

exiled ink

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Issue 2 2019

Editorial

This is the second issue of Exiled Ink e-magazine and its focus is on borders in all its diverse manifestations. To escape or move from the country of origin to the UK invariably involves an act of not only crossing physical borders but also cultural, imaginative and language borders.

Numerous literary voices represent crossing borders as acutely challenging. Whether it is Shamim Azad sharing her experiences as a Bengali teacher in an English school or Silvia Slovic recalling her 'countless uncomfortable moments' in mixing with others, the profound feeling of being 'branded as an alien' is forever present. Perhaps the only solution is to slip down a magical rabbit hole to another universe where there is freedom to be oneself as in Ugne Frolenkova's poem. Fatima Hagi's poem compares her Somali ancestors' lives with her own in London through experiences of rain. Yet some see the very space in-between belonging and alienation, home and away, as a transformative space or a space of dualities.

Translation reveals itself as an act across language borders with Robert Chandler describing entering the poet's world. With a passion for the potential of robotic poetry, Abol Froushan explains how software algorithms are deployed to create poetry in a shift across creative borders.

We include reviews of the latest books by exiled writers Nasrin Parvaz, Usha Kishore, Alemu Tabeje, Nick Makoha, Edin Suljic, Tenzin Tsundue, Yang Lian and Salah Faik. The theatre production 'Pizza Shop Heroes' is performed by refugees, while the drama 'The Dark' is by Nick Makoha.

Esther Lipton

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Borders

Between Two Worlds

Catherine Davidson and Bethany Webb-Strong

The theme of the Exiled Lit Café on 3rd September was 'Between Two Worlds' hosted by Aviva Dautch, a joyful, charismatic and generous writer whose poems delve into dark territory. The guest poets were Abol Froushan, Nick Makoha, Maria Jastrzębska and Sarala Estruch. The evening was framed with songs performed by the Israeli-Sardinian-English choral conductor, Sarit Aloni. Her songs were deep rooted and universal, linking ancient cultures and modern interpretations, a lone voice on stage with a piano.

Water was a theme which was explored in all of the poetry read at the evening. Water is the universal element of exile; the waters we cross and the water that links us, body by thirsty body.

Abol Froushan is an Anglo Persian poet, translator and critic who is the Iran Editor of Poetry International Web. His published poetry is: *A Language against Language*, Exiled Writers Ink (English, 2008) and the bilingual volume, *I need your desert for my sneeze*, PoetryPub (Persian & English, 2009). Abol performed a number of poems which drew on the theme of transformation. Framing the question of 'between' as an exercise in displacement, the poems imagine the space between genders, between dream and waking, between land and sea, between representation and reality.

A Border Crossing

My words take a parachute jump
in the night sky above you
Perhaps they land on an eye or ear
burrow through sense to heart
- yours still empty as mine
since we last meant bye
as I took my flight

These words hadn't yet checked in when
I boarded the silence

The aircraft was full of passengers
all attending a funeral of words
- paying me no heed
What could I say?
This stop on speaking
that wiped off grammar?

Perhaps our goodbye
parted humanity with words
erased them off the dictionary
left just the meanings dangling

We said nothing for months

The odd text was exchanged
Brief and simple blanks
I wondered off screen
Boarded the plane of a thought that was wordless
Our love's meaning was taken like daylight robbery

Pocket from Heaven

Pocketful of heaven
Forced entreats measure no vail
Frustration bids no change

Add a little salt
and pinch a punch of froth
Jack never drank of Jill's mug.
*

Sentiment of freedom
forced the bird into a cage
Caravans carted it off
to no-man's land

He was thus exiled to a cage bursting heart.
Jack, caged in his mug?
Free them from themselves

The why of a How
The hurdle of the vertical dimension of Wall.

Nick Makoha fled Uganda's civil war and Idi Amin's tyranny as a boy. His debut collection *Kingdom of Gravity* was shortlisted for the 2017 Felix Dennis Prize for Best First Collection and was nominated by The Guardian as one of the best books of 2017. He won the 2015 Brunel International African Poetry prize and is the 2016 winner of the Toi Derricotte & Cornelius Eady Chapbook Prize for his pamphlet *Resurrection Man*. The poems Nick read at the event balanced between the deep specificity of observation and the mythology of collective history, between tenderness and rage, between the inescapable world and our need to fly away.

When the bodies disappear, discarded like the husk of mangos,
he will weep with you in those hours of reckoning and judgement,
into the hollow night when the crowds disperse.

When by paraffin light his whiskey breath tells you
your mother's wailings in your father's bed are a song
for our nation, as he sits with you on the veranda to witness a sunrise,

say nothing. Slaughter your herd. Feed the soldiers
who looted your mills and factories. Let them dance
in your garden while an old man watches.

Then when they sleep and your blood turns to kerosene,
find your mother gathering water at the well to stave off
the burning. Shave her head with a razor from the kiosk.

When the fury has gathered, take her hand and run
past the fields' odour of blood and bones. Past the checkpoint,
past the swamp towards the smoky disc flaring on the horizon.

Run till your knuckles become as white as handkerchiefs,
Run into the night's fluorescent silence. Run till your lungs
become a furnace of flames. Run past the border.

Run till you no longer see yourself in other men's eyes.
Run past sleep, past darkness visible.
Stop when you find a country where they do not know your name.

The self (1979)

Don't quote me, but I swear the radio hissed:
Run for your lives. Anyway! Fast forward and
I'm being taken by the hand to Entebbe Airport.

Commercial flights are cancelled. There's a queue
of people with the right faces but wrong surnames
and no luggage waiting for a cargo plane to London -

people I barely know, but they swear they know me
well. Smiles disguise thoughts that if spoken,
would get us, you know, arrested, or worse. Then,

somebody shouts, *There's space in the front.*
Under floodlights we're shuffled in, Noah's Ark-style,
travelling all night, leaving the sun behind.

Only clouds show their form, when the colour

of the sky has gone, as the engines purr in a
constant exhalation. The future is speeding towards me.

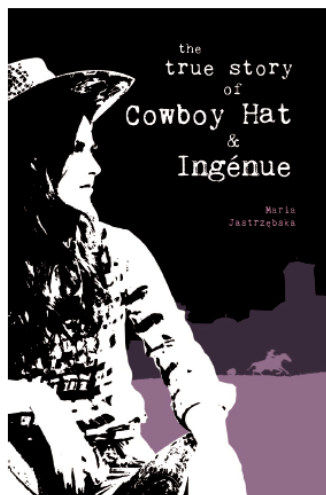
A loud darkness leaks through the cabin window.
I'm listening to it, not the noise, but the rhythm.
This high above the world, in between time,

I can't help but wonder: now that we have left
our country, who will turn out the lights?
In the terminal my ears are popping

when the immigration officer steps from his desk,
with my mother's passport in hand and asks me,
just like you did, *Tell me that story again.*

Maria Jastrzbska was born in Warsaw, Poland and came to the UK as a child, growing up between two cultures. Poet, editor and translator, she co-edited 'Queer' in Brighton (New Writing South 2014) and translated Justyna Bargielska's *The Great Plan B* (Smokestack 2017). A new collection *The True Story of Cowboy Hat and Ingénue* is out this autumn (Liquorice Fish 2018). Her narratives sit between prose and poetry, between travelling lovers, between the human and the animal world, between home and away, echoing the dualities she explores within her work.

**THE TRUE STORY OF
COWBOY HAT & INGÉNUÉ**
by
MARIA JASTRZĘBSKA



This poem is an extract from Maria's new collection *The True Story of Cowboy Hat and Ingénue* just published by Liquorice Fish/Cinnamon Press this winter. The entire book is the story of two women's love and quest and their journey is interwoven with the story of many other people's journeys, mostly escaping from war and violence. The stories happen simultaneously as past and present happen all at once in the landscape of poetry:

Inside the truck there was almost no light except for the smallest crack in the metal shutter doors, which enabled her to guess if it was day or night. The drivers had shouted that they were not to try opening the doors when the truck stopped or they could be apprehended, maybe shot. They had stopped only once in a forest and been allowed to relieve themselves at night. A signal of knocks from the driver's cabin had been arranged to let them know when a border patrol was being approached. Inside the truck there was nowhere they could relieve themselves so someone suggested they make one side of the truck their latrine and all sleep on other side. They dragged some cylinders and boxes across to create a divide but sometimes the urine trickled across to the other side anyway.

The clatter of the truck and passing traffic were something she quickly got used to. Much harder were the heat and thirst as no one had brought enough water for such a long journey. On the third morning, as she imagined it, even over the stench inside the lorry she could smell something different. The smell of brine. Ocean. They had reached the ocean.

Oh, oh! cries Ingénue, when she sees two humpbacks breach, shattering the ocean's glass blue sheen. *Where?* shouts Cowboy Hat startled. *How come I never see them and you do, even when you're driving?*

Eagles flank their pathway, swooping
down alongside the truck, which levitates
above the tarmac's haze. Ingénue rests an
arm on the rolled down window. She purses
her lips and whistles to the birds. Cowboy
Hat opens one eye. Eagles alight on her
lover's arm, snatching morsels of *quesadilla*
from her open hand. *I was gonna eat that*,
mutters Cowboy Hat then goes back to sleep.

The ocean is a blue lake of concentration. It
sucks in clouds. Swallowed whole, the clouds
are snowy peaks and mountains glitter, black
coal. The ocean is an ice rink, waves: hairline
fractures. And fishing boats are lovers,
casting a net between them.

