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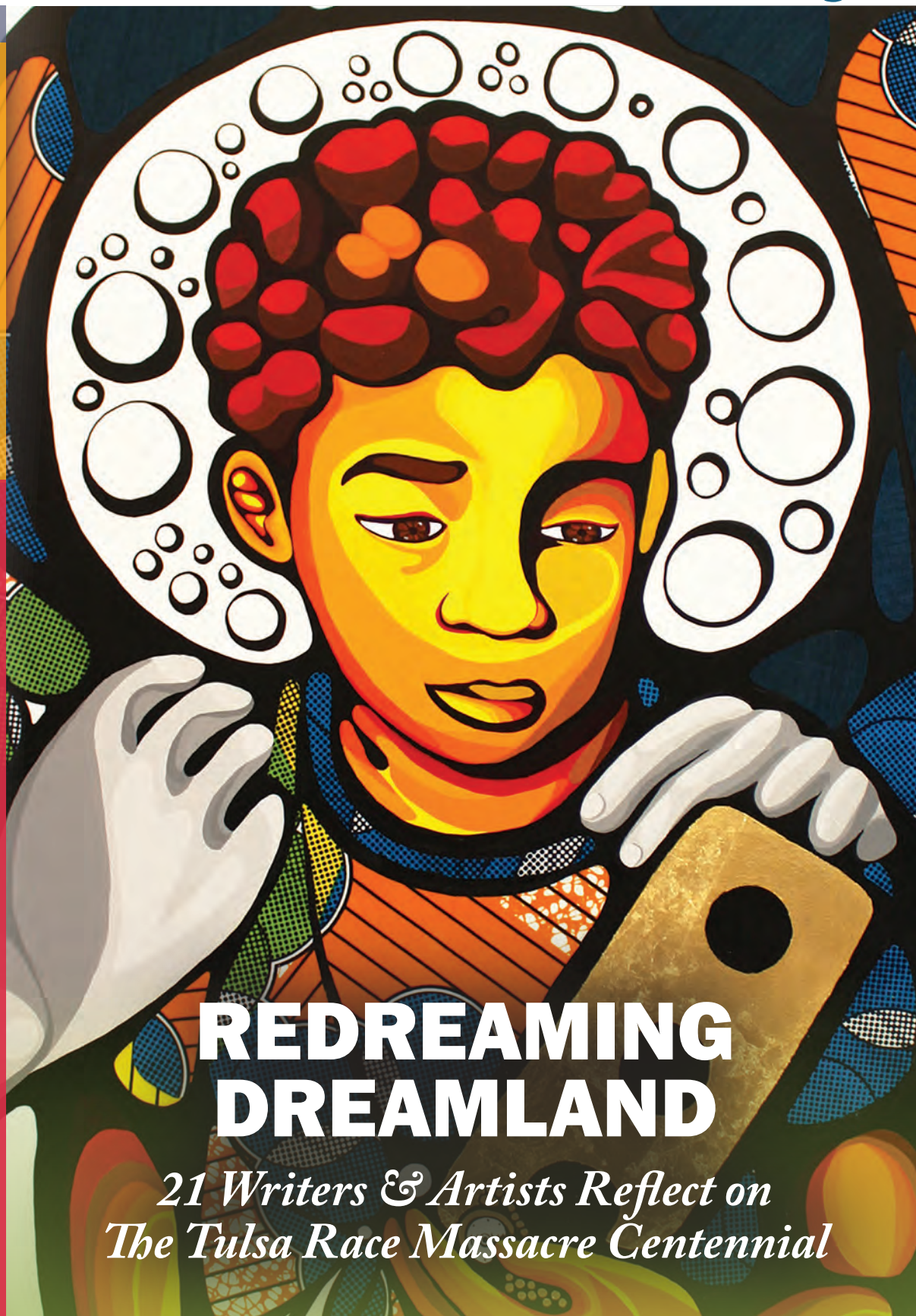
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Rudolfo Anaya**

*plus*  
**China's Invisible  
Migrant Workers**  
Writers Who  
Refuse to  
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**REVIEWS OF  
BOOKS BY**  
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Mieko Kawakami  
Olga Tokarczuk

SPRING 2021

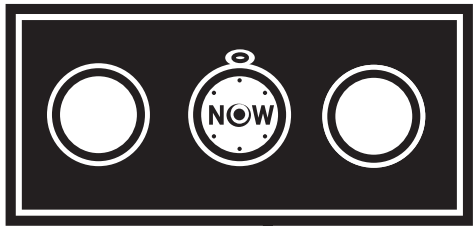
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## REDREAMING DREAMLAND

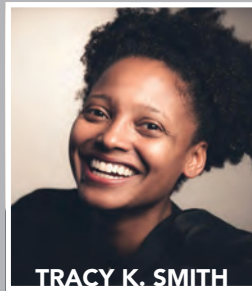
*21 Writers & Artists Reflect on  
The Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial*

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**The University of Oklahoma's  
Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Symposium**



REFLECTING  
ON THE  
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THE  
FUTURE

Major funding for this program is provided by Oklahoma Humanities, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the Norman Arts Council, and OU's Vice President for Research & Partnerships. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this program do not necessarily represent those of its sponsors.

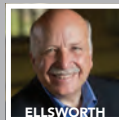


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The University of Oklahoma, Norman  
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Featuring a keynote talk by two-term  
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than a dozen writers, scholars and students



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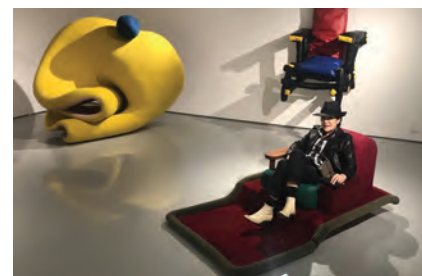
Detail from *Loud Whispers from Greenwood* (2021), by Ebony Iman Dallas, acrylic, golden leafing, and Ghanaian textiles, 40 x 50 in. "I am hoping that the confidence, dignity, and pride needed to create a thriving Greenwood shines through this painting," says Dallas, "represented by the Ghanaian textiles worn by the elders and passed down to the young boy. The ancestors' hands on the boy's shoulders symbolize that he has everything he needs to thrive. The golden brick represents a new Greenwood, and the vintage pocket watch with the word 'Now' reflects an urgent need to rebuild. These are gifts given by our ancestors. Their stories are our blueprints. These elements combine to represent the great past, present, and a bright future for Black Tulsans."

## 40 Redreaming Dreamland

21 Writers & Artists Reflect on the Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial

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by Tess O'Dwyer



## Vote in Our Readers' Poll! 21 BOOKS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY



## BOOKS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Earlier this spring, the editors of *WLT* invited twenty-one writers to nominate a book, published since the year 2000, that has had a major influence on their own work, along with a brief statement explaining their choice. Now it's your turn to help decide which books have had the most literary impact over the past two decades.

Visit [worldlit.org](http://worldlit.org) to view the longlist and vote during our two-week contest (April 1–15). The ranked list will then be published in the summer issue. Participating voters will be included in a drawing to receive a copy of the 1st place title, plus a book by the writer whose nominee received the most votes.

## COMING IN THE SUMMER 2021 ISSUE Palestinian Voices

The summer issue will include some of the best writers, poets, and artists, established and new, from inside and outside of Palestine. A mosaic of short stories, poetry, essays, and interviews, the issue will showcase Palestinians' vast imagination and their deep passion for verbal and artistic creativity. Guest editor Yusef Khanfar, an award-winning Palestinian author, has been recognized as one of world's top photographers. The Palestine mission to the United Nations honored him for his "extraordinary service to promoting peace and justice in Palestine through art."

# What's on worldlit.org

*Visit our website for fresh content including audio, video, web-exclusive stories, reading lists, and more.*

## Digital Extras

Look for these icons throughout the issue for information about exclusive content found online.



PHOTO GALLERY



VIDEO



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WEB EXCLUSIVE



YUDIT SHAHAR



Jenny Bhatt offers additional South Asian reading recommendations (p. 6)



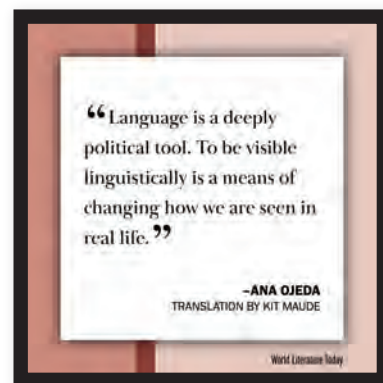
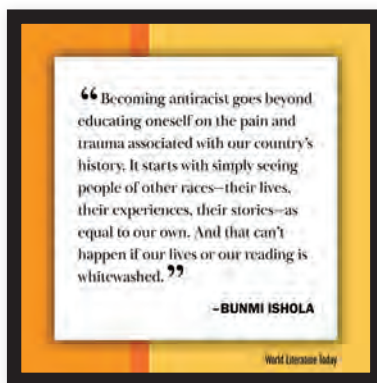
Read another poem by Israeli writer Yudit Shahar (p. 22)



Marie Casimir and Leslie Kraus write about choreographing *I Dream of Greenwood* (p. 41)

## Instagram Favorites

Follow [@worldlittoday](https://www.instagram.com/worldlittoday) on Instagram for literary inspiration.



## Connect with *WLT* Online

Find us on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Goodreads, and Flickr to share ideas, view photos, watch videos, discover book reviews, and more.







We were never meant to survive.  
– Audre Lorde, “A Litany for Survival” (1978)

AMID THE DESTRUCTION of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre—the white assault on the city’s Greenwood District that claimed as many as three hundred Black lives and displaced thousands more residents—the offices of the *Tulsa Star* newspaper were reduced to ashes. In the years immediately following the end of World War I, the *Star*’s publisher, A. J. Smitherman, along with fellow community leader J. B. Stradford, had traveled to towns around the state to prevent lynchings against African American citizens. Earlier that spring, Smitherman had invited NAACP cofounder and anti-lynching crusader W. E. B. Du Bois to give a lecture in Tulsa. Arsonists also torched Smitherman’s home, where he lived with his wife and five children, during the massacre. Accused of inciting the so-called race riot, he and his family were forced to flee Tulsa, as was Stradford.

For decades before statehood, print culture had flourished in the territories that, in 1907, would be patched together in a state called Oklahoma. After having been force-marched to Indian Territory in the 1830s in the wake of the Indian Removal Act, the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole Tribes began publishing work in their Native languages almost immediately upon arrival. Descendants of Freedmen who had been brought to the territory as slaves along the Trail of Tears also founded newspapers in the many all-Black townships that sprang up after the Civil War. Given A. J. Smitherman’s prominence in Greenwood, it’s clear that both the activist publisher and his newspaper were directly targeted during the pogrom of May 31 and June 1, 1921. Smitherman wrote one of the first literary responses to

the massacre, “A Descriptive Poem of the Tulsa Race Riot and Massacre” (1922), based on his own firsthand experiences. Mary E. Jones Parrish’s *Events of the Tulsa Disaster* (1922) also preserved many eyewitness testimonies in the immediate aftermath. Having lost so much else, Greenwood’s survivors retained the power of the spoken and written word to render witness to what happened, despite repeated attempts to bury the massacre story along with the bodies of its victims.

A century later, “Redreaming Dreamland” gathers the work of twenty-one writers and artists who reflect on the historical legacy of 1921 while also wrestling with its meaning in our current historical moment. In the cover feature that begins on page 40, readers will encounter perspectives by writers with deep firsthand knowledge of Tulsa as well as authors who place the events of 1921 in a national or international context. If the lessons of the past few years have taught us anything, we now know that no tragedy ever happens in a vacuum, and even if what happened in 1921 had—and continues to have—profound effects on the Greenwood community, our understanding of the massacre is incomplete if we view it only through a local lens: the magnitude of what happened in Tulsa had statewide and national repercussions that reverberate to this day.



I would especially like to thank my colleagues on OU’s Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Coordinating Committee, Kalenda Eaton and Karlos Hill, for their exceptional commitment to our work together. Since 2002, I have helped publish more than ninety issues of *WLT*, and I consider this the most important one I’ve ever worked on.

In 1921, A. J. Smitherman’s former managing editor, Theodore Baughman, salvaged the *Tulsa Star*’s badly damaged printing press and eventually launched the *Oklahoma Eagle*, which is still in print today and claims to be “the last surviving original black-owned business still operating within the historic Black Wall Street footprint.” A true phoenix, Greenwood and the Greenwood story will continue to be told by those who survived and rebuilt, having claimed the power of the word to witness, to remember, and to dream anew.

Daniel Simon

## COMMEMORATING THE TULSA RACE MASSACRE CENTENNIAL

The immediate impetus for this project began two years ago, when a student-led rally at the Oklahoma Memorial Union ignited a long-simmering conversation about diversity, inclusion, and racial equity at the University of Oklahoma. Immediately afterward, I reached out to my colleague Karlos Hill, chair of OU's Clara Luper Department of African & African American Studies, to thank him for offering words of witness, solidarity, and historical memory at the rally. I also broached with him the idea of a special issue of *WLT*, to coincide with the centennial of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, featuring writers and artists reflecting on the massacre but with equal emphasis on the current state of African American multicultural vitality in the twenty-first century, anchored in Oklahoma but rippling out on a global scale. He immediately and enthusiastically signed on to the idea.

The current issue of *WLT* is but one result of that conversation, which began in earnest two years ago but was also amplified in summer 2020, when demonstrations following the murder of George Floyd erupted worldwide. Dr. Hill and I along with our colleague Kalenda Eaton formed a committee to coordinate a yearlong series of more than two dozen courses, special projects, and events devoted to the centennial across OU's three campuses in Norman, Tulsa, and Oklahoma City. As we go to press, there is still time to register for the three-day "Reflecting on the Past, Facing the Future" symposium (April 8–10) and to watch the *I Dream of Greenwood* dance premiere that week; visit [ou.edu/tulsa1921](http://ou.edu/tulsa1921) to learn more.

Three generous grants made these centennial projects possible. We are grateful to Oklahoma Humanities, not only for their major grant, but also to Carla Walker, associate director and editor of *Oklahoma Humanities* magazine, for her enthusiastic partnership in support of co-published content in our respective spring and spring/summer 2021 issues. The Norman Arts Council and a Faculty Investment Program grant sponsored by OU's Vice President for Research & Partnerships also provided major funding. (The complete list of sponsors can be found on page 47.) Our profound thanks goes out to all who have supported this work, both at OU and beyond.

– Daniel Simon



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# Notebook

## CITY PROFILE

# Glasgow

## *City of Storytellers*

by J. R. Patterson



GLASGOW IS NOT SO MUCH A CITY of books as a city of stories and storytellers. In the years I lived there, the stories I heard reflected the truly woeful conditions in which so many Glaswegians grew up; of filthy tenement blocks and binmen strikes, of bone-chilling winters and rat-catching, of the local variations on the kiss (a headbutt) and the smile (a knife slash to the cheek). In other places, these tales might form the basis for lessons about character or values, but in Glasgow, they were more often the premise for jokes. Glasgow is, despite everything—the low pay, the *dreich* (bad weather), the weekend *fankles*—a jovial place, one quick to laugh.

What is so confusing is that so many of Glasgow's better times, usually considered to be when the Clyde shipyards and Singer sewing machine factory were in full swing, coincide with some of the city's worst: its barest poverty, its foulest slums. Both the shipyards and the slums are gone now, leaving "The Dear Green Place" in a kind of stasis, being neither fully modern (hovering around fifty-five years, the life expectancy in the city's east end is decades behind the rest of Europe) nor, with its plethora of vegan restaurants and modern sculpture, stuck in the dark ages.

Of course, hard times persist. It's for their evocation that Douglas Stuart's *Shuggie Bain* was lauded and rewarded the 2020 Man Booker. There again times have changed. In 1994, when Glaswegian James Kelman collected the same honor for *How Late It Was, How Late*, his Scots-language novel about substance abuse and generational trauma was ridiculed and scorned

by readers and publishers alike for being a literary sandbank.

Such thinking is completely *glait*, or stupid, as Kelman might write it. Much of it comes down to the language. Glaswegian, and the wider Scots language, is a form of English all its own, its meaning only possible to grasp in its echo, and sometimes not even then. It's a sound even the Scots themselves, from the northern countryside to the English border, struggle to understand. Of his fellow Glaswegians, Kelman noted in his essay "The Importance of Glasgow in My Work" that "none of them knew how to talk! What larks! Every time they opened their mouth out came a stream of gobbledygook. Beautiful! Their language a cross between semaphore and Morse code." Writers who chose to work in that local patois are often considered by English scholars to be nothing but literary oiks. But within the use of that rough vernacular is the understanding that language not only transcends form and tradition, it also shapes them.

Everywhere the Glaswegian is, the city is with him. Think of Billy Connolly's two Glaswegians in Rome (hearing the Pope drinks *crème de menthe* before bed, they order two pints each. "The Pope drinks that stuff?" one says. "It's nae wonder they carry him about on a chair!"). In the city, there are bookish sites—the baroque Mitchell Library, the Women's Library, Alasdair Gray's mural of roman-nosed nymphettes at the Hillhead subway station. Among the artists themselves, there is little literary tourism. If Glaswegians write well about hardship and want, it's because it's true to them. And any disregard among the



growing self-refinement of British writing only proves its worth.

Of course, there are books to buy. The best are found within the *bourachs* of Caledonia Books, Thistle Books, and the Voltaire & Rousseau Bookshop, which are all on the scrubby banks of the River Kelvin.

*Editorial note:* To read Patterson's essay on reviving Scottish Gaelic, turn to page 10.



**J. R. Patterson** was born on a cattle and grain farm in rural Manitoba, Canada. He has worked as a farm laborer, factory worker, and writer. His

fiction was longlisted for the 2016 CBC Short Story Contest. His essays can be found in *Maisonnette* and *Overland*.

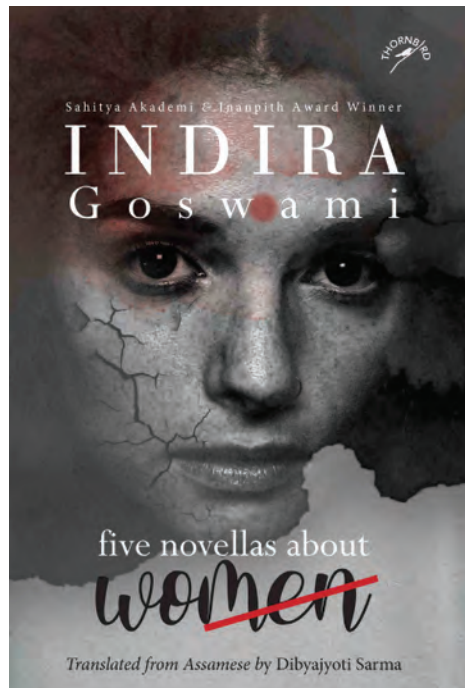
NEW IN TRANSLATION

# South Asian Literature in Translation

*A Preview of Notable 2021 Titles*

by Jenny Bhatt

**SOUTH ASIA**—which, per the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation definition, includes India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives—is the most linguistically diverse region with more than 650 individual languages across six major language families: Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burman, Tai-Kadai, and Great Andamanese. That figure does not include the many language isolates or dialects that are impossible to fully account for. Over the last decade or so, we've had a profusion of literary translations from many of these languages into English. While this has amply proved that some of the best literature from the subcontinent has been and continues to be written in non-English languages, there is a lack of global visibility and, indeed, demand for these works. Below is a small selection of notable 2021 books in English translation—as highlighted by their publishers—from Assamese, Gujarati, Marathi, and Tamil. While most will be initially released first in India, several will also be published in the US and the UK.

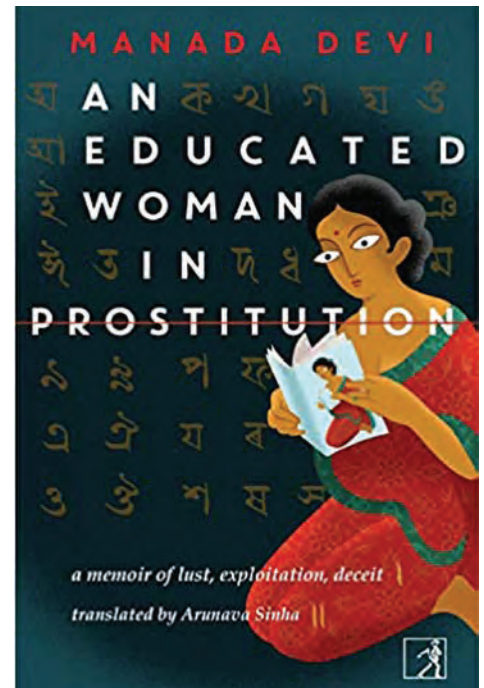


**Indira Goswami**  
*Five Novellas about Women*  
Trans. Dibyajyoti Sarma  
Niyogi Books

These impactful narratives, translated from the Assamese, depict the lives of the rural poor, the circumstances of widows, the plight of the urban underclass, and the various social constraints under which such people are forced to live. The deft use of language, striking imagery, and strong characters are hallmarks of Indira Goswami's writing.

**Manada Devi**  
*An Educated Woman in Prostitution:  
A Memoir of Lust, Exploitation, Deceit*  
Trans. Arunava Sinha  
Simon & Schuster India

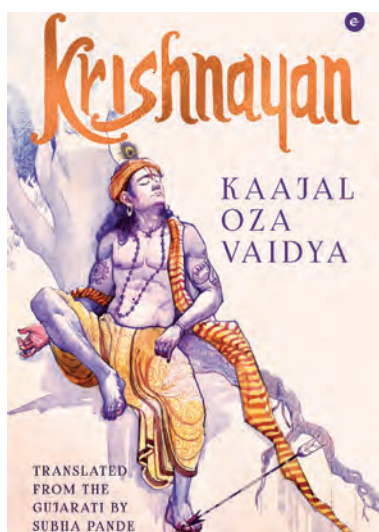
The 1920 Bengali classic *Shikshita Patitar Atmcharit* is Manada Devi's life story. During her time, she became one of Bengal's most powerful women. The book, translated from the Assamese, covers her upper-middle-class Calcutta roots, elopement with her lover at a young age, abandonment on getting pregnant, seeking refuge in a brothel, and more.







Visit [worldlit.org](http://worldlit.org) to read a longer version of this piece, with more of Bhatt's recommendations.



**Kaajal Oza Vaidya**  
*Krishnayan*

Trans. Subha Pande  
Amazon Westland (EKA Editions)

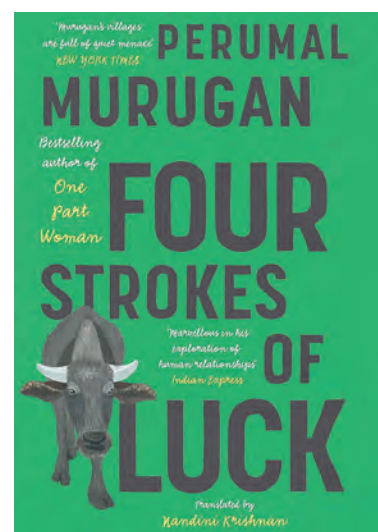
*Krishnayan* is Gujarati literature's biggest best-seller, having sold over two hundred thousand copies. The story starts when Krishna is injured by Jara's arrow, per Hindu mythology, and chronicles Krishna's last moments on earth. The most important women in his life—Radha, Rukmini, Satyabhama, and Draupadi—appear before him. The novel delves into their relationships with Krishna and what they meant to him.



**Sane Guruji**  
*Shyamchi Aai*

Trans. Shanta Gokhale  
Penguin Random House India (Puffin)

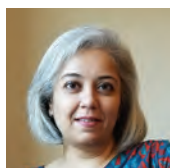
Pandurang Sadashiv Sane, known as Sane Guruji to his students and followers, was a Marathi author, teacher, social activist, and freedom fighter. This seminal Marathi classic is a poignant account of a life of poverty, hard work, sacrifice, and love for one's mother. Writer and translator Shanta Gokhale is a winner of the Tata Literature Live! Lifetime Achievement Award.



**Perumal Murugan**  
*Four Strokes of Luck*

Trans. Nandini Krishnan  
Juggernaut

From one of India's most acclaimed and beloved modern writers, this is a collection translated from the Tamil that will delight every admirer of Perumal Murugan and introduce new readers to his hallmark empathy, humanity, and humor. These stories of lives on the margins, of loners and outcasts seeking meaning and happiness, are tender, heartbreaking, and always surprising.



**Jenny Bhatt** ([jennybhattwriter.com](http://jennybhattwriter.com)) is a writer, literary translator, book critic, and the host of the *Desi Books* podcast. Her story collection, *Each of Us Killers*, was out in the US in September 2020, and her literary translation, *Ratno Dholi: The Best Stories of Dhumketu*, appeared in India in October 2020. She lives in the Dallas, Texas, area and teaches fiction at Writing Workshops Dallas.

WHAT TO READ NOW

# The Novella in Flash and the Flash Novel

## *Forms of and for the Times?*

by Sylvia Petter



**WHEN LYDIA DAVIS WON** the Man Booker International prize in 2013, flash fiction made it into the sitting room of the house of fiction. Not just flash fiction collections appeared, but also the novella in flash, a form perhaps already foreseen by Sandra Cisneros's 1984 "novel in vignettes," *The House on Mango Street*.

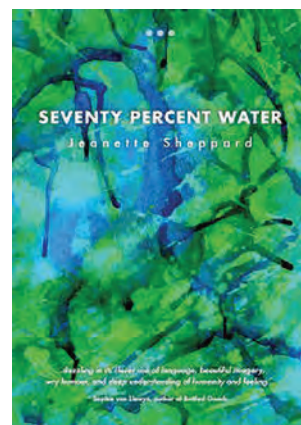
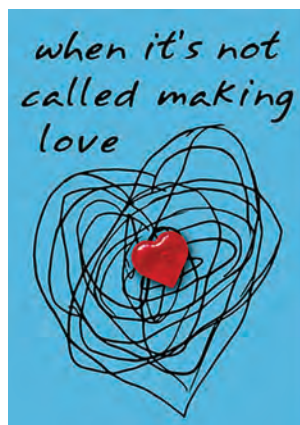
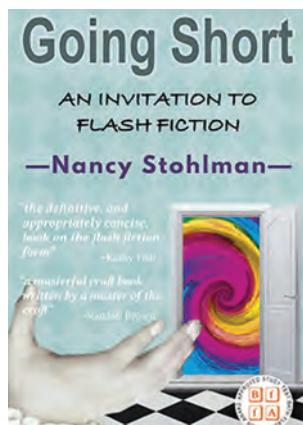
If flash fiction is a story under a thousand words, a novella in flash is a collection of such stand-alone pieces arranged to form a longer story where the reader may leap from one flash to another along a narrative arc. A flash novel is something else again, a new form with the urgency of flash fiction.

Nancy Stohlman  
*Going Short: An Invitation to Flash Fiction*  
Ad Hoc Fiction, 2020

**ALTHOUGH A CRAFT BOOK** on the form, Nancy Stohlman's *Going Short* is itself arranged like a novella in flash, with flash-like chapters "demonstrating the form as they discuss it." As Stohlman concludes, "The form is still soft and pliable. . . . The best ideas rarely fit into neat check boxes." And herein may lie the form's attraction. Stohlman debunks myths on size (smaller is easier / bigger is better) and that readers have short attention spans. Not so readers of flash fiction. Flash fiction, and by extension the novella in flash, "invites the reader up on the stage, hands them a tambourine and tells them to keep up." You become part of the act; you are included. And though you may read a novella in flash in one sitting, something can linger as you ponder the effect of words condensing ideas that might unfold much later again in your mind.

Karen Jones  
*When It's Not Called Making Love*  
Ad Hoc Fiction, 2020

**A RECENTLY PUBLISHED** novella in flash, *When It's Not Called Making Love*, by Karen Jones, was specially commended at the annual Bath Novella-in-Flash competi-



tion. In just forty pages, Jones takes the reader on a coming-of-age roller-coaster ride, attesting to how less can be very much more. Some titles, stories in themselves, are: "Recommended Stopping Distance," "Stop and Think," followed by "Everything Sucks," with the novella ending with a spin on the title: "What It's Called When It's Not Called Making Love."

Jeanette Sheppard  
*Seventy Percent Water*  
Ellipsis Zine, 2020

**ANOTHER UK PUBLISHER** devoted to flash fiction and the novella in flash is Ellipsis Zine, which brought out Jeanette Sheppard's *Seventy Percent Water*. In her approach to representing relationships and loss over fifty-three pages, Sheppard also plays with different representations, employing a hermit-crab approach in one flash and a triptych one in closing. Titles,

too, evoke stories: "Seventy Percent Water," "Because of You," "The Last Time I Visited My Mum," "I remember the cockerel my father received as a housewarming present," and the enigmatic "Kelly Loves Traffic Light Jelly."

Interestingly, these three books were published during the pandemic and launched via well-attended Zoom events.



**Sylvia Petter**, an Australian now based in Vienna, writes short, long, serious, sexy, and fun. Her debut novel, *All the Beautiful Liars* (2020),

was published by Lightning Books, UK, as an e-book and released in paperback in 2021. Her novelette in flash, *Winds of Change*, is forthcoming. She blogs at [www.sylviapetter.com](http://www.sylviapetter.com).



## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

# Scapegoats and Metamorphoses

by Chip Rossetti

**PEOPLE IN DIAA JUBAILI'S STORIES** have a confounding habit of turning themselves into other things: a eucalyptus tree, a dung beetle, a lighthouse, a butterfly, or even water. These stories—from his flash-fiction collection, *No Windmills in Basra*—read at times like modern folktales or urban legends, presenting the reader with inexplicable, even magical, events, even as they foreground the violence and war that have overshadowed Iraqis' daily lives over the past several decades. It's what first drew me to Jubaili's work.

His story "The Hat Stand" demonstrates this blend of fairytale metamorphosis and grim reality perfectly: the protagonist, 'Ubayd, has become the neighborhood scapegoat, blamed for everything bad, from broken streetlights to the US occupation and Iraq's burgeoning civil war. When rumors fly about a vicious testicle-eating creature at large in the city, 'Ubayd's neighbors, like the torch-wielding mob in *Frankenstein*, descend on his apartment to kill him once and for all. Having already served as a metaphorical hat stand on which they can hang all their problems, he transforms into an actual hat stand, which conveniently saves him from the clutches of his pursuers, who now focus their attention elsewhere.

I first came across this collection in December 2018, not long after it won the Almultaqa Prize, a relatively new award specifically for Arabic short-story collections. I was on a work trip to Abu Dhabi, and as on other occasions, I took advantage of access to brick-and-mortar Arabic-language bookstores to buy a pile of books and stuff them in my suitcase. I hadn't read flash fiction in Arabic before, but I was struck by Jubaili's stories, which ended with a dark twist and a surprise emotional wallop.

It wasn't until the late spring of 2020—still early on in the Covid pandemic, which now seems like eons ago—that I turned to the idea of translating the book. I naively thought these stories would be straightforward to work on. But, as I should have known, there is no such thing as an "easy translation": every literary

text reveals its challenges only after you've started working on it. In this case, the compactness of the flash-fiction genre makes it closer to poetry than to short stories: every word has to cohere and drive the reader seamlessly toward the final line.

Even more challenging from a translator's perspective, many of the pieces in *No Windmills in Basra* hinge on a pun in Arabic. One story, for example, turns on the word *mismar* (meaning both a carpenter's nail and a skin tag) and its close relation *mismari* (referring to cuneiform script) for its central motif—a neat vocabulary overlap that English can't replicate. Other pieces offer even trickier conundrums outside an Iraqi context: in the story "A Hundred Laylas and One Wolf," some alert English readers may catch Jubaili's allusion to the popular Majnun and Layla legend, but far fewer will realize that "Layla" is also the name used in Arabic for Little Red Riding Hood without some translatorial handholding.

While working on "The Hat Stand," I began thinking about the story as a metaphor for translation itself. Like a man becoming a lighthouse or a woman turning into water, translation is always an act of metamorphosis. At the same time, I have often felt the impulse to become as unobtrusive as 'Ubayd, to adopt the "invisibility" that can't (and shouldn't) always be the goal of translation. But unlike 'Ubayd, I have to confront the text and make decisions. As a translator, I don't have the option of turning myself into a hat stand.



**Chip Rossetti** has a doctorate in modern Arabic literature from the University of Pennsylvania. His published translations include *Beirut*, *Beirut*, by Sonallah Ibrahim; *Metro: A*

*Story of Cairo*, by Magdy El Shafee; and *Utopia*, by Ahmed Khaled Towfik. He is currently editorial director for the Library of Arabic Literature at NYU Press.





## Speaking in Tongues

by J. R. Patterson

*A writer with Scottish ancestry traces the life of Scottish Gaelic and assesses the current state of this “intangible heritage” now placed at the center of a culture-versus-race debate.*

It was in a shop on the Hebridean island of Berneray that I first heard it. Standing between the oatcakes and smoked salmon were two women, chatting warmly in their garbled speech. I had been in Scotland for months but, living and working in Glasgow, not understanding a word had become habitual. From out the midst of that city’s mauling twang, I’d begun to resemble my centenarian grandmother, leading with my ear and squinting with the effort of comprehension. On Berneray, I had no chance of eavesdropping on the women; theirs was the cipher of Scottish Gaelic. It was near Berneray where English writer and dictionary author Samuel Johnson, during his 1775 voyage to Scotland,

cemented Scottish Gaelic’s reputation as “the rude speech of a barbarous people.” In this, he was fantastically mistaken. There was nothing harsh or barbarous about these women. Their voices were lilting and light, with a touch of slosh, as though they had both just left the dentist and were working through the novocaine together.

Johnson is now infamous in Scotland for his Gaelic-bashing, and his adamance that it had never been a written language. In this, too, he was wrong: in 1760 Scottish poet James Macpherson garnered praise and worldwide renown for his discovery and translation of the poems of Ossian, the Gael’s epic-penning Homer-figure. Ossian enthusiasts included Thomas Jefferson and

Goethe, who, so taken by Ossian, taught himself Gaelic so that he might translate more of his work into German.

Beyond sparking an interest in Gaelic culture, the spread of Ossian’s work marked the beginning of an assertive nationalism in which successive European peoples, during the so-called Age of Revolution, demanded not only their national independence but their national language and literature, too. Johnson wasn’t ignorant of Ossian and knew well the legitimizing effects a national literature would have on Gaelic culture. Highland uprisings were still a risk to the British kingdom, only united since 1707, and British Unionists were eager to shift Highland culture away



from their history of clans and crofting. Thus began the violent and systematic Highland Clearances (*Fuadaichean nan Gàidheal*, or Eradication of the Gaels, to those at the sharp end), which did not end until Scotland was more sheep than people.

Pushed to the western fringes of Scotland (and to Canada, where Scottish Gaelic still survives), today's dearth of Gaelic speakers seems less a coincidence of history and more the success of a pointed cultural shift by Scotland's ruling majority. Gaelic was outlawed and suppressed well into the nineteenth century. In his memoir *Memories of Rannoch*, written in 1925, James Robertson recalled a time some seventy years previous when children in one of the many busy primary schools of Rannoch who had been caught speaking Gaelic in class were forced to wear a chain around their neck to which a human skull was attached.

Still, there are Scottish Gaelic words that worked their way into the English lexicon. There is *galore*, and *shindig*, and *pet*, which are charming; and there is *trousers*, which is baffling. And then there is *plaid*, *bog*, *cèilidh*, and *whisky*, which together form the foreigner's rough estimation of Scotland.

Traveling through that country, I often wondered who the real natives were. It is a small country, but in every place, there seemed to be a different take on what it meant to belong. I met urbanized Scots eager to join with refined Europe and put the kilt-and-bagpipe label behind them. Then, I met a man on the Isle of Rùm ferry, who said to me, "If you're wondering,

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I'm not Scottish. I'm Gaelic." In the Highlands, some locals considered their presence the only thing keeping the pedigreed foreigners (English, Danish, and Malaysian billionaires among them) from expanding the bounds of their already considerable estates. Some of those estate owners, born in Scotland but educated at Eton and Oxford (with accents to match), considered themselves—and their affection for Westminster—the only thing keeping the increasingly fragile United Kingdom together. But as far away as London politics feel in Edinburgh, so too does Scotland's capital from the *Gàidhealtachd*, Gaelic's cultural ambit.

Today, the Outer Hebrides (*Na h-Eileanan Siar*) is the nation's stronghold of the language, with eleven thousand of the nation's fifty thousand speakers. Still, even there, in the bastion of the *Gàidhealtachd*, only just under half the population speak the language as their cradle-tongue, an amount that puts it on the cusp of inaudibility. Move south and east across the country, and the language ebbs even further, becoming vague and imprecise. I asked an Edinburger if she spoke Gaelic. She bashfully see-sawed her hand. "I know 'Co às a tha thu?' she said. "That's 'How are you?'"

Though it isn't quite; the greeting "*Co às a tha thu?*" more directly translates to "Where are you from?"—a sharpening of the older "From whom do you come?" Both signify a time when surnames denoted clan, and clan implied geography.

The Scots who still maintain that level of connection with the land—and often with the Gaelic language—are crofters, the small-scale, generationally tenanted farmers dotting the *Gàidhealtachd*. Gaelic poet Iain Crichton Smith, in his memoir *Towards the Human*, surmised that "for the islander to lose his language . . . would be to lose to a great extent the meaning of his life, and to become a member of a sordid colony on the edge of an imperialist world." In an extrapolation of that sentiment, the Scottish Crofting Federation has called for the national government to recognize Scotland's thirteen thousand crofters as indigenous to the country. Drawing paral-

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els between themselves and Scandinavia's Sami people, the SCF suggests that not only should the crofters be recognized as indigenous but given the power to govern themselves through their own parliament, and have their own national language. Something so drastic is highly unlikely but displays the continued marginalization felt by these small, nonconforming groups.

There is Scottish Gaelic, but also Scots (aka Lallans), which itself is distinct from Doric, Orcadian, or Shetlandian, and different again from Ulster Scots (aka Ullans), and from Scottish English and Highland English. This crowding along the line of dialect and language has drawn any language that isn't English into a fracas for funding and recognition.

Where Gaelic's recognition differs is the underlay of *mì-rùn mòr nan Gall*—the indifference or outright hatred of the Scottish Gaelic language. While bilingual road signage (*Inbhir Nis* for Inverness, *An t-Eilean Sgitheanach* for Isle of Skye) gives the impression that the language is, if not thriving, then at least visible, anecdotal claims of confusion on the highway were enough for the Scottish government to launch an investigation into the effect of having Gaelic on road signs. There was none—only disgruntled bugbears about wasted money.

The Scottish parliament pours millions of pounds into Gaelic education, broadcast, and arts each year. Nearly 30 million GBP per annum have been allocated to Gaelic language programs since 2018, money some believe is disproportionate, given that only 1 percent of the nation's population are sentient recipients of its



benefit. The money argument is an easy one to make, as the remaining 99 percent see Scotland awash with social problems, where few benefits reach those on the lower rung of society's woes, of which there are many (in the Glasgow suburb of Calton, for instance, the average life expectancy is a mere fifty-four years).

Language is an intangible heritage, one entrenched firmly in identity. Rightly or wrongly, the Gaelic language has been placed at the center of a culture-versus-race debate. Crichton Smith spoke not only for Gaels when he wrote that "we are born inside a language and see everything from within its parameters; it is not we who make a language, it is the language that makes us." Thus, for native Gaelic speakers, the spread of the language is a double-edged sword. Education in the language becomes a matter of identity and gets to the heart of who is a Gael. In class-conscious Britain, Gaelic schools are taken for middle-class luxury, the kind offering far more support to urban centers far from the *Gàidhealtachd*, and teaching non-Gaels the language is seen by some as counterproductive to maintaining the Gaelic culture.

To counter these snags, community organizations such as *Urras na Gàidhlig* are organizing to take Gaelic out of the classroom, so to speak, to create a language-in-society revitalization. "The Gaelic Crisis," a 2020 pamphlet, points to island communi-

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ties that were once strongholds but whose social use and transmission of Gaelic is now at the point of collapse due largely to external central-belt planning by the Scottish government and remote academics at the national level.

And what of today's Gaelic literature? What are the prospects for carrying forward a tradition stretching back to Ossian? For writing the books so that Gaels can entertain and inform Gaels? To this end, there is the Gaelic Language Act, which ensures aid for writers and translators. In terms of literary output, there are many avenues, from grants to colleges, to monolingual literary magazines. Indeed, the lit-

erature is going through a revival, with some forty books published in Gaelic each year—no small number, bearing in mind that 100 percent of the Gaelic readership also reads English.

And English is always there, biting at the heels of Gaelic, enticing the young away and into the verbal desert that dominating languages create. Is the solution to negate English? To battle it through obstinance? For some, the detriment to professional exposure is worth the risk. Gaelic writer Micheal Bauer, for one, took the risk; his book *Rònan is Ciorstag*, written in Scottish Gaelic, can also be found in Irish Gaelic, and Manx, but not English.

There is hope of progress. Inclusion of Scottish Gaelic on online-learning apps has created a rising interest in learning the language, although it has yet to add to the *Gàidhealtachd* in any meaningful way. That requires people and commitment to a culture that becomes evermore insulated. When I heard those Gaelic tones on Berneray, it didn't evoke the ardor of my ancestors. It simply made me happy to know those beautiful sounds were still being made—and understood—where they belong. Regardless of how they are learned, languages survive through use rather than exposure. Gaelic is not a memory, or nostalgia, or a tourist trap. The language must breathe, it must exist for itself. Much of that existence is tied to feelings of oppression; open historical wounds that bleed as though they were inflicted yesterday. The traits so often associated with Scotland—stubbornness, hardiness, honor—are the flame needed to cauterize that pain and, in doing so, keep Gaelic alive.

*Gladstone, Manitoba*



**J. R. Patterson** was born on a cattle and grain farm in rural Manitoba, Canada. He has worked as a farm laborer, factory worker, and writer. His fiction

was longlisted for the 2016 CBC Short Story Contest. His essays can be found in *WLT*, *Maisonneuve*, and *Overland*.



# The Hat Stand

by Diaa Jubaili

Whatever happened in the neighborhood, ‘Ubayd was said to be behind it. Disappearing water pumps and gas cylinders, broken streetlights, and fires in the farmers’ market. The occupation, explosions, the financial crisis, the drop in oil prices, and the civil war.

Even when there was an outbreak of chickenpox among the neighborhood children, they said, “It’s him, it’s him. It’s ‘Ubayd and no one else.”

One day, word spread about the existence of a strange, savage creature that eats the testicles of young boys. Naturally, fingers of accusation were pointed toward ‘Ubayd. Everyone agreed to surround his house, arrest him, and be rid of him for good. He was late hearing about that rumor—at first, people said that it was the Americans who had dropped that savage creature out of one of their war planes in order to frighten the residents—he didn’t have time to flee. So he submitted to his fate and took refuge in a corner of the isolated single room that he lived in on the riverbank.

But when they barged in, they only found a large hat stand crammed into the corner. They hung up their clothes on it and began looking for someone else, someone they could hang the blame on for ‘Ubayd’s disappearance.

*Translation from the Arabic  
By Chip Rossetti*

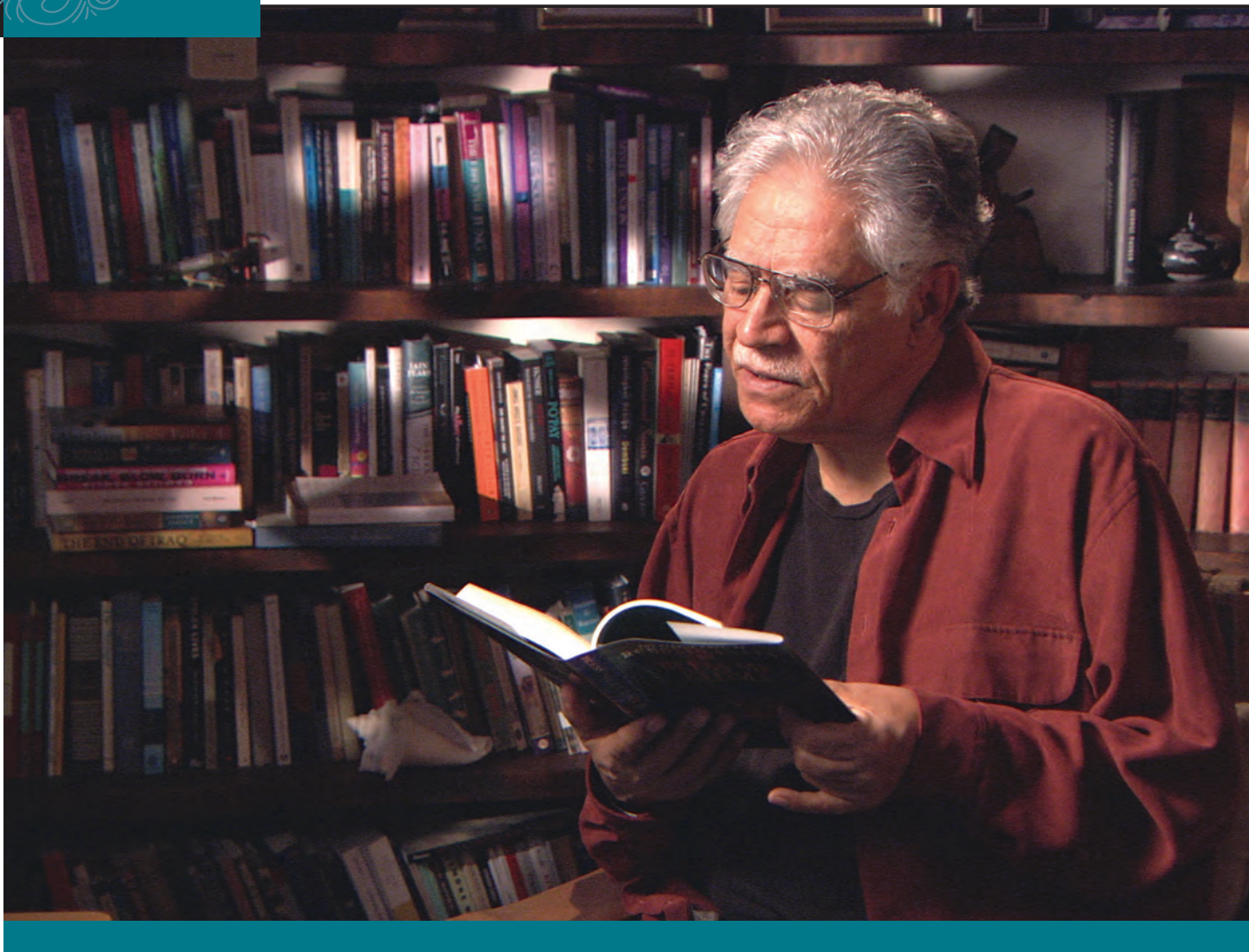
*Translator’s note:* “The Hat Stand” is from Diaa Jubaili’s collection of flash fiction *No Windmills in Basra*, which won the 2018 Almultaqa Prize for the Arabic Short Story, the largest prize for the short-story genre in the Arab world. From *Lā Ṭawāḥīn hawā’ fī-l-Baṣra*, copyright © 2018 by Diaa Jubaili.



**Diaa Jubaili** (b. 1977, Basra, Iraq) is the author of eight novels and three short-story collections, including *What Will We Do Without Calvino?*, winner of the Tayeb Salih International Award for Creative Writing, and *No Windmills in Basra*. He was a contributor to the short-story collection *Iraq +100* and has written for the *Guardian*.



**Chip Rossetti** has a doctorate in modern Arabic literature from the University of Pennsylvania. His published translations include *Beirut*, *Beirut*, by Sonallah Ibrahim; *Metro: A Story of Cairo*, by Magdy El Shafee; and *Utopia*, by Ahmed Khaled Towfik. He is currently editorial director for the Library of Arabic Literature at NYU Press.



# Rudolfo Anaya (1937–2020)

## *A Reminiscence*

by RC Davis-Undiano

*In the following tribute, WLT's executive director offers his homage to Rudolfo Anaya, both a legend of the Chicano Renaissance and a personal friend.*

With Rudolfo Anaya's death on June 28, 2020, *World Literature Today* lost a good friend—someone who published in its pages and liked to tell its director what he valued about each issue. For many more in the US and around the world, Anaya's death marks the end of an era, the loss of yet another major figure from a generation of writers who became known as “Chicanos”—socially

engaged contributors to the Mexican American experience. Often cited for his best-selling novel *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), Anaya published some fifty volumes that range over novels, plays, poetry, essays, and children's books. It will be said that during a crucial period in American history, he stepped up to help the Latinx community understand itself in relation to the US mainstream.



Many of his key contributions relate to Latinx identity. While the presence of Mexican Americans in the US is now evident to everyone, up through the 1960s there was little recognition of this hyphenated identity as having its own characteristics or any presence in the US. Someone could be a Mexican *or* an American, but the idea of a Mexican American had not received general recognition—at least, until Anaya began to write. Moreover, Latinos in general were not being presented in literature as having substantial, rich, and sometimes heroic lives.

Anaya was instrumental in helping to change this situation. Through his major works—including *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), *Heart of Aztlán* (1976), *Tortuga* (1979), *Albuquerque* (1992), *Rio Grande Fall* (1996), *Shaman Winter* (1999), *Billy the Kid and Other Plays* (2011), and *Poems from the Rio Grande* (2015)—he invited mainstream culture in to see Latinx life for itself, including perspectives on how Latinos saw the world. He did this by highlighting his characters with dynamic, evolving worldviews, hopes, and dreams. Whereas prior to Anaya's work there was a thin line separating being Mexican from being American, after Anaya that line blurred to become a cultural space and an identity in its own right. He assisted mainstream readers in seeing his world for themselves and appreciating characters and interactions previously unknown to them.

Anaya also promoted recognizing the beauty of Mexican American culture as a hybrid of various indigenous, European, and distinctly American strands. He believed that without an appreciation of the history of the Americas and the uniqueness of hybrid culture in this hemisphere, there could be no true appreciation of mestizo, mixed-race identity. And like Tomás Rivera, the other instigator of the Chicano Renaissance in the 1970s, he believed in the formative power of culture to shape identity and the very fabric of experience. Foregrounding the contributions of the Inca and the Maya, the ancient peoples of the new world—our version of the Greeks in Western civilization—he intended to make the backdrop of the Americas an obligatory frame for deciphering contemporary life in the US.

