Northwords Now

Issue 19

Autumn/Winter 2011

A Father's War

Dunkirk Poems by Ian McDonough

John Glenday, Margot Henderson & Maggie Wallis discuss writing & wellbeing

Bàrdachd ùr le Alasdair Caimbeul, Dòmhnall S. Moireach is eile

New poetry and fiction including Sheena Blackhall, George Gunn, Jim C Wilson, Niall Campbell, Alison Napier & Robin Fulton Macpherson

In the reviews section: Angus Peter Campbell, Zoe Strachan and a stunning new anthology of Island Poetry

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Sigurd the Unworthy's long golden braids trailed on the rug before the huge log fire. His head was in his hands.

'The taste of this life is like that of gristle too long chewed. The wonders of Asgard are as a tale told and told again. There is nothing new in all the world.'

Tyr the Twice Delighted replied to his complaint. 'They do say,' she said, 'That in Midgard there is a place full of cantrips and trifles of delight to make the heart sing.'

'Midgard, you say? Can I get there by Yggdrasil?'

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Old Hamish MacFee trundled his barrow down Barron Tailors Street in Inverness.

'Whit have ye in there, ma loon?' asked Mrs Harkes, pointing at his empty barrow.

Hamish set his barrow down. 'Light,' he said. 'The last load of light today.'

'Whit fur?' quoth the crone.

'It's for that wee shop round the corner, in Drummond Street. They gather the light into threads and weave them into clothes.'

Mrs Aiberdeen nodded wisely. 'I kent weel there was a trick to it. But why d'ye walk so verra slowly?'

He lifted the handles of his barrow and moved off. 'It's not light, you know.'

Clothes made of light. Sounds far-fetched? Well, it is.

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It is a sad fact that Lizzie, the one-eyed prophet of Inverfarigaig, remains less well-known than Nostradamus and the Brahan Seer put together. Yet she foretold the death of the geologist James Bryce in the Farigaig pass. 'That man will fall to his death if he clambers about on those cliffs. You mark my words.'

However, the most fascinating of her tales concerns 'a practitioner of the hidden arts who will direct power through cables of copper, thereby bringing light and heat to the homes of both Highlanders and strangers.'

While she did not name this 'practitioner,' few people seriously doubt that the prophecy has come to pass in the form of Greensparks.

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Gaelic Poetry in Translation: Corp-criadhach/Clay-corpse

EDITORIAL

You will have noticed that this issue of Northwords Now is rather 'fatter' than usual. There's a good reason for the increase in size. We're very happy to play host to a special, independent supplement on digital publishing assembled by Peter Urpeth, Writing Development Co-ordinator for Hi-Arts. Stella Rimington, ex boss of MI5 and chair of this year's Booker Prize judging panel, may have described the publishing industry as akin to the KGB, but as Peter's supplement shows, there are plenty of 'free agents' in the Highlands & Islands exploiting digital technology to bring some fine work before the public. Indeed, if we also bear in mind Frances Sessford's article on independent publishers (see page 18), then the conclusion that we're living in an exciting, if at times rather fretful age, as far as publishing is concerned, is hard to avoid.

One Scottish writer with good cause to celebrate of late is Robin Fulton Macpherson, the principal translator of the poetry of Tomas Tranströmer, 2011 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature. Robin's work has been invaluable in bringing the work of one of Europe's finest poets to the attention of the English-speaking world. A review of the latest edition of Tranströmer's *Collected Poems* can be found at the Northwords Now website (Issue 18), and I'm delighted that we're able to showcase Robin's own very fine poetry in this issue. ■

Chris Powici, Editor

Northwords Now

A three times yearly literary magazine published by Northwords, a not-for-profit company, registered in February 2005.

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Front cover image
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Subscriptions
The magazine is FREE and can be picked up at locations across Scotland. See list on P23

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.
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The next issue is planned for late March 2012

The Board and Editor of Northwords Now acknowledge support from Inverness & Nairn Enterprise, Creative Scotland, Hi-Arts and Bòrd na Gàidhlig.

ISSN 1750-7928

Everybody Has A Voice: Writing & Wellbeing

Writing at Maggie's (the dog's still working on its novel). Photo by Wendy

What is writing for? A good story or poem can entertain, it may make us laugh out loud, or move us to tears, or even turn our whole worldview upside down. For the writer, the act of setting down words on paper (or a computer screen) can be a joyful release of creative energy, a determined pursuit of the truth, or the lasting satisfaction of having created people and places that live on the page. But can writing help us to stay healthy, in mind and body? Northwords Now asked three writers whose working lives embrace the creative and the therapeutic dimensions of writing to speak of their experience.

The Individual as Writer

John Glenday

"To me, writing is a way of showing others what a particular person feels, it's a way of communicating without having to speak out loud about things that you feel are hard to talk about, and at the same time, another person who reads what you've written will feel better because they can see that they're not alone with how they feel, or what they've been through. Writing, like drawing or painting, is calming, it's a good way of trying to understand someone because when they write they put who they are in their word. What I mean is that everyone has their own way of writing, and from their style you'll be able to see more than just words."

"…writing isn't healing for everyone - people are different, and therefore they all heal in different ways."

"When I was little, I started writing because I realised that I could give my problems to a character I created, and I could write about how that person could deal with it, which reminded me there was a way to stand strong against what was happening in my life."

Saé Starkey

(Saé Starkey is a writer based in Inverness)

I don't think I could summarise it any better than writer Sae Starkey.

What is the relationship between writing and wellbeing? The primacy for me is the writing, of course, never the therapy. Not because I don't believe in the therapeutic value of creative writing, I do, passionately. It's because that beneficial effect is most noticeable, I believe, when we focus doggedly and single-mindedly on the writing, and on the individual as a writer, rather than treat writing as a convenient vehicle for therapy. Whether I'm leading workshops for published writers or mental health groups, school children or senior school staff, I consciously build in the same safeguards of personal space, mutual respect, security, privacy and support. None of us can write unless we feel safe and ready to do so.

So where does the health benefits in writing lie? Here's a pick list of possibilities:

Writing is an expression of selfhood. It betrays the writer as an individual; the fundamental unit of humanity. Everything they write, irrespective of relative worth, is something only they could have written.

Writing together, our lives come together.

Writing is always its own end. The story tells itself through the moving hand.

Writing is a discipline. It requires concentration, focus, purpose, intent.

Writing demands that we set our lives aside for a while.

Writing is a great equaliser. Everyone is in it together.

Writing usually stands for something else. A poem, for instance, is hardly ever about what it's about. It stands as its own metaphor. In that respect, writing is refreshingly subversive.

Writing makes everyone equal and individual. Everyone has their story, their song, their poem, their voice.

Writing requires reading out loud. Reading aloud requires an audience. An audience tends to be composed of people listening.

Writing is solitary in effort, collaborative in purpose and communal in outcome.

Writing encourages us to look at the world and ourselves. I mean really look at the world - as if it had just been opened to us. In doing this we are perhaps a tiny bit more likely to fall in love with a little bit of the world, and ourselves.

Writing stops things from being purposeless.

Writing, to paraphrase Van Gogh, is our souvenir of gratitude to the world.

Writing allows us to redeem the past.

Writing is a form of self control.

Writing is damned good fun. ■

John Glenday is a poet with extensive experiencing facilitating creative writing with a number of Mental Health Groups. He is a judge for the 2011 National Poetry Competition.

Writing on the Edge

Maggie Wallis

During the day, I work as a speech and language therapist. In the past, this work was equated with elocution – 'teaching people to speak proper!' - as if there were a way of giving marks out of ten for how people speak.

I don't mind how people speak. I care about connection: whether someone can find a way - through speaking, writing, gesturing, playing dominoes, getting their nails painted, whatever - that allows them to feel connected to whoever they want to communicate with.

Usually, I work with older adults who, because of illness, have experienced either a gradual or sudden decline in the way they are able to communicate. What largely determines their acceptance of such change is how they are received by the outside world. It depends on whether the people they meet daily, believe they have something valuable to contribute, and will work at creating conditions that allow them to communicate what they wish.

A few years ago I was walking by a stream not far from my home. At one place, the stream was clogged up with larch needles and twigs. As I freed this blockage, I felt the energetic shift of the stream, its voice lifting and lilting.

This is what I can do in my work. I can help create conditions where flow can occur. I can open up avenues of choice.

I was given the opportunity to take my working skills into a psychiatric hospital. I noticed how the hospital environment stunted opportunities for connection. For large amounts of the time there was little happening in the open ward areas - like a theatrical stage, continually waiting for the drama to begin: a listless atmosphere. And we were catering for a group of people already struggling to find connection.

So, I and one of the occupational therapists generated activity in the open ward areas at set times, creating a hub to which people could relate. We did a variety of things - making bread, baking, felting - with anyone who was interested. People chose how they related, and to what extent – participating, commenting, glancing as they went past, or even ignoring. One woman began by sitting with her back to the group and saying nothing. As the weeks went by, she was joining in, making tea for everyone, looking people in the eye.

Because of the needs and interests of some of the inpatients, a writing group evolved. The group was nomadic, collecting interested people along the way and settling in a ward where someone's movements were limited, either because of their physical condition or imposed restriction.

One week, I turned up fifteen minutes late, somewhat hot and flustered. My organised plan went out the window. I delved in my bag, brought out an old walking boot and laid it on a chair. The area became quiet as, for the next half hour, we mentally walked off in our own directions, using memory, imagination and observation, to write as we willed.

And that was the point. This was an island of choice and freedom where we were at liberty to explore ideas, voice them and listen to each other. By doing this, we made connection, became a living community. We were not trying to resolve anything. We were owning our lives and exploring how they fitted into the larger picture.

This is a quote from Arthur Frank's book, *The Renewal of Generosity* –medicine, illness and how to live. He is interested in dialogue as a practice of generosity, and is quoting from Bakhtin here -

All that matters is the choice, the resolution of the question, "Who am I?" and "With whom am I?". To find one's own voice and to orient it among other voices, to combine it with some and to oppose it to others, to separate one's voice from another voice with which it has inseparably merged - these are the tasks that the heroes solve in the course of the novel. (p133)

There is something refreshingly sane about gathering with people who are living on the edge. No one pretends to be 'sorted'. Writing out of that place is indeed a heroic act, and it is where connection can begin. ■

Maggie Wallis flits between home life, writing, felting, and working as a speech and language therapist. As well as working with older adults, she helps run a writing group at a psychiatric hospital for anyone in the mental health system.

Being Ourselves

Margot Henderson

The Maggie's Highlands Writing Group has been running for just over three years now, which is pretty amazing given that it was originally intended as a 6 week short course. It proved so popular with the participants that it is still going strong. We meet on Wednesday afternoons for 2 hours at the Maggie's Centre in the grounds of Raigmore Hospital in Inverness. It is the lovely green building that looks like a ship. In a sense it is, both ship and harbour for people navigating through lives affected by cancer.

There is a core group of participants who have been coming since the group began, with a number of people coming for as long as it serves them. Numbers fluctuate depending on people's circumstances and their state of illness or wellness. Sometimes people are too unwell to come, sometimes they have recovered and return to work.

Sometimes people drop into the group for the day or over the course of a few weeks while they are attending Raigmore hospital for treatment.

I remember one man, who came to the group for a few weeks while he was waiting for his operation. After the operation, one of the first things he did was sit up in bed and write some haiku about the experience. Another time a woman came over to the mainland from Orkney for treatment and she joined in the group. She went back and told the staff at CLAN Orkney how much she had enjoyed the writing group. CLAN got in touch with me and asked if I would be willing to do a session with them. The 'session' ended up being a writing week-end retreat on the island of Westray with 13 women.

It was wonderful, nourishing and inspiring to be together.

So what do we do in an Expressive Writing group. One clue is in the title, 'expressive' writing rather than 'creative' writing. That's not to say that it isn't a creative activity, but that the emphasis is on self-expression rather than on the craft of writing. The main focus is on using writing as a therapeutic process to share experiences, perceptions and feelings in a supportive environment.

We begin every session with a check in round, where each person has space to say how they are and to talk about what is going on for them right now. That is a really important part of the session and often the issues raised provide the themes for that day's writing.

Some of the themes touch on aspects of people's experience of living with cancer such as dealing with pain, fear, insomnia, side effects of treatment and loss. There are so many losses; loss of health, work, sense of identity, vitality, hair, memory…

So we write about it, all of it. I might pick out a key word or phrase someone has used to serve as a writing prompt such as : 'when sleep won't come', 'I do alone very well', 'from the chemo chair' and 'on not being a nuisance'…

The whole group will write on the theme and there is always a huge sense of relief for the person who raised the initial issue, a sense of not being alone in it and the chance to share insights and perspectives with others.

Other times I might offer prompts in response to what is present for people. Often I will use balancing statements like 'what really gets my goat', 'my medicine', 'taking the lid off' and 'taking comfort'.

This is a way of encouraging people both to get things off their chests and to draw on what nourishes them.

Sometimes we touch directly on cancer, sometimes through metaphor.

It came like a comet from the sky.
I thought I saw its icy tail
But did not recognise the speed of fall.
It sits like a filing cabinet in the city hall
Needing a decision

Sometimes we might look at what cancer brings with it, a sense of the preciousness of life:

It brings opportunities
to find out more about myself
and other people.
It brings new people, new experiences
new places.
It also brings a new appreciation
Of the life I have.
It says, never be complacent.

Both excerpts are from poems in our anthology *Leaves From The Same Tree*.

We reflect on the group regularly to see how it is serving people and how it might serve them better. Here are some comments from participants.

It is a safe place to express feelings about cancer, to express feelings in a different way, to hear how other people see things and to share feelings and experiences with people who understand.

We don't always write about cancer, sometimes we think we should. We have a lot of fun. We laugh a lot.

It has been a chance to try out something I have always wanted to do.

It is a way of learning about different ways of seeing and writing.

It has its own kind of privacy and confidentiality.

It is a place where you can really be just how you are, no need to pretend. You just feel accepted.

It has a therapeutic aspect.

It is a support for moving on.

The group is ultimately about expressing and sharing our human- ness, about being with ourselves and each other with whatever is.

Like all of the Expressive Writing tutors at Maggie's Centres I am part of LAPIDUS an organisation who work with creative words for well-being. So I see writing as a wonderful way to both express and contain our feelings, it helps us get feelings out so we can get some space and perspective and it allows us to put them into form in a way that is meaningful, powerful and sometimes even beautiful.

Another strong influence in my work is Mindfulness meditation practice which helps us to be with what is with compassion. ■

Margot Henderson is a Scots-Irish poet, storyteller and community artist. She has a background in Community Education and has trained in Integrative Arts Therapy and Mindfulness Practice.

Weeds

By Derek Ramsay

There's one there, look
You'll have to bend right down
Squeeze it between your
Thumb and fore finger

My father wincing for the pain
Of his age, crouched down
Crushing the sturdy flower
Dweller of the cracks in pavements
Releasing the scent of pineappleade
Into the air, his fingers sticky

Smiling, taken with the thought
That something unknown
Throughout long years of certainty
Had now revealed itself as treasure

Derek Ramsay is a writerworking with Art Angel, Dundee
http://artangeldundee.org.uk/

Useful Contacts

HUG (Highland Mental Health Services Users Group)
www.hug.uk.net

Lapidus: Creative Writing for Health and Wellbeing
www.lapidus.org.uk

Maggie's Highlands Cancer Caring Centre
www.maggiescentres.org/centres/highlands.html

Bàrdachd Ùr

Samhradh
Alasdair Caimbeul

Aotromachd samhraidh
A' sgaoileadh 's a' suaineadh
Feadh anamachd dhaonna.

Uspag bhlàth do-lèirsinn
A' suathadh 's a' snìomh
Am measg fhlùr is gheug.

Dathan a' stialladh
Is a' stealladh air feadh
Phàtran ùrail nach trèig.

Aodach is nàdar air ghleus
A' snàmh ann an abhainn cho-rèir
A' glugail is a' plubail nan sruthan ro mhaoth.

Soilleir is sunndach
Na sràidean ri faram is fruis
A' dannsa nam feannagan glas'.

