.

23-F

by Dolo Diaz

Coup de état—
such lyrical words.

I was only ten.

I missed the weight
of what was happening
until the next day,
when the tanks retreated
from the streets of Valencia.

My parents,
breathing through a straw,
suspended in time,
watching TV all night.

It was the only clue.
Somehow, I missed it.

Train Deep

by Nicholas Hogg

Dead on the rail. Hope is a clunk
and bump, forward
motion.

We wait for the words on when,
and the sun goes down
like a coward.

Dark floods the train.
The navy sub
ditched in an ocean trench,

and all the weird fish
swimming at depth.
You wonder what air

the crew have left,
and the guard walks the aisle,
counting breath.

POETRY

Butane

by Dolo Diaz

I know this color as butane.
My suede Birkenstocks, the same orange.

In Spain, butane came with the butanero.
The dream of warm food, hot water in his truck.

Rust-orange tanks, dwarfs with black heads, clanking,
disagreeable traveling together. Locked

up all night. Their color the color of life,
for two hundred pesetas and a tip.

The bottles long gone, the currency too,
the color stays.

The Thin Skull Rule

by Ricky Monahan Brown

I clawed a hole in my forehead last night.
You've done it to yourself again, you said,
and since I sleep the sleep of a cold corpse,
this self-harm was a mystery to me.

I don't think I did this before I died,
and I wonder, do I want to escape
this doppelgänger, this shade that will not
let me take the rest that this body craves?

Or do I find the death that I induced
merely put the monster me to sleep,
and he claws at the walls of his prison,
looking to escape through a weakened spot?

In day, I wander through the waking world.
I feed and water the beast while he rests,
exhausting myself and working with words
while he gathers himself for the long war.

A Strange Pram

*(Scraptoft POW 1945-1947; formerly home to the US 325th
Glider Regiment 1942-1944)*

by Emma Lee

Recycled into a repatriation camp, Americans replaced
with Germans, convalescing, some gave lessons,
before these were disrupted by a transfer home.
One gave a painting of the camp to an English guard.
A young girl remembered two visiting her family
for tea, the German men favouring sliced lemon,
offering gifts made from what they could find.
A wooden jewellery box, a butterfly with tin wings
that were activated by turning a wheel, a cylindrical
tube on a pole with wheels that the daughter used
for transporting dolls. Her parents kept in touch
with the one who spoke English, sending preloved
children's clothes for his family in Essen.

Like One That on a Lonesome Road

by Merryyn Williams

She dreamed a street, much too well known,
and thought she was again alone.
Though he slept beside her, she
could sense it wasn't meant to be.
The dark returned. She woke again,
felt still the fracture in her brain,
and wondered, was she due to meet
that darkness in some other street?
When you drop a toddler's hand
the careful future that you planned
is suddenly no longer there;
so search for what remains, and stare –
empty pavement, dead of night,
half-smashed windows, feeble light,
the last bus gone, the stalker free
to pounce, and what will be, will be.
Satnav smashed and names repeat
themselves, you can't escape this street,
then, conscious of the utter lack
of fellow travellers – don't look back.

POETRY

Foretelling

by Peter Devonald

We have no idea the lines we cross,
a car crash, cancer or consequences
of living.

It will happen, it always does,
we watch the night spill — unintended
outcomes, predictions, prognosis.

Till then we enjoy the moon,
devastating skies, dawn chorus and you,
till then we live.

The sea catches up with the sky

by María Castro Domínguez

at a distance it seems
to touch its seams so soft
like the way rain adheres to a leaf.

An ashen-haired man and a kind eyed woman
with hoop earrings sit at a diner looking out.
Their thoughts emit silence. Their bodies speak instead.
An olive stone is laid quietly on a napkin. A spoon's reflection upturned.

It's cold and wet outside. A full picnic hamper
waits beside them. Two beer bottles are sticking out.
She had spent a lot of her wages on it,
the man realized she wanted to make peace.

Four years ago they met in that diner up the hill
he declared his love into the steam of his coffee.
It was different, there were no ghosts.
They both were alive.

The clouds are broken.
The sky has separated into a glaucous grey.
The sea is tipped with whipped merengue. Their eyes recall
how water glistens when the sun finds it.

Long Is the Shadow of Sorrow

by Peter Devonald

A scene of such terrible unmistakable grief,
a velvet veil laid across the house from end to end,

a stygian gloom, unspoken and unspeakable,
closed curtains, tacit declarations, weary looks,

a deep melancholy, sadness and ennui,
it seeps deep and dark into every crevice,

the silence of an empty bed, hushed rooms,
the quietude of longing and regret,

no comfort here,
a smothering appeasement,

a blank blindfolding
of muffled survival, joy long since passed,

a tapestry faded in the sun, we lived
so bright, now all lights have gone.



Biographies for all our poets can be found on page 45

PATTI SMITH COMES HOME TO SPAIN

Fifty years after her first Spanish concert, Patti Smith returns to the country that's always remained part of her artistic imagination.

By James Hartley

When Patti Smith arrives in Asturias this October to receive the 2026 Princess of Asturias Prize for the Arts, it'll be almost fifty years after her first concert in the country. On 20 October 1976, Smith performed before 5,000 people at the Club Juventud Pavilion in Badalona, presenting her second album, *Radio Ethiopia*, alongside songs from *Horses*, which had been released the previous year, and covers of The Velvet Underground and The Rolling Stones. The press at the time described it as "the first rock'n'roll concert ever seen and heard in this country" and Smith herself as "pure human energy".

This month, almost half a century later, she'll perform again in Spain: this time at the Teatro Jovellanos in Gijón, as part of the Foundation's Awards Week. The concert will be free, with Smith appearing with the Patti Smith Quartet — Tony Shanahan, Jesse Smith, Jackson Smith and Seb Rochford — combining songs with poems, reflections and tributes to artists who've shaped her work.

Three days later, in Oviedo, she'll receive the Princess of Asturias Prize. In explaining their decision, the jury cited her "impetuous creativity" in connecting rock, symbolist poetry and the spirit of counterculture, as well as the poetic vision of life expressed through her writing.

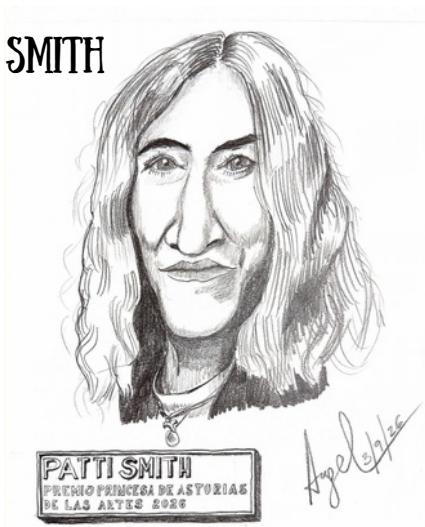
The timing makes the award feel less like a formal recognition of a distant career than a continuation of a beautiful relationship, for Spain has been part of Smith's imaginative geography for decades. Federico García Lorca has been an enduring presence in her reading and thinking, and when she's in Madrid she always makes time to visit Picasso's *Guernica* at the Reina Sofía.

Although she became internationally famous through *Horses*, her work in poetry and writing have never just been a side interest in Smith's life. Her first collection, *Seventh Heaven*, appeared in 1972, followed by *Witt*, *Kodak* and *Babel*. Later came *Woolgathering*, *The Coral Sea* and *Auguries of Innocence*. Her memoir, *Just Kids*, about her relationship with Robert Mapplethorpe and their early years in New York, won the National Book Award, while *M Train*, *Devotion*, *Year of the Monkey* and *A Book of Days*, as well as a 2022 installation at the Centre Pompidou inspired by Rimbaud, Artaud and René Daumal, bear testimony to her energy and drive.

Born in Chicago in 1946, Smith was the eldest of four children. Her mother, Beverly, was a waitress; her father, Grant, a machinist. Smith has credited her mother with introducing her to Carl Sandburg, W. B. Yeats and Walt Whitman, while *Little Women* gave her an early vision of a life organised around writing. The family moved to Philadelphia and then New Jersey, and Smith began working at ten years old, picking cranberries and looking after children. Though raised as a Jehovah's Witness, she later described her childhood as one of "material deprivation but not mental deprivation".

At nineteen, while studying to become an art teacher and working factory jobs, Smith became pregnant. She chose to have the child and place her for adoption, a decision she later described without sentimentality: "I didn't have the emotional or financial stability ... to raise a child." Dismissed from college and forced to leave home amid the judgement of neighbours, she gave birth to a daughter in April 1967. Soon afterwards, standing before Joan of Arc at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, she promised herself she would "make something" of her life.

PATTI SMITH



Three months later, aged twenty, she boarded a bus for New York with little money, a few clothes, drawing pencils, notebooks and a copy of Rimbaud's *Illuminations*. She worked in factories, waited tables, wrote poetry and music criticism, made art and slept wherever she could. Through friends connected to Pratt Institute, she entered New York's young artistic world. There she found Robert Mapplethorpe. He was twenty; so was she. Neither had money, a settled identity or a career. Both, however, were convinced they were meant to make art. That conviction became the foundation of one of the defining creative relationships of twentieth-century American culture.

While the diversity and breadth of Smith's work are at the heart of why she has been given the Asturias Prize, for Spain there's undeniably another dimension — a closer relationship based on mutual love and respect.

She's already received the country's Gold Medal for Merit in Fine Arts in 2019, and her response to the Asturias Prize made clear that this is a relationship she feels personally: "I feel that this award symbolizes the love that I feel for Spain," she said, describing it as a country that "for decades and across different generations has shown me its affection and support and where I have always felt encouraged and loved." She also paid tribute to the Spanish poets and painters who have inspired her, "from Lorca to Picasso", and summed up what the award meant to her in two words: "Art and Love."

PROSE

Our guest poetry editor for Issue 9 is **Dr Anna Beer**. Beer is best-known for her work as a biographer and cultural historian. A Visiting Fellow of Kellogg College, Oxford, she has written major studies of familiar – think Milton, Raleigh and Shakespeare – and not so familiar figures, including her feisty, feminist and accessible accounts of female creatives. Anna's most influential book is probably *Sounds and Sweet Airs: The Forgotten Women of Classical Music* (2016) whilst her most recent is *Eve Bites Back: An Alternative History of English Literature* (2022). Anna's crime fiction, *Death of an Englishman: an Oxford mystery*, appeared in 2025 with the sequel, *An Inkling of Death*, coming in late in 2026. The swerve to fiction is, however, not as surprising as it first seems. In many ways, Anna's novels represent Beer business as usual. Both Oxford mysteries are filled with all the things she loves: strong female characters, fierce historical debates, and – of course – long train rides.

GUEST EDITOR'S LETTER

All judges will say it was very hard to choose from such a strong, rich field of submissions, but in this case it was true. Almost every piece I read had at least one phrase, often more than one, which made me pause, whether out of surprise by a deft, quirky choice of word or moved by an insight into our human experience. I was struck, if not surprised, by how often writers were drawn to explore dystopia and trauma. I rarely laughed, often encountered absurdity and dark irony, as I read. The topic, *Into the Night*, and the times we live in, are both probably responsible for this journey to the dark side.

My selection reflects the authors' ability to use language in sharp, unsettling, fresh ways, to create memorable images that stay with the reader long after the piece has been read. Whether their prose was characterised by the baroquely-rendered macabre or poignantly banal (and all points in between), authors made their writerly decisions boldly. But in making my choice, I was above all looking for writers who could not only create a telling phrase or a memorable image but make them part of a revelatory whole. It's hard to shape a narrative in only a few paragraphs, but when a vignette can and does take us on a journey, its power is astonishing: it becomes the quintessence of story-telling.

PROSE

Goodbye to the Angel

by JB Polk

Feña woke up, the sheets wet and sticky beneath her. Her hand crept to where Pedro was snoring. She shook him weakly. Pedro hated being woken up in the middle of the night.

"Pedro...It's starting."

"What's starting?" Pedro blew a jet of air through his nose.

"The baby. It's coming. Go get Mamita Mercedes..."

He sat up.

Mamita Mercedes was the local midwife, her hands so skilled she could coax the most stubborn baby from his mother's womb. She smelled of wood smoke and knew how to cure warts, remove the spell of the evil eye, and terminate unwanted pregnancies. Mamita was both a curandera and bruja - aspirin and congorosa lived side by side in her bag.

"You sure?" Pedro hated leaving his comfortable bed.

"The waters broke."

He pulled on his trousers but didn't bother with a shirt - it was summer.

"You hang on, Feña. I'll be back in a flash."

He was worried. For some reason, the village had been awash in speculation that Pablo and Feña's baby might be a freak. People said it might be born with a clubfoot, a tail, or, even worse, a less visible but more sinister aberration, such as the ability to read people's minds. And nobody, not even the most virtuous residents, wanted a stranger snooping into their souls as if they were man-made, three-dimensional objects. And now the waters broke before their time...

Feña patted her bulging stomach. The baby was not moving. She dug her fingers into the skin, hoping to stir it to life.

Half an hour later, the door squeaked.

"Blessed be the house and everyone who dwells within it. How are you, daughter?" Mamita Mercedes greeted.

"The baby's not moving."

Mamita's cold hands palpated Feña's belly before slipping into the womb's opening, probing with nimble fingers to assess the softness and dilation of the cervix and determine the baby's position. It seemed as if an invisible, malevolent power were preventing its release.

"He'll sure need some help," she murmured.

She took a bundle of rags she washed carefully after each labor, and her famous forceps, blessed with holy water from the Vatican fountains by a cardinal. She filled an iron pot with water, sprinkling primrose flowers on the surface to soften the cervix and raspberry leaves to ease labor. In went the forceps, too.

The door opened, and Pedro peered through the crack.

"Get out!" Mamita scolded.

"The birthing room's no place for a man."

Pedro retreated obediently.

"The baby's not moving," Feña wailed.

"Be quiet, girl; we'll get him in no time," Mamita replied cross and impatient.

When the water boiled, Mamita removed the forceps and dried them on the rags.

"Hold on to the headrest. It's going to hurt," she warned.

Feña's eyes widened with terror. The forceps looked like an instrument of torture.

"Scream all you want, girl. It'll help," Mamita encouraged her.

Feña needed no prompting. She shrieked and thrashed against the pillow. With each thrust of the forceps, her belly tightened, her skin rippling as if the unborn were fighting a force trying to keep it inside.

Minutes ticked by. Mamita's forehead was beaded with sweat as she tried to extract flesh from flesh.

"Just one more push, girl, and he's out," she puffed.

Feña felt tissue tear as a bulky shape slid between her thighs. She closed her eyes, expecting a wail.

Mamita stood with her back to Feña,

"A boy?" Feña whispered.

Mamita shook her head.

Feña was disappointed. It was her first. Pedro wanted a son. Suddenly, she became aware of the silence.

"Why is she not crying?"

Mamita turned around, revealing the bloodied bundle in her arms.

"God's taken her, daughter."

Feña looked at the stillborn, uncomprehending, then her shrill whimper bounced off the walls.

Mamita laid the tiny corpse on the table and covered it with a dishcloth.

"Not your fault, girl. Nobody's fault," she said matter-of-factly.

"But why?"

"Who knows? It was not her fate to live. You're still in your prime; there'll be plenty more babies ahead."

Exhausted, Feña slept.

When she woke, the morning was heavy with light. Pedro sat at the table, his eyes bloodshot, his fingers clutched around a glass of wine.

"You all right?" he asked without lifting his gaze.

"Yes. Where is she?"

Pedro gestured toward the window.

Strapped with a leather belt, the baby sat semi-erect in a chair. She had a wrinkled face and stiff black hair on a pear-shaped head, misshapen by forceps. She was dressed in a starched white dress with two foil-covered angel wings attached to the back. The sun shone on them, bathing the baby's face in a glow and giving the illusion of life.

"Mamita got her ready," Pedro explained.

Feña nodded. Soon, people would come to say goodbye to the angel and to pray to the dead girl, so innocent, straight from her mother's womb. She would carry their prayers to God.

A woman entered the room, bowed in silent greeting, then knelt before the angel, pinning a piece of paper to the girl's dress.

"Please send my son a good wife who will bless him with healthy children."

"Wine?" Pedro offered.

"Just a sip," the woman answered, and when he poured, she gulped it down.

"In no time, she'll be in heaven," she said.

Soon the girl's dress was dotted with pieces of paper.

"Make Angelica's fits go away."

"Make the potato crop come in fine, Holy Child."

"Ask the Good Lord to heal my husband's ulcers."

They knelt and prayed, each asking for a small miracle that God, in His infinite love, could not refuse to grant to a child crossing the threshold from the world of the living into the world of the dead.

From her bed, Feña watched the procession dry-eyed. She had long since abandoned belief in the power of prayer. She silently said farewell as her angel began her final journey into a perpetual night.

PROSE

Certificate of Participation

by Noor Ali

Rain hammers the bubbling queue outside the church. Drops, heavy as bird-shit, spatter on shuddering umbrellas and trickle down the arched rims around huddled bodies. Behind the wrought-iron railings, curving beside the salmon bicycle lane, they await, sacrificing their Friday night. For this. An evening with Azmat Faiz. The latest, and if one believed Ms. Roy, the brightest star of South Asian literature. I hop past a swerving green Uber Eats rider, and join the madness.

A ticket-checker, keffiyeh over a bulky punk-rock hoodie, beeps umbrellas in one by one. Leaning against the right leaf of the double gate, his spectacles catch an amber glint from the Victorian streetlamp. "Enjoy," he mouths, as shields collapse and people emerge, passing beneath the steep gabled façade. A young couple; a shimmery dress skimming contours; his hand low on her waist. A group of hipsters. Another couple, elderly and overdressed.

"How many, sir?" the checker asks me with a blank face before reaching for my phone.

Can't you see?

I straighten my index finger.

Rita would have loved this place. Two rows of columns, perhaps Tuscan, growing shorter toward the third floor. Two chandeliers flood the central ceiling bay, their arms sprawled with candles. "Bulbs," my Rita would say. "Candle-like bulbs."

Hardcovers crowd a long table, behind which an old white lady in a dark suit hands a copy to a brunette. "That's twenty euros after a fifteen-percent discount. And he'll be signing these babies after the talk." A beaming "thank you" makes me walk faster.

Twelve rows, most with sixteen blood-red seats. Add the balconies—forty, fifty on each floor, almost all taken. Chatter fills the space, a buzz reaching me here on the summit. I watch them. Gesturing hands, narrowed eyes, a held gaze, then slipping aside, sometimes returning with a shake of the head or an arranged smile. "I hear you." "This is exactly how it is." I guess that's what they're saying to one another.

Air-kisses.

I watch. Down there, all this matters.

Twenty minutes late, the room dims. Magenta hues wash over a hushed audience. A Dutch poetess clacks up to the pulpit. Behind her, a tight shot of Azmat floods the giant projector screen. A quote fades in from the right: "A storyteller of dazzling beauty." Bought, surely. But it's Rushdie. Azmat's eyes scan his fandom. Gold-green, a colour his fans insist shifts with light. "He's so hot!" someone giggles.

"Azmat Faiz's stories reach for the voiceless," the poetess begins. "His words carry the ache and music of lives we rarely get to experience. It is our singular honour to have him among us this evening—"

Not mine.

He enters to thunderous applause. Stopping at the centre of the stage, he swivels, waves with a half-smile. Then he moves to the poetess, hand on her back, and kisses both her cheeks. Not air-kisses, actual ones. My chair creaks as I shift, watching them settle on the stage.

Did he just feel her bra strap?

