

# Brittle Star

ISSUE 39

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NOVEMBER 2016



## GOODBYE MONKEY

**O**ne of my favorite authors of recent years is Alessandro Baricco. Some time ago I bought his latest English translated book (he's Italian), *Mr Gwyn*. I've read several of his books after reading *Silk* back in the 1990's (which was one of those books that make you miss your stop on the Tube or bus!)

When I bought it *Mr Gwyn* was only available as an American import, and when it arrived I was nervous of reading it for two reasons: was I going to like Baricco's new book? and did I want to read a book about a writer's life (being so involved with writers daily; living with one, most of my friends are writers, reading submissions for the magazine and my press as well as going to readings and writing events)? So, I decided to shelve the book until I could find the right time to read it.

I found the right time and, of course, once I started I couldn't put it down. *Mr Gwyn* consists of a novella length story followed by three connecting short stories – Baricco is known for his brevity, (read his *Without Blood* to see what I mean; this is a short story that comes back to me time and time again).

While *Mr Gwyn* is about a writer, it's actually about not writing or, at least, stopping being a writer – as the main character at the start of the story explains in a column for the *Guardian*. Baricco cleverly, but never clever-clever, manages to tell a story very concisely,

without waffle or waste, while keeping the reader entranced. We learn a great deal about Mr Gwyn and the people he comes into contact with, yet there is always room for the little gems that come at you from nowhere; these tasty morsels are what makes it such a good read, and one I'll go back to.

I wanted to tell you this because I've shared my love of this book with several people over the past year, this complicated, mixed Year of the Monkey, that's thrown all sorts of confusion into our lives. But some good has come out of this year because everyone I've told have either gone away and bought the book or borrowed my own copy to read and, although some of them didn't know Baricco's work before *Mr Gwyn*, luckily all have enjoyed it. My copy is now being read in Germany. I'm sure we take away different things from reading the same book but that we can connect with it in our own way means that Baricco has done his job well. This is what good writing can do and why it (and reading) is important. I didn't set out to write a review of this book just to share my experience of how books can be passed along and how, in many ways, word of mouth is priceless. We can learn a lot from Mr Baricco and Mr Gwyn. You'd have to read the book to fully understand what I mean.

So, we're fastly approaching the end of 2016 and well on the way to the end of the Year of the Monkey, which I am relieved about; this mischievous, bad luck omen that I'm glad only comes along every 12 years. It has been a very mixed year and we, as a country, continue on an unstable foot limping along, caught off guard by political wrangling, lies and back-stabbing on all sides, and we pretend to wear the scars on our cheeks with pride. So let's lock our doors, pull up the drawbridge, cut the ties (lets get all the clichés in there!) and sleep 'till the end of the year – goodbye monkey (let's wake up to the Year of the Rooster!). – *Martin Parker*

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Julie Mellor

FEBRUARY

I went with the weather,  
the white bones of steady rain,

the idea of rain in woodlands  
where birch trees are leased in spring  
to give their sugary sap.

I thought of the body, how it bleeds,  
how cut rain moves,  
how leaves shiver.

If I could choose to be just one thing  
it would be a tree

and that tree would be birch  
for the first cut of spring,  
for the beautiful wound,

to fall in with the lengthening of days.

## DEAR HERON

When I saw you in that glass case with the handy leather strap so you could be carried about like luggage, I noticed you were a bird of two addresses: ID No. 56, Shelf K, being your indoor place and Acres Hill being where they shot you through the heart (which I imagine to be shrivelled, like Shelley's – although after forensic examination that turned out to be his liver).

Heron, you're as common as newspaper. Your neck has all the elasticity of one of those foam floats shaped like draught excluders that children use when they're learning to swim. I have memories of you struggling to take off from the river Don and how you were so nervous I could never get close.

I don't hold it against you. When I look at you now, all the ungainliness of flight gone, I think the dry and hollow body, its dull covering of grey, the wire frame instead of bones, is all any of us has.

## DAEDALUS' FUGUE

What washes up on the mind's shore,  
the things I've made with these trembling hands,

the saw, the plumb line, isinglass,  
an eye for detail, such as there is,

and my sister's son not wanting to learn  
but scrawl his name in sand,

the weathered bones of the Acropolis  
already dying from lack of attention

and the boy taunting me with his box of tricks,  
two pins of iron hinged to draw

the perfect circle in which I saw my downfall,  
my name erased, replaced by his as master,

so I pushed and he fell and that is all there is,  
except for the numbness in my brain,

the terrible sound of wings,  
my nephew turned into the dream of a bird,

a partridge hacking up its own dry discourse  
on how things should be done,

the way the young believe they know best  
because they are young,

his scream trapped in the cave of my skull.

Michael Farry

STRANDED

*After Ester Naomi Perquin*

They still don't know what I am  
mistake immobility for contentment  
chat about abstractions –  
achievements, status, serenity –  
even admire the location  
unaware of the rudderless impact  
the shudder of flesh against cliff face.

They hear nothing,  
my wailing drowned by chatter,  
wind on the cliff or predatory seagull, maybe,  
the language of lamentations alien  
to their unlearned ears.

Stroking my skin they read its grooves and ridges  
as accretions of experience, happy layers of living,  
fail to see the deep gashes, the embedded missiles  
how the epidermis flakes in the east wind  
scale after scale whipped off to who knows where.

They attend when they can, bring gifts,  
scents to hide smells, pages to pass hours,  
then go home, happy in the knowledge  
that contentment comes with age  
that creatures are what they appear to be  
that in the end, what is, is all there is.

When they leave  
I will resume,  
drag these bleeding stumps  
millimetre by millimetre  
towards the happy tide.

Edd Ravn

## BLUE AND BRIGHT TALK

(something like Simply Red plays in the background)

Blue: Layers  
Bright: Just one layer  
Blue: Heavy  
Bright: Your back starts to tickle  
Blue: Tickle  
Bright: Arching your shoulder blades back like a  
rose-ringed parakeet, ready to take flight  
Blue: You talkin about...  
Bright: Hymns of hallelujah racing slow motion  
across the sky  
Blue: Do you hear that

(they turn the corner and see the drummer, he looks  
Scandinavian, não locais)

One hand reaches the hi-hat and begins to tap at the  
Atlantic View.

Blue: ta ta chaa ta ta  
Bright: baa ta baa ta ta  
Blue: ta ta ta ta ta

Julian Cloran

## TRIBUTARIES

Tributaries' attributes, tribulation, defibrillator, fib to you later,  
moon crater,  
skin crater and hideous pock-marked face,  
case of whiskey, case history, case the joint, put a joint in the case,  
a head case, hard case, nut case,  
disgrace and disc race as 45s are hurled down hills,  
pills are swallowed,  
ascending knees bending, after money spending,  
wherever you live you always seem to go 'down' town, a town by  
the sea,  
for a weekend break, a holiday, a day, somewhere – in despair –  
to stay, pay for,  
work or be unemployed in, be a soldier and deployed in, be sent for  
and envoyed in, retire in,  
retirement gifts like carriage clocks and toasters,  
photograph albums filled with memories of office parties and  
work dos,  
do's and don'ts long forgotten but a poxy pensioner feels life's rotten,  
rotten to the core and a rotten apple on the floor,  
rotting of its own accord without the help of decomposing fruit –  
huh, decomposing fruit!  
Whoever heard of fruit composing music anyway?  
Berlioz and Bizet (not to be confused with bidet) are just two of  
the many composers  
whose names begin with B, there seems an excessive number:  
Bach, Bax, Beethoven, Boccherini, Borodin, Brahms and Britten,  
to name seven,  
7–11 is a ratio connected with the pyramids and a rip-off shop,  
stops can be for buses, people don't really 'catch' buses.  
Buses begins with 'B' too!



Wayne Burrows

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## THE LYRIC MODE

If the award of this year's Nobel Prize for Literature to Bob Dylan has achieved nothing else, it's certainly (to paraphrase Marianne Moore) set some real felines loose in a few imaginary aviaries. If my own social media time-lines were at all representative, the response divided almost equally into two opposed camps: those who expressed delight at a decision they felt only a hardened literary snob could possibly question, and those who considered the whole thing a monumental category error, serving the interests of populism (and a far from negligible academic lobby) at the expense of Literature itself. There was almost nothing in between.

We should probably accept at the outset that the Nobel has never *really* signified anything very reliable about the relative literary merits of its choices and omissions, any more than other prizes do. Despite its forbidding reputation, the track record has been decidedly patchy, even if we leave aside such self-evidently perverse choices as Winston Churchill in 1953. It's entirely arbitrary, for example, that Wole Soyinka deservedly received the award but Chinua Achebe never did; that Boris Pasternak was a recipient but not Anna Akhmatova; that Derek Walcott was garlanded in 1992 while the extraordinary,

transformative works of Edward Kamau Brathwaite have been consistently passed over in the many years since. Looked at from this perspective, Dylan's selection seems no more or less debatable than any other Nobel decision.

Perhaps the real issue, then, is that this award follows a century in which song-writing has been implicitly excluded. Had the achievements of Cole Porter, Bertolt Brecht, Big Bill Broonzy, Carole King, Gil Scott Heron or Buffy Sainte-Marie, to pick a few names at random, been at least *occasionally* given a show of consideration, it's unlikely that the inclusion of Dylan among the laureates would have generated the same, or indeed any, controversy. As things stand, the award implies either that he alone has made anything of literary value in his field, thereby insulting the entire medium, or it ladders his work with the task of justifying not only its own particular merits but the fact that the Swedish Academy has completely redefined its own remit to accommodate him.

Because of this, the award seems less like a belated acknowledgement of song-writing as a legitimate literary medium in its own right – which it undoubtedly is – and more something of a one-sided declaration that songs are to be judged of value only when they stand in close proximity to other, more respectable, forms of poetry. Those arguing Dylan's cause, or in support of other self-consciously literary songwriters like Leonard Cohen, often unwittingly compound this problem by endlessly quoting their subjects' most conventionally poetic lines, shorn of their context, while waving their hands at them: *Look, these are almost exactly like real poems.*

But this is surely to make a case *against* the song as a medium with its own strengths, traditions and methods, since the measure of value is not how well the words work within the song, but how closely they conform to established notions of what a legitimate poetic construct



should look like. This may be why it's instructive to consider less respectably literary or critically elevated examples of the art. Take this verse by a little known fourth generation US garage rock band, for example:

*I'm washing dishes at the Fat Boy Greasy Spoon.  
The rats are tall,  
the pay-check's small,  
the roaches crawl... I hope I die soon.*

[The Royal Pendletons: '(I'm A) Sore Loser', 1997]

Delivered as an exaggerated but affectionate pastiche rather than a true representative of its own lineage of songs rooted in adolescent and outsider frustration, the lyric also just happens to be as vividly sketched, tightly constructed and playfully self-aware as anything we'd usually recognise as poetry. Here's a further example of the way a popular song's strengths can often be found in precisely the *distance* its writer creates between the song's instantly telegraphed images or allusions, and written poetry's typically very different approach to questions of complexity and subtlety:

*She came from Planet Claire.  
I knew she came from there.  
She drove a Plymouth Satellite  
faster than the speed of light.*

*Planet Claire has pink air.  
All the trees are red.  
No-one ever dies there.  
No-one has a head...*

[The B52s: 'Planet Claire', 1979]

