

The Hall Writers' Forum

Poems on Conflict

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In memoriam

Justin Gosling

1930 - 2022

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Foreword

How many of us as school students studied the words of W H Auden's *September 1, 1939* and were moved, and yet, through the veil of the past, felt it was still somehow unknowable to one too young to have lived through the war or experienced its aftermath? Reading this collection I felt a very real connection to Auden's emotions:

Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine dominates all in the foreground, but there are connections throughout to the long-term injustices that burn across the globe, including the ongoing mistreatment of Palestinians in the occupied territories.

There are echoes of Charles Causley, too, in the range of styles and voices contained within these pages. Frustration may no longer be mute – social media enables a kind of solidarity and shared outrage – but as these poets convey, there is a new kind of horror in watching abuses through 24 hour news apps and user-generated content. We are closer than ever, seeing atrocities happen in real time and yet nothing seems different.

In these verses too, there is a challenge to the narrative of war as inevitable – with a focus on the business of weaponry and geo-politics as usual. As with *Oh! What A Lovely War* nearly fifty years after the first world war, these writers burn with fury and with pity.

There is the helpless anger of distance, but also the human stories of refugees and survivors. Above all these poems let us share, not just rage and compassion, but the hope of a future that is different.

Samira Ahmed

Editors' Introduction

The invasion of Ukraine in the early hours of 24th February 2022 chilled and revolted the world. That Russia, such an ancient and noble civilisation, should be led by its leaders to visit savagery upon a neighbouring culture, tied to it by ancient kinship, defied comprehension.

Shocked by this event, unable to offer any practical help, members of the Hall Writers' Forum elected to put pen to paper to express their outrage, to offer what little solace they could muster, and to give moral support. In so doing, they hoped that their sentiments would also give voice to similar feelings among their friends and neighbours.

But it is all too easy to imagine that the only conflict of interest is the one on our doorstep; discussion about this particular war soon led to comparison with recent or ongoing conflicts, notably in Palestine, Syria, Yemen, Myanmar and Afghanistan. Provoked by the Ukraine invasion, many contributions have been offered which dwell on these and other timeless examples of man's inhumanity to man.

Many of the contributions to this book were made in the heat of the moment: their passion and pathos shine through and will endure long after the fighting has ceased.

* * *

Sadly, as this volume was being prepared for publication, we received the news that Justin Gosling had died on 1st November. He had been a great supporter of the Hall Writers' Forum since its inception nearly ten years ago. We are thankful to be able to include three pieces by him.

Autumn 2022

Do not pull the trigger.

A Few Small Gifts

Peter Pegnall

A few small gifts for International Women's Day:
to wander across a springtime meadow;
take time as a matter of course; to follow
your child chasing a butterfly; to laugh;

to know he will never wear a uniform,
carry a gun, learn a taste for blood;
will love body and soul and survive;

to be heard above your own doubts;
to refuse to know your place if it's beneath,
if it contorts your god given graces;

to have enough - Food. Work. Sex. Music. Time.
for a start; to build on memories;
wash away bitterness on the tide;

to inherit a planet you shall pass on,
companion to the wolf and owl,
daughter of the soil; to wake, willingly.

Cool comfort,
Crouch in carriers,
Cradled closely on coach and on train,
Caressed by their women and children
Crushed in fright and in flight from Ukraine.

Cool comfort
Cower in carriers,
Through a country contorted in pain,
They cry to their women and children,
Who cry for their screaming Ukraine.

Cold comfort
Bring the carriers
Of Kremlin's orders, so cynically crass,
"Corridors open for women and children,
Via only Crimea or Donbas."

Cool comfort
Curled in carriers,
Carted quickly from Kremlin's war game,
Softly mew to their women and children,
As they weep their farewells to Ukraine.

Colours

Cathal MacThréinfhir

Colour Blue,
Colour Yellow,
stream in the evening air.
I can only stare as the TV glares.

Missiles in the air are falling on Freedom Square.
Every morning, I look to my TV screen
to see if Kyiv is still there.

Ukraine hangs on a prayer.
Is there a miracle out there?
How long will the pain go on?
How deep will the knife drive in?

The blood may never wash away.
The land forever stained like sin.

The Ash that Blows

Allan Kennedy

It's the ash that blows in the cold grey sky
The sirens wail
And the children cry
You got nowhere to run and nowhere to hide
The world's gone to hell and
We're all gonna die

Wake up in the morning with dust in your throat
Dust in your eyes &
Dust on your coat
You can't go for a run or go for a ride
And you can't go swimming 'cause
The river's all dried

It's the ash that blows in the cold grey sky
The sirens wail
And the children cry
You got nowhere to run and nowhere to hide
The world's gone to hell and
We're all gonna die

Look out the window see a mushroom cloud
See a ball of fire
Hear a bang that's loud
Cover up your ears and cover up your eyes
But the fire's still coming
And we're all gonna fry

It's the ash that blows in the cold grey sky
The sirens wail
And the children cry
You got nowhere to run and nowhere to hide
The world's gone to hell and
We're all gonna die

Listen to the guys on the hill tell lies
Smooth as silk and
The sickly smiles
It's all about the money at the end of the day
And the power and the glory
For which you will pay

It's the ash that blows in the cold grey sky
The sirens wail
And the children cry
You got nowhere to run and nowhere to hide
The world's gone to hell and
We're all gonna die

It's the end of the world and the end of time
Stick your hopes and dreams
Where the sun don't shine
Bury your head in the burning sand
And kiss goodbye
To your motherland

It's the ash that blows in the cold grey sky
The sirens wail
And the children cry
You got nowhere to run and nowhere to hide
The world's gone to hell and
We're all gonna die

.hiroshima.

Sonja Benskin Mesher



.numbers have meaning.

Spring Flowers

Darrell Barnes

The shy forget-me-nots
hide behind the daffodils.
Each is silent.
Each is brave.
I shall remember.

This Morning

Keith Evetts

a clear blue sky
but a fresh loaf

nothing arriving
from the baker

in the birdbath
sounds of infants

rainbow sparrows
from the playground

a plane above
well before

its contrail blurring
the faint farewell

and the scent
it is

of spring
is to die for

..the burning..

Sonja Benskin Mesher

he said the flames
came over the trees.

behind the buildings.
bombed the buildings.

so do not wonder why
i don't play soldiers,
lay them down to die.

he says that i will not battle,
i am no good at it.

too peaceful. i can play
hospitals.

Keepsake Peace, Flour and Water

James Walton

by the front hall door it sat
years after they had all grown
the cardboard box gone floppy
where the creaky sun spied through
the plaster of paris flaky
the kindergarten crinkled cellophane
over the heavy acrylics of hands
toddler signatures
slow printed joy
the stretching crayon wiggly names
days waiting to expand
and if we had collected them all
the host of us parents
wanting only a life of happiness
for them then and who they become
if we took out the snotty glue
covered over the maps of countries
making boundaries of palm
and reaching stubby fingers
if we wrapped the fighter planes
the missiles wobbly weighed down
turned the ships to papier mâché
brushed our sticky way to the rims
where their lives converged
in thumbs and names and falling down
our donations passing willingness
every child these our own
held through the night terrors
each told there are no monsters here
we can push down the edges
just like this together, see

Selene

Darrell Barnes

Against the dark blue sky,
the golden-yellow crescent Moon
holds the Morning Star in her arms
lest Hope should fail.

This Thing

Lucy Newlyn

*West goads East and East goads West –
Which is richer, stronger, best?
It's money, money, every day
Feeding this thing that won't go away.*

Boris sits at Number Ten,
Waving his flag of yellow and blue.
Brexit's done, the Tories are in:
His Russian cronies paid their due.
He's Churchill now, absolved of sin.
He's a hero now, he's brave and true.

Putin will do what Putin will do.
Biden watches with half-shut eyes,
Meek as a mouse and without a clue,
Safe at the White House, shielded by lies,
Flaunting his flag of yellow and blue
As the bombs rain down and Ukraine dies.

