

# READING THE POETRY OF MIMI KHALVATI

12. Międzynarodowy Festiwal Literatury i Teatru  
**between.pomiędzy**

## MIMI KHALVATI

Short biography

## GHAZAL

What is it?

## AFTERWARDNESS

The poem and excercises

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**UNDERLINED TEXTS AND IMAGES ATTACHED TO THEM PROVIDE LINKS TO AUDIO-VISUAL MATERIALS.  
EXTERNAL LINKS MARKED**



**AND**



# Introduction



**This chapter is about the English poet Mimi Khalvati and some of her poetry. She was born in Iran and grew up in Britain. She often refers to her Persian/Iranian background. She uses forms that are European and ones that come from the Middle East (especially the ghazal). She is a poet who often uses traditional fixed forms such as the sonnet.**

# Three places

- Khalvati was born in **Persia** at present called Iran. The principal language spoken in Iran is Farsi.
- She grew up on the **Isle of Wight** in the south of England, in the English Channel (French: la Manche).
- She lives in **London**.



# Short biography

Mimi Khalvati was born in Tehran in Iran. She came to Britain when she was six years old. She attended a boarding school in the Isle of Wight in England. She went to universities in Switzerland and in London. She worked as a theatre director in Tehran. For many years now, she has lived in London, working as a poet and a creative writing teacher. Khalvati has published several volumes of prize-winning poetry and is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. The RSL is meant to represent the voice of literary circles in the United Kingdom.



## SOURCES:

- [PoemHunter.com](http://PoemHunter.com)
- [poets.org](http://poets.org)
- [mimikhalvati.co.uk](http://mimikhalvati.co.uk)

# Do you know that...?

- o The civilization of Persia is one of the oldest and most sophisticated in the world.
- o Its poetry, stories, and visual arts are fascinating and have a very rich tradition.
- o Farsi is an Indo-European language – just like Polish and English.
- o Mimi Khalvati says that as a child growing up in England, she forgot Farsi. She calls English her “foster-language.”
- o Michael Schmidt (publisher and critic) writes that Khalvati “long resisted [his] attempt to stress her Persian antecedents.”
- o Khalvati likes working with fixed poetic forms (sonnets and ghazals), although she can also write in less strict forms.
- o Mimi Khalvati was a guest at the Between.Pomiędzy Festival in May 2021.

You may watch a recording of the conversation with MiMi Khalvati conducted by David Malcolm here:



# Ghazal

- o The ghazal is an old and very rich poetic form. Various writers have tried and do try to write it in English.
- o The ghazal was originally an Arabic and Persian poem dealing with love and loss of love. It has an intricate rhyme scheme in which important words are repeated. There are different versions of the ghazal, but it is usually melancholy and with lots of echoing words.
- o For more information and some examples of modern English ghazals, see: [poetryfoundation.org](http://poetryfoundation.org)

“The poem [a ghazal by Mimi Khalvati, ‘Ghazal: The Servant’ (2007)] aims at a non-English experience – revolution, repression, danger – and does so through a relatively unfamiliar fixed form. The poem’s sinister quality lies in its fragmentary quality, and in its not quite complete regularity. Although it is an exotic piece, it echoes traditional English ballads and folk songs, and the use of those traditional forms by Wordsworth, Stevie Smith, and James Fenton. Its focus on uncertainty, danger, and betrayal is not, of course, exotic, but is part of universal human experience. The ghazal invokes the ballad, and all that ballads are about.”

David Malcolm and Wolfgang Görtzschacher, “Introduction,”  
A Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Poetry,  
1960-2015 (Wiley-Blackwell, 2021)



A COMPANION TO  
CONTEMPORARY  
BRITISH AND IRISH  
POETRY, 1960–2015  
EDITED BY  
WOLFGANG GÖRTZSCHACHER  
AND DAVID MALCOLM

WILEY Blackwell

# Sonnet

$$14 = 8 + 6$$

$$14 = (3 \times 4) + 2$$

A **sonnet** is a fourteen-line poem usually with an intricate rhyme scheme/**octave/sestet** – a traditional division of the lines of a sonnet into eight lines (octave) and six lines (sestet); the break between lines 8 and 9 is sometimes called the volta or turn. A Shakespearean (or English) variant divides the sonnet into three quatrains (4 lines) and a concluding couplet (two lines). As you see, much formal precision is needed in this convention.