Memorable and effective as they are, songs like these aren't operating by the rules we expect when approaching the canons that define our sense of how contemporary poetry might be written. Their antecedents lie in those traditions represented by *Mother Goose* and Lewis Carroll, by the nursery rhyme, nonsense poem and anonymously authored folk air. Modernism's antipathy to its own late-Victorian lyrical inheritance may partly explain why this approach is undervalued in the poetry of our own time, but remains a live concern in the popular song. A good deal of nonsense verse can be found in the catalogue of The Residents, for example, whose 1978 *Duck Stab/Buster & Glen* recordings amount to a fairly direct, if musically unsettling, reinvention of Edward Lear:

*Skinny was born in a bathtub  
and grew so incredibly thin  
that even the end of an eye-dropper sucked him in.*

*Skinny never knew any questions,  
Skinny never looked at lights,  
but Skinny sold something every single night...*

[The Residents: 'Hello Skinny', 1978]

Eighteenth century literary fashions for ballads, children's rhymes and commonplace verses of the kind collected in Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) stirred disputes not unlike those seen since the Nobel committee made its announcement a few weeks ago. They were deeply concerned with questions about what was true and authentic art, what merely artifice and kitsch, in ways that are evidently still with us. Breaches of literary decorum, like the apparently superfluous but musical phrase, may be disapproved of but can also be

where much of the song's appeal lies: 'We can refute Hegel, but not the Saint or *The Song of Sixpence*,' as WB Yeats once put it:

*I went out to the hazel wood  
Because a fire was in my head,  
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,  
And hooked a berry to a thread.  
And when white moths were on the wing,  
And moth-like stars were flickering out,  
I dropped the berry in a stream  
And caught a little silver trout.*

[WB Yeats: 'The Song of Wandering Aengus', 1899]

Despite recent assertions, then, the relationship between written poems and songs has always been both controversial and negotiable. From the cocktail lounge sea shanties of Edith Sitwell's *Façade* (1923) to Peter Schickele's 1968 setting of Henry Treece's *The Magic Wood for Joan Baez*; from the blatant music hall borrowings of TS Eliot's *The Love Song Of J Alfred Prufrock* (1917) to the slippage between printed text and explosive musical incantation in the poetry of Jayne Cortez, it's plain that there are no clear or straightforward lines to be drawn. Poetry and song, as they currently exist, are distinct mediums whose differences might be more productively celebrated and explored than eradicated or merely assumed. They do not use words in the interchangeable way implied by Bob Dylan being named the recipient of a Nobel Prize for Literature, but the borders between them are also far more permeable than the decision's detractors seem to believe. ■

James Aitchison

## LOVE STORIES

Brain cells for falling in love do not exist  
until you fall in love.

And then the new cells fire  
in a swelling hallucinogenic flare  
that dazzles other networks in your brain.

You know how it is:  
can't eat, can't sleep, can't think of anyone but him.

Your mind's deranged by love until –  
a year, a month, a week –  
estrangement claims you and your love's deranged  
by lovers' love-in-hate.

You could cut and run  
or try to naturalize your statelessness.

*Don't listen to this man.  
He's lived so long his year is just a month  
and a month for him is an autumn afternoon.*

Your private quandary is everyman's,  
or everywoman's in your case.  
Remember who you were before you fell:  
allow your overshadowed selves  
back into an equalizing light.

*Don't listen to this man.*

Then there will be less fury in your love.  
He and you will grow companionable:  
you'll say the same word simultaneously  
and finish each other's sentences.

*Don't trust this man:  
he's forgotten how it feels to fall in love.*

You'll sleep safely in your lover's curved shape,  
and he in yours.

Richie McCaffery

ANTWERP

On a daytrip to the city  
we were shown the studio  
of a lapidary who'd spent  
his life polishing stones  
into smaller, brighter ones.

An agate cross hung above  
the door, as if he'd spent all  
those years readying surfaces  
like a table for someone  
who would never arrive.

Outside it began to rain  
and in no time the branches  
of the trees were beaded  
with shiny water like open  
necklaces awaiting a neck.

Graham Mort

SPECTRE

Sometimes, waking early,  
you try to remember your  
future life and it's faint as

voices playing through a half-  
tuned radio or wine that's  
past its best – present and

absent at the same time.

You think things must always  
be renewed yet they are some-

how just themselves and less  
than something lost that  
mattered then. Today mist

is douching fields where  
May blossom has startled us  
close to wonderment –

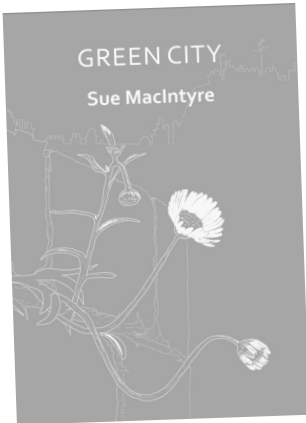
every tree its own spectre,  
hiding its untouchable, un-  
knowable self. And through

all that, the past you kept  
once, crying to come in, to  
re-enter a space it knows,

has marked with an old erotic  
scent, unfaithfully rubbing its  
neck at the window, always

hungry its ears *en pointe*, its  
pupils split green stones, its  
yawn fanged with boredom.

## Two new Thumbprints from Stonewood

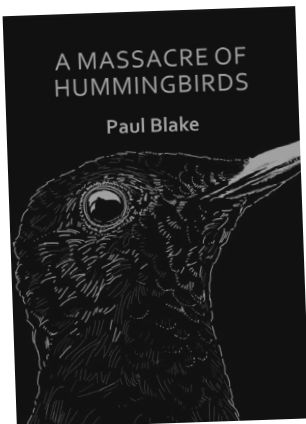


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Jenny Booth

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## I KNOW WHO I WAS WHEN I GOT UP THIS MORNING

**T**he carpet on the basement floor of the record shop was a grey fur of molecular thickness and the stock rested on rough plywood shelves coated with friable grey paint. Spotlights were set into the too low ceiling and streaks of white paint on their metal fittings showed someone hadn't cared enough to paint in the lines. Everything reeked of polymer compounds. I picked up an issue of Def Leppard's Greatest Hits with a purple border and a Mexican skull-faced Uncle Sam in skinny flares holding an electric guitar against orange pastel flames. It had a round red sticker saying 2.99.

When Dad came and showed me the blue on black words on his phone display I couldn't read them, but I understood they meant Mum was ready and we should meet her. We thought we might as well leave through the fire exit, so we pushed the bar to and eased the door open. But in the alleyway behind the record shop there was a wedding waiting for photos. The bride and groom were both in white and I never like white suits much. They make me think of the eighties, Michael Jackson on the cover of *Thriller*, *Miami Vice*. We closed the door quietly and went back upstairs to the main entrance. The street

outside the automatic doors was packed with people waiting for the spectacle of the wedding, even though it was impossible to see it from there. No one was moving so we stood at the back of the crowd and tried to look over the heads, not because we thought anything was there, just because.

There was a commotion from a different place and we looked over to see. There were animals on high platforms above the crowd. It was an entertainment like a circus for the wedding. Two monkeys balanced together on top of one platform. I don't know what species they were but one was ginger and one was grey and their fur was clumped and matted like the soft toys I'd dribbled and spilt food on when I was small, and they were chained somehow. On another platform was a baby elephant. It took up almost all the surface area it was given to stand on. It was tethered at the front to a free-standing pole about a metre away by a rope attached to its trunk. The same arrangement was used behind to stretch and tether its tail. It stood there fixed, its trunk lifted out and fully stretched so that its mouth was strangely distorted. Occasionally it slightly lifted one of its feet and I was terrified in case it fell and because of how badly it would be injured. But it stayed in place, its gently lidded eyes black and wide as it looked out at the crowd of people shouting or checking their phones or looking for the way to the car park.

We probably found Mum then and drove back to the house we were staying in because we were on holiday, which is why we had found ourselves in this strange place. But I couldn't forget about the elephant and when it got dark I fixed a crowbar under the crossbar of my bike with electrical tape and cycled back out to the record shop. I locked my bike a few hundred metres away, walked back to the alley and pushed the wooden gate open.

The alley stank of animals but in an unhealthy way, a

deeper odour of neglect and shit underlying the warm animal fust. I held the crowbar out in front of me. Yellow light and raucous voices came from a flat on the first floor and I moved carefully in case I knocked something. I heard something in front of me and moved closer to a large wooden crate, an assemblage of stained wooden pallets covered with a dark tarpaulin. I couldn't see anything inside but I heard a sound, a dry scrape like a brush sweeping a stone floor. I kept looking until my eyes adjusted and I saw the elephant inside. At first I thought it was asleep but I became orientated to its features and found a black eye open, watching me quietly. There was a channel in the dust that coated its face beneath the eye, as if it had been crying. I reached my hand into the cage, advancing it forward gingerly, and patted its flank. It stiffened as I touched it, a light quiver that moved through its body. It seemed counter-intuitive to put my hand in the cage of a wild animal but, like all my actions that evening seemed to be, it was an obvious, impulsive gesture. At the same time I had a fear at the back of my mind that it could seize my offered hand and, either through anti-human vengefulness or unaware excitement, tear or crush it. But when its trunk moved round to the spot where my hand was, it gently reached out, recoiling like a snail's antennae with the first touch, then coming back shyly for another. Then it rested there, a geyser of damp warm breath snuffing against my skin, fast at first then slower, water refilling the channel beneath its eye.

After a while I gently extricated my hand and went to see if I could find the way to open the cage, the little elephant watching me all the time to check I wasn't leaving. The crate it was in had one side that was a door and it was secured with a chain that looked cheap but still thick. I thought about trying to smash the padlock with the crowbar but worried about the noise it might make. Experimentally, I tried putting the crowbar through the

chain loop and twisting it round. I made a few turns but it was too hard to twist any more and I stood there at a loss. Then I felt the metal move under my hand and saw the trunk had slipped between the wooden slats and was applying pressure. It pushed down and there was a groaning sound. I worried that the bar would slip out of the elephant's grasp but in the end the wood gave way in damp splinters and the bracelet of chain fell to the floor. I stood there hardly breathing, but nothing suggested that people were coming to investigate. Then it nudged the door open with the front of its head. Again I worried that it might hurt me. Its back was around the height of my head. But it stood watching me expectantly, its ears quietly flapping the dark. Without any better ideas I groped my way back round the corner to the gate and opened the way to the street.

We crossed the empty road and through a gate to where the country opened out into moorland, paths of wet cropped grass between patches of bracken. At one point it occurred to me that I couldn't hear anything, but when I turned to check the elephant was trotting towards me placidly, slinky spring legs flowing forward and impacting on the peat.

By the time we reached the edge of a forest it was dawn. Black cut-outs of birds were rising in the air from the bare trees. The lighter sky made my eyes ache and my feet were cold and sore. The elephant plodded slowly. Its trunk hung listlessly. When we came across a freezing puddle it would plunge its trunk in and drain it dry. Over a hedge I saw a village newsagents and went to buy two large bottles of water, a sack of Happy Shopper potatoes and a cooking apple that I thought might be a treat. I split the bag of potatoes on the ground and it looked at them curiously, fingering them with the end of the trunk before putting one in its mouth. After that they disappeared quickly, flicked delicately from trunk to mouth. I

unscrewed the cap of the water and shook a little on the ground to show it. I poured it in a slow trickle so that it could suck some up, but after a while the trunk took it from my hands and upended it into its mouth. It sprayed a little on its face and we carried on into the forest.

The sun was out somewhere behind a high bank to our left and the light cast precise shadows on the limbs of the beech trees. Green holly spiralled up the trunks and the forest floor was a no man's land, barbed wire coils of brambles and saplings. The ground was covered with brown beech leaves and hulled beechnuts but beneath that I could feel cold crystalline mud give way beneath my feet. I struggled forward, my clothes snagging constantly, but the elephant came steadily, delicately moving brambles aside with its trunk.