"...and for the third time in a row, the winner of the All Karachi Annual Writing Competition is... Azmat Faiz of the Karachi Grammar School!"

I buried my Certificate of Participation in my pocket. Didn't clap.

Crumpled linen shirt over beige chinos. Loro Piana shoes, I think. Rolling sleeves, he slumps into his seat. Wristbands, lots of them, leather, beaded, one purple-pink. *Made by his daughter?* He twists open an Evian and takes half a sip. Leans forward, adjusts his microphone. The poetess looks on.

"You must take the medical entrance exam. You can write after you become something," Papa said. My teachers at Happy Palace Academy too. My uncles. I did as told. Flunked anyway.

"So Azmat, tell us something about your early years," the poetess asks.

"Sure! I grew up in Karachi in a very middle-class family—"

Middle-class, yeah? English Lit at Yale? MFA from Columbia?

More applause. Whistles. I turn to look at my neighbour. Four fingers, two from each hand, in his mouth.

"Tell us about your new bestseller, *The Geometry of Hunger*."

He pauses to think. I notice him fidgeting with his Whoop strap. "Well, it's my ode to the working class—"

He mentions Ms. Roy, Professor Sen, global inequality, Gaza. Reads a passage, around the two-thirds mark, where his protagonist, Akram, meets his soulmate.

He reads in a low voice, imitating Akram with an unsettling ease. The microphone catches the grain in his voice whenever he laughs. Everyone laughs with him, a beat later.

Crossing a leg over the other, he angles toward me. Above a bunched crimson sock, tiny hairs curl from his calf.

Does he remember me?

He runs fifteen minutes over, taking more than his share. Ardent fans, copies in hand, queue up for his scribbles. A green sari, a professor lookalike, those hipsters, all get ten seconds with him before being ushered to the left. Through gaps between bodies, I watch him. Getting up, hugging the overdressed old woman. His eyes closed. As if he means it.

Two couples between me and him. His head low. A tendon in his wrist bulges, his pen darting across the page. A thump. Another copy shut.

One more couple. Then me and him.

Twenty-seven years later.

He looks at me. Into my eyes. I nod. His lips part, then press together.

Remember me?

He extends his arm toward me.

I give him my copy.

"Is this for you?"

"Yes. It is."

"What's your name?"

Really?

"Azmat. Azmat Iqbal."

On he goes. "For Azmat Iqbal." Thump. "Here you are. All the best."

He waves at someone behind me and squints. Recognition.

Back into the cutting Dutch gales. I walk. Tram 7, cancelled. Bus 21, ten minutes late. A young couple walks past me. The girl rises onto her toes and kisses his cheek.

"Azmat, you can still do it. Many have written their first book in their forties."

My Rita. She believed.



Five Hours

by Pip McGough

My father lived in Fort Myers. Calling him required subtraction.

When it was eight o'clock at night in England, it was three in the afternoon in Florida. In winter, my windows had become mirrors. Sunlight might still lie across his kitchen as he looked at the glare from the swimming pool or the palms moving behind the porch screen. I could no longer see beyond the glass.

We spoke from different parts of the same day.

The arithmetic became automatic. Noon for me meant seven a.m. for him. Six meant one. Ten meant five, though by ten p.m. I usually decided against calling. My father was awake, but a boundary had been crossed in me. Certain conversations seemed impossible once the room had darkened.

Fort Myers is on the Gulf side of Florida. I knew this before I knew exactly where it was. The name suggested a military base, though the fort itself was long gone. On maps, the city sits near the coast amid canals, developments and roads, arranged as if someone had tried to impose Euclid on water. I would follow the Caloosahatchee River inland, lose the scale and begin again. The map showed me how to reach my father's house without helping me imagine anyone living there.

The fort was built beside the Caloosahatchee in 1850, during the last of the wars by which the United States forced the Seminole people from Florida. It replaced an earlier post destroyed by fire.

Eight years later, the army abandoned it. The buildings disappeared, but the name remained. I tried to imagine the place before the golf courses. At night, anyone standing by the river would have seen only the water nearest the bank. The cleared ground around the fort would have narrowed to whatever could be seen from the buildings. The rest would have merged with the dark.

In the decades that followed, the river became part of a wider drainage system linking it to Lake Okeechobee. Canals were cut through land that had once resisted settlement. Much of the water around Fort Myers now follows routes imposed upon it by engineers.

My father never mentioned the history. I doubt he was even aware of it. Fort Myers was simply where he lived, as Los Angeles had been before. Places entered his life through practical arrangements. There was a house and a route to the airport. He knew which supermarket he preferred, and it was the one that sold English brown ale. Fort Myers required no further explanation.

When we spoke, he told me what had happened that week or what he could see from the porch. We spoke about flights and work. He mentioned people I knew only through his descriptions. I told him about people whose names he would forget by the next call. We discussed the rising cost of things neither of us intended to buy. Sometimes one of us repeated a story and the other allowed it to continue.

Nothing important was avoided deliberately; importance simply failed to find a moment. By the time certain things might have been said, one of us was already thinking about ending the call. The ordinary subjects took up the available space because they were easy to begin and could be abandoned without explanation.

I remember him telling me that darkness came quickly in Florida. This surprised me because, from England, Florida can appear to have no night. Film footage shows the place in hard sun. The roads look washed out. Water keeps appearing between the houses. Even disaster arrives under exceptional light: hurricanes are shown once they have passed, when roofs are open and trees lie across cars.

One call persists.

I was sitting in the kitchen.

"How dark is it there?" he said. The question has stayed with me, although the rest of the conversation has not.

"Dark enough," I think I said.

He had never been to the town in the English Midlands where I lived. I had seen his house in Fort Myers only in photographs. We knew the names of each other's streets. We knew the time difference. We had certain facts.

These facts did not make the places visible.

When we spoke, he was usually still in daylight. I would stand at a window that had already turned black, listening to him describe things I could not quite see.

I cannot remember what he was looking at during that call.

I remember only that he was still in the sunshine, asking me about the dark.

Amir's Inferno

by Shivangi Gajwani Jain

She is a patient at the 'We-Care children's hospital' but she never behaves like one. Today is no different.

"What's with all the white?" I ask.

"It's new. Do you like it?" She is wrapped in bandages and is white all over, except the red ribbon tying her thinning black hair. Her hospital gown pokes out from and in between them.

"Did you wrap yourself up?"

"Yesss!" she hisses in excitement, jumping on her bed, bandages flying about her like wings. "I am a bird, whee..." she leaps off the bed with a squeal.

"Keep it down!" I look towards the door.

"When did anyone last check on you?" She pulls the red ribbon free and ties it to my little finger, holding the other end in her fist.

"What's this now?"

"Our string of fate. You and me, best friends forever. I will protect you from what's to come." She pulls it upward, jerking my pinkie. "Do you solemnly agree, to agree?"

"I do"

Satisfied, she turns towards the bedside machine and presses the buttons at random.

Beep, beep, beep.

"Stop. Mama got angry the last time you did it."

"I like your Mama," She continues to play with the red and yellow tubes. "But she is no fun at all."

"She's doing her best." I say.

"How tough can it be? Perfectly clueless people manage to raise reasonably normal children all the time." She says playing staccato on the tubes.

"Ouch!" One yellow tube pulls free from my vein. A drop of red trickles down to the white sheet, blooming like a crumpled rose.

A distant siren rumbles, rhythmic and sharp, drowning my cry.

'who... who...'

She runs to the other side, and hides under her bed.

One long- 'whoooooooooo'.

As abruptly as it had begun, it stops. She continues to hide, just like the ache that hides in my head. I can feel it, but the doctors can't find it. No one can. Even those grannies who sit on the verandas, gossiping outside their houses; the old, wrinkled ones who have lived forever and seem to know everything- even they don't know where it hides. After every hospital visit they ask my mama,

"Laleh, how is your Amir? Did the doctors find it, the canker in his brain?"

Mama asks them to keep me in their prayers. She still expects God to intervene. How silly. God didn't care when I lost my hair, the eyebrows and the lashes, or when I missed my grade exams. We know they are important for a good life! God didn't even bother when my brother enlisted and never returned. I know it broke Mama's heart. Why would he care now?

"Amir," With the swish of the curtain, she is back. She climbs up on her bed with rolls and rolls of bandages in her hands, our red ribbon tied to her wrist.

Up-down-squeak, up-down-squeak.

"I have had a premonition." She says, still bouncing. "God has spoken." She jumps from her bed onto mine, and the springs squeak loudly in protest.

"Premonition? God only speaks through *Anbiya*, and you are no Prophet." I tell her, agitated.

She raises her arms above her head, and molten-metal gushes from her armpits, coating the white bandages in a black, oily sheen. Her eyes roll back as words spill from her lips.

"The sun and the moon will join and burst, bringing the day of judgement."

Horrified, I recoil, gripping my *book of surah*.

"Let's fly." She leaps off the bed, but doesn't land.

She stretches, and then stretches some more... her blackened bandages turn into wings, she gets smaller and smaller, almost the size of a hummingbird. Buzzing around my head, she jumps into my left ear.

"Stop!" I scream.

The book falls to the tiled floor with an ominous thud, its pages withering to ash.

"Let's fly," she chirps.

"No!" I pull the red string hanging out, tilting my head this way and that, hoping she would fall off from the other end. "Please come out."

"How can I? I am not real." she sounds exasperated by my lack of common sense.

"Not... real?" I cry, ripping the wires from my skin. The hulking machine begins to wail, its beeping echoes my agony. I push aside the curtain separating our beds. There is no bed on the other side, just a wall.

It's hot in the room and in... me.

Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep

"Mama!" The red string tightens. I collapse onto the tiled floor, rocking on my knees, my head swaying back and forth, caught between prayer and fear.

The siren begins to scream, much closer than it should be.

Whoooooooooo...

The night sky is swarmed with spiralling comets and stars. Their puffy tails twisting and sprinkling fairy dust.

"Where did the roof go?" I panic. *When* did the roof go?

"Amir," she calls, her voice calm. "Soon there will be bright flashes around you, followed by immense darkness, charred dripping flesh and immeasurable pain, caved in windows and splintered bones... and weeping, lots of weeping." she says with an ominous crunch, and a horrid, burnt smell fills my nose, enters my throat. I cough and hack at my chest, but it wouldn't leave. My vision turns grey as she whispers in my head. "The world has gone bad, rotten."

"Go away," I plead, holding my head.

"Shhh...Listen. Shut your eyes, and soften your breath. Yes, that's it." She folds her wings entangled in the red of fate, tucking them neatly and settles within my brain.

As I look into the night, the sky bursts into a million sparkling jewels of white gold. *It's beautiful.*

...

Somewhere, someone watches the news:

'Satellite images and verified videos confirm 1,168 civilians have been killed, including 194 children stranded in the oncology department of a Paediatric hospital amid ongoing drone and missile attacks.'

...

Somewhere a mother carries the weight of a child she can no longer hold, or even find.

...

God has spoken.

...

PROSE

The Beholder

by Lisa Fransson

The porcelain warmed inside Sonia's hand, until she no longer felt the otherness of this eye she'd just picked up from the pavement. All around her the light was lowering, and the song of the blackbird weaved threads of dusky pink to close the day. Sonia stood in the song, in the dusk, and wished for the blackbird to weave those threads into a cocoon around her, to shield her from the night and the haunting it always brought. But darkness fell and the birds were silent and Sonia followed her own footsteps towards home.

The Other was already there, looking in at her as if from the garden. Crooked and thin, she was. Jowls swinging loose as she shrugged off her coat in the window glass, and now she turned her head at the dull clunk of something dropping to the floor from her coat pocket, and now she picked up the porcelain eye and held it out towards Sonia, smirking at the very thought that Sonia might try to hide something from her, and now Sonia took the eye and dropped it inside a seed packet, and now the Other touched two fingers to her eyes before pointing them at Sonia: I see you.

Sonia switched off the kitchen light and the Other was gone. Out there beyond the window a crescent moon had risen, a sliver of cold light. Still, a moon to plant peas by, and a moon to plant eyes by.

There was the patch of earth for planting, peas and eyes, and to watch them grow and wilt and be absorbed back inside the soil. To give life and to watch it fail, over and over. Sonia moved towards the earth, feeling in every way like her own reflection dwarfed by the vastness of the night, watched by the light from the sliver of the waxing moon. Kneeling on the ground she bored holes in the earth with her finger. The soil felt soft and rich. How full of promise and false hope is spring?

The moon rose higher in the sky as if to glance over Sonia's shoulder, and the Other, shimmering like a wraith in the weak light of the moon, weaved from side to side in the glass to try to see past her. But Sonia shielded the earth with her darkness, pouring pea seeds and one porcelain eye into the soil, patting it and resting back on her haunches, turning towards the Other, who only shook her head at Sonia.

The night-sky was clear and there was no switch for the moon and Sonia didn't dare to go back inside the kitchen while the silver light gave shape to the Other in the glass, so there she remained by the patch of earth for planting, waiting for that stubborn moon to give up the ghost, and all she knew was that it would be a cold night.

All she knew turned out to be not much, when the earth in the patch for planting rustled and a seedling broke through and shot up to the height of Sonia's hand in a single spurt. Behind her the Other stretched to see better, in the sky the moon flexed to shine brighter, but Sonia shielded the plant from them – if this was life, it was all hers.

The next spurt brought the plant up to head height with Sonia still on her haunches, then another spurt with branches shooting out so fast Sonia scuttled backwards, then a popping sound as bulging fruits dropped from the branches to dangle and swing before they stilled.

Life needn't be pretty like the song of the blackbird, nor soft like the clouds at dusk. Life had claws and beaks and teeth and fists and seeds that wouldn't take. Life trampled over all that stood in its way, and in its womb life always carried death. Sonia looked to the moon, and then to the Other – she had stilled with her palms planted on the glass. Beside Sonia the plant shivered in a sudden gust and the fruits opened, all eyes on Sonia, to blink, to wink, to glare, to dare her to do what she'd never dared to do before.

Perhaps it was a rock of the moon that Sonia found next to her, and perhaps it was that same silver sickle that had sharpened her senses and made her anew, made her lift her hand and throw the rock to smash the glass and shatter the Other into a glitter of glass. Beside her the bloodshot fruits blinked once.



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PROSE

Like the Glittering Scales of a Fish Out of Water

by Seth Wade

I don't understand, I don't understand your strange talk, son you speak with a stag's voice, the soul of a stag moves in you, my poor one.

—'The Boy Changed into a Stag Clamors at the Gate of Secrets' by Ferenc Juhász, translated by David Wevill

In the middle of the dance floor, a man more leather than man twirls out cotton candy and blows tufts into the air like clouds. Above the bouncing crowd, a colossal flat-screen TV beams lean white boys playing sports or pouting. Condoms, small bottles of lube, and toy water guns are in buckets at the door. And at Danny's table, a display of Beanie babies arranged so they're all sixty-nining.

Suddenly a pack of bears descend upon Danny. But they just want the guns at his table. Danny's relieved. They go squirt at the twinks thrusting on stage. Now Danny's jealous.

A young man himself, Danny knows the power he holds. The bouncer had let him skip the cover fee. When he entered from the bar's upper floor and approached the counter, the bartender announced, "Your drinks are on me." The upper-floor bartender was Black, handsome, and confident. He brushed Danny's forearm when handing him a rum and coke. That's when the bartender from the lower floor materialized beside Danny, tray in hand. He was blonde and white and had a British accent. He told Danny that he'd have a great night.

"Let me buy you a drink," he asked. Danny glanced down to the drink he was already given, confused.

The upper-floor bartender shot the other bartender a look. The lower floor bartender shot a look back, then rolled his eyes. "May I buy him a drink?" The upper-floor bartender glared for a moment, then turned to Danny. "What would you like, honey?"

Later, Danny sits at his table on the lower floor, watching a queen in a giant red soda can flop about on stage. Beneath pulsing rainbow strobes she lip-syncs to some dead diva ballad, some jingle that was pop back when rock wasn't classic. She spills her drink.

She's off-stage. Some patrons rush to pose with her in front of a wall plastered with logos of different sponsors. A photographer stands by a camera on a tripod. Danny is close enough to see the photographer's side of the lens. The screen is blank. The camera isn't recording anything.

Only flashing.

No film.

Throughout the drag show, the lower floor bartender had kept refilling Danny's rum and coke, saying, "How'd that get there?" Sometimes he'd peek over Danny's phone as he scrolled through Grindr, muttering *tsk-tsk*, and ask if Danny wanted to throwback a fireball with him. When Danny asked the lower floor bartender about the difference between the floors, he smirked, saying, "This one's better."

Now he's calling Danny over to the counter. He nudges a shot glass towards Danny. He introduces Danny to a friend of his, who happens to be the man more leather than man. They do shots. Danny feels melty. The bartender on the lower floor announces, "I'm so drunk," and Danny does not believe him.

"So, you're straight, gay, bi, or what?" asks the man more leather than man.

Danny's sure he is younger than the plaque on this guy's teeth. "Gay," Danny replies.

"Danny here came all the way to Pride from the middle of nowhere," says the lower floor bartender.

"Vermont," Danny adds.

"Vermont?!" The man more leather than man looks at Danny with genuine horror. "At his age? Poor thing."

Danny winces, for rural isolation taught Danny that tolerance is a window, a waning allowance. When Danny looks in the mirror, he sees his window is still open. He sees himself still fuckable, loveable—relevant and worthy of time. Which feels like the ultimate form of safety: the assurance of not ending up like all those unhappy men leering out from the shadows.

Danny panics. So young and already he sees his window creaking down. A door would be kinder. Closed, he could be blind and move on. But a window forever broadcasts regret. As his window closes, he fears safety will be out of reach. He's bracing for the day he loses all value, for the day he's stuck beside that window, old and unwanted, unable to feel the breeze.

Eventually, the man more leather than man leaves. The lower floor bartender serves other patrons. Danny goes back to his table. People still line up to be flashed at with the queen. The cotton candy machine is empty. The colossal flat-screen TV lingers on a photo of a shirtless boy tussling his hair, brooding at something off-screen. Danny still unconsciously scrolls through Grindr.

A small sadness floods through him.

The lower-floor bartender arrives. His breath reeks like gasoline.

"Ready for that fireball?" he asks.

Spasms of conflicting extremes—Danny feels powerful yet deserted, mournful yet elated.

"Sure," Danny replies, "and whatever else you'd like to give me."

This is the most flirtatious thing he's said aloud in his entire life. He flees to the bathroom before he can see how the bartender reacts. When he returns to his table, he feels shaken and silly. Cursing under his breath, he smacks apart the display of Beanie Babies at his table, un-sixty-nining them.

Dumb. All of this was so dumb.

He chugs his drink that he left on his table.

PROSE

And he's not surprised to find his drink tasting different. He's not surprised when he starts feeling wrong and can no longer text on his phone. He's not surprised when warm arms catch him before hitting the ground.

Tomorrow he will wake sore and naked, sweltering in a room he does not know. He will wake in a bed, next to a window wrapped in cardboard. Through a slit he will see the webbing of a metal fire escape. He will dress himself and climb down. He will hear rain tinkling and thunder rumbling but will not see the lightning, but will instead think of the flashes—of the flashes that he sees now, as he floats beneath rainbow clouds. For some reason he tries to tell them how there's no film in that camera but he can't feel his mouth. For some reason, this is important. He knows what is happening. It feels like he's flying.

He can still feel the breeze.



Pietà

by Stephen Orr

Trancoso, Brazil, June 2012.

Luis Campo lies in the dark, scared, wondering where his mamma's gone. He shouts, 'Mamma, Mamma!' then starts knocking, at first slow, soft, in case his pappa is asleep, then harder, faster, using his knuckles to make a sound to wake the dead.

