



Poems

John Ennis and Giovanni Mangiante

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John Ennis

“Boy Among Sparrows”

He recalls Tony’s hay benchknife that carved halfmoons and a white-beamed sun over wintry boughs on a hurley Sunday cousin Michael did not come.

They were the days of family and grain farms, of oats tall in the stem lodged by a rogue shower, the end of August when the first gale blew, when crows and pigeons glided down in flocks.

We children were dispersed to scatter them. Each midland house with its own tilled ripe cornfields, grain scattered freely in yards of rhode-island red and sparrow; grain fed to pigs and calves and ground

in barns where the new electric grinder spread a fine white flour dust even out the door. Contesting the troughs with turkeys, ducks and geese, untameable, domestic, close and yet distant,

the sparrows held assemblage over him, as a child in the yard, up in the great elm. Sparrows battling with white wyandottes for the evening victuals. Their cheeky skulls are long fallen into nettles, mosses of the dyke, covered in the ground

like uncles, fathers, mothers, freckled cousins
 let loose in the back meadows where sparrows
 of the air rose up for us in flocks. Sparrows
 no strangers then in blue changeable skies.

. . . *and the young calf dying*

I do not recall what malady left him prostrate
 kicking, made him bawl so. It happened all the
 time. Half a century before, children fell down
 in swathes from diphtheria. Staring at us, through
 us, we cradled his head with an armful of fresh straw.

Whether fattened animal or old man, Westmeath
 was a county where death called like the postman . . .

. . . After supper we buried you, sorrowing one to
 the other, for you never bothered sheep.

All the sunlit afternoon you lay, my brothers'
 collie, by the garden hedge, but out in the south
 -facing river field, your white teeth bared in little
 ivories for your tongue, glossy bluebottles tinkling

one open almond eye; late August, round then,
 for sweet pippins amid magpies up in the tall
 apple trees ripened red and unseen,
 the orchard side of the hedge with the bitter crab,
 your bushy tail rigid, your thin legs too. Corn was
 on the noisy mind of reaper and binder gold barley
 bearding me like an older brother. And I who loved
 to raise up my two arms cross them

round your ruff neck, rub your slender nose that
 tapered, touch the black-tipped ears that looked
 forward hurried past you in the hot sun. Bluebottles
 lit all over me. Magpies in the apples cackled for your
 other eye and I was so afraid in my heart, of the dead . . .

. . . Always on the dusty summer roads, after
 dinnertime when the men had left, they'd
 call at the kitchen door. Males in flight, they
 knew the short-cuts parish to parish. Said little.
 Sometimes word travelled

(de-frocked and priest, another lost his farm
 in poker). Sussed out haysheds for a doss, they

sat at the table for a bite of bread. Once sawed
a whole pan loaf for one till our eyes met over
first names.

Something wrapped for them, a little pep then
in their step, their stained windy greatcoats filling
out like Suibhne's wings, they tramped the roads
to put down some other house miles away where
they might expect the same no questions asked.
. . . *that whirr-whirr-whirr of wing . . .*
that high-pitched honking in the sky passing over,
mostly sideways wild geese like a correct tic on a
copy at school from the northwest south south-east
across November trees gone bare.

In their long necks a virility of ice-ridden times, a
promise of snow for us in their grown-up plaints.
Their wings like the wings of ballet dancers grown
dancers' wings in the now music-less heavens, but
we heard them on their November skies

to the green sloblands, no nuisance to cattle or sheep
-intense acres to peck and peck long intervals within
ease of flight and the sea. At school, History caned our
arms and legs in short pants with dates old finger-gnarled
Mammy Burke said were important

and she breathless in her chair by the fire.

Neighbour met neighbour stopped on the road,
their legs crooked over the bars of bikes looking
up too late to the empty heavens. As kids we wished
them like foreign cousins back till they were specks
lost on the sun's horizon:
Look at them, look at them, we cried . . .

