

PAUL DAVIES

1939 –

Contribution to 50plusArtSpace in August, 2020

POETRY FLOWS AGAIN, AND 50plusARTSPACE IS BORN

I'm 81 years old and feel very much alive even though I'm locked up, and down, with my wife in Mexico because of COVID-19, which has been running at between 500 and 1,100 deaths a day here for almost a month now. Yesterday the toll dipped to 273, but that's probably just a freak day like the 188 three weeks ago. Extraordinary times, but note that in 1939, the year of my birth, World War 2 began and, of course, in some parts of the world, war and disease are terribly ordinary times. We're lucky, then, if we have decent homes, in decent places, computers and smartphones, and perhaps a decent bit of garden, with lots of flying visitors, perhaps these:

FLIGHT AND MIND CONTROL

Hummingbirds may hum or whirl
when they get near your straining ear,
but they appeal more to your sight
with their zig-zagging stopping flight.

They zig and pause and zag and stop
mid-air and do not stall or drop
but look around, and look at you
as in the dreams where once we flew.

Where once our tiny eye and mind
could do what now is far behind
our busy and much larger life
so full of knowing, stress and strife.

That's here in Mexico, where I've lived for the past 55 years. You may not have hummingbirds, but certainly other birds, butterflies, bees and more visitors, or even residents, and you shouldn't complain about caterpillars, some beautiful, chumping leaves. Yes, 55 years in Mexico now, after 19 in England, 4 in Dublin and 2 in Spain. Anyway, I wrote that poem about a year ago, and it was the first I'd written for more than half a century. Something was happening to me. I was producing art again. Not 'GREAT ART', just art for myself and anyone else who might like it – for a start, that poem pleased even my Mexican wife, who generally doesn't like poetry, and my two daughters.

The year before, 2018, I'd finally retired from my life's paid work, English language teaching in all its modes: classroom teaching, management, teacher training, textbook writing, course design, consultancy, you name it. As my first retirement hobby I started an online ELT magazine in August, 2018, specifically for Latin America, and its 24th and last number came out last month, July, 2020. That poem in 2019, and others that came that same year, suggested my next retirement hobby and project: more poetry writing and a website for me and other older people producing some kind of art for our pleasure and satisfaction. That was the seed of 50plusArtSpace. Here are two more 2019 poems, less traditional:

ROGUE-BOT

Too smart by far
away and long ago
at first and aeons on
we don't quite understand
how it's gone wrong and now
is going on and on.
Might be affecting me.

They say it can't
go on for ever
more likely end
in grinding entropy
or Big Bang opposite
the Big Ker-runch.
Might be the death of me...

...and every one
of us unless we stop
our goings on,
our m.o. though they
be all we are not
but end all
may yet be.

VIRTUALLY

I was there
throughout that scare
you've read about,
no doubt,
and heard
from second parties, even third,
and analysed with friends
and strangers tend
to bring it up
in queues, in shops,
in waiting rooms
injection or extraction looms,
but incidents like that
can take your mind off what
was heavy on it till
appalling details still
your private ache or pain
and zoom those people's horror back again.

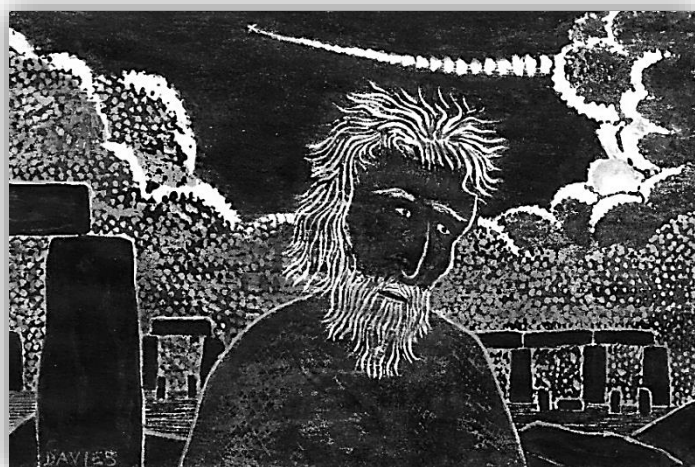
Yes, it was right around the corner
from the Café Horner,
where I was sipping cappuccino,
playing Solo Casino
without a care.
I was there.

The seed of 50plusArtSpace grew throughout 2019 and, as I tried the idea out on friends, became a solid project in 2020. In particular, I was listened to and supported by an old friend, Adrian Rumble, who became a partner in the project – junior, of course, because he's only 75 years old!