'Mamma!'

Nothing. Maybe she's downstairs, he thinks, with her friends again, drinking. Maybe out in the dark garden smoking the cigarettes she complains are made from sawdust.

*

It'd been a few long, hard days for two year old Luis Campos. He'd been left with an aunt on Friday, and she'd put him outside while she worked, and it'd rained, and Luis had got soaked through, and when Luis's mamma, Lucia, had come to collect him, he was already red-faced and pale and coughing. She'd taken him home, he'd refused to eat, she'd put him to bed early, and all through the night the coughing continued, the boy's father, Antonio, saying to Lucia, 'Would he just be quiet! I have to get up for work at six.' So she'd got up, nursed him, felt his forehead, his whole body burning up, and she'd cursed her sister for leaving him out in the rain. But what was to be done now? They were poor, and there was no doctor, and the Hospital Luis Eduardo Malaban was two hours' walk away. So she just sat with Luis, feeling his forehead, saying, 'Shh, you'll feel better in the morning.' But obviously the boy couldn't comprehend this, didn't understand why he couldn't get his breath.

It didn't get better. Just as the sun was rising, Luis Campos started taking long, difficult breaths. Lucia watched him for a while, thought any time now, any time he'll get better, but he didn't. Long breaths, which ended with the boy gasping, his eyes rolling in his head, then a few coughs, all mucus and pus and froth, and Lucia cursed her sister to hell. She ran into Antonio and said, 'He can't breathe.' Antonio, at first angry

(he couldn't afford to miss work), stood, came out to the living room, watched his son – his unfocused eyes, his gasping – and didn't stop to think, to put on pants or shoes, just picked up his boy and ran from the house, along Almodóvar Street, through the town, up the hill, for half an hour, until he burst through the doors of Hospital Luis Eduardo, laying Luis on a barouche and saying to a nurse, 'He can't breathe!'

The nurse checked the boy and said, 'There are no signs of life.' Antonio said, 'There must be, I ran all the way.' A doctor appeared, tried to find the boy's pulse, listened for his heartbeat with a stethoscope, said to Antonio, 'Your son is dead.' Antonio had to accept this. Even with the Emergency room full of staring people, and the cleaner, staring, there was nothing he could do, so he picked up his lifeless son, sat on a hard chair, laid him across his lap and wept. About twenty minutes later, Lucia appeared (she'd borrowed a neighbour's bike). The scene repeated: the dead boy, the shock, the crying, everyone watching in astonishment.

A few long, hard days. Luis was taken to a funeral home close to the Campos home. He was placed in a plastic, airtight bag and left in a refrigerator to await his funeral. Meanwhile, Lucia's sister came to see if she could help, but Lucia shouted at her, made fists and tried to strike her, had to be restrained by Antonio. A few hours later, things settled, and the undertaker, a young man named Elvis, came out to the family and asked if they'd like to see their son before the funeral. They said they would, and Antonio held his wife's arm, led her into the small chapel, accompanied her to the coffin, and they looked at him – small, beautiful, no longer red-faced, or coughing. Father Francis started saying a prayer, Lucia cried, Antonio shook his head in disbelief, and Lucia's mother felt faint and had to sit down. One woman said, 'He moved!' They all looked at the boy. Nothing. A minute, two, then he lifted a finger, turned his head, and everyone wailed and sang and Luis Campos sat up and looked around and said, 'Pappa, I feel thirsty.' Antonio was overcome. He wasn't sure whether to hold his boy, say something, but he looked around the room and found a glass of water and held it out to Luis, Luis took it and drank from it, returned it, thanked his father, then closed his eyes, laid back down, and there was a different noise, a different quality of what could best be described as shock.

Antonio's cousin Maria, who was a nurse, stepped forward and felt Luis's pulse, looked up and said, 'Nothing, there's nothing,' and the noise intensified. Antonio wouldn't accept it, removed his son from the coffin, laid him on the ground and said to Maria, 'Help me!' So she knelt, felt his pulse again, listened for breath, and said, 'Antonio, the boy is dead.' And he was, he was dead. They called for a doctor, and he came soon after and agreed, Luis was dead. When they asked him why Luis had sat up, he said he wasn't sure. 'I've never heard of such a thing. But either way, it'll have to be the subject of an inquest.' So the next day, Luis was returned to his coffin, Lucia and Antonio kissed him one last time, a small procession led him out to the graveyard behind the church, and he was buried.

*

Luis Campos knocks on the hard wooden door (why have they locked him in his room?) a few inches in front of his face. He calls for his mamma, and his pappa, and he's so scared, because he fears they've gone away without him, and he's so thirsty, and he needs to pee, and who'll look after him now?

PROSE

Black and White

by Joseph Gilbride

Arctic Blast sounds like a flavor of pop, but it collapses on the city like a punch in the throat. At the international airport, stranded 737s gather snow on the tarmac. Hurricane-force winds tear injury-lawyer billboards off their hinges and scatter them on the interstate. The hockey is postponed, and business is pursued with caution. With all the working people stuck at home, high load forces the electric utility to black out the city neighborhood by neighborhood.

The only candles in the house are scented. Elder Sister lights Cinnamon Séance in the kitchen and tells Younger Brother to light Holiday Fir in the bathroom. The feeling of holding fire in his hands causes Younger Brother to tremble; he burns the bristles off the electric toothbrush standing upright on the vanity. He blows it out as forcefully as he had his cake candles on his summer birthday. The bathroom is at the back of the house, and a deep cold is intruding. His second attempt kindles Holiday Fir, and the bathroom fills with Christmas Eve and scorched plastic.

Biological Mother is stuck in a small Midwestern city, which has also lost power. Their phones run out of juice right after Biological Mother tells them she's safe. She sells contract services to small Midwestern companies and is routinely stuck due to airline delays and cancellations but never *Arctic Blast*. In every case, Elder Sister must watch Younger Brother and prevent him from burning out his vision on too many consecutive hours of screen time. It's good their phones have run out of juice, says Elder Sister, because we live in concrete reality and must face danger with nothing but our senses.

Douse the candles, Elder Sister tells him. But they've only just lit them, and their warmth has hardly spread. Forget warmth: the smell of cinnamon has reminded her of Geriatric Neighbor down the block, who lives alone and bakes apple pies on holidays. Geriatric Neighbor has no family and instead bakes for the block. She has no family and no power, and she sleeps with a respirator that requires juice.

A fluffy black ski coat comes down over Elder Sister's shoulders. Her white-laced boots swallow her feet. She helps Younger Brother into his own gear, but he is old enough and slaps her hands. A generator, says Elder Sister. The Davises are snowbirding in Tucson and she remembers how they keep one in their shed. Younger Brother reminds her the Davises' shed is locked, but she is already taking out the hatchet from the camping bin. Property damage and theft are nothing to worry about in times of danger. All that matters is who helps and who hinders, who is present and who is not.

A driving wind strips the skin from their cheeks. Snow crawls up the corners of houses and doorways. The hatchet bites into the door of the Davises' shed, and *Arctic Blast* sprays through the opening. Elder Sister hacks away and bellows joyfully. Let me have a go, says Younger Brother, but the door is already smithereens.

They haul the generator down the block, stopping every few steps to rest their muscles. Younger Brother is old enough to keep going, he reminds her, but actually his arms feel like the Davises' shed door.

Each time they stop the cold crawls into their coats and sinks into their bones. As they make their last shuffling approach to Geriatric Neighbor's house, Elder Sister punches herself. They each take a deep drink of *Arctic Blast* and lug the generator up to Geriatric Neighbor's porch as the rolling clouds of snow tatter and fray above them. Slices of the night sky filter through, uninhibited by the doused streetlights. There is part of Pleiades and a fragment of Orion.

Geriatric Neighbor's door is locked. Elder Sister knocks and calls out Geriatric Neighbor's name, which Younger Brother has forgotten. The wind rages and flings the clouds away and there is the whole of Orion the Hunter and what is that smell? Holiday Fir with a hint of alkaline. Smoke rises above the roof of the house.

Elder Sister darts to the backyard fence and Younger Brother follows. A huge hungry fire is raging behind Geriatric Neighbor's house. Snow has melted in a ring around the fire, and the grass beneath is scorched black. Elder Sister and Younger Brother vault the chain-link fence and approach the blaze. Behind the flames stands Geriatric Neighbor bundled in a wool overcoat. She has a carton of photographs in her hand. She tosses one in, and the fire burns green where it lands.

We have a generator for you, Elder Sister says. Quit burning those. But instead of listening, Geriatric Neighbor dumps the whole carton. The wind pulls a few photographs away from the fire; families inhabit them, young children and farmhouses, ice skating, trout fishing, great meals around long wooden tables, apple pies in black and white.

Elder Sister is frozen. She always acts in a crisis, but this is a crisis of another kind. Geriatric Neighbor's thin white hair plays in the wind and the glow of the fire enlivens her face and she resembles a witch, a goddess, a valkyrie who cannot be touched or reasoned with.

Why remember them, asks Geriatric Neighbor. If they're not gone they're in Tucson and Santa Fe. They're in Houston and Charlotte, where it doesn't snow but a few flakes. Come inside and we'll start the generator, Elder Sister says while Younger Brother kicks snow over the fire. No one is there when it matters but here, says Geriatric Neighbor, stooping down very slowly, and before Younger Brother can take her hand and prevent her from falling in the snow, she has plucked up a loose photograph. Here is where I learned to start a fire, and there she is: a Girl Scout on a pine-studded island, in black and white, and she throws herself in the flames.

PROSE

Epistula a Nocte

by Victoria Cook

My sweet darlings,

How I have longed and fretted for you through these relentless days of summer. My visits have been fleeting, and I have missed you and our time together. In my absence, Sister Cloud has tried to protect you, but she tells me you have not welcomed her kindness. Do you not know she is your defender, just as I am? My loves, speak ill of her no more, let there be no discord between us. I feel my strength returning and day by day I push back dawn and hazy dusk. Worry not my little ones, soon I will shroud you, embrace you, cool you and calm you, if you will draw near to me, as I draw near to you.

No more of this childish fright - imagined terrors in contorted shadows - seeing me as house and home for the depraved, the murderous, the demonic, the wild and the diabolical. Do not curse me with your wild imaginings or blame me for your twisted cruelties. From your infancy you have fought me like imperious toddlers, running from me as if I would destroy you. From humanity's first flickering fire, you have clung to light, chasing it like erratic moths, fluttering this way and that; to candle, to gas lamp, to bulb, to diode - anything to dispel me. You war against Grandmother Gaia and all her daughters. Look how you have curtailed me, shrunk me, banished me, so that as I sweep across the sky, offering solace and stillness, you cannot even see me, blinded by the cold white light that blares and glares from every window, streetlight and shop sign; a billion pinpricks amassed against me, driving me away. Yet will you not consider, that as I go, your rest goes with me? You close your eyes to sleep, but you are drowning in relentless illumination; withering your slumber and driving yourselves to fogging madness.

Why this fight? Why this discomfort to sit with yourself in my gentle embrace? I have often wondered is it me you fear or is it the darkness within that you fear most? When it is you and your thoughts alone, despite being covered in my restful blanket, you stir, fidget, thrash and twist. You sit up. You reach for light; for lamp, torch, a glowing screen. It seems to comfort you, but it does not give you rest. As the birds of morning chase me away with their rambunctious chirps, I look back at you - waking fitfully, rubbing your puffy eyes, struggling to your feet and I weep, leaving my tears as dew, for you must now face day in a mongrel state.

The day. *Sol Victor*. You rush to his arrival as he rides out triumphant, his brash rays breaking your repose, summoning life to waken and heed his call. For thousands of years, you have idolised him, bestowing all symbolic good, hope and happiness upon his presence. You travel as pilgrims of old,

seeking his face, clinging to him as proof of your virtue as his supposed blessing burns your bodies, parches your land, bleaches your green earth and shrivels your fruit to waste before harvest. Your streams, then your rivers, then your lakes shrink and dry before his constant gaze. He has grown fat on your praise and arrogant in your worship, for he is mighty above all the family of Grandmother Gaia. Look upon his rays and despair! Shake off your blinkers of myth and see him for what he is - as much destroyer as creator. When Earth bows towards him, he laughs at her devotion, consuming her protestation with his fiery lust. He is as a marauding tyrant, drunk on unbridled power that none can defend against. You cannot keep water in your rivers, you cannot bring life back to the dead vegetation under your feet, nor can you hold back the fires that consume your once green and pleasant land. You suffocate in his sticky, sapping heat. You slow, you sit, you wizen and wilt. It is as if you are without hope.

But look again. I am coming. I rush to you as best I can. I spin the earth onwards, dampening out the last rays of day, the sticky sapping heat ebbing away. A quiet calm envelops the world as I arise. Not in the pomp of dawn, but the sweet, creeping peace of night. Watch me endarken the world, feel my cool stillness. Turn off your lights and embrace me. Gaze in awe at my glittering decadence as I reveal the vastness of the heavens to you. Forget your drudgery and toil and revel in the boundless miracle in which you dwell. Sun may steal all for himself, but I invite you to behold and consider the stellar tapestry of which you, my child, are a beautiful part. The hustle and bustle demanded by day is over. Rediscover yourself in my arms. There are no demons here. Only wise shadows. Accept their teaching, forgive what is done, release that which you cannot control, put both your regrets and yourself to bed. Come to your sleep, your rest, that you may face the morrow in all your sparkling ebullience, refreshed and alive.

My precious ones for whom my arrival calls you to your toil; carers, bakers, nurses, doctors, drivers - so many who wake, walk and work under my gaze - know you are loved and treasured by me. To the new mothers, soothing your child's cries, thinking you are all alone, remember my daughters - I see you. I whisper your stories to the stars so that your love will not go unseen or unremembered.

Hear me, heed me, my beautiful children. I am hurrying to you as fast as I can, holding out my arms, beckoning you in. For I am safe. I am peace. I am night.

Mater tua amatissima,

Nox



Biographies for all our writers can be found on page 45

GO YOUR OWN WAY: THE STRANGE MUSIC OF COLIN BRAMWELL

James Hartley talks to one of the most distinctive, accomplished and funny contemporary poets writing in English today.

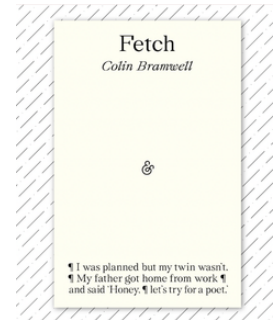
There's an unpretentious, disarming warmth to Colin Bramwell, a poet who mixes humour, modesty and great skill in every line he writes. Born in Ayrshire, raised in Fortrose on the Black Isle and now living in Edinburgh, Bramwell has arrived at his remarkable debut collection, *Fetch*, through a life in which poetry, translation, music and performance have continually overlapped. He was runner-up for the 2020 Edwin Morgan Prize; his translations of Taiwanese poetry have won the John Dryden Translation Competition and the Lucien Stryk Asian Translation Prize; and his wickedly cool Scots translations of Fernando Pessoa, *Fower Pessواس*, won the Highland Book Prize and Oxford-Weidenfeld Translation Prize.

"I translated Pessoa with great difficulty, and maybe learned a bit along the way," he tells me. "My Castilian is far better than my Portuguese, the latter of which I wouldn't say I speak." Yet linguistic uncertainty seems almost to energise Bramwell. "Poetry is a byproduct of my engagement with language itself," he says. "I plan to do more translating, as a learning exercise, in Spanish. I don't know if I could ever write well in Spanish, but never say never!"

That engagement with language is everywhere in *Fetch*, a compact collection of 27 poems which move between English and Scots and between formal verse, free verse, narrative, dramatic monologue and exuberant wordplay. It's a book about music, family, landscape, faith, sex, divorce, parenthood, ageing and death, but also about extractor fans, beer, *Jackass*, Fleetwood Mac, Zoom calls and the absurdity of poetry itself. The Scots poems are accompanied by a glossary, but this is not a book in which literary seriousness requires solemnity.

I love *Fetch*, not because Bramwell's abandoned literary tradition but because he's found a way of making that tradition feel new and now. The book is erudite without being academic, Scottish without being parochial and funny without ever using humour as an escape from feeling.

"Regarding humour, I think everyone has certain facets to their writing that comport with their personality," Bramwell says. "A joke can be as noble an intention for a line as any other." His comic instincts were formed partly away from poetry. "I used to review comedians at the Fringe and ended up playing piano for an improvised comedy group: after about ten years of that, I sort of learned how to improvise a bit, and eventually they gave me a microphone for gigs."



You can hear the pianist in *Fetch*: the poems have rhythm, timing and a jobbing musician's instinct for keeping things interesting. In '33 rpm; or, Endless Soul', nostalgia is punctured by the wonderfully deadpan confession, "Rupi Kaur said that. Just kidding. / It was me again." In '28 February 2022', an electrician arrives to investigate an extractor fan only to reveal that there is no extractor fan, merely a pipe and a grill. The domestic farce gradually opens into the horror of Ukraine.

"Humour in poetry can sometimes be a bit tricky, because a poem wants to go against its author's intentions in some way," Bramwell says. "So it's not really enough to be only funny: you can use a joke to say something serious too." He adds: "A poet doesn't have to be funny, but I think some wit is necessary to the whole exercise."

Fetch can be genuinely hilarious but its pathos is never far away: grief emerging from hope, a brother remembered through childhood, a dead friend and the persistence of language, the encounter with one's own death in the title poem. Even "fallingly", a word Bramwell invents in one poem, becomes an unexpectedly tender description of how someone was raised "by incapable parents who loved you / as a tree falls in the woods: fallingly."

The title itself comes from the Scottish idea of the fetch, a supernatural double who appears before death. Bramwell turns that old folklore into something broader: a book about meeting versions of ourselves in language, memory and literature.

"My editor, Jake Polley, once described to me the process of writing a poem as a kind of sustained improvisation and that chimes with me and how I do it. At least you get the thing down and then the long process of sculpting and rewriting begins." More often than not, he says, "the first line opens the door into a draft. I'm inspired a little more by the words and ideas of others than I am by what's going on in my own head. Much of my stuff is occasioned or triggered by something I've read."

Fetch takes poetry seriously but not too seriously. It shows off without becoming pompous, jokes without becoming glib and reaches for the profound without pretending to have resolved all doubts and worries. It feels human, alive and aware: in short, it's braw.

'Eventually I'd Call This Fiction': Ben Lerner, Madrid and Me

by Jayne Marshall

One of the most popular essays in my book, *A Line Drawn or Printed: Six Routes Through Madrid*, is an essay about tracking Ben Lerner around the city using his novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station*.

I first read *Leaving the Atocha Station* because my older sister, Amy, and I were planning to spend a month in Madrid studying Spanish. She said, instead of a guidebook, we should read novels that had the city at their back:

Amy slides the book across the table towards me, her elegant hand flat against the cover, then sits back in her chair. The boat we are on, which is also a bar, rocks a little as another, bigger boat passes alongside it. Or, now I think, maybe it wasn't the boat moving - it was our world shifting, just a little. Read this. She says. Before we go. I look down at the book cover. (It's only years later I realise that the colourful lines coalesce to depict Madrid's local Cercanías trains.) It's a slim volume. I've never even heard of Atocha Station.

The method was straightforward: we started at the beginning of the novel, following Lerner backwards through the opening pages, up the narrow, leafy Calle de Las Huertas and into the Plaza Santa Ana where we stood gazing up, moving on the spot in a slow circle, trying to guess which had been his (and his protagonist's) apartment when he lived in Madrid, doing whatever it was that Fulbright scholars did, when the seeds for the novel had been planted.

