BOOK REVIEWS

Colum McCann, *Apeirogon: A Novel*
New York: Random House, 2020
480 pages, $28, ISBN 9781400069606

Perhaps the easiest way of entering the 1001 sections of *Apeirogon* is at its very centre, where the stories of Israeli Rami Elhanan and Palestinian Bassam Aramin coexist in a specific symmetry. Despite the juxtaposition of their lives and the murder of their daughters in the two 500 sections, this central reading is not necessarily the only way of approaching *Apeirogon*—a novel where fact and fiction interweave at the margins to challenge any central vision. The author of *Let the Great World Spin* (2009), Colum McCann masterfully spins history, structure, and meaning. The Parents Circle of grieving Israelis and Palestinians coalesces with "the perfect circle" of McCann's mathematical structure.

In his "Acknowledgments," McCann acknowledges that this is "a hybrid novel with invention at its core." His hybrid novel may be approached from a number of different angles and levels. If one balances the "Acknowledgments" with the "Author's Note" that precedes the narrative, then its hybrid nature is linked to Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke's image of "widening circles that reach out across the entire expanse." Moving in from these margins, McCann begins with "The hills of Jerusalem are a bath of fog" and ends with "The hills of Jericho are a bath of dark." The parallels between Jerusalem and Jericho are blurred by the fog of war, and the bath metaphor has the potential to cleanse, but the reality of the region is far bleaker. McCann attempts to release what has been locked in among the hills.

Rami motorbikes through the fog, shifts gears, and observes a flock of birds: "Two answers for one swerve"—a phrase that captures the essence of hybrid *Apeirogon*, which is full of swerves, each one with its own set of answers. As characters travel, birds fly, their peripheral wings offering one view of stages in the theatre of war, their bird's-eye perspective offering an-

other, above the hybrid fray. Half a billion birds migrate along the Middle Eastern superhighway, their "ancient ancestry" highlighting the claims of "European rollers, Arabian babblers," and Israeli and Palestinian historical narratives. Birds also cover the cover of *Apeirogon* in a pattern of countably infinite numbers from dust jacket to fly leaf. Section 1001, the spine of the book, is a single sentence that tells the story while the surrounding pages flap. Inside the Cremisan monastery, where characters pursue peace, the reader discovers "within their stories another story" that is particular and universal.

The 1001 sections vary in length and subject matter, but each is connected to the overall structure. Consider the transition from birds to slingshot: in section 3 birds are targets of young stone throwers, and section 4 launches into the history of the ancient sling, which is the "size of an eyepatch." Invoking an eye, the author reminds us of the centrality of perception in conflict. Israel may be seen as David in comparison to the larger Arabic Goliath throughout the Middle East; on the other hand, it may also be considered a Goliath compared to its neighbours due to its nuclear power. Section 5 begins at the edges of battle, a reminder of the importance of edges, margins, and peripheral vision encroaching on meaning. Children shoot turtle doves and quails that are blinded, force-fed, and baked in clay ovens.

Innocently victimized birds segue to the ritual of former French President François Mitterrand devouring ortolans eight days before his death. If the ortolan represents the "soul of France," then what are we to make of the French soul with this decadent ritual? On the one hand, Mitterrand declares that "the only interesting thing is to live," and afterwards he fasts for eight and a half days until he dies; on the other hand, he covers his head with a napkin to inhale the aroma and to hide the act from the eyes of God. "He picked up the songbirds and ate them whole: the succulent flesh, the fat, the bitter entrails, the wings, the tendons, the liver, the kidney, the warm heart, the feet, the many head ones crunching in his teeth." McCann's anatomization of the scene captures the philosophies of *carpe diem* and *mea culpa*—the guilty gluttony of *haute cuisine*. This evisceration testifies to the victims of suicide bombings.

