

issue twenty-four

1.00

ISSN 1746-4390



# open wide magazine

fiction poetry reviews interviews

## contents

- 3 Editorial
- 4 The Confessions of a General Emperor *David Halliday*
- 7 The Last Night of John Tavish *Curtis McGlinchey*
- 11 Book Reviews *J.S. Watts, Michael Egan, Michèle Barzey*
  - Kicks to Hypnotise Suburban Daughters *Charlotte De'Ath*
  - Every Crow in the Blue Sky *Burgess Needle*
  - In Riskdom Where I Lived and Sixology *Ali Abdolrezaei*
  - Gesangvoll/Songful *Hugh Fox*
  - Revolt at the Internet Café *Jack Phillips Lowe*
  - Clinical, Brutal... An Anthology of Writing With Guts *Various Authors*
  - The Eloquence of Desire *Amanda Sington-Williams*
- 21 Diary on an Artist *W.P. Swindon*
- 23 Interview *James D Quinton*
  - Chika Unigwe
- 25 Letting Go *Colin Galbraith*
- 27 Poetry *Roddy Williams, Graham Nunn, Alan Britt, David Greenslade, Noel Williams, A.D. Winans, J.S. Watts, Heidi Colthup and Steve Nash*
  - James D Quinton
- 43 Jenny *James D Quinton*
- 45 Aunty Rose *Suzanne Ushie*
- 50 Contributor Biographies

## credits

Managing Editors *James D Quinton & Elizabeth Roberts*  
Fiction Editor *Heidi Colthup*  
Poetry Editor *Steve Nash*  
Poetry Reviews Editor *J.S Watts*

## connect

We are always open to submissions of fiction, poetry and reviews. For full submission guidelines please go to: [www.openwidemagazine.co.uk](http://www.openwidemagazine.co.uk).

Our e-mail address for correspondences is:  
[connect@openwidemagazine.co.uk](mailto:connect@openwidemagazine.co.uk).

All work copyright Open Wide Magazine 2010. No part of this magazine may be reprinted except short segments for review purposes.

Open Wide Magazine 2001-2010

## editorial

Hello and welcome to issue twenty-four.

How quickly a year passes! Four issues done and dusted, lots of poetry and fiction read, new acquaintances made and a new website/blog up and running (incidentally, if you have been published in Open Wide and have some news, we'll post it online).

It will be ten years of the magazine next year and we'll be back in print. At the moment the publishing schedule is looking something like this: January – open issue, April – SF only issue, July – open issue and October – special birthday issue, editor's choices in which will be inviting our favourite writers from the past ten years back with new work and maybe catching up with a few of them also.

But back to this issue, which, one again, is packed: reviews (we've had so many books come through that it's been difficult to fit them all in), some interesting and humorous fiction, an interview with one of our favourite writers, Chika Unigwe, and poetry, including a welcome return to A.D. Winans (by the way, issue 18, our tribute issue to A.D., is up and online to view/download for free).

Until next year, Merry Christmas, stay safe and keep writing!

Now, sit back, relax and open wide...

James D Quinton  
Managing Editor

**The Confessions of a General Emperor**  
**David Halliday**

From the desk of  
Alfonse D'Manero:

*To the most esteemed entertainer and gentleman of the state,*  
Dear Mr. Alec Baldwin,

The day began miraculously- I could feel it. The sunrise was spectacular like a birth of the world all those thousands of years ago. Like the opening credits of *Neverending Story*. Did you see that film? You must forgive the candidness with which I compose this letter. As a boy, I was always taught never to begin anything with an apology. In those halcyon days, I was beaten by my tutors for saying sorry. I would say sorry for saying sorry and they would beat me harder. I have subsequently had all of these tutors killed in the traditional and honourable fashion of silk rope around the neck. You do not wish to read a letter that begins with garroting either! But there it is. An apology at the beginning. What would my old tutors say now if their tragically dead eyes could read? However, I do believe, sir, that you alone are worthy of forsaking the rules learned as children.

Mr Baldwin, you have once before been a visitor to the Democratic Republic of Imalvia. You may not remember; it was some time ago. Many, many months. Do me the honour of allowing me to explain, thus possibly jogging your memory. We are a landlocked nation of trees, mountains, caves and rivers and red castle ruins and we are also last natural home of the diamond dragonfly. In size, we are not much greater than our capital city, Pigeo-Malvia.

Here we all honourably bear the name Alfonse. Addressing letters is never so fast as it is in Imalvia! It is a great honour to bear the name of the great revolutionary Alphonse d'Malvia, may his birds fly free forever! Every person, man and woman bears that name, from greatest to least among us. He was the first and Greatest Emperor General!

You may wonder why I write to you with such candour, Mr Baldwin. Your curiosity will be satiated in time sir, in time.

From long ago, I have been fascinated with your work on film. From *The Shadow* (that mask you wore! You have a splendid nose! You were magnificent! And was that Elizabeth Shue alongside you? May the birds of time be gracious to her soul) to *The Hunt For Red October* and *The Aviator*. You are so *method*! And no wonder, having studied under Lee Strasberg!

I loved your films and decreed that on one day every year, the population of Imalvia must partake in celebrations of your work. And how the people appreciated this! See Mr Baldwin, we have none of what you in Hollywood might call "Douchebag" people. Jerks, if you will. There is an honour code in Imalvia, sir, a strict one in force at all times. We are a proud people. If someone is constantly a *Douchebag*, he is voted as such by the people in a

secret ballot. The ballot boxes are electronic, located next to every ATM in the city centre. One may be reported with a name, or uploaded phone photo- it doesn't matter. We can find anyone here, Mr Baldwin! Every single Alfonse! From the age of 12, every citizen is implanted with a chip in their brain that can be located or detonated to cause the instant and painless death at the flick of a switch from my desk! You would think this might create fear in the people, but it makes them love me! So actively! They are always mindful of me and our proud nation. But when a person has four votes as a *douchebag* he is taken to trial. We have small courts for this, Mr Baldwin. Tiny. They look like Diners, or Pharmacies. And the judges, they look like Pharmacists with a white coat and everything! Standing on that raised platform area. If found guilty, the offender is exiled to the Isle del'Tor. About that, I shall explain later.

There is no crime here, Mr Baldwin. What a wonderful place for you to raise a family if you so desired! You must feast with us sometime. The food in Imalvia is at the forefront of global cuisine! That foulmouthed wretch Gordon Ramsay said so himself. He was compelled to, after having both testicles removed for committing a most heinous and ancient offense against our people- he killed a duck. Can you imagine? The greatest and most noble of the creatures. He killed one of the earth's most holy animals without a thought. I don't know if you remember during your time here, but in Imalvia, the ducks roam free. We have the biggest and tallest ducks in the world! Up to two feet tall! They wander, greeting us on the streets with their wisdom, for there is no animal wiser than the duck. This is the remnant of our ancient religion of Imalamam, founded many thousands of years ago with the creation of the earth. All other birds are kept caged, to bring greater glory to the duck, to reflect its greatness and its green glistening hide of jade! The bird cages are on every street corner and inside all the tall buildings. Grand, magnificent cages of gold and titanium! They are formed by the world's greatest and most creative metal workers- the bars are all twisted, curving, glistening in the sun. Inside the cages there are trees and flowers. You could fit a Starbucks coffee store in each of these cages!

Starbucks, I stress as an important part of life to my people. Every Alfonse must go there at least once a week and experience the freedoms found within. Failing that, they receive automatic shock treatment. But our coffee, it is better than the world's coffee! They say it tastes like dark chocolate!

But - may I venture to guess something? I will guess that you are worried! Do not be worried about these shock treatments of ours. We are not brutes as you may think. The implants cost 16% of the GDP when Emperor Alfonse Garudo III initiated them. But they help people, all thanks to the mighty duck! And I am their proud and loving father!

Every day I wake at 5am and watch the orange rising of the sun, making all shadows long and sharp and I see every Alfonse begins his day. I open a brand new white American Apparel t-shirt from its plastic wrapping every morning. I never re-use a tshirt! They are so clean and crisp! I have a military jacket for every month of the year in different colours. This month is burgundy. And I have a servant whose sole job is to polish the brass buttons and

another for the silver of the medals. I stand there in the bathroom each morning with its red porphrey bath tub, carved from a single block of porphrey marble, and its floor to ceiling mirrors, and its gold faucets shaped like the heads of ducks! I stand in my morning robe made from green duck feathers, surgically taken from the unconscious body of a one-year-old drake. I stand there in the bathroom, in the tangerine light of flaming oil lamps and I pretend I am an author speaking at a book launch! Or a famous actor speaking in front of a high school assembly! That would be an occasion they would never forget! Did you ever speak at high school assembly, Mr Baldwin?

You visited here once, as I mentioned earlier. You thought it quite by accident, but I masterminded the entire thing! The pilots of your plane – they were countrymen of mine. Alfonses both of them! They were made to fly here and were garrotted later for doing their duty so flawlessly!

You were delayed, Mr Baldwin. I had a parade organised for you, down the cobbled main street of Pigeo-Malvia, with its gilt bird cages, free roaming ducks and diamond dragon flies. The buildings are all four storeys tall and made of green limestone, all have at least one glass dome- surely you noticed? We had a feast prepared in your honour for afterwards with all the food on skewers- every meal here is on skewers! It is the only way to eat with finesse!

For the parade, we had months to prepare. A thousand men from the home defence and a thousand women of the foreign combat legion took part! Each company of 100 was dressed as a different character from your movies. *30 Rock! Elizabethtown! The Departed!* Some Alfonses lost their lives because they did not learn the routine fast enough. Do not mourn them! Their deaths were quick ones. Oh, Mr Baldwin! On that podium in the Eternal Drake square, in front of the palace, standing before all those people, I can hardly forgive my own behaviour. I dwell on it every night with nausea, caused by only the deepest regret. When my guards escorted you up on to the podium, I hardly know what happened to me. My breath – I was practically panting! And I became so dizzy! A duck had loosed its bowels in the skies that morning and landed its gift on my Imperial coal sleeve, which was a good omen. See the spots on the clothes of the people? Good, heh? Good tidings in the excrement of the duck! The Great Ducks smile down on us! Mr Baldwin, my entire life has been built up to this point, standing in your greatness. Under my military coat, I wore a singlet you wore once in *The Departed*. I bought it on eBay, still fresh with your musk, and I wore it for luck. But I hate to remember this day! I was so tongue tied I couldn't speak! What would I say? And then it happened. I threw up on your double-breasted suit. I did not mean to! I was so nervous. Then, then, oh the look on your face. I could not help but laugh! And laugh so uncontrollably! I did nothing but laugh, oh Mr Baldwin, you should have been a comedian! Forgive me, I am unworthy of your thoughts, as is my entire humble Democratic Republic of Imalvia.

Esteemed sir, member of the Academy, I have never laughed at nor thrown up on anyone before. All the joy and tension welled up in me in a furious ball and leaped from my chest like a duck taking flight, in a projectile and violent

display of love any human ever had for another! My egg and vanilla milkshakes served me very poorly that morning, as did the cherry pie I customarily have for breakfast.

I had no desire for you to slip in it too. None. And you laughed that beautiful laugh of yours, where your eyes disappear into wrinkled slits of joy! Over one such as me! I shamefully left you on the podium, for I, laughing, could not stand the shame.

I was voted as a *douchebag* by ten thousand people that morning, all dressed as Alec Baldwin in your honour.

