

Northwords **Now**

Issue 15

Summer 2010

The Lives of Others

GERRY CAMBRIDGE Looks at Animals

ALAN BISSETT on The Ullapool Book Festival

New poems and stories from GRAHAM FULTON, JOHN JENNETT, DONALD S MURRAY, KERRY HARDIE, LORNA BRUCE and many more.

In the Reviews Section: Poetry Pamphlet Heaven!



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Coriander, kor-i-an'der, *n*, an annual plant, the seeds of which when fresh have an offensive smell.

Corinthian, kor-inth-i-an, *adj*, pertaining to *Corinth*, a city of Greece.

Corium, ko'ri-um, *n*, the innermost layer of the skin.

Cork, kork, *n*, the outer bark of the cork-tree, an oak found in S. Europe.

Corm, korm, **Cormus**, kor-mus, *n*, sometimes called a solid bulb - the short, bulb-like subterranean stem of many plants.

Cormack's & Crawford's, Kor-max and Kraw-fordz, *n*, Purveyors of fine footwear and drapery. From the Latin, Cormakis et Crawfordus. A rare species of independent retailer known throughout the land for their quality of merchandise and service. To be found in its natural habitat of Dingwall and Ullapool in the Highlands of Scotland. Known also as C & C's, *See'n Sees*. To "do a cormack and crawford", *v* - to buy quality goods.

Cormophyte, kor'mo-fit, *n*, a plant having a true axis of growth - also cormogen - *adj*, cormophytic

Cormorant, kor'mo-rant, *n*, a genus of web-footed sea-birds, of great voracity; a glutton.

Corn, korn, *n*, a grain or kernel; seeds that grow in ears, as wheat, rye etc., grain of all kinds.

Also **Corn**, *adj*, poor humour. A joke that misses its mark - not unknown in the advertising industry

Also **Corn**, *n*, a small hard growth usually on the toe or foot, resulting from ill fitting footwear. Unknown in *Cormack's & Crawford's* - see entry above.

Extract by kind permission of the Oxford Dictionary and *Cormack's & Crawford's*, Dingwall and Ullapool.

Victor Frankenstein used electricity to animate his monster.

William McGonagall was struck by lightning while walking from Dundee to Braemar.

William Falkner wrote 'As I lay Dying' while working at a power plant.

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Boswell, being angry at her, threw the mutton chops out of the window. I ventured outside to see what Forres might offer a traveller. The main street was broad and fair though the brats on the street were impertinent. However they left off their games when we came upon a market, whereat they called out 'Babalu, babalu!' and ran among the crowd. I had not encountered this word before. A courteous woman explained it thus: somewhere in this place there is an object which you will desire, though you know not what it may be. A curious word, yet cogent. I am resolved to enter it into my Dictionary.

BABALU

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On dusty Southern roads, a bullock-cart heads North, laden with mandrake roots and bales of cotton.

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WHERE TO FIND NORTHWORDS NOW

EDITORIAL

THRILLING HARD WORK – that's the best phrase I can come up with to describe the joyful labour of editing my first issue of Northwords Now. Come to think of it, *joyful labour* isn't a bad description either. The sheer amount of poetry and prose that lands on the editor's desk can at first seem intimidating but once you realise that the pile is laden with gems a feeling of excitement and responsibility soon implants itself (*excited responsibility* might also do to describe the editing process). Of course, the fact that Scotland is home to so much good writing, and so many very perceptive, receptive and properly critical readers, should come as no surprise. Alan Bissett's description of the Ullapool Book Festival (see page 5) shows what a crucial place literature still holds in Scottish life. Poetry, fiction and memoir are means whereby the diverse folk of a country can hold a conversation with each other. Of course this does not mean that the subject of the conversation has to be Scotland itself, or indeed anything overtly political. The writers in this issue touch on subjects as local, and universal, as Andy Murray, bird life, weaving, marriage, Elvis Presley and the sea.

If there is one theme that does pervade the writing on show in this issue, it's a sense of home or, indeed, a sense of

homelessness. This is as it should be. The question of how we make sense of our place in the world is an old one but a vital one. From Helen Forbes' description of a child's experience of domestic isolation to John Jennett's tale of the price of 'homecoming', it's refreshing to see so many writers explore our experience of home with honesty, empathy, vigour and much artistry. It's a particular pleasure to feature the work of Gerry Cambridge in this issue. His poems and photographs form a vivid reminder that the home we all share – the earth – houses other beings besides the human variety.

My task in taking over the editorial reins at Northwords Now task has been made a lot easier by the trails blazed by Rhoda Michael and before her by all the editors of the magazine's forbear Northwords. I intend to honour their example by ensuring that Northwords Now continues to provide rich food for the heart and the mind as well as cause for the occasional cheer of agreement or even foot-stamp of anger! But in the end it's not editors that make a magazine – it's writers and readers. With that principle in mind the time has come for me to hold my tongue and let the poets and story makers have their say.

CHRIS POWICI

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Poems by Graham Fulton

Andy Murray Loses the US Open Final

8/9/2008

Leaning on the window sill watching the silence
orange streetlamps wet pavements parked cars
no-one there not even a wino
serenading the midnight rain

most of the houses are switched off a few still alive
doing the same thing I am leaning listening
to the radio

disembodied voices
talking about advantage love the importance
of being Scottish the breaking point of parked cars
streetlamps disembodied transmissions
the distance
the signal is still to travel

a fox nipping across the grass
among the whirlies between the wheelies

it's not dark enough for the stars to come out
dark enough for silence a backhand volley
the distance travelled from nowhere to Scotland
stars exploding applause light

I'm Lazarus ... Get Me Out of Here

We can watch *Celebrity Dump*
from the comfort of our flatline minds
and watch *Celebrity Facelift Gone Wrong*
and watch *Celebrity Facedrop Gone Right*
watch *Celebrity Exit*
as original thinkers long ignored
arrive to expire
on Snuffcam Prime

watch *Celebrity Stomach Pump*
watch *Celebrity Shooting Up*
watch *Celebrity Necrophile*
watch *Celebrity Paedophile*

and watch *Celebrity Resurrection*
Elvis Michael Adolf and Jesus
trumpet fanfares torn from time

watch *Celebrity Hump*
as the golden couple of the day
do sex in a new contortion of love
as long as they're caught on Camera One
and watch *Big Orwell's Placenta!*
as we vote for the latest accessory wean
named Krakow Caracas or Ulan Bator
depending on where
the foetus was sold the loser
neatly deleted off screen

The Anarchists on the Eight Sixteen

One two
a herd of chaos
bumping barging out of a field
on to the road with wobbling udders
yellow numbers attached
to their ears the cars

wait
at the makeshift lights
look straight ahead
at the 816 Lochgilthead road
windscreen wipers
bovine cabaret couldn't care less
drovers prodding them on their rumps
hoofing about
on the dung-slapped tar

The bull

who rules
this rudderless gang
is hugely humping
his cow of choice
keeps falling off getting back on
The men
at red
look straight ahead oblivious to
our horny king
still trying to hump
his cow of choice
keeps falling off getting back on

I'd Like to Thank Bela Lugosi

for saying *Listen to them children of the night*
as he stood on his cobwebby steps
while undead armadillos
scuttled among the coffins and droppings

and Lon Chaney for wearing a sixty pound hump
and dying of cancer in time for the talkies

and Dwight Frye for swallowing flies
and Dwight Frye for dying in poverty
while trying to feed his family
and Bela Lugosi for skinning Karloff alive
and William Henry Pratt for being Boris Karloff
and Boris Karloff for saying *We belong dead*
after getting a knockback from his girl

and Elsa Lanchester for hissing like a snake
and Conrad Veidt for somnambulating
across impossible Weimar rooftops
with black rings under his eyes
and Max Schreck for having a baldy head
and John Barrymore for having a pointy head
and King Kong for tickling Fay Wray's tum
as her dress conveniently fell apart

and Lon Chaney junior
for having a hairy terrier face
as he stalked the dry-ice woods
in his workie shirt and baggy breeks

and Claude Rains for whacking him on the napper
with a silver-tipped cane and who can blame him
and Boris Karloff for saying *Good!*
and Boris Karloff for saying *Friend?*
and good old Bela for saying *To die*
to be really dead that must be glorious

for being buried in his cape
for showing us there is more than being in colour
for showing us it's perfectly fine from behind the sofa
THE END is nowhere to be afraid of

Brian Wilson in Swansea Bus Station

Immaculately groomed
and cunningly disguised
as a Welsh bus driver
Brian Wilson
of the Beach Boys
stands beneath the canopy
of Swansea bus station
in search of

the normal life
he can never have
with a badge on his jacket
and a song in his heart
as he waits for the X15

to pull in
while the rain
buckets down on the roof
and takes his place at the wheel
and pulls out
as gracefully as
a Malibu surfer
riding the waves
and splashes up the hill
to God Only Knows where

while whistling
Wouldn't it be Nice
from the classic album
Pet Sounds
with a rabbit-caught-
in-the-headlights
look on his face
as the passengers sing the chorus
menacingly in tune
if this was

a parallel universe
which it

is

Talking Books.

Alan Bissett on appearing at the Ullapool Book Festival.



Alan Bissett blooms in Wester Ross

I'VE APPEARED AT the Ullapool Book Festival before, so was already familiar with its charms: the generosity of its host, Joan Michaels, and her team; the beauty of its scenery; the integrity of its writers; and the smartness of its audience. So of course I said yes to returning. This time I was not trailing an actual book. Joan had asked me to perform my 'one-woman show', *The Moira Monologues*, as part of its Scottish tour. It had been playing mainly in theatres and was still an unknown quantity to my fellow authors, many of whom had heard that I was involved with some kind of drag act. This would be Moira's first outing to the Highlands. The festival also comprised of writers whose work I admired, including Regi Claire, Ron Butlin, Iain Banks, Tom Leonard, Mandy Haggith, Kevin MacNeil, Lesley Glaister, Stewart Conn, Anne Donovan, James Robertson and Andrew Greig. For these reasons, I felt a sense of the stakes being high.

The previous night I had performed *The Moira Monologues* at Glasgow's Eastwood Theatre, and so, much to my disappointment,

had already missed more than half of the festival by the time I arrived. On the upside, Ullapool was bathed in sunshine, and an enchantment had been sprinkled following Humberto Ak'abal's Guatemalan sound-poetry that morning. 'He sang like a bird,' people mused, shaking their heads as though waking from a dream. I was sad I'd missed it but that was brief: straight into a creative-writing workshop, then a technical rehearsal for *The Moira Monologues*. Cursing my flagging energy levels, I managed to miss the event by Ron Butlin and Regi Claire, who talked with, I am told, great passion and insight about the dynamics of being a writing couple. Instead, I napped. I rehearsed Moira in my bedroom, like a demented, female de Niro in *Taxi Driver*. I bit nails. In the blink of an eye I was onstage before two hundred souls, with only a pair of skinny jeans, boots and an imaginary fag to convince them I was a single mother and school cleaner.

Despite what I personally felt was a sticky performance – perhaps it was big-

occasion nerves – Moira went down very well. Everything after that was a whisky glow, as a not-guilty verdict was delivered over the course of the evening. It's difficult to describe the feeling after a one-hour performance: you are both there and not there, still inhabiting the warped reality of the stage, enjoying a job well done, while trying not, for one second, to let any of it go to your head. I'd been worried about what Tom Leonard in particular would think. Tom is one of the finest working-class artists the country has ever produced and I fretted over what his political view of the show might be. A younger writer always hopes for the approval of the older generation (unless you're reading punk very selectively). 'Ach, you're making something out of the rhythms of your own language,' he nodded. And my entire system collapsed in relief – and exhaustion.

In the plush environs of the Ceilidh Place, everyone talked through more sobering matters, such as the imminent Tory apocalypse, public service cuts, the stranglehold of the giant booksellers, and the very real difficulties now

facing Scottish writers. The festival's chairman, Donny O'Rourke, always a gregarious spirit, muttered gravely about 'the way things are going'. Eventually, however, the sun came back out, as Donny and I celebrated the renaissance in the country's poetry and live literature scenes, and the revolutionary potential of new technology. Cargo Press, a young, innovative publisher in Glasgow, is planning to cut out bookshops entirely, marketing novels, poems and stories as downloads onto iPhones or as print-on-demand books. This would allow writers to reach their audience directly and gain a larger share of the profits. In the setting of Ullapool, this felt futuristic, almost utopian, and yet was of a theme with many of the events, which had cultural protectionism at their heart.

This was certainly the case with Jason Donald and Andrea MacNicoll's talk. I had the good fortune to chair this one, and it gave me the chance to read two wonderful books. Jason's novel, *Choke Chain*, is about the brutality of a young boy's upbringing in white South Africa, while Andrea's *Moonshine in the Morning* is a picaresque novel detailing life in a rural Thai village. Despite their exotic (and different) flavours, the themes of both felt close to home. Jason defended his decision to write about the South Africa he saw as he grew up there, and Andrea faced down the cultural colonisation of the Far East by the West.

Later, James Robertson previewed his enormous masterwork *And the Land Lay Still*. With the exceptions of Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* and Suhayl Saadi's *Psychoraag*, Scotland does not tend to produce works in its native idiom which are huge in scope. Robertson, however, establishing himself as the Uncle of the Nation, has allowed the ambition of his novel to match the seriousness of the times. Perhaps a new generation of Scottish writers will respond to the challenges of both.

Such a perfect setting for things to renew themselves in. What strikes me about this festival is the almost complete absence of a commercial imperative. There are no books being flogged at the events (although there's a bookshop along the road), no publicists shepherding the writers around and making sure the audience get their signing time only. Everyone attends everyone's events and an intense conversation rolls through the course of the weekend. This is a necessity. There is no doubt that it has become harder than ever for Scottish writers to reach the public consciousness. Everything about the Ullapool Book Festival keeps the spirit of our literature alive, providing a creative fount and an intellectual hiding-place, a generating of poetic energy and a forum for new ideas. All of it lovely and draped in sunshine.