Less a stream of consciousness or flight of fancy than a tissue of connectivity, McCann's ornithological technique segues to a white blimp rising over Jerusalem. The airship, nicknamed Fat Boy Two, surveys every single

licence plate on the highway, including Rami's yellow licence plate. Blimp, drone, or panopticon points to the overarching visual apparatus of *Apeirogon*, where each of the 1001 sections is linked. The camera work is carefully calibrated in geometrical patterns. Consider, for example, "amicable numbers": these recur in sections 220 in the first and second halves of the hybrid. Moreover, the number 220 is itself a rare example of an amicable number esteemed by mathematicians. The only other amicable number is 284, and sections 284 in the book are marked by blank squares that fold over the pages. Edges or margins delineate blank spaces. Amicable numbers suggest the amicable relationship between Rami and Bassam as well as the proper divisors, which are somehow meant to add up.

"As if those different things of which they are compressed can somehow recognize one another." Mutual recognition is not just between Israeli and Palestinian causes but also between the reader and the situation in the text. Prison guard Hertzl retrieves Bassam's badge 220-284 and hangs it in his office in the Mathematics Department at the Hebrew University, where he works on "harmonic integration"—a badge of McCann's writing.

Some of the 1001 sections consist of only one line: "Apeirogon: a shape with a countably infinite number of sides." Yet section 181 is immediately echoed and expanded in 182: "Countably infinite being the simplest form of infinity." Further elaboration of the title appears in the second half: "From the Greek *apeiron*: to be boundless, to be endless. Alongside the Indo-European root of *per*: to try, to risk . . . an *apeirogon* approaches the shape of a circle. . . . Anything is possible, even the seemingly impossible." This complex structure includes Philip Glass' experimental opera *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) as well as John Cage's musical project *As Slow as Possible* (1985). Philippe Petit makes a cameo appearance, crossing the great divide of the Hinnom Valley; similarly, McCann's high-wire act connects Israeli and Palestinian sides.

"Ramifications" extends Rami's name but more accurately derives from *ramus*—the Latin word for branch. Olive branches abound in *Apeirogon*, testing borders and boundaries, shades and shapes. Borges, Rushdie, and countable others migrate across McCann's aviary. "The rim of a tightening lung" is another refrain that focuses on the importance of perimeters in the act of reading and the pain of all pandemics.

—Michael Greenstein

Marc Jampole, *The Brothers Silver: A Novel*
Boulder: Owl Canyon Press, 2021
298 pages, $19.95, ISBN 9781952085079

Tales of trauma and neglect or memory and recovery comprise a literary genre that crowds the shelves of bookstores and bestseller lists these days, but *The Brothers Silver* is a great deal more than a story of survival due to its lyrical language and vivid characterizations.

Marc Jampole's novel traces the lives of two boys who grow up in a secular New York Jewish family haunted by mental illness, psychological violence, drugs, and abuse. The story begins in the early 1960s, shortly after their parents' divorce and the father's increasing absence. The first chapter tracks the mother's cycles of manic activity alternating with severe depressions that leave her sons fending for themselves.

The novel unfolds in numerous voices, each expressed in a unique literary style—from simple first person to third person omniscient and from Jules as a pre-teen to his sociopathic father Ed, who narcissistically justifies his desertion of wife and family. Other characters speak in dialect or irregular rhymes. The cumulative effect of this diverse narrative approach is akin to a multilingual Greek chorus that both propels the narrative and responds to it.

The effects of boyhood neglect and trauma rest like a stone on the chests of both brothers. The younger Leon retreats into depression, while the older Jules attempts to maintain a semblance of family normalcy. Leon later rebels by dropping out, attempting to escape the past through drugs, living in a teepee, and spouting counter-culture platitudes. Jules, by contrast, studies hard, thrives in school, and ultimately achieves professional success. But as with his younger brother, the faster he runs from the past, the faster he runs into it.

Jampole employs a number of modern and contemporary literary techniques to drive this account of the destabilizing effects of childhood trauma. James Joyce's use of stream of consciousness comes to mind in the very first lines, as Jules waits with his brother to testify at a parental custody hearing: "I count the dust rings floating down the beams of rusty sun, pouring into lofty windows, running over wooden billows in the surface of the floor, down a wooden hallway to a wooden door."

The author's multifarious narrative strategies risk courting display and

overwhelming the story at times, but they always seem to cohere while challenging the reader to consider literary connections that extend beyond mere narrative account. For instance, by introducing multiple voices with varying perspectives, Jampole raises questions concerning "the unreliable narrator." No single voice alone can with certainty be identified as lacking credibility, but the introduction of ten different voices compels the reader to call them all into question.

