

# PENning

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A R R I V A L S



**DECEMBER 2023**



## FOREWORD

PENning is compiled by the  
Writers in-Exile Committee of  
Scottish PEN. Submissions are  
selected anonymously.

Welcome to our 'Arrivals' edition of PENning. The theme has inspired a wide range of responses and forms. Poetry of hope and happiness and despair, prose about memories, philosophical thoughts and fine fiction. We hope you'll enjoy exploring the authors' work and find lots to reflect upon.



Bachtyar Ali is an enormously respected Kurdish writer from Iraqi. We are delighted to focus on his work as our International Featured writer. His translator, Kareem Abdulrahman, a former political analyst with the BBC, has kindly provided an excellent translation of Bachtyar's thoughts on his writing processes.

We usually invite a guest editor to assist the committee in our selection. We didn't engage one this time and we missed having one. It's always refreshing to have another voice, opinion and expertise alongside us on our editorial voyage. Hence, we want to use this space to ask Scottish PEN members if they would like to volunteer to guest edit an edition of PENning!

There's only 2 publications per year, so you may not be called upon till a year far into the future, if we're inundated with kind offers. Do contact the PEN office if you'd like to leave your name.

For our next edition, we've chosen the theme of 'Tradition'. This should hopefully spark a terrific variation in responses, as our contributors generally come from many different cultures and backgrounds.

We hope you enjoy this edition of PENning and consider submitting work to the next edition. Submission requirements appear on Scottish PEN website.

**Writers-in-exile committee:**

Liz Niven  
Moira McPartlin  
Samina Chaudry  
Charlie Gracie



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# What I have learned from writing novels

## Bachtyar Ali

### Translated from Kurdish by Kareem Abdulrahman

Why do I write novels? Novelists are often asked this question. I don't think there is just one reason, or just one answer to the question.

Every author has innumerable motivations for undertaking the challenging job of writing a book. Their reasons often outnumber those that their readers or critics might have in mind. So much so that when I sometimes want to write about these reasons, there are so many that I give up counting them. But the first and most important reason for me is that humans, by nature, are storytelling beings. Humans can only grasp their experience as beings by recounting stories. What other creatures convey to one another through natural instincts, humans do by telling stories.

When I began writing my first novel over 35 years ago, I was living in a remote, mountainous Kurdish village on the Iraq-Iran border in the midst of wars and grave dangers. Neither I nor my friends had much hope of surviving the wars and threats. And yet, a secret and unknown force prompted me to write, to tell a story. To some extent, this proved to me that the desire to craft stories was a powerful force in my psyche. I've always wanted to tell a story, one that the world hasn't heard yet, one that's not separate from my own life or the life of those around me, but at the same time has one foot in the imagination; a story that readers may find very realistic although it remains fiction. When I

began writing back then, I was looking for evidence to prove that life is bigger than the small place I was in and the grave dangers that surrounded us. I was looking for a force that would help me to surpass the boundaries of time and place that were besieging me. Like many other younger people of Iraq at the time, I dreamed of fleeing the fires of the many wars, of travelling. Writing novels became my alternative to travelling. I've come to believe that actual travelling in the world fails to give me the feeling of freedom that I gain from writing novels. The many journeys that I undertake these days – by car, train, or plane – are insignificant and dull compared to the one that I undertake when writing a novel. When I initially began writing, I wanted merely to knock down the walls of the place I was stuck in, but writing novels always offers me more than what I might call “expanding our horizons”. By that I mean that, through novels, I don't just see the world more beautifully, but also more deeply and more expansively. When we tell a story, there's an intrinsically deep conflict; on the one hand, we want to leave the world we live in behind, while, on the other, we want to stay in it and say what is not said about it and recount what hasn't happened. The struggle between reality and imagination springs from this conflict. Reality always draws us closer to itself, while imagination pulls us away from reality. The process of writing is impossible without this conflict.

## 2

We grew up in a dangerous time - our country, our nation, was eating away at itself from the inside, internally fragmenting. It wasn't just life and love that were under threat but all human values. For me, novels were the force that stopped things from dying. Through my novels I keep summoning those things that are under threat, such as love, solidarity, and beauty. Literature is not only a mighty force against oblivion, indifference, and neglect, but also against death. We can rescue everything that political and historical disasters seek to obliterate or dispatch to oblivion. Literature is the ambulance of history. Whenever we want to rescue a value or beauty from perishing, literature can help us achieve that. Literature is my main weapon for confronting catastrophe.

## 3

I've published 12 novels so far. There's this feeling that I can't get rid of no matter how hard I try – namely, the strange feeling that the characters that I've created are out there, alive and well. This is an unpleasant feeling; it's similar to feeling that a large part of your family is living under different names with different identities and are dotted around the world, but you can never find them. A true writer cannot but believe his own stories. Having lived with our characters for so long, we write at such length about their psyche, appearance, dreams, and behaviour that they stop being mere figments of our imagination. Most people believe that novelists base their characters on real people they know well or have at least encountered, but the opposite is in fact true. I always start looking for the characters of my novels in the outside world after I've written the novel, after I part ways with the book. I always have this sense that they are real people that I have lost and can't find anywhere. For me, the real search for the characters commences after writing the novel.

## 4

The novel is the only art that can prove not only that reality doesn't manifest itself easily but that it also deceives us completely. Just as no two

artists can paint the same scene in the same way, so no two novelists can tell the same story in the same way. The reason for this difference isn't only that we perceive things differently, but also that things manifest themselves differently to us. When two people read a book and each understands it differently, it's not merely because two different people with different perspectives have done the reading. It is also because the book itself inherently includes the possibility of being perceived in a variety of ways. What I am getting at is that reality speaks to us in different languages. What astonishes me is not that my friend and I can see the same thing in two different ways, but rather that the same tree, bird, painting speaks to each of us differently. Novels are the art that taught me to understand the different languages things speak in. It's the function of all major novels to make us see the world differently, to make us feel, once we finish reading a book, that we have heard a voice we hadn't heard before.