Baile mòr an Dùin
Le misneachd na fhuil, le eugsamhlachd rùn
Na chomar is na iùl

Do dh'iomadach smuain is càil
A theannas ri cleasachd is deò
A' sireadh stiùir is fàth sa cheò.

Am measg sùrd is spòrs agus sgleò
Air falbh bho àrd-theas na grèine
Tha bodach beag na shìneadh leis fhèin.

Ann an taigh beag dorcha
Shuas staidhre, far sràide
Tha bàs a' tadhal maille ri cràdh.

An èadhar sheargte is shearbh
'S i cho tioram na tàmh
Fuaighte le boltradh is deatach na pìob'.

Socair is ciùin am broinn clachaireachd mhìn
Tha beatha aon duine
A' dol na thanachadh crìon.

An anail pìochanach agus
Aog-neul na shùil
Nan cagaran sèimh ann an rùm dlùth a' bhàis.

Ann an glasadh do-shamhraidh
Fo sgàil dian-theas ar dàin
Tha balbhachd fhuar a' lìonadh a chuirp.

A' tilleadh gu cabhsair cùbhraidh
Ar latha, cò shaoileadh gum b' aithne
Dhuinn oidhche na dùdlachd is i fuar?

Lìonadh a chuinneanan le fàilidhean
Milis nan samhradh a dh'fhalbh,
Flùranach, faoin is faisg air a chuimhn'.

Gach nì a mhaireas
A thig fo threòrachd na grèin'
Siùbhlaidh e thar shreathan is mullaich ar n-eòil.

Aig deireadh ar cuairt san fhionnaraidh bhuan
'S e ar dòchas is ar ciall
Gun èirich grian às an smùr.

Sultain 2010

Dùil ri Fàs
Alasdair Caimbeul

Nuair a bha dùil ri fàs,
Nuair a chunnacas gucagan an sgithich a' togail ceann smiorail
A' cur cùl ri càs
A' gheamhraidh, is gach curaidh dhen eunlaith a' togail guth
Le duan is dàn.
Nuair a chualas an snagan ri buillean is bragan
A' drumadh 's a' gnogadh
'S an dealt trom mu phlanntrais an leth-latha.
Nuair a bha an talamh fo bhlàth
An ùr-fhàis,
Thàinig fios air bàs.

Gach crann is geug is gas
Is sop, gach sìon nan tàmh.
Ach fhathast ceòl sgairteal nan eun
Na ruidhle is na luinneig, na shèist gun èis.
Agus an clamhan gu h-àrd is faileas a' bheò is nam marbh na shùil.
Dùin do shùilean

Dùin do shùilean
Alasdair Caimbeul

Fairich na h-oiteagan a' suathadh is a' slìobadh do ghruaidhe
Èist ri sanais nan craobh
Gach cagar is sèist, gach siabadh is cuairteag
Gach duilleag air ghleus, a' chòisir ri siosarnaich

Fosgail iad is faic
Dannsairean uaine air bàrr gach gèig
Cumaidhean ag èirigh 's a' mùthadh
A' caismeachd 's a' tuiteam
Ag ùrnaigh 's a' mire
A' lùbadh 's a' tilleadh
Faileas is grian nan càirdeas iomarra nach eug

Fairich gach boinne às ùr fo do chois
Agus bileagan flùir cho mìn san fheur
Duilleagan leathair, is piullagan pàipeir
Stiallan sìoda is bioran nam freumh

Ùrail is lobhte co-bholtradh a' sgaoileadh
Fàs agus bàs suainte nad chuinnean
Fàileadh gach lus a' dathadh
'S a' soillse na h-iarmailt le sùrd –
Ùir thorrach air a fàsgadh à grodadh
Is seargadh à beatha fhàsmhor is bhàsmhor de gach gnè

Anns gach sian is dùl, ann an naomhachd a' phuill
Tha taisbeanadh
Tha dìomhaireachd
Tha gaol

Ògmhios 2011

Bàideanach

Pàdraig MacAoidh

Tro raointean reòthtee na tìre seo,
eadar-shiubhalaidh mi, a' seachnadh alltan
sgloigeach. Air deigh chruaidh tha mi fileanta

mar uisgean earraich nan glut 's nam briotal.
Ged nach eil fhios agad tha mi air corra-bhiod
trasd, thar na gìlead, digitigrade:

cha mhòr gum faic thu mo chlò air an t-sneachd'.
Ach faodaidh tu mo chomharrachadh
ann am barra-bhailc deigh 's adhair, anns na bacan

a thrus mo chròg an 's mi gam bhrùthadh.
Fàgadh mi tìr an ìmpis aiteimh:
tha fuaradh a' drùdhadh, òrain fad'-bhàithte.

Corp-criadhach

Niall O'Gallagher

Cha dèan mi corp-criadhach dhut
        cha nochd do chruth na mo dhàin
cha chuir meallachd mar a chuir
        na seann bhàird air luchd an gràidh

Thogadh iad luidheag bhon ùir
        an cumadh na dùilleag bochd
ga milleadh is boinnean bùirn
        a' sileadh 's drùidhteadh tron chorp.

'S ann leatsa tha d' àileachd fhèin
        's i gun fheum air m' fhaclan fann
gus a toirt don aimsir chèin
        ann an caint bhreugach gach rainn.

Chan fhalaich mi d' ìomhaigh òr
        cha mhair seo ach mairidh i
bheir mi air ais thugad beò
        do dhealbh; cum, a stòr, do bhith.

1961

Dòmhnall S. Moireach

Na balaich òg' a chaill iad fhèin
a' cumail cluas ri AFN
am Bun Abhainn Eadarr', Nis is Siadar,
Gàidheil is eileanaich gu lèir
cur orra craiceann ùr Ameireaganaich
a bheireadh dhaibh cothrom
Seinn fo sholas-gealaich
'be wop a lula',
'Go man go',
Òrain na Sun Sessions
a' putadh falbh
a h-uile *'Obhan Obhan', 'Wo Wo Wo'*
A bha iad ri cluinntinn timcheall
bho dhaoine cruaidh a bha
gun toileachas neo deò,
Gealach ghorm Kentucky
a teich' air falbh nan sgàilean,
's iomadh sgoth is ceò.

Tòiseachadh

1
Cha robh na caoraich
balbh an aineolas
an oidhche mus tug
m' athair a-null iad
dhan an taigh-spadaidh.
Bha iad a' dèanamh mèilich, miogadaich,
a' bualadh an cinn
air feans agus post,
gnogadh an dorchadais
gus am faigheadh iad a-mach
bhon an àite far an robh iad
ceangailte agus air an cruinneacheadh.
Mar gun robh fhios aca an rud a bha an dàn
sgrìobhte anns na rionnagan ;
na rusgan geal' mar targaidean
airson an t-Sealgair Mhòir Orion,
spuirean biorach Aquilla,
Saggitarius agus a shaighead
gearradh nan nèamhan le solas.
Agus mar sin a bha e
leis na daoin' againne
air am buachailleachd air bòrd bàta
gan toirt a-null gu feurach ùr
ann an Canada, na Stàitean,
Astràilia
Far a bheil an Southern Cross soilleir
os cionn talamh ro thioram
airson muilt is uain a reamhrachadh
neo bàrr a bhristeadh an uachdair
le beatha ghorm ùr.

2
Ghabh sinn a-mach aon oidhch'
sgròb Sgrìob Chlann Uis na speuran
is fhuair sinn
othaisg ann an trioblaid.
Bho chlòimh agus fuil,
shlaod m' athair na h-uain,
- Castor agus Pollux -
glanadh meamram
bho aghaidhean
mus tug iad cas-cheum
air talamh
mar rionnagan le reothadh.
Agus mar sin a bha e
leis na daoin' againne,
bristeadh chrìochan de chloich is inntinn
mus do choisich iad air feurach ùr,
na ceumannan cugallach
mus do gheàrr an Crann
gorm-an-latha
agus thionndaidh iad an glasach
a chuir beatha ghorm ùr.

Giùlan

Rody Gorman
(i.m. Iseabail NicAsgaill)

Thàinig i dham ionnsaigh mar aisling an-raoir:
Agus a' chist' aice ga giùlan -
Agus crois air na mnathan
Ged a b' e clann-nighean-an-sgadain
'S caileagan-an-fhuinn
'S caoineagan fhèin a bh' annta -
Gun ghuth gun ghabadh leis na fir,
A' luasgadh is a' tulgadh is a' turracail
'S a' falbh a-null 's a-nall
Air na clachan air ais don Rubha,
'S ann a dh'fhairich mi fuaim
'S cha b' e gàir a' chuain a bh' agam
No gaoir ag na cailleachan,
'S e bh' ann, air a chaochladh, òran-luaidh
Gu domhainn a-staigh na broinn
'S an uair sin a' dol fon talamh.

Easgann

Màiri NicGumaraid

Cha robh mi ach beag
a' chiad trup a chunna mi 'n easgann
ann an saibhear an rathaid bhig
a' sleamhnadh seachad bhon pholl bhog fhliuch
's mo phiuthar ag èigheachd
"Seall cho fada! Seall cho fada!"
gun earball neo ceann rim faicinn
ach an nathair ghleansach shleamhainn dhubh
mar roileag phuill dol beò
a' sglumhadh seachad
leth-shaoghal o mhuir
leth-mhìle o loch
's mo bhràthair mu thràth
a' dèanamh deiseil meudachadh
air cho mòr 's a dh'innseadh e
a bha i
anns an sgoil
nuair a thilleadh càch o thadhal
nathraichean na sutha.

Buinidh Màiri NicGumaraid do sgìre nan Loch an Eilean Leòdhais far na rugadh i ann an 1955 an Airidh a' Bhruaich agus far a bheil i fuireach an-diugh ann am Baile Ailein.

Poems by Niall Campbell

North Atlantic Drift

Laying together in a run bath
we'd think over the rowing boat
that neither one were rowing.

The evening berthing at the side
with its vowel song, and habit
of staying with us for a while.

Lit behind us, the hall-light
implying only where her breast,
her hip, undress from the water.

Some nights the swell and drift
delivered that same spoilt thought
of whether a life like this is long

or long remembered – the shirts,
receding in the corner shadows,
our first attempt at anchorage.

A Poem to Old Lovers Regarding the Venus De Milo in Transit

Crated it could now be a store
for anything – metal tools or plain glass,
or perhaps inside some ripe lemons
challenge the heavy scent of wood.
Boxed, closed up like this it reminds me
of those old books we take along with us
but never stop to read.
The white dress
slipping down her thigh, her abdomen
bare as a winter, all now a fiction –
as if that strange bow she would offer
was finally accepted by the nothingness –
as though, out of sight, she never really
happened – and this the Venus De Milo –
tell me, is this of any comfort to you?

Grez, Near Dusk

Just a postcard to say not that it has rained,
but that it smells impossibly of rain,

moths feed on this silk hour, there's smoke from chimneys
where families are preparing for the change.

Let me explain how the bowed sky is heavy
with the deep-song of that purple colour

and yet it's missing. But, stay, wait with me,
things will be different when the sun is lower.

Kindness

Ashore, how could I leave it there,
enriched with sweet potential smoke

of whale song, shipping lane, riptide,
never to be burnt, or offered

only to a summer pallet-fire?
So, this drift-wood carried home,

dragged and dried, left to distil
at a shed-wall, receiving light,

maybe, for three hours in a day.
Enough to set its gold tongue singing

as whisky poured into too warm a glass.
Its cracks, the knots in the bole, come to rest.

And thought to serve as nothing but itself
Or a post for birds; but from the wall-hook

But the axe head sings from the wall-hook;
so much depends on the length of winter.

For the New Forest on Islay

When, spared by gales, by gales and frost, their trees
first reach a summer of maturity –
the timber having served its apprenticeship
of groove and knot, and found itself in love
renewed, the ten or twenty times, their rings
with rings of another year – it'll feel complete.

Your locals taken by the summer and
that initial green luxury of pine
or oak or conifer, raised like a green sail.
Their finding of the forest floor's miscellany
of dropped things: brown leaves, old branches and fox-gloves:
their blossomed finger-holes from a missing flute.

The Tear in the Sack

A nocturnal bird, say a nightjar,
cocking its head in the silence
of a few deflowering trees,
witnesses more than we do
the parallels.
Its twin perspective;
seeing with one eye the sack-
grain spilt on the roadway dirt,
and with the other, the scattered stars,
their chance positioning in the dark.

Fontainebleau, May

Remembering, today, while you are reading
how in Uist we had gone too late to the bridge

and you could see nothing over the side
other than our own shapes spilt on the water.

Now, in the packed square, market vendors bark,
shout, loudly serve those, that in a basement shop

would now be softly greeted, softly thanked.
And I watch a mother float by our street table,

collecting hours into a small bundle at her arm.
You, despite, undistracted, bent over a book.

And here we are at the stone bridge again
me looking up, you looking down and through.

The Table

It was the one thing on the wedding list
actually wanted – pine or oak or elm –
planed and carpentered, but laid out recalling
its long treasured impact with the earth.

Once, perhaps, strewn with a shivering
of leaves - now decked, stripped, and re-decked
with morning letters, white plates, tea cups, the keys
to everything we have, and hope to have

for longer. And how, much later, we'll turn out
our last few lamps, and run hands over it,
read our brail of sittings: pocked, marked, dented;
what we had laid for us, what cleared away.

July, Snow Clouds

Back then, the thinnest boy in school
had disclosed how he'd lost a summer
spraying WD-40 on stale bread,

scattering this for the porch birds.
How he'd watch as mid-flight, or dive,
or song, they suddenly would open

from themselves like a solved knot.
My childhood earned disbelieving him.
This sky cold, quiet, he's recalled,

his pale hands, long as a night awake,
and realised in his father's shed;
white under-feathers in the air.
A snow-fall in the height of summer.

Eva

Short Story By Karen Bek-Pedersen

You must have forgotten something. This is your first thought when you wake up and open your eyes – that it is not complete and something about it makes you feel uneasy. There is a piece missing and you wish you knew what piece it was. You lie very still, taking up so little space in the big bed and staring into thin air as you put the dream back together again.

It was planting season. And you were doing the planting. Just like you did with the other children last year at school. All the seeds were in your hand and they were tiny, like carrot seeds. You put them into the soil with your fingers, one by one, and the smell of soil and growth came onto your hands as if by magic. And the seeds grew marvellously quickly. One became a dog with soft ears and a fluffy tail. One became a slender, silver candlestick. One grew into a tall tree where birds nested and squirrels lived. Many became flowers, delicious, dazzling, pungent flowers; yellow like sunshine, red like blood. None of the seeds seemed to become what you expected, nor what you wanted. You kept on planting until your hand was completely empty. All around you there were lovely things. Everything you once said you wanted. You kept on looking and looking. At first you wondered at what had grown. Then you began to doubt what you had planted.

Now you are not sure. The dream is crystal clear yet, hanging in the air above you, but you are not sure. Crystal clear and incomplete.

After a while you sit up in bed. The blue walls and white ceiling of the upstairs room become solid around you once more, safe and steady, and you look through the window to the cherry tree in the garden. Everything is normal, only deeper than it was – as if secret meanings have crept into the colours overnight. You slip out of bed and pad across to the window, silently on bare feet, polished wood under your soles, and the garden outside is green and dense. There are leaves everywhere. Flittering fluttering leaves. On windy nights they whisper and chatter outside the window. Inga is out there, weeding among the roses, and you watch her for a while, pensive. In Inga's garden things grow at normal speed. Flowers that spring from flower seeds. There is sunshine in the garden, sunshine and flowers and Inga. A fly is crawling on the inside of the windowpane. One lone fly, two dried out ones are flat on their back on the white sill, legs like little bundles of broken stalks that have lost their flowers. Then you open the window. One fly flies out, two drop to the ground in a breath of wind, and you feel the morning on your skin, soft and dreamy, makes you think of cream cheese from Inga's fridge.

