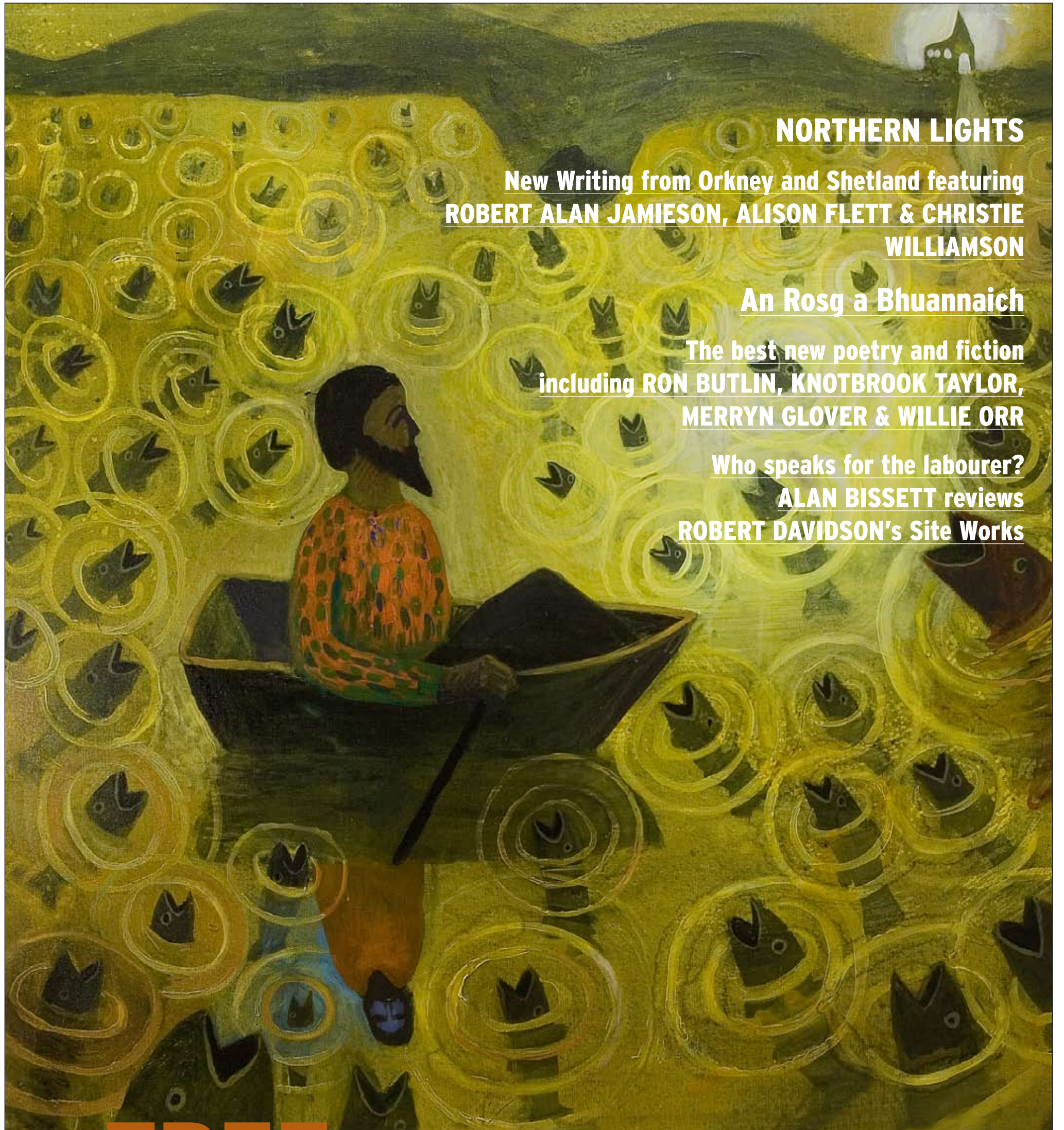


Northwords **Now**

Issue 18

Summer 2011



NORTHERN LIGHTS

**New Writing from Orkney and Shetland featuring
ROBERT ALAN JAMIESON, ALISON FLETT & CHRISTIE
WILLIAMSON**

An Rosg a Bhuannaich

**The best new poetry and fiction
including RON BUTLIN, KNOTBROOK TAYLOR,
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**Who speaks for the labourer?
ALAN BISSETT reviews
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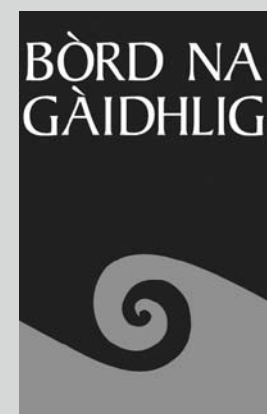
The fee for individual 'home-delivery' is £6 for 3 issues, cheques payable to 'Northwords'.

Submissions to the magazine are welcome. They can be in Gaelic, English and any local variants. They should be sent to the postal address - see above. Unsolicited e-mail attachments will not be opened. The material should be typed on A4 paper. Contact details and SAE should be included. We cannot return work that has no SAE. **Copyright** remains with the author.

The next issue is planned for late November 2011

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EDITORIAL

IT'S A REAL pleasure to begin this editorial on a celebratory note. On page 6 of this issue you will find the winning short story and flash fiction from Northwords Now's first Gaelic fiction competition. Our congratulations go to Seonaidh Charity and Ann Cameron MacRae for producing such distinctive and high quality work. I also want to pay tribute to the runners up - Alison Lang, Dòmhnall Iain MacDonald, Cassie Smith-Christmas and Calum Macleòid - and indeed everybody who entered the competition. It's good to know that the appetite for writing thrives so strongly.

There are also good reasons to be optimistic about the future of Gaelic writing when it comes to younger writers. I'm proud to publish the winning poem from the Sorley MacLean Poetry Competition, which was open to secondary school pupils throughout Scotland. Not only can you read Owen Sutcliffe's 'Beul an Latha' on page 5, you can

hear his poem, along with other prize-winning and highly commended poems from the competition, by visiting the Northwords Now website: www.northwordsnow.co.uk

Indeed the Northwords Now website is proving itself a real boon in broadcasting the strength and diversity of Scotland's literary voices. Along with Gaelic poetry you can listen to the crisp, earthy tang of Christie Williamson's Shetland lyrics and the haunting, incantatory poetry of J.L Williams, an American poet happily domiciled in Scotland.

Finally I want to thank everybody who has taken part in our readership survey and to make a small plea for others to do so, online, at www.northwordsnow.co.uk/survey

It only takes a couple of minutes to complete the survey form and you'll be helping to shape the character of the magazine as well as make sure that we reach as many readers as we can. ■

CHRIS POWICI, EDITOR

Edinburgh Poems by Ron Butlin

The Magicians of Edinburgh

Our Late Medieval cobbled-together city of kirkyards, cathedrals,
howffs, castles, closes, courts, vennels and wynds,
hay markets, grass markets, flesh markets
managed to hit the twenty-first century
- running!

How come?

How come our rudely interrupted parliament makes up for lost time by talking more sense
(or just talking more) than ever before?
How come trams and pavement tables are reclaiming our streets?
How come there's shopping 24/7, pubbing, clubbing and all-night kebabs?
Wall-to-wall festivals? Bus lanes and wheelie bins? The Hogmanay Party?

Did a sorcerer step out of a book of old Scottish Folk Tales,
take a 35 in from the airport, flash his Day-Saver Ticket,
ending up in the Southside at no extra cost?
Did seventies' Edinburgh shock him *so* much?
- the boarded up windows, the litter, graffiti,
the horses hauling themselves and their carts out on their rounds,
their breath clouding the cold morning air, and Sir Sean Himself
riding high on the milk crates?
Did one wave of a corporate wand turn soot-blackened tenements
and windowless pubs into these glass-
and-mirror palaces? (Banks, insurance, law and pensions
- for who else retains sorcerers these days?)

For magic happens daily on the Bridges, on George Street,
in Tollcross - a nod from a stranger, an occasional smile,
a greeting, a quick drink with a friend I've bumped into.
From my Newington flat the Forth's a Mediterranean blue,
there are faraway hills I can sometimes almost touch . . .
Most of all, when I stand at the top of the Mound, perfectly positioned
between God's Law and Man's (the Kirk to my left,
the Bank to my right) I see our city shaped by the sky
and the sky by our city - and heaven itself seems possible then,
if only for a moment, and if only I would let it.

Tenement City. Corporate City. Capital City. Festival City.
World Heritage City, UNESCO City of Literature.

We don't need street maps or SatNav to find where our friends live
(I never leave home, but I meet someone I know).
Together, we are the magicians and we make the city.

All Edinburgh is ours - and it's *personal!*

Ten Years On

Several centuries ago Scotland found itself drawn
into someone else's slipstream.
Our history shut down.

We breathed dead air. Whole villages collapsed into rubble,
fields wasted to empty moorland, mountains retreated
to wrap themselves in cloud, lochs swallowed down curses
and their waters turned black.
Families were split, clans broken up
and the human wreckage scattered
to the winds. What was left was still a country,
but only just.

In the last year of the last millennium we summoned up our strength
- we sidestepped the slipstream.
We kick-started our history.

Ten years on it's time to get together, all of us -
the families, the clans, the country.
Time to take a good hard look at what we've been through -
at the cost paid by generation after generation
of people just like us.

It's time to take a good hard look at who we really are.

Absolution on the Edinburgh City Bypass

This is the *rush* hour? - this slow-moving procession of men and women seated
as if in sedan chairs carried by invisible bearers?

Well, our bearers have walked off and left us. We're stuck.
Gridlocked in the middle of nowhere between the Lasswade
and Straiton turn-offs. Where have they gone to?
Have they headed for the hills? Migrated? Taken over our jobs, our wives
and our homes? Hijacked our evenings and weekends?
Have they re-planned the slip roads so we go round and
round in circles? Re-tilted the Earth so the tides are always against us?
One thing's for sure - they've reset its rotation. One minute's been slowed down
to an hour and that hour to a year. There'll be no tomorrow between Lasswade
and Straiton, not in our lifetime.

We'll watch the stars re-pattern themselves, cancelling out our birth.
Some Divine Hand or other will do the rest - one clean sweep,
and we're gone. An absolution of sorts.

Until that moment comes, however, we're stranded here, at a standstill,
struggling to remember who we are and where we're going. But we will
remember - like it or not, we always do.
Then, with a sudden shudder that catches us unawares,
we'll move forward half a metre,
half a metre nearer home.

In the Footsteps of Sorley

YOUNG GAELIC POETS from across Scotland have been putting pen to paper composing new poems as part of a competition intended to help celebrate the centenary of the birth of Sorley MacLean. The competition was run by Urras Shomhairle (The Sorley MacLean Trust) in association with Comunn na Gàidhlig, and was open to secondary school pupils from throughout Scotland. Northwords Now is

delighted to publish the winning entry from Owen Sutcliffe, along with thoughts on teaching Sorley Maclean's work from Catriona MacLean at Wallace High School in Stirling. You can also hear Owen's poem, along with several of the other prize-winning and highly commended poems from the competition by visiting the Northwords Now website at northwordsnow.co.uk.



The Third Battle Of Ypres (Passchendaele) 31 July - 10 November 1917
by permission of The Imperial War Museum (Image Q 3014)

Enduring Passions - Teaching the Poetry of Sorley MacLean

BY CATRIONA MACLEAN

THE MAIN REASON I choose to teach the work of Sorley MacLean to young people who study in the Gaelic medium is that I constantly try to find literature that is engaging. The particular class that I had at that time consisted of a very intelligent group of young people whose interest in historical and political matters could easily be sparked. I found MacLean's politics juxtaposed against his fascinating and complex relationships were themes that inspired me as a student and continue to allow me to present texts to young people that hold a valid place in their lives today.

The knowledge and awareness of politics that the young people whom I teach have is inspiring and they keenly identified with the constant struggle that MacLean has with his competing priorities of Scottish nationalism and desire to fight fascism in Europe. The dichotomies presented in two of the pieces that

we studied 'An Roghainn' ('The Choice') and 'Gaoir na h-Eòrpa' ('Europe's Cry'), both of which are contained in the Dàin do Eimhir anthology, illustrate MacLean's turmoil. The pupils explored MacLean's dilemmas and his regrets that neither of his deepest ambitions could be fulfilled; his inability to accomplish what he viewed as his political duty and his failure to secure the 'beithir-theine ghràidh' ('thunderbolt of love').

It was a fortunate coincidence that 2011 marks 100 years since the poet's birth and this made it all the more important for the pupils to acknowledge and celebrate his work. The pupils had attended Timothy Neat's "Hallaiig" Commemoration at the Tolbooth in Stirling and this was a great opportunity for them to observe how MacLean's work contextualises the timeless aspect of struggle with identity on a European and global scale, which generation of Scots have debated. ■

Beul an Latha

BY OWEN SUTCLIFFE

'S e 'n oidhche a th' ann.
Sùilean nan rionnagan a' sgrùdadh na talmhainn.
Amharasach.
Tàireil.
Truasail.
Foighidneach, a' coimhead, gun bheachd,
Air na h-argamaidean a tha dol air adhart,
Eadar na daoine,
A' sabaid thairis an telefòn,
Fhad 's a than a balaich a' sabaid le gunnaichean.

'S e beul and latha a th' ann.
Solas dearg na grèine a' bàthadh an t-saoghail ann am fuil.
Brèagha.
Eagalach.
Sgreateaidh.
Tha sinn nar suidhe nar prìosan puill,
Le grèim làidir air ar gunnaichean.
Tha iad mar leanabhan nar làmhan.
Àlainn.

'S e meadhan na maidne a th' ann.
Cupa nam làmhan, le boinneagan uisge na bhroinn.
Salach.
Iongantach.
Air chrith.
'S e mo làmhan as coireach,
Chan eil iad idir aig fois, a' gluasad còmhla ri mo chridhe.
Gun stad.
'S ann faisg a tha an t-àm.
A bhith a' faireachdainn peilear? Neo ciont.

'S e am feasgar a th' ann.
Thàinig an duine thugainn mionaid air ais, a' bruidhinn gu socair.
Còir.
Tuigseach.
Aineolach.
Chan eil easan air leanabh fhaireachdainn na bheatha.
Na shuidhe san t-saoghal bheag a tha e air a chur ri chèile,
Le pìosan paiper agus breugan.
Tha sinne dìreach nar gainmheach na làmhan.
Nar h-àireamhan.

A' chiad dhuine thairis.
Tha mi air chall am measg mhiltean de chuileagan.
A' sgiathalaich a-steach nar cuirp.
Cuileagan meatailt.
Tha m' fhèileadh dearg agus gorm.
Tha na h-iseanan sàmhach. Tha na cuileagan fuaimeil.
Tha mi sgìth.

Bàrdachd Ùr

Los ricos tambien lloran

PÀDRAIG MACAOIDH

Air blàr eadar an Ruis 's Abkhazia,
seanailear na sheasamh na aonar
ann an ceòlraidh nan steòrn, mar shimilear
gun taigh. Air Tbh tha a shaighdearan a' coimhead
mhuncaidhean flathail gan cumail fhèin beò
ann an lònintean bhòlcanach Seapain –
am fionnadh fiuch gan còmhdach mar ròban,
fuil teas dearg nan dòrn –
agus iad a' fuireach air Forbidden Planet,
Kojak agus *Los ricos tambien lloran*.

Do Theaghlach an Alba

MÀIRI NICGUMARAID

Aig an taigh
shuidheadh càirdean nan ceithir àrdean
ag aithris a' chàirdeis eatorra
's na thriall air ruithe cosnaidh
gu bailtean mòr mar Ghlaschu,
ag ainmeachadh a chèil'
air a chèil'
's orra fhèin
fhad 's a sheasadh
calpa cànan ris;
's nuair nach seasadh
chumadh iad fhathast
an càrdeas a' dol
ged nach rachadh a-mach
gach ginealach
's gus nach ainmnicheadh iad
ach glè bheag
air glè bheag.

