

Foreword

In the introductory note to his novel *The Romantic*, William Boyd makes a hard-hitting observation:

the fact is that for the huge majority of people in human history their fate, after a couple of generations or three, is to become effectively unknown, forgotten, a ghost. All that remains is a name on a headstone, a notation in a census-count, an online obituary, a mention in a newspaper and – if they're lucky – a date of birth and a date of death.

This seems to be the reality for most people, with countless generations of men and women having sought to combat the transience of human existence by means of all sorts of subterfuges. Cheating time and the anonymity that has cloaked almost every single person to have spent at least a few decades on Earth has been one of the most powerful motivators behind the construction of architectural wonders, the development

of revolutionary ideas, and the perpetuation of one's genes via offspring. Legacy is something that most people, whether privileged or not, are obsessed with. But as Percy Bysshe Shelley teaches us in 'Ozymandias', "Nothing beside remains."

Being quickly forgotten and dissolving into the void of time is what most human beings are destined for, with the exception of those few who create something that endures for a relatively longer period. In the realm of the arts, the enduring quality of that creative work is very much bound to how it interacts with its audience. I can still recall how I felt more than ten years ago when the character of Calaf walked on stage at the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg and sang 'Nessun dorma' from Giacomo Puccini's *Turandot*. The beauty of that aria was so moving that it gave me goosebumps and unashamedly it brought tears to my eyes. Every time I hear Luciano Pavarotti's 1972 recording of the aria, I feel pretty much the same way. An opera that first premiered in 1926 containing an aria that I can repeatedly hear being sung by a man who has now been dead for 17 years has the capacity to move me. That is just one example of how fascinating the enduring quality of some creative work is. It endures via the way it makes people feel and think.

Seeing Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* at the Louvre, reading John Williams's *Stoner*, listening to recordings of Seamus Heaney reciting his poetry, or attending a performance of *Macbeth* at the Globe Theatre are other instances in which a creative work left me with an afterglow once I had moved on to doing something else. That afterglow consists of a work's capacity to dwell in your heart and mind. The interaction with it enriches us on cerebral and emotional levels. There have been

many occasions like this in my life and every single time I have felt envious of the talent that succeeded in producing this kind of effect. While a work's afterglow is experienced in a highly subjective manner, if at all, the ability to influence one's audience through words, music, images or other media almost feels like a superpower to me. Some people experience this as a visceral effect while others feel that the work is communicating with something deep within their being. When the interaction with a creative work leaves an emotional and cognitive impact long after the originator—whether that be a writer, composer, artist, film director etc.—has produced the work, then its audience is engaging with something truly special. To generate such an afterglow in one's audience is perhaps the loftiest aspiration a creative person could have because it helps to vindicate all their efforts despite the limitations of human existence.

The act of producing a poetry collection is to some extent an attempt to commune with the reader's mind, emotions and experiences, seeking in the process to deposit something that leaves its afterglow. In Ray M. Cassar's *Whispers in the Wind*, I found much that communicated with me in this manner. The poet offers readers a profound and intimate examination of love, life, and the human experience. His poetry—stemming from deep emotion and a contemplative spirit—elegantly captures moments of joy, sorrow, and reflection. Divided into four main sections, the collection is made up of poems that probe a range of universal themes. From love poems inspired by marriage and friendship to ones that meditate on loss, old age and the approach of death, Cassar's words resonate with both tenderness and wisdom. For instance, in the section 'Musings in the Wind',

the poet includes several poems in which he contemplates the experiences that have enriched his understanding of life, at times doing so in a self-reflexive manner. This is what happens in ‘The Journey of Life’:

As I grow nearer to my journey’s end
My years appear like scudding clouds
Or wind-blown autumn leaves, that blend
Like pages from a book with many tales to tell

Most striking of all for me though are the poems in the section entitled ‘Winds of Wrath’. Here Cassar manages to achieve something that some poets shy away from: using poetry to comment on the most pressing political and social issues that matter to him and, hopefully, to his readers. In ‘Kowtow to the King’, ‘Fat Cats’, ‘The Trees’, ‘The Rape of a Beautiful Land’ and other poems, Cassar excoriates the corrupt practices of politicians and the greed of land developers. The anger and consternation conveyed by his words are palpable and it is difficult not to appreciate how much the poet cares about the subject provoking these strong emotions.

Reading the well-crafted poems in this collection, it immediately becomes clear that metre, rhyme and a wide range of poetic devices are an indispensable part of the value Cassar gives to traditional forms of poetry. Whether writing three-line poems or longer poetic musings, for him poetry is the ideal means by which to express sincere devotion to the people, places, issues and memories that have shaped his life. As the eminent Maltese writer and academic Oliver Friggieri remarks in his foreword

to Cassar's first collection *The Ship of Clouds* (2010), verse for this poet is deemed to be the most effective way of sharing his profoundest sentiments as well as providing the reader with literary pleasure and moral relevance.

With grace and eloquence, in this collection Cassar reminds us that in life we are buffeted by a variety of winds, some bringing pleasure and hope while others pain and dismay. Through their interaction with these poems, readers will find themselves stirred to reflect on their lives and experiences, perhaps even moved to such an extent that the poems' afterglow stays with them even after putting the book down.

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