When they came to arrest me, I flicked the switch and instantly killed one third of the population of Imalvia, including many of my captors! But now, like the common bird, I reside far from the freedoms I once knew and rightly so. On the Island del'Tor, the prison isle of rock, far underground there is a maximum-security prison, which rotates constantly within many other rotating wheels of prisons making it impossible to find the prisoners again. It is like an enigma machine! We can send and receive mail from the metal box in the roof. So here I sit, cell-bound, unable to see the sun in my brass buttons or the jade coat of the duck. Those people I killed mercifully in an instant, that was for you Mr Baldwin, the greatest gift a human ever gave another. You shall remember me now, for I am now a monster of the history books! With the flick of a switch! There is a sparrow with whom I share my cell. I have named him Alec and we eat cockroaches together, on the days when my meal doesn't come. How he got in here, I have no idea. Do not try to free me sir. I only ask that you will think of me, in my rocky cage, imprisoned like the non-duck birds of Imalvia. I live only to give greater glory to the free, and to you. Here I shall stay and spend the rest of my days. The final days of the Great General Emperor! Hah hah! Next Monday is my seventeenth birthday. About my kingdom, do not worry. I have left a son from my harem of two hundred wives and when he is old enough, he will become the elected Emperor General. I have left him instructions to leave it all to you! May you live free as the duck, Mr Baldwin. It is all for you- it has always all been for you.

All my love,  
Alfonse  
Alfonse D'Maero,  
Emperor General of Imalvia.

### **The Last Night of John Tavish** Curtis McGlinchey

Something banged against his mind and memory; he let it in.

He was sitting in front of two detectives in a white room with two windows; it was raining hard and had been all day. He stared at the raindrops hitting the

glass. One detective was looking him up and down ready to talk and the other was thumbing through files, folders, papers and photos.

“John, when was the last time you saw her?” He couldn’t reply.

“John...where were you? She was meant to be walking home from work was she not?” They both turned to face him.

“John...where did she go?”

“Where were you John? Where were you?”

\*

The house was modern and well lived in; the good kind of lived in, the kind where if you entered as a stranger you would feel comfortable, not just because of the house itself, but what made this particular house special to its occupants. The rooms were filled with a distinct account of the human imprint: hope and reconciliation, laughter and smiles, memories and love, both old and new. A man stood over the marbled counter of the kitchen, still fashioning his shirt and trousers from work along with a white apron, preparing vegetables on a thick wooden chopping board. There was a pot on the stove steaming and various ingredients placed around the kitchen with a freshly opened bottle of wine and two filled glasses. He wasn’t bad at cooking, in fact over the years he thought himself becoming quite accomplished. It wasn’t just this though, it calmed him. He was always looking for things that calmed him, pleased him, to ease the transition from day to night, from night to day...to make the passing of time in all of its inevitability, bearable...enjoyable. He strived to be happy.

The sound system in the living room opposite was playing a contemporary piano composition, he couldn’t remember the name, but he remembered the song and smiled in approval, both at the choice of music and the fine identical strips of red and green pepper he had just finished slicing.

The sound of a key finding its familiar metallic home made a noise he was used to hearing around this time every week day. He took his apron off, placed it on the side and headed down the hall towards the front door. A woman in a long black raincoat stepped in, bringing the smell of rain and fresh evening summer air into the warm hallway; she shook her umbrella, then closed the door. She turned unbuttoning her coat and met the expectant gaze of her husband of twenty-two years, John Tavish.

“How are you Liz?” He took her coat and hung it up.

“Good thanks John...I’ve missed you.” She brought her hands to his face, brushing aside his curtained hair. He put his hands on her waist, gave her a kiss, then stared at her big green eyes, blushed cheeks and youthful skin, her slightly rouged lips and the way her hair never looked out of place. She hadn’t changed much over the years; she still looked like the same nineteen year old he fell in love with.

“I missed you too.” He gave her another kiss and starting staring again. “I guess that’s how you know its love,” he thought aloud. “When you can look at her everyday and you still feel the same”. “Come on,” he said putting his arm around her, “Hope you’re hungry.” She laughed and leant her head against his shoulder. They walked through the hall and into the kitchen, subtle

piano notes still playing softly. John handed her the glass of wine on the kitchen side next to his as she sat on one of the kitchen stalls.

They talked for an hour or more, about their days, about their weeks, about their years, finishing the bottle between them. They finished dinner, left the dishes on the table and sat on the living room couch, with replenished glasses. The sound system changed album as they sat down; delicate but deliberate acoustic sounds filled the room, accompanied by a worn- in vibrato of raspy vocals. He smiled in recognition of the familiar song, but he couldn't name it. They laid on the couch, John's arms around Liz.

"How long has it been since we've done this John?"

"Done what?"

"This...just sitting, thinking, talking...spending time together."

"I can't remember...as time goes by, I forget things, it scares me." John looked around the living room, the wall lights were turned low and he could make out various pictures around the room of the two of them together. Their marriage, taking pride of place on the thick oak mantle piece, their holidays, anniversaries and birthdays positioned around the room, on walls and on tables. Memories washed in and out of thought as he looked around the room. He loved her.

"What you thinking about John?" She questioned, not looking up at him.

"The past."

"Why do you always think about the past?"

"It's important...it defines us. I don't want to ever forget Liz...forgetting you... it scares me." The room seemed to shimmer as he closed his eyes then opened them again. He laid with her in silence, running his hand down her long brown hair. "Liz..." he whispered. "Liz..." She was asleep. He kissed her head, laid back and joined her, wherever she was.

\*

His eyes blinked open slowly, everything hurt, like no other kind of pain he had ever felt. He was on his side, cheek to the cold wood floor. The room was dark; the only light allowed access in to the room was through the crack in the centre of the curtains. The room was filled with cold desolation, a depth of abandon that could only be described as if dropped into the centre of the deepest ocean. John lay sprawled, naked on the floor, lying on top of newspaper cuttings and folders. He looked barely alive, he struggled to move, a moan was all he could produce and brief twitches were the only signs of life. His head swam with pain and visions of a life gone by, a moment that could have been or never was. Liz was gone, he didn't want to forget, he wanted to be with her. As John barely managed to cling to this consciousness, his mind wandered...and found her...but now he was alone, again.

It was definitely the living room, but it was different and almost completely empty. The corners of the room were shrouded in a deep murky blackness and other features and objects were missing or blurred out of existence. They were there, the room was there, but only outlines and shadows remained. The light from the curtains shone onto a table next to John, positioned in what

seemed like the centre of the living room. On the table, next to an empty bottle of whiskey and his laptop, was a newspaper, dated July 11<sup>th</sup> 1997.

The day Liz disappeared.

There was no way of telling what date or day it was now, the only here and now was John.

A minute passed. His head was not clearing. He could feel his body becoming more and more weak and unwilling to obey him as his brain struggled to maintain synaptic strength. Void of energy, and imprisoned in dark and cold inertia, he desperately wanted to move, to look for her, to find her, to go outside of this room that was so familiar yet so alien. He couldn't move, but he could think, whether or not this was a good thing he could not decide. Immersed in a solitude vacuum of life, he thought...the only thing he could do. Liz's face flashed into view. "A memory?" He said to himself, "Liz?" She appeared again by the front door looking into his eyes. He was thinking about the scene he had experienced not long ago in a state of consciousness he could not fully explain or understand. The scene was real, it had happened, but when and where he could not say. Vivid pictures of the scenes flashed through his head. Liz stepped through the door and shook her umbrella. He noticed no water dripped to the floor when she came in; in fact no water was flecked from the umbrella to any other surface. She looked perfect, like she was never outside at all, never exposed to the world and to the elements. It was as if he could speak to her, smell her and touch her all again, like his senses and muscles had returned unhindered from this strange atrophy. He was there but he was not. She was dressed exactly the same as the day she went missing and her hair, her face, her make-up...perfect. No one's complexion and hair is that perfect when walking through wind and rain, even with an umbrella. She took a step forwards as they embraced all over again. His eyes glanced down to the floor behind her, no wet footsteps, no nothing.

This night...this night was real, but the circumstances were not.

"Liz...where are you." He thought about the night she disappeared, it was definitely raining. He remembered because it was after a week of unusually high temperatures, which prompted a relieving summer shower for the whole day and night.

She couldn't have stayed dry.

They walked in to the kitchen and John handed her a glass of wine. They drank and talked, had dinner and talked some more until they laid together on the sofa. He could smell her hair, and feel how soft her skin was, "Even if this isn't real, leave me here." He said aloud, his thought of speech vanishing as he noticed the date displayed in the middle of Liz's watch, July 11<sup>th</sup>. John's thoughts raced through his mind, "She couldn't have stayed dry. She couldn't have walked home that night...this night, where are you Liz...where are you?"

“The laptop.” John said to himself. On the screen were accounts, numbers and graphs. “The presentation I was working on, I never took that home.”

Then Liz’s voice, “Why do you always think about the past?” It echoed through his head. He heard himself reply,

“It’s important...it defines us. I...” Liz turned and put her finger on his lips before he could finish his sentence.

“No John... it’s important because it’s all we have.”

\*

A sharp intake of breath, every capillary screaming in protest, lungs barely managing to supply his brain with oxygen. A black sky. Fresh air and water hitting his face. He struggled to breath. The feeling of the cool droplets was replaced with a burning overwhelming sense of submersion and pain.

Back in the black room again. Back in his mind. “Where’s Liz...what was that place?” He screamed in his mind, “Liz!” As quickly as he was in the black room, he was now looking down on Liz again on the sofa. His laptop flashed into stand-by showing the date and time on a calendar screen-saver, oblivious to the world. 9:57 PM. Thursday, July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

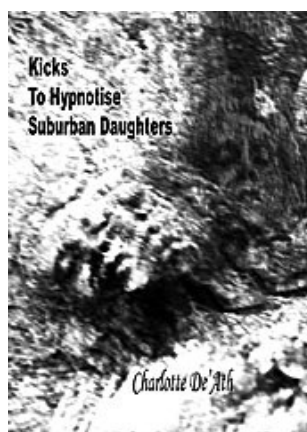
He kissed her head.

The burning was replaced with dots of sparkling light and a cool blackness, calmer than any place in all space and time. They both closed their eyes and found each other, wherever they were.

July 11<sup>th</sup>, the day John Tavish disappeared.

## book reviews

### Kicks to Hypnotise Suburban Daughters by Charlotte De’Ath



Warning - Charlotte De’Ath’s first chapbook contains poetry that is not afraid to take risks. This is a poetic high-wire act with added scumbag clowns and the risks pay-off big time.

The book consists of just two long poems, both taking their titles from lines in Milton's Paradise Lost and exploring the decline of Evie, from a suburban garden of Eden to the barren existence of a drug whore. It is a story told in fractured images and words splashed across the page, but every splash counts. The images they create are carefully and distinctively crafted, as are the disparate but conjoined elements of the story they tell, beginning with the colourful big top allure of twinkling stars,

“a sparkle clear and bright  
a multi facet twinkle of  
transmuting light  
diamond lustre”

but giving way to a nightmare kaleidoscope of voyeurs, sick-joke telling clowns,

“fake cherubs in PVC and leathers  
past tourniquet tightrope artists  
past two hermaphrodite whores who ravish each other  
on the grass”

and ending with “broken rainbows beyond repair” and the sordid death of an addict in a world bleached of colour beyond the white and blue of the corpse,

“body blue  
blue eyes locked  
ice blue

and  
frozen  
white morning  
white shroud  
white lilies  
every whore was a virgin once”

This is a poised and powerful small book that walks the tightrope of experimentation with elegance and panache.

