

Exiled Ink

magazine



Issue 4 2021

Afghan Voices
Existence in Exile – Book Reviews

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Cover image: Kabul street art by Kabir Mokamel

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Afghan Voices

With the withdrawal of western countries from Afghanistan, Exiled Writers Ink and UK Afghan writers are deeply concerned about the fate of writers, poets, artists, film directors, journalists and cultural institute personnel who have been left behind and are at great risk of being hunted down by the Taliban. Exiled Writers Ink and Afghan writers here are in contact with writers in Afghanistan who remain helpless there and whose lives are in imminent danger. There are numerous poets and writers who are in hiding with some having been detained without trace.

The only route out of Afghanistan currently remaining is into Pakistan which is a very dangerous crossing. Other neighbouring countries have closed their borders to the refugees with those who escaped to Iran having been deported back to Afghanistan. With the gravity of the situation, it is a matter of the utmost urgency to rescue these Afghans and we urge the UK government to comply with its pledge to provide them with protection and help to bring them out.

We present poetry and prose by some of the Afghans who fled from previous wars, occupation and terror in Afghanistan. The final poem, by an Iranian born poet, expresses deep empathy for Afghan women.

The First Crossing

Suhrab Sirat

Translated by Hamid Kabir and Aviva Dautch

The bone-burning
sands of Nimroz
melt my tattered boots,
borrowed from the feet
of a dead soldier.
This brutal desert.
This godless desert.
This fire-breathing dragon,
flames blazing from its mouth
like the hell painted in the Quran

Who has his foot on Kabul's throat?

Kabul...

the city that threw me up
like a blood clot.

When I was a child
we would see the dead:
their eyes wide open
staring at nothing.
their legs and arms
piled haphazardly
like sandbags.

Now I carry the burden
of all those corpses
on my shoulders.
The soil tastes of blood,
the water smells of crude oil.
I walk the rhythmic beat
of my journey;
the sound of death
follows with the screech
of a nail scratching glass,
and we become a flock of sheep, fugitives
from the slaughterhouse,
stacked on top of each other.

The fear of being shot
by the border-guard
dries in my throat
as we pass,
like a gust of wind,
through Sistan and Baluchistan.

From The Eighth Crossing, published by Exiled Writers Ink, 2021

Suhrab Sirat is a poet, writer and journalist who works for the BBC World Service. Born in 1990, in the Balkh Province of Afghanistan, Suhrab came to the UK as a political refugee in 2014. Three collections of his poems were published in Afghanistan and he has also written lyrics for several Afghan singers, including the first Afghan female rapper.

Don't Go My Son, My Beloved, O All My Wealth

Aryan Ashory

Don't leave your place empty, don't leave your home
Don't go my son, the way is too long, O all my wealth
Don't leave your place empty, build your home
Don't go my son, your absence drains my patience, O all my wealth
Don't leave your place empty, give some colour to your home
Don't go my son, don't leave your poor old father alone, O all my wealth
Don't leave your place empty, stay and rid your home of these corrupt
and unobtrusive people
Don't go my son, don't make yourself displaced in foreign countries, O all
my wealth
Don't leave your place empty, make your home one world one heart
Don't go my son, I am the broken-hearted one, don't let me overflow with
missing you, O all my wealth
Don't leave your place empty, don't leave your home without feathers
Don't go my son, I know they took your rights, they made your heart
black but it's your birthplace, O all my wealth
Don't leave your place empty, it has been years your fellows are
suffering, give them your hand
Don't go my son, don't don't

My mother my words are speaking to you, my heart is beating with you,
my peace is with you
But in my country there are no more safe places to live
They buried people alive
They turn our life into bloody life
My heart is tight, I just want to breathe
I know nowhere will be my homeland
No waterfall can wash away my inner pain
No song will make me happy
Because my heart is with you all
My mother, give me your hand
Khodahafiz
Only God knows our next meeting



Aryan Ashory is a 16-year old poet and filmmaker from Afghanistan. She spent two years in Greece, before moving with her family to a refugee camp in Germany. Her poems are in Dari, English, Greek, and German and have been published in magazines, books and online events. In 2019 Aryan joined Athens Democracy Forum as a reporter focusing on the voice of young people.

A Win-Win Situation

Abdul Sulamal

Translated by Dr James Caron

It's midnight. For two hours Gulwali has been reclining on the bed with his second wife Taj Bibi, playing with her soft delicate body in all manner of ways in an attempt to arouse himself. But every effort to warm his blood and stimulate himself is useless. Fruitless.

Helpless, he sits up in the bed abruptly. He starts pacing around the bedroom. He hasn't yet reached the middle of the room, though, when his wife slowly raises her head.

She is startled: if he wants water or anything else, he usually asks her to go get it; and she gets up to bring it for him. Mostly to rid herself of her anxiety, she calls over to him: “Do you need something?”

At the sound of his wife’s voice, his feet falter as if he’d been ordered to halt. He stops, mid-step. He turns to face her, slowly, and takes a deep breath. He’s silent for a moment, ashamed to say what it is, as she gets out of bed too. Something catches in his throat and it’s as if he can’t answer; but then it escapes:

“I need to take a tablet.”

“A tablet; what for? You mean, to sleep?”

The man’s face turns yellow with shame. He breaks out in a sweat and his tongue goes all heavy and sluggish. He evades the subject; can’t give her a direct response. Instead: “No, no...it’s a different tablet, for something else.” His wife still doesn’t understand; this kind of confusion eats at her. She asks him for a straight answer. “What is the tablet for? Today at lunch and in the afternoon you took ten different kinds of tablets for all your ailments.” She gets a bit more worked up: “You never take tablets at night!” He’s both ashamed and now a bit upset, but he keeps his composure. “Some tablets and some ailments are fit for discussion and others are not, Taj Bibi.”

She trembles in frustration then sinks back down motionless, as if she were asleep, even sedated. She says nothing more. Her husband opens the door of the wardrobe in the other corner of the room. Reaching into the pocket of a waistcoat hanging inside, he takes out a small green packet. He takes out a single tablet, throws it into his mouth, and swallows it immediately. He walks back over to the bed and lies down again next to his wife, gluing his body to hers all over again. His hands are roving over every part of her, his lips kissing her body. But there is still nothing, no benefit from all this touching, rubbing, and entwining! Abruptly he rolls away from her onto his side.

His thoughts are overtaking him one after another: his elder wife. His sons. His daughters. His grandchildren. Each one finding their way into his heart. His elder wife’s ultimatums, her crying, everything about her that he can think of; all of it is pushing its way into his heart. Her usual refrain: “I gave birth to ten beautiful children for you...healthy or not, whether I wanted to or not, I didn’t leave that bed.”

Each phrase, like a knife, slices his heart to ribbons but this one hits right in the middle and cleaves it in two: “You’re practically already on the

brink of death! Who will take care of her when you are dead and gone — me? Will you *keep on* using me, even then, to take care of her?”

All these thoughts occupy his mind, as his conscience condemns him and his soul burns. It all overwhelms even the effects of the tablet he took, and any desire for sex that he might have had is fading quickly.

A few hours pass, as if in the blink of an eye, during which he remains motionless. It's nearly time for the mullah to call out the morning prayer. His unease has caused his young wife even more distress though, and she can't control her anxiety any longer. She turns to him, bringing her face close. “What are these thoughts that you are so lost in?” Letting out a bitter sigh, he says: “I worry about you.”

A bit shocked by this, she bites her lip unconsciously. She nearly giggles, not entirely as if the man is joking; and without thinking says: “About *me*?” In a soft voice he repeats: “Yes, I worry about you.” The woman's forehead glistens and her mouth gapes in bewilderment. “Why?” With a bit more urgency he sighs, “It's your youth that causes my sadness; my eldest granddaughter is the same age as you and she is about to be married.”

At this sentiment, which she finally understands, she brings her lips close to his cheek and honours him with a kiss. She raises her hand and strokes his forehead. “Don't be upset. If I hadn't married you, my father was prepared to hand me over to a man ten years older than you. If you hadn't turned up, I'd be lying on his bed now.” Her words hit him like a thunderbolt. He leaps up, feeling as if he's saved this woman from a serious disaster. “Really?”

“Yes, God must have heard my mother's plea. If I had married him, then in exchange for me, my father would have been given a second wife instead of a bride payment. Instead, by marrying me off to you, my mother was spared my father getting a second wife and my father got a bag full of cash. Imagine, how could he have managed to support another wife, along with all those kids?”

Gulwali's heart is somersaulting with happiness. A feeling of joy fills his body, awakening his limbs. It's as if a heavy load of sin is released from his shoulders, and his body feels weightless.

Abdul Wakil Sulamal Shinwari lives in Britain and has to his credit seven books of short stories in Pashto. These have been translated into English, Urdu, Dari, Indi and Slovak, and published in the U.S., Slovakia, India and Pakistan. Several have been published in anthologies. He has written a number of published academic, research and analytical articles as well as political and literary essays.



painting © Kholoud Charaf

The Lute of the Mulberry Tree

Homan Yousofi



She sings
sanguine and squat
leafs by river dust
wide and gnarled
and dares for a peace
of resonance
ringing from soil in
water and bough

I cut her down
to harvest a fruit
a dome chambered lute
gauged in trunk,
string sinews on neck
fingered in emeralds
and lament
as I groove her
into instrument

Mother of roots
Sing for this man
for Afghanistan
in a transmutation of hurt
a spirit's door formed
from shattered ground

Homan Yousofi is a poet, playwright and short story writer born in Afghanistan. He teaches creative writing as a mindfulness practice in the outdoors.

Halaji

Mohammad Akbar Kargar

The moment I came to the city I was engulfed in thinking about it. It was such a great wonder to me. I could not keep my mind off it. I would spend hours trying to imagine its shape and form. Before coming to the city I had never even heard its name. If ever at some place or at home I would hear the sound of something being smashed I would stop and listen to it. For me the world would become meaningless and soundless. The only sound I would hear would be the sound of smashing. It was music to my ears. The things, due to the beating they would get, would form different shapes and forms and they took me far, far away from the real world, into wonderlands. I would not even pay any attention to the hands that were busy smashing that thing and giving it its many forms. For me they did not exist. I would think of pestle and mortar only; how hard and adept in crushing objects they are.

But when I came to the city I heard of a machine that would mince meat. Some called it d'Qoaf to machine (meatball machine), others called it the meat machine and yet others called it meat's Halaji. Halaji was the closest to my heart for I had heard it being used in my village home. I thought meat's Halaji too would be something like the halaji that separates cotton and its seeds.

To tell you the truth it has been a long time since I used to think that like the 'Maloocho (cotton) halaji' separating the clean white cotton from the black one, similarly Halaji too would strip bones off their meat and separate them. Just like the Maloocho halaji it too would operate smoothly and with great ease. How very true it is that with the passage of time a person's perceptions and ideas change and these changes in turn make us a very different person than we used to be.

One day I went to the market to buy some household things. I did a lot of shopping for the house and the children. I bought all that was required but all the time my eyes searched for the halaji. I looked for it everywhere

thinking I shall chop some onions and other things with it. To me this machine was a symbol of culture, modernity and civility. I could not wait any more; I was going crazy for it. In my desperation I even looked for it in the butchers' lane. But I did not find it. It increased my thirst for it. I was getting obsessed with it. With these failures to find it my longing for it increased. I called it meat's halaji but probably they knew it by some other name. I would get the same reaction from every butcher's cabin that I visited to enquire about the Halaji; they would drop their eyebrows and act ignorant. They would give me such looks as if to say how ignorant I was to ask such questions from them. They were butchers and it was their profession and yet they did not know Halaji. To me too they would appear a bit ignorant. At this point I would recall that such incidents were reminiscent of all the conversations I had heard regarding the latest developments in machinery and I would think to myself why are they so ignorant of their own profits and advantages? They do not like minced meat or what?

The whole market and city appeared blind to me, because they did not know halaji and with these thoughts I spent a long time in the city.

In any gathering if ever an electric mincing machine was mentioned I would act as if I knew a lot about the subject and would not reveal that I had never seen one, not even once. I would act as if I too sometimes used it to mince meat. Every time this topic was mentioned I would be split into two. The real me would stand before me and laugh at myself for not being able to see a halaji, and the superficial me would nod to the participants in the conversation to give the impression that I knew more than I actually did.

In reality I would divide into two beings, the first one real and the second artificial. The artificial one was to give me a pseudo appearance with which I could hide my real one. I pretended that I too was one of those who know what a wonderful machine halaji was. It could smash and soften even the toughest of meat. Even if you dropped stones into it, it would crush them into dust. But it was all a lie.

To save face, sometimes I too would fabricate some tale about halaji and tell it to impress the audience with my knowledge of present-day appliances. But I had no idea what a meat-halaji was. How much meat passed through its mouth; cities passed through it; villages were destroyed by it and rivers went through it. It was not only for meat but for everything. It was a machine for the annihilation of life and to wrap it up.

A lot of time passed like that. These thoughts wrapped around my mind like a serpent. I was thinking about something I had never seen. Then a strange thing happened. Wherever I would go and in every gathering I attended, I would hide my real self from myself. At all times I would consciously try not to give the impression to the people present that I was unaware of the things around me. They were not to find out that I was a naïve villager. I was unaware of the civilised life. I was unfamiliar with electric machines and the meat-mincing machine. I had never flown in an airplane. I had not seen anything. I was not used to attending ceremonies and I could not bear the beat of lively music and the like.

But out of all these, the most annoying and irritating was the failure to see halaji. Another reason for liking it was that I love to eat and meat is my favourite food I had a feeling that once I got this machine and I minced meat with it, its taste would definitely increase manifold.

One day in a gathering I felt very left out and ignorant when the conversation turned to this machine and other luxury items. I felt very small. I felt hapless and at that moment I felt cross with my father and family. I wished they had not brought me up in a village. I wished they had taught me the city way of life. How belittled I felt before my contemporaries. I too would have seen some symbols of civilised life. In spite of my educational and literary achievements, the ignorance of the meat-mincing machine and other such things was taking its toll on my mind. I could not stop thinking about them. I imagined them day and night. It is said that you dream about the same things you think about during the day. The same happened to me and I lost the love of life.