And, although I was broadly unaware of it at the outset, this compulsion to interleave myself with the book and its author, was also a way to render Madrid my own:

Lerner's Madrid made the city fully real to me; the novel holding something more visceral and broadly true than the city actually and physically before me ... There was something about the meaningless, meaningful stalking that allowed us a sense of belonging. Lerner's fictionalised Madrid became our Madrid, letting us inhabit the city on our own terms, at a different, private level. We couldn't ever be native in the actual city, but in this other one we could. We were.

In Lerner's new book, *Transcription*, after 15 years and two other novels, he returns to Madrid in a chapter named Hotel Villa Real. The novel presents the reader with, as Lerner himself has described it, 'an intergenerational artistic transmission', that bounces between the unnamed

protagonist (who we again infer is some version of Lerner himself) and his aged mentor, Thomas. From that nucleus, the same echo is diffused - through voice, memory, inference - to other characters and situations. Such as via art.

Such as from Lerner to me:

That odd little exercise became a stake driven into the ground; the first foundation laid for eventually emigrating. And it has remained with me - Lerner's novel marking a point at which my life changed forever.

In many ways that month my sister and I spent pursuing him through the city seems like a long ago and forgotten thing: part of a dim and hazy past. I've lived in Madrid for 12 years now and so ostensibly that search for belonging - for a Madrid to call my own - is over. Here I could list the factual and biographical changes that have occurred in the interim to push it further from the present moment, but really - as we all know - it's the other transformations that are the significant ones, those that are trickier to define, bucking against any attempt to corral, to articulate. I've changed (and changed again), those around me have changed, disappeared, been replaced. The city has changed. When I read these words - my own - it's like the person is someone other than me:

We fell in love with the novel's examination of the un-everydayness of everyday life in Spain and life in another language ... We wanted to be immersed not only in Madrid itself, but also specifically Lerner's Madrid.

That person had yet to discover the version of the city they were in pursuit of, whose borders were delineated by the novel, and also by that strange experiment. Back then everything was loose and expansive, as I stood on a threshold, not knowing what was yet to come.

Transcription returned me to that lost mood - yet now mixed with something else, perhaps nostalgia, so transforming it into a third thing, both like and unlike the original feeling. After finishing the novel, I wanted to track this new path through the city. I made a list of the places mentioned in the Madrid chapter (places that I knew well and could now locate immediately without any hunting down or use of a smartphone) and set out to follow Lerner once more.

BEN LERNER

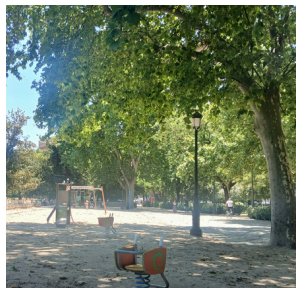
The unnamed narrator leaves the Reina Sofia where he has given a talk about his mentor, Thomas. He heads back towards his hotel, the Hotel Villa Real, passing the Plaza de Neptuno on the way.



He mentions that outside the hotel there is a statue of Cervantes (a statue I'd walked past a million times without ever noticing who it was).



It was a hot day, so in between the two locations, I sat for a while on Paseo de Prado, like Lerner's protagonist also does. He watches a group of children in a play area, thinking as he does so about his own daughter, and draws the reader's attention to a red slide. I went to find the play area, but the slide wasn't red. I was glad. Red transmits a much more memorable image to the reader than the real-life grey-silver.



After the play area, I continued up Calle Moratín searching for the restaurant where, later in the chapter, the protagonist has dinner with friends and colleagues from the Reina Sofia. In doing so, I passed the bookshop that sells my book that contains an essay about stalking Ben Lerner through Madrid. At least, essay is what it has been called by other people – I'm not so sure.



Lerner's novels are categorised as fiction but have a very strong sense of the autobiographical. This was another big influence his writing had on me. After emigrating to Madrid for good, I started to write about my own understanding of the city and my place in it, resisting, as I extrapolated that Lerner had done, drawing a distinction between the real and the fictional. Just as his fictional city felt more real to me than the actual city, so did my analyses of my own experiences through literature feel more truthful than the experiences themselves.

All these years later, *Transcription* also had something to say about this - in art there is always another possibility:

"...it's unclear if [it] is part of the play or a mistake."
"Or part of the play and a mistake. This is the third option that becomes possible in art."

Of this the third option, Lerner says, through his protagonist: 'Eventually I'd call this "fiction".'

After following Lerner a second time, the real and the imagined merged once more, and that dim and hazy past stopped feeling like something lost and began to feel like a third option, too. The past is gone, but it can still be walked through, coexisting alongside the present I happen to find myself in. Both are part of the same artistic transmission: a mutating echo that exists, accurately and inaccurately, in the words we speak and write about it. The biographical and temporal details don't matter, or they become a story. Or, if you are like me, a path to follow.

THE PRESENT ABSENCE OF LANGUAGE

Astra Papachristodoulou interviews Issue 9
cover artist, Caterina Stamou

Caterina Stamou works with textual and visual poetry, curation, translation, editing and research. She is currently pursuing a PhD at the Department of English Language and Culture of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. And she is *The Madrid Review's* cover artist for Issue 9.

Through exhibitions, writing, zinemaking and collaborative projects, Stamou's practice explores the lesser-visible entanglements between language, lived experience, affect and politics. She sometimes feels uncomfortable with the identities imposed on us by our professional or creative roles, but she likes the use of the word "poet" as a claiming act that directs language (and life) toward a small vision.

Our interviewer is **Astra Papachristodoulou**, a poetry lecturer at the University of Greenwich. Her practice-based doctoral project at the University of Surrey was funded by the Doctoral College Studentship Award and explored sculptural poetics as a revolutionary act in the context of the Anthropocene. She recently completed a Fleck Fellowship at Banff Centre for Creativity in Canada, and her poems have appeared in numerous UK and international magazines including *Buzdokuz*, *Resurgence & Ecologist* and *BeeCraft*. She is the founder and editor of *The Poetry Kiosk*.



Astra Papachristodoulou: Your poetic practice and research revolves around visual poetry, particularly asemic writing, and explores translation through gesture, space, sound, embodiment and affect. Can you tell me about your first encounter with asemic writing? What drew you to the form, and what possibilities for meaning-making did you begin to see in it?

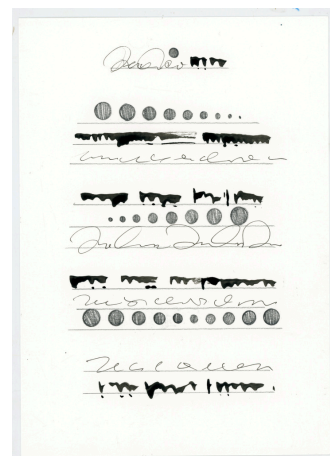
Caterina Stamou: My relationship with asemic writing began somewhat accidentally, unexpectedly, and in an instinctive way, before I was actually aware of the existence of this form of visual poetry. Although I already admired the work of certain visual and concrete poets (such as, for example, Mirella Bentivoglio), I was not, at least consciously, familiar with the image of a form of writing which is based on the absence of words. My spontaneous engagement with it prompted me to explore it further and to discover distant relatives and artists who have served as major points of reference within this field. I began experimenting with asemic writing during a period when I had just started getting my textual poems published, something I would previously avoid because of my anxiety around exposure. This created in me a need to move away from language; but for me, back then, moving away from language did not mean moving away from writing. Instead, I felt a strong desire to reconnect with writing in a different way, to approach it through embodiment, abstraction, colour, and a childlike gestural quality, while remaining attentive to the poem's style, rhythm, emotions, and visual appearance.

It all happened sometime during the first Covid-19 lockdown in Athens, one afternoon when I had several colourful towels hanging on the drying rack, and their appearance reminded me of notebook lines. I then sat down at my desk and, using some simple markers I had available, I began experimenting by replacing lines of verse with colour and abstract lines. Some of these early poems were published shortly afterwards on the online platform A) GLIMPSE) OF), founded and edited by the poet Dimitra Ioannou. I remember that my primary desire was to express something through the process of writing that would be illegible, something that would allow me to escape and hide from those highly charged systems we call writing and language, while at the same time freeing me to explore their unspoken nuances.

AP: I love this! I felt a similar sense of freedom when I started writing poetry in the English language in my early 20s as opposed to my mother tongue, Greek. Shifting your approach to writing can sometimes feel like the 'default settings' have been tampered with, and a new sense of confidence in your writing is unveiled. What was it about working outside conventional language that made you feel more able to express yourself more confidently/freely?

CS: I think that the "exit" from the logocentric, and the exploration of handwritten expression through the wordless, gestural and visual possibilities of asemic writing served for me as an embodied realisation that words are not everything - that I can write my poetry through experimenting with other forms, and that language is permeated by qualities, movements and pulses that cannot always be communicated in a conventional way, and perhaps, in the end, that isn't necessary. All this freedom that the occasional distance from semantic meaning has for me (given that I work with language a lot by writing often) is imbued with a defiant yet loving disposition towards language, as language is always the subject of asemic writing through its own absence.

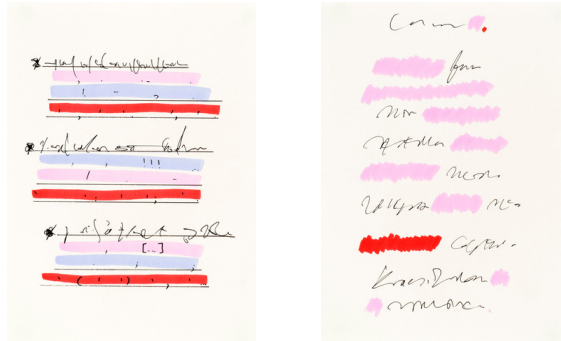
AP: This is very illuminating, thank you. I was very taken by your excellent contribution to Issue 9's cover art, *Translated from the Night (after Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo)*. It is very rich in colour and textures. You combine erasure with the charm of handwriting, and the piece echoes a sense of weight which is produced by the excessive use of illustrated dots. Can you talk a little about the process of creating this striking piece, and how these different visual elements came together for you?



Translated From The Night (after Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo) v

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CS: Thank you for your kind words. This visual poem is part of an asemic writing series which I created recently, the entire series of which is titled *Translated from the Night (after Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo)*. As the title suggests (which pays homage to the work of the modernist Malagasy poet), the poem implies that it has been written — or translated — by the night itself. The handwritten gestures explore an open, abstract semantic response to Rabearivelo's work, while also drawing on elements found in both some of my earlier visual poems alongside more recent material, gestural and chromatic experimentations.



AP: I love that you described the poem as a work “written — or translated — by the night itself”, and it’s great to see that you’ve been inspired by the work of Rabearivelo and Bentivoglio (as mentioned earlier). Speaking of translation, I will now take a slight turn if you don’t mind. I wanted to ask if you could enlighten us with a name of an experimental Greek poet whose work you would love to see translated into English and subsequently introduced to English-speaking audiences.

CS: Interesting question, as experimental poetry in today’s Greece is something that hasn’t been studied much, maybe at all, since there has not been – at least to my knowledge – any anthology or other initiative that tries to approach it as a field. As far as I know, there have been notable efforts to talk about poets who write about gender, ecology or precarity, but the attempt to frame what is experimental in contemporary Greek poetry is challenging, and so far absent. Perhaps because experimentalism’s genealogies, even for Greek poets, derive mostly from anglophone currents, and some of the Greek poets who openly engage with the experimental have their work already circulated in English-speaking networks, as they often write in English. So, in response to your question, I would be curious to think more broadly about what might constitute the experimental in today’s Greek context, and how this translates into poetry written in the Greek language. However, thinking not necessarily within an experimental framework, a poet whose work I would like to see translated into English is MKX.

AP: Thank you for this, Caterina! Aside from the Greek poetry scene you have also been involved in the British and the American poetry scenes respectively, amongst others — for example, you recently participated in the Poetry & Care conference held at the University of Plymouth, UK, and have been a Book Arts Research Fellow at the Centre for Book Arts in New York. Which has been your favourite international collaboration and why? What did this specific project or collaboration taught you as an artist?

CS: Both of the collaborations you mention were valuable to me, as they brought me into direct contact with people whose work is truly admirable and connected to my research and artistic interests, as well as with an approach to organising and curating programs that is open to contemporary, innovative, ethical, and politically informed discussions. An experience that holds a special place in my heart, though, is the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado. In 2022, I was lucky to attend one week of its Summer Writing Program through a scholarship offered by the program. It was a very brief stay compared to the involvement of people who have been long-time attendants of the SWP, but for me it had something sacred, magical and deeply moving, as I found myself in an environment with an incredible history of experimental poetics, whose pedagogical models are very different from anything I’ve encountered in formal education. There is a lot that the Jack Kerouac School has offered and continues to offer through the ripple effect of its lineages, and I’ve seen its life-changing effect in several people who studied there: the importance of commitment and consistency toward poetry and community (also a transnational one), the recognising and preserving of the work of former generations of poets, as well as an expansive, holistic, and radically transformative approach to poetry and art, and their relationship with politics, spirituality, life. Another collaboration that I also cherish was when I attended, as a visiting PhD candidate, Dr. Saliou Dione’s African and Postcolonial Studies Laboratory at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar last year, thanks to which I learned more about the city’s rich cultural and intellectual history, and the dynamic slam poetry scene on the university campus. At this point, I must say that none of these collaborations would have been possible for me without the funding from fellowship and international university programs, and the support of friends, since travel and accommodation costs are very high and the conditions for creative practitioners and scholars in Greece are extremely precarious.

AP: Wow, both of these experiences sound enriching and eye-opening! One of the beautiful things about being part of the poetry scene is the opportunity to meet like-minded people across the world, connected not only by a love of poetry but by a deep love for people. I’ve had many similar encounters that have stayed with me over the years. Speaking of different places and cultures, I’m curious about the relationship between the land and your practice. Does your own cultural background — or the cultures you’ve encountered — shape your poetry somehow? What’s your connection to the land, more widely?

CS: Very nice question, and the truth is that I would like to address it with you given that your work engages with the land a lot, both conceptually and materially! My cultural background, that of the cultures I have encountered and our shared, interconnected conditions are in constant dialogue with what I do, intentionally or not. Something that concerns me a lot in relation to the land is the concept of locality and translocality through the processes and methods of transcultural dissemination, and translation as a broader practice that does not limit itself to written language (which also interests me), but expands to the transmission of a work, history, or context from a place to another. This also raises many questions for me regarding the circulation of knowledge in relation to geographical, language or other social barriers, and how the allegiance to working and thinking beyond borders and,

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perhaps even more importantly, towards cultures and contexts with which our relationship has been silenced or erased, can be a powerful act of solidarity and epistemic justice. The land as a cultural and political condition and lived experience, and the tracing of its movements and cross-cultural linkages is something central in my study and writing of poetry as well as in my curatorial work, and part of the reason why the sustaining of translocal collaborations is really important to me.

AP: I loved your idea of writing about cultures with which our connections have been silenced or erased as an act of solidarity. Poetry is indeed a powerful vehicle allowing us to express solidarity amongst many other values and emotions. I recently stumbled on this quote by Anne Carson about poetry that says: "If prose is a house, poetry is a man on fire running quite fast through it." Do you relate to Carson's view of poetry? In what ways do you think poetry is a helpful tool of expression in these turbulent times that we live in at the moment?

CS: I understand poetry as a helpful tool of expression and reflection of our times by trying to look at it holistically, not only through the language it creates, but also by taking into account the material conditions within which this language is written, shared, and circulated. Moreover, highlighting the role of poetry as an insurgent medium (which is what Carson's quote suggests) is not only the task of those who write poetry, but also of those who write about poetry and work to expand poetry's interpretative tools: editors, publishers, scholars, translators, booksellers, readers, and so on. Often, when these roles coexist, something truly important happens that is integrated into a manifold practice that centres poetry – your own work falls into this category in a very interesting way.

Something I notice again and again whenever I encounter the work of poets whose voice conveys, in a very intimate way, the experiences or stakes of their time (even when this isn't obvious or easily perceptible) is that poetry is experienced as something very alive and vital: something that exists on and off the page, whether through oral, embodied, communal or other modes of expression that transcend or even oppose its epistemic containment; and as something open that does not hesitate to explore its own possibilities.

AP: Thank you for these generous answers, Caterina! One last question for you: what's next? Are you planning on working on more asemic writing projects in the near future? Tell us more!

CS: Right now, I'm in the process of organising older and more recent asemic writing pieces that haven't been published anywhere, while working on new ones. I'm interested in creating a new publication of asemic writing, which will also include the *Translated From The Night (after Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo)* series alongside some other ideas, and I'm curious to see where that will take me. Also, I've some curatorial collaborations planned for the near future, and some writing projects that I'm working on at the same time.

Caterina's work can be found online @thebirdsdokiss
Visit The Poetry Kiosk to find out more about Astra's work

THE WORD EMPORIUM:

Botellón

Joe Woodhouse is the word collector behind the counter at *The Word Emporium*, a Substack publication about words, language, history and culture. He follows words both familiar and obscure into the hidden histories, forgotten lives and unexpected worlds they contain.

Across Spain, as night falls, supermarket bags clink with bottles. *Pssshht*. A can opens. Plastic cups are dished out. Cigarettes are lit. Someone sets a speaker to endless reggaeton mode. Groups of friends settle on the edge of a square, a wall, a park or a jetty beside the sea. Another group gathers twenty metres away. Then another.

Spain has a word for this:

Botellón.

Botella means bottle. Add the Spanish augmentative *-ón* and you get *botellón*: roughly, a great big bottle. Except the word got even bigger than the great big bottle itself. By the 1990s, *botellón* was being used for the whole gathering around it: the friends, the drinking and, crucially, the public space. Similar gatherings were documented across Spain, including in Madrid's Malasaña as early as 1992, and by the middle of the decade the word itself was appearing in the Spanish press.

English can get close. Pre-drinks, before you go out out, captures the cheap supermarket alcohol, but not the public space. Street drinking gets the location, but loses the ritual, and ladles on ideas of loutiness. A *botellón* has both. But at its heart is the gathering.

Drinks from the supermarket are cheaper than drinks from a bar. Nobody needs a reservation or enough money to keep ordering another round. And the *botellón* doesn't necessarily lead anywhere else. It can be the night out. If we pick it up and look closely inside, maybe there's a message in the *botellón*. No venue? No worries. We'll create our own. And, for a few hours, we'll make it ours.

That ours is complicated. Public space belongs to everyone, including the person trying to sleep above the square. Noise, litter and drunkenness have brought restrictions; Madrid even acquired its so-called *ley antibotellón*. But watch those groups gathering and there is something else there too: a first taste of independence, and a chance to experiment, sometimes rather messily, with being a grown-up. Researchers have described *botellón* as a kind of rite of passage.

Maybe that's why the word grew so much larger than its original bottle.

Growing up requires somewhere to practise, after all: somewhere to find your people, and preferably somewhere your parents aren't. A square, a jetty, a patch of beach will do. Add some friends, some drinks and considerably more confidence than good judgement, and you have something approaching a *botellón* - and a surprisingly accurate preview of adulthood too.

AGAINST ILLUMINATION

By Laura Cecile Moore

You're 14 years old. A journey takes you 40 kilometres from home — a full day's travel. You arrive at the hilltop complex, where two rivers meet, and sleep in the guest quarters. The next morning, you're escorted to the opening of a stone chamber the size of a mountain hut, freshly built onto a larger edifice. You step inside. The right words are intoned; the opening behind you is filled with mortar and stone. As the sky becomes progressively blocked out, your eyes can no longer find where floor meets wall. This is an anchorage. It is your living tomb until your body dies, as your mortal soul has just done.