. . . You, high up, stretching to each fruited twig,

a rising October moon east of our damson tree
a nip, then, in the freshening east wind from
Murtagh's, you, shirt-sleeved, up the branches
after the tartiest

your fingers nimble as talons closing on the
velvet harvest, gathering the last of the damsons
the indigo sky at your back. Balanced on a hook
from a trusty bough the galvanized pail filled, or
nearly so, with tangy fruit

goodly-sized and wild; you reached out to whet
 your tongue, Tony, spit out the stone. A pale and
 placid midland moon rose higher with a blackbird
 cry. With ease of limb you lay horizontal on the
 boughs you loved,

on branches you could depend on to gather your
 knees round; lowered a full bucket to a boy in corduroy.

“Hussein Salem”

*the ice-cream man, shot in the spine, hundreds of metres from the Gazan boundary fence
 14 May 2018*

If you need flowers go search the Burrens of the Dead.
 Here there's only hot rocky acre after acre and a wall
 and the dead and profligate dying who will never scale
 it. As to what flavours he had, we have no word.
 Probably white, lots of it, plain's your only man.
 And as to your delicate posies of remembrance
 admire them elsewhere sprung from dry turds

of verse. But *he* had a name this middle-aged ice cream man falling—
 Hussein Salem Abu Uwaida —amid an enormous sadness in the eyes of kids
 at his side, lowering their silly sling-shots a minute for a lick.
 Remember Hussein Salem, you killers of the ice-cream man,
 for across the endless aeons to come we might need him
 calling, reaching over for just one lick. But Hussein Salem's
 too far.

Way too far off.

No reaching him.

We're too late.

“On Meeting John Ennis”

Giovanni Mangiante

I met Professor John Ennis, native of Westmeath (1944), through social media, and we quickly began a pleasant correspondence by e-mail. Being the solitary man that I am, I always find myself looking forward to receiving a new message from John. There is great value in the experience and wisdom John has been imparting with me throughout our time talking.

“When editing, edit in empathy with the self that first wrote the piece” says John, “Keep the creative, intuitive artist a few steps in front of the self-critical poet” (private correspondence with John Ennis 2021).

With 21 poetry collections (1976-2020) to date, a former board member and editor of *Poetry Ireland*, John earns a place as a powerhouse of Irish literature. If you don't think so just ask 1995 Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney. An Honorary Doctorate and Patrick Kavanagh Poetry Award awardee, Professor Ennis, I hope, forgives all of the run-on sentences and absentee/misplaced commas in my work.

On the matter of rejection letters, John writes: “... at worst they can say ‘Sorry’, then write your next poem on the rejection slip” (private correspondence with John Ennis 2021). Which brings to my mind how Stephen King impaled his rejection letters through a nail in the wall, and once the nail no longer supported the weight from the slips, he got a bigger nail. “If you don't succeed, get a bigger nail”.

John's poem “Boy Among Sparrows” (2020), a series of fragments edited from larger sequences, takes us through a journey of sorrowful, nostalgic, and hard-hitting imagery – a testament to the passing of time and the fragility of life. The first encounters with death. The first tears for what is never coming back, and a reminder in-between of how unforgiving the times before us were:

[...] Half a century before, children fell down
in swathes from diphtheria. Staring at us, through
us, we cradled his head with an armful of fresh straw.

Whether fattened animal or old man, Westmeath
was a county where death called like the postman . . . (“Boy Among Sparrows”)

In “Hussein Salem” we are met with the tragedy of humankind and its senseless armed conflicts. The piece emanates undertones of anger towards the inability to make those who pull triggers, understand. If we stood in front of the collective-tombstone of the unrightfully fallen, the epitaph would read:

“If you need flowers go search the Burrens of the Dead”.

Giovanni Mangiante

“Juxtaposition”

Rum-induced mouth sores plague my mouth
 as I throw myself
 face down
 an abandoned Peruvian avenue.
 I still haven't found where Vallejo
 left his footsteps,
 but I found out I could leave them too.
 So, if askew prints meet your eye on the dusty pavement:
 Don't follow—emptiness awaits at the finish line.
 Go break your face on sidewalks in Chiavari instead.
 Go looking for an eight-leaf clover
 at the bottom
 of a sunken Irish ship,
 supercharge your coffee with gasoline
 and bathe in nitric acid.
 But don't follow—you won't find me there.
 I punched down towards Tartarus
 to build a casino at the center of it.