For me, there are also two personal dimensions of Anaya's passing. In 1997 he and his wife, Patricia, became the adoptive grandparents of my children. Always remembering birthdays and

graduations, the Anayas were wonderful family for over twenty years of Christmas and other holiday gatherings. This close relationship became an extended professional tie when I began publishing about Anaya's work. And then in 2006, I became his editor/publisher and brought out his next seven works in the Chicana & Chicano Visions of the Américas book series at the University of Oklahoma Press.

But while I interacted with Rudolfo Anaya in a variety of professional ways, all of them fulfilling and productive, I will join many others in thinking of him as a teacher. He was only eleven years my senior, but I always thought of him as a wise elder who could be approached on any topic for deeper understanding. He was an accurate, insightful reader of people, and a Rudolfo eyebrow raised before a conversation's end was a certain indicator of much more discussion to come. He was a direct communicator, and he seldom left anyone in doubt about where he stood on a topic.

A large circle of people loved Rudy Anaya, and we will miss him terribly. As a Latino and a writer, I can attest that Rudy changed the cultural landscape in ways that have been welcome and positive. I think that we will honor Rudy most directly if we continue to build on the values that he held dear: pride in Mexican American identity, recognition of hybrid Latinx culture, and honoring the hemispheric scope for understanding our culture. Thank you, Rudy, for sharing your wonderful life with so many friends.

*University of Oklahoma*



**RC Davis-Undiano**, Neustadt Professor and Presidential Professor of English, directs the *World Literature Today* organization and the Latinx

Studies program at the University of Oklahoma. In 2018 he was inducted into the Oklahoma Higher Education Hall of Fame.





# How to Prepare Yourself for the Collapse of the Industrial Publishing System

by Eric Schierloh

*Using Bruce Charles Mollison's How to Prepare for the Collapse of Capitalism as a starting point, Eric Schierloh partially rewrites and expands far beyond it. The idea of "agricultural reform" that appears in this anarchist flattening of the hierarchy of urgency was outlined metaphorically, and only a few days apart, by two of the author's friends who don't know each other. For this, he thanks Chilean poet Diego Alfaro Palma and the Argentine letterpress printer stranded in Italy, Federico Cimatti of Prensa La Libertad.*

**1** Learn to print, not a text but a book, and not just using a home printer. A typewriter, stamps, engraving, silkscreen printing, letterpress, collage; this can all be useful for writing and for the book outside of the industrial publishing system.

**1** The industrial publishing system implies, to some degree, a standard-

ization of text (edition) and material for the marketplace, in addition to economic dependency—in the vast majority of cases pitiful and meager and altogether unfair in terms of percentages—both symbolically and instrumentally. Very few writers know how to make a book, and perhaps even far less want to manufacture them.

**1** The material diversity of the publications will never be industrial because the very nature of the industry is replication, centralization, and an endless increase of revenue to the detriment of everything else. Meanwhile, your nature as a being inserted into a dynamic system (which includes the biblio-system) is, first of all, diversity. So take that diversity to



the text as a writer and to the book as a publisher—ultimately, toward a new art of making books.

**1** Allow failure and error to have a place in your procedures.

**1** Publishing outside of the industrial publishing system implies printing, layout, designing, collating, and, in some ways, bookbinding. It is the incessant division of professional work, which then wants to see an overexploitation by oneself. Instead it is a series of possibilities to expand the dimensions of the work. In short, it is about getting involved beyond the text (the more the better), in other instances (the more the better), and with new tools (the more, especially of your ownership, the better) for the production of the book.

**1** Create a similar link with the diverse set of materials of artisan publishing (papers, cardboards, threads, glue, clothes, etc.), with tools and crafts (printing, design, editing and publishing, bookbinding) to that which is created naturally while writing. Where industry fosters or imposes a division (between writing and publishing, text and book, publishing and manufacturing), there it is necessary to restore or (re) build links that give grounds for a productive and political continuity.

**1** Set up a publishing project that transcends self-publication to some degree, in order to shape a community of better interconnected peers and a small, frequently visited community of recognizable individual beings—participants. Join in with the participants and look for ways to dwell in a more complete and committed way in that community. The publishing project is inhabited by artisan publishing, but the community is inhabited, in addition, by the sharing of knowledge, by attending fairs and other kinds of meetings, by discussing and politicizing editing and publishing, and ultimately by collaborating in the most direct and effective way possible with the

collapse of the industrial publishing system just as we know it today.

**1** The collapse of the industrial publishing system is due to its replicate nature, its asymmetric business efficiency, its professionalization of all areas in publishing, and to its bureaucratization of both personal and community ventures. The collapse of the industrial publishing system implies the collapse of the culture industry linked to the texts and books produced within the former.

**1** Artisan publishing articulates in the workshop: by the praxis of craft, in the spaces of horizontal socialization, within the community of its peers, and by using multiple tools, disciplines, and types of contacts and possibilities. In the face of growing industrialization and the division and specialization of labor—and even its complete split—appear the workshop, craft, and the community as the space and occasion for increasing self-management.

**1** Where the industrial book ends, the possibility of the artisan book is born.

**1** There is a lot to learn from the practice of disposal, especially from the waste of the industrial publishing system. The garbage can in the publisher's workshop can also be revealing. Reusing materials must be a concern for two main reasons: first, it is not one for the industry, and second, it is an ever-growing one for the community of artisan publishers and readers alike.

**1** Develop practical skills beyond writing such as: creative reading, rewriting

and appropriation, translation and versioning, printing using various techniques and materials, designing, drawing, photography, publishing as a criterion, bookbinding, reusing materials, the creation of financial mechanisms and distribution strategies, practicing coexistence in a community of peers, etc. In other words, increase writing. Because that is the natural way toward artisan publishing.


**1** Artisan publishing is the publication of texts with the body.

**1** One of the pillars of the industrial publishing system is the private property exerted over the text. Allow digital access, untethered circulation of electronic texts, and take ownership of the book.

**1** Share and teach your skills. And above all, share and teach what you have learned on your own—starting with the context and conditions that made it possible and necessary for you to teach yourself something. And before entering any college to study a craft, pay Jean-Joseph Jacotot a visit.

**1** Join a community of peers where people consume, share, and—when able—produce both individually and collectively (objects, events, situations, ideas, mechanisms, tools, etc.). Artisan publishing is not, of course, exclusively your writing or your artisan publishing house. Artisan publishing is, first and foremost, a collective dynamic that has its own history (long and diverse), which can serve as a brand or guarantee—perhaps much like some parts of the so-called independent publishing community, and as a condition of the deeply biopolitical and micropolitical praxis that deserves to be constantly rethought and updated.

**1** Simplify your writing by freeing it from the paraphernalia of the industrial publishing system. It is necessary to gain space and time in order to increase the dimensions and possibilities of writing, toward printing, editing, bookbinding, and



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the artisan publishing of books and other textual devices. New meanings, feelings, and encounters await, as well as new possibilities for texts, books, readings, and the publisher's economy.

**1** Discover all that can be done with very little: homemade prints, small unforeseen publications, translations that nobody cares about but will certainly matter to some, the reuse and recovery of scrapped materials, the manufacturing of unique copies in short and slow print runs (book-objects), sketches and prototypes, the exchanging of skills and workforces, the manufacturing of tools (from simple punches and folders to complex machines for engraving, drilling, or even printing), etc.

**1** Also, distance yourself from the logic of unlimited consumption within a culture industry based on incessant rotation and disappearance, excess publication and destruction, propaganda and the promotion of phenomena. Reread, lend, exchange, sell, give away, even reuse these printed materials in your publishing process. If possible, choose artisan publishing products and writings that are made with more care and in a finer way, that have a higher work density, are made by your peers, by small artisan publishing houses or by independent small-industrial publishers that are openly supportive within the biblio-system that we all inhabit.

**1** Exchange output beyond its market value and share the work in its digital format. The cost is almost equal to nothing for both you and the reader. It is also a primary and elementary way of participating

in and feeding back into the open-access culture, while giving back a bit of all that we inevitably take from culture.

**1** Spreading the artisan publishing knowledge that is acquired and developed in both an independent and collective fashion is useful for bringing "consumers" to the small-scale production domain. This is central in contributing to the collapse of the industrial publishing system. To put our creative strength, ideas, and symbolic capital in the safekeeping and service of what we seek to weaken is dangerously counterproductive.

**1** Certain laws specific to the industrial publishing system, which work closely with the design of the culture industry, become blurred and lose part of their meaning—if not completely—when culture is distributed and produced with an artisan standard. Such is the case of the paying public domain (a complete contradiction), or of at least certain intellectual property in relation to its materials, length, and scope.

**1** Any recognition at all of an emotional state or condition never has a favorable

moment. We are in transition, like a blinking text cursor.

**1** Your creativity—always in relation to the content and processes, to the original and synthetic productions, to the materials and the means of circulation—is the system's limit.

**1** The figures, benefits, and advantages of the industrial publishing system are always relative, misleading, or false. And more often than not, they only reflect the privileged reality of a minority or an elite.

**1** Faced with the incessant proliferation of fashionable texts, the oligopoly of industrialized publishing, and the hyper-concentrated market of global tendency, only the agricultural reform of writing remains. Take this literally. Because collapse conveys a global and complete plummet.

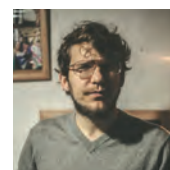
**O**nce a certain point is reached, "there is no possible return." This is the goal to reach.

*Translation from the Spanish  
By the author & Paul Holzman*



**Eric Schierloh** was born in Buenos Aires in 1981. He is a writer, translator, and artisan publisher. He runs Barba de Abejas, a small artisan publishing house and *letterpress* workshop.

Photo by Hernán Zenteno



**Paul Holzman** is a North American writer, translator, and musician living in Buenos Aires.

Photo by Nicolas Sedano



Visit [worldlit.org](http://worldlit.org) to read Holzman's interview with Schierloh.

Share and teach your skills. And above all, share and teach what you have learned on your own.





# Popping Up in Pop Culture and Other Unlikely Spaces

*Latinx Author Giannina Braschi Crosses Over*

by Tess O'Dwyer

*The avant-garde writings of Giannina Braschi are popping up in far-ranging culture spaces such as television, chamber music, and ecologic urbanism. Read on about the myriad of adaptations and applications of her cross-genre literature—including a chair.*

The avant-garde writings of Puerto Rican author Giannina Braschi have long been the subject of college courses and doctoral dissertations in fields ranging from Latin American studies and Spanglish linguistics to postmodern and postcolonial literatures. But these days her radical texts are popping up in popular culture and far-ranging spaces traditionally devoid of Latinx poetry, such as television comedy, chamber music, comics, industrial design, and even urban planning.

The quirkiest permission request of late came from the producers of the television series *Modern Love* based upon the eponymous

column in the *New York Times* and featuring Anne Hathaway, Tina Fey, Ed Sheeran, and Andy Garcia. Braschi's book *United States of Banana* will be a prop on the set of an upcoming episode of this romantic comedy, presumably as an objective correlative that offers some insight about a character in whose home the novel appears. If this is a set designer's way of saying *you are what you read*, what should viewers assume about a character who reads radical contemporary world literature? *Library Journal* described *United States of Banana* as a bizarre but intriguing book for fans of philosophical

fiction like *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*. Such fans are likely to be heady, creative, and up for a challenging read.

Born in San Juan and based in Manhattan, Braschi writes cross-genre works that are structural hybrids of poetry, fiction,

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essay, theater, manifesto, and political philosophy. Her titles include the poetry epic *Empire of Dreams*, the Spanglish novel *Yo-Yo Boing!*, and the geopolitical tragicomedy *United States of Banana* about the fall of the American empire and the liberation of Puerto Rico.

Her work has been widely adapted into other art forms, including paintings and wood carvings by Michael Zansky, short-short films and a photography book by Michael Somoroff, an artist's book by Italian printmaker Giorgio Upiglio, and a staged production of *United States of Banana* by Colombian theater director Juan Pablo Félix.

Maritza Stanchich, professor of English at the University of Puerto Rico, observed that "Braschi's reach has come to exceed not only the boundaries of literary genres but literature itself." A growing number of creators are using her experimental texts as a springboard for their own cultural productions.

On the world music scene, a young Puerto Rican composer, Gabriel Bouche Caro, shed light on his creative process in connection to his compatriot's work. The emerging musician discussed how he conceived of *Foreign*, a new composition for chamber ensemble with baritone voice. "I took fragments from chapters of *Ground Zero*, the first part of *United States of Banana*, and built my own libretto. It's a short piece, and it deals with the concepts of identity, understanding, and communication expressed through my own prism in a musical sense," he said. Braschi's musings about the feelings of American immigrants and the sounds of their "foreign-speaking English" prompted his own line of inquiries. "How does my/our foreignness affect our (musical) environment? Is it tied to a sense of belonging and to a sense of being through utterance?" He pointed to aspects of the novel that he found to be of particular musical interest, noting, "Her concept of re-contextualization of existing themes, characters, stories; the exploration of individual and collective self through dialogue; and the representation of ideas of national identity and political meaning—all presented in a way that's not 'on the nose'—are especially of interest to me."

Drawn to its raucous satirical elements, Swedish cartoonist Joakim Lindengren rendered a different section of *United States of Banana* into a Swedish-language comic book with poet and translator Helena Eriksson. Their adaptation focused on the aftermath of 9/11 based on Braschi's depiction of American life after the collapse of the World Trade Center. In response to the matrix of literary references in the original, Lindengren brought to his interpretation a dense overlay of quotes from iconic paintings, photojournalism,



movies, illustrations, and cartoons. Riffing on Picasso, Dalí, Magritte, Escher, Tom of Finland, and Walt Disney's Al Taliaferro, his treatment of art history and pop culture echoed Braschi's treatment of literary history: an homage rife with irony. The work is now available in English as a graphic novel from the Ohio State University Press, with an introduction and teacher's guide by Amanda M. Smith and Amy Sheeran.

Braschi has also influenced the design of three-dimensional objects. When industrial designer Ian Stell of New York City announced his plans to design a chair that resembled a lamp, Braschi encouraged her friend to take his concept further. She said, "Make the chair function as a lamp." This challenge was born of her philosophy that "things are beautiful when they work. Art is function." Stell rose to the challenge and built a kinetic device that morphs from a chair into a lamp and named it "Giannina." He explained how the invention transforms from one functional object into another: "When in its chair mode, a wheel that's shaped and positioned like a soup bowl rolling on its edge acts as a backrest. Out of the center of this wheel—at a perpendicular angle—an oversized saddle is mounted. The wheel spins around the central axis until the occupant leans back in the chair, acting as its

This challenge was born of her philosophy that "things are beautiful when they work. Art is function."



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brake. When the chair is unoccupied, the wheel can be flipped over to be a lampshade over the LEDs mounted beneath the saddle.” In the spirit of Braschi’s literary hybrids, the designer explained that this namesake chair is also “attempting to exist between typologies, resistant to being categorized, but striving to have purpose.” Its purpose is beauty.

Architects who have cited Braschi as an inspiration include theoreticians and practitioners in the burgeoning field of ecological urbanism. Amidst growing attention to climate change, green technologies, and sustainable design, ecological urbanists draw from ecology to propose socially inclusive urban settings that are sensitive to the environment. Mohsen Mostafavi, Marina Correria, Ana Maria Duran Calisto, and others at the Harvard Graduate School of Design led a Latin American project that proposed remedial and long-range planning solutions for parks and river systems from São Paulo to Santiago, educational infrastructures, and agroecology in the region. Their culminating publication, *Ecological Urbanism in Latin America / Urbanismo Ecológico en América Latina*, was organized around seven core concepts: *anticipate*, *collaborate*, *feel*, *include*, *mobilize*, *curate*, and *adapt*. Every section of the book opened with a defining passage by Braschi that illuminated one of these seven organizing principles of socially responsible design. Her definitions ranged in form from prose poem to Socratic dialogue.

Dorian Lugo-Bertrán, a professor of interdisciplinary studies at the University of Puerto Rico, posited that the wide application of Braschi’s writing stems from its own performativity and intermediality. Her work is not only daring artistically and politically, but it also engages with other artforms and media in provocative ways that can invite an open conversation or incite a visceral response. “There are portions for everyone, from any discipline and non-discipline, who cares to respond. One may paint, sculpt, act back in a myriad of tones: enamored, agitated, pensive,” he said, noting that the page is a catapult for something else.

New York City



**Tess O'Dwyer** is a translator, editor, and arts consultant in New York City. She and Frederick Luis Aldama co-edited *Poets, Philosophers, Lovers: On the Writings of Giannina Braschi* (2020), with a foreword by Ilan Stavans. She also

translated *Empire of Dreams* (1994), by Giannina Braschi, and *Martin Rivas* (2000), by Alberto Blest Gana. She is a board member of the Academy of American Poets.

Manash Firaq Bhattacharjee

## *The Town Slowly Empties: On Life and Culture during Lockdown*

Headpress

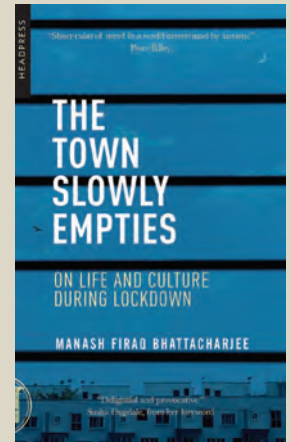
In her foreword to *The Town Slowly Empties*, Sasha Dugdale describes this slim hybrid as the author’s “lyrical diary of lockdown in India.” The diary begins on March 23, 2020, the first day of Covid-19 lockdown in India, and ends on April 14, when the author wakes to the news that the lockdown has been extended to May 3.

Like Dugdale, I appreciated the journal style, which “allows a degree of freedom to move about and tackle what concerns the writer on any given day,” as well as the international reach of Bhattacharjee’s cultural touchstones and how he focuses his eye on the pandemic’s effect on the poor. In his first entry, when “the pandemic is banging on India’s door,” he reflects on the migrant laborers, “whose daily earnings have suddenly disappeared as they face a situation of imminent hunger,” leading to a mass reverse migration. Bhattacharjee returns to them throughout the book.

Unable to move freely in the outside world, the writer’s mind moves freely across politics, philosophy, literature, and film, often with a startling range of reference. His April 1 chapter opens quietly, the writer sitting on his porch observing two parrots. He soon moves to T. S. Eliot, Chaucer, Dickinson, the 1962 film *Kanchenjunga*, and Darwish. We then accompany the writer to the kitchen, where he cooks pabda, “a fish of delicate taste.” He shares his tips for cooking pabda (garlic first, ginger later) and then moves into his inspiration for cooking. Soon we arrive at Laura Esquivel’s *Like Water for Chocolate*, the actress Jean Seberg, and Carlos Fuentes’s *Diana*. The next chapter focuses on Satyajit Ray’s films; in the next we find Romanian philosopher E. M. Cioran; and in the next Werner Herzog, Svetlana Alexievich, and Andrei Tarkovsky’s 1979 sci-fi film, *Stalker*.

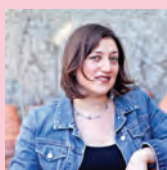
Somehow at home among the many literary and culture references—and discussions of nationalism, Montaigne, and “the gospel of reason”—we find the quotidian. There, in these personal close-ups, we likely recognize ourselves. Like Bhattacharjee, we’re cooking to keep our hands busy, cutting our own hair, and standing in our closets staring at the clothes we once wore as if they are from a former life. For separated lovers, the lockdown drops “between them like a gate at a railway crossing. The train of days rolls by endlessly.”

Michelle Johnson  
Managing & Culture Editor





**Yudit Shahar** grew up on the border of Sh'chunat HaTikvah, "the neighborhood of hope," in Tel Aviv. She is the author of the prizewinning poetry collections *It's Me Speaking* (2009) and *Every Street Has Its Own Madwoman* (2013) and recently won the prestigious Prime Minister's Prize in Hebrew Literature for her body of work. *Holy Illusion*, her third collection, was published in January.



**Aviya Kushner** is the author of *The Grammar of God: A Journey into the Words and Worlds of the Bible* (2015), a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award and the Sami Rohr Prize, and the poetry collection *Wolf Lamb Bomb* (June 2021). She is *The Forward's* language columnist and an associate professor at Columbia College Chicago.

Photo by Danielle Aquiline

## Three Poems from Israel

by Yudit Shahar

### Fingertips

Can you feel how the tips of my fingers  
vibrate in a scream?  
I am a simple woman of autumn,  
flesh tanned from the end of summer  
leaves me longing for the first rain.  
Flowers of delight burst  
when my daughter's hand leans into mine,  
as she toddles with little toes  
next to me on the pavement.

Do you know, we are children of luck,  
saved from the fall of pain  
that spread in the world.  
A new poem pushes its way to me,  
asking, where do screams blow to?  
And I push into the poem, say, go,  
no more delicate words.  
I want a scream,  
a scream.

### On the Day You Came

On the day you came to me I stripped off my  
clothes  
and drew on my scars:  
a Madonna lily, rare birds  
and a lone brown dove.  
The dove opened her mouth and said "Go"  
but the lily rushed to burn the flesh

and the birds flew away and screamed,  
rubbing their wings against each other,  
raining on me and on my eyes  
purple and gold feathers—  
on the day you came to me.

### Turkish Movie

At the bar on Rothschild Boulevard  
at nearly four in the morning  
the goddess of vengeance ignites  
radiant blood  
in a glass of Merlot.  
A Turkish movie,  
you said I made for you:  
I give you tastes  
of honey candy  
scented with roses,  
I lay your head  
so you can dissolve in tears  
between *rachat lukum* breasts,  
feed you almonds and raisins  
from the palm of my hand.  
May your tongue be singed  
so you will say thank you  
that you were made by God.

*\*Rachat lukum is "Turkish delight"  
candy, a soft, gel-like treat.*



Visit [worldlit.org](http://worldlit.org) to read  
another poem by Shahar.



# Chlorophyll

## *A Reminiscence*

by Tatsiana Zamirovskaya

*With two weeks of food and the outside world covered in cellophane, apartment dwellers under a stay-at-home order get to know their neighbors as things grow increasingly more bizarre.*

Ever since the stay-at-home order, Edward dreamed of visiting a botanical garden or at least a park. When he was still working, you couldn't get him to the park for anything: in the evenings he wallowed, splayed out on the broken couch like a blob of mercury emitting dangerous fumes; on the weekends, he sorted through his clothes, started and finished endless TV shows.

Now he was constantly complaining: about the park, the garden, the cherry blossoms that we would miss this year. We missed the cherry blossoms every year because Edward had work, and now we'd miss them because we weren't allowed to go out for some reason.

There was definitely something going on outside: Edward tried to leave the apartment but said that everything out there was covered in cellophane. At home we had enough food for two weeks—no more.

"We have to get to know the neighbors," I said. "We don't even know their names."

"So what?" said Edward. "Whenever we see their packages downstairs, we see their names, we already know everything we need to know."

It didn't work out that way: although we saw all these names regularly, we didn't remember them. Clearly, names became real only when people answered to them. All the others were empty tags: Damien Hernandez 3B, Parisa Vakhdatinya 2A, Miriam Monalisa Khomeini 1C, Joy Bang 3C, William Campbell 2C. Were these actually real, live people?

"William Campbell is Paul McCartney's doppelgänger," I said. "When Paul McCartney was hit by a car in 1966, he was replaced by William Campbell. But we love old William, our steadfast hero, so much so that we can't imagine he's the replacement of some cheeky upstart from a working-class neighborhood! Good thing he bit the dust in sixty-six, right?"



Names became real only when  
people answered to them.

Edward fumbled with the window frame, yanking it back and forth.

"These are all made-up names," I said. "Joy Bang—is that a man or a woman? Damien Hernandez is a pretty average name. That could be a person of any race, appear-

ance, or even gender. I couldn't tell Miriam from Parisa for my life. They're all just like mold on the walls, mere statistics."

Edward leaned out of the window as far as he could, taking a long time to tear off the layer of cellophane. It was thick and gray, like a bad dream where you can't move or talk. But there was another layer of cellophane, and about a meter away, in between the layers, a neighbor was walking his dog. Him, I knew.

"Wasn't he the one with the dog who howled whenever its owner was out?" I asked.

"Now we'll never know whose dog it was," Edward replied. "Everyone's at home and no one's dog is howling."

"If someone dies, their dog will start howling," I said. "I'd like to think so, anyway."

While washing the dishes after breakfast, I found some mold—ulcer-red, pink, alive—on the dish rack. I turned it over, coughed, and ran to the bathroom. I spent a long time bathing the slimy rack in boiling water as if it had come to life. Edward was working in the bedroom, and I decided not to bother him. I could hear the harsh sounds of a bad connection from the other room.

When I returned the rack to its spot, I noticed more mold below, black, by the legs of the sideboard. I crouched down to get a better look; at first glance it looked like a black bump of dirt that someone had scattered in a ritual act. But a closer look revealed some thin-barreled mushrooms climbing over each other like acrobatic ants with sprawling little hands and legs. The mushrooms were piled, heaped, stacked on top of one another, some forming pyramids. My careful sniff made clumps of the mushroom colony sway: a storm, I thought, they're running around, getting their emergency getaway bags together, poor things.

The mold was hard to clean off. I just scraped at the top of it. The next day the clump had grown back and this time looked like pure black earth.

"Did you repot the plants or something?" Edward asked. He had changed back into house clothes. Up until now, he'd been shaving and putting on a suit



and tie for conference calls, just like in normal life. I'd stopped shaving a long time ago.

"The gnats are gone," he said thoughtfully, checking the plants, which, of course, I hadn't repotted. The *Zamioculcas zamiifolia*, which everyone here calls a "ZZ plant," had the crisp, muscular hands of a magician. As if flicking a fan of cards, it released flickering, silvery-black gnats. They took off with difficulty, sporadically, as if they were about to fly in mini-squadrons to attack a tiny little Poland located somewhere under the vanity.

"Last night a gnat like that bit me," Edward said, as he rolled up his stretched-out, mysteriously greasy, sweaty pant leg. It turned my stomach.

"Look, it's a classic fly bite: the top layer of the skin is eaten off. Gnats don't bite like mosquitoes. They eat whatever they cut off with their little nail file. Even a little one can scrape a good bit off if you don't catch it in time."

Three days later, in a bowl that was more for decoration than for enclosing tea-faring sailors, I noticed a lemon covered in a gray-blue moldy fungus. I turned the lemon over in my hands. A gnat landed on it.

In the box where we kept fruits and vegetables, there was an embarrassed rustling, as if a shy schoolgirl was trying to wrap the cookies she'd made herself in wax paper, to make a neat little parcel.

"A mouse!" said Edward. "I told you!"

"No way there's mice in there," I said. "Maybe there's a rotting piece of fruit that's giving off gases. And those air currents are moving across the onions and rustling the onion skins. We need to report this to the super. They have to do something."

"I had a friend," said Edward. "She was around fifty. She was worried she might have Alzheimer's. One day she woke up and saw a possum sitting in the middle of the room. You know possums are huge! First floor. There was a garden right outside her window, and he jumped in through there, through some sort of hole. It was an old building. She shooed him. He hissed and ran away. And the next night she wakes up, looks around, and there's the possum, stomping around."

"Then what?" I asked. "It bit her, and she got rabies?"

"No," said Edward. "Possums don't have rabies. They're such ancient animals that they had completely developed before the virus even came into existence. They're marsupials, with a low body temperature. So low that rabies can't even survive in them—too cold."

"The rabies freezes like an arctic explorer," I said.

"She constantly complained to her super—hey, fix the holes, this possum comes every day and rummages through the laundry. No one believed her; they thought she was going crazy and said, 'Maybe you have early-onset Alzheimer's.' Awful, right? And when she made a scene, you know what they gave her? A little mousetrap. The size of your palm."

"Then what?"

"The possum didn't come back. But she thinks they just plugged the hole from the garden."

"All kinds of things come in from the garden," I said. "Although now there's cellophane everywhere, they probably can't get past that."

Edward washed his mug and stared at the blubbing drain hole.

"There are some gray, triangle-shaped flies circling around. Have you seen these before?" he asked.

"How many times do I have to tell you, don't rinse off even the tiniest bit of food! We always get drain flies, even from potato peelings!" I said.

Another rustle from the onion stockpile.

"Why don't I stick a knife in there?" I said. "An excuse to get to the bottom of this."

"I have to work," said Edward. "Can we do it tomorrow instead?"

I suggested we go down to the basement—maybe the neighbors had organized some recreational activities for people like us. The basement connected all the building's entrances. There were several communal rooms, a laundry room, a bike stand, a boiler room, and some winding corridor spaces for storing shit.

The basement stirred with the sounds of a forest, but everything was decayed and useless.

Pushing aside yellow branches that rustled like our mouse, we got to the common room. 3B was standing there with a tennis racket under his arm like a shotgun. After a good look, I realized it was a shotgun.

"There's not enough chlorophyll," said the neighbor, glancing at the yellow, botanical mess covering the ceiling: there were branches, ivy, and some sort of

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He'd been shaving  
and putting on  
a suit and tie for  
conference calls, just  
like in normal life.  
I'd stopped shaving a  
long time ago.

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And I thought, if I lose him, they won't send me any more people.

iridescent, ropy, hemostatic vines suspended like gallows above our heads.

He seemed to be apologizing for the poor quality of the forest.

"No sun, no chlorophyll. But they're still climbing, you see."

He kicked a withered, shaggy bush.

"We're hunting, you boys can come. If you just came down to talk, though, better wait."

3B and his partner moved slowly along the winding, rusty, jungle corridor toward the next entrance. 3B's partner carefully parted the brush with a machete.

A small, round deer appeared from around the corridor corner. Its eyes were clouded, bleary, and dull.

"A deer! Great!" cried 3B. "Let's go!"

From around the other corner, someone fired. It was 2A and 1C—they leapt out to meet us, guns smoking, trying not to touch the slow, yielding deer, letting out quivering teakettle steam from its nostrils.

The deer collapsed heavily, like a table, into the patchy brush.

"If you don't kill them, they don't send more," said 3B. "Don't even start. Everyone on our floor's vegan.

Just don't start, okay? I can't. I'm too fucking tired to explain again."

"Where are these guys from?" asked 2A and 1C. "The second floor? Do they have guns?"

"Why did you kill it?" asked Edward.

"If you don't kill them, they don't send more," said 2A. "We heard they didn't kill them in the building next door. And what happened? That's it, they didn't send any more. They're screwed over there. If you fumble a kill once, they'll overlook it. The second time is still more or less fine, they'll just delay the next shipment. After the third time, they won't send any more."

"There's some fruit growing there you can eat," I said, touching Edward on the shoulder.

"They're no good," said 1C as she leaned over the deer with a knife. "They either never get ripe, or they're overripe and rotten. There's not enough sun. At first, we also thought, 'hey, fruit!' Right, if you can call it that. Try it. There was a gooseberry branch by the third entrance, but man cannot live on gooseberries alone."

Edward turned around and went upstairs.

After a while, I knocked on the bedroom that he'd converted into an office. Somehow Edward knew I'd brought a piece of meat with me.

"I'm not eating that," he said from behind the closed door.

"Let me try to cook it!" I said. "Maybe you'll like it. Did you hear what happened next door?"

"I'm not eating that," Edward said testily.

I cut the meat into thin strips and sautéed them with olive oil, cream, garlic, onion, and other stuff. The deer tasted like beef, but more tender. It could've used some lemon juice, of course.

Edward came out of the bedroom in his robe and frowned at me.

"What are you going to eat?" I asked. "I know you're not eating deer. But you can't skip meals just because your regular food isn't available—your precious vegetables. Or are you such a sissy that you'll only eat gooseberries?"

"Chicken," Edward said after a moment. "It's not that good either, but I can learn to live with it."

I'll talk to the neighbors, I thought. For Edward, I'll try to hunt down a chicken in this jungle.

A few days later, I went down to the basement. The yellow jungle was there, like before. 2A and 1C sat on the steps in khaki suits, like soldiers in Vietnam. 1C was smoking a hand-rolled cigarette.

"Careful," I said. "All these plants are dry. The brush is dry. You could burn the whole building down."



"She's stressed out," said 2A. "She killed a lamb yesterday. She's upset. Couldn't eat it."

"I only killed it because our building's been given a warning. You know, from when you couldn't shoot that dog. Remember?"

"Shut up."

"You're from China!" 1C spat at her feet. "In China, you kill dogs every day without batting an eye! You boil them alive in cauldrons!"

"I'm not going to respond to that because I feel sorry for you," said 2A.

I told them I'd like to shoot a chicken for Edward. They referred me to 2C, who truly looked like someone's doppelgänger, or even a universal doppelgänger. Basically, he reminded me of everyone I'd like to forget.

"They don't send chickens often," said 2C. "They're hard to divvy up, not much meat. Although it's possible. Come to lunch tomorrow, there are rumors that some sort of bird is being sent. I'll tell the group that, starting on the third, it's your turn, since you haven't hunted yet. You'll save the legs and the wings for me and the others, alright?"

"Okay," I said.

The next day, I grabbed a large kitchen knife and googled how to wring a chicken's neck without putting it in pain. But how to catch it? Do you just shoot it?

Below, in the basement, by the entrance to the jungle, 2C was already waiting for me in a green protective jacket and a mosquito net.

"Flies," he explained. "Small and triangular. You've seen them! Like Phantom jets, hahaha. I've seen those things, clear as day!"

He thrust a rifle into my hands.

"Even if you get tangled in the vines, don't think—just finish it off! And never look the victim in its eyes! Not even a bird's. You won't be able to kill it, and we'll get a second warning!"

We went deeper into the brush. Corn husks slapped against my face, spilling out from under the wires that hung everywhere. We must have reached the electrical panel. Somewhere a tropical bird was screeching unpleasantly, and I could hear the gurgling of a stream.

"Stop," whispered 2C. "Quiet! Stop, you bonehead!"

Around the corner from the laundry room, a small green duck with round eyes waddled nonchalantly toward us.

I stood and looked at the duck.

"Don't even breathe," whispered 2C. "Go!"

The duck waddled a few steps and froze. Apparently, it had noticed a spider on the cement wall, which was uncharacteristically showing through the crum-

bling russet cap of shaggy tropical ivy, twisted like a witch's braid. The duck myopically poked its yellow beak into the damp cement. Its round eye reflected the electrical panel.

I breathed, aimed, and looked the duck in the eye. It turns out if you control your breath and focus on controlling it rather than on breathing itself, your hands stop shaking.

The duck spun around, rustled the leaves, and slowly turned the corner.

"Idiot!" 2C snatched the rifle from me.

I heard the sound of wings flapping around the corner. The duck flew away, spooked.

"Idiot," 2C said again and pointed the gun at me.

"Whoa, whoa!" I threw up my hands and backed away. "This can't be the first time someone in our building missed!"

2C lowered the rifle and began to cry, covering his unpleasantly familiar, bearded face with the unfamiliar hands of a stranger.

"That's it," he said. "They'll never send another duck. And they won't send anything in the next few days. Fuck. You've really done it, fucking Greenpeace. Fucking hippie."

"I have cereal at home," I said. "I can share it with the whole building."

"Don't come hunting again," said 2C. "I swear to God. Don't."

I climbed the stairs and quietly entered the bedroom. Edward was lying on the bed in his work suit, sleeping, apparently tired after more negotiations.

I quietly lay down behind him, hugged him, and closed my eyes. I put my hand on his neck. I remembered mentally practicing on an imaginary chicken. Weird—why does evolution give us necks, anyway? Such a fragile spot.

"Move your hand," said Edward.

"Okay," I said. "I'm sorry. I couldn't kill the duck."

And I thought, if I lose him, they won't send me any more people.

"We could just go down there for a walk, like a park," I said. "A park in the fall."

"Mmm," said Edward sleepily.

*Translation from the Russian  
By Fiona Bell*



**Tatsiana  
Zamirovskaya**

is a writer from Minsk, Belarus, who moved to Brooklyn in 2015. The author of three short-story collections, her recent book of metaphysical sci-fi stories, *The Land of Random Numbers* (2019), was longlisted for the Russian National Bestseller Award and NOS Literary Award. Her first novel, *The Deadnet*, will be published in 2021 by AST/Elena Shubina Imprint.



**Fiona Bell** is a literary translator and scholar of russophone literature. Her translation of *Stories*, by Nataliya Meshchaninova, received a 2020 PEN/Heim Translation Fund grant. Her essays have appeared in *Asymptote*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Literary Hub*, and elsewhere. She lives in New Haven, Connecticut.



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有我们的文  
就没有我  
有我们的历史  
就没有我们的将





# Why Does Workers' Literature Matter?

by Ping Zhu

*A group of Chinese migrant workers, who call themselves New Workers, have been uttering their voices through the medium of literature. The emergence of New Workers' Literature in contemporary China is significant, because it challenges the middle-class definition of literature and structure of feeling in today's capitalist empire.*

“Without our culture, we have no history, without our history, we have no future.” This mission statement can be read in a banner over the entrance of the Migrant Workers' Museum in Beijing's suburb of Picun. Some of the migrant workers have been meeting for two hours every Sunday evening in Picun since 2014, with Beijing-based academics and writers mentoring them. During those meetings, members read canonical works of world literature by Franz Kafka, Daniel Defoe, Lu Xun, Yukio Mishima, Allen Ginsberg, Bob Dylan, and others, but what excites them most is reading and commenting on their own prose and poetry. They call themselves “New Workers.”

In China, there are nearly three hundred million migrant workers. Working in low-paying factories and at construction sites, they have built Chinese cities but cannot become urban residents themselves owing to China's strict household registration (*hukou*) system. They are wage-earning “workers” but are still documented as “peasants” with little access to education, housing, health insurance, pensions, and vehicle licenses. Precarious both in terms of livelihood and identity, Chinese migrant workers are a constant reminder of the awkward position of postsocialist China, a socialist political system with a capitalist economy.

Their writings are diverse, ranging from pungent social commentaries to sentimental self-reflection, and from historical testimony to ruminations about humanity. Resisting stereotypes placed on peasants and workers along with different forms of social injustice in the age of globalization, this cohort of migrant workers is determined to show the world that they can speak *for* themselves, *of* themselves, and *by* themselves.

Migrant-worker writing is an important part of working-class literature and is getting recognized worldwide. The existence of this new literature is particularly significant because literature in our time is heavily imprinted with middle-class taste, structures of feeling, and world perspective. *Encyclopædia Britannica* defines “literature” as “imaginative works of poetry and prose distinguished by the intentions of their authors and the perceived aesthetic excellence of their execution.” This definition of “literature,” however, is

Chinese migrant workers are a constant reminder of the awkward position of postsocialist China.

a modern convention. Raymond Williams has told us that the shift of the meaning of “literature” from “learning” to “taste” or “sensibilities,” and the specialization of “literature” to “creative” and “imaginative,” emerged in the eighteenth century and was not fully developed until the nineteenth century (see *Marxism and Literature*). Because “taste” and “sensitivity” are essentially bourgeois categories, it would be almost impossible for working-class literature to measure up to this standard entirely or become a best-seller. In our time, reading and writing literature is deeply intertwined with commercial culture and usually requires disposable time and wealth. As a result, our culture doesn’t even have the language, sentiments, and narratives for having a discussion about realities outside of the middle-class world—a lack that would ultimately impoverish literature and humanity.

The prose and poetry of Picun are characterized by the unadulterated truth that they represent, overwhelmingly opting for personally expressive poetry, biographies or autobiographies, and journalism over high fiction. At the same time, the New Workers’ literature brings another kind of creative source and literary practice into contemporary literature. To borrow Williams’s words again, the migrant workers’ literature can challenge and extend the existing literary

tradition by “making ‘truth’ and ‘beauty,’ or ‘truth’ and ‘vitality of language’” (*Marxism and Literature*).

While reading and writing has become ubiquitous in the information age, literature as a social practice continues to wane. With the overstimulation of consumerism and the atrophy of social life, which depleted people’s practical sense of reality and dumbed down their moral standards, globalization has created a seemingly impregnable power structure that prevents people from interrogating values and constructing meanings. This is why workers’ literature matters: it can help us understand a different culture, obtain a new view of history, and possibly imagine an alternative future.

*University of Oklahoma*



**Ping Zhu** is associate professor of Chinese literature at the University of Oklahoma and the acting editor in chief of the biennial literary journal *Chinese Literature Today*.

She is the author of *Gender and Subjectivities in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature and Culture*. She has co-edited *Maoist Laughter and Feminisms with Chinese Characteristics*.



Visit [worldlit.org](http://worldlit.org) to read an excerpt from “I Am Fan Yusu.”

The prose and poetry of Picun are characterized by the unadulterated truth that they represent.







# New Workers' Literature

by Zhang Huiyu

*The Picun Literature Group has independently printed eight volumes of Picun literature since 2015 and released eleven volumes of the bimonthly literary magazine New Workers' Literature (Xin gongren wenxue) in electronic form since 2019. In his preface to the inaugural issue of New Workers' Literature, Peking University professor Zhang Huiyu, who is also the leading mentor of the Picun Literature Group, explains the meaning and significance of "New Workers' Literature" in relation to twentieth-century Chinese history and global capitalism.*

In late April 2017, domestic worker Fan Yusu's essay "I Am Fan Yusu" went viral on the Chinese social media app WeChat, reaching almost four million pageviews within a few days. This has brought to the limelight the Picun Literature Group, a group of migrant workers living in the outskirts of Beijing, who love literature and spend their weekends learning and discussing literature with volunteers from the city. Fan Yusu is a member of this amateur literary group.

The mainstream media often call the literary works produced by those migrant workers "migrant workers' literature," "subaltern literature," or "grassroots literature." These terms make sense, but I personally prefer the term "New Workers' Literature" for the following reasons. First, "worker" is not only a professional category; in twentieth-century China, workers were the political agents of the socialist nation. Second, as Chinese workers became the historical and national agents in the last century, notions such as labor, work, and production were no longer associated with negative implications like coolie and low social status, but instead assumed positive connotations in the society. Labor was endowed with honor and aesthetic value. Third, the new workers are different from the old workers. Both old and new workers engage in industrial production, but the old worker was a screw,

epitomized in the Lei Feng spirit, in the enterprise owned by the whole people; whereas the new workers become insignificant and disposable in private capital and foreign capital enterprises. The new worker is "a screw fallen to the ground," as the migrant worker Xu Lizhi wrote in his poem. Fourth, new workers include not only industrial workers but also subaltern laborers in the service sector in the city, such as domestic workers and couriers. The term "new workers" can be used to emphasize migrant workers' dissociation from agricultural production. Fifth, by including the word "worker" in the term, I intend to situate these literary works against the backdrop of twentieth-century China. As early as the 1930s, some Chinese educators were already committed to the education of the laborers. In the 1940s and 1950s, massive literacy campaigns and writers' schools gave rise to a group of worker-peasant-soldier writers. The Migrant Workers' Literature or New Workers' Literature that emerged in the 1990s exists in the same historical context of civilian education, grassroots culture, and mass culture.

The New Workers' Literature is new for three reasons: it has a new creative subject, namely, the new workers, or at least writers who used to be new workers; it manifests the workers' awareness of their own identity, as they embrace the socialist idea "labor creates

the world" to reflect on and criticize modern culture and industrialization; it is future-oriented, as the new workers seek a more fair and just modern world and human civilization. In this sense, the New Workers' Literature is not simply a genre of a specific group's literary output; it is a typical literary expression in response to the crisis of modernity.

I have read many stories written by the new workers. Those firsthand, eyewitness stories tell us about the lives of the new workers and can be read as literary testimonials of their historical position in our era. Literature is the new workers' medium to depict modern life and represent their individual experiences as well as their platform for public discussions and debates. In the name of literature, the New Workers' Literature presents new workers' lives and values, revealing the other side of China's industrial production and urban space; it is thus an integral part of the story of China and the Chinese experience.

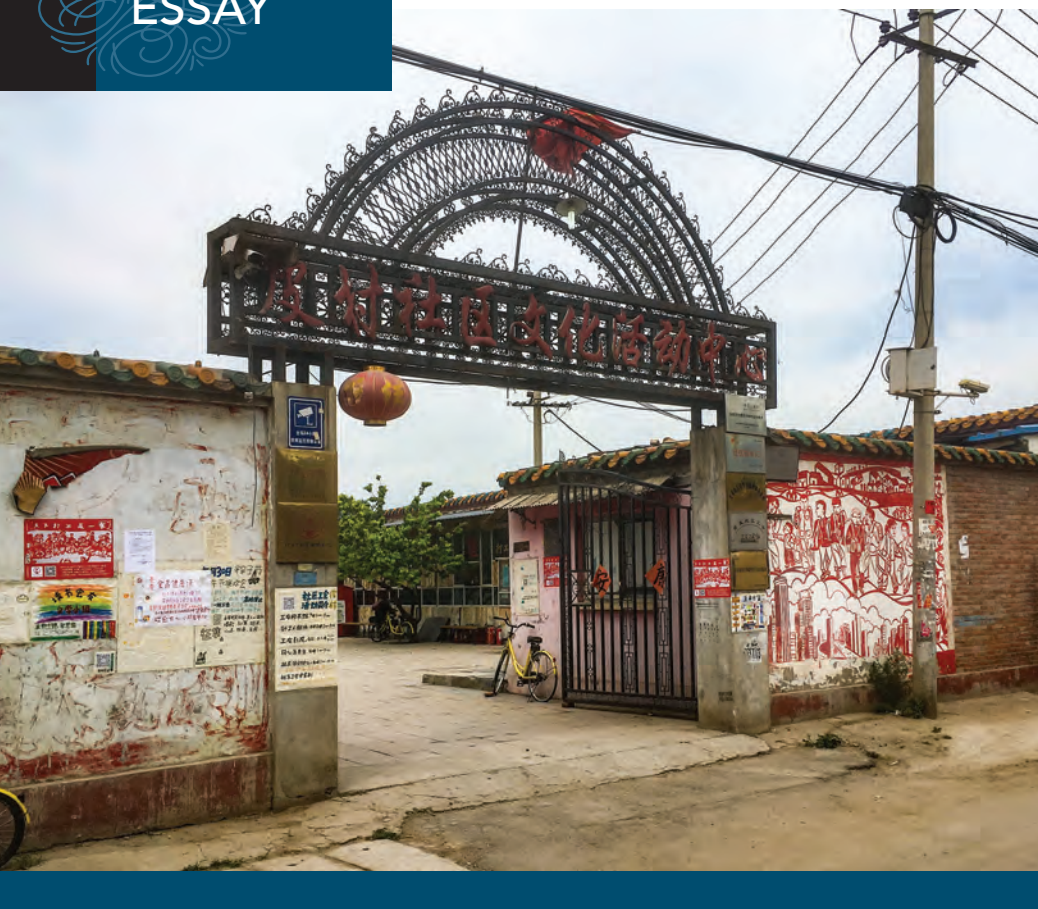
*Translation from the Chinese  
By Ping Zhu*



**Zhang Huiyu** is an assistant professor of journalism and mass communication at Peking University. His research

specializes in film and media studies, mass communication, and the social history of journalism. His publications include *Visual Modernity: Representing the Historical Subject of Twentieth-Century China* and *The Phantom Subject: Studies of Chinese Popular Culture*.

To read a bio of **Ping Zhu**, turn to page 30.



# My Impression of Picun

by Fu Qiuyun

*Fu Qiuyun, also known as Xiaofu, is a young migrant worker from Henan, China, and also the organizer of the literature group in Picun (aka the Pi Village). Picun is an “urban village” or “village in the city,” and the migrant workers are third-class citizens living in the periphery of China’s capital. In this short sketch of Picun, Fu has voiced the migrant workers’ feelings of injustice, powerlessness, and entrapment in Beijing.*

I want to escape from Picun, where I have spent four years of life, because I cannot tolerate its poor living conditions anymore.

In my imagination, Beijing was a splendid metropolis filled with high-rise buildings and bright neon lights. My beautiful dream was instantly crushed when I traveled to Picun. Even though both are in the capital of China, Picun and downtown Beijing are two totally different worlds. Picun is a suburban village located beyond the East Fifth Ring Road. Small as it is, it is home to migrant workers from all over the country, including Henan Province, Hebei Province, Qinghai Province, the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, and the three Northeast provinces. Some of the residents are single, some are couples, some have families, some came with relatives. They work as carpenters, furniture-makers, exhibition helpers, short-term laborers . . . anything that can allow them to make a living.

Precisely because there are so many migrant workers in this small village, our living conditions have increasingly degraded. But why do people choose to squeeze

into this village? Because we cannot afford renting an apartment in the downtown area, because the luxury department stores and fancy restaurants in the downtown area have driven us out. Whose fault is it? Is it the government policy or urban people’s discrimination against us? Without the migrant workers’ hard labor, what would Beijing be like today? Probably people would still live in the old single-story houses or quadrangle courtyards. Now Beijing is a prosperous city thanks to workers’ contributions, but the city is not grateful to us—it drives us out!

The residents in many other suburban villages in Beijing, including the one closest to Picun, have been relocated, and those villages have been demolished. But the demolition team hasn’t come to Picun yet. Maybe because the government does not have enough money for the reconstruction after the demolition; maybe because Picun is right below the flight line so no high-rise building can be erected here. Weirdly enough, more construction is going on this year in Picun. The village’s main street is being renovated. Perhaps some local people believed by doing so they would get more

resettlement compensation when it’s Picun’s turn to be demolished. The ongoing construction has made Picun a worse place. Piles of construction garbage are left on the streets.

As the village’s residents, we are powerless and cannot find a solution. Many people say that the living conditions are horrible in Picun, but no one knows how to solve the problem. Eventually, people just learn to live with it.

*Translation from the Chinese  
By Ping Zhu*



**Fu Qiuyun** is from the city of Zhoukou in Henan Province. She changed jobs many times before ending up at the Workers’

Home in Beijing, where she has been working for over a decade. Currently she serves as the main organizer of the Picun Literature Group.

To read a bio of **Ping Zhu**, turn to page 30.



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我们的根据地：在车间，在工地，在一切需要劳动者的地方……

## China's Battlers Poetry *Punching Up*

by Maghiel van Crevel

*China's "Battlers poetry" is written by members of the new precariat, especially rural-to-urban migrant workers. This is an exciting trend, both in its own right and when viewed as part of a more widely reported sense of poetry's revival in the twenty-first century.*

For a while now, there's been talk of a poetry revival. Maybe we need not take this any more seriously than recurring claims of the death of poetry, or its irrelevance in a demystified and disillusioned world. If you don't buy it when they say poetry has died, you can't very well rejoice when they say it's come back alive. But something is going on. It flows from poetry's ability to be at once ancient and cutting-edge, and to speak to social realities at the same time as transcending them.