An-diugh an seo
an dìleab caillt'
às aonais
às-ùrachd cleachdaidh.

Na ghlèidh sibh fèin
's às Eirinn 'ibh
ur lorgan beanaidh
air na bh' agaibh ann?
Air na lean o na thriall
bho thall gu bhos
's air an los
on tug thu de chiall?

'S e mo dhòchas gun ghlèidh
ged nach b' ann ach gur ann
air sgàth 's
a' bhlàths
a bhuilich iad ort.

Dàn

DÒMHNALL S. MOIREACH

Cha do thog e speal a-riamh
ach corran
a chùm e crùbadh
airson bliadhnaichean
ann an coirce neo feur.
A' cumail oir is bàrr
cho geur ri caol-ghealach
neo comharraidhan a bha e cur
timcheall faclan Marx.
*'S toil le uachdaran, man daoine eile,
a' buain far nach do chuir iad sìol.'*
Agus òrd cuideachd
a bha às aonais spot neo smal,
air a pheantadh òr
cho soilleir ris a h-uile càil
a thuirt
fiosaiche na feusaig liath.
*'Dhèanadh duine beairteach rud sam bith
airson duine bochd
ach cromadh sìos bho dhruim.'*
Agus phaisg e iad gu lèir
an searbhadair cho dearg
ri fhuil a chaidh a dhòrtadh
anns an Spàinn
o chionn leth-cheud bliadhna air ais.
Tubhailte a thug
a nighean leatha gu Benidorm
aon samhradh
airson a laigh' air fad
air tràigh,
'S i tilleadh dhachaigh
donn ri meirg
a tha an-diugh a' cruinneachadh
air òrd 's an corran
a chleachd a bhith na dhòrn.
*'Bidh eachdraidh a' tachairt dà thuras –
a' chiad uair mar traidseadaidh,
a-rithist mar fealla-dhà.'*

Leanabachd a' Cho-ghleusaiche

CRISDEAN MACILLEBHÀIN

Bho nach do shoirbhich le athair na ghnòthach,
fhuair e cosnadh mar neach bhiodh a' sìor chumail fair'
air a' chlachan, 's a bheireadh caismeachd, nan robh
tein' a' tòiseachadh an taigh air choreigin dam b' urrainn
sgaoileadh, 's a' choimhearsnachd gu lèir a mhilleadh.
Uime sin, chaidh esan is a bhean òg a dh'fhuireach
ann an stiopall na h-eaglaise, dà cheud cheum
's seachd air fhichead gan sgaradh bhon ùrlar chian,
gun aon nàbaidh aca ach an clag mòr, teangach
a b' fheudar da athair a chumail an òrdugh cuideachd.
B' ann an sin a rugadh e. Chaidh a chiad bhliadhnaichean seachad

mar gur eun beag san nead a bh' ann, nach ionnsaichheadh
itealaich a chaoidh, 's nach gabhadh os làimh na aonar
teàrnadh fada nan iomadh cheum gus an robh e, ach beag,
na dheugair. Aig amannan, co-dhiù, dh'fhairicheadh esan
e fhèin mar fhuamhair, a chionn 's gun robh an saoghal
ris a bha e buntainn (ach cha robh e cinnteach mu dheidhinn sin)

a' coimhead anabarrach beag. Cha robh anns na daoine
ach spuaicean meanbha nan ruith an siud 's an seo, ioma-dhatht'
uaireannan, a' tighinn le chèile air latha na margaide
ann am pàtranan a bha coltach (bhiodh e smaointinn,
's e na fhear inbheach, mòran bhliadhnaichean na dhèidh,) ris
na notaichean a bhiodh e cruinneachadh 's a' sgaoileadh
air còig loidhneachan clàr-chiùil. Bhiodh aislingean
iongantach aige. Aon oidhche bhruadair e gur cas an fhuamhair
a bh' anns an stiopall, is thòisich e a' coiseachd thar nam frìth,
a dh'ionnsaigh nam beann. Bha an clag 's na staidhrichean
nam bucallan air a bhrògan, 's iad a' sìor dèanamh
gleadhraich is gliongartaich. Oidhch' eile, 's e na chadal,
chreid e gur teang' a' chluig a bha san stiopall. Bha i
stèidhichte san ùir, ach a' tulgadh an siud 's an seo,
mar gum b' ann an crith-thalmhainn a bhitheadh,
le ruithim suidhichte, fòirneartach, gun fhios
cò bha a' tarraing 's a' slaodadh an ròpa. Bha esan
a' feitheamh fo àmhghair air a' mhòmaid sam buaileadh
an teanga a' mheatailt, le co-sheirm cho bodharach
's gun caillte gach mothachadh 's reusan an ath-fhuaim
na stairirich'. Ach b' àbhaist dhaibh fantainn nan càirdean,
an clag is am balach. B' urrainn dha sònrachadh,
bho chàileachd a sheirm anns a' mhadainn, an robh
an sneachda air tighinn mar-thà, no am bitheadh e ann,
am biodh an là ceòthach, no an sileadh driùchd cheanalt' a-mhàin.
Bha an t-adhar na chluais nach do mhothaich riamh air a' cheart dhòigh
do shearmon a' chluig. Nuair a dh'fhàs e na cho-ghleusaich' ainmeil,
bha e gu leòr a bhith ruamhar air ais gus a leanabachd chèn,
cuimhneachadh air a' chlag, ga chur mu a cheann na smaointean
mar gur ad a bh' ann, neo-chronail, ceòlmhor - is fhuair e air ball
gach còisir 's co-chòrdadh bha dhìth air, 's an obair aig' coileant'.

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DH'FHALBH GLAG AN dorais a-rithist agus dh'èirich a bhean gu h-obann le osnadh bheag, àrd. Choisich i gu leibideach, mar chearc phluideach shaoil e, a dh'ionnsaigh an dorais-aghaidh. Thill i, le fear a bha fuireach a-bhon an rathad agus a theaghlach (bean agus triùir mhac) air a sàil. Thàinig iad a-steach gu mì-shocrach agus chruinnich iad mun cuairt air mar gum b' e tein-èibhinn a bh' ann, agus iad a' campadh a-muigh air na Fèithean. "Bliadhna mhath ùr, a Dhanaidh!" dh'èigh am fear.

Sheirm an glag aon uair eile. 'Mhic an donais', thuirt e na cheann. Thòisich e air teine a thogail, 's e a' sìneadh a-mach bhon t-seithear-chuibhle gu corrach, a' dol sìos, a-mach is suas

mar chrann, a' cur maide às dèidh maide bhon a' pheile air muin a' phàipeir-naidheachd sgrògaich. Bha na balaich ga choimhead, 's an sùilean a' leantainn gach pìos fiodha, agus a làmhnan a bha rocach le bliadhnaichean an dubh-chosnadh: obair an fhearainn, togail an taighe san robh iad an-dràsta fhèin, poll goirt nan trainnseachan, giùlan ròpan garbha, troma, saillte agus cladhach thuill do na caoraich a chailleadh e gach geamhradh. Mu dheireadh thall bha e deiseil is a' dhrum a' gnùsadaich, sgìth agus lùbach, is e a' strì ri a cholann a chrannadh air ais dhan chathair a bha an-còmhnaidh a' giùlan a chuideim sna làithean a bha seo. Ghoirtich e a chas nuair a bha e ag obair aig muir. Ged a b' urrainn dha a cleachdadh airson grunn bhliadhnaichean às dèidh sin, b' fheudar dhaibh a toirt dheth mu dheireadh thall.

Thionndaidh e chun a' choitheanail a bh' air a chùlaibh, 's an dithis, boireannach is fear, (nach robh a' fuireach ri chèile ach a bha an-còmhnaidh ann an cuideachd a chèile) air a thighinn dhan a' choinneimh. Chuimhnich e air an fhear nuair a bha e na b' òige, is e cho diùid, sàmhach ach a bha an-còmhnaidh ri dibhearsain. Bha e riamh mar sin, 's tha fhathast shaoil e.

Bha aon de na balaich a' gabhail puirt air

an fhidheall. Bha e math, smaoinich e ris fhèin ach b' fheàrr leis nam biodh falt na bu ghiorra air. Cha bhiodh falt mar sin air balach nuair a bha e fhèin òg, ach air ceàrd. Thòisich an còmhradh a-rithist. Bha a shùilean ri spleuchdadh gu lom air meadhan an ùrlair. Thog e bleideagan den chòmhradh: 'sanasan-rathaid' agus 'coigrich' agus 'sgoiltean'. Bha iad ri bidsigeadh mun bhàrraisg ris an do choinnich iad an latha roimhe aig an robh taigh-samhraidh san sgìre is e a' dèanamh fanaid air a' Ghàidhlig. A rèir na thog e, bha an duine, Stuart, bha e smaointeachdainn, a' breithneachadh air pàrantan a bha air an cuid chloinne a chur dhan bhun-sgoil Ghàidhlig... bha iad air bacadh a chur orra, gan cumail air ais o shaoghal an latha an-diugh... carson nach ionnsaicheadh iad cànan nan Sìonach no nan Spàinnteach? Bhiodh e fada na b' fheumaile nan robh cànan mar sin aca, cànan a bhruidhneadh mòran sluagh agus a bha adhartach, is mar sin air adhart. Chuir seo dragh air. Bha a' Ghàidhlig aige bhon a' ghlùn 's cha do rinn e cron air a-riamh, bu docha leis an cànan, bha e nàdarra dha aig aon àm, is bha na h-òrain cho tlachdmhor an coimeas ri èigheach riaghach an latha an-diugh. Chuimhnich e air òige, 's mar a bha a' choimhearsnachd air atharrachadh.

Thill iad gu bruidhinn mu shanasan. Sanasan dà-chànanach, nach neònach an smuain? Dh'innis am fear diùid gu h-ain-deònach mu athair Dhanaidh agus nuair a chaidh an rathad a dhèanamh an toiseach, mar a bhiodh e a' dol air feadh an rathaid le a bhara is spaid a' càradh nan toll. 'S bha iad a-nis airson a dhèanamh na mhòr-rathad, chuimhnich e gu sàmhach. Cha do dh'fhaighnich iad dhàsan mu dheidhinn athar, is ghluais an deasbad gu rudeigin co-cheangailte ris an t.bh. agus freeview. Fhuair e litir mu dheidhinn a' freeview an t-seachdain sa chaidh. Bha rudan ùra daonnan a' togail ceann. Cha robh e a' tuigsinn na litreach ceart co-dhiù, bha a chomas leughaidh robach agus a shùilean ceòthach. Dreiseag às dèidh seo 'bhris' an t.bh. Thòisich e bhith ag èisteachd ris an rèidio a-rithist na àite. Cha b' e ach sgudal a bh' air an t.bh. co-dhiù.

Bha a bhean fhathast a' bruidhinn gun sgar, a smiogaid mar ghob circe a' glocail, a' cur às a corp mu dheidhinn a' mhinistear ùir à Nirribhidh. Cha robh e a' cluinntinn gu dè dìreach a bha i ag ràdh, ach bha deagh bheachd aige a dh'aindeoin sin: 'nach neònach a bhlas-chainnt?' agus 'chan eil e cho math air seinn idir'. Smaoinich e air a cho-ogha a bha na shalmadair uair san eaglais, ach dh'fhalbh esan sa chogadh, a bheul agus amhaich cam agus rag, glacte leis a' bhàs, gun fhuaim ach bragadh nam peilearan. Ach, bhiodh am ministear ùr a' seinn, cha b' ann seinn ach greòcail is an Caimbeulach ri tùirneanach air meuran plastaig a' mheur-chlàir.

Chùm an ceòl a' dol, 's na balaich uile a' gabhail cothrom air seinn is ceòl na pìoba is an còrr, is am fear diùid agus a charaid ri seachas mu sheann daoine is sinnsearachd

na sgìre - an fheadhainn a bha fhathast ann, an fheadhainn a dh'fhalbh agus a chaochail, agus an fheadhainn a bha an dùil ri falbh bhon sgìre is mar sin. Agus an uair sin, chlisg e le èigheachd an fhir ri a thaobh, "Nach gabh thu sibh òran thu fhèin, a Dhanaidh?". "Oh", thuirt e le beagan de ghàire air aodann, "Dh'fhalbh na làithean sin 'ille, tha e cho doirbh dhomh fiù 's bruidhinn a-nis, 's gu bheil eagal orm òran a ghabhail air eagal 's gum marbh e mi!". Chaidh lachan gàire mun cuairt. Nam biodh iad air faighneachd dha a-rithist, bhiodh e air òran a ghabhail, ach cha do dh'fhaighnich.

Thòisich iad air bruidhinn mu dheidhinn na sgoile a-rithist, is am mac a bu shine a-nis aig an oilthigh. Bha Gàidhlig aige, bhon sgoil, chuimhnich e. Ach, cha bhiodh e bruidhinn ris gu tric. Cha robh fhios aig a' bhalach dè chanadh e ris, shaoil e. Cha robh fhios aige dè chanadh esan ris a' bhalach na bu mhotha. Chunnach e am balach a' cluich le fòn beag airgead, a mhala a' dol suas an-dràsta 's a-rithist mar gun robh rudeigin iongantach air tachairt na bhasan. Ruig e air oir nan cuibhlichean agus roilig e e fhèin air ais gu oisean an t-seòmair, is a cheann ri fulaisg a' cuimhneachadh air a cho-ogha. ■

Farpais Shomhairle MhicGill-Eain - An Dara h-Àit

Colbhasa agus Pamplona

MIKAELA CARMICHAEL

Sgoil Naomh Sheòrais

Dùn Èideann

Beanntan àrda ruadha,
feur fada gorm.
A' mhuir a' bualadh air na creagan,
is na faoileagan a' rànaich.

An teannachadh san adhar.
Tarbh òg a' dol às a chiall.
Fuil dearg a' dòrtadh
gu borb.
Laigh sìos.
Olé.

Seann chù na laighe sa ghrèin,
cat a' slùbraich bainne.
Luchag blàth san taigh,
's an teaghlach air an tràigh.

A h-uile duine ga bhrosnachadh
"Sìos leis an tarbh!"
A' seinn a-muigh san t-sràid -
fion is fuilteachas gu uair sa mhadainn.
Olé.

Ciad Duais, Farpais ann an Rosg Prioba-nan-sùl

Am Ban-spealadair

ANN CAMERON MACRAE

CHUNNAIC MI O chionn ghoirid i, is mise air an rathad dhan bhaile. 'S e cailleach mu thrì fichead bliadhna a dh'aois a bh' innte, boireannach àrd, le falt liath, agus a cuid aodaich o linn mo sheanmhar. Bha i anns a' ghàrradh, a' spealadh an fheòir mun cuairt an taighe, ag obair gu sgiobalta, le spionnadh, agus cha do thog i a ceann nuair a chaidh mi seachad.

Chuir e iongantachas orm a faicinn oir cha robh duine a' fuireachd san taigh sin fad bhliadhnaichean. A bharrachd air a sin, airson dìog neo dhà co-dhiù, shaoil mi gun robh mi eòlach oirre, a h-aimn air bàrr mo theangaidh. Bha mi air impis stad a chur air a' chàr, ach le tòrr obrach a' feitheamh orm anns an oifis mar a b' àbhaist, lean mi orm suas an gleann.

Ach seo an rud neònach; nuair a choimhead mi air ais, cha robh ach tobhta ann agus na sgòthan a' fàs gu luath dorch bagarrach. ■

The Last Cup

SHORT STORY BY MERRYN GLOVER

FOR ELEVEN YEARS no voice had been heard in the old stone church other than that of Reverend Duncan. Without interruption he gave the intimations, read the lesson, delivered the prayers and expounded the Word of God in that strange, sing-song tone reserved for Highland pulpits. At one time, there had been singing. Hamish McDonald would stand in military stature at the front and hum the note, and all would intone the Psalm in nasal voice till it died a timely death and they could all sit down again. But Hamish was lost at sea and no one else felt the call to be precentor, so the singing stopped.

