

# TLC Showcase

---

MAIA ELSNER

|                                       |          |
|---------------------------------------|----------|
| <b>Introduction to the manuscript</b> | <b>2</b> |
| <b>Selected Poetry</b>                | <b>3</b> |
| <b>About the Writer</b>               | <b>6</b> |

## Introduction

---

I am working on a hybrid image and text memoir, that traces my journey to Poland to visit the places my grandparents survived in hiding during the Second World War, as well as my process of trying to share my grandfather's art with the world. He was a Polish Jewish Holocaust survivor, who found in making art a reason to hope, after the murder of his entire family in 1942. He came to the UK as a refugee in 1958, after a decade in poverty in Paris, and devoted his life to painting and pottery. Always mistrustful of authorities and institutions, he refused to show his work to anyone, and so it has remained in storage, in a shed in my parents' house in Oxford.

Because this book explores how a family deals with the 'stuff' they carry – both literal and metaphorical, how each generation responds to what is known and also what is not known, I wanted to find a syntax that could accommodate gaps and silences – a way of putting sentences together that could hold space for inconsistency, for the way memory suppression and forgetfulness transmute what is told and retold, and remade in that process.

But I had no prior experience with writing prose; this manuscript was my first experiment. Whereas I knew how poems can capture the tentative and fragmentary, the mess that defies logic – or rather, finds its own internal logic, a logic of emotion and possibility, away from the hyper-rational, prose felt like an uncertain space: how could I capture the unspoken in a medium that attempts to make comprehensible, to create a beginning and middle, driving towards the inevitable – destination? How would I account for the stuckness that is so often a result of trauma, the inability to move on?

Through Wasafari's support, I received a TLC Manuscript Free Read, which grew my confidence. Just having a second pair of eyes on a piece of work can be so important, and at times transformative, but beyond this, I was really touched by the care my manuscript received: the feedback was so sensitive and generous, and it also gave me a clear direction for how to transform the text. Overall, and as a result of TLC's reading, I felt able to be braver, to push the limits of language further. I am so grateful to the TLC for offering this fantastic service, and to Frankie Bailey, who so sensitively and critically engaged with my work.

## Selected Poetry by Maia Elsner

---

### Three poems inspired by my grandfather's paintings

(published in *Tentacular*)

#### Apa has been dead 70 years

When a coal tit tears into my room. Rush of wings thrashes  
against white. No clouds. No whisper-thin rain threading  
through a grey miracle. Instead, this thing we call shelter:  
brick walls. Tiled roof. Ceiling divides right-angled air

from sky. Apa longed for freedom. Conjured it in brush-  
strokes: a bowl of water. Today, he imagines a benevolent  
god. See his painted bird alight, so delicate. Safety is this  
small pause from flight. Apa on the run again from Kraków:

ghetto to camp, then the streets & strangers. No blankets, no  
coins. At some point, a soup kitchen. Flask of water, kind  
hands. Other days, there is ripped canvas, the stretch-marked  
body, bloated flesh. Each escape leaves an imprint of feathers:

The coal tit breaks frail bones against the glass. Window bruises,  
denting heart. Then a sudden last dash, finds the opening, flies –

## To speak of flying

Inside your mouth    are mountains    & in the seams  
of your lips    two figures running –    where do we go  
from here    when the land rusts    bluesilver & there is  
no rain    beneath the disappointed bridge    a pawn-  
shop trading nightmares    the murderer tends to a lady  
bird    her shafted wing    there are many different  
kinds of open    for instance    the night like a shout  
killed by a butt-end in the teeth    crucified shirts  
on the drying rack    a wreck of birds    silence sits  
at the table with thick lips    lapping up space the weight  
of it    & circular    geometry is our belief system  
there are algorithms    for this & this    listen  
our aesthetic is committed to vanishing    the river  
erodes my capacity    your circumference all outline  
the rabbit moon is quartered    drawn    shining

## Signifiers

The wind slashes through petals, hard  
caress; bud on the verge of surrender  
to a crush of hands. Here in Paradise,  
a man threatens another with a knife.  
We are all damned says the street  
but the lamp lights blink, ambivalent  
to how we handle beauty when every  
thing dies & I have no recording of  
your voice. I can't retain the shape  
your sigh made mid-thought, lit eyes.  
The river brings back mud as if a gift.  
An old man sits, beneath the fern's  
damp blush, nursing a frown; laughter  
ricochets like bullets through the town.

## About the Writer

---

Maia Elsner is the author of *overrun by wild boars* (flipped eye, 2021), a poetry collection that charts a search for intimacy and survival in the face of persecution and trauma. She was born in London to Mexican and Polish Jewish parents, and began writing poetry while studying race, migration and incarceration in Massachusetts, USA. Currently, she is working on a poetry-film collaboration with artists from



across Latin America and a postcard poetry project that explores the lives of objects that migrate through the imaginative space between words and images. She is also in the process of curating a series of talks and exhibitions that bring to light the artwork of her grandfather. Her poems have been published in British, Irish, American and Canadian journals, most recently in *Magma*, *Tentacular*, *Poetry Ireland*, *The Maine Review* and *Tinderbox*. She has been widely anthologized, most recently in *Crossing Lines: An Anthology of Immigrant Poetry* (Broken Sleep Books, 2021) and *Prototype 3* (Prototype Publishing, 2021). Before the pandemic, she worked in the Civil Service on public health policy and climate change. In September, she will begin an MFA in creative writing at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and be a reader for *The Michigan Quarterly Review*.