The tanks advance, the sirens sound.
The martyrs fight, but they're far too few.
Deep in their cellars underground,
Folded in flags that are yellow and blue,
Buildings in rubble all around,
Victims are cooked in a human stew.

Homes destroyed and nowhere to be,
What can the women and children do?
If you don't stay and die, you're a refugee
Waiting for help in a starving queue.
Watch them now, in their millions, flee,
Trailing their flags of yellow and blue.

Zelensky pleads for a no-fly zone.
NATO, frozen, says 'No can do -
ARMS you can have, but you're on your own.'
Waving a flag that's yellow and blue,
Welcoming neighbours to hearth and home,
Warm-hearted Poland lets Ukraine through.

Guarding privilege, wealth, and Queen
While touting a flag that's yellow and blue,
Tied up in red tape, slow and mean,
The UK does what it's seen to do:
'Here's your allowance. Times are lean.
We paid for your ARMS. You have had your due.'

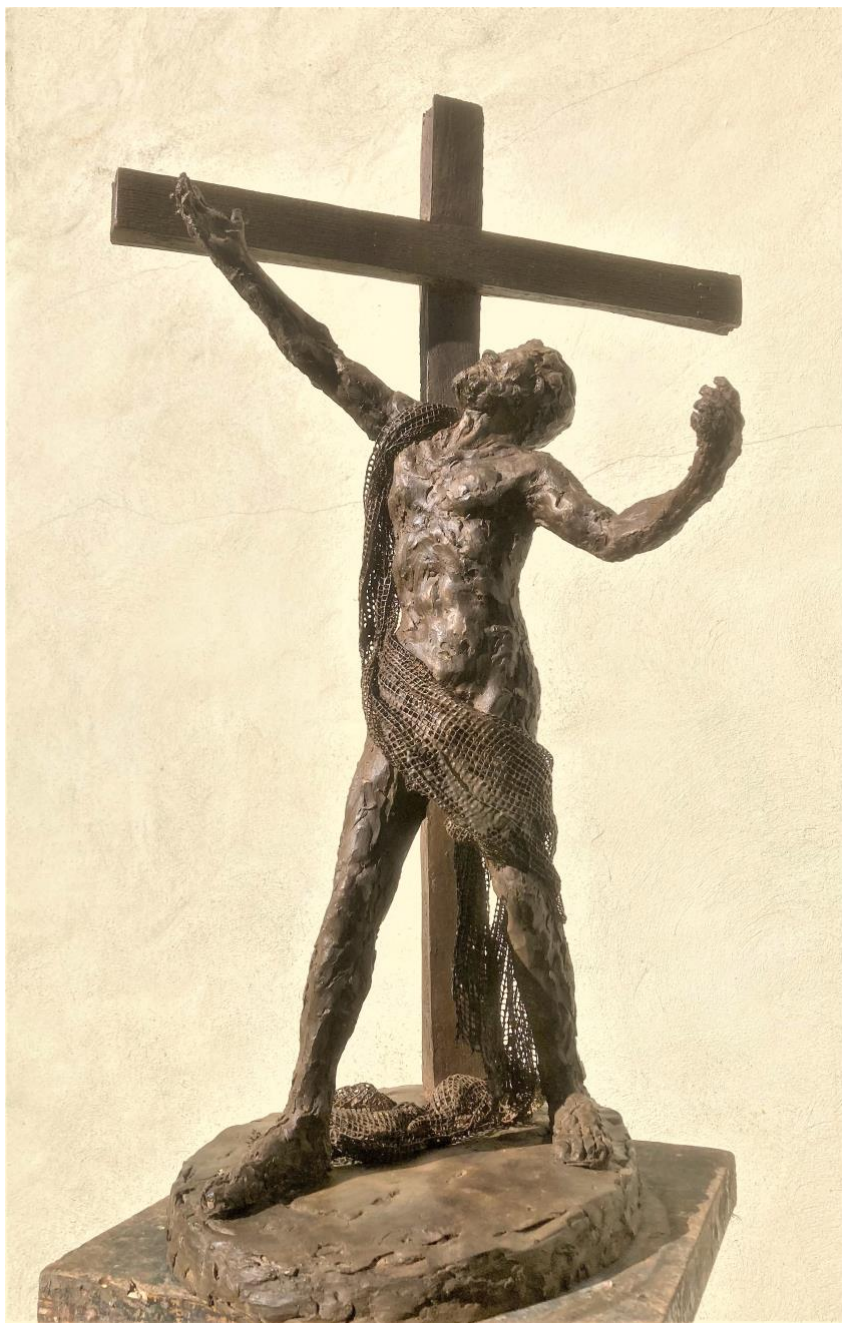
'There'll be no more martyrs after World War One':
So we all vowed, after World War Two.
But here we go again, till the killing is done:
Nothing new here, nothing new –
Firing our sanctions like bullets from a gun,
Bartering our badges in yellow and blue.

*West goads East and East goads West –
Which is richer, stronger, best?
It's money, money, every day
Feeding this thing that won't go away.*

I am currently working on a sculpture commissioned for a church building which is shared by both Anglicans and Catholics, and which is therefore an example of how differing views can be reconciled. The Anglican church is called Saint Andrew's, and the Catholic church Holy Cross, so I wished to incorporate both the saint and the cross within the sculpture. Because tradition holds that Saint Andrew preached as far north as Kiev to the Slavic nations descended from the Kievan Rus, he happened to become the patron saint of both Ukraine and Russia,

While I was working on this piece, Putin invaded Ukraine. His action and its consequences brought to mind the king of Brobdingnag's description, in *Gulliver's Travels*, of men with their war-like propensity, as: "the most pernicious race of little, odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth." How does one relate that depiction of man to anything worth a god dying for? How can one incorporate sin and suffering into a view of the creative work of a loving God? There is no simple answer. The best I think I have come across is in the words of a character in the *Last Chronicle of Barset*, who says: "It is in his perfection as a man that we recognise the divinity of Christ. It is in our imperfections as men that we recognise the necessity for a Christ." It seems to me that this statement recognises the problem and its solution without trying to explain or excuse it, which is perhaps as much as we can hope to do.

I have therefore depicted Andrew in his moment of exultation, when, in John's gospel, he declares: "we have found the Messiah". He is unaware of the cross behind him, which is yet to come; a gallows which represents the evil that men can and do inflict on each other; which, with all its horror, cannot detract from joy and hope, which have their own validity. That, it seems to me, must be what the Ukrainians are holding on to.



The Train

Darrell Barnes

The train pulled out: it was the last to leave,
taking refugees away from Kyiv.
On the station platform an upraised hand
waved farewell, a different future planned
from what they'd hoped a short sweet time ago.
Her little child was far too young to know
and snuggled closely in his mother's arm:
there was warmth and safety, peace and calm.
She closed the window, turned to face despair
which chilled her to the bone. She wondered where
he might be now. How soon would she forget
his fond embrace and how he looked? And yet
in the condensation on the pane
she'd smeared his name. She saw his face again.

Goodbye

(a cherita terbalik)

Keith Evetts

the breath
on the coach window
as he returns to fight

clouds their goodbye
before the border

their last sight

.burning 2.

Sonja Benskin Mesher

my face
or is the sky burning
again

we have a quiet place
as does he
some live
with bloody bombs
falling

The Battle for Ukraine

Cathal MacThréinfhir

(with thanks to W B Yeats and Simonides)

The world has changed;
'changed utterly' since last Tuesday.
For the first time in eighty years
air raid sirens are heard again in the heart of Europe.

The humped-backed beast of war
has been slipped loose upon
the world again, and on the people of Ukraine
trailing its dank spoor of death behind.

Ukraine has not yielded.
Like Spartans, their shield wall still holds.
Like Dieneke of old they will fight on
in the shade of the Russian missile strikes.

So, as you have your morning tea
among strangers, perhaps as they pass by,
pause, and go tell your friends,
for another day, the Spartans
of Ukraine hold the line
obedient to all their laws.

