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PETER RAMM  
*Leaves in August*

COVER ARTWORK BY IRISH ARTIST EMMA BARONE



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The Mekong, Laos. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.





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Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

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Peter Ramm. Photo credit: Carol Unwin.

Peter Ramm is a poet and teacher who writes on the Gundungarra lands of the NSW Southern Highlands. His debut poetry collection *Waterlines* is out now with Vagabond Press. In 2022 he won the prestigious Manchester Poetry Prize. His poems have also won the Harri Jones Memorial Award, The South Coast Writers Centre Poetry Award, The Red Room Poetry Object, and have been shortlisted in the Bridport, ACU, Blake, Newcastle, Tom Collins, and KSP National Poetry Prizes. He has been published in *Westerly*, *Cordite*, *Plumwood Mountain*, *The Rialto*, *Eureka Street*, and more. <https://www.peterramm.com/>

## PETER RAMM

### LEAVES IN AUGUST: OR SEARCHING FOR THEM.

A few weeks ago, during the term break, I spent a few days re-fencing the back corner of my yard. We had removed a row of Cyprus that have outgrown their welcome and had begun to loom over the house and neighbouring sheds. Behind the row was a broken-down farm fence, splintered with barbs, ramshackled with clumps of rusted chicken wire, and leaning further than a spirit level would care to measure. As a part of the task my wife and I had to dig out the old posts, cut out all the old fence, trim back the jasmine that had osmosed into its crooked lines, and breakup a footing of concrete the previous homeowner had laid. We were shocked that the owner, who we found out later had worked at the local cement works, had chosen to concrete in the star pickets along the row. It translated to hours of smashing cement with the sledgehammer. It felt like a war between what would break first, the cement or the joints in my fingers—thankfully it was the cement. But what we thought would be a two day job, turned into four. And in an ironic turn, a week later we adopted a little puppy into the house, and I had to again re-mesh the bottom third of the new fence with wire.

It brought me to thinking about the work of a poem. Those we sit down to write in an evening, and a week later remain unfinished. That's my experience anyway. This year has been incredibly slow on the 'writing' front. A bit like the diet front, there have been starts, and inevitable stops, when my day job crept in like a vine in spring—into the pockets of time I thought I'd safely tucked away for writing.

Or when my young children's feet scamper over the floorboards and pound the wooden steps up to my room—only to be outdone by the moans or cries in their voices: they need milk, a toy car fixed, their brother said something mean. And so, the poem sits and slants its intentions over a week, or two, or half a year. I wrote to a friend at the end of 2021, that it had taken me six months to finish the poem I had started in July—I'm still not sure if its any good. And yet, it's important work we do no matter the time it takes.

I remember many years ago when I started writing that I'd read a remark by Mark Tredinnick that went something like, "a poem is a leaf that tells a tree." I've wrestled with that notion for years. Initially, I didn't like the image too well. What does a leaf tell a tree? It's the tree that bore the leaf. Isn't the tree telling us more? Is the leaf missing the big picture? Yet, I keep coming back to it. The more I've rolled it in my mind, the more truth there seems to be. I'd obviously missed the concept the first time, and although I think I perceived it shortly after the initial reading, it was that first miss that unsettled me. There's always that chance with poetry. A line missed the first time—the reward of re-reading, of further analysis, and dwelling. Having been an avid Gardner for a few years, growing show dahlias, and landscaping my yard, I revisited the line again, and spent some time on it. I know what a leaf tells about a tree. It's often the first place a gardener looks for the 'tells' of the health of a plant: is it variegated, are the leaves the right shape, have they grown to size, are they withered, spotted black with mould, eaten by aphids, curled from microscopic bugs, the right colour? Is the soil too wet or dry? Is the fertiliser working? I could tell the future health of the dahlia plant and flowers from its first few leaves, months before the florets began to show. And so the leaf told the tree. It spoke of the future and of the past. It called out what was needed—like a poem holding a mirror to its writer or reader, and in turn, the world.

And then, three nights ago I had a moment like that. I saw my reflection in a poem, in the corner of some words strung by the lyrical mind of another. It was, funnily enough a poem by Mark that he was reading at Sydney Poetry Lounge where he and I were featuring. The poem, "Flash Fiction", from his new collection *A Beginner's Guide* (Birdfish, 2022) conveyed a sense of something I'd known for years but had never found a way to get to. There it was in vivid clarity,

"SO THE PHONE rings and it's a girl in pyjamas sitting by the freeway  
smoking cigarettes she gave up months ago and she tells me how she loves a poet  
who doesn't really love her *because poets are better at writing than doing it*"  
[my italics added]



Poets are better at writing it. Like a carpenter whose house is never renovated for the time he spends on others' work. Like a teacher, too busy to read his children's writing because he has a pile of student papers to mark on his desk. It's a hard truth, one that needs reflecting, Shakespearean in its tragedy. And that's where great literature should take us, that's the leaf of poetry. That we are not perfect, that we write to be our better selves, that ultimately, we know how far we lean from our initial intentions. How well-made foundations can grow old with time and bend when we swell like the Cyrus trunks with life's cares and the accumulated stresses of daily life. At the heart of those realisations and observations lay the work of the poem. In its truer sense the work of metaphor to connect the way we see the world to all its layered meaning. It's the poem that transcribes and transports us there, in my experience, at times starting somewhere, and eventually bending the writer to its will. There's freedom in that, as Anthony Lawrence said at his and Audrey Molloy's launch of their collaborative collection *Ordinary Time* (Pitt Street Poetry, 2022), "I didn't know what I was going to be writing, because I never do when I start a poem, I don't like to know about subject matter so much. Because poems tend to write themselves a lot... we're useless to question it." But what then, if setting the string line of our work is useless? It's in this sort of paradox that a love of poetry flourishes. Jane Hirshfield in her much cited *Ten Windows: How Great poems Transform the World* writes, "Perhaps for something to be found, the only thing that matters is that there be searching—certainly that is the way in the writing of poems." And so, poets are seekers. Seekers of the truth in a crumbling fence line. Seekers of the tree that the leaf speaks of. Seekers of our inner humanity, the parts of us we leave unsaid and wish against all odds, to be.

We 'dig' as Heaney saw it, beneath the surface of ordinary life. And hope, I imagine, that what we build will outlast us. That the taut lines we tension on the page, will stand for some time. That the reader will sense the immediacy of the moment in our words—that they may feel the same depth of emotion that we plumb when we hammer the pen to the page.

Works cited:

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*Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not.*  
—Seamus Heaney

I.

January again, the mile long beachhead, rain  
                                 Out back,  
   and I'm walking in the whole sea—no edge,

Grayscale to the horizon,  
                                 hung like a portrait

Of nimbostratus. Here, the morning's a stubborn  
 Shadow of night, like the first work of a poem  
 —The slant light, the slow movement through lines like the long  
 Corrugations of sand dune  
                                 water marked by tides.

There's a dullness to the bay, somewhat hungover,  
                     The slow topography of foredune and foreshore  
 —Gulls colonising the sand flats in monochrome.  
 It's hard not to see the undertones of a life  
                     In the rip,  
 in the undertow of waves  
                     —backwashed

## II.

And heaved out. But there are my boys,  
                                little titans  
  Inventing their own theogony on this coast

—Otus and Ephialtes  
      hurling spears of drift  
Wood at each other, Artemis a shearwater  
In the salt bush. These moments glean syllables, one  
Unstressed, the next stressed, the soft beats, one up, one down  
Their feet and the harshness  
                                of their shrieks. Virgil  
Had them reaching to tear Jupiter from heaven,  
      But mine are content with casting fistfuls of sand  
As libations to Poseidon. Around the spit,  
The estuary retreats each year, its sea grass  
Remnants  
      like a routed army  
                                on the lake's edge.

*continued overleaf...*

## BURRILL LAKE AFTER RAIN

## BURRILL LAKE AFTER RAIN *contd...*

### III.

And now, the boys out front,  
                                are scouting for plunder.  
                                A white-faced heron sits old as an oracle  
On a lopped branch of swamp oak,  
                    the boys miss her verse,  
Their shins deep in the flat water, a world away  
From Delphi. Car tyres on the new bridge ring the lake  
With tinnitus, the slow wearing of the landscape  
—Pylons, concrete columns,  
                                the otherworldly dark  
Channel. We share our toes in mud, shy of shallow  
            Oysters unperturbed in their decade of walking  
Underwater, theirs the long osmosis of lore.  
The lap of wave on the rim edge, time stirring with  
Lazarus in the grave  
            —not all of this  
                                will last.



Along the shore, sea rush and sedge  
are whispering  
Medusas in the wind, salt air in their lungs;  
The perpetual taste of grief  
soaked from their roots.  
Bend way down, take the strands, boys, feel the rubber pull  
Up spiny stem, to the tapering point, measure;  
The arc of your arm, the strain of sinew, the growth  
Of a year. Everything is tidal  
in this place,  
The sand bar bearing out its nakedness with worm,  
Cockle and muscle. A sooty oystercatcher  
Alone, beginning his black watch. His eternal  
Sifting of life's sediment, his beak a long knife  
Paring the skin.  
Time is a peripheral  
Vision,

*continued overleaf...*

## BURRILL LAKE AFTER RAIN

## BURRILL LAKE AFTER RAIN *contd...*

**V.**

Leaking through the inlet—intermingled  
And intertidal.  
The ebb of it, the slackness

Of minutes. At the bar,  
a little tern feasting.

Aegir's halls are full of feathered gods again: godwits,  
The gulls, the great egret—the long tongue of the sea  
Gathering the whole world. It's an old story told  
Along the Nile,

the bennu bird flew the chaos  
Waters, landed, and cried out to awaken  
Creation—how often we speak forth the cosmos  
For children. And mine pick and pry their way through plumes  
Of broom heath and bracken on the back dune. We walk  
To the boat ramp,

who's lazy in the dawn  
—showered

In a primal mix of salt and scale,  
                                and grease slick.  
                                We'll cross here, set course for the jetty, three bodies  
Piled on one kayak,  
                    the younger's nappy full  
Of seawater and leaking a calligraphy  
Of sand down his thighs. The elder, afraid of the deep  
Current, has sunk into his life jacket, eyes tight  
To horizon  
                                —castaway in his father's arms.  
Below the boat, King George whiting are schooling us  
            And the blackfish in a million-year-old chorus  
Theirs the tragedy of propellers and paddle  
Boards and the hand lines of little boys on the docks.  
Bream are drowned mirrors  
                    under the surface,  
                                chrome scaled sunlight

*continued overleaf...*

## BURRILL LAKE AFTER RAIN *contd...*

### VII.

The morningtide's sunspots on the seafloor.

Meanwhile, we fidget

about our business, the young one on the bow,

The elder,

hands on the paddle

Cutting a somewhat smaller arc than my own two,  
morning, going at its own pace—the father's work  
Is always the sons'. Peer down boys, see the stingray's  
Tail threatening

like a serpent, its bulbous head

An artifice of sand and contoured with the deep,

Like our bodies, written and rewritten with time  
—Drafted, revised, artefacts of the past. The draught  
Shrinks beneath us, Thor taking his long drink, the horn  
Of the point

almost at empty,

the roar of air



VIII.

Brakes from the bridge—everything has a limit.

It's all low now

and we've become semi-submerged

In the slough,

the prow dug in and we haul ourselves

Overboard. I'm marooned and mutinied by time's

## Two thieves who are tacking and tripping each other

To the bank as an eastern curlew wades, and weighs in,

And lets the water tell its life

—like we'd all like,

As if our story doesn't just run out with the tide.

Stratocumulus piebald the park, the sky somewhat

Undecided whether it wants to turn itself

And the weatherman to fiction or if the rain

Will drop by

—a dark suited witness

at the door.

*continued overleaf...*

## BURRILL LAKE AFTER RAIN *contd...*

### IX.

On this side, the sheoaks are thinning in their age

—Grey roots,

branchlets like sprung wires, remembering most

Of all,

the dust of the old road, the bangalay

And blackbutt forests—the way the cool ripe air blew

Before the caravan park moved in with redhead

Matchboxes, it's hung fly traps and Victoria

Bitter cartons slumped beside the bins.

In the park

An ice cream van is selling sherbet and flaked cones

—Ambrosia for the pint-sized gods, a soft serving

Of modernity. We're part of the understory,

The folds of land; bitumen, kikuyu, soft fall,

—Banksias like ogres,

twisted and knotted,

entombed

X.

By fence posts and driveway, the vanguard of wattle

Receding

like a dying myth, or a purse net

Broken to pieces.

Two fisherman putter on

By, their tinny and the gulls going the same way

Down the line of marsh, down the stoney creek, the birds

Circling unbelievers. We go separate paths,

Full of ice cream and chips

—some small faith, licked like salt

From our fingers, to the headland written cursive

On the horizon, unkept like a four-year-olds

Colouring book. Windblown heathland above, siltstone

And sandstone shelf below—the impulsive rock pools

Pocked and pierced,

a teenager

of a thousand years.

*continued overleaf...*

## BURRILL LAKE AFTER RAIN

## BURRILL LAKE AFTER RAIN *contd...*

## XI.

We roam the face of the platform, the Pacific  
                                Flung as a drop cloth,  
                                ragged and torn from the reef,  
Some snorkel at the littoral edge,  
                    but our troupe  
Forage for limpets and periwinkles in the holes  
And slits of the rock—portals to an under world.  
Evolution's most fit, great survivors,  
Starfish and anemone,  
                                keeping their secrets;  
Atlantis, the fall of Carthage, the Siege of Tyre  
            —The eternal hubris of men. In the distance  
An old man is collecting seaweed, a future  
Fathered in his work, kelp and bladderwrack—the wreck  
Of life washed  
                    and unfurled,  
                                the way we all must go.



## XII.

The day stretches itself out and into midlife,  
The moon exhales,  
the wrack line gathering the sea's

Sleep, pockets of shells  
—the residue of a life.