*Kicks To Hypnotise Suburban Daughters* by Charlotte De'Ath is published by [erbacce-press](http://erbacce-press.com).

## Every Crow in the Blue Sky by Burgess Needle



*Every Crow in the Blue Sky (and other poems)* is a solid, competent collection of poems. Coming in at 125 pages and 74 poems, plus a critical review of Burgess Needle's poetry and a page for readers' notes, it is also physically solid and quite a substantial book for a poetry collection.

To be honest, I found the critical review by Adam Piette, Professor of Modern Literature at the University of Sheffield and the page for readers' notes a tad strange for what appears to be a first collection, but publishing quirks aside the book contains an interesting selection of poems focussing on matters of place and time.

Needle is very much an American poet, living and writing in Tucson, and many of the poems are deeply rooted in the poet's home locale. "Red Stain Under a Full Moon" for example, with its reference to "Southwest Tucson myths" or "Tucson Night" where:

"Twilight on the road to Oro Valley found  
rows of hunter-citizens  
shotguns at the ready, staring  
skyward and, as we passed  
Blam! Boom!"

The collection is divided into three parts: "Connections", "Trips" and "Close to Home". In the middle section the poems journey in time and place to late 60s South East Asia, primarily Thailand, but also Cambodia and Mekong. This is the period of the Vietnam War, but these poems are "peaceable, sweet and entrancing, witty and engaging stories of transformation, incarnations and oddball experience" to quote Professor Piette. There is a trippy element to them, both in terms of the young Needle making a life changing trip abroad and the iconically 60s, chemically induced variety as found in "Cat Food, Fresh Fruit, Yeast and Psilocybin" which starts out as "a scrap-of-life-list" and becomes somewhat more existential:

"i am you      my cat says  
feed me  
so I feed her eat the fruit    make bread  
good trip she asks

the greatest I say”

In the final section of the book we find place and time colliding, as in “Somehow Not Safe At All” where a U.S. trip to a Safeway store becomes uncomfortable as memories of Thailand with its

“fresh green limes piled in pyramids alongside  
passion fruit, pomelo, rambutans, guavas and papaya.”

insert themselves into home town reality where

“a faint scent of disinfectant lingered  
behind the English cucumber” and

“everything was far too clean”

In the title poem of the collection, “Every Crow in the Blue Sky”, the times and places colliding are hereditary; ancestors that died “looking over their shoulders” and the family line that escaped “Pogroms, Cossacks and Nazis”, eventually leading the poet to leave

“it all behind, living  
now in an adobe home teetering  
on the edge of the vast Sonora Desert.”

The poet may have rooted himself firmly in his own time and place, but other times and other places have surely led him there.

*Every Crow in the Blue Sky* by Burgess Needle is published by Diminuendo Press, an imprint of [Cyberwizard Productions](#).

### **In Riskdom Where I Lived and Sixology by Ali Abdolrezaei**

Anyone who frequents the poetry networks on Facebook has almost certainly come across Ali Abdolrezaei. Abdolrezaei is a proactive and prolific Persian poet, now living in London following a ban on him teaching or speaking publically in his native Iran. He has published eight works of poetry in Persian and is now republishing them and other more recent works in English and, apparently, several other European languages. Both *In Riskdom Where I Lived* and *Sixology* were originally written in Persian and have been translated into English by Abol Froushan, a British/Persian poet writing in English.

*Sixology*, as might possibly be deduced from its title, is a collection of six long poems, while *In Riskdom Where I Lived* is a chapbook length collection of eighteen shorter pieces. Of the two works I found *In Riskdom*... the more accessible. The “risks” that Abdolrezaei explores in both sets of poems are not just the more obvious ones of exile, alienation from family and friends and the personal and political consequences of speaking up, but also the risk of playing with language itself in both appearance and content. The longer

poems in Sixology allow Abdolrezaei greater freedom and space to experiment with these risks, but this can make for less than penetrable poetics. At times the almost broken language of Sixology comes across as poetry of ideas and individual words rather than complete concepts and phrases, but that may well be the poet's intention as he plays with the rough hewn language that is so often expected of foreign exiles. The shorter poems of In Riskdom... have to get their message across in fewer words and tend, therefore, to be more focussed and accessible, as well as delivering a more immediate emotional impact. Less can so often be more, unless you are a diehard fan of Abdolrezaei's style, in which case you may well prefer the longer reins of Sixology. Personally, I preferred the emotional simplicity of a poem like "Banished" from In Riskdom....:

"Pointlessly, you walk across my mind

If you were here

you would no longer be the one over there

you would be like me over here

If I returned"

to the more exploratory lines from "Terror" in Sixology:

"Like a nation bequeathed of Imam Hosein

a home town is left behind

from a little house

at the end of a road

in a remote place left behind

A nation that put to fire its country like a match

slayed the bedstead

and morphed the spouse to the sea

Long live the wind that was but late

Long live the desert that has no sea

and mother

mother

a mother who can no longer

pin her lips onto my cheeks"

Abdolrezaei is very self consciously and self referentially a poet. His poetry is peppered with references to, "the poem I am writing", the fact that "the poem is not like the poet", "the poet is the man always in the window" and "Now you may read a poem by Ali Abdolrezaie (sic)"; the last quotation coming from an In Riskdom... poem titled "Circle" which takes self reference to a new level as a poem about reading the poem that you are reading. It begins with the lines "You are reading a poem called Circle" and comes full circle by ending on,

"It's a shame You are standing at the end of a poem Called  
Circle"

It also contains the previously quoted line "Now you may read a poem by..." not once but twice and this repetition of lines and free flowing imagery is one

of Abdolrezaei's traits; images of wetness, wind, windows, mirrors and alleys occur and reoccur throughout these two collections, along with references to the poet himself. Take, for example, these opening lines from "Paris in Renault" from Sixology:

"Out of the blue, past so many deaths we were born – mad  
how would we know the mirror forgets whatever it sees  
we believed the wind gets through the chink in the walls  
how would we know the wind stays behind a closed door  
senselessly past so many deaths we are a graveyard across  
we U turn only a hop away from our destination  
we weave in and out of outdistancing one another  
How many more margins does our distance stretch?"

This damned hooah rising from which neighbourhood window  
Which damned ear does it corner in?  
And revolves around which clock hand?  
This very tomorrow which rained a remote smile on lip heads  
in which station of the wind shall I stand to say Seven?"

The build up of image resonance within an individual poem can be quite powerful, polishing a specific image to gem like brightness within an otherwise murky torrent of words and the same is true of images that occur across both publications. Repeated images and metaphors acquire greater resonance the more you read until, collectively, the works take on a brighter sparkle than individual poems may generate in their own right. The gem like moments are memorable; lights in the dark that flare up suddenly to illuminate what you are reading, but the cost of this brightness can be impenetrable darkness at other times, but maybe that is just the price of taking risks and Ali Abdolrezaei is not a poet who afraid to take them.

*In Riskdom Where I Lived* by Ali Abdolrezaei is published by [Exiled Writers Ink](#) and Sixology also by Ali Abdolrezaei is published online by [Poetrypub](#). Both books are translated by Abol Froushan.

### **Gesangvoll/Songful by Hugh Fox**

The twenty three brief and at times multi-lingual poems in this 2010 chapbook come across as poems of farewell and letting go. The titles point the way: *Always, Finally, Final, Wishing, Afraid, Fall, Leaving, Vamos/Let's, Kaddish, Never*. They celebrate what was: memories of Chicago in the title poem and Chatham in *Wishing*; memories of past American immigrants in *Always* and *Never*; memories of dead family members in *Fall*.

These are also poems focussed on listing things, as if recording what is there before it is not: in *Gesangvoll/Songful* it is the, "neolithic Chicago street-/Greek-German-Czech-Polish smells"; in *Always* it is the immigrants who have populated America, "Czech, Hungarian,/ Irish, Peruvian, Dutch,

Mexican, Bulgarian,/ Swiss, Spanish, Japanese, Greek,”; in *Finally* it is the order of the poet’s day; in *Fall* it is the family dead, “the ghosts of our genes” and in *Satori* it is the symptoms of a serious medical condition:

“Enlarged prostate, PSA test,  
cancer, Lupron shots, a heart  
attack and I find an internet file  
that says Lupron causes blood-  
coagulation.”

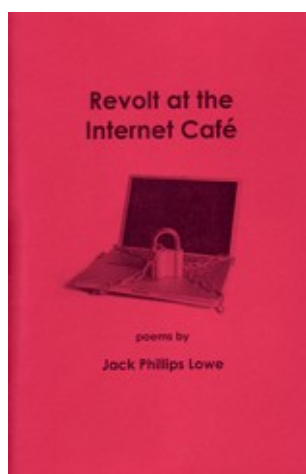
There are also the hopeful signs of renewed activity on campus in *Wake Up* following the “dead” of winter:

“ run, run, run, eternal  
legs, legs, legs, hair and all the bats and  
golf-clubs and magnolia ruminations, making  
me feel I just might have a chance for one  
more (month) year.”

If these poems have a valetudinarian feel to them, they are also positive, celebrations of now. There is a sense of immediacy to them. The past informs the present and the poems recognise what has gone before in order to root themselves in the America of today, “The United Wanderers of Everywhere” as opposed to the United States of America. The multiplicity of languages these poems are written/ part-written in celebrate the legacies of German, French, Italian, Spanish, Irish and Jewish antecedents which are still present in the immediacy of the language of today. There may be past dead, but we are still here, for the time being at least, to remember them. If these poems are letting go, they still manage to offer up a song for today at the same time.

*Gesangvoll/Songful* by Hugh Fox is published by [Pudding House Publications](#).

### Revolt at the Internet Café by Jack Phillips Lowe



The latest poetry chapbook by the American poet Jack Phillips Lowe is an interesting, if varied, selection of seventeen free verse poems. It contains treats like the title poem, where a reader creates mayhem in the aforementioned *Internet Café* because,



Clinical, Brutal is propelled by a manifesto of focusing on the recounting of the shocking using technical description and rejecting literary flourishes. It achieves the latter but fails to shock.

Christopher Nosnibor says in his introduction that he came up with the concept nearly ten years ago and the majority of pieces feel like they're shock value might have worked better then. Nosnibor states that we're living in a post CSI culture and that we're ready for Clinical, Brutal's shock and awe tactics. The problem with this collection is that it comes when the world is numb to CSI-type technical descriptions, to the clean brutality he's after. Reading the collection you come to the conclusion that a more raw brutality would have worked better. CSI, like the idea of Clinical Brutality, is over a decade old; maybe Nosnibor would have been better off looking to something like Spartacus: Blood and Sand for his pop-culture justifications. More severed heads and splashes of arterial blood please than dissection and disease.

Each writer works hard to shock, peppering their pieces with the gratuitous and the childish. The problem with these pieces setting out to shock is that they start on the wrong foot. They think they're working against the mainstream, that what they're working towards is a new school of anti-staid writing but what we get is amateurish sixth-form fantasies.