As a contemporary Scottish poet Don Paterson puts it: “A great sonnet . . . will often surprise you by doing at least one thing it’s not supposed to. . . . Poetic arguments appear to cohere simply because they rhyme. Rhyme always unifies sense, and can make sense out of nonsense; it can trick a logic from the shadows where one would not have otherwise existed.” – Don Paterson (1999)



# Two stanzas

An eleven-year-old boy from Aleppo  
whose eyes hold only things no longer there  
– a citadel, a moat, safe rooms of shadow,  
'afterwardness' in his thousand yard stare –



**Dzikistyl Company - "Uchodźcy. Testigo Documentary"**

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Photo by M. Moskwa



“Afterwardness” is really a made-up word, a neologism. It occurs twice in this poem, and so it must be important. It must refer to a mental and emotional state in which the past cannot be avoided. What is past is still alive and you are living in afterwardness.

There’s a reference to [Aleppo](#). The very ancient city was terribly damaged during the Syrian civil war between 2012 and 2016. Note that the central figure (not the speaker) is a child. His eyes see “only things no longer there.” He must be an exile from war, a refugee. The present is not there for him, only the past, what has been lost. He is living in “afterwardness.”

Note the places mentioned in line three. They are all associated with safety. The citadel was the part of a castle that you fled to in order to escape danger. The moat was a protective ditch. (Medieval Gdańsk had both.) “Safe rooms of shadow” are self-explanatory. You can hide there in the shadows.

A “thousand yard stare” is a powerful phrase. The child is so far away from the present and what surrounds him, so traumatized by destruction and loss. It is also rather scary. Try to make one yourself. It surely intimidates others.

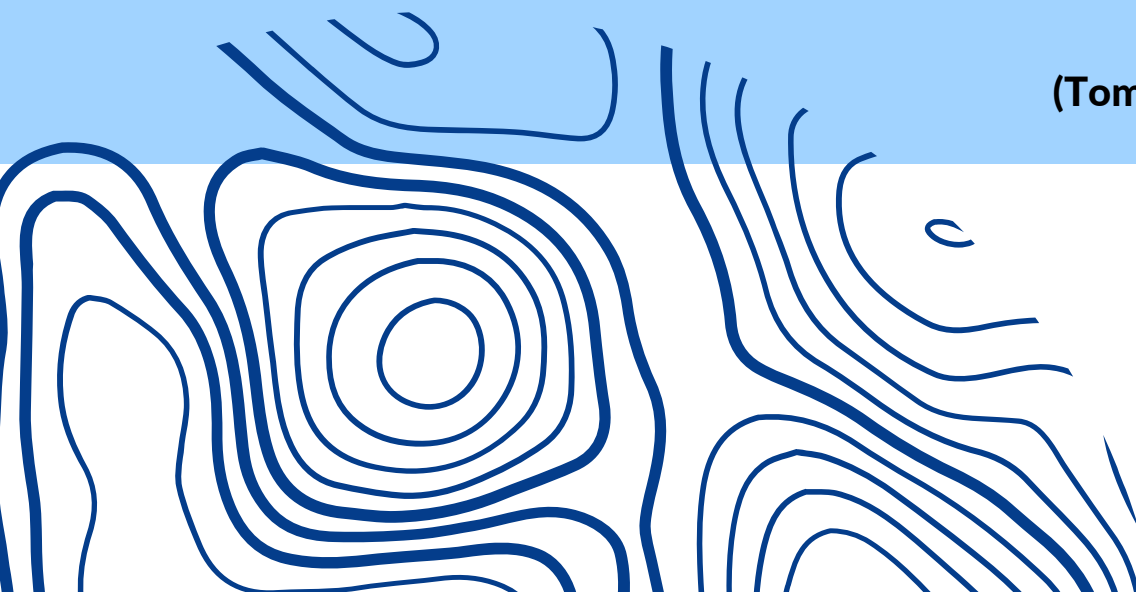
(David Malcolm)



Where do memories hide? the pine trees sing.  
In language of course, the four pathways reply.  
What if the word be lost? the pine trees sigh.

This is an interesting three-line stanza, what we may call a **tercet**. Each line is a separate entry that formulates a separate sentence. Speakers of particular lines change so that we may recognise a strange mini-dialogue in which the pine trees and the four pathways are involved in a conversation. Strong **alliteration** (**sing** / **sigh**) links the verbs that describe activities of the pine trees, and it is striking that both words refer to sounds they produce. In that way, our attention is drawn to the sonic organisation of the poem, which is always a prominent factor when reading poetry. We often say that in this way a poem becomes **auto-thematic** since it introduces themes closely related to the ways of its organisation. Indeed, in poetry, **sound-organisation** is of the greatest importance. Other motifs introduced here also explore themes that are poetic in character, memories, language and the lost word.