Art production was very much a large part of my life as a boy and young man but it turned to art consumption and appreciation for most of my 57-year-long working life, with no creation except

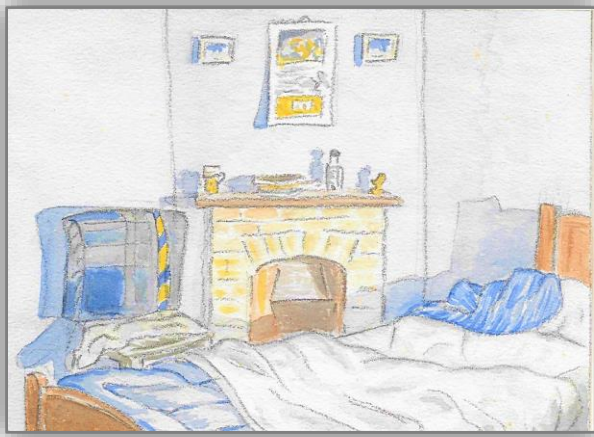
for impromptu singing, dancing and the like – as we say in 50plusArtSpace, “*Art is a virtually essential part of being human. Ordinary people, making their best effort or unable to stop themselves, sing, dance, make music, tell stories, and create images, as well as appreciating art far greater than their own, looking, listening and reading. Art is in and around us all our lives, like nature.*” The looking, listening and reading during my working years, and my wife’s, is all over our house – paintings and sculptures (all by friends and Mexican artists), Mexican and other craftwork, old vinyl records, cassettes and CDs, DVDs, books (and my Kindle, which I accidentally dropped in the lavatory bowl yesterday – Shit! – I’ll order a new one later today), my mostly home-grown bonsais, and no doubt some produced unwittingly or fleeting, a joke, for example.

My own art from my boyhood and youth, long ago, is all sequestered in my study, on the walls and in folders, much now uploaded into my computer. Obviously, a lot got left or lost in moves from England to Ireland to Spain to Puebla in Mexico, to Mexico City and back to Puebla. Below is much of what remains. I should mention that until I was around 17, art school was a possibility for my future, but I eventually decided to study literature, and that became English and Spanish literature because you couldn’t study English literature alone at Trinity College Dublin.



Above and top left, lino-cut illustrations for the Henley Grammar School magazine.

Left, a lino-cut started at school, forgotten and completed years later.



Pencil and watercolour of my bedroom (my school tie hanging over the blanket on the back of the chair).



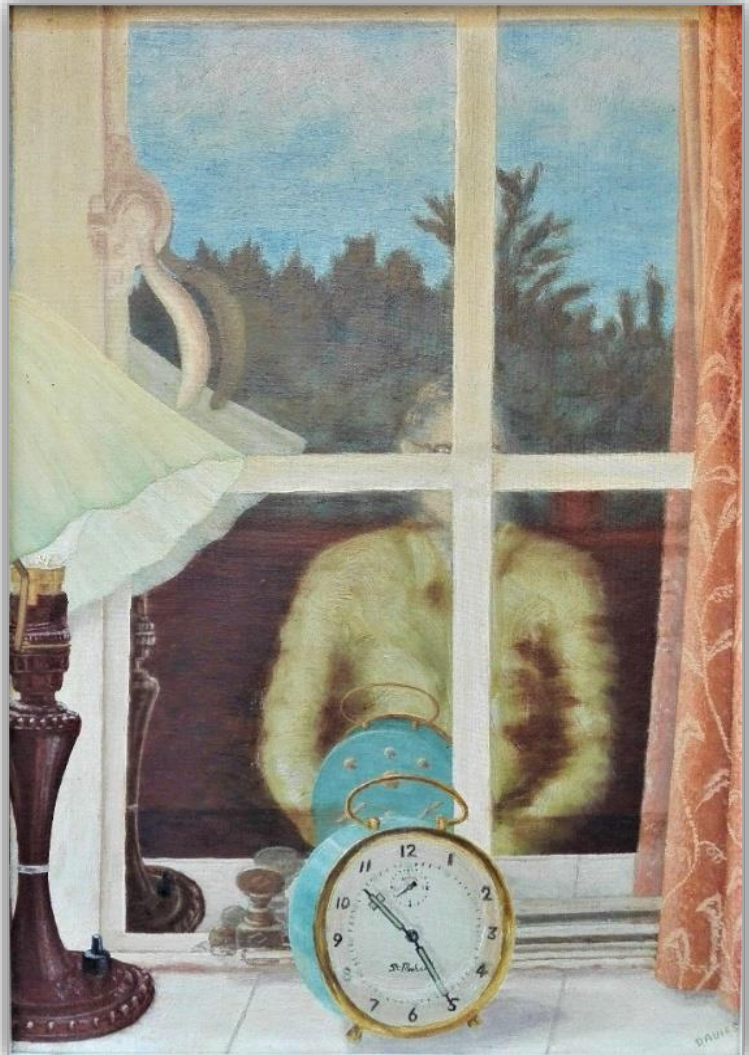
Watercolour sketch of the Chiltern Hills near my home in the village of Nettlebed (where Ian Fleming of the James Bond novels grew up).