Díre McCain's Papanicolaou Test: A Grand Guignol is the main culprit. The dialogue is stuttering. The introduction is dense and the interior monologue of the main character increasingly clichéd. The conclusion the story moves towards is already ruined by the conveyor belt of vitriol that has gone before it. Pablo Vision's confessional whining of Blood on the Tracks begins the vitriol. The over-used '*when everybody you ever put faith in lets you down*' moan of the central character deflates the story as it moves to its contrived ending. Jim Lopez' Rubber-Hose Real-Estate stands out for its essayistic consideration of Camus but eventually even this decent story falls prey to Clinical, Brutal's manifesto. Has heroin in popular culture shocked since The Velvet Underground? As with most of the stories here you're left confused and disappointed.

The Assassin by Mark David Dannov is an intriguing flash fiction/poem hybrid and Constance Stadler's Cancer Puff Piece stands out for its combining of the subtle with the clinical. By going straight into the piece with "*Fucking brilliant./Something/ Inside of you/ Conspires/To kill you*" she avoids the inevitable building towards shock that hampers other pieces. The shorter pieces work best because the space in which they attempt to shock the reader is confined, it is immediate, and we have no time to become aware of any contrivances. Teleny Bibliophile Parts I and II by Radcliff Gregory are interesting, suggestive and interlace the sexual with, Nosnibor be damned, literary flourishes such as "*Each lingua Franca lingers,/groin brushing my head,/softly aware of sheathed vellum,/but not its hand-swap of secrets.*" Even this makes the mistake of deconstructing its promise by following the Clinical, Brutal ideals. At the end of the poem we get the try-hard "*jolly-tales*

for born-again buggerados”. Nice on the tongue but it leaves a nasty after taste.

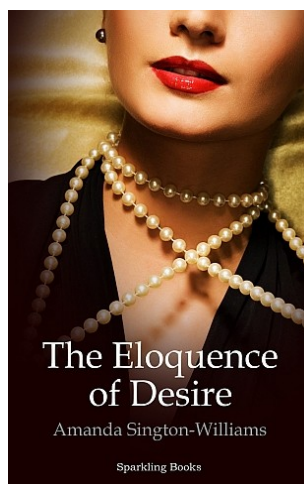
The clinical becomes repetitive, the brutality dull and the constant need to shock is tiresome. It is the need to shock that is the collection’s greatest failure because the majority of pieces just fail to pull this off. We see it coming; we saw it coming from the introduction, from the titles, even from the suspicious author names. There’s something contrived about everything. There’s something impotent about the anger and violence.

Nosnibor says it himself in the introduction. *“The trouble with shock is that it has limited currency, its effects short-lived, even if it is exercised as a means to an end and there’s a genuine point to or behind it.”* Clinical, Brutal counters this by combining precise terminology with extreme violence but at every step it feels like the collection is dragging itself back to 2000 when it could have clung to the coat-tails of CSI and enjoyed the ride. In 2010 the idea of Clinical, Brutal feels like a lung cancer patient waiting in a hospice to die (disease being a favourite motif in the collection). Listen to the doctor in Stewart Home’s Frenzy of the Flesh *“I won’t lie to you,’ the doctor said, ‘the cancer has spread from your lungs and into your bones. There’s nothing we can do. Personally, I’d give you a month to live at the most.”* He might have been talking about Clinical, Brutal.

*Clinical, Brutal...* is available now as a trade paperback via Amazon, Barnes and Noble and most other on-line bookstores, as well as direct from [Clinicality Press](#).

- Michael Egan

## The Eloquence of Desire by Amanda Sington-Williams



George Johnson has been caught having an affair with his boss’s daughter. As a result he is demoted and posted to Malaya at short notice. Post WWII Malaya was a dangerous place. The British Forces were fighting Malayan factions and Chinese Communists in what the colonials delicately called the

'Emergency'. Given the uncertainty of the situation, which he has not yet told his wife about, George decides that it would be best for their daughter to remain behind under the guardianship of his sister-in-law.

Understandably his wife Dorothy is devastated by the news. She has to deal with her husband's infidelity, the separation from Susan, and go and live in a country which she knows nothing about when she has never been abroad. Dorothy toys with the idea of divorce but cannot face the shame of being a divorcee and the recriminations from family and neighbours. She consents to go with George on the understanding that they will pretend that going to Malaya is a promotion.

On the long boat trip to the Far East, Dorothy begins to get some idea of the Emergency from snippets that other passengers let slip. By the time they get to their new home in Malaya she's a nervous wreck.

George is unrepentant, and mainly unaware of the havoc being wreaked on his family. His biggest regret is that he and Emma were found out. Despite his promises to Dorothy to start over again he doesn't give up planning and hoping for the day when he can be reunited with Emma.

I felt that with the aftermath of the affair, the political situation in Malaya, and the meeting of different cultures the book could have had much more depth. So could the characters, except for Susan, the teenage daughter, they were all borderline stereotypes. It is only when Susan visits Malaya for the school holidays that the book begins to come alive.

What I did find intriguing about this book was the way in which it evoked a sense of the 1950s. It felt very much like a book written in that era. I wonder whether it would have been better to write in a less stilted fashion and forego some of the realism. I would be interested in reading this author's next book to see whether her writing style in *Eloquence* is the norm.

*The Eloquence of Desire* is out now, priced £9.99 and is published by [Sparkling Books](#).

- Michèle 'Afrobehn' Barzey

## Diary of an Artist W.P. Swindon

5<sup>th</sup> July 2010

Well, since being named a cult in Open Wide Magazine (I told my Dad and he fervently agreed. Actually he said I was a 'little cult'. However, I assured him that I was a big cult and he said 'you're probably right') my Facebook profile soon hit the five thousand friends limit (obviously I don't know any of them). But I've decided to close my account and move off the Internet. Why? How can I be a hip, edgy, underground writer (which is what I am) with five

thousand “friends”? To be honest I have found that my popularity began to hinder my art. I *need* to be *struggling* to create!

17<sup>th</sup> August 2010

It was bound to happen sooner or later. Yes, Mike received another letter from Orion wanting to see the full manuscript of his book ‘Seethe’. ‘You did post it?’ he asked me. ‘Of course,’ I replied, with sincerity (gosh I’m a good actor). ‘Well, now that my back is better, I’m posting it myself this time.’

Later that day, after having to endure him putting his work together, he slipped the package into the post box. My heart sank. That should be me posting *my* manuscript off to a top publisher! I’m the one who had five thousand friends on Facebook, I’m the one whose a cult, I’m the one whose published thirty-eight chapbooks of high-quality radical poetry, I’m the one with a successful debut novel!

We headed into town. He couldn’t stop talking about *it*. Soon, he could be getting reviews in papers, doing signings etc. After our coffee I made my excuses and left. I returned to the post box, the last collection was due at six thirty. I waited. Finally a Royal Mail van pulled up. I watched the postman get out and then I pounced!

“Helloooo!” I beamed. The postie, a rough looking sort, eyed me suspiciously. I instantly decided I needed to get on ‘his level’, to speak his language, the language of the working class worker. I cleared my throat and started again. “Excuse me.... *mate*.”

“Yes, mate,” he replied, continuing unlocking the door.

It had worked! “Yes, err, I posted something very important earlier, but neglected to enclose a vital piece of information.”

Looked at me warily. “Right....”

“So... mate, I was wondering if I could get my parcel back. It’s very important... *mate*.”

He glanced me up and down. “What name?” he asked.

“Mike Fenton, mate.” I said, adding a gruff tone to my voice.

He riffled through the envelopes. I could see it before he did and held back all temptation to just grab it. “This the one?” he said. My eyes widened. He handed it over

“Yes, mate. *Cheers*.”

“Shouldn’t be doin’ that,” he told me.

“Us workers need to stick together.”

“What?” he questioned.

“Nothing. Thanks again.” I smiled and turned to walk away, but as I did so Mike and his missus walked around the corner! I froze on the spot. He stared at me and I stared at him. I swallowed hard and tried to think of something.

“You got it!” he said, breathing a sigh of relief.

“Yes....” I mumbled.

“I just remembered I printed out an old version.”

“... That’s right.”

“How did you know?”

I'd actually swapped the file over when he went to make the tea. "I suddenly recalled the title of the word document said Seethe V1, not Seethe V3," I replied, "which is the last edit you told me about."

"Yep and I'm not sure I put enough postage on it either. I guess I rushed it in my excitement."

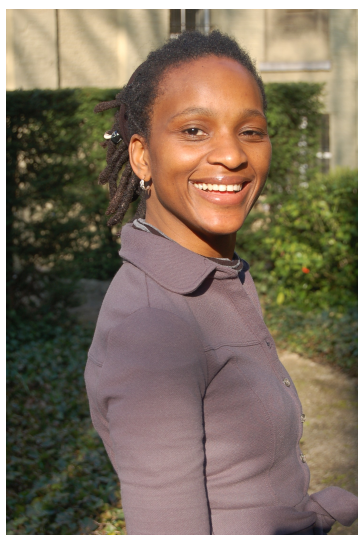
"Yes," I replied, reluctantly handing the package over.

"Next time," he continued, "they'll be no mistakes."

Damn.

## interview

Writer Chika Unigwe talks to James D Quinton.



*What made you want to be a writer?*

My earliest idol, Flora Nwapa, was a writer. The first African female writer to be published in the UK, in 1962. I met her as a primary school pupil and wanted so much to be like her.

*Who were your early influences?*

As a kid, I read everything. I read Enid Blyton (In fact, the earliest memory I have of reading involves *The Magic Far Away Tree* ), Louisa May Alcott ( *Little Women* was my favourite when i was about eight or nine), but the older I got, the more interested I became in the stories of African women writers. Nwapa, Emecheta, Aidoo, El Sadaawi

*Do you remember the first serious piece you wrote?*

I wrote a lot of poetry before I started writing fiction. But the first piece of fiction I wrote and got paid for it was a short story broadcast on the BBC in

1998, I think. I forget the title, but I was so excited I photocopied the cheque, and asked the BBC for the story on cassette (and they graciously obliged me). I forget the title of the story now, but I have the cassette still in a carton box in the attic.

*When do you write and where?*

I write better very early in the morning when everyone is still sleeping, and the hour is so ungodly that no one would call you on the phone or turn up at the door. Then I write at my desk, or on my bed (I admit, I get more work done at the desk). During the day, I write in cafes. That way I get a steady supply of hot chocolate without having to make it myself. My favourite cafe to write in is the Cafe waaranders in the Warande (our cultural centre).

*What inspires you to put pen to paper?*

I eavesdrop a lot. Bad habit but you pick up the most exciting story lines that way. I am also a much better listener than I am a talker (I think). I am also a news junkie. There's always something out there to inspire one.

*Where did you first get published?*

My high school magazine, the Bwariscope. I was on its editorial board. I hope the magazine is still going strong.

*How important was getting nominated for the 2004 Caine Prize for your story 'The Secret'?*

The nomination came at a point when I felt I was doing more than I could handle: raising kids, doing a PhD, writing, and keeping home. I felt I had to let something go for the sake of my sanity and writing seemed like the obvious choice. I was not sure I could make a career of it and wanted to concentrate on my PhD instead and forge a career in the academia. Getting shortlisted was the validation I needed that maybe I had what it took to be a writer. So, thank you Open Wide for taking a chance on this unknown writer, and accepting and publishing *The Secret*.

*Tell us about your novels 'De Feniks', 'Fata Morgana' and your latest 'On Black Sisters' Street.'*

*De Feniks* is about learning to grieve in a foreign tongue. It is easy, in my experience, to love in a foreign language but grief takes us to an almost primordial state and sends us seeking for our roots. My protagonist, a Nigerian immigrant in Belgium loses her son and finds it impossible to accept the loss until her mother comes from Nigeria. That link with her roots paves the way for acceptance, grief and finally healing.