Reverend Duncan's sermon was unvaried. No matter what the text or the day of the year or the season in the church calendar, there was one topic that burned a deep hole in his heart: The False Believer. The village was full proof of his teaching. How many had already left the ranks of the faithful and gone out into the darkness? (An ever increasing number, as it happened.) How many had forsaken the light and given over their lives to the lusts of this world? How many – even in our very pews! – might be harbouring these selfsame passions? Is it you? Is it you? Be not one who arrives at the gates of Paradise to find them barred unto you! Be not one who comes before the throne on Judgement Day to find you are cast aside! Be not one who falls into the pit of fire where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth!

Be not like the minister's wife. Sheila Duncan spent most of Sunday morning in bed. From time to time the Reverend made veiled references to her 'ill health' but the whole village knew she was a drunk. In her first, sober years she had accompanied him to church, arriving early and sitting half way back in her elegant suit and hat. Her pew marked the beginning of the congregation, everyone else assembling in the rows behind her and leaving the entire front of the church empty. It was as if a spell had been cast over those pews, that anyone who sat there would be turned to stone – or worse – find themselves the subject of village gossip. Mrs Duncan was the subject of that anyway, because she was beautiful. And she raised her voice in the Psalms. This was unseemly, to be attracting attention to oneself instead of God. Not many wanted to hear a pure and lovely voice, free of nasal congestion and flattened tone, because it suddenly lifted the words off the page and made them ring. People found themselves listening and this was an unwelcome distraction.

So nobody ever sat beside Mrs Duncan in her pew, preferring to turn her to stone. One week she did not come early but waited till the church was half-full and slid in beside the Fraser family. Their young son stared up at her, fascinated by the make-up and the foreign fragrance. His mother nodded to her and offered a tight-lipped smile but had little to say at the end of the service. The next week Mrs Duncan tried the pew normally occupied by

the Buchanan sisters, an ageing pair of spinners who prided themselves on never having left the island. But when they arrived – half way through the intimations – and saw her in their pew, they froze. Though there was plenty of space and a welcoming light in her eyes, the sisters found another pew. So over the years Mrs Duncan gradually slipped further and further back in the church, arriving later and later, till finally hers was the seat by the door, in an empty last pew. By then, her suit was old and missing a button, her hat dented and the make-up smudged around her blood-shot eyes. The fragrance was no longer alien, but the all-too-familiar miasma of drink. In the end, she did not come at all. No one asked after her; no one visited.

Till one day the Reverend Duncan himself did not appear in church. The dwindled congregation waited in growing unease, shifting and whispering and looking at watches. The Buchanan sisters sucked in their breath and declared they'd never seen a vacant pulpit. Mr Fraser, the Session Clerk, slipped out of his pew and spoke quietly to Mr McIntyre, the most elderly of the Elders and a man who had memorised much of Scripture for he could not read. The two white heads drew close and shook together in sorry unison. Then there was nodding and Mr Fraser walked up to the front as Mr McIntyre made his slow, bent passage out the back.

He found the Reverend on his knees beside his wife's bed, his hands gripping one of hers, his face buried in the mess of blankets. The room stank of alcohol and urine and spilled perfume, and Mrs Duncan's skin was grey as cloud, her eyes closed. But Mr McIntyre could see the slight rise and fall of a strand of hair across her cheek. She was not dead. He took a step closer; the Reverend did not look up. He seemed unable. Normally erect, exact and knife-sharp in his black suit, he lay crumpled against the bed in a frayed dressing gown and bare feet. His soles were yellowed and shiny, as if they had never known sunshine or the feel of pebbles. Clearing his throat, Mr McIntyre leaned forward and laid a hand on the Reverend's shoulder. It was the only time he had ever touched him, as the minister never shook hands at the end of services, preferring only to nod, keeping his hands clasped behind his back.

When Reverend Duncan still did not move or speak, Mr McIntyre phoned the doctor and boiled the kettle for tea. He remembered how Mrs Duncan had done this on the first Sunday afternoon of the Reverend's ministry in the village. The Kirk Session had sat balancing little plates on awkward knees trying to make sense of this stern minister and his smiling wife as she poured tea into tinkling china cups patterned with butterflies. Mr McIntyre, a fisherman since childhood, felt he had never held anything so fragile or seen a woman so lovely. He'd tried not to look at her.

It seemed the whole village had taken the same approach. The men averted their eyes,

embarrassed by their own roughness and the feelings she stirred. The women were suspicious. How could she have such expensive clothes and so many fine things on a minister's stipend? They gathered titbits of a story into their magpie hoard. Sheila Duncan, seemingly, was high-born, from a big estate in the Borders, and there was great wealth, and someone heard the family was linked to *at least* one European throne. Why she had married an austere man of the cloth and followed him through a succession of parishes to this wind-swept island was a subject of frequent and fevered speculation. Perhaps they had been *forced* to marry? A love-child! Who had subsequently *died*. Certainly, there was no mention of children and no photographs. Anyway, the women were agreed that Sheila Duncan was not the motherly *type*, so it was just as well.

As Mr McIntyre poured tea for the Doctor and the Reverend – finding only one butterfly cup, slightly chipped – he found himself wishing his own wife had still been alive when the Duncans arrived. Alice McIntyre had been as salt-skinned and no-nonsense as any fishwife in the village, but she'd a good heart and no patience with gossip. And she'd loved singing. She would have rejoiced to hear Sheila Duncan's sweet voice lifting the Psalms and would have sat next to her in the kirk and visited with stovies and bannock cake. She would have been neither threatened nor awed by Mrs Duncan's pedigree, but would have drawn out the threads of the woman's life and woven them into her own. And the other women of the village would have followed Alice, for she had that way among them. And though always different, Sheila Duncan would have been accepted and maybe even liked.

And the Reverend? Could Alice have won him for the village, also? Or was he beyond redemption? Whilst they had some information about Mrs Duncan's background, the minister's was a closed book. And what a dark and strange book it must be, Mr McIntyre thought, for in all his years he had never known a harder man. He did not preach salvation, but the certainty of damnation; not faith in God, but distrust in man; not hope in the life eternal, but despair at the ruin of today.

Mrs Duncan was taken to hospital that afternoon and the Reverend went with her, returning alone. In the pulpit on Sunday morning he thanked the congregation (considerably enlarged) for their prayers and said his wife would be joining them all in due course. Mr McIntyre saw how his chest was hollowed a bit, like he could not take in a full breath, and how his hands seemed uncertain over the Bible. His text was an obscure passage from 2 Chronicles and he did not appear certain of his theme. In the rare moments when he looked up from his notes, his eyes gazed through his flock and beyond them with the vacancy of a blind man. At the end he did

not wait for them to file past him, with his usual nodding and withholding of hands, but walked straight from the aisle down the path and across the road to the manse.

Mr McIntyre arrived not an hour later with a pot of chowder. At first he thought the Reverend would not grant him entry, standing as he was like a stone in the threshold, but after a minute of terrible silence he stepped back. As the soup heated, Mr McIntyre searched the dirty, crumb-strewn cupboards for crockery and set it on the kitchen table with the care he would have given Mrs Duncan's beautiful china, though nothing but the lone cup remained. Through this, the Reverend sat in a worn chair by the window and stared out at the sea, as if searching for a fishing boat believed lost. To cover the absence of words and the too-loud clanging of pots, Mr McIntyre hummed. He didn't think about what. They were just fragments of old folk-songs, Gaelic laments, some Psalms. Once, he heard the Reverend move abruptly in his chair and saw a look like forked-lightning pass across his face.

When all was ready, Mr McIntyre coughed and gestured to the table, taking his seat after the Reverend. He bowed his head and waited for the prayer, but when none came, murmured one in Gaelic. He knew the Reverend did not have the tongue, but he himself had never prayed aloud in English and was embarrassed to try.

They ate in silence at first, the sounds of their slurping and chewing animal-like in the dust-heavy hush of the manse. Then there was a bright, sweet piping from the hawthorn hedge. Song thrush, Mr McIntyre said. There was a nest in those trees with new-hatched chicks. The Minister barely glanced up. After a pause, Mr McIntyre said it had been a difficult year for the fishing. The young men were finding it hard, especially those with family. Reverend Duncan nodded. Mr McIntyre felt the warmth of the chowder spreading to his ribs. He spoke more: hadn't the young lassie from Ullapool done a good job with the hotel, painting it up and putting fancy things on the menu? He chuckled. Nobody on the island knew what the things were, but it was good for tourists. The Reverend raised his eyebrows and there was a struggle of a smile. Then Mr McIntyre got up to put the kettle on and pointed at the brooding sky. The wind would turn, he said, and start coming from the west. There would be some rain in the afternoon, but then clear by night. He took out the last butterfly cup, cradling it gently in his calloused hands.

Hope for a good day tomorrow, he said, then drew in his breath in a quick, soft suck across missing teeth. Yes, hope for tomorrow. ■

'The Last Cup' was broadcast on 5th January 2011 as part of Radio 4's Scottish Shorts series.

Poems by Lindsey Bone & J.L Williams

Birds

BY LINDSEY BONE

From the window I can't quite see the sea;
outside I see the old men at the nets.
Wind comes from the west on this straight-line coast
and storms unhinge the sea into dangers
young lads are brave to face. The old men
stay ashore, understanding differences
between boys and men.

There is my strong, fair man to talk about
who married me in curiosity
and some kind of love. He was born to the sea;
I followed him west every summer
chasing the herring. My life there was with
the women and the noisy chattering
over gutting tables. His was with
men who pitted themselves against the sea.

It does something to a man. His gaze grew
longer; his words fewer with each year that passed.
The church, in the end, held nothing for him,
he who had seen the power of the sea.
In the midst of our tight community
held bound by the church he stayed at home,
growing more and more unreachable,
self-contained – a boat sailed single handed.
But time changed me too: I watched him watch me
with a look of concern I never understood;
he had no words for. This morning he locked
the door behind him; left me alone
with the fear that unlit the spark of me.

Let me try and tell you this peacefully.
A week ago my bright son was taken
by the sea. The other boats came in
from out the storm and we waited
long hours on the shore before the minister
put his hand on my shoulder and told me
to go home. Crows picked on overturned
earth by his grave. I couldn't save myself
from the horror of it, but kept my calm
for the sake of the church, the villagers
and my silent man.

The women at the gutting heard my silence
but not the crowding thoughts of darkness
in my head that I couldn't stall. The speed
in my head was terrible, but outside
there was only terrible calm.
Through it all I never found relief.
I've buried 2 sons now and can't any longer
contain my grief. The birds never let me be.
This morning I watched a bird blown from a tree.
Now, my fears to discuss: a flock of birds
yammering and restless inside my chest.
I'm breathless with the telling of it.
There isn't plenty of time for this.

Yesterday. It was only yesterday.
The birds started battering against my ribs,
stirring their wings to the death of them,
and the sight of the sea brought me no calm.
I drew the gutting knife across my palm
and the women stopped talking.
Sometime in the night the birds crouched and flew,
lifting for the moon. There's no room now
to contain them. I'm going there –
soon and unstoppable.
I'm further away than I thought I was.

The birds have broken their wings now
and the fright of it overwhelms my mind
so full of places where the light once shone.
My head has left into some kind of night.
I'm forced now to believe in ghosts
and some agency in charge of all of this
and hosts of other things.
In the silence of the dawn
voices ring in my ears.
My ribs settle in
on nothing now the heart of me is gone.

In the Salon

BY J.L WILLIAMS

Most everyone here is
so genteel, velvet as peaches but he
has the scent of cow in his skin.

Ladies can smell it. They dance
as near as they can without touching.
Their eyes roll, eyelids flutter.

His hands are bent as if round
reins or a gun. He does not speak. He sees
something green in the parquet flooring.

He sees the land of his fathers, the promise
of seed wasted. Is that a chandelier
dropping a pearl of light or a tear?

Then he is gone and the ball gowns
ride on his wake; great coloured whales
nosing the hull of death.

There are four kinds of light in the world

BY J.L WILLIAMS

One is so blue it eats out your eyes.
It makes water of your piss.
It makes the leftover baby in you scream.

One is quiet as an angel's arm breaking.
When this one comes on
the breasts of men pour milk,
the veins of leaves unclench and
sap rains down on the backs of coming lovers.

One is a cat. It steals your breath as you sleep
and buries it out in the forest.
It comes back into your house
and eats what is left.

One is the sun on your face, the
hand of your mother brushing
a lock of stray hair, an extra day in the air
when you thought all was lost.

You Learn How Beautiful

BY J.L WILLIAMS

This morning you open your eyes.
For the first time
you can feel the rain on your skin
when you look at it wetting the panes of the window.
Out of the shadow comes light, more light,
and the walls fall away
and deer come to you and birds,
moths and the mouths of flowers,
attracted to the light
not out of the sun or some candle
but out of you, shining from you and
it may have always been there but you'd never seen it.
It blinds you.
You stumble and catch rough bark,
inhale mulch and soil,
touch the damp roots of ferns,
their feathery leaves.
You hear something,
a sound like someone calling.

On North Of South, Or ...

BY ROBERT ALAN JAMIESON

WRITING WITH A northern frame of mind, the Editor said, as we wandered back to The Ceilidh Place after another fine session at the Ullapool Book Festival. I nodded – of course I have something to say about that. After all, I’m a writer from ‘The Northern Isles’, in ‘The North Atlantic’. Yet watching ‘Cinema Paradiso’ in Vancouver the other night, the relative nature of the term was confirmed to me by the scene in which ‘The Neapolitan’ wins the football lottery. ‘Northerners have all the luck!’ someone shouts. To a Sicilian, Naples may indeed seem northern, but it is poor – distant from the rich industrial Italy of the Po valley, and far to the south for most of Europe. I got the intended joke – and derived a broader point: the habit of thought we in the Scottish/British north have of thinking that wealth and power reside in ‘The South’. But ‘The North’ to those living in the southern hemisphere is rapacious, wealthy and lucky, as with the Sicilian view of northern Italy captured in ‘Cinema Paradiso’.

‘North’, then, is not so much a place as a direction – perhaps a kind of intention, a choice as to how we define our world, where we look to for contrast. Even when qualified by the definite article, it is still not free of its corollary, ‘The South’, but always stands in relation to somewhere else. How, then, can we begin to think about what ‘North’ or ‘The North’ may be, in and of itself, what it may mean to people, how it may influence their creative work? If we limit the question to Europe, is there such a thing as a ‘northern frame of mind’ which translates across cultures and languages, some shared experience – or more broadly, within the northern hemisphere, some kind of circumpolar commonality?

A few years ago, I attended a poetry translation event in Estonia and was a bit surprised to see that one of the local participants – Hasso Krull, professor at Tartu University – had turned up wearing, under his dungarees, what looked to me like a Fair Isle ‘yoke’ jumper, with the classic ‘Star’ pattern around its neck. I asked him about it, mentioning Fair Isle, and was told that this was an ancient Estonian motif which he believed represented a fragment of a deep cosmology shared by a pre-Christian Shamanic culture that had once stretched throughout Scandinavia, northern Russia, Siberia and the far north of Canada. I had stumbled unwittingly on one of the professor’s fields of specialization, and he presented a keenly-argued case, the finer points of which I have forgotten, for a shared philosophy and quasi-religious practice which had once crossed the political and cultural borders, indeed the very seas, that now divide us in the north.