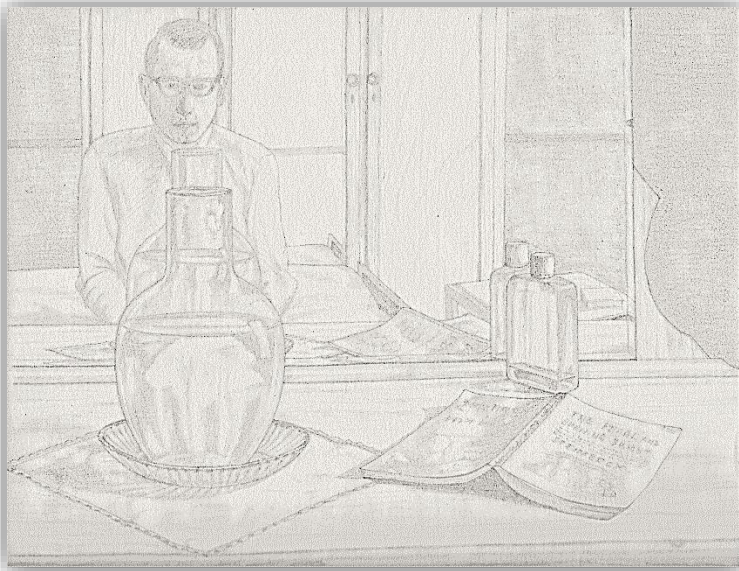


Above, oil on hardboard, a Toby jug of Dickens's Bill Sykes.

Right, oil on canvas board, the window of my boyhood bedroom. It looks as if I was crucifying or nullifying myself, but it was more or less what I saw before me.

Reflection interested me, and still does – it's an amazing phenomenon, visual and mental, isn't it? It's here in the painting of my bedroom window, again in the pencil drawing below, and again in the poem *Mirrors and Rain* below that.





All three, pencil on paper.

Top left, me in my room in a *casa de huéspedes* in Puebla just after my arrival in Mexico in 1965.

Top right, the en suite facilities in my room in that *casa de huéspedes*.

Right, Emma, my Mexican (and only) wife, not long after we married in 1965, certainly before 1970.

Now let me go to poems that I wrote while at Trinity College Dublin, several published in the university literary magazine, *Icarus*, starting with a 'reflection' poem written during a term off from TCD in Spain.

MIRRORS AND RAIN

Mirrors by day
don't dance and sing
like shimmering rain
nor spread dark light
on roofs and streets,
nor kiss you like an eager
wet-lipped thing.

Mirrors at night,
with icy eye,
see all and nought
in flat denial
of urgent sleep,
which rippling rains
allow and lullaby.

LULLABY

Oh yes, the fact can still be gilded,
or failing that, laughed upon lightly,
and at the last, denied. Sleep now.

Always there has been some way,
not to change things, but arrange things
in the mind somehow. Sleep now.

The mind should not be proud or stubborn,
being only soft grey matter
wrinkled like a puzzled brow.

Oh yes, the fact is undeniably
a hard pillow to rest upon.
Your heart may break tomorrow. But sleep now.

POACHING

Past midnight, mild for the time of year,
while one meandering moon seems many
in a slow-flowing flood of clouds,
he hunts compact black dreaming pheasants.

Striding a tall and grizzled hill,
sketching trees against the sky
and questioning blobs of last year's nests,
he hunts compact black dreaming pheasants.

Bouncing down towards the dark
across the valley where stray lights
shine remotely, he patterns the grey
beyond with blindly coloured thoughts.

Shouldering low through tangled branches,
angled black and broken curves
with thorns, he slowly discerns a bird,
shoots, and goes to find the thud.