Today I once again came to the market to buy some things; with the determination to see the meat grinder this time. The market was very busy today. It was very noisy. One could hear the shouts of hawkers coming from every direction. I went to the butchers' street. All of them were dressed in red jackets and shirts; lambs and sheep were hanging in the shops and all the butchers were sharpening their knives with leather strips and cutting chunks of meat from the hanging lambs and sheep. One could see wooden slabs by their sides and the numerous cut marks on them were witness to the hard blows of cleavers they had endured over the years.

Machines were fed raw meat and at the other end it came out minced along with thick red blood that dripped down into the filthy drains. These stagnant drains caused a very foul smell in the whole area.

The whole market was red, the sky was red and even the clouds were red. Walls appeared red and my bed was red too, everything looked red. I did not know what was going on but it seemed as if I had red in my eyes, or something. In front of every cabin I see these machines for meat. Initially, my joy had no bounds. I know that I have seen it; who can say that I have not. I am not a simpleton. I know a lot and not just the meat mincing machine but a lot of other things too. I know a lot...but the machine operated by electricity appears to be the latest and a very advanced one. It appears it is exported from a foreign country.

I cannot shake off the butcher-shops from my mind. One cannot figure out the start and end of the street; it's all red. Machine screeches and sounds increase and spread out. In my thoughts, the mouths of the machines gradually widen, their bellies expand and they assume the form of a huge serpent. With a long gasp they start pulling everything in, all the soil and all the meat. All the machines transform into a single monstrous meat-mincing machine. I feel as if the whole street is sucked in; the machine grows... expands. It appears the whole market, along with all the people in it, is sucked in and the whole city is being sucked into its mouth. Buildings fall into its mouth like small onions; roads disappear in it, mountains tumble down into it. Schools, their pupils and everything else is sucked in... and the ground beneath my feet moves in the direction of the machine and I too am pulled along... my family and the hand-held kids too are pulled. The earth is rotating towards the mouth of the machine.

But with a sudden long scream, soaked in sweat, I sat in my bed. The hairs on my body were standing on end. With immense thirst and fear, my lips were dry and protruding... I wish I had never thought of halaji and I wish I had never seen it... I wish.

(Kabul: 18/01/1368)

Mohammad Akbar Kargar studied the literature and Humanity Department of Philosophy and Social Science at Kabul University graduating in 1977. He started working in the Academy of Afghanistan and Ministry of Culture and Information. He has published more than 40 titles, including short stories, novels, and research in mysticism and philosophy and literature.



© painting: Kholoud Charaf

How to Measure Courage

Esther Kamkar

Guns pointing at seven women
demonstrating in the streets
seven women
not climbing the Hindu Kush Mountains
not smuggling through narrow passes
with head-covers and banners
with raised arms they shout

Afghan Women Exist

captured in the dragon's cage
deserted by the newest dragon maker
in their landlocked country
in the streets they shout

Afghan Women Exist

abandoned in their wounded country
they walk and shout in the streets.

A landay—

*Because my lover is an American soldier
blisters blossom on my heart.*

Must exile be the price of freedom?
Not to see ever again the deserts
and mountains the color of lions
not to kiss Grandmothers gnarled
hands, not to taste Mother's *ashak*
never to gaze at summer moon
on the rooftop.
Is the price of security exile
in the lands of dragon makers?

8/2021

Esther Kamkar is an Iranian-American poet, the author of poetry collections "of such things."; "Hum of Bees"; and "Hummingbird Conditions." She lives in northern California.

Existence in Exile

Symphony of Fear

Shirin Razavian

Translated from Farsi by Shirin Razavian

I am swallowed by the storm
When the thick, black liquid of dreams
engulfs my body that hangs off the bed
lifeless as a rag doll

I spin around
Carried further by the wind
Flying over the dry trees
With their brittle fingers
outstretched in palpable panic
A fine dust covers my dream
A herd of buffalo stampede over my head onto the barren planes
and the earth beneath me trembles under their hooves
Cold and damp hands grab mine
and take me further away

I see by the walls of the ruins
Women with charred faces squatting
their dead eyes staring into mine
I see children, their kidneys torn away for money

Men who have abandoned their soul
to sell their daughters to strangers, cheaply

I see houses, where love is traded at best price
and on their threshold, a sign reads "Chastity"

I am carried further, spinning with the tornado
Young men are hanging from cranes
Performing a hideous pantomime with their bodies swinging back and forth

Crickets sing breathlessly in my ear

‘Whatwillhappennowwhatwillhappen?
Whatwillhappennowwhatwillhappen?’
The wind ravishes and I sob uncontrollably

I wake up to a rainy morning
and a crow cawing bitterly outside my window

Shirin Razavian is a Tehran-born British poet whose work has appeared in Poetry London, Index on Censorship, Exiled Ink, Agenda and Persian Book Review among others. She has published five Persian and English poetry collections in the UK.



Desert Rain in London

Anna Maria Mickiewicz

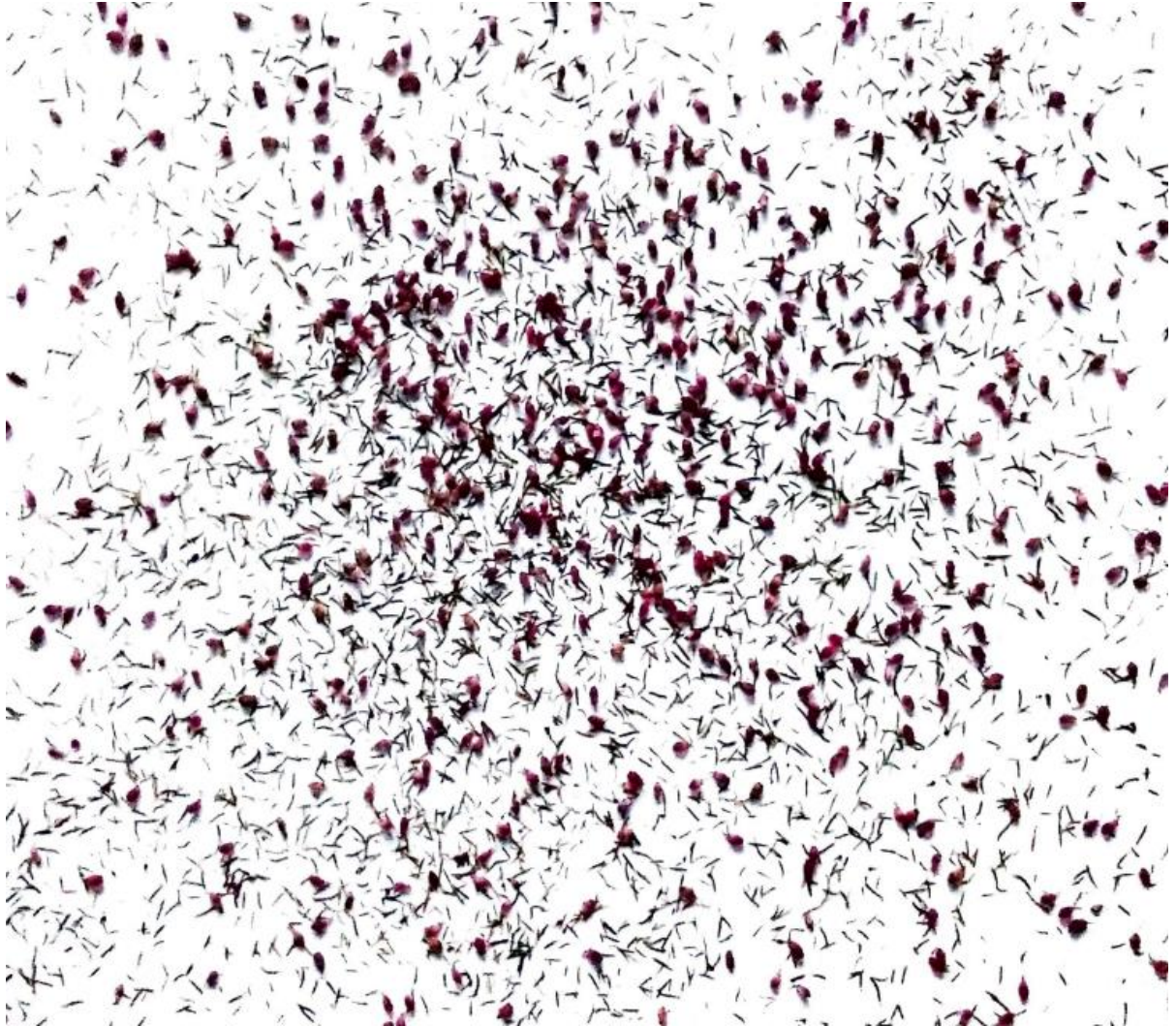
I long for a radiant rain
Rain of salvation
Field rain

A spruce smells dry
It has died forgotten
The light of the city breaks through the dusk

Is it Spring or Summer?
The desert air blurs my eyes

London, in May

Anna Maria Mickiewicz is a Polish-born poet, writer, editor, and publisher (Literary Waves) who writes both in Polish and in English. Honored with the Gloria Artis medal for Merit to Culture by the Polish Ministry of Culture, the Cross of Freedom and Solidarity and The Joseph Conrad Literary Prize (USA).



painting © Kholoud Charaf

Anticipation

Zoe Neirizi

It's twilight in the East
velvety clouds in the boundless sky.
A nightingale is singing in the leaves.

The fragrance of lotus flowers
fills the side lanes, the 'love lanes'
of our youth.

*A rapid heartbeat, a creak under my feet.
Little by little, you stay longer.*

Petersham Meadows swallows me.
Walking fast, I gasp for air
on the narrow tarmac paths
with their pungency of cattle-dung.
A jackdaw clambers over the doe.
It's twilight in the east,
raucous hawks overhead.
There are ears everywhere.
In Evin prison, the inmates
talk in Morse-code on the walls.
The voiceless, fragile bones shiver in their fingers.
*Memory is encrypted in the pathways.
Little by little, you stay longer.*

On a rainy day, my desk is dimly lit.
Where am I from?
Silence fills the room.
In the dark
the cold smell of loss.

*The ones who left had left themselves behind years before.
Little by little, you stay longer.*

We walk in the forest,
stand by the willow trunk,

inhale the freshly cut wood.
The stars have built small houses for us.

*The wild dove, and a captive bird.
Little by little, you stay longer.*

Zoe Neirizi is based in London. She practised as a solicitor until 2019, and established a UK-based law firm in 2006, with a focus on representing vulnerable women and families. Zoe was imprisoned in Tehran for more than three years as a human rights activist. She wrote a film script and made 'The Corridor' in 2004 about State violence against political prisoners. Today, Zoe's focus is on writing her memoir.



painting © Kholoud Charaf

Dawn of a New Dusk in Hampstead

Adina Tarry

I have taken sanctuary back in Europe...this time for good, and for myself...the few previous trips to London I have made, whilst living in New York, have been working trips...

I have arranged for the flat in Hampstead to be rewired, have central heating installed, be redecorated and finally furnished...it has been a job that had to be started from scratch... but we did...and it is paying off...at some additional costs nonetheless: the money Daniel earned and the work I put into project managing the refurbishment all the way to now...the time for interior design and decorations which I love...a real joy for the “closet designer” that I am...

Daniel is colour blind and so this makes things both more difficult and simpler too...Obviously, the best way to go is “blue”... furniture...bookshelves and colourful crafted decorative objects... clay pots and musical instruments from Puerto Vallarta and Spain...Chinese jade and wood carvings, collected by my parents from their travels, which I took with me when I left my mother’s home...Daniel’s records from his teen years and beloved guitar...many hundreds of my photographs...lace tablecloths and coasters from Greece and Romania...some Russian silver from my auntie...pale blue curtains and the bed linen set brought back from New York in my suitcase ... the rug from Acapulco...

A deep cerulean carpet, and a matching sofa suite...warm pine wood pieces and modern gold chrome and glass mixed pieces of Objects no doubt for some but for me also my beloved and trusted companions...with me everywhere if I so choose...like bread crumbs marking the time and the path of my journey through life...

The flat looks like a real home now...no clutter...just cosy, velvety soft and colourful...and given its size there is plenty of room left to have lots of plants which will grow happy and strong under the care of my green fingers and watered by much love, I am sure...

I now feel safe and secure and look to the future with confidence and hope...

Finally I now have plans for myself too...I would like to try my luck with the book I finished in New York...I would also like to get a job or start a small business...I feel as if I have just caught a rising tide...most of all I am happy to be back to Europe...

I understand now what that means...and I know that my being away was a needed step for me to grasp the essence of what “roots” means...a sense of cultural belonging...but in my case not to a city or country...but to a region....

I am without a doubt a citizen of the planet, but aware of a certain heritage and what defines me ...I feel very strongly European...and I notice with surprise how people of new nations, have the need to connect to their origins back somewhere else, a place established much longer ago, in the same sentence...Greek Australian or Irish American... I also understand how reassuring history can be...the difference between walking on stones and amongst buildings hundreds of years or just thirty years old...the otherwise obscure matter of belonging to the old and rich collective soul of an ancient human settlement...

A seasoned traveller at the time, I was still overwhelmed to tears by my first visit to Rome...maybe it was the touch of souls in their millions that the city has sheltered over a thousand years, lingering over its old stones and permeating the thick air, that made me cry, unable to control myself in spite of the embarrassment...

Europe has now emerged into my consciousness with great clarity and magnificence as an oasis of riches and beauty...an intricate entity made of many different fragments of equally valuable blessings to this one fortunate expanse of land...”Europa”...

London too, has become yet another home of mine...having tried me without mercy the first time I lived here a few years back, it has finally yielded to my perseverance and new wisdom, acquired during my frequent trips back and forth between “The Big Apple” and “Blighty”...and here I am now re-settled on my second coming...

In my neighbourhood the silence is deafening (the sirens and noise of New York a distant nightmare) and I marvel every day at the absence of cockroaches (which have occupied New York and even the White House I was told) and I can even leave food on the kitchen table without worrying about that...I can walk back at night and feel safe and I enjoy my tube and bus rides...pink and pastel sweet older ladies chat to me



photo © Adina Tarry

about the weather...people understand me since my stronger accent is now "American"...just as to the Americans, it was "English" or "European", when I first got there...somewhere between Dutch, French, German, or East European I was told...a result of being a good mimic and picking up accents as I go...