Another element in the author's literary arsenal is his use of extended symbols to provide continuity and deeper meaning to the storyline. Perhaps the strongest symbol centres on the mikvah, or bath, used for ritual immersion in Judaism. At a core moment in the novel, in which Jules spends an afternoon at a soon-to-be-demolished mikvah, he encounters a flash of self-understanding. He considers the mikvah's reputed power and wonders if its power might wash away the guilt and anger that consumes him. Yet, connected to the myth Jules has created for himself—an outsider who survives—he doesn't believe he deserves absolution. The element of water appears throughout *The Brothers Silver*, highlighting Jules' fluid sense of self-regard through time.

It is Jules' thoughts and perceptions that dominate the final long section of the novel. "Along an Unknown Highway" is an epic "re-journeying," in which Jules takes a road trip to reunite with various individuals he encountered as a young man hitchhiking up and down the West Coast. Those who once salvaged him from the side of the road have all aged poorly, some sad and bloated, others ethically compromised yet arrogant with self-regard. An earnest Jesus freak has turned into a righteous political Christian fundamentalist. A former pot dealer is now a doctor who makes a fortune pushing drugs for juvenile ADD. A young woman, whose once "flawless cheekbones" are now "worn and thatched," sells drinks and more at a casino. Jules is disturbed to discover that nearly all of these ghosts from the past have forfeited their youthful idealism to moral compromise and abject materialism.

Jampole risks weakening the focus and emotional thrust of the brothers' story in this chapter with social commentary and near-stereotypes, but his vivid description of these characters rescues them from formula. More importantly, these reunions provoke middle-aged Jules to reflect deeply upon his broken family and errant youth, connecting together the many detours he has taken on his own "unknown highway." A flood of memories possesses him, leading him to a greater understanding of how trauma has directed his

life. He recalls the call in the middle of the night when he learned that his brother Leon had experienced a tragic accident. He remembers the rare moments when his father showed him kindness. He reflects on the shame he suffered in his relationship with the emotionally manipulative El, which, no surprise, mirrored his own family experience.

Later, as he examines old family photos, Jules notes that his pose is always that of "an outsider, smiling desperately" in an effort to declare that all is well with the Silvers. He travels even further back in time to his very first memory, "on top of a makeshift bed consisting of a stack of linens on a dark-stained wooden bench built into an alcove in my grandmother's apartment."

The chords that run through his life tumble through Jules' consciousness until at the end we find him sitting on a bench in Central Park, his thoughts shifting from contemplating his surroundings to experiencing a moment of freedom from self-scrutiny that releases him from all memory: "My arms, like trembling gossamer, ride along Spring's thermal updraft, lift high and, spider-like, release, float upwards, downwards, sometimes height of hands, sometimes over birds that fly to unfamiliar lands."

—William Torphy

Tessa McWatt, *The Snow Line*
London: Scribe UK, 2021
256 pages, £14.99, ISBN 9781911617952

"Four wedding guests disembark separately from the Dhauladhar Express at the Pathankot train station in the state of Punjab." This is the very first line of Tessa McWatt's novel *The Snow Line*, and both its brevity and its punch have something to teach us. McWatt's omniscient narrator is guiding us through the sojourns of four travellers journeying across northern India and the Himalayas. Some are Westerners, some are Indian, but most are fusions of these two cultural standpoints. The characters are coming as wedding guests, but they are also coming to repair some sort of relationship they experience with the country of India. The sentences are sculpted in the shape of icicles, and they glide effortlessly through the interiors of her characters. McWatt summons paragraphs that can elucidate a character's backstory, build out her world, yet also inspire a sense of curiosity. Take,

for example, her introduction of Monica, who originally comes from India: "Monica arrives from Toronto with maps and fingernails. She buys trinkets and garments—souvenirs to fill her spacious suitcase—ignoring her shrinking bank balance. She has not yet told her family the truth." Pulling a reader to a character and their struggle usually takes novelists pages and chapters, but in a Chekhovian stroke, McWatt makes us want to learn more about Monica in just three sentences. Whether it is through the emphasizing of the word "souvenirs" or the detail of the "shrinking balance," we are attuned to something Monica is going through and curious to find out about this family secret that most assuredly will anchor a part of the novel's plot. We know nothing about how it will develop, yet we are already curious to see how it goes.

