

A READER'S COMPANION
for
James Byrne's
Everything Broken Up Dances
Tupelo Press (2015)

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Biographical Note

Poet, editor, and translator **James Byrne** was born in Buckinghamshire near London in 1977. His most recent poetry collections in the United Kingdom are *Blood/Sugar* and *White Coins* (Arc Publications, 2009 and 2015) and *Passages of Time* (flipped eye, 2003). He has also published chapbooks, including *Soapboxes* (KFS, 2014) and *Myth of the Savage Tribes, Myth of Civilised Nations* (Oyster Catcher Press, 2014), a collaborative work with the poet Sandeep Parmar. His first book published in the United States is *Everything Broken Up Dances* (Tupelo Press, 2015).

In 2009 *The Times* of London called James Byrne “one of the leading poets of his generation.”

He is co-founder and editor of the renowned poetry journal *The Wolf*, and is International Editor at Arc Publications. He co-edited (with Clare Pollard) *Voice Recognition: 21 Poets for the 21st Century* (Bloodaxe Books, 2009). He has co-edited and co-translated with ko ko thett the anthology *Bones Will Crow: 15 Contemporary Burmese Poets* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2013), the first anthology of contemporary Burmese poetry available in the West.

In 2008, he won the Treci Trg poetry festival prize in Belgrade, Serbia, and in 2009 his *New and Selected Poems: The Vanishing House* was published by Treci Trg in a bilingual Serbian–English edition. His poems have also been translated into Arabic, Burmese, French, Slovenian, and Chinese.

In 2009, Byrne was invited by the British Council in Damascus to participate in the Al-Sendian arts festival in Syria. In 2012 he read his work at the inaugural Tripoli Poetry Festival in Libya and in 2013 he opened the Irrawaddy Literature Festival in Yangon, Burma.

He earned an MFA as a Stein Fellow at New York University, and from 2011–2012 he was the Poet in Residence at Clare Hall, University of Cambridge. He now lives in Liverpool and teaches poetry at Edge Hill University.

Critical Praise for James Byrne's Poetry

“Reading James Byrne is like gulping fire-water shots of the world. The variety of poetic forms and lineations — in couplets, prose poems, anaphoric lists, singular lyrics, and sequences — acts out the author’s insistent concern for diversity, for internationality. The extraordinary and deftly employed lexicon derives from everywhere. While descriptive moments are rendered with a jeweler’s concision, Byrne’s savvy juxtapositions open each poem into panoramas of history, geography, and time in bright heuristic leaps. His poetic structures stage the tragedy of our failure to bring One/Another together; they enact the anxiety of foreignness in prose flickers broken by dashes. It is often as though the precise, sensual snail-horns of Byrne’s language keep touching a violence, the profligate violence of our epoch, and retracting; they extend again and retract. In the hopeful pulse of that sensing, ‘the world sees itself in this night.’”

—Forrest Gander

“What is the language of poetry that responds to twenty-first century wars? What modern-day Goya will paint the horrors of bombardment in Syria, Libya? What modern-day Brecht will insist that in dark times too, there must be singing?

To say that James Byrne is one of the best UK poets of his generation is to underestimate him. For in these poems conscience gathers scraps of voices in destroyed cities, always on search of ‘the other,’ in moments after blackout, in that darkness where the eye begins to see.

Sometimes I think Byrne is writing our times’ wailing songs, like those poets of the past who once came to wash and bury the bodies of the dead. He has that kind of *claritas*. He searches for truth without illusions, with full awareness that ‘still the fool’s face stares from smashed mirror.’

He isn’t the sort of a poet who goes to war-torn countries for the romancing of disaster. His aim is to balm (‘bell of your name, Ali’), to see and honor in each of us the ‘lifeboat of ribcage.’

It is his empathy that I love, the healing in poems such as ‘Trinkets,’ the embrace of the fractured, the wrinkled, in poems such as ‘Old Men of Skopje Old Town.’

And yet, just as I think I understand this poet’s perspective, he always surprises me. I want to call him a brilliant civic poet, but the page turns and Byrne stuns me with his take on family (‘blind on entering the masked ball that is marriage’), on sobriety of private existence (‘dreams are / embodied from people that exist’). Whatever his subjects are, it is his voice that haunts me, as he dares us to imagine the world ‘as if / Adam died before he had time enough to recast man’s beastliness among animals.’ A poet who attains such clarities is rare.”

