Unbelievers
Also by John Mateer

Poetry

Burning Swans
The Civic Poems
Anachronism
(Echo)
Spitting Out Seeds
Mister! Mister! Mister!
Barefoot Speech
Loanwords
Makwerekwere
The Ancient Capital of Images/Imaji no Koto
The Brewery Site: Six Poems
Words in the Mouth of a Holy Ghost
Southern Barbarians
The Republic of the East
Elsewhere
The Travels/Viagens
Ex-white/Einmal-weiss: South African Poems
The Azanians
This Dark Book/Este Livro Escuro

Prose

Semar’s Cave: an Indonesian Journal
John Mateer

Unbelievers,
or
‘The Moor’
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Half of man is his tongue, and half his heart.
—The Poem of Zuhayr

_Eighth Century A.D._
The Mall
Mall of the Emirates

We don’t use the word “exile” anymore, despite meeting in the Mall of the Emirates, that hyperbolic cave, ordering what is expensive peasant food, while contemplating our prospects on two or, maybe, three continents, confessing that we no longer return to our natal countries. We’re unlike our taxi-drivers, with our perpetually renewable visas and self-conscious amnesia, even if we, too, could forever cruise down Dubai’s freeways, reminiscing on the stupas of Anuradapura, how in the sunlight they glint like ricebowls over-turned. In consolation we have what used to be Literature, its metamorphosis, those phantoms, our other lives. Or isn’t it the other way round? Haven’t we been expelled from the Garden of Nothingness to wander, life-long, lost in thought, imagining Al Muteena Street as an avenue in Tunis, grey palmtrees attempting shadow against gilded exhaust haze? Ali, remember that dream you told me of: Hafiz appearing to an Australian scholar, nominating him his Interpreter? That’s probably how we ended up here in this extravaganza of shops, this oasis, as a poem born on the tip of another’s tongue, as perfectly translatable synonyms for that word: “exile”.
Al’Andalus
After the Only Known Poem by Abd Al’ Rahman

The palm-tree I beheld in far Westralia,
far from what might be called its origin, far from things familiar.
I shouted: You and I are far away, in a weird place among strangers!
I have been away from home so long nobody knows me, nowhere!
You, too, have grown up in a world where you are still called a stranger.
You: refugee, foreigner, exile, Unbeliever! Stranger,
know that there are now so many of us—reincarnated nobodies—everywhere.
May someone one day say that we weren’t merely illegals, wanderers.
May we someday be discovered somewhere far away, far away from this Westralia.
The Books

Not all the books were thrown on the bonfires. Some, as Ibn Zunbul recounts, were stored in abandoned mosques. Our Traveller, hearing of this, was led to a mosque, and through the keyhole saw nothing, but heard—not wind—the rustle of worms. 

*Maybe*, he thought, *all books are the Uncreated?*
The West
—Graffiti for the ruins of Córdoba Cathedral

Here, in this unreconstructed mosque,
the arches and proliferating pillars
are a million stilled camels returning
to the Caliphate of the Invisible,
leaving us behind, here, in this emptied
mosque of Mind.
For Ibn Battuta

I have sought
your Spirit here in scorching
Andalusia. But only found
those memories
of my travels, that
Shunyata.
While in the Salón dos Embajadores
—Remembering Years Ago Lecturing in Australia on 'The Poem' in the Second Week of September 2001

The New Capitalist students had been shouting at the Feral who’d come to “drum up support” for a manifestation.

I’d begun with the words of Adonis, his “Dream of New York”, its exploding skyscrapers and wingéd people floating like swallows.

Their unadulterated silence spoke:

*We are only ever marginalia, never a poetics of Terror*…
Images of the Saint

ON THE PAINTING

Neither that album page, nor its pristine miniature painting of a fabled Persian garden where plants bloom with human features, nor that monochromatic landscape in Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* under which, as under a bloodied Oriental carpet, there were the dead faces none of us could avoid stepping on,

this panel of the Altar of the Virgin of the Navigators in the Real Alcázar, in the chamber from which Queen Isobel despatched the Conquistadors, she who like the Eternal Mother harboured all behind her chador, this statement on the Expulsion of the Moors—

* Santiago on a white horse, sword raised and poised, ready to swoop; the heads of the disembodied, their faces stony and sprouting from the ground. 
ON THE STATUE

When in the Cathedral at Santiago de Compostela I will be invited to hug, for good luck, the marble torso of the Saint, I won’t. Not for moral reasons.

Embracing someone from behind like that reminds me too much of how, in the Apartheid army, we were taught to approach the enemy, to slit the throat.
(Kaffir)

Mirror.
The Andalusian Poet

QUARTET OF ECHOES

That poem
    of his
landscape
    is yours
and mine.

Whose voice?
Of that play
all I remember
are those women,

like wraiths,
like the black-garbed
sisters

of Our Poet,
flocking around
him for the ghost

of a photo.
My singing is yours—
At his birthday fireworks display,
the Poet doesn't know who he is:

    In your prison-cell
you echoed that.
(Reprise)

*Doves of my youth!*

You seemed to be there
in a lovely park in Madrid
staring down through the leaves
at the cute tanning tourists

*Doves of my youth!*

Memories of my first garden,
that happy forest hidden deep
in the goldmine of my heart
where even we can’t be lost

*Doves of my youth!*

You seemed to be there
in a park in summery Madrid,
but only I was heard
there, perched among you,

*Doves of my youth!"
Sé, Coimbra

Rivers of rocks running under my feet are streets,
and the weathered buildings my shadows skim
are photo-ready, after the fact, this:

that I look and look for the stone-mason’s words
engraved on the Cathedral, a Moor’s utterance
that could translate as:

…easier to change faith than re-hew stone.
That Proverb

Remember that photograph we saw
    of Old Barcelona, of carts pulled by ostriches?
Did I quote then that Arabic proverb, or
    say, *We’d ride their wings across firey bridges?*
The Moor

—for M

Let me be the Moor. You’re the Galician Princess, slavegirl. OK? I’m on my own Reconquista; you’re down on your knees. Yes, I am an African who reads a lot, and you are tilting back your wondrous head, your dark hair twisted tight in my fist. You are parting your balmed lips, tongue taunting, bright as a bitten strawberry. Yes, this is almost communion… Are you on your hands and knees? We’re both slaves to the blur of the mirror. Or do you want to be that famous pulpo gallego, squiggling away in my inky mouth? I am the Moor, and you, my almost conquered, interrupt: Enough History! Fóllame!
Ghazal

Between us she is Latin, a dark metaphor
unutterable, open and pulsating: not fear.

We are holding her, fully, in this happiness, waking,
finding everything silences us, our tongues, eyes and her.

Now where is a kiss, where begins the licking, the violence
that as our hands tumble over—holding her in her fear?

Yes, my beloved, she is the One Between, deep as an ear,
and as you tongue at her dangling lobe I grasp her. Hear?

Darling, my Sweetness, are you really whispering, that incendiary,
angry? Are you hitting her in this dream? Am I holding her?

This is our pleasure… Are you slapping, whipping our Latina?
She is crying. Then you are crying, still, trembling with fear.