*FM* is the Dutch version of *OBSS*. It is about Nigerian prostitutes in Antwerp.

*What do you do when not writing?*

I read, or I shop. For books and for shoes. I love shoes. I love United Nude shoes, beautifully designed and ecologically responsible

*What are reading at the moment?*

Fate of a Cockroach and other plays by Tewfik Al-Hakim; the Shadow of a Smile by Kachi Ozumba; Songs of Blood and Sword by Fatima Bhutto

*If you could have a beer with any literature figure alive or dead who would it be and why?*

Roald Dahl. His sense of humour is wicked!

*What have you got planned for the future?*

I am working on a new novel

### **Letting Go** Colin Galbraith

A frozen mist hung over the river, fingering the branches of the overhanging trees that lined the water's edge, still damp from the dew of nature's own condensation. A single crow squawked high in a tree and took flight into the dawn sky, disturbing a branch and shaking off pellets of recent rain, sending them tumbling through the branches below towards the river, flowing slowly and deep.

The field beyond was sparse; green and purple heather flowing over hillocks, rising and falling gently towards distant snow-peaked mountains. On the near side long grass flourished with overgrown weeds and the occasional rotting tree stump, and a small stream flowed into the river disturbing the silence with only the slightest of trickles.

"So," said Cameron, pausing to absorb the view. "What d'you think?"

"Yeah," said John. "It's pretty special. Probably just as special in the afternoon, though."

Cameron chuckled. "Special? It's beautiful here, John. And the reason I brought you this early in the morning was so you could see it at its finest. I mean, look ... listen ..."

The two men listened. The stillness and silence enveloped them.

"It's nice," said John. "How much further do we have to go?"

"Just up here," said Cameron sighing, and began to walk.

Each man was carrying similar equipment: fishing rod, net, and a bag full of accessories inside Tupperware boxes that clunked by their side with each step. Both were dressed in a dark green waterproof overcoat and waders folded down at the thigh. From far enough away you might never make them out.

They followed the man-made path alongside the river; man-made only in that it had been worn down by anglers passing along the same route. After half a mile, Cameron stopped and placed his gear on the ground.

"Here we are," he said, laying his arms open. "Take a look."

"What's so special about *this* place?"

"Take a seat," said Cameron, and sat down on one of three tree stumps behind them. "Here we have not only the best fishing site in the glen, but it also has the best view."

"It looks like every other part of the three miles of river we walked along to get here," mumbled John.

"Come on, mate. The bend in front of us ... look ... see how it flows gracefully under those branches on the far side; there's always trout lying under there waiting for a fly to come along. They drop off the branches and the trout nab them. And through the gap in the trees on the far bank ..."

Cameron pointed ahead using his rod as guidance. "That's Ben Lomond in the distance; see the snow on the highest point?"

John looked at the mountain and nodded. "Very impressive," he said. "But why did you bring me here?"

Cameron frowned with frustration. This was the man who had been the best man at his wedding, had been there when he found out his Jean was pregnant with their first child, and who had helped him through his cancer scare only five years ago. "Because you needed to get out of the house, John. You can't go on like you have been."

John rested his hands on his knees and looked at the jaggy purple-headed thistle growing out the base of the moss-covered stump acting as his chair. "I'm fine."

Cameron placed his rod on the ground beside him and lowered his fishing bag to the grass. "I know what it's like, John. Believe me, I know how hard it is to lose a wife; I know what you've been through. Mary died a year ago, John, but for your sake and for the sake of your kids - your grand kids - you've got to move on. We all know you love her, Christ, I'll never stop loving my Jean, but she wouldn't want this for you. You've still got your own life ... and you've still got all of us."

John lowered his head, appreciating his friend's sentiment but unable to speak.

"We all love you, John. You need to come back to us. We miss the old you. You've mourned enough."

A tear fell from John's cheek and landed on the head of a Thistle by his foot. "I really miss her, Cam."

Cameron put his arm on John's shoulder. "We all do, mate."

"No ... I mean I *really* miss her."

"I know. I've been through it ... got to the other side ... I'd never have made it if it hadn't been for you."

"I'm sorry," whispered John.

"Ach! What you apologising for?" said Cameron, waving his left hand. "You've done nought wrong."

"Where do I start, though? What am I meant to do with my life now she's gone?"

Cameron stood up and handed John his rod. "You can start by catching the most beautiful Brown Trout in this river."

John's face cracked a smile. "Aye," he said. "Might as well seeing as I'm here now."

"That's the spirit," said Cameron. "Come on, we can talk about old times while you're doing it."

The two men stepped forward to the river. John unravelled his line and pulled his rod back, flicked it forward a few times and cast his fly out across the water. He looked down at the section of river in front of him, saw his reflection peering back. He smiled at himself. For the first time in a year, he felt kind of good.

## poetry

### the day I saw rula lenska Roddy Williams

the sun called me up  
tantalised with offers of tawny warmth  
if i would only stretch from work  
to playful streets and breadwarm pavements  
scouring the crowds for  
the out of reach.  
a lou reed song fluttered just above my ears.

fifteen minutes later  
the contract with heat was withdrawn  
through laughing clouds.  
the almost perfect day  
slithered and escaped through my fingers  
as the sky collapsed into hysteria  
and wept for lou and me.

but, as I entered the station  
rula lenska  
rose,  
elevated from the platform horizon  
like a celebrity dawn;  
her hair a sun of  
blazing maples.

I shone in her light  
like a moon redeemed.

### someone else's ladder Roddy Williams

like a snake stalking prey  
i watched you today

left propped against the wall  
like someone else's ladder,  
watching the traffic.

on my neck fell twilight  
like a hand to warm my blood  
as you reached to stretch the rungs  
which bind your lungs,  
yawn power through your riblike steps  
and crush your cigarette.

we have not spoken yet,  
only the distant dicerattle rituals  
over your counter.

i have been waiting  
to land on your shoulder  
like the first grip on an upward journey  
to the words.

but you were folded away quickly  
into the too tidy evening.

game over.

**picking up the phone**  
**Roddy Williams**

I have to be forgiven  
for not picking up the phone sometimes.  
your voice is very powerful  
I must restrict your use like certain drugs.

i could get dependent  
on your words and then  
before we knew it, half an hour  
would never be enough.

I'd be drained away in downloads  
into broadband reservoirs.  
most of me would be in servers  
stashed across the globe.

that's why I have to save myself  
there's not enough of me to stretch  
and hold you back so please forgive me  
for not picking up the phone sometimes.

**Fork**  
**Graham Nunn**

You have two choices: wreck or  
get off the bus. You dress in black

either way. You consider a jacket  
and hat, your big red umbrella.

You want to be brief, spotted easily  
in the crowd. Especially if it's raining,

you want the busker in the mall to  
unlatch his lungs for you, to sing

hush, stop there bright thing.  
But if you wreck, you pack it all -

books, bitterness, the unmade bed. You  
sit unperfumed, knees touching the seat

in front, saying thanks, no thank you,  
where does this bus terminate.

Get off, they tell you, last hurrah. But  
a woman stays on, chewing gum.

She has her ticket and a pillow, one  
that comforts both sides of her neck.

You have your name, your breath,  
a borrowed sleeping bag, that photograph

and because it's between seasons, a scarf  
and sunglasses. Where to, she asks

and you want to know. But the rain,  
the engine, your blood's erratic hum,

fingerprints bare and flowering on the window -  
they hold you. They hold you still.

**The Crying Light**  
**Graham Nunn**

this is seriously old light  
we read it like sand

a cloud of mayflies rising

with slow vertigo

the river wearing the yacht's wake  
like a scar

a simple luminosity  
a grandmother's tear

how it fuels the heart  
like when the music stops

fingers gripping  
the rim of the cymbal

**Soup**  
**Graham Nunn**

ten pm. Chinatown  
birds wait  
in the window

he is drinking Johnnie Walker  
and I am drinking beer

a bowl of something clear with  
greens and pale meat

outside the steamy window  
it is raining  
he is smoking

pale blue curlicues  
drift from his nostrils

move across the surface  
of his scotch  
like famous Highland mist

I watch the words  
come out of his mouth  
but cannot hear them

I am listening  
to the birds  
pursue their seed in us

**Growing up near the Atlantic**  
**Alan Britt**

Human fingers that stroke  
a dog  
are tentacles  
of truth.

That's one way  
dogs and people communicate.

No option, really;  
fingertips have a lexicon  
all their own.

Sometimes they appear  
like stinging, pink man-o-war  
bubblegum demons,  
floating  
while you wallow  
the Atlantic,  
or follow you  
beneath blond undertows  
whose teeth  
slice you  
into universes  
you never even knew  
existed.

**Let's Say It's Tuesday**  
**Alan Britt**

It's a good thing  
I don't own a Harley.

I'd be out there  
making that noise.

Riding amnesia  
for all it's worth.

Taunting Beelzebub,  
himself.

Pretending that a  
coal-black winding road  
was the backbone  
of absolute truth.

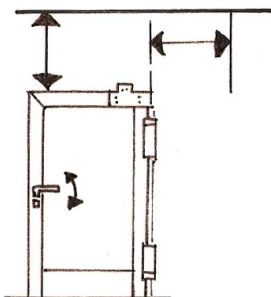
**My Older Brother**  
Alan Britt

My older brother had the toughest time.  
Had it rough, speeding right past  
our mother's perception,  
and my tender age.

I felt like an egg  
sloshing in its shell  
about to crack  
any second,  
while my brother,  
already past  
the violent breakers,  
those white-haired rumors  
revealing themselves  
as hand-in-hand  
myths  
with coming-of-age  
expectations.

So, Steve had to wipe  
the barrel clean, as it were,  
each time,  
extra careful  
not to reveal  
his fingerprints  
of amnesia.

**Dilemma**  
David Greenslade



A door can't decide whether to shrink or grow and ends up moving all ways at once. It manages to be ruthlessly elitist while never closing itself in the face of anyone. Even you or I could find a way through. Why kick such a door when it is easily opened. But what kind of confinement does it disobey? What paradigm discharge? It often asks the same question as every pronoun you could imagine passes through. At a distance things appear small, growing bigger as they approach. Then they become fragmented, then whole again,

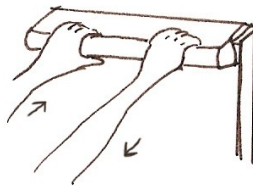
huge even but from weird angles as they pass to the other side. The door asks itself what am I, a trap door, an attic hatch, a door to the left, to the right, leading ahead or going back? It works all ways, even through time, yet still it can't decide whether to shrink or grow. Where did this indecision come from? It never goes away. Look, the dilemma is outside the door frame like a contradictory speech bubble. But the door already made a statement. It has nothing to add.

### How to Throw a Slave Overboard David Greenslade



The law has changed, three Navy ships have been sighted and the boatswain has been told that three hundred human beings have to be thrown into the sea. The bos'n draws a diagram in chalk on deck instructing the able bodied seamen, who will actually do the dirty work, on the best way to dispatch a slave. How to deceive them, where to club them; how to drag them and how to hold and swing them overboard. He makes a fair representation of a British seaman and uses impact lines to show where the club should ideally hit the subject's head. Use wood he says not metal; no need to wound the skull, just concuss the slave and do it as near as possible to the side of the ship. Some of the men snigger at the drawing until the time comes to whack the victim's head. As terminally depressed as they are, the slaves aren't exactly passive and having that drawing to refer to makes whacking them all – men, women and children – just that little bit easier.