Such a thesis is unlikely to be entirely proven or disproven. No doubt ancient peoples

did hold complex views of life, nature and the cosmos – and rituals arose around those. No doubt there were always itinerants, travelers carrying ideas and ritual practices from place to place. Peoples too migrated, followed the great herds, whether they called the beast ‘reindeer’, ‘caribou’ or some long-lost arrangement of syllables. They would inevitably have come into contact with others, shared stories and beliefs, perhaps as readily as they traded or fought. A good story always has value, if it can be translated. Perhaps there could have been a core shamanic practice or philosophical stance, a peculiarly northern view of the cosmos, as my Estonian colleague posited – yet it is recorded that those Siberian cultures which continue to practice shamanism today are extremely varied in their rituals, much as the elements of myth in circumpolar mythology – the creatures and the terrain – are alike, yet tales about them differ. So, for instance, we find the raven in Norse, Siberian and North American mythology, but with different functions: Odin’s *corvidae* companions, Huginn and Muninn, are very different mythical entities from the Raven-Creators of native North American myth. Yet shared familiarity with the same widespread flora and fauna, or natural phenomena such as the Aurora Borealis, is perhaps one way in which the human mind may be coloured in a particularly northern fashion, even if various tribes and clans shape different stories around them.

Whatever the deep natural roots or the varied human outgrowth from those, in the modern era ‘The Romance of the North’ is a concept we are familiar with – as a direction, those empty lands of expansive skies, endless birch forests, tundra and taiga, tend to engender a mood of solitude, of intense and often dangerous contact with the forces of nature. The Sublime, as it was once termed, as a notion, carries us towards isolation and the need for self-sufficiency of the spirit, in ‘the Great Alone’ as Robert Service called it.

Most of all, the north of the northern hemisphere is a place of extremes, where the tilt of the Earth brings what may ultimately seem like whole seasons of darkness and of light. Though culture and terrain may vary, this is one common factor to the ‘Far North’ experience. To those born into it, deep midwinter darkness and endless midsummer light seem normal – activities are modified accordingly. Seasonal Affective Disorder, with low winter activity and frantic summer-mania, was not an illness in the village of my youth, but a necessary response to the demands of living at 60 degrees north. Religion or whisky – or both – were important in making a passage from one year to the next. Necessary coping mechanisms.

So this is perhaps one factor in establishing a northern frame of mind which crosses all

seas, mountains and even social boundaries. Recently I’ve been making plans to visit the Yukon, part of the research for a new book, and by coincidence I’ve received an invitation to the Whitehorse Poetry Festival, held just after Midsummer. Excited by remembrance of childhood reading – gold-rush stories, those old movie or school prize-book versions of the wild northern frontier – I began to look again at Service and Jack London. I checked the gazetteer to see just how far north this trip would carry me – and then laughed to myself when I noted that Whitehorse is about half a degree south of Shetland. In my youthful imagination, the Yukon had seemed a long way beyond what I knew, which it is in many respects, but not on the northerly axis. The ‘simmirdim’ I know from my youth – the picture postcard rendition was of a man reading a newspaper outside Lerwick Town Hall at midnight – is roughly what I can expect from Midsummer 2011 in Whitehorse.

In literary terms, forms of northern-ness may be found manifest in many cultures. The great Icelandic sagas sit atop the list in terms of precedence, obviously, though whether an actual consciousness of ‘northernness’ can be attributed to the work of Snorri Sturluson is unlikely. As one of Glenn Gould’s interviewees states in his radio-documentary ‘The Idea of North’, it is necessary to leave the north in order to become aware of it, or perhaps to travel to it. Basho’s *Oku-No- Hosomichi*, ‘narrow road to the deep north’, recently reinterpreted in a Scottish context by Alec Finlay and Ken Cockburn*, or Mikhail Prishvin’s poetic-scientific accounts of nature studies among the forests of Russia, are more obviously concerned with the conscious experiencing of northern regions, with that framing outsider’s eye.

Travelling in the opposite direction are those packagers of ‘northernness’ for southern readers, such as the vastly successful Robert Service in the early 20th century. Besides Service, whose work is most often associated with Canada though he was from the west of Scotland in origin, Scotland can lay claim to the two earliest and greatest of these exporters. In the 1760s, James MacPherson’s ‘translations’ of Ossian created a world-wide fascination with the misty mounts and deep glens of Caledonia, and the act of making English versions from the raw material he gathered was a kind of insider-outsider transaction which gave high glamour to the Celtic past, sweeping across Europe as a fashion for things Celtic which would carry such as Mendelssohn to Staffa, while Napoleon bore his much-loved Italian translation round the battlefields of Europe. Half a century later, Sir Walter Scott – ‘the Wizard of the North’ – performed a similar function for more recent Scottish history, palatizing historic tales for widespread

consumption by those distant from their settings in both time and space. Both had a keen awareness regarding the tastes of their audience which allowed them to transform native ‘northern’ culture for broadest appreciation. Even if something was lost in that process, their success suggests that something intrinsically powerful remained.

Personally, the writers I found most inspirational as a young aspirant – those who made it seem possible to make literature about my native Shetland – were often northerners who wrote from the inside, about things that surrounded them – more the Burnsian model than the Ossianic. The poems and stories of George Mackay Brown, the early novels of Knut Hamsun, the Faroese and Icelandic work of William Heinesen and Halldór Laxness, all these seemed to depict recognizably familiar worlds which, despite the fact that they were not Shetlandic, had something of the social structure and the philosophy of my local people if not their language or the topography of the islands. Mackay Brown’s Hamnavoe was not so different from Scalloway in my imagination. Heinesen’s ‘lost musicians’ might well have been denizens of Lerwick. Lieutenant Glahn’s midsummer Nordland adventures might have taken place in some isolated part of my native isles. And Bjartur of Summerhouses, with his fierce independence and love of his flock of sheep, could easily have been one of the old Shetland crofters I grew up among.

So – this writing with a northern frame of mind thing, dear Editor. I suppose that I am distinguishing between intent and accident in this short essay. To travel to ‘The North’ and attempt to define it in some fashion, to bring back from one’s travels a testimony of experience for the appreciation of a readership elsewhere, is a different thing from living in the north, however defined, and writing down some historical version of it, or simply writing what one sees or knows. All would seem to be manifestations of a northern frame of mind. As writers we are governed by where we come from, but free to engage with wherever we land, and it is possible to live in ‘The North’, or indeed anywhere, and write about things quite distant in time and space, to make fantasy. Whichever way, writing always transforms reality. But the task of imagining is distinct from the task of describing. Good writing may emerge from either approach – indeed, may well require something of both. The North, it seems to me, is real yet also fiction. Boundless, yet distinct. Here, and not here. Past, present and future. ■

* www.theroadnorth.co.uk

John Kent Jr

POEM BY ALISON FLETT

John Kent Jr had lived through two wars
lost his father in the first, fought in the second
he was the man who knew what to do
when Billy Costie's bull got loose in our field
great big British White doing his business
amongst our wee Limousins

no-one knew till almost full term
their sides ballooning like zeppelins
skin stretched tight as an H bomb
eyes boggling terrified from their heads

John Kent Jr comes down in his tractor
shining coil of wire slung in the back
a hare he'd hit on the way
dangling by its hind legs
from the wing mirror
dark stuff dripping
from its open mouth
leaving glistery black splashes
on our new tarmac drive

right, says John Kent Jr jumping down
sliding knuckle-scabbed hands
into cracked leather gloves,
let's get to,
and off he sets
for the fenced-in kye
us bairns running alongside him
whooping and cheering
just bairns
not kenning
what like it would be

he digs a deep hole beside our Daisy
takes off the gloves and gently slides
first a knife, then the wire
inside her, Daisy
moaning slow
eyes rolling in her
gentle head
as John Kent Jr
strains foot braced

 against her
 backside wire
 wrapped round now
 gloved hands arms
see-saw slicing
 through the
 first bit of
 unborn
calf houking out
 head and foreleg
 amidst a
mud slide
of blood
and skitter
smell of metal
and shit
sweat
slipping
down his
shining face
a gloved hand gripping
the calf's foreleg
the curious angle
of the dangling head
as he flips it
away from him
the curve and bounce
of it thumping down
on the hard ground

he stands up
laying palms flat
on the cow's back
both their heads lowered
both panting

holy hell
says John Kent Jr
that wis a tough een

he stops to roll a rollie
big fingers fumbling untidily
with the fiddly paper
smears of dark stuff slicked
down the side of it
he sticks it in his mouth
the trigger click-click
as he tries to ignite
the damn thing
this damn wind
but at last he
lights up, right
he says
let's get to
a doodle-bug whine escaping from his nose
lips fixed tight round the rollie
clouds of fag smoke
mushrooming round his head
as he rips and tugs
falls back gasping
then back up and in
up to the elbows
grasping for the last of it

Daisy boggles
and a red explosion
slops at their feet

a winged shadow crosses the field
the rook's skrek trailing behind as
Daisy nuzzles her disembodied
calf's head
nuzzling
nudging
licking
licking
at those forever
closed eyes

until John Kent Jr
hauls it away from her
hurls it into the dark earth
takes off the gloves
gives a pfft on the rollie
picks it from his lips
stands staring at the
fenceposts
the wire stretched tight
between them
like a row of crosses
says
almost to himself
aye weel
there's worse things in life

drops the fag butt into the pit
houks, spits
shovels earth
more earth
over the top
of it all



Farmer with an Aberdeen Angus cow Photograph courtesy of Orkney Library & Archive

Saab

Clouds as wicht
as warm, frothy jugs
o mylk choost pue
fae happy kye
flott anunder dis kert
i da lift. Whit's ahint
is ay wi wis. Keenin
whaar wir gjaain
propels wis ower
a sunburnin sea,
keeps wis faain
ithoot laundin
fae takkin aff
ta touchin doon.
Workshop Poem

Annidder poyim aboot da mōn
screived apō da back
o da Sharon Olds poyim
aboot hir feddir snoring.

Da aald eens is da best.
Da simplest rules takks da langist
ta lairn. Aabody haes dir pert
ta play, dir wan step ta takk
at a time. Rules

is rules for a raisin.
Reduce. Reuse. Recycle.

Revolution

Ivviry moárneen da sun
haals licht laek scurtfus
o flibberin fysh ower da height,
ower da lent o wis aa.
Afore da wirld haes circumnavigaetit
hit's wye back ta whaar dat aa began,
ee day comes an geengs.
Fu lang does hit takk
ta fin oot whit mettirs,
ta keen whit nivvir will?
As lang as hit takks
ta pit de lips ta wark
on a plum i da sun.
As lang as hit takks
ta run da perfect bath
an lie in him.
As lang as hit takks
ta live da ony life
wi'll see in dis lifetime
at started wi a heid
pokkin oot laek da sun
fae anunder a clood.

Ecouter et

I wiss I'd entit
langir fae syne
as I'd prefer
whan aabody tell
"Dis years is da b
o dy life, boy.
Makk du da best
Du'll nivvir git d

If I'd a ony ecouter
der widna be
da urgency
whan I repeter
laek a mantra —
"Dis years is da b
o dy life, boy.
Makk du da best
Du'll nivvir git d

Shetl

by Christie

Repetier

t me –
est years

a dem.
lem back.”

red

est years

a dem.
lem back.”

Exposed

Dey wir nae licht
faain laek a tree
apö da carfuffle
o blankets liftin, sinkin
in time tae da sang
o birds at wisna dere.

Slowly da mön peeled
a cover awa, lat da lift
see hir leegs as wicht
as cream clinging ta empty glesses.
Den, sho bellt da hail lock
apö da flair, stood prood

fir aa da wirld ta feast dir eyes wi.
Da heir tae a orchard
o fruitless laiyes an branches
opinned his ee good ee,
saa he hedna bön granted
da reprieve he’d draemed he hed.

Guide

Imagine faain
heady craa itae a wirld
du kent naetheen o

dy een glinderin
ta makk wit o shaeps
an colours at shone

laek staurs da lift
hed nivvir seen.
Du’d perish athoot

a guide ta shaa de
da goodness o life
an keep de fae hit’s ills.

Du’d droon athoot a pair
o airms ta keep de aflott
in seas du’d nae notion

fu ta navigate.
Du’d disappear
athoot a heart

ta keep da time
du needs ta find dy wye,
ta fin dy feet.

Du is dat anchor
haudin strang i da storm.
Du is da maist

important person tae dy
maist important person.
Du’s as precious

as da day at shon apö
hir comin intae da wirld.
Keep da fires in,

be da good
du needs dy bairn
tae see.

and Poems

Williamson

Poems by Lorna Tait

at that time

at that time
which is over now
people brought me food

earthenware dishes of lasagne and leek bake
they stuffed ginger biscuits in my pocket
in pink and white striped bags
saved folded and neat
in the way older people save things

somebody once came with his van full of pallets
and asked if we could use some wood
my daughter was shown how to make a white sauce

maybe there are only certain things we need to know
how much brandy to force in a fruit cake
the draught needed to light a sullen stove
the boiling point of sugar
for a toffee apple
a soft fudge
a brittle glaze

waving at ferries

there are many ways of waving at ferries
if you are old you might
cautiously climb up an old wooden step ladder
and hoist a white sheet out of the top window
billowing in the wind
like a signal for peace or a cry for help or surrender
feeling like it is your last goodbye
and remembering the war and the Lusitania
and how old you really are

but if you are a girl who is six
if your dress is pink with yellow flowers
you will run down the pier
past the towering fishing boats and the orange string creels

and as the ferry gathers speed,
as if its resolve to leave had suddenly been strengthened
until you can make out only something small on the high deck
as it passes the grey houses against the startling sky
you will see your friend waving
still believing that if she waves hard enough
the ferry will turn back.

somewhere between two places

somewhere between two places there is a nowhere time
where everything is possible, like you
had not really left but are out on a daytrip
and could jump from the top deck
that is the *Captain's Bar*
onto the red sandstone cliffs
that the tannoy is telling you are the highest in Europe
and then as you round Hoy
and feel the full force of the gale
so that you are sitting lower than the
highest point of the last wave
you become part of the sea
you become a wave yourself
your watch rusting
your skin like a white horses salt lick
hardly noticing that a bucket chair
has rolled across the floor
that the occupant is still in the chair
still holding on
still clutching her hot chocolate
while a corkscrew wave spirals you back to the mainland
and quite suddenly the wind drops
a clanking of chains from the car deck
the earth inflexible and unforgiving
as you land in the eye of the storm
a thick haar coming down
so that you cannot see what you have left behind

witches' leaving poem

they marched out this morning unexpectedly
not in a temper but slightly peeved
they did not even leave by the back door
preferring instead to use the front
I had waved after them as they left
and shouted to them like they were children
to remember and shut the gate
which was stiff.
(I haven't got round to fixing it yet)

it was a relief that they were gone
my bones stopped aching
and I found myself singing
to the radio
joining in with the chorus
even although it was sunshine on leith
even although it was raining outside

I can still smell them but only slightly
sometime I will check under the bed and in the cupboards
just in case

Fowl Talk

SHORT STORY BY DONALD S. MURRAY

1.

THE BIRDS ONLY started to behave that way after they had watched Fionn for a year or so sitting at his household fire. He would move his head up and down continually while he was perched on a stool there, his eyes narrowing, neck swelling, mouth puffing. Finally he would let loose a thick black spleuchan of tobacco and gannet-fat from his lips, soaking all his neighbours and intruders long before landing. It sizzled in a pale blue flame on the fireside, providing more fuel for the blaze.

Fascinated by all this, the fulmars would study him for hours, imitating his every gesture, not only his behaviour in front of the fire but also the way he circled round the island, never moving in a straight line anywhere. (He would do this even as he clambered up a slope from the shore, his footsteps spiralling constantly as he climbed.) They, too, would work up their throats when they saw any man approaching, prepared to drench them in a dark shower of salt and oil, regurgitating fish they had swallowed and consumed.

Soon they even learned to speak Gaelic like him, impersonating his soft, liquidy vowels, his slight lisp, giving – in their own unique way – honour and praise to the one they saw as the greatest islander of them all.