—Ilya Kaminsky, from the Foreword to *Everything Broken Up Dances*

“This is language charged with a tough, sensual contraflow music, vividly alive to inquiry and witness . . . *virtù* and gravitas are in concord with a hermetic passion . . . fiercely and beautifully saying the unsayable.”

—Ishion Hutchinson

Postcard Observations: Poet as Note-Taker

by James Byrne

A few months after Gaddafi was executed, I traveled to Libya for a precariously arranged festival — the first in the country’s history — involving poets from around the world. Arriving at the then recently besieged airport in Tripoli, replete with bullet-holed windows and guards forcing immigrant men to sit on the floor, we were shuffled through “security.” A mile outside the airport and on the road into Tripoli was Gaddafi’s former compound, the size of the New York Yankees’ stadium and destroyed utterly by the dropping of just one bomb. I saw kids playing with swords made from sticks and their fathers watching on from above:

The boys have made a giant playhouse
 From the rubbled stanchions of the razed compound.
 Two kid Generals line up teams
 For a game of Guns vs. Swords.
 And then the swashbuckle
 And then the rat-tat-tat from their mouths
 To make the guns seem real
 For the onlooking father’s of the Revolution
 Who pick sides, shout and cheer.

—*from* ‘Postcards’

We drove past this scene quickly in a car *en route* to the hotel in Tripoli. I remember that I stuck my head out the window to listen to the sounds the children were making (the “rat-tat-tat” of plastic guns). It was the one chance I had to take in as much sensory information as possible in order to re-create the image, for what it was. Anything added would be artifice (for example, there was little movement in what I saw, children poised with fake weapons in their hands, fathers looking on. I didn’t have time to be sure if the watching fathers were actually picking “sides” which raises issues of authenticity amid any idea of poetry as *witness*).

As I hope this example exemplifies, “Postcards” is ultimately a collection of scenes, memories of photographs (taken/untaken). This process is a determining part of my how I write when on the move. But always there is the will towards communication and the sense that I must give something of myself away, freely, if the poem is to be any good at all.

For me poetry involves many elements (linguistic, sonic, and cognitive, to name but three), and all of these relate to the desire to communicate. Maurice Blanchot in *The Writing of the Disaster* talks about how conversing turns language away from itself by “letting it differ and defer,” and my instinct is often to let language distil and defer meanings.

In *Everything Broken Up Dances* I often approach communication by suspending myself in a kind of torque or flux, one that is particularly relevant to the process of notation, but also expressive of a fragmented, pluralized, and therefore more complex self.

In Libya we were closely chaperoned. The country was on the precipice of civil war and felt quite lawless in some places, even in its capital city. Gaddafi, months' dead, was still very much present (his face remained on the banknotes). When Carolyn Forché opened up the festival with her seminal poem "The Colonel," the army-guarded crowd under Marcus Aurelius gate initially twitched, wondering why an American poet would be speaking about *their* former dictator.

Each day we would discuss poetry and translation with several leading Arab poets, and with readings taking place in the evening. We were told to stay together as a group, but during one afternoon I managed to break off and took a walk through the old town of Tripoli alone. It was dry and hot and I sat down in shade to be greeted within minutes by a well-dressed man, perhaps nearing fifty, with eyes hidden behind sunshades and a gold-toothed smile. He introduced himself as "Shaqti" (see my poem by that title), and our initial connection was that he had lived in Europe too:

Dented blue-grey eyes laughing over Ray Bans. London '77, Zurich '79.

A Tripolitanian café in the hills of Bohemia, '88–90'.

When he arrived back from his first stint in Europe, Shaqti worked as an engineer for an oil firm. It was good money. Libya was rich then, and Gaddafi was a notoriously hard bargainer with the country's oil prices, knowing he could sell to the highest bidder. After a second stint in Europe (Czechoslovakia—he ran a restaurant there), Shaqti returned to Libya but couldn't find work and so re-invented himself as a local tour guide. But, of course, given that Libya was recovering from the bloodied effects of the "revolution" there were no tourists to show around. I told Shaqti I was a writer and he said he guessed as much because he knew about the poetry festival and so few white men were in town. "So let me do my job, let me show you around" he said, and we walked through several ancient concrete-lined alleyways stuffed with bougainvillea and jewelry. A man was selling guns, and I was told that if I heard gunfire not to worry too much because it was probably just a wedding going on (many weddings were delayed while Gaddafi held on to power, so it was suddenly wedding season).