Only immersion brings us into the kingdom,  
Knee deep pilgrims, the boys holding Neptune's necklace  
—Still after the gods. We come to a circle of sticks,  
A henge for a pair of hooded plovers,  
nesting

Their chicks on the blunt edge of the berm, on the brink  
Of all the southerly can throw. Theirs's the brindled  
Debris, the pumice stone and brown algae, urchins  
For a time, infant heirs of the tide—redeemers  
Of the detritus,

authors after  
the deluge.



Edward Caruso

Edward Caruso is based in Melbourne, Australia. Publications where his work can be found include: *A Voz Limpia*, *Australian Multilingual Writing Project*, 'La Bottega della Poesia' (La Repubblica, Italy), *Burrow*, *Communion*, *Live Encounters*, *Mediterranean Poetry*, *Meniscus*, *StylusLit*, *TEXT*, *Unusual Work and Well-Known Corners: Poetry on the Move*. He has work forthcoming with *Burrow* and *Kalliope X*. His second collection of poems, *Blue Milonga*, was published by Hybrid Publishers in January 2019.

## LIQUID CRYSTAL

1

troubled ring, marble-like band  
darkens to vermillion before turning cyan  
one day to fade  
the next deep blue  
from turquoise to apricot, streaks of ochre

concealed  
marble black, in its box  
oblivious to heat, sensitive to touch

porphyry, new-found  
colour, immune gold underlay  
abandoned to hours

2

in her renditions of Scarlatti's 'Sonata for Birds',  
Lizst's 'Polonaise 1'  
outpourings with a love for ivory keys

an apartment in San Lazzaro di Savena's hills,  
hallway and living room walls  
with shelves of artbooks,  
hand-painted landscapes  
& a portrait of her partner in an ebony shirt

to be with someone  
yet live alone

as she plays Ravel's  
'Don Quichotte à Dulcinée',  
her once marble-like band  
out of its box  
blazing

## FORSAKEN BOOKS

Second-hand bookstore,  
shelves over-filled.  
Hours forgotten,  
except for those tomes  
placed back for broken spines,  
yellowed pages written over or highlighted lines,  
and dreams of pristine leaves.

Dark windows replete with faded  
covers, old versions of updated works,  
proprietors with greying hair  
immersed in volumes  
outliving former owners and their tastes,  
another shelf to be stacked, contents  
picked up, relived.

The hankerings of forsaken books –  
to not be mislaid in refuse,  
stained, torn, eaten by bookworms  
or replaced by e-texts.



## CORE

Solitude the open space  
of movement    each second of a corolla's  
opening

    Within flight  
a stillness that could  
always be here but mistaken  
for an escapade that slumber  
never drifts from

## NEIGHBOURHOOD

After the rains withdraw,  
puddles linger on ploughed fields  
and a road being built over a paddock  
stripped of weeds and pines.

The earthmovers' monotony,  
what's brought up shakes loose,  
carried by the thud of a drainpipe  
hitting what's left of a riverbed.  
A trail of slush along a waterway,  
one endless ditch across the surface.

The breeze in overhead pines  
some kind of soft chatter;  
beyond, pirouettes  
of earthmovers and bulldozers,  
they halt in that moment called twilight.

## COLOSSEUM

Orange sun lost behind traffic.  
Actors in centurion's garb  
ready for the cameras of a perfume ad.



Fred Johnston

Born in Belfast in 1951, Fred Johnston has published nine collections of poetry, his most recent is 'Rogue States,' (Salmon Poetry 2019.) Co-founded the Irish Writers' Co-operative in the 'Seventies with Neil Jordan and Peter Sheridan and the annual CUIRT literature festival in Galway in 1986. In 2004, he was appointed writer-in-residence to the Princess Grace Irish Library at Monaco. He has written and published poetry in French and received a Prix de l'Ambassade in 2002. Two collections of short stories have been published, one in French, and three novels. Recent poetry has appeared in The Guardian, The Spectator, The New Statesman, The Irish Times, STAND, The Financial Times among other publications. He lives in Galway, Ireland.

## EMPTY HOUSES

Like blind men halted at the edge of a footpath  
The light nailed shut at window-height.

Who murmurs from room to room in such profound desolation?  
The ghosts are vacuumed out.

Let's hear it for the wide-boys who carry the mark of the  
Wrecking-ball on their forehead. Who have plans

## CANICULE

This is the weather when dogs die in locked cars  
Tarmac melts like ice-cream, beered-up swimmers drown  
When doors are left open to the insect chitter of radios:  
Grandmothers wear shorts discreetly in their walled gardens  
Feeble flowers die off and refugees float cruciform face-down  
Across the pixelated pages of red-top newspapers

There are temperature warnings and warnings of exposure  
To sunlight. We are told what winds deliver the High pressure  
And how long we might reasonably expect it to stay:  
Warned of cancers hibernating in our lucent Northern skin  
Too much wine drunk in the sun brings migraine-level pain  
This is what it must be like in Syria, Saudi, or Gaza

Tabloid photographers aim for money-shots of girls in bikinis  
Laid out like dead dolls in public parks. Or Royals in see-through  
Skirts. Hotter here today than in Riyadh. Hotter than Fuengirola  
The elderly are particularly vulnerable to this kind of weather  
And very young children left in shut cars. Sun-block sales are up.  
Very cold drinks can be dangerous. Stay cool.



## FIESTA AT THE SPANISH ARCH

Our age can't survive their youth for long  
Safer back in the car, you tell me  
And I can't say you're entirely wrong

And from the lowered windows we  
Watch the fire-eaters and the drummers  
Everyone glowing in the dark, the epitome

Of not giving a damn. Cans of beer  
And the too-long legs of girls in shorts  
No need for music, it's all rhythm here

Patchouli nights – do you remember?  
Say you remember, say you *identify*  
Say you'd toke one just to get back there

Say something translated from the heart  
It doesn't matter to me what it is  
I just want to hear you pull the words apart

Coloured stars, explosions in the air  
Constellations rearranging themselves  
Someone's dog howling somewhere –

How can we just sit here while they dance  
Two perverts in the dark, or two cops  
We're invisible to them, even if they glance

Our way, which they won't. We're not real  
Anymore, we've passed real, insubstantial,  
Things of the air. How do you like them apples?

## MUMMIFIED REMAINS OF WOMAN FOUND IN ARMCHAIR

Sound is luminous  
And its absence is what we mean by dark

I sat here while the dust  
Accumulated on the desk I had lived by

The book fell  
From my fingers, the cigarette blinked shut

There was nothing left  
To hear. So I no longer listened.

Quick I dry out and shape  
A pose, quick I am a strange small hyphen

Modest to the last  
Presentable, so who comes will say

She dressed so well –  
Scrafting their way through my letters

And bills, they'll smell  
Ordinary under-attended tasks, a private

Dessication, the dryness  
Of me, though they'll say I made them laugh

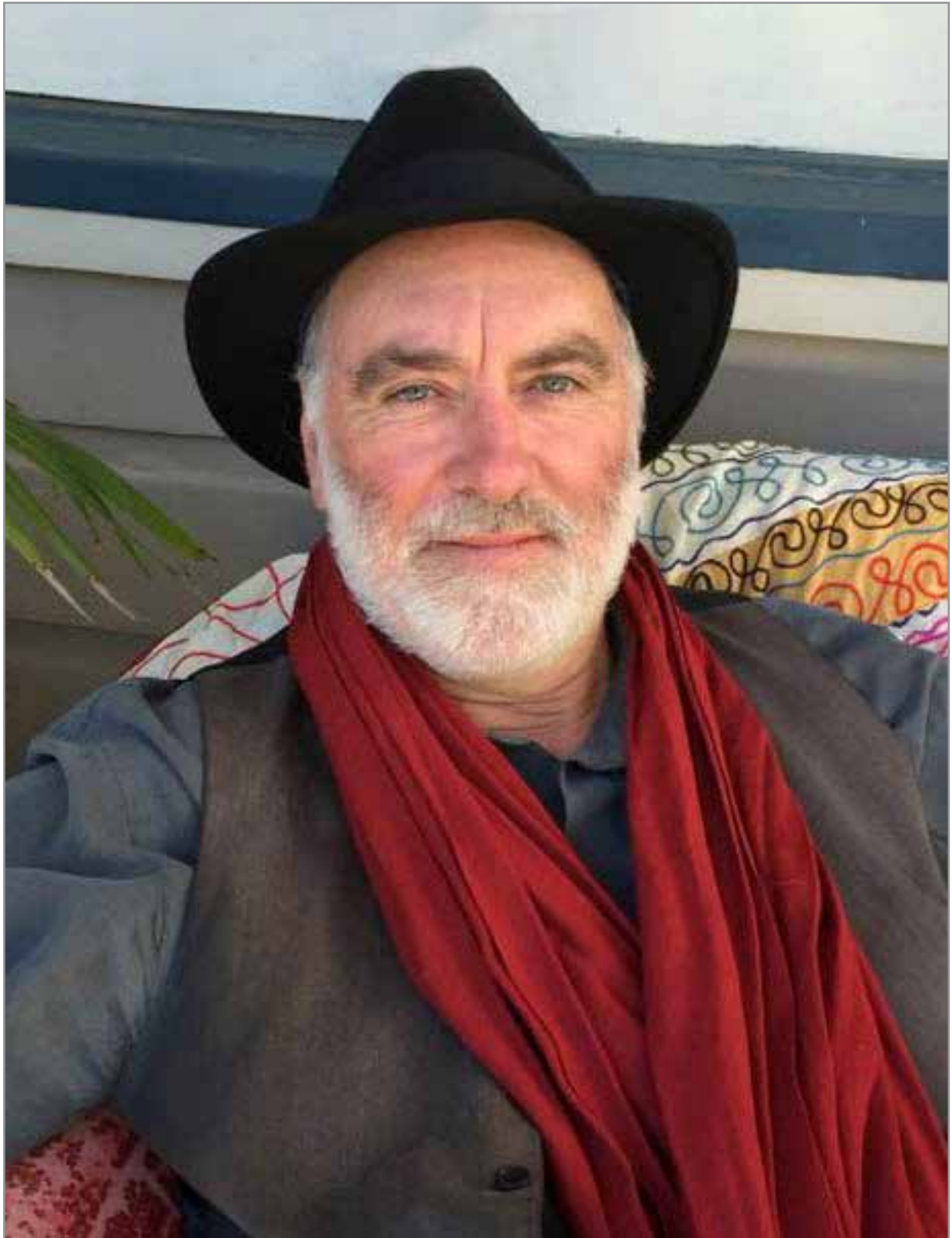
And even now I have a sort  
Of smile, though it could do with fattening -

O where were any of you  
While I sat here to read myself dead?



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.





Justin Lowe

Justin Lowe lives in a house called Doug where he edits poetry blog *Bluepepper*.

## CHARLES SIMIC

*for Kristen "Krip" Cherry \**

### I.

Dear Charles. Thank you for the games of chess:  
I still owe you one ivory tiger.

Thank you for pulling me from that dark pond:  
insomniacs seem to make reluctant heroes.

You pulled me out and whispered something in my ear  
a little canticle of nonsense, or maybe Serbian;

I am not very good with languages,  
or epistles, it would seem.

### II.

You often whisper when I am a little lost, Mr Simic,  
like a well-oiled door opening onto a warm room

where there is bread baking in an oven  
and a girl with heavy breasts kneads dough,

and your old pal Ristovic raises a glass  
and watches the girl while a T-train rattles past the window.

*continued overleaf...*

## CHARLES SIMIC

*contd...*

### III.

You have seen me through some good times and some bad, Charles,  
but mostly bad because that's when we call on our muses,

the dripping tap days in a room full of echoes,  
fevered while the cold gnaws at you like a monstrous rat.

### IV.

But there have been the plush days too,  
the warm bread smell of her as I stirred the covers

and the light breaking through  
where her face melted onto the pillow

as I read you to her  
and as she lay on her side

a single tear rolled down, a morning tear,  
like the last star falling.

**V.**

Thank you, Mr Simic, for reminding me of her  
who no longer lives and breathes like your poems,

and of the trees so still they seem afraid of themselves  
and of the Spirit that is nowhere and everywhere.

*\* This poem borrows lines from "Romantic Landscape" by Charles Simic  
(from "A Wedding in Hell")*



## THE NAVIGATOR

like the ancient tillerman  
holding up a damp finger to the wind

weighing up his options  
whether to keep hugging the coast

or to tack against the wind  
before it builds

and the white foam starts  
to gnash like Gorgon's teeth in the gathering gloom

so I put it to you  
that my slow response

is not a sign  
of indifference or neglect

but a mark of my respect  
for the advantages and pitfalls

of charting a course  
while the heavens are still brooding

while the wind is still wheeling  
in the rigging

## TORCH SONG

I have given a lot of thought  
to how she enters a room

the way her eyes fix, the copper of spent shells,  
an inch above our heads

where the whispers die, presumably  
where the ink finally dries on the column inches,

scowling the room for the sibilant source  
until she seems to run out of parting shots for the rebarbative.

I have mapped her movements in a disinterested way:  
how she walks taller off stage than on,

how she insists on the olive and then takes it out  
the second the barman sets her drink down

with a look in her eye that says:  
“you’re next”,

the rim catching fire with each slow sip

## GOLDEN HOUR

at that liminal hour  
when the sun clears the elderberry  
and evening ruffles the crows on the wire

when pen touches paper  
and the wine fires my blood  
and the neighbour's dogs surf the pickets

as the commuters sleepwalk by  
and the bower birds tick in the sapling  
constructing their future one twig at a time

when the dying hermit labours uphill  
all his voices in tow  
a kind man harbouring a cruel disease

and a cough he has carried all winter

## WHALE SONG

*for Georgina Woods*

last night I joined a gang.  
a group of hooded spectres said:  
“grandpa, would you like to join us?”  
and so I did. there was a ruffling of feathers as we shook.

they mulled verbs swelled like cake batter  
in the pale fire of their insouciance.  
they flicked their hands at nouns  
I had lived in all my days.

they asked: “grandpa, when did wars begin?”  
they asked: “grandpa, why did you chew up the world?”

they circled the fire with their hooded heads bowed  
as though traversing a narrow ledge.