### Eye Level Gutter David Greenslade



Forces indicated by two arrows, one sort of up and one sort of down, show that as long as the state of exile remains above eye level then a subject can overcome it. The trough or slough or depression of being sent to the other side of the world could be a ditch in Hades where only the dead come to drink at pilgrim rituals but, for as long as this ditch is merely an eye level gutter representing aspirations that heaven has only temporarily thwarted, then the poet or soldier or courtier or even servant to any of the above can aspire to climb above it. The mood, naturally goes emptily downward but the activity is to overcome. Nothing more is required than to allow the confined state to slop where it will – whether to an underworld of debauchery or to salons and parlors of the privileged. Nothing is gained by releasing hold of ones own ditch and falling into another random pit of formless disappointments. Exile is like swallowing a stone that slips remorselessly down the throat but how the appetites ingest the stone is within control of the distant guest. The hands must never greedily release the bar to force-feed extra pain or bitterness or even consider themselves lucky to be far from scenes of mayhem and destruction.

**A photograph of Mary J. MacDonald dreaming of her father**  
**Noel Williams**

Am I here or dreaming in black and white?  
My father's gaze, my brother's breath  
riffing the gentle bedclothes  
as they watch me dreaming that they watch.

It is not strange in Charles L. Dodgson's world  
to meet within a picture frame  
or find moments from three different hours  
scissored into a single cut of what never happened.

It could be playing cards painting the roses.  
It could be quadrilles, croquet or a catless smile  
but this time it's a fist of flowers exploding  
in a wreath writhing on my counterpane,

and fierce love shrouding me  
as if he saw fairies on my pillow  
circling in cruel protection  
predicting soft-focus and technicolour close-ups.

**Sandalwood, lavender, charcoal, lime**  
**Noel Williams**

Twice wrong times floated in the air today.  
I scented pasts I'd forgotten: two scraps.

In the car park a wet moment breezed,  
perhaps petals after new rain.  
But not that: my mother's hands maybe  
soaping my infant hair. I couldn't say what –  
a forgetting beyond getting back, except  
that tantalus scent.  
The second faded  
before I felt it. Only in the car-park's damp  
was I reminded I'd remembered that other scent,  
another lost time recovering itself  
in perfume, tuft by tuft.

A haunting of a kind, or a hunting: some  
indefinite once-certain thing,  
ghosting through the jungle of consequences,  
brushing the pollen of lilies from its flanks,  
questing through mulch and red mud.

It finds me precisely here, blind,  
nosing about the future.

### **Something and Nothing** Noel Williams

nubs red as buds of desire, strawberries  
roll in my palms until  
onto the plate i  
see they aren't what they are, but  
something else entirely  
not strawberries, but tales,  
futures in their seeds from pasts  
i haven't had,  
i won't hear

something else not fruit  
but hopes and remembrance  
as i look at the wall, mortar greening,  
a spilled azalea gaunt that  
becomes, i see, something  
entirely else a  
net striping me to the ocean  
acupuncture weights piercing  
me to coral spines, a city  
of saltwater-sky become  
something not itself, it's

a prediction, a wrestling match,  
a red-haired woman with her fringe down her throat  
everything is something else everything

something else entirely

and the thing of it is, this is  
the thing, it appears to be something else, too  
each thing is a thing it isn't  
understanding makes each else transforming  
under the hand of scrutiny, thinking of it,  
mouthing it, makes of it something  
other. Else.  
Nothing.

What.

**Seventy**  
**A.D. Winans**

the words come harder  
set their own pace  
sometimes the turtle  
sometimes the hare  
always stripped bare  
bukowski told me in a letter  
you seem like a man  
who knows where it's at  
didn't then don't now  
just hanging around  
with words that dangle  
like an outlaw's neck stretched  
at the end of a rope

**Words**  
**A.D. Winans**

There's still meat to these aging bones  
Squeezed like pulp from a ripe orange  
Steroid injection metaphors  
Grow like a malignant tumor  
Deep inside the gut where  
No cancer can reach them  
These words that scream out  
For a necklace of poems  
Like a street hawker transcending  
A cold winter  
No longer a hungry beggar  
No longer a lost sailor  
In a leaking life raft  
Floating aimlessly at sea  
Wed to these words

Like a nurse holding on  
To the hand of a dying man

**Going Back In Time**  
**A.D. Winans**

When I was young I drove to Salinas  
And ran through the bean fields  
Pretending I was James Dean in East of Eden  
Stopped off in Monterey imaging myself  
On Cannery Row packing sardines in between  
Midnight conversations with Doc and the boys

Driving to Carmel I scribbled a poem on a cocktail napkin  
That later became the Title for my first book of poems  
But the rents were high and the job pay too low  
So in 1964 I took my first full time job in Modesto  
Drove on weekends to Stockton's public square park  
To drink with the winos'  
In Crow's Landing I drank with unemployed Mexicans  
At run-down cantinas  
In North Beach and the Mission District  
I hung out with deadbeats and losers  
Street people fighting junkie tremors  
And cirrhosis of the liver  
In the Fillmore I cut my teeth on jazz  
Let Billie Holiday patch up my bleeding heart  
In the Portrero I saw the last of the factory workers  
Growing thinner like their paychecks  
Fearing for their jobs  
In the Tenderloin I drank with whores and prostitutes  
Who opened their pocketbooks as freely as their legs  
On Market Street I witnessed panhandlers crouched  
Like criminals in open doorways  
A short distance from the Jesus freaks  
With God's billboards pointing the way to heaven  
At the old Southern Pacific Railway Yard  
I saw the last brakeman smoking a cigarette  
With eyes vacant as an empty satchel  
While on the other side of town  
High on top of Nob Hill  
Society ladies sat in chauffeured limousines  
White poodle dogs nestled between their legs  
Unaware of the dredges of humanity  
Walking Third and Howard Street  
Drinking cheap port from brown paper bags  
Starving cold disheveled as the homeless are today  
Waiting on God or pneumonia  
To walk them to the grave

**When You Know The Party's Over Before It's Over**  
**J.S. Watts**

July comes quickly round again.  
Half a year evaporates and what's to show?  
No longed for dazzle that's for sure.  
This, a year of living lightly  
On the surface tension of my life,  
Of dancing flighty glitter ball dreams,  
Twelve dragonfly months of rainbow skinned bubbles,  
But the froth went flat  
From a surfeit of mediocre  
And the crystal it gushed from cracked  
With six months left to go.  
I'm dancing with flat feet from here on in,  
But I never was Nureyev, no Fontaine;  
An ugly duckling quacking the swan's swansong.  
If the stage was empty  
I'd not be asked to dance.  
Yet I go on in the chipped belief  
That perseverance conquers all,  
Except maybe blisters;  
A tortoise in sequined tennis shoes  
Still waiting for her invite.  
The streamers, having fallen down, lie flat  
Like last night's noodle takeaway.  
Torn tinsel rustles in the sticky shadows  
Looking for misplaced fantasies.  
Someone will have to clear this mess  
Before New Year.  
Six months of shovelling dust.

**The Visitation**  
**J.S. Watts**

No rustle of undergrowth or creaking of branches  
Betrays your presence. But you are here.  
I know you.  
But you will not come through.  
You say that you are not ready  
And wish to stay hidden.  
How much longer do you expect me to wait?  
You are so close. Why not show yourself ?

You could do it gradually, little by little.  
Like Salome, peeling off the veil a little at a time;  
An intellectual striptease.  
Or just ooze through like a slow wound.  
With a knife you could bleed through more quickly.

I would not mind.  
Take a deep breath. Step out from hiding.  
Now you see me. Now you don't.

You could surprise me.  
I like surprises: gift wrapped and startling.  
I love the suspense.  
Shape guessing the contents, the guts.  
Am I right? Am I right?  
I can feel you but I need to see.  
So near and still so far.  
Come nearer. Display yourself.

Be bold.  
Explode into the air, a gigantic firework.  
Incandescence of red, gold, yellow,  
To purge the eyes;  
A rain of fire to purge the soul.  
The glory of Armageddon.  
Come. Come like that.  
I would open my heart to you.

### **In Search of Moon Words** **J.S. Watts**

For years I have been  
Reading from others' pages  
Mouthing their souls  
In search of moon words  
Waiting for the silver to bite  
To make its quick cuts  
Into the soft of the dark.

Repetition makes an importance  
Of nothing                      of everything  
Concealing sharp incisions  
Again                              and again  
In hope of a flood                      a trickle  
The smallest hint of moisture  
The unseen source.

I am beginning my reclamation  
To a drum beat pulse  
Which I shall make my rhythm  
The month is lush with potential  
Taut white and round  
A gloriously uninterrupted circle  
Shining amongst the dark like hope  
Like a promise of the heart.

**Maeve**  
**Heidi Colthup**

Green garden twine cuts around Maeve's knees and wrists,  
she pales her bald head on her sleeping arm while the thin  
rain tries to beat the corrugated roof of the small wooden shed built from old  
palettes.

The squeezing apple trees lean in and scratch her  
hiding place. The ground is stoned with seven years of mirror slivers.

Maeve is guarded by a company of garden gnomes whispering and wishing  
in their sour plastic wells where they fight with magnetic gold  
fish and peel their paint jobs for the next thousand years while laughing  
at her dettol diluted reduction in circumstance.

Old school Maeve used up her claps and tinkles of bells - once upon a time  
doesn't pay a pension. Disney godmothers aren't surrounded  
by poisoned rotted apple smell like old people and piss  
in a centrally heated day centre where they tried to put her away.

Slick black electric flex slips Maeve the Twitter tongue she wants  
to animal the talk again with a Google wave of her wand. Toothless  
bites through the garden twine bind her keep, even though pixellated pixies  
tried  
to release her, organise a flash mob, put her in iTouch but it's out of iSight  
and out of iMind.

**A Bed of Bright Ashes**  
**Steve Nash**

To the west the sky burned red  
whilst we sang under the earth.

The day not quite yet done  
we life-frayed freaks  
engaged in clutching revelry.

Silhouetted hands and arms described  
arcs against cartoon light.

And once we'd finished singing our rough  
old-fashioned songs, we stopped.

Fingers blushed strawberry  
from the sticky blood  
we'd spilled to disguise our flaws.

And that thing that slipped  
like smoke unnoticed

into the chill of winter was I.

Throat sore, eyes stung to slits  
by the smoke from a murder  
of punk-blackened lungs.

I sagged like a cracked paper  
tray, and the street  
bucked as if to toss me from its back.

I fell through the glycerine  
curb to a bed  
of bright ashes and slept.

### **Gangrenous Foot** **Steve Nash**

I know my own scent, how it offends  
the crisp air into a mould of compost and wet leaves.  
That's why I'm bound in this strangle of cloth,  
mummified not for my host's health  
but to stifle the olfactory assault of my green  
fingers. I began as a creeping cutlet on a single  
baby-chubby toe. But the pull, I'm breathed  
further up every day, nutrients through roots.  
I drink my way further toward the ankle.  
Such a tug you'd swear he wanted this.  
I remind him of his youth – the faux terror of kiss-chase,  
running just a little slower, wanting to get caught.  
He won't let them remove me, so entwined are we  
now, so much shared, so much corrupted flesh.

