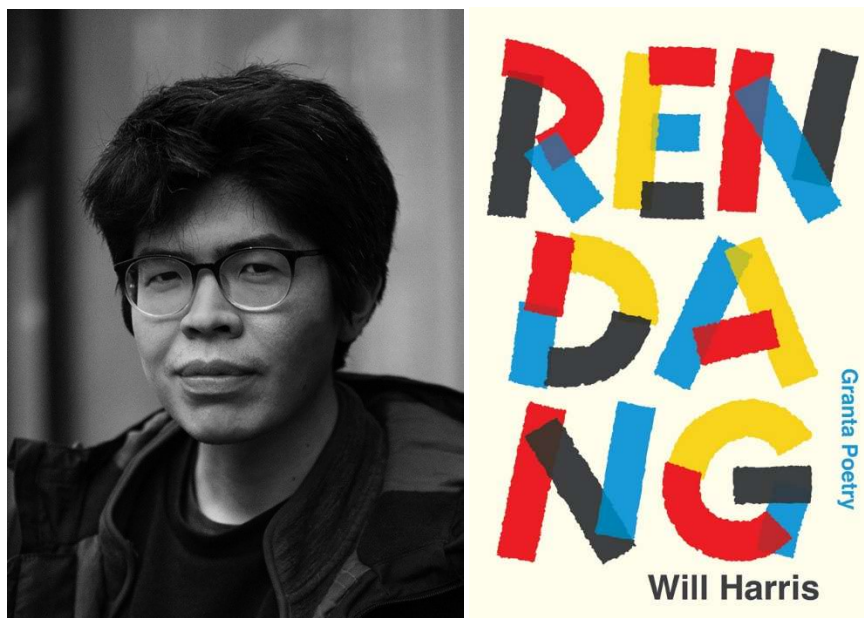


# **RENDANG**

## **by Will Harris**



Will Harris is a writer of Chinese Indonesian and British heritage, born and based in London. He is the author of an essay, *Mixed-Race Superman* (UK: Peninsula Press, 2018; US: Melville House, 2019), and a poetry book, *RENDANG* (UK: Granta; US: Wesleyan University Press, 2020). He also co-edited the Spring 2020 issue of *The Poetry Review* with Mary Jean Chan.

### **Reviews**

‘One of the standout scenes in *RENDANG* rises from a second-hand memory in the daydream of a bored poet in a dressing room. A couple see a woman on the street dancing, hood overhead, can of Diet Coke in hand: “The wind blew/and she nearly lost her balance but not only did she/not fall, she performed a kind of hop/and skip.” It’s one of many moving portraits of everyday grace in the debut collection of Will Harris, a young Anglo-Indonesian poet who has already won the acclaim of the Forward Prizes (Best Single Poem shortlist, 2018) and the Arts Foundation (Poetry Fellow, 2019) ... The poems in *RENDANG* span the formal range of a mature poet but it’s Harris’s playfulness that really impresses. He has the confidence and stylistic mastery to jump between dreams and scenes like a character in an old video game (and uses this as a device in “The White Jumper”). If verse is a tightrope, Harris skips along it.’ (Maria Crawford, *the Financial Times*)

‘Will Harris’s *RENDANG* is a sharp and assured debut collection that meditates on the multiplicity of identity, the shaky building blocks that make up a country and the politics of exhibition. It travels from actual terrains – in London, Chicago, Jakarta – to the surreal “purple rock” of “Planet Mongo”, and this exploratory curiosity is matched by the collection’s formal expansiveness, encompassing accomplished prose-poems, concrete

poetry and lyric sequences. Harris suffuses the everyday with a mythic dignity, so that the drunk singing Otis Redding in a pub takes on the tragic stature of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner and "bees groan inside / the carcass of the split bin bag" as Samson's biblical riddle is brought to summer pavements to later "draw forth – not sweetness – something new". As the speaker ticks "Other, Mixed" on forms, he muses that "some / drunk nights I theorize / my own transmembered norms", wryly using the non-standard English "transmembered" to evade being trapped in bureaucratic boxes himself. The collection leans into a vocabulary all of its own, and announces itself as an artefact that will not be dislodged.' (Joanna Lee, the *Guardian*)

## **Mother Country**

The shades open for landing,  
I see the pandan-leafed  
interior expanding  
towards the edge of a relieved  
horizon. Down along  
the banks of the Ciliwung  
are slums I had forgotten,  
the river like a loosely  
sutured wound. As we begin  
our descent into the black  
smog of an emerging  
power, I make out the tin  
shacks, the stalls selling juices,  
the red-tiled colonial  
barracks, the new mall.  
It is raining profusely.  
After years of her urging  
me to go, me holding back,  
I have no more excuses.