* * * * *

Down rabbit hole and back through black hole

Ugne Frolenkova

I wanted to be understood but I wouldn't listen
I sought truth but I wouldn't challenge

I wanted God to tell me what to do but I was lazy
I wanted to love and be loved but I was a narcissist

I wished my neurosis was gone but I wanted to stay a victim
I wanted to speak my truth but I sold myself through compromise

I sought connection in England, but I talked badly about English
I craved genuine intimacy but I feared commitment

I didn't know who I was anymore
Twelve years ago I was an immigrant

I thought the strong did what they could

While the weak suffered what they must

Then I went down the rabbit hole
Ended up in a black hole

Where Stephen Hawking told me not to give up
Because black holes gave hopes

They take you to other universes
Where you choose your cruises

So now I bask in gratitude of this ubiquitous truth
That I've always been free to choose

That my tantrums took me on this less travelled road
Where my goals were moulded by different crossroads

Quietly observing the mind's games
I bask in infinite flames of 'I am'

And so I continue playing games we all play
Every day, at homes, across borders, and even in black holes.

***Roob Doon* – A solemn plea for Rain**

Fatima Hagi

Where once my ancestors
Walked for days
Across a levelled plain
In the scorching heat
Followed by their camels
And weary livestock
Searching for heavily over dew
rain

In the month of November
I sat by the porch
amongst town-dwellers
watching the children play
In the rain
Splashing and rejoicing

In garments of grey
Without a care in the world
Even the adults were led astray
To join the rain dance
And in a way, I admired their
childlike freedom
To laugh and play
Like no one was watching
Uninhibited in free terrain
intrigued by their free rein
I wondered about my own fight for
Indefinite leave to remain

only weeks before they stood
congregated
In the town square
With hands held up high
Like branches reaching for the skies
In communal prayer
They chanted with assorted dialects
For 'roob doon'

At home in London
On rainy days
I relished quiet moments
Sat by the windowsill
Lamenting in perfect prose
And taking long over-due breaks
In between each sip
And stanza

Other days I would be caught
In the thick of it
Desperately clinging to my flying umbrella
Hurrying home in a flurry
windswept
Trapped between fleeting thoughts
And the everyday flow of life

There was something quite satisfying
about reaching home
To dry by the radiator
Bestowed with
the scent of

cinnamon
cloves
and cardamom
Tea infused with a little loving
from back 'home'
To warm my tender heart
As each cupful overflowed with virtue
the day slowly trickled away

Row your Boat

Shirin Razavian

Translated by Robert Chandler

I row my paper boat
on the oily black sea
Dead fish floating past
Staring with glassy eyes, mockingly toothy grins
Blue eyed soldiers lose their mind
Black haired soldiers lose their heads
Everyone is a loser in this futile game but more than most
the mothers screaming from broken windows
crying blood for the dead babies cradled in their arms
milk curdling in their swollen breasts for fear and grief
when the curtain of dark falls
No one is applauded
No soul has refuge from the deadly fire festival and the morbid
symphony of death plays on through the night
No place to run, nowhere to hide
All I see is the dark waters
my boat of paper
my pen for an oar...

Translating Shirin Razavian

Robert Chandler

When Exiled Writers Ink first asked me if I would translate some poems by an Iranian poet living in London, my first impulse was to say no. My knowledge of Farsi is elementary, and I had already taken on as much

translating work as I felt I could manage. Fortunately, I decided to wait until I had seen a few poems; I had asked Shirin to send me four poems, together with literal translations.

What I then received, to my delight and surprise, were three poems that Shirin had translated herself, and which needed only a very little editing – and one poem that she had originally written in English. I shall quote the beginning:

The Grey Morning

Runs its cold delicate hands
Over my shoulders
And playfully toys with my dress
The grey morning
Is full of the murmurs of life
The sounds of today
Voices of today
And the silent pains of yesterday
Which nobody speaks of

I was astonished by such clarity of voice even in a learned language, and I realised at once that a poet with this command of English would be able to explain her Farsi poems even to someone with my imperfect knowledge of the language.

More important still, Shirin writes with absolute directness and lack of pretension. I read Farsi slowly, letter by letter, like a child who has only recently learned to read. If it takes me ten minutes to puzzle out a few sentences, it is painful to discover that the writer has used twice as many words as he needed, and that the thought is in any case banal. But when I read a poem like 'Water Song', the images are so vivid that I almost forget that I am reading in a foreign language. Literally, two stanzas from this could be translated as:

Let me switch on
my loneliness meter:
how many degrees
below zero
is the temperature of loneliness?

The fish of my heart swims below the ice,
golden and hopeful,
and it sees the sun fogged

as if through frosted glass
and laughs shyly in itself.

This almost works as English poetry, but ‘itself’ is a weak word to end a stanza on, and ‘the temperature of loneliness’ somehow sounds less striking in English than it does in Farsi. Trying to make my English as direct and vivid as Shirin’s Farsi, wanting to remove anything that might obscure the clarity of her images, I made a few small changes:

Let me switch on
my loneliness meter:
how many degrees
below zero
will it say?

Below the ice swims the fish of my heart,
golden and hopeful,
and it looks at the sun
as if through frosted glass
and laughs shyly in its heart of hearts.

Shirin enters wholeheartedly both into the world outside her – as is clear from her political poems – and into the world within her – as is clear from these lines addressed to her son, Arvin, when he was still in her womb:

I enter, with you,
each moment’s smell
and touch, with you,
time’s smallest cells.

It has been a joy, and a privilege, to enter, even in a small way, into Shirin’s world.

Shirin Razavian’s publications:
Az Vajeh ta Pendar
The Sad Universality of Oyster
The Sweet Sonnets (50 Ghazals)
Free Fall (English poetry)
Which Shade of Blue
www.ShirinRazavian.com

Hereby

May Al Issa

Only two points:

Life and death

But, in between

Hereby lies a paper

No. Papers and papers and papers

Birth certificate

Degree certificate

Working certificate

Marriage certificate

Divorce certificate

Walking certificate

Seeing certificate

Papers here. Papers there

Dust covers everywhere

Words are shuttered, in disguise

Truth's manipulated

Reality is burnt

And through the ashes

Search for that self.... Continues

Death certificate is hereby drawn.

STOP!

Have you seen me there?

where do you come from?

Silvia Sovic

March 2018, somewhere in London

Snow! In London?! The temperature has fallen below zero, and white flakes like tiny powdery crystals were drowsily dancing around the silent streets of this proud cosmopolitan city, gently transforming it into something mystical and magical. White roads, white houses, white city.

For the last twenty or so years I have learned how to live my life without snow, but moments like this turn my past into present and my memories into reality. Over the years the image of snow and the shimmering white-coated valley, the cool mountain breeze, sublime sounds and tranquillity have been locked away in the universe of my memories of the now distant past of my childhood years, only to be awoken again on a winter day like this.

Winter 1983, somewhere east of Trieste

Setting out to school early on cold winter mornings, into fresh snow, was to enter into the spectacular. As I opened the front door of my parents' house, I would be greeted with a beguiling picture of phantasmagorical curtains of stars parading in the sky before giving way to the crack of dawn. When I stepped outside, my lungs were filled with the fresh and frosty breath of the dark winter day. The deep stillness made the white surroundings even more surreal, almost supernatural. No cars on the road, no traffic, hardly any footprints in the powdery snow on the ground, just the embrace of pure nature; ahead of me lay a peaceful, transfigured landscape – a white desert. Overwhelming, irrational feelings of freedom and bliss accompanied my brisk walk on a small village road meandering through the luminous landscape to a distant bus station located across the sleepy river, covered with thin translucent ice. I hadn't met many people up to then; it was only six o'clock in the morning. My first encounter with them would be at the bottom of the hill, across the running stream, where the road cut the flat, snowy square field into two asymmetrical pieces with scattered houses on both sides. There I would see the usual suspects: a few teenagers, sullen and grumpy, going to their secondary school, like me, and some grown-ups heading to work in a nearby industrial town. We all knew each other, at least vaguely – we recognized each other's faces, sometimes even knew each other's names – but we hardly talked to each other. For us teenagers it was

far too early to strike up a gentle conversation. Tired and not quite awake, we were dreading school, at least some of us. On a snowy winter day like this I was usually buried in my own thoughts and the expression on my face clearly betrayed my unwillingness to engage in small talk. Frowning looks and brisk replies were all I was prepared to offer. Having exchanged quick glances, lukewarm nods and fake smiles, we stood there silently, impatiently waiting for the bus to come, sometimes hopping from one foot to another to keep warm: I, a permanently dopey teenager, who resented school; a blue-eyed boy of a similar age, with dishevelled golden hair and pale complexion, reticent but friendly.

Then there was a straight-laced woman in her mid-forties with a distinctive high-pitched voice. Dressed in a long grey coat that stretched almost to the ground, she was unusually tall, with a slender neck and wavy-brown hair tied neatly at the back with a black pin; her round brown eyes were sharp and focused, her thin lips covered with a slightly sparkling brown lipstick showing discreet signs of femininity. Her posture and distant manner reflected the times we were living in: depersonalized and distant. To us younger ones she seemed polite but fierce; had she worked in school we would certainly have given her a wide berth. Next to her usually stood a rather small, chubby man with oily but carefully combed hair and a crooked nose that caught people's attention, though to me it simply made his appearance less boring. Doubtlessly a professional white-collar type, in his early fifties. He looked composed and well dressed for our rough bus ride: typical white shirt, dark suit and tie, impeccably polished shoes. In his smart winter coat and black leather briefcase he stood out against the rest of the crowd which was mostly younger and casually dressed in washed-out jeans and t-shirts. His excessive use of a sweet and strong perfume made us wary of his presence. Pleased to see the tall woman, he chatted and giggled with her every morning while we waited for the bus, observing the two of them in silence.

A young, lanky man in his early twenties, laid back and gregarious, was the last person to join our small crowd at the bus station. His curly raven hair and coal-black eyes set in a broad face were distinctive. He liked to show up in a sporty grey winter jacket with carrot-shaped dark jeans (a statement of fashion at that time), heavy black boots and a faded red woollen scarf wrapped around his short neck. He often came last, running – along with me – to catch the bus. Sometimes we were both late, and the bus driver would have to wait a few seconds for us to cross the main road and jump on the bus. Given his slender figure and unusual height – nearly two metres – I thought of him as a basketball player. But I never really knew. I never asked. His smile was benevolent, he was always willing to talk, almost annoyingly cheerful for this valley of serious, hardworking people. But it was not only

his demeanour that made him stand out. There was something more. It was the way he greeted us, the way he uttered the combination of those two words: *dobro jutro* – good morning! His cadences did not come out as ours, the way he joined the sounds was slightly different; his vowels unveiled otherness, perhaps together with enduring optimism. And it was not any kind of accent. It was a sound from the south, a foreign tongue. Dark looks, one of them.