I now understand most of the rules of “British-ness” too, and love to play this game the best I can, using the unfair advantage of being an outsider...I also understand the exquisite and peculiar humour of Monty Python, Dudley Moore, Peter Cook or Spike Milligan, almost like an insider...

I understand that these islanders have feelings too, kept in check with supreme mastery by another overwhelming emotion, the fear of embarrassment, which overwhelms all the others...

Having looked for the same signs of emotional life as the ones of my culture of origin, I was clearly on the wrong track...this discovery has finally lifted the veil of much disappointment and frustration...

I am glad to settle down in this blue apartment, on this quiet street and get on with my life...my heart is filled with hope...my two years in New York have also very much clarified the essence of my relationship with Daniel...

That city and him I have come to love and hate...life there, just like life with Daniel, has pushed me to the limits of what I can endure mentally...both seem by design not quite compatible with the essence of me and that which makes me happy...deprived of things vital to my soul I have also been to the magic land where unique moments of communion with aspects of beauty, art, spirit, intellect have been illuminated by his presence in that city that never sleeps...

But we have grown too close and our inner selves are so tightly entwined that even when kilometres apart we cling to one another, connected by invisible threads which have grown, from within us, like a web and wrapped us into one and the same stifling cocoon...

I want to find out who I am when not in the close company of this other human being...I long to re-join him refreshed by hope and with a view of a bright new beginning for the two of us...

I share with Daniel my confidence and hopes for the future...but he appears rather depressed...he speaks little, drinks a lot, and cannot find the energy to engage me and sustain arguments or clarify his ideas and thoughts, which he does seem to be doing in his own head...but doesn't share with me...

He also appears to already know something that has not even crossed my mind...

That for the next leg of his journey he will seek more useful company...

That by distorting the truth he will justify his betrayal of me...

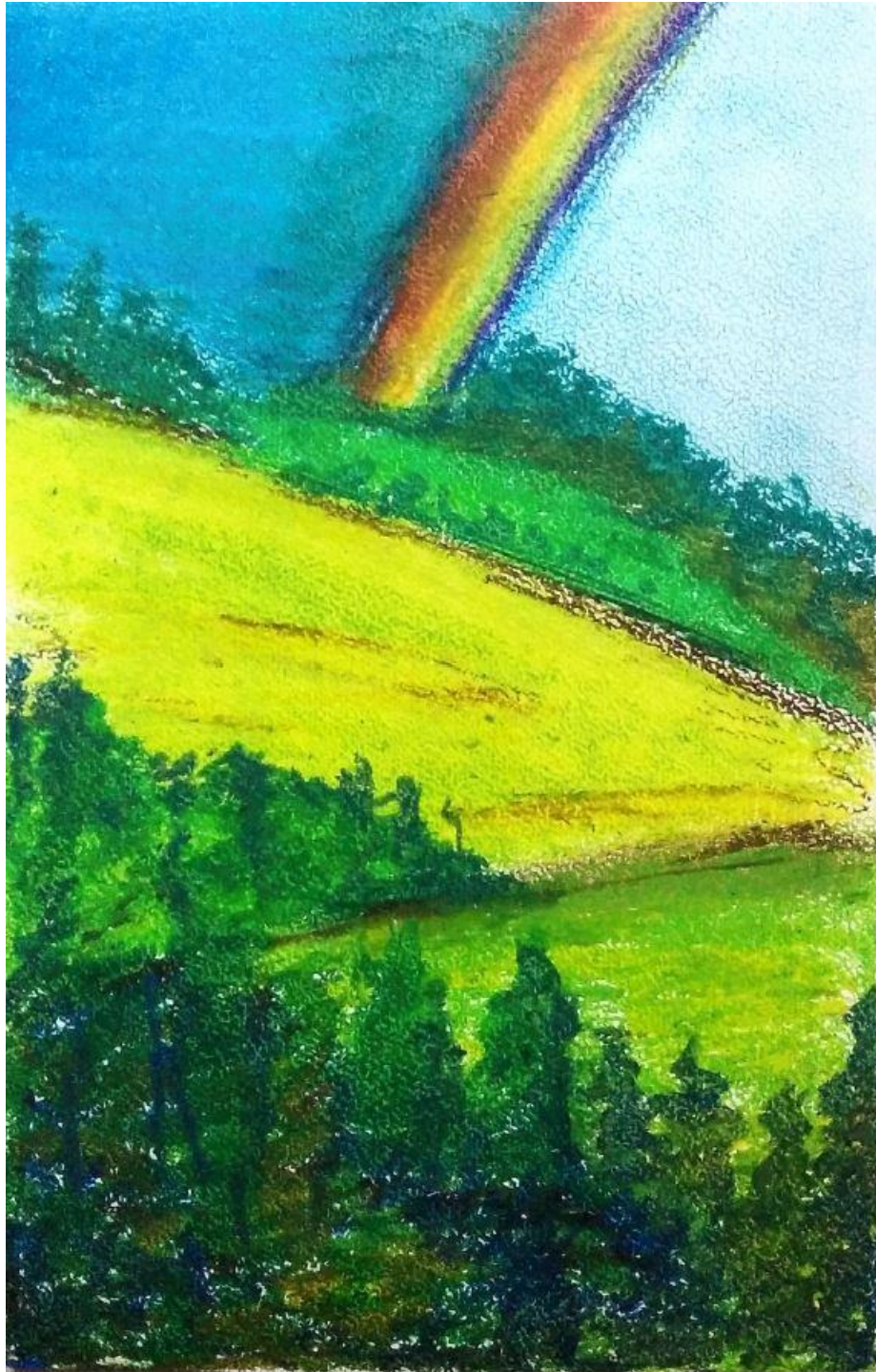
That I am about to lose my most precious travel companion...

That there will be no more travels for the two of us...

That...

This is the end...

Adina (Mironovici) Tarry is a business psychologist and master coach. She is a multilingual published author of professional books, fiction and poetry.



painting © by Kholoud Charaf

Secrets

Kholoud Charaf

-1-

I can walk on water
I am fluent in a language they aren't
And wonderful secrets are revealed to me
I can sing
My voice walks on water
It reaches the nightingale on the bough
The fish thought it was food and took it to the bottom of the lake
The bird took it to her young and fed them my secret
On I walk
Fluent in all languages
But no one understands me
Surrounded by stone pine and Holm oak
Joy overwhelms me
The brook passes in front of me
And I whisper very quietly
I wish to be

-2-

I pricked my finger
And a flower dripped crimson
An anemone with roots in love and in pain
I cried, and the earth cried
I promised to buy
Another flower when we grow up

-3-

I buried my toy
To have a place for my secrets
I buried my doll
While everyone else was running away
We walked through the forests
Along the train tracks
I saw my toy
In another child's hand
I said: Give me my doll
He replied: It's mine, I picked it from the doll tree
It looked like mine

-4-

The swallow falls and rises in the sky
We made up a game
We arrange pebbles in two piles
And throw sticks back and forth between them
I didn't catch a single one,
But every time I reached my hand out
The swallows caught me up
They took me to pick colours from the nape of the sky
And put me back down
The colour turned into an enchanted stick
No one could believe
That whenever I opened my hand
A rainbow flew out

-5-

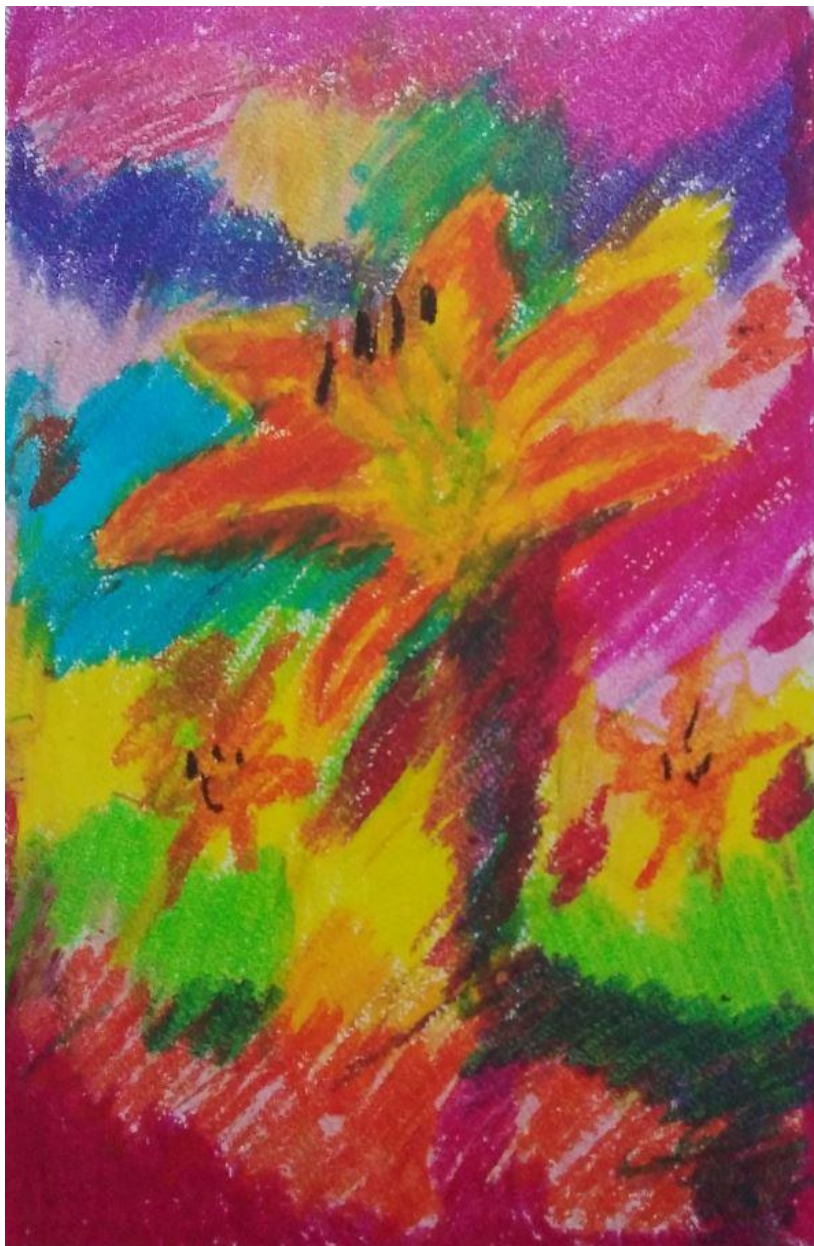
Give me your feet
Take my shoes
My life rolled along and I ran behind it until my back grew bowed
Like a steadfast tree
I pray for those who have rested in my shade
The rest of my body is clouds
Along the path, I am guided by
Spider webs
Like a skylight
I have been eating time
Questions hang signs of inquiry
From my ears
In another world
Free from evil
I look after my soul
Don't forget to take care of my body.

-The final secret-

The truth will die with you
And only a book will remain.
At every station, we leave a suitcase
Beside it, a tree
And a slice of sky and earth
Then
We are sold socks and a watch showing the new time
The country that wanders through our memories

Got lost
I still have my gypsy hair
From an earlier life,
And a white bird in my heart.
I still quiver at every melody
As if I belonged everywhere.
So, love is harmony
And music flirts with dancing
The secret: I practise music on my existence

O, western woman! Won't you share your peace with me?
Come here, wrap your cold hands in my sunshine.



painting © by Kholoud Charaf

Kholoud Charaf is a Syrian poet, writer, researcher, a holder of many writing scholarships ICORN, IIE Award and ongoing German Pen. Winner of Arabic unique IBN BATTUTA Prize. She has 3 books in Arabic, one in Polish, one bilingual English and Polish, and a children's story translated into 7 languages. Her poetry has been translated into 10 languages.

Two Names

Jorge Etcheverry

Translated by Jorge Etcheverry, edited by Sharon Khan

Amapola
Zaida
two names
among the Amazons who straddled the sixties
and I was busy reading books
or piling bricks at the barricades

I became a Triton in the Maule River
and things were happening
a Red Flower had just been planted
and we lived those times
like leaves on the back of the wind
Zaida
whom I used to see
eating her slice of life
and struggle
like an ambiguous watermelon
Amapola
with whom I talked sometimes
furtively she couldn't circulate
that much...

Meanwhile the trees in this neighbourhood
have grown a lot
They almost cover the houses
in the new city of this new country
but the earth on the banks of the Maule River is still red

Strange birds have come down to the neighbourhood
all the way
from the South
from the Cordillera

Jorge Etcheverry Arcaya is a poet and writer of Chilean origin living in Ottawa. He has published numerous books of poems and fiction and authored critical essays about literature.



© painting Kholoud Charaf

I Fly to the Light, I am a Moth

Azadeh Parsapour

I used to speak to the moon once a month. From the massive terrace adjoining my bedroom, I stood atop the city, atop the pine tree, staring at my perfectly round silver neighbour. For over twenty years, since I was twelve, I was up there for my monthly therapy sessions, chatting to the moon while Tehran slept. I am not embarrassed; There was no one else to speak to. No one could shine on me while I spoke of my dreams, my disappointments, my sorrows the way my silver friend could. I remember tears, I remember clenching my hands firmly and praying. And still, she kept shining on me. Light, light and more light. Who responds that way to your nonsense, to your everyday miseries, to your whining and asking for impossible things?

The moon knows of the boy I loved. The dark-skinned boy with eyes like an owl's and his 1976 BMW. The moon knows of my struggle with severe depression during university, how I failed physics over and over again, and my dreams of winning an Oscar or at least getting a nomination. I was lost in my thoughts then, suffering for no good reason. But once a month, I could open up. I could break free.

When, at thirty-two, I was squeezing the last items into my brown, fat suitcase, nothing hurt more than the thought of leaving my sacred place behind, my monthly confession, my sanctuary of consolation. I was losing the light of my life. My mom never tired of telling me how London is always cloudy and damp. "It's always grey and cold, take another pair of socks," she would say. And it was eating me up inside thinking about not chatting with my round silver friend!

That night, she was up. I walked toward my suitcase, left in the middle of the room, my shadow stretching over the mini rice cooker and a pair of jeans strewn in the corner. It felt like I was looking down a grave. I trembled. My thirty-two years laid out in layers. A layer of clothes, a layer of memories, a layer of food my mom made for me to take. How would you fit a life in a suitcase? So, where should I put Alborz mountains or Vali-e-Asr street? The fear of forgetting memories, the fear of not being forgiven for leaving behind possessed me. It was a dreadful night.

