

12th May 2019.

from John Gallas

to Voices of Israel/Reuben Rose Competition

Dear Friends,

I am honoured and delighted to be the winner of the Reuben Rose/Voices of Israel Poetry Competition. I'm sorry that I can't be here in person. I would dearly love to have been, but events and time conspired to make it impossible. I would like to thank the folks that tried to help me get to you, especially Susan Olsburgh, and have sent, as a Disembodied Replacement, a recorded reading of the poem.

'at the funeral of a ploughman' was first thought of whilst I was living in Diyarbakır, in south-eastern Turkey. I was invited to a Kurdish wedding at a village set amidst a vast wilderness of barren and unyielding earth, and I was struck by the celebrations' primary thread of land-yearning and land-loyalty as expressed in songs and stories and dances. Some of the young men of the village had gone to work in Germany, where, I was assured by the villagers, they sat in over-civilised rooms and sang sad songs of their homeland, and would come home immediately their jobs were done. When I was taken outside into a stony, half-ploughed field (the toilet) and kindly stood guard over by the host's son with a machine-gun, I had, in my crouching ablutions, time to look about at the unlovely landscape, and wonder at such love.

The funeral was in Bali. The father of my host died suddenly, and I attended as an outsider. It is often the way with a poet that s/he will conflate impressions to make them One Sense. Over the next year this poem emerged as a Truth and Idea from Turkey, an Event from Bali, and a setting made unparticular enough to be, I hope, universal, peopled with other, random but real remembrances that I pulled into the poem, such as the owls, the great Hall, the boots outside tied with flowers, and the mourners' shovels left in a pile as they went to give quiet thanks for the life of someone they knew.

It is not a merry poem. I hope the recording that follows has a voice that brings it properly to its rather blue life.

Once again, many thanks to all.

With best wishes,

John Gallas.

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