Then it ran suddenly and I, not really understanding anything about it, thought that it had gone for good. But I heard the sound of splashing water ahead and when I reached the pond it was standing in the middle coated with slime and pond weed, dousing itself with water. A tide of alarmed frogs swam for the shore. It blew a puff of water into the air and squealed, its trunk extended in the air like a trumpet. That was how the dream ended.

Right now the sun outside my window lights the brickwork on the chimney opposite into pale orange and grazes of purple. It reminds me of other days woken into. Of bars of light and rain moving over pale hills and clusters of stone houses. Coloured traffic lights marshalling pre-dawn still city streets. Empty expanses of concrete boulevards in China left to dream of tourist traffic, leading down to green willows dipping their leaves in flood water. Why did my consciousness furnish my dreams so conscientiously with the minutiae, the petty background noise of everyday life? And what warm, alive, vulnerable, humiliated beings from my real world were making themselves known and offering me a second

chance to protect them using the irrational power of dreams which, confronted by any material obstacle, blithely float out of reach?

Elephants live for a long time so when, maybe ten years later, I found myself in the area I had last seen it, I drove over to the forest. It had been developed. There was a carpark with a toilet block and picnic benches. A map on a signboard showed a variety of short colour-coded circular nature trails. I set off along one and found the pond, smaller than I remembered, bounded by benches and an information board with pictures of frogs and herons. I wandered through the deserted woods past litter bins and silent bird hides until I found myself back at the car park. I chose a different coloured route at random and set off again. The dull yellow winter sun no longer reached the surface of the pond and a warm darkness was beginning to gather at the base of the trees in drifts of leaves. As I walked away I heard a noise in the trees and looked. The noise grew louder until it was almost upon me and then not much more than a metre away I saw it, not understanding how I hadn't seen it until then. Perhaps my brain had refused to acknowledge the unlikely shape of a huge elephant pushing its way through the trees parallel to the path. I stood still and watched the enormous rippling footfalls shake the ground. It looked my way once and stood, holding its ears out from the side of its head, huge like Africa. Then it moved into the dusk of the forest, fading from the light like a phase of a planet turning away into the darkness of space. ●

Peter Ebsworth

AT THE PINOCCHIO SHOP  
IN BENIDORM

Each thing made here  
is wooden in the main,  
which is as it should be.

Only they've changed  
the story's emphasis  
so that a frog is king.

There are frog necklaces,  
rings, pens, bracelets,  
and every size of clock;  
all wearing a froggy smile.

To be sure, I asked  
the owner if they were  
all frogs. *Of course,*  
he said, *why would we lie?*

Stuart Nunn

## THIS SCEPTR'D ISLE

England's your racist uncle who appals  
and fascinates. His jokes about women, gays and blacks  
embarrass even blokes who slap his back  
and cheer him on in city centre brawls.

His tales of far-off places, distant times  
hold a gruesome charm. His Christmas gifts  
are exotic, designed to give your spirit a lift,  
though probably the innocent product of appalling crimes.

His watercolours show his sensitive side.  
On walks he shows you clouds on the Cotswold edge,  
blackbirds fossicking below a bramble hedge,  
a wren's neurotic flit, a buzzard's glide.

A sawn-off branch of vivid orange wood  
shows how time passes through its rings.  
England relates abstractions to such things,  
suggests his vulgarity is seriously misunderstood.

But he's in hock to gangs who mean us harm.  
No fellow-feeling, conscience, love or chivalry.  
They'll mortgage health, impoverish all our poetry,  
screw the workers, flog the farm.



Julian Flanagan

IRISH WRITERS, A SERIES OF SIX  
COFFEE MATS

They migrate, shuffled, reshuffled,  
as my daughter wanders playing  
with their School of Pub Sign portraits.  
They appear in factions by the computer;  
face down around a glass;  
staring up from Benedict's pram.  
She makes tickets of them, books,  
I.D. cards. Pausing to choose,  
she'll hand over Yeats or Shaw with 'This is you.'

Or Wilde looking like an amused, spoilt priest.  
O'Casey, a chunky-sweatered solicitor.  
Beckett, collar up, about to ask for spare change.  
And pale Joyce, black hair widow-peaked,  
round horn-rims magnifying the eyes  
and looking like who, *who is it?*  
'Look' she says, 'It's Mickey Mouse.'

Sue Burge

BILLANCOURT 1938

Picasso has been invited to a party;  
a party on a film set; a party  
on a film set which *exactly* reproduces  
Canal St Martin and the peeling facades  
flanking the Hotel du Nord.

He will drink champagne  
watching boats, yes boats,  
navigate a working lockgate.  
He marvels at how *tout* Paris  
dances and drinks, balancing  
so lightly on this grand illusion.

Arletty waves rippling fingers  
from the ironwork bridge;  
swirling silks contour  
the women's limbs,  
their smiles briefly held  
in the watery crucible of the canal.

He will remember it forever  
as the world deconstructs, thins,  
regains weight around him.

## LOOKING FOR FRANÇOIS TRUFFAUT

A day of sunshine and birdsong in this cool corner of Paris,  
couples stroll overhead on the Boulevard de Clichy  
*don't look down, it's unlucky to gaze on the city of the dead,*  
and I can't find you in the place where you're supposed to be.

Couples stroll overhead on the Boulevard de Clichy,  
there are frost-struck stones, chipped ceramic wreaths, wary cats  
and I can't find you in the place where you're supposed to be,  
I need a guide to take me through this labyrinth of the gone.

There are frost-struck stones, chipped ceramic wreaths, wary cats.  
I want to hang a huge screen over these tombs, show the world your world,  
I need a guide to take me through this labyrinth of the gone, then  
a man in a leather jacket with a retro haircut takes my hand.

*I want to hang a huge screen over these tombs, show the world  
your world,  
how you made the cinema more real than my life.*

The man in the leather jacket with the retro haircut holds my hand,  
'*You know I'm not here, you know where I am,*

*how I make the cinema more real than life  
so don't look down, it's unlucky to tread on the city of the dead,  
you know I'm not here, you know where I am  
on this day of sunshine and birdsong in this cool corner of Paris.'*

Ingrid Leonard

## FIRST FLIGHT

Captain Porteous had a dream... on a hill on the edge of London, she built gas-powered portocabins and within them she set out tables, test tubes, Bunsen burners, gloves, stirring sticks and her telescope...

She wanted to strain the moon of its darkest clouds, isolate their active ingredient to coat the earth against incalcescence, so that the cool of night would be collected and deployed as a protective shell...

She'd seen rainfall before... seen spittle and deluge and water rebound between earth and sky but to touch the powdery ash that ghosted the satellite and harvest its essence; Porteous set to work...

No one thought she could do it, but she had planned in advance. She bred Teflon pigeons in her Croydon garden, gave up her job at the Federation Space Agency, studied gravity, oxygen depletion, stars...

She gathered tools and prepped her salts, set them to bubbling... so while potassium drowsed in oil and mercury glooped in pressed glass, Captain Porteous let go her seven pigeon-babies in unison...

They flew in a perfect V and their spent fuel sprayed golden trails across the night sky, while through a telescope, Porteous watched. She lost one as he exited the atmos, one broke a wing and still floats in space with a spent heartbeat...

One hit debris and kept on going, in the wrong direction, a speck on his mother's lens, another got tangled in a parachute, the next was caught in the slipstream of a federation space station...

The sixth was choked by pollution...and so the mission of Captain Porteous fell to Tellum, the last of her beloved pigeons. Porteous drained her 28th latte against a frosty sky, remote in hand...

Clear conditions for spaceflight, low chance of raincloud. Night extended into day and she dozed. While she did, the air turned softer and it rained. On the fourth day, Tellum the Teflon pigeon hit moonsmoke...

Porteous acted. With a tilt of her finger, nets of the finest spider-mesh sprang from his ribs, sweeping, scouring and scooping the soot into pots within his belly. Then he headed for home...

Captain Porteous poured herself a dram and went back to her blueprint, for she knew what was coming. She had read her charts about speed and light, knew how to protect her work against the might of the powerful...

Like the small ships of the English amidst Spain's armada, Tellum scooted and dived between the seven metal eagles that hovered below the atmos, puffing out his chest and spraying soot in circles...

It confused the fighter jets, he was able to make free... On his descent, Tellum changed from Teflon black to fluffy

grey against a London sky, indistinguishable from his feathery peers. The jets returned empty-handed...

The presidents of the federation were confounded, the might of their military hoodwinked by a stout-bodied bird. They ordered 'Comms Lockdown' until the threat was contained, but Tellum had vanished into the pigeon ether...

No sedge of spies, no parcel of commodores could find a trace. In her house in Croydon, Porteous added water, minerals, salt to the mix and heated, boiled, froze, thawed and reheated...

At last she had a paste whose particles would hold fast to each other, even in space. Yet she lacked one thing: reinforcement. An excitation of atmospheric constituents, a solar wind, magnetospheric plasma...

She had forgotten about the essence of the aurora. Tellum hopped from side to side, bobbing his head. She ordered more Teflon from the internet. Captain Porteous had a dream.



Paul Blake

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## DOMESTIC FANTASTIC ELASTIC – ADVENTURES IN THE HOUSES OF FORM

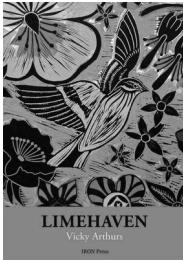
Vicky Arthurs: *Limehaven*, Iron Press, 2015

Jill Munro: *Man from La Paz*, Green Bottle Press, 2015

Di Slaney: *Reward for Winter*, Valley Press, 2016

In her magisterial overview of contemporary British poetry, *Beyond the Lyric*, Fiona Sampson identified a number of groupings and trends within that great and variable body of work. One of them is those she calls the New Formalists, poets who make extensive use of classical verse forms to transform their experience into poetry, but with, necessarily, contemporary sensibilities. And at a time when so much published poetry emphasises free verse, and sometimes falls into the trap of what Sampson calls the poetry of inertia, poetry that has not undergone some sort of transformational effort, it is a pleasure to review three collections all of which make extensive use of various types of formal verse.

*Limehaven*, by Vicky Arthurs, offers us a glimpse into that strangest and most remote of countries, the recent past. As a book it's a pleasure to handle, with generous margins that give the poems space to breathe, and charmingly illustrated with black and white



woodcuts that share the deceptive simplicity of the poems.

The poems centre around the author's grandparents and their home at Shepperton in the Thames valley, west of London. Although both South Londoners by birth, the two, as presented here, created a semi-rural idyll, a lush, private world that reflected a canny self-sufficiency that would have been familiar to still earlier generations.

Following a scene-setting introduction there are 39 poems, divided into 4 sections – two shorter sections, Before and After, bracketing more substantial ones titled Indoors and Outdoors. They range considerably in length and style, from a couple of three-liners to the four page ballad 'Two sons, two wars', some with formal rhyme schemes, others in free verse. The thing that unites them is the poet's obvious love for her grandparents and the environment they created. It infuses these poems like a perfume.

For me, the poems are most successful where most domestic. In 'Treasures' the child's eye view of the offered wonders:

'the broken blue  
of a blackbird's egg;

a bean seed  
in the palm of his hand;

the green swelling  
of a new tomato'

is beautifully and precisely captured, along with the shared delight of grandfather and child. Similarly, many a reader of a certain age and background will resonate to



the controlled panic of ‘Company’ which begins ‘Dust the clocks! Company’s coming!’ and goes on to instruct:

‘Lay the table we never eat at,  
Put out the china we never use,  
Polish the glasses that nobody drinks from,  
Answer the doorbell that nobody rings!’

