



Issue I

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Editor's Preface

*'Describe the Borough'—though our idle tribe
May love description, can we so describe,
That you shall fairly streets and buildings trace,
And all that gives distinction to a place?*

—George Crabbe, *The Borough*

Tilbury Town Burns Down

In lieu of the epigraph above was supposed to stand the quotation below, with Crabbe, who gives our journal its name, making appearance via the man of the moment, namely, The Man Against the Sky:

*Give him the darkest inch your shelf allows,
Hide him in lonely garrets, if you will,—
But his hard, human pulse is throbbing still
With the sure strength that fearless truth endows.*

– Edwin Arlington Robinson, *George Crabbe*

This issue is not, then, as initially advertised, themed in relation to Edwin Arlington Robinson's Tilbury Town poems. As a neophyte editor I might have done better by heeding my own misgiving: *How likely is it that the first-rate poets you want to publish will have something precisely appropriate on hand, or be ready to drop what they're doing and write something to order? You'll be lucky if you can get enough good stuff to fill an issue, in any case.*

I should have listened to that voice in regard to the themed-issue issue, but the prediction that I would struggle to get enough quality content could not have been more wrong. In fact, I have managed to convince eighteen of the best poets from across the world to send me their best work. It needs no particular rationale to publish it.

And I should acknowledge that some contributors really did engage with the theme. Edith Speers, for example, wrote two sonnets in deliberate engagement with Robinson, and I suspect the same is true of Mark Blaeur's and Jake Dennis's contributions. James Matthew Wilson assures me that his 'A Cat in Sunlight' has something in common with Robinson's rhetoric, and I couldn't positively swear that he *is* only pulling my leg. Huck Astley, our sole insular Briton, manages to bring in some fortuitous Arthurianism, while Lucas Smith seems to have confused E.A. Robinson with Robinson *Jeffers* on the same basis that Burl Horniachek has him mixed up with Robinson *Crusoe*. The Borough is decidedly richer for these contributions, however. And just imagine rejecting a poem by Stephen Edgar merely because it has nothing to do with an arbitrary theme!

Town Planning

Future issues of The Borough will be themed even less than this one is. Just as, in turning an idea into a poem, one often ends up producing a different and no less coherent piece (or more coherent, because now possessing the complex organisation of a linguistic artefact), so the identity of this journal has begun to assert itself.

But let this not dissuade me from making a few manifesto-ish statements:

- ❖ The Borough is grounded in the deep tradition of English poesy; that is, the one going back to Chaucer and beyond, not the one that started with the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and which seems likely to destroy all meaningful literary culture;
- ❖ We take form seriously, and, other things being equal, like it when our poems use meter and rhyme both competently and creatively;

- ❖ We don't mind a bit of personal confession, meditative epiphany or everyday mysticism, but we do acknowledge that other modes are possible and often desirable;
- ❖ We contend that the flowers of evil smell better than those of self-justification;
- ❖ We publish the best English-language verse from Australia, North America, Britain and anywhere else it may be written (although our slant is more antipodean);
- ❖ We especially seek to intervene in the moribund Australian literary scene and deliver a glove-slap to its leadership. Instead of publishing the ephemeral, trendily politicised content coming out of creative writing programs, we seek the poets who may not attain their full reputation until the coming of the next Satya Yuga.

Sincere thanks are due to The English Speaking Union (Victoria Branch) for the Oldham Wedlick Scholarship, which has enabled this publication to be born.

- *Clarence Caddell, Editor*

Mark Blaeuer

A Perfect Contempt

He swore he'd never live in Arghansas
again, and if he did, it wouldn't be
at Fanduval, and if it was, not that
darned Vixen Street, and if so, not the raw
funk of You-All Apartments, Hole 10-C.

Low rent. Sweet air at Woo Pig Laundromat,
a scent of leatherwork at Flyting Possum.
Ingesting verity in George's Ye
Majestick Lounge, which honorably sat
across from Hutch of Books, hard downhill from

his flat.

He gravitated to the old address,
a building of dark brick and trumpet vine.
Ungentrified. Historic seediness.
A place, one might say, for the genuine.

Edith Speers

Not even a dressing gown

“Well, what the hell,” she thought, “it isn't far...”
and for a change the morning was quite warm,
so wearing just pyjamas in the car
she headed down the road and past the farms,
then—damn and blast—a bang and flop flop
informed her that a tyre had gone flat.
She'd never catch the post, and that was that.
No choice except to steer sideways and stop,

still halfway in the lane because the ditch
was deep and close. God damn it, what a bitch.
She hadn't brought her purse or mobile phone...
This township doesn't dote on formal dress
and always helps a neighbour in distress,
but loves a yarn—and so it's grown and grown.

They left the land

They had it good but left it all behind
because they thought that something better beckoned.
Away they went to climates warmer, drier,
where jobs were plentiful and pay was higher.
But we stayed put, because we didn't mind
the problems here, and also 'cause we reckoned
the land beneath our feet was good enough
to see us through whenever times were tough.