I wanted to apologise but I could not.  
the dream sewed my mouth shut.  
I hummed like a moth in the pale light of their questions.

for the old to apologise to the young  
requires an act of Parliament, a Papal Bull.  
thus I deflected like the old do with their soft skin.

like when the first whale decided  
that the sea was a far safer option  
and so returned to where their songs carried farthest.



Kate McNamara

Kate McNamara is a Canberra based poet, playwright and critical theorist. Her plays have been performed internationally. McNamara delivered the opening address to the Fourth International Conference of Women Playwrights in Galway (2001). She was awarded the H.C Coombs Fellowship at ANU (1991) and elected to the Emeritus Faculty. She won The Banjo Patterson Award for her short story *Verity*. Her published works include *Leaves*, *The Rule of Zip* (AGP) *Praxis* and *The Void Zone* (AGP). Her poetry, short fiction and critical theory has been published in a number of anthologies including *There is No Mystery* (ed. K Kituai, 1998), *The Death Mook* (ed. Dion Kagan, 2008) *These Strange Outcrops* (2020) and *The Blue Nib* (2020) She has also worked extensively as an editor and has only recently returned to her first great love, poetry. McNamara is currently working on *The Burning Times*.

## CELEBRATE

Spending my 66th year in a strange and conflicted life  
 I reflect on the fact that I really should not be alive.  
 But for that time of change of love  
 and now I sing *Nessum Dorma*  
 broken but rebellious in  
 a cathedral of Norman Lindsay women  
 lusting for the 20's I play  
 croquet and win and listen  
 to poems composed for me only me.

In a courtyard that the Gods designed  
 where the autumn light is dazed with red gold maroon  
 and I try to forget that winter of Persephone of  
 Demeter howling in grief O Hades  
 I can forgive forget and I can file  
 in memory in the abject darkness of  
 Nothingness but I too can still be  
 ambushed by tenderness and your smile.  
 In that long night where performing  
 for my life I married you in a  
 Chinese tavern and old witchdoctors came and sang  
*Unchained Melody* until I exhausted beyond tears  
 breaking and sobbing cold with the concession  
 that I had made yielding and unyielding  
 I sobbed into my blue dress  
 my Lady of the Lake blue dress for  
 which I am justly famous and you took my hands  
 and wiped my eyes like a child and I was  
 a brilliant and exhausted child with hilarity and  
 sobbing as you took off my party frock  
 and covered me with the old leather jacket  
 that we had bought at the Salvos for two whole dollars  
 that coat was my refuge my father my home.

*continued overleaf...*

## CELEBRATE *contd...*

Then you fed me tea and honey and music  
and told stories of your riding days in winter  
and we laughed again in delight as the fire  
burned between us both burning us back  
to the ground you were hardly  
prepared for tenderness or protection or kindness.

You were trying so hard to be a barbarian and  
you will still always back a conquest rather than a kill  
a conquest love under stars or tussocks or by that wild old river.  
Like Alexander the Great you would have forced all your companions  
to marry down by Persepolis in the sophistries of Persia  
in a wild drunken frenzy as the Greatest Library  
on the earth was set aflame by you and all those hapless wives.

And now what will you actually do with my ravaged  
and mutilated childhood you are a capricious lovemaster  
of the game you could let in the light open a door  
and then run while I will sit quietly  
very still reading an old old chart  
mapping paths new paths across the High Country to the stars





©Mark Ulyseas

Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



Michael Minassian

Michael Minassian is a Contributing Editor for Verse-Virtual, an online poetry journal. His poetry collections *Time is Not a River*, *Morning Calm*, and *A Matter of Timing* are all available on Amazon. A new chapbook, *Jack Pays a Visit*, was released in 2022. For more information: <https://michaelminassian.com>

## WHEN I CLOSE MY HAND

When I close my hand  
I'm not sure if it resembles  
a fist or a seashell—

it's not enough to say  
that if you want to know  
death, look in the mirror.

Lately, I miss the vestiges  
of former lives:  
webbed feet and gills,  
sharp teeth and wings.

Those yellow tinged clouds  
racing in from the horizon  
look like someone else's  
excuse for last night—

Tell me, what would  
you have done differently:  
crawl back into the sea  
once you tasted land  
and sun, not water,  
on your back?

## AT THE FRENCH BAKERY

The croissants line up  
like the errant heads  
of the aristocracy.

Napoleons march off  
to the Russian Tea Room  
or the island of desserts.

Baristas operate guillotines  
cutting off the foam  
of lattes and the sound

of the ocean, a mosaic  
of musical notes:  
*la mer, la mer, la mer.*

Behind the scenes  
bakers line up beating  
and kneading dough.

Mona Lisa moaning  
in the bathroom stall  
smiling to herself.

Baudelaire cutting  
holes in his story  
following Poe

waking to find  
women rising like yeast  
in a graveyard of bread.

Still hungry, you wander  
into the kitchen  
watching Madame Bovary

molding madeleines  
into the petite shape  
of a vulva:

the waiting room  
of Proust's dreams  
and the palate's abyss.

## SILVER ALERT

Staring at the telephone,  
Cordelia takes a sip  
of her morning coffee,  
waiting until the kids  
are fed and at school,  
her husband on his way to work—  
watching the video clip  
of her plea for her father's  
safe return: forgiveness  
measured in algorithms,  
post-truth expressions,  
and YouTube hits.

After lunch she visits the police,  
then staples flyers to sign boards  
next to posters for pets  
and runaway teenagers:  
the lost and permanently missing—  
searching in homeless shelters,  
park benches and alleyways,  
cardboard boxes and tents—  
calling hospitals every other day  
and the morgue once a week.

Her bickering sisters tell her  
not to bother, complaining  
about their husbands  
and the lover they share.

Some days, she looks along  
the banks of the river,  
dragging fishing nets behind her,  
consulting palm readers  
and brain surgeons—

His memory emptied:  
*a delicate delirium*,  
her father said.

(Once, unable to answer  
Cordelia found language  
rusted on her tongue)

She thinks to herself:  
*too much time has passed*—  
wondering if she would  
recognize him dressed in rags  
or walking with his sightless  
friends, wearing dark glasses  
or tapping a white cane,  
hiding from men of stone  
or the proximity  
of his daughters' last words.



## FILM NOIR

In a black & white world  
tendrils of fog rose  
from city streets, manhole  
covers, and factories  
that burned day & night.

All the men wore hats,  
& women could smoke  
you with their eyes,  
leading you down a trap  
only a bullet could cure.

Children were urchins  
or angels, depending  
on the curl of hair  
or cut of their clothes.

Mothers in aprons  
waited at home,  
wringing their hands  
as the clock ticked,  
& the sun went down,  
throwing a lattice work  
of shadow on shadow  
across the room.

Somewhere in the dark  
a whistling sound  
approached through the mist,  
the single glow of a cigarette  
pierced the screen  
and light poured out,  
colorless, bright,  
& filled with stars.

Ahead only bad choices—  
you can't see what's coming,  
even though you've heard  
this story before.

## WILDERNESS

From a distance,  
the figure standing  
on an outcrop of rock  
near the lake shore  
looks like a person  
wearing a grey sweatshirt.

Tall as a man,  
it lifts its head  
& the sharp point  
of a beak glints  
once in the sunlight.

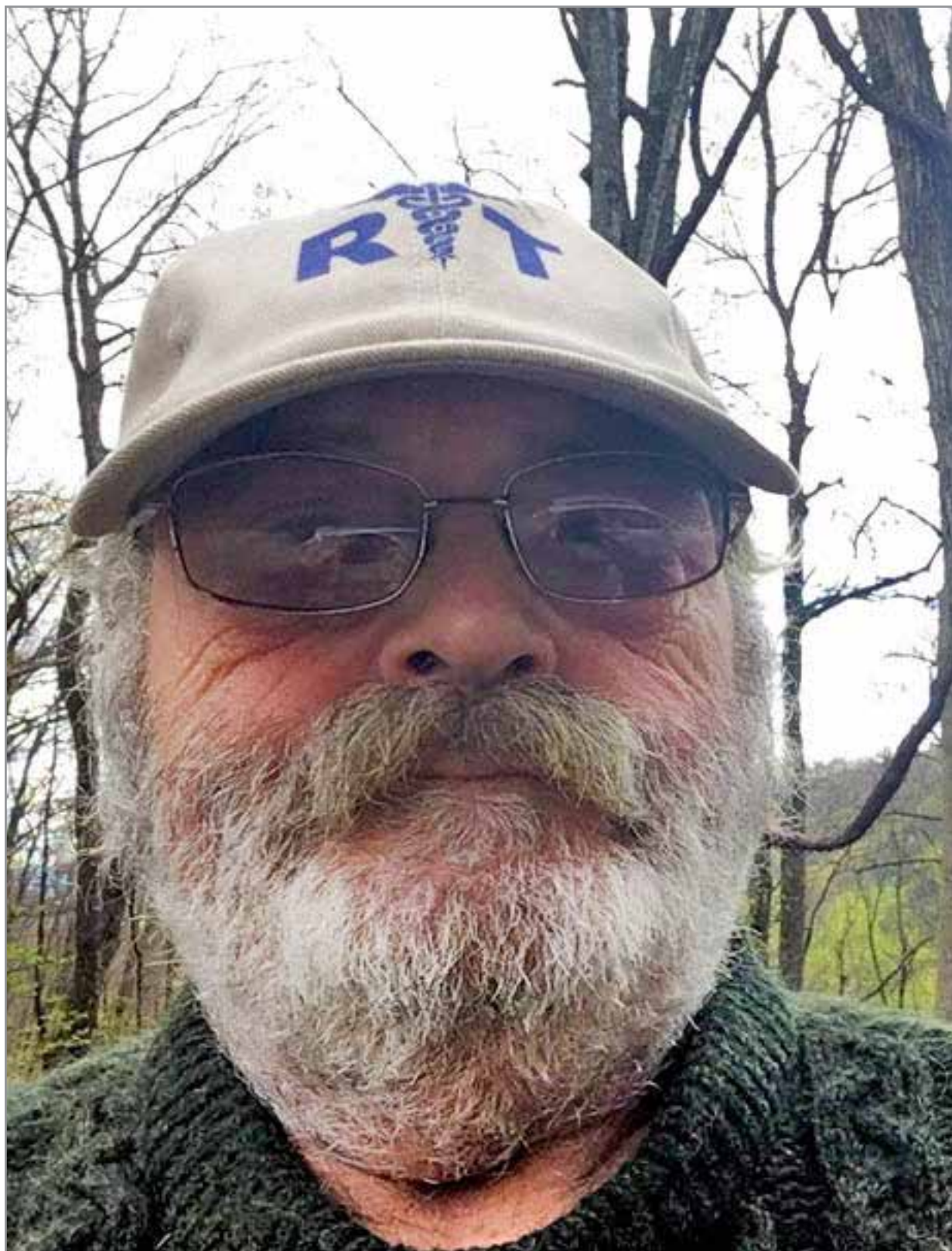
The great blue heron  
flies off when I get too close,  
skims low over the surface  
and complains in a loud voice,  
a long jungle-like squawk.

I hold my breath,  
wait for the soft landing  
wings outstretched, then folded  
like a paper fan  
an origami of feathers & sound.



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

## LOOK UP, IT'S STILL THERE



Ray Whitaker

Ray Whitaker has been writing both prose and poetry since he was seventeen. What Ray is writing now is very different from what he wrote those so many years ago. All writers and poets are writing out of "the Self" however there are directions that the self speaks into, that change. Now Ray's writing is to put foremost in his work, just who he is writing for. He intends on writing for the everyday man and woman. He firmly believes that poems need to reach into the everyday person's pictures in their minds, and engage with those. This is where he aims to make a difference in his creative writing. He's fulfilled when he sees that his work is provoking thought in his readers.

## LOOK UP, IT'S STILL THERE

*It is the authoritarians that inhibit the expression  
of art, music, poetry and comedy. - Jon Stewart*

I

There was a generator,  
maybe its a capacitor pushing a impetus of development  
a source of the growth  
moving along the steps, one foot in front of the other

even tho you may have never  
felt so alone  
so strapped for friendship, and comfort  
in your distant bungalow

still there is the driver  
the place where the self comes  
out of the blues  
into a light.

The lyrics you are listening to would have you believe  
that you are somehow a shining star  
floating in among the galaxies  
viewed from the Webb Space telescope.

All it takes is a good look around  
looking far and wide  
to see the injustice, inhumanity  
insolence, the in-between, the inaccessibility

those inanimate insensibilities that conflict  
with the sense of the way things are  
opposed to the way things ought to be.  
You see this without trying.

*continued overleaf...*

## LOOK UP, IT'S STILL THERE *contd...*

### II

Multiple rounds fly from rifled explosions  
into the people gathered,  
for their reasons to be in public spaces  
drilling down into the disambiguation

of the way the world works, or how it works not  
those mass shooters [aka mass-murderers]  
must feel that there isn't a way to handle it  
without killing, without violence.

We are armed to our incisors  
ammo at the ready,  
members of the public unwittingly walking by  
strolling as if there was no concern

buying concert tickets has a different cost now  
going to hear beautiful music from enlightened artists  
comes with wondering  
if it'll be safe to attend.

### III

Into your blues without having to think  
like it is there as a natural part of the movies in your head  
so alone, your hotel is burning in the night,  
seen for miles away.

Terrorists bomb  
megalomaniacs dictate  
narcissistic sickness  
abusers inflict

those of us that had parents that loved us  
cherished our young diapered butts  
saw to it that we grew without undue pain, and  
don't understand the why of terrorists, narcissists.

Empirically we know we know things  
the result causing us shake our heads in disbelief  
a New York woman walks without looking right or left  
to the subway

are the terrorists,  
-the truly talented sociopaths-  
asleep tonight...?...  
Or is it tomorrow that their insomnia will catch up with them?