Gotcha, Volodymyr! This one's for you!
I wrote your name myself in blood-red chalk
upon the shell (my God: it's heavy too!).
It might with luck curtail your pompous talk.
Let's face it, mush: Ukraine should not exist;
someone should have strangled you at birth.
That's the official line. An iron fist
will now attack to wipe you off the earth.
Oh, what the shit! This fucking motor's stalled;
we're low on key components and supplies;
that tank's shed its tracks and must be hauled
slowly through the mud; a comrade dies.
I wonder what the fuck I'm doing here:
overworked and underpaid, no beer.

It takes all spring for me to strain
from mud-grubbed seeds
as horsemen on our Cossack plain
come riding metal steeds.

*The tyrant's universal
with bombs and tanks and guns;
his aim is sharply tactical
when murdering our sons.*

It takes the sun for me to flower
while centred in this land.
Nothing here will make me cower;
I'm legion, out of hand.

*The tyrant's universal
with bombs and tanks and guns;
his aim is sharply tactical
when murdering our sons..*

It takes much warmth come harvest time
to let seeds fall on ground
prepared to nurture all in grime
where strength and power's found.

*The tyrant's universal
with bombs and tanks and guns;
his aim is sharply tactical
when murdering our sons.*

It takes the frost in chilling days
to fortify each shell,
but while I wither, they'll find ways
to bloom where hostiles dwell.

*The tyrant's universal
with bombs and tanks and guns;
his aim stays sharply tactical,
but he can't kill all our sons.*

The Piano¹

Darrell Barnes

This music that she knows by heart
she will not play again.
The notes which filled her house with joy
now float through broken glass and shattered doors;
and in the street below, people pause,
picking their way through the debris of last night's concert of hell.
They stop and weep.
They will remember.

¹ For a video of this woman playing her grand piano in her shattered apartment, click <http://bit.ly/3UQiN xu>

Images that repeat
burnt out frozen
on fields in memories
in the eyes of children
of soldiers of civilians
no difference now
charred rigid where they fought
or lying limp by their homes
or by their belongings
as they fled
neither side distinguishable
from the other
their thoughts and feelings
gone
leaving stories at a glance
abandoned pushchairs
scattered between shell craters
on what used to be
a merely potholed road
that used to lead somewhere
a woman stooped
head bowed
sheltering underground
once her friendly station
all the old dates
and all the old places
remembered yet again
in these same old images

Underground

Kate Newlyn

Underground, a small girl sings
while overhead
the bitter eastern winds
freeze rivulets of blood
among the rubble & the weeds.
A city's sap,
new boundaries on a map.

Down here the need
is for a song
a seed.



A Chink of Light

Natasha Walker

A chink of light destroys your sleeping face.
Ukraine, your mother calls you by your name.
Blurred imposters impregnate the space

between my thoughts and yours. A thudding base
erupts to cover up our shame.
A chink of light destroys your sleeping face

and hope looks meek, and hope has lost its grace
as soldiers cripple futures. All the same,
blurred imposters impregnate the space

between your eyes where bad things grow and pace
around your dormant brain. And like a flame,
a chink of light destroys your sleeping face.

Choking, as men embrace, encase, debase
the Maidan maiden, your mother's lost this game
of blurred imposters impregnating space.

In war, there's never really time to replace
bad with good before the shrapnel's aim:
a chink of light destroys your sleeping face,
Blurred imposters impregnate your space.

What Does Courage Look Like?

Peter Peggall

Mostly you don't see it. They make films,
construct stories, gloss the truth:
it makes its way to the shops,
a trek up the Matterhorn
on the flat. Doors fail to open,
or swing shut in its face.

There is no one to witness
first aid to a stranger, words
uncalled for that make a difference.
There is no meter of grief
to register loss. Not my business
echoes coward wisdom.

Beyond the call of duty,
immeasurable, unpaid,
liberating as wings
in an invisible sky. Imagine,
to shoulder the world for one moment
to make contact in a block of ice.

There is a small child lying in the dark,
a tight-pulled knot of hunger, thirst, and fear,
not knowing what has happened to her home
and friends
and parents.
Though she doesn't understand,
she has a hard-gained sick familiarity
with sharp small-arms fire, dull explosions,
shattered buildings, falling dust,
has grown accustomed to the screams
and to the screaming silence,
waking and in dream.

She can't remember who she is -
has lost her name, her playfulness,
her curiosity, affection, warmth.

She can't remember where she lived:
in Syria, or Yemen, or Sudan, or Palestine,
Iraq, Ukraine, Somalia...?
So many lands she might have once called
home;
they've merged
into a broken nightmare,
filled with smoke.

It billows from a burnt-out tank,
from blocks of flats and hospitals,
from camp-fires,
crematoria, and cigarettes
that glow in sentried night -
smoke is the substance,
grief the form of war.

Crying Is Not Enough

Cathal MacThréinfhir

Each day is circled, hammered and bent to purpose now.
Colour strains to black and white.
Young mothers holding their children close,
greyed by experience before their time,
pick their way through the debris of broken lives,
of bomb breached hospitals and homes,
and stare sightless upon the ruin.

Men of fighting age are not there.
They are keeping faith,
holding the line at the outskirts of the cities;
frontsighting the enemy's approach.

Will we remember?
After the ground has grown cold
from the heat and blast of shellfire,
after the molten metal of burnt out tanks
and mangled material of war
lie smouldered in the powdered dust of cities,
and the nameless lie buried in makeshift ditches unshriven.
Will we remember?

Crying is not enough
to fill the well of loss and hurt
that has been memoried down deep there now.

Visceral.

The kinetic purity of violence,
cold as a blade of sharded ice,
has gashed an open wound
hilt-deep across the land
and sunk it far in blood.

Crying is not enough

The Willows

Tony Hufton

Willows line the lane by the marshes,
ancient stumps as tall as a man
above the unfeathered reeds.

I walk here every spring when,
withies cut, they are like knuckled fists
clenched around some thing to fling.

And what they fling up in a season
is a crown of straight green rods,
each a good six feet in height –
for baskets, hurdles, country crafts.
But this year the trees aren't neatly pruned,
they've been thrashed by some machine –

two or three foot left on each stump
and mutilated mindlessly.
What they took off no one could weave
and this year's growth will not be true.
Did he die, then, whoever coppiced here,
or is it no more worth the harvesting?

At the river the ferryman waited –
“from the corner of my eye I saw you
coming just when I was casting off” –
and as I took a photograph agreed:
it would have been a finer morning
without this blowing from the east.

Prayers For the Safety of Ukraine (to the poets of Ukraine)

Bruce Ross-Smith

In Mariupol the seagulls are silent now
as swan and nightingale flail
the wings of competing symbols,
then die together on a mangled street.

In Chernivtsi the Cathedral
of the Holy Spirit redeems
its past but could lose its souls,
sursum corda not possible here.

Infinite breaths ago the poet Auden,
driving an ambulance in another war,
whispered “the trial of heretics among
the columns of stone”, then prayed
in a dark corner for the grace of redemption –
but failed to stop the blistered hand of hate.

The poet Dr Khersonsky knows the underbelly of loss,
yet at a touch could believe that “God is God alone”,
speaking in tongues down the alleys of death, “Kyrie”
won’t dispel Auden’s “private nocturnal terror”
even after he rejected every word of what would never be.

God forgive, perhaps, where terror sits on the knee
of an angel spinning false faith. This must be wrong
for the corrupted as for the chaste, this iconostasis
can’t protect the dead when the equinox downs the swan
with the nightingale, Ukraine’s icons silenced on a strangled street.

Spring Equinox 2022

The Amortals

(an extract)

Jane Griffiths

Today Flora and Miles are learning about war –
how it happens in other places
 over the water,

how people put out to sea in little boats
under a flag-like blue and gold sky
 of stars.