2.

NIALL IAIN WAS the one who noticed that the fulmars were speaking Gaelic when he returned to the island a short time after the evacuation. The birds were squatting on nests that overlooked the spot where the men of the community used to sit in their 'Parliament', discussing the nature and timing of the work to be done that day. Occupying the edges of roofs and chimney-tops, they squirted a black, oily substance from their beaks at those that came near them, behaving the way their role-model, Fionn had done all those years before.

'Oich – oich...' Niall Iain overheard one fulmar say.

'Obh, obh ...' another muttered.

'S truagh an latha a dh'fhàg iad a chroit,' a third one added. 'It's a sad day they left the croft.'

Niall Iain smiled sadly to himself. For all that there were no people remaining on its shores, the nature of the conversations he heard there hadn't changed much.

Poems From The Northern Isles

Whoopers in April

BY NALINI PAUL

Feathers scatter like snowdrops.
Beneath the ribcage
red has stopped bleeding.

The long neck a tangle of seaweed
beak the colour of mustard seed
eyes magicked away
to perfect empty orbitals.

I open mine again.

The sky is only passing dark
the velvet grass stroked by sunlight
the calling lark drenched with rain.

On a higher plane
swans ghost the light,
catch its scattered essence in slow motion:

white

pink

yellow

white.

Catch

BY PAM BEASANT

In the basin
trout catch midsummer light
catch themselves
out to dry

too greedy
taut bodies
now food.

Scales scraped,
swim bladders full,
guts spill.

Mouths wide as if they want to breathe,
or shout
with barbed tongues ripped out.

The Scots Kitchen

BY MORAG MACINNES

This book's been weel used. The sellotape's
sellotaped and there been glue afore that – aal us
Scots wifies, tuttan an fixan so hid'll deu yet, fur a peedie start.
Handed doon, everything handed doon an turned
up an let doon again. No a aubergine
in sight, but plenty o cheap cuts.

Mak do an mend. Granma falls oot the pages,
owld agged corbie
droppan feathers roond wur nest, them
scrappy bits o drawer liner. On them she's scralled
wi her big black ink pen
recipes for kitchiri an chutney. Puddins to use up
that big tins o apricot jam (watch yer finngurs)
Canada sent in the war.

Clagum or tablet or coconut kisses – we beasted
on sugar. She beasted
on makkan, meringue pie or marmalade, heisk
like a wife makkan love tae hersell.

Mebbe she'd say, wance wur plates wis all scraped to the china:
(she et like a flea)
weel
at wis richt good tho I sez it as shouldna – an A'm nae a
sweet tooth. It's bairns at
need flesh. Then
she'd hug up her dug, sook at her wallies an
hit on the dishes.

Here's me plooteran about
Tryan te sort oot
the condition o wur nation
an the nature o love. Aal I hid te do
wis shak oot her Scots Kitchen.

Beach huts

BY PAM BEASANT

In a row, as if to say
you can perch quite safe on the orderly
edge of land.

You come for views,
ice cream, shells,
sandcastles, caves.

From a distance the huts make
a xylophone through dune grass blown
flat. You run to play,
the sharp-edged carpet
catching bare legs.

On the ink-line horizon
one tiny ship
heads anarchically
over the world's rim.

Eye-opener

BY CHRISTINE DE LUCA

I tip watter fae da jug, an scales faa
fae mi een. Foo come I wis sae blinnd?
I bowt hit for da colours, da cut candy
o da *millefiori* gless meldit trowe hit,

da boannie nairrow waist, flutit rim.
But noo hit's Renoir, nae mair, nae less.
Da gless-blower man a seen da paintin
A'm jöst seen; tized hit fae his furnace.

Woman wi a Parasol ithin a Gairden:
you could sink, slidder inta sic a idyll
or, wi da gairdener's haands, free
da mind ta trivvel möld, heal

chaos, marvel wi him at rebirth,
da riot o flooers – scarlet, wicht, indigo,
– mirrors o simmer: da Paris Commune
laid sindry, dan nature takkin owre.

Ir dey weeds, dis squaander o blöd-red
poppies; an daisies, coarnfloors allooed
ta resurrect his yard? Drifts o licht haloed
as shö lingers ithin a wirlde med new.

man a: **must have;** tized: **coaxed;** slidder: **slither;**
trivvel: **poke/ feel gently;** möld: **soil;** laid sindry: **destroyed;**

Note: The Paris Commune – workers' refusal to accept the French Government's capitulation to the Prussians in 1871. Barricaded in the Montmartre area, they were massacred by soldiers of their own Nationalist government. Many were lined up & shot in what became known as La semaine sanglante. Renoir's painting of this glorious wild garden dates from 1875/6, not long after the tragic event.

Through Fog from Lerwick.

BY JANE ALDOUS

July brought us three days of blindness.
Even to myself I was partially obscured. Drifter,
dissembler. Every step outside the hotel
an adventure. Kindness, too, in strangers
imprisoned like me who had plans.
The newsagent with no papers to sell,
the waitress dreaming of America.
The forecast made no mention of fog.
Standing on the harbour wall,
listening to bilges spewing, men shouting.
Oil and fish and fog in my nostrils.
The skua casually taking flight
from a metal ladder
seemed surer of its plight.
The next evening boarding the ferry
on a calm summer sea
I found passage through the shroud.
At the yellow dawn Aberdeen became a portal
to something unknown.

Trout

SHORT STORY BY ANN MACLAREN

ADAM WAS FLOATING on his back in ten inches of heavily salted water trying to think pleasant thoughts when the idea came to him. He had been told by the therapist that one of the benefits of a session in the flotation tank would be deep mental relaxation, an emptying of the mind, yet his brain had been working overtime on all sorts of worries and anxieties: such as how he would manage to find the door when it was time to leave this blacked-out cell. He imagined he'd have to stand up and reach out till he made contact with a wall, then move along the surface testing it with both hands – a bit like Britt Ekland in that bedroom scene in *The Wicker Man* – until he came upon the door handle.

There was also the problem of what to do with his arms. At the moment he had his hands clasped behind his head, which was fairly comfortable, but he couldn't keep them like that for the full hour or they'd become stiff and sore. He had tried relaxing them by his sides, but the buoyancy of the water floated them out sideways until his elbows were level with his ears and his forearms dangled in the general direction of his hips. He was tempted to stretch them straight out at right angles to his body and cross his legs at the ankles, but he thought that might be blasphemous. He supported his head again with his hands. He was anything but relaxed.

Then there was the hygiene issue. Adam couldn't help thinking about all the bodies that had been floating in the tank before him that day: had they all washed thoroughly first? Was he floating in a pool of dirt and germs, not to mention hair and dead skin cells? The leaflet he had read in the waiting room suggested that the enormous quantity of Epsom Salt in the water would draw toxins out of his body. Where would these toxins go? Was he, in fact, lying there absorbing the toxins of those who had been in there before him? He was sorry he had allowed Marissa to talk him into this so-called therapy.

"They say it works wonders for anxiety," she had told him. "And depression. It's just what you need."

Adam wondered who "they" were. Here he was, anxious about being in the tank, anxious about how clean it was, anxious about getting out of it, depressed about not enjoying it and depressed about the thought of having to lie there being anxious for an hour. It wasn't working, was it? "They", it seemed, were wrong.

He toyed with the idea of standing up and finding his way out of this oversized coffin, but Marissa was out there, in the next room, having a facial. She would hear the shower running; she would probably even hear him

trying to find his way out of the tank. She had that super-acute, finely-tuned hearing that only a wife can possess. Sometimes he was sure she could hear him thinking.

It was Marissa's discriminating hearing that had caused his anxiety and depression in the first place. No, that wasn't fair. He couldn't lay this one on Marissa's shoulders. It was his own faulty hearing; dare he say it, even to himself? His own deafness. He just couldn't be deaf. For a musician in an orchestra, of course, deafness was an occupational hazard: a lot of them became deaf to a greater or lesser degree sooner or later, what with all the noise going on around them all the time. But he was a concert pianist, for God's sake. It wasn't expected.

It had taken him a long time to admit he had a problem. About the beginning of last year, when he was practising for a concert in Dubai, he began to notice a change in the tone of his piano and wondered if it was suffering the effects of the previous two extremely damp summers. When he mentioned this to Marissa she insisted that the piano sounded as good as it always had. She had a good ear, so she ought to have noticed there was something odd about the sound. He had wondered if perhaps she was becoming a little dull of hearing. She was, after all, approaching fifty. Later that year, when Erica came home from South America, en route for Budapest, and unpacked her violin so that they could play a duet together, he was horrified to hear the mistakes she made. She was usually note perfect. Lack of practice, he supposed, because of her busy lifestyle; but when he suggested this to her she became extremely stropic.

"There's nothing wrong with my playing," she shouted as she flounced out of the room to complain to her mother. "Why don't you get yourself a hearing aid?"

Marissa, who had been listening from the kitchen, took Erica's side.

"I thought she played the piece perfectly," she said. "Maybe you should get your ears syringed. Shall I make an appointment for you?"

He had refused, of course. But gradually all the little bits of the jigsaw had clicked together: the tone of the piano; not hearing Erica's high notes; the television sounding muffled; even thinking the musicians who occasionally accompanied him sometimes sounded a bit off. He supposed it meant his career was over.

Marissa had been sympathetic, but pragmatic.

"Well, it's not the end of the world. Just be thankful you can afford to retire. And think of all the things we can do: we can spend the whole winter in Sitges, visit my family in

Chisinau, go up to Edinburgh and stay with Oliver and Patrick. We'll have a wonderful time."

Adam no longer even liked Sitges, which had become overcrowded with tourists since they had bought the house there. He'd rather cut his wrists than spend time with her mad Moldovan relatives, and so far he had managed to avoid sleeping in the same house as Oliver and his partner. It wasn't that he didn't love his son, and he accepted the situation, of course he did, but it was all so... oh, he didn't know what it was.

"It's not as if you're completely deaf," said Marissa. "You'll still be able to enjoy life."

Yes, but for how long? He'd soon have to get a hearing aid. Maybe two. What if he reached the stage where he couldn't hear anything at all? How would he cope? He became quite agitated. He didn't want to be deaf. He didn't want to retire. How could he live without his music? He couldn't sleep, went off his food. That was when Marissa dragged him along to the Health Oasis, to relax in the flotation tank.

Adam tried not to think about his encroaching deafness, and instead worried about how much longer he would have to spend floating in this black hole. He was surprised he didn't feel cold lying in the water. There would be a system for maintaining the temperature, no doubt, like in swimming pools. He'd probably end up in hospital with Legionnaire's disease. Or at the very least get an ear infection. He wished he'd remembered to put in the foam earplugs that had been given to him. He tried to focus on emptying his mind, but found that impossible, so he began to imagine himself playing one of his favourite pieces of music – one of the variations on a theme from Schubert's "Trout" Quintet: the one where the double bass carries the melody as the pianist gives a virtuoso performance on the keyboard. He took his hands from behind his head to play the notes into the air, and it was at this moment that he became aware of the silence. He could hear nothing. Nothing. He was aware of his heart pounding in his ears, but that was more a sensation than a sound. And then, in that complete silence, as he played his piano in the air, he could hear the notes. He could hear them in his head as his fingers rippled along the keys, hear the double bass by his side. Yes. He could hear the music perfectly.

And that was when the idea came to him. It was as if a switch had been flicked; he could almost see a little light bulb going on inside his head, illuminating his brain-wave. He would give a concert. A piano recital, but with a difference. An air piano recital. And why not? Plenty of people played

air guitar didn't they? There was even a World Air Guitar Championship Competition; he'd seen an article about it in the newspaper. Well he would play air piano. He would perform a whole concerto facing his audience with his imaginary instrument, and they, instead of hearing the music in the traditionally accepted manner, would interpret the sounds as he expressed them through his hands, his face, his head, his whole body. Goodness, he could think of pieces he could interpret with just his eyebrows. It would be a concert for the deaf principally – from the hard of hearing to the profoundly deaf – but anyone would be able to come along. It seemed such a simple idea he wondered it hadn't been done before; or perhaps it had and he hadn't heard about it. In fact, he could probably get a little group together, a trio perhaps, or even a quintet sometimes – he'd need a quintet for "The Trout". He thought about the dozens of musicians he knew, some of them old friends. Like Peter. He could ask Peter to be violin; he had the most expressive face Adam had ever seen. Peter would be happy to help out. And Sam – double bass would have to be Sam. With his long face and large watery eyes he'd be ideal; and he had retired last year, so he was sure to be bored by now. Then there was Sam's wife, Stella. She played the cello, he remembered; she hadn't played professionally for years, so she'd probably be happy to be asked. That just left the viola. Maybe Marissa would do that – she used to be quite good, just needed a little practise; anyway, it wasn't as if anybody would notice if she dropped a note here and there. It was only the viola after all. Marissa certainly knew how to convey what she wanted to say with just a look, so he didn't think she'd have much problem with musical expression.

His mind raced on, working out a programme, deciding which venue would be most appropriate, wondering about Arts Council funding, till the piercing strains of a Peruvian flute filtered into the chamber, breaking into his deliberations and signalling the end of his session. Adam stretched out an arm and his hand immediately came into contact with the door handle. He pulled himself up, pushed open the door and stepped out into the dimly lit shower area.

"And here and there he da-a-arted, as swift as swi-ift could be" He sang loudly as he stood under the hot water, scrubbing the salt out of his hair. "Was never fish so li-ively, and frolicsome as he?"

He hoped Marissa could hear him. ■

Bitter Harvest

SHORT STORY BY WILLIE ORR

NO. AND THAT'S final' He lifted his cloth cap off its nail and tugged it tight on to his head. It settled into a rim that it had worn round his skull over the years. Its peak was frayed and dark with grease and flecks of chaff had attached themselves to the tweed. He lifted the latch roughly and left the kitchen, leaving his wife leaning over the sink. Outside, he paused and glanced at the sky, narrowing his eyes as he tried to penetrate its mysteries. The rain was not far away. He would have to see to the milking and get back to the field before the hay that he had turned that morning was soaked.

'Spoiled rotten,' he muttered, looking back at the house, 'Mammy's boy.'

His nailed boots echoed as he limped across the cobbled yard to let out the dog.

'Away for the cows!' he said as she streaked out of the shed.

He hurried to the byre, pulled open the heavy sliding door and walked across to the gate. The cows were lumbering through a gap in the hawthorn hedge, their heavy udders swaying between their legs, while the dog was trotting leisurely behind them.

'Mammy's boy,' he snarled again and spat into the mud.

He released the rusted cow-chain that held the gate and hauled it open, dragging it over the cobbles. The hinge had been broken since last harvest. Another task he had neglected. It was all getting too much for him. He glanced up at the sky again.

'Hurry up, for God's sake. Useless bloody dog.'

He leaned on the gate, watching the cows ambling past, their hooves slithering on the cobbles. A small man with a face shaped like a ploughshare and skin furrowed by endless toil in the east wind that flayed the poor land he had inherited. Sour, sterile land with patches of rashes showing where the drains were choked. Yet he fought with it stubbornly, determined to bend it to his will, his twisted leg trembling when he lifted heavy stones from the rigs.

As he followed the beasts into the byre, he saw the dark cloud swelling over the valley, and he slapped the hip of the last cow.

'Come on, come on.'

In the kitchen, she stood with her hands in the suds, enjoying the warmth of the water. The tears were already drying on her face as she stared vacantly into the yard. She sighed and pulled out the plug of the deep sink, its glaze cracked and stained so that it never looked clean. She crossed to the range and, leaning her back against the rail, dried her hands. Her only son, James, stooped under the

lintel as he came through from the parlour. Too tall for the ancient farmhouse, which had never troubled his father's squat side of the family. Her son was like her people.

'Your eyes are red,' he said, snapping shut the book he had been reading.

'It was the onions.'

'He said no, didn't he?'