The crystal clear dream has followed you out of the big bed. It is still around you and you feel as if you ought to know it all even though something is missing. How can you fail to understand it when it is your dream? You wonder whether it might have been someone else's dream. Perhaps it was here in this room before you were? Like the mirror. And the bed. You had been planting. The little trench you had made in the soil was neat and straight exactly like the one you made down there in the garden in the spring when you and Kurt planted peas and radishes. Although they were so small, you knew in the dream that every single seed sprouted and grew. This was very important. A failed seed would be bad. But there were no failed seeds. None that you remember now. Is that what you have forgotten?

You put on your skirt with the blue and purple flowers. Pull the white top with elbow sleeves over your head and walk across to the mirror. She is still there – as she always has been, the woman with silver eyes. She has not forgotten you. If she ever did you would probably die. This is what you think every time you see her. That she must never disappear. Ever since you first came to visit this house when you were very small the woman in the mirror has been there for you. For a long time you thought she was your mother's mother, that she was Inga's sister. Only much later did you find out that was not the case. She looks old and young at the same time and something about her is very like a mother. Does she know that you are so young? Perhaps she sees you as an old woman. Inside the mirror the woman with silver eyes dreams that you are there and that you look at her in the mirror, as if she is the one standing here in the room and you are the one looking out at her from the mirror. You smile. You know she recognizes you and it feels good.

"Kristina", you whisper. Or perhaps you just shape your mouth and think of her name. "I had a dream this past night."

She smiles at you and says something back. There are no words. You can never make out any words, although the voice is clear and bright. It has swirls in it, white and purple swirls like bramble jam stirred into a bowl of yogurt. She speaks as if you already know it all and you have a feeling that if only you had lived longer then you would understand. If you had been born much earlier than you were. She thinks you know. Someone else's memories. So many questions to ask. Then you grab the wooden door handle, the door creaks on its hinges and you leave it open behind you.

Downstairs in the kitchen Kurt is making bread. There are bags of flour on the table and he has rolled up his shirtsleeves. Now he looks at you and says good morning. You notice that once again he has not shaved. He rarely seems to shave and yet his stubble never really becomes a beard. This is something that remains strangely fascinating. It makes you look at him in a special way.

"Where is my father today?" you ask – as you do every day.

Kurt looks at you with the same slight puzzlement that this question always and mysteriously produces in him.

"Your father is still in prison", he says. Then he smiles.

When Kurt says those words you feel reassured. His voice makes you think of pottery, baked clay and nutmeg. You sometimes think you could believe anything if it was Kurt who said it. You have heard him and Inga talk about your father when they think you cannot hear them and then they always say Lennart. You find it makes him seem unreal. They also say 'bad seed' and this is very hard to listen to. You do not like the name Lennart.

You watch Kurt as he kneads dough in the big blue bowl. The lines in his face. Tiny folds in the skin right in front of his ears. The honey coloured hairs on his arm. You want to tell him about the dream, but this is difficult to do while he is busy and so you wait, patiently. Kurt makes good bread. He makes the whole house smell beautiful and you like to eat the bread and to watch Inga eat it. It brings pearls to her dimples. She says that Kurt's bread makes her eat like a horse on fire and she laughs when she says it. Strawberry smoke from her ears. Once the sunlight has crawled across the table and drops down onto the floor in luminous spills, Kurt puts the dough into three baking tins and begins to wash his hands in the kitchen sink. When he looks at you over his shoulder with the breakfast question in his eyes, you tell him that you had a dream.

He listens to your story about the planting of the seeds. You can see him thinking about it and this is a comfortable moment. The fact that he listens to what you say. Everything you once said you wanted. Since then the truth has melted and now it no longer matters. You tell him that there is something you have forgotten. Something important. He looks at you and nods his head. You say that forgetting is frightening. Then he and you make breakfast together. He drinks coffee with milk and you drink milk with coffee while you munch on crisp bread with cream cheese.

"When my father comes out of prison, can I still stay here then?"

Kurt says that there are many years until that time and that he cannot say for sure. Underneath these words, he really wants to say yes, but you know that is not the way adults speak. For a while neither of you says anything. You like it this way. Kurt and Inga read few newspapers and they do not need to leave the radio on at all times. Inga says they are far too busy for such time consuming activities and she smiles when she says it, a smile that makes everything around her titter with a sense of having been touched. Right now, the only audible noise in the kitchen is the sound of you chewing on crisp bread.

You think about Kristina in the mirror. "Do people disappear if you forget them?" you ask.

"No." Kurt sips his coffee. "They are not gone. You have just forgotten."

The words make you wonder whether he has understood what you mean.

"What if you never remember them again?" you try. "What if they are dead and everyone has forgotten them?"

The thought runs deep into your heart and it is heavier than stone. It only came into you when you spoke the words. Now you find it suddenly terrifying.

"You cannot remember everything or everyone", says Kurt. "Not everything is supposed to be remembered."

The way he says it makes it clear that he thinks you are talking about the forbidden topic and it makes your heart beat faster. You stop eating, glance at him without seeing him, your eyes big like full moons in the dark. There is only one rule and the rule is not to talk about the forbidden topic. Cream cheese sticks in your throat. He did not mean to say anything about it, you know that, but sometimes your skin becomes very thin. He leans over and kisses your forehead gently. Someone else used to do that. You put a lid on that thought before you remember any more about it.

"Forgetting is not entirely real, Eva."

Coffee on his breath. You look up at him. There is something in Kurt's eyes as he says this. A chilled colour. Not scary, just very clear, like ice. He allows the words to cross the room and settle gently in shady corners before he speaks again.

"Forgetting is just bits of memory that have fallen asleep."

Something in his voice makes you want to cry. Something about it seems to hurt, but you are not sure whether it hurts him or you. Are there perhaps more forbidden topics? Does Kurt have one, too? The idea has never occurred to you before. What if he also cries sometimes? The thought is far too big to handle all in one go. The smell of nutmeg on his voice and a shadow in his eyes; Kurt's tears. Somewhere off in a far distant place you find yourself realizing that you have already known about this for a long time, you have just not understood that you knew, that it was real. It hurts. For both of you. You swallow a mouthful of breakfast and overcome the tears.

"How can you wake them up again?" you ask.

Kurt puts his coffee cup down. "Sometimes they wait in a certain place and wake up once you return. Or at a certain time of day. Sometimes they fall into smells or sounds."

You think again about the crystal clear dream. You walk through all of it in your mind, all of it until the moment you woke up. The unsettling sense of having forgotten.

"They are still growing", you say as you dimly realize that this is how it is. It scares you to know this. All of those seeds are still sprouting and coming to life somewhere behind the world although you are wide awake. Everything you once said you wanted.

Kurt asks why the seeds grew so fast and you say that it must have been a miracle. Saying this out loud makes you feel a bit calmer. Big words do not have to be understandable in ▸▸

Poems by Jim C Wilson

The Visitor

Gravestones lie flat; abandoned casualties.
The tall wet grass moves over them.
A finger traces names in the moss,
finding out if they've faded yet.

The visitor has skin like paper,
dry-twig bones, and hair like snow.
She looks for paths, she pokes for clues
among the broken flowers and urns.

The grass gathers all into the ground,
covering births and names and deaths,
and deep in a handbag, deep in a purse,
a baby smiles through cellophane.

Caught in a snare of clinging weed,
the graveyard gates no longer move;
and the visitor can't quite squeeze through
to where the children play in the sun.

She hears their voices, hears their laughter;
she reaches out her hand to them.
The sunlight flashes on her ring
and a little boy plays dead in the grass.

Dreamlands

Your breathing is irregular.

Are you hearing again
your father's lorry wheels
scrunching deep into the gravel?
Are you waving goodbye
to your mother again,
leaving so early, riding
her bike to the marshes?
Are you drowning a little
as I stand nearby
and heartlessly watch
- as I usually do?

All these, perhaps, while I lie
here guessing, wondering
where on this earth you can be,
until once more I climb
those stairs and take my place
on the shining linoleum,
switch on the old wireless,
and wait, wait, wait
for a kind of fun to begin.

After The Readings

Fine words are spoken on friendship and love
then the poets retire to the bar; pints
appear and, in the gloom, the whole wide world
is put to rights (at least in their own minds).
That bastard's been bought up by Bloodaxe Books
and so-and-so's new volume is vile! Yes, sonnets
are back, the money's no good, and should
they have just one more drink? And The Scotsman,
they're sure, has gone down the pan; yes, peanuts
are fine, how's your glass? And as the clock ticks
on and on, a woman sits and stares. 'See
you,' she cries, Greek-chorus-like: 'You all talk shit.'
It's late and it's cold, there are hills to climb;
through moonlit streets, the poets sway, in time.

The Hoard

One slow
July a girl
took a jar and gathered
up dust from the sunbeams warming
her room.

That girl
believed the dust
was sunshine and hid it
away from all of the people
she knew.

When she
was old and cold
and on her own she found
that her jar was filled with nothing
but dust.

▶ order to work. You finish your milk and ask for more coffee. As Kurt pours just the right amount of coffee into your milk you find yourself wishing you could grow up really fast. Surely then you would understand. Then it would be complete.

"I would like to go to school again", you say when he places the cup in front of you.

"You will." Kurt smiles a stubbly smile. "Once the summer is over. Then it has been almost a year. But no one goes to school over the summer."

"Are the other children on holiday now?"

He nods. You see the forbidden topic flicker through his mind and it makes you shiver. The thought of all the children that you knew at school. They will ask why you did not come to classes all year and the thought ties itself in a tight muddle in your stomach. Kurt does not say anything. He knows that only you can mention the forbidden topic. Or perhaps he knows something more, something much bigger than that. You watch him. He sits there, oozing kurt-ness and kindness and nutmeg.

"Will they ask about my mother?"

You gasp as if a butterfly has just come out of your mouth and you can still feel the fluttering of its wings behind your teeth.

He nods again. You think about your mother. You see her from the top of the stairs of the lofty white-walled house you used to live in. And she falls against the wall downstairs. And there is a lot of noise. And she breaks her head on the bottom step. And you cannot move. Even when she looks up at you just before she forgets all about how to breathe. You cannot move at all. Then you blink and now you are back in the kitchen and Kurt is here and Inga is in the garden. You are back in their house. You are here, in this place, now. This is a good house, small and old, but it has been lived in slowly and pleasantly. Kristina's house. It has quiet happiness from bygone days in the corners. Your father has been in prison for many months.

"Tell me about Kristina", you say.

The smile on Kurt's face makes him look very young, like a boy. The shadow falls away. "Then we have to go out in the garden. The garden was where she most of all enjoyed being. I remember her best there."

'Yes', you think, 'we have to go out in the garden. And maybe we have to water the radishes.' You sit still on the chair, put your finger on a bit of cream cheese that has fallen onto your plate and stick the finger in your mouth. Then you gaze into thin air while Kurt finishes his coffee. Sometimes you wish that Kurt and Inga really were your grandparents. Then you get up from your chair and carry your plate with crisp bread crumbs across to the sink. Kurt puts a dishtowel over the three tins of bread. It feels good to clean the cups with hot water and soap and put them back in their place. Outside the kitchen window a spider has made a web and now it sits right in the middle of it, waiting.

"Look", you point at it.

Kurt says that it is a spider and you say that it was not there yesterday.

"Oh?" he says, not understanding why that matters.

But this is okay. You know he does not really understand such things. As you walk out the open door into the garden you hold his hand and he begins to talk. His sentences are short, but you know how to listen to his voice. You know it is a good story. It has deep colours and few words.

"Kristina was very young when she had me. So young she could almost not be a mother. But she did it anyway."

The sound of the words walking across his tongue and out of his mouth brings the dream back to you. You have not yet remembered. It is incomplete still. But here you are, coming down the steps to the garden one morning, barefoot. Kurt's story fills your ears and fills your heart and you sense something different – the smouldering beginnings. Kurt's warm hand. Inga weeding among the roses. Slowly, a thought grows in your head until it becomes so clear that you could say it out loud if you wanted to – there is a reason. Crystal clear. Kurt has a reason for telling the story. You look up at him with this new piece of knowledge in your eyes, but you say nothing about it. The strange thing is that he looks almost exactly the same. ■

Poems by Raymond Friel, Lindsy MacGregor & Julienne Thurrott

In Dalyan

BY RAYMOND FRIEL

1.
We gave up on the air conditioning
and flung open the side door to the furnace-
roar of air, tomb-opening light, a drop

from the ragged edge of the mountain road
to the turtle-shadowed, sun-astounded bay.
We were on a mission all right, on a high

leaning out too far over the chasm,
cold bottles of Efes doing the rounds.
Damp-haired from our dip in the last place,

we knocked the sand out of our sandals.

2.
Back down to earth, a drouth setting in,
we pulled up at the orange-seller's stall,
the only sign of life for miles around.

The farmer hailed us like a delegation
from the capital: pompous, irritable,
shown to the battered sofa in the shade.

There we sat with mugs of warm pithy juice,
half-intent on his oddly formal speech
about the state of his crops, the taxes,

the useless son he hadn't seen for months.

3.
You slipped away on the boat after lunch –
head propped on a cushioned bench, mouth open
in the single note of unconsciousness,

a glass of rosé tilted in your grasp
(a spirit-level, holding light).
Malevolence entered me

as I zoomed right in, and no sooner
that than shame, and then as you stirred, a surge
of new love, like a resurrection –

the unsung resurrections of the heart.

4.
Another time, we dropped anchor midday –
vapour trails, unlookable-into sun.
Time for your wake up call, shouted Erdem.

Later, you replayed my atrocious dive –
legs in a spindly splash to the port side
like the poem about the painting of Icarus,

except you lifted me from oblivion,
put the shattered water back in its place
and set me up: tiptoe in sunlight

like the god of second chances.

5.
I stood up and sat straight back down again.
All that would sustain me down there – air tank,
bendy flippers, leaded belt – left me ill-

suited for the *habitus* of the deck.
A step in the dark and I was in, breathing
deliberately, a space voyager learning

to breathe, then stiff-kicking, shaping an O
to my guide, moving through the shoal-darts,
hull-shadow, calm with it, until we dipped

over the edge into a stunning void.

6.
I dragged my sorry son around the ruins
because the imagined past is a boon
to the present and here in the agora

where the black goat trails his rusty bell
is where St. Paul might have addressed the pagans –
God is not far from any of us

(from the dice-players in the eucalyptus shade,
rattling dice in a wooden cup,
little more than a quick, cagey glance

at today's crowd, today's proselyte).

7.
Oscillating fans were duly found
and placed at either end of our last supper.
Beaded foreheads cooled in the new breeze.

Across the square, a hundred pairs of sandals
underneath the mosque's lit minaret
waited for their bodies to return.

Ramazan came out with bread and olives
and wavered only by an eye-flicker,
or so I thought, when the imam called

over rows of unbowed, uncovered heads.

8.
At noon the sun is the only emperor.
We lay in submission in the bothy
with a book and a beer, in my case

Waiting for the Barbarians –
the Magistrate of the frontier settlement
traduced and tortured until he is licking

his prison food from the paving stones.
So I was grateful for the sudden gift
of *meltem*, early today,

the sea-breeze shaking the trumpet vines.

Littoral (Machir Bay, Islay)

By Lindsay Macgregor

Stranded on an ebb-tide line
flanked by the sorrow horses
eyes like soul-holes
blanking a liquid metal sea
she'll do anything
for anything

Effie and Gibbie (Scalasaig, Colonsay)

By Lindsay Macgregor

Both eighty-six.
Him, hirpling on two sticks.
Her, shearing with bad hips.

No beasts of their own.
Just one fenced field.
The rest's sold.

Each day
more salt air
takes hold.

Corrodes.

Construction of the CPR Trestle Rail Bridge, Vancouver, 1889 as Heard by the Natives Living in the Indian Village of Snauq on Kitsilano Point.

By Julienne Thurrott.

They came from the Dancing Stars some say.
Drifted here
Through the dark and salty atmosphere
Like dirty smoke.
Then settled
On the sea and the sandbars and the silence.

From Snauq we caught the strange thwack
Of metal beating metal.
We heard them saw and chop and plane
The hundred wooden legs they staked across the creek;
Crude stitches on a new wound.

When conspiracies and disputes ensued
We caught the more familiar whine
Of voice beating voice.
Then we knew the wound would never heal
Only deepen and widen.
Till the wooden legs turned to steel
The stitches to scars
And only the ravens remained to savour the ring
Of a woman's heel striking a tram track.