Three examples, from my personal perspective. One: in Dutch poetry, inasmuch as I "naturally" know about this as a native speaker who takes an interest, there is growing engagement with issues of social justice, from racism to environmental destruction and surveillance capitalism. This poetry wants to assert itself *in* society rather than shield itself *from* society, without the awkwardness vis-à-vis the mundane that can mark the genre in its more rarified moments.

Two: in international scholarship, one encounters theoretically armed-to-the-teeth, transnational projects on poetry in the twenty-first century. These projects often invoke globalization, new media, and liberation from strictures of social class and poetic form (think spoken-word, Instapoetry), and they

question the notion of aesthetic value as inversely proportional to the size of the audience.

Three: in Chinese poetry, my area of specialization, there's the fascinating phenomenon of poetry written by members of China's new precariat, mostly rural-to-urban migrants whose cheap labor has fueled the workshop of the world since the 1980s, with few civil rights and often under gruesome conditions. There are about three hundred million of them, and many have put pen to paper—or finger to touchscreen, as smart-phones have enabled the emergence of an imagined community-in-poetry over the last fifteen years or so.

In English, their writing is usually referred to as migrant worker poetry. Nothing wrong with that, but it is an explanation rather than a translation. I prefer to call it Battlers poetry instead, after an Australian colloquialism. This comes closest to the Chinese term (*dagong shige*), which breathes a mix of denigration and pride, of vulnerability and strength. Battlers writing is now becoming visible outside China, in poetry and other genres such as autobiographical fiction, in the work of authors like Zheng Xiaoqiong, Xu Lizhi, Fan Yusu, and others who appear in these pages.

Similar trends exist elsewhere in the world (for comparison, in one of my classes we look at poetry by

The literary establishment approaches this writing through a combination of sponsorship and censorship.

highlights the uneasy entanglement of low-skilled labor, literary writing, and the state in modern China. The battler's ordeal—displacement, exploitation, alienation—is a far cry from jubilant images of the worker as dignified masters of their fate in the early, high-socialist decades of the People's Republic. Accordingly, the literary establishment approaches this writing through a combination of sponsorship and censorship.

But things aren't just black and white. Today's state capitalism brings hardship and precariousness but also opportunity. Conversely, back in the day, high socialism brought jobs for life but also cynicism—and remembering this is one of the many things Battlers poetry can do. Witness this excerpt from Chen Ge's "The State Factory," published in the first issue of *Workers Poetry* (*Gongren shige*, 2007), a fine specimen of China's formidable tradition of "unofficial" poetry journals:

Back then we worked at the state factory / with its tall walls and vast grounds / The socialist grass grew like mad / We'd often drop everything / and start cutting. That is to say / there'd be an investigation yet again / With higher-level leadership descending to inspect the guidance we were offered / By the looks of it they didn't like / wild grass uncut . . . And we'd cut. And cut. And cut / Cut through the neck of slavery / Cut through the spine of feudalism / Cut off the tail of capitalism / We harvested socialist wild grass / and communist thought / We didn't cast off our chains / and we didn't win the world

This adds to the story of writing by the underclass, from another angle. And that is precisely what is needed as we engage with Battlers poetry as an illustration of the genre's versatility, as above: at once ancient and cutting-edge. And punching up.

Leiden University



**Maghiel van Crevel** is professor of Chinese language and literature at Leiden University. A specialist of contemporary poetry, he is the author, editor, and translator of a dozen books in English, Dutch, and Chinese, most recently *Chinese Poetry and Translation: Rights and Wrongs* (with Lucas Klein).

*Rights and Wrongs* (with Lucas Klein).

Latinx immigrants in the contemporary US). Still, Battlers poetry is a very Chinese thing. Punching up from the grassroots, it shows that in China, poetry is a social practice that crosses socio-economic boundaries. It also

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**Zheng Xiaoqiong**

has been a migrant worker in Guangdong Province since 2001. Her poetry and prose have appeared in *Shikan*, *Shanhua*, and *Renmin Wenxue*, among many others. She has won multiple literary awards and attended poetry festivals all over the world. Her poems have been translated into a dozen other languages.

To read a bio of **Tammy Lai-Ming Ho**, turn to page 37.

# Huangmaling

by Zheng Xiaoqiong

I settle my body and soul down in this small town  
 Its lychee orchards, its streets  
 A little deck in the assembly line  
 The rain wets my head, again and again  
 I rest my ideals, love, dreams, and youth down on it  
 My lover, sounds, smell, life  
 In a foreign place, under its dim streetlights  
 I rush about, covered with rain and sweat, panting  
 —I put my life into plastic products, screws, and nails  
 On a small worker's ID card . . . My whole life  
 Ah, I give myself to it, a small village  
 Wind blows away everything that I have  
 Hoary and old, I return home

*Translation from the Chinese*  
 By Tammy Lai-Ming Ho



**Xiao Hai** (b. 1980) came from Shangqiu City in Henan Province, the philosopher Zhuangzi's hometown. He has drifted in different cities as a migrant worker for many years and composed over five hundred poems. He was a member of the Picun Literature Group and won the Best Poet prize at the First Laborers' Literature Awards.

# Two Chinese Working-Class Poems

by Xiao Hai

## Chinese Workers

I am a Chinese worker  
Our revolutionary comrades are found in every  
corner of the Earth  
Perhaps consciously or perhaps unintentionally  
We truly stand here  
Traveling the world's ups and downs with our  
hands that feed horses and chop wood  
I am a Chinese worker  
Lurking inside the desire of tall mansions in steel  
and concrete is our captive cut-price  
Youth  
The changes of the season are not ours  
Food and vegetables don't need our attention  
All we can do is let the mystery of the words  
*Made in China*  
Fiercely flood every river leading to the four  
oceans and seven continents  
And at every intersection  
Take the spoils of the October Revolution  
To exchange for much sought-after ticket stubs to  
return home at year's end

I am a Chinese worker  
Let those days of monotonous workshop/factory  
life explode and tumble in the cogwheels of  
time  
On the quay, the suitcases that have crossed  
oceans and seas are stuffed with our  
Penniless and ephemeral pursuits  
The sparks of the years howl  
Torrential rain in the heart, endless winds

Between lightning and thunder we ask ourselves  
When will we give our lives a wild run  
Eight thousand miles is too far  
Three thousand miles is too near  
We are in this vast land, nine million six hundred  
thousand kilometers  
Surviving the night  
I come from a village  
You come from a town  
Both of us fight barefoot in this dreamy big city  
Against the gunfire of the Second Industrial  
Revolution  
I wish to write those blond-haired yuppies with  
blue eyes across the ocean  
A letter  
A letter that can't be delivered  
Tell them of the blooming of spring flowers  
Tell them how high birds fly  
Tell them those walking in the streets  
Wear clothes that appear decent  
Oh, but they make us feel embarrassed  
We sleep ashamed on the warm beds in the  
workshop  
Without warning we wake up in shock  
Full of incomprehension  
Full of drilling pain

I want to ask them  
Why is the dawn sun covered by dark clouds  
Why isn't there a rainbow after rain  
Why are nights in the city bright as day  
Why are rivers, once grand, now sparkling gold  
A shining place or somewhere with overgrown  
grass





There grow Chinese workers standing side by  
side like the Great Wall  
There grow Chinese workers covering mountains  
There grow Chinese workers holding bronze tools  
There grow Chinese workers who smoke and puff  
There grow Chinese workers who are armored  
There grow Chinese workers quiet as a riddle  
There grow Chinese workers  
There grow Chinese workers  
There grow Chinese workers  
I am a Chinese worker

## We Come from the Workshop

The blue work clothes are covered in grease  
The oily hands smell of rust  
In the messy hair hides the light of the cutting  
machine  
I leave the workplace dragging my tired legs

Forget about the assembly-line rush  
Forget about the production supervisor's bark  
Forget about the deep solidified depression after  
being abandoned by fate  
I take off the antistatic garment shaped like iron  
netting and come from the workshop

We are like the wandering wind  
We are like the drifting clouds  
We are the prodigal sons that have left home to  
travel day and night  
We fold love like bauhinia and orchid in dreams

Some come through the Yellow River  
Some come through the Yangtze  
Some come through the boundless Milky Way  
Those bosoms are stuffed with gravel and mud

We come from the workshop, covered in grease  
We come from the workshop wearing decaying  
moonlight  
We come from the workshop, our bodies  
mechanized  
Our communal living space is between the  
workshops  
We come from the workshop  
We come from the workshop

We come from the workshop with strengthened  
hearts  
We come from the workshop with assured and  
loud steps  
We come from the workshop braising in a big  
river of time  
We come from the workshop picking up the glory  
of the sun  
We come from the workshop  
We come from the workshop

*Translations from the Chinese*  
*By Tammy Lai-Ming Ho*



**Tammy Lai-Ming Ho** is the founding co-editor of *Asian Cha*, the president of PEN Hong Kong, and an associate professor at Hong Kong Baptist University. She guest-edited WLT's city issue devoted to Hong Kong (Spring 2019).

# The Sound of Silence

## *Chinese Domestic Workers' Literary Writings*

by Hui Faye Xiao

Since the economic reform launched in 1978, China has witnessed a vast group of rural women leaving their families behind in the countryside to enter urban middle-class homes as domestic workers. However, these domestic workers' physical and emotional closeness to their employers is often seen as a problem, sometimes even a threat to the maintenance of the proper domestic order. Recently, a growing number of domestic workers have participated in the Literature Group at the Workers' Home in Picun to break the longtime silence to tell their own stories revealing social injustices and inequalities at the intersection of gender and class.

On April 25, 2017, a long essay titled "I Am Fan Yusu" was first published on NoonStories, a WeChat public account featuring nonfictional writings. Within twenty-four hours, this article was viewed over one hundred thousand times and reposted hundreds of thousands of times on various social media platforms like WeChat or Weibo. In the following weeks, the "Fan Yusu" fever even spread to state and international media, including *People's Daily* and *China Daily*, the most authoritative newspapers run by the Chinese Communist Party, as well as the *Economist* and the *Guardian*.

This article is an autobiographical account of Fan Yusu, a domestic worker who once lived in Picun on the outskirts of Beijing. Born in 1973 to a rural family in central China, Fan Yusu first worked as a primary schoolteacher in the village after graduating from middle school. At the age of twenty,

she went to Beijing as a migrant worker, first as a waitress and later as a live-in nanny, or *baomu* in Chinese. Her life trajectory is typical of hundreds of millions of women migrant workers from rural China.

Why would an autobiographical essay make such a huge hit? What is the social and cultural significance of this domestic worker's self-writing? To find answers to these questions, we must understand the literary tradition of representing domestic workers and the sociological significance of this group in China's economic boom.

The domestic worker or nanny, as a representative persona of disadvantaged social groups, has been an important subject of Chinese realist literature since its birth. In the humanist-spirited works composed by left-leaning writers in the long twentieth century, the nanny is often portrayed as a stereotypical traditional Chinese woman who silently puts up with all kinds of suf-

fering and social injustice. Lu Xun, often dubbed as the founding father of modern Chinese literature, renders such a voiceless and self-erasing figure as the "dark, kindly Mother Earth." Women writers such as Lin Haiyin, Yang Jiang, and Wang Anyi have written about domestic workers from a gendered perspective to highlight both sexist and classist oppressions of the marginalized group. In other words, the domestic worker has been a staple figure standing at the intersection of minor literature and feminist literature who strives to reveal the everyday experiences, struggles, and concerns of disenfranchised social groups along gender, race, class, and age lines.

However, these canonical literary works about domestic workers have rarely been authored by the workers themselves. Even during the socialist period when the Chinese Communist Party promoted and organized literary activities for factory workers and





farmers, few writings by domestic workers could be found, mainly for two reasons. First, many domestic helpers were illiterate elderly women who were confined within a domestic space that was not even their own home. Second, in comparison to industrial workers or farmers living and working in the same commune, they were less organized due to their migrant status from rural to urban. As a result of their more isolated working and living conditions in an informal employment sector, little institutional support was provided to encourage their literary productivity. All these socioeconomic constraints and displacements made it nearly impossible for domestic workers to pick up a pen to write their own life stories.

Four decades after the economic reform launched in 1978, China's economic boom has also given birth to a rising urban middle class that resorts to purchasing commodified private home ownership as well as commodified domestic labor to fulfill a dream of domestic bliss. As a result, China has also witnessed a vast group of rural women leaving their families behind in the countryside to enter the urban middle-class home as domestic workers. However, these domestic workers' physical and emotional closeness to their employers is seen as a problem, sometimes even a threat to the maintenance of the proper domestic order. A proliferation of tabloid news reports and mainstream media products constantly shed negative light on the nanny figure. For example, a recent megahit TV show, *All Is Well* (2019), portrays how a young domestic worker uses her sexual appeal to manipulate her aging employer and con him out of all his assets. As a result of all these sociocultural stereotypes, domestic workers are disparagingly called "little nanny," a name suggesting their low socioeconomic status, decreasing average age on a competitive labor market, and moral ambiguity as the "intimate stranger" in the urban middle-class home.

Against such a prevailing sociocultural current of demeaning domestic workers, Fan Yusu's autobiographical writing is groundbreaking as arguably the first piece about and by a domestic worker that has attracted so much media attention and stirred up a series

of heated public debates. It chronicles her life and work, providing an alternative gendered narrative in a female migrant laborer's own words and giving voice to those belittled and silenced domestic workers who are scattered and besieged in millions of urban middle-class families.

In this sense, Fan's self-writing continues both traditions of minor literature and feminist literature since the turn of the twentieth century. More importantly, her participation in the Literature Group at the Workers' Home in the Picun and frequent interaction with other migrant-worker writers suggest the formation of a small literary commune outside of the mainstream literary circle. Fan's writing has inspired more domestic workers to write and publish their own stories.

When I visited the Literature Group in June 2019, Fu Qiuyun, a woman migrant worker who founded the Literature Group upon the suggestion of some fellow workers



with a strong interest in literature, told me that the Literature Group has been the most popular and long-lasting branch unit of the Workers' Home. Its regular participants vary from ten to twenty. People come and go because they often change jobs and living places since migrant workers are not guaranteed job security or life stability.

At the beginning there were very few women workers participating in the Literature Group. Fan Yusu was an exception. After the publication of her autobiographical piece, an increasing number of domestic workers have recently joined the group to read, write, and discuss literary works. As

Picun is located far from the urban center of Beijing where most migrant workers live and work, these workers have to spend long hours taking buses or subways to get to the Literature Group. Sometimes they are so absorbed in the ongoing literary activities that they would stay too late and miss the last bus or subway back to the city. Since taking a taxicab was considered too expensive, they would spend the night in the office of the Literature Group next to the Migrant Workers' Museum at Workers' Home.

This belittled and demeaned social group has shown great enthusiasm creating their own writings, often in colloquial or sometimes even crude language, to deal with topics that are usually perceived to be trivial or insignificant by official literary history and mainstream media. In comparison to canonical literary works, their writings are less structured or refined, and easier to read and write for domestic workers whose packed schedules and frequent job changes only allow them to dedicate some fragmented time to literary efforts in their off hours.

With their writings, these domestic workers have broken the longtime silence to find their own voices and critical visions. The Literature Group has provided them with a cultural home in a strange city and a locus for a growing network of domestic-worker writers. Through creating their own cultural texts, the belittled domestic workers demonstrate the power of smallness—namely, to assemble the energy and agency of "small," atomized individuals to establish a novel form of literary commons and to create a grassroots lifeworld not recognized by mainstream media and middle-class culture.

University of Kansas



**Hui Faye Xiao** is associate professor and chairperson of East Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of Kansas.

Her most recent publications include *Youth Economy, Crisis, and Reinvention in Twenty-First-Century China* (2020) and *Feminisms with Chinese Characteristics* (co-edited with Ping Zhu, forthcoming 2021).



An abstract artwork by Alexander Tamahn titled 'Golden Reciprocal'. The piece is an acrylic on canvas, 12 x 8 feet. It features a complex composition of layered, wavy horizontal bands in shades of yellow, green, and blue. Overlaid on these bands are dark, expressive brushstrokes and lines that create a sense of movement and depth. In the upper right, there is a prominent, dark, textured shape that resembles a clenched fist or a stylized animal head. The overall effect is one of dynamic tension and visual reciprocity between the organic, flowing background and the more structured, gestural foreground elements.

# Redreaming Dreamland

*21 Writers & Artists Reflect on the  
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*Plus recent Tulsa Artist Fellow M. Florine Démosthène  
as well as photographers Gordon Parks and Joseph Rushmore*





**Patricia Smith** is the author of eight books of poetry, including *Incendiary Art*, winner of the 2018 Kingsley Tufts Award and finalist for the 2018 Pulitzer Prize; *Shoulda Been Jimi Savannah*, winner of the Lenore Marshall Prize from the Academy of American Poets; and *Blood Dazzler*, a National Book Award finalist. She is a Guggenheim fellow; an NEA grant recipient; a former fellow at Civitella Ranieri, Yaddo, and MacDowell; a professor in the MFA program at Sierra Nevada College; and a distinguished professor for the City University of New York. She was also a nominee for the 2018 Neustadt Prize.



# The Storefronts Wore Their Names

by Patricia Smith

Lord, he was born a pesky question. Know he always wore the danger hour of dusk. The white folks named his skin impossible. He teetered, balanced on the Negro inch of sidewalks, dressed in hues of chance and mud, eyes straight ahead, while trying to recall the gospels that were conjured just for him: *Unsee the white men that you see, demand yourself upright. Your name is Rowland, give it bellow.* But in other mouths, that name would slog through spittle, wrap its hateful hands around his neck. He barely found the breath to ask what was so terrible in him. Their answer had to be some form of fire.

The answer's bound to be some form of fire, perhaps a blinding spew of blood, a tree with shadowed arms that stiffen for the hang. They sweat the need to disappear a thing, to unbelieve in, unbecome a thing, to call a man or boy a thing, to kill all that he is until he's less than that. The white man loves to torch a thing, to torch a landscape flat, to turn it to mistake and then deny it ever was. They hate by hating most the things they've made to disappear, and then what they still see—the way he walked, unleashed, his stride, too loud, too Negro, riding flow

just like some Negroes stride, in overflow, as if he were a man and white, he had to realize how sharp the anger bloomed inside their chests, and then—he touched the girl, he ruined her sterling skin with his, they screeched. He touched the girl!, and if he did or not, he did. And “touch,” of course, meant he had scraped her with his crave, he bit and lapped and penetrated, he drew blood and moan, he left that nigger sound on her, a wail she'd always wear. He touched her. So his rawboned throat was measured for the noose, and white men gathered for his disappear, their tangled voices rising like a pyre.

Entitled voices tangled in a choir of loathing, bloated blue, its keyless shard of song a bitter spitting of his name again and yet again—he'd shortened it to *Diamond Dick*, and yes, they were afraid that might be right, afraid Miss Sarah Page would fret and fever-flail, not wanting to forget him happening to her. They named him beast, and startled at the way that he succumbed to cuffing—upright, bristling, knowing his people just enough to know they wouldn't let him swing, they wouldn't let him disappear, his body left to those who'd sing their privilege in place of dirge.

They warbled privilege because their days were filled with nothing but deciding how best to dispose of Diamond Dick, his blunt and brutish fingers still an awkward source of agitation for Miss Sarah Page, who some folks thought might not recover from that touch, or what she'd dreamed as touch. But they had no real knowledge of the family of Negroes, viscous as the stubborn blood of Negroes, men who'd lay their own lives down so he could live. He sensed their rumbling march toward him, determined men who knew the sun rose high on every man, so every man deserved some sun. The homes, the offices,

were theirs to own. The storefronts wore their names. And yes, they'd gathered, minds set on that boy, not knowing if their numbers were enough to save him from the rope, but needing to be there, to say, *We're here*, to pull that boy inside the widening circle of their arms, to meet the menace in his jailers' glare with menace of their own. And as they marched in their unsettled silence, hefting sticks and guns, their path ahead began to swell with rancor, venom blurred the way, and soon those bladed sounds for black rained down, that spit in lieu of Christian names. The crackling in the crowd, the screech of hate and all its ways





aloud. The blacks clawed thru the toxic maze of crowing, snarling throngs, that sea of white the jail so close. And then—it could have been most anything, so many things can make “upstanding” men become the monsters that they are—a numbing shove, a rifle wrenched away, the flinging of a barb that names a man much less than what he is, the gall of those who will not lower their eyes or step aside, so many things can make a man decide on blood, to answer questions no one’s asked with every form of fire. The boy forgotten as that savage specter stalked the Greenwood streets. White men, taking aim.

In Greenwood, so assured and laying claim to everything a black man’s hands had built, the chosen ones obliterated all the crooked triumphs, those unscrupulous successes, lives that coloreds had been fool enough to think were theirs to flaunt and mark with their tenacious stain. A fever, dank, relentless just below the skin, had wrapped the white men in its blister. So they were inclined to kill it all, to blast the breath even from things that never lived. Their howl was feral, and their hatred blind. The god in them set out to touch their sacred flame to everything they set their eyes upon.

In everything he set his eyes upon—the riddled bench, the wretched rusting bars—the boy saw shudder. And the windows cried of endings. He had touched a white girl—he had grabbed her arm to keep from falling, but had gone and really touched the girl—and now the much-debated sacrifice of his one Negro body and its only neck would never be enough. Even the air was frantic soldier, slapping blue aside to spew its heat. He heard the bullets as they wounded wood in search of pulse. He smelled the stigma in the brick, the ruin of every shelter they had built and blessed.

They built the blessed shelters and the banks and busy offices, the barbershops, the millinery with its smart chapeaux and silken crowns for Sunday service, plus the churches, where the congregations prayed their shelters would be built and duly blessed, the schools where children learned to write their names, the shop where bolts of cloth were cut for dresses, kitchens turned into salons, that stink of flowery pomade and burning hair. That place where music rose... without a source or reason, mingling with voices ’til the sky itself was song, their tribulations waning with the dawn.

Their tribulations waned with every dawn until the white man, so intent upon his quaint possessions, rose to claim his dawn again. He rose to claim his sky, his cloth and nails, his wood, his bolts of silk, his shears and pressing comb his many books and pens, the market and its crooked stairs, he claimed the women, then the men, and then the black in all their mirrors, then their mirrors. And Greenwood, glorified and built in search of blessing, disappeared—gone was its whole assembled soul, and all those loud black hands were silenced, still. And were just hands again. Were silenced, still. And were just hands again.

The men were silent, women still, amazed and quieted beneath the dust from their dismembered homes. Their shadowed skin was still their own, just bulletted and brown, no longer interesting, all that was left was Negro, just the simple mud of it, no lush brocade, chapeaux, or bank accounts, no, just the haughty scraps of wreckage, that slaver bobbing in the distance, perhaps a snippet of a chain. There, someone’s hand. A heart rifled to gone. Blood gumming up the soles of one man ambling, weeping. His only path had crumbled and collapsed. *White man keep beatin’ on that killin’ drum.*

*They just keep pounding on that killing drum.* Inside his cell, Dick Rowland wondered if his skin against her skin, that second of mistake, was all it took to end the world. He heard the fading roar of colored men, the horrifying sound of pleas with God that ended in a panicked psalm. He heard the frantic one-note squall of children, and the women—*Jesus, Jesus, Jesus*. But... he didn’t hear one white man’s voice, not one—perhaps they’d died of too much carnage or believed that they were God again. If so, their craven clemency would save his life. When you are born a question, you just know.

Whenever you are born a question, know the answer’s bound to be some form of fire. Oh, how those Negroes strode, in overflow, entitled, voices tangling in a choir that warbled privilege as if their days were theirs. The storefronts wore their names aloud. They ambled thru the twinkling maze of Greenwood, assured and laying claim to everything they set their eyes upon, to all the shelters they had built and blessed their tribulations waning with the dawn, its silence, its still-rising. They found rest. White folks kept beating on that killing drum, too blind to know the hearts of those to come.



# Writing History, Uncovering Truths

by Jewell Parker Rhodes

*This year—2021—marks the hundredth anniversary of the 1921 race massacre in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Will it take another hundred years before our nation has full and complete clarity about what happened?*

Recent social justice protests have sparked a new awakening to right historical and contemporary wrongs. George Floyd's murder on May 25, 2020, was a watershed moment for recognizing systemic racism and how, since the dawn of slavery, brutality continues to oppress Black lives.

Video of Floyd's killing, widely shared around the world, served as a catalyst for others to "bear witness" to racial horror. Technology spoke. The murderous tale couldn't be buried, unwatched, or untold. Black Lives Matter protesters connected links between past and present trauma, and, for the first time, the Tulsa

Race Massacre was widely discussed in the media and protest communities.

The Tulsa Race Massacre, like so many atrocities against African Americans, had been hidden and voices silenced for so long that it *almost* disappeared from national consciousness.

In a 1983 *Parade* magazine, I read the headline: "The Only US City Bombed from the Air." A black-and-white photo, taken in 1921, showed a community burned to ash. The story, no more than a few paragraphs, cited the basic "facts": Dick Rowland, a shoeshine, was accused of assaulting a white female



elevator operator. A white assault ensued and the National Guard bombed Deep Greenwood, a thriving Black community known as Negro Wall Street. More than four thousand Blacks were interned in tents for nearly a year and forced to carry green cards.

The subject haunted me emotionally and intellectually. How was it that I'd never heard of the Tulsa Massacre? When did Blacks migrate to Oklahoma? Why was this history suppressed? During my research, I found that Dick Rowland and Sarah Page, the white woman, were victimized by yellow journalism that inflamed racial tensions. Ultimately, charges against Rowland were dropped—Page refused to testify.

As a writer, I've always been committed to uncovering suppressed stories. Historically, the event wasn't taught in school curricula, and some children raised in Deep Greenwood first learned of the tragedy once they left Oklahoma.

Thirty-eight years ago, I clipped that *Parade* magazine article, knowing eventually I would write a novel. Why a novel? I've always believed that fictional characters invoke empathy, so readers not only recognize but *feel* the horrific tragedy of humanity under attack.

Researching the massacre in the 1980s, I was told the massacre “never happened,” threatened, and called a liar. Scott Ellsworth's *Death in a Promised Land* (1982) was an important inspiration. His book, for me, was an emotional and literary “tuning fork,” affirming the massacre happened. Meeting Mr. Ellsworth in Tulsa, I can still hear his words: “They're searching for the mass grave.”

Nine years later, with my first novel, *Voodoo Dreams*, published and newly employed as a professor at Arizona State University, I turned to writing *Magic City*.

True to the African American oral tradition, in order to begin a tale, I need to hear the character's voice. It took six months for Joe, the protagonist's voice, to spring from my soul:

Joe Samuels had decided to quit dreaming. Decided to stop dreaming of leaving Tulsa, of discovering new horizons streaked with magic. Yet here he was lying by the tracks, his head to the ground, listening to the rumblings of the 9:45 preparing to leave, trailing Pullman cars and flatcars loaded with cotton and crude.

Wearied, disoriented, Joe needed to sleep. He wanted to ride the rails over the Rockies to the Pacific in a sleeper car, cozy, dreamless in an upper bunk. He didn't want to dream of dying. Three

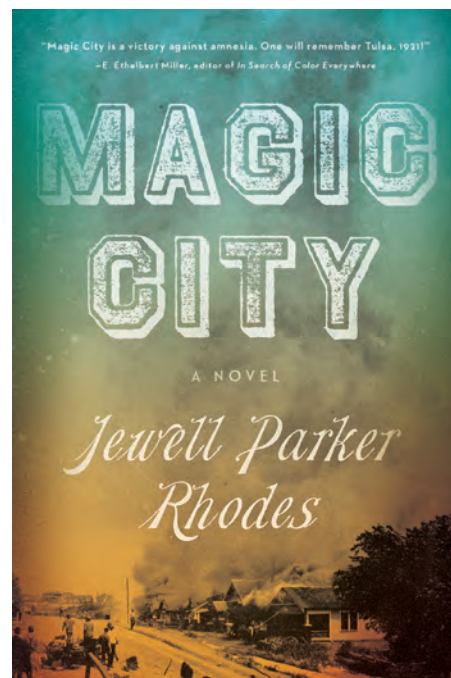
nights in a row, he's had the same dream. A dream that he senses was more than a dream—a haunting, a premonition, an evil worked by the Devil.

**M***agic City* is an imaginative rendering of the Tulsa massacre. Dick Rowland bears no relation to my character, Joe, just as Sarah Page bears no resemblance to my Mary. As a novelist, I invented characters struggling to define themselves and their responsibilities to their communities. I envisioned a spiritual awakening that sustained the human spirit in a time of crisis. Mary and Joe's humanity is as important in my novel as the massacre.

Joe is having vivid dreams of being lynched and set afire. The novel's opening is Joe's attempt to bargain with fate: promising not to migrate further west (a lesser-known African American migration pattern) and not to rail against the racist confines of Tulsa. By the end of the novel, Joe recommits to Deep Greenwood, his home, and the fight for social justice.

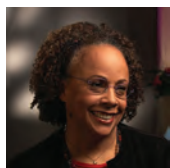
When I discovered Tulsa was called the “Magic City” during the 1920s, I thought of America's spiritualism movement, Houdini, and the linking of African American and Jewish traditions in the spiritual “Go Down, Moses.” Tulsa, during the 1920s, was a stronghold of KKK activism, which included the persecution and lynching of Jews, suspected communists, and prolabor leaders. The character David Reubens was created as another bridge between Jewish and African American struggles to escape bondage, and as an illustration that prejudice blunts growth, literally and spiritually. My novel's ending affirms love and the greatest civil right: the ability to determine one's identity despite and in spite of discrimination.

**P**ublishing has always lacked diversity. I was thrilled *Magic City* was under contract. Spreading the history of the 1921 massacre seemed a certainty.



In *Magic City*, I envisioned a spiritual awakening that sustained the human spirit in a time of crisis.

Finally, seventy-six years after the Tulsa massacre, the first novel about the massacre would be widely available. Except it wasn't.



**Jewell Parker Rhodes** is the Virginia G. Piper Endowed Chair at Arizona State University. She's written six adult novels, *Voodoo Dreams*, *Magic City*, *Douglass' Women*, *Season*, *Moon*, and *Hurricane*; a memoir; two writing guides; as well as seven youth books, including the *New York Times* best-seller *Ghost Boys*; *Black Brother*, *Black Brother*; *Towers Falling*; *Ninth Ward*; *Sugar*; *Bayou Magic*; and the forthcoming *Paradise on Fire*.

Photo courtesy of the author

Inexplicably to me, my editor refused to publish the manuscript, saying the characters were “unlikable” and it wasn't clear that the white woman “didn't ask for it.” I was floored. *Magic City* was inspired by America's classic racist trope that a white woman was sexually assaulted by an innocent Black man. This rumored assault sparked the massacre. While I was ready to

do any revisions to improve my novel, my contract was abruptly canceled.

HarperCollins then acquired the book and launched it with an impressive ten-city book tour in 1997. Finally, seventy-six years after the Tulsa massacre, the first novel about the massacre would be widely available. Except it wasn't. Starting my tour in Atlanta, bookstore after bookstore didn't have copies of my book. I was told it was remaindered. Rumor said the fault was corporate reorganization.

A year later, HarperCollins sent me on a paperback tour. I arrived in Oklahoma City right after the veteran, Timothy McVeigh, had been convicted for domestic terrorism for the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. One hundred and sixty-eight people died, and over 608 were injured. Of course, my planned Borders bookstore visits in Oklahoma City and Tulsa were both canceled. Yet the irony of quick justice for a primarily white assault in a federal building and the lack of justice for a seventy-seven-year-old Black community massacre didn't escape me. Echoes of inequitable policing and justice still haunt America. Excessive police and military force for Black Lives Matter protests contrast with the relative ease of access of domestic terrorists on January 6, 2021, who stormed the nation's capitol. The vigorous pursuit of these terrorists also contrasts outrageously with the lack of prosecution of white supremacists and police officers who still to this day kill people simply for driving, talking, walking, and being Black.

**A**fter *Magic City* was published, the *Tulsa World* sent a reporter to interview me who had also done a book review. He suggested *Magic City* should be nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. (A copy of his interview and review remain in my files.) *Tulsa World*, the city's premier newspaper, never published the interview or the book review. A year later, at Tulsa

LitFest, I encountered the newspaper's editor. “It's nothing personal,” she remarked. How could it not be personal as well as antagonistic to Black cultural and historical truths? Presumably, subsequent generations of white Tulsans feared reprisal so much, they couldn't even bear to publish an interview or review of a fictional account of the real massacre. Several national reviewers, I later learned, received hate mail for discussing a novelization of a “fabricated” event.

To me, it makes a perfect, traumatizing sense that the first time I saw the robed Ku Klux Klan was in Tulsa. It was another Tulsa LitFest event, and my biracial middle-grade daughter accompanied me. Both of us were deeply shocked to be within a few feet of grown men dressed as pointy-headed ghosts. Covering my pain, I tried to joke, “Wow, going on a field trip with Mom, you get to see the Klan!” My daughter and I further deepened our conversation about race. Knowing how the KKK terrorized Blacks, we discussed how the police officers—Black and white, male and female—were protecting the Klan's (for the moment) peaceful, sign-carrying protest before the courthouse steps.

**F**lash-forward, it is now nearly a hundred years since the Tulsa massacre. President Trump in 2020 convened his first, maskless, not socially distant rally in Tulsa during the Covid-19 pandemic. Though it has been denied, there's no doubt in my mind that the Tulsa rally was a dog whistle for white supremacists. Sadly, three weeks after Trump's rally, virus cases soared. Herman Cain, a rally attendee, former Republican presidential candidate, and a Black man, died from Covid-19.

In recognition of the hundredth anniversary of the Tulsa massacre, twenty-four years after its first publication, *Magic City* is being reissued.

I still believe history has power to teach and unite us. I believe artistic representations can promote much-needed empathy and healing.



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In the wake of Black Lives Matter protests, publishers are making a concerted effort to publish more diverse voices and to promote social justice. The aim is to change the master narrative—to allow *no* story ever to go untold.

I still believe history has power to teach and unite us. I believe artistic representations (whether visual, musical, fictional, etc.) can promote much-needed empathy and healing.

Unfortunately, white supremacists today continue to promote racial and religious discrimination. Yet chants of “Jews will not replace us” and Black Lives Matter deniers have been met with multiethnic and multigenerational protests. Prejudice and implicit bias are not dead, but I’m inspired by the coalition of people who are beginning a new civil rights wave.

In October 2020, archaeologists excavated part of Oaklawn Cemetery in hopes of finding the more than three hundred people killed during the Tulsa Massacre. Twelve bodies have been unearthed but not yet identified.

There are still thousands of smaller stories within the larger 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre that have been suppressed and lost. Will it take another hundred years before our nation has full and complete clarity about what happened, how many died, and who were all the destroyers and murderers?

My hope is that my novel, *Magic City*, continues to inspire and to affirm that hatred for any reason—race, religion, gender, class—diminishes us all.

All stories deserve to be told. Especially those that have been buried, purposefully not told.

*Arizona State University*

*Author's note:* With profound gratitude to Jane Dystel and Miriam Goderich of Dystel, Goderich, and Bourret. Thank you for believing. Heartfelt thanks to Peternelle van Arsdale, my brilliant editor. In loving memory of Jan Cohn, whose wisdom and guidance inspired me. Extra special love to Brad, my husband and first reader—*vous et nul autre*.

*Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this issue do not necessarily represent those of its sponsors.*



## POETRY



**Joy Harjo** is an internationally renowned performer and writer of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation and was named the 23rd Poet Laureate of the United States in 2019. The recipient of multiple awards and honors, most recently she served as executive editor of *When the Light of the World Was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through: A Norton Anthology of Native Nations Poetry* (2020). Her memoir, *Poet Warrior*, is forthcoming in fall 2021.

Photo by Karen Kuehn



# Somewhere

by Joy Harjo

It was the day of brutal winds, all of them  
ganging up to blow injustice down. They sang the  
changing weather. I was going nowhere.

Anything on the ground not burdened by gravity  
was twisted and lifted up to drop. There were  
dreams, cities, and plastic bags. I was going  
nowhere.

I tightened my coat to the approaching winter,  
but you cannot duel and win against a season,  
history, or a murder of winds.

Shooting down MLK Boulevard, I was  
approaching Archer, the juncture of several  
histories. A burned street of wishes was smoking  
there. I was going nowhere.

I just wanted to get home, but where is home I  
always ask the sky, no matter where I roam. An  
old Mvskoke map is different. We know by trees,  
rocks, and the obligations of relatives. We might  
be going nowhere.

Our roads aren't nice lines with numbers; they  
wind like bloodlines through gossip and stories  
of the holy in the winds. History is everywhere.  
Three tribal nations met here. We weren't going  
to go anywhere.

At the corner of justice and fight, the thought of  
the miraculous was miles from my mind. It was  
nowhere in my mind. It was curled up in a distant  
field in the heart of a once-loved country.

Then I saw books flying from an unseen woman's  
hands, shoes that never fit her or anyone, and  
poetry everywhere. She was going nowhere.

I had been thinking of the massacre down the  
street from here, and how ghosts keep their place  
among us. How I might be a ghost set loose here  
in the wind, walking with a ghost of fire.

And then there she stood, a ruined goddess, half-  
naked on the sidewalk, classic Africa in her stance  
of beauty. We are going nowhere.

"Excuse me, excuse me," she called out to me.  
There is no excuse for this raw story of abuse.  
And no clothes will fit this moment of the tale.  
Nothing good enough for her beauty.

She was a child when the first man took her. Her  
home is her pain naked without clothes. Where  
was her father, her mother? Burning. There is  
nowhere nowhere.





Time is always moving. It is we blood carriers who stay rooted to the gravity of hurt. The story has to be told to be free like a tree lifted in a breeze. If we don't tell it; the stillness will.

I could give her my jeans, my jacket, my shoes. I searched her mind as it flew in the wind. My mind chased her mind through tunnels of time. It was going nowhere.

There is no excuse sang the winds of forgotten history as they covered her up with a ragged blanket stitched with loneliness to take her with them.

I was feeling my pockets for change, for guns to protect her, nails and lumber to rebuild all the houses burned by hatred. I only found a pen without paper. History goes nowhere.

It is always female power that bears truth to righteousness of any new nation. Liberty guards the harbor. Sacagawea the river of discovery. The Virgen de Guadalupe, the earth.

And here, the one for whom I have no name, is not nameless. The mass grave is a grave of names. Without knowing them, we are going nowhere.

I see her now on every corner, the miracle the winds brought, a song made by the rejects of history, wearing clothes that cover nothing. She is everywhere.

I turn up the music. It's from my girlhood just miles up the road. Blood tales run through our bones, like these streets made of the unspeakable. These winds will never stop telling the truth. I thought I was going nowhere.

*December 30, 2020*

*Tulsa, Oklahoma*

*The Muscogee Creek Nation Reservation*

## POETRY



Poet, librettist, and translator **Tracy K. Smith** served two terms as Poet Laureate of the United States and is the Roger S. Berlind '52 Professor in the Humanities at Princeton University, where she also chairs the Lewis Center for the Arts. The author of four books of poems, she received the 2012 Pulitzer Prize in poetry. In October, Graywolf Press will publish *Such Color: New and Selected Poems*.

Photo by Rachel Eliza Griffiths / Courtesy of Steven Barclay Agency



# Mothership

by Tracy K. Smith

You cannot see the Mothership in space,  
It and She being made of the same thing.

All our mothers hover there in the ceaseless  
blue-black, watching it ripple and dim

to the prized pale blue in which we spin—  
we who are Black, and you, too. Our mothers

know each other there, fully and finally.  
They see what some here see and call anomaly:

the way the sight of me might set off  
a shiver in another mother's son: a deadly

silent digging in: a stolid refusal to budge:  
the viral urge to stake out what on solid ground

is Authority, and sometimes also Territory.  
Our mothers, knowing better, call it Folly.



# ellison visits greenwood, 1921

by Quraysh Ali Lansana

oklahoma sun an oppressive neighbor  
in august 1920. churchgoers settle  
after-dinner stomachs. deep deuce  
a murmuring disquiet: raid at the chandler's.

moonshine & melanin the news on the street.  
daddy chandler & one officer dead & young  
claudé jailed with alleged murder on his shirt.  
the christian sabbath a buzzing lynching bee

three white men freed claudé from his cage  
one thousand armed black men on 2nd street  
mayor & police allow one of three cars  
of now unarmed black men to find claudé

to return the next sweltering midday without  
him, his body rotting meat ten miles from okc  
beaten & shot. miss ida had had enough.  
her lewis gone years now, she frets when ralph

delivers the *dispatch* & herbert still too young  
to spell KKK. maybe indiana. maybe gary, where  
brother works steel. a stop in greenwood to visit  
family on way north. hundreds of shops

businesses, elegant houses, hospitals. vibrant  
black life in the face of jim crow, so unlike  
the deuce. closer to the harlem ralph would know.  
gary was not negro paradise. ida jobless, the boys

eating garbage from trash cans. okc was hateful  
but at least familiar. dry heat stings black skin  
irritable but somehow bearable with family.  
highway leads them back to tulsa before 2nd street.

greenwood was gone. black wall street now invisible.



The author of twenty books of poetry, nonfiction, and children's literature, **Quraysh Ali Lansana** is currently a

Tulsa Artist Fellow as well as writer in residence, adjunct professor, and acting director of the Center for Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation at Oklahoma State University-Tulsa. He is executive producer of KOSU radio's *Focus: Black Oklahoma*, and his forthcoming titles include *Those Who Stayed: Life in 1921 Tulsa after the Massacre*. He is a member of Tri-City Collective.

# Djeli

by Kalenda Eaton

*A djeli (commonly known as a griot) is a West African storyteller who is the keeper of oral tradition and village history. The following creative essay, based on the author's family history, is written to honor speakers, perspectives, and storytelling traditions carried by Black women.*

She was in a talking mood that day. The sun was shining through the side window that was covered with dust no one could ever reach. She was sitting in her large, upholstered rocking chair with her tray table, books on tape, and Bible concordance nearby.

*"People said to go out to Mohawk Landing when the trouble began. There were people hiding out there. And that's where she went, until it was over."*

The holder of our legacy and secrets in narrative form. This was not a role I knowingly accepted or sought. But it was inevitable as an only child raised by my working mother and retired grandparents, and the youngest grandchild for thirteen years. Outside of school, my playmates were these stories. I would interview my grandparents about

their childhoods with a tape recorder. They would play along, mostly in amusement, but also to encourage my "sharp mind." They would tell me as much as they could remember about their lives in the Deep South and Southwest. Life on the farm, in the fields, in school, or how they were unable to go to school. It all depended

I am known in the family as the histo-

ABOVE M. FLORINE DÉMOSTHÈNE, *BUT I HAVE TO*, COLLAGE ON PAPER, 44 X 60 IN. / COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

I feel like I have known about Tulsa all my life.



on who was speaking at the time. When I would ask about adulthood, they were not as clear on the details. They didn't remember certain things. As a child, I trusted their forgetfulness. They were "old," after all. Sixty-plus years to my eight or nine. And even I knew older people started to lose their memories at some point.

It was only later that I found out they were lying.

*"So, she went out there and waited. When she came back, her house was still there. They didn't touch it—"*

*"And how long was she out there?"  
"... Until it was through."*

Memories tell us everything and nothing at all. Some days they cannot be trusted. I feel like I have known about Tulsa all my life. I remember when Hannibal Johnson's *Black Wall Street* arrived in our house and the conversation about Tulsa that followed. I have always placed this memory along with others I have of being in elementary school and devouring books when I returned home. Yet when the book came out in 1998, I was not a child. I was a semi-adult living on my own and finishing college five states away.

So maybe, that book was not the first I learned about Tulsa at all. Okay. Then, it must have been when I was flipping through *The Black Book* (1974), edited by Toni Morrison. This scrapbook chronicling Black life over a hundred years or more included triumph, tragedy, violence, and the destruction of Black communities. In later interviews, Morrison even says that she first had the idea for her novel *Paradise* while editing *The Black Book*. She came across ephemera in the form of broadsides against the South and newspaper clippings encouraging cer-

tain types of Black people to move west and build Black towns in Oklahoma, for example. So, of course the "riot" would have to be in there. This coffee-table book has been in my house since before I was born. I remember being a small child looking at the images of lynched and beaten bodies, ads for hair-care products, caricatures, and also copies of newspaper clippings celebrating

Memories tell us  
everything and  
nothing at all.

Black achievement all in one place. Certainly, then, that is where I first learned about Black Tulsa. However, recently, I checked out a copy of the book from the library and began searching for any of the many mentions of the "race riot" existing in the Black newspapers of the time. It seems the editors included nothing. Strange.

Was it the African American history classes I took in college, then? Or maybe a documentary on TV?

*"They say it was the white man who sat on her porch. He must have gotten tired from stirring up all that trouble. He sat down right when the mob passed, and when they saw him they must have thought he owned the house, or he was protecting it for somebody. So they passed it up—"*

"But how did she know this?"

*"... The people who were still around saw it and told her when she got back."*

So, the house was saved by grace or divine providence. When she first told this part of the story, so matter-of-factly, it made me doubt these events. This twist of luck always struck me as mythic and wishful thinking. A bit of magic, or a little "Jesus" inserted into an otherwise bleak narrative. Yet, in 2003, while designing a humanities course entitled "The Black West in History, Literature, and Film," I included a section on Black Wall Street and the Tulsa Race Riot. While choosing material, I read accounts of employers who stood in front of houses they wanted saved. They protected. Images of a twisted biblical Passover flashed in my mind: the chronic disease, the fire, three days of darkness . . . But, in the absence of lamb's blood, scores of able-bodied white men flung themselves across the porches and doorways.

What are we to make of these whites in Tulsa who saved their workers' homes? Those who vouched for Sally or Charles. I assume landlords were a part of this effort as well. Are we supposed to appreciate their efforts to save their investments in human labor and/or residential property? Does that count as benevolence? *Are we* to make of these whites in Tulsa?

Would that count as benevolence?

*"But I had a wonderful childhood and upbringing. I listen to how friends of mine who grew up in Jim Crow talk about all of the problems and how they couldn't look white people in the eye. We never had to move off the sidewalk when we saw white people coming toward us. We were not bowed down and afraid. At*

Images of a twisted biblical  
Passover flashed in my mind:  
the chronic disease, the fire,  
three days of darkness . . .

The keepers do not  
claim you as righteous  
stewards.

Dr. Eaton's piece also appears in the Spring/Summer 2021 issue of *Oklahoma Humanities*. To get a free copy of the issue, visit [okhumanities.org](http://okhumanities.org).



*Booker T. Washington [High School], we were always taught our history and to be leaders. You know, one of my classmates, John, turned out to be a great man and well-known professor. Real high up. We have always been very proud of him. He was always so smart. His whole family was. He even skipped a grade—*

*"Wait, who?"*

She was a child of Greenwood's renaissance. At seven years old, she moved to Tulsa with what was left of her nuclear family to live with her mother's sister. She was her favorite. An entrepreneur who was always running something. In 1922 they were all starting over with more determination than before. In an earlier publication I wrote of how transgenerational trauma produced from "knowledge of past racist violence, coupled with witness of present racist violence," transfers. Yet, her memories defy me at every turn. She made no room for the dead, only the living. Tulsa transferred excellence, pride, and confidence down through her generations. The "riot" was never buried but also not the way she or her community defined its existence. She lived her life unapologetically because of Tulsa, not in spite of.

What does it mean to commemorate acts of racist violence? We piece the scattered parts back together. We honor those who experienced loss. We grieve. We give space to acknowledge, reflect, repair, and repay. Do we remember those who fought

back? Those who refused to be broken? Those who stayed to rebuild, or willingly moved in? Is the exercise the same? Do we celebrate as we also recall?

Some thrive and profit off narratives of Black death and destruction. They can only bear witness to suffering and pain yet remain blind to Black resilience, tenacity, or self-sufficiency. That's okay. They need not perceive these truths.

The keepers do not claim you as righteous stewards.



A century later, I am the one living in Oklahoma. I stand at the crossroads of epics old and new. I carry the yield—tales of five generations harvested from these plains. Though this land does not belong to us, I dutifully bring our stories home.

During the first months of the coronavirus pandemic, going to the grocery store made me nervous. I would steel myself against the unknown and make a mad dash in and out. I knew exactly what I wanted with an eye on the line queue, while calculating how long it would take for me to get out of there and back to the car. But for some reason, not this day. I was looking through the glass case of meat and fish trying to decide how much to spend.

He worked in the store. He wore a smudgy neck gaiter barely clinging to the

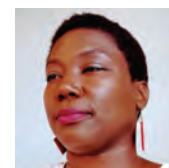
crease between his upper and lower lip. Every time he spoke it fell down more and he would quickly pull it up, but not far enough to cover his nose, so this routine kept happening. It was tortuous, but I couldn't look away. He said, "I wear this 'cause they make me (gesturing to the store), but I don't believe any of it. It's not real. It's all a hoax." His voice was gravelly and rough. He coughed. "You know what? All my life something has been trying to kill me. But it hasn't."

As we looked across the meat case at each other, we had that one thing in common.

Yes, we are still here.

*"They thought they won, but they didn't."*—Says she.

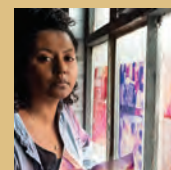
*University of Oklahoma*



**Kalenda Eaton** is an associate professor in the Clara Luper Department of African & African American Studies at the

University of Oklahoma. Her scholarship focuses on Black women's narratives, the American West, and historical fiction. Eaton is a Fulbright Scholar and has received funding from the Mellon Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Social Science Research Council to support her research.



**Crystal Z Campbell**

is a writer, multidisciplinary artist, and experimental filmmaker of African American, Filipino, and Chinese descents who hails from Oklahoma. Campbell's hybrid essays and poems have been published in *Hyperallergic*, *GARAGE*, *Monday Journal*, and *World Literature Today*. Campbell is currently a Harvard Radcliffe Film Study Center Fellow (2020-2021).