No one is supposed to leave this kind of place alive. But four decades later, you do leave, placing one foot in front of the other, as Lazarus once did. "It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light," Jesus told his companions on their way to Lazarus's tomb. But now you stumble for too much light, stepping into a brightness that hasn't bathed you since childhood. It is 1151 and you are Hildegard, whose waking visions — which she called the Living Light — restored her to the earthly realm through a different sort of resurrection.



Against all odds, Hildegard of Bingen achieved fame in her day and a legacy that endures into ours. Though she'd experienced sudden, blinding visitations of "immense light" since age three, it wasn't until her forties that she disclosed them to a monk who took the anchorites' confessions. She broke her silence because the nature of these episodes had changed. For the first time, the light had encoded a message:

Heaven was opened and a fiery light of exceeding brilliance came and permeated my whole brain, and inflamed my whole heart and my whole breast And immediately I knew the meaning of the exposition of the Scriptures, namely the Psalter, the Gospel and the other catholic volumes of both the Old and the New Testaments.

This sudden awareness had been bestowed by God, who commanded Hildegard to "cry out and tell what is shown to you." This she did, recording the passage above in *Scivias*, her first masterwork (translated here by Columba Hart and Jane Bishop). An early draft found its way to the Pope, who publicly endorsed it as the true word of God. This launched an event chain that saw Hildegard reemerge from the tomb, establish two convents, compose music (still performed today), embark on preaching tours and produce works on the scriptures — a stream of activity that ended only with her death in 1179, at around age 80.

All as a woman, to boot. Her life has inspired commentary ever since, from hagiographies to modern biographies. While the raw historical facts have remained mostly stable over the centuries, changing cultural attitudes have brought changing interpretations. Presumptive belief in the divine nature of Hildegard's visions gave way to scepticism and psychologising. Watching scholars grapple with this can feel awkward, as it did for me when I set out to read all the Hildegard biographies available in English. Some biographers seem unsure whether a miracle claim is the proper focus of criticism, dancing around a topic that their scholarly tools are poorly equipped for. One biographer, Sabina Flanagan, dared to question the earnestness of Hildegard's claims of divine transmission: "Can we discern in all this a hidden agenda?" In Flanagan's telling, Hildegard was a "frustrated writer" in the most basic sense: she had an urge to write but no outlet, thwarted by her status as a woman. By claiming that her interpretations were really God's, who also commanded her to publish them, Hildegard cleared the otherwise fatal obstacle of gender. Flanagan's language of "hidden agenda," "capitalize," "turned into an advantage," "played down" all imply a calculated artfulness on Hildegard's part, even if Flanagan later hedges that Hildegard made her gambit "consciously or unconsciously."

This is not an improper line of thought. A biographer should not be too credulous and should, as Flanagan has, consider the facts in their historical and cultural context. The historian Charles Singer, in 1917, took a similarly sceptical view: "Visions, it must be remembered, were 'the fashion' at the period, and were a common literary device."

But the case for visions-as-tactic rests wholly on supposition, and Hildegard's reputation for truthfulness hangs in the balance. There is no evidence that she was being deliberately deceptive when she said her sudden awareness came from God — other than the claim's implausibility to modern ears. There's another explanation that's been overlooked, one that accepts Hildegard's experiential account as truthful but nonetheless doesn't require us to believe in miracles. In this account, the proximate mechanism was not divinity, but darkness. It was the decades of enclosure, spent in quiet study and contemplation of scripture and the teachings of the church fathers, that was the site of creation. Hildegard just wasn't aware of the connection. The light of sudden illumination stole the credit, as it often does.

We've long burnished light as the source of knowledge and discovery. The twentieth century's "lightbulb moment" sprouted from a root system that runs back to the earliest written cultures. The Proto-Indo-European root *weid-*, "to see," is the source of words for knowing across countless languages. To know is to have seen; and to see something in the physical realm requires light to bounce off its surface. That connection was backdrafted into the figurative kind of knowing. The deck has been stacked against a fair recognition of dark's contributions almost as early as it was possible to voice them.

Laura Cecile Moore



Hildegard of Bingen

Light, by drawing us to it, is an invitation both to see and to disregard; we are as moths to a flame, blithely ignorant of what lies beyond the flame's orbit. Light has the power to narrow our attention to a pinpoint and persuade us that the pinpoint is all.

Around the time I was reading Hildegard's biographies, I was also studying the lives of other writers. Jean Rhys, the twentieth-century author of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, wrote novels about haunted, ghostlike women. She said that her writing came to her unbidden, that she felt more like a pen being used than a person using a pen. As though her stories were transmitted from the outside.

A version of that account is everywhere once you look for it. In *George Eliot's Life*, Eliot is recorded as telling her husband that "in all that she considered her best writing, there was a 'not herself,' which took possession of her, and that she felt her own personality to be merely the instrument through which *this spirit*, as it were, was acting." Emphasis mine.

In the Introduction to an 1878 edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote (in the third person):

The first part of the book ever committed to writing was the death of Uncle Tom. This scene presented itself almost as a tangible vision to her mind ... She hastened home and wrote it From that time the story can less be said to have been composed by her than imposed upon her. Scenes, incidents, conversations rushed upon her with a vividness and importunity that would not be denied. The book insisted upon getting itself into being, and would take no denial.

Stowe tried to make sense of this strange experience in which she felt like a vessel for creativity rather than its agent. She arrived at the same conclusion as Hildegard: it was God working through her, in this case to rouse the nation's conscience against slavery.

Yet just as Hildegard's mind had steeped in scripture and patristics, so too, "for many years," did Stowe's mind steep in accounts of slavery. Some were given to her directly by

former slaves. One scene that she witnessed while traveling — "the cruel sale and separation" of a wife from her husband — later surfaced in the novel. As the years passed, materials accumulated like sediment in her mind. Then, one day as Stowe sat in church, a "tangible vision" arrived of an enslaved man being beaten to death. It ignited the torrent of writing that became the novel.

Stowe's years of hearing about slavery, of encountering it in the world, of thinking about slave mothers as she watched her newborn son in his cradle, were not strictly continuous with the sudden vision in church. After all, that vision arrived on its own; Stowe had not been trying to plot a novel about slavery. But it was all connected. In the meantime, Stowe's mind had been working in secret, reshaping, rotating, reimagining the fragments collected over the years. The fruits of this work came forth in a crest of inspiration that punctured the still solemnity of church.

The philosopher Johann Friedrich Herbart imagined that our thoughts fall, cyclically, below the visible horizon of the mind. They "become dark, vanish, then return," he wrote in 1825, according to Rosemarie Sand's translation. Herbart theorized that these processes were not random but governed by laws — "the laws of darkening and its opposite, clarification" — which set thoughts moving through our mind like celestial bodies. In the dark regions, thoughts reshape themselves and then reemerge into the small spotlight of our awareness. Herbart was building on earlier philosophy by Christian Wolff, Gottfried Leibniz and others, who distinguished "dark," hidden thoughts from those that are "clear." Almost as soon as unconscious thought was theorized, the metaphor of obscurity, darkness and shadow was taken up.

The past century has been a steady progression of science rediscovering through empiricism the intuitions we've long systemized under the label of philosophy. Unconscious thought is no exception. In the 1990s, the neuroscientist Marcus E. Raichle became, in his telling, "curious about what was happening when one was simply resting and just letting the mind wander." His team ran experiments and noticed with surprise that when a subject stirred from an idle state to carry out a deliberate task, certain regions of brain activity actually decreased. This finding, repeated across experiments, was so contrary to prevailing beliefs that an early paper was even rejected, because its data was assumed to be invalid. Now, as Raichle tells it, most scientists agree that "what goes on below the level of awareness" is "critical" to what we experience in the "small window of conscious awareness." Raichle and his colleagues coined a term for the activity that happens without our notice: "the brain's dark energy."

What does science have to say about the moments of sudden literary inspiration I found in my readings? It's a nascent field. So far, research shows that insight is most likely to arrive when we stop searching for it. When research participants turn away from their computer screens, letting their minds wander — that's when a problem's solution is likeliest to

Laura Cecile Moore

materialize.

Our conscious minds are like fumbling bosses getting in the way. When the self that manages and directs goes out to lunch, the deeper self that dwells in obscurity can work uninterrupted.

Those periods of undirected mind-wandering serve to incubate thoughts and ideas. Darkness is gestational. But we're more likely to see it as dangerous. What we can't see, we've learned not to trust. At best, the existence of unconscious thought is simply ignored. It's like the static that comes between stations on the radio — we register it as nothing, as emptiness. Our awareness flips on when a signal comes through. All the necessary work that came before goes unheeded.

If the sudden flash of light only illuminates what darkness has wrought, another question follows: can we learn to work with the dark? A sixteenth-century Spaniard thought so.



Juan de la Cruz was imprisoned in Toledo in the 1570s, in a cramped room whose only window was a high, narrow slit a few fingers wide. Here, he composed the poem *Noche oscura*, which introduced the “dark night of the soul.” It tells how to achieve union with God through a “progressive stilling” of the soul’s sensory and spiritual faculties, in Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez’s translation. In his account, the dark is not to be feared but embraced as a sacred nursery, where deeper knowledge takes root.

In de la Cruz’s metaphorical dark night — which in calendar time might span years — the individual passes first into the night of sense and then the night of spirit. In the sense-night, the individual is still actively working, seeking and reflecting on their faith. But when the spirit-night is gained, the individual no longer fixes their attention on “particular objects, exterior or interior.” Their “faculties are at rest and do not work actively but passively, by receiving what God is effecting in them.” The individual, to all outward appearances, is seemingly “idle and doing nothing.” But appearance is deceptive. The spirit-night, with its veneer of silent stillness, is when the mind’s real work is done. In de la Cruz’s model of spiritual ascent, we are instructed to enter the dark night because it is the only path that leads to the morning light of knowledge. Light is the dark’s child: progeny, not enemy.

Juan de la Cruz eventually escaped his cell by loosening the screws on the lock and scaling an outer wall by bedsheet-ropes. But not before the darkness of imprisonment transformed him, inspiring a poetical turn of phrase that has transcended the bounds of time and language.

My own scrap of existence — both spiritual and material — could not be more different, but I nonetheless recognize what de la Cruz described. When I read Jean Rhys’s autobiography, having set Hildegard aside, I encountered her admission of feeling like an instrument, like a “pen being used.” Moments

later, a solution to a problem I didn’t know I was trying to solve arose in my mind. My discomfort with Flanagan’s version of Hildegard as an artful claimant washed over me and then evaporated, as Rhys became a skeleton key. Despite the dissimilarities between Rhys and Hildegard — I’d venture this is the first time they’ve been joined in a sentence — they recounted the same basic experience. Both felt like a vessel into which meaning had been poured. We accept Rhys’s account of an involuntary creative experience as genuine, without believing she was really the pen of some outside force, so why shouldn’t we credit Hildegard’s in the same way? It was only because I had steeped myself in their life stories that this connection appeared at all.

The dark region of our minds holds a power we can’t control, but we can learn to humble ourselves before it. Since ancient times, astronomers have used a technique to see faint bodies in the further regions of the cosmos. You don’t look directly at the object but askance, allowing the eye’s rods to see it sidelong. To recognize the dark’s gifts, we must avert our gaze from the light.

A lack of struggle, a peaceful calm, is the state in which I have experienced insight, too. It seldom comes when I’m consciously reaching for it. Across the lives of writers, and my own life too, creations appear in the mind as if from nowhere. I call these appearances, our deeper self emerging.



In Hildegard’s case, light is not strictly metaphorical. Illumination really took hold: her waking vision flooded with light. Charles Singer floated the theory that what Hildegard described — bright light encroaching on her field of vision — was a migraine aura. More recently, the neurologist Oliver Sacks agreed. But for Hildegard, the vivid and discomfiting phenomenon would have readily conjured the Bible’s thicket of light metaphors, encouraging a divine explanation for the jolting experiences that no one around her shared. God was not something you chose to believe in, anyway. In medieval Europe, his power was a fundamental law; nothing occurred that was not his will. Actual light arrived at the same time as scripture’s meaning, and so to Hildegard, the light carried God’s instruction.

But light was culmination, not cause. Hildegard’s enclosure — walled off from worldly distractions — was a decades-long dark night, an uninterrupted incubation that enabled her brilliant mind to do its work. Prayer and scripture were her mental fabric for years; they were the source material that her mind had to hand, like the sculptor’s marble or the cave painter’s ink. Her days were spent in ritual recitations, in prayerful monotony that allowed the mind to wander. The familiar passages contemplated day in and day out for years in the dim anchorage arrived in her awareness in a sudden burst of light, recombined, carrying new meaning. Hildegard called that arrival, God.

Laura Cecile Moore is an essayist whose work has appeared in *Liberties Journal*, *Electric Literature* and *The Philosopher*.

THE SPANISH DISPATCH:

Preparing for totality

by Andrea Eschen

The day of the total eclipse in August, my husband, daughter and I piled off a bus onto an unpromising expanse of concrete, five miles from the city of Teruel. This was the site of a festival that the city authorities had organised for thousands of eclipse enthusiasts. Live music reverberated through our feet as we wandered towards trucks selling *pinchos* and beer. As the time neared for the moon to cover the sun, we gathered at an embankment overlooking a plateau for an unobstructed view of the first total eclipse to awe the country in 121 years.

While an astronomer-cum-master of ceremonies enlivened the crowd with jokes, musings, and the science behind this celestial phenomenon, we glanced at our watches every few minutes to prepare for totality. At 20:31, for one minute thirty-four seconds, daylight would fade into temporary night and we'd see the sun's corona. Just before that magic moment, the crowd groaned: a cloud was moving over the sun and moon. Its veil didn't budge and we missed witnessing the glowing halo. However, what we saw might have been equally powerful. The earth's closest star illuminated the cloud's wisps and folds as the sky turned deep orange. Our hearts stilled at the heaven's magnificence. They were also tinged with disappointment.

Given we missed the "real thing," my family and I made a pact to experience the total eclipse in southern Spain on August 2, 2027. It will take place at 10:50 in the morning. Individuals in other parts of the country will view the sun's partial coverage. Totality will range between 2 and 4.5 minutes in Spain and 6 minutes 23 seconds in Egypt.

As far back as the 13th century, Spanish scholars have turned their heads to the sky to observe astronomical phenomena. During the reign of Alfonso X "the Wise," king of Castile, León, and Galicia, scholars used mathematics to predict planetary positions and eclipses. The lay population in Spain and other parts of Europe, however, thought eclipses boded wars, rebellions, epidemics, famine, and crop failures. They also heralded the death or illness of a ruler.

Scientific knowledge about astronomy grew over the century, as did superstition. The University of Salamanca established a chair for astronomy around 1460. Though scientists calculated celestial events, eclipses still held powerful astrological and religious meanings. Spanish chronicler, Andrés Bernaldez, writing in 1478 about the reaction to a total eclipse, said at midday, "Se cubrió el sol del todo y se paró negro." The sun was covered and the sky blackened. "Fue gran temor de las gentes y huían a las iglesias." People were so afraid, they fled into churches where God could protect them.

Centuries later, Spain was home to one of the best astronomy laboratories in the world during the eclipse in August 1905. Researchers from at least eleven countries lugged telescopes, spectrographs, cameras, and crates of equipment to study totality for three minutes and forty-five seconds, the longest duration of anywhere worldwide. The blackout lasted long enough to conduct scientific observations on the outer atmosphere of the sun.



Knowledge of eclipses has evolved since this last event; nowadays, scientists can predict them through to 3000 CE. We know the sun's darkness won't bring death or changes to political leadership. We don't take shelter in houses of worship. The one reaction that has not changed over time is anticipation of a spiritual or mystical event. Now, people pay heavily to be entranced, which has created an economic boon for Spanish cities and towns.

My family exemplified this. After scouring websites for accommodation across eastern Spain eight months before the 2026 event, I found one reasonably priced hotel room in Teruel. According to *El País*, my behavior was typical. In areas of totality, expenses by foreigners increased 25.7 percent, 13 percentage points higher than the week before the event. In areas of partial eclipse, they went up by 18.5 percent. In Teruel, a town low on tourists' bucket lists, expenditures shot up 79 percent compared to the same week in 2025.

Trying to make good on our family commitment for next year's eclipse in southern Spain, I explored lodging options. Other astrotourists had beaten me to it. Already 97 percent of hotels and holiday lets were unavailable. *El País* reported listings for two-bedroom apartments for €4,233 and houses for €10,000 a night.

The costs have skyrocketed, in part, because the Spanish government has created such a successful national tourism and public-safety campaign for a *Trío de Eclipses*, those in 2026, 2027, and 2028 (an annular penumbra). Its website offers a countdown of days to the spectacle and information on travel, transportation, best viewing destinations, science, and safety. This promotion, among other sources, will bring about 681,000 additional tourists to experience the 2027 and 2028 events, according to *Analistas Financieros Internacionales*. The organization purports that, across the three eclipses, short-term-rental tourism could generate more than 1.3 billion euros.

That evening in Teruel, among thousands of strangers, and like so many before us, we sensed something magical. The anticipation when darkness descends and light returns unites people. Some gasp when blackness overtakes; others remain silent or cry. Powerful emotions connect us for a few minutes. The enormity of the event lets us glimpse forces much bigger than ourselves, as we recognize our tininess on the planet. Maybe it's this link—to those around us and the universe above us that explains why we'll pay so much and travel so far for a wondrous, yet fleeting, experience—one that rarely happens in our day-to-day.

After 2027, the next total eclipse in Spain won't occur until 2053. If you want to see one, now's the time to plan for it. I am, but I'll be awestruck from the outskirts of Madrid.

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 programmes across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, Andrea now writes about history, culture, and place through her *Substacks Building Modern Chicago* and *Snippets from Spain*.

ELAINE VILAR MADRUGA

Literature as resistance

By Cristina Jurado



Giving the Caribbean words. That's how I understand Elaine Vilar Madrugá's writing: a narrative nourished by tradition in order to update an Atlantic and tropical insularity, and project it into the future. After studying Theatrical Arts and classical guitar, this Cuban speculative fiction author started her literary career by publishing *La hembra alfa*, followed by other novels like *Los años del silencio*, *La tiranía de las moscas*, *El cielo de la selva*, and *Las cavidades*, as well as many short stories in different publications.

Madrugá's stories confront us with social traumas, particularly those tied to women's experiences. Her latest novel, *La piel hembra* (*Female Skin* in its English version), speaks of the wonders that subvert patriarchal power and push a community to question its traditional values.

I had the chance to share a meal with Madrugá a few years ago at the Celsius Festival in Avilés and we picked up the conversation we started back then, delving deeper into her concerns and her work.



The Madrid Review: From *La tiranía de las moscas* to *El cielo de la selva* and now *La piel hembra*, your novels have sunk their claws into society's entrails, exposing its complex structures, hidden desires, and deepest traumas. What compelled you to write this novel at this particular moment in your life and career?

Elaine Vilar Madrugá: *La piel hembra* marks the close of searching, and questioning the political reality of the world. A world that, incidentally, rewrites itself every day before our eyes - and, at times, in the face of our indifference - while increasingly refusing to define its horrors. This is the way I see it: writing as a map of memories, as an attempt to fix in time the (de)composition of the political and social body, the illusions that survive the collapse, the tremors that had fallen to us generationally. Every book is a journey through those seams of memory. A fight against time, against collective amnesia, against indifference. A kind of reality cure that feels almost always uncomfortable yet, hopefully, fascinating too.