Although he did his best to elicit a little smile from our sober and thoughtful faces by greeting us with an exuberant grin, eyes lit up, followed by a quick wave, on seeing him we only returned perfunctory nods and murmured a cold good morning. Courteous but aloof. As we stood there, his companionship unleashed a feeling of awkwardness and, especially to young local girls, discomfort. We were geared to believing that single men from the south were after us, to seduce and marry us. Fat chance, we thought. We resented his presence, and responded to his overtures with reluctance, but we did not know any better. In a way we acknowledged his presence, but more out of communal duty, perhaps a sense of moral obligation, imposed by unwritten rules, that our small, inward-looking community dictated to us.

Mulling over those days, in the four years in which we performed this daily ritual I don't think anyone initiated a decent conversation with him. Chats were short and brisk. Without doubt he must have felt frightfully lonely in that sleepy picturesque village, eager to see a friendly face, desperate to hear a warm word. Questions about him, his family, his life were too personal for us to engage with; we thought openness might wrongly lead him to believe that we were proffering him friendship. We pretended. Pretended he was accepted, pretended to be cordial towards him, pretended we did not ignore him when, in reality, we did... And worst of all, we did not have the slightest remorse for our discourtesy. Ignorance and arrogance were the name of this silent and sinister game back then. Sooner or later he would find a wife, or leave, or perhaps even both. Not worth the effort. After all, the featureless industrial town nearby, which also happened to be the final destination of our daily bus journey, was thought to be a much more appropriate home for people like him; it was the place for bewildered aliens who liked milling around, sitting in bars, slowly drinking Turkish coffee, smoking, listening to music that was foreign to our ears and eating food foreign to our taste. In our eyes, the young man was a token of another culture, the culture from a distant and dysfunctional Byzantium... His world was not our world.

All we knew about him was that he came from Bosnia, or so we thought, from the South anyway, all the same to us. The flavour of the Orient. The label 'South' was enough; sufficient to classify him as 'not one of us'. His was the face of difference, and we simply did not want to inhabit otherness,

were not prepared to stretch beyond ourselves. There, in our minds, stood this deep, unbridgeable abyss that separated our superior world from his unknown, distant land, though at the time we were still living under the umbrella of one country, then called Yugoslavia.

Twenty years later, after Brexit, somewhere south-east of London

A National Trust coffee shop. An unseasonal cream tea – cucumber sandwiches, scones and butter, strawberry jam with clotted cream. English countryside, bucolic setting. Fluttering snow outside. We were slowly sipping our warm tea and coffee in a large converted barn with inadequate heating. Next to our table a middle-aged couple ritually enjoying their Sunday afternoon out: a stocky bald man and a woman with bleached hair carefully combed into a high ponytail; her huge golden earrings dangling down, almost touching her shoulders. Probably local. A couple of tables away, a family whose tea was not going quite so well. Rupert, apologise to your sister immediately, ordered the mother, in tones that ensured that Rupert's humiliation was known to everybody. Only a matter of seconds before the inexorable meltdown pierced our ears. But our attention was soon diverted by a loud, confident voice behind us, speaking in a foreign tongue. An energetic woman in her early forties, smartly dressed, with thick black hair, a face with high cheekbones and heavy make-up, was on her mobile, visibly agitated, walking up and down in the narrow gap between the counter and the tables, shaking her head and vigorously waving her hands. Occasionally she would stop, pause to listen to the person she was conversing with, and then resume talking, nervously touching her forehead, raising her voice again and speaking even faster than before, in her own language. Heads began to turn, and some sniggering could be heard. Unperturbed, the woman continued with her conversation. The more I listened, the more I had this uncanny feeling of familiarity; the combination of Slavic and Romance words in her talk made me think she was Romanian. But I wasn't sure.

The stocky man stood up and briskly walked towards the woman on the phone. Poised for combat, he leaned forward and asked if she could be quieter. Without please, or excuse me, or sorry to bother you, just bluntly, directly, as a matter of fact. My jaw dropped, we all gawped in disbelief. A moment of uncomfortable silence. Barely keeping her composure, the woman turned to him and began to explain, in fluent English, that she had been speaking to her elderly mother who was very ill in hospital. That cut no ice. You are very noisy, the man retorted, now reddening more. A pang of unease across the room. The worst thing was that I could not say anything. I had an accent, I was 'foreign' too; all I could do was stare numbly at them.

His partner got up and they walked out together. Job done. In the room the silence lingered.

It was not that I hadn't seen this sort of behaviour before. Over the previous two decades I could recall countless uncomfortable moments, in many countries, of casual remarks and deceptive looks, disdain towards people coming from different milieux: at conferences, meetings, parties, bus stops, tube journeys, airports, shopping centres, coffee places, restaurants, school playgrounds and parks. Universities were not immune either. To the otherwise well-meaning insiders of the host community this was perhaps less than obvious; for those on the receiving end, those who did not blend in well – odd accents, unfamiliar gestures, uncomfortable straight talk – it had become a way of life. Time and again it would boil down to the moment when that seemingly harmless question is put – where do you come from? Our replies, a short pause, and then the precipitous drop in temperature; feigned smiles, embarrassed looks – I'm just going to get another coffee, forgive me but I've just seen a colleague I need to catch... I was familiar with all this; I had been part of it long ago. But what was different on this occasion was the tone, the aggression of this man who, vigilante-like, had decided to speak up and give the woman on the phone to understand that English is the language of the country she now lived in. It was all there, insidiously creeping back out of oblivion, lurking behind the scenes, waiting for the right moment to come, and finally bursting like a genie out of a bottle. A paroxysm of frustration and anger.

Time spans backwards into my past, slipping back into my youth. The face of the Bosnian man flashed through my mind. I have no knowledge of him, I have no idea what happened to him, how his life went after I left my parents' home to study in a city that was foreign, unknown to me. Not long after that the Yugoslav war broke out. Was he Serb, Croat, Bošniak or mixed? Secular or religious? Would he become a refugee? a victim? or even a perpetrator? Who knows? People in the village no longer even know about his existence; he had evaporated from their memories. Outside the cafe, snow was still gently falling from the sky, and I suddenly realized that this time my role had changed. Twenty or so years ago I belonged. Now, I understood, I was cast, just like him, among the branded: an alien. It felt as if in some strange and unexpected fashion our life geometries, from escaped past to anxious present, had suddenly converged.

July 2018

Bring me the night

Nasrin Parvaz

I see my sister
rolling on snow
to put the fire out
I see the snow melt
at her touch on her tongue.
She runs to the snow-man
we had made together.

I see her
burying her face
in his chest
before she dies
in his arms.

I see my father
the petrol can still in his hand
just looking at her
mouthing that she'd dishonoured him.

Bring me the night
tell the snow to stay in the sky
its light burns my eyes.

waiting at the wet Bay

Shamim Azad

Excerpt from *The Ancestral Embryo*

Translated by Selim Jahan with the author from her autobiographical Bengali novel *Bangshobeej*.

In my first encounter with her, I could not impress the short-haired middle-aged very 'English' Head Teacher of the school. I could not evoke a favourable reaction from her chubby and jumpy Welsh Deputy either. I was not – and after all these years, still am not - sure of the reasons. The Head Teacher was wearing a pair of smooth-textured trousers. Through a pair of round-framed tinted glasses, her squinty eyes looked like green seeds of *bethfol*. When the Second in Command addressed me, I did not look at her eyes, as my own eyes got fixed on her brass necklace, where two pythons, with their shiny ruby-red eyes were tangled together. They asked me some spiky questions and I felt like, both were measuring my worth. I was told that the children would address me by my first name - Shamim, and not Mrs Azad. All the teachers were addressed by their first names. That was the rule. In that way, little ones would feel friendlier towards, and undaunted by their teachers.

On my way to Assembly, I had to go past a huge dining space full of tiny tables and chairs. The lip-smacking smell from yesterday's fish and chips still thickened the air. The sliding wooden door of the kitchen was shut but I could hear the noise of pots and pans and smell the succulent aroma of strawberry jelly. The last one must be on today's menu, I thought. The assembly room looked like a huge lifeless storage place to me. But with sweet nursery rhymes played on the sound system, the tiny feet started filing in there in rows. As I looked at those small cute faces, my heart started melting with affection. There were a few Whites and Blacks, but the majority were of Asian origin. I thought, wow, in which England have I come to teach? Furthermore, I would have to teach the national curriculum, whose main thrust was English, Mathematics and Science! No Bengali! I was amazed by how smoothly they had run the Assembly and embedded stories, songs, kids' achievements and awards etc in it.

Even though there was a teacher from Kolkata, the school didn't have anyone from Bangladesh. It, however, had a Bangladeshi Instructor. Instructors were between a teacher and a teaching assistant, and they acted mainly as interpreters or facilitators between the parents and the

teachers. This is because most of the parents didn't know English. At Thomas Buxton School, the Bangladeshi children were mostly from Sylhet.

The quite plump Number Two took me exactly where I would be temporarily placed before I went for residential induction for four days. She also showed me the resource room from where I could collect all the teaching supplies. Two metal snakes still swirled from her neck. Suddenly she said, 'Shamim, wait for the children at this 'Wet Bay'! Kids will be coming here from two other classes'. What did it mean? It meant that today I would take an arts-based class.