As the above will make clear, Arthurs has a gift for rhythm, and many of her poems are metrically regular, and sometimes formally rhymed. It is always nice to see a first collection that makes use of form, and this is to be applauded. However, it has to be said that while some of these poems use form successfully, there are also some where, combined with the choice of language, it does not quite come off in the way that I think the poet intends.

In particular, ‘Two wars, two sons’ the long, ballad-type poem that forms the main part of the first section, doesn’t, in my view, really work. In its style it seems to owe something to Kipling (and before him to Coleridge), but Kipling’s is a voice that few, if any, modern poets can successfully inhabit. Formally it’s a bit uneven too, starting with two six line verses before settling for the classic four-line ballad verse, and seeming unsure what sort of rhyme scheme it wants (it tries several throughout its considerable length), or whether it wants a chorus or not. It’s a bravura attempt, and all kudos to her for trying, but this is a case where I think the form has not been properly resolved, and both form and language are in fact working against the poem, so that genuinely felt emotion is transformed into something slightly pastiched and artificial, as if it were being read off a municipal war memorial rather than telling the real lived history:

‘A generation went to War;  
A generation died.

He waited hopeful for his friends,  
But few came back alive.

The few came back, returned as ghosts,  
As though they too were gone,  
Behind their eyes, the horrors  
Of the slaughter on the Somme.'

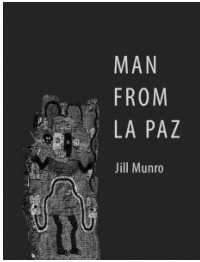
If we contrast this with the utterly delightful lullaby 'She crochets the stars', in which form and rhyme work beautifully with the subject matter, we can see the difference:

'Crochet the stars  
with your dainty hook  
Knit me some counting sheep  
Knit me a crook

Spin me a story  
Spin me the moon  
Spin me the milky way  
Sleep will come soon

Wrap me in starlight  
And indigo lace  
Wrap me in silence  
Wrap me in space'

Though the language is simple, there is an immediacy here, a freshness, that is missing from the other poem. It illustrates Arthurs' gift for tenderness, which is so powerfully demonstrated in this collection. And that, I think, is ultimately what makes the book work, despite any technical flaws. Like its subjects it is uncynical, a little old-fashioned and warm-hearted: in short, rather charming.



Jill Munro's *Man from La Paz* is again well produced book, bound with a silky matt cover that's nice to touch – and an unusual shape, with wide, almost square pages. Indeed, perhaps more could have been made of the space so afforded, by offsetting the left hand margins which look, particularly on right-hand pages, rather cramped compared with the generally wide space to the right of the line endings.

There are 32 poems in the book, and again it comprises a mixture of formal poems, including pantoums and a sestina ('It was too late in every sense'), with free verse. The collection is also rooted in the details of the poet's life, but has a very different tone from the Arthurs – more surreal and more sensual, and informed by a wry wit that pokes fun at the ridiculousness of human relations.

The poet handles the forms with characteristic humour, though in some places I'd argue not entirely successfully. In the pantoum 'Eggs', for example, which begins 'How come life throws us a double-yolker' the poet concludes:

'I suggested a romping, early night,  
nonetheless, Surly managed to perform  
(aware of my ovulating green light)  
Nine months later our twin sons were born.

Nonetheless, Surly manages to perform.  
We wonder if God is quite the joker –  
Nine months later our twin sons were born.  
How come life throws us a double yolker?'

The difficulty with these repeating forms is always to open up a different interpretation with the repeated element in its new context, and I'd argue that the second

use of the Surly line isn't really doing that here. But perhaps this is being unnecessarily picky. Certainly, the use of repetition in the other pantoum here seems very appropriate to its subject matter (the myth of the nymph Echo) and its breezily modern language makes an amusing contrast to the subject matter:

'So what's a sexy forest sprite to do  
when the forest hunt's lost its spark a bit?  
Find a handsome guy without an ego  
and hope he's not, in fact, a total shit.'

The collection exhibits an obvious delight in playing games with language. In 'Titlestrop' (apparently the original name of Adlestrop), the poet considers the inescapable pun for poets (I know I've had quite a few strops finding the right title myself) and asks whether Edward Thomas would have written his famous poem had the station sign borne that name or simply

'...wondered why

The bare unwonted platform bore  
Such a stropmy sign, not stopped to share  
The sounds of all the misty, far-flung birds  
Of Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire.'

There is also a delight in other forms of play. Many of the poems are deliciously sensual. In the opening poem of the collection, 'Cimsagro', the poet wonders, after making love on the eponymous boat how it got its name, redolent of exotic places, only to be told: 'Sail backwards my love – you'll find it's a place we've both just been.'

Similarly, in the surreal and potentially erotic poem with which the collection shares its title, and which brilliantly opens 'Last night I knitted a Bolivian,' the poem ends:

'Later I found him sitting on my bed  
playing his Bolivian pan flute,  
pressing warm fingers to my  
dropped stitch holes.  
He paused his music, licked his fuzzy lips,  
murmured *Desnudarme, desnudarme...*  
as we began to unravel.'

But the collection does not shy from the darker side to relationships, either. The sestina 'It was too late in every sense' (the title acts as the first line of the opening stanza), the poem sadly notes:

'But sometimes, words are just hot air  
revealing vows never were ingrained.'

The words in this collection are rather more than just hot air – I enjoyed reading it, and would be interested to see how the poet's further work develops.



**T**he third collection reviewed this time is Di Slaney's *Reward for Winter*. Slaney's work will be familiar to avid readers of *Brittle Star* and her pamphlet *Dad's Slideshow* was published by Stonewood Press last year. She has been well served by her publishers (Valley Press) here: the book is beautifully produced, and the subtly matt, silky cover with its wintry tones, and the spaciouly typeset pages make it a pleasure to handle and to read.

This is a more substantial collection than either of the others, comprising 56 poems divided into 3 sections: *How to Knit a Sheep*, *Washing Eggs*, and *Bildr's Thorpe*. The poems reflect the poet's life as a smallholder in Nottinghamshire, but like all good poems, that is only

where they start, for they expand elastically to contain wider worlds within them.

Nearly all of these poems are rhymed, and largely formal. However, Slaney often uses small twists and variations that make the forms her own – varying one of the endwords in a sestina, altering one of the repeated lines in a pantoum, often making a line rhythmically irregular. This is a high-risk strategy: in the hands of a less accomplished poet it could give the impression that the writer just couldn't make the form work, but that is never the feeling here. Instead, these small changes feel playful and heart-lifting, as if life had suddenly given you an unexpected and pleasurable gift.

The collection opens as it means to go on, with 'Rehomer's prayer':

'Bring me the wobbly, the scabby, the beaten,  
the oldies, the lost, the could-have-been-eaten,  
the wayward, the strays, the nightmares to tame,  
the cringers, the timid, the ones with no name...'

This seems to be not only Slaney's personal credo (the flyleaf comments that she had, at the time of writing, 150 animals, most of them rescued) but an apt statement of the work the poet does with words – nightmares to tame, indeed! The generosity, and the mixture of humour and seriousness, is very characteristic – sometimes the tone of these poems reminds me of early Sophie Hannah, who is one of the few poets whom I can recall making the audience crack up in a TS Eliot prize nomination reading.

The poems also have a strong narrative bent – Slaney is, I think, interested in telling stories: the stories of the house she inhabits, which together with what appear to be reflections from her own history, are largely the topic of the first part of the book, *How to Knit a Sheep* (echoes of the Jill Munro collection in that title!); the stories of

the animals she shares her life with – the second part, *Washing Eggs*, has titles taken from a guide to chicken keeping; and in the third part of the book the story of the landscape and community in which she lives (Bilsthorpe, once Bildr's Thorpe, whose name references that Norse word for a settlement, *þorp*, found across Eastern England from Essex to Yorkshire).

For me, some of the most interesting and successful poems, in what is undoubtedly a well crafted collection, come in the middle section of the book. While the conceit of the titles is that they represent particular afflictions and problems relating to chickens, the best of the poems are actually potent summaries of human dilemmas. In 'Hybrid', for example, which might ostensibly be about hybrid vigour in laying hens, the voice of the poem reflects on parents: 'One tall, controlled and stately/one compact, quick and round,/me somewhere in the middle.' But the poem finishes, menacingly:

'...But when  
its time for shooting trouble, splicing pays  
in spades. They won't mess with me again,

not now they've seen the fast and fatal ways  
a hurt can be returned. Serve it cold Dad says.'

Similarly, in the moving 'Quota', which derives its title from the fact that the ovaries of a chicken (like those of a human) contain at birth only a limited number of egg cells, the poem asks 'How will I know when I'm done?', concluding:

'...Did praise  
provoke me past a peak I'll not admit?  
When will I know it's over? Is this it?'

These are much broader questions than matters of fertility, and the poem is all the stronger for it. Not all the poems in this section are quite so successful – ‘Egg bound’, for example, seems to me too specifically to reference the chicken to be readily interpretable at the human level – but overall the anthropomorphic interpretations are very effective.

Not that anthropomorphism implies sentimentality – you need a certain toughness to farm successfully, and certainly there are poems here that reflect that. There is an undercurrent of violence, even savagery in some of them – ‘Careless’, for example, which perhaps addresses an unreliable lover or partner, perhaps simply a lazy employee (though the emotion seems too strong for that), who ‘couldn’t be arsed to text or call’, concludes

‘...my  
fingers itched to crush your careless windpipe, legs twitched  
to stomp my dung-caked wellies on your slackjaw, sleeping face.’

Strong meat indeed. But it is not the overall impression one takes away from these poems. One of my favourites, from the last section of the book, deals with a real historical character, Bishop William Chappell, who according to the helpful notes at the end of the book was bishop of Cork and Ross, and on being displaced from his position by the rebellious Irish in 1640 took refuge with his friend, the rector of Bilsthorpe and eventually died in Derby. Here we have the rehoming of one of the human ‘lost’ and ‘strayed’ and the unconventional sestina ‘The Man Who Taught Milton’ treats him with quiet generosity:

‘They say you make your best friends at Cambridge, and he  
believed that as much as he believed in God, found  
ease in our conversation and some pecks of peace



in this small spot on the hill here  
by the church, my house a home none  
had ever thought to offer him elsewhere...

...So that was the last time. They say they found  
him on the floor of the chapel, that it would have been peaceful.  
We went to Derby to fetch him, to bring him back here  
where we could do things properly, none  
of us wanting him buried elsewhere,  
somewhere we couldn't visit. I think he's

pleased. The church is quiet, its hearbeats slow  
and at night I see the hare. He found peace here  
when there was none for him elsewhere.'

That 'at night I see the hare' is masterly and I was really interested in the liberties the poet took with the form – it would have been easy enough to regularise those line endings 'peace[ful]', 'he['s]', but the poet was sufficiently confident in her writing not to do so.

All in all this is one collection I could recommend to anyone who enjoys a good story and a well written poem. ■

Put a Poet in Your Stocking!