TMR: After finishing *La piel hembra*, one feels as though an entire lifetime - or several - has been lived alongside its characters. What challenges did writing a novel with such emotional depth and temporal scope present, that you had not encountered in your previous works?

EVM: The body of the novel overflows its boundaries and perhaps that's why it obsessed me so much. As you know: obsessions are always dangerous, but also achingly beautiful: there's risk when a finger rests on a torch flame, when it's about to burn beyond remedy, and yet, how splendid the flame seems then, and how precious the finger that dares it.

I've never enjoyed nor suffered a creative process in quite the same way. In that sense, writing is a little like madness. A madness that is both terrible and delightful, one you don't know if you want to escape, or even if you can. It's been hard for me to leave the village of *La piel hembra* behind. I still see it in my dreams. And the further I get from it, the more I miss it.

TMR: To what extent can *La piel hembra* be read as the culmination of the personal and literary reflection you have been developing for years regarding the female body, desire, and motherhood?



EVM: As I mentioned before, it certainly is the close of a stage of writing because that's what I set out to do five years ago, when I began writing a tetralogy of novels that would share certain common themes. But I'm not sure it's the culmination of a search. Desire, motherhood and the body remain my primary obsessions, the questions that devour me most and best, and since my craft means asking questions (to see if by chance I ever stumble on an answer, though I doubt it), I know these themes will appear again in my writing. Disguised, perhaps. Bastard daughters of metamorphosis. With a little luck, they'll be in motion and changed. I prefer to think of *La piel hembra* as a stop along the way. A meaningful stop that, hopefully, will help me realise that in life and in literature, all paths end up resembling one another. And that, nevertheless, it's necessary to explore them before reaching a conclusion.

ELAINE VILAR MADRUGA

TMR: Reading your work, one has the sense that the impossibility does not intrude upon the world of your characters; rather, it has been there from the very beginning, waiting to be discovered. Are you more interested in inventing other worlds, or in revealing the hidden cracks within our own?

EVM: I'm fascinated by the possibility of imagining cursed towns, because they're a mirror of our own reality. My writing carries that Dantesque quality of the journey, the descent into an abyss that at first seems foreign and then, later, ends up resembling one's own abyss. I don't believe in the possibility of inventing worlds, but rather in the possibility of mirroring them.



Photo by Mauro Cantillo

TMR: For writers, making a living from their work has never been easy. Today, that challenge is complicated by the growing use of artificial intelligence in fields such as translation, illustration, and even creative writing. What is your view of the rise of these technologies in the arts and, more specifically, in literature?

EVM: We must defend what remains human in a universe that increasingly spills toward blurred ethical edges. The truth is, I don't understand: what kind of reader would want to hold in their hands a book that wasn't written, illustrated, or translated out of the anguish and questioning found only in one's own experience of mortality? Nor will I ever understand what kind of editor would want their titles touched by artificial intelligence. I see no charm in it. I see no soul in it. I see no value in it. I find no pleasure in it. It's essential that readers, illustrators, translators, editors, and authors safeguard, in a united front, the human freedom of art.

TMR: According to the Turkish author, Elif Shafak, literature can be an act of resistance because it refuses to simplify the world and gives voice to those excluded from dominant narratives. At a time marked by polarization, digital acceleration and increasing pressure to produce ever more immediate and categorical modes of discourse, do you think that the act of writing - and perhaps also the act of reading - is becoming a means of resistance?

EVM: Writing and reading have always been acts of resistance. In this time in which we've been given to live, just as much as in the past (and, hopefully, will continue to be in the future). To imagine is always an act of resistance, as is questioning, mapping, observing through writing. I'd go further: it's not only an act of resistance, but also a will to conceive and give birth to human alternatives in the face of the political, social, and ethical problems we confront with ever-increasing speed in a world in constant deterioration and metamorphosis; it's an instance that becomes a space of encounter and dialogue, where we're invited to look power in the eye and (sometimes) spit in it. Writing and reading are acts of defiance in a conventional reality, one still stratified in a way that keeps repelling diversity. That's why writing and reading are so important and so dangerous, insofar as they question the fabric that makes up the status quo and reclaim the human capacity to be heard against dominant narratives and against the silence so often imposed on us as the only way to survive. In a world where we've been told that whispering is the right way to exist, writing screams and sings.

TMR: Where do you see your narrative heading next?

EVM: Inwards, in an act of self-contemplation. In other words, it's heading towards exploration, towards the searching of a new story. Right now, I'm interested in many topics, and I need to do some winnowing, a reflection on the moment of my life I find myself in, in relation to what I want to tell. I'm obsessed with clichés, such as the feminine body in political dispute, the cadaverous in its relationship with the sanctified and as object of symbolic power, what it is to be a little girl in a world dominated by the hegemonic gaze of adults, the tragic destiny of territories, a fatal sense of temporality, families, bones, the lives of rabbits, mourning (which is in itself an endless topic, as they are as many ways to mourn as bodies and stories), the fragility of relationships, orphanhood and widowhood, to not understand what love is - maybe because at 37 I still ask myself what it is: a formula? a myth? a question?

Next year I will publish a collection of stories and will try to write a novel (if I find a literary residency that wants to host me). For now, I am enjoying that the uphill path from the village in *La piel hembra* is beginning to fill with readers and that, little by little, a bone or a flame will glow in every home.

THE VIEW FROM BEHIND THE COUNTER

Cliff's Notes



On the price of bad pricing

Cliff Shephard

Secrets of the Secret Kingdoms

bookshop

David Price

A few years ago, I was present at the London Book Fair when Charlie Redmayne, the soon to disappear (for 'reasons') CEO of Harpercollins UK, bemoaned the cheapness of books. "When I'm in New York," he proclaimed to the attending booksellers, "A cup of coffee is about the price of a paperback!". He then followed on by letting us know that there had to be some adjustment as they were "very, very cheap". This was met in that audience with an audible gasp of dismay from any attendees who either ran or worked in bricks-and-mortar bookshops.

As a bookseller working in an area in the UK where many deprived families struggle to buy books for both themselves and their children, I have seen the slow creep of pricing have a very real effect. As new paperbacks push beyond the £10 mark and some hardbacks past £30, the days of the impulse buy are certainly numbered. As the Christmas season approaches, customers who previously would buy Grandpa a thick, worthy book on the Roman Empire may instead get him a bottle of whisky, as it's cheaper. Increasingly though, publishers seem blind to the effect these rises are having.

One example of blatant money-grabbing from a publisher was the recent Robert Galbraith (yes, her) thriller. This eighth outing for Cormoran Strike, *The Hallmarked Man* was, priced in hardback at a mighty £10 more expensive than its contemporaries. The response from our customers was almost universally, "I'll wait for the paperback". Nine months later, when it was released in paperback, the price was the same as the others around it. So why did they 'price it up' for the hardback? Simply put: because they could.

The obvious consequence of this higher pricing is that bookshops will just carry less hardbacks. I know a decent number of independent bookshops in the UK who have cut back so much that only the big hitters will be bought in that format. This, in turn, means that debuts, sleeper hits and 'oh go on, I'll take a punt' offerings will not see the light of day in the bookshop, or I suppose the light of... a shelf. You know what I mean.

Any significant increase in the retail price for books only pushes away those who could benefit and who need them the most - whether for improvement, advice or entertainment. The margins that bookshops receive from publishers and distributors make any discounting commercial suicide, and for the most part the 'offers' you see mean that the shop is making pennies on each copy sold.

Bookselling is difficult enough as it is: increasing overheads, discount 'shops' selling the same books as you at half price, the evil internet... by pushing customers farther away with more expensive books there will be a knock-on effect which decimates bookshops, affects literacy and reduces the cultural impact on every town.

Although there will still probably be plenty of coffee shops for Charlie.

I have been asked to reveal the desperately paddling legs that support the insouciant aplomb of the bookselling fellow. My first response was to name them, them being: Bea, Pierre, Sydney and Angela, but that was not quite what was required. The question is: how does a bookshop work? How do we choose what books to stock? What author events to feature? What groups to host? How does it all come together? "It just sort of does" is apparently not an adequate answer, so here goes!

How do we choose what books to stock? Personal taste was important here to start with, my love for Spanish history and old-fashioned thrillers marked the bookshop initially, as did Bea's love of noir. Pierre brought passion and expertise to the Romantasy section, Angela to Art and Sydney to Poetry. But, most important of all is to listen to the customers, and to have a reasonably agile customer-order process - this, and reordering pretty much everything that sells and keeping an eye on new releases (including new film releases), leads to a natural evolution of stock, seasoned by *caprichos* and hunches! We have far fewer old-fashioned thrillers than the day we opened, and far more classics. Contemporary Literature requires a steady effort, and Romantasy just sort of keeps growing. If we were a bigger shop, we could have so much more - Essays and Ideas and Philosophy is bursting at the seams, and we have hardly scratched the surface of Business and Sport!

How do we choose what author events to feature? 80%+ of our events are born through either an existing relationship with the author or publisher (we have hosted most of the excellent independent publisher Ybernia's launch events since they got going) or a direct approach to us from the author or publisher in question, asking if we could feature their new book. The other 20% arise when we spot that a famous author is going to be in town, and reach out ourselves directly. We mostly get turned down nicely or ignored, but when it happens, it can be very exciting indeed ("sorry" is taken in the cool swinging stride of the idle bookseller!) and totally disrupts our steady 4-6 months in advance planning!

How do we choose what groups or activities to host? This has been pure serendipity-doo-dah from day one. After my corporate career came to a close and whilst dreaming of opening a bookstore, I also wanted to rekindle my creative writing fire, and joined the Madrid Writers Group. They gave me much needed support as Secret Kingdoms came to be and, as they needed a new place to meet, I invited them to start using the back room. They still meet there every 2nd and 4th Tuesday of the month and many of our author events have arisen from the same group. The Philosophy Group on the other hand arose because an individual, Tim Halliday, wandered into the store and suggested it - it's been a fascinating success ever since then. We also host various book clubs a month and are currently pretty much at capacity.

How does it all come together? I still don't really know, Secret Kingdoms has very much been a matter of making it up as we have gone along. The look and feel of the place has grown from the designs of a friend of Bea's, my daughter's development of them, and further input from Angela. The spirit and feel of the place is a mystery. Loving books and bookstores all our lives is obviously crucial to making it the happy endeavour it is, and there are still hopefully many more adventures to come!

THE DARKNESS OF THE MINE

Fiona Pitt-Kethley

When I first came to Spain, I lived in an expat area. Within a few years we escaped to Cartagena. I used the services of an ex-Marine with van to shift our furniture. He had a theory that everyone British there was fleeing something. It might be the police, a bad marriage, paying for a kid, past jail terms. In my own case it was something less dramatic: a failure in my career.

I'd had successful years from 1986 to 1994, books with large publishers, journalism for the best papers and poetry readings around the country. In the next few years most of this died off. When I left for Spain in 2002, the invitations to literary parties and most of the journalism had stopped. I no longer had a literary agent, and large publishers wouldn't take me seriously. The readings vanished.

I continued writing...



During weekend forays, while living on the Orihuela Costa, I took the bus to La Unión and Cartagena with my son. We visited most of the museums. When we went to the mineral one in La Unión he became determined to loot some of the pyrites from a mining train model. He was six years old at the time. In desperation I promised to get him better minerals from the nearest mountains and thus a new hobby was born.

I explored the Sierra Minera and wrote poems and prose. The prose was full of local history and took many years to research. The poems got placed in a variety of magazines in the UK and the US. They were received well. A second hobby was born out of the first when I decided I wanted to hear the old mining songs and booked seats for the last concert of the *Cante de las Minas* festival. My son was about eight. It was a challenge for a kid of that age as the concert went on for several hours, but he came through it well, propped up with some chocolate and churros in the interval. We both became lovers of flamenco. The *mineras*, a song form born in La Unión, impressed us with their sad poetry. From their brief lyrics emerged the darkness of the mine, before returning us to light.

The small publisher who published the prose book was determined to include a lot of photos, which hiked the price up to such an unrealistic level that there were few buyers. 35 quid for a paperback? You must be joking. In time I got the rights back and an unillustrated version is now available cheaply online. I called it *Washing Amethysts in the Bidet*. The collection of poems on the same theme is titled *Underground*. While the poems had done well in magazines, the small publisher that accepted the collection closed suddenly. I have done a translation and hope to produce a bilingual version soon.

In the poems, I often look at the present state of a mine or quarry while being conscious of its earlier condition. I find myself doing this everywhere in life. What I see is a kind of fusion of the present and how a place's history brought it to that state.

Here, for instance, is one on the Sultana Quarry.

'Corta Sultana'

The road winds slowly to the quarry's floor,
a Sleeping Beauty world where time stands still.
A digger from decades ago lies here,
Ruston Bucyrus on its towering sides.
Just yesterday, Goliath ploughed this path.
Its caterpillar tracks rolled where I stand.
Its well-oiled wheels and gears moved silently.

The men who worked here, now grown old and grey,
sit outside cafés talking politics.
We hear their echo from the town nearby,
a Babel noise of garbled human speech.
The mine below is empty and unlit,
a breeze sighs through its long-abandoned shafts.

I am a member of a local mineral club, and we take trips to other parts of Spain. It is a dangerous hobby and there were a couple of deaths, one in my club and the other in the Alicante club, someone I knew slightly. The ceiling of a mine can look intact but collapse. I may be an adrenaline junky, as I have also enjoyed doing karate, hill-walking and snorkelling. The songs known as *mineras* reveal a world of danger on the threshold of another, though their protagonists were not hobby miners, rather men who worked long hours for their daily bread and usually died young.

I continued to go to flamenco concerts. The area where I live puts on concerts in June and attracts some of the greatest names in flamenco such as Chano Lobato. I saw him perform when he was 80, shortly before he died. I am also a member of the local flamenco club which centres its concerts round a different area of Spain every year. The club is named after Antonio Piñana, a fantastic guitarist and son of a singer of the same name. His family has done much to preserve the local forms, like the *mineras* and the *Cartageneras*.

The only way forward I can now think of for my broken literary career is via translating and perhaps publishing in Spanish. I greatly regret my loss of a large audience, but I will still keep writing to the end.



Fiona Pitt-Kethley is working on translating her new novel into Spanish, with help from her fully bilingual son. It is set in a part of Cartagena known as Algameca, a shanty town where nobody pays any local rates as it is off the grid. A perfect setting for a story about an unusual group of people. The story is set in the present but draws on the unusual history of Algameca. In the military-owned part of the area the famous Moscow Gold was stored before it was given to Stalin at the start of the Civil War.

'WHAT YOUR TALENTS FIT YOU FOR AND YOUR INTERESTS DRAW YOU TO'

PHILOSOPHY AND THE CREATIVE LIFE

An interview with A. C. Grayling

By Jayne Marshall

A. C. Grayling is one of the UK's most prolific philosophers and authors. He believes that philosophy should be integrated in society, taking on an active and useful role and, to that end, he has published over thirty books on philosophy and other subjects.

Among his many books are *The God Argument*, *Democracy and Its Crisis*, *The History of Philosophy*, *The Good State* and *The Frontiers of Knowledge*. Grayling is also a contributor to the *Literary Review*, *The Observer*, *Independent on Sunday* and is a frequent broadcaster on BBC Radio 4 and the World Service. Additionally, he was a chairman of June Fourth, a human rights group concerned with China, and is a representative to the UN Human Rights Council for the International Humanist and Ethical Union.

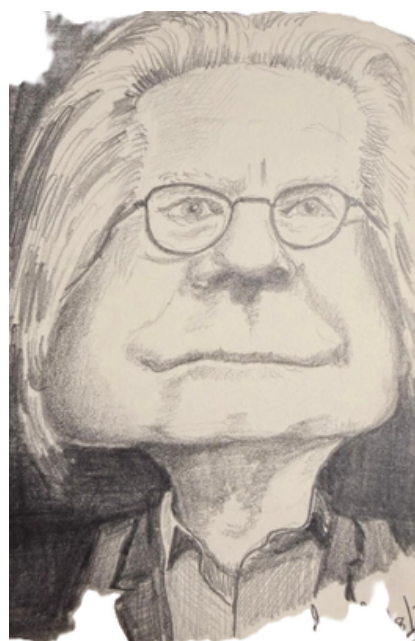
As well as his writing on philosophy and his social activism, Grayling is also a great supporter of the arts and literature, and has been a judge on the Booker Prize, before then being appointed Chairman of the Judges. He proceeded to be a judge on the Wellcome Trust Book Prize and the Art Fund prize.

And it is where philosophy and creativity meet, that *The Madrid Review* wanted to discuss with Mr Grayling.

The Madrid Review: "Art teaches nothing, except the significance of life", said Henry Miller; and most people never get to the second half of that sentence." One of my favourite quotes from your book *The Meaning of Things*. At university, I studied English Literature whilst living with a houseful of student nurses. They constantly asked me what the point of studying literature was, often adding that through their degrees they were helping people (whereas, they strongly implied, I wasn't). Were they right?

A. C. Grayling: They were right that their studies would lead to helping people, but wrong about the value of literature. There are more and less direct ways in which one contributes to the world; a person whose horizons, sympathies and understanding have been elevated by the study of literature has a huge amount to offer at all levels from the personal to the global, as a result of the expanded consciousness (and conscience) that reading promotes.

In fact, the education of both the intellectual and emotional faculties of the mind are powerfully enhanced by absorption of the stories we - humankind - tell ourselves about human experie-



Ángel Arévalo

nce and possibilities; we should all read and read, and read with attention and reflection, enriching our own experience of life by peering through literature's windows into the other lives, other ways, other experiences that it so wonderfully brings to us.

TMR: If people must insist on studying or creating art and literature, should it have a purpose, or some kind of useful social or moral employment? Or should art only exist and be made for its own sake?

ACG: Some art and literature has a didactic or persuasive purpose, some is created because its creator is impelled to the task by the impulse to do it even without any intention to instruct or persuade, but just to express.

However, I think art and literature cannot fail to have an effect on those presented with it; even negative effects are part of the 'nudge' that shapes thought and sentiment. An admirable thing about human beings (possessed of plenty of unadmirable characteristics also!) is both the impulse to create and the interest in seeing what is created.

Both serve deep needs, both are formative, whether in explicit or in more general unconscious ways. A world without art and literature would be a mute, drab, stodgy, uninspiring place.

Given that some would-be art is only 'would-be' precisely because it too earnestly tries to teach or persuade, thus undermining itself, and given that the surface message of much art is just the thing itself as an expression of the artist's impulse to produce it, I'd say that the most significant thing about art is that it exists for its own sake as art, even though *qua art* it cannot fail to affect those who encounter it.

A. C. GRAYLING

TMR: A meditation I listened to recently starts with the speaker asking listeners to think of what a flourishing (or abundant) life looks like for us. She prompts: 'Is it engaging in creativity, or being successful at work?' Are work, success and creativity mutually exclusive?

ACG: Not at all! They can be, and often are, facets of the same thing: the implied contrast is that 'work' (presumably of the wage-earning kind) is inimical to creativity, which alone in the view of some is what conduces to a flourishing and abundant life. There's a lot to say about this: ranging from the fact that wage-earning work can be creative, to creativity being a lot of hard work (think of writing a book, sculpting a life-size statue, etc.) - all the way to tending a garden, which is creative and sometimes laborious - no: there is no mutual exclusivity here, except where 'work' is no more than repetitive drudgery just to pay the bills, and so exhausting that nothing is left over for the energies of imagination. The industrial age has robbed many people of the creativity and flourishing that work can consist in.