Photo by Melissa Lukenbaugh

**ABOVE**

Crystal Z Campbell, *Notes from Black Wall Street* (Soft, Receptive, and Absolute), 2019, mixed media on wood, 30 x 20 inches / Courtesy of the artist

# Makahiya

*(How Do I Tell You I Remember)*

by Crystal Z Campbell

Can a weed be humble  
bashful, sensitive, or shy  
to test for memory, drop it from its senses  
lean over the balcony  
with your camera  
telephoto a royal freefall  
repeat from increasing crowns, observe  
in bursts, freeze  
a mandrake's scream  
in frames

*(to survive, means you have mastered the art  
of feigning sleep.)*

Can a weed fake its own death  
rumor itself a zombie  
lavender pom-poms shrieking with laughter  
accordion breaths, pleat upon pleat,  
each one advocating for the drone of the next  
twinned petioles fanning inward  
synchronized swimmers of predictable  
choreography  
space race in battered capsules  
shunning contact, drooping in

*(masses, are like weeds, too.)*

Can weeds be so unknowable  
deserving only of uprooting,  
unnaming, and withholding  
details dusted in loose soil  
one thick skull to four heads

pollinating a pistil  
shooting the system  
with no hands  
to tell the times or  
plot a way to leave

*(let it be to move from, or stay back.)*

Can a weed be a clock  
like a rounded pocket glass of hours  
buds and stems cut from past lives  
leave this one with eyes enclosed  
arms folded, mummy  
stay, forever  
inside of a sleeping bag  
there are dogs,  
cats, too

*(a sentient being often closes, falls, or stills,  
when touched.)*

Can a weed crack  
wisely, perennially  
or what did  
the riot say  
to the massacre

*(even the wind is a threat to something  
without roots.)*



# Goldilocks Syndrome

by Minna Salami

*There was once a beautiful little bear called Baby Bear. One day, Baby Bear went for a walk in the wild woods with her parents, Mama Bear and Papa Bear. After a long stroll, the family looked forward to returning to their cozy home where three bowls of sweet and delicious porridge awaited. Baby Bear skipped happily as she thought about eating porridge with her parents in their three comfortable chairs before relaxing and napping in their three new made-to-fit beds.*

To be colonized is precisely to have your subjecthood compromised through various means.

The above is the first paragraph of *Three Bears and Goldilocks*, a story that I'll tell interspersed in paragraphs throughout this essay. You might notice that there is something off-kilter both in the title and above paragraph. That is because it is an inversion of the original fairy tale, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, where Goldilocks is the subject of the story. In my retelling, it is instead the three bears and specifically Baby Bear who occupies the position of subject.

Subjecthood is a central motivation in my instrumentalizing the fairy tale because subjecthood, or lack of it, is pivotal to discussions about decolonization, which is the principal theme of this essay.

Grounded in the work of such thinkers as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak, "the colonized subject" is, for example, a frequently employed expression in postcolonial studies and successional discourses. However, at least at surface, "the colonial subjecthood" expression betrays the agonizing truth that the categorical deprivation of those who are colonized *is* subjecthood. To be colonized is precisely to have your subjecthood compromised through various means.

The writer W. E. B. Du Bois referred to this debilitated position of personhood as "double consciousness" when speaking of the consequences of racial apartheid for Black Americans. He wrote that double

consciousness is "a sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."

To the extent a colonized people claim subjecthood, I would argue that it is a "precarious subjecthood." The hallmarks of "precarious subjecthood" are that it does not allow placement of the self at the center. It means not being the person, group, or entity that is observed; the thing to which time is devoted. The precarious subject is thus deprived of the agency that time provides, whether that is the narrative timeline of human history or the comfort of the present moment. Conversely, to



hold a stake in the wider world, a sense of uninterruptedness is necessary. But that sense of abiding continuity is instead the privilege of what we in contrast can refer to as “assured subjecthood.” The difference between “precarious subjecthood” and “assured subjecthood” is in polymorphic ways the difference between existing and living.

*As the three bears neared their home, Baby Bear suddenly froze. She stopped hopping around and turned to look back at her parents, whose pace had also slowed down upon noticing that their kitchen windows were wide open. “That’s strange,” Baby Bear said. “Yes, it’s very strange,” Mama Bear replied; “I specifically remember leaving the windows only an inch open, to air the house.”*

Colonization is never “simply” land theft and occupation. In order to create the position of “precarious subjecthood” that is necessary for colonial enterprises, the colonizer must assume control of the interiority of the colonized. He must enter those chambers of the soul where power and agency are bolstered and transmogrify them into a space of bewilderment and mistrust.

The Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921, when organized mobs went on rampages killing African Americans and destroying and looting their homes, is an example of the monstrous pattern of creating precarity in both the interiority of a body politic and their external environment in order to create an atmosphere of fear and submission.

The colonizer must enter those chambers of the soul where power and agency are bolstered and transmogrify them into a space of bewilderment and mistrust.

By colonization, I am thus referring both to the occupation of land and the corresponding manipulation of the mind where the ultimate goal is the monopolization of power, agency, and selfhood. The colonizer therefore appears in many roles: as the settler, the patriarch, the exploitative capitalist, etc.

The method of monopolizing power is always the same. Take away people’s rights, with violence if necessary; deprive them of economic resources; and manipulate culture and tradition to justify your actions. The colonizer imposes their language, religion, ideologies, and narrative and uses violent tactics such as detention without trial, collective punishment, mass incarceration, forced resettlement, and extreme torture to occupy geographical and psychological territory. The patriarch uses similar violent tactics to colonize women’s bodies and minds. He uses domestic violence, female genital mutilation, foot binding, breast ironing, forced abortion, witch trials, dowries, honor killings, sexual assault, rape, corrective rape, forced prostitution, sexual slavery, sexual objectification, and respectability politics.

*As they entered their home, Baby Bear and her parents found that their porridge was eaten, their comfortable chairs were broken, and then in their bedroom, they found a little girl sleeping in Baby Bear’s new made-to-fit bed.*

*Who was she? Was it she who had eaten their food and broken their furniture? And why?*

*She was a little girl called Goldilocks, who lived at the other side of the town and had been sent on an errand by her mother, passed by the bears’ house, and looked in through the window. Then, seeing how cozy and resourceful it looked, she lifted the window latch and snuck in.*

*Baby Bear noticed that her bed was broken and burst into tears. Her sobbing woke the girl up. Visibly frightened by seeing the three bears, Goldilocks screamed, “What are YOU doing HERE?”*

It is perturbing that while the colonized people of the world are forced to engage with decolonization, people of white Western heritage are absolved of the arduous work that decolonization involves. You would almost think that the subconscious of white selfhood is free of the burdens of history. This is acutely false. The truth is that if brown and black people must grapple with the individual and collective ramifications of “precarious subjecthood,” then white people need to wrestle with what we can call the “Goldilocks syndrome”: a condition causing ostensibly compulsive and unnecessary injury to the interiority and exteriority of others’ realities while systematizing a position of automatic vindication and worse, reverse victimhood.

*Sooner than Baby Bear could reply that it was she—Goldilocks—who was the intruder rather than the other way around, Goldilocks got out of the bed, put her shoes on, and pushed Baby Bear to the side before running away in panic.*

*Stunned at what had taken place, the three bears were left with a multitude of questions. Had they been naïve to leave their home unprotected? If so, why had they been naïve? Was this all partly their fault? And would Goldilocks return to do more damage? They would never see the girl again, but the specter of her actions would unsettle them for years to come.*

In the story of decolonization, the prefix *de* plays a small and innocent-seeming role. When combined with a verb, *de* typically means to undo or reverse an action: to decaffeinate, defrost, deindustrialize, dethrone, demythologize, detoxify, and so on all connote a reversal, a backpedaling.

Yet when used before the term *colonization*, the innocuous-seeming prefix *de* cannot be taken literally to mean *undo* or *reverse*, as neither is possible when it comes to colonization. The looming sense of danger and the tenor

No one, of any race or gender, can trust a system that is discriminatory even if they themselves are spared from the inequity.

of dissonance remain even when the colonizer exits. As the Egyptian feminist Mona Eltahawy once said concerning the Arab Spring, “I’m interested in how once we’ve removed the Mubarak from the presidential palace, we now have to remove the Mubarak from our mind, the Mubarak from the bedroom, and the Mubarak from the street corner.”

What is possible, however, is to aim toward transforming “precarious subjecthood” into a sense of “assured selfhood.” This is by no means a straightforward task, but by naming it, it is made simpler. To quote from a 1975 speech Toni Morrison gave at Portland State University:

It’s important, therefore, to know who the real enemy is, and to know the function, the very serious function of racism, which is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and so you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn’t shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says that you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says that you have no kingdoms and so you dredge that up. None of that is necessary. There will always be one more thing.

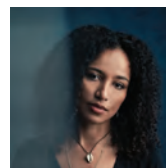
It may not seem essential, but tackling the “Goldilocks syndrome” in a shared “glocalized” ecosystem is critical. No one, of any race or gender, can trust a system that is discriminatory even if they themselves are spared from the inequity.

When the underlying structure is unjust, then the society produced is

vulgar. The place of light and love is in rebuilding together in the spirit of conscientiousness and collective intentionality.

*The End.*

London



**Minna Salami** is the author of the internationally acclaimed book *Sensuous Knowledge: A Black Feminist Approach for Everyone* (2020).

Translated into five languages, *Sensuous Knowledge* has been called “intellectual soul food” (Bernardine Evaristo), “vital” (Chris Abani), and a “metaphysical journey into the genius the West hasn’t given language to” (Johnny Pitts). Salami has written for the *Guardian*, *Al Jazeera*, *El País*, and is a columnist for *Esperanto* magazine.

Minna Salami / Photo by Alan Howard



## WLT JOINS JSTOR OPEN LIBRARY COMPLEMENTING THE SCHOMBURG CENTER’S BLACK LIBERATION READING LIST

In summer 2020, during the worldwide protests on behalf of racial justice in the wake of the killing of George Floyd and other unarmed African American citizens, the New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture launched its Black Liberation Reading List, ninety-five titles that, according to the Center, “represent books we and the public turn to regularly as activists, students, archivists, and curators.”

Late last year, JSTOR approached the editors of *WLT* about adding more than twenty articles from the pages of the magazine to an open library that complements the books on the reading list. Work by and about Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Malcolm X, Alice Walker, August Wilson, Mildred D. Taylor, Edwidge Danticat, Matthew Shenoda, Chris Abani, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Fabienne Kanor was selected for inclusion.

*The library launched on February 1 and will remain available until December 31, 2021. For more information, visit [www.nypl.org](http://www.nypl.org) and [daily.jstor.org](http://daily.jstor.org).*



# Three Poems

by Candace G. Wiley



POETRY

## things to teach my son

*Tulsa, June 1, 1921*

how to hold the line at first street. no escape  
how to tramp backyard gardens  
how to spot hiding places—attics, chicken coops,  
    long tablecloths  
how to force-march men  
how to command your peers  
loot before you shoot  
how a torch makes the cursive motion of a silent  
    e on every doorstep and window. no escape  
loot before you flame  
how to stand back from kerosene puddles like  
    piss after a romp, wide and wary of the fire  
how to recruit the police  
niggers who escape will bring reinforcements  
    from okmulgee  
never let nobody see you flinch, son  
how to hold your bile in front of the boys. no  
    escape  
always grab something nice for your mom and  
    sister  
how bullets can disguise themselves as rose, as  
    man, as sleep  
shoot the dogs. take the horses  
how to recruit the national guard  
how to move a piano  
how to find the good jewelry  
how to include women—as drivers, browsers, to  
    hold the line at first street  
how to use trucks, boxcars, boats, to make bodies  
    disappear  
the righteous rain of turpentine incendiaries, little  
    black birds dropping from the sky  
how to recognize blackface and not shoot your  
    own  
how to hide it if you do  
how to make a rose bloom in the mind of a  
    nigger who shaped himself greek as a sigh  
the magic of making a person a fiction  
like israelites or the middle passage  
how to turn a people into myth

## Sarah Page,

Who schooled you in the Incendiary Arts?  
Trained you to wield helplessness?  
You, 17, full of hip-switch and giggle  
adrenaline-high with the judgment  
of a matchbook.

Who taught you  
the Craft of Damsel? How to snatch breath  
from the air?

He grabbed  
your arm, not knowing it was made of fire  
and fuel. It's since been a century fraught  
with reverbed 911 screams.

Cities still burn.  
Your comfort still kills.

## Dear Neighbor,

*Mysteriously, unsigned warnings began to appear on  
the doors of homes and in an Okmulgee, Oklahoma  
... newspaper. These warnings prophetically  
announced the dire consequences that would befall  
African Americans who remained in Oklahoma after  
June 1, 1921.*

I'm pinning this to your door because I know  
these words will be lost to history.  
Let me confess. You take money from my  
community. You take our jobs.  
My little girl grows too much for shoes. My boy  
looks like your pickaninny should.  
He asked for your boy's hand-me-downs. You  
undermine everything I teach them  
about the White Race. They get nigger diseases  
like scabies and I don't know why.  
My wife compares me to you. My mother does,  
too. In you, I see my failures  
and I hate us for it. The big boys downtown see it,  
too. They can smell it on me.  
Despite this, I still own you. The sun goes down  
on Greenwood June 1st.



**Candace G. Wiley**

was born in South Carolina and is co-founding director of The Watering Hole, a nonprofit that creates Harlem Renaissance-style spaces in the contemporary South, and she often writes in the mode of Afrofuturism, covering topics from black aliens to mutants to mermaids. Her work has been featured in *Best American Poetry 2015*, *Prairie Schooner*, the *Texas Review*, and *Jasper Magazine*, among others. Wiley is now living, writing, and helping direct The Watering Hole from her new home in Tulsa.

Photo by Melissa Lukenbaugh

*Author's note:*  
The epigraph to the poem "Dear Neighbor" comes from Hannibal B. Johnson's 1998 book, *Black Wall Street*.





the massacre; the rugged individualism of the westerns, where indigenous peoples were inevitably portrayed as bloodthirsty “savages”; and the glittering wealth and beauty of the privileged class, a dream that would reach its apotheosis in the 1930s, when Americans of all races were standing in soup lines and dying from dust pneumonia.

In his 1957 story “Sonny’s Blues,” James Baldwin speaks of young boys growing up in midcentury Harlem knowing only two darknesses: “the darkness of their lives, which were now closing in on them, and the darkness of the movies, which had blinded them to that other darkness, and in which they now, vindictively, dreamed . . .”

In 1921 Tulsa, the future promised to be different for young African Americans growing up in Greenwood. At the Dreamland, they could believe a certain dream, imagine a promise fulfilled, until those chaotic hours of May 31 and June 1 when the dream was crushed—and not crushed only but devastated, annihilated, burned to ash, ground to dust by white rioters in just such a determined way as to teach the citizens of Greenwood, and by extension all Black Americans: this is what happens when you dream. Or rather, this is what happens when you work to make a concrete reality of your dreams.

For white Americans—for this white American, anyway—*dreamland* offers other connotations. I think of the myriad illusions and delusions of whiteness in the American dreamland where I grew up, just fifty miles north of Tulsa, never having heard a word of the massacre, as most white folks in those days never heard. This is surely one illusion in white America’s dreamland: we think we know our history, when whole swathes of it have been, and continue to be, covered in silence, obfuscation, and smoke.

Then, too, there is the illusion of the American Dream: our grand notions of democracy, liberty, equality, opportunity for prosperity through hard work regardless of race, class, or circumstances of birth. It is a lie now. It was a lie then. And we believed the lie unspoken: that Black folks were not worthy to be a part of that dream. No one said it in words, not to us white seventh-graders riding our school bus through the segregated Black district of poverty and separation in our town. We were kept ignorant of the fires in Greenwood that rolled north across the prairie decades earlier, scorching away all hope of Black

prosperity, peace, safety from white violence—it was not to be. Not in our town, or any town, not in this white-dominated America. We were so segregated, so indoctrinated, there was a permeation of bias and prejudice so invisible and complete, it was like the air we breathed.

Yet I listened to Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, my heart lifting with the soaring cadences, and somehow believed his dream was our dream. I heard: “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that *all* men are created equal.”

What I did not hear—did not have ears to hear—was his other promise: “And there will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.”

I heard: “I have a dream that one day . . . little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers”

and did not hear the words inside the ellipsis:

“ . . . down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, one day right there in Alabama . . .”

My mind could receive only the illusions I’d been taught. *All men are created equal. Certain unalienable rights. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.*

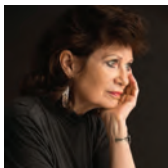
This dream is only one part of our dreamland, but it is foundational, and I was well into young adulthood before I began to see the lie at the heart of it. For many years I called it as I saw it and lived it: “the presumptions of whiteness.” These days I call it by its more telling name: white supremacy. This is the dream that has to be undreamt.

To do that, of course, we have to first come awake, and that’s not so easy to do in this American dreamland. For me it has been a slow, groggy process, beginning in the Civil Rights Era of my youth and continuing through the racial unrest in 1980s New York, where I’d moved in my twenties and where I first learned about the Tulsa Race Massacre while reading a biography of Black writer Richard Wright. Immediately I began research for a novel about the massacre, and this is one powerful place where awakening began for me as I read in blunt, direct language the overt anti-Black racism in the white newspapers of the day. I learned for the first time that they were, in fact,

Then, too, there is the illusion of the American Dream. It is a lie now. It was a lie then.

And history, my own and the nation’s, tells me how hard it is for white folks to come awake.

How do we recognize this horror, which for so long we kept hidden?



### Rilla Askew

(rillaaskew.com) is the author of four novels, a book of stories, and a collection of creative nonfiction, *Most American: Notes from a Wounded Place*. She received a 2009 Arts and Letters Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and teaches at the University of Oklahoma. Her novel about the Tulsa Race Massacre, *Fire in Beulah*, received the American Book Award in 2002.

white newspapers. I had thought them merely “the newspapers,” until I read in Oklahoma’s *Black Dispatch* and *Tulsa Star* and the NAACP’s *The Crisis* and other Black journals a reality I’d had no inkling about. These contrasting visions have informed everything I’ve written since—not just the novel about the massacre, *Fire in Beulah*, but all my novels and nonfiction. It permeates everything I write because it permeates everything in America.

I think of African Americans who live the nightmare of that dreamland in ways I’ll never live it, nor completely imagine it, though I have to try, as we all have to try, those of us who dwell in America’s white dreamland enjoying its privileges, benefits, unacknowledged illusions. I think of white Americans who are trying to come awake in this season of our so-called national reckoning on race—I say “so-called” because I am not sure that it is a true reckoning. I want to believe it is, that we’re making a true accounting of our sins past and present, but I also know that white demonstrations and discussions and book-club readings may turn out to be another daydream allowing us to go on believing our goodness dream of America. How tricky it is to know one is dreaming in dreamland. And history, my own and the nation’s, tells me how hard it is for white folks to come awake.

Even for the many who are really trying, it seems nearly impossible. With every shaking hand on the shoulder, every heart’s cry, *wake up wake up!*, from Mother Emanuel Church to the killing of George Floyd, reality calls to us, and groggily, with a kind of dazed yearning, we are trying to come around. Maybe, like Homer’s lotus eaters, we need an Odysseus to capture us and truss us and pull us, weeping and wailing, away from the land of the waking dream.

I’ve wondered if the January 6, 2021, white mob assault on the Capitol could be our Odysseus. But then I consider the similarities between that assault and the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, which surely shook the nation when it happened, and afterward—by unspoken collusion in dreamland—disappeared from our history. I take it for a

warning. How powerful is the lotus, how insidious our willful forgetting.

So now we come to the centenary of the 1921 white terrorist assault in Tulsa, and I ask myself, What is our place in the commemoration, we Americans who, in the words of James Baldwin and others, believe we are white? How do we recognize this horror, which for so long we kept hidden? How do we acknowledge that we are the authors, both intentional and incidental, of that riotous conflagration one hundred years ago when the dream of white supremacy annihilated the dream of Black Wall Street? How do we own it and yet not try to take ownership of it, not try to make it somehow about us, as we are so inclined to do? For myself, I think of a few possible paths forward:

*To learn more.* Although I’ve been studying the events of the Tulsa Race Massacre and its aftermath for thirty years, when it comes to America’s race story, there is always, *always* more to know.

*To listen* to the voices of those who have suffered the violence, theft, and death, then and now.

*To surrender the narrative* to those who endured it and daily endure the anti-Black racism at the heart of this country—except for the parts I can know, the parts I must recognize, and render: the white illusions that tell me America’s promise of equality and justice is a true thing.

*To own* my part in the collective dreamland.

*To wake up.*

How do we do that? America’s white-supremacist dream is a collective dream in a collective dreamland, and so it will have to be undreamt collectively. But the collective is only changed, finally, individually. Person by person. Dream by dream. Black artists and activists are way ahead of white dreamers on this one; they’ve already envisioned the new world, they’re already creating it—as are indigenous and other artists and activists of color. For the rest of us, though, maybe the question is how do I do it? What’s my part? I don’t have simple answers, I just know we have to be willing to risk it: risk knowing what we don’t know, and unknowing what we think we do. Risk

asking ourselves: What, precisely, do I lose if I lose that dreamland? Am I willing to risk that? If we are, then, yes, I believe that’s a place to begin.

University of Oklahoma

The collective  
is only changed,  
finally, individually.  
Person by person.  
Dream by dream.



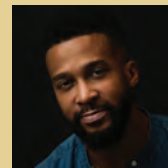




# Against the Horizon

by Clemonce Heard

Every hour or so a train tears in  
like a trumpet, barrels through what was  
once the depot, now the Jazz Hall  
of Fame. The tracks ring louder than  
*massacre*. Older than the land claimed  
by force. Removal. It is a single-file  
stampede with the stamina of steam, no,  
coal, no, diesel. Only night knows  
the plants' pliant smolder. How muted  
stacks secrete what's barely visible  
by sunset. Film that filters its sin.  
The town shuts down at ten, but a single  
finch beckons my window, perches  
power line, preens its disheveled self.  
Its feathers are primed in dust. In what  
rids the parasites, & what kills us.  
The sky thins into a holographic squint.  
My eyes burn against the horizon.



**Clemonce Heard**

is the winner of  
the 2020 Anhinga-  
Robert Dana Prize  
for Poetry, selected  
by Major Jackson.  
His collection,  
*Tragic City*, which  
investigates the  
events of the 1921  
Tulsa Race Massacre,  
is forthcoming from  
Anhinga Press in  
October 2021.

Photo by Melissa  
Lukenbaugh /  
Courtesy of the Tulsa  
Artist Fellowship



# Photographing the Tulsa Massacre

*A Conversation with Karlos K. Hill*

by Daniel Simon

*Just published by the University of Oklahoma Press, The 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre: A Photographic History represents a landmark work of historical scholarship. Historian Karlos K. Hill spent three intensive years researching and writing the book. I had the privilege of reading an advance copy and reached out to Dr. Hill to initiate a dialogue about his work on the project.*

**Daniel Simon:** You write that “photographing brutal acts of anti-black violence had become an important social ritual in early twentieth-century America.” Coincidentally, photography became widely popular in the 1910s with the advent of affordable 35mm cameras, which were marketed to the general public to coincide with the rise of the tourism industry as a national pastime. Yet as “one of the most photographed episodes . . . of anti-black violence in American history,” the site of the Tulsa Race Massacre remains a century-old crime scene. As a visual historian, how would you like readers in 2021 to view the massacre as a *photographed* event, especially in the con-

text of lynching culture and its prevalence during the Nadir of American race relations (ca. 1877–1923)?

**Karlos K. Hill:** Without the photos of Greenwood’s destruction, I believe it would be more difficult to convince people now of the scale of violence that took place. While not their intention, white Tulsans who snapped pictures of Greenwood’s destruction made it possible for future generations to bear witness to what occurred. To a degree, visual evidence of Greenwood’s destruction stands in for so many other instances of racial terror that were not visually recorded and subsequently forgotten.

*The Williams Dreamland Theatre  
before May 31, 1921 / Courtesy of  
the Greenwood Cultural Center*



Visual evidence of Greenwood’s destruction stands in for so many other instances of racial terror that were not visually recorded and subsequently forgotten.



Weaving survivor narratives throughout the book was meant to make their stories central to the story, as they should have been all along.

**Simon:** You also write about your “deep desire to write a book that would highlight the perspectives of the black survivors.” Yet much, if not most, of the photographic history of the massacre represents the gaze of white Tulsans. How did you go about reconciling that discrepancy?

**Hill:** In writing this book, it was important for me to prominently feature Black survivor testimony in ways that disrupted and recontextualized the white gaze embedded in the vast majority of photos exhibited in the book. Doing so was all the more important because many of the images were inscribed with racist comments. While the white gaze is never completely silenced, I think inclusion of Black testimony alongside the images creates a powerful counternarrative.

**Simon:** One of the most horrific aspects of the massacre is that white perpetrators used technologies of war—which had been perfected in the so-called Indian Wars of the late nineteenth century, the Spanish-American War, and World War I—against Black American citizens: machine guns, assault-style military rifles (including bayonets), airplanes dropping incendiary bombs, and trucks that could speed groups of armed mobs into Greenwood. Survivors were also “herded like cattle” into euphemistically named “detention centers” afterward, ostensibly for their own protection. Yet white spectators casually observed the destruction of Greenwood as if attending a matinee and even brought shopping bags with them to carry off stolen property. Was that also an effect of lynching culture’s ability to desensitize onlookers to mass spectacles of anti-Black violence?

**Hill:** Quite frankly, many white Americans accepted lynching and other forms of anti-Black violence as a “necessary evil.” Lynching culture’s primary function was to rationalize white Americans’ brutal

repression of Black people as legitimate, even commonsensical. At the height of lynching during the 1890s, a Black person was lynched every three days on average. Because the lynching of Black people became both routine and uncontroversial for white Americans during the lynching era, even spectacular acts of anti-Black racial violence such as the race massacre were deemed acceptable.

**Simon:** I was struck by Dr. P. S. Thompson’s description of the aftermath of the massacre—namely, the white looting and arson of Black-owned businesses and homes in Greenwood—as the “unthinkable, unspeakable climax” to the events of May 31 and June 1. The ensuing cover-up and historical erasure of the massacre were also unthinkable, but the photographs confront anyone who sees them with the inescapable brutality of the event. A century afterward, they “speak” to us in ways that mere words cannot. Pedagogically, what do you hope teachers and students learn from your book?

**Hill:** When I decided to pursue a pictorial history of the race massacre, my main

goal was to provide an arresting visual record of what occurred in the

interest of making the case emphatically that what occurred was a race massacre rather than a riot. For teachers and especially students who might read the book, I hope the images make it possible for them to develop a deeper emotional connection to the story and to individual survivors of the massacre.

**Simon:** Chapters 3 through 5 document the heroic resilience of Black Tulsans who set up tents amidst the rubble and almost immediately began to raise up the Greenwood community from the ashes. “Angels of Mercy” (chap. 3) tells the remarkable story of the American Red Cross’s efforts, which helped more than 8,500 survivors get back on their feet. I was struck by the fact that seven churches had been rebuilt by December 30, 1921 (fig. 5.12). According to Rev. Dr. Robert Turner, the current pastor of Historic Vernon AME Church on North Greenwood Avenue, parishioners went back to church the next Sunday, just four days after the massacre, having been “refined by fire.” Could you talk about the role of Black churches—and the importance of belief in general—in rebuilding Greenwood?

**Hill:** Black churches (particularly Mt. Zion and Vernon AME) were looted and burned by the rampaging white mob. As photos in my book illustrate, Greenwood’s Black churches were some of the first buildings to be rebuilt. I believe Greenwood’s Black churches sought to quickly reestablish themselves so that they could provide much-needed assistance and support to

Inclusion of Black testimony alongside the images creates a powerful counternarrative.



## Reparations for survivors and descendants are crucial for achieving justice.

their destitute congregants. Due to the leadership that Black churches played in providing emergency relief, the idea that survivors could remain in Tulsa and rebuild became a viable possibility.

**Simon:** Returning to the question of representing Black survivors' perspectives, their written and oral testimonies in chapter 6 provide an overwhelming portrait of courage and resilience in the face of such terror. The sheer humanity of their stories stands in stark contrast to the gut-wrenching devastation depicted in the photographs of chapters 1 and 2. What prompted you to include their perspectives?

**Hill:** My photographic history is dedicated to the lives and legacies of race massacre survivors. Without their grit and determination, there would be little to commemorate on the hundredth anniversary of the massacre. It was important to me to share their perspectives on what occurred because for so many years their accounts were either ignored or discredited. Weaving their survivor narratives throughout the book and especially in chapter 6 was meant to make their stories central to the story, as they should have been all along.

**Simon:** In the epilogue, you write about justice for the victims and survivors of the massacre being "too often permanently deferred." Beyond your book, what can the



occasion of the centennial offer to help the Greenwood community achieve justice?

**Hill:** Reparations for survivors and descendants are crucial for achieving justice. The hundredth anniversary of the race massacre is an opportunity for the City of Tulsa and the State of Oklahoma to do the right thing in regard to reparations. Without a commitment to repair what was taken away, it is not possible for authentic reconciliation and renewal to occur.

**Simon:** In September 1955, *Jet* magazine famously published photographs of Emmett Till's mutilated and mangled body and continued to publish articles about the Montgomery bus boycott and the growing Civil Rights Movement throughout the 1950s and '60s. Many of the iconic civil rights photographs of the 1960s went on to be published in magazines and newspapers with largely white readerships. What role do you see photography and cultural magazines playing in the current debates about racial justice?

**Hill:** As I have tried to frame the history of the race massacre through photos, I hope magazines and other cultural outlets will follow suit because race massacre photos (combined with survivor accounts) tell a compelling, even unforgettable story of

death, destruction, and rebirth. I hope that magazines such as *WLT* can amplify and disseminate widely the story I've tried to tell in the photographic history.

January 2021



**Karlos K. Hill** is an associate professor and chair of the Clara Luper Department of African and African American Studies

at the University of Oklahoma. His other books include *Beyond the Rope: The Impact of Lynching on Black Culture and Memory* (2016) and *The Murder of Emmett Till* (2020). He also serves on the steering committee of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission.



**Daniel Simon** is the assistant director and editor in chief of *World Literature Today*. Along with Dr. Hill

and Dr. Kalenda Eaton, he co-chairs the coordinating committee for OU's yearlong commemorations of the Tulsa Race Massacre. A poet, essayist, and translator, his most recent book is *Dispatches from the Republic of Letters: 50 Years of the Neustadt International Prize for Literature*, which he edited.

An excerpt of this interview also appears in the Spring/Summer 2021 issue of *Oklahoma Humanities*. To get a free copy of the issue, visit [okhumanities.org](http://okhumanities.org).





**Jasmine Elizabeth Smith** (she/her) is a Black poet from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and Cave Canem Fellow. She received an MFA in poetry from the University of California, Riverside. Her poetic work, invested in the diaspora of Black Americans in various historical contexts, has been featured in *Black Renaissance Noir* and *Poetry*, among others. She is the winner of the Georgia Poetry Prize, and her collection *South Flight* is forthcoming with the University of Georgia Press.

# [Greenwood Ghosts Dress Their Sunday Best]

by Jasmine Elizabeth Smith

*after Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool"*

this no parade for your pleasure

no one winds up brass band  
stand celebration

this no market we knife  
melons sample  
haggle down our price

aspirin, or the lady-hand  
leather of Louise half heels,  
some our bit-o-honey, salted seed

from Ferguson Drug Store  
& Grier Shoemaker

no one here hunch their back,  
low eyes, pantomime themselves  
minstrel or maid

we don't give—  
we grand

stand our own  
streets

headlining *Tulsa*  
*Star* newspaper,

Attorneys Spears, Saddler, & Chappelle.

we call Lazarus up from the dead,  
his bluebonnet gurney in  
Frissell Hospital's  
basement

just seen to be seen we filled  
out, we bright enough, we gold-

end weed, we oil reserve, we keep

no time, we Bunn's Shoeshine  
gospel. we holy

spirits  
broken from the mouth  
& matchsticks  
of Bethel Adventist Church pews

past Abner & Hunter  
Barbershop, Carter Billiards,

Hardy Furnished Rooms  
Dixie Theater—

you mistake our procession for ghosts  
envious, the figurative  
you claim we isn't

so why you stop and stare  
is our beauty so vain it a form

of resistance?



# The Slope

by Laurie Thomas

*In the following story, the narrator imagines what role her family might have played in a race massacre—and the generations of silence that followed.*

**MAY 20, 2009**

We used to ride our bikes over it. In the strip mall, behind the old JCPenney that's now a Christian crafts store, there was an empty parking lot for shipping trucks, trash compactors, recycling dumpsters, and us. The lot covered roughly the length of a high school football field, and at the very far end, where a goalpost might sit, was the slope. That was the real appeal. Where the lot's perimeter met a weather-stained six-foot

concrete wall (meant to keep us out of the golfing range next door), the ground sloped sharply upward.

It slopes upward. The slope. It's still there. This morning, after the funeral, I went by for the first time in a long time. I told Ma I couldn't meet her for breakfast; I had some errands to run before my flight. I don't lie to her. The slope was on the way. Parked Ma's Chrysler in front of the store and walked the long way around back.

We were lucky. The forty-five-degree rise in the pavement created the perfect makeshift bike ramp. Back then, we didn't own Mongooses or anything, but we had Huffys and Dynos and Kmart bikes. Good enough to catch some gray sky and tap the mildewed wall, or eat the pavement and crack a tooth on the way down.

I must have looked odd, a grown person in thin cotton khakis and a white button-down shirt staring at a slope in the ground. But there I was again. Twelve-year-old me. Fumbling a pedal grind, wiping out and burning the skin off my thigh. Twice. The hospital visit I tried to avoid became three.

*If you'd stop riding like a demon, maybe we could still save your soul.* Those were Ma's words. "The demon rides," she started calling them, possessed us. If she couldn't make me wear a bra or brush my hair, the least she could do was save my soul.

*What do you want with that old parking lot anyway?* I remember her asking as we scrubbed, starched, ironed, and folded. We came from tough Scottish stock. Pop was a fourth-generation oil field worker. There was always plenty of blackened laundry to make clean again.



I never answered Ma's question. We were twelve. We didn't ask ourselves what the slope was for. In the middle of a strip mall. We practiced all the one-handers and no-footers our stupid bodies could handle. We took it for granted that the slope was just like any other paved hill, and we were going to ride it until someone told us not to.

There were five of us that made up the main roster of "the demon riders." Rust, Fiddler, Husk, Gator, and me, the only girl. You could say we were a gang in the technical sense. On summer nights, when everyone was out, there might be up to ten of us white kids crashing into each other on the lot. When the smell of sulfur got bad, and the asthmatics couldn't ride, our numbers might dwindle to two or three.

Older, wiser kids stayed clear of us, but occasionally Fiddler's brother would tag along if he was out of juvie. I don't recall his name, but I know he was perpetually in the eleventh grade and rode a Raleigh ten-speed with electric-blue handlebars.

It was Fiddler's brother who told us about the bodies buried under the slope. Not Ma or Pop or anyone in our family. He said my grandfather had been one of the leaders. He'd bring a souvenir to prove it. A photo album. Inside, a seventy-year-old picture of my grandfather and a bunch of other men shoveling dirt, digging holes, smiling. Everyone who worked in the oil fields knew, he said. The boy seemed to enjoy the look of shock on my face.

I've tried to picture that moment again: the five of us kids standing at attention, straddling our bikes in a circle around Fiddler's brother as if he were the sun. Or maybe no one paid attention to him but me, while the others spun orbits around us. All I remember for sure is feeling sick to my stomach.

He never came back with the album. Never saw him again at the slope either.

After the boy's account, the possibilities of grandfather's *souvenir* had begun entering my dreams. Yellowing, speckled, photo paper. Fingerprint-smudged cellophane. I finally asked Ma about it. She sat me down in Pop's old easy chair. She had heard the rumors, too. There was no photo that she

knew. If it were true, why didn't the boy show his face again? *Because no proof exists*, she said.

I heard the craft store's back door bang shut. I couldn't stick around the lot much longer. The sulfur in the air was making me nauseous. I had a flight to cancel, some phone calls to make. The number of times we raced our tires over it. Slammed our bikes into it. Bled from gashed knees and scraped chins all over that grave.

### MAY 23, 2009

Rush hour wasn't quite over on the way back from the newspaper's office, and I needed to stop listening to stories about the city council race. I called Ma to ask if she wanted me to pick up anything for dinner. Our conversations were chipper if we kept our talk to the three C's: church, choir practice, and cast-iron cooking. Anything about the slope and our conversation soured pretty quickly.

"We're just getting in from choir."

"I know, Ma. That's why I called after it was over."

"Well, can you give us a minute to walk inside and settle in?"

In the background, I heard Pop's disapproving grunts.

"You can put the phone on speaker while you settle."

"Your father doesn't like speaker."

"I know, Ma. I've heard it a thousand times. *The government is recording our every move. Why help them?*"

"Well, if you know what he thinks, why did you . . ." She trailed off, either because Pop left the room, or because she was pulling her choir robe over her head. ". . . why did you call?"

"I forgot your recipe for three-bean casserole."

"That's a fib, honey. You're not calling to ask about the parking lot, are you? Don't tell me you went back there again today?"

"I won't tell you."

"It doesn't do you any good to focus on dark things. Think of more pleasant stuff. Go to Him."

I bit my tongue. I was wondering how this conversation had switched so quickly to the fourth C—Christ.

"Ma. Why aren't you sadder? That's what I want to know."

"Because I don't think about things that are in His hands." She trailed off. "You know, Annie, I'm starting to think you didn't stay in town an extra week to spend time with your folks."

"Ma. The photo album—"

"—I wish you'd let the dead stay dead."

When I can't sleep, I do laundry. Old habits die hard. I wandered from room to room in my crew socks, scooping up mildewy towels I left on the floor. Being out of fresh towels *could* keep me up at night. I passed an hour in the basement listening to the knocking of the dryer and feeling the room's dampness invade my skin. And writing this.

There are human remains everywhere. Not only in cemeteries. Under almost every building, sidewalk, or parking lot, there's dirt. And in the dirt—casualties. Of countless brawls and battles and accidents. We don't think about the number of dead under our schools or amusement parks. Somewhere, a hole had to be dug in the ground to lay them to rest, right?

I put my folded white shirts away in the dresser and hung my pressed pants in the closet. Since staying in my old bedroom, I had been having a terrible time adjusting. I tried my best to make the space warm and inviting, but it was not uncommon for me to wake up five times in one night. I slid my chilled body under the bedsheets, hoping in my sleep to find some of that pleasant stuff Ma kept talking about.



Our conversations were chipper if we kept our talk to the three C's: church, choir practice, and cast-iron cooking.

No one ever wanted to  
talk about the slope.

## MAY 24, 2009

I rose having slept three hours less than normal. The phone rang with a caller ID that read: *potential spam*. I would normally let it go, but for some reason, I answered. On the other line was someone I was hoping would call—Laurel Brand, a journalist for the *New Times*. She had been working on a story on the perpetrators for years but was having a devil of a time, as she put it, finding anyone who would go on record.

We had set up a date to meet in person tomorrow before I flew back home, but the council race was eating up more of her-schedule than she anticipated. Laurel had a window to talk today and didn't know when she would be available again. I punched Laurel's address into my GPS and asked Ma if she needed anything from the store.

The body sat from sunup to sundown in a closed golden maple casket behind his house. We were burying my grandfather, CT, on his land, under the giant red sweet-gum tree we used to take refuge in during searing summers. It was unorthodox, but the Stewarts were never a family that paid attention to regulations.

My grandfather died peacefully, at home, in the bed he hand-carved from oak, surrounded by four generations of family. The Stewarts had taken turns massaging his cold hands for comfort and singing his favorite hymns. He had lost his sight by then—his once sea-green eyes had turned gray and fishy, but he kept them open to ease the minds of the six daughters, fourteen grandchildren, and thirty-odd great-grandchildren who drifted in and out of his bedroom throughout his last week, wiping his pale forehead and moistening his dry, red mouth.

At the wake, gusts of warm wind swept through the open windows, lifting cocktail

napkins and tussling the fabric of dark skirts and dress pants. It was CT making his presence felt, folks said. Anyone who knew him over the past hundred-odd years—the congregation from First Methodist, lifelong friends from the American Legion, his old Lucky Strike bowling team—came to the house to pay their respects. He was showing us his usual gratitude.

By sunset, most had passed through, and CT had been lowered into the dirt. The spit-roasted pig that the Dawsons brought over had been picked clean down to the knuckles. A trash can overflowing with crushed Coors cans leaned against a barrel of cartilage and bones. Everyone was sauced. After hearing the ninth version of the time CT pulled those farmworkers out of that overturned pickup, I was ready to leave.

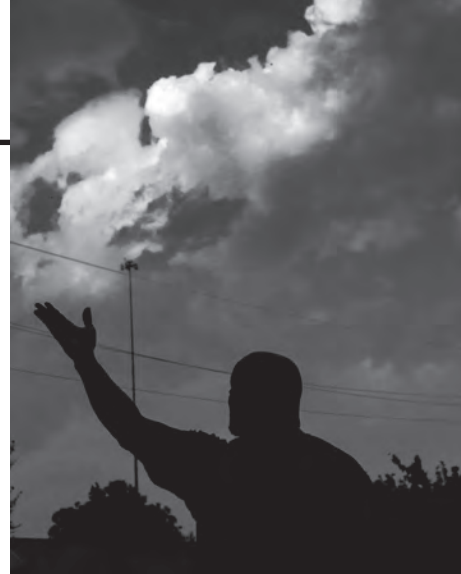
His bedsheets had been washed and changed. I had ducked into grandfather's bedroom to call a cab. It felt strange to sit in his bed, in the spot where he had just passed. Through his window, I could see everything else coming to its natural end. Cars and trucks pulling out of the gravel driveway. A drunk man playing the violin; his inexperienced shrieks cutting through the dark. Pop throwing handfuls of dirt onto the fresh mound.

I was on the phone when Ma came in behind me. Face bloated, makeup soggy. She had dipped into the punch, which wasn't like her at all. Standing there, she looked like she might hug me, which was also unusual.

Instead, she took something that was tucked under her arm and tossed it onto the bed. I picked it up. A photo album. Maybe because of the punch, she turned around and closed the doors behind her.

## MAY 25, 2009

I was surprised. On the way to Laurel's, I drove past an espresso bar, a green market, and a hipster cocktail bar. Laurel, a white journalist, lived out north in what used to be a black neighborhood. Drive under the freeway, past the Baptist Church and the Boys and Girls Club, and you enter the four or five square miles our parents warned us not to cross.



Going there on my own, the shame started to settle in. I hadn't been back to this side of town since I was sixteen.

We were sophomores in high school when Rust started calling us again. Whenever he was bored with our neck of the woods, he would call up the gang. This time, instead of the slope, we'd drive north in his Saturn. If it hadn't been for Rust's boredom and Gator's gas money to burn, I don't know if we would have seen this side of town.

What I remembered most is that Rust always made me slink down in the back seat as we approached the dividing line. He never answered why. Maybe he thought a girl would attract unwanted attention? In my mind, a car full of white kids would be the thing attracting attention. I did it anyway because Rust was the only kid I knew with a car, and it didn't pay to argue with him.

The corners of Rust's cheap blue window tint were curling, so even though I was slumped down, I could still make out a sign here, a storefront there. Much of what I recall about those drives north are corners of corners. And the sounds falling in through Rust's open sunroof of men and women shouting, kids playing, music.

We got out every once in a while on those "demon drives," as I began calling them, to get gas at the Gas-n-go, or to page someone's girlfriend. I was forever pressing Rust to stop so we could get a burger at least. Or sit on the school bleachers and watch a game or something. But he never did. Didn't matter who was behind the wheel; we never stopped the car for long. We always ended up driving through the neighborhood and going home. We didn't have a plan or a



reason to be there. I realize now they only wanted to look. Something in me possessed me to look, too.

No one in the car ever wanted to talk about the slope. I brought up Fiddler's brother a couple of times, but the conversation went nowhere. After a few years, I pushed the idea of the photo existing out of my mind, moved across the country for college. No proof existed.

But part of me knew, crossing under the overpass, slung low in the back seat, that the kids we passed on those drives—the legs, and necks, and hands that I caught pieces of—didn't have relatives because of mine.

Laurel's street was still except for the swift rain beating down steadily against the Chrysler's rooftop. Her house was a fixer-upper with a sagging porch. But her block was lined with beautiful single-family homes, more dignified than the housing where we grew up. I felt a sickness return to my stomach. For the first time that day, I thought of the work I was missing. And Ma.

Sitting in my car, with the rain striking down, I started thinking. My grandfather in his work pants, crushed with dirt. His smile hollow and endless. His sea-green eyes, something like mine. I saw him every time I went to sleep. Sometimes I imagined the men behind him with their shovels and heard them whistling in the photo. Other times I saw my fingers smudging the prints. Since the funeral, my dreams were propelling me on this street and, with any luck, in a room with the only person I knew of who wanted to hear this story.

And there I was. Parked and staring at Laurel's entrance. With proof on the seat next to me. I could see myself, thirty-five-year-old me, opening the car door, getting soaked dashing toward her porch. Running

up her rickety steps, made worse by the rain. Steps that I could plunge through at any moment.

But let's say I arrive on her doorstep in one piece. My knuckles rapping on the peeling wood. The sound of footsteps approaching. Before I can finish wiping my damp forehead and catching my breath, the door opens a crack.

What would I say?

*What did I want with that old parking lot anyway?*

I heard the sounds of men and women shouting, and kids playing outside my car. No proof existed that black men organizing around the city were targeted and murdered, their bodies scattered throughout town, including under the pavement that begins in the parking lot behind the old JCPenney and ends somewhere under a private golfing mound.

No proof, just some old photos.

The smallest statistical chance existed that talking with Laurel would change anything I already knew. The greater chance existed that in talking, I'd move the darkness from myself onto somebody else.

I turned the key in the ignition. I slinked off past the Gas-n-go and the bleachers, the espresso bar and the tapas place. I stopped at the green market and bought a pound of ground beef, an onion, three cans of kidney beans, butter beans, and baked beans. I called Ma when I was more than halfway there.

*Ann Arbor, Michigan*



**Laurie Thomas** is a fiction writer, screenwriter, and first-generation American with roots in Kingston, Jamaica. Thomas has

received awards from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, the MacDowell Colony, the Tulsa Artist Fellowship, and the Helen Zell Writers' Program. She is at work on a first novel and story collection.

Photo by Melissa Lukenbaugh

## Toward "One Tulsa" (an excerpt)

by Hannibal B. Johnson

A few short years ago, the touchstone phrases of what is widely considered to be the modern civil rights crusade—"Black lives matter." "I can't breathe." "Say my name."—did not resonate. In 2021 America, these phrases define the mission of advocates, activists, and allies aiming to expand social justice, transform law enforcement, and eradicate structural systemic racism.

Tulsa's historical racial trauma stands not in isolation, but as part of a long arc of oppression that has bedeviled Black Americans since our enslaved African ancestors arrived in the English colonies at Point Comfort, Virginia, in 1619. We can imagine those individuals—precious cargo on cramped slave ships—crying out in vain: "Black lives matter." "I can't breathe." "Say my name." Tulsa, 1921, is an arbitrary midpoint on the arc of oppression, somewhere between slavery and Freedom Summer. That long-ago fiery demise of Tulsa's Black community revealed much about the trajectory of race relations in America. Connect the dots. The volatile ingredients that set Tulsa alight—white supremacy, ignorance, and fear—endure and threaten to ignite a national conflagration.

Our cultural competence, individually and collectively, and our capacity to diffuse the landmines that mark our history around race will be our most reliable firewall. Diversity and the related concepts of equity and inclusion rest on the fundamental proposition that our shared humanity matters more than that which might otherwise separate and divide us.

*Editorial note:* The full text of Johnson's essay appears in the spring 2021 issue of *Oklahoma Humanities*. Visit [www.okhumanities.org](http://www.okhumanities.org) to read it.

A Tulsa native and graduate of Harvard Law School, **Hannibal B. Johnson** is an attorney, author, and consultant. His latest book is *Black Wall Street 100: An American City Grapples with Its Historical Racial Trauma* (2020). He will deliver one of the plenary talks for "Reflecting on the Past, Facing the Future," OU's symposium devoted to the centennial of the Tulsa Race Massacre, on April 8-9.

Sometimes I imagined  
the men behind him  
with their shovels and  
heard them whistling  
through the photo.

# How We Write about Tulsa

by Lindsey Claire Smith

*Several recent works on the Tulsa Race Massacre add to an already rich collection of publications that serve as essential resources for learning the histories of our communities and how we can meaningfully honor those who have endured racial terror.*

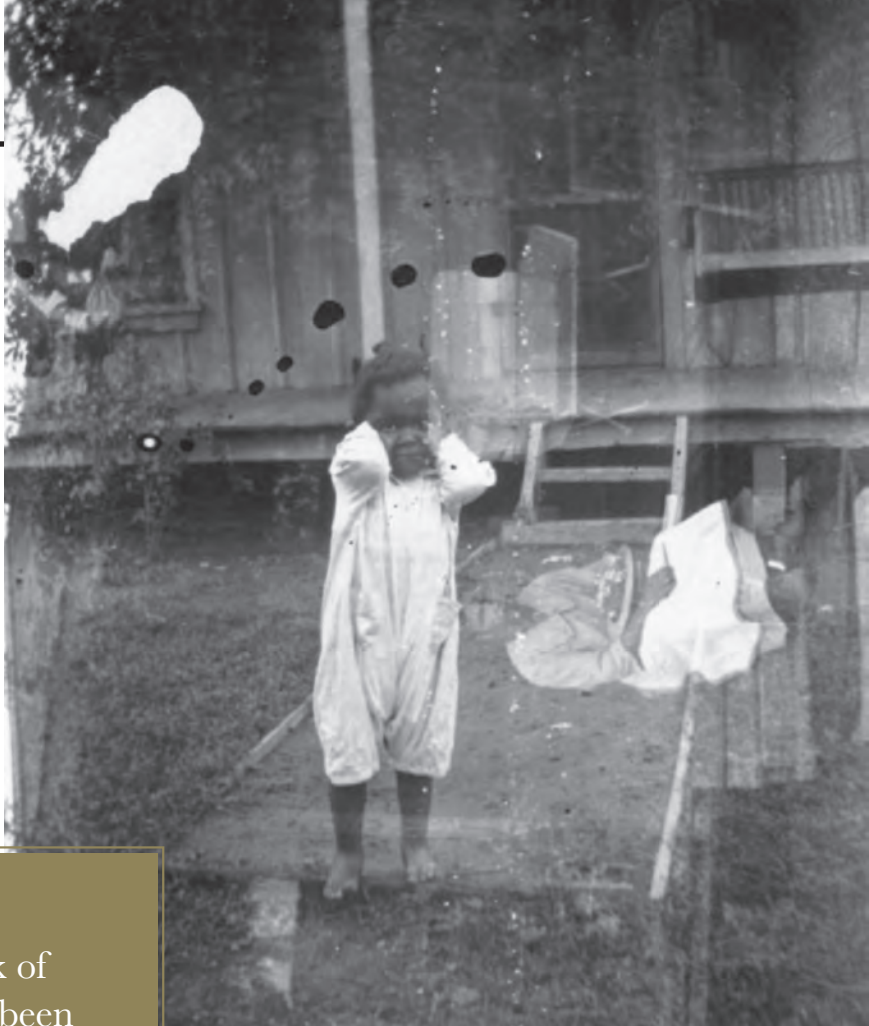
*A double exposure photo taken after the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre by personnel of the American Red Cross*

The important work of commemoration has been ongoing long before 2021 and our current challenges.