(Tomasz Wiśniewski)



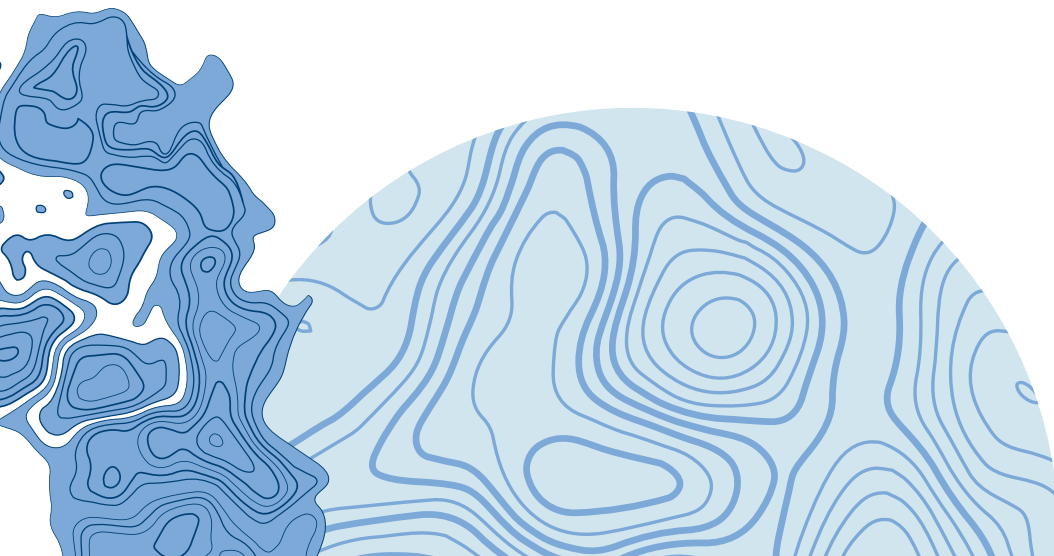
# A poem "Afterwardness"

An eleven-year-old boy from Aleppo  
whose eyes hold only things no longer there  
– a citadel, a moat, safe rooms of shadow,  
'afterwardness' in his thousand yard stare –

years later, decades even, might turn around  
to see, through the long tunnel of that gaze,  
a yard, a pond, and pine trees that surround  
as in a *chaharbagh*, four branching pathways.

Where do memories hide? the pine trees sing.  
In language of course, the four pathways reply.  
What if the word be lost? the pine trees sigh.

Lost, the echo comes, lost like me in air.  
Then sing, the pathways answer, sigh and sing  
for the echo, for nothing, no-one, nowhere.





# David Malcolm about the poem

The poem is a **sonnet**, a genre of poem that has a fairly strict and traditional organization. Notice that this sonnet is broken up into four sections. Do you see how the focus changes slightly in each of those sections? We move from the present of the child in lines 1-4 to a possible future in which he might see the beauty he has lost (lines 5-8). Then the speaker asks questions in lines 9-11 (through the voices of pine trees). How do you get back memories, especially if the first language has disappeared in exile? Then the answer comes back in lines 12-14: just sing, sing beautifully for the echo of what was lost. Notice the word “sing” (lines 9 and 13). The repetition there is not usually seen as a rhyme in English, but that certainly emphasises the word. In this way, the act of singing (maybe making poetry) becomes central to the **sestet**. You sing to bring back what is lost, to recreate it. Notice, too, how there is **sound orchestration** in this poem – as an example: “for the echo, for nothing, no-one, nowhere.” The patterning of sounds makes something beautiful. This is the last line – almost always key in terms of overall meaning.

The **chaharbagh** is mentioned in line 8. There are various spellings of this Persian word. Look it up. It is beautiful and offers safety, and is, thus, important in this poem. The word is rather beautiful too.

There are lots of references to loss (of beauty, security) in this poem, to danger (Aleppo, being a refugee), and to kinds of safety (gardens, castles, rooms). The poem also suggests that even when everything has gone (language, words) you can somehow capture echoes in song, in beautiful verse. The poem embodies this: it sounds beautiful, but it is about absence and loss. It makes beauty out of sadness. Surely that is worth doing. This is, of course, a poem about exile and trauma. But it could also be about other experiences – death, loss of a loved one.