They had it good but left it for the lure,
the dream of futures that can be perfected
and hit more complications than expected.
We stayed, content with little, but secure.
There's nothing better, as we all have found,
than keeping faith, and feet on solid ground.

Crippled

the long road home can take you far away
from the warmth of your fireside on a rainy day,
down a mud-slick dripping bracken track
through a failed tree-squashed fence
and onto someone else's devastation,
their loss of faith in anything other than money,
up a hillside that tough tea-tree and graceful wattle
tried to heal and shelter from a young man's regret
for a long-gone generosity that left beauty
flowering in thick bunches he has now cut off
with a chainsaw and bulldozed into burnt heaps,
until halfway across churned dirt and ashes

you sit on a stump in the middle of it all,
halfway between home and a strayed goat
who stands on his crippled legs under a lone tree
at the top of the hill, left because it is blackwood
and everyone knows blackwood is expensive,
good for something, good for making furniture
good for selling and making money
and it doesn't matter that it won't grow tall here,
not on its own like this, no need to grow tall
where comrades don't crowd you
and it doesn't matter that even if it did grow tall
it would stay there as a boast and never

get turned into a holiday or school fees or a new car
and it doesn't matter that the poor-cousin wattles,
now all char and ash, make beautiful boards
burn hot in a hurry, enrich the soil where they grow
and it doesn't matter that no amount of regret
for past generosity and no number of hard-nosed
attempts to get more dollars per acre
from slaughtered animals will ever appease
the greed of the next generation or win

their gratitude or win anything else for that matter
because what can you feel but pity
for anyone who turns their back on beauty

and thinks that they are on the path of duty
and kills the goose that lays the golden egg
and cuts off their nose to spite their face
and jumps from the frying pan into the fire
and thinks that the end justifies the means
and sells their heritage for a mess of pottage
and none of it amounts to a hill of beans
because now is the time to shift your rump,
rise with the bag of bread from this stump
and go to that crippled beast waiting beneath
the only tree, for he is lonely, he has lost heart
and it will take patience and love and art

and a trail of bread crumbs, petting and praise
and just an occasional shove in the rear
to get him downhill and away from here
through an acre at least of loss of hope
past burnt out piles of cannot cope
through tangled patches of barren strife
and the death makes wealth and wealth
supports the kids and wife, and all the other pities
of a young man's life, through the fence
the poor bugger squashed himself by dropping
the wattles he was worried would fall
and squash the fence.

Hannah Flaxon

Memory

I bear no rancour for the childhood bled
of innocence: I do not come with feud:
I am too stiff in time's vicissitude
to stem the swell: to resurrect the dead.

I only seek to scour my memory's ocean:
to restitute the image of a minute,
or more, or less: to plumb what depth is in it:
to apprehend where all its phantoms motion.

Not Marble, Nor Granite

Not marble, nor granite: no lapidation
is required: only something opaquer
than the meagre, sensual manifestation

of silence: not of slab and stencilled nacre:
for no signifier, none, can hope to fix
what makes of space and time a vain partaker

in notions neither flower nor crucifix
can intimate: these effigies at most
skin emotion: but no belated tricks:

none, can apprehend the vacuous host
by whom the ranks of masonry allot
mere landscape to memory: whose single boast

is: "No: it's not, it's not, it's not, it's not."

Stephen Edgar

Late Brahms

What was it about Brahms and funerals?
“How marvellous,” he wrote to Clara Schumann,
“To be staying with my parents. How I wish

I could take my mother with me everywhere.”
After her stroke, he hurried to get home.
Too late. She had already passed away.

When Clara died, the great love of his life,
The telegram was late in reaching him.
He dashed to the station, catching the first train

To Frankfurt, fell asleep, and woke to find
He had gone past his connection, and was bound
For who knows where. He finally arrived,

Frantic, exhausted, only to be told
The funeral would be taking place in Bonn!
A comedy of errors. It was Bonn

Where Robert was interred, and she'd expressed
Her wish to lie beside him. Bathed in sweat,
Brahms reached the cemetery, but the service

Was over and the funeral procession
In progress to the grave. He could not face it,
And shielded by a bush gave way to tears.

Who knows what anguish hides inside the heart?
A photograph records him at the scene.
Hard to believe the handsome and fresh-faced

Young man the Schumanns had embraced and hailed
As a genius stood there, now a corpulent,
White-bearded, ageing image of renown.

How poignant, though, the late piano pieces,
Some of those intermezzi, “lullabies,”
He rather fondly styled them, “for my sorrows.”

So Bruckner died, leaving his Ninth unfinished,
And Brahms, who lived hard by the very church,
The baroque Karlskirche, where the obsequies

Were being held, still managed to be late,
And lingered at the back near the closed doors
(Though some have said that he would not come in),

Tears dropping on his cheeks, a child reported,
Which seems unlikely, given his well-known
Disdain for Bruckner’s music. Did he not,

While scanning with a friend of his the score
Of one of Bruckner’s symphonies, once place
His thumb on the direction Misterioso,

Obscuring all the letters except Mist,
The German word for dung? Unless of course
In weeping he had someone else in mind.