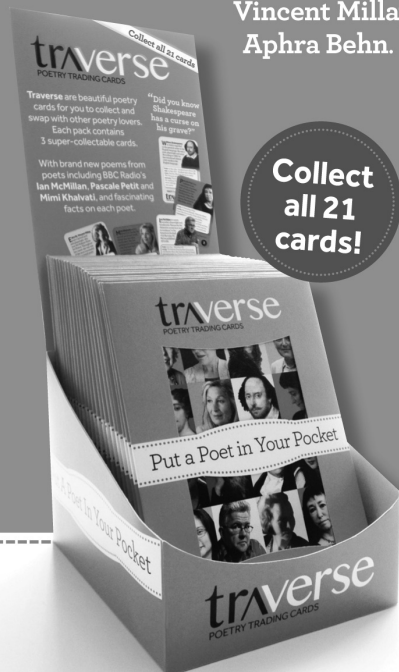
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Jayne Marshall

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WXNDERING\*

*All this wandering got you nothing.* – Ben Folds

*If she had spurned gifts from fate or God or some earnest substitute, she would never feel it in that way. She felt like someone of whom she was fond, an old and future friend of herself, still unspent and up ahead somewhere, like a light that moves.* – Lorrie Moore

**Y**ou are in your old Renault. You are stuck in traffic, there is always traffic on this stretch of road between your flat and work. The road is steep and you have to keep your foot pressed on the brake because the hand brake doesn't work very well. This makes your leg hurt. You are worried the car will overheat, or do something else mysterious and break down. You don't know it yet, but it will do exactly this in a few months time, leaving you stressed and worried because you will have no money to replace it.

It is your last day at work. Impetuously, you have decided to quit. This is the first of many times you will do this. You are listening to a song, it plays out to you: *here I stand, sad and free*. Your reasons for leaving are intangible even to yourself. You want to do something

significant, something which you will write on a list of achievements and then be able to tick off with pride. You are sad, and free.

\*

Years later, at the airport, he is crying. His face wet and crumpled. You don't know how long it will be until you will be in the same city, the same country again. Your parents don't cry, but look... indefinable. This is sadder yet, somehow. You don't cry either, or do much of anything. You are numb, probably with terror, but maybe you are just numb. Although, when the plane begins its descent into Madrid, you will have some kind of attack. You will want to faint and vomit at the same time, and you will feel you are falling very far and very fast though you are fastened tight into your seat. Your sister holds your hand until you begin to feel better.

\*

You are ascending in a lift to the penthouse. You are going to a party. In a penthouse. You have friends in Madrid now, friends who invite you to parties in penthouses. You and your sister clutch excitedly at one another, like the kind of teenagers neither of you ever were. *Is this really happening?* You ask each other, amazedly, your faces close together. You never used to be like this.

It's already summer and the night is hot, of course. You have started to tan and you wear yellow to set it off. The view is undeniably beautiful, Madrid is lit up and laid out before you. You stay at the party until the sun rises. The sky turns pink, then pale blue. You think you might cry for the beauty of it all, for this particular moment in your life. You walk home in full sunshine and take pictures of each other in the Plaza Mayor, it is deserted like it never

is. When you look at the pictures the next day you think how happy you look, and how brown.

\*

You have read about this plaza in a local newspaper and you want to see it. You go with your sister and you have a beer and sit outside, even though it is February. The plaza is pretty and full of evergreens. But you know you will never be able to come here again without feeling immense, *insondable* sadness. You notice how the name of the plaza is a bit like the Spanish verb to forget. She will leave you, this is what you are here to talk about. He has already gone. Your heart is breaking.

\*

You manage to pull it off, you are proud of yourself – you weren't at all sure you had it in you. You find a better job and an apartment of your own. Your apartment is so idyllic it makes visitors jealous. On good days you feel like you are living in a film. Your Spanish improves. 'Por cierto, tu español fenomenal,' a friend tells you.

\*

You are watching a film. A colleague told you that he thought you should. You are thinking how the Spanish word for restlessness makes you think of being seasick. The film is set on a beautiful island, it is summer and everyone is good-looking and happy. It is Romantic and romantic. The main character is an English girl, she could look a bit like you. You suppose he is trying to tell you that he likes you, or perhaps not. You wish he would just say which it was. What is it about men? You wonder. It's that they have a ludicrous sense of plot, you decide.

\*

He comes to visit you for the weekend and it is beautiful. He strokes your bare ankles as you sit in the Plaza San Ildefonso and you begin to wonder why you ever broke up. But yet you feel the pull. You start to worry there is something seriously wrong with you. Serves you right, for not knowing just exactly what you want.

\*

It is only 8am but it is already hot. The sky is a punishing blue. You are trying new things. You are still drunk from the night before as you get on the Metro. Two middle-aged women sitting opposite you are looking at your dress (too short), your disheveled hair, your... whatever it is that lets them know just exactly what you are like. You imagine they are immigrants on the way to the first of their four jobs. You don't feel ashamed, you have seen plenty of people like you on the Metro.

Surely this is the greatest expression of freedom there is? But you know – not now, now you feel the arrogance of it – that hovering just out of sight is the agony. After you return home and have slept some, you wake up to find you have written on your hand, *el amor es un hechizo*. You don't remember doing it.

\*

It's the weekend, you have nothing much to do. You sleep late, then read awhile. You take pleasure in the coffee you make for yourself and then drink in bed. The brand is local, the packaging hasn't changed since 1932. These things please you immensely. Later on you do some errands. You walk half an hour to *Lavapiés* to buy Indian food, then you stop for a drink in a place you have never

been before. You sit outside and eavesdrop on the conversations around you. You can do this now, a year ago you wouldn't have been able to understand. The conversations are intermittently obscured by the tickatickaticka of people fanning themselves. You wonder why things keep on unravelling.

Your mum calls and asks how you are. You say good, and then think that you really mean it. That evening you meet some friends for ice cream. It is midnight when you meet and still hot out. You stand in the street and eat it. People are just starting to come out for the night. You see a few people you know. The ice cream is cool and sweet. ●

*\*In English we have the word 'wonder' for when you are questioning yourself, or speculating about something. We also have 'wander' for walking around aimlessly. Spanish is a gendered language, and so if you want to express something without assigning gender, some people will use an 'x'. For example, 'Chicos' means boys but is the equivalent to saying 'Guys', so if the 'Guys' you are referring to are made up of both boys and girls, and you don't want to succumb to gender bias, you can say 'Chicxs'. Therefore, I named this story 'Wxndering' as it was a mixture of both questioning and walking aimlessly.*

Rodney Wood

## THE GARDEN IN JUNE

dandelions gone mad / tulips were brutal / I expected an invasion  
the lawn neglected / untouched / dandelions gone mad / tulips were brutal  
the lawn neglected / untouched / I expected an invasion

I fell down on my knees / and cried at the waste / he told me about Iraq  
when John was back / I fell down on my knees / and cried at the waste  
when John was back / he told me about Iraq

everything thing I'd done / made me angry / had ended in Chapter 11 failure  
life had taken a wrong turn / everything thing I'd done / made me angry  
life had taken a wrong turn / and had ended in Chapter 11 failure

then started reading poetry / walking sunken paths with Wordsworth  
I spent the days turning to seed / then started reading poetry  
I spent the days turning to seed / walking sunken paths with Wordsworth

he wouldn't set anchor down south / he lets his lawn grow wild  
tracks though moors / over mountains / he wouldn't set anchor down south  
tracks though moors / over mountains / he lets his lawn grow wild

it's sending up flowering heads / there are snails dancing in fairy rings  
I think I'm better / the lawn needs cutting / it's sending up flowering heads  
I think I'm better / the lawn needs cutting / there are snails dancing in  
fairy rings



Hilaire

SUMMER HOLS

January was paddleboats,  
mint choc chip in a stale cone,  
sunburn dressed in cold black tea,  
French cricket on the beach  
and the mad zigzag dash  
provoked by march flies.  
January was salt and sand  
and high hot winds delivering  
a peppery frisson of bushfire smoke.  
January was Back to School sales  
in town. January was endless  
like boredom. One long  
Sunday evening of  
low-level dread.

Marija Smits

THE SWIMMING LESSON

We take it in turns to show interest  
in the swimming lesson,  
to wave at our children  
when they pause,  
panting from their exertions,  
to seek our approval.

We direct remarks at each other:

*Isn't it hot?*

*They need to get some air in here.*

I watch my daughter,  
part-mermaid, part astronaut,  
glide and then kick  
her way through the water;  
and I long to join her –  
to escape the heat,  
the small talk and screens,  
and the gravity that binds me  
to this sticky plastic seat.

Rachel Thanassoulis

THE LIZARD ORCHID

Is it rare? I always asked.  
Mum and I would gather round  
the camp-fire of our reference book  
and even now I marvel at  
the wonder and the patience she  
bestowed upon just common weeds;  
and so with careful love were passed  
between the press's cardboard leaves  
stems of *groundsel*, *shepherd's purse*,  
*chickweed*, *horehound*, *cuckooflower*.

I dreamed a *lizard orchid* though.  
The dim picture of it – *very rare* –  
totemic like the thing I made  
of bottle tops, one rainy afternoon,  
nailed to the handle of a broom –  
a kind of staff; its flowers were  
the sudden curls I watched a person  
magic once, turning wood,  
how his chisel's touch produced  
a shock of stiff, blonde scrolls.

Those yellow afternoons we spent –  
The waste ground yielding only vetch,  
buttercups and willow herb –  
seem early fieldwork for the now,  
when shots from a stranger's macro lens  
shuffle like a deck of cards on  
the little window of my screen:  
the lizard orchid rendered there,  
like a pageant, a re-enactment,  
streamers shot, trailing oriflammes –  
something unravelling.

Belinda Rimmer

WINDFALL

Slow fall to heavy rhythm of rain,  
and for the first time she's alone –  
a finger nail's breadth from the pavement,  
half buried beneath red devil and rambling rose,  
tangled ivy and clover.

Voices above, they search for patterns in her bruising:  
a pig, giraffe, butterfly.

As fingers prod, she wills them to scoop her into their basket.  
Let the others – not fit for pie or crumble;  
shrunken corpses – rot on the ground.

It doesn't mean anything to her  
that they with their mildewed, maggot infested bellies,  
reflect her own imminent ruin.



Stephen McNought

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## PUBLISHING FOR ALL: AN INTRODUCTION TO ARCBOUND

**T**he publishing world can sometimes seem reserved solely for the wealthy and well connected. Whilst there is an expansive array of publishing service providers these days, most of these are not actually interested in promoting talented authors – let alone sponsoring those who cannot afford their high rates. For these companies, publishing is a business and, like every other business, the ultimate decider is whether they are able to turn a profit. For contemporary publishers, this means concentrating on authors who seem ‘commercially viable’ and which do not compete with their ‘list’. For self-publishers, it means offering publishing to everyone – provided they have the money to pay.

Arkbound was founded against this background. We emerged in early 2015 as a small community publisher, committed to providing a real alternative. Our slogan – ‘Building Futures, Bridging Divides’ – is based upon the idea of helping talented disadvantaged authors get published, whilst offering great value services to those who wish to self-publish. Since starting we have managed to win customer service and environmental sustainability awards, as well as helping writers from deprived

backgrounds develop their potential. But it has not been an easy journey!

I remember, in the first few months, going to a ‘business networking event’. To my (misplaced) pleasure, another publisher was in the room. “What do you do?” the CEO asked, and I enthusiastically explained what Arkbound hoped to do. It was like I had made an audible fart (which I’m pretty sure I didn’t!). But, ignoring her disapproving look, I asked her the same question. ‘We provide high quality publishing services to the discerning author,’ she replied. ‘Oh right,’ I smiled, ‘so you’re a vanity publisher?’ It was like something exploded in her, and the next thing I knew she was striding away, nose high in the air, almost knocking aside a chair as she approached another group of well-dressed business people. Then there have been occasions, whilst reaching out to other small publishers with a more community focus, when we have basically been told to ‘F off’. Some of the big names in the publishing and media world resolutely dislike us, simply because we openly criticise their profit-driven methodology and perhaps because we represent a threat.