One part of me was leaving, one part was staying behind. I said goodbye that night. I looked all around the terrace; my friend shone so brightly I could even see the dragonfly on my basil plant. It was nearly autumn and my tomatoes were just turning red. The swing was cold and empty. There was no wind. Silence... "I really don't know what will happen to me," I said, my voice shaking. "They say if you don't emigrate by the time you're thirty, you never will. But I want to try, even though I'm scared I might have a heart attack on the way to the airport... but I will do this. I will change my life!" And that was it. I blew my friend a kiss. I can only imagine what I looked like if anyone was watching in that moment, but she was my old friend, my goddess that kept me sane over many years.

The silver light went dark that night.

My new room in north London was a large single room with two generous windows, but I could not reach the moon from either of them. The house had no terrace or balcony, not even a roof I could reach. I was lonely and frightened, but I kept myself busy with life. Studying again, learning, writing every night. Time moved quickly and I wanted to experience everything I could in this new world. I was too tired at night now to dwell on my miseries or talk to a bloody white ball!

At least there was always light in my room, even when the lamp was off. My room opened onto a roundabout, where two large street lamps shone just behind my windows. I never closed the curtain. In the two years I lived there, that room turned into a mystic, sepia-toned dream every time I turned off the lights. It was so bright you could still read. For me, I slept like a baby in that sepia-soaked, melancholic air.

When I felt down, I would write on a piece of paper and tape it to the spot on the white walls where the light hit. When I lay in bed, words mixed with light and sang in my head: "My clothes go round and round in the washing machine to be cleaned, why do we go round and round in the world?"

It was two years before I could afford to live alone. It was a studio flat and I was so excited to move there. There was a pub called *Catcher in the Rye* in the neighbourhood; I could not ignore Salinger's sign to rent the flat.

The night I moved out of my sepia-toned single room, I closed the curtains for the first time. I thanked them for guarding my light. I whispered quietly and left.

The twin orange lights went dark that night.

Moving day was a very long one, but I was filled with a sense of pride at having my own first flat. It had been two years I was living alone, far from my family, but I had roommates. Abdol used to feed me all the time with his magic aromatic curries and Andel... well, she used to surprise me with her spooky stories about her grandmother's old cottage. Two long hugs with watery red eyes and I was gone.

After hours of unpacking and cleaning, I place my three mugs in the cupboard with an OCD air, handles all facing out. Then, exhausted, I just pushed the thousands of different types of dried herbs my mom had sent me into the drawers and shut them. I could no longer stand on my feet; I went to bed. When I turned off my bedside lamp, it hit me at once. I was drowning in absolute darkness. I panicked and felt my heart jumping out of my chest. I switched the lamp back on immediately.

I thought about keeping the lamp on for the night, but I knew this couldn't be a long-term solution; I was not rich enough to pay a huge electricity bill! I looked around. No hopes. The drapes were closed but I knew the window opened onto the garden, and there was no lamp post there. Only our garden, the neighbour's garden, then the next neighbour's garden... not a street lamp in sight! I was desperate. I pulled the string and opened the drapes anyway wondering: Can I see the moon from here? Suddenly, an astonishing Avatar-like scene appeared before me. The garden was covered in small solar lamps, blinking from blue to purple, to yellow, to red and then orange!

In the next two years, the drapes were never closed again.

My life was stable again. I was settled in my new home. I had my night lights, a good job and I was becoming someone, the me from ten years ago would've liked to be friends with. But, living alone is really... living 'alone'!

A friend gave me an African Violet for my first birthday in the new flat. It wasn't in bloom yet and I was impatient to see its colour. It was the first thing *living* with me in my room. I began talking to her. I even sang to her and played Classic FM for her. Although new leaves appeared, she would not bloom. I tried every scientific method I could think of and bought special fertiliser. Still: leaves, tens; blossoms, none!

She was still my friend though. Maybe she wasn't perfect and I didn't know her 'true' colour, but she was growing, she was alive. I told her first about the boy I met. The boy who smelled like oranges and mint. The boy who said hello with three kisses every time. The boy I decided to live with.

I spent my last night in that studio flat with my flowerless violet and my dancing garden lights. I was happy not to leave my new companion behind this time and, at this point, I believed I would find a new light, one way or another. I said goodbye to the flat the next morning. My bright cosy flat.

The rainbow lights went dark that night.

Living with a stranger is scary, even if you love that tall, handsome... stranger. But I had my African violet and he had two coleus plants. It was a good start. I was happy. I was not alone anymore. Even the plants were getting along well, competing as to who could sprout the most leaves per week!

I no longer needed to speak to the moon or to a plant. I stopped sticking poems on the wall. I had a real companion to talk to, to laugh with and even argue with very loudly! There was no more whining. I was living it all. I'd turned my life into what I'd wanted.

It should have been better than ever, but gradually my heaven turned to hell. I couldn't sleep well. I had horrible nightmares every night. I hated our bedroom. There was no light there.

My partner hates light at night. He was probably a vampire or, at best, a bat in his previous life. He can only sleep in absolute darkness. We have thick curtains with drapes underneath. Every night he examines the curtains and carefully blocks every possible gap. If there is sun the next morning, the light can't touch us.

Some nights, when I awoke up from a nightmare and couldn't get back to sleep, I would turn on my mobile to light up the room for a couple seconds. But I always quickly turned it back off so as not to wake him. I also tried more creative methods. I bought a pack of glow-in-the-dark stones to arrange around the room, but they didn't work.

It seemed unreasonable to break up with him for our light-less nights! He was the human I wanted to share my life with. I thought time would mend

this divide. But, it was not really time that fixed it; It was a handheld vacuum cleaner.

One weekend, on an impulse, we bought a white and blue handheld vacuum cleaner. The manual said the vacuum should remain plugged in so the battery stays charged, and the only place we could find an appropriate plug – where the vacuum could sit on the floor and not be in danger of being kicked – was in the upstairs corridor, in the corner behind our bedroom door.

We plugged the vacuum in and a soft blue light blinked on. According to the manual, this meant it was working! It was only hours later, when we went to bed, that I discovered what'd really just happened, as the waves of blue touched the shores of our bedroom from under the door.

Now the blue light is on every night. I can go to the loo without slipping and falling down the stairs (that's how I justify the light to my partner). I can make funny shadows on the white closet when I get insomnia. I can go to sleep knowing there is light, a tiny ray of bluish light colouring my room, slowly changing it from a sea to an ocean. I can float away on my dreams, either in happiness or misfortune. I don't speak to the vacuum though. It might be romantic to kiss the moon, but I don't fancy my partner seeing me blow a kiss to our electronic vacuum cleaner!

I just want to have my share of light in life. I fly to the light, I am a moth.

Azadeh Parsapour is a journalist and publisher living in London. She migrated to the UK in 2010 and due to her freedom of speech advocacy work, she cannot return to her country, Iran.

Z

Maria Jastrzębska

It wouldn't be difficult.
A small scratch would excise you
from my name which has perplexed
teachers and counter clerks,
who frowned, sighed

making mistakes or simply
missed you out, unable to believe
a *z* might follow hard on the heel
of *s* then *t* and *r*. Even today
good friends omit you.

Oh, once-Phoenician letter *z*
scored by North Semitic peoples
on wax tablets long ago,
taken in and out
of alphabets in Latin – see

what trouble you cause!
Are you necessary?
Though pronounceable in *Zulu*,
familiar following *kiss kiss*, *why*,
like an extinct wildflower

you'd soon be forgotten.
What does one less letter matter?
How easy to gloss over, tell white lies.
My hidden weapon *zeta*, *zemiya*, *zay*
Ⲫ *z*, I still refuse to give you up.

Polish-born poet Maria Jastrzębska's fifth collection Small Odysseys is forthcoming from Waterloo Press. She translated Justyna Bargielska's The Great Plan B (Smokestack Press 2017).

Ektara

Marsha

Ektara is a traditional string instrument of wandering bards and minstrels from the Indian subcontinent. It is plucked with the index finger and represents spiritual and religious beliefs in folk music and art.

There, she never missed a folk concert
Sitting on the dusty grass or a torn discoloured rag
Dreaming amongst the mesmerised audience.
Twilight faded slowly with the resonant echo of the Ektara
Ting ting tinggg ting ting
Open air, magical baul singer's voice and Lalon Shah's
Mystic lyrics
'if you want to drink only the first raindrops
Extracted, like ambrosia, from clouds
You must work hard'
Casting a spell of cool and quiet
Over the summer evening.

Here, she hesitates
even to go to the Cambridge folk festival.
She sees herself as an outsider,
Who doesn't know what all this means.
Fighting with the bitter wind
Wellies stuck in a muddy field.
She doesn't know the lyrics, the feelings or the world they come from
None of it.
She can't join the cheerful chorus or slip into the dance moves.

She knows her roots grow from a musical instrument
of dried bottle gourd, bamboo and a single metal string.
She carries in her heart the philosophy of the same Fakir Lalon
'There is a season for everything
And once it's past, your effort will be wasted'
She thinks of those spiritual baul and baulini traveling barefoot
The land they knew before the borders were drawn on the map.

Her heart clings to
Her inherited ancient knowledge
Live and Let live,

Soul always searching, free from the delusions of the material world.
With its virtual praise, and relentless pursuit of the new.

She wants to remember who she is and
Where she came from.
When she finishes her graveyard shift in the West End,
When she goes for a lonely walk on Felixstowe Beach,
When a kind heart asks her
'How do you say "thank you" in your language'?

*Marsha is a member of Freedom from Torture's creative writing group
Write to Life. She has been living in London for the last nine years.*

Perhaps

Rouhi Shafii

Perhaps I go back to the beginning
and rename the road
or erase the memory of destination
altogether.

Perhaps I sit at the edge of the river
where the water flows in from the unknown
and wash your face
and your gaze in the thunder of waves.

Perhaps I write your name on a leaf
and give it to the white pigeon
to take it further
and far away from me.

Perhaps I do not wish to remember
that summer night
and the kiss which froze at destination.

*Rouhi Shafii is a writer and committee member of Exiled Writers Ink and
also a board member of the Jaleh Esfahani Cultural Foundation.*



painting © Kholoud Charaf

Temple Lover

Alan Asman

In the temple of the Goddess of love I am waiting to
meet
To pray the lovers' prayer on my knees in front of her feet

I am alone in the Temple, living a life of
loneliness
I use all my weapons peacefully to save my holiness

I make strings from the sunlight and play a melodic love
song

Among ignorance, jealousy and hate with a shout so strong

I fight my night and my void with the earth dreams and the sky
wine

My drunk night drinks bottles of pain, sleeps in a coma so fine

The stars share my night, teach me how to swim alone and
fight

Against suffocating silent waves of the dark of the night

While my heart is a new born baby, left in the
wilderness

An abandoned orphan, dreams to find a chest of tenderness

A hungry person wishes the nipple of life to feed him love
milk

A homeless person looking for a mother with her fingers of silk

To make him calm on the beats of her heart, to keep him a
sleep

To revive his life, to become an open smile on his lip

I still yearn to lie fearlessly on the grass of her
body

While her streams of spring fountains play a nostalgic melody

May my head be on her rocky chest, cover me with her
sun

Kisses me with her breeze and knows me like a confident son.

Dr. Alan Asman is a Kurdish poet who graduated from the University of Rome and studied 12 languages, speaks and writes poetry in five languages. He practised politics and wrote against the Syrian Arab colonial regime in defence of the Kurdish issue and entered Syrian prisons five times, two of which were solitary confinement cells, and one because he secretly wrote and published the Kurdish grammar. Due to injustice and discrimination, he left Italy and currently lives in London, UK.

Interview with Nick Makoha

by David Clark



I first met Nick Makoha at a production of his play *The Dark*, at the Oval House, London, in 2018. The play recounts his own flight from Uganda, as a young boy, together with his mother, fleeing Amin’s brutal regime in 1978. 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 small band of travellers making that fateful journey from Kampala to Busia, hoping to surreptitiously cross the border into Kenya.

During the play, the audience was invited to use their imagination by various devices. Apart from the stage set there was the sound of radio announcements, rebel broadcasting, shots being fired and the visual effects of the bright search lights or interrogation lights contrasting with the darkness. Above all, you had 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.

This was my first taste of the extraordinary diversity of artistic talents that Nick Makoha has at his fingertips. I had also read his first collection of poems, *The Kingdom of Gravity* (shortlisted for the 2017 Felix Dennis

Prize for Best First Collection) concerning life in Uganda under Amin's brutal regime. He 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.

It was poetry that was his first love. Nick started writing poetry already in primary school, once he reached England. He says he just loves language, the sound of voice, the turn of phrase, snippets of conversation. He was taking everything in, even the sound of the call to prayer, or singing in another language. He just loves the musicality of it all.

But it was during his secondary school years, back in Kenya, when he was staying with his father, that poetry became an integral part of his identity. He had been moved about several schools, including a spell in Saudi Arabia, and he had to constantly adapt to new environments. As a consequence, his grades tended to fluctuate in different subjects, often depending on how well he got on with a particular teacher. It was at a school in Thika, that he found a maths teacher, a Mr. Patel, who took him under his wing and his maths grades improved. When the teacher suddenly died, Nick sat under a tree and cried. He was so moved that he wrote a poem that day, which was read out in class, and from then on, he became the 'school poet', writing poems for various occasions and writing poems to his mother, who had stayed in England.

Indeed, Nick returned to England to complete his school A levels and went on to study biochemistry at Queen Mary University in London. He did well in his studies, but was torn between having a career and developing his artistic talents. While still an undergraduate student he started taking courses at the WAC Arts College, based in the former Hampstead Town Hall, which provided classes for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. It was here that he began to find his milieu which helped to shape his identity as an aspiring artist in London of the 1990s.

After obtaining his degree in biochemistry he landed a well-paid banking job, but soon realised it was not for him; it was not where his heart lay. He took the hard road instead, of forging a career in the arts, where he could fully develop his talents and discover his true inner self.

What struck me most in reading his various biographies was Nick's persistence and dedication to the task of becoming an artist, all the while embracing the many diverse opportunities that were on offer. Above all,

his willingness to try new ventures and to learn from everything that came his way.