“I’ll be the next,” one mourner heard him mutter,
“Inside a coffin.” And indeed he died
Only a few months later, on a day

Awaiting his attendance in good time.

Alex Rettie

Nightlife

Calgary, 1973

It isn't cheating if they never know.
I made sure Frank didn't. I'd only go
to Memorial Park on evenings he worked
late. The number 3, empty, bumped and jerked
across the bridge while I sat back and thought
of San Francisco. 12th Avenue's not
Folsom Street, but I could dream. I could score
most nights, behind a bush or the Boer War
statue staring sternly from its plinth.

A kid, half-frozen, making his eighteenth
birthday one that he'd never not remember,
Roughnecks whose steel toes stomped down September
leaf piles as I tugged down their grease-stained jeans.
Priests and policemen. Swish, pathetic queens
who'd settle for hand jobs. Each of them worth
a little time before I bussed back north.

Admirers

Montreal, 1976

She shouldn't have come. Café Cléopâtre
was just what Sister Marie-Madeleine
said: "une boîte d'enfer." Cloven hoofs clattered
as the sad danseuses-nues and lust-crazed men
dragged each other's sorry souls to Hell.
Not that she went inside the club, of course.
You only had to see the sign to tell –
a shameless Germaness, made even worse
by being pretty, exposed her youthful
hips and heavy breasts for every passerby.
She envied her brio, to be truthful.
Her freedom, too. She didn't have to try
to make admirers notice her. With God,
you give up everything for one small nod.

Paul Scully

The Detective's Almanac

None of trench coat, fedora, deerstalker, priestly vestments,
nuns' habits, an inscrutable Caucasian posing in yellowface,
a sou'wester and battered jeep or waddling spats spells
investigation, so too this thesaurus bypasses the upturned bottle
and marriage havoc, those tropical tropes, but embraces gumshoe.
Accoutrements don't measure mind. The city may be naked, the dragnet

trawled through low-life alleyways, demeanour made matter-of-fact in
the matter of fiction, but observation is never wanton,
slogged feet may stumble, but trample on, and minutiae adhere
to the sub-conscience-lightning bolts, pierce the ether as often
as moonlight is pickled viridian. Facts beget premise and more facts,
the human is always connective tissue and McGuffins are best left

onscreen. Death is labile and numerous, harm and hurt a chasm,
theft a cloying absence, omission the greater part of untruth,
emotions wisely forensic and guilt eternal, though necessarily
a found object in our trade. When the case is solved, the file sutured
shut, in exhaustion and sometimes error, I have inventory
enough of eyes and teeth, revenge is more prison than sweet harbour.

A Defiant Cosmos

Galileo was forced to abjure his belief in the heliocentrism of Copernicus by the Holy Inquisition under threat of torture and death.

The ocean of night is awash with petals and sprays of light. Though I peer through a naive tube fraught with mirrors, there is spark enough for both wonder and calculation, the latter should my failing eyes consent. Before, I placed this scope so images were cast on the parchment I had set below it and I traced the shadowed patterns with charcoal, a cartoon of the immeasurable. (An apparent paradox, no more.) The Creator turns all, counts as gnats our squabbles as to the Sun or Earth as axis, the other in orbiting thrall, yet shares His auspices everywhere to inch us towards knowledge. Yes, I recanted to spare myself Bruno's flames, but *sotto voce* screamed "*eppur si muove*" to the silence that comprehends, the mind that is the spheres.

James Matthew Wilson

Two Swans

The snow that stole in with the night
Gives back the grey sky's pearl of light
However poor, but finds an edge
Along the shoreline's drying sedge,
Where ice extends a fragile haze.
We've waited for these colder days
And got them now. My son and I
In boots and gloves have trundled by
To watch what sudden cold has wrought
Upon all moving things. We knot
Our scarves a little tighter here.
The lake's black sinks in us like fear;
The pale of snow shines like a sign
Of hope or purities not mine.

Our steps pause with the frozen reeds
And willow boughs, whose next year's seeds
Are distant thoughts. Together, we
Look up, and in the vague sky see
Two great and muscled swans in flight,
Their down a regal kind of white.
And, with each beating of those wings
The silence all about us rings.
That slow and certain pulse, that grace,
Which arcs above our fallen place,
Will carry them away from it,
The pearl-grey snow, the lake's dark pit.
We listen to such strength, such power,
Reign over that first frozen hour.

The Lord of Hosts before His Prophet

The Lord appeared before his prophet, throne
Burnished amid the hosts of seraphim.

Their masses swarmed, circling as leaves are blown
Across autumnal roads, save that their hymn
Did not lament the fading year, but praised
That presence out of whom all fullness blazed.

And, even as the others veiled their eyes
With the empurpled wings on which they flew,
Unceasing in their choir of undulant cries,
One came forth with a fiery coal and drew
It near the prophet's lips. Be clean, it said,
Your sins lie burned and buried with the dead.