Shaqti took me into rooms that were once harems, flashing his gold smile and snappily making a comment that I couldn't resist later inserting directly into the poem ("My teeth are only worth a concubine's room"). On our walk we saw children coming home from school fighting and, though the squabble looked particularly vicious, I mentioned ignorantly that this is something universal. Shaqti responded: "But you see, these are the children that Libya doesn't want. Their fathers were hired from Sudan to fight for Gaddafi." In fact, he was quite

aggressive towards the Sudanese and here, in the poem, I dressed up what Shaqti said as incorporated in the following section:

‘These scavengers won’t go home’ he says,
 Breaking the allegro of a tour through the Old City,
 ‘Now Sudan doesn’t want them and Africa doesn’t want them.’
 Two schoolchildren pin a wriggling Sudanese boy to the wall
 And they hold him there and spit out their demands.
 Shaqti at the water hyacinth with the tears of Apollo.

The last line here is, to me at least, the most transcendent. I can’t remember where or how it arrived to be in the poem, but this is the line I’m most pleased with. Shaqti reckoned himself a prophet-in-waiting and spoke of healing Libya, which seems the obvious reason why I would recast him as Apollo. The youth Hyacinth was loved by Apollo, who killed him. After Hyacinth died mythology states that from his blood sprang forth a flower, which bore on its petals the syllables of lament (*ai, ai!*). To me, the poem “Shaqti” revolves around the lament of a man who, as a lost son of Libya, mourns the loss of the country’s sons to war.

Shaqti . . . has bargained too much and lost too much.

Who strokes the face of a MISSING poster at Hammamkbir and says:

‘Look at this boy. He is my son.’

We finished the walk with coffee (the only payment Shaqti would accept). He dropped me off back where we started our walk, and I wrote notes for the poem right there before going back to the festival.

Later there was a line missing from the initial draft I’d made, and I filled it with something Shaqti hadn’t told me but I imagined he might have said.

This came from another story told to me by a Libyan poet on the bus back to the hotel. Apparently when King Idris was deposed by a young Gadaffi, he and a few other socialist-leaning Libyan poets were arrested. Writers weren’t allowed to meet in groups of more than five. The writers went on hunger strike. One of these poets told the story that while Gadaffi was in power he would not catch a fish from the sea or drink from it. I liked hearing this line and immediately wrote in my notebook. Later that was edited down and layered into the poem to amplify Shaqti’s voice, and it felt more complete for this act of open thievery. Poets steal

fire (was it T. S. Eliot who said that?). *Poesis* is something made by us — often from people other than ourselves.

I'd like to stay with Libya but briefly return to the process of notation and how I attempt to communicate through fragments.

Our only excursion outside of Tripoli (it was too dangerous to visit elsewhere) was to the ancient city of Sabratha. From there we would head back to the capital via the Nafusa mountains to meet a tribe called the Algazeer — a people that Gadaffi tried to decimate.

Common at poetry festivals is the sight of writers, often frazzled with jetlag, clutching at their notebooks whenever the chance arises. Christopher Merrill, one of several American poets on this particular trip, is the most extraordinary poet/note-taker I've ever seen. By contrast, my notes tend to be an attempt to capture the ephemeral: filmic/linguistic/sloganistic. I have several pages of graffiti that I saw in Yangon in Myanmar, for example. On our trip to Sabratha I wrote down, in my usual way, several observations, including occasional portraits I saw from street life:

exact middle of the sun-burnished street
 a hunched woman harries sacks of grain
 our driver honks her to a fright
 and she spills half the carryweight
 then turns to level back at us
 staring from under a black shawl
 open and enormous in her silence

We arrived at Sabratha, a Greek *and* Roman site, looted somewhat post-Gadaffi, but still resplendent, particularly the amphitheater (which, in fact, “the Colonel” had helped restore). I toured around the site making a few cursory notes but mostly soaking up the atmosphere. I believe that, as a writer (as a human being) it is not enough to experience a place physically, and I try and get a sense of the energy that is happening in a location — the “electrolife” of a place, as Mina Loy called it — in order to respond loco-specifically and so more rigorously.