Smiling Survivors

In Dunkirk Municipal Museum a photo
of survivors captured for posterity on Margate pier.
Under each steel hat
a haggard face, grinning madly,
terror screaming to get out
behind each widened pair of eyes.

And I think of the livestock sales in Sutherland,
the grime and the panic,
the stench of raw fear. Still, hopelessly I search
each face for something of my own.
There are too many: the distance grows and grows.

Each! There is no each, here among the uniforms,
platoons, battalions, random bursts of luck.
More than the population of your village
died around you in the space of half an hour.
There was little time for names, and only one distinction –
those who remained and those who lived
to stand on Margate pier,
their torn and weather beaten souls exposed.
Snakes and Ladders

Dunkirk to Margate, a small miracle of boats,
but not straight home – this was snakes and ladders.
Waiting in Sutherland my Mother and your kids;
but the coughing grew
and where you landed was the sanatorium.

You hacked up seven years, in Tornadee,
in fever hospitals across a country
lacerated by the scars that ran across its lungs.

And then eventually back to Brora,
pensioned off, working
illicit hours in the pub,
building a nation from your family.

Dad – I am on the beach you got away from –
and there are no Stukas, Panzers, Totenkopfs.
The sand blows off my footprints
Just the way it did with yours – I find a stick,
scratch 'Thank You' on the shore,
watch as it is taken by the sea.

13 Hours on a Dutch Barge- Dunkirk to Margate

There is an art to being sick at sea,
when the tug of currents
shifts your centre constantly;
all it asks is you surrender thankfully,
knowing you are not dying on that shore.

There is an art to waving the white flag,
to knowing you have no stomach for the fight.
to pitching your resistance overboard
in an emptying so brutal, so complete
you wonder what is left to hide.

There is an art to lying still on deck
among the half-dead, the half-alive,
clinging in your stricken mind to one last vision
of walking up Glengolly Braes
with Kate Ann somehow by your side.

There is an art to living on, eyes locked only onto the future.

Lipton's Van

Before this coughing armoured truck
you drove a rural grocer's van
steering bread and beef and preserved ham
up weathered single tracks to hillside homes.

Bunkered on this dreadful beach
did you hear a collie's bark
those bleating new-born lambs
in every private's scream
in the poisonous echo of the machine-gun?

There is a beach like this one back in Brora –
miles of flat strand – on summer afternoons
you'd lie down patiently
for the children to bury you in sand.
You are calling to them now – 'Dig me out! Dig me out!
I can hardly move my hands.'

Sea beckons. Between you and rescue
lies half a mile, a universe of blasted land.

A Kind of Church

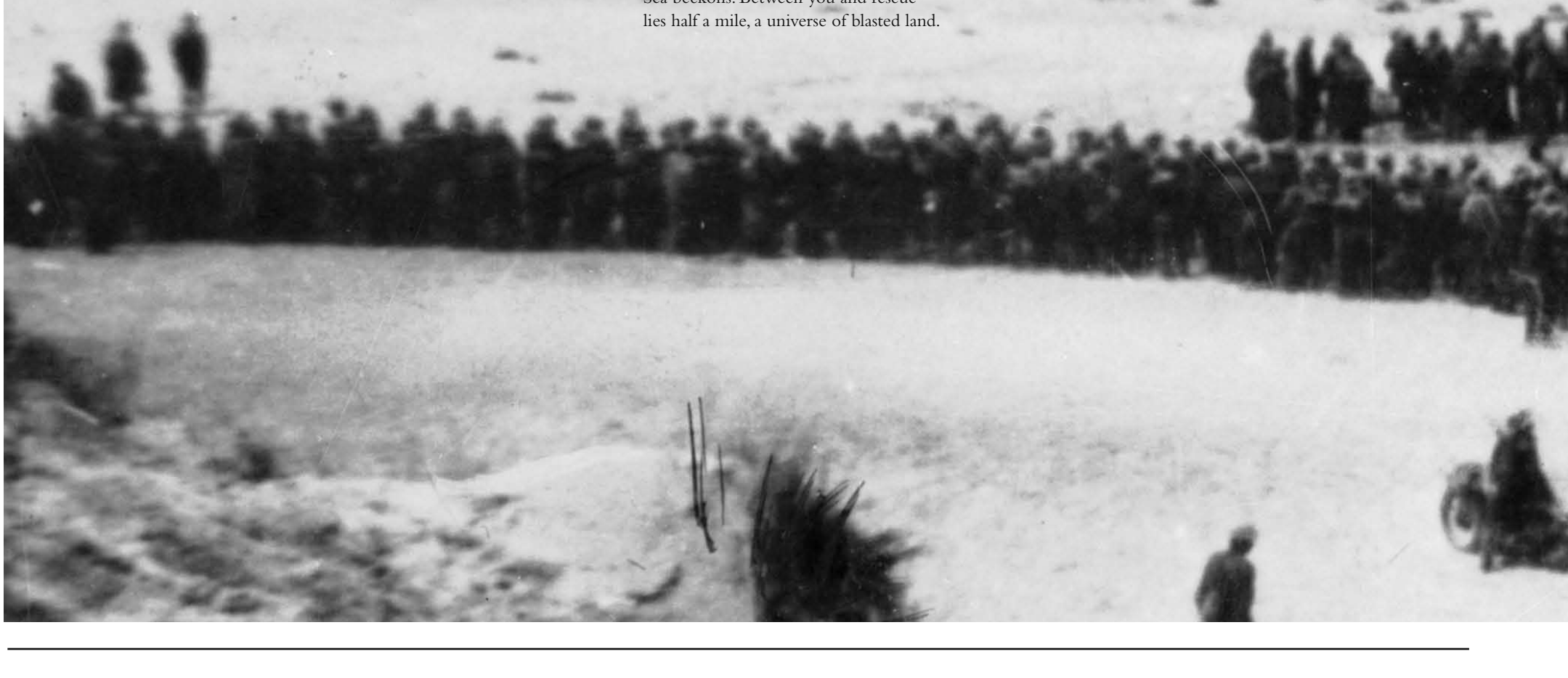
You had avoided congregations
but this was a congregation
although there was no praise
or giving thanks.
Cordite drifted on the Dunkirk breeze
like incense – all here prayed mightily -
not like at home where they might beg
to let their theft of Dan's best net be overlooked,
but just to keep a hand hold
on the slippery fish of being.

Stukas swept the beach, descending
in a long, unwinding scream
that five years later,
walking the green reaches of Strath na Frithe,
you still felt searing through your inner ear.

Bray Dunes today, a cold-clad November afternoon
and the sea shines hard as nails.
Ghostly thuds, a litany of phantom hammer-blows,
pillars of haunted dust,
surround me everywhere I cast my look.

Wading to your ticket out of hell,
that clumsy, flat Dutch barge,
you watched as comrades,
knapsacks stuffed with contraband,
sank under the indifferent waves;
watched your sergeant's body torn to shreds
just as his fingers gripped the rails.

A kind of church, this strand
where the slain lay careless of the weather,
bodies printed and stained
by the instruments of their despatch.
All there was left to do was trust,
to luck, to the deaf blind God of chance,
to a random outstretched hand.



Poems by Ian McDonough

In 2011 Ian McDonough was given a Creative Scotland Writers Award to write a series of poems around his father's experience of Dunkirk.

The Death of Surrealism

Shards of memory surfaced now and then
as though they'd worked their way
out of your mind like splinters.
A line of bombs the full length of the convoy
stopping thirty yards from your own lorry:
the rear stuffed full of live artillery shells.

Most vivid to my schoolboy mind,
you saw among the streams of refugees,
the winding lines of cars and carts and trucks,
a circus wrecked while making for the coast –
elephants rampaging, crazed among the hedgerows
their maddened bellowing
mixing with the scream of tanks churning the Dunkirk fields.

Hotel Borel, Dunquerque

After a post-lunch doze I'm busying myself,
for my sortie to the museum.

Camera, wallet, water, phone, book, map,
all stuffed inside my battered khaki knapsack.

It's fifteen hundred hours and I need to start
before the town attractions close their doors.

I have discarded my green apples, waterproof,
and the compass bought on impulse.

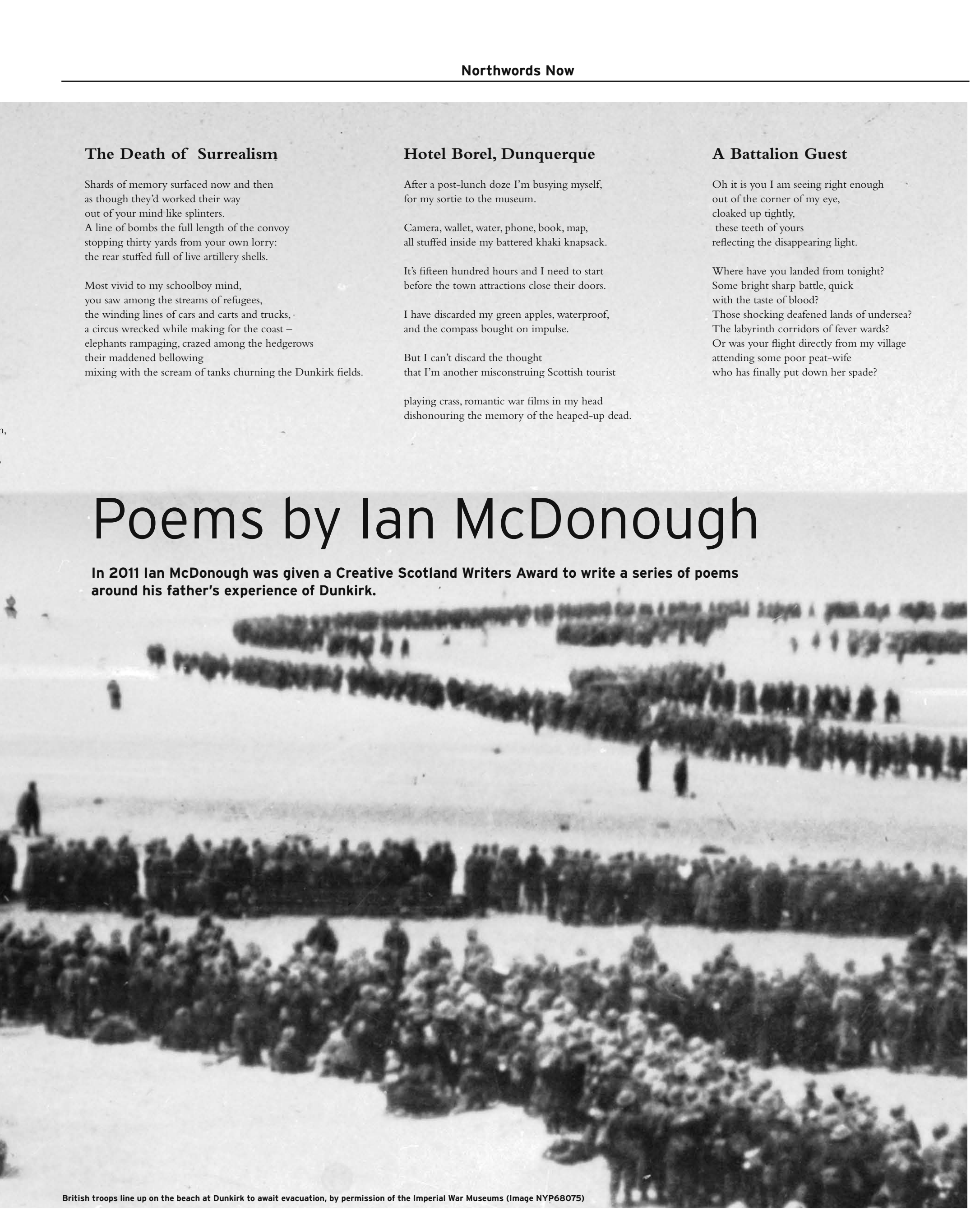
But I can't discard the thought
that I'm another misconstruing Scottish tourist

playing crass, romantic war films in my head
dishonouring the memory of the heaped-up dead.

A Battalion Guest

Oh it is you I am seeing right enough
out of the corner of my eye,
cloaked up tightly,
these teeth of yours
reflecting the disappearing light.

Where have you landed from tonight?
Some bright sharp battle, quick
with the taste of blood?
Those shocking deafened lands of undersea?
The labyrinth corridors of fever wards?
Or was your flight directly from my village
attending some poor peat-wife
who has finally put down her spade?



British troops line up on the beach at Dunkirk to await evacuation, by permission of the Imperial War Museums (Image NYP68075)

Poems by Sheena Blackhall & George Gunn

Animals at Large, Oban
By Sheena Blackhall

The salmon farm looks like a wedding marquee tent
Or a huge mosquito net for a Caliph's harem

The fishy banquet of pellets comes hailing down
An uninvited gull on the outside looking in
Drools at the salmon hedonism

Nearby on Sgeir Donn Island
The local Oban seal colony
Rolls over to face the tourists

Line dancing seals bob up black in the waves
Like little fat nudists, flashing their chubby tummies
With exuberant whiskers, Victorian and lavish.
They eye you up, then vanish in foam and spray

On the top of the Dutchman's Hat greylag geese from Canada
Rest like aircraft travellers, after a gruelling flight

At Oban harbour, peeled prawn sandwiches
Sit cheek by jowl with lobsters, fresh from creels

Mussels, crabs and oysters,
Langoustines (live or cooked)
Hang around looking shelly and hard
Headstrong gulls, slap the ground with their flippers
Forage and screech and dive, slick opportunists

The gravelly, shingly beach, ripples and rucks
Sucked by the tides, the pebbles like small, lost souls
Spat out by the weary ocean

A cormorant holds up its arms like a prophet,
Old Testament preacher of death and retribution.

In the whitewashed sky, terns swoop
Over the housed breasts of tourists

The sea is filling a dead dove's open beak
With foam, like bridal blossom

The Meeting
By George Gunn

The land has turned brown
a storm has blown
the Atlantic in from the West
there is no sky
only a grey conveyance of chaos
the light is flat
no ground is better cut
for weather than Caithness
gravity hugs the skyline
as the air opens up for snow
the sea consumes itself
at the back of the wind
& in the face of the Sun
I will meet you

Footsteps on an Island, Kerrera
By Sheena Blackhall

Following the star of time and movement
Walkers tread a path of many turns

In the aftermath of Culloden
Flora MacDonald came here as a prisoner

Whoever burns his backside must sit on it.

Quarry workers stepped from whitewashed cottages
Salmon fishers, weavers, and distillers
Millers and peat cutters all laboured here
Lobster fishermen supplied great liners
Shellfish packed in ice for Cunard's Queens

The value of the well's known when it's dry

A Hunting Tower held Hebridean chieftains

Hold back your dog until the deer falls down
The chief's house has a slippery doorstep.

The artist, Turner came to paint a castle
Beauty's fine but it won't boil the pot.

Ministers preached from sea stacks in extremity
Nothing can get into a closed fist.

At Cnoc na Faire, a clutch of childrens' graves
Hebrideans who died in Glasgow's slums
The grass that grows in March will fade in April.

St. Marnock's monks walked round in meditation
What comes in with the wind goes with the water.

