

# New Poetry by Michal Rubín: “I Speak Not Your Language” and “Omar Abdalmajeed As’ad of Jijlya”

I, born from the womb of  
my mother’s remembrances  
wrapped in the cocoon  
of her story[...]

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## On the Subject of Walls

While it’s [fallen off the news somewhat](#), one of Donald Trump’s most conspicuous campaign-trail promises was to build a wall between the U.S. and Mexico. Not only did Trump say that a wall was necessary, but he said that he would get [Mexico](#) to build it, conveniently ducking the question of cost to U.S. citizens. This is because the border between the U.S. and Mexico is long, and walls are [expensive](#). Especially the kind of [well-built walls that are required to stop crafty humans](#) from getting around them.

Ukraine has a wall of its own. Or, at least, it’s building a wall. Sort of. In [September 2014](#), during the height of Russia’s attempts to intervene in Ukraine, shortly after Russia occupied Crimea and during the beginning of its ongoing incursion into Ukraine’s east, lawmakers developed a plan to create a wall between Russia and Ukraine.

The wall received some coverage in Western Press—not much, but

some—because building a wall along thousands of kilometers of territory is a big project, and the wall had a big number attached to it: 4 billion UAH (at 8 UAH to the dollar in 2014, \$500 million, now at 26 UAH to the dollar, or about \$160 million). The wall was scheduled for completion in 2018, and building commenced. Since then, there have been questions over whether or not it will be completed on time, according to the printed standards. There have been allegations of corruption, as well as questions over whether the planned structure would be capable of accomplishing its military mission of stopping Russian infiltration and military intrusion.

### **A Wall in Name Only**

Based on reporting that I have done, including visits to the wall and interviews with subject matter experts, national security personnel, veterans, villagers living within 10 km of the wall, and online research, if the wall is completed as promised and planned, it will not serve as a significant military obstacle against Russia. Without being able to find any evidence beyond official statements and visual confirmation that *something* is being built, it's impossible to decisively state anything. Has money been embezzled? Maybe. It's Ukraine, so, maybe *probably*. Is the wall being built to standard? Has every meter of the border with Russia been accounted for? There's no way to confirm that construction has succeeded or failed.

As of right now, the wall consists of two elements. The first, which looks much like what the wall was supposed to be based on initial projections, are a series of well-developed emplacements near significant border crossing points along major highways. Ukraine's State Border Service and military units staff and patrol these sections, guarding against saboteurs, infiltrators, and the possibility of a Russian military offensive. Practically speaking, of course, a ditch,

concertina wire and double-fences won't create much more than a brief tactical pause for even the smallest military unit (and no pause for airborne or air assault units)—but (apparently) according to military thinkers and the politicians who give them strategic guidance, something is better than nothing at all.

This reality has given rise to a new story: the idea that the wall will be useful for stopping criminal activity. Smugglers and illegal border crossings will be diminished by the wall, which (along with the security provided by the wall) will help make Ukraine a safer and more law-abiding place. This has some merit to it, although it's also worth stating that every person with whom I spoke living near the wall viewed it as an eyesore at best, an actual nuisance at worst, and that it seemed (paradoxically) to be increasing smuggling and illegal activity—precisely the opposite of its intended effect.

Notwithstanding the views of its residents, the border area with Russia is startlingly, astonishingly open. When I visited the area north of Kharkiv last in February, I nearly walked *into* Russia. There was no wall present, though residents were on edge, and warned me (through the Ukrainian who was interpreting) that patrols came by every few minutes looking for people who didn't have a reason for being there. I assumed that they meant Ukrainian patrols.

As of February 2017, two years after the battle of Debaltseve and three years after the invasion of Crimea, it was still possible to walk into Russia from Ukraine, more or less accidentally.

## Why Should We Build a Wall?

Walls require strength and power, and wealth. They require organization and commitment, and maintenance. They are also the single most noticeable evidence of a nation's insecurity and fragility. What nation requires walls? What confident *people* would even think about erecting barriers? A weak nation, filled with anxious and neurotic people. And while this describes Ukraine to a certain extent—with all due respect to my Ukrainian friends, whom I love and respect, and with due respect for the idea of a country called Ukraine, (a) Ukraine as a country lacks significant allies, and has an overwhelmingly powerful enemy on its doorstep while (b) its people are justifiably traumatized by the repeated revolutions and various attempts by Russia and Russian agents to undermine their economy, political autonomy, military, and (writ large) their independence.