But I can nowise speak. My mouth is sealed
By wings, caked over with impurity,
Smothered in earth beneath a stony field.
The darkness that my eyes perceive is me.
Burn it away, kind angel, you will not;
You leave this flesh, these lips, these eyes, to rot.

A Cat in Sunlight

He finds the sunroom radiant and warm,
And, piled sloppily on the sofa's crest,
A doughy afghan welcoming his form,
Which his paws knead before he sinks to rest.
He can't believe his luck, this young grey cat!
His life proceeds from somnolence to feast
And back again. He yawns and stretches flat,
Then licks his pelt until all's cleanly greased.
And you, who tell us one so plump—content
To bathe in heat and purr in perfect measure—
Would never, at another hour, vent
His sharpened wrath upon a mouse with pleasure,
It's really only you who drowse in light,
Who think that only what we love is right.

Dan Rattelle

Cows

I didn't know that cows could fall asleep.
Phlegmatic beef-lockers, I thought their consciousness
Suspended somewhere between the barn and sky
and hovered there in mute contemplation.
You see them sometimes, soul-vacant, shuddering hulks,
so dumb they pierce their browsing tongues with thistles.
But there they were, asleep, at least a dozen
on a hill one night, and you could see the heat-
distorted air above them, blurry stars
against a blurred horizon. Stars that took
all the time of life on earth to get here
found me gaping as I slowed and stopped
and would have crossed the road and electric fence
and climbed the hill to add my smidge of heat
to their collective. But I don't know which stars
were which, or what was just a satellite,
or if the moon was turning earthwards or
away or was indifferent altogether.
Why weren't they in the barn? Someone knows.
At least the sleeper, for a while, forgets
the things he never knew, or thought to ask.
In hell he's left to catalogue them all
like wander-lusting stars whose only rest
is in the eye of someone looking up.
They gather, transubstantiate, grow dim
like lightning when, at last, it touches ground.

Touch Wood

—*after an engraving by Gabriel Guay*

Poor limb. It doesn't know it's dead.
For two years now its leaves still bud

and then, like other trees, they fall.
Nothing's changed. It isn't special.

It feels the vigor still of sap
drawn up from phantom roots dug deep.

Men will call it "seasoned" soon.
Mushrooms climb its bark in rain.

Delusional, it still believes
in nymphs, it still believes that trees

can talk. It whispers all the time.
It says two words and thinks they rhyme.

Joshua Patch

Quail Vision

Say you're a quail. You drop your bread
and look at where a hollow bone
was hidden in the shadow head
of Moses Austin carved in stone.

Father of Texas, Pioneer,
you do not read, for now the light
has moved and brought his shadow ear
around and off that shaft of white.

Do you remember, little quail,
that fallen moment when the bread
was on your tongue, as bold as braille,
a tumor on your shadow head?

The shivered ulna of a hawk
is back to bleaching in the sun.
Beside it lies a narrow stalk,
stone Moses Austin's shadow gun.

That harmful thing is not alive.
You do not know that harmful thing
is hollow and is now a hive
for wasps and not a piece of wing.

Inside the chamber, one is still.
Its sleek antennae hang at ease,
brushing the cool floor. Shadows fill
a hiding place that nothing sees.

A shape of life is hid in you,
still cast by that sun-sallow limb—
a swooping life who cuts in two
the air between his prey and him.

The specter circles, then it drops.
A humming flutter from the bone
begins and stops, begins and stops,
regular as a ringing tone.

Your tongue recalls the fallen bread
as up and out the hornet springs
and whirls and rises and is red
and makes invisible his wings.

You track him till he finds the sun
and he and all things disappear.
Blinded you see, leaned on his gun
in restful state, the pioneer.

What is he signing with his hand
outstretched—his hand the carver made,
which led into the thistled land
his bone and flesh and stone and shade?

Humphrey Astley

Mentes (a Goddess Intervenes)

“Flashing down from Olympus’ height she went
to stand in Ithaka...”

—The Odyssey

“And the sometimes-abandoned gods confuse
with immortal essences men’s brief lives...”

—Geoffrey Hill

Penelope turns and screams. Mentes is gone;
and in his place there stands a female form
uncanny in its splendour, glistening
as though with sweat or surf, yet dry as stone.
Telemachus bursts in just as his mother
grabs up the gown to clutch across her breasts
and taking in the goddess with a trill,
drops to his knees acknowledging “Athena—!”

*

‘And who are you?’ Penelope demanded,
turning away from her view of the clear sea
to study her guest, though not with any relish.
The stranger looked at the queen’s stoic face—
the face of one suspended in cold grief
yet poised impossibly, a murmur
frozen in mid-air—and said ‘My name
is Mentes. I am your humble servant.’
And somehow he divined that this was true,
as surely as he knew he loved that face,
was humbled by its dignity, and found
himself declaring his intentions as
they came to him: that he would banish each
and every suitor from her home if he

could take their place. She laughed and waved a hand; then turned again to the tide that still withheld Odysseus. ‘Indulge yourself,’ she sighed.