Flora says she sees them sailing for the idea
of a green continent unrolling, unbombsites rising
 from uncratered plains

where they'll walk long roads lined by unexplosions
(lamp-posts, trees) and she sees them sinking in
 a watery horizon

that towers infinitely too close to hand.
She says if she sits very still under the table
 and saves her money

she'll come to understand. Miles, practical,
will make a raft: he gathers water bottles,
 murmurs words

like buoyancy and inflatable under his breath,
exhales slow. Flora considers the solid ring
 of hills round the town.

Miles says if it happens we'll take the raft over
to Exwick, live on apples and fish & chips
 and be on Sky

like the Titanic, he says, hands full of improvised
flotation devices, or like all the stars going out
 that we did last week at school.

Escape

Justin Gosling

That was bad but this is the worst –
The sun and the sand,
The cracked throat, the thirst.
That was bad, but this is the worst –
Skin taut and tanned,
No hope for help at hand –
That was bad, but this is the worst –
Just the sun and the sand.

We Play Turtles² (the children of Ukraine, Spring 2022)

Cathal MacThréinfhir

Teachers teach a game
when loud bangs crash around us.
Closed ears, open mouths,
We hide and gulp like turtles.
We giggle, we like turtles!

² Ukrainian teachers were trying to deal with the fear and trauma that children were having due to the loud noises of shelling and the effects on them. The game was designed to take their minds off the sounds, and in playing “turtles”, mimicking the way turtles breathe. The children put their hands over their ears and opened their mouths by gulping to equalize the sonic pressure due to the percussive effect of the shells.

The Fall of Taiz³

Bruce Ross-Smith

Many evenings the cool inside
carried laughter down to Mocha,
to the White Minaret at peace
with itself, at least it was then when
the faithful headed home after prayer

“If Taiz falls, so does Yemen”,
the saying goes, though
how much further to fall
is no concern down the echoes
of sniper’s alley.

Long ago
Ibn Khaldun’s ancestors
thought long and hard
about the dignities of life,
what could be measured
as good where the mountains
brokered the stretching coast.

Now all is broken, children starving
through the contortions of hate.
Where now the dreams of yesteryear?
Why now so much loss? Why now blood
on the steps of the Mosque, voices
crushed in lost prayer? Where no-one
can win no-one will recall the end
of this cruellest war.

³ The cultural capital of Yemen, under siege since 2015.

Suspended in a moment's silence, Time
gathers herself, tells me a story that began
such a long time ago she can barely remember –
something about love being prayer-flags...

My peace is shattered by the siren of an ambulance
in my street, syncopating with air raid warnings
on TV. I watch more atrocities unfolding in Ukraine.

Knowing the jungle lurks everywhere,
does our thinking for us, I pray
for comfortable earth and sumptuous heaven.

I have seen the splendours of Lviv and Kyiv –
the faith of worshippers in the Monastery of the Caves.

A mad man, drunk with delusions of grandeur,
spreads death and destruction like a virus –
feeds the lives of fellow humans
like logs into a train's furnace.

A woman gives birth in an underground bunker,
another dies with her child when a hospital is bombed.

Truth may have many faces, but when it stares
me in the face, there is no escape. I cannot say –
'There by the grace of God' - and cross the street –

pretend Bosnia, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan never happened,
nor Bucha, Borodyanka, Chernihiv, Kherkiv, Mariupol...
The ghosts of Srebrenica, Grozny, Aleppo reappear
reminding me of man's inhumanity to all creatures.

How does one rise from the depths of despair,
exhausted as the stars, and find the resources
to resist like the evening sky outside my window
glowing in the colours of Ukraine?

I think of sunflower seeds the old lady gifted
a young soldier defending her street.

Knowing how it feels when left with no choice,
I accept vulnerability like a sunflower seed –
believe in Life when inside a black hole.

explosion!
can't find the button
on the alarm

*the tentacles
encircling her breadbasket*

painting
the town red -
the regrets

*so many vampires
in that neck
of the woods*

kept alive
by Sputnik V

*after the shots
the dwindling antibodies
to war*

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Aleppo, My Aleppo!

Shanta Acharya

What have the barbarians done to you,
my beloved city?

Once the beating heart
of the world with its flourishing trade routes,
the envy of nations, you now lie in ruins.

My soul seeks peace, instead I hear screams,
ghosts in a giant graveyard.

I've been ruled by Hittites, Assyrians, Mongols,
Mamelukes, Ottomans, Arabs and Greeks –

my city walls sheltered Kurds, Christians, Yazidis,
Turkomans, Armenians, Circassians - outsiders all.

Emperors had come and gone,
the splendour of my land had grown.

At the height of my glory the great mosque
was born, followed by the grand citadel -
later the palaces, souqs, madrasas, caravanserais

I survived bullet holes lodged in the flank
of my imposing Roman-walls –
the beauty of my rich Byzantine churches,
mosques and crusader fortresses.

Never imagined my magnificent monuments
would be reduced to rubble, my proud people
forced to flee, seek refuge in strange lands.

Those who stayed live in fear,
in streets that stink like slaughterhouses.

Parched without water the weakest go first,
orphaned children die, playing with cluster bombs.

No one knows how many perished in this war,
how many fled leaving their possessions –
every family is broken, severed.

Can this be the will of Allah?
Lamented the ghost of the ancient city of Aleppo.

What is left to squabble over –
not riches, nor honour?

It's not power
that brings freedom, only love for all creation.

Every son and daughter of Aleppo knows this truth.

Did they all die in vain defending the faith,
their souls lost in this godforsaken city?

Where have my thriving enterprises gone,
my craftsmen, goldsmiths, map-makers, glass blowers?

My libraries, museums, coffee houses and souqs –
the home of explorers, inventors, the brave and curious.

There is no debate, dance, music or muwashshah⁴ anymore –
all I hear is the deafening blast of missiles and bombs.

Where are my scented gardens and fountains,
when will I hear bird-song and laughter of children,
lose myself in a whiff of jasmine?

⁴ Muwashshah refers to both an Arabic poetic form and a secular musical genre.

.tidy.

Sonja Benskin Mesher



i use you.
blind you, hash tag
nagasaki.

you had a clean shirt
ready for after the bomb fell.

was pushed.

You say you know what's right, what's wrong,
and yet you've strung us all along
while oligarchs have played your song.

But Ivan's near.

It seems you all with one accord
have made excuse: you can't afford
to summon strength to meet the horde.

But Ivan's near.

For years you've watched this threat unfold
and now you've left us in the cold;
so just what truths do you uphold?

But Ivan's near.

Belatedly you're wide awake;
in winter's grip you whine and shake
while crisis doth a profit make.

But Ivan's near.

You've pushed regardless to the East
yet hoped to satisfy the Beast:
a foolish plan, to say the least.

But Ivan's near.

You've smugly satisfied the West
and closed your eyes, hoped for the best,
while money furnishes your nest.

But Ivan's near.

You've promised us with every word
to hold our hand, but hope's deferred.
Your sabre rattles are absurd.

But Ivan's near.

You've said you'll help our refugees –
“just fill this form out: quickly please!”
We plead for bread upon our knees.
But Ivan's near.

You sport our badge of gold and blue
to show that you are strong and true.
You wring your hands: what else to do?
But Ivan's near.

The bombs explode. No sanctions bite.
You cannot bring your troops to fight.
We're closing down. Farewell. Good night.
For Ivan's here.

Revenant

Steve Dixon

The devil departed for a season (Luke 4. 13)

Woken by crackling and the tang of November in spring,
I open my curtains, gawp without comprehension:
beyond my fence, the house at the end of the row –
flames erupting from an ancient gash in the roof,
inferno, full throttle, like an opened furnace door,
intense, scarlet as an angry unhealing wound.
Surely that house was burned out years ago.
Why did no one fix it, sort the slates?
Did no one check the embers were really dead?
How could the smouldering bide so long a season?
Where's the fire brigade? Should someone call?
My neighbour's in her garden, mouth agape.
Glowing flakes are settling on my shed.
Tendrils of smoke begin to coil in the cock-light.