## 5

Literature is the sole domain that pays attention to the voice of the individual. Understanding humans in general is different from understanding one person or several. In literature, we are not dealing with a generic image of humans but with one character or a handful of characters. Most of the sciences look for universal rules, and even philosophy focuses on the general and on wide-ranging problems. Literature is the only domain that dedicates itself to one person's problems at length. Science has tremendous power but suffers from a fundamental shortcoming, namely that it can't interpret individualism. While the sciences look for rules that are true in all settings, literature trains its lens on individual things, on the particulars. When an individual has a distinct experience that is immediately the domain of literature. I personally have chosen literature over science because it's the only form of knowledge that tells me “no human being will be repeated twice”; it's the only form of knowledge not looking for a universal law. Literature gives back value to distinct individuals, the exceptions, the rare phenomena, the human beings and situations that our other branches of knowledge don't pay attention to.





**Bachtyar Ali** is one of the most prominent contemporary intellectuals from Iraqi Kurdistan. His novels have been translated into Persian, Arabic, Turkish, German, Italian, French and English, a renown very few authors writing in the Kurdish language enjoy. He has written nearly 40 books, including 12 novels, as well as a number of essay books and collections of poetry. In 2017, he was awarded the Nelly Sachs Prize in Germany, joining past recipients such as Milan Kundera, Margaret Atwood and Javier Marías. He is the first author writing in a non-European language to do so. He lives in Cologne, Germany. (For a more detailed profile of the author, please see [here](#).)

**Kareem Abdulrahman** is a translator and Kurdish affairs analyst. From 2006 to 2014, he worked as a Kurdish media and political analyst for the BBC, where translation was part of his job. He translated Bachtyar Ali's *I Stared at the Night of the City* into English (UK; Periscope; 2016), making it the first Kurdish novel to be translated into English. His second translation, *The Last Pomegranate Tree*, also by Ali, came out in January (Archipelago Books). He is also the Head of Editorial at Insight Iraq, a political analysis service focusing on Iraq and Kurdish affairs. He lives in London.

مەن انەم یرەهە ئی ناموگ و لەکوو یسنجەلەم  
تیا یرەد یناکەش یرف یسنجەلەم  
و ەرئسەه ئیریەسەلە نوژۆرەب یناتش یرف وەئ  
!!ناکەلەگنەج وائ و ایگ  
یناکەلەخەژۆدەب ئتک ناوئێم نوەش یەئ... رای یەئ  
نەم  
هوەتیی شۆهر دەن رتایز الەتەلەم رەگەئ  
ئێرکان ۆب ادەنایاناکەنم ژۆد مەئ لەگەل مێرەش نەم  
رتنشۆر ویژ یناکەگن شەرپەلەم ۆت یگن شەرپ رەگەئ  
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نەم یناکەزاسانەیی نایەب یگنەدەلەم یگنەد  
تێبان رتەرودگ  
تینئوخەن گنەج یزاوئ ۆت رەگەئ  
مەئ یناکەلەوک یکسال نەم یناکەرئ شەم ش  
ماب رتیچ نەم! رای یەئ، تێبان ۆب نایەمەنەدەج  
ینەم ینینئوخ یەمانەگنەب یەباب وەئ، تیان شۆخ  
یڕد ادیانەت لەگەلەم  
دناکش ادناکەرایەبەکاخ لەگەل ینەم یدنئوس  
دناسرت ادناکایگ و لەگنەجەلەم یحۆر  
لەلەدرەگەل مەرتهپۆت دناجەقشەدەشاپەکرەس  
ناکەنافۆتو  
ووب مەدنای، امێچەب نەمەلەهوەئ  
مەمۆخۆبەکەیدەناژۆر وەئ، تابیدەب ادنەمەلەهوەئ  
هوبتەرگنەدەم  
ۆت کەن مەن، تێرژۆکەد ادنەمەلەهوەئ  
ناکەدنای و ینایەب و نەمەز کەوون، مەن  
ناکەدازنەمەج و وائ یرانەک کەوون، مەن  
تا کەد کەدی رایچەقشەدەمەرم یاودەکرەس  
راگزر ادوائەل کەنمەکرۆوب مەدەنایتشەک وەئ  
چەمەدرەم، قشەدە یاودەکرەس،! مینەمەک، نەکەد  
تا کەد کەدی رای  
(ادوائەل ناکەن فیلۆد رای کەو)  
یلەبەلەکەهوەئ تینئەمەدئچەنەمەلەهوەئ  
، ادناکەرئ تسەئ رانەکەل تینئەمەدئچەناکەدن لەب  
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!نلئەمدی ئچەمەئ  
ەلەکەهوەئ، نەبیەد ناکەلەلەدرەگەهوەئ  
، ادماحۆرەل تێچەد ناکەلەولەدرەگ

قشەدە یەدی سەق  
رگائەل نیتسەد وودۆت و نەمەزەب یەن یسەب  
نیگەرەم یناکەن ئوائ یدازیریپ وەدازنەم یرەهەئ  
یسنجەلە کئ لادنەم ینود یوایپ نیرتیبارەس نەم  
(ژۆت) و (لەکوو) و (اب)  
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حۆر یناکەتەفائەل مەرایسەرپ رەب  
،لەقەئ یناکەنتیفەل مەرایسەرپ رەب  
ەتسەج یناکەووب یخاەل و تەزەل یناکاتیدۆکەل  
مەل، تێد مەسانەەلەن ارادلەب وەئ ینۆب  
! ادەناموگ یەمەنەدەج  
ادەراوئ یناکەواسرتەناتس راد رەسەب نیقەدی  
هوەنشخەبەد  
... ناولەرەت یەم نیرتیریپ، پەسەئ نیرتریپ کەو  
... نیرتریپ  
، راکپارخ یزاب نیرت نیگمەغ... نرت نیرئز  
یۆخ ینووبریپ یناکۆسائەل کئ ئەدەش  
رگائەل کئ نیرفەب  
ەل کئ نولئکەب.. دراس نسا ئ کەو کئ گەرەمەب  
، تاخ بەد ناکەکس و رەبەل کئ لفق و یان شۆر  
، ئرەدەمەچەدەنایا فوئەیی توت مەئ یەچ و کەل  
یۆکشپ رەسەل ادناتووس یناوپەواچەل نەرم ۆب  
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زیکرە وەن ینەئەمەئ): مئ لەدەن ان یرئد  
!(هوبەن شینەن  
کئ گنچ تۆخ یناکەدی تیشەبەراگژۆرەل شۆت  
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، تەیریگەشۆگەچخا ب مەئ یمیکەج رەگەئ)  
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نووبەرودگ  
چەب نوەخ و کئ رەگامیگچەب مووب، ..ەکرەس  
! مینەدەهەک ئروبال  
!! هووچرەدئ ل مکی رفاکچ، کەریەس...ەکرەس  
مەئ یەناوەل مۆخ ینووب نچنەئ نچنەئ دەوئەب  
، نەم یخەژۆد... نەم ینەرم، هەمئ لەدەن اشئورەد  
ەمەوون و بۆدنی یژۆر  
ەکەلەف و ناکەشۆخ رەسەتەل لیم ناوئەل  
ادناکەتسەم

# Magical Times

## Dr Antje Bothin

I grew up in East Germany.