### **Closing Night** **Steve Nash**

After the clutching rocks of hands  
had unfurled into paper  
and scissored taxi doors;

after the coins had been tallied,  
grudgingly given/received;  
the open scent of excitement  
closed from coffee to sweat,

they found him foetal in a corner booth,  
the closed fist of his body quivering  
like an echo through the cheekbone of a giant;  
the leak of his deference rolling

in broken streams across the bruised leather,  
but perfect, caught in that moment.

After everything they knew it was over,  
it had to be.

**boots crush sandy soil**  
James D Quinton

white smoke in the distance  
rises against a sharp blue sky  
the weather, for once, as  
the meteorologists predicted

my boots crush sandy soil and gravel  
sweat pours from my brow  
rabbits dash to their burrows  
small birds flit from tree to tree  
flying without a care

and above

92 million miles away  
the scorching sun

at its centre  
hydrogen nuclei  
fuses into helium

yellow, gold  
orange, red  
white hot

burning

**last kiss**  
James D Quinton

by candlelight,  
that flickers from a draft  
coming through a  
Georgian window,  
from which  
the moon shines through,  
we share one last kiss

and in that brief moment

I recall our sensual encounters  
where our hands danced across  
our bodies and we created our  
own heaven

**unannounced**  
**James D Quinton**

in the distance  
cargo ships,  
lights illuminated,  
as the night and  
mysterious dark clouds  
roll in on a stiff wind

the sea crashes into  
the coastal defences,  
an untameable  
force of nature

then, the moon,  
unannounced,  
cuts through the clouds,  
sun reflected on its surface

that radiance cast down  
onto crystal clear  
shimmering water

**Jenny**  
**James D Quinton**

A few weeks ago I lost my job, my woman left and then my dog got run over by a car that was driven by some guy with a bad Sinatra cut. I didn't think things could get any worse until I met Jenny. It was late. I was sitting in a downtown bar nursing my seventh beer, taking a pull on a Marlboro, when this woman with a cheap dye job sat herself down next to me.

'Hiya hun, I'm drinking vodka and coke are you buying?'

I looked her up and down. Apart from the barkeep she was the only person who'd spoken to me in weeks. She was wearing a low cut top; her breasts pushed up in danger of spilling out, a mini and high heels, all clashing primary colours. She was about forty, but was trying to look twenty. Her skin resembled a something you might pull from a KFC bucket.

I gestured to the barkeep, 'Paul, get the lady a vodka and coke.'

'*Lady?*' replied Paul.

'Make it a double, Paul,' drawled the woman. 'My name's Jenny, what's yours?'

'Richard, Rick, whatever.'

'Like Richard Gere?'

'Yeah, honey and you are my pretty woman.'

The barkeep put the double vodka down in front of Jenny.

'Have you got a spare ciggie, hun?' I passed her one. 'Thanks. So whatcha doin' here?'

'A few drinks, I've had a rough time.'

'Ain't we all,' she said, blowing out a cloud of smoke. 'How about I make things good for you again?'

'I don't know, I'm still getting over someone.'

'What are you? A faggot?'

'No,' I replied, washing down the remains of the beer and indicating for another.

'Okay, so oral is twenty, straight sex is fifty.'

Paul put the new beer down in front of me. Once again I looked her up and down, it had been a while, too long.

'Okay, how about I give one hundred to spend the night?'

'ONE HUNDRED?' She shrieked making the rest of the drinkers turn round, 'sure hun, you got a deal!'

Jenny downed the rest of her drink. I threw a twenty onto the bar and we left.

\*

'It's this way.' I said when we got outside.

'Wait a minute, hun. I gotta get my stuff.'

'Stuff?'

'Yeah, my landlord threw me out. Said I was a whore, can you believe that?'

'Right...'

I mumbled, running my hand over my stubble, regretting my decision.

Jenny disappeared down a side alley and reappeared dragging a suitcase on coasters behind her.

As we walked to my place she started telling me about her car crash of a life. '...and then I had another abortion...'

'Terrible...'

I muttered, as we reached the door of to my house.

We went in. Jenny dumped her stuff and then walked up to me and grabbed my groin.

'So, you want it in here or upstairs?'

'Err... how about some food? I'm hungry.'

'Hey, I can cook...'

'Urm...'

It was too late Jenny trotted into the kitchen. I sat down and sighed.

She came out with a beer.

'Here you go, hun.'

I took the beer. I needed it. Taking a swig, I pulled out my wallet and counted out the one hundred. She giggled, stuffed in her bra and returned the kitchen.

After about fifteen minutes Jenny came back into the living room and opened her suitcase.

'What are you doing?' I asked.

'Time to give you your moneys worth, hun.' She pulled out two pairs of handcuffs.

'Oh, I don't think so.'

'Come on upstairs.'

\*

In the bedroom Jenny went to work. She stripped me down to my bare ass, handcuffed my hands behind my back and pushed me onto the bed. She then handcuffed my legs together and went to work on my cock.

'How does it feel, hun?' she asked, whilst chewing on bubblegum.

It did feel good.

After a few minutes I smelt burning. Jenny looked up and sniffed. 'Oh no, the food!' she screamed.

She got up and rushed downstairs.

I could hear her screaming. I tried to get up but couldn't get far. I started shouting at her to come and uncuff me.

But she didn't return. Smoke started to rise and it soon filled the house. I managed to get up and shuffle to the window, I undone the latch and worked my way out. I fell fifteen feet to the ground; my ex-wife's shrubbery broke my fall. Flames were licking out of the house and my neighbours were all in the street watching. I got myself up right and hopped away from the burning building, with my cock and balls bouncing up and down in full view of everybody.

As I watched the house burn I turned to see Jenny, half way down the road, dragging her suitcase behind her, fixing her knickers.

(2003)

*(Poems and short story taken from a forthcoming collection 'The City Is On Fire And Has Been For Weeks' published by Xplosive Books)*

### **Aunty Rose** **Suzanne Ushie**

The first time I met Aunty Rose, I was walking down the open corridor of the administrative block. The building was made up of four blocks that came to a perfect square, with iron pillars holding up the ceiling. The courtyard in the middle was framed with endless rows of ixora, behind the Nigerian flag that rippled at the end of a long pole and the ground was covered with a smooth layer of carpet grass. I was with the headmaster; a tall man who was wearing suspenders and had a badly done jheri curl on his head. Aunty Rose had a long, rather horsey face and took quick, bird-like steps. I judged her to be in her late thirties or so. Her eyes were striking, a light shade of brown, glassy like an albino's. She had a brown envelope in her left hand. The headmaster introduced me as the new teacher. She ran her eyes over me slowly and said she hoped I would have a pleasant stay with them. It sounded automated, like a recital she had given to several young, eager teachers like me.

On my first day at work, or school as it was, I dressed carefully in a pair of black trousers and a white blouse with stiff shoulder pads. I got to the assembly hall only to find that in my excitement, I had gotten there before everyone else. After the morning prayers the headmaster introduced me to the rest of the school. He made a superfluous speech about me having an English Education Degree from University of Port Harcourt and Montessori Certification from England. Nonetheless, my foolish head swelled with pride when everyone clapped politely. As I scanned the crowd, I met Aunty Rose's piercing gaze. She stood there, hands stiffly by her side.

I settled in quickly. It was impossible to flounder, not where I was. Emma Duke International was a first of its kind in Calabar, a sleepy coastal town in Southern Nigeria. It was named for its owner - a plump light skinned woman whom it was said never left home without wearing red blush on her cheeks. Originally founded as a private primary school, Emma Duke gradually evolved into a leveller of sorts. Here, you were likely to find children who spent their long vacation abroad; as well as those for whom a trip to Lagos was a luxury they could only imagine. Some of them had bureaucrat parents who gave them Nasco biscuit for school lunch and dropped them off in silver Peugeot 504s. They were placed in classes that were divided in alphabetical order. I was assigned to Primary 2B as junior teacher, second to none other than Aunty Rose.

I fell in love with Calabar in my first few days of being there. I loved that everyone knew the next person's business, that if you knew a girl named Emem and I did too, chances are they were the same person. The slow paced lifestyle was a welcome relief from the concrete jungle where I grew up. When I returned to Port Harcourt after spending a year in England, I turned down a job offer with British Council in favour of the teaching job. My parents thought I was crazy. I refused my father's offer to call the Minister for Education and "talk" to him about getting me a job in Abuja. My mother called me every other day to tell me that her friend's daughter was getting married, or that she bumped into the handsome, British-educated son of a family friend at a party. I would listen attentively, clutching the curly telephone wire whenever she did so. I found the phone obtrusive, especially at times when I wanted to think clearly. But to her, it was a metaphor for my social status; a souvenir of the life I'd left behind.

The pupils were given reading assignments everyday. I sat quietly at first, listening as they read in their tiny, sing-song voices. I thought they were doing quite well. But Aunty Rose had a nonchalant look on their face, as if the whole activity was pointless. Her back was straight in her wooden chair, and a thick exercise book lay open on the table in front of her. I couldn't tell who had done well and who had not. If she spoke, it was only to chastise anyone who made a mistake. Afterwards, she kept the book in the top drawer of her desk, the key to which she carried about on a chain around her neck. Another thing she was attached to was her brown envelope. They were inseparable, like a baby and a blanket. The only time she showed any sign of emotion was in the morning, when the children sang hymns before classes began. She would close her eyes in the throes of spiritual ecstasy; then read a passage from a

leather bound Bible, clasped tenderly in her hand as though it was the Shroud of Turin. Her clothes were practical, tweed skirts and cotton blouses. Sometimes there was a wistful look in her eye. Her stoic countenance and the wedding band around her finger made an interesting paradox. I wondered what kind of a man was bold enough to marry her. Surely he would have to give a year's notice before he could make love to her.

I developed a friendship of sorts with two other teachers. There was Monsieur Essien, the French teacher who could not locate France on a map. I knew he liked me, because he always had an excuse to talk to me. Then there was Nkese, head teacher of Primary 1C who told me that with my foreign ways and cultured accent, I reminded her of an *Mbakara*, a white person. It was she who told me that Auntie Rose did not have children. We were on a first name basis, we teachers. Apart from Auntie Rose whom everyone called quite simply, Auntie Rose.

]

Once during recess, I stayed behind while the pupils ran off. Auntie Rose and her brown envelope left the class too. Another time perhaps, I would have been curious about what was inside. But I was beginning to get disillusioned. In all the time I'd been there, the only thing she had asked me to do was write names of noise makers. I found it belittling, this petty task of reprimanding children for chattering about Voltron and Super Ted. It's not as though I could punish them, for any form of spanking was strictly prohibited. So that day, I went through the books on the shelf by the corner; even though I didn't know what I hoped to find. I discovered nothing apart from old exercise books, covers dressed in coats of dust, which belonged to ex-pupils. Immediately the bell that signalled the end of recess went off, I returned to my desk and pretended to be busy.

\*

Giant, menacing drops of rain were falling freely from the sky as I arrived at school. Auntie Rose had not arrived yet, presumably because of the weather. The class was very noisy but silence descended immediately I walked in. The pupils greeted me in unison and when I merely replied, they were baffled, as if they expected me to do something else. After dropping my bag, I went to the board and wrote in my fine writing "Frere Jacques." It was a French song, a simple song, which we would sing in place of hymns today, I told them. Then I began to sing and somehow, although I was slightly off key, they started singing along, asking me a thousand questions afterwards. Who was Frere Jacques? Why didn't he answer his brother? I told them he was a little boy who got into trouble because he loved to sleep. They laughed. Next, I gave them some words to memorize in time for a spelling competition. Soon they were huddled together; dictionaries and exercise books open. I was relaxing in my chair, drinking a cup of Lipton tea, when Auntie Rose walked in. She was frowning furiously. The pupils went back to their seats and brought out their hymn books. A butcher's knife would barely have grazed the tension in the air. But she didn't speak, not until they went out for recess.