Bronze Age Cists hold early walkers' bones
The moon is none the worse for barking dogs

In the bay lies the wreck of a tobacco boat
That plied its trade as far as the Caribbean.
A little hole will sink a mighty ship.
A wave will raise its head on quiet seas

Voar
By George Gunn

A hard Spring as Winter holds on
Balor has Lugh by the throat
lambs lie dead by the flagstone dykes
the snow is butchered in the ditches
a Beltane with a grey fire
smoored beneath the coming wave
of a civil war not found in nature
in the age of the fish
this time of the unborn
these frightening years
of gods & demons
the shavings of ideas
washed in on the tide
dragged out by the storm

Coming Into Kildonan
By George Gunn

The purple heather is frozen
& this only September
the birches are still
with the silver morning in their leaves
the harvest grass has halted
as if the season has stopped
to let the habit of time catch up
the river licks the calf-cheek of the strath
it has swallowed the sky
& returns it slowly
on wings it has borrowed from dragonflies
breathing ghost-like smoke
the bracken shadows itself in fading green
beneath the famous birches
deer-grouped & heron-shaded
like a letter all is enveloped by the hills
as the morning grows
the deer surprise themselves by being
herons crouch into tree-stumps
ownership makes even looking
toirmisgte
forbidden

Dulce Et Decorum Est Pro Patri Mari Ya Bass
By George Gunn

The frosty Winter mist hangs above the river
the flood has gone
& left the cemetery bridge
dog-legged on the western bank
so they rise up
those who lay down at the Somme
those who tanned & died with Monty in the desert
silently they mingle with the frost
I see Mackay march towards me
his pockets full of hands
his breath half smoke & whisky
he does not see me or the frozen trees
in the paper he has seen the TA reading "The Groat"
sandbagged like reason into their Basra base

the thin snow whisking in whispers
as it moves in off the ocean

Stones

Short Story By Alison Napier

Vicious little hailstones in the northeast wind stinging our faces, tugging at our thin anorak hoods and leaving us exposed and weather blasted. It was days since we had been warm. Jamie was being brave again but kept stopping without warning. He refuses to talk and walk simultaneously.

"Can we go again tomorrow? I was good. Wasn't I good?"

"Six next time and right to America. Come on," I yelled over my shoulder.

"Seven! Fifty! A thousand!"

But the wind blew his ambitions away.

"Move, Jamie. We're nearly there."

Heads down and eyes screwed up we had battled the mile or so from the reservoir on the footpath that skirted the restless Blackies Wood and along the car-lined residential streets, televisions flickering behind curtains, hurrying on to the beach end of the town with its rows of battened-down No Vacancies guest houses and deserted cafes full of stacked chairs and plastic forks.

We were drenched and shivering. The wooden gate by the shore was swinging hopelessly on a broken hinge and I paused to reattach the loop of rope, stiff with sand and brine, before hurrying us along the rutted track and past the pale ghost-ship shapes of a dozen static caravans. Ours was second from the end, a stone's throw from the dunes, and next to Isaac the commis chef at the Harbour Inn. When Isaac asks Jamie something, Jamie says 'Yes chef sorry chef' before he answers. Jamie watches too much television.

I pushed us inside and slammed the door. The wind was muffled now and the rattling hail on the roof drowned the sound of my cursing as rain dripped from our clothes into the carpet. Moving quickly, I switched on all the lights and both the heaters, filled the kettle and put bread in the toaster. We did not take off our anoraks.

Jamie crouched in front of the ineffectual gas fire and began arranging small flat stones in a spiral on the beige swirls of the carpet.

"Isaac says that starlings are little stars that have lost their way. He saw a billion trillion of them all dancing together above Blackie's Wood on a magic carpet."

This was classic Isaac. I would often make him out through our permanently steamed up caravan windows between his restaurant shifts in the afternoon, a shape hunched over his banjo, concentrating and frowning, dreaming perhaps of faraway prairies and faded denim skies and blue horizons, far away from scampi and chips and daily specials. Yes chef sorry chef. Someone's in the kitchen I know I know. But little dancing stars. Oh, yes please to that one.

"Toast teeth bed story sleep. Sound like a plan?"

But the child was already asleep, an arm still in its sodden jacket circling the stones, another stain on the carpet. I carried him to bed, tiptoeing so that the cooker would not rattle and back in the sitting room I wriggled into my sleeping bag and sat in the dark and ate toast like a caterpillar at a leaf, until the wind eased and the hail turned to rain and Isaac crept back from his deep fat fryer. I hugged my radio and listened to the news and the weather and the shipping forecast. Warnings of gales, Shannon and Biscay.

It was still dark when the storm dragged me awake. The caravan was straining and tugging at its coiled wire tethers, like a hungry beast on a chain, and the plates and mugs rattled in the thin plywood cupboards. Weather was flinging itself against the flimsy walls and ill-fitting windows. I sat up, pulling the sleeping bag hood over my head and slid the toggle right under my chin, cocooned as a burns victim. I eased my encased feet onto the carpet, scattering Jamie's spiral, and remained hunched, frozen, waiting, until a feeble light showed through the curtains and scared away the dark.

I pushed off the sleeping bag, appalled at the temperature. "Jesus Jesus," I muttered and pulled on yesterday's clammy clothes and boots and anorak. The chill pierced the soles of my feet and wrapped itself around my wrists and neck. I crept out of the caravan. My jacket immediately rippled and slapped at me, urgent as a mainsail. Sand blown off course from the dunes smouldered as if alive against the rotting plank windbreaks round the caravans and red and rusting gas cylinders loomed out of the bitter dawn like wounded wanderers in a desert. Grit blew into my mouth and my eyes and leaning into the wind I picked my way across the campsite to the beach. The rain eased to a fine mist and the North Sea, endless in its mourning grey, watched me as I gathered flat pebbles. But there were whisperings that I did not like in the whipping wind and spies behind the spiky marram grass in the shifting sandscape so I turned and fought my way back to the caravan.

Jamie was up and clutched a gnawed lump of orange cheese in his fist. He was crouched in front of the unlit fire, a navy blanket round his shoulders, an angry raven.

"It's all spoiled," he muttered, pushing at the stones.

"No it's not. We'll do it again. Look." His mood had changed in the night and I glimpsed the man he would become.

I knelt down and began to gather the scattered pebbles, arranging them again and feeling foolish and then annoyed. I had been saving the cheddar for macaroni cheese tonight and now I would have to think of something else. I was hungry too and stretched out a hand for the last of the cheese but Jamie moved it away and stuffed it into his mouth. He swallowed hard and his face went red.

"You spoiled it. I hate it here. There's no food and my clothes feel foggy."

He was crying now, his expression far too bleak for a nine year old. I moved nearer to the unhappy boy and held him against my windswept heart and we sat together, swaying and lost to each other, until the storm passed. Later, we heard the distant stumbling strums of a banjo, the call of another misplaced soul who wished he could be somewhere else. Isaac had learnt some minor chords and the wind had caught them and slid them under our door as surreptitiously as a court summons. Jamie moved away from me and sniffed. He knelt by the steamed-up window and wiped it with his sleeve.

"If I didn't go to school we could practice with the stones again," he said after a while. "I could get to ten bounces."

"He would borrow a van, he said, we could go together. There were so many reasons why this was impossible and I spoke none of them aloud. It was many months away."

"It's Saturday, Jamie. We can practice as much as you want."

I swallowed grains of sand. I offered crumbs. I said,

"And then we'll go to Isaac's restaurant and have fish and chips."

"And you'll have salad and I'll have ketchup!" said Jamie, turning from the window and almost looking at me.

"And I'll steal your chips until you have a spoonful of lettuce."

"NO!" he shouted, laughing now.

The sun had come out again.

Isaac had once worked a season in a hotel in Gairloch and he had told Jamie about the stone skimming competition held every year at Easdale. For two months now Jamie had been practising to become under-16 world champion and every evening after school and for hours at weekends he threw flat stones, crouching low on the shingle at the edge of the bay when the water was still. When the sea was too rough he filled his pockets with flat pebbles and walked round the edge of the town to the reservoir and stood on the dam, throwing his stones until they had all bounced into oblivion. Out in all weathers, my goretex boy. Defeated by guilt for the life we were living I had agreed to a trip north for the event in September and Isaac had said he would tag along and meet up with old mates. He would borrow a van, he said, we could go together. There were so many reasons why this was impossible and I spoke none of them aloud. It was many months away.

We stayed in the caravan all morning until the weather improved, Jamie watching cartoons on television while I hoovered and dusted around him and then after toast and a banana we walked to the beach for stones that we carried in plastic bags all the way to the reservoir and Jamie skimmed them across the water until they were all gone. I walked back and forwards along the dam to keep warm, imagining cracks in the construction and drowned villages.

The lounge of the Harbour Inn was already busy at quarter to five and we sat down at a little round table near the bar. Jamie was perched on a maroon velvet stool. Glasses had left white rings on the wooden table-top. A barmaid brought us cutlery wrapped in red paper napkins and put salt and pepper and a sugar bowl stuffed with sachets of sauces on a square raffia mat in front of us. There was a log fire near our table and I could feel its heat on my legs. Jamie pulled off his sweater and passed it to me and I saw he still had on his Nintendo pyjama top. A group of men in ironed rugby shirts and chinos leant against the bar and laughed and argued with each other. There were couples drinking at other tables. No one else was eating yet. I went up to the counter to order and the men made a space for me.

"Yes, the haddock and chips please, and a toasted cheese sandwich. With salad. And two cokes."

When it came Jamie ignored my sandwich, and I looked longingly at his fish and chips which he started eating immediately with his fingers. I slid his cutlery across the table and got two chips off him while he gnawed at a ketchup sachet to puncture it and he nibbled at a disc of cucumber and a shred of iceberg lettuce, pulling faces. I had saved three pounds.

When the barmaid came and took the plates away I asked her if Isaac was on duty tonight.

"Oh, Zak you mean. Well yes he should have been but someone, Terry it was, he said he'd left, he was down for four to ten but didn't come in for breakfasts either. Do you know him then?"

Jamie was starting to speak and I said, "Not really, he lives near us that's all. Thanks."

▸▸

"Waste of bloody space. Sorry, shouldn't say that. Can I get you anything else?"

She returned with our order and Jamie chattered about stones and world records and how he would find the best flattest skimmiest stone ever and take it to Easdale in the summer and how when he won they would put the winning stone in an engraved glass case like the school trophies, only they would have to dive and find it as it would be sunk and a thousand skims away, so first he would put his initials on it with a blue marker pen so they would know it was his on the sea bed. I listened and watched him spooning chocolate ice-cream into his mouth, his thin elbow sticking out and his head down close to the plate, and I placed my coffee cup carefully back onto its circle of embossed paper on the saucer. Rombouts. Jamie would miss him. I would miss the banjo. And someone else would be told lies about starlings. Jamie would really miss him. I was putting off leaving the warmth of the bar.

It was nearly eight when we got back and there was a dark van parked between the end two caravans, his and ours. Its rear doors were open and swinging and banging in the wind and Isaac, in his flapping leather coat and with a woolly hat pulled low over his forehead was loading cardboard boxes and stuffed black bin bags into the back.

"We went to the Harbour for our tea," I said, going over to the van. "They said you'd not been in."

"Yeah, well, time to move on, you know?"

I did know.

"Were you going to tell Jamie?"

"I thought you were out," he said.

"Were you going to tell him?"

Jamie was arranging another spiral on the carpet and didn't look up when the van door slammed shut and worn tyres spun on the damp grass. Or when Isaac stamped on the accelerator and roared off up the track. I watched him race past the broken gate, the two red tail-lights moving closer together as he sped away. I closed the curtains.

"We'll still go, won't we?"

I stood watching the back of his head, his black hair squashed flat from his anorak hood, I could see him holding his breath, his narrow shoulders braced and rigid, still as a millpond, a flat stone waiting inches above the carpet, wondering if there was a place for it.

I wanted to strangle a million billion starlings with the severed strings of a smashed up banjo. This is what disappointment looks like mister yes fucking sorry fucking chef. I wanted to grab Jamie's hand and race after the van and say take us too, to wherever you're going. Birds of a feather on a magical carpet. Marginal people balanced on the earth's edge like skittles, wondering if the next throw will finally dislodge them. My statue did not move.

"There's a flat stone with your name on it so far out in the bay the divers will take a whole week to find it before it goes onto a red velvet cushion in a glass case and travels the world. Of course we're going."

He placed the stone on the carpet and breathed. ■

Poems by Peter Gilmore, Eveline Pye, Andy Jackson & Graham Morgan

A Grandfather

By Peter Gilmore

His actions have begun to trouble children.
He cannot move but he casts a long shadow.
A place of gloom. His voice especially is bad,
more of a screech than he had ever hoped to hear.
This was not the kind of granddad he had aimed to be.
It is as if something low has come home to roost,
something in his nature he has failed to spot,
something round the back of himself, festering.
Too late, he thinks, to trace it all the way back
to childhood, some misadventure there, some muckheap
even (for there have been plenty of those, God knows).
These days, there are so many tracks going backwards:
he knows them by their look of dereliction,
the dead bracken and branches heaped in disorder.
Are you supposed to enter, go down, go backwards,
or leave it be? He no longer knows that either.
Once he might have set off smartly but got lost,
emerging a few days later with some half truths,
a most deadly air of pallid compromise,
or not set off at all, too vain for the moment
to bother. But now in the waiting fetid gloom
he would die immediately. Better to rest here,
sit well back from the frightened children, wave
to people too far off to see him waving,
ponder the tired shape of himself in the deckchair,
and learn by imitation, if he possibly can,
the book of love of all these grandfathers, grandmothers,
on the beach, as he speaks, with their gathered children.

Summer by the Road Side

By Graham Morgan

The ground is baked; a cracked white clay sheet
Ants scurry across the earth
Butterflies flutter just out of reach
A cricket makes the verge exotic

Above us the blue sky stretches
Way, way up
Until it feels that we could fall upwards into the blue blueness
But for the small smudges of white clouds that anchor us to the ground

The field beyond, is green, is verdant
In the distance a skylark makes the world liquid
A car brushes past leaving
A smell of exhaust in the air.

The blanket has scattered strands of yellow grass
There is a contrail slipping across the sky
The wine is dark red
And the cheese compliments the long chunks of bread

There are olives and there are juicy peaches
We are eating lunch in the middle of nowhere
We have no idea where we are or where we are going
The car engine ticks in the heat waiting.

Scotch Broth

By Eveline Pye

In the dream, I know he is dead but I also know
he's going to be hungry so
I walk to the butcher's with a wicker basket,
select a good mutton bone with plenty of meat,
weigh out the soup mix, leave it to steep,
peel carrots until my hands turn orange,
chop onions until I
cry, skim away the froth,
check the seasoning
try to make it just the way he likes it.

He comes in tired, walks right
to the table and sits down
at the clean white cloth.
I place the bowl before him
and he eats without saying a word. I say
it's good to see him and he smiles,
limps over to the chair by the fire and falls asleep,
yellow light flickering warmth on his poor dead face.

Living Will

By Andy Jackson

To you I grant these heirlooms; things not held
in inventories or identified by legal clause
or codex, but alive there in my open cities,
meeting halls aglow with the redemptive force

of poetry and art and politics of place.
This bequest includes the love of peace
that damns the submerged payload in the loch
but holds all sailors in a true embrace.

I also pass to you the signature that separates
the real from fake, and offer meaningful dissent
to help you grow. And words - the finest of them,
lodged in story, song and declaration of intent,

and blown from town to town until they find
their voice again. Other random trinkets are:-
my recipe for cranachan, my trail of golden
malting sheds, the whitened fingers of the haar,

a hundred secret lowland Burghs, the kyles,
the cup-and-ring marks carved upon the dead,
the roads that peter out to wind-lashed capes,
the endless reel that plays out in your head.

These are yours, except the islands out beyond,
their harbour-clustered people caught in rain,
their wizened brochs and scatterings of perfect sand,
for they belong to Caledonian Macbrayne.

Publishing from the Edge

Frances Sessford on why there's nothing marginal about some of the Scotland's boldest publishers

UNTIL A FEW years ago, Sandstone Press described itself on its website as a 'Scottish Literary Publishing House'. Now the strap line reads: 'Contemporary Quality Reading'. This change illustrates the perception that publishers based in the more remote areas of Scotland have of themselves. They want to show that their mission extends beyond the boundaries of Highland region. They know it but they need us to know it too. They are pleased to be where they are; hell mend the nyaff that tells them they need to be in the commercial hubs of Edinburgh and London in order to be 'successful'. But often the nature of your location leads to the assumption – from certain parts of the UK – that you are not worth bothering about; too small to be taken notice of; lacking in ambition.

Two Ravens Press in Uig, Isle of Lewis, Sandstone Press in Dingwall, and Acair Books of Stornoway, Isle of Lewis are three publishers not in the least constrained in ambition and outlook by the circumstances of their respective locations. These publishers seek not to publish content for an exclusively Scots audience and neither do they look to their location alone to source that content. The wild, beautiful and 'remote' places of course provoke interest and provide inspired writing; and having a presence in a particular location will mean that you become a focus for the ambitions of local writers. But these publishers are in no way conduits for simply bringing Scottish writing to market. They have very firm ideas on what they want to publish, who it's for and where they want to reach.