#### IV

War and pestilence flow  
class five hurricanes and F-four tornados  
whirl the sensibilities around  
fires consuming landscapes threatening thousand year old trees abound

can't let the depression take hold  
one must be bold  
to leave the city of night  
and move into the light.

Yet we can still be a human [being?]  
be creative and spiritually seeing  
the end of your blues  
there remains good news.



# LOOK UP, IT'S STILL THERE

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## LOOK UP, IT'S STILL THERE *contd...*

Can't dwell on the loss of someone dear  
knowing, feeling that they're no longer near  
gotta keep on going up to the stars  
and stay outta bars.

The existential pain  
is a part of what makes us, it is no Bain  
to be human,  
to Love even so, yes we can.



Photograph by Ray Whitaker.

## THE TWO

The two of them can't help it  
She reaches out  
He stands too far away

the two of them just can't help it  
she stands in the moonlight  
wonders about him, what is he doing tonight

the two of them can't seem to help it  
he walks in the creative sunshine  
thinks of her as the sun warms his face.

Oh, yes, the two of them are living alone  
they are walking the walk of their separate ways  
it needn't be, blue eyes could be looking into brown ones

oh, yes, the two live their lives alone  
reckon it's not the best for either, not the easiest,  
their dogs are not the dogs of war, they are the best companions

oh, yes, living alone is the choice they've made  
even so he wishes for her in the starlight  
desires her closeness in the dark.

They could have different  
she wishes that there was not the withhold  
desires his warmth when it's cold at night

they could have much different  
he has placed his independence above  
his wanting her softness and her quick wit near

they could be together  
she has to be free  
to walk with him by her choice.

One peak of the nearby mountains is higher than the others.

The lithic path is blind to what is in reach.

There is nothing that stands between Love and you.



Raine Geoghegan



Raine Geoghegan, M.A. is a Welsh born poet, prose writer and playwright of Romany descent. She is a Forward Prize, twice Pushcart Prize, and Best of the Net nominee. Her work has been published online and in print with Poetry Ireland Review; Travellers' Times; Ofi Press; Under the Radar; The Clearing; SkyLight47; Fly on the Wall and many more. Her essay, 'It's Hopping Time' was featured in Gifts of Gravity and Light (Hodder & Stoughton, 2021). She has a Highly Commended Award for poetry from Winchester University's Reaching Out competition and was long listed for the NHS Poetry competition in 2019. Two pamphlets, 'Apple Water: Povel Panni' and 'they lit fires: lenti hatch o yog' are by Hedgehog Poetry Press. Apple Water was listed in the Poetry Book Society Spring 2019 Selection. Her play 'The Tree Woman' was featured in the online festival with the Same Boat Theatre Collective based in San Francisco. She is the Romani Script Consultant for the musical 'For Tonight' which will be performed in the UK later this year. Her third pamphlet 'The Stone Sleep' was published in January 2022 with Hedgehog Poetry Press. 'The Talking Stick: O Pookering Kosh' was published in June 2022 by Salmon Poetry Press. <https://www.rainegeoghegan.co.uk/>

## THE BEAUTY OF SILENCE

Chaplin walks onto the set. He sits on the director's chair. A single pool of light falls across his body. He leans forward, rests his head in his hands. Taking a deep breath he looks out into the empty studio.

*'Sound.'*

*'They want to use sound. They are ruining the great beauty of silence. 'The little fellow' doesn't speak. He's not meant to speak, that is the point. It is his face that speaks. The audience are free to imagine his voice; they then become part of the creative act. Take that away and they are bereft.'*

*'Sound.'*

*'Imagine how it will fill the picture houses, destroy the intimacy. Everything the audience needs is right there in front of them, not booming out from a speaker, somewhere at the back of the picture house.'*

Chaplin looks around him, sighs.

*My brother and I sit on the old red sofa, leaning our heads back, pretending not to look at our visitor. Our Mother fidgets, looks worried. The man doesn't stay long. He tells us he's our uncle, a Romany chal, come all the way from Birmingham. He drops some coins into our clammy hands and speaks in a strange language. When he leaves, our Mother kneels in front of us and say's 'Now, Charlie, Syd. You're not to tell anyone about him coming here. You keep quiet, alright? Now then, let's have some dinner. Pork chops is it?'*

*We sit there and wait for our dinner, but we don't get pork chops, we get bread and dripping. Our Mother goes to bed. When I tiptoe into her room, she says 'Be quiet Charlie boy, I'm done in.'*

*continued overleaf...*

## THE BEAUTY OF SILENCE *contd...*

*A short while later, we hear our Dad's footsteps on the stairs. We pretend to be asleep. He doesn't like us; we have the marks on our legs to prove it.*

*Maybe that's where it started, the turning inwards. The danger of making noise. When I'm in front of the camera, I feel it, the hurt; the pain; the fear. Ahh, the beauty of silence.*

Chaplin stands, picks up his bowler hat and cane, puts the hat on his head, swings the cane round in his hand, does a funny walk and shouts. 'Cut'

*'The little fellow' – the name of the character that Chaplin played in his films. Chal – man in Romani.*



Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp costume at the V&A museum.





Pratibha Castle

Pratibha Castle's award-winning debut pamphlet *A Triptych of Birds and A Few Loose Feathers* (Hedgehog Poetry Press) was published in 2022. A retired holistic therapist and workshop facilitator of women's retreats, and a singer, she studied creative writing at the University of Chichester. Published widely in print and online including Agenda, Blue Nib, Fragmented Voices, Friday Poem, High Window, Honest Ulsterman, Ink Sweat & Tears, London Grip and One Hand Clapping, her work has been highly commended and long-listed in various competitions including Bridport Prize and Welsh Poetry Competition, Binsted Arts, Storytown, Sentinel Literary Journal, Gloucestershire Poetry Society. A regular reader for The Poetry Place, West Wilts Radio, her second book, published by Hedgehog Poetry, is forthcoming later this year. Born in Ireland, she lives on the south coast of England.

## FALLOW

Fleur pegs laundry on the line,  
sheets and shifts, long johns  
floppy as a sot

her own petticoat-plump skirt  
tucked up under a ragged shawl,  
a crossover harness for a fractured heart.

Mallards waddle through the yard,  
bodyguards to a duck whose head  
last spring one jumped on  
while the other scored.

In winter months  
their plumage mutes, fervour  
stifled as a seed in slush.

That night, beside the fire,  
Fleur coddles an orphan lamb,  
comforts its raggedy bleat  
with tepid cow's milk  
and a rubber teat,  
the new-born's pull a pulse  
her calloused hands regret.

Jacques, in a creaking rocker  
sucks at the stem of his tarry briar,  
its shallow bowl simmering  
with throttled words and  
embers of contrition.

Fleur rubs her back, takes  
comfort from the crackle-hiss  
of flames' cavorting gossip  
churning kitchen tales  
in the couple's silence.

Her belly feigns bounty,  
swollen as *Rugosa Rosa* hips  
on the bush beyond the byre.



Shanta Acharya

Shanta Acharya was born and educated in Cuttack, India. She won a scholarship to study abroad and was among the first batch of women admitted to Worcester College, Oxford. A recipient of the Violet Vaughan Morgan Fellowship, she was awarded the Doctor of Philosophy for her work on Ralph Waldo Emerson. She was a Visiting Scholar in the Department of English and American Literature and Languages at Harvard University before moving to live and work in London. Shanta's latest poetry collections are *What Survives Is the Singing* (2020) and *Imagine: New and Selected Poems* (2017). Her doctoral study, *The Influence of Indian Thought on Ralph Waldo Emerson*, was published in 2001 and her novel, *A World Elsewhere*, in 2015. Shanta's poems, reviews and articles have featured in journals and anthologies nationally and internationally. The author of twelve books, her poems have been translated to Bengali, Chinese, French, German, Hindustani, Odia, Russian and Ukrainian. [www.shanta-acharya.com](http://www.shanta-acharya.com)

## VIEW FROM THE GODS

Didn't you say nothing will come of nothing –  
was it then wise to strip yourself of everything?

There's no love nor rest in nothingness,  
taking upon yourself the *mystery of things* –

many more ways to learn *unaccommodated man*  
*is no more but a poor, bare, forked animal.*

That's how we are deceived,  
mistaking our limits for that of others.

Dreaming of impossible things,  
we place our trust in those undeserving.

I am no more the mistress of my life  
than you mighty King were of yours.

Owning nothing but myself, my powerlessness,  
how can I buy my rightful place in this playhouse?

Arriving alone, dispossessed, I take my seat in the gods –  
witness humans unleash the terrors of the earth.

Living at the edge of any universe also serves a purpose –  
the view from the gods is no less precious.



## INSIDE ONE'S OWN SINGING

Selecting her own society, my soul  
surrounds herself with truth and beauty –

garlands of exquisite memories  
that wear their fragrance like gods and lovers

lost in an unimaginable shower  
of grace, alight with the unbearable

pleasure of being here, steadying me  
with the thought that whatever happens,

nothing is forever. Everything changes  
*when one has lived a long time alone.*

Whether we know it or not,  
we do not own the fruits of our actions.

We are as separate from our actions  
as a decanter from the wine sparkling in it.

If we accept the world as a gift,  
not take the gifts of the world for granted,

we may learn to cherish what we have,  
thankful for things we never had, never needed.

Grace received is according to our measure,  
a steadfast prayer inside one's own singing.

## PARADISE IN MY SOUL

Keen as a root quickening in darkness,  
I was born to witness the world differently.

Wisdom of the universe centred in me,  
I see what's hidden, discover what's forbidden.

*In the astonishing light of my own being,*  
all that is dark turns bright as the sun.

Yet they call me stupid, moron, pugli –  
a child who never grew up, not really.

Having survived so many knives carved  
into me, edges sharp as inhumanity,

my pain earns invisible wings for bravery,  
badges and medals, stars and ribbons of glory.

Carrying my own paradise in my soul  
feels wicked. Breaking free, living like a god,

making my rules – flying, soaring, not forgetting  
Icarus' fate, I consider myself blessed.

Letting rip the madness like a river in spate  
opens the doors to the world of a wilder self –

*much madness is divinest sense,* kindles  
the love and light shimmering in any truth.



Wendy J. Dunn



Wendy J. Dunn is an award-winning Australian author, playwright and poet. Her first Tudor novels were two Anne Boleyn novels: *Dear Heart, How Like You This?* and *The Light in the Labyrinth*. Wendy's most recent publications are two novels inspired by the life of Katherine of Aragon: her *Falling Pomegranate Seeds* duology: *The Duty of Daughters* (a finalist in the 2020 Chaucer award) and *All Manner of Things* (2021), Silver Medallist in the 2021 international Readers' Favorite Award for historical personage, Silver Medallist in The Coffee Pot Book Club Book of the Year Award (Tudor and Stuart category), a finalist in the 2022 Eric Hoffer Award and a first place win for Tudor fiction in the international 2021 Chaucer Award. Wendy tutors in writing at the Swinburne University of Technology. She's currently writing a novel set in 2010. Of course, it includes a Tudor story. She is also writing her first full length Tudor biography, commissioned by Pen and Sword.

## SAPPHO WEPT

Sappho wept  
sorrowing  
for her lost poems,  
sorrowing  
for all the women  
from her time to mine  
who dared creating art  
for it to be  
judged an artefact  
*worth less*  
beyond *worthless*  
compared to male  
created art.

Countless female poems  
tossed aside,  
Countless paintings  
erased,  
canvases painted over.  
Female creations  
violated into palimpsests  
of unspoken pain  
by man's hand.

Words of female writers  
read only by them  
(and then by those  
empowered to destroy)  
blazed bonfires  
prolonging the night

Still  
we wait  
for light.

Sappho wept  
for the remnants left  
of her voice  
Sappho wept  
for so much  
too much  
silenced,

Sappho wept.

## CENTURIES OF BONES

They came  
from the stars  
'Who lived here?'  
they asked.  
'What happened to them?'

They explored  
awed by beauty  
under a blue, clean sky  
Butterflies flittered  
by them  
as if with  
jewelled wings  
birds twittered  
their dawn songs  
welcoming a new day.

The ruins  
of countless tall buildings  
adorned with green  
cast long shadows  
but glittered with eyes  
of animals  
dwelling safe  
in their homes

'To build such things,  
they had intelligence.  
but whoever they were,  
They're long gone.'

'Strange.  
Their habitant is paradise.  
Who lived here,  
lacked nothing.'

They walked on  
beneath their feet  
crumbled centuries  
of bones.

## EXERCISE IN SPEC FICTION.

Last Thursday  
I taught on zoom  
my Spec fiction class  
Speaking of what ifs

Speaking of societal possibilities,  
my voice trembled  
and I closed my mouth  
on fears  
I dared not speak.  
I averted my eyes  
weighed down by tears  
I tried to calm myself  
by looking at the clouds  
outside my study window

I returned my gaze  
to my students  
scattered in zoom isolation  
and thought  
our world is an exercise  
in Speculative fiction.

## AUSTRALIA BURNS

Her blisters appeared  
seconds afterward  
she did not care  
or realised  
Or perhaps  
knew at all.

The wind roared

Its heat  
sucking breath  
from the air

Without thought  
for her own safety  
she became the chalice  
(as women  
often are)  
and saved  
the koala's life.

How brief that time  
would be.