As the year 2021 begins and we mark one hundred years since the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, a horrific attack on African American Tulsans that was meant to invoke terror and enforce white authority, many in Tulsa are reflecting on our city's legacy of violence, ever mindful that the coming of this year shines a light on our community and its failures, even as we point toward evidence of triumph. As political, institutional, and community leaders mark the centennial with events, programs, and the completion of a new history museum, the story of the Tulsa Race Massacre and the eventual rebirth of the Greenwood District will be told and retold. And yet, even as our city has been shaped by this violence into the present, many Tulsans will stubbornly insist that the past should stay in its place. Still others will express surprise and sadness at learning about the Tulsa Race Massacre for the first time, confessing that “no one told them” about this profoundly traumatic event for our city and nation, though it is the subject of a now-comprehensive body of scholarship, literature,

and journalism developed over decades. Centennial commemoration events long planned with great anticipation have unfortunately been dimmed by the Covid-19 pandemic, which itself exposes enduring racial inequities in Tulsa and worldwide. Coupled with the pandemic and following numerous egregious acts of police brutality against African Americans, an insurrection attempt at the US Capitol on January 6 of this year—fueled by white nationalism—echoed the acts of mob violence that continue to haunt Tulsa.

While it certainly is not news that silence has surrounded the events of 1921 for years in Oklahoma, including in school textbooks, the important work of commemoration has been ongoing long before 2021 and our current challenges. Due to the efforts of a broad coalition of leaders inspired by the memories and words of those who survived the massacre, institutions such as the Greenwood Cultural Center, the John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation, and the Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission, among others, provide numerous opportunities for learning about and becoming involved in advocacy for truth and reconciliation in Tulsa. The centennial is an opportunity to ask ourselves key questions: When will we be responsible for learning the histories of our communities, even if “no one told us” these histories





(or we weren't listening)? How can we meaningfully honor those who have endured racial terror in our country and ensure that we do not perpetuate the kind of ignorance that led to their suffering? Who should tell the story of the Tulsa Race Massacre, and what if narratives of the massacre conflict? What should the future of Greenwood be?

Several recent works on the Tulsa Race Massacre add to an already rich collection of publications that serve as essential resources for finding answers to these questions. Fiction, drama, poetry, memoir, eyewitness accounts, journalistic, photographic, and scholarly histories (and works that cross genres) comprise the full canon. Some literary works were completed in the massacre's immediate aftermath by those who witnessed it. A poem, "A Request from a True Friend," was composed by massacre survivor A. J. Newman in 1921 as a tribute to Red Cross relief director Maurice Willows, who himself compiled a report documenting the Red Cross's efforts to provide "relief to the innocents." A. J. Smitherman, *Tulsa Star* editor and key leader of African American resistance to racial violence in Oklahoma, published in a pamphlet in 1922 the poem "The Tulsa Race Riot and Massacre" after fleeing Tulsa for Massachusetts. A short story by former Tulsan Frances W. Prentice, "Oklahoma Race Riot," was published in *Scribner's* in 1931. *Magic City* (1997), by Jewell Parker Rhodes; *Fire in Beulah* (2001), by Rilla Askew; *Dreamland Burning* (2017), by Jennifer Latham; and *Angel of Greenwood* (2021), by Randi Pink, are all contemporary novels that feature the massacre within their plotlines. Clemonce Heard's *Tragic City* (2021) explores the legacy of the massacre through poetry. Tara Watkins's play *Tulsa '21: Black Wall Street* (2018), Deborah Hunter's *Porches* (2021), and Marta Reiman's 2021 adaptation of Askew's novel bring the story to the stage. *Opal's Greenwood Oasis* (2021), a middle-grade children's book authored by Quraysh Ali Lansana and Najah Amatullah Hylton and illustrated by Skip Hill, provides a tour of Greenwood on the eve of the massacre through the eyes of an eight-year-old. Adding to this creative treatment of the massacre are several film projects under development by production companies linked to such household names as LeBron James and Russell Westbrook, coming on the heels of Damon Lindelof's choice of 1921 Tulsa as the setting for the 2019 premiere of his HBO series, *Watchmen*.

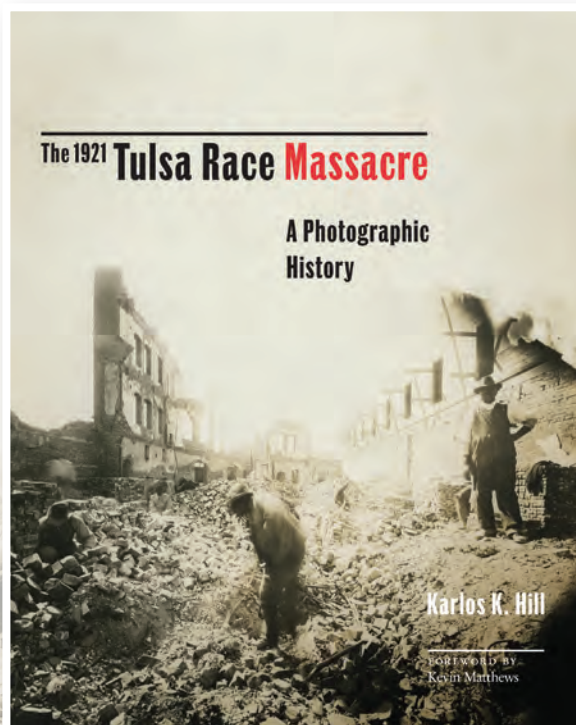
Alongside the trajectory of creative renderings of the massacre are histories that likewise began with firsthand accounts and experiences of the violence that waged destruction on Greenwood in 1921. Mary

E. Jones Parrish's *Race Riot 1921: Events of the Tulsa Disaster* (1998) is a collection of eyewitness reporting from Parrish herself, a typing instructor and journalist who, having come to town from Rochester, New York, lured by the promise of opportunity in Tulsa's Black economic ecosystem, was compelled to flee her home in the Greenwood District with her young daughter. Parrish not only includes her own detailed observations about the attack on her neighborhood but also compiles interviews with several other survivors; she self-published her book and distributed copies in 1922. Attorney B. C. Franklin, whose law office was destroyed in the massacre, completed a manuscript in 1931, "The Tulsa Race Riot and Three of Its Victims," which was discovered in 2015 and donated to the collection of the new National Museum of African American History and Culture.

After decades of little attention devoted to telling the story of the massacre in the modern era, in 1971 Ed Wheeler published his article "Profile of a Race Riot" in *Oklahoma Impact*, a North Tulsa publication edited by state legislator Don Ross. Scott Ellsworth, arguably the foremost historian of the massacre, published in 1982 his dissertation, which was informed by oral histories of survivors, as *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*. Author and attorney Hannibal B. Johnson published *Black Wall Street*, which provided a history of Greenwood within a larger discussion of Oklahoma history, in 1998. The turn of the twenty-first century saw the arrival of several new books that

*Detail of five men sifting through the burned ruins of the Gurley Hotel located at 112 1/2 North Greenwood Avenue, Tulsa, OK, following the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre / Courtesy of the Tulsa Historical Society and Museum*

*Karlos Hill's The 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre: A Photographic History (2021)*



accompanied the 2001 release of the final report of the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, with historian Danney Goble providing the report's historical overview. Journalist Tim Madigan's *The Burning* (2001), James S. Hirsch's *Riot and Remembrance: The Tulsa Race War and Its Legacy* (2002), and Alfred Brophy's *Reconstructing the Dreamland: The Tulsa Riot of 1921: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation* (2003) were all no doubt galvanized by renewed attention to Tulsa's past via the creation of the commission in 1997 following the massacre's seventy-fifth anniversary.

With the centennial, another critical mass of new writing about the Tulsa Race Massacre arrives, and with it some new developments in our reckoning with the truth and its role in our future. Randy Krehbiel's *Tulsa 1921: Reporting a Massacre* (2019), Hannibal B. Johnson's *Black Wall Street 100: An American City Grapples with Its Historical Racial Trauma* (2020), Scott Ellsworth's *The Ground Breaking: An American City and Its Search for Justice* (2021), and Karlos Hill's *The 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre: A Photographic History* (2021) all build on the insights of previous researchers while

updating readers on the search for clarity and accountability regarding the massacre. Several subjects referenced in these works stand out as critical at the same time that they are debated. First, uncertainty about the number of lives lost and the presence of mass graves in Tulsa continue to complicate the legacy of the Race Riot Commission and relations between the city (specifically the mayor's office) and advocates for Greenwood, including the survivors and descendants of the massacre. Second, there is an important conversation to be had about who writes about the massacre, whose narratives are given the most weight and exposure, and how stories of Greenwood impact North Tulsa's future. Third, for many in our city, Greenwood is sacred, hallowed land, both because of the lives lost there and the promise of its thriving Black Wall Street. But the settler-colonial dynamics of Oklahoma's his-

tory undergird tensions between African American and Indigenous Tulsans, notably over the status of the Freedmen but also in the discourse of land acknowledgments and "land back" advocacy that are a part of decolonizing movements. Finally, though actions to provide reparations to survivors stalled out after the commission report, there is renewed national dialogue about reparations that may factor into the case for such amends in Tulsa. These conversations accompany concerns about gentrification in Greenwood. Invest-

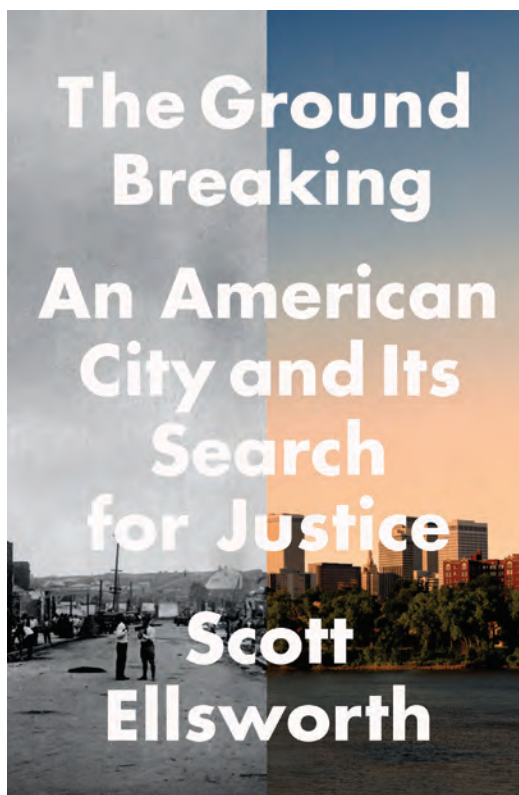
ment in a renewed Black Wall Street is often touted as a kind of reparation, but rising rents and contracts granted overwhelmingly to white developers call that assessment into question.

Krehbiel's *Tulsa 1921*, a deep dive into Tulsa's news reports about the massacre, is copiously detailed, providing specific information about the key actors whose decisions (and missteps) led Greenwood to ruin. While the failures of news reporting, especially the incendiary language published in the *Tulsa Tribune*, have been named as justification for discounting the local news at the time, Krehbiel makes the case in his comprehensive study of news archives that the cultural mind-set of

the city and the corruption that fueled the failures of law enforcement can be accurately gleaned from those reports. Particularly interesting are Krehbiel's descriptions of the civic (and decidedly less civic-oriented) activities that occupied Tulsans of the day. From the strong-arm tactics of fiercely nativist and anti-union vigilantes, on one hand, to the lax regulation of dance halls, speakeasies, and hotels where people of different races mingled, the tensions of nativist whites who were unhappy about the perceived moral failings of Greenwood regulars were already simmering in advance of the spring of 1921. Krehbiel includes with his citations of reports of the mob attack references to Parrish's authoritative account, offering a full and reliable sense of the scale and trauma of the loss that resulted. Of the death toll, Krehbiel writes that "the fact remains and cannot be ignored: from Day One, whites and blacks

Scott Ellsworth's *The Ground Breaking: An American City and Its Search for Justice* (2021)

A detail of the panoramic view of the Greenwood District following the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. / Courtesy of the Tulsa Historical Society and Museum





alike believed more people died during the riot than were accounted for. The search continues still, with the city planning a new investigation into possible mass burial locations, but the truth remains as elusive now as it was then.”

Of the massacre’s aftermath, Krehbiel makes clear that most white Tulsans, even those viewed as moderates of the time (among them leaders of all the major downtown churches), blamed African Americans for this blight on Tulsa’s reputation and took little meaningful action to encourage or assist in the rebuilding of Greenwood. The Real Estate Exchange, for example, organized a campaign for Black resettlement elsewhere to pave the way for a new industrial area, introducing debates over development in the area that persist. In the final chapter, Krehbiel traces the establishment of the Race Riot Commission and its report, which he concludes ultimately accomplished little, and documents ways the commission shifted focus from documenting violence and making specific recommendations to account for it (including the possibility of reparations), to the more positive message of reconciliation and a physical site for commemoration. With far less funding than originally committed from the state, John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park was the result.

Krehbiel ends his book with the significance of the work of the Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission, especially in the aftermath of the 2012 Good Friday killings in North Tulsa and the officer-involved shootings of Eric Harris, Terence Crutcher, and Jeremy Lake. He points toward the significance of Senator James Lankford’s meeting with constituents in North Tulsa as a sign of hope for genuine reconciliation. In light of Lankford’s calling into question the legitimacy of the results of the 2020 presidential election, in which heightened African American voter turnout ushered in Biden’s presidency, is that hope misguided? For some members of the commission, Lankford’s position on the commission is in question, as the violent actions of insurrectionists on January 6 called to mind the violent mob of 1921 in Tulsa. Lankford wrote a letter of apology to Black Tulsans, and, citing the important work of reconciliation, Senator Kevin Matthews, commission chair, announced on January 25 that Lankford will remain.

Scott Ellsworth’s *The Ground Breaking* conveys with candor and considerable self-reflection the lengthy and painstaking work of documenting the Tulsa Race Massacre and searching for graves of its victims, achieved in community with survivors and their families and led by the belief that this atrocity

spoken of so little in his hometown of Tulsa would form his career. Ellsworth includes absorbing stories of his encounters with white Tulsans in his youth who, some casually and some forcefully, maintained their commitment to segregation and behaved with disdain toward African Americans. This is especially true of Beryl Ford (whom Krehbiel also mentions), who in the late 1970s was president of the Tulsa County Historical Society. When Ellsworth met with Ford and asked him to view photographs of the “riot,” under the auspices of seeing how white rioters were dressed, Ford’s denial was immediate: “There weren’t any white rioters. . . . They were all Mexicans and Indians.” Realizing the futility of searching for candid stories of whites’ roles in the massacre, Ellsworth formed relationships with individuals such as W. D. Williams, John Hope Franklin (who would become a mentor and colleague), and others who opened up to him about the significance of the atrocity and allowed him to create an oral history archive that adds to the interviews Parrish immediately collected.

In his discussion of the opportunity and challenge of serving on the Race Riot Commission, it is clear

When will we be responsible for learning the histories of our communities, even if “no one told us” these histories?

that Ellsworth is disappointed in the missed chance to award survivors and their families some form of direct reparation (other than the gold commemoration medal each of 118 survivors received in 2001). The differing backgrounds and goals of the members of the commission, as well as the national media attention they received, also led to some strife, since as Ellsworth notes, he and his historian colleagues were often summoned for interviews, leaving commissioner Eddie Faye Gates to ask, “When are the local people going to get to talk?” Entwined with his discussion of reparations is Ellsworth’s dedication to locating and identifying the massacre’s victims, including the possibility that they are buried in mass graves in one or more sites. Ellsworth echoes Krehbiel’s assertion that the number of deaths is unknown (and may never be), but in this task, the work of telling the stories of survivors comes together with honoring those who did not



**Lindsey Claire Smith** is an associate professor of English at Oklahoma State University and director of the Center for Poets and Writers at OSU-Tulsa. She is editor of *American Indian Quarterly* and author of three books, most recently a monograph on urban Native writing from Oklahoma. She serves on the advisory committee for the Center for Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation at OSU-Tulsa.

Among our challenges  
is to remain open to  
new tellings, not just  
of survival but also of  
triumph against racism  
and hatred.

*Detail of a burned  
brick building in the  
Greenwood District  
following the 1921  
Tulsa Race Massacre /  
Courtesy of the Tulsa  
Historical Society and  
Museum*

survive, and the weight of the commission's findings years ago seems to rest on what the experts consulting on the digs with Mayor Bynum and the City of Tulsa find today. The culmination of the Oaklawn Cemetery dig was the discovery in October 2020 of eleven coffins that constitute a mass grave.

Current efforts to revive the case for reparations are informed in Ellsworth's book by the often-overlooked history of Greenwood that came after the massacre. The story of Greenwood's rebuilding is often lost in an emphasis on the area's devastation in 1921 but is nonetheless inspiring—by some accounts the era that most exemplifies the spirit of Black Wall Street in its thriving economy. However, Ellsworth explains that post-World War II industrialization ushered in a new era of big retail that squeezed small, independent Black business owners, and with desegregation, African Americans were afforded new and sometimes cheaper shopping options than could be found in Greenwood. Urban renewal in Tulsa, which in the 1970s brought the construction of I-244 right through the heart of the neighborhood, cut off North Tulsa from new growth southward. With the development of projects affiliated with the Centennial Commission and new institutions in the 1990s, new advocacy for Greenwood emerges in the activism of Rev. Dr. Robert Turner and attorney

Damario Solomon-Simmons, as Ellsworth describes. Solomon-Simmons, himself a descendant of Creek Freedmen, is using a strategy that was successful in state lawsuits against opioid companies; he is suing the city of Tulsa and other defendants for reparations in light of the efforts of many institutions to profit off of tourism without compensating survivors and descendants of the massacre.

The search for, discovery, and excavation of mass graves gives legitimacy to Tulsa's overdue effort to end the silence surrounding the massacre. In photographic form, Karlos Hill's *The 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre* likewise expresses, in images, undeniable realities that witnesses have shared about the terror. Pairing images with excerpts from oral histories, chiefly those featured in Parrish's book, Hill contextualizes photos taken by white Tulsans in the aftermath of the massacre within the broader history of American lynching photos. As Hill explains, these photos give "an unvar-

nished glimpse into the psychological underpinnings of white supremacist violence," eliciting the enthusiasm of those who were eager to document their mob actions. Indeed, because of the racial terror it evoked, some, including John W. Franklin, son of John Hope Franklin, have assessed the events in Tulsa as a mass lynching rather than a massacre, akin to similar events in other cities in the early twentieth century when Ku Klux Klan activity was heightened. Hill also notes that no reparations to Black business owners were made following the massacre though some compensation was offered to white businesses, and like Krehbiel and Ellsworth, he views the results of the Race Riot Commission as falling short of potential.

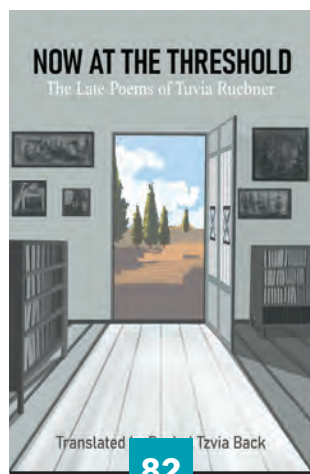
Hannibal B. Johnson's *Black Wall Street 100* provides, of the recent literature, the most thorough accounting of the initiatives, institutions, and programs that have come into existence to commemorate the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre and effect meaningful change in Greenwood beyond the centennial. Johnson's book details the members of the current Centennial Commission, outlines the purposes of the original Race Riot Commission, and includes written reflections from its members on the effectiveness of their work. Johnson's book devotes considerable attention to the future of Greenwood based on Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s model of a "Beloved Community" grounded in justice, love, and equal opportunity. Johnson, acknowledging Tulsans' struggle to live down our troubled past, calls on us to *live up* to our potential as embodied by King's ideals. In Johnson's view, the most meaningful action we as a community can take to move forward in achieving our potential is through education. Johnson's design of a curriculum for teaching about the Tulsa Race Massacre thus appears in the appendix along with other educational materials.

As we mark one hundred years since the Tulsa Race Massacre destroyed the lives of so many, we as a city and nation are aggrieved by acts of violence and performative power that are in many ways fundamental to our national story. In our telling of this story, we are hearing, witnessing, and honoring those who were victims of this violence. Among our challenges is to remain open to new tellings, not just of survival but also of triumph against racism and hatred. With the now numerous publications, media stories, and films about the massacre, let us never again rely on a "nobody told me" refrain to perpetuate the amnesia that has held our city back.

*Tulsa, Oklahoma*



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# Najwan Darwish

## *Exhausted on the Cross*

TRANSLATED BY KAREEM JAMES ABU-ZEID

FOREWORD BY RAÚL ZURITA

NYRB/POETS

Najwan Darwish

*Exhausted on the Cross*

Trans. Kareem James Abu-Zeid. New York. NYRB. 2021. 144 pages.

IN NAJWAN DARWISH'S unflinching new collection of poems, *Exhausted on the Cross*, we witness a poet in conflict with his calling, conversing with bards across the ages as he struggles with the burdens of his craft. Some of that struggle, such as a sense of alienation from family and friends or the pains of empathy, is universal to the artist, while other aspects remain particular to Darwish, as a Palestinian scribe. His is a double weariness; it is not only Darwish the Palestinian who hangs exhausted on the cross but also Darwish the poet, who has discovered the cost of being *a man mourning the entire world*, as he describes the titular poet in the sly, arresting "The Appearances of Taha Muhammad Ali."

In that poem, Ali tells the narrator, "Death has liberated me / from the shackles of our small jailers / just as poetry has liberated us / from the greatest jailer—time." Poetry, Ali implies, bestows immortality to its maker. Darwish, like any artist, finds this notion seductive and assesses its possibilities in several poems, including "The Sleeper in the Stone," where the poet is enchanted by the image of a saint sculpture: "Like him, I want to sleep / and have an image made of me."

For Darwish, this is the only hope for an afterlife, as his poems tell us that paradise is not some divine fantasy but, rather, the earth beneath our feet, the bread on our table, the breeze from Haifa, the dew on Mount Carmel. In Darwish's liturgical imaginings, the poet prays to the goddess Justice and "follow[s] no one but myself."

In several lashing poems in the fourth section of the collection, including the



terse “Without,” Darwish probes his own estrangement: “I lived without a mother or father, / without siblings, / without peers, / I lived without kin or companions, / without allies. / I lived without.” And the bitter “Thieves” describes a material impoverishment imposed by a grasping cohort: “I know I’ve got nothing left— / all my food was eaten by thieves / who are laughing now / and burping and farting in the hall / (the thieves are old neighbors and classmates and cousins).” But it’s the poet who has the last laugh, for he has accepted this state of being and declares defiantly, “You know I want for nothing— / I let that food go of my own free will.”

And a poet outwitting death through genius is not so simple. The artist toils knowing that his work may not achieve lasting influence, an anxiety manifest in “To Lament a Mountain”: “I’ll risk my impermanence, / I’ll risk the fact that you’ll endure / while my words crumble and decay.”

Even if the poet’s words last, it comes at a psychic cost. In “Obituary,” Darwish writes, “He fought the invaders as best he could. / He wasn’t victorious, / but neither was he defeated. / In oblivion he made a life / for a thousand years to come. / He died fulfilling his poetic obligations.” The oblivion denoted here reappears as various forms of limbo endured by the poet. He makes his country in the state of “equivocation and doubt,” next to “The sea: / hope embroidered with despair, / despair distilled from hope,” between a shattering past and cruel present.

At times, the laconic poems in the fourth section can feel petulant, more interested in settling scores and calling out those who have disappointed the poet than in engaging with life’s mysteries. These short poems are the sucker punch hidden within the folds of an otherwise generous

examination of what it means to suffer and resist suffering, to be an artist who contests the artificial boundaries of race, ethnicity, and nation, while remaining forever bound to a highly politicized homeland. The poet, as it turns out, is more Greek god than Christ, reflecting back our human foibles rather than transcending them.

In the end, and despite his reservations and disappointments, Darwish understands that poetry remains a powerful means of resistance. In “A Story from Shiraz,” Darwish shows us how Hafez confronts the invader Tamerlane, who obsesses over two lines of the poet’s verse, which declare that Hafez would give away whole cities for the mole on his beloved’s face. The conqueror, who “had never honored any god but cruelty,” cannot fathom a heart devoted to something other than power and acquisition, and asks the poet, “You’re still resisting, in such a wretched state?”

Hafez is, of course, a stand-in for Darwish, a latter-day poet of resistance. *Exhausted on the Cross* reveals a poet in many ways fed up with struggle, striving and sometimes failing to find in himself the generosity of his artistic forebears. Still, he writes, gifting us with this complicated but magnificent collection, the very existence of which reveals he has not yielded the fight, even while he calls out for the knife, for release from suffering. While the work flirts with despair, speaking to the bleakness of life on an earth that “tortures us relentlessly,” in the end these poems bend toward hope.

Yet Darwish acknowledges that hope is itself a form of madness “common among my people,” like “a wedding on judgment day.” The hope the poet cultivates is not one of pure childish expectation, like “my friend Tayseer,” a boy who believes he’ll see the Gaza sea again, but something polluted by experience. And Darwish’s “mad”

people are poets and Palestinians, yes, but they are also all of humankind who, despite everything, endure in hope, however compromised.

Here, in verse that is by turns incandescent, conflicted, playful, righteous, petty, vengeful, and never less than astonishing, Darwish offers a raw interrogation of his “poetic obligations” and the spiritual and material cost of fulfilling them. Throughout this relentless collection, we see that while the wages of poetry-writing might not be death, the toll on the artist is significant.

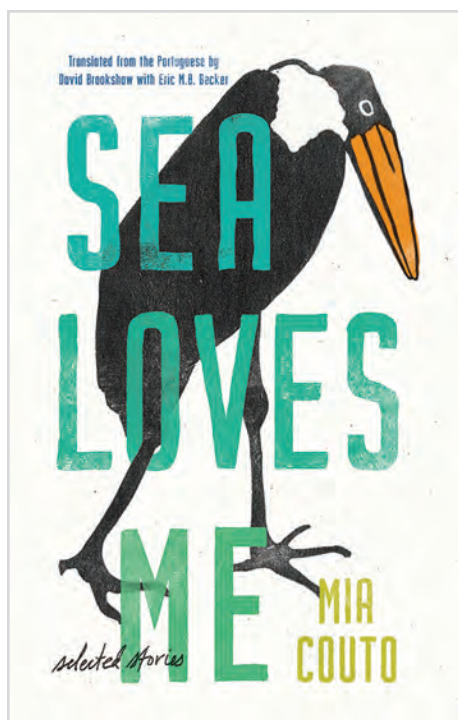
Yet he persists. When he incites Mount Carmel to “keep on giving” “even when the dew runs out on your heights,” he is also instructing himself. “Remember,” he tells the mountain: “Generosity was born with you.” The final lines of the book proclaim where Darwish has landed in his own furious dance between hope and despair, between cynicism and generosity: “it’s all a journey, dear, / and here we are now, back from it. / I name it earth, and am not ashamed.” While he has not made peace with this flawed world, he accepts it, not as an act of resignation, but of abiding love.



**Keija Parssinen** is the author of the novels *The Ruins of Us*, which received the Michener-Copernicus Award, and *The Unraveling of Mercy*

*Louis*, which earned an Alex Award from the American Library Association. A graduate of Princeton University and the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, where she was a Truman Capote Fellow, she is currently an assistant professor of English and creative writing at Kenyon College and lives in Ohio with her family.

Photo by Shane Epping



Mia Couto  
*Sea Loves Me: Selected Stories*

Trans. David Brookshaw with Eric M.B. Becker. Windsor, Canada. Biblioasis. 2021. 399 pages.

“SEA LOVES ME,” the title story of Mia Couto’s latest collection, brims with secrets, seduction, and the wisdom of ancestors. Zeca Perpétuo, the widowed narrator, is pining for his voluptuous neighbor, Dona Luarmina, daughter of a Greek sailor and Mozambican mother. But before she’ll succumb to his charms, Luarmina insists Zeca divulge his most private memories. And so, he begins to weave together tales—of his fisherman father, who dove into the sea to rescue his mistress and resurfaced with the eyes of a shark; of his wayward wife, Henriquinha, who mysteriously vanished off a cliff; and Maria Ballerina, the whirling dervish of a dancer who caught fire one night and was turned to ashes. The more Zeca recalls, the weepier he gets. “A tear is the sea caressing your soul,” Luarmina explains. “That little speck of water is us as we return to the womb we came from.”

Mia Couto, winner of the 2014 Neustadt International Prize for Literature and author, most recently, of the novel *The Sword and the Spear* (WLT, Autumn 2020, 90), has been writing bewitching tales like this his entire career. *Sea Loves Me*, in fact, includes work from two previous collections, *The Fire* and *The Waters of Time*, as well as thirty-six stories that appear in English for the first time. (Eric M.B. Becker has translated the stories of *The Waters of Time*; the rest are by David Brookshaw, Couto’s longtime translator. Both have done masterful jobs rendering Couto’s inventive language and imagery into English.)

Taken as a whole, the stories offer a kaleidoscopic vision of Couto’s world, deeply rooted in Mozambique but imbued with an ethereal, otherworldly quality. Often in just a few pages, Couto is able to breathe life into a variety of characters that range from war refugees, witch doctors, and cross-dressing apparitions to bird-dreaming baobab trees and blind fishermen. Rural villagers, stuck in time, jostle with newly arrived city dwellers. Africans, Portuguese, Indians—and combinations of the three—fall in love across communities, even species. In “Bartolominha and the Pelican,” a lonely woman shares her bed with a pelican, hugging its wings so that “her body would learn to fly”; while in “So You Haven’t Flown Yet, Carlota Gentina?” a condemned man confesses, “Inside me, I’m not alone. I’m many. . . . That’s why, when I tell my story, I mix myself up, a *mulata* not of races but of existences.”

*Sea Loves Me* is a thrilling addition to Couto’s extraordinary body of work, bringing together new and old stories that evoke past and present Mozambique, memories and dreamscapes, natural and spirit worlds. War, race, sky and sea, death and desire—these are just a few of the eternal elements Couto uses to mold his wise, enchanting fiction. “As I rowed a long return,” thinks the solitary boatman in “The Waters of Time,” “the old words of my grandfather came to mind: *Water and time are twin brothers, born of the same womb.*

I had just discovered in myself a river that would never die.”

Anderson Tepper  
New York



Mieko Kawakami  
*Heaven: A Novel*

Trans. Sam Bett & David Boyd. New York. Europa Editions. 2021. 192 pages.

**FORTY-SIX-YEAR-OLD** Mieko Kawakami refuses to trivialize the agony of adolescence; instead she bears witness to it. She has described her own childhood in Osaka, Japan, as a hellish experience. Her father often went missing, and she was forced to find work in a factory to help support her family. She pursued adulthood with a gritty determination. She tried singing but gave it up when she was told she couldn’t write her own lyrics. She turned to writing, and her novels and poems, which often play fast and loose with experimental bursts of prose, have catapulted her into international fame. Kawakami concedes, “I try to write from the child’s perspective—how they see the world. Coming to the realization you’re alive is such a shock. One day,



we're thrown into life without warning." But the reader senses something more is going on. Kawakami seems to fetishize adolescence as the time of life that reveals a person's deepest and purest self—before it is buried beneath the flood of adulthood's expectations and disguises (see *WLT*, Winter 2021, 16).

Kawakami is captivated by that precious time of life when one is on the cusp of adulthood but still really a child. The author's ability to mimic the rhythmic disturbances of a teenage mind is mesmerizing; she is a master of the interior voice. She instinctively grasps how one can feel silly and light one moment and be in the throes of anguish the next. In one of her earlier novels, *Ms Ice Sandwich*, she describes a lonely boy, whose family is in disarray, finding solace by visiting a supermarket worker each day who kindly gives him an egg sandwich.

In her new novel, *Heaven*, she explores similar territory. The narrator is a fourteen-year-old boy whose life is surrounded by horrors he must suffer in silence. He has a lazy eye, which has made him the target of the other boys who brutally beat him. His father has left home, and his mother, who is not his real mother but a recent replacement, takes quiet care of him. She prepares dinner but never speaks to him directly, and the two of them sit quietly eating while listening to the drone of the television. This silence is familiar to the boy; it is the silence he has been raised with, as well as the silence that keeps him from telling his teachers about his suffering. It is this same toxic silence he has always sensed in the landscape surrounding him that beats steadily to the heartless cruelties of the patriarchy. He never questions why he doesn't fight back, but just knows he can't; it is not his way.

The skinniest sliver of hope arrives with a letter from a schoolmate named Kojima. She is bullied too, for her stained clothes and dirty hair, but not as savagely as he. She wants them to start writing to each other, and he reluctantly agrees, afraid at first it

is some sort of prank. Their letters have the strange aching sound of two teenagers putting their thoughts to paper for the first time, startled by the specificity of their own views. Their questions are simple at first: "What were you doing, when it was raining?" and "If you could go to any country in the world, where would you go?" Sometimes he tells her about things that fascinate him, like "spots on ladybugs. The height of bike seats. Snow globes." They meet up a few times, and their conversations grow more personal but usually stop before each of them can really say what is on their mind. He is troubled by Kojima's feeling that their suffering is holy somehow, like some sort of warped sacred ritual that ultimately serves some higher purpose for them and the others. When he reveals his doubt, she lashes out in anger. He shudders at her idealization of their torment.

Kawakami keeps a cool control over her protagonist, allowing him some leeway but never permitting him to see the promised land of adult perception, freedom, and reflection. There is something about her prose that is so immediate and pressing it blocks out the future almost as if it were a threatening force. We are forced to deal with her characters as they are living now: alone, vulnerable, and unprotected.

Elaine Margolin  
Hewlett, New York

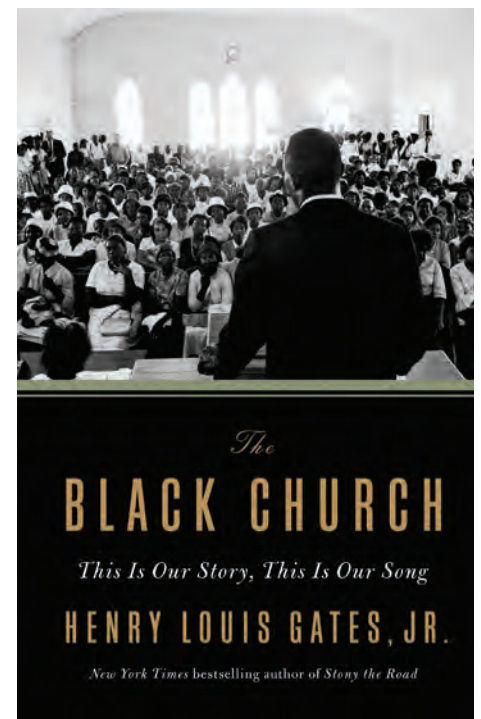
Henry Louis Gates Jr.  
*The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song*

New York. Penguin Press. 2021. 304 pages.

**THIS WORK IS A** wonderful addition to the recent scholarship that reevaluates the role of the Black Church in the development of African American (and by extension American) society. From religious studies to literature, scholars are highlighting the Black Church's contributions that extend beyond the obvious source of spiritual comfort in troubling times. This

work derives from research and interviews Henry Louis Gates Jr. conducted for a forthcoming PBS series by the same name. It combines historical accounts, interviews, photographs, illustrations, and Gates's own personal narrative to demonstrate the long relevance of the so-called Black Church, which Gates makes clear early in the work "is diverse and contested."

Like the Black experience itself, the Black Church is not one thing, and Gates provides, among other things, historical tracing reaching back to Africa, to the early republic, the antebellum period, Reconstruction, the Great Migration, the modern Civil Rights Movement, and the present. Consistently, the Black Church emerges in this work as a beacon of resistance, sustenance, activism, and communal care; in other words, it is "the cultural cauldron that Black people created to combat a system designated in every way to crush their spirit." Paradoxically, the work also depicts it as a site of oppression and conservatism related to women and people of LGBTQ+ communities. Yet Gates's work is inclusive of the many contributions of women, beginning notably with Jarena



Lee's persistence in her desire to preach, the recognition of women as the backbone of the church, and Prathia Hall's "I Have a Dream" talk aloud with God, among others.

The discussion of Islam from the beginning of the abducted Africans' forced migration to North America to the Nation of Islam's influence during the modern Civil Rights Movement is fascinating. Other notable discussions include the historical bombings of Black worship houses as they were recognized as the seat of empowerment for Blacks. Gates's discussion of the Jesuit scandal (indeed the role of the entire Catholic Church in the slave trade) involving slavery and their educational mission is riveting. Finally, his discussion on Black music (spirituals, gospel) as a requisite feature of the Black Church (along with sermonizing) is brilliantly executed and weaved throughout the account.

Framed by a very informative introduction and an epilogue that contains Gates's personal recollections of the church, the four chapters are organized chronologically by key moments in American history. Chapter 2, "A Nation within a Nation," is

especially illuminating in its guide to the development of the Black Church. Likewise, chapter 4, "Crisis of Faith," charts the decline of the Black Church as a force for transformation to its resurgence with new and powerful voices for both social change and accommodation to new musical styles and messages. Gates identifies hip-hop as "a new kind of secular ministry." This is a brilliant work: a compelling read that incorporates little-known facts about the Black Church and clarifies other information held popularly by the public.

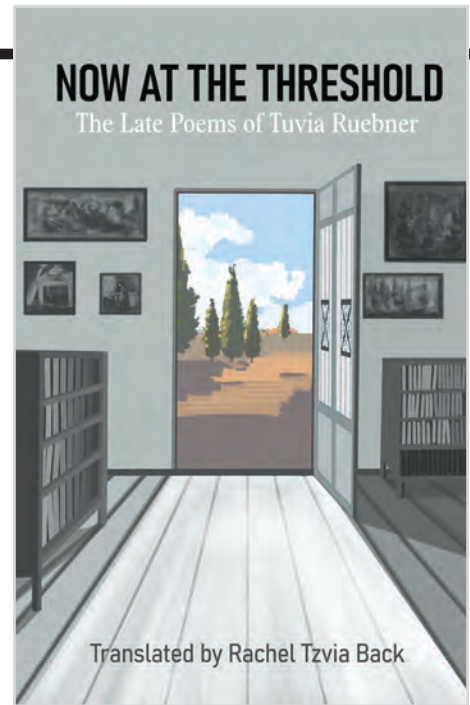
Adele Newson-Horst  
Morgan State University

**Tuvia Ruebner**

### *Now at the Threshold: The Late Poems of Tuvia Ruebner*

Trans. Rachel Tzvia Back. Cincinnati. Hebrew Union College Press. 2020. 188 pages.

**THE POET TUVIA RUEBNER** left this world just months before the arrival of a pandemic that has since shaken it. For a life shaped by continual loss, both communal and personal, this seems a small measure of



mercy. But as I read through Ruebner's late poems, gathered in a superb bilingual collection of translations by Rachel Tzvia Back, I wondered whether the global health crisis would have affected him at all.

Though his life spanned two centuries, traversed two continents, and encompassed two languages (German, his mother tongue, and Hebrew, his adopted and main language of composition), Ruebner took up

## IMBOLO MBUE

**Imbolo Mbue**

### *How Beautiful We Were*

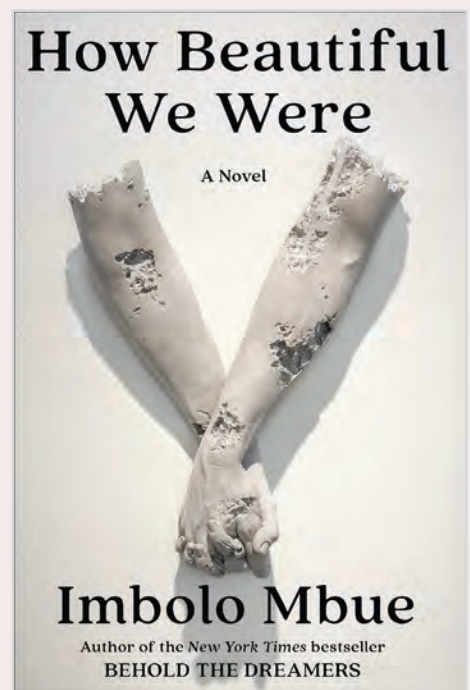
New York. Random House. 2021. 384 pages.

**HOW BEAUTIFUL WE WERE** is Imbolo Mbue's second novel to be published; however, Mbue started writing it long before her first novel, *Behold the Dreamers*, appeared. This novel transports readers to the imaginary African village of Kosawa, grappling with the ravages of environmental pollution as a result of drilling by an American oil corporation.

The novel opens dramatically when, at a village meeting with representatives from the Pexton Oil Company, Konga, a madman, captures the car keys of the delegates,

steering the village toward an astonishing act of rebellion: holding the Pexton men hostage to exert pressure on the company to reveal what happened to their own men who disappeared when they went to the city to lodge a complaint.

The narrative vacillates between the perspectives of the children who witness this primary act of rebellion and other characters in the village. The dramatic act of collective solidarity initiated by Konga is a sly inversion of Pexton's strategy of liquidating the emissaries from the village who had demanded better environmental protections. The initial act of rebellion prompts a retaliatory bloodbath against Kosawa and the arrest and execution of several villagers on charges of kidnapping. Already, readers are plunged into cycles of trauma:





remarkably little space. As a teenager he traveled from his native Bratislava to Kibbutz Merhavia in northern Israel, where he remained in a modest two-room home until his death at the age of ninety-five. Terms like “social distance” and “shelter in place” never entered his parlance, but the concepts were intuitive for him. For this reason, his poems are needed today more than ever before. They observe the wonders of the quotidian, the splendor in the small, and above all the beauty that eases pain. In Ruebner’s words: “Suffering also asks to speak, as does rage, disappointment too, / ruin, regret. / So many facets to life, turn them over and over again — / all are beautiful to poetry.”

Ruebner was a poet not of “false starts” but of “false stops.” Late in life he published the collection *Last Ones* (2013), which bluntly signaled his impending retirement. Ironically, as Back points out in her excellent introduction, the swan songs kept coming: in 2015 *The Crossroads* and *Still Before* appeared, followed by *More No More* in 2019, shortly before Ruebner’s ninety-fifth birthday. Back’s collection encompasses all three volumes, rounding out not only the poet’s prolific corpus but also her ongoing

engagement with it. Back deftly replicates Ruebner’s terse language and rhythms, for instance with the lovely turn of phrase “so much / plentiful / life” to match the syllabic count of the Hebrew (*kol kakh harbeh hayim*). Considering that Ruebner took to writing haiku late in life, every syllable surely matters.

At times celebratory and at times mournful, the poems are rooted in the mundane but occasionally turn political, reflecting the poet’s disenchantment in recent years with Israel, “This land where truth turns its back on itself,” and concern for the refugee crisis (“Lampedusa: Terra Fermé”). For a poet who occupied little space, the scope of his empathy was expansive. With this elegant volume, Back has carved out slightly more space for a poet who reminds us that, despite every challenge we face, “It’s beautiful to be alive.”

Rachel Seelig  
Toronto, Canada



## Olga Tokarczuk *The Lost Soul*

Trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones. Illus. Joanna Concejo. New York. Seven Stories Press. 2021. 48 pages.

“ONCE UPON A TIME there was a man who worked very hard and very quickly, and who had left his soul far behind him long ago . . .” So begins Olga Tokarczuk’s latest book in English translation, *The Lost Soul*, and her first book for all ages. It is a beautiful collaboration with Joanna Concejo, a visual artist and fellow Pole, and Tokarczuk’s longtime translator Antonia Lloyd-Jones. *The Lost Soul* is a simple story about what happens when we are forced to wait for the little feet of our inner child to catch up with the hurried pace of life.

John, as his name suggests, could be anyone. In fact, he is not even sure if he is called John, or Andrew, or Matthew when he wakes up in a hotel room suddenly unable to remember which city he is in or what he is doing there. “All cities look the same through hotel windows,” he thinks. A wise doctor frankly informs him that he’s

the original trauma of oil drilling close to human habitat, the lack of environmental protections to preserve the sanctity of water resources, and retaliation when villagers protest.

These traumas are registered most acutely on the Nangi family, particularly Thula, whose father goes missing in the original delegation. Her uncle is then executed without a proper trial for the alleged kidnapping. These early episodes of irrevocable loss radicalize Thula, who is determined to seek justice for her village. She overcomes tremendous obstacles to secure a high school education and then pursues higher education in the US, which leads her to an understanding of neocolonial oppression, capitalism, and environmental justice.

She returns to Kosawa, choosing the solitary path of teaching and activism in her

native country. However, even before she returns, she flirts with the idea of violence as a mode of exerting pressure on Pexton. She inspires a group of her age-mates to engage in acts of arson to sow some fears in the minds of Pexton managers. She pours all her energy into building a grassroots movement against His Excellency, the political head of state who has allowed Pexton to drill with impunity. She is able to hire a lawyer to sue Pexton in a US court for reparations. Her brother, Juba, while initially her ally, gradually disassociates from her, choosing instead the easy life, working for the government, and accepting corruption as part of the fabric of life in his country. The novel ends with the shattering of hopes for legal restitution and with yet another episode of violence and tragedy.

Mbue seems to be suggesting that every successive generation in Kosawa is subjected to its own history of failure and a brutal crushing of hope. While this may seem to be a presentation of utter pessimism, what preserves a more hopeful sensibility in the novel is the care with which Mbue depicts the bonds of African village life. The Nangi family is characterized by relationships of mutual care, reciprocity, and nurture. The bonds between family members are lovingly portrayed and stand in contrast to the death and violence surrounding them. The memorialization of these affective bonds is perhaps the call to future generations to continue the struggle against the collusion of neocolonial governments with global capital.

Lopamudra Basu  
University of Wisconsin–Stout



lost his soul and, while he's been unaware of the missing soul for quite some time, it is out there looking for him, desperately trying to catch up. Souls live slow, gentle, and unhurried lives, so John is given a prescription to rest and to wait. He finds a cottage on the outskirts of the unnamed city and does precisely as prescribed; "He didn't do anything else," Tokarczuk writes.

What follows are pages of Concejo's timid, delicate pencil drawings: postcards of indistinguishable places, a public park in winter, silhouettes of people walking their dogs or playing ice hockey, a lone figure's footsteps in the snow, and a child, no more than seven or eight years old. While John waits and the plants in the cottage grow tall and wild, the child wanders on, observing a village dance, playing at the seaside, and gazing at a sunset through a train window. These scenes feel far from the frantic existence John left behind. Is the child unable or just unwilling to witness those moments—dull commutes, board meetings, tennis sessions, late nights working? Or is it John himself, sitting in the cottage, revisiting only the slowest and most serene memories to invite his soul back in? As the child closes in on the present day, Concejo's grayscale illustrations give way to a burst of color, as a bearded, aged John and his soul

meet face to face on opposing pages in a sincerely moving tableau.

Of course, there has never been a stranger time to review a book about slowing down, a year into a pandemic and in the dead of a dark winter lockdown. We don't really know what John has left behind, only that he lives "happily ever after" through "all the peaceful winters that followed." Reading, I felt a sad pang of envy for John's hurried modern life—an ache to see a city through a hotel window, or to look through any window that isn't mine. Our response to enforced inertia has been an insatiable craving for more: more excitement, more feeling, more lockdown hobbies—anything to keep us from sitting, "day after day, waiting." But in waiting for his soul, John came to recognize what is "enough" or, as many other fairy tales imply, "*just right*."

In a time of uncertainty, stagnation, and grief, Tokarczuk and Concejo offer consolation—that we too might stop and recognize what is enough, endure our own "peaceful winters," and possibly let go of the craving for more than that.

Hannah Weber  
Brighton, United Kingdom

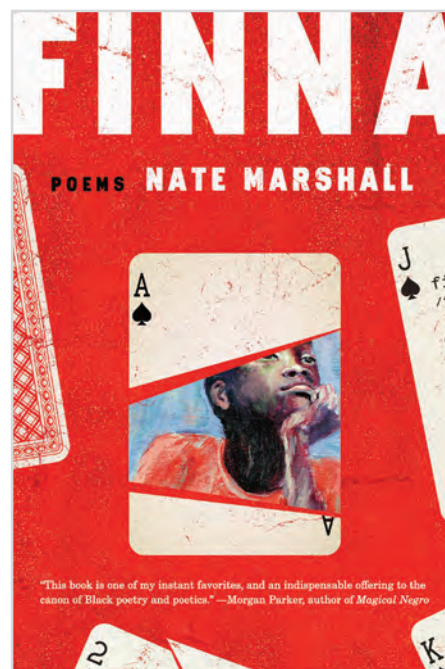
### Nate Marshall *Finna*

New York. Penguin Random House. 2020.  
112 pages.