It's enough to make Moira want to pack her skinny jeans and move there. ■

Sgrìobhadairean an t-Sabhail

Seo beagan den t-saothair a rinn a' bhuidheann-sgrìobhaidh aig Sabhal Mòr Ostaig anns an Eilean Sgitheanach fo stiùireadh Bàrd an t-Sabhail, Rody Gorman. Tha barrachd den obair aca air <http://sgrìobag.wordpress.com/>

Uisge

CAITLÍN NÍ RODAIGH

B' ann aig an Aifreann a bha sinn
Nuair a thàinig an t-uisge
Nuair a chaidh na speuran a bhriseadh mar ugh
Le tàirneanaich is dealanaich
B' ann aig an Aifreann a bha sinn
Nuair a dhòrtadh uisge oirne
Miltean againn còmhla
Bho gach dùthaich is teanga is treubh
Nuair a thàinig am meall
A chrathaich sgàileag is fallainn
A leagh na leabhraichean nar làmhan
Cha robh rathad às
Nuair a thàinig an t-uisge
A-nuas mar shaighdean
Is chaidh ar bogadh chun a' chridhe
Is cha d'fhuair duine againn às
Miltean againn còmhla
Nuair a thàinig an t-uisge

Rugadh Caitlín Ní Rodaigh ann an Ceap Breatainn ann an Alba Nuadh. Tha i ag obair mar neach-rannsachaidh is neach-teagaisg Gàidhlig thall is a-bhos.

cùram

RUAIRIDH NETHERCUT

thog mi fhèin
na bailtean,
mean air mhean
nan tèarmann
a' diùltaidh nàimhdean
a' toirt cùraim
ach
le aon phrìob
thuit iad às a chèile
's solas na grèine
a' blàthachadh mo bheatha

Tha Ruairidh Nethercutt à Fìobha bho thùs. Tha e na bhall den chòmhlàn-chiùil Ghàidhlig Na Gathan.

Tuath is Deas

STEFAN MACRISNIDH

Bha Tuath is Deas ann an seo romham,
far a bheil mi nam chòmhnaidh an-dràst';
ach a-nis, chan eil ann ach Tuath oir
bhàsaich Deas fo chuibhle càir.

Tuath, a tha air fàs suas cho luath
bhon a chunnaic mi an toiseach e na aonar –
's an uair sin taingeil toilichte a bhith
an làthair dhaoine nach b' aithne dha.

'S mi fhìn mar an ceudna air làithean brèagh'
a-muigh a' coimhead mu dheas thar na linn';
's a' phiseag a' suathadh rium 's ag iadhadh
mum chasan le aigne bheò is mèilich.

Rugadh Stefan MacRisnidh ann an Dùn Dè ann an 1977 is chaidh a thogail ann am Bruach Tatha. Tha sgrìobhadh leis air nochdadh anns an iris 'Gath is anns a' chruinneachadh An Claipeann aig Damien Hirst.

Coileach-teas an t-samhraidh

ANGELA NICILLEBHRÀIGHE

Is iomadh facal
a tha na mo cheann
glaiste air cùl dorais
aig a' chaileag ghruagach dhonn
a chur a làmh san tobar
agus a leig don uisge
sioladh ann

Chi mi fhathast
san coileach-teas iad
a' sruthail tron ghleann
agus am bodach
ag innse an stòraidh
mun latha
nach biodh i ann

Agus aig a' bhòrd
tha i na suidhe
is a' feuchainn ri rann
a' faighneachd do Ghoogle
(cò chuala riamh!)
mun fhacal
a tha cailte
le fiaradh nam fonn

'S ann à ceann a tuath an Eilein Sgitheanaich a tha Angela NicilleBhràighe is tha i a-nis a' fuireach ann an Àird Shlèite san eilean. Thug i a-mach ceum Gàidhlig aig Oilthigh Ghlaschu.

Facal

SÙSAIDH ARNOLD

Facal air an fhacal
le facal beag airson toiseach tòiseachaidh
ainm
aois
gnè
Cò às a tha thu?
An tig thu còmhla rium?

Coiseachd air an tràigh
grian a' deàrrsadh
oiteag shocair
muir ciùin
latha gun crìoch

Làithean ri chèile
sgrìoban sa chàr
a' dol dhan bhùth
ceannach stuth
biadh
deoch
àirneis

Faclan beag eile
gaol
sonas
dòchas
fàinne
dithis leannan
airson greis

Mios no dhà air falbh
gus latha eile
faclan snog a dhith
sgòthan dorcha
uisge
toileachas
air falbh
gaol tuilleadh

Facal air an fhacal
a' tighinn
gu
crìch

'S ann à Berkshire ann an Sasainn a tha Sùsaidh Arnold. Bha i an sàs ann am foghlam roimhe seo is tha a-nis tha i ri sgrìobhadh is ealain am measg nithean eile bhon taigh aice san Òrd san Eilean Sgitheanach.

Am Foghar

ANDREA KLUGE

Nuair a thàinig am Foghar
Dh’fhalbh am blàths às mo bheatha.

Nuair a dh’fhalbh duilleach nan craobh
Dh’fhalbh na dathan às mo bheatha.

Nuair a thàinig an t-uisge
Thàinig na deòir gu mo shùilean.

Bidh fadachd orm gus an till an t-Earrach
le bhlàth, le dhathan.

Bidh fadachd orm gus am falbh na deòir
às mo shùilean.

Bidh fadachd orm gus an till mo bheatha.

Rugadh Andrea Kluge ann am Frankfurt ann an 1968. Thòisich i air Gàidhlig ionnsachadh ann an Dùn Èideann ann an 2001 agus tha i air a bhith a’ sgrìobhadh anns a’ chànan a chionn bliadhna no dhà.

Am Foghar

RHONA NICHÙGHAILL

tha mi ag iarraidh a bhith
mar am foghar, nuair a bhios
a’ ghrian bàn anns na speuran:
a’ dannsa còmhla ri
na duilleagan dearga;
òrach le raineach; brèagha
is meadhan-aosta.

Buinidh Rhona NicDhùghaill don Òban. Tha i ag obair aig Comann na Gàidhlig anns a’ Ghearastan an-dràsta.

Am Foghar

FRANCES NICEACHAIRN

Aimsir sam bith, bidh mi a’ coiseachd air duilleagan tioram,
Aimsir sam bith, bidh mi a’ coiseachd air duilleagan marbh.

Dè th’ ann an aimsir, bidh mi a’ coiseachd air duilleagan trom,
Dè th’ ann an aimsir, bidh mi a’ coiseachadh air duilleagan an tì
tòiseacheachadh.

Bha Frances NicEachairn na h-oileanach aig an t-Sabhal Mhòr ann an 2009. Tha i a’ fuireach an an Lunainn ‘s ann an Dùn Èidean.

Crìonadh

NICOLA NICTHÒMAIS

Thig crìonadh air an t-sluagh
Gun fhearann nis ri lorg
Don fheadhainn sa cheann a tuath

Gach fear ‘s a choltas truagh
‘S na h-uachdaran cho borb
Thig crìonadh air an t-sluagh

Nan inntinn nis fo bhuidh
Na fàiridhean cho dorch’
Don fheadhainn sa cheann a tuath

Gun bhlàths ‘s iad fàs cho fuar
An cridhean uile goirt
Thig crìonadh air an t-sluagh

Am beatha nis cho cruaidh
Gun sìol, gun fleur, gun choir’
Don fheadhainn sa cheann a tuath

A’ fasgadh ann an uamh
An taighean nis fo thoit
Thig crìonadh air an t-sluagh

Na taighean nis mar luath
Na morairean gun sgot
Don fheadhainn sa cheann a tuath

A’ dèanamh air a’ chuan
Gus beatha ùr a lorg
Thig crìonadh air an t-sluagh
Don fheadhainn sa cheann a tuath

Tha Nicola NicThòmais a’ fuireach ann an Camas Chros anns an Eilean Sgitheanach bhon a bha i dà bhliadhna agus ag obair aig Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. Tha ùidh aice ann am bàrdachd gu sònraichte.

Bàn

RODY GORMAN

Bha mi nam chromadh
Air a’ cheàird agam fad an latha
San dorchadas, an tòir air na faclan
Air an Lion
Air an annalair-uchd
Mar gun robh e nam dhàn ‘s nam dhual a-riamh.

Agus gun fhiosta,
Siud e Pangur Bàn e fhèin
A’ nochdadh mun a’ bhòrd
Agus, dìreach mar sin,
A’ leum
Air an luचाig agam.

Thug an dàn seo a’ chiad duais a-mach ann an roinn na Gàidhlig de dh’Fharpais Bàrdachd Bhaile Ùige (Wigtown) 2010.

Draghadh

RODY GORMAN

A’ cur le gaoith ‘s a’ draghadh
Air a’ Chuan Sgìth, mi fhìn air a’ chlàr,
A’ glacadh is a’ sgaoileadh,

A’ tilgeil is a’ tarraing,
A’ dol mu seach,
Air mo thachdadh, ag aiseag.

Is tu fhèin ga stiùireadh
Le sùil agad air thoiseach
A’ sgrùdadh na doimhneachd is nan dathan
Is do chùl rium fhèin

Is an fhairge cho mòr
Is nach tog thu leis an troimh-a-chèile
M’ èigh san deireadh:
Lìon briste! Lìon briste!

Chaidh duais an dàin Ghàidhlig a b’ fheàrr a bhuileachadh air seo ann am Farpais Bàrdachd Bheul nam Buillean (Strokestown) 2010.

Baileach

(RODY GORMAN BHON A’ GHÀIDHLIG AIG MAOILIOS CAIMBEUL)

Cé go ndeachaigh muid i léig,
Ní d’ég baileach
A chuaigh go baileach barainneach –
An fhad is atá sú sa duilleoig
Agus cur an tsíl sa ngort
(Agus fonn sa bport)
Agus atá súile sa síol,
Níl muid go baileach i ndiaidh dreo
Ná feo go baileach.

Nuair a thioctas an barr faoi thoradh,
Beidh muid beo
Le súil
Is go mbeidh anáil sa mbás
Is an síol i gcónaí faoi bhorradh fáis.

As: Céill san Oíche (Coiscéim, 2010)

Falmhachd

(RODY GORMAN BHON A’ GHAEILGE AIG ÁINE NÍ GHLINN)

Tha i air àite-suidhe tharraing
Chun a’ bhùird air a shon ‘s air srùbag
A dhòrtadh a-mach. Tha i ‘g innse dha
Mu ghnothaichean mòra ‘s beaga ‘n latha.
Ri bruidhinn, ri gàire, ri claonadh
A cinn gus èisteachd a dhèanamh.

Tha mi fhìn a’ feuchainn ris an fhalmhachd a thomhas.
Tha mi dèanamh leth gàire ‘n taobh
Sa bheil i fhèin den bheachd a bhith faicinn
An dà shùil aige (mar a tha mi beachdachadh).
Gu faillidh, tha mi ‘g èaladh às
Is gam fàgail leotha fhèin.

As: An Guth 6 (Coiscéim, 2010)

Poems by Karin Slater & Kerry Hardie

BY KARIN SLATER

The Local Man

is aware of the stares,
of the eyes, ears and noses
teasing him out
from the town's
early morning rush
for daily papers and gossip.

Their tongues follow him
round street corners
into the butchers
where he orders,
half a pound
of pork sausages.

He heads for the bus stop,
carrier bag in hand
and a dog
sensing dinner,
not judging
the man in the dress.

Croft No. 7

Sunbathing with the pet ram
between rushes and flies,
a space in the long grass
he steams under red admirals,
a starling on his back
tilts his head from the watchtower,
and three pairs of eyes catch
Ally the cat's dark arse
revolving in the buttercups.

Peat Cutter

A bicycle under foot,
pedals taking the strain
of the cumbersome sack
holding his ingots.

He pushes head down,
his lone silhouette
making slow progress
into the south-westerly.

Deep in circadian motion
he passes my auntie's window
as Corrie's adverts finish
taking her to a Fruit & Nut.

BY KERRY HARDIE

Delph Man

He always set porcelain
outside the shop
to pull in the women,
pricing it low,
a few pence for a plate,
the temptation
they allowed themselves
he said—

Now—watching you—
up on that stool,
how you lift down a plate,
stroke
the blue lozenges
pressed on the rim,
polish the garlands,
dust the egg-white centre,

I'm shooting my arm out
over the years,
I reach for the plate,
touch him again—
his slung hips
in his faded jeans,
brown curls, how he always loved
women—

London Blues

These white walls, this silence.

On journeys out for bread and milk
September dahlias in civic beds.

I do not want to live too long
in this frail airy place.
Trains running into tunnels into darkness;
sky doming,
bricks for leaves.

For all this white paint I am
flat, grimy,
on the bottom.

Once the train slowed to an unscheduled halt.
A bank, ragged with bee-crawled asters.
The child who picked a casual way
among the whip and snake of many tracks.

I come in from these ventures and I wash
my hands until the black dust runs.

After a while, like everyone else,
no longer noticing,
the train's swift rush from darkness into light
or back again.

Thrush

It always begins the same way.
The pup is absorbed
down where the fruit-net and whitethorns
funnel the gloom.
A crouch and a pounce.
Something is thrashing and crying.
She pounces again.

My voice demands her
and she comes.

There must be a way through I haven't found
where songbirds—blackbirds, thrushes—go
to pock the half-grown fruit.
Then, panicked by the pup they rush full-flight
into the drapes and foldings of the net.

It's quiet now, the wet air stirs
the wind-chimes in an empty tree.

I catch the trapped bird in my hand
and, sliding scissor blades beneath the down,
cut strand on strand.
It strains, a fresh blood marks
the soft grey stuff of breast, the mottled throat.

Then suddenly its head turns and it strikes.
It strikes again, oblique, the angle poor,
eye fixed, beak wide, an empty gape
like those old tales where tongues were wrenched away
to silence witness—

It stills, I still. It watches from a life
intense as mine. The last strand gives. A wing-rush
and it's gone into the dusk beyond the thorns.

October

The world is a small red fox.
The light is a golden goose
laying eggs in the pumpkin patch.

The red fox moves through the grass.
He snuffles about in the wrinkled leaves
on the scent of the golden goose.

But the golden goose will drown in the night
of the deep black rains of November.
The little red fox will shrivel and starve,
his white bones will lie in the fields.

Home Fires

SHORT STORY BY JOHN JENNETT

ALTHOUGH IT'S BEEN forty years, you recognise your sister through the glass screen of the island airport. Flora wears her anorak like she needs it, her hair escaping thick and black like yours, her face grated raw. You finger your stubble and think about Mother again, hungry to exchange the stench of aviation fuel for the harsh breeze that means you are home.

A few hours ago you rested against the roar of the 757's shell, watching the map not the movie. When the dart on the display edged past Iceland you pressed your face to the cold perspex but you could see only cloud; a bright froth on the submerged December day that defied the small-hours time on your Toronto-set watch.

They call you *Dòmhnail* - *Dhòmnaill mac Iain Calum mòr* - Donald, from John, out of big Malcolm. John's only surviving son, you have flown home each May these thirty eight

years. Home to cut and store the peats for your mother's winter fuel, and now she is two days dead. Each year you leave behind a completed peat stack that's shaped like a surfacing submarine, the jigsaw teeth of turf herring-boned to fool the rain.

Your sister is not badly turned out but her lips are crinkled shut as if she is holding her breath underwater.

'You've taken the scraping of the pot,' the last she said to you four decades ago, when you sailed for Canada with the serviceman's daughter. Now, when her lips burst apart she throws open her arms, holding you in a way you think you have never been held.