He was a mentor on the recent Exiled Writers Ink Mentoring and Translation scheme. In fact, he has worked in numerous capacities in a variety of settings, as facilitator helping disadvantaged youth, a guest reader and tutor on creative writing courses at Arvon (where he is now a trustee), artistic residencies at Newham Library, Theatre Royal Stratford East, (where he worked on his play, *My Father and Other Superheroes* and as an artistic director for the Spoke Lab Programme). In 2005 Flipped Eye Press published his first poetry pamphlet, *The Lost Collection of an Invisible Man*. He joined Malinka's Kitchen and was featured in *A Storm between Fingers* (2006), an anthology showcasing the work of an international and multicultural collective based in London, reflecting on the realities of life in Britain from diverse and engaging perspectives.

Between 2008 and 2010 he took part in The Complete Works, a programme for ten Black and Asian poets in Britain, receiving individual mentoring and intensive feedback, culminating with an anthology of poems by the ten selected poets. He has also been a fellow of the Cave Canem Foundation Programme, at the University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (a tuition-free retreat in a week of faculty-led writing workshops and poetry readings for African-American poets). In 2012 he represented Uganda in the Poetry Parnassus, as part of the Cultural Olympiad in London. In 2015 he was the joint winner of the African Poetry Prize. The following year he won the Toi Derricotte & Cornelius Eady Chapbook Prize for his manuscript *Resurrection Man*. Since 2015, Nick has been a Creative Entrepreneur in Residence at Goldsmiths' College, London, working to create an in-depth online digital archive of the experiences of Black British writers. I am sure I have missed out quite a few of Nick's ventures and achievements in the artistic field, but suffice it to say that Nick maintains an active interest in many of the organisations mentioned above.

It is clear that Nick takes his art very seriously; it is equally clear to anybody who knows him that he also takes parenting seriously and that family is something really important to him. He has a son and a daughter, and has written and talked about the issues of father-son relationships in particular. He has been a panellist on this issue at the Southbank Centre in London, as well as at the Being a Man Festival (2004) and at the Women of the World Festival.

Finally, I asked Nick if he had any piece of advice to give a budding writer. He told me that it is easy to get distracted in a busy modern world, with so many demands put upon us. Sometimes it is good to let go of certain things, to set time and place aside for doing the creative stuff. It takes time to really make a piece of art, like all good things, it takes time. But sometimes you just have to go with the creative instinct, take the risk, and go all out to do the best you can, and take that risk. There is no guarantee of success and you have to keep at it, but at least you will have tried. Well, Nick certainly has tried his very best and probably succeeded even beyond his expectations.

David Clark grew up in Italy and Austria, studied in Canada and Africa before settling in London. His poems have been published in Contemporary Writers of Poland (2015, 2020), Voices Israel (2019, 2021) and The Litterateur (2021).

Exiled Writers Ink Mentoring and Translation Project

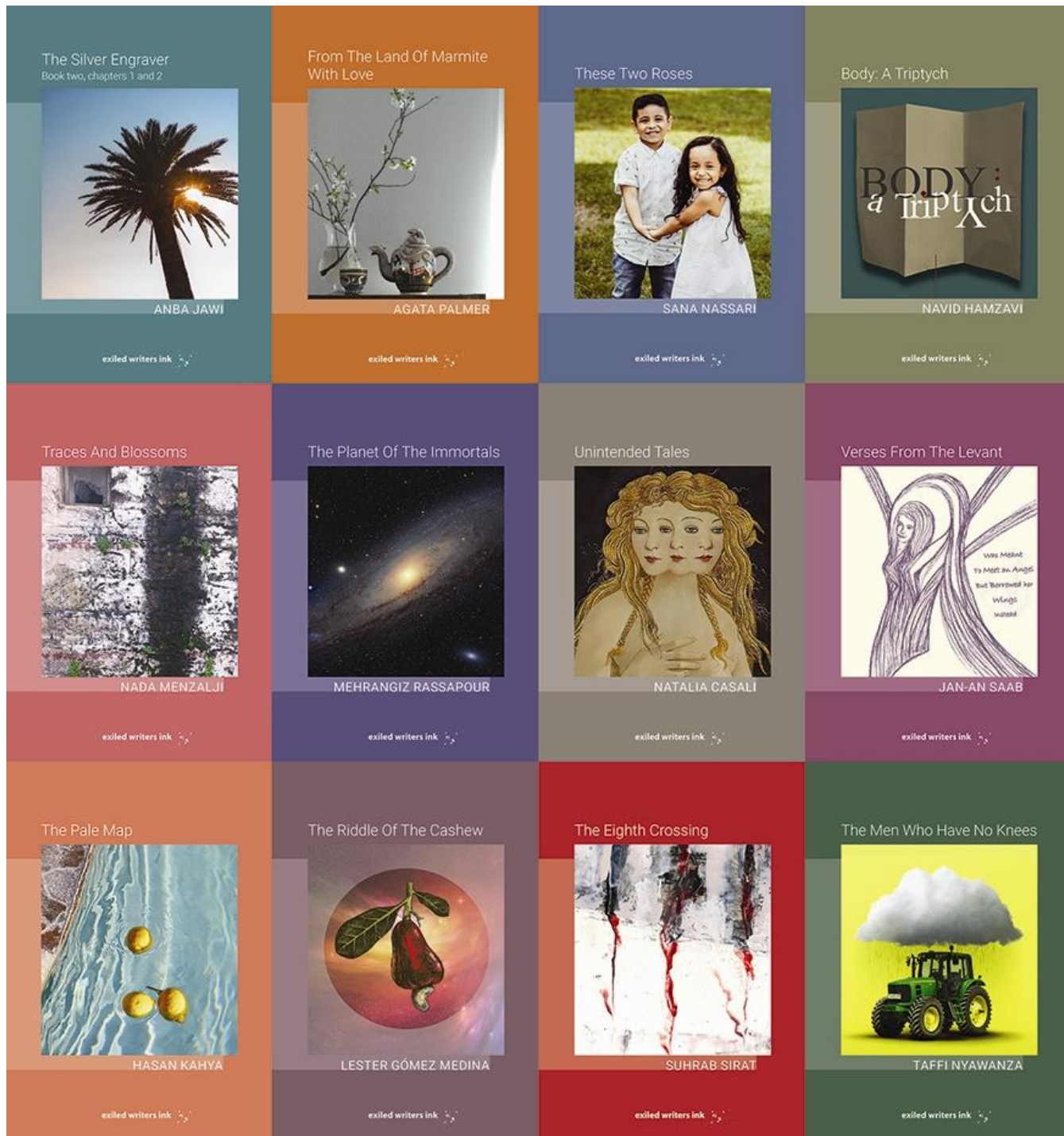
by Jennifer Langer

It all began in late October 2019 when we were gathered together in the basement of the Poetry Café, London, for the induction meeting of the project – organisers, writers, mentors and translators. Fundamentally, the project aimed to creatively and professionally develop writers of refugee and migrant background so that they were enabled to access and contribute to the literary sector. Crucially, we anticipated increasing the representation and visibility of the writers in the mainstream literary world where their voices had not been sufficiently heard.

Having been through a process of carefully selecting the participants after assessing their submissions, David Clark, project manager, and I, then invited the involvement of experienced mentors and translators. The writers of refugee and migrant background comprised seven poets: Hasan Kahya, Nada Menzalji, Lester Gómez Medina, Agata Palmer, Mehrangiz Rassapour, Jan-An Saab, Suhrab Sirat, and five prose writers: Natalia Casali, Navid Hamzavi, Anba Jawi, Sana Nassari and Taffi Nyawanza, who were mentored by highly-regarded writer-mentors: Catherine Davidson, Dr Aviva Dautch, Jane Duran, Graham Fawcett, Dr Ariel Kahn and Nick Makoha, The esteemed translators were Dr Alireza Abiz (Farsi), Dr Atef Alshaer (Arabic), Isabel del Rio (Spanish) and Hamid Kabir (Dari).

The regular monthly one-to one sessions enabled the writers to develop their work to a high standard despite having to largely meet remotely because of the pandemic. We published a chapbook of each writer's work and importantly, this was their first published collection in English.

We had originally planned one big, live showcase event to launch the poetry and prose chapbooks but instead, because of Covid, held two separate Zoom events for poetry and prose respectively, to which we had invited the literature sector in order to help open doors for the writers. The events were well-attended with an atmosphere of warmth and excitement.



As an integral part of the project, we organised ‘Access to the UK Literature World, an information and advice event to enable, not only the project writers, but exiled writers generally, to understand the workings of the UK literature world and how to access it. We collaborated with The Literary Consultancy and invited editors and publishers to provide us with insights: Aki Schilz of TLC, Briony Bax of Ambit magazine, Clare Pollard editor of Modern Poetry in Translation, Michael Schmidt of Carcanet, Kevin Duffy of Bluemoose Books and Emily Berry, Poetry

Review editor. They were all really responsive to the exiled writers' needs.

The writers' professional development was equally important. Prior to the one-to-one session, we organised a mentors' meeting to pool knowledge and increase awareness. The final session with each mentee focused on specific areas for action and on how to use their publication as a calling card. Each writer received two hundred copies of their own pamphlet, the aim being for them to arrange readings and opportunities to promote their work.

We are beginning to see some individual achievements. Two chap books were favourably reviewed in the Morning Star; two prose writers were featured in the 'Storyfest Literary Festival' at Middlesex University; some participants had their work published in literary magazines and in anthologies such as *Can You Hear the People Sing* (Palewell, 2020), and the Exiled Writers Ink anthology *Resistance: Voices of Exiled Writers* (Palewell, 2020). A poet was the guest of honour at a Nicaraguan embassy event and one mentor had assisted her mentee in creating a collection of her poems which will be published. We have now submitted the poetry chapbooks for the Michael Marks Awards.

The project was kindly funded by Arts Council England, Garfield Weston and the Nina and Roger Stewart Charitable Trust.

The pamphlets can be ordered from Exiled Writers Ink bookshop

<https://www.exiledwriters.co.uk/bookshop/>

Poetry

The Riddle of the Cashew by Lester Gómez Medina

The Pale Map by Hasan Kahya

Traces and Blossoms by Nada Menzalji

From the Land of Marmite with Love by Agata Palmer

The Planet of the Immortals by Mehrangiz Rassapour

Voices from the Levant by Jan-Jan Saab

The Eighth Crossing by Suhrab Sirat

Prose

Unintended Tales by Natalia Casali

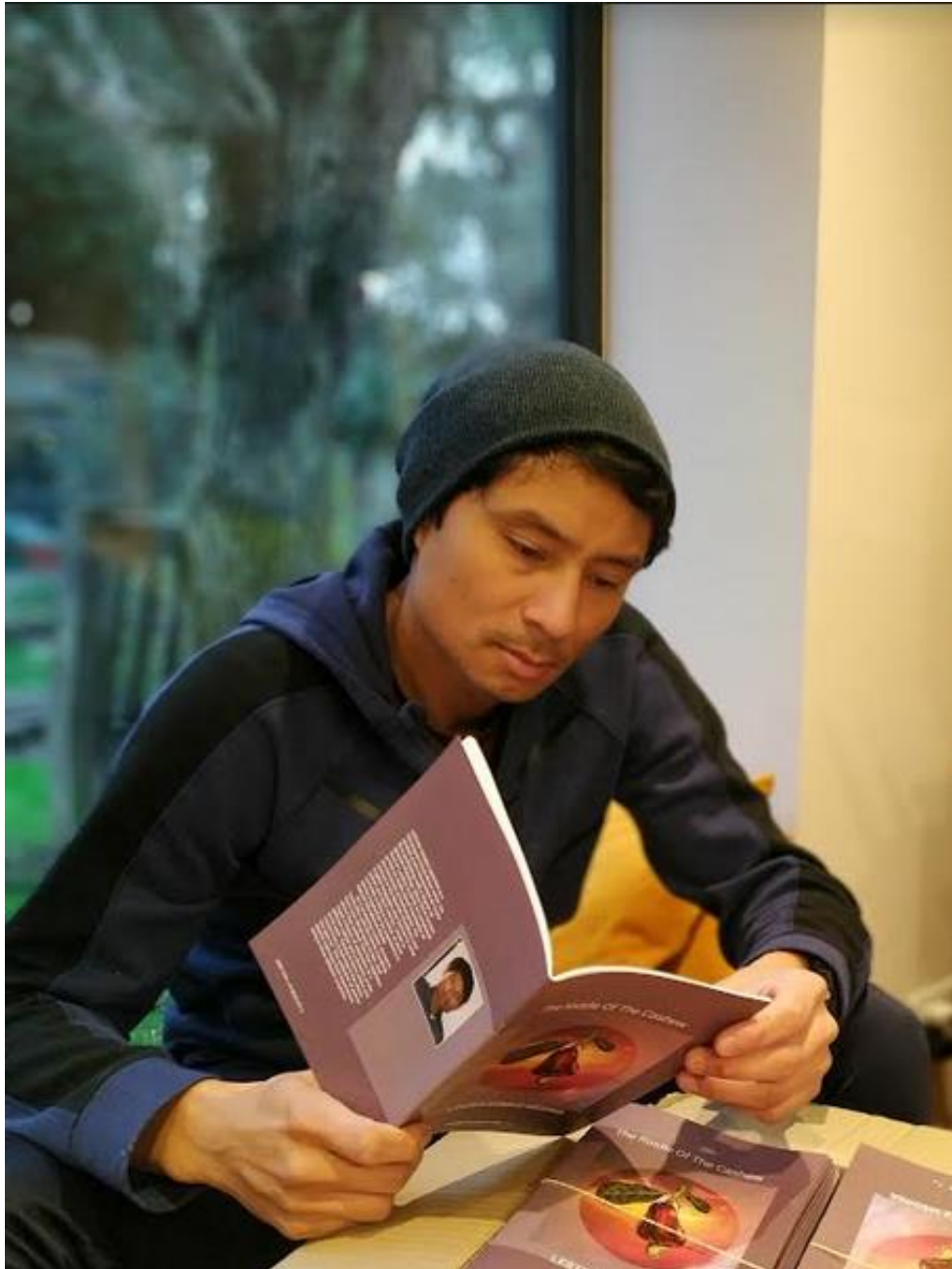
The Men who have No Knees by Taffi Nyawanza

Body: A Triptych by Navid Hamzavi

These Two Roses by Sana Nassari

The Silver Engraver by Anba Jawi

*Dr Jennifer Langer is founding director of Exiled Writers Ink. Her debut poetry collection *The Search* is forthcoming from Victorina Press.*



Lester Gómez Medina

Refugees of the Future:

A different way of thinking about the present by projecting into the future

Lester Gómez Medina

The relationship between poetry and time (past, present or future) is significant. On the one hand, for the reader or listener, it shows how the poet places an event, while on the other hand, it also gives the poet the tool to show his or her location in time. I would like to reflect on this topic: the reference of time in poetry, with special attention on how poets project themselves and their poetic content into future time.