**SLIPPERINESS IN LANGUAGE**, often invoked as a postmodern outcome of oppositional poetry, could mean, in some parts of the world, slipperiness in life, literally social or physical death. Words carry consequences. No one understands this more than Nate Marshall, whose eponymous poem *Finna* catalogs near misses and narrow escapes that underscore a journey of linguistic and emotional survival. Such a journey is arguably emblematic and a necessary precursor for living fully as a human being and flourishing inside an art that, as this book testifies, is more than imaginative fodder:

i remember a million *finnas*  
i avoided to get here. like the day  
them dudes jumped me off the bus & i  
was *finna*  
get stomped out like a loose square. or  
the day  
they got to shooting at the park & i was  
*finna*  
catch one like an alley-oop. or the day  
my grandma died & my grades dropped  
& i was *finna*  
not finish high school except i had a  
praying mama  
& good teachers & poems to write.

If, as poststructuralist critics remind us, language is destiny, Marshall also knows that language is likewise geography and the people "who you [matter] to." Alerting his reader to its origins, a speaker announces, "*finna* comes from the southern phrase *fixing to*," but one of the nobler aims of the book is to pay homage to his genesis, the city of Chicago where, yes, "bustdowns bloom in our mouths" but also where gangs give "the strong dap & safe haven / to go on being bookish / & breathing & walking in the hood," and where the young poet's tongue is shaped by a grandmother who "kept a dictionary on the kitchen





table,” where the complicated covenants and codes of masculinity are passed down in silence and violence.

Everywhere in this book, *Finna* strikes notes of salvation and resistance. Collectively, the poems make a parable of vernacular culture, which is to say, Marshall constructs an eloquent and defiant freedom inside the very contours of speech that is designed to imprison. This battle is played out as a kind of verbal interplay where “we make shambles of their standards / we stand on them / & fashion an abolition / in diction.” In a series of portrait poems and origin stories, he names and writes himself into existence as “Nate Marshall” while outing the other “Nate Marshall” that a google search reveals is a white supremacist in Colorado. Then, of course, is the brutal poem “nigger joke,” which narrates a palpably tense conversation in a bar in a gentrifying neighborhood with a white man that exposes the limits of language and faulty logic of comparative suffering.

Marshall’s power is an unmitigated belief in the expressive and communicative powers of language to proffer agency and might, sustenance and strength, but he remains committed in writing poems that are authentic in capturing both the beauty and ugly reality of struggle in America. These poems work to embody that complexity if not to supremely imbue the world with the aliveness born of twisting and bending language as a measure of one’s enduring humanity: “let all my poems be / bowls or thrones or hairpieces or mariages. / let everything i make, if it should survive, tell the next world / mine were a people of faculty & faith.”

Major Jackson  
Nashville, Tennessee

Amit Chaudhuri  
*Finding the Raga: An  
Improvisation on Indian Music*

New York. New York Review Books. 2021.  
253 pages.



IF FICTION IS “CREATED,” then non-fiction is surely “found.” Criticism is a hunt for flaws and virtues, history spotted in the wind-mirror, memoir nothing but the druff at the bottom of memory’s barrel. Quality is not intrinsic to characters, events, or ideas but a question of how they come together, like notes in a melody. Viewed in this light, *Finding the Raga*, the latest book by writer-cum-singer Amit Chaudhuri, is an awkward and somewhat dissonant composition in which musical exegesis rubs shoulders with commentary on modernist art and episodes from Mughal history; “chapters” range in size from a paragraph to a dozen pages, while part 1 (out of four) occupies three-quarters of the book. And yet it is precisely by tearing through structural conventions that Chaudhuri is able to alight on a new summit of cultural discourse. For this is not just a book about found things. Rather, as its title implies, it is a commentary on the process of finding the inaudible harmony, or raga, between music, art, and life.

A raga is a scale, the musical framework of Indian classical music. “You can’t compose a raga because ragas have no composers in the conventional sense,” writes Chaudhuri. “They are ‘found’ material turned into fluid and imperishable forms by the culture.” But Chaudhuri’s presence as the maestro of this quiet work, and his

unique position on the threshold between music and literature, between East and West, are what make *Finding the Raga* so illuminating. Nearly every thought and anecdote is forged by Chaudhuri’s experiences and tempered by his humble, understated style, from discovering the overlap between social consciousness and musical taste as a student at University College London, to learning from his tutor to incorporate external factors—a drop in temperature, the pitch of the air-conditioner’s humming—into musical performance.

Chaudhuri himself proves a patient teacher, as he familiarizes readers with the lexicon of Hindustani classical music and walks us through the various *khayals* and ragas note by note. The reading is certainly enhanced by having a pitched instrument at hand, for ultimately the book remains a literary, as opposed to musical, work. Perhaps *Finding the Raga*’s greatest shortcoming is its inability to reconcile form and content in this way, but it is a shortcoming that Chaudhuri acknowledges. “People have asked me, ‘In what way does being a musician affect your writing?’ . . . After three decades, I see . . . one link: I’m told I have a tendency not to come to the point.”

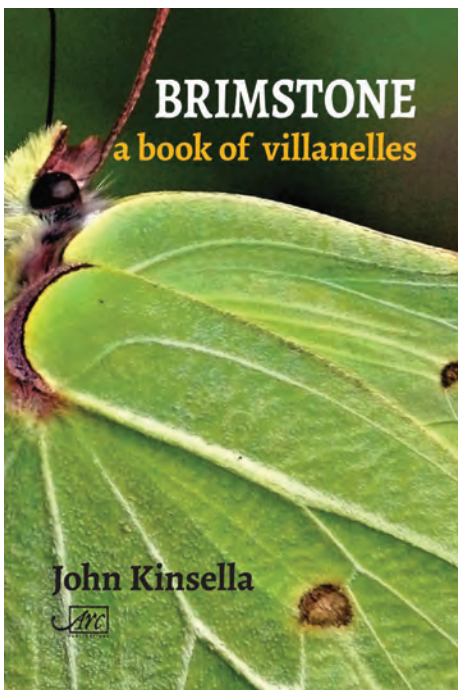
Readers hoping to find that point will be put off by *Finding the Raga*’s profound but detumescent musings. But those looking to attune themselves to the timbre of Indian classical music, or to discover fresh insights into this ancient tradition, will not be disappointed.

Josh Allan  
Oxford

John Kinsella  
*Brimstone: A Book of Villanelles*

Todmorden. Arc. 2020. 77 pages.

THE VILLANELLE OCCUPIES an unstable canonical history. Jean Passerat’s “J’ay perdu ma Tourterelle” (written in 1574, published in 1606) is the only example of the form dating from the Renaissance, though as *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry*



and *Poetics* (4th ed.) notes, it was Théodore de Banville's "popular handbook *Petit traité de poésie française*, [that gave rise to] the mistaken belief that the villanelle was an antique form," a belief that "persisted tenaciously throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries." In some contexts, the misapprehension persists: see, for example, the claims made on *Poetica*, aired regularly until somewhat recently on Australia's national broadcast network: "The villanelle was embraced by the musician-poets of twelfth-century France; the troubadours of Provençal and the trouvères of the north, but its origin is Italian."

John Kinsella is one Australian who is confused by neither the history nor the political possibilities of the form. This celebrated anarchist vegan pacifist remains Australia's best-known contemporary poet, and Kinsella writes ferociously from a suite of compelling literacies. *Brimstone* is a tententious, indeed capacious book, which, to lend from the title of another recently published collection (co-written with Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore) *weaves* language together into a braid of remarkable unities.

As if the form provokes his themes (and following Passerat's ur-villanelle in which a "lost turtledove" is mourned), Kinsella

threads together texts either praising or memorializing nature. These poems flap ornithologically, their parrots, kittiwakes, honeyeaters, kingfishers, shufflewings, nightjars, et al. winging above poisoned rivers and burning trees, "slaughterhouses [being] fed sheep/pig/cow," the deforested landscapes performing to an illogical "commerce of . . . *new colonialism*" where, as Kinsella painstakingly points out, there remains a "disconnect between cause and effect" and where the country air is full of "agrichemicals," the midwinters "yellow with [early blooming, unseasonal] apocalyptic flowers."

One such text, "Goading Storms out of a Darkening Field" (taken from *The Silo: a Pastoral Symphony* [1995]), demonstrates a set of complex settler connections to land: Kinsella's lines watch the "[s]heep on their last legs. Dams crusted over" and echo the echoes of farmers "[c]ursing the dry, cursing the bitter yield," as if to both sympathize and ironize these graziers' lack of awareness. The ways in which Australian land is put to use, agro-industrially, in no small way co-creates the Anthropocene's emerging precarities; increasingly, the once-fecund Australian landscape (not just in Western Australia's so-called wheat belt, where Kinsella is based) is semi-permanently drought-stricken, ravaged by rapacious megafires, scarified by erosion, arid, and ruined. This is a global trend, up to a point, and Kinsella's ecological imaginary has long understood the endgames of unchecked capitalism. As much as they are godless hymns, these villanelles are fiats: surveying colonized lands while the planet endures a fourth industrial revolution, Kinsella sees and sings of how sustained, instrumentalizing attacks are causing systemic collapse.

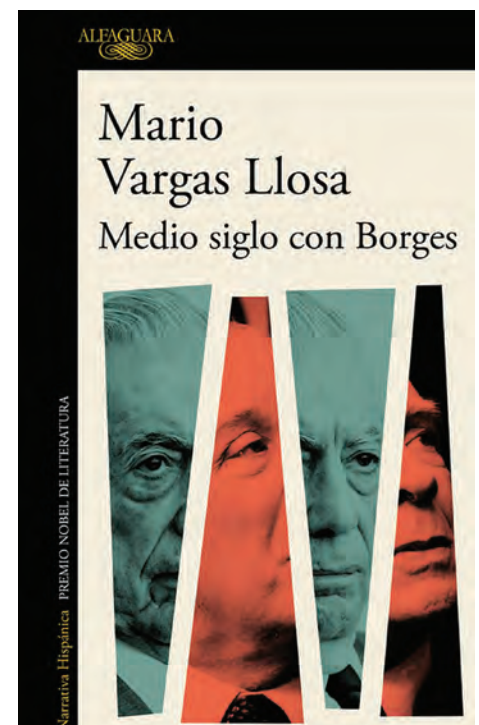
Amid the emergent ruins, though, Kinsella continues to find ways to sing new possibilities. Imagining himself alongside that other greatly invested tree-loving poet, W. S. Merwin, he "water[s] trees / using the zigzag technique to handle the gradient," and this is understood not merely

as a "survivalist act but one of constancy." In other words, an act of faith and fealty, a generosity founded not just in anxiety but goodwill and kindness, too. Poets like Kinsella (and Merwin) are nature's good neighbor and, of course, our moral and ecological exemplars.

Here is a poet who maintains a steadfast gaze, at once "not[ing] fresh constructions of roads and antonyms of nature," while "look[ing] to learn / what our impact might or might not be." This is a poetic language that can secure us, these villanelles weaving narratives that can hold fast against the as-if compulsive "repetition[s] / of crisis and peace and quandary."

Dan Disney

Sogang University (Seoul)



Mario Vargas Llosa  
*Medio siglo con Borges*

Miami. Alfaguara. 2020. 108 pages.

**MEDIO SIGLO CON BORGES** is a compilation of interviews, essays, and reviews written by Mario Vargas Llosa about Jorge Luis Borges over five decades. In many ways, the volume is Vargas Llosa's hom-



Khal Torabully  
*Cargo Hold of Stars: Coolitude*

Trans. Nancy Naomi Carlson. Kolkata.  
Seagull Books. 2021. 200 pages.

THROUGH NANCY NAOMI CARLSON'S translation of the French original, anglo-phone readers finally have access to Khal Torabully's groundbreaking poetry collection, *Cale d'étoiles: Coolitude*. First published in 1992 and crowned with the Prix Jean Fanchette the following year, the text is notable for its conceptualization of "coolitude" as well as for its linguistic innovation and sensual archipelagic imagery (see *WLT*, Winter 2019, 27).

"Coolitude" reclaims the noun "coolie," long used as a derogatory to refer to the Indian indentured laborers who replaced slaves on sugarcane fields in British colonies across the world. In order to reach their work destinations, Indian laborers had to undertake the dreaded *kala pani* crossing, which literally means the "crossing of dark waters." "Coolitude" is a reformulation of this journey from one of loss—loss of country, caste, and community—to one of transformation and infinite possibilities: "I propose we be porters of futures, worker bees of worlds, sowers of languages, builders of bridges connecting continents poised for a healthy sharing."

For Torabully, coolitude is neither static belonging nor desired return to India. Instead, it is a future-oriented rebirth that weaves connection between migrants from all over the world: "In saying coolie, I'm also speaking of every voyager barred from a ship's registry, all who've ever embarked for horizons of dreams, whatever the ship they boarded or had to board." This inclusiveness, however, falls short when it comes to gender: Torabully's work is steeped in the male language of brotherhood, with the female only present metaphorically, as the "blue womb" of the ocean or the "carnal call" of an imagined lover.

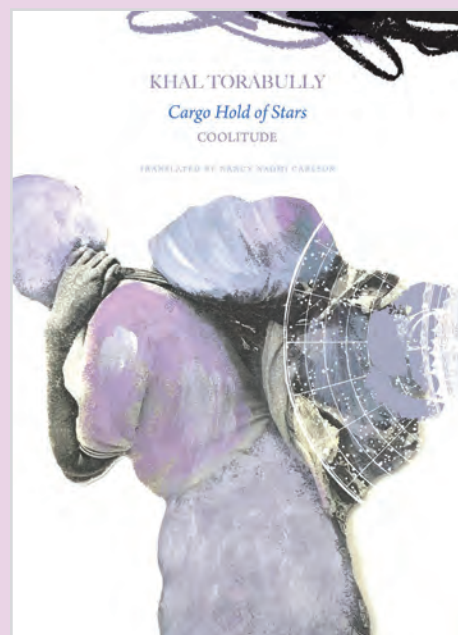
Even as he evokes a global experience of migration emerging from "an open wound

in the sea," Torabully remains true to the contextual specificities of the *kala pani* crossing. The poetry collection is infused with the scents of cumin, thyme, and coriander that traveled overseas with the migrants, and Torabully's native Mauritius is present through a plethora of allusions, ranging from the seventeenth-century fort (La Citadelle) looming over the capital city of Port-Louis to the *bolom souna* of the island's folklore. This subjectivity is addressed by the poet himself as he defines the text as "my vision of the ocean all of us crossed, though we didn't see the stars from the same point of view."

Quite strikingly, Torabully does not shy away from exploring the links between indentured labor and slavery, an impactful move given the rifts that exist between Afro- and Indo-descendants on previous plantation economies: "We are molasses, we are bagasse / my African brother descended from slaves / our skin is the trace / like yours, of the same dark race." He is careful to note, however, the distinctiveness of the coolies' Indian heritage as it comes to bear on this job once thrust upon the enslaved: "And if African gestures came to our hands as we cut the cane, the cracking and dancing of fingers remained ours, used to the tabla, often attuned to the ravanne's great cry of hearts adrift."

What Torabully describes above is part of a history of "endless métissage," a constant mixing of cultures that shines through in the collection's linguistic innovation. Carlson describes Torabully's language as a "new French," one that melds together "Mauritian Creole, old Scandinavian, old French, mariners' language, Hindi, Bhojpuri, Urdu and neologisms." If Torabully posits that his "true mother tongue is poetry," his sense of belonging is to this unique, self-fashioned language: "And I speak my French tongue to point out my home port on the map of my discoveries."

To translate Torabully's poetic rhythm and "linguistic acrobatics" is no mean feat, and the translator's foreword offers us valuable insight into Carlson's creative process,



including a detailed explanation of her "sound mapping" approach. She is overwhelmingly successful in her translations, though some polysemy is invariably lost, for example in the straightforward translation of *negre marron*—which could also mean "brown Negro," another expression of Afro-Indo connection—as "runaway slave."

Torabully's work is relentless in its optimistic hope for a world with borders, in which shared humanity is highlighted over separate origins. He does not forget the coolies' suffering, which is ultimately ungraspable by language: "no grammar can express / the blood of men." However, he consciously chooses to foreground their agency and resilience: "And I know that my crew will be among those erasing borders to broaden Humanity's Homeland." In today's Covid-19 reality of closing national borders, Torabully's collection takes on renewed appeal as it challenges us to dare to imagine a fragile and yet glittering tomorrow: "The horizon [is] a pink more delicate / than the first seashells' exquisite skin."

Nikhita Obeegadoo  
Harvard University

age to a writer he has deeply admired since the 1950s. Such an opinion holds a hidden irony, however, for while Vargas Llosa is himself a staunch realist, concerned with politics and contemporary social debates in his fiction, Borges's writings revolved around more abstract themes such as dreams, labyrinths, philosophers, and mirrors. In books such as *Ficciones* and *El Aleph*, Borges made significant contributions to philosophical and fantasy literature and, in so doing, established a rich dialogue between Latin American letters and other world literatures.

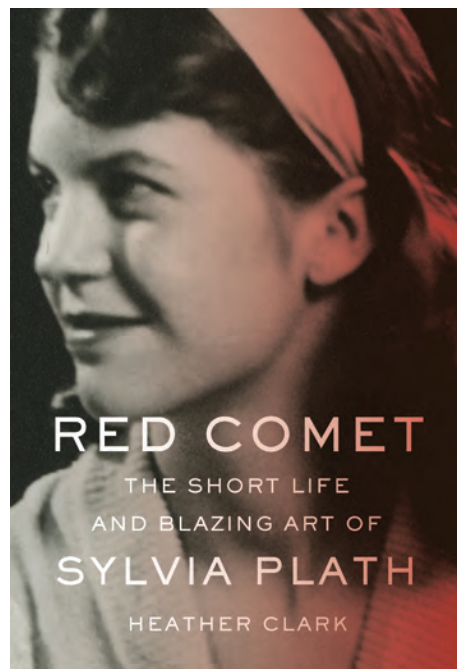
The book opens with a conversation between Borges and Vargas Llosa in Paris in 1963. In it, Borges confesses his admiration for Flaubert's novels as well as for the poetry of Verlaine and Apollinaire. However, when asked about his interest in politics, he quickly replies that politics is nothing short of "una de las formas del tedio" (a type of boredom) for him. He repeats this idea on politics in another interview from 1981, while also expressing his admiration for Joseph Conrad's and Henry James's novels and asserts that *modernismo* was Latin America's most important contribution to Hispanic literature.

For Vargas Llosa, Borges "inventó una prosa en la que habitan tantas ideas como palabras" (he invented a way of writing in which there are as many ideas as words) and authored short stories that he describes as unusual, perfect, and cerebral. He credits him for a body of work that, along with his poetry and essays, constitutes pure intellectual pleasure. At the same time, he underscores Borges's cosmopolitanism. Indeed, Borges was an author who enjoyed speaking about French or English literature as much as he did exploring old Scandinavian myths. He shared these interests with numerous reflections on Argentine literature and culture, amid a unique style of writing that was always rigorous and intelligent, as Vargas Llosa ably comments in "Las ficciones de Borges" (The Fictions of Borges) or "Borges entre señoras" (Borges among Women).

The ten pieces included in *Medio siglo con Borges* are highly recommended reading to review the many facets of Borges as a writer and as a public figure from the perspective of another key protagonist of contemporary Hispanic letters. In them, Vargas Llosa pays tribute to an author he has read with admiration over the years and who is arguably the most important Latin American writer of the past century.

César Ferreira

University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee



Heather Clark

## *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath*

New York. Knopf. 2020. 1152 pages.

OVER THE YEARS I'VE approached each new biography of Sylvia Plath hoping for a fully comprehensive account of her life that would portray her as the person of extraordinary intellectual and aesthetic accomplishment that she actually was rather than as the madwoman who killed herself. Heather Clark's *Red Comet* is the book I've been waiting for.

Meticulously researched and conceived with a sympathetic, sure-footed grasp of

her subject, Clark has created a glass-smooth read of a thousand pages about Plath's brilliant life and art. In the process she has filled in many of the spaces in the poet's life that have remained inexplicably blank: her professor-father, Otto Plath's, early life after immigrating to this country; the influential relationship between Plath and her psychiatrist, Ruth Beuscher; and the behind-the-scenes alliance between Plath's mother, Aurelia, and the poet's benefactress, Olive Higgins Prouty. Ultimately what emerges is the portrait of a highly resourceful, resilient woman—an uncommonly original thinker and artist who brought passion and discipline into remarkably taut balance in both her life and poems.

Plath's love of poetry ran deep, which Clark underscores by presenting selections from her juvenilia, something no previous biographer has done. These excerpts trace the rapid evolution of Plath's rare lyrical gift and the singular industry and ambition with which she drove herself to express it as she matured. Clark also emphasizes Plath's professionalism, which was unusual for a woman writer of her time. Despite regular rejections, she systematically continued to submit both poetry and fiction to women's magazines and literary publications, and she also mastered the sophisticated art of networking, pointedly establishing contact with well-known poets and critics, such as Marianne Moore and A. Alvarez.

Like most lives, however, the trajectory of Plath's was complicated. Losing her father at a young age, constantly striving to earn money to make ends meet, and trying to simultaneously find academic, professional, and romantic fulfillment during a period when most of her well-educated female peers still chose marriage as their life's work were ongoing challenges that she met with courage and determination.

De-pathologizing Plath is the central mission of Clark's book: "I have tried to recover what Plath gave to us rather than what she gave up," Clark declares in the book's prologue. To that end she has not



only probed Plath's family history more deeply than previous biographers, but she also includes the commentary of friends not previously consulted. Additionally, she draws on a wealth of other new material, including the complete Ted Hughes archives and the voluminous research for a biography of Plath by the scholar Harriet Rosenstein that was never published. Clark's aim is to "reposition" Plath "as one of the most important American writers of the twentieth century."

This is the only biography of Sylvia Plath that has ever given me a logical way to think about why she decided to end her life. Clark convincingly argues that both the combination of potent medications Plath was taking for depression during her final weeks as well as her fear of again being forced to submit to electroshock therapy, an experience that had previously so traumatized her that she vowed never to allow herself to undergo it again, contributed significantly to her decision. Yet Plath's struggles with depression had always existed in counterpoise with the instinctive pull she had also felt toward optimism and hope. "Wintering," the final poem in the original manuscript of *Ariel* that she left on her desk the morning of her death, ends: "The bees are flying. / They taste the spring."

Rita Signorelli-Pappas  
Princeton, New Jersey

**Karl Ove Knausgaard**  
*In the Land of the Cyclops*

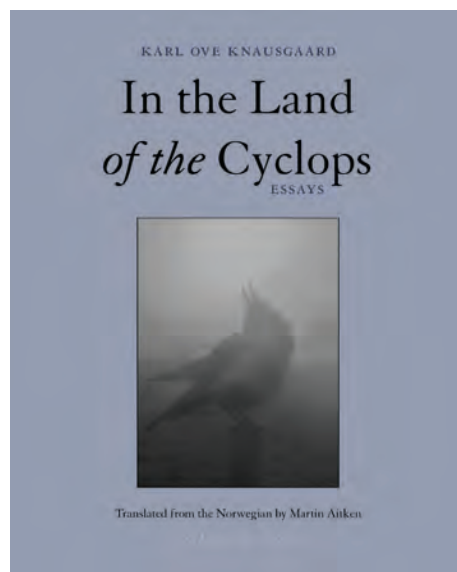
Trans. Martin Aitken. New York.  
Archipelago Books. 2021. 350 pages.

**IN HIS NEW COLLECTION** of essays, *In the Land of the Cyclops*, Karl Ove Knausgaard continues to use writing as a process to defamiliarize and move beyond the world as one knows it. The subjects of the essays for the most part center on visual artists and writers: Cindy Sherman, Gustave Flaubert, Anselm Kiefer, and Knut Hamsun, among many others. Knausgaard

approaches these subjects directly, eschewing a dense critical style in favor of the personal and rigorous fascination with the subject itself that informed his monograph on Edward Munch, *So Much Longing in So Little Space*.

As with Munch, Knausgaard at times vanishes in his intense scrutiny of his subjects. Those familiar with Knausgaard's epic *My Struggle* will find his shift into essay writing a natural evolution. That series was defined by two separate impulses, the first being the excavation of Knausgaard's personal life in which he chronicles the challenges and mundanities of modern life in exacting detail. The second impulse, however, tended toward expansive inquiry, most notably in the last volume, where a four-hundred-plus-page essay on Adolf Hitler is tucked away in the middle of the book. Both impulses are on display in this collection in which Knausgaard continually returns to thoughts of boundaries, the absolute, differentiation, sameness, and defamiliarization, both in terms of his subjects and his own life. His strategy, irksome to some but exciting for others, is to bring the reader right up to the precipice of insight before lodging a question and disappearing.

Knausgaard is less interested in answers than in authentic engagement with the world. This appears to be his primary



interest as a writer and is summed up neatly in an early essay where Knausgaard recalls his joy as a teenager flying on an airplane for the first time. "I was sixteen when I last felt something I'd never felt before," he recalls. "It was sensational. I was looking out the window of the plane, looking at the clouds, the landscape beneath them, when I got this intense feeling of the world. It was as if I had never seen it before then." *In the Land of the Cyclops* is another worthy addition to Knausgaard's oeuvre that aims to recapture this intense feeling and to see the world anew.

Phillip Garland  
St. Louis, Missouri



**Vigdis Hjorth**  
*Long Live the Post Horn!*

Trans. Charlotte Barslund. New York.  
Verso. 2020. 196 pages.

**FOR HER SPLENDID** *Will and Testament* (2019), Vigdis Hjorth allegedly based her narrative on family history (*WLT*, Spring 2020, 100). The autofiction occasioned a literary squabble that led to a rebuttal novel. This time, Hjorth's slim but fulfilling

novel focuses on a piece of recent Norwegian history. In 2011 the European Union considered allowing competition for the postal service delivery of letters under fifty grams in the nonmember Scandinavian country. Character, not plot, becomes the core of the exploration of the consequences of that action.

The fight against Labour falls into the hands of thirty-five-year-old Ellinor, a member of the small public relations firm Kraft-Com, whose slogan is "Selling the Power of Thought." It is not a good time for her. She is suffering from a "diffuse feeling of loneliness." She is in more than a slump. It's not so much ennui as it is acedia. Her dark night of the soul seeps into every pore of her personal and professional life.

Her aimlessness is compounded by the departure of one of the group, Dag.

His divorce, subsequent breakdown, and withdrawal from the firm complicates her already unsettled life. She is in an endless round of meaningless sex. When Dag's body is discovered in the harbor basin in Calais, Ellinor is appointed the lead member of the diminished team to deal with the Norwegian Postal Workers Union to resolve the political impasse.

The title and epigraph for the novel are from Søren Kierkegaard (*Repetition: A Venture in Experimental Psychology*). They serve as appropriate signposts to the subject and themes and to the extraordinary examination of loneliness, local politics, and public relations.

The character Constantin Constantius (a pseudonym) exhorts:

Long live the post horn! . . . you can never be sure to coax the same tone

from it twice . . . he who puts his lips to it and invests his wisdom in it will never be guilty of repetition, and he who, instead of answering his friend, hands him a post horn for his amusement, says nothing yet explains everything. . . . Just as the ascetics of old placed a skull on their desks for contemplation, so will the post horn . . . always remind me of the meaning of life.

The sentiment applies to Ellinor after she discovers an old diary of hers from 2000 and doesn't recognize the persona encased in it. As months drop behind her, she latches onto a story of the postal service that seems to give her purpose and direction. She follows the trail of a presumably lost letter—addressed to a Helga Brun—that a postal carrier never abandoned.

## SAHAR KHALIFEH

Sahar Khalifeh

### *My First and Only Love*

Trans. Aida Bamia. Cairo. Hoopoe Press. 2021. 401 pages.

**THE ARABIC READER IS** witnessing an evolution in the Arabic novel, particularly in the past decade and in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Novelists have been experimenting with new forms, styles, and topics of interest. Sahar Khalifeh is a pioneer in this evolution, spanning a career in writing for over fifty years. The depth and breadth of her literary creations are unparalleled by any living Arabic novelist. Thanks to Aida Bamia, the English library is enriched by her translations of Khalifeh's works.

Aida Bamia, a professor emeritus from the University of Florida, surprises us again with another excellent translation of Sahar Khalifeh's work. This is the continuation of an earlier novel by Khalifeh, *Of Noble Origins*. Both describe the life of the Qahtan family from Nablus in the

West Bank during the tumultuous time of British Mandate (1918–47). In the current novel, the reader sees living in Nablus from the point of view of Nidal, a woman in her seventies who had traveled and lived in many capitals in the world but decides to return to her roots. Nidal meets her first love, Rabi', and they both reminisce about their young love for each other. Rabi' also came back to Nablus after a life of wandering. Khalifeh transcends the local struggles of the Palestinian protagonists to the more universal meanings of loss of everything familiar.

Nablus is Khalifeh's birthplace and where most of her characters come from. A proud capital of an Ottoman district for about four hundred years, it lost its status after the First World War and its aftermath. It became another provincial town in Palestine and in the Middle East in general, losing its place to the two port cities of Yaffa and Haifa. Khalifeh's characters move between these cities and Jerusalem. The mobility signifies a society in transition from a traditional agricultural economy to



a more modern economy. As Palestinians were struggling with the changing economic and subsequent social and political changes, they were also fighting for self-determination. The spectacular fall of Palestinian society and the dispersal across



Desperation leads to engagement. Ellinor's search for the story behind what happened to Helga, the letter, and the postal carrier occasions the second most important quote in the novel. She exclaims her praise: "Long live the postman! Who finds your letter and puts it in the right letter box. Love letters, birthday cards, postcards, invitations . . . much-awaited confirmation of an all clear after medical tests. . . . Perhaps a bill, but we don't count them . . . every link is [equally] vital . . . the certainty of it, the predictability of the Post Office, the repetition! Long live the postman, the post box, the Post Office and all its beings!"

Hjorth's brisk, spare prose invigorates *Long Live the Post Horn!*, making it a captivating read.

Robert Allen Papinchak  
Valley Village, California

the region is observed and witnessed in Khalifeh's novels as a universal loss of "who one is." Khalifeh successfully transcends the particular to the universal.

Khalifeh's novel takes us into the Palestinian history of the past century and its encounter with British colonialism, on one hand, and the Jewish settlement project in Palestine on the other. Palestinian protagonists are not the ultimate victims of both. Rather, they are willing agents who interact with both challenges to their identity as well as the right to simply live their lives. By telling the story of the Qahtan family, Khalifeh is telling us the story of Palestine through the life changes, aspirations, and choices of the main characters. Further, to Khalifeh, who holds a doctorate in women's studies, the urgency of the liberation of women is no less important than the urgency of the liberation of Palestinians from occupation. Self-determination is a right to both women and to the Palestinians as a whole. To her, both go together. Khalifeh resurrects in her novels a society on

Cixin Liu  
*To Hold Up the Sky*

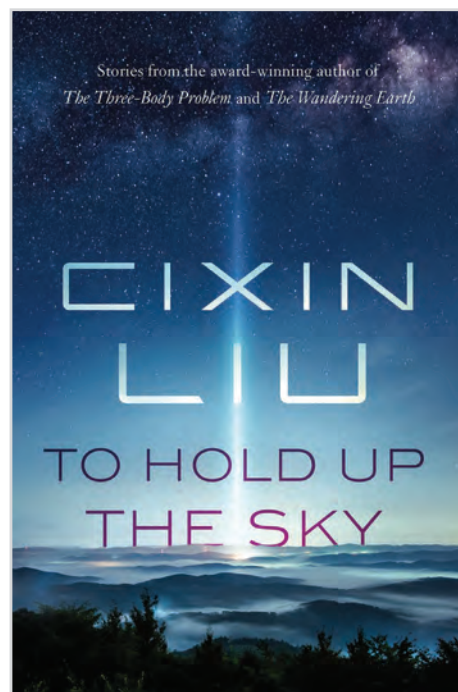
Various translators. New York. Tor Books.  
2020. 336 pages.

CIXIN LIU likes to think big. Macromolecules, vast time spans, galaxies, and universes: these are just some of the materials Liu plays with (often virtuosically, I might add) in the Three-Body Trilogy, *Ball Lightning*, *Supernova Era*, and his many short stories, especially those eleven collected in *To Hold Up the Sky* (some of which have never before been translated into English). Like historians who study eras and civilizational arcs, Liu is interested in how large swathes of time can help humans think about the future of our species and planet. How will we live in ten

the verge of dispersal and then its aftermath. Palestinian society was facing the challenges of modernity at the same time that it was clashing with colonialism. The characters depict this struggle successfully.

If there is an Arabic novelist who deserves the Nobel Prize, after Naguib Mahfouz, it is Sahar Khalifeh. The strength of the structure of her novels and the aesthetics of her style are unparalleled by any living Arabic novelist. Thanks to the excellent translation by Aida Bamia, both are rendered vitally in English. I highly recommend reading the novel. Of Khalifeh's eleven novels, Bamia has enriched the English library with translations of four of them. Not surprisingly, Bamia also translated Naguib Mahfouz into English.

Camelia Suleiman  
Michigan State University



thousand years? What will the earth look like in a hundred thousand years? What would happen if time ran backward?

Many of his stories, including a few in *To Hold Up the Sky*, feature cataclysmic events that set off what characters call the "[X] Era": in "Sea of Dreams," the alien who removes all the water from Earth's oceans sets off the "Ring of Ice Era," while in "Mirror," the discovery of a computer program that accurately predicts the future initiates the "Mirror Era." "Eras" are a key feature of *The Supernova Era* and the books in the Three-Body Trilogy as well, as humanity must wait hundreds of years between, say, finding out that an alien species is headed for Earth and then actually meeting that species. Time is as much a character in Liu's work as any human, and indeed Liu often is more interested in exploring time's curious properties than describing human relationships, psychology, and interactions. "Time Migration" imagines what would happen if a group of people moved so far forward in time that they eventually discovered an Earth as pristine and wild as it was millions of years in the past, while "Contraction" (one of the most successful stories in the

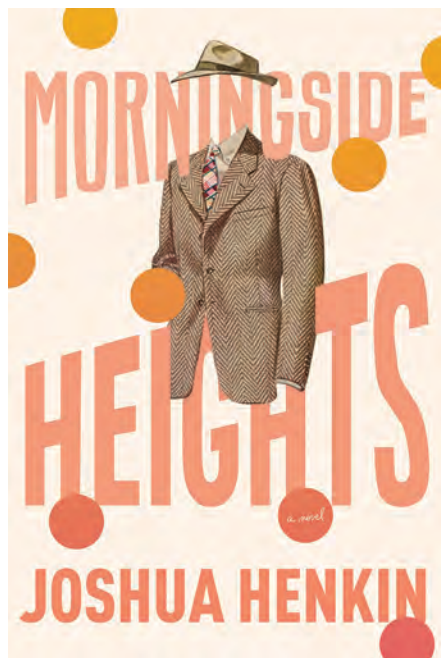
collection) posits that time will start moving backward at the exact moment when the universe switches from expanding to contracting.

This collection also includes three intriguing stories about powerful aliens exploiting the Earth to create art. The most fully developed of these, “Sea of Dreams,” introduces us to an amoral alien whose sole interest is in using any kind of matter in the universe to create spectacular objects. When it visits Earth and learns about “low temperature art,” the alien becomes inspired and turns all the oceans into ice, after which it hauls all the ice blocks into orbit to form a kind of jeweled necklace around the planet. Liu carefully contrasts this cosmic creative act with the suffering and destruction that the lack of water causes on Earth. Eventually, humanity summons its last resources to force the ice blocks back down to the surface to begin the process of planetary regeneration. The mirror-alien in “Ode to Joy,” unlike the ice-cube alien, leaves Earth unscathed but uses it as an instrument in a cosmic concert; unfortunately, Liu has the world leaders in the story all speaking authoritatively about astronomy and physics, which renders farcical a piece that would have otherwise been compelling. Finally, a powerful alien race in “Cloud of Poems” destroys much of the Milky Way (though not Earth) in order to power a quantum computer that will generate all the poetry past and present produced by humans.

The two most successful stories in this collection serve as perfect bookends. “The Village Teacher” switches back and forth between a small school in a poor mountain village in China and an intergalactic war between carbon- and silicon-based life-forms. Thanks to the school’s devoted but dying teacher, the schoolchildren are able to recite Newton’s Laws of Motion when they’re tested by an alien species deciding if humanity should be wiped out or not. In “The Thinker,” an astronomer and a brain surgeon realize, after decades of paral-

lel research, that the twinkling of certain kinds of stars mirrors that of neurons firing in the human brain’s right hemisphere. Their conclusion that the universe might itself be conscious is just one example of Cixin Liu’s unique approach to science fiction. Despite the unevenness of the collection, *To Hold Up the Sky* is yet another exciting contribution to the genre.

Rachel S. Cordasco  
Madison, Wisconsin



Joshua Henkin  
*Morningside Heights*

New York. Pantheon Books. 2021. 304 pages.

**AT FIRST IT APPEARS** that *Morningside Heights* is yet another campus tale of the professor-meets-grad-student variety, but Joshua Henkin’s new novel quickly side-steps formula. Crisply and at breakneck speed in a brief first section, we learn that Pru Steiner has always had a weakness for older men, so it’s no surprise when she falls for Spence Robin, her charismatic but only slightly older Shakespeare professor at Columbia.

After that the novel takes on more texture and depth as it develops the story

of a marriage and an oddly blended family. Spence is a certifiable star. After a Guggenheim and a Mellon, he wins a MacArthur, but at the age of fifty-seven, things begin to go awry. He stumbles, in language, in memory, and, eventually, in movement. His dementia appears slowly with his inability to work on, let alone finish, a book he has contracted to write and continues quickly to the point where Pru has to hire a caregiver to help out while she is at work as a development officer at Barnard.

In the early years of their marriage, Pru feels that “Spence’s success was her success, too. There was no separating them.” But at fifty years old, Pru is forced to see herself as separate, and the thrust of the narrative follows her growth and the redefinition of her marriage and herself. She has faced some difficulty in the past, mostly with trying to blend Spence’s son from an early marriage, Arlo, into their lives with their daughter, Sarah. But in dealing with Spence’s decline, Pru comes into her own.

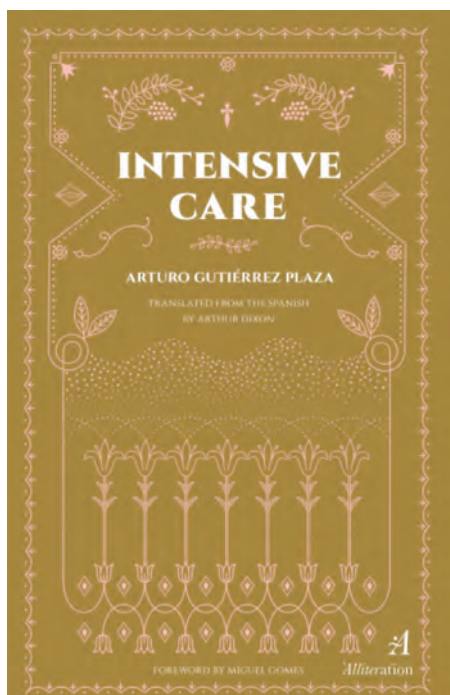
Henkin touches us most deeply with the small moments and details—the descriptions of a clueless Pru trying to hire a caregiver for Spence, or her coping with Spence’s inability to see his condition, or her attempting to navigate the academic environment at Columbia when it is clear that Spence cannot continue his classes. She becomes fierce, something she never was before. She is also lonely for the first time, living with someone who isn’t really there against the backdrop of a huge, impersonal city. Henkin truly captures the specific ambience and feel of the Upper West Side of New York in his depictions of the apartments, the street scenes, and the dinner parties.

This novel could have been bleak or sentimental, yet it is neither. Henkin has managed to inject humor as well as pathos into a searing portrait of a family in crisis. There are some flaws along the way—Arlo is a bit too much of a tech genius caricature and his mother is a relic of hippie wanderlust. But *Morningside Heights* is beautifully



written, and nothing mars the undeniable power of this poignant and very intelligent novel.

Rita D. Jacobs  
New York



Arturo Gutiérrez Plaza  
*Intensive Care*

Trans. Arthur Dixon. Columbia, South Carolina. Alliteration. 2020. 213 pages.

“POETRY IS THAT WHICH is worth translating,” says Eliot Weinberger in *19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*, his 1987 treatise on the difficulties of just such an enterprise. “Great poetry lives in a state of perpetual transformation, perpetual translation: the poem dies when it has no place to go.” In other words, translating poetry from one language to another requires a kind of transformation in which the poem succeeds on its own terms not only in its source language but also in the target language. Otherwise, to paraphrase the American poet and translator Robert Bly, the poem is what gets lost in translation.

Arthur Dixon’s translation of Venezuelan poet Arturo Gutiérrez Plaza’s *Cuidados intensivos* succeeds brilliantly as both

translation and English-language poetry. Gutiérrez Plaza’s voice in Spanish, his diction and rhythms, are those of everyday speech—earthy, gleaming like a rock in the sunlight. Yet at the same time it is visionary and incantatory, carrying with it poetry’s power to bring something momentous into being. To be at once straightforward on the surface but suggest the deepest human dilemmas and emotions is a hallmark of this book, a paradox Dixon’s translation brings out beautifully. For example, in “A True Story,” Gutiérrez Plaza’s speaker tells us, “It’s true, today you know nothing / for certain, / except that from one dawn to the next / things happen.” This gesture toward the mystery of existence—that our lives are disorderly, random, and mostly unfathomable—is rendered in the most straightforward diction, without the kind of embellishment that would weaken the gravity of the realization.

The major themes of *Intensive Care* accumulate and dovetail throughout the book through such oracular pronouncements. The book’s title suggests illness and mortality but also the vocation of the poet to impose order through language on chaos, even though language has the power both to bring us closer and to separate us. In “Written at the Wrong Time,” the speaker tells us, “Had it been said before, / had it been said without pause, / then maybe, just maybe, all writing / would be in vain and time would do the talking.” Other themes of the book include the mysterious interventions of fate and the difficult situation of contemporary Venezuela at this particular historical moment.

*Intensive Care* is Gutiérrez Plaza’s fifth book of poems but the first to be translated into English. He has won major awards in both Venezuela and Mexico and is currently a professor emeritus at the Universidad Simón Bolívar in Caracas. Given the high quality of both the poems and the translation, here’s hoping Dixon will bring us other of Gutiérrez Plaza’s books in English.

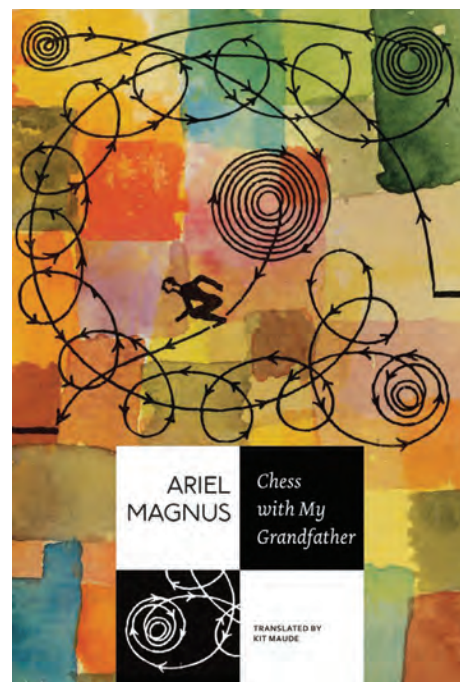
Steve Bellin-Oka  
Tulsa, Oklahoma

## Ariel Magnus *Chess with My Grandfather*

Trans. Kit Maude. Kolkata. Seagull Books. 2021. 312 pages.

WHAT IS CHESS if not a metaphorical microcosm of a myriad of human institutions, conflicts, and systems? In *Chess with My Grandfather*, Argentine novelist Ariel Magnus (with the help of Kit Maude, his infinitely talented translator), descendant of German immigrants, shows just how honed a tool this tabletop theater has been in acting as a proxy for a vast number of human endeavors, specifically war. And what better war to allegorize than the Second World War, whose star hegemony resembles the command the King and Queen pieces have over the fate of the game?

Ariel Magnus’s grandfather, Heinz Magnus, was a German Jew who managed to escape (along with his mother, father, and sister) likely death by fleeing to Buenos Aires, Argentina, after the first rumors of Hitler’s ascent and the ensuing transcontinental conflict. The plot of Heinz’s relatively languid life in Argentina crescendos when the 8th Chess Olympiad takes place between



August 21 and September 19, 1939, in the Politeama Theater in his newfound hometown, coinciding with the outbreak of the war.

Despite the imminent demise of world peace, Heinz is enveloped by a fatal infatuation with tomboy Sonja Graf, real-life German American chess master and dominatrix. Unlike the chess players who traveled to Buenos Aires, Heinz is not part of the “intellectual fraternity” that comes with being a master or connoisseur (or, more precisely victim) of the game; his preferred cerebral enigma is the enchanting woman who antagonizes him so profusely, refusing outright his attempts at courtship.

Ultimately, Heinz gives up on the idea of love and takes on a new, more arduous task. In his long-winded soliloquies scattered throughout otherwise mundane diary entries, Heinz argues that the political boundaries between nations are “unnatural,” similar to the checkered squares on the chessboard that were introduced to the blank expanse of the board in the tenth century. Heinz eventually transitions from a reserved pacifist into a full-blown anarchist. Determined to prevent the Germans from corrupting the most classical of ancient pastimes, Heinz, with the help of the Palestinian, French, and Polish teams, attempts to thwart the only remaining conquerable

enterprise for the Germans: the world of chess.

Ariel Magnus uses the sixty-four-square board as a canvas for the German domination of the “checkerboard of Europe”; the international chess competition that the Germans so effortlessly conquer symbolizes their eventual belligerent conquest of Europe. *Chess with my Grandfather* is laden with what seem to be long-winded bouts of inspiration that can be likened to a diver’s parlous journey into the obscured unknown, all in the duration of one fateful breath. Shifting between such genres as novel, biography, philosophical essay, and historical fiction over the course of this work, Magnus attempts to rectify his grandfather’s failure

## FRANCES LARSON

Frances Larson

### *Undreamed Shores: The Hidden Heroines of British Anthropology*

London. Granta. 2020. 352 pages.

FRANCES LARSON IS AN anthropologist at the University of Durham and the author of three books on anthropologists, collectors of artifacts, and beheadings. *Undreamed Shores* is her latest addition to this list. It traces the lives of Britain’s first female anthropologists—a group of five women, all educated at Oxford in the early twentieth century. However diverse their backgrounds, all were confronted with the severe limitations to which English society subjugated their gender. While their brothers, male friends, and colleagues were privately educated and able to pursue university degrees and research positions, “most women were educated [to] become good wives and mothers.”

We not only learn of the lives of these extraordinary women, the cultures they studied, and the times they lived in, but we also see the field of anthropology establish and define itself, as Larson’s heroines struggle to survive in a world both hostile to

their gender and their field. To Larson, the slowly growing emancipation of women in England in the early twentieth century did not merely coincide with the birth of modern anthropology but was a necessary contribution to it. A woman’s perspective is an essential part to the study of any society and particularly valuable in the study of subjects such as the societal role of women, family structures, childbirth, and sexuality. In the context of field research specifically, female researchers may be perceived as a lesser threat than their male counterparts and may thus be more tolerated by certain subject groups. And finally, Larson’s anthropologists were less likely than some of their male colleagues to put tales of their own bravery before the content of their work. Their books were “modest and attentive. True to their data and its limitations . . . their work was respected without being celebrated.”

Katherine Routledge, born 1866, sailed to Easter Island to study its Polynesian culture and past. Winifred Blackman, born 1872, lived with agricultural peasants of Upper Egypt for nineteen seasons. Barbara Freire-Marreco, born 1879, lived and worked in the pueblos of New Mexico



and Arizona. Maria Czaplicka, born 1884, was a Polish citizen and traveled northern Siberia throughout the winter. Lastly, Beatrice Blackwood, born 1889, traveled to New Guinea twice and, for decades, held a leading role with the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, contributing more than two thousand objects herself.

Braving all odds, these women made their way to Oxford at a time when there were only three university posts in anthro-



to transcribe his life in a single meaningful, coherent work. As he probes the intersection of racism, nationalism, and war, Magnus dips in and out of history and fiction to reveal telling philosophical lessons about the tendency of man to make black and white the cultures of the world, when in reality we are all pieces of the same game.

Ellie Simon  
Norman, Oklahoma

Maria Stepanova  
*In Memory of Memory*

Trans. Sasha Dugdale. London.  
Fitzcarraldo Editions. 500 pages.

**THE LITERATURE OF MEMORY** often explores what consciousness is stored in and speaks from objects. Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* uses the (now legendary) madeleine cakes of Marcel's aunt Léonie to access hidden memories from Combray; Péter Nádas's *A Book of Memories* finds a key motif in the colored stained-glass windows of Berlin and Budapest apartment buildings and the way in which they filter the light coming in. Between these two novels (1913 and 1986, respectively) spans the fiction of recollection of the twentieth century. The poet Maria Stepanova's first long book, *In Memory of Memory*, is clearly in love with this tradition, while it also mourns its

pology across the whole country, and the department at Oxford had only began to take shape. Eventually, a troika of male professors from varied backgrounds, "the triumvirate," ended up leading the department. None of these three professors had done fieldwork. And the fact that all of Larson's women did go on to work in the field was, for some, due to the increase of its importance but, for all, born out of their longing to "travel far away." Fieldwork was an escape "from the strictures of English society" and offered a temporary freedom that was lost again, once they came back. They had changed, but their expected role in English society had not. This dichotomy between who they were and who they were allowed to be brought tragedy for all of their lives, albeit to varied degrees.

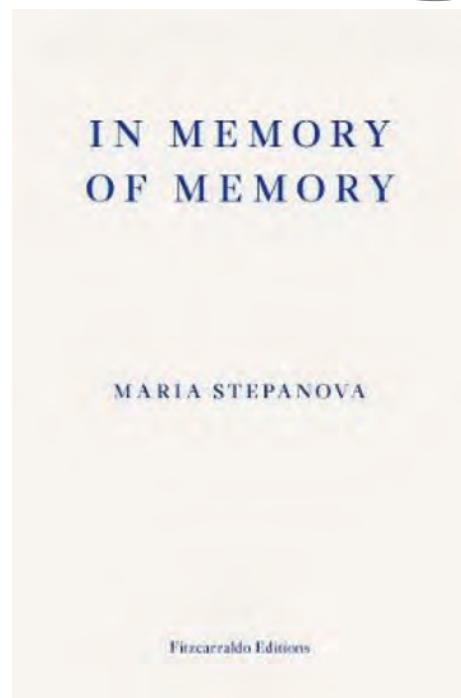
Between the two world wars, anthropology's center of authority shifted away from Oxford and an aging triumvirate to Bronisław Malinowski at the London School of Economics. Today, Malinowski is referred to as the "father of social anthropology," having introduced a strong focus on fieldwork and taught a generation of anthropologists that went on to practice and teach around

the world. Malinowski was Polish, like Czaplicka. They were friends born in the same year and had come to England at similar times. However, the tragically opposite fates of these two brilliant and driven people point to the divergent opportunities between men and women in early twentieth-century Britain.