She drives past the school, the shop; the men in oilskins waving from their tractors and fence-mending. The car smells of perfume and you inch down the window, admit the acrid aroma of burning peat from townships where smoke is bent from the chimneys.

You milk your chin as your sister steers towards the statue of *Our Lady* where the view will unfurl like kicking open an old rug. The croft houses of home are scattered boulders at the back of the seaweed-fertile machair, the brushstroke beaches grey from balling ocean skies, secret slits in the dunes you could still find in the dark.

You have never seen so many cars at the house. On the plane you twisted your clean fingernails into the soft heart of your hand like a screw that wouldn't tighten. You imagined the feel of the thousand handshakes waiting for you, the etching on each dry mourning palm. Toronto has become nothing more than the tidy downtown apartment you don't know how to leave, only the humming fridge awaiting your return. Tomorrow you'll be expected to cast off your jacket and shovel sand until your mother's grave is full.

As you walk towards the door you wonder

what shoes they will have put her in, surely not her boots. You never did see her feet. Pausing at the half-used peat stack, you see the old plastic feedbags stretched over some of the exposed fuel, weighted with stones the way your mother liked, to keep some good turfs tinder dry. The free parts of the sacks are flapping around like snared crows in the gusts. She would have been out here groping for a few peats on the night she died.

You are wondering if there might be one left inside that bears her floury handprint when you feel Flora slip her finger into your hanging hand. You had forgotten that for once you were not alone, the sound of your sister following behind yanked away in a squall. If you had ever reached out to a child you would know, *Dhòmnaill mac Iain Calum mòr*, that you are clutching her finger like a baby. ■

Highland Clearance

SHORT STORY BY MOIRA MCPARTLIN

AH CAN ALMOST hear Archie in the next room, faffing and pacing – his disapproval reachin' me fae the grave. The flair boards might be creaking but ah know it's jist the hoose settling hersel' doon fur the night.

Ah cannae believe this is ma last night in this room, ah've slept here fur as long. First as a child sharing wi Archie, that wis until he got too big and wis moved intae the kitchen recess. When the parents went, wan efter the ither, Archie took up residence in their room, through the wall fae me. It wis jist the two o' us then, left tae git oan wi things. He always wis a night pacer and ah niver did get used tae the silence when he deid.

Ah expect that Edinburgh bitch 'll be here at the toot the morra morning; champin' at the bit tae tear the hoose intae her way oh likin' and ah know jist where she'll stert.

Ah wonder wit Faither wid huv said aboot me sellin' the croft intae a holiday home. Ah couldnae count the generations o' MacKenzies that lived and worked this place. It wis bad enough when Help the Aged poked thir nose intae oor business a few years ago. Ah could hear Faither birrlin' in his grave when they came in and covered up a' the tongue and groove walls wi' padded wallpaper tae stop the drafts. And he wis that particular aboot keeping the peat fires goan in a' the rooms, but Help the Aged insisted they wir a fire hazard up the stair and pit in they useless electric things.

Mind, Faither widnae huv believed the interest ah've hud in this place. Ah even had a pop star flew up here in a helicopter fur a look, but he wisnae interested when he heard aboot the iffy internet connection.

It wis jist a shame that nice couple fae the village couldnae huv afforded mair money, they'd huv done something wi the place.

'Anither nail in the coffin of the community' the meenister said. He didnae say that when the pub wis revitalised by that Yorkshire wummin, did he? It's a' right fur him in his fancy new manse wi its fitted carpets and electric central heating. He disnae huv tae pit up wi the scuttlin' invasion o' field mice behind the skirtin' the minute the temperature drops below zero ootside, and he disnae huv tae hirple ma auld bones oot tae the coal hoose every morning and freeze until the kitchen fire catches.

Well, the deed is done. This is the last night ah'll huv tae lie in bed and look at the peeling wallpaper roond that botched job the Help the Aged plasterer made o' the fire place. The Edinburgh bitch spotted it right away the first time she came tae view. Niver said a word; jist rubbed her hand o'er the wall. That type think we're a' donnert up here. Ah could see her calculating dippin' and strippin' the doors and scourin' the wallpaper doon tae the tongue and groove, but it wis the promise o' fireplaces that sold her the hoose.

Next time she came she asked if the fireplaces were boarded up.

'Search me,' says I, wi ma fingers crossed behind ma back.

Little dis she know ah got the plasterer tae take the fireplaces oot and ah took them tae auction tae be selt on tae folk like her in the cities. That money came in right handy tae buy a new rug and a swish marble mantelpiece fur ma nice wee, central heated flat in the toon. Ah'll jist huv tae live wi Archie's disapproval. ■

Jock

JOHN BURNS

in the fading photograph on my desk
my grandfather is poised
on the very point of his left foot
the small shoe delicately
keeping contact with the earth
but only just
as he sends the heavy weighted circle
of the quoit trembling in a long graceful arc
towards the marked iron pin in the clay bed
that is the end of his world
for this one moment
in the failing light
the clang of iron on iron
rings out sharp
before its song is silenced
by the clay

Poems by K. Henderson & Stephanie Green

Winter Landscape

(After John Berryman)

BY K. HENDERSON

Five of them lift from the field
into a bronze age sky to home
under this same canopy and make
by winters slip-pity light a way
towards their heart's true company;
everything seen, Scotland herself,
her existence, owed to this light;
the wind-blown scalp of the field,
whin combed to the shoulder.
Now rain, melting Brueghel's
winter; coal tit, blue tit, crow,
everything seen, flying to nest.

Whitehills

BY K. HENDERSON

There is a field and sky.
Wood pigeons flock in the interstice,

songbirds peck at the ice on the roof of a bird table.

The tops of two trees conclude a hill, which forms the first step to the
clouds, which are mountains covered in snow.

Clothes dry in the back of a room in which there is no permanence,
only another image, more faithful to what I happen to see outside.

And at the back of that image, another and another;
the smell of lard, birdseed, a warm coal scuttle;

the sound of a shovel cutting quietly through snow.

The De'il Tak the Minister,

(Fetlar, Shetland)

BY STEPHANIE GREEN

The island is hardly viable.
Cut with voes, worn out at the elbows,
a thin place

where the spits of land rise like whales from the haar,
where a nun prays, solitary but brimful with laughter,
where by mid-day, the reds of the buoys are eye-popping,
the blue of the ferry is more intense than blue has ever been.

Before you know it, there are only two children in the school,
and next there'll be no school, no hall, no church, no pub,

only the wind, the white crosses of the gannets' plunge.
Light all summer, dark all winter

where *Trowies* may lure you into their hills
for a night of jigs and slip-jigs, strathspeys and reels
and you'll emerge a hundred years later
to find all your friends and family are dust.

★

Note: Trowies or trows are goblin or troll-like creatures.

My Love, the Shetland Trowie

(After Rabelais)

BY STEPHANIE GREEN

His head is like a wrecked sixereen
His eyes are like extinguished lighthouse beams
His pupils are like bobbing red buoys
His brow is a sheer geo
His eyebrows are like a gadderie of fiddlers
His hair is like the turquoise ropes of fishing nets
His back is like the keel of a Viking long ship
His fingers are like voes probing deep into the land
His nails are like sea-stacks
His hands are like hollows holding pools
His chest hair is like a kishie
His legs are like posts encrusted with mussel shells
His feet are like lobster pots
His jaw is like the blue ramp of the ferry lowering and clanking shut
His mouth is like a gloup
His teeth are like smashed Blue Vodka bottles
His saliva is like the seven tides of Shetland
His member is like the seal's head bobbing up and down in the harbour
His buttocks are like skerries
His bollocks are like a pony's nose-bag
His pubic hair is like the hay-nets flung over black plastic rubbish bags
His arse hole is like the slippery steps down to the lower deck
His urine is like the swell in a Force 10 gale
His sweat is like a salty houb
His oxters are like a scorie's nest
His nipples are like the metal rings of salmon-traps
His arms are like whirling wind-turbine blades
His elbows are like crane-winchies
His navel is like a sand fire-bucket peppered with fag butts
His skin is like stiff, sea-drenched gaiters
His nose is like a broken sea-arch
His breath is like a blow-hole
His sigh is like the haar
His fart is like the flare at Sullom Voe

Glossary: trowie - a Shetland troll or goblin; sixereen - a six-oared rowing boat; geo- a narrow chasm, often ending in a cliff falling at right angles to a beach; gadderie - a gathering; voe - a sea-loch; kishie - woven straw basket used in pairs as panniers either side of a pony's back; gloup - a collapsed cave; skerries - rocks in the sea, submerged at certain times; houb - a salty loch; oxters - arm-pit; scorie - adolescent herring-gull; haar- a sea-mist; Sullom Voe - the oil refinery.

Going Poetic In St Andrews

The StAnza Festival 2010 17th - 21st March

By STUART B CAMPBELL

HAVING GENERATED AN increasing audience and an increasingly interesting festival programme over the last ten years, Brian Johnstone oversaw his final StAnza as Festival Director. Brian was accorded the opportunity to create his 'Director's Cut' to twin the festival's other theme of 'Myth & Legend'. An enviable, but perhaps weighty, task: to personally select without hindrance (or, for that matter, confirmation) twelve poets? Brian described it as "an indulgence", but one which regular festival goers would have had no reason to deprive him. If an explanation was needed for his choice (though the rationale must have been far more subtle), Brian said he selected "six who have never appeared at StAnza but whom I would be loath not to feature, and six of the poets I have most enjoyed". Given the way previous programmes have brought out the contrasts, connections and conjunctions of a diversity of poets, it could be confidently assumed that Brian's choices would reflect the festival's strengths. So we were treated, for example, to Tom Pow – giving a generous, wide-ranging and assured reading – teamed with Colett Bryce, whose

poetry, with its subtle rhyme and rhythm, was so affirmative. Another 'Director's Cut' session paired Jacob Polley (a 2004 'Next Generation' poet) with Anna Crowe who has provided previous festivals with co-readings of Spanish and other language poetry. Polley's reading was very focussed; it was essentially the poems, more than being a poet, he wanted to communicate. Anna Crowe read from a series of poems written in memory of her sister. These were poems of mourning that contained and sustained the grieving process. A lesser writer might have been overwhelmed by the necessary sincerity of the subject, but Crowe's craft matched that task to give poetry of intense feeling and direction.

The festival opened with a St Patrick's day celebration: skilfully arranged and beautifully played music from Dordán blended perfectly with poetry from Moya Cannon to give a truly bardic experience (even when she read a poem about Brazil!). Their performance also provided the right context for Matthew Sweeney, whose delightfully strange lyrics disrupt our accepted realities and would probably have been regarded as quite natural to

our early ancestors. For all the other-worldliness of myths and legends, this theme had a robust presence throughout the festival. In Hamish Whyte and Valerio Magrelli's 'Border Crossings' reading, both reflected consciously on memory as something both real and transient. Grevel Lindop, giving the StAnza lecture 'Myth, Magic and the Future of Poetry' (available at [HYPERLINK "http://www.stanzapoetry.org"](http://www.stanzapoetry.org) www.stanzapoetry.org) argued for the necessity of myth as a means of finding the sacred in the world, as a defence against a (world) consuming society. The theme was present too in Luiz Muñoz reading with John Burnside, in the musicality of his voice and his searching verses. At the same reading Anne-Marie Fyfe's poems conveyed the imagery of people who were never really themselves, caught in not-quite-real places. In a round table discussion on 'How Poets Develop' there was an insistence of the need for poets to ground themselves within the community; a restating of the traditional role of the bard. In a discussion on poetry and mythology we learned how, even in the ancient world, there was no definitive text and people constantly argued about what the myths meant. In another fascinating discussion about 'Poetry Beyond the Page', the panel regarded new technologies as the obvious means of not being restricted to print media – but more importantly, as a way for the poet to reclaim the means of communicating with the

community (even if that was a virtual one). In that respect, they concluded that getting poetry off the page via technology (including desk-top publishing) was more authentic and closer to the oral tradition of the bard in the community.

This year's StAnza seemed more packed full of poetry than ever. More than 60 poets participated, from Canada, the USA, Germany, Italy, Spain, Cuba, Croatia, Australia and Ireland (not to mention a large home contingent) – and more prize-winning poets than could really be wished for: Dennis O'Driscoll, Jen Hadfield, Don Paterson, Linton Kwesi Johnson, John Akpata and Seamus Heaney. It would be hard to pick, other than by personal preference, any particular reading as the stand out event (for me it was O'Driscoll... or maybe Akpata... or then again...). The measure of the festival's success must surely be the fact that so many of the events were sold out – such was the demand for tickets for Heaney's reading, StAnza and the Byre Theatre staff pulled off the minor miracle of rigging up a second video-link for an overflow of the overflow audience.

This year's StAnza was a fitting finale for Brian Johnstone's time as Director; poetry in Scotland has been well served and his successor, Eleanor Livingstone, inherits a sound platform to build on for the future. ■



Discovering Carol Ann Duffy

The Poet Laureate Among Schoolchildren
Photo: Ian MacRae.

A visit to the Nairn Book and Arts Festival in company with Rosie Cameron

N AIRN HOLDS ITS annual book festival in June. It's a stylish little town that comfortably spreads itself behind the bents that fringe the western end of the Moray Firth. Clustering lanes of older cottages, known as Fishertown, slope down to a little harbour and the river. But, unlike many along the Moray Coast, this was never primarily a fishing community; and nowadays the most likely creature to be found fishing there would be a heron.

The main residential streets have a pleasant sense of Edwardian leafiness and stability and the town continues to keep its longstanding popularity as a beach and golfing holiday resort attractive both to families with young children and to the middle-aged. It's a town that can support the well-stocked Nairn Bookshop; and it's there that the seeds of its Book and Arts Festival took root more than six years ago.

John Fyfe is the festival's continuing chairman and a vigorous team of volunteers work to make it all happen. The programme brochure quotes Tilda Swinton, one of the Patrons of the festival, as saying: fish and chips on the beach in combo with great writing in good company – how could June be better spent!

This festival runs across nine full days

– quite a bit longer than most – and the programme includes not only the expected literary events but also musical performances and arts and crafts exhibitions. And on most days also there are workshops which run for up to six hours each, a satisfyingly useful spread of time that allows a new piece of work to be developed. Events and workshops for junior and senior school-aged children are organised in collaboration with the local schools; and for children of primary age the experience starts in their classrooms many weeks before the festival dates. This year's workshops for adult visitors include landscape painting, sculpture, stained glass and felt-making as well as creative writing. There are also competitions: this year photographic, with categories for different age groups, as well as a short story competition.

A further virtue of this festival's wide-ranging programme is that it offers a well-planned mix of writers, artists and performers local to the area as well as those of wider experience and national reputation. And, delightfully, most evenings finish latish on a lively note of comedy, some nights of the stand-up sort, some nights a film.