# Quotes about Khalvati

“Mimi Khalvati is a prolific and **courageous poet** who has produced what for some would be a lifetime’s body of work in a short decade. The Chine, her fifth book, is a marvel of generosity, which mirrors the contours and contradictions of the poet’s history.”– Marilyn Hacker (a contemporary US poet)

“Much is said of Khalvati as a very **formal poet**, yet, in the vast majority of poems here, the forms are organic to the work and don’t obtrude.” – Moniza Alvi (2002) (a contemporary British poet and novelist)

“There is a **great depth of feeling** in Khalvati’s work, and tremendous formal control.” – R.V. Bailey (2002) (a critic)

“What I love about Mimi’s poetry is the distance she travels in thought and feeling from the starting point of small detail and everyday matter, her ability to weave together the language of speech and meditation, the way she draws on her **different backgrounds**, her enormous but unobtrusive technical skill.”–Myra Schneider (2004) (a modern British poet)

# More poets

Some other poets whom you might like to compare with Mimi Khalvati are:

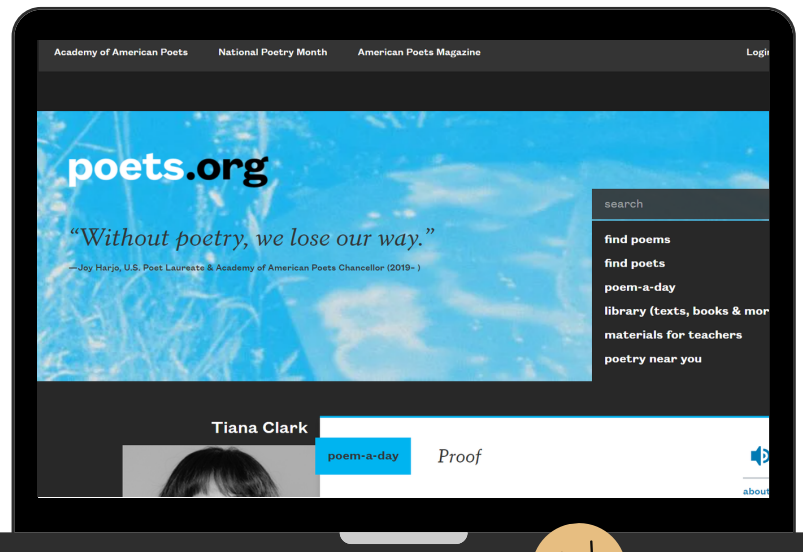
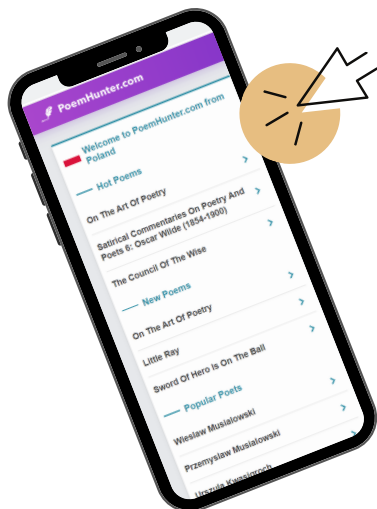
Monica Alvi - [Moniza Alvi - YouTube](#); [Moniza Alvi - Poetry Archive](#)

Michèle Roberts - [Michèle Roberts Website](#)

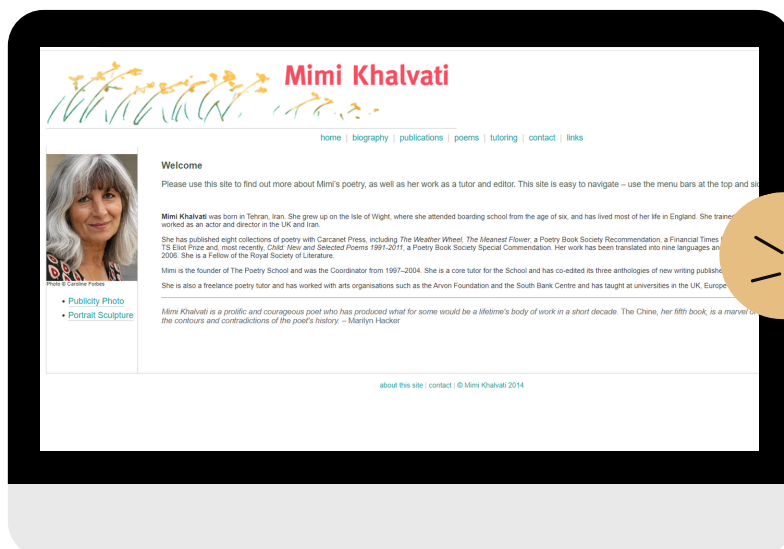
James Fenton - [James Fenton Website](#)

## Further exploration of the internet

[PoemHunter.com](#)