I experienced Germany's reunification as a child. I saw the country grow together.

I had been in the middle of a peaceful political revolution. A revolution in its very literal sense.

A change. East and West re-united. Happy faces.

Still, I always felt that I belonged somewhere else.

My academic journey led me to Scotland nearly twenty years ago. I was young and looking for an adventure. My first time away from home, all on my own. It was a scary prospect but I was determined to go for it.

Was I on my way to another kind of revolution without knowing?

I was an exchange student at the University of Paisley, as it was called by then, now it has changed its name.

In the beginning, I felt lonely and overwhelmed by this new country, some things familiar, some not so much, and discovered lots of new places. I went to Loch Ness and tried to see the monster. I also went to the mountains, saw the top of Ben Nevis. I began to love this new world.

At first, it was not easy to understand people's Glaswegian accents but I quickly got the hang of it. I think it should be called Scots now to be politically correct, actually a language somehow quite similar to German. No wonder I believed I could understand certain expressions. Later, I took part in a short



course on Scots at the Open University and enjoyed learning more about the language and culture.

I had a friend at university, who I went to visit years later. Only one - because people thought I was shy or I would not understand enough English. But it was not shyness that I had issues with, nor my language skills. Dealing with Selective Mutism (SM) did not make things any easier. It meant I was unable to speak freely in certain situations in public but I could speak normally at home with close family members.

At times, I struggled with my inability to communicate with people at university.

I felt ashamed. Weak and helpless.

How could I complete group assignments? I remember week after week sitting in class, next to my fellow group members, and I did not participate, we did not talk. I had no idea what they were doing and worried about my assessment.

Nobody cared.  
Time for a revolution of the education system?

Inclusion in education seems to work much better now compared to then. Thinking of the Equality Act 2010, reasonable adjustments and all that, this was an important kind of revolution, indeed. But have we reached the end yet? Is there room for improvement, still?

In the end, I managed to contribute a little and successfully passed the class. Coursework for other modules, I had to do on my own but that was fine. What struck me though was the fact that exams appeared to be easy in this country. You could get the questions from previous years, you could choose which tasks you wanted to work on during the exam. Clearly, the German academic scene expected more from you. Did I not learn folders full of information by heart, read lots of text books to deepen my knowledge and understanding of things? I was lucky these times were over. Of course, I still had to write my dissertation but written exams were a thing of the past.

Looking back, it probably was a great achievement.

I survived.

In hindsight, it seemed silly to have thought I could not get along in this new environment. Where would I stay? What about proper meals, shopping, cooking and cleaning? Existence. But it worked because I survived. Like the saying goes, what does not kill you makes you stronger.

I grew. I did not notice it at the time but it happened.

Experts say, it is good to challenge yourself to overcome fear and anxiety. I did exactly that. Over time, I gave myself harder and harder tasks to complete in tiny steps. Talk to people, start with one person. Just say hi. Such greetings are incredibly difficult for a person living with SM. Raise your hand. Speak up. Practise conversations.

As it is not very well known, other people never fully understood these struggles. That is why our society should be more aware of such issues and the

general public should be better educated about such things. I think that would make the world a much kinder place where people cared about themselves and others.

Or how can we expect our children to overcome this if most parents, nursery and school teachers, health care professionals and psychologists even, have never heard of it? This would require a structural revolution involving governments and organisations, workplaces, universities and schools. But do we also need a moral revolution on the level of individual thoughts and feelings so that stigma and ignorance could diminish?

I wanted to do something. I started blogging. I was a guest on podcasts. I volunteered a lot.

I wanted to take the lead.

I got involved with peer support groups because we are stronger together. Only we know what our suffering looked like.

Creativity won. I knew what I could do. I felt the spirit of a proactive revolution inside me.

We all can do something.

Nowadays, I love to look back at these magical times.

I began to write poetry. Poems about Scotland, about nature and many more things.

And about lived experience, mental health and SM. Telling people inspiring stories.

That was my own very personal revolution!

**Dr Antje Bothin** loves writing poetry. She lives in Scotland and has recently authored an inspiring book on a treasure hunt around Iceland. Her poems were published in several international anthologies. When not being creative, she can be found doing voluntary work in nature or drinking tea.



# Rebirth in the Highlands

## Javad Daraei

Once, I was a fearless pigeon engaged in an unequal war with brutal crows. In the midst of battle, I was grievously wounded and imprisoned in a solitary confinement, unforgiving cage. When I finally tasted freedom again, my wings remained shattered, and my dreams were in ruins. With a heavy heart, I embarked on a perilous journey into the unknown, a lonely exile with nowhere to call home. I searched far and wide, but the world seemed to reject me, offering no sanctuary. Only the rugged landscapes of Scotland opened their arms to me. It was here that the healing touch of this ancient land began to mend my broken wings and soothe my wounded soul. Four long years have passed since those dark days, and now, a newfound sense of joy fills my heart. I soar through the skies once more, unburdened by the weight of cages and the relentless cawing of crows. I've discovered the freedom to express myself without fear, without the stifling grip of censorship.

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**Javad Daraei** is an award-winning filmmaker, exploring the reality of life in Iran for people whose rights are systematically denied and who suffer under a regime with strict social norms, including LGBTQ and queer people, people with disabilities, women, and more. His films try to bring clarity and empathy to the plights of everyday people and seek to raise visibility of their realities. He believes that filmmakers should produce the best film at the lowest cost and learn all the parts of filmmaking professionally.