## **Lines of Flight**

### *Mariinsky Canal*

A girl twists a stalk of rye  
around her wrist like  
a bracelet. She sees her father  
at the plough and wants  
  
to pick a cornflower, its dark  
blue almost purple  
colour threaded through  
with grief, among the weeds.

She wants to go and pin  
one to his chest. And all this  
is implied, though  
the photograph itself

shows just a field of rye  
with cornflowers.

## **My Name is Dai**

I heard him say his name was die, and seconds later that it was short for David, spelt *D-A-I*. We had just sat down when he walked up to me and Susie. He said he recognized her from the National Portrait Gallery. The one with the large forehead above the door. People miss it. The sad smile. Beer sloshed against the edges of his glass like a fish trying to escape its bowl, but in this case the fish was dead and only looked to be alive because of Dai's swaying. There are people who relieve themselves of information like a dog pissing against a streetlamp to mark out territory, urination no longer in the service of the body, providing no relief. Likewise, conversation. Dai was a type of Ancient Mariner.

It was in his bones. He'd been working on a site with Polish builders and it was one of their birthdays. He mimed plunking bottles on the table. *Vodka*. Whole bottles? *I'm Welsh*, he said. *I was born on a mountain. Between two sheepdogs*. He started talking about the village he grew up in, how happy he was among the meadows and milking cows, how unhappy he was at school. *You might've heard of one boy from school. A right goody. Spoke like Audrey Hepburn or Shakespeare. We all bullied him, but my mam would say why don't you be like Michael, why don't you be like Michael. Michael bloody Sheen. Michael's shirts were always clean and ironed. Anthony Hopkins, he was a local too. A tiny village,*

*And who came out of it? Those two and me. You know, I probably know more words than anyone in this pub. Look at them. You think any of these cunts can spell verbiage?* He spat out each letter – *V-E-R-B-I-A-G-E* – and in the act of spelling became self-conscious. He turned to Susie. *What do you do?* She was a writer so he told her more words. I said I taught a little and wrote. *Teach me*, he said. *Go on*. But I couldn't think of anything wise or useful to tell Dai. On the verge of tipping over, he held a hand out towards us. *Tenderness*, he said, *try a little tenderness*, and then repeating it, half singing it, he said it in a voice both louder and more tender. *That's my advice. You know who that is? Otis Redding.*

*Try a little tenderness, mmm nuh uh uh*. That was when Susie saw the haze descend. Like an explosion in a quarry the inward collapse rippled out across his face, throwing clouds of dust into the sky.

*I'm sorry. A man shouldn't cry. I haven't cried since I was a boy. I haven't...* He stopped. *A man should be a brick, a boulder.* He made his hand into a fist like he was playing rock-paper-scissors in the schoolyard. *My ex-wife died last month. The funeral was yesterday. We were together twenty years but her family, her bloody family, wouldn't let me near it. God, he said, I loved that woman.* He couldn't say her name. He was swaying. I got the impression that he saw

his life as a sea voyage during which he'd done many strange, inexplicable and stupid things, of which shooting an albatross was one. But perhaps he knew it was better to have shot that albatross through the heart and be able to talk about it than to bear it having entered his life and gone. It was then I saw the TV and pointed. *Look! Michael Sheen.* It was true. There he was on *The One Show* in a freshly ironed shirt, smiling at Matt Baker. Dai turned around. *I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. I need some air.* He stared at us. *You're writers,* he said. *You should write about this.* And though it may have been unfair, I thought about how many people he'd said this to before.

## Discussion Ideas

- The aeroplane is still in mid-air in 'Mother Country'. What do you think has preceded this journey? What might follow it?
- What does the phrase 'mother country' mean to you? Do you live in your own mother country? How does the phrase change in meaning or importance to you, depending on your proximity to your mother country?
- This is the photograph referred to in 'Lines of Flight' <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/4817/> and here is more information about the photographer [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sergey\\_Prokudin-Gorsky](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sergey_Prokudin-Gorsky). How does the poet transform this photograph to the poem? Does the reader need the photograph to understand the poem fully?
- 'All this is implied' was the title of Will Harris' first pamphlet publication. What might it mean as a statement of poetic intent?
- More about the original Ancient Mariner - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Rime\\_of\\_the\\_Ancient\\_Mariner](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rime_of_the_Ancient_Mariner). What does it mean for a 21<sup>st</sup> century poet to invoke this 18<sup>th</sup> century poetic character in his poem?

## Other books by Will Harris

*Mixed Race Superman* (an essay, Peninsula Press, 2018)  
*All This is Implied* (Happenstance, 2017)

## **If you liked Will Harris, try ...**

- Mary Jean Chan
- Stephen Sexton
- Rishi Dastidar

## **Will Harris online**

[willharris.com](http://willharris.com)