War, like pain,
brings time to its knees;
time crawls from hurt to hurt.
On the second floor ward,
is a fragile life,
born far too soon
to a shell-shocked mother,
six-hundred grams,
too slight to move
to approximate safety,
underground,
where most already shelter.
Not this nurse; she stays above,
protecting this tiny child,
this sliver of life,
now doubly endangered.

Now, you cowards,
seize the moment!
What better target
for your cowardice
than this courage?

Black Sea Reverie

Justina Hart

I want to shuck off all my lives
like clothes
skinny-dive into rock pool
as water-baby or limpet⁵
my whole being
doused by tides of saltwater
twice each lunar day
taken in my dreams out to sea
as if carried on a tiny sedan chair
made of carpet shells
high above the waves
then, refreshed by travel
returned to this limestone bed
where my foot's latched so dearly
that I've grooved the rock
with my oval shape
and no matter the weather
no violent storm, crab or crow can ever
winkle me from my home
whisk me away
again

⁵ Limpets hold on so hard over time to one spot of rock that they make an impression called a home scar.

A Ukrainian Guest

Natasha Walker

Sonja is nine and comes with a duffle bag
no one needs to carry for her.

“No, no, very light.”

Sonja’s eyes are sprites above unchildlike
black circles. They flick from me
to the rest of us all. Collected
and nervous in our home.

She calculates and weighs up
who we are and where she is.

She hits the floor in the night.

She laughs in the morning.

“I like dogs,” she says.

When she leaves, she leaves
a teddy-bear-keyring, pushing it on us.

“A gift,” says Google.

Her duffle bag is lighter now.

The refuge

Papia Ray

The window rattled, split, shattered. Fell apart.
Where once the oil painting hung was now a gaping hole.
It was time. She must leave.
Leave her home of forty years and seek refuge.
But where? Where should she go with a creaking knee and
rheumatic heart?
But first, she must collect her things. Yes, her keys.
That brass lock would hold firm. So what if the window's gone?
The door to the rooftop will stand strong.
She would be back in a month.
After all, how long can one fight and kill?
Wouldn't they tire? Be sick of the blood and blasted bodies?
The photographs. Not whole albums.
That would never do.
Of childhood, sisterhood, motherhood and more---
those lovely moments fading with gunshots in the air.
Another window rattled. Something to eat too.
She must call a taxi.
Would one come to take her to the park where wild roses grew?
And where she could collect her thoughts in peace?
Peace. Would she find it?
Taxi, she called, her voice hardly a whisper
as she saw a sky full of eagles, circling, circling
in frenzied fury.

from Journal 22nd – 29th June 2022 Sonja Benskin Mesher

a world of extremes
or maybe the contradictions
were dreamed

*

broke
shattered
broken reflections
of a former life
smashed

*

“and who allowed you to live a beautiful life?”

.#ukraine

*

asked if he referred to the war
which we consider affects us all
he nodded then sat down in his garden chair

*

struck dumb
i shook to think of you all
looking up as one plane flew over

*

some comes shocking and hard
to bear
james.
fighting the predictions

*

he says people will carry on
the fight;

while
those on the streets suffered
even more this week

*

we wonder how it will map
out

we have wondered before
when waking to a misted world

The Final Curtain

Tom Sprent

There is dust in my beams and rafters, unmoved in decades,
stirred not by climactic orchestral crescendos or bombastic tenors,
apathetic to the bombardment of rapturous applause night after night,
to the deep sonic booms of the double bass.

Now, though, this untouched dust falls gently from my bones,
mixed with plaster and flakes of paint, tumbling like apocalyptic snow.
And while the winter weather outside nips at the passers-by,
huddled up in their thick hats and padded coats,
this seems to be even colder on the skin
as it flutters gently down to the unusual audience within me
and I watch as they recoil or tremble,
covering their children to protect them from its icy touch.

A most unusual audience indeed.

My ribs ache now,
not from the packed house or its reverberating laughter,
nor from the pounding of percussion or a melancholic violin solo,
but from the mournful wail of the sirens,
the shock and awe,
the howl of the rockets
and the blasts of the shelling splintering my bricks and mortar.
Through my shattered windows I hear the snaps and pops from the
street outside,
the grinding of metal, the humming from the sky.
The old man in the worn velvet seat at the back of the stalls covers his
face with his hands,
all veins and knuckles.
The gods seem so inaccessible now.

A most unusual orchestra indeed.

The curtain at the front of the auditorium,
once exuberant and thick but now faded and heavy with dust and fear.
The final curtain.

It has fallen now, hitting harder than iron against the well-trodden stage,
its frills and ropes and drapes spilling out like entrails.

I wonder momentarily in these final seconds whether my structure will
be re-built,

Brick-by-brick

whether the lives of the children huddled in my front row are so easy to
reconstruct.

A most unusual act indeed.

Where there were war graves once,
the dust of shattered buildings coats the ground,
and rubble covers wreaths laid weeks or days ago.

In that poor earth whole families lie –
or worse, whole families but for
one surviving child, whose hospital
or makeshift refuge in a U.N. school
at any moment could be caught,
a fly webbed in the crosshairs
of a tank commander's sights.

Upon the hills the audience eats snacks, drinks beer,
and cheers each firework flash and bang,
applauds each baby torn to bloody shreds,
each roman candle, catering wheel.

الخبرُ والسيرك: غزة 2014
قصيدة للشاعر: بيتر. ج. كنج

ترجمة: ع. الصانع

مرةً حيثُ كانت هناك قبورُ الحرب، غبارُ المباني المخطمة يغطي الأرض، والأنقاضُ تغطي أكاليلَ
الزهور الملقاة، قبل أسابيع أو أيام مضت.

في تلك الأرض الفقيرة عائلاتٌ بأكملها تقبع - أو ما هو أسوأ، عوائلٌ بأكملها لكن بقي
طفلٌ واحدٌ على قيد الحياة، حيثُ التجأ إلى المستشفى ، أو فريقه المؤقت في إحدى مدارس الأمم
المتحدة.

في أية لحظة من الممكن أن يقبضَ عليها، حشرة طائرة نسجت شبكةً على مرمى من أنظار قائدِ
الدبابة.

على التلال؛ الجمهورُ يأكلُ وجباتٍ خفيفةً، يشربُ البيرة، يتتهججُ بكلِّ وميض وفرقة لعبة نارية،
يهتفُ لكلِّ طفلٍ مسرِّدٍ لأشلاء دموية،
لكلِّ رومن كاندل، وكاثارين ويل.

The holy clouds of tear gas
sprayed over believers
revered rubber bullets
holiest most deadly month
the injured of Ramadan
the stun grenades of the mosque
celebration Night of Eid-al-Fitr
fast breaking breaking
celebration of the West Wall
a memorial of destruction
the plaza over Mughrabi
the stage for prayer and military might
medics blocked from emergency
hospitalisations on prayer mats
attacks on the makeshift clinic
smoke shrouding the wounded
the stink of gas and screams
of men gassed in their devotions
the explosions of faith
a place of peace desecrated by violence
a place of violence pierced by prayer
beaten and shot in the holiest
death in Masjid Al-Aqsa
fire raging on Temple Mount
anthem of vengeance
'be their name effaced!'
holy tree ablaze
man and woman and child
a bomb between them
the breath of life between them
language between them
love between them

Dear Maria Prymachenko

Jean Morris

You should know, Maria,
that the whole world has seen your paintings now –
the flat, strong hues and repeating gestures
of your mythological birds and beasts.

While no one is sure if it was pure chance
or out of calculated spite
that the first incoming missile set alight
that small museum of your prized outsider art,

the global media, hungry for a hook,
seized the story, complete
with illustrations in glorious colour.

You should know about the lovely banners
and the murals appearing overnight –
your work such a telling contrast
to the ash-grey disintegration of war.

Now your paintings are admired everywhere.
In these dark days, we love
to imagine your two-headed dragons
breathing bright fire and devouring the enemy.