Today, I am free to write my own story, to paint my own skies, and to revel in the beauty of the world around me. The scars of the past have only made me stronger, and the land of Scotland, my steadfast companion, stands as a testament to the resilience of the spirit.



# Sisyphus Struggles: endless journey to arrive

## Nabaz Aziz

The concept of departure cannot be contemplated without the antecedent notion of arrival; indeed, the genesis of any journey hinges upon the audacious aspiration of reaching a destination. It is only by harbouring dreams, by envisioning that somewhere, an alternate portal shall appear, leading to another realm, another abode, that the prospect of departure even becomes conceivable. The very act of stretching one's dreams to encompass this juncture necessitates a cognitive shift, for it is here that we undertake the profound endeavour of not only thought but tangible action toward fulfilling our fundamental human need: freedom.

In the realm of immigration, freedom and arrival are inexorably linked, serving as the cornerstone upon which they mutually depend. The notion of setting forth on a journey, of embarking on migration in pursuit of newfound liberty, would never materialise in our collective consciousness without the profound belief in the very essence of arrival. Much like Sisyphus perseveres in his quest to reach the pinnacle of the hill, we too cling to the hope of reaching a destination. Yet, within this aspiration lies a perplexing conundrum central to the very fabric of our understanding: How can we definitively discern that we have, in fact, arrived? In simpler terms, what attributes of arrival grant us the coveted mantle of freedom? Have those who have arrived articulated and codified their understanding of freedom to serve as a yardstick for their own arrival? These queries encapsulate the multifaceted challenges that

confront contemporary emigration, encapsulating the very essence of the immigrant experience.

To delve deeper into the heart of the matter, it's imperative to unearth the intrinsic connections between arrival and freedom. As previously mentioned, these two concepts share a symbiotic relationship in the social context; when one is absent, the other loses its profound meaning and significance. While the physical dimensions of arrival are readily apparent – we encounter arrival signs at airport terminals and national borders, signifying a tangible shift from one place to another, nevertheless, the psychological impact of departure and the implicit expectation of returning to one's place of origin impose substantial pressure on our self-assuredness that we actually arrived.

In this light, the idea of arrival takes on a less distinct form within our consciousness. Paradoxically, arrival becomes the very point from which we departed, as the lingering sense of attachment to the place of departure prevents our cognitive function from fully embracing the concept of reaching a new destination. In essence, for arrival to truly occur, a distinct rupture from the point of departure is necessary, a rupture that bars any possibility of returning to the initial starting point. In practice, this kind of unequivocal break is elusive. Consequently, the realm where this transformation transpires is the arena of our thoughts and understanding where we hold and develop our

understanding and perspectives of our beliefs, these elements are shaped and formalized by social influences and social situations.

Hence, the existence of arrival hinges on the social context that moulds our consciousness and allows us to discern whether we belong within it or not. This sense of belonging serves as the cornerstone for the very essence of freedom. The interplay of arrival and freedom lies not only in the physical act of journeying but also in the shaping of our mental landscapes, where the concept of arrival acquires its true meaning and significance.

In short, the essence of what's been discussed can be distilled into two key aspects. Firstly, to enable the concept of arrival to metamorphose into a manifestation of freedom, there must be a pronounced rupture between the two points, severing ties with the place of departure. Secondly, for freedom to truly take root, individuals must forge a sense of belonging to society. This connection to society is the bedrock upon which individual consciousness is founded, a prerequisite without which our distinct awareness could not exist. However, within this paradox lies a conundrum: The very break that is imperative for the existence of arrival creates a state of consciousness that can seem detached from reality. In the absence of an active mental function, the realm becomes ephemeral, rendering freedom a mere illusion. Human activity is inherently intertwined with the tangible world and the social fabric, and it is within this interconnectedness that freedom finds its meaning.

It is from this vantage point that we glimpse the complex existence of the social entity known as the immigrant. Their journey is marked by an enduring struggle, a ceaseless race to uncover their identity, all the while ensnared in the liminal space between departure and arrival. In simpler terms, the act of arriving is inherently radical, sparking contradictions as it challenges the boundaries of our understanding and experience. This inherent paradox underscores the complexity of the immigrant experience, caught between the dream of arrival and the reality

of forging a new identity. In this situation, living between the act of leaving and the moment of arrival becomes a way of life. For immigrants, their entire existence becomes an ongoing examination, continually questioning the meaning of their lives. They find themselves weighed down by the choice to either remain within their current state of existence or to depart from it, often without a clear direction forward.

While our primary focus here is not on delving into the intricacies of psychological schools, it's still crucial to depict the immigrant's experience. In this context, Freud's theories are particularly relevant. His emphasis on the role of the superego holds significant relevance. The superego rigidly suppresses any desires or impulses deemed socially unacceptable, embodying a moral ideal. This framework moulds one's personality in a manner that makes deviating from it not just challenging but nearly inconceivable. Immigrants are acutely conscious of being caught between two points, unable to return to their place of departure and yet to fully arrive at a new one, this situation also underscores that the barriers preventing immigrants from moving forward to arrive are not solely physical constraints in the real world. Unconsciousness and the existing mental structure play a powerful role in this context.

From here on, it becomes evident that life for immigrants becomes an internal struggle that affects every part of their existence. During the toughest times, denial takes charge, making the idea of arriving seem impossible. This strengthens the bond with the place they left, and they start living a nostalgic life, like a distant shadow experiencing life rather than their own flesh and blood. In better cases, this may give rise to a wanderer, someone curious and hesitant to easily commit to any new agreement. They might act like they belong to one side, but deep down, they'll find it hard to trust any story.

On the flip side, some choose to pretend and create an idealized, imaginary situation. For those who refuse to accept that arriving is a profoundly

challenging achievement, this pretending allows them to believe they've actually arrived, overcome all obstacles, and live in a world of fantasy and daydreams.

Immigrants, as new additions to the social fabric of society, are a result of the complex nature of the arrival process and encounter a host of challenges that permeate various aspects of their lives. They aspire to establish a distinct identity, one that allows them to contribute meaningfully and occupy a role in their new community. However, due to the complex reality of straddling two worlds, as mentioned earlier, this pursuit becomes a formidable task. They find it challenging to harness their existing identity to forge a unique place in their new surroundings. Consequently, they tend to adopt one of two tactical approaches.