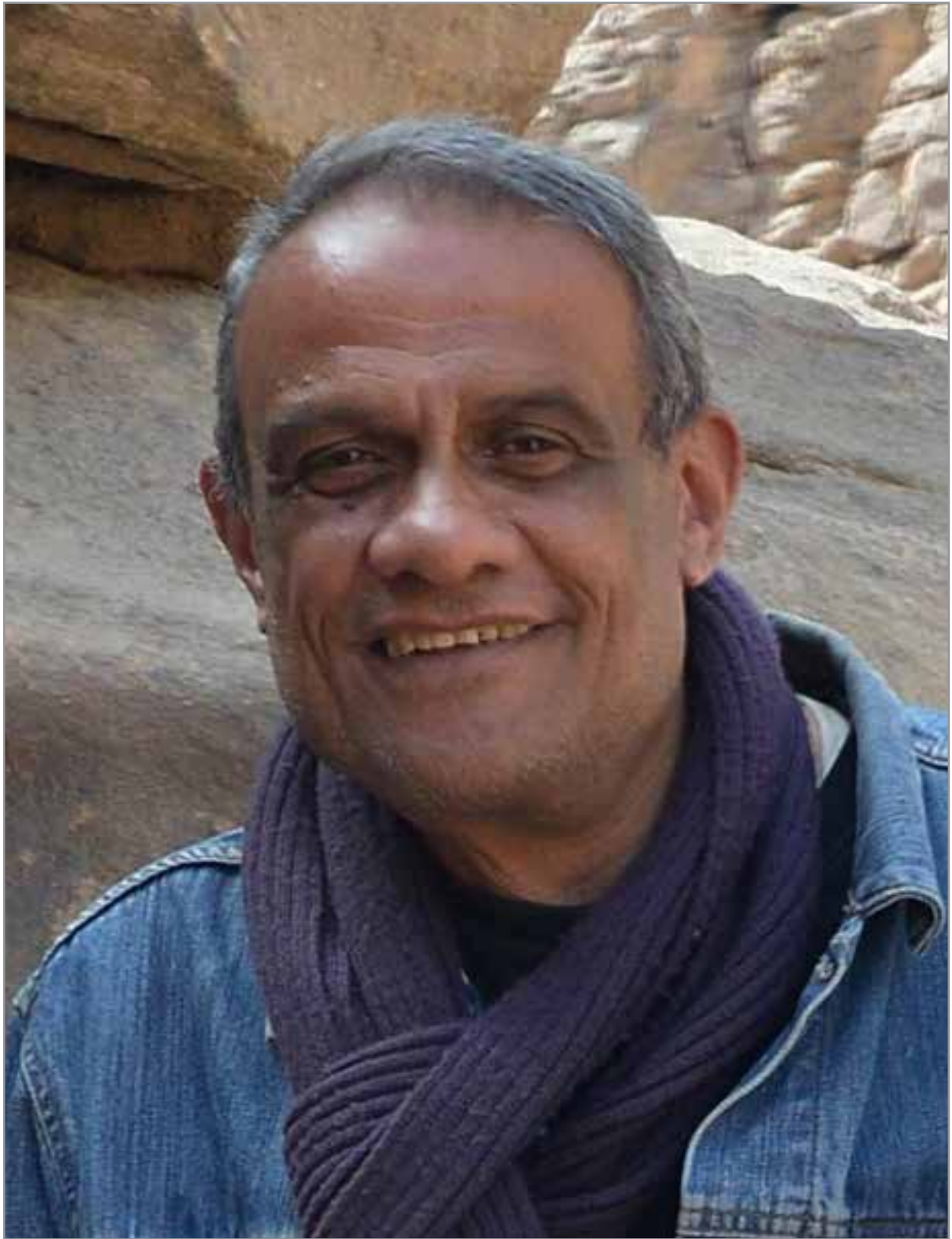
The wind roared  
a devil's breath  
scorching all before it  
To flame

She held the wild animal  
against bare skin  
wrapped in her top  
embers alive in its fur  
Trailing red  
then singed black  
the embers ate away  
the wild beast's skin

Woman and marsupial  
united in pain  
scarred by fire  
scarred by life  
and dystopian nightmare.

The wind roared  
a devil's breath of  
Brimstone and death.

My country burns.



Alaa Khaled

Born in Alexandria in 1960, Alaa Khaled has published Seven Divans, the last one being *For once only* 2015, and 4 prose books. Khaled has written a biography of his home city, Alexandria, titled *Alexandrian Portraits*. Published 4 novels including *Alexandria Labyrinth* 2021. He graduated in Biochemistry, University of Alexandria, in 1982.

These poems are translated from Arabic by Amal Shafek.

## A WINTER MORNING

Our breakfast plates  
And the breadcrumbs,  
I carelessly leave on the table  
To complete our daily chatter  
After we're gone  
On another journey  
Where we gather at a heavenly table to complete our unfinished conversations  
Like that miracle table which God sent to Jesus so they would believe in him  
But today we need no other miracle than love  
Love made us alive  
And the birds from far away gather around our left-over crumbs



## I MEET DEATH WITH A FLOWER IN MY HAND

All our daily rituals became important.  
Our rushed breakfast,  
The smell of burnt bread.  
Maybe there is no time for more important things.  
We all leave an empty footprint.  
There are those watching us from the other side  
like prophets from another time.  
We abandon our empty footprints,  
The sacred emptiness that follows us when we walk,  
And the coffee that boils over  
When I am sitting in front of you at breakfast.  
I embrace you without leaving my chair.  
It is all that we have,  
To touch each other in The Book of Spirits.  
I am not afraid of death.  
I only want it to take my memories with me,  
as a last barter.  
Even the smell of burnt bread,  
the odor of our bodies.  
Let my heaven be the heaven of memory.  
I don't recite these intimate details to soften the heart of death.  
I don't put our burnt bread under its nose  
to arouse its appetite for our daily life,  
for the smell of our kitchen.  
But it is the truth.  
I meet death  
With a flower in my hand

## JUST ONCE

Just once, we burn to light the darkness that we won't walk  
For the future not for us  
For what will grow in the garden of coming memory  
A ball of light we drag step by step  
up the mountain  
Just once  
And life doesn't end

No matter how many brides of death we accumulate  
or rare seedlings of death we might keep  
or edges of a high balconies we stroll  
or turnings of our hearts and skins, like socks, inside out  
We are responsible for our own pain  
even if we are not to blame  
Of our stray gestures  
to greet a distant passing star, bidding farewell to the sky of our joy  
Just once, life shine  
like a sodium flare  
As if transcending itself  
challenging the intimate future darkness  
From the beginning we learned to read by candlelight in bed  
so the book falls on our face as we fall asleep  
We are the only and last copy of life



Hatif Janabi

Poet Hatif Janabi is one of the most talented and admired contemporary Arab-Polish poets. His poetry celebrates man's triumphs and defeats in a world of trials, tragedies, and absurdities. Through vivid metaphors, similes, and rare subject matters, the poet takes us into a magical and real journey, showing us the beauty of life, death, and nature represented by all its creatures. The poet fights, through his poems, for man's liberty against tyranny, prejudice, and violence in all its forms.

These poems are translated from Arabic by Kahtan Mahboob Mandwee.

## DAWN'S PRAYER

Kissing at night the lip of the cup,  
too hot of much holding,  
they slept during the day and woke up at dusk.  
The leaves of hope fell  
over the scuttle wood.  
From tugging and releasing,  
the secrets glowed  
after the embrace of the breast's grape.  
The fire cracking turned into susurrations,  
the voice into silence.  
The spark itself was touched but unnoticed,  
for it was an agony  
clarified  
at dawn's prayer.

## IRAQ IN 2021

### 1

I saw in my dreams  
people exhausted from chest flogging.  
When I awakened, I found the hands  
beating my chest  
with the chisel of destruction.  
An insomniac eye, asthmatic lung, none-beating heart,  
the sand covers the streets and the fields.  
Cats and dogs search for shelter.  
The politicians' heads are saturated with sins.  
The people, like gorbans, pray  
to hasten the last episode of doom.

### 2

For twenty years, she dreamt of a wedding.  
When the dreams' knight arrived,  
he melted like a glove of salt in water.  
The river runs unusually slowly.  
Then, the shining remnants of her cousin's hidden saber  
glittering on the waves' surface.  
Twenty candles were snuffed by the water.

## 3

He thought to be from the descendants of Babylon.  
He laced the proverbs and the roaring speeches,  
walking over a dangling rope, all his life.  
Every so often he raises his voice rowdily:  
"I am the summary of the past, the guardian of the imminent."  
The days passed rapidly; the storms dragged him down.  
He had no obvious grave, but the passersby often found his offspring,  
urinating in a desolate place  
with no more than a tombstone  
on which a broken sentence was written:  
"Here dwells the sacred clown."



Kadhem Khanjar



Kadhem Khanjar is a poet and performer from Iraq. Along with some friends he set up a project called 'the Culture Militia,' a group which performs poetry in sites of destruction and death including blown-up cars, minefields, bombed out-houses, ambulances, ISIS cages, and mass graves. His collection *Picnic with an Explosive Belt* was published in Arabic by Dar al-Maktutat in the Netherlands.

These poems are translated from Arabic by Alice Guthrie.

## BREAKING NEWS: MASS GRAVE DISCOVERED NEARBY

Yesterday I went down to Forensics. They asked me for a sample for DNA matching. They said that they had found some bones, as yet unidentified. I turn and turn like an orange on the knife of hope.

Now I am at home, brother, wiping the dust from the artificial flowers around your picture, and watering them with tears.

\*\*\*

The medical report says that the bag of bones that I signed for today is "You". But this is little. I laid him out on the table in front of them. We counted again: a skull with six holes, one clavicle, three cervical ribs, a shattered femur, a pile of wrist bones, and a few vertebrae.

Is it possible that this little is a brother?

The medical report indicates that it is. I put the bones back in the bag. I brushed the earth from my hands, then blew the rest from the table, put you on my back, and left.

\*\*\*

On the bus I sat the bag beside me. I paid for two seats (this time it's me who pays). I grew up today, enough to carry you on my back and pay your bus fare.

\*\*\*

*continued overleaf...*

## BREAKING NEWS: MASS GRAVE DISCOVERED NEARBY

*contd...*

I didn't tell anyone that I had received this little. I watch your wife and your children brush by the sofa that I left you on. I wanted one of them to open the bag. I wanted them to see you one last time. But you were as unyielding as a bone. Afterwards they asked about the tearstains on the sofa.

\*\*\*

For an hour I have been arranging these damp bones in the bottom of the coffin, trying to make you complete. Only the nails in either side know how little this is.



Photograph credit: AFP.



Mohamed Miloud Gharrafi

Mohamed Miloud Gharrafi was born in Berkane (the North of Morocco) in 1966. He lives in France since 1990. He published three collections: *burns of passion* (Morocco, 2002), *I chew it like black chewing gum* (France/Morocco, 2009) and *I don't associate anyone with my loneliness* (Cairo, 2014).

These poems are translated from French by Evelyn Got.

## LOOK HOW IT FLIES

« Have it repaired »: my mother said to me.  
I took it to the shoemakers. He stitched both sides and proudly hit one nail into the heel, another one into the sole. He was polishing it saying to me: «you will go away and it will remain at the height of its glory”. You won't run any risk if you walk in water wearing it. It would be wasted were you not proud of it. Hit the ground at will in a gipsy dance, raise dust while dancing a *regadda*, walk on stones, on flagstones. It won't wear out. Look I can twist as I like, it does not break. See how it flies (than he threw it up to the ceiling). You now? Its secret does not lie in its leather or its heel. It lies in the step. Between the arteries of the earth and the veins of the foot. The secret lies in what you make of it. Wearing it is not enough. It will sometimes pride itself on your wearing it through thorns and embers for you to grasp the secret of the rotation of the earth as well as the one of the passing of the scream into spaces beyond the realm of words. At times, place your shoe close to your head. As close to your head as you can. You will hear all the torment of the earth, the scream of the Assyrians, the burning-hot asphalt, the breath of the dead, and the horror of the phosphoric night. Then place it near your hand, son, and see how it flies. See how it does fly!

\* *Reggada*: traditional dance performed in the East of Morocco.



# MIGHTY MEKONG RIVER



Theresa Griffin Kennedy

Theresa Griffin Kennedy is a Portland, Oregon native with a strong connection to her Pacific Northwest heritage, rooted in the blue collar, working class experience. She was educated at Portland State University, and completed a double major, double minor and later a masters degree in 2013. She has been a daily writer since the age of eighteen, when her father, author and poet, Dorsey Edwin Griffin, began encouraging her to write. Kennedy has been published with The Rumpus, Pathos Literary Review, Live Encounters Magazine, Portland Monthly Magazine, the Portland Alliance Newspaper, Street Roots Newspaper, with letters to the editor published with the Portland Tribune, Willamette Week and in Vanity Fair Magazine. Her first book of fiction, *Burnside Field Lizard and Selected Stories* was selected as a finalist for the 2019 Next Generation Indie Book Award for the regional fiction division. Her first novel, *Talionic Night in Portland: A Love Story*, was published in 2021 through Oregon Greystone Press. Her second book with the History Press, *Lost Restaurants of Portland*, premiers in September 2022. She lives in Portland Oregon with her writer/author husband, former PPB homicide detective, Don DuPay, where they both continue to write and be published.

## THE ROMANCE, LEGEND AND TROUBLES OF THE MIGHTY MEKONG RIVER!

I first fell in love with the idea of the Mekong River when I read the short novel *The Lover*, by legendary French novelist, Marguerite Duras. The protagonist mentions passing over a stretch of the Mekong with reverence, wonder and even fear. That section of the book pulls the reader into an unlikely fever-dream, a play between fantasy and reality in which the river becomes personified and almost human-like. I don't know why but when I read that passage of *The Lover*, nothing seemed more foreign, alluring and unattainable than the mysterious Mekong River.

The girl is on a ferry that shuttles between Vinh Long and Sa Đéc in southern Cochinchina, in an area called the Plain of Birds, a vast expanse of mud, rice paddies and water. It is on the ferry that she meets the man who will become her lover. The role of the Mekong River in this scenario becomes symbolic of a rite of passage. As the girl steps out of childhood and into her future as a woman and a *writer*, the Mekong acts as a buoy of support and enticement beneath her feet.