The school house was under an 'open school system', which seemed like a huge elongated barn house. The classes were separated by red non-inflammable curtains. A long corridor ran between classes, which were on the two sides of the walls. Twenty children of age six would be coming to me from two near-by classes. The rest would remain with other teachers. Thus, the two classes would be divided into three. I was a little bit confused and puzzled. Could an art-based class be termed a *proper class*? And why is this dry floored place called Wet Bay?

The Bay was stuffed with so many things – water colours, dry colours, chinks, brushes, plastic pots – big and small. Balanced on wheels, there were huge store boxes with deep red trays filled with card paper, sugar paper, tissue paper, old Argos catalogues and newspapers. For Science lessons, there were two wheeled trays too, one containing sand and the other water. On both side walls, I saw displays of big beautiful paintings and drawings, done by children.

A few yards away from the passage, near the window, stood a deep sink with two taps for washing away paints and palettes. Next to the sink, there were small red plastic aprons, **fine sticks for aching**, wooden knives for curving, small scissors for cutting and clay for modelling. In another storage-unit, there were cut cloths, coloured ropes, wires, threads, big containers of PVC glue and cotton buds for collage work. Yet on the third side, a wrought iron cage contained heaps of empty cartons and boxes of cornflakes, eggs, biscuits and soft drinks to be used for junk modelling. I was baffled – it seemed to me that I had got into an art store, but I understood why this place was popularly known as the 'Wet Bay'! You can't get out of this place without messing around and getting sticky hands.

Come on! With this abundance, the lesson won't be interesting? Ah, that couldn't be the case. I looked at those low grey metallic tables. Around those small tables, a dozen empty chairs, awaited little bums. And I felt totally powerless. What would I do with those friendly children?

What sort of a wreath was I going to make? How would I know what to use for what?

Suddenly from behind my red curtains I heard that the sound of small feet inside nearby classrooms. I understood that this was not a normal stroll. Was I was to be put on a test - a challenge? White feet were also on the move to witness the misery of a species brought from abroad! Through the wide window next to me, I gazed out and saw a mulberry tree full of ripe berries. I was sure that on the ground moths were walking secretly on fallen leaves. But they were walking, weren't they?

So, was it a test for a new Bangladeshi teacher at the very outset? Maybe, maybe not. But I got totally engrossed in the lot of super-excited little faces. I looked at the attendance register and tried to understand the abbreviations, marking the long causes of absence. During that baffling moment, I felt a kind touch of assurance on my back and heard an affectionate voice from behind. Completely in Sylheti, "*Kita chinta koro?*" Then in total cockney "*Don ya worry Gal, let's ge' on wid the job.*"

That was the sweet-faced petite Mariam! A qualified classroom assistant. Her English was in high-pitched Cockney. Born in East London, and almost the same age as me, she had not forgotten Sylheti, her mother tongue. I didn't know that a teacher would have another person in the class for assistance. Great! Today, her time had been allocated to my lessons. She amazed me with her expertise and energy. Except for that Sylheti utterance, there was no Bengaliness left in her. Once upon a time, long ago, her grandfather might have come to this country! Yet the smell of the sweet soil of Bangladesh would come out of her hands!

After all the children settled in, I smiled. Mariam sat just behind them. With the roll call finished, I briefly explained my class objectives, which were based on their *name-stories*. They can draw anything which might have a connection with their names. But first they needed to write their names on a piece of sugar paper. Mariam kept explaining, almost in whispers, the same instructions in Sylheti to a couple of children. Once they started writing their names, I got up and went close to them, in case they needed anything. There I found three kids struggling to write their names in English! In England! And one couldn't even write it without Mariam's help! Later I found out that whether they could do it or not, all of them must be promoted to the next class according to their age – that was how the country was under the Conservative Government at that time. Is that the policy of the Thatcher Government! Otherwise, everyone would go for white-collar jobs, I guess. In that situation, who would clean dustbins or who would be the bus drivers?

There were more surprises waiting for me the following day, when I talked to a white parent. The lady had Cockney English coming out of her mouth just like roasting popcorns. Yet, she couldn't read to her child the book given for home reading. She didn't have time, she said. I realised that the real reason for not doing so was that she couldn't read. She was talking to me in a brassy voice and taking quick puffs on her cigarette. At that time, in this country, smoking was not prohibited inside schools or offices. I knew that across the board, the working mass belonging to the lower class was in the same boat.

* * * * *

Tenzin Tsundue

Tenzin Tsundue was recently on a tour of Britain and performed his poetry at the October Exiled Lit Café. He is a Tibetan writer and activist who lives in exile in India. Currently working on his fifth publication, a book of Tibetan refugee stories, he won the first ever Picador-Outlook Non-Fiction Contest in 2002. He spoke to us of a restlessness deep within him which prevents him from settling. As a refugee, he says, his mind is always somewhere else and he lives between reality and the hope of tomorrow.

Horizon

From home you have reached the Horizon here.
from here to another here you go.

From there to the next next to the next horizon to horizon every step is a horizon.

Count the steps and keep the number.

Pick the white pebbles and the funny strange leaves. Mark the curves
and cliffs around
for you may need
to come home again.

when it rains in Dharamsala

When it rains in Dharamsala raindrops wear boxing gloves, thousands of them
come crashing down

and beat my room.
Under its tin roof
my room cries from inside and wets my bed, my papers.

Sometimes the clever rain comes from behind my room,
the treacherous walls lift
their heels and allow

a small flood into my room.

I sit on my island-nation bed and watch my country in flood, notes on
freedom,
memoirs of my prison days,

letters from college friends, crumbs of bread
and Maggi noodles
rise sprightly to the surface like a sudden recovery

of a forgotten memory.

Three months of torture,
monsoon in the needle-leafed pines Himalaya rinsed clean
glistens in the evening sun.

Until the rain calms down and stops beating my room
I need to console my tin roof who has been on duty
from the British Raj.
This room has sheltered many homeless people.

Now captured by mongooses and mice, lizards and spiders, and partly
rented by me.

A rented room for home

is a humbling existence.

My Kashmiri landlady
at eighty cannot return home. We often compete for beauty Kashmir or
Tibet.

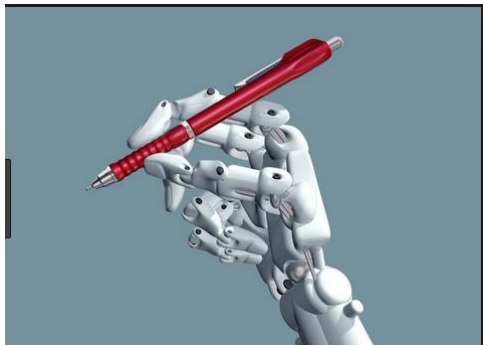
Every evening
I return to my rented room,
But I am not going to die this way. There has got to be
some way out of here.
I cannot cry like my room
I have cried enough
in prisons and
in small moments of despair.

There has got to be some way out of here.
I cannot cry,
my room is wet enough.

* * * * *

The Advent of Poetic Robots

Abol Froushan



On a rainy evening, 27 November 2018, a curious event took place upstairs at 63 New Cavendish Street. First of all they managed to connect Webex to the PA system and telepresence an Israeli poet and a Japanese poet, Eran Hadas and Yasuhiro Yotsumoto to join in live discussion and presentation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) generated poetry with Marianne Magnin and I, to an audience of about thirty-five, only two of whom had ever read poetry written by artificial intelligence.

So what was curious about this? Apart from the fact that a BBC World Service reporter called me beforehand to ask a few questions, that conversation prefigured the event's conversations. So, the reporter asked me: the robot you have, what does it look like? I explained that there is no physical robot. It's all about software algorithms that do so called Natural Language Generation. No need for robotic hardware. She asked, so how does it work, is it really possible to write poems like that? I said there is a

whole history of this. Back in the 1840s a John Clark created a mechanical automaton that looked like a cross between a book case and a juke box that created Latin hexameters to startle Victorians at the Egyptian Hall on Piccadilly for a shilling. This made automatic poetry generation contemporaneous with Charles Babbage's first computer the Analytic Engine. So the phenomenon isn't new, but has been there since the dawn of computing. She then asked if robotic poetry made any sense.

Having then excused herself from actually attending, she asked: is there stuff I can read about it instead? I referred to the series of articles and exemplars on Poetry International Web. When I mentioned my interview with a Cyborg published that same month, she said, so let me ask, how long did it take for the Cyborg to respond each time? I had to disappoint her by saying well the Cyborg was actually my alter ego, since we are already post-human, we cannot tell where our natural bodies stop and where the artificial or the technological begins, I think I completely lost her. So I said please come and see for yourself.

The technical tests had failed for three preceding days. Juan de Lara, the curator of the event, had just informed me that they had managed to crack it, as I was running late from work to get there. We had thirty minutes before the start to get Eran and Yasuhiro projected on the wall, get them heard through the speakers and test Eran, the designated screen jockey to share his computer screen as he was the man with the robots, a developer and poet, a rare combination. In this field, you mostly deal with computer scientists and mathematicians who dabble in poetry generation and its computational modelling, but rarely with poets dabbling in maths.

It was apt that three of the poets on the panel that night originated from Asian soil. It is a curious thing, Israel and Iran are not often thought of as being in Asia but put in the ghetto of the so called Middle East, forgetting that they are actually as much Asia, as Japan. But we actually had to break down the country or continental boundaries as AI, like mathematics, is universal. It is its own continent or country. On Poetry International we call it the AI Archipelago next to Afghanistan - only alphabetically, of course. Have a look.

Now the key argument for me comes from William Carlos Williams, that a poem should work like a small or large machine. Gertrude Stein experimenting with automatism, wrote like a machine and her works such as 'Tender Buttons' can easily pass as computer poetry though she just used pen and paper to write them. That's the thing: does a poem work? And how does it do that? My argument with the Cyborg also has been that a big part of it has to do with the fact that we ourselves are made in Language. Never

mind which country we come from or who our mother is. Our birthplace is always in language. And that is where we have a blind spot. We think we speak a language or two. But really it is language that speaks us. As readers, a poem should work by taking us into a focus on the imaginary level. That is why poetry is quintessential - it is language and creative imagination - never mind the poet. The author has long been pronounced dead. At least since Roland Barthes in the 70s wrote his essay on Hugo's 'Sarasin'. Never mind Nietzsche's dictats about God.