Some immigrants clasp onto their existing identity with unwavering determination, creating a strong attachment to their past. Others, in response to this conundrum, opt for a different route. They distance themselves from their previous identity without a clear path or destination in mind. What complicates matters further are the towering expectations thrust upon immigrants, stemming from both the world they departed and the one they've arrived in. The place they left behind often demands a steadfast allegiance to their former identity, while the new society anticipates an almost superhuman ability to seamlessly integrate. Neither side is inclined to compromise, adding to the intricate web of challenges immigrants grapple within their quest for identity and belonging.

As we grapple with this intricate web of experiences, we find ourselves bearing witness to a life that could be aptly described as an unending quest to reach a destination promising freedom for immigrants. What's intriguing is that this journey blurs the line between reality and imagination, where the boundaries between real and imagined lives become strangely intertwined. It's unclear if this life has the potential to carve out a distinct third path, running parallel to the two dominant worlds. However, as humans, we are innately driven to socialize, to forge

a clear and distinct identity that helps us navigate the currents of existence.

Without this identity and societal role, it becomes nearly impossible to navigate our social lives and find our place in the broader human tapestry. The immigrant experience lays bare these challenges and vulnerabilities, but it also presents a radical opportunity to rebirth the fundamental question: Have we truly arrived, or are we still on the path to a destination that is ever elusive? It's within this enigmatic journey that we find the essence of the immigrant's story, a narrative that continually poses this fundamental query, inviting us to contemplate the very essence of arrival and its complex relationship with freedom.

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**Nabaz Aziz** is originally from Iraq, having immigrated to the UK in 2016. Since then, he has called Glasgow home. He spent over nine years as a journalist in the Iraqi Kurdistan region, contributing political and non-fiction writings to newspapers and creating TV reports for the KNN TV channel. He has also been an active human rights advocate, challenging oppressive government policies. These efforts ultimately led to his decision to flee the country and seek refuge in the UK.



# Dead End

## Jenni Daiches

Light was fading when she found the house. It was just as he had described, low-roofed, off-white – more off than white, she thought as she sat in the motionless car, engine still running. A blue Skoda with a sagging tyre parked in front. A yellow plastic fish box by the front door with remnants of geraniums. A stack of logs roughly covered with plastic. No lights, but when she turned off the engine and opened the car door she could smell peat smoke. Beyond the house dark shapes of mountains, and a gate closed against the road which continued as a track disappearing into the gloom. To the west a thin gleam of orange was broken by more hills.

She stood uncertainly. She expected a light to go on, the door to open. Nothing. She walked up an uneven path. Peering through the window she could see the glow from a wood stove. She knocked. Silence. She knocked again, waited for several minutes, then turned the handle and stepped inside. Hello, she called. Calum? She found a light switch. In the stone-flagged passageway a pair of walking boots, two umbrellas and one glove. An old Barbour jacket and a once smart raincoat hung from hooks.

There were smells of damp and dust and peat. She pushed open the door on her right and stepped into the room with the wood stove, switched on another light. The room was small, one wall shelved with books, a sofa under the window piled with cushions and rugs, armchairs on either side of the stove. A low table strewn with magazines, more books and yesterday's paper open at the sports page. A mug half full of black coffee sat on a smaller table beside notebooks and what looked like letters. A sideboard crowded with photographs, Calum as a young man, Calum receiving some kind of award, Calum older with a look of gravitas and responsibility. And their children at various ages, splashing in the sea, their son playing the fiddle in a school concert, their daughter at her graduation. And there were Calum and Amanda posing somewhere with standing stones, Orkney perhaps, or Lewis. Cal? she called again.

She went back into the passageway and opened another door. A bedroom, empty of humanity but full of human stuff – clothes on a chair, books piled beside the bed, a jumble of male and female shoes under the dressing table. The room was cold and musty, the curtains closed. The next door opened into a cupboard, a shelf of spare light bulbs and plugs, a toolbox, a box overflowing with string and parcel tape. A broom, a mop and bucket, an upright vacuum cleaner, old newspapers, two pairs of wellington boots, one large, the other smaller. Another room, with a desk, a computer, a single bed made up – where she was to sleep, she supposed. Another wall lined with bookshelves and a filing cabinet. Papers and files on the floor.

In the kitchen, a narrow space with a small table and two chairs at one end, there were dishes in the sink. She touched the kettle which was faintly warm. She opened a cupboard door – tins of soup, baked beans, rice pudding. Ah, she said, remembering his fondness for tinned rice pudding. In the fridge two eggs, an inch of milk in a plastic bottle, several cans of IPA. A pan on the hob had something unidentifiable in it. She could just make out through the kitchen window a garden with trees beyond and beyond them the thickened darkness of the mountains

Where was Calum? She went back to the living room and sat down on one of the armchairs, relishing the fire's warmth. He was expecting her. He had phoned, out of the blue, could she possibly, feeling wretched, I'm not good at being on my own, he said. She knew that. It would have to be the weekend, she said. I can't take time off work. You're an angel, he said. You always were too good for me. Yes, well, she said. Saturday afternoon, then. I'll try to get to you before dark. It's a couple of miles beyond the village, he said, off-white house, a blue Skoda parked in front. The last house before the road ends. The only house.

It was Amanda's idea to move away from the city. He needed to focus on his writing, she said, get away from metropolitan distractions. She hadn't understood that metropolitan distractions were his lifeblood. So long as we don't give up the flat, he said. It became her mission, to find somewhere rural, somewhere remote, where he could finish the book he'd been working on for more than a decade, where she could grow things, offer her services to a small community – she'd been a social worker until burn-out compelled her into early retirement. So she'd found the cottage and they'd made the move, returning from time to time for spells in the city until the money began to run out and they had to sell the flat. And then Amanda became ill, and then she died. I'm not good at being on my own, Calum said. Why don't you come for a few days? You'd like it here. He was looking out of the kitchen window as he spoke, at the mountains he'd never climbed, never would climb. A problem with my knees, he explained. It was Amanda who got friendly with the local teacher who knew the hills. During that first summer the two of them set off almost every weekend. Amanda got to the top of every peak she could see from her kitchen window. It wasn't right that it was Amanda who got ill.