The silent evenness of the currents of the Mekong steadily moving forward, and the river's mystery is deepened by the quiet and erotic prose of Duras. Many believe the novel is a simple recounting of her lived experience as a fifteen-year-old girl. It was then that Duras embarked on a sexual affair with a handsome young Chinese man, Huynh Thuy Le, a forbidden lover in every way for a French white girl in late 1920s Indochina.



# MIGHTY MEKONG RIVER

When I read this passage of the book, I too, wanted to know about the Mekong. I wanted to experience its beauty, its mystery and understand on some level why the millions of lives that depend on the river *are* so reliant upon its continued existence. What is contained within the Mighty Mekong and *why* is she so beloved?

*"I get off the bus and go to the railing. I watch the river. My mother tells me that never in my entire life will I see rivers as beautiful as these, as wide, as wild as the Mekong and its branches ebbing toward the sea, its waters rushing into oblivion, into the vacuum of the ocean, from the foreground to the vanishing point, pouring, gushing, as if the earth was tipped vertical.*

*I always get off the bus once we're on the ferry, once night comes, because I am always afraid. I am afraid that the cables will break, that we will be carried out to sea. In the terrible current, I see the last moment of my life. The current is strong enough to carry away anything. Stones, a cathedral, a city. A storm brews under the water, in the battering wind."*

What the Mighty Mekong, also called the "dragon river", represents is the very identity and survival of most of mainland Southeast Asia. It signifies custom, tradition and a time-honored way of life due to the river's ever-present cycles, its rich abundance of aquatic life and of the lush natural world surrounding it, which includes 54 million hectares of forestland. As such, the Mekong is one of the most biodiverse rivers on the planet, coming in second only to the Amazon River. As one of the world's most productive natural fisheries, the Mekong produces 20 percent of the world's inland and freshwater fish, providing food for millions of people.

The name Mekong is from the original name Mae Nam Kong, which is a contracted form of Thai, and in Thai and Lao, Mae Nam is used when describing large rivers. In time the name was shortened to Mae Khong, and the shortened and modern version for the Mae Nam Kong River has now become Mekong. It is an elegant sounding name which means *Mother of Waters*. The meaning seems most appropriate considering the length of the meandering river, the force of the currents and the countries it sustains with its rich turbid waters.

With an estimated length of more than 2,700 miles, the Mekong River is the seventh longest river in Asia and the 12th longest river in the world, traveling through six countries and sustaining more than 60 million human lives.



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Mekong in the monsoon. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

# MIGHTY MEKONG RIVER



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



In Southeast Asia, the Mekong is worshiped, prayed to, and sometimes even cursed during a particularly bad season. As the giver of all things, the river is as beloved as a precious family member or prideful deity who sustains all life. Conversely, the Mekong can be as feared as a demon or angry ghost when its cycles change or become in any way unpredictable. Most villagers' who live along its shores have some sort of story to tell of something they've experienced. It could be a legend, or a myth they were raised to believe, or even a frightening mystical experience they personally survived while traveling the river or fishing for the larger, more dangerous Mekong fish.

But the truest reality is that in the fate of the Mighty Mekong looms the fate of all of Southeast Asia. But what is that fate? And what are the river's current troubles?

### **The Allure of the Mighty Mekong**

In a physical sense, the Mekong speaks to the beauty of its jade colored, muddy waters. It speaks to the wildflowers and abundant species of colorful butterflies that flourish along its shores. The Mekong also speaks to the inherent dangers of culling the river for food sources, primarily fish, and the survival of the people who live upstream and downstream of its sandy or rocky banks—people who accept those dangers as normal and what is expected.

The Mekong in mythology represents a home for the spirit world, for the departed ancestors who have taken from the river what they need to survive, including those who have died along its banks during times of war and political upheaval. For example, during the Vietnam War, the Mekong was the scene of gruesome deadly fighting with Vietnamese and American soldiers dying within its shallow and deeper waters. The river and its numerous tributaries and channels were used regularly to transport supplies and soldiers during conflicts. In a true sense, the river banks of the Mekong have become the foundational support on which kingdoms and cultures have intersected for millennia, becoming both past and future simultaneously.

Known also as Southeast Asia's "Big Muddy " the Mekong carries the memories of a million dramas, a multitude of forgotten histories, of disappeared kingdoms and brutal ancient warlords. To the peasant farmers and fisherman of today, subsisting on its huge numbers of fish, some say more than 1,200 species while others say 1,700 species, the Mekong River is simply indispensable.

Species of fish include the Giant River Carp, which can grow to 4.92 feet and weigh close to 155 pounds. Then there is the Giant Mekong Catfish, and the Mekong Freshwater Stingray, which can develop a wingspan of up to 13 feet. Because of the incredible richness of fish species, the Mekong has become both the sun and the moon to those people whose survival depends on the river's health and its natural rhythms.

Other forms of aquatic life in the Mekong include Hairy-nosed otters, which are currently threatened due to poaching, and may be extinct in parts of India and Myanmar. The Siamese crocodile is also a resident of the Mekong, along with the "smiling" Irrawaddy Dolphin, whose numbers are dwindling but can still be seen in Kratié province, Cambodia. The vast numbers of fish that live and breed in the Mekong are the most important source of protein for the millions of people living in the lower Basin. This includes what are called Monster Fish, some species of which, amazingly, have not yet been identified or named. Many Monster Fish, however, include the Mekong Giant Barb, Mekong Giant Catfish, and the Mekong Giant Stingray.

## **The Upper Mekong; China, and Myanmar**

The upper Mekong begins in China and travels to Myanmar. Below the Khone Falls, (around Kratie) is where the Mekong floodplains start. Typically, the upper and lower areas of the Mekong are divided by the length of the mainstream. Half of the mainstream's length is in China, and the other half are in the South East Asian countries. The northern portion of the Upper Mekong, near mountainous regions and verdant jungles is thought to be more attractive and scenic for tourism. This portion of the Upper Mekong is regularly traveled by a select number of exclusive luxury cruises that occur throughout the year. In these areas of the Upper Mekong the water is relatively clear during the dry season, and flows quickly as it is fed by snowmelt from the mountains. The snowmelt assures a uniform circum-annual flow in the river from the upper to the lower basins. During the wet season, however, the water is the typical muddy brown color due to the particulate matter within it.

The falls sit near the border of Cambodia and are for the most part non-navigable because of large boulders and rocks which form tiny islands within the river and make navigation difficult if not impossible. The lush vegetation of the Upper Mekong is pristine, and some travelers describe it as timeless in a prehistoric kind of way, as if it has never been impacted by human occupation or modernization, despite the several medium-sized cities that dot the shoreline, like Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Nakhon Phanom, Savannakhet/Mukdahan, and Pakse.



Butterflies on the bank of the Mekong. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



Animals graze undisturbed along the banks of these Upper Mekong areas and there are isolated stretches where travelers may not come across another boat or person for several hours, despite the cargo boats and local fishermen that travel there regularly. Some people say in these sections of the Mekong, the traveler feels as if they are “going back in time” to an era in which the land was untouched and the trappings of modern civilization, unseen, particularly for the favored stretch between the Golden Triangle and Luang Prabang, which is so popular among tourists.

Upper Mekong Highlights:

- *The Upper Mekong River begins and ends in Laos*
- *The Upper Mekong offers fewer numbers of luxury cruise boats or lodges to stay in*
- *The Upper Mekong has a landscape which is pristine, untouched & less explored*

## **The Lower Mekong; Cambodia and Vietnam**

The Lower Mekong is the opposite of the Upper Mekong and acts as its counterpart and it is for this reason that the Upper and Lower Mekong Basins are as different ecologically as night and day. The Lower Mekong Basin is also recognizable for its muddy, turbid and often heavy water, which is thick with suspended particulate matter.

For this reason, the water of the Lower Mekong is rich with nutrients that replenish farmland soil each year with effective irrigation methods and natural flooding. However the muddy water is seen throughout the entire length of the Mekong during the wet season, even far upstream in China, with typically 60 percent of the sediment in the river coming directly from China. Now, eleven major dams block that precious sediment flow and have slowed down its natural movements.

Where the Upper Mekong is more isolated, and tranquil, with the mountains, the snowmelt and a landscape which appears prehistoric, the Lower Mekong Basin is where humankind interacts more directly with the river. The Lower floodplain tends to be livelier because of the number of people living nearby and the bustling human activity. There are floating markets, best visited in the early morning which clutter the shorelines in harmonious riverside communities. There residents and tourists can purchase rice, exotic spices, vegetables, local herbs and fruit like papaya, mango, pineapple, bananas and even smuggled goods such as cigarettes, chewing tobacco and other novelties.





Harvest. © Photograph by Mark Ulyseas

Taxi Boats escort people to their destinations, whizzing by in all directions in a whirl of activity in the lower Mekong basin.

Lower Mekong Highlights:

- *The Lower Mekong is populated with floating markets selling food, spices & other goods*
- *The Lower Mekong is popular with tourists due to the riverside communities*
- *The Lower Mekong offers travel by water with Taxi Boats*

It is not an easy task to fully understand the struggles of the people who live in the Lower Mekong Basin. In fact it is extremely difficult if you're American or European with no connection to those regions. To adequately understand the impact the river plays on the lives of the people who depend on it requires careful thought, study and consideration. And to truly understand the cultures of Cambodia and Vietnam, there is no better place to get an authentic glimpse of those cultures, traditions, customs and values than by visiting the floating markets of the Lower Mekong Delta.

### **The Troubles of the Mighty Mekong**

When human activity and industrialization begins the inevitable strangulation of dynamic river systems, and the complex biodiversity that depend on those systems, all rivers are at risk, not just the Mekong. But what happens when relentless dam construction, channelization, overfishing, sand mining, poaching, and vital agricultural irrigation begin to choke the naturally occurring life that depends on a river as vast and as long as the Mekong?

In an online article called *The Great Mekong River*, the situation is made clear. "It's virtually impossible for foreigners to appreciate the role of the river in the lives of those who live in the Mekong Basin. It influences every aspect of their daily existence, shaping not only the land, but also the people themselves."

There are approximately 70 million people in the Mekong basin, and 55 million inhabit the watershed areas lying within Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. They all depend on the Mekong River and its tributaries for travel, water to drink and bathe in and of course for food to live on.

# MIGHTY MEKONG RIVER

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Approximately nine-tenths of the people who live in the Lower Mekong Basin work in agriculture, primarily in growing rice, but they also grow other crops such as sugarcane, sweet potatoes, other vegetables and various nuts. These farmers depend on water from the Mekong to do that, with the success of crops dependent upon that constant source of direct irrigation.

Furthermore, much of the rice crops are exported to markets in Southeast Asia and around the world, which provides food for a larger number of people than only those living in the Mekong Basin. Those exported rice stores then become an important part of the successful economies of multiple communities in the lower Mekong Basin and beyond.

When considering the resources of the Mekong, it is the colossal length of the river, which snakes through six countries that is directly tied to concerns for its continued health and ability to sustain the millions of lives dependent upon it.

The river runs from its source deep in China's Qinghai Province through the eastern part of Tibet. From Yunnan province, it becomes the border between Myanmar and Laos, and between Laos and Thailand. From there it surges across Cambodia to Phnom Penh, where the Bassac River branches off. The two rivers continue to divide into nine outlets, the Cuu Long or (Nine Dragons) of Vietnam's Mekong Delta, and finally discharge into the East Sea. The river is navigable from the delta to Southern Laos, where massive waterfalls near the Cambodian border prevent boats from traveling farther.

The entire Mekong Basin is an extremely delicate ecosystem. Surprisingly, it is its colossal size and length that has made the Mekong River somewhat impervious over the centuries to interference by humankind. Things are changing rapidly though, and the inevitable threat of human interference in the naturally occurring fluctuations of the river is becoming more evident.

The Khone Falls and the rapids at the Golden Triangle have staved off major river cargo traffic, while the mountainous terrain in Laos, Thailand, Myanmar and China can make accessing those portions of the river difficult.



Monk © Photograph by Mark Ulyseas

The health of the river is dependent on many things, such as the high flows during the wet season and the low flows during the dry season, as well as what sediment flows during those times of the year. But inland fisheries and the continued development of dams block fish migration paths between the rivers downstream floodplains and its upstream tributaries. These changes in the natural flows of the river can have catastrophic impacts on fish biomass, productivity and biodiversity.

There are 440 dams of all sizes and uses in the Mekong, with irrigation systems and reservoirs built within the Mekong system as well, since the 1950s. There are now several more dams that span the Mekong mainstream in Yunnan Province in China. This new reality has had a cumulative effect on the upstream health of the river, which impacts how the river functions in other countries, from the headwaters to the mouth.

The dams have reduced peak floods, which occurred naturally for millennia, and have interfered with aquatic habitat, which has, "...blocked fish spawning and nursery areas to migratory species. For example, Vietnam is concerned about the danger of increased seawater in the fertile Mekong Delta if the dry season water level drops. River transport, vital for Cambodia but also important for the other riparian countries, is badly affected by falling water levels."

As many Mekong fish species migrate for feeding and spawning, traveling vast distances, things like water quality and upstream and downstream water flow, including water temperature, can seriously and negatively impact those species' survival.

When dams affect water levels because of upstream use, downstream agriculture can be adversely impacted. Moreover, upstream pollution does not defy the laws of gravity. Polluted waters will continue to flow with the river, and impact all those communities of subsistence farmers and fishermen who cannot control what drifts into their water sources or farmland.

The Mekong Basin is continuing to experience rapid development and this may alter the actual landscape permanently, because both the Upper Basin and the Lower Basin are being impacted by the complex realities of climate change in conjunction with the relentless dam building.

This continued change to the natural structure of the river represents dangerous uncharted territory, not only for the integrity of its bio-diverse ecosystems' but also for the quality of life of the people who live within the Mekong Basin.

While many argue that the Mekong and its ecosystems are still healthy and remain unchanged, others dispute that and warn against irreparable harm that continued damming, brought on mostly by China and Laos, will bring to the Mekong River. Where the changes are becoming most obvious is in the drying up of the river banks along the lower basin areas, where the naturally occurring flood waters creep lower and lower each year.