McWatt is also a master of the telling detail. For example, she says of Jyoti, a character who is a friend of another character named Jackson, who is half-Goan and half-English: "Jyoti is lucky. She is simply Indian . . . In London when Jyoti is called a Paki, she does not have to hate one part of herself that is abusing the other part." Just one sentence is all it takes to flesh out the hurt that almost all second-generation migrant children feel when they suffer racism and oppression in their birth country, and none of it feels contrived. McWatt's sentences are almost always taut, tight, and thought-out.

The focus of *The Snow Line* tends to be on British-born Reema and the half-Goan half-English Jackson. Both struggle with the sense of homelessness that most novels involving multiracial characters are rooted in, but in making *The Snow Line* a travel novel rather than an immigrant novel McWatt is able to portray a very different side of the Third Culture Kid's experience—namely, the experience of returning to the motherland as a complete foreigner. Whether it comes in the partaking of yoga or the witnessing of violence between Tibetans and Indians, McWatt's Western (or Westernized) characters are constantly attempting but almost never able to relate to the country of their ancestors. The novel becomes an exploration of what it means to be a tourist in one's own homeland and to be unable to fully connect. McWatt gives no real solution to such individuals—no real pathway for them to make sense of their identity. Rather, she wallows in the melancholy of not being from the country with which you identify or by which you are identified, thus beautifying a very real condition of contemporary being.

The Snow Line is an inspired love letter to the country of India, and

it is strongly recommended to anyone who aspires to study multinational characters as they too learn to discover themselves.

—Kiran Bhat

Cora Siré, *Not in Vain You've Sent Me Light*
Toronto: Guernica, 2021
90 pages, $20, ISBN 9781771836111

In "Go Back to Finger Painting," the final poem in Cora Siré's new collection *Not in Vain You've Sent Me Light*, the speaker asks, "Remember the smeary freedom and tactile bliss?" Siré, who also released a new collection of stories titled *Fear the Mirror* in 2021, has clearly graduated beyond finger painting but retains that childlike wonder for the "tactile bliss" of creating art. Colour, texture, shape, and sound are always in the poet's mind regardless of whether the topic is courtship, political upheaval, the nuclear power industry, or painting. But it is the "smeary freedom," not the pursuit of perfection, that Siré embraces most. So it is appropriate that Paul Klee—an important artist for Siré—fronts the collection with the following epigraph: "To emphasize only the beautiful seems to me to be like a mathematical system that only concerns itself with positive numbers."

The collection opens with a sequence of poems in which the small, messy minutiae of personal relationships comprise the artist's canvas. Consider the wonderful tactile detail in the first poem, "At Our Book-Scrambled Table," in which the speaker squints at

> the French's
> Classic—yolkbright
> with a crust of dried
> mustard by the plastic spout.

Evidently, the couple in the poem are in some kind of standoff, where they "delve into devices, / pause at intervals, / meet the other's gaze" but do not broach the subject (whatever that might be). So mustard—and its ingredient list, which is notably compared to their "marriage / certificate"—becomes an easy aesthetic escape from an awkward conversation.

The follow-up poem, "Across the Condiments," implies that some of the

friction may have to do with cultural differences, which are hinted at when the speaker offers the following striking contrast between that sorry store-bought brand of mustard she's used to and an authentic version favoured by her partner:

> Where he grew up
> the mustard isn't neon bright
> but rusty as the cordillera
> zingy on your lips—
> a bee sting at first taste.

In just a few words, Siré captures the good and the bad—the "zing" and the "sting"—of relationships. Other poems use the context of mishaps (on the ice in "Red Calamity," in the Andes in "Andean Altitude") to explore the bumpy road of romantic entanglement, all rendered with equal doses of humour and pure reveling in the aesthetic pleasure of words.