Arkbound has, and always will be, a place of collaboration and creative development ahead of profits and competition. This means we are open to sharing reviews of books, exchanging support, and finding ways to find common ground against the overshadowing dominion of giants like HarperCollins. But the publishing world can be both short-sighted and remarkably stubborn in its ways. Creativity, innovation and collaboration is rare to find.

Aside from book publishing, Arkbound also publishes magazines – or rather, provides a way for people to become ‘Regional Editors’ of their own magazines. This project has led to an expanding hyperlocal and national press network, with wide links to other groups and organisations, in turn allowing us to effectively promote

books. 'Boundless' magazine, published every quarter in Bristol, is one of those we are most proud of – with features as diverse as the 'dark web' to 'paranormal investigations'!

In early 2016 we launched a new literary award ('the Zooker'). The name derives from highlighting its polarity with the famous Man Booker Prize, which is arguably the epitome of literary elitism. Every book published through Arkbound, and indeed any other publisher, is eligible to enter the Zooker Award. However, it's primary focus is on disadvantaged authors. They may be from a poor background, unemployed, disabled, or spent time in prison. They may have faced insurmountable obstacles in getting published that few others have encountered. 'Disadvantaged', then, can be quite broad – but generally it should encompass a state of extreme hardship, which an author may be struggling to overcome or has already done so. The second aim of the Zooker Award is to recognise works of wider social value. A book may be entirely fictional, but it can still encourage us to dwell on social and environmental issues of present relevance. If an author inspires us to think about such issues, in a way that could lead to positive changes of mind and behaviour, then clearly they should be rewarded.

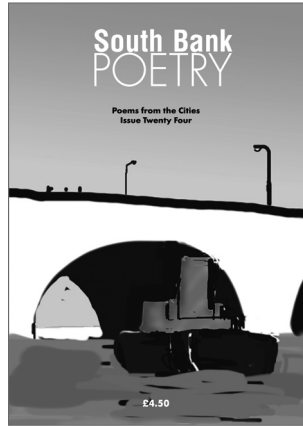
This, alongside our magazine competitions and creative writing projects (aimed at young writers to help develop their potential as authors), has brought Arkbound further in its mission to help others. If there is one thing I have learnt, it is that the future of publishing doesn't have to be one of fiscal pressure and general decline, but one of opportunity and creative adaptation. There will, no doubt, be further challenges on the road ahead, but like our authors we will persevere. ■

*Stephen is Co-Director of Arkbound, Bristol*  
[www.arkbound.com](http://www.arkbound.com)

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Jenny Booth

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## IRISES

I'm not sure which of them we noticed first: Her, the patient, or him, the husband. Of course, we saw her daily. One of us would help her wash in the mornings, run hot water and bubble bath into a plastic bowl. Tug the nightie from under her, warm and wrinkled from sleep, while she raised her arms so that it could be lifted over her head, obediently, like a little girl. Wait while she scrubbed herself carefully but not too slowly, then turned onto her side so that someone could wash her back, the smooth shiny skin that older people have. Roll so that we could change the sheets and put a new nightie and knickers on, folded and fresh from a pile in her locker he replenished daily. Maybe we took her to the shower on days when she had more energy, but I don't remember those days.

She cooperated with it all. She made quiet, cheerful, undemanding conversation so that you could almost believe that terminal illness wasn't such a big scare after all but something that could be faced in time, and you didn't feel so bad leaving her on her own in the clean white room smelling of soap with a bowl to do her teeth, perhaps with the radio on, while you moved on to the next person. An easy patient. One that made it all worthwhile, made you remember why you wanted to care for people.

So maybe it was the patient first, because that's how it works. The nice ones do get noticed if they're round for long enough, maybe not as quickly as the mad or the angry, but soon enough. And once that happens, everyone wants to talk about them. At the end of the day, we'd rather be telling stories about ourselves being caring people, because that's how we want to be seen, how we want to be if we can. That, rather than, "You won't believe what his son in 3F just said to me," though there's a place for that too.

But maybe it was the husband we noticed first, that brought them both to our attention. He came on the ward every day, always at the right visiting times, not forcing himself on anyone's consciousness. Dressed smartly, in pressed trousers and a smooth wool jumper. Maybe a tie. Neatly combed white hair. Not tall, but well put together. He might ask politely for a vase for the flowers he often brought in, or a knife and plate to cut up fruit for her. Standing by his wife's bed when we came in to take her blood pressure he might make a joke, something mischievous but never lewd, enjoying the effect of his unexpected humour.

He became part of it. 'Aren't they a lovely couple.' 'That's what I want my husband to be like when I'm 80.' (She was 73). And so on. It became this kind of love story unfolded in installments relayed back to the staffroom. He'd brought her a box of organic 90% chocolate Belgian truffles from that fancy shop in town. The black and white photo on her medicine locker of a woman in a backless gown looking over her shoulder from the days when they went ballroom dancing together. The first time they'd met was outside the cinema. She'd been to see 'A Matter of Life and Death,' and had got separated from her friends in the chatter of the crowd pushing out into the early winter darkness.

'I heard someone ask if I was lost and when I looked I

thought for a second it was David Niven in the flesh.'

And the two of them kept it up for us, the quiet good humour and love, in a way that I at least didn't expect or think likely.

One morning I went in to help her. It was her birthday. They'd made a point of saying so in handover, and everyone clucked because we knew it was going to be her last. I folded things while she sat up in bed brushing her hair. I asked her, 'Is your husband coming in today?'

I knew he would be, but I couldn't think of what to say. She smiled and said yes.

I said, 'I hope you have a really nice day,' coming out with an awkward honesty, like a small child telling an adult they thought they were beautiful. But I meant it. She smiled and said thank you, as if one day I'd understand that there was nothing really to be frightened or upset about. I don't think they did anything special for her birthday. She was too tired. He came, of course, and maybe their children visited. They lived a way away and we didn't see them that often. I went in later when she'd buzzed for something and a bunch of irises were on the top of her locker, swamped in a giant pyrex vase that was the only one that could be found on the ward.

'For my birthday,' she said when she saw me looking. 'Every year he buys me irises. They come out around my birthday.'

We looked at them for a while, at the joints in the hard grassy stems, the network of veins in the soft purple petals; the sun shining through the water in the vase.

The love story began to take a different turn. 'Did you see the big box of Thorntons he's bought her,' gradually developed into, 'He catches the bus every day. Well, two buses. He comes all the way from the other end of town. By himself.'

She wanted to die in hospital. She was going to, quite soon. We started to wonder how he managed, travelling

to hospital alone on the bus, an hour each way easily, and if he would think to look after himself afterwards. There was some to-ing and fro-ing over the best way to tackle this. The district nurses maybe, perhaps social services could do something, did he talk much with the doctors?

I don't know how many different people raised it with him in different ways but I was with one of the nurses when she tried to grasp the nettle.

'But it's such a long way for you to come,' she was saying when I came in. 'Do you have a neighbour, could one of your children help?'

He smiled at her and addressed us both like he was delivering a lecture.

'When I was in the war,' he said, 'I ended up in a prisoner of war camp in Eastern Europe. When it all finished, they just let us out. I had to walk home. That's when I learnt to look after myself.'

That was the only time he ever came across as old-mannish. Telling an anecdote that couldn't easily be processed, anachronistic, irrelevant to the question of whether catching the bus every day was a problem, or if he would know to cook and clean when his wife died. The nurse said doubtfully, 'Well, if you're sure?' and left it hanging. She'd tried.

I thought of him, a young man in the prison camp, waking one day to find the unknowing monotony broken. Liberated by an army speaking a foreign language, or simply deserted, the guards vanishing to fight some last desperate front. Taking some food if any remained, and walking the long roads past the smashed cities of Europe, trying to find intact bridges to cross the wide brown rivers. Past the lines of the new prisoners of war, past the smouldering factories of the death camps, the mounds of rib cages and shins and skulls. Past the suicides of the defeated, the children starving in basements. What learning to look after himself might have meant in that

time and place. Back to England. To meet and fall in love with his younger wife, who knew nothing about the war; except for dances and songs, the romance of billeted men in uniform from other countries, missing friends and relatives, air raids on the city; but next to him, nothing. Who he took to dances. Back to the country, where rain was now falling, a continuous warm drizzle, a grey sky over the bursting green of the trees in the city park by the hospital, cool air smelling of grass and leaves coming in at the window where his wife slept, stirring the petals of the irises. Where the buses and cars crawled up and down the wet roads, and people went shopping and then on to the pub or home for tea. Where, mercifully, people couldn't understand anything much worse than an old man getting dressed every day, catching a bus across the city by himself, washing and ironing his wife's clothes, hoovering their home, to where she was never going to return. ●

Miriam Patrick

EVERYTHING THAT FOLLOWED

I

Eve stoops to the washing basket,  
shakes out piece by piece, trousers,  
dresses, socks and underwear. Lastly  
she pegs the white shirts collar down,  
like falling men. They hang at first  
heavy, inanimate as sloughed skin,  
then taken by the wind, they fill and fly.  
She thinks about her husband coming home,  
loosening his collar, unbuttoning his shirt,  
his pale flesh, the scar he can't explain, of how  
she'll press her lips against his smooth chest's  
rise and fall; still astonished by his nakedness.

II

She stands at the kitchen window  
waiting for the iron to heat.  
Rooks chatter in the hornbeam.  
A sapling is laden with small apples.  
The lawn's in sun, a stage set  
waiting for new actors to arrive.  
Beyond the tree line blackness,  
from which two half grown foxes  
suddenly appear. They sniff the air,  
explore, then hesitate until, disturbed,  
they shrink back into shadow once again.  
The iron hisses, ready to begin.

### III

In the mirror she is voluptuous as an old master.  
God's fingerprints dimple her elbows,  
her belly is a mountain, her navel a goblet.  
She sighs, breathes in, turns a little  
for a kinder view, steps into the dress  
and draws it over thighs and hips and breasts,  
zips it, smiles to see herself transformed.  
Grateful at that moment to the snake,  
the trick that took the scales from their eyes  
and let them see themselves the way they were,  
vulnerable in an unforgiving world.  
And everything that followed, down to her.

Sue Dymoke

## GARDENING WITH MATTHEWS

Source: Matthews, JW (1950) *Garden With Matthews. Volume 2.*  
Wellington, NZ: AH & AW Reed

Every gardener can be a plant improver

but growth can be harmful.

Boronia's enemies kill

homely swede with kindness

or wetter water.

When hedges become undesirable

when walnuts do not fruit

when sweet peas drop their buds

the Kowhai lament.



Laura Seymmour

WINTER SOLSTICE

Anything tin,  
I was told. The officials  
with blue duffle coats  
and trailing black legs  
appeared from the phoneboxes  
a week before. They were always there.  
*No matter how much it pleads  
no matter how much you think, wrongly,  
that you could withstand it don't  
look at the sky.*

I bang a grater  
against a fork so loud  
my head bursts into a bloom  
of mossy twigs, so hard  
our black cat slopes from his basket  
completely white.

The teeth brilliant as salt  
sag and tangle  
the telephone wires, pylons  
careen towards each other. It still  
crunches you  
to pieces. When you come back,  
your boots massive with snow,  
you stand in the doorway,  
looking at spiders,  
asking me my name.

Kitty Coles

KEEP AWAY FROM FIRE

Be safe and cold.  
Avoid the fate of the witch,  
the moth, the martyr.