*

By nightfall, he had driven every rival away by force of will alone, it seemed. Penelope and her son, Telemachus, observed the stranger going from man to man and raising them with little more than a hand on a shoulder, a word in an ear. Some went as though sleepwalking; others leapt to their feet and made for the door as though impelled by threats they hadn’t the time to repeat; one poor contender

staggered out and paced the shoreline up and down, berating it as though it blocked his path—until Penelope, disturbed by this display, had slaves lead him away. With each dismissal, Mentès turned to her with eyes of grey that deepened over the hours—as though infused with something of each suitor’s spirit—giving the impression he was more and more the man he claimed to be. “There’s something about this Mentès,” she confided, the prince replying instantly “I know... I knew it the moment I welcomed him inside.” And something in the way Telemachus regarded the stranger told her it was time; such that when this last-man-standing asked her hand in marriage, she let slip her assent.

*

The wedding night was humid, promising storms. Penelope and Mentès, man and wife, retired to the bedroom where they stood facing each other, speechless in the torchlight.

She kissed him, then took two steps back and turned

away to drop her gown, untie her hair.

The bridegroom hesitated—then undressed
until he was entirely exposed.

Penelope turned and screamed. Mentos was gone;
and in his place there stood a female form

uncanny in its splendour, glistening
as though with sweat or surf, yet dry as stone.
Telemachus burst in just as his mother
grabbed up the gown to clutch across her breasts
and taking in the goddess with a thrill,
dropped to his knees acknowledging “Athena—!”
The deity herself was perfectly still;
then slowly raised her hands to where her grey
eyes could study them, draining of shock.
And then she turned those grey eyes on the room.
“Beloved wife and stepson, it would seem
that even I, a Goddess, can be fooled
by living fantasies—those fairy tales
that captivate the teller with the told!
But since I have inhabited the heart
of the errant king, and shared in its desires...

Forgive me, and believe that I am changed,
as one made fluid by a reckless journey.”

Excalibur in a Black Hole

The hand that caught the sword decisively—
in spite of vacillation on the part
of that despairing knight to send it back
into the lake at last—to give it up—
the hand that bolted from the water like
a blade itself—that made a perfect fist
around the flailing hilt—making them one—
that hand is like the singularity

entrenched behind the deep's event horizon—
where everything we know is not quite lost
to time—but taken out of time itself—
sequestered by a godlike grip whose pressure
wrenches light—erupting glimmers in mist—
after-effects outlasting entire epochs—
the image of that hand before it dips
below the surface—knowing what must be done
must be undone—not saving ruined hopes
but catching the ruins when and where they fall—
that image of the hand indefinitely
held above the heart of the abyss
would say—if it could speak—There is an Order—

Marly Youmans

The Deepening Shade

His infant world was made awry,
And no one could explain
To little him the reason why

For night or clouds that send the rain,
Or why the flowers go
While death and cruelties remain.

The boy sensed darkneses that flow
Between a forest's leaves,
How mirrors lie, how secrets grow...

The man loved best of all what grieves
The soul with mystery,
So made a shadow realm of dreams.

In subtle reverie
He shaped its portal-gates and key.

Jenetta, Blessed

A ruined loveliness,
An eschaton of blight,
Reminder that to bless
 Is to take flight

From what is merely seen
To revelation's truth:
No longer laughing queen
 Of hearts, you're ruth

And harrow to men now,
Your essence pulled inside
And wordless, yet somehow
 You still abide,

Your riddling self a thing
Composed of flame and years
And silences that bring
 The gift of tears.

My Fox Wife

At dusk, when she peers out the tower glass,
The truth comes clear: I didn't capture her,
And never have I truly held her fast,
For she goes flitting on quicksilver feet
Through leaves and ferny fronds, inhaling sweet
And wildly multifarious perfumes
Of earth and clay, rejoicing in a mode
I'll never know, no matter what I do
Or how I seal her here with bolts hard thrown
And seven golden locks a fullness set
With not a locksmith for a hundred miles
To strike the locks and let her fling from doors...
So this remains my sin, to hang her round
With clasps of gold, to force her winding, up
And down the ceaseless tower stair all day,
To slide the combs into her coarse red hair,
To wrong her with this soul and body, mine
That she caresses with her own lithe limbs,
To load her with the anchor-weight of kits.
For though she feels a bright, invisible
Restraining cord between her heart and theirs,
Still twilight falls and dream-life flees away,
To lope and roll between the sea and cliffs,
Sharp verdant fragrances of scrub on skin,
Eyes growing greener as she wanders woods
Inhabited by strangeness, crowned by fogs,
So that my wife is more unknowable,
Impossibly far off, inscrutable,
Perhaps not even moving through my time
Before the red-gold cockcrow cracks the night.

And will I ever let her step beyond
These tower stones by day, so that she flies
Our children and my love forevermore?
Could I set free her feral energies?
I cannot pray to change, nor do I wish
To see some slender, glistening animal
Alight on nearby rocks to watch me pass,

One paw upraised, though not to greet or bless,
So that I long and wonder if I am,
Half-sure, unsure, glimpsing the shape of love.