A pigeon only in his hand,
almost rueing the sudden end
of such a disappointing prey,
he can't deny the satisfaction.

He plucks a soft grey pile of feathers
and strips the little bird naked,
broken, limp and plump, and dreams
of predatory pleasures in the dark.

PUSSY CAT

Our cat will chase a leaf
in windy weather,
and butterflies
in hazy sky blue calms,

but it dreams no doubt of birds,
blood bone and feather,
and mouse's cries
and flesh among dry grass.

NATURAL HISTORY

Incessantly the squalls of seagull cries
are swirling up the falling cliffs
of rusty iron red and granite grey.
Like spilling ivory beads the seagulls dive
to skim the surf of white-laced waves
and rise as bubbles of dissolving spray.

The bird of oceans high upon the air
above the gulls, is each alone and free.
Its mind through gleaming eyes reach ceaselessly
and sure from this to every homeless sea.

Inland, in branches black against the sky
in latticed crowns of towering trees,
the rooks in fractious harmony abide.
Society of raucous croaks and cries
on hunchbacked sombre business,
arriving and departing like the tide.

The old crow in that solitary tree,
wind-knocked and huddling his back,
may watch all beasts and birds from there,
or sleep there like an aged man in black.

FLY AND I

Little dry and gilded fly
that runs the humid soil
of this old weed patch
in the summer sun,
here we are together you and I.

Still, or hopping into flight,
and pausing still again
to preen your body's sheen
in midday sunshine,
everything about you is right.

WILD OLD THOR

When the storm floods down
upon your town
and the sky is dark and cold,
you may watch the rain
and recall again
all the rage in Thor of old.

Many Nordic gods
were vulgar clods
compared with those of Rome
or the Greek elite,
so in defeat
they fled their native home.

They left the land,
the shores of sand
and the sky high overhead,
they crashed through trees
and waded seas
and riding clouds they fled.

Then human names
usurped the fames
and the wealth of the gods of yore.
But the lightning flash
and the thunder crash
still belong to wild old Thor.

INSIDE THE BOWL

The solemn goldfish in a bowl
must be unhappy on the whole
although it has no memory
and no ambition that could be
its more or less sufficient goal.

The lack of others of its kind
must really blow its bubble mind
(it is, of course, quite widely known
that fishes are by nature prone
to do what nature has designed).

It must be filled with loneliness,
a yearning, and a drear distress
that human care (with plastic weeds
and all they think a goldfish needs)
can scarcely, if at all, make less.

That is the pretty captive's lot,
confined within a round glass pot
upon a mat of crocheted lace
without another of its race,
fed by a goggling behemoth.

ICARUS BY NAME

Bravely escaping the mundane coop,
lyrical he waxed on a vaulting swoop,
but came down to earth in a terminal splash
when, no doubt about it, his aim got rash.

In lifelong travels far and wide, oh,
Achilles, Daphne, Ulysses, Dido
and other names have travelled with us,
but never, ever a single Ic'rus.

For this there is of course a reason:
not even in the bleakest season,
would parents name a daughter or son
to be brave and bright but crash out young.

A STUDENT STUMBLES HOMEWARDS
BESIDE A DUBLIN CANAL

Time the black canal slides by
while neither moon nor stars
can fix the sky. Today is dead,
tomorrow may never dawn.

The destined ones may never meet
because a surly sun
will not repeat the simple dawn
of just one more tomorrow.

But like another yesterday
it shuffles out of nowhere,
a thread of grey, a twittering bird,
a flawless parchment sky.

El Valle de los Caídos was the last poem I wrote (before going from Spain to Mexico in 1965) until 54 years later, just a year ago, when my spring of poetry suddenly began to flow again. In addition to *Poems written in COVID-19 Lockdown* (in the 50plusArtSpace Catalogue) and the three poems at the beginning of this piece, the following is what I've written so far since that day in 2019 when a hummingbird hovered and looked me in the eye in my garden.

COGITO ERGO.....

I think therefore I am,
and when thought stops, I'm dead,
a thought I couldn't have
defunct inside my head.

But there's a thing or two
to say about this trope,
like how does thought begin
to make me be and hope?

And what if thought is me,
not what I say and do? –
a thought to make me squeal
and hide my thoughts from you...

...conceal some, too, from me.

EL VALLE DE LOS CAÍDOS
THE MEMORIAL TO
THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR DEAD

Among the trees
and random boulders
fighting bulls
with nowhere to go
saunter idly.