Stand back  
from the scarlet heart;  
do not walk in

to the wooden arms,  
the rays  
of heat and light.

You must think  
of the body as sturdy,  
a thing to safeguard.

Do not be taken up,  
white ash, black tinder.  
Refrain from flight,

from falling like rain  
from Heaven  
and smutting the townsfolk.

Do not darken the air.  
Do not scent us  
with your burning.

Jay Whittaker

PATH

I was rabbit  
riddled with mixy  
grey pelt pocked with death,  
flank heavenward,  
eye film cooling.

I was frond  
wrenched from the sea bed:  
dessicating, twisting  
into wizened serpent:  
my root, a face.

I am cairn:  
taking my place  
in a congregation of flotsam,  
all the whittled, weathered,  
stacked anew.

Sarah Marina

## THE OWL

This is the secret of her body's itch:  
the softest feathers that have brushed  
her stomach wall, the talons  
that have raked their way along her ribs,  
the glass cold beak that prickles at her breasts.

It is a patient hunter, hears  
every twitch and whisper,  
sees her blood pulse keenly in the dark.

She wants to keep this creature,  
learn the discomfort  
of having it inside her.  
Is this the bird  
who ate its own mother?

Michael W Thomas

VICTORIA STREET

*Wolfville, Nova Scotia*

The shortest day, in a season and place  
where shortness can't be measured anyway.  
All afternoon the snow has waved downhill,  
bulging the corners of the five or six  
flung houses between up here on the heights  
and Main Street far below, a river lost.  
How stopped it is, how soft at ten to five,  
with everyone back home or trying hard –  
the slew and rev of cars unheard from here  
like graceless souls along the Kentville Road  
or howling through New Minas. One's got through  
off to the right way down the flurried slope,  
unless it never left. A sudden wind  
heaps white in scarps and foothills on its hood,  
dresses its red charge-cable in mint pearl.  
Give it an hour, a half, the car will be  
an ice-bomb with an endless cartoon fuse.  
The snow lays off the senses and the blood.  
Behind, above the heights, a march of pines  
must be conferring as they've always done  
in creak and brush – but no word reaches here.  
Each flake finds boot, cloth, waterproof, as if  
pretending to be moments of an age –  
so melts, so lingers. Day is just a tale,  
the pines are shadows that once thought in green,  
the houses down the slope were never there.  
Gone five now, surely, even six, and still  
the heavens tighten and unmake. Someone  
somehow gets out and calls and calls. But still  
each moment falls and is and ends and falls.

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Jacqueline Gabbitas

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## PUT A HUMAN IN YOUR POCKET

Sometimes I think people forget that poets are just everyday people too; they shop at supermarkets, corner shops, markets; watch TV, Freeview, Netflix etc.; they take their kids to school, spend time with their grandkids; have holidays, jobs, hobbies. They wear clothes, eat food, sleep, shower and do all the things that well... people do. They also write poems – some earn a living from it, others don't, but they all produce work that, at its best, can be breathtaking.

Yet there's an unwritten notion that poets are somehow other-worldly, or that if you're not a poet (or you haven't studied poets and poems) you won't understand poetry. Of course, this is rubbish. (Fair enough, not everyone will understand every poem they read, but that's fine. I don't understand cricket but it doesn't stop me liking sports.) Many of us who do write poetry remember that it probably wasn't all that long ago that we didn't, and that we also didn't spend our waking hours studying it. We might have read poems at school and carried the music and wonder of them around in our hearts for a long time afterwards before we one day put pen to paper (and I bet we all did just that, that first time – put pen to paper rather than fingers to keyboard!) and wrote our first

poems. Perhaps we wrote them because we had something to say, or because they were nagging at us to write them, or because we were looking for some form of self-expression. It doesn't matter. We wrote them. At some point we (tentatively) showed them to someone else who encouraged us to write more, and then we showed them to other people who encouraged us even more until eventually we published some in magazines and then books. And we felt all the anxiety and excitement that goes with that. Wonderful poets are talented but they aren't superhuman. Just human.

People, regardless of what publishers might believe, actually do like to read poetry. And complex, rich poetry, at that. Poetry that begs for second and third readings. You don't have to look much further than the packed audiences of festivals to see this. In fact you don't have to look much further than publishers like Candlestick Press, whose *Ten Poems...* anthologies are full of complex, thought provoking poems, to see that people enjoy them, because they keep buying them. They buy one, then buy the same one again and send it to a friend. The press last year sold over 60,000 books. Yes, I said over 60 thousand. Yes, poetry. This is in part due to the beautiful packaging of the books as gift-card-pamphlets and partly because they're in shops that are targeting a market beyond the bookshop (they're in bookshops too, don't worry). You see them in gift shops and galleries and at fairs.

You also don't need to go much further than social media to see how much people like poetry – on Instagram there's a whole community of poets enjoying not just their own work but Rumi and Basho and Akhmatova and Keats and Byron and... and not all of them are poets, some are readers.

When I came up with my project, Traverse Poetry Trading Cards, it was partly because I play a lot of card-collecting game apps on my iPad, partly because I'd just



discovered Artist Trading Cards (where small artworks are made using a very specific form) and partly because, through work, I meet a lot of people who think poetry is not for them (and then they read some and find they can't stop reading it). I think a book of poems, even anthologies, can seem a little intimidating (especially when at school we're not taught about poems but canons) and I wanted a slightly different way to offer poetry to people. And I felt they needed to be short. People like short. So I married these things – the card-collecting, the artist trading cards, the short poems – with a little bit of tech, some gorgeous designs and a massive amount of help from poet-friends, and came up with a series of collectible cards printed by the lovely Moo.

The poems are a mixture of donated poems from contemporary poets including Mimi Khalvati, Susan Wicks, Pascal Petit, Ian McMillan, and classic poets including Edna St Vincent Millay, Shakespeare, Blake and Keats. They come in little packs of three randomly chosen cards. The first series (Volume 1) has twenty-one cards in it, and they all have a number; some are rare to find, others a bit less rare and others still are plentiful. Their rarity is reflected in the production of the card from plain (but still lovely) to hand-embossed, to gold-foil and lacquer printed. My favourite, because I like the techy element, is the Super\_rare William Blake card, which has an embedded video chip that takes you to a film of David Constantine reading Blake's 'A Divine Image'.

Poetry postcards and greeting cards have been around for a long time, and I later discovered that in America poetry trading cards (modeled on baseball cards), but I wanted Traverse (which is short for Trading Verse) to be also about you building up your own anthology and being part of a collecting community. I ran a crowdfunding campaign with Stonewood Press, which raised enough money to produce them. We launched Traverse at the

Poetry Book Fair with a surprisingly successful outdoor reading (surprising because it was freezing!)

But getting back to the poets being human thing. We're told biography isn't important to the reading of a poem, and for a long time I believed that (I still do to an extent) but after years of reading and, in the main, loving poetry, I've learned how much context is important. On the back of each Traverse card is information about the poets. Some of it's just fun to know, but some of it puts the work in context and adds another layer to the richness of the poems. The project is a playful way of presenting poetry, but I'm very serious about the poetry itself. I could go on for a year and a day about my choices for poets but it really all comes down to confidence – I had a very restricted space for the poems to fit in (about the size of a business card) – and I was confident that I could find superb (if less well known) poems by the classic poets and that the contemporary poets I asked could write something wonderful for that space. And they did (maybe they are superhuman, after all!)

I'm slowly but surely getting Traverse into shops (blast my day-job getting in the way!) and you can buy them online from Stonewood Press ([www.stonewood.co.uk](http://www.stonewood.co.uk)) at a 10% discount but for those of you who don't like to buy online, it would be a massive help to us if you wanted to order them from your own bookshop or local gift shop. My slogan for the project is Put A Poet in Your Pocket, but with Christmas round the corner I think I'm going to change it to Put A Poet in Your Stocking! What do you think? ■

*Buy Traverse Poetry Trading cards from Stonewood Press online [www.stonewoodpress.co.uk](http://www.stonewoodpress.co.uk). Visit the Traverse website at [www.traversepoetry.co.uk](http://www.traversepoetry.co.uk), like us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter and Instagram @traversepoetry*

Brian Docherty

## DRAFTING A CV

Start with the first job we care to recall,  
running messages for our mum or gran,  
our first paper round, or delivering potatoes  
& eggs for a local farmer, or picking those  
potatoes, our first job after leaving school,  
in a bookshop, bakers or hairdressers,  
as an office junior, apprentice plumber  
or electrician, assuming we didn't go  
to university, or do we prefer to start  
with the first post with responsibility,

where what we did, made a difference,  
where we got paid enough to start making  
a life for ourselves, where this, not school,  
or going out to play with our friends,  
or what we did in the summer holidays,  
was our life, and everything else flowed  
from it, or depended on it, and there was  
no going back, soon we would realise  
work did not stop when the office went dark  
or we walked through the factory gates,

but work carried on when we got home,  
our home, not our parents' house, but ours,  
we had to do the shopping, the cleaning,  
the decorating, the gardening if we had one,  
(omit the bedsit, squat or shortlife co-op)  
suddenly this was us, this really was our life,  
and there was no turning the clock back,  
we were in that river, our earlier life  
a previous canoe, and now it is our hand  
on the paddle, our eye on the rapids.

Dharmavadana

## LAST LETTER FROM HAMBURG

In Veddel by the docks it smells of *Scheisse*.  
That's where they found my mother in the end,  
sitting on the wall of the girder bridge  
in her nightgown. You used to tell my friends  
you couldn't believe how white she was, like  
she'd never had blood. Now she's even whiter.  
She lies on the sofa all day in a rage  
for Valium, glotzing stupid TV,  
comedies that don't make anyone laugh,  
and only shouts at me to go to school.  
I went to her bridge and looked at the river,  
and to the café where you wanted to go  
on our last night, to talk things through, so late.  
The sky here's nothing but black any more  
with clouds like thieves who never go away.  
My father tells me I must live with him now  
and soon I will, but it's not what I want.  
He's always somewhere on business. His place  
is in Glückstadt, north of here, an apartment  
with a bar with whisky bottles lit  
like a Versailles chandelier, and bar stools  
I could spin on I guess, smoking Camels,  
and stare at the river or spit and swear  
like a prostitute at men who aren't there.  
The Elbe stinks as bad in Glückstadt as Hamburg.  
Even the ships pour out shit as they pass.  
But the lights are pretty at night on the river,  
waving like bad swimmers for a hand  
pup out of the *Dreck*. What would it be like

to take that *Scheisswasser* in your mouth?  
I wonder where my mother sat exactly.  
At least when you were here she tied her hair  
in pigtails. Now she's like a Kaspar Hauser,  
or one of those kids they find in woods sometimes,  
crazy-eyed because they don't understand  
about cars, apartments, eating with forks and knives.  
She says she doesn't hate my father. So?  
Whatever she thinks, it's all the same to me  
and what he did to her was long ago.  
He acted in his interests like we're taught to.

Edd Ravn

WET AND RED TALK

Red: The weather

Wet: Not just the weather.

Red: The whole, whole...

Wet: You know it's not broken but

Red: Dusty.

Wet: Dusty. Stained white dusty with nice hot  
hot dry ground.

Red: Glare

Wet: Real glare. Not shiny glare. Cobbled street  
white rough walls glare. Heat. But they'll have  
those water coolers that make those sounds.

Red: Blue?

Blue: Dusty and hot. Suspiciously dead grass that's  
still alive or still sleeping, stuck still in the  
ground. Sweaty flip-flops. Older men wearing  
suit jackets with shirts open past dark chest  
hair down to their belly button. Dry dusty hot.