I do invite you, like the BBC reporter, if you are curious to find out more about what the well oiled facilitation by Marianne Magnin, herself a competent French poet, brought out in front of the audience that night, by looking up my interview with a Cyborg and related AI Poetry articles by Eran and Yasuhiro on Poetry International [Web.Org](http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/cou_article/item/29374/POETIT-ORIAL-Can-computers-write-free-verse).

https://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/cou_article/item/29374/POETIT-ORIAL-Can-computers-write-free-verse

The video of the event is also available on
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ERbaHeeGhE4>

* * * * *

I Used to Search For It

Danielle Maisano

I used to search for it,
In the eyes of strangers.
A spark of hope,
A familiar danger.
I would poke and prod
At a glimpse of recognition.
And I found it in a few.
A small handful.
Maybe two.

Back booth dive bar kisses,
Who could say what they were worth?
And if they brought us any closer,
To a sense of some salvation,
Or just a little less alone
In a hollow bedroom
Here on earth.

We never found what we were after.
But at least it offered a brief reprieve
From a search that's only ever led me
To the chaos of divine disaster.
But still I catch myself
From time to time,
Looking for the hint of a flame
That might match mine.

You'd think by now
I would have learned.

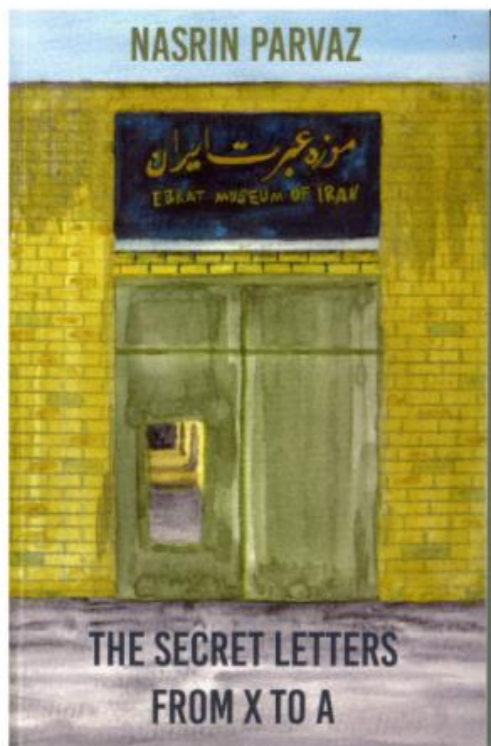
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Reviews

The Secret Letters from X to A by Nasrin Parvaz

Victorina Press, 2018

Reviewed by Catherine Davidson



Stories are the frailest and most ephemeral of weapons, and yet we still rely on them to help us fight against oppression. *In the Secret Letters from X to A*, Nasrin Parvaz has written a book that is a thriller, a love story, a mystery and an examination of what it is like to live in a state that terrorizes its citizens. Above all, it is a story about story-telling and resistance, and how one person's words can reach through time to encourage, enable and empower others.

Faraz is a young historian living in Tehran. In 2002, he gets a visit from his father's brother, an uncle who has become estranged from the family as he has risen in the ranks of the religious regime that rules the country. Now he has come with an offer of a job that the young man sorely needs: to help turn one of Tehran's most notorious prisons into a museum showcasing the horrors of imprisonment under the Shah. The Uncle omits to mention that the prison continued to be used after the revolution, to imprison and torture opponents of the regime. The job is not only to preserve but to literally whitewash.

While working in a room that once held women prisoners, Faraz discovers a hidden cache of letters, from a young, pregnant Xavar to her husband Azad, detailing her life in prison – both the brutality and horror, and the solidarity of other prisoners, who help her hide her messages. Slowly, he becomes obsessed with her letters. His determination to uncover the story of these two doomed lovers puts at risk not only his own family, but his own love, a woman fleeing persecution under a false identity who is hiding in his home.

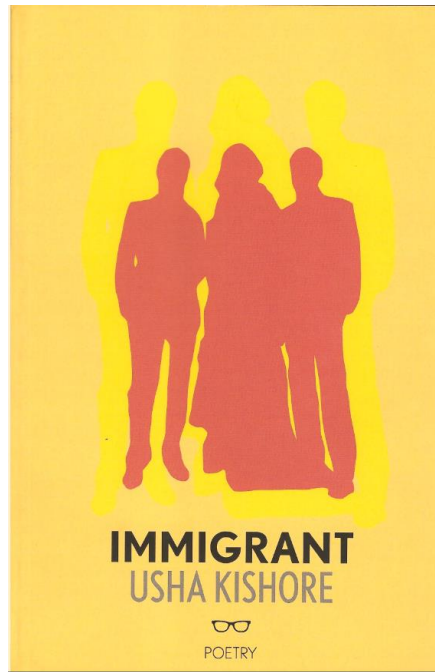
Parvaz' story is gripping from the opening pages, pulling us into the heart of the prison and its secrets chapter by chapter. Her characters are sympathetic and believable; we feel Faraz' compulsion and the anxieties of those around him. Story by story, it becomes clear that in a regime that terrorizes its own citizens, where the slightest perceived resistance could land you in prison, no one is really free. Everyone is "a prisoner who has not been arrested yet." Faraz' final act becomes a powerful message – across time, across space – to remind us about the power of stories, and why those in power fear our fragile words so much.

That may be why many survivors of imprisonment and torture become story-tellers, and why Victorina Press, founded and run by Consuelo Rivera, a survivor of torture in Chile now living in Wales, was determined to put out this powerful novel in a really beautiful edition.

Immigrant by Usha Kishore

Eyewear Publishing, 2018

Reviewed by David Clark



This is a delightful collection of poems which explore the duality of being “here” whilst also being a part of “over there”. Kishore’s poems are playful and serious at the same time, displaying a beautiful lightness of touch, gentle humour and a wonderful sense of being secure in her own skin, her own fluency and self-assuredness in the language and culture of the dominant group as well as being at home in her ancestral culture, with its rich diversity in languages, gods, music, poetry and cuisine.

The poem ‘Journeying into a Foreign Tongue’ sets the scene for the rest of the book:

“Journeying into a foreign tongue
is like re-incarnating yourself in an unknown form...
I line up my Hindu gods,
adorned in monsoon winds
and trespass into English verse.

A new horizon opens, and I
dressed in borrowed robes,
journey into a foreign tongue.

A child, holding the hand of postcoloniality...”

This poem, gentle in tone, is juxtaposed on the next page with ‘Postcolonial Poem’, which is much harsher in judgement and hard-hitting.

“You are the enterprising seafarer,
in search of adventure.

I am the wild orient, waiting
to be discovered.

You cast your imperial net.
I welcome you like a god.

You trade. You invade.
You conquer. You divide.

I bleed in saffron green. I sing
patriotic songs in mumbo-jumbo...”

But the poem does not end there, and through new twists and turns, through subversion and non-violence, a new modus-vivendi is reached, replete with subtle irony:

“My swelling masses flood you out.
Your sun is set. You saw me in two.

Yet, I rise again. I build nations.
You seek new horizons.

We pretend to ignore each other.
But we need each other.

I dream of western skies.
You dream of a new empire.

I come. I see. I conquer.
I teach you your language.

Together, we journey through Prospero-land.
My pagan spirit resurrects in mumbo-jumbo.

I people your island with little Calibans.

You hurl abuse. You discriminate.

I resist. You make new laws.
I teach you my language..."

In her other poems, Kishore beautifully explores her dual identity, as in 'I Am Not One, But Two', where:

"India bleeds in my veins; England
paints my feathers with her mists."

Or again, in 'Postcolonial Sonnet':

"I do not have a language to claim as my own
only an irrevocable parental pledge made
on the pyre of a deceased empire to dye me
in the colours of an invading eloquence; ..."

Yet she remains attached to the culture, language, landscapes and soundscapes of her ancestors.

" A country stretches across my wings,
at times a burden, at others a blessing.
I have learnt to live with it, its silhouettes.

of waving palm fronds seizing my dreams,
its myths spreadeagled on my verse, the cry
Of its peacocks, haunting my silent nights...
...My country grows with its roots

penetrating my bones, it binds the culture
of distance into my heart. Its paraphernalia
of blue gods, red demons, sun festivals....

....and I wrap the retreating monsoons
around me, like a shimmering pashmina shawl... ('Immigrant').

Kishore also introduces the reader to a rich array of terms, flora and fauna, smells and sounds, songs and food, gods and demons, from the Indian subcontinent. Hence the wonderful glossary at the end of the book, with explanations for all the terms the reader might not be familiar with, set out in order of appearance, rather than in alphabetical order.

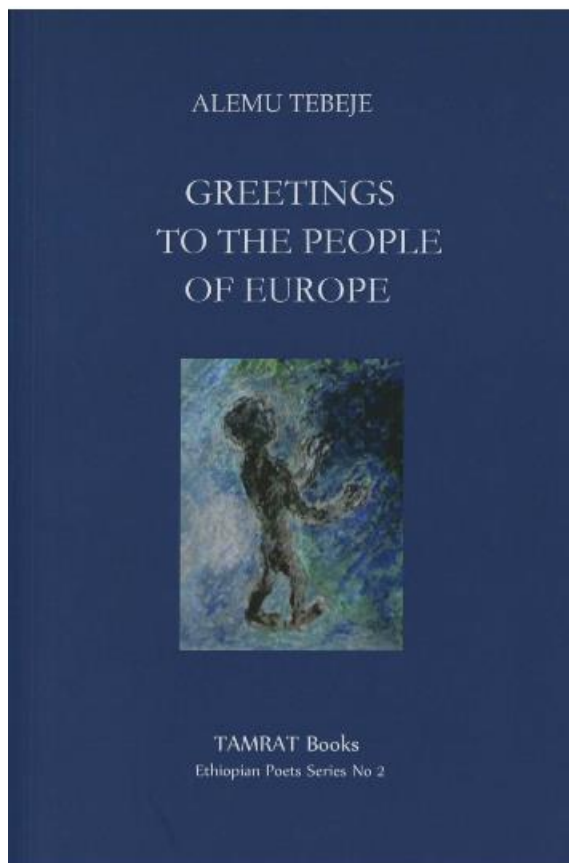
In reading her poems, I feel transported to a place of multiple identities and co-existence, the place of in-betweeness; truly, as Kishore writes:

“Language is the magic carpet
of their exiles”... (‘In Exile’).