She was tired after the drive and now, sitting in the warmth, had no inclination to move. If Calum had just nipped out on an errand – but it was two miles to the village and the store she had passed – surely he'd have left a note and now been on his way back. Or she'd have seen him on the road. She got reluctantly to her feet and went to the front door. When she opened it the cold grasped at her. A sleety rain had started to fall. She stepped out and walked down the uneven path but it was quite dark now and she could see nothing. She quickly returned to the warmth and looked at her watch. I'll wait half an hour, she thought. Maybe make a cup of tea. Back in the kitchen she switched on the kettle, found a jar labelled tea bags and washed one of the mugs in the sink. She was hungry but couldn't find biscuits and the end of a loaf in a musty-smelling bin didn't tempt her. She took the mug of tea back to the fire and added a log to the smouldering red. She sat in an armchair cradling the hot mug. The only sounds were occasional spits and shifts from the stove.

Something might have happened. He could have gone out for – what? – and fallen, knocked himself out, broken a leg. Perhaps she should walk round the house, search the garden. She had a torch in the car. But why would he have gone out knowing she was due to arrive? If he'd needed firewood he only had to go as far as the front door. A sound at the window startled her, the hand holding the mug jerked and tea was nearly spilt. But it was only a gust of wind flinging sleet at the glass. Minutes passed. What should she do? She wasn't going to spend the night in the house without him. She wasn't going to drive the five hours back to the city. The pub in the village – did it have rooms?

Perhaps it was deliberate. Perhaps he'd set it up, invited her with his plea of loneliness intending all the time not to be there. But why? And where? What was the point? Surely he hadn't... She shivered. Could he have planned a dramatic exit, that she would arrive and find him gone and phone the police and mountain rescue and they would find him dead on a mountainside he'd never climbed? Or perhaps not dead. A cry for help they would say as they carted him on a stretcher down a stony path or perhaps winched him up to a helicopter. Suffering from exposure but he'll live. A lonely man who had lost his wife – lost two wives, if truth were told, one to death, the other to neglect. She laughed. That was being kind. She had closed her eyes for a long time to his absences, his excuses, missing the children's birthdays, vaguely important meetings in other cities. Until it all came out over too much whisky late at night. She leant a little closer to the fire and



sipped her tea. You know as well as I do it's not working, he had said. Do I? His pupils were dilated, by alcohol or perhaps something else. It was a May evening and the smell of lilac drifted through an open window mingling with the whisky aroma from her glass.

So that was that. She hadn't argued, pleaded, tried to dissuade. He moved into Amanda's flat, saw the children at weekends. They objected at first but soon realised that there were treats and good times. Amanda took them to McDonald's and bought them stuff. Then all of a sudden they were teenagers and Calum and Amanda didn't know what to do with them. And now they were grown up and gone. They didn't see much of their dad now. He phoned sometimes and complained, as if she controlled their children's lives and it was her fault that now they were hundreds of miles away and home was hardly the city they grew up in and certainly not a cottage in a place they weren't sure how to pronounce.

And sometimes when he was back in the city for a few days, he'd suggest they meet for a drink, and sometimes she said yes, and sometimes she said no. After a couple of pints it became clear that he was not happy in his Highland home. Amanda would come in from a bracing walk and say she had seen mountain hares or an eagle, while he had been trying to write a sestina instead of the next chapter of his book. It was more than seventeen years since that evening in May. She got up from the chair and took her empty mug back to the kitchen, where she washed it and the other dishes left in the sink. She tidied a bit, wiped the surfaces, back to the living room and another log on the fire. It was over an hour now since she'd arrived. She looked out into the black night. Nothing. No sound except the wind. She would have to find somewhere to spend the night.

She put on her coat, checked the car key was in her pocket. She was at the door when she said out loud, I'll leave a note. She found paper and a pen. I was here, she wrote. A wasted journey?

She got into the car, started the engine, headlights on. They showed the closed gate and the track carrying on into the hills. She turned the car cautiously and drove slowly back to the village. When she saw that the pub was called the Drovers' Inn she stopped and went inside. There were a few people in the bar. For a moment she thought she might find him there, sitting companionably with two or three to listen – he'd always liked an audience. But there was no recognition in the curious glances cast in her direction and she didn't like to ask if he'd been seen. She was very tired. It had been a long drive.

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**Jenni Daiches** has published three novels, most recently *Borrowed Time* (Vagabond Voices), a few stories and two collections of poetry. She writes non-fiction on literary and historical subjects as Jenni Calder. She is a trustee and past president of Scottish PEN. She lives in South Queensferry where she is currently involved in a community project as part of Scotland's Year of Stories.

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# Onwaird

Donald Adamson

The auld hame A passed yestreen  
isnae like it wis. Whae awns it noo  
hus covered it wi a thick scarf  
o pines as if hidin frae the warld.  
The rowan tree that gleddened ma hert  
wi reid rowth wis hackit doon lang syne.

Some friens frae ma bairnhuid  
that A thocht A kent  
got tanglt in the briars o thir days,  
heids fou o scratchy ideas  
that hae gane their awn gate  
faur frae oor auncient commonalities.

A'm chynged an aa, chynged  
this mornin whae whit A wis last nicht  
and whit's the herm? It's whaur A am,  
a destination that A say is 'noo'  
and the morn's morn will bring  
anither, aye arrivin, traivelin on.

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**Donald Adamson** is a poet and translator from Dumfries, writing in English and Scots. He currently lives in Tampere, Finland. His most recent collection, *Bield*, was published by Tapsalteerie. He has been a prizewinner in many poetry competitions, including first prize in the Herald Millennium Competition (Adjudicator Edwin Morgan), the 2022 Sangschaw Translation Competition, and the 2020 Scottish Federation of Writers Competition.

# Majella

Anne Connolly

She arrived at Westminster  
twelve years old and luminous  
pixillated on the cold stone,  
about to be a cold case beyond  
the warmth of justice.

Forty-seven years span the time.  
She should be fifty nine  
and like the countless children  
birthed into eternity by civil war  
her story is the truth.