“Childhood Fragment #3”

“Ahí viene El Loco Pancho” would say my father
 trying to scare me because I refused to get some shut-eye.
 I must have been 4 years old, tucked in bed but restless,
 and already showing signs of the 25-year old night-owl
 typing this poem at 3:21 in the morning.
 “Ahí viene El Loco Pancho, rápido, duérmete para que no entre”.
 “El Loco nunca viene” I would say.
 My mother then pounded on the front door,
 and wide-eyed I wished
 I had the power to bury myself down the mattress.
 “Te dije que ahí venía El Loco Pancho” said my father.

El Loco wiped out the varnish off the door from knocking.
 In Lima, Peru, every child slept on time but me.

Their clever idea fell apart one night (as my father told me)
 when El Loco announced himself with his
 go-to-sleep knocks,
 and after my father cried the so feared, so fatal:
 “Ahí viene El Loco Pancho”
 I shrugged, and said “El Loco Pancho es mi amigo”.
 We all stayed up that night.
 There are worms for night-owls to feast on
 as well.

“On Looking into Giovanni Mangiante”

John Ennis

the danger and the beauty of a city
 fire-swallowed in absolute riot:
 the hair-pulling hammering inside your chest
 cracking your ribcage.
 That is poetry. That is writing. That is what it is:
 wanting the world from an empty room.
 (Fragment from “it runs like blood”, 2021)

Born in Perú on Patrick’s Day 1996 to a Peruvian mother and Italian father, poet Giovanni Mangiante has had his own epic struggles with BPD and Poland Syndrome. Like the *puer aeternus* in Jung’s “The Invincibility of the Child” (1990), he has fought and humanised each hand-to-hand, in his poems, like the parental night-time ogre of his childhood, the vagrant *el pobre loco Pancho* killed crossing a busy street.

Already there are fans who steer by Mangiante’s star as evidenced by the responses to his poetry. His coping mechanisms in life have also had a knock-on effect on his work as a poet. He has (since 2019) been published in or had his work accepted by some 40 journals. Amazing! Must be some kind of record for discipline and diligence. Prolific Mangiante is, but still his own *il miglior fabbro*. He says he writes best sleep-deprived and edits well rested. Lesser poets do the opposite.

The journals where Mangiante has cut his teeth read like a *Who’s Who* of an online publishing world where motley is worn on a subversive, alternative planet, each one a must-read like *Rat’s Ass Review*. Humour glints in Mangiante’s Dantean eye as he negotiates a youthful Tartarus; he’s been down there and back, thankfully for him, and for us, with the “rum-induced mouth sores” to show for it. These days he is in search of a publisher for his first book of poetry.

What first grabbed my attention in Giovanni Mangiante were his poems entitled “Fragments”. Fragments like the broken mosaics of Italian antiquity, but utterly, rawly, contemporary:

scrapping stains
 off of bathroom tiles
 we ripped apart
 the remaining potential
 we had,
 and then we drank
 all night
 to cauterize
 the wound (“incognito youth”, 2021)

In *The Waste Land* Eliot writes of shoring his fragments “[...] against his ruins” (1971). Eliot wrote some three pages for the section “Death by Water”, but it was Pound, *il miglior fabbro*, who salvaged from them the gleaming pearl of Phlebas the Phoenician. Fragments inform the medieval Spanish *romance*. For Giovanni, his fragments are his building blocks.

Giovanni Mangiante believes writing should never be censored no matter how dark it is “as long as it doesn’t aim to harm others”; and this poet’s world can be very dark as in “on the brink of madness” (*Death by Punk*, 2021 and *Voices from the Fire*, 2021), “the final glass of whiskey” (*Voices from the Fire*, 2021), “among the debris” (*Open Skies Quarterly*, 2021)¹, yet he can write with exquisite tenderness of his dog Lucy, a rescue from the 2017 El Niño Costero natural disaster in Peru, or of his father in “Just hold on a while longer”. One of his favourite movies is Roberto Benigni’s *La vita è bella*.

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¹ The anthologies *Death by Punk* e *Voices from the Fire* are ebooks published by Dumpster Fire Press; the poem “among the debris” was included in *Open Skies Quarterly*, vol. IV, 2021.