Of these many attractions I shall mention two outstanding ones in a little more detail. The first of these was a presentation by Roderick Graham of his most recent book, *Arbiter of Elegance*, a Biography of Robert Adam. (Birlinn, 2009. £25). Mr Graham has been a director and producer with the BBC. He was at one stage Head of Drama for BBC Scotland; and had worked at other times in England directing TV series, and writing and producing for radio. In more recent years he has written several biographies (of John Knox, David Hume, and Mary Queen of Scots) all

published by Birlinn, the latest of these being *Arbiter of Elegance*: of which he spoke.

Mr. Graham was excellent in the matter of context, in the detailed picture he provided of the period: the low regard in which Scotsmen were held in London; the status of the national banks and their cash flow problems; artists of the period and their ambiguous scales of status. And especially he was excellent in his account of the struggles Adam's faced to succeed in that by no means easy context.

And then there was Carol Ann Duffy. She is a quietly impressive figure on the stage. The clothes she wore, a plain loose grey jacket and trousers, were somehow suggestive of a robe. She has a marvellously 'classical' face, framed by thick dark hair that curls. There are quick moments when you glimpse in her something of a priestess; then swiftly, by an offered glance from beneath her eyebrow, she is entirely of the human kind, inviting us into the pleasure of her wit, the warmth of her responsiveness, the immense skill of her performance.

Her audience was eager to enjoy the already known predicaments of Tiresias, the precautions undertaken by Mrs Midas, the singular wisecrack cracked by the wife of Charles Darwin. And then she offered other moods, loves and losses: as told in her collection, *Rapture*; as in poems written after the death of her mother.

Carol Ann Duffy also gave a special workshop for the benefit of local school students. It gladdens the heart to think of such artistry and insight reaching young minds and providing good reason to feel excited about poetry.

Some of us have had the good fortune to hear several of our Poet Laureates read. Each, in their way, quite splendid. Carol Ann Duffy will be remembered as one among them who is great. ■



The Queen

There's something almost vulnerably human in the way
The wasp, below the wine glass I've inverted
To a clear cell on my kitchen sill,
In pauses between her quartering, combs
Out each long antennae with a foreleg—
First one, and then the other,
Like a girl teasing out her tats
Holding the long gold strands between
A forefinger and thumb;
Then it is back again to waspishness
With blurring spasms of wings,
Antennae quiverings,
Climbing her wall of glass on pricking feet.

I only want to briefly look at her.
She is a queen, newly awake from her winter sleep;
In her warning abdomen is stored
Ten thousand summer wasps, wasp dynasties
Down the perpetual light of centuries;
And she will be adored.
But, for now, she rests again, her segmented antennae
Drooping and her jaws, so secateurish,
Slightly open, clinging against her prison glass
With the disconsolate air of a scunnered spaniel
Gazing out, not even angling her plated face
When my gigantic head
Looms like a mountain into view.
It is Easter Sunday; she wants to begin
Her own fierce story of resurrection
Though they would kill her still,
Those bleak gusts of March
And that high, wasp-headless blue.

Epic

The couple of thousand miles
Behind each olive wing

From Ghana or the Ivory Coast
For its five inches to perch and sing

On this Teavarran willow
In a chilly Highland May;

And in its brain that's big
As a pea the dowdy one and her clutch of white

Bloodspeck-constellated
Eggs comprise

A centre for the universe, despite
These aeons of mountains

Smudged with hail it sings in sight of, light
As a leaf on its shoogly twig

Poems and Photographs
by Gerry Cambridge



HARE MOMENTS

—For Tanya

I

As soon as I passed
Where it hid, all flattened
In the growing barley,
As if an invisible box-lid opened,
Its soot-tipped ears
Sprang
Up!

II

Watching peewits
Back to their nests
Two hundred yards off, down
The bright tunnel of binoculars.
In the foreground tussocks
A hare, going left, crosses.
A minute later, closer,
It crosses again—
Going right this time.
And a minute later,
Again closer, left again.
And every time, at just the same spot,
Like successive stills
Each closer, reversed,
It pauses for a look
At this twin-lensed face,
Till I can see
Its whisky eye, its nostrils flexing
As it susses me out.

III

I seldom see one
Without wanting to catch it
And stroke its tall ears
And kiss its soft muzzle—
Romantic, of course,
But all very hare-ish,
Discounting the thrown
Sinew and kick
And its yellowing teeth,
For the hare is no rabbit,
Not to be kissed,
Rank individualist
Like this that went
Chuntering by
Talismanic at Moniack
Momently airborne
In the blue morning
Under lightmad larks and saying
(I like to think)
Heh heh, just thocht ah wid gie ye
Wi thon brammer o a lens
A wee bit luk
Fae an aulder warld
An the gift o a swatch;
And was indomitably off
On its split-new track
Through lit silver and green,
Shattering the pristine dew.

IV

And there was that day
On the road to Kiltarlity,
Out with four weans—
Down the brae in a field
Four hares
Go-karting around the whinny bushes.
We heard their gasps and their rustlings first.
Then one broke ranks and sprinted
Right up the brae
And for moments we lost it
In a dwam of uncertainty
Till with a twang
It leapt through the fence
A yard from our feet
And was over the road
Through the six-barred gate
To the higher field—
The fence wire thrumming to stillness.
The gift of the hare.
All of us, later,
Sun-faced at supper round the big table,
Bearing those moments
Of scruff and amber
Carefully as a casket with a secret jewel.

Meeting of the Minds

Kristin Pedroja on The Highland Literary Salon

THE TERM *LITERARY salon* evokes a delicious pretence. The term was first used in France in 1664 to describe the room where the event occurred, rather than the gathering itself. The idea began in 16th-century China and flourished in France in the 17th and 18th centuries, becoming an institution in French society by the mid-1700s. Soon thereafter, literary salons became fashionable for both men and women in Britain. Throughout the centuries, salons have played instrumental roles in the sharing of ideas and opinions for people throughout Europe, from Polish royalty to Scandinavian politicians, Italian art patrons to aristocratic Jewish women in pre-war Germany.

Scotland too has a grand tradition of literary salons, dating back to the eighteenth century. Legend says that Robert Burns met a young Sir Walter Scott at an Edinburgh literary salon in 1786, and salon evenings are said to have inspired Scottish writers for centuries. These salons may have been formal or informal, private or public, but with the same focus at their core: to celebrate the magic of literature.

The literary tradition of the Highlands is also rich and vibrant. Such greats as Norman MacCaig, Hugh Miller and Neil Gunn spent time in the Highlands, and the area is rife with talented authors and poets and even a few successful publishing houses. Writers' groups can be found in nearly every area of the Highlands, and their members are not limited by age, background, degree of success, or preferred genre. It's impossible to guess how many people in the Highlands find themselves scribbling into the night, trying to connect with the world in a private, yet potentially public, manner.

Those of us who write realise the solitary nature of working with words. We can go hours, perhaps days, without speaking to another person, lost in our own creative bubbles. And those of us who write in this distinctive part of Scotland are also somewhat limited in our opportunities to connect and network with other writers. The idea behind the Highland Literary Salon (HLS) is to provide a place where writers, artists, publishers, and authors can meet others who share the same passion for literature.

The founding members of HLS met through a creative writing course at Eden Court in Inverness. After taking Cynthia Rogerson's class in the autumn of 2008 and again in the spring of 2009, they were keen to continue their relationships as friends and writers in a relatively informal setting. The salon idea had been attempted in the Highlands before, and the core interest was evident; within the first two months, the email distribution list had quadrupled, and salon attendance has grown nearly every month.

The founders were keen to provide an atmosphere of creativity and inspiration, yet

wanted the format to remain fluid. Thanks to generous funding from HI-Arts, HLS was able to invite authors from around Scotland to share their work and anecdotes about their careers, along with writing advice and suggestions. "It's interesting to hear how other writers find success," says Janet Brinton, a writer based in Duffus. "Everyone has their own path unique to their circumstances."

The event has been popular with Highland-based writers. Attendance has ranged from 8 to nearly 30, with attendees from as far away as Forres, Wick, and Skye. The inaugural HLS took place in October 2009 and, fittingly, featured Cynthia Rogerson, who spoke about a variety of writing opportunities available in the Highlands and about her own path as a writer.

Other featured writers have included Janis Mackay, author of the Kelpies Prize-winning *Magnus Fin* and the *Ocean Quest*, who spoke about her time as writer-in-residence in Caithness and Sutherland and how she has created a career in writing. Her use of the excellent HI-Arts Work in Progress scheme resulted in a book deal. Simon Varwell, author of the travelogue *Up the Creek Without a Mullet*, shared how an arbitrary comment in an Eastern European pub wound up written, edited, and bound. His lack of writing

experience didn't hold him back, and his easygoing humour and natural writing talent helped an idea turn into a cult hit for mullet-spotters everywhere. Donald Paterson, debut author of *Homecomings*, discussed his long and satisfying journey from idea to publication, and the challenges of creating a historical novel. Salon regular Angus Dunn shared a few of his poems and read from his book *Writing in the Sand*. His personal writing history is both interesting and inspiring. And it was standing-room-only for Kevin MacNeil, who discussed many aspects of writing and publishing both in the context of his own work and the context of those who seek publication. He shared some of his poems with us and treated us to the world-premiere reading of a scene from his forthcoming novel *A Method Actor's Guide to Jeckyll and Hyde*.

The salons have been fortunate to also feature publishers. Sharon Blackie, co-founder of Two Ravens Press, provided a primer on the publishing side of the book business from the perspective of both author and publisher. Commissioning Editor for Sandstone Press Moira Forsyth also joined for an evening, where she discussed the acquisitions process and fielded numerous questions from the audience about everything from query letters to synopses and editing. Both women are

authors in their own right, and gave the group inspiring and encouraging advice throughout the evenings. Their perspectives on the ever-changing publishing world helped debunk the myths that surround the industry.

Looking forward, HLS hopes to extend its reach beyond Inverness, perhaps hosting weekends in Caithness or Saturday retreats in Oban. Those who attend regularly have expressed interest not only in meeting authors, agents, publishers, and others connected with Scottish publishing, but also attending focused workshops to improve their writing. The HLS hopes to continue to keep the focus broad, including those involved in drama and non-fiction as well as fiction and poetry. Guests for 2010/2011 have already been approached, and once funding is in place, the salon will announce its programme.

As the Highland Literary Salon wraps up its inaugural year, it hopes to continue to inspire and connect writers in the Highlands. The salon meets on the third Tuesday of each month at the Glen Mhor Hotel on Ness Walk in Inverness. Upcoming dates are September 21, October 19, November 16, and December 21. For more information, see www.highlandlitsalon.com. ■

Poems by Andy Jackson

Long Haul

I worry that one day we'll leave our bags
unguarded for too long. Security with dogs
will sniff around them, come to the decision
to destroy them in controlled explosions.
We sometimes walk away and don't attend
to what we lug between us. Crunching sand
in shoes annoys like missing buttons on a shirt,
reminders of the things which, at the start,
we planned to reconstruct together
but now are happy to forgive of one another.

We know that, for as long as we have flown together,
a change of weather changes more than weather.
We exchange our boarding cards for empty air
which isn't nothing, simply nothing to declare.

Worms

I pleaded with you, told you we were worms,
our bellies full of soil, knowing that the lazy spade
may come upon us as we wriggled between forms.
I told you how the science teacher took her blade
and cut the hopeless crawler into two,
made us watch how both halves curled
but did not die. I knew that this defence
was risky, but I wanted for our world
what worms could have. It made some sense,
to me but not, as time would prove, to you.

Poems by Charles Bennett & Kenneth Steven

Forecast

CHARLES BENNETT

Gently disintegrate me / Said nothing at all
‘Enter a Cloud’ WS Graham

Looking at clouds in our bedroom
I try to decipher what mood today is in.

Whatever’s arrived overnight – a rain of frogs
perhaps or a butterfly blizzard, it’s waiting

to be made welcome. What kind of cloud
are you I ask myself and what do you bring?

Will I see a swan or a storm? Will I read
these drifting shapes until they speak?

I’m lighter than I knew as I blow from this
into that; as I slip into something more unstable.

When I float above our bed and see below
the crumpled land of quilt, will you wake

and tell me what I am? A lake or an island
or a long slim fish who swims in the sky.

Porthgwarra

CHARLES BENNETT

Sit with me here at Porthgwarra,
let’s listen to the bell in the buoy

and notice the way whatever we hadn’t noticed
is coming to rest in a greeny-blue interval

between the strike of one sour sea-note and the next.
And even if it’s true that the voice in the buoy

is the groan of a drowning man,
after a while the sun will warm these stones

and the day swing round by itself
on the right heading. So let’s sit quietly here

as everything settles into place –
and then, when we speak, let’s speak

at the same time and state the obvious:
This is the life! we’ll say – and yes, it will be.

Salthouse

CHARLES BENNETT

When we walked up the hill above Salthouse
and saw, looking down where we’d been

ourselves on the beach waving,
we were here and there and no-place

coming and going at once, perceiving
the speckled clouds as sleeping seals,

as we dipped our toes in the breeze
and watched from the hill’s shoreline

a kestrel come in with the tide,
and hold his stillness open

over the ship weathervane
of a church that was floating and drowned,

his shadow on the ground beneath him
the anchor that kept him aloft.

St Ives

CHARLES BENNETT

In the painting of St Ives above our bed
are you the red and white lighthouse, holding
your ground in the centre, or a shoal

of five rowing boats, tied to the waves
and tilted on a deep swell? Are you the rain
which is just about to arrive, or eight

lazy fronds on a solitary palm tree;
the trawler’s slippery deck, or the leap
of yellow swirls on green water?

And what do you mean I wonder,
as I lie here washed-up beside you, hauling
the warm beach over my head.

Luskentyre

KENNETH STEVEN

On a day the wind comes from everywhere
And the sea is a rugged fleece,
The bell flows over the island
And the black suits and the black hats go
Slow to the church at the top of the beach.

The psalms lift and fall in long waves,
And after the minister’s words are blown away
In the field of stones like broken teeth,
They go back to the warmth of the hall.

The tea is poured like liquid peat into white cups,
And there is talk, the soft water of Gaelic,
As through the advent calendar window
The hill is sugared with snow
And flakes chase the air like birds.

The Linn

KENNETH STEVEN

On August days when thunder
Prowled about the hills like bears
And skies were low and heavy
We went to swim in the river. By then
It was thin and slippery, resting in rocks,
Half-hidden under green overhangs.
But the pool was a whole stillness of smoky quartz,
Deep as a dungeon.
We skinned ourselves, crashed into the water –
Its delicious gasp of cool – plunged under
To lie on our backs breathless, listening
To the whizz of the swifts above us,
The river’s silvering below.
By nightfall we trailed back home, barefoot,
Hearing in the trees muffled smudges of talk
As rain pattered dark around us
And lightning flickered the sky.