Greetings to the People of Europe by Alemu Tebeje

Tamrat Books Ethiopian Poets Series No. 2, 2018

Reviewed by Esther Lipton



This is the first collection of poems by the Ethiopian journalist, teacher, poet and campaigner, who left Ethiopia in the early 1990s. The title is taken from one of sixteen poems written in Amharic with translations by the author and by Chris Beckett who grew up in Ethiopia. Also included, in the Amharic script with English translation, is a short play commissioned by BBC Radio 4 *Tamrat in the Cyclops Cave*.

The title poem sets out the plight of refugees 'braving seas and leaky boats, cold waves of fear.' It asks the People of Europe to remember the words of their missionaries who preached love and non-resistance to their forebears. It is a short poem with an important message clearly expressed.

It is evident from several of the poems that they are based on personal experience (Alemu lives just 200 yards from Grenfell) and true events. In particular, the poignant poem, 'My Mother in her country town' in which his mother dies never having seen him for 18 years expresses his deep and profound feelings.

'the tiny ray of hope inside the sadness of not seeing her slipped out of me and sat down on the ground and wept.'

The poem 'Visa' paints a convincing picture of a young boy, a protester thrown into the Birshaleko prison 'whose legs are plugged in ragged trousers, one shoe smiling through a hole in front, his other foot unshod and swollen broken by a whip.' He is applying for a visa to leave Ethiopia. He appears before 'the chairman in a woollen suit and tie and expensively buffed shoes'. Despite his brave questions 'the boy is only tightening his chains.' Is this boy the poet himself? In the poem 'Hope' he is clearly in prison 'I am locked in on every side but I have a key inside my heart.'

'Oh, that night' expresses beautifully the memory of sleeping under the stars. Lines like 'beneath the blanket of the moon, we/lit ourselves like torches and flared blissfully –wax bodies, souls, love /like a match on lovers skin/flared and rocketed us together into the startled sky.'

Also included in this collection is, 'The Voices of Grenfell Tower' previously published in the first issue of Exiled Ink e-magazine. This personalises in a haunting and desperate way, the voices of individuals trapped in the inferno of the Grenfell tower. Mention of an individual by name and the repetition of the words 'calling, calling' bring a terrible authenticity to the event which one will never forget, 'the fire consumed a building now it is consuming me with all the burning voices of the dead old people young people.'

The short play, spoken in Amharic and English is about Tamrat, son of Tesfal, son of Hope. It is based on the story by Homer, Odysseus and the Cyclops. In just five scenes we meet Tamrat, the young Ethiopian boy 'whose knees are laughing as he climbs mountains' and finds a cave full of games that he plays with his friends. Tamrat sees the future clearly. In scene two Tamrat and his friends pretend they are cruel policemen like the monster Cyclops. Scene three describes Tamrat's love for Almaz while scene four tells of Tamrat, now aged 20 at university. He and his friends are involved in student demonstrations against the regime. The Great Policeman has many eyes that, like Cyclops, they join together. His cruelty is vividly described. 'He keeps us in small cells to watch each other's every move then rolls over our country's mouth so we cannot speak.' Almaz, now heavy happy with his child', searches for Tamrat among the demonstrators. In scene five we find Tamrat in fear of his life hiding beneath a truck load of sheepskins heading for the border at Metema. Again the atrocities against his fellow students are mentioned and Tamrat curses the Great Policeman 'let his umbilical cord rot in the ground like an onion.' In an allusion to Homer, Tamrat explains 'I have pushed my hands against the stone, I have tried to be a voice for the dead... Now my only way of living is to leave, to turn myself into a shadow man, a Nobody.' The play ends as Tamrat escapes over the border defiantly shouting at the guards, 'I am Tamrat, son of Tesfal! I am Tamrat, son of Hope!'

In this play we see and hear the suffering. It enlightens those who have no knowledge of the exile's previous life; an exile who loves Ethiopia but states that the only way to find it is to leave it. Tamrat is that exile and represents the plight of many other exiles fleeing terror, repression and extreme cruelty.

Protest through poetry helps heal one's personal sufferings, brings to our notice events of the past and, most importantly, what is happening in current times. To that end, further work of this gifted writer who speaks so compassionately for others, must be welcomed.

The Dark and The Kingdom of Gravity by Nick Makoha

Reviewed by David Clark

I was particularly keen to see the play *The Dark*, by Nick Makoha, as the background to the play was Nick Makoha's own flight from Uganda, fleeing Amin's brutal regime in 1978. I myself had been living in Kampala, as a postgraduate student in 1968 till early 1969, the year before Amin's coup, and had returned to Kampala for brief visits in 1970, when tanks were still roaming the streets of the capital.

The play is set largely in a "matatu", the East African cross between a regular bus service and a shared taxi. This device enables the author to move beyond his own personal story and to tell a much larger story, about the state of the nation at the time. As the matatu proceeds along its journey, we get to hear the views and circumstances of the various characters that make up the small band of travellers making that fateful journey from Kampala to Jinja, seeking to surreptitiously cross the border into Kenya after reaching Jinja. We also get to see and hear the interactions with those encountered along the way, at check points and other unforeseen stops, as the matatu suffers burst tyres, encounters a rebel group, and so forth.



As Nick Makoha explained at a Q and A session after the play, the advantage of setting the story as a play, in prose, as against writing a poem, is that the audience gets to use the imagination in a very different, almost tangible, way. Apart from the stage set you have the sound of radio announcements, rebel broadcasting, shots being fired, the visual effects of the bright search lights or interrogation lights contrasting with the darkness. Above all, you have the actors playing a wide range of roles, changing roles in split seconds. There were only two actors, who between them had to cover the roles of the assorted band of passengers, the four-year old boy with his mother, a heavily pregnant woman, a white student or reporter, an old man seemingly on his last legs, an educated woman, the driver and his business partner. In addition, the actors took on the roles of those encountered along the way, soldiers at checkpoints, boy soldier seeking refuge from the violence of war, a woman who fights for the rebel cause and also joins the trip, and so forth. The actors later acknowledged what a huge challenge it had been to take on such a range of roles in the one play, especially since they only had three weeks in which to rehearse the play.

As a companion piece to the play, I highly recommend reading Makoha's book of poems, *The Kingdom of Gravity* (2017), which brings together a number of poems written over the years, concerning life in Uganda under Amin's brutal regime. It is a brilliant account of the contradictions between the promises and the harsh, brutal realities of that world, written in lines with unexpected twists and turns, vivid and haunting phrases. Makoha writes about what it is like living under dictatorship, the false promises of a better future laid bare as the corpses pile up by the wayside, the haughty complacency of the mighty as well as the petty lives of informers and the killing craft of the soldiers.

To give you a flavour of Makoha's poetic skills, here are some extracts taken from *The Kingdom of Gravity*.

"My body is the protagonist watched by soldiers
in patrol cars. Roof down, the front windscreen
framed them. Amin's voice bleeds
from a radio wafting up into a window of sky.

The Times will report of people
being forced to volunteer to avoid
being a body hiding in a toilet
or a corpse folded on a table.

I have heard men say *We will serve you*.
Others will say he saved them,

and yet others will flee, by passage
out to a border that no longer exists..." (At Gunpoint, *The Kingdom of Gravity*, p27).

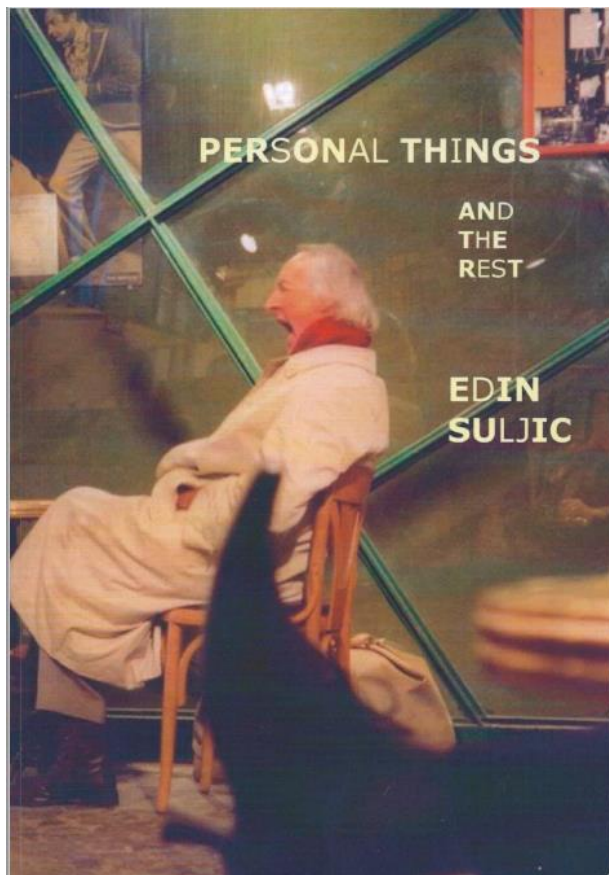
Makoha gives voice to a wide range of characters in his poems, boy soldiers, informers, executioners, dictators, rebels, farmers, shepherds, smugglers, all trying to live in a land that is on fire, torn by violence, where death stalks them and many perish. It is a nightmarish world, but despite all this, Makoha is able to depict the country and the landscape with tenderness and beauty that speaks volumes about his love and attachment to his homeland. Yet, he also makes it clear that he is glad he was able to escape from such a nightmare.