Situated on the Atlantic coast of the Isle of Lewis, Two Ravens Press is probably the most geographically remote publisher in the UK. And that's just how they like it. Sharon Blackie and David Knowles set up Two Ravens in 2006 to produce challenging literary writing of the highest quality. They publish not what they like, but what they love. Inevitably, there is a smaller audience for their content than for more accessible, commercial writing and at best they will break even on a title; loss is common, profit is rare. Yet, uncompromising and forthright in their views, they make it clear that the schmooze scene contains nothing they want. And Two Ravens wants no more to be considered a Scottish publisher than it wants to be part of the schmooze scene. Sharon and David promote 'contemporary British and international literature' written by authors from Europe, England, Wales and the US. Indeed, should you ask the question, 'but are you a local publisher or an international publisher?', the reply is swift: 'Why does there have to be a distinction?'

There is none really; publishers just publish. Sandstone, Two Ravens and Acair take their place in the local economies but they are not bound by them; they serve the local populations if the local populations want to take what is on offer, but they do not exist solely for them. Sandstone and Acair, for example, are best-placed to serve Gaelic-speaking communities and have an immediate market both locally and in the rest of the country. They have built up expertise in this kind of publishing and are ideally placed to use it where they are. But while they are able to produce content for that market they do not exist for it alone. Gaelic language has the potential to go much further than Scotland. Any country where Gaelic language learning is popular – Germany (yes, really), Australia, Canada – whether for educational or self-development purposes – is a potential market for Sandstone and Acair, but reaching that market is, for a small publisher, a constant challenge.

It could be argued that location is an element of that elusive brand identity to which so many publishers aspire (not to mention spend lots of money building). In this way, it is an asset. It's not a deliberate ploy – isolated is not the new black – but an output that reflects some integrity of environment helps the publisher to form an identity. Who needs to be in London anyway? Publishing is still south-east-centric but on what, specifically, do you miss out by not being situated in Edinburgh or London? Parties, events, gatherings; all the outward-facing activities that publishers engage in to promote their wares. Publishing Scotland is situated in Edinburgh and runs many training and networking events for its members, and it is to its credit that many publishers outwith the main cities do attend these events, evidence that they do indeed feel part of Scotland's publishing infrastructure. Sure, it might take an entire day to get there but it's a trade off, as Agnes from Acair points out, between the investment of time and resource and the gathering of knowledge and contacts.

Publishing has a complex and intricate distribution system; bedding into that system and putting your content into the hands of people who want to read it – whether in print or on a device – is one of the main keys to success. In 2006, Mainstream Publishing, an independent sports and non-fiction publisher based in Edinburgh, sold a stake in the company to Random House in order to access the big publisher's distribution network. Random House promised to leave the publisher's editorial integrity intact. Anathema to some, it serves to show that the occasional whiff of compromise can help build the business. It should be pointed out though, that Mainstream is, well….

Technology enables small publishers to engage with their readers, manage their distribution accounts and sell their titles, regardless of location. However, having the technology available doesn't mean sales will miraculously improve. And technology can be a burden as well as a blessing. The big commercial publishers routinely digitise their titles so that they are available as e-books for the asking. Not so with the small publisher –the move to digital does save on print costs, but these savings are immediately consumed by the costs of electronic input, storage and distribution. Bear in mind also, that while the public experiments with this and that hand-held device and still secretly likes to sniff paper, digital format is an extra and not an alternative. Thus publishers actually have to bear additional costs. The small publisher may also need to hire expertise to produce their content in e-formats. There are lots of production companies – Faber Factory is one – which will take the headache away with a complete digital production and distribution service, but at a cost. And money is one thing small publishers don't have.

The nature of publishing means it can take a long time before the investment needed to bring a title forth results in any profit. Sometimes books only break even and frequently, they make a loss. Some types of publishing are more stable than others, but regardless, the demand for investment is heavy and the risks are high. Hectic publishing schedules ▶▶

and a constant stream of titles coming through enables large publishers to subsidise their losses with successes and to maintain even cash flows. Small publishers with perhaps only 10 or 12 titles a year (often fewer) can't spread their losses so readily. Conventional forms of finance are out, especially in this climate; banks have never really understood the long-term investment needs of publishers anyway. Public bodies like Creative Scotland exist to help publishing businesses develop and grow and can help them find sources of funding; but the truth is that most publishers end up financing the business themselves. Two Ravens are completely self-funding and few of their titles are profitable. But David Knowles and Sharon Blackie believe passionately in great writing and bringing that writing to a market, however small.

Publishers have to be flexible and must keep an eye out always for opportunities, and this is one area where small houses have the advantage. The big corporate publishers are often constrained by market slavery and lack of imagination: they want to play safe and to their strengths. This means that if smaller houses do find something special then they have a chance to get right up there with the big players. The reviews system helps – getting your titles noticed can boost the profile of a small publisher. One such success has recently occurred for Sandstone. In 2009, Sandstone moved into fiction publishing, that most difficult and unpredictable area. Its fifth fiction work, The Testament of Jessie Lamb, was published in February this year by award-winning writer, Jane Rogers, and was long-listed for the Man Booker Prize. This success has resulted in Sandstone coming onto the radar of foreign literary agents looking for new UK publishers, more media coverage and the attendant opportunities a generally higher profile brings. But Bob Davidson, MD of Sandstone, tells on his recent blog of how Sandstone had little or no attention at all from south of the border until The Testament of Jessie Lamb was reviewed by The Independent on Sunday and went on to be long-listed.

Small publishers in Scotland grapple with the same basic business problems as big publishers everywhere else: what to publish when, how to make it available, and to whom. Just how do you produce profitably for a market where often you simply cannot point to an absolute need? Why can getting a title out there just one month late result in complete failure? How is it that the fortunes of a publisher may be literally made or broken on one title? There is so much risk, guesswork and luck involved in publishing profitably that it's a wonder anyone gets involved in the business in the first place. Maybe it's morbid fascination. Certainly, it's for love. Mike Miller, previously of Blackie and Geddes & Grosset and now retired, is one of the most experienced Scots publishers of his generation. He jokes: 'A man once told me how you could make a small fortune. Take a large fortune and go into publishing.' It's the same the whole world over. ■

Websites

Two Ravens Press: www.tworavenspress.com
Acair: www.acairbooks.com
Sandstone Press: www.sandstonepress.com

Four Poets

National Poetry Day Heron
By Sally Evans

Washed wood picnic table,
oblong paving slabs,
splendid in dirty green grass
at the service station.
The duck waddles in -- no surprise,
bown-pink in colouring.
Then the heron, quietly there
with his two shades of grey,
matching the pavement and table
looking for crumbs in vacant space.
Ignoring the orange peel,
accustomed to fishless rivers,
he approaches me.
I should have brought my bread from the car,
to thank him kindly for
the tame-heron-on-national-poetry-day
poem he has given me,
to write down on my
inedible paper.

The Pianist
By Mario Relich

My God,
a Polish pianist
playing Chopin for the SS.
What agonies
he must endure
and lucky escapes
in Polanski's film.
It's quite a story
of helpless survival
suddenly interrupted
in medias res.
First, by brands to sell,
then the News.

Our priorities
must be right,
if we recollect
such a dark time,
you, or your neighbour
could be sporting
a yellow star,
or be rounded up
to be tattooed.
Now, they just tell you
that you're worth it.
Think about it.

But hey, we are free
to be affronted
or merely bored.
Put the kettle on.
After all,
a film is just a film,
for Christ's sake.

The Weight of Ghosts
By Irene Cunningham

My grandmother is
a frail fairytale. I must
trust to memory
wisps of butter-coloured hair.
I should have driven
deep in my mind the loved lines
of her face as well
as the map of my Glasgow,
marked her smile instead
of memorable music.
When she existed
God and religion were an
extension of her
old age pension. Nuns
followed her home. She hassled
priests, and wandered streets
in the middle of the night
wrapped up tight in tweed
searching for a sister, lost
in time. Now my hair
is wound up with sliding ghosts
her combs curl, gouging
tortoiseshell teeth in my scalp
bone spears through leather.
I float past security
at airports, alive
and dead, unremarkable.
As long as I live
she'll feel the wind in my hair.

Postcard from Mellon Udrigle
With apologies to Ivor Cutler
By Stephen Keeler

I'm standing on a beach, to watch birds.
Standing on a beach, to watch birds.
The sea is polished.
The sand is lemon.

I'm listening to the burn, to catch songs.
It truckles sweetly.
The plants are fleshy.

My day is made of wind…

The birds are waders.
The sea is polished.

Snow-sugared Coigach.

To watch birds.

Poems by Robin Fulton Macpherson

Elsewhere

On land
tips of whin bushes are fidgetting
which means
ridges of nine metre waves at sea.

Birch bark
has lost lustre: light-waves, sun to earth,
have been checked by a dithering cloud.

A glance
with a great absence noticed in it:
from a remote time-zone in the brain.

Apocryphal

Frighteningly three-dimensional
with two lamps in the heavens, plus stars –
that was Creation on the fourth day.

Since when distance has outstripped distance.
Off the record, He devised for us
a firmament in two dimensions:

a waning moon resting on an oak,
and stars on a protective ceiling
above but not far above rooftops.

Tome

Imagine language dead: the chosen words
sound like a language with only one word
and that word whines and hurts like tinnitus.

Imagine the tome, the holy book, sunk
wedged by its own weight and deep sea pressure.
It´ll be silenced by weed and coral.

Imagine instead the unchosen words.
They´ll be white and singular as snow-drops
defying debris and the rot of spring.

Not Received

Light all the way from sun I can´t see
to moon I can, all the way from moon
to waves I see only when the light
ricochets off them
flails me with spiky Japanese signs
splintered and smudged out.
Each message so brief. Each journey so long.

Half-

way across a sea
halfway through a night
a half moon looks in.

For half a minute
that lasts an hour, all
the incomplete halves

in my life balance.

At Sea

Time and space dislocated.

Not far west, a bulge of cloud.
Beyond it, beyond my sight,
Caithness grandparents are there
alive in their last decade.
Not perhaps looking up much.
If they did they´d see the cloud
not so far off in the east.

High above humans and clouds –
half-moon, seems paper-thin but
never gets time and space wrong.

Birdsong

"Conterminous," long ago and today –
thinking of chaffinches in childhood trees
(on an island in the rain) or blackbirds
in a New Town square, late, when cobblestones
are silent.

Northwords Now In Glasgow

Thanks to the fine folk of the Scottish Writers' Centre (www.scottishwriterscentre.org.uk) this issue of Northwords Now will be given a special Glasgow launch on Thursday 8th December at:

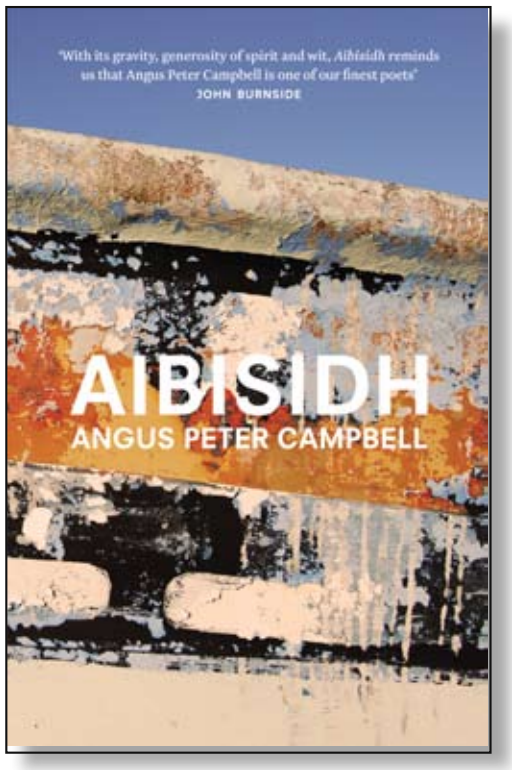
CCA Clubroom
350 Sauchiehall St
Glasgow
19:00 - 20:30

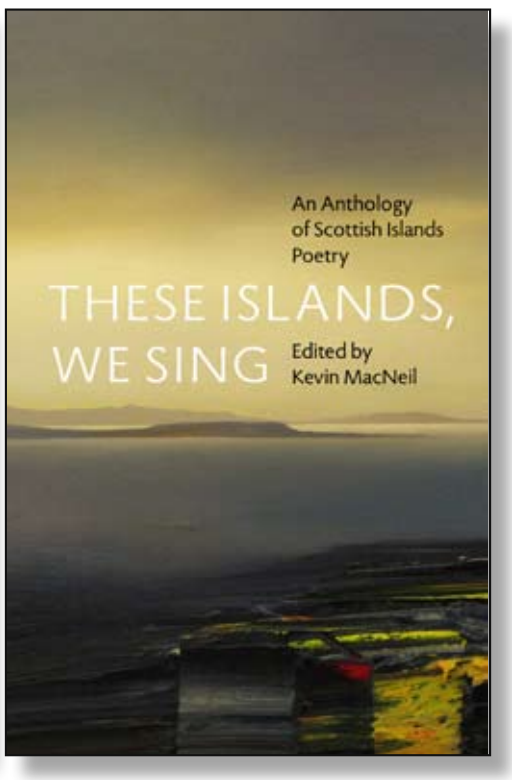
Featured readers will be Niall Campbell and Ian McDonough.

Copies of Northwords Now will be available and the evening, like the magazine itself, is free. It would be great to see you there.

REVIEWS

These Islands, We Sing: an anthology of Scottish islands poetry.
Edited by Kevin MacNeil.
Polygon
Review By Lesley Harrison





For outsiders, perhaps the most striking and envious feature of the Scottish islands is their language; whether the musicality of Gaelic, or the lilt and spark of North Isles dialects more authentic than our own Scots English. In his introduction Kevin MacNeil describes how over millenia the whole history and identity of a people would be contained and renewed through their oral tradition. In more isolated communities, such as on Scotland's islands, it has left a legacy of rhythm and colour in spoken language that has not survived more mobile populations. This instinctive musicality, this love of rhyme and rhythm of everyday speech, was most concentrated in poetry, says MacNeil. 'Poetry was anything but elitist,' he says. 'It was commonplace.'

MacNeil has brought together a collection that demonstrates how this continues to be true. Through inviting new verse from poets who grew up or have chosen to live on Scottish islands, he has collected poems that demonstrate a tradition in the act of updating itself. We see a definite rejection of brooding, backward-looking insularity. Here, the old and the new are becoming comfortable with each other; contemporary poets – 'well-travelled, well-educated' - examine the experience of living somehow both at the edge of the map and the hub of a deeper universe. 'Liminality is a native state.'

This is a wonderful collection. The poems are wise and fluent, intimate and joyous, resilient and wary, and everything between. I let the book fall open and found Derick Thomson in 1949, hoping that his homeland would 'rise out of winter' and 'find steadiness' like the aeroplane that was taking him away. I found prose poems in Gaelic and English. I found Iain S. MacPherson describing how the islands came to his friend's funeral, and I found William J. Tait's homage to the monumental Fat Marget.

Lise Sinclair's modern love poem 'Kuna' is just beautiful: 'An du makks on at dat sem haunds / Dunna keen da hedd o me aes due hauls / Me fae sleep'.

I also found Aonghas MacNeacail's 'a proper schooling': 'it wasn't history but memory / the emigrant ships / sailing out / through a fog of stories'. The past is as real and as raw as the present. In 'Rough Sea' by Alison Prince: 'The dead are everywhere. / They are the curled life in the gull's egg, / The rain, the leap of dolphin'. But the overall tone is of looking outwards and ahead. While the old cycle of exile continues, says MacNeil, 'new people come to the isles and enrich the indigenous cultures'. The future is already here. 'The autumn light ... is more various for you having / taken it home', says Pam Beasant in 'Visitors'.