Aaron Poochigian

The Elsewhere across the Street

Jam-packed Manhattan caves in and concedes the mercy of a public park, unlocked each morning. Just inside, ten-man stampedes divide all day into the waltz of blocked and blocker. Stars retire, and teams regroup with friends and strangers. Often rubber-bound ambition, heaved from mid court, whiffs both hoop and backboard and explores a wild playground

where nannies, dads, moms, and a few old-timers sit grinning at the gung-ho little ones mobbing the monkey bars and spiral climbers. Endlessly the hypnotic rim that runs around the mulch serves as a balance beam. “Watch me, watch me,” they chirrup, and their trebles whee on the swirl slide. They converge, tease, teem, and games of tag spill, clacking, onto pebbles

that pave a hideaway rock garden, where a three-time widow, Saigon-haunted vet, bag lady and insolvent “artist” share a ring of benchlike stones just past sunset. Our questions flicker in the nave of dusk until the keeper with the keys comes round. Back, then, we pass into the brisk, bright, brusque unrest where working answers can be found.

Monika Cooper

Mairi's Basket

So. Mairi's basket, withy lashes, brims
With fish so fresh that they're still swimming, live.
Alive and lithe, the single eel she stowed
Away with them. It fights to eat its tail:

Just one more bitter meal! But Mairi walks,
Her plait wound on her head, a shining crown,
Indifferent to ouroboros despair
In the wet cavern of her peaty creel.

An eel to her poses no ox-cart snarl.
Her kitchen boasts a very cleaving knife.
She'll treat him like the herring of routine.
Just one more, but more relished, cottage meal.

What's in the basket, Mairi? Charms and knots.
A monster maybe. Chunks of bog brick. Worlds.
What do you carry, queenly, through the fog?
Just one less baby-egg than last month's hoard.

Time taxes mother Mairi. It will steal
But gently, softly so she doesn't feel.
Mairi goes home to her ancestral stove.
She kneels to fetch the flame from soggy loam.

Burl Horniachek

Robinson Crusoe

i. On Alcohol

Praise God Almighty for sugarcane.
I'm thankful for water and thankful for food
But ten years alone, you want to stay sane,
Alcohol's close to the ultimate good.

Old Daniel Defoe would have you think
I spend my spare time just reading the Bible,
But I'd much rather sit, eat mangoes and drink
than gin up some one-man religious revival.

I drink when I'm frightened; I drink when I'm bored.
It's not like I now have some great other passion
to keep me away from this drink of the Lord.
So, before I leave off, here's my assertion:

If alone an island, your ship gone and sunk,
spend some time on working, but most of it drunk.

ii. On Cannibals

The drums come over the hills at night.
Full of menace, their voices carry
a long, long distance to where I now sit
and can't go to sleep 'cause I'm sick from the worry.

A few years ago, I found on a beach
a spot where these men had left skulls, hands, and feet
from all they had brought there to butcher, and which
they'd gone on so blithely to cook and to eat.

I then had to vomit right there on the sand,
and rage at such wretches who hold at low worth
the lives of their brothers. God, stretch forth your hand
and wipe all these men from the face of the earth!

There is not on earth so wretched a sinner
deserves to wind up as his fellow's dinner.

iii. on Friday's Arrival

Back home it was girls that said my amen;
about all such things there was not a dispute;
I'm no longer picky, like I was back then;
now I find goats are ridiculously cute.

Rules here are like those that you find in a prison.
Just don't let a man put it up in your rear!
neither inside your mouth, and then
you'll still have your manhood, all free and clear.

No, I must not fall, nor get sucked in,
or of hell's price I will pay the full sum.
Lord keep me from terrible, terrible sin!
(But I can't tear my eyes from his beautiful bum!)

Yes, all must agree, it is such a pity
That Friday's a boy, when his bum is so pretty.

Lucas Smith

A Good Death-Bed

The smallest watercolour in the house
Is a rocky shore with orange kelp and winding waves:
Point Lobos, from not just any angle
but from Robinson Jeffers' "good death-bed"
(or near enough). I won it at a silent auction
In Carmel, and later on that tired trip
The docent stood at Jeffers' bed and said,
As the tour group filed in, "Who would like to read
A poem?" No one, inevitably, raised a hand.
"You," she said. I read. His angel nodded
Appreciatively. It sits above our dining table,
Window to the window to the negligent sea.
I keep it there because it fits a perfect panel
Between two windows, far from any death-bed.

Sidodo

I picked it out when I was four,
the long-necked green stuffed dinosaur
My daughter drags across the floor.

At the Children's Museum shop,
"Something small", said Dad, but I looked top
Shelf and would not budge, would not stop

until it came down. She's named it "Sidodo,"
and it alone from her stuffed zoo
does not live in town or a video.

When will she know it can't be seen
Around the corner or up a tree,
Or in the lake lounging with the geese?

That day will come as we know it should,
Mournful and bright for her greater good,
But Sidodo lives, for now, as it should.