Dead Scorched Birds

SHORT STORY BY HELEN FORBES

FORKED LIGHTNING IS shooting from the end of the child's arm. There is no hand, just jagged gold, crackling and jumping, balls of sparks bouncing off the ring of pink fur that trims her sleeve. Nothing but the lightning moves. Not her arm. Not her face. Not even her eyes.

Someone speaks. Her mother. She has shining chestnut hair and sparkling white teeth. Lightning in both hands, she swirls her arms, making golden streaks in the night, dazzling circles and great swooping trails. A name, spelled out in sparkling gold. Amy.

"Look!"

Amy doesn't look. Her eyes are still fixed on her own fire, her arm still rigid.

At the end of the garden, where the shed used to sit in a jungle of nettles, three coloured wheels are spinning on the newly-painted fence. Faster and faster, showers of coloured sparks dancing in frenzied spirals. In Amy's hand, the lightning is fading. Frowning, she watches it die, then she drops the burned-out sparkler and runs.

"Wait, darling! Not too close."

Amy stops at the bush. A gloved hand emerges from her sleeve, each finger a different colour, and grasps a branch. The scarf has slipped from her little oval mouth. She holds her breath, but tendrils escape through the gap in her front teeth, float from her and evaporate into the freezing night. On the fence, the Catherine Wheels splutter and die.

"This one, Dad?"

A boy; Amy's brother. He has lifted a rocket from the metal box. He hands it to his father, then he carefully replaces the lid on the box.

Together, they set the rocket in a small bucket of sand.

"Stand back, Mark."

The night's stars dim and disappear as the sky explodes. Beyond the fence, the solid bulk of the hill is lit up in showers of cascading colours. Again and again, the hill is lit up, the sky sprinkled with stars of gold and purple and red. The fireworks whistle and crack and bang. The noises bounce off the hill, slam against the windows, echo across the moor.

In the house next door, thumping feet on the stairs and the watching boy drops down on his bed. The door is shoved open and he shrinks from his mother's whisky breath.

"Like bloody Baghdad out there!" she hisses. "Close those curtains and get to sleep."

But . . .

The word stops before it reaches his throat. He swallows it and tugs at the curtains. They don't meet. Sometimes he watches the moon through the gap. Sometimes it is a pale sliver of gold, sometimes just a shadow behind bruised clouds. Sometimes he stays awake all night, watching for the first signs of daylight trickling from the sky.

From the neighbours' garden, a high pitched squeal, then a barrage of bangs that shake the island. The boy can get up without making the bed squeak. It hurts his chest to hold his breath so tight, but he can do it. The moon is a huge orange ball. Around it, white rockets of light are flashing and skittering randomly. They whistle, then they die, falling from the sky like the feathers of dead, scorched birds.

It is silent now, the orange moon shining

down on the garden next door, on the giant heap of rotting wood that was once Old Alasdair's shed. The father is crouching, fire in his hand. He touches it to the base of the heap.

"It's not going to work," Mark says. "It's not, Dad."

The man laughs, pokes some more among the wood and the fire catches.

In the room, the boy has to let his breath out. It steams up the window and he rubs at it quickly with his sleeve. By the time the window clears, the fire has taken hold. Mark is gazing into the flames. His father stands behind him. He drapes his arms over his son's shoulders, pulling him close against him and smiling down on him as if he is the most precious thing in the whole world.

The watching boy shivers. There is a memory in him, in his shoulders. A memory of being held close like that, warm breath on his head and his neck. A man . . . It is gone, evaporating into the night until it was never even there.

They are all gathered at the fire now. The burning wood is roaring and crackling. The mother is crouched beside Amy, her arm holding her tight. Amy's little mouth curves into a huge smile and then it's distorted by a yawn. She sinks against her mother.

The boy turns from them. He pulls the cover up around his ears. Its thinness cannot shut out the chattering voices, carried on the still night air. At last he hears the father tell them it is time to go in. He's on his knees again, peeping through the gap. Their faces, as they approach their back door, have

turned blue in the moonlight. Amy looks up. She stops. He hesitates, swallows, and then he waves. She stares back, then she runs into the house.

The father takes his time tidying the garden, lifting the spent fireworks, dousing the bonfire until not a spark is left, locking the shed and checking the back gate. A window creaks open. A lisping, baby voice: "Night night, Daddy."

"Night night, sweetheart." He grins up at her, blows her a kiss. The window creaks shut.

The boy's face is in the pillow, tears soaking into the lumpy stuffing, a fist in his mouth to keep the sobs in. He wishes it was Baghdad. He wishes a missile would land on their council house, with its damp chill and the wind always battering the grey walls. On his mother and her hidden half-bottles and gaunt wasters of boyfriends. On the village and the fat headmaster with his prize ram and his bad breath. On their new neighbours with their perfect garden, their perfect children. Amy, blown to fluffy pink smithereens, strewn across the moor; Mark and his shining mountain bike, jet-propelled into outer space and annihilated, like one of their fireworks. The whole island, smashed to bits and scattered across the sea.

But it's not Baghdad. It is nowhere; just a tiny scrap of land crouching on the shores of the Atlantic. And now the sky is dark, the moon and stars shamed into hiding. The hill squats, black and unyielding. ■

Poems by Donald S Murray

Weaving The Seasons

Below the mackerel skies of spring,
Shonnie's loom would shoal out herringbone.

When summer skies were flecked with rain,
he would weave 4 x 4 and plain.

There would be barley twist at harvest time
when others twisted knots round sheaves.

the grain within his broadcloth
like seeds wind cast round their fields,

and in the cold of winter,
his skin would take on tartan's checks and shades

as he perched before the fireside,
thighs marked with patterns from the flames.

A Philosophy For Weaving 1

With the swiftness of a shuttle,
trouble sometimes darts across our lives,

its steel-tip trailing sadness,
pulling threads that tie

and fasten
knots in our existence,

snags and snares
that either tear

within us like a wound
or else grant us resilience,

the folded cloth prepared
to protect us on our journey

from all life's cuts and bruises,
each day's relentless wear.

Weaving Spells 1

There was a day when women told daughters
to picture patterns in their sleep

And see what life might weave for them,
what thread would lace with theirs within the tweed.

Some foresaw the criss-cross of the twill,
plain and simple, cloth that will

Withstand the rigour of the years,
while others saw more complex weaves.

The fleck – *some joy mingled with grief.*
The barley twists – *the smiles and small deceits.*

The dogtooth – *sorrow biting into bone.*
The check, the plain, the herringbone,

All given meaning till the future's known.
even the girl with threadbare dreams

foretold to wake each morning
both lonely and alone.

Two Short Stories by Lorna Bruce

Elvis is Dead

IT'S TEN PAST nine and the kids are finally in bed. I'm in front of the TV with a glass of white wine and a packet of Salt and Vinegar crisps. On the screen a po-faced, forensic pathologist is sorting through body parts. Wine, Crisps, Murder - Bliss. I hear somebody running along the landing, footsteps on the stairs. I turn the sound down a bit. My son comes into the living room, sobbing. I quickly change channel to a documentary - 'Young Elvis in Colour.'

'What's wrong?' I ask.

'I've had a really bad dream.'

'But you've not been in bed long enough to have fallen asleep and had a dream.'

'But I'm really, really frightened. I can't sleep.'

And he is really, really frightened. Big tears are rolling down his cheeks, his eyelashes clumped into wet spikes.

'Is it something that you've done?'

'No!'

'Is it something that someone has done to you?'

'No!'

'Is it something that you've seen?'

'No!'

What's left? I take a sip of wine. Have a think. 'Is it something that you're frightened might happen?'

He nods his head. 'But I can't tell you, it's so bad and I can't stop thinking about it.'

I take another sip of wine. Think for a while about the things that used to frighten me, and still do. Night terrors. 'Are you worried about dying?'

He looks amazed and nods his head. 'I keep on thinking about when you and Daddy and everyone dies. And me' - he gulps - 'what will happen to me when I die?'

He's waiting for an answer that I just can't give. There's a big black hole where my faith should be. I could tell him things like well I'm beginning to see a pattern, there must be something to it all, some kind of circular shape, but I don't think any of that would reassure him - it's all too vague. Useless, rubbish mother. We look at the television. A young Elvis swivels across the screen.

'Well, this is something that frightens everyone, on and off' I tell him, 'but as you get older and have children and grand-children and great-grand children and you are a very old man - you won't be frightened any more.'

'How do you know that?'

'Well I don't really - you can try to stop thinking about it now, don't dwell on it. Enjoy your life. But I won't lie to you - it frightens Mummy too, sometimes.'

Elvis smirks at us. They're showing us clips of Blue Hawaii and all those other rubbish films he laughed his way through. Wearing his talent lightly. Not caring. I try to remember what my mother told me about death, but

I don't remember ever asking her - the fear just seemed so big. Now it just seems like a pointless question to ask. She doesn't know any more than I do.

He cooies into me, still sobbing. I hold him close so he can't see my face. I keep my voice steady.

'But what happens when you die?' he says.

'I just don't know - some people believe in God and heaven. Do you want to go to Sunday School or speak to a minister about it?'

'No!'

I don't blame him. All I can remember about Sunday School is the sour smell of the hall; the hymns so high that it made you feel as if your throat was cracked and bleeding; the hymn books which weren't printed like proper books on proper paper. The first day there we were told to draw a picture of God and I sat for ages, staring at a blank piece of paper, too frightened to draw in case I got it wrong. I never went back.

Picture after picture of young Elvis flashes up on the screen. His swarthy skin, soft mouth, dark lashes. Beautiful, beautiful man. He was my first death. We sat at my Auntie's house as she screamed and ranted, her mouth wide, big black fillings on show, her funny pencilled-in eyebrows all smudged. I thought my uncle had died. But it was worse than that. It was Elvis.

He's getting calmer now, just the occasional, wobbly intake of breath. I smooth his brow over and over again. He stares at the screen - mesmerized by Elvis. Cliff Richard comes on and says his piece. Piously.

'Who's that old man?'

'That's Britain's own Elvis.'

'He's rubbish, isn't he?'

'Yes, he is.'

Better to be a smirking fat Vegas Elvis, than this. Later, as we watch the sweat trickle down Elvis's bloated face and scary sideburns, a voiceover says - Elvis died at the age of forty two.

'But Daddy's forty two.'

'Yes, but Elvis drank too much and ate too much and took too many drugs.'

'But Daddy's at the pub now, and he's fat. Does he take drugs?'

'Daddy's just having a pint with his pals, and he's just a little bit overweight and, no, he doesn't take drugs.'

'But forty two. You're forty one!'

And he's right - I am forty one. I switch the television off. I tell him that Elvis was sitting on the toilet in Graceland when he died. This cheers him up no end.

'Now go to bed and I'll be up in a little while to tuck you in.'

I pour the wine down the sink and chuck the crisps in the bin. Later, when I go up, I look in on him sleeping - flushed cheeks on swarthy skin, dark lashes. Beautiful, beautiful boy. I go to bed shivering, winding the sheet

tight around me. I'm really tired, but my eyes won't close. ■

The Ring

A WOMAN ONCE told me that her husband killed a deer. With a gun. Shot it through the neck as it dipped its head and sipped from the green pool that lay at the edge of the woods near their steading, in the evening light.

Then he took a short knife with a sharp blade and split the deer. First, he made careful circular cuts releasing the bowels, the bladder and the birth canal. These he pulled from the deer and knotted so as not to contaminate the meat. Then he freed the doe's milk sacs and let them fall to one side. Next, he divided the deer from the warm hollow in the base of her throat to just below the rib cage. Other careful cuts followed until the deer lay divided. He turned her on her side, her warmth spilling onto the grass.

The husband fed the lights to his dog that had sat silently by his side as he shot the deer. As the dog licked his paws clean, he plunged his knife into the earth to mask the smell of sweet blood. Then he took the entrails and spread them along the grass at the edge of the woods, to tempt the fox he planned to kill next.

The husband slung the doe over his shoulder and carried her to the steading, where he hung her from the rafters in an out-house, dripping blood onto the damp earth. He said

goodbye to his wife, drove his car to Edinburgh, took a plane to Norway, then a helicopter to somewhere in the North Sea where he spent twenty-one nights and twenty-one days drilling for black oil as, back home, the deer hung from the rafters staring - its eyes filming over with a milky cataract.

After twenty-one nights and twenty-one days, the husband took a helicopter to Norway, a plane to Edinburgh and drove back home to be greeted by his wife. In the out-house, he butchered the deer reserving the most tender parts for their meal that night. The rest he put in zip-lock bags, deep inside their chest freezer.

That evening, the husband and the wife sat facing each other and ate the deer. It was good. When they were finished, they spread their hands wide and touched fingertips across the table, as they liked to do. It was then that they saw the husband's wedding ring was gone.

They sat and thought about the ring. Could it be deep inside the chest freezer, inside the dog, a fox or one of them? Perhaps it lay on a soap dish, by a sink, on an oil-rig somewhere off the coast of Norway. Who knows?

I said to the wife, 'buy a new ring and the old one will reappear.' But she doesn't believe in that sort of thing. She said the rings were special; made from pieces of gold that each had brought to the marriage and had rendered down to make two new bands.

After twenty-one nights and twenty-one days the husband left. In his absence, the wife spends each evening prowling the perimeter of their steading, wading through the damp, sweet grass that lies between the green pool and the edge of the woods. As she searches, deep in the woods, a fox barks. ■

The Breakwater (and Emily Dickinson)

BY GORDON MEADE

I am becoming Emily Dickinson;
an outrageous thing to say, especially

coming from someone who has read
hardly any of her poems. I am becoming my own,
uninformed idea of what Emily Dickinson

might have been. I blame
the breakwater. I seem to read

so much into it that, nowadays,
I rarely go out. I have set up my work-station
at the window, so I can watch it all day

long. It does even less than me,
but there is something about it that consumes

my every waking thought. Soon, I will start
to dream about it too. And then, I, like the breakwater
itself, will be truly lost at sea.

Iris

SHORT STORY BY ANDREW STOTT

THE SOIL IS wet and it is in clods around my fingers. My fingers are in gloves though, thick gardening gloves and so they are protected. I pick up the plant, an aster starlight, and press it into the ground. I hold it gently, so it remains upright, whilst I press all the earth in around it. That's the last one. I push back with my hands but I don't get up. I rest on my knees. It is damp this morning. It is only ten am, or maybe just past and I am done. The whole line of them are in place, all along the length of the bed. They sit in front of the azaleas, and behind them the juniper. I planted the junipers fifteen years ago. And I have seen them grow and grow. Now, they are my height, when I'm standing up. I've come down as they've come up. I am a whole inch shorter than I used to be, when I was young, twenty, and the world was bright lights. I have shrunk. That's what happens with age. At least my nose hasn't grown, like a man's nose grows. And I'm sure my ears are the same size they always used to be. For a moment a man's tongue catches the ridges of my ears and I shiver. The thought passes, and the feeling. Something flickered down there but it is almost out.