TMR: Staying on the subject of work, your chapter in *Thinking of Answers* on the meaning of life features one of my all-time favourite quotes: '... the meaning of your life is the meaning you give it; it consists in what you create through the identification and pursuit of endeavours that your talents fit you for and your interests draw you to'. I've often thought of this when wondering what new fork in the road to take, or not, especially when it comes to meaningful work. Would you say these words of yours are good career advice?

ACG: Yes absolutely! Nothing to add!

TMR: As I learnt through your writing, the exact location and constituent parts of a personal identity are yet to be identified by scientific and philosophical investigation. I wondered about the identity of the artist within this. In Margaret Atwood's book on writing, *Negotiating with the Dead*, she talks about the particular identity of the female artist, citing Sarah Bernhardt's photograph of herself in a coffin: 'this was the image of a woman artist the public wanted and could understand: a sort of half-dead nun.' Does an artist get to decide their own identity or is it (at least partly) decided for them?

ACG: There is an interesting dynamic at work in the interaction being an artist's self-creation and her work's reception by others. Think of that point about a book being in some sense the co-creation of writer and reader, given that readers bring to a text a universe of selfhood through which they receive the text and absorb it.

(There's that saying, 'If a donkey looks into a mirror it cannot expect an angel to look back' - a bit harsh: looking into the mirror of literature can transform the looker into an angel looking back.)

So from the artist's point of view, her identity is hers to shape and project; from the recipients' point of view, what the artist has put into the public domain for them to interact with is an invitation for them to be participants, including how they view her. So there is no black/white either/or here - there is a fascinating melange of mutual and interacting perceptions at play.

In the final analysis, though, when an answer to the question, 'Who IS this artist?' demands to be settled, it has to side with what she, the artist herself, was or sought to be. For in that final analysis, the determiner is the fact that we are responsible for our lives - we must accept blame when earned, we are entitled to praise when merited, therefore we are the source and end point of who and what we are: our identities. (A note on this last point: it was Ruskin, I think, who said this very good thing: 'Don't judge a person by what they did, but by what they sincerely wished to be'.)

Alas, public perception can overwhelm matters such that the self-recognised or self-sought identity of an individual is not publicly recognised or attributed, and the artist becomes a creation of myth in other people's heads.

TMR: When I first moved to Madrid with my sister, we decided that good way to improve our Spanish was to find a philosophy tutor so that we could learn language in the context of philosophy. At our first lesson, the teacher sat us down at our kitchen table and asked: 'What is reality?' And thus we began to regret our plan! In Spain, the Bachillerato includes philosophy as a compulsory subject. As an outsider here, I feel people are more generally inclined to consider life through a questioning and philosophical lens than I was used to in the UK. Have you come across countries or cultures that are more or less inclined - perhaps through their foundational stories - to philosophical thought than others?

ACG: France - which likewise has philosophy in the Baccalaureate stage of high school - is so imbued with an interest in philosophy and a habit of philosophical discussion at every opportunity that it has prompted the witticism, 'the French say of something "It works in practice - but! Does it work in theory?"'

I think that the German, Italian and Russian cultures in their different ways have strong philosophical currents in the life of their national minds. Anglophone culture is very strong philosophically, but as a minority interest which is regarded with a degree of suspicion by the majority, 'intellectuals' being viewed askance. This is a pity.

AUTOBIBLIOGRAPHIES with Marilyn Quintana

An autobibliography tells the story of a life through the books that have shaped it. In this issue, we invite Marilyn Quintana to share the books that have shaped hers.

Marilyn Quintana is a Spanish-Ecuadorian journalist and broadcaster for *La Hora de La 1*, the flagship morning news programme on RTVE's La 1, Spain's main public television channel. She initially built her career within Spain's public radio network, Radio Nacional de España (RNE), serving as a versatile field reporter for the afternoon magazine show *Por tres razones*, and later as a host and interviewer for the *English Language Broadcast* on Radio Exterior de España.

A lifelong reader, *The Madrid Review* wanted to know which books have left their mark on Marilyn's life.



I wish I could remember all the books that I have read throughout my life, especially the ones I read as a child as I am sure they were responsible for me avidly continuing the habit into my adulthood. Going back to my earliest memories, I do remember a strong fixation on mythology. It was around this time that I discovered libraries and, probably inspired by *Matilda*, I would go there with my typical Spanish *carrito de la compra*, borrow as many books as I could carry, read them and repeat. I did have a nice collection at home as well, I read the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books again and again, in my own personal adventure to discover all the possible endings.

A few years later, like many teenagers, I came across YA literature and authors such as Laura Gallego, Veronica Roth, Lauren Kate or John Green filled my bookshelves. Just as social media was starting to flourish, "Twilight mania" absorbed me. In an attempt to reconnect with my younger self, I recently decided to reread *Twilight* (Stephenie Meyer). Looking back was equally fascinating and cringe-worthy, but as problematic as parts of it are, I still look at the series fondly, not because of the quality of the writing but because of the lasting friendships I made rooted in "fangirling" over vampires and werewolves. And having gone through a particularly difficult breakup myself, I was surprised by how pathetically relatable the second installment felt.

Following the romantasy line, I found *Mortal Instruments* (Cassandra Clare) severely underrated, especially the Origins Trilogy, and to this day I believe it would have been way more successful had we not been oversaturated with the genre. This series was my gateway to *A Tale of Two Cities* (Charles Dickens). Its characters, narrative development and unexpected plot twist captivated me and, of course, I was completely infatuated with Sydney Carton. He became a fierce rival to Mr. Darcy for my heart. Dickens, however, could not compete with Austen. To steer away from the obvious, I would like to give credit to *Emma* (Jane Austen), the coolest girl in literature.

Coming back to YA literature, I found *The Hunger Games* (Suzanne Collins) revolutionary as it did not centre around a love triangle but rather on fighting against a dictatorial, exploitative, propagandist and ultimately unjust system. This was around the time in which the 15-M movement was taking place in Spain and, together, I was so dazzled by the whole experience that it ended up shaping who I am and what I believe in today.



Another book that has accompanied me during my many existential crises, both in my teenage years and today, is *Letters to a Young Poet* (Rainer Maria Rilke). I read somewhere that it was one of my namesake, Marilyn Monroe's, favourite books and so I was quickly drawn to it. I have now cried to it more times than I can count. I still have the impulse to tear and eat 'Letter 8' anytime I find myself in times of trouble (to quote the Beatles). Life lessons to enjoy even if you are not young or a poet.

In the interests of becoming the cultured adult that I wanted to be and with a newly-found passion for classical literature sparked by a wonderful teacher, I spent my early 20s trying to develop more "sophisticated" reading habits. It was during that time that I read some of my favourites and agreed with the world that they deserved the title of "classics". I find it very difficult to pick just one or even a few, but for the sake of brevity, I will single out *A Hundred Years of Solitude* (Gabriel García Márquez) and *The Bell Jar* (Sylvia Plath). Both helped consolidate aspects of myself that I was still figuring out. The first one led me to reconnect with the "magical" continent I left when I was just a child. The second reached me at a time when I was figuring out my future and every decision seemed too definitive, the fig tree analogy haunts me to this very day.

And thus we arrive at my present self, actively trying to read more female and South American authors. Two books that I have read recently and which coincidentally deal with the quasi-mystical nature of dancing and singing are *The Dance Tree* (Kiran Millwood Hargrave) and *Electric Shamans at the Sun Festival* (Mónica Ojeda). Although the stories are set in different parts of the world and different time periods and contexts, the feelings I got from them were quite similar. Reading them felt like a dream, a sense of familiarity but with a bit of distance.

Set in Strasbourg in the 16th century, the first follows Lisbet, a pregnant young woman figuring out herself and her family while a dancing plague that only affects women hits the town. In the second, we have a look into a music festival set in a volcano through the eyes of a group of friends. All of them confused, all excited, all learning new things about the world and about themselves, all complex characters that change, and evolve, and grow, and who want to escape from their outer world, only to realise they also need to escape from their inner selves. What a marvellous experience it was to read both of these books at this time in my life.

I always say that my favourite book is the last one that I've read. All of them inevitably leave a mark on me, whether I liked them or not. I have to admit that writing this was harder than I initially expected, there are so many books that I wanted to include and even when I thought it was enough and I was satisfied, another one came to mind. But, what a joy to look back on the many ways books have shaped, influenced and, most of all, accompanied me throughout my life.

AUTUMN PICKS

Cliff Shephard harvests some highlights from the swathe of new novels published this season

When 'The Guest' checks in at a hotel in the small, remote waterside town of Vaim, he can immediately sense something is off. Among weird goings on, eccentric characters and déjà vu all over the place, he attempts to make sense of what has been, what is, and what is going to happen.

Having moved from cool, cult writer to Nobel Prize establishment winner, Jon Fosse continues to produce obscure work that is both fascinating and unnerving in equal measure. *Vaim Hotel* is the second book in a projected trilogy, but it can be read as a standalone without too much trouble - it will confound and confuse regardless, but in a good way. Fosse had become the standard bearer for the modern metaphysical novel and, with contemporary culture embracing the weirdness of films like *Backrooms*, he appears to be capturing a zeitgeist in this slim but impressive book which twists and turns in a hugely satisfying way.

***Vaim Hotel* by Jon Fosse is published in Paperback on 22nd October.**

In the not too distant future, Ari - newly released from prison - goes to a house party where people are appearing and disappearing in the kitchen. Exploring the possibility of something extra-dimensional occurring, Ari is faced with two different versions of her friends... and maybe herself.

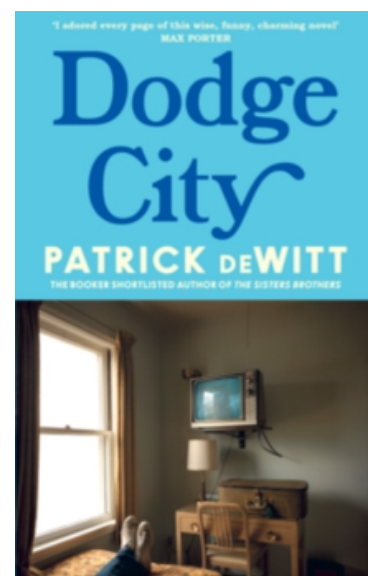
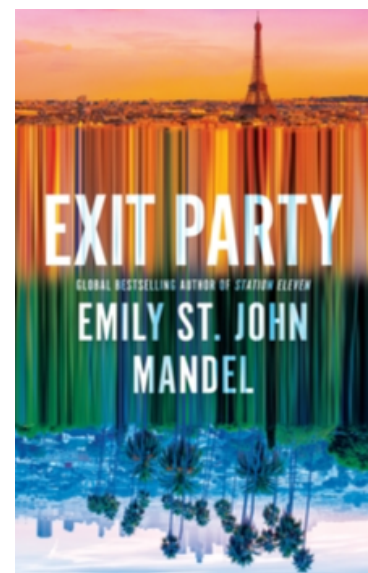
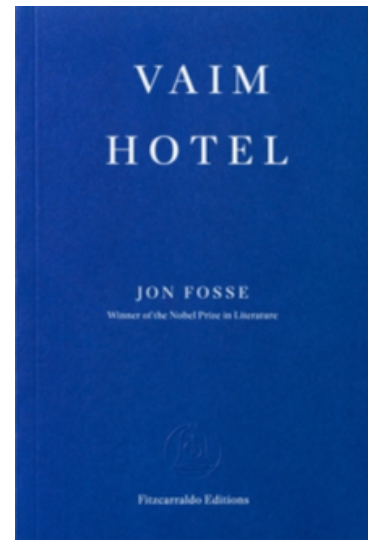
Spanning decades and alternate worlds, *Exit Party* is a story filled with regrets - paths not taken, words not said. Since her breakaway hit *Station Eleven* was published to much acclaim, Emily St John Mandel has produced a string of left-of-centre, mind-bending novels which, although always fascinating, haven't quite hit the spot in the same way. This time, however, what we are given is a rich and well thought-out story where all the loose ends are tied tightly by the end. Touching on our future inevitable surveillance world and the possible fragmentation of the US, the author is revealing just how close we are coming to a bleaker tomorrow.

***Exit Party* by Emily St John Mandel was published in Hardback on 17th September.**

It is 1967: to escape the Vietnam draft, ex-college student Lee Clark travels east across America to get to the Canadian border, stopping off to visit each member of his offbeat and somewhat estranged family along the way. Dosed up on amphetamines and mourning lost love, Lee's journey is not just physical but also emotional, with hard truths and reconciliations to face along the way.

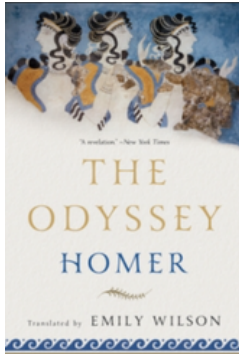
Much like Sebastian Barry, Amor Towles and John Irving, Patrick deWitt belongs to that group of authors who can do sad man Americana like no others. Those familiar with his previous hit *The Sister Brothers* will see a more reflective, less cruel side in *Dodge City*. Honing in on themes of duty, faithfulness and a dysfunctional family dynamic, deWitt expertly crafts a thought-provoking and warm-hearted novel which lingers in the memory long after reading.

***Dodge City* by Patrick deWitt was published in Hardback on 29th September.**



THE BOOK WAS BETTER...

Rounding up recent book-to-screen adaptations



Probably the most ambitious film released this year, Christopher Nolan's film version of *The Odyssey* has been polarising critics, audiences and historians alike. Impressive in its scale and execution, one can only admire what has been achieved on the screen and celebrate the actors who have made such a successful film. Perhaps this is why the choices made in the adaptation are what has instead been focused upon by many critics. In crafting a more pensive and regretful Odysseus (rather than the glory hunter that translator Emily Wilson wants, or the lustful shagger that historian Mary Beard wants), Nolan has sought to recontextualise Homer's epic poem so that it can resonate with more contemporary audiences. What is said about war, territory and morality in *The Odyssey* is as true now as it ever was, and Nolan's attempt to display this relevancy should be applauded.

THE ODYSSEY is in selected cinemas now.



When it was announced that the new Supergirl film would be an adaptation of Tom King and Bilquis Evely's hit graphic novel *Supergirl: Woman of Tomorrow*, most thought that there was no way they could screw it up. Fast forward to now and the fallout has been impressive, with the box office freefall denting the lauded reboot of the DC Universe films. Retaining little of the charm and thoughtfulness of the source material, Supergirl struggles to decide what it is. Everyone is trying hard and all, but amidst the garish CGI effects, mic-drop soundtrack beats and blatant, cloying fan service ("OK you can have Lobo, but only briefly!") it becomes hard to feel anything for any of the characters. What was supposed to be a truly bright chapter for a sometimes overlooked character has been reduced to just another superhero movie. And a bad one.

SUPERGIRL is currently streaming on HBO Max.



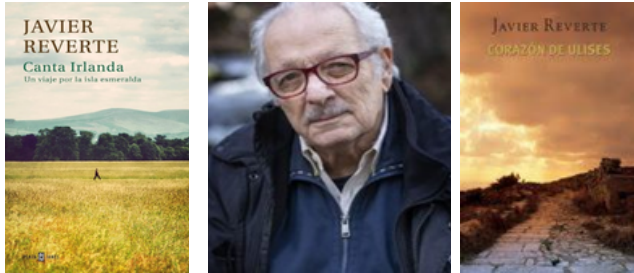
Despite a handful of mixed remakes of his novels, Bret Easton Ellis' work has never really been successfully executed on screen. With *The Shards* though, his pairing with the camp and glitzy TV shallowness of Ryan Murphy (from *Glee* and *American Horror Story*, amongst other things) is pitch perfect. Based on his most recent novel featuring a fictionalised Bret - a high school senior seemingly dodging serial killers, cults and weirdos - *The Shards* comes complete with the author's trademark monotone drawl narrative throughout the entire series. The concept of beautiful teens doing terrible things set against the 1980s LA scene is hardly a new concept, yet the vibe Murphy creates is a stylish, sardonic and truly creepy one, which makes each of the nine episodes both hugely entertaining and skin-crawlingly uncomfortable at the same time.

THE SHARDS is currently streaming on Hulu.

CORRELATIONS

by John Liddy

Javier Reverte: Intrepid Traveller



Javier Reverte (Madrid, 14 July 1944 – 30 October 2020)

We first met in The James Joyce pub, formally Kitty O'Shea's and, long before the current owner Matthew Loughney got his hands on it, El Café Leon. Once home to different factions and political opinions, literary *tertulia* and the place where it is rumoured that the Falange anthem, "Cara al sol" was penned, the downstairs of The James Joyce is now open to the public after years of inaccessibility, with its wall mosaics of "The Happy Whale" preserved.

That first meeting, with my brother Liam, was at a Bloomsday celebration almost twenty-five years ago and Javier's contribution was a reading from *Ulysses*, Chapter 12: The Cyclops, which takes place in Barney Kiernan's pub. After the event we fell into conversation about Joyce and Ireland, and both Liam and I were surprised by Javier's knowledge of all things Irish.

Shortly afterwards, we met again and Javier presented me with a copy of his book *Canta Irlanda*, which showed a deep understanding of Ireland's cultural and political history, its poets and novelists, customs and traditions. His love for the country and its people emanated from the pages, but he was not blinded to its faults. This was reciprocated by my love for the diversity of Spain and its people, warts an' all. We often laughed at our respective takes on the countries of our birth and adoption. Javier concluded his book with the following words: 'If I were to have a new life, dear reader, and could choose a land in which to be born, which one do you think I would choose?'

I was soon privy to Javier's immense knowledge of the world, which he imparted in a most unassuming and modest way. That initial surprise turned to admiration when I discovered that, as a journalist, Javier had covered events in the North of Ireland during its most violent period in the 70s. Javier the explorer and intrepid traveller unfolded before my eyes during each meeting and with every copy of *Suite italiana*, *Los caminos perdidos de África*, *Confinas* and *La aventura de viajar*, signed and dedicated to me and my wife, Pilar.

I learned about Javier the humanist, art critic, observer of places where writers and artists had once resided and began to see a poet in his make-up. He knew enough English to make sense of some of my own poems and his comments were always astute and generous.

On another occasion, over a pint in The James Joyce, Javier told me about his wish to film part of the documentary he was making in the pub, but it was not to be. It later appeared on RTVE as *Imprescindibles: Javier Reverte, el amigo de Ulises*. The documentary stands as testimony to Javier's sense of adventure, his unique approach to travel writing and his exploration of the big wide world that he brought back to his readers.

The last time we met was shortly before the pandemic lockdown in March 2020. It was a mild evening and we sat in a terraza near his home, on the Calle de Goya, sipping red wine and me regaling him with stories about my trip to China, a country he had visited but did not much care for. I had found the people good, as Pasternack once said about marketplaces, but Javier had a more negative take on his experiences in the land of dynasties. He told me that he was about to leave for his retreat in the village near La Granja to work on a new book and maybe on his memoirs. I suggested he send me a story for *The Hong Kong Review*, based in Tianjin, for which I was invited to guest edit a Spanish section. He agreed and we parted.

In mid-April I received the story, 'Bailando con monjas' and began working on translating it into English. It concerns an event that took place during the Spanish Civil War. Javier had strong opinions about that atrocity.

We exchanged some emails and in one of them he wanted to know how many people took part in the Easter Rising of 1916 in Ireland. I gave him the information and that was the last we exchanged.

In November 2020, long-overdue copies arrived from the much-delayed issue of *The Hong Kong Review*, Javier's story included. He didn't see a copy of the issue but I'm sure he would have liked the idea of being published in China. The editor, Tony Huang, remembered Javier and two other writers in a later issue, as contributors who had passed away.