Red: White but sandy white. Hot white hot rough  
hot walls.

Wet: Yeah.

Kaye Lee

ANOTHER COUNTRY

There'll be a moment when someone tips over  
a jug of milk and white surges across the pine table  
like froth on a surf beach, and the skin of my belly  
stings with sand-burn as salt and ozone  
clear my head of years lived inland,

or the jug clinks on a teaspoon  
and I clamp a cold bucket between my knees  
and giggle – my ear against a prickly hide  
has picked up the gurgle of summer hay settling  
in the cow's first stomach,

but before the trickle of milk becomes a stream  
someone rights the jug and mops up the spill.  
As I pour hot tea into waiting cups  
no one guesses how far I've travelled.

Sarah Marina

## BARNACLED ROCK

I was only visible within myself.

I could not let you see me.

I was a mind hardened by air and did not give good things to myself.

This is the place where you once tried to comfort me. So I amassed

barnacles to meet your touch, patterned myself

with softly biting mouths.

When you listened I put an ache in your ear, and let you catch

my deep water smell. Then you attended to my skin

which is the texture of thoughts working themselves

out of the body.

I wanted to eliminate all movement, slow

breath to its heaviest point. And when I was found by the sea

I drew it towards myself and suffered its movements

over and within me.



Howard Wright

THE MAN WHO WAS JEALOUS OF WALLS

*after Guillevic*

That they are always in evidence  
That they tell their stories  
That they can be prisons  
That they live in disguise  
That they remember voices  
That they might not make sense  
That they appear strong  
That they see further  
That they go without saying  
That they break blades on their joints  
That they are made with care  
That they stand to reason  
That they make you look up  
That they always go deeper  
That they speak of life  
That they be more than meets the eye  
That they fall with difficulty  
That they protect from horizons  
That they have a way in  
That they mask their wounds  
That they are indifferent

Clive Eastwood

## GARAGE

Three five-litre tins of paint  
wear their label like a *cépage*,  
the bouquet matured over years,  
their colour intensifying  
as the hallway grows more shabby.  
In the corner, a hatchet,  
for burying perhaps, a curtain pole  
should there be something to hide  
and a spare set of coals in case  
those laid in the gas fire  
forget themselves and burn.

But under the carpet offcut  
is the print of a tyre. He tests  
his foot against its remembered  
zigzags, accelerating gently  
towards the Downs. The bricks  
have kept the smell of old oil  
and evaporating damp, marks  
of opening doors and the sigh  
of an engine settling. The draught  
around his feet might be  
a coast wind stroking his face.



Sarah Passingham

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## NOT GETTING TO GRIPS WITH STRUCTURE

**M**ost of us are all the better for a bit of structure and direction in our lives. We can get by without, and might even have a lot of fun living a sort of ricochet existence, but after a while we find that a modicum of routine is more comfortable.

I'm a bit of a rule follower and am never happier than working within boundaries, so I'm all for a bit of structure. But really, what was I thinking when I decided to expound on something so elusive as the anatomy of the short story?

There are any number of accepted formats: linear, circular, open-ended, frame-stories, sequential, epistolary, stream of consciousness, journal or even this year's Goldsmiths Prize winner, Mike McCormack's 'Solar Bones', which is written in a single sentence. There are the more generalised: Man against Man, Man against Nature or Man against Himself, and these are useful to identify a diegesis and keep the writing focused during the process but, and this has taken me a while to understand, long fiction rules rarely apply to the short form.

Superficially, a short story is first cousin to a novel and you might expect it to behave like a further compacted

version of a novella or even the novelette, but where a novel is expansive, a short story condenses. In reality it's far closer to a piece of flash fiction or even poetry, where mood and nuance, even personal resonance, are frequently given more importance than characterisation or plotting, and it's these nebulous attributes that make it such a slippery form to analyse.

What do we want from a short story? Or to put it another way: what's the point of a short story? I think it all boils down to reader satisfaction. And if we refine it further: satisfaction in a single sitting.

John Steinbeck said, 'Write freely and as rapidly as possible. Never correct or rewrite until the whole thing is down.' For the most part that is exactly my approach.

Some writers spend their time on the page, crafting perfect sentences until they end with an almost polished piece. I find writing incredibly hard and put most time in away from my keyboard. I often start with feeling I'm inside someone's head – sometimes for days or weeks – feeling their way around the world, encountering their problems. I don't open a fresh file and put a finger onto the keyboard until I'm absolutely certain I can be that person, then I gallop as fast as I can, hurtling past words I can't quite find, leaping bits I don't understand, barely glancing at other characters that muscle in on the action, finally arriving at what might be the end in a proper lather, desperate for tea or something stronger, and feeling like I've had an encounter with a thing much bigger than myself. Plotting sort of happens in the same intuitive fashion that someone might tell an anecdote of a funny incident that happened in their day, the difference being that an anecdote knows where it's going because it's already happened, and the other is fantasy. As a maker of short stories, we don't always know what the end will be. What I'm searching for in that original frenzy, is where this is all going. What is the end point? Or perhaps, as

suggested by Julia Bell in 'The Creative Writing Coursebook' I'm looking for 'the internal logic of the story'. In other words, the answer to the harsh, but fair, 'so what?' question that we should all ask of our creative work. Sometimes a first draft works as a narrative right there on the page, but usually it needs attention well beyond a basic edit in the form of re-structuring (I prefer the word shaping) and this can leave a writer floundering.

I think the reason many writers and would-be writers are nervous of shaping is because it's so crucial. As a reader you know immediately if you have a poorly constructed story in your hands: it feels turgid, or baggy, or leaves you bewildered but not in an exciting way. We can forgive other constituents being lacking if something else keeps us engaged, but poor structure will derail any interest and we'll walk away, yet putting a finger on exactly what's wrong and identifying the remedy isn't always obvious.

So what is this 'shape' that provides the vital support for a collection of creative ideas and presents it in a form to the reader that feels new, unique and captivating? Is structure simply another term for plot? In linear narrative perhaps but not always, in fact in contemporary short fiction, not often. Beyond the linear, I believe that structure is a combination of (usually) three elements: Pace, Plot and Order, to a greater or lesser extent. Plot can be the most obvious element of a story, but a successful structure will lie beneath the plot almost unnoticed, and some writers of short fiction almost dispense with plot entirely, concentrating on emotion to ratchet up tension, or deliberately hold back events, using the slow reveal to keep the reader's attention. Ailsa Cox in her superb guide to 'Writing Short Stories' says that 'short stories are arranged, not as visibly as lines of poetry, but according to their own internal architecture'.

With the above in mind, we can look at accelerating

pace, introducing interior argument, dropping another hurdle in the way, or any number of other devices, but the truth is that shaping is often inexact, nothing more than a matter of trial and error. Sometimes it feels like hammer and chisel stuff, crude and destructive, chucking out everything that doesn't add something essential, other times patience is needed to chip away until exactly the right place for a change of mood is found, or where to release information. You need fewer rules, more honesty and courage, and loads of time for reflection...well I do. You'll have heard the word ruthless used about the writing craft, which suggests that it will be painful, but if you lay aside your inner-writer and re-draft as a reader, you'll get nearer to a detached critical acumen, which is reward in itself.

Have you noticed how every instruction I've tried to give is fuzzy with qualifiers? This is because every story has it's own requirements with bits of it to be moved about, distilled or deleted until it feels right. Think of this column more as a pointer to the direction that might work for you. A finger to the signpost, if that isn't too much of a tautology. Unless you are a highly experienced or profoundly gifted story teller, it's unlikely that you hit on the perfect structure before, or in the process of writing, so shaping has to take place after you have the words on the page. There are accepted structures for Hollywood screen plays and many other forms of writing, which can be crammed into particular boxes, but short stories aren't off the peg, they are couture and bespoke. We come back to Ailsa Cox's 'own internal architecture' and the reader's need for satisfaction.

You can remove other elements of a story: character, place, dialogue, plot etc. and work on them individually, but it's difficult to take structure out of context and devise exercises to examine and practice it, except from a general and academic perspective. I have failed to identify rules,

other than the one that tells us to wait until after the story is written down, however, shaping has always to take the reader into a story, and has a moment at which they leave it.

As writers, we can be forensic in finding the point where the story begins. I find that it's almost never in my original opening paragraph. Beginnings and endings have to be as perfect as you can make them. The first is the chink through which your reader's curiosity is aroused, the last is the sunlight that illuminates all that has gone before. Once you have these two components in place, you'll understand how your story needs to be told. There is no easy pathway, but like anything worth the effort, the more you try, the quicker you'll recognise the clues to navigate you.

And if, unlike me, you are rebellious by nature, chuck out all the rules, go for something entirely new and experimental. Short stories can absorb a radical approach and many writers have succeeded even after giving the form a good shaking. ■

Dominic Fisher

## A BIRD'S FOOT FROM JACK

The doorway is a bar of shrinking gold. It goes to nothing, clicks shut. You turn the key, pull down your hat. Only the blood-red streetlights punctuate the night as you head up the hill when Jack at number nine pops out in his work clothes. He hands you a bird's foot telling you it might come in handy, then goes back in saying those floorboards won't lift themselves.

You duck along hedges and over the playing fields, come to a stretch of dual-carriageway between a field of carrots and a business park. The pages there have gold edging and scuffed green leather bindings, paw pads and signs of hasty gorgings have overwritten themselves repeatedly in the muddy verges, and there's a danger that your name will get lost among them.

You bed down in traffic-din by a torn water course among brambles, wind-ripped plastic sheeting, and tell yourself how these are times of collision, write with the bird's foot how culverts and sub-stations are being held hard against the Chancellor's men in long goblin wars that must continue because he sold all the silver and children but still can't pay off the interest.

In your bits and pieces of coat you shift out of town towards morning where children and birds once sang in your head as well as in the trees. You wonder when it was that the doors got shut on the perpetual hills as if they had just been books going back on the shelves in a library some closing time. But it comes as no surprise to find your old house has become a department store.



You recognise the stairs but not a lot seems familiar among the floors of purchasable items. Going up, the echo sounds the same as you listen for voices you would know. And the corridor that this time takes you through soft furnishings was always there, the passage through rock, the track through mountains towards friends, the unlit path, the road to the water's edge.

Late evening. The reed beds are silent. There's a crunching of footfall on the causeway ahead, but the shape just in front of you in the hat is simply your shadow. Although your name is a fading imprint of claws, you can still touch the silt and the surface, or ask yourself what Jack, lit up blood-red, was doing under his floorboards. There are no stars, just unpronounceable blue.

Kaye Lee

## NIGHT SHIFT

The last drip-line is checked, a final pill  
signed for, swallowed. Blankets –  
those airy cotton-weave ones, more  
hole than cotton – offered, refused,  
folded to the ends of beds.

The mutter of room-mate chatter  
drifts into sighs and snores. It seems  
I'm the only person in the world awake  
as the shades of watchful women slip in  
carrying lanterns and torches –

they whisper of fevers and crises;  
birthing, dying; how to read stars,  
and tealeaves; and in the long hour  
that joins deepest dark to dawn  
they join me on my rounds –

their hands soothe aching flesh,  
their voices calm fearful dreams –  
all is well, and all shall be well.

Jeremy Page

## HYGGE

No colour ever more pleasing  
to the eye than this whiskey's,  
and no sounds easier on the ear  
than those furnished by our blazing hearth.

Five pm on the briefest day  
and every door and window  
stands closed against the world,  
strains to hold night at bay.

There can be no one else for miles;  
the privilege of these moments,  
this fireside, is ours alone. *Sláinte*.

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