November 2018

Personal Things and the Rest by Edin Suljic

Hafan Books, 2018

Reviewed by Shirin Razavian



Poetry is one of the most complex forms of art. Not only it has to fascinate the reader to read on but it has to be aesthetically pleasing not just to the eye but to the soul. In addition to that, we expect poetry to contain a profound message or a philosophical thought. It's a lot to ask of one art form, would you agree? This makes for high expectations and frequent disappointments when this wish list is not fulfilled. My first reading revealed a depth of emotion and warmth that is the result of a soul entirely true to himself. The poems are coloured as though you see the world through a warm fuzzy filter of a candlelit room, with a roaring fireplace, smelling the aroma of cinnamon, clove and pine. There is such innocence in the pictures depicted and the thoughts projected that almost seems to belong to a bygone era of simpler times even though he addresses topical issues of today's unsettled world.

The poet expresses humanistic and altruistic traits throughout the collection especially in the poem titled "Brothers" where he, time and time again shows kindness and mercy to a brother who betrays and persecutes him. He is affected by tragic events caused by totalitarian governments or as a result of religious or national frictions in various parts of the world. Examples of this are the poem called "Orange" about the destruction of orange groves in the Gaza Strip and "Curtain Call" addressing the tragic event in the Dubrovka theatre in Moscow.

Edin uses clear simple language and displays clarity of thought and sincere belief in all that is good and just in today's turbulent times.

In the poem 'Morning Prayer' he marvels at the miracle of being alive every day:

"Oh God, what a miracle that we are still alive today.
Nobody takes it seriously anymore."

And he ends the poem with:

"As if every new morning is everybody's right."

The reader comes across some strong but delicate imagery such as used in 'Rose-Colossi'

"Rain drops are signing themselves in a morning picture
Framed by the window-pane of my room, making the colours run."

The poet seems to be on a pilgrimage of spiritual and emotional discovery where many philosophical questions are being asked.

In the poem 'Note on the Rose'
We read:

"The question was
What is the Being of a rosebud's heartbeat?
The insight of the one who was and hence knows he is:
If the rosebud is cherished long enough, close to the heart
(in the inside pocket of a coat for instance)
The two hearts become one.
The Question is the Answer:
Is there a God?
Or: Is love everything?
Or..."

Many poems in this book express the pain and sadness the poet has experienced as a result of becoming estranged from a part of the world that he "once could loosely call" his country. "What was once one country is now seven."

There are many poems in the book that touch the soul but my personal favourite is 'Dress Rehearsal'

"Every night when I close my eyes,
Before sleep comes upon me
I choose the costume in which I am going to die
From an open trunk..."

And then in sleep, I play my heroes.
Countless destinies, yet in each of them, I look for myself.

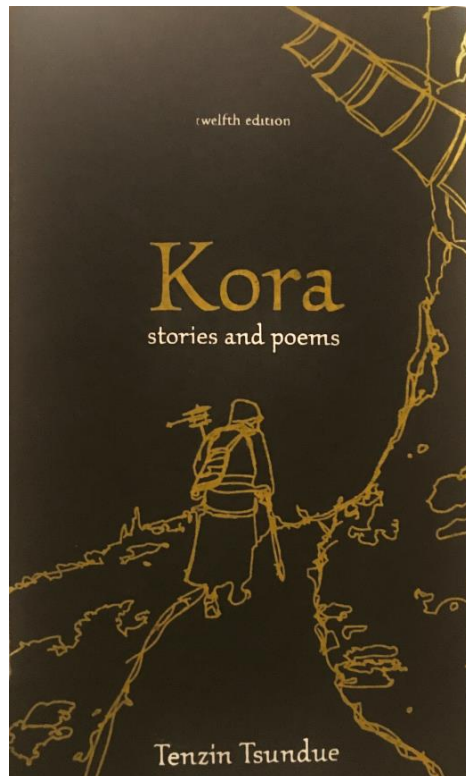
When the scenery of the night fades
And the first patches of a pale new day start to appear,
Tired,
I close the trunk and wake up
Hoping that the coming night I will choose well."

I wish Edin many happy years of writing and look forward to reading more of his work.

Kora by Tenzin Tsundue

Tibet Writes, 2017

Reviewed by May Al-Issa



This little booklet of fifty-five pages by the Tibetan poet, writer and activist Tenzin Tsundue, has powerful insights in its short stories and poems. Now in its twelfth edition (2017), it is published by 'Tibet Writes', a core of poets and writers who created this group in the English language to have a unique voice worldwide. Four thousand copies have been sold. *Kora* gained Tsundue fame in the eastern hemisphere. He dedicates his words "to the freedom fighters of Tibet who never gave up on their dreams". The poems are: Horizon, Losar Greeting, A Personal Reconnaissance, Desperate Age, My Tibetanness, Refugee, Space-bar, The Tibetan in Mumbai, 'I am tired...', Betrayal, I am a Terrorist, When it Rains in Dharamsala, Pedro's Flute and finally Exile House. The short stories include: My Kind of Exile, Why I Will Climb more Scaffolding and Towers, Kora, My Mumbai Story and finally Protest as Celebration of Difference. The booklet is concluded by an interview with the author by the Daily Star, Bangladesh on 13th December 2003 'I am born a refugee' and a note about the author and Tibet Writes. The poems are more intense than the short stories.

The book cover was designed by the author himself. A black ant marks the end of each poem. Ants symbolise strength, determination and loyalty amongst other meanings. It conveys what Tenzin Tsundue really is.

According to Wikipedia, Kora, means "circumambulation" religiously and a type of meditative practice in the Tibetan Buddhist. It also means "revolution". As a Tibetan refugee born in India, Tsundue calls himself a warrior. After graduation from Madras University, South India, he braved snowstorms and treacherous mountains and crossed the Himalayas on foot to enter forbidden Tibet to join the freedom struggle against his homeland. He was arrested by the Chinese border police, imprisoned for three months then pushed back to India. Tsundue gained global celebrity in January 2002 when he scaled fourteen floors of a Bombay hotel to greet Zhu Rongji - then premier of the People's Republic of China - with a 'FREE TIBET' banner and a Tibetan national flag.

Refugees experience similar pain all over the world whether they are born in their own country or in an exiled one. This is the pain of losing their land and their country and the pain of struggling with their identity. The struggle for freedom is a further pain. This is true for Tsundue as he puts it in his poem, 'Refugee'.

The R on my Forehead
Between my English and Hindi
The Tibetan tongue reads:
RANGZEN
Freedom means Rangzen

The language is simple and powerful in all aspects. In 'The Tibetan in Mumbai' in his daily life, he shows his struggle in a daily routine and how he has been laughed at. During the day, he works as a cook in a Chinese takeaway where 'they think he is a Chinese running from Beijing' with more abuses in the mixed languages he uses. He gets angry when they laugh at him 'Ching-Chong ping-pong'. He still wants to dream but is 'tired of forty years of sitting in dust and spit'.

In 'I Am a Terrorist' the way that the refugee is looked at is well illustrated:

I am a Terrorist
I like to kill.

I have horns,
Two fangs
And a dragonfly tail.

Chased away from my home,

Hiding from fear,
Saving my life,
Doors slammed in my face,

Justice constantly denied,
Patience is tested
On television, battered
In front of the silent majority
Pushed against the wall,
From that dead end
I have returned.

I am the humiliation
You gulped down
With flattened nose.

I am the shame
You hurried in darkness.

I am a terrorist
Shoot me down.

Cowardice and fear
I left behind
In the Valley
Among the meowly cats
And lapping dogs.
I am single,
I have nothing
to lose.

I am a bullet.
I do not think.

From the tin shell
I leap for the thrilling
2-second life
And die with the dead.

I am the life
You left behind.

Narrative Poem by Yang Lian

Selected Poems by Salah Faik

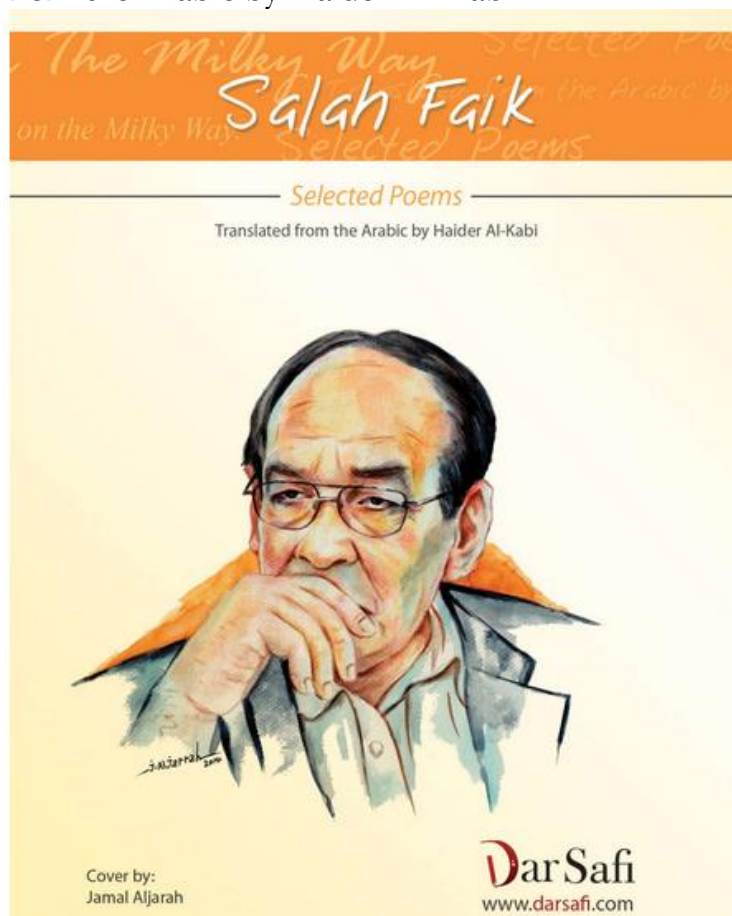
Narrative Poem: Bloodaxe Books, 2017

Selected Poems: Darsafi Books, 2014

Reviewed by Catherine Davidson

Two recent publications in the wider exiled writers' community raise a question about how poetry can work in an environment of disjunction. What happens to exiled poets rooted in ancient traditions? Where does the story go? For whom does the writer speak?