She told me that I had no right to usurp her authority because frankly, she was sick of my patronising attitude. The fact that I had a degree did not make

me better qualified than those who had Grade II certificates; those who upheld the Presbyterian values upon which Emma Duke was founded. She called me an amateurish academic who pranced about school in trousers. I told her that children, like the times, were changing, that they needed to be seen as different individuals with different needs. For all the attention she gave me, I would have been better off talking to myself. It was important that children knew hymns and prayers, she continued. Had I no regard for the fact that our country was on the verge of a general election? Children had no business engaging in frivolous activities during these troubled times, she said, with the certainty that by praying fervently and looking solemn they could change the fate of their country.

In the days that followed, I expected the headmaster to summon me regarding the incident. But he didn't. It was as if he was afraid to get involved. Monsieur Essien started avoiding me. Nkese told me that the only person who had ever complained to the school authorities about Aunty Rose was an Irish teacher who established the Debating Club. The matter was being investigated when, in a strange turn of events, she was alleged to be an illegal immigrant and deported back to Ireland. Aunty Rose barely spoke to me after that day. If she had something to say, she would write it on a piece of paper and pass them to me rigidly, mouth set in a straight line like a jukebox slot.

I called my mother and asked her to send me cartons filled with rolls of cardboards, sketch pads and watercolours. They arrived the next day, wrapped in shiny red and yellow paper emblazoned with the DHL logo. Later that week, as soon as Aunty Rose left the class, infamous companion in tow, I told the children that I would be giving extra lessons on Saturday. I said it casually, not making a big deal of it, so that no one would blow the whistle. It worked. They showed up, looking excited, and I had never been so glad to see anyone. We painted pictures and selected those that were good enough to go up on the wall. It was our little secret; even though I knew it was only a matter of time before Aunty Rose would find out.

\*

It was a Thursday afternoon, the last time I saw Aunty Rose. The ceiling fan whirling above was doing nothing to quench the stifling heat. Aunty Rose was giving the pupils a Maths lesson. I was seated at my desk, comfortable as a passive onlooker. She was about to write a problem on the board, when she paused mid-air and started staring hard at someone. My eyes followed hers to a girl, who wasn't doing a very good job of hiding the book on her lap. As Aunty Rose walked up to the girl whose eyes were wide with panic, as if her parents had caught her begging a visiting uncle for the meat inside his soup. Aunty Rose seized the book and held it up for all to see. It was an Enid Blyton book, a title which I cannot remember. The girl started chewing her lower lip nervously. Aunty Rose flipped through the book randomly. Gnomes and goblins? She said with horror as she turned page after page. She called it witchcraft as her eyes glowed with fanatical fervour. The girl protested, saying that it was a fairy tale. Aunty Rose called her a stupid girl and hit her on the head with the book. Did she not know that these creatures were agents of the

devil who visited children in their dreams and gave them *puffpuff* to eat? She asked. The girl started to cry, loud sobs hiccupping out of her little chest. By then I was standing beside Aunty Rose, trying to calm her down. She brushed me aside and gave the girl one last lingering swat, then she ripped the book apart from the middle. The torn pieces fell on the floor like confetti being thrown at a wedding reception.

The next day the girl's Commissioner father stormed the school in a convoy, complete with armed guards, demanding for Aunty Rose's head. That book had cost him good money in London, he told the startled headmaster while he pulled up his trousers on his pot belly. And who was the low life who had the audacity to touch his precious daughter? He would withdraw her from the school, he threatened, as long as that illiterate teacher remained here. The precious daughter was sulking beside him, occasionally whispering things that seemed to enrage him further in his ear. Aunty Rose disappeared. Later on, I learned that her husband, a huge strapping man with red eyes, had given her a thorough beating before their neighbours could break down their door and restrain him. He was fired from his job as a clerk in the Civil Service because as it turned out, the head of his Ministry and the angry Commissioner father were one and the same person. It was not the first time Aunty Rose's husband had hit her, Nkese said. She was certain because her cousin who attended the same church as Aunty Rose told her this.

\*

The class was empty on the last day of the term, devoid of the previous prattle of the pupils as they collected their report cards. I missed them already, but I was grateful for the silence as I cleaned out my desk. Aunty Rose's desk sat in a corner, covered with files, converted to a make shift cabinet in her absence. I removed a large bundle of files from my drawer and dumped them there. They landed with a thud, releasing a cloud of dust. Shielding my nose, I opened her drawer in search of more space. The school carpenter had broken the lock when Aunty Rose left; revealing nothing but her thick exercise book and a daily devotional guide. But that day, as I kept the files inside, I saw her brown envelope hidden in a corner. She must have forgotten it in her hurry to disappear. I touched it, feeling the slim bulk of a book inside. I reached in and brought it out. It was a worn copy of a Mills and Boon.

## contributor biographies

**Michèle 'Afrobehn' Barzey** has published poetry, articles on womanist theology, and 'race' and gender in literature. She is interested in how the creative and the theological interact and inform each other and how spoken word blurs the boundaries between poetry, prose and drama. Examples of her work can be found at <http://michelealbarzey.com>.

**Alan Britt** had, in July 2007, ABC Radio National (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) broadcasted a straight read, plus live stream on their website, of his poem, "After Spending All Day at the National Museum of Art," as part of their Poets on Painters series. His work has also appeared in Fire (UK) and he has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize in 2008 and 2009.

**Heidi Colthup** lives in Kent and has been; a published poet, a columnist for a national magazine, a university lecturer, a short film maker, an artist who has exhibited with Tracey Emin, a goat keeper, a chicken keeper, a tractor driver, a farmer's wife, a Primary school teacher, a mother, and a dreamer. She has a grand masterplan, which involves reading books in bed while eating cake, but until that comes to fruition she divides her time between writing and teaching. [Blog](#).

**Michael Egan** is a poet and editor from Liverpool. A pamphlet, *Folklores*, was published by the Knives, Forks and Spoons Press in June 2010 and his first full length collection, *Steak and Stations*, is out from Pinned in the Margins in December. He has been published widely in magazines and journals including Poetry Salzburg, Pen Pusher, Erbacce, Great Works and Zafusy. He edits the Binturong Review.

**Colin Galbraith** has been publishing books, short stories, poems and non-fiction articles in print and online publications since 2004. He is a regular contributor to the News of the World's Scottish music supplement, and is the Chief Editor of The Ranfurly Review. You can find out more about him at: [www.colingalbraith.co.uk](http://www.colingalbraith.co.uk).

**David Greenslade** has many books in print among them *Zeus Amoeba* and *Each Broken Object (Two Rivers)*, *Weak Eros* and *Adventure Holiday (Parthian)*. He writes in Welsh and in English. His latest publication is *The Dark Fairground* (UWIC Press).

**David Halliday** is a screenwriter, fiction writer, editor and historian. He has worked with creative studios writing scripts for advertisements, short films and music videos for Universal Music. He also wrote a short film for entrepreneur Geoffrey Edelsten, starring *Seinfeld's* Jason Alexander and *The Nanny's* Fran Drescher. He completed a Masters in Editing and a Diploma of Education following an Honours Degree in Creative Writing, during which he was awarded a Penguin Prize for short fiction. His first book, *The Bloody History of the Croissant* was released this year.

**Curtis McGlinchey** is twenty-one years old, from Brentwood, Essex and entering his final year of a history degree at the University of Southampton. If he had to choose a notable literary figure as inspiration it would be Ray Bradbury, who in his opinion set the benchmark for writing short stories with amazing depth and vision. After his degree Curtis hopes to dedicate much more time to writing complex, challenging and original fiction.

**Steve Nash** is a writer from York UK who should be writing his Ph.D thesis. He's a qualified teacher but despite this earns his keep (sort of) as a musician playing to anyone foolish enough to stay in the bar. His work has appeared in London Grip, Ouroboros Review, Read This Magazine, Relection's Edge, The Cartier Street Review, Smoke, Word Salad and the Poetry Warrior.

**Graham Nunn** is co-ordinator of the QLD Poetry Festival Programming Committee, co-founder of Small Change Press and a founding member of Brisbane's longest running poetry event, SpeedPoets. He blogs fiercely at Another Lost Shark, is the current QLD editor of Blue Dog: Australian Poetry Journal and is Secretary of the Australian Haiku Society. He has published four collections of poetry, his most recent, Ruined Man, published by Small Change Press in 2007 and has recently released his first spoken word CD, The Stillest Hour, in collaboration with local musician, Sheish Money. His fifth collection, Ocean Hearted, is out now.

**James D. Quinton** has had poetry and fiction published around the world since 2001. His debut novel *Touch* and collected poems *Street Psalms*, published by Xplosive Books, are out now and available from all good bookshops.

**W.P. Swindon's** poetry has appeared in over one thousand publications worldwide (so he says - *Ed*) and he has had 38 chapbooks (self - *Ed*) published including the seminal 'My Heart Belongs to She Behind the Counter in the Local Shop'. In 2006 he compiled 'Our Souls in Poetry - The Contemporary Review and Anthology of Poets'. His novel 'Confessions (of an Artist)' is out on Radical Beat Books. He is editor of The Poet's Tool.

**Suzanne Ushie** is from Cross River State in Southern Nigeria. She has a Bachelor's Degree in English and Literary Studies from the University of Calabar, Nigeria. Her work has appeared in print and online publications like africanwriter.com and élan (nextonsunday). Her hobbies include reading, daydreaming and tweeting.

**J.S. Watts** lives and writes in the flatlands of East Anglia. Her poetry, short stories and book reviews have appeared in a variety of publications in Britain, Canada and the States. Her story Jenny won third prize in the 2009 Wells Literary Festival International Short Story Competition and was broadcast on BBC Radio Somerset in January 2010. You can find her on [Facebook](#).

**Noel Williams** is Resident Poet at Bank Street Arts Centre, Sheffield. He has published widely in anthologies and magazines including The North, Orbis, Envoi, Iota and Other Poetry. He's won many commendations and prizes in

competitions, including the Yorkshire Prize in the Yorkshire Open, finalist in Aesthetica Creative Works, runner up in Troubadour. He also writes stories and reviews.

**Roddy Williams** lives and works in London. His work has recently appeared in 'The Rialto,' 'The Frogmore Papers', '14', 'South Poetry', 'Magma', and the Ware Poets recent competition anthology. He is a keen surrealist artist and photographer, and cooks a mean Thai curry.

**A.D Winans** is a native San Francisco poet and graduate of San Francisco State College. His poetry, prose, book reviews, and essays have appeared in over 1500 literary magazines and anthologies, including City Lights Journal, Margie, Rattle, Poetry Australia, the New York Quarterly, the Outlaw Bible of American Poetry, and the Beatitude 50th Anniversary Anthology. He is the author of numerous books and chapbooks of poetry and prose. In 2002 a song poem of his was performed at New York's Alice Tully Hall. In 2006 he was awarded a PEN National Josephine Miles award for excellence in literature. In 2007 Presa Press published a book of his selected poems. In 2009 he was given a PEN Oakland Lifetime Achievement Award.

“I have my own communication with God.  
We are all the son of God. No middle man  
required.”

- Bill Hicks