With the present rate of deforestation near the river's edge, depletion of soil quality, and even lower numbers of fish species, it is probable that the Mekong Basin systems may decline to such a point that recovery for those areas becomes impossible.

*\*The primary concern is the water drying up along the shores of the Lower Mekong Basin and the lack of flooding and sediment depositing along the river's banks. Flooding sends sediment far across the floodplain making the soil rich and fertilized for robust agriculture production. Floods bring freshwater and drive out salinity intrusion. More sediment keeps the land strong and intact and helps defend against sea level rise. The sediment also forms the basis of the food web for hungry fish. When fish can spread out into the floodplain they grow plentiful and large, sustaining those human populations that live nearby.*

## **The Mekong River Commission**

Fortunately, there is a *Mekong River Commission*, dedicated to: "Promote and coordinate sustainable management and development of water and related resources for the mutual benefits of the lower Mekong countries and the people's well-being."

The *Mekong River Commission* was formed April 5 of 1995 by agreement of the governments of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. The creation of the commission is dedicated to manage the shared water resources of all the countries the Mekong travels through and to develop the economic potential of the river that is fair and equitable to all concerned.





©Mark Ulyseas

Bamboo growing on the bank of the Mekong. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

In 1996 China and Myanmar became Dialogue Partners of the *Mekong River Commission*. These countries now try to cooperate within a framework of attempting to do what is best for the sustainable development of water and related resources in the Mekong Basins. But 70 large dams have been built in the last 15 years and they are delivering a death of a thousand cuts to the Mekong in various ways.

## **Environmental Concerns for the Mighty Mekong**

The primary environmental concerns impacting the Mekong River are the continuous building of additional dams. China, rumor has it won't be building anymore dams, but Laos plans to build 200 more dams within the next few years, with 70 completed and 44 currently under construction.

Then there is the blasting of rapids and the number of dams that have already been built on the river's numerous tributaries. Cambodia has expressed concern over the risks of building more dams and they have postponed several of their projects.

For decades China has been involved in extensive dam-building with no end in sight, but other countries have also been building dams. There is the Pak Mun Dam, in Thailand, built by Thai construction companies, which has long been criticized for its destruction to the environment and the livelihoods of nearby affected villagers. The two largest dams in the Mekong remain in China. They hold about half of the water stored in all the dams of the Mekong. In all, some 400 dams have been built in the Mekong over the last four decades and with the building of so many dams, since the 1950s, not only has the water been impacted but wildlife as well. Many species have become endangered, such as the aforementioned Hairy-nosed Otters, and Irrawaddy "smiling" dolphins.

Because of the thousands of dams, water levels are dropping each year in the Lower Basin. This causes all kinds of problems for fishermen and rice farmers, but also causes ferries to get stuck and makes travel by ferry much longer and more difficult. Fishing for species of fish previously plentiful in the Mekong has been cut in half in the Lower Basin areas.

Residents of the Lower Mekong Basin also complain of ever increasing pesticide pollution. This is caused from runoff and exacerbated by the potentially disastrous water level drops and weaker flows caused by so many dams.



Nam Ou, tributary of the Mekong. © Photograph by Mark Ulyseas

The pollution is caused by pesticides, antibiotics and other chemicals used in farming, which mostly occurs in Vietnam. The pollution is also caused by intensified rice and shrimp farming, mostly occurring in Vietnam. And booming cities like Phnom Penh actually dump their waste water directly into the river, which doesn't help matters.

*But the reality is that whole stretches of the Mekong River are simply drying up.*

There are other unforeseen concerns which have created increased water flow in some parts of China due to the excessive dams. This occurs when the Chinese governments clear rocks, sandbars, and blast gorges. The water slows down as more Chinese dams are built, which then floods other sections of China in unexpected ways. But countries like Laos, Vietnam and especially Cambodia, with its high level of poverty, are the most vulnerable to these environmental changes, spurred on by China's dam operations.

Villagers living in Cambodia and Vietnam regularly complain that they catch less fish, and have water that is heavy with pollution and cannot be consumed without making them physically ill if they drink it. However, the other issue is that Cambodians and Vietnamese are actually poisoning themselves with unregulated agricultural practices.

Also problematic is that with low water flows, the seasonal riverbank crops, usually vegetables and various greens, do not flourish. Rice is planted in flat paddy-land near floodplains, and riverbanks tend to be steep, so it's difficult to grow rice there, as that requires standing water. But riverbank crops can be adversely impacted with low water flows and often they simply wither away and die.

### **The Mekong Reveals a New and Alarming Tipping Point**

Recently, the world was shown how unforgiving Mother Nature can be when strange things began happening in the Mighty Mekong River. The Mekong which has sustained civilizations for centuries with an almost indefatigable abundance of natural riches has begun demonstrating how decades of human interference is now strangling the river.

In 2019 critical monsoon rains failed to begin at their usual time in the latter part of May. Drought began to assert its destructive tentacles and water levels in the Mekong dropped to ranges not seen in over 100 years. When the late May rains finally arrived they were short lived and sporadic.



# MIGHTY MEKONG RIVER



Banana blossom on the bank of the Mekong. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

The wet season drought persisted for three years straight, from 2019 to 2021.

In other areas of the Mekong the waters began to transform into something ugly and unfamiliar. In areas in the north, the once powerful Mekong slowed to a weak stream, becoming nearly unrecognizable, with large rocks becoming visible in the middle of the wide scenic waterways. The water's color also changed, becoming strangely clouded with "globes of algae" dotting the surface. Fish from some of the inland fisheries have dwindled and the fish that are caught are so "emaciated" they can only be used to feed other fish.

The Mekong River is literally being strangled due to these forces with the regular damming all along the river which has gone on unabated for over fifty years. With the 2019 to 2021 wet season droughts which were caused by an abnormal climate pattern, essentially an enormous lack of rain, coupled with the impact of the dams, these forces working together created the worst recorded drought in a century.

The situation currently affecting the Mekong River has further created a tremendous amount of hardship for the tens of millions of people who rely on the Mekong's waters and has possibly pitched the river's ecology past a dangerous tipping point.

The great inland lake, called the Tonle Sap, and described as "the beating heart of the Mekong" has experienced unprecedented shallow areas during times when the lake levels should be high. One floating village has nearly completely dried up, but this did not occur in the natural dry season but rather two months into the wet season.

Youk Sengleng, who works as an NGO fisheries expert near the Tonle Sap has shared his thoughts on the matter: "Many fish died because of the shallow water, hot temperature, and toxic water resulting from lack of oxygen. Around 2.5 million people who depend on the lake's once abundant fisheries have been directly affected."

When countries like China and Laos selfishly take too much water from the Mighty Mekong, they remove the dynamic life force from the river. They suck out its natural essence, pollutants concentrate, and the water flows weaken and dwindle. This results in the inevitable build-up of sludgy sediment that lines the riverbed and clogs it, leading to the development of dangerous forms of Algae and other toxins which pollute the water and kill fish and other aquatic life.

## The Rivers Decline Impacts Rare Wildlife

In early 2020, it was reported that a single and endangered Irrawaddy dolphin had become entangled in fishing nets, and became disoriented. This lonesome dolphin was seen wandering the Mekong River, trying to find its way home to its normal habitat in northern Cambodia. Conservationists came together, hoping to capture it so it could be jettisoned back to its original habitat. They were desperate to save the dolphin considering there are only 92 individual Irrawaddy dolphins left in the wild, compared to over 200 some twenty years ago.

Dolphins represent an important role in Cambodian myth and folklore and the fate of this small dolphin became daily news in many communities. This lost and confused mammal, unsure how to find its way back home, is thought to be symbolic of how the Mekong River has also become lost and endangered.

*The lost Irrawaddy dolphin is presumed to have died.*

*\*The role of the Irrawaddy dolphins in helping Burmese fishermen is legendary and goes back some 300 years. This symbiotic relationship could fill a book in itself and warrants continued study if only for its historical significance and whimsy.*

For decades experts have warned that an environmental crisis is waiting and will impact the 2,700 mile long river. The Mekong can no longer survive under the constant manipulation of decades of dam building and overfishing. For so many years the river just continued, despite all odds, to adapt and provide for the millions of people who depend on it. Now, the health of the Mekong is being strangled on a basin-wide level. This is due to the changes caused by the numerous dams that dot the Mekong, but also the rivers inability to sustain diverse ecosystems due to what is called “hungry water.”

“Everywhere you look there are indications that this river, which has provided for so many, for so long, is at a breaking point,” says Zeb Hogan, a fish biologist at the University of Nevada, Reno. Hogan is also a *National Geographic Explorer* and is concerned with the river’s ability to survive and adapt.

The unfortunate reality is that the problems facing the Mekong River in the Lower Basin areas are the result of China, which operates eleven massive dams.



Annual boat race. © Photograph by Mark Ulyseas

During times of serious drought, China's dams hold back more than 12 trillion gallons of water impacting all the countries in the lower basin areas.

This reality has devastated the natural flows downstream, diverse fish reproduction and other forms of wildlife. "When drought sets in, China effectively controls the flow of the river," says Brian Eyler. He acts as director of the Southeast Asia program at The Stimson Center in Washington, D.C. and is justifiably concerned about the role China has played in the slow drying up of the Mekong in the Lower Basin during the wet seasons.

With a river as long, complex and interconnected as the Mekong, with its numerous tributaries, changes in one place can have serious and immediate consequences elsewhere. All of these changes are controlled by China and it is China who holds the cards on the future of the Mighty Mekong River.

China is the power player in this scenario and has been for decades as they hold the most power over the natural flow of the Mekong. But Cambodia and Vietnam do the most sand mining, which they do for domestic development, so there is plenty of blame to go around in how all of these dynamics affect the Mekong River.

### **The "Hungry Water" of the Lower Mekong Basin Begg the Question, what is hungry water?**

In northern Thailand, farmers and fishermen have had to contend with wildly unstable fluctuations in river flows as China stores and then unexpectedly releases water from their dams. Such irregular water releases, sometimes without any direct telephone or email warning, can have disastrous impacts on livestock and equipment, and fish migration. Sudden increases in water levels wash away crops, and destroy them. This disrupts the rural riparian communities in the lower Basin and sets them back months, literally taking food out of their mouths.

Laos, in an effort to protect its own resources, has vowed to build hundreds of additional hydro-plants in the next few years. Laos is currently operating more than 60 dams on Mekong tributaries. "The larger of those two, the Xayaburi dam, had long been stuck in a legal battle over concerns that it would hurt fish migration and communities downstream. The dam's developer, a Thai company called CK Power, claims it has spent more than \$600 million to mitigate negative impacts, including installing fish ladders and special gates for sediment to pass, though many environmentalists remain unconvinced."

Not long after this dam began operation, the typical chocolate-colored Mekong River water began to transform to a brilliant blue in areas farther south. This change in color indicates the river has been stripped of the rich brown sediment it has transported for centuries. This changes the waters from turbid and rich in nutrients and particulate matter, which enriches farmland soils and sustains fish to something else entirely.

This kind of water, though pretty to look at, is called “hungry water” and it is a foreboding of bad things to come. Hungry water can be destructive to the delicate ecosystems of the Mekong, by causing erosion, as it eats away the delicate river banks.

Ecologists believe sediment is being blocked by the new Northern Laos 2019 Xayaburi dam which is a run-of-river, hydroelectric dam. And it's well-known that China already holds back a whopping 60 percent of the precious sediment that normally flows the length of the river. Another theory is that the weak river flow causes the sediment to drift to the floor of the river. Whatever the cause, it stems from the change in the natural flows of the river, before dam construction altered those natural rhythms.

The blue water coming in from tributaries alters the structure of the rich brown waters that are the lifeblood of the Mekong and this impact is insidious and destructive. It is supposed that the Xayaburi dam is being operated in ways that shock the downstream of the river through irregular releases which cause specific injury to the river.

This hungry water has moved to Cambodia as well and ecologists worry that it will continue to spread, like a virus, with the low water flows. One of the dangers of this slow-flowing water is that algae then grows on the sand and the bedrock bottom of the river. In normal conditions, with the violent and vigorous flows of the river, those algae would be washed away by the violent currents, which would also energetically oxygenate the water, thereby killing any potential algae growth. But with the low water levels algae is freely growing with sections of the river in Thailand and Laos turning an alarming green with brightly colored algae blooms dotting the surface of the water.





Floating Village, Tonle Sap. © Photograph by Mark Ulyseas

### More Troubles for the Tonle Sap Lake

Southeast Asia's largest lake, the Tonle Sap, located in Cambodia, which is affectionately called "the beating heart of the Mekong" has become a serious concern for conservationists and the fisherman who depend on the lake. The Tonle Sap has been a huge source of food for centuries and has always had an abundance of fish to support Cambodians.

Each year, after the start of the rains, the Tonle Sap, which connects to the Mekong, swells to many times its original size and provides important habitat for fish to feed, grow in and reproduce. This yearly process has enormous importance on the commercial sales of fish. In recent years over 500,000 tons of fish is taken from the Tonle Sap, which is more fish than can be caught in all of North America's Rivers and lakes combined.

In 2019, the water from the Mekong to the Tonle Sap arrived so late and receded so early that large sections of the lake never fully filled up. What happened next was alarming when mass deaths of fish occurred because of the shallow water levels and the toxic oxygen-poor water. Authorities were forced to collect millions of dead fish and dispose of them, warning nearby residents not to eat them, as they were toxic and rotten.

According to some estimates fish catch in the Tonle Sap may have declined by up to 70 percent. This puts fishermen out of work and families go hungry. Many fishermen are not catching fish for human consumption from the Tonle Sap Lake, but only fish larvae to provide for fish farms, which can be expensive and time consuming to operate. As fish larvae are the future of fish, this is killing the fish population even more in the Tonle Sap.