Those justifications don't travel very well when the destination is the U.S.A. Although walls require power, money, and strength to build, they aren't *for* the powerful, they're for the weak, the fragile, the exhausted. Walls exist where there is no energy left to patrol, where one believes that some powerful energy or tendency toward chaos and entropy will, left *unwalled*, lead inexorably to conquest. This is what certain Americans believe: that a wall with Mexico is necessary, presumably because Mexico is more powerful, and left to its own devices, Mexico's Mexican inhabitants will swarm over the border and destroy what they find on the other side.

Of course, if U.S. citizens legitimately believed that Mexicans constituted some type of threat, the response to

Mexico would be different from wall-building. What Americans fear is not Mexico—it's the loss of control, it's not being able to convince others that it is in their best interests to behave according to America's best interests. In many ways, this has been the story of the millennium, a slow-building narrative since the towers came down on 9/11.

On a psychological level, it seems almost certain that to Americans, the wall with Mexico is a replacement for the Twin Towers. We want to rebuild the towers and protect them from being blown up. We will call the product of this constructive but paranoiac impulse "The Wall with Mexico." It's a sad and quixotic impulse, if impossible due to constraints built into the space-time continuum.

### **But Why Build a Wall at All?**

There are good points to be made against the building of walls. They restrict commerce, dampen the flow of accurate firsthand experience between citizens of different countries, reduce the ability of people to communicate, and lead to factionalism, nationalism, and the dangerous kind of international competition.

Walls are a last resort, when one must defend oneself against some foe that cannot be deterred by any other means. They are fixed positions that generate no revenue and require great sums for their upkeep. They can be avoided with the use of airplanes, rockets, and boats. They are as useful and necessary as fixed fortifications (which is to say, not very).

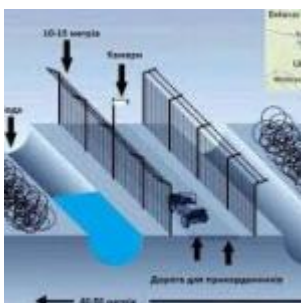
Ukraine's excuse for building a wall is that it's hard up for emotionally satisfying ways to thwart Russia. A wall is something that is seen, and can be measured, and will make it more difficult to enter Ukraine from Russia. There are many downsides, but from the perspective of Ukraine, a much smaller country than Russia, and isolated from meaningful alliances, building a wall is *something* (given that it actually gets built, rather than partially funded while the remainder of the funds designated to build it are pillaged by oligarchs).



Ukraine's planned wall with Russia—the word impregnable quickly springs to mind



Where the wall is supposed to be and what it's supposed to look like



No attacker could ever possibly breach this conceptual wall, it is perfect

For Americans, the question is different. To begin with, it is a more powerful country than Mexico—the most powerful nation in the world, in fact. Its southern border with Mexico is

patrolled by drones, security personnel, helicopters, dogs, radar, and automatic detection systems. There is already a fence separating the two. *Inside* the U.S., it's very difficult to exist off the grid without eventually running into some electronic or procedural requirement that will establish that one is in the country illegally (whether the people monitoring those systems do anything about it or not is a different question).

Normally, one builds walls under desperate circumstances when no other possibilities are available to solve some critical international question or another. Mexico's turmoil stems from the illegal drug trade. The drug trade is profitable in part because it is so unpleasant to live in a capitalist society that objectifies its citizens that many U.S. citizens will pay excellent money for drugs that are easily fabricated and refined in Mexico, and in part because the U.S. (despite creating and abetting the conditions by which citizens would want to use drugs in the first place) has criminalized non-prescription drug use, artificially inflating the market to the point where Mexican citizens involved in the trade can afford to build private armies large enough to contend with the government's military (or simply buy government units wholesale). Rather than build a wall with Mexico, it'd be cheaper and ethically more humane to do something about the drug trade—legalizing and taxing drugs would be an excellent first step.

Ukraine cannot “settle” with a Russia intent on its partition and destruction—Ukraine is left with the unpleasant choice of having to just grit its teeth and do what it can to prevent Russian intrusion. A wall isn't the best way to do that, and especially when details of the wall's construction are kept secret. Still, it's *understandable* in a way that the U.S. wall

with Mexico is not.