But justice swaddled into oblivion  
by the Mother of all parliaments  
compounds atrocity, remoulds  
that blind balance into a Statute  
of Limitation.

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**Anne Connolly** is an Irish poet settled for many years in Scotland. Her work has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies and "Feather," her fourth collection of poems with Red Squirrel Press, will be published in September/October 2023. Anne has been both the Makar and Chair of the The Federation of Writers (Scotland). She enjoys reading and performing her work at various festival and events throughout these islands.

*Parliament approved the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill on 6th September, 2023 and it awaits royal assent. It thwarts any possible legal action.*

# Going Home

**Nabin K Chhetri**

When all the work and wait is done,  
 I long to go to my country.  
 In October, the mud on the paddy fields dries up,  
 the earth sends a fragrance  
 I knew as a child.  
 The village roads wait for people  
 from Kuwait, the UK, Australia, the US.  
 The hibiscus and marigold  
 scatter along the sideways.  
 The smell of clothes, freshly-stitched,  
 hangs in the air as children pass by.  
 The nights fill up with tinsel lights.  
 Buses go with people on the hoods, and goats.  
 The stench of diesel in the marketplace  
 reminds me, I can't belong elsewhere.  
 The little happiness that arrives  
 when I enter that creaking wooden door.

# Evening at Loch Lomond

There is a forecast for rain.  
 A greyness gathers above the loch  
 but that is on the east  
 where the watercourse narrows down to a river  
 disappears into the wood.  
  
 On this side, a light-break  
 strikes the cloud.  
 I pitch my tent –  
 a slight drizzle begins  
 and then a rainbow appears on the hilltop.  
 No sooner have I set up my folding table  
 the microlite chair  
 put the logs in the firepit  
 than the early evening moon hangs in the treetops.  
 The bay glows like a lantern.

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**Nabin K Chhetri** is a poet and writer based in Scotland. He graduated with an M.St in Creative Writing from Oxford University and an M.Litt. in The Novel from the University of Aberdeen. He is officially recognized by the Scottish Book Trust and has conducted workshops/readings in various institutions, including Oxford University and Robert Gordon University. He can be reached at [nabinkchhetri.com](http://nabinkchhetri.com). He is a director of Mist and Mountain Creative Residency [mistandmountain.co.uk](http://mistandmountain.co.uk). He lived in Aberdeen with his wife and two children.



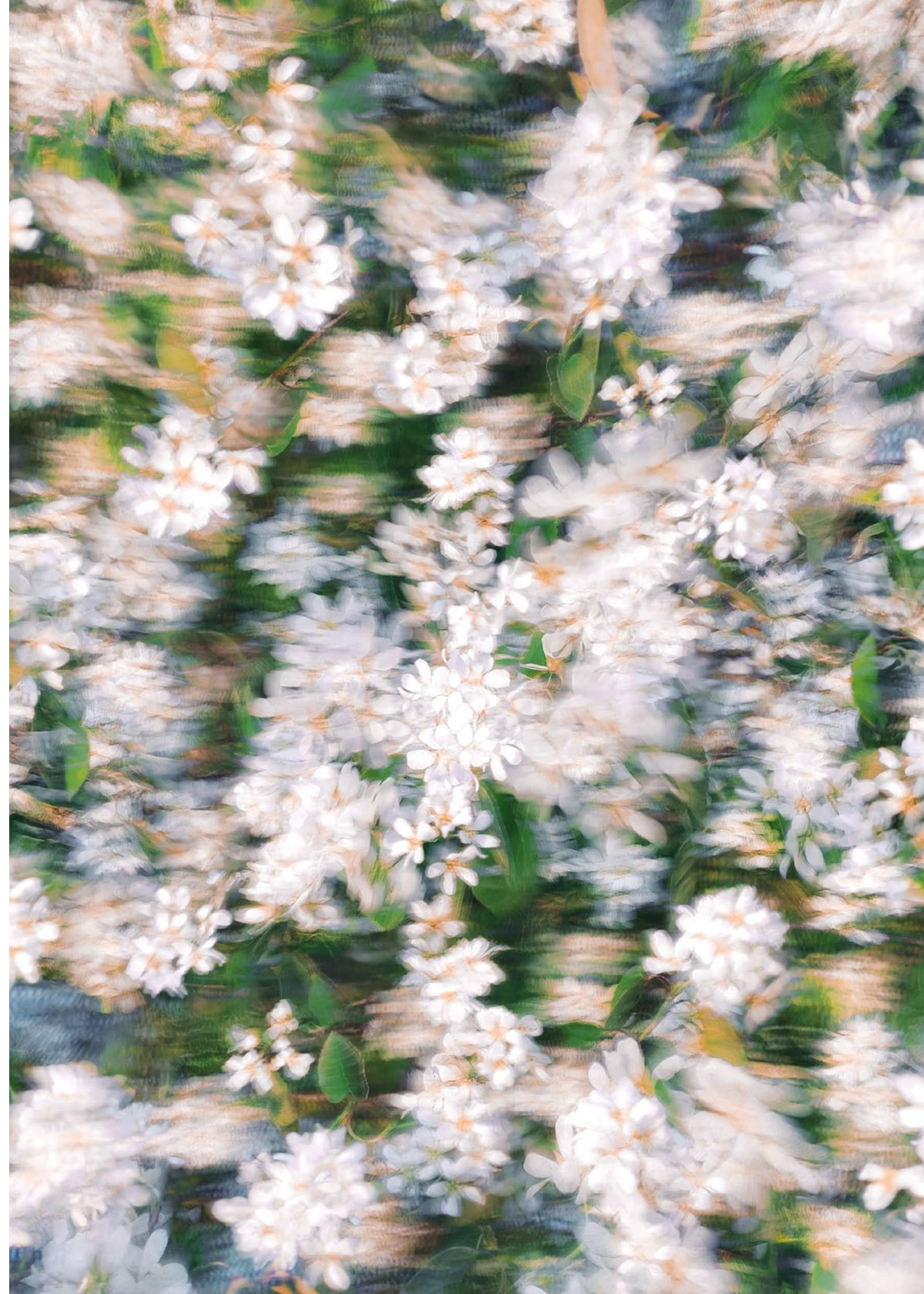
# Spring Arrivals

## Gerda Stevenson

You left forever in Midwinter,  
your legendary mane, once black  
as the lifetime's river of ink you penned,  
a snowdrift on the pillow.  
I wanted you to stay forever,  
in the loose use of that lovers' word –  
the miniscule span of 'till I die' –  
so far from its real essence:  
the absolute permanence  
of your infinite, fathomless absence.