Let me share with you this anecdote: I attended a series of literary workshops in Sheffield early this summer. All the attendees at the workshops reside in the UK, and most of them (myself included) come originally from other countries. As part of the exercises we were set, participants were given the following guidance: 'Write about arriving to yourself or arriving at your utopia.' The objective of this exercise was to outline a piece of poetry in which we could project ourselves into the future.

In order to help the creative process flow, we read two poems as models, 'Love after Love' by Derek Walcott and 'The Window' by Mary Jean Chan. We were also given the choice of using phrases from the poems which could help to trigger our writing. I went for this line:
The time will come when... (beginning of Walcott's poem).

While trying to accomplish the task, I realised that thinking of the future was not my first approach when writing poetry. I felt stuck, but I was not the only one. I saw that other fellow writers were in a similar position. I also realised I had not read enough of this type of poems, *future poems*, which I now find interesting because they move away from the common reliance on memory that so many poems use. Luckily, I managed to picture an idea and wrote a few lines in my notebook, it then became a draft that after some crafting ended up as a poem which I titled *Arriving*. The first stanza says:

*The time will come when you have to leave,
believe me,
leave the anger, the resentment.
It will not be the end but
the start for carrying less.*

After that day, my intrigue motivated me to dig more about the relation between poetry and time (past, present or future) in which poets often project themselves when writing. The research did not require much digging to notice that poetry is the type of genre that seems to fit well with the past, the well-known time, what we have stored through history, life experience and memories. This, of course, does not mean poets deliberately avoid referring to the present or the future. The present tense is often used to set the content of poetry, which by the way, can be also used as a tense to speak about events in the future, but in a minor scale. Nevertheless, I also noticed that future itself is generally less commonly referred to in poetry.

The way we refer ourselves into time when writing poetry.

Time is a concept often beyond concrete comprehension; I am not aiming to adopt a physicist role nor to define time here, but I would like to just briefly underline one of its properties. Time is something that we humans cannot control. There is certainly an awareness of time, and our need for recording it has taken us to describe 'time' based on our perception of how events progress in human life.

Language is a tool that helps us to record time by describing and connecting events to past, present or future; it gives us the possibility to bring experiences to life through orality or text.

Having mentioned that, moved by my desire to understand the reason for the scarcity of future poems, I have chosen a thought by the poet Andrew Cecil Bradley (1851-1935) who held the belief that one of the effects of poetry should be to give us the impression, not of discovering something new, but of remembering something forgotten.

I have reflected on Bradley's point; his thought has been useful to me as a way of triggering ideas when attempting to write poetry. How could 'remembering' not be helpful in evoking some of those experiences that we might have forgotten as time goes by? However, Bradley's view suggests digging in our memory, inevitably means searching for events from the past.

In the end, a good piece of poetry can still be good regardless of the tense used or the time referred to. The time poets choose to convey their message in a poem, counts as another element in the composition which serves a purpose, just as structure (number of lines per stanza), rhyme scheme (or lack of it) grammatical person (or point of view) represented by I, you, she, he, etc. In this sense, evaluating the time we want to use to locate the content of our poems should be seen as a suggestion of approach, not a rule. After all, it may be the poem itself which will dictate what fits better for its composition.

Finally, after reflecting on the topic of poetry and time, and how poets project themselves into the future, I would highlight, as a sort of gratitude, having found out about an approach for setting my mind to write the type of poems I am always keen to write. These are *celebratory poems*, which seem to fit well into poetry that projects the future.

I once wrote this idea as part of my biography, something I then used in a poem:

‘Having to leave where one comes from, is learning to live where one goes.’

This thought may not apply as a general rule to everyone, but for those who have had to leave their place of origin it could refer to a way of life. It may not directly express the future, but it implies it; we could all have a reason to migrate; hopefully, we will manage to also find good chances to adapt ourselves in whichever place we may be in the future.

Lester Gómez Medina was born in Nicaragua, raised in Costa Rica and settled in London since 2014. In 2021, he completed his first pamphlet, The Riddle of The Cashew, published by Exiled Writers Ink.

Remembering Two Exiled Poets

Esmail Khoi: Iran's prominent poet

by Rouhi Shafii



You ask me why I drink wine?
And where, when and with what friend of mine?
So long as I am I and life is what it is,
I drink wherever, whenever, and with whomever
To feel divine.

Esmail Khoi, poet and philosopher, was born in 1938 in the city of Mashad, the birthplace of many poets such as Khayam and Ferdowsi and of philosophers of the Khorasan region which stretches far into the present-day Afghanistan region of Herat. After schooling in his home town, he gained a degree from Tehran University receiving a scholarship to study in England where he enrolled at London University and was awarded a PhD in Philosophy. He returned to Iran to teach at the Teachers Training University.

He published 83 volumes of poetry and many articles and translated work including the translation of *Cats and Rats* by Obeyd Zakani. His work has

been translated into German, English, Russian and French. He also wrote poetry in English and published *Voice of Exile*. He was the first writer to be awarded the prestigious Coburg Ruckert Prizen for literature in 2010.

Esmail was one of the founders of Iran's Writers Association and in the centre of the intellectual movement in the 1960s-70s in Iran. His philosophical criticism of the social discontent, censorship and suppression of political and social thought imposed on writers during the Shah's reign surfaced in his writings where he used symbolism as a way to demonstrate his anger. Like his predecessors, Nima Ushij and others, he used his pen to fight against restrictions against freedom of thought. Still, it would be incorrect to label him a poet of political issues. He was compassionate and in love with the love of humans. He produced a new concept for poetry, although in line with the classical poets such as Sa'adi, and he wrote:

Happiness would not exist in the world
If sorrow exists even in one heart.
The world is not well-built,
even if one village is in ruins.
even if only one prison is left in the world,
nowhere would be free in the world.

Khoi's definition of poetry is precise. Poetry is the entanglement of thought and imagination in compressed and measured language. In one of his poems, he admits that he was forced by the political situation to write political poetry. He often warned against the dangers of 'political Islam' and 'religious dictatorship'.

After the revolution he quickly turned against the new regime and for that reason was forced to go into hiding for two years, after his comrade, Saeed Soltanpour, was detained on his wedding night and executed. He then left the country for good and resided in England. Khoi was an outspoken critic of the Islamic regime and several times confessed to his mistake in supporting the revolution. When Khomeini issued a fatwa against Salman Rushdie, Khoi, along with many other writers and poets around the world, condemned the Fatwa.

Somewhere nearby hides a bird
Whose voice I have never heard
Before – Such lovely songs
O, I wish mine were so soft, so measured.

According to Lotfali Khonji, the translator of a number of his poems in *Beyond the Horizon*, Khoi is indisputably one of the shining stars of modern Persian poetry. “His poems are the reflection of his time. They are over-flowing with ifs and whys. They are sometimes as ferocious as a river rushing down a ravine and sometimes as soft and calm as the same river flowing through open, peaceful countryside.”

The essence of love always saddens me:
Exactly,
Like an existence that resembles annihilation.
Or a possession that resembles deprivation
Which is life
That can mean the sweet possibility of freedom
At every moment of life
Every moment of which is another chain
That signifies your link, your bond
With the history of bondage.

(From *Beyond the Horizon*, translation by Lotfali Khonji)

Esmail Khoi was married twice, first to Italian, Franca Galio, and later to Roksana Saba, daughter of the renowned musician, Abolhasan Saba. He is survived by a daughter, Atoosa from the first marriage and Saba and Sorayeh from his second marriage.

Esmail Khoi passed away on the 25 May 2021. At the final farewell, many members of the Iranian diaspora spoke of his work and said goodbye to a man who was loved and cherished by many. A memorial plaque has been installed facing the Lily Pond of Golders Green Crematorium, to remember him. It is to be a place of gathering for many Iranians and others who loved his work as well as his dedication to freedom of thought and justice for people around the world, including those in his homeland, Iran.

Esmail was a patron of Exiled Writers Ink. He was one of the founders of the Iranian Writers Association in Exile and one of the founding members of the Jaleh Esfahani Cultural Foundation and for ten years was the judge of its poetry competition for young Persian speaking poets. He acted as advisor to the poetry competition for the past two years.

Melody

For me still and forever
the sight of your smiling glance
in the dawn of love and charm
is and has been
an infinite number of times
sweeter than the melody of sunrise
as heard from the mouth of the sun itself.
I have been left unfinished by you,
exactly like the mouth of a fish
by the melody of water;
water,
water,
water, w.....

From *Beyond the Horizon* translated by Lotfali Khonji

Rouhi Shafii is a writer and committee member of Exiled Writers Ink and also a board member of the Jaleh Esfahani Cultural Foundation.

Saadi Youssef

by Anba Jawi

Saadi Youssef was an Iraqi poet, author, journalist, translator, and political activist. He published forty volumes of poetry, seven books of prose, and translated forty books, including Arabic translations of the works of Walt Whitman, Constantine Cavafy, Yannis Ritsos, F. G. Lorca, Vasko Popa, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Wole Soyinka.

Two books of selected poems by Saadi Youssef have been translated into English: *Without an Alphabet, Without a Face* (translated by Khalid Mattawa) published by Graywolf Press in 2002 and *Nostalgia, My Enemy* (translated by Sinan Antoon and Peter Money) published in 2012 by Graywolf Press.



Youssef is considered one of the greatest poets of the Arabic world in the past fifty years, a pioneer of modern Arabic poetry. He was born in Abu al-Khaseeb, a village southeast of Basra in southern Iraq in 1934, a fertile area famous for its dates and canals. Youssef held his childhood dear to him as was so often seen in his imagery of the area through his poems. Saadi Youssef learned the metric system of Arabic poetry at an early age and commanded it. He studied Arabic literature in Baghdad, worked as a

teacher and journalist and published his first collection when he was 18 years old.

He was forced into exile due to his political activities and radical opposition to successive Iraqi regimes. He lived in Algeria, Lebanon, Yemen, France, the former Yugoslavia, Cyprus, Jordan and Syria. He arrived in London in 2000. He died at his home in Hatfield, Hertfordshire on 12th June 2021 after losing his battle with lung cancer.

He was uncompromising in his criticism of the Iraqi regime after 2003. He relentlessly mocked the present regime and lamented his homeland.

Iraq Is Coming

Beautiful Iraq is coming
Iraq will come
After the American leaves
And the servant of the mullahs
This is beautiful Iraq
Coming in the air we breathe

His poems had a great influence on Arabic poetry, catching a moment of daily life to answer one or two questions about how it feels to be a human being living in this world. He wrote about trees, animals, rain, mankind and culture. His surprising imagery entices the reader into the complex layers of the poem. Writing about his personal experience, he takes the reader with him to the many countries he lived in. Recognised as a poet's poet, the style of his poems were new in Arabic literary circles.

Legacy

One drop,
Drop, then another
Long drops on this window
Like exclamation marks
After a while, April departs
Packing up like any wanderer
Its soul and its scents
Leaving exclamation marks in the dust
Leaving me to linger

He once mentioned "I am a blogger of daily life not a poet ... so what is poetry about?"

Heathrow Airport Terminal 5

That early morning was intense
She was heading for the capital of the North Sea
Like a complete amateur, I slowly sank
Deep into the core of my shell
The rain and wind escorted us
Our gloomy taxi driver looked haggard
(He was from South India)
The road in front of us fading

I don't know why – the silence
She said nothing
I said nothing
Like I did not know the words goodbye

I had spent my life going back and forth
To wondrous airports
But now I had lost my sense of direction?
And what was our destination?
And the Indian driver kept going -
Where was he taking me?
And her?

The road was murky
My girlfriend who was on her way
to live in a house on the North Sea
said to me: "Look! You're crying!"

Saadi Youssef joined the Iraqi Communist Party in his youth and regarded himself as a true communist throughout his life. He bitterly criticised the party when they sided with the US-led coalition invasion of Iraq in 2003 and stated he was not against the American people but against the American administration. He wrote a collection of 27 poems under the title, "The Last Communist."

Blue coveralls

The uniform was my size
I didn't even need a moment
To try it in the dressing room
Truly it was my coverall

And now I wear it
I don't even take off
Its blueish cotton in bed
My girlfriend says,
What the hell is this?
City labourers don't wear blue coveralls any more
City labourers don't even call themselves city labourers
Are you crazy?
Even in bed, the blue coveralls?
Are you listening to me?

Youssef was considered one of the great intellectuals of Iraq and the Arab world. He did not hesitate to voice his opinions, which provoked and annoyed even his admirers. In 2019, he wrote an ironic poem about the prophet and his parents. He openly challenged the norm and refused to be buried according to the Islamic tradition. He even wrote his will as a poem, not surprisingly dripping with irony and defiance.

I've done it, this Saturday, like the English
Yeah!
I wrote my will
(Three witnesses were there. In fact, three women.)
So...
And I paid thousands to the Cooperative bank i.e. the "*Altaeawun* bank"
To scatter me like ashes
Yeah!
In a crematorium that's near the hospital.
I said,
Better for me, the fire here
Yeah!
In this world,
And not, as they say, there, on Judgment Day ...
Who knows? You see
Perhaps my punishment, on the Day of *al-Qiyammah*, will be worse.
.....
Right now
I am as relieved as I wanted to be
My will is written
And the cost of my burning has been paid.
So ... let's suggest a toast.
To raise high my brimming glass:
I live.

Saadi Youssef died on 12th June 2021. Following his wish, his family announced his death on 13th June 2021. (One of his poems mentions his hatred for the number 13.) He was cremated as stated in his poem, his ashes laid in Highgate Cemetery not far from the famous thinker he so famously believed in.