Outside the Fence, London Bridge, Portsea

A moving swatch is all it is at first,
outside the fence that cuts me off from un-
stable cliffs, as a weary sign announces.
Proboscis wriggling in end-times ant-swarm,
a spiny anteater, echidna in
scientific terms, digs deeper into sand
which scatters down that instability
towards the bobbing board-riders below.

Spectating, obediently behind
the fence, I watch its crow's nest snuffled hunt,
how it waddles at the brink of aerie
like you my baby at home dancing your way along
a coffee table rim, rapt, unruffled,
ignorant to any sign of falling.

Jake Dennis

Cheque Signers and Line Markers, or *Le Nouveau Palais*

“*Qu’ils mangent de la brioche.*” — Jean-Jacques Rousseau
1 Timothy 4: 14

Covering gravel white paint dries
while dollars chime through parking metres. Bob
marks lines as straight as Mondrian, eyes
a boss who strides across his canvas. Rob
writes fines for a car parked like a slob
in two bays. A young sculptor cries
employed to structure policies that rob
creative minds of flight and time. She sighs.

A musician in Admin delays the welcome guests
until HR is ready. Owners are heavy
with cake: Our staff are paid to give their best.
They smile. We strive to make our workers happy.
Enjoy security and workplace culture.
Join our palace: end your debts and hunger!

A.Z. Foreman

Pam's Accident

Pam drank then climbed the roof to die, unable
To scream Tom's name before the planet spun.
Her fall smashed through the rotting picnic table,
Ending a marriage where it had begun
To lie there with the horizontal rain
Filling the sockets of her painless head,
Her hair down like a soggy weather-vane
Pointing toward the free land of the dead.

The neighbor who had seen it, her pale brother,
Her husband and her bastard son combined
Their question on the thin-skinned latex glove
The coroner threw out like any other
Disposable. Drunk again? Yes. Never mind
That anything is possible in love.

Portrait of Alexander German
(Russian author turned Romani poet)

The past was over. Its last sovereign died
gunned in the chest, the children bayonnetted
by sulfurous powers that kept this man indebted
for kindness to those history-mortified
nomads he loved. Their language, blazed state pride,
nursed his ear. Brass bands in the fresh time's breeze
seemed heralds to the eschaton of peace
so his verse could lie honestly. He tried
to speak them civic, mindless how the slow
boils dribbled in the twisting smile of Fate,
how Freedom gaped and simpered from the snow,
and how Equality would fail a state
maimed on its own myth to an altered throne
that bayonet and gun had made their own.

The Matter of Principle

The period of principles can last
No more than winking years, or a decade.
Soon we must count our way to first from last.

Narrow your comprehensions of the past
As if in our grand-throated gasconade
The period of principles can last.

Though ballots will continue to be cast,
Though cheers yell honestly at the parade
Soon we must count our way to first from last.

Only when flag and comfort have harassed
An earnesty into our loud charade
The period of principles can last.

It is like counting sheep. The light has passed.
The mind has got to sleep or break unmade.
Soon we must count our way to first from last.

Remembering what we have had to blast
Will mark the fool. The wise should be afraid
The period of principles can last.
But soon we count our way from first to last.

Clarence Caddell

Cold Approach

He set off in the morning, Evereldown,
To meet them in their commerce or their play,
The women who called to him that Saturday
As every day and night, from Tilbury Town,
Its streets and aisles and parks. Their very own,
And beardless now because his beard was grey
(And surely they would like him less that way),
John thought it might be time to dye it brown.

The first was friendly... such a pixie nose!
No go. He walked and talked, if not with verve,
Then with sufficient, somewhat drunken nerve
To go on failing to perceive his gross
Effrontery, until a lady cop
(A siren? Hardly)—commanded him to stop.

Maryann Corbett

A Valediction: of Maintenance Work

Time was, we spent our muscle and our nous
propping an aging house
against the pummeling of its hundred years.
Clean paint, neat gardens, upkeep rarely in arrears,
sober as Donne. Yet now each year afresh
burdens us with new failings of the flesh:

Legs that once mounted ladders without qualm
tremble. Nor are we calm
confronting pipework; torsos will not shrink,
backs bend, or shoulders fold to grope below a sink.
Hands shake; eyeballs glaze over. What appalls
is that our bodies buckle like our walls:

plaque in arteries, soot in chimney stacks,
stubborn and troublous cracks
in teeth, in plaster. House! Ought we to call
ourselves—and you—new poster children for the Fall,
for that hard doctrine grumbling down the ages
that Sin's to blame, with Death and Rot its wages?

Entropy as theology—would Donne
jape at it? Wink and pun
as in his randy youth? Or solemnly
robed in his winding sheet, sing Mutability,
spinning into the praise of God in Art
the fact that all things earthly fall apart?

Or pull from air some bit of modern science,
yoking (even by violence)
thermodynamics, shortened telomeres,
transplants, genetics, sex, the music of the spheres?
Strange physics and wild metaphors—all grand,
but Rot and Death, plain woes we understand,

are better fought with checkbooks than with verse.

We'll sit, these days. We'll nurse
our beers, while able bodies stir their dust.

A distant siren whines—we sigh; it whines for us.