Armistice Centenary

Lucy Newlyn

In each lapel a poppy
and the fallen soldiers rise
to haunt our sleep and punish sleep
with the chill of dead men's eyes.

In each lapel a poppy,
hollow payment for the past
and every paper petal
more pricey than the last.

In each lapel a poppy!
Our bombs descend on schools,
and thousands starve, in Yemen.
They are taking us for fools.

In each lapel a poppy,
some red, some ghostly white.
No fields of paper penance
will put us in the right.

No Longer Drinking Qishir

Bruce Ross-Smith

That night during Ramadan you sat on
a pavement with your three children
waiting to break your fast when a mortar
got to you first, nothing personal, rather
collateral shelling into a void where
the angels failed to act.

Just up the street you used to drink
qishir with family and friends,
here in Taiz, the cultural
capital of so much more than
your house in ruins, while
for you and your three children
the mortar carried no thought
that night the angels stepped
down and signed off.

Little Bones

Kim Whysall-Hammond

Tiny feet slap the road running
running
little bones snap
like wood-sticks

Yesterday you watched mother
brother
sister
burn alive

Babies as yet unborn
weep for you

“There Must Be Something Wrong with Us”

(Martha Gellhorn)

Mike Spilberg

There is nothing no nothing at all
some zealot super-charged
by his presentiments and outraged bile
cannot do; no deed or act
he can't conceive, and can't then gestate it
into being. How barrenness
would be a blessing here.

Great explosions dispassionately observed
(in slow-motion on the news though
it's not essential) have
great beauty. The blast
rips and ripples through solid things
made liquid while the rush of air,
then the silence mesmerise,
enchancing,
all so beautiful you could cry, cry
your eyes out, as you watch,
watch the blinding light
on the desolate pathway
to Damascus or some other dusty death.

What can you weigh
in scales fallen from your eyes?
The evil that men do outweighs
every god and bit of good - no matter
how high-heaped. We cannot abide
our own kind. Our largeness of mind
encompasses every worst crime.
There are no excuses
to justify what shouldn't be.

As the tough reporter standing appalled
at the opened gates of Dachau
wondering how would it have been

made possible (by how much collusive
compromise was it, is it ever, all permitted?)
wrote resignedly, woe-struck, surveying
all she'd seen and knew
here, in Spain, and everywhere,
the past, the future ...

attempting summary
finding no other words she said
there is something wrong with us.

Hiding Places

Brian Hutchinson

Some have nowhere to hide,
others will be found.
Tainted faces stained with guilt,
warmed by the rubbing of hands.
Chlorine-gasped breaths,
maced, laced, mustard for the kids.
Children choking,
staying alive, playing dead.
Silently screaming,
skin wrinkled, eyes peeling.
Hope trickles from sobbed-out hearts.
Life is - was - now. Real. Surreal.
Soiled-eyes turned homeward, searching
for sunshine in mummy's rubble.

The Privee Thief

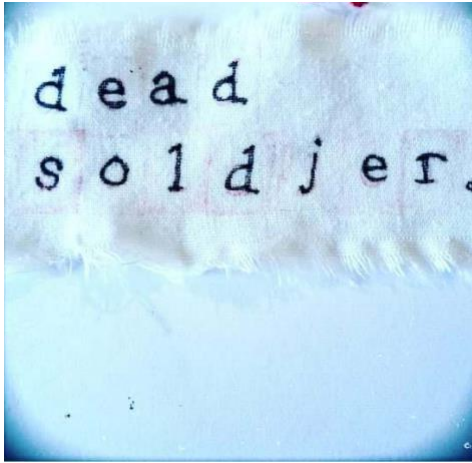
Bernard O'Donoghue

We'd always heard he was active in these parts:
Mostly some miles away, but recently
Rumoured to be closer. In one village
He was said to have attacked woman, child,
Householder and servant. So why don't they
Do something about it? Raid his furtive camp
And kick asunder all his pots and pans
Amid the greying ashes,
The utensils in which he brews his potions;
Or strike out boldly with knife and gun.
I hesitate to put a name to him
Because that way he's won. Better to let on
You don't know.
Meanwhile in our neighbouring country
They are taking the locks off of the doors
So the refugees can find some refuge there.

The sky is blue and in the fading light
the clouds take on a vestiture of gold.
You cannot see it, head bowed down in flight,
carrying a child, the sick, the old;
your only thought's of twenty yards ahead:
can you get that far? Your feet are sore,
there's little left to eat, no warmth, no bed.
"This," you tell your children, "this is war."
I do not know your name. What can I say,
except the earth revolves? Each passing hour
brings you one step nearer to a day
when hope is firmly rooted like a flower.
The sky is blue and from this burning hell
the clouds have rolled away. All will be well.

The Bandage Is Pointless

Sonja Benskin Mesher



the bandage is pointless, will not help him nor no one else who is dead.

shall i make some more, label them and roll tight ready. we
use the rubber stamp on paper, trace through onto rags. it is
a fine pen.

still connected our thread is black.

knotted
quite dead.

you came late, scattering all you saw.

left quickly.

mistakes occur.

The Orphan: Two Poems

Justin Gosling

A child,
a village,
and two severed heads.
They'd burned the village,
topped the parents,
and left the child the dead.
Couples came - earnest and romantic - intent on some good action.
With her facial scars,
the missing arm and eye –
she lacked attraction

* * *

A child,
a village,
and two severed heads.
They'd burned the village,
topped the parents,
and left the child the dead.
Couples came - earnest and romantic, intent on some good action.
With her facial scars,
the missing arm and eye –
she lacked attraction.
Then two came,
looked her over,
and put her on their list.
Were they mad?
Or heroic?
Or had they seen some charm the others missed?
Or did they think that,
with those repulsive features,
given just any kindness,
she'd feel bound to feel grateful?

Waiting at Longjumeau

Freda Edis

Fields were soft as mist in England
and here glare green in the shaken air.
The bed jitters where roses shatter

their petals, spatter concrete red:
a train's brakes shriek.

I fold the morning's news to a scene
where soldiers stroll down a village street,
blood black on the page.

Who, who? asks an owl, caught
in the upturned bowl of night.

At the valley's end a neat
triangle of sea oscillates slightly.

Small granite houses along the ridge
are groundwork, silhouetted and steady,

so steady on their co-ordinates they
are a world away from the illuminated

ellipses off-shore that ride at anchor,
the botched craft that slip between

and behind them below the horizon
the full weight of the globe spinning

in its heavenly body of water, fringed
with thorny valleys like these. Only

when a cry goes up into the sky's
anechoic margin of error it means

differently in different human tongues.
And every which way, the next port of call.

He stands alert and tense, eyes fixed on distance;
danger's out there, he can feel it in his gut.
There in the shadows,
there in the moment of the twitching of his eye,
there in the entrails of small birds, the coffee grounds
in arabesques of darkness at the bottom of his cup.
Death, pain, and evil waiting patiently to strike
if he lets down his guard.

Behind him, bodies pile; plump limbs
of babies loll from underneath their mothers'
limp embrace. Children stand in tears
as bulldozers destroy their homes;
their parents watch in blank-eyed misery
as colonists grub up and burn their olive trees.
Those wearing an invisible but damning
yellow crescent walk down demarcated streets
(Juden–Nicht-Juden), through the checkpoints
manned by sneers and random violence.
At any time they might be seized, knocked down,
blindfolded, bundled roughly into armoured
vehicles, pushed into cages in the blazing sun.

He doesn't look behind him
at his land of promised refuge.
He mustn't look behind him – if he does'
then all the honour, truth, and justice
that he's sure is shining at his back
would be at risk from what is lurking
in the world outside, just waiting for his blink.

adrift, will the sky at last explode, or will this hate
continue pointlessly, for thousand thousands years.
numbers that cannot describe each particle of pain.
each bloody bomb that kills yet again.

it may have left us tired, we are alive to witness.
yet again

Hero City

Tom Clucas

At dawn even the birds are silent,
fled or deafened by bombs.

After such destruction
it is too soon for birdsong,
far too soon for words to enter the scene,
for any pretence of explanation.