I started the garden twenty-five years ago. I never used to like the idea of gardening. There were so many other things to be done. So much life to be lived. Never let it become boring. Never let it fade. You only have one life, you know? I do. I've only had one life and I've lived it. Myself. Don't get me wrong, I've had friends. I have friends. I go to knitting once a week and I drink red wine once a month. We tell each other we prefer this one and prefer that one. I don't like wine. Not really. I used to. But I'm off it now. I go because my friends go. And having friends is a habit.

There is a breeze and it feels its way through my hair and around my ears, like a lover's hands. I take my gloves off, and correct my hair. It is so thin now, dry, empty of life. It has died before me. I used to have dark hair. Thick and lustrous, and, apart from that time, it has always been in place. I love my hair. I love having hair. I would never be without hair.

The air is damp. I feel it on my hands. They have gone cold, half way to the grave. It is because they were sweaty inside the gloves. I feel it now. I should go inside. I have tea in there, and milk, in the fridge, and sugar, in the bowl. Gotta get me some sugar in my bowl.

Today I will go and see Iris. Iris is the reason my hair fell out. And Iris is not so far away. I have to drive. I like it to be that kind of distance. Something right. Something just right. Iris isn't buried there but it's the closest I have got.

The house is large and white. They say that the wife dies after the husband dies. And the other way round. Within a couple of years. They can't live without each other. Well, that's not the case with me. I expected to die. I really did. I thought it would come because I

loved George. I loved him very deeply, but after the pain, and believe me there was so much pain... and the pain returns, in moments. But after the huge fiery onslaught of its initial breath was through, I became used to it. It is how life must be. It is sad. He never saw the junipers grow. Not to their final height. And he planted them, one after the other in a row. That was fifteen years ago. I mean he died fifteen years ago. The junipers were planted twenty years ago. So, there you are, the timeline, and I'm not dead.

It has a perfect four windows around about the backdoor which sits in the middle of the wall. It is a perfect house.

I get up off my knees and pick up the plastic cushion. I sigh and put my hand to my back. That's it. Work done. Space to fill. I couldn't live without the radio. The irony! Of course I could. I have. I cannot die. But the radio keeps me sane. You know what I mean. I have life about the place. I am not lonely. An old woman in a house listening to the radio. Not lonely at all.

The boy runs across the road pushing his bike. I put my foot on the brake but I am too slow. I don't hit him! I don't mean that. But the movement of my foot is inconsequential, unnecessary because I do slow the car, but only once he is well onto the other side and shouting in the face of his friend, who shoves him back and off they go down the pavement.

I drive on.
My foot is back on the accelerator now.
I just have a small car.
Because I do not drive far.
Only as far as Iris.

Iris, the beginnings of life. I can see her blinking at me. I have never lost her eyes, even though I never saw them. Her eyes have come to me ever since that day. People say they are sorry about my husband, but, to me, that is not the pain I have to deal with. George's death was natural. Well... as natural as prostate cancer can be. But he died at a decent age, sixty-two. I suppose that is not so old. But not young. Not less than nine months. Which is the most terrible age to die.

I watch it on the television. The Americans arguing about the right to life, and I feel it inside me, even now. The twist, as her life gave up. It's my fault. I don't know what I did wrong. All I can see are her eyes.

I get out of the car. I am slow. I close the door behind me but it doesn't close properly. I open it again, reel the seatbelt back to where it belongs and slam the door again. The car wobbles. I am strong enough to shake a car. I press the button in my hands and put the key into my handbag. I wrap my scarf tight

around my neck. The gravel crunches under my feet and I walk across the carpark, between others cars onto the path down to the beach. I go through the kissing gate. There is a family ahead of me. The children are circling the parents. I am old. There is no one to help me. I am alone. I keep walking until I reach the small, almost invisible, muddy path that runs off to the left between the beech trees. I wonder if I am responsible for the continued presence of this path. It is my feet alone that shift the leaves this way and that, that compress the ground in such a way that it prevents or dissuades the nettles from coming up. I walk. I can follow this route with my eyes shut and I come out into the little clearing. It is hardly a clearing. It is at most three meters from one tree at one side to another tree at the other side. As it is autumn the sun never comes up high enough to make its way directly down into the space. And, besides, it is not midday. The sun comes through the trees and lights me. I put my hand up so I can see. The leaves, still on the trees, shake and the trees sway. I hear the breeze although I do not feel it and I look down at my feet. There, pressed into the ground, is the small grey plaque, the one that I had set, in place, the one that says Iris, that is all; she never grew old enough to take a second name and it says a year: 1969. That is the year Iris died. She died by pouring out of me and I screamed because she did not have a mouth.

I kneel down. I wipe the broken pieces of the wood from the plaque. I read her name, Iris. I see her eyes. I stare round. You may wonder why it is here. Why so far off the beaten track and yet close to people, close to the people who make their way to the beach. Why is the plaque here? Because it was here that Iris was conceived. George's and my own little secret. We couldn't help ourselves. Oh, what nonsense! Of course we could. Everyone can help themselves but we had built ourselves up into such a fever in the car, on the way, just by talking that when we saw the path. Yes! The path was there even before we began. Even before Iris began. So people must have come before. Maybe they do come now. Maybe they see Iris too. I bend over and kiss Iris. The plaque is cold against my lips. George and I tumbled into the space. He pressed me against the tree and kissed me and my fingers pulled at the buttons on his shirt, which was of no consequence as he pulled his shirt off himself and I busied myself with his belt and trousers. I took him in my mouth. He was salty and I sucked and when he was free I pulled him to me and we never do it standing up. Maybe we thought the floor of the forest would be cold, or sharp, I don't know. It was a strange way to make Iris, different to all the other ways in which we had made love and I wonder if that was the problem. If Iris had been made in a different way... I don't know.

We tried again, afterwards. We tried many times but it didn't happen, and I only wanted

George's baby. I only wanted George inside me. I know people adopt but I didn't want the screaming. I never wanted the sleepless nights. I just wanted George's baby and hang the consequences. Deal with them later. You know what I'm saying. Oh God. I want to scream. But I can't. I'm an old person. I will never see the flowers I have planted grow to their full height. I am like George. I will die and all I will leave is my garden. ■

The Black Loch

BY HUGH McMILLAN

We climb the track, and go through the ghost of gardens, stone seats melted to moss, a heron frozen by a pond lacquered with shoreweed. There's a gap in the wall, and a bluebell path cut by the edge of a burn, but we leave fairyland for wilder stuff, where pines brood on hilltops and each step slips on centuries, a carved rock, a tumulus, and all the while we sense in the strobe of light a revelation. At last through the trees, a skin of water rippling with fire. The Black Loch, more ancient than the forest, older even than the rock tombs bound in bracken at its side. Here the people of the parish left gifts as their fathers had, took the cold spring water, while the Minister fumed in his pulpit far below. There's no-one now, nor trace there ever was, but as we look at the surface, flat as glass except for the tiny needling of dragonflies, as we listen to the silence behind the song of lovesick birds, it is easy to imagine a presence that long predates our trying to call the world our own. What would you name it? Not some red brick god, nor love, nor death, nor any currency of ours. It is divine context.

Poems by Jim C Wilson, Diana Hendry, Michael Pedersen & Patricia Ace

The Hunchback At The Bar

BY JIM C WILSON

Hunch? Hump? He's sure it's more a curve,
a rise. And with his roomy anorak, well,
who would ever notice? Another large gin,
and half-smile for the barmaid; big girl,
she is, and him only four-feet-eleven.
And her jeans are so tight that's he's sure
they must hurt. He averts his eyes,
and fingers his tie. Perfect, in the mirror.
The loud boys barge past but he never stirs –
or complains – it's good just to be there,
mixing with folk. He likes to hear the chat,
the deals, the arguments and laughter. Sometimes
he nods or shakes his head, takes a point of view.
His shoes almost sparkle; his suit is neat,
it's made-to-measure. He bathes twice a day
(at least), meaning to make the best impression.
Some night he'll talk with a willowy girl,
inhale the scent of her new-washed hair.
He'll stare into her confident eyes, escort
her back to his immaculate flat –
then enfolding him close with her long lithe arms,
she'll not even notice his hump, the curve.
Sweat glows on his forehead, *Excuse me, Miss.*
Has he got the time for one last large gin?

Heatwave

BY DIANA HENDRY

Anything unending we hate,
Anything that seems without mercy,
That requires endurance,
Like this blistering heat in which
The michaelmas daisies
Loll on the path panting for breath,
In which we fill the freezer
With ice cubes, seek shady trees, showers,
Throw off the duvet, bare ourselves.

Anything long-lasting we love,
Anything that asks something of us,
That will endure after us.
The house that comforts us with its longevity,
The tenderness in the kept lace cloth,
Those trees that surely pity us.

News Cast

BY MICHAEL PEDERSEN

Siem Reap is stitched together
with huts and hovels, electrical wires
and bent barbed fencing.

Each day begins to the oily trigger
of a moto-bike ignition, post porridge,
pre the first garish sales pitch.

This 'want to walk' flummoxes Tuk-Tuk
operators flanked by a bride – confused
as cowboys confronted by spacemen.

These red roads come without a welcome,
quickly turn to sloppy clay when damp,
clump, bubble and cook in heat,

forceful as a butcher tenderising meat.
Bees are bigger, beer is cheaper
the coins have absconded for China,

the poor paper is scuffed and over-worked,
like beloved old sneakers. Each evening
conducts its own incongruous symphony

of capricious deeds (fickle as the habits of fish);
and though I end up bug-bitten and perspiring
wildly, taken for a mug and sometimes lonely

I am happy, in this wooden house, reading
a backlog of texts from a brimful list,
so many miles from all your news.

Ugly as old Onion

BY MICHAEL PEDERSEN

Unlike secret lockets, fished out
for afternoon sigh sessions,
a broken heart is public, purulent
as a lather of onion gook
lining the upper-lip;

it can't be coloured over
as pimples are, or oil stains
on frocks – it's transdermic,
seeps through skin

and into hair, looting
with the myriad mites,
devouring our dying parts
like pirates scoff rum.

Gathering

BY PATRICIA ACE

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help.
Psalms 121

Walking on the Knock, aware of my breath and every move I make,
I climb in the footsteps of many forebears – legs drumming atop
a thick crust of ice after the hardest winter anybody can remember.

My feet punch the white like pistons: the body responds – cogs
in a waterwheel; head spinning with oxygen.
My heart thumps in the rhythm of a bodhràn.

Sap rises through soles from its underground store, its vault,
feeds the glow in my belly like whisky.
The hills above Glenturret
picked out in snow against a sky blue as the hackle of a thistle.
The air sharp on my tongue, clean and clear as a dram of malt.

All this I carry like a creel from the shore, a stack of kindling
gathered from the wood, but suddenly light, light now,
the spring of heather under my step until I get to the top and I stop.

Torsa

BY PATRICIA ACE

This is where I want to be, here
where sky meets sea on Atlantic swell

and tidal races flicker and turn
like giant creatures under the sea.

Where a lone grey seal bobs in the bay –
a buoy cut loose –

and a herd of red cows
like beasts of antiquity,

muster and low at our approach,
crowd us like children, so close

we can hear their scissoring jaws,
their pelts on fire in sun on the wane.

Where at night we bank the fire as high
as we dare, read poems to each other

in voices slurred by fresh air,
our tongues, thickened with wine,

stumbling over consonants
singing the vowels.

Where we lie in the lee of a tumbled byre
and let the world blow over us,

the wind and sun and salt water
picking us clean as a bone.

REVIEWS



IN PRAISE OF PAMPHLETS

Arc o Mõns by Christie Williamson
Hansel Cooperative Press
(www.hanselcooperativepress.co.uk)

Figures of Stone by Gerard Rochford
Koo Press (www.koopress.co.uk)

Figure in a Landscape by Anna Crowe
Mariscat Press
(hamishwhyte@btinternet.com)

How to Hug and Other Poems by
Susie Maguire, Mariscat Press
(hamishwhyte@btinternet.com)

**One Bird Flying: Poems from The
Great Road** by Lesley Harrison
Mariscat Press
(hamishwhyte@btinternet.com)

REVIEW BY GREG MALLEY

Are poets and readers – indeed is poetry itself – too in thrall to the book? Why so much emphasis on the glossy paperback collection or anthology? After all, novels (finished and complete novels at any rate) tend to be book-sized but the poem is a far more amorphous creature when it comes to shape and proportion. Poems can squeeze onto postcards, sprawl across subway posters, laze about the pages of a magazine and echo in the sound space of an MP3 download. They can also come together in pamphlets. Less intimidating – and certainly less heavy – than the book, the pamphlet can be idiosyncratic, light on its feet, brash, serious and, as the pamphlets reviewed here so amply demonstrate, fresh and surprising.

I am a speaker neither of Spanish nor Shetlandic and so approached Christie Williamson's translations of Lorca, *Arc o Mõns*, with some trepidation, but the sense of

conviction and sheer brio that suffuses this bilingual collection (as well as a helpful glossary) makes it hard to resist. Some might find the occasional friction between geography and language a little too unsettling, but this is balanced by some wonderfully nuanced and textured diction. The opening lines of the title poem are a case in point:

*A arc o black mõns
oure da still sea
Mi bairns at isna boarn
is shaesting me.*

There's a sense of yearning and desperation in the Shelandic 'shaestin' that the English equivalent, 'chasing' can't match. Throughout the collection Christie Williamson exhibits a finely tuned 'linguistic imagination' in echoing the vigour and earthy lyricism of Lorca's evocations of life in rural Andalucia. This attractive produced pamphlet is enhanced by some intricate and evocative drawings from Diana Leslie. *Arc o Mõns* isn't 'quirky and interesting', it's a bold and serious effort at showing just how successfully poems can cross oceans, paying due respect to Lorca without being cowed by his reputation.

Gerard Rochford's pamphlet *Figures of Stone* is aptly titled. Not only are several of the poems about actual stones of various kinds but he's also interested in the figurative and symbolic resonances of stones and, in particular, the congruence between poetry and stone, between language and silence, and how both poems and stones serve as memorials. Indeed, the sensitive and very practical task of choosing a headstone forms the subject matter of *The Split*:

*We set it at your grave, beside a circle of stones
It waits there for your name and for your dates.*

Elsewhere it is the ambiguity of stones, as metaphor and as material, which draws Rochford's meditative gaze. In *Gaelic Psalms* the rock of the church can oppress as well support, while the digging of a grave in *Funeral at Tigh-na-dig* involves a kind of violence to the earth where the boulders 'lie...scattered/like bones and skulls of war.' There are also, it should be said, some altogether breezier poems to lighten the load of this collection but, in the end, it's Rochford's clear-sighted focus on the earth as a place for dying as well as living that stays in the memory.