Involving myself in the language of place means a meeting of the senses. Peter Redgrove talked about this as a kind of “healing synesthesia,” which is what the hour inside the ancient walls of Sabratha felt like, a jangling together of sensory information. This might account for my rather scattered note taking there — I found myself caught up looking for other forms of language, other “correspondences in air,” as Akhmatova called them, beyond the naming of language itself.

In the museum next door there were many tapestries and sculptures, where my note taking was more fluid:

Concordia's matted scarf
snake-printed, ushering in
the marching boot and Jupiter's luck.

[. . .]

House of the tragic actor
pastoralised, the blue-brown
man reclining with a spear.

In writing these fragments in my notebook, it seemed as if I was looking for a narrative to bind them. It wasn't until we arrived at Yefren — some twenty miles away, past “checkpoint soldiers / of the Free Libya Army” — that I realized the entire day had also revolved around me looking for something I could give my wife, the poet Sandeep Parmar.

In Yefren, at the summit of a mountain, we met an Algazeer elder and he told us that his people had to hide for months on end from Gaddafi's soldiers in order to survive. In the poem I was collating that day, I've changed his real name to Sālim, respecting the elder's wish of anonymity, for his people had barely survived the recent conflict. As I mention in the poem:

the Algazeer re-hoist their flag
(rainbow of yellow blue red and green)
the Algazeer who have farmed this mountain
for 800 years
and who survived the war
by living in ancient caves
beneath the stonebase of their ancient city

Gaddafi banned the Algazeer
burnt their flag
cut the food and water
says Sālim
spiderishly nimble on the tumbled rocks
pointing to a road
that does not meet and has not met
for 800 years

At the end of our walk through Yefren our host mentioned that we should look at a Jewish synagogue before getting back on the bus. It was an extraordinary moment, to look out over the Nafusa mountain range, back towards a war-battered country that was trying to repair itself. Sometimes the real is more surreal. Here, standing in a synagogue in the northern tip of Africa, the Libyan poet Ashur Etwebi asked us to turn away from the view a moment and look towards green clumps sticking out of the desert hillside.

“Wild desert thyme,” said Ashur, and I realized this was the title of the poem I was looking for. “Take these herbs back to the people you love and write about them,” said our host, and I did.

It was the closest I’ve had to an invitation to write about something that does not belong to me. For about a month, Sandeep kept the thyme in a green felt box until one day we sat down together and opened it. Sensory information: once I smelled the thyme again, I sat down and began to pull together all the notes I’d made, and the result was the poem “Wild Desert Thyme.”

Links

James Byrne's page on the Tupelo Press website

www.tupelopress.org/product-category/author/james-byrne/

Jams Byrne's Wikipedia entry:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Byrne_\(poet\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Byrne_(poet))

James Byrne's page on the Poetry International (Rotterdam) website

www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poet/item/22611/29/James-Byrne

James Byrne's faculty page at Edge Hill University

www.edgehill.ac.uk/creativewriting/staff/james-byrne/

James Byrne essay "Notes Toward a Poethics of Uprootedness," from *World Literature Today*

[www.worldliteraturetoday.org/blog/road/notes-toward-poethics-uprootedness -.VlwOh5-ByOU.mailto](http://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/blog/road/notes-toward-poethics-uprootedness-.VlwOh5-ByOU.mailto)

Interview with James Byrne from *Los Angeles Review of Books*

<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/qa-james-byrne/>

Interview with James Byrne from *I Don't Call Myself a Poet*

<https://idontcallmyselfapoet.wordpress.com/2012/08/08/james-byrne/>

Three poems by James Byrne on the *Granta* website

<https://granta.com/three-poems-byrne/>

Four poems by James Byrne at the *Morning Star* website

[www.morningstaronline.co.uk/a-7607-Four-poems-by-James-Byrne -.WbGKz62ZOYU](http://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/a-7607-Four-poems-by-James-Byrne-.WbGKz62ZOYU)