New Year has blown in and gone,  
snow forecast, and every second, it seems,  
I'm flying a hundred miles and more  
to where you lie deep in loch-side soil  
beneath emerging snowdrops,  
your ears I'd trace with my fingertips –  
those perfect auricles – deaf  
to the lapping shore, eyes blind  
to the wheeling birds above you,  
no light ever reaching  
your retinas again;

while here, as dawn breaks,  
beaks tap at the chimney cowl  
where once they built their nest –  
wired over now; yet still they tap, tap  
at the remembered place, veiled notes  
spiralling down the flue's throat  
waking me to their signal of Spring.





# The Right Time

I can't tell when it might arrive –  
the right time to take your clothes  
from our wardrobe, slip my hand  
under the rail support – the divide  
between 'his and hers' – where  
your shirt still strokes my dress.

When will it come – the moment  
to pluck your hat and coat  
from their hook on the door,  
empty the bulging pockets  
of their reliable supply –  
that meticulous ritual you had  
of folding tissues for your next walk  
in nose-watering Pentland wind;  
when to remove your dressing gown  
from its warm bathroom corner  
those listless folds (the scent of you  
still in their weave), waiting  
to receive your nakedness  
after a shower?

For months I've left everything  
exactly as you placed it – your cup  
on the kitchen windowsill,  
boots in the hall ready to step out  
with the hazel staff you cut from a branch,  
its head polished by your grip;  
old bus timetables, spectacles  
nestling blind in their worn case,  
as if giving this silent host, bewildered  
by their sudden uselessness, the chance  
to become accustomed to your lack of touch.

How long will it last, this private pact  
between them and me – our unspoken  
hanging on, afraid of your final erasure?




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**Gerda Stevenson** – award-winning writer/actor/director/singer-songwriter, her writing widely published, staged and broadcast; stage play *FEDERER VERSUS MURRAY* toured to New York (published there by Salmagundi); nominated as MG ALBA Scots Singer of the Year for her album, *NIGHT TOUCHES DAY*. Poetry: *IF THIS WERE REAL* (Smokestack Books), and *QUINES: Poems in Tribute to Women of Scotland* (Luath Press), both also published in Rome by Edizioni Ensemble in Italian translations; *INSIDE & OUT – the ART of Christian Small* (Scotland Street Press); *EDINBURGH*, with landscape photographer Allan Wright (Allan Wright Photographic); collection of short stories, *LETTING GO*, and latest poetry collection, *TOMORROWS'S FEAST* (Luath Press).



# Souvenir

**MT Taylor**

We packed small gifts, wrapped in hope  
of bringing back something of where we were then

but none do  
the way this blouse traps pollen and dust  
and compels a return  
to an unmarked road on a mountain border  
where the air was heavy with thyme

where boys played soldiers  
mocking in untranslatable laughter  
our fear of their toys

none do  
the way I hear  
in the click of this old suitcase unfastening  
the cock of a gun.

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**MT Taylor's** work has appeared in *Gutter*, *The Interpreter's House*, *Glasgow Review of Books*, *Ink Sweat and Tears*, *The Lake*, *Algebra of Owls*, *Ofi Press*, *Under the Radar* and *Northwords Now*. She has worked as a librarian in Fife, Aberdeenshire, and Edinburgh, and now lives in Glasgow. She has four children who still talk to her, and she still interrupts.

# Jiandong Airport

胶东机场

**Xinyi Jiang**

you smile, touch my upper back  
take my case's handle, ask my flights  
*how long it's been?*

a trace of grey on your tan  
your spot scars deeper  
thinning patch on your crown bigger

*washed*, you peel the lids open  
*how they don't taste the same*  
put them on my laps, tell me your secondment

since leaving navy, tales of local  
GDPs, corruptions, aborted projects such as  
another dock for yachts never to moor beyond

the tinted windows and crash barriers  
across Jiaozhou Bay as dark red juice ripened  
in polytunnels bursts between my teeth

# Heaven Emperor Court 天帝山城

up the winding cobbles  
overloaded trucks of watermelons  
engraved SimSuns, gilt patchy

an orthogonal maze gridded by rampless steps  
potholed paths zigzagging cars vans three-wheelers

I drag my case up down left right east west  
pause again under an empress tree from  
whose crown of three-lobed hearts  
lime green puss moths hang  
cicadas sing

between slurps of sesame noodles  
a melamine bowl bigger than her face  
she looks at me head to toe  
*Who am I?*  
*Who am I looking for?*

the boy says nothing but taps his watch  
which flashes and ding-dongs  
till my mother's rasping wai from  
one of the boxes of concrete and bricks  
barred windows, steel doors



# Columbarium

## 浮山怀念堂

the steps are steep, uneven at places  
under crushed cans smashed bottles wilted flowers

towards an arched gate, a gilded plaque  
a gable of glazed tiles – a few missing

the distant granite hill a baldy red  
mottled brown, still I'm thinking of

Sun Yat-Sen's mausoleum, September 1988  
you had a work trip to Nanjing

never had we two posed side by side  
how I looked like you

how along cypresses and ginkgos  
you admired its grace compared to

Mao in the middle of Tiananmen Square  
against his wish – how about your wish

to be scattered in the sea?  
how long will you wait in a wood box

draped in a red silk in a cube locker  
unless on a day like today

on the bench of the furthest gazebo –  
chrysanthemums are laid

sticks lit and relit, crumbling to ash  
joss paper worth billions doused in

53 ABV Maotai you never cared for  
whirling in a choking cloud as a sour-faced

guard is approaching, pointing at the sign  
we're fetching the peace-making fags –

are you laughing? I am –  
tears down the cheeks they say are yours

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江莘莢 / **Xinyi Jiang** was born in China's coastal Qingdao and studied in Nanjing and Shanghai. She was a lecturer in Fudan University before moving to the UK. Xinyi discovered poetry when studying with the University of Dundee.



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