Anna Crowe's *Figure In A Landscape* is also a poetry of memorialisation. The poems are responses to the ceramics and paintings of the Mallorcan artist Andreu Maimó, whose work Anna Crowe encountered shortly after the death of her sister. Evidently it is an encounter that has opened a way into thinking and speaking about bereavement. In many of these poems, descriptions of a particular artwork – usually representations of fig trees – evolve into a kind of post mortem dialogue with the lost loved one. For example, fig tree bark is described as holding:

*the shape of the tree
green, still living, with
all your body's tender marks and creases
your sad frown lines
a hollow shape like our mother's
dressmaker's dummy*

Although strong, sometimes painful, feelings are never far from the surface in these poems they are realised in language which knows the value of restraint when it comes to expressing

emotion. I found myself especially drawn to poems which explore memories, as if the particularity of detail were itself an affirmation of and tribute to the life that has passed. *Fig Leaves I* describes the young sisters making:

*daft models in plaster-of-Paris –
Snow White with dwarfs, Humpty Dumpty –
We learned how brittle our world was
how fragile the things we make to love.*

Figure In A Landscape is a small collection of mostly small poems. That it is spacious enough to accommodate the depth and range of feelings bound up with loss is testament to Anna Crowe's craft, and to her humanity.

I was about halfway through Susie Maguire's *How to Hug and Other Poems* and already drafting sentences about how well the deftness of her phrasing, clarity of thought, and formal precision contributed to the comedy of the collection when I came to 'In this gap...' I soon realised that Susie Maguire isn't just a comic poet but a poet with real imaginative and emotional reach; 'The rain is where I am, the rain is where they are not' is as lucid and poignant description of loss as I've come across in a long while. Her ability to seamlessly weld idea, image and phrase is compelling. Take for example her elegiac description of Leonard Maguire:

*clothed in grey-green lichen
of time and wool and beard
holding the smallest roll-up
in the known universe.*

Here the humour enlarges the emotion, makes it all the more human and, come to that, humane. Images as fresh as this engage the reader's senses and feelings. Indeed, the great thing about the poems in this collection is that they're clearly the work of a writer who understands that surfaces are as important as depths. Her poems are sassy, erudite, funny, wise and moving – sometimes all at once. By addressing subjects such as how to dump an imaginary boyfriend, dragon therapy and messages from chameleons, Susie Maguire goes about the serious business of exploring themes such as love, literature, and the nature of the imagination.

The road in question in Lesley Harrison's *One Bird Flying: Poems from The Great Road* is the Silk Road, and it is Mongolian landscapes and people that form the subject matter of the poems. Moreover, a number of these poems 'borrow' the voice of Marco Polo as a kind of meticulous, if spellbound, travel guide. But this collection is much, much more than an elaborate literary conceit. Lesley Harrison is not interested in some vague, lazy evocation of a stereotypical 'mysterious east'. In, for example, *A Woman Makes the Earth*, she explores the world with a precision which verges on the mesmeric:

*A woman makes the earth
flat to hold her tent, her hard feet
pacing out its girth from hub to rim
round in the milky air.*

*Laying out the moons on the grass
she wraps herself in colours
as the ground wrinkles into hills
and sunlight slides towards her.*

Throughout this collection, Lesley Harrison's attention to detail is deft and assured, her language as luminous as the territory it describes. In *Yakut Calendar* a sense of grandeur and intimacy contribute to a superbly realised sense of place:

*The sun burns a hole in the sky.
Now is the birth of all ponies: a foal, tethered to a wheel,
its mother trickling milk into a skin.*

No doubt the fact that Lesley Harrison spent a year in Mongolia has helped make her so sensitive to nuances of landscape and culture, but it's the poems themselves that convince. The American poet Robert Hass once wrote that 'poetry should be able to comprehend the earth.' Lesley Harrison more than meets this demand. In seeing the earth as so richly people, as well as wildly beautiful, she reminds us that it is also our home.

Editor's Note – On 19th May *Arc o Möns* was announced as joint winner of the 2010 Callum Macdonald Memorial Award. Our congratulations go to Christie Williamson (poet), Diana Leslie (illustrator) and to Christine De Luca (editor). Our congratulations also go to the other joint winner, Leonard Mcdermid and Stichill Marigold Press for *And for that minute*, and to the runner-up, Lesley Harrison and Mariscat Press for *One Bird Flying*. ■

Small Expectations

by Donald S Murray

Two Ravens Press

REVIEW BY MANDY HAGGITH

"My parents fed me with so many fish that when I was around eight, I began to grow gills." So begins this small, enchanting book, with the start of a sequence of 'Scenes from Hebridean Boyhood', itself the first of a string of other scenes, and songs, of haunting, romance, domesticity and distance. The book is an archipelago of short proses and poems, clustered into groups as if they are perhaps connected at low tide, and all somewhere off the mainland of Scottish writing, definitely worth exploring.

The protagonist of the first tale becomes a fish, then is starved by his mother and father and used by them as bait. Next he is buried by his malicious parents, out on the moor where he metamorphoses into peat, so they come and dig him up and burn him. The next scene he becomes seaweed, and is used to fertilise the fields. In the final scene, he transcends the hardship meted out to him and takes revenge. I won't spoil it by telling how. It is enough to say that this story sets the themes and tone of the book, revealing Murray as both intrinsically identified with the Hebridean Island of his birth (Lewis) and riven by tension and frustration with it.

The book is drenched in the experience of exile. Donald Murray writes verses and fictions of voluntary removal from the limitations of island life, of people who follow 'the persistent urgency of heart and body's call' to leave home. The book is openly nostalgic, full of brooding on the place left behind but also for a particular time, when the soundtrack was

Elvis Presley, Dusty Springfield, Marvin Gaye. Songs of youth evoke a time of rebellion, of break-out from a community too tightly-knit, looked back on now with a mixture of yearning and irony.

A Hebridean past is painted that is surreal, almost mythic, yet also more than a little ridiculous, with anti-heroes like Martin John Macleod, with his hopeless efforts to unburden himself of unwelcome guests by feeding them exclusively on mackerel, a sad young John sitting in his Hillman Avenger pretending to be driving the highways of America, and ghosts on the ferry from Ullapool to Stornoway who haven't worked out they're dead yet. There are light stories, like what happens when Xanthia MacCrimmon doesn't know the address of the man she loves, so sends a Valentine card to all the John Macleods on the island. There are darker threads too, most poignantly about the loss of the Gaelic language, which 'like grains/ of oats, turnip-seed, split potatoes/ ploughs folded below earth each spring... Yet now croftland lies fallow... The words of English broadcast on the air/find strange new seed-beds on our lips.'

Among the sheep-shears, magic porridge pots and a gutting knife with a mind of its own, there are times when it's tempting to think this is a frivolous collection and to question that we are being asked to suspend our disbelief for the sake of what, exactly? Then along it comes: redemption. The final story loops back to the opening scenes. Revenge and exile has become bitter, but closure is found. I won't spoil it by telling how, but it is an uplifting end, not least because it is accompanied, not by a global pop hit, but by an old Gaelic song. This is a book, at its heart, about the loss and rediscovery of voice. ■

Zero

By Brian McCabe

Polygon (Birlinn)

REVIEW BY STUART B CAMPBELL

A few years ago there was a conversation that went something like:

1st speaker – "What if there was another number,

a number that came between three and four?"

2nd speaker – "But there isn't, there can't be."

1st speaker – "Yes, but suppose a new number was found, what would happen?"

2nd speaker – "Nine would become ten; all the numbers would shift up one, that's all."

1st speaker – "No. What I mean is, what if there was a new number, not a re-naming of the numbers?"

2nd speaker – "But that's not possible!"

1st speaker – "How do we know?"

The first speaker was Brian McCabe, floating an idea he had been mulling over, which has found expression in *Zero* – his fourth collection of poetry, with numbers as its ostensible subject, that must be the frontrunner as far as inventiveness and originality in poetry is concerned.

I'll quote another bit of dialogue:

1st speaker – "No, we'll jump."

2nd speaker – "Like hell we will."

1st speaker – "No, it'll be OK - if the water's deep enough, we don't get squished to death."

That exchange is from the film *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* – before they launched themselves off the cliff into the river. It's that sort of willingness to take the risk of leaping into space, without being certain you'll land ok, I think McCabe has taken with this book. The fact that the poems focus on a subject so apparently concrete as maths revives the question of what constitutes a suitable subject for poetry. It's all very well to answer (theoretically) 'anything', it's quite a different matter to deliberately choose not to write about conventional subjects (like love, or nature) and, in the case of *Zero*, prove it can be done – and be done with so much humanity, wit, humour and depth. These poems go some way in reconciling C P Snow's 'two cultures' debate. This is an exceptional collection; McCabe has given himself a challenge, taken a risk – and if we readers grasp the end of the gun-belt and jump with him (remember the movie), we get to go places we might not otherwise contemplate.

There are three main themes running through the collection, though they emerge at different points within the book's three sections ('Counters', 'Perspectives' and 'Zero'). The most obvious theme McCabe explores is the human interaction with the stuff of numbers. The first poem, 'Counters', narrates a history many readers will be familiar with: from our first encounter with numbers in primary school: counters "Tiddlywinked into the inkwell", through a growing dissent "Soon they'd have us lined up / in columns: Human logarithms / chanting an ugly prayer / to the god of multiplication". It is perhaps McCabe's criticism of how maths was stultifyingly taught (and perhaps still is) that fuels some of these poems: allowing him to ask what "the dunderhead asked / 'Sir, what are maths for?" and which also allows him to provide an answer the teacher couldn't. The playfulness of 'Twin Primes', for instance, expresses a delight in maths that was denied. McCabe's research has influenced the construction of some poems: 'The Undecidables' does linguistically what maths does in equations; in 'Two Infinities' there is the Möbius Strip of "If only the closing date wasn't / the day after the day before / tomorrow". Elsewhere it is in the biographies of the pioneers of mathematics (some familiar like Turing and Napier; others less known such as Poincaré or Brahmagupta) that the humanity behind the theorems is described; all too human in the case of Pythagoras.

The second theme that becomes apparent is that of subversion, both in McCabe's willingness to challenge the strict logic of science and in how numbers are manipulated politically. In 'Seven' he suggests "never mind the claptrap of the Apocalypse / the candlesticks the stars the trumpets" and urges us "Go ahead / count the spots on the common ladybird". 'The Fifth Season', which "stirs / its after-image in our memory" and 'The Seventh Sense', where "the diligent earth / might forget to go on turning" if it did not exist, challenge the reliability of perception. Political machinations are deftly, and nakedly,

described in the brilliantly realised 'Throu': what appears as a government initiative "to help children count beyond three" becomes a complete system of politico-speak: "the rational numbers / and the real numbers may not be / subsets of the complex numbers, / but separate subjects isomorphic to / subsets of the complex numbers". In 'Mow' (a place) the men engaged in the Sisyphean task of cutting the grass down-tools and "very soon there is an exodus / of men from the meadow", including the dog who "cocks his leg at the infinite / and pisses a zero in the grass" – a poem that is to this reader what a beautifully balanced equation is to a mathematician.

An altogether weightier theme, tackled directly in the fine long poem 'Zero', but also evident throughout, places humankind in proportion to the immensity of the cosmos. Both the mathematical and philosophical concepts of chaos theory are addressed. In 'Green Bottles', McCabe wants "the ten to stay ten" but confronts the inevitability that there will be none – a poem of mourning that acknowledges the lack of causality. The latent irrationality of human behaviour, first hinted at in 'Counters', is placed in the context of the primordial void in 'Zero'. Here McCabe's poetry has echoes of the first chapter of John's Gospel or Genesis as he meditates on the pre-existence of nothing, "its halo the crown of that chaos" and how it might "outlive us at last: / implacable, inscrutable to the end".

These poems confound expectations – you might know some of the personalities or concepts, but McCabe's poetics consistently provides an alternative or revised understanding. McCabe's enquiry into maths and mathematical facts extends the poetic vocabulary, but he also reminds us of the extent to which numbers (as words and symbols) are necessarily imbedded in our folklore and shared histories. McCabe demonstrates how it is possible for poetry to step outwith its comfort-zone and provide the reader with an enriching experience. I cannot recommend this collection highly enough. ■

The Ice and Other Stories

By Kenneth Steven

Argyll Publishing

REVIEW BY GREG MALLEY

You only have to glance at the acknowledgements page of Kenneth Steven's new collection of short stories to get the idea that he seems more interested in being read as widely as possible than being discussed and analysed by literary coteries. Stories from *The Ice* have appeared in everything from *The People's Friend* to *The French Review*. In an age when short stories, despite the laudable efforts of dedicated websites as well as magazines like *Northwords Now*, struggle for breathing space, Kenneth Stevens' enterprise and determination are valuable qualities in their own right. The fact that he can write a good short story helps as well.

His principal subject matter in this collection is childhood and his predominant themes are revelation and change, moments when circumstances combine to lay bare the

REVIEWS

► warp and weft of a life. In this respect his stories, like so much modern short fiction, owe a debt to James Joyce's notion of the 'epiphany': the sudden recognition of a truth that a character senses about his or her self or about the world around them. However, these stories push the notion of epiphany beyond the psychological; these are narratives that aspire to the condition of myth. Indeed many have more than a hint of the fairy tale about them, even if the narratives unfold in recognisably human settings. In 'Kilninan', for example, a farmer's self-absorption in seeking wealth leads to anxiety and depression until he learns that the real riches of the land – including its beauty – are gifts to be shared, not gold to be hoarded. In one of the longer stories, 'The Pearl', the greed of a mussel fisherman leads to madness and death, and the journey to redemption is slow and painful, though it is at least possible.

Unsurprisingly, Steven draws on some very elemental – one might say archetypal – imagery to anchor his stories; the moon, the sea, wind, rain, snow, trees, rivers, ice, jewels all proliferate. The trouble with this approach is that the symbolism can, at times, seem rather too blatant and the characters come across as 'types' intended to embody some more general truth about life, rather than flesh and blood human beings with their own particular history. Nonetheless Steven is too keen a craftsman to the let message completely overwhelm the medium. As one might expect from a writer with five collections of poetry to his name, he possesses an eye (and ear) for the telling detail. In 'Cloudberries', for instance, a young girl takes a seat on a train against the direction of travel because it means she can sit 'watching things till they were swallowed in the past'. This is beautifully insightful in the way it captures how the mind makes sense of time and space. A similar deftness of phrasing is evident throughout the book, as is a well-honed command of plot and structure. The long(ish) title story 'The Ice' holds the reader's attention because Kenneth Steven knows that complex narratives are held together though vividly realised individual scenes, whether it be the fragile conviviality of a family Christmas dinner, or the feral joy of walking on a frozen lake. 'Clockwork', especially its opening paragraphs, is a wee gem in terms of its handling of large passages of time, whilst 'The Pearl' moves in and out of different phases of its narrator's troubled life with admirable fluency.