In what might be one of the best pieces in the collection, Siré employs an almost Larkinesque dry wit in tackling the fraught arena of literary criticism, which potentially threatens the artist's pursuit of aesthetic freedom:

> Shovel on his shoulder,
> he scans vast fields of verse
> in search of fertile soil in which to dig.
> Rambling in a tract of songetry
> he stoops to scoop some home-tilled silt:
> Is it common or eclectic, sunbaked
> as concrete, wet and wormy or
> scattered willy-nilly on the landscape?

The speaker invites the reader to "dissect *his* style," adapting Seamus Heaney's "digging" poetics for a brilliant, barbed commentary on how some critics tear apart poetry to leave "soil deconstructed / and demystified."

But, Siré reminds us, there are threats other than the merely academic. In "Origins of the Blast," the speaker confesses

> Before Bolaño, I never thought of poets
> as detectives who track

collateral damage when fear
is twisted by malicious hands.

Though the epigraph to the poem comes from Roberto Bolaño's *The Romantic Dogs* (1995), the reference to "detectives" in that last passage also conjures up his novel *The Savage Detectives* (1998), which is intensely interested in the relationship between (avant-garde) poetry and political crises (e.g., Mexico's "Dirty War" of the 1960s-1980s). Siré does her own detective work in linking the suspension of habeas corpus in 1970s Argentina to the same scenario in 1970s Montreal, when the War Measures Act was invoked during Quebec's "October Crisis."

Siré continues to track the "collateral damage" of her world in "Escape Route"—an interrelated sequence of four poems that are each written in tercets and that each tackle the subject of nuclear power. The frenetic pace—for example, the first poem, "Equations," is one 27-line sentence, leaving the reader out of breath—matches the breathtaking, nightmarish reality of the nuclear power industry, including its museums filled with "proliferations of seemingly / innocuous factoids forming a supercritical mass of rock-hard / evidence hiding the gaps, unknowns and side effects" ("Free Particle"). "Escape Route" is the motivating operation of the speaker, who is (as we should all be) hyperaware of the "consequences of betraying laws of nature" ("Evening Star"). And yet, as is the case throughout the collection, art remains the speaker's "terra firma"—a way of not *forgetting* but rather better *grasping* the destructive impact of humans on the natural world:

. . . my chain
reaction is triggered by Georgia O'Keefe's desert

landscapes as I detect radioactive sludge glowing beneath
the blood-red rock formations of New Mexican mesas . . .

When the speaker in the final poem asks, "Remember the smeary freedom and tactile bliss?" it's not so much a desire to return to childhood as it is a yearning to wrest the aesthetic work from the forces that wish to reduce all matter to "factoids" or (as in the case of the toiling critic) dig apart that which cannot be readily understood. Siré's exemplary painter is Klee, whose *Architecture of the Plain* (1923) was the inspiration for "Go Back to Finger

Painting." A faraway glance (or a casual view on Google Images) offers a fuzzy, out-of-focus perspective of Klee's work. Spend a little more time, and Klee's "water colours shift according to your gaze." As the poem concludes, "The painting is greater than the sum of its brushstrokes." The same can be said for Siré's new collection.

—Adam Lawrence

Jerry White, *The Battle of London 1939-45: Endurance, Heroism and Frailty under Fire*
London: Bodley Head, 2021
448 pages, £30.00, ISBN 9781847923011

A lot of people probably know a little about London during the Second World War. It was then the world's most populous city (8¾ million in 1939). It was the centre of the world's greatest empire, which, it could be argued, was the hinge of world history during much of 1940. And while a few other places had been subjected to terror bombing before, London was the first great city—a sprawling, almost unmissable target—to be forced to endure sustained aerial destruction. It suffered from these attacks, on and off, for some 4½ years. Property damage was extensive. Almost 30,000 people were killed, and many more were seriously injured.