What makes Saadi Youssef a distinguished and special poet? Is it because he wrote poems ahead of his time? Is it the high quality of his craft? Is it his open embrace of other cultures and his vast knowledge of international communities/humankind's heritage in his poetry? Is it because he was innovative throughout his 70 years of writing poetry? Is it because cities around the world are so prominent in his work? Maybe all of the above. But there is one thing that strikes me about Saadi Youssef after meeting him in 2001. He told me he spends hours reading dictionaries; I liked this discovery very much as I do the same. It is his relationship with words and the languages – English and French but especially the Arabic language. He once said, "The Arabic language is the most beautiful language, it is free, and one can create new words, it is an open language that the poet can always renew." It was that love and respect for words in a language that many consider rigid and difficult, where he discovered the complete opposite. He found flexibility and secrets to make words respond to his unconditional love. Such passion led the words to surrender to his craft and he introduced many new words to the literature. In each poem he wrote, I look for that special word he planted with care and love, which makes the poem fly.

I cannot remember where and when, and who wrote this line.

"It is possible to live in an exile, when the country has been stolen... no one can steal words."

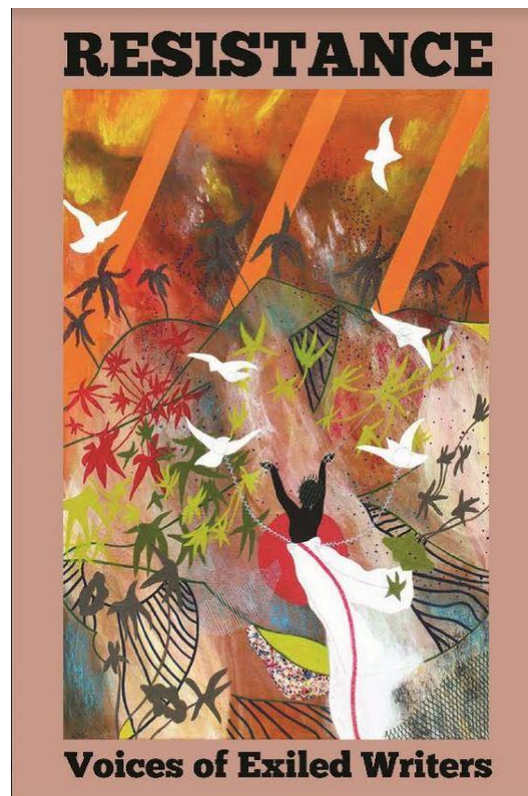
(All the poems have been translated by the author with editorial help from Catherine Davidson)

Born in Baghdad, Dr Anba Jawi lives in London and is a writer, poet and translator.

Reviews

Resistance: Voices of Exiled Writers

by Exiled Writers Ink Editorial Committee



Exiled Writers Ink celebrated its 20th anniversary with *Resistance*, a poignant anthology of exiled writers' voices, a gem of a collection.

Resistance comprises one chapter for each of the twenty years of EWI's existence and editorial members introduce each section and see the contributions as the intersection of the personal and the political. Each chapter represents an aspect of collective resistance against the abuse of human rights in countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, Syria and Zimbabwe, as well as focusing on specific themes such as violence against women, genocide, censorship and Black Lives Matter. There is also a chapter dedicated to UK-based EU citizens' response to the June 2016 Referendum.

Several of the writers in the collection are censored in their countries of origin. Yang Lian's work was banned in China for drawing attention to the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. Comrade Fatso, a Zimbabwean poet and rapper sums up the dangers of speaking out in his country: "That's the joke in Zimbabwe – you've got freedom of expression but you don't have freedom after expression."

There is also a chapter on the UK's Hostile Environment because as Danielle Maisano observes, "in the wake of Brexit... and the tides of xenophobia and nationalism sweeping the globe, it is now more important than ever... to share these stories... as a means of resistance to our increasingly divided times." As O.T. Mukozho (Otilla Tsvegie Slater) suggests in 'Defeated but not Broken', the hostile environment exacts a particular toll on those waiting to be granted refugee status.

Resistance also highlights the work of those who are currently imprisoned abroad for attempting to speak the truth. Ahmed Mansoor is an Emirati poet and blogger serving ten years in prison, charged with posting 'false' information 'which insulted the status and prestige of the UAE and its symbols'. We can hear this yearning for freedom in 'What Are All those Stars For?' (translated by Tony Calderbank).

*What are all those stars for?/And the night/And the coluds/And the sky
erected like a tent in the desert/in a place this/Everything is/Luxury*

Galal El-Behairy, an Egyptian poet and lyricist, was sentenced to three years in prison for 'spreading false news' after writing the lyrics to a rock song 'The Tartan Shirt'.

The plight of those held indefinitely in refugee camps is beautifully encapsulated in Nada Menzalji's poem 'I Come from Syria':

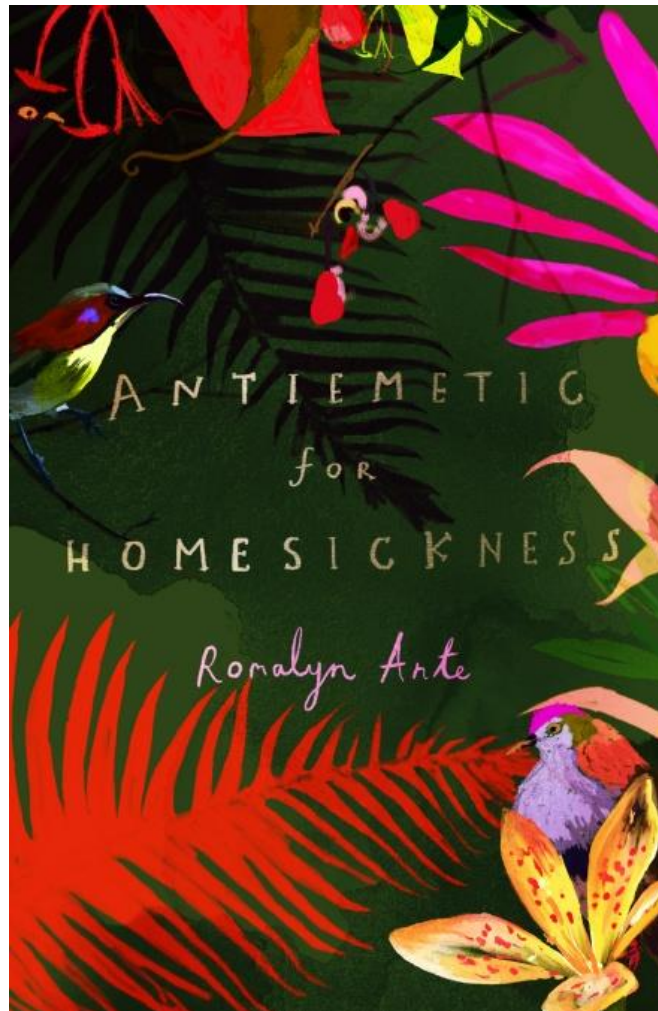
*I once believed / I was a citizen of the world / my sense of belonging has
been constrained /it closed down upon me.*

She reminds us of our shared humanity – the aim of this anthology – and that we are all citizens of the world.

*Adapted from the review by Lucy Popescu that appeared in the Camden
New Journal.*

Two New Collections Look at Migration

Reviewed by Catherine Davidson



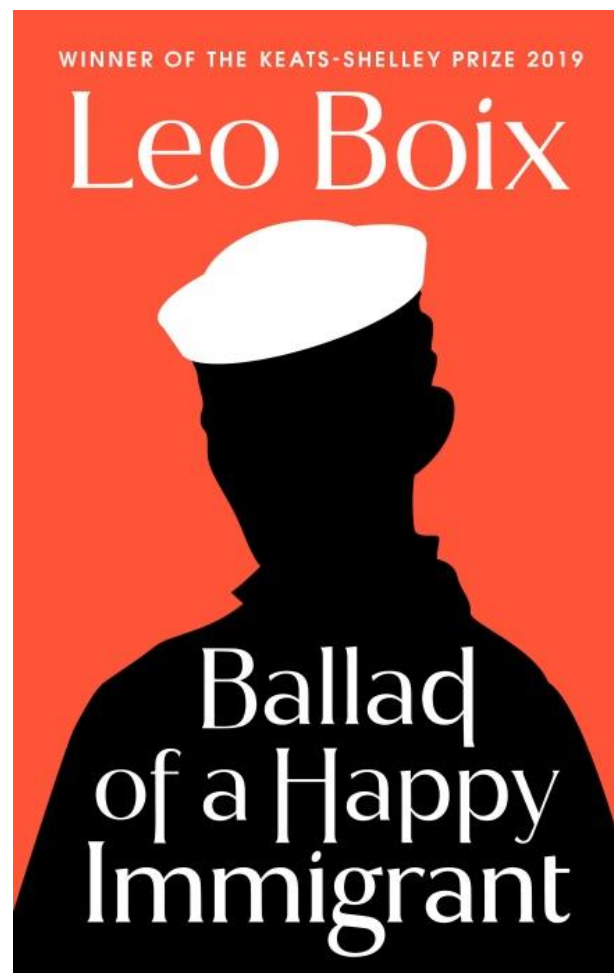
Romalyn Ante's *Antiemetic for Homesickness* is full of layers of loss and resilience arising in the wake of migration. Ante's a nurse practitioner, as well as poet and editor. Metaphors of injury and repair run through these poems. The pains sustained are not only emotional but embodied – and there is a lot of physicality in her language, images of bodies seen and unseen, parents, children, friend, separated through space and time. Yet the poems suggest migration can also be a gift, giving access to a wider range of language and ideas: the mythology and discourse of two cultures in dialogue with each other.

The freedom that arises from a dual perspective shows itself in Ante's formal experimentation, her playfulness with how we construct meaning in form. Her poem, "Mastering English" looks like a series of tick boxes,

a piece of bureaucratese, offering instead an exploration of the potential for language to either shut down or expand meaning: “In the UK when they say the sky is not working they mean:/God is too high to hear your prayers/The television channel”.

Ante’s characters are “economic migrants” – driven by a compulsion that is as urgently about survival as war or violence. Ultimately, she is able to suggest empathy as the force that unites divided bodies. Her poem, “Anosmia” uses the intimacy of the second person to describe an act of care for a failing body – beginning with embarrassment and ending in an act of shared imagination, “a plumeria” or frangipani, the memory of which runs counter to the “stench/of solitude” – the breath of the nurse on the spine of the patient.

This is a beautiful, hopeful book despite the losses it explores. Ante is a rising star who deserves our attention.



Journalist and translator Leo Boix was awarded the Bart Wolff first prize by Exiled Writer's Ink in 2017, and now his impressive first collection has been published by Chatto and Windus. These poems are also dexterous, empathetic explorations of migration. His title, *Ballad of a Happy Immigrant*, is layered with irony; the "other country" in these poems is as much a site of misunderstanding, gaps, missed messages as discovery and transformation.

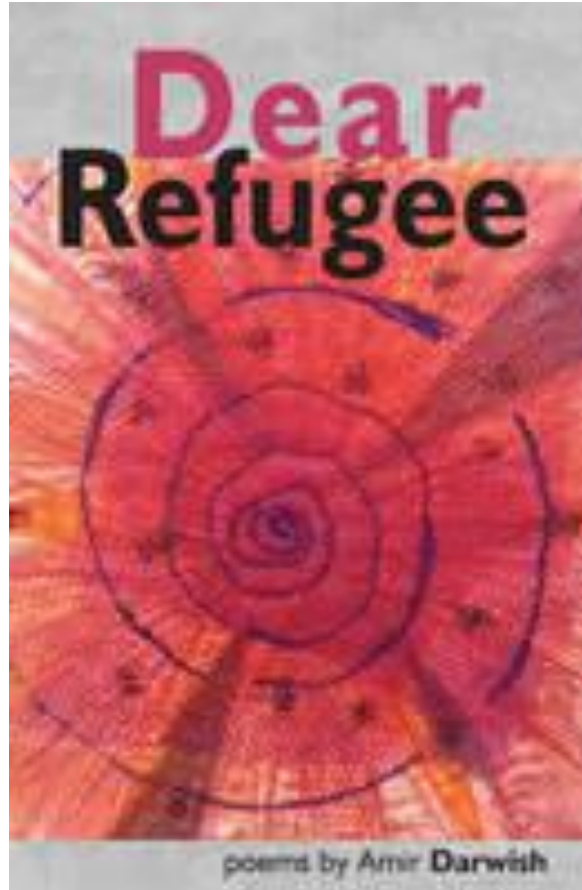
Boix creates new forms, using the architecture of the page to wake us up to the physicality of a poem. Lists, maps, tables, wings weave both English and Spanish into their meaning making. Charms, birds, mirrors, water imagery appear often – as if the poems are trying to take off, to lift themselves out of the heavy weight of expectations, especially around masculinity and sexuality. In the long narrative poem, "SS General Pueyerrdon", an imagined ancestor who arrives in Liverpool from Buenos Aires by steamer falls in love with a sailor, creating and leaving behind a self who cannot travel back with him. The sea in these poems is a source of transformation and alienation – a corrosive salt and also a byway for freedom.

The eponymous poem tells a life story in rhyming couplets, woven into the lines from an old sea-chanty, "Come back a man or never come" that questions the imperatives of identity: "And if they ask: Is this your home?/I say...well, yes, at least I hope." The ellipsis and commas in the last line evoke the way these poems offer meaning-making as both active and tentative, home a language we have to make for ourselves.

Catherine Temma Davidson is a novelist and poet with roots in Europe and the United States. She teaches Creative Writing at Regent's University, London and is Chair of Exiled Writers Ink.