Let plumbers, painters, carpenters begin
this season's round of battling Death and Sin.

About the Authors

Humphrey ‘Huck’ Astley is a poet and musician based in Oxfordshire, UK. His works include the three-part album and stage-show *Alexander the Great: A Folk Operetta* (PinDrop/PRSF, 2013-15), *The Gallows-Humored Melody* (Albion Beatnik Press, 2016), and *The Quintains* (Rain over Bouville, 2024). His writing has appeared in various publications including *Agenda*, *The London Magazine*, and *Poetry London*. He is founding editor of *The Crank*, and an occasional critic. huckastley.substack.com

Mark Blaeuer lives in Percy, Arkansas. His poems (and occasional translations) have appeared in ninety-plus journals, including *Able Muse*, *Antiphon*, *The Dark Horse*, *Ezra*, *The Flea*, *Grand Little Things*, *Nimrod*, *The Orchards*, *Pulsebeat*, and *The Road Not Taken*. Kelsay Books published a collection, *Fragments of a Nocturne*, in 2014.

Clarence Caddell lives in the Western District of Victoria, Australia. He has authored a poetry collection, *The True Gods Attend You* (Bonfire Books, 2022), and edits *The Borough*: theboroughpoetry.com.

Monika Cooper is an American family woman.

Maryann Corbett is the author of six books of poetry, most recently *The O in the Air* (Franciscan U. Press, 2023). Her recent poems have appeared in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Image*, *the New Statesman*, and *Rattle’s Poets Respond* feature, and are forthcoming in *Eclectica*, *Raritan* and *J Journal*, among others.

Jake Dennis is a Burmese-Australian, Boorloo-based entertainer. He has had poetry published in ten countries this year. JD is a Writing WA Emerging Writers Program 2024-25 recipient and Big Sky Readers and Writers Festival guest who received a Haiku On Hay commendation. His chapbooks, *Gone* and *The Exhibition*, were published by QPoetry. [@PoetOfJazz/www.PoetOfJazz.com](http://PoetOfJazz/www.PoetOfJazz.com).

Stephen Edgar's most recent book, his thirteenth, is *Ghosts of Paradise* (Pitt Street Poetry, 2023). His previous collection, *The Strangest Place: New and Selected Poems* (Black Pepper, 2020) won the Prime Minister's Literary Award for Poetry, in 2021.

Hannah Flaxon is from the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales. By day, she works as a teacher of modern languages in the public school system. In her spare time she runs the poetry-themed website www.lookingtoleeward.se, where her work mostly appears. Her poetry has been published in *Quadrant*.

A. Z. Foreman is working on a doctorate in Near Eastern Languages at the Ohio State University. His translations from Arabic, Latin, Occitan, Spanish, Ukrainian, Russian, Old English, Irish and Yiddish have appeared in, e.g., *Metamorphoses*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Asymptote*, *Brazen Head* and the *Penguin Book of Russian Poetry*. He sometimes writes his own poetry if it comes to that. If you have a dog or even a pet fox, he would like to pet it.

Burl Horniachek is a Canadian teacher, poet and translator, and the editor of *To Heaven's Rim*, a major anthology of world Christian poetry. He was born in Saskatoon and grew up near Edmonton. He took Ancient Near Eastern Studies (Hebrew/Ancient Israel) at the University of Toronto, and creative writing at the University of Alberta with Nobel Prize winner Derek Walcott. He currently lives near Winnipeg with his wife, a surgeon, and their two kids.

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Aaron Poochigian earned a PhD in Classics from the University of Minnesota and an MFA in Poetry from Columbia University. His latest collection of poetry, *American Divine*, the winner of the Richard Wilbur Award, came out in 2021. He has published numerous books and translations with such presses as Penguin Classics and W.W. Norton. His work has appeared

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Dan Rattelle is a poet from New England and the author of *Painting Over the Growth Chart* (Wiseblood 2024).

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Paul Scully is a Sydney-based poet with three published collections, the latest being *The Fickle Pendulum* by Interactive Press in 2021. His poems have been commended and shortlisted for major Australian prizes and published in print and online journals in Australia, Ireland, the UK and USA. His website is paulscullypoet.com.au.

Lucas Smith is the co-founder of the publishing house Bonfire Books. His first book, a collection of short stories, will be published by Wiseblood Books in 2025.

Edith Speers is the author of three collections of poetry. Her work has been published in all the major Australian literary journals and many anthologies, and has also appeared in several Canadian, American and UK journals. She has won many literary awards for both poetry and short stories.

James Matthew Wilson's most recent book is *Saint Thomas and the Forbidden Birds* (2024). He directs the MFA program in creative writing at the University of Saint Thomas, Houston.

Marly Youmans has most recently authored *Seren of the Wildwood* (Wiseblood Books, 2023); a novel set in Puritan New England, *Charis in the World of Wonders* (Ignatius Press, 2020); and a collection of poems, *The Book of the Red King* (Phoenicia Press, 2019.) She divides her time between Cooperstown, New York and Cullowhee, North Carolina.