A hundred years after her heroines met at Oxford, Larson found that these first five female anthropologists "remained peripheral to the histories . . . of great men" and set out to write a book that was to change that. With *Undreamed Shores*, Larson has not only made a superb effort in achieving this but has also given us, man or woman, inspiring examples of unusual bravery and strength in fighting all odds and daring to follow our dreams.

*Undreamed Shores* is an extraordinarily well-crafted, many-layered, and captivating book, in which the author makes the amount of research that underlies its chapters seem effortless. We read on, anxious to see how these five lives unfold and, on the way, find Larson opening doors to different cultures and a time far away.

Felix Haas  
Zurich, Switzerland



irrevocable loss: in the present century, the connections between memory and object, meaning and world, and mind and body have become obscured.

For Stepanova, objects appear "*just as they were*"; the italics are original here, and the phrase is significant, as it chimes with a leading motif in contemporary political thought: could-have-been-different / just-as-it-is denotes an ontological modality that lingers at the cusps of sovereign power, together with a promise of emancipation. Indeed, objects, as they appear to the private archaeologist Stepanova, do not arrive together with their proper meanings and histories; they emerge in excess of narrative. They are just things, although things that communicate, in an obscure or even a negative way, the history of her family to the writer. It is this communication that must be carefully unpacked and deconstructed. In the same way and for this very reason, Stepanova's writing presents itself as more clearly of a learned or scholarly character: it engages explicitly with Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag, W. G. Sebald, and other writers interested in photography and history.

Clearly, Stepanova testifies to—and warns against—a contemporary, postmodern variant of the separation of mind of body; a decision enforced by the trauma of the Holocaust, which has ripped the fabric of history between generations, as well as our uncanny social mass media that in Stepanova’s analysis resemble the imploding crater of Benjamin’s essay on *The Idiot*. In this sense, when remembering memory, besides contemplating the lives of family members, Stepanova is also making an existentialist statement on the brink of an abyss wherein history disappears. Sebald is the closest comparison in this regard.

For memory has an essential connotation in the work of saving as well as, here, letting go. In a crucial chapter devoted to Osip Mandelstam and Sebald, Stepanova draws out memory’s work of “making the past strange,” restoring it to the thing, giving it back to time. Consciousness withdraws into artifact once again; here, we witness something resembling the birth of Odradek, the mysterious creature from Kafka’s story. *In Memory of Memory* has been Maria Stepanova’s lifework since she was ten years old; this great book is a highly urgent theological treatise on memory and saving.

Arthur Willemse  
University of Maastricht

## Federico Falco *A Perfect Cemetery*

Trans. Jennifer Croft. Edinburgh. Charco Press. 2021. 174 pages.

IN THE AFTERWORD TO *A Perfect Cemetery*, translator Jennifer Croft contemplates the crucial translation challenge of rendering the relationship between place and speech through vernacular, dialect, or peculiar conversation. Croft concludes that the question of “how to represent place in speech” is unanswerable, “because translation isn’t a system. Translation is an encounter between two human beings that takes place in words that belong to dif-

ferent systems.” As an example, she gives her choice, in one particular moment, to translate the Spanish word *hermoso* as “swell,” instead of—as might be expected—“beautiful” or “lovely.” Her explanation for this unorthodox choice lies in another debate that rages throughout the history of literary translation: the question of loyalty. “[I]t is the word to which I’m most attached.”

This attachment to her translation is, in turn, a form of loyalty to Federico Falco’s original Spanish text. Whether a translation is faithful to the original is a question that presumes a text has a fixed and singular meaning and casts the translation as a mere vessel to be judged on accuracy above all else. But, as Croft’s faithfulness to the word “swell” illustrates, a text’s meaning is not fixed but rather uncovered and created, again and again, by all its readers. Croft’s translations of the stories in *A Perfect Cemetery* are loyal to the profound beauty, rootedness, and longing they portray.

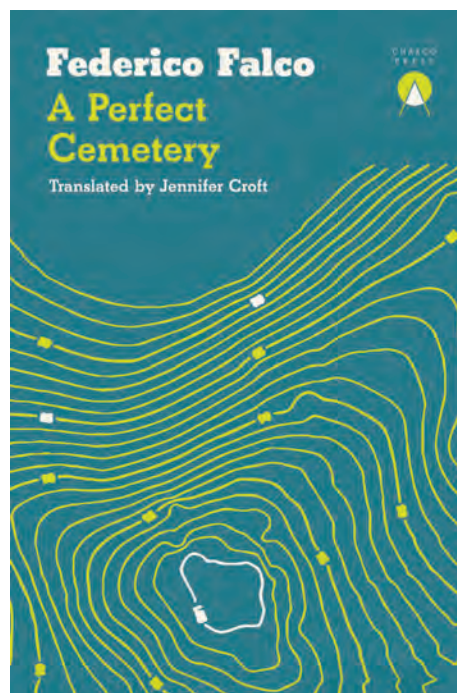
The stories, in turn, each focus on relationships between human beings, nonhuman beings, and the spaces they occupy. At the heart of all the relationships are questions of loyalty. The characters explore

how to honor estranged family members, how to show love to people who have abandoned a community, what happens when family members’ philosophies diverge. The stories have been described as “interlocking,” but that characterization is too mechanical, too artifactual for my taste. I’d rather call them “interlaken”: a series of stunning bodies of water, secretly connected by underground rivers. The stories’ relationships aren’t immediately evident, but one can sense they are of a piece, fed by the same spring. More than anything, one is left with a strong sense of place.

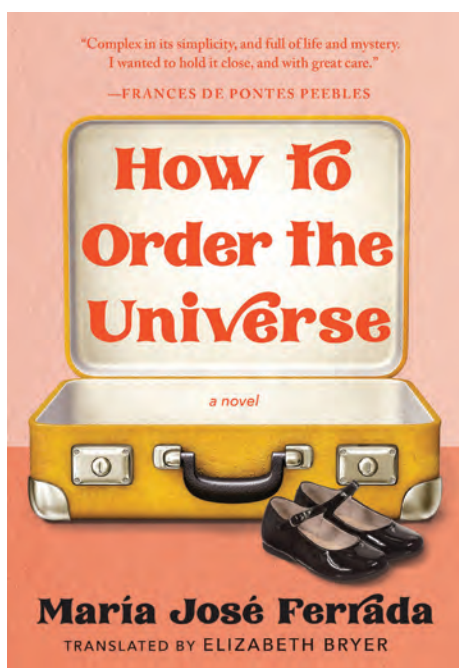
Alongside its loyalty to the landscapes of Córdoba (the Argentine province that serves as the setting for all the stories), which are described with intense sensory detail, *A Perfect Cemetery* explores the question of loyalty in the tender, subtle portraits of its protagonists. Whether it is the king of the hares, who finds more comfortable society with the animals of the forest than with the human beings who populate the town; a teenage girl who forsakes her family’s religion in search of new connections; a designer hired to create the perfect resting place for a man’s implacable father; a woman who seeks a new site for her loyalties after her home is threatened; or a widow seeking to maintain her previous life as a wife: all the characters’ struggles in *A Perfect Cemetery* revolve around faithfulness to place and to one another.

Loyalty—that ideal of translation—is also the ideal of the characters in the stories. And what loyalty means, in both Croft’s translation and in the stories themselves, is to be true to an idea—the idea of a person, the idea of a story, the idea of a place—without necessarily being bound by their rules.

Julie Ann Ward  
University of Oklahoma







María José Ferrada  
*How to Order the Universe*

Trans. Elizabeth Bryer. Portland. Tin House. 2021. 180 pages.

**WHEN SHE GOES TO SCHOOL**, which isn't often, the seven-year-old protagonist of this terrific novel is reminded that she has atypical interests. Let her classmates scribble rhyming verse about blue skies. She'd rather write paeans to pairs of pliers. M, as she's called, is never far from her father, D, a traveling hardware salesman who thinks formal education is overrated. Each day, they drive around Chile's hinterlands, persuading store owners to stock his hammers and wrenches. D neglects to tell his wife that their daughter accompanies him on daylong sales trips, but M is a vital partner. When she stands by his side, adorable and vaguely sad, shopkeepers tend to order more stuff.

A successful author of children's books, Santiago-based María José Ferrada has set *How to Order the Universe*, her first novel for adults, in the 1970s, when Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship jailed and murdered countless law-abiding Chileans. M's mother—she's not part of M and D's secret society, so we never learn her name or ini-

tial—knows these facts too well. Her first love, a regime opponent, disappeared without explanation. Her pain is renewed when D befriends a photographer who knew her missing ex. The photographer is driven to document the junta's crimes, a quest that imperils all who enter his orbit.

Narrated decades later by an adult M, this is a short book with ambitious goals. Ferrada wants to honor those who suffered under fascist rule while also spinning a comic yarn full of workplace absurdities and domestic intrigue. She accomplishes both with enviable grace. Why doesn't M's mother realize she's skipping school? Because D and his daughter have concocted "a false booklet of parent-teacher communications." Though her mother seems withdrawn, in truth, "she was simply sad," M says, "and her sadness meant she couldn't pay attention to details."

At heart, this is an appealing ode to eccentric forms of resistance in the face of brutal repression. Ferrada's portraits of D and his colleagues are entertaining. All are liars—one claims he triggered a woman's heart attack by delivering too many sewing needles, another that he accidentally drove his sedan into a river and floated to safety on a car door—but they're endearingly so. Their apocryphal tales take on a mournful hue when viewed as coping mechanisms, a way to make sense of life and loss in a country run by a murderer. M, meanwhile, learns to organize her thinking by shadowing her sweet, misguided father, carefully taxonomizing his wares (everything from screwdrivers to peepholes), the stores he supplies (mom-and-pops in varying states of disorganization), and his expense-account-padding scams (falsified restaurant checks, pilfered tollbooth receipts).

As it chugs toward a tense third-act crisis, this bighearted story, skillfully translated by Elizabeth Bryer, offers a host of memorable set pieces. Hitched together by this multitalented writer, they make for an outstanding novel.

Kevin Canfield  
New York



David Diop  
*At Night All Blood Is Black*

Trans. Anna Moschovakis. New York. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2020. 160 pages.

**IN THE BLOOD-MIRED** trenches of World War I, an unwilling soldier ascends to an agent of death. Though David Diop anchors *At Night All Blood Is Black* in the plight of Senegal, the historical context of the novel is hushed by an examination of the psychological duality of conflict. A recollection of late childhood and carnage, Diop's prose is less of the fever dream sometimes associated with similarly grotesque subjects and more an organic, direct recount of destruction years at a remove à la Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Look of Silence*. His early illustrations of violence in the novel are abrasive even when compared to most notorious contributions to realistic wartime fiction, but Diop skirts dwelling in such memory in favor of understanding the fractured life that inevitably follows.

Alfa is a young Senegalese man with academic aspirations outside of Africa. Unfortunately, he and his best friend, Mademba, are recruited for the French war

effort against Germany. He and his companion are forced to adopt a veneer of savagery, a vestige Alfa begins to embrace after Mademba is mortally wounded. Unable to bring himself to mercifully kill his friend, Alfa begins viciously killing every German he can find and harvesting their hands, at first to his squadron's encouragement. Their response quickly shifts to horror, however, as with each kill Alfa embodies the vicious animal his superiors believe him to be.

Diop's aforementioned focus on duality is apparent throughout almost every passage. Trenches are likened to a womb or a giant woman, as if Alfa's deadly outings are bookended by a perverse source of life. Diop draws particular attention to how Alfa and his fellow "Chocolat soldiers" are presented: they hold a state-of-the-art rifle in one hand and a crude machete in the other. So far removed from any inclination

toward this kind of behavior, Alfa feels himself slide into a cruel parody of his ancestral plight.

Alfa, to the character's credit, is presented as far from helpless. Despite dismembering Germans in an almost clinical routine, Diop never suggests that Alfa has utterly lost his humanity. In every life he takes, he sees a bit of himself die as the myth of the savage grows. Even then, he knows it is not conclusive, and the novel's latter half is almost entirely centered on contemplating consequences.

War as a literary theme is abundant but is rarely presented with tact when framed as visually as it is with *All Blood Is Black*. David Diop's sophomore effort is readily adapted to the wartime canon.

Daniel Bokemper  
Oklahoma City

## *North American Gaels: Speech, Story, and Song in the Diaspora*

Ed. Natasha Sumner & Aidan Doyle  
Montreal. McGill-Queen's University Press.  
2020. 511 pages.

**THE MONOLITH OF** American history often overshadows the continent's early multiculturalism. This is especially true of the Age of Revolution, when Americanism as both noun and verb began its long echo across the world. So much has been written about the burgeoning American state of that time that the collective of cultures which made it tend to get lost in the noise. Here is a book that delivers on that lamentable gap, with a history and present-day analysis of two shared, but disparately rich, cultures: Irish and Scottish Gaelic.

When the first cracks in the old-world Gaelic political systems spurred emigra-

## BIJAN ELAHI

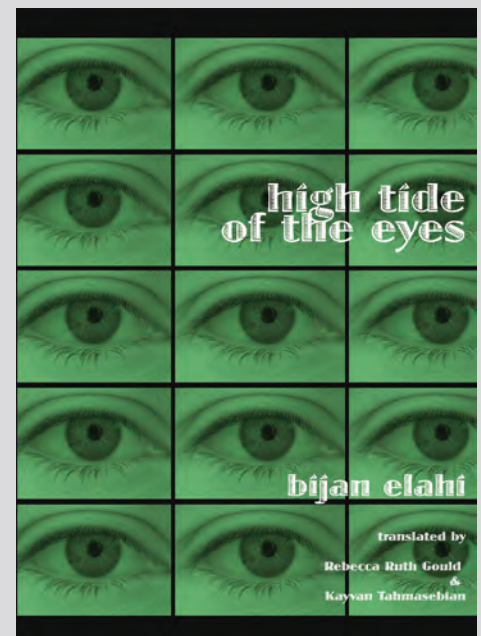
### Bijan Elahi *High Tide of the Eyes*

Trans. Rebecca Ruth Gould & Kayvan Tahmasebian. Brooklyn. The Operating System. 2019. 106 pages.

**BIZHAN ELAHI (1945–2010)** was not a prominent voice in Iranian poetry during his own lifetime. His relative obscurity might explain why *High Tide of the Eyes*, Rebecca Ruth Gould and Kayvan Tahmasebian's dual-language Persian-English translations of Elahi's work, appears in a series titled Unsilenced Texts. Elahi's silencing as a poet, it should be noted, was of the self-imposed variety. Born into "a wealthy family," as the translators introduce him, and a "perfectionist" who was "indifferent to fame," Elahi never endeavored to publish a poetry collection, apart from a single 1972 poem cycle that was scheduled to run in two hundred copies

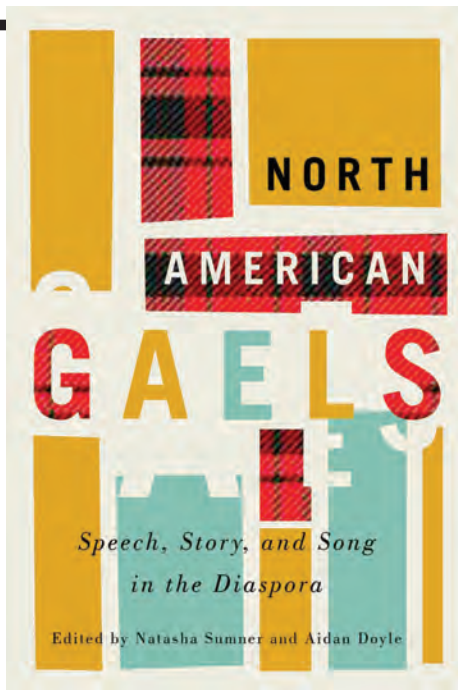
but that he withdrew before the poems ever saw their way to print. It was only with the posthumous publication of two collections, *Vision (didan)* and *Youths (javānihā)*, from which Gould and Tahmasebian have selected twenty poems, that the poet's voice could begin to be more widely heard.

Elahi the translator, however, was not so reticent with his words. On the contrary, Elahi inserted his erudite and boldly experimental poetic voice into his many published and relatively well-received Persian translations of poets like Lorca, Eliot, Rimbaud, Hölderlin, and the nineteenth-century mystic al-Hallaj. Echoes of Elahi's dialogues with other poetic traditions reverberate throughout the poems in *High Tide of the Eyes* and refract through Gould and Tahmasebian's sensitive translations. Perhaps one of the collection's best features is that it includes Elahi's disparate statements on translation, drawn from various prefaces, introductions, and notes, so that



readers can hear the poet-translator's distinguished critical-theoretical voice as well. It is here that Elahi characterizes translation, which he calls "the repressed complex of creation," as "a dance in chains," an image that captures the constant negotia-





tion to the New World, both Irish and Scottish Gaels were drawing on a deep well of art, music, and literature, thanks to their shared literary language, Classical Gaelic.

Being the sixteenth century, illiteracy was rampant (though slightly less among the Scots), and both cultures relied heavily on oral traditions. British ingress from the south and east was the ultimate catalyst of change. Its focus on expunging the Gaels through diminishing their language pushed the most stubborn-tongued to the very western fringes of their land and, ultimately, to North America.

Cultural instability wrought by transference made these incomers susceptible to change and influence, though some fared better than others. From Cape Wrath and the Outer Hebrides (*Am Parbh* and *Na h-Eileanan Siar*), the Scots found new homes in North Carolina's Cape Fear and Canada's Maritime region. By and large settling in the countryside and towns comprised of kinfolk, Scottish Gaels maintained their traditions and customs through collective memory and insulation. The Irish,

for their part, went largely urban, clustering in boroughs of New York and Boston, where intergenerational transmission of Gaelic met with more resistance.

Adding to the difficulty of preservation was bureaucratic racialism. The Canadian government grouped Irish and Scottish Gaelic into one language, and the United States acculturated Celtic with English—assimilation techniques many Gaels likely thought they'd escaped by leaving their English-controlled homelands. These sleights may seem like hair-splitting now, but these language cousins are not siblings, let alone twins.

At its best, this book is a reminder of the burden placed on speakers of dying languages. That the few remaining native Gaelic speakers are sometimes forced to choose between their interests and the continuation of their language is a tragedy worthy of Ossian. Gaelic's decline has been

tions between self-expression and formal constraints that are hosted within a poet-translator of Elahi's caliber.

While Elahi's dancer in chains might struggle to accommodate the demands of an unheard music, in his poetry it is through images, even more than sounds, that we come to experience his imaginative universe. Vision serves as the primary faculty for attaining meaning and the sense that awakens all the others. The poems in *High Tide of the Eyes* enact a kind of wandering contemplation and a thoughtful gaze, an observation for the sake of seeing itself. In "Dissecting an Onion," it is the process of peeling layers that matters; there is no kernel at which to arrive, or, if a kernel exists, it does not reside within the object of dissection: "Without core, instead / labyrinthine. / What is a core, / if not the relation of the layers? / Centerless circles spiraling out / cut their relationships. / It is high tide of the eyes." The Persian in that final phrase, *madd-e binā'i*, invites one to reflect on Elahi's assertion in his intro-

duction to Rimbaud's *Illuminations* that "everywhere, everything can be defined in innumerable ways depending on the innumerable possibilities available in each situation."

Here, *madd-e binā'i* could be translated innumerable ways, including but not limited to "the scope of seeing" (suggesting the poet's play on the word *madd* as it appears in the expression *dar madd-e nazar gerefetan*, meaning, roughly, to consider) or "the elongation of vision" (pulling toward another meaning of *madd* as a symbol denoting the long vowel sound *ā*). But the translators have landed upon the most poetically apt rendering, not only because *madd* can mean literally "high tide" but because the right kind of vision, the poem seems to say, is one drawn toward entities beyond the earthly and one that transforms the very performance, if not shape, of the eyes themselves. In Elahi's dilated mode of seeing, vision covers a wider expanse while arousing the other senses in its wake; to

watch an onion unravel into its layers is to feel the eyes washed clean.

Indeed, it is refreshing to take in the world from Elahi's perspective, to sit in quiet contemplation, considering how "Wild grass / is wild grass. / Otherwise, it's nameless." In a different time, such musings may have been derided as "aristocratic poetry," but today, one hopes, it is possible to think of artists and their art as inhabiting multiple spheres and realms. All attention in these poems turns toward words and things, words as things, the simplicity of words and the complexity of things. Elahi's self-silencing suggests a certain type of quiet life, an advantageous view from a hilltop where one is left alone for such musings, unperturbed by the urban din beneath. It's a privilege to join Elahi from such a vantage and to enjoy a freely wandering imagination from that view: "There you sit / atop a stone lion. / The lion gazes calmly, at the hill below."

Samad Alavi  
University of Oslo

long in the making (its last “revival” dates to the late nineteenth century), and an appropriate sense of urgency runs through the book. But there is also celebration. Learning about the songs, myths, and legends of the Gaels is a joy to read. Sumner and Doyle have compiled a wonderful breadth of research and inquiry, showing not only the deep history of the Gaels’ language but their spirit of life.

Much credit is obviously due to Kenneth Nilsen, a man for whom a moving tribute is included. Though Brooklyn-born, he was “more Gaelic than the Gaels,” in the opinion of one interviewee—proof that dying languages are accessible to anyone with the will and means to learn them. It’s largely owing to his tireless effort cataloging the Gaelic speakers of North America that the vital and necessary work presented in this book, and that yet to come, is possible.

J. R. Patterson  
Gladstone, Manitoba

Sergi Pàmies

## *The Art of Wearing a Trench Coat*

Trans. Adrian Nathan West. New York. Other Press. 2021. 128 pages.

IN A RECENT INTERVIEW in *La Vanguardia*, Catalan author Sergi Pàmies remarks that “we are fiction and reality at the same time.” Accordingly, the narrators of the thirteen stories in *The Art of Wearing a Trench Coat* are more or less autobiographical: usually unnamed first-person (singular and plural), occasionally second- or even a cinematic third-person, but all discernible avatars for their author. In one story, we are told his mother was fond of saying that “the advantage of being a writer was that everything that happened to you could be turned into literature,” a truism he comes to admire as a “particular method of getting by.” This could be considered the book’s modus operandi, transforming sundry quirks of everyday life into occasions for insightful meditations on the intimate

subjects of middle age: growing older, losing your parents, going through a divorce, and raising children.

Pàmies is a popular writer in Spain, where he is a fixture in radio, television, and print and has written a number of award-winning story collections and novels. He comes with a storied pedigree: his parents, writer and activist Teresa Pàmies and Communist politician Gregorio López Raimundo, were noted figures in the anti-Franco resistance, and Pàmies was born during their years of exile in Paris. The backdrop to these stories, familiar to native readers, is the sociopolitical strife spanning twentieth-century Spain: the forty-year Francoist regime, the difficult transition to democracy predicated on the state-mandated suppression of memory, the eventual and ongoing reckoning with the past, not to mention the attendant struggle for Catalan independence.

This history is distilled into the details and vicissitudes of family life. In the remembrance “Father-Son Christmas Carol,” beautifully framed in terms of nostalgia as a form of archaeological excavation, Pàmies’s usually absent father momentarily relaxes his commitment to

communist thrift to take his son to pick out a present for his Christmas wish list, only to inadvertently confirm the nonexistence of that outsized childhood myth, Santa Claus. In contrast to the “ideological intrusions” that mark his own upbringing, Pàmies wholeheartedly embraces normalcy for his own children, of a generation “not forced to live with the same historical intensity as their ancestors.”

The keystone story, “I’m No One to Be Giving You Advice,” from which the book draws its title, begins with the startling adolescent fantasy of being the son of Jorge Semprún (Semprún, the dissident exile, socialist politician, Buchenwald survivor, and writer who insisted on the power of fiction to explore historical truth, and also a friend of Pàmies’s parents). This almost essayistic piece traces the wane and wax of paternal idolatry, whose progression marks the narrator’s coming of age. What unites the role models in young Pàmies’s life is the polysemic figure of the trench coat, when worn best conveying a masculine confidence that he can never seem to adopt. Instead, our avowedly average antihero, beset by ailments and pudginess and hang-ups, accedes that although his father’s coat may never quite fit him, he can wear it nonetheless. Self-awareness, in Pàmies’s book, is a form of morality too.

Pàmies repeatedly reminds us of his own lack of elegance, especially in the stories about the decline of his marriage. Yet in all this, *The Art of Wearing a Trench Coat* is suffused with a quiet humor, mostly in the form of irony and endearing self-deprecation: “Generally speaking, a union of two people evinces a clear disparity in beauty, status, or intelligence. I fell short in all three.” Pàmies’s lilting approach recalls the dialectical quality described as “lightness” by Italo Calvino in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*: writing that makes use of elements which resist the gravitational pull of the raw material of reality in order to better represent it. Translator Adrian Nathan West, a stylist of the first order, performs a similar operation in his





transformation of the text from Catalan to English, delivering lean and pithy prose that brings these broody vignettes just the right touch of levity.

Jamie Richards  
Milan



Alejandro Zambra  
*Poeta chileno*

Barcelona. Editorial Anagrama. 2020. 421 pages.

**ALEJANDRO ZAMBRA**—who frequently expounds on why the Great Latin American Novel will be distinguished by its poeticity and keeps garnering worldwide prestige with his short novels, stories, and nonfiction—has published a brilliant poetical novel that is not strictly “Latin American.” Like Bolaño, his only peer, he started as a poet in a country overrun by Nobel Prize-winning poets and wannabes and never lets the cat out of the bag. The framing story centers on Gonzalo, an aspiring poet and stepfather to Vicente, a child addicted to cat food (the cover’s black cat is called Obscurity) who later refuses

to go to college because his dream is to become a poet.

A topsy-turvy blend of bildungsroman and roman à clef, *Poeta chileno*, a title heaving with allusions and semantic charges, amends the poetics of contemporary “autobiographictions,” verifying the need to renovate their validity. Zambra does so by brilliantly coaxing his readers in each of the novel’s four parts to believe his frequently hilarious tales, faithfully reproducing various speech registers (English included), and by infusing the poetization of his novel with profound questions about history, pop culture (mainly musical), and especially literature from all the Americas. The cumulative effect of this cultural wokeness endows the novel with a distinctive yet recognizable precision and reliability.

The particulars and symbolism of poets’ misfortunes differ from tale to tale, so Zambra commingles them with a realist bookish gaze in a mash-up devoid of ellipses, subtly handling layers of circularities and recurrences to underline the poets’ or their detractors’ shortcomings and hollowness; in Gonzalo’s case, his relationship with Carla (Vicente’s mother) and León, her former husband. To reconcile themselves with poetry, in “Parque del recuerdo” (Remembrance Park; Santiago’s cemetery), the final part set in Brooklyn and Santiago, stepfather and stepson discuss books or authors read and unread, with Vicente’s poetry interspersed. For such inflections and intellectual enthusiasms, the American Ben Lerner is the only eminent author who approximates Zambra’s comprehensive take on the genre.

The second (“Familiastra,” Stepfamily) and third (“Poetry in motion” in the original) parts are the most extensive, with the latter introducing Pru, an initially naïve American cultural journalist who in exchanges with Vicente (her “translator” of Chilean speech before they split), Pato, Virginia, and others provides an accounting of the poetry scene. The characters (among them Prof. Rocotto, a priggish

poetry “expert” uninterested in Nicanor Parra!) have different stakes in the vetting of the genre, its usefulness, and practitioners. Many of their comments—like “anthologies are the phonebooks of new poets,” a comparison they may not understand because “they grew up in a world in which phonebooks were disappearing” (the time is after 2014)—are pithy, or sarcastic, as when Pato says, “Zurita beats the shit out of all of them, because he is the true people’s poet.”

What links these souls is infrequent empathy, not poetry’s angst, the gist of the second part. In that part Gonzalo has written *Parque del Recuerdo*, in two months, and will self-publish it probably with one of the synonyms he had thought about in the first part—Gonzalo Rimbaud, Gonzalo Ginsberg, Gonzalo Pizarnik, Gonzalo Lee Masters—before leaving for New York to finish a doctorate. A different narrator says in the first part’s last page, “nine years later they saw each other again, and thanks to that reencounter this story reaches the number of pages necessary to be considered a novel”; reappearing in the novel’s very last page to speculate on an optimistic end, to the point of his feeling “like writing until I reach a thousand pages.”

There are recurring themes in Zambra’s fiction, but he always takes risks and refuses to placate identity politics, despite Rita’s saying to Pru that the world of Chilean poetry is slightly better than Chile, which is “class-conscious, machista, rigid.” Thus, when James Wood returns to praising his fiction in the revised edition of *How Fiction Works* (2018), he places Zambra alongside Ali Smith, Knutsen, Ferrante, Lydia Davis, Roth, Saramago, and Beckett, whose works “comment on story-making and which are, at the same time, intensely invested in the world we inhabit.” But the Latin American tradition is larger than Wood’s world literature corpus, with the Chilean at its forefront. Possessed of a great critical mind and abundant readings in world literature, as *Not to Read* (2018) displays authoritatively, he shows that it is

better to read one's models or masters well than disguising who they are.

For the canonical critic Ignacio Echevarría, *Poeta chileno* is not a novelistic epigone but primarily a charming, very rare, and disconcerting tribute to the poet's vocation; a poignant settling of scores (in the third part Pato says, "He wasn't a great poet, Bolaño"). The reception is equally enthusiastic in Spanish-language publications that are decisive in evaluating current literatures. For *El País*, the novel is "exemplary, humorous, and moving"; and in *Letras Libres*, Rodrigo Fresán, his contemporary, sees it as "The Great Chilean Novel about The Poetry of his generation." It is also one of the two masterpieces of this century by his selected cohort, and Zambra is just getting started.

Will H. Corral  
San Francisco

## Sergio Chejfec *Notes Toward a Pamphlet*

Trans. Whitney DeVos. Brooklyn. Ugly Duckling Presse. 2020. 45 pages.

WE MAY THINK OF THE pamphlet as an obsolete genre and format, the kind libraries and archives collect and educated readers associate with the religious or political conflicts of centuries ago. With its 2020 Pamphlet Series, however, Ugly Duckling Presse has given us an ingenious collection of "twenty commissioned essays on poetics, translation, performance, collective work, pedagogy, and small press publishing," whose overall aim is to explore the literary potential and relevance of this, indeed, most current form. Moreover, the inclusion of Sergio Chejfec is an appropriate and brilliant choice, given his own peculiar exploration of writing (and literature) as a process rather than a product, constantly reflecting on, and reenacting, itself.

With the figure of the Argentine poet Samich—who lived "in that part of the twentieth century before everything was

either stored or archived," wrote almost nothing, published even less, and "aspired to a voice permanently lowered"—Chejfec's exploration expands to the idea of a writerly life pursued through nonaction, inaction, or subtraction. In a present "saturated with redundancy" and hyperactive behaviors, the slippery, digressive, and ephemeral Samich represents a challenge or, in the words of this pamphleteer, "a wedge with which I propose to start the cleft, then the crack, and later the splintering of the whole worn-out schema."

The text consists of an introduction, an outline of "The Character," a sequence of thirty hierarchically numbered notes, and a coda. The introduction is vintage Chejfec, a shrewd sequence of associative processes that anticipate and contextualize the more systematic, nested sequence of the notes. Listening to the radio broadcasting a "program dedicated to lives upended by events somehow involving trains" leads to the idea of waiting as "the layout upon which actions are delineated." Trains and waiting make the narrator think "naturally" of Hitchcock and Samich, "who had nothing to do with Hitchcock [and] knew how to

position himself diametrically opposed to any vitalist intention associated with trains or anything else—even if he'd been a frequent passenger on them."

Not surprisingly, the notes begin with a train's arrival and Samich walking to his house on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, a typically Chejfecian nonspace to which the poet has moved from his faraway province. What follows is a canny exposition of Samich's progress through his own "system," which is simultaneously centripetal and centrifugal, and further suggests the "paradigm of the alveolar, enemy of the linear, which grows in all directions." Through his followers (the "small and vague group" of relatives, close friends, and admirers for whom he writes and from whom he eventually withdraws) he achieves the quasi-oracular status of a "radiophonic being," operating "on the surrounding environment by irradiation." (Not unlike the Trieste-born editor and critic Roberto Blazen, who during his life was very influential without publishing anything, and whose posthumous writings appeared recently in English with the suggestive title *Notes Without a Text*.)

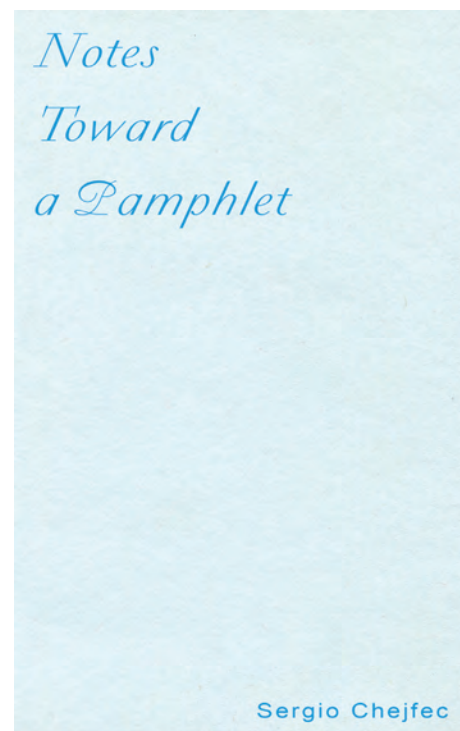
When Samich's life "assumes an elegiac nuance," and "moves toward a slow and fatal concentration," we are subtly reminded of a pamphlet: this obsolete, absolute form whose function, in Chejfec's keen definition, is to "first concentrate, and afterwards to dissolve within," a particle of time extracted from current events.

Graziano Krätli  
New Haven, Connecticut

## Jurij Koch *Gruben-Rand-Notizen*

Bautzen, Germany. Domowina-Verlag. 2020. 191 pages.

IN 2003 THE VILLAGE CHURCH in Horno/Rogow, Germany, was "beheaded." The steeple of its church was cut off, emptied of its various time capsules, and transported to a relocated "replacement" village.





Dana Gioia

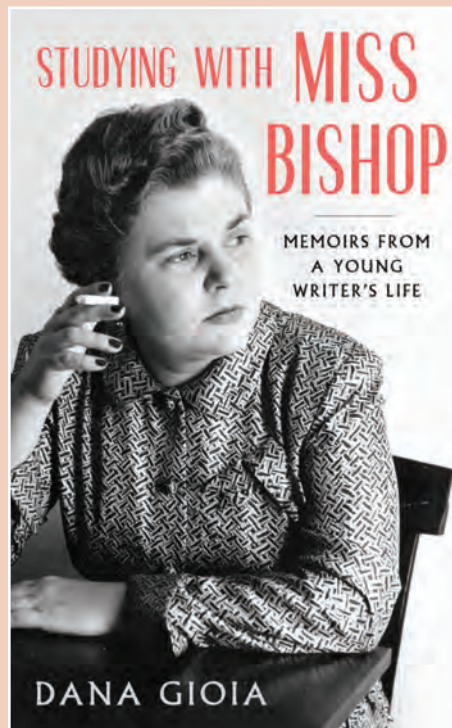
*Studying with Miss Bishop:  
Memoirs from a Young Writer's  
Life*

Philadelphia. Paul Dry Books. 2021. 184 pages.

**AS THE TITLE SUGGESTS**, this book of memoirs recounts the author's interactions with Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Fitzgerald, and John Cheever as a student at Harvard and Stanford, but also with James Dickey at the Library of Congress and with persons unknown to most people (the author's Mexican uncle and mostly forgotten poet, Ronald Perry). This is not, however, a Vasari-style collection of biographical sketches; instead, it is a book about Gioia's "becoming," a portrait of the poet as a young boy and man. In fact, after an important contextualizing preface, the first chapter is devoted not to one of the authors mentioned above but to Gioia himself in his "happy, lonely childhood" among working-class relatives ("a tight enclave of Sicilian relations") and books left by his deceased uncle. The reader soon discovers that this book is more than supposed; it is a personal history of influence and stages of growth, about moments of recognition and awareness, then and "now," by an author processing his own past.

The mystery of literary influence across cultures and time is one thing (e.g., that of Homer to Virgil to Dante), and it is usually discernible in matters of style, technique, and/or theme; however, influence is all the more mysterious and ineffable when complicated by interpersonal experience and the interplay of personalities and temperaments. There is also the issue of timing, of receptivity or vulnerability to influence and change, and of the phases of life and development of both student and teacher. (The best teachers and artists are always still under construction themselves, never fully "accomplished.") Influence, then, between authentic talents is not

a question of one being molded or formed by the other, but of taking from another what one already recognizes as one's own, a spirit assembling/constructing its poetic body from the "materials" it chooses from the world around it. The artist participates in their own birth by selecting literary parents from among the many options or by selecting certain qualities to emulate, revise, and combine. The resulting newly created style and voice are thus woven like a bird's nest holding the globed promise of original work.



So it is that Gioia, the important American poet so luminously encountered in *99 Poems*, humbly and unaffectedly recalls for us the intimacies of his own influence by Bishop, Fitzgerald, and others—at least those accessible to conscious recollection, for there is always more. In so doing, he not only allows us the pleasure (promised by the title) of learning more about the personalities and manners of the encountered writers but also a greater understanding of how he himself was influenced by

these encounters. In the chapter devoted to Bishop, we soon surmise that Bishop's unassuming personal style was also something he admired and carried into his own manner; similarly, the freedom from stylistic tics and the clarity of language we find in Bishop are qualities we discern in Gioia's work. In the chapter devoted to Fitzgerald, Gioia recalls Fitzgerald's teaching methods, specifically his lingering over individual lines of poetry. In offering us these examples, Gioia soon seems to be channeling Fitzgerald himself, and we feel as if we are there in the classroom (a good thing, in this case) hearing what we might have heard had we been actually present.

"Channeling," however, is the wrong word because we soon realize that Gioia has fully internalized the lessons of Fitzgerald (and others) for himself; we find the focus on musicality and the individual line everywhere present in Gioia's own work. Similarly, in the chapter on Cheever, Gioia's writing takes on a shimmering narrative quality reminiscent of Cheever's own: "A waterfall of conversations filled the air. . . . Mary led him gently through the packed room towards the door. I watched them over the bobbing heads of the crowd until his tiny, shuffling frame disappeared into the early evening." Hundreds, possibly thousands, of students met these same writers, often to little or no effect. It is not, then, the meeting of gifted persons that matters as much as what one takes from those meetings, in person or in print.

In summation, Gioia's writing is vivid, generous, and unpretentious, leaving us with enduring and haunting images so fully realized that we feel as if we too were there. This is a beautiful book and an important contribution to American letters. (*Editorial note:* "Poetic Collaborations," Gioia's fascinating interview with Michelle Johnson, appears in the September 2011 issue of *WLT*.)

Fred Dings  
University of South Carolina



Within two years, the church itself had been blown up, its cemetery moved away, and the final inhabitants of the village driven out. These were the final phases of the life of a Sorbian village in Brandenburg that had been condemned to death by judicial and legislative organs of government so that a massive coal producer, LAUBAG, could expand its strip-mining operations for lignite. In the past century, 123 villages and urban districts have been destroyed in Lusatia, the traditional home of the Sorbian nationality. Over thirty thousand people have been forced to relocate, involving extensive cultural (especially linguistic and architectural) damage to minority communities.

In his third volume of memoirs, Jurij Koch strikes a markedly different tone. Here he covers the decade after 1996, and although the substantial volume does include a mix of notes on the contemporary Sorbian (or Wendish) cultural scene, family details, insights into the changing media landscape, European travels (especially to Russia and to the North Sea island of Helgoland), and the author's lively personal reading list, writing process, and outreach, it is environmental activism that

ties the months and years together. Koch details the legal attempts of the Horno residents to fight off destruction; he chronicles the parade of politicians and international activists who traipse through the region, sandwiched between the city of Cottbus and the Polish border; he participates in town halls and conferences with industry leaders; and he organizes an open-letter campaign with a large number of famous writers.

Fans of Koch's brilliant earlier volumes of memoirs will also find some familiar themes. With characteristic integrity and directness, Koch discusses in detail his interactions with the Stasi and the party bureaucracy from the 1960s on, his views on the writing of contemporaries from the GDR such as Erwin Strittmatter and Jurij Bržan, and debates about the nature and future of the Sorbian ethnos. There are also selections from some of Koch's hard-to-find environmental speeches and essays as well as commentary on world political events from the war over Kosovo and the anxieties over Y2K to the 9/11 attacks and fighting in the West Bank. Koch raises many interesting points about the referendum on a possible merger of the German states of Berlin and Brandenburg, and he includes excerpts of his powerful unpublished novel *Die Flut* (The flood), which also has been performed as a play.

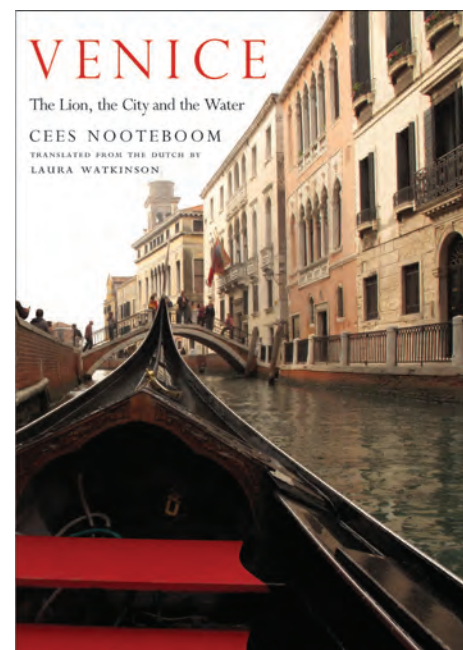
Koch has done more here than assemble a diary of grassroots political engagement. He also, subtly but memorably, asks a list of hard questions about the economic and political realities we are encouraged to accept as "givens." His tone is not fiery, and his politics are not programmatic, but it is easy to see his concerns evolving from ethnicity and ecology to an encounter with the hypocrisy he sees in a reunified Germany managed by political and economic elites.

Two final paradoxes lodge in the reader's mind as this very worthy read draws to a close. The first twist is Koch's warning that we not fall prey to a kind of detailed, glossy, digitized documentation fantasy. Recording things for posterity, and

remembering them for a time, is now possible, but civil courage and pride in resistance are what we should seek. The second irony is that even as other rapacious coal operations in the vicinity of Cottbus and around Germany continue, the desired material underneath Horno was primarily a special type of clay for land reclamation projects in—you guessed it—open-pit lignite mines.

John K. Cox

North Dakota State University



Cees Nooteboom  
*Venice: The Lion, the City,  
and the Water*

Trans. Laura Watkinson. New Haven. Yale University Press. 2020. 302 pages.

"THE MISERY OF VENICE stands there for all the world to see," Henry James wrote in *Italian Hours*, "a thoroughgoing devotee of local color might consistently say it is part of the pleasure." The Dutch writer Cees Nooteboom is one of those devotees, having made innumerable visits to the city over the past sixty years. From his memories and observations, it's clear that one hundred years after James, Venice remains



a place of contradiction, both morbid and full of life, like a sick but noble animal.

Underneath the monochrome skyline packed with Renaissance masterpieces, a sulfurous lagoon bubbles away, eroding the very foundations of the city. When Nooteboom watches support poles being “extracted like rotten teeth” from “mud the color of death,” another writer might feel encouraged to question the future of the city when the very thing keeping it afloat—tourism—is one of the main catalysts implicated in the rising waters threatening its existence.

But Nooteboom is more concerned with memory, both personal and communal. Already confident that tourism has done more to harm the city, more than its sinking ever could, he does little investigation. Instead, he prowls the streets, conjuring up emblems of the past in statues, paintings, and gardens, seeking answers to questions that are more like riddles: *Are we still who we once were?* and *Were we ever who we once were?*

Late in the book, he considers a gondola as it shunts by, crammed with faceless tourists snapping pictures: “Once upon a time they did not merely transport people who wanted to sit ignorantly . . . but also those who really knew something about the city . . . people who were there for their love of the city . . . a better kind of tourist.” It’s clear into which camp Nooteboom places himself. He may feel miserable about the mass onset of visitors to his beloved city, but his deep knowledge and love of Venice’s past provide the suitably pleasurable Venetian contradiction.

J. R. Patterson  
Gladstone, Manitoba

Susan Abulhawa  
*Against the Loveless World*

New York. Atria Books. 2020. 384 pages.

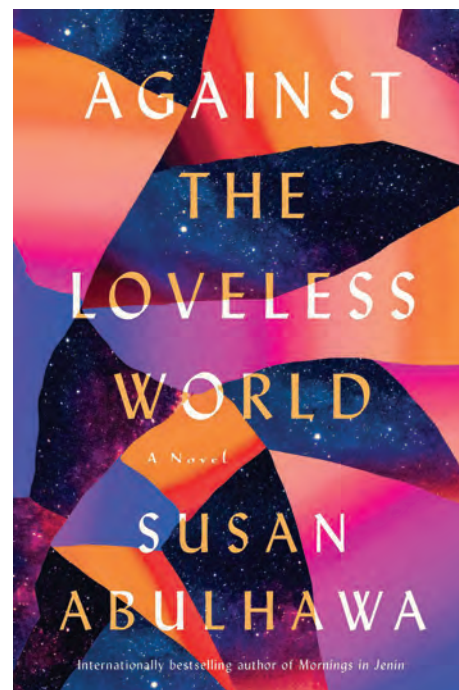
**SUSAN ABULHAWA TITLES** her latest work with the words of James Baldwin. One book at a time, she continues to per-

sonify the Palestinian story in masterful prose. This third novel draws on her roots as a child of refugees in the 1967 Six-Day Arab-Israeli War.

*Mornings in Jenin* (2010), translated into thirty languages and now in development as a television series, brought the tale of Amal, born in a Palestinian refugee camp. *The Blue between Sky and Water* (2015), now in twenty languages, follows the Barakas family in the Palestinian diaspora after Israel’s 1948 creation.

This time, *Against the Loveless World* introduces Nahr, a resilient but exhausted woman trying desperately to survive forces sweeping her from place to place—Kuwait, Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine—and it may be Abulhawa’s strongest book yet. All three novels share similarities. What’s different here is the fascinating method.

Gray-haired Nahr begins: “I live in the Cube.” Articulating her memoir is difficult, however, since the Cube is an Israeli solitary-confinement cell where she’s been for years. She talks to prison walls until a sympathetic guard brings her two pencils and a notebook. Feeling “an irrepressible instinct to account for life,” she fills three thousand pages.



Starting with her birth in Kuwait (“a country that abandoned us”), Nahr describes girlhood in a patriarchal society—followed by arranged marriage and swift abandonment. She’s blackmailed into well-paying escort work, but after the US invasion of Iraq, her family flees to Jordan, where they become refugees again. Seeking divorce, Nahr travels to Palestine (no easy task). There, in her ancestral homeland, she falls in love.

Slowly, Abulhawa reveals secrets, building her story around a hexahedron, perhaps a metaphorical nod to both Black Cube (the Israeli private intelligence firm) and a psychology-insight game popularized by Annie Gottlieb’s 1995 book *The Cube* (based on *kokoro*, a Japanese concept of mind or spirit).

Alternating Nahr’s backstory with present-day Cube chapters, Abulhawa applies geometric properties as well as architectural principles. Subtitles represent each square side of six faces: East, West, North, South, Up, and Down, plus The Space Between.

Abulhawa brings a cube’s ancient symbolism to bear on what she’s rendering. Facing sides are parallel, all equal, with three-dimensional stability. One of five Platonic solids, representing earth, a cube as prison cell separates public and private spaces—yet Nahr has no privacy. Architects consider the sun’s path across the sky when orienting their buildings. Abulhawa locates the Cube’s window high, disorienting Nahr: “time is immeasurable in here.”

Metaphorically, Abulhawa explodes the cube, allowing the shape’s language to editorialize in fiction akin to the way designer Yannick Martin did in architecture.

How neatly Abulhawa embeds chaos theory: “Our dance is about chaos and anarchy . . . the antithesis of control.” Nahr names her shower “Attar,” an apt reference to the Persian poet but also suggestive of Jon Stewart’s 2014 film, *Rosewater*, about an Iranian prison.

Topics abound: water rationing, Zionist colonizers, Western imperialists, tobacco

companies, journalists, craft skills versus desk jobs, internet impact, mother/daughter relationships, recurring generational trauma, ancient warfare techniques, birthrights—and forgiveness. Descriptions of olive-picking traditions are lyrical.

The novel's title stems from James Baldwin's 1962 *Progressive* essay, "A Letter to My Nephew." Discussing it with Nahr, a character says: "Reading Baldwin ought to be slow. Every sentence beckons not only the mind, but also one's heart, history, and future." They talk about surviving colonialism, loving ancestors, and relating to Israelis.

Abulhawa sums it up: "This is what it meant to be exiled and disinherited—to straddle closed borders, never whole anywhere." *Against the Loveless World* is a compelling novel by an author who's lived Middle East headlines.

Lanie Tankard  
Austin, Texas

## Rossana Campo *Never Felt So Good*

Trans. Adria Frizzi. McLean, Illinois. Dalkey Archive Press. 2020.

**ROSSANA CAMPO** (b. 1963) burst on the Italian literary scene in 1992 with a picaresque novel about underwear: her own. A movie version followed the success of *In principio erano le mutande* (In the beginning was underwear), and Campo, the daughter of Neapolitan parents who resettled in Genoa, was off and running. Like many Italian writers of her generation, especially those associated with the so-called *Giovani cannibali* (Young cannibals), her prose was a slangy, provocative narrative that explored female sexuality.