It feels like something of a cliché to say of a book that 'there is something here for everyone' but this is pretty much the case with *The Ice*. Even if you do feel a touch wary of stories which seem a little too obviously concerned about 'Truth' with a capital T, there are others which will grab your attention simply because they make you feel so keenly a sense of place and time. In any event, Kenneth Steven deserves credit for his investment of craft and imagination into the 'humble' short story; it is a genre that deserves a wider readership and it's refreshing to know that Kenneth Steven is making the effort to build one. ■

Late Love & Other Whodunnits

by Diana Hendry

Published by Peterloo Poets and Mariscat Press, pbk. £7.95
ISBN 978 0 946588 480**The Assassination Museum**

by Andy Jackson

Published by Red Squirrel Press
pbk. £6.99
ISBN 978-1-906700-16-4

REVIEW BY MARIO RELICH

Diana Hendry is a well-seasoned poet whose poems often tend to be quite personal about her own life, but with a kind of Mozartian free-spiritedness which enhances experiences we can all share, or at least recognise. Andy Jackson, a younger poet, focuses rather more on the alienating aspects of modern life, with his pulse very much on popular culture. And although they are very different, both display mastery of their craft, and a distinctive voice.

To begin with Hendry, her autobiographical poems in *Late Love* are very much about what the title promises, namely her quest for love, and how she found it, as well as some wry ones about ongoing family relationships. 'Reading in Bed', which begins the collection, is one of the most amusing, and could legitimately be called a sonnet, although an irregular one. It's not just that it's made up of fourteen lines, although these are of irregular length, but that the final six lines, although only starting with the final two words of line 9, 'I lie', clinch the observations in the first eight. Her template was evidently the Spenserian sonnet. However, all these formal aspects are barely noticeable, because the poem is very entertaining. It sets up a situation in which a couple go to bed and start reading, so far so recognisable and possibly very domestic, but the poem is very precise in its observations. Once read, the ritual of couples reading won't look so ordinary, but exceptional in its demonstration that this is one mode of how two people may be happy with each other in a less obvious way than usually imagined.

This poem is followed by 'Late Love', which delicately, yet also with self-deprecating humour, describes the sudden onrush not quite of passion, nor of affection, but an alchemical fusion of both: '... that old quickening/ I thought had died in me. Against/ my own better judgement, I went/ deeper in.' 'Application' has a rather unassuming, and faintly bureaucratic title, but it's actually intensely lyrical, with something of the Song of Solomon to it. The poem also plays wonderfully with the Scots word 'bidie-in', as in the opening and closing refrain of 'O let me be your bidie-in'. Somehow 'bidie-in' sounds more domestic than 'live-in lover', yet Hendry's poem gives the Scots version greater erotic charge than the comparatively banal English version. It's a poem that insists on being read rather than explained.

Other poems, like 'Big Sister's Coming on a Visit' and 'Dear Brother in Law and Love', come across as quirky looks at family, both the poet's, and her partner's. 'Looking for the Dalai Lama' is the most striking of these,

and most humorous. It focuses on parental anxiety about their grown-up children. Their personalities inevitably tend to confound all expectations, not necessarily for the worse, but end up as something quite unexpected. A book by the Dalai Lama, which cannot be found during a son's visit, becomes an emblem for parental sense of bafflement. It ends with a question mark about whether the son with his 'yogic wife, successor to the blonde/ he eloped with to Paris' is any closer to his mother, the clinching line being: 'I miss him. We never found the book'.

Her own versions of the Psalms are thought-provoking and kaleidoscopic in finding new ways of reading them, or getting acquainted with how rich a heritage not just of religious conviction, or moral wisdom, but of great literature they happen to represent. Why be interested only, or exclusively, in haikus and other esoteric forms when the Psalms are there to provide inspiration? Sometimes what's closer to home, or at least what used to be closer to home, might be worth a look, and Hendry does so with her versions of the Psalms. The poem 'Punctuation' is worthy of an exclamation mark. It simultaneously clearly indicates why punctuation is necessary, yet also a warning against those who use it more aggressively, as a weapon. I expect Tom Leonard might find this poem congenial. 'Black Dog' is more sombre. As may be surmised, it is about depression, but the metaphor at its heart is sustained most powerfully, because the dog is also unmistakably a dog, and thereby its unexpected conclusion becomes a kind of beneficial 'snapping out' of depressive gloom: 'Toss him your funny bone/ let him gnaw on that'.

On the whole, though, Hendry's poems testify to a sunny disposition, even if not in the least sentimental, yet shrewdly realistic about the twists and turns of life. Much darker terrain is to be found in Andy Jackson's impressive debut collection, *The Assassination Museum*. The title-poem alludes to the Kennedy assassination museum in Dallas, right inside that infamous School Book Depository Building where Lee Harvey Oswald allegedly shot the President, but at first I thought this was just a figment of Jackson's surreal imagination. It isn't. The poem itself reads like a playfully paranoid vision of how to 'pick off' lonely crypto-fantasists, or bequeath the poem to the poet laureate ('she'll know what to do') if the author 'should die in questionable circumstances'. It's chilly, deadpan funny, and inimitable. The cover of the book itself treats us to an aerial view in technicolor of that building overlooking Dealey Plaza. Like a ghostly palimpsest, the Dallas tragedy is also alluded to in 'Interloper': 'Look! A third camera on the grassy knoll/ but I will not be edited out.' 'Off the Wall' has rap-like rhythms and rhymes, a poem about 'sex codified in sound', and dance crazes of the past, such as the Slosh and the Locomotion, winding down bathetically to 'that corroborree of perfection/ they call the hokey cokey'.

'Grave Green', a grim poem about an accidental drowning, contains stark, bleakly resonant images like the following: 'a crucifix of reeds above the spot/ where he went under

for the last time'. And there is really nothing comforting about it despite the possibly ironic religious overtones. 'Djinn' is remarkable for its lines about Edith Piaf's 'shredded voice', and 'her tremolo the rise and fall/ of empires'. The djinn itself, whose voice controls the poem, mocks human endeavour: 'We are not slaves to your command,/ but flies in amber of the past.' It compares most interestingly with 'Cheeky Devil', a poem about a decidedly less supernatural, but rather anti-social phenomenon. The poem is reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon riddle poems, in which the voice tells us not who it is, but what others call it, and what it's known for. 'Cheeky Devil' begins with 'I am public enemy number one', its gloating voice suggested in the following lines: 'I shout, dance on benches/ scuffle on civic furniture'. It's a poem which certainly engages with the reader's own social and possibly political attitudes. Another poem, 'Wrong Time, Wrong Species', takes on the voice of one who claims that 'deep down, subconsciously/ subcutaneously/ I was born a Dalek'.

One of the finest poems is 'Jennie Lee by Robert Capa'. It celebrates the great Labour activist and politician Jennie Lee herself, the miners' culture in Fife, and photography as a method of social critique. It concludes with sentiments about Capa, representing artists in general, whether poets or photographers, which are deeply unfashionable at present, and yet likely to return with a vengeance:

... His art
is in the truth, his propaganda
is the likeness of a better world
already here, if we could only see
its levelling of light and dark,
its socialism of the eye.

Jackson's collection, in fact, includes black-and-white photographs, by Catia Montagna, of evanescent, almost anonymous city scenes, in which something of a 'socialism of the eye' seems evident.

Two poems, 'New World Order' and 'The Gymnast', tell us much about what Jackson attempts to do in his poetry, in a way they are like aesthetic manifestoes. 'New World Order' plays with the paradox of how the subjective personality relates to the objective reality revealed by science, and warns that 'Those of us who have a way with words/ can sometimes look so hard we miss it --', whereby 'it' can simply be 'running just to feel the wind', at the end of the poem, 'leaving us, who want each life to be a poem,/ wordless when it matters most'. 'The Gymnast' explores questions of balance and gravity, both in physical terms, and more abstract ones. To adapt some of his lines, for Jackson writing poetry entails striking 'a deal with gravity', and then pushing it at its margins. His quatrain 'Dysfunctional' illustrates such gravity-defying qualities. It ends with the following deflation of expectation:

the woman said, but sex should be a joyful symphony.
Too right, he thought. Pathetic. Unfinished.

But Jackson's witty lines of dialogue transform such an ostensibly downbeat ending into a triumph of verse musicality. ■

CONTRIBUTOR'S BIOGRAPHIES

Patricia Ace's chapbook, *First Blood*, has nearly sold out. *Gathering* was Second Runner Up in The Gathering 2009 Poetry Competition and *Torsa* was Commended by the Poet Laureate in the Poetry on the Lake Competition, 2009.

Charles Bennett is Field Chair in English and Programme Leader for the BA in Creative Writing at the University of Northampton. In 2007, Enitharmon published his second collection, *How to Make a Woman Out of Water*.

Alan Bissett is a writer and performer. His most recent book is *Death of a Ladies Man. The Moira Monologues* will run at the National Library of Scotland this August.

Lorna Bruce teaches English at Larbert High School. She was a prize-winner in the 2008 Bridport Short Story Competition.

John Burns is a poet and short story writer. He teaches English and Tai Chi, and is the author of books on Neil Gunn and on Bob Dylan.

Gerry Cambridge is a poet, photographer and editor whose books include *'Nothing But Heather!': Scottish Nature in Poems, Photographs and Prose, Madame Fi Fi's Farewell*, and *Aves*, a book of prose poems about wild birds. He edits The Dark Horse. His website is at: www.gerrycambridge.com

Stuart B Campbell lives in Portsoy on the Moray coast. His new collection of poetry *In Defence of Protozoans* is forthcoming from Dionysia Press early next year.

Helen Forbes is a solicitor, living in Inverness. Her writing is set mainly in the Highlands and Islands. She has recently completed a novel set in 18th century St Kilda.

Graham Fulton lives in Paisley. His collections include *Humouring the Iron Bar Man*, *This, Knights of the Lower Floors, Ritual Soup and other liquids, twenty three umbrellas* and *Pocket Fugues*.

Stephanie Green is of Irish/English parentage, born in Sussex and living in Edinburgh since 2000. She received a SAC New Writers' Bursary in 2007 and recently another bursary to fund time in Shetland towards her first poetry collection.

Mandy Haggith lives in Assynt and writes in a shed with a tree-top view. In 2009, her novel *The Last Bear* won the Robin Jenkins Literary Prize for environmental writing.

Kerry Hardie has published two novels with Harper Collins and five books of poetry with the Gallery Press. *A Selected* is due in February 2011 from the Gallery Press [Ireland] and *Bloodaxe* [U.K.]

K. Henderson is an artist and writer who lives in Perthshire. A comprehensive archive of this art and writing practice may be found at www.artcyclescotland.wordpress.com

Diana Hendry's third poetry collection is *Late Love & Other Whodunnits*. She has also published pamphlets, short stories and books for children including the Whitbread Award winning *Harvey Angell*. She is a Royal Literary Fund Fellow attached to Edinburgh University.

Andy Jackson is from Manchester but has lived in Fife for nearly twenty years. His debut collection *The Assassination Museum* was published in March 2010 by Red Squirrel Press.

John Jennett is a graduate of Glasgow University's Creative Writing program and winner of the 2010 Sceptre Prize. His current work is inspired by the landscape and culture of the Hebrides. Further details at www.johnjennett.com

Hugh McMillan has published five full collections of poetry, the latest being *The Lost Garden* (Roncadora Press 2010) as well as several prize winning pamphlets. He lives in Penpont in Dumfries and Galloway.

Moira McPartlin's work has featured in many national publications. She is currently seeking a publisher for her

novel *The Incomers*. Moira lives in Stirlingshire with her husband.

Gordon Meade lives in St Monans, Fife. His most recent poetry collection is *The Private Zoo* with Arrowhead Press. For the last two years he has been one of the Royal Literary Fund's Writing Fellows at the University of Dundee.

Donald S Murray is a weaver's son from Ness, Isle of Lewis. His most recent book is *Small Expectations* (Two Ravens Press). His next book, *And On This Rock* about the lives of the Italian prisoners-of-war in Orkney is due out from Birlinn in October.

Michael Pedersen is a 25 year old poet of Scottish stock. His inaugural chapbook *Part-Truths* (Koo Press) was a Poetry Book Society Pamphlet Choice and a 2010 Callum MacDonald Memorial Award finalist.

Kristin Pedroja is a writer and editor originally from Wichita, Kansas. She is now based in Inverness. Kristin is a founder of the Highland Literary Salon.

Mario Relich lives in Edinburgh and is Secretary of the Poetry Association of Scotland.

Karin Slater is a 26 year old creative writing graduate based on the Isle of Lewis, currently grafting away on an allotment and building a poetry collection.

Kenneth Steven lives in Dunkeld in Highland Perthshire; he's a poet, translator and children's author. His collection of short fiction, *The Ice and other stories*, appeared from Argyll in 2010.

Andrew Stott lives, writes and works in Edinburgh. He has had a number of his short stories published and is working on his first novel.

Jim C Wilson's three poetry collections are *The Loutra Hotel, Cellos In Hell* and *Paper Run*. He has taught Poetry In Practice sessions at Edinburgh University since 1994. Contact: jcw.verse@live.co.uk

Postscripts

Alan Riach has been in touch to correct an error in his review of The Poems of Norman MacCaig (Northwords Now 14). Here's what Alan has to say:

In my review of Norman MacCaig's Poems I referred to the poem 'Highland Ceilidh' in which MacCaig praises the singing of a certain 'Ishbel' and I mistakenly wrote that this was the poet's wife. I am informed that in fact this was not Isobel, his wife, but Ishbel MacAskill, the marvellous Gaelic singer with whom I had the privilege and delight of performing at the Harris Arts Festival in 2009. I should have known, and would like to note the correction. The point about the poem stands, though: in an atmosphere of good company, laughter, conversation and song, what MacCaig remembers most are the two marriages he has witnessed: 'of the anguish and the beauty / of the singer and the song.' The syntactic elision of those lines is wonderful – the second 'of' linking not only 'singer' and 'song' but also the preceding line with what follows, so grammatically there are three marriages: (1) of anguish and beauty; (2) of singer and song; and (3) of anguish and beauty with singer and song (the abstract terms with the human being and her actual expression, her singing). But there are only three marriages in the poem, not four.

On the subject of Norman MacCaig generally, Top Left Corner and Hi-Arts have organised a Norman MacCaig Centenary Poetry Competition. For details about this and other MacCaig-related events visit www.topleftcorner.org.

On the subject of Scottish Poets generally, this year's Tarskavaig Fèis on Skye features the work of Burns' contemporary, Iain MacMhurchaidh (John MacRae). Mairi Sine Campbell will introduce his songs and poems. For a full programme of events visit: www.seall.co.uk. ■

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