Jerry White's *The Battle of London 1939-45* presents a compelling and panoramic portrait of London's wartime experiences. There were the tens of thousands of members of the Civil Defence Force, tasked with enforcing the blackout, mitigating the consequences of raids, and providing support for those injured or driven from their homes or both. Some of these men and women were firefighters, others were drivers of ambulances, others still were members of demolition squads. Some collected dead bodies. (There is one chilling photo of a young woman's body lying among ruins at the Aldwych in June 1944, the victim of a V-1 missile.) Some were full-time and paid, but many were part-time and volunteers. As the novelist Inez Holden wrote in September 1940, this "Civil Defence Army is fighting to a fierce accompaniment of incendiaries, dive-bombers, and guns; the sky is lit up in patches, a hideous melodrama let loose over London." The work of these defenders was of critical importance, and their efforts became more effective with time, practice, and improved organization (as witnessed by their

actions in 1944). White often acknowledges these achievements.

Almost every sort of Londoner (or temporary Londoner) is found in this book. Housewives, schoolchildren, local government officials, teenagers, U.S. and Canadian troops, shoppers, deserters, patrons of dance halls, office "girls," pig-keepers, publicans, writers, construction workers, entertainers—all these make appearances. Readers can appreciate the great range of Londoners' experiences, many imbedded in social class (as usual, the poor suffered the most). Class resentments were frequently evident. Personal character was also a force to be reckoned with. Many people behaved admirably, a few heroically; lots were commendably stoical. Others were mainly concerned with keeping their heads down. Some (who knows how many?) were cowards, cheats, or looters. Wartime revealed a human canvas of vivid and almost unlimited variety.

The Battle of London 1939-45 is very effective in blending matters of quantity and matters of subjective experience. On many pages there are important numbers that help to root the urban narrative. These hard data ensure that the book has a firm structure. There are population figures—London's population in mid-1944 was some 3 million less than it had been in mid-1939. There are figures on production, prices, employment, destroyed houses, savings, government expenditures, and of course deaths. Out-migrations and in-migrations are specified, including the numbers of evacuees at different times (notably September 1939 and the summers of 1940 and 1944). And along with these numbers White offers much rich material on personal experiences of the war drawn from diaries, memoirs, the press, and social observers. He is a master of these sources. Many voices are heard. Readers are invited to understand the conflict from dozens of perspectives, many of which were widely shared.

Londoners lived on a roller coaster of emotions for over six years. The relief of Munich in 1938 was followed by a toughened resolve in 1939 not to back down, which was succeeded by eight months of the strains and puzzlements of "phoney war." Then, suddenly, from May 1940 there was real, mind-gripping war, with the prospect of an enemy invasion—a minority of Londoners were resigned to defeat—and soon the destruction of the blitz, which lasted until May 1941 and left parts of the city in ruins. These nightmares were followed by over 2½ years of almost no major raids on London and a sense of relief and recovery, even a sort of relaxation, as the Allies finally enjoyed successes in battle and the Axis powers seemed to be heading

for defeat. But the German bombers weren't finished with London, as they returned in early 1944, again ripping apart people's lives. From mid-June of that year Londoners were knocked about by the V-1 cruise missiles (White is excellent at showing how and why these pilotless planes were so emotionally toxic), and from September by the V-2 rockets. Pessimism, optimism; hope, fear; confidence, anxiety; the certainty of victory in late 1944/early 1945 combined with doubts about personal survival: the public mood ran in a jagged line for six long years, and White expertly explores these many ups and downs and the reasons for the shifts in psychology.

How did war change Londoners' feelings about each other and about their society? In his penultimate chapter White argues that the war "stimulated radicalising tendencies by opening out the opportunities for public discourse in new organisations or movements . . . and by providing an object lesson in how greater equality of sacrifice and consumption was necessary to win the war, and perhaps to win the peace too." Shared experiences gave a boost to collectivist values and solidarities. "All classes were involved daily in keeping Londoners safe from the most extensive and long-lasting bombardment aimed at any city in the world." Neighbours and strangers were brought together in unexpected ways, often sharing the same purposes. Mutualities became commonplace and pointed toward a different and (many hoped) better, more humane, less grim future. So, in July 1945, when the nation voted for the first time since 1935, Winston Churchill was still vastly admired—about as universally celebrated as any political leader in any democracy has ever been—but his Conservative Party was not, and Labour won its greatest victory ever.

—Robert Malcolmson, Queen's University