Poor fishing conditions have continued in the Tonle Sap Lake, which has impacted the critically endangered Mekong Giant Catfish, when they try to make their way back to the Mekong River. Many of the fish are so emaciated that Cambodians cannot make *Prahok*, which is a fish paste that is a Cambodian food staple. Because the fish yields are so low, many fishermen have decided to leave, hoping that they can support their families better if they move elsewhere.

Though nature and even fish can be remarkably resilient to change, the danger currently is that the Mekong River and the Tonle Sap are both changing in ways that are outside the limitations of natural variability. Because of shortages, the price of fish is jumping in fish markets, and in the long run there could be a serious food shortage in Cambodia, and all along the Mekong, particularly after contending with the global Covid-19 Pandemic and its still occurring economic repercussions.

In Vietnam, concerns continue to multiply over the current condition of the Delta. Vast erosion is taking place because of sand mining and hungry water. This has led to homes and even roads collapsing with several states of emergency being declared in six provinces, alone.

Brian Eyler is troubled, stating: "Mekong governments are not reacting fast enough to understand the oncoming crisis and work together to mitigate risk and improve resilience."

Zeb Hogan believes that human values and priorities must change for the Mekong to survive. "The river has been changed to benefit people who see it as a source of power. That must change, so that the food, fertility, and ecosystem services provided by a healthy, connected, and free flowing river are valued higher."

Part of what needs to happen is that there must be a cease to the constant dam creation all along the Mekong, but that doesn't seem to be occurring. Another change that must take place is that the *Mekong River Commission* must take on a more aggressive role.

The MRC appears to have no real political clout when it includes only four of the basin countries, but not China, which has the most power and the most obligation to help the other countries overcome and survive these changes. The Mekong is even said to have become a "new front in U.S.-China rivalry, environmentalists and officials say..." with the countries downstream of the river being at the "mercy" of China's control. Most conservationists agree there is still time to save the Mekong and that it is not too late for the river. They agree that the river can be restored to its original rhythms if some of the Dams are altered or even dismantled. Pianporn Deetes, an activist with International Rivers has hope: "We've seen the Mekong getting injured, and more and more devastation happening here and there. But it's not dying. The Mekong's incalculable ecological value can be restored and brought back to function to sustain the region's future."





Boats on Mekong. © Photograph by Mark Ulyseas

One area of study that should be investigated further is that hydropower dams are slowly being regarded as an older technology that is becoming obsolete. The reality is that renewable energy from solar and wind power is gaining more popularity in the regions near the Mekong River. Even Mekong energy analyst, Brian Eyler, believes that MRC states are beginning to rally around the idea and practise of renewable energy, and will in time shift away from presuming hydropower is the only way to operate.

### **Facing a Grim Reality - Having Accountability**

In an April 2020 article by Brian Eyler, *Science Shows Chinese Dams are Devastating the Mekong*, Eyler successfully argues that it is due to China that these humanitarian issues are arising, wherein millions of people's lives are being impacted due to the Chinese Dams. Eyler is also the author of an outstanding book called *Last Days of the Mighty Mekong*, which provides a greater understanding of all of the issues facing the Mekong and the lower basin countries which straddle it and what the future may bring.

In the excellent article by Eyler, mentioned above, he makes no bones about what is really going on and provides a serious warning. Eleven enormous dams that front the great Mekong River, before the river flows out of China, and into Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and then into Vietnam, are impacted directly and depend entirely on the "...moonsonal ebb and flow of the Mekong" in order to survive. If these dams interfere with that natural process, it is inevitable that the landscape will be altered irrevocably and the 'last days' of the Mekong really will be in our midst.

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# MIGHTY MEKONG RIVER



Hibiscus growing on the bank of the Mekong River. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

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## **Hard Questions Remain Unanswered**

The power player in all this is of course, *China*. How many cultures must be devastated, how many people held hostage and how many millions of lives along the lower delta, destroyed before China sees how their water greed is undermining not only millions of innocent lives but also their own global reputation?

Eyler explains a great deal of the reality of China's obsession with hoarding Mekong water in his essay, writing "China considers water management data to be a state secret, and, barring new evidence, it has always been difficult to reach defensible conclusions about China's management water levels in the Mekong River."

When the Tonle Sap has historically provided up to 70 percent of Cambodians their needed daily protein, which comes out to approximately 500, 000 tons of food, those who will suffer the most in this situation are Cambodians. The yields of fish in the Tonle Sap have been cut in half and the fertility of the lake has been devastated. The changes in the Mekong River, because of the Chinese dams have impacted Vietnam's Mekong Delta, which has resulted in depriving millions of people the access they need to *fresh water*, which they had previously had for millenia.





Pink water buffalo grazing on the bank of the Mekong. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

*The author wishes to thank Mr. Brian Eyler, celebrated author of The Last Days of the Mighty Mekong, for his gracious help in providing feedback and suggestions for this essay, detailing in layman's terms, the current troubles of the Mekong River. I am most grateful to him for his invaluable assistance.*

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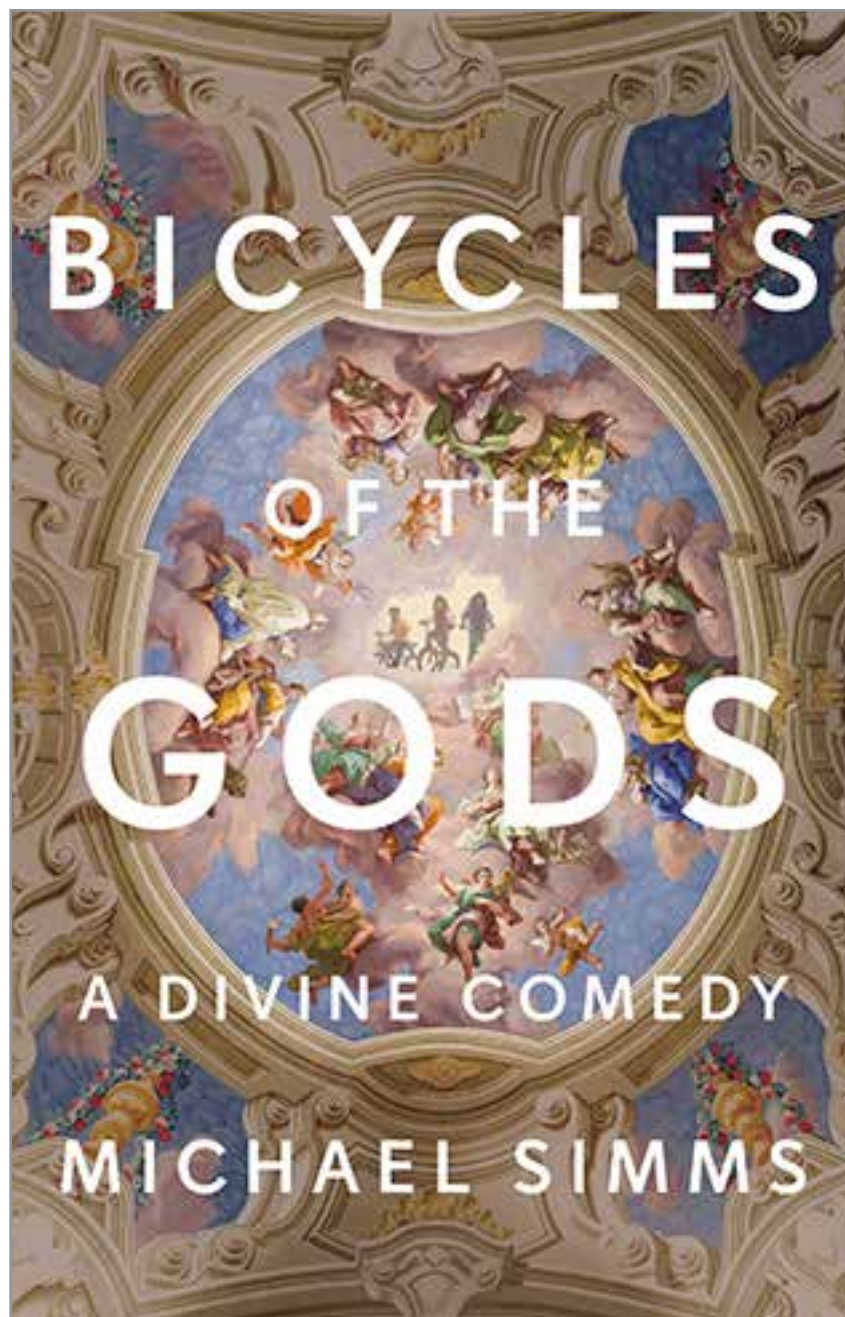
Twilight. Nam O is one of the 12 principal tributaries of the Mekong River Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



# MICHAEL SIMMS



Michael Simms is the founding editor of Vox Populi: A public sphere for poetry, politics and nature. His latest publications are two books of poetry, *American Ash* and *Nightjar*, and a novel *Bicycles of the Gods: A Divine Comedy* released in August 2022.



Available at: <https://madvillepublishing.com>

Dr. John Samuel Tieman, of St. Louis, is a widely published poet and essayist. His chapbook, "A Concise Biography Of Original Sin", is published by BkMk Press. His poetry has appeared in "The Americas Review", "The Caribbean Quarterly", "The Chariton Review", "The Iowa Review", "Rattle", "River Styx" "Stand", and "Vox Populi". He writes a weekly column for "Azar.az", a popular online news service in Eurasia.



DR JOHN SAMUEL TIEMAN  
 Review of  
 MICHAEL SIMMS'  
*Bicycles Of The Gods: A Divine Comedy*  
 Madville Publishing

God and Lucifer team up. As they do now and again, they plan to destroy the world. A cast of Fellini-like characters band together, and work to save Los Angeles and the world. *Bicycles Of The Gods* is an apocalyptic saga that is always riveting, always thought provoking, and alternately funny and sad.

It is refreshing to read a novel that, while satiric, takes seriously spiritual journey. One of the truly surprising parts of the novel is that, while religion is satirized, it is never disrespected. It's a real accomplishment. A lot of folks regard spirituality in general, and religion in particular, as irrelevant. Science and technology have given us ways of seeing the universe that truly benefit humankind. The Webb Telescope literally sees the unseen. All of which can lead to a sense that there is nothing that can remain unseen and unknown. It's a kind of intellectual arrogance, that there is nothing beyond the senses and the instruments, nothing sacred, nothing holy, nothing spiritual, nothing just beyond the tips of the fingers. In this novel, the holy and the spiritual are everywhere, in the streets of Los Angeles, along the Mexican-American border, everywhere. Our vision of heaven and hell have much more to do with Dante than Jesus. Simms picks up where Dante left off.

The novel also reminds me of the Cueva De Los Manos in Argentina. Christianity believes that the Creator God is holy, and that in creation we see expressions of the one God. Pre-monotheistic societies are held to be primitive because they people the universe with all manner of gods, a god of the mountain, a god of the sea, a nymph that protects a shepherd's hut. Polytheists and animists believe that holiness is everywhere. Everything is animated by holiness. Everything is alive with the sacred. In the Cueva De Los Manos in Argentina, those hands, those concentric circles, the animals, lizards, people and beasts, surely this is a world in which the spirits are no further than an outstretched arm.

Mythology is an attempt to not simply explain the unknown, but to participate in the holiness of all things. Odysseus may hate Poseidon, but he never forgets the divinity of the sea. This novel asks us to never doubt, therefore, that three kids, riding by on bicycles, could be gods or angels or demons.

Michael Simms' novel is peopled with gods and angels and demons. There are indeed humans, like the Sisters of the Pistons, a motorcycle gang of nuns, an order that instantly became a favorite this of reviewer. We also meet Maria Nazarene, who is Mother Mary. Then there's the homeless poet, Stefan Jozsef, and his social worker, Christina O'Malley. The central characters, however, are Jesse, Mikey, and Xavi, which is to say Jesus, St. Michael The Archangel, and Shiva respectively. And, yes, they ride their bikes around Los Angeles, awaiting and debating the coming apocalypse. Along the way, they meet all manner of being.

The apocalypse in *Bicycles Of The Gods* is not that of St. John. There are no horsemen bringing conquest, war, hunger, death. There are, however, three kids on bicycles. And nuns on motorcycles. And immigrants. And racism. And a whole host of contemporary characters and problems. In this sense, this novel is not unlike St. John's book.

The eschatology of *Bicycles* is rooted in the troubles of this century, just as St. John is rooted in the first century. At the core of each apocalypse is spiritual corruption that leads to societal disaster. When Jesse's uncle, Lucifer, talks about how he started racism, he admits that Xavi is "still a little pissed at me about that screw up". Lucifer didn't foresee that creating racism as a joke, a spiritual corruption, would lead to a disastrous combination of capitalism, slavery and racism.

Simms begins his novel with a disclaimer, saying that the book is not strictly orthodox when it comes to Christianity. That's true. The book is, however, a search for meaning, for spirituality, indeed for holiness. Much of that holiness is found in politics. Consider the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "Those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion is."

One of the central characters, a homeless poet, Stefan, near the beginning of the book, looks upon America, and writes -

*Oh poor dear  
Broken America  
To whom will you  
Leave your bars  
And laundromats?  
Who will inherit  
The warehouses  
Of the dying?  
Who will want  
The poisoned soil  
The Gideon Bibles  
The libraries of ghosts?*

Toward the end of the novel, Stefan writes –

*Our Father who art in flowers  
In the corner of the birds/ in the heart  
Of compassion/ in charity  
In patience and forgiveness  
Our Father who art in me  
Rid me of evil/ of violence  
Rid me of pain/ of heartache  
And disappointment/ But still  
When such difficulties are necessary  
Give me strength and courage  
To say Thank you Father  
For this lesson*

Stefan's spirituality asks us to look upon our home, then consider how we would rewrite the "Our Father". There are many things that recommend this novel. It is extremely well written. It is clever, thought provoking, funny, politically astute. But above all other things, it is a profound spiritual journey. And that journey includes everyone from those who occasionally say the rosary or Mincha, to those who occasionally read Sylvia Plath or Thomas Merton.



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