



sevelt's excessive caution. Had the failure of the League of Nations, the Depression, the Dust Bowl so turned our concerns inward? Did we feel secure because an ocean separated us from Europe? Can we expect another book?

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**Kemal Varol**  
*Wûf*

Trans. Dayla Rogers. Austin, Texas. Center for Middle Eastern Studies. 2020. 193 pages.

**KEMAL VAROL IS** little known outside Turkey, where he is a minor star of con-

temporary literature. He is best known for the 2014 novel *Haw*, translated into English under the title *Wûf* as part of the University of Texas's Center for Middle Eastern Studies' (CMES) book series Emerging Voices from the Middle East. In Turkey, the novel was awarded multiple prizes, including a journalism association's peace prize, and was translated thanks to a prestigious PEN/Heim grant. The sixth book in the CMES series, *Wûf* is the rare literary work from Turkey made available into English and proves its author to be as strong an emerging talent as Elif Shafak or Orhan Pamuk were upon their anglophone debuts.

FRANK ORMSBY

**Frank Ormsby**  
*The Rain Barrel*

Winston Salem, North Carolina. Wake Forest University Press. 2020. 112 pages.

**KEEN OBSERVATIONS ARE** expected of a poet, and Irish poet Frank Ormsby satisfies many times over in *The Rain Barrel*. The book is filled with bright idylls such as "The Beekeeper" and "Small Things." In "Small Things," a pair of "old boys" try to cheer the speaker because he's just missed seeing a heron: "They cast about for fitting consolation. / 'Have you seen the egrets?'" they ask. But the speaker's not disappointed: he finds "three pleasures" in their joy from "the small things made precious by their delight." Each of these poems is a pretty figure in its own right, like pieces of beach glass, but *The Rain Barrel* is much more than a string of pretty baubles. There are poems of playful personification, such as "Scarecrow," in which Ormsby imagines the family's scarecrow pining for a "ragdoll / who won a prize for lady of the house" and who "lives in a cornfield further west." As these character/objects multiply and

reoccur throughout *The Rain Barrel*, they begin to weave a complex tapestry of a place and a family.

Ormsby demonstrates a subtle virtuosity in this book. There are many variations and departures from the quiet, reflective poems. The poem "Small World (4)" is a series of ten brief and independent stanzas. Each of them is a highly compressed combination of observation and sentiment. If one isn't fussy about counting syllables, they are excellent examples of the haiku form. Or, for a different form, consider "The Love Poem," which begins by announcing "the love poem has been discredited / . . . a day has been set aside for the shredding of the English love sonnet." However, by the end of the piece, the love poem has been restored—"my prohibition love, / aroused, we will melt underground"—and improved: "It will be the old loving, toughened and tenderized by exile." The poem is formally playful, ending, as does the English sonnet, with a rhyming couplet. And yet another example of formal variation is the eponymous poem, "The Rain Barrel," which is composed of eighteen distinct observations. Together, they describe and personify an enormous old whiskey cask, which has become a family's rain barrel. The poem's turns of perception

propaganda minister; and Rudolph Hess, who landed a plane in Scotland in a futile attempt to negotiate a peace in 1941.

One appreciates Larson's attention to the morale of the English people undergoing repeated attacks in the cities. Clementine Churchill became quite concerned with conditions in the shelters, where many chose to sleep when there was a "bombers' moon."

Finally, there is the Great Man himself, never quite stepping off his mythic pedestal, uplifting the populace with regular tours of bombed areas, speaking by radio to the nation. The reader also sees a man in his moods, as war news comes in, a man with appetites for eating, drinking, smoking, and talking till the wee hours of the morning.

Reading of Churchill's and England's trials during 1940 and 1941, month by month, one becomes quite unsympathetic with America's sitting out for so long. It should have been clear to F. D. Roosevelt and the American public that England suffered immensely and would not be able to withstand a full-scale invasion. Why did it take Pearl Harbor to bring the US into the war?

One wants to know more about public sentiment for staying out, the resistance even toward the Lend-Lease program, Roo-

*Wûf* tells the story of Mikasa, a street dog who grows up amidst the conflict between “Northerners” and “Southerners” in the Turkey of the 1990s, falls in love with a dog who guards the Southerners’ party headquarters, is captured by the Northerners, trained to sniff out bombs, and after a disastrous incident is sent to recover in a vet shelter, where he becomes something of a legend among the impounded animals. Mikasa is passionate about those he loves (human and canine alike) and about cigarettes. Characters are drawn in the thin veneer of this literary style—the political allegory that strives not to be too partisan—but nonetheless come alive: the ruthless Lama, kind Canine Cengiz, sweet

old Uncle Heves. Not surprising, given the human interest of the story, it’s the human characters and not the dogs (with Mikasa as the exception) who really come to life in Varol’s prose.

*Wûf* is a love story of war and violence. Touted as surrealism thanks to its canine narrator, it is utterly realist in its depictions of the horrors of armed conflict, emphasizing the damage done to both soldier and civilian, psychologically and physically, in the name of political ideologies. While Varol speaks of “Northerners” and “Southerners” for the sake of plausible political deniability, *Wûf* is quite obviously a novel about the Kurdish revolution against the Turkish state, focused on the period of particularly

intense violence in the 1990s. Dayla Rogers has rendered all this in an excellent translation that brings Varol’s novel to life, and she provided a number of endnotes that help contextualize some of the more oblique historical references for those unfamiliar with the specificity of the conflict.

Kemal Varol’s *Wûf* is an excellent contribution to the literary consideration of war’s many damages and will no doubt continue to be an important cultural referent for the Kurdish-Turkish conflict in the Turkish cultural imagination. I won’t be surprised to see it on 2020’s “best of” lists.

Sean Guynes  
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are reminiscent of Wallace Stevens’s play with blackbirds, though Ormsby’s poem is less abstract.

Unlike Stevens’s blackbirds, Ormsby’s rain barrel is absolutely tangible, even if many ways of looking at the barrel reach deeply into fantasy and, in describing the arc of its existence, transform it into a reflection on the narrator’s father. Section 7 of the poem describes the barrel and the father together, the latter “struggling to accept the gifts of air.” By section 13, the barrel is a way of looking back at the father’s funeral—“so strong” does it look on that day, “it might be carrying / clay as well as water.” The barrel, like many objects, is transformed by light and well-crafted personification into a character with its own secret life and romances, and even the massive cask must someday succumb to age. In this way, the objects in this book metonymize the family and the countryside’s transition from one way of life to another—a region leaving the pastoral and entering the industrial world.

Cross-woven through the book are poems that deal with the *disappeared*, a



word that evokes some of the most brutal periods of the twentieth century. The first poem in the book is titled “Untroubled.” At first, the poem seems a wholesome

recollection (and the mention of JFK recalls the enormous pride of many Irish in President Kennedy), but the title evokes the Troubles, and the remainder of the poem forecasts the fear and violence to come. Along this thread is “The Disappeared,” a haunting, sparse poem that speaks of mass graves hidden on the mountain, and just after that comes “Today There Has Been Information,” one of many poems that deal with the search for bodies. The family at the center of *The Rain Barrel* has lost a son to the Troubles, and there can be no closure for them without answers, without a funeral, as heartbreakingly detailed in poems such as “No Closure” and “There Will Be a Knock.”

*The Rain Barrel* is a substantial text at over a hundred pages of poetry. It contains a wide range of subject and style, but Ormsby doesn’t lean on technical mastery to dazzle the reader. This is a book that satisfies at many levels, from individual poems to the work’s multiple arcs. I highly recommend it.

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