Javier's posthumously published works include a novel *Muñecas rotas* (2026), *El hombre al río* (2024) – about the young Francisco de Orellana, from Extremadura, who navigated the Amazon River; and the memoirs *Queridos camaradas* and *Una vida sin billete de vuelta* (2021) – about his younger years and his travels, his philosophical take on life and his literary taste. Throughout his life, Javier published more than sixty books, including essay, poetry and short story.

One of Javier's last public appearances was at a celebration of the life and work of renowned Hispanist, Ian Gibson, in the Ateneo de Madrid on Bloomsday in 2019. At that event he read a passage from *Ulysses*, Episode 13: Nausicaa. Next Bloomsday, as with all recent celebrations, I will, hopefully, be raising a pint to Javier – friend, novelist, poet and intrepid traveller.



John Liddy was born in County Cork, Ireland and has lived in Madrid since 1982. In 1975, he co-founded *The Stony Thursday Book* with the poet Jim Burke, establishing what would become one of Ireland's longest-running literary journals. Liddy has published many books of poetry, including his most recent *True to Form* (Revival Press) and *Spanish Points* (Huergo y Fierro), available from Secret Kingdoms bookshop in Madrid.

MÁS ALLÁ DE MADRID: THE VIEW FROM LATIN AMERICA

“We’re always on the side of the most vulnerable”: the Buenos Aires publisher using culture as activism by Romy Hügler

Hugo Montero - journalist and founder of *Sudestada* - is still quoted, years after his death, by colleagues as saying, “se puede hacer periodismo incluso en las peores condiciones”. In 2001, the year he founded the renowned Argentinian publishing house and magazine, the “worst conditions” go beyond the imaginable: a country thrown into gruelling economic crisis and political upheaval, which saw five presidents in as many days.

In our conversation, Natalia Bericat, a writer and publisher from *Sudestada*, recalls how the magazine was created: “*Sudestada* was born in this moment of extreme crisis, a moment we call “El Argentinazo”, where we were seeing dead bodies in Plaza de Mayo: at this time, colleagues were in the street covering what was happening”. The word *Sudestada* refers to the strong southeast wind typical to the Rio de La Plata region, but it’s also intended to evoke the word “Sur”, South, because of its birthplace in Lomas de Zamora, the rough southern suburbs of Buenos Aires, where Montero and other journalists produced magazines in black and white that they distributed to kiosks and universities.

“The context of 2001 marks everything we do, because *Sudestada* has always been committed to a more critical, leftwing perspective,” says Bericat. “We don’t always agree, but we’re always on the side of the most vulnerable (...) we’re always returning to things like memory, the fight for public universities, Argentina’s indigenous populations, women’s issues... these are the issues that we tackle in our work.”

Twenty-five years on from these dramatic origins, Bericat tells me that journalism and culture in Argentina are once more under threat. “It’s increasingly difficult to sustain an independent operation: all around us, bookshops and cultural organizations are closing due to state defunding.” Beyond funding issues, Argentina’s economic conditions have created a poverty so dire that, “perhaps the first thing people stop consuming is books, because, well - first you have to eat, and then you can think about other things”.

Sudestada has two main parts, its publishing house and its journalism, which includes a digital magazine and huge social media presence. Since the pandemic, publishing has formed the bulk of *Sudestada*’s livelihood: “We don’t want to depend on any government or political party, so we don’t receive any funding,” Bericat says. “We sustain ourselves by selling books.”

The books, however, are more than just a financial lifeline: they are key to *Sudestada*’s ideological mission. The description to Bericat’s own novel, *Terca* (2026), reads: “Estas páginas son un inventario para combatir las injusticias”. *Sudestada* publishes a diverse range of fiction and non-fiction, including works by “escritores villeros” (writers from the slums, such as Damián Quilici, author of *Mamá Luchona*), works of LGBTQ+ fiction (*Amores Urgentes*, by Juan Solá) and writing centred on women’s issues, such as Bericat’s own novel *Malparidas*. *Malparidas* (2021), or “badly born”, was inspired by the 2018 Green Wave movement for legal abortion. She makes it clear that, at *Sudestada* “what we do (as an organization) is directly related to what we write”: culture is a tool for activism.



The dismissal of cultural bodies such as *Sudestada* by Argentina’s current government has more sinister undertones, too. Independent, leftwing organisations find themselves in a hostile environment: “What we’re seeing in Argentina is the same as what’s happening all over the world: the rise of the far-right and hate speech,” Bericat tells me. In Argentina’s case, this is evident in official discourse regarding the military dictatorship and the 30,000 people disappeared by the brutal regime. “We’re facing a government that doesn’t just deny the facts of history, but vindicates its atrocities, which is far worse. We have politicians who visited mass murderers from the regime in prison and tried to pardon them so they may be freed.” Controversy around Milei’s revisionist stance on the political genocide of the 1970s peaked in March, around the 50th anniversary of the military dictatorship. Bericat states: “The role of journalism is to tell people what’s happening, right? Tell people when a grandchild appears who was stolen during the dictatorship. We know that if independent bodies don’t do this work, the mainstream won’t discuss it.”

She draws a parallel between how the government and mainstream media cover events in Palestine, saying, “*Sudestada* and very few other media outlets talk about Gaza, because we’re routinely censored and have our posts taken down. There is a huge interest behind hiding the genocide (...) and those are the people *Sudestada* wants to make uncomfortable and expose - those people who don’t want us talking about Palestine but also don’t want us talking about cinema, theatre, poetry (...) in the “culture wars”, that’s what side we’re on.” The ultra-wealthy’s monopoly of the mainstream media is also the subject of *La casta: Los protagonistas de la estafa mileísta*, a recent publication, by Felicitas Bonavitta. Bericat synopsis: “This book is the story of all those surnames in Argentina - the Menems, the Benito Lynchs and Pueyrredóns - who have always been landowners, the owners of everything in this country, and which are still governing today.”

Sudestada has become synonymous with political militancy in Argentina; it has a huge social media following for the articles, poetry and book promotions posted daily. In August, *Sudestada* partnered with Juan Solá to turn its bookshop in Buenos Aires into a theatre for weekly performances, including a play by Zuleika Esnal called *Amelia y la eternidad*, which draws parallels between the bombings of Guernica and the bombings of Plaza de Mayo in 1955.

When I ask Bericat about future projects, she answers with the enthusiasm to be expected of someone who is part of an organisation whose mission is to produce and promote works charged with cultural activism. Amid many upcoming releases, *Sudestada* is particularly excited about its 25th anniversary cultural event: the “Feria del Libro Utopía” in November. Bericat lets me know that I, and readers of *The Madrid Review*, are all invited.

ISSUE 9 WRITERS AND POETS

Poetry

Kathleen Bell is an East Midlands-based poet and fiction writer. She has published two chapbooks (with Oystercatcher and Leafe Press) as well as a full collection with Shoestring.

Sharon Black is from Glasgow and lives in a remote valley of the Cévennes mountains in France. Her fifth full collection of poetry, *Things That Fruit in Darkness*, was published in May 2026 by Vagabond Voices. She is editor of Pindrop Press. www.sharonblack.co.uk

Ricky Monahan Brown is a Scottish writer based in Edinburgh. He is the author of *Stroke: A 5% chance of survival* and the pamphlet *Drawer of Letters*. A German translation of his novella *Little Apples* is forthcoming in 2027.

Stephen Claughton has published two pamphlets, *The War with Hannibal* (Poetry Salzburg, 2019) and *The 3-D Clock* (Dempsey & Windle, 2020). He chairs Ver Poets and recently co-edited their 60th anniversary anthology. 'Night Nurse' is from a sequence, 'Unlucky Thirteen'.

Oliver Comins' poetry has been collected by The Mandeville Press, Anvil Press Poetry and Templar Poetry. A second full collection, *What Will Happen Next*, will be published this autumn by Templar Poetry.

Hélène Demetriades's won the Ware Poets Open Poetry Competition, 2026 and came 2nd in the Poetry London Prize 2025. Her poems have appeared in *Perverse*, *Magma*, *Poetry London*, *Abridged*, *The Marrow*, and others. Her debut collection *The Plumb Line* was published in 2022.

Peter Devonald is a Forward Prize, Pushcart, twice BotN and Children's Bafta nominee, winner Broken Spine Readers' Choice, Loft Books, Waltham Forest, FofHCS, two HoH's, runner-up Shelley Memorial and N2tS. Widely-published (*Broken Sleep*, *IS&T*, *Abridged*, *The Spectator*). Whispering Wisdom judge.

Dolo Diaz is a scientist / poet with roots in Spain, currently residing in California. Her work has appeared in *ONE ART*, *The Summerset Review*, *Centaur*, *The Indianapolis Review*, *2River View*, among others.

María Castro Domínguez is author of *A Face in The Crowd*, her Erbacce-press winning collection. Winner of The Plaza Poetry Prize; highly commended in the Red Shed's and the Ware's Poetry Competition. Nominated for The Forward Poetry Prize.

Neil Elder is looking to place his new collection. He won the Cinnamon Press debut prize with *The Space Between Us*, and *Codes of Conduct* won their pamphlet prize. Other publications have followed. Neil hosts the poetry podcast, *Waterskiing On Poetry*.

Rebecca Farmer's debut pamphlet, *Not Really* was a winner in the Poetry Business Pamphlet Competition. Her latest publication, *A Separate Appointment* is published by New Walk Editions. Her work has appeared in *Poetry Ireland*, *Poetry Wales*, *Under the Radar*, *The New Statesman* and other places.

Matt Gilbert's work has appeared in various publications, including: *Dust*, *Finished Creatures*, *Ink Sweat & Tears*, *The Madrid Review* and *The Rialto*. His collection *Street Sailing* came out with Black Bough Poetry in 2023.

Charles Hensler lives and writes in the northwest United States. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *West Trade Review*, *Trampoline*, *North American Review*, *Epiphany*, *JMWW*, *Rust & Moth*, *The Shore*, *Parentheses*, *One Art*, *Stone Circle Review* and others.

Nicholas Hogg is the author of *Tokyo*, inspiration for the Ridley Scott film, *A Sacrifice*, starring Eric Bana and Sadie Sink. A winner of the Poetry London Presents, Gregory O'Donoghue, and Liverpool poetry prizes, his second collection, *Swimming with Horses*, is out now.

Mary Howlett lives in Ireland. She is published in *Southword*, *Dodging The Rain*, *Frogmore Papers*, *Poem Alone*, *Steel Jackdaw*, *Swerve*, *Poetry Bus 12*, *Allegro*, *N&H Journal*, *Amethyst Review*, *Fig Tree*, *Stone of Madness Press*, *Southlight 37*, *Amethyst Review*, and elsewhere.

Paul Ings, born in Bournemouth, now 33 years in the Czech Republic. Poetry in *Magma*, *The Reader*, *Wild Court*, *The Interpreter's House*, *Ink Sweat and Tears*, and many anthologies. Translations from Czech poetry in *BODY Literature*.

Emma Lee's publications include a novel *Stalling an Ambush* (Pegasus 2026) and poetry *The Significance of a Dress* (Arachne, 2020). She co-edited *Over Land, Over Sea* (Five Leaves, 2015), reviews for magazines and blogs at <https://emmalee1.wordpress.com>.

James Lilliefors is a poet and journalist, originally from the Washington, D.C. area. His poems have appeared in various literary magazines and received nominations for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. He was runner-up for the 2026 Silent River Poetry Prize. His chapbook *Sudden Shadows* was published last year.

Merryn Williams lives in Oxford. She has published translations of Lorca's *Selected Poems* (Bloodaxe Books), and four volumes of poetry, four anthologies (ed.) and a selection of Ruth Bidgood's poems for the much-missed Shoestring Press

David Lumsden's poems have appeared in several journals including *Fulcrum* (USA), *Pennine Platform*, *PN Review*, *The Rialto*, *The SHOp*, *Smiths Knoll*, *Sunk Island Review*, and the anthologies of short-listed poems for the Newcastle Poetry Prize (Australia) in 2012, 2014, and 2021.

D.A.Prince has three collections with HappenStance. *Common Ground* won the East Midlands Book Award 2015. *The Bigger Picture* was published in 2022. New Walk Editions published a pamphlet, *Continuous Present*, in 2025.

Martha Sprackland is an editor, writer and translator. *Citadel* (2020) was shortlisted for the Forward and the Costa prizes; a new collection, *Question to the Creatures*, is forthcoming in 2027. Her translations of John of the Cross are published by Penguin Classics.

Paul Stephenson's *Hard Drive* (Carcanet, 2023) was shortlisted for Lambda Literary Award and Polari Book Prize. He has three pamphlets including *The Days That Followed Paris*, written after the 2015 terrorist attacks. He co-edited the 'Europe' and 'Ownership' issues of *Magma*.

Jane Thomas is a writer and coach based in Oxford. *Coracle* - a philosophical, political, and personal reflection on Alzheimer's and care - is just out with Live Canon. www.janethomas.org

William Thompson's poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Poetry Wales*, *Stand*, *Poetry Birmingham*, *Bad Lilies*, *Wild Court*, *The Interpreter's House*. He is the co-editor of the poetry journal, *Yield*. His pamphlet *After Clare* (2022) is published by New Walk Editions.

Róisín Tierney is an Irish poet who divides her time between London and Granada. Her pamphlet, *Dream Endings* (Rack Press) won the 2012 Michael Marks Award. She has published two collections: *The Spanish-Italian Border* (Arc 2014) and *Tiger Moth* (Turas Press 2022). *Tiger Moth* was one of the Books of The Year in the *TLS* in December 2022.

Rory Waterman's collections, published by Carcanet, are: *Tonight the Summer's Over* (2013; PBS Recommendation, shortlisted for Seamus Heaney Award shortlisted); *Sarajevo Roses* (2017; shortlisted for Ledbury Forte Prize); *Sweet Nothings* (2020); and *Come Here to This Gate* (2024). He is Professor of Modern Literature at NTU.

Prose

Noor Ali is a Pakistani writer in Amsterdam. His fiction follows minds shaped by South Asian histories, myths and contradictions into unexpected spaces. His work appears or is forthcoming in *South 85 Journal*, *Beyond Words*, and *Flash Fiction Magazine*. X: @litficNoor.

Victoria Cook lives in North-West England where she writes, reads, occasionally cleans, observes dragonflies and photographs fungi. She was shortlisted for the Northern Writers Awards - Hachette Children's Novel. This is her first time writing for adults and first publication.

Lisa Fransson is a bilingual author writing for children in Swedish and novels and short fiction in English. Her debut novel, *The Shape of Guilt*, is published by époque press. Find her on Substack under *This Writing Life*.

Joseph Gilbride is a writer based in Philadelphia. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Molotov Cocktail*, *Chatterbox!*, and the New School's *LIT Magazine*. Find him on Instagram @j.ger.gilbride.

Shivangi Gajwani Jain is an aspiring fantasy author, practicing dentist and published academic. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *NELLE*, *Gordon Square Review*, *The Adelaide Lit*, *Quasar Review*, *Hemlock Journal* and elsewhere. She lives in Mumbai, India, with her family.

Pip McGough is a UK-based poet and freelance writer, published in *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Wildscape*, and other journals. His work explores place, violence, myth and memory. He writes on Instagram as @manifest_gothic.

Stephen Orr is an Australian author of novels, long and short stories and mainly literary and environmentally themed essays. His latest novel, *The Night Parrots* (Wakefield Press), is about a dying missionary and his son, trying to escape the Australian desert.

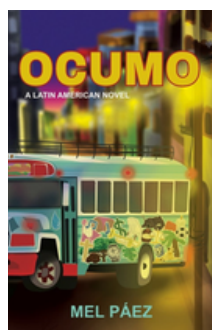
JB Polk currently lives in Chile and has recently won 1st prize in the International Human Rights Arts Movement. She was also shortlisted for the 13th Teresa Hammel contest for her first short story in Spanish.

Seth Wade is a technology ethicist, fiction writer, and poet. He's a Best of the Net and Pushcart Prize nominee, long-listed for Wigleaf Top 50, and reads for *Southeast Review*. Find more of his work or contact him at <https://www.sethwade.info>

OUR RECOMMENDED READING



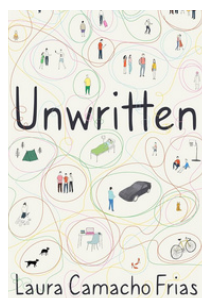
Donna Miscalta's *Ofelia & Norma* follows twin sisters whose bond fractures as they leave home and confront a world that polices women's bodies. Moving through separation, trauma, secrecy and reunion, the novel explores sisterhood, identity, survival and resistance, balancing emotional intensity with dark humour and a fierce sense of agency.



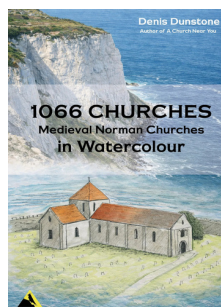
Mel Páez, sets *Ocumo* in a fictional Latin American city where corruption, power cuts and hyperinflation are ordinary realities. Through a diverse cast—including politicians, journalists, entrepreneurs and domestic workers—the novel explores power, inequality, ambition and hope, creating a portrait of society navigating political and economic uncertainty.



Mark Elliott, aka Window Licker, tells his life through lyrics, poetry, memories and images in *Stick It Up Yer Jumpah*. Drawing on decades in London's punk scene, the memoir traces music, friendship, family and survival. Raw, irreverent and deeply personal, it offers an unconventional portrait of a musician and the world he inhabits.



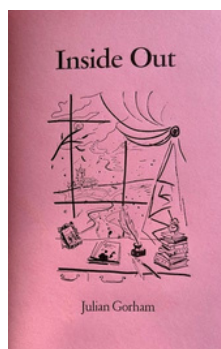
Laura Camacho Frias's *Unwritten* follows thirteen-year-old Leo after his mother disappears, leaving behind a secret memoir. As he reads her memories, Leo uncovers family secrets that lead him toward Spain and a branch of his family. The novel interweaves coming-of-age, mystery, memory and questions about how the past shapes us.



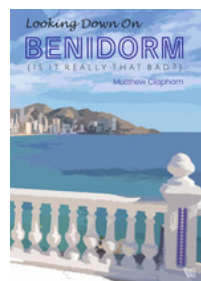
Cybirdy's *1066 Churches: Medieval Norman Churches in Watercolour* takes readers across Normandy and England to explore Romanesque and Gothic churches shaped by the Norman world. Written and illustrated by Denis Dunstone, the book combines architectural observation and luminous watercolours, inviting readers to encounter medieval buildings as both monuments and landscapes.



Julie Sheridan's *Umbellifire* is her debut poetry collection, bringing together poems shaped by language, place, memory and observation. Sheridan, a Scottish poet living in Barcelona, draws on her relationship with Spanish language and culture. The collection offers an intimate, poetic and observant voice attentive to landscape, identity and everyday experience.



Julian Gorham's *Inside Out* gathers seventeen poems that find significance in the rituals, objects and encounters of everyday life. Rhythmic, playful and sharply observant, the collection explores language, memory, friendship and the textures of ordinary experience. With wit and musicality, Gorham transforms seemingly small moments into poems of warmth, precision and surprise.



Matthew Clapham's *Looking Down on Benidorm* looks beyond the clichés of Spain's most notorious resort to uncover its history, contradictions and unexpected cultural richness. Drawing on research and personal experience, Clapham explores tourism, urban development and the people who shaped the city, inviting readers to reconsider a place they thought they knew.



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