'He said he didn't want anyone snooping around in his affairs.'

'So I can't go then.'

She shook her head and her eyes filled with tears.

'Its alright, Ma. I will stay here. He can't manage the farm anyway.'

He put his arm round her shoulder and squeezed.

'I'll go and help with the milking,' he said and left the kitchen.

She tossed the towel on to the table, walked through to the parlour, and searched through the papers on his desk for the form. Cattle sale catalogues, bills from the feed merchant, an empty cheque book, but no form. Surely he would not have burnt it. It would be like him right enough. He had refused to complete the section declaring his income so James could not apply for a grant for university. She remembered the day his results arrived, how she had wept with joy and James had lifted her feet off the floor, whirling her round the room. She remembered the feeling of relief at the prospect of her son's escape from the slavery of the farm. All shattered now. Or was it? Maybe there was a way. A sacrifice she might make for her son.

He lifted the cluster of pulsing cups and plugged them on to the teats. At least the milking machine was working. As he raised his head he saw his son tip a basket of chopped turnips into the trough in front of the bulling heifer. They did not speak. Each knew their tasks, the monotonous ritual of the byre. The rhythmic suck of the machine beside him was satisfying. He remembered the days when he had to milk them by hand, rising at five to finish before the milk lorry came for the churns at the road end. Folk had it easy nowadays. The electric in the house, the telephone, tractors instead of horses. What did these boys know about hardship? Soft. Like her son.

The shop doorbell rang as Margaret stepped in beneath the low lintel. The woman behind the counter did not smile but lifted a sweet jar, turned her back and heaved it on to a high shelf, grunting with the effort. Margaret noticed the varicose veins in her legs and the little feet encased in buttoned shoes.

'Hello Minny.'

'Well, Margaret, how are you, dear?'

The old woman pushed her specs up her nose with one finger and studied Margaret through the thick lenses.

'I'm fine. If we could finish the hay, I would feel even better.'

'You have a hard row to how up in that place. My father, God rest him, said it was the worst land in the glen. Thin, poor soil on top of cold clay, he said. Cold as the grave, he said, no sun in winter and that bitter east wind in the spring. I don't know how you manage.'

'We manage, Minny. Is the farming paper in yet?'

'My father ploughed those rigs, you know. When old Jamieson had it. Took the old mare up and ploughed the stubble for him. I don't know how your man manages and him with a bad leg. I mind the day the stallion kicked him. Wouldn't have the doctor. No, not him. Hardy as they come, your John.'

'The paper, Minny. Has Billy Spence been in?'

Minny looked up sharply and then bent to retrieve the paper.

'How's your Jamie? What a fine boy he is. Great help to his Da. Just you wait. He'll make a go of the place yet.'

Margaret, avoiding her stare, searched in her purse for change.

'He's going to the University.'

'Is he now? Well, well. He'll be good at that too, though. Clever. His Da'll miss him on the farm. Will he ever manage without him?'

'We'll be fine. Has Billy been in?'

'No but he should be any time.'

'Thanks, Minny. I'll see you on Saturday.'

She lifted the paper and left.

'Can I give Billy a message for you?' Minny called after her.

'No thanks.'

She stood outside, her basket over her arm, waiting. Billy always came for his newspaper just before tea. He had men to do the milking and his hands were plump and soft like the flabby folds under his chin. So many times he had offered a lift and just as often she had refused. He had flirted with her at the farmers' dance, suggesting that they go for a 'wee run' in his new Land Rover. He could dance too, not like her man with his lame leg. She untied her headscarf and shook out her hair, allowing it to fall like a black shawl over her shoulders. She could do nothing about the frayed cuffs of her overcoat or the scuffed toes on her shoes. She pretended to be absorbed in the farming paper.

How she have been so wrong? How could she not have known it was there, the brooding silence, the bitterness? It must have been there. But John was great then. They sat by the fire at night and blethered, just talked. About the farm, the neighbours, the sales, the

show, anything. He seemed to be happy then. Maybe it was James that changed things. And yet he used to sing him to sleep in his arms, whisper to him. No. Not James. Maybe his long battle with the land, clearing the whins and bracken, draining the rashes, hauling out boulders bigger than millstones, ploughing by moonlight, cutting corn in the dawn. All for nothing. A Treadmill. Running like a race-horse to keep still. Not even still. Backwards now. Drains choked. Rashes returning. Beaten. Maybe that was it. Beaten by the land, crushed by the clay and the sterile soil. Too proud to work for another man. Hardy? No, fool-hardy. Stubborn.

She did not notice Billy's Land Rover till it stopped in front of her.

'Well, Margaret, watching your stocks and shares, eh?'

'Looking at the price of hay, though that wouldn't bother a big farmer like yourself.'

'I've no need to buy it in and I've offered your man the use of my baler and the new tractor any time but he'd sooner blister his hands building rucks. Living in the past, Margaret. Time to modernise or pull out. Anyway, can I offer you a lift to the road end?'

'You can. My feet are killing me.'

For a moment he seemed surprised but then the expression changed into one of enquiry as his porcine eyes searched hers for meaning. He opened the passenger door for her.

'Climb in. I'll just get my paper. Won't be a second.'

Why were her fingers trembling as she settled into the seat?

'You've changed your mind then,' he said, turning the key.

'About what?'

'About taking a lift. If I've offered once, I've offered a hundred times.'

'Things have changed. I've no choice.'

'Not much of a compliment that, Maggie.'

'That's how it is. I need your help.'

'You had only to ask.'

'I don't think so. Billy Spence never did something for nothing. I know that.'

'You're too sore on me, Maggie. I'm a big softie really.'

'Your men don't think so.'

'Bunch of wasters, trash from the town most of them, sweetie-wives so they are. If I didn't drive them, they would sit on their arses all day.'

'A big softie.'

'I thought you needed my help.'

'It's James. I want him to go to University and I can't afford it.'

'I see.'

James drove the rusted Ferguson into the ►►

Poems by Knotbrook Taylor

► field and used the buck-rake to sweep in the dry hay as his father built the rucks. The small man grunted as he plunged the pitchfork into the hay and swung a forkful on to the ruck, his lame leg trembling as he hurried to keep up with his son. A curtain of rain was creeping up the valley. Suddenly the tractor engine stopped.

'Switch it to petrol for God's sake.'

'I've done that,' Jamie replied.

'Christ Jesus! Did you not check it? You didn't, did you? Useless bastard! You long string o' misery. Go back and get a can of petrol. If it was work for your mother, you would do it right. Go on, for Christ's sake. Don't just stand there with your mouth open.'

John leaned on his fork and watched the boy running up the field.

He remembered Margaret when they were young. Together then. In the field, in the byre, at the mill. Even howked Swedes gripped in the ground with frost, kicking them out with their boots. In the sale ring too. She herded them in, the lambs or the calves, into the ring. Proud of her then. They all envied him, specially Billy Spence. Every farmers' dance he was the one, pestering her for dances. Stayed with him, though. But more and more time in the house. With the boy. Teaching him sums, reading books, excusing him chores. 'Can't do that, he's got homework.' Both of them less and less in the fields. 'Got to do his history' 'Got to learn his poetry' Jesus, what use is poetry when there's three acres to plough, eh?

He had never read a book in his life. And look at the boy now. Head's up is arse, in the clouds, away with the faeries. University! Christ Almighty!

She will remember the string vest and the hair protruding through it from the belly like a hog's back. She will remember the smell of his sweat, the taste of his breath, the sound of his grunts as he thrust at her like a breathless bull and his soft, plump hands squeezing her breasts. She will not forget the waves of disgust that surged up her gullet as his lips closed on hers and the cloying fluid drying on her clothes as the Land Rover stopped at the road-end. She will not forget, for she will have to return time and again to pay for her son's future.

Where was the boy? All he had to do was fetch a can of fuel, for Christ's sake. He finished the ruck as the first heavy drops of rain fell and looked round the field at the remaining crop. Half his work would be wasted. He stabbed the fork into the soil and limped back to the farm. It was raining. The heavy drops ran down his face and soaked his shirt. In the yard he noticed the calf shed door was open, the place which he kept for killing the sheep and hanging the carcasses to season. The rope hanging over the rafters was black with grease. As he approached he heard the creak of the hemp as if a beast were swinging from the ceiling. ■

Walmsleys

(a bike poem)

today on the road as I splashed through January's muddy puddles
past its bulging rivers and newborn pot-holes
I heard a clamour in the air
a thousand indecipherable arguments...
saw a fractured cloud: a troubled shoal: a splitting in the sky
more geese than I've ever seen: more confused than I've ever seen

circling: circling back: above the village: my village
it came to me that these were my ancestors: the Walmsleys
perhaps they were not arguing: perhaps they were lost
perhaps magnetic north no longer existed
perhaps heaven was full and they were outraged
at the loss of their entitlement

I tried pointing but I didn't know which direction: east or west: hotter or colder
I'm one of you: I'm a Walmsley: can't you tell? I shouted up
but I was too far away and they were too high

for a while they moved off to the south
but later they returned
well I'm here if you want me!
but the swarming Walmsleys continued to wheel
broken and unbroken

my neck hurt from craning
my hands were cold on the handlebars and I was hungry
and I still had a way to go
the Walmsleys, I decided, would have to work it out for themselves...

the little lost lambs of Ardnamurchan

ignorant of the-spat-back-plastic
and fishing-boat-floats-like-lemons
simply accepting as part of the night
the trawl of the light - flashing twice every twenty
perhaps I can hear their unhappy bleat
among the fallen waves and cracking metamorphics
I follow their tracks through in-for-the-day rain
I thought they might huddle at the Glendrian cave
all jammed into this crack-in-the-world
their vulnerable little bodies - shivering
little lambs! - little lambs!
just echoes: driftwood and tiny tiny hoof marks
they were here...

★ ★ ★

did they make passage round the edge of the head
where the path laughs as-close-as-you-can-get
where the wind's an angry widow
bereaved again - lashing out - lashing them down
the little lost lambs of Ardnamurchan

★ ★ ★

aaah!!!..... here we are at the foot of the cliff
my brothers and sisters
leached-beached bones matter-of-fact-scattered
no more nervous nibbling
little-smiling-pebble-skulls

*we were just trying to find - our way back home
through this dangerous life - this stone hearted holding
little lambs! - little lambs!*

Six Poets

Familiar

BY IAN CROCKATT

There's one for every poet; mine's a flamingo.
It refuses to fly, stands on its reflection amongst the reeds. Look,
its inverted beak becomes a canoe. It paddles the lake.

There were scores. When I clapped my hands
the others unravelled themselves from the surface's shifting silks
and rose as one frayed pink wave; but this one

refrained, just raised its head's question-mark, considered,
then declined the awkward gantry of its neck -
and stayed. I love the livid pigmented fluff of it,

the scaffolding of its legs, its mechanical knees. I imagine
we've more in common, I conclude that having witnessed
the sun bleed when it departs, and parting lovers

eviscerated by metaphorical wounds, it fears
flesh torn from reflection routinely scars; that therefore
it's safer disguised as this rickety water-tower,

this pink-splashed improbable crane. If I were its creature
it would plunge me to the bottom, beyond reflection.
I'd see nothing and fly nowhere again.

Fly

BY JIM STEWART

When thunder broke the heat,
the fat air burst.

This pregnant fly
squat with egg
droned in from the torrent
to muzzle through the rooms
that drew her there
and once in, to the window.

Then, safe against the rivers
sluicing that glass,
she made her fixed arrangements
in translucent rows of prisms
dabbed on the pane;
and so discharged herself
to die somewhere.

The pouring light
and the light of the rain
passed through the lenses she had laid,
whose brood would focus soon
its hunger for the odour of decay
no storm in the world
can wash away.

Romauntics

*(Robert Burns, d. 1796, aged 37; George Gordon,
Lord Byron, d. 1824, aged 36)*

BY JUDITH TAYLOR

Laird or loon, yir hert
can aye be brucken.

Ye can aye hae nichts
barren o sleep – scribblin awa, frantic,
by the flichterin lowe o a cannel-end

wi the morn's clabberin duties
aa ootbye, bidin their moment
tae come cletterin in like bailiffs.

Ye can aye hae fame
an' aa the naethin it has tae gie ye,
laird or loon:

the drawin-rooms,
the publishin-hooses,
aa the teem flirtations – naethin ava

tae set yir life on.
Syne ye'll be telt ye're ill news,
cast oot again tae wander.

Oh, whiles there will be bricht days
when the words rin like caller waters:
they will be fewer aye, farrer atween

alang the mirk road ye're beglamourt intil.
Laird or loon, God help ye if yir dark e'e
is the e'e she catches.

Laird or loon, there's nae mercy waitin
gin that jaud Poetry lo'es ye.

Baboon by the Keyboard

BY JOAN LENNON

Thoth
Egyptian god of scribes
squats on my desk
supervises superciliously.
He doesn't bother to show
the canines behind his lips.
Around his shoulders
he wears a mantle of ancient hair.
His gaze is fixed
on the middle distance.
He is
impossible to impress.
Thoth
Egyptian scribe to the gods
disdainful bastard
I'll get you yet.

Highland Cow in the Hills above Loch Long

BY JANE BONNYMAN

Your mountain head bobs,
as you pull at straw grass.
My pink jacket or awkward step
catches your great goggle eye
and you face me like a Viking,
looming out of soggy peat;
your rust coat blends watercolour
hues with amber leaves
and reddening hills.

You could stamp me out
in a hoof flick;
pin me to the lochside
with your crescent horns;
dung-slap me with your mighty tail.
But sun has the Midas touch:
she has glorified your turf
and you stand in velvet robes,
unmoved by my presence,
or the camera's staring nose.

Shade of an Ancient Apple Tree

BY SARAH ZILLWOOD

I am holding an old photograph,
black and white, early Sixties.
There is a boy, late teens,
quiffed hair, jeans, his arm resting
on a girl's shoulders.
They stand in the piebald shade
of an ancient apple tree.
Her hair blows in the breeze, curls
round the straps of her summer dress.
He looks at the camera,
a cigarette hangs loosely
from his smile.
She is gazing at him.
I notice that her feet are bare,
toes sunk deep into the grass.
They are young, beautiful, in love.
I do not know these people.
No lines of disappointment
have crossed their faces.
They are not yet my parents.

REVIEWS

**Site Works**

by Robert Davidson
Sandstone

REVIEW BY ALAN BISSETT

It's a distortion so commonplace that we hardly observe it, but British literature has rarely reflected the lives which most people in Britain actually lead. Given that writers tend to be educated and middle-class, the 'stuff of drama' usually won't revolve around the mixing of cement, the rolling of pipelengths or the unblocking of toilets. Not so in Robert Davidson's remarkable first novel, *Site Works*, which follows the travails of a group of men on a civil engineering project near the Black Isle. Look beyond the rather dull title, this is a vital, powerful insight into the existence of one of Britain's least-championed social groups: the manual worker.

Who speaks for the labourer? It's certainly not Labour, who long ago abandoned the working-classes to chase the votes of Middle England. Trade unions were hobbled by Thatcher. Artists, in general, have little experience of lifting concrete slabs in the rain, and are unlikely to be financially rewarded for documenting the lives of people who do. Our bookshelves and TV screens sink under the weight of detectives, lawyers, forensic scientists, royalty, venture capitalists and

beautiful, young Americans, whose worlds comprise the bulk of our cultural diet. Yet to the huge amounts of the population who rise early to do back-breaking or mind-numbing work this is a false reality. Writers like James Kelman who point out the obvious are dismissed as spoilsports, or embittered relics, such are the ideological pincer movements of the rich. Few and far between are novels like Emile Zola's *Germinal*, Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* or Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, which expose the ways in which the moneyed class assign exhausting or dangerous work to the 'lower orders', enforced by daily, psychological bullying. In Davidson's novel a building-site boss rebukes a chirpy loo-cleaner in the following way:

Don't do this again. Not only is it too clean in there, it's getting on to being warm and dry. It's too comfortable and I don't want the troops hanging about in there. Just keep the u-bend clear so it's more or less usable.