Such is the diversity and richness of this collection that readers will be able to follow their own themes - literary, political or personal - through the book. 'Poetry's efficacy,' says MacNeil, 'can be extraordinary.' I loved 'listening' to the poems – so many just beg to be read aloud. 2011 is the Year of Scottish Island Culture. Go to an island now, and take this book with you. ■

Aibisidh
By Angus Peter Campbell
Polygon
Invisible Islands
By Angus Peter Campbell
Otago
Review By Aonghas Macneacail

Angus Peter Campbell may be counted as singularly blessed in having had as English teacher, in his Oban High School days, the inspirational Iain Crichton Smith, with, later, the encouragement of Sorley MacLean, then Writer in Residence, while he was a student at Edinburgh University.

As MacLean observed in the West Highland Free Press around 20 years ago; "I have no doubts that Angus Peter Campbell is one of the few really significant living poets in Scotland, writing in any language." Whether he needed the support of those great predecessors, or not, MacLean's assessment reads even more persuasively today, with a new bilingual Gaelic and English poetry collection complemented by a collection of short stories in English.

And, perhaps unsurprisingly, prose and poetry share certain characteristics. As Campbell observes, in a recent Scottish Review of Books interview, '....the contemporary world seems to me to be straight out of the Gaelic folk tradition: magical and fragmented, without any seeming 'logic' weighing it down. The capacity in ancient stories to move from A to Z on a wisp of grass, for example, strikes me as being utterly modern.' Which is another way of saying that the surrealism infusing his work is as old as the human imagination, and perpetual.

The ability to view subjects from unexpected perspectives also allows a ludic element to slip along beneath the surface, ready at any time to reveal itself in satirical or gently humorous forms. In the title poem of Aibisidh ('Alphabet', which he renders as 'ABC'), he resolves the dilemma implicit in one alphabet making do with eighteen letters, against the other's twenty-six by creating two separate compositions, based on song-titles, each in the spirit of the other.

'Aiseirigh nam Marbh' ('The Resurrection of the Dead') takes us on a journey, from Balivanich through Berwick and Baden Baden to Buenos Aires, via burial grounds and bards, taking in Passchendaele, the Twin Towers and Saigon, with recognisable snatches of song, and the names cited of poets, musicians and artists, including Mandelstam, Dante, Iain Crichton Smith and Jock Stein (playing football with Saint Theresa!) - that edge of humour in no way undermining the sense that this loosely structured poem is an affirmative kind of hymn.

His poem to Marina Tsvetaeva, in its fragmentary layout, evokes the Russian's tragic life, and death under Stalin, while subtly touching on the damage done to his own culture: the imperialism is implicit, birds provide a delicate unifying metaphor. 'Iteagan Hiortach' ('St Kildan Feathers') stays on home territory, and history, which places those remote islands in direct juxtaposition with the Crimea. Whether he is being absurdist or satirical, there is always a "something else" going on in these poems. Human identity, at both the individual and collective levels - and in the face of a dislocative world, clearly matters and is subtly examined in poem after poem.

The collection is suffused with a sense of song. There are a couple of sonnets - one translated into Italian. Campbell's translations are themselves an interesting phenomenon, sometimes straying considerably from the literal, while always retaining the sense of the original, and never failing to animate the reader's imagination. In that the collection is a kind of dialogue between loss and affirmation, it doesn't take sides, but there's no question that the effect is affirmative.

Although *Invisible Islands* is in English, each story is given a Gaelic title, which may just give a clue to its theme. 'Liursaigh', the first piece, derives its 'Liur' from, according to Dwelly's Dictionary, 'Noise, clamour, prating', and features an island which, having been cleared of its people, and repopulated, must also live with its ghosts. 'Craolaigh' draws on, and touches on, the broadcast media; 'Mònaigh has mountains: and so on.

Such choices, inevitably, create opportunities for the surrealist wit which is so characteristic of Angus Peter Campbell's writing, but which he uses toward ends which are quietly satirical and gently moralistic. He brings together scholarship, cod and actual. He doesn't preach, but he does invite us to draw conclusions. And it works, because we sense an imagination engaged in the precise details of everyday realities, with sharp digs at the ways of bureaucracies, but sensitive also to history, tradition, the possibilities of magic, and the vagaries of fashion.

Laughter may be drawn from these stories, but also grief. They may travel across the world, as many islanders have done. They weave threads of elegy and affirmation together. Though eloquently English they are quintessentially Gaelic in spirit, and, being rooted in the author's own tradition, told with the conviction of a natural storyteller, they become universal. ■

Ever Fallen In Love
By Zoë Strachan
Sandstone Press
Review By Mandy Haggith

Ostensibly a story about a software developer in a remote highland village, to whom not a lot happens, this novel has an illuminating second narrative hiding within.

Richard is a youngish gay man, living a quiet life in Achiltibuie, working remotely as part of a computer game development team. His teenage sister Stephie comes to stay. They are visited by one of her friends who causes a bit of a scene with the next door neighbour's son then goes away again. Once the game that he is working on is complete, Richard takes Stephie for a weekend away and meets up with an old university pal. And that's about it.

Except it isn't. Because there is another Richard, the teenager who grew up into the rather cautious thirty-something geek, whose passions and tribulations form the heart of the novel. Interspersed with the main narrative are reminiscences about the young Richard's formative relationship with a fellow student, Luke. Episode by episode, their misdemeanours become more and more transgressive, until eventually they have done something so bad they are expelled from University in disgrace.

It makes for compelling reading, as the drama of young Richard and Luke's adventures

escalates, and as the incidents of youth shed light on the older Richard's story, or apparent lack of it. His caution in relationships and his quiet life comes to seem less due to conservativism than the tail end of shame. The novel's two threads converge towards the end, the two parts merging into a single reflection of the lasting impacts of hasty acts of youth.

The story is deftly woven and the chapters about young Richard capture in their tone and pace the sense of frenzy and blind madness of teenage love. There is a cooler tone in the older Richard's narrative, reflecting the maturing adult's hindsight.

As characters, Richard is a rounded and convincing focus while Luke, reckless and charismatic, is an enthralling foil. The present-day narrative lacks an equivalent counterpoint to the main character, with Richard's little sister Stephie, although a constant presence, never quite making it into full colour. She claims to be making a total mess of her life, but her failed exams and wrecked relationship are delivered second hand, filtered through Richard's perceptions, and the behaviour we are shown of her, cooking and studying, make her seem perky rather than traumatised. In a way, though, this serves to emphasise how the experiences of teenage selves are opaque to adults, and how as grown-ups we are inevitably aloof from the traumas and dramas of youth.

The book is full of food for thought about how young people are 'led astray'. Zoë Strachan has produced a powerful exploration of how youthful passion makes for vulnerability to bad influences, and the way even the strongest moral compass can swing wildly when faced with the pressure and agony of unrequited desire. ■

The Autobiography of Ireland's Greatest Living Genius
By Fiachra MacFiach; edited by Ian Macpherson
Gnarled Tree Press http://irishgenius.me
Review By Greg Malley

At long last the book the world doesn't know it has been waiting for. Fiachra MacFiach's account of his struggle to reconcile his literary genius to a vulgar world is both heroic and modest; as MacFiach so touchingly puts it, 'It is not for me to draw parallels between my own life and that of Christ'. Along the way the reader is rewarded with myriad examples of MacFiach's searing insight and profound humanity. There is, for example, his penetrating but sympathetic critique of Seamus Heaney ('the greetings card industry may be his natural home'), and public-spirited revelation of the Nobel Laureate as a part time impersonator of fishmongers. Nor should we overlook MacFiach's devastating analysis of the French language as 'a medieval parlour game that went disastrously wrong'. These are truths that need telling and MacFiach, as he gently (and frequently) reminds the reader, is the man to tell them.

Inevitably though, it is the travails of genius that elevate the soul and rend the heart as MacFiach bravely endeavours to find fertile soil for his art to flower ('At the age of 23 I left Ireland an embittered exile. It was the done thing.'). However, even the festival city of Edinburgh ('The Glasgow of the north') turns against him in the heinous shape of legions of culture-despising unicyclists and the entire cast of the world's first Catholic Lesbian Musical, '17 Brides for 17 Sisters'. But MacFiach's eventual triumph is never in doubt as he draws on a deep well of intellectual and artistic courage (not to mention monthly postal orders from his mother) to overcome the plebeian onslaught and be reborn as 'an even better person than the better person I'd already resolved to be.' Indeed one is tempted to conclude that nobility of spirit, not blood, courses through the veins of the great man. He has even allowed the Glasgow-based 'comedian' Ian Macpherson to play a small part in bringing this memoir before the public, although personally I doubt Macpherson's claims to have discovered and edited the manuscript; some occasional typewriter maintenance seems rather more likely. Nonetheless, in contemplating a practitioner of the 'low arts' attending to the needs of a master I am put in mind of Renaissance images of Mary Magdalene washing the feet of Christ, or Rembrandt's sadly overlooked late masterpiece 'Jimmy Tarbuck polishes Virginia Woolfe's spittoon'. In the end Fiachra MacFiach, like his book, is quite beyond words.

Beartan Briste agus dain Ghaidhlig eile/ Burstbroken Judgementshroundloomdeeds and other Gaelic poems
By Rody Gorman
Cape Breton University Press
Review By Meghan Mcavoy

Rody Gorman is a prolific poet and the author of several poetry collections. His latest, *Beartan Briste agus dain Ghaidhlig eile (Burstbroken Judgementshroundloomdeeds and other Gaelic poems),* has a scholarly feel about it. Robert Dunbar's preface posits Gorman as the inheritor of an ancient lineage of Gaelic writing which stems from the late 12th century bardic schools to Skye's Sabhal Mor Ostaig – where Gorman was formerly currently Writer in Residence. With testimonies by leading poets Aonghas MacNeacail and Meg Bateman, and a transatlantic scope (the book is published by Cape Breton University Press), this collection sets out to establish Gorman as both tradition-bearer and pioneer of Gaelic verse.

This pioneering aspect is particularly apparent in the English translations of his poems, 'intertongueings' which and read like experimental poems in their own right. The first poem (the only one which is mainly in English) offers by way of explanation: 'According to Dwelly [...] one of the words used for moon/ Means a greyhound or paunch, a loin and kidney also', and this poem resonates throughout the collection, not only in terms of its declaration that certain Gaelic words can have diverse meanings to an effect which is both surreal and eerie, but in its clash of languages and cultures. This poem instils an awareness that this is a collection of poetry by an Irish Gaelic speaker writing in Scottish Gaelic. Furthermore, it is a bilingual collection aimed at an audience whom – Gorman is painfully aware – will not all speak Gaelic well enough to grasp the complex webs of connotations in his work, which contribute in no small part to the poems' effect. While Gorman's Gaelic poems are short, minimal verses, gathering much of their effect from the nuances of his langauge, in his translations he is determined to display each alternate meaning and every connotiation present in the Gaelic verses, showcasing the resonance and richness of the language. Perhaps the effect of this is most apparent in the final poem of the book: Aisling/ dreamnightmareaislingwomanvisionpoem, which offers an ethereal vision of Scotland as a living, interstitial entity which is silent, hidden, and tantalisingly outwith the persona's reach.

Aside from his experimental translations, it is Gorman's range which makes this collection stand out. The familiar Gaelic subject matter is there: women reading bibles, village story-tellers and bodachs (local characters who know/record everything), and a melancholic awareness as another year passes of the diminishing status of Gaelic. But Gorman also handles deftly images of a world-spirit watching Parkinson, a vision of Li Po, another of the protagonist of an ancient Irish verse attacking on his mouse as he surfs the internet, and a nod to Albert Camus in a poem which juxtaposes French and Gaelic. It seems that the spectre of Iain Crichton Smith hangs over this collection in both its specificity in dealing with a Gaelic world and its insistence that Gaelic has an unlimited scope as poetic medium. The collection is a welcome addition the growing and multifarious body of Gaelic poetry since Smith, and indicative of the current vibrancy in Gaelic writing. ■

Bheir foidhidinn duais
Sia Dealbhan-Cluiche
le Alasdair Caimbeul
Cuid a' Chorra-Ghrithich
le Alasdair Caimbeul
Review By Raghnal Macilledhuibh

Car son a shuidheadh tu sìos a leughadh Sia Dealbhan-Cluiche le Alasdair Caimbeul (Clàr, £9.99)? Tha mise faicinn trì adhbharan.

Faodaidh gu bheil thu ann am buidheann dràma 's gu bheil thu coimhead son rudeigin ùr ri chur air an àrd-ùrlar. Ma thà, tha feòil agus ceòl ann. Cha leig thu leas a dhol nas fhaide.

Neo faodaidh gun tug thu tlachd ás na nobhailean 's na sgeulachdan aig Alasdair Caimbeul a leugh thu roimhe 's gun can thu, "Bha iad sin loma-làn chòmhraidhean 's eirmseachd cainnte, bha cho math dhaibh a bhith 'nan dealbhan-cluiche co-dhiù."

Neo faodaidh gun gabh thu m' fhacal air. Ga brith dé an genre, tha Alasdair Caimbeul 'na thoileachas ri leughadh. Daonnan.

Ruitheamaid tro na sia pìosan, ma-thà.

Tha "S E Seo Do Bheatha' agus 'Na Craoladairean' 'nan candaidh-siùcair a thogas iomadh gàire. Tha iad air an seatadh an saoghal an telebhisean. Tha a' chiad fhear 'na aon hóró-gheallaidh mhór ach bidh e 'na chuideachadh ma tha cuimhn' aig an éisteachd air Eamonn Andrews. San fhear eile tha eileamaidean de dh'aoir mu shaoghal neònach na Gàidhlig an-diugh.

Tha 'An Sgrìobhaiche' 'na dheagh chomadaidh-dràma le iomadh car sa phlot – roghainn shàbhailte dhan àrd-ùrlar. Tha 'An Staffroom' agus 'Toiseach an Earraich' intinneach agus bhiodh iad furasta an cur air. Tha iad le chéile mu dhol seachad na timeadh. Tha an aon dithist a' coinneachadh san aon staffroom fad 40 bliadhna; fiùs as déidh na tha siud a thìde chan eil fios aigesan gu bheil e ann an gaol rithese. San fhear eile tha dà chàraid aig dà bhòrd, aon dithist aost', aon dithist òg; bheir sinn an aire dha na diofaran móra dòigh-beatha a th' eatarra.

Se 'Am Fear a Chaidh dhan Eilean' an dealbh-cluiche as motha 's as fheàrr, ach se bu dorra a chur air an àrd-ùrlar (tha bàtaichean agus tagsaidhean ann, am measg eile). Chan eil faclan agam gu innse cho math 's a chòrd e rium ga leughadh. Tha e loma-làn chleasan. Tha na caractaran uile a' tighinn 'nan dithistean, gu ìre 's gu bheil co-choisiche aig a' ghaisgeach (alter ego a bhruidhneas ris), 's gu bheil dà thaigh-aoigheachd air Eilean Nog nach eil air an ainmeachadh uair sam bith ach còmhla, an Commercial 's an Seaview salach far an "fheumadh tu do chasan a shuathadh anns an tighinn-a-mach". Se an aon duine nach eil 'na chaigeann Mr Ram Singh an ceannaiche, a bhruidhneas deagh Laideann.

Mar dhealbh-cluiche tha 'Am Fear a Chaidh dhan Eilean' shuas am measg an fheadhainn as fheàrr aig Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn 's Iain Moireach.

Tha Alasdair Caimbeul cuideachd air "nobhail theaghlaich" a chur a-mach, Cuid a' Chorra-Ghrithich (Clàr, £8.99). Ma chuireas sinn e ri taobh "nobhailean teaghlaich" eile, chan eil i cho poilitigeach ri Clann Iseabail aig Màiri NicGumaraid, cho fad-ruigseach ri An Oidhche mus do Sheòl Sinn aig Aonghas Pàdraig Caimbeul, neo cho trom-structaraichte ri Samhraidhean Dìomhair aig Catrìona Lexy Chaimbeul. Tha i sìmplidh, le pailteas fealla-dhà, deòir an-dràsta 's a-rithist, agus, taing dhan chorra-ghritheach, teachdaireachd bheag shean-fhasanta. "Bheir foidhidinn duais."