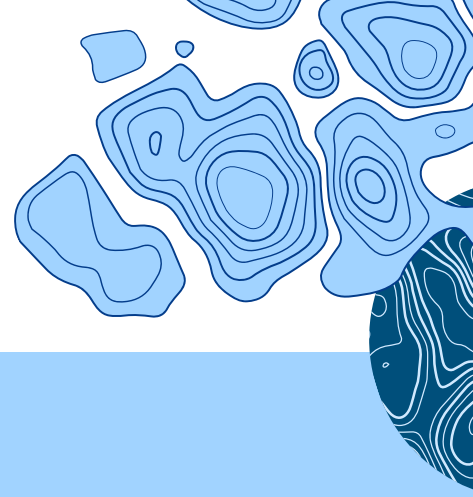


[poets.org](#)



[mimikhalvati.co.uk](#)

# Four exercises



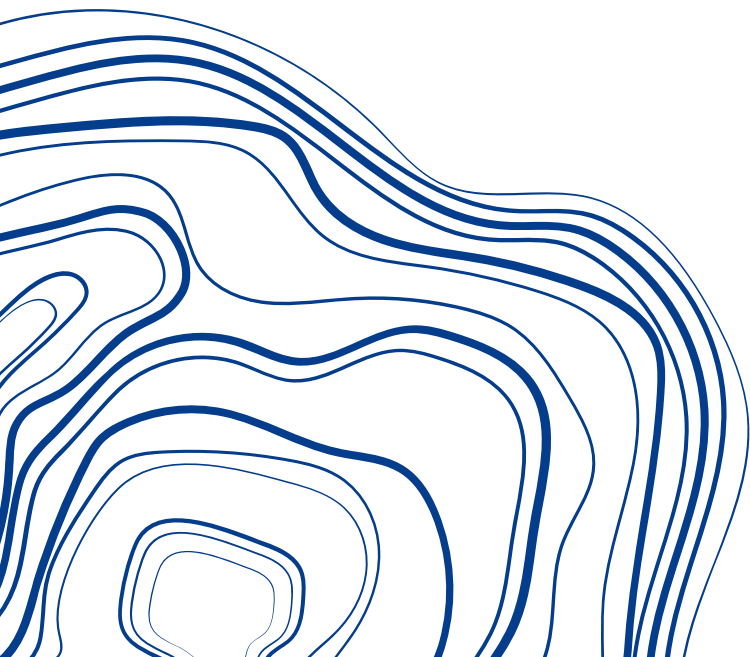
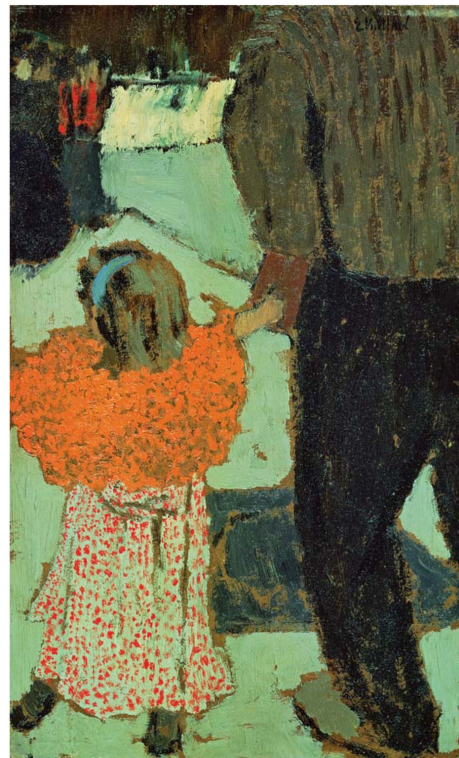
## Exercise 1

What associations do you have with the following words?

- Exile
- Native language
- Loss
- Security
- Danger
- Trauma
- Survival
- Memory

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MIMI KHALVATI *Child*  
*New and Selected Poems 1991–2011*





## Exercise 2

Choose one of the following tasks (or perhaps all of them?):

oWrite 100 words on exile, or danger, or loss.

oWrite 100 words on being a refugee.

oWhere do you feel safe?

- Write 100 words
- Take 7 photographs and create a visual essay.
- Be a director and create a short film (no longer than 2 minutes!).

MIMI KHALVAT *The Weather Wheel*



### Exercise 3

Make a film that responds to the topics of exile and loss in the poem “Afterwardness.”

Find visual images of traditional Persian gardens. Find images of traditional European ones. Compare and contrast.

### Exercise 4

Many Poles were exiles/refugees in Iran during the Second World War. Can you find any accounts or pictures of that time? Can you analyse and comment on them?

Do you know any stories from the contemporary Polish diaspora in Britain or the rest of Europe? Write some (or any) of them down.

How relevant is the poem “Afterwardness” to the world in which we live today? What’s the image you’d start with when speaking of an exile?