Both Campo's themes and stylistic choices may explain why it's taken twenty-eight years for English-language readers to get a taste of "what women talk about when men aren't around." In an essay that accompanies her translation of Campo's third novel, *Mai sentita così bene* (Never

felt so good), Adria Frizzi suggests some reasons for the neglect: "the American literary establishment's (publishers and literary agents alike) perceptions of Campo's writing appear to be largely based on the fact that it doesn't fit familiar but rigid and often obsolete categories and expectations (literary vs. commercial; canonical vs. experimental; highbrow vs. lowbrow) or even established genres and subgenres (fiction vs. theatre or film script; romance, confessional, chick lit, etc.)." Frizzi quotes the novelist: "What I'm trying to do with my writing is to deliver maximum force and energy. In order to do this I've always tried to eliminate everything that sounds fake, cloying, sappy, literary and stuffy to me." Campo's project—and the source of her unique voice—is to transfer the immediacy of speech onto the page.

I first met Campo's hilarious, spot-on satire in her second novel, *Il pieno di super* (Full tank), in which adolescent girls facing discrimination as *meridionali* (southerners) use humor as their protective shield. Few are spared in this send-up of racist teachers and dysfunctional families. (The title comes from a father's sex boast to his

wife—"Come here, let me fill you up"—as reported by their spying daughter.)

Specifically, Campo's teenagers are trying to free themselves of the tentacles of an entrenched patriarchy. Their girl gossip is itself a transgressive act, and Campo renders their dialogue without censorship or punctuation. The same boisterous idiom and obsessive intimacy characterize the female protagonists of *Never Felt So Good*, who might be the same girls ten years later and living in Paris. Their lives unfold in all their messiness during an endless dinner party, arranged to welcome back Lucia, who has fled her "veerry square" life to run off with a German biker. "Anyway, we've been making fun of her forever," the narrator explains. "Because she's really ridiculous, the type who doesn't drink, doesn't smoke, suffers from gastritis, is afraid of flying and getting locked in the bathroom at a bar, can you imagine?"

What defines the "crazy girlfriends" as much as their bad-ass jargon is their commitment to sexual freedom. Lucia is the butt of their jokes because she was married for five years without cheating on her husband. And cheating, as it turns out, provides the climactic bombshell that Betty is pregnant by Gianni, who is Beate's husband and Ale's lover. Confused? The evening is full of unusual twists, such as when the vengeful Beate, hell-bent to murder her rival Ale, joins the party, with a helping of pasta alla Siciliana. "It's important to me," says the narrator at one point, "not to hurt people's feelings." This comedy is more Grand Guignol than *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Campo's female characters transgress all codes of decorum and good taste. What's important is that they not "suffer in silence" like windup dolls, that they bare their souls. It would have been easy for a translator to de-jargonize these rapid-fire exchanges, to smooth Campo's raucous yawp. But Frizzi's translation is true to the author's fiercely pro-woman ethos and colloquial register. "There is no animal more invincible than a woman, nor fire either,





nor any wildcat so ruthless” is the Aristophanes epigram that launches this novel. To defang this wildcat was never an option.

Lisa Mullenneaux  
New York

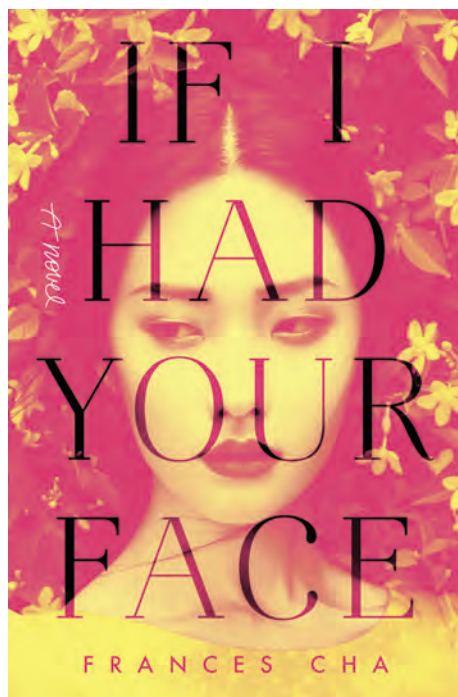
**Frances Cha**  
*If I Had Your Face*

New York. Ballantine Books. 2020. 274 pages.

**FRANCES CHA**, A FORMER travel and culture reporter for CNN in Seoul, aims to engross in her debut novel *If I Had Your Face*, a desperate yearning for survival of four female characters amidst the social hub of contemporary South Korea. We find these young ladies confronting a capitalist, consumerist, and competitive society with the help of real friendship and concurrence, striving against the prescribed, uneven social hierarchies projected in form of patriarchy, class distinction, and inequality. Women face a precarious situation of competition and social stratification, which is the hallmark of the city’s cultural demands; a heavy toll for the endless quest of self-solicitude and socially upward mobility.

The novel highlights the beauty industry and social strata of postmodern South Korea while exploring themes of childhood abuse, patriarchy, and misogyny. It revolves around the alternate perspective of four main female characters: Kyuri, a high-class party host; Ara a mute hair stylist with some painful memories of an assault in the past; Wonna, an office worker and a newlywed; and Miho, a talented artist whose scholarship to study in New York ensnared her in a hyperwealthy crowd.

The lives of these four women, affected by both unattainable beauty standards and social hierarchy, oscillate between distress and relief. For instance, Kyuri, who seems to achieve success through multiple facial surgeries and works as an elite-class salon room girl, is the most melancholic as well because of the alcoholic clients with whom



she has to spend her nights. This sadness and sense of dislocation are found in all the characters. Although the lifestyle for which they opt is dazzling and glamorous, the pitfall of disillusionment is always there waiting, as the wealthy and elite class of Korean men seem only interested in commodifying and objectifying them.

The mesmerizing world of Seoul in *If I Had Your Face* comes across as obsessed with the high standards of beauty. These tangled and intertwined stories of female characters map the social chasm of gender roles for women, unattainable standards of beauty, hypercompetition of survival, and ruthless social strata, which is both enlightening and riveting.

Naghmana Siddique  
Govt. Postgraduate College for Women  
Sahiwal, Pakistan

**Evelina Rudan**  
*Smiljko i ja si mahnemo*  
(*balada na mahove*)

Zagreb. Fraktura. 2020. 128 pages.

**EVELINA RUDAN** (b. 1971) is an awarded and translated Croatian poet and scholar. She has published several poetry books,

some of which are in standard Croatian, some in Chakavian dialect, and one book for children. Her newest, sixth book of poetry, *Smiljko i ja si mahnemo* (*balada na mahove*) (Smiljko and I are waving to each other [A ballad from time to time]) is written in Chakavian dialect, one of the most archaic Croatian dialects, spoken by Croats near the Adriatic coast. It keeps the richness of the language alive and preserves a local and a personal heritage.

The book consists of forty long poems that tell stories, melodically and rhythmically, about her childhood and youth events, so it can be read as a short novel in verse. After each poem, the author includes a vocabulary of Chakavian words, allowing readers to understand her native language and culture. At first glance, this appendix looks like a standard, dry, and expert narrative explanation, but soon we understand that it reflects the author’s poetic world and imagination.

The book title is chosen to articulate the power of a childhood friendship that continues later, as Smiljko and the poet get older. A nonverbal communication gesture between two friends is also the refrain of the first verse of each poem. The gesture



always turns into a call for an immediate meeting and conversation. Sometimes the meetings open up memories. Sometimes they bring new intellectual knowledge that the friends have to share with each other. While their memories belong to the world of children's play and the mysterious discovery of nature, their debates about books are part of their educational knowledge and growth.

In essence, this is a book about a little girl growing up in a boy gang, the Croatian seaside, and the complexity of the former Yugoslavia's culture. It describes numerous episodes from the children's world but also a girl's unconventional gender roles as well as documenting a former way of life. Unfortunately, the cheerful world is marked with the tragic death of one boy, her brother. Even though the poet does not write many lines about this trauma, a clever usage of dialect does express her deep pain. The reader is left believing that these archaic words are the only means to portray the feelings of sorrow.

The shadow of a tragedy enters with the ending of the first poem, with observation of the time when her family was a complete unit. This awareness becomes another refrain, which is repeated at the end of every poem. In contrast to the introductory refrain about Smiljko and the poet, this one shifts from knowledge about this rupture in the life of the family to knowledge about the time when children stay become separated from family members as adults, and emptiness or nihilism can creep in.

Stories about the tragedy are compatible with the book's subtitle, "A Ballad from Time to Time." Even more than ballads, the book is a collection of odes, since it celebrates life, play, and friendship. It additionally includes contours of prayer, asking for people to be saved, as well as evoking creativity, nature, and language. With powerful lyrical tools, buoyed by the beauty, melody, and rhythmic play of the Chakavian dialect, the poet successfully evokes a rich world and transmits truths

about life and communication. The world the author sees today, she notes with a degree of sadness and anxiety, is much different, so different, in fact, that she admits she is lost in it. However, the whole book reminds us, right now, during one of the world's deadliest pandemics and imposed social distancing, that each of us knows a Smiljko, a friend to whom we wave, whom we call and whom we need in order to be closer to ourselves, to other people, to the world.

Svetlana Tomić  
Alfa BK University



Rumi Hara  
*Nori*

Montreal. Drawn & Quarterly. 2020. 228 pages.

**NORI TAKES PLACE IN 1986** in the suburbs of Osaka, and it follows the daily adventures of a young girl named Noriko, or Nori for short, and her grandmother who cares for her while her parents are at work. Mischievous and headstrong, the young Nori is constantly running off and causing trouble for her grandmother, who can't help but dote on her.

This sequence of short pieces takes readers through slice-of-life adventures in late Showa-period Osaka, brimming with the city's characteristic warmth. Through the eyes of a child, the mundane experiences of everyday life become fantastical, and Nori has no shortage of imagination. Often the comics will slip into her daydreams, and her imagination comes to life on the page, showing things to be as strange as she imagines them.

As Nori explores the world around her and comes to learn about her place in it, her grandmother is the one by her side, helping guide her through the parts of human experience that can be altogether strange for a child. At the same time, Nori's grandmother also finds herself with a new world to navigate as Japan of the 1980s is a wholly different time from the war and postwar years that she lived through. This gap in age and experience makes for some truly heartwarming moments, such as when the two of them win a trip to Hawaii and both have to find their way around a foreign culture together.

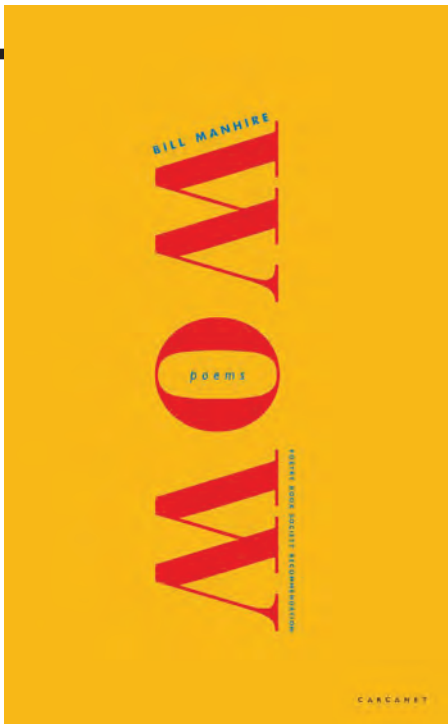
Those expecting manga-style illustrations from a Japanese graphic novel might be surprised with the artwork of *Nori*. The style is simple and beautiful, perfect for capturing the tranquil scenery of Osaka. The only color in the book is the cover and the color of the shadows, which changes with each chapter, giving each one a different emotional timbre.

Rumi Hara has created a playful and charming depiction of childhood that reminds readers that no matter how old they get, there are always new experiences on the horizon. Even as decades pass and our surroundings completely change, as they did for Nori's grandmother, we can still approach the world with an earnest zeal and a childlike wonder.

Reid Bartholomew  
Eugene, Oregon







**Bill Manhire**  
*Wow: Poems*

Manchester, UK. Carcanet. 2020. 88 pages.

**THE OPENING POEMS** of Bill Manhire's new verse collection, *Wow*, suggest an ecological theme. The first poem, "Huia," is about an extinct New Zealand bird, which was nearly driven to extinction early in the twentieth century due to hunting for its plumage and agriculture-driven deforestation. The poem, sung in the voice of the vanished bird, has a haunting lyric structure, and its imagery befits its beautiful but doomed subject. The next poem, "Untitled," continues the theme with its opening line: "This book about extinct birds is heavier than any bird." The speaker of "Untitled" lifts up "page after page of abandoned wings" and imagines that the book on his lap is a house cat, implying the role people have played in the ongoing crisis of mass extinction. At this point, readers may think they know what kind of book they hold in their hands.

*Wow* is not limited to ornithology or ecology, however: impermanence is the central theme. Manhire explores time and change, birth and death in poems occasionally humorous, often absurd. There are many masterful poems of loss. "Wood-

work" is a poem such as this. The opening subject comes from a story of Dutch students who help build a coffin for their dying teacher. Though inspired by contemporary events, the poem reminds one of Faulkner's scenes in *As I Lay Dying* of Cash building Addie's coffin outside her window. By the time the poem's couplets come to close, the speaker imagines children everywhere building coffins—a synecdoche for the way one generation replaces another.

Manhire's regard for passing things is not limited to the animal world. In "Discontinued Product," a strangely anthropomorphic smart speaker argues like a feeble relative with its owner as its circuitry degrades beyond repair. In "After Lock-down," the subject is a mechanical dog likewise at the end of its serviceable life. As its owner goes to disassemble it, noting that it had been a good guard dog in its day, the machine tells its owner: "You know I can still talk . . . / I do have feelings." The title poem uses the ubiquitous noise of baby talk and traces it through life, from the early babble of infants to the awe of discovery in youth to the rambling mumble of the very old and infirm. All of humanity goes along for the journey, and the poem describes those in the middle observing this like passengers getting ready to board a plane. These poems ask what sentience really is and consider where we should draw the line of sympathy. The answer is clearly "as widely as you can."

The poems of *Wow* range from lyric and rhyme to sparse, ironic poems. There is enough variety of technique here to demonstrate Manhire's skill as a poet, but experimentation on the field of the page is not the point, and there's a voice behind the printed words that makes me wish I could see Manhire perform his work live. Perhaps one day, when the pandemic too has passed.

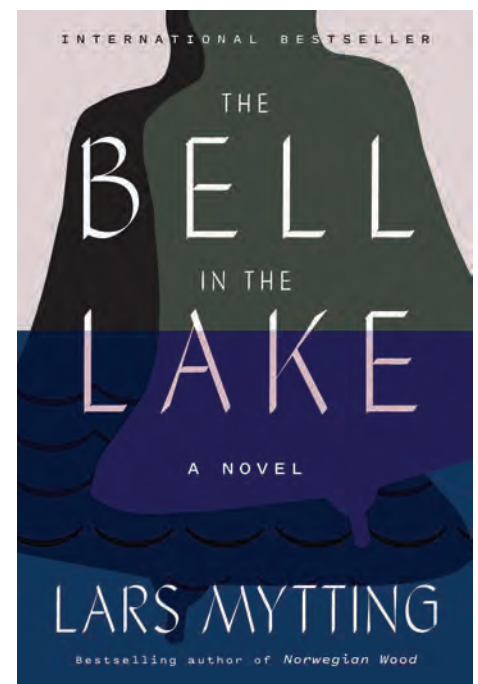
Greg Brown  
Mercyhurst University

**Lars Mytting**  
*The Bell in the Lake*

Trans. Deborah Dawkin. New York.  
Overlook Press. 2020. 391 pages.

**LARS MYTTING'S** *Norwegian Wood: Chopping, Stacking, and Drying Wood the Scandinavian Way* became an international best-seller soon after it appeared in 2011, riding the wave of nostalgic desire for a life governed not by digital media and congested highways but by the ties of rustic communities happily providing for their own sustenance. In his new novel, *The Bell in the Lake* (originally published in 2018), Mytting (b. 1968) offers a woodcut of such life by introducing his readers to a small village on a forlorn Norwegian peninsula in the last decades of the nineteenth century, where people can't be buried for months unless they die in the short period when the land isn't frozen.

Death and the lasting legacy of the dead indeed make up the central axis of the novel (the first part of a planned trilogy); the survivors of the deceased and the one who has to administer their last rites make up its central characters. While Mytting's



peers have shocked readers all over the world with monumental autobiographical provocations (Karl Ove Knausgaard and his overreaching *My Struggle*), enlightened them with light philosophical fare (Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World*), or truly surprised them with striking panoramas that link Norway to recent world history (Johan Harstad's *Max, Mischa & Tetoffensiven*, yet to be translated into English), Mytting prefers to play it safe and plain.

He puts a young pastor into a desolate hamlet, driven by ambitions that are a tad larger than the small old church in which he delivers his sermons. Standing out from his lost flock is Astrid, a young woman who "has a restless mind, and her thoughts always seemed to race ahead of her." Trying to dive deep into the geographically remote and economically backward community, Mytting simply surrenders our perspective on life back then and awkwardly embraces the language of the past to render his bucolic portrayals: "There was a strong preference for a well-built woman, wide in the beam, preferably with big breasts and with a good, strong back. Astrid was long-limbed and bony, with a thin face and dark, curly hair, and in another village she might have been reckoned pretty."

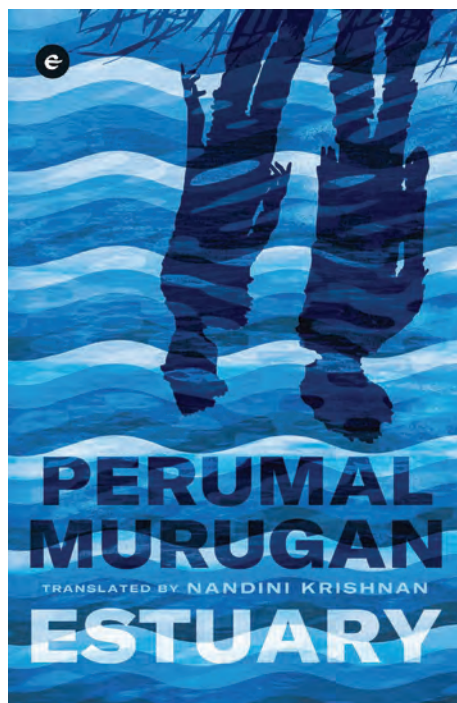
Once this predictable melodramatic arrangement has been set into play, Mytting tries to heat it up by introducing yet another suitor fascinated by Astrid who is considered "mulish and impossible to discipline." A student of architecture, hailing from Dresden and in charge of overseeing the dismantling and transport of the village's church to Germany, this young man quickly will achieve what the pastor could envision only in feverish dreams.

All this would be hard for the reader to bear if Astrid's ensuing plight were not told against the intricate backdrop of her ancestor's generous gift to commemorate the loss of conjoined twin sisters. The bells of the church that the young pastor is ready to have shipped to Germany become a powerful *Dingsymbol* that the author

handles much more convincingly than the flat characterization of his stock characters.

Revisiting life in the nineteenth century has emerged as a productive pastime in recent European fiction: Thomas Hettche's *Pfaueninsel* or Andrés Neuman's *Traveler of the Century* succeeded in taking the pulse of historically removed times and characters by neither sentimentalizing nor patronizing them. Mytting still has a long way to go.

Thomas Nolden  
Wellesley College



Perumal Murugan  
*Estuary*

Trans. Nandini Krishnan. Hyderabad. Eka. 2020. 250 pages.

**IN *ESTUARY*, HIS LATEST NOVEL** in English translation, Tamil writer Perumal Murugan depicts the predicament of the generation gap between parents and children in contemporary India. In the wake of technological advancement and the launch of a new model of a mobile phone or other gadgets every month or so, many parents find themselves entrapped in a vicious

cycle of fear and ignorance. As urban India gears toward a more cosmopolitan outlook, rural and small-town people are still bound with age-old traditions and living conditions.

The protagonist of the novel, Kumarasurar, is obsessively caring for his only son in a society where sons are revered as gods. Kumarasurar and his wife are left worried when their son takes a long, arduous path to find a place in an engineering college, against their wish to see him become a doctor. At times, it feels like Kumarasurar is going through a mental health crisis, which is not addressed—neither by Kumarasurar himself nor by the author.

Kumarasurar is bound in a traditional marriage and a salaried middle-class life. His wife is a homemaker who prefers the confinement of her home and daily chores over anything else. Kumarasurar finds himself trapped in a vicious cycle of fear, confusion, and anger. The constantly changing world around him brings out his worst fears. He worries about the future of his son, who might go astray and become good for nothing in life. He also finds it absurd that people consume pornography, alcohol, or any such deviant pleasures. He believes in simplicity and is at times too obstinate to change himself according to the changing society. Murugan's choice of the novel's theme is safe and pertinent, given his controversial history of being hounded in the past because of the delicate themes he chose for his novels.

It would be unjust to deem all of Kumarasurar's fears irrational. With the technology-driven world and abject consumerism, modern society is not without its pitfalls. The challenge, however, is to navigate these spaces with astute rationality and patience and to make diligent life choices. It is heartening to see Murugan render the much-needed balance in Kumarasurar's life at the end of the novel, or else it would have become a pessimistic read.

From the conservative mindscape to a more broadened vision, *Estuary* signifies a union of the old with the new—akin to



how river and sea meet and yet maintain their distinct identities. Murugan makes sure to convey that not everything modern and new implies progress. This necessity to navigate and compromise in life, as endorsed by Murugan in the novel, also brings with it a share of laughter and a perceptive sense of humor. The excellent translation by Nandini Krishnan is praiseworthy, given its accessibility and poignancy that make the novel a delightful read.

Fathima M  
Jawaharlal Nehru University

Sejal Shah

### *This Is One Way to Dance: Essays*

Athens. University of Georgia Press. 2020. 185 pages.

**THE MOTIF OF DANCING** is central to Sejal Shah's memorable collection of essays about growing up "Indian outside of India, in non-Indian places; about the formation of ethnic identity in small cities and towns in the United States, away from urban centers." Dancing, spinning, and twirling don't fix a body in place; they worry boundaries and borders. These elements define Shah's forays into creative nonfiction, which encompass "the wildest field of voice, thought, and performance." The essay, for Shah, is "hybrid and non-binary, the aesthetic as queer," and probes self-definition while aiming for invention. The essays themselves, written, rewritten, and revised across different moments in time, become simultaneously a mode of invention and of excavation.

Consider the essay titled "Matrimonials: A Triptych," which connects the motif of dancing to the two other dominant themes of the book: marriage and eating. Beginning with a reminiscence of her brother's wedding in 1992, Shah moves to a discussion of her visceral attraction to the Mira Nair film *Monsoon Wedding*, which made her and her friends want to "unwind and expend the coiled energy built from listening to electronic dance music." How-

ever, Shah's attraction for the film and its representation of big Indian family weddings also evoked for her the wistful experience of being "Indian in Amherst," a "parallel universe to the public schools" where she and her siblings were among a handful of Indians. Weddings meant food and dancing.

Later, while she was in graduate school (1997–2002), attending weddings reminded her that "there was a wider world out there—multilingual, vibrant, layered—every riotous color, every ephemeral dance." No wonder then that these wistful memories of weddings left a mark on her writing. Rewatching *Monsoon Wedding* in 2018 made her realize what she had persistently wanted to "create and represent" in her writing: "context, aesthetic, multiple languages . . . a diasporic backdrop for my work, for how I hoped my writing might be read and situated." Dates—1992, 1997–2002, 2018—function as temporal markers in a continuing dance that excavates and returns with new insights to earlier experiences, while keeping doors ajar for new forms of self-creation and recognition.

In essays like "Kinship, Cousins, and Khichidi," remembered experiences of eat-

ing and cooking are foregrounded as Shah kaleidoscopically reevaluates the centrality of such activities to her mutating sense of identity. While she finds cooking to be an intimate kind of social relation, when she was younger, cooking "seemed to be about work: more and more work, always for women." But later in the same essay, which, like "Matrimonials," skips back and forth across time and places, Shah concludes: "Even now, I find it difficult to eat alone—it's not how Indians eat, I think. It's hard to enjoy food without talk. Eating is communal: what is food without sharing, without laughing, without pressing seconds on one other?"

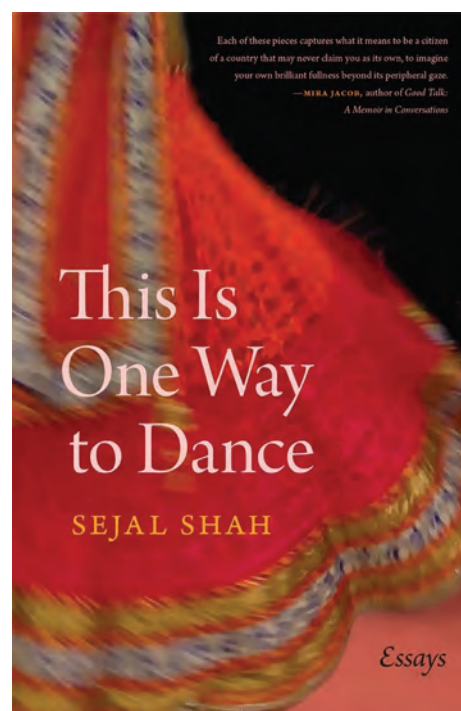
These probing dances that re-turn and redefine, while still encapsulating the germs of the prior affective experience, come full circle in the essay where Shah reflects on her own wedding: "Saris and Sorrows." Life, she says, is not only about weddings. It is about mundane practicalities like cooking and dishes, writing, determining the compromise temperature in the room. Yet there is something about weddings that still retains the power to astonish—"the threshold, the intention, the cusp; the crucible, the gathering, the hope." While her resonant prose powerfully registers loss, the persisting power to astonish and be astonished enables her to "dwell and revel in the spaces between."

Amit R. Baishya  
University of Oklahoma

### Karoline Georges *The Imago Stage*

Trans. Rhonda Mullins. Toronto. Coach House Books. 2020. 166 pages.

**WHEN READERS MEET** *The Imago Stage's* narrator, she has been offline so long that she's "starting to suffocate." Her solution? "I've got to become an image again. As fast as I can." Enter Anouk, her avatar. The novel's first section is titled Reality—followed by Stupor, Space-Time, Immortality, Substitution, Synthesis,





Disappearance, The Eternal Return, and, finally, *The Image*. Canadian author Karoline Georges's narrative plays out between reality and the image.

Reminiscences and insecurities, disappointments and cruelties add flesh to Georges's skeletal portrait in perfunctory prose. Her narrator learned about femininity from her grandfather's pinups and her grandmother's Hollywood stars, from *I Dream of Jeannie*, Wonder Woman, and Olivia Newton John. Jeannie and Wonder Woman are transformational: by spinning and blinking, they are reborn. Olivia Newton John is "a goddess . . . better still: a fictional character." Even then, she was learning how to become Anouk.

As a child, our narrator studied particular women's transformational powers and recognized her capacity to blur reality and fiction. "That was my first career choice. Fictional character, body of light on a screen." As an adult, she transforms her own reality and creates fiction; for work, she models and, in her off hours, becomes Anouk. "A career as a virtually static object was perfect for me . . . spending as much time as possible being passive, as if already I barely existed beyond the image."

The novel hinges on the theme of perception. Initially, the narrator perceives herself through others' images: "I was learning to collect myself." But becoming the photographer "creates a bridge between reality and fiction. Between life and death." Her artistry reveals other means of transformation and preservation, but a family member's illness challenges the limitations of her creativity nevertheless. With few personal relationships, this potential loss makes her yearn for "a whole truth that substituted for movements of the body, matter, time," and digitization offers unconventional solutions.

Thematic layers and resonance add complexity to this novel of ideas. Georges won the 2018 Governor General's Award for French-Language Fiction for this novel, *De synthèses*; its English translator, Rhonda Mullins, previously won a Governor General's Award in 2015 for translating Jocelyne Saucier's *Les héritiers de la mine*. These are the kinds of connections that *The Imago Stage*'s narrator forges with Anouk: real but as much about separation as connection.

*The Imago Stage* is flat, intensely orchestrated, and nearly lifeless: essentially and purposefully so.

Marcie McCauley  
Toronto

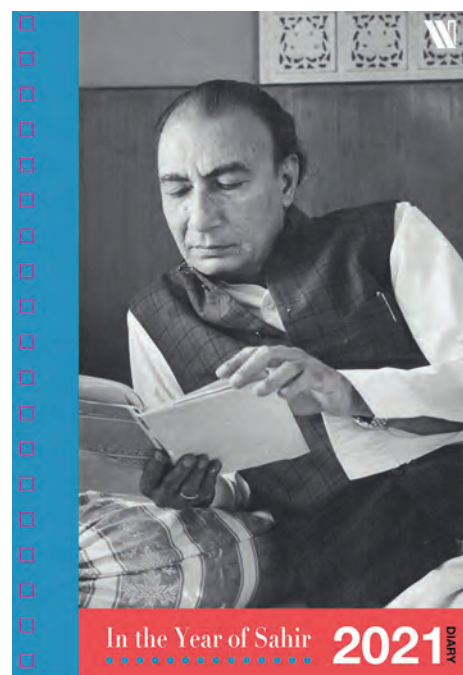
Nasreen Munni Kabir  
*In the Year of Sahir: 2021 Diary*

Chennai, India. Westland. 2020. 144 pages.

MUCH OF INDIA'S LITERARY and cinematic worlds are geared up to celebrate with considerable enthusiasm the birth centenary of Sahir Ludhianvi (Abdul Hayee; 1921–1980), "a colossus among film lyricists," considered by many as one of the foremost Urdu poets of the twentieth century. As her contribution to these festivities, Nasreen Munni Kabir, the eminent scholar of Indian film, has published this elegantly designed, spiral-bound, diary-

like collection of reminiscences of Sahir's many prominent friends and colleagues, numerous, never-before-published photographs, brief, incisive essays, remarks, and intriguing personal bits and pieces of sahiriana. For example, the back cover shows Sahir's actual diary for August 23–26, 1978, along with his entry for the 24th: "Kaifi / Dinner – Faiz," presumably a meeting with poet Kaifi Azmi (1919–2002) and dinner with poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911–1984).

Akshay Manwani, author of *Sahir Ludhianvi: The People's Poet* (2013)—the best biography of the poet in English—introduces the volume with a concise essay that charts the trajectory of Sahir's poetry from its beginnings to its etiolation in the 1970s. The diary concludes with Kabir's incisive and contextualizing essay "The Story behind *Parchhaiyan* and *Shadow Speaks*," which introduces a reprint of novelist/film director K. A. Abbas's long-out-of-print English translation of one of Sahir's most famous (and lengthiest) poems, the anti-war *Parchhaiyan* (Shadows; 1955), a harrowing account of what two young lovers experience during the terror of World War II. It appears side by side with the original text in Urdu script.





Sahir started writing poetry during his high school days and continued on into college, from which he was expelled for refusing to take his final exams as a political protest. He worked as a writer and sub-editor of a number of major Urdu literary journals in Lahore, where he came in contact with young leftist-Marxist writers of the newly established, Soviet-inspired Progressive Movement. This group would dominate Urdu literature, as well as other major South Asian literatures, from the 1930s till the 1970s. On his first visit to Bombay in 1940, he came into contact with the Bombay film industry, many of whose most talented members were Progressives. There, his gifts as a writer of film lyrics (a number of which are essential for actors to lip-sync at intense or comic moments) were immediately recognized, and, over the next three decades, he became a major artistic icon in Indian cinema.

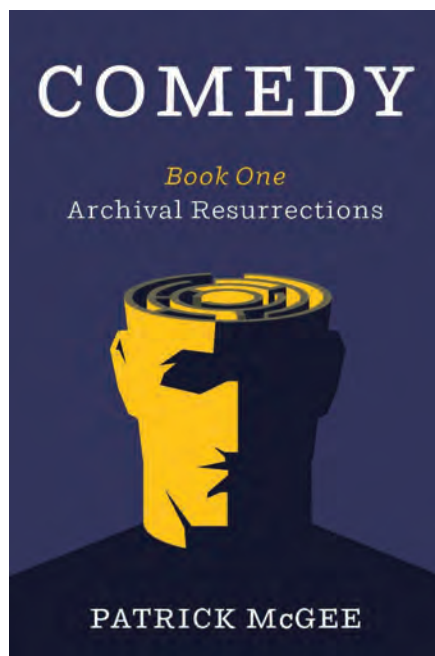
It was also at this time—the 1940s to the 1970s—that he wrote many of his most notable film lyrics, working closely with many of the Bombay film world's major on-screen and behind-the-scene personalities. Some have commented about the poet especially for this publication. Remarks about Sahir made earlier by others, now deceased, are also included. Still others appear in many photographs. It's a veritable who's who of the Bombay film world: producer-director brothers B. R. and Yash Chopra; playback singers Lata Mangeshkar, Asha Bhosle, and Sudha Malhotra; poet/lyricists Gulzar and Javed Akhtar; composers Zakir Hussain, Rajesh Roshan, and Shankar Mahadevan; actors Waheeda Rehman, Jaya Bachchan, and Naseeruddin Shah, to mention just a few.

Much of what others have said about Sahir in this diary suggests that he had a strong sense of self-worth. Though generous, he refused to be taken advantage of. He famously struck long-overdue blows for all underpaid, underappreciated artists when he demanded that producers pay him more for his songs and insisted that radio hosts announce the names of

composers and lyricists of a song they were playing, not just the names of the singers. This acknowledgment was key in making the composers and lyricists of Indian film music famous across South Asia.

Carlo Coppola

University of California, Los Angeles



Patrick McGee

*Comedy: Book One, Archival Resurrections*

Eugene, Oregon. Resource Publications.  
2020. 188 pages.

**I SUPPOSE IN A BOOK REVIEW** one should not be overtly polemical or even intrusive, supposing a reader's viewpoint. Yet, in a time when we have seen the ideals of our democracy threatened, it seems necessary not only to reflect on those ideals but also to consider how those ideals emerged to begin with, and just what it is exactly that protects and promotes them.

This is one of the values of reading Patrick McGee's *Comedy*. To reimagine, to innovate the work of Dante is audacious, to say the least, but we need both: the original Dante and McGee's innovation. Past figures inform the present. The emphasis is to "focus on this day. / In life no man knows

his effect on the world / And in death recognition becomes pointless." In other words, the ideals of democracy, though informed by the past, must always be contemporary. Democracy is the composite of individual conscience, and sadly, "most lives waste away in self-made hell. / Still one person committed to truth outweighs / The horde lost in a bottomless malaise." Two civilizing forces, religion and enlightenment, should work to protect us individually and collectively. Too often, unfortunately, "Every thought has its worth, / But when religions sometimes go astray, / Usually it's their own tenets they betray / For fear some other vision may have a say."

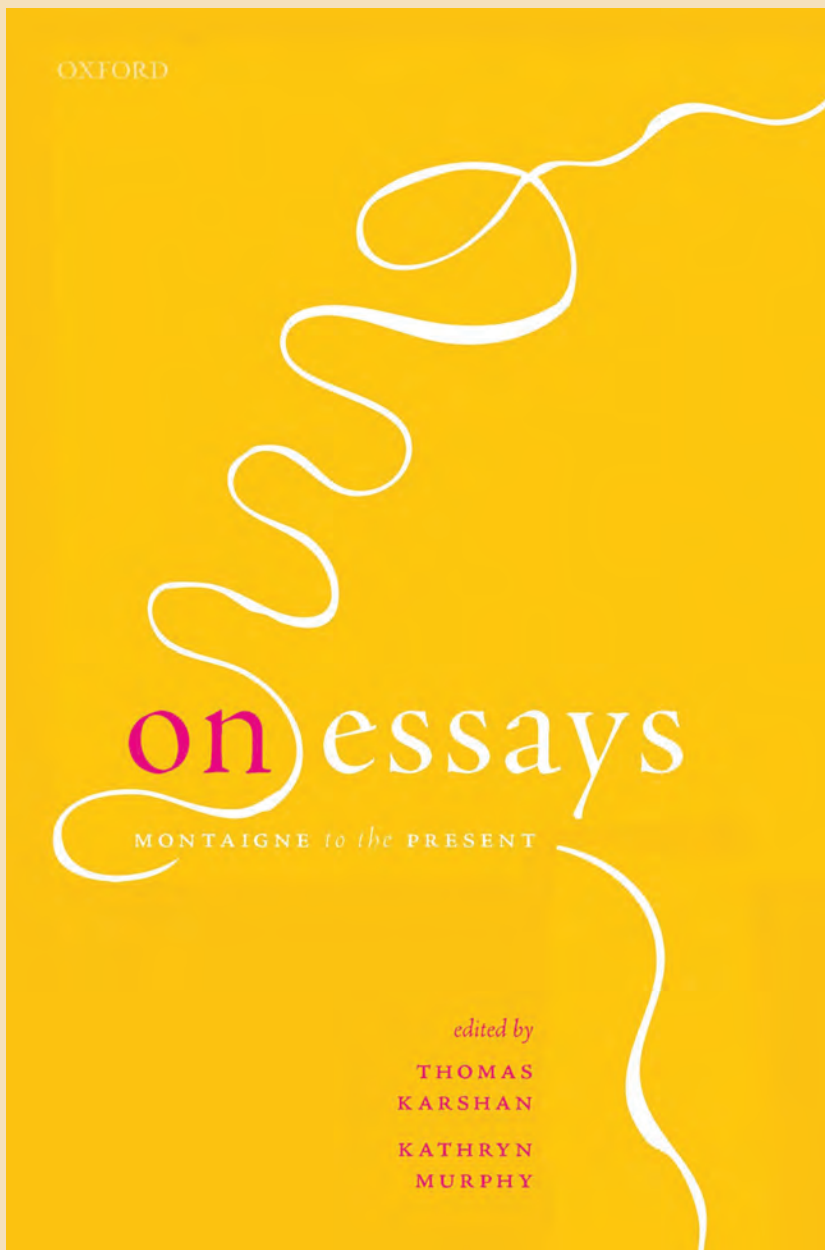
Within this social context, the author resurrects a significant number of personalities, as if to say we are all, individually, products of a society shaped by these eminent personalities whose presence in our history, whose real-life efforts have made our world, and to whom we are ever responding. Making use of three-lined rhyming stanzas constructed in pentameter, the poet offers thirty-four cantos. He alludes freely to numerous figures such as Jesus, Dante, Spinoza, Marx, Blake, Wilde, Lincoln, Hughes, et al. Imposing the past with its conflicted and emerging ideals onto our present sense of identity is to emphasize our current need. Can we know ourselves, in truth, without knowing what has made us, who has shaped us?

An Aristotelian concept of comedy, as survival, seems to underscore the work. I appreciate that the persona of this *Comedy* is guided by a teacher. The concomitant link between education and enlightenment is thus emphasized. The goal: "The transformation of the human heart / In generations that remember us. / Their faith and forgiveness, which we are bound to trust, / Will spring us forward to a world more just."

Read Dante again. Read McGee as well. Read both anew. Read yourself, read ourselves. I look forward to *Book Two* and *Book Three* in McGee's trilogy.

Ken Hada

East Central University



*On Essays:  
Montaigne to the Present*

Ed. Thomas Karshan & Kathryn Murphy  
Oxford. Oxford University Press. 2020. 380 pages.

IN HER INTRODUCTION to *The Best American Essays* 1992, Susan Sontag writes: “The culture administered by universities has always regarded the essay with suspicion.” Twenty-eight years later, does the appearance of *On Essays: Montaigne to the Present*—produced by one of the world’s premier university publishers and written by academics—indicate a change of heart? Scholars are certainly showing signs of a dawning awareness that this is an area worth exploring. Thomas Karshan and Kathryn Murphy are correct that the twenty-first century is witnessing “a revival of interest in the essay form.” In similar vein, Felicity James—who contributes an excellent chapter on Charles Lamb—talks about the essay today being “rediscovered and reinvented.” And, in another essay-focused volume published in 2020—*Imagined Spaces*, edited by Gail Low and Kirsty Gunn—no less an authority than Phillip Lopate adds his voice to this idea of a contemporary essay-renaissance. Though the essay has long been “neglected at a theoretical level,” Lopate reckons this “is beginning to change.” In evidence he cites recent conferences and books that have started to construct “a poetics and ideology of the essay.”

But although there are signs that the attitude Sontag noted in 1992 is changing, it would be premature to see the essay being comfortably ensconced in the standard syllabus of literary concerns, its pariah status exchanged for the same kind of mantle of genre-respectability that scholarship has draped so thickly over novels and poetry. Theodor Adorno—whose theoretical work on the essay remains an important touchstone—recognized heresy as “the law of the innermost form” of this type of writing. The essay is an independent, even outlaw genre that likes to go its own way. Orthodoxy and conformity are anathema to it. As such, it is resistant to the kind of categories scholars bring to bear. Karshan and Murphy talk about “the various ways in which the essay bristles



against academic writing.” Specifically, they identify its “resistance to introductions, to generalization and abstraction, to accounts of its origins, its freedom from discipline, rules, and criteria.” In other words, the essay swims against the current in which books like this are written. Essayists should not be surprised, therefore, if they experience a certain bristling as they read—but there is also much to engage their interest.

Attempting to summarize the book’s seventeen chapters is beyond the reach of a brief review. Instead, as a way of indicating something of the spread of topics, let me pick out a few points that struck me. Fred Parker’s chapter on David Hume offers a refreshing perspective on this key Scottish thinker by arguing that it was “as an essayist, not a philosopher, that Hume made his name.” Scott Black makes a convincing case for seeing Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* as more an essay than a novel, flagging up “digression, irregularity, wildness” and “discursive wandering about” as some of its most striking essaylike features. Tom Wright’s examination of the “voiced essay” in Carlyle and Emerson—both of whom spoke to live audiences as well as producing written texts—provides persuasive evidence that the essay “has never been solely introspective or intimate.” Michael Wood—in a chapter that nicely complements those on Hume and Sterne—looks at “Essayism in the British novel after Borges.” His comments on Julian Barnes are particularly good.

Writing on “The Psychoanalyst and the Essay,” Adam Phillips shows how, for those professionally engaged in this area, calling their books essay collections “is like a declaration of independence.” Looking at the essay’s “genial scepticism” and “hospitable curiosity,” Phillips makes the intriguing suggestion that “the essay can be, to put

it psychoanalytically, the genre in which we are free of tyrannical parents.” Christy Wampole contributes a photo essay on Salvador Dalí’s illustrations for an edition of Montaigne’s essays published by Doubleday in 1947. In a fascinating aside she speculates that if Montaigne had had a camera, he “would have left behind a different kind of cultural artefact.”

Other chapters range over the importance of coffee houses and smoking to the eighteenth-century English essay; “The Montaignian Essay”; Walter Pater and the essay; essayism in George Eliot and Thomas Hardy; and politics in the English essay. Ned Stuckey-French provides expert commentary on the American essay in the present century—though his assessment of John D’Agata’s work seems to underplay the seriousness of the critique it received in William Deresiewicz’s devastating attack in the *Atlantic Monthly*.

By its very nature, a book of this type can’t be comprehensive. The editors make clear that it’s not intended as a handbook, companion, encyclopedia, or history of the essay. They recognize that any reader is likely to have “favorite essayists to whom we have paid scant attention.” I wouldn’t expect my favorites to be mentioned, but I was surprised by some of the names that were absent: E. B. White and John Berger, for instance. It’s good to see recognition that “the introductions by practicing essayists contributed annually since 1986 to Robert Atwan’s *Best American Essays* anthologies form, taken together, one of the most substantial recent bodies of thought on the essay.” That is undoubtedly the case. But Atwan’s expert yearly forewords should surely be included too. It’s likewise welcome to see editors of anthologies being credited for doing “important work in framing their topics,” but the references that accompany this

point seem curiously limited. It’s a particular shame that Lydia Fakundiny’s *The Art of the Essay*, with its brilliant introduction, is nowhere mentioned. One might also have expected at least a nod to *The Penguin Book of Twentieth-Century Essays*—if only to quote editor Ian Hamilton’s deft dismissal of a particular type of belletristic essay. He calls them “virtuoso feats of pointless eloquence.”

To return to Susan Sontag, in “Under the Sign of Susan,” an essay included in *The Best American Essays 2020*, A. O. Scott suggests that Sontag’s essays are exciting “not just because of the ideas they impart but because you feel within them the rhythms and pulsations of a living intelligence.” It is precisely such rhythms and pulsations that characterize good work in this area—and that make it so hard for academic prose to handle. (*Editorial note:* For more on WLT’s commitment to the genre, see Robert Con Davis-Undiano’s “Back to the Essay” manifesto in the Winter 2000 issue.)

Chris Arthur  
St. Andrews, Scotland

## Cuba at the Table

*Waiting for Change Again*

by Norge Espinosa Mendoza



**YOU HAVE TO WALK TOWARD THE** Callejón del Chorro, alongside the Cathedral of San Cristóbal in Old Havana, to get to Doña Eutimia. The private restaurant or *paladar*—one of the most well known in the capital, and one of the few that has managed to make its way onto the most in-demand tourist sites—awaits its guests next door to the Taller Experimental de Gráfica. It's small, and yet the clientele is aware of the privilege it confers. It's recommended, of course, to book in advance, because there's always someone waiting to take the first available chair, if there is one, at one of its few tables. Doña Eutimia represents more than twenty-three years of work, prestige, and, of course, authentic *comida criolla* (Cuban cuisine). The secret of their success: black beans, *ropa vieja* (shredded beef in tomato sauce), the favorite of my friend and translator George Henson, as well as other traditional dishes. Decorated with screens, lamps, and works by national artists, this cozy restaurant is more than what's on the menu; it's the experience that has managed to preserve its charm.

Named for a *señora* who once cooked for the painters and artists who worked in

the adjacent engraving workshop, the real-life Eutimia won the affection and praise of creators of all types, and today her memory lives on in the restaurant that bears her name. On one occasion, I took a rather haughty and formal academic friend to a lunch, together with a group of American professors, and it amused me to see that such a professorial man waited as the others served themselves the thick black beans, only to repeat the Cuban custom, so typical of humble families, of cleaning the serving bowl with scraps of bread, to enjoy the delicacy to the fullest. Good food has that power: it frees us from certain atavisms and airs to return us to the mere pleasure of unabashed pleasure.

To keep a *paladar* open—especially one celebrated for its famous menu and with ingredients in high demand—is a true feat in today's Cuba. The unavailability of supplies, the internal failures of the national economy and its mechanisms, the weight of the US embargo imposed on the island, and the reduction of points of entry for seasonings and other products—for reasons that Covid-19 has only aggravated—have compounded and belie the boom image that trade, small

businesses, and *cuentapropistas* (entrepreneurs) enjoyed not long ago. During the brief bridge of exchange that the Obama administration built between 2014 and 2016, hopes multiplied. Then, everything changed dramatically. And the negative impact has even reached the table of such famous restaurants (and away from the pockets of “ordinary” Cubans) as La Guarida, where essential ingredients for their select and exclusive menu have vanished.

Beginning January 1, the Cuban government launched the *Tarea Ordenamiento* (restructuring of the country's economy), which includes the withdrawal of the CUC—the convertible peso that tourists exchanged for dollars—and a revaluation of the Cuban peso. It's a delicate context, amid numerous shortages, of a dissatisfaction that manifests in long lines, a meteoric rise in prices, the end of subsidies, and the changes that Cubans are demanding on social media from the government beyond mere sloganeering, despite the consequences that such actions exact.

In 2021 the island's resistance and hope will be put to the test once again. Hopefully, in a not-so-distant future, we'll be able to talk about all of this, sitting at a table at Doña Eutimia, waiting for the black beans to arrive. Because one doesn't live by faith alone.



Poet, playwright, and cultural critic **Norge Espinosa Mendoza** (b. 1971, Santa Clara) is widely considered one of

Cuba's most important LGBTQ activists. His plays have premiered in Cuba, Puerto Rico, France, and the United States.



**George Henson's** translations include Elena Poniatowska's *The Heart of the Artichoke*, Sergio Pitlor's *Trilogy of Memory*,

and, most recently, Alberto Chimal's novella *The Most Fragile Objects*. He teaches Spanish translation at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey.





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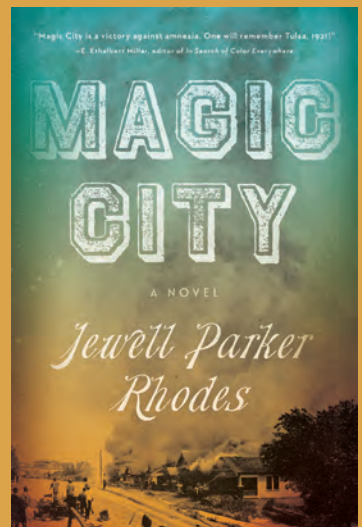
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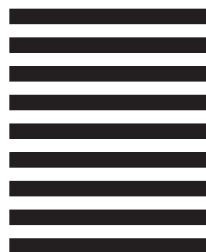
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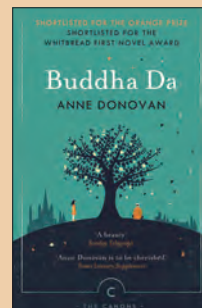
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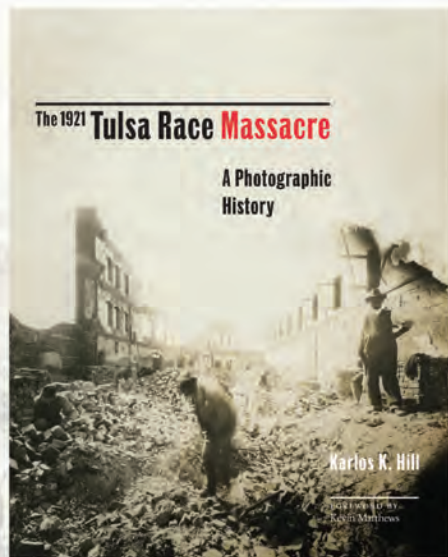
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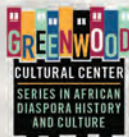
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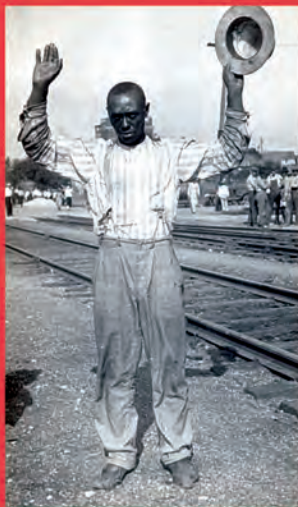
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