And so, like a reporter, search the rubble
for nouns, verbs, the gravity of fact,
toys strewn in the blood-soaked grass,
steel girders buckled by the flames,
images of daily life blown apart and littered
in the street, where none is intact
or equal to such suffering.

The look of contrition is fake,
something the viewer projects
on this square of grey sky, blasted trees,
scorched shells of buildings, the crowds
and the comfort flown overnight,
the lived-in feel and sense of home
lapsed back to raw material,
leaving only dead metaphors for this hero city,
a fresh, smouldering atrocity.

What was done here lies beyond comparison,
it undoes language, rhythm, sense,
forcing these last unspeakable sights
to stand for the whole:
the red rag-covered face of each dusty corpse
dumped by the roadside.

Let them be.
For now there is no poem,
only these bodies lying in the street,
then their loved ones howling by improvised gravesides
with lungs full of grief.

Words Don't Stop Wars⁶

Peter Peggall

And ye shall hear of wars
and rumours of wars
but be not alarmed.

In words lie not only lies:
there may be comfort, reason,
there may be sorrow
so real, so deep that violence
cease. An aftermath of silence.

We see what we choose in the mirror,
write our legends on blank pages,
scrawl slogans on crumbled walls
as breath fades and spirits deaden:
there are no sides in Armageddon.

There may be seeds of healing,
hands stretched across the abyss,
there may be truth in promises.
All war is crime, the last heroes
frame forgiveness in the dust.

⁶ Lyse Doucet, BBC Chief International Correspondent, March 4th 2022.

The Guidance Patrol

(to the memory of Mahsa Jina Amini)

Bruce Ross-Smith

She died they claimed
of an ancient complaint,
a childhood wound
reopened by the tender
touch
of the ‘Gasht-e-Ershad’
who bear witness
to the dead, Mahsa Jina
just 22 when she bled
from the head,
a childhood legacy, they said.

O to be protected by
The Morality Police,
clear guides to what
is right in the shallows
of the night, headscarf
worn right RIGHT across
the blaming of the light.

Now armies of women
and girls wrack the streets
and cut their hair, declaring
“Women, Life, Freedom”:
you can’t kill us all.

Remember Mahsa Jina, our dear
sister, her beauty our beauty,
everywhere.

And everywhere will prevail.
“I do not think of prayer-mats
but I do think of a hundred roads”⁷,

⁷ Mina Asadi, b. 1943

each paved with gold even as death
is a detour in the name of what?
Mahsa Jina can no longer say in life,
no longer laugh at the folly of fate,
no longer smile across an empty room,
no longer stream today for tomorrow,
so deep this sorrow in her voice's last rite.

time is layered here.

Sonja Benskin Mesher



time is layered here.
rain came, history remembered.
the dead soldjer passed.
we work in layers.

Spotty geeks in UK attics take on Putin,
In comfy gaming chairs with little mice they sit,
And put to use their knowledge of computin,
To slash through Kremlins propaganda shit.

Spotty geeks in US attics silence Putin.
For twelve minutes they cut through the Kremlin take,
With the images the West tv's been shootin,
Replacing Russian state tv accounts, so fake.

Spotty geeks in Europe's attics aim at Putin,
With a Twitter and a click they fire alone,
These Hactivists they love to put the bootin,
These cyber Robin Hoods we must condone.

Free

Keith Evetts

it's been

quite a while
since the war was over

and now
we are free
to fight about everything

Lives No Longer Met⁸

Bruce Ross-Smith

‘Listen to the reed and the tale it tells,
How it sings of separation.’
(Rumi)

The tale told whispers of shame
where the wind bites tight
against the faces of becoming,
fresh in spindles twisting
and winding finest threads
through lives no longer met:
Mahsa Jina Amini, Nika Shakrami,
two names lost yet many more
the cloth of redemption declares
war on the innocent while the guilty
muffle their voices in false regret.

“Who understands the pain,
speaks up for many
against the tyranny
of the few”, sounds trite
against the horror of knowing
what’s right, never knowing
the wrong sides of might.

Who speaks up for what
here or there, no purity
of intention in memoriam
for the many not yet dead?

This is not abstract, not least
behind a screen of remorse,
trying to understand force
as the denial of good, young
lives lost over the wearing

⁸ 26/10/2022 : 40 days since the death of Mahsa Jini Amini.

of what and why and how
is neither beginning nor end,
just or not as the falcon flies,
lovers curse a poisoned eye.

.bad night dreaming.

Sonja Benskin Mesher



dreamed of devastation, flew miles low
over concrete . skeletons, bones of the thing.

all is dust, as dust we have become. slow.
grey. nothing moves here no more. no sighs.

they have forgotten us. we have forgotten them.
are we now the bones of what we were?

mother sits on the banks
of the brackish river,
the little boy eyes the tanks,
they have rolled like thunder
all night long,
father quietly gives thanks,
that they're still quite alive
as he reassembles the mortar
and the little girl starts to cry;
they all shake with the cold
down in their bones,
they dare utter nothing but sighs,
the red soldier dying in the dirt
could still shoot them before
his demise,
the blood has soaked through his shirt
so they can't take that when he dies
but other than that
they'll strip him clean
and wrap themselves in his rags
to stave off the cold
and swathe themselves up
in the burlap bags
that have run out of sand
and survive by their meager means;
they can't go home,
it's blown all to hell
so they wait in this squalid ravine
to shoot the thing
at the rolling caissons,
they're forty miles long it seems,
one shot won't mean one damn thing
and they'll die as they sing
to ward off the sting
as they wait and they wonder why;
no one can defeat a dying heart
as black smoke closes the sky.

Contributors

Shanta Acharya was among the first women admitted to Worcester College. Awarded a Doctorate of Philosophy for her work on Ralph Waldo Emerson, she was a visiting scholar at Harvard University. The author of twelve books, her poems, articles and reviews have featured in publications nationally and internationally and her poems have been translated into several languages. Her latest poetry collections are *What Survives Is The Singing* (2020) and *Imagine: New and Selected Poems* (HarperCollins, 2017).

Darrell Barnes read Modern Languages (so long ago they are probably ancient) at St Edmund Hall and joined Barclays Bank DCO after leaving university. He worked in East Africa, Belgium, Netherlands, Switzerland and other places beyond Ultima Thule before concluding that the rewards of work were vastly inferior to the those of working in the voluntary sector in various capacities. He lives in Putney where he once rowed - alas, no longer.

Sonja Benskin Mesher is a full time, independent, multi disciplinary artist. “I like to draw, paint, make and write. I like the immediacy and physical connection with the media. Memories that form themselves on paper, the marks and patterns.”

David Braund, now a retired computer software consultant active in literary and musical pursuits, graduated from St Edmund Hall in geography in 1962.

Tom Clucas completed his DPhil in English literature at Oxford. He subsequently worked as a Deputy Professor of English and American Literature and Culture in Giessen, Germany, before returning to London to work as an investment funds solicitor. His first pamphlet *The Everyday Unspeakable* was published by Maytree Press in 2022.

Steve Dixon is an Anglican priest, a Quaker and a former arts administrator, teacher, and retired education adviser for the Church of England. His poems have appeared in a number of magazines and his short stories have been published, broadcast on BBC Radio 4, and adapted for film. His dramatic work has been toured and anthologised.

He has published five novels for older children, two of which were shortlisted for the UK Christian Book Awards. He is married with two adult sons and a granddaughter and lives in his native West Yorkshire.

Freda Edis has been writing poems since her teenage years. Not much of a one for publishing her poetry, she is quite happy with her various online presences among other poets. After pursuing a career in education and teaching political theory, she retrained as a counsellor/psychotherapist and has reached retirement age, but still works part time in Glasgow where she lives with her husband.

Keith Evetts, a former biologist and retired British diplomat, has published papers in *Nature* and other scientific journals, and long-form poetry in *The Oxford Magazine* and elsewhere. Some 350 of his haiku and related short forms have appeared in many leading journals, and cherita and gembun in *The Cherita* book series and the *Gembun* anthologies. Listed in the top 100 European haikuists, he hosts the weekly haiku commentary feature at *The Haiku Foundation*.