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# Scrabble Can Build or Break Friendship

My Sunday morning began with a Wall Street Journal article about Scrabble. The story, which featured scrappy young Nigerian players, underdog victories, and applications driving the most rigorous systematic analysis of the game to date, decided that the future of Scrabble lay in defensive play. It was one of the saddest, most depressing articles I've encountered this week—and utterly in keeping with social trends toward cynicism and narrow self-interest.

We haven't always played Scrabble in our house, but it's always been around. I grew up poor—the kind of poor where you eat meat twice a week, and beans are a good source of protein, and you get invisible Christmas presents, and your black and white television craps out when you're five years old and you don't get a replacement until you're ten—a 12-inch screen. No cable, just antennae, which would pick up signals better in certain areas than in others.

I grew up “poor” rather than “in poverty.” My parents were both well educated artists. Our (small) apartment was filled with books and wooden blocks and board games like Scrabble. And poetry (my mother was a poet) and music (my father was a classical guitarist). Furthermore, during the day, my surroundings were safe and engaging—we lived in a rural area, on the Connecticut shore. There are crucial differences between being poor and living in poverty, and one of the most important is the sense of limitation or despair that attends



impoverished conditions—I did not see my world as being bounded or limited by possibility.

Still, the lack of toys, television, and infinite disposable physical energy meant that our family tended to play board and card games or listen to music as a means of recreation. And so as soon as my sister and I were old enough, we played Scrabble with our parents.



Playing Scrabble together opens up space for competition within a framework of cooperation

Our first games weren't great—low-scoring contests normally won by my father or mother, who'd routinely net over 200 points. Nothing impressive. We rarely exceeded 450 points total. Breaking 100 was considered good for me or my sister. We didn't know how to play, didn't know the words, the techniques, the strategies. Too, the game began to grow unpleasantly competitive when I and then my sister reached High School—we became invested in winning, to the detriment of the game itself.

When I hit college, though, Scrabble came into its own as the family game par excellence. This was due to an observation made by a girlfriend at the time. Following a victory of mine, she pointed out that because the group had failed to break 500 points, collectively we had all lost. At first I thought this was motivated by spite. Later, though, she directed my attention to the inside of the box, upon which the rules were printed. Sure enough, the language on the box stated quite clearly that 500 points was the score four average, amateur Scrabble players should reasonably be expected to achieve.

This changed the game for me, and for my family and friends. The implication was clear: playing Scrabble, which I'd always viewed as a winner-take all, zero-sum game, had a team component. If one player scored 496 points and the other three each managed (somehow) to score 1, and that one player won, but the combined total for the game was 499, then collectively, the group had failed to measure up to the "average" for a game of four players: 500. This meant that according to the game's own logic, while one should be aiming for the best score possible, one should also be looking to ensure everyone else was maximizing their scores, up to a certain point. In other words: Scrabble is a game about competition within a framework of cooperation. The essence of Scrabble is not doing everything one can to defeat one's opponents, but rather to defeat them within a matrix of collaboration. It would not be an exaggeration to point out that this lesson, which I first understood playing Scrabble as a young man, has been salutary for other areas of my life. Winning a friendly post-prandial competition or losing in a broader winning effort became equally enjoyable pursuits.

Our scores quickly reflected this. From struggling to break 500, my family routinely scored in the 600-750 point range. The winner was the person who played the best words in the best places—but that distinction applied more or less equally to myself, my parents, and my sister. We learned more words

through competition, and were able to push the boundaries of the game, while blossoming within its framework. Risking more in the context of succeeding at the game was elevating our individual and collective game to new heights—we weren't risking less in an effort to dominate, or to win. By cooperating, all of our scores were increasing. All of us were winning. One might view that as sportsmanship.

I'm glad that Nigerian iconoclasts have demonstrated that they can defeat their former colonial occupiers in an equal contest of wits. That seems important on its own, a useful lesson for all who might erroneously believe in an essential cultural or social hierarchy. As an American, I'm not a huge fan of Great Britain—not in the past, not in the present—and usually happy to watch them lose to the people they exploited for so long, under almost any circumstances. I will say this: Scrabble is best as a pedagogical tool encouraging friendship and mutually-supportive growth, not as a means of recreating intellectual trench warfare. I hope these Nigerian Scrabble players continue to win—but also that this victory does not come at the expense of Scrabble's best and finest attributes: its capacity to encourage a conception of the common good.