'More or less' usable? Suddenly those trade unions of the Seventies, who'd famously strike because there wasn't any bog roll, don't appear quite so ridiculous. They'd simply recognised that to keep men acting as sheep, you have to treat them like animals. Davidson extends

the point: 'The men were worse off than the sheep if only because they understood.'

In *Site Works*, dehumanisation is what keeps the whole system running. Decent labourers who take pride in a good job are sacrificed for men who work quickly but shoddily. Those taking an honest, taxed wage are pitted against 'grip squads', who take cash-in-hand and toil for longer. Wage differentials are a tactic used to generate conflict between the men. None of this is paranoid Marxism. It goes on to this day, every day.

Davidson's novel is confident in these politics, but is far more than tract. His project is to detail the mental and physical experience of manual labour itself, and its after-effects in the personal lives of the men. If this sounds boring, well, sometimes it is. There are long passages which describe engineering and construction work, which will be like a foreign language to many a reader (including this one), but these are soon recognised as necessary parts of the overall design. They add pinpoint realism to both the setting and the psychology, and the ballast of them makes the novel's various epiphanies, as the men escape their lives in moments of banter, longing, self-examination or philosophy, almost unbearably moving.

The author is close enough to the coal-face, as it were, to recognise that even those utterly trapped by work are forced to find

some kind of reward in it. Labouring, to these men, is permanent. Other features of existence – the ones which so entrance the bourgeois writer, such as love, sex, family and socialising – are exposed as flickering, almost illusory pleasures which occupy the scant hours spent offsite. For these men the only thing worse than working are 'the long, empty hours being out of a job brings'. That construction work has denuded them of an imagination with which to fill those empty hours is the true cost of their labour. It is little wonder that they find meaning in abstract concepts larger than themselves: football teams, nationhood, socialism, and the consolation that, despite the surrendering of their individual selves, together they are physically constructing a civilisation from nature's raw materials. Davidson's understanding of this is nothing short of revelatory.

Skirmishes with ex-wives, and the broken families which result from this itinerant existence, are mere sideshows to the defining issue of the men's lives: The Job. The desire to rest is always countered by the need to make money. In this book, Davidson has given voice to a whole class of people who are treated simply as figures on a balance sheet by economists, or peripheral stereotypes by other novelists. *Site Works* deserves to be read by the very men to whose lives it gives such beautiful attention. ■

Stroma

by Roddy Ritchie, Alistair Murray and George Gunn

The Islands Book Trust

REVIEW BY MALACHY TALLACK

Such is the grasp that St Kilda has on our cultural imagination, such is the ever-rising flood of books and articles about this one place, that it would be almost possible to forget that abandonment is a story familiar to all of Scotland's archipelagos. Mousa, Hildasay, Samphrey, Hascosay, South Havra and more: the list of islands emptied of people here in Shetland alone is long, and may yet grow longer. The cult of Kilda has, ironically, obscured the extent of depopulation in remote communities. It has concentrated a tale of two centuries or more into a single, tragic event.

It is a relief then to find at least one book published, in this, the year of 'Scotland's Islands', that focuses elsewhere, on a place much closer to mainland Scotland and yet much further from mind. *Stroma* lies between Orkney and the mainland, and belongs, administratively, to Caithness. In the nineteenth century there were more than 300 people there – crofting, fishing, making their living from land and sea. But now there are none. The last families left the island in 1962; today it is used only as a sheep farm.

Stroma is a collaboration between a writer, Alistair Murray, a poet, George Gunn, and a photographer, Roddy Ritchie. The book brings together their impressions of the island with the recollections of those who used to live there. It is a worthy project, beautifully presented in wide hardback. Flicking through, as one is always tempted to do with a

publication like this, it is the photographs that make you stop, halting your progress through the pages. There are seascapes here – two or three, perhaps – and fine portraits of the seven former islanders interviewed for the book. But these are not what make you pause.

What Ritchie has captured in his pictures – some in colour, some in black and white – is that most awful of beauties: the beauty of decay. Flaking scales of red rust; the brilliant blue-green of corroding copper; crumbling machinery; rotting wood; the weather-softened words of a gravestone, tilting towards the earth. Everyday objects are transformed by the lens into tributes, monuments to the hands that once held them. A tap, a spoon, a door handle: their very ordinariness adds to the pathos of these images, and provides an eloquent portrait of loss and the death of a community.

Perhaps it is the strength of these photographs that makes so much of the text in this book seem a little disappointing, even unnecessary. Both poetry and prose sometimes struggle to make their mark convincingly, and there is an underlying sense of distance in the words, which betrayed the writers' lack of familiarity with their subject (the book is apparently the product of just a single visit, lasting only a day). No amount of research, it seems to me, can make up for what is missing here: a genuine acquaintance with the place.

Alistair Murray's introduction, potted history and short meditation on the island's future in particular would have benefited from some serious editing. There are lumpy passages in the text, which sound rushed and uncrafted. On the potential for tidal energy development around the island Murray imagines "A scenario that can create wealth by bringing in revenues which can domino demand for local support networks", which sounds more like breathless bureaucrat-speak than thoughtful prose. And then there are the strange, clunky phrases and poorly-chosen metaphors that litter the text and that truly do not belong in a book like this.

It's certainly not all bad here though. There are plenty of worthwhile and astute observations, and Murray's enthusiasm for the subject adds sparkle to his prose. George Gunn too brings enthusiasm to his writing, and he does, overall, a good job of conveying the richness of community life and of the island's history. There are some great images throughout. I enjoyed particularly the portrait of "Dougie Fulton sucking the insides / out of a roll up / all nervous energy and boilersuit", and the "startled lamb" that "darts through the rushes / its tail flapping behind it like a castanet".

I would have liked more from the interviewees in the book – those who truly know this island – and a little less from the two writers, who do not. A more straightforward approach to the text might also have been appropriate, rather than the fairly unpersuasive tone of intimacy that Murray unfortunately adopts. But I suspect these changes would not have altered my impression of this book overall.

In one poem, George Gunn calls Stroma a "wordless island of ruin", and he is right. While we may discover something of this

place through words, it is the photographs of Roddy Ritchie that have truly captured the feeling – the sadness and the beauty – of Stroma. They alone are well worth the price of this book. ■

The Forgotten Highlander

by Alistair Urquhart

Abacus

Black Watch

By Tom Renouf

Little, Brown

REVIEW BY JIM MILLER

These two books are destined to occupy honourable places on the very long shelf of Scottish war memoirs. Reading them and recognizing both the courage of the protagonists and the brutal realities of war reminded me how military service occupies a special place in the history and culture of Scotland.

It is a very complex story, perhaps one we do not fully understand but one that begs examination. A remark I overheard on a bus arriving in Edinburgh on the day after the last parade of the Royal Scots before they merged with another regiment sticks in my mind. Lamenting the event a man said to the driver, 'They're takin' the heart oot o the nation, we've nothing to be proud o anymore.'

Is our identity really bound up so strongly with soldiering? Why should this be so, and is it an unalloyed cause for pride? There is not the space here to explore the subject but it has a long pedigree, stretching back to the Dark Ages and the warrior societies of prehistory.

Long before the Empire needed soldiers, Scotland was exporting fighting men. It has been estimated, for example, that as many as 50,000 Scots fought for different continental powers during the Thirty Years War, 1618–48.

Examining what lies behind this aspect of our history does not, of course, belittle the heroism, fortitude and comradeship displayed by individual soldiers. These two books provide ample evidence of these virtues.

At the Inverness Book Festival in 2010 I was asked to chair the event with Alistair Urquhart. Before we went on stage I ran briefly through the format for the hour-long session. A few minutes later on stage I introduced the author briefly and invited him to speak.

He rose, spoke without notes or any hitch for exactly the 45 minutes I had suggested, covered all the main points of his astonishing story without repetition or hesitation, and sat down to a spontaneous standing ovation from an awed audience. The queue at the book signing snaked the width of the Eden Court foyer.

No wonder. How had this 90-year-old guy with a twinkly smile, a mild demeanour and a fondness for ballroom dancing, neatly dressed in the blazer and slacks often favoured by veterans, come through all that?

As a 19-year-old, Urquhart was a soldier with the Gordon Highlanders in Singapore when it fell to the Japanese in 1942. As a prisoner he endured starvation, disease and brutality on the notorious Thai-Burma railway of River Kwai fame, days in the hold of a

prison ship en route to Japan, the sinking of the ship by a US submarine, recapture, and slave labour only a few miles from Nagasaki when the bomb was dropped.

The Forgotten Highlander has been a best-seller in hardback. No doubt this paperback edition will continue the run.

Tom Renouf's war took a different course. At the school in Musselburgh when the Second World War began, the first years of the conflict were for him a time of excitement and adventure.

In April 1943, when he turned 18, he was called up for military service. After training in Perth and service with the London Scottish in Sussex, Renouf was assigned to the Tyneside Scottish, part of the Black Watch and the 51st Highland Division.

The unit went ashore in Normandy on D-Day plus four. Shortly afterwards Renouf had his first-ever taste of alcohol – such was the innocence of young men from some backgrounds in 1944 – and also came under enemy fire for the first time, an experience he found 'absolutely terrifying'.

The first major battle happened a few days later. It was followed by the long slog across France, Belgium, the Netherlands and into Germany until the final days of the fighting in Bremerhaven, and the capture of Himmler.

I am quite sure, though, that surrendering German soldiers did not shout 'Nicht scheissen!' but 'Nicht schießen!'. This classic school-boy howler on page 174 of Renouf's book should not have escaped the sub-editor.

Renouf and Urquhart both write with a straightforward narrative style. The understatement is effective in framing their courage. The omissions are telling.

Here is Urquhart on the death of a comrade in the prison camp from malaria: 'Holding his hand I felt it go limp. He twitched for some time after he passed away. When it stopped I fetched the medical orderly and left. When I returned he was gone.'

Renouf won the Military Medal for his actions during the crossing of the Rhine and was commissioned as a lieutenant, occurrences that surprised him, he says, and which he mentions almost in passing. ■

The Familiar

by Gordon Meade

Arrowhead Press

REVIEW BY STUART B CAMPBELL

This is a troubled and troubling collection of poems. The title might be taken as an act of defiance for anybody who thinks they are acquainted with Gordon Meade's poetry, as much as it suggests a sense of being haunted.

The five sections are prefaced by a single meditative poem, 'Shadows'; and it is prefaced with a quote from the developmental psychologist, Melanie Klein. There is no obvious connection between the sections in terms of subject matter; however, there is an undercurrent that flows through the book. In the first section, 'The Swinging Sixties', nearly all the poems begin innocently enough as reminiscences about childhood experiences, but end with a disconcerting observation that

makes the reader recoil. This is not a negative point, but the effect of poetry that is unflinching in its honesty. The poems are not blatantly confessional, however, and it is left up to the reader to imagine, for instance, all the consequences of his mother "relishing my father's return" (The Penknife), or to ponder the ambiguity of "everything / my mother had planned for me" (The Queen of Spades). It's not possible to tell the extent to which Meade is grounded in Kleinian psychology, but the emotional intensity of these poems is such that they could be characterised as being 'oral-aggressive'. Meade's forthrightness is, nonetheless, tempered by an objectivity that detaches him from his child-self, conveying a kind of out-of-body observation – and in a couple of poems he describes how as a child he removed himself from his actuality.

In the 'Shooting Venice' section, that detachment becomes ontological dislocation. In 'The Four Horses', "Nothing here appears to be the way / it is yet all of it exists, real or not." The poet seems to encounter an uncertain world: "trees which, / down the years have turned to stone" (Foundations). Even the relevance of time changes, "the bells just mark its passing [...] not when or where" and in 'Nightfall' he becomes lost (or perhaps loses himself in the hope he'll find himself somewhere more preferable. Two poems here foreshadow concerns explored later in the book. In 'Il Ponticello di Paglia' the poet dreams of a dead girl and in 'The Muse' he questions the validity of one art-form while appearing bound to accede to the demands of his own.

Meade might be best known for having written extensively, and well, about the Fife coast and there is much to be valued in a poet knowing in detail his local environment. In 'We Live By The Sea', however, Meade confronts any easy assumptions the reader might have. Although the poems contain some expected images – seabirds, rocks, waves – they depict the poet struggling to reconcile himself with a land/seascape he knows so well. At times he seems to be consumed or overwhelmed by it, "truly lost at sea" ('The Breakwater and Emily Dickinson'). Here, too, the permanence of the poet's world gets altered. In 'Storm Tide', "the beach / itself, almost totally clear of sand, lay there naked / with its bedrock exposed to the wind and rain". That might be read as a metaphor for the poet himself; he sometimes seems to be exhausted by the act of living in his world: "If ever / there was a day for just getting through this is it". A breakwater appears as a recurring motif. It might be assumed that this has been a fixed feature in Meade's view of the sea and has afforded him some sense of safety. In 'The Breakwater and Healing', it becomes a defence he can no longer rely on: "Soon, it will be reabsorbed into / the featureless face of the sea". In 'The Absent Sea' he can, "see the breakwater / hunker down onto the sea floor, // almost feel it tense its muscles". There is a stark reality in the poet becoming aware that if his defences cave in, his world-view will be changed permanently: "Entire towns will be lost, cliffs / will disappear" (The Absent Sea).

The final two sections do not explain the earlier ones, but do provide a context. In 'Not

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► a Chameleon' the writer describes himself as "kin / to the original shape-shifters [...] impossible / to get rid of", but it might be as much the poetic vocation that neither he nor anybody else can rid him of. 'The Poet of Death' portrays the poet, "drawn to the gates of the hospital / like a vulture" and here Meade seems to be most uncomfortable; he continues by saying, "she should not have let him in". This reproach for using poetry as a means to deal with death is continued in 'The Estuary': "I take the easy way out and pick up a pen". In 'Midas' he reflects, "the deaths I have / encountered along the way have been / nothing to me; nothing but gold". The poems in the last section are concerned with the death of Meade's sister-in-law (though he avoids that term). For all that Meade writes, "She got ill. She got worse. She died. / These for me are the salient points", her death, in the way it generates the need for a reappraisal of life – these poems – has far more significance. Meade observes, "everybody touched by death / must first deny, then suffer, then accept" – there is truth in that. Meade makes explicit the moral question: is it right to profit (poems) from somebody's death and the grief that follows? Poets can only answer that for themselves. The honesty with which such poems are written must be a significant factor in doing so. Readers will recognise in *The Familiar* poetry born more out of necessity than indulgence. ■

From The Small Presses

REVIEW BY RHODA MICHAEL

Several pamphlets of new poetry, published across 2010, have been offered to Northwords Now for review. Most, maybe all, of these writers have had poems previously published: some modestly in small-press magazines; others who have strongly developed skills, more substantially; and yet others who, although they admit to only minimal previous publication, have produced, in their welcome new voices, collections that impress both for the interest of their content and for their technical skill.

Without exception these pamphlets have been well presented. The quality of the paper they are printed on is good and will outlast many page-turnings; the covers are attractively designed at a professional level; layout is crisp and clear – I have yet to find a single typo! Publishers are named, though two or three of these may be self-publishing thinly disguised. Most of them have purchased ISBN numbers: a further investment.

Some of these pamphlets acknowledge 'support' from various sources; but none of them mentions support of a specifically editorial kind. By which I mean someone who has literary judgement, who can advise on things like unity, coherence, and balance, not just on individual poems or passages, but also over the thing as a whole? Do publishers still offer that kind of provision? Such an input might have been of benefit in the selecting/ planning of some of these pamphlets.

What is the economics of producing such publications? Who pays? Only two of these

poets acknowledge support from funding bodies, one from SAC (awarded in 2007) and one (in 2010) from the Federation of Writers (Scotland). None of the others mention a funding source. Should we assume, then, that some of these poets have contributed to the costs themselves?