Dear Refugee by Amir Darwish

Reviewed by Elena Croitoru



Separation induces a search for affection in its many forms and this is one of the ideas emerging from *Dear Refugee* by Amir Darwish. Love in its hard-to-define facets threads these poems together and Darwish has a talent for large-scale metaphors:

Be thankful to the roads
Their stones as they lie before you
To the sky that generously shows you
The moon dangling its legs in your eyes

The experience of being exiled teaches people to love the things that may pass unobserved for those who live stable lives. Poems such as 'Dear Refugee' and 'What I left behind' exult in quotidian details that are being transformed poetically. Darwish is not taking anything for granted and is

writing an ode to life. In just a few lines, we zoom out from the present-day into the place from which the poet was exiled:

I left the old corner shop
Containing a debt book
That has my name in it

The debt book has a layered meaning; the poem refers to the physical object but also to the aspect of guilt that sometimes accounts for a small part of the fragmented identity of a refugee. This is because gratitude for having survived can transmute into guilt. We also notice at this point the careful syntax and how the ordering of these lines increases the dramatic possibilities of the enveloping stanza. This is a technique that is not easy to master, and yet Darwish has used it effortlessly. The way an exile thinks about their past is also undertaken in ‘The news has just arrived’, where:

Nonetheless, the news has just arrived
That my wine bottle still stands

In this context, life itself is as fragile as that wine bottle. And yet another parable unfolds in ‘Fizzy drink’, where the expectations of a lifetime get postponed while the journey towards exile takes place, a journey that doesn’t stop with arrival. The fear that the refugee is on the verge of death at any moment makes for a cautious life and this gap between what one wants to become and what exile imposes on them is hinted at in this poem:

Twenty years later,
I gaze into that bottle
On a window sill.
Here.

The above lines demonstrate what a poet can do with sentences inside a line, how they can express the most extensive ideas in a single stanza. Had all these words been conjoined in a single phrase, their effect would not have been as potent.

Love returns again and again in this collection as the life of an exile is annotated with tokens from the past:

Likeable as honey, our thoughts furnish the land with desire.

The above line from ‘We are in love’ manages to express the constant yearning that becomes defining for a refugee. And it gets echoed later in ‘It’s a mistake to think that love ends’, where the poet compares it with a precise, physical sensation:

It’s a mistake to think that love ends
That it dies like the nerve end of a finger trapped in a door.

The imaginative capture of daily rituals in such a manner that we see them anew is picked up again in ‘Daily routine’:

I wake up everyday
Pair my thoughts together
Like I do when I put my black socks together after a wash

But the quotidian is never just the ordinary, it is always a symbol of something else and that is what it is like being out of one’s country for good. Underneath the present reality, there is always another, rooted in a different time and space.

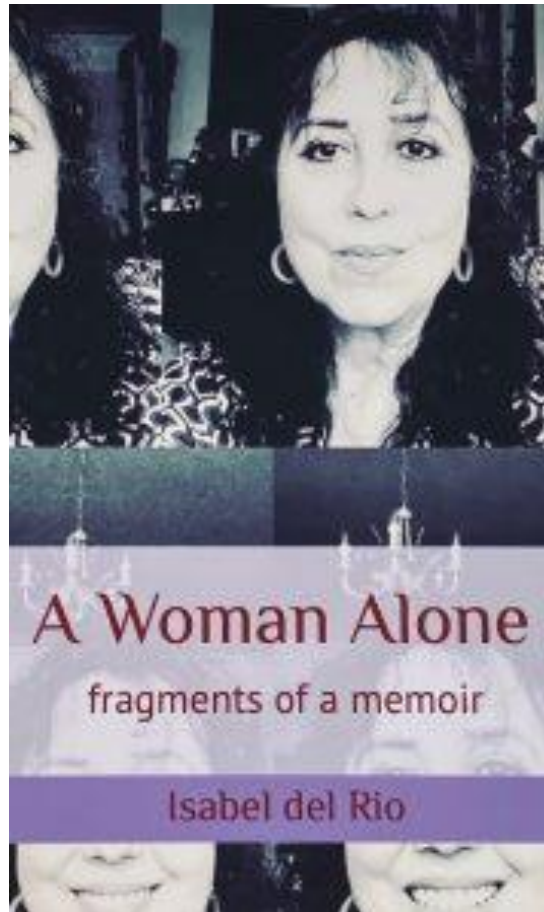
Elena Croitoru won the Live Canon Pamphlet Prize and her pamphlet, The Country With No Playgrounds, will be published in 2021.

A Woman Alone by Isabel del Rio

Reviewed by Catherine Davidson

“Women’s history is mostly an oral history, and our knowledge was passed from generation to generation by word of mouth through traditions and rituals.... It is a history that still needs to be fully and painstakingly documented. Until then, we must write it down, individually, one by one.”

Isabel del Rio’s book, *A Woman Alone: fragments of a memoir*, is a poet’s recounting of a life. As the title suggests, the book is written in short bursts – a paragraph, a sentence, very rarely, half a page or a page – circling back on recursive themes, exploring memories, reflections, insights and short narratives.



At first, this feels disorientating, but soon it becomes compelling. The book reflects our current moment – our lockdown isolation, alone in our own minds. At one point, the voice cries out: “stuff chronology.” Instead of conventional narrative, we have obsessions: early childhood in Franco’s Spain, girlhood in London, university life back in Spain under dictatorship, the trails of a working woman, sexual politics in all its guises, vulnerabilities and desires of the body, motherhood, the writing self, and the reflections of a woman who has been through a major stroke incident.

Del Rio’s voice is compelling, and takes on different registers, positions, aspects. Sometimes writing in the second person, sometimes declaratory, the voice of earned experience, sometimes novelistic, acutely drawing character, setting, moments in time. This symphony of tones itself is powerful, at times tender, furious, regretful, wise, darkly humorous, elegiac.

Del Rio is an accomplished bilingual poet and fiction writer, and Spanish is as important here as English. She writes, ironically: “There really is nothing to knowing other languages. You just need to have a wider

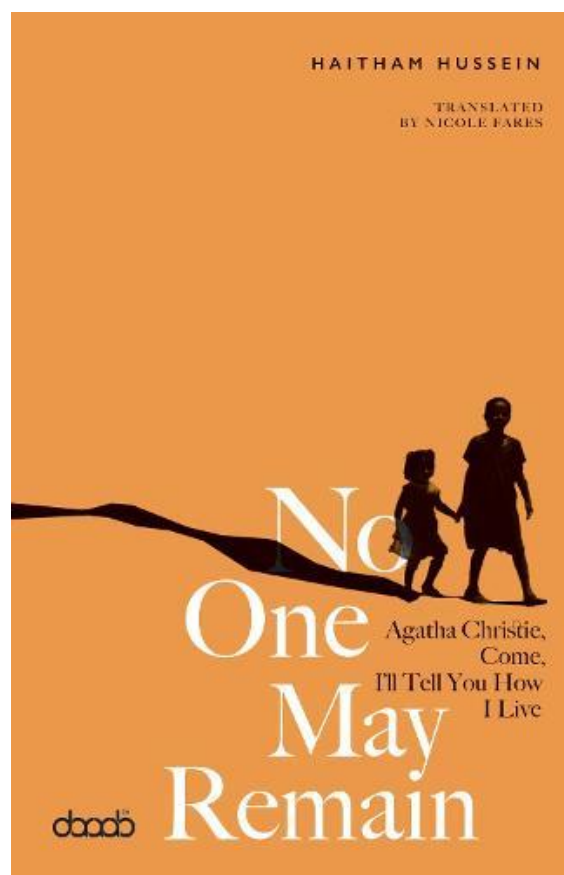
vocabulary and a marginally more complex set of emotions.” It’s ironic because emotional complexity is at the heart of this memoir.

Writing with urgency “to speak before it is over”, the raking over the same territory, the return again and again to certain themes, feels true in a way that conventional memoir misses. This is how memory works, the conversations with ourselves that preoccupy us all our lives.

There may not be conventional chronology here, but there is progress. From the moment she was born, del Rio has been fighting against silence and being silenced. Her book is a powerful assertion of a voice that will not be suppressed, that compels us to listen. It is well worth spending time in its company.

No One May Remain by Haitham Hussein

Reviewed by Taffi Nyawanza



‘No One May Remain’ is a thoughtfully written autobiography which adds to the growing canon of what has fast become an autonomous genre; that of migrant literature. It is written by Haitham Hussein, the Syrian

writer exiled in England, and beautifully translated into the English language by Nicole Fares who has clearly captured something of the lyricism and elegiacal character of Middle-Eastern story-telling.

The writer uses the writing of Agatha Christie as a counterpoint, conducting a riposte to her journals, 'Come, Tell Me How You Live'. It's an effective device which allows him to weave a discourse on exile, through a series of keen observations of his own journey and of those around him. He describes with unflinching brutality the deception practised by human traffickers and their supposed victims, who are at times merely 'economic refugees' taking advantage of geo-political upheavals to claim false identities in order to be recognised as refugees.

He explains his method thus;

'It is a must, as I write my British diaries, that I return to certain encounters and stops along my path to asylum, exile, displacement, stability.. there were some places I passed through that left indelible traces on my soul and my conscience.'

But his powers of observation are at their most acute when he describes the condition of the asylum seeker; the endless waiting, the queuing, the living in-between and *'the complex relationships we have with both the places we live and have left behind'*.

He writes intimately about the elation of the asylum-seeker when he eventually moves from *'the five pound stage to the ten pound stage'*, only to start on another endless, soul-destroying search for elusive riches, 'postponing living.'

More importantly, he saves his bitterest rants for the *'merchants of death'* who have made the whole world *'a black market'*. These are the distant Western powers and their local lackeys, who start and perpetuate wars which create refugees, and then close their borders and erect tall fences when the refugees appear on the horizon.

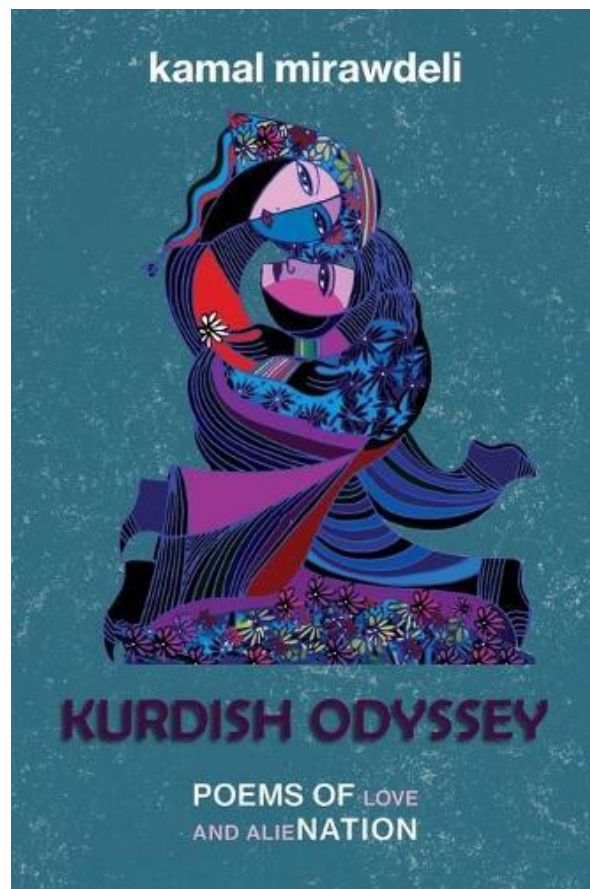
He also writes about the more mundane human things; about love and marriage and dreams and youthful indiscretions - the emphasis being that refugees are just people like everyone else.

The book is not without its faults; it tends to be repetitive at points and it can be heavy and plodding in parts, with little levity, but it rewards you if you stay with it and it is a must-read for anyone who is interested in migrant literature and world literature generally.

Taffi Nyawanza is a Zimbabwean born lawyer and writer. He explores themes on displacement and identity in his debut chapbook, The Men Who Have No Knees, published by Exiled Writers Ink in 2021.

**Kurdish Odyssey:
Poems of Love and AlieNATION
by Kamal Mirawdeli**

Reviewed by Esther Lipton



Despite calling himself a ‘lazy poet’, in this aptly titled collection of poems by the distinguished Kurdish writer, Kamal Mirawdeli, this is his fifth book of poems and his first in English. His other books are in the Kurdish language. He studied and taught English at Baghdad University then, in 1981, came to England and gained a doctorate in English Literature.

His use of English and poetic form is original and very effective. In reading his expressions of personal trauma, of love and death, the

loneliness and pain of exile and longing, memories, humour, patriotism, the Kurdish tragedy and a deep sense of justice, the reader is left with a portrait of a complex and spiritual man far from his beloved country. Kamal shares with us illuminating forays into philosophy and history and his deep love of the natural world. All are expressed in words that stand up and breathe. There are also some which shout and rage against the injustices of the world. His poem, 'Poetic Laziness' explains how he uses words to express his thoughts.

I woo the words, I wound the words, I alienate them, / Turn them upside down, inside out, / I let them be naughty, rude, narcissist, nauseating, neutral, nihilistic / I let them choose their meaning, their own manner, their medium, their make-up, / their own life and death.

His very first poem, 'All I Have', sums up his duty as a writer, a poet.

What do I have? / A pen / A Heart / Your thoughts / The wrath of a suppressed volcano / A little wish

In another poem 'Doubt' we gain an understanding of the poet.

I doubt myself / I doubt my faith / I doubt my life, my soul / My resurrection in another world / But I ever doubt / The truth of my words / And this is the meaning / of my very being.

Other poems recall poignant memories, as in 'My Village' and sadness as in 'Tora Bora' in which he is reminded of his 'martyred little brother'. Another graphic poem is 'The Map' wherein he recalls as a young boy being asked to draw the map of his motherland.

'Mother You are not a Winter' is dedicated to a mother who spent one year as a captive in the deserts of the south of Iraq. It is a poem which brings one close to tears with its focus on separation and reunion of parent and child. He begs 'This is I, mother./ Please recognise me.' The nationalistic tone of the poem, 'O Road of Sharazur, Take Me Home' has a beat that marches with the reader and begs to be set to a rousing tune. It is a song for the patriot. In his poem 'Nightingale' Kamal shares his personal feelings with his wonderful imagination. The more one reads this poem, the more it reveals itself. This is true of several other poems too. Such re-reading has led me to a better understanding and appreciation of the poem's structure and depth of meaning.

One of the messages that this remarkable collection of ninety-four poems conveys is that we should not stand by and let other nations deprive the Kurdish nation of its language, culture and history. It is a call of hope, of resistance and remembering, especially so for Kurds in exile, and it is a call to all peoples who are persecuted solely for who they are.

Esther B. Lipton writes poetry and short stories some of which have been published in national and international anthologies. She was a prize winner in Voices Israel, Reuben Rose Competition (2020). She leads a Creative Writing group for u3a.