Launch Speech by Chris Wallace-Crabbe
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Dawn the Proof, Tony Page

A book of lyric poetry, which sounds pretty obvious these days. But what is poetry? Not one simple thing and what is more, as Goethe wrote, "If you wish to advance into the infinite, explore the finite in all directions." Including that of *time*.

Song, ritual, history or magic – it preserved tales of the gods and spirits. Prose would not be written for umpteen centuries, but poetry celebrates the deep meanings of natural places, as it long has done. And this will lead us to Tony Page, a poet as explorer.

Prose wouldn't be written for many centuries. There's no written English before 680 AD, for instance, but there was oral poetry, handling *all* these tasks.

The same had been true for Greeks, Hebrews, Indians and Chinese. Poetry was singable, choric, even danceable. But that newer medium – prose – would in time take over most of language's jobs.

We still have lyric poetry, even if it isn't sung to the lyre. And thus we have Tony Page's new book, *Dawn the Proof*. Even its cover is by Tony, making vivid use of another, far later, art photography. Yet what does he portray there? A desert in Egypt, a land that is synonymous for us with being truly ancient.

Ancient? Ah, yes. Which might lead us to Tony's lyric, "Falling Leaves" (page 78 – see below).

Many of these lyrics spring from the poet's travels, especially in South-East Asia and the Mediterranean. We are all travellers, after all. And as my late friend, poet and priest Peter Steele once wrote, "It is good to know the truth, but better to speak of palm trees." And Tony chimes in from "how long can I withstand/ the scourge of panorama?" or in another poem, "Not much to believe in/ once we've feasted on history."

History, the truths of the generative past, can be seen as pressed into clay tablets with cuneiform signs. Or else they can be viewed in the controlling pen of the geographer:

 "A Geographer Takes Stock of the Terrain" (Page 57 – see below)

In all these lyrics, as well as keen perception, we hear Arnold's "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of belief systems falling away, yet leaving their signs on the stone or in the baked clay. Desert and sunset may surround our protagonist, but he travels, as Mozart did before him. Or Chekhov, who drew back and speculated like this: "But perhaps our universe is suspended on the tooth of some monster."

Monsters or not, we have Tony's own mortal Mozart, alive in art itself on page 48.

"Candle smoke… dust."

Falling Leaves

Cuneiform long obsolete
by Plato's time, yet if not
for those scribes who pioneer

chiselled words on clay, no one
would be texting on the train.
Millions die mouthing Greek

while hordes of babies babble
for their mothers in Latin. Homer
and Virgil people the underworld

with heroes; but how many souls are
swallowed by the abyss, how many
exiled to the other shore? Multitudes,

more than all the leaves of every
autumn; calling to us in lamentations
and languages no longer alive.

A Geographer Takes Stock of the Terrain

To fathom the essence of this landscape
should be a manageable procedure.
As so often before, I choose
      well-behaved parameters.

My strategy: draw a map which
controls every contingency.
I provide the code, explain
what each symbol represents
out where the earth imagines
      it can still hide secrets.

No matter how breathtaking,
our model will standardise.
You can visualise precisely
every milestone, never need
      to venture outside yourself.

With this know-how, all is routine.
Facts prove safer than ephemeral ecstasy,
better than being transported by
      a rush of awe.

My instruments cut down to size
all that dust and inconvenience.
The technique's foolproof:
to pace out the valley's gradient
      I do the walking for you.

Let's reduce to scale: 1 in 7 –
no, worlds steeper, 1 in 3. What?
This is more than I have
wrestled in any ascent.
These dancing sightlines erode
the certainty I've laboured
          a lifetime to accumulate.

All the contours of my body
vibrate with wonder's onslaught.
Let me apologise: I guarantee
          this will only be a brief
          systematic shutdown.