Justin Gosling was Principal Emeritus of St Edmund Hall, having been a Lecturer in Philosophy at Wadham and Pembroke colleges and then Tutor in Philosophy at St Edmund Hall. He had published numerous works on philosophy as well as a poetry collection, *The Jackdaw in the Jacaranda*. His main relaxation included gardening, drawing and writing poetry.

Donald Gray is an author, artist, attorney and college teacher, educated at Yale University and the University of California, Berkeley; he is currently working on the monograph *Toward a Psychology of Hope: Humanistic Psychology after Postmodernism*. He lives in Southern California with his wife and daughter.

Jane Griffiths has published six collections of poetry with Bloodaxe Books, of which the most recent is *Little Silver* (2022) and in which *Anchorage* and the extract from *The Amortals* appear. She is Associate Professor of English at the University of Oxford, and a Fellow of Wadham College.

Justina Hart is an award-winning poet and fiction writer. She won first prize in the 2022 Wolves Lit Fest poetry competition and first in the long

poem category of the 2020 Second Light competition. In 2018 she was awarded a British Council/Arts Council England Artists' International Development Fund Award to take her commissioned sequence *Doggerland Rising* to Australia, where she read alongside the New Zealand poet laureate. She's currently completing an Arts Council-funded book of water-themed poetry and memoir that in part stems from her time living aboard a former working narrowboat built in the 1840s.

Tony Hufton is a freelance writer. He lives in Norwich, where he gardens in ancient churchyards.

Brian Hutchinson has written short stage plays, *Green to lilac verging on purple*, a farce and *Red rum and punches*, an historical jaunt throughout Merseyside. He is mapping out another play called *...Who's Abigail...?*. He has had poems published in the Southport fringe magazine and in *Networds* (formerly *Worktown Words*). He writes by channelling all his emotions into creativity. It is his hobby, his sanctuary; he loves it and will always write.

Peter J King was born and brought up in Boston, Lincolnshire. He was active on the London poetry scene in the 1970s, returning to poetry in 2013 after a long absence. His work (including translations from modern Greek (with Andrea Christofidou) and German poetry, short prose, and paintings) has since been widely published in magazines and anthologies. His available collections are *Adding Colours to the Chameleon* (Wisdom's Bottom Press), *All What Larkin* (Albion Beatnik Press), and *Ghost Webs* (just out from The Calliope Script).

Cathal MacThréinfhir lives on the Mid West coast of Ireland near the city of Limerick. He has a love for the written word and has had some of his work published. He plans to self publish a book of his poetry early in 2023.

Jean Morris lives in Dulwich, edits, translates and came late to reading and writing poetry. A recent 14-liner is published in the 2022 issue of *14 magazine*. Films based on her poems *Metamorphosis* and *Cries and Whispers* can be viewed through the Mixed Media section of the online journal *Atticus Review*.

Gill Newlyn is not a poet. She trained as a BHSII, taught dressage from a Leeds bedsit, ran a pony trekking centre in Wales and worked for the Canadian Olympic Equestrian coach in Stanton, Broadway. After learning the Irish fiddle, she moved to Ireland to set up fiddle courses for adult beginners and is now an equestrian sculptor and a jobbing musician.

Kate Newlyn has spent most of her professional life as a sculptor, dipping into various other professions in order to support and fund the habit. Self-taught, but for an apprenticeship at a bronze foundry, she moved to the island of Rhodes and later Turkey, where she produced a body of work which, on her return to the UK, she exhibited in galleries across the country. Her final commission (after a recent diagnosis of MS) was a bronze portrait of the Duke of York, after which she happily laid down her tools and picked up a considerably lighter pen.

Lucy Newlyn Co-founder of the Hall Writers' Forum, Lucy is an Emeritus Fellow of St Edmund Hall, where she taught English for thirty-five years. She has published widely on English Romanticism and is the author of six poetry collections. She now lives in Cornwall.

Bernard O'Donoghue was born in Cullen, Co Cork in 1945, and he still lives there for part of the year. Since 1965, he has lived in Oxford where he taught Medieval English and Irish Poetry at Wadham College. He has published seven volumes of poetry of which the most recent was *The Seasons of Cullen Church* (Faber 2016).

Peter Peggall has always had dreadful handwriting and smudges the page at every opportunity. The fact that he was enchanted by the sounds and defiance of Chesterton's *Donkey* despite his italic mess testifies to his passion for poetry. Eight collections, two edited anthologies and one book of translations later and he is still at it. He also writes obituaries for *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*, and reviews for several outlets. He has taught at universities and prisons and directs *A Casa dos Poetas* in Silves, Portugal and *Bright Scarf* at The Belfry Arts Centre in Overstrand.

Papia Ray was born in Kolkata, India, where she presently lives. Educated in different parts of the country, she has always been interested in writing, be it poetry or prose. The Hall Writers' Forum and a poetry group on a social platform have been instrumental in honing her skills.

Reading and writing are still close to her heart and at present she is working on her novel for future publication.

Bruce Ross-Smith was born in the Cowichan Valley, Vancouver Island, in February 1949. He enjoyed a Pacific upbringing and education until a move to England when he was twelve and a boarding school education in D H Lawrence country. The bulk of his higher education was achieved at Deia Archaeological Museum and Research Centre. He worked as a teacher and lecturer on both sides of the Atlantic and is married with four children. His essay *My Soul There Is a Country: E.P. In the Mirror of Poetry* will be published in February 2023. He has been writing poetry since the age of twelve.

Ann Smith is retired after years in the electronics industry and lives in Wales. Her poems have featured in leading journals of haiku and senryu, the Cherita and Gembun anthologies, and the *South Wales Evening Post*. So far she has earned two bottles of rum and some toilet brushes for her longer poetic efforts.

Mike Spilberg Born in Walthamstow in 1949, Mike spent his formative years in Ibadan, Nigeria interspersed with lengthy holidays in Naples, before going to school in Brentwood. He emerged from three happy years of English at St Edmund Hall, a married man with a degree no better than you would expect, and took to teaching (Surrey and Hampstead) to tide him over until retirement, since when he has returned to writing after years of day-dreaming about it. He has four adult children and something like nine grandchildren. After living in SW Surrey for many years he lives currently in East Hampshire.

Tom Sprent has been working within St Edmund Hall's Development Office since 2016 in a variety of roles and has, since the pandemic, been tentatively exploring a new-found pleasure in writing, with the longer-term goal of progressing a Young Adult novel. He is married to Julieta, a Mexican national who is brave enough to endure the British climate, and has two children who are lucky enough to grow up enjoying literature in both English and Spanish.

Natasha Walker is a process consultant for change, strategy implementation and team development. Her clients range from corporate and start-ups to research organisations, governments, civil

society and philanthropy. She studied English and German literature in Oxford and Göttingen, before settling in Heidelberg, where she lives with her family and dog, enjoying the beech forests and a view of the Neckar river.

James Walton is published in many anthologies, journals, and newspapers. He has been shortlisted for the ACU National Poetry Prize, the MPU International Poetry Prize, The James Tate Prize, and the Ada Cambridge Prize. Four collections of his poetry have been published. He was nominated for 'The Best of the Net' 2019, and was a Pushcart Prize 2021 nominee. He is a winner of the Raw Art Review Chapbook Prize. His fifth poetry collection, *Snail Mail Cursive*, will be published by Ginninderra Press shortly.

Kim Whysall-Hammond is a Londoner who now lives in deepest Berkshire. She has worked in Climate Research and in Telecommunications. Her poetry has appeared in *Ink*, *Sweat and Tears*, *Alchemy Spoon*, *Amsterdam Quarterly*, *London Grip* and *Crannóg*. She also has poems in anthologies from *Wild Pressed Books*, *Experiments in Fiction* and *Palenwell Press*.