I expect that some among us have known the discomfort of having our offerings rejected by editors. To take matters into one's own hands may be an act of protest or of vanity; but it is surely also an act of courage. And also, I suggest, an act of value. It is a grass-roots gesture, an essential undergrowth from which new things grow.

Among the thirty poems in Gordon Jarvie's *Now and Then Poetry* (Harcroft, Old Bank House, 24 Castle Street, Crail, Fife KY10 3SH Tel 01333 451744) some of them succeed because they describe a lively moment eg 'Eagles or Buzzards'; or some touching circumstance, as in 'Walking down the Lane' where the unseen person heard practising the piano across the years never does anything but scales. Others reveal a boyish sense of humour, for example calling the family campervan 'Rosinante' (he puts a footnote in to explain the reference); or, as a lad, referring to his father as 'our father which art in Troon'. He enjoys making rhymes – poems such as 'Walking the Dug' are based entirely on rhyme play: 'stroll thonder/ tak a daunder/ time tae ponder'. He can do it also in French as in 'En Finistere/ elle gronde et rode, la mer./ Une pluie de fer/ arrose Quimper./ Quelle drole affaire!' He is not so good on rhythm or flow – he will pack in phrases to pad the line out and sometimes it can feel as if he has two left feet.

What comes over is that Gordon Jarvie is a lively sociable person who enjoys making these gently amusing verses and who has had the courage to publish them and take the risk of presenting them for review.

The Lost Garden by Hugh McMillan (Roncadera Press www.hughbryden.com) is a set of three pamphlets secured within a black cardboard box. The construction of the box is not without ingenuity; but it is also confusing – the title the reader reaches first is 'Scotland Revisited', after which there is a choice, either 'Scotland Visited' or 'Other Worlds'.

There is an eccentricity to this arrangement that irritates; and the irritation is heightened by the omission from the contents pages of these pamphlets of page numbering.

What of the poems themselves? McMillan is a poet of considerable and well-respected experience. The 'Scotland Visited' group offer bleakly vivid moments that adumbrate whole lives. As in 'Moonshine': through a fog of hops/ we sniffed the perfumes of a more exotic land/ and gazed . . . to the edges of the world/ . . . but when I last saw you . . . you were ready to travel light'. This feels like a wail of grief for Scotland. 'Scotland Revisited' picks up on what might be called the 'apocrypha' of Scottish history: the Templar legends/ the Douglas, astray in Spain, taking Bruce's heart on Crusade/ the advance of camp followers at Bannockburn/ Bruce and the spider.

McMillan doesn't set much store by any of that – but then, who does?

Also within the black box there is a fold-in single sheet which, when unfolded, is the size of 9 A5 pages and on this there is a map of Scotland with contrived place names eg The Western Isles are The Hi-ro Hairos; some of the west coast sea lochs are named things like The Keel Row, Stream of consciousness; the elongated Ayrshire coastline is The Thin Smile of Home.

There is wit, humour, irony in much of what McMillan offers here; but, dare I put it this way? – he has done better. But sometimes a poet may have to get something 'out of the way' before he can get on to whatever is waiting to be done next.

In *Watermark* (Christie Books – ISBN 978-1-873976-43-2) Sue Mitchell's is a clear vivid eye that sees the wonderful unexpected detail of human responsiveness, and she has a clear and vivid voice that draws our attention to it.

Consider 'The Red Arrows' as they fly up from an airfield just a few miles along the road. But it's not 'the acrobatics in the sky' that engage her; but what the onlookers do. Their cars cluster 'like a sudden rash', hands shield eyes, cameras are 'held in supplication', the arc of the bridge near Sueno's Stone is 'hung out like a washing line/ with an array of garmented bodies'. And then there is the most remarkable part of this event: 'occurrences of lone trajectories appeared:/ the deft, determined flight of small birds/ astonishing with their silence'.

She understands also the way in which abstractions like eg 'love' are grown out of an accumulation of small interactions: as in her poem 'Porch Light'. The bulbs in the lights in the porch need to be attended to. The ladder is unsteady, the light casings rusty. It needs the two of them to manage the adjustments, the passing up of the screwdriver, down of the extracted bulb. It's a love poem, it's a collaboration between two people whose familiarity has become a fine mutuality. And when he who is up the ladder asks her who is holding it to 'try the switch', the porch 'is flooded with sunlight.' Lovely!

Nalini Paul is a Canadian writer, based in Glasgow since 1994, and who was the George Mackay Brown Writing Fellow in Orkney across 2009-10. *Slokt by Sea* (Red Squirrel Press www.redsquirrelpress.com) is a pamphlet of 25 poems, twenty of which are a response to her Orkney experience – the wind, the rain, the sun, the sea – all the blowy, watery stuff.

She does the inescapable bluster of it well – 'inside the song continues/ a murmur of flagstones/ wet, creeping in.' She shows the encroachments of the sea: 'A wave washes us/ as we drive across the Barriers'; 'waves lash over the paved edge/ hands reaching to take something back'. Yet in all this wind and blown water she finds colour and surface: 'Sea – bottlegreen/ Breakers – white/ Shoreline – brown/ dark/ blurred'. 'The day is blue . . . we walk on liquid mirrors.' And in all this weather there are people, a friend on a blue

sky day in a blue van; and birds – 'geese in dyed-green muslin'. Colours emerge: 'The rain . . . dances the curve of leaves/ like pieces of yellow-gold paper/ from pre-school'. At first reading of the words the lines seem so simple, so light; but then you discover the detail: 'the rain drags its skirts into gutters . . .'. The year develops colour. 'Birds, starlings return/ festooning rooftops/ like coal-coloured bunting'. And follows the turning year again to 'browning fields . . . blinds drawn by nine.'

The remaining six pages of this pamphlet are reminiscences of her life growing up in Canada. There is a slight disjointedness, not enough connection with what has preceded them. They feel a bit as if they are an add-on to fill the pages – a slight imbalance. As if they should be in a different book.

I first came on Maggie Rabatski's work in 2009 when she sent in some of her poems to Northwords Now, and to come on some of those poems again, included in Maggie's first collection, *Down from the Dance* (New Voices Press www.writersfederation.org.uk) is a special pleasure, as it is to discover her work more extensively. Donny O'Rourke, himself a writer of wide experience, has contributed a paragraph of commendation that is so in accord with my own response to Maggie's work that I have no hesitation in drawing on it to describe the qualities of what she has written. He writes that she can

'make a phrase; find an image; evoke a mood; create an atmosphere; is technically accomplished; has an apparent simplicity; is powerful; discreetly confiding; intensely humane.'

Was it Paul Klee who 'took a line for a walk'? It's something like that, spare and minimal, that Maggie does too. Here's how she does it in 'Smoke Signals': since teacher training/ sixty years ago/ every Tuesday/ Jean and Nancy meet in Byres Road/ for coffee/ and a stubborn cigarette,/ So much to see/ so many changes/ so much to fume about . . . With her 'line' she leads you through lifetimes, a remembered past shouldering the poignant present: as in 'Farewell': 'a crush of dark coats and suits, full cast/ of a colourful life . . . your knack/ that made us forgive you anything/ intact . . .' and she remembers 'the cold air scent/ of your face, Gauloise tang, your mouth/ warming the streets from strange/ to intimate. My red dress with the lace/ collar, Madras curries in the Green Gate . . .' Or as in 'Message': 'I'm startled to see you/ here tonight;/ oh you look good –/ She brushes an imaginary hair/ from your shoulder,/ the sting of it/ takes my breath/ away.

More than half of the poems in this pamphlet arise from her life in Glasgow; but she is by birth and upbringing a Hebridean and she also writes in Gaelic, a few of which poems are included here with welcome translations. And she includes vividly loving pictures of life in her Hebridean past: her grandmother making black puddings, baking scones on the girdle, knitting speckled socks from scratchy wool, and, 'on Sundays/ black-hatted, Bible to bosom/ waiting/ as one of her dark-suited sons/ crank-starts the Austin/ for Church'. ■

CONTRIBUTOR'S BIOGRAPHIES

Jane Aldous lives in Edinburgh. She has recently completed a six month Faber Academy poetry course and is working towards her first collection.

Pam Beasant writes poetry, fiction and non-fiction. She lives in Stromness, Orkney, and was the first George Mackay Brown Writing Fellow in 2007.

Alan Bissett is a novelist, playwright and performer from Falkirk. His new novel, *Pack Men*, is released this August.

Lindsey Bone grew up in the distilleries of Speyside, and then on the Moray coast. She studied medicine at Edinburgh, and now keeps sane by writing poems.

Jane Bonnyman has been writing for two years. She teaches English and also writes stories for children. She lives in Edinburgh.

Ron Butlin is the current Edinburgh Poet Laureate. At present, he is finishing a new collection of poetry, *The Magicians of Edinburgh*, and a novel. www.ronbutlin.co.uk

Stuart B. Campbell lives in Portsoy on the Moray Firth. His latest collection of poetry, *In Defence of Protozoans* is due to be published in the summer.

Mikaela Carmichael is a student of St George's School for Girls in Edinburgh.

Seonaidh Charity is from Lochbroom and is 22 years old. He went to school in Ullapool and has just finished a PGDE at Jordanhill. Rugadh agus thogadh mi ann an sgìre Loch a' Bhraoin is tha mi 22 bliadhna a dh'aois. Chaidh mi dhan sgoil ann an Ulapul agus tha mi dìreach air crìoch a chuir air PGDE aig Cnoc Iordain

Ian Crockatt is a widely published poet. He is currently a student at Aberdeen University researching and translating Old Norse skaldic poetry.

Christine De Luca is a Shetlander with five collections (English and Shetlandic), including *North End of Eden* (Luath Press 2010). Her poetry has been

published in many languages and a 'Selected' won the poetry Prix du Livre Insulaire 2007.

Alison Flett's poetry collection *Whit Lassyz Ur Inty* was shortlisted for the Saltire First Book of the Year Award. 'John Kent Junior' is from a series of poems, 'Veterans', about people who fought in the Second World War. She is currently away from Orkney in Australia where she is working on a novel.

Merryn Glover is Australian by passport, grew up in South Asia, trained as an English and Drama teacher and now writes short stories, radio plays and a novel.

Robert Alan Jamieson is a novelist and poet, originally from Shetland. His most recent book *Da Happie Laand* was shortlisted for the Saltire Prize in 2010.

Joan Lennon says that the Kingdom of Fife is thought to be shaped like a dog's head. If this is so, 'I live on the tip of the ear, which explains a lot.' www.joanlennon.co.uk

Morag MacInnes is an Orcadian who has lived in Shetland, Germany and England and has now returned home to see what's changed and what's remained the same.

Ann MacLaren lives in Plockton where she writes plays, articles and short stories. She would like to complete her first novel soon, but her social life keeps getting in the way.

Catriona Maclean is from Ullapool, graduated from Aberdeen University with a Gaelic Degree and is currently teaching Gaelic at Wallace High School in Stirling.

Ann Cameron MacRae grew up fascinated with words and ideas and feels lucky that she works at the public library in Champaign, Illinois. On bha mi beò-ghlacte le faclan fad mo bheatha, nach mi tha fortanach gu bheil m'obair ann an leabharlann poblach ann an Champaign, Illinois.

Rhoda Michael won the 17th Poetry Life prize, and joined the Northwords team as poetry editor, both in 2001. She was editor of Northwords Now from 2005 till April 2010.

Jim Miller's books include *The Dambuilders*, *Swords for Hire*, *Scapa* and *The Foresters*. He is a Caithness man and does regular columns in north newspapers.

Donald S. Murray comes from Lewis but works in Shetland. A full-time teacher who is also a poet, author and journalist, his books include *The Guga Hunters* (Birlinn), *Small Expectations* (Two Ravens Press) and *And On This Rock; The Italian Chapel, Orkney* (Birlinn). His latest book is *Weaving Songs* (Acair).

Willie Orr worked with Tom Devine on *The Great Highland Famine*. He has had several stories published in the Harper Collins Scottish Short Stories annual collections

Nalini Paul worked as George Mackay Brown Writing Fellow in Orkney (2009-2010). Her first poetry pamphlet, *Skirlags* was shortlisted for the Calum Macdonald Memorial Award, and *Slokt by Sea*, was published in 2010.

Jim Stewart teaches Creative Writing at the University of Dundee. His poems have appeared in various outlets. He sometimes reviews for the Times Literary Supplement.

Owen Sutcliffe is a student of Wallace High School, Stirling.

Lorna Tait started writing poetry at the 'Find your voice' class run by Raymond Raszkowski Ross. Lorna lives mostly in Edinburgh, partly in Orkney.

Malachy Tallack is a writer and singer-songwriter from Shetland. He is the editor of Shetland Life magazine and co-author of *Fair Isle: Through the Seasons*.

Judith Taylor comes from Perthshire and now lives in Aberdeen. Her second pamphlet collection, *Local Colour*, was published by Calder Wood press in 2010.

Knotbrook Taylor is an Angus poet and performer, currently writer in residence at the Museum of Scottish Lighthouses. His latest collection is *Scottish Lighthouse Poems*. www.lighthousemuseum.org.uk

JL Williams' poetry has been published in journals including Poetry Wales, Fulcrum and Stand. Her first collection, *Condition of Fire*, was published in February 2011 by Shearsman Books www.jlwilliams poetry.co.uk

Christie Williamson is a poet from Shetland, a father of two, and author of *Arc o Mòns*, joint winner of the 2010 Calum MacDonald Memorial Award

Sarah Zillwood trained as a doctor in the Midlands and now looks after three children full-time in Dumfries. She has had previous poems published in Orbis and Southlight.

Hi Wireless

A NEW TEN-MINUTE play has just been released on the Northings website. Another one will be released at the beginning of each month, until the end of the year. Each one is by an author based in the Highlands and Islands.

This project began in November 2010 and was devised by Dave Smith and Euan Martin. They came up with the idea of commissioning writers here in the Utter North to create a ten-minute radio play, to be broadcast on the internet rather than conventional radio.

The first in the series is 'Shaman in the Kitchen,' by Angus Dunn, available as a podcast, to download or listen online. Here is the northings.com/2011/07/01/hi-wireless-shaman-in-the-kitchen/ (Or just Google it: t' Internet is up to the challenge.)

The other plays are: Iain Hector Ross's Harris Tweed and Golden Slippers in August; Gavin Humphreys' Gaelic drama Eireaball Na Dìbhe (The Hangover) in September; Phil Baarda's Piper on the Roof in October; and Jan Storie's Rinse Aid in November. After that will come the five-part series Morrison's Van, by Dave Smith and Euan Martin.

It seems unlikely that the name of the project refers in any way to Blondin.

Funding has come from from the Highland Council's Literature Fund and from HI-Arts. An excellent use of resources. ■

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Ewart Libraries, Dumfries
Gracefield Arts Centre, Dumfries
Byre Theatre, St Andrews
The Forest Bookstore, Selkirk

Edinburgh

Blackwells Bookshop, South Bridge
Scottish Poetry Library, Crichtons Close
Bongo Club, Holyrood Rd.
Oxfam Bookshop, Raeburn Place
Elephant House Café, George IV Bridge
The Village, S. Fort Street, Leith
Filmhouse, Lothian Road
The Forest, Bristo Place

Glasgow

Centre for Contemporary Arts, Sauchiehall St, Glasgow
Mitchell Library, North St.
Òran Mòr, Great Western Road
The Piping Centre, McPhater St.
Caledonia Books, Gt. Western Rd
Tchai Ovna Teahouses, Otago Lane
Oxfam Books, Byres Road & Victoria Rd.
Mono, King's Court, King St, Glasgow
Gallery of Modern Art, Royal Exchange Sq.
Glasgow Film Theatre, Videodrome, Rose St.

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