Se an teaghlach clann Choinnich Mhòir: Coinneach Beag, a tha "iomraiteach mar innleadair-thogalach air feadh an t-saoghail"; Doileag, nurs a tha a' pòsadh "seòrsa de bhàrd" agus a' dol a dh'fhuireach a Bhearsden; Seòras, a tha trom air an deoch 's a' fuireach ann an Suaineabost; Aonghas Coinneach a chaochail òg, a' toirt dhuinn caibideal nan deur faisg air an toiseach; Annabel, a tha dol a dh'Ameireaga 's a' pòsadh millionaire aois 85 – nuair nach cuir i ás dha le buille cridhe tha i feuchainn salmonella 's a' crìochnachadh sa phrìosan, a' toirt dhuinn iomadh gàir' air an rathad; Mòr, tidsear tha pòst' aig ministear; agus Calum a tha 'g obair 'na shaor an Glaschu an toiseach, an uair sin Liverpool, a' Chuimrigh . . . Sann bhuaithe a thig deagh eisimpleir den dibhearsain a th' anns an dà leabhar. "Ulapul!"

▶▶

REVIEWS

▶ tha Calum Beag, mac a' mhinisteir, ag ràdh. "Seòrs' ainm!"

"Man prais lit a' plubadaich," arsa Calum. "Man braim anns a' bhath." ■

Boswell's Bus Pass
by Stuart Campbell (with illustrations by Colin Milne)
Sandstone Press
Review By Stephen Keeler

This is a terrific story before it even starts. Campbell readily concedes that recreating Johnson and Boswell's journey to the Western Isles is 'a well-established literary indulgence', but, he asserts, no one has yet done it by bus. He speculates at the outset whether what will follow will be a guide to modern Scotland, a social satire, a critical commentary on Boswell and Johnson, or a 'grumpy old man's road novel'. In fact, we get the lot: witty, insightful, poignant, and closely-researched. Better still, it offers a tantalising eighteenth-century equivalent of sex, lies and rock 'n' roll in the three-and-a-half pages of the introduction alone.

Before his saltire-embossed, free-travel-bonanza-for-old-folk bus ticket is flashed in anger for the first time, he gives us one of those unassuming preludes so favoured of Scandinavian thriller-writers: an unsuspecting car boot sale browser (Campbell himself) stumbles across a bundle of handwritten love-letters from James Boswell's manservant, 'Bohemian Rhapsody Joe' (a clue there, dear reader), Joseph Ritter, to his – Boswell's! – wife, Margaret. Intriguingly, the letters were evidently written as Ritter accompanied the two great men on their Scottish travels.

What follows is a delightful tale of modern travel-in-the-footsteps-of, written with an unobtrusive literariness which seamlessly weaves together Boswell's and Johnson's words, from the *Journal of A Tour to the Hebrides* and *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, respectively, and those of the lovelorn Ritter whose letters to Margaret conclude each stage (chapter) of Campbell's journey. An additional twist worthy of any thriller-writer is that 'what may have been references to a number of amorous encounters" in Ritter's correspondence were 'rendered illegible by the insistent rain that 'was falling in the Asda car park on the day of the auspicious discovery'.

Campbell's narrative, which is never less than lively, is beautifully written and enriched with cameo observation and epiphany from the start. There are the anomalous fairy-lights on an Armistice Day wreath in Berwick, the locals in a pub who would 'eat their young rather than welcome strangers', the obese man bending down beside his car, his trousers and underpants having 'surrendered to gravity … a brave, existential, but truly shocking gesture in these sub-arctic temperatures'. There are newspaper hoardings – '71 year-old avoids jail over horse sex' – and dreary café menus offering 'gastro food of ambivalent ethnic origin', and an occasional overpowering sense of gloom which never quite descends into sentimentality: 'Not since my parents had cancelled a holiday because of my bad behaviour had I felt such acute disappointment.' Ivor Cutler lives on!

As the parallel travellers 'bump' (Ritter's word) their way 'up Scotland', Ritter becomes more critical of his masters and more lovesick for his 'O Dear Margaret'. Campbell's Johnson-lookalike travelling companions, and those they observe on the way, begin to resemble a Chaucerian parade of androgynous punks with "more piercings than a High Church martyr", panda-eyed bus-drivers, fumbling pensioners and baseball cap clad Neanderthals. This is modern Scotland in the raw, just the right side of parody and sentimentality.

Johnson confided to the judge Robert Chalmers that he had often been disappointed by books of travel. It is difficult to imagine that Boswell's Bus Pass would not have conjured rather more than a passing smile even from someone so hard-wired for disappointment as Dr Samuel Johnson. This is a delightful read, reminiscent of the very best of early Bryson. ■

Poetry from Dionysia Press
http://dionysiapress.wordpress.com/
Sky Burial by Tom Nairn
In Defence of Protozoans by Stuart B. Campbell
Doubling Back by Tom Bryan
Review By Jon Miller

Sometimes it seems there is too much poetry being published; sometimes you wonder if yet another collection was worth adding to the shelves. From among the range of new work recently published, three new collections from Dionysia Press stand out for their power and variety as well as being representative of the range this notable publishing house produces. These are all collections certainly worthy of space on your shelves.

The title of Thom Nairn's *Sky Burial* references the Tibetan practice of leaving a corpse out on a hillside for the eagles, hawks and other animals to pick the bones clean before they are interred. It is a renunciation of the flesh, the human carcass of this world, the border between the physical and the spiritual, the renunciation of one for the other. Consequently, Nairn's poems depict a landscape that is frequently bleak, darkened, lit by a lowering Moon, where 'Twilight's come early/a shadow sky for killers' ('Gardens in Gaza') and which is inhabited by ravening animals – wolves, snakes, wildcats, ravens – that threaten the peopled cities and buildings. Others depict a post-apocalyptic landscape as in 'Big Yellow', a polluted or stained heavens, possibly a post-environmental disaster. Still more evince the disorientated and disorientating reality between our ears and Nairn frequently employs imagery - 'shackled like tigers/walking through the moon' - to dislocate our sense of self through starkly expressed chilling visions. For Nairn, this is the world picked clean where 'we're all falling through the eyes of the night' ('From Snow to Blood') yet where we reach for some other definition – 'working on new signals in silence,/ diving at shadows through a clear moon,/ for when,for a time, faces may be gone' ('Sky Burial').

Twelve poems -'Pictures from the Floating World' – are based on Japanese ukiyo-e artists of the 17th and 18th centuries: Hokusai is perhaps the best known to us in the west. This art is based on the fleeting, the evanescent, the impermanent and Nairn has crafted some beautifully distilled imagery from these paintings: contemplative poems of 13 lines, identically structured, of rich or fearful pictures. These compressed mini-narratives are some of the more successful poems in the collection because of this compression, the Eastern tradition of paring away to reveal more, the value of the suppressed, the inner, the evoked rather than the explicatory. There is also a finer balance between the impermanent, the fearful and the affirmative in what is a long collection whose apocalyptic imagery can become over-familiar as the collection progresses and, occasionally, lose its tightness of form. There is power aplenty to disturb and unsettle in this collection as Nairn confronts some of the ravages of of the world – inner and outer - we humans have created.

The poems in Stuart B Campbell's *In Defence of Protozoas'* are heavy weight-lifting poems. Campbell goes for big ideas often in an abstracted space with a particular object – ceiling, sculpture, altar piece, prayer flag or classical myth (Ariadne, Eurydice, Prometheus, Daedalus) – as a point of entry to an exploration or meditation on such subjects as the nature of time, history, the soul. They take work and substantive reading. The opening poems reference rock and stone and the slow emergence of man and consciousness out of the huge past of geological time. Part of the exploration and evocation of the collection is the setting of the age of the earth against ideas of evolution, science and human spirituality, and its complications in the forms of religion. In 'Rodin's Eve', he essays the elusiveness of consciouness and being as the sculptor tries 'by touch alone' to 'feel his way/into her mysteries'. Campbell seems very much assured of the value of science – as witnessed by the title poem - but also finds the virtues and ironies of spirituality in the midst of this. Another 'sculpture' poem such as 'Slave' (about an unfinished statue of Michelangelo's), although about the idea of rebellion, is emblematic of this science/spirit tension in the powerful image of the human figure half-emergent, half-hewn from marble.

These are also poems of the hillwalker and mountain climber: Scottish and Gaelic place names abound, there are references to particular hills, routes and climbs and we gain a sense of the solo walker out in the spaces of the earth in contemplation of its huge geology and timespan. These are inquisitions of the soul, of deep reflection. A common pattern and structure is the contemplation of the place or object, followed by the excavation or journey into the heart of the meditation and the concluding considered response. Many of these are, for all their bigness, quietly revelatory ; however, some insights are perhaps rather easily come by and rendered in a diction that can seem too grand for a rather easily arrived at conclusion. At other times, clotted abstractions and vocabulary dull the understanding and stall incisiveness or stray into archaic diction and constructions in reaching for a big voice for the big idea - but it could also be argued that this same clottedness echoes the geological nature and references in many of the poems. Nonetheless, this is an absorbing and ambitious collection that will challenge the reader to meet its substantial demands.

In contrast to the marbled abstractions of Stuart B. Campbell, Tom Bryan's Doubling Back, as implied in the title, has a sense of the poet revisiting places and memories with a distinctly well-travelled feel, the feel of a man loose-limbed on the face of the world.. This too has the poet in the landscape or rather various cities and townscapes of the world – Hong Kong, Istanbul, San Francisco, Singapore (as well as Biggar) - as he teases out the nature of a life lived. However, there is a sense of greater participation in the fleshy stuff of existence, its blood and gristle, than in Campbell's world. The collection is divided in to five main sections each broadly thematically linked – 'Born by a River (home life), 'Road Man' (travelling), etc. Bryan also reaches for the visionary and epic in the long poem that concludes the collection: 'Wolf Dream Alba' - a fusion of Whitman and MacDiarmaid, that has him perched atop Suilven at the turn of the millenium, epic in its swooping through time and history in a hopeful pleading 'for another epoch to get it right'. Whether this arrangement into sections is a deliberate plan or just a convenient organisation masquerading as a deliberate plan is hard to tell but it feels like the latter given the dates referred to in some of the poems.

This is not to denigrate the poems – collections are often rather arbitrary and put together after the fact: poems do not always come when called. Bryan writes with great warmth and humanity and the characters he writes about – bluesmen (Bryan is a harmonica player), dementia sufferers, poets, artists, eccentric old women in post offices - are all picked out in their particularity and evoked with great sympathy and compassion. The strength of this collection is in its variety of personalities with which the reader becomes engaged. He is able to find a tenderness that is never sentimental and a rich sensuousness in living: 'Imaginary CV' has a strong sensual musicality: 'butterflies the size of crepes/ tease women rolling on samba hips,/singing through lips like gardenias/and where, always,/poppies dance that never fall.'

The section entitled 'Songs' is perhaps the weakest: song lyrics, while intriguing enough on their own, require music, voice, cadence and intonation to properly deliver their impact. Similarly, some of the directions about accompaniment ('Instrumental lead in. Something in a strange minor key.') are rather vague to say the least and do not take the reader any further into an appreciation of the lyrics. Overall, a fine collection that takes you with the poet in his many guises and who like a good travelling companion, has a fine eye for the worlds he finds himself in. ■

CONTRIBUTOR'S BIOGRAPHIES

Karen Bek-Pedersen studied at the University of Edinburgh and currently works as a university lecturer in Denmark. Her first collection of poetry, *On the Blue Shelf*, was published 2011 by Braga Press, Orkney.

Sheena Blackhall is a writer, illustrator, traditional ballad singer and storyteller in North East Scotland. From 1998-2003 she was Creative Writing Fellow in Scots at Aberdeen University's Elphinstone Institute. In 2009 she became Makar for Aberdeen & the North East.

Alasdair Caimbeul - À Muile bho thùs, a' fuireach anns an Eilean Sgitheanach an-dràsta far a bheil e ag obair mar fhear-naidheachd is eadar-theangair. Originally from Mull, currently living in Skye where he works as a journalist and translator.

Niall Campbell, from the island of South Uist, received an Eric Gregory Award in 2011. His pamphlet will be released by Happenstance Press in 2012.

Irene Cunninghan has had poems published in many literary magazines: London Review of Books, Writing Women, Stand, Iron, New Welsh Review, Poetry Scotland, Haiku Quarterly, New Writing Scotland.

Sally Evans is a widely published poet, & is pleased to say she has now had a poem published by every NorthWords/NorthwordsNow editor since the publication began!

Raymond Friel was born in Greenock. His poetry collections include *Seeing the River* (1995), and *Stations of the Heart* (2008). He lives with his wife and three sons in Somerset. He is the headteacher of a secondary school.

Robin Fulton Macpherson has translated Tomas Tranströmer, Harry Martinson (Bloodaxe,) Kjell Espmark (Marick) and Olav Hauge (Anvil). A *Collected Poems* is promised by Marick (Michigan).

Peter Gilmore was born in Glasgow where he still lives with his partner and one of his two sons. He has had stories and poems published in a range of magazines. A pamphlet is to be published by Happenstance Press.

George Gunn was born and lives in Caithness. He is well known as a poet and playwright. His latest book was *Stroma*.

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

Lesley Harrison lived on Eday, Orkney until recently. Her poetry pamphlet, a collaboration with artist Laura Drever was published in June 2011.

Andy Jackson is originally from Manchester, and has been resident in Scotland for 20 years. His poetry collection *The Assassination Museum* was published by Red Squirrel in 2010. He is editor of *Split Screen*, poems inspired by movies & TV, out 2011.

Stephen Keeler is a teacher and writer. He recently moved to Ullapool where he hopes to continue teaching and writing.

Pàdraig MacAoidh / Peter Mackay has a pamphlet - 'From another island' - out with Clutag Press. He has lectured at Trinity College Dublin and Queen's Belfast, and now works for the BBC.

Lindsay Macgregor started writing at Dundee Maggie's Centre. She is studying towards an MLitt in Writing Practice at the University of Dundee.

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Jon Miller recently toured 'Echo', an exhibition of poetry and painting with the artist Peter White which has been widely exhibited in the Highlands and Islands.

Dòmhnall S. Moireach - Bàrd is rosgach a bhuineas do Nis is a tha ag obair ann an Sealtainn an-dràsta. Poet and prose writer from Ness in Lewis, currently teaching in Shetland.

Graham Morgan works in the field of advocacy and mental health. He has at times been a yacht skipper and has travelled extensively. He lives in Nairn. His autobiography *Feathers in my Soul* is available from Chipmunka publishing.

Alison Napier lives in NW Sutherland. Her fiction has appeared in various journals and anthologies and she has just completed her first novel, *Take-Away People*.'

Màiri NicGumaraid: Às na Lochan, Eilean Leòdhais. Cruinneachaidhean bàrdachd leatha: Eadar Mi 's a' Bhreug agus Ruithmean 's Neo-Rannan (Coiscéim).

Niall O' Gallagher - Fear-craolaidh, fear-breithneachaidh is bàrd, ag obair mar fhear-naidheachd aig Pàrlamaid na h-Alba airson a' BhBC an-dràsta; Broadcaster, critic and poet, currently reporting for the BBC at the Scottish Parliament.

Alasdair Caimbeul - À Muile bho thùs, a' fuireach anns an Eilean Sgitheanach an-dràsta far a bheil e ag obair mar fhear-naidheachd is eadar-theangair. Originally from Mull, currently living in Skye where he works as a journalist and translator.

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Julienne Thurrott was born in Aberdeen. She lived in Partick, Paris, Brussels, Toronto and Vancouver before settling in Edinburgh. She writes poetry and prose fiction.

Jim C Wilson's writing has been widely published for nearly thirty years. He lives in East Lothian. More information (and his blog) at jimcwilson.com

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Mono, King's Court, King St, Glasgow
Gallery of Modern Art, Royal Exchange Sq.
Glasgow Film Theatre, Videodrome, Rose St.

Os acipit alit veniat velesequat praesequip endignit acing euisi tie feum at lummodo ese tinit, sim de-lessecte dio commolobore vel euisi erostrud te tatue tin eraesequam at-uero odolortin hendre velestio do ro