These are questions that Yang Lian raises in the introduction to his book, *Narrative Poem*, a Poetry Book Society Recommended Translation. They are also questions addressed indirectly by Salah Faik's *Selected Poems*, translated from the Arabic by Halder Al-Kabi.

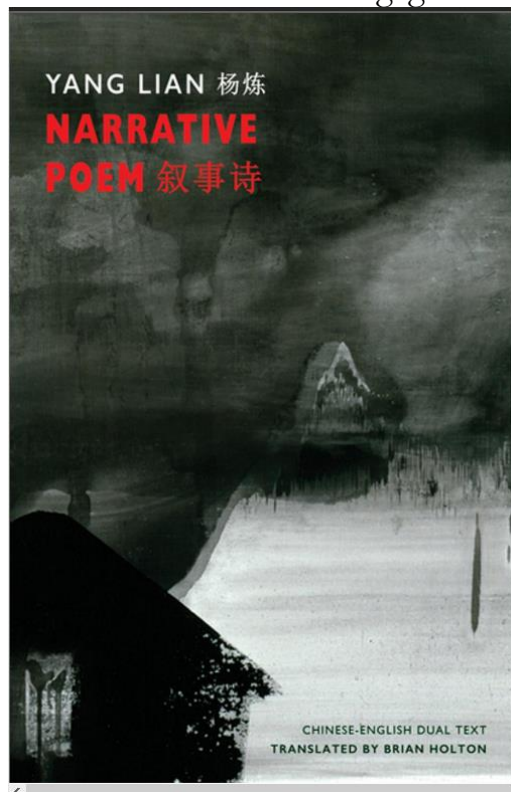


It is worth reading Lian's book for his introduction alone. In it, he references what he calls "Family Tradition" – a long horizon of time that encompasses two thousand years of classical Chinese literature – offering the writer a formalism that demands engagement. What happens when you are separated from it by exile; how to find the vehicle to move forward? His answer is worth quoting:

"To write it to seek enlightenment, to cultivate the self, and it is not the poet who makes the poetry, but the poetry which makes the poet."

Lian calls his book a long poem, and can be read as a narrative – the story of a life that begins with birth and family and moves to a series of portraits from Chinese and European culture – from Qu Yuan to Pablo Casals and Christa Wolf.

Many of the poems exist on two planes of time – the immediacy of the moment, and the wide sweep of cultural chronology: "the vast expanse in one drop of water." The state/power looms, more often than not bringing in mortality – the end of time. These are not easy poems but this deep, long and rich book rewards engagement.



Salah Faik was born in Iraq, and has lived in London, Turkey and now the Phillipines. He is a prolific poet, and his quick and light poems are surreal, funny and full of metaphor. But he also grapples with the long sweep of

history; his imagination is like a jumble sale – mythology, history, nature, all tumble together in a metaphoric pick n’ mix in which humour and ironic humility are the only constant. In Faik’s poems, even God is a bewildered exile, wandering into the poet’s kitchen for a meal and a grumble.

I Am a Weak Man

I am a weak man
I am almost ignorant
I know very little about electrons.
My copper bulbuls would sing on a whim,
My head is filled with conflicting translators
I don’t know which language to choose
In order to look for another land.
Or should I hide myself, or commit suicide?
I wait for my big time
but my big time always shows up late
and I have nothing to do
but think
and feel
and imagine

Pizza Shop Heroes

Phosphoros Theatre

Reviewed by Bethany Webb-Strong



'Pizza Shop Heroes' is Phosphoros Theatre's latest production, a theatrical company born in 2015 from a supported housing project. Shortlisted for the Amnesty Freedom of Expression Award in 2016, the company's previous productions include 'Dear Home Office' and 'Dear Home Office, Still Pending'. I was particularly excited to see this production because of my own experiences working on projects designed to help refugees integrate into the UK. 'Pizza Shop Heroes' is politically charged and unapologetic; an autobiographical play which portrays the story of four young male refugees who came to the UK from Afghanistan, Eritrea and Albania.

The play was performed at 'The Bunker': a small, intimate space which housed a diverse audience of all ages. The house was filled with both friends of the company and newcomers, all crammed onto benches and eager for the show to begin.

Altogether, 'Pizza Shop Heroes' was exactly what it set out to be: a reclaiming of stories. The actors unabashedly set out the 'rules' of the performance from the very beginning: (1) They were not looking for sympathy (2) There could be no judging of their credibility or consistency (3) They were not there to help our consciences and (4) We were not to feel sorry for them. Empowered to take control of their own stories, the four men invited us to share in both the profound and mundane moments of their journeys.

The play is set in a pizza shop where the refugees came together to rebuild their lives in the UK, "lost far from their families... dying a bit more every day". This device allows the actors to invite us into their everyday lives whilst telling a larger story about the state of our nation, of the prospects for refugees who arrive in the UK. The simplicity of the set allowed the harsh truth to stand bare, shining a light on the great failings in our system and the way England welcomes (or more to the point, does not welcome) refugees. Refusing to shy away from the inadequacies and arduous processes experienced by those who come to the UK, the actors challenged the audience: "we are illegal because you have made the rules".

Despite the inspirational and vocal content of the play, the enactment left me wanting more. It was messy in structure and the quality of the acting was amateur and unfocused at points, although this was forgivable given the importance of the refugees themselves telling their stories. What was sorely missed was an emotional depth to the material; despite the breath-taking reality of the men's journeys, the performance did not inspire or capture me wholly. I wonder if this owed itself simply to the lack of cohesion in the performance.

However, what the play lacked in depth and structure, it made up for in sincerity. The piece retold tales of family, fatherhood and was bound together by friendship and connection as demonstrated by the composition of the company (one of the actors' mothers contributed to the writing of the production).

All in all, 'Pizza Shop Heroes' was joyful and raw. We heard tales of storms, trials, escapes, betrayals, bruises, trickery and abuse. And yet, the stories were not all of torment. The actors reconjured moments of celebration, the sharing of cultural identity, hope, success and new life. The piece playfully tackled complex polarities of heritage and future, home and away, freedom and imprisonment. And, most importantly, the play acted as a voice for the refugees who performed, allowing them to be 'seen' in a way the Home Office refuses to recognise them. I look forward to seeing what Phosphoros Theatre will shine a light on in their next production.

Biographies

May Al-Issa Iraqi Poet, writer, translator, financial analyst and fine artist combines poetry and painting. She writes in both Arabic and English. *and she Whispered* is her latest Arabic poetry collection. She has an MA in Translation and Linguistics and MSc in International Finance.

Robert Chandler is a translator of the poetry of Sappho and Guillaume Apollinaire and is a university lecturer in London. He has translated poetry and prose by Pushkin and a considerable amount of other Russian prose, including Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate*.

David Clark grew up in England, Italy, and Austria, studied anthropology in Canada and East Africa and taught tourism and heritage management. His poems have been published in *Contemporary writers of Poland*, *Flying Between Words*, edited by Danuta Blaszak and Anna Maria Mickiewicz (2015) and in *Second Generation Voices*.

Catherine Temma Davidson is a writer, teacher with dual UK/US citizenship. In 2018, she published *The Orchard* with Gemma Press and has authored one other novel and two poetry pamphlets. She teaches Creative Writing at Regent's University and is a member of the board of Exiled Writers Ink.

Ugne Frolenkova is a Lithuanian who is passionate about connecting- people, words, ingredients, skills, disciplines, languages, etc. You can read her creative musing here: www.createsomethingcrazy.com

Fatima Hagi was born in Somalia and grew up in London where she obtained a degree in English Literature and a Masters degree in Anthropology. She writes poetry and short stories about displacement, hybridity and womanhood.

Jennifer Langer is founding director of Exiled Writers Ink and editor of four anthologies of exiled literature (Five Leaves). Her poetry has appeared in various cultural publications. She holds a PhD from SOAS in the literature of exile and is a SOAS Research Associate.

Esther Lipton's poetry and short stories have been published in several national and international anthologies and on the internet. She co-edited Exiled Ink magazine and is a reviewer and translator. She runs a Creative Writing group for the University of the Third Age.

Originally from Michigan, **Danielle Maisano** has a BA in journalism and an MA in international relations. Her first novel, *The Ardent Witness*, will be published by Victorina Press in Spring 2019.

Nasrin Parvaz became a civil rights activist when the Islamic regime took power in Iran. She was arrested, tortured and spent eight years in prison (1982-90). *One Woman's Struggle in Iran*, A prison memoir, and her novel *The Secret Letters from X to A*, are published by Victorina Press.

Shirin Razavian is a Tehran-born British poet whose poetry has appeared in *Poetry London*, *Index on Censorship*, *Exiled Ink Magazine*, *The London Magazine*, *Agenda* and *Persian Book Review* among many others. She has published five Farsi and English poetry collections in the UK, the latest of which was *Which Shade of Blue*.

Silvia Sovic is an historian/anthropologist who has worked on family history, especially in South-East Europe. She lives in London and is Honorary Fellow at the Centre for European Research, Queen Mary University of London, and a member of the European Literature Network (ELN).

Bethany Webb-Strong is a recent Law graduate who has enjoying writing for and editing both political commentary and creative publications. She is passionate about culture and international travel since living in Singapore for a year and has developed a keen interest in refugee writings since her experiences volunteering in Greece. She has been a writer and editor in many capacities which has included working on the University of Nottingham magazines: Advocate and Impact.