The high meseta,
mountain rimmed,
is filled with sky,
the lopped willows
clenched like fists.

A hilltop cross
comes looming
into view,
with esplanade
and colonnades below.

Phantoms haunt
the consecrated cave,
and die again
in incensed air,
muddled thought.

Out on the hot
and rolling plain
the fighting bulls
with nowhere to go
saunter idly.

DOG AND BOY ENJOY SOME SPORT

He throws the ball, she runs, and turns,
it hits her back and bounces high,
she leaps and twists and catches it!
He cheers, she comes, stub tail applauding,
drops the ball, eyes fast on it.

Too far, he says, and doesn't move.
She blinks, then nudges with her nose
so it rolls and slows and stops at his toes.
He picks it up and throws – too hard,
she misses and trots to recover it.

All in the game, the tedious bits
of running around recovering balls,
the awful bits of failing chances,
rising thrills that come down flat.
Yet all worthwhile for a brilliant catch!

She drops the ball right at his feet
and stares at it, expecting, tense.
That's it, he says, and turns to the house,
and turns the telly on where football roars!
Outside, she dreams, the ball between her paws.

THE SPREAD OF ENHANCEMENT

I suddenly became aware of the spread of enhancement
after the turn of the century, the twenty-first,
soon after my own seventieth year, in fact.
The change-age link is why I mention that.

When I was young, and not so young, enhancement
gently put an extra sheen on things,
especially those with certain appeal or romance
that a touch of polish could... you know, enhance.

You could seek to enhance the allure of lips and eyes,
for instance, with old or modern expertise,
the charm of a room with tapestry furniture covers,
the magic, even, of being life-long lovers.

I know that's dabbling in dreams and fuzzy illusion,
bolstering true fulfilment with empty padding,
no authentic improvement or effective ointment,
just one more slip or slither to disappointment.

But it gave a shimmer of hope to mundane life,
the faith – and what is faith? – it could float higher.
It used to be an enchanted state of mind
induced by fibs of the white or rosy kind.

And then I suddenly noticed the lexeme in ads
to enhance one's kitchen with new machines and gadgets,
government commitments to enhance roads and bridges,
and scientists' efforts to enhance research procedures.

A scene from twenty eighty-four arose
before my eyes, the Backroom Robot brooding:
“I can't really improve a goddamn thi-ing,
but just enhance their ephemeral dream of being.”

HORSE AND CARRIAGE TOURISM IN KILLARNEY

(A farm boy once, perhaps, whose folk grew spuds
and stuff behind their cottage in the hills
when all the land as far as eye can see
belonged to the lords – and ladies – of the park
we're entering now.) Clippety-clippety-clop.

The horse's name? Sally. Eight years old.
Fine girl. On the right, just over there, that's ABC...

...Another Bloody Castle. Too bloody cold
to live in. The lodge we passed, that's the place for me.

(A sense of humour – sharper than he looks?
– or learnt by heart, recited flat and deadpan,
which makes it seem quite funny when it's not.
Hard to tell. I wonder what he thinks
of us, his cosmopolitan clientele.)

Ryan's Daughter? Filmed not far away,
nineteen seventy, director David Lean...

...No, none of them. Robert Mitchum played
the lead, with John Mills, Sarah Miles, Howard and McKern.

(He knows his stuff, true, one way or another,
and the way he handles Sally is amazing,
walks and trots, and stops and waits and starts
without a sign that I can hear or see.
Mm, both he and Sally deserve a decent tip.)

Thank you. Thanks... Take care, ma'm... mind the step.
Thank you. Thanks... Sure, Sally gets her share.

(Oh, come, you know you do, Sal. Let's go and get
the last lot of the day, from Lord knows where.)

GIRL WITH IMAGINARY TRUMPET

Shouldn't look,
should look away,
but she's been seen
and eyes then stray.

By covert glance
a picture grows:
a snout for mouth
and little nose,

just six or seven,
her odd fortune
to forever blow
a trumpet tune,

with hands aflutter
on cornet keys
inside her mind
with artless ease.

She turns to Mum
with goggling eyes,
who looks straight back
and brightly smiles.

My eyes look down
and there they meet
the moving ground
beneath my feet,

no stream of thought
but eddies –
of being her,
her parents,
of seeing
and not seeing...

I hope you've enjoyed reading and looking at these dozen pages, thought about your own art life, and that you become a regular 50plusArtSpace visitor, and even a welcome contributor.